

170 Years of Change in Living Arrangements in the United States Using Expected Years of Life: A Research Note

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ABSTRACT Over the past 170 years, the United States has undergone demographic, structural, and cultural changes that are reflected in—and a reflection of—changes in living arrangements. In this research note, we link living arrangements and life expectancy to calculate expected life years spent across different living arrangements by sex for the U.S. population for the period 1850–2021. We decompose changes in this measure by age group and describe change across cohorts. We use harmonized data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Samples, classifying living arrangements into alone, with primary kin only (partners, parents, and children), and in extended households; more detailed subcategories include, for example, single-parent households and extended families. Three historical ages of U.S. living arrangements emerge: a “large household” system (1850–1940) characterized by relative stability in the extended household, when primary kin arrangements incorporate the majority of the substantial gains in life expectancy; an era of “primary kin” dominance (1940–1980) when life years spent only with primary kin increase faster than life expectancy, while the prevalence of extended households declines; and a “diversified” phase (1980–onward) characterized by a decline in two-parent households in favor of greater diversity, including living alone and with extended family.

KEYWORDS Households • Family demography • Life expectancy • Cohorts • IPUMS

Introduction

Living arrangements are both a reflection and a determinant of demographic, structural, cultural, and policy change and have evolved significantly across societies throughout modern history (Furstenberg 2019; Ruggles 1994). Over their lifetime, people experience a variety of living arrangements, of which the type and duration are influenced by the prevailing household structure and survival conditions. Much influential work has looked at historical changes in household composition (Cherlin 2012; Furstenberg 2019; Parsons 1949). Still, few studies have linked living arrangements to life expectancy to calculate expected life years spent by living arrangement

(Raymo et al. 2022), and no research to date has done so across the entire population age distribution or for a large time span. Demographic methods allow for translating period data on household structure into expected life years by living arrangement, on the basis of the survival conditions of each period. Studying historical changes in expected life years by living arrangement can provide insights on how survival gains contribute to the composition of households above and beyond social trends. Intuitively, improvements in survival increase the availability of life years to be spent across any living arrangement in the population; meanwhile, such improvements affect household composition by creating the demographic potential for social change to occur.

We make use of a unique population-level dataset on 170 years of living arrangements for the United States, a country that since 1850 has seen its life expectancy double from around 40 to around 80 years in 2021, while undergoing radical social, economic, policy, and cultural shifts (Cherlin 2012; Furstenberg 2019; Ruggles 1994). Previous research has examined historical changes in living arrangements for selected age groups, specifically, older adults (McGarry and Schoeni 2000; Raymo et al. 2022; Ruggles 2007; Szoltysek et al. 2020) and children (Pilkaukas et al. 2020; van Poppel et al. 2013). We take a life years approach, showing how historical changes in survival are reflected in living arrangements across the entire age distribution by sex. Additionally, we offer a complementary perspective by comparing the distribution of living arrangements across individuals born in the 1860s, 1900s, and 1940s.

We focus on the United States because of the availability of long-term, harmonized data on living arrangements. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the country experienced the transition from an agricultural to an industrial and service-based economy and the strong institutionalization of marriage and gender divisions of reproductive and market labor. These changes are thought to have led to a shift from extended family arrangements to the dominance of the so-called “nuclear household” (Parsons 1949; Popenoe 1993), defined as parental units with any number of young children. Fertility decline also contributed to falling household size throughout the period (Kobrin 1976), for example, by decreasing the number of siblings. Toward the end of the twentieth century, changes associated with the deinstitutionalization of marriage, increased divorce rates, postponed childbearing, and declining fertility rates, combined with economic uncertainty, began to reduce the dominance of the so-called “nuclear,” two-parent household, giving new life to extended family arrangements and consolidating emerging ones, such as living alone (Cherlin 2004; Esteve et al. 2020; Kennedy and Ruggles 2014; Kramarow 1995).

To summarize the experiences of different age groups in relation to their living arrangements, we use expected life years. This measure is directly derived from life expectancy at birth, a summary measure of mortality indicating the number of years a fictitious cohort of people would live if, throughout their lives, they experienced the same age-specific mortality rates as those prevalent in the population in a given year. Expected life years by living arrangement is a decomposition of life expectancy at birth based on the age-specific proportion of individuals in each living arrangement at a given time (for an example, see Schwartz et al. 2023).

We define three broad living arrangements: alone, with primary kin only (partners, parents, and children), and in extended or composite households. For primary kin households, we distinguish three categories: couple-only, two-parent households

with children (as a parent or as a child), and single-parent households with children (as a parent or as a child). For extended households, we also distinguish three categories: extended kin only (i.e., everyone in the household is kin-related), mixed (i.e., some individuals are kin-related and others are not), and nonkin only (i.e., nobody in the household is kin-related). First, we describe change in expected life years by living arrangement over time by sex; then, we analyze where changes are concentrated in terms of age groups and periods. Finally, we provide an overview of changes across cohorts born in the 1860s, 1900s, and 1940s. Although our results are specific to the United States and not generalizable to other contexts, they reveal some empirical correspondences between changes in life expectancy and living arrangements that can be used to derive testable predictions about the evolution of household structures.

Data and Methods

We use microdata samples from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) USA (see <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>). IPUMS data include decennial censuses from 1790 to 2010 and American Community Survey data from 2000 to the present. We use all censuses from 1850 to 2000 except the 1890 census, which was lost to fire, and the American Community Surveys for 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021. This selection of the latter surveys ensures continuity while avoiding 2020, for which data were not representative. The inclusion of 2021 allows to capture some of the short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on life expectancy (Schöley et al. 2022). To the basic census information, IPUMS have added variables about individuals' identification within the household, which are key for classifying living arrangements (Sobek and Kennedy 2009). These variables are the unique identifier for mother, father, partner, and children of the reference person, as long as they live in the same household unit. People in the household who share a parent are classified as siblings; only siblings with a coresident mother or father can be identified as such. By elimination, we identify whether the individual lives with anyone else. Among other coresidents, it is possible to distinguish between nonprimary relatives of at least one member of the household and those who have no kin relationship to any household member. We limit our samples to individuals living in private households, excluding those living in institutions. In line with census definitions, we group the population by age and sex (female or male). From the microdata, we obtain the proportions of people living in each of the categories of living arrangements detailed above, by age and sex.

Life expectancy at birth (e_0') is a summary measure of age-specific mortality rates in year t . Years of life expectancy are distributed across the three broad categories (and seven subcategories) of living arrangements ($i = 1, 2, \dots, 7$). To calculate our indicator e_{0i}' , we require age-specific mortality rates by sex. We use life tables from the Human Mortality Database for each year between 1940 and 2021 (see <https://www.mortality.org/>). For the years between 1910 and 1930, we use life tables produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Bell and Miller 2005), and for 1850 to 1900, we use Haines' (1998) estimated life tables.

We apply the Sullivan (1971) method to calculate the expected life years spent in each living arrangement by year in the population, as well as the corresponding life

expectancy indicator e'_{0i} . We multiply the age- and sex-specific proportions in each living arrangement by the life years lived in that age and sex group in the same year. To understand the relative contribution of different age groups to changes in e'_{0i} over time, we use a simple age decomposition based on Arriaga's (1984) method. We divide the entire period into eight 20-year intervals, from 1860–1880 to 2000–2021, and split the population into eight 10-year age groups, from 0–9 to 70+. For each 20-year interval, we calculate the change in total life expectancy as $e'_0 = {}^2 - e'_0 = {}^1$, and do the same for the change in life expectancy in each living arrangement e'_{0i} . We then decompose such changes into the contribution of each 10-year age group. Arriaga's decomposition formulates differences in life expectancy by living arrangement between two periods as the sum of changes in life years spent in living arrangement i within an age interval as both mortality and the proportion of people in i change (direct effects) and changes in the number of survivors in living arrangement i at the end of the age interval (indirect effects).

Our analysis refers to the noninstitutionalized population as a whole. In principle, it is possible to disaggregate the results by race and ethnicity or educational attainment, among other factors. Unfortunately, in doing so we would lose the long temporal dimension, as disaggregated mortality data are unavailable or highly imprecise for earlier census years. Similarly, life tables for migrants are unavailable, so the oversimplifying assumption here is that migrants to the United States have historically had the same mortality profile as natives.

Results

Changes in Life Expectancy by Broad Living Arrangement

Figure 1 shows changes in life expectancy at birth between 1850 and 2021, with different colors for living alone (purple), with primary kin only (teal), and in extended households (yellow). Table A1 (shown in the online appendix, along with all other tables designated with an "A") shows the corresponding data for Figure 1. Tables A2 and A3 decompose those changes into the contribution of different age groups, for females and males. This decomposition allows us to understand the ages at which changes in life years by living arrangement are concentrated, showing the extent to which they are in line with changes in life expectancy or disproportionately higher or lower.

Life expectancy at birth rises from around 40 in 1850 to around 80 years in 2021 for both sexes. Of these life years, the greatest share is spent living only with primary kin, followed by extended households and alone. This order is maintained in every year, although the relative importance of each category changes substantially over time. In 1850, life years spent living with primary kin only (20.0) and in extended households (19.1) are almost identical. From then onward, living with primary kin increases until 1970, as this state absorbs the majority of the extra life years added due to decreased mortality. The most rapid increment (from 45.8 to 52.9 years) is observed between 1910 and 1970, followed by a stabilization around that level until the end of the observation period (50.5 in 2021). Notably, the average absolute number of years spent in extended households at the population level is similar between

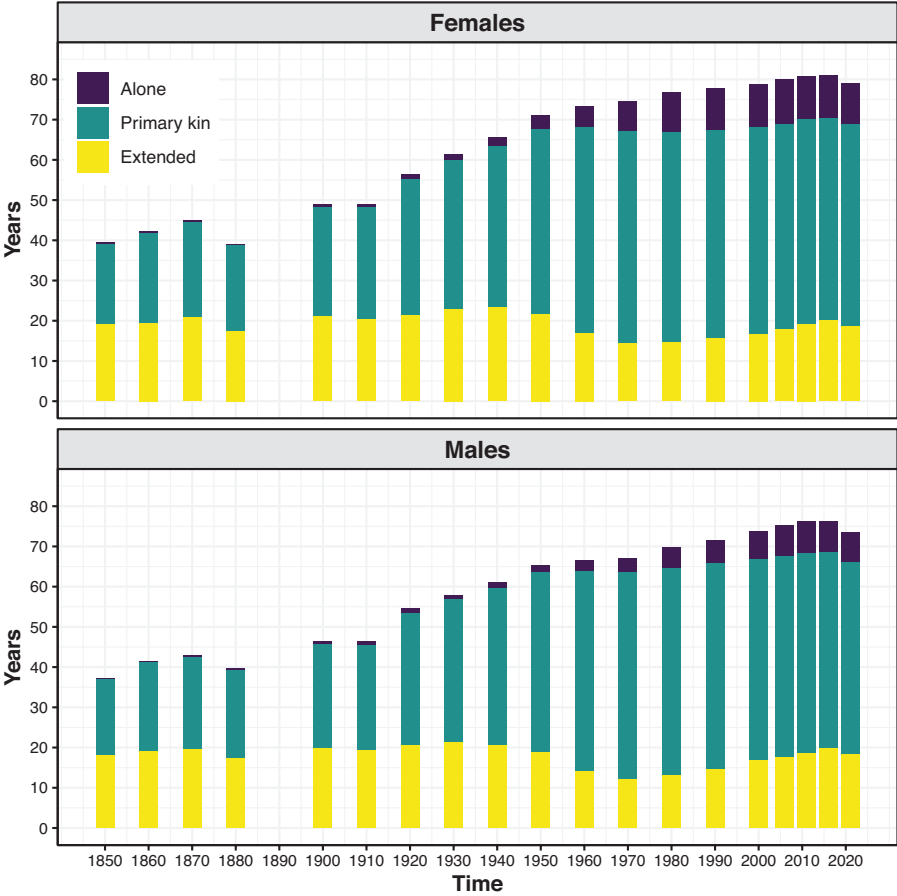


Fig. 1 Female and male years of life expectancy at birth by broad living arrangement, 1850–2021

2021 (18.6) and 1850 (19.1). Living alone remains relatively rare until 1940, when it accounts for up to two years of female life expectancy and 1.6 years for males. After 1940, expected years spent living alone rises quickly, reaching an additional eight years for females and seven years for males in 2021.

Of the 9.5 years of life expectancy at birth gained between 1850 and 1900, seven are added to living with primary kin, two are added to living in extended households, and 0.5 to living alone. The majority of life years are gained between ages 0–9 as a consequence of declining infant and child mortality, and changes are substantially more modest among other age groups. Between 1900 and 1940, the majority of life expectancy gains (from 49 to 66 years for females, and from 46 to 61 for males) are added to living with primary kin only. For example, of the 7.3 years of female life expectancy gained between 1900 and 1920, 6.9 are added to years living with primary kin. Overall, the century-long rise in life expectancy. The number of years spent in extended households remains constant throughout this period, making for a

progressively lower share of the total. With the exception of living alone, most of the gains in life years spent in any living arrangement are concentrated among infants and children.

The years between 1940 and 1960 see the most radical transformations in living arrangements observed for the entire period. For the first time, the increase in life years spent in any living arrangement outpaces the increase in life expectancy: for females, 11.2 years of life expectancy with primary kin are added, compared with a total increase in life expectancy of 7.8 years. This situation is counteracted by a decrease in expected years in extended households for females by 6.7 years between 1940 and 1960. This transformation is also reflected in a rapid increase in years spent living alone, from 1.1 to 3.2 years during this period. The majority of these changes occur between ages 10 and 50, which are generally characterized by low mortality.

In the following two decades (1960–1980), we observe an increase in expected years spent living alone for females that outpaces the increase in total life expectancy. The older age groups (70+) contribute the most to this change, and their rise in living alone outpaces declining mortality. The same is not observed for males, suggesting that increases in female life expectancy spent alone after age 70 are driven by the departure of children from primary kin households, followed by the death of the partner in couple-only households.

The years after 1980 see a moderate increase in total life expectancy, with a slight fall for males between 2000 and 2021 that is partly attributable to COVID-19 (Schöley et al. 2022). During these years, the stabilization and subsequent fall of primary kin living arrangements are observed at all ages between 0 and 60. The increase in years spent living alone also stabilizes during this period, with a slight decline among older females, compensated by an increase among people in their 40s and 50s. Between 2000 and 2021, the largest increase in living alone is detected for people aged 20–29. The number of life years spent alone rises among older males and declines among older females. From the 1980s onward, the greatest expansion in any living arrangement, outpacing total life expectancy, is observed for extended households. Of the four years of male life expectancy gained between 1980 and 2000, 3.6 years are added to extended households. This rise is observed across all age groups but is especially concentrated among children and young adults (0–9 and 20–29), in line with findings from Pilkauskas et al. (2020).

Internal Diversity in the Composition of Living Arrangements

Figure 2 decomposes the change in life expectancy into subcategories of living arrangements, with the exception of living alone, which has no subcategories. Tables A4 and A5 show the age decomposition of changes in life years in primary kin and extended households into their subcategories, by sex. The top left panel of Figure 2 shows the rapid increase in female life years spent living alone between 1925 and 1975. For males, living alone increases more gradually between 1950 and the early 2000s and appears to stabilize around the mid-2000s at slightly lower levels than for females (7.5 years in 2021, top right).

The internal composition of life years spent in primary kin households changes considerably over time (see middle row of Figure 2). The rise in such households

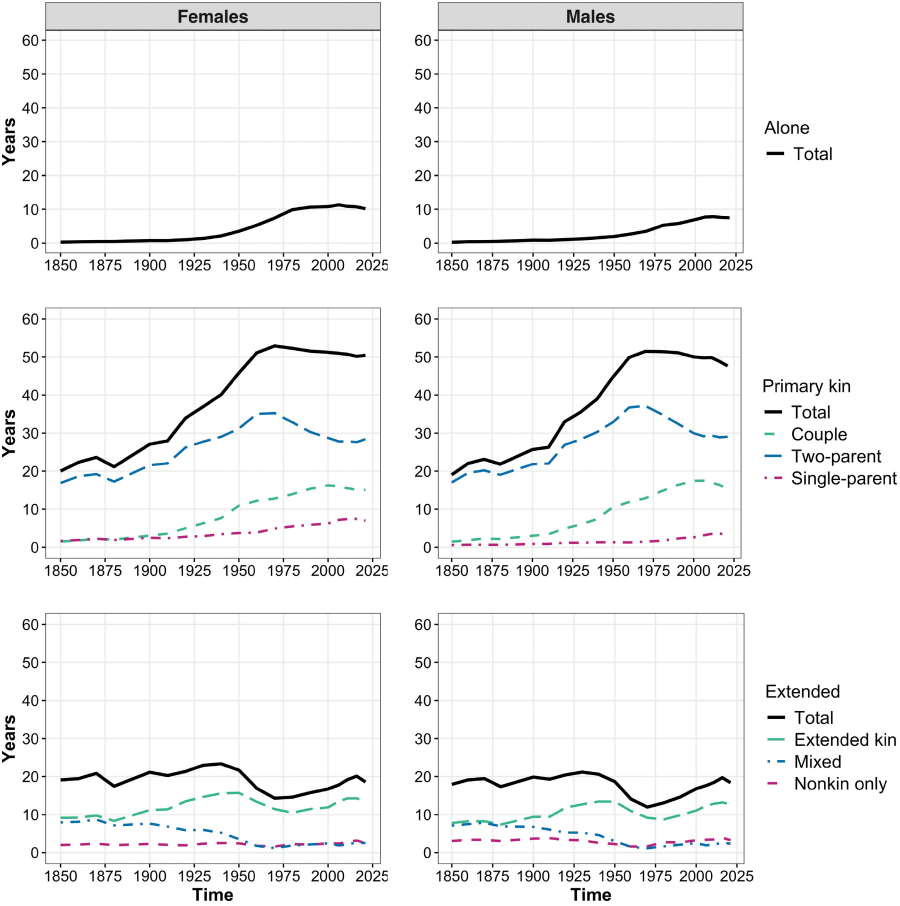


Fig. 2 Female and male years of life expectancy at birth while living alone (top), with primary kin only (middle, by category), and in extended households (bottom, by category), 1850–2021

until 1900 is predominantly attributable to life years spent in two-parent households with children, which increase as infant and child mortality declines. Between 1900 and 1960, the rapid rise in primary kin households is attributable to continued rapid growth in two-parent living arrangements, but also to an increase in years spent living only with partners. After 1960, couple-only living arrangements continue to rise, experiencing a slight decline only in the last observed decade. By contrast, life years spent in two-parent households peak around 1960 and decline thereafter, with the decline signifying a major structural trend as it runs in the opposite direction to life expectancy changes. Our own calculations show that, relative to total life expectancy, years spent in two-parent households go from representing 48% of the total in 1960 to 36% in 2021. Life years in single-parent households remain low throughout most of the period but increase from 3.8 to 7.0 years for females between 1960 and 2021, and from 1.3 to 3.3 among males. This tendency likely reflects increases in union dissolution during this period (Schwartz et al. 2023).

As noted earlier, years spent in extended households are similar between 1850 and 2021, with oscillations between these time points (see bottom row of [Figure 2](#)). These oscillations mask substantial diversity and change within this category. A consistent trend between 1850 and 1950 is the steady decline in mixed living arrangements, which likely reflects the decline in the presence of live-in servitude, boarders, and lodgers, characteristic of the preindustrial United States (Modell and Hareven 1973). Life years in nonkin households also decline between 1850 and 1950 and slightly increase from 1975. Extended kin-only households, on the other hand, experience a consistent rise between 1850 and 1950, in line with declining infant and child mortality. Our calculations show female life expectancy in extended kin-only households increasing together with total life expectancy between 1850 and 1950 (from 9.2 to 15.7 years) and then declining to 10.5 between 1950 and 1980, to rise back to 13.5 by 2021. We find similar trends for males. The decline and subsequent rebound in extended kin households can be interpreted as structural trends as they do not align with changes in survival.

Change Across Cohorts

To complement the period trends, we present an aggregate cohort perspective. [Figure 3](#) shows the proportion of noninstitutionalized individuals by age (from 0 to 80) in each type of living arrangement for females and males born in three decades: 1860–1869, 1900–1909, and 1940–1949. For this figure, we distinguish the two subcategories of two-parent and single-parent households into whether the individual is a parent or a child of other household members.

The 1860s cohort has a high share of people (40–50%) living in extended households at every age, with peaks just before age 20 for females and just after for males, and increases at older ages for both sexes, especially for the extended kin-only arrangement (see top row of [Figure 3](#)). The prevalence of extended households is much lower in the 1900s cohort, which experiences the “dying out” of mixed extended households and the decline in extended kin coresidence at older ages (middle row). The 1940s cohort has the lowest prevalence of extended households, mainly concentrated at younger ages in sharp contrast to the trends observed for the 1860s cohort (bottom row). The peak in extended living arrangements around age 20 (when both parents and children are likely to be alive) is consistent across all three cohorts.

The 1860s cohort shows low levels of living alone, concentrated at advanced ages, and similar for females and males. In the 1900s cohort, we observe a large shift from living in extended households to living alone at older ages, but only among females. As noted earlier, this finding is due to the combination of children’s residential emancipation and earlier death of male partners. Living alone is widespread for the 1900s female cohort, in line with the historical circumstances this generation lived through, especially World War II. The 1940s cohort is comparable to the 1900s cohort, but levels of living alone among females are lower in favor of living as a couple, in line with greater male survival. In the 1940s generation, for both sexes, living as a couple emerges as a predominant living arrangement, first before children are born (early to middle 20s) and then after they move out (from age 45 onward). Considering our life expectancy results, trends will likely look very different in subsequent cohorts (e.g.,

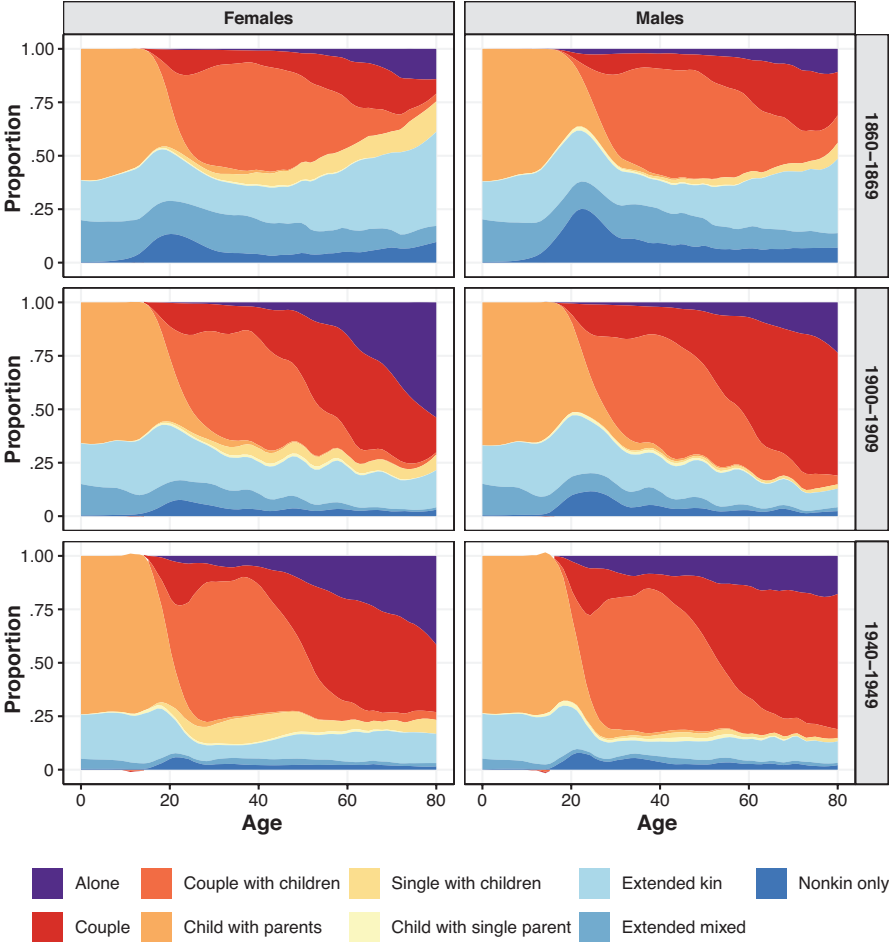


Fig. 3 Proportion of female and male U.S. population in three 10-year birth cohorts (1860s, 1900s, and 1940s) living in different living arrangements by age

those born in the 1980s) owing to delayed union formation and fertility. We cannot, of course, provide a complete picture for younger cohorts in our data.

Discussion

In this research note, we provide a broad overview of living arrangements in the United States for the longest period of time for which population data are currently available, from 1850 until 2021. We make use of a unique data source providing detailed living arrangement information over 170 years. Our empirical approach allows us to combine information about changes in survival and living arrangements. We shed light on the relative importance of mortality decline for historical shifts in living arrangements at the population level. We decompose changes in expected life

years by living arrangement into the contribution of different age groups and complement the period life expectancy approach with a cohort perspective. Although our findings are specific to the U.S. experience, the trends we unveil allow us to draw some theoretical generalizations that are open to empirical testing.

The first pattern emerging from our historical investigation is that, when survival improves primarily among infants and children, those living arrangements in which infants and children are concentrated increase at a proportional rate to life expectancy. In the case of the United States between 1850 and 1940, increases in life years are mostly observed in two-parent primary kin households and extended kin-only households. The increases in these two living arrangements never outpace life expectancy because infants and children are not drivers of social change. In line with early life mortality declines, we find that the share of extended kin-only households rises consistently throughout the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries in the United States. This finding contradicts earlier discourses regarding the historically low prevalence of extended families in the United States and Western Europe (Laslett 1965; Ruggles 2009). What did disappear over the period were mixed households, in line with the declining prevalence of live-in servitude and lodgers (Modell and Hareven 1973).

A second testable generalization is that, as survival improvements shift to progressively older age groups, the distribution of living arrangements is more likely to shift as a result of social trends. Traditional sociological and demographic accounts posit that the potential for social change is highest when there are large cohorts of young adults (aged 20–40) in the population (Ryder 1965). This situation appears to be the case in the United States between 1940 and 1960, when the rise of primary kin households significantly outpaces life expectancy gains and extended family arrangements decline. However, structural changes in the system of living arrangements will have repercussions across the entire age distribution, as evidenced in the U.S. case by the rapid rise of living alone, which begins among older women as a result of children moving out and partners' higher mortality.

We can summarize our results into three distinct historical ages of U.S. living arrangements. A "large household" system prevails between 1850 and 1940. It is characterized by relative stability in the number of life years spent in extended households and a slow and steady increase in living with primary kin, which incorporates the majority of the substantial gains in life expectancy. An intensified rise in two-parent households ushers in an era of "primary kin" dominance, between 1940 and 1980, when all age groups experience an increase in life years spent living only with parents, partners, and children. Among older age groups, the share living alone and in couple-only households also rises significantly as a result of the economic and residential emancipation of adult children (Ruggles 2007) and expanded social security (McGarry and Schoeni 2000). These transformations bring about a "diversified" phase (1980–onward), which for the first time sees the decline in two-parent households in favor of a greater range of arrangements, including living alone among young adults and living in extended kin-only households among young adults and children.

Our results invite social scientists to consider the role of extended life spans as well as other demographic and social trends in shaping living arrangements. This approach requires only basic life table and household structure data, and efforts to generate harmonized living arrangements data across countries are underway (Galeano

et al. 2024). An account of the role of macroeconomic, compositional, policy, and cultural changes over the period considered is beyond the scope of this research note. However, we hope to encourage further work that examines, for example, the extent to which the described trends correspond to migration flows or changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the population; the role of the decline in social spending on families and housing for living arrangements across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups (Park et al. 2019); and the role of educational expansion, union dissolution, and female labor force participation. ■

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Reproducibility and Data Availability The data for this article are publicly available upon registration from IPUMS USA at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/> (DOI: 10.18128/D010.V16.0 and 10.18128/D014.V4.0). Life tables come from the Human Mortality Database (<https://www.mortality.org/>), the Social Security Administration (https://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/as120/LifeTables_Body.html), and Haines (1998) (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01615449809601197>). All analyses were conducted in R Studio. The code used for the analyses is publicly available at the following link: <https://github.com/gfloridi/US-living-arrangements>.

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