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# Lone-Father Families in Canada, 1971-1996

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**Lone-Father Families in Canada, 1971-1996**

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The study of lone-parent families has been high on the agenda of social science research for some time now. The rapid growth in the number of families headed by a lone adult and the higher incidence of poverty and other social problems among such families have attracted the attention of demographers, sociologists and others interested in social policy. Not surprisingly, most of this attention has centred on the situation of lone-mother families. More than four-fifths of lone parent families in most industrialized countries are headed by a woman. And it is among these mother-only families that the incidence of low income reaches strikingly high levels. The 1996 census indicates that 73% of families headed by a woman less than 35 years of age fell below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Off.

The limited attention paid to male lone-parent families has usually been excused for two reasons. First, there are relatively few such families. In 1976, there were fewer than 100,000 in Canada. Not only did the small number of these families make them appear an unimportant topic of study, it also made it difficult for interested researchers to learn much about them since studies based on national samples would find very few cases for analysis. Beyond their small numbers, however, lone-father families were also seen as less problematic from a social policy perspective. Since the fathers were expected to be in the labour force, the incidence of poverty and associated social problems was believed to be less.

Of late, however, researchers have begun to turn their attention to male lone-parent families (Daniels, 1998; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995). One reason for this is the growth of interest in the subject of fatherhood. There is renewed acknowledgment that fathers play an important role in the lives of their children, a role that extends beyond supplying a regular pay cheque (Harris et al., 1998; Amato and Booth, 1997:228; Barker, 1994). At the same

time, there is growing concern that problems that have long faced lone-mother families are a concern for lone-father families as well. While poverty rates are still well-below those found among female lone-parent families, some studies suggest poverty among lone-father families are significantly higher than in two-parent families and are on the rise (Eggebeen et al., 1996).

The present paper has a modest goal. We seek to describe the growth and change among lone-father families in Canada over the last generation. Drawing on the public use micro-files of the Canadian censuses, we will examine the changing demographic and economic characteristics of lone fathers and the families they head. We will also compare the situation of lone fathers with that of lone mothers, and end with some comments on the issues that need to be explored in the years ahead.

### **Demographic Characteristics**

Tracking the growth of lone-parent families over time is not as easy as one might think. Changing practices in the Canadian censuses makes the job of arriving at precise figures on family structure a challenge. Prior to the introduction of the public use micro files in 1971, researchers were forced to rely on published data, data which vary in presentation from one census to the next. Nevertheless, the overall outline of the situation is well known. High rates of adult mortality and a later age at last birth meant relatively large numbers of families were headed by a lone parent. Wargon (1979:91) calculates that as late as 1941, 12.2% of families were headed by a lone parent, most often a woman. These lone parents were generally older and most had become lone parents as a result of the death of a spouse. Even in 1951, almost seven in ten lone parents were 45 years of age or over and two-thirds were widowed. Improvements in

adult mortality and the marriage boom of the post-war period contributed to a decline in the proportion of lone parent families during the fifties and sixties. By 1966, only 8.2% of Canadian families were headed by a lone parent. Rising rates of divorce and non-marital fertility served to change this situation in the post-Baby Boom era. As Figure 1 indicates, the proportion of families headed by a lone mother began to rise sharply in this period, and by 1996 12.1% of Canadian families were headed by a female lone parent while 2.5% were headed by a lone male.

These figures, often quoted in both social science articles and in the popular media, do not really speak to the issue that concerns most people when they hear the term lone-parent family. The image that comes to mind is of an adult struggling on his or her own to fill the roles of mother and father. Yet, the census data include all families with a never-married child living with a parent. A thirty-year old never-married man living with his sixty-five year old mother is counted as a lone-mother family. Thus, in the rest of the analysis in this paper, we will focus on a subset of families: those containing at least one child less than eighteen years of age.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of such families for the period from 1971-1996. The proportion of families headed by a lone parent continues to rise, moving up from approximately one in ten families in 1971 to almost one in five in 1996. As we would expect, most of these families are headed by women. But the number and proportion of lone-father families have grown as well, and by 1996 111,000 families or almost 3% of families with a child under 18 were headed by a lone male.

Figures 3 and 4 provide more information about the characteristics of these families. Much of the concern about the growth of lone parenthood has centred on the ability of the lone parent to support their children. This, in turn, is linked to the changing demographics of these

families. When the parents and children in the family are older, it is easier for the lone parent to work outside the home and more likely that some of the children may contribute to the family income. In the earlier part of this century, this was very often the case. Indeed, as late as 1971, more than one-third of lone mothers were 45 years of age or older. In the last twenty-five years, however, this distribution has shifted, and more lone mothers are now young women struggling to support dependent children. In 1996, almost half were under 35, and less than one in six was past age 45. This shift in the age distribution has come more slowly to lone fathers. In 1981, for example, more than 40% were over 45. This situation has changed significantly in the nineties, however, and by 1996, less than 30% were over 45.

A major reason for the shift in the age distribution of lone parents has been the change in the demographic antecedents of lone parenthood. In 1951, approximately two-thirds of lone parents were widowed (Wargon, 1979:83). When we focus on families with at least one child under eighteen, the role of widowhood is less significant and continues to recede in importance. As Figure 4 indicates, the 1996 census shows that only about 5% of lone mothers were widows, while just 8.6% of lone fathers were widowers. Separation and divorce are the most common route to lone parenthood, but increasingly many lone parents have never been a party to a legal marriage. In 1996, just over one-third of lone mothers and almost one in five lone fathers had never married. The increasing popularity of common-law unions and their greater instability suggest that this route will grow in importance in the future (Garasky and Meyer, 1996).

While lone fathers and lone mothers tend to be similar in terms of the number of children for whom they are responsible (Peron et al., 1999:92-93), they do differ with respect to the ages of the children in their care. The younger the children in the family, the less likely it is that a lone

father will head the family. In 1996, only 1.6% of families with a child less than six were headed by a lone father. This figure rose to 3.7% for families where the youngest child was between 7 and 14, and to 5.7% where the youngest child was 15-17 years old.

### **Economic Status of Families**

Lone-parent families have been a focus of public policy concern for some time because a growing amount of social science research suggests that the parents and children in these families are at higher risk of experiencing a number of negative outcomes (Bianchi, 1995; Blankenhorn, 1995; Whitehead, 1993). Children in lone-parent families have been shown to be more likely to encounter problems in the educational system, to be at higher risk of developing behavioural problems that may lead to troubles with the law, and to be more likely to experience early entry into marriage or cohabiting relationships or to experience a non-marital birth (Harper and McLanahan, 1998; McLanahan, 1997; Downey, 1994; McLanahan and Booth, 1989). An intense debate has raged over the sources of their disadvantage, with some arguing that the family structure effect is negligible when the economic deprivation of these families is taken into account, while others claim that the absence of a parent and the differing social experiences of lone-parent families place additional strains on the parents and children beyond those imposed by economic disadvantage. In one comprehensive review of the American situation, McLanahan has concluded that about half of the problems encountered by children of lone-parent households are a result of poverty, while the other half is attributable to other dimensions of the life of lone-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Again, most of the attention in this literature has focussed on lone-mother families. It is well known that such families face enormous economic difficulties and poverty rates among these families can reach very high levels. Moreover, as the proportion of lone-mother families has grown, these families have come to make up a very high percentage of the families living below the poverty line (Eichler, 1997; Lino, 1995). Part of the economic disadvantage mother-only families face results from the low level of earnings of the mother. The presence of young children makes participation in the labour force difficult, and when the mother does work, limited human capital and low wages in the labour market often mean that family income is very low. Rather less attention has been paid to the economic situation of lone-father families, in part because it is assumed that the fathers are more likely to be working and earning sufficient income to keep the family out of poverty (Eggebeen et al., 1996; Meyer and Garasky, 1993). The changing demographics of lone-father families described above make it important to examine whether or not father-only families continue to escape the financial problems that plague female lone-parent families.

Figure 5 shows the total family income of male and female lone-parent families as a percentage of the average income received by two-parent families for the period from 1971-1996. Two facts stand out in this chart. The first is that the economic problems of lone-father families have not been as severe as those faced by mother-only families. At each point in time, the income of lone-father families significantly exceeded that received by lone-mother families. At the same time, it is evident that the advantage enjoyed by lone-father families relative to lone-mother units has been eroding over time. In 1981, the total income of father-only families was 76% of that received by two-parent families, while the income of lone-mother families fell below



40% of the two-parent figure. In the last fifteen years, however, while the figure for mother-only families has remained nearly constant, the relative position of male lone-parent families has deteriorated significantly. In 1996, the total income of these families amounted to only 58% of the income enjoyed by two-parent families. As a result, 28.8% of lone-father families fell below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-Off in 1996 (see Figure 6). This figure is still far below the 58.6% level for mother-only families, but is more than double the rate (13.3%) for married-couple families.

To understand the declining economic status of lone-father families requires looking more closely at the components of family income. Earnings through wages and salary or self-employment continue to be the largest element of family income for all family types. In 1996, earnings accounted for almost 90% of the income received by two-parent families, and even among female lone-parent families, earnings made up almost 60% of income. For lone-father families as well, earnings are still the largest source of income. But their earnings as a percentage of the earnings of two-parent families has fallen sharply in recent years. The earnings of father-only families have slipped from 73% of the two-parent figure in 1981 to just 54% in 1996, paralleling the relative decline in total income (see Figure 7).

The relative decline in the earnings of father-only families appears to result from two factors. First, the earnings of the father have fallen as a percentage of the income earned by fathers in two-parent families. From 88% in 1981, a lone father's relative earnings have dropped to 77% in 1996 (see Figure 8). This contrasts with the situation of lone mothers, whose earnings as a percentage of those of fathers in two-parent families actually increased slightly since 1981, albeit from a very low starting point. Second, as Figure 9 indicates, the average number of

earners in both lone-father and lone-mother families has declined in recent years, while at the same time increasing slightly in husband-wife families. While lone parents bring home almost all the earnings in their families, the dramatic rise in labour force participation among mothers in two-parent families has allowed them to increase their real income at a time when male wages have been largely stagnant. Substantial increases in government transfer payments to lone-parent families, both male and female, have helped but have not been sufficient to offset the disadvantage associated with lower earnings.

Part of the growing relative disadvantage experienced by lone-parent families in our society is the unavoidable consequence of the growth of dual-earner couples. Lone-parent families with young children, who are the focus of this paper, are simply not in a position to compete with families that have two adult earners. In the majority of the lone-parent families included in this study, there is simply no one else capable of entering the labour market to supplement in a significant way the earnings of the lone parent. At the same time, there is also some evidence that the earning power of the lone parents has been deteriorating as well. Census data do not allow us to explore this question thoroughly, but two pieces of information are suggestive. The first, shown in Figure 10, looks at the labour force activity of parents by family structure. Both male and female lone parents were less likely to be working in the week prior to the census than their counterparts in two-parent families. Figure 11 adds another piece to the puzzle, focusing on the educational credentials of parents by family structure. While the differences are not huge, male and female lone parents are less likely to have acquired a university degree than are fathers in married-couple families.

## **Conclusion**

Lone-father families constitute a small but growing part of the family landscape in Canada. They are a distinctive group in that their experiences contrast with those of both two-parent and lone-mother families. Several American studies have pointed to the “in-between” status of lone-father families (Eggebeen et al., 1996; Bianchi, 1995). In other words, on many dimensions, they stand somewhere in-between the very disadvantaged status of female lone-parent families and the more secure situation of most two-parent families. In the Canadian case, this seems true as well. Lone fathers are significantly more likely to be in the labour force than lone mothers but less likely than fathers in two-parent families. Their incomes are lower and poverty rates higher than two-parent families, yet they do not experience the extreme disadvantage of lone-mother families.

What is worrisome from a social policy perspective is that the situation of these families is, at least relative terms, deteriorating. When one-earner families were the norm, lone-father families experienced an economic situation similar to husband-wife families. The dramatic rise in the labour force participation rates for mothers in two-parent families and the changing demographics of lone-father families have widened the gap between these two types of families. Lone-father families have fallen significantly behind two-parent families and are now at a substantially higher risk of living in poverty.

Extending our knowledge of lone-father families should be high on the agenda of social policy research. We need to know more about the consequences of life in these families for both father and children. Does the “in-between” status of these families extend to the outcomes for children? If the children of lone-father families fare better than those who have lived in female

lone-parent families is this because of the greater economic health of the family or for other reasons not immediately apparent. As we have seen, lone fathers are significantly more likely to be in the labour force than lone mothers. Is this because lone fathers receive more help from others that makes employment more manageable? Past research has shown that lone-father families are more likely to reside with others (Peron et al., 1999:35; Eggebeen et al., 1996; McLanahan and Casper, 1995). Who are these co-residents and what help do they provide?

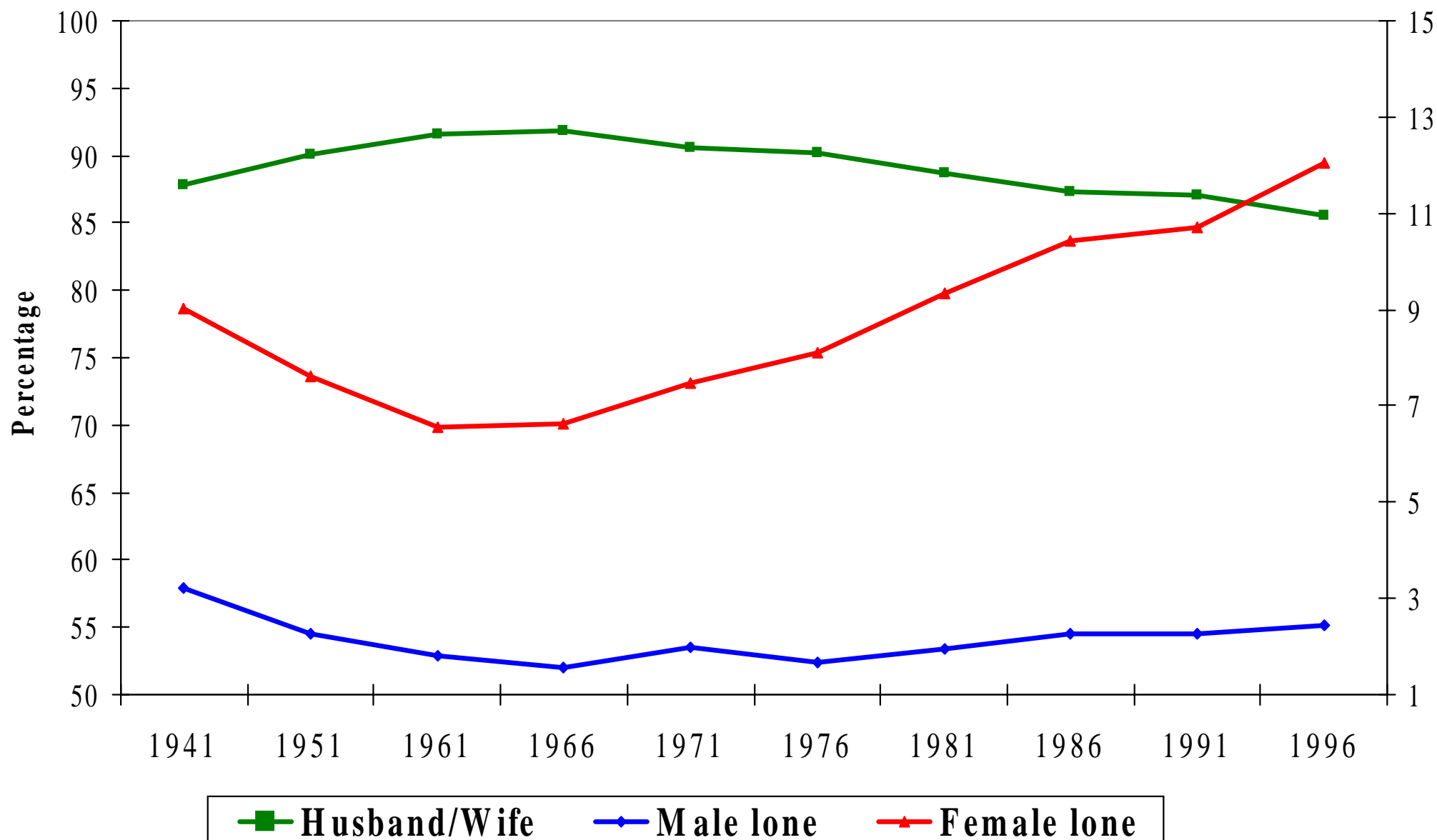
A great stumbling block in answering these questions is the small number of lone-father families. Most national surveys provide too few cases for detailed analysis while the census provides only a snapshot of the situation of lone fathers and their children. It seems likely that a more complete picture of lone fatherhood will have to make use of studies specifically designed to answer some of the questions discussed above. This will mean using sampling strategies that oversample lone father families. The knowledge that might be gained from this approach would seem to justify such a strategy.

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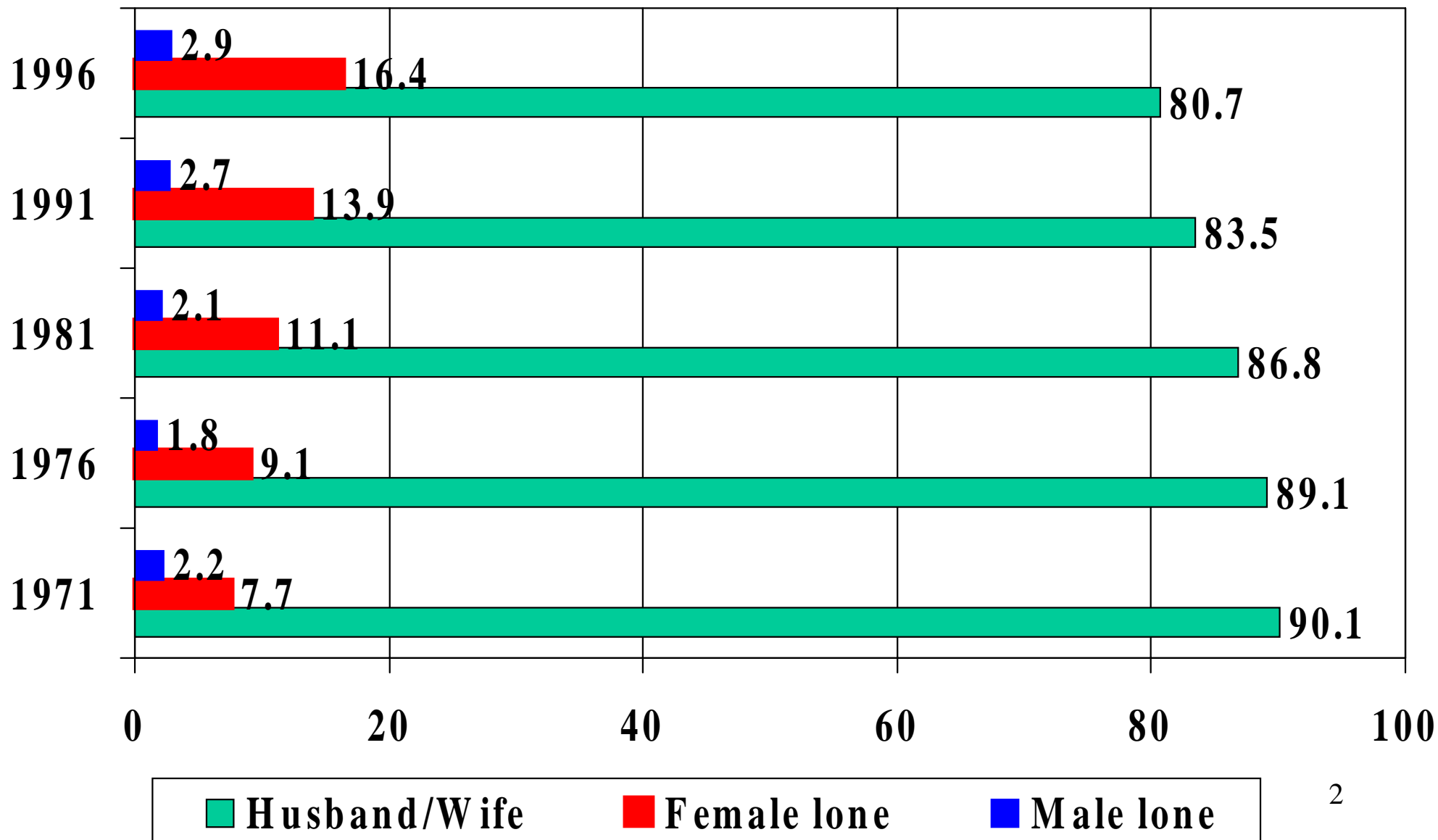
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# Distribution of census families in Canada by type, 1941-1996

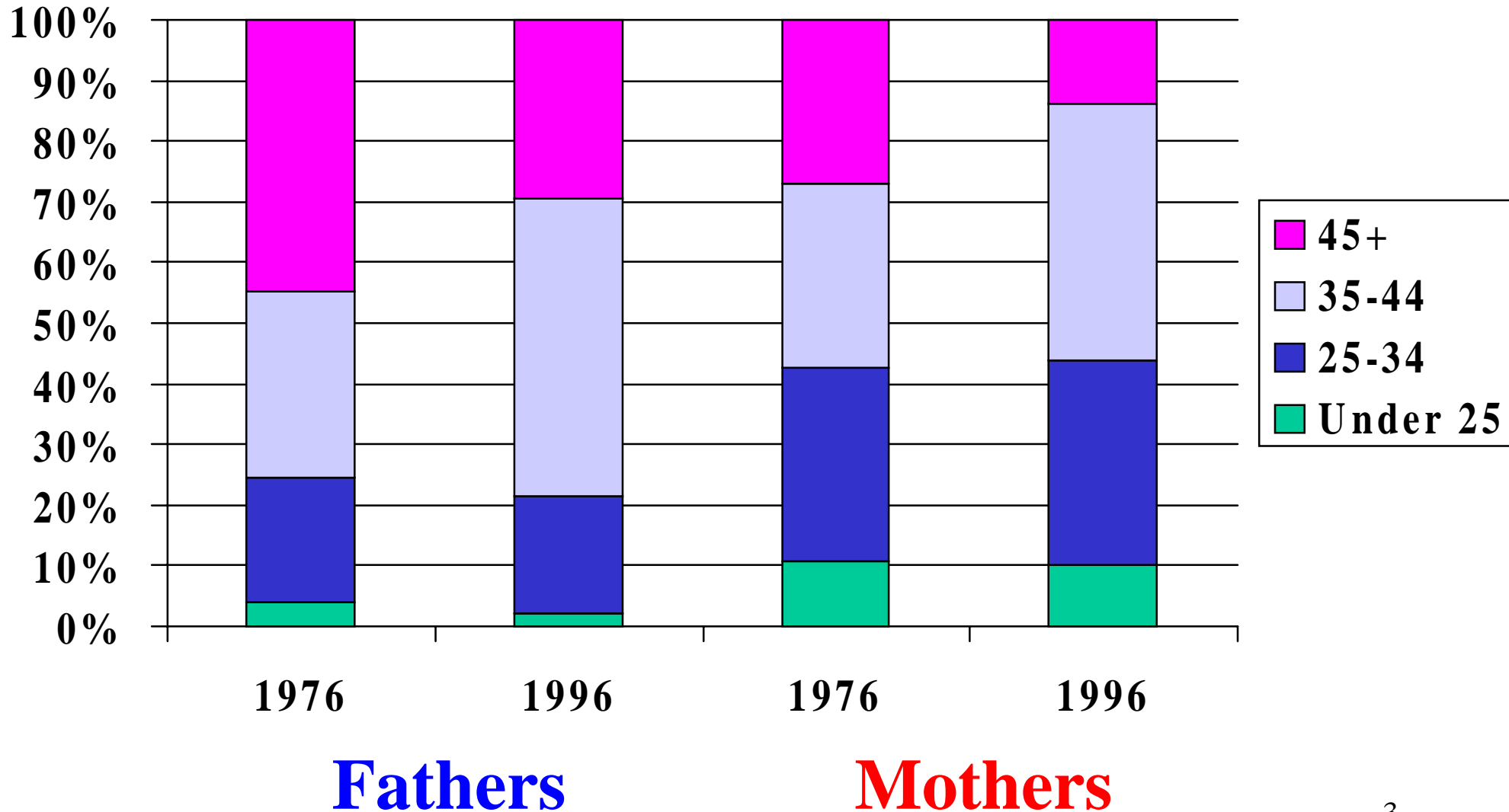


# Distribution of families with at least 1 child under 18 by family structure

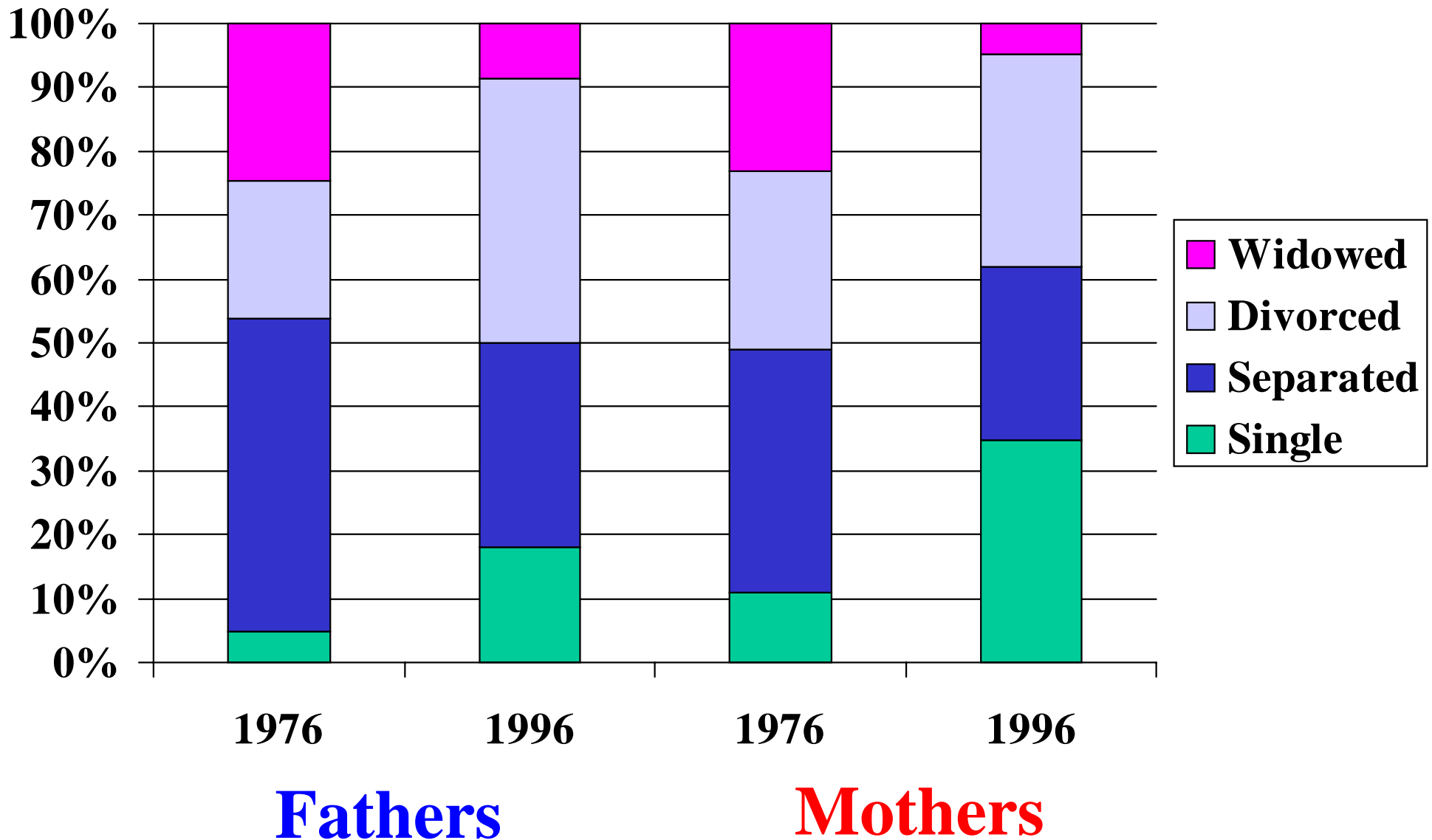




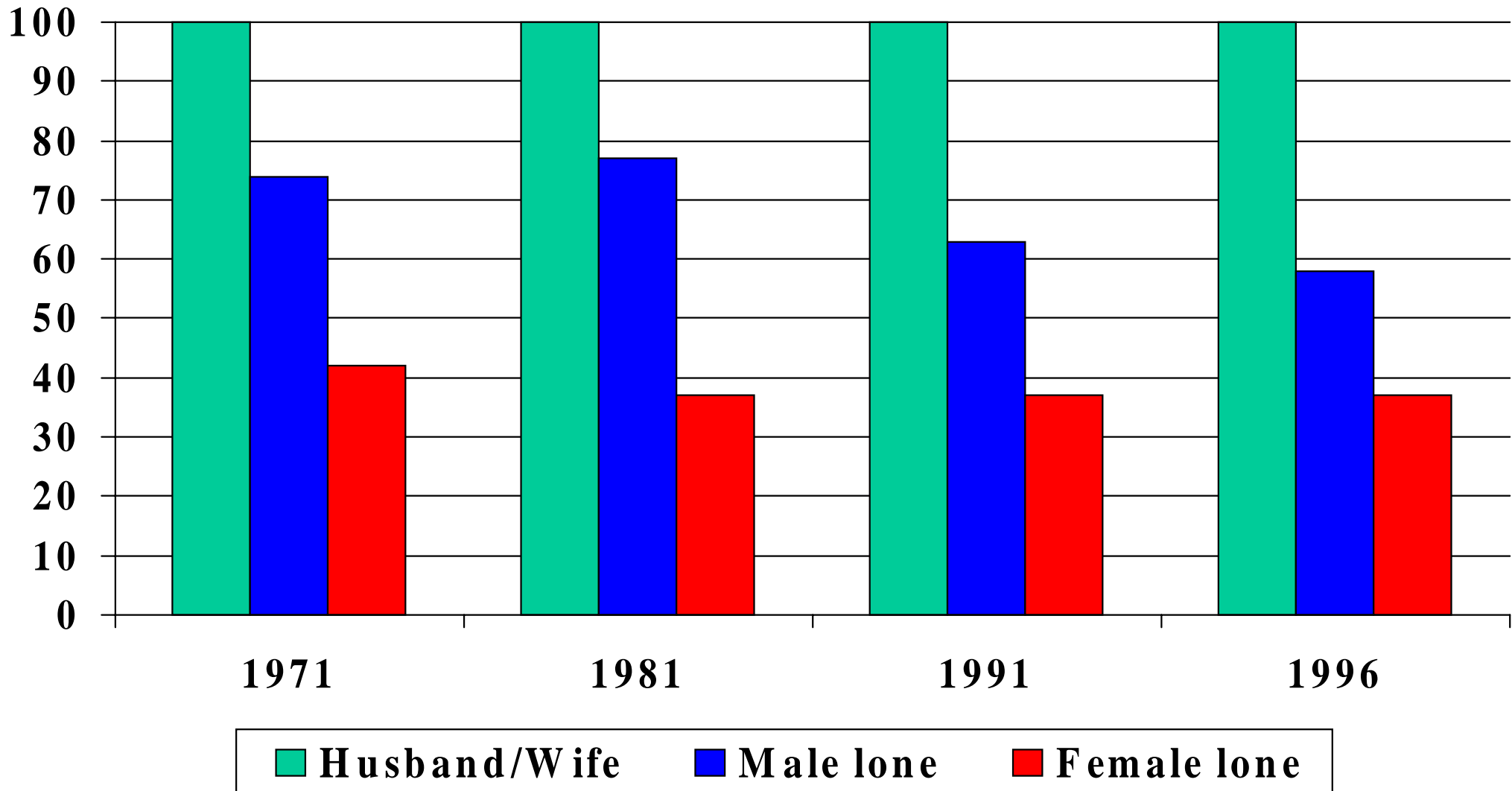
# Age distribution of lone parents with at least 1 child under 18



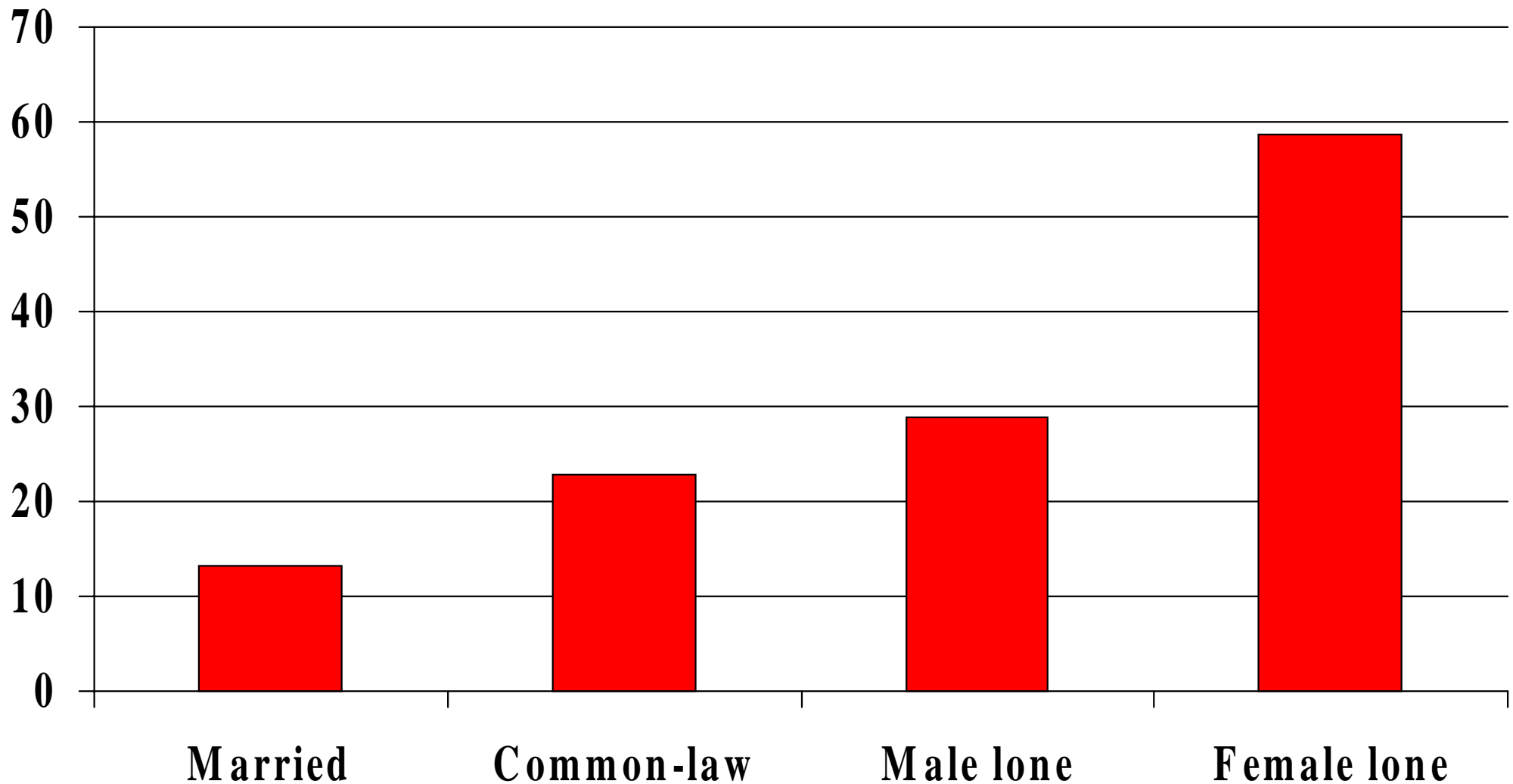
# Historical marital status of lone parents



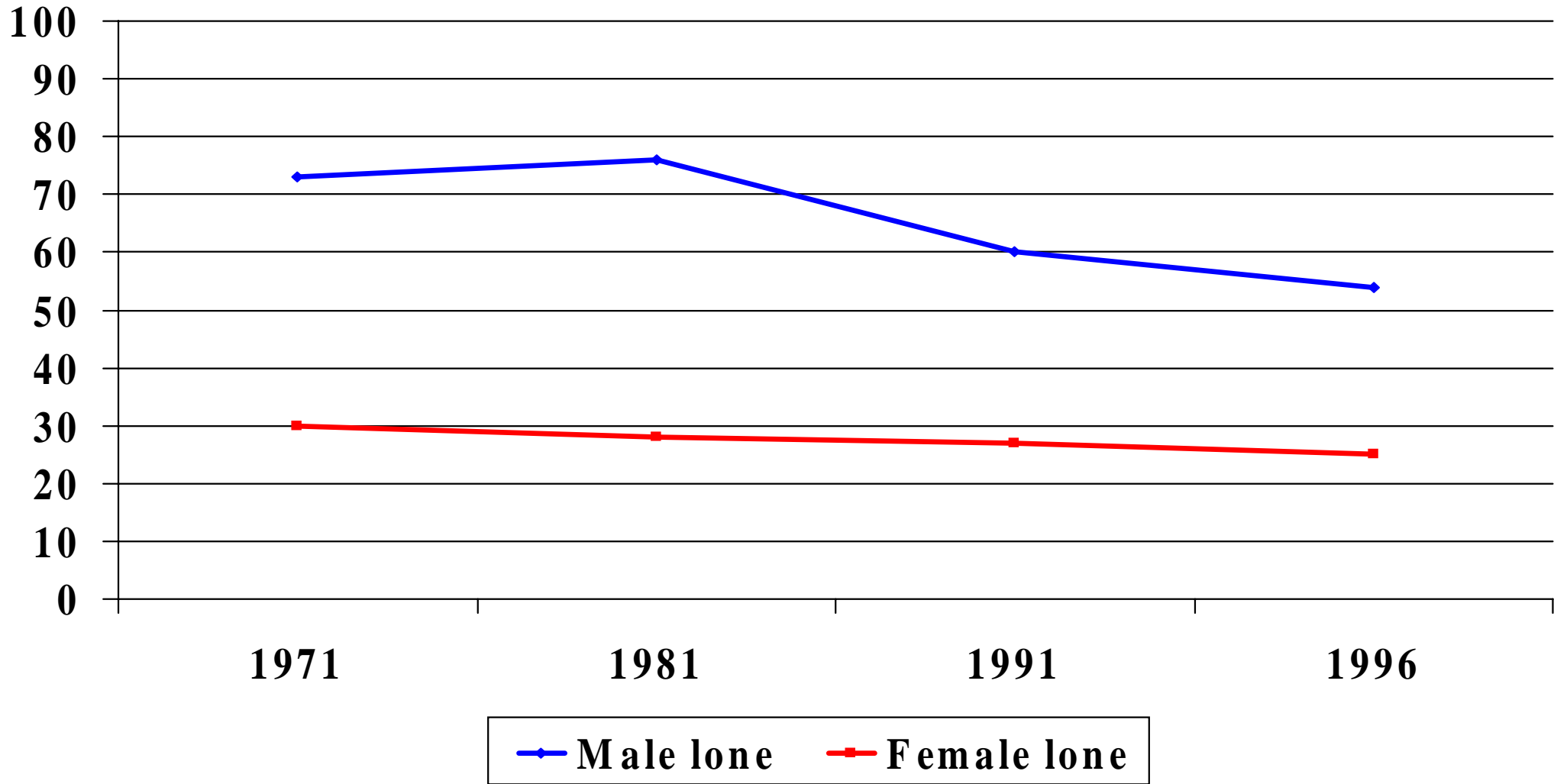
# Total family income by family structure



# Percentage of families below LICO by family structure, 1996

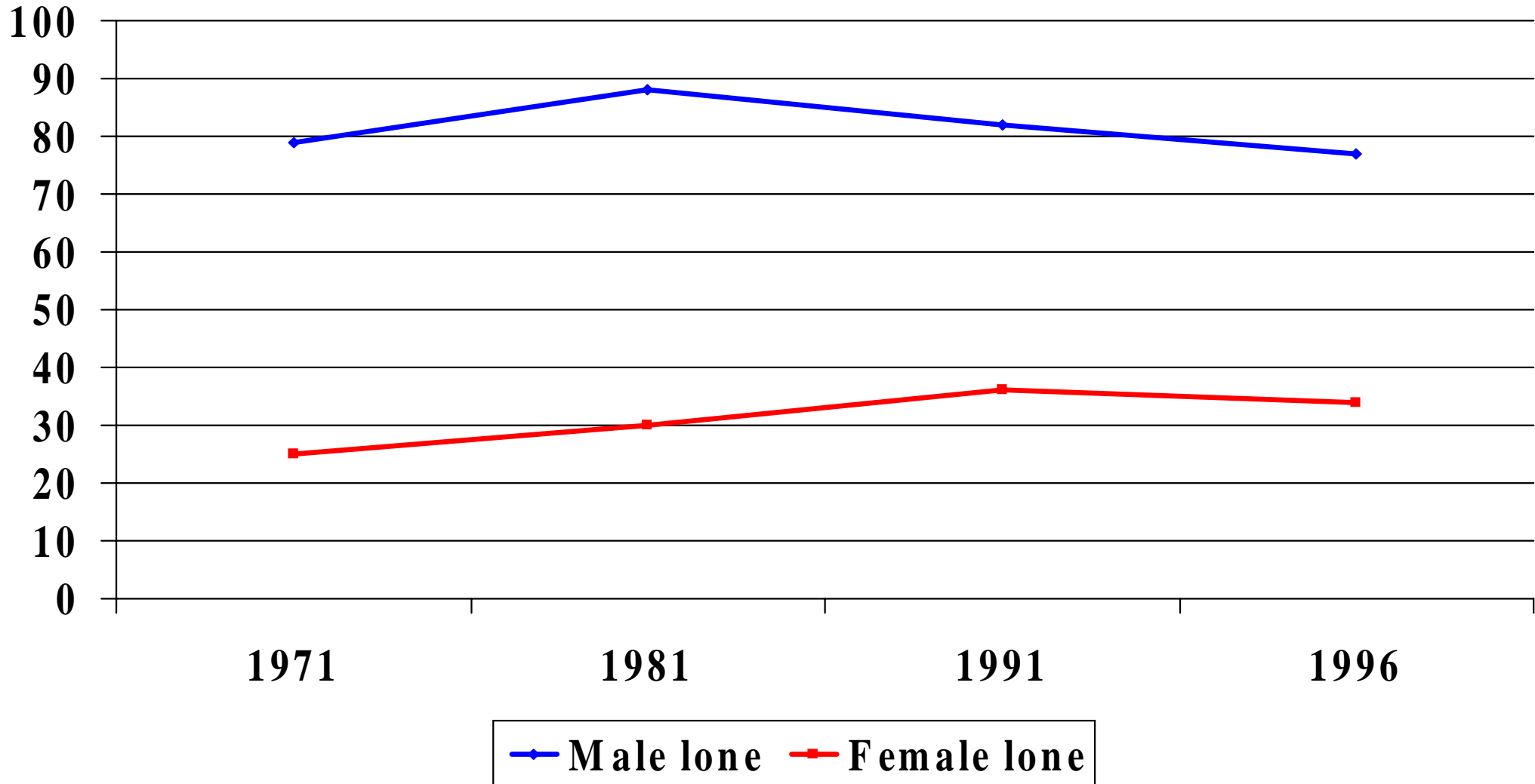


# Total earnings of male and female lone parent families



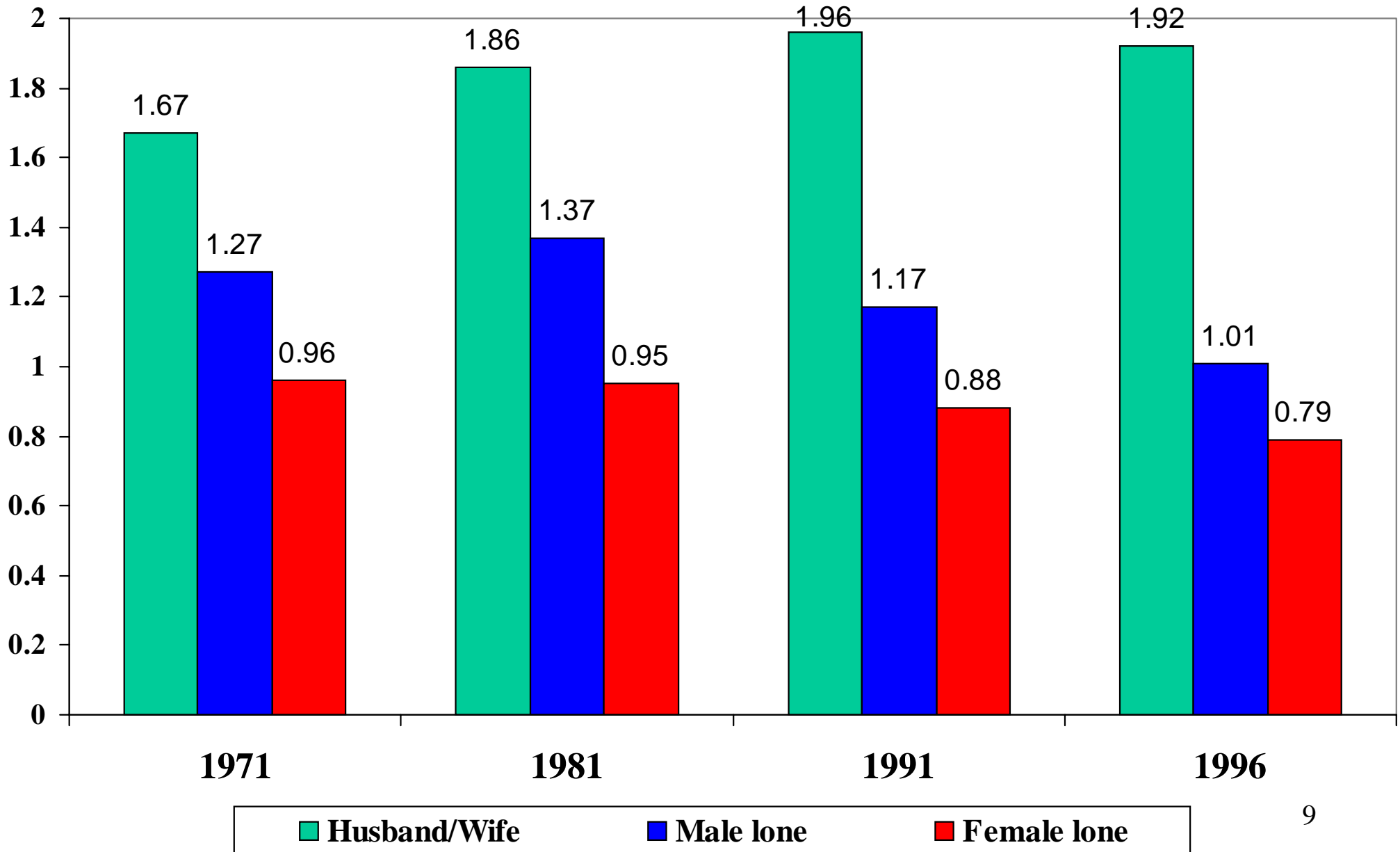
As a percentage of total earnings of two-parent families

# Earnings of male and female lone parents

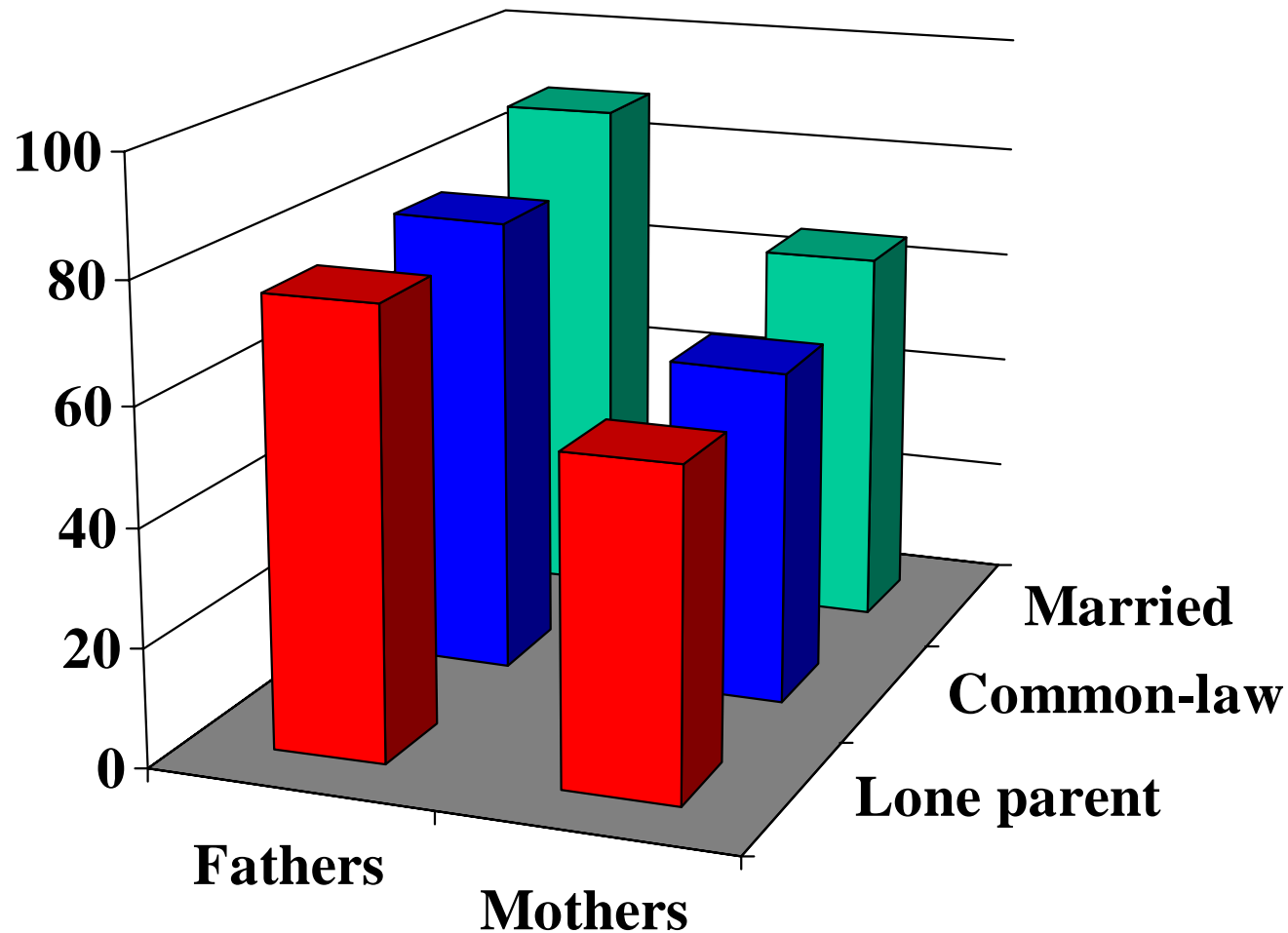


As a percentage of fathers' earnings in two-parent families

# Average number of earners by family structure

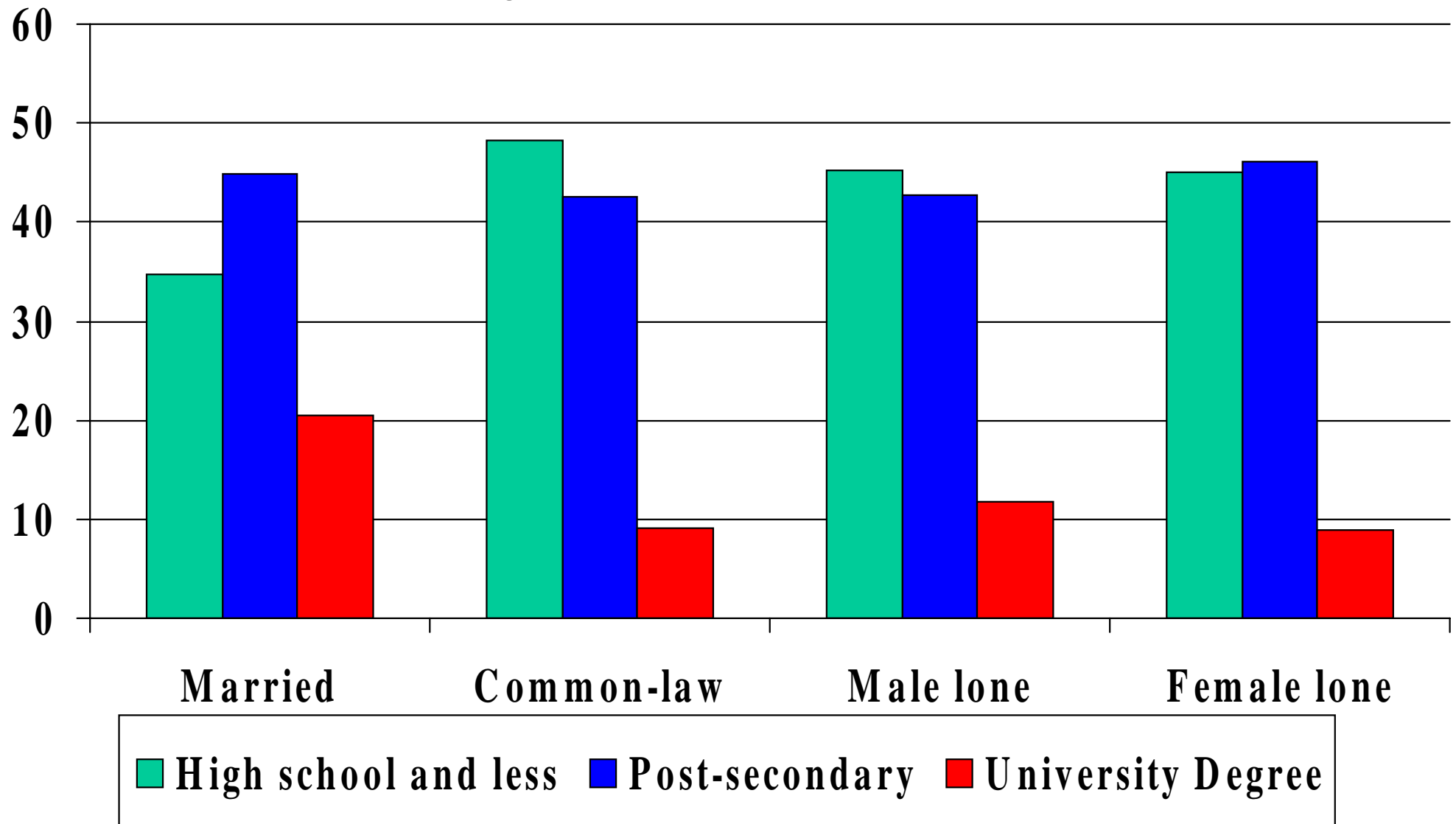


# Labour force activity of parent by family structure, 1996





# Level of schooling of parents by family structure, 1996



Schooling level as represented by father in married and common-law families