

Confusion Ensued After Census Report on Two-Parent Families

By TAMAR LEWIN

Last week, the Census Bureau heralded the return of two-parent "traditional" families — glad tidings that were trumpeted on front pages and newscasts nationwide.

The only problem with the rebound of two-parent families, experts say, is that it is just not so.

"I wish it were true," said David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values. "But it's a colossal blunder. You had 280 million Americans being told by hundreds of news outlets that the tide has turned, that there's been a major turnaround

in family fragmentation. But there's no evidence of that. The issue that's on people's minds, the important issue, is how many children live with both their parents. And the Census Bureau concedes that that number hasn't changed."

The census report, released on April 13, found that the proportion of children younger than 18 living "in a traditional nuclear family" with their biological parents had risen to 56 percent in 1996 from 51 percent five years earlier.

But what the Census Bureau calls a traditional nuclear family is a

household made up of a married mother and father living with their biological children — and no one else.

The increase in those households probably reflects a decrease in another kind of household that many experts see as just as traditional: married couples and their children, who live with someone else, like a grandmother, niece or boarder. That kind of household declined as the economy improved and there was less need to live with extended-family members.

Bottom line, the overall proportion of children living with their married

biological parents has remained essentially unchanged, about 62 percent, throughout the early and mid-1990's, said Jason Fields, the Census Bureau family demographer who wrote the report, "Living Arrangements of Children: 1996."

"I was a little distressed when I saw the stories," Mr. Fields said. "I tried to be as clear as I could talking to reporters and to describe the complexities, but for the most part, they wrote the story they wanted to."

The first sentence of the press release did seem to support the idea of an increase in two-parent families,

describing an increase in the share of children "living in a traditional nuclear family with their biological mother and father."

Small wonder, then, that many news reports said that a larger share of children were living with both biological parents. (As it happened, The New York Times did not publish an article on the study.)

Mr. Fields, who did not write the press release, agreed that it would have been a good thing to elaborate further in that first sentence.

The census report described other changes in the family that Mr. Fields said were perhaps more interesting.

"We found that about half the children living with cohabiting parents are living with both their biological

parents," he said. "What we saw, and what we tried to communicate, was the enormous diversity in family structure."

But what was communicated to the public, family experts said, was a flawed view of family structure.

"When every reporter gets it wrong, I think you can conclude that the Census Bureau didn't make itself very clear," Mr. Blankenhorn said. "I think misinformation from such a trusted agency, on such an important issue, causes real harm. We've been hearing for years about the weakening of the family, and that's a big issue, not a technical question like whether the family's letting grandpa or a boarder live with them."