Prize Winner

Single-Person Households and Aspects of Retirement

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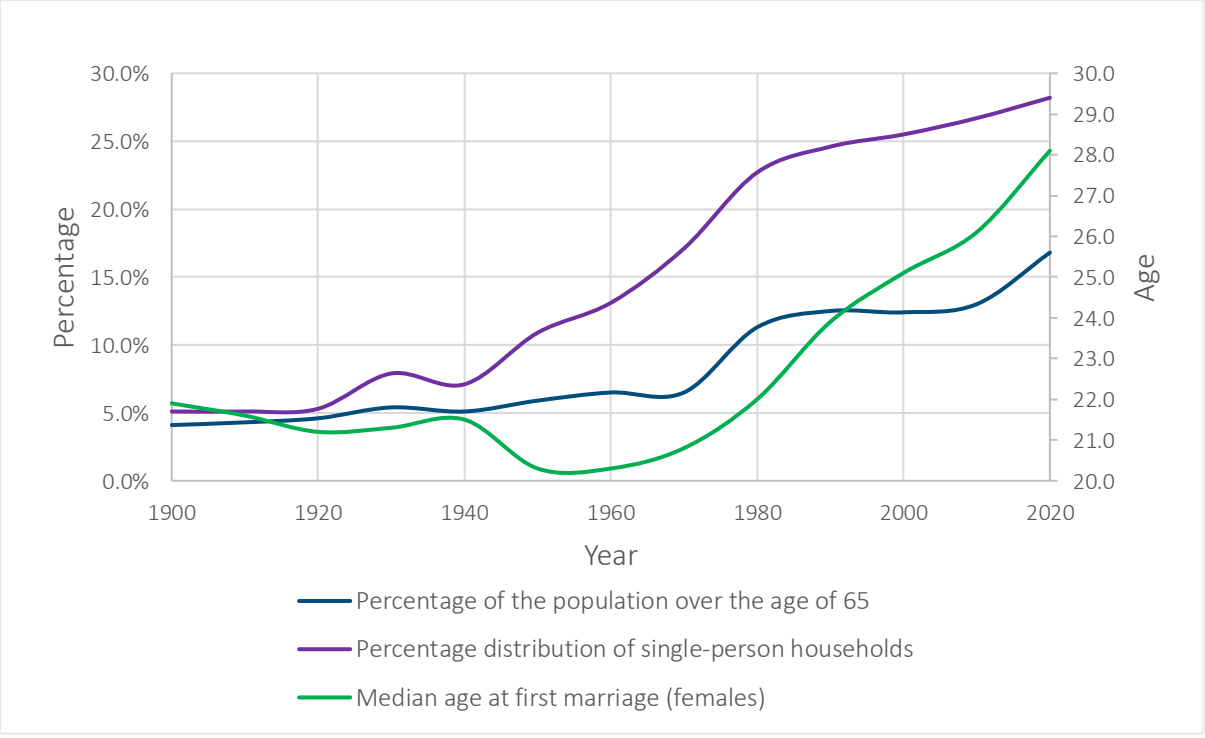
INTRODUCTION

A single-person household is a household consisting of one individual living alone in a housing unit, without any co-residents, family members, or roommates. From 1790 to 1890, the percentage of single-person households in the United States remained between 3% and 4% of all household sizes. In contrast, the percentage of single-person households has risen from 5.1% in 1900 to 28.2% in 2020 (Figure 1). The rise in single-person households is driven by a complex interplay of demographic shifts, economic conditions, and social changes. Some demographic shifts that can be associated with the increase include the increase in the median age at first marriage and an aging population (Figure 1).

Figure 1

BROAD DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES 1900-2020



Source: United States Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2020.

Kreider & Vespa[1] explored shifts in the demographic traits of single-person households over time. Higher life expectancy among men is correlated with a reduced likelihood of single-person households, while higher per capita gross domestic product (GDP) correlates with a greater likelihood of individuals living alone. Men's life expectancy impacts the trend in single-person households, as older married women are less likely to live alone if their husbands live longer. GDP per capita serves as a proxy for economic conditions, reflecting factors such as individuals having enough disposable income to support independent living and the availability of housing that accommodates this lifestyle.

The association between single-person households and GDP per capita is reflected worldwide.
A visualization of the share of single-person households plotted against GDP per capita from 1985 to 2018 can be observed at the following link: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/one-person-households-vs-gdp-per-capita?time=2018.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the impact of the growth in single living within the context of the retirement landscape, focussing on aspects such as mortality, health, environmental impacts, the timing of retirement, care giving, and inflationary effects.

MORTALITY

Ng *et al.*[2] examined the relationship between living alone and mortality risk among older adults in Västerbotten County, Sweden, by integrating data from two comprehensive longitudinal datasets. The study analyzed data from 22,226 men and 23,390 women aged 50 and 60 years who participated in the Västerbotten Intervention Program from 1990 to 2006, totaling 445,823 person-years of observation. Men and women living alone without children at home had a significantly higher risk of mortality compared to those living with a partner and children at home (adjusted hazard ratio [HR]: 1.38 for men; 1.27 for women). Living alone was a stronger predictor of mortality than several chronic disease risk factors or lack of social capital. Hence, interventions focusing on enhancing social support and designing community-based preventive strategies may mitigate the adverse health effects associated with living alone.

Using data from 4,888 participants of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, transitions in living arrangements between 2004–2005 and 2008–2009 were analyzed by Abell & Steptoe,[3] alongside subsequent mortality over an average follow-up of 8.5 years. Participants living alone had a higher risk of mortality (hazard ratio [HR]: 1.20; 95% Confidence Interval: 1.04–1.38). Those transitioning to living alone following divorce or bereavement exhibited an even greater risk (HR: 1.34; 95% Confidence Interval: 1.01–1.79), whereas moving to living alone for other reasons showed no increased mortality risk. Psychosocial factors, including depression, loneliness, and mobility impairments, partially explained these associations, though two-thirds of the relationship remained unexplained. Targeted interventions addressing loneliness, mobility, and social support are considerations to mitigate these risks among older adults.

HEALTH

Lee & Lee[4] investigate differences in health behaviors, health status, disease prevalence, and medical needs between one-person elderly households and multi-person households in Korea. Data from the 2017 Community Health Survey were analyzed, encompassing 66,211 individuals aged 60 or older. Health behaviors (nutrition, exercise, smoking, and drinking), subjective and objective health status, disease prevalence, and medical access were compared between one-person and multi-person households. One-person elderly households exhibited poorer health behaviors, including less exercise, higher salt intake, and lower nutritional knowledge. They reported worse subjective health, higher levels of stress, and greater prevalence of depression. Objective health markers, such as disease prevalence, were significantly higher in one-person households. Moreover, barriers to accessing healthcare, including regular health exams and dental care, were more pronounced in single-person households.

This study underscores the heightened medical vulnerabilities of elderly individuals living alone. Comprehensive policy interventions, including health promotion programs and enhanced healthcare accessibility, are essential to address the unmet needs of this growing population.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Williams[5] notes that within the United Kingdom (UK) context, one-person households consume more resources per capita, such as energy, land, and materials, than larger households. This trend is expected to increase resource demand and environmental strain over the coming decades. Affluent single-person households have a higher ecological footprint, impacting energy and material consumption significantly. It is noted that while the UK government acknowledges the environmental impact of this demographic shift, current policies lack targeted measures to address the inefficiencies of single-person households. Existing policies focus on general recycling, carbon reduction, and housing density but lack specific strategies for this group's resource demands. Williams suggests various policy options, including fiscal incentives or taxes on under-occupied housing, redesigning council tax to reflect household occupancy, and increasing the availability of smaller, efficient housing. Additional recommendations emphasise educating single-person households on greener lifestyle choices and implementing a national land-use strategy to manage housing demand sustainably.

While an increase in council tax to reflect household occupancy could promote more efficient resource use, it risks placing undue financial and social pressure on single-person retirees. Balancing environmental objectives with the needs of vulnerable populations will be critical to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes.

TIMING OF RETIREMENT

Eismann, Henkens, & Kalmijn[6] use data from the Netherlands to examine non-financial reasons as to why single workers prefer to retire later than their partnered counterparts. The authors found that single workers attribute more social value to work as a source of social interaction and structure, which partners may already gain from their relationships. The study also emphasizes the influence of spousal preferences on partnered workers' retirement choices. Spouses can either "push" workers to continue or "pull" them toward retirement, shaping their retirement timing.

The insights provided emphasize the importance for policymakers to consider relationship status and social contexts when designing retirement-related programs or interventions. For single older workers, targeted efforts to facilitate social integration post-retirement could help address concerns about losing work's structural and social benefits. Future research should explore the broader implications of these findings across diverse contexts, ensuring that retirement policies are inclusive and responsive to the evolving demographics of aging populations.

CAREGIVING

Pacheco Barzallo *et al.*[7] observe that as single-person households increase, traditional family caregiving becomes less viable. This trend is coupled with a higher labor force participation by women and declining fertility rates, leading to a decline in the availability of unpaid family caregivers. Consequently, health systems are under pressure to transition from relying on family caregivers to professional home care solutions. The study estimates the economic value of caregiving tasks, showing the significant costs that would arise if professional care replaced unpaid family caregivers.

To address caregiving gaps in single-person households, the study advocates for adapting long-term care policies to reflect demographic realities, ensuring the sustainability of caregiving support.

Various policy recommendations could include expanding home-based care services, developing technological solutions (such as the use of telehealth, wearable devices and other technologies to monitor health), encouraging

co-housing arrangements or shared caregiving cooperatives for single retirees to pool resources and support, and introducing tax breaks or financial support for retirees needing care or to incentivize caregivers.

INFLATIONARY EFFECTS

One-person households may have different consumption patterns compared to larger households. They might spend more on convenience goods and services, which could drive up prices in those sectors. As demand shifts towards products and services tailored for individuals, this could lead to localized inflation in those markets.

Hsueh, Lin, & Peng[8] discuss the characteristics and housing decisions of single-person households in Taiwan. The study indicates that the number of single-person households is rising significantly, with increasing preferences for homeownership and larger living spaces. This growth in demand, especially in urban areas, can place upward pressure on housing prices and rents, contributing to inflation. The concentration of single-person households in urban centers leads to higher demand in already constrained housing markets. The resultant price increases for housing could have a cascading effect on overall living costs. Single female households are increasingly becoming homeowners and seeking larger spaces, which could alter traditional housing market dynamics, influencing demand and prices in certain segments.

CONCLUSION

The rise of single-person households has profound implications for retirement, encompassing aspects of health, mortality, caregiving, environmental sustainability, and economic pressures. Single retirees face heightened health risks and vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for targeted healthcare policies and social interventions. The environmental impact of single living necessitates consideration of innovative policies to address resource inefficiencies without disproportionately burdening retirees. Additionally, caregiving systems must evolve to accommodate the declining availability of unpaid family caregivers, while retirement policies would benefit from considering the unique social and structural needs of single workers. Finally, the inflationary effects of single-person households on housing and consumer goods emphasize the need for inclusive economic strategies. A comprehensive approach that balances social, economic, and environmental concerns is essential to ensure the well-being and sustainability of this growing demographic.

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