

# Trends and rural-urban differences in family structure in Ghana: Is there nuclear convergence?

Josephine Akua Ackah - *Department of Population Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine*

## Introduction

Across the globe, developmental forces are driving changes within the family system. There have been mixed perspectives, theories, and evidence on the direction of this family change. Well known is Goode's nuclear convergence hypothesis which emphasizes a shift towards nuclear families as a society develops, especially in urban areas [1–3]. Studies on global family change report that low-and-middle-income countries are experiencing diverse patterns that deviate from the nuclear convergence hypothesis. However, given the global scale of the findings, national level unique patterns are missed and the direction of change not clearly understood.

Ghana's urbanisation landscape has changed in the last six decades from about 23 percent in 1960 to about 57 percent in 2021[4]. Its human development index also increased from 0.360 in 1990 to 0.632 in 2021, transitioning from a low development category to a medium one [5]. Some scholars have inferred that families are gravitating towards nuclear ones[6,7], however, such assumptions are often based on qualitative descriptions and insufficient quantitative evidence. Regarding the latter, figures from census reports are cited and overinterpreted and where surveys have been used, it was limited to households with only children under five years[8]. This necessitates a thorough investigation into trends on family structure and whether the Ghanaian context is drifting from nucleation. At the heart of this discussion is the household concept with its inherent limitations. Given the cooking arrangement emphasis, larger families are more likely to be divided into smaller ones and therefore a higher proportion of nuclear families is only expected, requiring careful interpretations alongside comparisons between urban and rural areas.

## Data and methods

Data from four rounds of the Ghana Population and Housing Census (1984, 2000, 2010, 2021) were extracted to explore family structure typologies in Ghana and trends over time. A ten percent sample of the censuses that are publicly available via IPUMS International and the Ghana Statistical Service websites were extracted for analysis. The samples comprised 259377, 369910, 542109, and 836515 households for the 1984, 2000, 2010 and 2021 censuses, respectively. Of relevance to the construction of family structure typologies was household members relationship to the household head. A household structure was considered a family structure if it comprised two or more related individuals (blood, marriage or legal/social arrangements such as adoption/fostering). Though not of primary focus, non-family households were also explored. They included single-member households and households comprising only non-related individuals. A descriptive analytical approach was adopted for this study. Typologies were manually coded using members' relationship to the household head. The decision for a typology was informed by proportion, existing understanding of family types and whether it was meaningful and interpretable. It is important to note that the family structure typologies shown in the results are from the perspective of the household head. Rural-urban differences was also explored.

## Results and discussion

Figure 1 and 2 show the trends in family structure and their rural-urban differences in Ghana, respectively. The results only illustrate manually coded data from the Ghana Population and Housing Census (1984-2021). Ghana has experienced notable demographic shifts as the urban population increase from 23 percent in 1960 to 57 percent by 2021. While convergence theory suggests a transition towards nuclear families with urbanization, the data offers a nuanced perspective. Over four decades, some nuclear family types (core nuclear and couple only) witnessed moderate growth, while semi nuclear and all extended family households declined. An additional sub-group analysis for place of residence presented an intricate interplay across rural and urban areas. The findings show more *core and semi nuclear* families in rural areas compared to urban

ones before 2010. In 2010 and 2021, alongside an increase in the proportion of core and semi nuclear families, there were also more *semi extend, couple + extended* and *other extended* in urban areas compared to rural areas. For *core extended* families, urban and rural areas had the same proportions in 2021. Single member and households of non-related individuals were typically urban.

The decline in extended family households has several underlying factors ranging from social changes in favour of individualism, migration and weakening of extended family values[2,9]. However, the trend for its corresponding rural-urban difference challenges these underlying propositions. The 2021 census survey show higher proportion of extended families in urban areas which are often the receiving end of most migration streams and changing social values. This unique distribution draws on explanations that could be linked to the need for resource sharing and support to mitigate economic strains in urban areas as well as persisting cultural and social values that sustain extended family systems [10,11]. Irrespective, additional research studies, including sub-group analysis by important socio-demographic characteristics are required to explain such shifts.

As proposed by some scholars [1,3,12], low-and-middle income countries are experiencing diverse forms of family change. In the case of Ghana, the evidence portrays a layered perspective where (1) some nuclear groups have been stable over time while others have had a decrease and (2) though extended family households are declining, the skewed distribution over the last decades toward urban areas suggest unique forms of divergence. The household concept partly weakens attempts to capture family structure in Ghana as reflects social reality. The emphasis on cooking arrangements during data collection masks the true family changes that are occurring in the Ghanaian society. For instance, there could be more extended families than captured. It is important to draw out this distinct feature for a number of reasons: (1) concepts such as household and family are often used interchangeably but the former is majorly a data collection/statistical concept; (2) end users need to understand what the censuses and surveys capture in order to draw appropriate conclusions that informs decision making and (3) the onus to make predictions on Ghana's family demography need to highlight this feature, especially when compared with other contexts.

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### Ghana Population and Housing Census - Family and non family household structures

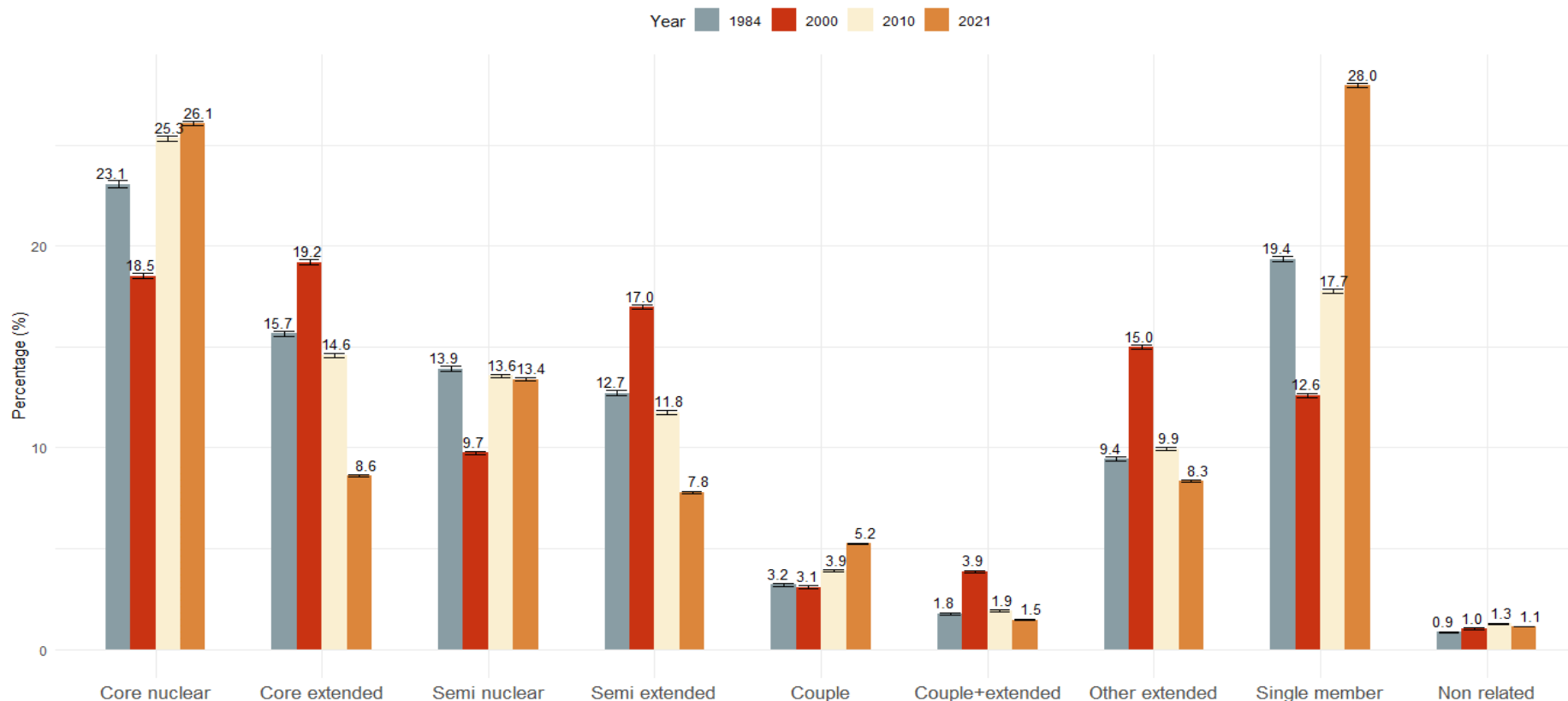


Figure 1: Percentage distribution (& 95%CI) of family and non-family household structure typologies (of the household head) based on data from the Ghana Population and Housing Censuses (1984- 2021).

**Core nuclear:** head, spouse and child(ren). They could be living with child-in-law or non-relatives or may even be polygynous. **Semi nuclear:** head and child(ren) only. They could be living with child-in-law or nonrelatives. **Core extended:** head, spouse, child(ren) and one or more of either grandchild, parent, parent-in-law, brother/sister and other relatives. Such families may or may not have nonrelatives, son/daughter-in-law or may be polygynous. **Semi extended:** head, child and one or more of either grandchild, parent, parent-in-law, brother/sister and other relatives. Such families may or may not have nonrelatives, son/daughter-in-law. **Couple:** This captures only head and spouse. **Couple+extended:** head and spouse and one or more of either grandchild, parent, parent-in-law, brother/sister and other relatives. Such families may or may not have non-relatives, son/daughter-in-law present. **Other extended:** head and one or more of either grandchild, maternal, paternal relatives present. Such families may or may not have non-relatives or son/daughter-in-law present. **Single member:** One member household. **Non related households:** head and members that are not related to the head.

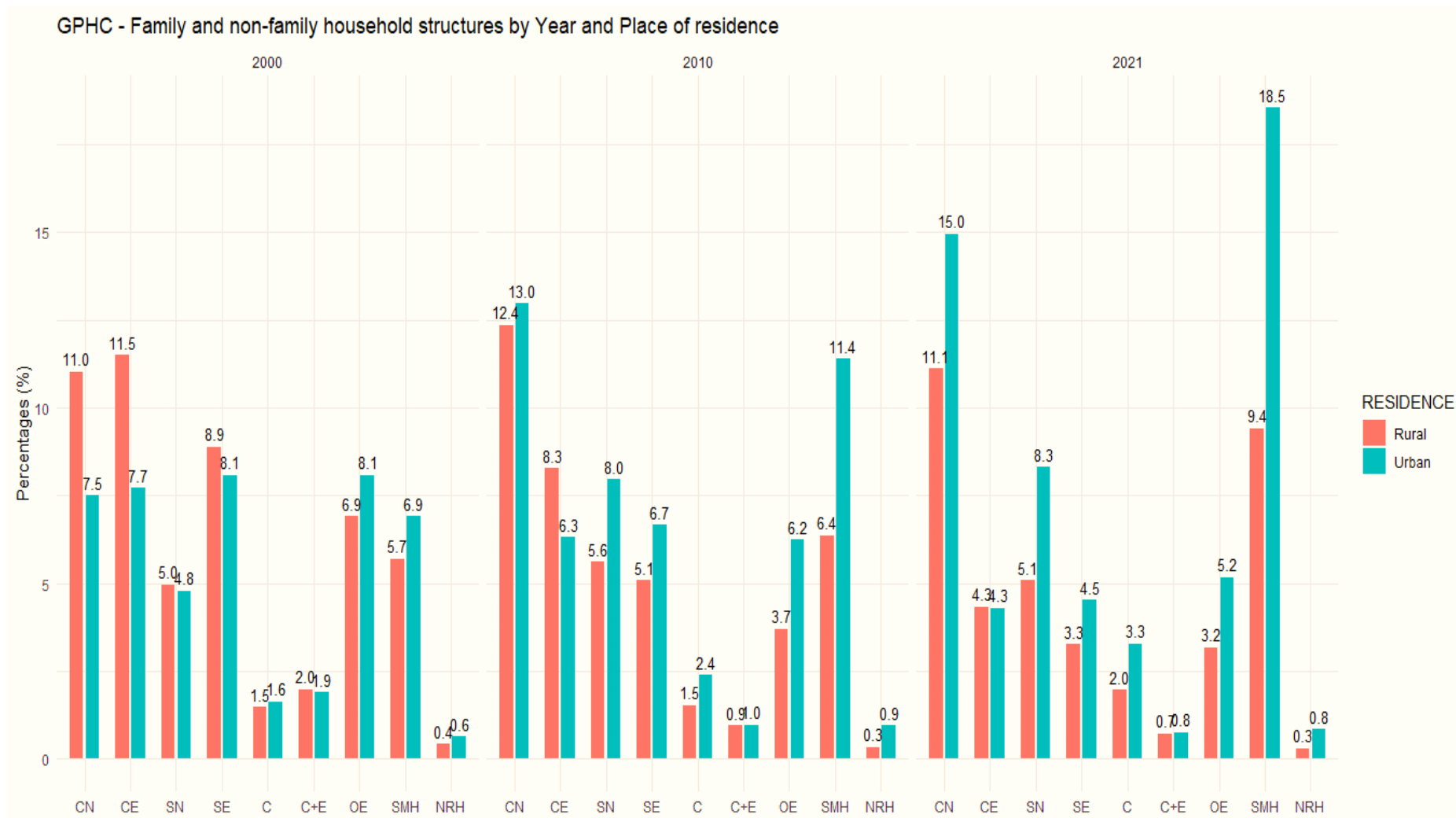


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of family and non-family household structure typologies by year and place of residence based on data from the Ghana Population and Housing Censuses (2000- 2021).

CN – Core nuclear; CE – Core extended; SN – Semi nuclear; SE – Semi extended; C – Couple; C+E – Couple+extended; OE – Other extended; SMH – Single member household; NRH – Non-related households. There was no data on rural-urban residence in the 1984 census.