
Low-Income Widows and Other Aged Singles

by Thomas Tissue*

Based on data collected in a nationwide survey in late 1973, this report describes the living conditions, health, social activity, and attitudes of unmarried older persons at low to middle income levels—that is, below \$5,000 per year. Although most previous research has focused on the special situation of widows, the current findings indicate that lower income widowers and divorced/separated/never-married persons generally experience many of the same problems as the widows and respond to them in a remarkably similar fashion. Old age without a spouse or adequate income seems to dictate the same material and social hardship regardless of whether the spouse was lost to death, divorce, or separation, or was never acquired in the first place.

A great deal more is known about elderly widows today than was known 20 years ago. The current literature seems to offer the average reader as much as he could possibly want to know about these women as they deal with grief, cast off old roles and assume new ones, interact with friends, cope with familial crises, expand and contract livespace, and so on. The preoccupation with widowhood is easily understood. Along with retirement, loss of a spouse is a major status and role transition of later life and can pose difficult problems in social, psychological, and economic adjustment. And very many women have lost a husband by the time they reach age 65.

Widowhood is not the only unaccompanied passage through old age, however. It is generally agreed that married persons are better off than widows, but scant factual evidence is available with which to compare the circumstances of widows with those of widowers and divorced/separated/never-married persons of either sex. As a result, it is not at all clear that the widow differs greatly from anyone else who goes through later life as a single person.

This report provides some of the answers. Based on data gathered in a national survey in late 1973, it offers a broadly drawn description of aged widows at low to middle income levels and contrasts their living conditions, health, behavior, and attitudes with those of other unmarried older persons who were equally poor. If this survey is less than the definitive study of marital status in old age, it nonetheless establishes a reasonably solid empirical foundation upon which to base more sophisticated research. It may also serve to

direct attention toward those neglected groups to which Barbara Payne and Frank Whittington allude in their critique of past research into widowhood.¹ As they point out, the study of other aged singles is dictated not only by the independent importance of these types of marital status in later life but also by the need to place widowhood itself in context. Are widows basically different from other old and unmarried persons or are there just more of them?

Data and Methodology

These data were collected for the Social Security Administration as part of the 1973 Survey of the Low-Income Aged and Disabled (SLIAD). The sample cases were drawn originally from the ongoing Current Population Survey (CPS) of the Bureau of the Census—a monthly study of the labor-force participation of 50,000 households nationwide. In July 1973, all CPS respondents aged 65 and older were asked to report their total cash income for the preceding 12 months. Those who met the screening standard for low to middle income (less than \$5,000 for singles, \$6,500 for couples) were selected for interview later in the year as members of the CPS-AGED sample of SLIAD. The first field interviews were completed during October, November, and December 1973.²

The full 1973 CPS-AGED sample consists of 3,402

¹ See Barbara Payne and Frank Whittington, "Older Women: An Examination of Popular Stereotypes and Research Evidence," *Social Problems*, April 1976.

² A general description of the SLIAD samples, survey design, and purpose is found in Thomas Tissue, "The Survey of the Low-Income Aged and Disabled: An Introduction," *Social Security Bulletin*, February 1977.

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individuals representing a national population of 15,444,000 noninstitutionalized aged persons at low to middle income levels. This report is based on information gathered from 2,195 survey respondents who were not married at the time of the SLIAD interview. The distribution of unmarried survey respondents and the corresponding population estimate for each sex/marital-status group discussed in this report is seen in the following tabulation.

| Marital status and sex | Survey respondents | Population estimates (in thousands) |
|---|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Total number | 2,195 | 7,948 |
| Widowed: | | |
| Women | 1,446 | 5,225 |
| Men | 255 | 915 |
| Divorced, separated, and never-married: | | |
| Women | 285 | 1,046 |
| Men | 209 | 762 |

These estimates are based on sample data and may differ from the results that would have been obtained if all members of the study population had been surveyed under the same conditions. Approximate standard errors for estimated number of persons and percentages are available in tabular form in earlier SLIAD publications. Differences mentioned here are significant at the .95 confidence level.³ It should be kept in mind that the sample selection procedure systematically excluded from the survey those in the upper income level and institutionalized persons. Thus, the results reported here are capable of generalization only for the approximately 8 million unmarried aged persons living outside institutions and receiving annual income below \$5,000 at the time the SLIAD sample was drawn in mid-1973.

Findings

Biography and Demography

According to table 1, the widows were predominantly white, native-born, and very old (1 in 2 was aged 75 or older). Most had married only once and had lost their husbands at least 10 years before the interview. Fewer than half had completed the ninth grade or worked full time for pay during the major part of their adult lives. The great majority had living children, and roughly 1 in 4 lived with a son or daughter at the time of the interview.

Like the widows in terms of age and race, widowers were

Table 1.—Selected characteristics: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

| Characteristic | [Numbers in thousands] | | | |
|--|------------------------|----------|--|-----|
| | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Age: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 758 |
| Percentage aged 75 or older | 53 | 58 | 38 | 37 |
| Race: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent white | 87 | 84 | 90 | 79 |
| Education: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,145 | 911 | 1,043 | 749 |
| Percent with 9 years or more | 41 | 28 | 58 | 35 |
| Nativity: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,204 | 915 | 1,043 | 762 |
| Percent foreign-born | 13 | 22 | 12 | 17 |
| Number of marriages: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,219 | 915 | 1,042 | 762 |
| Percent married more than once | 22 | 20 | 17 | 22 |
| Years widowed: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,027 | 849 | | |
| Percent widowed less than 10 years | 42 | 57 | | |
| Living children: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,219 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent with 1 or more | 82 | 77 | 30 | 34 |
| Household composition: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent living: | | | | |
| Alone | 62 | 62 | 59 | 60 |
| With own children | 27 | 25 | 6 | 5 |
| With other than own children | 11 | 13 | 35 | 35 |
| Work history: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,161 | 907 | 1,033 | 759 |
| Percent who worked full time during most of adult life | 45 | 93 | 74 | 84 |

somewhat more likely to be foreign-born. Although they had lost their spouses more recently, widowers resembled widows in terms of family history and current parental status. Nonwidowed men and women were typically younger, and considerably fewer of them were parents. The nonwidowed women were better educated than the widows and had more full-time work experience in the past. Obviously, divorced and never-married women had had greater responsibility for supporting themselves over the life span.

The chances of living alone were nearly identical regardless of sex or marital status. Widows and widowers often lived with their own children; divorced and never-married persons frequently shared a home with relatives or friends. Nevertheless, the rate at which individuals lived independently was the same in each of the subsamples. In the absence of a spouse, roughly 3 in 5 lived alone. Much the same situation occurs among older persons in the general population (that is, among the aged at all income levels). A recent Bureau of the Census publication reports the following

³The basic technical discussion of SLIAD data is found in Erma Barron, **SLIAD Report No. 5: Survey Design, Estimation Procedures, and Sampling Variability**, Office of Research and Statistics, Social Security Administration, 1978, which describes the sampling procedures and weighting techniques used in SLIAD, presents generalized standard error tables for each of the samples, discusses tests of significance applied to specific estimates and differences between estimates, and reproduces the complete 1973 questionnaire.

Table 2.—Activity limitation: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Activity limitation | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Able without difficulty to— | | | | |
| Lift and carry objects weighing 10 pounds or more: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,211 | 911 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 23 | 34 | 31 | 45 |
| Stoop, crouch, and kneel: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 40 | 40 | 53 | 58 |
| Stand for long periods: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,042 | 762 |
| Percent | 41 | 39 | 54 | 52 |
| Climb stairs: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,218 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 47 | 44 | 59 | 51 |
| Walk: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,221 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 52 | 54 | 65 | 54 |
| Lift and carry objects weighing less than 10 pounds: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 53 | 63 | 65 | 70 |
| Reach with arms: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,043 | 762 |
| Percent | 66 | 70 | 79 | 81 |
| Grasp with hands: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 912 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 77 | 75 | 82 | 79 |
| With no activity limitation (INDEX): | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,214 | 912 | 1,043 | 762 |
| Percent | 24 | 27 | 38 | 34 |

proportions of unmarried aged persons who are “primary individuals living alone”: widows, 65 percent; widowers, 64 percent; other unmarried men, 60 percent; other unmarried women, 56 percent.⁴

Health

As might be expected of women whose median age was 75, the widows were physically weak and none too spry. Table 2 indicates that substantial numbers of them had difficulty lifting objects, walking, stooping, standing, and climbing. Just 1 in 4 met the “no limitations” standard defined in Lawrence Haber’s index of physical activity limitations.⁵ Still, they were better able to care for themselves than one might have supposed (table 3). Heavy housework—defined here to include such activities as scrubbing floors and walls and moving furniture—was beyond the capacity of most widows, but the majority could

⁴ See U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Current Population Reports: Marital Status and Living Arrangements**, March 1978, Series P-20, No. 338, 1979.

⁵ For a description of the scale, see Lawrence Haber, **The Epidemiology of Disability: II. The Measurement of Functional Capacity Limitations** (Social Security Survey of the Disabled, Report No. 10), Office of Research and Statistics, Social Security Administration, 1970.

do their own shopping, light housecleaning, cooking, and laundry, and were able to bathe and dress themselves. Approximately one-third of the widows could perform all of the self-care tasks, including heavy housework, listed in table 3.

Widows and widowers hardly differed with respect to the summary measures—activity limitations and self-care capacity. Widowers were somewhat better able to lift and carry objects and were less able (or willing) to wash their own clothes and do their own light housecleaning. Otherwise, they suffered activity limitations and self-care restrictions at the same rate as widows and scored no higher on either of these summary measures.

Divorced and never-married men and women were physically superior to widows and better able to care for themselves on a day-to-day basis. The pattern holds for most item-by-item comparisons and emerges clearly for the summary measures as well. Aged widows were definitely more frail and less self-sufficient than both of the divorced/never-married categories of aged singles studied here.

Circulatory and musculoskeletal conditions, chiefly arthritis/rheumatism, were the leading health disorders among the widowed and nonwidowed alike, but widows reported the highest rates of each (table 4). Compared with

Table 3.—Self-care capacity: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Self-care capacity | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|---|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Able without help to— | | | | |
| Do heavy housework: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,218 | 915 | 1,046 | 758 |
| Percent | 44 | 49 | 55 | 67 |
| Do grocery shopping: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,042 | 762 |
| Percent | 68 | 75 | 76 | 88 |
| Wash clothes: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,218 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 75 | 66 | 84 | 77 |
| Nurse self for colds or flu: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,212 | 915 | 1,043 | 759 |
| Percent | 76 | 74 | 84 | 86 |
| Do light housework: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 88 | 80 | 96 | 89 |
| Prepare own meals: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 89 | 83 | 92 | 90 |
| Bathe self: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,223 | 915 | 1,046 | 759 |
| Percent | 93 | 92 | 96 | 98 |
| Dress self: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 95 | 93 | 98 | 98 |
| With no self-care incapacity (summary measure): | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,186 | 915 | 1,039 | 752 |
| Percent | 38 | 42 | 50 | 60 |

Table 4.—Chronic health condition and medical care: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Chronic health condition and medical care | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|------------------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Chronic health condition: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,225 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent with impairment: | | | | |
| Circulatory | 63 | 52 | 51 | 46 |
| Musculoskeletal | 54 | 41 | 42 | 43 |
| Digestive | 18 | 26 | 15 | 20 |
| Respiratory | 15 | 24 | 11 | 20 |
| Mental | 14 | 9 | 12 | 10 |
| Endocrine, nutritional, and metabolic | 11 | 6 | 13 | 8 |
| Genitourinary | 8 | 10 | 4 | 6 |
| Skin | 7 | 4 | 5 | 2 |
| Neoplasm | 5 | 7 | 5 | 3 |
| Nervous | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| Infective parasitic | 1 | (¹) | (¹) | 1 |
| Medical care: | | | | |
| Most recent visit to physician: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 909 | 1,042 | 762 |
| Percent who saw physician in past year | 83 | 79 | 75 | 65 |
| Most recent hospitalization: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,212 | 915 | 1,038 | 762 |
| Percent hospitalized in past year | 20 | 30 | 14 | 21 |

¹ Less than 1 percent.

widowers, they were less often subject to digestive and respiratory complaints and somewhat more susceptible to mental and endocrine-metabolic-nutritional disorders.

More than 80 percent of the widows had seen a physician in the preceding year, and 20 percent had been hospitalized in that period. Physician contact was lower among divorced and never-married persons; widowers experienced a higher rate of hospitalization.

Housing and Diet

About half the widows owned the homes in which they lived, and nearly three-fourths resided in houses (including duplexes and rowhouses) rather than apartments, rented rooms, trailers, or hotels (table 5). Nearly all of them (93–99 percent) had access to a kitchen, tub or shower, toilet, television set, and telephone in the home. Two-thirds had the use of a washing machine as well.

Widowers lived in the same types of houses as widows and were just as likely to own them. Never-married and divorced persons were more inclined to rent and to occupy living quarters other than separate houses.

As far as structural improvements and household conveniences are concerned, widows were housed a great deal more comfortably than nonwidowed men. A surprising number of the latter group occupied homes that lacked toilets and bathing facilities.

Table 5.—Housing, household conveniences, and diet: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Housing, household conveniences, and diet | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|---------------------------------------|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Home ownership: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent sole or joint owner of home | 51 | 48 | 40 | 40 |
| Type of dwelling: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,211 | 915 | 1,038 | 762 |
| Percent living in: | | | | |
| Detached house, duplex or row house | 72 | 71 | 59 | 59 |
| Apartment | 22 | 19 | 28 | 24 |
| Hotel, roominghouse, or other | 6 | 10 | 13 | 17 |
| Access to— | | | | |
| Kitchen: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,219 | 915 | 1,043 | 762 |
| Percent with shared or sole access to kitchen | 99 | 98 | 96 | 93 |
| Flush toilet: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,222 | 915 | 1,043 | 759 |
| Percent with shared or sole access to toilet | 96 | 95 | 97 | 85 |
| Tub or shower: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,221 | 915 | 1,043 | 754 |
| Percent with shared or sole access to tub shower | 95 | 93 | 95 | 82 |
| Conveniences in home: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,043 | 762 |
| Percent with access to— | | | | |
| Television | 94 | 89 | 89 | 80 |
| Telephone | 93 | 83 | 89 | 60 |
| Washing machine | 63 | 52 | 55 | 43 |
| Diet adequacy: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,195 | 903 | 1,028 | 752 |
| Percent with diet meeting— | | | | |
| Minimum standard | 64 | 56 | 65 | 53 |
| Recommended standard | 4 | 3 | 7 | 4 |

Daily diets were graded according to standards developed by the Department of Agriculture for use with nutrition education experiments.⁶ Hardly any of the widows reported diets that met the recommended standard. Only 2 in 3 could pass the “minimum” test of diet adequacy. Even so, widows appeared to enjoy better meals than the divorced/never-married men. From the evidence on housing and diet available here, the greatest material deprivation seems to occur among the nonwidowed men.

Transportation and Social Activity

Being old and physically frail, widows had serious transportation and mobility problems (table 6). One in 4 was unable to leave home without assistance. Comparatively

⁶ See Gerald Feaster, *Agricultural Economic Report No. 220: Impact of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program on Low-Income Families*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1972.

Table 6.—Local travel: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Local travel | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|---|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Able to leave home unaided: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent | 75 | 84 | 86 | 92 |
| Means of local transportation: ¹ | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,928 | 882 | 992 | 748 |
| Percent who— | | | | |
| Drive themselves | 23 | 49 | 23 | 44 |
| Are driven by others | 78 | 55 | 66 | 43 |
| Most recent visit to— ¹ | | | | |
| Grocery store: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,755 | 842 | 973 | 725 |
| Percent in past week | 74 | 78 | 73 | 84 |
| Friend's home: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,747 | 838 | 973 | 725 |
| Percent in past week | 62 | 61 | 57 | 53 |
| Church or temple: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,748 | 842 | 970 | 719 |
| Percent in past week | 46 | 33 | 49 | 28 |
| Drugstore: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,758 | 842 | 973 | 725 |
| Percent in past week | 34 | 39 | 32 | 39 |
| Bank: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,758 | 842 | 973 | 725 |
| Percent in past week | 28 | 36 | 30 | 29 |
| Restaurant: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,741 | 842 | 973 | 721 |
| Percent in past week | 27 | 37 | 30 | 40 |
| Post office: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,758 | 842 | 973 | 725 |
| Percent in past week | 23 | 36 | 30 | 29 |

¹ Number reporting excludes persons unable to leave their home.

few drove automobiles themselves—roughly three-fourths relied on other people to drive them around town for errands or visits.

For those who could leave home, the volume of local travel in the preceding week was substantial, however. Most of the widows had been to a grocery store and to the home of a friend. About half had attended religious services, and many had eaten a meal in a restaurant and gone to a post office, bank, or drugstore during the week before the interview.

Nonwidowed women were better able to leave home than widows but experienced serious transportation problems too. They were no more likely than the widows to drive cars and were less successful at getting others to give them rides. In consequence, their pattern of local travel was nearly identical to that of the widows.

The men, both widowed and nonwidowed, had greater mobility than the women. More of them could leave the home unaided, and a significantly larger number still were able to drive. They were more likely to eat in a restaurant and visit a post office, but they did not go to the home of a friend any more often than widows and were even less likely to attend religious services.

As far as social contact is concerned, widows appear to

maintain a relatively high level of interaction (table 7). They do as well as other aged singles in this respect and seem considerably more active than the divorced/never-married men. Unlike the widows the nonwidowed men seldom entertained at home, bought presents, saw the children they had fathered, or belonged to a club or other social organization.

Income

About half the widows in this sample of low-income households received monthly income below the poverty line for a single person. Approximately 1 in 3 lived in households whose total income failed to reach the poverty standard for the unit as a whole. Most widows received social security benefits and a few received public assistance payments. Only 1 in 12 had a job at the time of the survey.

Very much the same economic profile is applicable to the other categories of aged singles (table 8). The likelihood of poverty (both individual and household) was the same in each marital group, as was the welfare reciprocity rate.

Table 7.—Social activity: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Social activity | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Contact with— | | | | |
| Neighbor: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,202 | 915 | 1,032 | 759 |
| Percent seeing weekly | 62 | 64 | 56 | 61 |
| Friend: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,217 | 915 | 1,039 | 759 |
| Percent seeing weekly | 42 | 47 | 39 | 48 |
| Relative: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,217 | 915 | 1,035 | 758 |
| Percent seeing weekly | 43 | 41 | 39 | 38 |
| Own children: | | | | |
| Number reporting ¹ | 4,242 | 696 | 318 | 253 |
| Percent seeing weekly | 74 | 71 | 53 | 45 |
| Confidant relationship: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,005 | 872 | 959 | 707 |
| Percent with at least one specially close friend | 85 | 86 | 84 | 81 |
| Entertaining and exchanging gifts: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,209 | 915 | 1,038 | 759 |
| Percent during past month who— | | | | |
| Entertained friends or relatives in home | 46 | 34 | 43 | 31 |
| Bought a present for someone | 34 | 22 | 34 | 19 |
| Member of formal organization: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,043 | 761 |
| Percent belonging to club or organization | 36 | 31 | 34 | 22 |
| Member of informal friendship group: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,203 | 908 | 1,038 | 762 |
| Percent | 39 | 30 | 41 | 34 |

¹ Excludes those with no living children.

Table 8.—Poverty status, benefit receipt, and employment status: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Poverty status, benefit receipt, and employment status | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Poverty status: | | | | |
| Own monthly income below poverty line: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,840 | 868 | 964 | 696 |
| Percent | 49 | 41 | 51 | 45 |
| Household monthly income below poverty line: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,115 | 740 | 844 | 626 |
| Percent | 37 | 33 | 35 | 34 |
| Benefit receipt: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent receiving— | | | | |
| OASDI | 88 | 90 | 79 | 88 |
| Public assistance | 15 | 14 | 17 | 20 |
| Employment status: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 5,225 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Percent currently working | 8 | 8 | 13 | 17 |

Fewer of the nonwidowed women were receiving social security benefits, and more of the nonwidowed men were working. No other statistically significant differences were apparent, however. Restricting the survey to individuals with personal income below \$5,000 guarantees a uniformly low level of financial security throughout the sample and provides some assurance that observed differences in housing, diet, and transportation are not merely the result of different income distributions. Robert Atchley points out that the failure to control for economic factors has been a serious shortcoming of many comparative studies involving widows.⁷

Attitudes and Preferences

Low-income widows registered surprisingly few complaints about their houses, neighborhoods, diets, and even their financial situations (tables 9 and 10). A clear majority were "very satisfied" with the state of repair, comfort, and appearance of their homes. Two in 3 approved of their neighbors and described their own neighborhoods as safe and convenient; half of them also called the neighborhoods attractive. Nearly all felt they got enough to eat, and more than half said they always ate the proper kinds of food. Only half of them worried even "once in a while" about money. A third of these widows perceived a decline in their financial situation over the preceding decade, and less than a fifth felt poorer than other aged persons in the community.

To a remarkable degree, everyone else felt the same way about himself and his own situation. Widowers worried less

Table 9.—Attitude toward housing, neighborhood, and diet: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Attitude toward housing, neighborhood, and diet | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|---------------------------------------|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Housing: | | | | |
| Home comfort: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,920 | 853 | 998 | 717 |
| Percent very satisfied | 79 | 75 | 75 | 67 |
| Appearance of home: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,941 | 856 | 1,001 | 720 |
| Percent very satisfied | 71 | 68 | 70 | 62 |
| Home repair: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,930 | 853 | 998 | 720 |
| Percent very satisfied | 63 | 62 | 56 | 60 |
| Neighborhood: | | | | |
| Safety: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,937 | 853 | 1,005 | 730 |
| Percent very satisfied | 67 | 69 | 56 | 63 |
| Convenience: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,929 | 839 | 1,001 | 728 |
| Percent very satisfied | 69 | 71 | 70 | 66 |
| Attractiveness: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,927 | 853 | 1,005 | 732 |
| Percent very satisfied | 46 | 46 | 44 | 40 |
| Approval of neighbors: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,905 | 848 | 977 | 722 |
| Percent approving all or most | 67 | 70 | 65 | 67 |
| Diet: | | | | |
| Quantity of food: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,930 | 851 | 1,005 | 727 |
| Percent always getting enough to eat | 88 | 88 | 87 | 82 |
| Quality of food: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,934 | 849 | 1,001 | 718 |
| Percent always eating right type of food | 55 | 55 | 63 | 53 |

about money, nonwidowed women were a little more confident about the quality of their diet and somewhat less reassured about neighborhood safety; nonwidowed men were less often satisfied with the comfort of their homes. Otherwise, as far as attitude toward the immediate environment is concerned, no perceptible difference between widows and the other groups was noted.

Nor was any significant difference apparent in the choices people made regarding desired changes for the future (table 11). Increased income was far and away the leading choice, followed by increased contact with friends, better transportation, more recreational activity, improved medical care, and a new place to live. The order of choice was remarkably uniform in each of the four subgroups, as was the specific rate at which each suggestion was endorsed.

Conclusions

How do widows fare in comparison with other aged singles with low to moderate income? On the whole, not too bad. Their special difficulty consists of reduced mobility and a few specific health complaints. Widows were most

⁷See Robert C. Atchley, "Dimensions of Widowhood in Later Life," *The Gerontologist*, April 1975.

Table 10.—Attitude toward money worries and level of living: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Attitude toward money worries and level of living | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Money worries: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,926 | 845 | 998 | 732 |
| Percent who worry at least once in a while | 52 | 42 | 49 | 44 |
| Level of living: | | | | |
| Compared with— | | | | |
| Own level 10 years ago: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,926 | 845 | 994 | 732 |
| Percent who consider current level lower | 35 | 41 | 31 | 42 |
| Current level for aged peers: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,923 | 835 | 998 | 729 |
| Percent who consider own level lower | 15 | 14 | 16 | 17 |

likely to be weak physically, housebound, and subject to circulatory and musculoskeletal health disorders. Little distinguished them from all three types of unmarried status beyond this minor theme of physical frailty.

In general, as far as measures of health and housing are concerned, widows were most like widowers and least like the nonwidowed of both sexes. Widows and widowers suffered many activity limitations and were often unable to accomplish the tasks of daily living without assistance from friends or relatives. Nonwidows were younger, in better physical condition, and more self-sufficient with regard to independent living. They were not as well-housed, however. Divorced/never-married men seemed to be living the least comfortably of all.

Widows did not differ from others in the survey in their attitudes or opinions about their immediate surroundings, socioeconomic status, or social lifespaces. The same hierarchy of change preferences was observed for each marital status, and the degree of satisfaction with specific elements of the immediate situation was remarkably similar for all four groups.

A great deal has been written about the social integration/isolation of widows. Nothing in the current data suggests that widows wind up more isolated than anyone else passing through later life without a spouse. Widows resembled the others with respect to living alone, talking to friends and neighbors, having a confidant, and visiting a friend's home. The differences observed generally pointed to greater rather than less social integration and interaction among widows.

Widows retained stronger bonds to organized religion than did the men in the survey, and they observed a number of social amenities that were comparatively rare among the

Table 11.—Preferred changes in lifestyle: Number and percent of low-income aged population, by marital status and sex

[Numbers in thousands]

| Preferred changes in lifestyle | Widows | Widowers | Divorced, separated, and never-married | |
|--|--------|----------|--|-----|
| | | | Women | Men |
| Total number | 5,226 | 915 | 1,046 | 762 |
| Desire for— | | | | |
| More money: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,934 | 845 | 998 | 732 |
| Percent wanting higher income | 75 | 74 | 75 | 74 |
| Increased social contact: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,929 | 845 | 998 | 728 |
| Percent who want to see friends more often | 36 | 40 | 29 | 30 |
| Better transportation: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,923 | 845 | 998 | 728 |
| Percent | 31 | 25 | 29 | 29 |
| More activities: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,919 | 845 | 998 | 728 |
| Percent who want more things to do | 24 | 29 | 21 | 29 |
| Better medical care: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,922 | 845 | 998 | 732 |
| Percent | 23 | 24 | 21 | 27 |
| Living elsewhere: | | | | |
| Number reporting | 4,918 | 845 | 998 | 728 |
| Percent who would rather live elsewhere | 14 | 17 | 16 | 21 |

men—entertaining friends and relatives in the home and exchanging presents, for example.⁸ Widows seemed close to their children. Compared with nonwidowed men and women, the widowed were more likely to have living children, share a home with them, and keep in touch with their sons and daughters on a regular basis. If one insists on describing aged widows as socially marginal or isolated, it can only be in comparison with the lifestyles they themselves maintained when they were younger and married or with their aged peers who retain a spouse in later life. To a greater extent than other aged singles at comparable income levels, these widows enjoy a relatively broad and active social life.

As to the question raised originally—are aged widows basically different from other unmarried elderly persons or simply more numerous—it is hard to sustain a belief in the uniqueness or special plight of widows with the data available here. Admittedly, the SLIAD study offers us little information on personality variation or social-psychological adjustment. Neither is it possible to break out the “other singles” category to compare widows with divorced men, with separated women, with never-married men, etc. The sampling plan did not generate enough of these cases to support independent estimates for each non-widowed marital status group. Lumping the divorced,

⁸ For a similar result with respect to male-female differences in religious participation, see Marc Petrowsky, “Marital Status, Sex, and Social Networks of the Elderly,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November 1976.

separated, and never-married persons into a single "nonwidowed" category may mask important differences between the two components. Within these data and sample limitations, however, SLIAD produced a reasonably clear and consistent image of the comparative status of aged widows. They may be old and physically shaky, but they are at least as well-housed, well-fed, socially integrated, and satisfied with themselves and their immediate surroundings as anyone else. At or around the poverty line, aged widows seem to hold their own.

The continuing preoccupation with widows seems best explained by their numbers and special claim to popular sympathy. In 1970, more than half the noninstitutionalized women past age 65 were widows. At the upper age ranges—age 80 and older—widows constituted nearly three-fourths of the total noninstitutionalized female population. Since they are so numerous and because their financial position has always been precarious in the aggregate, much of the public policy discussion about old age has centered on widows and their needs. One need not do less for these widows, but it does seem unwise to focus on their needs to the exclusion of other aged singles. The SLIAD data show that widows are not specially disadvantaged vis-a-vis other aged persons who get along without a spouse or a comfortable income.

One should also note that widows are not more likely to be poor in old age than are many other single persons. In its latest poverty report, the Bureau of the Census reported the following poverty rates for aged persons not living with a spouse: Separated women, 36.3 percent; separated men, 30.2 percent; divorced women, 26.7 percent; never-married men, 24.0 percent; widowed women, 21.7 percent; never-married women, 17.9 percent; widowed men, 16.2 percent; and divorced men, 15.2 percent.⁹ It is only when they are compared with married persons (7.5 percent) that widows appear specially prone to poverty. It seems reasonable to

⁹ See U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, **Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1977**, Series P-60, No. 119, March 1979.

conclude that advanced age and the absence of a spouse determine economic hardship rather than widowhood per se.

In considering social research on later life, it is hard to argue with Payne and Whittington¹⁰—one simply cannot go on studying widows as if they were the only old people worthy of independent research. Widowhood among women is not intrinsically more interesting than widowhood among men, or divorce, or a lifetime without marriage. Felix Berardo's discussion¹¹ of widowers illustrates the point, as do any number of gritty descriptions of "skid row" populations consisting largely of divorced and never-married men.¹² The fact that comparatively few of them exist is in itself a theoretically compelling reason for paying particular attention to them.

Many structural and contextual theories predict special difficulty for persons in a type of marital status that is unusual for their age and sex. Zena Blau notes the effect of these structural factors on friendship patterns, and Walter Martin attempts to relate them to social stress and eventual mental illness.¹³ It is time-consuming and expensive to draw samples that contain sufficient numbers of cases in these rare categories and virtually impossible to find secondary sources that combine adequate data sets with satisfactory sample representation. The definite need exists, however, to enlarge the scope of current research to cover these population segments and to deal with the analytical questions they pose. It is time to redefine the study of marital status in old age so that it covers more than married persons and elderly women whose husbands have died.

¹⁰ Barbara Payne and Frank Whittington, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Felix Berardo, "Survivorship and Social Isolation: The Case of the Aged Widower," *The Family Coordinator*, January 1970.

¹² See, for example, Joyce Stephens, **Loners, Losers and Lovers: Elderly Tenants in a Slum Hotel**, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1976.

¹³ Zena Smith Blau, "Structural Constraints on Friendship in Old Age," *American Sociological Review*, June 1961; Walter Martin, "Status Integration, Social Stress, and Mental Illness: Accounting for Marital Status Variations in Mental Hospitalization Rates," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, September 1976.