

Weak job market has more dads staying home - and they may stay there

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Changes in values and norms - along with better pay and job opportunities for women - are slowly increasing the number of stay-at-home fathers who leave the U.S. workforce to care for their children, according to two recent studies by Karen Kramer, a professor of human and community development. Photo by David Riecks

(Phys.org) -- There's a quiet revolution going on in kitchens and carpools across the U.S. Increasing numbers of men are hanging up their power ties, waving goodbye to jobs with paychecks, and becoming full-time stay-at-home fathers who care for their children while their wives become the family's sole breadwinners.

And, if the current economic recession follows the same pattern as its predecessors, a number of these families will find that the SAHF arrangement works so well for them that they will decide to have the husband remain at home as the primary caregiver for the children even when the job market rebounds and offers opportunities for him to re-

enter the [work force](#), suggests new research by Karen Kramer, a professor of human and community development. The department is a unit within the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois.

Kramer examined 34 years of data from Current Population Surveys, a monthly survey of 60,000 U.S. households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In her analysis, Kramer applied the most stringent definition of a SAHF household: a married heterosexual couple with a husband who was not employed and didn't earn any income, a wife who worked 35 hours a week or more and who had at least one child age 18 or under living in the home.

By this definition, the number of SAHF households grew from 2 percent in 1976 to 3.5 percent in 2009. An estimated 500,000 households with a total of more than 1.1 million children were run by SAHFs during the previous decade.

Unemployment levels strongly affect the proportion of SAHF households, which become more prevalent during economic slumps. Although the number of SAHF households declines in accordance with male unemployment rates when the U.S. economy is recovering from a recession, the number of SAHF households never reverts to its pre-recession level, resulting in a slight but steady upward trend.

“Once the recession is done, we'll see a decrease in SAHF households, but not to the point that it was at before the recession,” Kramer said about the current economic downturn.

In the 1970s, nearly all of the families surveyed reported that the man was a SAHF mainly because he was unable to work or unable to find

work. However, leaving the work force to care for the children has come to be viewed as an option for fathers as well as mothers in some families.

In the 1970s, “only 1 percent of families said that the husband was staying at home to care for the children,” versus 22 percent of families surveyed in 2000, Kramer said.

The change “from virtually no fathers reporting that they stay at home to more than one-fifth of fathers (staying) at home ... indicates a major shift in domestic and family arrangements,” Kramer wrote.

Although many men become SAHFs because they are laid off, become ill or are unable to find employment, most intend to return to work as soon as possible. However, a small number of men – even some who become SAHFs by default rather than by choice – will embrace their new roles as caregivers and elect not to return to work, even when they have job opportunities.

“Once a family gets into the routine of functioning as a SAHF household, the husband becomes more selective about which jobs he’ll accept, and he’ll only go back to work if he finds something he thinks is appropriate,” Kramer said.

Kramer found that households with men who chose to be SAHFs had higher income, more children under age 5, and wives who tended to be younger, had more education and greater earning potential than families in which the father was at home because he was unable to work or to find work.

Wives’ level of education had a significant impact on household structure: If the wife had five or more years of college, the probability of her being a stay-at-home mother – versus her spouse being a SAHF – plummeted by nearly 91 percent.

But cultural norms change slowly, and for a couple to become a SAHF household, the woman must be willing to flout current societal expectations that motherhood should be her primary identity, Kramer said.

With greater earning potential, women have more bargaining power when couples make decisions about division of labor and whose career will take precedence. As more women surpass their husbands in education and income, especially if the wife's earning potential is very high, marital partners seem to agree to exchange traditional roles, basing decisions on economics rather than gendered cultural expectations.

Currently, more women than men are attending college, and the income gap between the genders is narrowing as greater numbers of women enter high-skilled, higher paying occupations formerly dominated by men – increasing the likelihood that more fathers will choose to leave the work force to raise children.

“The number of SAHF households is still very small,” Kramer said. “But soon we’re going to have young adults (who were raised by SAHFs) who will be making these decisions for their own families. It will be interesting to see what they decide.”

In future research on SAHF households, Kramer intends to examine its impact on couples' satisfaction with life and marriage, children's academic achievement and men's careers when they decide to re-enter the labor force.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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