

Single Women

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Over the past decades, the place of people who are single in contemporary American society has changed markedly. From 28% in 1970, the group of divorced, widowed, and always-single Americans has grown to nearly 42% in 2007. Currently, there are fewer households consisting of mom, dad, and the kids than of singles living on their own. However, ways of thinking about single and married people have not kept up with these rapid social changes. In the academy, much research and teaching is based on the outdated assumption that marriage and nuclear family dominate adult life. As a result, people who are single, and perspectives not based on conventional marriage, are greatly underrepresented in scholarship and public policy.

As with other groups considered to be outside the mainstream of society, singles are often targets of stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion. In federal statutes, for example, marital status is a factor in 1,138 provisions for determining rights, benefits, and privileges. Attempts to expand access to those protections have focused on the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, even if those efforts were entirely successful, the growing number of people who are single would still be excluded from full protection under the law.

Who Counts as Single?

- **Legal definition.** People are single if they are not legally married. This legal definition includes people who are currently divorced, widowed, or have always been single, as well as unmarried cohabitators.
- **Social definition.** People who cohabit with a romantic partner are typically viewed as socially coupled (rather than socially single), and that criterion can be regarded as definitional. However, many people in sex-linked relationships who are not cohabiting are also viewed and treated as socially coupled. Self-identities do not necessarily coincide with social or legal identities.

How Many Single Women (and Men) Are There in the U.S.?

Marital Status in the United States: 2007 (Ages 18 and Older)

	ALL ADULTS		MEN		WOMEN	
	Number (millions)	%	Number (millions)	%	Number (millions)	%
Married	124.8	56.0	62.6	58.1	62.1	54.1
All UNMARRIED*	92.8	41.7	43.2	40.0	49.7	43.3
Widowed	13.9	6.2	2.7	2.5	11.2	9.8
Divorced	22.8	10.3	9.6	8.9	13.2	11.5
Always-single	56.1	25.2	30.9	28.6	25.3	22.0
Separated	5.0	2.2	2.0	1.8	3.0	2.6
TOTAL (all categories)	222.6	100	107.8	100	114.8	100

From U.S. Census Bureau, Housing & Household Economic Statistics Division, Fertility & Family Statistics Branch

*The category of all legally unmarried Americans has many subcategories:

- It includes cohabitators and single parents. As of 2006, there were 6 million unmarried-partner households; 5.2 million included other-sex partners and 780,000 were comprised of same-sex partners. There were 12.9 million single parents in 2006; 10.4 million were single mothers.
- The percent of unmarried Americans (41.7% overall) varies by group: 34.3% of Asians, 39.0% of Non-Hispanic Whites, 42.6% of Hispanics, and 58.5% of Blacks in the U.S. are legally single.
- The percent of unmarried American women is 46.1 for women earning under \$25,000; 37.9 for women earning between \$25,000 and \$74,999; and 33.4 for women earning more than \$75,000.

Did you know...?

American women now spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married.

- The trend toward spending more time single is not specific to the United States. Across 192 countries, people who, by age 30, had always been single, increased from 15% in the 1970s to 24% in the 1990s. The increase was greater for developed countries: In the 1990s, 38% of the women and 57% of the men reached the end of their 20s without ever marrying (World Fertility Report, 2003).

What Are Some of the Myths and Realities about People Who Are Single?

MYTH: Older women who have always been single are alone and lonely.

FACT: They have very low levels of loneliness (Dykstra, 1995; Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

MYTH: Single people are unhappy, and they become happier if they marry.

FACT: Single people are generally happy (DePaulo, 2006). Those who do marry and stay married report small increases in happiness around the year of the wedding (a honeymoon effect), then go back to the same level of happiness they had when they were single. Those who marry and later divorce do not experience the honeymoon effect (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Happiness levels of people headed toward divorce drop more for men than for women.

MYTH: Single people are responsible for weakening interpersonal and community ties.

FACT: Adults who have always been single are more likely to visit, contact, advise, and support their parents and siblings, and to maintain intergenerational ties, than are the currently or previously married. Singles are also more likely to socialize with, encourage, and help their friends and neighbors (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2006, 2008). Many single women maintain networks of friends who have been in their lives for decades (Simon, 1987; Trimberger, 2005).

MYTH: Single mothers raise their children single-handedly.

FACT: They are often interdependent with friends, family, and other social network members, sharing care-work and support (Hertz, 2006; Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Trimberger, 2005).

MYTH: In order to have good outcomes, children need to be raised by two parents.

FACT: The quality of the relationship between a parent and a child, and the degree of conflict in a household, can be more important than the number of parents (DePaulo, 2006; Lansford, Ceballos, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

In What Ways Are Single People Excluded or Underserved by Current Laws and Policies?

People who are legally single and do not have children are excluded from benefits and protections such as the ones described in this section. A separate point about parental (rather than marital) status – that non-parents who have caregiving responsibilities should have the same benefits as parents – is discussed in Young (1996).

- **Access to care and to opportunities to provide care.** The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows married workers to take time off to care for an ailing spouse. Single workers, however, cannot take time off under FMLA to care for important peers in their lives, nor can any of their peers take time to care for them.
- **Access to health insurance.** In some workplaces, married workers can add their spouse to their health care plan at a reduced rate. Single people cannot add a person to their plan, and no other worker can add a single person to their plan. When married workers can add someone to their plan and single workers cannot, single workers are receiving unequal compensation for the same work.
- **Estate tax exemptions.** Upon death, the estates of married people go to their spouse, tax-free. When single people bequeath their estate to someone, their estate is taxed.
- **Social Security benefits.** The Social Security benefits earned by married workers go to the spouse upon the death of the worker. The benefits earned by always-single people who do not have children go back into the system.
- **Testimonial privileges and immunities.** Spouses can be protected from testifying against one another, but single people have no similar protections with regard to the most important persons in their lives.
- There are other protections that accrue automatically to married people that single people can obtain by contracting for each of them individually, and at their own **expense**. Proceeding in such unwieldy and costly ways, single people can, for example, designate a close friend, relative, or other important person to have power of attorney or hospital visitation rights, or to be beneficiaries of their estate.
- In a number of important domains, singles are targets of discrimination (DePaulo, 2006). For example, studies of **housing discrimination** have shown that married couples are preferred as tenants over single men, single women, unmarried couples, and pairs of friends (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). Studies of **pay disparities** have documented that single men are paid less than married men for the same work, even when their accomplishments are comparable.

What Are Some of the Policies and Practices that Would Protect All Dependent and Interdependent Caring Relationships?

- Extensions of policies such as **FMLA** to include people beyond nuclear family members would provide single people (and others, including siblings, aunts, and nieces) with important opportunities for caring and receiving care.
- Where civil unions are recognized, qualified couples can register and thereby receive all of the available benefits and protections. The process allows couples access to an entire package of privileges and protections, without needing to contract for each of the benefits individually. A comparable **registration process** that is not restricted to people who are sexual partners would extend basic benefits and protections to all citizens.
- In the workplace, **cafeteria-style benefit plans**, whereby all employees can choose the particular benefits that fit their needs, would be useful to single workers and all other workers, too. Some corporations already offer such plans (Trimberger, 2002).
- Scattered legal reforms in specific locales, such as the 2007 Virginia law that permits patients in hospitals to see whomever they wish, should be extended nationally (Polikoff, 2007).

Sources for Further Information and Other Resources

The Singles Studies website, <http://issc.berkeley.edu/singlesstudies/>.
 Scholars of Single Women Network, <http://www.medusanet.ca/singlewomen/>
 The Alternatives to Marriage Project (AtMP), <http://www.unmarried.org/>.
 The information service at Unmarried America, <http://www.unmarriedamerica.org/>.
 The Anthony Marchionne Foundation small grants program,
http://www.wsu.edu/~socpsych/anthony_marchionne_foundation.htm.

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