

Divorce in Middle and Later Life: New Estimates from the 2008 American Community Survey

Susan L. Brown and I-Fen Lin
Bowling Green State University

The U.S. has the highest divorce rate in the world, with upwards of 45% of marriages expected to end through divorce (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). This overall rate of divorce has remained stable since the early 1980s (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Sustained high levels of divorce over the past three decades have coincided with extensive research on the predictors and consequences of divorce. Nonetheless, the research to date has largely ignored the divorce experiences of older adults (Cooney & Dunne, 2001).

This omission is notable considering the demographic composition of the population. The U.S. is an aging society. Today, about 13% of the U.S. population is over age 65 and estimates suggest this figure will rise to 19% by 2030 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). The aging of the population reflects lengthening life expectancies as well as declines in the birthrate over the past several decades. Baby boomers, the first to divorce and remarry in large numbers (as younger adults), are moving into the older adult population, and this portends a growing number of older adults will experience divorce. Moreover, as remarriages become a larger share of all marriages, the proportion of marriages at higher risk of divorce also climbs (Sweeney, 2010).

The increasingly complex marital biographies experienced earlier in the life course have ramifications for the marital status of America's older population, which is becoming more diverse. Marriage is likely to be less common in the near future as baby boomers continue to swell the ranks of the aged. And, divorceds are expected to constitute a larger share of older persons (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). A recent study by Manning and Brown (in press) using Census data illustrates the growing prevalence of divorced elderly. The proportion of adults ages 65 and over that are divorced doubled among men between 1980 and 2008, rising from 5% to 10%. Among women, the percentage divorced tripled during this time period, climbing from 4% to 12%. In contrast, levels of widowhood among older men remained unchanged and actually fell among women between 1980 and 2008. These figures illustrate the changing marital status distribution among older adults, but do not speak to the *risk* of divorce during this life stage.

The 2008 American Community Survey offers a unique opportunity to estimate the divorce rate among older adults because all sample members are asked whether they divorced in the past 12 months, allowing us to calculate an annual divorce rate. In this paper, we extend the figures available from U.S. Vital Statistics (Clarke, 1995) to examine the incidence of divorce among middle aged and older adults in the U.S. today and how this rate has changed over time. Our preliminary analyses indicate that the rate of divorce has risen dramatically among this group. In 2008, there were 11 divorces per 1,000 married population ages 50 and older versus 4.7 divorces per 1,000 marrieds ages 50 and older in 1990 (Clarke, 1995). Among persons ages 50-64, the divorce rate was 14 divorces per 1,000 marrieds in 2008 versus 6.9 divorces in 1990. Thus, the divorce rate among older adults has more than doubled over the past few decades.

Not surprisingly, this growth in the divorce rate among older adults translates into a larger share of all divorces being experienced by middle aged and older adults. About 8% of all persons who divorced in 1990 were ages 50 and over. Now, over 25% of all persons who divorced in 2008 were ages 50 and over. This rise partially reflects the aging of the population, but also the actual

increase in the risk of divorce among older adults. Regardless, the number of older adults that experience divorce is large and likely to continue to accelerate rapidly, foregrounding the urgency of investigating the incidence of divorce during the second half of life.

The remainder of our paper will document variation in divorce after age 50 by gender, race/ethnicity, education, marriage order, the presence of children, and other relevant demographic factors available in the ACS data. Thus, our goal is to establish a portrait of divorce during middle and later life that illustrates for which groups divorce is more (or less) common. This paper will provide important new information on the divorce rate for older adults, the fastest growing age group in the U.S. This group has been largely ignored in prior research on divorce, but our early findings from the 2008 ACS data illustrate the salience of the topic. Older adults, unlike the U.S. population as a whole, have faced rising divorce rates over the past 20 years. We will explore this trend in detail, documenting subgroup variation that will elucidate the heterogeneity of the divorce experience during later life.

References

- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650-666.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2010). Demographic trends in the United States: A review of research in the 2000s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 403-419.
- Clarke, S. C. (1995). Advance report of final divorce statistics, 1989 and 1990. Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 43, No. 8. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Cooney, T. M., & Dunne, K. (2001). *Intimate relationships in later life: Current realities, future prospects*. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22, 838-858.
- Manning, W. D., & Brown, S. L. (In Press). The demography of unions among older Americans, 1980-present: A family change approach. *Handbook on the Sociology of Aging*.
- Raley, R. K., & Bumpass, L. (2003). The topography of the divorce plateau: Levels and trends in union stability in the United States after 1980. *Demographic Research*, 18, 245-260.
- Sweeney, M. M. (2010). Remarriage and stepfamilies: Strategic sites for family scholarship in the 21st century. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 667-684.
- Vincent, G. K., & Velkoff, V. A. (2010). The next four decades, the older population in the United States: 2010 to 2050. Current Population Reports, P25-1138, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.