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.
• Marriages were delayed or forgone.
• Divorce rates climbed to all-time highs.
• Older parents and caretakerدوايشن 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 middle life.

Prior Research

• Prior research has shown that unmarrieds are disadvantaged relative to marrieds in terms of:
  ▪ Economic resources
  ▪ Health
  ▪ Social supports
  ▪ Whether widows, 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.

The Present Study

• Our study provides a national portrait of the Baby Boom generation, emphasizing heterogeneity among unmarried Boomers.
• We also address whether this heterogeneity operates similarly for women and 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 on samples
  ▪ 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) on samples
  ▪ 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 samples.
• The area-level 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

• One third of Baby Boomers are unmarried.
• The vast majority of those 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 men, never-marrieds are the least advantaged as they have fewer 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 on 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 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.

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