

# Stay-at-Home Fathers: Definition and Characteristics Based on 40 Years of CPS Data

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## ABSTRACT

In the last 42 years, different definitions of stay-at-home father (SAHF) households have been used to estimate their prevalence in the U.S. A strict estimate of such households defines a SAHF household as one in which the wife provides all household income. Less strict definitions are arrayed by the proportion of household income the wife earns. In this study, analysis is based on CPS data from 1968 to 2009 and examines differences in the proportion and characteristics of SAHF households when using different definitions and over time. We find that SAHF households have fewer children, older children, and fewer children under age 5. Mothers in SAHF households are much more educated than their fathers. Mothers in SAHF households also report the sharpest increase in education compared to males and females in all other types of households. Both mothers and fathers in SAHF households are older than mothers and fathers in stay-at-home mother and dual-earner households. We interpret the results as evidence of greater choice among families to live in a SAHF household.

## INTRODUCTION

Stay-at-home father households are the least frequent and least studied form of household type income structure. Yet, SAHF households are occurring more frequently. The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we show how different definitions of SAHF households lead to different proportions and different characteristics of this household structure. Second, we follow the changes in the proportion and frequency of SAHF households over more than 40 years, between 1968 and 2009, thus providing a mapping of SAHF households over time. We accomplish these goals using the Current Population Survey (CPS) because these data provide a representative sample and longitudinal estimate of what trends the United States has seen in the proportion and characteristics of SAHF households over the last 4 decades.

## DEFINITION OF HOUSEHOLD BASED ON WORK STRUCTURE

- SAHF households are those in which the mother works and the father does not, and there is at least one child 18 years of age or younger living in the household.
- Stay-at-home mother households are those in which the father works and the mother does not, and there is at least one child 18 years of age or younger living in the household.
- For the purposes of this study, dual-earner parent households are defined as those in which both parents work and there is at least one child 18 years of age or younger living in the household (Presser, 1998).

## THEORY

### Social Exchange Theory

- Social exchange theory can be understood as the “economic analysis of a noneconomic social situation” (Emerson, 1976; p. 336).
- As women’s participation in the labor force increased and they gained greater access to careers that were previously open only to men, some women began to earn significant amounts of money that allowed them to exchange family roles with job roles.
- Exchange theory guides us to examine the resources husbands and wives hold within each household and how they exchange these resources. As such, it is important to observe education and income as resources that can be exchanged for time spent in household work.

### Gender Role Theory

- Gender roles are attitudes and behaviors prescribed to males and females by the broader society (Bartley et al., 2005). Gender roles are unrelated to an individual’s knowledge, skills, or abilities.
- Traditional gender roles prescribe division of “expertise” for women and men, in that women have power and greater responsibilities at home and men have power outside the home, most importantly as primary breadwinners (Beavers, 1982).
- Gender role perceptions remain relatively rigid for most couples: mothers are expected to assume the primary caregiver role and men are expected to be the primary providers (Coltrane, 2000).
- Gender role theory provides a framework for moving beyond observation of the resources husbands and wives hold and allows for the exploration of socially constructed roles.

### Feminist Perspective

- Focuses on examining how the level of egalitarian attitudes of husbands and wives influences how work and family roles are distributed within the household.
- Couples with egalitarian attitudes tend to have more equal division of both family and work roles, although even among the most egalitarian couples, wives continue to have greater responsibility for the family role while husbands are more invested in the work role (Fox & Murray, 2000).
- For most households, the husband’s career is considered primary, while the wife’s career is considered as secondary (Bartley et al., 2005).
- Feminist theory guides us to employ a critical perspective by considering explanations that take into account power relations rather than a simple exchange between couples of house and paid-work roles.

## SAMPLE

The March Current Population Surveys (CPS) provides a unique opportunity to estimate: a) how different conceptualizations of stay-at-home father households change their proportion in the population over time, as well as b) the characteristics of the households and its members. The CPS monthly survey includes a battery of labor force and demographic questions. In addition, the March Annual Demographic File and Income Supplement includes additional variables that are used in this study. In particular, the current study utilizes the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series of the Current Population Surveys (IPUMS-CPS; King, Ruggles, Alexander, Leicach, & Sobek, 2004) that coded variables identically between 1962 and 2009 to allow cross-time comparisons using the March CPS. The CPS provides information at the individual person and household levels and as such is very well suited for the current study goals. (N = 577,071).

## RESULTS

Figure 1a: Percent of SAHF, SAHM, and dual-earned households (wife is sole earner)

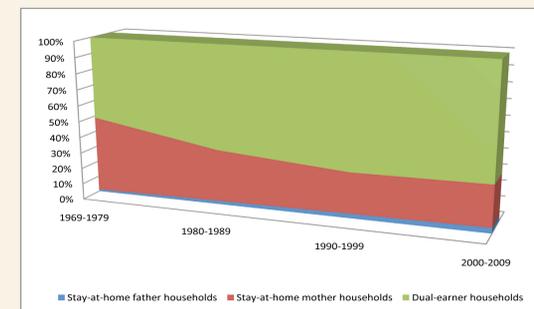


Figure 1c: Percent of SAHF, SAHM, and dual-earned households (wife earns 75% or more of household income)

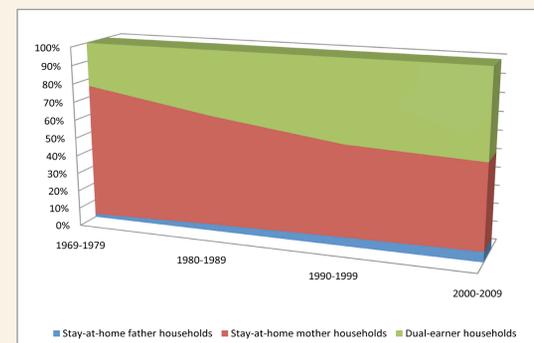


Figure 1a: Percent of stay-at-home father<sup>a</sup>, stay-at-home mother<sup>b</sup>, and dual-earner<sup>c</sup> households, 1968-2009, first definition

## RESULTS CONTINUED

Figure 2: SAHF, SAHM, and dual-earned households number of children, by decade

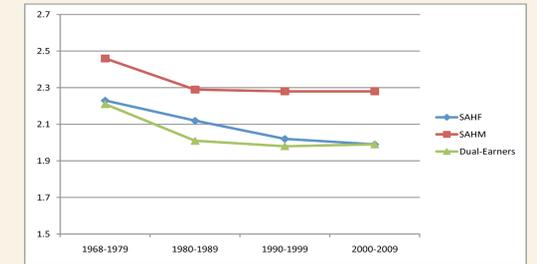


Figure 3b: SAHF, SAHM, and dual-earned households education of husband and wife

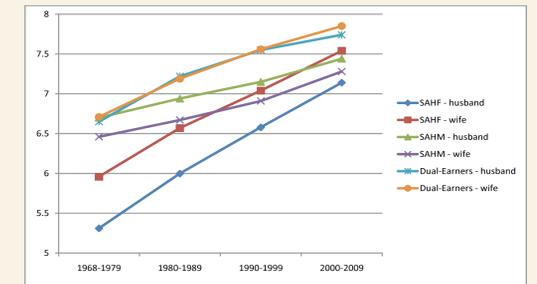
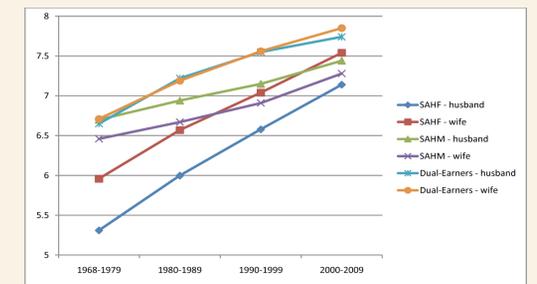


Figure 4a: Reasons for not working last year, fathers in stay-at-home father households, 1968-2009



## CONCLUSION

Stay-at-home father households are steadily growing in frequency but are rarely studied in current family literature. In this study, we show that SAHF households have unique characteristics that differentiate them from SAHM and dual-earner households such as older children, fewer pre-school children and far lower income. We also find that the SAHF household type is increasingly a choice by U.S. families over time, unlike in earlier decades when SAHF household type was forced on families because of the husband’s illness or disability. This findings support our hypotheses that predict SAHF household becoming more a matter of choice. As expected, gender roles and economic exchange still play a major role in families’ decision to become SAHF households, with large differences in earning potential between the wife and the husband being much more predictive of families choosing SAHF household type.