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ORANGE COUNTY

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Major Changes Reshaping O.C. Family Makeup

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The 1990 Census shows an increasing number of Orange County children growing up in non-traditional households and in many cases without their parents—with a dramatic rise among severely disturbed children living in group homes.

Some blame the parents' absence on an increase in dysfunctional families that cannot provide even minimal care for their children. "People are in jail. People are on drugs. There are people who split," said Thomas Coleman, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Family Diversity Project, a non-profit education and research organization.

In Orange County specifically, social scientists cited financial pressures and the influx of immigrants as contributing to the non-traditional living arrangements.

The census offers a snapshot of the ever-shifting nature of the American family. Since 1970, figures have documented trends away from married couples with children to unmarried couples, singles and fluid kinship combinations that may include former spouses, former in-laws, stepchildren and grandparents.

The latest census shows that the vast majority of Orange County children, 73%, still live in some form of two-parent family. But it also illuminated dramatic changes in non-traditional homes.

The number of children under 18 living with relatives other than their parents rose 63% over the past 10 years, and the number of children living with non-relatives jumped 74%, according to census figures.

The census reported that the number of children living in group quarters—private homes staffed by professionals—nearly tripled, jumping 194% from 725 to 2,133.

Orange County demographer Bill Gayk said the area's high cost of living and the large influx of immigrants have probably resulted in more residents seeking shelter with friends or family members.

"Rates of separation and divorce haven't changed dramatically one way or the other," Gayk said. About 50% of marriages are still expected to end in divorce and six of 10 children in the United States will live for some time with a single parent, according to James R. Wetzel, director of the Center for Demographic Studies at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Single parents in high-priced Orange County are more likely than others elsewhere to seek housing with relatives, Gayk said.

Similarly struggling for wages and more accustomed to living with family members, recent immigrants are also more likely to share housing with relatives, he said.

Census officials said the category of children living with non-relatives includes foster children, those living in the home of their mother's boyfriend, or whose parents have moved out of the area or died.

The figures for those living in group quarters—halfway homes for drug addicts, delinquents or mentally disturbed children—indicate an alarming growth of seriously ill or troubled youngsters making their way into the system at younger ages, social workers said.

For example, 24 children from ages 1 to 12 live at Casita de San Jose, a long-term group home in Santa Ana for wards of the court who require psychological treatment. Situated in a residential neighborhood, the home is much like any other, with living room, dining room, a playroom and shared bedrooms. But instead of parents, the children live with child-care assistants, a man and a woman supervised by social workers.

Many of the children are too disturbed to live with foster parents, said the home's executive director, Sister Marie Jeannette Ansberry. One 9-year-old was sexually abused by his father and removed from his parents at a young age. But the child, sexually aggressive and subject to deep

mood swings, was rejected by six homes before coming to live in the group home.

The child will probably never be reunited with his mother because she is incapable of protecting him, Ansberry said.

The children's parents, ranging from poverty level to upper middle class, are as much in need of therapy as the children, she said. "They don't know how to be a parent. Nobody ever role-modeled what a parent is."

Ansberry said that when reunification attempts are made—in 20% of the cases—parents are invited to classes where they are taught skills as basic as cooking, bathing children and helping them with homework.

"One mother had no idea that the child's hair should be washed weekly, that it would be nice for him to go to school in clean clothes, that if a child is sick, you don't think they'll just get over it," Ansberry said. "Some have to be taught how to play with a child, how to touch in a nurturing way. All those things they have to be taught."

Some believe that the rising numbers of disturbed children indicate an increasingly intractable underclass finding fewer family supports available to help families stay together.

The figures mirror a serious national trend of great concern to child advocates and policy-makers, said Gene Howard, director of children's services for the Orange County Social Services Agency. "Quite frankly, the kids coming to the attention of the system are much more disturbed than they were in the past," Howard said. "The families they are coming out of are a whole lot more dysfunctional."

In the majority of cases, either drugs or mental illness is a factor, and many problems have been compounded over generations of disease and abuse, Howard said.

Howard said the rapid rise in the number of children in group homes now appears to be slowing. Group homes are particularly expensive, he explained, because of the high cost of housing and the salaries needed to pay a specialized staff to deal with severely disturbed children.

FAMILY

More Children Live Without Parents

In addition, a major movement is also under way among social service agencies to intervene with families at home without removing the children.

Howard noted that despite the large increases in Orange County's percentages of children in non-traditional homes, the rates are less than those in the state and the nation. Nevertheless, the face of Orange County—long known as a bastion of traditional families—has been changing for decades and will continue to change, said Coleman of the Family Diversity Project.

Since the 1970s, the census has shown decreasing numbers of American married couples with children, and rising numbers of one-person households and households with unrelated adults, Coleman said. According to the latest census, the once-rapid increase in singles has leveled off and the rise in homes with unrelated adults has slowed, but the percentages of married-couple households and traditional families of married couples with children at home continue to drop.

The decline is less pronounced in Orange County with its "huge presence of married couples with children," Coleman said.

But sociologists suspect the change may be greater than the figures show. Many believe the census may have seriously undercounted the number of non-traditional families.

Census takers did not find all the people living in garages and shacks, and had problems communicating with individuals filling out forms, said Richard Serpe, director of Cal State Fullerton's Social Science Research Center.

In some instances, people living with many families in one house answered census questions as if there were only one family, he said. "They believe they might get in trouble if they talk about all the people in the house," he said. "There's a lot of mistrust of governmental activity, especially among immigrants."

In addition, he said, "there are lots of definitions that may not fit the things that were there. People were left to their own resources to fill out the questionnaire."

Also, some of the 73% of Orange County children listed as growing up in two-parent families may not really be in "traditional" families, Serpe noted. "How those kids get into that family may be very different. Marriage, remarriage, blended families." Heads of some households may not be married.

A more detailed breakdown of census statistics next year will reveal how many unmarried couples, either of the same sex or of opposite sex, have children living with them, Coleman said. The 1989 annual survey done by the Census Bureau indicated that a third of unmarried couples have children living with them, Coleman said.

In Orange County, Coleman said, an additional 5.7% are living in step families. But Coleman said the real number may even be twice as high due to the wording of the census question.

All family relationships relate back to Person No. 1 in the household, he said. "In a second marriage, someone's got to be Person No. 1 but maybe they both have children from previous marriages. Some [children] will be considered biological and some step kids. In reality, they are all step kids of one or the other married couple."

"It's unfortunate for step families to be counted in an inaccurate way," he said.

The census also reported fewer single parents in Orange County than in other parts of the country, a phenomenon largely attributed to finances and housing costs. One reason the figure is low is that many are driven out to less affluent areas, sociologists said.

Fifteen percent of the county's children live with single parents, compared to 20% in all of California, 24.4% in the city of Los Angeles and roughly 25% in the United States, according to the 1990 Census.

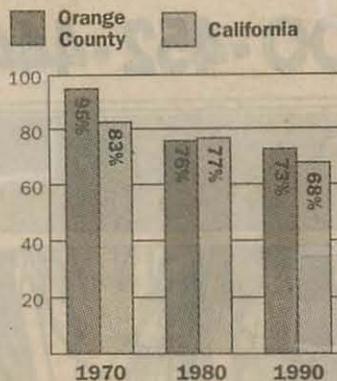
"If you're a single parent it becomes difficult to live in a place where housing prices are escalating at a rate higher than other areas," Serpe said.

Major Changes Reshaping Makeup of O.C. Families

The 1990 Census shows the vast majority of Orange County children, 73%, still living in some form of two-parent family, but it also shows an increasing number of children here growing up in non-traditional families and, in many cases, without their parents. Social scientists cite financial pressures and the influx of immigrants as contributing to the non-traditional living arrangements.

Two-Parent Families Declining

The percentage of children living in two-parent households has dropped in the last three decades in both the state and in Orange County.



Source: Family Diversity Project and U.S. Census Bureau

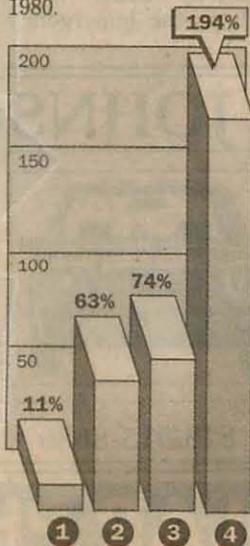
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The Changing Family Structure

Orange County remains a bastion of traditional nuclear families. But, as in other parts of the country, signs on the horizon point to change: more children living with one or no parents.

Non-Traditional Homes on the Rise

The growth in some groups of children being raised by non-traditional "parents," such as grandparents, unmarried couples or paid professionals, has far outstripped the county's 12% increase in total children since 1980.

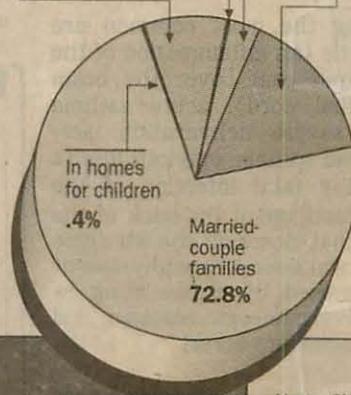


1. Single-parent families
2. With relatives
3. With non-relatives
4. In homes for children

Where the Children Live

The vast majority of Orange County's nearly 589,303 children live with married parents in traditional biological families, stepfamilies or adoptive families.

Category	Percentage
With relatives	8.2%
Institutionalized/ Jailed	.2%
With non-relatives	3%
Single-parent families	15.3%



Note: Children living alone or with a spouse are 0.1% of the county's total.