



The More Things Change? Children's Living Arrangements since Welfare Reform

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In 2002, six years after the enactment of federal welfare reform, young children and children in lower-income families were less likely to be living with single mothers and more likely to be living with two biological or adoptive parents, whether the parents were married or not.

Increasingly, U.S. policymakers are seeking to promote child well-being by influencing children's living arrangements. The antecedents of today's marriage promotion initiatives appear in the explicitly stated goals of 1996's federal welfare reform: encouraging marriage and raising the share of children living with two parents.

The 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families make it possible to examine changes in children's living arrangements since the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program.¹ Between 1997 and 2002, the share of children living in single-mother families declined significantly; however, that decline occurred during the early part of that period.² Among key subgroups of children—those age 5 and under and those in families with incomes in the lowest quartile³—declines in the share living with just their mothers were accompanied by marked increases in the share living in both married and unmarried two-parent families.⁴

Changes in Living Arrangements of All Children

Between 1997 and 2002, the share of children living in single-mother families fell from 21.5 to 19.2 percent, and the share living with unmarried parents rose from 2.0 to 2.9 percent. Over the same period, the share of children living with married biological or adoptive parents rose from 59.6 to 60.0 percent, a statistically insignificant change. These changes occurred mostly during the early years of welfare reform, between 1997 and 1999. Indeed, the living arrangements of children in 1999 and 2002 are virtually identical.

Changes in Living Arrangements for Young and Lower-Income Children

To the extent that changes in policy influence childbearing, the effects of change would be most apparent among young children. This Snapshot therefore examines the living arrangements of children age 5 and under in 2002. Moreover, because welfare reform and current marriage promotion policies are targeted toward lower-income families, it is useful to consider changes in the living arrangements of children in those families.

Figure 1 shows striking changes in the living arrangements of young children between 1997 and 2002. The share living in single-mother families declined by 3.8 percentage points, from 21.0 to 17.3 percent, with about two-thirds of the drop occurring between 1997 and 1999.⁵ This decline was accompanied by a rise in the share of young children living with two married parents (2.5 percentage points, from 66.5 to 69.0 percent) and a rise in the share living with two unmarried parents (1.2 percentage points, from 4.6 to 5.8 percent). The increased share living with unmarried parents occurred between 1997 and 1999, whereas the increased share living with married parents occurred after 1999.

This pattern is even more pronounced among children (up through age 17) in the lowest income quartile (figure 2). Between 1997 and 2002, the share of such children living with a single mother fell by 6.7 percent-

age points, from 48.5 to 41.7 percent; the share living with married parents rose by 3.5 percentage points, from 32.7 to 36.2 percent; and the share living with unmarried parents rose by 2.1 percentage points, from 3.3 to 5.4 percent. Again, the bulk of the decline in children living with a single mother occurred during the early years of welfare reform. About two-thirds of the increase in children living with married and unmarried parents occurred between 1999 and 2002.

DATA AT A GLANCE

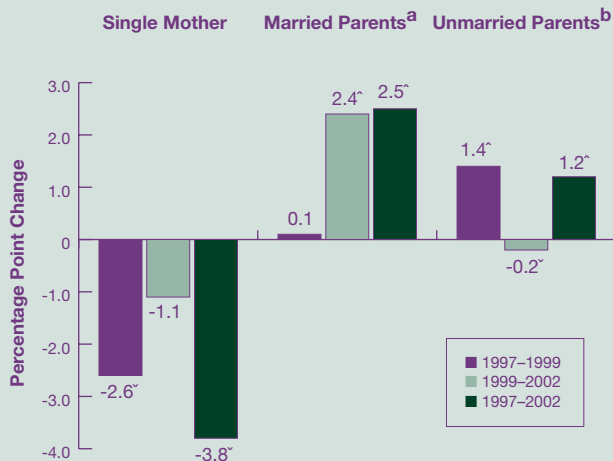
THE SHARE OF CHILDREN 5 AND YOUNGER LIVING WITH SINGLE MOTHERS DECLINED FROM 21.0 PERCENT IN 1997 TO 17.3 PERCENT IN 2002.

THE SHARE OF YOUNG CHILDREN LIVING WITH MARRIED PARENTS INCREASED 2.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS BETWEEN 1997 AND 2002.

THE SHARE LIVING WITH UNMARRIED PARENTS INCREASED 1.2 PERCENTAGE POINTS.

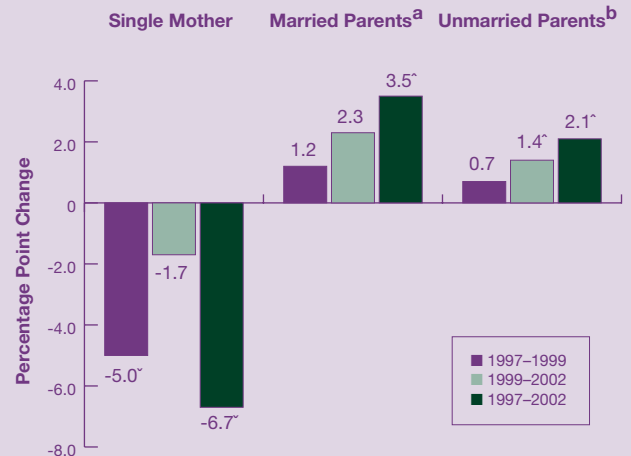


Figure 1. Changes in Living Arrangements of Children Age 5 and Under, All Incomes



Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families
^a Children living with married parents include those living with either two biological or two adoptive parents who are married.
^b Children living with unmarried parents include those living with either two biological or two adoptive parents who are unmarried.
[^] Increase is significant at the 0.10 level.
[~] Decrease is significant at the 0.10 level.

Figure 2. Changes in Living Arrangements of Children Ages 17 and Under in Lowest Income Quartile



Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families
^a Children living with married parents include those living with either two biological or two adoptive parents who are married.
^b Children living with unmarried parents include those living with either two biological or two adoptive parents who are unmarried.
[^] Increase is significant at the 0.10 level.
[~] Decrease is significant at the 0.10 level.

Conclusion

Research shows that, on average, children fare better in families with two married parents than in single-mother families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Therefore, the dramatic declines in the shares of young and lower-income children living in single-mother families between 1997 and 2002 must be considered good news, especially since the declines are accompanied by increased shares living with married parents. It is also important to note the significant increases in the shares living with two unmarried parents, a historically rare living arrangement that has been growing in recent years, particularly among children in lower-income families. It is far from clear if this trend is beneficial for children (Acs and Nelson 2002).

References

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 McLanahan, Sara, and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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Endnotes

- ¹ All NSAF data presented here are adjusted using weights from the 2000 Census. Data from the 1997 and 1999 rounds, published elsewhere, were computed using weights from the 1990 Census.
- ² A more detailed analysis of trends in children's living arrangements appears in Acs and Nelson (2003).
- ³ Social family income (which is roughly equivalent to household income) relative to a family's needs is used to determine whether a child is in the lowest income quartile. This measure captures the resources available to the child and adjusts for differences in family size. In addition, it allows investigators to compare the poorest 25 percent of children in one year with the poorest 25 percent in another.
- ⁴ Children in married and unmarried two-parent families include those living with either two biological or two adoptive parents.
- ⁵ Differences may not be precise due to rounding.

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