

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-1990s¹). 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.² Children who grow up in single-parent homes or homes without either parent are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems,³ to have lower educational achievement,⁴ lower social and psychological well-being,⁵ to leave home at an early age,⁶ to engage in early initiation into sexual activity,⁷ and to become adolescent parents.⁸ 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,⁹ and poorer health outcomes¹⁰. 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.¹¹ Single-parent households tend to have fewer economic resources and more time constraints than two-parent families,¹² which may negatively influence child outcomes.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Therefore, childhood living arrangements are important predictors of subsequent well-being.

Differences by Subgroup

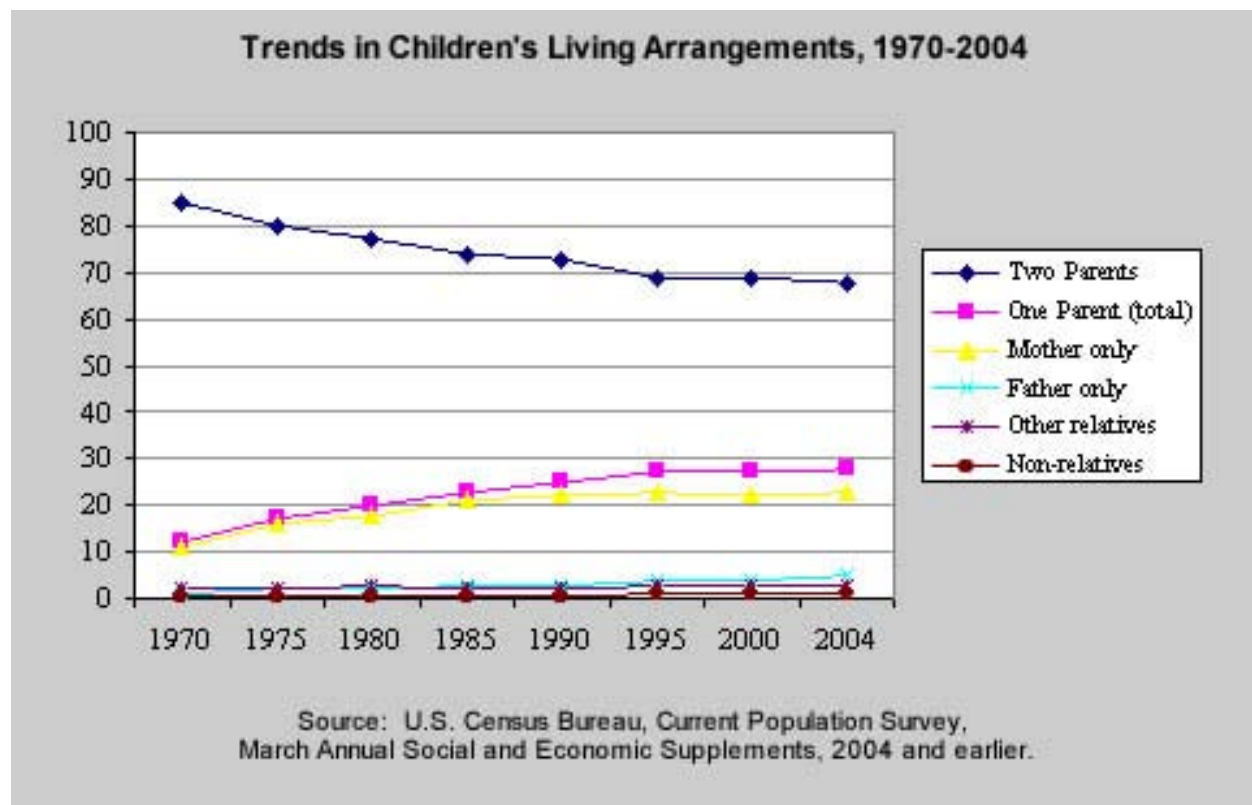
In general, trends seen in living arrangements among U.S. children are evident across different racial/ethnic subgroups, with fewer children over time from all racial and ethnic backgrounds growing up in a household with two married parents (approximately 10% less in each subgroup since 1980¹⁵). However, black children are far more likely to grow up in single-parent households compared with white and Hispanic children.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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).¹⁸ 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.



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.¹⁹ 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

U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2004 and earlier.²⁰

Table 1. Children’s Living Arrangements in the United States, 1970-2004.

Year	Total # of children under age 18	HOUSEHOLD LIVING ARRANGEMENTS					
		Two-parent household	One-Parent Household			Living with other relatives	Living with non-relatives
			Total one-parent household	Mother-only household	Father-only household		
2004	73,205	67.8	28.0	23.3	4.6	3.2	1.1
2000	72,012	69.1	26.7	22.4	4.2	3.0	1.2
1995	70,254	68.7	27.0	23.5	3.5	3.3	1.0
1990	64,137	72.5	24.7	21.6	3.1	2.2	0.5
1985	62,475	73.9	23.4	20.9	2.5	2.1	0.6
1980	63,427	76.7	19.7	18.0	1.7	3.1	0.6
1975	66,087	80.3	17.0	15.5	1.5	2.1	0.5
1970	69,162	85.2	11.9	10.8	1.1	2.2	0.7

* Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1970-2004.

- 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.

2. Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62(4), 1269-1287.; Child Trends. (2002). Charting parenthood: A statistical portrait of fathers and mothers in America. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
3. Child Trends. (2004). Early child development in a social context: A chartbook. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
4. Brown, S.S. & Eisenberg, L. (1995). The best intentions: Unintended pregnancy and the well-being of children and families. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.; Baydar, N. (1995). Consequences for children of their birth planning status. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 27(6), 228-234 & 245; Brown, S.S. & Eisenberg, L. (1995).
5. Amato, P. R. (2001). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. In R. M. Milardo (Ed.), *Understanding families into the new millennium: A decade in review* (pp. 488-506). Lawrence, KS: National Council on Family Relations.
6. Cherlin, A. J., Kiernan, K. E., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (1995). Parental divorce in childhood and demographic outcomes in young adulthood. *Demography*, 32(3), 299-318.
7. Kiernan, K. E., & Hobcraft, J. (1997). Parental divorce during childhood: Age at first intercourse, partnership, and parenthood. *Population Studies*, 51(1), 41-55.
8. Cherlin, Kiernan and Chase-Lansdale (1995).
9. Teachman, J. D. (2004). The childhood living arrangements of children and the characteristics of their marriages. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25(1), 86-111.
10. Dawson, D. A. (1991). Family structure and children's health and well-being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53(3), 573-584.
11. Moore, K. A., Jekielek, S. M., & Emig, C. (2002). Marriage from a child's perspective: How does family structure affect children, and what can we do about it? (Research Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.; Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2001). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. In R. M. Milardo (Ed.), *Understanding families into the new millennium: A decade in review* (pp. 507-526). Lawrence, KS: National Council on Family Relations.
12. Child Trends. (2002).
13. Ventura, S.J., Martin, J.A., Curtin, S.C., Menacker, F. & Hamilton, B.E. (2001). Births: final data for 1999. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 49(1). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.; Brown, S.S. & Eisenberg, L. (1995).; Baydar, N. (1995).
14. Albrecht, C., & Teachman, J. D. (2003). Childhood living arrangements and the risk of premarital intercourse. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24(7), 867-894.

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.
17. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1980-2004. Detailed tables available on the U.S. Census Bureau's website.
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.
20. The Census Bureau collects annual data from samples that are representative of the civilian noninstitutionalized population ages 16 years and older in the United States (Data available online from the U.S. Census Bureau's website). ; See also: U.S. Census Bureau, & U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2002, March). Current Population Survey – Design and methodology. Technical Paper 63, Revised. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.