

Changes in Married Couples' Intra-household Distribution of Work and Earnings

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Abstract:

Wives and mothers have increased their labor force participation and earnings, raising questions about the relative importance of husbands' and wives' contributions to family income. We use decennial census data for 1970 to 2000 to estimate the proportion of couples with wife-primary, husband-primary or equal (each contributing 40 to 60 percent) earnings or hours/weeks worked. We show that, contrary to media accounts that have emphasized the recent growth of couples in which the wife is the "dominant" earner, the greatest increases in wife-primary and equal working and earning couples occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. We document differences by education, race/ethnicity, and the age and presence of children. Equal work is far more common than equal earnings. Wives of high-earning husbands continue to be somewhat less likely to work, however there is little evidence of a parallel reduction in work for husbands with high earning wives.

Introduction

In this paper we consider changes in the *intra*-household distribution of work and earnings for married couple families between 1970 and 2000. The “traditional” married couple family, with a full-time working husband and a stay-at-home wife, has grown less common over time. We document both the magnitude and timing of changes in spouses’ contributions. Our results demonstrate the importance of separate analyses of labor force participation and earnings. Using a synthetic cohort approach, we also consider the evolution of intra-household distributions across cohorts and over time.

We focus our initial descriptive analysis on two sets of questions. First: how common are marriages in which the husband and wife have similar hours or weeks worked, and are these “equal worker” marriages a new phenomena? Second, are “equal worker” marriages also “equal earner” marriages? We then explore alternative explanations of changes in the patterns of intra-household distribution. After considering differences over time and across cohorts, we consider patterns across education and racial and ethnic groups, and the association between low levels of employment and child care responsibilities (as suggested by the presence of young children).

We use data from the 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 PUMS of the Decennial Census. Our analysis considers married couples¹ in which both spouses are between 25 and 55 years old (inclusive).² For these couples we analyze the relative contributions of husbands and wives to the couples’ total labor force participation and earnings. For some analyses we show the full distribution of spouses’ relative contributions. In other cases we report the distribution of all married couples across three mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. In particular, we classify couples in which each spouse earns between 40 and 60 percent of total couple earnings to be “equal earner” couples. We designate couples in which wife’s earnings account for more than 60 percent of earnings to be “wife-primary earner” couples while those in which the husband’s earnings account for more than 60 percent are designated “husband-primary earner” couples. We use the same classification for labor force participation, relying primarily on a measure of total annual weeks worked, as that measure provides the most consistent indicator of the intensity of labor force participation across this period.³ Note that marital status and education are measured at the time of each survey whereas earnings and annual work effort are measured in the year prior to the survey. For simplicity, we refer to results using the year of the survey. For example, when we analyze couples in 2000, their annual earnings are actually from 1999. This difference causes a small amount of measurement error.

Do husbands and wives work alike? The magnitude and timing of increases in equal-worker marriages

To a large extent, the transformation in the distribution of intra-household work and earnings for married couples has been characterized by changes in *wives*’ labor force participation. Married

¹ In order to maximize the consistency of our definition across the years, we include only spouses who are “married spouse present” and ignore nonmarital co-habitation, which cannot be consistently identified over the full period analyzed here.

² We create weights for the couple by averaging the weights of each person.

³ Annual weeks is preferred to annual hours because no comparable hours data is provided for 1970. Annual LFP is preferred to other options (eg weekly hours) in order to include 2000 and to match with annual earnings measures.

women, especially those with small children, have dramatically increased their labor supply (see Spain and Bianchi, 1996; Blau, 1998; Fullerton, 1999). Explanations for the growth in wives' employment include less confidence in the stability of marriage (and therefore the availability of husbands' earnings), higher wages of women and increased access by women to occupations that reward tenure (increasing the opportunity cost of specializing in home production), and declines in family size and growth in market child care and other substitutes for domestic production (reducing the relative productivity of time at home).

As wives' employment has increased, have wives remained supplementary or secondary workers, or, has the increase in wives' employment been part of a potentially more fundamental shift in which husbands and wives play similar roles in working in the market? Figure 1 shows the cumulative distribution of weeks worked by the husband as a share of total weeks worked by the couple from 1970 to 2000. For example, if a husband works 48 weeks and a wife works 26 weeks, then the husband works 65 percent of total family weeks. Couples in which the wife does not work are shown on the far right (and include almost half of all couples in 1970, but just over 20 percent by 1990 and 2000). The figure shows that between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of couples with "equal" work (each spouse working 40 to 60 percent of total weeks) increased from 30 to 62 percent. This dramatic increase was concentrated in the 1970s and 1980s.

The popular media has recently focused on the emergence of wives who are the "dominant" workers or earners in their families.⁴ While equal worker couples are now in the majority⁵, wife-primary worker households (wife working more than 60 percent of total weeks) have remained uncommon. In 2000 only 6.0 percent of couples included a wife who worked 60 percent or more of total weeks worked. While there has been substantial growth in this category—only 2.5 percent of couples were wife-primary worker in 1970—it appears that for most couples, changes in wives' work represent wives joining their husbands, rather than substituting for them as primary workers.

⁴ A 2003 Newsweek cover story featured wives who worked more than their husbands (Tyne and McGinn, 2003). More recently, *Psychology Today* featured a discussion of the "New Trophy Wife"—who works, earns and achieves as much or more than her husband (Seigel, 2004).

⁵ Note that when we consider hours, rather than weeks, worked, fewer than half (46 percent) of couples have equal working spouses.

Figure 1. Husband's Share of Annual Weeks Worked, Cumulative Distribution

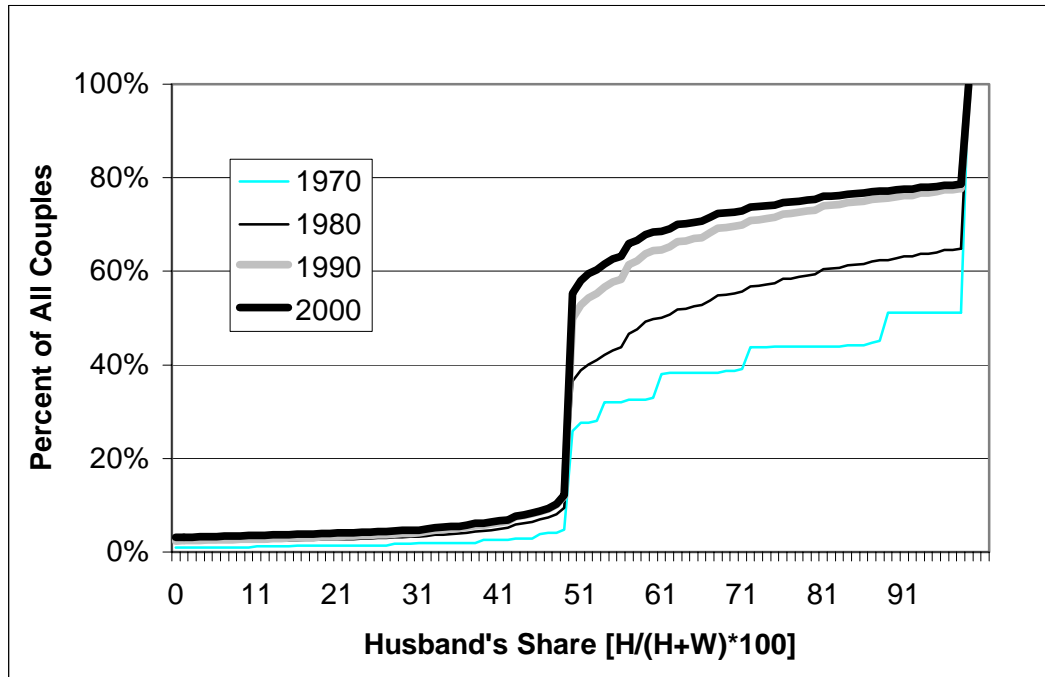


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one week of the year.

Figure 1 shows the full distribution of *relative* weeks worked. The growth in wives' contribution primarily reflects increases in wives' work, rather than declines in husbands' weeks worked. The proportion of husbands working at least 48 weeks per year fell somewhat from 87 percent in 1970 to 82 percent in 1980 and 1990 and 83 percent in 2000. The proportion of husbands working 13 or fewer weeks grew but remained small: 3 percent in 1970 and 6 percent in 2000. In contrast, the proportion of wives working at least 48 weeks grew from 25 to 55 percent between 1970 and 2000, while the proportion working 13 or fewer weeks fell from 55 to 26 percent. The greatest increases for wives came during the 1970s and 1980s, and are reflected in the growth of equal-working couples over the same period.

Data on annual hours worked is not available for 1970, so Figure 2 shows the cumulative distribution of the share of annual hours worked by the husband for 1980, 1990 and 2000. As with weeks worked, the greatest change over the observed period is in the 1980s, with little change between 1990 and 2000. As expected, the distribution of relative hours is smoother than that for relative weeks, with fewer couples reporting exactly equal hours. Equal-worker couples (i.e. those in which each spouse worked 40 to 60 percent of the total) grew from 45 to 62 percent of all couples between 1980 and 2000 when we consider weeks worked. Calculations based on hours worked suggests lower levels but similar change over time; by this measure equal-worker couples grew from 33 to 46 percent of all couples.

Figure 2. Husband's Share of Annual Hours Worked, Cumulative Distribution

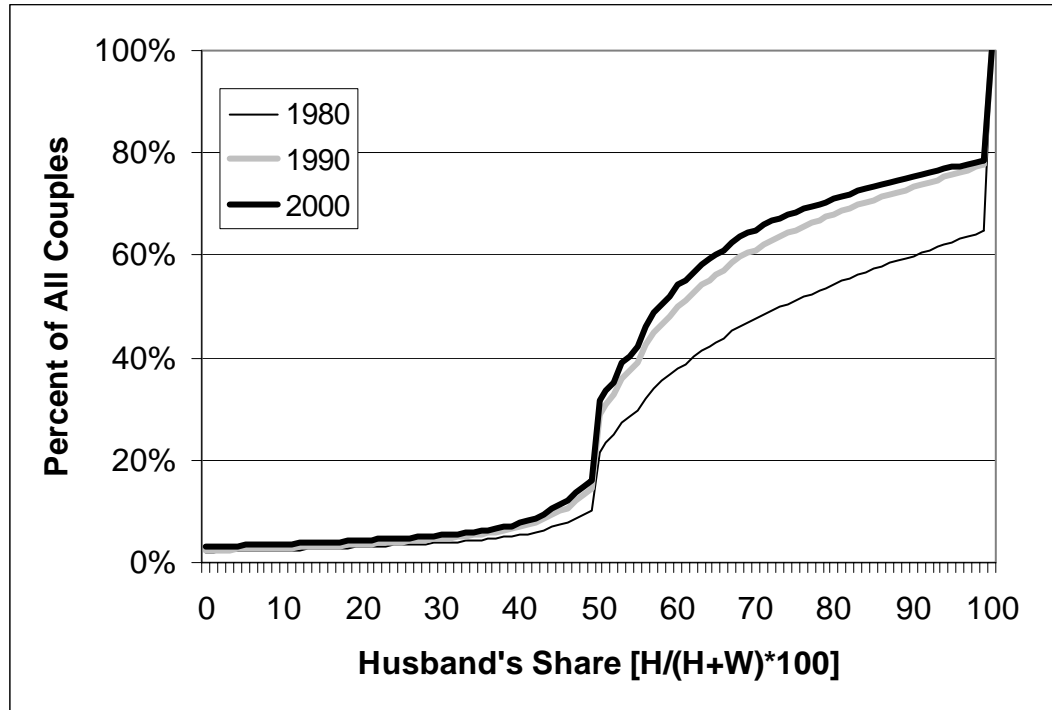


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one hour of the year.

Do husbands and wives earn alike? The magnitude and timing of increases in equal-earner marriages

Earnings reflect both wages and hours. To the extent that wives earn lower wages than their husbands, we might expect equal-earner (and wife-primary) couples to be less common than are equal-worker (and wife-primary) couples. Since labor force participation is more narrowly distributed (there are only 52 weeks in a year, and most employment is year-round) than wages, we might expect fewer equal-earner than equal-worker couples. Given the greater variability of earnings, we might expect both husband-primary *and* wife-primary earner couples to be more common than husband- or wife-primary worker couples. Both the intra-household distribution of work and the intra-household distribution earnings are of potential interest. For example, if responsibilities for home production reflect availability when not working in the market, then the intra-household distribution of labor force participation is of primary interest. On the hand, to the extent that allocation of household work and other decisions reflect the bargaining power of each spouse, relative earnings may be more central.

Figure 3 shows the cumulative distribution of husband's share of total earnings. The proportion of equal-earner couples grew dramatically, from 11 percent in 1970 to 27 percent in 2000. But, as expected, the levels remain well below the proportion of equal-worker couples. The proportion of wife-primary earner couples grew from only 3 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 2000. Thus, even in 2000 husbands provided substantially more earnings than wives in most couples. Yet, wife-primary earning couples substantially outnumbered wife-primary working couples (wife-primary couples

include 11 percent of couples for earnings, compared to 8 percent for hours and 6 percent for weeks.)

Figure 3. Husband's Share of Annual Earnings, Cumulative Distribution

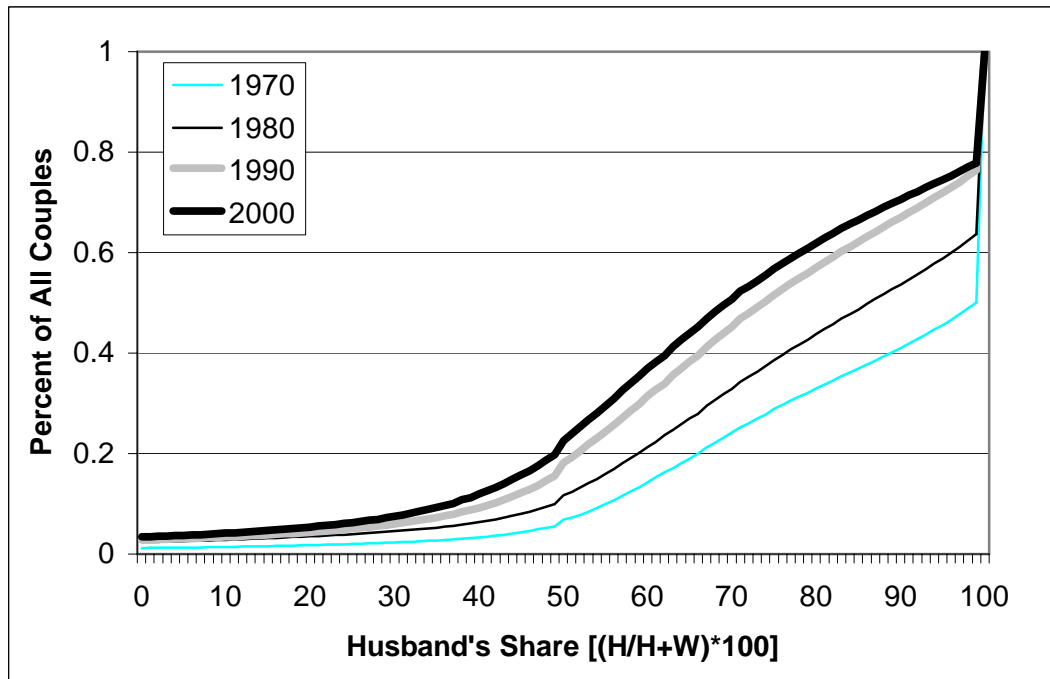


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner with positive earnings during the year.

As in the case of hours, wives' earnings grew primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, with less change in the 1990s. Wives' relative share of earnings grew largely because of increases in wives' earnings, rather than a decline in husbands' earnings. Mean husbands' earnings were relatively stable, increasing in real terms by only 18 percent from \$42,085 in 1970 to \$49,736 in 2000. Over the same period, mean wives' earnings almost tripled from \$7,486 to \$20,847.

Do increases over time in equal-worker and equal-earner couples reflect generational change or a cross-cohort time trend?

We have documented substantial increases in equal-worker and equal-earner couples in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as more modest increases in the 1990s. While wife-primary workers and earners remain the exception, there has also been substantial growth in these patterns of intra-household distribution. We have considered patterns for married couples ages 25-55 over a thirty year period. Changes in the composition of the sample over this period reflect the formation and dissolution of marriages, and also the aging of existing couples. For example, a married couple with wife age 25 in 1970, could be included in 1980 (when she would be age 35), 1990 (at age 45) and 2000 (at age 55). In contrast, a couple with wife age 55 in 1970 could not be included in our calculations in 1980, while a couple age 25 in 1980 could not have been included in our calculations in 1970 (when the wife-to-be would have been 15).

With this pattern of replacement in mind, we consider the extent to which the changes observed over this period reflect generational change (for example, with husband-primary couples aging out, and being replaced by equal and wife-primary couples), or across-cohort time trend (with couples of all ages experiencing a decline in husband-primary intra-household distributions). Because we have repeated cross-sections, we are only able to observe “synthetic” cohorts of currently married couples—for example, we compare patterns of intra-household distribution for couples in which the wife was 25-34 in 1970, 35-44 in 1980, 45-55 in 1990. Of course, the population of married couples changes for a variety of reasons not captured by this analysis—the dissolution (through death or divorce) or formation (through marriage and remarriage) of couples, as well as immigration.⁶

For simplicity, we consider cohort and over-time changes in equal and wife-primary couples combined. That is, we first consider the percent of couples in which the wife worked at least 40 percent as many weeks as the husband. Table 1 shows the proportion of couples meeting this criteria for each of the four decades, by ten-year cohorts. The data show growth over time within age categories (for example, among 25-34 year olds, we find 27, 48, 62 and 64 percent of wives working at least 40 percent as many weeks as their husbands in 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000—reading down the first column). They also show growth over time for a given cohort—for example equal or wife-primary couples grew from 27 to 51 to 66 percent if we consider 25-34 year olds in 1970, 35-44 year olds in 1980, and 45-55 year olds in 1990—reading diagonally). In contrast, we see only modest differences in intra-household distributions across cohorts in a given year. Especially in 1980 and later, the proportion of equal-worker or wife-primary worker couples is quite similar across cohorts in a given year.

Table 1
Percent Equal or Wife-Primary Work Couples
(Wife working at least 40 percent of couple’s weeks)

	Age 25-34	Age 35-44	Age 45-55
1970	27	34	39
1980	48	51	51
1990	62	66	66
2000	64	68	73

⁶ In 1970 4.7 percent of the U.S. population was foreign born. By 2000 this figure had risen to 11.1 percent. Rates of emigration from the U.S. were relatively modest.

Figure 4. Percent of Equal or Wife-Primary Worker Couples By Wives' Cohort

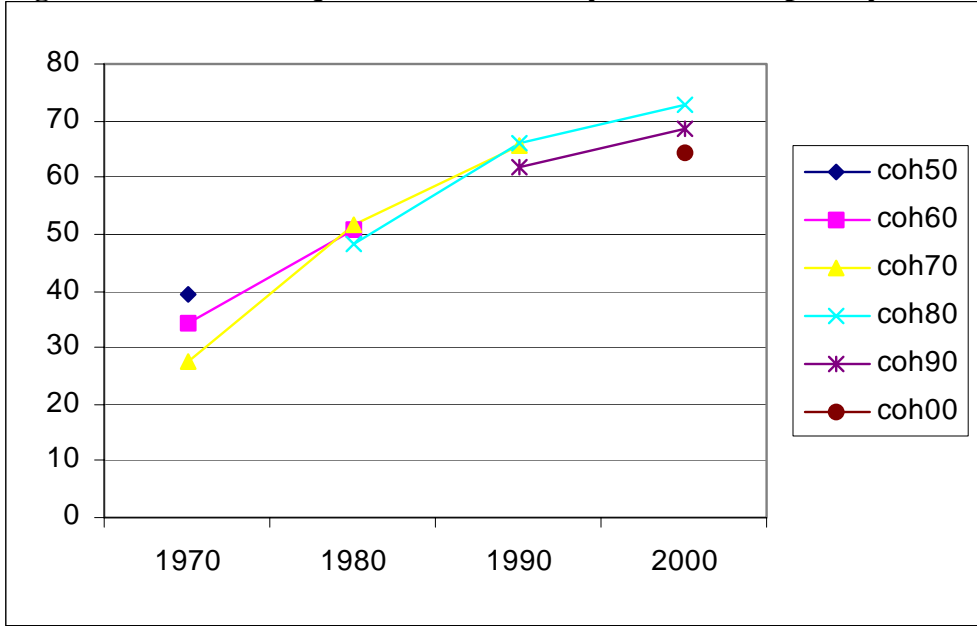
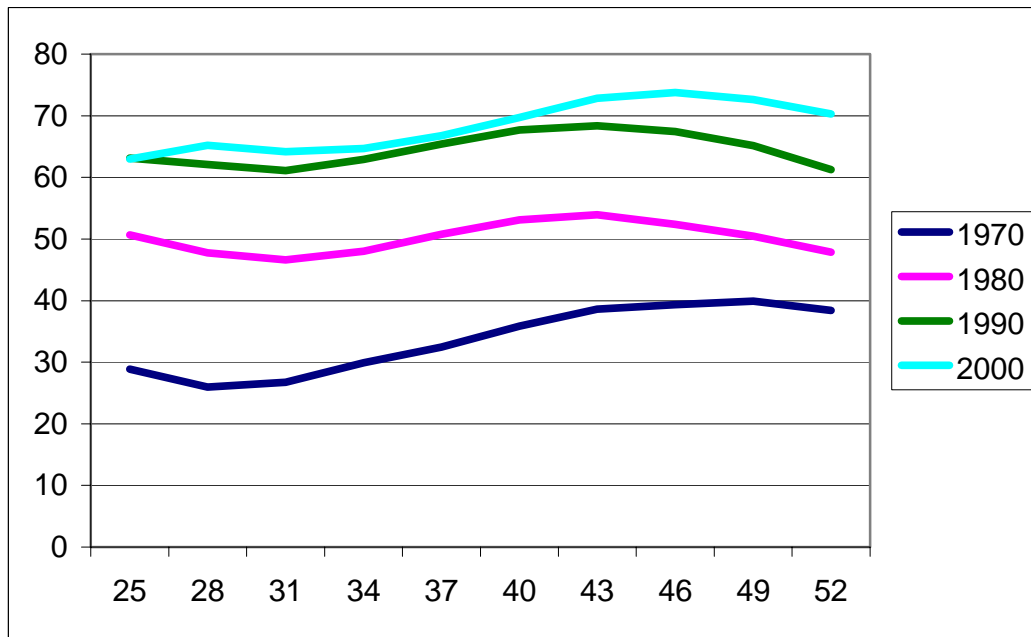


Figure 5 Percent of Equal or Wife-Primary Worker Couples in Each Year



The substantial differences over time, and consistency across cohorts in each year, is illustrated from two different perspectives in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 shows the proportion of equal-worker or wife-primary worker couples, illustrating the change over time for wives for cohorts turning age 25-34 in 1950 (cohort 50), 1960 (cohort 60), etc. The figure shows that all the relevant cohorts experienced the same pattern of rapid growth in the 1970s and 1980s, with more modest growth in the 1990s. Figure 5 shows the proportion of equal-worker or wife-primary worker couples in each year (1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000) by age of wife (with three-year age groups). While there is some evidence that in each year wives' relative contributions are higher for wives in their early 40s

compared to wives in their early 30s, the greatest growth is over time—especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

Table 2, and Figures 6 and 7 show the same calculations for the intra-household distribution of earnings. In Table 2 we again see substantial growth over time within age groups, but relatively modest variation across age groups in any year. From the table and from Figure 6, we again see little evidence of substantial differences in the proportion of equal earner or wife-primary earner couples across cohorts in a given year. Figure 7 shows modest differences in the pattern of growth over time: the increases were greatest in the 1970s and 1980s for younger wives, and in the 1980 and 1990s for older wives.

Table 2
Percent Equal or Wife-Primary Earning Couples
(Wife earning at least 40 percent of couple’s total earnings)

	Age 25-34	Age 35-44	Age 45-55
1970	13	14	17
1980	23	20	20
1990	33	31	29
2000	37	36	38

Figure 6 Percent of Equal or Wife-Primary Earner Couples By Wives’ Cohort

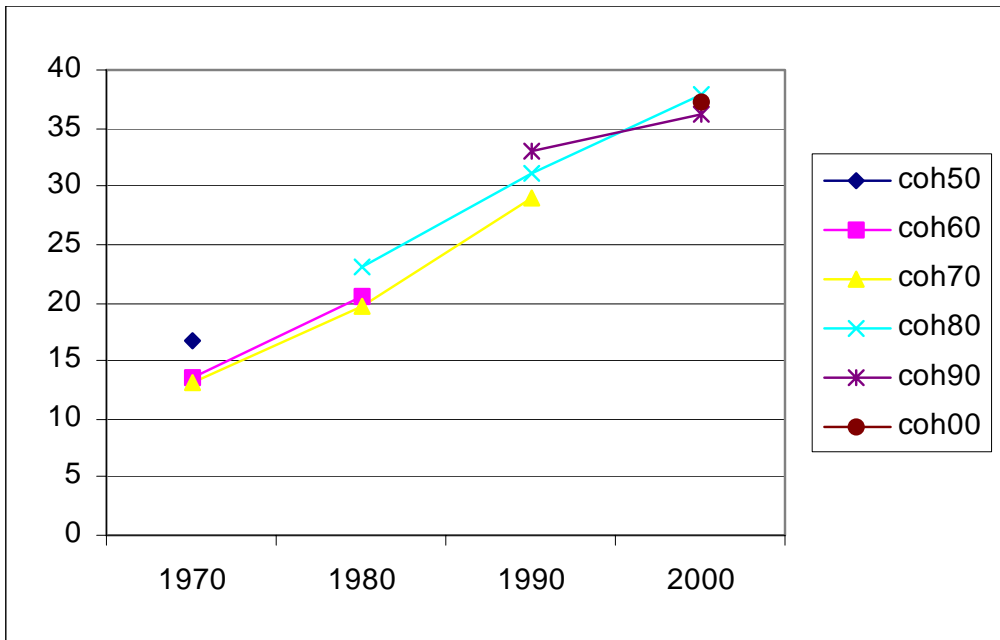
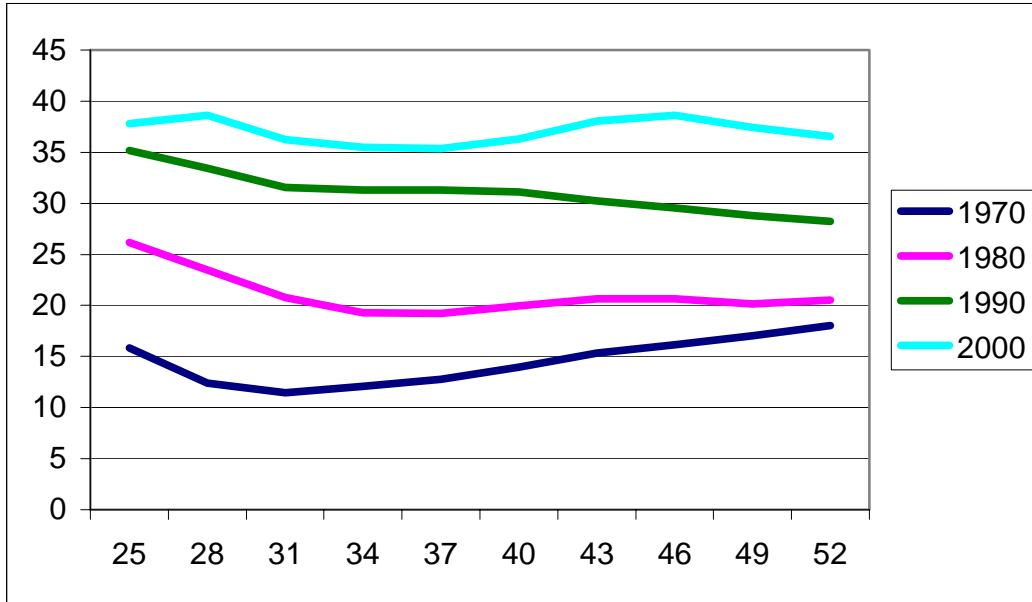


Figure 7 Percent of Equal or Wife-Primary Earner Couples in Each Year



Overall, these figures suggest that changes in the intra-household distribution of work and earnings among married couples over the 1970-2000 period can largely be understood by considering changes over time, without regard to the aging of particular cohorts of couples. With this in mind, we consider changes over time for all 25-55 year old couples in the remaining analysis.

Who are the equal-worker and equal-earner couples?

While wife-primary couples remain fairly uncommon overall, it may be that wives are emerging as primary workers or earners in particular sectors of the labor or marriage markets. In this section and the next we consider changes in spouses’ relative work and earnings by education, race and the presence of children. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the distribution of spouses’ contributions, or the patterns of change over time, vary across groups.

Differences in intra-household distribution by education groups

In considering differences by education, we examined those with high school education or less, those with some college, and those with a bachelor’s degree or more. Here, we show results for the two largest groups defined by the couple’s joint education: both the husband and wife have a high school degree or less (26 percent in 2000), and both have a bachelor’s degree or higher (20 percent in 2000).

Figure 8 shows the change from 1970 to 2000 in the share of weeks worked by husbands. For example, the first bar shows that in 62 percent of all couples in 1970 the husband was the primary worker (working at least 60 percent of total weeks), with only 35 percent of couples working about equal weeks (40 to 60 percent of total weeks each) and only 3 percent of couples having a wife-primary worker (working at least 60 percent of total weeks). By 2000, equal worker couples were the most common, representing 62 percent of all couples. The proportion of wife-primary couples had doubled, but remained small, at 6 percent.

The next two set of bars show the same distribution for couples in which both spouses have no more than a high school degree, and couples in which both spouses have at least a bachelor’s degree. The general patterns are remarkably similar, though we note the higher proportion of equal-working couples (and lower proportion of both husband-primary and wife-primary couples) among more educated spouses. The greater proportion of wife-primary working couples among lower education couples reflects higher levels of unemployment by low education husbands. Among couples with at least one worker in 2000, 5 percent of husbands in the lower education group, but only 1.4 percent of husbands in the higher education group, did not work.

Figure 8. Changes in Spouses’ Relative Weeks Worked, by Education

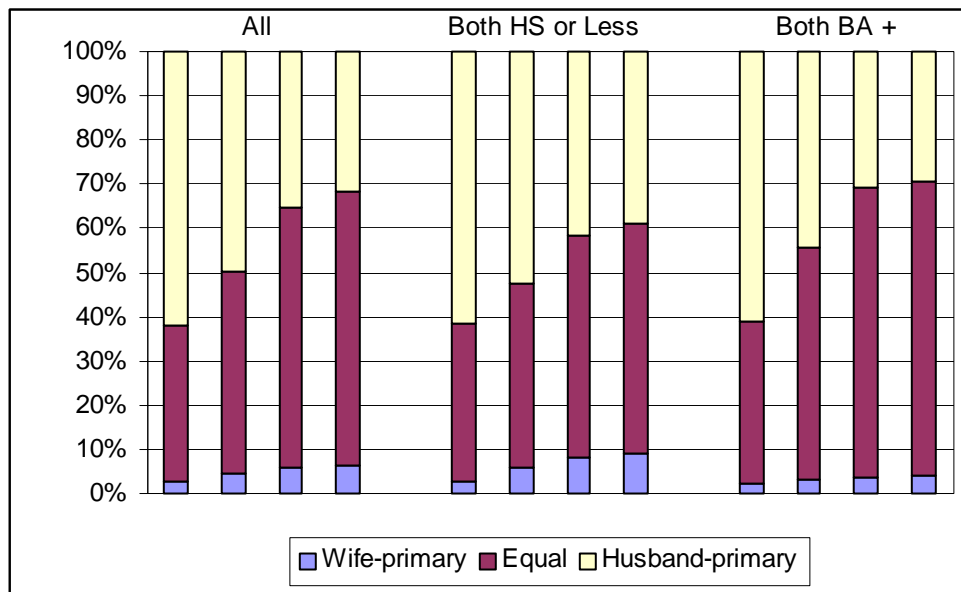


Figure Note: Authors’ calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one week of the year.

Changes in spouses’ relative earnings are shown in Figure 9. As discussed above, equal-earning couples are substantially less common than equal-working couples. A comparison of the three sets of bars suggests remarkably similar distributions and changes over time for the low and high education groups. Equal-earner couples are somewhat more common among the higher education group, accounting for 28 percent of couples in which both spouses had at least a bachelors degree, and 22 percent of couples in which both spouses had a high school degree or less. For both groups, wife-primary earner couples account for only 11 percent of couples. Thus, while there is some indication of greater equality of earnings for more educated couples, even for this group the husband remains the primary breadwinner in most couples. Even among couples in which the wife is more educated than the husband (not shown separately in figures), wife-primary earning couples remain a minority, accounting for only 5 percent in 1970 and 19 percent in 2000.⁷

⁷ This group includes couples in which the wife has a high school degree but the husband does not, the wife has completed some college but the husband has no more than a high school degree, and couples in which the wife has at least a bachelors’ degree, but the husband has less than a bachelors degree.

Figure 9. Changes in Spouses' Relative Earnings, by Education

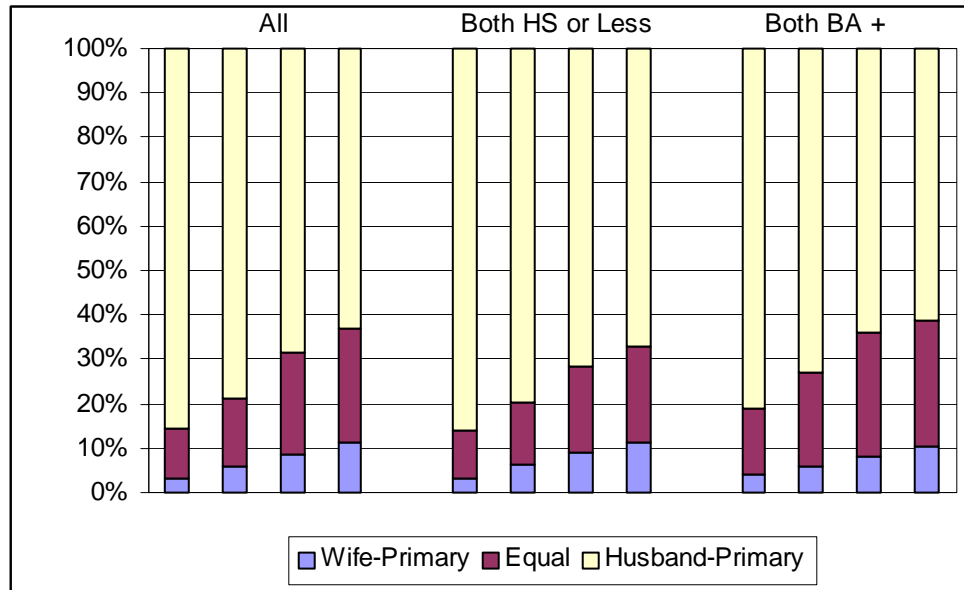


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner with positive earnings during the year.

Differences in intra-household distribution across racial and ethnic groups

There are a number of reasons why we might expect to observe variation across racial and ethnic groups in spouses' relative contributions. Perhaps most importantly, there are substantial racial and ethnic differences in hours and wages for men and women, as well as differences in family formation patterns, which might be associated with differences in spouses' relative contributions. Labor force participation rates vary by race and ethnicity. For example, in 2000 among women ages 25 to 55, 48 percent of white women, 49 percent of black women and 37 percent of Hispanic women worked full time full year.⁸ Male-female wages differentials also vary across groups, with white women earning on average 58 percent of white men, black women earning on average 81 percent of black men, and Hispanic women earning an average of 72 percent of Hispanic men.⁹ Finally, our analysis includes married couples, which among those ages 25-55 accounts for 61 percent of whites, 35 percent of blacks and 51 percent of Hispanics.¹⁰

Figure 10 shows spouses' relative weeks worked in 1970-2000 by race and ethnicity, distinguishing patterns for three groups: white, black, and Hispanic.¹¹ The growth over time in equal-worker couples is apparent for all three groups, but there is substantial variation in both the level and rate of change. In 1970, equal worker couples are substantially more common among

⁸ By fulltime full year we mean at least 48 weeks and at least 36 hours per week.

⁹ Based on the ratio of average earnings for workers with positive earnings.

¹⁰ These percentages are somewhat lower than marriage rates for ages 25-55 in these groups because our sample is restricted to couples where both spouses are 25-55.

¹¹For simplicity, race and ethnicity are defined by the self-identification of the husband. Census 2000 allows respondents to identify themselves as members of multiple racial groups. In our analysis by race and ethnicity we define a person of any race who is also Hispanic as Hispanic (and not in any other category). Among non-Hispanics, we include as black any respondent who reports being black, regardless of any other races reported. In our sample, just over 3 percent of blacks identified as more than one race.

blacks (47 percent) than among whites (35 percent) or Hispanics (31 percent). Relatively rapid growth in equal work among whites results in both white and black couples having about two thirds equal-worker couples by 2000, while about half of Hispanic couples are in this category. Wife-primary worker couples remain most common among blacks, where they account for 5 percent of couples in 1970 and 11 percent in 2000. The proportion of wife-primary worker couples also doubles over this period for the other groups, but remains relatively modest at 5 percent for whites and 7 percent for Hispanics in 2000.

Figure 10. Changes in Spouses' Relative Weeks Worked, by Race & Ethnicity

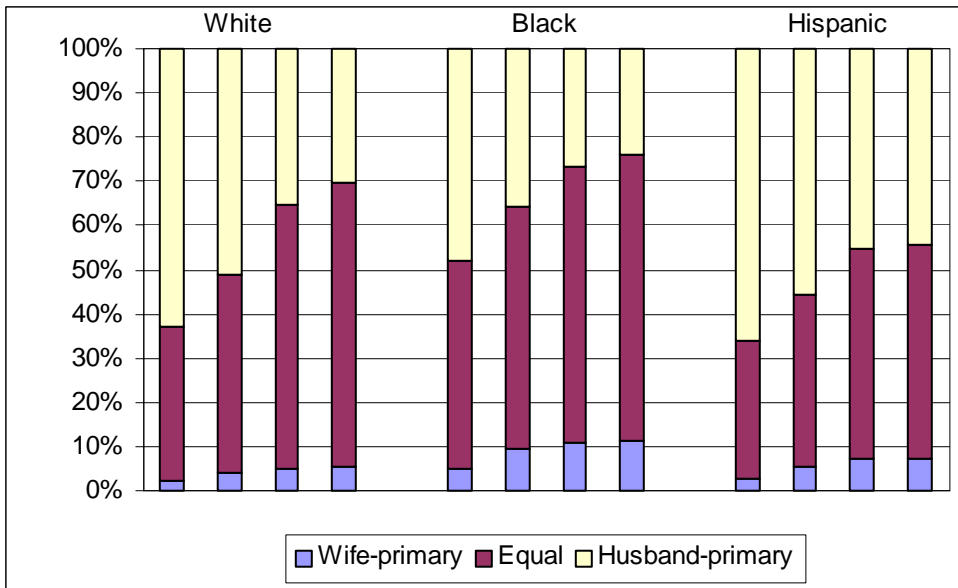


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one week of the year. Race and ethnicity are defined by the self-identification of the husband. We define a person of any race who is also Hispanic as Hispanic. In 2000, when multiple races could be indicated, we define as black any respondent who reports being black, regardless of any other races reported.

Racial and ethnic differences in spouses' relative earnings are even more pronounced than differences in weeks worked. For whites, blacks, and Hispanics, there is substantial growth in both equal earner and wife-primary earner households. However, while the proportion of equal worker couples was similar for whites and blacks by 2000, the proportion of equal earner couples remains substantially higher for blacks than for whites or Hispanics. Wife-primary earner couples also remain substantially more common among blacks in 2000.

Figure 11. Changes in Spouses' Relative Earnings, by Race & Ethnicity

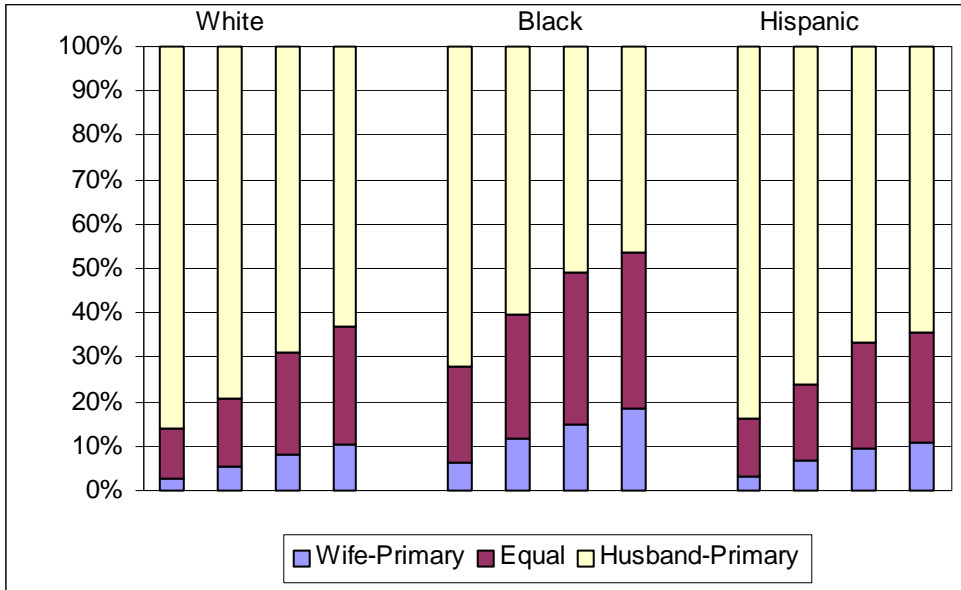


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner with positive earnings during the year. Race and ethnicity are defined by the self-identification of the husband. We define a person of any race who is also Hispanic as Hispanic. In 2000, when multiple races could be indicated, we define as black any respondent who reports being black, regardless of any other races reported.

Differences in intra-household distribution by the presence of young children

The growth in women's labor force participation has been particularly dramatic among mothers, especially mothers with young children (Spain and Bianchi, 1996; Cancian and Reed, 2001). In some well-publicized cases, stay-at-home fathers have taken the place of stay-at-home mothers. In this final section we consider the extent to which the growth in equal-worker and equal-earner households reflects reductions in *fathers'* labor force participation and earnings when there are young children present in the household. As mothers work more, are fathers playing a large role at home with consequent reductions in their market work and earnings? To simplify our presentation of descriptive statistics, we consider the proportion of spouses who have low levels of work (less than 13 weeks per year). We show the changes in the proportion of low-work wives and husbands by their spouses' work and by the presence of young children. In particular, we contrast patterns for couples with no children and those with at least one pre-school age child.

Figure 12 shows the proportion of wives working 13 or fewer weeks per year by husbands' weeks worked in 1970-2000. In 1970, there is relatively little variation by husbands' weeks, though for every category of husbands' work, wives are substantially *more* likely to have low levels of work if there are young children in the family. For example, among husbands with any weeks worked, the proportion of wives with low levels of work ranged only between 38 percent (among those with husbands working 1-13 weeks) and 42 percent (among husbands working 40-47 weeks). Mothers of young children were substantially more likely to have low levels of work, and there was somewhat more variation, as 63 percent of those wives whose husbands worked 27-39 weeks, and 71 percent of those whose husbands worked at least 48 weeks, worked 13 or fewer weeks per year. In 2000 couples with young children continued to be more likely to have a wife with low levels of

employment, regardless of husbands' weeks worked. However, overall rates of low employment fell substantially—especially among couples in which the husband worked all year. Thus, by 2000, wives of men working full year were no longer more likely to be staying at home—in fact, while the variation is small, low weeks worked is least common among wives of men working at least 48 weeks per year, even among families with young children.

Figure 12: Proportion of Low-Work Wives by Husbands' Weeks Worked

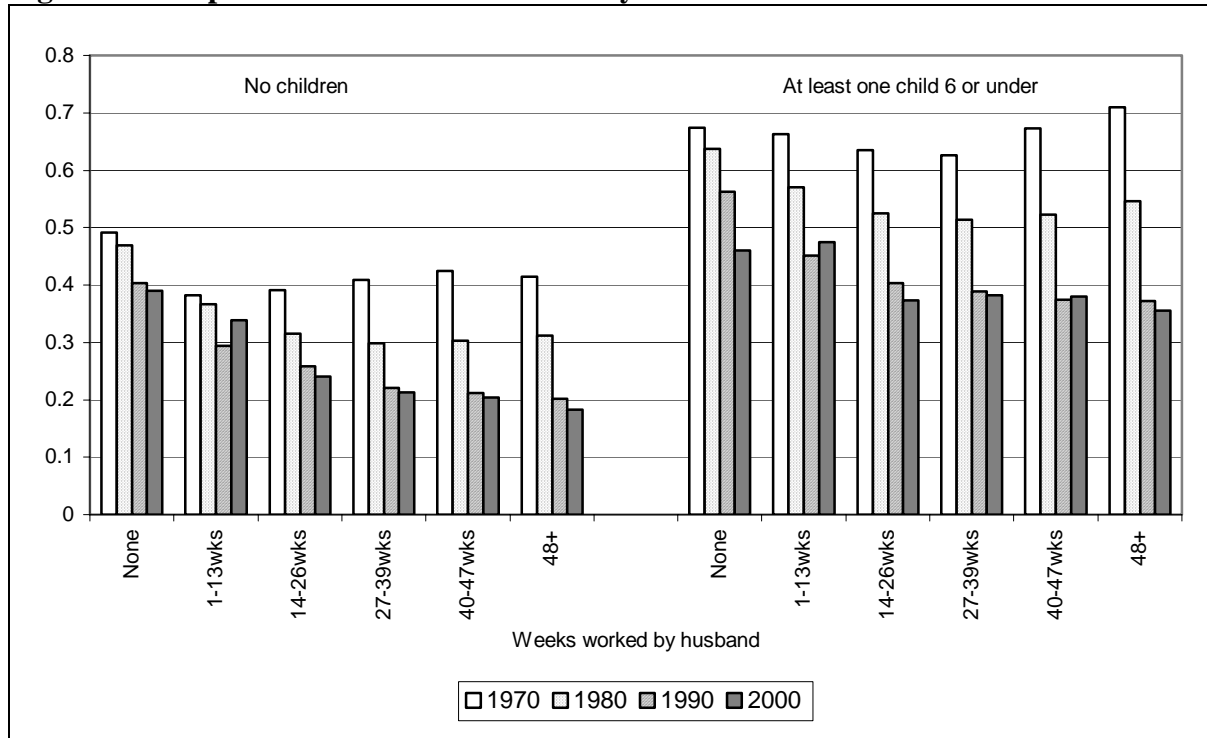


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one week of the year. Low-work is defined as working 13 or fewer weeks per year.

Figure 13 shows the proportion of low work husbands by wives' weeks worked. At least three contrasts are noteworthy. First, as expected, husbands are much less likely than wives to have low levels of work. Second, the proportion of husbands with low levels of work has grown over the period—while the proportion of wives with low levels of work has generally fallen. Finally, while mothers are more likely to work less if the couple has young children, the same cannot be said for fathers. In each year and for each category of wives' work, husbands are more likely to have low levels of work if the couple has no children, than if they have a preschool child. Moreover it is striking that by 2000 low work is substantially more common among husbands whose wives are *also* low work.

Figure 13: Proportion of Low-Work Husbands by Wives' Weeks Worked

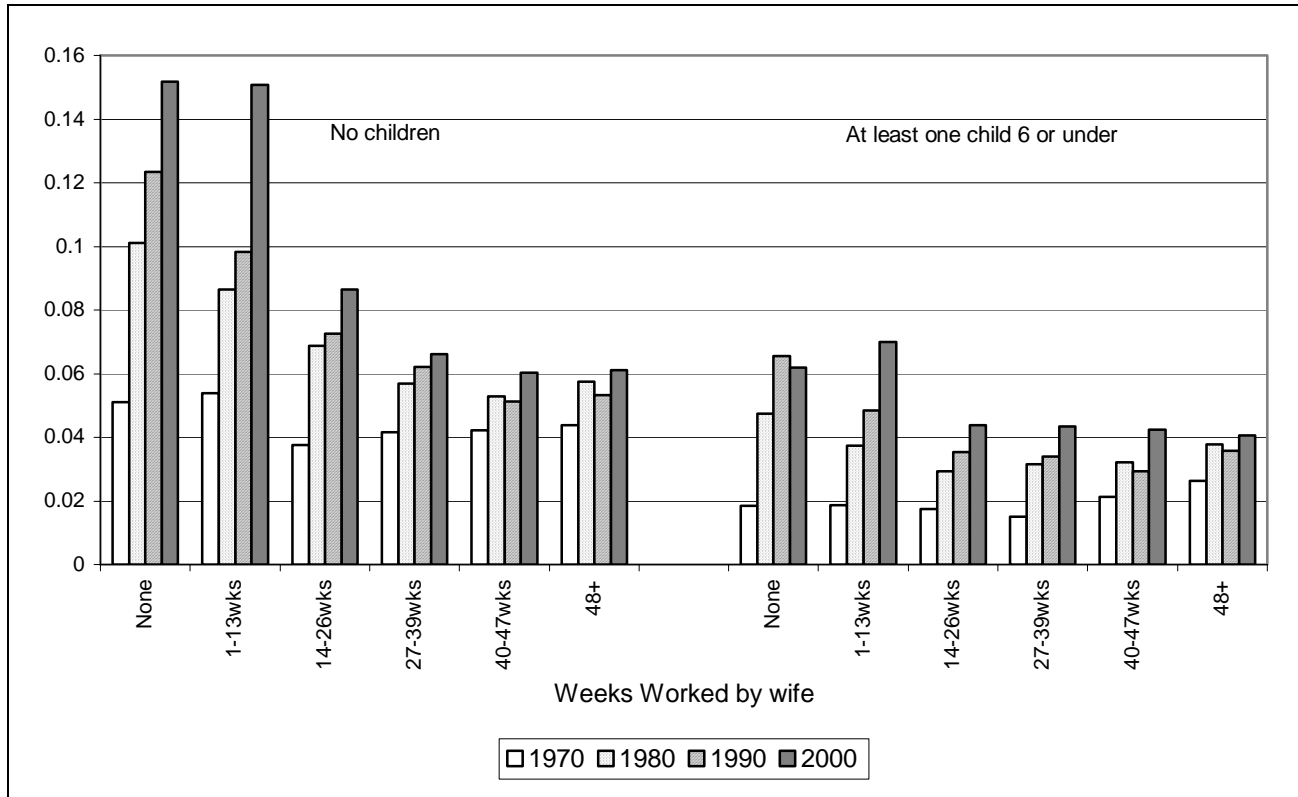


Figure Note: Authors' calculation from Census PUMS 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Sample includes married couples with both partners ages 25-55 inclusive and at least one partner working at least one week of the year. Low-work is defined as working 13 or fewer weeks per year.

In sum, there is almost no evidence of a compensatory increase in low work by fathers married to high work wives—in fact husbands appear less likely to stay at home if there are young children present. While there has been substantial media coverage of stay-at-home dads and working moms, only 4 percent of families with children under six include a mother working full year and a father working less than 13 weeks—a figure that remained fairly stable between 1980 and 2000.

Conclusions

In this paper we have documented substantial changes in the intra-household distributions of work and earnings over the last thirty years. Many wives now work full time and by some definitions equal-worker couples are now the majority. A growing, if smaller, proportion of wives now have earnings comparable to their husbands'. These changes are not new; over the period examined here, the largest changes were experienced in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than the 1990s.

Our results show substantial differences in intra-household distribution by race and ethnicity—black married couples are more likely to have equal or wife-primary work or earnings than white or, especially in recent years, Hispanic couples. In contrast, we find quite similar patterns of intra-household distribution across education groups. Even among couples in which the wife is more

educated than the husband, slightly less than one in five included a wife-primary earner in 2000. Perhaps most surprisingly, our cohort analysis shows that growth in wife-primary and equal earner and worker couples was similar in each decade for all cohorts.

Despite a rash of popular media coverage regarding wives with “dominant” work lives, wife-primary worker and wife-primary earner couples remain uncommon. Stay-at-home dads with young children and a full time working wife are particularly rare. In fact, in contrast to patterns for wives, husbands appear to be less likely to withdraw from the labor market if they have young children at home, and substantially more likely to do so in cases in which their wives are also not working.

In this preliminary analysis we have set out to document recent changes in the intra-household distribution of work and earnings, and to begin to explore some potential explanations. In ongoing work we hope to extend the timeframe of our analysis to include the 1950s and 1960s,¹² and further explore the role of race and ethnicity—considering here the role of marriage rates as well as the distribution of work and earnings within married couples. With these and related issues in mind, we will decompose changes in intra-household distributions to consider the importance of changes in the propensity to marry, and assortative mating, as well as the roles of changes in men’s and women’s labor supply and earnings.

¹² A recent paper by Goldin suggests a “turning point” in women’s labor supply near the start of our series (Goldin, 2004).

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