Unmarried Boomers Confront Old Age: A National Portrait

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Background

- Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) came of age during the dramatic upheaval of U.S. family life in the 1970s (Cherlin, 2010):
  - Marriages were delayed or forgone
  - Divorce rates climbed to an all-time high
  - Cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing became widespread
- These diverse family life experiences earlier in the life course shape the current family circumstances of Boomers, who are more likely than their parents' generation to be unmarried during midlife (Frey, 2010; Hughes & O'Rand, 2004).

Prior Research

- Prior research has shown that unmarrieds are disadvantaged relative to marrieds in terms of:
  - Economic resources
  - Health
  - Social integration
- Whether widoweds, divorceds, and never-marrieds are equally vulnerable remains unknown.
- Women are more likely to be widowed, whereas men are more likely to be never-married.
- Whether the heterogeneity among widoweds, divorceds, and never-marrieds operates similarly for women and men is unclear.

The Present Study

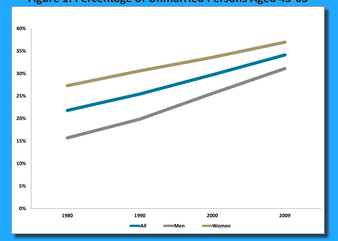
- Our study provides a national portrait of the Baby Boom generation, emphasizing heterogeneity among unmarried Boomers.
  - Variation among widowed, divorced, and never-married Boomers.
- We also address whether this heterogeneity operates similarly for women versus men.
- This study expands prior literature on Baby Boomers by addressing the role of marital status in the life circumstances of Boomers.

Data and Sample

- Data come from:
  - 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census 5% samples
  - 2009 American Community Survey (ACS)
- The 2009 ACS is used to construct a sociodemographic portrait of Baby Boomers by marital status.
- The samples were weighted to represent the entire U.S. population.
- Age-standardization was used to adjust for differential age structures across the three unmarried groups.
- The analytic samples were limited to adults aged 45-63 because this was the age range of Baby Boomers in 2009.

Trends in the Share of Unmarried Middle-Aged Adults

Figure 1: Percentage of Unmarried Persons Aged 45-63



Trends in Marital Status Composition

Figure 2: Marital Status Composition of Unmarried Persons Aged 45-63

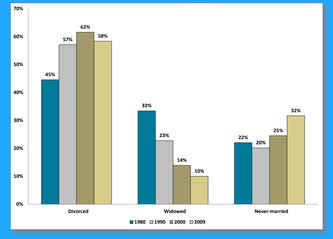


Figure 3: Marital Status Composition of Unmarried Women Aged 45-63

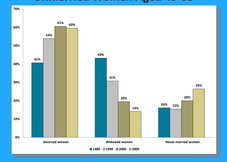
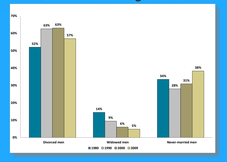


Figure 4: Marital Status Composition of Unmarried Men Aged 45-63



Unmarried Versus Married Baby Boomers

Figure 5A: Characteristics of Baby Boomers

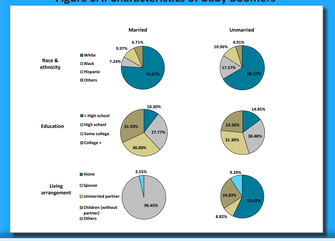
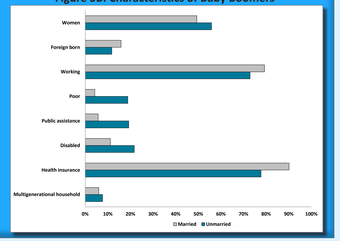


Figure 5B: Characteristics of Baby Boomers



Heterogeneity Among Unmarried Baby Boomers

Figure 6A: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomers

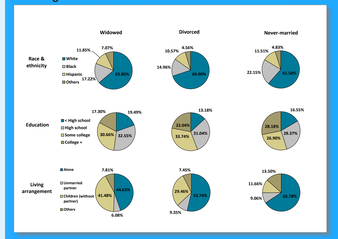
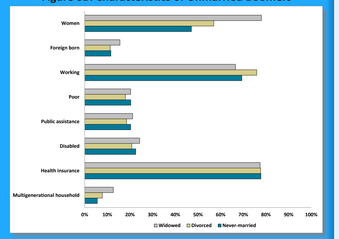


Figure 6B: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomers



Unmarried Boomer Women

Figure 7A: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomer Women

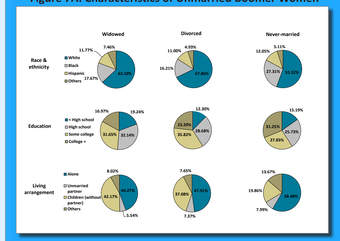
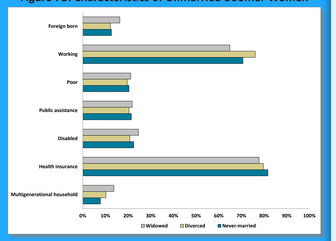


Figure 7B: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomer Women



Unmarried Boomer Men

Figure 8A: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomer Men

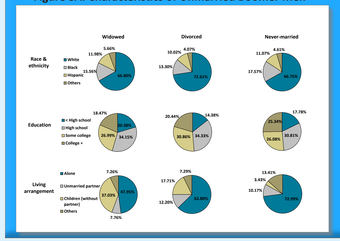
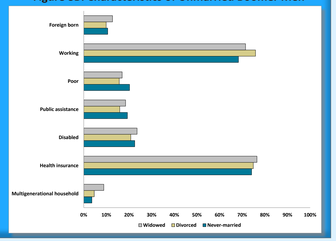


Figure 8B: Characteristics of Unmarried Boomer Men



Conclusions

- One in three Baby Boomers was unmarried.
- The vast majority of these unmarried Boomers were either divorced or never-married; just 10% were widowed.
- Unmarried Boomers faced greater economic, health, and social vulnerabilities compared to married Boomers.
- Divorced Boomers had more economic resources and better health than widowed and never-married Boomers.
- Among women, widows appear to be the most disadvantaged as they enjoy fewer economic resources and have poorer health than divorced and never-married women.
- Among men, never-marrieds are the least advantaged as they have poorer economic characteristics and are most likely to live alone.

Limitations

- This cross-sectional study does not permit causal conclusions about the association between marital status and well-being.
- This study does not account for the time since divorce or widowhood occurred or the marital biography, both of which are likely to be correlated with individual economic, health, and social vulnerabilities.

Future Directions

- The rise in unmarrieds at midlife leaves Baby Boomers vulnerable to the vagaries of aging:
  - One third of Baby Boomers are unmarried.
  - The current safety net may not provide sufficient protection to an increasing share of unmarried Boomers.
  - Unmarried Boomers are twice as likely as married Boomers to be disabled.
  - Most unmarried Boomers live alone.
- Health care and social service providers as well as policy makers must recognize the various risk profiles of different unmarried Boomers to ensure that all Boomers age well and that society is able to provide adequate services to all Boomers, regardless of marital status.

Published Article

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