

# Childless Older Americans: 2018

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## Current Population Reports

By Tayelor Valerio, Brian Knop, Rose M. Kreider, and Wan He  
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## INTRODUCTION

The fact that the U.S. population is rapidly getting older is common knowledge; now aging research increasingly focuses on the well-being and care of older people. U.S. Census Bureau data show that the vast majority of older people with a disability reside at home (He and Larsen, 2014). It is estimated that, upon turning age 65, over half of individuals can expect the need for someone to help them with activities of daily living or will require supervision for at least 90 days or longer (Favreault and Dey, 2016).

Changes in family life have taken place alongside the aging of the population. Variations in family dynamics, such as declines in marriage and fertility, and increases in cohabitation, divorce, and childlessness, have important implications for the pool of potential caregivers available to adults as they age (Seltzer and Bianchi, 2013; Stone, 2015). According to a 2016 study, about 22 percent of adults are or will be their own sole caregiver in old age. Such adults have no known family member or designated surrogate or caregiver they can count on for support (Carney et al., 2016).

In 2018, more than 1 in 7 women were childless by the ages of 40 to 44, up from 1 in 10 in 1976.<sup>1</sup> While support in old age may come from many different sources, and the strength of relationships between parents and children vary, children have traditionally played an important role of support during later

<sup>1</sup> “Historical Table 1. Percent Childless and Births Per 1,000 Women in the Last 12 Months: CPS, Selected Years, 1976–2018,” available at <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par\\_list](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par_list)>.

### How Do We Define Childlessness?

In this report, *childless adults* refer to those who have zero biological children. We focus on adults 55 years and older, as almost all adults of this age have completed their fertility and those who are childless are unlikely to later become biological parents (Monte and Ellis, 2014).

This report compares childless adults to biological parents. Note that older adults who report having children but no biological children are included with childless adults. SIPP estimates that 12.8 percent of childless adults 55 years and older have step or adopted children and no *biological* children, but cannot distinguish between those with stepchildren and those with adopted children.

life (Horowitz, 1985). Studies comparing the psychological well-being of parents and childless adults have shown mixed results (Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek, 2010), but there is evidence that children also provide additional emotional benefits to parents (Wang, 2013; Musick, Meier, and Flood, 2016), particularly in old age (Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011). In the United States, much of the care for older generations falls to their children, so when an individual does not have any children, the burden of their care often falls to themselves or to the state (Graham, 2018, for a discussion).<sup>2</sup>

Childlessness is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Women born during the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries had levels of childlessness ranging from around 10 to 25 percent (Morgan, 1991; Rowland, 2007). Childlessness increased among women born between 1910 and 1914, whose childbearing years overlapped

<sup>2</sup> “‘Elder orphans,’ without kids or spouses, face old age alone,” available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/elder-orphans-without-kids-or-spouses-face-old-age-alone/2018/10/12/a2c9384a-cb24-11e8-a3e6-44daa3d35ede\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/elder-orphans-without-kids-or-spouses-face-old-age-alone/2018/10/12/a2c9384a-cb24-11e8-a3e6-44daa3d35ede_story.html)>.

with the Great Depression, before dramatically declining during the Baby Boom (Morgan 1991; Rowland, 2007).<sup>3</sup> However, unlike childlessness in the early 1900s, the recent rise in childlessness is occurring in tandem with the aging of the population and smaller family sizes, calling into question the available supports for the growing older population.

With the increase in childlessness seen over the past few decades, a comprehensive and up-to-date description of the childless older adult population is necessary. This report examines the prevalence of childlessness among the noninstitutionalized older population and potential support systems for these older people.<sup>4</sup> We focus on adults 55 years and older, as almost all adults of this

<sup>3</sup> Baby Boomers in the United States include people born from mid-1946 to 1964 (Hogan, Perez, and Bell, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The SIPP conducts interviews among the noninstitutionalized population of the United States. The noninstitutionalized population resides outside of institutional group quarters such as nursing facilities or adult correctional facilities. Research from the American Community Survey, which includes data from institutionalized group quarters, suggests that the percentage of older adults 65 years and older living in group quarters is 3.1 percent. “The Population 65 Years and Older in the United States: 2016,” available at <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/ACS-38.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/ACS-38.pdf)>.

## What Is the Survey of Income and Program Participation?

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a nationally-representative panel survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects information on the short-term dynamics of employment, income, household composition, and eligibility and participation in government assistance programs. It is a leading source of information on specific topics related to economic well-being, family dynamics, education, wealth and assets, health insurance, child care, and food security. Each SIPP panel follows individuals for several years, providing monthly data that measure changes in household and family composition and economic circumstances over time. More information is available on the SIPP Web site at <[www.census.gov/sipp](http://www.census.gov/sipp)>.

age have completed their fertility and those who are childless are unlikely to later become biological parents (Monte and Ellis, 2014). We use data from the 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to examine the circumstances (socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics), potential supports, and health and well-being of childless older adults, and to compare these characteristics to those of biological parents of the same age group.<sup>5</sup> In this report hereafter, *childless adults* refers to adults who have no biological children; *older adults* refers to those 55 years and older.

The SIPP, a nationally representative survey of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, is the first Census Bureau survey to collect a complete fertility history for both women and men 15 years and older, as well as information on whether couples have children together. Though direct measures of caregiving are not included in the SIPP, it publishes detailed relationship information for all household members. We use these data

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and approved the disclosure avoidance practices applied to this release. CBDRB-FY21-POP001-0004.

to identify potential sources of support within the household; and in conjunction with health and socioeconomic data, we examine the welfare of childless adults in later life.

The first section of this report provides estimates of the number of older adults who are childless by age and sex, and provides parallel estimates for biological parents. Next, the report provides a demographic portrait of childless adults and compares their characteristics to those of biological parents. We also provide estimates of childlessness within the population of older adults who are living with a partner, living alone, or living with someone else, and we estimate couple-level childlessness. To gain an understanding of the potential supports available, we examine living arrangements, marital histories, and financial transfers for childless adults compared to biological parents. Lastly, we examine the health and well-being of childless adults and biological parents by sex.

## HOW MANY OLDER ADULTS ARE CHILDLESS?

Childless adults make up a sizable portion of the older adult

population in the United States. Of the 92.2 million older adults 55 years and older in 2018, 15.2 million (16.5 percent) are childless (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> Men are more likely to be childless at the age of 55 and older than women—18.2 percent of older men are childless, compared to 15.0 percent of older women (Figure 1). This is consistent with other data sources, including the National Survey of Family Growth, showing higher concentrations of childlessness among men (Martinez, Daniels, and Febo-Vazquez, 2018).<sup>7</sup>

Levels of childlessness have increased among recent cohorts of women.<sup>8</sup> This pattern is reflected when examining childlessness by age group—childlessness is more prevalent among those who are 55 to 64 years old compared to those who are in older age groups (Table 1). For instance, 19.6 percent of all adults aged 55 to 64 are childless, compared to 15.9 percent of those aged 65 to 74, and 10.9 percent of those 75 years and older. As such,

<sup>6</sup> All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing, and, unless otherwise noted, all comparisons are statistically significant.

<sup>7</sup> The collection of data on men's fertility is more recent than on women. Moreover, there are some concerns over the quality of the fertility data reported by men and the coverage of men/fathers in surveys. Although reviews of SIPP fertility data suggest that most surveyed men report their fertility information without high levels of missing data and that the fertility information of surveyed mothers and fathers is similar (Monte and Fields, 2020; Monte and Knop, 2019 [Appendix]), there is also evidence that some fathers are underrepresented in national surveys such as the SIPP. In particular, fathers who are young, have multiple partner fertility, and do not live with their children may be underrepresented. This could contribute to an overestimation of childlessness among men. Further discussion on SIPP's coverage of men is available in Monte and Fields (2020).

<sup>8</sup> "Historical Table 1. Percent Childless and Births Per 1,000 Women in the Last 12 Months: CPS, Selected Years, 1976–2018," available at <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par\\_list](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par_list)>.

we expect that levels of childlessness among the oldest adults will increase in the future as the younger cohorts age into their later years. Figure 2 illustrates the age patterns in greater detail. For example, 10.6 percent of those aged 55 to 64 are childless men, and 9.0 percent are childless women. This compares with just 4.9 percent of those 75 years and older who are childless men, and 5.9 percent who are childless women.

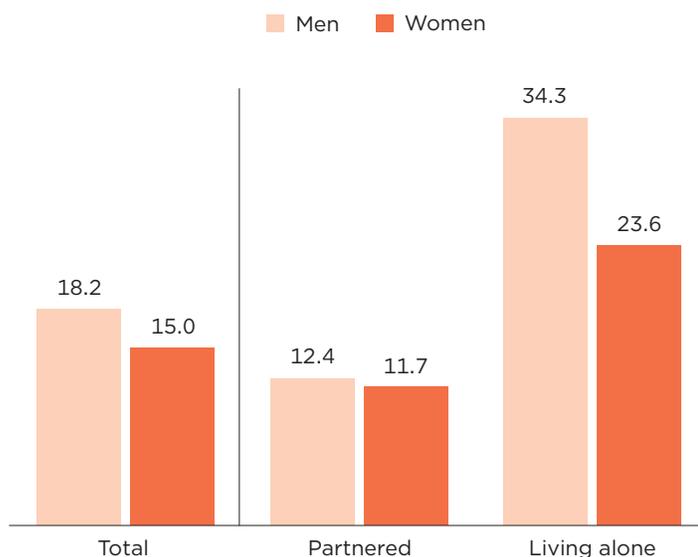
### WHO ARE THE CHILDLESS OLDER ADULTS?

This section presents a demographic portrait of the older adult population. Table 2 displays educational attainment, labor force participation, race and Hispanic origin, and nativity status for all older adults, childless older adults, and biological parents 55 years and older.

### Educational Attainment and Labor Force Participation

Differences in educational attainment can be seen when comparing childless adults and parents

Figure 1.  
**Percent Childless for Adults Aged 55 and Older by Sex and Partnership Status: 2018**



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

(Figure 3). Childless adults, as a group, are more educated than parents. About 38 percent of childless adults have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 30.0 percent of parents. At the lowest education level, about 35 percent of childless adults have a high school degree or less,

compared to 43.3 percent of parents. Additionally, a greater share of childless adults 55 years and older are currently in the labor force—about 44 percent of them are in the labor force, compared to 40.1 percent of parents. This difference in labor force participation may partly be a result of

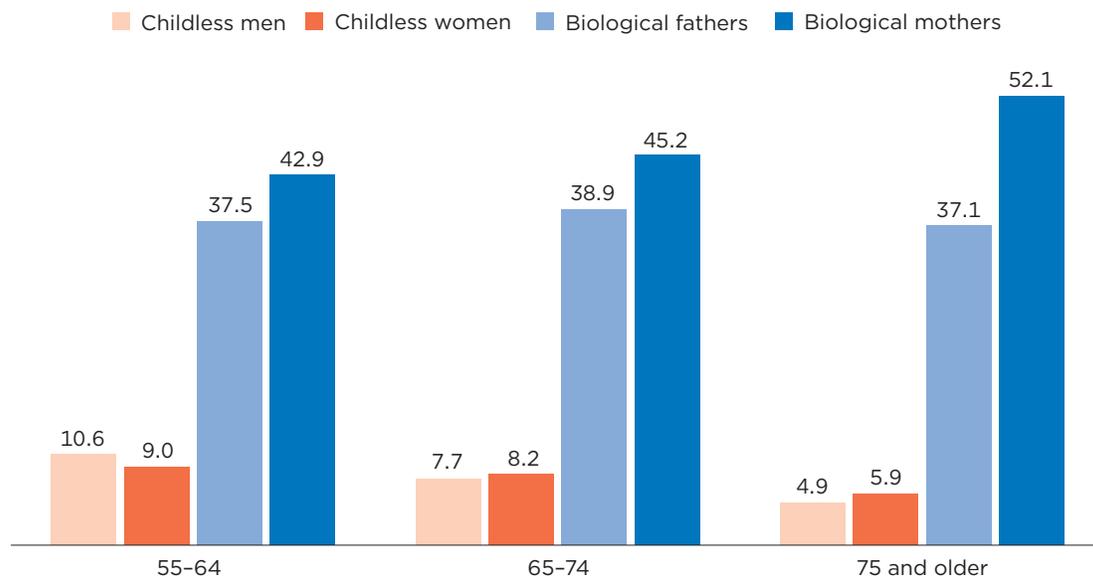
Table 1.  
**Childlessness and Parenthood Among Adults Aged 55 and Older by Age and Sex: 2018**

(Numbers in thousands)

Age	Total	Childless adults <sup>1</sup>			Biological parents		
		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)	Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>92,200</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>77,010</b>	<b>83.5</b>	<b>0.5</b>
55-64. ....	41,890	8,212	19.6	0.7	33,680	80.4	0.7
65-74. ....	29,970	4,761	15.9	0.9	25,210	84.1	0.9
75 and older. ....	20,340	2,214	10.9	0.8	18,130	89.1	0.8
<b>Women</b> .....	<b>49,530</b>	<b>7,433</b>	<b>15.0</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>42,090</b>	<b>85.0</b>	<b>0.6</b>
55-64. ....	21,740	3,770	17.3	1.0	17,970	82.7	1.0
65-74. ....	15,990	2,453	15.3	1.0	13,540	84.7	1.0
75 and older. ....	11,800	1,210	10.3	1.0	10,590	89.7	1.0
<b>Men</b> .....	<b>42,670</b>	<b>7,754</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>34,920</b>	<b>81.8</b>	<b>0.7</b>
55-64. ....	20,150	4,442	22.0	1.1	15,710	78.0	1.1
65-74. ....	13,980	2,308	16.5	1.2	11,670	83.5	1.2
75 and older. ....	8,542	1,004	11.8	1.3	7,538	88.2	1.3

<sup>1</sup> Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Figure 2.  
**Percent Distribution of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older Within Each Age Group by Sex: 2018**



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Table 2.  
**Demographic Characteristics of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older: 2018**  
 (Numbers in thousands)

Characteristics	Total	Childless adults <sup>1</sup>			Biological parents		
		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)	Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>92,200</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>77,010</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Z</b>
<b>Race</b>							
White alone .....	76,220	12,940	85.2	1.1	63,290	82.2	0.2
White alone, non-Hispanic .....	68,060	12,000	79.0	1.3	56,060	72.8	0.4
Black alone .....	9,677	1,401	9.2	0.9	8,276	10.7	0.2
Asian alone .....	4,044	517	3.4	0.6	3,527	4.6	0.2
All other races, race combinations .....	2,253	333	2.2	0.4	1,920	2.5	0.2
<b>Hispanic Origin</b>							
Hispanic (of any race) .....	8,972	990	6.5	0.7	7,982	10.4	0.3
<b>Nativity</b>							
Native-born .....	78,790	13,600	89.5	1.5	65,200	84.7	0.5
Foreign-born .....	13,400	1,591	10.5	1.5	11,810	15.3	0.5
<b>Educational Attainment</b>							
High school degree or less .....	38,620	5,238	34.5	1.3	33,380	43.3	0.7
Some college .....	24,660	4,119	27.1	1.2	20,550	26.7	0.6
Bachelor's degree or higher .....	28,920	5,830	38.4	1.5	23,090	30.0	0.7
<b>Labor Force Participation</b>							
In labor force .....	37,510	6,633	43.7	1.5	30,880	40.1	0.7
Not in labor force .....	54,680	8,555	56.3	1.5	46,130	59.9	0.7

Z Represents or rounds to zero.

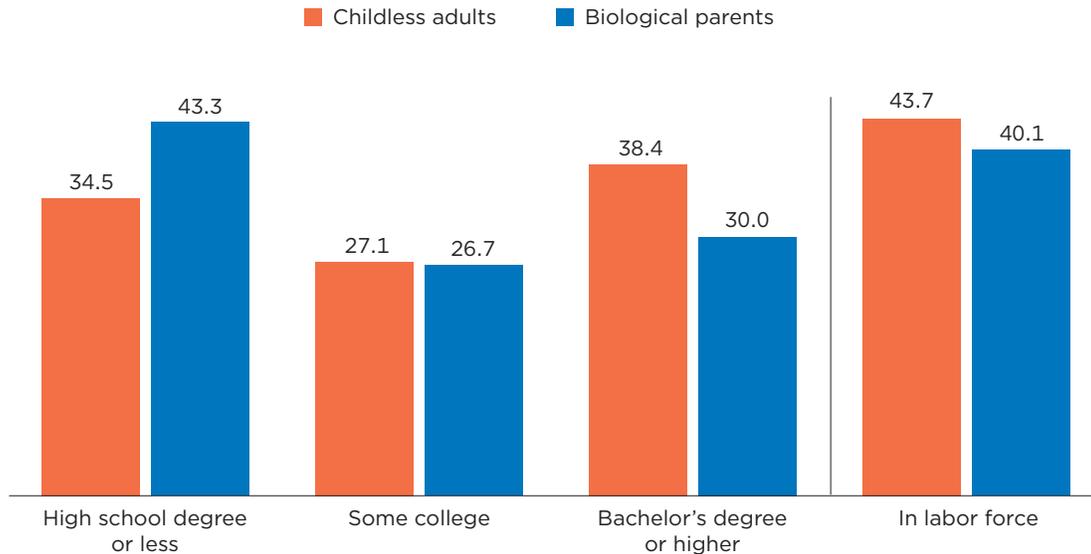
<sup>1</sup> Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Figure 3.

**Educational Attainment and Labor Force Participation of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older: 2018**

(In percent)



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

age differences between childless adults and parents; as a group, childless adults are younger than parents.

**Race, Hispanic Origin, and Nativity**

A greater share of childless adults are non-Hispanic White and native-born compared to those who are biological parents (Table 2).<sup>9</sup> Of childless adults, 79.0 percent are non-Hispanic White, compared to 72.8 percent of parents. Additionally, almost 90 percent of childless adults were native-born, compared to 84.7 percent of parents. Historical

<sup>9</sup> This report refers to the White alone population as White, the Black alone population as Black, the Asian alone population as Asian, and the White alone, non-Hispanic population as non-Hispanic White, unless otherwise noted. Hispanic ethnicity is a measure independent of race, and someone who is Hispanic can be of any race. The SIPP survey allows for self-identification with any combination of five different race categories, as well as a variety of ethnic origins. Here, we present only the most populous racial categories.

data from the Current Population Survey show that, for the last 2 decades, childlessness has been more prevalent among native-born women than those who are foreign-born.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 4 visualizes childlessness across groups by showing the percentage of adults who are childless in each race group and adults who are of Hispanic origin. Of White older adults, 17.0 percent are childless, compared to 14.5 percent of Black older adults, 12.8 percent of Asian older adults, and 14.8 percent of older adults belonging to all other races or

<sup>10</sup> Historical Tables 1a and 1b “Percent Childless and Births Per 1,000 Women in the Last 12 Months: CPS, Selected Years, 1976–2018,” available at <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par\\_list](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/fertility/his-cps.html#par_list)>.

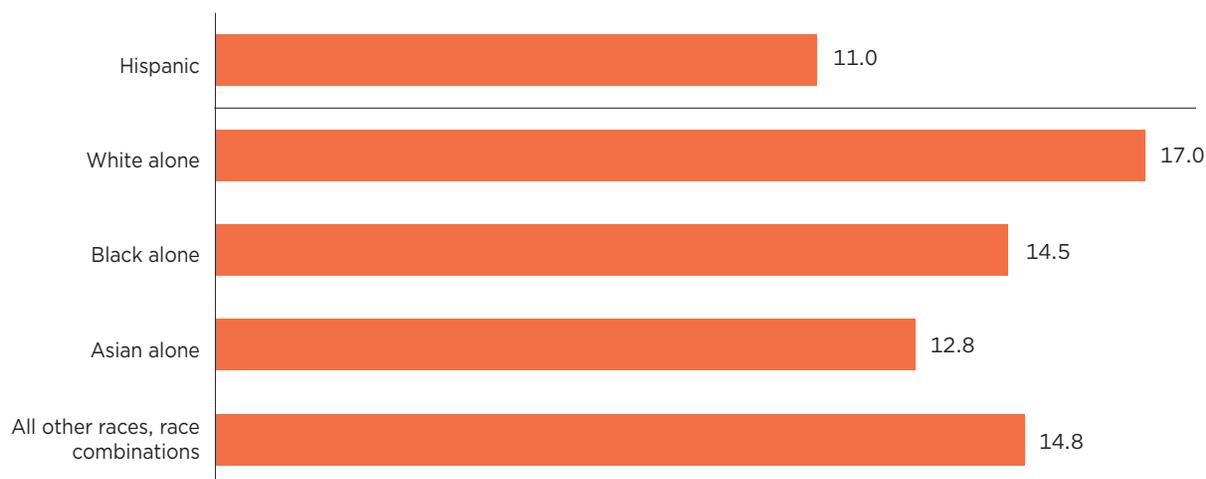
multiple races.<sup>11</sup> Eleven percent of Hispanics 55 years and older are childless. These patterns reflect broader variations in childbearing across race and ethnic groups (Martin, Hamilton, and Osterman, 2020).

**AVAILABLE SUPPORTS FOR CHILDLESS OLDER ADULTS**

This section explores the living arrangements, marital status and history, and financial supports received by childless adults and parents. Maintaining social connections with others is important for health and well-being across the life course, and particularly so for older adults. The later years in life are often filled with transitions, such as retirement or loss

<sup>11</sup> The percentages of older adults who are Black, Asian, and those belonging to all other races or multiple races that are childless do not significantly differ. Also, the percentages of older adults who are White and those belonging to all other races or multiple races that are childless do not significantly differ.

Figure 4.  
**Percent Childless for Adults Aged 55 and Older by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2018**



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

of spouse, that have the potential to increase isolation. However, large social networks provide opportunities to access resources, information, and social support in times of need (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1995). Relationships with kin are particularly valuable, as they are likely to provide stronger social support (Hurlbert, Haines, and Beggs, 2000).

### Living Arrangements

Examining the living arrangements of older adults offers insight into potential sources of immediate social support. Tables 3a and 3b present estimates of childlessness among older adults who are living with a spouse or partner (Table 3a) and living alone

or with someone else (Table 3b) by sex and age group. Of the 57.5 million older adults who are living with a spouse or unmarried partner, 3.9 million (6.8 percent) are in a partnership in which neither the respondent nor their partner has any biological children (Table 3a). About 490,000 of these partnered older adults with no biological children are 75 years or older.

The percentage of older adults who live alone has increased historically due to gains in life expectancy, economic prosperity, and other cultural changes (Klinenberg, 2013). Moreover, many older adults prefer to age in place at home (Binette and Vasold, 2018). One concern, however, is

that older adults who live alone may not have the same access to immediate sources of social support as their peers who live with someone else. About 22.1 million adults 55 years and older live alone, among whom 6.1 million are childless (Table 3b). This means that about 28 percent of older adults who live alone are childless.

Childlessness is more common among older men living alone than among older women—34.3 percent of older men and 23.6 percent of older women living alone are childless. Childlessness is also more prevalent among the younger age group of older adults who live alone. For example, 36.3 percent of adults aged 55 to 64

Table 3a.

**Childlessness Among Adults Aged 55 and Older Living With a Partner by Age and Sex: 2018**

(Numbers in thousands)

Age	Total <sup>1</sup>	Neither respondent nor their partner has any biological children		
		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>57,470</b>	<b>3,915</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>0.5</b>
55-64.....	28,190	2,154	7.6	0.7
65-74.....	19,580	1,271	6.5	0.8
75 and older.....	9,702	490	5.1	0.9
<b>Women</b> .....	<b>27,120</b>	<b>1,882</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>0.5</b>
55-64.....	14,130	1,090	7.7	0.8
65-74.....	9,083	609	6.7	0.9
75 and older.....	3,906	183	4.7	1.1
<b>Men</b> .....	<b>30,350</b>	<b>2,033</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>0.6</b>
55-64.....	14,060	1,063	7.6	1.0
65-74.....	10,500	662	6.3	0.9
75 and older.....	5,796	308	5.3	1.0

<sup>1</sup> Total number of partnered adults aged 55 and older includes childless adults and parents.

Note: This table includes adults who are living with either a spouse or an unmarried partner.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Table 3b.

**Childlessness Among Adults Aged 55 and Older by Living Arrangement, Age, and Sex: 2018**

(Numbers in thousands)

Age	Older adults who live alone				Older adults who live with someone else			
	Total <sup>1</sup>	Childless adults <sup>2</sup>			Total <sup>3</sup>	Childless adults <sup>2</sup>		
		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>22,100</b>	<b>6,114</b>	<b>27.7</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>12,630</b>	<b>2,145</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>1.2</b>
55-64.....	7,747	2,815	36.3	1.9	5,952	1,427	24.0	1.9
65-74.....	6,979	2,081	29.8	1.9	3,410	486	14.3	2.3
75 and older.....	7,375	1,219	16.5	1.5	3,263	231	7.1	1.7
<b>Women</b> .....	<b>13,710</b>	<b>3,235</b>	<b>23.6</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>8,696</b>	<b>1,018</b>	<b>11.7</b>	<b>1.2</b>
55-64.....	3,980	1,270	31.9	2.6	3,623	598	16.5	2.1
65-74.....	4,380	1,158	26.4	2.2	2,529	275	10.9	2.1
75 and older.....	5,348	807	15.1	1.7	2,543	146	5.7	1.7
<b>Men</b> .....	<b>8,394</b>	<b>2,879</b>	<b>34.3</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>3,929</b>	<b>1,126</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>2.7</b>
55-64.....	3,767	1,545	41.0	3.0	2,329	829	35.6	3.6
65-74.....	2,599	922	35.5	2.9	881	212	24.0	5.1
75 and older.....	2,027	412	20.3	3.2	719	86	11.9	4.7

<sup>1</sup> Total number of adults aged 55 and older living alone includes childless adults and parents.<sup>2</sup> Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.<sup>3</sup> Total number of adults aged 55 and older living with someone else includes childless adults and parents.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

who live alone are childless, compared to 16.5 percent of those 75 years and older. However, the 16.5 percent still translates into 1.2 million childless adults 75 years and older who are living alone.

A lower percentage of the 12.6 million adults 55 years and older who live with someone other than a spouse or unmarried partner are childless—17.0 percent (Table 3b). Older men who live with someone other than a spouse or partner (28.7 percent) are more than twice as likely to be childless as older women (11.7 percent).

Figure 5 shows the living arrangements of older childless adults compared with older biological parents. Over 60 percent (62.5 percent) of parents 55 years and older live with a spouse, compared to 40.2 percent of childless older adults. Cohabiting, or living together with an unmarried

partner, is less common among older adults than it is among young adults.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a higher percentage of childless older adults live with a cohabiting partner (5.4 percent, compared to 3.1 percent of parents).

About 27 percent of parents live with at least one biological, adopted, or stepchild (of any age). While childlessness in our analysis refers to those with no biological children, a person may still be a step or adoptive parent. For example, 4.2 percent of older childless adults live with a step or

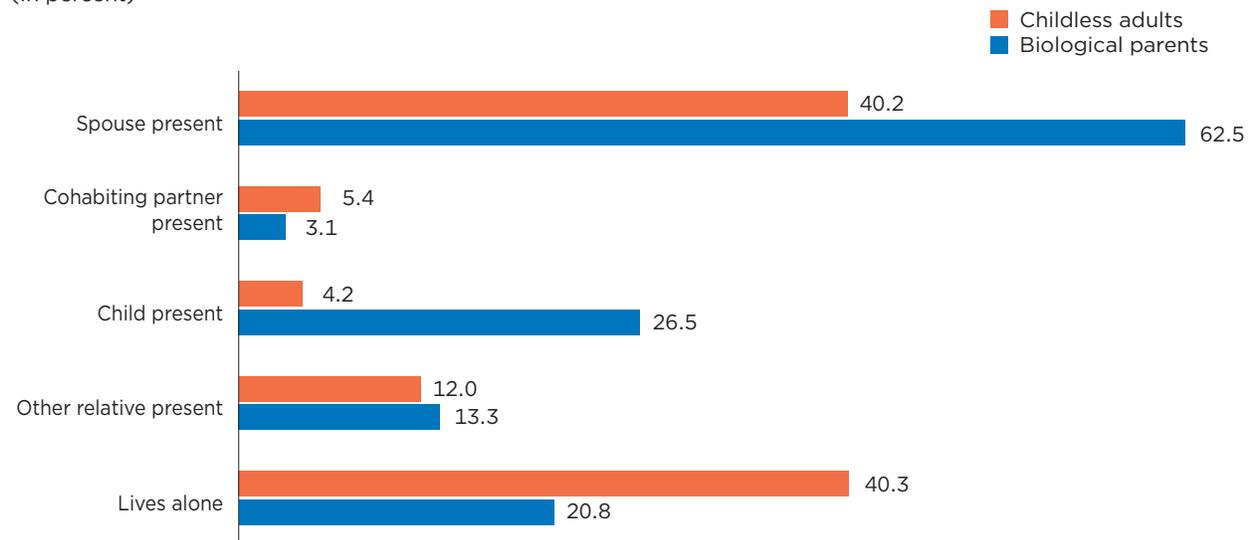
<sup>12</sup> "Table AD-3. Living Arrangements of Adults 18 and Over, 1967 to Present," available at <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/adults.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/adults.html)>. Separate tables illustrating the difference in the prevalence of living with a partner for those aged 18 to 24 are available at <<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/time-series/adults/ad3-18-24.xlsx>>, and for those aged 65 to 74 at <<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/time-series/adults/ad3-65-74.xlsx>>.

adopted child. About 13 percent of older parents live with another type of relative (e.g., aunt/uncle, cousin, nephew, or parent), compared to 12.0 percent of older childless adults.

Living alone is more common among older adults who are childless than their counterparts who are parents—40.3 percent compared to 20.8 percent (Table 4). Research suggests that older adults who have fewer people in their social networks living with them have more interaction with their neighbors, and those without children are more likely to volunteer and participate more frequently in organized groups (Cornwell, Laumann, and Schumm, 2008). Thus, older adults may seek out alternative sources to increase their social integration.

In short, childless adults appear to have fewer immediate sources of

Figure 5.  
**Household Composition of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older: 2018**  
(In percent)



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children. "Child present" includes step or adopted children of childless adults, and biological, step, or adopted children of biological parents. The children may be of any age.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Table 4.

**Availability of Supports for Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older: 2018**

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristics	Total	Childless adults <sup>1</sup>			Biological parents		
		Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)	Number	Percent	Margin of error (±)
<b>Total</b> . . . . .	<b>92,200</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>77,010</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Z</b>
<b>Living Arrangements<sup>2</sup></b>							
Spouse is present . . . . .	54,270	6,110	40.2	1.8	48,160	62.5	0.7
Spouse has biological children . . .	47,840	2,509	16.5	1.2	45,330	58.9	0.7
Cohabiting partner is present . . . . .	3,205	818	5.4	0.8	2,387	3.1	0.3
Cohabiting partner has biological children . . . . .	2,295	504	3.3	0.6	1,791	2.3	0.3
Child (biological, step, or adopted) is present . . . . .	21,030	643	4.2	0.7	20,390	26.5	0.7
Has another relative present . . . . .	12,070	1,825	12.0	1.1	10,240	13.3	0.6
Lives with someone under the age of 18. . . . .	8,687	527	3.5	0.6	8,161	10.6	0.5
Lives alone . . . . .	22,100	6,114	40.3	1.6	15,990	20.8	0.5
<b>Marital Status</b>							
Ever married. . . . .	85,330	10,320	67.9	1.7	75,010	97.4	0.2
Married. . . . .	55,620	6,301	41.5	1.9	49,320	64.0	0.7
Widowed. . . . .	13,710	1,563	10.3	0.9	12,150	15.8	0.5
Divorced . . . . .	14,470	2,299	15.1	1.0	12,170	15.8	0.5
Separated . . . . .	1,529	156	1.0	0.3	1,373	1.8	0.1
Never married . . . . .	6,868	4,868	32.1	1.7	2,001	2.6	0.2
<b>Times Married</b>							
Once. . . . .	57,790	6,897	45.4	1.6	50,890	66.1	0.7
Twice . . . . .	20,700	2,624	17.3	1.4	18,070	23.5	0.7
Three or more times. . . . .	6,846	799	5.3	0.7	6,047	7.9	0.4
<b>Financial Transfers</b>							
Received money from family or friends . . . . .	1,507	386	2.5	0.5	1,121	1.5	0.2
Received money from a community or religious charity . . . . .	210	36	0.2	0.1	174	0.2	0.1

Z Represents or rounds to zero.

<sup>1</sup> Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.<sup>2</sup> Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Note: Denominators for the percent estimates are the numbers in the total row.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

social support within their households. They are more likely than parents to be living alone and less likely to be living with a spouse, child (step or adopted), or another type of relative. Childless adults are more likely than parents to be living with a cohabiting partner, but these relationships are still relatively uncommon among older adults. Of particular concern to policymakers may be the 3.9 million older adults who live with a spouse or partner, but neither

they nor their partner have biological children.

**Marital Status and History**

Declining rates of marriage have contributed to the rise in childlessness seen in the last few decades (Hayford, 2013). Having children outside of marriage has become more common among young adults today, but for many older adults, marriage was seen as an important precursor to having children (Cherlin, 2004). Over

90 percent (92.6) of older adults have ever been married, but childless adults are less likely to have gotten married than biological parents—only 67.9 percent of childless adults have ever been married, compared to 97.4 percent of parents (Table 4).

Childless adults are also less likely to be currently married than biological parents. About 42 percent of childless adults are currently married, compared with 64 percent of parents. The

percentage of these two groups who are divorced does not differ statistically (15.1 percent of childless adults and 15.8 percent of parents). A higher percentage of parents were widowed (15.8 percent), compared with 10.3 percent of childless adults, likely reflecting the slightly older profile of the cohort of the parents as well as the fact that more of them had ever been married (Figure 6).

Multiple marriages are also more prevalent among parents. Around 24 percent of parents have been married twice, and 7.9 percent have been married three times or more. In contrast, about 17 percent of childless adults have been married twice, and 5.3 percent have been married three or more times.

### Money Transfers

One type of support directly measured in SIPP is financial support received from various sources such as friends, family, or a community or religious charity. Few older adults received money from loved ones (family or friends) or from a charity (Table 4). Although it is rare, childless adults received money from loved ones more often than parents. About 2.5 percent of childless adults, but only 1.5 percent of parents, received money from friends or family in the last year.

### HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDLESS OLDER ADULTS

Table 5 and Figure 7 show a collection of well-being indicators for childless adults and biological parents 55 years and older

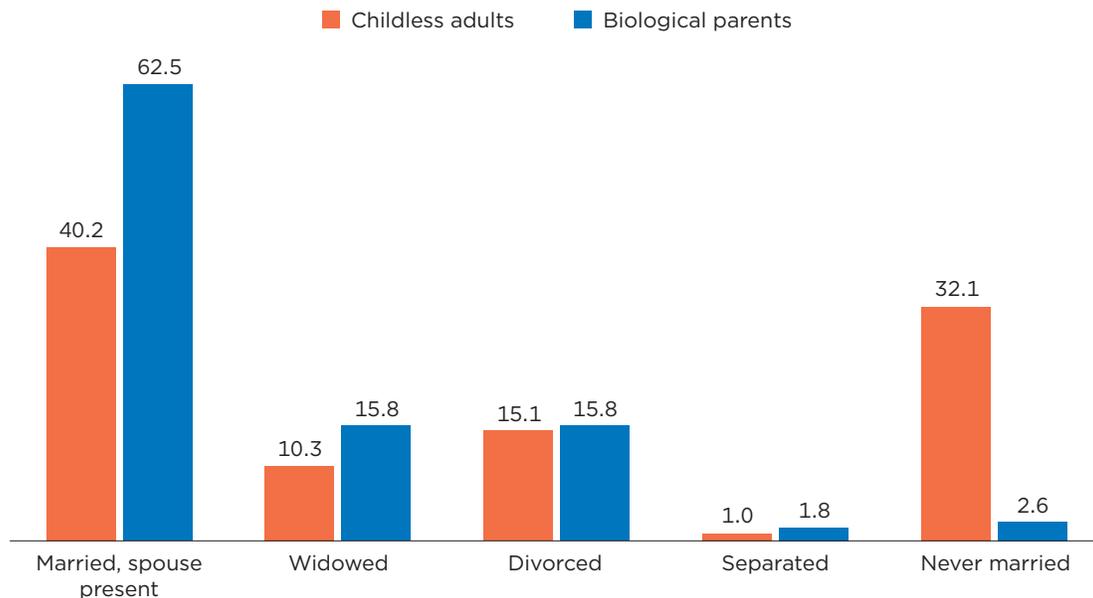
separately by sex. Taken together, this information provides insight into potential stressors in the lives of older adults.

### Economic Well-Being

A key indicator of economic well-being is net worth. Net worth is the value of assets owned minus the liabilities (debts) owed. Potential assets can include home equity and retirement accounts, while liabilities can include debts such as credit card bills or mortgages on a home. The median personal net worth among all adults 55 years and older was \$133,500 (Table 5). Personal net worth is highest among childless women (\$173,800) and biological fathers (\$161,200).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Personal net worth estimates do not significantly differ between childless women and biological fathers.

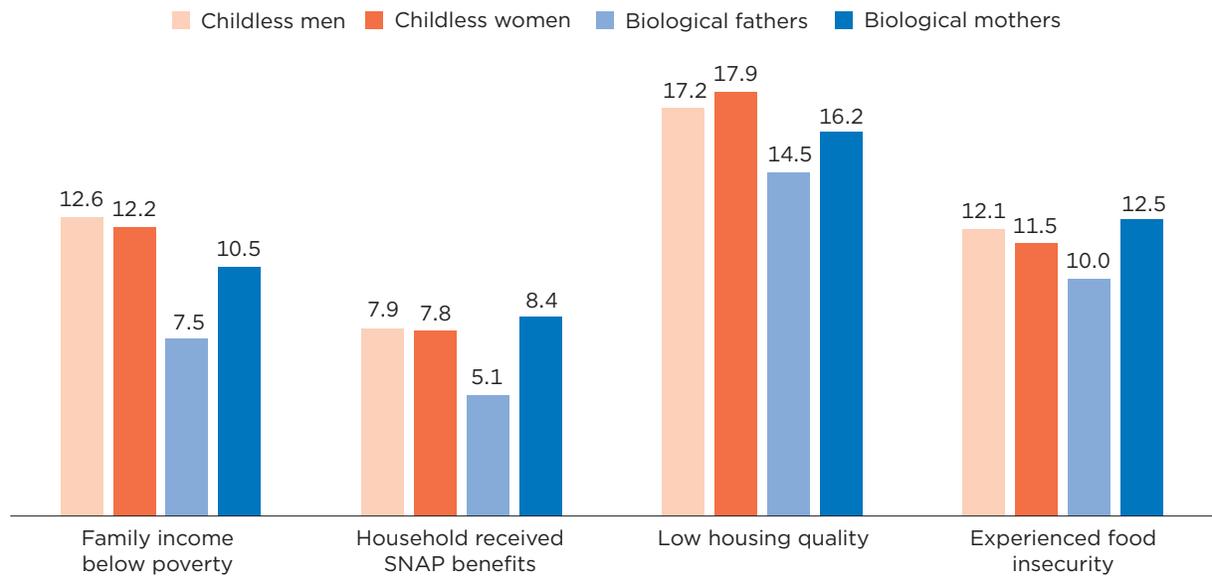
Figure 6.  
**Marital Status of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older: 2018**  
(In percent)



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Figure 7.

**Percentage of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older Experiencing Food Insecurity, Low Housing Quality, Poverty, and Receiving SNAP Benefits by Sex: 2018**



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children. SNAP stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Another essential indicator of economic well-being is poverty status. Poverty rates are higher among childless older adults than they are among parents (Table 5). Around 12 percent of childless men and women each have family incomes below the poverty line. This contrasts with the pattern seen among parents, where a greater share of mothers have family incomes below the poverty line (10.5 percent) than fathers (7.5 percent). Childless men and women also do not differ in the receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits—about 8 percent. But among

parents, a higher percentage of biological mothers than biological fathers (8.4 percent versus 5.1 percent, respectively) live in a home where someone receives SNAP benefits.

Food insecurity is another source of stress that many older adults experience.<sup>14</sup> About 10.5 million older adults live in households that experienced food insecurity

<sup>14</sup> A household is considered to have food insecurity if the reference person reported that it was “often” or “sometimes true” that the food that they bought did not last or that they could not afford balanced meals, or that they ever cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money for food in 2017.

in 2017.<sup>15</sup> Childless adults and parents experienced food insecurity at similar levels—about 11 percent of both groups. When stratified by sex within the two groups, the only significant comparisons are in relation to biological fathers—compared to fathers, a higher percentage of childless men and biological mothers live in households that experienced food security in 2017.

Research shows that only about 10 percent of homes in the United States are considered

<sup>15</sup> Food security questions in SIPP refer to conditions experienced during the reference year, which was 2017.

Table 5.

**Health and Well-Being of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older by Sex: 2018**

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristics	Childless adults <sup>1</sup>						Biological parents												
	Both sexes			Men			Women			Both sexes			Men			Women			
	Number	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	Num- ber	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	Num- ber	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	Num- ber	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	Num- ber	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	Num- ber	Per- cent	Margin of error (±)	
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>92,200</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>7,754</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>7,433</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>77,010</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>34,920</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>42,090</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Z</b>
<b>Median Personal Net Worth</b> .....	<b>133,500</b>	<b>153,900</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>11,840</b>	<b>132,500</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>14,240</b>	<b>173,800</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>21,200</b>	<b>130,400</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>4,769</b>	<b>161,200</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>9,129</b>	<b>109,500</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>5,012</b>
<b>Poverty Level</b>																			
Below poverty.....	8,917	1,886	12.4	1.1	980	12.6	1.5	906	12.2	1.4	7,031	9.1	0.4	2,606	7.5	0.5	4,425	10.5	0.4
At or above poverty ...	83,280	13,300	87.6	1.1	6,775	87.4	1.5	6,527	87.8	1.4	69,980	90.9	0.4	32,310	92.5	0.5	37,670	89.5	0.4
At 100 to 199 percent of poverty.....	14,260	2,638	17.4	1.2	1,386	17.9	1.6	1,251	16.8	1.6	11,630	15.1	0.5	4,299	12.3	0.6	7,327	17.4	0.6
At 200 to 299 percent of poverty.....	14,510	2,389	15.7	1.1	1,246	16.1	1.5	1,143	15.4	1.5	12,120	15.7	0.6	5,199	14.9	0.7	6,925	16.5	0.6
At 300 to 399 percent of poverty.....	12,400	1,957	12.9	1.1	975	12.6	1.4	982	13.2	1.5	10,440	13.6	0.6	4,891	14.0	0.7	5,553	13.2	0.6
At 400 percent of poverty or higher ...	42,100	6,318	41.6	1.7	3,168	40.9	2.4	3,150	42.4	2.0	35,790	46.5	0.8	17,920	51.3	1.0	17,860	42.4	0.8
<b>Experienced Food Insecurity in the Last 12 Months</b> .....	<b>10,540</b>	<b>1,796</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>939</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>857</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>8,742</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>3,490</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>5,252</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Received Public Assistance or Medicaid</b>																			
Received SNAP benefits in last 12 months.....	6,518	1,193	7.9	0.9	614	7.9	1.2	579	7.8	1.1	5,326	6.9	0.4	1,775	5.1	0.4	3,551	8.4	0.5
Received Medicaid health insurance in last 12 months.....	9,167	1,760	11.6	1.0	969	12.5	1.2	791	10.6	1.3	7,407	9.6	0.4	2,633	7.5	0.5	4,774	11.3	0.5
<b>Housing Quality</b>																			
Has housing quality issue(s).....	14,550	2,668	17.6	1.3	1,336	17.2	1.8	1,332	17.9	1.6	11,880	15.4	0.6	5,074	14.5	0.7	6,806	16.2	0.6
Has neighborhood quality issue(s).....	17,850	3,054	20.1	1.3	1,546	19.9	1.7	1,507	20.3	1.8	14,800	19.2	0.7	6,386	18.3	0.8	8,410	20.0	0.8

Footnotes provided at end of table.



to be “aging-ready,” defined as having a step-free entryway, a bedroom and full bathroom on the first floor, and at least one bathroom accessibility feature (Vespa, Engelberg, and He, 2020). Homeownership allows for greater control over the physical space to make aging-ready modifications as needed. Living in a home owned or being bought by someone in the household is highest among biological fathers (81.5 percent) and lowest among childless men (73.3 percent). The percentage of women living in homes owned or being bought by someone in the household does not differ by parenthood status—77.3 percent of mothers live in such households, compared to 76.0 percent of childless women.

### Housing and Neighborhood Quality

The physical environment that one lives in is important for the health

and safety of older adults. Living in a neighborhood with traffic or that feels unsafe can be stressful to residents and deter them from going out to visit friends or family. Trouble with the housing conditions, such as plumbing or pest problems, can also negatively impact quality of life. About 16 percent of older adults have at least one problem with their housing quality,<sup>16</sup> and about 19 percent of older adults have a problem with the quality of their neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> Biological fathers fare better in terms of housing quality—they are the least likely out of all four groups (childless men, childless women, fathers, and mothers) to report that they are experiencing a housing quality issue. This is

<sup>16</sup> A household is considered to have problems with housing quality if the reference person reported that their home has cracks, holes, pests, or plumbing problems.

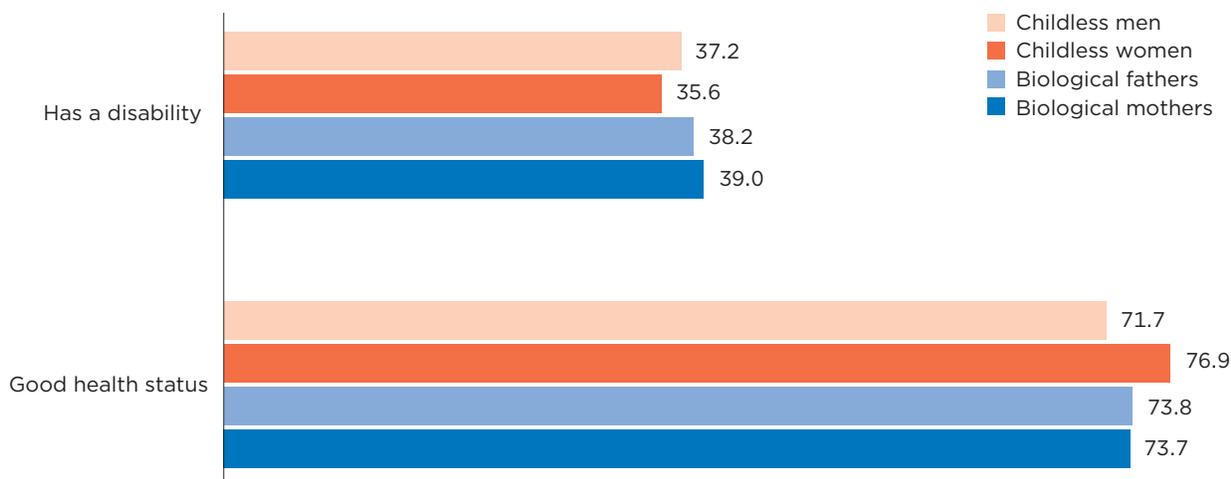
<sup>17</sup> Problems with neighborhood quality include feeling unsafe, staying home, saying that traffic or street noise is a problem, or saying that trash is a problem.

likely an outcome of their higher rates of homeownership, which may give them more control to fix issues as they arise. Fathers are also less likely than mothers or childless women to report a problem with their neighborhood.

### Health and Disability

The SIPP also collects information about the health of respondents. Physical health and cognitive functioning tend to decrease as we age, though they do not always do so equally across groups of people (Chen et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2005). Figure 8 shows the health and disability status of older childless adults and biological parents by sex. Self-rated health has long been acknowledged as a good predictor of mortality (Mossey and Shapiro, 1982). About 74 percent of both mothers and fathers report themselves as

Figure 8.  
**Health and Disability Status of Childless Adults and Biological Parents Aged 55 and Older by Sex: 2018**  
(In percent)



Note: Childless adults are those who reported having zero biological children. “Good” health includes excellent, very good, and good health. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

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having excellent, very good, or good health.<sup>18</sup> However, there is greater variation in health status for childless adults. For instance, childless women are more likely to have excellent, very good, or good health (76.9 percent) than childless men (71.7 percent).

Around 38 percent of adults 55 years and older have a disability that is measured by having severe difficulty in at least one of six core categories: hearing, seeing, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, or independent living.<sup>19</sup> This amounts to 35 million older adults having severe difficulty with at least one of these categories (Table 5). Disability rates do not differ for older men, regardless of parenthood status. However, older women who are biological mothers are more likely to have a disability than older childless women (39.0 percent versus 35.6 percent, respectively).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This report presents an overview of the childless older adult population in the United States. Changing demographic patterns, such as the aging of the population and increases in childlessness, alongside a growing trend of older people living alone, raise new questions about the experiences of older childless Americans as they navigate their later years, and whether they will have the support they may need in their oldest years. Using 2018 data from the SIPP, we compared selected demographic, economic, health,

and household characteristics of childless adults to those of biological parents 55 years and older.

One in six older adults in the United States is childless, amounting to 15.2 million childless older adults. The majority of childless older adults are non-Hispanic White and native-born. Older men are more likely than older women to be childless at the ages of 55 and older. Moreover, childlessness is more prevalent among the younger cohort of older adults. This suggests that childless adults will make up a greater share of the older adult population in the future and underscores the importance of research such as this study.

We identified several spheres in which childless adults appear to be either more or less vulnerable compared to their peers who are parents. For instance, childless older adults have fewer sources of potential support within their households than parents. About 4 in 10 childless older adults live alone, compared to 2 in 10 parents. Childless adults are also less likely to have gotten married, and as such, are less likely to be living with a spouse than are parents. Moreover, more than 1 in 4 parents live with a biological, step, or adopted child, while only 1 in 25 childless adults live with a step or adopted child. As spouses and children are the primary sources of informal care in the United States (Spillman et al., 2014), these discrepancies are concerning.

Though childless adults may have fewer sources of immediate support within their households, they have higher levels of personal net

worth and educational attainment than older parents. This may put them at a greater advantage when it comes to obtaining paid care. On the other hand, childless older adults are more likely than parents to receive financial support from friends or family and more likely to be in poverty. This suggests that the childless older adult population is multifaceted, with a portion who are socioeconomically well-off and another who may be at greater risk of financial hardship.

There are also important distinctions between childless men and women. Childless older women appear to be in a more advantageous position than their male counterparts in later life; they have better self-rated health scores and higher personal net worth than childless men. Research on family life course trajectories, which looks at combined histories of partnerships and parenting roles occupied by an individual over their lifetime, suggests that these roles are more strongly linked to later-life health for men than for women (O'Flaherty et al., 2016). For instance, the lack of family formation is found to be associated with poorer physical health in later life among men, net of the effects of socioeconomic status, but the same effect was not found among women.

Disability rates are lower among childless adults than parents; however, given the greater prevalence of living alone within the childless population, the 5.5 million disabled childless older adults may be particularly vulnerable, and could need special attention from the government, community, and family in the coming years.

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<sup>18</sup> The estimate for mothers does not differ statistically from that for fathers.

<sup>19</sup> More information on disability in the SIPP is available at <[www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-sipp.html](http://www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-sipp.html)>.

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The composition of the older population will continue to change in the coming decades. The youngest Baby Boomers were 54 years old in our study year of 2018, thus the current childless older adults are composed of Baby Boomers and the generations before them. With the U.S. population continuing to age and new birth cohorts coming into older ranks, will future childless older Americans have similar patterns and characteristics to the childless older adults studied in this report, and how will they fare economically and health-wise? Further research is needed to understand the changing characteristics and well-being of older childless Americans, particularly for those who are most vulnerable as evidenced in this report.

## **SOURCE AND ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES**

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between the estimates being compared does not include zero. Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately the answers are

coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production process, including the overall design of surveys, wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and the statistical review of reports.

Additional information on the SIPP is available at <[www.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.census.gov/sipp/)> (main SIPP Web site), <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/guidance/users-guide.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/guidance/users-guide.html)> (SIPP Users' Guides), and <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html)> (SIPP Source and Accuracy Statements).

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