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Editor's Choice

Brief report

Older Adults Without Close Kin in the United States

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Abstract

Objectives: We document the size and characteristics of the population of older adults without close kin in the contemporary United States.

Methods: Using the Health and Retirement Study, we examine the prevalence of lacking different types and combinations of living kin, examine how kinless-ness is changing across birth cohorts, and provide estimates of kinless-ness for sociodemographic and health groups.

Results: In 1998–2010, 6.6% of U.S. adults aged 55 and above lacked a living spouse and biological children and 1% lacked a partner/spouse, any children, biological siblings, and biological parents. Kinless-ness, defined both ways, is becoming more common among adults in their 50s and 60s for more recent birth cohorts. Lacking close kin is more prevalent among women than men, native born than immigrants, never-married, those living alone, college-educated women, those with low levels of wealth, and those in poor health.

Discussion: Kinless-ness should be of interest to policy makers because it is more common among those with social, economic and health risks; those who live alone, with low levels of wealth, and disability. Aging research should address the implications of kinless-ness for public health, social isolation, and the demand for institutional care.

Keywords: Demography—Family structure—Kinship—Population aging

Kin are important for social, physical, and economic well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) and for most of human history almost all older adults have been part of dense kin networks (Höllinger & Haller, 1990). Social gerontologists have not studied the size or characteristics of the contemporary population of older adults without close kin, which is an important omission from the literature. Recent demographic changes in marriage, fertility, and mortality may lead to larger numbers of older adults with fewer close family members. The proportion of currently married adults is declining, because of lower marriage rates and increased cohabitation and divorce at older ages (Brown & Lin, 2012; Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). Historical fertility declines and increases in childlessness and one child families mean contemporary adults have fewer siblings than prior generations, and fewer children of their own. Mortality decline may exert a countervailing effect, increasing child, spouse, sibling, and parent survival. Together, these demographic and social changes suggest a stark contrast in the pool of family members that contemporary older adults might rely on for instrumental, emotional, and economic support when compared with same-age groups in prior cohorts.

It is important to understand the population of older adults without close kin, the characteristics of this group, and how it is changing over time because the kinless may be an extremely disadvantaged group with special needs in older age. Although most people want to age in place, lacking a spouse and having few living kin are among the social factors most positively associated with nursing home placement

(Luppa et al., 2009; Thomeer, Mudrazija, & Angel, 2016). Having kin visit and check in on relatives in institutions is an important predictor of the quality of care (Gaugler et al., 2004). Moreover, ethnographic work highlights that older adults without kin are some of the most disadvantaged and isolated members of society (Klinenberg, 2002; 2012). Kin comprise the majority of most Americans' close confidant networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006) and lacking them is one of the largest contributors to loneliness and social isolation in older age (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014; Ong, Uchino, & Wethington, 2015; Wilson & Moulton, 2010), which is a growing public health concern (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Methods

In this brief report, we first examine the prevalence of lacking different types of living kin among the contemporary older American population. Second, we examine how kinless-ness has changed across birth cohorts. Third, we examine demographic characteristics associated with kinless-ness.

Data come from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a longitudinal aging study that surveys older Americans biennially. We draw on the RAND HRS and RAND Family data files, which give the vital status of each respondents' parents, children, and siblings across survey waves (RAND HRS Data, Version P, 2016). Our analysis focuses on the period 1992–2010, which covers the range of the available RAND Family data files at the time of this manuscript's submission. To examine the prevalence of lacking kin among older adults (Table 1) and how kinless-ness varies by sociodemographic and health groups (Table 2), we concentrate on respondents aged 55 years and above during the 1998–2010 waves of the HRS (N = 116,245 person waves). This sample provides nationally representative estimates of kinless-ness for the recent period. The data are weighted using the combined person level and nursing home weights, which make the data representative of the noninstitutionalized population 1992–1998 and representative of the noninstitutionalized and nursing home population 2000–2010 (More information about the survey weights, sample, and attrition can be found at http://www.rand.org/labor/aging/dataprod/hrs-data.html). To examine cohort trends in kinless-ness, we explored the largest possible range of age and cohort trends, including all individuals aged 50 years and older who were alive and took part in the HRS surveys (N = 173,925 person waves 1992–2010) either responding themselves or by proxy, including those in nursing homes. The data are weighted using combined person level and nursing home weights.

Older Adults Without Close Kin

We first described the prevalence of lacking each type of kin separately (biological children, biological or step children,

Table 1. Available Kin Among Adults Aged 55 Years and Above, Health and Retirement Study, 1998–2010 (N = 116,245 Person-Waves)

		Ages 55–74		Ages 75+	
	All 55+	Men	Women	Men	Women
Percent (*SE*) without each kin type					
No children (biological, step, other)	8.04 (0.08)	8.22 (0.15)	6.98 (0.12)	7.59 (0.21)	10.41 (0.21)
No biological or step children	8.09 (0.08)	8.31 (0.15)	7.01 (0.12)	7.62 (0.21)	10.46 (0.21)
No biological children	10.49 (0.09)	10.83 (0.16)	9.39 (0.14)	10.42 (0.22)	12.43 (0.22)
No biological siblings	16.64 (0.11)	12.01 (0.17)	11.82 (0.15)	26.50 (0.37)	31.38 (0.32)
No partner or spouse	36.29 (0.14)	20.01 (0.21)	37.41 (0.23)	30.59 (0.39)	70.62 (0.31)
No spouse	38.49 (0.14)	23.26 (0.22)	39.54 (0.23)	32.18 (0.39)	71.18 (0.31)
No biological parents	79.07 (0.12)	71.08 (0.25)	71.82 (0.21)	99.26 (0.07)	99.43 (0.05)
Percent (*SE*) lacking kin constellations					
No spouse or biological children	6.59 (0.07)	6.25 (0.13)	5.61 (0.11)	5.77 (0.20)	10.09 (0.20)
No spouse/partner or biological children	6.15 (0.07)	5.54 (0.12)	5.24 (0.10)	5.48 (0.19)	9.96 (0.20)
No spouse/partner, biological or step children	5.51 (0.07)	5.09 (0.12)	4.78 (0.10)	4.47 (0.17)	8.72 (0.19)
No spouse/partner or children of any type	5.50 (0.07)	5.08 (0.12)	4.77 (0.10)	4.46 (0.17)	8.70 (0.19)
No spouse/partner, children of any type, or biological parents	4.62 (0.06)	3.80 (0.10)	3.65 (0.09)	4.46 (0.17)	8.69 (0.19)
No spouse/partner, children of any type, or biological siblings	1.17 (0.03)	0.77 (0.05)	0.75 (0.04)	1.02 (0.08)	3.07 (0.12)
No spouse/partner, biological or step children, biological partner, or biological siblings	1.07 (0.03)	0.64 (0.04)	0.60 (0.04)	1.02 (0.08)	3.08 (0.12)
No spouse/partner, children of any type, biological parents, or biological siblings	1.06 (0.03)	0.64 (0.04)	0.60 (0.04)	1.02 (0.08)	3.07 (0.12)

Note: Weighted to be representative of the adult population aged 55 years and above outside institutions (1998–2010) and in nursing homes (2000–2010), using the combined person-level and nursing home weights.

Table 2. Percent Kinless (*SE*) by Two Definitions of Kinless-ness, Shown by Demographic Characteristics, HRS 55+, 1998–2010, *N* = 116,245 Person Waves

	No spouse or biological children		No spouse/partner, any children, biological parents, or biological siblings	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Percent kinless (total)	6.13 (0.11)	6.95 (0.10)	0.73 (0.04)	1.33 (0.04)
Race				
Non-Hispanic White	6.29 (0.12)	6.72 (0.11)	0.78 (0.04)	1.30 (0.05)
Non-Hispanic Black	7.02 (0.33)	9.26 (0.29)	0.41 (0.08)	2.31 (0.15)
Hispanic	3.15 (0.27)	4.90 (0.29)	0.41 (0.10)	0.49 (0.09)
Non-Hispanic other race	6.20 (0.86)	12.80 (1.05)	0.81 (0.32)	0.75 (0.27)
Nativity				
Foreign born	3.83 (0.28)	5.65 (0.29)	0.76 (0.13)	1.10 (0.13)
Native born	6.35 (0.12)	7.08 (0.10)	0.73 (0.04)	1.36 (0.05)
Education				
Less than high school	6.63 (0.22)	6.72 (0.19)	0.67 (0.07)	1.48 (0.09)
High school degree	5.91 (0.15)	5.95 (0.12)	0.76 (0.05)	1.04 (0.05)
College degree	6.23 (0.22)	10.71 (0.31)	0.71 (0.08)	2.16 (0.14)
Marital history				
Previously married	2.83 (0.07)	4.54 (0.08)	0.26 (0.02)	0.87 (0.03)
Never married	89.98 (0.82)	73.41 (0.99)	12.65 (0.90)	14.28 (0.78)
Living arrangements				
With others	2.14 (0.07)	1.97 (0.06)	0.09 (0.01)	0.25 (0.02)
Alone	25.44 (0.49)	17.29 (0.26)	3.83 (0.22)	3.58 (0.13)
Total wealth				
<0	12.93 (0.65)	10.20 (0.40)	1.90 (0.26)	2.00 (0.18)
0–50k	9.96 (0.33)	9.02 (0.24)	1.30 (0.12)	1.93 (0.12)
50–150k	5.98 (0.23)	7.16 (0.21)	0.49 (0.07)	1.27 (0.09)
150–500k	4.62 (0.17)	5.76 (0.17)	0.50 (0.05)	0.86 (0.07)
500k+	4.55 (0.19)	5.41 (0.20)	0.60 (0.07)	1.27 (0.10)
Self-rated health				
Good, very good, excellent	5.62 (0.12)	6.62 (0.12)	0.56 (0.04)	1.16 (0.05)
Fair or poor	7.52 (0.22)	7.76 (0.18)	1.16 (0.09)	1.76 (0.09)
Disabled				
No	5.83 (0.11)	6.41 (0.11)	0.53 (0.04)	1.04 (0.04)
Yes	7.97 (0.31)	9.19 (0.25)	1.19 (0.15)	2.55 (0.13)

Note: Weighted to be representative of the adult population aged years 55 and above outside institutions (1998–2010) and in nursing homes (2000–2010), using the combined person-level and nursing home weights. The percent missing cases are: Race (0%), nativity (0.12%), education (0.14%), marital history (0.06%), living arrangements (0.01%), wealth (0.01%), self-rated health (0.07%), and disabled (0.07%). HRS = Health and Retirement Study.

children of any type, biological siblings, spouse/partner, biological parents). Then, we examined the prevalence of kinless-ness defined as lacking different combinations of kin. The broadest definition of kinless-ness we employ is being without a spouse or biological children; the most restrictive is being without a spouse, child of any type, biological parents, or biological siblings. We considered both definitions because childless and spouseless older adults, especially women, tend to rely on other family members such as siblings for social support (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999). We distinguished biological from step, adopted or other types of children from the RAND Family data, coding the modal relationship over different interviews if multiple types are listed.

Correlates of Kinless-ness

We next examined demographic characteristics related to being kinless at ages 55 and above, including: gender, nativity, and race/ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, non-Hispanic other). Birth cohort is measured by the HRS study birth cohorts (born before 1924, 1924–1930, 1931–1941, 1942–1947, and 1948–1953). Marital history is measured as previously or never married (note, the currently married are not kinless). Education is measured as less than a high school degree, high school degree, or college degree or higher. Total wealth is measured with five categories (see Table 2). We also examined respondent living arrangements (alone or with others) and two measures of health: self-rated health

(good, very good, or excellent vs. fair or poor) and disability, which we code as whether the respondent reports any difficulty performing five activities of daily living.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of adults aged 55 years and above without each type of kin separately and then the percentage kinless by various combinations of kin (1998–2010). Most have living children or siblings: 8.0% do not have any children, 10.5% do not have any biological children, and 16.6% lack siblings. Just over one-third have no living partner or spouse (36.3%) and more than three quarters have no living parents (79.1%). An examination of sex and age differences shows that many more women than men are without a spouse or partner at ages 55–74 (37.4% vs. 20.0%, $p < .001$) and especially among those aged 75 years and above for whom rates of missing a spouse or partner are higher (70.6% vs. 30.6%, $p < .001$). Sex and age comparisons also reveal that older respondents are more likely than younger respondents to lack parents (men 99.3% vs. 71.1%, $p < .001$; women 99.4% vs. 71.8%, $p < .001$) and siblings (men 26.5% vs. 12.0%, $p < .001$; women 31.4% vs. 11.8%, $p < .001$). Considering different definitions of kinless-ness in the lower portion of the table: 6.6% lack a spouse or biological children, 6.2% lack a spouse or partner and biological children, and 5.5% do not have a spouse/partner or children of any type. It is far less common to lack a partner, children, and biological siblings, with just over one percent of the 55 and above population in this group. One percent lacks a partner, children, parents, and siblings. In general, women more than men and the older more than the younger lack living kin, such that women aged 75 years and above tend to have the highest rates of kinless-ness by any measure.

Figures 1a and 1b show how the prevalence of the most broad and narrow definitions of kinless-ness vary by age groups and birth cohorts. In more recent birth cohorts, the percentage without living spouses or biological children has increased in middle age (Figure 1a). For example, at ages 50–54, 6.7% of the 1931–1941 birth cohort had no spouse or biological children but this number increased to 9.0% among those born 1948–1953. We see similar increases across ages 55–59 and 60–64. At ages 65–69, kinless-ness of this type is also more prevalent among the cohort born 1942–1947 (6.7%) than the cohort born 1931–1941 (4.6%). At ages 70 and above, older birth cohorts born before 1924 and 1924–30 are more likely to lack a spouse and children but for these cohorts, there is no clear trend of change in kinless-ness. We see the same overall trend for the percentage without a spouse/partner, any children, parents, or siblings (Figure 1b). At ages 55–59, 60–64, and 65–69, this type of kinless-ness is becoming more prevalent among more recent birth cohorts. However, for older births cohorts, at ages 70 and above, it is less common to lack all types of close kin among the 1931–1941 birth cohort than among those born earlier. We caution readers to interpret the results for the age group 80 and above with care as survivorship bias may affect these results, especially among those born prior to 1924.

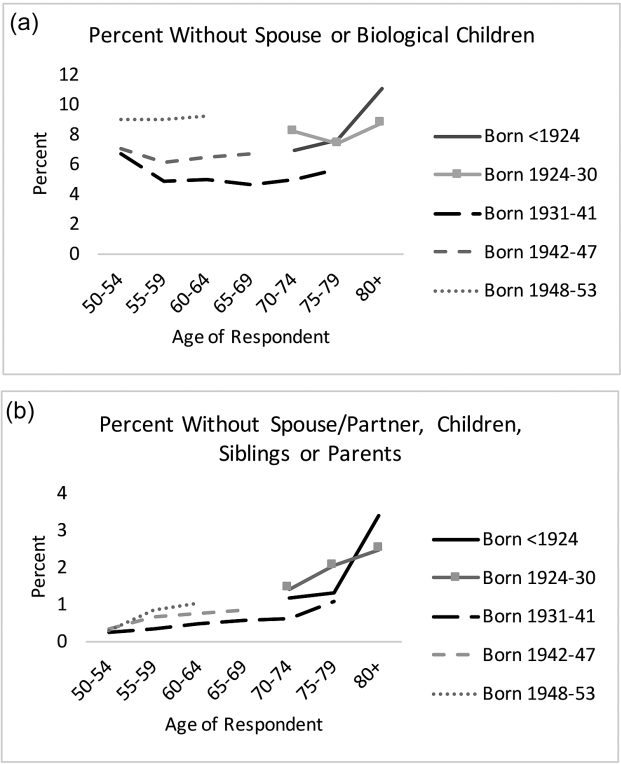

Figure 1. Percent kinless by two definitions, Health and Retirement Study 1992–2010. (a) Percent without living spouse or biological children. Notes: Within age groups, all cohort differences are statistically significant ($p < .01$) except 50–54: 1931–1941 vs. 1942–1947. (b) Percent without living spouse, children of any type, biological parents, or biological siblings. Notes: Within age groups, all cohort differences are statistically significant ($p < .01$) except ages 50–54, 65–69, and 80+. Both figures are weighted to be representative of the adult population above 50 outside institutions (1992–2010) and in nursing homes (2000–2010), using the combined person-level and nursing home weights.

Table 2 presents correlates of our broadest and most restrictive definitions of kinless-ness. We show the percentage without a spouse or biological children (left) and without a spouse/partner, any children, parents, or siblings (right) by sex. Lacking a spouse and biological children is especially concentrated among particular demographic subgroups, including non-Hispanic Black women and non-Hispanic other race women, those who are native born, never married, live alone, in poor health, or disabled. There is a particularly high rate of lacking these kin among college educated women (10.7%), yet also among men and women with low levels of wealth compared to those with more resources. As the right side of the table shows, the percent lacking all close kin is much higher among women than men (1.33% vs. 0.73%; $p < .001$). Lacking all four types of kin is especially common among non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White women, women with a college degree, those who never married, live alone, and women with a disability.

Discussion

Our brief report provides current estimates of older adults without close kin. Seven (6.6%) percent of contemporary American adults aged 55 years and above are without a spouse or biological partner, the two kin types that do the vast majority of care work for the disabled (Wolff & Kasper, 2006). One percent of the older adults lacks a larger group of close kin—a partner/spouse, any children, siblings, and parents. Both measures of kinless-ness are becoming more common for those in their 50s and 60s among more recent cohorts, which might portend increasing prevalence of this phenomenon. In addition to the increasing prevalence of kinless-ness, population aging and population growth will contribute to increasing numbers of kinless older adults in the future.

Our analysis of the correlates of kinless-ness highlights the heterogeneity of the older adult population without kin. There is a clear difference in kinless-ness by gender and education, mirroring Bernard's (1982) typology of unmarried women as the "crème de la crème" and unmarried men as the "bottom of the barrel." College-educated women and the least educated men have higher rates of kinless-ness. Kinless-ness should be of interest to policy makers because it is more common among those with social, economic, and health risks. It is more common among those who live alone, have little wealth, and are disabled. Kinless-ness may be expected among those who never marry or have children and these individuals may be more likely to form close social relationships with non-kin over the years. However, becoming kinless through the early mortality of kin may be unexpected and this pathway is more common among the most disadvantaged (Daw, Verdery, & Margolis, 2016; Umberson et al., 2017).

Social gerontologists have documented the importance of kin for social, economic, and emotional well-being in older age but they have not studied the characteristics of older adults without close kin. Increasing rates of loneliness and social isolation among older adults is an important social problem (Klinenberg, 2012; McPherson et al., 2006; Wilson & Moulton, 2010), with consequences for public health and the demand for institutional care (Gaugler et al., 2004; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Luppa et al. 2009). There are many open questions regarding what will become of kinless older adults as the population ages and increasing pressure is placed on social welfare programs and the health care infrastructure that serves older adults. Aging research should address the implications of kinless-ness for the well-being of older adults.

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Author Contributions

R. Margolis conducted the data analysis. R. Margolis and A. M. Verdery planned and wrote the study together.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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