

Research explores kinless population of older adults in the U.S.

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Older adults rely on family for companionship and help with all sorts of tasks as they confront the frailties of old age. But what about older adults who have no living family members? One Penn State researcher is exploring the kinless population of older adults in the U.S. and how it is expected to change in the coming years.

Ashton Verdery, assistant professor of sociology and demography and affiliate of the Population Research Institute and the Institute for CyberScience at Penn State, is looking into emerging evidence that white older Americans may have more [family](#) available than their Black counterparts, and he suggests this gap will continue to widen in the coming decades. His work was recently published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

According to Verdery, family members who provide support to [older adults](#) can help to ensure their health, financial well-being and happiness. "Conversely, older adults without these family ties report higher rates of loneliness and experience elevated risks of chronic illness and need for care

outside of the home. As a result, older adults without close family members are some of the most disadvantaged and isolated members of society."

Verdery and his colleague, Rachel Margolis, associate professor of demography and sociology at the University of Western Ontario, made demographic projections through the year 2060 using the U.S. Census Bureau's recent national projections of core demographic rates. They used a specific method, microsimulation, which allows them to look at present and future distributions of individuals' specific family ties in addition to the total [population](#).

"Prior research looked at the size of the childless population or those without spouses, but did not look beyond those demographics. We wanted to examine the population of older adults with no family ties," Verdery explained. "From there, we studied two different groups: those without a partner or living children, and those without a partner, children, sibling or parent."

After analyzing all the data and simulations, Verdery and Margolis made projections of the population without living family members based on a number of different demographic factors, including race, sex, and life-course pathways. They compared these results to other demographic projections of major health concerns in older adulthood such as arthritis, diabetes and dementia.

They estimate there will be 21.1 million individuals over 50 years old without a living partner or biological children in these demographic groups in 2060, up from 14.9 million in 2015. The number of older adults without any living family members will increase from 1.8 million to 6.3 million.

"While historically there were few older adults without living family members, we can project more older Americans will be without close family members in the upcoming decades. This exceeds

the number of older adults suffering from conditions such as diabetes, Alzheimer's dementia, arthritis and other health concerns," said Verdery. Provided by Pennsylvania State University

The increase is due to a number of factors, including more Americans choosing not to marry or remaining childless. Additionally, in recent national projections, the Census Bureau estimates the number of Americans age 50 and older is increasing, so there will simply be more older adults in the future. Other factors include the rising divorce rate among older adults, which has more than doubled since 1990.

While the researchers found that the percent of older [adults](#) without a partner or biological children is increasing among all races, they expect that the Black population will experience higher rates of kinlessness. "We were most surprised by the large increases in percentages, especially among Black Americans," commented Verdery.

The work is important because previous research has shown that there is a 50 percent increase in survival for those with strong social relationships, which most often come from [family members](#). Increases in the population without living family may represent a growing public health concern.

"Policy makers and aging researchers should be paying attention to kinlessness because of its implications for public health, social isolation and the demand for institutional care," said Verdery. "So much attention is given to expected increases in medical conditions like diabetes or dementia, but much less attention is given to changes in the social environments that make us better able to weather such conditions. In the future, I would like to compare these findings in the U.S to other countries. I am currently working on comparisons with China and Europe."

More information: Ashton M. Verdery et al. Projections of white and black older adults without living kin in the United States, 2015 to 2060, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1710341114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1710341114)

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