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# The Spread of Single-Parent Families in the United States since 1960\*

By David T. Ellwood and Christopher Jencks

The spread of single-parent families has been both an intellectual challenge and a source of persistent frustration for social scientists. Some of the nation's most influential social theorists, including Gary Becker (1991) and William Julius Wilson (1987), have sought to explain the change. These theories have led to a large body of empirical research, but there is still no consensus about why single parenthood spread, much less about why it spread faster in some populations than in others. The most widely cited empirical papers seem to be those that disprove various hypotheses. Indeed, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that quantitative social scientists' main contribution to our understanding of this change has been to show that *nothing* caused single-parent families to become more common. Nonetheless, they did.

This paper examines the ways in which families with children changed over the course of the twentieth century in the United States. We begin with a brief discussion of what kinds of changes ought to worry us. Next we describe the changes that actually occurred. Finally, we try to explain these changes. While many questions remain unanswered, our review suggests that social scientists may have learned more than they realize.

## **1. What Changes Should Worry Us?**

When legislators, policy analysts, and opinion leaders discuss family change they usually focus on two issues: out-of-wedlock births and fatherless families. In many cases they discuss these two issues as if they were identical. Yet more than half of all fatherless families are created by divorce, separation, death, or imprisonment, and nearly half of all out-of-wedlock births are now to cohabiting fathers and mothers. These facts suggest that we need to be more precise about which changes worry us. Americans worry about family change for at least three kinds of reasons, which we will label economic, developmental, and moral. Each of these concerns implies a different definition of "the problem."

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**The Economic Problem.** From an economic perspective, the most troubling feature of family change has been the spread of families headed by a single mother who is not living with another adult who helps support her and her children. Single mothers seldom command high wages. They also find it unusually difficult to work long hours, since they must also care for their children. Many get very little child support from the absent father, and even generous child support payments provide less money than a resident father with the same income would normally provide. While single mothers are eligible for various forms of public assistance, neither legislators nor voters have wanted to make such assistance at all generous, lest generosity encourage still more women to raise children on their own. The spread of single-mother families has therefore played a major role in the persistence of poverty in the United States. In 1964, when Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, only 30 percent of poor families with children were headed by single mothers. Since the late 1970s the figure has been about 60 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Not all children from disrupted families live with what the English call a lone mother, but other living arrangements are less likely to leave children in poverty. Mothers who divorce and remarry tend to be about as well off economically as mothers who remain married to their children's biological father (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Unmarried mothers who cohabit with a boyfriend also tend to have significantly higher household incomes than those who live on their own, although it is not clear how much of the typical boyfriend's income is available to support the mother's children. And when unmarried mothers live with their parents or other relatives, they too face fewer economic problems than when they live alone. If we are mainly concerned with reducing child poverty, all these alternatives reduce its incidence. Unfortunately, however, these alternatives to lone motherhood often have noneconomic costs that make lone mothers reject them. Nor would marrying the father of her children solve every single mother's economic problems. Marrying a chronically unemployed man, for example, is likely to exacerbate a mother's economic problems rather than reducing them. Nonetheless, if our basic concern is with economic hardship, lone mothers are the group at greatest risk.

**The Child Development Problem.** Most Americans believe that growing up in single-parent family is likely to harm children even if the family's income remains ample.

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1. Calculated from US Bureau of the Census (2000), Table B-3.

Indeed, the idea that two loving parents can raise children better than one seems self-evident to most couples who get along reasonably well. But when parents do *not* get along, the assumption that their children will always fare better if the parents remain together becomes problematic. Much is likely to depend on what form the parents' incompatibility takes. Getting a violent parent out of a household may often be good for the children. Getting an unfaithful parent out of a household may benefit the other parent more than the children.

Determining what proportion of divorces and decisions not to marry harm children and what proportion benefit children is currently beyond the powers of social science. Given such uncertainty, leaving the choice to parents themselves has obvious advantages, but from a policy viewpoint this strategy runs two major risks. First, adults tend to make marital choices aimed at maximizing their own individual welfare. If one parent wants to marry while the other does not, no marriage is likely to occur, even if the couple's mean well-being would be higher if it did. Second, while parents considering marriage or divorce usually put some weight on what they think would be good for their children, they may not give their children's welfare as much weight as the rest of society thinks they should. Children's long-term welfare might, for example, be optimized when 80 percent of couples who conceived children stayed together until their children were grown. At least one of the two parents might, however, be better off if only 40 percent of all couples stayed together until their children were grown. If this were the case, a *laissez faire* system that allows each parent to do what he or she wants, giving some weight to children's interests but more weight to the least satisfied parent's interests, might mean that half of all biological parents split up. Such a system would not serve children very well.

Those who worry about the noneconomic effects of lone parenthood on children express concern about the lack of male role models, the potential for reduced discipline and control over children, the legitimization of "dependency" on the government, and the quality of single parents' relationships with their children. Of course, not all single-parent families suffer from any of these problems, and having two resident parents does not always solve any of them. Still, the correlational evidence is suggestive.

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) used data from a variety of American surveys to compare young people who had grown up with both of their biological parents to those

who had grown up with a single biological parent or a biological parent plus a step-parent. After taking account of differences in parental education, number of siblings, race, and region, late adolescents and young adults who had grown up with both biological parents performed better on school achievement tests, had fewer children as teenagers, finished high school more often, attended college more often, and were more likely to be employed in early adulthood than those who had grown up with a single parent or a step-parent. The reasons for these disparities seemed to vary depending on who the children lived with.

Most children raised by a single parent are raised by their mother, and families headed by a single mother tend to have less income than two-parent families. McLanahan and Sandefur found that about half the disadvantage associated with growing up in a single-parent family was explained by this income difference.<sup>2</sup> Children living with a step-parent, in contrast, were almost as well off economically as children living with two biological parents. Nonetheless, children who lived with a step-parent in adolescence were at least as likely as children who had lived with a single parent to drop out of high school or to have a baby before they turned twenty. For adolescents, the economic advantages of having a step-parent seemed to be offset by psychological disadvantages. Presumably most children find it harder to deal with a new parent than one who has been there for as long as they can remember, and presumably most adults find it easier to parent their own children than somebody else's children.

For our purposes McLanahan and Sandefur's key finding is that children raised by two biological parents fare better than children raised either by an unmarried parent or a biological parent plus a step-parent. This may be partly because children need stability, and not living with both biological parents is associated with changes in household composition that children find upsetting. In principle, one could test this hypothesis by looking at children raised by single mothers who never cohabited or married while their children were growing up, but we have not seen evidence of this kind. We note, however, that in McLanahan and Sandefur's surveys children raised by a widowed parent fared

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2. One potential limitation of McLanahan and Sandefur's findings is that they generally controlled income for a single year, which is a very imperfect proxy for long-term income or for most forms of consumption. To the extent that family structure is a proxy for unmeasured income differences, their results underestimate the importance of family structure's economic effects and exaggerate the importance of its noneconomic effects.

better than children raised by a parent who had never married, had divorced, or had divorced and remarried, so instability is not the only factor at work. The sampling errors for some of McLanahan and Sandefur's estimates are also fairly large, so it would be premature to conclude that the disadvantages associated with having a single parent and a step-parent are strictly equivalent. There are also complex methodological issues associated with determining whether the differences between children living in different kinds of families are really causal, since the adults in these families probably differ in ways that surveys do not measure.

Nonetheless, if children's social and psychological outcomes depend on whether their biological parents stay together, the trend that should worry us is not the percentage of children living with a lone mother but the percentage not living with both of their biological parents—a group we refer to as living in “disrupted” families. As we shall see, the percentage of children from disrupted biological families is much larger than the percentage living with a single mother, and it has risen more since 1960.

**The Moral Problem.** When American politicians and citizens talk about changes in the family, they often focus explicitly on moral issues. When social scientists talk about these changes, in contrast, they usually try to avoid making explicitly moral judgments. Even those social scientists who deplore the spread of single parenthood prefer to argue that single parenthood has costly social consequences rather than arguing that it is wrong. Sociologists do discuss changes in social norms and attitudes, many of which involve moral judgments, but they seldom endorse these judgments and often write as if all moral judgments were automatically suspect. Even the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who never shrank from moral judgments, made a more prudential argument when he delivered Godkin lectures at Harvard, declaring:

The institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger social sense whether he is capable of loving his fellow men collectively. The whole of society rests on this foundation for stability, understanding and social peace (Moynihan, 1986).

When Americans talk about the breakdown in traditional moral norms, they usually emphasize three forms of behavior: premarital sex, out-of-wedlock births, and divorce. Those who see such behavior as immoral often claim that it has costly social

consequences, but their moral judgments seldom depend on claims about consequences. Most people who think premarital sex is morally wrong regard it as wrong even when couples contracept effectively, do not spread AIDS, and eventually marry. Likewise, among those who think that divorce violates immutable religious principles, its moral status does not change when it makes both partners in a particular marriage happier or when it makes particular children better off. The proportion of Americans who view premarital sex, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births in moral terms has clearly declined over the past generation. But among those who continue to see such choices in moral terms, growing public permissiveness serves as further evidence that the nation faces a moral crisis.

**Divorce.** In the early twentieth century most Americans took wedding vows literally and saw marriage as a lifetime commitment. Indeed, official statistics suggest that divorces were almost as rare as nonmarital births. But between 1960 and 1980 the divorce rate more than doubled, and it has remained high ever since. Thornton (1989) demonstrates that attitudes toward divorce changed dramatically between the early 1960s and the mid 1970s. In 1962, only half of all respondents disagreed with a statement suggesting that parents who don't get along should stay together for the children. By 1977, over 80 percent disagreed. Attitudes towards divorce do not seem to have changed appreciably since the 1970s.

**Premarital Sex.** In the early 1960s roughly half of all 25 year old women had had sexual intercourse before they married. By the late 1980s five out of six had done so. This change in behavior has been accompanied by a parallel change in the way people talk about premarital sex. In early 1960s roughly three-quarters of American adults said that premarital sex was wrong. By the 1980s only a third of adults said that premarital sex was "always" or "almost always" wrong.<sup>3</sup>

**Out of Wedlock Births.** In 1960 most men and women who engaged in premarital sex assumed that if the woman became pregnant they would marry and raise the child together. As a result, premarital pregnancies were fairly common, but premarital births were rare. By the 1990s roughly one baby in three was born to an unmarried

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3. These estimates come from Harding and Jencks (2002). The estimate for the 1960s is from Gallup data for 1969, but Harding and Jencks find little evidence of change between 1962 and 1969. The estimate for the 1980s is from the General Social Survey, which uses a different question, but Harding and Jencks find that the change in wording only accounts for about five percentage points of the shift.

couple. Here again moral norms have changed along with behavior, but apparently not as much. In 1994 three-quarters of all adults interviewed by the General Social Survey (GSS) agreed with the proposition that “people who want children ought to get married.” For many respondents, however, this judgment may have been prudential rather than moral.

## 2. Trends in Family Disruption

We now turn to an examination of trends in disrupted families, divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and single parenthood.

**Disrupted Families.** Traditional moral arguments all suggest that biological parents have an obligation to raise their children together, if this is at all possible. The child development literature also suggests that this moral injunction may serve a practical purpose. We therefore begin by examining changes in children’s chances of growing up with both of their biological parents. Unfortunately, the US Bureau of the Census (2000), which is our main source of data on long-term trends in living arrangements, seldom distinguishes between biological parents and step-parents.<sup>4</sup> This omission probably reflects the fact that federal policy has been mainly concerned with the spread of single-parent families, which tend to be poor, not with the spread of step-parent families, which are not especially poor. The dearth of data has made research on trends in the proportion of children living with their biological parents quite scarce.

One can, however, get some information on such trends using the General Social Survey. Since 1972 the GSS has been asking American adults “Were you living with both your own mother and father around the time you were 16?” Most respondents presumably interpret this question as referring to their biological parents, although some adopted children may well have said they lived with their “own mother and father,” especially since children adopted before 1960 were often not told that they had been adopted.

Figure 1 shows that from 1900 until around 1970 about a quarter of American 16 year olds did not live with both of their own parents. By the 1990s the proportion had

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4. The Survey of Income and Program Participation is an exception.

risen to almost half. The estimate for the 1990s is roughly consistent with other sources.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 also shows the fraction of children whose parent(s) died before they reached 16 and the fraction that split up for all other reasons. In the early part of the century family disruptions due to the death of a parent affected about one child in six, while other sources of disruption affected about half that number. By the end of the century the pattern was reversed. Just 5 percent of those who turned 16 in the 1990s reported that one of their parents had died, while 39 percent reported that they did not live with both of their parents for some other reason.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the GSS does not distinguish respondents whose parents divorced from those whose parents never married.

Similar changes have occurred in most other affluent nations, but Figure 2 reveals that none experiences as much family disruption as the United States. It is true that out-of-wedlock births are as common in many European countries as in the United States. But the estimated percentage of 15 year olds living with both of their biological parents is far lower in the United States than in Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> Even in Sweden, where nonmarital births are almost twice as common as in the United States, most unmarried parents raise their children together. As a result, two-thirds of all Swedish 15 year olds are expected to live with both of their biological parents – a figure comparable to that in Germany and France.

**Divorce.** Figure 3 shows both divorce rates and the fraction of children whose parents will divorce by age 18. Until the 1940s divorce was rare. It shot up briefly after World War II, but quickly returned to roughly the prewar level, which persisted until the 1960s, when it began to rise again. The divorce rate peaked around 1980 and has fallen slightly since that time.

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5. The estimates in Figure 1 will overstate the fraction of children living with both of their own parents early in the century if, as seems likely, such children live longer than children raised in other arrangements. We have no data on the magnitude of this bias, but we doubt that it is large enough to alter the basic picture in Figure 5.

6. Both nonmarital births and divorce among married parents with children have now leveled off, but the proportion of 16 year olds living with both of their own parents is likely to keep falling for at least another decade, because a child born to a lone mother in 1994 will not be 16 until 2010.

7. The difference between the estimates for the United States in Figures 1 and 2 are probably a byproduct of methodological differences. The estimates in Figure 2 are analogous to life expectancies in that they are projections based on the rates at which parental unions dissolved during the seven-year interval shown for a given country. Because dissolution rates have been rising, the observed rate among 15 year olds in any given year is likely to be lower than the rate projected using dissolution rates for younger children in the same year. The estimates for the 1990s in Figure 5 are based on a relatively small sample of GSS

**Non-marital Births.** Figure 4 shows that non-marital childbearing was also unusual until the 1960s. But whereas divorce leveled off around 1980, the fraction of children born out of wedlock continued to rise until the 1990s. Since then the increase has slowed dramatically. Figure 4 also shows the percentage of children under the age of one who were not living with married parents. Between 1940 and 1970 this figure matched the fraction of births to unmarried parents quite closely. Since 1970 the two sets of numbers have diverged dramatically. This divergence is not well understood.<sup>8</sup> As we noted earlier, the fact that nonmarital births were rare before the 1960s does not mean that nonmarital *pregnancies* were rare, only that prospective parents nearly always married before their baby was born.

Another important change since 1980 is the increasing probability that unmarried parents are living together when their baby is born. Bumpass and Lu (2000) argue that cohabiters accounted for the entire increase in nonmarital births among white women between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. No consensus has emerged about how we should think about such families. Andersson (2001) has calculated that if the patterns that prevailed in the United States between 1989 and 1995 were to persist, 65 percent of parents who were married when their child was born would still be together when the child was fifteen. Among parents who were cohabiting when their child was born only 22 percent would still be together when their child was fifteen. Furthermore, the cohabiting parents who stay together mostly marry within a few years of their child's birth. In the United States, therefore, parental cohabitation is seldom a stable arrangement. Most cohabiting parents split up, and most of the rest who stay together marry.

### **3. Trends in Single Parenthood**

For a child, living with a lone mother is often a temporary situation. The fraction of children living with a single mother in any given year depends on how many mothers

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respondents, most of whom turned 16 in the first half of the 1990s.

8. Both birth certificates and Census data on household composition are usually based on self-reports, although some states do not ask whether the mother and father listed on the birth certificate are married. The discrepancies in Figure 4 are partly explained by the fact that some couples marry after the birth of their child and some children born out of wedlock are adopted by another married couple.

have divorced in the past and how old their children were, how many remarried and how long they waited, how many mothers who had children out of wedlock subsequently married, whether they stayed married, how many cohabited, and so on.

Figure 5 shows that the proportion of children under 18 living in single parent families rose from about 10 percent in 1965 to 29 percent in 1997 but had fallen back to 27 percent by 2001. The reasons for this decline are still uncertain, but welfare reform and an extraordinarily tight labor market are the most obvious candidates. Figure 5 also shows that most of the rise during the 1960s and 1970s can be traced to rising divorce rates. In the 1980s and 1990s nearly the entire rise was traceable to out-of-wedlock births.

The data in Figure 5, which come from the Current Population Survey (CPS), do not allow us to distinguish children who live with a step-parent from children who live with both of their biological parents. Figure 5 therefore understates the fraction of all children not living with both biological parents. It also understates the fraction of all children who have experienced the death or divorce of a parent, and the fraction whose parents have never been married to one another.

Figure 6 shows the same information for African-American children only. Vastly more black children live in single parent families (note the change of scale). And for black children, never-married motherhood became the primary source of change much earlier. Here too rates have fallen slightly in recent years. The reasons for the difference between blacks and non-blacks remain controversial and poorly understood.

In her comprehensive review of trends in the well-being of American women, Blau (1998) demonstrated that trends in single parenthood differed considerably by education between 1970 and 1995. Figure 7 looks only at children living with their mother and asks how the mother's education relates to the probability that she is married. Trends for college graduates are strikingly different from trends for less educated mothers. Among children whose mothers had college degrees, the fraction living in single-parent households rose from 6 percent in 1965 to 10 percent in 1980 and then leveled off. Among children whose mothers had not finished high school, the fraction living in single-parent households rose from 13 percent in 1965 to over 40 percent in the mid-1990s, although there has been some decline since then.

If the growth of single motherhood had been largely confined to college educated women with high earning power, it would not pose a major economic problem. But

Figure 7 shows precisely the opposite trend. Single motherhood has spread faster among women with lower potential earnings. The trend is not confined to the least educated, however. The increase has been almost as steep among women with 12 to 15 years of school as among those with less.<sup>9</sup> Only college graduates seem largely exempt. The obvious question is why. The social science literature is rich with models and hypotheses that seek to explain these changes in family structure, but the empirical literature has proven disappointing. As a result, no explanation has won general acceptance. But there are some partial explanations in the literature and some pretty clear implications about where we should search for better answers.

#### **4. The Changing Roles of Divorce and Nonmarital Childbearing**

Until now we have focused on trends among children, since the discussion of family change has often focused on their well-being. But if we want to understand the causes of family change, we need to understand the choices made by adults—men and women making complicated and often joint decisions regarding whether and when to have sexual relations, use contraception, have abortions, live together, marry, divorce, and remarry. Since 92 percent of children under 18 live with their mother, most social scientists have found it convenient to focus on explaining women’s behavior. We largely adopt that convention here, while conceding that this approach could obscure crucial elements of the story.

The rising correlation between a mother’s marital status and her education can be traced primarily to the fact that nonmarital childbearing rose far more rapidly among the less educated. In 1965, hardly any mothers at any education level reported that they had never been married. This does not mean there were no nonmarital births. Some unmarried mothers placed their children with adoption agencies. Some mothers married after their child’s birth. Some had been married and divorced before their children’s birth. Still, nonmarital births were rare. That is still true among mothers who have finished college, all but 3 percent of whom have also been married. Among mothers without high school

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9. It is tempting to suppose that single motherhood has risen among the less educated because mothers at each educational level have become a less and less select group since 1964. But if one assigns women to the top, middle, or bottom third of the educational distribution for their birth cohort and then tracks trends for each third of the distribution, the results are essentially identical to those shown in Figure 7 (Ellwood and Jencks 2004).

diplomas, in contrast, 25 percent now say that they have never been married. This pattern persists when we look at blacks, whites, and Hispanics separately. Nonetheless, it is also true that blacks are more likely than whites with the same amount of education to be never-married mothers.<sup>10</sup>

One useful way to think about these trends is to compare changes in the timing of first births and first marriages. If a woman's first birth precedes her first marriage, she becomes a never married mother, at least temporarily. The first row of Table 1 shows the percentage of women born between 1940 and 1944 who had had either their first marriage or their first birth by the time they were 25, 30, and 40 years old. The second row shows these percentages for women born between 1960 and 1964. Among white women we see an 18 point decline in the percentage who had married by age 25 and a 22 point decline in the percentage that had borne a child by that age. By the time white women had turned 40, however, the changes were far less dramatic: a 6 point decline in the percentage who had married and an 8 point decline in the percentage that had had a child.

Black women show far greater declines in marriage than white women. Only about 68 percent of black women in the most recent cohort will have married by age forty, compared to 87 percent of those born two decades earlier. But while more white than black women have married by age forty (89 versus 68 percent), more black than white women have had children (85 versus 80 percent). Thus white women are more likely to marry than to have children, while black women are more likely to have children than to marry.

Table 2 shows changes by level of education.<sup>11</sup> Marriage patterns for the cohort born in the early 1940s were quite similar across all education levels, except that college graduates married a little later. By age 30 education no longer mattered much. In the cohort born twenty years later, women at all education levels married later, but the

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10. In 2001, for example, 19 percent of white non-Hispanic dropout mothers had never married compared to 54 percent for blacks. Among white mothers who had completed college less than 2 percent had never married, compared to 18 percent of black mothers who had completed college. For Hispanics the figures were 16 percent for dropouts and 4 percent for college graduates.

11. Education, of course may be partly endogenous. Women who have children early are presumably less likely to get as much education and thus will be more likely to show up in the bottom education third. Ideally one might like to do such tables based on parental education or some other non-endogenous variable.

fraction who had married by age 30 still looked quite similar for women at all education levels.

The trends are very different for childbearing. The fraction of college graduates with a first birth by age 25 fell from 47 percent to 20 percent. Even by age 30 the fraction of college graduates who had had a child fell from 71 percent to 50 percent. The least educated women, in contrast, had hardly postponed childbearing at all.

In sum, highly educated women are postponing both marriage and childbearing, while less educated women are postponing marriage but not childbearing. The result has been a rapid rise in the fraction of less educated women who have had children but have not married. Figure 8 shows this trend by race and (after 1980) Hispanic origin. Figure 9 shows the trend by mother's education. Note that the racial differences in Figure 8 are far larger than the educational differences in Figure 9. The racial differences in Figure 8 are also too large to be accounted for by economic factors alone.

Trends in divorce also differ by race and education. Figure 10 shows the fraction of ever married black and white mothers who were separated or divorced. (These estimates include some mothers who had had a nonmarital birth, subsequently married, and then divorced. The estimates exclude mothers who had divorced and remarried.) In any given year the chances that a previously married mother would be divorced or separated were highest for blacks and lowest for non-Hispanic whites. Divorced mothers became much more common in all groups during the late 1960s and 1970s but the trend levels off in the early 1980s and begins to fall in the late 1990s. It is not entirely clear why divorce leveled off in the 1980s or why non-marital births continued to rise. The fact that most couples were marrying later (and some were not marrying at all) should have reduced the proportion of "high risk" marriages, but we do not know how much of the decline in divorce is explained by rising reluctance to marry.

Figure 11 shows that the percentage of ever-married mothers who were divorced also rose for every education group between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. College educated women were less likely to be divorced in all years. These patterns hold within both the black and white populations. But once again the racial disparity is much larger than the educational disparity.

These data sharpen the questions we need to answer. First, why did the tendency to postpone childbearing differ by education and race? Why did the considerations that

led less educated women to delay marriage not lead them to delay parenthood as well? Second, why are college educated women postponing childbearing so much? And third, why did divorce rates flatten out when nonmarital childbearing was accelerating?

## **5. The Traditional Economic Model**

Much of the empirical literature on family structure has been based on a broad class of economic models that we will refer to as the “traditional economic model” (TEM), which derives to a great extent from theories developed by Gary Becker (summarized in Becker, 1991). The adjective “traditional” reflects the fact that far more elaborate formulations are now found in the economics literature. The adjective “economic” is more ambiguous. Economists played a central role in developing these models, but sociologists have proposed models in which economic variables play similar roles. Still, since this model lies at the core of much current empirical work, some label is needed.

The traditional economic model seeks to explain decisions about marriage, not decisions about fertility, but it assumes that marriage leads to parenthood. It treats marriage as a contract from which both the husband and wife expect to reap economic benefits.<sup>12</sup> Becker emphasizes gains associated with specialization among marrying partners. If one partner has a comparative advantage in either market work (because of higher wages) or home production (because of either a stronger taste for nurturing children or greater skills in such work), it will generally make sense for at least one partner to specialize. Thus most men might specialize in market work and most women in home production. By improving efficiency, specialization creates gains from marriage analogous to gains from trade. This model yields fairly straightforward predictions. If male and female wages converge, the advantages of specialization and the gains from marriage will decline. Likewise, if men and women derive increasingly similar non-monetary benefits from either employment or childrearing, the gains from marriage will also fall.

Weiss (1997) highlights three other ways in which marriage can generate

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12. There are several excellent recent reviews of the theoretical literature. In particular see Weiss (1997) and Hotz et al. (1997).

economic benefits: overcoming credit market imperfections (one partner can invest in the other's schooling, for example), sharing collective goods (such as a home), and sharing risk (if one partner becomes unemployed, the other can enter the labor force or share earnings). These advantages of marriage should be more sensitive to changes in the overall income level than to changes in the relative earnings of men and women. As incomes rise, both men and women will find it easier to live alone rather than sharing their home with someone they do not find congenial. Those with more income also face fewer credit constraints and have less need to share economic risks. These considerations suggest that if all else were equal marriage should be more common among those with lower potential earnings. Since that is not what we observe, other influences must also be at work.

The traditional economic model also predicts that external economic support for single adults, particularly single parents, will make marriage less common. If a parent who wants to specialize in household production can get money from public assistance or from relatives, the advantages of marriage diminish. Rising welfare benefits should therefore reduce marriage rates, while falling benefits should raise marriage rates. What matters for marriage, however, is not the absolute benefit level but the difference between a mother's standard of living when she is unmarried rather than married. Thus if real welfare benefits fall but unskilled men's potential earnings fall even more, marriage rates among unskilled women may fall.

Economic factors figure prominently in the work of sociologists as well as economists. The best known theory is the one proposed by Wilson and Neckerman (1986). Unlike most economists, Wilson and Neckerman focus on blacks living in inner cities. But like many economists they emphasize the importance of male earning power, along with the ratio of young black men to young black women. They argue that high levels of unemployment, weak connections to mainstream employers, rising levels of imprisonment, and a low ratio of young black men to women created a shortage of "marriageable" black men in the 1970s and 1980s. They do not say much about the role of improved economic opportunities for black women.

In summary, traditional economic models highlight the potential importance of four factors:

1. *Male earnings*. All else equal, improvements in men's economic opportunities

should be associated with higher marriage rates and lower levels of single parenthood.

2. *Female earnings*. All else equal, improvements in women's economic opportunities should be associated with lower marriage rates and higher levels of single-parenthood.
3. *Sex ratio*. All else equal, when one sex is in short supply, marriage rates for the other sex should fall.
4. *Public assistance*. All else equal, more generous benefits for single-parent families should lead to less marriage and more single parent families.

Each of these predictions assumes that the other three factors remain constant. Thus, one can only test these hypotheses rigorously by looking at all four factors simultaneously.

Empirical tests of these predictions generally use one of three methods: comparisons of geographic areas, comparisons of individuals observed at a single point in time, and changes over time in the behavior of the same individuals ("hazard models"). Comparisons of geographic areas examine variation in the likelihood that members of a given group (usually defined by age, race, and education) have had children and are married, divorced, or never-married. These area averages are typically regressed on the area's economic characteristics. Comparisons of individuals link the odds that an individual has a given marital or family status to that individual's labor market opportunities, the characteristics of potential spouses, and local welfare benefits. Both individual and area models are sometimes estimated by pooling cross-sectional data for a number of years.

Unfortunately, studies that use these methods seldom distinguish changes in timing from changes in the probability that an event will ever occur. Many studies examine changes in the prevalence of marriage among 25-34 year old women, for example. These studies almost all find that marriage rates have fallen over time. But because they look at relatively young women, these studies cannot distinguish those who are postponing marriage from those who will never marry. This limitation would not be a problem if the factors leading women to delay marriage were the same as those that lead women to eschew marriage entirely, but that may not be the case. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) argue, for example, that higher education leads women to delay marriage but increases the probability that they will eventually marry. We are not certain whether

this is true, but analyses that focus exclusively on women between the ages of 25 and 34 cannot address the possibility.

Hazard models use longitudinal data to estimate the odds that an unmarried person will marry at a given point in time. Such models can yield predictions about the timing as well as the overall likelihood of marriage, but they are seldom estimated in a way that allows the effect of variables such as women's labor market opportunities to vary by age. If higher education leads women to marry less when they are in their twenties but more when they are in their thirties, for example, the hazard models in the literature would seldom detect this pattern.<sup>13</sup> Like other models, longitudinal hazard models also have trouble measuring the characteristics of a respondent's potential spouses. This is largely a data problem rather than a modeling problem: until recently surveys of unmarried adults seldom tried to identify respondents' potential spouses.<sup>14</sup>

**Findings on Marriage and Divorce.** Ellwood and Jencks (2004) summarize many of the articles on marriage and divorce, as well as discussing their strengths and weaknesses. The four main conclusions are that:

1. All empirical methods suggest that men's economic opportunities exert a strong influence on marriage and divorce. Improved male earnings appear to hasten marriage and may also increase the overall prevalence of marriage.
2. The role of women's economic opportunities is unclear. In cross-sectional studies of areas and individuals, women with more economic opportunities are less likely to be married and in some cases more likely to be divorced. But hazard models that follow the same woman over time seldom find this pattern. These divergent findings cast doubt on the hypothesis that improvements in women's economic opportunities discourage marriage. Better economic opportunities may, however, lead women to *postpone* marriage.
3. A lower ratio of men to women reduces marriage.
4. Welfare has ambiguous effects on marriage but may increase divorce.

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13. Suppose that improvements in women's economic opportunities lower the odds that a young unmarried woman will marry in the next year, but raise the odds that an older unmarried woman will marry in the next year. Unless one allows both the magnitude and the sign of the effect of female opportunity to vary with age, one will not find this pattern.

14. Recent research on cohabiting couples (Smock and Manning 1997) has begun to overcome this limitation, as has the Fragile Families study, which has been quite successful in tracking the fathers of children born out of wedlock (see the working papers available at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/ffpapers.html>).

Several authors have also sought to explain trends over time in marriage. Changing patterns of male work and earnings cannot explain much of the trend.<sup>15</sup>

**Findings on Female Headship and Unwed Motherhood.** Another part of the literature focuses on female headship and unwed motherhood. Most of this work is preoccupied with the role of welfare. There have been a number of careful reviews of this literature, including Acs (1995), Hoynes (1997), and Moffitt (1998). We agree with Moffitt's overall conclusion:

Based on this review, it is clear that a simple majority of the studies that have been conducted to date show a significant correlation between welfare benefits and marriage and fertility, suggesting the presence of such behavioral effects. However, in addition to this finding not being able to explain the time-series increase in non-marital fertility and decline in marriage, the majority finding itself is weakened by the sensitivity of the result to the methodology used and to numerous other differences in specification. A neutral reading of the evidence still leads to the conclusion that welfare has incentive effects on marriage and fertility, but the uncertainty introduced by the disparities in research findings weakens the strength of that conclusion (Moffitt 1998, p. 75).

For our purposes the key point is that regardless of whether welfare impacts are large or small, the traditional economic model suggests that if all else had been equal the gradual cuts in welfare benefits since the 1970s would have reduced the number of single parent families.<sup>16</sup>

*Why don't economic models perform better?* The fact that empirical work generates such divergent results and does such a poor job of explaining trends over time poses a challenge for those who think that economic change has played a major role in family change. In our view, however, the main problem may be with the way the traditional economic model has been used, not with the hypothesis that economic change explains family change.

First, as Oppenheimer (1997) points out, the traditional model is meant to explain *whether* people will marry, not *when* they will marry. If the economic gains associated with marriage decline, fewer unmarried adults should marry and more married adults

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15. Ellwood and Rodda (1990) employ a hazard model with little control for female work. This combines both timing and avoidance effects, thus providing an upper bound for the impact of male earnings. Yet even they conclude, along with Jencks (1992) and Wood (1995), that male labor market performance can explain only a tiny share of the declines in marriage.

16. As the cost of medical care rose, the value of Medicaid also rose. This change could offset the declining value of cash benefits for families with serious medical problems.

should divorce, lowering the fraction of adults who are married at any given time. The fraction of adults who are married has indeed fallen, but it has fallen far more among young adults than among older adults. Because the traditional economic model makes no predictions about how economic change will affect the age at which people marry, it is not especially helpful in explaining the delay in marriage.

A second limitation of the traditional economic model is that it pays little attention to fertility decisions, especially outside marriage (Hotz, Klerman and Willis, 1997).<sup>17</sup> Since the gains from marriage derive chiefly from specialization in the care and nurturing of children, the model implicitly assumes that marriage should lead immediately to childbearing. Yet one of the most important changes over the past generation is that the timing of marriage and childbearing has become decoupled. These changes are quite dramatic.<sup>18</sup> Among women who married for the first time in 1960, 71 percent had their first child during their first three years of marriage. Among women who first married in 1990, only 37 percent had their first child during their first three years of marriage. The decoupling of marriage and childbearing occurred not just because more women are now having children before marriage but also because childless women postpone their first birth longer after marriage. Over 75 percent of childless women who married in 1960 had a child within three years. Less than 50 percent of childless women who married in 1990 had a child within three years. Since this decoupling of marriage and childbearing is a large part of what we seek to explain, models that treat marriage and childbearing as inextricably intertwined are unlikely to be helpful.

## **6. Noneconomic Explanations**

The traditional economic model largely ignores the interpersonal relationships associated with marriage. Instead, it treats a family like a firm that generates profits (in the form of increased well-being) for its owners (the husband and wife). If the family ceases to improve the well-being of either partner, it is dissolved. But a marriage, like a business partnership, requires constant negotiations about how the enterprise will be run and how the profits will be divided. These negotiations raise issues about power and

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17. As will be discussed later, there have recently been a few attempts to integrate models of fertility and childbearing, see for example, Willis (1999).

18. All the data on the decoupling of marriage and first births is from Ellwood and Jencks (2004).

control. The outcome of such negotiations depends partly on societal norms and expectations, as well as the legal environment, all of which change over time. Such changes may well affect the likelihood that couples can achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome.

Sociologists, anthropologists, social psychologists, and even some economists have investigated the interpersonal, social, and legal forces that might influence family formation and dissolution. Here we consider four types of explanations: gender role conflict, limited confidence and personal efficacy, altered attitudes and social norms, and technological and legal change.

**Gender Role Conflict.** One popular explanation for the rise of single motherhood has been that women are less willing to put up with the way the men they meet treat them. This change is often attributed to the breakdown of consensus about gender roles (Furstenberg 1996, 2001). Both the women's movement and the increase in women's employment certainly appear to have changed the way many prospective husbands and wives think about their obligations to one another. If male and female expectations have changed in different ways or at different rates, that could have produced an extended period in which marriages were slow to form and often dissolved because couples had incompatible views about their respective roles. This could also have contributed to the spread of single motherhood. If these changes were unevenly distributed by education or race, that would help explain why single motherhood increased more among black women and among women without college degrees.

Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) review changes in the role expectations of men and women. Using data on the attitudes of high school seniors from 1976 to 1998, they report that disagreement with the statement "the husband should make all the important decisions in the family" rose from 72 to 85 percent among women and from 44 to 49 percent among men. Disagreement with the statement "it is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family" rose from 42 to 71 percent among women and from 17 to 37 percent among men. If these attitudinal changes led to parallel behavioral changes among prospective spouses, that could help explain why men and women have become more reluctant to marry and have had more trouble staying married. But the published data do not tell us whether the gender gap is wider among blacks than whites or among those who

do not go on to college than among those who do.

The General Social Survey also asks adults two questions about gender roles. One question asks whether respondents agree with the statement “women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country to men.” The second asks whether the respondent approves of “a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her.” We found that more recent birth cohorts were more likely to endorse gender equality. Among those who had completed college, the trend was the same for men and women. Among those who had not completed college, egalitarian responses to the question about women’s place being in the home increased significantly more among women than among men. This area deserves more systematic study.

**Efficacy and Control.** Social psychologists typically posit an interactive relationship between the results of people’s behavior, their feelings of confidence, and their perceptions of control. Behavior that is validated by perceived success builds confidence. Behavior that leads to perceived failure can lower self-esteem, reduce sense of control, and sometimes generate dysfunctional behavior. Poor information on subjects such as contraception can also weaken people’s sense of control.

Nurturing children can often provide women with avenues for success and validation that the market does not provide. Women who feel they have few opportunities in the labor market may therefore turn to childrearing sooner in order to gain a greater sense of self-worth and efficacy. Whereas the traditional economic model suggests that better job opportunities for women reduce the benefits of marriage, efficacy models suggest that better job opportunities could reduce women’s chances of becoming young mothers and thus increase the proportion who marry before having children. Furthermore, if women with better jobs are better able to maintain a sense of control or power in their marriage, this might conceivably increase their chances of remaining married. However, if men have less power in a relationship, they might be less inclined to marry or more inclined to divorce.

The notion that low efficacy causes early out-of-wedlock births among disadvantaged women comes up repeatedly both in the social sciences literature on teen

pregnancy and in programs designed to prevent it.<sup>19</sup> Plotnick (1992), for example, finds that a variety of measures of self-esteem, attitudes toward school, educational expectations, and the presence of an employed adult woman in a teenager's household influence teen pregnancy and its resolution. But the National Academy of Sciences' Panel on Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing (1987) noted that "several studies of social and psychological factors associated with adolescents' sexual behavior conclude that self-perception (not self-esteem)—that is who one is, can be, and wants to be—is at the heart of teenagers' sexual decision making" (Panel on Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing 1987, p. 120). Lack of knowledge about contraception and inability to resist peer influence and pressure from men are also frequent themes in this literature.

Struggles over power and control also seem to play a role in explaining why single mothers decide not to marry. Edin (1999) reports that:

In a non-marital relationship, women often felt they had more control than they would have had if they were married. Even if the couple cohabited, they nearly always lived with her mother or in an apartment with her name on the lease. Thus, mothers had the power to evict fathers if they interfered with childrearing or they tried to take control of the financial decision making....

When we asked single mothers what they liked best about being a single parent, their most frequent response was, "I am in charge," or, "I am in control".... (Edin 1999, p. 22, 24).

Edin emphasizes that single mothers want to marry, but only if men bring something valuable to the table, namely economic resources. Much of Edin's work focuses on the consequences of the fact that unskilled men not only have trouble bringing in much money but are often unwilling to do their share of the housework and childcare, especially when the children in a household are not their own. Her story is consistent with both traditional economic models and gender role conflict, but power struggles played a central role in what Edin's informants told her. Women wanted to maintain control of their household, and the "primary way that mothers thought they could maintain power in a marriage relationship was by working and contributing to the family budget" (Edin 1999 p. 25).

Patterson (1998) makes a related argument about why marriage is less common among blacks than other groups. He sees high levels of gender conflict as having been

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19. For excellent reviews of the recent literature see Moore et al. (1995a) and Moore et al. (1995b).

endemic in both African-American and Afro-Caribbean culture and traces this to the legacy of slavery, not poverty. Patterson argues that because of slavery there has always been a big difference between the families of blacks and whites in North America. This argument remains controversial, partly because one would expect the cultural legacy of slavery to diminish over time, and the difference between black and white parents' living arrangements did not narrow during the late twentieth century and by some measures widened. Patterson argues that this is because African-American men and women are moving on "very different socioeconomic trajectories" with men "falling behind in both absolute and relative terms" (Patterson 1998, p. 160). Because black men's economic position has deteriorated while black women's position has improved, the economic benefits of marriage are smaller and persistent gender conflict is more likely to drive couples apart. Patterson's story thus combines a traditional economic explanation for recent trends with a cultural explanation for the long-standing difference between blacks and non-blacks in similar economic situations.

**Altered Attitudes and Social Norms.** Sociologists and anthropologists often see culture as people's collective interpretation of their situation and as their initial guide to appropriate behavior. Different cultures and subcultures have different definitions of what is rational, reasonable, desirable, and good, and these ideas often influence individuals' responses to particular opportunities and stimuli. Most anthropologists and sociologists also believe that culture is adaptive. In particular, if a given norm of behavior fails to achieve its intended result, it is unlikely to persist indefinitely. New definitions of success and failure may also emerge if old definitions are no longer attainable. The adaptive nature of norms and values makes it hard to investigate their causal role unless an exogenous source of change can be identified and changes in a norm or value can be directly observed rather than just inferred.

Norms and values could be linked to changing family patterns in several different ways. The simplest case is when some exogenous shock alters attitudes, which then alter family patterns. The origins of the "sexual revolution" that de-stigmatized premarital sex, for example, are often (if not altogether convincingly) traced to the pill. Once sexual activity outside of marriage became socially acceptable, this change could easily have reduced marriage rates, since one of the strongest incentives to marry was reduced or removed.

Another possibility is that changes in social norms amplify the initial impact of exogenous shocks. If economic conditions reduce the appeal of marriage, for example, marriage rates will fall. But if marriage rates fall, social pressure to marry may also fall, which could lower marriage rates even among couples whose economic situation had not changed. Because social norms change slowly, the full impact of an economic change might not be felt for some years. The uncertain pace of normative change poses a problem for quantitative social scientists, because strong empirical tests usually rely on evidence that changes are closely linked in time. The longer and more uncertain the interval between a cause and its presumed effect, the harder it is to separate that effect from the effect of other changes.

Norms and culture also play a prominent role in discussions of the “culture of poverty” and the “underclass.” In Murray (1984), new social policies adopted in the 1960s reward behavior that is dysfunctional within the larger society and ultimately undermine traditional mores. In Wilson (1987), declining economic opportunities for less educated black men plus the out-migration of the black middle class leave an impoverished inner-city ghetto with few mainstream economic opportunities, and an urban underclass is the result.

Parental religion can also be treated as an exogenous cultural influence on children. Lehrer (2000) finds that even after controlling for parental SES, education, family structure and the like, children raised in fundamentalist Protestant households are significantly more likely to marry early than mainstream Protestants, who in turn are more likely to marry early than Jews. Mormons are the most likely to marry early. Zelnik et al. (1981) report that religion also affects the likelihood of premarital intercourse, although it does not seem to affect the likelihood of becoming pregnant before marriage. Presumably young people from more “liberal” denominations are more likely to have sex before they marry but also more likely to practice birth control.

There is considerable controversy about whether surveys of attitudes can provide reliable data about social norms. If survey respondents who say that premarital sex is “wrong” express disapproval of premarital sex among their friends, one can say that premarital sex violates a social norm. But if those who think that premarital sex is wrong never tell those who are sexually active that they are doing something wrong, one cannot say that premarital sex violates a social norm. Attitude surveys seldom ask about such

matters. Nonetheless, attitude surveys probably provide *some* useful evidence regarding normative change. Adult attitudes about sex and family formation changed far more during the 1960s and 1970s than during the 1980s and 1990s. Thornton (1989) reports that in a 1965 NORC survey, 69 percent of women under the age of 30 said that it was always or almost always wrong if a woman “has intimate relations with a man *to whom she is engaged and intends to marry*” (italics ours). Seven years later, in the 1972 General Social Survey (GSS), only 34 percent of women under 30 said it was always or almost always wrong “if a man and a woman have sex relations before marriage.” By 1974 the number had fallen to 24 percent, and it has hardly changed since.

More permissive attitudes towards non-marital sex have been accompanied by greater acceptance of women choosing not to marry. According to Veroff et al. (1981), the fraction of respondents who agreed that a woman who remained unmarried was “sick, neurotic, or immoral” fell from 80 percent in 1957 to 25 percent in 1978. Just as with attitudes towards premarital sex, Axinn and Thornton (2000) find virtually no changes in attitudes toward marriage since the mid-1970s. But while few Americans now disapprove of remaining single, both ethnographic and survey data still find widespread interest in marriage, even among inner city blacks whose marriage rates are quite low (Edin 1999).

Overall, surveys suggest a substantial change in attitudes during the 1960s and early 1970s on everything from divorce to gender roles to premarital sex. But with the exception of attitudes toward cohabitation, surveys show relatively little change in attitudes since the 1970s. Published time series seldom report trends by race or level of education, making it difficult to determine whether attitudinal changes could account for the uneven spread of single parent families. This issue requires further work.

**The Pill and Abortion.** Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz (1996) argue that new contraceptive technologies and legal abortions altered the character of sexual relations between unmarried couples. Until the 1960s, engaging in premarital sex usually implied a commitment to marry if the woman became pregnant. “Shot-gun” marriages were the frequent result. Akerlof et al. argue that the invention of the pill and legalizing abortion made unmarried women more willing to participate in uncommitted, premarital sex by reducing the odds of a pregnancy. Women who sought to hold men to the old rules (no sex without a commitment to marry) therefore found it harder to compete successfully for boyfriends. Even women who were unwilling to get abortions responded to this

competitive situation by engaging in more premarital sex. When such women became pregnant, however, they could no longer rely on social pressure to ensure that their boyfriend married them. Nonmarital births therefore rose. Akerlof et al. (p268) estimate that “about three-fourths of the increase in the white out-of-wedlock first birth ratio, and about three-fifths of the black increase, between 1965-1969 and 1985-1989” can be traced to a decrease in the fraction of premarital pregnancies that led to marriage.

Akerlof et al. rest their argument primarily on a clever theoretical construction and a loose connection between the timing of changing events. Several other authors have sought to tighten the case by investigating whether the legalization of abortion led to changes in teen birthrates. There is an obvious direct effect: if pregnancy rates remain unchanged, birth rates will almost inevitably fall when abortion is legalized. But when the risk of pregnancy falls, the expected cost of premarital sex falls. When costs (or risks) fall, demand normally rises, often more than proportionately. As a result, cutting prices sometimes raises a firm’s total revenue. This logic can also apply to nonmarital sex. If halving the risk that nonmarital sex will lead to a nonmarital birth more than doubles the frequency of nonmarital sex, the total number of nonmarital births will rise, not fall.

Several scholars, notably Levine et al. (1996) and Sklar and Berkov (1974), have shown that birth rates among both married and unmarried women fell in states when abortion became legal. Conversely, Morgan and Parnell (2002) found that funding restrictions lowered abortions and raised births in North Carolina. But Kane and Staiger (1996) found that modest new restrictions on abortion actually *reduced* teen motherhood. They speculate that small increases in the obstacles to obtaining an abortion may have made some teenagers more careful about avoiding pregnancy without reducing abortions among those who were likely to abort before the new restrictions were imposed.

Goldin and Katz (2000) examine the diffusion of the pill among college-educated women and argue that by facilitating sexual activity prior to marriage, easy availability of the pill reduced the cost of delaying marriage and staying in school (Goldin and Katz 2000, p.26). Others have investigated the possible effects of more liberal divorce laws on marriage and divorce rates, property settlements, and even suicide and spousal murder.<sup>20</sup> In virtually every case, legal and institutional changes appear to have had an impact, but

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20. See for example, Friedberg (1998) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2000).

whether they affected the fraction of children living with their biological parents is unclear.

While the literature on contraception, abortion, and divorce law suggests that changes in these domains have influenced sexual behavior, fertility, and marriage, this literature has not investigated whether technical or legal changes might account for racial and educational variation in the spread of nonmarital births, divorce, and single-parent families. All these technical and legal innovations occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Invoking such innovations to explain changes in family patterns during the 1980s and early 1990s requires a rather complicated story in which technical and legal changes have delayed effects, perhaps because it takes a long time to alter traditional social norms. While this story is theoretically plausible, the rather skimpy evidence on attitudes that might be expected to affect family structure does not show many big changes after 1980. Changes in family structure after 1980 may, therefore, be largely due to other influences, such as the declining economic fortunes of less educated men.

## **7. Where Might We Look For Better Answers?**

Our review of existing research has not uncovered any simple explanation for changes in the American family. We found consistent evidence that deteriorating job opportunities for men modestly reduce marriage and increase single parenthood. But both the theoretical and empirical literature is more ambiguous about the effects of improved job opportunities for women. Contraceptive technology, access to abortion, and attitudes all changed during in the 1960s and early 1970s, but there is little direct evidence that these innovations contributed to family change in subsequent decades.

Nonetheless, if we take a broad view of the trends and findings, we believe a fairly plausible hypothesis emerges. Like Sweeney (2002), we think that the relationship between economic opportunity and marriage has changed over the years. Three factors are likely to have altered the preferred timing of marriage and parenthood.

First, *the pill and legalized abortion* weakened the link between marriage and childbearing. Previous forms of contraception, such as condoms, withdrawal, rhythm, and diaphragms, were less reliable, required interruption of sexual activity, or gave males control. The pill and legalized abortion gave sexually active couples, and particularly women, far more control over the timing of births, allowing other factors (including

economic incentives) to exert more influence on the timing of marriage and parenthood.<sup>21</sup>

Second, *changing sexual mores* made it more acceptable for unmarried couples to engage in sexual activity and live together. This change also reduced the non-economic incentives to marry, making economic considerations more likely to be decisive.

Third, *gender roles and expectations changed dramatically, particularly with respect to maternal employment*. As late as March 1968, less than a quarter of married mothers with a child under five were working, and the percentage did not vary much by the mother's education. Even among mothers with elementary school children, only about 40 percent worked and even fewer worked full-time. By March 2000, roughly two-thirds of married mothers with children under five were working, and the fraction was even higher among mothers with older children. Despite welfare reform, moreover, rates of employment in 2000 were substantially higher among college educated mothers than among those with less schooling. Because women now expect to spend more of their life working, they know that their decisions about the timing of fertility have greater financial implications.

Why should these changes lead college-educated women to delay childbearing more than women with less schooling? First, college educated women have more attractive labor market options, so they may choose to postpone motherhood simply because it would interfere with another satisfying activity. Second, the career costs associated with early childbearing appear to be greater for more skilled women. College-educated women may need to invest more heavily in the early parts of their careers in order to maximize their lifetime earnings (by becoming a partner in a law firm, for example). Ellwood, Wilde, and Batchelder (2004) find strong evidence that early childbearing reduces the earnings of women with high test scores more than the earnings of women with low test scores. Finally, college educated women may anticipate using more paid childcare and may therefore want to wait until they can afford the amount of help they want.

Our hypothesis, then, is that women's economic opportunities now play a more important role in the timing of motherhood than they did a generation ago. College educated women have probably always had somewhat more economic incentive to delay

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21. See, among others, Goldin and Katz (2000).

childbearing than less educated women had. But this difference has widened over the past generation, both because college educated mothers now spend more of their life working and because the earnings gap between more and less educated women has widened. In addition, growing acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation, combined with greater control over the timing of births, has made family formation less sensitive to the hormonal influences that had traditionally encouraged women to marry early.

Meanwhile, less educated women who want to have children at a relatively early age see less reason to marry, because their potential spouses have fared so badly in the labor market. As a result, many of these women delay marriage but not childbearing. More educated women, who are in no rush to have children, are also in no rush to get married. Hence they delay both marriage and childbearing, even when their boyfriends are doing well economically.

This hypothesis can also help explain the sudden change in many trends during the late 1990s. For the first time in almost 30 years, both marriage and delayed childbearing became more common. Jobs became plentiful. Real wages of less skilled men rose by about two percent per year from 1995 to 2001 (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003). The Earned Income Tax Credit and other supports also made work more lucrative for some parents. Welfare reform pushed more women into paid employment. And perhaps welfare reform also signaled a modest shift in attitudes toward single-parenthood.

This explanation is far from perfect. It cannot explain why racial differences have grown so large. It says nothing about divorce or remarriage. We offer this hybrid hypothesis only as a starting point, which is meant to suggest that if social scientists estimate multivariate models and allow the importance of different influences to change over time, we may eventually be able to explain far more than we have to date about why American families changed.

## **8. The Policy Morass**

Like the weather, everyone complains about family change, but no one seems able to do anything about it. Nor is it obvious that a better understanding of past changes in family structure would change this situation. We understand the weather far better than we used to, after all, but while better understanding has produced better forecasts, it has

not produced better weather. For those who want to alter family structure, we can offer only one bit of advice: treat anyone who claims to know how to do this with a high degree of skepticism.

Still, our review does suggest that a few things might help reduce the prevalence of single parent families. First, improving job opportunities for less skilled men seems to be an unambiguously positive step. Second, improving job opportunities for less skilled women has more ambiguous effects. Third, supports for two-parent families, such as refundable tax credits, childcare subsidies, and health insurance subsidies, seem likely to reduce their vulnerability.

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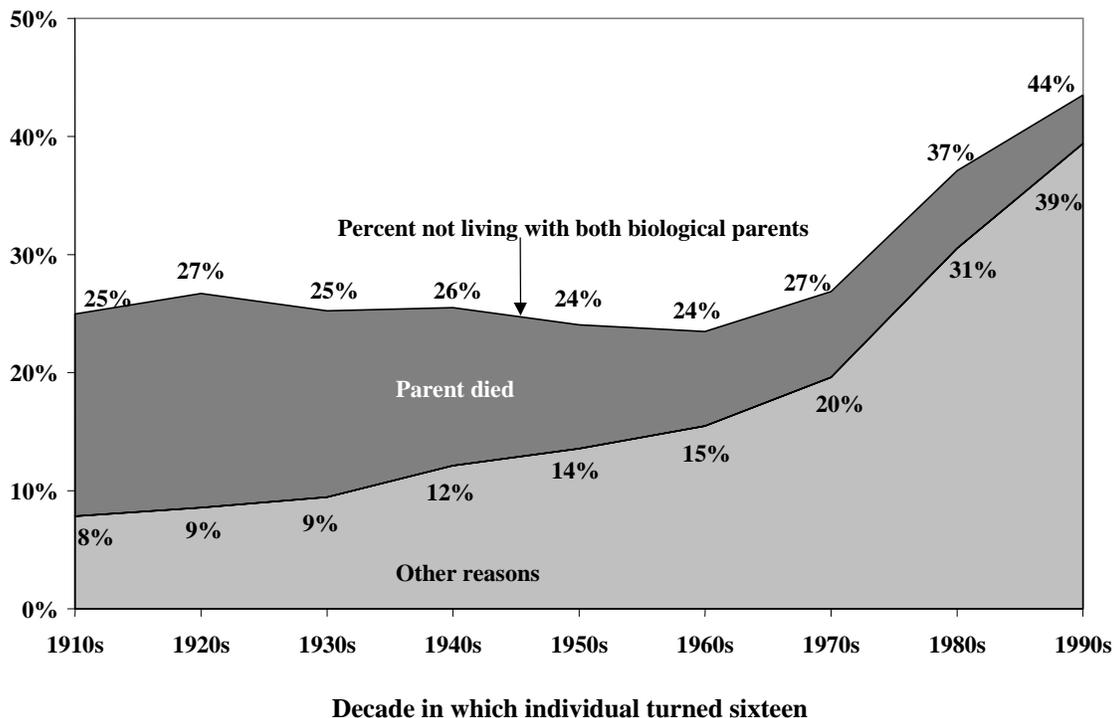
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**Figure 2.1**

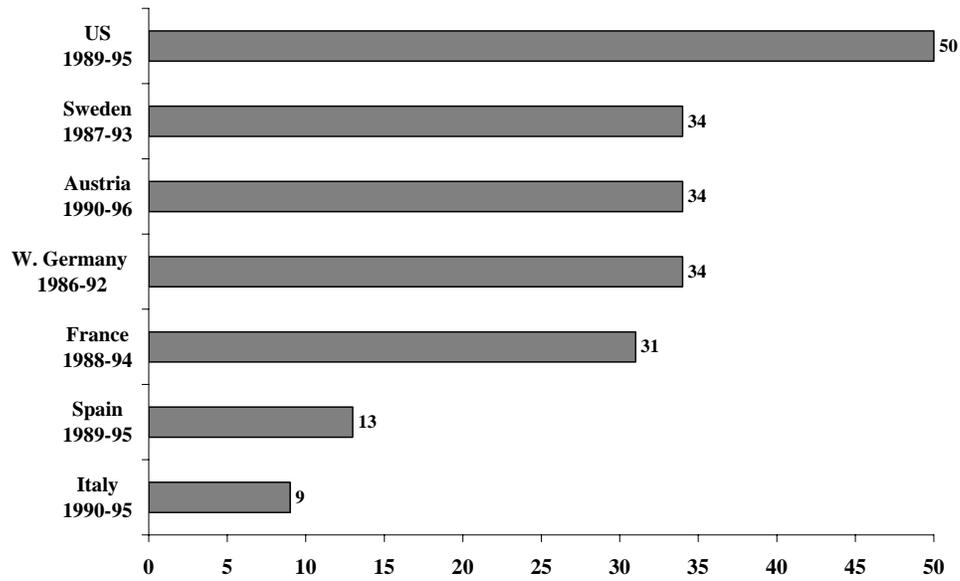
**Percent of Children Not Living with Own Parents at Age Sixteen Because a Parent Died or For Other Reasons: United States, 1910s to 1990s**



Source: Retrospective reports from 40,090 surviving adults interviewed by the General Social Survey between 1972 and 2000 (tabulations by Zoua Vang). The question is “Were you living with both your own mother and father around the time you were 16?” If not, “With whom were you living around that time.” If respondents had married or left home by age 16, the interviewer asked with whom the respondent lived “Before that.” If respondents were not living with both their own mother and father, they were asked, “What happened ?” Aside from a parent dying, the most common answer was that the respondent’s parents “divorced or separated.” There is no separate category for respondents whose parents never lived together. Some of these respondents may have described their parents as “separated.” Others may have given answers that were tabulated as “other.”

**Figure 2.2**

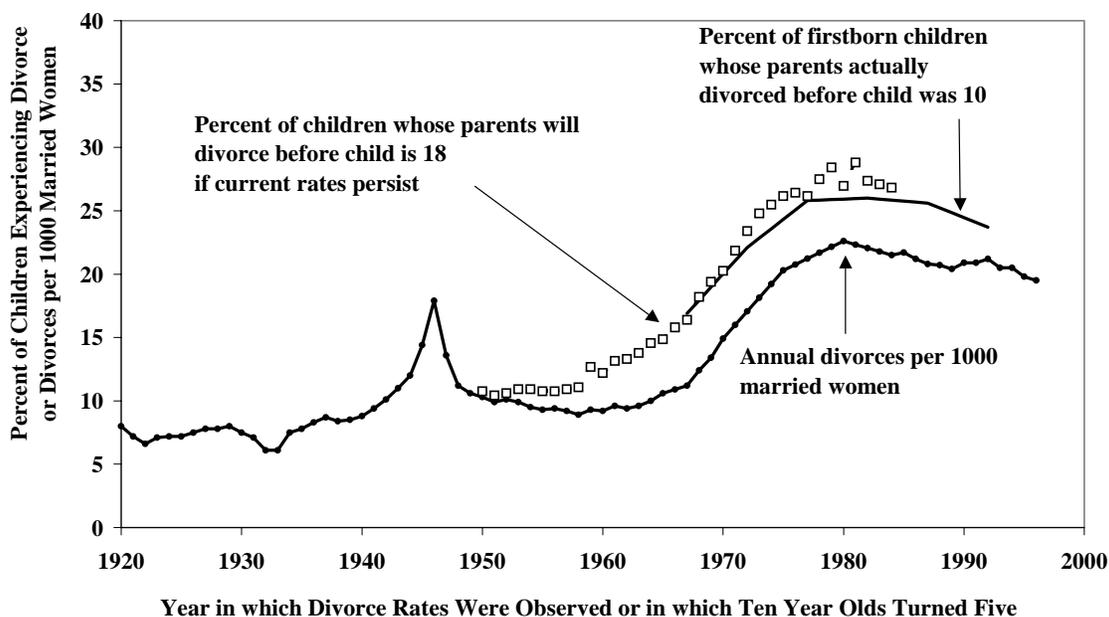
**Projected Percent of Children Not Living with Both Biological Parents  
at Age 15 in the US and Six West European Nations,  
Based on Split-up Rates around 1990**



Source: Andersson (2001)

**Figure 2.3**

**Percent of Children Whose Parents Will Divorce before the Child's 18th Birthday if Current Rates Persist, Percent of Firstborn Children Whose Parents Actually Divorced before the Child's 10th Birthday, and Divorces per 1000 Married Women: United States, 1920 to 1996**

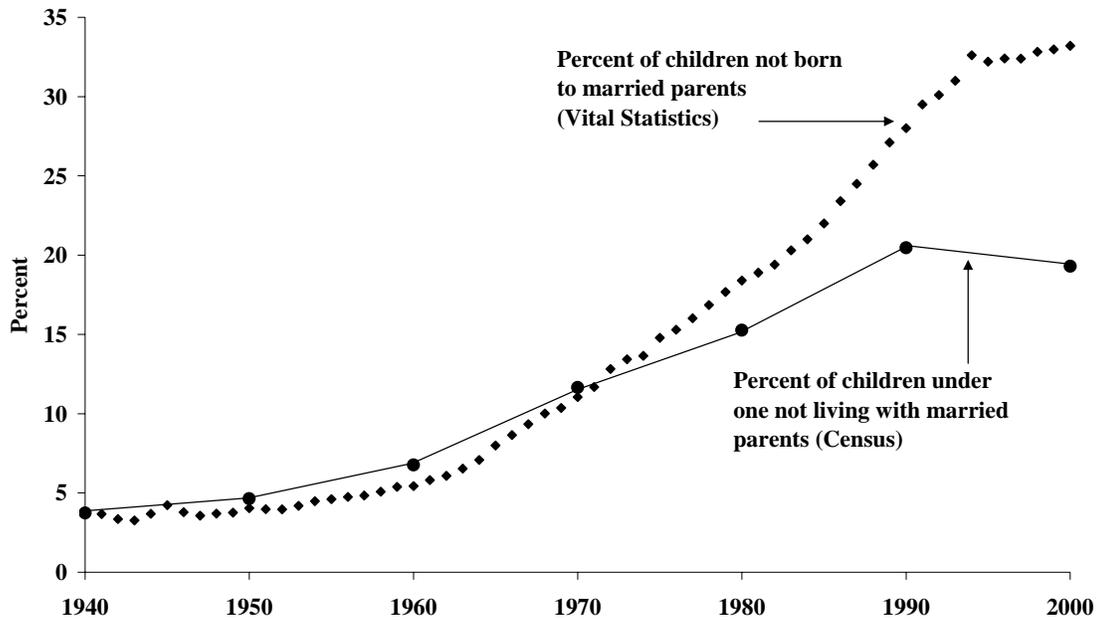


Sources: Divorces per 1000 married women are annual estimates from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Series B 217 and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years. Percentages of children whose parents will divorce before the child is eighteen are based on the percentage of children whose parents divorced in the year shown, taken from London (1989, Table 1). We converted the annual risks that a child's parents would divorce ( $P_{DI}$ ) to a cumulative eighteen year risk ( $P_{D18}$ ) by assuming  $P_{D18} = 1 - (1 - P_{DI})^{18}$ . Percentages of firstborn children actually experiencing a divorce within ten years of birth are for children from first marriages and are based on hazard models for five-year birth cohorts in the June Current Population Survey. We are indebted to Steve Martin for these estimates. We used linear interpolation to estimate probabilities for one-year birth cohorts. Each cohort's probability of experiencing a divorce before age ten is shown for the midpoint of the interval during which it was at risk, namely the year in which the cohort was five years old.

From csjfile: bothpar2.xls (F4 divorce).

**Figure 2.4**

**Percent of Births to Unmarried Couples and Percent of Children Under Age One Not Living with a Married Parent: United States, 1940 to 2000**

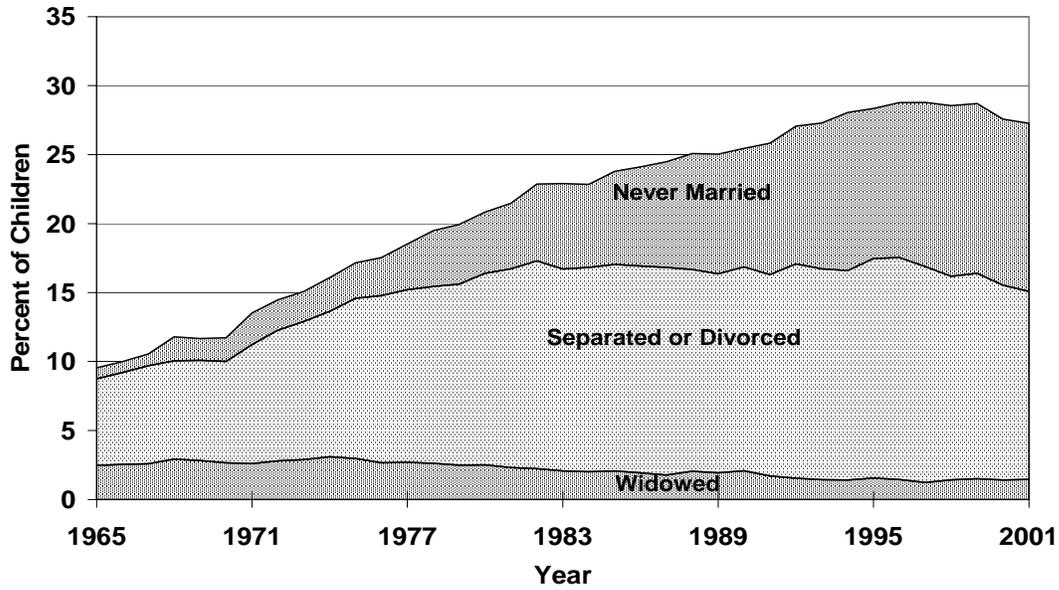


Sources: The pre-1970 percentages of nonmarital births are from *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to the Present*, Series B1 and B28. The post-1970 percentages are from *Vital Statistics*. Pre-1980 estimates have been multiplied by 1.034 to make them consistent with post-1980 estimates. The percentages of children under age one not living with a married parent are from the Integrated Public Use Microsamples of the decennial Censuses for 1940 to 2000 and were calculated by Andrew Clarkwest. Definitions, methods, and coverage change slightly from year to year in both series.

From csjfile: bothpar2.xls (F5 wedlock).

**Figure 2.5**

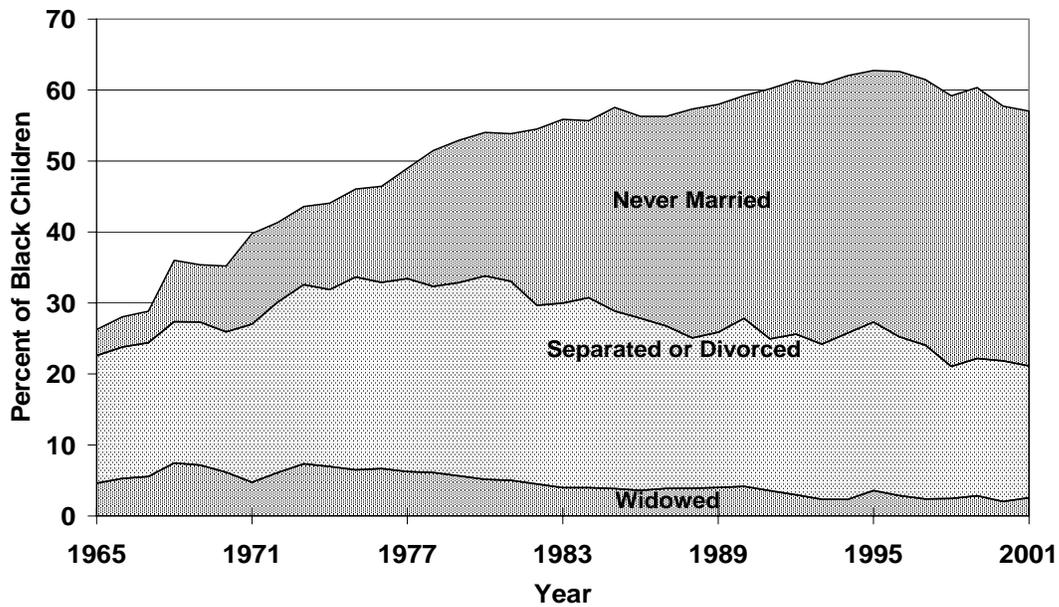
**Percent of All Children Living with One Parent  
By Marital Status of Single Parent**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.6**

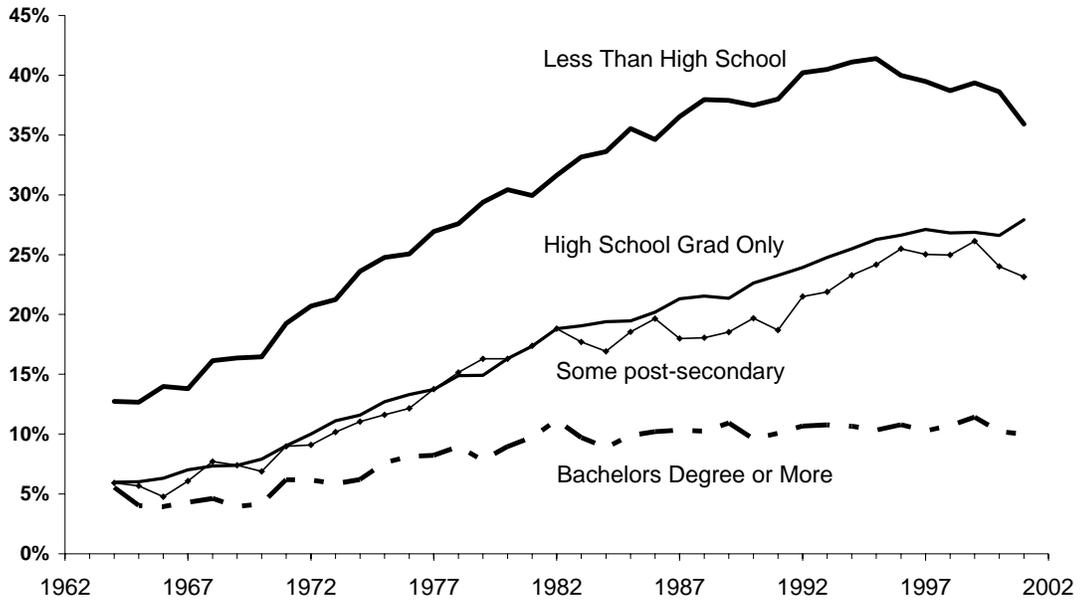
**Percent of Black Children Living with One Parent  
By Marital Status of Single Parent**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.7**

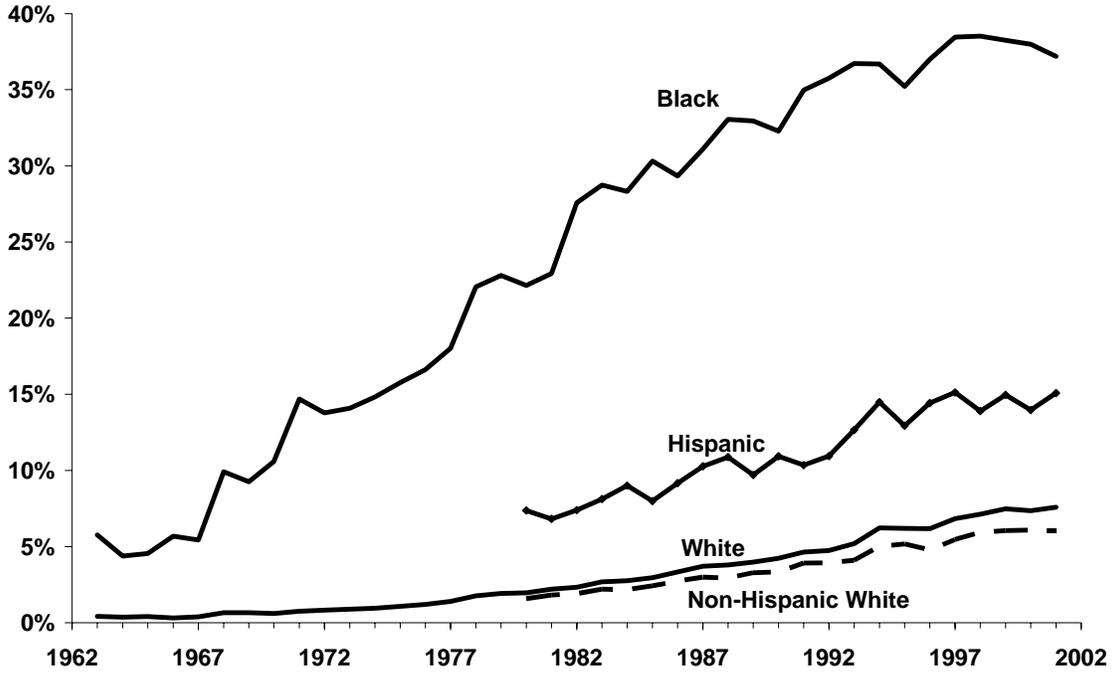
**Percent of Children in Single Mother Homes  
By Education of the Mother**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.8**

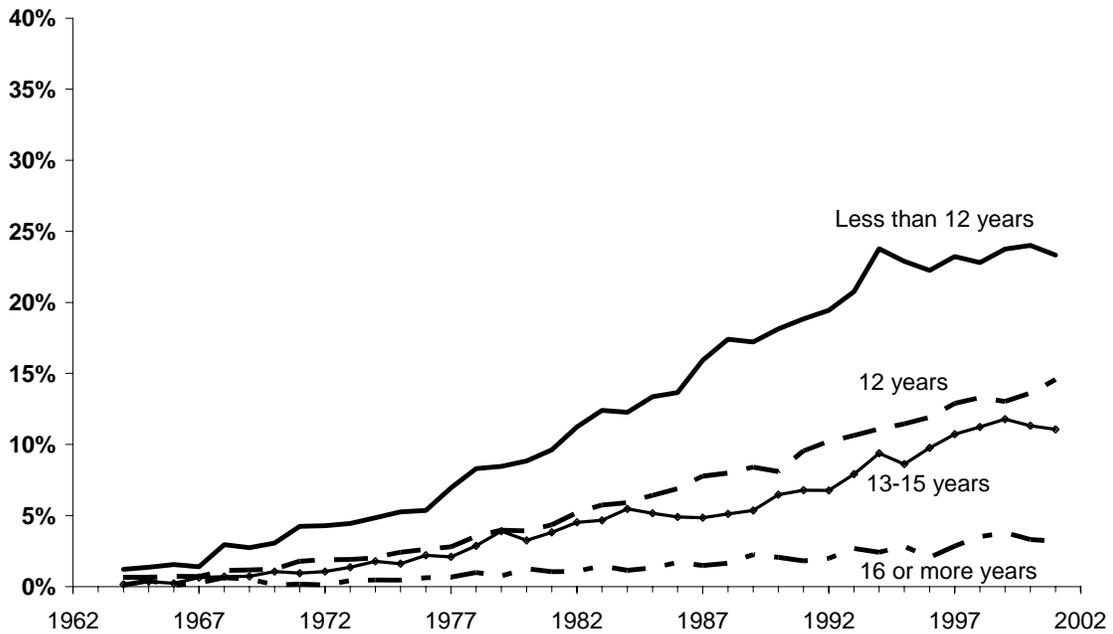
**Percent of Women with Children Who Had Never Been Married  
By Race and Ethnicity**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.9**

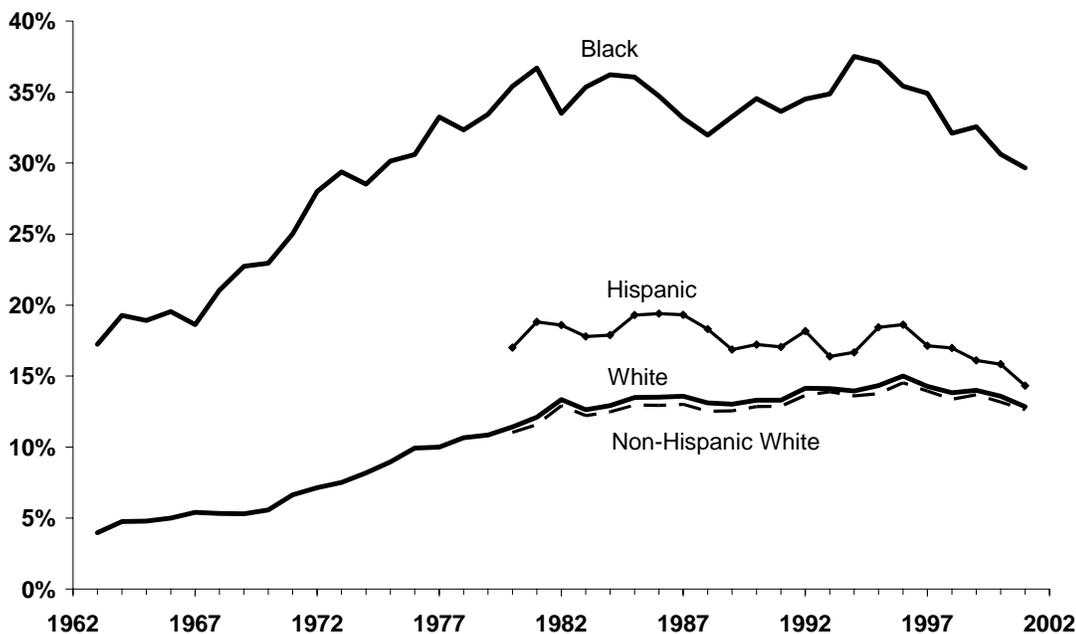
**Percent of Women with Children Who Had Never Been Married  
By Education of Mother**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.10**

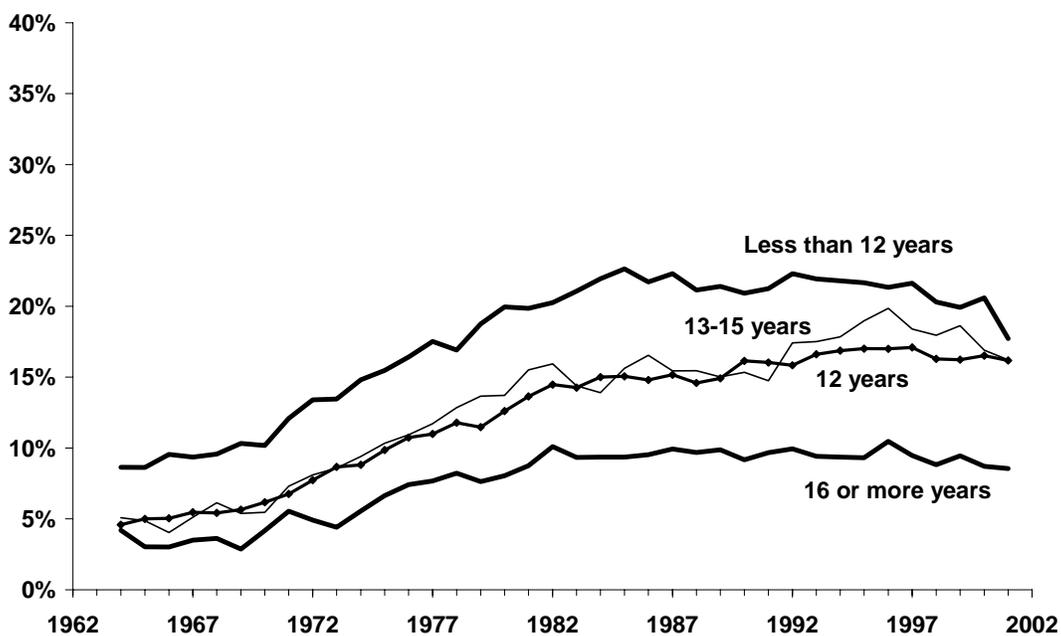
**Percent of Ever Married Mothers with Children under Eighteen Who Were Separated or Divorced, by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

**Figure 2.11**

**Percent of Ever Married Women with Children under Eighteen Who Were Separated or Divorced, by Level of Education**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the March Current Population Survey.

Table 2.1  
Change in Age at First Marriage and at First Birth among Women Born  
in the Early 1940s versus the Early 1960s, by Race

	Percent with first marriage by a given age			Percent with first birth by a given age		
	Age 25	Age 30	Age 40 <sup>1</sup>	Age 25	Age 30	Age 40 <sup>1</sup>
<b>All women</b>						
Born 1940-44	84	91	94	71	84	88
Born 1960-64	64	78	86	52	70	81
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-20</i>	<i>-13</i>	<i>-07</i>	<i>-19</i>	<i>-14</i>	<i>-07</i>
<b>White women</b>						
Born 1940-44	86	92	95	71	84	88
Born 1960-64	68	82	89	49	69	80*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-18</i>	<i>-10</i>	<i>-06</i>	<i>-22</i>	<i>-15</i>	<i>-08</i>
<b>Black women</b>						
Born 1940-44	72	82	87	77	86	88
Born 1960-64	42	55	68	68	76	85*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-30</i>	<i>-27</i>	<i>-19</i>	<i>-09</i>	<i>-10</i>	<i>-04</i>

Source: Authors' tabulation of June and March CPS data.

1. For women born between 1960 and 1964 estimates at age 40 are extrapolated by combining percentages married or with children at ages 30 to 35 with the fraction of unmarried or childless 30 to 35 year olds in the 1955-59 cohort who had a child within the next ten years.

Table 2.2  
Change in Age at First Marriage and at First Birth among Women Born  
in the Early 1940s versus the Early 1960s, by Education

	Percent with first marriage by a given age			Percent with first birth by a given age		
	Age 25	Age 30	Age 40	Age 25	Age 30	Age 40
<b>High school dropouts</b>						
Born 1940-44	83	89	91	82	88	90
Born 1960-64	66	75	82	78	83	86*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-17</i>	<i>-14</i>	<i>-09</i>	<i>-04</i>	<i>-05</i>	<i>-04</i>
<b>High school graduates</b>						
Born 1940-44	87	93	95	77	88	90
Born 1960-64	70	81	88	64	79	84*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-17</i>	<i>-12</i>	<i>-07</i>	<i>-13</i>	<i>-09</i>	<i>-06</i>
<b>Some college</b>						
Born 1940-44	86	92	95	71	83	87
Born 1960-64	65	79	90	49	70	81*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-21</i>	<i>-13</i>	<i>-05</i>	<i>-22</i>	<i>-13</i>	<i>-06</i>
<b>College graduates</b>						
Born 1940-44	74	87	92	47	71	82
Born 1960-64	50	75	85	20	50	73*
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-24</i>	<i>-19</i>	<i>-07</i>	<i>-27</i>	<i>-11</i>	<i>-09</i>

Source: Authors' tabulation of June and March CPS data. For women born between 1960 and 1964 estimates at age 40 are extrapolated by combining percentages married (or with children) at ages 30 to 35 with the fraction of unmarried (or childless) 30 to 35 year olds in the 1955-59 cohort who had a child within the next ten years.