What Are Families Like in Wisconsin?

Increasing numbers of single parents, rising divorce rates, and a spike in the numbers of couples who choose cohabitation over marriage have led to widespread discussions about changes in family life. Are these trends reflected in Wisconsin families?

Out of 5.4 million people living in Wisconsin, about one quarter is under the age of 18. Almost three quarters of Wisconsin’s children (71.3%) live in married-couple households. This number has decreased since 1990 (76.2%), but is higher than the national average (66.0%). This is good news for Wisconsin’s children who, according to a recent study by the Urban Institute, significantly benefit from living in married households due to a more stable home environment and less poverty. Children living in high-conflict marriages, with a stepparent, or with cohabiting parents generally have lower levels of well-being than children in families with both biological parents in a low conflict marriage.

**Wisconsin's Percent of Own Children in Married-Couple Households Higher Than the National Average, 2000**

For more than 80 years the divorce rate in Wisconsin has been lower than the national average. A total of 17,457 divorces occurred in Wisconsin in 2001, for a divorce rate of 3.3 per 1,000 total population, compared to 4.0 for the United States. In spite of the lower divorce rate, 55% of all Wisconsin divorces in 2001 involved families with children under 18 years of age, and each divorce affected, on average, almost two children (1.8). Divorce has been linked to a variety of problems for children’s behavior, mental health, and school success.

The percentage of children living with a single parent increased from 18.1% in 1990 to 21.7% in 2000, but is slightly lower than the national average (23.3%). Wisconsin ranks 12th lowest in the country, with Utah having the lowest percent of children in single-parent homes (13.6%) and the District of Columbia the highest (44.7%).

Taking a closer look at Wisconsin families, we find that:

- **59.6%**
- **65.0%**
- **60.7%**
- **75.6%**
- **75.2%**
- **71.3%**
- **56.8%**
- **67.0%**
- **56.0%**
- **64.0%**
- **71.3%**
- **75.6%**
- **76.7%**
- **70.0%**

- **40.4%**
- **34.0%**
- **24.4%**
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For more information, visit [http://www.childtrends.org/](http://www.childtrends.org/) for the latest data and research on family trends in Wisconsin.
Check Out These Websites

Child Trends

http://childtrends.org

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to studying children and families. This site includes research briefs and comprehensive research reviews on topics directly influencing children’s well-being. “What Works” tables provide summaries of what works and what doesn’t on topics such as adolescent reproductive health, early childhood care and education, education, emotional and mental health, and social skills and relationships.

http://childtrendsdatabank.org

A new service of Child Trends provides data on over 70 key indicators of child and youth well-being. Both Child Trends and Child Trends Databank have user-friendly e-newsletters to keep subscribers informed of recent research briefs. Subscribe at:


Connecting with UW Faculty

Questions on families and family policy? Contact:

Professor Karen Bogenschneider

Karen Bogenschneider is a Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at UW-Madison and a Family Policy Specialist in University Extension. She has directed the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars since their inception in 1993. She also directs the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars, which provides technical assistance to 11 states conducting seminars for state policymakers. Her book, “Family Policy Matters,” was recently released. She studies family policy and parenting of adolescents, particularly parent influences on teen substance use. Contact her at: kpbogenschneider@facstaff.wisc.edu or (608)262-4070.

Unemployment Rates Vary Across State

Research shows that parents’ loss of employment can lead to higher rates of child abuse and neglect.1 When looking at unemployment rates in Wisconsin, counties across the state differ widely. Overall, the Wisconsin rate of unemployment for August is 5.2%; this is up 4% from July. Based on not seasonally adjusted 2001 data, the Department of Workforce Development reports that the average annual unemployment rate of Dane County is the lowest (2.0%). Other counties with low unemployment rates in 2001 include Ozaukee (3.0%) and Waukesha (3.3%). Menominee reported the highest rate of unemployment for 2001 (11.6%), followed by Juneau (9.1%) and Langlade (7.8%).

For further information, contact the Family Impact Seminar Office at (608)262-5779, ffs@ssc.wisc.edu, or Karen at (608)262-4070, kpbogens@facstaff.wisc.edu. You can access WISFIS briefing reports on the web at:

http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/wisconsin.htm

Family Matters is on the web at:

http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/newsletters.htm

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Long Term or Short Term: Education Pays Off

Families are a powerful influence on school success, which in turn impacts future economic outcomes.1 According to a recent study by the U.S. Census Bureau, not only does getting a degree earn workers more money, but the benefits of educational attainment compound over time. Researchers found that over the course of their work-lives, individuals with a bachelor’s degree earn:

- nearly one third more than workers who do not finish college,
- almost twice as much as those with a high school diploma, and
- more than two times as much as high school dropouts.2

In Wisconsin, like the U.S. in general, 85% of adults 25 years and older have at least completed high school—an all time high. Additionally, two out of every ten Wisconsin adults hold at least a Bachelor’s degree. According to U.S. Census estimates, over the course of their lives these individuals will earn from $1.2 million for high school graduates to $2.1 million for those with a college degree.2

Yet these outcomes are not the same for everyone, and not all degree recipients look alike. The Census data show that whites earn more than Blacks or Hispanics at every level of educational attainment.3 What’s more, according to a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction report, the graduation rates for many of Wisconsin’s minority students lag behind those for whites. While 94% of white students and 90% of Asian students graduate from high school, only 78% of Native Americans, 70% of Hispanics, and 55% of African American students do.3

Education remains a key factor in closing the income gap between the rich and the poor. As the Census date show, educational attainment translates to higher levels of income regardless of race or ethnicity.

For more information on educational attainment and achievement programs, see Child Trends’ “What Works” tables http://www.childtrends.org/whatworks_intro.asp. These tables present clear summaries of the best available research and evaluations about what works, what doesn’t work, and what are the “best bets” for improving outcomes for youth.

