Household spending, household employment, and median household income are often cited in the news as indicators of the economy’s health. But what exactly is a household?

Households fall into two major categories, family and nonfamily. A family household has at least two members related by blood, marriage, or adoption, one of whom is the householder. In 1970, 81% of all U.S. households were family households, but this figure had fallen to 69% by 2000. The composition of family households has changed as well: In 1970, the largest segment of family households was made up of married couples with their own children. In 2000, married couples without their own children formed the largest segment.

Nonfamily households, on the other hand, typically include people living alone, boarders, roommates, and unmarried couples. (The 2000 census introduced the “unmarried partner” category to reflect the difference between roommates and couples.) Women living alone have always formed the largest segment of the growing nonfamily portion of households, but this share was larger in 2000 than in 1970. The share of men living alone has increased steadily in the last four censuses.

The size of households has also changed over those four decades. Between the 1970 and the 1980 census, the decrease in the share of households with five or more persons (8.1 percentage points) exactly equaled the increase in the share of one- and two-person households. Since the 1980 census, one- and two-person households have increased...
steadily, while households with three or more persons have decreased correspondingly. In 2000, the average U.S. household size was 2.59 persons, and the average family size was 3.14 persons. Figures for Fourth District states were close to the national averages.

The 2000 census allows one to examine not only the composition of households but also the living arrangements of various age groups or cohorts. Among younger adults, more males than females live with their parents, while females tend to live with a spouse. Only a small percentage of young people live alone. More often than not, older individuals live with a spouse, except females 75 and over, who more frequently live alone (in most cases as widows). This, combined with evidence that younger females live with a spouse more frequently than do younger males, suggests that women marry men who are older than themselves. A look at the relative ages of both married and unmarried couples living together confirms this: More often than not, the man is older than the woman. Males not only tend to be older but also tend to have higher incomes than the females with whom they live. Among couples living together, the male makes more than the female does in almost 60% of married and 55% of unmarried couples. The female makes more money in barely more than one of every seven married couples and in less than one of every five unmarried ones.

NOTE: Data do not include the 2.8% of the U.S. population who are homeless or living in group quarters.