Aging Alone:
Overview, Trends, and Data Sources

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Today's talk

1) Background: Changing Family Networks and Aging

2) Aging Alone: Measurement and Meaning

3) Levels and Trends

4) Data Sources

5) Data Gaps and Open Questions

Family members key for older adult well-being

- Health and Survival
  - Care for disabled & management of chronic illnesses
  - Use of institutional care
  - Survival

- Social integration/Loneliness
  - Kin comprise the majority of older adults' conversation networks, and as primary confidantes
  - Primary source of social support

- Economic well-being
  - Making ends meet and building wealth

Demographic Changes Affect Family Networks and Kin Availability

- Decrease in currently married adults
  - Lower marriage rates, increased cohabitation, increased gray divorce
- Fertility decline
  - Increased childlessness, and more people without siblings
  - Fewer cousins, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews
- Mortality decline
  - Increases availability of kin at all ages.
- More complex families
  - More higher order marriages, more step-children, living apart together

Aging Alone: Measurement

- Kinless adults: simultaneous lacking multiple family ties
  - No spouse or biological children
  - No spouse/partner or children of any type
  - No spouse/partner, children, parents, siblings
- Adults living alone
  - May or may not have family ties, or other network connections
- Elder Orphans
 - Those living alone with little to no support system

Aging Alone: Pathways

- For people characterized as aging alone (kinless, living alone, elder orphans), this may be:
  - Short-term or lifelong
  - Expected or unexpected
- Many pathways to aging alone
  - Divorce, Widowhood
  - Childlessness, Death of child(ren)
  - Living far from kin
  - Estranged from kin
  - May have social ties not serving their needs

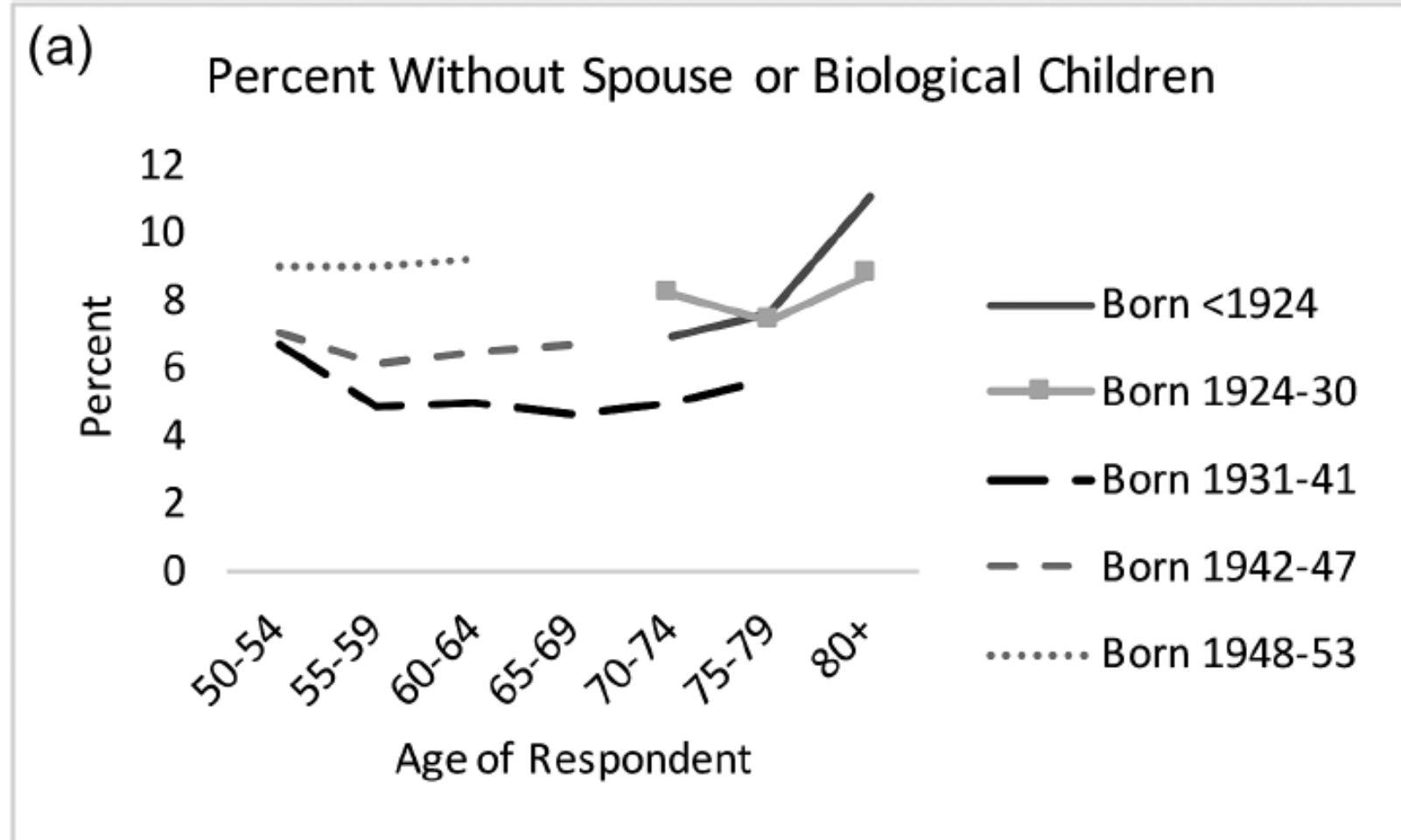# Levels of lacking close kin in the U.S. among adults 55+ (1998-2010)

- **Partner/Spouse**
  - 38.5% lack a spouse
  - 36.3% no spouse/cohabiting partner
- **Children (biological, step, adopted)**
  - 10.5% no biological children
  - 8% no children of any type

- **Parents**
  - 79.1% no biological parents
- **Siblings**
  - 16.6% no biological siblings

Source: Margolis and Verdery (2017) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences*

Levels of Kinless U.S. 55+ Adults
Simultaneously lacking kin types (1998-2010)
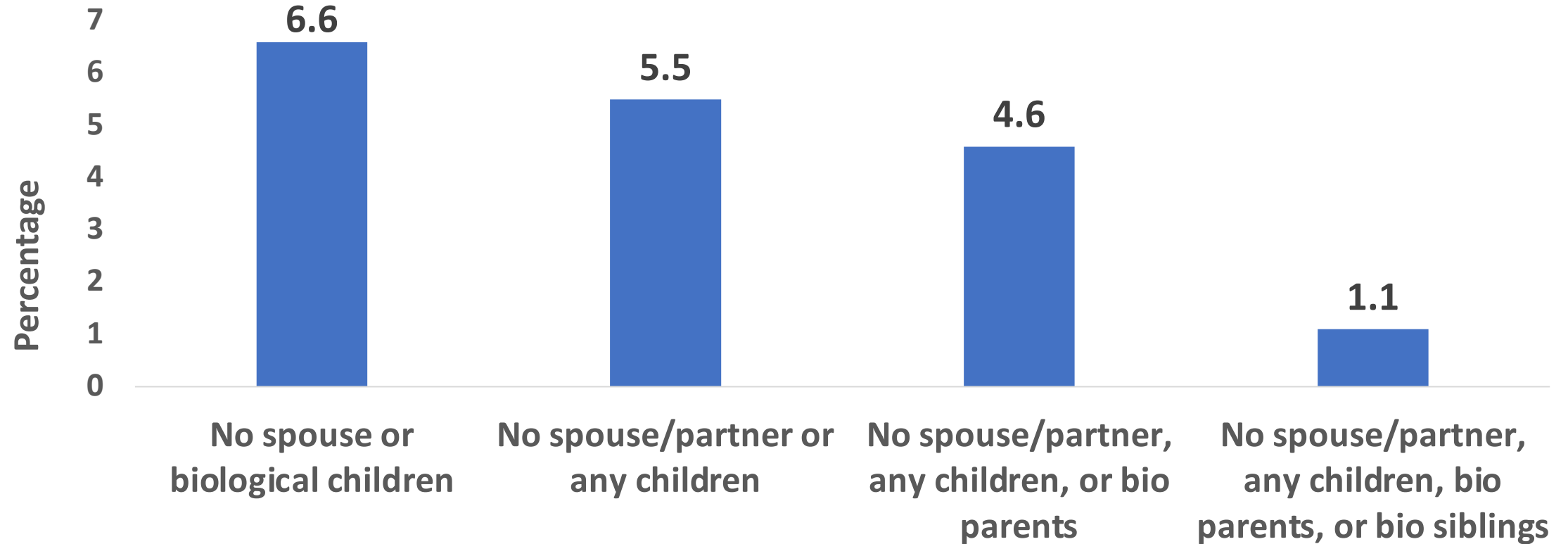
Source: Margolis and Verdery (2017) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences*
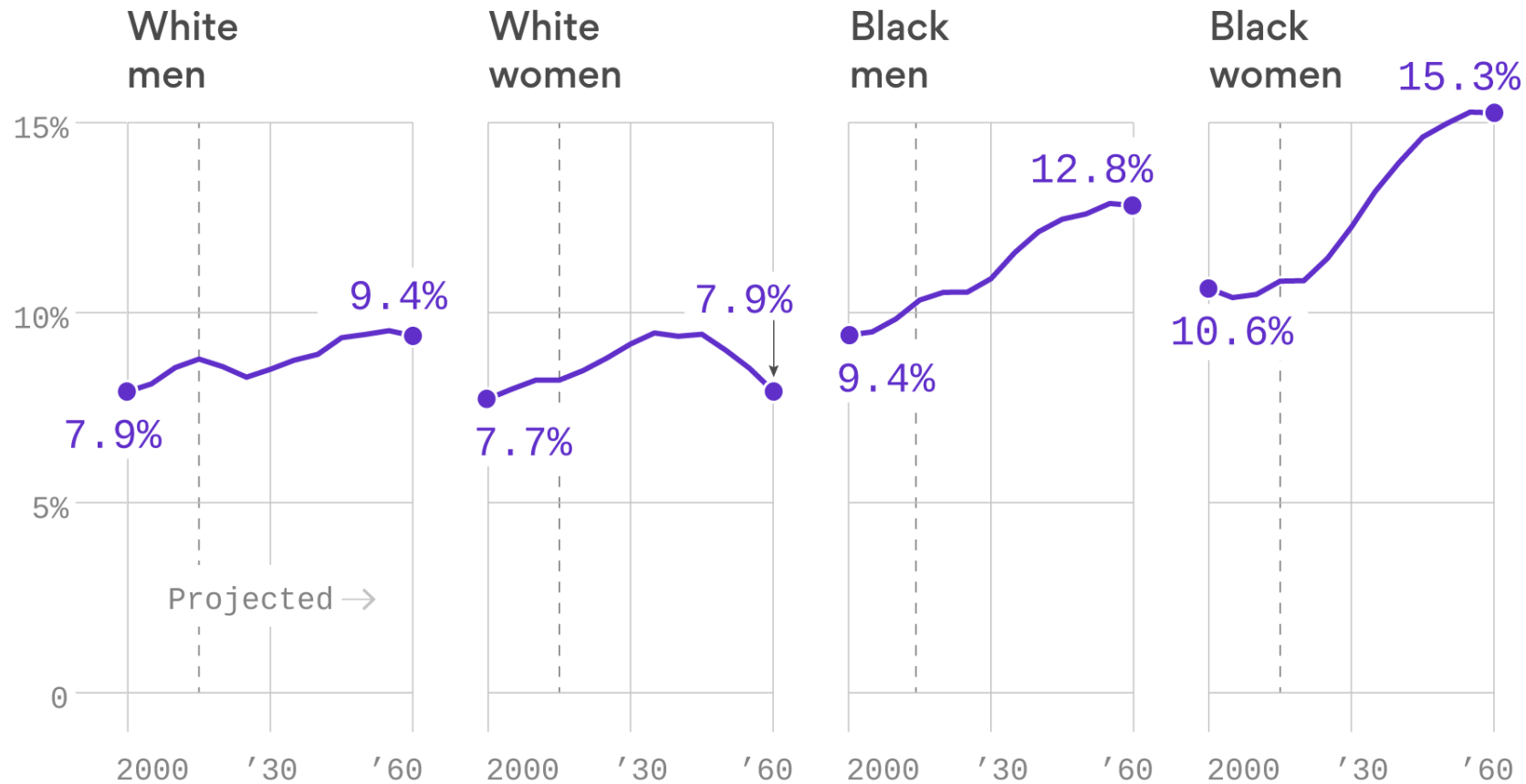
% No Spouse or Biological Children is Increasing across Cohorts

(a) Percent Without Spouse or Biological Children

Legend:
- Born <1924
- Born 1924-30
- Born 1931-41
- Born 1942-47
- Born 1948-53

Source: Margolis and Verdery (2017) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences*

How is kinlessness likely to evolve in the US?

Percent of people 50 and older without children or a living partner

White men — 7.9% → 9.4%
White women — 7.7% → 7.9%
Black men — 9.4% → 12.8%
Black women — 10.6% → 15.3%

Source: Verdery and Margolis, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 2017;
Chart: Lazaro Gamio / Axios

Kinless Older Adults in the U.S.

Older adults without family are not uncommon

- 7%: no spouse or biological children

- 1%: no spouse/children/parents/siblings

- Highly disadvantaged group across multiple measures: Race, health, disability, education (men), mortality, living alone

- Becoming more prevalent for more recent birth cohorts

Sources: Margolis and Verdery (2017) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences,*
Verdery and Margolis (2017 in PNAS,
Patterson, Margolis & Verdery (2020) Population Studies

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Expected increase in kinless-ness in next 40 years

- Larger prevalence increases for NH Black population

- Much greater numbers b/c population aging & growth

- Driven by cohort replacement

- Greater projected expected increases than many key health burdens in 2060
  - No spouse or bio children (21.3 m)
  - Diabetes (16.9m)
  - Alzheimer's dementia (13.8m)

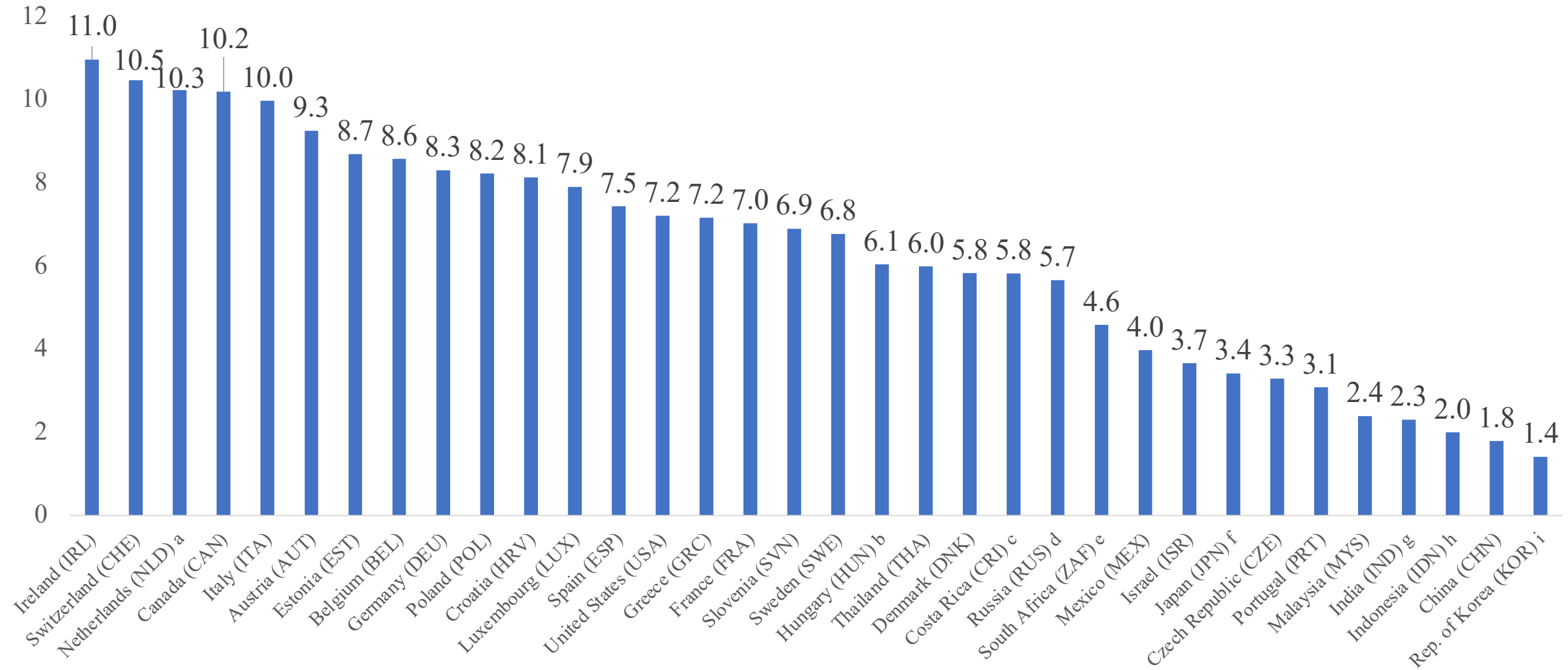# Other Definitions of Aging Alone Estimate Even Higher Levels

Elder Orphans

- Estimates that 22% of US adults 65+ live alone and have little to no support system (Carney 2016)
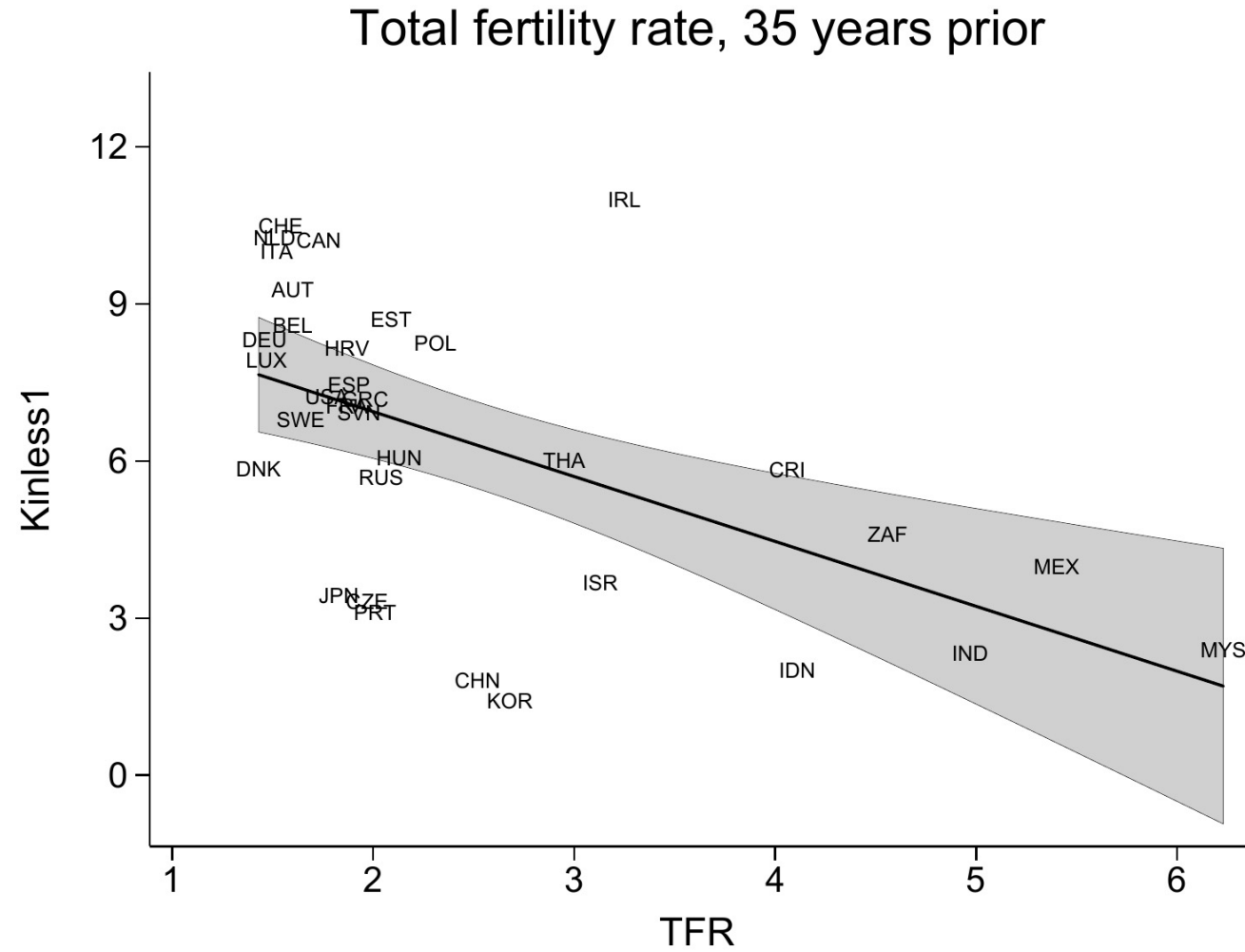
Living Alone

- 27% of adults 60+ in the US now live alone.

Percentage of Adults 50+ with No Spouse or Child Across Countries

We can expect increases in kinlessness as more countries have experienced fertility decline

Total fertility rate, 35 years prior

$Kinless1 = \alpha + \beta_1 \times TFR; \alpha = 9.42***; \beta_1 = -1.24***; R^2 = .31$
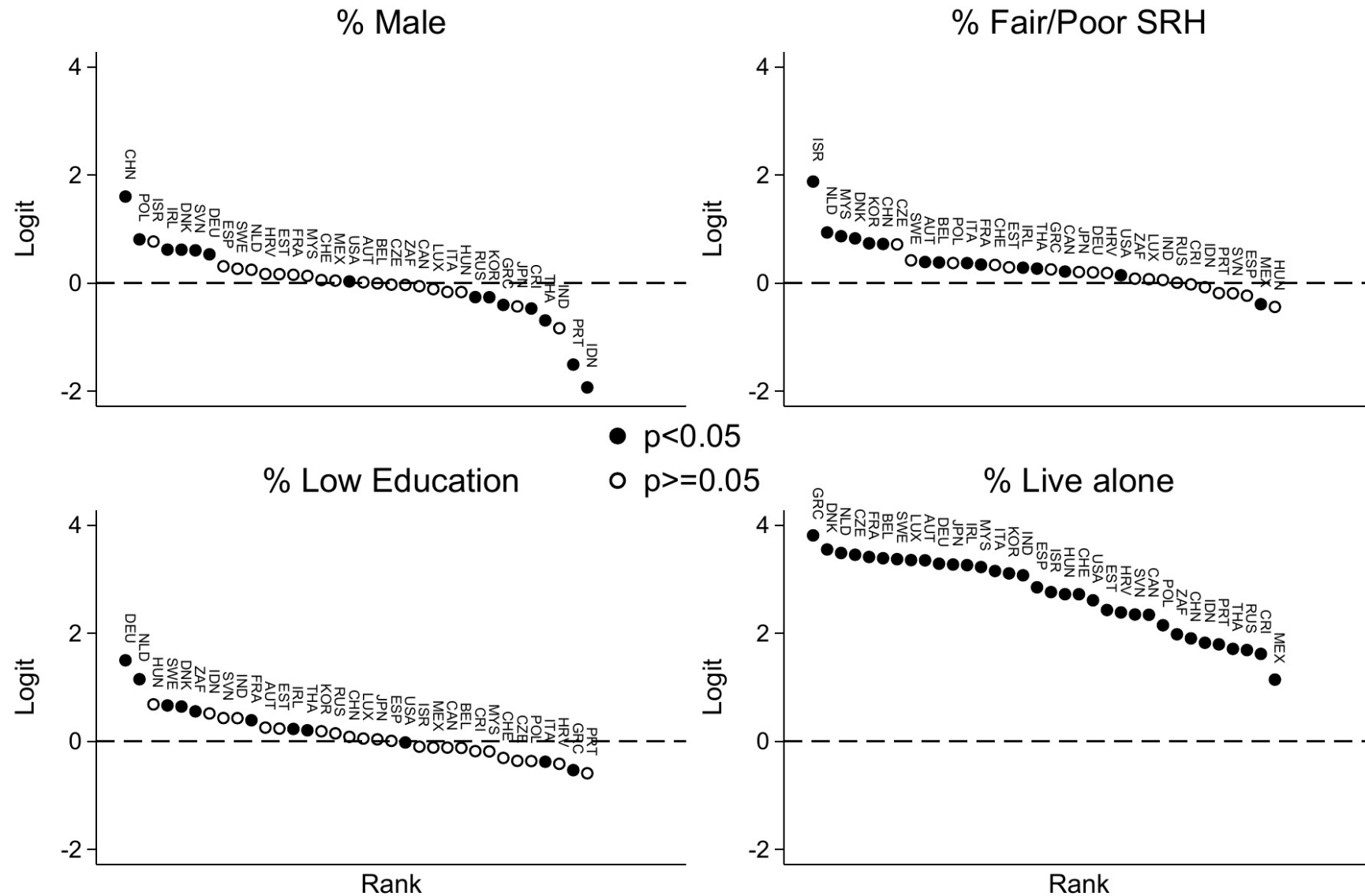
Source: Verdery, Margolis, Chai, Zhou, Rittirong, (2019) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences*.

Kinlessness raises unique challenges in different countries, even where levels are low, like in China

no living spouse or children

Men in China

Women in China
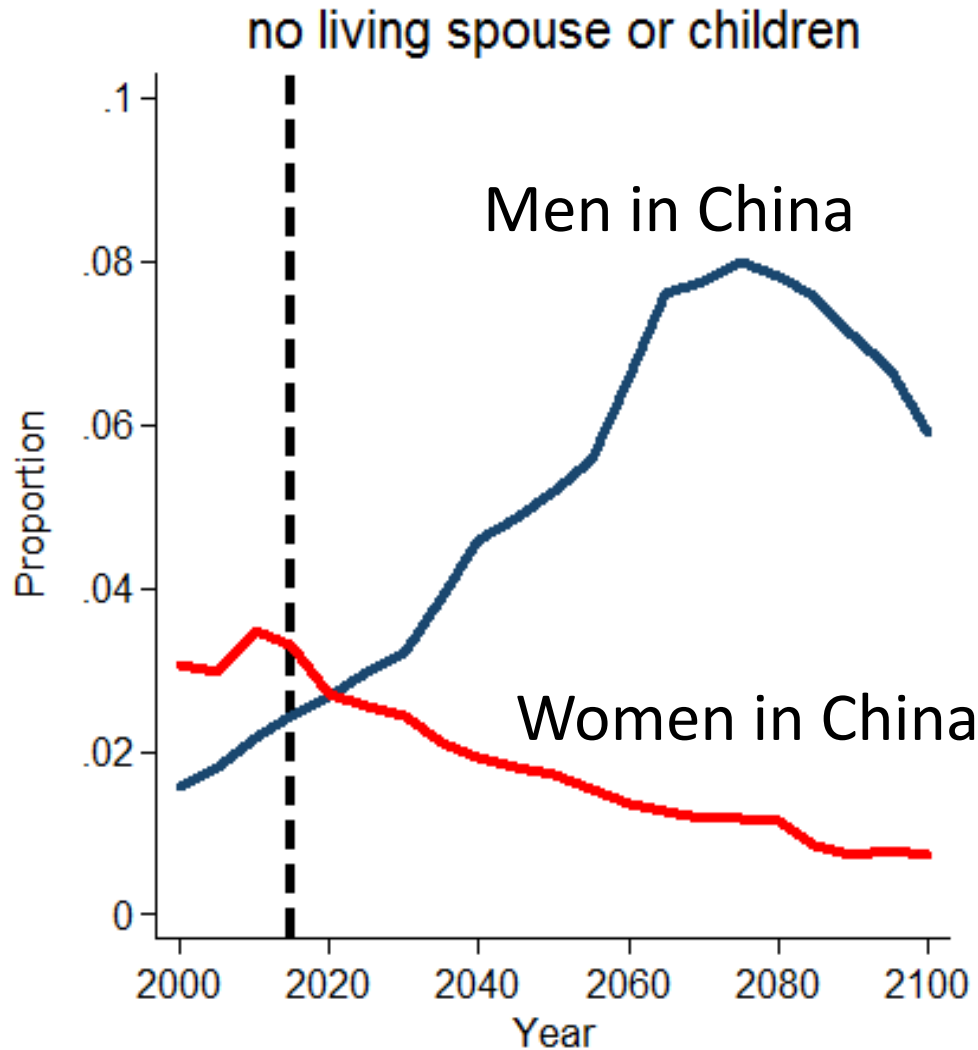
- Men challenged by marriage squeeze
- More older men without living family
- Non-negligible subpopulations without the kin that typically provide elder care
  - 1.4% without partner/children = 6.35m people
  - Those without kin are most disadvantaged
- Elder care predicated on family ties
  - Who will support those without children?
  - Who will support those with only unmarried sons?

Kinless Adults are a Heterogenous Bunch

Source: Verdery, Margolis, Chai, Zhou, Rittirong, (2019) *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences*.

Data Sources

- Kinless adults
  - Most surveys ask about partners, children, grandparents
  - Few ask about siblings, cousins, non-household kin and support (ISSP is one that does)
- Adults living alone
  - Easiest to measure due to popularity of household surveys (e.g. IPUMS)
- Elder Orphans
  - Few surveys measure social support, contact with kin, and proximity (NSHAP is a leader, NHATS)

Summary of Available Family Network Variables by Country

(HRS Family)

Country	Spouse/partner	Children (all types)	Siblings	Grandchildren	Parents
Brazil	X	X	X	X	X
China	X	X	X	X	X
Costa Rica	X	X		X	X
England	X	X	X	X	X
India	X	X	X	X	X
Indonesia	X	X	X		X
Ireland	X	X	X	X	X
S. Korea	X	X	X		X
Mexico	X	X	X	X	X
SHARE [1]	X	X	X	X	X
Thailand	X	X	X	X	X
United States	X	X	X	X	X

- **Notes:** "X" notes that the variables are available in that data set.

Data Gaps

1) Do people substitute within their networks if they have few or no kin? If so, for what types of tasks?

2) To what extent do step-children, LAT partners, siblings count as potential sources of care?

   - Measurement of step-children is complex.

3) Care gaps because of aging alone

4) Prospective aspect of kin availability

   - Many changes in families occur between waves. Direct measures vs. inference.
   - Family pathways before aging surveys even begin

5) Having kin vs. estrangement, distance, disconnection

6) Those aging alone is a heterogeneous group. Need data to keep up.

Understanding Aging Alone is Key
for Many Policy Priorities

- How can **institutions modernize policies** to acknowledge that helpers and social networks are diverse?

- How to best support older adults **aging in place**? What types of **services** will be needed?

- How can we forecast **healthcare costs**?

- How to combat **loneliness**?

- What **housing** will we need in the future?

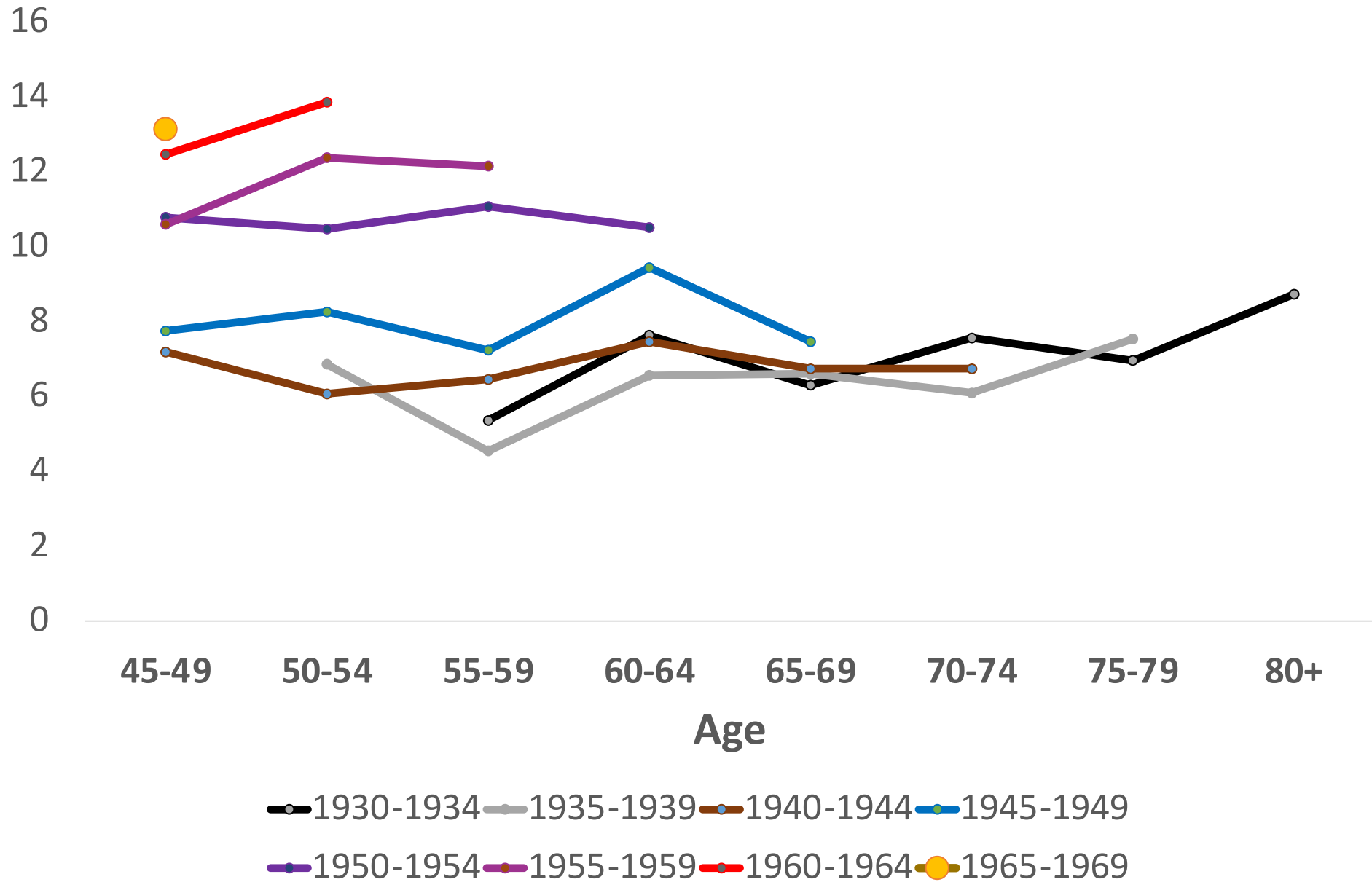- What will be our future **public transport** needs?

Thank you for inviting me.

Collaborators: Ashton Verdery and Crossnational Aging
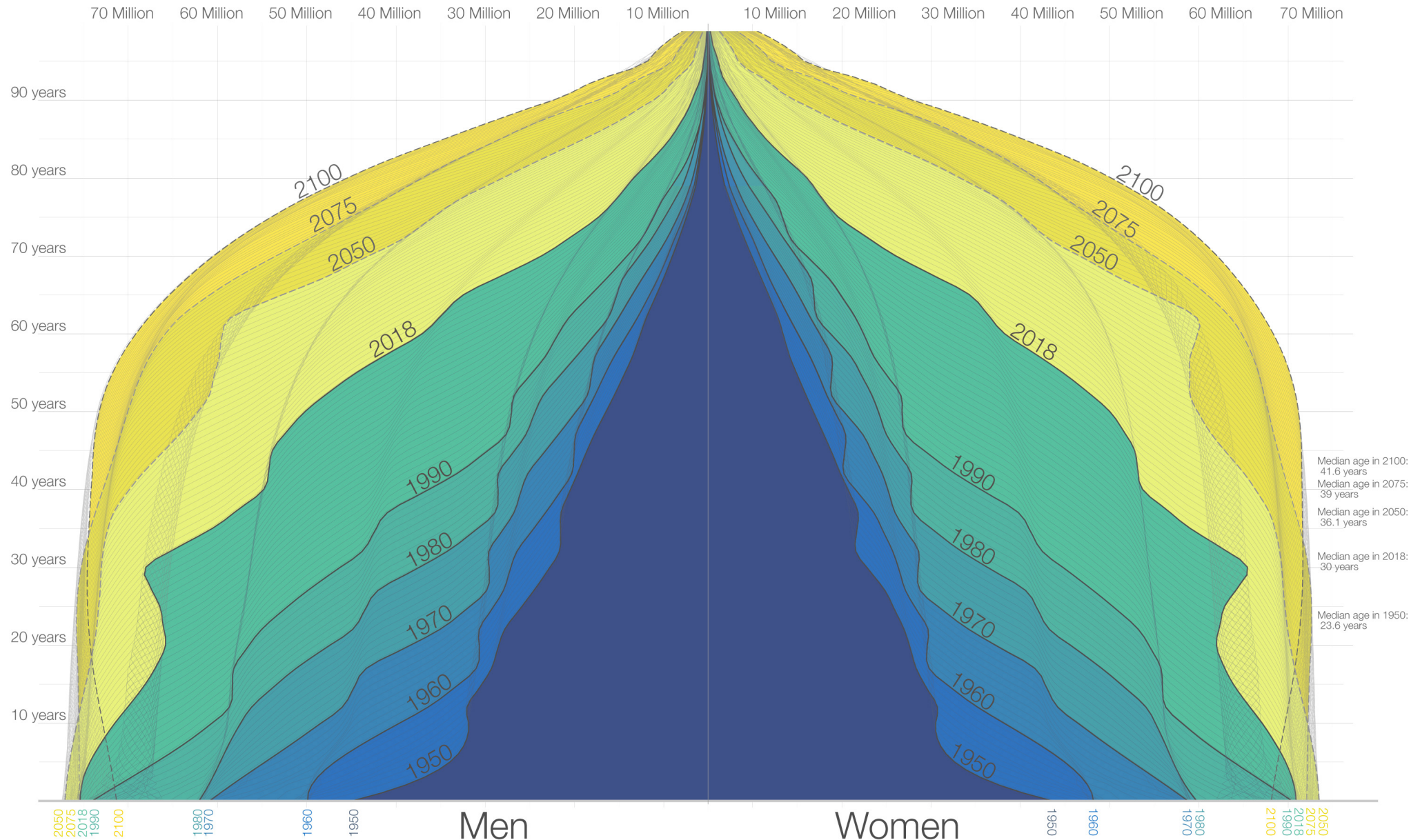Research Lab members

Grant Funding:
- National Institute of Aging (NIA)
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
- Penn State's Population Research Institute
- Network on Demography of Family Caregiving (Michigan)

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Percentage with No Living Spouse or Biological Children by Birth Cohort (Canada GSS)

Age

1930-1934   1935-1939   1940-1944   1945-1949
1950-1954   1955-1959   1960-1964   1965-1969

The Demography of the World Population from 1950 to 2100

Shown is the age distribution of the world population – by sex – from 1950 to 2018 and the *UN Population Division*'s projection until 2100.
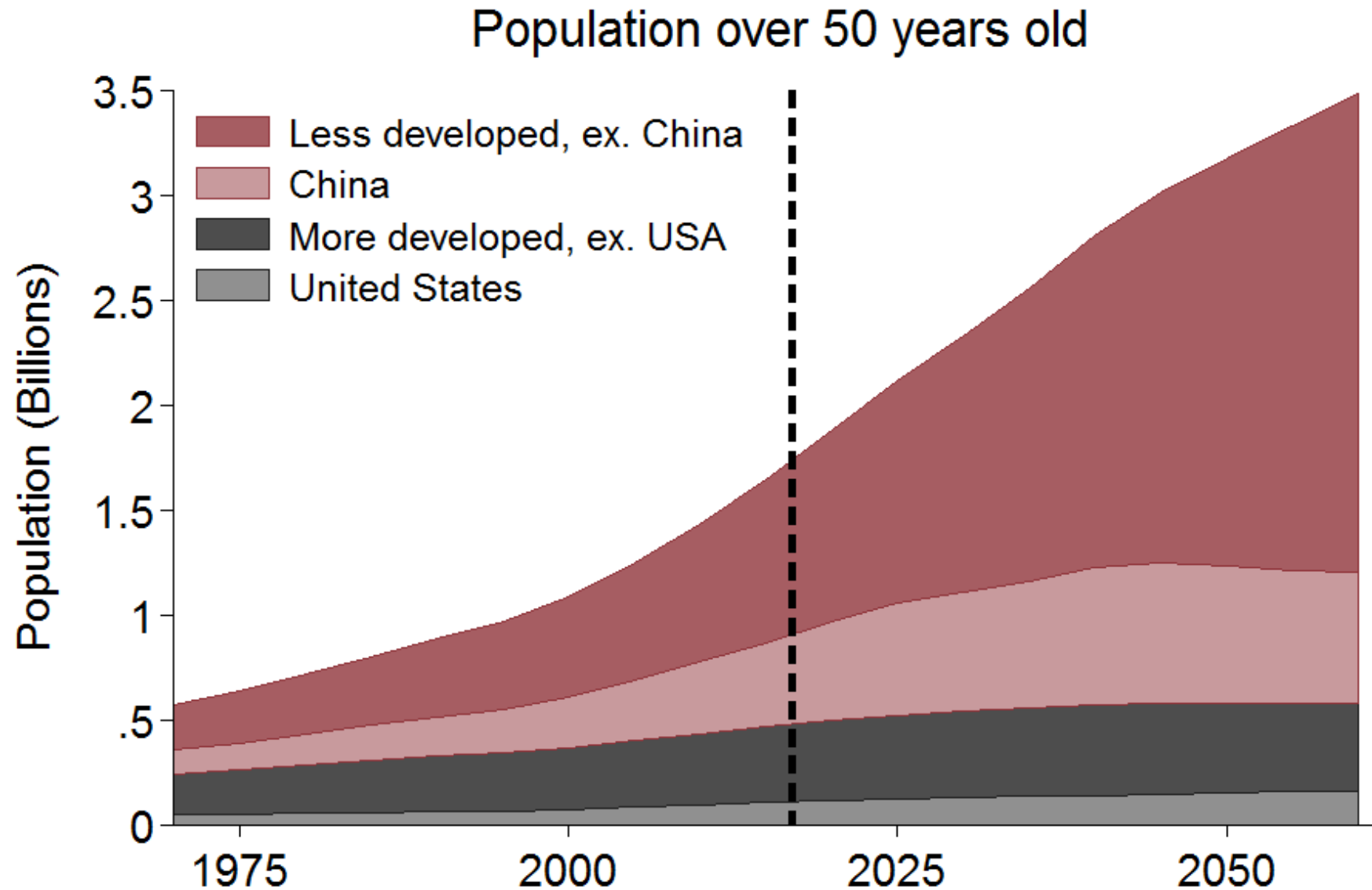
70 Million 60 Million 50 Million 40 Million 30 Million 20 Million 10 Million   10 Million 20 Million 30 Million 40 Million 50 Million 60 Million 70 Million

90 years

80 years

70 years

60 years

50 years

40 years

30 years

20 years

10 years

2100
2075
2050
2018
1990
1980
1970
1960
1950

Median age in 2100:
41.6 years
Median age in 2075:
39 years

Median age in 2050:
36.1 years

Median age in 2018:
30 years

Median age in 1950:
23.6 years

Men

Women

1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2018 2050 2075 2100

The number of older adults globally will increase

Population over 50 years old

Source: United Nations 2017