

The Changing American Family

By Editor Test *Wed, Oct 17, 2012*

The 2010 Census revealed that married couples are, for the first time, less than half of U.S. households, according to this article, which appeared recently in the MetLife Mature Market Institute newsletter.



Whatever happened to the “typical” American family of four: Mom, Pop, and two kids? This is an important question because every time a change in federal health care policy or any retirement program is proposed its impact on that supposedly typical family of four is at the center of the debate.

But lost in that debate is this simple fact: That type of family, a married couple with two children, is a very long way from being representative of U.S. households, if they ever were. The 2010 Census revealed that married couples are, for the first time, less than half (48%) of U.S. households, those with any children under age 18 are just 20%, and those with two children are 8%, or less than one in 10 households.

In a 50-year period, the number of U.S. households has more than doubled, rising from 53 million in 1960 to almost 117 million in 2010, a 120% increase. At the same time, the number of married couples with children actually slightly declined, from 23.9 million to 23.6 million — not a huge number change, but a notable change in direction for the married population.

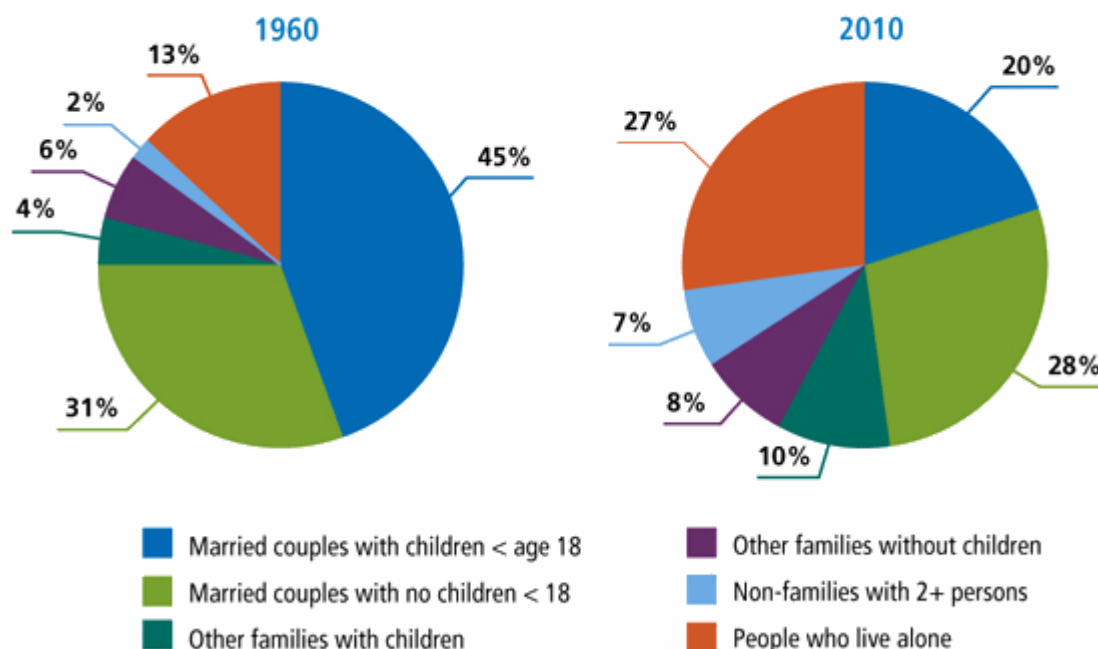


What has increased the most is the number of people who live alone. The 7 million counted in 1960 (then 13% of all households) jumped 350% to 31.2 million, and now accounts for 27% of all households. People who live alone also now rank as the second largest household type, right behind married couples with no children under 18, who account for 28%.

Bottom Line — There Is No “Typical”

Today, no household category can be described as typical. This is because, unlike 50 years ago, no one type reached even a third of the total, as the charts below show.

Household Types — 1960 compared to 2010



The Impact on Finances and Home Health Care

An accurate picture of the nation’s household structure is essential to gaining a deeper understanding of what resources families and other types of households need for their retirement planning as well as provisions for home health care.

Many retirement programs, such as Social Security, have spousal benefits that are not available to the now majority of households who are not married couples. But equally important is that unmarried individuals must fund their own retirement programs as well as pay all their household living expenses without the benefit of the second income that two-thirds of married couples have.

From a health care planning perspective it is harder to control costs when patients can’t convalesce at home because no family members are there to help them. Unlike 50 years ago, many former hospital-based medical procedures are now done in an out-patient clinic, and recovery is expected to be done at home. That can be quite difficult for people who live alone or for those whose spouse must go to work.

Regarding longer term care, many elderly would prefer to be cared for at home rather than spend their retirement savings on a stay at a nursing home or rehabilitation facility. But almost half (45%) of householders age 65 or older live alone, making home health care delivery to them considerably more expensive.

There are no easy solutions to helping the many millions of single individuals plan for their retirement and manage their short- or long-term health care expenses. But it may help to fully acknowledge that Mom, Pop, and two kids are most certainly not the “typical” American family today.

Peter Francese founded American Demographics magazine, now part of Advertising Age.

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