

# Labor force statistics from a family perspective

*Over time, the family unit has become a major focus for policy planning, program evaluation, and research; two data series, which are now part of the regular CPS, more quickly capture the effects of the business cycle on the employment and earnings of family members*

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“As are families so is society . . . If well ordered, well instructed, and well governed, they are springs from which go forth the streams of national greatness and prosperity—of civil order and public happiness.”<sup>1</sup>

Families are the basic unit of American society that provide the country with its current labor supply and mold the character of its future workers. But, in contrast to the “well ordered,” ideal state described above, family life is more often depicted as in flux or crisis. This has been especially true of the years following World War II, during which families changed from an extended to a nuclear structure, moved from a rural to an urban setting, and adjusted from wartime pressures to periods of peacetime prosperity or recession.

In 1940, a monthly sample survey was initiated to measure changes in the characteristics of the Nation’s labor force.<sup>2</sup> This article draws on the results of that survey to present a historical perspective on the labor market activities of family members. Subsequent sections review recent developments in survey procedures that permit the tracking of broad secular trends and of business-cycle effects on family employment and income, and suggest future directions for family-oriented economic analyses.

## **Trends: 1940’s to early 1980’s**

Since 1940, but especially over the last decade, families have become substantially smaller, and the variety of living

arrangements has increased. For example, today’s school-age and preschool children are more likely to be living with one parent or a stepparent and are far more likely to have a working mother. Factors contributing to such changes include unusually low fertility rates, exceptionally high divorce rates, later marriage, the aging of the population, and greater labor force participation by married women.

Some other results of these developments are shown in table 1. Since 1940, the number of married couples has nearly doubled, but the number of families maintained by women has nearly tripled, and half a million more men now do not live with their spouses but maintain their own families.

The 43-year span which saw broken families become more numerous and their employment and unemployment problems more prominent also witnessed the gradual transformation of more than half of all married couples to multi-earner families, and the labor force from one that was predominately male to one that is currently 45 percent female. Married women have accounted for the majority of additional workers demanded by the economy, except during 1941–44, when men and single women dominated the wartime influx to the labor force.

Despite the grave national emergency of World War II, married women continued to be utilized in the civilian labor force along traditional prewar lines. If a wife had no children, she was generally free to take a paid job, but if she had even one young child, society expected her to stay at home. The largest single source of additional wartime work-

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ers were male and female youths of high-school or college age. Women over the age of 35 were the second largest labor pool.<sup>3</sup> These "extra" workers were recruited mainly from the ranks of married women who either had no children or whose children were old enough not to require their mothers' full-time care. Married women's wartime labor force participation rates were:

	Participation rate (in percent)	
	1940	1944
Age 18 to 64 .....	14	23
Age 35 to 44 .....	15	26
With no children under 10 years ....	20	35
With children under 10 years .....	8	13

The labor force recruitment of women ages 20 to 34 was limited because of the wartime rise in marriages and child-birth within this age group.

Labor force participation rates for married women did not decline in the postwar period. In 1950, participation rates of wives were much the same as they had been in 1944 (table 2). Over the ensuing decades, wives' rates moved up, pausing only occasionally, mostly during some recessions. For wives with young children, labor force participation rates have quadrupled since 1950.

### Age of youngest child

One of the effects of the general increase in married mothers' labor force activity is that many differences in their participation rates that previously were correlated with the age of the youngest child in the home have become blurred or have disappeared entirely in recent years (table 3). In 1970, married mothers' participation rates ranged from 24 percent for those whose youngest child was less than a year old to 57 percent where the youngest was 14. Moreover, participation rates exhibited a step-wise progression closely related to the age of the youngest child. On balance, the participation rates for mothers of children 0 to 2 years old were about 30 percent or lower; for mothers with 3- to 5-year-olds, they were in the mid- to upper-30-percent range; and for those with 6- to 11-year-olds, rates were in the 40- to 50-percent range. Participation rates exceeded 50 percent only among those women with junior-high or high-school age children.

By March 1983, these four distinct "steps" or ranges of participation rates had been reduced to three. The rate for mothers of infants was 45 percent, with rates for those with children 2 to 5 years old falling in a narrow band between 50 and 57 percent, and rates for mothers with school-age children concentrated in an almost equally small range between 60 and 67 percent. In addition, by 1983, the entire range of participation rates had contracted. In 1970, the highest rate (57 percent) was more than twice the lowest (24 percent), but by 1983, the highest (67 percent) was only about half again as great as the lowest (45 percent). That

45 percent of all wives with infant children are now in the labor force reflects many interrelated factors, such as inflation and recession. It also attests to the turnaround in society's attitude about mothers working outside the home and to women's persistence in the labor market despite higher-than-average unemployment rates.

As in the past, mothers with young children have a more difficult time in the labor market than other mothers.<sup>4</sup> In March 1983, the unemployment rate for married women with toddlers under 3 was 12.8 percent, about twice that of mothers whose youngest child was at least 6 years old. In part, unemployment rates of mothers of young children may be higher because child-care responsibilities may restrict the types of jobs these women can accept. When employed, however, more than 60 percent of toddlers' mothers work at full-time jobs. This proportion rises to more than 70 percent when the children are school age. Of all 46 million children under age 18 in married-couple families, half had both parents in the labor force. (The issue of child care for working mothers is discussed by Sheila Kamerman elsewhere in this issue.)

### Husbands

In March 1983, when 52 percent of all wives were in the work force, 79 percent of the husbands were, too. But, over time, husbands' labor force participation rates have drifted down considerably:

Year	Participation rate (in percent)
1940 .....	93
1950 .....	92
1960 .....	89
1970 .....	87
1980 .....	81
1983 .....	79

Much of the decline is attributable to a reduction in the number of husbands 55 or older in the labor force. This is due in large part to the growth of a great variety of private

**Table 1. Families by type, selected years, 1940-83**

[Numbers in thousands]

Year <sup>1</sup>	All families	Married-couple families	Other families		
			Maintained by men	Maintained by women	
				Total	As percent of all families
1940 .....	32,166	26,971	1,579	3,616	11.2
1947 .....	35,794	31,211	1,186	3,397	9.5
1950 .....	39,303	34,440	1,184	3,679	9.4
1955 .....	41,951	36,378	1,339	4,234	10.1
1960 .....	45,062	39,293	1,275	4,494	10.0
1965 .....	47,836	41,649	1,181	5,006	10.5
1970 .....	51,227	44,415	1,239	5,580	10.9
1975 .....	56,257	47,528	1,412	7,316	13.0
1980 .....	59,910	49,132	1,769	9,009	15.0
1983 .....	61,834	49,947	2,059	9,828	15.9

<sup>1</sup>Data were collected in April of 1940, 1947, and 1955, and in March of all other years.

NOTE: Data for 1975 have been revised since initial publication.

retirement plans and better social security benefits, including a broadening of the eligibility requirements for disability benefits. In 1982, the labor force participation rate for husbands age 65 or over was 19 percent, compared with 48 percent in 1952. Corresponding rates for husbands 55 to 64 years of age were 71 and 89 percent. But participation rates for younger husbands have also drifted downward, a development probably related, to some degree, to the increasing participation of their wives. (More details about the current labor force activity and income of husbands and wives by race and Hispanic origin are provided in Howard Hayghe's article on page 26 of this issue. Information on men's reasons for early retirement and the effects on the family is presented in Kezia Sproat's article on page 40.)

**Divorce**

Divorce is . . . "a symptom of general family illness due to vast social changes confusing to individuals. But will these confusions be resolved as long as women insist upon feminist movements and men in baffled protest cry out that women are usurping their place in the world."<sup>5</sup>

These thoughts from a 1939 treatise, "The American Family in A Changing Society," could easily have been written during the turbulent 1970's, when the divorce rate hit the highest level ever recorded,<sup>6</sup> and a million women were added to the labor force in every year but one. The Depression of the 1930's had placed enormous strains on family life as the economic foundations of a great many families crumbled. Although neither divorce nor the employment of wives was as common as in recent years, both were viewed as destroyers of family life. The 1970's—like the 1930's—were also years of great stress for many families, but for different reasons, including inflation and changing lifestyles.

In 1940, there was 1 divorce for every 6 marriages, while in 1980, there was 1 for every 2 marriages. During both periods, an extensive amount of remarriage occurred, so that married-couple families predominated—84 percent in 1940 and 80 percent in 1980. However, divorces have also swelled the number of families maintained by women in recent years, a factor that raises the labor force participation rate of women maintaining families because divorcees have historically registered the highest participation rates of any marital group of women. In 1983, 60 percent of women maintaining families were in the labor force, compared with 44 percent in 1946 when widows dominated the group. (More details on families maintained by women are provided in Beverly Johnson's article on page 30 of this issue.)

**Current data**

All of the family labor force statistics discussed so far are derived from detailed data collected only once each year. Since 1940, these statistics have typically been collected in the March supplement to the Current Population Survey, to provide a "snapshot" of the employment status of family members. When the structure of families changed exten-

sively in the 1970's, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began developing two new series of monthly and quarterly data that would more quickly capture the effects of business-cycle changes on the employment situation of families and their members.<sup>7</sup>

BLS now publishes a series of person-family data every month in *Employment and Earnings*. Introduced in July 1977 on a quarterly basis, this series confirms long-term trends. For example, families in which the husband is employed are more likely to have other employed members than families where the husband is either unemployed or not in the labor force. Of the 36.8 million families where the husband was employed in the second quarter of 1983, 64 percent had at least one other employed person, while of the 2.6 million families where the husband was unemployed, 58 percent had some other person employed. Only 18 percent of the unemployed women maintaining families lived with another relative who was employed. The monthly statistics thus enable analysts to track the extent of unemployment within families as a recession develops or abates, and report on the cushioning effect when other family mem-

**Table 2. Labor force participation rates of married women, husband present, by presence and age of own children, 1950-83**

Year <sup>1</sup>	Participation rate				
	Total	With no children under 18 years	With children under 18 years		
			Total	6 to 17 years, none younger	Under 6 years
1950	23.8	30.3	18.4	28.3	11.9
1951	25.2	31.0	20.5	30.3	14.0
1952	25.3	30.9	20.7	31.1	13.9
1953	26.3	31.2	22.4	32.2	15.5
1954	26.6	31.6	22.7	33.2	14.9
1955	27.7	32.7	24.0	34.7	16.2
1956	29.0	35.3	24.5	36.4	15.9
1957	29.6	35.6	25.3	36.6	17.0
1958	30.2	35.4	26.5	37.6	18.2
1959	30.9	35.2	27.9	39.8	18.7
1960	30.5	34.7	27.6	39.0	18.6
1961	32.7	37.3	29.6	41.7	20.0
1962	32.7	36.1	30.3	41.8	21.3
1963	33.7	37.4	31.2	41.5	22.5
1964	34.4	37.8	32.0	43.0	22.7
1965	34.7	38.3	32.2	42.7	23.3
1966	35.4	38.4	33.2	43.7	24.2
1967	36.8	38.9	35.3	45.0	26.5
1968	38.3	40.1	36.9	46.9	27.6
1969	39.6	41.0	38.6	48.6	28.5
1970	40.8	42.2	39.7	49.2	30.3
1971	40.8	42.1	39.7	49.4	29.6
1972	41.5	42.7	40.5	50.2	30.1
1973	42.2	42.8	41.7	50.1	32.7
1974	43.1	43.0	43.1	51.2	34.4
1975	44.4	43.8	44.9	52.2	36.7
1976	45.1	43.7	46.1	53.6	37.5
1977	46.6	44.8	48.2	55.5	39.4
1978	47.5	44.6	50.2	57.1	41.7
1979	49.3	46.6	51.9	59.0	43.3
1980	50.1	46.0	54.1	61.7	45.1
1981	51.0	46.3	55.7	62.5	47.8
1982	51.2	46.2	56.3	63.2	48.7
1983	51.8	46.6	57.2	63.8	49.9

<sup>1</sup>Data were collected in April of 1951-55 and March of all other years.

NOTE: Children are defined as "own" children of the women and include never-married sons and daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children. Excluded are other related children such as grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins, and unrelated children.

bers are employed. (The article by Deborah Klein on page 21 of this issue provides more details on this subject.)

A second new statistical series concerns the weekly earnings of families. Between 1967 and 1978, BLS reported once a year on the usual weekly wage and salary earnings of individuals by age, sex, race, and occupation. The information was obtained from supplemental CPS questions asked each May. As part of the shift in emphasis to current, family-based statistics during the late 1970's, steps were taken to relate the earnings of individual workers to the families in which they lived and to collect the data more frequently.

The new quarterly series of weekly family earnings began with data for 1979 and was first published early in 1980.<sup>8</sup> Since that time, quarterly news releases have illustrated the different earnings patterns among families and the general effects of inflation on their purchasing power. For instance, during the second quarter of 1983, median weekly earnings for married-couple families were \$517 per week—\$354 if there was one earner and \$646 if there was more than one. Multi-earner families continued to account for slightly more than half of all married-couple families. These families were a little better off than others over the year, because their median earnings had increased somewhat more (4.4 percent) than the increase in the Consumer Price Index (3.5 percent). For families maintained by women, median weekly earnings (\$271) were well below those of married couples, but had at least kept pace with inflation.

### The present and future

Increasingly, the family unit itself has become the focus for policy planning, program evaluation, and research. The data series currently published by BLS permit policymakers and planners to address the social and economic issues that affect the daily lives of people in families on a more timely basis than ever before. We can now examine the ways in which children and youth, their parents or stepparents, elderly couples, and those living in minority families are affected by the dynamics of the labor market.

Most importantly, the analysis of family statistics aids in shaping our thinking about family life in the future. Clearly, we know a great deal about the demographic characteristics of the population and can estimate the age and race distributions of the population for 1990, the year 2000, and

**Table 3. Labor force participation rates of wives by age of youngest child, selected years, 1970–83**

Presence and age of children	1970	1975	1980	1983
All wives	40.8	44.5	50.1	51.8
With no children under 18	42.2	43.8	46.0	46.6
With children under 18	39.7	44.9	54.1	57.2
Age of youngest child:				
0 to 1 year	24.0	31.0	39.0	44.6
2 years	30.5	37.1	48.1	50.4
3 years	34.5	41.1	51.7	56.1
4 years	39.4	41.2	51.5	57.2
5 years	36.9	44.0	52.4	56.6
6 years	42.0	46.4	58.5	59.4
7 years	44.7	51.3	61.7	61.1
8 years	44.6	52.1	62.3	65.0
9 years	48.5	52.4	60.8	60.4
10 years	48.7	56.2	63.3	62.4
11 years	47.6	52.8	63.4	66.4
12 years	51.8	49.7	65.7	66.6
13 years	51.8	54.0	64.6	65.3
14 years	56.9	52.5	62.6	66.4
15 years	52.8	55.3	60.8	64.1
16 years	54.3	54.7	62.3	66.8
17 years	55.1	52.6	55.6	62.2

beyond. We can apply current age-, sex-, and race-specific labor force participation rates to the extrapolated population to obtain estimates of the future size and configuration of the labor force.<sup>9</sup>

But how far off are such estimates likely to be? What are the long-term trends in the nondemographic factors affecting the proportions of women who will be in the labor force at some future date? What will be the effect of today's technological changes and worker dislocations; of more flexible work schedules; of later retirement? Is the nuclear family in its classical form (father, mother, children, but no grandparents or other relatives) truly "rapidly breaking down today, not because of 'loose morals' or 'permissiveness,' but because it no longer serves the needs of the population?"<sup>10</sup> Some of these nondemographic factors may have as much to do with shaping the future labor force as similar factors—such as the birth control pill, the transistor, the computer, and the laws governing employment—have had in molding today's work force. As the articles on family statistics in this issue suggest, it is appropriate to monitor both the current status of workers in families and emerging demographic and nondemographic trends in constructing statistics for the future. □

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Makepeace Thayer, American author, 1820–1898, as quoted in Ralph Emerson Browns, ed., *The New American Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York, Standard Book Co, 1957), p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> The survey referred to is the Current Population Survey (CPS). Detailed information about the survey's background, concepts, and reliability is published in "Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment from the Current Population Survey," *Handbook of Methods, Volume I*, Bulletin 2134–1 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1982).

Unless otherwise indicated, labor force data in this report were obtained from the CPS.

<sup>3</sup> See "Source of Wartime Labor Supply in the United States," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 1944, pp. 264–78.

<sup>4</sup> See reprints of special labor force reports on the marital and family status of workers, beginning with *Marital Status of Workers, March 1959*, Special Labor Force Report 2 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1960). Also see Elizabeth Waldman and others, "Working mothers in the 1970's: a look

at the statistics." *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1979, pp. 39-49, and other articles in that issue.

<sup>5</sup>Harriet Ahlers Houdlette, *The American Family in a Changing World* (Washington, American Association of University Women, 1939), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>See Waldman and others, "Working mothers in the 1970's." Also see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, "Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths for 1982," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Mar. 14, 1983, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>See Howard Hayghe, "New data series on families shows most jobless have working relatives," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1976, pp. 46-48; and Janet Norwood, "New approaches to statistics on the family," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1977, pp. 31-34.

<sup>8</sup>See U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics "New Data Relate Workers' Earnings to the Families in Which They Live," *USDL* 80-188, Mar. 27, 1980.

<sup>9</sup>Articles in the November 1983 issue of the *Review* present the results of the Bureau's most recent projections of economic growth, distribution of demand, and employment through 1995. See also Richard W. Riche, Daniel E. Hecker, and John U. Burgan, "High technology today and tomorrow: a small slice of the employment pie," in the same issue for a discussion of the employment implications of the growth of high technology industries.

<sup>10</sup>Alvin Toffler, *The Eco-Spasm Report* (New York, Bantam Books, 1975), p. 89.

### Achieving pay equality

Although most people are familiar with the implications of the Equal Pay Act . . . and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act . . . [the struggle against] pay discrimination has a long and confusing history. It began as far back as the National War Labor Board (NWLB) in World War II with the movement of women into industrial jobs. Title II of Executive Order 9250 established the Wage and Salary Stabilization Policy; Paragraph Two of the order set standards for wage adjustments to be "the correction of maladjustments or inequalities, the elimination of substandards of living and the correction of gross inequities." The NWLB also issued General Order No. 16, which stated that wages for women could be increased without approval of the NWLB to "equalize the wage or salary rate paid to females with rates paid to males for comparable quality and quantity of work on the same or similar operations." . . .

Beyond Title VII and the Equal Pay Act there still exist two other possibilities regarding legal action for comparable worth plaintiffs: The first is that the cases may be tried under the 14th amendment, which provides equal treatment under the law, and this is where plaintiffs might venture. The guarantees of the 14th amendment have been raised in questions including reverse discrimination. Many cases in this area have been tried and are continuing to be developed. Another resort is to have new legislation passed that makes it clear that jobs are to be priced based on comparable worth . . . .

—RICHARD W. BEATTY AND JAMES R. BEATTY

"Job Evaluation and Discrimination: Legal, Economic, and Measurement Perspectives on Comparable Worth and Women's Pay," in H. JOHN BERNARDIN, *Women in the Work Force* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1982), pp. 211 and 215.