

Chapter 2

How Americans Lived: Families and Life Courses in Flux, 1900-2000

Draft 6.2; July 2005

Apx. 13,700 words of text and 8,200 words of notes and backmatter.

When the Census Bureau released their findings from the 2000 census, major newspapers featured articles on how “*the American family*” was disappearing. Fewer homes contained married couples with children, and more homes sheltered only single individuals, unmarried partners, or one-parent families. Feature writers suggested that the American family might be entering a scary new era. We do not in this chapter contest the facts, but we fault the reports on their historical perspective and analytical gaze. All too often, journalists contrasted the 2000 family with the fictional family typified in 1950s sitcoms. The historical record, once closely examined, reveals some dramatic changes, but not necessarily the ones they focused on. Also, there were significant continuities over the century. Most important, there is no, and never was, *an American family*, only a mix of families and households. Our topic here is how that mix changed over the century.

We will see that:

* Americans lived predominantly in two-parent nuclear families throughout the century. They did so especially in the 1950s, but that was an unusual era in American family history. The major change for Americans *under 45* was that living as a single adult became the primary alternative to living in a nuclear family.

* The most revolutionary changes, however, happened to middle-aged and *older* Americans. Over the century, they increasingly lived in empty-nest or single-person households. And they preferred it.

* Americans’ travels through the life cycle became increasingly *similar* over most of the century, as variations among them how long they lived, how many children they had, and when they made key transitions narrowed.

* While greater commonality was the major story, substantial differences in

family life opened up between blacks and whites and between the less- and the more-educated. The two-parent household became atypical for African Americans after 1960. And white high school dropouts were decreasingly likely to live in a nuclear family after 1970.

We begin our exploration of a century's change in Americans' living arrangements by describing the mix at the end of the century.

American Households in 2000

We first have to establish a set of basic categories that capture the major variations in living arrangements; we delineate six:¹

- (1) *Primary Individual*: In 2000, 12 percent of Americans headed a household, but lived without any adult relative or child. These were mostly people living alone, but some had a roommate or a domestic partner. (We will have much to say later about cohabiting couples.)
- (2) *Single-Parent Family*: 11 percent of Americans in 2000 lived in a household of one parent and at least one child. The typical home had a single mother and her children, but some included others, such as roommates and unmarried partners.
- (3) *Married Couple with No Children*: 16 percent lived as members of couples who had not yet had children or whose children had left home.
- (4) *Married Couple with Child(ren)*: 39 percent of Americans in 2000 lived in the “classic” nuclear family of married parents and their child or children.
- (5) *Extended Family Household*: 14 percent of Americans lived in households which included a *relative*, other than the spouse or child, of the head; typically, these relatives whose presence defined an extended household were elderly parents or siblings of a

1. Ruggles and Brower's categorization, (in “Measurement of Household and Family Composition in the United States, 1850-2000”) is comparable to ours. Note that homeless people are almost certainly undercounted in the census, but those who are included are typed by the same criteria as people who live in a permanent residence.

husband or wife.

(6) *Shared Quarters* includes two sorts of people: (a) 3 percent of Americans who lived in group settings, such as orphanages, dormitories, barracks, or assisted-living homes; and (b) 5 percent who were the *non-relatives* in the other household arrangements – roommates, boarders, servants, or unmarried partners.²

We count *individuals* and how they lived, although much of the popular writing on the family counts *households* and how they are structured. The angle of vision makes a big difference. In 2000, for example, 26 percent of all *households* contained a single person, but only 13 percent of all adult *individuals* lived alone. We prefer to count people rather than homes; it better describes Americans' experience.³ It also better helps us understand what shapes the formation of households.

One complication to our categories is cohabitation. Only since 1990 has the Census explicitly offered respondents the option of labeling adults in their homes as “unmarried partners”; before that, estimating the number such partners required crude procedures.⁴ Cohabiting was common; by one estimate, most married couples in 2000 had lived together before the wedding. But cohabiting was usually brief, so that on April 1, 2000, relatively few Americans were cohabiting – probably 4 to 5 percent of adults.⁵ Cohabitation is, as many Americans can testify, a much vaguer state than marriage. Some couples have deliberately-planned and enduring partnerships which work much like marriages; others have casual and

2. For historical consistency, we follow the 1970 definition of group quarters, which classifies a household situation as group quarters if it contains 5 or more unrelated individuals. We combine the two small categories of group quarters and non-relatives for ease of presentation and to deal with definitional problems between 1900 and 1910.

3. Our approach is consistent with Ruggles and Brower's observation (in “Measurement of Household and Family Composition” p. 93) that, given various methodological issues, such studies should use individuals rather than families as the unites of analysis.

4. This is the “POSSLQ” estimate (see Casper et al., “How Does POSSLQ Measure Up?”). In the 2000 Current Population Survey, the POSSLQ estimate was about 24 percent larger than the unmarried partners count (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabUC-1.pdf>; accessed 26 May, 2004).

5. See, for example, Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States.” Census table UC-1 cited in note 6 yields an estimate of 4 percent; using POSSLQ rules on the 2000 census yields 4.6%. A Gallup poll in 2002 found that 37 percent of married Americans reported having lived together before marriage (51% of those under age 50) – Jones, “Public Divided on Benefits of Living Together.”

indefinite liaisons, where, for example, each person keeps a different official address. For such reasons and also because only legal marriage was recognized in earlier censuses, we focus on the distinction between married and unmarried. But we note cohabitation when important.

To make sense of this variety of household arrangements, we need to distinguish people by age. (Children, for example, rarely live as primary individuals.) Figure 1 shows the basic distribution of Americans by their ages and the type of household in which they lived in 2000. Among the key points to note are:

---Figure 1 about here---

- * About 62 percent of American children lived in “traditional” nuclear family households – two parents or step-parents, children, and no other relatives. Twenty percent lived in single-parent households and 16 percent in extended households. If we treat cohabiting couples as if they were married, the percentage of children who were living in two-parent families rises to 66 percent.⁶
- * Young adults 18 to 29 years old lived in a wide variety of households – 42 percent (44 percent if we add in cohabitators) in a married-couple or single-parent household either as a child or a parent. Eight percent lived in group settings such as dorms.
- * About half of 30-to-44-year-olds lived in a two-parent-plus-child nuclear family of married parents and children.
- * Over 60 percent of the 45-to-64-year-olds lived in married couples, about half with children and half without children.
- * Over 40 percent of the elderly were part of couples without children at home, and 30

6. The Census Bureau’s counts of children living with parents is somewhat higher because they do not separate out extended households as do we here. (Below, we will examine trends for children the same way as the Census does.) In 2002, the Bureau estimated that about 69% lived with two parents, about 73% if cohabitation is counted (from table 1 of Fields, “Children’s Living Arrangements, 2002”). This estimate is based on the Census 2000 finding that 5.7% of children were living in “unmarried partner households” (5.1% with opposite-sex partners, 0.6% with same-sex partners) – from Table 2, “Household and Family Characteristics of Children,” Census 2000 PHC-T-30, “Characteristics of Children,” on-line: www.census.gov (accessed 26 May, 2004). We return to the extended household issue later.

percent lived alone (or with roommates). Fewer than 20 percent lived with their children or grandchildren and 6 percent were in group living of some sort.⁷

About half or more of each age group except the 18-to-29 year-olds lived in a household headed by a legally married couple.⁸ Is this a lot or a little? We will see later when we explore how these figures changed over time.

Variations in 2000. Typical living arrangements differed not only from one age group to another, but also along other axes of difference. Women, for example, were likelier to be single parents or, as a senior citizens, to live alone than were men. The most dramatic contrasts in living arrangements were by ethnicity and education. African-American children were much more likely to living with single parents than were other ethnic or racial groups, as shown in the following table. (Treating cohabiting adults as if they were married changes the percentages only a few points.⁹)

7. The children estimate adds married-with-children to extended household; the institutions estimate refers to the group quarters segment of the “shared quarters” category.

8. The results, treating cohabitation as “marriage,” are in the table below. Counting cohabiting couples is complex, given the variety of arrangements that might qualify. Our goal was to use a common classification system across the century. We count households as cohabiting-couple households if there was a person present of opposite sex to the household head, who was age 15 or older and identified as a “partner,” “friend,” or “visitor.” We excluded as cohabitators foster children, people paying to stay, or employees. (Possible cohabiting couples in the household that do not include the head are not counted.) This method overestimates cohabitation with the household head to the extent that some partners, friends, or visitors are simply roommates, and it underestimates cohabitation to the extent that some who pay or work to stay may actually be in a quasi-spouse relationship with the head. These counts make a negligible difference before about 1970. Others whom we cite use different procedures for cohabiting counts in 1990 and 2000, but the numbers are similar.

<i>Percent by age, 2000</i>	0-17	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+
Married with children	66.1	35.4	52.5	28.3	5.0
Married without children	0.0	13.7	12.5	36.1	43.3
Single parent	15.6	9.0	8.2	5.6	3.7
Extended household	16.5	17.2	11.4	12.7	12.6
Primary individual	0.0	9.5	10.2	14.2	28.8
Shared quarters*	1.9	15.1	5.2	3.0	6.7

(* non-relatives & group quarters)

9. One major racial contrast is that white women’s cohabitation tends to end in marriage far more often than African American women’s cohabitation (Raley, “Recent Trends and Differentials in Marriage and Cohabitation”). These rates are all snapshots. If we change the focus to the proportion of children who ever live in a given arrangement, cohabitation makes a modest difference in ethnic comparisons. African-American and Hispanic children in the 1990s were 30 percent likelier than non-Hispanic whites to have lived with a cohabiting parent (Graefe and Lichter, “Life

Percent of children living in household types, by ethnicity:¹⁰

	Non-Hisp. White	African American	Hispanic	Other
Married with Children	77	36	53	63
Single Parent	12	33	13	11
Extended Household	9	28	31	24

We see here the result of the fact that proportionally many more African-American children were born to unmarried mothers. In 2000, for example, 62 percent of births to African-American women were to unmarried ones, compared to 26 percent of non-Hispanic white and 30 percent of Hispanic births.¹¹ African Americans and non-Hispanic whites in other age groups also differed sharply in household arrangements. African-American adults of all ages were about 25 percentage points less likely to live in a married couple household than were whites; black adults instead lived as single parents or in extended households. Also, black men were exceptionally likely to live in group quarters – notably, in prisons.¹² These racial contrasts, we will see, grew

Course Transitions of American Children"). Similarly, African-American and Hispanic children spent, on average, more of their childhoods in a cohabiting arrangement than white children did – about 11% to 7%. In the end, however, the basic differences in the 1990s between blacks and others remain dramatic: The percentage of children's childhoods spent with a couple, married or cohabiting, was 87% for whites, 79% for Hispanics, and 27% for African Americans (Bumpass and Lu, "Trends in cohabitation").

10. Other, minor categories not included. All categories other than Hispanic are "non-Hispanic."

11. Bachu and O'Connell, "Fertility of American Women: June 2000." See, also, Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, Ch. 4.

12. In 2000, 14% of African-American men aged 18 through 44 were in "group quarters," compared to 7% of Hispanic and 5% of non-Hispanic white men. A methodological note about racial differences with a substantive implication: African-American men between 30 and 44 years old were notably more likely to be recorded as living in a married couple household than were African-American women, by about nine percentage points, 43.5 versus 34.6 percent. Given the very small percentage of African Americans who marry non-blacks, this is an odd discrepancy. The discrepancy lies not in the numbers of African-American men and women who were married – that was about right – but in the base number of African-American men and women. Census Bureau researchers counted notably fewer African-American men aged 30 to 44 than African-American women in that age category. Some of the missing were men who lived with a "spouse surrogate" but were not reported. A much larger part of the missing were African-American men living in unconventional, uncounted, and typically unpleasant housing arrangements. Because these marginal African-American men were missing in the denominator, the census data made it seem that a higher

over the century.

Hispanics also differed sharply from whites, but in another way. Throughout the life cycle, adult Hispanics were likelier than whites, by about 20 to 25 percentage points, to live in extended households rather than alone or in married couple households (they especially eschewed empty-nest arrangements). The patterns for “others” – mainly Asian Americans – differ from non-Hispanic whites in a similar fashion, although not as sharply – by about 15 points. Broadly put, non-Hispanic whites tended to live disproportionately in nuclear families, African Americans disproportionately in single-adult households, and Hispanics and “others” disproportionately in extended households.¹³

Americans’ living arrangements in 2000 also differed substantially by *educational* level. Take, again, the case of children:, as shown in this table:

Percent of children living in household types, by education of head of household:

	No High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate
Married with Children	42	56	63	81
Single Parent	22	24	22	11
Extended Household	34	18	13	8

The table shows that 81 percent of children living in a household headed by a college graduate lived in a married-with-children home, while only 42 percent of children in a household headed by a high-school dropout lived in such a household; children in households with intermediate levels of education fell between these two extremes.¹⁴ The differences by education arise in part

percentage of African-American men were married than was actually true. Jon Stiles analyzed these data. See, on the African-American undercount: Hogan and Robinson, “What the Census Bureau’s Coverage Evaluation Programs Tell Us”; Darden, et al., “Ethnographic Evaluation of the Behavioral Causes of Undercount”; West and Robinson, “What Do We Know About the Undercount of Children?”

13. There is some evidence, however, that Mexican-origin Americans are moving toward a higher single-parent pattern (Wildsmith, “Race/Ethnic Differences in Female Headship”).

14. Cohabitation affects the pattern little; and looking only at non-Hispanic whites affects the pattern little. The 39-point difference between most and least educated shrinks a little, to 35 points, if we include cohabiting parents, since less-educated couples cohabit more often than the more-educated couples. And, the 39-point gap also narrows but

from differences in out-of-wedlock births. In 2000, only 9 percent of young, unmarried college-graduate women were mothers, compared to a full 70 percent of young, unmarried high school dropouts and even 53 percent of young, unmarried high school graduates.¹⁵ Marriage, typically went with education. Among the adults aged 30 to 64, college graduates lived much more often in a married-couple household – 68 percent of the time, versus high school graduates at 58 percent, and high school dropouts at 44 percent.

One way to characterize the family differences between Americans of differing education is to say that the more education Americans (or their parents) received, the more often they followed a “normal” life-course: being raised by two parents, then living as a single person, getting married, becoming a parent, and living in an “empty nest.” The less education people (or their parents) had, the more likely it was that their life-course was “off-track”– being raised by a single parent, being a single parent themselves, living in an extended household, or being unmarried in middle age.¹⁶

American family patterns in 2000 – both the general tendencies, such as the predominance of the nuclear households, and the variations by race and education – were shaped by generations of complex social changes. Those changes, in turn, are a composite of new circumstances, such as improved public health, economic growth, and the decline of farming, and to some harder-to-estimate degree of new cultural expectations and so the choices Americans made. The first task in tracking household arrangements over the century is to understand the changes in the critical life events – births, deaths, marriages, and marriage dissolutions – that heavily determined the kinds of family arrangements Americans could choose.

remains sizeable, at 30 points, when we restrict our focus to non-Hispanic white children. This means that the education differences are not simply mirroring racial or ethnic differences – and vice-versa. On cohabitation differences, see Graefe and Lichter, “Life Course Transitions of American Children.”

15. And 41% of young, unmarried women with some college were mothers. These numbers refer to women aged 25-44 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2002. "Fertility of American Women:2000" Current Population Report P20-543 revised.

16. There is, no doubt, some causality running the other way: Youngsters who become unwed parents often drop out of school. But, overall, we can assume that educational diversity drives the variety of household patterns we see here. Further on in the chapter, we look more closely at the “normal” life cycle.

The Century's Vital Events

For most of the twentieth century, the pace of births and deaths shaped Americans' living arrangements more than any conscious preferences they had. In 2000, planned births outnumbered unplanned births by more than five to one, but back in 1900 many fewer American couples pursued family planning and even fewer attained it.¹⁷ Forestalling death in 1900, an era of widespread infection and accidents, was also limited; death rates were high. Most of the changes in living arrangements since 1900 resulted from curtailed childbearing and extended lifetimes. And in both respects, Americans became more similar to one another.

Longer Lives. The extension of Americans' lifetimes has been so great that it is hard to exaggerate its significance. Worldwide, life spans increased more between 1900 and 1980 than they had from prehistory to 1900.¹⁸ Had the parents of a newborn baby girl born in America in 1900 asked an expert about their daughter's prospects, they would have learned that she could expect to live 48 years. In 2000, a newborn daughter could have expected to live 79 years – 31 years more, on average. In 2000, death happened to the elderly, because the biggest changes in life expectancy came from a 90 percent reduction in infant and child mortality.¹⁹ In contrast, 20 percent of the people born in 1900 died within 18 years; demographers predict that, of Americans born in 2000, it will not be until 75 years later that 20 percent of them will have died – and that assumes no great medical breakthroughs, such as curing cancer, before 2075.²⁰

Twentieth-century progress in longevity came in three phases. First, improved sanitation, especially municipal water and sewage treatment, and public health controls, such as meat and milk inspection, reduced the infections and diseases that especially killed children. Second,

17. Mosher and Bachrach, "Understanding U.S. Fertility."

18. Preston, "Mortality Trends."

19. White and Preston, "How Many Americans Are Alive Because of 20th Century Improvements in Mortality?"

20. David Cutler, "The Economics of Better Health." In another calculation, Peter Uhlenberg, "Death and the Family," estimated that families in 1900 had a better than 3:2 chance of losing a child before reaching age 16; that dropped to a 1:20 chance by the 1970s. Conversely, in 1900 a child had a 1 in 2 chance of losing a parent or sibling before reaching 16; that dropped to 1 in 10 by the 1970s.

inoculations against smallpox, polio, and measles effectively eradicated those killers, and with drugs like penicillin, again largely extended children's survival. Third, toward the end of the century, medical developments, such as improved therapies for heart disease and cancer, extended the life spans of the middle-aged and the elderly.²¹

Figure 2 displays the century's change in women's life expectancy. The heavy line shows the age at which half of women born in the given year died or will die – i.e., the average life span. It rose from 71.5 years for women born in 1900 to a forecast 86 years for those born in 2000. (The attentive reader will recall, from a previous paragraph, that the average baby girl born in 1900 would have been expected to live only 48 years. That *projection* was based on the death rates of infants, children, and adults in 1900. The typical woman born in 1900 actually lived to nearly 72 because of the health improvements which came along during her lifetime.) The lower line traces the trend for those women who had shorter life spans: Twenty percent of the women born in 1900 died before their 17th birthdays, but women born in 2000 will not see 20 percent of their cohort die until they reach their 74th birthdays! The higher line in Figure 2 traces the trend for long-lived women. The 20 percent of women born in 1900 who lived the longest made it past age 87; the 20 percent of women born in 2000 who will live the longest will make it to at least age 95.²²

---Figure 2 about here---

One consequence of health improvements is the convergence in Americans' life expectancies displayed in Figure 2. The long-lived birth class of 1900 had 65 more years of life than the their short-lived sisters. If the cohort born in 2000 conforms to demographers' predictions, then their longest-lived will survive 23 years more than their shortest-lived – cutting

21. Preston, "Mortality Trends" and *Mortality Patterns in National Populations*, esp. 183-86. See, also, specific studies such as Wells, "The Mortality Transition in Schenectady."

22. The data behind Figure 2 come from historical vital statistics (www.cdc.gov/nchs). We used actual cohort experiences up through 1998 and projected the rest assuming that age-specific death rates will change half as much between 2000 and 2050 as between 1950 and 2000. Our spreadsheets are available at our web site <http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/rsfcensus>.

by two-thirds the variation among American women in life spans. The great disparities in health that remained in the United States in the last decade of the twentieth century – notably by social class and race – should temper any enthusiasm about this equalizing trend.²³ But on the most vital of vital statistics, the life span, Americans became noticeably more alike over the twentieth century.

Less Fertility. In 1900, American women averaged between four and five childbirths each. This average is misleading. Relatively few women had exactly four or five; more women had either *never* given birth or gave birth *seven or more times*.²⁴ Over the first one-third of the century, the average came down as many fewer women bore seven or more children. By the depths of the Great Depression, ill health and even malnutrition brought the average to a temporary bottom of just over 2 births per woman. The famous “baby boom” began in 1947 and peaked at average of 3.6 births per woman in the late 1950s. The subsequent “baby bust” brought fertility to an all-time low of 1.7 births per woman in 1976; then fertility bobbed back up to two births per woman in the 1980s – where it stayed through the end of the century.²⁵

Fertility is a complicated mix of biology, choice, and happenstance. A nation’s birth rate reflects millions of couples’ decisions about the number of children they want and when they want them, accidental pregnancies, complications that prevent conception, and changes of partners through widowhood or divorce and remarriage. We can simplify the picture of what happened in the twentieth century by looking at cohorts of women when they reached an age when few would have yet another birth and calculating how many children they had had by that age. These statistics are called “cohort fertility data.” We present that data in Figure 3: the number of children a cohort of women bore is displayed by the year of their 30th birthdays. We plugged in projections for those cohorts that are still having babies. (The exact numbers in this

23. See, for example, Williams and Collins, “US Socioeconomic and Racial Differences in Health.”

24. Of women in their early 30s in 1900, about one-fifth had never given birth and one-fifth had done so seven or more times. Fewer than one in eight had had any specific number of births between from one to six.

25. These figures are based on the vital statistics reports in Heuser, “Cohort Fertility Tables, 1917-1970” and subsequent data posted on www.cdc.gov/nchs.

figure differ from those given in the previous paragraph for technical reasons.²⁶) Women who had their children early in the twentieth century had an average of four births each. That fell to nearly two births by 1940, rose to over three by 1961, and fell below two by 1979. The lower line shows the trend for women who had relatively few children. In 1900, women at the 20th percentile of fertility averaged one child; in 1970, they averaged about two. In 1900, the especially fertile women, those at the 80th percentile, averaged seven children, four in 1940, five in 1970, and fewer than four after 1990. Once again, American variability in a critical life event narrowed considerably. The difference between the most and least fertile shrank from 6 to 2.4 children – mainly because large families became much less common.

----Figure 3 about here---

This narrowing is depicted another way in Figure 4 by comparing four specific cohorts of women: the ones who were in the midst of their childbearing in 1900, the ones who were around 30 years old during the Depression, the mothers of the baby boomers, and then the last set to complete nearly all of their fertility in the twentieth century. Within each cohort, we stack births up from zero to seven; the length of the bar indicates the percentage of women in that cohort who had that many live births. We also note the mean number of births for the cohort.

----- Figure 4 about here -----

At the turn of the twentieth century, far more women had no children or seven children by age 30 than had the average of three or four. Depression-Era women had much lower fertility, mainly because many fewer women had large families and many more instead had one or two

26. The calculations in the previous paragraph refer to so-called "period" estimates -- the number of births a woman would have if she experienced at each age what the women that age in year t experienced. The calculations behind Figure 3 eliminate the synthetic nature of the period estimate by tracking a real cohort of women as they progressed through each age one year at a time. Even though the latter, cohort approach is a better description of how life works out, demographers often look at the period fertility rate to keep tabs on younger women who are just beginning their childbearing years.

children. The mothers of the baby boomers had higher fertility because fewer women than ever remained childless and few stopped at one child. With the baby bust, the variation contracted dramatically. Few women had more than three births and one-third had exactly two births. The women born in the 1960s and 1970s appear headed to birth experiences much like this last one. The fertility patterns have now been stable for almost 25 years – the only period of stable fertility in American history. (If not for immigration, the U.S. population would begin to decline around 2045 or so.) Americans have converged on two children as the norm.

An important detail in the story illustrated by Figures 3 and 4 is childlessness. Early in the twentieth century, childlessness was as common as having large families; 18 percent of the women who were 30 in 1900 had no children. In mid-century, childlessness was rare; during the 1960s, fewer than 10 percent of women in their 30s were childless. Late in the century, childlessness was once again common; 21 percent of the women who were 30 in 1990 will probably end up having no children. But the reasons for early- and late-century childlessness were quite different. In the first era, infections and other health problems made conceiving difficult, and miscarriages and stillbirths disheartened many who did conceive. In the second era, at least three-fourths of the childless women chose not to have children.²⁷

Another key detail is the “baby boom.” The explanation for the baby boom is still unclear to demographic historians, but a combination of catching up for delays during the Depression, improved nutrition after the war, medical advances ending barrenness, and cultural fashion led Americans to marry younger and have children sooner and more often than the generation before or after them. The consequences of the baby boom have been enormous, as the population bulge worked itself through crowded schools, a tight job market, parenting, and, in 2000, anticipation of mass retirement.²⁸

Thus, the history of American birth rates is partly one of health and one of preferences.

27. McFalls, "Risks of Reproductive Impairment in the Later Years of Childbearing"; Mencken, "Age and Fertility"; Morgan, "Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Childlessness."

28. For discussions on causes of the baby boom, see, e.g., Klein, *A Population History of the United States*, Ch 6; Nugent, *Structures of American Social History*, pp. 126ff; Westoff and Westoff, *From Now to Zero*. On consequences, see, for example, Macunovich, *Birth Quake*.

The Gallup Poll has, since the 1930s, asked people how many children they consider “ideal” for a family. The average number Americans considered “ideal” dropped suddenly from three-plus to two or less around 1970 (a development we explore in detail later in this chapter). Americans decided, amidst many dramatic social changes, that smaller was better. And they did so with increasing consensus that two was the right number.

Marriage. In the middle of the twentieth century, marriage was all but universal; only about five percent of adults who came of age around 1950 never married. But that was not so earlier; over 10 percent of those who came of age between 1880 and 1900 never married. And it was not so afterwards; as many as 10 percent of recent cohorts will never marry.²⁹ The age at which Americans married also followed a cycle over the century, as shown in Figure 5. The solid lines display the median age at first marriage for women and the ages at which the youngest-marrying 20 percent and oldest-marrying 20 percent of women for each birth cohort walked the aisle, sorted by the typical year of marriage for that cohort.³⁰ (Men married a few years later than women, on average, but the difference between the genders shrank from 3.5 years early in the century to just 1.7 years by 2000.) Early in the century, women married on average at about age 22. At mid-century, the median age had dropped such that the average bride was, by several weeks, still a teenager. And the differences among women had narrowed; the late-marrying were now late by only a few years. By the end of the century, the median had soared to almost 24 and the late-marrying were very late, perhaps not marrying until approaching 40. A very wide gap had developed between the late-marrying and the rest.³¹

29. Fitch and Ruggles, “Historical Trends in Marriage Formation,” esp. figure 4.7. Also Westhoff, “Marriage and Fertility in Developed Countries”; Goldstein and Kenny, “Marriage Delayed or Marriage Forgone?”; and authors’ own calculations from the March CPS data files (<http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/rsfcensus>). The fraction of 19th century women who never married was probably significantly higher, although precise national figures are not available. Data for Massachusetts indicate that the proportion single at age 50 rose from 15 percent in the cohort born in 1830 to 22 percent for the cohort born in 1890 (see Uhlenberg, “A Study of Cohort Life Cycles”), but women elsewhere were likelier to marry.

30. Age at marriage data are from IPUMS for 1940-1980 censuses and from the June, 1985 and June, 1995 CPSs.

31. With 20 percent still unmarried we might suspect that many women born in the 1970s might never marry. But recent projections indicate that all but 6 or 7 percent of the women in these cohorts will marry in the first decade of the 2000s (Goldstein and Kenny, “Marriage Delayed or Marriage Forgone?”).

But this summary about age at marriage needs to be qualified, and sharply so, by cohabitation. In 1995, about one-third of women in their mid-twenties who had not yet married had nonetheless lived with someone.³² The dashed lines in Figure 5 estimate the ages at which women either first married *or first cohabited*. By that standard, *fin-de-siècle* women were sharing a home with an official or unofficial spouse later than their mothers had, but not much later than their grand- or great-grandmothers had. Women forming a couple around 1985 did so typically at about age 22, the same as women around 1905. Note also that the variability of women's age at union at the end of the century, while greater than that during the baby boom, remains less than that before the Depression.

-- Figure 5 about here --

When people marry depends a lot on having sufficient income to start a household and on their plans for schooling. Historically, men delayed marrying until they could inherit a farm or, more recently, get a job that would pay a family-supporting wage. Once that became easier, especially after World War II, people married younger. In the late twentieth century, however, higher education became a prerequisite for a middle-class income. That change in the labor market undercut many men's opportunities to start families (especially among African Americans) and their desirability to women, and it also propelled other men – and increasingly women, as well – to postpone marriage while they pursued further schooling.³³

Divorce. Marriages end, and over the century divorce replaced death as the prime reason why they ended. The ratio of divorces to marriages in a given year increased slowly but steadily (except for a major spike just after World War II) from 13 divorces per 100 marriages in 1920 to 33 per 100 in 1970 – when for the first time the number of divorces exceeded the number of

32. This estimate (35%) is calculated from table B of Bramlett and Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce*. It covers women aged 20 to 29 at the time of a 1995 survey. Cohabitation was defined in the survey as “as being unmarried, but ‘having a sexual relationship while sharing the same usual address’” (p. 89).

33. See Fitch and Ruggles, “Historical Trends in Marriage Formation;” Oppenheimer, “A Theory of Marriage Timing;” “Men’s Career Development;” and “The Continuing Importance of Men’s Economic Position;” and Furstenberg et al, “Growing Up is Harder to Do.”

marriages ended by deaths – and then soared to a peak of 51 per 100 in the early 1990s.³⁴ The divorce rate declined slightly over the last few years of the century.³⁵

The upswing in divorce was a generational experience. About 25 percent of marriages formed around World War II had ended in divorce by the time the couples had reached age 55; about 50 percent of marriages made in the 1970s ended by age 55. Scholars who have tried to explain the rise in divorce point mainly to the increasing employment of women (perhaps giving them more independence, or exposing them to new ideas, or creating marital strain) and to the stagnation in men's wages since the 1960s (perhaps making marriage less possible or attractive, or causing strain). That the divorce rate shot up rapidly between 1965 and 1975 – from about 1 divorce for every 4 marriages a year to about 1 divorce for every 2 marriages a year – was surely tied to the spread of no-fault divorce during those years. It may also have been part of the general cultural change of the '60s. Divorce rates probably subsided in the 1990s because Americans were marrying at older ages and gaining more education.³⁶

About half of divorced Americans remarried in the ten years after their first marriage ended, but the other half did not. So, the fraction of Americans divorced at any one time continued to rise. That means that divorcees accumulated. For example, 6 percent of American women in 1970 were divorced, but 13 percent in 2000 were. (However, many, perhaps one-fifth,

34. The pre-1970 increase in divorce is exaggerated by the tendency early in the century for census respondents to hide the fact of their divorce or abandonment. So, for example, the percent of ever-married Americans, aged 18 to 64, who were recorded as divorced grew from 0.6% in 1900 to 4.6% in 1970 (more than a five-fold increase), but the percent who were divorced, separated, or whose spouses were "absent" on census day grew from 4.3% to 9.8%, a two-fold increase (calculated from IPUMS data).

35. See National Center for Health Statistics, "Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States."

36. These generational estimates are based on GSS data, because the Census does not inquire about married peoples' previous marriages, information vital to figuring out where a person has ever been divorced. We calculated them by sorting respondents by age within birth cohorts and smoothing the percent who had ever been divorced. On explaining the rise in divorce, see, e.g., Ruggles, "The Rise of Divorce and Separation in the United States, 1880-1990" (and subsequent comments); South, "Time-dependent Effects of Wives' Employment on Marital Dissolution."; Friedberg, "Did Unilateral Divorce Raise Divorce Rates?"; and Thornton and Rodgers, "The Influence of Individual and Historical Time on Marriage Dissolution." Cherlin (*Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, pp. 45ff) contends that the no-fault laws were only coincidental. On reasons for decline, see Heaton, "Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States."

of divorced Americans under 65 in 2000 were living as unmarried partners.³⁷) Who was divorced, just like who ever got married, became increasingly tied to education. Marriages formed in the early 1960s lasted at least ten years 80 percent of the time irrespective of spouses' educational levels. But for 1980s marriages, that survival rate was attained only by wives who were college graduates; high school graduate and high school dropout wives reached their tenth anniversaries in only 65 and 50 percent of the cases respectively.³⁸ The tightening connection between marriage and education is, we will see, a critical feature of the later twentieth century.

Implications for American Households. Longer lives, fewer children, changing age at marriage, more divorce – these developments, abetted by increasing affluence and changing tastes, shaped American families over the century. Gretchen Stockmayer's analysis of the household data we shall describe below indicates that the long-term drop in birth rates (as well as the baby boom) most strongly determined living arrangements for most of the century. Fewer children meant fewer married-with-children households, more empty nest households, and fewer elderly living with their adult children.³⁹ Longer lives simplified living arrangements as fewer families had to take in widowed and orphaned relatives and as more grown-up children left home with their parents still alive.⁴⁰ Household arrangements bend to the vital events of birth, death, marriage, and divorce.

The death in 1901 of Cyrus, a coal miner from Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, illustrates how one death could change three families in that era. Cyrus had married Catherine in 1882. Their first child was born in 1883 and their tenth in 1901; three children died between the two births.

37. Calculated from 2000 one-percent PUMS.

38. Martin and Parashar, "An Education Crossover in Divorce Attitudes," figure 1, drawn from the Surrent Population Surveys.

39. Stockmayer,

40. See Watkins, et al., "Demographic Foundations of Family Change," for estimates of how the demographic changes altered family life. Family historians have increasingly stressed the "strategic" use of co-residence to deal with life shocks such as migration and death. See, e.g., Anderson, "Family, Household, and the Industrial Revolution"; Modell, "Changing Risks, Changing Adaptations"; and Hareven, "The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change."

Late in 1901, Cyrus was struck and killed by a train at the mine, leaving Catherine with seven children and little means of support. The three boys moved in with Cyrus's younger brother, Jake, and his wife, who eventually had six children of their own. Catherine took the four girls back to her parents' home in Marianna, Pennsylvania, where she remained the rest of her life. By the time Catherine's parents died, only Sarah, the ninth child of Cyrus and Catherine, was still living at home. Sarah married Patrick in 1919 and the couple, along with two children of their own, lived with Catherine. Patrick followed mining work all over the region in the 1920s and the Depression, leaving his family in his mother-in-law's home in Marianna. Catherine died there in 1932. Over 20 years later, Sarah and Patrick sold the house and moved to Pittsburgh, where they died in the 1970s.

At the time of the 1900 Census, then, there were three families composed of married couples with children: Cyrus's family, Jake's family, and Catherine's parents' family. Cyrus's death turned the three nuclear families into two extended families, that of Jake plus his three nephews, and that of Catherine's parents, Catherine, another daughter, and four granddaughters. The 1910 Census recorded these two extended families (and a new nuclear family formed by Cyrus's eldest son). The 1920 Census found a nuclear family – Jake's, now that the Catherine's boys had moved out – and the extended family of Catherine, Sarah, and Patrick.

Large families and the caprices of early death created complicated households such as these early in the century. About one-fourth of mothers like Catherine, for example, were living apart from at least one of their young children.⁴¹ By the middle decades of the century, fewer children and longer lives (and greater economic security) reduced some of this complexity. But in the later decades, delayed marriage and more frequent divorce and remarriage brought greater family complexity again, only that complexity was now more often a matter of choice than of uncontrollable events like unplanned births, premature deaths, and financial destitution. When we say that changes in births and deaths altered Americans' living arrangements more than any conscious choices they made did, the contrast between women like Catherine and her

41. In 1910, nearly 25% of white and over 30% of black mothers under the age of 35 and without husbands reported children living apart from them (Meohling, "Broken Homes").

descendants are what we have in mind.

The Changing Profile of American Families

A century of revolutionary changes in Americans' births, deaths, marriages, and divorces – together with other social changes like immigration, increasing wealth, and perhaps new values – produced the variety of living arrangements in 2000 depicted earlier in Figure 1. Figure 6 shows specifically how the distribution of Americans across six types of households changed – and in some important ways, did not change – from 1900 through 2000, distinguishing again by age. There are many details the reader can glean from these graphs, but we focus only a handful of general points. We separate the experiences of younger and older Americans, turning first to those under 45:

---Figure 6 here---

* For the three youngest age groups, the most common living arrangement at the end of the twentieth century was surprisingly similar to that at the beginning of the century; the middle decades seem, in retrospect, unusual. Throughout the century, the “modal,” or typical, American under the age of 45 lived in a household headed by two legally-married adults. This stability was especially true for whites. The proportion of young Americans in two-parent nuclear families peaked in the 1960s, when, for example, 78 percent of children lived in them, 8 points higher than in 1900 and 16 points higher than in 2000. (The 16-point decline between 1960 and 2000 is only 10 points when cohabiting couples are counted as if married; we'll look at these numbers more closely later.)

* While the typical family remained married-with-children, alternatives to it changed. Before mid-century, the most common alternative for Americans under 45 was to live in an extended household – the experience of Catherine being illustrative. After mid-century, people outside of nuclear families increasingly ended up either in single-

parent households – women especially – or as primary individuals – men especially. As late as 1960, only 6 percent of children lived with a single parent, but by 2000, 20 percent did (16 percent if we treat cohabitation as marriage).⁴² The proportion of adults 30 to 44 years old living the single life – as primary individuals, single parents, or in shared quarters – declined substantially from 1900 to 1960 but increased greatly afterward, no doubt because they married later and divorced more often. (We must keep in mind that perhaps one-fourth to one-third of the apparent increase in single living is actually cohabitation – i.e., people recorded as living with “roommates.”)

The short story for Americans under 45 was that their household situations were not much different or much more diverse near 2000 than just after 1900: a clear majority lived in a nuclear family. If you count cohabitation, which increased rapidly after 1970, then about the same proportion of under-45's lived in two-parent nuclear households at the end of the century as at its beginning.⁴³

These results cast new light on the debate about the fate of the family in modern America. Much of that debate is framed by two alternatives: One view holds that the family *disintegrated* in the twentieth century, leaving more adults single, more children with one parent, fewer Americans committed to their families, and the family weaker relative to other institutions. The other view claims that the family *changed* in the twentieth century as Americans found alternative – and just as wholesome – forms of family life, each serving its members as well if

42. Some of the 16% living in an extended household lived there with a single parent or, less commonly, both parents. We will return to this complication below.

43. The table below shows the proportion of each age group living in a married-couple or cohabiting couple nuclear household in three key years. (Our coding rule for cohabitation is discussed above in note ##.)

	1900	1960	2000
0 to 17 yrs old	70%	78%	66%
18 to 29	52	67	49
30 to 44	62	76	65

not better than the “traditional” form.⁴⁴ We found that, overall, family life for the under-45's did not change that radically between the start and end of the century; the middle of the century was aberrant. Those were the years in which Americans married young, set up independent households young, and had children sooner and more often than in the decades immediately before or after. More families could get such early starts because the postwar economic boom provided young men with well-paying jobs, and because Social Security and private pensions reduced the pressure for the elderly to double-up with their adult children. These economic and demographic trends were probably reinforced by a cultural uniformity that grew to fit the uniformity of family experiences – the later-derided “Ozzie and Harriet” culture. Then came the ‘60s, and American household patterns once again became diverse.

It is important to qualify our finding that Americans’ early- and late-century household arrangements were similar: The two-parent households of the late century were much more often headed by remarried parents. The implications, especially for children, of living in households headed by the original couple or by widowed and remarried couples or by divorced and remarried couples has stimulated considerable discussion.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the major change for children and young adults was *not* that twentieth-century Americans abandoned the “traditional” nuclear family, but instead, in the alternatives they turned to when they were not in a nuclear family. Before roughly mid-century, Americans under 45 outside the nuclear family joined relatives in extended households; after mid-century, such Americans lived in smaller-than-nuclear households, either as a single parents or as primary individuals with roommates or partners, or alone.

The living arrangements of middle-aged and elderly Americans, however, did change radically; they shifted to independent living either as couples or as singles:

* Early in the twentieth century, three out of four 45-to-64-year-olds lived in complex households with children and other relatives or both; only one in seven lived

44. See, for example, Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest*; Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*; and Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*.

45. See, for example, Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*; Cherlin and Furstenberg, “Stepfamilies in the United States”; Biblarz and Raftery, “Family Structure, Educational Attainment, and Socioeconomic Success.”

alone or with just a spouse. But in the last years of the century, half of the middle-aged lived in a childless couple or lived alone. The empty-nesters⁴⁶ alone tripled from 11 to 34 percent of the middle-aged. (The increase in this proportion was steady and undisturbed by the baby boom.) Fewer children, longer lives, and more options account for this change.

* For the 65-plus, the twentieth century brought a revolution in family life. In 1900, 45 percent of elderly Americans lived in an extended household (women more often than men). This proportion declined steadily over 100 years to only 13 percent in 2000, when the elderly lived either in a childless couple or lived alone. Because wives typically outlived husbands, 37 percent of elderly women lived on their own while only 18 percent of elderly men did (64 percent of them lived with their wives). The early and steep rise in women's solo-living suggests that the increase in the single-person household, a subject to which we will return later, is largely the story of elderly women. Together, these changes describe the emergence over the century of both a new and a shared life cycle for middle-aged Americans: In their 40s and 50s, couples see their children off and have the home to themselves; in their 70s and 80s, one dies, typically the husband, and the other continues living on her own. There are other scenarios – moving in with grown children, having an adult child linger at home, boarding or finding a roommate, or going to an institution – but fewer and fewer elderly chose those alternatives. Eighty-six percent of 45-to-64-year-olds in 1900 lived in one of those complex alternatives, but only 52 percent did in 2000 (and for half of this 52 percent, the complexity was a *minor* child still at home). Eight in 10 of the elderly lived in a complex arrangement in 1900, but only 4 in 10 did in 2000. This echoes our findings on the history of life events: Americans converged into common living patterns.

Among younger Americans, the era of greatest commonality was the 1950s and 1960s, when over 70 percent of those under 45 were in nuclear households. (Even most of the 18-to-29-year-olds were.) Conformity was notably greater than earlier in the century when many young

46. A small percentage of middle-aged Americans living in a childless couple never had children, of course. But that is sufficiently small that the label of “empty-nester” is reasonably accurate.

adults lived in extended households and in shared quarters. After 1970, family diversity increased substantially for these groups, with more young Americans living alone or in single-parent households – although the two-parent-plus-child(ren) household remained the dominant choice. The degree of diversity in the households of older Americans changed little, but the 45-plusers went through the major shift we just described from more complex to simpler households.⁴⁷

One common result of all these developments is a shrinkage in the size of the American household. In 1900, smaller households (those at the 20th percentile in size) contained 3 people, the average (median) household about 5 people, and the more crowded one (80th percentile) about 7. Except for a small bump during the 1950s, those numbers dropped steadily to 2000, when the range of household sizes were 2 at the low end, 3 in the middle, and 5 at the high end. American households became both smaller and less variable.⁴⁸ Three-fourths of Americans in 2000 lived alone or with one, two, or three other people. Small-scale forms of living replaced large-scale forms.

The overall changes in American living arrangements over the twentieth century were therefore profound, but *not* the sort that much of the controversy has been about. Older folks' situations changed radically, much more than younger folks' or children's. The two-couple household remained by far the major form for young adults and children. There is a trend toward simpler and smaller household arrangements, but not the explosion of diversity that fans of the "traditional" family fear and its critics cheer. And the warning we started the chapter with comes back: It matters whether one takes the 1950s as the benchmark for normal or one adopts a longer historical view, one which reveals the unusual character of that decade.

47. These comments are based on a diversity index calculated across the six types of households. In abbreviated form, they show the following pattern:

Age Group	1900	1960	2000
0-17	.46	.37	.56
18-29	.72	.64	.80
30-44	.65	.52	.70
45-64	.71	.74	.76
65+	.73	.75	.71

48. These numbers exclude group quarters; including them would steepen the decline.

Axes of Difference in Family Life

There is yet more history to the diversity of living arrangements. We can look not only at the distribution of Americans across types of households, as we just did, we can also look at how family patterns varied according to ancestry, education, region, and the like – and at how those patterns of difference may have shifted over the century. Different groups of Americans, notably black and less-educated Americans, experienced distinct family histories. To pursue group differences over the century, we must, however, simplify matters lest we get swamped by complexity. We simplify in two ways: we collapse the six household types into three larger categories and we look at only three age groups: children (those under 18), 30-to-44-year olds, and those 65 and older. The simplified household types are:

- (1) *Married-couple* households, with or without children.
- (2) *Extended* households, those that include relatives in addition to parent(s) and child(ren).
- (3) *Singles* households, those headed by unattached adults. This category includes adults living as primary individuals, and adults and children living in a household headed by a single parent or a non-relative, or in group quarters. A portion of these “singles” households, however, included cohabiting couples, which we will track more deliberately now.

Figure 7 presents these now simplified trends. The solid lines in Figure 7 count only legally-married couples and the dashed lines treat cohabiting couples as if they were married.⁴⁹ We see in the first panel that the living arrangements of children changed little until the post-World War II years, when nuclear family-living became more common – at the expense of extended households – and then after 1960, when an increasing proportion lived with one parent. More and more Americans 30-to-44-years old lived in a married couple up to about 1970 and then fewer did; instead, single living became more common. The dashed line shows that the 1900 to 2000 difference in *unions* was not as great as that in *married* unions, nor was the increase in

49. See note ## for our rules on coding cohabiting couple households.

singles as notable. As we saw with the more complex typology, the dramatic change was among the elderly. We turn to group variations.

----Figure 7 about here---

The Widening Racial Divide. Earlier, we saw how strikingly different African-American and European-American households were in 2000. Just as striking is the fact that these differences *grew* substantially over the twentieth century. Figure 8a shows the patterns for children: the percentage of each group in two-parent nuclear households and the percentage of each in single-adult households – which includes a few percent who were non-relatives in a household or lived in an institution. The light lines treat cohabiting couples as married. (For ease of reading, the lines for extended households are not shown.)

---Figure 8 about here---

The proportion of black children who lived with two married adults in a nuclear household dropped rapidly over the century, from about 6 in 10 to 3 in 10. In contrast, the proportion of white children who lived in such households at virtually the same rate, 7 in 10, both in 1900 and 2000 (albeit more often with remarried adults in the later years). The difference between black and white children widened from 14 to 41 percentage points. Considering cohabitation does not change the story of divergence much. Beginning particularly in the 1930s, the African-American family experience diverged sharply from that of whites. This conclusion must be partly qualified by evidence that the married rate for African Americans was somewhat exaggerated early in the century; so the divergence is not quite as sharp as shown here, but is nonetheless substantial.⁵⁰

The question of concern for many, however, is not whether children live with two parents

50. On the exaggeration issue: Morgan et al, "Racial Differences in Households and Family Structure at the Turn of the Century"; Pagnini, and Morgan, "Racial Differences in Marriage and Childbearing;" and S. Philip Morgan, personal communication, 7 June, 2004.

in nuclear households, but whether they live with two parents anywhere. Some proportion of children lived in a home with both their parents and other relatives, such as grandparents. Figure 8b displays the numbers that way, counting children who lived with a married couple in nuclear or extended households.⁵¹ (For technical reasons we only have the count since 1910.) Still, black and white diverged sharply by just about as much. One conclusion does change a bit, that about white children: In 1910, 87 percent of them lived with two parents, while 76 percent did in 2000; all that drop occurred since 1960 – not the drastic change that occurred for black children or that seems depicted in the media, but still a noteworthy decline in two-parent households.

The story of racial division in living arrangements is roughly the same for the other age groups. For example, in 1900, black and white men 30 to 44 years old were distributed across the three types of households in a roughly similar way: about 60 percent lived in couple households, and 20 percent each in extended households and single arrangements. By 2000, their profiles were very different: about 60 percent of whites but only about 40 percent of black men in this age group lived in a married-couple household. Similarly, in 1900, most white and black women aged 30 to 44 were in married-couple households; in 2000, two-thirds of European-American women lived in married-couple households, but only one-third of African American women did.

The racial differences are rooted in marriage: At the beginning of the century, blacks were somewhat less likely than whites to be married; around 1940, age at marriage started rising rapidly for African-American women and the percentage who ever got married dropped rapidly.⁵² African Americans did not experience the marriage boom that whites did in the 1950s and by the end of the century, their rates of marriage had plummeted. (Including cohabitation into our counts reduces the contrast only modestly.) This divergence of black and white is doubly striking, since it happened while blacks narrowed their gaps with whites in health, longevity, educational attainment, and income.

51. We counted each child living in a nuclear household “embedded” within an extended household as having two parents. (This figure also includes up to one percent of residents 17 or younger who were the *spouses* in an embedded nuclear household, but that complication has negligible consequences for our results.)

52. As noted earlier, black marriage rates were exaggerated early in the century. This distortion does not affect our household analysis, because we count widows and married women whose husbands were absent as unmarried.

Scholars have offered two general explanations for the distinctiveness of black marriage and household patterns. One stresses traditions that originated in slavery or perhaps earlier, in Africa. Yet, African-American family patterns changed significantly in the twentieth century. So, most scholars focus on the second, the deterioration of African-American men's economic circumstances during the century. The agricultural depression of the 1920s, the mechanization of southern farming, and the Great Depression hit African-American men hard; the millions who left the rural South became dependent on an unstable and discriminatory labor market in northern cities. Then, in the 1960s and beyond, the de-industrialization of major Northern cities further undermined African-American men's employment chances. Unstable employment and low wages – which we will explore in Chapter 4 – combined with high death and soaring imprisonment rates to shrink the number of truly marriageable African-American men (i.e., men who could support a family). Once marriage became rarer, the mother-headed household took on some cultural power of its own.⁵³ Whatever the explanation, the division of black and white in family experiences is a major story of the century.

Because the racial differences are so great, the remainder of this section looks at other differences only within the *white* population. (Hispanics are overwhelmingly counted with non-Hispanic whites for most the century; we make that distinction where needed.)

The Educated Family. The living arrangements of white Americans differed increasingly by education since 1940 (when the census first collected educational information). Figure 9 displays, as an example, the percentages of white Americans of different ages and educational attainments who were living in married-couple households. The lines each represent those who did not graduate from high school, who graduated high school, attended some college, and graduated college. (For related minors in the household, education refers to the educational attainment of the head of the household.) In 1940, there were few differences among the

53. See, for example, Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, Ch. 4; Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*; Ruggles, "The Origins of African American Family Structure;" Pagnini and Morgan "Racial Differences in Marriage and Childbearing"; Morgan, et al., "Racial Differences in Households and Family Structure at the Turn of the Century"; Bennett, et al., "The Divergence of African American and White Marriage Patterns"; Fitch and Ruggles, "Historical Trends in Marriage Formation"; Goldscheider and Bures, "The Racial Crossover in Family Complexity in the United States"; Taylor, "Postbellum African American Culture"; and Katz et al., "The New African American Inequality." On the issue of imprisonment, see, e.g., Petit and Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course."

educational groups in the percentage living in a married-couple household. But the gaps widened greatly, so that by 2000, the child of a college graduate, for example, was 34 points more likely to live in a two-parent nuclear household than was the child of a high school dropout, 19 points more likely than the child of a high school graduate. Smaller but similar differences emerged for the other age groups. (Including cohabiting parents in the count reduces the differences a few percentage points at most, but does not change the story.)

— Figure 9 about here —

Reciprocally, the less-educated adults and the children of less-educated parents increasingly appeared in extended households (not shown). A more detailed look shows that the less-educated adults increasingly became single parents while the most educated who were in neither a nuclear household or an extended one became increasingly primary individuals – i.e., single without children.

We do not know what the patterns would look like if we had educational data for 1900 through 1920. Nevertheless, these data show a growing division by education – and presumably, therefore, by occupation and income – in Americans’ family lives. Other sorts of studies also point to this conclusion. For example, with women’s advancement into higher education, more and more Americans married someone of similar educational attainments. In the 1950s, business and professional men might have married their secretaries, nurses, or high school sweethearts; in the 1990s, they more often married business or professional women.⁵⁴ This divergence is even more profound than the figure suggests because, between 1940 and 2000, more Americans graduated from high school and college. We might have assumed that the democratization of higher education would dilute differences by class. Instead, they have sharpened.

(A technical note: As we mentioned in Chapter 1, we could think of educational differences not in terms of diplomas, but as relative standing. A high school degree may have been a major accomplishment in 1940 when only one-fourth of adults had earned one, but not in

54. See, e.g., Kalmijn, “Shifting Boundaries.”

2000 when over three-fourths had and when half of adults had gone to college. Assessing educational differences in this manner, by where people stood relative to one another, does not, however, alter our conclusions.⁵⁵)

Smaller Divides. The late-twentieth-century wave of immigration from Asia and Latin America introduced another dimension of difference in household structure, that between the native- and the foreign-born. Early in the century, the European immigrants' household patterns were not dramatically different than those of the native-born; their families were larger, but were western in structure. After mid-century, native-born Americans lived less commonly in extended households, but foreign-born ones increasingly did. In 2000, 9 percent of the American-born 30-to-44-year-olds lived in extended households, while 25 percent of the foreign-born did.⁵⁶ The historical changes for other age groups were parallel. (Cohabiting households do not change this story.)

The emerging differences may reflect the particular “family strategies” that Asian and Latino immigrants brought with them: a greater emphasis on extended kin than was true for the

55. Nie, et al, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*, analyze this aspect of education. We explored the question of what the patterns would look like if we ranked individuals by their relative amount of education. The answer is that, as long as we compare more and less educated people of the *same age*, the results are the same as we reported: relative educational differences in household arrangements widened. See Stiles, “Education: Comparison of Absolute vs. Relative Measures.” On educational attainment, see Chapter 1.

56. The distribution of household types by nativity and year is given by this table. The percentage in extended households goes up for the foreign-born and down for the native-born

	1900	1910	1920	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
<i>Foreign-Born</i>										
Couples	.62	.58	.64	.68	.65	.72	.73	.65	.55	.55
Extended	.15	.15	.15	.15	.16	.15	.13	.16	.22	.25
Single	.24	.27	.22	.17	.19	.14	.14	.19	.23	.22
<i>Native-Born</i>										
Couples	.62	.63	.65	.67	.73	.79	.81	.76	.69	.60
Extended	.21	.21	.21	.20	.17	.12	.08	.06	.06	.09
Single	.16	.16	.14	.13	.10	.09	.11	.18	.24	.31

European immigrants. One European strategy, for example, was to be a boarder or live in a rooming house. In the early part of the century, about one-third of foreign-born 18-to-29-year-olds lived in group quarters or as non-relatives; only 13 percent of 18-to-29-year-old native-born whites did. But immigrants circa 2000 were not attracted to such settings; they lived with relatives. We should also note that “family reunification” legislation certainly increased the number of parents and siblings entering the country to join foreign-born kin already here.⁵⁷

On the other hand, family patterns became more similar across American regions.⁵⁸ One may have also expected that urban-rural differences would have shrunk; instead they changed axes. We pursue the complexities in Chapter 3, but for present purposes, this gloss will suffice: In 1900, whites living in the countryside were more likely to live in nuclear households than those inside the cities; by 2000, that difference had *widened*. But at the same time, white residents of suburban areas – and their numbers swelled greatly over the century – shifted from sharing the family patterns of city residents to sharing those of white rural residents, i.e., became heavily nuclear. The contrast within urban areas thus sharpened: central cities with many single-person and, to a lesser degree, extended households versus suburbs with nuclear family households.⁵⁹

57. For more extensive discussion of this topic, see Glick, et al, "Immigration and Changing Patterns of Extended Family Household Structure."

58. For example, in the early years, an unusual proportion of white western region 30-to-44-year-olds lived as “singles” – about 31% compared to 13-20% elsewhere (not shown). By 2000, the rates in all the regions were between 29 and 31%. Similarly, early in the century, the elderly in the West were especially absent from extended households, while the opposite was true of the elderly in the South; by 2000, this difference had also disappeared.

59. This analysis is made difficult and approximate by data issues. Simply trying to compare Americans over the century by their places of residence is complex for a few reasons: One, there are various ways to categorize places. Here, we use a simple three-part division: nonmetropolitan areas, the center-cities of metropolitan areas, and the remainder – largely suburban – parts of metropolitan areas. Second, places change categories over time. In particular, small urban areas grew into metropolitan places over the century. Third, in recent years, the Census Bureau has, for confidentiality reasons, hidden the locations of millions of respondents from researchers. (For fear that individuals could be located if information about their personal traits and location were combined, the Bureau of the Census leaves place of residence unidentified for many Americans, especially those in small places.) All this means, that our comparisons here are crude ones. Nonetheless, these analyses are consistent with more complete ones in Chapter X. The following table illustrates the general trends, showing the distribution of household types for 30-to-44 year-olds:

Summary. Americans' household arrangements varied by race, class, and other axes of difference, but those variations changed over the century. Regional differences narrowed, as did metropolitan-nonmetropolitan ones; immigrant patterns changed, as newcomers with more distinctively different family patterns arrived after 1965. Most significantly, African-Americans' families became much more distinctive, as living in a married-couple household became atypical for them. Also, a wide gap opened up between more- and less-educated white Americans. For the college graduates, living in nuclear households was more common at the end of the century it had been before the baby boom; for high school dropouts, living in nuclear households was becoming a minority experience. While some lines eroded, others grew sharper, such that different patterns of family life increasingly distinguished white and black, well-educated and poorly-educated, native-born and immigrant, city-dweller and suburbanite.

<i>30-to-44 years old</i>	Place	1900	1950	2000
Pct. in couple households	Nonmetropolitan	66%	75%	68%
	Metro: Outside City	57	75	66
	Metro: Center City	58	67	47
Pct. living as singles	Nonmetropolitan	15	9	26
	Metro: Outside City	22	9	25
	Metro: Center City	22	15	41
Pct. in extended households	Nonmetropolitan	20	15	6
	Metro: Outside City	21	17	9
	Metro: Center City	20	18	11

In 1900, the two metropolitan categories are essentially identical; from 1950 on, that is true of the nonmetropolitan and outside center city categories. Trends are roughly similar for 0-17-year-olds and those 65-plus.

A Closer Look: Living Alone

One major change in living arrangements that has concerned many observers is the increasing proportion of Americans living alone. Living alone suggests isolation, longing, and pathology – although that may be a misconception.⁶⁰ Only 5 percent of American homes housed a single person in 1900; in 2000, over 26 percent did.⁶¹ But that comparison again counts housing units, not people. We shift to counting people. In the last section, when we looked at “singles,” we were combining primary individuals, single parents, unrelated roommates, and residents of group quarters. Here we focus on those Americans who literally lived by all by themselves.

Figure 10 shows, for different genders and age groups, the percentage of adult Americans who lived alone from 1900 through 2000. Proportionally, the changes are sizeable for all the categories, but especially so for older women; they are the only ones among whom least 20 percent lived alone in any decade. Note, also, that the trend for living alone started before World War II for middle-aged and older Americans, but only after 1960 for those younger. We can get a better sense of what was happening by looking closely at three sharply delineated groups: never-married young people, separated and divorced 30-to-44-year-olds, and the widowed elderly.

---Figure 10 about here---

No more than 3 percent of the never-married 18-to-29-year-olds lived alone until 1960; then 11 percent did in 1980 and 10 percent in 2000. (Early in the century, men more often lived alone than women, but that difference disappeared by 1940.⁶²) This roughly tripling coincided with the increasing delay of marriage and with increasing affluence after the 1950s, both of which made moving out of parents' homes more reasonable. The one-point decline after 1980

60. For a sense of the issue and some data, see, e.g., Fischer and Phillips, “Who is Alone?”

61. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, pp. 41-2; Bureau of the Census, Table HH-4, on-line, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>.

62. From 1910 to 1920, 1.7% of never-married 18-to-29-year-old men and 0.6% of women, on average, lived alone. After 1930, the averages were 6.1% and 5.9%.

might be the result of the sag in earnings for young workers, some of whom consequently stayed in or returned to their parents' households.⁶³ Although living alone never exceeded about 10 percent of the young never-married at any given time, many more went through that experience at least briefly.

The historical experiences of divorced 30-to-44-year-old men and of women took different turns starting in the 1950s. Separated and divorced men increasingly lived alone, rising from 14 percent of that population in 1950 to nearly 40 percent in 1980, and dropping to 31 percent in 2000. The proportion of separated or divorced 30-to-44-year-old women who lived alone ranged from a low of 4 percent in 1910 to a high of 15 percent in 1990 and ended the century at 14 percent. The major reason for the stark differences by gender was, of course, that the separated and divorced women typically lived with their children and men typically did not. In the early part of the century, many women from broken marriages returned to their parents' homes (just as did many widows, like Catherine); in the latter part of the century, they typically lived independently as single mothers.⁶⁴

The most dramatic change in solitary living was among the widowed elderly. In 1900, it was a rare widow or widower who lived alone; only about 10 percent did, even fewer than lived in shared quarters. In 2000, the great majority of the widowed elderly, 62 percent, lived alone. Many scholars have focused their attention on accounting for the astronomical rise in solo living by the elderly.

Part of the story seems to be demographic: As birth rates plunged, the elderly had fewer children who might be alive and both able and willing to house them.⁶⁵ A larger part of the story is economic. In the nineteenth century, American farm couples commonly had a grown son stay

63. According to a 1980s Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate, it cost at least 25 percent more for all parties combined if a young adult set up a separate household from his parents (Levy, *Dollars and Dreams*, pp. 153-6). See, also, Michael, et al, "Changes in the Propensity to Live Alone."

64. From 1900 to 1950, divorced and separated women were about equally likely to live either in extended households or single-parent households (about 30 percent in each situation) ; toward the end of the century, they were over three times as more likely to live as single mothers rather than in an extended household.

65. Fitch and Ruggles, "Historical Trends in Marriage Formation," however, estimate that only 3 percent of the change in elderly white women's co-residence with children was due to demographic shifts.

with them to help out until, growing feeble, they handed the farm to him and stayed in the house as his dependents until death. The shift away from farming to industrial work in the twentieth century undercut that system. Then, with growing affluence, the institution of pensions, and especially the formation and expansion of Social Security and Medicare, elderly people increasingly had the resources (and health) to live alone. A third part of the story may be – this point is debated – cultural, that elderly Americans came to value independence more and more. One scholar argues that American norms moved toward “uncompromising nuclearity.” Others, however, argue that the elderly always preferred independence, but it was only until recently that they were able to attain it. Yet others imply, to the contrary, that the elderly have always preferred co-residence, but children in recent decades have increasingly spurned their parents. Poll data from late in the century suggest that the elderly preferred independent living, but those polls cannot tell us whether this was a new development (see analysis of the polls below).⁶⁶

In sum, the widespread concern over single-person households may be misplaced. Over 20 percent of Americans living alone in 2000 were elderly widows, even though they were only 3 percent of the population. Young never-marrieds making a brief transition from their parents’ homes to couple households of their own formed another large chunk of the solitary residents. The singles probably of greatest concern are the separated and divorced 30-to-64-year-olds – about 5 percent of their age group – most of whom, research shows, would much rather be in a couple. Otherwise, the increased rates of living alone seem to be the result of increasing affluence and choice, not abandonment.

66. The nuclearity quotation is from Kobrin, “The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual,” p 79. Similarly, Ruggles, “The Transformation of American Family Structure,” p. 127, explains the change by saying that in “every sphere of family life, there has been a loosening of bonds of obligation among kin.” However, it may be that some elderly see that their obligation to their children is to avoid burdening them. It makes more sense to speak of cultural change toward more autonomy. Ruggles, “Multigenerational Families,” lays out the argument about farming. On this debate, see also Kramarow, “The Elderly Who Live Alone in the United States”; Schoeni, “Reassessing the Decline in Parent-Child Old-Age Coresidence”; McGarry and Schoeni, “Social Security, Economic Growth, and the Rise in Elderly Widows’ Independence”; Elman, “Old Age, Economic Activity, and Living Arrangements,” and “Intergenerational Household Structure and Economic Change”; Ruggles, “The Demography of the Unrelated Individual: 1900-1950”; Michael et al, “Changes in the Propensity to Live Alone, 1950-1976”; Heaton and Hoppe, “Widowed and Married: Comparative Change in Living Arrangements, 1900 and 1980.”

A Closer Look: A More Common Life Course?

Delayed marriage, divorce, unwed parenthood, independent living, the entry of mothers into the labor force – these and other changes make it seem that family life and growing up became increasingly chaotic. Yet, we have already seen that in many ways Americans' experiences became less, not more, disorderly: early deaths became rare, family sizes became more similar, retirement started coming at about the same time for all, and so forth. Most family scholars would argue that Americans' life courses became, at least for most of the century, increasingly ordered, standardized, and predictable. More and more Americans finished school, left their parents' homes, married, bore children, and retired – in that order and on a common and predictable schedule.⁶⁷

The demographic developments we discussed earlier created the potential for a standardized life cycle, but social institutions formalized it. For example, the first local school laws only compelled basic literacy training; then, early in the twentieth century the scope of compulsory schooling expanded, making attendance mandatory, usually in age-segregated classes. Similarly, states that had allowed 14- and 15 year-olds to marry pushed those ages upward, compressing age at marriage. At the other end of the life-cycle, Social Security and private pensions established incentives to retire at exactly 65. Another component of growing standardization is, paradoxically, greater choice. When people agree on what the good life is, variation in how they live usually reflects circumstances beyond their control, such as the early death of parents, unanticipated pregnancy, infertility, and wild swings of economic boom and bust. As the unpredictable exigencies of life became less frequent, Americans were freer to follow their preferences. One might imagine that such freedom would lead to diverse choices, but historians such as John Modell argue that more freedom from circumstance became more

67. The literature on this subject includes: Modell, "Changing Risks, Changing Adaptations" and *Into One's Own*; Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*; Hareven, "Historical Changes in the Life Course" and "Ageing and Generational Relations"; Shanahan, "Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies"; Buchman, *The Script of Life in Modern Society*; Furstenberg, "Family Change and Family Diversity"; Rindfuss, "The Young Adult Years"; Gutmann, et al., "Three Eras of Young Adult Home Leaving"; and Stevens, "New Evidence on the Timing of Early Life Transitions."

freedom to conform. And so, a standard life course developed. Some research suggests that the standard life course became less standard again after 1970, perhaps as the consequence of a faltering economy or perhaps of increasing diversity in tastes. Fewer Americans followed the typical sequences, such as marrying before parenting, and more found themselves in atypical situation such as being middle-aged and unmarried, or single and a parent.⁶⁸

David A. Stevens has presented some of the most persuasive evidence regarding the “orderliness” of the life cycle.⁶⁹ Using the 1900 through 1980 censuses, he looked at the variation in the ages at which people left home, married, had a first child, and so forth – that is, the range of ages at which Americans typically made those transitions. Stevens found that the variation narrowed from 1900 to 1970. Americans became likelier to take these steps at the same time in their lives. He also found that differences in timing among regional, racial, and class groups shrank across the decades, suggesting, again, an increasing *consensus* on when to proceed through the stages of the life cycle.

We pursue this issue through the year 2000, asking a simple question: Did the connection between a person’s age and the kind of household he or she lived in tighten or loosen over the century? If the connection grew stronger over the century – in the sense that, knowing a person’s age, one could tell with greater certainty what sort of household he or she lived in – then that is evidence of greater regularization of the life course. If the connection grew weaker, it became harder to tell a person’s living arrangements from his or her age, that would suggest increasing disorderliness. We measure this correspondence with a statistic we term the Goodman association; it ranges from zero, no correspondence, upward with no numerical limit. By way of a standard for comparison, the Goodman measure is .41 for the association between a voters’ social class positions and their candidate choice in presidential elections.⁷⁰

68. See in particular, from previous note, Shanahan, Buchman, Furtsenberg, and Rindfuss.

69. Stevens, “New Evidence.”

70. Many measures of the association between categorical variables analogous to the correlation coefficient for interval and ratio variables were developed over the course of the twentieth century, but consensus on which is best has eluded us. Here we use a measure proposed by Leo A. Goodman and popularized in the analysis of voting differences; it is the standard deviation of elementary coefficients from a multiplicative (or log-linear) model of

We found a steady, roughly linear increase in the association between age and household type from 1900 to 2000, from 0.87 to 1.41. Closer analysis reveals that the decline of the extended family household was the most important change behind this trend. Extended families mix generations. Thus, almost by definition, there is no direct connection between a person's age and living in an extended household. As extended household living declined, Americans became more concentrated in households typical of their age groups. Children lived with one or both parents, young adults with roommates or a spouse, middle-aged adults with their children, and seniors with a spouse or alone. Thus we cycle back to the concerns that Modell raised. As demographic security and economic growth removed risks and offered choices, Americans "acted their age" in arranging their families. Almost everyone who wanted children had them, parents lived to see their offspring leave home, older couples chose the empty nest, and so on. Of course, divorce and out-of-wedlock births interfered with more peoples' plans as the century evolved, but even those developments occurred during narrow stages of life.

As demographic and economic circumstances came under control, at least from 1900 to 1970, variation in how people lived increasingly arose when individuals chose to break from the general consensus – deciding for example to have a child outside of marriage. It sometimes seems that the chaos of an earlier era was simpler. But the regularities that evolved over the last century suggest that the people who were exposed to complexities out of their control might have preferred the complexities we face that result from having control.

Family Values in the Later Century

Changes in living arrangements were driven by demographic shifts such as longer lives, economic changes such as greater affluence, and perhaps by changes in preferences – what we might term family values. Disagreement about such values, whether about allowing divorce, how

association (Goodman, "Measures, Models, and Graphical Displays"). The Goodman measure, like the correlation coefficient, is zero when the variables being compared are statistically independent, but there is no upper bound to the Goodman measure (the correlation coefficient cannot be greater than 1.0). The comparison with class voting comes from Manza and Brooks, *Social Cleavage Politics*, p. 110.

to treat single mothers, or accepting gay marriage, is a recurrent source of national division. Family values changed substantially in the later part of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1960s and '70s, and so did the way Americans divided on those values.

We explore the divisions among Americans on four specific issues: the ideal number of children; the acceptability of premarital sex; leniency toward divorce; and where the aged should live. We chose these four because, among the topics which are covered in the archives of survey research, they represent a range of important family issues. Unlike census data, information on Americans' opinions typically cover only the last 30 to 50 years of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, substantial changes are evident even within one or two generations, changes in the views of average Americans and changes in who takes what side of these issues.

Before proceeding, we need to briefly explain our method for analyzing public opinion data, a method we apply in most of the chapters that follow. We have two tasks: first, tracking changes in overall public opinion over as much of the twentieth century as possible; and second, tracking the diversity of public opinion – differences in views between races, social classes, regions, and so forth. To accomplish the first, we sought and used as many polls on each topic that we could reasonably find, drawing often on just their published results. To accomplish the second, we analyze a subset of those polls. These second results, concerning group differences in opinion, appear as *deviations from the main trend*. They show how opinions changed over the years for, say, rural people compared to city people. Appendix 2-1 [to be added] provides the technical details. Here is a shorter explanation:

For any particular question, we take the basic results for each poll that was taken – say, the average number of children survey respondents said was an ideal or the percentage of respondents who said that premarital sex was not wrong – and plot them over time. To summarize the historical trend underlying these survey results, we use a “smoothing” technique that provides a “best-fitting” line. It is necessary to smooth such data because polls are taken episodically and are based on relatively small samples (often around 1000 respondents and sometimes fewer overall, and far fewer cases when we compare subgroups such as young people to old people). Also, respondents' answers are influenced by several incidental conditions of any particular survey, such as the nature of the question asked immediately before. Smoothing helps

extract the “signal” from the “noise” in the trends. For our analyses of public opinion, we use the LOESS technique, which allows us to smooth, summarize, and test the trends in survey responses. We fit a LOESS line to all the national data points we know of and this represents the national trend.⁷¹ Then, using the specific surveys we had in hand, we estimate how attitudes of Americans from specific groups deviated from that national trend. The procedure will be apparent in our first example, on how many children Americans thought made an ideal family.

How Many Children? As we saw, excepting the baby boom of the 1950s and early ‘60s, Americans had fewer and fewer children over the century. Americans’ preferred number of children – the answers survey respondents gave when asked, “What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family to have?”⁷² – also went down, but went down suddenly between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Figure 11 shows the trend in the average number Americans gave when asked the question by Gallup polls taken since the 1930s and by the General Social Survey⁷³ since 1972. The light line connecting the points traces the actual survey results. The heavy line “smooths” the points; it helps us describe the general, long-term trend while not getting distracted by year-to-year fluctuations and occasional fluke results.

— Figure 11 about here —

The detailed line shows a precipitous change in Americans’ ideals in less than a decade, from an average preference of 3.6 children in 1962 to 2.5 in 1976.⁷⁴ Viewed another way, in 1967, 75 percent of Americans endorsed three or more children and by 1976, a mere nine years

⁷¹ The smoother used here is a LOESS regression (invented by William S. Cleveland – see *Elements of Graphing Data*), using the STATA software package, with a bandwidth of .50 in our analyses of opinion data. We experimented with polynomial functions, but discovered that they often yielded clearly ill-fitting curves particularly when summarizing data with long periods between points.

⁷² We excluded those who answered the question with something like “as many as they want,” and we coded all answers 6 and higher as 6 to avoid distortion by extreme scores.

⁷³ [Discussion of GSS to be added.]

⁷⁴ The drop is *not* the result of shifting from Gallup to GSS polls; it shows up in the Gallup polls alone.

later, only 39 percent did.⁷⁵ The smoothed line in Figure 11 takes some of the drama out of the change, but displays the general trend: a rising average into the 1950s, then a rapid drop into the late '70s, and then little change. The trend parallels fairly well that of the average number of children Americans actually had. This is *not* a shift away from wanting children altogether – even at the end of the century, almost all adult Americans had either had or wanted to have children.⁷⁶ As in their actual child-bearing practices, Americans converged to a consensus that two children was the ideal. In 1967, 25 percent of Americans answered the question with “two”; six years later, 51 percent did.⁷⁷

How can the precipitous change in family values during the late 1960s be explained? Part of the answer is that the 1960s was a decade of considerable social change on many family values, notably the role of women (as we shall see later here and in Chapter 8). Another part of the answer is evident in Figure 11: the 1950s were anomalous. Americans' average family size preference in 1973 was about the same as it had been in 1936.

By analyzing 28 of the Gallup and GSS surveys from 1936 to 2000, focusing mainly on the volatile period of the 1960s and 1970s, we can see the convergence in Americans' preferences in more detail. During the 1950s, city residents preferred fewer children than rural residents, easterners and westerners fewer than southerners and midwesterners, men fewer than women, and Protestants fewer than Catholics, but these differences narrowed by the 1980s as

75. We also analyzed the trends using as a dependent variable whether a respondent answered 3 or more. The results are similar although somewhat noisier.

76. The specific figure is 96 percent. Gallup found that 72% of adults had children, 6% wished they had had children (but were too late), 16% wanted to, and 4% did not want children (Newport, “Desire to Have Children”).

77. Some (e.g., Westoff and Ryder, *The Contraceptive Revolution*) have dismissed the shift in survey responses as just a consequence of fertility control. Women, they suggest, no longer had to rationalize, after the fact, births that they had not wanted. But we see more to it than that. Adults of all ages answer this question about ideal family size, not just parents. The sudden drop from 3+ births to 2 births as “ideal” occurred all at once and for all age groups (including those done with child-rearing and those anticipating it); the trend is very similar for respondents 30 and under and those over 30 years old. Also, the change was too widespread and happened too fast to be merely the end of rationalization. Even more tellingly, after the '60s, people over 50 seemingly stopped “rationalizing” the “extra” births that they had a decade earlier. Many respondents to the 1972 through 2000 GSS who had in fact parented three or more children – 40 percent of them – said that fewer than three children was ideal. These and similar findings suggest that the drop was a real and widespread shift in American values, not a casual rationalization.

rural, heartland, female, and Catholic respondents reduced their preferred family size.⁷⁸ Figure 12 illustrates the pattern by region. Each line represents the smoothed average responses for a region. We see the convergence among regions between the late 1950s and late 1970s (although there remains at least a visible South-and-Midwest versus coastal difference even afterwards). At the same time, differences by race and age did not noticeably narrow during the critical decades. Overall, however, Americans from different sectors of society collected around the ideal of the two-child family.

– Figure 12 about here –

Premarital Sexuality. Premarital sexual experience became more common and at a younger age over the twentieth century. There appeared to be two waves of sexual liberalization in the last century – one in the first couple of decades involving mostly “petting,” and another in the 1960s involving intercourse. Until recent decades, girls typically married the boys they slept with or, at least, they married the boys who fathered their firstborn children. Distinctively, late twentieth-century premarital sex less often ended a marriage. A 1995 survey, for example, found that 45 percent of Chicago-area residents who had been born around 1940 had married their first sexual partner, but that was true of only 6 percent of those born after 1965. Demographers detected a leveling-off of and perhaps slight reversal in premarital sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. But generational change had sufficient inertia so that in the early 1990s 53 percent of first-time mothers had conceived their children before marriage (compared to a mere 14 percent in the 1940s).⁷⁹ Younger sexual initiation combined with delayed marriage lead to more single-

78. As discussed in the appendix, these conclusions are based both on visual inspection of graphs such as Figure 12 and on statistical tests for interaction effects between a given characteristic – say being a southerner – and a function of year (linear, quadratic, and/or cubic), depending on the best-fitting equation. In this particular case, the Protestant-Catholic differences are not significant, but the trend is evident. We also examined year X attribute patterns for many other traits, like education, but those data are largely available only from 1972 on, a period with relatively little change in family size preferences and little of interest to report.

79. On the general topic, see, e.g., Smith, “The Dating of the American Sexual Revolution” and Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*. The Chicago survey is reported in Laumann et al, “Sex, Intimacy and Family Life in the United States,” p. 13. Nationally, of girls born around 1940, about 30 percent had had premarital intercourse before turning twenty;

parent households and more cohabiting households.

Sexual behavior changed and so did Americans' attitudes about premarital sex. Gallup has asked national samples, "Do you think it is wrong for a man and a woman to have sexual relations before marriage, or not?" In 1969, 21 percent said "not wrong"; in 1973, 43 percent did – a doubling in only four years.⁸⁰ The GSS, at which we shall look more closely, began asking a similar question only in 1972: "If a man and woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" In 1972, 26 percent said "not wrong at all"; that percentage increased into the 1980s and then leveled off at about 42 percent.⁸¹ While Americans became more accepting of premarital sex, they became *less* accepting of *extramarital* sex. Also, their acceptance of premarital sex was largely directed (however wishfully) toward *adults*, not teens.⁸²

Using these same data, David Harding and Christopher Jencks found that Americans substantially relaxed their views on adult premarital sex around 1970. After the mid-1980s, the

of girls born around 1950, about 40 percent had; and of girls born around 1960, about 60 percent had. But, then about 55 percent of girls born around 1970 and about 50 percent of girls born around 1975 had premarital sex as teens. These statistics on intercourse by age 19 are combined from Hofferth, et al., "Premarital Sexual Activity Among American Teenage Women," table 3, and the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, as reported in Advocates for Youth, "Adolescent Sexual Behavior" (<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsbehdem.htm>). (See also Seidman and Rieder, "A Review of Sexual Behavior in the United States" and Lindberg et al., *Teen Risk-Taking*.) Young women during the 1960s were especially likely to engage in sex early. Laumann et al.'s survey, *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, pp 197-99, 213-14, found that there was a big change between the 1933-42 cohort of women and the 1943-52 cohort – most of whom were in their teens and twenties in the 1960s – in rates of premarital sexuality, but minor differences between the second and subsequent cohorts. On first births: Bachu, "Trends in Marital Status of U.S. Women at First Birth." The out-of-wedlock trend is composed of two processes: fewer women giving birth plus more of those who were doing so out of wedlock.

80. Gallup, "Current Views on Premarital, Extramarital Sex."

81. Readers will notice that, although the trends were similar for Gallup and the GSS, the absolute levels of "not wrong" answers were quite different: 26% for GSS in 1972 and 43% for Gallup in 1973. This testifies to the importance of specific question wording in affecting responses. See, also, Harding and Jencks, "Changing Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex."

82. In the GSS, 71% of respondents during the mid-1970s said that extramarital sex was "always wrong" (85% that it was always or almost always wrong); 78% (90%) did in the mid-1990s. On the teen issue: Americans in a 1986 survey were far less tolerant specifically of teenagers having sex, suggesting that increasingly "premarital sex" came to mean sex among adults rather than teens. See Thornton, "Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues"; Smith, "The Dating of the American Sexual Revolution;" and Axinn and Thornton, "The Transformation in the Meaning of Marriage."

relative stability in public opinion on the issue was the result of two roughly balanced processes: On the one hand, as people aged, they became more sexually conservative.⁸³ On the other hand, as the years passed, older and more conservative cohorts died out and were replaced by younger, more liberal ones.⁸⁴

American opinion on sex converged across several dividing lines after 1972. Disagreement declined between age groups, between nonmetropolitan and metropolitan residents, and most sharply between the races. In the mid-1970s, African Americans were about 20 points likelier than European Americans (or Hispanics) to say “not wrong at all.” By the end of the century, there was effectively no difference, partly because whites and Hispanics became more liberal, but also because African Americans became more conservative.⁸⁵ Differences in opinion by region and education did not change after 1972, because, we suspect, they had converged before 1972. Differences on premarital sex by gender remained wide; throughout the last three decades of the century, men were about 11 points likelier than women to see nothing wrong with premarital sex.

But division on premarital sex did widen sharply between Americans along one particular line of division: religion. Figure 13 displays the patterns. Within the Christian groups, Catholics, mainline Protestants, and conservative Protestants⁸⁶ began in 1972 with similar positions: 21 to 26 percent said “not wrong at all.” They then diverged widely, with conservative Protestants even

83. For example, in 1978, about 6 in 10 baby boomers – who were in their 20s then – said premarital sex was “not wrong at all,” but in 2000, when these baby boomers were in their late 40s or so, only about 4 in 10 said it was not wrong at all.

84. Harding and Jencks, “Changing Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex.”

85. Between 1985 and 1990, 51% of African American respondents said premarital sex was not wrong at all and 24% said it was always wrong (n=643); between 1994 and 2000, the percentages were 34 and 41 (n=1065). African Americans born after 1960 were less accepting of premarital sex than Baby Boomer African Americans. African Americans’ decreasing endorsement in the 1990s of early sex roughly matches a reported drop during that decade in early sexual activity among African-American high school students (Lindberg et al., *Teen Risk Taking*). Also, rates of births to unwed mothers among African Americans peaked in 1994 and declined slightly afterwards to 1998 (Parnell et al., “Nonmarital Pregnancies and Marriage”; National Center for Health Statistics, Health, United States, table 9); rates for whites continued rising. Similarly, rates of teen births dropped sharply among African Americans in the 1990s (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Vital Statistics Reports 47, p. 5).

86. For the categorization of Protestants, see Ch. 6.

reversing the trend toward liberalism. In a similar fashion, beginning in the mid-1980s, frequent church attenders became conservative on the topic.

---Figure 13 about here---

Divorce. Between 1960 and 1980, divorces zoomed up from 9 to 23 per 1000 married women. Attitudes toward divorce also changed rapidly, as shown in answers to the question, “Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now?” In 1960, 9 percent of Americans told Gallup that divorces should be easier to get; in 1966, 18 percent did; and in 1974, 32 percent told the GSS that divorces should be easier – more than tripling in 14 years.⁸⁷ Perhaps Americans were acknowledging the increasing reality of divorce or perhaps they were responding to rising expectations Americans had for a good marriage.⁸⁸ Then, support for easing divorces dropped 8 points to 24 percent by 2000, perhaps because no-fault divorce had in fact made it so much easier, and perhaps because of the escalation of divorce rates. The trend *against* easier divorce was led by the usually more liberal sectors of American society – the young, the urban, the less religious, and notably, the better-educated.

In the 1970s, college-graduate Americans were considerably more liberal on divorce than

87. The 1960 question was “Should divorce be made more difficult to get, easier to get, or should things be left as they are now?” Both Gallup poll results were obtained through the Lexis-Nexis service.

88. On attitude trends, see Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, pp. 45ff; Thornton, “Changing Attitudes toward Family Issues” and “Changing Attitudes Toward Separation and Divorce.”

the less educated, but by 2000 they were more strict.⁸⁹ Steven P. Martin and Sangeeta Parashar have looked closely at this “education crossover” among younger Americans. They concluded that women without B.A. degrees were increasingly facing risky marriages and becoming single mothers; presumably more of them viewed easy divorce as a potential escape from a bad choice. Also, women with B.A.s became increasingly socially conservative. It was not as clear why the education crossover happened for men, but Martin and Parashar speculate that young people generally, “particularly college graduates, [were] becoming more concerned about negative consequences of divorce.”⁹⁰ And to be sure, divorce *had* become easier. Between 1970 and 1985, all the states had adopted no-fault divorce laws. Thus, the college-educated seemed to lead a modest movement recognizing that change and rejecting further easing. This reversal in attitudes also corresponded with a slight decline in divorce rates. As with premarital sex, the 1980s and 1990s saw modest moves in a conservative direction.

Where Should the Elderly Live? So far, we have seen popular attitudes roughly parallel behavioral change. (As cause, consequence, or coincidence, we cannot say.) Not so on this issue. Over the twentieth century, more and more elderly Americans were living on their own, as singles or as married couples (see Figures 6, 7, and 10). However, Americans’ attitudes on this issue moved, at least since 1957, in exactly the opposite direction. National samples have been asked, “As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think

89. The percentage answering “easier,” by education and year are shown in this table. The numbers for 1960 and 1966, from Gallup, are the observed percentages; those for 1975 through 2000, from the GSS, are smoothed.

<i>Pct. for easier divorce</i>	1960	1966	1975	1985	2000
Total sample	9%	18%	30%	24%	23%
College graduates	22	29	36	24	14
Some college	6	21	30	23	22
High school graduate	6	15	26	21	24
High school dropout	8	17	24	24	32

90. Martin and Parashar, “An Education Crossover in Divorce Attitudes.”

this is generally a good idea or a bad idea?” In 1957, nearly two-thirds answered “bad idea,” consistent with the emerging trend toward independent living for the elderly; at that time about 5 in 10 elderly Americans lived in an empty nest or alone. Support for independent living then went *down*, all the way down to one-third in 2000, even as now more than 7 in 10 elderly Americans lived on their own.⁹¹ The driving force in the opinion change was generational turnover; the later people were born, the more they rejected the idea of the elderly living on their own. (At the same time, older people of whatever generation were more supportive of living on their own than were younger people.) The shift against independent living – just like the move away from easy divorce – was led by the young and highly-educated, as shown in Figure 14.⁹²

– Figure 14 about here –

One possible explanation for the trend is nostalgia for the past. Younger, well-educated generation could express a costless romanticism, because it became less and less likely that mom and dad really *would* move in. Another is that acceptance of co-residence reflects increasing economic anxiety of recent generations, increasingly relying on their parents for financial aid and perhaps worrying about their own “golden years.”⁹³ Whatever the reason, Americans generally become *more* divided by age and education on this question.⁹⁴

91. The 1957 estimate is from a National Opinion Research Center survey (Michael Forstrom, NORC Archives, personal communication, 28 June 2001). The raw data provided by GSS are affected by the question’s setting in the interview schedule. The numbers reported here correct for that and the results reported are robust (Smith, “Timely Artifacts”).

92. The education X year interaction effect is robust in regression analyses.

93. Alwin has suggested the economic argument in his analysis of these data through 1991 (Alwin, “Coresidence Beliefs in American Society, 1973 to 1991”). See, also, Goldscheider and Lawton, “Family Experiences and the Erosion of Support for Intergenerational Residence.”

94. Differences by race declined, as white opinion shifted toward blacks’ greater support for extended households. Differences by religion (Protestants and Jews more likely to say “bad idea”) and ethnicity (Latinos much less likely to say “bad idea”) change little. For more on this and the correlates of attitudes toward co-residence, see Burr and Mutchler, “Race and Ethnic Variation in Norms of Filial Responsibility,” as well as the Alwin and the Goldscheider and Lawton articles cited earlier.

Summary. A few general points about Americans and their family values emerge from these details. Americans changed their views on some family issues substantially during in an exceedingly short period. Between about 1965 and 1980, opinion shifted sharply toward smaller families, accepting premarital sex, and easier divorces. After 1980, these trends stabilized or even reversed slightly. The story is different and more puzzling on the question of where the elderly should live, but is consistent with a slight trend toward more traditional views and practice after the 1970s. Generally, different groups in America – by region, place, race, gender – converged toward shared positions on family issues, with a few noteworthy exceptions: widening religious differences on premarital sex, and widening differences by cohort and education (the two are tightly connected) on divorce and on where the elderly should live. There are suggestions here – as in the trends on actual living arrangements – that educational differences at least partly displaced racially- and geographically-based disagreements about family life.

Conclusion

Despite the politicized debate on whether the American family has splintered into various “broken” (the language of the right) or “alternative” (the language of the left) forms, the diversity of Americans’ living arrangements was only slightly greater at the end than at the beginning of the twentieth century. The married-couple nuclear household remained the dominant form to about the same degree in 2000 as it had been in 1900, at least for non-black Americans. The century’s middle years of many young and large nuclear families, the years which form the “once upon a time” of the political debates, were exceptional. Certainly, much changed: people lived longer, started marriages later, had fewer children, and ended their marriages by divorce more often. Extended households became less often the first alternative to the nuclear family, and single-adult households more often the first alternative. In later decades, cohabiting households, while still a small percentage, became more common (or perhaps just more visible). But we are most struck by the relative stability, across more than three generations of profound changes in fertility, mortality, marriage, economics, and immigration, of young Americans’ living arrangements. The truly revolutionary changes occurred to middle-aged and older Americans.

Instead of having young children late into their lives or living in extended or other complex households as they typically did at the beginning of the century, Americans over 45 increasingly lived on their own as empty-nest couples or as singles. This change made the lifestyle of late twentieth-century Americans during their middle and later years far different than it had been for their grandparents.

A full explanation for the changes in the mix of family patterns is beyond us here, but certainly demographic, economic, and cultural changes all played a part. The extension of lifetimes, for example, made the empty-nest and single households of older people possible. Rising wealth made the proliferation of one-adult households, whether for the young, the divorced, or the elderly, possible. And new choices, for example, to have children but have fewer of them and have them later, facilitated several rearrangements of family life.

The popular story of increasing family diversity is challenged by the many ways that Americans' family experiences became more similar and shared over the century. To be sure, rare family types became somewhat more common – the single-mother household, the gay couple, for example – but other rare living arrangements dwindled, such as the orphanage and lodging house. The nuclear household remained the standard for the great majority. And Americans became more similar to one another in their life spans, the number of children they had, and, at least into the 1970s, in the life stages they passed through. Also, past differences in American family patterns, differences by region and place, diminished.

Still, not all differences narrowed. Most critically, African Americans' family path through the twentieth century diverged sharply from that of other Americans. In 2000, only 30 percent of black children lived in a two-parent nuclear household, compared to 71 percent of white children (Figure 8a). Poorly-educated whites also departed from mainstream living arrangements. For example, only 48 percent of white 30-to-44-year-olds who had dropped out of high school lived in a married couple in 2000, compared to 70 percent of those with B.A. degrees (Figure 9). In the chapters that follow, we will find such rearrangements of American diversity – such as the declining significance of region and the increasing significance of education – in other aspects of American life.

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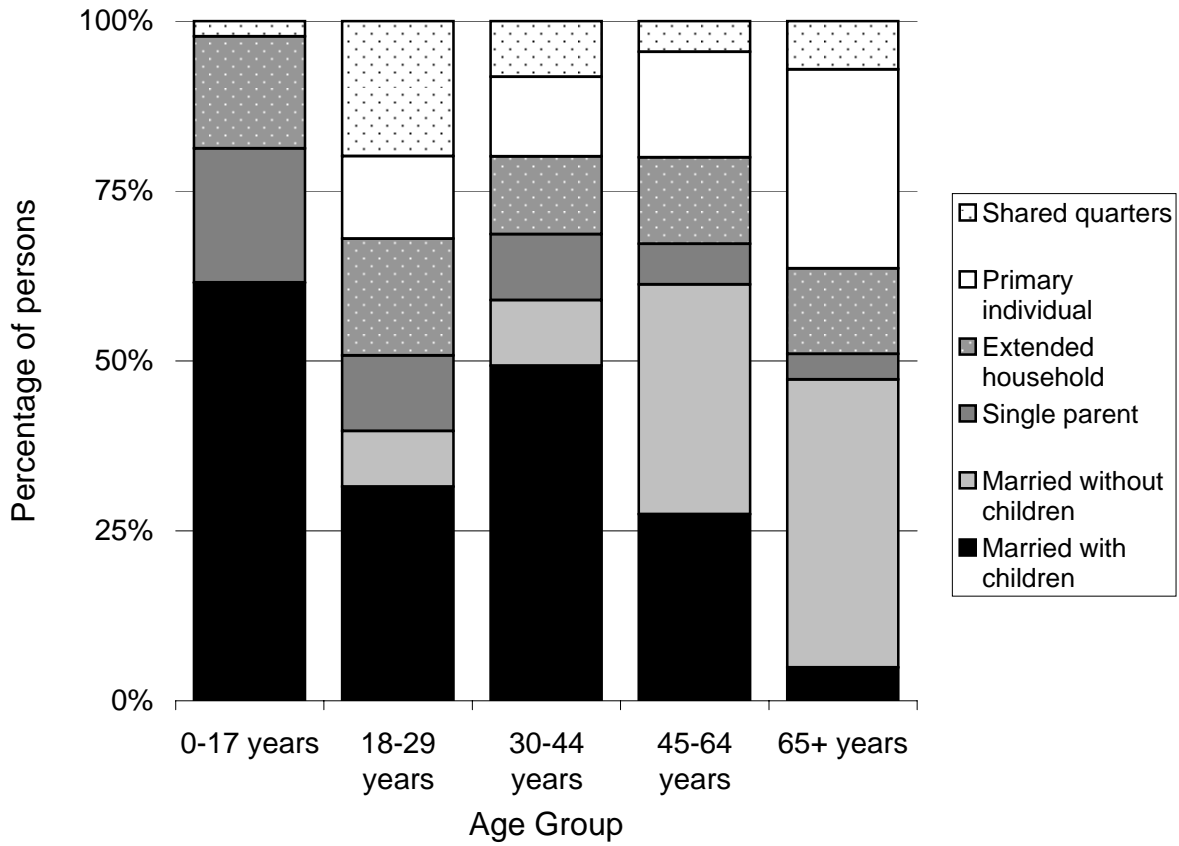


Figure 1. Percentage of Americans Living in Types of Households, by Age, 2000.

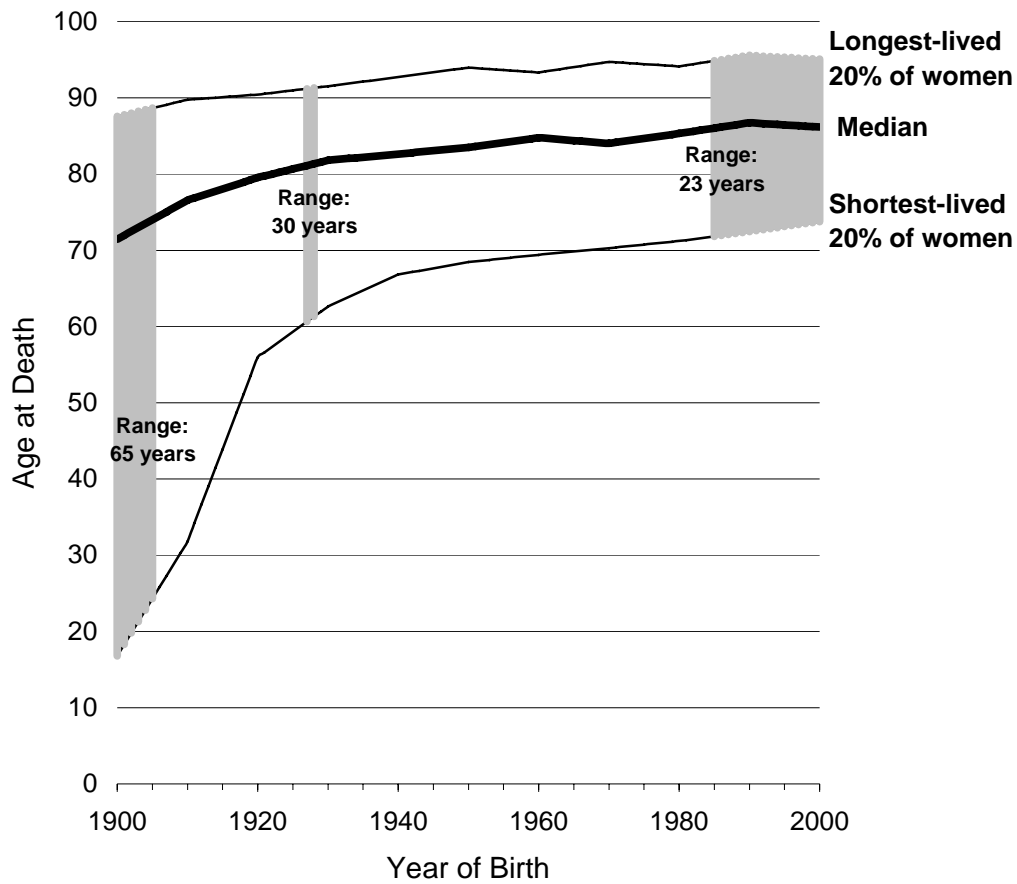


Figure 2

Observed and Projected Mortality of Women Born in the Twentieth Century by Year of Birth: Age at Which 20%, 50%, and 80% of the Cohort Has Died

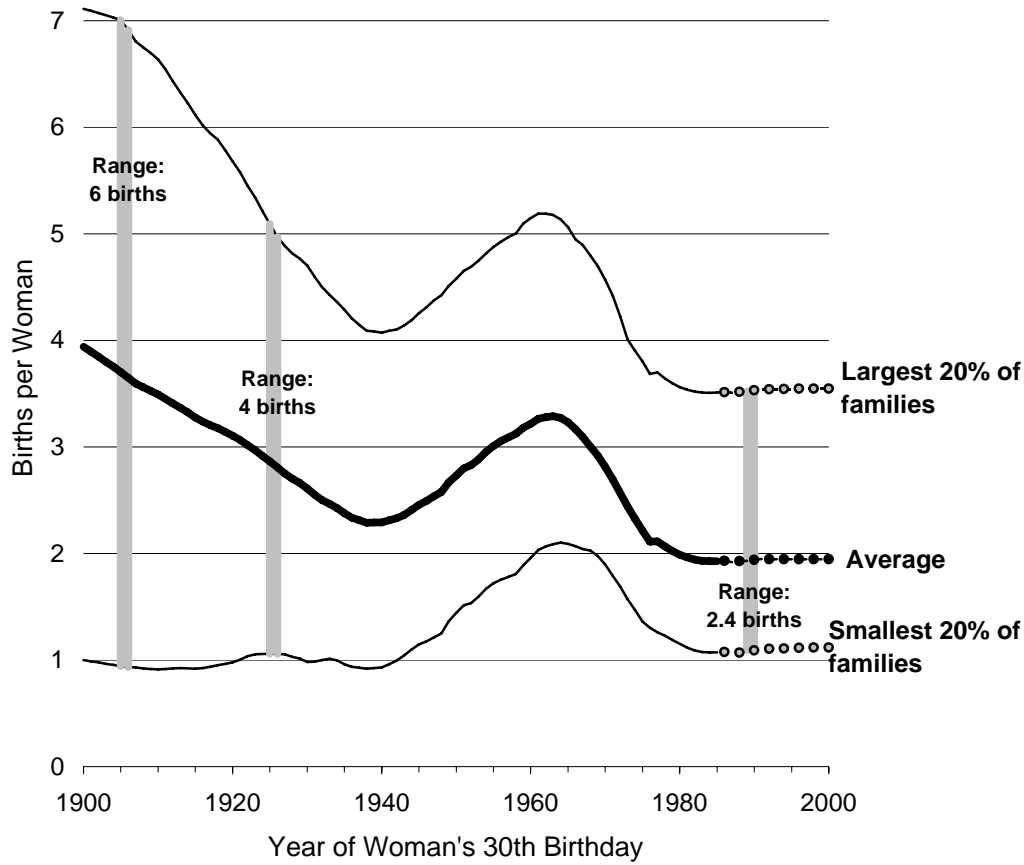


Figure 3
 Number of Births Over a Woman's Lifetime by Year of Her 30th Birthday:
 NOTE: For women born after 1955, we projected forward to when they finish their childbearing (projected fertility shown with dots on the lines).

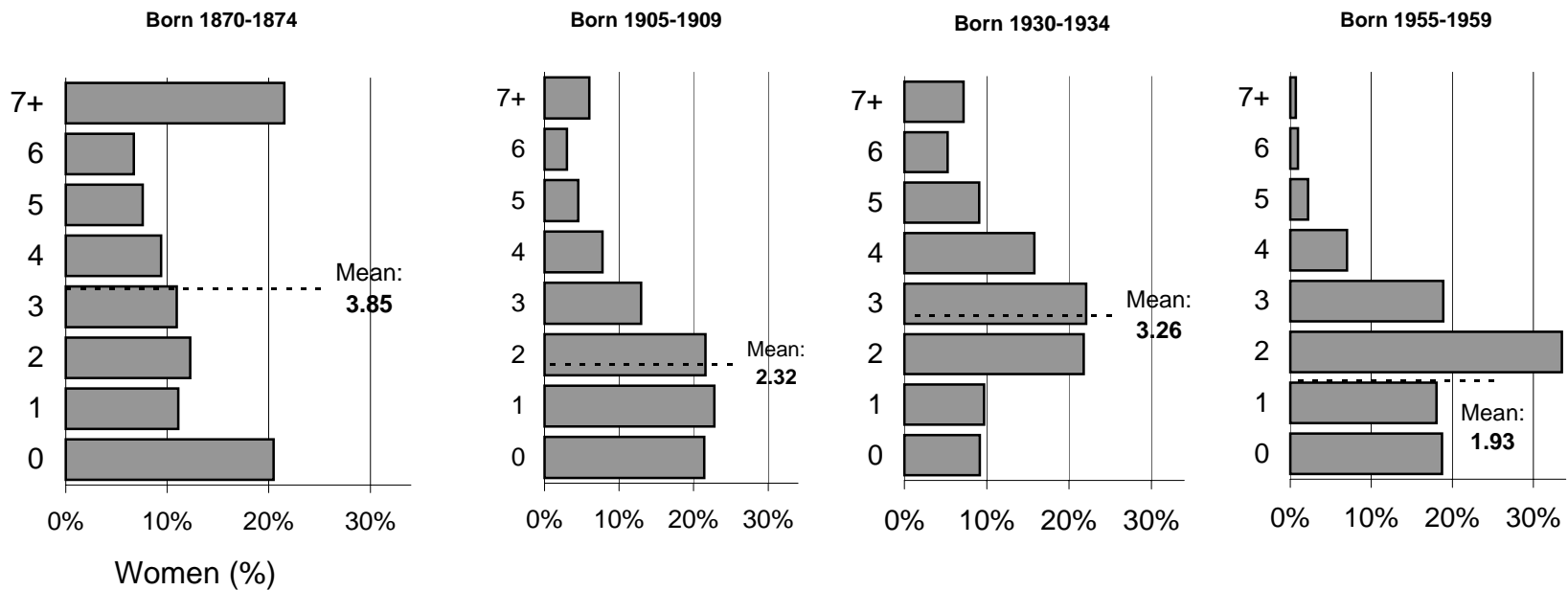


Figure 4
 Number of Births Over a Lifetime by Woman's Year of Birth: Women Born 1870-1959

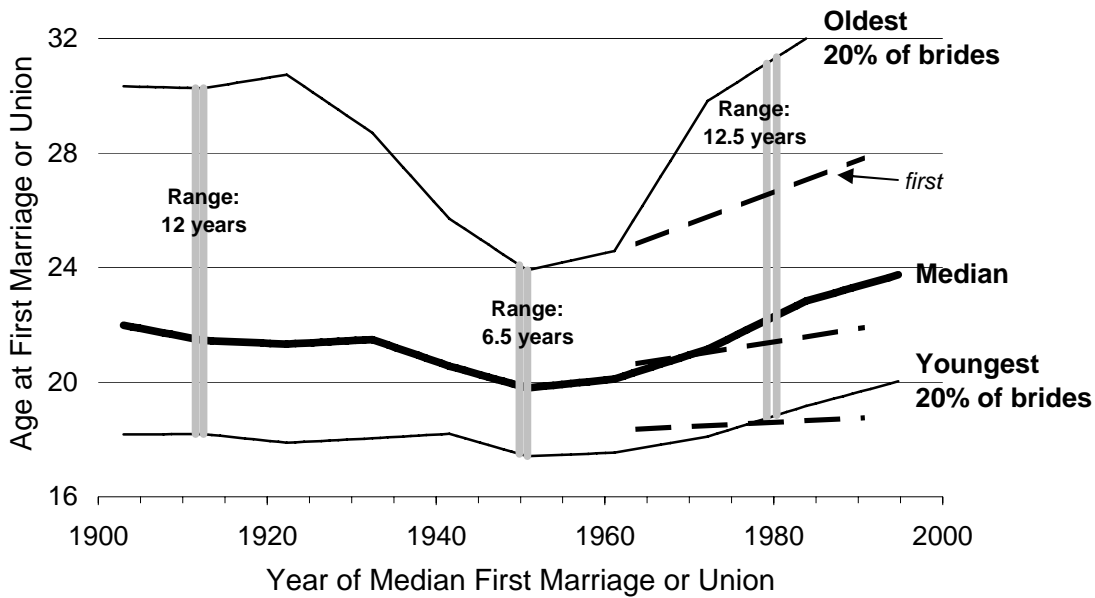


Figure 5
 Age at First Marriage or First Union (dashed lines) by Cohort:
 Women Born 1881-1971

NOTE: Cohort is dated according to the year in which the median marriage or union occurred. First union is the first of marriage or cohabitation, estimated from the 1988 and 1995 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth. Union percentiles are plotted for each cohort and the dotted line shows the linear trendline for each percentile series.

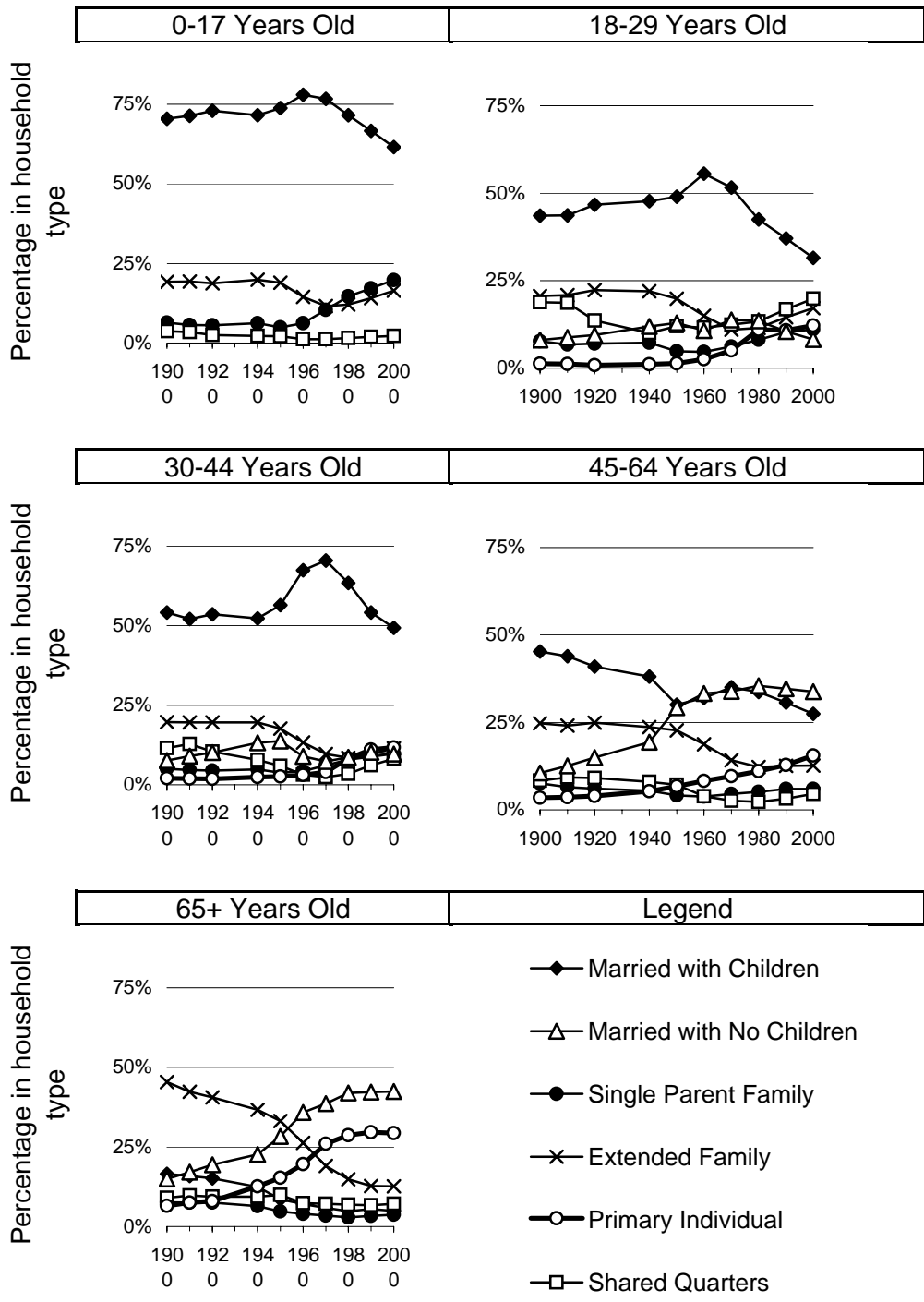


FIGURE 6. Household Type by Year and Age.

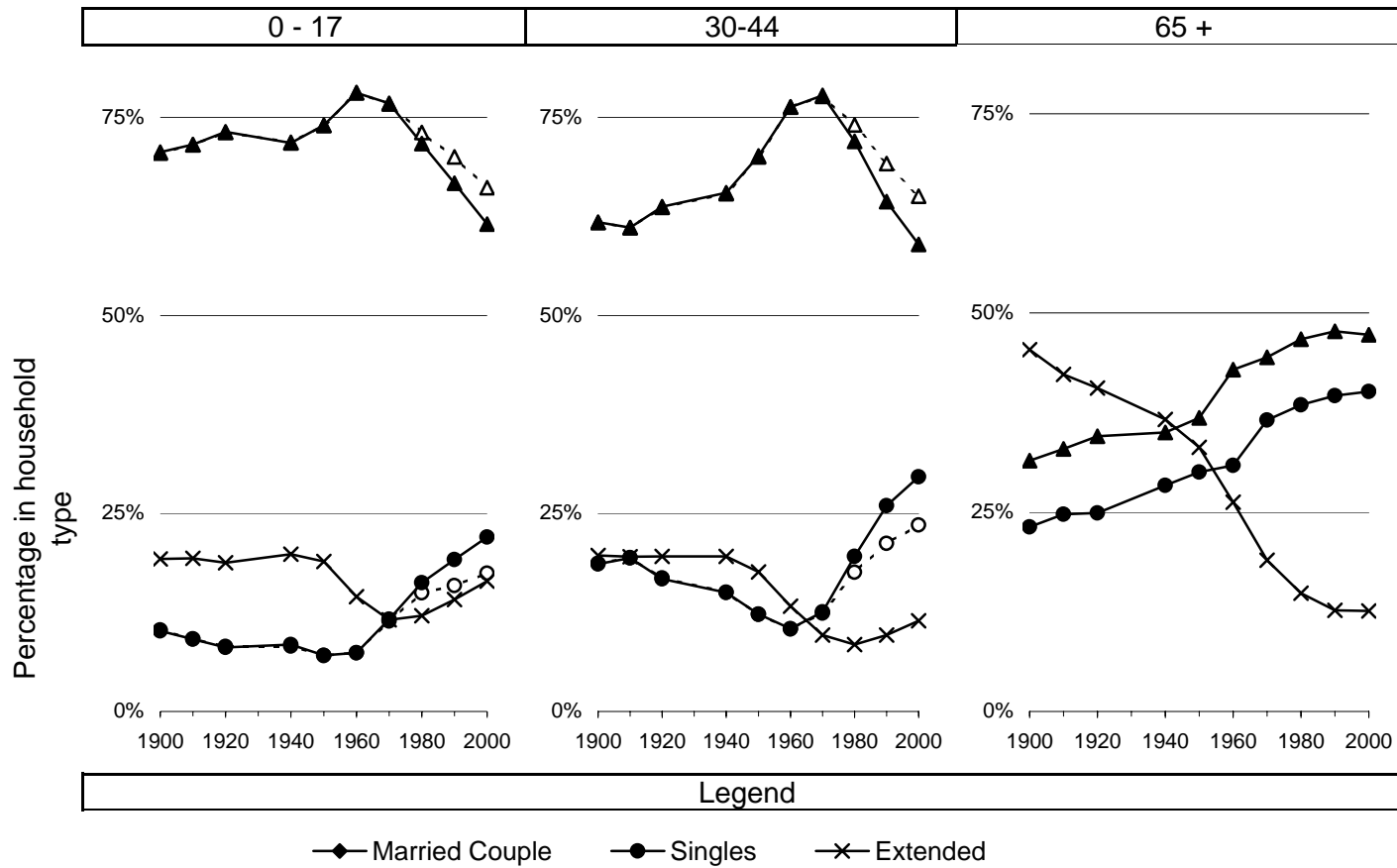


Figure 7. Simplified Household Types by Year for Three Age Groups, 1900-2000.
 (Dashed lines in first two graphs include cohabiting-Married Couple households with married-Married Couple households and subtract them from the Singles category. Cohabitation is miniscule among the elderly.)

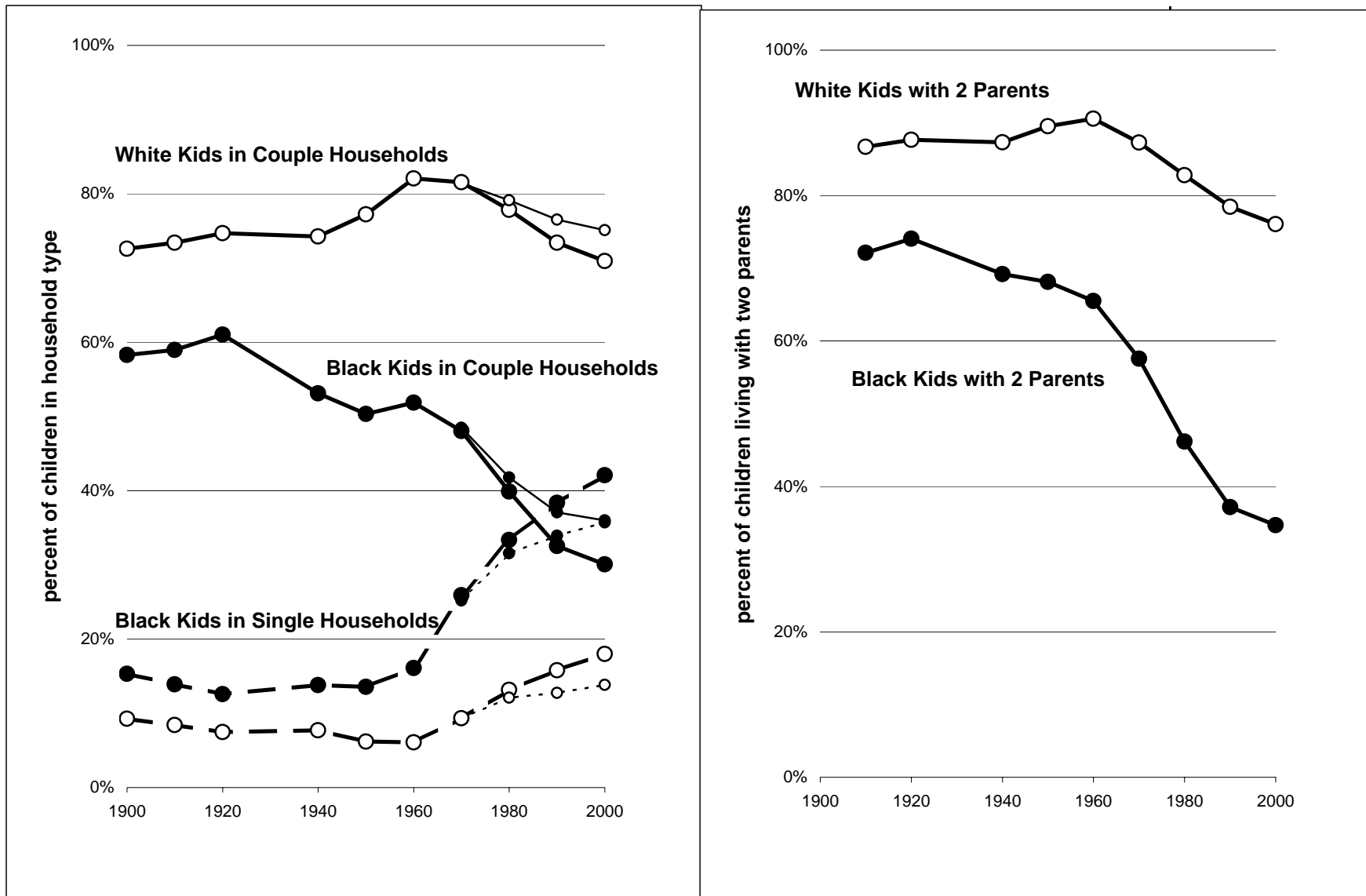


Figure 8. (A) Simplified Household Types, by Year and Race, for Children; (B) Children in Households with Two Parents. (Light lines in (A) from 1970 on represent counts that include cohabiting couples.)

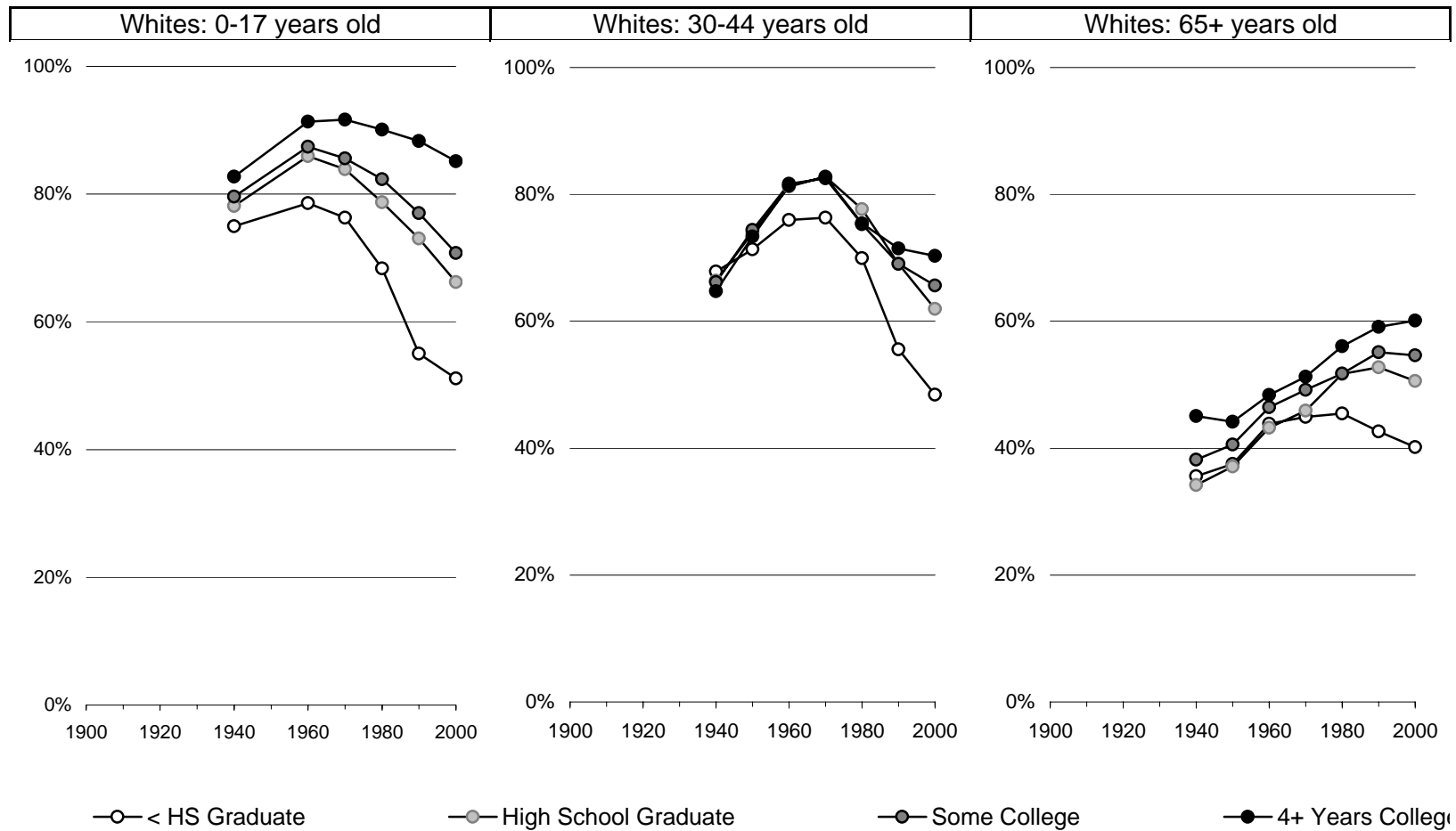


Figure 9. Percentage of White Americans Living in Married Couple Households, by Age and by Educational Attainment (attainment of the household head in the case of children).

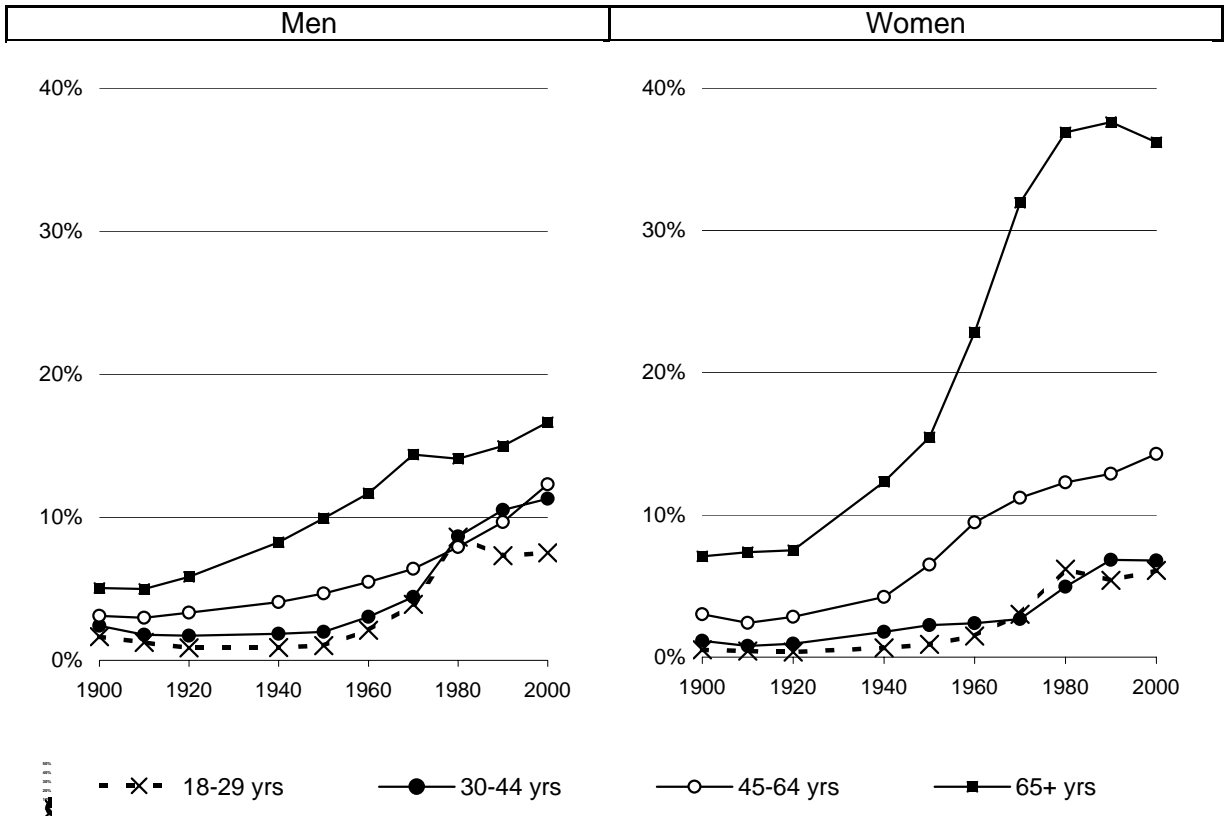


Figure 10. The Percentage of Americans Living Alone, by Age and Gender, 1900-2000.

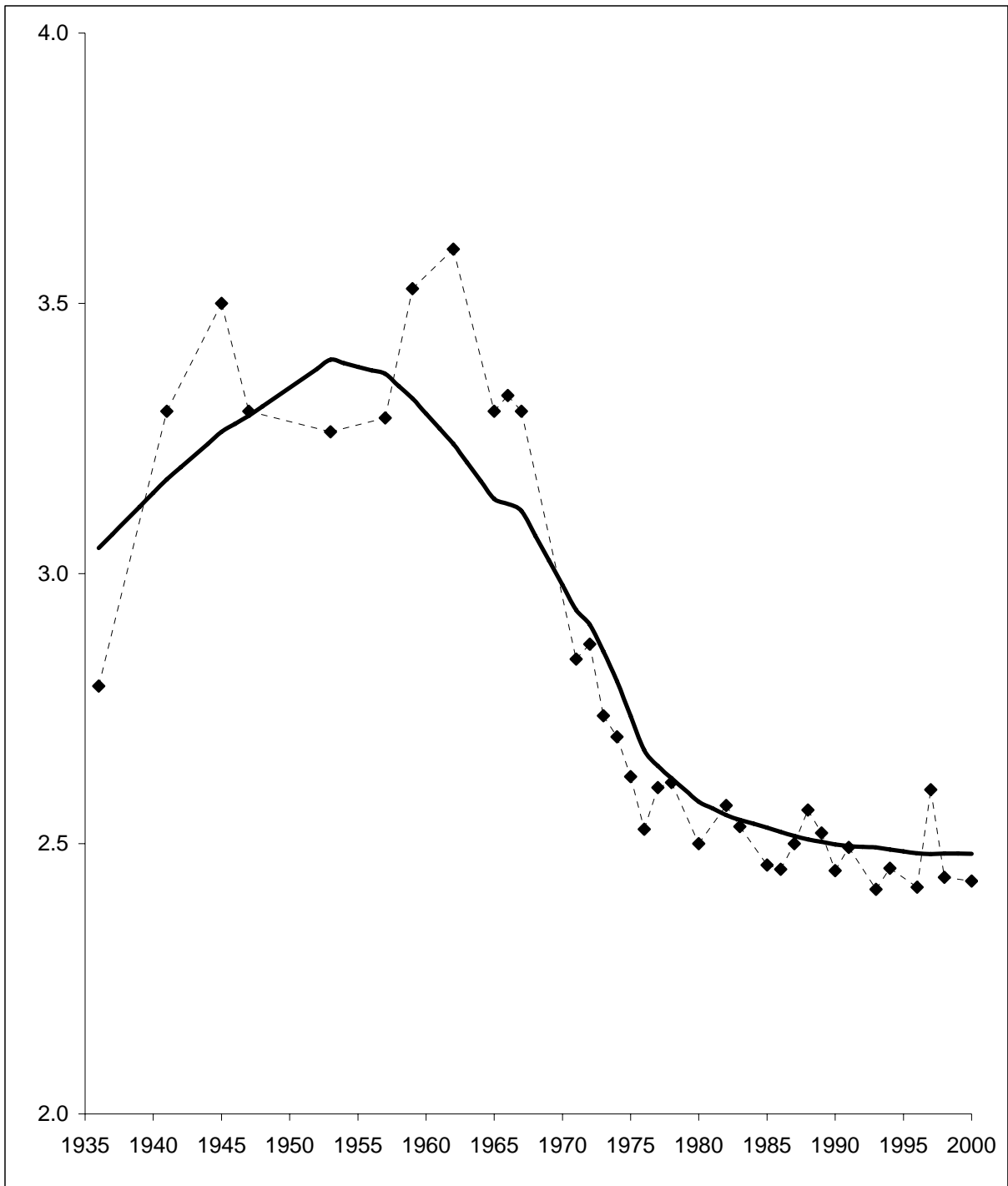


Figure 11. The mean answer Americans gave as the ideal number of children (raw means and smoothed line).

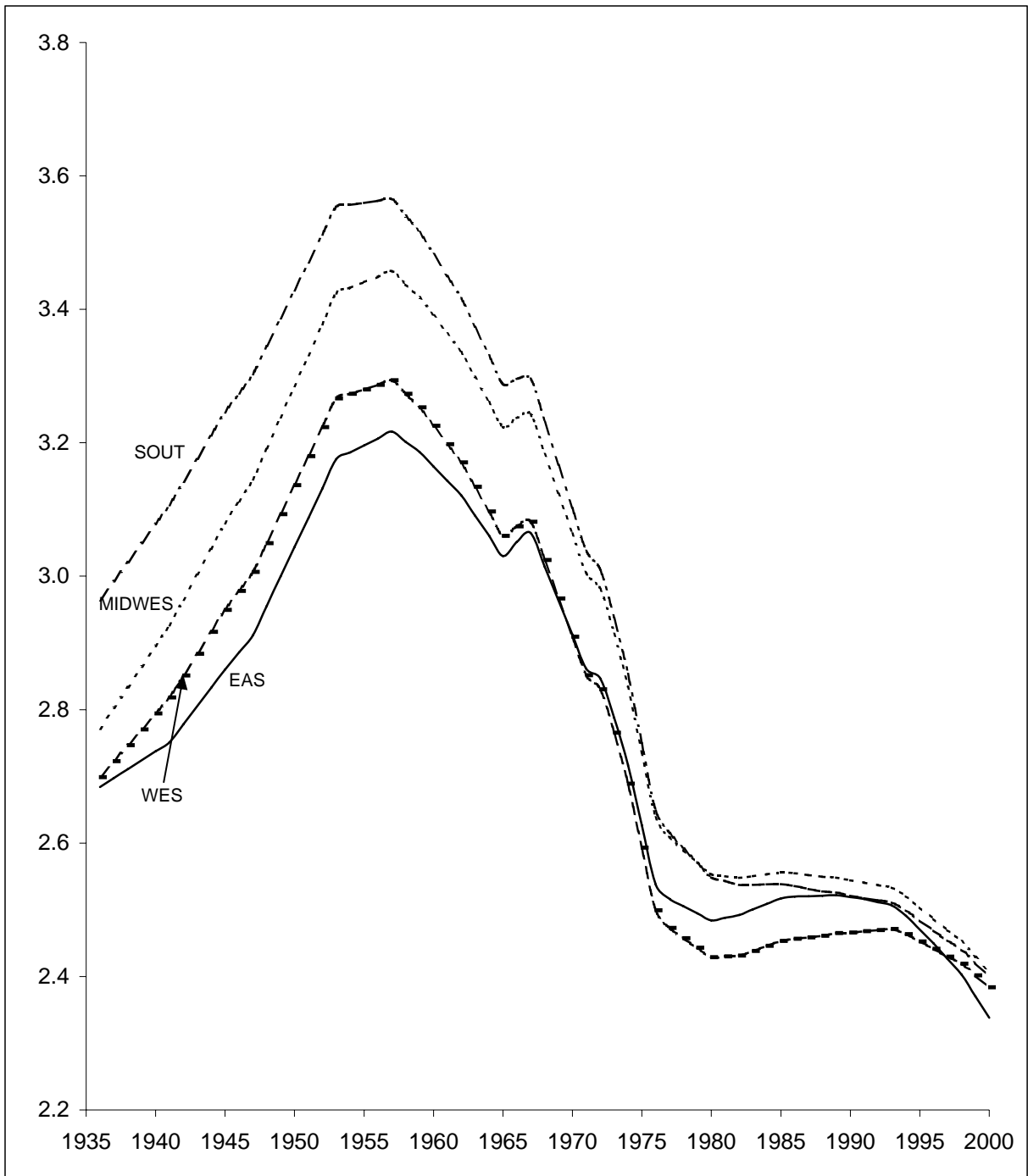


Figure 12. The mean answer Americans gave as the ideal number of children, by region (smoothed lines).

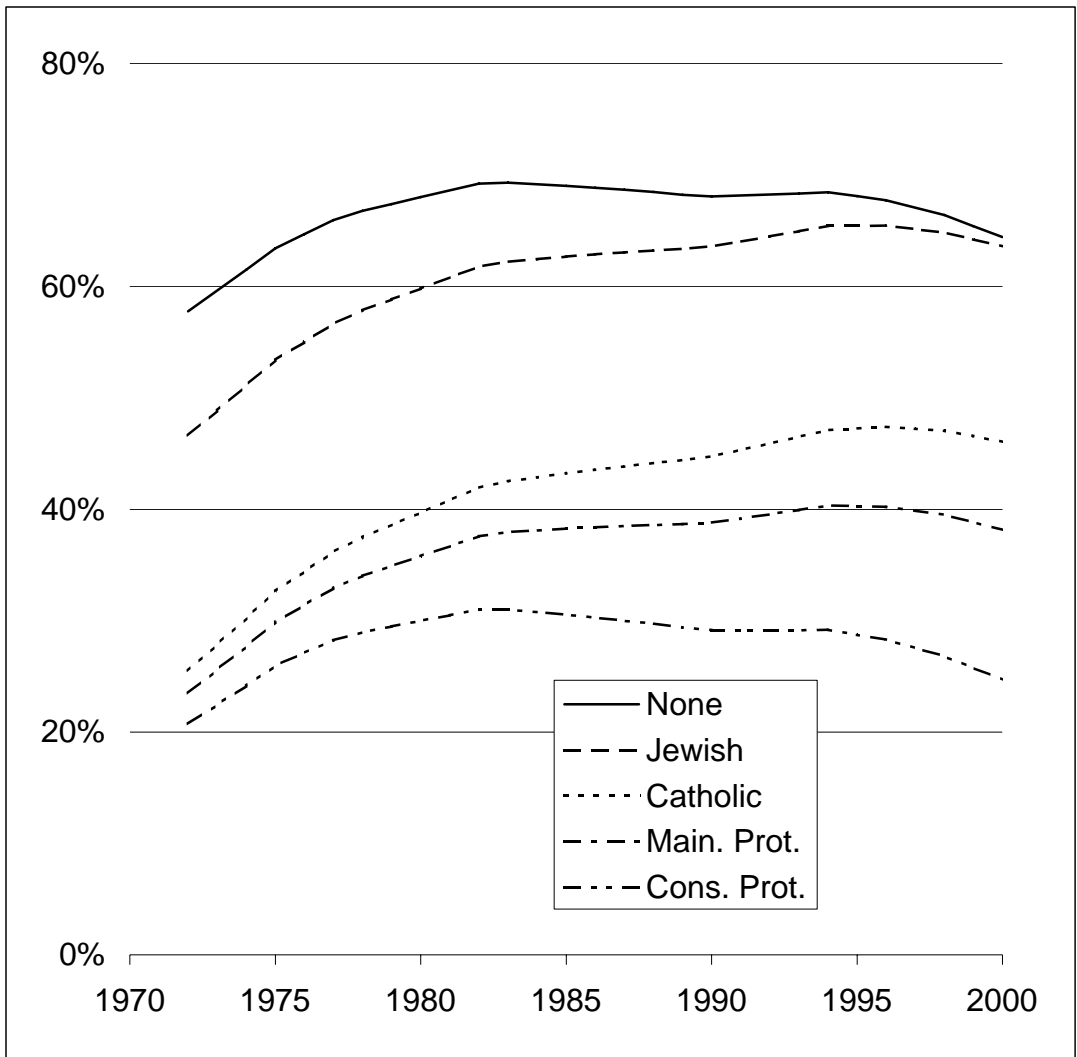


Figure 13. Percentage of Americans who say that premarital sex is not wrong at all, 1972-200, by religion (smoothed).

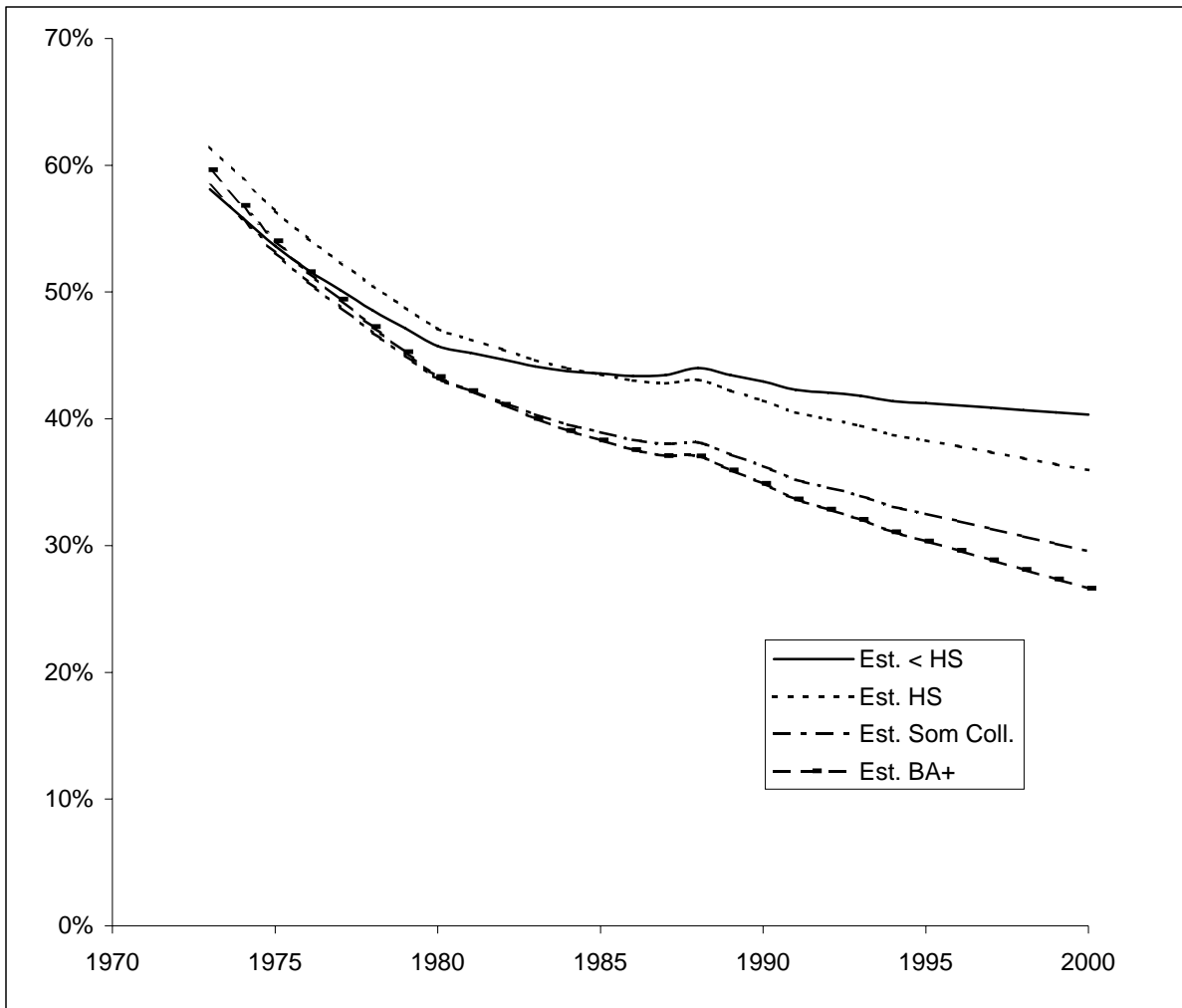


Figure 14, Percentage of Americans (aged 25 and older) who say that the elderly living with their children is a "bad idea," by educational attainment, 1973-2000