

Office of Legislative Research
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FAMILY COMPOSITION

This Backgrounder provides information on the makeup of families with children under age 18 in Connecticut and the nation and a brief discussion of current research findings on how family composition may affect child wellbeing. We include a list of further reading with hyperlinks to documents that are available online; legislators and staff can ask OLR for copies of all documents listed.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Connecticut Households with Children

Married-couple families comprise the majority of households with children in both Connecticut and the nation, but a substantial minority are headed by single parents, mostly women. Table 1 shows family household characteristics for Connecticut in 2006. Single householder families include unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, and cohabiting heads of household.

Table 1: Connecticut Households with Children 2006

	Total	Married-Couple	Female Householder, No Husband Present	Male Householder, No Wife Present
Total	430,067	310,225	94,780	25,062
Under 6 years only	22.3%	23.8%	16.6%	25.9%
Under 6 years and 6 to 17 years	18.9%	19.4%	18.3%	14.8%
6 to 17 years only	58.8%	56.8%	65.1%	59.3%

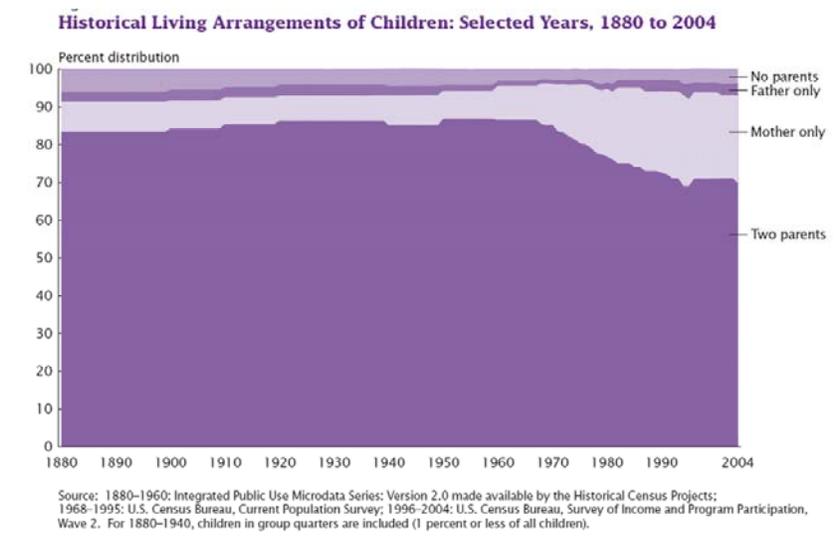
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey

Historical Living Arrangements of Children in the United States

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that the distribution of children’s living arrangements was relatively stable between 1880 and 1970; between 83 and 85% of children lived with two parents during this period. A major shift occurred between 1970 and 1990, when the percentage of children living only with their mothers doubled from 11 to 22%. Changes in children’s living arrangements have leveled off since 1990 (Kreider, R.: *Living Arrangements of Children: 2004*. U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports P70-114. (Feb. 2008)).

Table 2 reproduces the Census Bureau chart tracking the changes in children’s living arrangements between 1880 and 2004.

Table 2:



Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States

In 2002 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) released an extensive report examining individual factors and community conditions associated with cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Among other things, the NCHS found that cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages. Although 20% of first marriages ended in divorce within five years, 49% of cohabiting relationships failed within that period. After 10 years, break-up rates were 33% and 62%, respectively.

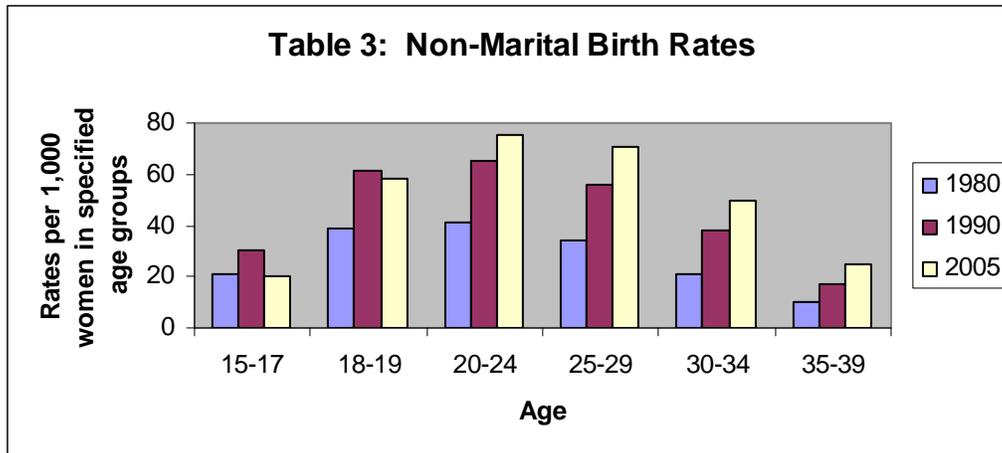
The report noted that some conditions appear to be associated with longer-lasting marital and cohabiting relationships for women:

1. being relatively older at the time the marriage or cohabitation begins;
2. being raised in an intact, two-parent family;
3. being actively involved in church or other religious organizations; and
4. having a higher family income or living in a community with a high median family income, low male unemployment, and low rate of poverty.

The probability of remarriage among divorced women was 54% in five years – 58% for white women, 44% for Hispanics, and 32% for blacks. But a substantial number of second marriages broke up (23% after five years and 39% after 10 years) (Bramlett and Mosher; *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States*. National Center for Health Statistics Vital Health Stat. 23(22) (2002)).

Non-Marital Birth Rates

An increase in the number of out-of-wedlock births contributes to the relatively recent increase in the number of children living in female-headed households. Table 3 shows birth rates per 1,000 unmarried women in 1980, 1990, and 2005. In most age groups, the rates have risen, with the largest jump occurring in the 1990s. However, birth rates for teens aged 15-17 dropped 10% between 1990 and 2005; they dropped 3% for 18- and 19-year olds.



IMPACT OF FAMILY COMPOSITION ON CHILD WELLBEING

Poverty

Census data shows that the percentage of children living below the poverty level¹ varies by the number of parents with whom they live. In 2004, 18% of children lived in families with incomes below the poverty level. While 10% of children living with married parents were living in poverty, this was the case for 34% of those living with one or two unmarried parents. Children living with their unmarried mother only were more than twice as likely to live in poverty (37%) as children living with their unmarried father only (17%) (Kreisler, supra, at 7).

Physical and Emotional Wellbeing

Until recently, much of the research about the effects of family structure and transitions on child wellbeing has focused on middle-income families or national data sets controlling for income. There is much less information about the particular outcomes in low-income households.

The body of academic literature supports the conclusion that children do best when they live with their married parents, provided that the marriage is one of low-conflict. Studies of children raised in single-parent households show them to be at greater risk of emotional, social, educational, and employment difficulties than those living with married parents. However, some research points to household and parental income as being more important predictors of child wellbeing than family structure.

¹ For a three-person household in 2008, the federal poverty level is \$17,600.

Changes in family structure negatively effect children in general, although the magnitude of the effects varies depending on an individual child's age and personality and other conditions in the household or community. Living in a stepfamily can have negative effects as well; children in stepfamilies do not do as well as those living with married, biological parents, and may do no better than children in single-parent or unmarried, cohabiting households. There is some evidence that growing up in a single-parent household leads to better outcomes for children than living through family structure transitions (Waller, Margy: *Social Scientific Data on the Impact of Marriage and Divorce on Children*. (Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation (May 2004)).

FURTHER READING

- Kreider, Rose M.: *Living Arrangements of Children: 2004*. (Current Population Reports P70-114. U.S. Census Bureau (Feb. 2008)) <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p70-114.pdf>
- Bramlett, M. and Mosher, W.: *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States*. (National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 23(22) (2002)) http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf
- The National Marriage Project: *The State of Our Unions 2007: The Social Health of Marriage in America* <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2007.pdf> (copy link and paste into Web browser)
- Knab, Jean: *Cohabitation: Sharpening a Fuzzy Concept* (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #04-05-FF (May 2005)) <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP04-05-FF-Knab.pdf>
- Carlson, Marcia et al., *What We Know About Unmarried Parents: Implications for Building Strong Families Programs* (Mathematica Policy Research Brief (Jan. 2005)) <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/bsfisbr3.pdf>
- *State Spending on Unwed Mothers* (2008 joint report from the legislature's offices of Fiscal Analysis and Legislative Research) <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2008/rpt/2008-R-0202.htm>

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