

# Cohabitation among Older Adults: Psychological Well-Being and Physical Health

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## Background

- A large proportion of the older adult population is unmarried (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Lin & Brown, 2012)
- Cohabitation is on the rise among older adults
- It is unclear how cohabitators compare to marrieds and unmarries on well-being

## Previous Research

- Married adults have higher levels of well-being than the unmarried (Carr & Springer, 2010)
- Older cohabitators report more depressive symptoms than the married, but are similar to the unmarried (Brown et al., 2005)
- Previous work has not examined older cohabitators' physical health

## Gender Differences

- Men may enjoy greater benefits from unions than women (Bernard, 1972)
- Some research suggests few differences in union benefits by gender (Manzoli et al., 2007)
- Older cohabiting men report more depressive symptoms than married men (Brown et al., 2005)
  - No difference among women

## Research Questions

- How do older cohabitators compare to continuously married, remarried, divorced, widowed, and never married persons on psychological well-being and physical health?
- Does the relationship between marital status and well-being differ by gender?

## Data

- Data come from the 2008 and 2010 Health and Retirement Study (HRS)
- Analytical sample:
  - Interviewed in 2008 or 2010
  - Age 50+, nonmissing on DV and focal IV
  - N = 21,417 for depressive symptoms
  - N = 22,156 for self-rated health

## Health Outcomes

- Depressive symptoms
  - 8 CESD items summed
  - Higher score reflects poorer well-being
- Self-rated health
  - 1 = excellent or very good health
  - 0 = poor, fair, or good health

## Variables

- Independent Variable
  - Marital Status
    - Continuously married
    - Remarried
    - Cohabiting (ref)
    - Divorced
    - Widowed
    - Never married
- Other variables
  - Gender
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Age
  - Education
  - Employment
  - Assets
  - Religious attendance
  - Resident children
  - Health insurance

## Results

Figure 1. Mean Depressive Symptoms

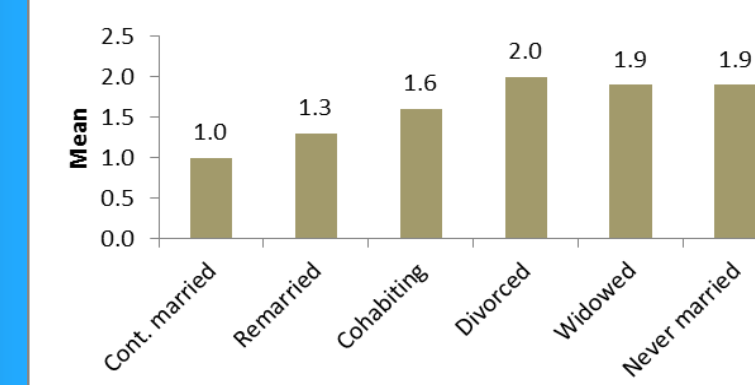


Figure 2. Percentage in Excellent or Very Good Health

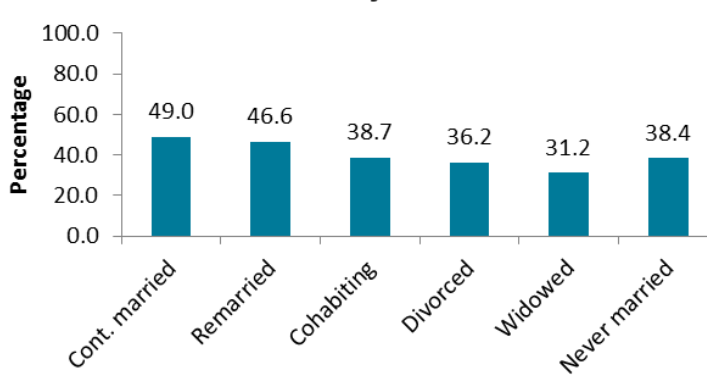


Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Depressive Symptoms

	Women		Men	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	b	b	b	b
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Continuously married	-0.70***	-0.37*	-0.40**	-0.03
Remarried	-0.33*	-0.15	-0.21	0.06
Cohabiting (ref)				
Divorced	0.16	0.15	0.53**	0.51**
Widowed	0.09	0.25*	0.63***	0.87***
Never married	0.04	0.06	0.49*	0.50**
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>				
White (ref)				
Black		0.08		0.08
Hispanic		0.32**		-0.01
Other race		0.42*		0.20
Age		-0.02***		-0.02***
<b>Economic Characteristics</b>				
Less than high school		0.43***		0.32**
High school (ref)				
Some college		-0.11		0.03
College or more		-0.20**		-0.14*
In debt		0.56		0.34**
<b>Assets \$0-\$50,000 (ref)</b>				
Assets \$50,001-\$100,000		-0.40***		-0.31**
Assets \$100,001-\$250,000		-0.42***		-0.51***
Assets \$250,000 or more		-0.72***		-0.60***
<b>Employed full time (ref)</b>				
Employed part time		0.25**		0.21*
Not in the labor force		0.79***		0.69***
<b>Social Support</b>				
Religious attendance		-0.13***		-0.07***
Resident children		-0.03		0.01
<b>Health Insurance</b>				
Has health insurance		-0.07		-0.26*
Constant	1.82***	3.13***	1.37***	2.75***
Unweighted N	12,290	12,290	9,127	9,127

\*p < .10, \*\*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .01, \*\*\*\*p < .001.  
Analyses are weighted to correct for the complex sampling design of the HRS.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Self-Rated Health

	Women		Men	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	OR	OR	OR	OR
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Continuously married	1.62**	1.21	1.44**	1.00
Remarried	1.49**	1.27*	1.30*	1.02
Cohabiting (ref)				
Divorced	0.90	1.03	0.89	0.88
Widowed	0.70**	0.99	0.77*	1.04
Never married	0.93	1.03	1.05	0.95
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>				
White (ref)				
Black		0.50***		0.65***
Hispanic		0.44***		0.70**
Other race		0.65**		0.65*
Age		0.99**		0.98***
<b>Economic Characteristics</b>				
Less than high school		0.79**		0.80*
High school (ref)				
Some college		1.26***		1.18*
College or more		1.65***		1.75***
In debt		0.83		0.83
<b>Assets \$0-\$50,000 (ref)</b>				
Assets \$50,001-\$100,000		1.44**		1.27*
Assets \$100,001-\$250,000		2.06***		1.75***
Assets \$250,000 or more		2.99***		2.37***
<b>Employed full time (ref)</b>				
Employed part time		1.02		0.79
Not in the labor force		0.51***		0.46***
<b>Social Support</b>				
Religious attendance		1.16***		1.19***
Resident children		0.93		0.92
<b>Health Insurance</b>				
Has health insurance		0.93		0.98
Constant	0.64**	1.02	0.62**	1.40
Unweighted N	12,547	12,547	9,609	9,609

\*p < .10, \*\*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .01, \*\*\*\*p < .001.  
Analyses are weighted to correct for the complex sampling design of the HRS.

## Limitations

- Not fully able to account for selection
  - Those with lower levels of well-being may be less likely to form and maintain unions
- Cannot capture those in dating or Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships

## Conclusions

- Older cohabitators have similar psychological well-being and physical health as the married
  - Cohabitation may operate as a substitute for marriage
- Cohabitators have higher levels of psychological well-being than other unmarries
  - Only among men
- Physical health is similar for cohabitators and other unmarries
- Few gender differences in the association between marital status and well-being

## Next Steps

- Examine receipt of care by marital status
- How is cohabiting associated with parents' relationships with their adult children?
- Consider other health outcomes