Parents raised affluence before children

*Then a strong mid-'90s economy delivered an increase in marriage and kids*

By JENIFER B. McKIM
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Andrea Owen of Coto de Caza waited until she was 33 to have children because she didn't want to be put on the "mommy track" early in her advertising career.

Most of her friends postponed children to get degrees and go to work, too. But they made up for lost time in the mid-'90s, contributing to a 5 percent growth in the number of traditional nuclear families between 1991 and 1996, according to Census Bureau statistics released today.

"I waited a long time (to have children) because I knew once I had a child I wanted to devote time," said Owen, now 39. "If I had started having kids sooner we probably wouldn't be where we are now."

Although the new numbers are national, local experts say Orange County's affluent communities and immigrant families easily match the pattern.

"I would not be surprised to see Orange County ahead of the curve on this," said Philip Cohen, assistant professor of the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. "When the economy is good, people get married and have children more."

The report culled data from the federal Survey of Income and Program Participation, carried out in 1991 and again in 1996. It provides more detailed information about family structure than census 2000, which is being released over the next three years.

While the number of "traditional nuclear" families increased, the total number of two-parent families decreased, from 73 percent to 71 percent, from 1991 to 1996, said Jason Fields, author of the report, "Living Arrangements of Children: Fall 1996."

Traditional nuclear families include married parents and their biological children, while two-parent families include mixes of stepparents and extended families.

Fields attributed the decrease in two-parent families to a small growth in single-parent families and in the number of children living with neither parent. What is significant, however, is that the number of single-parent families is not growing as dramatically as it did over the past three decades, he said.

"Overall, the collapse of the family has not materialized," agreed Cohen.

Bill Gayk, director of the Center for Demographic Research at California State University, Fullerton, concurred.

"The wedding is coming back into vogue," Gayk said. "It does not take me by any surprise."

Dinh Tran of Fountain Valley waited until he was 35 to get married and have children. Tran, now 48, initially devoted his time to starting a law career. Tran, who is Vietnamese, was not surprised to hear that 58 percent of Asians were living in nuclear families, a percentage second only to white families.

He said while he sees more divorce among Asians, it's still taboo.

"We still look upon a single parent with children as something that is really, really bad for children," Tran said.

The survey also showed:

The number of single-parent families increased from 24 percent in 1991 to 25.4 percent in 1996.

The number of children living in "blended families" increased from 14.4 percent in 1991 to 16.5 percent in 1996.