

Who Lives Alone? Characteristics of One-Person Households: 1990 and 2000

In the first half of the 20th century, living alone increased from 5 percent of all households in 1900 to 9 percent in 1950 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). During the second half of the 20th century, the percent of all households increased each decade, reaching 26 of all households in 2000. Thus, at the century's close, 1 of every 4 households in the United States consisted of a person living alone.

The growth in the proportion of one-person households has generally been more rapid than other household types. A consequence of this more rapid growth is that by 2000, living alone had become more common than the number of married-couple households with only natural or adopted children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Although one-person households grew considerably over the past several decades, limited information has been published about the characteristics of these households. In an effort to more fully understand the composition of this group as well as to investigate how the composition of households may be changing, this poster examines selected social and economic characteristics of one-person households using data from the population censuses of 1990 and 2000.

Two common perceptions of people living alone are that they are largely made up of young never-married people and elderly widowed women. Although there are sizable numbers of these two groups living alone, census data show that during the 1990s people living alone declined among younger householders (15-34 years), increased modestly among older householders (65+), and increased most rapidly among householders aged 35-64. By 2000, nearly half (46 percent) of the population living alone was aged 35 to 64 years.

Although both men and women householders under age 65 represented sizable proportions of all one-person households, these proportions were much less than these age groups' share of the total population. In contrast, men, and especially women, age 65 and older represented proportionally larger shares of one-person households than they did of the total population.

In addition to age, this poster examines the distribution and change in the living alone population by gender, marital status, educational attainment, poverty status, housing tenure, and other characteristics. For example, the paper investigates whether the increase of nearly 5 million householders living alone from 1990 to 2000 occurred primarily among the young, middle-aged, or older populations; the never married, widowed, or divorced populations; or among people who owned or rented their homes or among the poor or people not in poverty.

Householders living alone also are compared with householders living with others using a variety of social and economic characteristics. For example, the poster illustrates whether or not householders living alone are more likely to have moved in to their

housing unit in the previous year, to have higher levels of educational attainment, to be in the labor force, or to be foreign born.

The changes from 1990 to 2000 in the distribution of people living alone are examined by age group and by birth cohort.

Geographic patterns are illustrated with the use of state maps. By 2000, data show that in all U.S. states except Utah, at least 20 percent of households were one-person households. Regionally, although the West historically was the region with the highest percentage of householders living alone (as recently as 1970), in both 1990 and 2000, the West had the lowest percentage of one-person households among the four U.S. regions.

U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, by Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Census 2000 Special Report (CENSR-4), Washington, DC.

U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, *Examining American Household Composition: 1990 and 2000*, by Frank Hobbs, Census 2000 Special Report (CENSR-24), Washington, DC.