



Building Strong Families

Insights from Research

Number 2, October 21, 2002

Who Are Today's Parents?

Highlights:

Images of families surround us, but people often know little about what families in the United States are really like. American families are very diverse, and recently changed greatly in racial composition and family structure. Most families with children consist of a married couple, but the percentage of families that are single-parent households has grown over the past 30 to 40 years. Single-parent families are relatively disadvantaged compared to married-couple families. They are more likely to have lower income and live below the poverty line.

What Is the "American Family"?

We see families all around us—on television, in the store, around the neighborhood, or maybe even at work. Nearly all of us belong to a family in one way or another. But what do we *really* know about families? Is there a "typical" American family? Are American families in a state of decline? Are we seeing the end of the traditional, two-parent family?

How Many and What Kind?

Of the 105 million households in the United States, nearly 70 percent (almost 72 million) are occupied by families.¹ Of these families, not quite one-half (almost 35 million) include children under 18 years old. There is an average of 1.9 children in each of these families.

While a majority of all households are made up of families, the *proportion* of all households that are families has declined over recent decades as more people are living alone and/or delaying marriage. Further, the average number of children per family is now smaller than in the past. This has led some people to argue that the American family is in a "state of decline." Others, however, assert that the American family is going strong, despite its many variations and changes, because most people still choose to marry and have children.

Is the era of the traditional, two-parent family coming to an end? About 74 percent of all children in the United States live in families with two married parents.² Another 21 percent live in single-mother families, and 5 percent live in single-father families. The proportion of families with single-parents has increased in recent decades, largely due to increases in unwed births and divorce.

Households, Families—What's the Difference?

A household includes all the people who live together in one housing unit.

A family is two or more people who live together in a household and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. Married couples without children are also considered families.

Families are one type of household, but households also include people who live together but aren't related.

Increasingly Diverse American Families

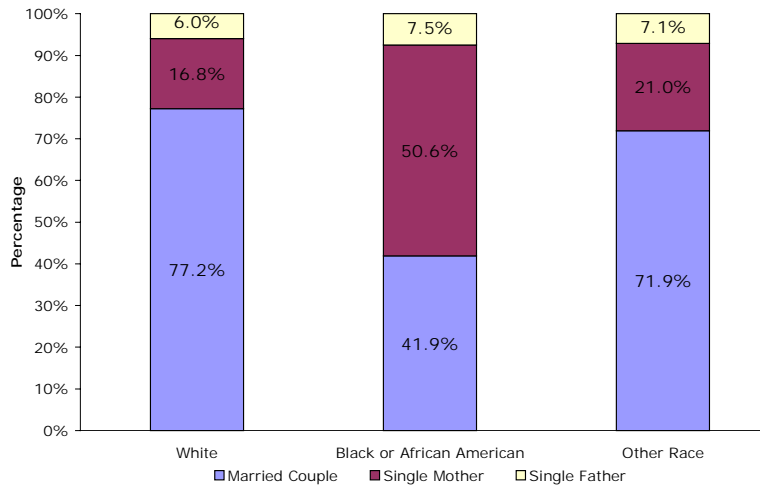
While nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of all families with children under age 18 are headed by a white person,³ about 13 percent are Black or African American, and 14 percent are Hispanic.⁴ The proportion of all families that are of families of color is likely to continue to increase, as they tend to have a slightly higher average number of children per family.

Families with Children Under 18 Years Old by Race/Ethnicity in the United States		
	Number	Percent
White	25,402,833	73%
Black or African American	4,597,167	13%
American Indian/Alaska Native	328,964	1%
Asian and Other Pacific Islander	1,302,404	4%
Some Other Race	2,196,580	6%
Two or More Races	760,420	2%
Hispanic or Latino	4,757,616	14%
Total	34,588,368	100%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

Substantial differences in family structure exist between different racial groups. Over three-quarters of the families with children headed by a white person are married-couple families, about 17 percent are single-mother families, and 6 percent are single-father families. African American families are much more likely to be headed by a single mother (51 percent of these families are headed by single mothers).

Structure of Families with Children Under Age 18 Years by Race
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000



How Are Families Doing Financially?

Logically, having two earners in the home often increases family income. About one-third of all married couple families with children under 18 years old (both single earner and dual earner families) earn more than \$75,000 a year, compared to about 4 percent of single-mother families. In fact, 60 percent of all single-mother families with children under 18 have an annual income below \$25,000 (compared to about 11 percent of all married-couple families). More than one-third (34 percent) of single-mother families with children under age 18 have incomes below the poverty line, compared to only 7 percent of married couple families with children under 18.

What Do You Think?

- What differences are there for parenting behaviors by family structure? By race?
- What challenges does single parenthood and/or poverty pose for parenting success?

*The YMCA of the USA and Search Institute are exploring these kinds of questions in their Building Strong Families initiative, which is made possible, in part, by the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, Dallas Texas. For more information, watch for future **Building Strong Families: Insights from Research** newsletters and, in late November 2002, the results of **Building Strong Families: A Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed**. This newsletter is available at www.search-institute.org/families.*

This electronic newsletter, *Building Strong Families: Insights from Research*, is prepared by Stacey P. Rude, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota, for the Abundant Assets Alliance. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults.

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¹ All data used for this issue of *Building Strong Families: Insights from Research come from the* U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000. Accessed on American Fact Finder at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>.

² There are a total of 64,494,637 children under age 18 living with their parent(s). Of these, 47,682,383 live with two parents, 13,307,097 live with a single mother, and 3,505,157 live with a single father. These parents could be biological, adopted, or step-parents. The families discussed here only include parents with their own children, and not other related children (e.g., nieces/nephews, grandchildren).

³ Family race is determined by the race of the head of household. The children of these families may be of a different race or two or more races.

⁴ Hispanic or Latino is an ethnicity, not a race. Therefore, people classifying themselves as Hispanic may be of any race. For this reason, adding the percentage of families that are Hispanic/Latino to the racial breakdown equals more than 100%.