

American Families

by Suzanne M. Bianchi and Lynne M. Casper

Families remain an important anchor for individuals' well-being.

Families continue to evolve as men and women assume new roles.

Young people will live in a variety of settings within and outside families.

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The suggested citation, if you quote from this publication, is: Suzanne M. Bianchi and Lynne M. Casper, "American Families," *Population Bulletin*, vol. 55, no. 4 (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, December 2000).

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ISSN 0032-468X

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About the Authors

Suzanne M. Bianchi is professor of sociology and faculty associate in the Center on Population, Gender and Social Inequality at the University of Maryland, College Park. She served as president of the Population Association of America for 2000. Her current research focuses on parental time with children, and the changing economic and family roles of men and women in the United States. She has published numerous articles and books about women, employment, and family and currently is co-authoring a book with Lynne Casper entitled *Trends in the American Family*, to be published by Sage Publications.

Lynne M. Casper is health scientist administrator and demographer at the Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. She previously was a senior demographer and statistician in the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch, U.S. Census Bureau. She has published numerous articles in the areas of families and households, cohabitation, child care, and demographic methods.

The authors would like to thank Philip Cohen, Jane Dye, Jason Fields, Marybeth Mattingly, Chris Morett, Cathy O'Brien, Martin O'Connell, Kelvin Pollard, and Liana Sayer for assistance in preparing this report. The authors also appreciate the comments of Susan Brown, Steven Nock, and R. Kelly Raley, who reviewed an earlier draft of the manuscript, and the editorial suggestions of Mary Kent.

American Families

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If there is one “mantra” about family life in the last half century, it is that the family has undergone tremendous change. No other institution elicits as contentious debate as the American family. Many argue that family life has been seriously degraded by the movement away from marriage and traditional gender roles. Others view family life as amazingly diverse, resilient, and adaptive to new circumstances.¹

Any assessment of the general “health” of family life in the United States and the well-being of family members, especially children, requires a look at what we know about demographic and socioeconomic trends that affect families. The latter half of the 20th century was characterized by tumultuous change in the economy, in civil rights, and in sexual freedom, and by dramatic improvements in health and longevity. Marriage and family life felt the reverberations of these societal changes.

At the beginning of the 21st century, as we reassess where we have come from and where we are, one thing stands out. Our rhetoric about the dramatically changing family may be a step behind the reality. Recent trends suggest a quieting of changes in the family, or at least of the pace of change. There was little change in the proportion of two-parent or single-mother families during the 1990s. The living arrangements of children stabilized, as did the liv-

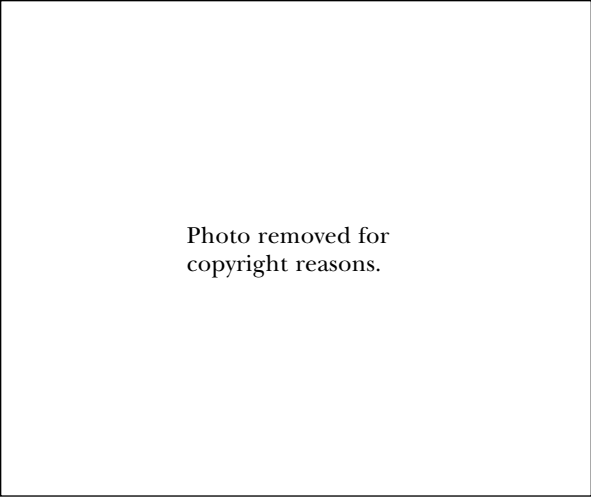


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American families are transcending the traditional image of the past century as they evolve to reflect social and economic realities.

ing arrangements of young adults and the elderly. The divorce rate had been in decline for more than two decades. The rapid growth in cohabitation among unmarried adults has also slowed.

Yet family life is still evolving. Age at first marriage rose as more young adults postponed marriage and children to complete college and settle into a labor market increasingly inhospitable to poorly educated workers. Accompanying this delay in marriage was the continued increase in births to unmarried women, though here, too, the pace of change slowed in the 1990s.²

Within marriage or marriage-like relationships, the appropriate roles for each partner are shifting as American society accepts and values more equal roles for men and women. The widening role of fathers has become a major agent of change in the family. There are an increasing number of father-only families, a shift toward shared custody of children by fathers and mothers after divorce, and increased father involvement with children in two-parent families.

Whether the slowing, and in some cases cessation, of change in family living arrangements is a temporary lull or part of a new, more sustained equilibrium will only be revealed in the first decades of the 21st century. New norms may be emerging about the desirability of marriage, the optimal timing of children, and the involvement of fathers in childrearing and of mothers in breadwinning. Understanding the ever-evolving American family requires taking the pulse on contemporary family life from time to time. This *Population Bulletin* describes the American family in the latter half of the 20th century to better understand what changes in the family portend for the first half of the 21st century.

A Changing Economy and Society

Consider the life of a young woman reaching adulthood in the 1950s or early 1960s. Such a woman was likely to marry straight out of high school or to take a clerical or retail sales job until she married. She would have moved out of her parents' home only after she married, to form a new household with her husband. This young woman was likely to marry by age 20 and begin a family soon after. If she was working when she became pregnant, she would probably have quit her job and stayed home to care for her children while her husband had a steady job that paid enough to support the entire family.

Fast forward to the last few years of the 20th century. A young woman reaching adulthood in the late 1990s is not likely to marry before her 25th birthday. She will probably attend college and is likely to live by herself, with a boyfriend, or with roommates before marrying. She may move in and out of her parents' house several times before she gets married. Like her counterpart reaching adulthood in the 1950s, she is likely to marry and have at least one child, but the sequence of those events may well be reversed. She probably will not drop out of the labor force after she has children, although she may curtail the number of hours she is employed to balance work and family. She is also much more likely to divorce and possibly even to remarry compared with a young woman in the 1950s or 1960s.

Many of the changes in when women (and men) marry, have children, and enter the labor force reflect changed economic circumstances since the 1950s. After World War II, the United States enjoyed an economic boom characterized by rapid economic growth, full employment, rising productivity, higher wages, low inflation, and increasing earnings. A man with a high school education in the 1950s and 1960s could secure a job that paid enough to allow him to purchase a house, support a family, and join the swelling ranks of the middle class.

The economic realities of the 1970s and 1980s were quite different. The two decades following the oil crisis in 1973 were decades of economic change and uncertainty marked by a shift away from manufacturing and toward services, stagnating or declining wages (especially for less-educated workers), high inflation, and a slowdown in productivity growth. The 1990s were just as remarkable for the turnaround: sustained prosperity, low unemployment, albeit with increased inequality in wages, but with economic growth that seems to have reached many in the poorest segments of society.³

Marriage was early and nearly universal in the decades after World War II.

When the economy is on such a roller coaster, family life often takes a similar ride. Marriage was early and nearly universal in the decades after World War II; mothers remained in the home to rear children, and the baby-boom generation was born and nurtured. When baby boomers hit working age in the 1970s, the economy was not as hospitable as it had been for their parents. They postponed entry into marriage, delayed having children, and found it difficult to establish themselves in the labor market.

Many of the baby boomers' own children began reaching labor force age in the 1990s, when individuals' economic fortunes were increasingly dependent on their educational attainment. Those who attended college were much more likely to become self-sufficient and to live independently from their parents. High school graduates who did not go to college discovered that jobs with high pay and benefits were in relatively short supply. A high school graduate lucky enough to land such a job earned about 25 percent less than a comparable job would have paid 20 years earlier.⁴ The increasing benefits of a college education probably encouraged more young men and women to delay marriage and attend college.

Both men and women are remaining single longer, and are more likely to leave home to pursue a college education, to live with a partner, and to launch a career before taking on the responsibility of a family of their own. After a period of "no family" living, these young adults will increasingly form "new families."⁵ Many of these new families have increasingly egalitarian roles for men and women. The traditional, gender-based organization of home life (in which mothers have primary responsibility for care of the home and children, and fathers provide financial support) has not disappeared, but young women today can expect to be employed while raising children, and young men will likely be called upon to share in childrearing and household tasks.

Changing Family Norms

In 1950, there was one dominant and socially acceptable way for adults to live their lives. Those who deviated could expect to be censured and stigmatized. The idealized family was composed of a homemaker-wife, a breadwinner-father, and two or more children. Americans shared a common image of what a family should look like and how mothers, fathers, and children should behave. These shared values reinforced the importance of the family and the institution of marriage.⁶ This vision of family life showed amazing staying power, even as its economic underpinnings were eroding.

For this 1950s-style family to exist, Americans had to support distinct gender roles and the economy had to be vibrant enough for a man to financially support a family on his own. Government policies and business practices perpetuated this family type by reserving the best jobs for men and discriminating against working women when they married or had a baby. After 1960, with the civil rights movement and an energetic women's liberation movement, women and minorities gained legal protections in the workplace and discriminatory practices began to recede.

A transformation in attitudes toward family behaviors also occurred. People became more accepting of divorce, cohabitation, and sex outside marriage; less sure about the universality and permanence of marriage; and more tolerant of blurred gender roles and of mother's working outside the home.⁷ Society became more open-minded about a variety of living arrangements, family configurations, and lifestyles.

While the transformation of many of these attitudes occurred throughout the 20th century, the pace of change accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s. These years brought many political, social, and medical developments, including the highly publicized, although unsuccessful, attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA);⁸ the develop-

Society became more open-minded about living arrangements, family configurations, and lifestyles.

ment of new, effective contraception; the legalization of abortion; and the dawn of the sexual revolution and an era of “free love.”

A new ideology was emerging during these years that stressed personal freedom, self-fulfillment, and individual choice in living arrangements and family commitments. People began to expect more out of marriage and to leave bad marriages if their expectations were not fulfilled. These changes in norms and expectations about marriage may have followed rather than preceded increases in divorce and delays in marriage; however, such cultural changes have important feedback effects, leading to later marriage and more divorce.

An Aging Society

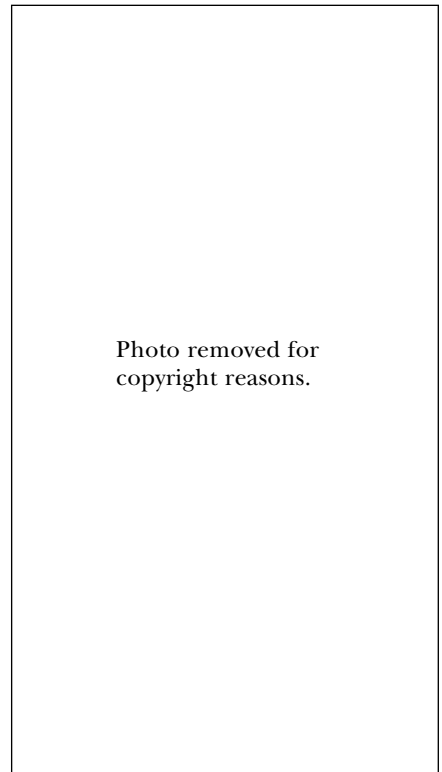
For Americans born in 1900, the average life expectancy was just below 50 years. But the early decades of the 20th century brought such tremendous advances in the control of communicable diseases of childhood that life expectancy at birth increased to 70 years by 1960. Rapid declines in mortality from heart disease—the leading cause of death—significantly lengthened life expectancy for those ages 65 or older after 1960.⁹ By 1998, life expectancy at birth was nearly 77 years. An American woman who reached age 65 in 1998 could expect to live an additional 19 years, on average, and a 65-year-old man would live another 16 years.¹⁰

Increased life expectancy translates into extended years spent in family relationships. A couple who marries in their 20s could easily spend the next 50 years together, assuming they remain married. Couples in the past were much more likely to experience the death of one spouse earlier in their older years. The increased life expectancy, in fact, may be implicated in the increased incidence of divorce. All family members today have more years together as adults now than they did during the early 1900s. Mothers and daughters spend nearly two-thirds of their

years together as adults.¹¹ Siblings will spend a greater proportion of their relationship as adults now than when life expectancy was shorter.

Longer lives (along with lower birth rates) also mean people spend a smaller portion of their lives parenting young children. More parents live long enough to be part of their grandchildren’s and even great grandchildren’s lives. And, adults often are faced with caring for extremely elderly parents about the time they are beginning to experience their own health difficulties.

In sum, an aging society alters the context for family relationships. Longer life expectancy—combined with shifts in the economy and changing norms, values, and laws—influences individuals’ life course trajectories. All these changes in individual lives and family relationships are transforming U.S. households and families.



Older Americans are increasingly likely to live independently—and prefer to do so.

The 'Ups and Downs' of U.S. Fertility

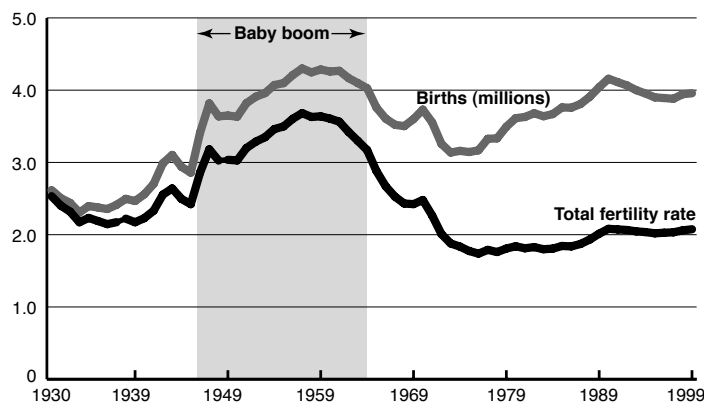
American fertility patterns were extreme and unpredictable during the 20th century. Attitudes toward the level of fertility and its effect on families and U.S. society have also been in flux. High fertility during the early part of the century evoked fears of overpopulation. As the birth rate plummeted during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many Americans became concerned about depopulation.¹ Family demographer Paul Glick labeled the family demographic picture of the late 1930s as “gloomy” and provided this description:

“Many marriages had been delayed, so that the average age at marriage had risen, and a near-record nine percent of the women 50 years old had never married. Birth rates had lingered at a low level... Lifetime childlessness was edging up toward 20 percent and many of the children whom some leading demographers thought were merely being postponed were never born...”²

The picture changed dramatically after World War II: Marriage occurred at younger ages and fertility rates rose. Postwar optimism seemed to produce a surge in the birth rate in many countries, but the most dramatic baby boom was in the United States. Between 1946 and 1964, U.S. fertility rates rose to a lifetime average of more than three children per woman. More than 4 million babies were born annually at the height of the baby boom (see figure).

The roller coaster ride of American fertility rates then promptly, and unexpectedly, ended in the mid-1960s. By the mid-1970s, the total fertility rate fell below two children per woman—the level needed to replace each person in the population and avoid population decline.

Annual Births and Fertility Rate, United States, 1930 to 1999



Note: Total fertility rate is the average total number of children born per woman given current birth rates.

Sources: U.S. Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, various volumes; and R. Heuser, *Fertility Rates by Color, United States, 1917–1973* (1976).

Glick’s description of the 1930s is quite similar to what a demographer today might write about recent trends in marriage and fertility. However, it is less clear that these trends would be described as “gloomy.” If marriage and family changes at the end of the 20th century are largely viewed as the consequence of poor employment opportunities for young men, they might indeed be termed “gloomy.” But, to the extent that delayed marriage and childbearing resulted from greater educational and labor market opportunity for women in the 1980s and 1990s, recent trends might be viewed more optimistically as opportunities for improving the care and well-being of children.

The annual number of births slowly rose during the 1980s. It reached the 4 million level again in 1989 in the so-called “echo” of the baby boom. Most of the increase in the numbers of children born since the 1980s did not reflect a new baby boom among younger women. Rather,

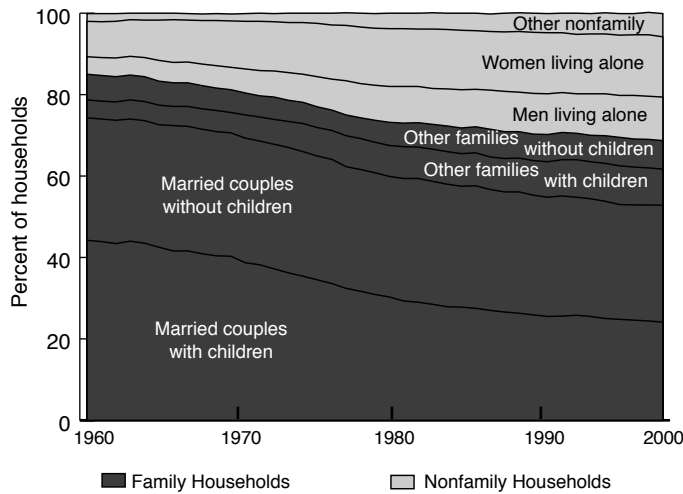
the boom resulted from a shift in the pattern of childbearing to older ages. This shift coincided with a large increase in the numbers of women in these age groups and produced a mini baby boom. Women 30 to 39 years of age—traditionally past the peak reproductive years—were responsible for the fertility rise of the 1980s. The annual number of births slipped back below the 4 million level in 1994, and shows little evidence of increasing again. The 3.9 million births in 1998 were still less than the number born each year during most of the 1950s, when there were at least 20 million fewer women in the childbearing age groups than there are today.

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Figure 1

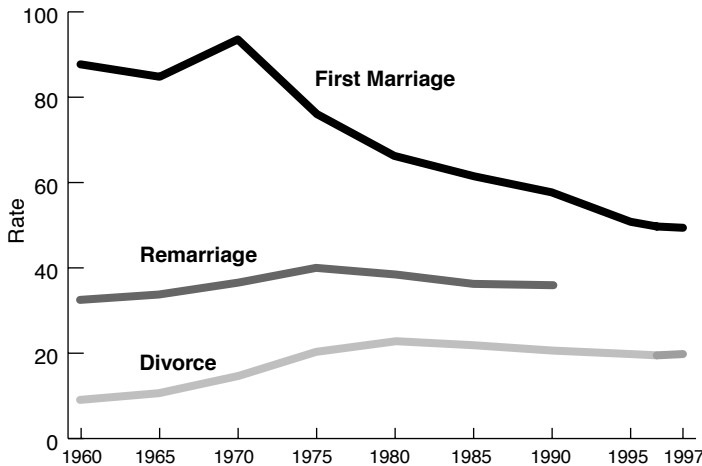
Trends in U.S. Households, 1960 to 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March supplements of the Current Population Surveys, 1960 to 2000.

Figure 2

Rates of First Marriage, Remarriage, and Divorce, 1960 to 1997



Note: First marriage rate is the number of first marriages per 1,000 women ages 15 and older (ages 14 and older in 1960 and 1965); Remarriage rate is remarriages per 1,000 divorced and widowed women ages 15 and older (ages 14 and older in 1960 and 1965); Divorce rate is the number of divorces per 1,000 married women ages 15 and older. Remarriage rates are not available after 1990.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports*.

Family Structure and Living Arrangements

The term “family” carries rich social and cultural meanings, and it has deep personal significance for most people—but for statistical purposes a family is defined as two or more people living together who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Most households—which are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as one or more people who occupy a house, apartment, or other residential unit (but not “group quarters” such as dormitories)—are maintained by families. But the social and economic transformation of the family in recent decades means that the family share of U.S. households has been declining, as shown in Figure 1. In 1960, 85 percent of households were family households; by 2000, just 69 percent were family households. At the same time, nonfamily households, which consist primarily of people who live alone or who share a residence with roommates or with a partner, have been on the rise. The fastest growth was among persons living alone. The proportion of households with just one person doubled from 13 percent to 26 percent between 1960 and 2000.

Most of the decline in family households reflects the decrease in the share of married-couple households with children. Declines in fertility within marriage between 1960 and 1975 (see Box 1, page 7), later marriage, and frequent divorce help explain the shrinking proportion of households consisting of married couples with children. The divorce rate rose sharply between 1960 and 1980, and then eased, while the rate of first marriages declined steadily after 1970 (see Figure 2). Two-parent family households with children dropped from 44 percent to 24 percent of all households between 1960 and 2000.

Change in household composition began slowly in the 1960s, just as society was embarking on some of the most radical social changes in our

nation's history (see Box 2, page 10), and the leading edge of the huge baby-boom generation was reaching adulthood. The steepest decline in the share of family households was in the 1970s when the first baby boomers entered their 20s. By the 1980s, change was still occurring, but at a much less rapid pace. By the mid-1990s, household composition reached relative equilibrium, where it has been since.

Elderly Americans

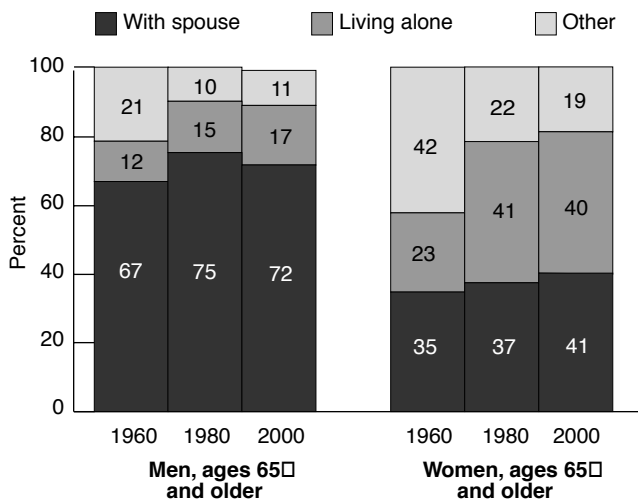
Improvements in the health and financial status of older Americans helped generate a revolution in lifestyles and living arrangements among the elderly. Older Americans now are more likely to spend their later years with their spouse or living alone than with adult children. The options and choices are different for elderly women and men, however, in large part because women live longer than men yet have fewer financial resources and smaller pensions.

At the beginning of the 20th century, more than 70 percent of people ages 65 or older resided with kin.¹² By 1980, only 23 percent of elderly lived with relatives, and by 1998, the percentage had slipped to 20 percent.¹³ Meanwhile, living alone increased dramatically among the elderly in the latter half of the 20th century. Just 15 percent of widows age 65 or older lived alone in 1900, for example, while 24 percent lived alone in 1950, and more than 70 percent lived alone in 1998.¹⁴

The improvements in life expectancy among elderly Americans have meant more years in retirement and a greater likelihood of spending those years with a spouse. Accordingly, married couples without children under age 18 have made up an increasing share of American households. Both men and women ages 65 and older were more likely to be living with a spouse in 2000 than in 1960 (see Figure 3). After 1980, elderly men experienced a slight decline in the proportion living with a spouse, while elderly women experienced additional

Figure 3

Living Arrangements of Elderly Men and Women, 1960, 1980, and 2000



Note: Other living arrangements include people living with unrelated roommates or other relatives, and unmarried couples. People living in a nursing home or other institution are excluded.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March supplements of the 1980 and 2000 Current Population Surveys, and the 1960 Census.

increases. Some demographers tie the decrease in the proportion of elderly men living with a spouse to the increase in divorce during the 1960s and 1970s: Divorced men are entering their older ages without a spouse. For women, the increase in divorce was offset by a countervailing decrease in the proportion of women entering their older years as a widow.¹⁵

A woman is likely to spend more years living alone after a spouse dies than will a man because life expectancy is about four years longer for an elderly woman than an elderly man, on average, and because women usually marry men older than themselves. Men age 65 or older were nearly twice as likely as women to be living with their spouse in 2000 (72 percent vs. 41 percent respectively). In sharp contrast, women were more than twice as likely as men to be living alone (40 percent vs. 17 percent).

Women were also almost twice as likely as men to be living with others (19 percent vs. 11 percent), in part because they tend to live longer and

Gay and Lesbian Families*

Demographic statistics can inform policy debates and provide sound information on which to base policies and develop social programs. One area in desperate need of accurate information is the demographics of gay men and lesbian women in the United States. Issues surrounding gay and lesbian family rights and responsibilities have emerged as one of the most hotly contested social and political debates of the past five years. Topics of discussion include policies concerning the extension of family benefits such as health insurance, life insurance, and family leave to gay and lesbian couples; the parental rights of gays and lesbians and their suitability as adoptive parents; and the legalization of same-sex marriage. The importance of these issues and the need to inform policy have prompted demographers and social scientists to develop national estimates for the gay and lesbian population.

Accurate measurement of cohabitation among the gay and lesbian population is even more difficult than among heterosexual couples (see Box 3, page 14). Great strides have been made toward societal acceptance of oppo-

site-sex couples living together without being married, yet people are much less accepting of homosexual relationships in general, and *cohabiting* same-sex relationships in particular. This stigma may lead more gay and lesbian couples to misreport their relationship status in surveys. Most nationally based surveys with questions regarding sexual orientation are not large enough to provide reliable estimates. Quality estimates are even difficult to make using the nation's largest dataset—the decennial census.

A recently published report constructed the first real portrait of gay and lesbian families in the United States.¹ The report, based on 1990 Census data, finds that gay and lesbian families are highly urban: About 60 percent of gay families and 45 percent of lesbian families were concentrated in only 20 cities in the United States in 1990. The greatest proportions resided in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New York City. In contrast, about 26 percent of the total U.S. population resided in these same 20 cities.

A number of gay and lesbian families include children: 22 percent of

* We refer to gay and lesbian cohabiting couples as families. They are not considered families according to official definitions because they are not legally married, although some gay and lesbian couples would marry if they could.

reach advanced ages when they are most likely to need the physical care and the financial help others can provide. Men generally receive companionship and care from their wives in the latter stages of life, while women are more likely to live alone, perhaps with assistance from grown children, to live with other family members, or to enter a nursing home.¹⁶

To explain trends in living arrangements among the elderly, researchers have focused on a variety of constraints and preferences that shape people's living arrangement decisions. These constraints and preferences fall under three general cate-

gories: availability and accessibility of relatives; feasibility; and preferences.¹⁷

The availability and accessibility of relatives with whom an elderly person might live are generally governed by the number and gender of their children. The greater the number of children, the greater the chances there will be a son or daughter who can take in an elderly parent. Daughters are more likely than sons to provide housing and care for an elderly parent, presumably as an extension of the traditional female caretaker role. Geographical distance from children is also a key factor; having children who live nearby promotes coresidence

lesbian families and 5 percent of gay families, compared with 59 percent of married-couple families. Many of the children in same-sex families were probably born of previous marriages: 17 percent of gays and 29 percent of lesbians had previously been in a heterosexual marriage.

Gays and lesbians who live with partners have higher educational attainment than men and women in heterosexual marriages. In 1990, 13 percent of cohabiting gay men ages 25 to 34 had a postgraduate education, compared with 7 percent of married men. The differences are even greater for women in this age group: 16 percent of lesbians living with a partner had some postgraduate education compared with 5 percent of married women.

Gay men who live with a partner generally earn less than other men, however, while cohabiting lesbians generally earn more than other women, even when taking into account differences in age and education. The rate of homeownership is lower for gay and lesbian families than for married-couple families. Among those who own a home, however, gay and lesbian families tend to own more expensive homes than married couples, although this may

reflect the large proportion of gays and lesbians who live in cities with extremely high housing costs. About 67 percent of gay families and 55 percent of lesbian families who owned homes had homes valued at \$100,000 or more compared with only 15 percent for married-couple families.

Gay and lesbian families share many of the same lifestyle choices as families of heterosexual couples: Many pursue higher education, have children, hold down well-paying jobs, and own homes. But they also differ from heterosexual families in some important ways—gay men earn less than other men with similar education, for example. Do these differences reflect personal preferences, discrimination, or other factors? We do not know, but the emerging information about how gay and lesbian families resemble and differ from other families should help to answer some of these questions and to guide social research and family policy.

Reference

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when living independently is no longer feasible for the elderly person.¹⁸

The feasibility of living alone, with relatives, or in a nursing home is tied to economic resources and health status. Older Americans with higher income and better health are more likely to live independently.¹⁹ Growth in Social Security benefits accounts for half of the increase in independent living among the elderly since 1940.²⁰ Similarly, elderly Americans in financial need are more likely to live with relatives.²¹

Finally, social norms and personal preferences determine the choice of living arrangements for the elderly.²²

Many elderly individuals are willing to pay a substantial part of their incomes to maintain their own residence, which suggests strong personal preferences for privacy and independence. Social norms involving family obligations and ties also have an effect on residence patterns and may be especially important when examining racial and ethnic differences in the living arrangements of the elderly.

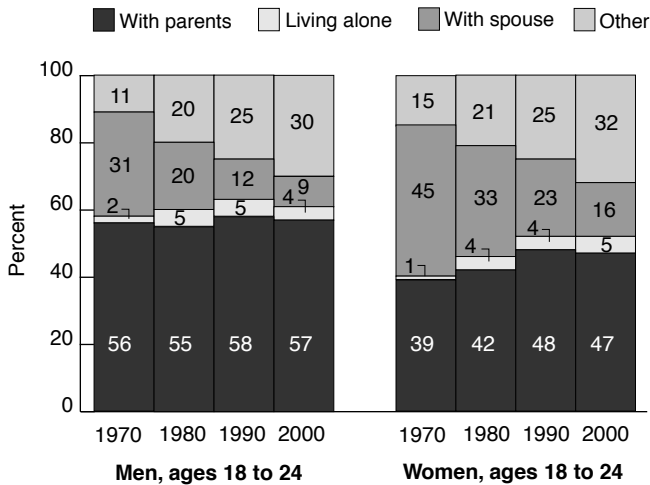
Young Adults

In 1890, one-half of American women had married by age 22 and one-half of American men had married by age 26.

Growth in Social Security benefits accounts for half of the increase in independent living among the elderly.

Figure 4

Living Arrangements of Young Men and Women, 1970 to 2000



Note: Other living arrangements include unmarried couples and people living with unrelated roommates or other relatives. People living in military barracks or institutions are excluded.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March supplements of the Current Population Surveys of 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

The ages of entry into marriage dipped to an all-time low during the post-World War II baby-boom years, when median age at first marriage reached 20 years for women and nearly 23 years for men in 1956. Age at first marriage then began to rise and reached 25 years for women and 27 years for men by the end of the 1990s.²³ In 1960, it was unusual for a woman to reach age 25 without marrying: Only 10 percent of women ages 25 to 29 had never married. In 2000, a woman in her late 20s who had never been married was not typical, but she had many more friends like herself because two-fifths of women ages 25 to 29 had not been married. And, in 2000, the majority (52 percent) of men were still unmarried at these ages.²⁴

This delay in marriage has shifted the family behaviors in young adulthood in three important ways. First, it lengthens the period of time young adults have to settle into adult roles and stable relationships. Consequently, later marriage coincides with a greater diversity and fluidity in living arrange-

ments in young adulthood. Secondly, delaying marriage has accompanied an increased likelihood of entering a cohabiting union before marriage. Third, the trend to later marriage affects fertility in two important ways. It tends to delay entry into parenthood and, at the same time, increases the chances that a birth (sometimes planned but more often unintended) may happen before marriage.

The young adult years have been referred to as “demographically dense” because these years involve many inter-related life-altering transitions.²⁵ Between the ages of 18 and 30, young adults usually finish their formal schooling, leave home, develop careers, marry, and begin families; but these events do not always occur in this order. Delayed marriage extends the period young adults can experiment with alternative living arrangements before they adopt family roles. Young adults may experience any number of independent living arrangements before they marry, as they change jobs, pursue education, and move into and out of intimate relationships. They may also return home during school breaks, if money becomes tight, or if a relationship breaks up.

Many demographic, social, and economic factors influence young adults’ decisions about where and with whom to live.²⁶ Family and work transitions are influenced greatly by fluctuations in the economy as well as by changing ideas about appropriate family life and roles for men and women. Since the 1980s, the transition to adulthood has been hampered by recurring recessions, tight job markets, slow wage growth, and soaring housing costs, in addition to the confusion over roles and behavior sparked by the gender revolution.²⁷ Even though young adults today may prefer to live independently, they may not be able to afford to do so. Many entry-level jobs today offer low wages yet housing costs have soared, which has put independent living out of reach for many young adults. Higher education, increasingly necessary in today’s labor market, is expensive, and living at home may be a way

for families to curb college expenses. Even when young adults attend school away from home, they still frequently depend on their parents for financial help and may return home after graduation if they can't find a suitable job.

Annual data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) chronicle how the living arrangements of young American adults have changed over the decades. Married living declined dramatically between 1970 and 2000, among both young men and young women (see Figure 4). Thirty-one percent of men ages 18 to 24 lived with their spouses in 1970, for example, while only 9 percent lived with a spouse in 2000. A similar drop occurred for women—from 45 percent in 1970 to 16 percent in 2000.

As a declining share of young adults chose married life, a greater share lived with parents or on their own. The percentage of young men living in their parents' homes was 57 percent in 2000, about the same as in 1970, while the percentage increased for young women from 39 percent to 47 percent.

The differences between young men's and women's living arrangements have declined. Traditionally, young men were much more likely to reside with their parents than were young women. Young women were much more likely to live with a spouse than young men, in part reflecting the older age of marriage for men. While these differences still persist, they have diminished somewhat over time.

Americans were leaving their parents' homes at increasingly younger ages throughout most of the 20th century. In the 1980s, however, this trend had reversed for both young men and young women. Not only are recent cohorts leaving home later, they are also more likely to return home—a “backwards” transition out of the adult role and back into the role of a dependent. By the 1980s, about 40 percent of young adults who left home eventually returned for a time, a marked increase from less than 25 percent of those reaching adulthood before World War II.²⁸

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Although many young adults live with their parents, increasing percentages form their own households—living alone or sharing a residence with friends or other relatives.

Young adults who leave home to attend school, join the military, or take a job have always had, and continue to have, high rates of returning to the nest. The “return rate” is nearly as high for those who leave home to live with a partner or to form another type of nonmarital family. Those who leave home to get married have had the lowest likelihood of returning home, although returns to the nest have increased over time even in this group. Historically, moving away for independence was associated with very low rates of returning home—less than 20 percent prior to World War II. This pattern has changed over time so that currently about 40 percent of those who first leave for independence return to the nest.

American parents routinely take in their children after they return from the military or school, or when they are between jobs. In the past, however, many American parents apparently were reluctant to take children in if they had left home simply to gain “independence.” This is not true today. Demographers Frances Goldscheider

Measuring Cohabitation

One of the most dramatic developments of the past 30 years is the increase in men and women living in a “marriage-like” relationship outside marriage. Tracking the levels and trends in cohabitation has been tricky¹—indeed there was little reason to count these households separately when they were a small minority of U.S. households. As more couples lived together outside marriage, researchers sought ways to measure cohabitation. But it was not until the 1990 Census that “unmarried partner” was included among a list of possible categories respondents could choose to identify household relationships. In 1995, a similar category was added to the Current Population Survey (CPS), a labor force survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Researchers have long relied on indirect estimates to document the increase in cohabitation in the latter half of the 20th century. In the 1970s, Paul Glick and Arthur Norton of the Census Bureau were the first to use information on household composition from the decennial census and CPS to derive indirect estimates of cohabitation. Glick and Norton defined cohabitators as “Persons of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters” or POSSLQs for short, which were households consisting of a man and a woman age 15 or older who were not related.² Their estimates excluded households with more than two adults and thus missed unmarried couples in group living situations. But their estimates were also probably inflated by including people of the opposite sex who shared a residence but did not have an intimate personal relationship. Despite its drawbacks, the new measure was valued because, for the first time, it allowed researchers to track the emergence of cohabitation outside marriage.

A recently developed “Adjusted POSSLQ” measure expands the historical estimates to include households with adult children (age 15 or older).³ By including adult children, this Adjusted POSSLQ measure captures many more cohabiting couples than the original measure developed by Glick and Norton.

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s national surveys routinely collected

cohabitation data directly. Surveys have used different methods for gathering information on cohabitators. Surveys whose major focus is family formation and behavior have typically asked very detailed questions and have employed relatively broad definitions of cohabitation, whereas those whose main focus is the labor force or family income have tended to ask fewer questions and to have more narrow definitions of cohabitation. For instance, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) both ask multiple questions to identify cohabitators who might not have been identified as partners in the initial list of household residents. These surveys take special precautions to make respondents feel at ease in reporting their cohabitation status. They also have a broad definition of household membership—a concept that is necessary to establish cohabitation. The NSFH includes anyone on the household roster who stays in the household “half of the time or more,” and NSFG respondents are asked to define relationships with those “people who live and sleep here most of the time.”

The CPS and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) have narrower definitions of household membership than the NSFH and NSFG. The CPS and SIPP define a household member as anyone who “ordinarily stays here all of the time”; those who have a residence elsewhere are specifically excluded. Thus, cohabitators in the NSFH and the NSFG can and do have more than one residence, whereas cohabitators with more than one usual residence are excluded from the CPS and SIPP.

In contrast, the CPS lists individuals who always reside in the household and asks how each household member is related to the householder or reference person. Because of this design, the CPS can only identify a cohabiting relationship that includes the householder. The SIPP uses the household roster technique, but includes a relationship matrix that asks about the relationship of each household member to every other member. In this way, the SIPP gathers information on all cohabiting members in the household.

Unmarried couples began to set up households that include children.

The differences in the survey designs produce different estimates of cohabitation. The family formation and behavior surveys—the NSFG and the NSFH—produce much higher estimates of cohabitation than the demographic and labor surveys. The NSFG estimated that 24 percent of unmarried women ages 25 to 29 were cohabiting in 1995, for example, while the SIPP estimated 16 percent and the CPS 14 percent. The indirect measures (POSSLQ and Adjusted POSSLQ) based on the CPS were different again, but closer to the direct estimates from the family formation and behavior surveys—the NSFH and NSFG—than to the directly estimated CPS measure.

The concept of cohabitation is difficult to define and to measure, and differences in conceptualization and measurement yield very different estimates of the number of unmarried couples. Researchers are searching for the best methods for collecting reliable cohabitation data. But they also need to grapple with a more comprehensive definition of “cohabitation.” Should surveys include only those couples who do not have another place to stay or should surveys also include those who maintain separate residences? Should researchers tailor the definition to fit the purpose of the study? That is, should a survey whose goal is to measure fertility use a more inclusive definition than a labor force survey? Or should our definition of cohabitation be based on what the relationship means to the partners involved? In coming years, researchers will need to address additional questions as family norms continue to change and personal relationships evolve in ways that defy traditional definitions.

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1. Steven L. Nock, “A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships,” *Journal of Family Issues* 16 (1995): 53–76.
2. Paul C. Glick and Arthur J. Norton, “Marrying, Divorcing and Living Together in the U.S. Today,” *Population Bulletin* 32 (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1977): 4–34.
3. Lynne M. Casper and Philip N. Cohen, “How Does POSSLQ Measure Up? Historical Estimates of Cohabitation,” *Demography* 37 (May 2000): 237–45.

and Calvin Goldscheider argue that in the past, leaving home for simple independence was probably the result of friction within the family, whereas today, leaving and returning home seems to be part of a successful transition to adulthood. In the past, a young adult may have been reluctant to move back in with parents because a return home implied failure; there is less stigma attached to returning home these days.²⁹ Changes in the economy have also contributed to this trend. It may be more difficult to sustain an independent residence today than in the past.

Unmarried Couples

One of the most significant changes in the second half of the 20th century was the increase in men and women living together without marrying. The rise of cohabitation outside marriage appeared to counterbalance the delay of marriage among young adults and the general increase in divorce.

Most adults in the United States eventually marry. In 2000, 91 percent of women ages 45 to 54 had been married at least once.³⁰ An estimated 88 percent of U.S. women born in the 1960s will eventually marry.³¹ But the meaning and permanence of marriage may be changing. Marriage used to be the primary demographic event that marked the formation of new households, the beginning of sexual relations, and the birth of a child. Marriage also implied that an individual had one sexual partner, and it theoretically identified the two individuals who would parent any child born of the union. The increasing social acceptance of cohabitation outside marriage has meant that these linkages could no longer be assumed. Unmarried couples began to set up households that might include the couple’s children as well as children from previous marriages or other relationships. Similarly, what it meant to be single was no longer always clear, as the personal lives of unmarried couples began to resemble those of their married counterparts.

Youth reaching adulthood in the past two decades are much more likely to have witnessed divorce.

Cohabiting and marital relationships have much in common—shared living space; emotional, psychological, and sexual intimacy; and some degree of economic interdependence. But the two relationships differ in important ways. Marriage is a relationship between two people of the opposite sex that adheres to legal, moral, and social rules. It is a social institution that rests upon common values and shared expectations for appropriate behavior. Society upholds and enforces appropriate marital behavior both formally and informally. In contrast, there is no widely recognized social blueprint to guide appropriate behavior between men and women who live together, or for the behavior of their friends, family, and the other institutions with whom they interact.

Because there is no legal bond, and because fear of social disapproval might discourage people from stating publicly that they live together, measuring trends in cohabitation has been tricky (see Box 3, page 14). There is little disagreement, however, that cohabitation has increased in U.S. society. Unmarried-couple households made up less than 1 percent of U.S. households in 1960 and 1970.³² This share rose to 2.2 percent by 1980, to 3.6 percent in 1990, and to nearly 5 percent by 1998. Unmarried-couple households also are increasingly likely to include children. In 1978, 29 percent of unmarried-couple households included children under age 18; by 1998, 43 percent included children.

The number of unmarried-couple households surged from 1.3 million in 1978 to 3.0 million in 1988, and to 4.9 million in 1998. These figures suggest that the growth in cohabitation from 1978 to 1998 could account for 38 percent of the decline in marriage over the period, assuming that all the cohabitators would have married.

Although a relatively small percentage of U.S. households consists of an unmarried couple—one in 20 households in 1998—many Americans have lived with a partner outside marriage at some point, which means

that cohabitation is a large and growing component of U.S. family life. The 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households found that 25 percent of all adults and 45 percent of adults in their early 30s had lived with a partner outside marriage. More than one-half of the couples who married in the mid-1990s had lived together before marriage, up slightly from 49 percent in 1985-1986, and a big jump from just 8 percent of first marriages in the late 1960s.³³

Why has cohabitation increased so much since the 1970s? Researchers have offered several explanations, including increased uncertainty about the stability of marriage, the erosion of norms against cohabitation and sexual relations outside of marriage, the wider availability of reliable birth control, and increased individualism and secularization. Youth reaching adulthood in the past two decades are much more likely to have witnessed divorce than any generation before them. Some have argued that cohabitation allows a couple to experience the benefits of an intimate relationship without committing to marriage. If a cohabiting relationship isn't successful, one can simply move out; if a marriage isn't successful, one suffers through a sometimes lengthy and messy divorce.

The increase in unmarried-couple households is slowing from the frantic pace of the 1970s and 1980s. The CPS estimates show the number of households with unmarried couples increasing 67 percent in the five years between 1978 and 1983, but just 23 percent in the five years between 1993 and 1998.

The pace of growth varied among the three largest racial and ethnic groups. In 1978, single non-Hispanic white women were least likely to cohabit outside marriage, while single Hispanic women were most likely to cohabit. By 1998, 10 percent of single non-Hispanic white women lived with a male partner, compared with 9 percent of single Hispanic and 7 percent of single non-Hispanic black women.

Cohabitation serves different purposes for different couples. It may be a precursor to marriage, a trial

marriage, a substitute for marriage, or simply a serious boyfriend-girlfriend relationship.³⁴ In a 1987-1988 survey, 46 percent of cohabitators characterized their living arrangement as a precursor to marriage (see Table 1). Another 15 percent of these relationships were classified as a trial marriage and 10 percent as a substitute for marriage. Nearly 30 percent of the relationships were characterized as coresidential dating.

Some researchers believe that cohabitation closely resembles marriage. If so, family life as we know it is not likely to be altered much as a consequence of cohabitation because these cohabitators will either eventually marry (precursor) or are already in a relationship which functions like a marriage (substitute).

Other researchers maintain that cohabitation is more like being single. Cohabitation is seen as an enjoyable relationship of convenience that provides intimacy without the long-term commitment of marriage. This interpretation worries many people because it suggests that the increase in cohabitation signals a retreat from marriage. It allows for an intimate, but temporary, relationship without commitment or responsibility.

Still others argue that living together before marriage is somewhere between marriage and singlehood and that cohabitation provides a couple the opportunity to assess their compatibility before getting married. In this trial period, incompatible mates can easily end their relationship and presumably escape an unsuitable marriage. Thus, cohabitation might strengthen marriage and family life because some unsuited couples are weeded out before they marry.

About 40 percent of all unmarried couples surveyed in 1987-1988 were married within five to seven years. Their reasons for forming the relationship were strongly related to its eventual outcome.³⁵ Those with the strongest commitment to one another and to marriage were most likely to get married. More than one-half of couples who characterized their living

Table 1

Unmarried Couples by Relationship Type in 1987-1988, and After Five to Seven Years

Type of relationship in 1987-1988	All couples Percent	Outcome of relationship after 5 to 7 years		
		Still live together ¹	Married ²	Separated ³
All unmarried couples	100	21	40	39
Substitute for marriage	10	39	25	35
Precursor to marriage	46	17	52	31
Trial marriage	15	21	28	51
Coresidential dating	29	21	33	46

Note: Couples were interviewed between 1987 and 1988 and again from 1992 to 1994.

¹ Couple was still cohabiting at the time of the second survey.

² Got married some time between the two surveys (may or may not be currently married).

³ No longer cohabiting.

Source: L.M. Casper and L.C. Sayer, "Cohabitation Transitions: Different Attitudes and Purposes, Different Paths." (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, March 2000.)

together as a precursor to marriage did marry within five to seven years, compared with 33 percent of "dating" couples with no long-term expectations about their partner, their relationship, or marriage. About one-quarter of unmarried couples in "trial marriage" or "substitute marriage" married within the seven years.

How do unmarried couples compare with married couples? Although many cohabiting couples eventually marry, men and women who choose to live together outside marriage differ from married couples in some very interesting ways. In general, cohabiting couples tend to be more egalitarian and less traditional than married couples. Compared with a woman who is part of a married couple, for example, a woman in a cohabiting relationship is more likely to be older than the man, to be of a different race or ethnic group than the man, to contribute a greater percentage to the couple's income, and to have more education than the man.

American women tend to marry men a few years older than themselves and relatively few marry a much younger man. Yet nearly one-fourth of women in cohabiting couples were two or more years older than their male partner, compared with one-eighth of

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Even with the rise in marital instability, most Americans marry and have children, and most children live with two parents.

women in married couples (see Table 2). Cohabiting couples were also more than twice as likely to be of different races than married couples—13 percent compared with 5 percent. About one-half of the interracial unmarried couples consisted of a white woman and a man who was African American, Hispanic, or of some other racial or ethnic group.

In many married couples, the husband has a higher educational level than the wife. Women had a higher education level in 21 percent of cohabiting couples, compared with 16 percent of married couples. In almost four of five cohabiting couples, both partners were working in 1997, compared with only three in five married couples. Women in cohabiting couples contributed 41 percent of the couple's annual income in 1997, while married women contributed 37 percent. In addition, men earned at least \$30,000 more than their partners in just 11 percent of cohabiting couples compared with 27 percent of married couples.

Parenting

Even with the rise in divorce and cohabitation, postponement of marriage, and decline in fertility, most Americans have children and most children live with two parents. In

2000, 73 percent of families with children were two-parent families. But the changes in marriage, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing over the past few decades have had a profound effect on American families with children and are changing our images of parenthood.

Changes in marriage and cohabitation tend to blur the distinction between one-parent and two-parent families. The increasing acceptance of cohabitation as a substitute for marriage, for example, may reduce the chance that a premarital pregnancy will lead to marriage before the birth.³⁶ A greater share of children today are born to a mother who is not currently married than in previous decades, but some of those children are born to cohabiting parents and begin life in a household that includes both their parents. Cohabitation has also become a widely accepted pathway into remarriage. It may effectively bring “stepfathers” into the picture before there is a formal remarriage.

Demographers Larry Bumpass and R. Kelly Raley show that the increase in cohabitation among Americans may be reducing the time children spend in a single-parent household. Bumpass and Raley found that the number of years a white mother spent as a single parent declined by one-fourth when they took into account the time she and her children shared a home with a partner.³⁷ Black women with children spent half as many years as a single parent after adjusting for the years they lived with an unmarried partner.

Many single-father families may also effectively be two-parent families because the father is living with his children and another woman. Demographers Steven Garasky and Daniel Meyer used census data from 1960 through 1990 to track the increase in the percentage of families that are father-only families. When they ignored the increase in cohabitation, Garasky and Meyer estimated that father-only families rose from 1.5 percent to 5.0 percent of families

with children between 1960 and 1990. When they remove fathers who are likely to be cohabiting, the 1990 figure falls to 3.2 percent of all families with children.³⁸

The percentage of unmarried mothers who were cohabiting grew from 5 percent to 13 percent between 1978 and 1998, according to the CPS (see Table 3). Cohabitation increased for unmarried mothers in all race and ethnic groups but especially among whites. Cohabiting couples account for up to 16 percent of the white mothers classified as unmarried mothers in 1998, compared with 8 percent of black and 10 percent of Hispanic mothers.

Unmarried fathers living with children are much more likely than unmarried mothers to be living with a partner: 33 percent of the 2.1 million "single" fathers lived with a partner in 1998, more than twice the percentage for single mothers. About 1.4 million American men were raising their children on their own, without a wife or partner, in 1998.

Single Mothers

Single mothers with children at home face a multitude of challenges: they usually are the primary breadwinner, disciplinarian, playmate, and caregiver for their children. They must manage the financial and practical aspects of a household, and plan for their children's and their own futures. Most mothers cope remarkably well, and many benefit from financial support and help from relatives and from their children's fathers.

Most single mothers are not poor, but they tend to be younger, earn lower incomes, and be less educated than married mothers. Women earn less than men, on average, and because single mothers are younger and less educated than other women, they are often at the lower end of the income curve. Single mothers often must curtail their work hours to care for their children. Many do not receive regular child support from their children's fathers.

Table 2

Selected Characteristics of Unmarried and Married Couples, 1998

Characteristics	Unmarried ¹ couples	Married couples
Number of couples (thousands)	3,142	54,317
Percent of couples in which:		
Woman is at least 2 years older than man	24	12
Woman is of different race/ethnicity than man	13	5
Woman has more education than man	21	16
Both man and woman worked for pay	77	60
Woman's contribution to couple's 1997 income (percent of total income) ²	41	37

¹ Unmarried couples who maintain a household together.

² Calculated for couples in which both partners were employed.

Source: Authors' tabulations of the March 1998 Current Population Survey.

Table 3

Living Arrangements of Unmarried Fathers and Mothers With Children Under Age 18: 1978, 1988, and 1998

Living arrangement	1978	1988	1998	Change, 1978-1998
Unmarried fathers (percent)	100	100	100	
Only adult in household	42	47	38	-4.2
Cohabiting ¹	14	27	33	19.8
Living with parent(s)	18	10	10	-7.1
Living with other adults ²	26	16	18	-8.5
Unmarried mothers (percent)	100	100	100	
Only adult in household	60	56	54	-5.8
Cohabiting ¹	5	10	13	8.0
Living with parent(s)	14	15	17	2.4
Living with other adults ²	21	19	17	-4.6

¹ Includes a partner of the opposite sex who is not married to the parent.

² Other adults include nonrelatives other than a cohabiting partner and relatives other than parents.

Source: Authors' tabulations of the March supplements of the Current Population Surveys of 1978, 1988, and 1998.

Because single-mother families have lower incomes than other families, they have been linked with poverty and welfare receipt in the public's eye. Single mothers with children in poverty are particularly affected by major welfare reform legislation, such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in August 1996. President

Table 4

Trends in Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families With Children Under Age 18, 1950 to 2000

Year	Percentage distribution of families		
	Single mother	Single father	Two parents
1950	6	1	93
1960	8	1	91
1970	10	1	89
1980	18	2	80
1990	20	4	76
2000	22	5	73

Note: Includes only families who maintain their own households.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Families, by Presence of Own Children Under 18: 1950 to Present." Accessed online at: www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/htabFM-1.txt, on Oct. 13, 2000; and PRB analysis of the March 2000 Current Population Survey.

Clinton claimed that the law would "reform welfare as we know it," and the changes embodied in PRWORA—time limits on welfare eligibility and mandatory job training requirements, for example—seemed far-reaching. Some argued that this legislation would end crucial support for poor mothers and their children; several high-level government officials resigned because of the law.³⁹ Others heralded PRWORA as the first step toward helping poor women gain control of their lives and making fathers take responsibility for their children. Many states had already begun to experiment with similar reforms.⁴⁰

Why has welfare receipt become such a contentious issue? In part, it was because many people were alarmed by the dramatic increase in the second half of the 20th century in the numbers of single mothers, in particular the increase in divorced and unmarried mothers. When legislation to protect poor women and children was enacted with the Social Security Act of 1935, most single mothers, poor as well as nonpoor, were widows. That changed dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s as the divorce rate soared. After 1980, the delay in marriage and increase in the proportion of births that occur to unmarried mothers meant that never-married mothers accounted for an

increasingly significant component of the growth in single-parent families.

Why have mother-child families increased in number and as a percentage of American families? Explanations tend to focus on one of two trends. First is women's increased financial independence, either through their own wages as more women entered the labor force and women's incomes rose relative to those of men, or because of expanded welfare benefits for single mothers. Women today are less dependent on a man's income to support themselves and their children, and many can afford to live independently rather than stay in an unsatisfactory relationship.

Second, the job market for men has tightened, especially for less-educated men. As the U.S. economy experienced a restructuring in the 1970s and 1980s, the demand for professionals, managers, and other white-collar workers expanded while the jobs available for semiskilled and unskilled workers declined. The wages for men in lower-skilled jobs have declined in real terms over the past two decades. Men still earn more than women, on average, but the income gap has narrowed as women's earnings increased and men's earnings remained flat or declined. Many men without a college degree cannot earn enough to support a family of four.

Some analysts tie men's weakened economic position to an erosion of marriage and of fathers' involvement with their children—which promotes single-mother families. This line of reasoning assumes that men are less attractive marriage partners if they earn low salaries or do not have steady employment. Men's financial problems would affect their personal relationships by eroding men's self-esteem. Fathers may not feel they are a necessary part of their children's lives, which can make them more likely to live separately as well.

Other analysts interpret the general movement away from marriage as part of a broader cultural shift toward more individualism that is affecting Americans at all income levels.

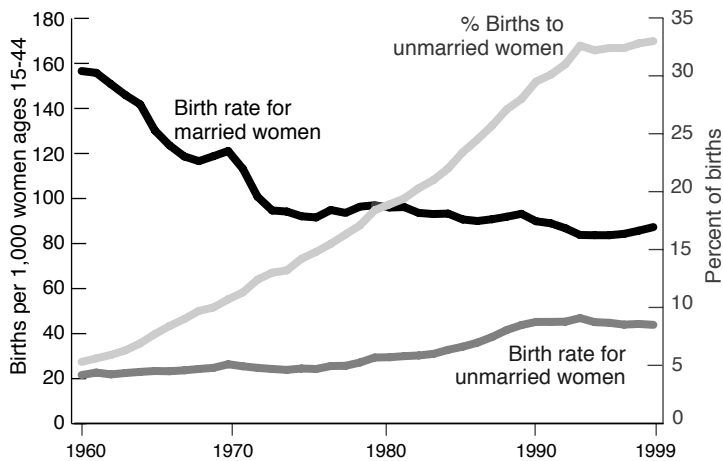
Who is a single mother and for how long turns out to be a more difficult question to answer than it would first appear. Over time, it is easiest to calculate the number of single mothers who maintain their own residence. Between 1950 and 1998, the number of such single-mother families increased from 1.3 million to 7.7 million.⁴¹ The most dramatic increase was during the 1970s, when the number of single-mother families was increasing at 8 percent per year. The average annual rate of increase slowed considerably during the 1980s, and was near zero after 1994. By 2000, single-mother families accounted for 22 percent of all families with children, up from 6 percent in 1950 (see Table 4).

In the early years of the 20th century, it was not uncommon for children to live with only one parent because of high mortality.⁴² As falling death rates reduced the number of widowed single parents, there was a counterbalancing increase in single-parent families because of divorce. Still, at the time of the 1960 Census, almost one-third of single mothers living with children under age 18 were widows.⁴³ As divorce rates rose precipitously in the 1960s and 1970s, most single-parent families were created through divorce or separation. By the end of the 1970s, only 11 percent of single mothers were widowed and two-thirds were divorced or separated. During the past two decades, the path to single motherhood has increasingly bypassed marriage. In 1978, about one-fifth of single-mothers had never married, but had a child and was raising that child on their own. By 2000, two-fifths of single mothers had never married.

The remarkable increase in the number of single-mother households with women who have never married was driven by a dramatic shift to childbearing outside marriage. The number of births to unmarried women grew from less than 90,000 per year in 1940 to more than 1.3 million per year in 1999. Less than 4 percent of all births in 1940 were to

Figure 5

Birth Rates for Married and Unmarried Women, and Percent of Births to Unmarried Women, 1960 to 1999



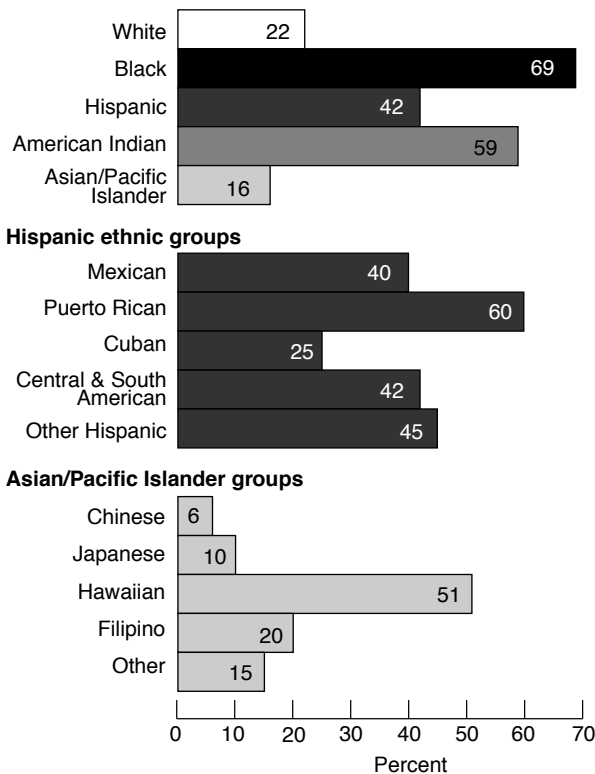
Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports* 48, no. 16 (Oct. 18, 2000): table 1.

unmarried mothers compared with 33 percent in 1999. The rate of nonmarital births—the number of births per 1,000 unmarried women—increased from 7.1 in 1940 to 43.9 in 1999. The nonmarital birth rate peaked in 1994 at 46.9 and leveled out in the latter 1990s (see Figure 5). A similar plateau in the early 1970s proved to be temporary, so demographers cannot predict whether the stability of nonmarital birth rates in the late 1990s is a temporary lull or an end to one of the most pronounced trends in the latter half of the 20th century.⁴⁴

Trends in nonmarital fertility are connected to broad trends in marriage and fertility. The delay in marriage, for example, can lead to an increase in the number of births outside marriage even if the birth rate for unmarried women remains the same. When women remain single longer, they spend more years at risk of becoming pregnant and having a child outside marriage. At the same time, married women are having fewer children, which means that children born to unmarried women make up a greater share of all births.

Figure 6

Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women, 1998



Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports* 48, no. 3 (March 2000): tables 13 and 14.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the delay in marriage and decline in fertility within marriage were the major factors contributing to the increase in the proportion of births outside marriage. During the past two decades, the increase in the birth rates of unmarried women has been a much more important factor and, indeed, has raised concerns about the move away from marriage and a breakdown of social sanctions against out-of-wedlock childbearing.⁴⁵

The proportion of births that occur outside marriage is as high or higher in some European countries than in the United States. But the factors prompting unmarried childbearing may be different in Europe.⁴⁶ In the United States, the tremendous variation in rates of

unmarried childbearing among population groups suggests that there may be a constellation of factors that determine whether women have children when they are not married. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of the babies born to African American mothers in 1998 were born to unmarried mothers, as were more than one-half (59 percent) of babies of American Indian mothers (see Figure 6). The percentage is relatively low for Cuban Americans (25 percent), and for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (16 percent). The rates are extremely low for Chinese Americans (6 percent) and Japanese Americans (10 percent). On the other hand, rates are extremely high for Hawaiians and for some Hispanic ethnic groups: 60 percent of Puerto Rican births were to unmarried women.

Women form single-mother households through divorce, separation, or by having a child while unmarried. These households dissolve when the children move out or the mother marries or remarries. How many women will become single mothers and how long will they spend as single mothers? Using demographic and microsimulation techniques, Robert Moffitt and Michael Rendall have estimated how the likelihood of becoming a single mother has changed across birth cohorts.⁴⁷ For women born around 1935, about 35 percent became a single mother at some point before all their children reached age 18. This percentage is projected to increase to 53 percent among women born around 1970—women who were in the midst of their childbearing years at the end of the 1990s.

Single mothers spend a total of about nine years raising children without a partner present, on average, but some mothers have several shorter periods of single parenting. The average length of time a women spends as a single mother at one stretch is about six years. These averages have not changed much over

time, even though single parenting has become more common.

The age pattern of single parenting has changed over time. As the source of single motherhood has shifted from widowhood (a transition that occurs later in life) to nonmarital childbearing (which occurs relatively early in life for most women), women enter single motherhood at younger ages than in the past. The peak in single motherhood occurs around age 30 for recent cohorts whereas for the 1935 birth cohort, the peak would have come for women in their late 30s and 40s, most often after the death of their husbands.

There are large racial differences in rates of single parenting, but the trends are similar for black and white women: Increasing percentages of women become a single parent and increasing percentages experience more than one episode of single mothering. Yet, the total number of years spent as a single mother has remained fairly stable. Among blacks, however, the likelihood of becoming a single parent increased from 65 percent of black women born in 1935 to 80 percent of black women born in 1970. The comparable estimates for whites were 31 percent and 45 percent, respectively, for women in the 1935 and 1970 birth cohorts. One caution about these estimates is that they rely on data collected in the mid- to late 1980s. If growth in single parenting is slowing, the high estimates of single parenting for younger cohorts may be leveling out and could decline somewhat, given the decrease in divorce rates since 1980.⁴⁸

Fathering

A new view of fatherhood emerged out of the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The new ideal father was a co-parent who was responsible for and involved in all aspects of his children's care. The ideal has been widely accepted throughout U.S. society; people today, compared with those in earlier times, believe that fathers should be

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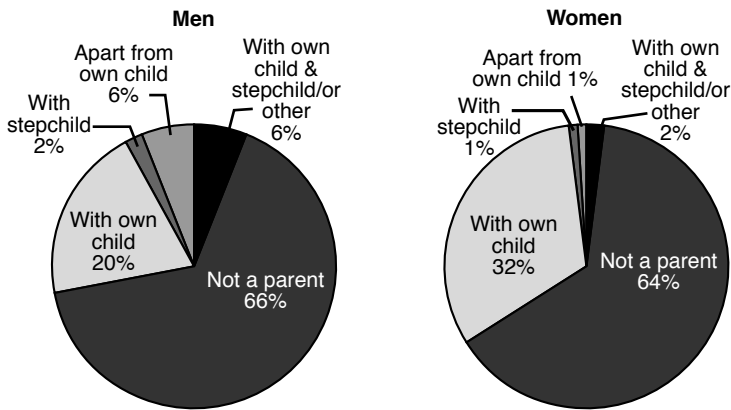
In the United States and many other countries, the ideal father is involved in all aspects of parenting.

highly involved in caregiving.⁴⁹ Fathers do spend more time with their children and are doing more housework than in earlier decades. In 1998, married fathers in the United States reported spending an average of 4.0 hours per day with their children compared with 2.7 hours in 1965.⁵⁰ Parallel findings emerge from data collected on children and who they spend time with. Studies of fathers' time with their children in other industrialized countries, including Great Britain and Australia, also indicate that fathers are becoming more involved in parenting.⁵¹

At the same time, other trends increasingly remove fathers from their children's lives. When the mother and father are not married, for example, ties between fathers and their children often are tenuous. Family demographer Frank Furstenberg uses the label "good dads, bad dads" to describe the parallel trends of increased commitment to children and childrearing on the part of some fathers at the same time that there seems to be less connection to and responsibility for children on the part of other fathers.⁵²

Figure 7

Percentage of Adulthood Spent as Parents With Children Under Age 18



Note: These estimates are for men and women who were ages 20 to 24 in 1987–1988, and estimate the number of years (until age 69) adults will spend living with biological children, stepchildren, or foster children.

Source: R.B. King, *Demography* 36, no.3 (August 1999): 377–85, table 2.

It is difficult to measure “father involvement” in the United States; until recently, there has been little scientific research that focuses on men as parents. Demographers Dennis Hogan and Frances Goldscheider have described some broad trends using census data from the late 1800s through 1990 that examine men’s likelihood of sharing a residence with children under age 15, whether they are the fathers’ own children (including stepchildren) or other children. Hogan and Goldscheider show that 42 percent of men ages 18 to 75 lived with their own biological children or stepchildren in 1880. This dropped to 33 percent in 1940 and to 28 percent in 1990—a decline that parallels declines in the birth rate. The major interruption to this long-term trend was the baby boom years, captured in the 1950 through 1970 censuses. Almost one-half of adult men lived with an “own child” in these years, a higher percentage than in 1880.⁵³

How many years do men spend as parents? Demographer Rosalind King has recently estimated the number of years men and women will spend as parents of own (biological) children

or stepchildren under age 18 if the parenting patterns of the late 1980s and early 1990s continue throughout their lives.⁵⁴ Almost two-thirds of the adult years will be “child-free” years in which the individual does not have biological children under age 18 or responsibility for anyone else’s children. Men will spend about 20 percent of their adulthood living with and raising their biological children while women will spend more than 30 percent of their lives raising biological children (see Figure 7). Whereas women, regardless of race, spend nearly all of their parenting years rearing their biological children, men are more likely to live with stepchildren or a combination of their own and stepchildren. Among men, whites will spend about twice as much time living with their biological children as African Americans.⁵⁵

Father-Only Families

One of the new aspects of the American family in the last 50 years has been an increase in the number of families maintained by the father without the mother present. Between 1950 and 2000, the number of households with children that were maintained by an unmarried father increased from 229,000 to nearly 1.8 million. An additional 250,000 unmarried fathers lived with their children in someone else’s household, bringing the total count of single fathers to about 2 million for 2000.

While mothers generally get custody of children after divorce, shared physical custody—in which children alternate between their mother’s and father’s households—has become more common in recent years. While divorced fathers still rarely are granted sole custody of their children, shared custody promotes close involvement in all aspects of their children’s lives.⁵⁶

In one of the few analyses of child custody trends, researchers Maria Cancian and Daniel Meyer examined the custody outcomes of divorce cases in Wisconsin between 1986 and 1994.⁵⁷ Their study found little change in the

percentage of cases in which fathers were awarded sole custody of children; fathers got sole custody in about 10 percent of divorce cases throughout the period. The percentage of cases in which mothers were awarded sole custody declined, however, from 80 percent to 74 percent, and the percentage of cases with shared physical custody between the mother and father rose from 7 percent to 14 percent over the period. If trends in other states are similar to Wisconsin's, fathers are becoming more involved in the lives of their children after divorce, not as sole custodians but as increased participants in legal decisions (joint legal custody) and in shared physical custody arrangements.

Grandparenting

One moderating factor in children's well-being in single-parent families can be the presence of grandparents in the home. While the image of single-parent families is usually that of a mother living on her own, trying to meet the needs of her young child or children, many single mothers live with their parents. In 1998, about 17 percent of unmarried mothers with children lived in the homes of their parents, compared with 10 percent of single fathers (see Table 3, page 19). A much higher percentage of single mothers (36 percent) live in their parents' home at some point before their children are grown. Black single mothers with children at home are even more likely to live with a parent at some time. Never-married women are especially likely to live with their parents after they have a baby: 60 percent of white and 72 percent of black single mothers who had a child outside of marriage resided with their parent(s) for a period.⁵⁸

The involvement of grandparents in the lives of their daughters (and sons) who become single parents is receiving increased attention. Court cases are ruling on grandparents' visitation rights, and some welfare reform measures highlight the responsibilities of parents whose

teenage daughters become mothers. The 2000 Census included a new set of questions, mandated as part of welfare reform, on grandparents' support of grandchildren.

Emerging research shows that grandparents play an important role in multigenerational households—which is at odds with the traditional image of grandparents as family members who require financial and personal support. While early studies assumed that financial support flowed from adult children to their parents, more recent research suggests that the more common pattern is for parents to give financial support to their adult children.⁵⁹

In most multigenerational households, the grandparents bring their children and grandchildren into a household the grandparents own or rent. In 1997, three-fourths of multigenerational households were of this type. In nearly one-third of the grandparent-maintained families, grandparents lived with their grandchildren without the children's parents.⁶⁰

Grandparents who own or rent homes that include grandchildren and adult children are younger, healthier, and more likely to be in the labor force than are grandparents who live in a residence owned or rented by their adult children. Grandparents who maintain multigenerational households are also better educated (more likely to have at least a high school education) than grandparents who live in their children's homes.

Parents who maintain a home that includes both dependent children and dependent parents have been referred to as the "sandwich" generation, because they provide economic and emotional support for both the older and younger generations. Although grandparents in parent-maintained households tend to be older, in poorer health, and not as likely to be employed, many are in good health and are, in fact, working. These findings suggest that the burden of maintaining a "sandwich family" may be overstated in the popular press. Many of these grandparents are

The 2000 Census included a new set of questions on grandparents' support of grandchildren.

capable of contributing to the family income and helping with supervision of children.

Well-Being of Single-Parent Families

The well-being of children, mothers, fathers, and grandparents is influenced by the type of family and household in which they live. In general, single-mother families have the lowest incomes while married-couple families have the highest.

Mothers who have never married tend to have many characteristics associated with low income and poverty. First, mothers who have never married are younger than divorced or separated mothers, single fathers, or married parents. Never-married mothers have less education and are less often employed than divorced mothers. The family income of children who reside with a never-married mother is less than one-

fourth that of children in two-parent families (see Table 5). Almost three of every five children who live with a never-married mother are poor. Mothers who never married are much less likely to get child support from the father than are mothers who are divorced or separated. While 60 percent of divorced mothers with custody of children under age 21 received some child support from the children's father, less than 20 percent of never-married mothers reported receiving regular support from their child's father.

Children who live with a divorced mother tend to be much better off financially. Although the family income of divorced mothers is less than one-half the income of two-parent families and rates of poverty are greater, divorced mothers are substantially better educated and more often employed than are mothers who are separated or who never married. Homeownership is also signifi-

Table 5
Socioeconomic Characteristics of Children in One-Parent and Two-Parent Families, 1998

Characteristics of children	All single mothers	Single mothers who are				Two parents
		Divorced	Separated	Never married	Single fathers	
Percent of children by:						
Status of parent(s) in household	24	8	5	10	5	71
Presence of other adults (other than parent(s)) in household	41	42	36	43	59	17
Mean number of siblings at home	1.3	1.3	1.7	1.3	1.0	1.5
Children living with parent who is:						
Younger than age 25	14	3	5	28	10	3
High school graduate	75	85	71	68	77	86
Employed (one parent)/ (both parents)	65	75	66	57	84	60
Employed full-time	51	63	50	42	76	76
Median family income, 1997	\$16,236	\$21,316	\$15,297	\$12,064	\$29,313	\$52,553
As % of two-parent family income	31	41	29	23	56	100
Percent below poverty, 1997	48	36	51	58	20	9
Percent in owned home	37	49	36	26	53	76

Note: Characteristics in this table are weighted by the number of children in each household type.

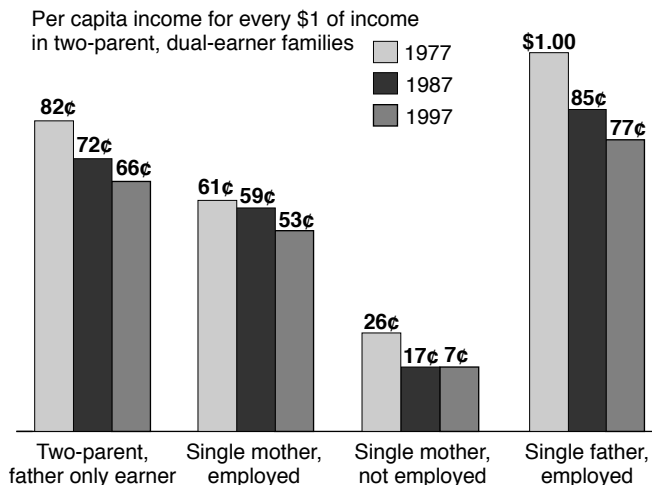
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March 1998 Current Population Survey.

cantly higher among families of divorced mothers, although not as high as among two-parent families.

How do single fathers who live with their children compare with married fathers? CPS data for 1998 show that married fathers were better educated, more likely to be employed full-time year-round, more often working in managerial or professional occupations, more often homeowners, and have higher earnings and income than single fathers. Never-married fathers were far more disadvantaged economically than divorced or separated fathers. In addition to their relatively young age, never-married fathers were the most likely to have dropped out of high school and the least likely to work full-time year-round or work in a managerial or professional job.⁶¹

Figure 8

Per Capita Income of Selected Family Types Relative To Two-Parent, Dual-Earner Families, 1977, 1987, and 1997



Source: L. Casper and S. Bianchi, *Trends in the American Family* (forthcoming).

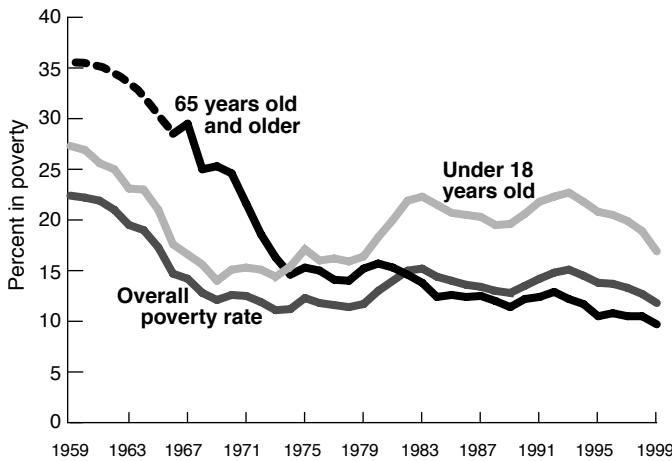
Income and Poverty

The amount of income available to each American depends on the type of family in which he or she lives, and how many people in the family earn incomes. For families with children, the income differences can be stark. Families with two parents who both work earn the highest family incomes, and their family members have the highest per capita incomes. Two-parent families in which just one parent works produce less income, and they have been losing ground to the two-earner families since the 1970s. For every \$1 of per capita income in the two-earner family, the one-earner family—the traditional working dad and stay-at-home mom family—had just 82 cents in 1977, and just 66 cents in 1997 (see Figure 8). Perhaps because they tend to have fewer family members, father-only families supported by the father's income had higher per capita incomes than married-couple families supported by one employed parent. But they too have lost ground to families in which both the mother and father are employed.

Families with two working parents also have higher living expenses than families with a parent who is not employed outside the home, and many question whether the extra income really covers these expenses. Many dual-earner families pay dearly for child care that a parent would provide in a traditional one-earner family. They often spend more on convenience foods, household help, restaurant meals, and clothing than families with a parent at home. Nevertheless, an increasing proportion of two-parent families have both parents in the labor force, and the income-advantage of having two working parents has increased in recent decades. A single-parent family that relies on the mother's income had just 53 cents for every dollar of per capita income in the two-earner families in 1997. The children of single-mother families in which the mother is unemployed face especially bleak economic circumstances: they have just 17 cents for every \$1 of income in the dual-earner families, down from 26 cents in 1977.

Figure 9

Poverty Rates by Age and Overall Poverty Rate, 1959 to 1999



Note: Data unavailable from 1960 to 1966 for those age 65 or older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports* P60–210 (2000); tables B-1, B-2.

Poverty

Household and per capita income assesses how families are doing, *on average*, but an assessment of family economic well-being also requires a look at those families that end up at the bottom of the income distribution and experience substantial material hardship. The U.S. Census Bureau began calculating the poverty rate in 1959 and has tracked it annually ever since. During the 1960s, there was a dramatic decline in poverty rates as the economy expanded and the War on Poverty began (see Figure 9). Rates continued downward until the 1970s, and then began to rise. Poverty rates tended to fluctuate with recessions, reaching a peak in the early 1980s, falling off in the later 1980s, then peaking again in 1993. During the latter half of the 1990s, a period of strong economic performance in the United States, the poverty rate dropped and the number in poverty declined, although the rate has remained above the lows reached in the 1970s.

The chances of falling into poverty vary greatly by family type, the employment status of the parents or grandparents, and the presence of

children. Married-couple households, which have the highest average incomes, have the lowest poverty rates. But their poverty rate is twice as high if they have children than if they do not have children in the home. Families maintained by women with children have the highest poverty rates: in 1997, 42.5 percent of these households were poor, six times the rate for married couples with children.

Families in which both parents work have extremely low poverty rates; the rate was just 2.4 percent in two-parent, dual-earner families in 1997. Poverty rates rise considerably—to almost 15 percent in 1997—if only the father works. Single-parent families with an employed mother had poverty rates of about 30 percent in 1997.

In 1978, sociologist Diana Pearce argued that poverty was “rapidly becoming a female problem,” that poverty was “feminizing.”⁶² She suggested that female-headed families were losing ground vis-a-vis families with an adult male present in the household, noting that the ratio of income in female-headed families to other families had declined between 1950 and 1974. Between 1950 and 1980, poverty seemed to be affecting women disproportionately: The ratio of women’s to men’s poverty rates increased during the period among adult whites and blacks at all ages.⁶³

After 1988, the feminization of poverty appeared to cease among the working-age population, although it may have continued among the elderly. Women’s increased salaries and job opportunities and men’s decreased access to well-paying jobs in the 1980s coincides reasonably well with the halt in the feminization of poverty among working-age adults after 1980.⁶⁴

The feminization of poverty also led to a “juvenilization” of poverty in the late 1970s and 1980s, because many of the women falling into poverty had children at home. Child poverty fell dramatically between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the mid-

1970s.⁶⁵ In 1959, when the official poverty figures were established, 27 percent of children were counted as poor. This declined to about 15 percent by the 1970s. Poverty declined even more sharply for the elderly: from 36 percent in 1959 to about 15 percent in the 1970s. Poverty rates for the elderly and children were about the same. After the mid-1970s, however, trends diverged for children and the elderly. The poverty rate for the elderly fell to about 11 percent by the mid- to late 1990s. Poverty rates for children rose after the mid-1970s. The rates fluctuated between 20 percent and 23 percent throughout most of the 1980s and early 1990s, and dropped below 20 percent only in 1998. Hence, children's relative risks of poverty skyrocketed vis-a-vis the poverty risk of the elderly. In the late 1960s, children's odds of being poor were only about 60 percent of those of the elderly; by the early 1990s, children's poverty rates were almost twice those of the elderly.

Children's Material Hardship

While there is little question that poverty rates have increased among U.S. children, living conditions for children have improved in many ways—especially in the poorest households.⁶⁶ Poor children are increasingly better housed over time: The percentage of low-income children living in homes without a complete bathroom, with leaky roofs, holes in the floor, no central heat, no electric outlets, or no sewer or septic system has declined substantially. Children are less likely to live in crowded housing conditions, though the safety and vibrancy of the neighborhoods surrounding these residences may have deteriorated over time.

Poor children today are also more likely to receive medical attention than in the past. The percentage of children who had not visited a doctor in the previous year declined, especially during the 1970s. Poor children are more likely to be immunized than in the past. Children at the bottom of the income distribution became more likely to live in families that owned an

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The wage gap between men and women has narrowed, but women's wages often must support a larger household, which accentuates the remaining wage inequality.

air conditioner and had telephone service. The improvement in these indicators raises the possibility that trends in official poverty based on money income do not adequately capture trends in material hardship of children. Children's housing, health, and access to certain items such as telephones and air conditioning seem to have improved over time, even among those with the lowest one-fifth of income. The most dramatic improvement took place during the 1970s, but conditions have not deteriorated since then and some indicators (access to air conditioning, for example) suggest continued improvement.⁶⁷

Increase in Family Income Inequality

In 1949, 15 percent of children lived in the poorest 20 percent of families, but by 1996, 28 percent of children were in the poorest 20 percent. The percentage of children in families at the bottom of the income distribution almost doubled over a 50-year period. This widening gap in income for families with and without children paralleled a notable shift in family structure. More children lived in

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The economic well-being of families increasingly depends on whether both parents earn incomes.

mother-only families, which are more likely to have extremely low incomes: 15 percent of families in the bottom fifth of the income distribution had a female householder in 1949, but this rose to 42 percent by 1996. Reflecting this shift toward mother-child families, in 1949, 75 percent of the poorest families had at least one employed person in the household, while in 1996, 62 percent of these families had at least one person working.⁶⁸

At the other end of the income distribution—in the top 20 percent of families—another revolution was underway. The likelihood that married-couple families had earnings from both husband and wife grew tremendously. The likelihood of a wife being employed outside the home rose for married-couple families at all income levels. In 1949, for example, 32 percent of married-couple families in the richest 20 percent of families had an employed wife; this rose to 81 percent in 1996.⁶⁹

By any measure, income inequality has grown in the United States in recent decades. In 1970, the bottom 20 percent of households controlled only 4.1 percent of all household

income, whereas the top 20 percent of households controlled 43.3 percent of income. By 1999, the gap had widened—the income share of the poorest 20 percent of families dropped to 3.6 percent, while it expanded to 49.4 percent for the families in the top 20 percent.

Why has the gap between the poorest and wealthiest families increased? The answer is complex and involves a mix of factors having to do with how well certain types of workers are doing in the labor force and with marriage and living arrangements. Inequality in the earnings distribution increased as the earnings of less-educated workers fell behind those of college-educated workers. Families relying on earnings from high school-educated (or less educated) householders are increasingly disadvantaged. The increase in single-parent households during this same period only amplified the income inequality.⁷⁰

Economics and Changes in Family Life

Changing family structure and changing economic opportunities of men and women interweave in complex ways to widen the gap in family and household income. Shifts in family structure and economic change interact and affect each other. A relatively large body of theory and empirical research assesses the ways in which economic changes may have promoted such changes in the family as later marriage, more cohabitation, less marriage (especially among the African American population), and more divorce and marital separation.

There have been two main thrusts in the literature on the economic causes of changes in marriage timing and divorce. First are theories that place major emphasis on male economic opportunities as determinants of when couples marry, whether couples marry at all, and whether marriages are disrupted. The second set of theories emphasizes the role of women's enhanced labor market opportunities in the delay in first mar-

riage and the increase in marital disruption. Some argue that women's labor market opportunities should encourage marriage because women's high earnings may make them more "attractive" as a marital partner. Others assert that women's employment inhibits marriage and erodes marital stability to the extent that women's increased opportunities for employment and enhanced earnings make them more independent and less inclined toward marriage.

Men's breadwinning ability speeds the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Men with higher earnings are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce.⁷¹ Married men earn more than unmarried men, whether because higher-earning men are more likely to marry or because marriage changes the behaviors of men in ways that enhance labor market productivity. Men's unemployment is associated with an increased likelihood of divorce.⁷² All this is evidence for the importance of men's employment and earnings in facilitating marriage and enhancing marital stability.

The alternative hypothesis, that women's employment destabilizes marriage, is prominent in both sociological and economic theories of marital instability. Under this hypothesis, women's decreased specialization in childrearing and household maintenance, coupled with their increased labor force participation, reduce the benefits from marriage for men and women.⁷³ The effect of a wife's increased economic resources on marital disruption has been termed the "independence effect." Because of this effect, women who can support themselves and their children, either through their own earnings or via welfare payments, would have less incentive to marry and find it easier to exit unsatisfactory marriages.

The independence effect may delay marriage as men and women take longer to search for a good match when the job market is unstable, but there is little evidence that men or women are rejecting marriage because of women's increased economic

opportunities.⁷⁴ The relationship among employment, earnings, and marriage is quite similar for men and women: Higher earnings and better job prospects enhance the likelihood of marriage, although the effects are larger and more consistent for men's than for women's employment and earnings.⁷⁵ Evidence relating a wife's greater economic independence to an increased likelihood of divorce is mixed. Studies that find that the wife's relative contribution to family income or her wages are positively associated with increased risks of marital disruption are counterbalanced by studies that find no relationship between a wife's economic independence and marital disruption.⁷⁶

Just as economic conditions affect who marries and divorces, decisions about whether to marry or remain married have economic consequences. The wide gap in economic conditions of husband and wife after divorce or separation has garnered considerable attention among the American public, and may affect the decision to separate, especially if dependent children are involved. When a couple with children separates, the children usually live with their mother. The mother is likely to have a lower salary than her husband, but much higher living expenses, especially if she must pay for child care. Many mothers do not receive regular child support. Fathers, however, may reduce their living costs when they separate from their family, while maintaining the same salary.

For couples who had children and who separated in the late 1980s or early 1990s, economic well-being declined for mothers by 36 percent, while the financial status of fathers improved by 28 percent. One-fifth of mothers improved their standard of living, but two-thirds of fathers benefited financially from the separation. In poor families, fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to rise out of poverty after marital separation. Only one-quarter of fathers who were poor when they separated remained in poverty, compared with almost three-quarters of mothers. Similarly, among

In poor families, fathers are more likely than mothers to rise out of poverty after marital separation.

Table 6

Hours and Weeks of Paid Work for All Women, Married Women, and Married Women With Young Children, 1978 and 1998

	All Women			Married women			Married women with children under age 6		
	1978	1998	Change 1978-1998	1978	1998	Change 1978-1998	1978	1998	Change 1978-1998
All women, ages 25 to 54									
Total annual hours	1,002	1,415	413	884	1,339	455	583	1,094	511
Average weeks worked last year	27.5	36.8	9.3	25.2	35.8	10.6	17.5	30.9	13.4
Employed 1+ weeks (percent)	66	79	14	62	78	16	51	71	20
Employed full-time, year round (percent)	32	50	18	27	46	19	14	35	20

Source: Authors' tabulations based on March supplements of the Current Population Surveys in 1978 and 1998.

couples whose income was above the poverty line before the separation, 19 percent of mothers compared with 3 percent of fathers fell below poverty as a result of the separation.⁷⁷

In sum, a complex set of interconnections among changes in family structure, decisions adults make about employment, and conditions in the labor market and the larger economy constrain, or at least set the context, for how well families do economically.

Blending Work and Family

A little over two decades ago, sociologist Rosabeth Kanter pointed out that, despite the “myth of separate worlds” of work and family, there were a myriad of ways in which work “spilled” over into family life.⁷⁸ The influence of work on family continues to be strong, probably stronger than the influence of family on work. Financial rewards from work define the opportunities families have and, hence, men, women, and children are called upon to adapt home life to the work schedules of the adults within the home. The dramatic increase in mother’s labor force participation, particularly married mothers, has meant that more married

couples commit more than 40 hours a week to market work because now both husband and wife are working for pay. A sizable reallocation of time is underway in American households with children.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of women’s labor force participation over the past 20 years is how steadily the trends have moved upward.⁷⁹ In 1978, almost 66 percent of women in the prime “work and family” ages (25 to 54 years) worked during the year; this increased to 79 percent in 1998 (see Table 6). The percentage of women in these ages who worked full-time year-round increased from 32 percent to 50 percent between 1978 and 1998. The average annual hours of paid employment for all women increased 40 percent over the period, from 1,002 hours to 1,415 hours. Most of the increase occurred because more women were working in 1998 rather than because working women dramatically increased the number of hours they worked during the year.

In recent decades, the most dramatic increases in labor force participation have been among married women, particularly those with young children. In 1998, 71 percent of married mothers of children under age 6 did some work for pay during the year. But just 35 percent worked full-time year-round, which means that

nearly two-thirds of married mothers of preschoolers did not work full time in 1998. Most married mothers have not traded raising their own children for paid work. Although U.S. mothers of young children are much more likely to work in the 1990s than they were in the 1970s, which implies an increasing attachment of women to market work, married mothers tend to scale back their hours during their children's preschool years.

Housework

How have American men and women fulfilled their childrearing and job responsibilities, given women's increased hours in the labor market? One strategy has been to do less housework—or to do it faster. In 1965, women spent about 30 hours weekly doing unpaid household work, which included such core tasks as cooking meals, meal clean-up, housecleaning, and laundry, as well as more discretionary or less time-consuming tasks such as outdoor chores and repairs, gardening, animal care, and bill paying. By 1995,

women spent just 17.5 hours per week on these tasks (see Table 7). While U.S. men spent much more time on household tasks in the 1990s than in the 1960s, they did not make up for the decline in women's time on housework. Women averaged 6.1 times more hours of housework than men in 1965, but this ratio fell to 1.8 in 1995 primarily because women spent so much less time on these chores. Men increased their time on weekly household chores from 4.9 hours to 10.0 hours between 1965 and 1995.

About half of the 12-hour decline in women's average weekly hours of housework could be attributed to the fact that more women were employed and fewer were married and living with children in the household in 1995 than in 1965. More specifically, if women in 1995 had the same characteristics as those in 1965—the same low rates of labor force participation and higher rates of marriage and greater numbers of children—the decline in hours would be about six hours per week, not 12 hours.⁸⁰

Table 7
Average Hours Spent on Housework by Women and Men, Ages 25 to 64, 1965 and 1995

Household task	Hours per week				Ratio of women's hours to men's	
	Women		Men		1965	1995
	1965	1995	1965	1995		
Total housework	30.0	17.5	4.9	10.0	6.1	1.8
Core housework	26.9	13.9	2.3	3.8	11.9	3.7
Cooking meals	9.3	4.6	1.1	1.6	8.8	2.8
Meal clean-up	4.5	0.7	0.5	0.1	9.9	5.4
Housecleaning	7.2	6.7	0.5	1.7	15.5	3.8
Laundry, ironing	5.8	1.9	0.3	0.3	22.1	6.9
Other housework	3.1	3.6	2.6	6.2	1.2	0.6
Outdoor chores	0.3	0.8	0.4	1.9	0.7	0.4
Repairs, maintenance	0.4	0.7	1.0	1.9	0.4	0.4
Garden, animal care	0.6	0.8	0.2	1.0	2.4	0.8
Bills, other	1.8	1.3	0.9	1.5	2.0	0.9
Number of women/men	579	493	469	359		

Source: S. Bianchi, J. Robinson, L. Sayer, and M. Milkie, *Social Forces* 79 (September 2000): 192-228.

Home Alone? Children Caring for Themselves

Many people believe that changes in women's family and work patterns have resulted in an increasing number of children being left to care for themselves. The "latchkey kid phenomenon" invoked images of droves of children heading home from school sporting house keys on chains around their necks, letting themselves into empty houses where danger lurked around every corner. Such disturbing images were advanced by press reports of extraordinary situations in which children home alone were harmed or when parents were blatantly irresponsible. In 1992, for example, national attention was focused on the arrest of David and Sharon Schoo when they returned home to Chicago from a 10-day trip to sunny Acapulco. Their crime? Leaving their daughters, Diana, age 4, and Nicole, age 9, to spend Christmas alone without adult supervision. Concern for the well-being of children in self-care spurred debates among policymakers and researchers, as well as among parents. Many worry that while self-care may be fine for some children—presumably for those who are more mature and in a safe environment—it may be harmful for others.

In 1995, 15 percent (5.2 million) of children ages 5 to 13 were reported to be in self-care regularly during a typical week.¹ But most of these were older children; very few of the youngest children were in self-care on a regular basis. Just 3 percent of children ages 5 to 7 were in self-care, compared with 33 percent of children ages 11 to 13. And children in self-care spend relatively little time caring for themselves—less than four hours per week for children ages 5 to 7; four hours per week for those ages 8 to 10; and six hours per week for those ages 11 to 13. Self-care is generally not the primary type of child care for grade school children, which explains why children spend relatively few hours on their own.² The percentage of children in self-care did not increase in the 1990s.³

How do latchkey kids fare? Children in self-care are similar to adult-supervised children on several key developmental dimensions such as independence, self-esteem, locus of control, social adjustment, or interpersonal relationships.⁴ These findings may show that parents select self-care for children who are more mature and better behaved, rather than any effect of self-care on children. Research has also linked self-care to both fearfulness and anxiety and to antisocial and headstrong behavior.⁵ Again, these findings cannot distinguish whether self-care causes these problems or whether children in self-care were more fearful, anxious, or antisocial than other children before they began caring for themselves. Research has not been able to determine whether self-care *causes* negative outcomes for children.

Other research suggests that the effects of self-care on children depend on whether there is some form of informal adult supervision, and how children spend their time when they are alone. Some children may have informal adult supervision, such as when they go to a friend's house or when a parent checks on them by phone, and these differences can have implications for children's well-being. Children who have more adult supervision are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior.⁶ Children who stay at home while in self-care are less likely to have behavior problems than those who "hang out" with their friends.

The cost and availability of alternative forms of child care are related to whether parents choose self-care for their children.⁷ Children whose parents work full time and older children who lived with one parent are much more likely than other children to be in self-care. And children are more likely to care for themselves if they live in areas where alternative child care is expensive than where the cost is low.⁸ Children who are older, more mature, and presumably better able to care for themselves, are also more likely to be

in self-care, regardless of other factors. And finally, young children were more likely to be in self-care if their parents perceived that their neighborhoods were of good quality—with safe places for their children to play outside.

What do these findings imply for the latchkey kid phenomenon and for the well-being of children? As mothers spend more hours in the work force, more children probably will need to care for themselves. These findings are particularly salient given that welfare reform is moving single parents with dependent children off welfare and into jobs. Because many of these mothers may not have other affordable child-care options, many are likely to leave their children in self-care.

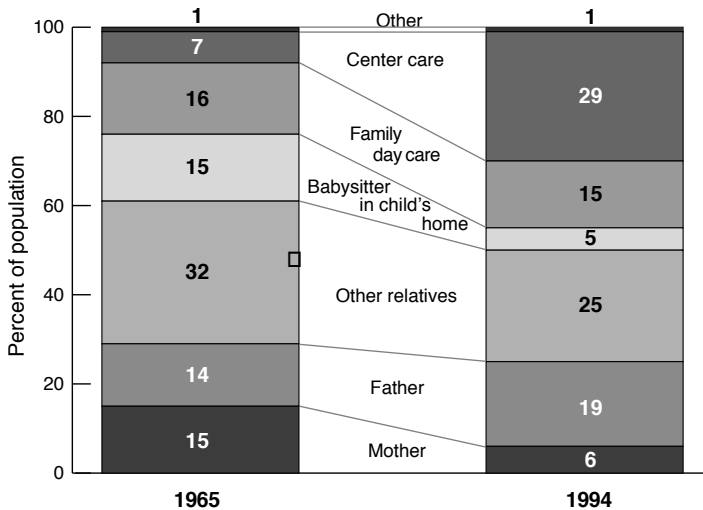
Several policies could provide low-income parents alternatives to leaving their children in self-care when it might be deleterious for the child. Providing low-income or welfare parents with child-care subsidies and school-based enrichment programs, for example, would reduce the out-of-pocket cost of child care and may deter parents from leaving young children unsupervised. And enrichment activities may benefit young children in other ways and help prepare them for a time when they can responsibly care for themselves.

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Figure 10

Trends in Child-Care Arrangements for Preschool Children Whose Mothers are Employed, 1965 and 1994



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, June 1965 supplement of the Current Population Survey and the 1994 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Child Care

Another change that has accompanied women's movement into the workplace is the type of child-care arrangements mothers and fathers use. Between 1965 and 1994, the use of center care for preschool-age children increased, with a corresponding decline in mothers caring for their children while they worked, and care by other relatives and babysitters (see Figure 10). In 1965, just 7 percent of preschoolers of employed mothers were in center care as their primary arrangement; by 1994, 29 percent were in center care. The proportion of preschoolers who were in family day care—usually cared for by a nonrelative in a private home—increased until the mid-1980s and then declined sharply (see Box 4, page 34). Care by fathers increased from 14 percent to 19 percent.

Attitudes About Women's Work and Family

Attitudinal data suggest that Americans have become much more sup-

portive of paid work for mothers but that they are still concerned about the consequences for children of combining paid work and childrearing. Responses to the General Social Survey between 1977 and 1994 show that the percentage of Americans, men or women, who disapprove of a married woman working even if her husband can support her has declined from one-third to less than one-fifth. In 1977, more women than men (61 percent and 53 percent, respectively) agreed with the statement: "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself." In 1994, only a little more than 20 percent of both men and women agreed with that statement. Americans were much less likely to agree with the traditional division of labor in the home in 1994 than they were in 1977, but 38 percent of men and 33 percent of women still agreed in 1994 that it is better if a man achieves outside the home and a woman cares for home and family.⁸¹

Questions about children also show a dramatic change over time, with a smaller percentage of respondents thinking children will suffer if a mother is employed outside the home. But Americans still display a surprisingly large gender difference and express considerable ambivalence when asked about the wisdom of combining mothering and paid work. In 1994, almost 40 percent of men but about one-quarter of women felt that a working mother cannot have as warm and secure a relationship with a child as a mother who is not employed. And one-half of men and more than one-third of women still feel that a preschool child is likely to suffer if a mother works for pay.

Families use several strategies to balance paid work and childrearing. First, as women increase their market work, they seem to be shedding unpaid housework at a rapid rate. Second, despite the increase in women's employment, many mothers still do not work full-time year-round

How Involved Are Fathers? It Depends on Whom You Ask...

Most of the research on parenting has surveyed mothers, but not fathers. The recent surge of interest in the father's role has promoted surveys of both parents, which have, incidentally, documented substantial discrepancies between men's and women's reports about their relative involvement in raising their children. A 1999 University of Maryland study explored these discrepancies by asking a sample of mothers and fathers about five domains of parenting: discipline, play, emotional support, monitoring of activities and playmates, and basic care.

Parents were asked: "Ideally, who should discipline children, mainly the mother, mainly the father, or both equally?" Similarly, respondents were also asked: "In parenting your children, who disciplines the children, mainly you, mainly the child's father/mother, or both parents equally?" Questions were repeated for each domain of childrearing and were asked both of parents who currently had children in the home

as well as of parents who had adult children.

There is overwhelming consensus between men and women that parenting should be shared equally across most domains, as shown in the figure on the left. For four of the areas—disciplining children, playing with children, providing emotional support, and monitoring activities and friends—at least 90 percent of men and women say these parenting domains should be shared equally. More than two-thirds of men and women say that caring for children's needs should be shared equally by mothers and fathers.

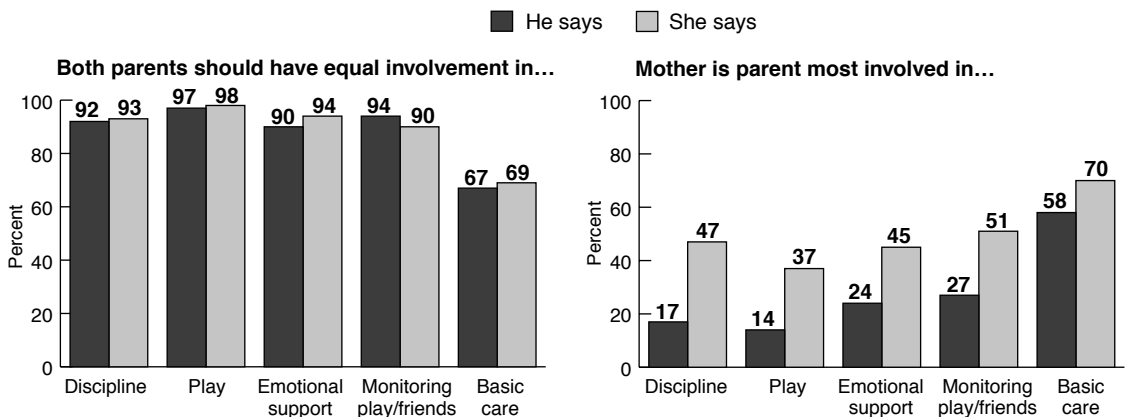
Parents' reports of actual involvement, however, do not agree (figure on the right). Mothers are far more likely than fathers to report that the mother is the main disciplinarian of children (47 percent, compared with 17 percent), and that it is mainly the mother who plays with children (37 percent, compared with 14 percent). Similarly, mothers are far more likely than fathers

to report that the mother provides most of the emotional support of children (45 percent compared with 24 percent) and that the mother is the one who mainly monitors their children's activities (51 percent compared with 27 percent). More mothers than fathers believe that mothers are the main caretakers of children (70 percent vs. 58 percent). Overall, fathers are much more likely to hold the view that domains are shared equally with their partners, while mothers are much more likely to report that they are primarily the ones involved in rearing their children.

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Who Should Do vs. Who Does Most Parenting?



Source: M. Milkie, S.M. Bianchi, M. Mattingly, and J. Robinson, "Fathers' Involvement in Childrearing: Ideals, Realities, and Their Relationship to Parental Well-Being." (Revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Portland, OR, May 18–21, 2000.)

when their children are preschool-age. And, although there has been a substantial shift in attitudes toward more acceptance of working women and mothers, many Americans are uncertain about the effect of women's paid work on children's well-being.

Many individuals feel they have struck a reasonable balance between paid work and family, and interestingly, men and women are equally likely to report success in their balancing act. Yet there continue to be large gender differences in work-family balance. Men are more likely to take on additional work if they feel the need for additional income for their families, and more likely to miss a family event to fulfill work obligations. Women are far more likely than men to reduce their hours of market work to give more time to childrearing.⁸² The implications these gendered responses to work-family balance have—for men's "caring" selves, for women's labor market success, and for children's lives—are the major issues and challenges ahead (see Box 5, page 37).

Finally, with the aging of the population, meeting needs of parents as well as children will challenge more of tomorrow's working families. The increase in the number of elderly also is important for the public policy debates that will take place in the coming years. Work-family initiatives may not be enacted without support from those who no longer juggle

work and family as intensely as in the past, that is, support from grandparents as well as parents.

Conclusion

Families change in response to economic conditions, cultural change, and demographics such as the aging of the population. The United States may have gone through a particularly tumultuous period in the last few decades, resulting in rapid change in family behaviors. Families have emerged more diverse, with boundaries among family types more blurred than in the past. Whether U.S. families have now adjusted to the dramatic social changes that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century and have reached a new equilibrium, only time will tell.

Economic fortunes and family relationships remain intertwined. Issues growing in importance are how families will balance paid work with childrearing, what income inequality will do to the fortunes of the next generation, whether fathers will increasingly play a nurturing role given the growing similarity in mothers' and fathers' breadwinning roles, and how relationships between the generations will be altered by the increase in life expectancy. Families have been amazingly adaptive and resilient in the past; one would expect them to be so in the future.

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Child care: www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/childcare.html;
Households and families: www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html.
- Population Reference Bureau websites include articles and data on U.S. family and other population topics at: www.prb.org.
- Ameristat, maintained by the Population Reference Bureau and the Social Science Data Analysis Network, provides summaries—in graphics and text—of the demographic characteristics of the U.S. population: www.ameristat.org.
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