



# Dating Relationships in Older Adulthood: A National Portrait

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## Background

- A substantial share of the U.S. older adult population is unmarried, and this trend is expected to accelerate in the future as baby boomers continue to age into older adulthood
  - In 2008, 29% of men and 60% of women ages 65+ were unmarried
- Unmarried older adults continue to form partnerships, although they increasingly do so outside of marriage
  - There has been a rapid increase in unmarried cohabitation among older adults, doubling from 1.2 to 2.4 million individuals ages 50+ between 2000 and 2009 (U.S. Census, 2009)

## Rationale

- The antecedents and consequences of forming unmarried relationships in later life are not well-known
- Some research has been conducted on cohabiting relationships among older adults, but dating relationships have received scant attention
- The goal of this study is to investigate the factors associated with dating among older men and women using a national sample

## Prior Research

- Nearly all of the existing research on older daters comes from qualitative studies that explore the reasons why older adults (often only women) pursue or avoid intimate relationships
- These studies highlight some of the distinctive features of dating in later life:
  - Most daters are involved in serious, long-term relationships (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986)
  - Men are more interested than women in formalizing these relationships through marriage (Stevens, 2002)
  - Women are often reluctant to marry because of the potentially heavy caregiving burdens that marriage can entail in old age (Talbot, 1998)
  - Many women also wish to maintain their autonomy (Dickson, Hughes, & Walker, 2005; Stevens, 2002)
- The sole empirical study of older daters used NSFH to examine the correlates and outcomes associated with later life dating (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1986)
  - They found daters were younger than nondaters and more likely to be men. Daters were also characterized by better self-rated health and driving ability and greater involvement in organizational activities
- Carr (2004) examined older widow(er)s' desire to date and found men were more likely than women to be interested in dating or remarriage. Men with lower levels of social support were particularly likely to express interest in forming a new partnership

## The Present Study

- We construct a national portrait of today's older adult daters
- Drawing on prior research, we pay special attention to gender differences as well as:
  - Demographic characteristics
  - Economic resources
  - Health
  - Social support

## Data

- 2005-06 National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP)
  - Collected by the University of Chicago and NORC
  - Topics covered include: demographic characteristics, sexual and union histories, social networks, physical and mental health, well-being and illness, and social and cultural activities
  - In-person interviews, self-administered questionnaires, and biomeasures collection
  - N=3,005 persons ages 57-85

## Analytic Sample

- The analytic sample is
  - 1,114 unmarrieds (and not cohabiting), of which 356 are men and 788 are women
- 152 of the unmarrieds report being in a dating relationship
  - 99 men
  - 53 women

## Dating Relationships

- Dating is asked of respondents who do not report having either a married or cohabiting partner. It is measured by the question:
  - Do you currently have a romantic, intimate, or sexual partner?

Table 1: Weighted Proportions of Older Adults Dating

Total	13.5%
Men	27.1%
Women	7.4%

## Dating Status by Age Group

- Daters tend to be younger than nondaters

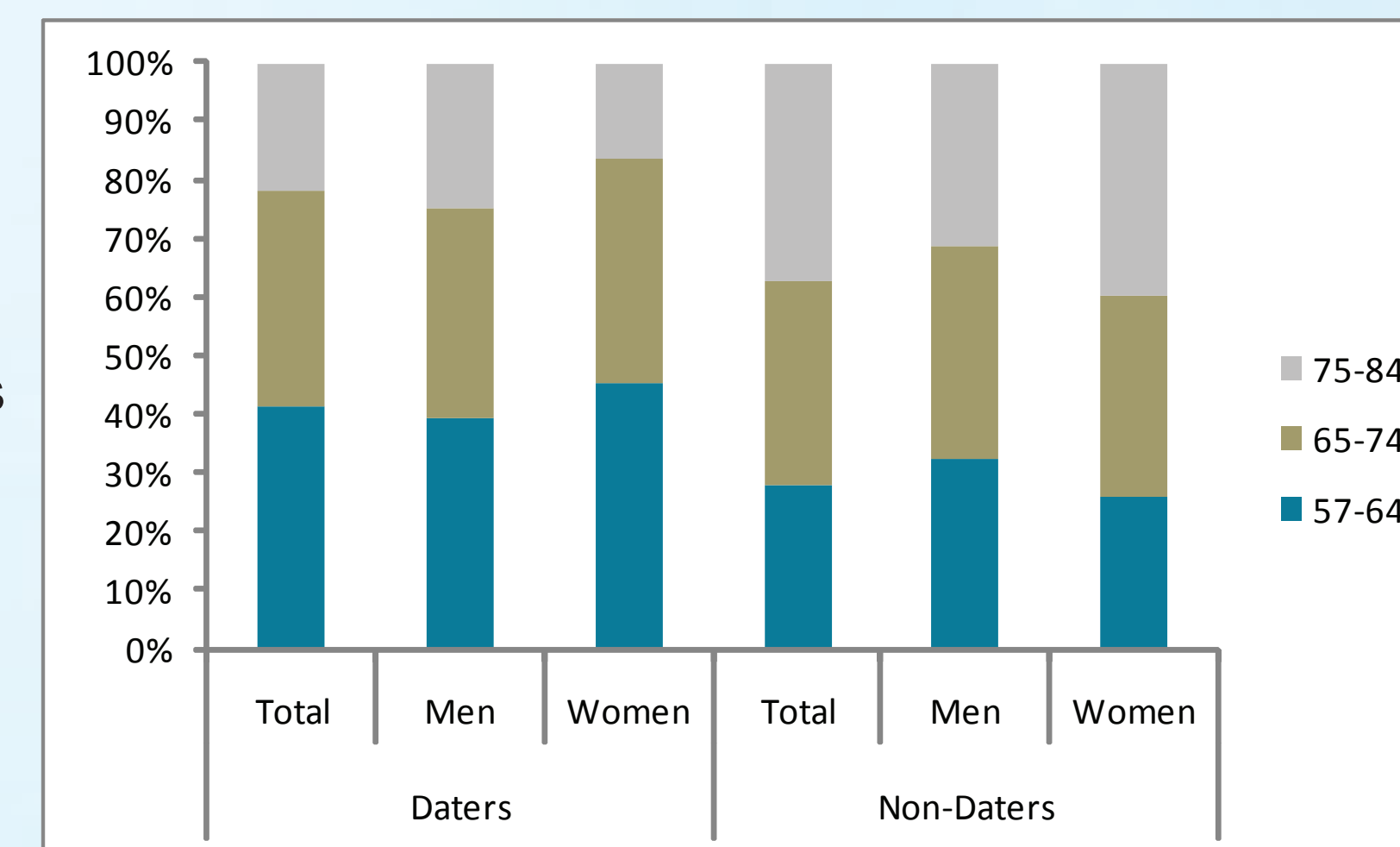


Figure 1: Dating Status by Age Group

## Dating Status by Marital Status

- Most daters are divorced, whereas nondaters are typically widow(er)s

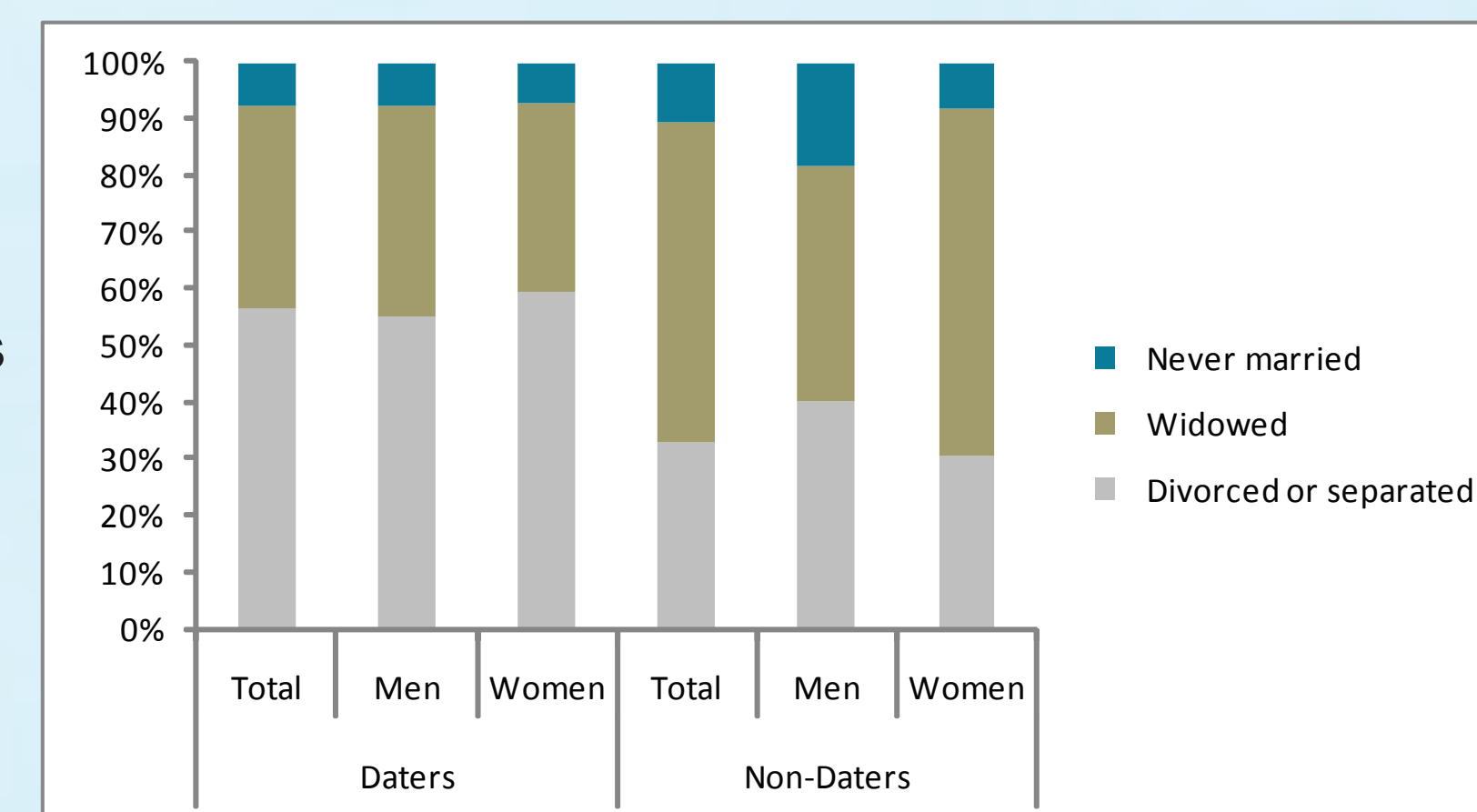


Figure 2: Dating Status by Marital Status

## Dating Status by Education

- Daters are well-educated. Among both men and women, larger shares of daters have a college degree than among nondaters

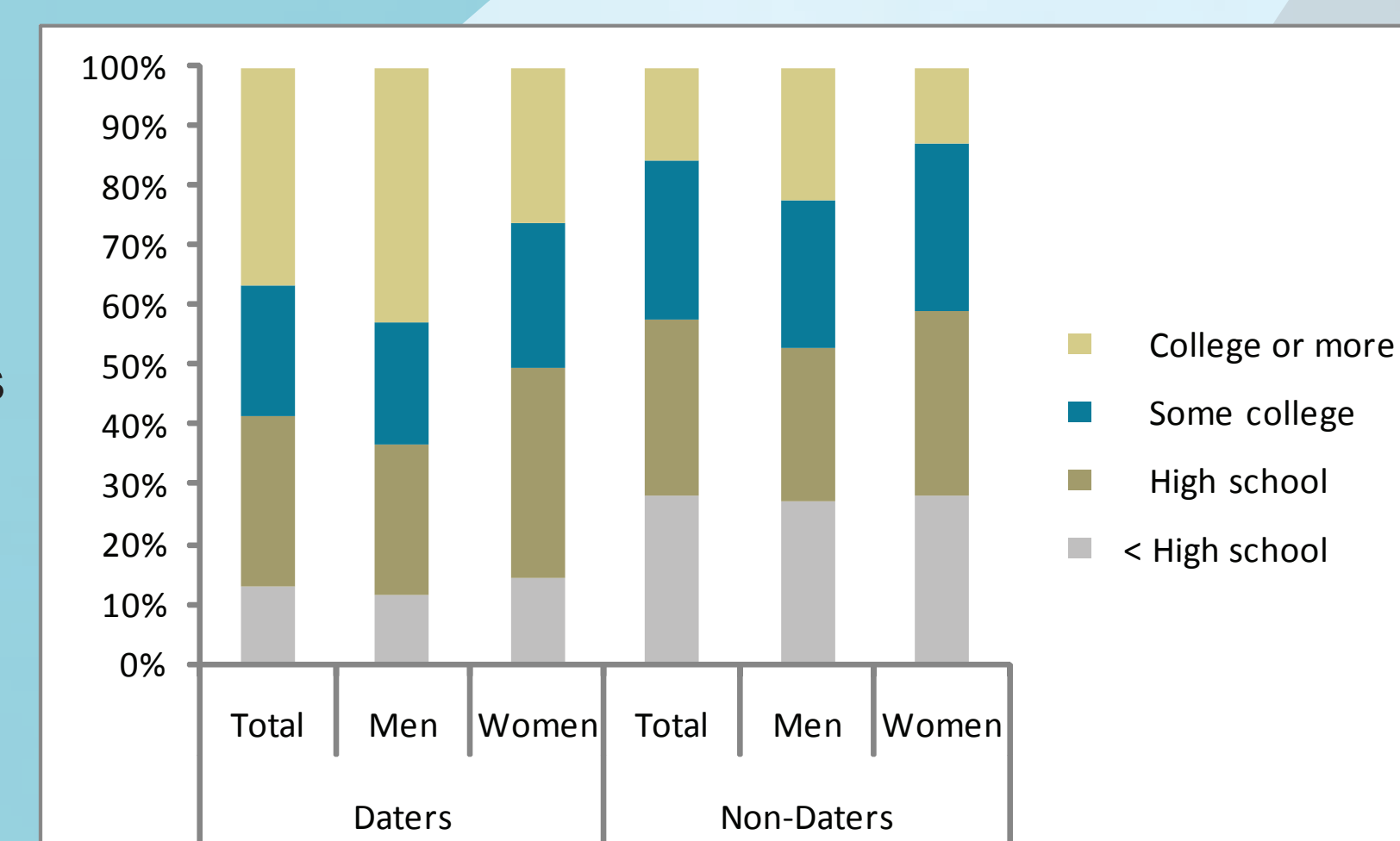


Figure 3: Dating Status by Education

## Models

- Logistic regressions are estimated to predict dating status net of controls for the total sample as well as separately for men and women
- All analyses were conducted in Stata using svy commands to correct for complex sampling design

## Summary of Results

- Older women are less likely to be dating than older men
- The correlates of later life dating vary by gender:
  - Younger women are more likely to be dating than older women (age is not associated with dating among men)
  - Among men, Blacks are more likely to be dating than Whites (there are no significant racial differences among women)
  - Never married men are less likely to be dating than divorced men (both widowed men and women are less likely than the divorced to date)
  - Better health is positively associated with dating, but only among men
  - Religious attendance is negatively related to dating among women
- Economic resources are not associated with dating status net of other factors

## Conclusions

- Nearly 15% of older unmarrieds are currently in a dating relationship
  - More than one-quarter (27%) of unmarried older men are dating versus about 7% of older women
- The factors associated with dating in later life differ for men and women
  - This is consistent with prior qualitative research suggesting men and women have different expectations for their dating relationships

## Limitations and Future Directions

- This is an exploratory, cross-sectional study that does not permit causal conclusions
  - Nonetheless, it improves on prior work by drawing on a large, recent, nationally representative sample that includes both men and women
- The relatively high prevalence of dating relationships among unmarrieds, especially men, raises important questions about how dating in later life is linked to well-being
  - This is a promising direction for future research
- Another topic for future research concerns the similarity between dating and cohabiting relationships at this stage of the life course
- Some of the dating relationships could be LAT (Living Apart Together) relationships that provide similar levels of support and companionship as unmarried coresidential relationships

Table 2: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Dating Status

	Total	Men	Women
Demographic characteristics			
Age (in years)	0.98	1.00	0.94 *
Gender (women)	0.24 ***		
Race			
White (Ref)			
Black	2.25 *	2.82 *	1.70
Other Race	0.80	1.32	0.23
Marital status			
Divorced or separated (Ref)			
Widowed	0.59 †	0.70 *	0.44 *
Never married	0.26 *	0.16 **	0.39
Economic resources			
Education			
< High school (Ref)			
High school	0.48 †	0.45	0.60
Some college	0.72	0.85	0.72
College or more	1.54	1.67	1.36
Employment (1=Working)	1.01	1.11	0.90
Assets (\$1,000s)	1.00 †	1.00	1.00
Health			
Self-rated physical health	1.48 ***	1.67 ***	1.30
Social support			
Living children	0.93	0.90	1.01
Regular religious attendance	0.50 *	0.53	0.47 †
N	1,114	356	788

\* p < 0.10, † p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

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