



The changing family in international perspective

Families are becoming smaller and less traditional as fertility rates fall and more persons live alone; Scandinavian countries are the pacesetters in developing nontraditional forms of family living, but the United States has the highest incidence of divorce and of single-parent households

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Far-reaching changes are occurring in family structures and household living arrangements in the developed countries. The pace and timing of change differ from country to country, but the general direction is the same practically everywhere. Families are becoming smaller, and household composition patterns over the past several decades have been away from the traditional nuclear family—husband, wife, and children living in one household—and toward more single-parent households, more persons living alone, and more couples living together out of wedlock. Indeed, the “consensual union” has become a more visible and accepted family type in several countries. The one-person household has become the fastest growing household type.

In conjunction with the changes in living arrangements, family labor force patterns have also undergone profound changes. Most countries studied have experienced a rapid rise in participation rates of married women, particularly women who formerly would have stayed at home with their young children.

Scandinavian countries have been the pacesetters in the development of many of the non-traditional forms of family living, especially births outside of wedlock and cohabitation outside of legal marriage. Women in these societies also have the highest rates of labor force partic-

ipation. However, in at least two aspects, the United States is setting the pace: Americans have, by far, the highest divorce rate of any industrial nation, as well as a higher incidence of single-parent households, one of the most economically vulnerable segments of the population. Japan is the most traditional society of those studied, with very low rates of divorce and births out of wedlock and the highest proportion of married-couple households. In fact, Japan is the only country studied in which the share of such households has increased since 1960. But even in Japan, family patterns are changing: sharp drops in fertility have led to much smaller families, and the three-generation household, once the mainstay of Japanese family life, is in decline.

As part of the *Monthly Labor Review*'s 75th-anniversary examination of the family, this article develops an international perspective on the changes in the American family by looking at selected demographic, household, and labor force trends in the past 25 to 30 years in Canada, Japan, and the major Western European nations. The 25- to 30-year time frame was chosen as the longest span for which data were available for all the countries examined. Because definitions and concepts differ among countries, an appendix dealing with these is included at the end of the article.

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Demographic background

Major demographic and sociological changes directly influencing family composition have taken place in this century, with the pace of change accelerating in the past two decades. Almost all developed countries have seen changes of four principal types: A decline in fertility rates, the aging of the population, an erosion of the institution of marriage, and a rapid increase in childbirths out of wedlock. Each of these four trends has played a part in the transformation of the modern family.

Fertility rates. Over the past century, women in industrialized countries have moved to having fewer children—that is, to lower fertility rates. The decline was, in many cases, interrupted by the post-World War II baby boom, but it resumed in the 1960's. Japan is an exception, in that fertility rates have declined sharply and almost continuously since the late 1940's, with no postwar upturn apart from a small recovery and stabilization from the mid-1960's to the early 1970's.

The change in total fertility rates in 10 countries is shown in table 1. With the exception of some baby "boomlets" in the late 1970's and 1980's, total fertility rates in most developed countries have declined to below the level needed to replace population deaths, namely, 2.1 children per woman. This means that the current population will not even replace itself if

current levels of fertility continue. By 1988, fertility rates in the developed countries fell into a narrow range of from 1.3 to 1.4 children per woman in Germany and Italy to around 1.9 to 2.0 in the United States and Sweden.

Decreased fertility has important implications for the family. In particular, family size is getting smaller, with consequences for parents—especially mothers—and children. Probably the most significant effect of falling fertility is the opportunity it has afforded women for increased participation in the labor market. And the converse relation holds as well: increased participation leads to lower fertility. Smaller families also mean fewer relatives to care for young children.

Aging of the population. It is important to consider the age structure of the population because different arrays of persons by age result in different household structures across countries. Mortality, as well as fertility, has declined in the 20th century. The decline in mortality has been more or less continuous, and the average age at death has risen considerably in all developed countries. The decrease in fertility has resulted in a decline in the proportion of children in the population. However, because it affected all age groups, the drop in mortality did not have a major effect on the age structure of populations. In fact, mortality decreased more at younger than at older ages, thereby offsetting rather than exacerbating the effect of the fertility decline. Thus, the progressive aging of the population in the developed countries is attributable primarily to the declining fertility rates.¹

Table 2 shows the distribution of the population by age in 10 countries from 1950 to 1990. The proportion of the population in the youngest age group (0-14 years) is declining everywhere, while the proportion of the elderly (age 65 and over) is increasing. Compared with most European countries and Japan, the U.S. and Canadian populations are more youthful, reflecting higher comparative fertility rates. However, in both North American countries, the declining fertility rates have produced a sharp drop since 1960 in the share of the population held by the under-age-15 group. With the exception of France, all the European countries and Japan now have less than one-fifth of their total population under 15, with Germany having the lowest proportion.

At the other end of the spectrum, European countries tend to have larger proportions of elderly persons than do the two North American nations. Sweden, Germany, and Denmark all have about the same proportion of elderly as they have children under 15. In contrast, the

Table 1. Total fertility rates¹ in 10 countries, selected years, 1921-88

Country	1921	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1986	1988
United States	3.3	2.3	3.2	3.6	2.3	1.8	1.8	1.9
Canada	4.0	2.8	3.5	3.8	2.2	1.7	1.7	1.7
Japan	5.3	4.5	3.2	1.9	2.1	1.7	1.7	1.6
Denmark	3.1	2.2	2.5	2.5	2.0	1.4	1.5	1.6
France	2.6	1.8	2.8	2.8	2.5	2.0	1.8	1.8
Germany	(2)	(2)	2.1	2.5	1.9	1.4	1.4	1.4
Italy	(2)	2.7	2.3	2.4	2.4	1.6	1.3	1.3
Netherlands	3.5	2.6	3.0	3.2	2.4	1.6	1.6	1.5
Sweden	2.7	1.9	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.6	1.8	2.0
United Kingdom	2.7	1.7	2.1	2.8	2.4	1.8	1.8	1.8

¹ The total fertility rate is defined as the average number of children that would be born per woman if all women lived to the end of their childbearing years, and at each year of age they experienced the birth rates occurring in the specified year.

² Not available.

³ 1921-25.

SOURCE: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Employment Outlook* (Paris, OECD, September 1988), p. 204; Statistical Office of the European Communities, *Rapid Reports, Population and Social Conditions*, no. 1, 1989, p. 4; Statistics Sweden, *Befolkningsförändringar 1988, Del. 1, Församlingar, Kommuner och A-regioner* [Population Changes, 1988, Part 1, Parishes, Communes, and Regions], p. 9; and unpublished estimates (1988 for the United States, Canada, and Japan) by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Center for International Research.

proportion of children in the United States and Canada is nearly twice as great as the proportion of elderly.

Life expectancy at birth is higher for women than for men in all the countries studied. Women outlive men by 6 to 7 years, on average, and this influences household structures, as many more women than men live alone at older ages. In most developed countries, women must anticipate a period of living alone at some point during their later years.

Aging of the population is common to all the industrialized countries, although there are considerable differences in the extent and timing of the phenomenon. These differences are reflected in the comparisons presented later on household type. For example, countries with high proportions of elderly people tend to have higher proportions of single-person households, because the elderly are increasingly living alone.

Marriage and divorce. Almost everyone in the United States gets married at some time in his or her life. The United States has long had one of the highest marriage rates in the world, and even in recent years it has maintained a relatively high rate. For the cohort born in 1945, for example, 95 percent of the men have married, compared with 75 percent in Sweden.² The other countries studied ranked somewhere between these two extremes.

According to table 3, a trend toward fewer marriages is plain in all of the countries studied, although the timing of this decline differs from country to country. In Scandinavia and Germany, for example, the downward trend in the marriage rate was already evident in the 1960's; in the United States, Canada, Japan, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the decline began in the 1970's.

In Europe, the average age at marriage fell until the beginning of the 1970's, when a complete reversal occurred. Postponement of marriage by the young is now common throughout the continent. The generation born in the early 1950's initiated this new behavior, characterized by both later and less frequent marriage.³ Average age at first marriage has also been rising in the United States since the mid-1950's, but Americans still tend to marry earlier than their European counterparts. For example, the average age at first marriage for American men and women in 1988 was 25.9 and 23.6, respectively. In Denmark, it was 29.2 for men and 26.5 for women.

The high U.S. marriage rate is, in part, related to the fact that the United States has maintained a fairly low level of nonmarital co-

Table 2. Distribution of population by age, 10 countries, 1950-90

[In percent]

Country and age range	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990 ¹
United States:					
Birth to 14 years	26.9	31.1	28.3	22.5	21.8
15 to 64 years	64.9	59.7	61.9	66.2	66.0
65 years and over	8.1	9.2	9.8	11.3	12.2
Canada:					
Birth to 14 years	29.7	33.6	30.3	23.0	20.8
15 to 64 years	62.6	59.0	61.7	67.5	67.9
65 years and over	7.6	7.5	8.0	9.5	11.4
Japan:					
Birth to 14 years	35.3	30.2	23.9	23.6	18.3
15 to 64 years	59.5	64.1	69.0	67.4	70.3
65 years and over	5.2	5.7	7.1	9.0	11.4
Denmark:					
Birth to 14 years	26.3	25.2	23.3	20.9	16.8
15 to 64 years	64.5	64.2	64.4	64.7	67.9
65 years and over	9.1	10.6	12.3	14.4	15.3
France:					
Birth to 14 years	22.7	26.4	24.8	22.4	20.3
15 to 64 years	65.9	62.0	62.3	63.7	65.9
65 years and over	11.3	11.6	12.9	13.9	13.8
Germany:					
Birth to 14 years	23.5	21.3	23.2	18.2	15.1
15 to 64 years	67.1	67.8	63.6	66.3	69.4
65 years and over	9.3	10.8	13.2	15.5	15.5
Italy:					
Birth to 13 years	26.4	23.4	22.9	20.5	17.8
14 to 64 years	65.5	67.6	66.5	66.7	68.4
65 years and over	8.0	9.0	10.5	12.9	13.8
Netherlands:					
Birth to 14 years	29.3	30.0	27.3	22.3	18.1
15 to 64 years	62.9	61.0	62.6	66.2	69.2
65 years and over	7.7	9.0	10.2	11.5	12.7
Sweden:					
Birth to 14 years	23.4	22.4	20.9	19.6	17.2
15 to 64 years	66.3	65.9	65.5	64.1	65.0
65 years and over	10.2	11.8	13.7	16.3	17.7
United Kingdom:					
Birth to 14 years	22.3	23.4	24.1	21.0	19.1
15 to 64 years	66.9	66.4	62.9	64.1	65.8
65 years and over	10.7	11.7	13.0	14.9	15.1

¹ Projected.

SOURCE: *Ageing Populations: The Social Policy Implications* (Paris, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1988), pp. 80-81; and *Labour Force Statistics, 1960-71 and 1967-87 editions* (Paris, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1973, 1989).

habitation. In Europe—particularly in Scandinavia, but also in France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands—there have been large increases in the incidence of unmarried couples living together. This situation is reflected in the lower marriage rates of these countries. Swedish data that include all cohabiting couples indicate that family formation rates have remained stable since 1960, even though marriage rates have dropped.

Divorce rates have shown a long-term increase in most industrial nations since around the turn of the century. After accelerating during the 1970's, the rates reached in the 1980's are probably the highest in the modern history of these nations. While a very large proportion of Americans marry, their marital breakup rate is

by far the highest among the developed countries. (See table 3.) Based on recent divorce rates, the chances of a first American marriage ending in divorce are today about one in two; the corresponding ratio in Europe is about one in three to one in four.

Liberalization of divorce laws came to the United States well before it occurred in Europe, but such laws were loosened in most European countries beginning in the 1970's, with further liberalization taking place in the 1980's. Consequently, divorce rates are rising rapidly in many European countries. By 1986, the rate had quadrupled in the Netherlands and almost tripled in France over the levels recorded in 1960. The sharpest increase occurred in the United Kingdom, where the marital breakup rate increased sixfold. Although divorce rates continued to rise in Europe in the 1980's, the increase in the United States abated, and the rate in 1986 was slightly below that recorded in 1980. In Canada, although divorce rates remain considerably lower than in the United States, the magnitude of the increase since 1960 has been greater than that in the United Kingdom.

Italy is the only European country studied in which the divorce rate remains low, and divorce laws have not been liberalized there. Japan's divorce rates are lower than in all other countries except Italy, but, unlike Italy, there has been an upward trend in Japan since 1960.

Divorce rates understate the extent of family breakup in all countries: marital separations are not covered by the divorce statistics, and these statistics also do not capture the breakup of families in which the couple is not legally married. Studies show that in Sweden, the breakup rate of couples in consensual unions is three times the dissolution rate of married couples.⁴ Statistics Sweden tabulates data on family dissolution from population registers that show when couples previously living together have moved to separate addresses. The data indicate that the family dissolution rate rose more than fourfold between 1960 and 1980, while the divorce rate merely doubled.

Births out of wedlock. Rates of births to unmarried women have increased in all developed countries except Japan. (See table 4.) The phenomenon arises from the decline of marriage, the increase in divorce, and the rising rates of cohabitation. Close to half of all live births in Sweden are now outside of wedlock, up from only 1 in 10 in 1960. Denmark is not far behind. In the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, unmarried women account for more than 1 out of 5 births, while the rates are far lower in the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany.

Although relatively high proportions of Swedish and Danish children are born out of wedlock, it should be noted that nearly all of them are born to parents who live together in a consensual union. These cohabiting parents are typically in a relationship that has many of the legal rights and obligations of a marriage. Statistics Sweden estimates that only 0.5 percent of all live births in the early 1980's involved a situation in which no father was identified and required to pay child support.

A relatively high proportion of births out of wedlock in the United States and the United Kingdom are to teenagers—more than 33 and 29 percent, respectively. In Sweden, teenagers account for only 6 percent, and in France and Japan about 10 percent. More than half of the births out of wedlock in Sweden are to women between the ages of 25 and 34, while only one-quarter are to women in that age group in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵

All of the foregoing demographic trends have had an impact on household size and composition in the developed nations. This impact can be seen clearly in developments since 1960.

Table 3. Marriage and divorce rates in 10 countries, selected years, 1960–86

Country	1960	1970	1980	1986
Marriage rates (per 1,000 population, ages 15 to 64)				
United States	14.1	17.0	115.9	15.1
Canada	12.4	14.3	11.8	10.2
Japan	14.5	14.4	9.8	8.6
Denmark	12.2	11.5	7.9	9.0
France	11.3	12.4	9.7	7.3
Germany	13.9	11.5	8.9	8.7
Italy	11.7	11.3	8.7	7.5
Netherlands	12.7	15.2	9.6	8.7
Sweden	10.2	8.2	7.1	7.2
United Kingdom	11.5	13.5	11.6	10.6
Divorce rates (per 1,000 married women)				
United States	9.2	14.9	22.6	21.2
Canada	1.8	6.3	10.9	12.9
Japan	3.6	3.9	4.8	5.4
Denmark	5.9	7.6	11.2	12.8
France	2.9	3.3	6.3	8.5
Germany	3.6	5.1	6.1	8.3
Italy	(2)	1.3	.8	1.1
Netherlands	2.2	3.3	7.5	8.7
Sweden	5.0	6.8	11.4	11.7
United Kingdom	2.0	4.7	12.0	12.9

¹ Beginning in 1980, includes unlicensed marriages registered in California.

² Not available.

SOURCES: Statistical Office of the European Communities, *Demographic Statistics, 1988*; and various national sources.

Household size declines

One of the major ramifications of the demographic trends, especially the declining fertility rates and the aging of the population, is that households have diminished in size throughout this century. All of the countries studied have seen declines from an average of four or five members per household in the 1920's to an average of only two or three persons living together in the mid- to late 1980's. (See table 5.) Denmark, Germany, and Sweden currently have average household sizes in the range of 2.2 to 2.3 persons. The United States, Canada, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom have households in the 2.6- to 2.8-person range. Japan maintains the highest average, at about three persons per household. This is explained, in part, by the prevalence of three-generation households there.

Married couples living with both their children and parents made up 12 percent of all households in Japan in 1985. However, such households have lost considerable ground since 1960, when they represented one-quarter of all households in Japan. Meanwhile, three-generation households have virtually disappeared in Europe and North America. For example, the traditional German "stem" family comprising more than two generations represented 6 percent of all households in 1961, but only 2 percent by 1981. The share of the population residing in such households fell from 11 percent to less than 4 percent.⁶

Household composition

Households come in many sizes and types. Table 6 sets forth a proportional distribution by major household type for the period 1960 to 1988. Despite definitional differences that do not allow for full comparability across countries, broad distinctions and trends are reliable. Deviations that should be kept in mind involve the concepts of a married couple and a child. The classification "married couple" increasingly includes couples living together who are not legally married. The definition of the age limit for a child varies considerably from country to country, ranging from under the age of 16 in Sweden and under 18 in the United States and several other countries to any age in Germany and the Netherlands. Finally, the data for Denmark are derived differently than those for the other countries. For further information on all of these points, see the appendix.

Table 6 indicates that all countries shown, except Japan, are moving in the same direction in terms of household composition, although

Table 4. Births to unmarried women as a percent of all live births, 10 countries, selected years, 1960-86

Country	1960	1970	1980	1986	Percent change, 1960-86	
					All live births	Births to unmarried women
United States	5.3	10.7	18.4	23.4	-12	292
Canada	4.3	9.6	11.3	16.9	-22	209
Japan	1.2	0.9	0.8	1.0	-14	-26
Denmark	7.8	11.0	33.2	43.9	-27	308
France	6.1	6.8	11.4	21.9	-5	243
Germany	6.3	5.5	7.6	9.6	-55	-2
Italy	2.4	2.2	4.3	5.6	-39	41
Netherlands	1.3	2.1	4.1	8.8	-23	403
Sweden	11.3	18.4	39.7	48.4	0	329
United Kingdom	5.2	8.0	11.5	21.0	-18	231

SOURCES: Statistical Office of the European Communities, *Demographic Statistics, 1988*; and various national sources.

some are moving much faster than others. Married-couple households are declining in share in all but Japan; however, this category disguises the different changes occurring in the households with children, as opposed to those without children. Married-couple households without children are holding steady or increasing, while households comprising married couples with children are declining everywhere. Single-parent and one-person households are both on the rise.

All of the trends shown are partly reflections of the demographic patterns previously discussed. The erosion of marriage and the increase in divorce rates have brought about the decrease in the proportion of married-couple households. The decline would have been even greater in some countries if cohabiting couples had been excluded from the more recent statistics. Diminishing fertility rates and aging of the population, as well as postponement of parenthood among those who intend to have children, are behind the decline in the percentage of married couples with children. Divorce rates combine with the sharp rise in births out of wedlock to propel the increase in single-parent households. Postponement of marriage, increases in the incidence of divorce, and the aging of the population all have played a part in the increase in the proportion of one-person households. The next sections examine these trends in further detail.

Married couples decline

Reflecting a significant change in family patterns, the term "married couple" now encom-

passes an increasing number of unmarried cohabiting couples, particularly in Europe, but also in Canada. Although "married-couple" households remain the predominant household type in all countries, the term has a different meaning today than it did in 1960, when it was more likely to refer only to legally married persons. Nowadays, even though cohabitants are increasingly included as married couples, this type of household has lost considerable ground since 1960 in all countries except Japan. The decline is entirely in households with children.

Couples with children, the traditional nuclear family, accounted for half or more of all households in Canada and the Netherlands at the beginning of the 1960's. In Japan, too, such households were virtually half of all households, while their share was somewhat lower in the United States (44 percent), Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and probably France.

By the mid- to late 1980's, households comprising couples with children had fallen to under 30 percent of all households in the United States, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Canada's and Germany's proportions were slightly more than 30 percent, while France's was 36 percent. Couples with children were most prevalent in Japan and the Netherlands, where they constituted almost 4 out of every 10 households. However, it should be noted that the data for Germany and the Nether-

lands are overstated in relation to the other countries because such data encompass children of all ages. Furthermore, the data for Japan and the Netherlands are for 1985, lagging 2 or 3 years behind the figures for several of the other countries. Because the trend is downward, 1988 data could show Japan and the Netherlands at around the level for France.

The share of married-couple households without children held fairly steady in all countries except Japan, where such families rose from 16 percent to 28 percent of all households, and Canada, which recorded an increase from 27 percent to 32 percent. These households are actually a diverse group, comprising young couples who have not yet started their families, childless couples, and older couples whose children have left home. Thus, some of the couples who appeared as those with children in earlier years have now moved into the category of those without children.

Overall, married-couple households accounted for about 3 out of every 4 households in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 1960's. They represented 6 or 7 of every 10 households in Japan, Germany, and Sweden at that time, and probably slightly more than 7 of every 10 in France. By the mid- to late 1980's, such households represented fewer than 2 out of every 3 households in all countries except Japan. The United States, Germany, and Sweden (and probably also Denmark) had the lowest proportion of married-couple households, about 55 percent. Excluding unmarried cohabiting couples, Sweden had well below half (44 percent) of all households in this category in 1985. If cohabitants classified elsewhere had been included in the U.S. figures for married couples, the late 1980's proportion would have been slightly over 60 percent of all households.

Rise of the consensual union

As noted previously, there has been a rapid increase in the incidence of cohabitation outside of marriage in a number of countries. Such arrangements became much more widespread in the 1970's and, by the 1980's, received more general acceptance in public opinion. For some couples, particularly younger ones, consensual unions may be a temporary arrangement that eventually leads to marriage. For others, it is an alternative to the institution of marriage.

A recent public opinion survey in Germany revealed increasing acceptance of marriages without licenses. The percentage of respondents who disapproved of couples living together without being legally married dropped from 36

Table 5. Average number of members per household, 10 countries, selected years, 1960-88

Country	1960	1970	1977	1985-88 ¹
United States	3.3	3.1	2.9	2.6
Canada	3.9	3.5	22.9	2.8
Japan	4.1	3.4	33.3	3.1
Denmark	2.9	2.7	(4)	2.3
France	3.1	2.9	2.8	2.6
Germany	2.9	2.7	2.5	2.3
Italy	3.6	3.4	3.1	2.8
Netherlands	3.6	3.2	2.9	2.5
Sweden	2.8	2.6	32.4	2.2
United Kingdom ⁵	3.1	2.9	2.7	2.6

¹ 1988 for the United States, Denmark, and France; 1987 for Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands; 1986 for Canada and the United Kingdom; 1985 for Japan and Sweden.

² 1981.

³ 1975.

⁴ Not available.

⁵ Great Britain only (excludes Northern Ireland).

SOURCES: Statistical Office of the European Communities, *Economic and Social Features of Households in the Member States of the European Community* (Luxembourg, EUROSTAT, 1982); and various national sources.

Table 6. Percent distribution of households by type, nine countries, selected years, 1960–88

Country and year	Married-couple households ¹			Single-parent households ²	One-person households	Other households ³
	Total	With children ²	Without children ²			
United States:						
1960	74.3	44.2	30.1	4.4	13.1	8.2
1970	70.5	40.3	30.3	5.0	17.1	7.4
1980	60.8	30.9	29.9	7.5	22.7	9.0
1987	57.6	27.5	30.0	8.1	23.6	10.7
1988	56.9	27.0	29.9	8.0	24.0	11.1
Canada:						
1961	478.0	450.8	426.7	43.8	9.3	48.9
1971	74.0	46.5	27.5	4.5	13.4	8.1
1981	66.8	36.3	30.5	5.3	20.3	7.6
1986	64.5	32.3	32.2	5.6	21.5	8.4
Japan:						
1960	65.3	49.4	15.9	3.1	17.2	14.4
1970	64.3	44.6	19.7	2.3	20.3	13.1
1980	68.4	42.9	25.6	2.2	19.8	9.6
1985	67.4	39.2	28.2	2.5	20.8	9.3
Denmark:⁵						
1976	44.5	23.5	21.0	4.9	(6)	(6)
1983	43.7	22.6	21.1	5.4	(6)	(6)
1988	41.0	19.9	21.1	5.1	(6)	(6)
France:						
1968	70.1	43.6	26.5	4.2	20.3	5.4
1975	68.8	42.1	26.8	4.1	22.1	5.0
1982	67.0	39.7	27.2	4.3	24.6	4.1
1988	63.4	36.2	27.3	5.1	27.1	4.4
Germany:						
1961	66.7	44.3	22.4	10.8	20.6	1.9
1970	64.8	41.7	23.1	6.2	26.5	2.5
1980	60.5	37.0	23.5	6.6	30.2	2.7
1988	54.3	31.4	22.9	6.7	34.9	4.1
Netherlands:						
1961	77.6	55.4	22.3	5.7	11.9	4.8
1971	74.1	51.8	22.3	5.1	17.1	3.7
1981	66.5	43.7	22.9	6.1	21.4	6.0
1985	60.0	38.5	21.5	6.7	27.8	5.5
Sweden:						
1960	66.4	35.7	30.6	3.5	20.2	9.9
1970	64.3	30.2	34.1	3.2	25.3	7.2
1980	57.9	24.8	33.1	3.1	32.8	6.2
1985	54.8	21.7	33.1	3.2	36.1	5.9
United Kingdom:⁷						
1961	73.7	37.8	36.0	2.3	11.9	12.1
1971	69.7	34.4	35.2	2.8	18.1	9.4
1981	64.3	30.5	33.7	4.7	21.8	9.2
1987	64.0	28.0	36.0	4.0	25.0	7.0

¹ May include unmarried cohabiting couples. Such couples are explicitly included under married couples in Canada (beginning in 1981) and France. For Sweden, beginning in 1980, all cohabitants are included as married couples, and the figures for 1970 have been adjusted by Thora Nilsson (see source note below) to include all cohabitants. The 1960 data have not been adjusted, but the number of unmarried cohabitants was insignificant in 1960, according to Nilsson. For Denmark, from 1983 onward, persons reported separately as living in consensual unions with joint children have been classified here as married couples. There was no separate reporting of such persons in 1976. In other countries, some unmarried cohabitants are included as married couples, while some are classified under "other households," depending on responses to surveys and censuses.

² Children are defined as unmarried children living at home according to the following age limits: Under 18 years old in the United States, Canada, Japan, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, except that the United Kingdom includes 16- and 17-year-olds only if they are in full-time education; under 25 years old in France; under 16 years old in Sweden; and children of all ages in Germany and the Netherlands.

³ Includes both family and nonfamily households not elsewhere classified. These households comprise, for example, siblings residing together, other households composed of relatives, and households made up of roommates. Some unmarried cohabiting couples may also be included in the "other" group. (See footnote 1.)

⁴ Estimated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, based on ratios of adjusted to unadjusted series in 1971. See source note on Canada.

⁵ From family-based statistics. However, one person living alone constitutes a family in Denmark. In this respect, the Danish data are closer to household statistics.

⁶ Not available.

⁷ Great Britain only (excludes Northern Ireland).

SOURCES: Compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from national population censuses, household surveys, and other sources. For the United States, data are from the March Current Population Survey; for Denmark, data are from the Central Population Register; for Canada, Japan, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, data are from population censuses, with the following exceptions: French data for 1988 and British data for 1987 are from household surveys; German data for 1970, 1980, and 1988 are from the Microcensus; Dutch data for 1981 and 1985 are from Housing Demand Surveys. Data for Sweden for 1960, 1970, and 1980 are adjusted for historical comparability by Thora Nilsson of Statistics Sweden in the article "Les ménages en Suède, 1960–1980" [Households in Sweden, 1960–1980], *Population*, no. 2, Mar.–Apr. 1985, pp. 223–48. Data for Canada (1971, 1981, and 1986) have been adjusted to U.S. concepts by Statistics Canada.

Almost all developed countries have seen a decline in fertility rates, aging of the population, an erosion of the institution of marriage, and a rapid increase in childbirths out of wedlock.

percent in 1982 to 27 percent in 1989, and correspondingly, the notion that unmarried couples should enjoy the same legal recognition and advantages as married couples received more support.⁷ Germany is a country where the number of consensual unions has remained low, compared with the rest of Europe.

The high marriage rate in the United States means that, so far at least, the country has maintained a fairly low level of nonmarital cohabitation, a rate lower than in most European countries and in a different league entirely from Scandinavia. The Census Bureau reports the number of households comprising two unrelated adults of the opposite sex, with or without children. Although some may be roommate or landlord-tenant arrangements, most of these households can be viewed as consensual unions.⁸ None are included in the married-couple data in table 6; rather, they are classified in the "other households" group. According to the Census Bureau data, the incidence of such arrangements has risen from 1.2 percent of all couples living together in 1970 to 3.1 percent in 1980 and 4.7 percent in 1988. Moreover, these percentages are understated to the extent that people in common-law marriages report themselves as married couples and are, therefore, not included in these statistics. By definition, no more than two unrelated adults are present in an unmarried-couple household, but the household also may contain one or more children. About 3 out of every 10 unmarried-couple households included a child under 15 (not age 18, as in other U.S. statistics on children) in 1988, slightly higher than the proportion for 1980. Thus, a minority of consensual unions in the United States involve a parent-child family group.

The U.S. figures on consensual unions are low in comparison with those of Europe and Canada. In Canada, 8 percent of all couples lived in common-law marriages in 1986, and all are included among the married couples in table 6.

Sweden and the Netherlands have recorded rapid increases in consensual unions. In Sweden, the proportion of such unions rose from only 1 percent of all couples in 1960 to 11 percent in 1975 and 19 percent in 1985. In the Netherlands, the ratio rose from 11 percent in 1982 to 19 percent in 1988. Thus, about 1 in every 5 couples in these two countries is living together out of wedlock.

Denmark reports that the number of couples in consensual unions with joint children rose from 4 percent of all families with children in 1982 to 8 percent in 1988. The proportion of all consensual unions among couples living to-

gether is undoubtedly far higher.

In France, nonmarital cohabitation increased from 3 percent of all couples in 1975 to more than 6 percent in 1982 and 8 percent in 1988. Table 7, which shows the percent of all French men and women in consensual unions or marriages by age group in 1988, illustrates the fact that cohabitation occurs predominantly in the younger age groups.

As in France, the younger age groups in Sweden have a higher incidence of cohabitation. For instance, in 1980, 4 out of every 5 unmarried Swedish men ages 20 to 24 were living in a consensual union, as were 68 percent of all unmarried women in that age group. In the age group 25 to 29, the proportions were 49 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Virtually all Swedes now cohabit before marriage.⁹

Sweden has long been permissive about premarital sexual relations, and even in the 1950's it was not uncommon for marriages to occur around the time the first child was to be born. The difference today is that nonmarital cohabitation is regarded legally and culturally as an accepted alternative, rather than a prelude to marriage. This is reflected by the fact that the average period over which Swedish couples remain unmarried lengthens each year, with a growing number never marrying at all.¹⁰ The rapidly declining influence of childbirth on marriage is brought into focus by the data presented earlier on the percentage of children born out of wedlock. Statistics Sweden has been modifying its family statistics to take into account the in-

Table 7. Percent of French men and women in marriages or consensual unions, by age, 1988

Sex and age	Married	In consensual union
Men:		
18-24	4.7	6.1
18-19	0	.1
20-24	6.5	8.4
25-29	42.7	14.5
30-34	67.4	9.8
35 and over	78.7	3.4
Women:		
18-24	14.0	10.4
18-197	1.8
20-24	19.0	13.7
25-29	55.9	12.3
30-34	71.7	7.6
35 and over	63.5	2.1

SOURCE: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, *Enquête sur l'emploi de 1988: résultats détaillés* [Labor Force Survey of 1988: Detailed Results], Les Collections de L'INSEE, Série D, no. 128 (Paris, INSEE, October 1988), table MEN-07, pp. 104-05.

creasing incidence of cohabitation. Thus, figures on family formation and family dissolution are replacing data on marriage and divorce, respectively.

British surveys also indicate that consensual unions have become more prevalent there.¹¹ The proportion of women ages 18 to 49 who were cohabiting more than doubled between 1979 and 1987. In the latter year, about 11 percent of all women ages 18 to 24 were cohabiting, about the same proportion as in France for this age group. The figure for British women ages 25 to 49 was 5 percent. Cohabitation is more prevalent at ages 25 to 29 for men and ages 20 to 24 for women. British men tend to be a few years older than their partners, as is the case in France and Sweden. Women and men who are divorced are more likely than those of other marital status to be cohabiting.

Estimates for Germany indicate that consensual unions have not reached significant proportions there. In 1981, only about 3 percent of all couples were cohabiting outside of marriage. However, the increase in numbers has been great, from 100,000 in 1972 to 440,000 in 1981. These figures may well be too low, because some German couples living in consensual unions claim to be married.¹²

The rise of the consensual union is a significant move away from the traditional nuclear form of the family. In particular, there is a higher rate of family dissolution among unmarried as opposed to married couples in all countries. Thus, where consensual unions are significantly numerous, official divorce statistics do not encompass the extent of family breakup.

Single-parent families increase

Intercountry comparisons of single-parent families are restricted by variations in definitions. The main issues relate to the upper age limit for children and the presence or absence of cohabiting parents. (See appendix.) For the comparison presented in table 8, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has obtained data for recent years using the under-18 age limit for children—the U.S. definition—allowing for more valid international comparisons of lone-parent households.

All countries shown in table 8, except Japan, have experienced significant increases in single-parent households as a proportion of all family households with children. Allowing for definitional differences, it is clear that the United States has the highest proportion of single-parent households. (See chart 1.) In 1988, more than 1 in 5 U.S. households with dependent

children were single-parent households, up from fewer than 1 in 10 in 1960. Only Denmark approaches the U.S. level in the 1980's, and the Danish data are overstated because they count single-parent families instead of households; that is, they include single parents who are part of a larger household, while the U.S. figures exclude such parents. (In 1987, one-parent family groups in the United States represented 27 percent of all families with children; this figure is more comparable to the Danish proportion of 20 percent.) In France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the incidence of lone parenthood was in the range of 10 percent to 15 percent of all households with children. Using the under-18 age limit, Sweden's proportion of lone-parent families in 1985 was closer to the U.S. proportion in 1980, but well below the U.S. figure in 1988. Of the countries covered in table 8, Japan had by far the lowest incidence of single parenthood: 5 percent to 6 percent of all households with children in the period since 1960. This is to be expected, given the low rates of divorce and births out of wedlock in Japan.

The paths to single parenthood are numerous: Marriage and childbirth with subsequent widowhood; separation or divorce; and childbirth without marriage or consensual union. Combinations of events may lead to an exit from or reentry into single-parent status—for example, divorce and subsequent remarriage. The growth in the number of single-parent families has some common demographic elements in all the countries studied.

In Europe and North America, there is a growing proportion of those entering single parenthood through marital dissolution (separation and divorce) and childbirth outside marriage, and a diminishing share arising through the premature death of a spouse. Prior to the last three decades, single-parent families were usually formed as the result of the death of one of the parents.

A recent study indicates that, with the exception of the United States, the growth of divorced and separated mothers was responsible for the vast majority of the net increase in one-parent families since 1970.¹³ In the United States, family dissolution also accounted for the majority of the net increase, but the growing number of never-married mothers contributed about 40 percent of the increase as well. Even in Japan, divorce or separation has become the predominant route to single parenthood.

Another common characteristic is that the great majority of single-parent households are headed by women. In every country, 85 to 90 percent of all heads of single-parent families are women.

There has been a rapid increase in the incidence of cohabitation outside of marriage in a number of countries.

International Perspective of the Family

In all countries, single-parent families frequently have low incomes, and they are more likely than other families to experience poverty. Families headed by women are often in economic difficulty because of the absence of the father and his resources, the limited earnings of many women, and the immense difficulties of reconciling paid work and family obligations. The pressures on countries to address the requirements of these families efficiently and effectively are increasing.

Indicative of the financial instability of such families in the United States is the fact that the

average difference between after-tax income and total expenditures of single-parent households in 1984-85 was negative.¹⁴ A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics study indicated that unmarried women maintaining families are the workers with the greatest risk of living in poverty and almost one-fourth of these families are poor.¹⁵ An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development conference paper revealed that lone-parent family incomes were only half as much as two-parent family incomes in the United Kingdom and the United States, a little closer in France, and about four-fifths as

Table 8. Family households with children and single-parent households in nine countries, selected years, 1960-88

[Numbers in thousands]

Country, age limit for children, year	Total family households with children	Single-parent households		Country, age limit for children, year	Total family households with children	Single-parent households	
		Number	Percent of total			Number	Percent of total
United States				Under 25:			
Under 18:				1968	7,532	658	8.7
1960	25,662	2,329	9.1	1975	8,189	726	8.9
1970	28,731	3,199	11.1	1982	8,628	847	9.8
1980	31,022	6,061	19.5	1988	8,613	1,070	12.4
1988	31,920	7,320	22.9	Germany			
Canada				Under 18:			
Under 18:				1972	8,872	707	8.0
1971	3,076	271	8.8	1980	8,391	879	10.5
1981	3,441	438	12.7	1988	6,918	934	13.5
1986	3,406	503	14.8	Netherlands			
No limit:				Under 18:			
1981	4,122	639	15.5	1981	2,005	176	8.8
1986	4,335	770	17.8	1985	1,950	240	12.3
Under 25:				No limit:			
1961	12,725	266	9.8	1961	1,903	177	9.3
1971	13,391	408	12.0	1971	2,270	202	8.9
Japan				1981			
Under 18:				1985			
1960	11,839	707	6.0	1985	2,522	309	12.3
1970	14,228	710	5.0	1985	2,527	376	14.9
1980	16,147	796	4.9	Sweden			
1985	15,836	940	5.9	Under 18:			
Denmark²				1985			
Under 18:				Under 16:			
1976	731	126	17.2	1960	1,015	91	9.0
1983	717	139	19.4	1970	1,019	98	9.6
1988	674	137	20.3	1980	978	110	11.2
France				1985			
Under 18:				United Kingdom³			
1988	7,070	769	10.9	Under 18:⁴			
				1961			
				1971			
				1981			
				1987			
				(5)			
				(5)			
				12.7			

¹ Estimated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics partially from family data.

² Data are from family-based, rather than household-based, statistics. (See note.)

³ Great Britain only (excludes Northern Ireland).

⁴ Includes all children under 16 and those ages 16 or 17 who are in full-time education.

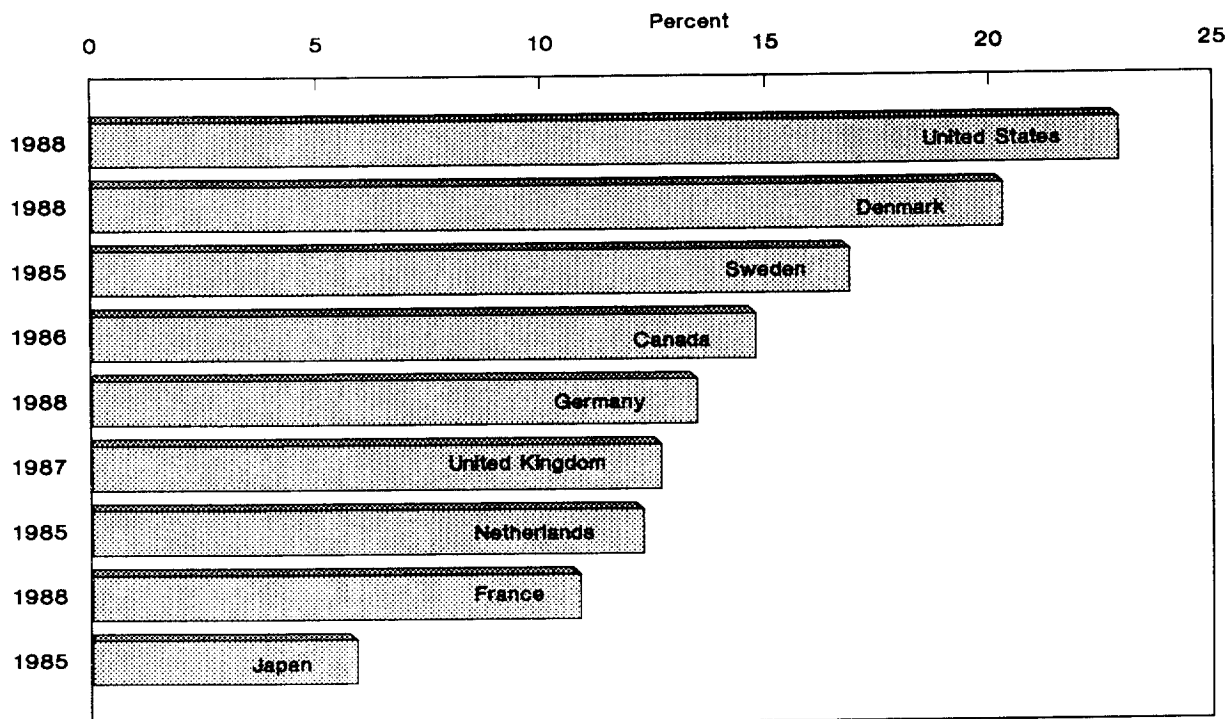
⁵ Not available because survey data were not inflated to universe levels.

NOTE: Intercountry comparisons should be made with caution due to differing age limits and different treatments of unmarried

cohabiting couples across countries. Some households of unmarried cohabitants may be classified as single-parent households in all countries except Canada (1981, 1986), Denmark (1983, 1988), France, and Sweden. Except in Denmark, single-parent households living as part of a larger household are excluded.

SOURCES: Compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from sources listed in table 6; unpublished data provided by foreign statistical offices and John Ermisch, "Demographic Aspects of the Growing Number of Lone-Parent Families," Paper No. 2, prepared for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Conference of National Experts on Lone Parents, Paris, Dec. 15-17, 1987.

Chart 1. **Single-parent households as a percent of all households with children under 18, nine countries, latest available year**



much in the Netherlands.¹⁶

Great Britain was the first among the European countries to carry out an extensive official study of single-parent families, with special attention focused on mothers-only families. The Finer Committee was established by the Government in the early 1970's to study the problems of these families, and a well-publicized report was issued in 1974. The report recommended a policy goal of assuring that single mothers and their children have enough income to provide an adequate standard of living even if the mother is not in the work force, and that it not be assumed that the caretaker should go out to work. The report's recommendations have still not been implemented, and discussion of the problem and the need for more concerted attention continues.¹⁷

All industrialized countries except the United States have family allowance programs that provide cash payments to families with children. In addition, the Scandinavian countries provide special benefits for single parents. For example, the Swedish Government assumes the responsibility for collecting child support payments from the absent parent. When this parent fails to pay or pays irregularly, the Government makes the payment to the custodial parent, assuring a

regular flow of income. The Government also guarantees a minimum level of support for each child. Further, Swedish single parents receive housing allowances, parental leave, and other benefits designed to ease the tension between work and family life. Unlike Great Britain, Sweden assumes that the single parent will work, usually on a part-time basis. Support for single mothers is much more extensive in Sweden than elsewhere; however, recent analyses reveal that single-mother families are still strongly disadvantaged economically.¹⁸

More persons living alone

Historically, virtually all household units have been families in some form. To live in a household was at the same time to live in a family. This is no longer the case. Many households in modern societies do not contain families, and the one-person household is the most common type of nonfamily household. Except in Japan, this type of household has shown the most rapid growth of all household types since 1960.

In the United States, one-person households increased their share from 13 percent of all households in 1960 to virtually one-quarter of all households in 1988. (See table 6.) France,

the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom reached about the same level in the 1980's. Sweden and Germany have even higher proportions of single-person households. In Germany, they make up about 3 out of every 10 households;¹⁹ in Sweden, they are approaching 4 out of every 10. Meanwhile, Canada and Japan have much lower proportions of these households than the other countries, about 1 out of every 5.

The fastest growing groups in the living-alone category tend to be young people in their late teens and twenties, the divorced and separated, and the elderly. In many cases, living alone is the voluntary choice of people who can afford separate housing coupled with the increased availability of such housing; higher personal incomes and pensions over the past three decades have allowed people who want to live alone to do so. From this point of view, living alone can be seen as a privilege of affluent people and an expression of individual autonomy.²⁰

Sweden has built a large number of apartments in urban areas that are ideal for single people. This new housing has helped to increase the incidence of living alone in all age groups, especially among the young and middle aged, for whom living alone had been a historical rarity. In Sweden, the fastest growth in living alone has been among the younger age groups.²¹

A French study reveals that one-person households grow with the degree of urbanization.²² That is, rural people tend to live in families, whereas urban people increasingly live alone. In Paris, for example, nearly 50 percent of the dwellings are one-person households. Swedish studies also find that one-person households are predominantly in urban areas, and this is likely to be true in all countries.²³

A five-country study of living arrangements of young adults looked at how income from various sources affected the decision to live alone.²⁴ The study showed that German youth had a much higher propensity to live separately than did young people in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia. Among the five countries, youth in the United States and the United Kingdom had the lowest propensities to live alone. Earnings levels were positively correlated with living alone in the United States and the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent in Australia, but in Germany there was no such correlation.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the proportion of the elderly living alone is generally high and increasing. The proportion of persons 65 years of age or older living by themselves at various times during the 1980's is given in the following tabulation:²⁵

<i>Country</i>	<i>Percent living alone</i>
United States	30.4
Canada	27.7
Japan	8.6
Denmark	38.3
France	32.6
Germany	38.9
Netherlands	31.3
Sweden	40.0
United Kingdom	30.3

In Japan, the figure is low because nearly 65 percent of the elderly still live with their children in either two- or three-generation households. There is a sharp contrast between East and West in this area: among persons age 75 or older in Japan, fully three-quarters live with their children; in the United States, about 1 in 4 persons 65 or older lives with his or her children.²⁶

Women outlive men, on average, and women tend to be younger than their spouses. Therefore, the proportion of elderly women living alone is much higher than that of elderly men in all countries studied. In the United States, about 16 percent of all men and 40 percent of all women 65 and older live alone. These proportions are similar to those for the European countries, except that in Germany and Scandinavia, about half of all elderly women live alone. In all the countries studied, women constitute about four-fifths of all one-person households maintained by people 65 and older.

The importance of elderly citizens in overall national household profiles is apparent in the percentage of single-person households in the countries studied that were maintained by an elderly person. In Germany, more than 30 percent of all households are one-person households, and half of these are individuals age 65 or older. Thus, more than 15 percent of all households in Germany consist of one elderly person. In the United Kingdom, about two-thirds of single-person households consist of one elderly person, and proportions for Denmark, France, and the Netherlands are also high. In the United States, persons 65 and older account for 40 percent of all persons living alone.

Among older persons, living alone is most often the result of having outlived a spouse. Consequently, the likelihood of living alone increases with age, although there may be a decline at the oldest ages, when the elderly enter nursing homes or homes for the aged or take in companions or boarders in a search for additional income or assistance.²⁷

Both numbers and proportions of elderly living alone have risen sharply during the past three decades, although the rise in the propor-

Except in Japan, the one-person household has shown the most rapid growth of all household types since 1960.

tion may be leveling off in North America. The number of elderly residing alone in the United Kingdom more than doubled between 1961 and 1981. In Germany, 37 percent of all widows lived alone in 1961; by 1981, the proportion was up to 63 percent. These figures partly reflect the large number of postwar widows still living with their children in 1961, but who lived alone by 1981 as their children married and moved away. For widowers, the proportion living alone rose from 41 percent to 72 percent. Among persons who were divorced, the proportion living alone hardly changed, as remarriage and cohabitation were choices that were preferred to living alone. German data also indicate a strong increase in never-married persons living alone.²⁸

Mothers at work

The developed countries have witnessed notable increases in women's labor force participation since 1960, with an acceleration in the 1970's. More and more, these increases have involved mothers of dependent children, with profound effects on family life because of the problems of reconciling employment with family responsibilities. Consequently, the availability of child care facilities has become a significant issue for many families in these countries.

As women have entered the work force in increasing numbers, marriages have been postponed, the average size of the family has declined, and the divorce rate has risen. The increased economic independence of women, through labor force activity, has been a major factor behind changes in the traditional family over the past three decades.

The increases in women's labor force participation have been universal across age groups, except for teenagers in Japan and Europe and elderly women in all the countries studied. Most dramatic has been the rise in labor force participation for women 25 to 34 years of age, as shown in the following tabulation:

Country	1970	1988
United States	44.7	72.6
Canada	*41.2	74.9
Japan	46.8	54.5
Denmark	**	90.0
France	52.2	74.5
Germany	47.6	61.5
Italy (ages 25-39)	***44.1	60.8
Netherlands	23.9	55.4
Sweden	60.7	89.4
United Kingdom	43.3	66.0

*BLS estimate.
 **Not available.
 ***1977 data.

Table 9. Labor force participation rates of all women under age 60¹ and women with children under the ages of 18 and 3, eight countries, 1986 or 1988²

[In percent]

Country	All women	All women with children		Lone mothers ³ with children	
		Under 18 years old	Under 3 years old	Under 18 years old	Under 3 years old
United States	68.5	65.0	52.5	65.3	45.1
Canada	66.8	467.0	58.4	463.6	41.3
Denmark	79.2	86.1	83.9	85.9	80.9
Germany	55.8	48.4	39.7	69.7	50.4
France	60.1	65.8	60.1	85.2	69.6
Italy	43.3	43.9	45.0	67.2	68.0
Sweden	80.0	489.4	585.8	(6)	(6)
United Kingdom	64.3	58.7	36.9	51.9	23.4

¹ Women ages 60 to 64 are included in Canada and Sweden. Lower age limits are 16 for the United States and Sweden, 15 for Canada, and 14 for all other countries. For participation rates of women with children, no upper limit is applied for the United States or Canada. These differences do not distort the comparisons because very few women under 16 have children, while few women over 60 live with their children.

² Data for the United States are for March 1988; Canada and Sweden—annual averages for 1988; data for all other countries are for spring 1986.

³ Includes divorced, separated, never-married, and widowed women.

⁴ Children under 16 years.

⁵ Children under 7 years.

⁶ Not available.

SOURCES: Published data from U.S., Canadian, and Swedish labor force surveys; unpublished data for other countries provided by the Statistical Office of the European Communities from the European Community labor force surveys.

Women ages 25 to 34 are in the primary childbearing and childrearing ages. In most of the countries shown, fewer than half of such women were in the work force in 1970. By 1988, a substantial majority were in the labor force, except in Japan and the Netherlands. Still, the Dutch women increased their participation from a low among these countries of 24 percent in 1970 to 55 percent in 1988.

Swedish women were already participating at a comparatively high rate of 60 percent in 1970, and by 1988, almost 9 out of every 10 Swedish women ages 25 to 34 were in the labor force. Danish and Swedish women in this age group had the highest participation rates, by far.

Table 9 focuses on participation rates of women with children under the age of 18 and under the age of 3 in a recent year in eight countries. Except for Italy, women with younger children tended to have lower participation rates than women with children under age 18. Danish and Swedish women continued to stand out, with more than 8 out of every 10 women with younger children participating in the work force. (The Swedish proportions are based on women with children under age 7; proportions for those with children under age 3 would be somewhat lower.) French and Cana-

dian women, with about 6 out of 10 economically active, were second to the Scandinavian women. In the United States, about 5 out of 10 women with children under age 3 were in the labor force. The participation rates for German and British women were substantially lower than in the other countries.

Although no historical data are shown in table 9, it is clear that there has been a dramatic increase in participation rates of women with younger children. For example, about 40 percent of Swedish women with children under the age of 7 (the age at which compulsory schooling begins) were employed in 1970; today, 85 percent are working. In Canada, women's overall participation rate increased from 45 percent in 1976 to 55 percent in 1986, and the greatest increase involved women with children under 3 years of age.

Table 9 also shows participation rates for mothers without partners. In the United States, Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, single mothers with young children had lower participation rates than all mothers with young children. By contrast, in France, Germany, and Italy, single mothers of young children had higher participation rates than their married counterparts.

The dramatic growth in female participation in the labor force has contributed toward substantial political pressures for more child care services in all the countries studied. Decades of both national and international debate, task forces, and commissions have resulted in a wide variety of responses. In all the countries, there have been two factors besides the participation of women in the labor force that have fueled the increase in demand for child care: Changes in family structure and changing parental attitudes and needs. As regards the first, with smaller families, there are fewer relatives to care for young children. Also, additional pressure for child care facilities has been brought about by the rise in single-parent families. Concerning parental attitudes, in the past, most parents preferred to raise their children during the early years within the family environment. Now, however, more and more families, whether the mother is working or not, are turning to day care centers, nurseries, and preschool programs to foster the intellectual, social, and emotional development of their children. As an example, preference studies in Canada show that both working and nonworking parents have a high propensity to choose licensed day care for children ages 3 to 5. There appears to be less preference for infant care, although studies vary in their conclusions as to whether this is so.²⁹

There are wide differences in child care services across countries. In Europe, broadly speaking, the highest levels are found in Denmark, Sweden, and France, and the lowest in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. As a percent of gross national product, Denmark spends more than six times as much for services for children under age 5 than does the United Kingdom. In Denmark, 44 percent of all children age 2 or younger attend publicly funded day care facilities on a full-time basis. This contrasts with 1 percent to 2 percent of all very young children in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and 16 percent to 17 percent in France. In the United States, one estimate indicates that about 20 percent of children under the age of 3 were in day care in 1984-85, largely part time. About 12 percent of children under age 3 were in day care in Canada.³⁰

In all of the countries, the supply of publicly funded services is inadequate relative to the demand. Even in Denmark, with its high level of services and its population of only 5 million, present waiting lists suggest an unmet need of approximately 40,000 spaces.³¹ Sweden also has a shortage of full-time day care spaces. About 55,000 children who need a place cannot be served. The Swedish Parliament recently decided that all children older than 1½ years whose parents are working shall have a right to public day care after the year 1991.³²

Canada's National Day Care Information Center estimates that licensed day care facilities serve only 7 percent of the need for spaces for children under 18 months of age. Overall, licensed day care facilities serve 12 percent of the estimated need for spaces for Canadian children age 12 and under.³³

Public debate regarding the possible negative effects of employment on parenting has been nowhere more spirited than in Sweden. Consequently, Sweden has adopted legislative reforms expressly intended to alleviate the contradictions between work and family needs. These reforms include paid parental leave for either father or mother, time off from work to take care of a sick child, publicly supported day care, and the option of part-time work for parents of preschool children. There is widespread acceptance of these parental supports throughout the country.³⁴ More than other advanced industrial societies, Sweden has explicitly recognized the dilemmas of employed parents and has adopted programs to address them.

One aspect of the Swedish family support system bears further mention. Swedish parents have the right to stay home and take care of their newborn infant for quite a long time without risk of losing their jobs. They are guaranteed an

More than other advanced industrial societies, Sweden has explicitly recognized the dilemmas of employed parents and has adopted programs to address them.

economic standard corresponding to their previous salary, paid by the social insurance system. Up to 1977, the time during which financial support was provided was limited to 7 months; it has subsequently been increased in stages to 15 months as of July 1989, the last 3 of which, however, are funded at a greatly reduced level. By mid-1991, parental leave will be available for 18 months with full financial benefits.³⁵ Either mother or father can take advantage of the parental leave, or they can take turns. No other country offers such a generous system of parental leave.

Like Sweden, Denmark provides extensive family support programs that have eased the entry of a very high proportion of mothers into the labor force. Women employees have a right to be absent from work for 4 weeks prior to childbirth. After the baby's birth, the mother has a right to be absent from work a total of 24 weeks, of which up to 10 weeks may be used by the father. During their parental leaves, the mother and father are entitled to cash payments in compensation for their loss of income amounting to a maximum of 2,126 kroner per week, the equivalent of 67 percent of average industrial wages. Parents with low incomes receive 90 percent of their former pay, and those with high incomes receive the stipulated weekly maximum.³⁶

Conclusion

During the past three decades, the family has undergone major transformations in all developed countries. The general direction of household composition patterns suggests a common contemporary trend to which all developed countries are a party, to a greater or lesser

degree. Four major demographic developments—declining fertility, aging of the population, rising divorce rates, and an increasing incidence of childbirth out of wedlock—are underlying factors in the transformation of the modern family.

Japan is the most traditional society of the countries studied, with very low rates of divorce and births out of wedlock. It was the only country with an increase in the proportion of married-couple households since 1960. But even in Japan, the traditional nuclear family—mother, father, and children—lost ground. And Japan preceded the other countries in the decline in fertility rates.

Among the countries studied, the United States is either a leader or a follower, depending on the trend. We are a country of relative family traditionalism, as evidenced by our greater tendency to marry, and at an earlier age, than persons in other countries and to have slightly larger families; moreover, our rate of nonmarital cohabitation is still relatively low, compared with European countries, and so is our tendency to live alone. Women with young children in Scandinavia and France are well ahead of their American counterparts with respect to labor force participation and access to child care services.

Nonetheless, the United States is by no means a land of family stability. We have long had the highest incidence of divorce and single-parent families. The United States surpasses even Scandinavia in its nontraditionalism in regard to these two indicators. Thus, in some respects, this Nation is catching up to other developed countries, but in certain other respects, the rest of the developed world is following the United States. □

Footnotes

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⁸ *Households, Families, Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1988, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 432 (Advance Report)* (Bureau of the Census, September 1988), p. 2.

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¹⁸ Kamerman and Kahn, *Mothers Alone*, pp. 95-100.

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APPENDIX: Concepts and definitions

For the United States, trends in the family can be analyzed from the point of view of two types of related statistics: Those based on all households and those based on families. For international comparison, the data presented here are based on all households rather than families because they are more readily available, are more comparable across countries, and cover a longer span of time than most family-based data. In addition, nonfamily households—primarily one-person households—have been the fastest growing household type, and their increase is one of the factors affecting the changing composition of family households.

Households take many forms and are not limited to families. For example, in 1988 there were 91 million households, but 65 million families, in the United States. Households contain family members residing together, but they also may include nonfamily members sharing the dwelling. One person living alone represents a household, but not a family. By the U.S. definition, a family is two or more persons residing together and related by blood, adoption, or marriage. A household is one or more persons sharing the same housing unit. Yet, households are the basic unit of family life, and in the majority of cases, the household and the family coincide. Analysis of household composition across countries allows us to see how all of a society's population—not just families—lives.

It would have been interesting to show a family-nonfamily breakdown of household types across countries; however, definitional differences precluded this kind of breakdown. In the other countries studied, the concept of a family is generally more restrictive than the U.S. definition, limited to married (or cohabiting) couples with or without children and single-parent families. Households comprising brothers and sisters and other family configurations are counted as family households in the United States, but not in these other countries. Multifamily households are also treated differently. In the United States, such households are classified according to the status of the family that includes the householder. Abroad, multifamily households are classified as a separate category and not allocated to any particular family type. However, the number of such households is small in all the countries studied, and the difference in treatment should have no significant impact on the household comparisons in this article.

For most countries, household composition data were available back to 1960 or 1961, but for France the series began in 1968 and for Denmark in 1976. Data for Italy could not be shown at all, due to definitional changes over the period studied. Household statistics for Denmark were not available in terms of the classifications of table 6; therefore, proportions derived from family-based data are shown instead. These are not comparable with the figures for the other countries, but they illustrate the more recent trends in Denmark.

The figures in table 6 are generally based upon national population censuses and labor force surveys with broadly comparable household definitions

across countries, although there are some definitional differences that do not allow full comparability. Among these differences are the concepts of a married couple and a child.

Married couples. The classification "married couple" increasingly includes couples living together that are not legally married. The 1980 United Nations recommendations for population censuses states that "couples living in consensual unions should be regarded as married couples." (See United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses*, Statistical Papers, Series M., No. 67, p. 72.) However, this is not always the case in the statistics for the countries studied. In fact, such couples are generally categorized as nonfamily households in U.S. data, rather than as married couples. In the United States, the reported number of married couples depends upon the answers of survey respondents. Those who are in common-law marriages may respond that they are married; if so, they are classified as married couples. Those who say that they are unmarried partners, friends, or roommates are classified as nonfamily households if there are no children present. However, if there are children, the household is classified as a family household if the children are those of the reference person or "householder." In this case, the grouping could even be classified as a single-parent household, despite the fact that there are two cohabiting "parents" in the household.

Although most countries follow the U.S. method of self-reporting of marital status, some countries are more explicit in their treatment of persons of the opposite sex living together but not married. Since 1981, the Canadian census questionnaire has directed such persons to classify themselves as husband-and-wife couples. Since 1980, all cohabiting couples are classified together in Swedish household statistics, whereas earlier censuses classified married couples as a separate category. The Swedish data presented in table 6 for 1970 have been adjusted to include unmarried cohabiting couples. Data for 1960 were not adjusted because the number of unmarried cohabitants was believed to be insignificant. French household statistics report data on "couples" whether married or not, and separate data are collected on married and unmarried cohabitants. All French couples have been classified as married couples in table 6.

Families with children. The national definitions of families with children vary considerably because of differences in the age limits delineating a child. Most countries count as children all unmarried persons under a certain age and living at home or away at school. The United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom consider children to be all those under the age of 18, except that the United Kingdom counts 16- and 17-year-olds only if they are in full-time education. In Sweden, children are defined as all those age 16 and under. Canada (since 1981), Germany, and the Netherlands impose no age limit in their classi-

fication of children, although earlier Canadian censuses used a limit of under 25 years of age. Denmark counts as children all those under the age of 26, while France counts those under the age of 25. The Danish and Canadian Statistical Offices have provided special tabulations for table 6 based on the under-age-18 cutoff. However, the other countries using different age limits were not able to provide such data, although some provided a year or two of recent data on the under-age-18 limit for comparisons of single-parent households in table 8.

The differences in age limits for children have an impact on the comparisons of married couples with and without children and of single-parent households. Therefore, it should be recognized that the proportions in table 6 for these types of households are on a different basis for France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden than for the other countries, which use or have provided data on the basis of the under-age-18 cutoff. The effect of these differences on the classification of households can be seen in table 8.

Single-parent households. The main issues in comparing single-parent households across countries relate to the definition of a child and the presence or absence of cohabiting parents in the statistics. A further issue, which involves all countries except Denmark, is that the household statistics on single-parent families understate the number of such families because they exclude single-parent families that are part of a larger household. These differences affect both the cross-country comparisons and the trends in different countries over time.

The age of children in families encompassed by the term "single-parent family" differs across countries. Ideally, the concept should cover families with one or more unmarried children who live at home (or are away at school) and receive their financial support from the parent. As discussed earlier, there is little agreement across countries as to the specific age limit required for an individual to qualify as a child of a single-parent family. However, all countries that do not use the U.S. age limit of under 18 were able to provide unpublished tabulations with this age limit

for one or more years. These data are shown in the single-parent household comparisons in table 8. They indicate that higher age limits produce higher proportions of single-parent households.

Another important issue is that the data in table 8 are for households rather than families, except for Denmark. Single-parent households include only those which form a single household on their own. Thus, a single-parent household occurs in household statistics only when the single parent is the head of the household or the reference person for the household. Situations in which single-parent families are part of a larger household—such as a husband-and-wife household with an unmarried daughter and her young child—will be excluded from the figures, except in Denmark. Thus, on this account, the Danish figures are overstated in relation to the other countries. Further, the data for all the other countries understate the true extent of single parenthood, especially in countries where a sizable portion of single parents live in their own parents' or other people's households. British family statistics for 1977, for example, indicate that about three-quarters of single parents were living alone with their children, while about 14 percent lived in their parents' household. The remaining single-parent families lived with other relatives or with nonrelatives. (See Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Social Trends*, No. 11, 1981, p. 31.)

It would be preferable to define a single-parent household as one in which there is a parent with no cohabitant. In practice, however, cohabitants may be included in the figures for lone parents, except in Canada (1981, 1986), Denmark (1985, 1988), France, and Sweden. For the other countries, it depends on how people classify their status in the surveys and censuses. British statistical investigations indicate that most cohabiting parents describe themselves as married and, therefore, are not classified as single parents. (See Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *General Household Survey*, 1986, p. 11.) However, it should be recognized that the rise in consensual unions in these countries means that the number and growth of one-parent families may be overstated to some extent.

free until 1979—are now fully subject to Federal income taxes.¹⁵

Some analysts have attributed declining labor force participation rates among preretirement-age men to the expansion of *disability assistance*. Labor force participation rates of men 45 to 54 years old remained steady at around 95 to 96 percent from 1948 to 1969, then dropped to 91 percent by 1977 as disability programs grew dramatically, before stabilizing again.¹⁶ More than half of severely disabled working-age individuals currently receive Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Income, or both, and an unknown proportion of the remainder obtain assistance from other disability programs.

The expansion of programs aiding the disabled probably contributed to declining labor force participation rates among preretirement-age men, but the connection is far from unequivocal. Due to liberalized benefit rules, Disability Insurance beneficiaries could replace a high proportion of their previous earnings during the 1970's, and even receive more than the pay on their former job with the additional benefits paid to spouses and dependents. However, amendments in 1977 and 1980 significantly lowered these replacement rates.¹⁷

On the other hand, disability assistance had expanded greatly during the 1960's without a concomitant withdrawal from the labor force. Moreover, even rejected Disability Insurance applicants (who presumably are more healthy than beneficiaries) tend to have very limited subsequent work experience. Half of applicants rejected in 1984 were jobless 3 years later (most had not worked at all during the period), and half of those with jobs earned less—usually at least 25 percent less—than they did prior to becoming disabled. Some 43 percent of Disability Insurance beneficiaries are poor.¹⁸

The *Aid to Families with Dependent Children* (AFDC) program contains stronger work disincentives than other social programs, because (1) it assists many able-bodied individuals, (2) participants are not required to establish a work history, and (3) benefits may be provided for many years. Illinois and Missouri inaugurated “mothers’ pensions” for widows with children in 1911, and local governments in almost all States had such programs by 1935, when Congress augmented their efforts with Aid to Dependent Children.¹⁹ The program probably assisted a third or less of those potentially eligible until the 1960's, but coverage rapidly escalated to nearly 90 percent of potential eligibles by 1976 before dropping to 80 percent or less in the 1980's.²⁰

In 1989, AFDC and food stamps (which four-fifths of AFDC beneficiaries receive) yielded a

single mother with three children nearly 20 percent higher income, on the average, than she could earn from a full-time, year-round minimum wage job. Although the value of AFDC and food stamp benefits has eroded since 1970, the purchasing power of the minimum wage declined even more until 1990, increasing the gap between welfare benefits and income from low-wage work. The U.S. Congressional Research Service has estimated that in Pennsylvania (where AFDC benefits are about 10 percent higher than the national median), the disposable income of a single mother with two children on AFDC would barely change if she increased her earnings from \$2,000 to \$8,000 annually, and earnings above \$7,000 would eventually result in her losing health insurance through Medicaid.²¹ In the early 1970's, Congress required certain AFDC recipients to enroll in work programs, but because of limited funding and numerous exemptions, only a minority have done so. The 1988 Family Support Act mandates increased participation in educational, training, or work programs, but the impact of the legislation is still uncertain.

The *minimum wage* encourages work by rewarding it, but may also reduce employment by raising the cost of labor to prospective employers. The positive effect has not been measured, but the negative consequences have been heatedly debated. Attempting to estimate the employment loss associated with a higher minimum wage, the U.S. Minimum Wage Study Commission reported in 1981 that a 10-percent increase in the statutory minimum could reduce teenage employment by as much as 1 to 3 percent. However, because of declines in the teenage population and the value of the minimum wage, a recent estimate (made before the 1989 congressional amendment) using the commission's methodology suggested that the tradeoff would reduce teenage employment by only about 0.5 percent, and have no measurable impact on the employment of older individuals.²²

There are no eternal verities to guide governments in devising work- and family-related policies and programs, because working behavior and societal preferences change continually. Policies enacted during the Great Depression to encourage the elderly to retire and discourage poor single mothers from working have been increasingly challenged in recent years. Economic factors play an extremely important, though not exclusive, role in fashioning governmental and family decisions concerning work. Rising productivity permits both additional affluence and leisure time. However, the divergence among different nations' working be-

The extent to which various social programs unintentionally discourage work has been vigorously debated.

havior and the social programs they have designed demonstrates the various factors that shape employment decisions and family structure. As in most democracies, U.S. governmental decisions have tended to reflect

the preferences of the populace. But just as today's choices would have appeared alien to past generations, what will be "normal" behavior in the next century might be equally disturbing to us. □

Footnotes

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