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So Where's the Epidemic?; The number of families in our position is actually much smaller than you might think.

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It's become a rite of each school year, a masochistic little ritual that I can't resist. As soon as my daughter's school sends out the parent directory, I open it immediately. I may glance at the teacher photos, but I'm really looking for divorced families. We're easy to spot: those painfully obvious entries with two addresses listed next to the student's name. This year, we are the only one in my daughter's class. It's not that I'd wish this on any family. But if divorce is an epidemic in America and half of all marriages fail, how come I so rarely meet other divorced parents? Have I landed in an episode of "Mad Men"?

The mystery apparently extends beyond my Brooklyn neighborhood. "The 50 percent thing doesn't seem to be my reality," says Debbie Zeitman, 47, a divorced mom who lives with her 15-year-old son in Venice, Calif. "I'm surprised by how relatively uncommon it seems to be." Dorothy Lloyd, the divorced mother of an 11-year-old girl in Highland Park, Ill., says most families where she lives are "more of the traditional kind, both parents at home."

We're not imagining things. The number of families in our position--thankfully--is much smaller than you might think. Only 10 percent of the nation's children were living with a divorced parent in 2004, according to my calculation using the most current available U.S. Census data. That doesn't include kids living with parents who have remarried, or parents who have never married. But it doesn't feel like a national crisis, either.

That's partly because the divorce rate is dropping--and has been for some 25 years. The oft-repeated statistic that one in two marriages ends up in divorce isn't exactly right. It's based on the annual marriage rate per 1,000 people, compared with the annual divorce rate. In 2005, the marriage rate was 7.5 per 1,000 people, while the divorce rate was 3.6 per 1,000, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. But since the people who get married in any given year usually are not the same people who get divorced (OK, maybe a few), the statistic isn't very meaningful. Even if you look at divorces among married couples, the rate has declined from a peak of 22.8 divorces per 1,000 in 1979 to 16.7 divorces in 2005.

Thanks to later marriages, smaller families, longer life expectancy and the fact that unhappy couples tend to divorce faster than they used to, the number of children affected by each divorce is also shrinking. In 1968, the average divorce affected 1.34 kids, according to Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, both assistant professors at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. By 1995, that number was 0.91, about the same level as 1950. And in general, divorce

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rates are lowest among those with a college degree, according to Stevenson. She thinks that may be because educated women tend to marry later, and the older you are when you get married, the more durable your marriage seems to be.

"You're simply running in the wrong crowd," says Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash. Small comfort. While not all divorced parents feel this way, I worry that people will view my daughter differently. "It's a new kind of stigma, masquerading as sympathy," says Coontz. She sees it even with people like physicians and social workers who are trained to deal with children. People have lowered expectations for children of divorce and are more likely to anticipate problems, all of which can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. No wonder I hate those parent directories.

With Karen Springen

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