

Opinion: Californians thumb their noses at marriage

By Joe Mathews, Zocalo Public Square

This month, The Accident gets hitched.

The Accident is my term of endearment (really!) for my baby sister Katie, who arrived, unexpectedly, 11 ½ years after me and seven years after my brother. She exchanged vows in L.A.'s San Gabriel Valley with her longtime boyfriend, Matt, in a big family wedding that (my mother would like you to know) is costing a fortune.

I thought this family milestone was a totally unremarkable story – hardly worthy of a column – until I came across some data on California and its families. In our state, a seemingly conventional marriage is now exceptional. And Katie and Matt—who, if encountered on the street, would appear to be fairly conventional millennial professionals—just might be radicals.

Marriage rates are declining across the country and the industrialized world, and married couples represent fewer than half of American households. In California, the trend runs even deeper: The state's marriage rate has reached almost European lows. There are fewer than six marriages a year now for every 1,000 Californians, putting the state at or near the bottom of the nation. (The rate in Arkansas, for example, is nearly twice as high.) Matt and Katie are swimming against a strong tide.

In California and around the country, people who are tying the knot are waiting longer to do so. The reasons for this are much debated, but one factor seems to be how long it takes people to get through school and find an economic footing. Such waits are particularly long in high-cost places like the

Bay Area, where Katie and Matt live. My sister tells me that people there keep telling her that she's "pretty young" to be getting married. That's flattering but not true. She's 29, a couple years older than the average American (and Californian) bride.

A decline in marriages may not be worrisome in itself, but in California it has been accompanied by a rapid decline in the number of children. The number of children under 10 in L.A. County dropped by 17 percent in the last decade. Some demographers have raised alarm that the sliding birth rate, in combination with diminished immigration, is producing a child shortage in the state. We need to produce more future taxpayers to buy houses and support the retirements of the old.

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