

2-parent homes increase; so do unmarried families

By Thomas Ginsberg
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A government study this week confirmed a trend that may confound the family-values debate: More children lived in the traditional two-parent family in the 1990s, but more also lived with adults who were not married.

Statistics from a 1996 Census Bureau survey, combined with more recent surveys, show increasing diversity in living arrangements for the nation's children, thanks to everything from high immigration to changing divorce rates to the strong economy.

"It's not any one thing," said Jason Fields, author of the report released this week, based on a survey, not the 2000 census. "We're seeing that the nuclear family has increased in recent years. But we're also seeing a rise in unmarried cohabitation."

The study found that between 1991 and 1996, the share of children living with both of their biological, married parents and any full biological siblings — the traditional Ozzie-and-Harriet nuclear family — rose from 51 percent to 56 percent of all children.

At the same time, the study, along with more recent surveys, indicates that the number of children living with unmarried adults rose slightly.

The exact percentage change in cohabitation is unclear because the figures came from different surveys. The newly released 1996 survey, considered the most comprehensive, found that 5 percent of children that year (3.3 million) were living with adults who were not married, at least one of whom was a biological parent.

"It is now more common for people to cohabit not only before they get married, but also after a marriage ends," said Lynn Casper, a researcher on children's development at the National Institutes of Health.

Casper offered several reasons for the trend, including the possibility that more divorced parents were moving in with their new partners but not marrying them.

The study of 71.5 million children in 1996 also found:

- About 17 percent of all children, and 57 percent of black children, lived with an unmarried parent in 1996, some of whom were cohabitating with another adult.

- About 71 percent of children lived in any type of two-parent household, 25 percent lived in single-parent households, and 4 percent in households with some other adult, such as a grandparent.

- Less than 1 percent (5.2 million) were living with one biological parent and either a stepparent or adoptive parent.

- About 21 percent (15.3 million) had no brothers or sisters present in the house. Among the 79 percent with siblings, about 11 percent shared one biological parent but not the other.

Experts differed on the reasons for the trends in cohabitation and traditional families, and particularly whether a child is better off living with two unmarried adults or with a single parent.*

Links to the '60s

The strong economy of the 1990s may have enabled some biological families to stay together longer, several said.

Fields also said a bigger number of immigrants in the 1990s, who tend to cling to their families upon arrival, may have pushed up the numbers. He also noted a general increase, from the 1980s to 1990s, in the fertility rates among women in their 30s.

Attitudes also may be changing about the value of staying in the traditional nuclear family, which had been steadily breaking up since the 1950s.

"What started all these trends was the 1960s, the social unrest, the women's movement, the eras of free love," said Casper, who is writing a book about the trends. "It gave people the opportunity they didn't have before to get out of the nuclear family, and maybe those things have played themselves out."

Susan Orr, a specialist in family trends at the conservative, pro-marriage Family Research Council, based in Washington, said the trend showed more people were questioning the notion that children were best served by having their unhappy parents get divorced.

Two views

"I think there is ... an increasingly open and public discussion that divorce is bad and marriage is good for children and adults," Orr said. "More mothers and fathers staying together with their children is a good thing."

Asked about more parents living unmarried, Orr said: "Let's help them get married. If this is a real family unit, let's formalize it. If there are barriers we've put in their place, let's remove them."

Gregory Asc, a senior research associate at the nonpartisan Urban Institute, noted that the trend away from single-person parenting might not always be good.

"Bringing an [unmarried] man into the house may be a mixed blessing," Asc said. "There is some evidence that having a boyfriend around is worse."

Advocates for unmarried people, however, sharply criticized the study's contention that the nuclear family has rebounded, pointing out that the number of married-with-children households is still down dramatically from the 1950s and 1960s.

"Unmarried America keeps growing," said Thomas F. Coleman, director of the California-based American Association for Single People. "More and more children are living with unmarried adults, more are being raised by grandparents, and the reality is family diversity."

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