

CHAPTER Ae

Family and Household Composition

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FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

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Household and family composition in the United States is in rapid flux, and historical data are essential to put current trends into perspective. Nevertheless, the previous edition of *Historical Statistics of the United States* included no long-run statistical series describing family and household composition. The Census Bureau published minimal statistics on families and households until 1940, focusing mainly on the size distribution of households. Even for the period since 1940, the official published statistics on the subject are minimal. Consequently, until recently most scholarly discussions of long-run changes in the living arrangements of Americans focused on isolated fragments of inconsistently tabulated data for particular localities.¹

During the past two decades, new microdata samples of historical censuses have become available. These data are collected in the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), a coherent national database describing the characteristics of 55 million Americans in thirteen census years spanning the period from 1850 through 1990.² The IPUMS allows us for the first time to construct detailed and consistent statistical series on family and household composition for the past 150 years.

This essay briefly surveys the comparability issues posed by measurement of long-run changes in family and household composition and then presents selected summary statistics on key changes in American living arrangements since 1850.

Data

The IPUMS combines census microdata files produced by the Census Bureau for the period since 1960 with new historical census samples produced at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere. By putting the samples in the same format, imposing consistent variable coding, and carefully documenting changes in variables over time, the IPUMS is designed to facilitate the use of the census

¹ Before the mid-1990s, only a few studies attempted long-term comparisons of family and household composition at the national level. These included Kobrin (1976), Smith (1986), Ruggles (1988), and Sweet and Bumpass (1987).

² See the Guide to the Millennial Edition for more information about the IPUMS.

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samples as a time series. The IPUMS allows us to circumvent most of the incompatibilities and errors in published census tabulations and to create new series on household and family composition over the last 150 years.

A key innovation of the IPUMS is a set of consistently constructed family interrelationship variables for all years. These variables identify the location within the household of each individual's spouse, mother, and father. The family interrelationship pointers provide the building blocks to construct virtually any standard measures of household composition. Because the family interrelationship variables were designed to be as compatible as possible across census years, the resulting measures of household and family composition are more useful for the study of long-run change than are the tabulations generated by the Census Bureau.

Comparability Issues

The construction of consistent long-run series requires close attention to changing census definitions and procedures. To maximize comparability over time, scholars should account for changes in the census concepts of households and group quarters and should be aware of shifts in the criteria for distinguishing the boundaries of households. This section briefly describes the most important comparability issues.³

The census concepts of household and group quarters did not emerge in their modern form until 1930, and their definitions have shifted significantly since then. Until 1920, the permanent residents of large dwelling units such as institutions, hotels, and boarding houses were enumerated as if they were simply very large households.⁴ From 1930 onward, such units were classified as group quarters and excluded from the count of households. In all periods since then, the group quarters category included residents of correctional institutions, asylums, homes for the aged or needy, convents and monasteries, worker's dormitories, crew quarters

³ For further detail, see Ruggles and Brower (2003).

⁴ Before 1940, these units were called "census families" rather than households. In this discussion, we use the term "household" for all census years to avoid confusion with the modern census concept of "family." In 1930 and 1940, the term for group quarters was "quasi-households"; to simplify the discussion, we use the term "group quarters" throughout. The Census Bureau implemented an early version of the group quarters concept for the 1900 Census, by excluding from the count of households hotels, boarding houses, schools, institutions, work camps, ships, military posts, and "miscellaneous groups of persons lodging together but having no family relationship" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1902, p. clviii). We have ignored this count of private households because the

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TABLE Ae-A Estimates of the number of households and group quarters residents: 1850–1990

Year	Households			Group quarters residents	
	Published by Census	1950–1970 definition	1980–1990 definition	1950–1970 definition	1980–1990 definition
1850	3,598,240	3,539,847	3,581,172	808,353	361,720
1860	5,210,934	5,143,703	5,194,160	844,999	347,386
1870	7,579,363	7,471,754	7,549,028	1,339,846	586,931
1880	9,945,946	9,824,573	9,907,583	1,656,167	802,140
1890	12,690,152	12,530,206 ¹	12,638,749 ¹	—	—
1900	15,963,965	15,977,199	16,119,014	2,604,683	1,974,006
1910	20,255,555	19,984,021	20,165,673	3,508,773	1,793,064
1920	24,351,676	24,073,793	24,233,961	3,135,649	1,827,598
1930	29,904,663	29,798,665 ¹	29,904,663 ²	—	—
1940	34,948,666	34,904,634	34,948,666 ²	2,807,103	—
1950	42,857,335	42,857,335	—	4,075,907	—
1960	53,021,061	53,023,935	—	2,881,383	—
1970	63,573,042	63,637,721	—	3,659,644	—
1980	80,389,673	80,351,102	80,389,673	3,500,854	3,242,871
1990	91,947,410	91,873,988	91,947,410	3,806,303	3,363,726

¹ 1890 and 1930 group quarters residence interpolated.

² 1930–1940 definition (10 or fewer unrelated).

Sources

Households, published by census. U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1850–1880: *Twelfth Census Special Reports, A Century of Population Growth, 1790–1900*. 1900: *Twelfth Census of the United States, Population*, part 2. 1890 and 1910–1950: *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*, volume 4, *Special Reports, General Char-*

acteristics of Families. 1960: *Census of Population and Housing: 1960 Final Report PC (2)-4A, Subject Reports: Families*. 1970: *Census of Population: 1970, Detailed Characteristics, Final Report PC(1)-D1, United States Summary*. 1980: *Census of Population: 1980, General Population Characteristics*, part 1, *U.S. Summary*. 1990: *Census of Population: 1990, General Population Characteristics*, part 1 (CP-1-1).

Households, other series, and group quarters: series Ae1–2 and Ae114–115.

on inland vessels, college dormitories and fraternities, hospitals, hotels, missions, flophouses, camps, and large lodging houses. In each census year since 1930, the Census Bureau also classified as group quarters any unit with more than a specified number of persons unrelated to the householder. The threshold number of unrelated persons for classification as group quarters was eleven in 1930 and 1940, fell to five in 1950–1970, and then rose to ten in 1980 and 1990.

Ruggles and Brower developed a procedure for estimating the number of households and group quarters residents under constant definitions (Ruggles and Brower 2003). These methods form the basis of the statistical series on the number of households and group quarters residents under both the 1950–1970 and 1980–1990 group quarters definitions (Tables Ae1–28 and Ae97–127). The main results are summarized in Table Ae-A. The aggregate impact of variations in the group quarters definition on the total number of households is small. In no case does the difference between the published total number of households and the number of households under 1950–1970 definitions exceed 2 percent, and in the 1980–1990 period, the effect of differences between the two definitions is trivial. The effect of definitional changes is much greater, however, for size of the group quarters population. Indeed, in the 1850–1890 period, the number of people residing in non-institutional group quarters is twice as large under the 1950–1970 group quarters definition as under the 1980–1990 definition. Thus, long-run comparisons of the group quarters population are meaningless unless we impose a standard definition of group quarters.

The introduction and modification of the group quarters concept is not the only definitional change that affects census-based measures of family and household composition. The criteria for

distinguishing one household from the next have also shifted over time. For most measures, these changes have marginal effects, but for certain kinds of living arrangements the potential effects of changing household definitions can be significant.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the definition of the household was a preindustrial one: the household was an economic unit that depended on “one common means of support” and resided together in a house or part of a house. This definition was altered in 1870 by an instruction to enumerators to distinguish the number of separate households within a dwelling according to the number of separate eating tables. Since multihousehold dwellings were comparatively rare in the nineteenth century, this change probably had minor effects.

From 1870 through 1940, the definition of household was subtly modified several times, but the changes seem to have had insignificant consequences for the identification of households in the census. Throughout this period, the instructions stressed shared house-keeping, dining tables, or cooking facilities. Moreover, before 1950 the instructions made it clear that single rooms in apartment hotels should not be counted as independent households; rather, the entire hotel should be counted as a single group quarters unit.

In 1950, the enumeration instructions introduced a new criterion: a unit could be distinguished as a separate household if it had at least two rooms and direct access to the outside by means of a common hallway. This concept was expanded in 1960, when even single-room units without separate cooking facilities could qualify as separate households if they had direct access to a common hallway. The common hallway criterion meant that many single-room occupancy units that had previously been regarded as hotels or boarding houses were reclassified as independent households.

Ruggles and Brower estimate that this definitional change added between 240,000 and 400,000 additional single-room households in each census year from 1960 to 1980 (Ruggles and Brower 2003). The change had only a small effect on the total number

definition is incompatible with later census years; instead we followed the same procedures for 1900 as for the other early census years. All enumerator instructions for the period 1850–1990 are available online at the IPUMS Internet site.

of households, which stood at about 53 million in 1960, but it did have important consequences for the number of nonfamily households, which are defined as households in which the household head or householder has no coresident relatives. For example, the relaxation of the definition of household between 1950 and 1960 accounts for approximately 28 percent of the increase in male non-family householders during that decade. In most instances, the IPUMS microdata allow researchers focusing on this period to make adjustments for these definitional changes.

One additional change in census procedures should be noted. In 1940 and before, the census enumerated college students at their “usual place of abode,” which meant that those students who lived in dormitories were usually counted as part of their parental family. In 1950, the census began to enumerate college students in the community where they attended college. Because of this change, 45.5 percent of college students were unrelated to the household head in 1950, compared to only 10.6 percent in 1940. Because the college population was small in 1940, the overall effects of the change are modest, but analysts should nevertheless use caution when assessing the living arrangements of the college-aged in the mid-twentieth century (Ruggles 1988).

In addition to problems caused by shifting census definitions, statistical series can also be distorted by changes in census processing. In particular, Ruggles and Brower argue that because of errors in tabulation procedures, published statistics on subfamilies from both the census and the Current Population Surveys are unreliable.⁵ Accordingly, the statistics relating to subfamilies that are presented here are derived entirely from the IPUMS (Table Ae38–78).

Trends in American Living Arrangements

During the past century and a half, American families have become dramatically smaller and simpler. In the mid-nineteenth century, the aged ordinarily lived with their children, divorce was exceedingly rare, and births to unmarried women were infrequent. Today, most of the elderly reside alone, about half of all marriages will end in divorce, and about one in three babies are born to unmarried mothers (Cherlin 1992; Bramlett and Mosher 2001). Pundits, politicians, and scholars have debated and analyzed these changes in countless publications and speeches, but they still disagree about exactly what happened and why. Past discussions of the transformation of the family have involved guesswork because, until recently, we had only fragmentary information on family structure for the period before 1960. IPUMS data allow researchers to construct high-precision, closely comparable series describing national changes in the family over the very long run. The sections that follow describe two key changes in American living arrangements: the decline of multigenerational families and the rise of single-parent families.

Decline of the Multigenerational Family

Figure Ae-B presents the living arrangements of the population ages 65 or older between 1850 and 1990. In the mid-nineteenth century, about 70 percent of individuals and couples ages 65 or older lived with their children. In addition, about a tenth of the aged lived with other relatives – mainly grandchildren, siblings, nephews, and nieces. Another tenth lived with nonrelatives; some

⁵ Ruggles and Brower (2003). See also Bianchi (1995), Graham and Beller (1985), London (1998), and Sweet and Bumpass (1987).

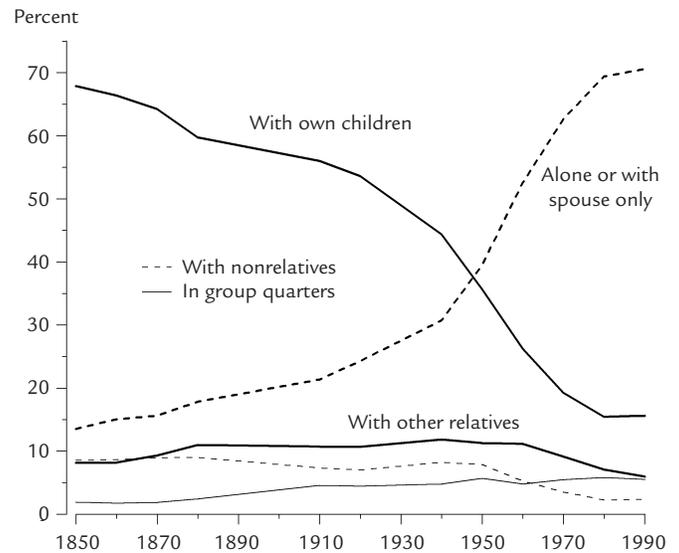


FIGURE Ae-B Living arrangements of individuals and married couples age 65 or older: 1850–1990

Sources

Computed from series Ae245–269.

of these were household heads who kept boarders or servants, but most were boarders in other people’s households. Only 11 percent of the aged in 1850 lived alone or with only their spouses, and only 1.5 percent lived in institutions such as almshouses and homes for the aged.

After 1850, residence with children began to decline. Increasingly, the elderly began to live alone, with their spouses only, or in old-age homes. The trend was gradual until 1920, but then it began to accelerate. The decline in residence with children was most rapid during the period from 1940 to 1980, when more than half the total change took place. By 1990, only 16 percent of the aged lived with their children, while 6.5 percent lived in institutions, and 70 percent lived alone or with their spouses only.

The high percentage of aged who resided with children in the nineteenth century is especially striking when we consider that not all the aged population had the possibility of residing with their children. About 7 percent of the elderly never married, and with few exceptions, this meant that they had no children with whom to reside. Another 8 percent married but remained childless. Some 5 percent of the aged had outlived all their children. Taking all this into account, then, somewhere on the order of 20 percent of the elderly in the mid-nineteenth century had no living children; thus, as near as we can measure, living with children must have been almost universal among the aged population that had living children (Ruggles 2001).

The decline of coresidence between the aged and their children is the single most dramatic change in the American family during the past two centuries. Contemporary observers were well aware of the decline of the multigenerational family, and they had little doubt as to the cause. Thomas H. Eliot, the chief drafter of the Social Security Act of 1935, put it this way:

In the old days, the old-age assistance problem was not so great so long as most people lived on farms, had big families, and at least some of the children stayed on the farm. It was customary when the old people got too old to do their share of the work they would stay on the farm and the sons or daughters would keep them there

in the home. That pattern changed slowly but continuously from the early part of the century as more and more of the young, rural population left the farms. The three generation household (aged parents, children, and grandchildren), perfectly common 50 years ago, had begun to become very rare indeed. By the time people got old, the children had already left and gone to the city. There was no one to take care of them. Hence, an increase in the problem of the needy aged. (Eliot 1961)

This interpretation makes sense. In preindustrial America, the economy was based on farming and wealth derived from the land. Land was concentrated in the hands of men, who inherited it from their fathers and passed it on to their sons. Those men who did not work in farming – such as merchants, artisans, and craftsmen – were also frequently self-employed. This system was destroyed between 1850 and 1950 by a fundamental transformation of the economy. Agriculture and crafts ceased to be the dominant occupations; they were eclipsed by the enormous growth of jobs in commerce and industry, which shifted millions of workers from self-employment to wage labor. This shift in the economy undermined the logic of the preindustrial family.

With the growth of new job opportunities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many young men left the farm in favor of the high wages, independence, and excitement offered by town life. The declining importance of farming, in turn, meant that fewer and fewer parents could offer the incentive of agricultural inheritance to keep their grown children from leaving home. Moreover, without the labor demands of the farm, fewer and fewer aged had reason to try to keep their children at home. Many of the other traditional self-employed village occupations – such as blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, and shoemakers – were rendered obsolete by industrialization, and the disappearance of such businesses reinforced the effects of declining agricultural employment.

Historians of the family, however, do not agree with this interpretation. Virtually all scholars writing on this subject in recent years regard nineteenth-century coresidence of the aged and their children as a form of old-age support. They maintain that the aged in the nineteenth century lived with their children when they were infirm or impoverished and had no other good alternatives.⁶ In this scenario, the increase of aged living alone resulted from increasing income of the aged, a consequence of the Social Security program and the growth of private pensions.

There are several problems with the hypothesis that declining coresidence of the aged resulted from rising income. First, census evidence clearly shows that in the nineteenth century the needy and sick aged were the group least likely to reside with their children (Ruggles 2003). Moreover, most studies have found that even in the recent past the rising income of the aged has been insufficient to account for the entire shift in living arrangements.⁷ There are also problems with the timing of change: the shift to independent residence began well before Social Security had a significant

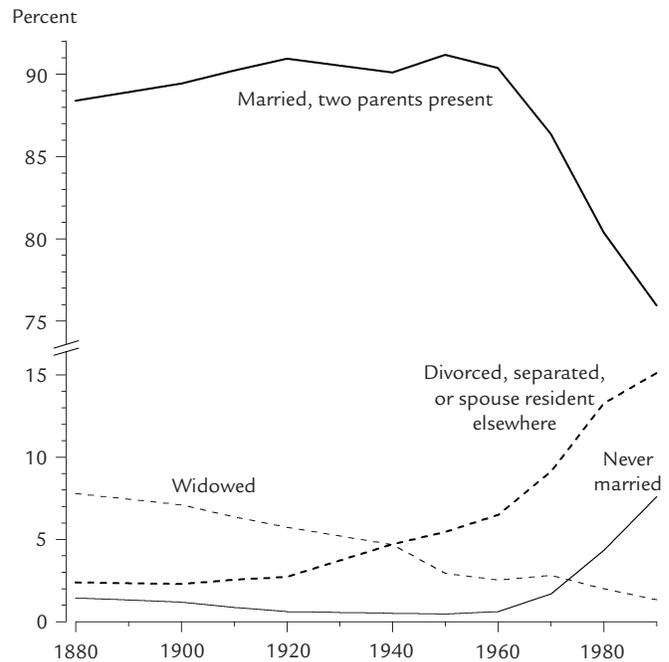


FIGURE Ae-C Marital status of mothers with children younger than age 18: 1880–1990

Sources

Computed from series Ae223–228.

impact on the resources of the aged. Judging from the commentary of Thomas Eliot and the other creators of the Social Security legislation, the changing living arrangements of the aged were as much a cause of Social Security as they were a consequence.

After 1940, the pace of change in the household composition of the aged accelerated. There can be little doubt that, in this period, rising incomes were an important contributor to the increase in independent residence of the aged. It is also likely that changing norms reinforced the decline of the multigenerational family. Nevertheless, I am persuaded by Eliot and other contemporaries that the key to understanding the transformation of the living arrangements of the aged lies with the rise of wage labor and the destruction of the preindustrial family economy.

Rise of Single Parenthood

The changing marital status of mothers with children under 18 years old is summarized in Figure Ae-C. From 1880, when marital status was first recorded in the census, until 1950, the overall percentage of young children without married mothers declined slightly from 11.6 to 8.8 percent. The percentage of children with divorced or separated mothers more than doubled during this period, but that increase was canceled out by a dramatic decline in

⁶ See, for example, Hareven (1994, 1996), Smith (1979, 1981, 1986), Costa (1997), Elman (1998), Elman and Uhlenberg (1995), McGarry and Schoeni (2000), Kramarow (1995), Wall (1995), Hammel (1995), and Schoeni (1998). The implicit assumption that the aged have always preferred residential autonomy owes much to Laslett's (1972) finding that extended families were rare in northwestern Europe before industrialization; see Ruggles (1987, 1994, 2001).

⁷ My own analysis suggests that about a fourth of the change in the percentage of aged residing with children between 1950 and 1990 can be attributed to income effects (Ruggles 1996a, 2001). This result was obtained by decomposing the

effects of changing income distribution using the method proposed by Das Gupta (1978), controlling for age in five-year groups, eight income categories, sex, and currently married status. This estimate is somewhat lower than has been found by most other investigators; although there is some disagreement, most studies suggest that about half of the recent shift toward living alone can be explained by rising income. See Beresford and Rivlin (1966); Chevan and Korson (1972); Carliner (1975); Davis and van den Oever (1981); Michael, Fuchs, and Scott (1980); Pampel (1983); and Ruggles (1988, 1996a, 1996b). Also relevant are Angel and Tienda (1982), Troll (1971), and King (1988).

the percentage of children with widowed mothers. From 1950 to 1990, however, the percentage of children residing with never-married mothers rose sixteen-fold. Simultaneously, the percentage of children with divorced or separated mothers continued to rise. By 1990, about one quarter of all children was residing with a single mother.

The increase in single parenthood is a consequence of the rapid rise of divorce, separation, and unmarried fertility (Table Ae507–513). The causes of these changes have been vigorously debated. The traditional explanation is that rising female labor force participation weakened marriage. Writing in 1893, Emile Durkheim pointed to the sexual division of labor as a source of interdependence between men and women, producing what he called “organic solidarity.” Durkheim warned that if the sexual division of labor receded, “conjugal society would eventually subsist in sexual relations preeminently ephemeral” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 60). More recently, scholars have argued that the rise in economic opportunities for women encouraged both the increase of marital instability and the decline of marriage rates (Cherlin 1980, 1992; Degler 1980; Fitch and Ruggles 2000; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Mare and Winship 1991; McLanahan 1991; McLanahan and Casper 1995; Preston and Richards 1975; Ross and Sawhill 1975; Ruggles 1997b; Waite and Spitze 1981). According to this interpretation, women in the past who lacked independent means of support were often trapped in bad marriages; as the opportunities for female wage labor expanded, women were increasingly able to escape and live on their own. Hence, the rising economic power of women undermined patriarchal authority and made separate residence as a divorced or never-married parent feasible.

Following the publication of Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* in 1984, many commentators blamed the rise of single parenthood on the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. From 1936 to 1996, AFDC provided a federal entitlement to economic support for single parents with children younger than age 18 who fell below a threshold of assets and income. Murray argued explicitly that the growth of female-headed families during the 1960s and 1970s was the result of increasing generosity and availability of AFDC. His proposed solution was radical: the elimination of welfare benefits to unmarried mothers and their children. Murray’s argument was ultimately endorsed by Congress, but few scholars were persuaded. Dozens of separate investigations involving the impact of AFDC benefit levels on family structure were carried out from the 1970s to the 1990s (Moffitt 1992; Ellwood and Bane 1985; Groenveld, Hannan, and Tuma 1983; Ruggles 1997a). The results of these studies uniformly suggest that the impact of welfare on single parenthood is small and often insignificant. As Robert Moffitt concludes, “the failure to find strong benefit effects is the most notable characteristic of this literature” (Moffitt 1992, p. 31).

A third line of argument contends that both unmarried fertility and marital instability were encouraged by stagnant and declining economic opportunity for young men between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s (Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997; Oppenheimer and Lew 1995; Wilson and Neckerman 1987). There is evidence that a shortage of young men with sufficient earnings to support a family contributed to the large increase in marriage age during the past three decades, especially among blacks (Cready, Fossett, and Kiecolt 1997; James 1998; Fossett and Kiecolt 1993; Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991; Lichter, McLaughlin, et al. 1992; Lloyd and South 1996; Testa and Krogh 1995). By reducing the pool of desirable husbands, declining real

wages and labor force participation of young men probably contributed to both the dramatic growth of unmarried fertility and the increase of divorce and separation.

Although economic theories predominate, some scholars have also emphasized cultural explanations for rising marital instability and unmarried fertility (Cherlin and Walters 1981; May 1980; Thornton 1985, 1989; Riley 1991). The social stigmas associated with divorce and illegitimacy have greatly diminished, and the legal barriers to divorce have virtually disappeared. The rise of individualism associated with urbanization and industrialization has meant increasing emphasis on self-fulfillment and growing intolerance of unsuccessful marriages. In essence, the cultural argument suggests that marriages in the past were governed more by social norms and less by rational calculation to maximize individual happiness.

Decline of the Patriarchal Family

There can be little doubt that the transformation of the American family could not have occurred without changes in attitudes. That does not, however, mean that we should assume that the changes in the family were driven by shifting cultural values. The destruction of the nineteenth-century patriarchal family system was simultaneously an economic and a cultural change.

The American family in the mid-nineteenth century was organized according to patriarchal tradition. The household head held near absolute authority. In most states, wives could not own property, the husband owned any earnings of his wife and children, fathers had veto power over the marriage of their daughters, and disobedience could be met with corporal punishment. Today, patriarchal authority has diminished to the point that the very concept of “household head” is obsolete; in recognition of shifting attitudes, the U.S. Census Bureau abandoned the term in 1980 (Ruggles and Brower 2003; Shamma 2002).

Within the preindustrial family economy, older-generation men exercised control over the means of production. Women and younger-generation men provided labor in exchange for food, shelter, and economic security. The decline of farming, the rise of wage labor, and the growth of mass education fundamentally shifted the balance of power within American families. First, the rise of wage labor among men reduced the importance of agricultural and occupational inheritance by providing opportunity for young men. Second, the rise of wage labor among women curbed the control that husbands and fathers exercised over their wives and daughters.

These changes undermined the patriarchal authority at the heart of the nineteenth-century family. Power within the family shifted from fathers toward sons, and from husbands toward wives. The increasing economic independence of sons and wives was essential for the decline of multigenerational families and the increase in single parenthood. Most wage-labor jobs available before the mid-nineteenth century – farm labor and domestic service were the most important ones – simply did not pay enough to support independent residence. Hence, the transformation of the economy made the transformation of the family possible. The changes in the family were not, however, purely economic; little would have happened had there not also been profound attitudinal changes. It is not especially useful to debate whether the economic or cultural changes were primary; both were essential.

In the second half of the twentieth century, rising incomes of the aged further encouraged independent residence, and declining economic opportunities of young men probably accelerated the rise of single parenthood. It would be a mistake, however, to

devote too much weight to these comparatively recent effects. The decline of the multigenerational family and the rise of single parenthood clearly predate these shifts in the age patterns of income. If the same economic changes had occurred a hundred years earlier, they would no doubt have had very different consequences. In the nineteenth-century context, increased income of the aged and reduced opportunity for young men would probably only have strengthened the patriarchal authority structure of the family.

This brief survey can only hint at the complexity of the transformation of the American family. Much work remains to be done. The availability of consistent census microdata has stimulated a surge of new research on changes in American households and families.⁸ Nevertheless, the field is in its infancy; scholars are just beginning to grasp the dimensions of change in American living arrangements from childhood to old age. The statistical series in this volume illustrate the sort of dramatic trends and differentials that are virtually invisible using previously available published statistics. But thousands of other measures of household and family composition are possible, and researchers now have the means to tailor their measures to the particular research question at hand.

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⁸ See the IPUMS Internet site for a current listing.

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