
Single Parenthood Households in Wisconsin

Summary Statements

- ❖ As in the nation generally, Wisconsin households are less likely to contain children now than was the case thirty years ago.
- ❖ Among Wisconsin households that do contain children, proportionately more are headed by single parents today than thirty years ago.
- ❖ Judging in part from national data, it is likely that, over the 1980s, an increasing percentage of Wisconsin single parents were never married, whereas the proportion of single parents who were separated, divorced, or widowed declined.
- ❖ Since 1970, the percentage of births that are to unmarried mothers has grown substantially in Wisconsin and the nation, although the Wisconsin percentages remain somewhat under the national percentages.
- ❖ After a period (1960-1988) of decline in the birthrate among teenagers, the rate has recently started to climb in both Wisconsin and the nation. The likelihood that a birth to a teenager will be a nonmarital birth has increased almost continuously since 1960.

The Percentage of Households Containing Children

As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of households in Wisconsin containing children declined from 49% in 1960 to 36% in 1990. The Table also indicates that the percentage of all Wisconsin households containing a married couple with children has declined faster (from 46% in 1960 to 28% in 1990) than has the overall percentage of households with children.

The Increasing Frequency of Single-Parent Households

Table 2 suggests why the drop in married-couple families with children has exceeded the decline in all households with children: single-parent households have become more common. Of all family households with children, the percentage headed by a married couple declined from 94% to 78% between 1960 and 1990, the percentage headed by a single woman rose from 5% to 18%, and the percentage headed by a single man rose from 1% in 1960 to 4% in 1990.

Table 1
Households with Children Compared to All Households in Wisconsin
1960-1990

	1960	1970	1980	1990
All Households	1,146,040	1,332,907	1,652,261	1,822,118
Family Households with Children				
Number	562,645	607,093	648,344	650,628
Percentage of All Households	49.1	45.5	39.2	35.7
Married-Couple Family Households with Children				
Number	527,377	549,818	550,856	506,018
Percentage of All Households	46.0	41.2	33.3	27.8

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Family Studies, March 1993).

Table 2
Types of Family Households with Children in Wisconsin
1960-1990

	1960	1970	1980	1990
All Family Households with Children				
Number	562,645	607,093	648,344	650,628
Married Couple with Children				
Number	527,377	549,818	550,856	506,018
Percentage	93.7	90.6	85.0	77.8
Female Headed with Children				
Number	29,681	47,125	84,427	118,004
Percentage	5.3	7.8	13.0	18.1
Male Headed with Children				
Number	5,587	10,150	13,061	26,606
Percentage	1.0	1.7	2.0	4.1

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1.

Table 3 summarizes this information in a different way, showing the percentage change in various household types between 1960 and 1990. The number of married-couple families with children in Wisconsin declined by 4% from 1960 through 1990. The number of female-headed families rose by 298% in that period, and the number of male-headed families rose by 376%.

Numbers of Children in Single-Parent Households

The 1990 Census indicated that 18.1% of all Wisconsin children resided in households headed by single parents, compared to the 1980 level of 13.5% of children. As Table 4 indicates, the range by county of children in single-parent households extended in 1990 from a low of 9.6% in Taylor County to highs of 57.1% in Menominee County and 38.2% in Milwaukee County. The 1990 rates in thirteen Wisconsin counties exceeded the statewide rate. As Map 1 indicates, the thirteen were generally in northern or southeastern Wisconsin.

Table 3
Percentage Change among Family Household Types in Wisconsin
1960-1990

	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90	1960-1990
All Families with Children	+7.9	+6.8	+0.4	+15.6
Married Couple	+4.3	+0.2	-8.1	-4.1
Female Head	+58.8	+79.2	+39.8	+297.6
Male Head	+81.7	+28.7	+103.7	+376.2

Source: U.S. Census data, 1960-1990, reported in Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Briefing Report #1.

Table 4**Percentage of Children in Single-Parent Families in Wisconsin Counties,
1980-1990**

County	1980	1990	Percentage Increase
Adams	13.0	20.3	7.3
Ashland	14.6	19.5	4.9
Barron	10.3	15.9	5.6
Bayfield	11.6	16.9	5.3
Brown	12.3	16.2	3.9
Buffalo	9.9	10.8	0.9
Burnett	11.3	18.7	7.4
Calumet	5.5	9.9	4.4
Chippewa	8.7	15.8	7.1
Clark	7.4	9.8	2.4
Columbia	9.9	12.6	2.7
Crawford	8.8	14.4	5.6
Dane	15.1	17.3	2.2
Dodge	8.4	11.9	3.5
Door	8.8	12.4	3.6
Douglas	17.0	25.6	8.6
Dunn	9.8	13.5	3.7
Eau Claire	13.7	17.9	4.2
Florence	8.8	13.2	4.4
Fond du Lac	9.0	13.8	4.8
Forest	11.4	22.5	11.1
Grant	7.5	10.2	2.7
Green	11.2	12.5	1.3
Green Lake	7.2	13.7	6.5
Iowa	7.4	12.2	4.8
Iron	14.9	16.8	1.9
Jackson	9.1	20.0	10.9
Jefferson	9.7	12.2	2.5
Juneau	10.7	11.7	1.0
Kenosha	16.9	20.5	3.6
Kewaunee	6.9	10.0	3.1
La Crosse	13.2	18.0	4.8
Lafayette	4.0	12.2	8.2
Langlade	10.0	13.5	3.5
Lincoln	8.0	15.5	7.5

County	1980	1990	Percentage Increase
Manitowoc	9.4	12.7	3.3
Marathon	9.4	11.4	2.0
Marinette	11.3	14.7	3.4
Marquette	8.8	13.8	5.0
Menominee	19.5	57.1	37.6
Milwaukee	26.5	38.2	11.7
Monroe	9.2	14.3	5.1
Oconto	8.9	13.2	4.3
Oneida	13.3	16.6	3.3
Outagamie	9.6	12.6	3.0
Ozaukee	8.2	10.0	1.8
Pepin	7.2	10.7	3.5
Pierce	8.4	10.7	2.3
Polk	10.2	13.6	3.4
Portage	8.6	13.5	4.9
Price	9.3	13.6	4.3
Racine	16.3	22.6	6.3
Richland	10.4	11.8	1.4
Rock	13.0	22.6	9.6
Rusk	12.4	16.0	3.6
St. Croix	7.2	11.1	3.9
Sauk	11.0	14.6	3.6
Sawyer	14.4	24.0	9.6
Shawano	9.0	11.4	2.4
Sheboygan	9.6	12.9	3.3
Taylor	5.5	9.6	4.1
Trempealeau	9.6	13.3	3.7
Vernon	7.1	12.7	5.6
Vilas	12.3	21.9	9.6
Walworth	13.3	15.3	2.0
Washburn	11.6	15.3	3.7
Washington	8.2	10.6	2.4
Waukesha	8.0	9.9	1.9
Waupaca	8.6	12.6	4.0
Waushara	10.2	14.3	4.1
Winnebago	13.2	16.6	3.4
Wood	11.0	14.4	3.4

Source: U.S. Census, 1980 and 1990

Wisconsin has a lower percentage of children in single-parent households than does the nation as a whole, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
**Percentages of U.S. and Wisconsin Children in Single-Parent Households
1980 and 1990**

	1980	1990
Wisconsin	13.5%	18.1%
United States	17.0%	20.2%

Source: U.S. Census, 1980 and 1990.

Note: These percentages compare children (persons under age 18) in single-parent households to all children, including children residing with parents or relatives, children in institutions, children who are married themselves, and other children not living in a household headed by a parent.

Complexities in the Measurement of Single-Parent Households

Figures from the decennial census on the number of children in single-parent families are point-in-time counts taken in April of each decennial census year. The figures are sometimes thought to misrepresent the prevalence of the single-parent experience. At least two forms of undercounting are said to exist. First, many more children experience life in a single-parent family at some point before their 18th birthday than are captured in one point-in-time count. Second, some children counted in the decennial census as living in a married-couple household are not living with both biological parents, but rather with one biological parent and a stepparent.

Of all U.S. children living in married-couple families in 1990, about 16% (as Table 6 indicates) lived in a household with a stepparent.

Table 6
**Types of Married-Couple Households with Children, United States
1980-1990**

	1980	1985	1990
Biological Mother and Father	83.7%	82.1%	81.5%
Biological Parent and Stepparent	12.8%	14.9%	15.9%
Adoptive Mother and Father	2.9%	1.9%	2.1%
Unknown Mother or Father	0.6%	1.1%	0.4%

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993), p. 1125; based on data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P 23, no. 180, "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the 1990s," 1992.

In another way, however, the decennial census may overstate the prevalence of single parenthood, because a child residing with two cohabiting but unmarried birth parents will be reported as living in a single-parent household. Data from two national surveys (the 1987 Current Population Survey and the National Survey of Families and Households), both of which characterize the United States as a whole but not any individual state, show that over 40% of households with unrelated, opposite-sex adults contained children. In an unknown number of these cases, the two adults would both be biological parents of the resident children.

The Marital Status of Single Parents

The Current Population Survey (CPS), a nationally representative survey conducted annually by the Census Bureau, also reports on the marital status (divorced, separated, widowed, or never married) of single parents. Because Wisconsin's overall rate of single parenthood is close enough to the national rate, CPS statistics may be used to provide a rough description of the Wisconsin situation. In the United States in 1990, as Table 7 indicates, about 39% of children living in a single-parent household resided with a divorced parent, compared to 42% in 1980. The percentage of children in single-parent households living with widowed and separated parents also declined during the 1980s. In contrast, the percentage of children in single-parent households who resided with a never-married parent rose from 15% in 1980 to 31% in 1990. Most of that increase occurred in the first half of the decade.

Table 7
U.S. Children Living with One Parent, by Marital Status of Parent
1980-1990

	1980	1985	1990
Never Married	14.6%	25.7%	30.6%
Married, Spouse Absent	31.3%	25.6%	23.7%
Widowed	11.8%	7.5%	7.1%
Divorced	42.4%	41.2%	38.6%

Source: U.S House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993), p. 1120; based on data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20.

Births to Single Mothers

One relevant figure available annually from state vital records agencies is the percentage of births to single mothers. In interpreting this data, it may be worth remembering that, in the United States as a whole, according to the CPS, 29% of births to unmarried white women and 18% of births to unmarried black women were to cohabiting women in the period from 1970 to 1984 (Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1993 Green Book, p. 1128).

Over the last three years for which published records are available in Wisconsin, births to single parents have represented 23-25% of all live births in the state (23% in 1989, 24% in 1990, and 25% in 1991). This is slightly below the national rate of 28%. Table 8 summarizes recent state and national rates.

Table 8

Births to Unmarried Mothers as a Percentage of All Births

	1970	1980	1990
Wisconsin	8.6%	13.8%	24.0%
United States	10.7%	18.4%	28.0%

Sources: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics 1988, p. 27; Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Maternal and Child Health Statistics, Wisconsin 1990, Table 2.7.2; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means 1993 Green Book, p. 1113.

Table 9 shows the percentage of births to single mothers by Wisconsin county in 1991.

Table 9
Percentages of Live Births to Single Mothers in Wisconsin Counties, 1991

Adams	28	Iowa	13	Polk	20
Ashland	25	Iron	22	Portage	16
Barron	20	Jackson	23	Price	18
Bayfield	21	Jefferson	18	Racine	33
Brown	19	Juneau	23	Richland	22
Buffalo	18	Kenosha	30	Rock	30
Burnett	36	Kewaunee	16	Rusk	19
Calumet	13	La Crosse	22	St. Croix	16
Chippewa	20	Lafayette	19	Sauk	17
Clark	17	Langlade	27	Sawyer	37
Columbia	16	Lincoln	20	Shawano	21
Crawford	22	Manitowoc	20	Sheboygan	15
Dane	18	Marathon	14	Taylor	16
Dodge	17	Marinette	17	Trempealeau	17
Door	18	Marquette	25	Vernon	13
Douglas	31	Menominee	74	Vilas	32
Dunn	18	Milwaukee	45	Walworth	19
Eau Claire	19	Monroe	22	Washburn	21
Florence	15	Oconto	19	Washington	12
Fond du Lac	19	Oneida	21	Waukesha	10
Forest	26	Outagamie	15	Waupaca	23
Grant	18	Ozaukee	7	Waushara	18
Green	14	Pepin	15	Winnebago	18
Green Lake	18	Pierce	15	Wood	18
				Wisconsin	25

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Maternal and Child Health Statistics, Wisconsin 1991, Table 2.7.2.

As is true with census statistics on children in single-parent families, Menominee and Milwaukee Counties show the highest rates of births to single parents. Map 2 indicates that, of the 12 Wisconsin counties that exceeded the statewide average of 25% of births to single mothers, almost all were in southeastern or northern Wisconsin. Many were the same counties that exceeded the statewide average in single-parent households.

Births to Teenage Mothers

Not all births to teenage mothers in Wisconsin are nonmarital births, but the likelihood that a birth to a Wisconsin teen will be nonmarital has increased significantly over the last thirty years, as Table 10 indicates.

During most of this thirty-year period, the teen birthrate (that is, the number of births per thousand teenage females) was declining, even as increasing percentages of those births were to single mothers. In the mid-1980s, however, in both Wisconsin and the nation as a whole, the long-term decline in the rate of births to teens ended. Over the last few years the rate has begun to rise, as Table 11 indicates.

Table 10

Nonmarital Births to Teenagers as a Percentage of All Births to Teenagers in Wisconsin

	1960	1970	1980	1990
15-17-Year-Old Mothers	18%	53%	71%	90%
18-19-Year-Old Mothers	7%	26%	41%	76%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Health Data Review, Vol. 7, No. 5 (May 1993), p. 4.

Table 11

Teen Birthrates for Selected Years 1960-1991

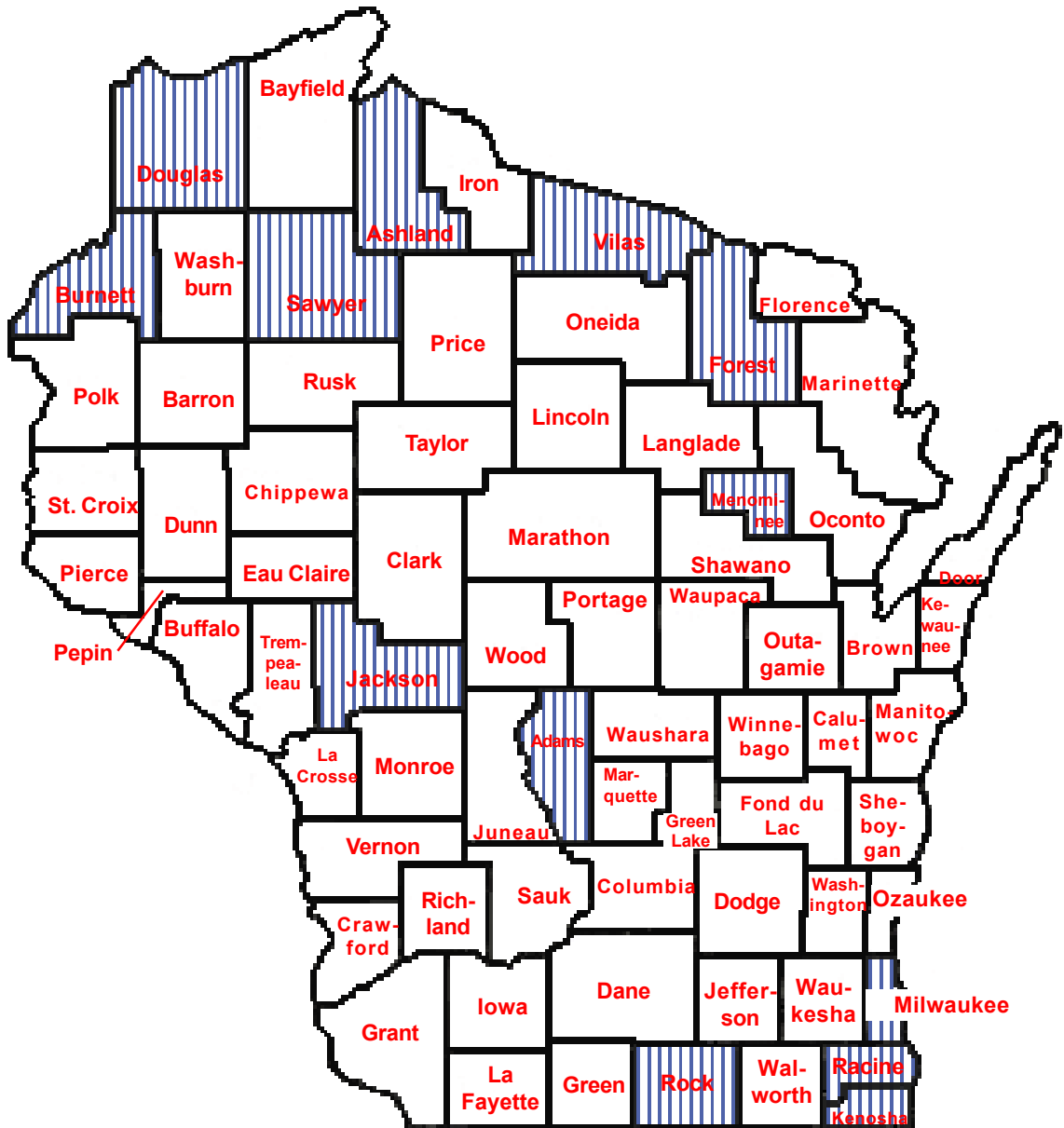
	1960	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
15-17-Year-Olds										
Wisconsin	23	19	20	22	21	22	23	25	24	25
United States	--	39	32	31	30	32	34	36	38	--
18-19-Year-Olds										
Wisconsin	135	83	66	65	60	60	59	62	66	71
United States	--	115	82	80	80	78	80	84	89	--

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Health Data Review, Vol. 7, No. 5 (May 1993), p.2.

Note: Birthrates are calculated as the number of live births per thousand females in the age category. A dash indicates that the data are not available.

Map 1

Counties Exceeding the Statewide Percentage of Children in Single-Parent Households 1990

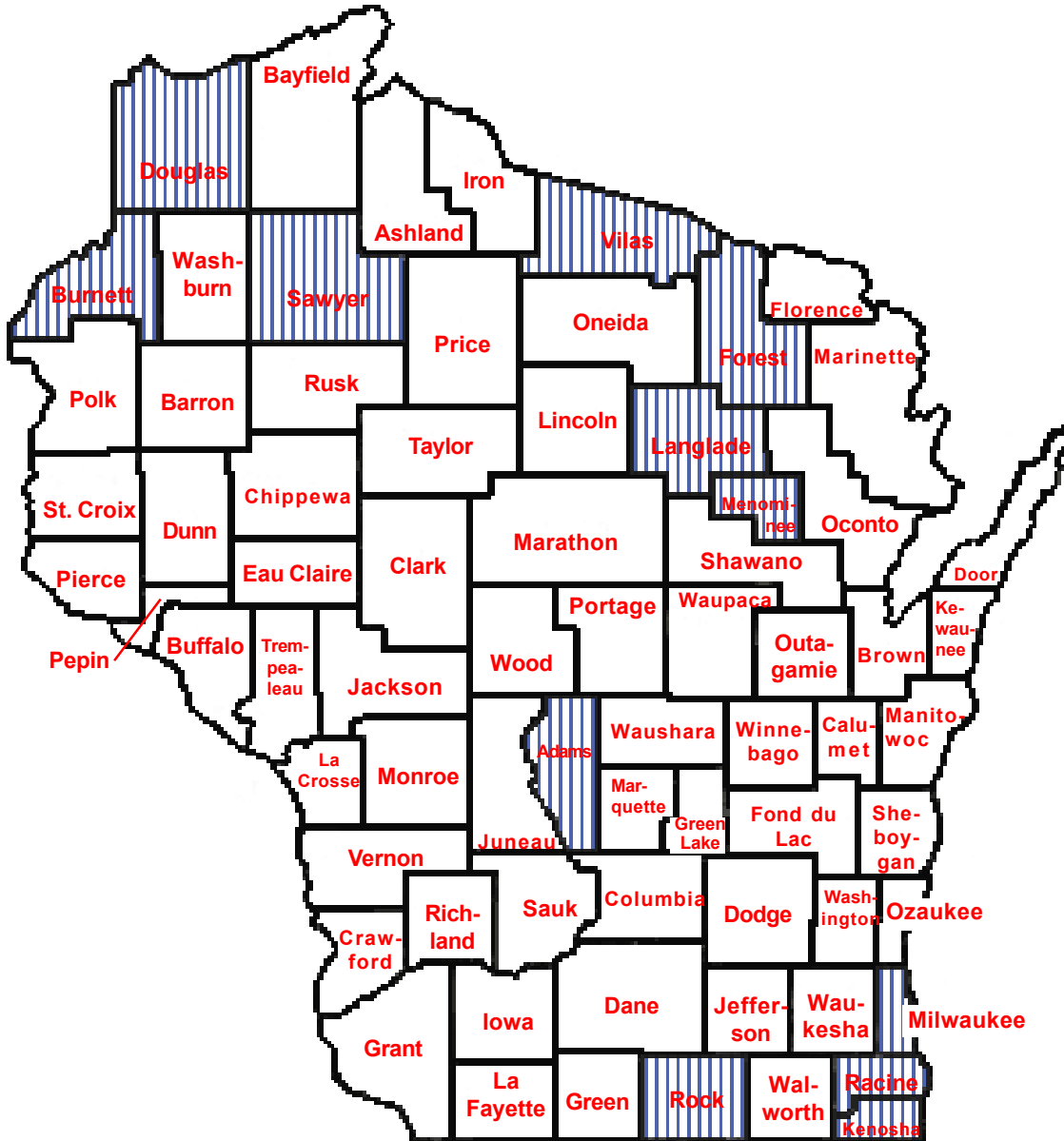


Source: U.S. Census.

Note: The lined counties exceeded the statewide average of 18.1%. See also the note to Table 5.

Map 2

Counties Exceeding the Statewide Average of Births to Single-Parents 1991



Source: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Center for Health Statistics, Material and Child Health Statistics 1991, Table 2.7.2.

Note: The lined counties exceeded the statewide average of 24%.