Abstract

The Demographic Foundations of Change in U.S. Households in the Twentieth Century

by

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The first objective of this research is to describe household change in the United States over the twentieth century. The next is to determine how much of that change is due to the changing demographic composition of the population, defining demographic composition as the structure of the population by age, sex, marital and parity status. The final objective is to determine how much of the demographic composition effect is due to each of the three vital rate components of fertility, mortality, and nuptiality. Achieving these objectives allows us to understand household change in the past, unite disparate threads of research on households, and refine tools for the projection of future household change.

I describe household change in the United States using decennial census samples from 1900 to 2000, combined with a new household classification system. The results confirm the long-term trend of household atomization, with the distribution of people across household types shifting away from complex structures involving extended kin and non-relatives, and toward living alone, with only a spouse, or children. In addition, longer average lifespans have brought with them a new household stage during which spouses live together after the children leave the parental home. Less noted in existing literature are the continuities in American households over the century. The proportion of people who share a household with relatives only has remained fairly stable, as has the presence of spouses (for adults) and parents (for children) in the average person's household. Finally, the new classification system's treatment of non-relatives reveals their rapidly increasing prevalence in households in the most recent decades, reversing a long-term trend. Thus, non-relatives

may be a new source of household complexity in the future.

Much of the description of household change suggests ways in which demographic composition affects households. To specify these effects, I use the same data as in the descriptive work, combined with decomposition techniques to attribute changes in the distribution of people across household types to two components: the demographic composition component, defined as the age, sex, marital and parity distributions in the population, versus the household propensity component, defined as the conditional probability of living in a certain household type given age, sex, marital and parity status. Microsimulation is then used to separate the demographic composition component into its vital rate components of fertility, mortality, and nuptiality. The results of this analysis show that, although the movement away from larger, more complex household types does not seem to have been demographically driven, demographic composition had a great deal to do with which of the smaller household types grew while the more complex types became less prevalent. Specifically, population aging favored people living alone or in households consisting of married couples only while fertility fluctuations increased the share of households consisting of nuclear families during the baby boom, and decreased that share during the subsequent baby bust. The most recent decades have seen an increase in more complex household structures, stemming from decreases in marriage, increases in divorce, and increases in cohabitation.

In addition to revealing patterns in the past, the microsimulation is also used to project future household change under various demographic scenarios. These projections imply that current patterns of delayed or foregone marriage and high divorce could end the century-long increase in married couple household prevalence. Also, continued high levels of extramarital childbearing could lead to a rise in household complexity, as unmarried parents and their children tend to live in more complex household types. Finally, projections suggest that future population change will continue to contribute positively to living alone and negatively to nuclear family households.

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