RECENT TRENDS IN FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION IN EUROPE

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Abstract. During the past few decades profound changes have taken place in European households and families. The role of the traditional family has become weaker and new living arrangements have gained importance. Consensual unions are now widely accepted; one-parent families now originate more in divorce than in widowhood; and solitary householders have become more common. The traditional family has also witnessed changes. The number of ‘others’ belonging to the family household (relatives, servants) has fallen, as has the number of children. Moreover, young adults have started to leave the parental home at an earlier age (except in the last few years). Average family size has thus dropped considerably. However, simulations indicate that household structures contain considerable inertia. Although a substantial increase in non-traditional living arrangements may be expected, marriage is not likely to lose its dominant position in many European countries before the turn of the century.

Résumé. Tendances récentes de la composition des familles et des ménages en Europe
Au cours des dernières décennies, de profonds changements ont affecté les ménages et les familles en Europe. Le rôle de la famille traditionnelle s’est affaibli, et de nouveaux styles de vie ont pris de l’importance. Aujourd’hui, les unions consensuelles sont largement acceptées, les familles monoparentales sont l’effet du divorce plus que du veuvage, et les ménages d’une personne sont devenus plus fréquents. Mais la famille traditionnelle a, elle aussi, changé. Au sein du ménage, le nombre des ‘autres personnes’ (apparentés, domestiques) a diminué, de même que le nombre des enfants. En outre, l’âge auquel les jeunes adultes quittent le foyer de leurs parents s’est abaisssé (sauf ces toutes dernières années). Aussi la taille moyenne de la famille a-t-elle considérablement diminué. Les simulations présentées ici montrent cependant que les structures des ménages sont dotées d’une très grande inertie. Dans la plupart des pays européens, même si on peut s’attendre à une montée sensible des styles de vie non traditionnels, le mariage traditionnel ne semble pas devoir perdre sa position dominante avant le tournant du siècle.

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1. Introduction

Profound changes have taken place in European households and families during the last few decades. The role of the traditional family has become weaker, and new living arrangements, such as consensual unions and households headed by divorced mothers, have gained considerable importance. Behind these demographic trends in the West have been changes in behaviour and attitudes, which might be characterized as a declining motivation for parenthood and a growing search for individual status. The latter often implies that families or individuals desire privacy, which leads to falling average household sizes. Indeed, the growing importance of the solitary householder is one of the most striking features of recent household structures in Europe. In general, one notes a growing diversity of life styles, producing a much more complex picture of the European household and family than, say, forty years ago. Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa (1986) consider the shift from family orientation toward an emphasis on the individual as the onset of a 'second demographic transition'. The fall of fertility to far below replacement level since the 1960s, the increased acceptance of consensual unions and divorce in the 1970s and the prospects for population decline are important demographic aspects of this second demographic transition.

This article attempts to give a broad overview of trends in family and household composition in Europe during the last few decades. The focus is on Western Europe. We look at the decreasing average size of the household and the family (section 2) and its demographic causes. The changing role of the traditional family is reviewed in section 3, while section 4 contains a discussion of non-traditional household types: one-parent families, consensual unions and one-person households. Future trends in living arrangements are explored in section 5, where simulation results of a dynamic household model, applied to the Netherlands, are presented. The projections suggest that, although a substantial increase in non-traditional living arrangements may be expected, traditional marriage is not likely to lose its dominant position in many European countries before the turn of the century.

Most of the data we use stem from census counts. It is a well-known fact that an analysis of households and families, comparing trends over time and space, poses severe difficulties as to definition, classification and accuracy. Nevertheless, the trends we observe in European coun-