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Economy Drives Marriage Market and Family Stability, Data Indicate

Americans are marrying later, divorcing more frequently and remaining single at a greater rate, resulting in dramatic changes in the composition, economic prospects and diversity of American families. An analysis of the nation's shifting demography over the past three decades shows Americans spending more of their adult lives outside the institutions of marriage and parenthood, and children experiencing three or more different family structures and living arrangements while growing up. The tendency to never marry is particularly prevalent among African-American women.

The analysis by Western Washington University sociologists reflects the growing importance of women's income in an economy laden with continuing inequities as well as opportunities, and the declining value of marriage as a source of economic stability.

"There is no monolithic American family," says lead author Jay Teachman. "People still need to make a living and want to have a family. But there is more diversity in the way people form unions outside of marriage and construct their family life."

Reported in the November "Decade in Review" edition of the national Journal of Marriage and the Family, the study adds fuel to the ongoing debate about the future of the American family. It is particularly significant because the data also track variations by race and ethnicity.

In compiling the analysis, Teachman and his colleagues used the latest statistics available, but point out that today's multifarious family types go far beyond the restrictive definition of being related by blood, marriage or legal means and living together used by the 1998 U.S. Census and other official data.

Between 1970 and 1998, households consisting of a married couple with at least one child living in the home decreased from 40 percent to under 26 percent.

During the same period, the percent of households made up of persons living alone, households

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headed by a single woman, and other situations of non-related individuals living together substantially increased.

What isn't known are the long-term consequences of these different relationships and family experiences for the children whose environments and circumstances are substantially altered by the choices of the adults in their life.

"Researchers often tend to focus on the individuals and the choices they make about relationships and living arrangements without considering the other people linked to them," says Teachman. "Children are attached to adults, and what we do affects them."

Today, as a result of moving into and out of different family situations, nearly 50 percent of White children and two-thirds of African-American children are likely to be born into or spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family.

Historically, marriage has been an economic union, offering a practical division of labor among men and women to provide for themselves and their children. This is no longer the case, particularly for women, according to Teachman. While young men are less likely to be able to support a family on a single income, young women no longer need to get married to support themselves.

"In reality, family life continues to stray from the mythology," says Teachman. "There are different types of families for different people, and race and economic opportunity are significant markers for how people live and share their lives."

As the nation continues its long-term shifts from an agricultural to an industrial society and information age, men and women have had to renegotiate assumptions about their roles in providing for the economic well-being of the family, the researchers note. While economic stagnation and uncertainty have plagued young men, economic opportunities have increased for young women. Such changes make it extremely difficult to imitate - or accept - the type of family modeled by their parents or grandparents.

Teachman and colleagues Lucky Tedrow and Kyle Crowder pooled their expertise and came up with a closer look at the very fluid portrait of American families.

Among highlights of their findings:

- Americans have retreated from almost universal early marriage. The percent of ever-married women aged 20-24 declined by approximately 32 percent between 1975-98 for

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both Whites and African-Americans. Changes among Hispanic women have been more moderate, and they still are more likely than either White or African-American women to have married by age 20-24.

- Marriage is more common among Whites when men are employed, have more education and higher incomes. It is less common when women are employed, have more education and higher incomes, which helps explain much of the decline in marriage for White women.
- The availability of suitable spouses as the result of racial segregation in the United States is also a factor. Blacks tend to be concentrated in economically depressed areas with few economic opportunities for males.
- There has been relatively little change in the likelihood of permanent singlehood for White and Hispanic women. However, the percentage of Black women still single by age 35-39 has significantly increased, implying that nearly one in three may never marry.
- The proportion of women divorced by age 40-44 rose sharply between 1975-90 for all three races and ethnic groups, with the largest increase - from 20 to 30 percent - among White women. The growing prevalence of divorce has been matched by a pronounced decline in the percent of women remarrying.
- As American women spend fewer of their childbearing years in marriage, the number of births to unmarried mothers has increased, mirroring the racial trends in marital patterns and economic opportunities. In 1995, about 25 percent of White births occurred outside

of marriage, up from 14.5 percent in 1970. About 41 percent of Hispanic births and 70 percent of African-American births in 1995 were from non-marital unions, up respectively from 29.5 and 60 percent 15 years earlier.

- Both White and African-American families have experienced an approximately 17 percent rise in median income since 1970, but the continuing inequity is clear. For White

families, median income advanced from just under \$40,000 to about \$57,000 in 1997,

while the gain for African-American families climbed from \$24,400 to \$28,600.

The increase for Hispanic families was even more modest, going from about \$27,000 to just over \$28,000.

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- Married couples with the wife in the labor force increased their income about 20 percent. Married couples in which the wife did not work outside the home experienced a

slight decline in median income. Valued labor market skills are increasingly concentrated in two-earner families.

Wage inequality and poverty pose huge barriers to family and economic stability, the analysis indicates. The very poor and constant economic position of families headed by women stands out in the data. In 1970, these families earned slightly more than \$21,000, which was virtually unchanged by 1997. Families headed by single males also lost ground with income declining from about \$37,234 to \$32,960. The poverty rates for most groups have also remained basically stable since 1970, and Black poverty is still almost three times higher than among White families.

" We need to understand that many of the shifts we are seeing are not unexpected given continuing external constraints," says Teachman. "The changing economic fortunes of men and women shape the likelihood of marriage and the situations in which children are raised."

The analysis of the changing demography of American families by Teachman and colleagues is a significant tool for researchers, according to Robert Milardo, editor of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. "The landscape defined by Teachman and his colleagues is one of a diverse array of family forms as individuals respond to economic opportunities and cast their family roles in new ways or in ways that were more common at the end of the 19th century," says Milardo. "The basic social geography of American families gives us the big picture and truly has something for every."

The *Journal of Marriage and the Family* is the quarterly publication of the National Council on Family Relations, headquartered in Minneapolis. Editorial offices are located at the University of Maine.

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The entire article and accompanying charts are available on the National Council on Family Relations website (Online Journals section) <http://www.ncfr.com/>.

