

# Trouble in paradise: UCLA book enumerates challenges faced by middle-class L.A. families

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It's the place to look for the plumber's phone number, the date of the next doctor's appointment, that photo from your summer vacation and the spelling test your kid aced last week.

Yet even for all these telling glimpses into the minutiae of daily life, your refrigerator door reveals much more about your middle-class family.

The sheer volume of objects clinging to it may indicate how much clutter can be found throughout your home. Furthermore, that clutter provides a strong clue to how much stress Mom feels when she walks through the door at the end of a day at work.

This is one of the juicy tidbits from "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors," the first book by researchers affiliated with UCLA's Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf).

Founded in 2001 with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, CELf sent a team of professional archaeologists, anthropologists and other [social scientists](#) to conduct a systematic study of home life in 32 middle-class, dual-income families in Los Angeles.

The resulting rigorously documented book presents a troubling picture: costly but virtually unused "master suites"; children who rarely go

outside; stacks and stacks of clutter; entire walls devoted to displays of Barbie dolls, Beanie Babies and other toys; garages so packed with household overflow that cars have to be parked on the street.

"This is the very first study to step inside 21st-century family homes to discover the material surroundings and vast number of possessions that organize and give meaning to the everyday lives of middle-class parents and children," said co-author Elinor Ochs, a UCLA [anthropologist](#) and director of CELF.

Added lead author Jeanne E. Arnold: "This is something that's never been done before in a modern society and may never be done again because it was an incredibly labor-intensive enterprise."

"Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century," which will be published July 1 by UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, shows how these families are using their time, what they do with the stuff they buy, how much use different parts of their homes get and what aspects of home life cause stress.

Findings include:

- Managing the volume of possessions was such a crushing problem in many homes that it actually elevated levels of stress hormones for mothers.
- Only 25 percent of garages could be used to store cars because they were so packed with stuff.
- The rise of big-box stores such as Costco and Sam's Club has increased the tendency to stockpile food and cleaning supplies, making clutter that much harder to contain.
- The addition of costly "master suites" for parents proved the most common renovation in the homes that were studied, yet the

spaces were hardly used.

- Consistent and troublesome bottlenecks emerged in the homes, yet families rarely devoted renovation dollars to remedying these obvious problems.
- Even in a region with clement year-round weather, the families hardly used their yards, and this was the case even among those who had invested in outdoor improvements and furnishings.
- Most of the families relied heavily on convenience foods like frozen meals and par-baked bread, yet they saved an average of only 10 to 12 minutes per meal in doing so.
- Fragmented dinners — those in which family members eat sequentially or in different rooms — threaten to undermine a sacrosanct American tradition: the family dinner.

The book focuses on the physical surroundings of the families and, in the parlance of anthropologists, their "material culture," a subject that includes everything from art and trophies to televisions and outdoor furnishings and actually is much less understood than one might think.

"Marketers and credit card companies record and analyze every nuance of consumer purchasing patterns, but once people shuttle shopping bags into their homes, the information flow grinds to a halt," said Arnold, a UCLA professor of anthropology. "But the 32 families who threw open their doors to us allowed unfettered access to their busy homes and lives."

The researchers doggedly videotaped the activities of family members, tracked their every move with position-locating devices and documented their homes, yards and activities with reams and reams of photographs. They asked family members to narrate videotaped tours of their homes and took measurements at regular intervals of stress hormones via saliva samples.

The researchers then plotted, compared and correlated the mountains of data they had collected over the course of four years. The project generated almost 20,000 photographs, 47 hours of family-narrated video home tours and 1,540 hours of videotaped family interactions and interviews.

"Most of the time, the average American cannot see that which is most deeply familiar," said co-author Anthony P. Graesch, an assistant professor of anthropology at Connecticut College. "But when you invite anthropologists into your home, they will force to you step out of the 'insider's' perspective and examine your house, your possessions, the ways that you use time."

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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