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Census shows living together without marriage on the rise

By GENARO C. ARMAS
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — Living together out-of-wedlock surged in popularity in the 1990s, even in Bible Belt states where alternative arrangements traditionally have been seen as less socially acceptable.

Nationally, there were 72 percent more unmarried-partner households than a decade earlier, 2000 census figures showed. Homes headed by married couples increased by just 7 percent.

The practice of living together without being married grew even faster across the South. In Arkansas and Oklahoma the portion of unmarried couples doubled, from 2 percent to 4 percent.

"You are talking about states that have a lot of organized religion and a lot of Southern Baptists," said Thomas Coleman, executive director of the

American Association for Single People. "In those states, the social stigma is considerable. You are considered — now people joke about this — 'living in sin.'"

Despite the rapid growth in nontraditional arrangements, Americans mainly live together as husbands and wives.

Nationally, 52 percent of homes are headed by married couples, down from 55 percent in 1990. Unmarried-couple homes made up 5 percent of all households in 2000, compared with 3 percent in 1990.

Groups like Coleman's hope the trends draw more attention to the financial penalties of living together outside of marriage, such as the lack of employee benefits and inheritance tax exemptions for unmarried, live-in partners.

For the partners, lack of a marriage certificate also brings criticism from friends and

parents, said Emma White, 24, who has lived with her boyfriend in St. Louis for two years and plans to get married next year.

At a grade-school reunion, White said, "Some of the mothers said, 'Oh, no, that's not what we were raised to do.'" She added that her family was not accepting of the move at first.

"After a while, you just try to tune it out," she said. "I don't think our relationship would have moved any further had we not moved in together."

Unmarried partners led 5 percent of all households in White's home state, Missouri, compared with 3 percent in 1990, while the proportion of homes led by married couples fell from 56 percent to 52 percent.

The 2000 census so far has released information on relationships for 21 states and the District of Columbia.

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Number of unwed couples rises

Trends • Census shows 72 percent more unmarried households than 10 years ago.

By **GENARO C. ARMAS**
The Associated Press

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Unmarried partners in the Bible Belt show some apprehension about the arrangement due to the "strong Christian background" of residents and the wide influence churches have over congregations, said Dr. Stewart Beasley, a family therapist and

professor of psychiatry at the University of Oklahoma.

In many instances, the biggest increases in unmarried couples came in states with some of the highest divorce rates in the country. In both Oklahoma and Arkansas, where the percentage of unmarried couples doubled, federal figures from 1998 show there were six divorces for every 1,000 people. The national average then was 4.2 per thousand.

Some couples are choosing to test their relationships by living together before getting married, Beasley said. Others, fearful of the marriage penalty on federal income tax, simply see it as a financial issue.

Scaling back the marriage penalty tax and other laws that seem to penalize marriage will help "people see that marriage is the best choice," said Heather Cirno, spokeswoman with the Family Research Council in Washington.

The numbers released so far do not disclose how many unmarried-partner homes were made up of same-sex couples. That will be released over the next year.

Many advocacy groups lobbied hard prior to the 2000 count to get homosexuals living together in committed relationships to identify themselves as "same-sex unmarried partners."

Other options to identify a relationship included "roomer," "housemate," and "other nonrelative."