

(Mis)measuring female headed *families*: EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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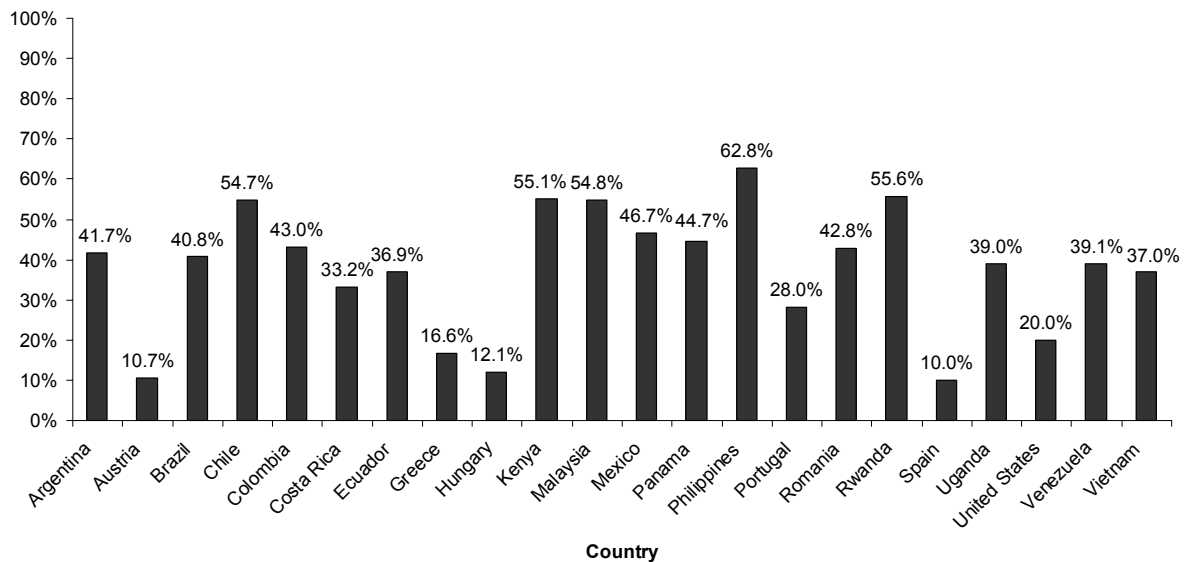
Mothers and children are of continual interest to social scientists and policy analysts because of their vulnerability to poverty and other social ills. Numerous previous studies have analyzed the economic and social vulnerability of mothers and their children in developed countries (Bedard & Deschenes 2005; Dalton & Miriam 2005; Daniels, Rettig, & delMas 2006; Rodgers 1991; Ross & Sawhill 1975; Schmidt & Sevak 2006), and recently studies have attempted to capture the experiences of these families in developing countries (Arends-Kuenning & Duryea 2006; Horrell & Krishnan 2007; Mitra, A. 2005; Yamano et al. 2006). The studies mentioned above identify female heads of household as a unit of analysis for understanding female headed *families*; however, this type of analysis excludes the experiences of those single, separated, and divorced female-headed *families* who live as a subfamily within another family member's household.¹ Excluding these families from an analysis of female headed *families* has major implications for social, family, and economic development policies, particularly if the characteristics of those families living with other family members are significantly different from those living alone.

My analysis shows that a large percent of children in female headed *families* are not captured by this type of analysis because single, separated, and divorced females with children commonly live in a household headed by another relative, especially in developing countries. Using recent IPUMS-International data, which includes variables to identify the location of mothers and fathers within a household, as well as the ability to attach certain characteristics of the mothers, fathers, and spouses to individuals within the household, I show that as many as 28

¹ Female headed *families* is defined as single, separated, or divorced mothers who have primary custody of their children and live either alone with their children or in the household of another relative, such as a parent or grandparent.

percent of children in female headed *families* are missed by only analyzing female headed households in developed countries and up to 72 percent are missed in developing countries (Figure 1). These figures imply that researchers should be more careful when analyzing the vulnerability and characteristics of female-headed families by including those families where the single, divorced, or separated mother is not the household head.

Figure 1. Percent of children in single female headed *families* where the mother is NOT a household head, Census data from 1999-2005



Source: IPUMS-International (Minnesota Population Center 2008)

Figures 2 and 3 below show trends around the world in the proportion of children living in female headed *families* where the mother is not the household head. In Europe there has been a general trend down in the proportion of children living in female headed families where another family member is the household head, and in the United States the proportion has increased slightly. No clear trends are seen in developing regions of the world. It is apparent, however, that measuring female headed *families* as only female headed households underestimates female headed *families* in all countries and could potentially lead to biased results.

Figure 2. Percent of children living in female headed *families* where the mother is NOT the household head by country and decade, developed countries, 1970s to present

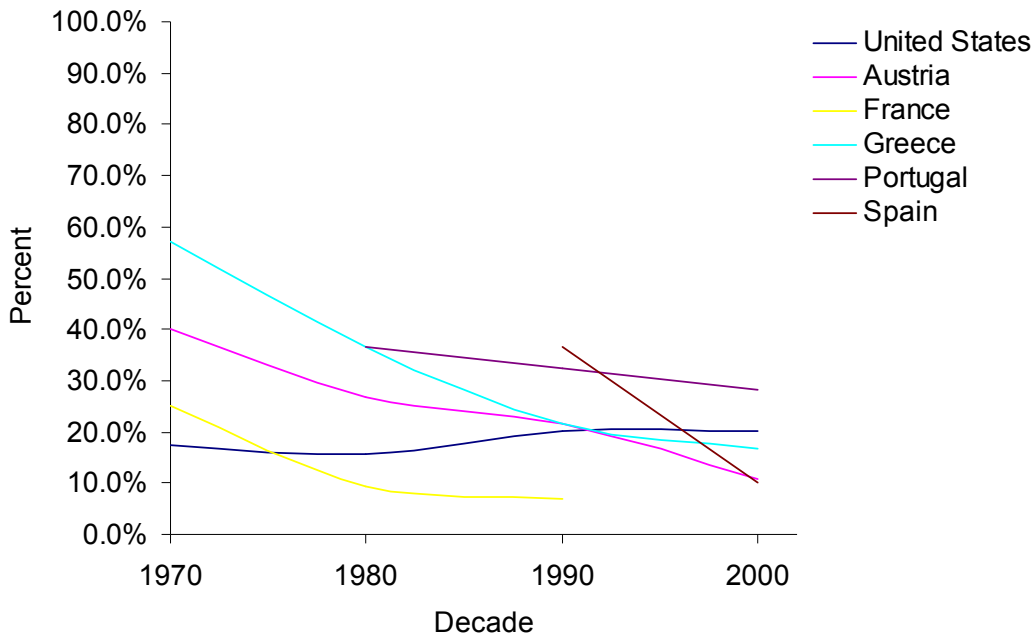
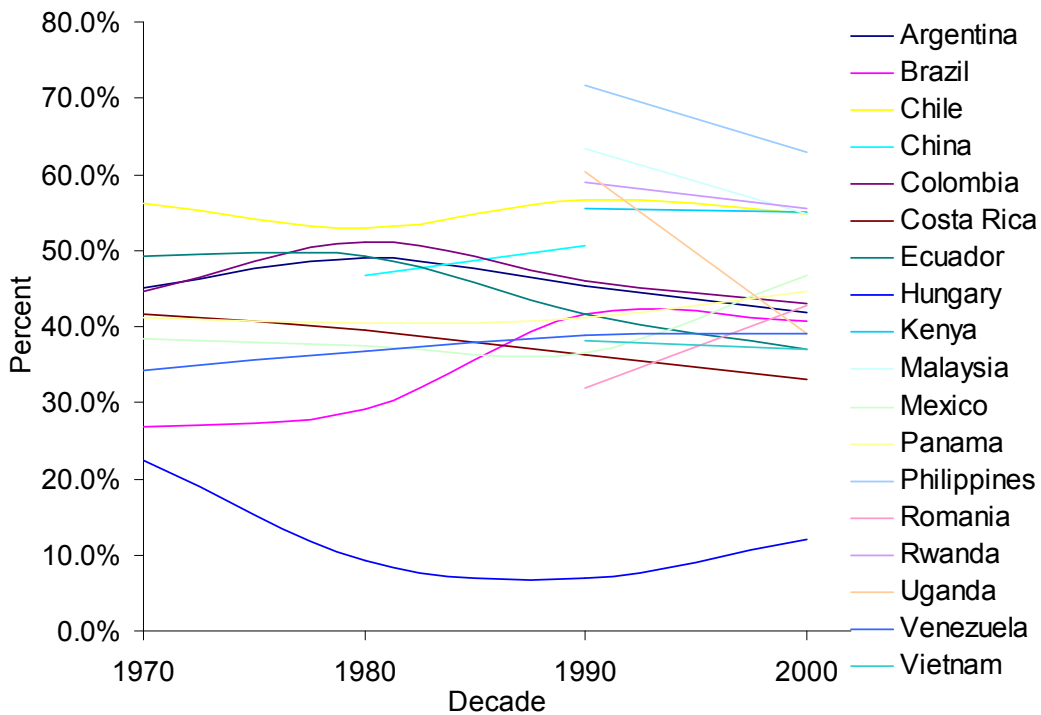


Figure 3. Percent of children living in female headed *families* where the mother is NOT the household head by country and decade, developing countries, 1970s to present



Further analysis for this paper identifies the proportion of female headed families where the mother is NOT the household head from the *perspective of the mother* and compares demographic and socioeconomic variables of families with custodial mothers who are household heads to the families of custodial mothers who are not household heads but live with other relatives in an attempt to better understand any significant differences and similarities between these two groups.

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