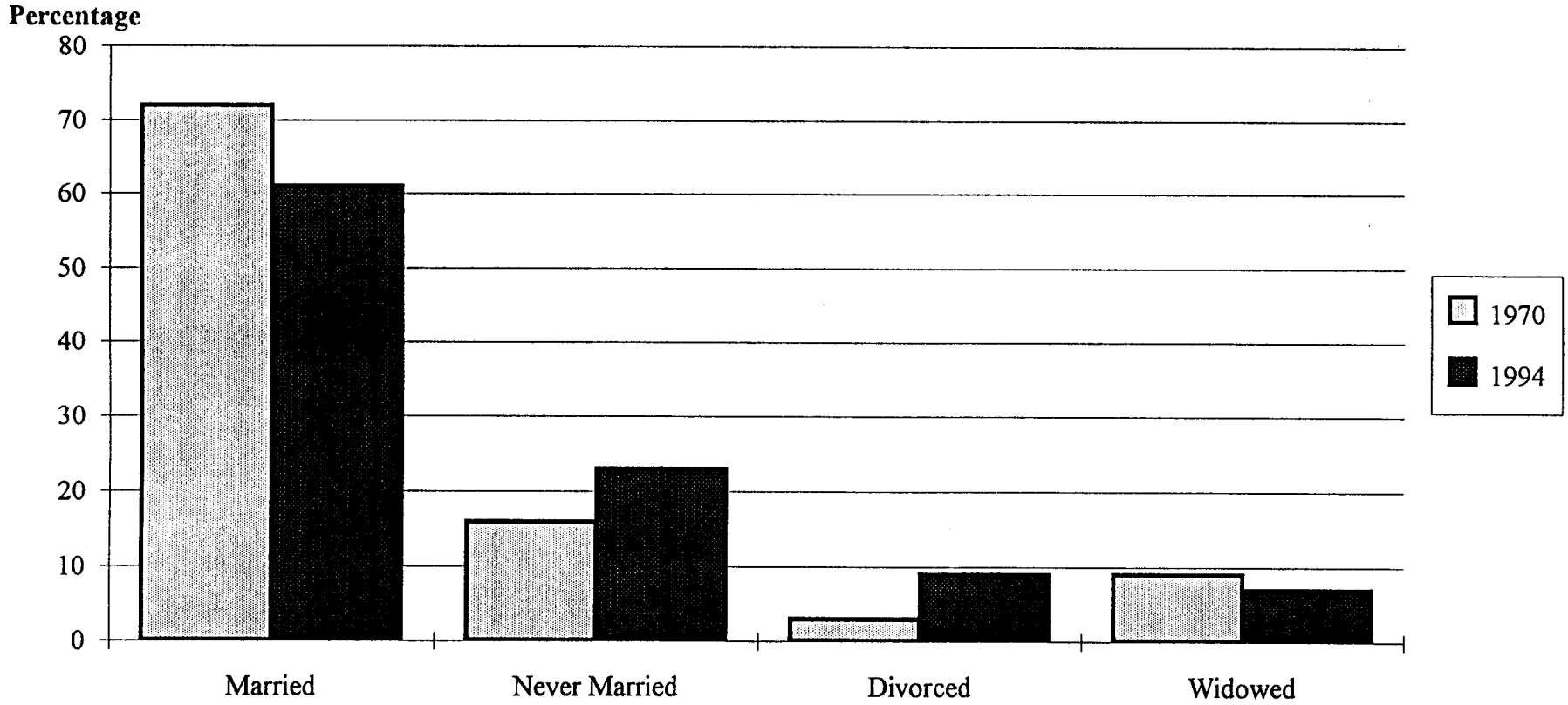
Family Composition

Marital Status of Americans 18 Years and Over: 1970 and 1994



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996

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Households, Families, and Children:

A 30-Year Perspective

by Terry Lugaila

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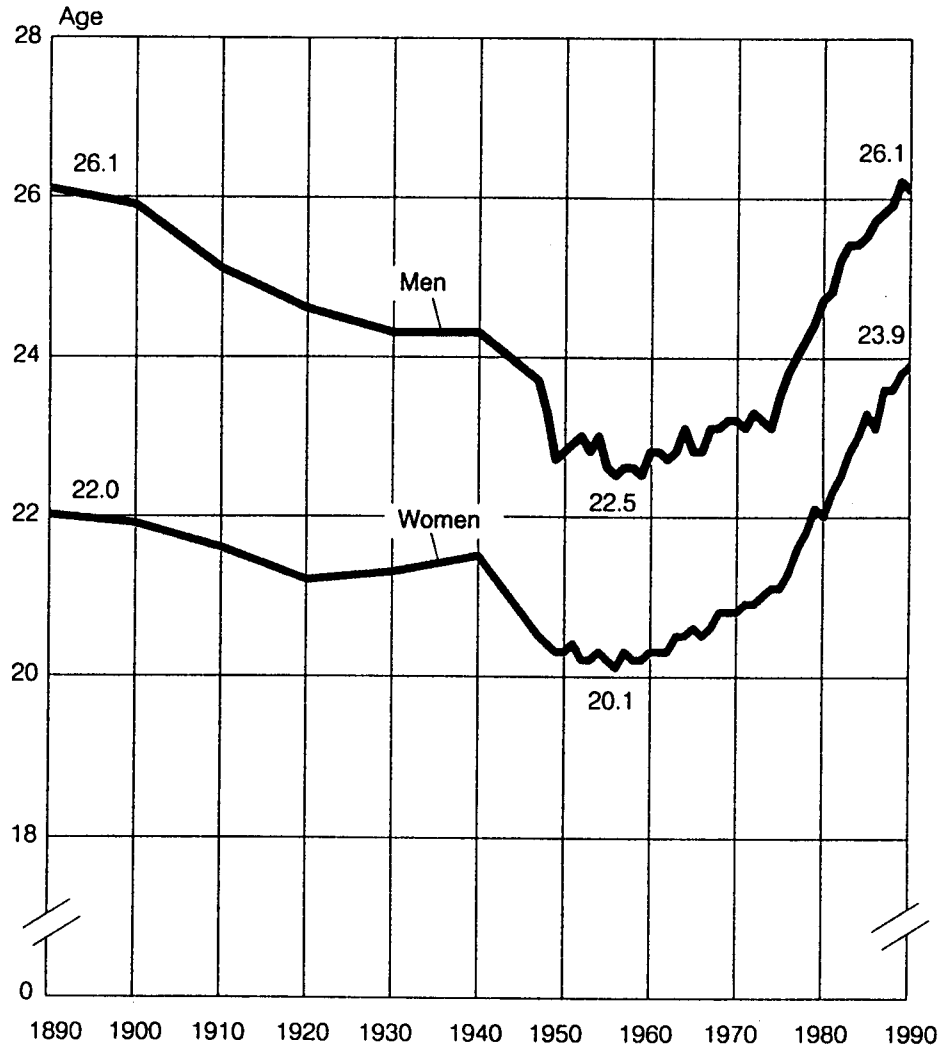
Age at First Marriage Increases

In the last several years, women have had the highest median age at first marriage (23.9) since data were first collected on this subject in 1890. For men the median age of first marriage in 1990 (26.1) equaled that in 1890. For both men and women, the median ages at first marriage were lowest in the mid-1950's and have been rising since. The median has increased 3 full years for both men and women in the past two decades.

Figure 2.
Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to 1990



Likelihood of First Marriage Before a Premaritally Conceived First Birth Declines

For women with a premarital pregnancy that results in their first birth, the likelihood that their first marriage will occur before the birth has decreased greatly during the last 20 years. In the 1960-64 and 1965-69 periods, of all women whose first birth was conceived premaritally, 52 percent married for the first time before the birth. This percentage has decreased by one-half to 27 percent for the 1985-89 period. The increasing social acceptance of never-married mothers and the desire to avoid an unstable marriage may be involved in the decline of women marrying before the birth of their first child.

Figure 6.
Women 15 to 34 Years With a Premaritally Conceived First Child — Percent Marrying Before the Birth of Child: 1960-64 to 1985-89

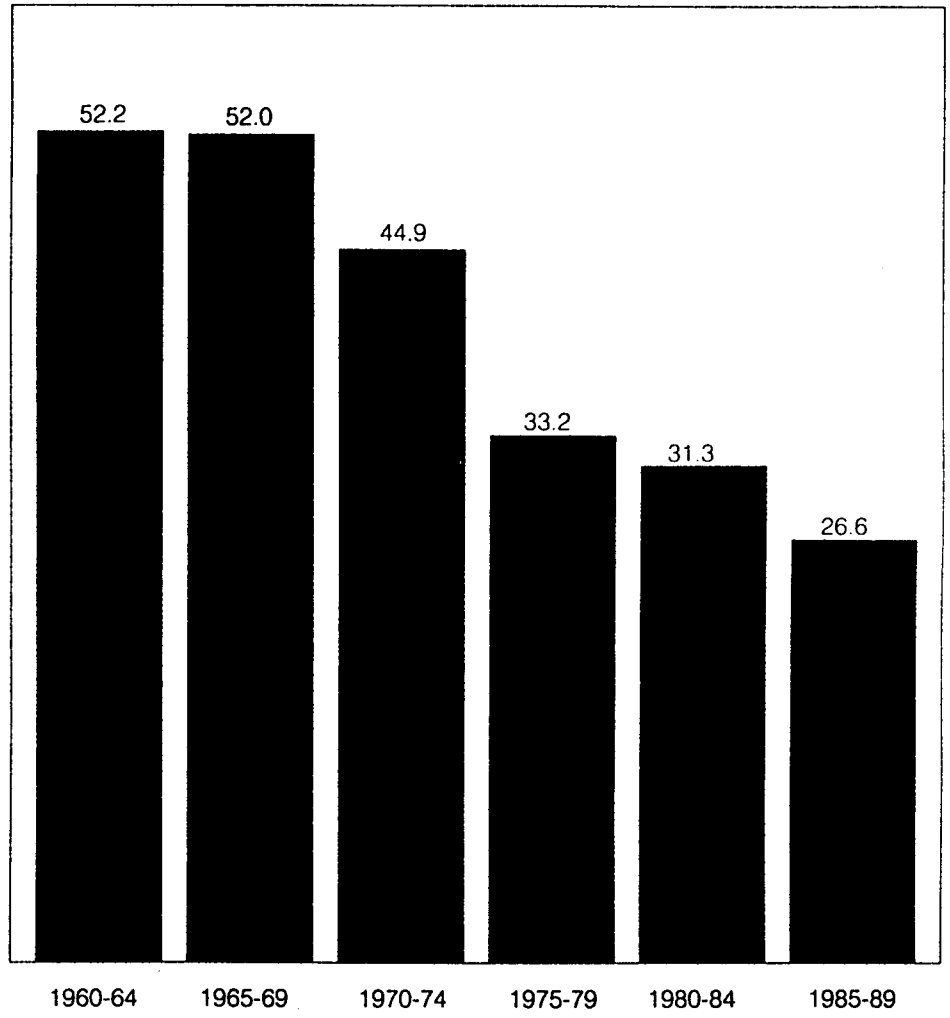
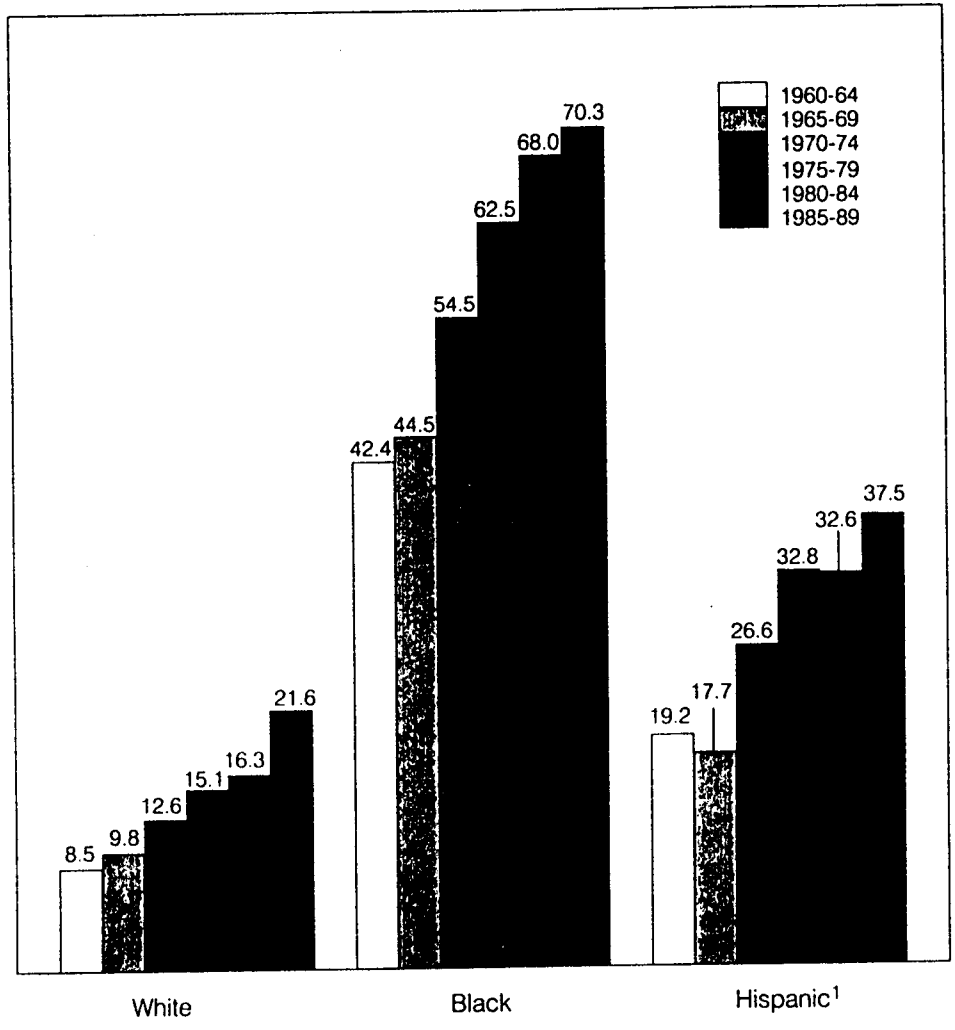


Figure 7.
Women 15 to 34 Years With a First Birth — Percent With First Birth Occurring Before First Marriage, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1960-64 to 1985-89

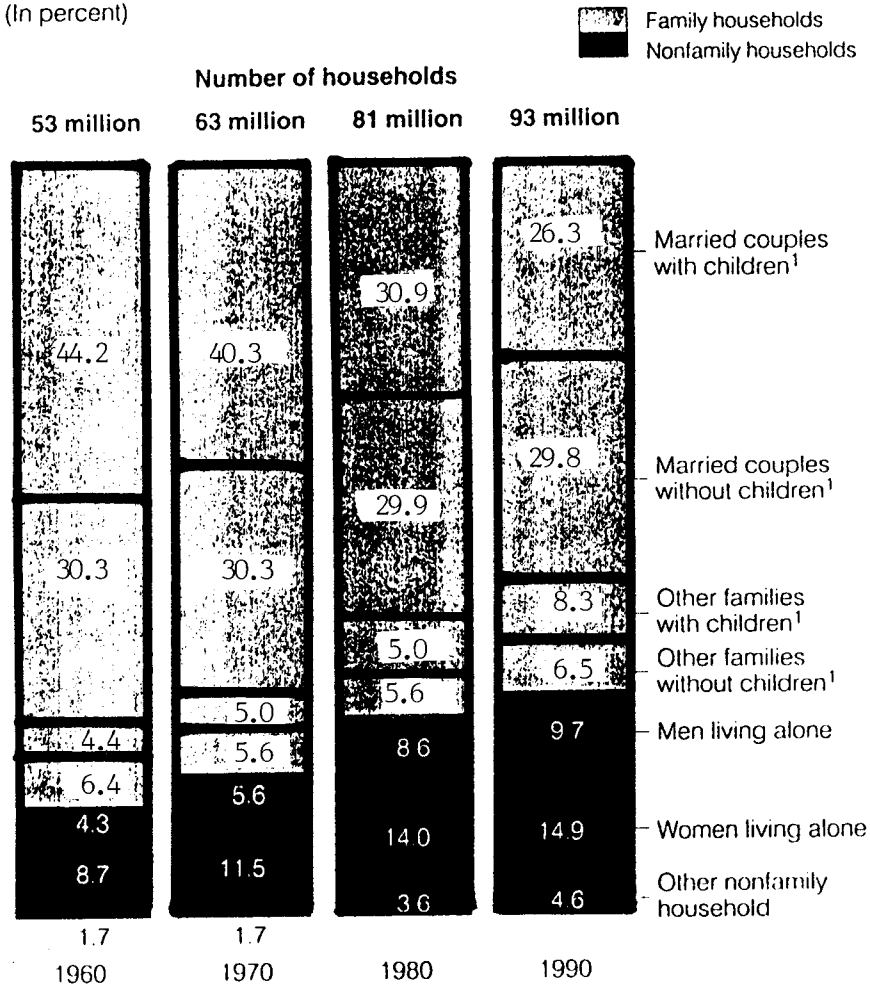


[1]May be of any race.

Premarital Births Increase

Because of the growing percentage of women deciding not to marry before their first birth, the number of premarital births is on the rise. In the 1985-89 period, there were about 2.2 million premarital births compared to about 700,000 premarital births for the 1960-64 period. Premarital births have been more common among Black women than among Whites or persons of Hispanic origin (who may be of any race) since at least the early 1960's. However, the percentage of White women age 15 to 34 with their first birth occurring premaritally more than doubled between the 1960-64 period and the 1985-89 period, from 9 to 22 percent. The proportion also doubled for Hispanics from 19 to 38 percent. The proportion for Blacks increased from 42 to 70 percent.

Figure 9.
Household Composition: 1960 to 1990
(In percent)



[1]Own children under 18

Household Composition Changes

A household can be either a family household or nonfamily household. A family household consists of the householder and at least one additional person related to the householder through marriage, birth, or adoption. A nonfamily household is composed of a householder who either lives alone or exclusively with persons unrelated to the householder.

Married-couple households dropped from 75 percent of all households in 1960 to 56 percent in 1990. This decline is due to the drop in the proportion of married couples with children under 18 (largely accounted for by delayed childbearing), to increased one-parent family households, and to increased nonfamily households with 1 or more persons. One-parent family households rose from 4 to 8 percent of all households during the three decades. Nonfamily households with one or more persons made up 29 percent of all households in 1990, almost double compared with the 15 percent in 1960.

Family Income Increases and Then Stabilizes

Median family income increased by 104 percent during the 26 years between 1947 and 1973. The median income of married-couple families increased by 115 percent.

During the subsequent 17 years between 1973 and 1990, the median incomes for all families and for married-couple families experienced three periods of decline and two periods of increase. Despite these fluctuations and the increase in wives' labor force participation, by 1990 the median income for all families was only 6 percent more in 1990 than in 1973 and the median income for married-couple families was only 11 percent greater than in 1973.

For families with male householders, no spouse present, median family income grew by 88 percent between 1947 and 1973, but it declined by 2.3 percent between 1973 and 1990. Hence, male householder families had median incomes 6 percent smaller than married-couple families in 1947, but 27 percent smaller in 1990.

Among families with female householders, no spouse present, median family income grew by 37 percent between 1947 and 1973, and increased by 5 percent between 1973 and 1990. Hence, female householder families had median incomes 56 percent smaller than married-couple families in 1973 and 58 percent smaller in 1990.

Figure 23.
Median Family Income, by Type of Family: 1947 to 1990
(In 1990 dollars)

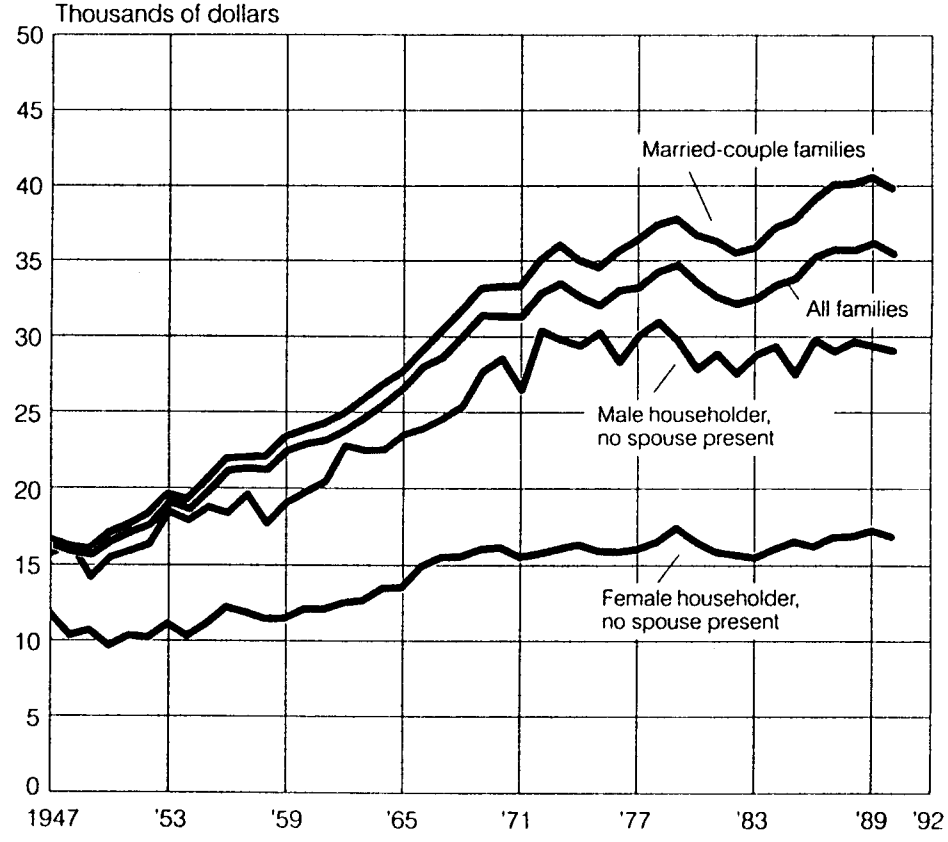
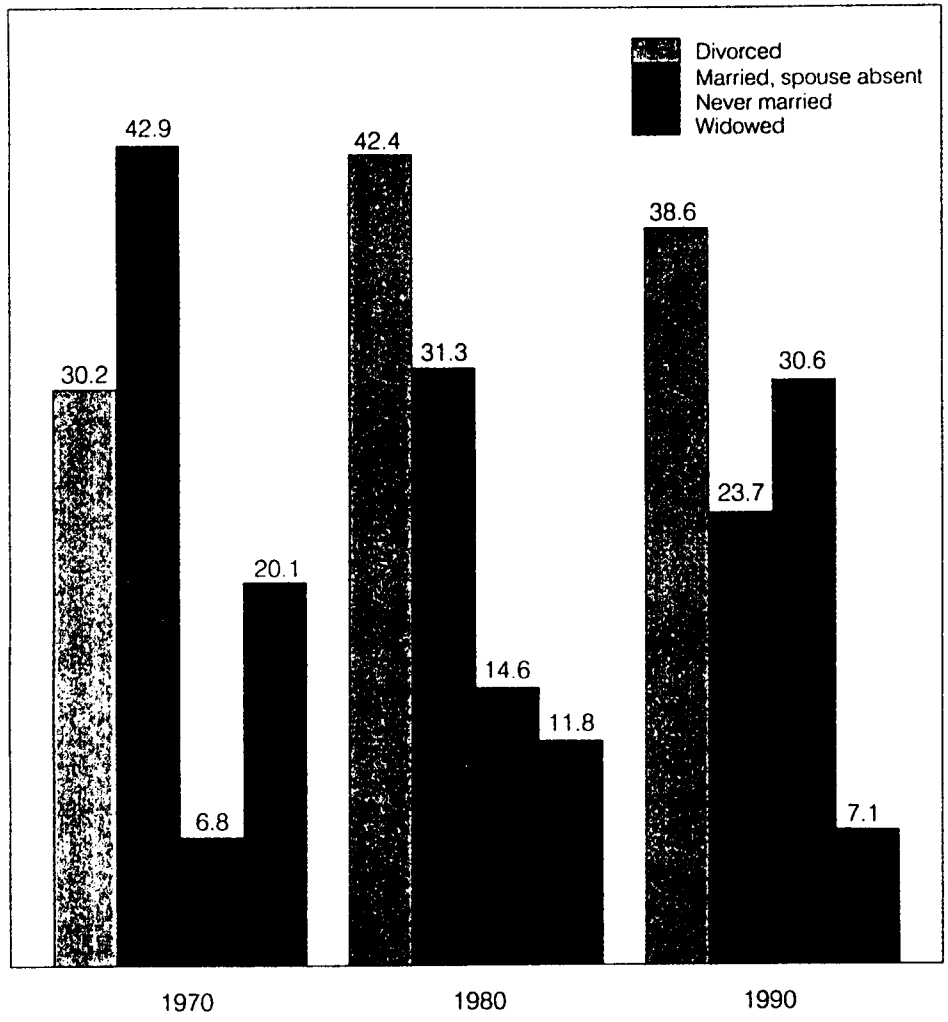


Figure 30.
Children Under Age 18 Living With One Parent, By Marital Status of Parent: 1970, 1980, and 1990
(In percent)



Increasing Proportions of Children Living With One Parent Live With a Never-Married Parent

In 1990 the majority of children living with one parent were living with a parent who was divorced or whose spouse was absent (either separated or living elsewhere). This proportion declined from 73 percent in 1970 to 62 percent in 1990. The proportion living with a widowed parent also declined during the past 20 years from 20 percent to 7 percent. The proportion of children in one-parent families who lived with a never-married mother increased from 7 percent in 1970 to 31 percent in 1990.

Conclusion

Family Life in the Early 1990's

American family life has changed dramatically during the past three decades, but especially since the mid-1970's. Some trends continue, and others have reached a plateau, but no major reversals have occurred since the mid-1970's.

Small families with one or two children increased sharply as a proportion of all families with children during the 1970's and more slowly during the 1980's. The total number of births per year rose sharply between the mid-1970's and 1990, as the large baby-boom cohorts reached the main childbearing ages.

Both median age at first marriage and the proportion of young adults who had never married increased rapidly during the 1970's and 1980's. With these changes in marriage, a sharp increase occurred in the proportion of women having their first birth before marriage. Divorce, however, had reached a plateau by the late 1970's, following a decade of especially rapid increase.

With continuing high levels of divorce and increasing premarital childbearing, the proportion of children living with a lone parent doubled between 1970 and 1990, reaching 25 percent.

The proportion of parents who had completed at least some college increased rapidly during the 1970's but more slowly during the 1980's. Families with higher educational attainments had much higher median incomes and much lower poverty rates than families with lower educational attainments.

The steady increase since 1960 in labor force participation among married women was especially large among wives with young children during the 1970's and 1980's. Even among mothers with infants under age 1, labor force participation rose from 31 percent in 1976 to 53 percent in 1990. These increases in mothers' work involved corresponding increases in the need for child care, especially for preschool-age children.

Along with rising labor force participation for wives, 28 percent of married-couple families with children by 1990 had both spouses working year-round full-time, and 30 percent had a husband working year-round full-time and a wife working part-time. Since another 21 percent had a husband working part-time or not at all, this left only 21 percent as "traditional" families with a husband working year-round full-time and a wife not working.

Median family incomes and poverty rates varied greatly among married-couple families with children according to work input. Female householder families with children whose householders worked had comparatively low incomes, with poverty rates similar to married-couple families with children where the wife worked but the husband did not work.

In the 26 years from 1947 to 1973, median family income doubled. Despite rising educational attainments and married women's increasing labor force participation during the subsequent 17 years, however, median family income in 1990 was only 6 percent higher than in 1973. The large increase in one-parent families after 1970 tended to hold down the increase in overall

median family income. But even among married-couple families with related children, median income in 1990 was only 11 percent higher than in 1973.

With median family income changing little, the poverty rate for children varied from 19.5 to 22.3 percent between 1981 and 1990, with a level of 20.6 percent in 1990, compared to the historically low range of 14.0 to 15.6 percent between 1968 and 1974. In the 20 years between 1969 and 1989, inequality in the distribution of income increased, as the proportion of children with relative incomes in the middle range declined from 75 percent to 63 percent, and the proportion with incomes below the middle range rose from 19 to 29 percent.

The higher proportion of children living in one-parent families, especially among Blacks, is often noted as contributing to childhood poverty. But this is only part of the story, since Blacks also have much lower median family incomes and much higher poverty rates than Whites with similar educational attainments and with similar family composition and patterns of adult work.

Finally, lack of health insurance coverage is often noted as a problem for poor children living in mother-only families, but even among children living in married-couple families, the proportion not covered by health insurance anytime during 1990 was 9 percent for the non-poor, and 33 percent for poor.