

THE BABY BOOM AND THE SQUEEZE
ON MULTIGENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS

by

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Introduction

Between 1970 and 1980, the number of households in the United States increased by over 25 percent compared with an 11.5 percent growth in resident population. That households were to increase faster than population should not have come as any surprise since the same pattern has held every decade since 1850 (see Table 1). However, household growth at a rate more than twice that of population growth during the 1970s was not anticipated. The reason for such unprecedented household growth was that unmarried adults formed households at record rates, far outpacing any previous historical experience. For example, the Census Bureau's household projections done in the early 1970s (Bureau of the Census, 1972) predicted 76 to 77 million households for 1980 compared with 80.5 million actually counted in the 1980 Census. Part of their error is explained by there simply being more people than expected in the household formation age groups in 1980 due to greater than expected rates of immigration and improvements in longevity over the decade. But the largest source of error related to the rate at which the population formed households.

Long Term Trends

The literature on household formation and changing household structure emphasizes long term trends. Burch (1970) and Coale (1963) have stressed the fact that increases in life expectancy must be accompanied by changes in rules of residence that normally favor multigenerational households in order to avoid unwieldy household sizes. Beresford and Rivlin (1966) have emphasized the importance of

Table 1

Rates of Change Over Decade

Decade	Population	Households	Single Person Households	Household Size
1850-60	26.2%	30.9%		-4.9%
1860-70	21.0%	31.2%		-3.6%
1870-80	20.6%	23.8%	< 10.0%	-1.0%
1880-90	20.3%	21.6%		-2.2%
1890-1900	17.1%	20.5%		-3.4%
1900-10	17.7%	21.2%		-4.6%
1910-20	13.2%	16.8%	< 18.0%	-4.4%
1920-30	13.5%	18.6%		-5.3%
1930-40	6.8%	14.4%	-10.0%	-10.7%
1940-50	12.9%	19.6%	53.5%	-8.2%
1950-60	16.0%	17.4%	20.2%	-1.2%
1960-70	11.8%	16.3%	29.8%	-5.7%
1970-80	11.5%	26.4%	32.9%	-12.4%

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, Part I and 1980 Census Provisional Estimates of Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics, PHC80-S1-1 (March 1982).

rising real incomes, which allow individuals to satisfy preferences for more privacy in their living arrangements. Modell and Hareven (1973) have argued that increasing opportunities for female labor force participation outside the home, as well as the growth of social security benefits, have allowed wives and widows to give up renting out rooms as a means of stabilizing household income over the family cycle. Kobrin (1976) has called attention to the importance of declining ratios of middle-aged household heads to elderly widows who might like to live with their children, as a low fertility/low mortality demographic equilibrium raises the number of unmarried elderly and reduces the number of middle-aged married couples.

One can add to this list of "evolutionary" social and demographic trends that support more independent living arrangements the notion that preferences for independence and privacy on the part of young adults have increased over time. In particular, premarital sexual activity has become more accepted and such activity requires bedrooms that are isolated from the judgmental eyes of close relatives.

One consequence of more open-minded attitudes about premarital sexual activity is the greater acceptance of periods of "trial marriage" early in the life course. To the extent that more unstable cohabitation substitutes for more stable marriage, this new life course pattern could lead to higher overall headship rates as more "unions" are dissolved. While there are strong reasons to suspect greater instability in the less official living arrangements, the available evidence is too weak to speak confidently about such an inference.

It might be helpful at this point to clarify the difference between "heading a household" and "living alone," on the one hand, and "living independently" on the other hand. Living alone unequivocally implies living independently, but household headship does not. Even among unmarried individuals, household headship can involve living with children or other relatives. Compared with young adults, older, formerly married adults are especially likely to head families rather than live alone or with nonrelatives only. In contrast, those who live with unrelated roommates, even if they do not head a household, are in many ways independent. This arrangement is typically found among young adults. Since the post-1960 increases in headship rates have been paralleled by increases in the incidence of living alone and (among young adults) living with roommates, the trends in headship rates run parallel to changes in independent living.

As independent, and particularly solo, living has become more common, it has also become more socially acceptable. With later age at first marriage, rising divorce rates, and longer periods of widowhood, the average woman can expect to spend somewhere near half of her adult life living outside of a nuclear family situation. Independent living early in the adult life course has largely replaced marriage as the key event signaling the transition to adulthood. Following a failed marriage, a period of independent living is now considered almost necessary to allow the divorced to gain perspective on questions of integrity and self-worth. Widows are similarly encouraged by norms and values to move into a phase of independence and to begin to chart the rest of their lives as somewhat self-reliant actors, if only for the fact that their period of widowhood is likely to last for many

years. The slim chances of remarriage in a society where many fewer men survive to a ripe old age, and where most of the few eligible bachelors who are in the marriage market are looking for younger partners, is a reality few can ignore.

Short Term Fluctuations

When we shift perspective from long term trends toward greater independence in living arrangements to the short term departures from these trends, the explanations tend to emphasize growth in incomes rather than psycho-social or demographic shifts. For example, the sharp drop in both population and household growth during the decade 1930-1940 is generally explained by the effects of the Depression on fertility and household formation. The 10 percent decline in single-person households over the Depression decade and the sharp rebound in the number of single-person households between 1940 and 1950 would seem to suggest an economic interpretation. When times are bad, more people double up; when times are good, they unbundle. The 1950s and 1960s also witnessed substantial growth in real incomes, and it appears that people used that increased buying power to purchase greater independence in living arrangements.

As one moves into the 1970s, however, the linkage between higher rates of household formation and rising real incomes breaks down. The 1970s was not a decade of rising purchasing power because inflation wiped out almost all nominal gains in income. Modest gains in real per capita income translated into negligible growth of real income per adult because of changes in the age distribution of the population.

The latter measure of income is clearly more closely related to the ability to pay for independent living. Yet the 1970s was the decade with the fastest growth in households and the second largest increase in single-person households of any decade in this century. Calculations by Pitkin (1982) of the effect of real income growth on household formation, controlling for age and marital status, show that the share of the overall increase in headship rates attributable to income growth alone fell from 39 percent of the growth in the 1960s to 6 percent of the growth in the 1970s--from over one million households to under 200,000.

Economic factors other than income may have contributed to the continued strong growth in independent living in the 1970s. In particular, the price of independent living, as measured by the rental component of the Consumer Price Index, declined relative to that of other goods: Between 1970 and 1980, rental costs rose by 75 percent, compared with the 107 percent rise in the price of all goods and services except shelter. The comparable figures for the period 1960-1970 are 20 and 29 percent.

The upward trend in the proportion of household heads among never-married young men and women living in households can be seen in Table 2. By focusing on five-year periods instead of decades, it can be seen that the last half of the 1960s and first half of the 1970s were periods of particularly strong growth in headship rates for never-marrieds under age 30. The large percentage growth in rates of those under 25 years of age in the early 1960s is figured on very low initial levels of headship and should therefore be somewhat discounted.

Table 2

Trends in Headship Rates of Never Married Men
and Women Living in Households: 1960 to 1980

Year	Headship Rate		
	Ages 15-19	Ages 20-24	Ages 25-29
1960	.0064	.0885	.1954
1965	.0098	.1341	.1984
1970	.0103	.1592	.3397
1975	.0169	.1948	.4369
1980	.0174	.2116	.4425

<u>Period</u>	<u>Increase in Headship Rate</u>		
1960-65	+0.0034	+0.0456	+0.0030
1965-70	+0.0005	+0.0251	+0.1413
1970-75	+0.0066	+0.0356	+0.0972
1975-80	+0.0005	+0.0168	+0.0056

<u>Period</u>	<u>Percentage Growth in Headship Rate</u>		
1960-65	53.1%	51.5%	1.5%
1965-70	5.1	18.7	71.2
1970-75	64.1	22.4	28.6
1975-80	3.0	8.6	1.3

SOURCE: Authors' tabulations of 1960 and 1970 Census Public Use Sample, 1966 Survey of Economic Opportunity, and 1975 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey tapes.

The post-1975 slowdown, however, cannot similarly be explained by a change in the base and appears to indicate a definite weakening in the trend.

Without denying the possible role of housing costs in explaining living patterns, we argue here that an additional demographic factor may have also been important. Unlike all the other forces, the impact of the baby boom on family structure is capable of explaining the unusually rapid spurt in independent living in the early 1970s and the subsequent slower increases in headship among young adults.

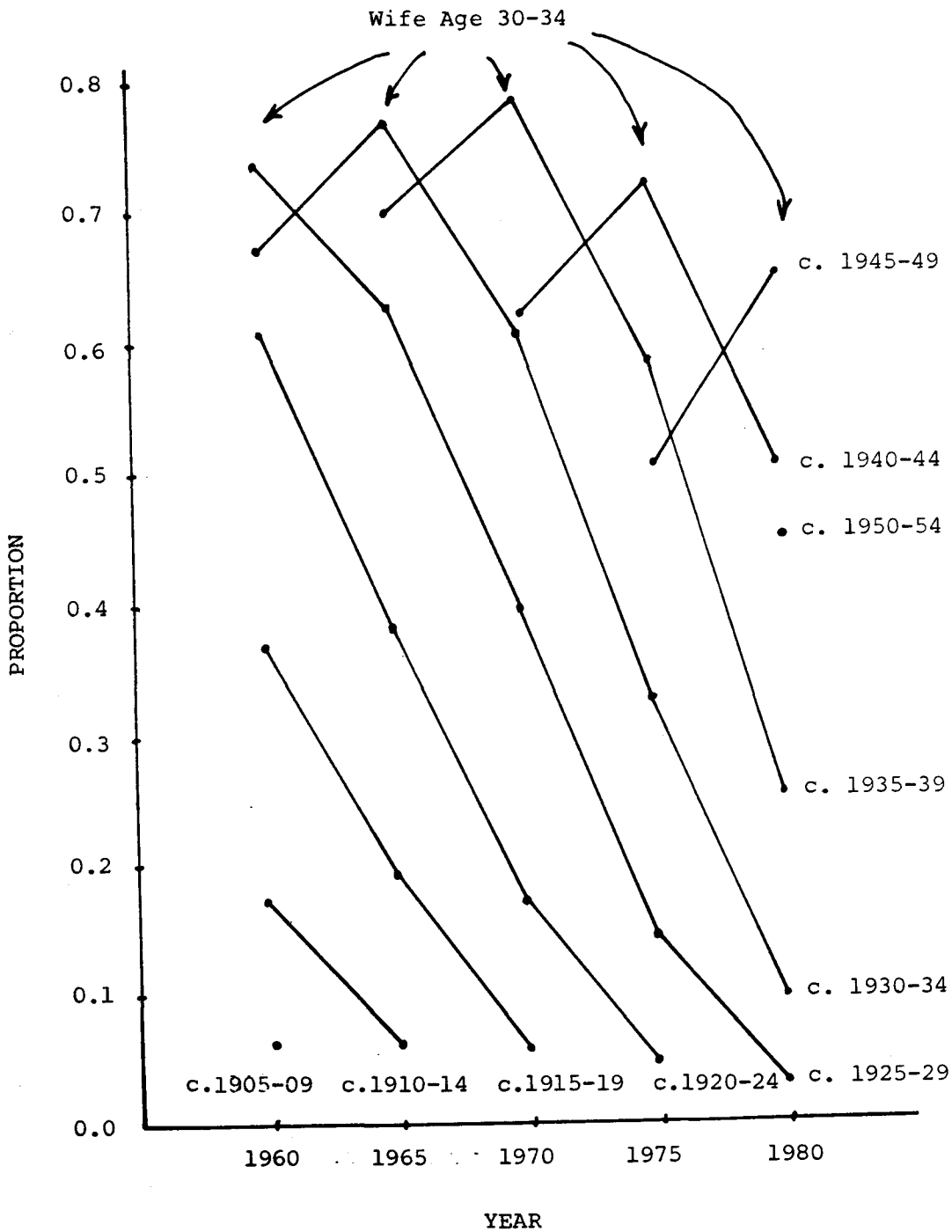
The Baby Boom and the Squeeze on Multigenerational Households

As we search for a perspective on the rapid rise in household formation around 1970, one aspect of changing population composition cannot be ignored. It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the squeeze on multigenerational households caused by the large families of the baby boom was at its worst. This squeeze, identified by Pitkin (1977), reinforced the trend toward independent living in the 1960s and by the late 1970s had the opposite influence.

Figure 1 follows the proportion of married couples with two or more children under the age of 15 living at home through the time period from 1960 to 1980. The figure shows how cohorts born between 1905 and 1954 reach their maximum saturation with minor children present in the household when the wife is aged 30-34, and that cohorts of married couples who passed through this period of their lives during the years 1965 through 1970 attained the maximum saturation of more than 75 percent with two or more young children under the age of 15 at home. These cohorts of wives are those who were themselves born

Figure 1

Proportion of Married Couple Cohorts with Two or More Children
Under the Age of 15 Living at Home: 1960 to 1980



Source: Authors' tabulations of 1960 and 1970 Census Public Use Sample, 1966 Survey of Economic Opportunity, and 1975 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey tapes.

during the 1930s and achieved record high fertility levels as they passed through the reproductive ages.

After the wife reaches age 35, the married couples can be said to enter the "launching" stage of the family cycle as their children increasingly become eligible to go away to college or into the service, or move out to set up their own households. For cohorts born since 1945, this launching stage might not begin until the wife is slightly older because of trends toward later age at marriage and childbearing. For the cohorts of mothers born before 1945, however, sharp declines in the fraction with two or more minor children still under the proper age to be launched began when the mothers turned 35.

Thus it was at the turn of the decade that the oldest of the baby boom generation entered the age at which people normally would marry and set up their own households. Many of them did just that, but many set up their own households without marrying. To delay both marriage and household formation would have meant a delay in the transition to adulthood for those baby boomers who could have elected to continue living at home with their parents and younger siblings. From the parents' point of view, further delays in launching their first- and second-borns out of the nest were not desirable given the disorder that teenagers generally bring to domestic life, especially when the younger children begin to resent the greater freedom of older siblings and demand the same for themselves. For the oldest children in baby boom households, remaining at home could be equally intolerable if their parents treated them like their younger siblings. During periods of conflict, the easiest path for parents to take was usually for all to be treated as children. For many households with three or

four children and only three bedrooms, teenagers could hardly wait until they could get their "own room." For the oldest, this meant moving out. For the youngest, the time when they would get their own room would come at an earlier age.

The pressure created by the presence of the baby boom generation on the ability of two generations of adults to share the same home also affected the chances that aging parents would move in with their children. Not only were the parents of the baby boom cohorts financially hard-pressed by their growing families, but space was also not available to accommodate elderly relatives. Evidence seems fairly conclusive that in the past the elderly were more likely to live with their children in place of grandchildren, and that the presence of many children seemed to discourage multigenerational households (Laslett, 1972). While considerations of space and household economics are undoubtedly important factors in explaining this pattern, the problems of sharing psychological and social space among three generations are probably comparable for households with young children and the elderly, or those with younger children and older children in their early 20s. The major difference in the two types of multigenerational households is that the elderly would be made unwelcome over a much longer period of time, both while the nest was filling up and while it was emptying. The baby boom, therefore, probably helped to increase headship rates among the elderly during the entire period from 1950 to 1980, while it affected the launching of young adults beginning only in the late 1960s.

Families also responded to the squeeze by occupying larger houses with more rooms. Since the squeeze is most acute when several chil-

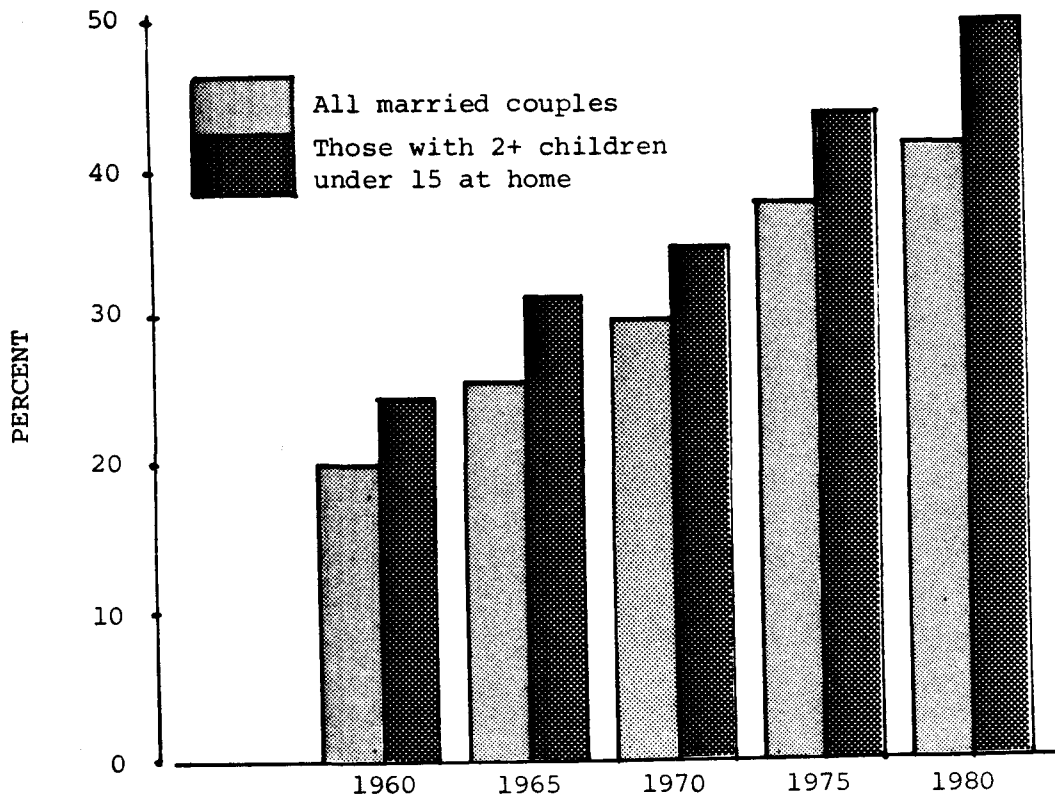
dren are reaching adulthood, we have focused on married couple households where the wife is aged 35-39 and 40-44. This life course period also often corresponds to the time when grandparents have lost a spouse. Figure 2 presents two trends with respect to wives aged 35-39 for the period 1960 to 1980. The lower panel of Figure 2 depicts the proportion of wives who have two or more children under the age of 15 living at home. As can be seen, this fraction increased up to 1970, then fell off sharply. The upper panel of Figure 2 gives the proportion of married couples living in large single-family houses with seven or more rooms. This fraction is consistently higher for couples with at least two minor children. It also increased between 1960 and 1970, keeping pace with the growth in large families with teenaged children over this period. After 1970, the occupancy of large houses continued to increase, both among couples with two or more young children at home and among those with fewer young children as well. During the 1970s, the pressures on multigenerational households brought on by the presence of young children was thus reduced both by increases in the size of houses occupied by married couples and by the decline in the presence of young children. The same trends are also clear from Table 3 giving similar data for couples where the wife is aged 40-44.

Implications for the Future

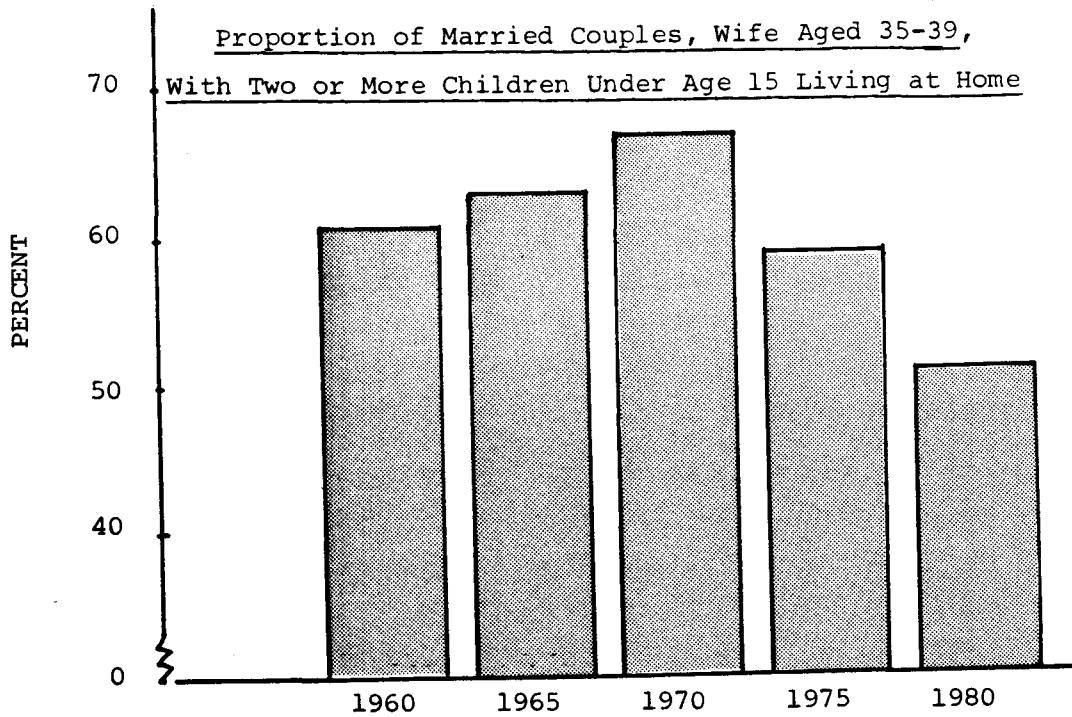
The trends documented in Figure 2 and Table 3 should mean that young adults will find it more comfortable to delay their departure from the parental home. The combination of fewer siblings at home, more space and a mother who spends more time at work provides a living

Figure 2

Proportion of Married Couples, Wife Aged 35-39
Living in Single-family Houses with Seven or More Rooms



Proportion of Married Couples, Wife Aged 35-39,
With Two or More Children Under Age 15 Living at Home



Source: Authors' tabulations of 1960 and 1970 Census Public Use Sample, 1966 Survey of Economic Opportunity, and 1975 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey tapes.

Table 3

Proportion of Married Couples in the Launching Stage of the
Family Cycle with Young Children at Home and Who Live
in Large Single-family Homes by Age of Wife: 1960-1980

	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980
<u>Wife Aged 35-39</u>					
Proportion with 2+ children <15 at home	.6087	.6297	.6611	.5881	.5077
Proportion in single-family houses with 7+ rooms	.1994	.2587	.2968	.3715	.4143
Proportion in single-family houses with 7+ rooms who have 2+ children <15 at home	.2486	.3177	.3442	.4364	.4949
<u>Wife Aged 40-44</u>					
Proportion with 2+ children <15 at home	.3674	.3817	.3872	.3287	.2489
Proportion in single-family houses with 7+ rooms	.2113	.2633	.3018	.3704	.4099
Proportion in single-family houses with 7+ rooms who have 2+ children <15 at home	.2893	.3443	.3803	.4521	.4770

SOURCE: Authors' tabulations of 1960 and 1970 Census Public Use Sample, 1966 Survey of Economic Opportunity, and 1975 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey tapes.

environment that some young adults should find more attractive than living alone or with roommates in increasingly expensive rental apartments. Many young adults may delay their departure until their mid or late 20s, while others may find it easier to return to their parental home temporarily when they find themselves unemployed, attending school, or recovering from a failed marriage. Similar considerations of excess space and the absence of small children may also lead to greater doubling up among the elderly.

An additional demographic consequence of the baby boom that affects only the elderly is illustrated in Table 4. It can be seen that elderly widows with more children are more likely to avoid institutionalization and to live in family households. The parents of the baby boom have just begun to turn 65. For the balance of this century, elderly widows will be more likely to find that they can count on being taken in by one of their three or four children. While few of the baby boom generation are not working and available to care for elderly parents, their smaller families, larger homes, and two incomes could help cause a reversal in the trend toward ever more independent living among the elderly.

The delayed departure of young adults and greater opportunities for return of elderly parents will thus reduce the number of households that will be formed during the 1980s. To the extent that the baby boom generation postpones household formation to the 1990s rather than foregoes it altogether, the reduction will mitigate the sharp decline in household growth that is now projected to occur when the baby bust generation reaches young adulthood.

Table 4

Living Arrangements of Widows Aged 65+
By Number of Children Ever Born: 1970

Children Ever Born	<u>Percent in Specified Living Arrangements</u>			N(000s)
	In Families	In Non-family Households	In Institutions and Group Quarters	
0	18.7%	71.6%	9.6%	1,020
1	32.4	58.0	9.4	1,029
2	38.0	55.6	8.2	1,164
3	40.6	50.8	8.7	867
4	38.6	53.0	8.3	651
5	46.7	47.2	6.2	403
6	51.0	43.8	5.2	306
7+	58.0	37.7	4.3	634

SOURCE: Crystal (1983), Table 3-3.

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