

Profile of American Families, 1940-57

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DESPITE the dire warnings we frequently hear concerning the deterioration of the American family, family life is more popular today than at any other time since the turn of the century. But marked changes are occurring in the patterns of family life, many of which have proceeded more rapidly since World War II. Change almost invariably creates tension, especially when it involves the modification of deeply rooted traditions or expectations. Many current social ills have been causally attributed to contemporary family life. If this is so, a basic understanding of changes in family life is indispensable to understanding these social problems.

The number of families in the United States has increased. More than three-fourths of the decline in the proportion of the population "never married" since 1890 occurred between 1940 and 1957 (fig. 1). In this period the proportion of men currently married increased from 59.7 to 67.3 percent, and of women from 59.5 to 66.4 percent (1a, 2a). The number of families increased 35.1 percent between 1940 and 1957 (2b). Four basic factors have contributed to this increase in families:

1. More couples survive to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary. Glick has estimated that median ages to which husbands and wives survive jointly increased 0.5 year between 1940 and 1950 (1b). The improvements in life

expectation since 1950 have undoubtedly extended this gain in the duration of marriage.

2. The proportion of remarried persons has increased. Although this trend started before 1940, the proportion of remarried women among those 15-44 years of age, with husband present, increased 4 percent between 1940 and 1950 (from 9 percent to 13 percent), or more than in the preceding 30 years (1c). The increasing proportion of remarried persons can be ascribed principally to the remarriages of divorced persons. In the years 1950 to 1956, there were 3 to 4 widowed brides and grooms to every 10 divorced brides and grooms (3a).

3. The greatest factor in the increased proportions of currently married persons, quite obviously, is the decline in the proportion remaining single. The proportion single of the population 14 years of age and older declined more than 6 percent between 1940 and 1957, 34.8 to 28.1 percent for men and 27.6 to 21.6 for women (1a, 2a). This decline was observed in each age group in 1955 compared with 1940 (1d). Between 1940 and 1955, the median age at first marriage dropped 1.6 years for men, or almost as much as in the preceding half century, while for women the median age dropped 1.3 years, or about twice as much as in the preceding half century (1e). Two social trends would seem to be particularly significant in the recent decline in the age of first marriage, especially in the oldest 25 percent. College enrollment of married students increased with the advent of the GI bill and the veteran-student. As recently as 1955, many colleges still reported increased enrollment of married students. The increased opportunities for, and acceptance of, married women in the labor force may well have paralleled the GI bill as a factor facilitating

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earlier marriage since the war. These trends may be regarded as part of the generally favorable economic conditions since World War II which have facilitated marriage.

4. Better economic conditions have also contributed to the increase of families by decreasing the "doubling-up" in households. At least 14 percent of the increase in families between 1950 and 1957 was due to the decrease in sub-families which would have otherwise lived with relatives (2b).

Fertility Rates

Parents today apparently want, or can afford, to care for more children. In 1956, the fertility rate reached 120.8 infants born alive per 1,000 women 15-44 years of age, which is in sharp contrast to the 1940 rate of 79.9 and is in excess of the 1947 rate of 113.3, the year of the "baby boom." Most important for trends in family size is that the increase in fertility rates in recent years has been due to increasing rates of third and higher order births, which have continued to rise since 1950 (3b). Between 1950

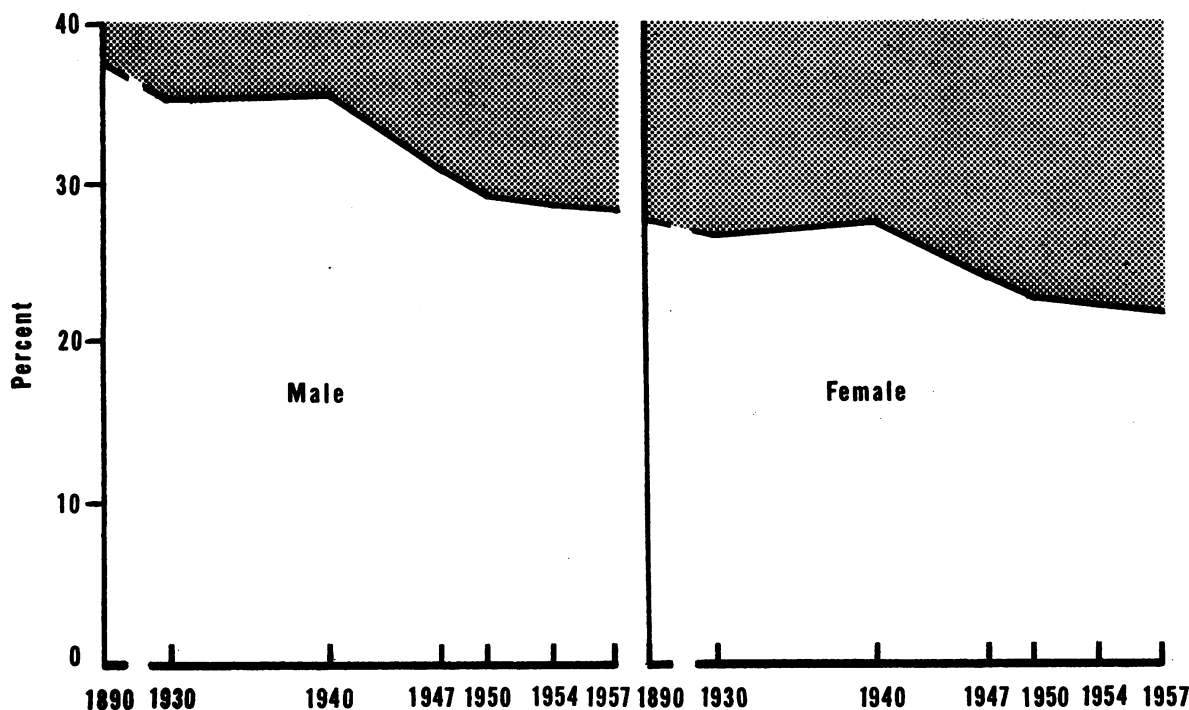
and 1957, all age groups of women 15-44 years of age who were ever married showed a marked increase in the number of children born to them. Moreover, while women with increasing education have fewer children, the proportional gains in fertility between 1950 and 1957 were greater as the level of education increased, excluding those with less than 8 years of schooling and with 4 or more years of college. Also, the proportional increase in fertility in the last 7 years was greater among women aged 15-44 in the labor force than among those not in the labor force (2c).

Family Composition

Despite the marked increase in fertility and children born, the average size of families has increased but little and only in the last few years. Average family size, which had decreased to 3.76 persons in 1940, decreased further to 3.53 persons in 1953. By 1957, the average size of families rose to 3.61, although this is still below the level for 1947 (1f,2d).

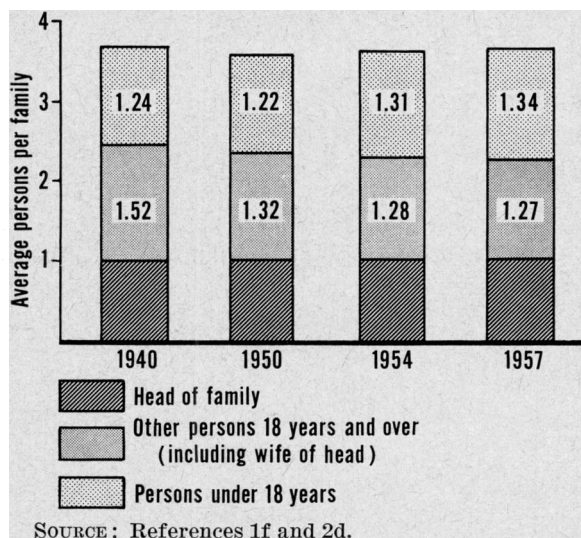
The decline in family size up to 1953 is the

Figure 1. Percentage of persons never married, 14 years old and older, by sex, 1890-1957.



NOTE: Standardized for age; based on the age distribution of the 1940 population.
SOURCE: References 1a and 2a.

Figure 2. Average family size and family members, by type, 1940, 1950, 1954, 1957.



result of the changing composition of families (fig. 2). Between 1940 and 1950, the average number of family members under 18 years of age decreased as a result of low birth rates in the 1930's. Between 1950 and 1954, the rising fertility of the late 1940's and early 1950's brought a substantial increase in the average number of family members under 18 years old (1f,2d). This trend continued to 1957 when there were 1.34 persons under 18 compared with 1.17 in 1950. However, throughout the period 1940-57, the average number of persons over 18 years of age fell from 2.52 to 2.27 (2e).

Changes in the household and family situation of persons over 65 years of age have been small, but in the direction of increasing isolation from kinsfolk. Between 1950 and 1957, the proportion of persons over 65 who were classified as unrelated individuals or inmates of institutions increased from 23.5 percent to 24.8 percent, or by 3,645,000 people. Among those 75 years of age and older, in the same period, the proportion classified as unrelated or as inmates of institutions rose from 27.8 to 30.2 percent, which was due to the increase in unrelated individuals.

Between 1950 and 1957, the proportion of persons over 65 years of age who were family members, but not the head of the family or the wife of the head (that is, dependent elders usually), declined from 21.2 to 18.1 percent.

In the same period, the proportion who were heads or wives of heads of husband-wife families increased from 44.4 to 47.2 percent (4,2f). The majority of these latter families (70.8 percent in 1953) were elderly couples with no other adult family members (1g). Also, most of these husband-wife families owned their own homes. The median income in 1949, however, was less than half, \$1,129, that for all husband-wife families, \$2,803 (1h).

Socioeconomic Conditions

The social and economic conditions of families have generally improved throughout the period 1940-57. The educational achievement of husbands in husband-wife families has increased from an average of 8.0 years in 1940 to 10.8 years in 1957. The educational improvement was greater for younger than for older husbands (1i,2g). Improvements in housing are reflected in less "doubling-up" of the generations. From 1947, when 8.7 percent of married couples were without their own household, the percentage dropped to 3.2 in 1957 (1j,2h).

Although money income alone is only a fair indicator of an increase in real wealth or buying power, the trend in family income, which has increased every year except 1949 and 1954 (from a median of \$2,533 in 1944 to \$4,971 in 1957), undoubtedly represents a real gain in the economic conditions of families (5a,b).

The improved social and economic conditions of families are associated with the increasing number of families with more than one earner, and especially with the increase of women in the labor force. Between 1948 and 1956, the number of families with more than one earner increased from 41 to 46 percent among non-farm families and 37 to 42 percent among farm families (5c).

Despite the increasing number of dependent children in families, the participation of married women in the labor force has increased. Among married women living with their husbands, 14.7 percent were in the labor force in 1940, and 29.6 percent in 1957. The increased participation was largest for married women over 35 years of age, which rose from 20.1 percent in 1947 to 30.0 percent in 1956; the largest proportional contribution to this

growth was among women 45 to 64 years of age (6a,b). In 1955, husband-wife families with the wife in the labor force had a median income of \$5,622, compared with \$4,326 for families in which the wife did not work (5d). The thought is suggested from these and similar data that the erstwhile productive functions of the family unit may be returning in a new institutional form.

From the point of view of family growth, children seem to be less a barrier to the employment of the mother than formerly. The percentage increase between 1950 and 1957 in children born per 1,000 women 15-44 years old who were ever married was 13 percent greater among women who worked, a 30.7 percent increase, than among those not in the labor force, a 17.9 percent increase (2i).

This increase results in part from the greater increase of married women over 35 years old in the labor force, that is, women who have completed or nearly completed their childbearing. The proportion of married women in the labor force decreases with duration of marriage through the first few years, indicating that women leave the labor force during the early years of childbearing (7). Women with children under 6 years of age have a lower proportion in the labor force at all ages than women without children under 6, but the proportion increases among these women as age increases (6c). As the children enter school, mothers tend to return to work, as indicated by the much greater participation of women with children 6 to 17 years of age but none under 6 years old.

A current deficiency in statistics on the family is the lack of data on total family health, but certain indexes from vital statistics data reflect improvements in the health of family members. Between 1940 and 1956, the improvement in life expectancy at birth rose from 62.8 to 67.3 years for white males, and from 67.3 to 73.7 for white females. Although the improvement in life expectancy was greater for nonwhite males and females than for white persons in this period, a marked disparity remains (3c). Infant mortality provides another index, declining from a rate of 47.0 per 1,000 live births in 1940 to 26.0 in 1956 (8a,3d). Maternal mortality offers a similar picture of

marked gains in health for the family: a rate of 37.6 per 10,000 live births in 1940 dropped to 4.1 in 1956 (8b,3e).

Family Stability

The increasing proportion of remarried persons, mentioned earlier, and the increasing proportion of divorced persons suggest a growing problem of family instability. Actually, on the basis of available data, it is extremely difficult to assess the trend in family stability. The percentage of men currently divorced rose from 1.2 in 1940 to 1.8 in 1954; for women it rose from 1.6 to 2.2 in the same period. Between 1954 and 1957, the change in the percentage of persons currently divorced was negligible (1a,2a). The trend in the divorce rate per 1,000 women 15 years old and older through this period gives a different impression. From its highest point of 17.8 per 1,000 married women 15 and over in 1946, the divorce rate declined to 9.4 in 1956 (3f). Divorce trends alone can be misleading in assessing trends in family instability, since they do not reflect the total population of families broken by separation and desertion, from which the majority of divorces arise. Much more detailed study, based on reliable nationwide statistics of family formation and dissolution, is needed before conclusive analyses can be presented.

Divorce has increased in relation to death as a type of family dissolution. While the proportion of currently divorced persons rose between 1940 and 1954, the proportion of currently widowed persons declined in the same period (1a). Comparisons of the trends in currently divorced and currently widowed understate the relative increase of divorces, since proportionately more people who were ever divorced are likely to be among the remarried at a given time than persons who were ever widowed. Most important is the fact that divorce, by and large, affects families relatively early in marriage, while death affects them much later.

Marriages of young persons (women less than 21 years of age) are less likely to be permanent than marriages of somewhat older persons (1k). Divorce rates are considerably higher for nonwhite than for white women, as

are rates of separation and widowhood. Divorce rates are lowest for women with 4 or more years of college, and highest for women with 1 to 3 years of high school. The rates of separation for women vary inversely with education (17). In recent years, the proportion of divorces affecting children and the median number of children per divorce involving children have increased (39).

Illegitimacy is an increasing problem in family life. Between 1940 and 1956, the illegitimacy rate rose from 7.1 per 1,000 unmarried women 15-44 years of age to 20.2. The ratio of illegitimate births per 1,000 live births increased from 17.5 to 19.0 for white persons and 179.6 to 204.0 for nonwhite persons between 1950 and 1956 (9,10). In one study, premarital pregnancy was found to be associated with divorce and with young age at marriage (11).

Basic Problems

While many of the trends in American family life, especially since World War II, may be regarded as encouraging, sight must not be lost of the fact that many social problems thought to be closely related to family life have been increasing. Among these we may list juvenile delinquency, mental illness, illegitimacy, and living conditions and productive opportunities for our elder citizens.

In addition, with the improvement of public health methods in combating the great killers of yesterday, our attention must turn more and more to the prevention and control of chronic disease that saps the will and the physical energy of so many, especially in later years.

A basic step in understanding these problems and effecting preventive techniques lies in a more detailed study of the family as the unit of social, mental, and physical health. Among the research needs concerning the family, mention should be made of at least the following:

1. A statistically useful definition of the family for health and welfare purposes, including all relevant persons in and out of the household unit.

2. Nationwide coverage of marriage and divorce statistics, based on the centralized registration of marriages and divorces in all of the States. Data broadly similar to those obtained

for divorces should be obtained for families broken by death and separation.

3. More intensive study of differential mortality by marital status, age, sex, and race to locate the social and psychological correlates of mortality differences.

4. Intensive studies of health conditions and practices in the family unit as a whole, and of the functions of the family in rehabilitation and in preventing and treating illness.

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