

Measuring and Analysing Household and Families in Contemporary Developed Societies

Households and families

The ‘family’ and the ‘household’ are such basic units in human society that they have been studied extensively from many perspectives and are used in day-to-day conversation, although not in a consistent manner. ‘Family’ may refer to concepts as distinct as a kin descent group (“our family has lived in this area for generations”) or a nuclear family unit (“they are a two-child family”). A ‘household’ is a group of people who live together. In demography, family and household patterns may be the object of the explanations. For example, what family and household changes result from the (first) demographic transition from a high mortality and fertility regime to the low fertility and mortality patterns seen in developed contemporary societies? What about the more recent (second) demographic transition, characterised by reduced marriage and increased partnership breakdown? Families and households are also important determinants of demographic processes. Historically, in northwestern Europe, the ability to form an independent household (often following death in an earlier generation leading to inheritance) acted as a gatekeeper to marriage, which was in turn an important gatekeeper for having children, although never an absolute bar, of course. On average, married people not only have more children than others, but they also live longer. In Britain, household size started to fall only with the

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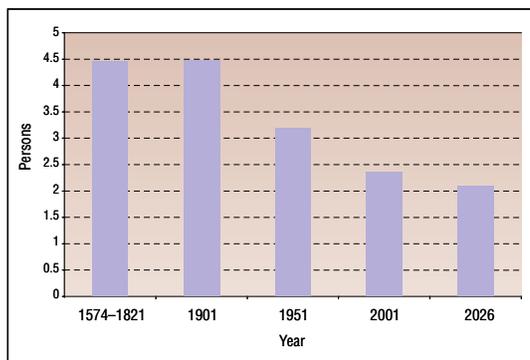


Figure 1. Average household size, Britain 1574–2026

Note: Geographical coverage varies between England and England and Wales

Sources: Table 4.4 in Laslett, P. & R. Wall (Eds.), 1972. *Household and Family in Past Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

New Projections of households for England and the Regions to 2026. ODPM Statistical Release 2006/0042. Available at www.communities.gov.uk.

onset of fertility decline at the end of the 19th century. Rather than behavioural changes, demographic changes, such as a population ageing, remain primarily responsible for the continuing decline in household size (Figure 1).

Definitions

Quantitative disciplines require that the topics under study should be meaningful and measurable, preferably in ways that are valid in different places and times. They should also be sufficiently simple and acceptable to be included in large-scale data sources of which traditional censuses are still the most widely used. The concept of the ‘common cooking pot’ underpins the notion of a household. The UN defines a household as a person living alone or a group of two or more persons living together who make provision for their own food or other essentials for living. The ‘common cooking pot’ is declining in importance as there is less pooling of resources and activities within households. In many European countries, in fact, a household is simply defined as the group of persons living together in a housing unit. These definitions refer to a particular point in time at which each person should be allocated to one particular household (or possibly to a non-household category, such as communal establishments or the homeless, depending on the particular treatment of these groups). The household was well-defined in Western societies when it was frequently an economic as well as a domestic unit, and the head of household had legal responsibility for and authority over members of the household. Indeed, the head of household had legal responsibility for ensuring that the census form was completed for all members of the household until 1981 in Britain, when the responsibility was widened to include all adult members. The idea of the ‘head of a household’ became increasingly anachronistic and had disappeared by 2001, a victim to more egalitarian household roles/political correctness/risk aversion by data collectors. It has often been replaced by a more neutral title such as ‘household reference person’ or ‘householder’.

A further complication is that increasing numbers of couples are cohabiting rather than being formally married to each other. Cohabitation is a household-based concept requiring co-residence and also a sexual relationship, although questions on the latter requirement will usually not be posed in such blunt terms. Marriage, on the other hand, is a formal attribute which requires neither co-residence nor a sexual relationship, especially since many countries do not include a category such as ‘separated’ for non-co-resident married people. Cohabitation is difficult to measure, even if explicit questions are asked. The two nominal partners can (and do) disagree about their status. Moreover, people report very differently about cohabiting at the time and if asked in retrospect, since entry and exit are often gradual processes rather than a well-defined yes or no state.

Other emerging social trends such as increasing numbers of couples ‘Living-Apart-Together’ (LAT), i.e. people with a regular partner acknowledged by friends and relatives, implicitly including a sexual relationship, although not co-resident. Measuring its prevalence is effectively impossible with register or census data and very difficult with survey data. Since the status is not well-defined, it is easy to conceal and it may be sensitive. However, tentative estimates suggest that four million people under age 60 in Britain are in a LAT relationship, very similar to the estimated number

cohabiting (and such relationships are known to be relatively common in The Netherlands among older people). Statistical or administrative systems may require a single residence to be identified, but this may not correspond with people's actual experience, indeed until recently, only married (and by definition different sex) couples were identified as being in a partnership.

The question "Who do you consider to be a member of your family?" produces very heterogeneous responses. While these may be informative about attitudes to family life among different groups, a consistent definition is required for making comparisons between groups. The statistical definition of a family unit corresponding to that of household discussed earlier is those members of the household who are related, to a specified degree, through blood, adoption or marriage. To add to the confusion, 'family' is derived from the Latin 'familia', which refers to what we would now designate as a 'household', i.e. the residential group, including non-relatives such as servants. In Europe, the definition of family is that of a nuclear unit consisting of a couple, with or without unmarried child(ren) or a single parent living with unmarried child(ren). Families are defined by data collection agencies based on information collected on topics such as partnership status (couples now usually include both cohabiting and married partnerships) and on kinship relationships within the household, rather than from information directly reported by the subjects themselves. There are some problems associated with a definition based on a maximum of two generations, e.g. how to categorise households which consist of three generations. The family defined as a 'co-resident nuclear unit' is operationalisable and meaningful but incomplete. Phrases like 'one-parent families' are widely used, but very few young children in developed societies do not have two living natural parents. In addition, the above definition does not distinguish children living with natural or step-parents, and provides no information on whether they have natural parents, children or sibs living elsewhere. It is possible to obtain such information relatively easily from mature registration systems, but it requires considerable additional information to be collected through censuses.

In practice, there is considerable overlap in these classifications. Most households consist of a single family unit as defined above (or a single person household – countries such as Norway define these as 'single person families'). In Britain, five out of six people living in the private household sector (a further 2 per cent are in communal establishments) are in a single-family household, and 12 per cent live alone. Other household types, multi-family or multi-person, are increasingly rare, accounting for only 5 per cent of the population, a proportion that has declined by half in the past three or so decades (Table 1).

Table 1. People in households (per cent), by type of household and family, Great Britain

| | 1971 | 2005 |
|---|------|------|
| One person | 6 | 12 |
| One family households | | |
| Couple with: | | |
| No children | 19 | 25 |
| Dependent children ¹ | 52 | 37 |
| Non-dependent children only | 10 | 9 |
| Lone parent | 4 | 12 |
| Other households | 9 | 5 |
| All people in private households (=100%) (millions) | 53.4 | 57.0 |

¹ May also include non-dependent children. Dependent children are never-married children in full-time education in families; in 1971 under age 25, and in 2005 childless and under age 19.

Source: *Social Trends* 36, Table 2.3, London: The Stationery Office.

Families vs. households

This apparently closer relationship between families and households may be potentially misleading. The link between ‘family’ and co-residence is becoming weaker, as about one-third of dependent children in Britain do not live with both biological parents. The majority of them lives in lone parent families (Table 2). There are increasing numbers of former partners, step families and half-siblings. In some cases, rights and obligations are household rather than family-based. For example, for social security purposes, the resources of cohabiting couples will be aggregated when assessing eligibility for social benefits, whereas only married partners may be eligible for spouses’ pensions benefits (although cohabiting partners may be eligible under discretionary rules). The legal position with respect to family responsibilities varies considerably across Europe.

Table 2. Families with dependent children, by family status England & Wales, 2001

| Family type | Per cent |
|--|--------------|
| Lone parent family | 25.3 |
| Couple family: | 74.7 |
| of which: | |
| Married | 63.0 |
| Cohabiting | 11.6 |
| of which: | |
| Step family | 9.9 |
| Not step family | 64.8 |
| of which married and non step-family | 57.6 |
| Families with dependent children (000s) (=100%) | 6,377 |

Note: a dependent child is a person aged under age 16 in a household (whether or not in a family) or aged 16 to 18, in full-time education and living in a family with their parent or parents.

Source: derived from Census 2001, National Report for England and Wales – Part 2 Table S007 Age of Family Reference Person (FRP) and number and age of dependent children by family type. Available at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7504>.

Household and family as longitudinal variables

Changes in family and household patterns are of great interest, but these apparently closely-related concepts are often analysed using different approaches (see the article by Keilman in this volume). A household is generally well-defined in space at a given point of time (since a household is directly linked a specific physical dwelling unit), but it has no clear longitudinal definition. If a couple splits up, is the household dissolved? If one of a number of children leaves ‘home’, does the household cease to exist? There is no obvious conservation law to guide us, in contrast from the balancing equation for individuals, which underpins much analysis of population change and forecasting:

$$\text{Population at time } t+1 = \text{Population at time } t + \text{Births in time period } (t \text{ to } t+1) - \text{Deaths in time period } (t \text{ to } t+1) + \text{Net migration flow in time period } (t \text{ to } t+1)$$

A ‘family’ in the broader non-co-resident sense can be well-defined in time. If we use each ‘ego’ as the reference point, it is possible to identify biological and marriage relationships in a straightforward manner in most cases, although even here, cohabitation may be difficult to identify and the paternity of babies may not easily be determined. Relationships are meaningful even when a link is missing –grandparents are still grandparents even if the intervening generation is dead, but the families so defined are not mutually exclusive. Given that everyone has or has had

two parents, four grandparents etc., we all have 10 billion ancestors 1 000 years ago, but these are not distinct. Each of these ancestors is likely to be an ancestor of a large percentage of the present population.

Postscript

In the post World War II period, the pattern featuring married couples with their dependent children (if any) living in a separate residence became increasingly common in modern societies. Marriage and longevity increased, while divorce and extra-marital childbearing remained relatively low. There was reduced pressure to share with others (apart from living with elderly relatives, which often remained common). In such situations, the benefits obtained from analysing families and households as separate variables were reduced. In more recent decades, trends such as increased partnership turnover have highlighted the importance of the distinction of the residential and kin/biological group, including rights, responsibilities and social ties extending beyond the household. The development of family analysis is facilitated in particular by register-based systems that include marriage and fertility information, whereas traditional censuses are based on the household as the principal group for which information is produced. Neither system is well-placed to elicit information on emerging topics such as LAT relationships. However, the tension between what can be reliably measured and what is important in behavioural and policy terms will remain a constant issue in future.

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