



University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development

*Children, Youth & Family*

# background

Report # 13

Childhood Demographics

Spring 1998

## Shifting Landscape

*How Demographic Change Has Redefined The Childhood Experience*

If history is a credible witness, demographic shifts in the future will be followed by profound changes in the nature of childhood.

The dynamics of the American family are particularly sensitive to changes in demographics. The kinds of work parents do determine not only family income, but, for example, where children grow up and how much time they get to spend with their parents.

A snapshot of major demographic shifts helps explain how childhood in America has evolved to what it is today and provides a glimpse of what it might be like in the future.

Among the most influential shifts were the exodus of American families from farm work and rural life, followed by the whittling down of family size, fathers and mothers being away from home for longer periods of time each day, and a steep rise in education for all.

Such factors influence how children spend their time and with whom. They also affect family organization and the social context in which children are raised.

### Family Work

From the first European settlers to more than a century after the American Revolution, America was chiefly a farming society. Most children grew up in two-parent farm families. These families were usually large. Their communi-

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*Of great importance to the development of children is the nature of their parents' work. As America moved from an agrarian society, work took fathers from the home. More recently, mothers have joined the workforce in increasing numbers. Today, more children than ever before are being left in the care of adults other than their parents.*

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ties were usually small. All family members were involved in the farm, working side-by-side for most of the day. Crops and livestock came first. Children's education came second.

In 1830, about 70% of American children lived on farms and in families with two parents. By 1930, after the rise of industry, fewer than 30% of the children lived in farm families.

Of great importance to child development was the nature of the work that now supported these families. Parents – typically fathers, at first – left home to work in mills, factories and offices. The time they spent with their children diminished considerably.

### Family Size

The average number of children in American households fell sharply as families moved away from farm life.

In 1865, 82% of the nation's adolescents lived in families with five or more children. By 1930, 57% of adolescents lived in families with three or fewer children. Family size fell by a median of 7.3 children to 2.6 children.

### Education

The decline of the farm family also meant the end of daily farm chores for most children. School enrollments shot up sharply.

In 1870, half of the nation's children 5-19 years old were enrolled in school, averaging about 16 weeks in the classroom a year. But by 1940, 95% of the children 7-13 years old and 79% of children age 14-17 were enrolled in school, spending an average of 30 weeks in class.

Better educated children made better educated parents down the road. Only 15% of adolescents born in the 1920s had fathers who completed at least four years of high school, and 17% had mothers who had completed high school. Two decades later, 39% of fathers and 44% of mothers had at least earned a high school diploma.

### Working Mothers

Several major changes occurring

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(Continued from the front)

after World War II continued to re-define the family landscape.

Mothers took work outside the home in steadily increasing numbers. In 1940, only 10% of the nation's children lived in families in which the mother worked outside the home. In 1950, the number had risen to 16%. Four decades later, nearly 60% of America's children had working mothers.

With more mothers in the workplace, more children were placed in the care of someone other than their parents for much of the day.

The "traditional" family of a wage-earning father and a stay-at-home mother — which earlier had replaced the "traditional" farm family as the norm — became the exception. By 1995, only 12% of the nation's children lived in families in which the father was the sole breadwinner and the mother stayed home.

### Single Parents

Mothers are also at the center of another demographic shift that has contributed to the redrawing of the American family: an unprecedented rise in the number of children growing up in families without fathers.

Between 1940 and 1960, only 6%-8% of the nation's children lived in mother-only households. By 1990, nearly 20% of the children lived only with their mothers.

### Child Poverty

Poverty places children at risk of being abused or neglected, performing poorly in school, developing health and behavioral problems, and encountering other limitations.

The years following the Great Depression saw child poverty rates decline,

## The Big Six

*Of the demographic changes over the past 150 years, these influenced child development the most.*

- The shift to non-farm work by fathers.
- The sharp reduction in family size.
- The dramatic increase in the level of education found within the families.
- The increase in the number of mothers in the workforce.
- The rise of single-parent families.
- The large decline and then substantial rise in child poverty.

then rise; the gap between rich and poor narrow, then widen.

The number of children living in relative poverty dropped from 38% in 1939 to 27% in 1949, then fell to 23% between 1950 and 1969. A family in relative poverty is one whose income is less than 50% of the median family income reported in a specific year.<sup>1</sup>

In 1970, child poverty began to

rise. By 1988, nearly 27% of America's children lived in relative poverty.

Official U.S. government poverty rates — based on an income scale determined by the average costs of feeding a family — show a more dramatic upswing: after bottoming out at 14% in 1969, the official child poverty rate climbed to 23% in 1993.<sup>2</sup>

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## references & notes

*This article was based on the following report:*

Hernandez, D., J. (1997). Child development and the social demography of Childhood. *Child Development*, 68, 1, 149-169.

<sup>1</sup> Hernandez, D.J. (1993). *America's children: Resources from family, government, and the economy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1995). *Current Population Reports, Series P60-188. Income, Poverty, and Valuation of Noncash Benefits: 1993*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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**Co-Directors:** Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD. **Associate Directors:** Carl N. Johnson, PhD.; Marks S. Strauss, PhD.

**background Editor:** Robert B. McCall, PhD.; **Writer:** Jeffery Fraser (412) 731-6641, e-mail: Fraser53@msn.com

Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh, 2017 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; (412) 624-7425; fax: (412) 624-1187