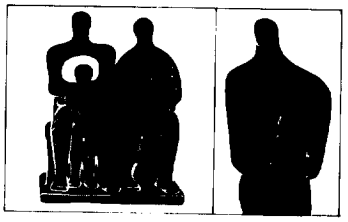

Family members in the work force

Work patterns of families have become so diverse in recent decades that a specific family type can no longer be identified as "typical"

Howard V. Hayghe

As a social and economic institution, the American family has undergone some profound changes in recent decades. One of the most talked about changes has been the substantial increase since the 1940's in married-couple families in which both spouses are in the labor force, or "dual-worker families." As the number of dual-worker couples increased, the number of families in which only the husband is in the labor force, or "traditional families," dwindled. Simultaneously, the number of unmarried men and women in the labor force who maintained families grew, as divorce and separation became increasingly common. But, perhaps the most overlooked development has been the steady increase in the proportion of families in which neither the husband nor the person maintaining the household is in the labor force, or "other families."

The traditional family group is now far from being in the majority. Yet, no other group has taken its place. Instead, the composition of the family has become increasingly diverse, as the labor force roles of members have changed, and the proportions of "other families" and families maintained by divorced, widowed, separated, or single persons have grown. In other words, there is no longer a "typical" family.

This article traces the changing labor force characteristics of families over the years since the *Monthly Labor Review* began publication. It looks back to the pre-World War II era to provide a picture of family labor force characteristics during the early decades of this century, and traces the broad trends from 1940 to the present, focusing on the current situation.

The analysis is based on data from a variety of sources. Information on pre-1940 developments is drawn from studies based on the decennial censuses, as well as some other smaller studies. Data for the post-1940 period are from the decennial censuses and the Current Population Survey.[1]

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Pre-World War II trends

Today, there is a standard definition of what constitutes a family—namely, a group of two persons or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.[2] Prior to 1940, however, the concept was not as clearly defined. As a result, information from these earlier periods is not always comparable to today's data. Fortunately, historical data on the labor force participation of women are available from which a fairly good picture of the family work patterns of those early decades can be constructed. (See table 1.)

Between 1900 and 1920, decennial census data show that the number of women in the labor force grew by about two-thirds, from about 5 million to 8.3 million. The proportion of these women who were married also grew fairly rapidly, rising from 15 percent of the women in the labor force to 24 percent.

The information on labor force participation of wives, together with data on households, can be used to derive estimates that are indicative of family labor force patterns prior to World War II. Overall, there were about 24.4 million households in 1920. A breakdown of these households by type is not available because the collection and tabulation of such data were inconsistent before World War II. However, calculations based on the 1910 and 1930 censuses indicate that in 1920, roughly 85 percent—or around 20 million—of the households consisted of married couples.[3] And, because most of the approximately 1.9 million wives in the labor force had husbands who also were in the labor force (92 percent of the husbands were participants),[4] dual-worker families would have constituted around 9 percent of all families.

Estimates of the proportion of families maintained by women in the labor force are equally difficult to determine. Information based on data collected in the 1920 decennial census from an 11-city sample indicates that about 15 percent of employed women maintained households in which no husband was present.[5] Thus, by extrapolation, there were about 1.3 million women in the labor force nationwide maintaining their own households without husbands.

The number of wives who were working or looking for work continued growing from 1920 through 1940. (See table 1.) This was a remarkable feat, considering the social, cultural, and, indeed, technological barriers confronting wives who worked for pay outside the home. While poor, black, or immigrant women often had to work, the cultural and social mores of the time—unlike those of today—discouraged a breadwinning role for wives. For example, Gallup polls conducted in the 1930's found that about 80 percent of the population felt that wives should not work.[6] But, it should be noted that these polls were conducted during the Depression, and public opinion might have been affected by the notion that women would take some of the shrinking number of available jobs away from men. (There was as little foundation to this reasoning in the 1930's as there is today. Then, as now, women tended to be employed in service sector jobs which are relatively unaffected by economic downturns, whereas men tended to be employed in goods-producing industries that typically bear the brunt of recession.)

In addition, 50 years ago, household technology was relatively primitive and families were larger. Consequently, housework required far more physical labor and time than it does today. Not only was present-day technology unavailable to wives, so were modern time-savers such as prepared foods, fast-food outlets, and supermarkets where an entire week's worth of groceries can be purchased at one stop.

Table 1. Women in the labor force by marital status, selected years, 1900–40

Year	Total women		Married women[1]	
	Number in labor force (thousands)	As percent of all women	Number in labor force (thousands)	Percent of all women in labor force
1900	4,997	20.6	769	15.4
1910	7,640	25.4	1,891	24.7
1920	8,347	23.7	1,920	23.0
1930	10,632	24.8	3,071	28.9
1940	13,007	25.8	4,675	35.9

[1] Includes small number not living with their husbands.

SOURCE: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Series D 49–62 (Bureau of the Census, 1975), p. 133.

Given these daunting social and physical obstacles, why did some wives work? The answer then is similar to the response frequently given today—economic necessity. In a study conducted in 1920, wives gave various reasons for working outside the home, such as the need to support large families, the inadequacy of their husbands' wages, inflation, providing for their children's education, and saving for old age.[7] In a later survey, 80 percent of wives who were job applicants said they were looking for work out of necessity.[8]

Trends since 1940

In a sense, 1940 was a watershed year for statistics on the family. This was the first time that concepts of the family and of the labor force that are still in use today were incorporated into a decennial census. Thus, 1940 is a natural starting point for an examination of trends in family labor force characteristics.

By 1940, the employment picture for women had changed somewhat from its pre-World War II trend. About 13 million women, or 26 percent of all women, were in the labor force.[9] Approximately 30 percent of them were married and living with their husbands, while 16 percent maintained their own families with no husband present. But the largest group of women in the labor force—about 6.7 million, or nearly half the total—were single (had never been married).

This was still the era when a wife's primary occupation was homemaking. Thus, families in which the husband, but not the wife, was in the labor force accounted for nearly 7 of 10 of the 32.2 million U.S. families. There were barely 3

million dual-worker couples, only 9 percent of all families. (See chart 1.)

There were also 5.2 million families—almost 1 of 6—in which the householder, whether a woman or a man, had no spouse present. Relatively few of these householders, especially the women, participated in the labor force. Families maintained by a man or a woman who was in the labor force each made up about 8 percent of all families.

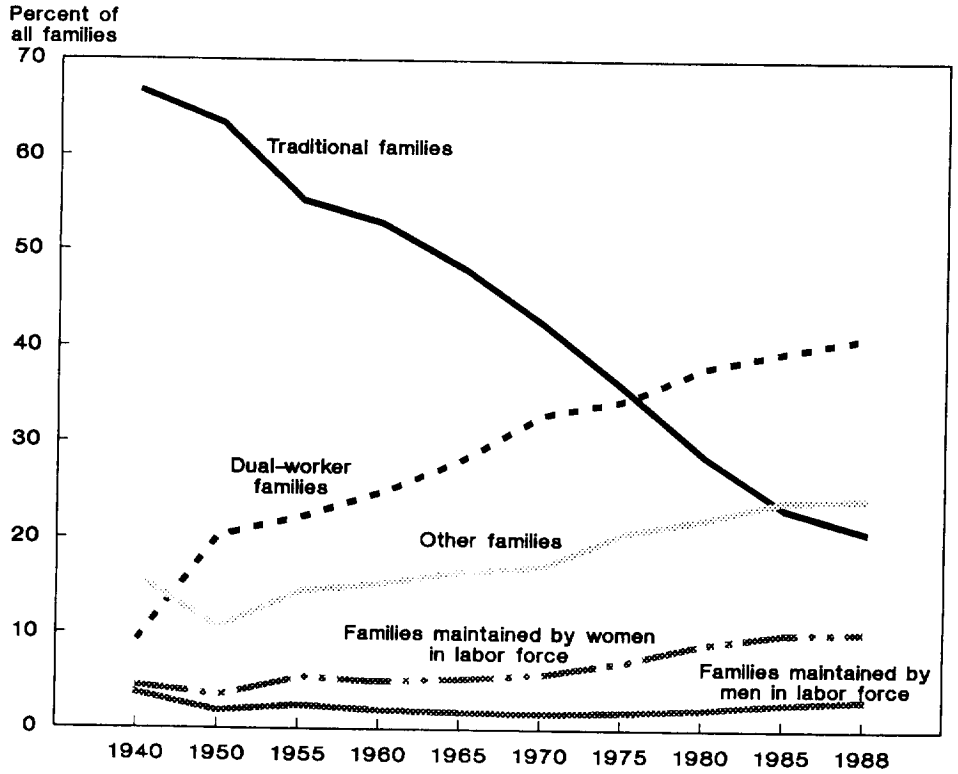
During World War II, wives helped supply the additional labor required by industry to meet the demands for war materiel and to fill the jobs of the men called to serve in the Armed Forces. Consequently, between 1940 and 1944, the number of married women who were working or looking for work grew by about 2 million, and their labor force participation rate shot up from 14 percent to nearly 22 percent. Immediately after the war, many wives left the labor force. However, within a few years, they started reentering, and, by 1948, their participation rate had returned to its 1944 level; by 1950, about 24 percent of wives were working or looking for work.

This postwar increase in wives' labor force participation—coupled with a surge in marriages—is reflected in the sharp jump, between 1940 and 1950, in the proportion of families composed of dual-worker couples. Over the next 15 years, the number of wives in the labor force continued to grow, expanding by nearly 400,000 a year. Consequently, the proportion of "traditional" families declined gradually, although such families remained the majority for about half of the 1940–88 period. After 1965, the number of wives in the labor force grew very sharply, by an average 700,000 a year, and the decline of the traditional family accelerated. By 1988, the traditional family accounted for only about a fifth of the total families, compared with more than three-fifths in 1940.

In addition to the rise in dual-worker couples, there were other changes in the labor force behavior of families that have become increasingly significant over time. For example, the number of single-parent families maintained by women in the labor force grew from about 5 percent of all families in 1965 to around 10 percent in 1988. By contrast, the increase among those families maintained by men in the labor force was almost negligible.

"Other families" group. Also significant was the growth in the proportion of the other families group. This group is quite heteroge-

Chart 1. **The changing labor force patterns of families, 1940–88**



neous, but its members all share a common factor—the person who maintains the household is not in the labor force. This group includes retired couples; couples where the wife, but not the husband, is in the labor force; and families maintained by unmarried householders who are not labor force participants.

Between 1940 and 1988, the number of other families increased by 11.2 million, from 4.8 million to 16 million. Over the same period, the number that were in the married-couple category increased to such an extent that this category became the overwhelming majority of the other families group. The number of other families that were maintained by men or women who were not in the labor force grew as well, although not so rapidly as the married-couple group. (See table 2.)

The increase in the proportion of the married-couple category of the other families group was probably spurred by a growing tendency during this period—especially from 1955 to about 1986—for husbands to retire and leave the labor force at a relatively early age.[10] Somewhat surprisingly, however, the proportion of the couples where the wife was a labor force participant but the husband was not was about 3 times greater in 1988 than in 1940—14.8 percent and 4.5 percent. (See table 2.) In contrast, the number of families in which neither spouse was in the labor force grew at a slower pace.

Table 2. **Trends in the composition of "other families," by type, March of selected years, 1940–88**

Other families type	1940[1]	1950[1]	1960	1980	1988
Total:					
In thousands	4,788	5,584	6,883	13,314	15,974
In percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Married-couple families	46.2	51.2	62.5	69.3	69.3
Wife in labor force, not husband	4.5	9.3	11.8	14.6	14.8
Neither wife nor husband in labor force	42.2	41.9	50.7	54.7	54.5
Families maintained by women not in labor force (no spouse present)	45.5	40.9	32.8	27.3	26.5
Families maintained by men not in labor force (no spouse present)	8.3	7.8	4.7	3.4	4.3

[1] Data are from *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Series A 288–319 (Bureau of the Census, 1975), p. 41; and *Current Population Reports*, Series P-50, Nos. 5 and 29, and Series P-S, No. 20 (Bureau of the Census, May 1948, May 1951, and March 1947, respectively).

Table 3. **Trends in labor force activity of families with children under age 18, by type of family, March of selected years, 1975–88**

[Numbers in thousands]

Family type	1975	1980	1985	1988
Total families with children	30,375	31,325	31,496	32,347
Married-couple families:				
Number	25,400	24,974	24,225	24,611
Percent of total families with children	84.0	79.7	76.9	76.1
Percent with—				
Father in labor force	96.0	95.7	95.7	95.6
Father only	52.6	43.2	36.6	32.7
Father and mother	43.4	52.5	59.1	63.0
Mother only in labor force	1.6	1.8	1.9	2.2
Neither parent in labor force	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.2
Families maintained by women (no spouse present):				
Number	4,461	5,718	6,345	6,666
Percent of total families with children	14.6	18.3	20.1	20.6
Percent with—				
Mother in labor force	59.9	67.4	67.8	67.2
Mother not in labor force	40.1	32.6	32.2	32.8
Families maintained by men (no spouse present):				
Number	454	633	926	1,070
Percent of total families with children	1.4	2.0	2.9	3.3
Percent with—				
Father in labor force	87.0	88.6	90.0	90.2
Father not in labor force	13.0	11.5	9.9	9.8

NOTE: Children are "born" children and include sons, daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children. Not included are other related children, such as nieces, nephews, and grandchildren and unrelated children.

Today

The children. Children are being raised in a wider variety of family situations today than ever before. Half a century ago, the overwhelming majority of children lived in traditional families with the husband in the labor force and the wife at home. As times changed, this scenario became the exception rather than the rule; more, and younger, wives entered the labor force, and the incidence of marital breakup and out-of-wedlock births increased. Indeed, to the degree that households dissolve and are reestablished, children may live in several different family situations before reaching adulthood.

Comprehensive data on the living arrangements of children by the labor force status of their parent(s) and family type first became available on a regular basis in 1975. However, even in the relatively short time since then, some dramatic changes in the children's family situations have occurred. (See table 3.)

Since 1975, the proportion of married couples with children has declined from 84 percent of all families with children to 76 percent. Moreover, as wives and mothers increasingly entered the labor force, fewer families with children fit the old model of "father in labor force, mother at home." In 1975, 53 percent of the married-couple families with children consisted of traditional families, while 43 percent fell into the dual-worker category; by 1988, the proportions were 33 percent and 63 percent.

As the proportion of families consisting of

Table 4. **Families, by type, labor force status of husbands, wives, and persons maintaining families, and presence and age of youngest child, March 1988**

Family type	Total	With no own children under age 18	With own children under age 18		
			Total	Ages 6 to 17, none younger	Under age 6
Number (in thousands)					
All families	65,670	33,323	32,347	17,486	14,860
Married-couple families	51,847	27,236	24,611	12,688	11,924
Husband only in labor force	13,744	5,708	8,036	3,156	4,880
Husband and wife in labor force	27,037	11,544	15,493	8,839	6,654
Wife only in labor force	2,364	1,821	543	360	184
Neither husband nor wife in labor force	8,702	8,163	539	333	206
Families maintained by women (no spouse present)	11,061	4,395	6,666	4,086	2,580
Householder in labor force	6,834	2,353	4,481	3,088	1,393
Householder not in labor force	4,227	2,042	2,185	998	1,187
Families maintained by men (no spouse present)	2,762	1,692	1,070	713	357
Householder in labor force	2,079	1,114	965	641	325
Householder not in labor force	682	577	105	73	32
Percent					
All families	100.0	50.7	49.3	26.6	22.6
Married-couple families	79.0	41.5	37.5	19.3	18.2
Husband only in labor force	20.9	8.7	12.2	4.8	7.4
Husband and wife in labor force	41.2	17.6	23.6	13.5	10.1
Wife only in labor force	3.6	2.8	.8	.5	.3
Neither husband nor wife in labor force	13.3	12.4	.8	.5	.3
Families maintained by women (no spouse present)	16.8	6.7	10.2	6.2	3.9
Householder in labor force	10.4	3.6	6.8	4.7	2.1
Householder not in labor force	6.4	3.1	3.3	1.5	1.8
Families maintained by men (no spouse present)	4.2	2.6	1.6	1.1	.5
Householder in labor force	3.2	1.7	1.5	1.0	.5
Householder not in labor force	1.0	.9	.2	.1	(1)

[1] Less than 0.05 percent.

NOTE: Children are "born" children and include sons, daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children. Not included are other related children, such as nieces, nephews, and grandchildren and unrelated children.

two parents declined, the proportion maintained by a single parent rose. In 1975, about 15 percent of the families with children were maintained by a single-parent mother, and 1 percent by a single-parent father. By 1988, the proportions had increased to 21 percent and 3 percent, respectively. It is important to note that a parent was in the labor force in about 7 of 10 of the single-parent families maintained by women, compared with nearly 9 of 10 of the families maintained by single-parent fathers and virtually all (98 percent) of the two-parent families.

Very few families with children are in the other families group, largely because most of the parents are relatively young and do not have the resources that would allow them (especially the married fathers) to leave the labor force. Overall, a little more than 10 percent of families with children fell into the other family group in March 1988, slightly more than in 1975, and the majority were maintained by single mothers.

The families. For families, trends since 1940 have led away from the "married couple with only the husband in labor force" paradigm. But, instead of reorganizing around one particular household model, such as the dual-worker household, families appear to be moving away from any modal category. The adjective "diverse" best describes the family scene today. Table 4 shows why.

Of the 65.7 million families in the United States in March 1988, about 41 percent consisted of married couples in which both husband and wife were in the labor force. In an additional 21 percent, the husband, but not the wife, was in the labor force; in 13 percent, neither spouse was in the labor force; and about 14 percent were maintained by a man or a woman who was in the labor force, but with no spouse present in the household.

When the presence and age of children are taken into account along with the labor force

status of family members, the complexity grows. For instance, dual-worker families with no children compose 18 percent of all families, while those with children are about 24 percent of the total. Single-parent families maintained by women in the labor force account for 7 percent of all families, and families maintained by women in the labor force with no children represent 4 percent.

This perspective on family types provides insights into today's debates regarding national family policy. For instance, although dual-worker families with preschool children number 6.7 million, this group makes up only 10 percent of all American families. Moreover, while 7 percent of the families consist of a single mother who is in the labor force and her children, about 2 percent of families (1.4 million) are maintained by a single mother with children under age 6.

Of course, these numbers and proportions are based on information about the family situation at one point in time and do not reflect the changes families inevitably undergo over time. For instance, many of the two-parent families in which both parents are in the labor force may join the traditional family category at some time in the future, or a divorce can change a married-couple family into a single-parent family.

THIS CENTURY HAS SEEN MARKED CHANGES in the composition of families and in the labor force patterns of family members. About 50 years ago, most wives had the exclusive role of homemaker and childraiser. Today, the reality is that, more often than not, she also works outside the home. Families are far more dynamic today: added to the changes that inevitably occur over time (for example, as families go from raising children to being "empty nests") are other changes that stem from the frequent breakup of families through separation and divorce and the reestablishment of families through subsequent remarriage. The result is that the majority of families no longer fit into a single category that can be termed "typical." Instead, there are numerous work-family patterns with none of them as dominating as the "traditional" family was 50 years ago. □

Footnotes

[1] The Current Population Survey is a monthly survey of (currently) about 60,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics to obtain statistics on the employment status of the population. Information collected in March of each year is specially processed to produce employment estimates by family status and characteristics.

[2] See, for example, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1987, Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 60 (Bureau of the Census, 1988), p. 60.

[3] *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Part 1*, Bicentennial Edition (Bureau of the Census, 1975), Series A 288–319, p. 41.

[4] J. A. Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations, 1879 to 1920*, Census Monograph IX (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1929), p. 153.

[5] Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations*, p. 128.

[6] Ruth Shallcross, "Shall Married Women Work?" National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 48, reprinted in R. Baxandal, L. Gordon and S. Reverby, eds., *America's Working Women* (New York, Random House, 1976).

[7] See *Women's Wages in Kansas*, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 10 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1921).

[8] See Emily C. Brown, *A Study of Two Groups of Denver Married Women Applying for Jobs*, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau No. 77 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1929).

[9] *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Series D 49–62 (Bureau of the Census, 1975), p. 133.

[10] For a discussion of the labor force participation trends of husbands, see Howard V. Hayghe and Steven E. Haugen, "Profile of husbands in today's labor market," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1987, pp. 3–11.