Living Arrangements of Children in the United States Over Time

The proportion of U.S. children who live in a single parent household has more than doubled since 1970.

Headline/Trends

The percentage of children under the age of 18 who live with two parents decreased steadily for several decades (from approximately 85% in 1970 to approximately 68% by the mid-1990s). Beginning in the mid-1990s, this decrease leveled off and the proportion of U.S. children who live with two married parents has since remained at approximately 68 percent. Despite relatively little change over the last decade, the proportion of U.S. children who live in a single parent household has more than doubled since 1970, from approximately 12 percent to 28 percent.

While the majority of U.S. children reside in two-parent homes, the likelihood of living with two married parents has decreased since 1970 (from 85% to just 68% in 2004). The proportion of children growing up in single-parent households has more than doubled in recent decades, especially among mother-only households, which have increased from 11 percent in 1970 to 23 percent in 2004. The proportion of children living in father-only homes is small compared to the proportion living in mother-only homes, but this type of living arrangement has increased fivefold since 1970, from one percent to five percent. There have also been slight increases in the proportion of children growing up in homes with relatives other than their parents (from 2% in 1970 to 3% in 2004) and in the proportion of children who live with non-relatives (0.7% in 1970 versus 1% in 2004), but these arrangements are still far less common than living with one or with two parents.

Importance

A large body of research provides evidence that the structure and composition of children’s households affect their outcomes later in life, with children faring best when raised by two married parents in a low-conflict relationship. Children who grow up in single-parent homes or homes without either parent are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, to have lower educational achievement, lower social and psychological well-being, to leave home at an early age, to engage in early initiation into sexual activity, and to become adolescent parents. The negative consequences of being raised in a single-parent home stretch into adulthood, with higher rates of adult idleness, lower rates of marital success, and poorer health outcomes. On average, the presence of a step-parent does not seem to alleviate these negative consequences; children in two-parent step-families tend to have outcomes that are similar to those of children who are raised in single-parent homes. Single-parent households tend to have fewer economic resources and more time constraints than two-parent families, which may negatively influence child outcomes. Children raised by single parents are also
more likely to experience high numbers of transitions in living arrangements, which is also associated with an increased risk for poorer outcomes. Therefore, childhood living arrangements are important predictors of subsequent well-being.

**Differences by Subgroup**

In general, trends seen in living arrangements among U.S. children are evident across different racial/ethnic subgroups, with fewer children over time from all racial and ethnic backgrounds growing up in a household with two married parents (approximately 10% less in each subgroup since 1980). However, black children are far more likely to grow up in single-parent households compared with white and Hispanic children. In 1980, less than half of black children in the U.S. (42 percent) were raised in two-parent households, compared to more than three-quarters of white and Hispanic children who lived with two married parents. In 2004, differences between groups are similar, with only 35 percent of black children growing up in two-parent homes, compared to 65 percent of Hispanic children and 74 percent of white children. Black children are also more likely (9%) to live in homes without either parent compared to Hispanic (5%) and white children (3%).

**Definition**

Two-parent households are defined in the CPS as those with two married co-resident parents. The CPS does not distinguish between two-parent biological households and other types of two-parent households (e.g., stepparent, adoptive parent). Single-parent (mother-only and father-only) households are primar-

The percentage of U.S. children living in two-parent households has decreased steadily over time, while the proportion living in single parent homes has risen and the proportions living with other relatives or non-relatives has remained fairly stable.

![Trends in Children's Living Arrangements, 1970-2004](image-url)
ily those in which one adult parent resides alone with a child(ren), but may include a second cohabiting adult who is not married to the parent. Other relative households are those in which children reside with related persons other than their parents, such as grandparents. Non-relative homes are those in which children are raised without the presence of parents or blood relatives (e.g., foster homes).

Data Source


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total # of children under age 18</th>
<th>Two-parent household</th>
<th>One-Parent Household</th>
<th>Living with other relatives</th>
<th>Living with non-relatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total one-parent household</td>
<td>Mother-only household</td>
<td>Father-only household</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>73,205</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>28.0</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>69.1</td>
<td>26.7</td>
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<td>1995</td>
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<td>68.7</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>23.5</td>
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<td>1990</td>
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<td>72.5</td>
<td>24.7</td>
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<td>1985</td>
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<td>73.9</td>
<td>23.4</td>
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<td>1980</td>
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<td>76.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
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<td>1975</td>
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<td>80.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>69,162</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1. Note that the data shown are from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS), which does not distinguish between two-parent biological households and other types of two-parent households (e.g., stepparent, adoptive parent). According to data from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the majority of these children (90%) live with either two married biological parents or two married adoptive parents. Ten percent (10%) lived with one biological/adoptive parent and a stepparent, in most cases (83%) consisting of a biological mother and stepfather combination. See: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. America’s children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2005. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.


15. Data are from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, which did not collect data by Hispanic ethnicity until survey year 1980.

16. Beginning in 2002, racial categories in the CPS were revised and estimates here include only those persons who identified themselves with a single racial category. Note that persons of Hispanic origin can belong to any racial group.


18. Two-parent households may consist of biological, adoptive, or step-parent combinations.

19. Because the CPS does not historically account for cohabiting relationships, in some cases, children may live in homes with both parents but be classified as living in single-parent homes because those parents are unmarried.