
How Are Wisconsin Families Changing?

Introduction

The American family has changed dramatically in the last 3 decades, but some reports exaggerate the amount of change or fail to present data fairly. For example, a U.S. congresswoman has repeatedly stated that fewer than 10 percent of today's families fit a "traditional" family model where the family has young children and the mother doesn't work outside the home. In fact, one in three families with pre-school children have two parents, and mothers that don't work outside the home.¹

Then where did the congresswoman's data come from? It appears she was actually giving an estimate of the percent of all households (not families) in which there are two-parent families where the mother does not work outside the home, and where there are exactly two children, both of pre-school age. It's no surprise that such a narrow description of traditional family yields such a small proportion of households.

This paper is an attempt to describe some Wisconsin family demographics in a fair way. Perhaps it will clear up some confusion about how the family is changing. It begins by introducing Wisconsin's household distribution (how many households there are of various types) and how that distribution is changing. Then it shows how many children live in various types of households, and briefly discusses increasing labor force involvement of mothers. Finally, it raises questions and provides some answers about county variation, and other sources of data diversity.

Changes in Household Structure

According to U.S. Census Bureau definitions, families are a subset of households. In Wisconsin in 1990 there were about 1.8 million households² and 1.3 million families³. Perhaps the most common error made in reporting family statistics is confusing families with households, as in the illustration about the congresswoman above.

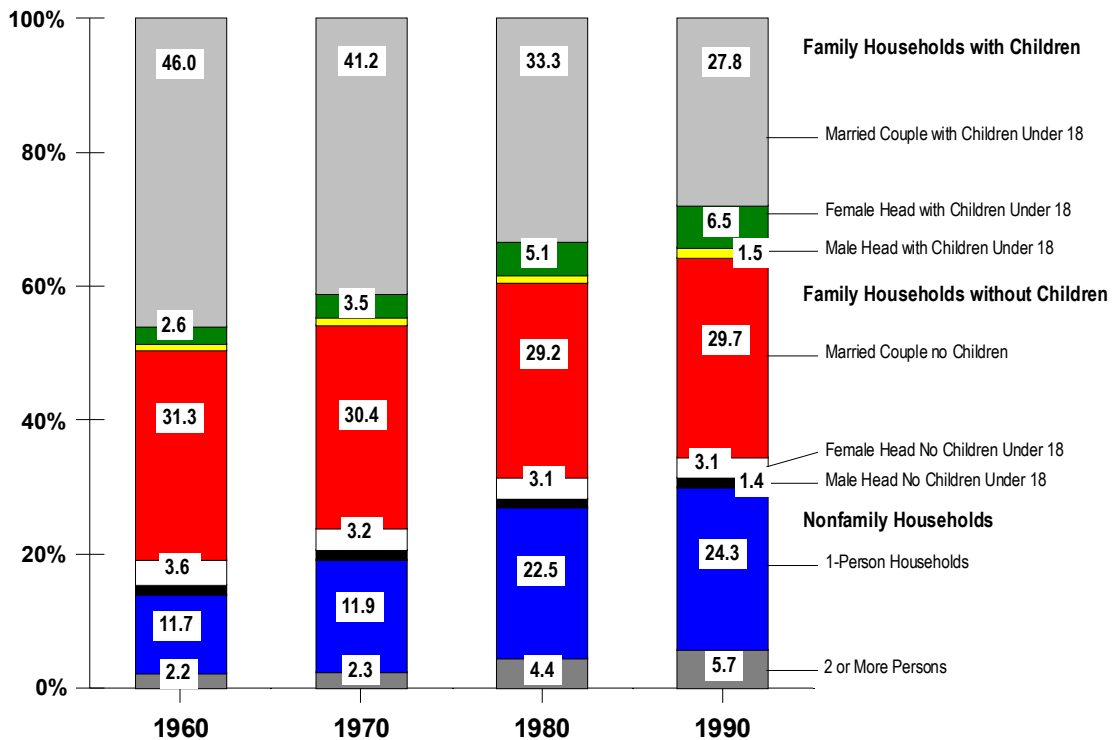
¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1990.

² An abbreviation of the Census' definition of household: A housing unit that is occupied as a separate living quarters.

³ An abbreviation of the Census' definition of families: Persons living in the same household including the householder and those related to the householder by blood, marriage, or adoption.

Figure 1 shows four percentage distributions of households in Wisconsin. They illustrate the relative size of household categories from 1960 to 1990. Three major subdivisions are used, breaking out families with and without children, and non-family households.

Figure 1
Percent Distribution of Wisconsin Households
1960-1990



Source: 1960-1990 Censuses of Population & Housing. U.S. Bureau of the Census (See Appendix A).

Note that there are two types of married-couple families, those with and without children. For many spouses in married-couple families there have been previous marriages. Cohabiting couples are excluded from both these categories, and help make up the single-parent categories or 2-person nonfamily households, depending on the presence of children or other related persons in the household.

Your attention may have been drawn to the sizable decline in the *proportion* of “married couple families with children”, a decrease from 46 percent in 1960 to 27.8 percent in 1990. Why has the proportion declined so much? One reason is that the average *duration* of this type of household has decreased. The parents:

- ❖ Form their households later (the average age at first marriage has gone up).
- ❖ Have their children later (the average age of mothers when their first child is born also gone up).
- ❖ Have fewer children.

For all these reasons they parent for fewer years, which results in fewer families of this type at any given time⁴. For further evidence of this, notice in Figure 1 how the category of “married couples without children” has remained large. This is partly due to an increase of childless couples, but also to the fact that there is a steady supply of married couples whose children are already grown (age 18 or older).

Another reason that “married couples with children” have decreased is an artifact of the use of *percentage* distributions: the total number of households increased 59 percent. But the number of married couples with children actually decreased by about 4 percent—so its *relative* size changed in the overall distribution⁵. For illustration, Table 1 compares “married couple families with children” to two other household categories. Note that 1-person households increased about 400 percent. This is not surprising given that there has been marked growth in the elderly population, and that increasing numbers of young adults live alone.

Table 1
Selected Household Types, Wisconsin, 1960 & 1990

	1960	1990
Total Households	1,146,040	1,822,118
Married Couples With Own Children Under 18	527,377	506,018
Single Women With Own Children Under 18	29,681	118,004
1-Person Households	133,934	443,673

Source: Appendix Table A

⁴ From Young, R. L. (1992). Family and household structure. Changing family demographics, UW-Extension report series, No. 4, Pg. 3.

⁵ For a *numerical* comparison of all household categories, see Appendix A.

In addition, high rates of divorce and increasing “never-married single parent families” have raised the numbers of single parent families over 300 percent. But they still only constitute 6.5 percent of all households (triple a small percentage and it’s still a small percentage). However, narrowing our scope to include only those *families with children*⁶ we find that single parent families constitute nearly one-fourth (see Table 2 below).

Table 2
Wisconsin Families with Children, 1960 & 1990

	1960		1990	
	No.	%	No.	%
Families with Children	562,645	100	650,628	100
Married Couples	527,377	93.7	506,018	77.8
Single Parent	35,268.0	6.3	144,610.0	22.2
Ratio*	15 to 1	-	3.5 to 1	-

*Ratio of Married Couples w/Children to Single Parent Families
Source: Calculated from Appendix Table A

Living Arrangements of Children

What effect have these changes had on the living arrangements of children? First, children are more likely to have fewer (if any) siblings than in past decades. Secondly, they are less likely to be living in a married couple family. Table 3 below shows changes in the living arrangements of Wisconsin children from 1980 to 1990.

Table 3
Living Arrangements of Children, 1980 & 1990

	1980	1990
Children in Households*	99.7%	99.7%
Child is Householder or Spouse of	0.1	0.1
Child is Living With...		
Married-Couple	81.9	76.2
Male Householder	1.7	2.9
Female Householder	11.8	15.2
Other Relatives	3.2	3.7
Other Non-Relatives	1.2	1.7
Children in Group Quarters	0.3	0.3

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 & 1990 Census of Population

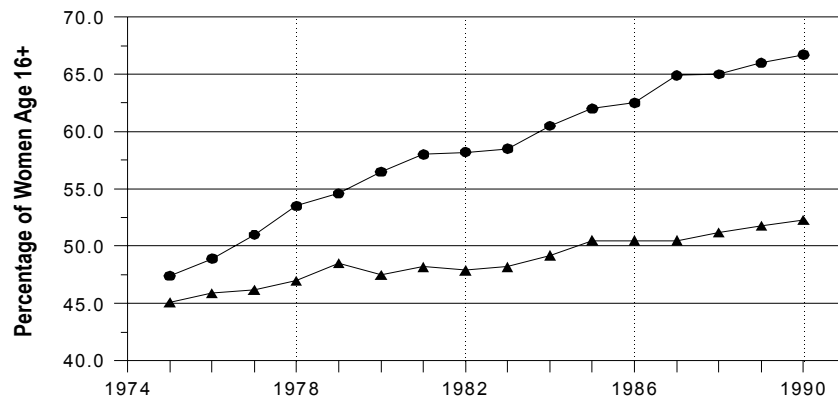
⁶ Children in this paper are defined as unmarried persons under age 18.

Contrary to popular belief, a large majority (three-fourths) of children live in married couple households. This proportion declined during the 1980's while percentages of children in single parent families, and living with relatives increased.

Employment of Mothers

For several decades the number and percentage of women in the labor force has increased. Figure 2 below shows that the rate for *mothers* in the U.S. has increased faster than the rate for women as a whole. In 1990 over two-thirds of mothers with children were employed at least part-time.

Figure 2
Labor Force Participation Rates of Women by Presence of Children, U.S.
1975-1990



Sources: U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Handbook of Labor Statistics, August 1989, & unpublished report: Marital & Family Characteristics of the Labor Force from the March 1990, Current Population Survey.

Appendix C shows Wisconsin 1990 labor force participation of mothers by age of child and employment status. It shows that even most mothers whose only children are under age 6 are working. Over two-thirds (68.9 percent) are in the labor force 64 percent are employed.

Are Changes in Families Accelerating?

No, in fact, most are slowing down. The most rapid changes in household structure occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, the trends have been winding down. Take single person households as an example. In both the 60s and 70s, single person households increased over 60 percent across each decade. But in the 80s the increase was less than 20 percent. The Census Bureau tells us that we may be on the threshold of change once again. In 1991 the U.S. for the first time in many decades did not experience a decrease in household size⁷. Average family size may start to increase.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census. Household & Family Characteristics, 1991.

The trend was similar for the living arrangements of children: dramatic changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by a slowdown in the 1980s. There is no indication however, that increase in labor force participation of mothers is slowing.

How Does Wisconsin Compare With the Nation?

Table 4 shows how the state compares with the nation. The household structure distributions have been closely parallel since 1960. Data on living arrangements of children is also very similar, but Wisconsin typically has followed the U.S. trend by a few years, resulting in more disparity than is seen in the household structure comparison.

Table 4
Comparison of Selected Statistics for Wisconsin & the U.S.

Household Structure			Living Arrangement of Children		
% of All Households That Were...	W I	U S	% of Children in Households That Were Living With...	W I	U S
Married Couples With Children	27.8%	26.3%	Married Couples	76.4%	73.1%
Single Women With Children	6.5%	7.1%	Single Mothers	15.2%	21.5%
1-Person Households	24.3%	24.6%	Single Fathers	2.9%	2.8%
Other	41.4%	42.0%	Other	5.5%	2.6%

Source: Young, R. L. (1992). Population shifts: Focus on youth. Changing Family Demographics report series, No.5, Table 7. (UW-Extension, Family Living Ed.)

How Much Data Variation Across Wisconsin Counties?

Appendix D, E and F show maps of indicators for household structure, child living arrangements, and mother employment. There is a good deal of variation across Wisconsin counties on all three maps. Look at county differences in the percent of households that were “married couples with children” (Appendix D). The percentages range from the low 20s to the high 30s. Living arrangements of children (Appendix E) show even greater variation with most counties having 50-85 percent of their children in married-couple families. Mother employment ranges from 40 percent in Menominee county to 83 percent in Iowa county.

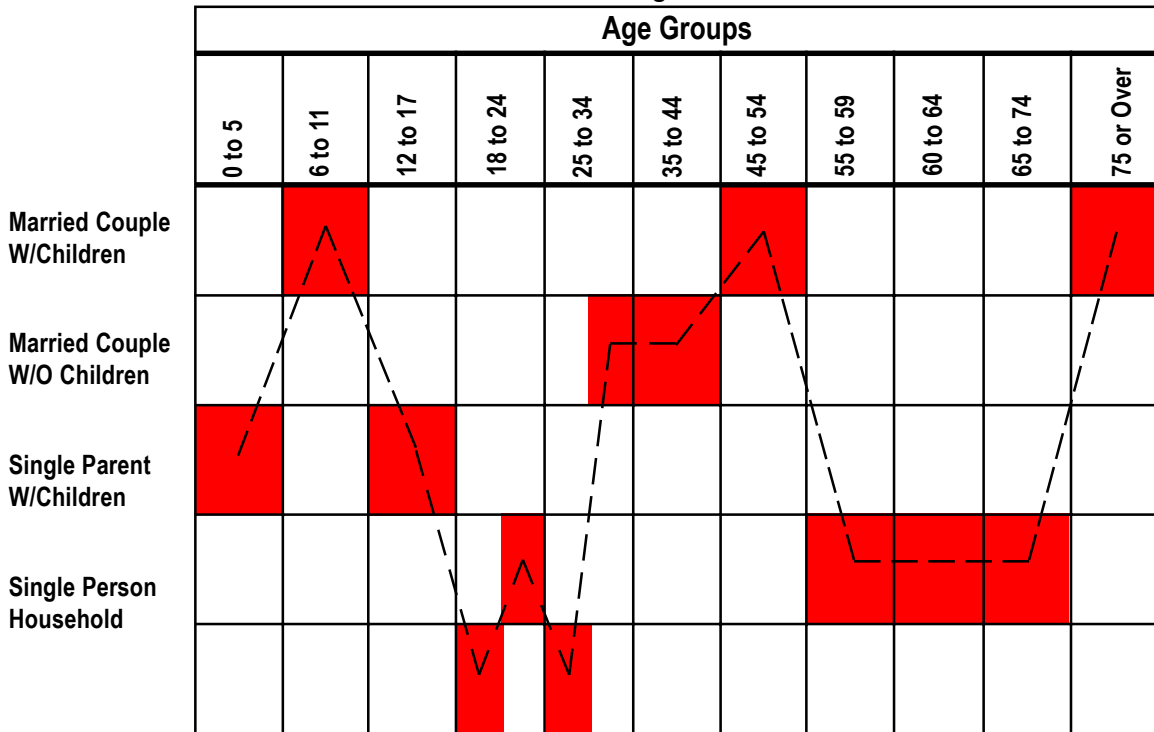
What about change within counties? Analysis of minor civil divisions within counties suggests there is typically much variation within counties as well. The rate of change also varies across counties⁸.

What About Change Within Families?

The data reported in this report are from surveys that measure families at a single point in time. So they don't tell us much about how families change or evolve, nor much about the transitions they experience. But families are constantly changing. From an individual perspective, persons don't stay in one household type indefinitely either. Rather, they move from one type to another because of changes that they, their parents, or their children go through.

An example of this is shown in Figure 3. Here is the life course of a boy who was born into a single parent family. In his early years his mother marries, then divorces when the boy is in his teens. As a young adult he first lives alone, then with roommates, then alone again. In his late twenties he marries, but together with his wife, postpones having children for a few years. In his fifties he divorces his spouse, and lives alone for 15 years. Finally at age 76 he moves in with his daughter's family where he lives out his remaining years.

Figure 3



⁸ County comparisons were conducted relative to dozens of family demographic topics in the Changing Demographics report series. Some ad-hoc analyses by minor-civil-division (MCD) were also conducted by the principal author.

The example is not far-fetched. It shows that it is common for individuals to go through as many as 9 or 10 household-type transitions in a lifetime. The important point to register is that on the average, individuals today go through more household/family transitions than in years past.

Conclusion

We have reviewed trends in household structure, child living arrangements and labor force participation of women. The paper has taken us behind the numbers to explore what's behind the trends, and how they are sometimes misinterpreted. Data diversity was discussed in terms of variation in statistics and trends across and within counties. Also variation in life course and life-course transitions was touched on.

Wisconsin families are extremely diverse, and they are changing. Are traditional families disappearing? It depends upon your definition of traditional families. Married couple families with children continue to constitute a sizable portion of Wisconsin households, but they continue to decrease in number and in proportion. They also have a shorter duration than in years past.

Given the importance of families to Americans and the changes that have occurred recently in family structure, we now turn to the value of implementing a family perspective in policymaking.