



MARRIED WITH CHILDREN

Although new census data does not point to an outright revival of so-called “traditional” family life in America, it does suggest a slowdown in its decline. BY WILLIAM H. FREY

The demise of the “traditional” married-with-children family is nearly as old a story as the 1950s-era *Ozzie and Harriet* plots that promoted this image of hearth and home in America. In 1960, nearly half of this country’s households fit the mold of a married couple with at least one child under age 18. Fast-forward to today, when, according to Census 2000, less than one-fourth of households conform to this family model.

While alarms may have sounded at the news, the greatest decline in traditional family households actually began in 1960. The trend continued into the 1970s, when many Baby Boomers entered their family-forming years. By postponing marriage and childbearing (among those who even chose marriage or childbearing), and by divorcing at

higher rates, Boomers contributed to the lower share of married-with-children households. Also contributing to the lowering of the percentage was the senior generations, whose increased life span allowed them to spend more years as empty-nesters, widows and widowers, creating many more childless and single-person households than in the past.

Still, any pronouncement of the death of the married-with-children family may be premature, as its decline slowed considerably in the most recent decade. Although this family type now accounts for just 23.5 percent of all households, its share has dropped by only 2.1 percent since 1990, compared with a 9.9 percent drop between 1970 and 1980 and a 4.8 percent decline during the 1980s. Moreover, these reputed traditional families registered an increase of 5.7 percent during the 1990s, in contrast

to numeric decreases during the previous two decades. (See chart, “Stemming the Decline.”)

The stronger-than-expected showing of traditional families in the 1990s can be attributed in large part to the population growth of immigrant Asians and Hispanics, who are more likely to form this family type, and to the lifestyle choices of Generation Xers (those born between 1965 and 1976), who have entered their household-forming years. In fact, married-with-children couples constitute more than one-third of Hispanic and Asian households. And while Gen Xers still assume a variety of household configurations, their preference for the traditional family has declined only modestly compared with that of earlier generations, suggesting a bottoming out of the three-decade trend. (See chart, “Gen X Marks the Spot.”)

LISA POWERS/MASTERFILE

Leave It to Beaver Country

These specific family-forming groups—Asian and Hispanic immigrants and young adult Gen Xers—are gravitating toward several metropolitan areas and states. The impact of increased immigration and of Gen Xers' family building is evident in areas that are home to the largest shares of married-with-children households. Utah, with its growing immigrant and twentysomething populations, leads all other states, with more than one-third of households (35 percent) conforming to the married-with-children model. Likewise, two of the top five metropolitan areas (in terms of shares of married-with-children households), Provo-Orem and Salt Lake City-Ogden, are located in the Beehive State.

States where married couples with children make up more than a quarter of all households include those with high percentages of immigrants, such as Texas, California, New Jersey, Idaho and New Hampshire. The impact of large immigrant Hispanic populations is also seen in the list of metropolitan areas that rank high for traditional family share. In each, such families account for more than 3 in 10 households. They include the Texas border metros of Laredo, McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, Brownsville-Harlington-San Benito and El Paso, as well as Merced in central California.

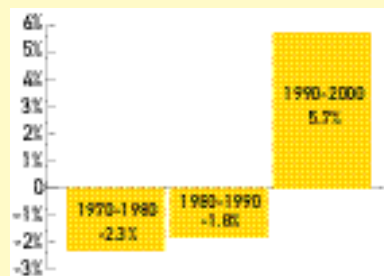
Regions that registered the largest rates of growth in married-with-children households in the 1990s overlap broadly with those having the largest shares of such families. (See map, "Family Growth and Decline.") Among those with the fastest-growing rates of married-with-children households: much of the West; California; the Southwest's Texas; and the Southeastern states of Florida, Georgia and North Carolina. The latter two states, as well as many Western states (besides California), are also destinations for white suburbanites moving away from congested metro areas of the Northeast and West Coast. (See "The New White Flight," *American Demographics*, June 2002.)

Metropolitan areas with the most growth in traditional families are located primarily in these same regions, led

STEMMING THE DECLINE

After large declines in the 1970s and reduced declines in the 1980s, the share of married-with-children households now shows gains.

MARRIED-WITH-CHILDREN HOUSEHOLDS, 1970-2000

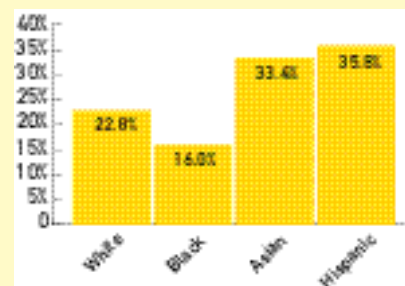


Source: William H. Frey analysis of census data

NEW AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS

More than twice as many Hispanics as blacks form married-with-children households.

MARRIED-WITH-CHILDREN HOUSEHOLDS, BY RACE

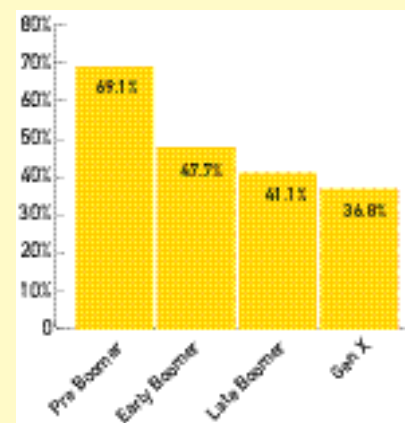


Source: William H. Frey analysis of census data

GEN X MARKS THE SPOT

The three-decade-long decline in the share of married-with-children households may finally bottom out with Gen Xers.

MARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN, AS SHARE OF U.S. HOUSEHOLDS, AGES 25-34



Source: William H. Frey analysis of census data

by Las Vegas, where married-with-children households increased by 75 percent during the 1990s. (See table, "Las Vegas: Family Friendly?") These metro areas also have high overall household growth rates, but they can be distinguished from parts of the country that experienced declines in married-with-children households.

While all states showed gains in the total number of households in Census 2000, 21 registered declines in married-with-children households. They are largely located in the central part of the U.S., including the Midwest and the Great Plains, as well as in some demographically stagnant parts of the South and New England.

Many of the states that saw a decline in married-with-children households have older age structures due to past out-migration of the young and their inability to attract large numbers of native or foreign-born migrants. The decline is also due, in part, to the inevitable increase in the number of empty nests in those states.

Future Family Havens

Doubtless, the aging of Baby Boomers will lead to even larger numbers of empty-nest households, retired couples, and widows and widowers, categories which are growing much faster than are married-with-children households. Areas of the country where they are expected to dominate—large swaths of the heartland and the graying suburbs around older cities—will see different consumer preferences, lifestyles and health and service needs than those of the budding family-friendly regions.

Although the new census information does not point to an outright revival of traditional family life in America, it does suggest a slowdown in its decline. Census 2000 shows that the parts of the country where these households are increasing are also areas where they tend to constitute larger shares of their communities. Some of these are in immigrant gateway states, with growing numbers of Hispanics and Asians. Others are in fast-growing Western and Southeastern states that are attracting, from other parts of the U.S., young couples with children.

METRO GAINS AND LOSSES

The metros gaining the largest shares of married-with-children households, such as Texas and California, are magnets to Boomers and Gen Xers, while those with the smallest shares tend to be elderly havens in Florida.

LARGEST SHARES OF MARRIED-WITH-CHILDREN HH METROPOLITAN AREA*

METROPOLITAN AREA*	SHARE
1. Provo-Orem, UT	42.5%
2. Laredo, TX	41.0%
3. McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	38.7%
4. Brwnsvlle-Hrlngtn-San Benito, TX	34.0%
5. Salt Lake City-Ogden, UT	33.3%
6. Merced, CA	32.5%
7. Jacksonville, NC	32.5%
8. El Paso, TX	32.2%
9. Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, CA	31.8%
10. Brazoria, TX	31.7%
11. Ventura, CA	31.0%
12. Killeen-Temple, TX	30.8%
13. Clarksville-Hopkinsville, TN-KY	30.3%
14. Newburgh, NY-PA	30.3%
15. Nassau-Suffolk, NY	30.2%

SMALLEST SHARES OF MARRIED-WITH-CHILDREN HH METROPOLITAN AREA*

METROPOLITAN AREA*	SHARE
1. Punta Gorda, FL	12.2%
2. Sarasota-Bradenton, FL	14.1%
3. Fort Myers-Cape Coral, FL	15.4%
4. Daytona Beach, FL	16.1%
5. Gainesville, FL	16.3%
6. Ocala, FL	16.5%
7. Naples, FL	16.5%
8. Fort Pierce-Port St. Lucie, FL	16.8%
9. Tampa-St. Pete-Clearwater, FL	17.4%
10. Bloomington, IN	17.5%
11. West Palm Beach-Boca Raton, FL	17.5%
12. Myrtle Beach, SC	17.7%
13. Barnstable-Yarmouth, MA	17.8%
14. Wilmington, NC	17.8%
15. Tallahassee, FL	18.0%

Source: William H. Frey analysis of 1990 and 2000 census data

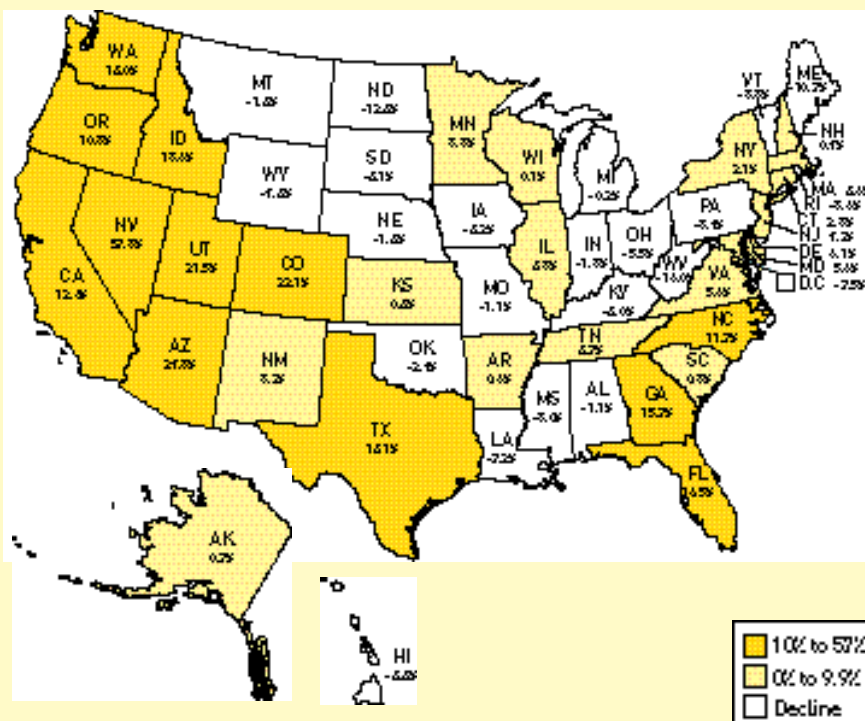
The next decade bodes well for even more traditional families in these regions. Continued immigration from Latin America and Asia is expected to contribute additional households of younger adults who have a strong tendency to start a family.

At the same time, Gen X will be replaced in the key household-formation ages by significantly larger Gen Y cohorts. Because the decline in traditional families appears to be bottoming out among those entering their household-forming years, these larger cohorts, coupled with the new immigrant waves, could contribute to a mini revival for the married-couple-with-child household in growing "family magnet" regions of the country. ■

William H. Frey is a senior fellow of demographic studies at the Milken Institute in Santa Monica, Calif., and on the faculty of the University of Michigan Population Studies Center. He may be reached at www.frey.demographer.org.

FAMILY GROWTH AND DECLINE

Changes across the U.S. in married-with-children households, 1990-2000.



Source: William H. Frey analysis of Census 2000 data

LAS VEGAS: FAMILY-FRIENDLY?

Sin City boasts the highest rate of growth in married-with-children households.

GREATEST PERCENT INCREASE METROPOLITAN AREA

METROPOLITAN AREA	PCT. CHG.
1. Las Vegas, NV-AZ	75.4%
2. Naples, FL	50.8%
3. McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	43.7%
4. Laredo, TX	41.5%
5. Austin-San Marcos, TX	41.5%
6. Boise City, ID	40.9%
7. Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR	38.8%
8. Provo-Orem, UT	38.6%
9. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC	37.6%
10. Fort Lauderdale, FL	37.4%

GREATEST PERCENT DECLINE METROPOLITAN AREA

METROPOLITAN AREA	PCT. CHG.
1. Steubenville-Weirton, OH-WV	-23.7%
2. Elmira, NY	-19.1%
3. Anniston, AL	-18.9%
4. Pine Bluff, AR	-18.8%
5. Lewiston-Auburn, ME	-18.4%
6. Johnstown, PA	-18.4%
7. Decatur, IL	-18.3%
8. Grand Forks, ND-MN	-18.3%
9. Wheeling, WV-OH	-17.9%
10. Binghamton, NY	-17.7%

Source: William H. Frey analysis of 1990 and 2000 census data