

# For First Time, Unmarried Households Reign In US

by Maxim Kniazkov *Sun Oct 15, 1:02 PM ET*

WASHINGTON (AFP) - It is by no means dead, but for the first time, a new survey has shown that traditional marriage has ceased to be the preferred living arrangement in the majority of US households.

The shift, reported by the US Census Bureau in its 2005 American Community Survey, could herald a sea change in every facet of American life -- from family law to national politics and its current emphasis on family values.

The findings, which were released in August but largely escaped public attention until now because of the large volume of data, indicated that marriage did not figure in nearly 55.8 million American family households, or 50.2 percent.

More than 14 million of them were headed by single women, another five million by single men, while 36.7 million belonged to a category described as "nonfamily households," a term that experts said referred primarily to gay or heterosexual couples cohabiting out of formal wedlock.

In addition, there were more than 30 million unmarried men and women living alone, who are not categorized as families, the Census Bureau reported.

By comparison, the number of traditional households with married couples at their core stood at slightly more than 55.2 million, or 49.8 percent of the total.

Unmarried couples gravitated toward big cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco, while the farm states in the Great Plains and rural communities of the Midwest and West remained bastions of traditionalism, according to the survey.

The trend represented a dramatic change from just six years ago, when married couples made up 52 percent of 105.5 million American households.

It indicated that efforts by President George W. Bush and his allies, who over the past five years have made a concerted effort to shore up traditional marriage and families through tax breaks, special legislation and church-sponsored campaigns is bearing little fruit.

The shift, experts said, also raises the question about the future effectiveness of so-called "family value" politics currently played by both Republicans and Democrats.

Douglas Besharov, a sociologist with the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington-based think tank, said it is difficult for the traditional family to emerge unscathed after

three and a half decades of divorce rates reaching 50 percent and five decades out-of-wedlock births.

"Change is in the air," Besharov said in a recent interview with the State Department journal called *US Society and Values*. "The only question is whether it is catastrophic or just evolutionary."

He predicted that cohabitation and temporary relationships between people were likely to dominate America's social landscape for years to come.

"Overall, what I see is a situation in which people -- especially children -- will be much more isolated, because not only will their parents both be working, but they'll have fewer siblings, fewer cousins, fewer aunts and uncles," the scholar argued. "So over time, we're moving towards a much more individualistic society."

In the opinion of Stephanie Coontz, who heads the Council on Contemporary Families, growing life expectancy as well as women's earning potential are impacting the traditional marriage in unexpected ways.

If before World War II the typical American marriage ended with the death of one partner within a few years after the last child had left home, she pointed out in the journal, that today couples can look forward to spending more than two decades together in an empty nest.

"The growing length of time partners spend with only each other for company, in some instances, has made individuals less willing to put up with an unhappy marriage, while women's economic independence makes it less essential for them to do so," Coontz wrote.