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The Demography of Unions Among Older Americans: 1980-present

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The current generation of older Americans faces more complex family and marital histories than any prior generation. Moreover, baby boomers, the first cohort to experience high levels of divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage, are now moving into older adulthood. This movement will likely exacerbate the trend away from marriage among older adults. Researchers are uncovering greater heterogeneity and complexity in the family life of older Americans, which in turn portends a shift in the benefits and rewards offered by certain family circumstances (Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto et al. 2000; Cooney and Dunne 2001). The growing diversity of living arrangements characterizing older adulthood is likely to have important consequences for individual health and well-being as well as policy ramifications for the changing types of institutional support older adults require (Wilmoth and Longino 2006).

In this chapter, we document changes in the marital status and household living arrangements of older Americans over the past four decades. The increasingly varied family life course trajectories experienced in early and middle adulthood have enduring consequences. Namely, older adults are much less likely to be married now than were previous cohorts. This trend is expected to accelerate with a declining share of the older adult population being married in the coming decades (e.g., Allen et al. 2000; Cooney and Dunne 2001). A decade ago, gerontologists predicted that older men more likely will be never married, and older women increasingly will be divorced rather than widowed (Cooney and Dunne 2001).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide empirical evidence that describes the recent trends in marital status and living arrangements for older adults. In addition to examining marriage and widowhood, which have been the primary foci of earlier work on the family status

of older adults, we also consider union experiences, which fall outside these typical marital status categories. Specifically, we investigate cohabitation, living apart together (LAT), and same-sex unions, all of which appear to be increasing among the older adult population (Bennett and Gates 2004; Brown, Bulanda, and Lee 2005; Brown, Lee, and Bulanda 2006; de Jong Gierveld 2005; Huyck 1995; Urban Institute 2003).

Measures and Data

Older Americans here are defined as men and women age 65 and older. We focus on comparisons of older Americans in 1980 (65-year-olds were born in 1915) to 2008 (65-year-olds were born in 1943). The early cohort became adults during the Great Depression, and the later cohort became adults during the economic boom years (1960s).

The U.S. is an aging society with older Americans representing an increasingly greater share of the total population. In 1980, persons over age 65 comprised 11% of the American population, while in 2008, those over age 65 were 13% of the population. Over the next 50 years, the population of adults age 65 and older is predicted to double. By 2050, the U.S. older adult population will reach 88 million or one-fifth of the population (Census 2008).

Life expectancy is increasing for women and men alike, but the two groups continue to have different life expectancies. Currently, life expectancy for men is about 75 years, whereas for women it is 80 years. Consequently, the majority of older adults are women (Heron et al. 2009). In 2007, there were 137 women over age 65 for every 100 men over age 65 in the U.S. This ratio increases among the oldest old. By the time older adults reached their mid-eighties, there were 210 women to every 100 men (Administration on Aging, 2009).

Apart from gender, life expectancy also varies by race–ethnicity. Although the racial gap in life expectancy has declined over time as minorities are living longer, nonetheless, whites

enjoy greater life expectancies than do either Blacks or Hispanics in the U.S. For instance, current life expectancy among whites is about 78 years, whereas for Blacks it is 73 years. Today, among 65-year-olds, life expectancy is roughly two years greater for white than Black men and one year greater for white versus Black women (Heron et al. 2009). Consequently, the older adult population is now more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past. In 1980, 8% of the 65 and older population was Black, and less than 3% was Hispanic. Today, nearly 9% of older adults are Black, and more than 6% are Hispanic (National Center for Health Statistics 2008). Population projections estimate that by 2050, about 58% of the older population will be Non-Hispanic white, 20% of the older population will be Hispanic, and 11% Black (Administration on Aging 2009).

Gender and race-ethnicity structure the experience of aging. Therefore, we provide gender-specific comparisons of marital status and living arrangements across age groups. Where possible, results are shown for specific racial and ethnic groups.

This chapter draws on several data sources. A primary source of data is the United States decennial Census, which offers a view of the trends in marital status and living arrangements of older Americans. The recent American Community Survey (2008) provides specific measures about marriage that are not available in the Census data. We also present findings from surveys, such as the Current Population Survey March Supplement and the Health and Retirement Study. In the concluding section, we discuss future data needs for research on the family demography of an aging population.

Marital Status Trends

Marriage

Overall, there has been a substantial decline between 1980 and 2008 in the proportion of older men who are married, as shown in Figure 1. In 1980, more than three quarters (76%) of older men were married. By 2008, there was a slight decline, and 71% of older men were married. In 1980, the proportion of men married was negatively associated with age. In 2008, the proportions married were less sensitive to age than in 1980, with those ranging in age from 65-79 almost equally likely to be married. Indeed, the trend in proportion married between 1980 and 2008 varied by age, such that among the young old (65-74), smaller proportions of men were married in 2008 than in 1980, whereas among the old old (75-84) and oldest old (85 and older), married men were a bit more prevalent than in 1980. For instance, 83% of 65-69-year-old men were married in 1980, but just 75% of men in this age group were married in 2008. In 1980, 48% of men 85 and older were married. By 2008, 54% of oldest old men were married.

Among older women, the proportion married appears to have changed little over the past four decades (Figure 2). In 1980, 37% of older women were married compared to 40% in 2008. This overall pattern characterizes young old women, too, but not old old and oldest old women, who now compose a larger share of the population. Among women 65-69, there was essentially no change between 1980 and 2008 in the proportion married (55% and 56%, respectively). All other age groups witnessed an increase in the proportion married over time. Among 75-79 year olds, the proportion married grew from 29% in 1980 to 41% in 2008. Similarly, among the oldest old, the proportion married rose 50% from 8% in 1980 to 12% in 2008.

Comparing the proportions of men versus women that were married reveals that more men were married than women, regardless of age or time period. Gender distinctions in marital

status were due in part to the substantial gender differentials in mortality and life expectancy and the tendency for women to marry men a few years older than themselves. Indeed, at all ages, older men were more likely to be married than older women, and this differential became more pronounced with age. Nonetheless, the gender differential was smaller in 2008 than it was in 1980. Six times as many men as women age 85 and older were married in 1980 (48% and 8%, respectively) versus 4.5 times in 2008 (54% and 12%, respectively).

Widowhood

Widowhood remained consistent among older men over the past four decades: 14% in 1980 to 15% in 2008 (Figure 1). Despite this overall trend, the pattern varies by age group, with the growth in widowers concentrated among the oldest old men. In 1980, less than one-fifth of men ages 65-79 were widowers, about one-quarter of 80-84-year-old men were widowers, and about half of men over age 85 were widowers. In 2008, less than 15% of men ages 65-79 were widowers, 22% of men 80-84, and 37% of men over age 85 were widowers.

In contrast, there have been declines in widowhood among older women, from 52% in 1980 to 43% in 2008 (Figure 2). In 1980, the proportion of women widowed ranged from one-third among 65-69 year olds to 82% among women age 85 and older. The proportion of women who were married outpaced those who were widowed only at ages 65-69. At every other age, the proportion of women married was less than the proportion widowed. In 2008, these trends persisted. One-fifth of the youngest older American women were widowed, and 77% of women age 85 and older were widowed. These results suggest we may be observing a slight delay in widowhood among women, which is consistent with lengthening life expectancy.

As expected, widowhood increased with age, but the age gradient was steeper among women than men. A greater proportion of women were widowed than men at every age. Among

the oldest old, widowhood was 50% higher among women than men (77% versus 37%, respectively, in 2008).

Divorce

Sustained high levels of divorce over the past few decades in the U.S. population have contributed to the declines in the proportions of older adults that are married. We combine separated and divorced into one category. In fact, the proportion of older men that were divorced (or separated) doubled between 1980 and 2008 (Figure 1). Only 5% of older men were divorced in 1980, whereas the figure rose to 10% in 2008. This growth is concentrated among the young old. In 1980, 5% of men ages 65-69 and 6% of men ages 70-74 were divorced. In 2008, the corresponding figures were 15% and 11%, respectively. At older ages, the proportions of divorced men did not change much over time. Among the oldest old, 3% of men were divorced in 1980, and 5% were divorced in 2008.

Among older women, there is a similar pattern. The proportion of older women that were divorced climbed from 4% in 1980 to 12% in 2008, nearly identical to the proportions documented earlier for older men (Figure 2). The rise occurred among all older women except the oldest old. Among 65-69-year-old women, 6% were divorced in 1980 versus 19% in 2008. For women ages 80-84, 3% were divorced in 1980, and 6% were divorced in 2008. The proportion of the oldest old that is divorced increased from 2% in 1980 to 6% in 2008.

Comparing the trends for men and women, the proportions divorced in each five-year age interval were essentially the same in 1980. By 2008, older women were somewhat more likely to be divorced than were older men, at least at younger ages. There were no gender differences in divorce among the oldest old.

Never Married

The percentage of the older population never married has not shifted over the past four decades, nor does it differ for men and women (Figures 1 and 2). Between 5% and 6% of the older adult population was never married in 1980 and 2008. In 1980, only 2 or 3% of old old and oldest old men and women were never married. By 2008, between 4 and 5% of both older women and men in all age groups were never married.

Racial and Ethnic Variation

Most research on the marriage and living arrangement patterns of older Americans focuses on gender and age distinctions. Given the striking racial differences in marriage and divorce rates, however, it is important to consider race and ethnicity when studying marriage and other close relationships among older Americans.

In 2008, the majority of older white, Black, and Hispanic men were married. Nearly three-quarters of white men, two-thirds of Hispanic men, and about half of Black men were married. Widowhood levels were similar across race and ethnic groups, with slightly higher levels among Black men (18%) than Hispanic (14%) or white (13%) men. The proportion of older men who were divorced was twice as high among Black as white men. A substantial minority (9%) of Black men had never married in contrast to 5% of Hispanic and 4% of white men.

Older women were less likely to be married than men, and less than half of each racial and ethnic group were married. White older women were more often married (42%) than Hispanic (36%) or Black (23%) women. Nearly half of Black older women were widowed, and about two-fifths of white and Hispanic women were widowed. The levels of divorce were higher among Black (20%) and Hispanic (17%) women than white (12%) women. The vast majority of

older American women were ever married; however, Black (9%) and Hispanic (7%) older women were more often never married than white (4%) older women.

Marriage and Divorce in 2008

While we typically think of brides and grooms as young men and women in their twenties, there were about 91,000 marriages among older Americans, including 31,500 brides and 59,300 grooms over the age of 65 in 2008. In 1985, nearly twenty-five years ago, 71,000 persons over age 65 married (Meyers and Wilson 1988). The increase was not necessarily due to an increase in marriage rates among older Americans but a shift in the age structure of the population. Most older Americans who married in the last year were not first time brides or grooms; only 10% were first marriages. About half (54%) of marriages in the last year to older Americans were second marriages, and one-third (35%) were third marriages. The patterns and levels are similar for men and women. In 1985, one-quarter of grooms over age 65 were divorced, and three-fourths of the brides were widowed (Myers and Wilson 1988). In 2008, about three-quarters of married older Americans were still in their first marriage, which is similar to 76% among the population over age 15 (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2009).

In 2008, there were approximately 119,700 divorces among older Americans. The ratio of marriages to divorces among older Americans in 2008 is opposite of what it is among the total population. Among older Americans, there were only 0.8 marriages for every one divorce, indicating divorce is more common than marriage. Among the total population over age 15, the ratio is two marriages for every one divorce. Given the stabilization of high divorce rates among the total population (Raley and Bumpass 2003), we expect divorce rates among older Americans to follow the broader population trends.

The most common marital status change in older adulthood is widowhood. As indicated earlier, widowhood is prevalent among older Americans, and over one million older Americans were widowed in 2008. Women were 2.3 times more likely to experience widowhood than men. Projections provide a glimpse into the relationship patterns of older Americans in the next few decades. Projections of marital status suggested that by 2040, 42% of older women and 69% of older men will be married (Wade 1989). Wade argues that women's decline in marriage will be the result of declines in widowhood and growth in divorce, while men's decline will be due to older men's lack of marriage (never married status). Updated projections suggest the proportion of older adults never married will increase, the proportion married will decline, and the proportion divorced will stabilize in recent years (Tamborini 2007).

Living Arrangements

The living arrangements of older Americans are tied to their marital status but living arrangements offer a unique lens on the potential sources of support available to older adults within the household. For instance, marital status alone does not reveal whether an individual lives alone or with other family members. The rapid rise in older adults living alone is of considerable policy interest to the extent that it portends growth in the share of elderly without the supports required to delay or avoid institutional care (Mutchler 1992). Transitions in living arrangements among older adults sometimes follow a different pattern than that documented at a single point in time (Wilmoth 1998), but they are beyond the scope of this chapter.

We examine changes in living arrangements among older adults over time, distinguishing among four categories: living alone, married, living with family members, and living with nonfamily members. Older Americans also may live in group quarters but are not included in our Census estimates below. The term 'group quarters' may include a variety of circumstances.

The Administration on Aging (2009) reports that in 2007, 1.57 million or 4.4% of older Americans lived in institutional settings, and 2-5% lived in senior housing with support services.

Living Alone

Figure 3 shows that the proportion of older men living alone has increased slightly from 15% in 1980 to 19% in 2008. As men age, a greater proportion were living on their own; the oldest old were about twice as likely to live alone as the youngest old. In 1980, 11% of men ages 65-69 lived alone, and 26% of the oldest old men lived alone. Similarly, in 2008, 15% of men 65-69 years old lived alone, while 32% of men age 85 or older did so.

There was a consistent pattern in the proportion of older women who lived alone in 1980 and 2008: 40% in 1980 and 37% in 2008 (Figure 4). The proportion of older women who lived alone increased sharply according to age. In 1980, 30% of the youngest old (65-69) women lived alone, and 46% of the oldest old lived alone. In 2008, there was a steeper age gradient, 26% of women ages 65-69 lived alone, while 56% of women over age 85 lived alone.

Women more often live alone than men, and this is true for every age group of older Americans. In fact, the gender gap in living alone increases with age. In 2008, among the oldest old, about one-third (32%) of men and half (56%) of women lived alone.

Married with Spouse

These estimates differ slightly from the levels discussed earlier because we exclude in the denominator older Americans living in group quarters. Accordingly, these estimates are limited to older Americans who are not living in group quarters. Over the last forty years, there has been a small decline in the proportion of older American men were married, from 78% in 1980 to 71% in 2008 (Figure 3). In 1980, the youngest old (65-69) men experienced the highest levels of

living with a spouse (83%), and this declined to 55% among the oldest old. Comparatively, a similar age pattern existed in 2008.

There has been no change in the proportion of older women who live with a spouse (46%) in 1980 and in 2008 (Figure 4). About three-fifths (61% in 1980 and 58% in 2008) of the youngest old (65-69) lived with their spouse. In both 1980 and 2008, the oldest old (85+) experienced a sharp decline in coresidence with their spouse; only 19% in 1980 and 22% in 2008 lived with their husband.

As discussed earlier, a greater proportion of older men than women lived with their spouse. In 1980, 46% of women and 77% of men were living with their spouse. The gender gradient in marriage increased with age, and the levels remained consistent in 1980 and 2008. In 2008, men 65-69 years old were 1.3 times more likely to be living with a spouse than women, while men 85 years old and older were 2.5 times more likely to be living with their spouse than women.

Living with Family or Nonfamily Members

In 1980, it was relatively rare for older men to live with family members (5%) or non-family members (2%) (Figure 3). Coresiding with family (7%) or nonfamily (3%) members remained uncommon in 2008. The proportion of men living with nonfamily members remained nearly constant across age groups. In contrast, in 1980, there was fourfold increase in the proportion of men living with family across age groups. About 4% of the youngest old (65-59) and 16% of the oldest old (85+) lived with family members. In 2008, 6% of the youngest old (65-69) lived with family, and only ten percent of the oldest old (85+) lived with family. Thus, there is a decline in the proportion of the oldest old men who were living with their family.

In 1980 and 2008, a similar proportion (2%) of older women lived with nonfamily members (Figure 4). The low level of nonfamily coresidence persisted across age groups. In 1980, 12% of women lived with family members, and in 2008, about 15% lived with family. In 1980, 7% of 65-69-year-old women lived with family, and 32% of 85+ year-old women lived with family. By 2008, there appears to be an increase in family living among young older women (65-69) and a decline among older (85+) women. Consequently, in 2008, 13% of 65-69-year-old women lived with family members, and 20% of women age 85 or older lived with family members.

There is no gender gap in the proportion of older Americans living with non-family members; however, in 2008, older women more often lived with family members (12%) than men (7%). At each age, women were more likely to live with family than men, and the proportion living with family increased with age. The gender gap is consistent across age groups at both time periods; women experience about two to three times higher levels of family coresidence than men.

Racial and Ethnic Variation

As discussed earlier there were racial and ethnic distinctions in the proportion of older Americans who were living with a spouse. White men and women more often lived with a spouse than did Black men or women. Very few (5%) of white older men lived alone, while 15% of Black and 16% of Hispanic men lived alone. About one-quarter of Black men lived with family members in contrast to only 18% of white and 16% of Hispanic older men. Living with non-family members is relatively rare and quite similar across race and ethnic groups.

The majority of older women did not live with a spouse; nearly three-quarters of white women and only about one-quarter of Black women lived with their spouse. One-third of older

Black women lived alone, while 28% of older Hispanic women and 12% of older white women lived alone. Nearly two-fifths (38%) of Black women lived with family members, representing the most common living arrangement among older Black women. Similar proportions of Black and white older women lived with family, and 28% of Hispanic older women lived with family. Only 2% of older women lived with non-family members, and this was similar for each race and ethnic group considered here.

New union and couple forms

There are several union and couple experiences that are not captured with the traditional indicators of marital status and living arrangements, including cohabitation, living apart together and same sex unions. Although these less traditional couple relationships have received comparatively little attention in the gerontological literature, aging scholars have begun to call attention to the importance of examining these emerging union types (Cooney and Dunne 2001; Huyck 1995). As fewer older adults are married, a larger share is available to form nonmarital relationships. Whether these relationships offer benefits akin to marriage is unknown and awaits future research (Brown et al. 2005). Here, we document the demographic trends in cohabitation, living apart together, and same sex relationships.

Cohabitation

In recent decades, cohabitation, or the sharing of a household by an unmarried opposite-sex couple, has increased dramatically in the U.S. This growth is not limited to younger adults but rather extends through older adulthood (Brown et al. 2006; Chevan 1996). The reasons for cohabiting later in life are distinctive. For instance, older adults may prefer to cohabit to retain financial autonomy and protect their wealth for eventual transfer to their heirs (Brown et al. 2005; Chevan 1996; King and Scott 2005). Among older adults, cohabitators tend to be younger

than marrieds. Cohabitators are disproportionately Black. Most older cohabitators are divorced (71%) as opposed to widowed (18%) or never married (11%) (Brown et al. 2006). Chevan's (1996) estimates using indirect measures of cohabitation revealed sustained growth in cohabitation between 1960 and 1990 for adults age 60 and older. Direct measures indicate that by 2000, more than 400,000 persons in this age group were cohabiting (Brown et al. 2006). In 2008, the number of older Americans who were cohabiting increased; 4% of cohabiting couples had a member age 65 or older (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Among older Americans living in an opposite sex relationships, about 2% were cohabiting, and 98% were married (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

Living Apart Together

The concept of Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships evolved from research in Europe (Levin 2004; Haskey and Lewis 2006) and has extended to the United States (Strohm et al. 2009). These relationships are committed, long-term intimate relationships in which couples do not share a home but rather maintain separate residences. Most of the U.S. and European studies are limited to younger age groups, and only a few examine patterns among older adults. De Jong Gierveld (2006) focused on Dutch respondents age 50 and older who experienced widowhood or divorce and found that one-third of those who repartnered after age 50 were in LAT relationships. She concluded that respondents age 55 and older are more likely to live apart together than their younger counterparts (de Jong Gierveld 2006). Research in Sweden indicates that this arrangement is increasingly common among older couples as a strategy to engage in emotional support with some level of autonomy (Karlsson and Borell 2002). This seems to be a relationship that may be especially well suited to older Americans who can afford to live separately and want to maintain some autonomy while experiencing the benefits of a close

intimate bond. Unfortunately, estimates of LAT relationships among older adults in the U.S. are not available.

Gays and Lesbians

Research on gay and lesbian family experiences is typically restricted to young ages, excluding older Americans. Same sex relationships traditionally may be viewed as a union type experienced by younger Americans, but older Americans are part of same sex couples, too. Recent data permit measurement of the prevalence of same sex households in the U.S. In the 2007 American Community Survey, just over ten percent (11.3%) of same sex couple households have one member over the age of 65. A greater proportion of these are male (60%) than female (40%) couples. Seventy-one percent of same-sex older couple households have coresided for five years or more (Bennett and Gates 2004). According to the 2000 census, almost every county (97%) had an older same-sex American (Gates 2003).

Given new legislation about marriage among same-sex couples and the development of domestic partnership agreements, there are more options available for older Americans. The legal definitions of these relationships are significant when one member of the couple dies (Bennett and Gates 2004). The social security benefits are lower, and taxes on inheritance and retirement plans are larger among gays and lesbians than among married couples (Bennett and Gates 2004). Gay and lesbian older Americans also face constraints due to Medicaid and property laws that may make it difficult for partners to remain in their home following their partner's move to a nursing home or death (Bennett and Gates 2004).

Conclusion

The aging of the U.S. population coupled with rapid changes in family formation and dissolution earlier in the life course have contributed to shifts in the marital status and living arrangements of

older men and women over the last forty years (Chevan 1996; Cooney and Dunne 2001). This chapter documents changes in the marital status and living arrangement distributions of women and men between 1980 and 2008 using data from the decennial census and the American Community Survey. We also describe racial and ethnic variation in these patterns. These demographic trends are informative for researchers and policymakers alike, as an increasingly diverse older population likely will require an array of both informal and formal supports as they age. Specifically, with fewer older adults married and more living alone, increased institutional supports will be needed. New family forms, such as cohabitation, living apart together, and same sex relationships, merit careful study to determine the costs and benefits of these unions relative to other living arrangements.

Similar to the overall U.S. population, marriage among older adults has declined since 1980. This decline has been more pronounced among men than women. For women, the proportion married has changed very little. Consistent with the projections made in prior research (Wade 1989), widowhood has fallen, whereas divorce has risen among women. Men are also much more likely to be divorced today than they were in 1980. The share of men who are never married remains essentially unchanged, even though it was projected to double between 1990 and 2040 (Wade 1989). More recent projections indicate that the proportion of older adults married will continue to decline with a corresponding increase in the never married. The proportion divorced should stabilize in the coming years (Tamborini 2007).

Living alone is more common today than in 1980, and a larger share of women than men reside solo. Family and nonfamily living arrangements remain rare. The vast majority of older adults are either residing with a spouse or alone, and this is especially true among whites. Blacks are relatively less likely to be married and more likely to reside with family, reflecting the racial

and ethnic variation characterizing the living arrangements of older adults (Himes, Hogan, and Eggebeen 1996).

This examination of changes in marital status and living arrangements does not capture all family and relationship types that exist among older Americans. For instance, our measure of marriage does not distinguish between first and higher order marriages. Remarriage among older Americans in 1980 was largely a function of widowhood rather than divorce. In 1980, most widowed older Americans did not remarry; just 1% of women and 25% of men remarried (Moss and Moss 1981). More recent analysis of remarriage is warranted, as remarriage and stepfamilies are linked to variation in support in older adulthood (Curran, McLanahan, and Knab 2003).

Our descriptive analyses rely on cross-sectional data to provide a snapshot of older adults at two points in time. This approach is useful because it illustrates the distribution of older adults across marital status or living arrangement categories, but it obscures the broader trajectories of relationship histories that unfolded earlier in the life course. Increasingly diverse family and living arrangement experiences during young and middle adulthood have enduring consequences for later life (Cooney and Dunne 2001). At the same time, older adults experience living arrangement transitions and, from a life course perspective, these transitions are contingent upon earlier events and experiences (Wilmoth 1998). Voluntary (e.g., marriage or divorce) versus involuntary (e.g., widowhood) transitions may have differential effects on older adult well-being. For these reasons, future work on the demography of unions in later life would benefit from a longitudinal approach that incorporates family and living arrangement transitions both prior to and during older adulthood to provide a more nuanced portrait of the family and relationship experiences of older adults.

Indeed, intimate relationships outside of marriage have risen in recent years. Growing attention has been paid to unmarried intimate relationships among older adults, including cohabitation, living apart together, and same sex relationships (Cooney and Dunne 2001). Still, little is known about the prevalence of these union types or the determinants of entry and exit from these unions (Brown et al. 2006). As they become more common, especially with the movement of the baby boom cohort into older adulthood, it will be more feasible to incorporate these emerging relationship types in large, national surveys to generate new scholarship on the demography of these unions. This line of inquiry will be enriched by theoretical developments concerning the meaning and significance of these new partnerships for the health and well-being of older adults.

We focus on *coresidential* relationships, including marriage, cohabitation, and family household membership and therefore do not examine romantic or sexual relationships. Qualitative evidence suggests that dating among older adults following widowhood or divorce is fairly common (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1991; Cooney and Dunne 2001), although women are less likely to desire remarriage than men (Talbot 1998). There are few empirical studies of dating, with Carr's (2004) recent work a notable exception. She finds that widowers' interest in dating is greatest when they lack other forms of social support, whereas widows' interest in dating does not depend on levels of support from friends.

In addition to dating relationships, new research is emerging on sexual activity among older adults. Waite (2009) maintains that sexual functioning is integral to overall well-being in later life. Even though research often assumes that older Americans are not sexually active, (Lindau, Schumm, Laumann, Levinson, O'Muirheartaigh, and Waite 2007) report that in a sample of partnered older adults, 67% of men and 40% of women age 65-74 report being

sexually active in the last 12 months, while 39% of men and 17% of women age 75-84 did. These figures are from the recently fielded National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), which provides detailed data on the relationship and sexual behaviors of Americans ages 57-84. The declining share of married older adults translates into rising proportions at risk of forming new sexual partnerships, which not only may have ramifications for access to social support but also for physical and mental health.

Older adults are a growing share of the U.S. population. In fact, the oldest old are the fastest growing age group today (National Center for Health Statistics 2009). The older adult population, which is diverse in terms of racial and ethnic composition, has witnessed significant changes in marriage and living arrangements since 1980. The decline in marriage coupled with rises in divorce and living alone have consequences for the well-being, care, and support of older adults. Shifts to more complex family living arrangements, including the emergence of unmarried partnerships, have led to more varied types of support networks. Mounting evidence suggests that women, by virtue of living longer than men, will pay a higher cost for less stable family life by having limited support networks in old age (Curran et al. 2003).

The demography of unions in older adulthood has important social policy implications. Institutional supports will be needed to serve a growing, heterogeneous population that will have fewer forms of informal support to draw from. Lengthening life expectancies will only exacerbate these trends. Policymakers must be cognizant of the wider array of family situations characterizing older adulthood to ensure responsive policies are developed and maintained that reach across the range of relationship and living circumstances experienced by older adults. Close relationships play an integral role in the health and well-being of older adults, and formal

institutional supports, particularly large government-sponsored initiatives, have the potential to greatly enhance the lives of the aged.

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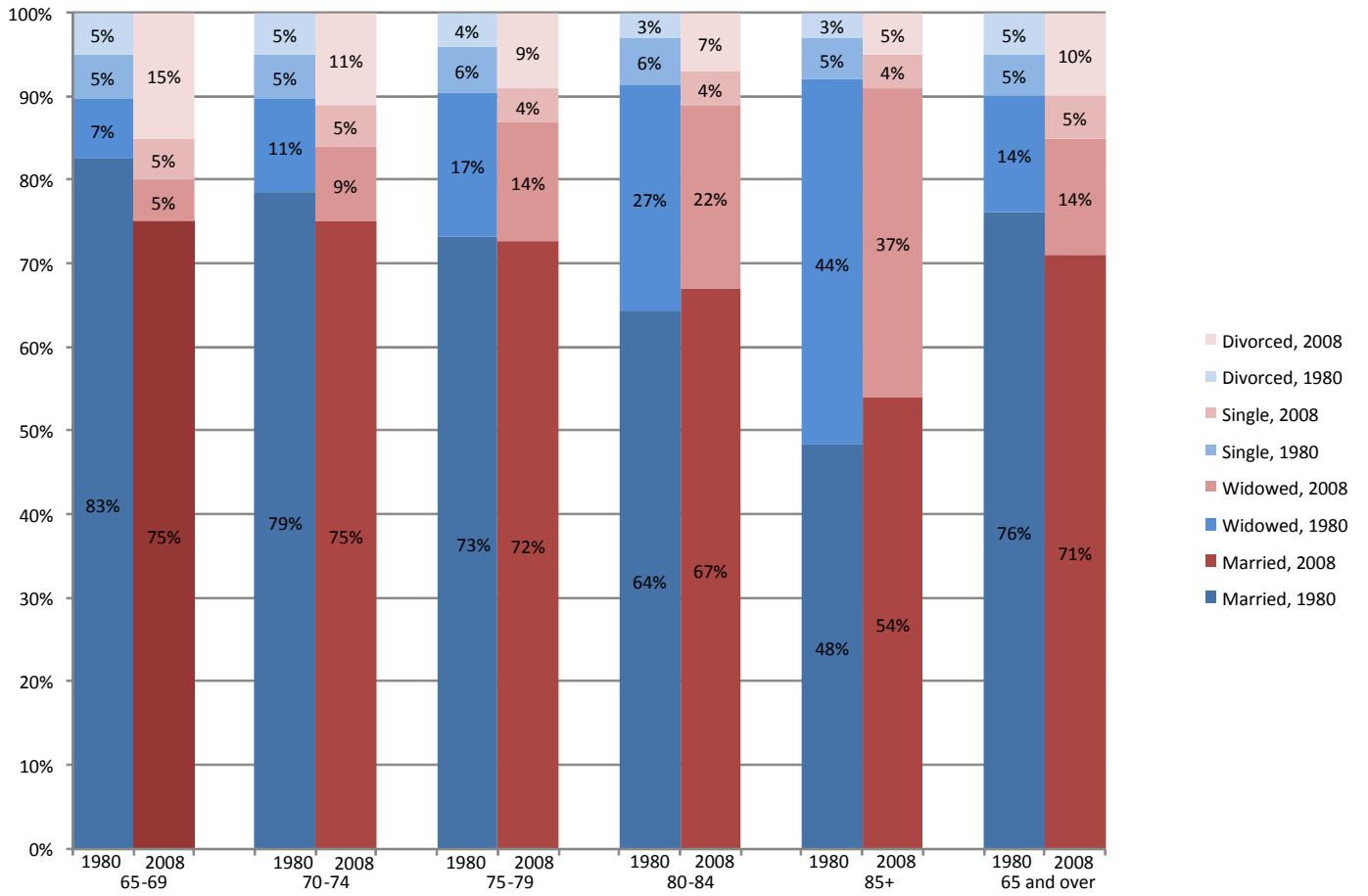
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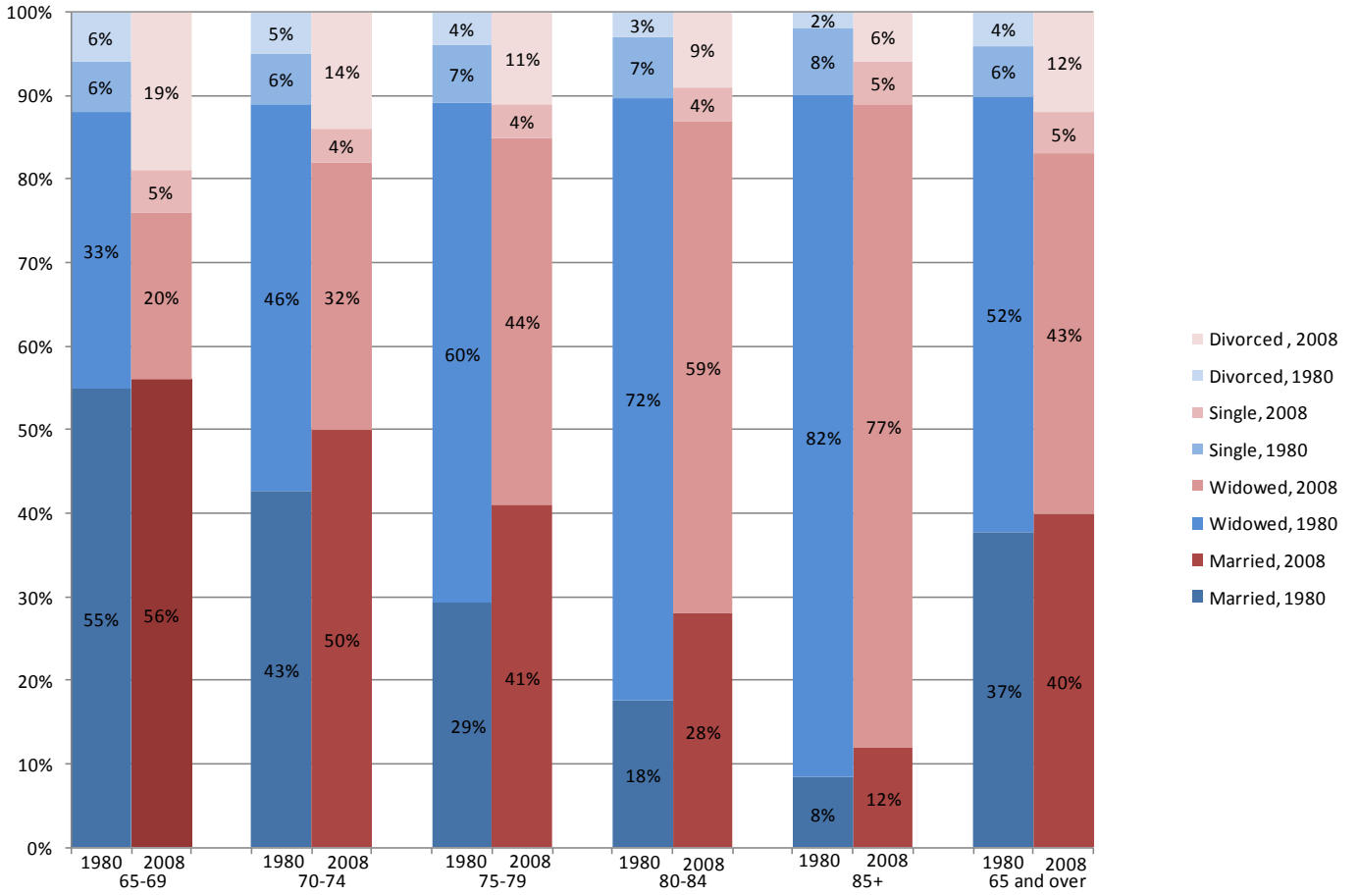
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Figure 1: Marital Status by Age For Males, 1980 & 2008



Source: 1980 Census & 2008 American Community Survey

Figure 2: Marital Status by Age For Females, 1980 & 2008



Source: 1980 Census & 2008 American Community Survey

Figure 3: Living Arrangements by Age For Males, 1980 & 2008

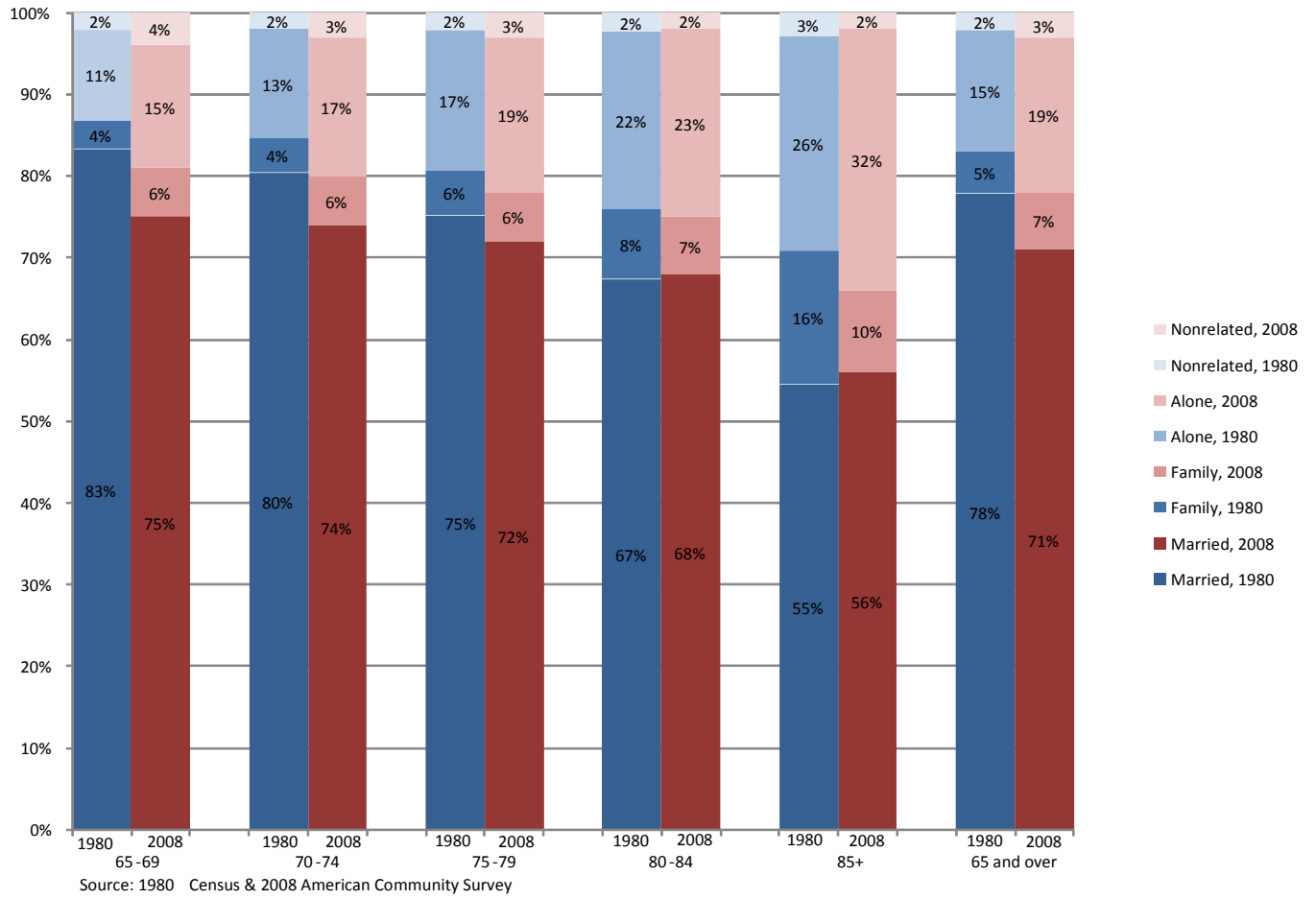


Figure 4: Living Arrangements by Age For Females, 1980 & 2008

