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FP-20-23 Widowhood: Decades of Change, 1940-2018

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Family Profile No. 23, 2020

Widowhood: Decades of Change, 1940-2018

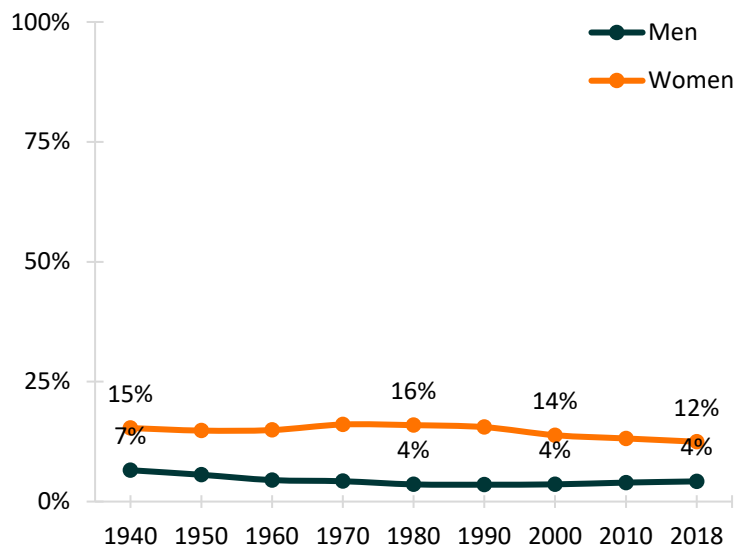
Author: Lisa Carlson & Valerie Schweizer

Sociodemographic variation is evident not just in marriage and divorce, but also widowhood. Using National Vital Statistics, Decennial Census, and American Community Survey data to cover the years 1940 to 2018, we document trends in the proportions of ever-married men and women who are widowed. Then, focusing on women (who experience higher levels of widowhood than men), we examine variation in widowhood across race/ethnicity, education, and age. The proportion of ever-married adults who are widowed reflects not only change in the widowhood rate, but also the changing propensity for widow(er)s to remarry and exit the widowed state. For more information on changes in marital statuses over time, see our profiles on more than century of change in marriage (FP-20-21) and a more than a century of change in divorce (FP-20-22).

Change in the Share Widowed by Gender, 1940-2018

- Since the 1940s, among those ever married, the proportion of women who were currently widowed was consistently higher than the proportion of men who were currently widowed.
- The proportions currently widowed, overall, decreased for both ever-married men and women between 1940 and 2018.
- From the 1980s and on, the proportion of women currently widowed decreased (from 16% to 12%), while the proportion of men currently widowed remained constant (at 4%).

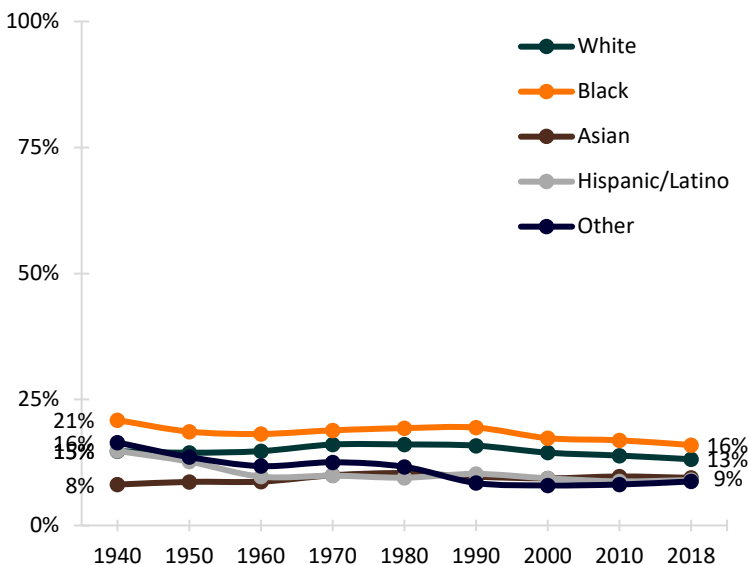
Figure 1. Proportions of Men and Women Currently Widowed Among Those Ever Married, 1940-2018



Source: NCFMR analyses of U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940-2010 (IPUMS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 (IPUMS)

Change in the Share Widowed by Race/Ethnicity Among Ever-Married Women, 1940-2018

Figure 2. Percentage of Women Currently Widowed Among Ever-Married Women by Race/Ethnicity, 1940-2018



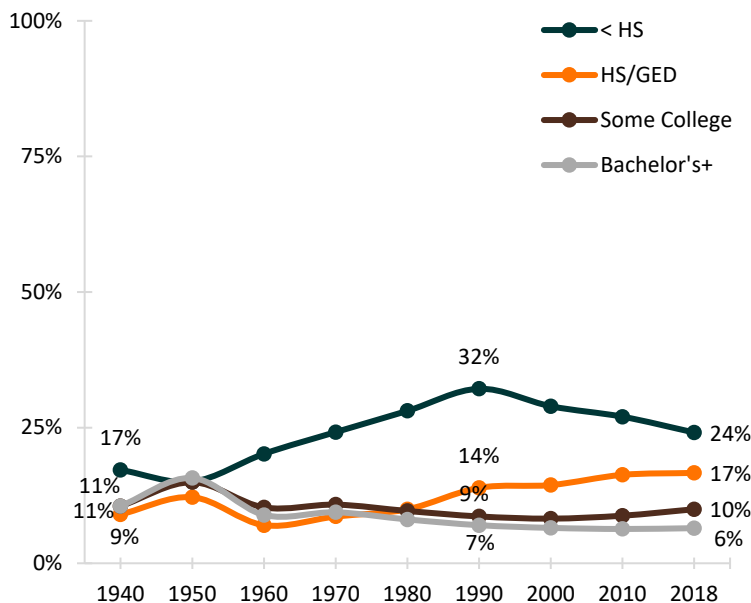
- For most racial/ethnic groups, the percentage of women currently widowed declined between 1940 and 2018.
 - For Asian women, the percentage currently widowed increased slightly from 8% in 1940 to 9% in 2018.
- The differences between racial/ethnic groups in the percentage of women currently widowed has narrowed over time.

Source: NCFMR analyses of U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940-2010 (IPUMS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 (IPUMS)

Change in the Share Widowed by Educational Attainment Among Ever-Married Women, 1940-2018

- Since the 1980s, the share currently widowed has been higher among ever-married women without a college education than among those with at least some college.
 - Among women without a high school diploma, the share of women who were widowed increased from 17% in 1940 to a peak in 1990 of nearly one third before declining to 24% in 2018.
 - For women with a high school diploma but no college education, the share currently widowed almost doubled between 1940 and 2018 (9% to 17%).
- The shares of currently widowed women among those with some college or a bachelor's degree decreased from 11% in 1940 to 10% and 6% in 2018, respectively.

Figure 3. Percentage of Women Currently Widowed Among Ever-Married Women by Educational Attainment, 1940-2018

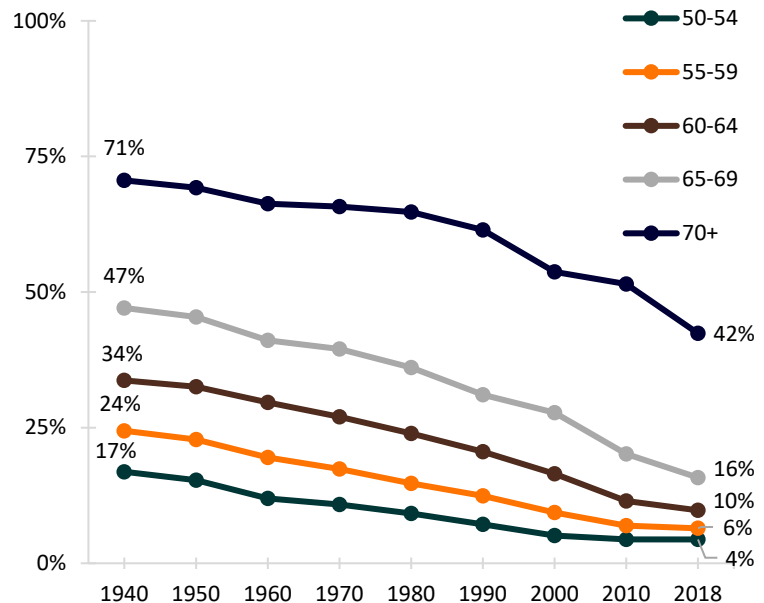


Source: NCFMR analyses of U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940-2010 (IPUMS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 (IPUMS)

Change in the Share Widowed by Age Among Ever-Married Women Aged 50+, 1940-2018

- Since the 1940s, the share of women currently widowed decreased dramatically for those aged 50 and older.¹
- The largest percentage declines in the share of women who were currently widowed were among women in the younger age groups.
 - Among women aged 50-54, and women 55-59, the shares of currently widowed were around four times as large in 1940 compared with 2018.
 - The smallest decline in the share of currently widowed women was among women aged 70 and older--the share currently widowed is about 40% lower in 2018 compared to 1940.

Figure 4. Percentage of Women Currently Widowed Among Ever-Married Women by Age 50+, 1940-2018



Source: NCFMR analyses of U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940-2010 (IPUMS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 (IPUMS)

¹ Among younger women, widowhood has consistently been a rare event; the percentage of ever-married women under age 50 who are currently widowed has consistently been lower than 12% throughout the time period, with the number for women under 40 consistently 5% or lower (figures not shown).

Data Sources:

Ruggles, S., Flood, S., Goeken, R., Grover, J., Meyer, E. Pacas, J., & Sobek, M. (2020). IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0>

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