

# FAMILY COMPOSITION IN THE UNITED STATES

BARKEV S. SANDERS\*

COMPREHENSIVE information on the composition of families in the United States has been available only on the basis of items tabulated by the United States Census and, of course, for no period later than 1930. Estimates of family income and its distribution among the population as a whole have necessarily been based on sample data and have limitations for many types of analyses. Of the two most comprehensive recent studies in this field, one<sup>1</sup> provides data for 1929, when economic conditions were dissimilar to those of subsequent years, and the other, relating to 1935-36, is admittedly inadequate for the large relief population in that period and unsuitable for certain analyses of other groups.<sup>2</sup> Important as these two studies are, they are restricted in their application insofar as relation between income and the family composition is concerned. Information on family composition and on family income and especially on the interrelations of these two factors in family security is of vital importance to the Social Security Board. Only through such data can the Board evaluate the scope and adequacy of present Federal-State operations in the fields of public assistance and social insurance or prepare the estimates of the coverage and costs requisite for consideration of the future development of these or other provisions for social security.

Judgment of the optimum use of available funds—for example the relative urgency of measures to promote the security of children or of the aged—requires information as to the extent to which young and old persons are members of families of given types and incomes. To consider questions of social and fiscal policy such as those involved in a proposed extension of the old-age insurance program to provide benefits to specified dependents of deceased wage earners, it is necessary both to estimate the present and future numbers of individuals of designated age or marital status and to evolve benefit scales and project cost estimates on the basis of information as to the bio-legal relationship of these persons to

the groups of covered workers at given income levels. The need for continuing analyses of these types is the greater in a period like the present when there are evident changes in economic and social aspects of family life and when the declines of past decades in birth rates and death rates and the post-war restriction of immigration are operating to effect important changes in the ratios of children and of the aged to the total population.

## Data Available From National Health Survey

A unique opportunity to obtain information on many such points, and especially on the interrelation of family composition and family income, was presented by data recorded in the National Health Survey, made in the winter of 1935-36 as a project of the Works Progress Administration under the supervision of the United States Public Health Service.<sup>3</sup> The completed schedules of the survey were made available to the Social Security Board, and tabulation of data basic to social security operations was inaugurated in February 1938 in Richmond, Virginia, as a WPA project (No. 365-31-3-5) under the supervision of the Board's Bureau of Research and Statistics. This article outlines briefly the basis, purpose, and scope of this study of family composition. Subsequent articles will report the results of specific analyses.

## Size and Basis of the Family Sample

The family composition study is based on schedules of the National Health Survey obtained in a house-to-house canvass of nearly 740,000 households, of which 703,000 were in urban and 37,000 in rural areas. The urban sample comprises more than 2,500,000 persons, representing nearly 4 percent of the urban population enumerated in the 1930 census; the rural sample includes 140,500 individuals. The former included data from 83 cities in 18 States; data obtained in the original survey for 12 additional cities were discarded because of inadequacies of one type or another.

\*Bureau of Research and Statistics, Division of Health Studies. This article is the first in a series.

<sup>1</sup> Leven, Moulton, and Warburton, *America's Capacity to Consume*, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> National Resources Committee, *Consumer Incomes in the United States*, August 1938, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Public Health Service, National Institute of Health, *The National Health Survey 1935-36: Significance, Scope and Method of a Nation-Wide Family Canvass of Sickness in Relation to Its Social and Economic Setting*, 1938.

The rural sample includes data from 23 rural counties in 3 States.

The cities were selected for the survey on the basis of size and geographic location so as to give a representative sample for the urban population as a whole. In the rural counties and in the cities with less than 100,000 population in the 1930 census (except for Montgomery, Alabama) every household was canvassed. In the larger cities census enumeration districts or parts of such districts were selected on a representative basis, and every household in a selected area was canvassed; the households included in the survey and in the family study ranged from about one in three or four in middle-sized cities to one in 38 in New York City. Table 1 shows the numbers and percentages of rural and urban households.

### The Sample in Relation to 1930 Census Data

As will be seen from table 2, the urban sample included in the National Health Survey is very similar to the total urban population enumerated in the 1930 census with respect to distribution of population by major geographic areas. The urban sample shows a slightly lower percentage for the East and a slightly higher one for the West than was found in the census data; for the other two major areas—Central and South—the same percentages are reported in both enumerations. With respect to distribution by size of city, the divergencies are larger. There is a marked deficiency in the sample's representation of population in cities of less than 25,000.

A distribution of the urban sample population by age groups, sex, and marital status indicates that there is in general a close correspondence in

**Table 1.—Number and percentage <sup>1</sup> of households canvassed in cities and rural counties included in the National Health Survey and used in the study of family composition in the United States, by States**

State and city	Households canvassed		State and city	Households canvassed		State and city	Households canvassed	
	Number	Percent of total in city or county		Number	Percent of total in city or county		Number	Percent of total in city or county
Total, urban and rural.....	730,835		Michigan.....	40,607		Oregon.....	22,013	
Urban, total.....	703,032		Detroit.....	21,383	5.3	LaGrande.....	2,264	100.0
Alabama.....	28,900		Flint.....	4,826	12.5	Portland.....	10,328	11.0
Birmingham.....	11,173	18.9	Grand Rapids.....	5,112	11.2	St. Helens.....	1,270	100.0
Eufaula.....	1,412	100.0	Houghton.....	991	100.0	Salem.....	8,142	100.0
Gadsden.....	5,625	100.0	Port Huron.....	8,205	100.0	Pennsylvania.....	63,381	
Greenville.....	1,048	100.0	Minnesota.....	35,199		Durycn.....	1,720	100.0
Montgomery.....	9,742	50.0	Chisholm.....	1,778	100.0	Indiana.....	2,490	100.0
California.....	45,825		Minneapolis.....	12,296	0.1	Lebanon.....	6,412	100.0
Chico.....	2,539	100.0	St. Paul.....	12,000	14.2	Philadelphia.....	32,359	6.6
Grass Valley.....	1,507	100.0	Willmar.....	1,799	100.0	Pittsburgh.....	20,391	12.2
Jackson.....	683	100.0	Winona.....	6,420	100.0	Texas.....	46,017	
Los Angeles.....	20,207	5.5	Missouri.....	44,546		Amarillo.....	11,091	100.0
Napa.....	1,812	100.0	Chillicothe.....	2,135	100.0	Dallas.....	10,898	14.5
Oakland.....	8,361	8.9	Clinton.....	1,646	100.0	Houston.....	11,738	12.5
Vallejo.....	4,626	100.0	St. Louis.....	24,116	11.1	Weatherford.....	1,497	100.0
Georgia.....	13,831		Springfield.....	16,649	100.0	Wichita Falls.....	10,793	100.0
Atlanta.....	10,737	14.2	New Jersey.....	20,204		Utah.....	10,474	
Brunswick.....	3,094	100.0	Bridgeton.....	4,419	100.0	Bingham Canyon.....	905	100.0
Illinois.....	42,337		Lambertville.....	1,100	100.0	Eureka.....	651	100.0
Benton.....	2,107	100.0	Newark.....	13,069	12.6	Salt Lake City.....	7,775	20.6
Chicago.....	38,501	4.2	Somerville.....	2,106	100.0	Tooele.....	1,143	100.0
Normal.....	1,740	100.0	Trenton.....	7,580	21.7	Virginia.....	14,899	
Louisiana.....	23,868		New York.....	91,719		Covington.....	1,501	100.0
Abbeville.....	1,373	100.0	Buffalo.....	24,055	16.7	Farmville.....	857	100.0
Bossier.....	917	100.0	Hudson.....	3,185	100.0	Richmond.....	12,541	24.9
Minden.....	1,401	100.0	Newark.....	1,861	100.0	Washington.....	23,038	
Monroe.....	6,985	100.0	New York City.....	48,278	2.6	Ellensburg.....	1,466	100.0
New Orleans.....	13,192	11.0	Penn Yan.....	1,514	100.0	Olympia.....	3,721	100.0
Massachusetts.....	57,683		Syracuse.....	12,820	19.0	Seattle.....	9,724	10.0
Boston.....	29,768	14.3	Ohio.....	69,471		Spokane.....	8,127	25.0
Fall River.....	10,481	33.1	Cincinnati.....	12,549	10.0	Rural, total.....	36,803	
Greenfield.....	4,045	100.0	Cleveland.....	31,093	11.3	Georgia (16 counties).....	12,102	100.0
Ipswich.....	1,448	100.0	Columbus.....	11,057	12.4	Michigan (4 counties).....	10,631	100.0
Pittsfield.....	11,951	100.0	Franklin.....	1,088	100.0	Missouri (3 counties).....	14,067	100.0
			Lima.....	11,285	100.0			
			Wilmington.....	1,109	100.0			

<sup>1</sup> Based on number of households as enumerated in the 1930 census.

**Table 2.—Percentage distribution of the urban population canvassed in the National Health Survey and of the total 1930 urban population, by geographic area and by size of city**

Geographic area	Percent distribution		Size of city	Percent distribution	
	National Health Survey	1930 urban population <sup>1</sup>		National Health Survey	1930 urban population <sup>1</sup>
All.....	100	100	All.....	100	100
East.....	37	39	500,000 or more.....	43	29
Central.....	33	33	100,000-499,999.....	31	23
South.....	18	18	25,000-99,999.....	14	19
West.....	12	10	Under 25,000.....	12	29

<sup>1</sup> Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population, Vol. II.

Source: U. S. Public Health Service, National Institute of Health, *The National Health Survey, 1935-1936, Significance, Scope and Method*, 1938, p. 6.

these characteristics with the urban population enumerated in 1930. In considering the data given in table 3, allowance must be made for differences in definitions for persons classified in the category "widowed, divorced, and separated." The family study, contrary to census usage, included unmarried parents in this group and also listed as "separated" husbands and wives who were reported as having been absent from the household for a month or longer, unless the absence was due to hospitalization. These differences in classification tend to explain the higher percentages shown for this group in the sample population.

It is probable also that the lower percentages of single persons aged 60 and over reported for the sample arise from an under-enumeration of single aged persons, many of whom doubtless were in institutions and hence not reached in a house-to-house canvass. For children under 16 the sample showed a somewhat smaller percentage than was reported in the 1930 census. This discrepancy doubtless is due to the upward trend in age distribution of the total population; the percentage found in the sample is the same as that indicated in the "medium" estimate of the National Resources Committee for the population in 1935.<sup>4</sup> In general it may be concluded that the sample urban population closely approximates the total population of 1930 with respect to major age groups, and distribution by sex and marital status. The differences indicated in table 3 are not large and are to be explained primarily by differences in

<sup>4</sup> National Resources Board. *Estimates of Future Population by States*, 1934.

definitions adopted for the family composition study in view of the purposes for which analysis was undertaken.

The number of families included in the rural sample of the National Health Survey is relatively small and highly restricted in geographic location. As might be anticipated, comparison of this sample with the rural population enumerated in 1930 indicates a somewhat less satisfactory agreement. (See table 4.) In general, however, the similarities are sufficiently close to warrant use of the rural sample as a valuable, if not wholly precise, indication of characteristics to be found in the rural

**Table 3.—Distribution by marital status of urban sample of persons of given age and sex compared with a similar distribution of the urban population of the United States in 1930<sup>1</sup>**

Sex, age, and marital status <sup>2</sup>	Family composition study		United States census	
	Number of persons	Percentage distribution	Number of persons	Percentage distribution
Males aged 16-59.....	775,187	100.0	21,890,236	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	482,225	62.2	18,412,411	61.8
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	38,773	5.0	793,823	3.6
Single.....	254,189	32.8	7,684,002	35.1
Females aged 16-59.....	853,330	100.0	22,855,057	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	508,724	59.6	14,050,085	63.0
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	108,885	12.7	1,946,964	8.7
Single.....	236,227	27.7	6,807,158	28.8
Males aged 60 and over.....	102,249	100.0	2,658,829	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	71,329	69.8	1,818,998	68.4
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	24,091	24.1	607,807	22.9
Single.....	6,229	6.1	232,024	8.7
Females aged 60 and over.....	122,413	100.0	2,975,830	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	44,653	36.5	1,184,174	38.1
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	67,852	55.4	1,551,456	52.1
Single.....	9,908	8.1	290,200	9.8
Males aged 65 and over.....	63,710	100.0	1,624,497	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	41,269	64.8	1,032,520	63.6
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	18,793	29.5	459,677	28.8
Single.....	3,657	5.7	132,294	8.1
Females aged 65 and over.....	78,875	100.0	1,892,193	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	22,922	29.1	576,378	30.5
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>3</sup> .....	49,859	63.2	1,138,467	60.1
Single.....	6,094	7.7	177,348	9.4

<sup>1</sup> Excludes persons of unknown age and persons under 16 years of age. The proportion of the latter in the urban sample to the total urban population was 25.9 percent; the corresponding percentage in the 1930 census was 27.9. In the National Resources Committee's medium estimate of the 1935 population, persons under 16 constituted 25.9 percent of the total. Data are preliminary.

<sup>2</sup> The census classifies as "married" all individuals who were married and living apart whether legally separated or not. The study classifies such persons as "separated;" absence of the spouse for a month or more was considered to constitute separation. The study also includes unmarried parents in this classification.

population as a whole, the more so since existing economic and social data for the rural population are even more fragmentary and limited than data on urban population.

### Purpose and Scope of the Study

The purpose of the study undertaken by the Social Security Board has been to obtain for this large and generally representative group of the population an analysis of family composition and size in terms of the biological and legal relationships pertinent to consideration of present and potential measures for social security. For this purpose, persons in the households canvassed were classified in terms of "bio-legal" families as defined below. The definition used in the family composition study differs from the 1930 census definition of "private families" <sup>5</sup> in that it was so formulated as to make it possible to identify, within a household, the members of the family whose relationship to the head, by blood or law, constitutes a legal claim on him for support. The 1930 census definition of private families, on the other hand, may include in a family all members of a household related by blood or marriage even though the relationship (cousin, niece, nephew, married sons and daughters, and so on) does not imply, in social insurance usage, that they are actual or potential dependents of the head of the family group.

The family composition study provides the following information for each bio-legal family: its location by city and State; its farm or nonfarm origin; the length of time the family has been established and the period during which it has lived in the particular city and house; the number of intercity moves made by the family in the last 10 years or since its formation; the relationship of each family to others in the household where there are two or more bio-legal families in the household; number of persons in the family and the number per family of persons under 16 years of age, of gainfully occupied persons, and of veterans; the annual income of the family; data concerning home ownership, indicating value of home or the rental paid; number of persons per room; race and nativity of parents; and for each member of the family the age, education, occupation, employment status, and relationship to the head of the family. The

<sup>5</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population*, Vol. VI, pp. 5-6.

**Table 4.—Distribution by marital status of rural sample of persons of given age and sex compared with a similar distribution of the rural population of the United States in 1930 <sup>1</sup>**

Sex, age, and marital status <sup>2</sup>	Family composition study		United States census	
	Number of persons	Percentage distribution	Number of persons	Percentage distribution
Males aged 16-59.....	38,485	100.0	15,463,007	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	24,467	63.6	9,303,023	60.2
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	1,667	4.3	527,531	3.4
Single.....	12,351	32.1	5,631,853	36.4
Females aged 16-59.....	38,097	100.0	14,177,836	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	26,985	69.2	9,923,724	70.0
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	3,599	9.2	848,443	6.0
Single.....	8,413	21.6	3,405,669	24.0
Males aged 60 and over.....	8,737	100.0	2,598,713	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	6,349	72.6	1,776,089	68.4
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	1,892	21.7	582,543	22.4
Single.....	496	5.7	240,081	9.2
Females aged 60 and over.....	7,657	100.0	2,134,313	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	3,827	60.0	1,012,380	48.8
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	3,489	45.6	953,098	44.7
Single.....	341	4.4	138,835	6.5
Males aged 65 and over.....	5,760	100.0	1,693,708	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	3,939	68.4	1,084,011	64.0
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	1,505	26.1	461,374	27.2
Single.....	316	5.5	148,323	8.8
Females aged 65 and over.....	5,063	100.0	1,410,350	100.0
Married <sup>3</sup> .....	2,070	41.0	570,822	40.6
Widowed, divorced, or separated <sup>4</sup> .....	2,763	54.6	748,460	53.1
Single.....	221	4.4	91,068	6.4

<sup>1</sup> Excludes persons of unknown age and persons under 16 years of age. The proportion of the latter in the rural sample to the total rural population was 33.2 percent; the corresponding percentage in the 1930 census was 36.7. In the National Resources Committee's medium estimate of the 1935 population, persons under 16 constituted 31.0 percent of the total. Data are preliminary.

<sup>2</sup> The census classifies as "married" all individuals who were married and living apart whether legally separated or not. The study classifies such persons as "separated"; absence of the spouse for a month or more was considered to constitute separation. The study also includes unmarried parents in this classification.

information is placed on punch cards so that any of the items enumerated above can be cross-tabulated against any other item or items to indicate interrelationships.

### Definition of Bio-Legal Family

A "bio-legal" family is defined for purposes of this study as comprising (a) one or both spouses and their unmarried children, if any, including adopted or foster children, living together as a family unit; or (b) *unmarried* sisters and/or brothers, including adopted or foster brothers and sisters, living together as a family unit; or (c) per-

sons living in extra-familial groups, as here defined, or by themselves, who are considered as separate one-person families. Among the 740,000 households canvassed there were nearly 978,600 bio-legal families, including 931,400 in the urban and 47,200 in the rural sample. In the surveyed population as a whole and in both the urban and rural samples there is an average of 1.3 bio-legal families per household.

The families enumerated in this study have been classified in five major categories as follows, according to membership and the relationship of the members to the head:

1. *Husband and wife families.* Families with both spouses, with or without children.
2. *Husband or wife families, husband.* Families with only the male spouse, with or without children.
3. *Husband or wife families, wife.* Families with only the female spouse, with or without children.
4. *Nonparent families, male.* Families without either spouse, with an unmarried male as the head, with or without sisters and/or brothers.
5. *Nonparent families, female.* Families without either spouse, with an unmarried female as the head, with or without sisters and/or brothers.

Table 5 shows the numbers of families of these various types and the numbers of individuals in such families. For both the urban and the rural sample populations, by far the largest number of persons—76.9 percent and 81.9 percent, respec-

tively—were in families including both husband and wife, with or without children. Such families comprised 59.5 percent of all urban families and 65.5 percent of the families in the rural areas. In both urban and rural areas, the next largest group, in terms of the numbers of families and also of

**Table 5.—Number of bio-legal families of given type and number of persons in such families**

Type of family <sup>1</sup>	Number of families			Number of persons		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
Total.....	978,648	931,369	47,279	2,644,568	2,504,104	140,464
Husband and wife.....	585,079	554,170	30,909	2,041,498	1,920,389	116,109
Husband or wife (husband).....	67,173	63,599	3,574	100,848	95,386	5,462
Husband or wife (wife).....	183,095	170,844	12,251	339,113	325,847	13,266
Nonparent (male).....	60,004	62,782	7,222	74,764	70,984	3,780
Nonparent (female).....	70,297	73,968	3,329	88,345	85,498	2,847

<sup>1</sup> According to membership and the relationship of the members to the head. Data are preliminary.

individuals concerned, was that comprising families in which the wife was the head and the husband was dead or absent. These families include 13.0 percent and 9.4 percent, respectively, of the persons comprised in the urban and rural samples, and represent 19.0 percent and 15.2 percent of the families in those samples. Families classified under each of the other three types represent from 3 to 4 percent of the total number of individuals and from 5 to 8 percent of the total number of families in the population canvassed.

The next article on the study of family composition in the United States will consider the distribution of the families and individuals according to economic status.