

**Research Brief**  
Mississippi Urban Research Center  
College of Education and Human Development

**The Socioeconomic Consequences of Changing Family Structures:  
A Review of the Research Literature**

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**ABSTRACT**

This brief examines the research literature regarding what impacts, if any, are changes in family structures having on key socioeconomic indicators. Changes in traditional family household structures have become increasingly widespread over the past forty years and are showing no signs of abating. Some researchers have found household structure and composition have important socio-economic consequences for members of those households, communities, and for public and private resources. Research has identified a multitude of reasons explaining changes in family structures. Some of those reasons included women having more employment opportunities, more young adults attending college prior to marriage, advances in contraception, limited economic mobility, changes in divorce laws, and changes in societal norms and values. Of the research literature reviewed for this study, there does appear to be an abundance of evidence establishing statistical associations between certain types of family structures and certain socioeconomic indicators. The social, economic, and political implications of those associations vary depending upon an individual's race, age, geographic location, and income level. A major conclusion is that changes in family structures are occurring and that those changes affect some racial, income, and age groups more than others. These findings lead to the question of whether society overall is better or worse because of the changes taking place in the traditional family structure. The general answer to that question is "it depends" upon whether those changes are viewed negatively, positively, or neutrally.

**INTRODUCTION**

This brief examines the research literature regarding possible relationships between changing family structures and certain socioeconomic indicators. Changes in traditional family household structures have become increasingly widespread over the past forty years (Haskins, 2015; Raley, Sweeney and Wondra, 2015; Wilcox, Wolfinger and Stokes, 2015). (See Figure 1 and 2) At issue is whether these changes in family household structures are affecting the overall

quality of life in local communities. Some researchers have found household composition has important socio-economic consequences for members of those households,

Figure 1

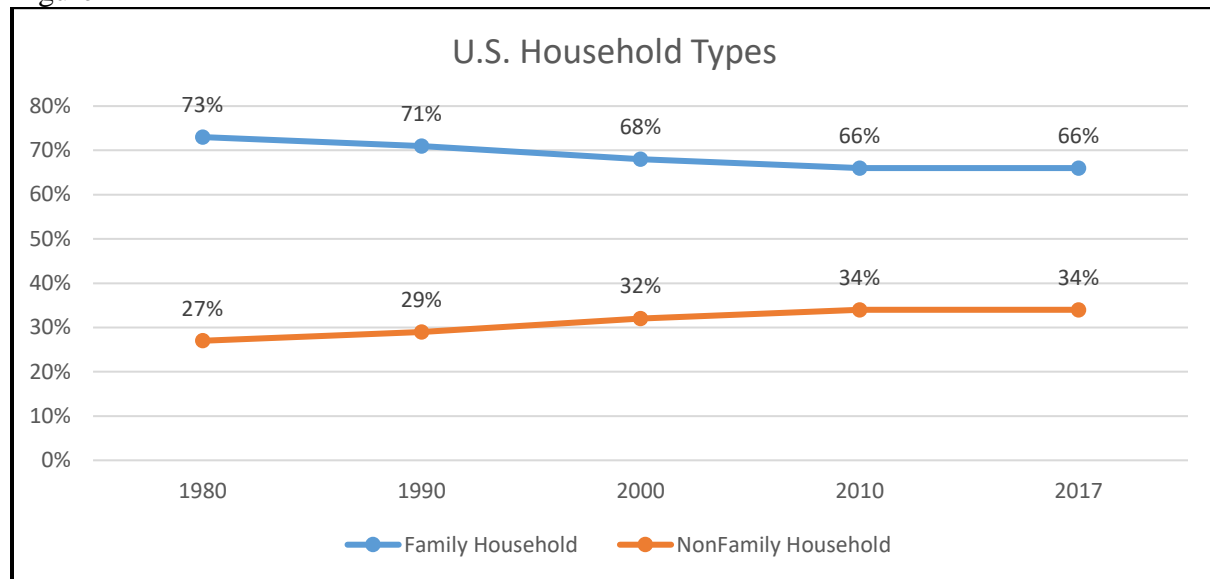
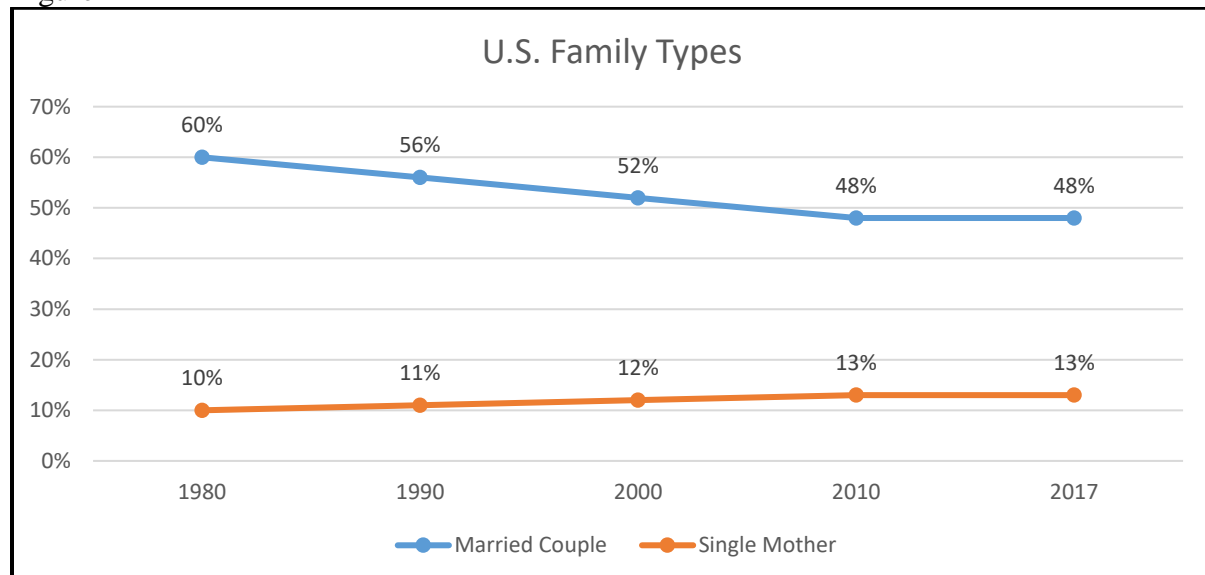


Figure 2



communities, and for public and private resources (Pilkauskas and Cross, 2018). Due to the central role families have historically performed in the functioning of society, it is important to understand what changes have been occurring, and how those changes could be affecting the quality of life in local communities. This brief seeks to provide answers to questions such as: Do family structure changes have positive or negative impacts on children, families, and communities? How much of the impact is attributable to changes in income and other economic factors? How much is attributable to changing norms and values regarding what constitutes a

family? And how much of the association between family changes and socioeconomic indicators is due to non-causal mechanisms? Do changes in family structure impact the provision of public, private, and/or nonprofits services at the local level? The goal of this research brief is to provide a wide perspective regarding how changes in family structures are affecting society today.

## **DEFINING FAMILY STRUCTURES**

The Standard North American Family (SNAF) is an ideological code that influences everyday language, research, advertising, legislation and more (Roberto and Blieszner 2015). Under SNAF, families serve as a buffer in providing elderly care, with underlying assumption that many older adults reside in a conventional household with a living spouse or children nearby to provide care (Roberto and Blieszner 2015). Most Census and demographic surveys in the United States use the standard residence-based definition of a family. The standard definition of the family is generally persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption and living in the same residence (USCB, 2019). However, this definition of family does not include persons who are not related but living together (e.g., unmarried couples; same sex couples; single individuals).

One problem associated with the SNAF definition is that particular types of families are not considered. The definition of a family influences federal government guidelines used to determine eligibility for numerous programs such as Head Start, Food Stamps, the National School Lunch Program, Home Energy Assistance, and Children's Health Insurance (Roberto and Blieszner 2015). Tillman and Nam (2008) argue that by broadening the definition of family to include cohabiting couples and their children, U.S. researchers would have a more holistic and realistic picture of family life in the United States. Therefore for the purposes of this research brief, "family" is defined broadly to include persons related, or not related, who live in the same household.

### Family Structures and Changing Norms

Long-term trends indicate that the traditional family structure (that is, a married couple and their two dependent children) is declining as the societal norm. Changes in the social and economic structure of the United States have significant implications on family life and the ability to support a traditional family structure. Today, it is common for educated, unmarried women to bear children and provide financially for their family needs without a husband. It has also become more common for households to be comprised of single, same-sex or unmarried individuals (Tillman and Nam 2008). All of these changes have implicit and explicit consequences for society across a wide range of areas such as education, health, crime, housing, and caring for the elderly. The following sections will explore those consequences in more detail.

### Marital Status

Marital status refers to a person's state of being single, married, separated, divorced, or widowed (USCB, Glossary, 2019). Americans are getting divorced less often but they are also cohabitating more (USCB, CPS, 2018). Marriage and birth rates also have been declining for years. While declining divorce rates may look like good news, many of the likely factors contributing to falling divorce, marriage, and birth rates are not necessarily good news depending

upon one's perspective (Anderson 2014). In particular, young couples are more likely to live together before getting married than they were in the past, essentially allowing breakups without a formal divorce (Tillman and Nam 2008). However, young couples are not unique in their cohabitation trends. Couples of all ages, races, and incomes are waiting longer to get married in an attempt to divorce-proof their marriage (Eggebeen and Litcher 1991). Therefore, while the rate of divorce has declined, it does not mean the percentage of all relationships that are stable and lifelong is increasing. Recent divorce and cohabitation trends demonstrate a major shift in attitudes toward marriage and the deinstitutionalization of marriage in society (Wax 2007).

Since the 1980s, the likelihood of marrying has decreased, cohabitation prior to or in place of marriage has become common, and rates of single mother families have risen (Gurrentz 2018; Jordan 2018). These changes have occurred among Americans of all races, as well as among populations in other developed nations (Eggebeen and Litcher 1991). Yet, they tend to affect Blacks more than other races in America (Fothergill et. al. 2009). Blacks are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and more likely to be a single parent compared to whites (Cready and Fossett 1997). The question is not whether these demographic trends exist, but what is their significance. In particular, there is controversy over whether these trends occur due to changes in the economy versus shifts in people's norms and values (Rodman and Sidden 1992; Wilcox, Wolfinger and Stokes 2015).

In the 1960s, less than 1 percent of young adults, ages 18 to 24, lived with an unmarried partner. In 2018, young adults ages 18 to 24 are more likely to live with an unmarried partner (9 percent) than to live with a spouse (7 percent) (Gurrentz, 2018). Compared to the rates of marriage for young adults today, marriage was twice as common for young adults in the 1970s (USCB, CPS, 2018). Higher socioeconomic status tends to have a positive relationship to higher marriage rates for young adults (Lee 2008). Young adults are forgoing marriage in pursuit of economic security and are less likely to see marriage as a means to economic security, compared to young adults in the 1960s and 1970s (Jordan, 2018).

Researchers in the United States are still debating whether the changes in family structure over the past few decades constitute a decline or merely the emergence of new family norms. However, there is little doubt that the place of marriage in family life has declined. The findings from a study on the relationship between mate availability, African American family structures, and the decline in marriage identify two interacting factors: (1) declining employment opportunities for black men and (2) residential segregation by race and class (Cready and Fossett 1997; Eggebeen and Litcher 1991; Dixon 2008). Black men's economic opportunity and status positively related to marriage, whereas black women's socioeconomic opportunities and status were negatively associated with marriage (Cready and Fossett 1997; Dixon 2008; Eggebeen and Litcher 1991).

There is a growing divergence in family life patterns being created by social class, income, education and race that includes shifts in marriage patterns (including timing and prevalence), changing incidences of divorce and remarriage rates, and changing patterns of childbearing and child rearing (Eggebeen and Litcher 1991; Dixon 2008; Anderson 2014). These patterns vary widely by sociodemographic status. For example, affluent and well-educated whites marry at very high rates and bear children predominantly within marriage in comparison

to their counterparts (Wax 2007). The lack of responsible, married fathers tends to undermine the supervision and proper socialization of children in less affluent communities (Wax 2007). In summary, research has established a strong association between family structure and marital status.

### Economic/Income

In the African American community, some researchers have found a strong connection between declining male employment opportunities and the growth of female-headed households (Eggebeen and Litcher 1991; Darity and Myers 1983; Cready and Fossett 1997; Dixon 2008). This connection suggests changes in economic opportunities can lead to changes in family structure, and that the mother-only form of family structure is a potential consequence of those changes and increases the chances of entering poverty (Albrecht and Albrecht 2000; Eggebeen and Litcher 1991; Dixon 2008). Family structure and poverty in both urban and rural America appear linked to economic circumstances that impact income and wealth distribution (Albrecht, and Albrecht 2000; Khachaturyan and Peterson 2016; Lee 2008)

Research has also found that due to increasing rates of mass incarceration and low employability of black men, educated black women appear to be living unmarried without children in far greater proportions than low-income black women (Darity and Myers 1983; Dixon 2008). Some researchers have found that black mothers who live with extended family members reap the same social support and benefits as married mothers, suggesting that black mothers are no worse off if they choose not to ever marry (Fothergill et. al. 2009). Overall, research has established an association between family structure and economic conditions.

### Health

Traditionally, single parent households have the highest rate of child food insecurity (Miller et. al. 2014). Today, one fifth of all children in the United States are born to cohabiting parents, however the findings on child well-being in cohabitating families show mixed results. In a study that compared married parent families, cohabiting parent families, single mother families, and remarried families, (Miller et. al. 2014) found that rates of child food insecurity in cohabiting and remarried families were high and often statistically indistinguishable from those in single-mother families, the group typically identified as being at the highest risk of child food insecurity. As with other research studies that assess changes in family structure, household income, race, education, and age differences all tend to have different levels of impact on family structures and food insecurity (Eggebeen and Litcher 1991; Miller et. al. 2014).

### Mental Health

As related to mental health, single parenthood emerged as a significant risk factor for mental health problems for both children and adults (Behere, et. al. 2017). Specific links to mental health problems included greater psychological distress and depression, and placing women at a greater socioeconomic disadvantage (Behere, et. al. 2017). Parents with poor mental health, antisocial behavior, and substance dependencies are likely to have greater difficulties maintaining intimate relationships and in providing their children with a family environment that is likely to promote their wellbeing (Mackay 2005). Parents with poor mental health may lead to

a child having mental health problems later in life. According to Mackay (2005), it appears that genetic factors may play a role in the association between family structure and mental health among adults and children. Having divorced parents have also been found to increase the likelihood of a wide range of problems, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and obsessions (Morse 2003). Overall, research has established a link between family structure, health, and mental health.

### Education

Parental separation and divorce increases the likelihood that a child will drop out of school and live in poverty (Lund 2009; Anderson 2014). Family structure, income, substance use, residential location, and motivation are all factors that influence the dropout rate (Lund 2009).

In terms of higher education, students from unstable families are less likely to attend college due to parental separation and having an absent father (Doherty, et. al. 2016). Some researchers have found stark gendered differences in higher education participation rates when including father absence (Doherty, et. al. 2016). In one study reviewed for this brief, father absence from birth was associated with a 7% difference in risk of men not participating in higher education versus women (Doherty et. al. 2016). Overall, research has established a link between family structure and educational attainment in K-12 and higher education.

### Crime

In a city-level analysis of black-white homicide rates, LaFree and colleagues (2010) found that family structure is a strong predictor of differences in city-level black and white homicide arrest rates; overall violence rates; the ratio of black-to-white drug arrests; and the ratio of black-to-white homicide arrests.

### Intimate Partner Violence

Juby and colleagues concluded that intimate partner violence households with multiple changes in family structure are at high-risk for physical abuse for the parents and ultimately the children (Juby et. al. 2014). Intimate partner violence occurs when conflict among couples accelerate to the point of violence (e.g., sexual, physical, emotional, or psychological violence). Indicators show that intimate partner violence significantly increased the risk of child abuse and neglect (Juby et. al. 2014). Certain family structure types are more likely to contribute to intimate partner violence, and can result from partners who bring a history of disorder to the relationship (Juby et. al. 2014). Overall, research has established a link between crime and family structure.

### Drug Use

In addition to crime, researchers have explored the relationship between drug use and out of wedlock birth rates between black and white families (Kaestner 1998). Drug users are likely to be unmarried with no children than unmarried with children. In some studies, marijuana and

cocaine use positively correlated with out of wedlock births (Kaestner 1998). For black females, long-term marijuana use increased the probability of an out of wedlock birth by 18 percent, and significantly related to family structure with respect to marijuana use (Kaestner 1998). In summary, research examined for this brief found drug use helps predict family structure; that drug use affects contraception choices; and that drug use reflects underlying values that influence family structure (Kaestner 1998; Wilcox, Wolfinger and Stokes 2015).

### Aging

With the aging of baby boomers, there has been growing research interest regarding the interaction of aging individuals and family structure types (Waite 2009). Older adults, particularly those without children, may be more vulnerable to having unmet needs and have a higher likelihood of requiring institutional care (Roberto and Blieszner 2015). Factors such as divorce, people living longer, declining disability, and a greater variety of medicinal treatments are helping to shape interactions between older populations and children (Anderson 2014). Being legally married greatly affects women's access to economic support in older age; however, women's increasing levels of education, labor force participation and earnings counterbalance some of the changes in access to the benefits from marriage. Older cohabiting partners are particularly disadvantaged because they cannot claim social security benefits on their partner (Waite 2009). In sum, changing family structures affect current and long-term needs of the elderly.

### Child Well-Being

Unmarried mothers and unmarried couples are more likely to be young and less prepared for parenting (Krueger et. al. 2015). Single mother households experience the highest proportion of poverty due to the gender wage gap (Lund 2009). Some researchers have found that children in single father families fare better than children in single mother families (Krueger et. al. 2015), and that parental health is a strong indicator of child well-being (Behere et. al. 2017).

Children in single black mother families living in poverty are much more likely to be in poor health compared to children in married-couple families, white families, and affluent families (Montgomery, Keily and Pappas 1996; Krueger et. al. 2015). Black children are more likely to be born out of wedlock with inadequate familial foundation support, thus having a major effect on the child's opportunities later in life (Montgomery, Keily and Pappas 1996; Krueger et. al. 2015). Parental separation and divorce can also lead to a complicated parent-child relationship due to decreased levels of support, guidance, and attentiveness (Lund 2009; Anderson 2014). However, it is important to note that many relationships between family structure and child well-being lose significance when including poverty due to its impact on child health (Montgomery, Keily and Pappas 1996, Miller et. al. 2011; Krueger et. al. 2015). Overall, research has established an association between family structure and children's well-being.

## DISCUSSION

The research literature examining changing family structures is large, complex and growing so fast that it is difficult to keep abreast of new research. Yet, a review of past and recent research does find significant statistical relationships existing between certain family types and certain socio-economic indicators. One of the goals of this research was to begin providing answers to questions such as . . . Do family structure changes have positive or negative affects children, families, and communities? How much of the impact is attributable to changes in income and other economic factors? How much is attributable to changing norms and values regarding what constitutes a family? While the research literature seems clear that some changes in family structures (e.g., the growing number of single parent families) have been negatively associated with certain socioeconomic indicators, the research literature also seems clear that the impact of those changes are not equal and/or consistent across groups or categories such as income, race, and educational level.

Society in general and families in particular are constantly changing within the context of shifting environmental, economic, political, and other factors. Changes in family structure may be difficult to accept because they challenge traditional values and traditional structures of power (Wilcox, Wolfinger and Stokes 2015). The traditional family serves as a benchmark in judging the impact of alternative family arrangements such as levels of family decline, social deviation, or perceived moral deterioration (Popenoe 1988). Therefore, many of the factors associated with changing family structures are very circumstantial and difficult to isolate from a causal basis (Rodman and Sidden 1992).

Of the socioeconomic indicators examined in this research brief, household income and social status explain many of the disparities identified between the various types of family structures examined. As mentioned earlier, higher socioeconomic status has a positive relationship with higher marriage rates for young adults (Lee 2008). While it can be debated whether changes in family structure have causal links that lead to negative or positive consequences, there is little debate that they are having an impact on society overall, and certain groups in particular. For example, Blacks are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and more likely to be a single parent compared to Whites (Cready and Fossett 1997; USCB 2019).

One question asked in this research brief was “How much change in family structures is attributable to changing norms and values regarding what constitutes a family? It is on this question that the research literature is not definitive. As discussed in the “Marital Status” section of this research brief, changing norms and values regarding marriage (especially among young adults) indicate individuals are making conscious decisions to pursue other forms of non-traditional family structures. The reasoning behind such decisions vary across age, race, and income categories. Trying to answer the question of whether these changes in “norms and values” are good or bad for society depends upon the perspective of each individual. What can be determined is for certain groups, changes in family structures can have negative consequences on those individuals and their communities. How society responds to those changes is the larger question that needs answering.



## CONCLUSIONS

As discussed earlier in this research brief, there many reasons offered to explain changes in family structures. Some of those reasons included women having more employment opportunities, more young adults attending college prior to marriage, advances in contraception, limited economic mobility, changes in divorce laws, and changes in societal norms and values. Because of the above reasons, a number of different alternative family structures are emerging (e.g., single parent; same sex unmarried couples; opposite sex unmarried couples; un-related individuals living together).

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this brief. The first is that research has established a significant statistical association between certain types of family structures and certain socioeconomic indicators (e.g., marital status, economic status, health, education, crime, drug use, aging and child wellbeing). The social, economic, and political implications of the changes discussed in this research brief vary depending upon an individual's race, age, geographic location, and income level. The major conclusion is that changes in family structures are occurring and that those changes affect some racial, income, and age groups more than other groups.

These findings lead to the question of whether society overall is better or worse because of the changes taking place in the traditional family structure? The general answer to that question is "it depends" upon whether those changes are viewed negatively, positively, or neutrally. The traditional family concept (that is, a married two-parent family with kids) is changing and showing no signs of abating. If changes in family structure are likely to continue whether because of economic drivers or changes in norms and values, then it is incumbent upon public, private, and non-profit officials to make necessary policy adjustments where needed. The quality of life and economic future of millions of individuals and families will depend upon the policy choices made in response to changes in the traditional family structure.

### Policy and Social Implications

Researchers, educators, practitioners, and other individuals working to improve conditions for families can play a major role in helping society adjust to changes in family structures. One contribution they can make is to promote a better understanding of the complex connections between families and larger social systems (Rodman and Sidden 1992). They can help policymakers and the general public understand the connections that exist between families and social systems such as education, health, the economy, government, and other systems affecting family well-being.

Based upon the trends cited in this literature review, the declining negative perception regarding non-traditional families appears likely to continue. Single mothers, in particular, need to be educated on the risk factors associated with single parenthood (Morse 2003). There is longstanding evidence that youths raised by single parents are more likely to perform poorly in school and partake in deviant behaviors such as smoking, sex, substance use, and crime (Antecol and Bedard 2007; Sogar 2017). Policymakers should encourage young people to become "planners" of their family formation (Doherty et. al. 2016). Government entities should refrain from policies that discourage family formation or encourage family disruption (Morse 2003).

Other policy-oriented recommendations include enacting policies that ease the burden of economic stress that undermines marital quality for families in crisis or in need (Mckay 2005), and encouraging work-place policies that reduce tensions for families as they struggle to balance work and life needs (Amato 1996).

The changes taking place in family structures today are real and show no signs of reversing anytime soon. Given that reality, it is incumbent upon individuals, communities, and public and private officials to adapt whether those changes occur because of changing norms and values, or because of changing economic drivers.

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