



Recent Changes in the Percent of Children Living in Single-Mother Families

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After increasing steadily for several decades, the percentage of children living in single-mother families leveled off in the mid-1990s at 25 percent and actually fell slightly between 1999 and 2001.

Despite the change in the trajectory of children living in single-mother families that occurred in the mid-1990s, there has been relatively little recognition of this major change in American families by researchers, policymakers, or the media. The lack of attention is surprising in light of the extensive discussions among policymakers about the importance of marriage and the need for government intervention to create more stable two-parent families. The goal of this paper is to stimulate researchers, policymakers, and family experts to focus on the radical change that occurred in the mid-1990s by presenting detailed data on recent changes in family structure.

Key findings:

- The share of children living in single-mother families decreased from 25 percent in 1996 to 23 percent in 2001, and the change was widespread. Between 1996 and 2001, the percentage of children living in single-mother families declined in 12 of the 15 demographic groups examined in this study.
- Several economically marginalized groups experienced the largest decreases in the share of children living in single-mother families. Between 1996 and 2001, the share of children living in female-headed families fell by:
 - 6.2 percentage points among children living in central cities,
 - 5.9 percentage points among black children,
 - 4.4 percentage points among Hispanic children,
 - 4.1 percentage points among children in poverty, and
 - 2.6 percentage points among immigrant children.

It is noteworthy that racial minorities and families living in big cities have been at the vanguard of the recent downturn in the percentage of children living in single-mother families because these are among the very groups that led the increases in single-mother families during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

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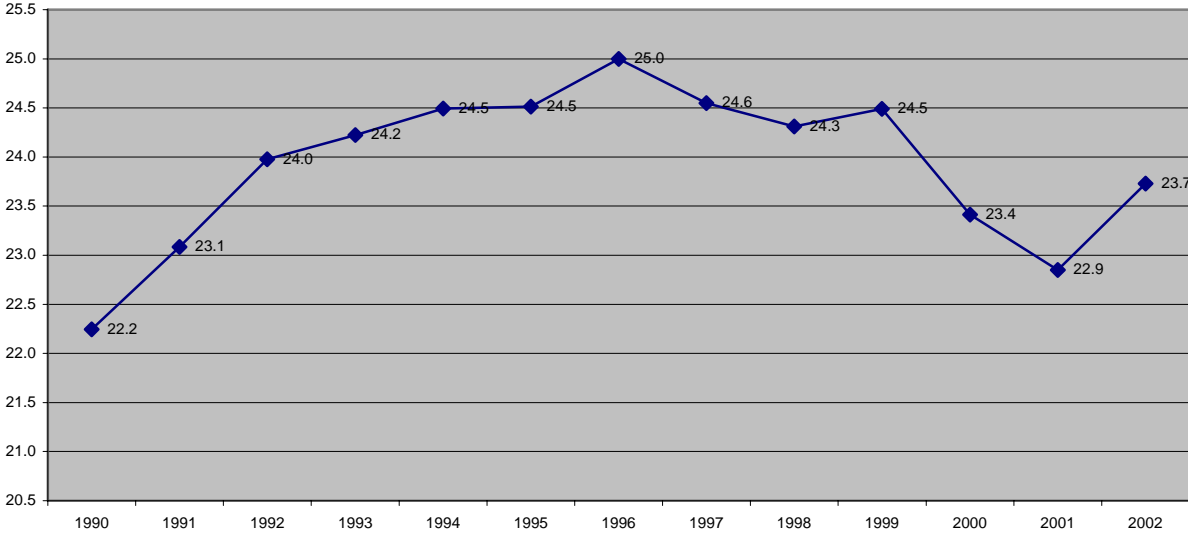
INTRODUCTION

For several decades prior to the mid-1990s, the share of children living in single-mother families increased steadily. The share of children living in single-mother families rose from 8 percent in 1960 to 25 percent in 1996.¹

In the mid-1990s, however, something happened. The share of kids living in single-mother families peaked at 25 percent of all kids living in families in 1996, fluctuated between 24 and 25 percent from 1997 to 1999, and then declined to 23 percent by 2001 (see Figure 1). The percentages shown here are based only on children living with one or more parents. In 2002, there were about 3 million children living with neither parent; therefore, they will differ slightly from percentages based on all children. However, calculations that include all children show similar trends.²

Despite a slight increase between 2001 and 2002, the share of children living in single-mother families is still below what it was in 1996, and well below where it would have been if it had followed the trajectory of the early 1990s. If the pace of change seen between 1990 and 1996 had continued for another five years, 27 percent of children would have been living in single-mother families in 2001. Instead, only 23 percent of children were in single-mother families in 2001.

Figure 1. Percent of Children Living in Single-Mother Families, 1990-2002



Source: Analysis of The Census Bureau's CPS Data Files

While the decline between 1996 and 2001 was relatively small, the break from the long-term, upward trajectory is significant. Despite the clear change in trajectory that occurred in the mid-1990s, there has been little recognition that the long-term trend that defined American families during the last half of the 20th century has ended, at least for now. The lack of public attention to this new trend is reflected in a poll taken in 2002 which found that 76 percent of adults believed the percent of kids living in single-mother families had increased over the past 5 years.³

What accounts for the change in trajectory that occurred around the mid-1990s? This paper attempts to illuminate what happened to family structure during the past decade by taking a closer look at changes among several different subgroups defined by demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics. If we discover which groups experienced the biggest shifts in family structure, perhaps we can identify the social, economic, and/or policy factors that are causally related to the turnaround.

The long-term rise in divorce and single parenting has led some policymakers to propose or enact policy interventions designed to reduce the number of single-parent families. Major federal welfare reform legislation (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – TANF) passed in 1996 stated, “The purpose of TANF is to increase... and encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” The legislation also provided a financial bonus to states that lowered the rate of births to unmarried women without increasing their abortion rate. As legislators debate the reauthorization of TANF, policy implications of family formation and family structure are likely to be key topics of debate.

Another reflection of the pro-marriage political agenda is the fact that the tax cut plan passed by Congress and signed by the President in May 2003 includes a reduction in the marriage penalty.⁴ In 2002, President Bush proposed \$200 million to fund community and religious groups to promote fatherhood, marriage, education, and conflict resolution.⁵

There are also several marriage initiatives under way at the state level. For example, Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas have introduced the option for couples to choose a “covenant marriage” rather than a regular marriage. In a covenant marriage, couples agree to a set of stipulations that make it more difficult for couples to obtain a divorce.⁶ A recent *Washington Post*⁷ article mentioned several new state-level initiatives focused on lowering the divorce rate. For example, the governor of Arkansas declared “a state of marital emergency,” and Oklahoma’s governor announced a \$10 million initiative to reduce his state’s divorce rate by one-third.⁸ Several states have passed, or are considering, legislation that would reduce the cost of a marriage license for couples that take a marriage preparation course.

Because reducing the number of single-mother families, particularly those formed when unmarried teenagers give birth, is a prominent focus of federal and state welfare reform legislation,⁹ results of this study should be of interest to policymakers.¹⁰

This paper provides detailed data on the recent changes in the share of kids in single-mother families, explores some of the nuances within general trends, and offers several possible explanations for the change of trajectory witnessed in the mid-1990s.

It is important to stress that this analysis focuses on trends over time, and not on the considerable differences among groups. Many of the groups that showed a steep

decline in the percent of children living in single-mother families still have a relatively high percentage of children living in these kinds of families compared to the nation as a whole.

BACKGROUND

From statements made by Daniel Patrick Moynihan¹¹ in the 1960s to Dan Quayle¹² in the 1990s, the issue of single-mother families has been a lightning rod for public controversy. It has been more than ten years since Dan Quayle caused a stir by criticizing popular TV sit-com character Murphy Brown for glorifying single-parenthood by electing to have a baby even though she wasn't married. For many people, this episode galvanized the public debate on this issue. Murphy Brown symbolized the tension between those who feel strongly that children should be raised in married-couple families and those who think single parenthood is a legitimate social choice for women.

During this cultural turmoil, however, hardly anyone noticed that the yearly increases in single-mother families that defined U.S. family life for more than 50 years had ended! The share of children born to unmarried mothers has virtually stabilized, the divorce rate continues to fall, and the share of children living in single-mother families has inched downward over the past 5 years.

To fully appreciate the recent shifts in family structure, they must be seen in the context of the last several decades. During the last half of the 20th century, it is difficult to think of any other social change that affected children more than the rise of single-mother families. The share of children living in single-mother families doubled between 1970 and 1995.¹³ Moreover, because of divorce and remarriage, the percentage of

children affected by the end of a marriage is actually higher than these figures suggest. Many children currently residing in married-couple families are actually living with step-parents. The Census Bureau recently reported that only 56 percent of all U.S. children are living with both biological parents.¹⁴ The National Survey of American Families reports a similar percentage.¹⁵

The change in family structure has dramatically affected the every day living conditions for millions of children and their parents; and, increasingly, social science evidence suggests that kids growing up in single-mother families have a host of disadvantages relative to their counterparts in married-couple families.¹⁶ For example, the poverty rate for children in female-headed families was 39 percent in 2001 compared to 8 percent for those in married-couple families.¹⁷ Part of this economic difference can be attributed to the fact that only about one-third (35 percent) of female-headed families reported receiving child support or alimony in 2000.¹⁸

The absence of fathers in single-mother families may have implications beyond economics. Children growing up in single-mother families are likely to get less time and attention from parents,¹⁹ and one recent study found that youths raised in fatherless families were much more likely to be incarcerated even after controlling for other factors such as poverty.²⁰

Data from the Census Bureau's March 2002 Current Population Survey (see Table 1), show that, relative to children in married-couple families, children in single-mother families are:

- five times as likely to be poor;

Table 1. Percent of Kids with Risk Factors by Family Type: 2002

Risk Factors	Kids in Married-Couple Families	Kids in Single-Mother Families
1) Percent where household head is not a high school graduate	14	25
2) Percent in poverty	8	39
3) Percent living with parent(s) who do not have full-time year-round employment	12	55
4) Percent receiving welfare benefits	3	19
5) Percent without health insurance	9	15
6) Percent of children living in rental housing	23	60
7) Percent of children without a telephone in the household	3	9
8) Percent of 16-to-19-year-olds who are high school dropouts	6	12
9) Percent of 16-to-19-year-olds who are not attending school or working (idle youth or disconnected youth)	6	13
10) Percent of 16-to-19-year-olds in labor force and unemployed	14	26

Source: U.S. Census Bureau March 2002 Current Population Survey

Total Children = 72.6 million

Total 16 to 19 = 16.0 million

- nearly twice as likely to be living in a family where the head of the household did not finish high school;
- more than four times as likely to be living in a family where no parent has a full-time, year-round job;
- almost twice as likely to be without health insurance;
- three times as likely to be living in a household without a telephone; and
- twice as likely to drop out of high school.

Two major demographic factors can be identified as the underlying causes for the rise of single parenthood over the past several decades. First, is the increased rate of divorces; and second is the big increase in the number of births to unmarried women. A recent estimate from the Census Bureau indicates that almost 50 percent of today's marriages are likely to end in divorce.²¹ Today, one-third of all births occurs to unmarried women. Children also become part of a single-mother family through death of a parent, but widowhood has been a relatively minor factor in the last half of the 20th century.

The overall trend witnessed in the 1990s was the result of two different trends (see Table 2). During the 1990s, the share of children living with a never-married mother rose and the share living with a divorced parent or a widowed parent fell. During the last half of the 1990s, the combination of these trends resulted in a smaller share of kids living with a single-mother.

The distinction between single parents who have never been married and single parents who are divorced or separated is important. Data from the 2002 CPS show that 46 percent of kids living with a never-married parent are in poverty compared to 33 percent of those living with a divorced parent. A recent report from the Census Bureau²²

Table 2. Distribution of Own*Children in Single-Mother Families by Marital Status of Mother, 1990-2002

Year	TOTAL (in 1,000s)	In Single- Mother Family (in 1,000s)	Mother is Never Married	Mother is Divorced	Mother is Widowed
2002	69,477	16,479	41.7%	53.9%	4.4%
2001	69,199	15,813	41.9%	53.4%	4.7%
2000	69,032	16,164	40.8%	54.9%	4.3%
1999	68,709	16,828	40.2%	55.8%	4.0%
1998	68,420	16,634	40.3%	55.7%	4.0%
1997	68,186	16,740	39.4%	57.2%	3.4%
1996	67,984	16,996	37.5%	58.6%	3.9%
1995	67,220	16,477	35.6%	60.2%	4.2%
1994	66,700	16,338	36.7%	59.0%	4.3%
1993	66,579	16,129	35.7%	60.1%	4.2%
1992	64,216	15,396	35.1%	60.4%	4.5%
1991	63,282	14,608	34.5%	60.2%	5.3%
1990	62,370	13,874	31.5%	61.5%	7.0%

Source: US Census Bureau Current Population Survey, various years

*"Own children" are those related to the family head through birth, marriage, or adoption.

shows that 44 percent of divorced, custodial mothers received child support payments compared to only 26 percent of never-married custodial mothers. Research also shows that fathers who pay child support are more likely to be involved in their children's lives.

While it is difficult to untangle all the possible causal relationships between child outcomes, household income, and family structure, it is clear that children in single-mother families, on average, are more disadvantaged than those growing up in married-couple families. Consequently, changes in the prevalence of children living in single-mother families have important implications for children, families, and society.

Measuring Family Structure with the CPS

The data presented in this paper are taken from the Demographic Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a large monthly household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. It is the source of the monthly unemployment figures. In March of every year, a Demographic Supplement is included in the survey to collect information on a variety of socio-demographic topics. This data source is widely used within the federal government and by social science researchers.

One shortcoming of the CPS, however, is the inability to identify stepchildren within families. In terms of child outcomes, this is an important distinction. Stepchildren in married-couple families do not fare as well as children living with both biological parents in terms of many outcome measures.²³ A rise in the number of children living as stepchildren in married-couple families might provide a misleading picture of child well being based solely on family structure as traditionally defined. If the decline in percent of children living in single-mother families is masking an increase in the number of

stepchildren in married-couple families, the trend may not be as beneficial as the data suggest.

There has also been a long-term increase in children living with co-habiting couples.²⁴ In the early 1990s (1990-94), 11 percent of births were to co-habiting women, compared to 6 percent in the early 1980s. Children living in co-habiting situations often have both parents present, or at least one parent and his or her partner, but this information is not captured by looking only at Census-defined, married couples. Child outcomes for children living with co-habiting couples are generally not as good as those in married-couple families. In this study, single mother refers to an unmarried mother who may or may not be living with a partner.

Despite these caveats, a closer examination of trends in the percent of children living in single-mother families may help us discover what happened in the mid-1990s to reverse the decades-long trend.

The figures presented here may differ slightly from figures derived from other tabulations of the CPS because the calculations shown here include only those children who are living with at least one parent. In 2002, there were almost 3 million children living with neither parent.²⁵

Within the CPS file, several socially significant groups can be identified based on the demographic, geographic, and economic characteristics listed below:

Race/Hispanic origin status

- Non-Hispanic White
- Non-Hispanic Black
- Hispanic

Urban/Rural Status

- Central city
- Suburbs
- Rural areas

Immigrant status of child (and parent)

- Child of immigrant parents
- Not a child of immigrant parents

Education of mother

- Less than a high school education
- High school education only
- Some college
- College graduate

Income/poverty level

- Below poverty level
- Between 100 and 300% of poverty level
- More than 300% of poverty level

Admittedly, the income/poverty categories specified above are somewhat arbitrary. With slightly different thresholds, one might get slightly different results. However, I am confident that the major trends and patterns found in this study would be similar with any reasonable set of income/poverty categories.

Some of the characteristics used to identify groups, like race and immigration status, are relatively permanent while others, like poverty, can easily change from year to year. Characteristics that can change year to year confound this analysis because changes

in any one group over time may be due to people moving into or out of that group, as well as changes to people staying in the group.

ANALYSIS

The early part of the 1990s was characterized by persistent increases in the share of children in single-mother families, reflecting the continuation of a long-term trend (see Figure 1). By mid-decade, however, the long-term increase ended. Between 1996 and 1999, the percent of children in single-mother families stabilized at about 25 percent. By 2001, the figure had fallen to 23 percent. Other independent data sources corroborate this trend during the late 1990s.²⁶

Moreover, the trends were widespread. Appendix Table A shows the percent of children living in single-mother families each year from 1990 to 2002 for each of 15 groups examined in this study.

In Table 3, the fifteen groups are ranked on the basis of the percentage point change in the share of children living in single-mother families between 1996 and 2001. Twelve of the fifteen groups examined here experienced a decline between 1996 and 2001. Eight of the fifteen groups experienced a statistically significant decline, and one group experienced a statistically significant increase in the percentage of children living in single-mother families.

A quick look at Table 3 indicates that the groups experiencing the biggest declines are all economically marginalized groups.

- Living in central cities
- Black non-Hispanic

Table 3. Groups Ranked by Percent of Children Living in Single-Mother Families 1996-2001

	Percent 1996	Percent 2001	Percentage Point Change 1996-2001	
Total	25.0	22.9	-2.1*	
Rank				
1	CENTRAL CITY	38.2	32.0	-6.2*
2	NONHISPANIC BLACK	58.6	52.7	-5.9*
3	HISPANIC	30.3	25.9	-4.4*
4	POOR	60.5	56.5	-4.1*
5	IMMIGRANT	21.5	18.9	-2.6*
6	SOME COLLEGE	26.4	24.1	-2.3*
7	NON-IMMIGRANT	25.8	23.9	-1.9*
8	RURAL AREAS	23.1	21.6	-1.6
9	NONHISPANIC WHITE N	16.7	15.8	-1.0*
10	COLLEGE GRADUATE	11.2	10.4	-0.8
11	LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	51.9	51.2	-0.7
12	SUBURBS	18.8	18.5	-0.3
13	AFFLUENT	7.8	8.1	0.3
14	HIGH SCHOOL ONLY	27.6	28.9	1.3
15	MIDDLE CLASS	23.7	26.3	2.6*

Source: Analysis of the Census Bureau's CPS Data Files

*Statistically significant at the .05 level.

Only children living with at least one parent are included in this analysis. About 3 million children live with neither parent.

- Hispanic
- Poor

The extent to which economic status is linked to recent changes in family structure is underscored by looking at the groups listed at the bottom of Table 3.

- Middle-Class
- Mother high-school-only education
- Affluent

Middle-class and affluent families did not experience a decrease in the share of children living in single-mother families between 1996 and 2001. These are families that are typically shielded from the biggest impacts of economic ups and downs. It is difficult to interpret the increase in single-mother families among those headed by a mother with high-school-only education.

Looking at the groups that experienced the largest decreases in the share of children living in single-mother families from 1996 to 2001 suggests that economic changes are closely related to changes in family structure. Several economically marginalized groups are leading the overall downturn in the share of children living in single-mother families.

Reasons for the Trends

What explains the change seen over the past five years? A thorough and rigorous examination of the causes behind this trend is beyond the scope of this paper, but six factors that might help explain the changes seen since the mid-1990s are:

- The booming economy of the late 1990s
- Expanded programs to support low-income working families

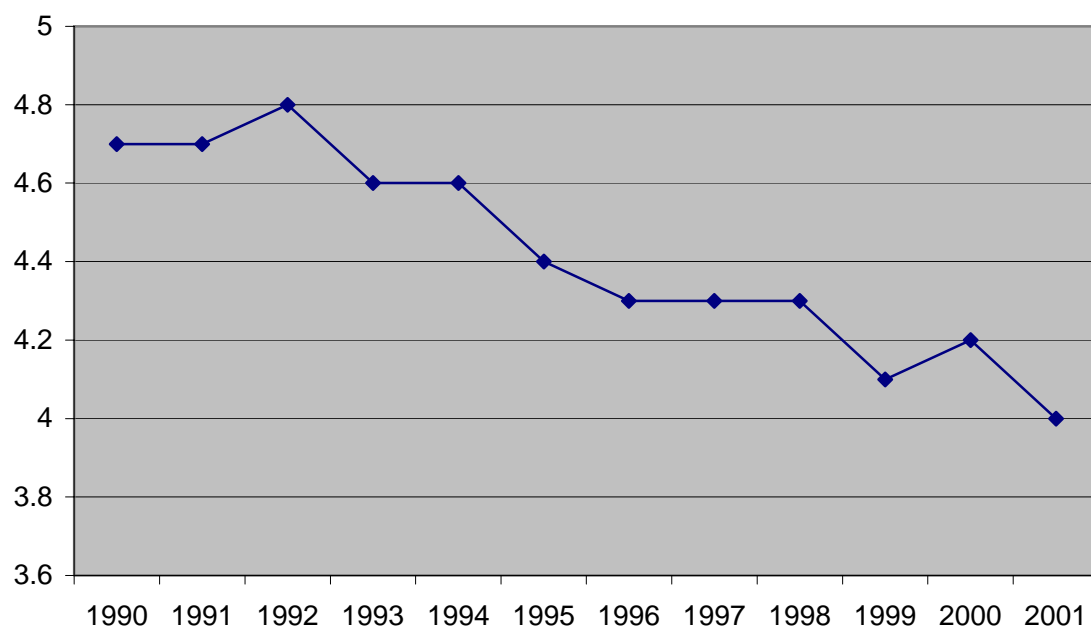
- Welfare reform legislation passed in 1996
- Increased immigration
- The decline in teen childbearing
- The fatherhood movement

Each of these is discussed briefly below.

The last half of the 1990s was characterized by very robust economic conditions. The unemployment rate was low throughout the late 1990s, and median family income (expressed in constant dollars) rose by 17 percent, from \$44,090 in 1993 to \$51,751 in 2000.²⁷ The child poverty rate in 2000 (16.2 percent) was the lowest since 1978.²⁸ It is likely that the robust economy of the late 1990s reduced pressures on families leading to fewer divorces. (see Figure 2).

The fact that more males in the prime age for marriage had higher incomes may have facilitated more marriages and fewer divorces. Table 4 shows the well-established relationship between male earnings and marriage. Men with higher earnings are more likely to be married (one could also say that men who are married are more likely to have higher earnings). Table 4 shows that 22 percent of men age 20-50 with incomes below \$10,000 are married compared to 75 percent for men in the same age group with personal income above \$50,000. The share of males age 20-50 with personal income below \$20,000 a year fell from 43 percent in 1994 to 31 percent in 2001, and the share of males with annual incomes of at least \$50,000 grew from 16 percent in 1994 to 26 percent in 2001. In other words, more men have left the income categories where they are least likely to be married, and more have entered the income categories where they are more likely to get, and stay, married.

Figure 2. Divorce Rate* 1990-2001



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002 U.S. Statistical Abstract: 2002, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, Table 66

*Number of divorces per 1,000 people

Table 4. Percent of Men Ages 20-50 Who Are married, By Income

	Percent Married*
Total	53
Less than \$10,000	22
\$10,000-\$19,999	36
\$20,000-\$29,999	49
\$30,000-\$39,999	58
\$40,000-\$49,999	67
\$50,000 and above	75

Source: Analysis of the Census Bureau's March 2002 CPS

*Married includes only those with the spouse present

While the temporal correlation between the strong economy of the late 1990s and the leveling of the share of children in single-mother families makes the economy an obvious factor to examine in this context, it is important to recognize that, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, there were periods of good economic performance that did not result in any change in the rise of children living in single-mother families.

In addition to the economic expansion during the late 1990s, many programs to support low-income, working families were initiated or expanded during the 1990s. Research shows that government investments in programs to support children result in better outcomes.²⁹

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a federal program that works through the tax code to allow low-income workers to enhance their income. It targets low-income families with children in which one or both parents work. It has enjoyed strong bipartisan support since it was first enacted in the early 1970s.

Since the EITC was expanded in 1993, the number of families receiving the Earned Income Tax Credit increased by 25 percent while the average amount received per recipient family grew by over 50 percent.³⁰ In recent years, the EITC has lifted as many as 2.5 million children out of poverty each year and increased the family income in millions of other families. Research shows that, among low-income families, even small increments of income can lead to better child outcomes.³¹ Many states have also passed EITC-like programs relative to state income tax.

As low-income parents have moved from welfare to work, the need for childcare has grown dramatically. Between 1996 and 2000, federal and state spending on child care subsidies for low-income working families tripled, in part because the Personal

Responsibility and Work, Opportunity and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), often referred to as “welfare reform,” allowed states to use TANF dollars for child care.³²

States and localities, as well as some companies, also contributed to helping low-income working families find affordable childcare. While there are still many low-income workers who do not receive a subsidy, the expansion of these support systems was undoubtedly helpful.

In the past, one big deterrent for leaving welfare for a low-wage job was the prospect of losing health care coverage for children. In response, Congress passed the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in 1997, designed to provide health care coverage for children in low-income families. By 2001, 4.6 million children had been enrolled in the SCHIP program.³³

The welfare reform movement of the 1990s, which led to the federal welfare reform legislation of 1996, removed one possible incentive for becoming a single mother. Previously, AFDC provided a welfare check for as long as a family met the income eligibility criteria, but the new reform imposed time limits and, in many cases, more stringent work requirements. This was meant to discourage women from having children out-of-wedlock, discourage divorce, and encourage marriage. While the welfare shift would directly affect only a small share of women, it is a group of women who have a disproportionately high rate of unmarried births and a high rate of single-mother families. Moreover, welfare reform may have sent a message to a broader group of women (and men) about a new set of expectations regarding childbearing and marriage. However, there is a stream research which suggests that it is doubtful changes in welfare policy were a major factor in marriage decisions of low-income women.³⁴

During the 1990s, there was a large increase in the number of immigrants, and immigrant families with children are more likely to be married. An immigrant child is defined here as one who was born abroad or had at least one parent who was born outside the United States. The Current Population Survey began tracking the number of immigrant children in 1994, and shows that the number of immigrant children increased from 12 million in 1994 to 15.5 million in 2002. In 2002, 20 percent of children in immigrant families were living in single-mother families compared to 25 percent for non-immigrant families.

A recent report from the National Center for Health Statistics shows a 26 percent decline in the teen birth rate between 1991 and 2001.³⁵ This has implications for the living arrangements of children because a large share (79 percent) of births to teens occurs to unmarried teenagers. If the birth rate for this group declines (as it has during the 1990s), it means there are fewer single-mother families formed through births to unmarried women.

Another social trend that emerged during the 1990s was something often called the “fatherhood movement” that encouraged fathers to take their parental responsibilities more seriously.³⁶ Groups like the Promise Keepers and events like the Million Man March served to encourage men to meet their family responsibilities. This social movement was also accompanied by increased government efforts to collect child support payments from absent parents, typically fathers.

To the extent that the fatherhood movement led to more men marrying the mothers of their children and/or more men deciding not to leave a stressful or disappointing marriage, this movement may have had some impact on the share of

Table 5. Number and Percent of Children Living in Father-Headed and Mother-Headed, Single-Parent Families: 1990-2000

	Number in Single-Parent Families		Percent in Single-Parent Families	
	Mother-Headed	Father-Headed`	Mother-Headed	Father-Headed
2000	16,162	3,058	84.1	15.9
1999	16,805	3,094	84.5	15.5
1998	16,634	3,143	84.1	15.9
1997	16,740	3,059	84.5	15.5
1996	16,993	2,759	86.0	14.0
1995	16,477	2,461	87.0	13.0
1994	16,334	2,257	87.9	12.1
1993	15,586	2,286	87.2	12.8
1992	15,396	2,182	87.6	12.4
1991	14,608	2,016	87.9	12.1
1990	13,874	1,993	87.4	12.6

Source: Analysis of the Census Bureau's CPS Data Files

children growing up in a single-mother family. This movement may also be linked to the large increase in the number of children living in father-only, single-parent families during the 1990s. The number of children living in single-parent, father-only families increased by 50 percent between 1990 and 2000. In fact, between 1996 and 2001, while the number of kids in single-mother families declined, the number of children living in father-only families actually rose by 11 percent (see Table 5).

2001-2002 Post Script

Following the initial preparation of this paper, data for 2002 became available. This data file reflects family structure as of March 2002, but income and poverty for the 2001 calendar year. The link between economic fortunes and family structure seen in the analysis of 1996 to 2001 data is reinforced by the changes seen between 2001 and 2002. While few of these changes are statistically significant, many are in the direction one would predict if economic changes at the low end of the income spectrum were driving family structure changes (see Table 6).

The Census Bureau report notes that there was a statistically significant increase in the overall poverty rate between 2000 and 2001 for the first time since 1992-93.³⁷ Many of the most vulnerable economic groups (for example, blacks, foreign-born persons, female-headed households, people living in central cities) experienced an increase in poverty although none of these changes was statistically significant. Many of the groups that experienced a decline in the share of kids living in single-mother families between 1996 and 2001, as poverty fell, experienced an increase between 2001 and 2002, when poverty increased. Here is a list of groups in which the share of kids in single-parent families fell from 1996 to 2001, then increased between 2001 and 2002:

Table 6. Percent of Children* in Single-Mother Families, 2001- 2002

	2001	2002	% Point Change 2001-2002
TOTAL	22.9	23.7	0.9
LOCATION	32.0	34.0	2.0
CENTRAL CITY	18.5	18.8	0.3
SUBURBS	21.6	23.2	1.7
RURAL AREAS			
RACE/HISPANIC STATUS			
NONHISPANIC WHITE	15.8	16.6	0.8
NONHISPANIC BLACK	52.7	52.6	0.0
HISPANIC	25.9	26.4	0.5
POVERTY			
POOR	56.5	58.3	1.8
MIDDLE CLASS	26.3	27.3	0.9
AFFLUENT	8.1	8.2	0.1
EDUCATION OF MOTHER			
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	51.2	51.9	0.7
HIGH SCHOOL ONLY	28.9	30	1.1
SOME COLLEGE	24.1	25.2	1.1
COLLEGE GRADUATE	10.4	11.7	1.3
IMMIGRANT STATUS			
IMMIGRANT	18.9	19.6	0.7
NON-IMMIGRANT	23.9	24.9	1.0

Source: Analysis of the Census Bureau's CPS Data Files

*Living With At Least One Parent

- Central cities
- Rural areas
- White non-Hispanic
- Hispanic
- The poor
- Mother with less-than-high-school education
- Immigrants and non-immigrants

It is too early to say whether the most recent changes in poverty and family structure provide any conclusive evidence. It is only one year of change, and most of the changes are small. However, this analysis provides a promising framework for examining data from the March 2003 CPS when they become available in the fall of 2003.

Conclusion

This paper shows that the yearly increases in single-mother families that defined the U.S. landscape for more than 40 years prior to the mid-1990s have ended. The share of children living in single-mother families stabilized in the mid-1990s and showed a slight decrease between 1999 and 2001. Whether the reversal is a temporary stage before it climbs again, plateaus, or decreases is unclear.

The new trend is being led by groups that are economically marginalized and therefore more likely to be influenced by changes in welfare policies and by the strong job market of the late 1990s.

This trend has largely been overlooked by the popular media and the research community. As debate surrounding the reauthorization of welfare reform legislation heats up in 2003, and policymakers are searching for ways to strengthen American families, this paper may be useful by providing a solid statistical underpinning for examining recent trends in family structure.

Appendix A. Table A. Trends in Percent of Children* in Single Mother Families, 1990 – 2002

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
TOTAL	22.2	23.1	24.0	24.2	24.5	24.5	25.0	24.6	24.3	24.5	23.4	22.9	23.7
LOCATION													
CENTRAL CITY	34.5	35.1	37.2	37.2	37.8	38.3	38.2	37.2	35.6	37.7	34.0	32.0	34.0
SUBURBS	16.7	17.5	18.5	18.6	19.1	19.0	18.8	17.8	18.4	18.6	19.0	18.5	18.8
RURAL AREAS	19.3	20.3	18.7	20.1	21.4	21.4	23.1	24.0	23.8	22.3	20.9	21.6	23.2
RACE/HISPANIC STATUS													
WHITE NH	14.8	15.4	16.2	16.1	16.4	16.4	16.7	17.0	16.9	16.7	16.0	15.8	16.6
BLACK NH	55.5	57.6	58.1	58.5	59.1	58.3	58.6	56.6	56.2	57.1	54.2	52.7	52.6
HISPANIC	28.0	27.7	29.4	29.1	29.2	29.8	30.3	28.2	28.3	28.5	26.6	25.9	26.4
POVERTY													
POOR	58.3	59.9	60.7	59.6	58.3	58.7	60.5	58.9	60.6	60.1	58.3	56.5	58.3
MIDDLE CLASS	20.1	19.8	20.0	21.0	21.9	22.5	23.7	24.1	24.0	25.9	25.6	26.3	27.3
AFFLUENT	7.2	6.9	7.3	7.0	7.2	7.4	7.8	7.4	7.5	7.7	8.3	8.1	8.2
EDUCATION OF MOTHER													
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	46.9	48	50.5	50.7	50.2	51.9	51.9	52.5	53.1	53.5	52.4	51.2	51.9
HIGH SCHOOL ONLY	22.9	24.2	24.8	25.8	26.5	27.1	27.6	28.1	27.7	27.7	28.1	28.9	30
SOME COLLEGE	21.3	21	22.6	22.7	24.2	24.7	26.4	26	26.2	26.9	24.8	24.1	25.2
COLLEGE GRADUATE	9.9	10.4	10.8	11.3	10.9	10.4	11.2	10.4	10.7	11.4	10.2	10.4	11.7
IMMIGRANT STATUS													
IMMIGRANT	NA	NA	NA	NA	20.3	20.6	21.5	20.2	20.0	20.5	19.0	18.9	19.6
NON-IMMIGRANT	NA	NA	NA	NA	25.4	25.4	25.8	25.6	25.4	25.5	24.5	23.9	24.9

Source: Census Bureau CPS Files

*Living With At Least One Parent

NA = Not Available

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