

## **Married Couples**

**The decline in the share of U.S. households maintained by a married couple proceeded slowly until 1970 and accelerated thereafter.**

Married couples headed 80 percent of U.S. households in 1910 and 71 percent in 1970; by 1998, however, married couples maintained just 53 percent of all households. In addition to the rise in unmarried cohabitation, this trend had two major components: an increase in the number of people, especially older people, who lived alone; and an increase in the number of families maintained by one person, usually the mother.

At the end of the century, a substantial majority of the white population continued to live in households maintained by married couples. In 1998, women maintained just 21 percent of white families with children under age eighteen. That is a significant proportion, but it hardly signifies the collapse of the traditional family pattern.

The pattern was quite different for the black population. Among black families with children under age eighteen, only 38 percent were headed by two parents in 1998. Mothers maintained a majority—57 percent—of these families.

As single-parent families became more prevalent, so too did the number of people living alone or with unrelated individuals or in institutions (at colleges or in the military, for example). Between 1970 and 1996, the number of Americans who did not live with relatives more than tripled from 15 million to more than 40 million.

Another way of looking at these trends is to examine the erosion of private support for a large part of the population. In 1910, nearly all married women obtained their subsistence from the earnings of their husbands, nearly all young children from the earnings of their fathers, and many older people from the earnings of their adult children. By the end of the century, the majority of married women were no longer wholly supported by their husbands; millions of young children and their mothers were supported by the government; and most older people lived on some combination of their own savings and government contributions, without significant support from their children.

**Households Headed by a Married Couple**  
Percentage of all households

