

American families don't fit one definition

By Natalie Angier, New York Times

CHELSEA, Mich. — Kristi and Michael Burns have a lot in common. They love crossword puzzles, football, going to museums and reading five or six books at a time. They describe themselves as mild-mannered introverts who suffer from an array of chronic medical problems. The two share similar marital résumés, too. On their wedding day in 2011, the groom was 43 years old and the bride 39, yet it was marriage No. 3 for both.

Today, their blended family is a sprawling, sometimes uneasy ensemble of two sharp-eyed sons from her two previous husbands, a daughter and son from his second marriage, ex-spouses of varying degrees of involvement, the partners of ex-spouses, the bemused in-laws and a kitten named Agnes that likes to sleep on computer keyboards.

If the Burnses seem atypical as an American nuclear family, how about the Schulte-Waysers, a merry band of two married dads, six kids and two dogs? Or the Indrakrishnans, a successful immigrant couple in Atlanta whose teenage daughter divides her time between prosaic homework and the precision footwork of ancient Hindu dance; the Glusacs of Los Angeles, with their two nearly grown children and their litany of middle-class challenges that seem like minor sagas; Ana Perez and Julian Hill of Harlem, unmarried and just getting by, but with Warren Buffett-size dreams for their three young children; and the alarming number families with incarcerated parents, a sorry byproduct of America's status as the world's leading jailer.

The typical American family, if it ever lived anywhere but on

Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving canvas, has become as multilayered and full of surprises as a holiday turducken – the all-American seasonal portmanteau of deboned turkey, duck and chicken.

Researchers who study the structure and evolution of the American family express unsullied astonishment at how rapidly the family has changed in recent years, the transformations often exceeding or capsizing those same experts' predictions of just a few journal articles ago.

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