

The gray divorce revolution

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When Al and Tipper Gore called it quits a few years ago, we wondered: Why would a couple married for 40 years decide to split up? Divorce among long-term first-married couples is unusual. It is well known that the risk of divorce declines with each year of marriage. Indeed, scholars and the public alike probably think that older adults (the Gores were 62 and 61 when they separated) don't get divorced. The phenomenon has received scant attention in the literature. Nearly all of the research on divorce examines young and middle-aged adults, not the AARP-eligible population over age 50.

The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, with roughly 45% of marriages expected to end through divorce. For the past 30 years, the divorce rate in the United States has remained steady, or perhaps even declined slightly. But there are some reasons to speculate why divorce patterns might have changed among older adults. Perhaps a key reason lies in the changing composition of the older adult population, with Baby Boomers moving into this age group. Boomers came of age during the 1970s and 1980s, when divorce was on the rise. This is the cohort that was the first to divorce and remarry in large numbers, and we know that remarriages are at higher risk of divorce than first marriages.

Moreover, a recent federal report shows that the proportions of adults ever divorced, currently divorced, or married at least twice are highest among those ages 50 and older, suggesting that there is considerable flux in the marital status of this age group. Nearly one third of married individuals over age 50 are in remarriages, versus just 19% in 1980. Regardless of whether the divorce rate for older adults has changed, the aging of the U.S. population means that many more people over age 50 will experience divorce in the coming years.

Broad cultural shifts in the meanings of marriage and divorce suggest that gray divorce could be on the rise. Changing family norms have spread across the generations. The notion that marriage is a lifelong institution has fallen out of favor as there has been a

growing emphasis on individual fulfillment and satisfaction through marriage. A marriage may have been good for the first 20 years when the couple was raising children together and each going to work, but it might not measure up once they retire and have a lot more time together. Marriages change and evolve and so do our expectations for our spouses. The key transitions that epitomize this stage of the life course—empty nest, retirement, failing health—can all be very stressful for marriages. Against a backdrop of lengthening life expectancies, older adults may now be more critical in their assessments of their marriages, because they have the potential to endure for years to come. Adults who reach age 65 can expect to live another 20 years. In our culture of individualized marriages, where the focus is on what marriage can do for the individual, people are much less likely to stay in an empty-shell marriage.

Existing research on the marital status composition of older adults suggests that

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divorce in later life could be on the rise. In an article published earlier this year in *The Gerontologist*, we looked at unmarried Baby Boomers, who were 45–63 years old in 2009. One in three is unmarried, compared to just one in five in 1980. The percentage currently divorced more than doubled over the last 30 years, rising from 9% to 20%. The patterns are similar for women (11% to 22%) and men (8% to 18%). The same story applies for people aged 65 and older, according to recent work by Manning and Brown. In 1980, just 4% were divorced, compared to 11% in 2008. For women, the figure tripled from 4% to 12% and for men it doubled from 5% to 10%.

Divorce is increasingly widespread among older adults, but these prevalence measures obscure when the divorce occurred. Possibly the risk of divorce remains unchanged and the rising prevalence is simply an artifact of individuals being less likely to remarry—which is plausible given research showing declining levels of remarriage. Alternatively,



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these trends could be capturing an actual increase in the risk of divorce.

We combined data from the 2010 American Community Survey and the 1990 U.S. Vital Statistics Report to examine how the divorce rate for adults ages 50 and older has changed over the past two decades. The ACS is a nationwide, annual survey that is administered to roughly 1% of the U.S. population (3 million) in lieu of the old U.S. Census long form. In 2008, marital history questions were added to allow for new estimates of marriage, divorce, and widowhood rates. One of the reasons why there has been little research on trends in divorce is that the federal government stopped requiring states to report these data in the mid-1990s. The ACS measures now allow us to generate national estimates of transitions into and out of marriage, including divorce. The U.S. Vital Statistics Report from 1990 provides the divorce rate and the number of persons who divorced during 1990 by 5-year age intervals separately for men and women. These rates are derived from a sample of states that yield nationally representative, age-specific divorce rates for 1990.

For both 1990 and 2010, we calculated the annual divorce rates for married individuals aged 50 and older (a detailed description of these calculations is provided in the full paper, http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file108701.pdf). The divorce rate for older adults has doubled in the past two decades, rising from 4.9 divorces per 1,000 married individuals in 1990 to 10.1 divorces in 2010. Additional analyses revealed that this doubling is evident not only for Boomers aged

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Unintended childbearing in the United States

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In an ideal world, men and women would become parents only when they reached a life stage in which they were prepared to provide children with a stable home environment and the emotional, practical, and financial resources necessary for healthy development. Unfortunately, that is not the reality in the United States. Instead, a third of all births in the United States are considered unintended, according to information from the National Center for Health Statistics, and thus many parents may not be fully ready for the sacrifices, demands, and investments children require.

As outlined in the federal government's Healthy People initiatives, unintended childbearing is a major public health crisis because it is linked to poorer well-being among mothers, children, and families (see the 2007 white paper by Cassandra Logan and colleagues

at Child Trends for a thorough discussion). Women who are not planning to become pregnant are less likely to take prenatal vitamins; abstain from tobacco, drugs, or alcohol; or seek early prenatal care—all of which are linked to better outcomes at birth. Children born from unintended pregnancies are more likely to be born prematurely and to have low birth weight; they are less likely to be breast-fed. Further, the effects of an unintended birth seem to extend beyond pregnancy-related behaviors and infant outcomes. Although there is qualitative research suggesting that women with unintended pregnancies often receive social support from family and friends, the general finding is that unintended pregnancies and births are associated with lower levels of psychological well-being and happiness both during and after pregnancy, as well as a higher risk of depression. In addition to any

psychological issues that arise, there are likely impacts on other life course domains. For instance, an unintended pregnancy may derail educational or career trajectories, especially since the United States lacks strong supports for young and single parents. Certainly, family functioning is likely to be negatively affected by an unintended birth, as I have seen in my own research. Among cohabiting and married women, an unintended birth increases the risk of union dissolution; it is likely this is even more so the case for those in more casual relationships in which union commitment is weaker. Caring for a
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50–64, but also for those individuals aged 65 and older. (The levels of divorce are lower for adults 65+ than for 50–64-year-olds.) This is not a trend that is confined to Baby Boomers.

To contextualize these findings, consider that a mere 8% of individuals who divorced in 1990 were age 50 or older. Today, the corresponding figure is 25%. Part of this growth in the proportion of divorcing adults who are over age 50 reflects the aging of the population, but it also is due to the doubling of the divorce rate for this age group. Regardless, we can no longer ignore older adult divorce when one in four people getting divorced are over age 50.

Another way to assess the trend is to evaluate its meaning in terms of numbers of people affected. Although the divorce rate doubled from 1990 to 2010, the number of people who got divorced tripled from more than 206,000 to more than 643,000, which provides some indication of how the aging of the population is shaping this phenomenon. Indeed, even if we assume the divorce rate will remain constant for the next two decades

(which it is, arguably, unlikely to do), we project that the number of older adults who experience a later life divorce will rise by 33% to more than 828,000.

As we anticipated, the marital biography plays a key role in later life divorce. The divorce rate for individuals in remarriages is 2.5 per 1,000 individuals higher than for those in first marriages. And the risk of divorce declines precipitously with marital duration. We also document racial and ethnic variation in the risk of divorce, with Blacks and Hispanics slightly more likely to divorce than Whites. Education is somewhat protective of marriage.

Ultimately, we were surprised to discover that the divorce rate for people ages 50 and older is at a record high. As the risk of divorce has stabilized for society at large and actually fallen among married individuals younger than 35 (see http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/family_profiles/file108695.pdf), older adults are distinctive in their climbing rate of divorce.

This trend raises a number of important questions not only about the predictors of divorce,

which we are able to address modestly in our work using the ACS data, but also about the consequences. There is considerable evidence that marital dissolution through widowhood is detrimental to individual well-being, but how does the experience of divorce later in life affect one's financial resources, social support, and physical and mental health? As older divorced people age, some may remarry or cohabit, but most will remain single. Who will provide care for the growing numbers of older divorced people? Traditionally, spouses have provided care for frail elders. This question takes on particular urgency when we consider that one third of all Baby Boomers are unmarried and divorce is on the rise for this age group. Our article in *The Gerontologist* shows that unmarried Baby Boomers face economic, social, and health vulnerabilities; we anticipate this characterization applies to individuals who divorce after age 50, too. As a society, we may need to rethink how we provide care and support to the aged, who are increasingly likely to be unmarried and now face a higher risk of divorce than any older adult generation in history. ■

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child is labor-intensive and expensive; even those with planned pregnancies report that parenting is stressful. It is no surprise that individuals and couples with an unintended birth may find their relationship highly strained—and highly unstable. Thus it seems that children born from unintended pregnancies are less likely to grow up in a stable family unit.

Children born from unintended pregnancies also seem to fare less well than their intended counterparts throughout childhood and even into adulthood in a number of ways, as detailed by the Child Trends report. First, they suffer from poorer physical health throughout childhood and are more likely to be overweight. Second, there is some evidence that these children have lower cognitive and educational outcomes. Third, adolescents (but not younger children) born from unintended pregnancies seem to be at higher risk for behavior problems, particularly delinquency. Finally, there is a fairly wide body of work showing that children

born from unintended pregnancies are less likely to be born prematurely and to have low birth weight; they are less likely to be breastfed.

to women 20–24 and less than a quarter of births to teens. There are large relationship status differences as well—77% of all births to married women were intended, followed by 40% of births to cohabiting women and 33% of births to noncohabiting, unmarried women. Just over half of all births to African American women and slightly more than 40% of all births to Hispanic women are reported as unintended, compared to just under a third of births to White women. The vast majority (83%) of college-educated mothers categorize their births as intended, compared to only 60% of women with a high school degree or less. Taken together, this shows that unintended births are concentrated among the least advantaged. What's even more troubling is that my 2010 research with colleagues Sarah Hayford and Elizabeth Wildsmith suggests that over time, the concentration of unintended fertility seems to have grown, with women who have one unintended birth increasingly likely to have had a subsequent unintended birth. If low

any births at all, at that point or in the future. These are usually people who have either decided they never want to have children, or, more commonly, those who have already reached their desired family size. Mistimed births are those that occur to someone who wants children in the future but not yet; such births tend to occur early in the life course. Recent work has shown that births that are only slightly too early (less than 2 years too early) are similar in outcomes to those that are wanted, whereas those that are seriously too early (2 or more years) tend to resemble unwanted births in terms of outcomes. Thus, the preferred demographic approach now is to categorize wanted and slightly mistimed births as intended and unwanted and seriously mistimed births as unintended. But Kathryn Edin and colleagues, in their book, *Unmarried with Children* (2007), which uses qualitative data, found that many unmarried parents are often ambivalent about the circumstances that surround births, with intention status existing more on a continuum rather than in discrete categories. Some individuals and couples do not particularly want to get pregnant but take few steps to avoid pregnancy; others may strongly wish to avoid a pregnancy at a certain time yet are happy when a pregnancy occurs.

Beyond issues with defining unintended childbearing, family demographers are also challenged by logistical issues. Because intention status is not available in the vital statistics system, we use survey data that collects retrospective information—asking parents whether a particular birth was wanted, unwanted, or mistimed. This presents two problems: retrospective accuracy and social desirability. In essence, surveys ask parents to remember what they were feeling when they got pregnant; not only are feelings notoriously difficult to remember, but the feelings about a birth are inevitably colored by the feelings toward a child (and perhaps the context in which the child was conceived). It's also worth noting that most surveys collect information from only one parent, usually the mother. Information on childbearing from women tends to be more accurate than information from men, but when information from both parents is collected, it is not uncommon for there to be disagreement about birth intentions. Not only does this make it difficult to produce

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born from intended pregnancies have better relationships with their mothers throughout childhood into adulthood; conversely, other work suggests that lower levels of affection, less social support, and even spanking and physical abuse are more common among those born from unintended pregnancies. There is even some evidence that intended children do less well if they have an unintended sibling than if they do not, though it is difficult to understand how much selection might play a role in these situations.

Clearly, then, unintended childbearing can be detrimental for both parents and children. At the same time, it is important to state that many of the findings noted above are associations and do not necessarily reflect causality. We know, for instance, that unintended childbearing does not occur equally across the population, with large differences across age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and marital status according to recent data from the National Center for Health Statistics. Although three fourths of the births occurring between 2006–2010 to women 25 and older were intended, the proportion declines dramatically to only half of births

levels of education or young age increase the chances that a birth is unintended, and an unintended birth increases the risk of an unfavorable outcome, it is almost certainly the case that at least part of the association between unintended fertility and outcomes is attributable to the factors that lead to the birth in the first place. That is, poverty might be the underlying cause of both birth intention status and parental, child, and family well-being. In most demographic research, such causality is difficult to prove due to data limitations, but the extant research suggests that accounting for underlying factors reduces, but does not eliminate, the association between unintended childbearing and poorer outcomes across a range of domains.

Family demographers have played a major role in identifying and understanding unintended childbearing, but it is a challenging area of study. Even defining the term unintended is tricky. Traditionally, we characterize wanted births as intended and unwanted and mistimed births as unintended. Wanted births are those that are actively desired at the time of conception. Unwanted births are those that occur to someone who does not want to have