The end of the ‘traditional’ family?

In the age of social media and increased geographical and social mobility, just how important is the family to us today? And why is the number of single person households rising so rapidly?

The demise of the ‘traditional’ family has long been predicted by sections of the political left, and by some feminists who allege that it oppresses women and does a poor job of raising children. Right-wing commentators also bemoan the supposed fragmentation of the family and what they describe as the ‘pick and mix’ attitude of adults today to forming long-term family commitments. Evidence here may suggest something else.

Despite increasingly complex families — over one in ten families are now stepfamilies — and a recent increase in cohabiting couple families, married couple families are still the most common family type in the UK, both with and without dependent children.

Table 1: Households by size 1961–2011 (Great Britain)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One person</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<td>Two people</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three people</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four people</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>Five people</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td>Six or more people</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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All households (~100%) (millions)

- 1961: 16.3
- 1971: 18.6
- 1981: 20.2
- 1991: 22.4
- 2001: 23.9
- 2011: 25.5

Note: A household is defined as a person living alone, or a group of people living at the same address as their only or main residence. Numbers have been rounded, so totals may not always add up to 100.


But we also know that the way we live in households is changing.

Table 1 shows that the proportion of people living in lone parent households has more than doubled over the past 50 years. Can you think of some reasons why?

Figure 1: Families by family type (1996 and 2012)

Figure 2: People spending part of most or every day with family or friends, by age (2011)

Figure 3: Projections of single person households (2008–33)

Figure 4: Multifamily households in the UK (1996–2012)

The message from all these data is that the family continues to be important — but it adapts and changes over time.

John Williams is a managing editor of Sociology Review.