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LINKING BENEFITS TO MARITAL STATUS: RACE AND SOCIAL SECURITY IN THE US

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ABSTRACT

In the US, marital status is more important than work history in determining economic security for many older women. Two-thirds of older women in the US receive spouse or widow Social Security benefits. These benefits generally require recipients to be currently married or to have had a ten-year marriage. Declining marriage rates, coupled with shorter marriages, dramatically change the distributional impact of these benefits on each cohort as they become eligible for Social Security. This paper uses June 1985, 1990, and 1995 CPS supplemental data to trace the decline in marital rates for women from five birth cohorts. We find that the proportion of persons who will be eligible as spouses or widows is decreasing modestly for whites and Hispanics, but dramatically for African Americans. This growing race gap in marital rates suggests that older black women will be particularly unlikely to qualify for these benefits.

KEYWORDS

Social Security, gender, race, marital status, economic security

JEL Codes: H550, J180

INTRODUCTION

The Social Security system is the single largest social transfer program in the United States. Roughly 97 percent of all older persons receive monthly income through this nearly universal program. Most older people receive retired worker benefits, which are based on lifetime contributions. But most older women actually receive noncontributory Social Security spouse or widow benefits, which are equal to 50 percent or 100 percent of their spouses' benefit, respectively. Even though many are eligible for retired worker benefits, 64 percent of women aged 62 and older receive spouse or widow benefits because these benefits are greater than what they would receive based on their own work record (Social Security Administration 2002). This makes marital status more important than employment status in shaping old-age financial security for many older women. The frequency and length of marriages are down, however, particularly among African

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Americans. In this paper, we explore the implications of linking benefits to marital status in the face of an unprecedented retreat from marriage.

MARRIAGE AND SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

The welfare-state literature wrestles nonstop with the merits, or demerits, of linking benefits to citizenship, paid work, unpaid work, poverty, marital status, or parental status (Joan Acker 1988; Ann Orloff 1993; Jill Quadagno 1994; Madonna Harrington Meyer 1996; Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme 1998; Ailsa McKay 2001). In the case of Social Security, retired worker benefits are linked to employment history, but spouse and widow benefits are linked to marital history. Eligibility for spouse and widow benefits is determined by the recipient's history of marriage to a covered worker. The size of that benefit is determined by the retired worker's earnings history. Benefit formulas for retired workers redistribute resources and reduce inequality in old age (Martha Ozawa 1976; Richard Burkhauser and Jennifer Warlick 1981; Michael Walzer 1988). A high-wage earner receives benefits that replace 28 percent of pre-retirement income while a low-wage earner receives benefits that replace 78 percent (Century Foundation 1998; David Koitz 1998). While retired worker benefits redistribute from higher to lower lifetime earners, spouse and widow benefits do not. Because they disproportionately reward single-earner couples with lengthy marriages, these noncontributory benefits have features that are at odds with the otherwise redistributive impact of the program (Harrington Meyer 1996).

Initially only those who contributed to Social Security through their employment were eligible to receive benefits. But because early benefits were relatively small, and the retirement test was set at a very strict $15 per month, experts worried that married men, in particular, would have difficulty supporting a couple on such a meager monthly income (Harrington Meyer 1996; Edward Berkowitz 2002). Thus, the expansion of the program began even before the first benefits were distributed. By 1939, spouse and widow benefits were granted to women who were currently married and who were not eligible for an equal or larger benefit based on their own employment record. Therefore, the size of a spouse or widow benefit was, and continues to be, unrelated to the employment history of the recipient; rather, it is determined by the earnings history of the retired worker upon whom the benefit is based. Even though they had not contributed, wives received what was called a spousal allowance equal to 50 percent of the benefit the husband was receiving (Harrington Meyer 1996; Berkowitz 2002; Social Security Administration 2002). Widows received a benefit equal to 75 percent, later raised to 100 percent, of the benefit their husband received prior to his death.

As divorce became more common in the US, Congress created a requirement that divorcées must have been married for at least twenty years

to claim a spouse or widow benefit. In 1950, Congress made the rules gender-neutral and men became eligible for both spouse and widower benefits. By 1977, the marriage requirement had been reduced to ten years (Social Security Administration 2002). Men rarely receive these benefits because their own retired worker benefits are almost always bigger. In 2000, 97 percent of spouse and widow beneficiaries were women (Social Security Administration 2002).

Table 1 shows the current eligibility guidelines. Retired workers become eligible by contributing to the system through the FICA tax, currently set at 5.6 percent for employees and an additional 5.6 percent for employers. The size of their benefit is linked to the size of their contributions over their lifetimes. Eligibility for spouse and widow benefits is based on marital status rather than contributions. Currently, married couples that apply for benefits face no length-of-marriage requirements. Those who are divorced, however, must have been married to a covered worker for at least ten years. If divorcées are remarried at the time of eligibility for benefits, they forfeit claims based on earlier spouses' earnings histories. For retired worker and spouse beneficiaries, eligibility for reduced benefits begins at age 62 and eligibility for full benefits begins between ages 65 and 67, depending on year of birth (US House Committee on Ways and Means 2002). Widows qualify for widow benefits after age 60 if they were married to a worker who was fully insured at the time of death. All spousal beneficiaries who outlive their spouses eventually become widow beneficiaries and, in the process, double their benefits (Harrington Meyer 1996). Even women with relatively high and stable earnings over the life course who are entitled to retired worker benefits larger than half the value of their husband's benefit are

Table 1 Eligibility for Social Security in the US

Retired worker benefits
40 quarters of covered employment
Benefits based on earnings over time
Spouse benefits
If married when applying, no length of marriage requirement
If divorced when applying, ten-year marriage requirement
If remarried, forfeit claims on earlier spouse
Benefit equal to 50 percent of spouse's covered worker benefit
Widow benefits
If married to an insured worker at time of his death, less than one-year marriage requirement
If divorced at time of his death, ten-year marriage requirement
If remarried, forfeit claims on earlier spouse, unless remarrying after age 60
Benefit equal to 100 percent of spouse's covered worker benefit

likely to prefer to receive widow benefits because the latter are generally greater.

Declining eligibility for spouse and widow benefits would not be troubling if other economic trends compensated for these losses. The elderly experienced a notable overall economic improvement in the second half of the twentieth century. Currently, poverty rates for the elderly are at an all-time low – just under 12 percent – and well below those for other age groups (Jill Quadagno 2001). Moreover, women's increasing labor force participation rates mean that more women will be eligible for larger retired worker benefits in their own right. But pockets of poverty among the elderly persist: older blacks, Hispanics, and unmarried persons all have poverty rates in excess of 20 percent. At the intersection of those variables, older single black women have poverty rates near 50 percent. Despite women's advances in the labor market, Social Security remains the leading source of income for older women (Madonna Harrington Meyer 1990; Lou Glasse, Carroll Estes, and Timothy Smeeding 1999). Women's increased employment and higher wages have helped to raise women's retired worker average monthly benefits, but it is unclear whether these increases will offset possible declines in access to spouse and widow benefits. The national average for women's wages in the US remains below 75 percent of men's, and average earnings for black and Hispanic women tend to be substantially lower than for white women (Nancy Hooyman and Judith Gonyea 1995; Irene Padavic and Barbara Reskin 2002).

Moreover, significant portions of women continue to take time away from paid work to care for young children or frail older relatives. Social Security benefits are based on indexed earnings over the forty years from age 22 to age 62. The Social Security Administration (2002) benefit calculator disregards the five lowest years of earnings, but those with more than five years out of the labor force will have zeros entered into their benefit formulas. The Social Security Administration estimates than even among women retiring in 2020, only 30 percent will have been employed for enough years to eliminate all of the zeros from their benefit formulas (Michael Boskin and Douglas Puffert 1987; Lois Shaw, Diana Zuckerman, and Heidi Hartmann 1998). The remaining 70 percent will continue to have at least some zeros, and their benefits will be smaller as a result. The impact of these zero- and low-earnings years may become more severe as fewer women rely on spouse and widow benefits. The Social Security Administration estimates that between 1990 and 2020, the proportion of women taking retired worker benefits will rise from one-third to one-half (Glasse, Estes, and Smeeding 1999). Single and divorced women are more likely to be in the labor force and to have higher earnings than married women, but they are not likely to have earnings records that match those of men.

The distribution of social benefits on the basis of marital status is based on the outdated traditional "breadwinner" model. When spouse and widow benefits were created in 1939, roughly 85 percent of married women were in single-earner marriages and marriage rates differed less dramatically by race (Berkowitz 2002). From the middle 1800s until the early 1960s, more than 90 percent of women in every birth cohort in the US married (Joshua Goldstein and Catherine Kenney 2001). But since the 1960s, a pronounced retreat from marriage has taken place. The percentage of women ever married dropped, age at first marriage rose, the tendency to divorce rose, and the tendency to remarry dropped (Teresa Castro Martin and Larry Bumpass 1989; Robert Schoen and Robin Weinick 1993; Joshua Goldstein 1999; Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Divorce rates rose steadily through the 1960s and 1970s, and then stabilized in the mid-1980s (Steven Ruggles 1997; Goldstein 1999). Since 1988, the average age at first marriage and first divorce have been less than ten years apart (Schoen and Weinick 1993). In fact, the tendency to divorce now peaks in the fourth year of both first marriages and remarriages (Goldstein 1999). Many demographers suggest that marriage will remain nearly universal, that perhaps 90 percent of American women will be married at some point in their lives (cf. Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Even if marriage remains common, marriages may not necessarily last the ten years needed to qualify for Social Security spouse and widow benefits. Moreover, the Social Security Administration does not acknowledge same-sex partnerships or cohabitation; thus, no matter how long those individuals live together, neither partner may make noncontributory spouse or widow claims.

Accordingly, the use of marital status as an eligibility requirement is problematic for two key reasons. First, marital rates are down. Table 2 reports US Census Data on the percent of women currently married by age group in 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. For example, among white women ages 45 to 54, 82 percent were married in 1970, compared to only 69 percent in 2000. One consequence of declining marital rates is that with each successive cohort we may expect fewer women to be eligible for spouse or widow benefits. As a result, more women may rely solely on retired worker benefits. This is problematic to the extent that women's Social Security benefits based on their own work records may be smaller than those they would have received as spouses or, more often, widows (Richard Burkhauser and Greg Duncan 1989). Thus, reduced reliance on spouse and widow benefits may lead to increased *gender inequality* in old-age income.

Second, a much more substantial retreat from marriage has taken place among black women than among white and Hispanic women (Schoen and Weinick 1993). For example, Goldstein and Kenney (2001) project that among women born between 1960 and 1964, 93 percent of whites, but only 64 percent of blacks, will ever marry. Table 2 shows that in 1998, black

Table 2 Percent of married women by age among whites and blacks, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000

	Total	Age 15 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	55 to 64	65 and over
1970[a]							
White	62	35	86	87	82	69	37
Black	53	29	74	76	71	57	32
Black as percent of white	85	83	86	87	87	84	87
1980[b]							
White	60	28	75	82	81	71	38
Black	44	17	56	66	64	56	31
Black as percent of white	73	61	75	80	79	79	82
1990[c]							
White	56	19	65	73	74	70	40
Black	31	9	34	42	45	42	25
Black as percent of white	55	47	52	58	61	60	63
2000[d]							
White	54	14	62	70	69	68	43
Black	29	5	31	41	40	39	25
Black as percent of white	54	36	50	59	58	57	58

Notes:
[a]US Bureau of the Census (1973a, Table 203, pp. 6543–643), married.
[b]US Bureau of the Census (1984a, Table 264, pp. 70–2), married.
[c]US Bureau of the Census (1992, Table 34, pp. 45–6), married except separated.
[d]US Bureau of the Census (2000, Marital Status of People 15 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Personal Earnings, Race and Hispanic Origin/March 1, 2000; Table A1), married spouse present.
Source: Authors' calculations using Bureau of the Census data.

women aged 25 to 34 were only 52 percent as likely as whites of the same age to be married; similarly, black women aged 35 to 44 were only 54 percent as likely as whites of the same age to be married. One consequence of these decreasing marital rates is that with each successive cohort we may expect even fewer black women to be eligible for spouse or widow benefits. Thus, the safety net provided by noncontributory benefits may become increasingly irrelevant for older black women and may lead to increased race inequality in old-age income.

Past demographic research on trends in marriage, divorce, and remarriage has not addressed the issue of ten-year marriages, which are key to establishing eligibility for spouse and widow benefits. Thus we address the following questions:

- What proportion of women born in the 1920s and 1930s entered old age without being eligible for spouse and widow benefits?
- How is the picture changing for those born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s?
- To what extent does declining eligibility for spouse and widow benefits vary by race?

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our analysis is based upon pooled data from the June 1985, 1990, and 1995 US Current Population Survey supplementary questions on marital history. Our sample included women 15–65 years old in each survey year. Sample sizes were 50,115 in 1985, 48,444 in 1990, and 44,944 in 1995. In each survey, women were asked a series of questions about their current marital status and previous marital history. They were asked to specify the month and year in which up to three marriages began and ended. The respondents' month and year of birth are also recorded. We determined the month and year (if any) in which a woman first reached the tenth anniversary of a marriage, then computed her age, in years, that month. We classified the women into five birth cohorts: 1920–29, 1930–39, 1940–49, 1950–59, and 1960–69. Then, using weighted data so that the sample is nationally representative, we plotted these trends. The cohort lines depict the cumulative percentage of women who have had a tenth anniversary at each age. The CPS provides self-reported race and ethnicity. We coded everyone who said they were Hispanic as Hispanic, regardless of what they indicated about race. Therefore, the white and black categories refer to non-Hispanic people.

In a series of figures, we show the cumulative percentage of each cohort that had at least one ten-year marriage by age and by race and ethnicity. What we chart is not the total number of women who are eligible for spouse and widow benefits in each cohort, but the moment at which they first become eligible on the basis of marital status. For the purposes of our analysis, we assume that all marriages are to a covered worker who will work the 40 quarters needed to qualify for Social Security. We under-report eligibility for Social Security benefits in two ways using this method. First, we chart the age at which women have a ten-year marriage. We do this because once a marriage lasts ten years, subsequent divorces do not alter eligibility. However, any women who reached age 52 without a ten-year marriage, who then married after age 52 and remained married until she began taking benefits, would not appear as eligible for Social Security spouse benefits in our charts. Second, widows are eligible at age 60 as long as they were married to a worker who was fully insured at the time of his death. Any women with less than ten years of marriage, but who were married briefly to fully qualified workers and then never remarried, would qualify as widows

for Social Security but would not appear as eligible for Social Security in our charts. Both groups who have been overlooked are relatively small. Moreover, we have no reason to believe that they have grown in recent cohorts, so this bias is likely to be consistent across the five cohorts we analyze.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the cumulative percentage of women with a ten-year marriage, by age, for each of the five birth cohorts. Between 80 and 90 percent of the women in the three oldest cohorts had a ten-year marriage by age 42. For those women born between 1950 and 1959, only 60 percent had a ten-year marriage by age 42. The youngest cohort, born between 1960 and 1969, can only be traced to age 32, so we can draw no firm conclusions about their chances of reaching old age without a qualifying marriage. However, the slope of their line is remarkably flatter than that for the preceding four cohorts, indicating an ongoing retreat from marriage.

The next five figures show the cumulative percentage of women with a ten-year marriage by race and ethnicity, for each cohort individually. Figure 2 depicts women born between 1920 and 1929 and shows very similar marital trajectories for white, Hispanic, and black women. By the time they reach age 62 and qualify for early Social Security benefits, 94 percent of the white, 90 percent of the black, and 80 percent of the Hispanic women had

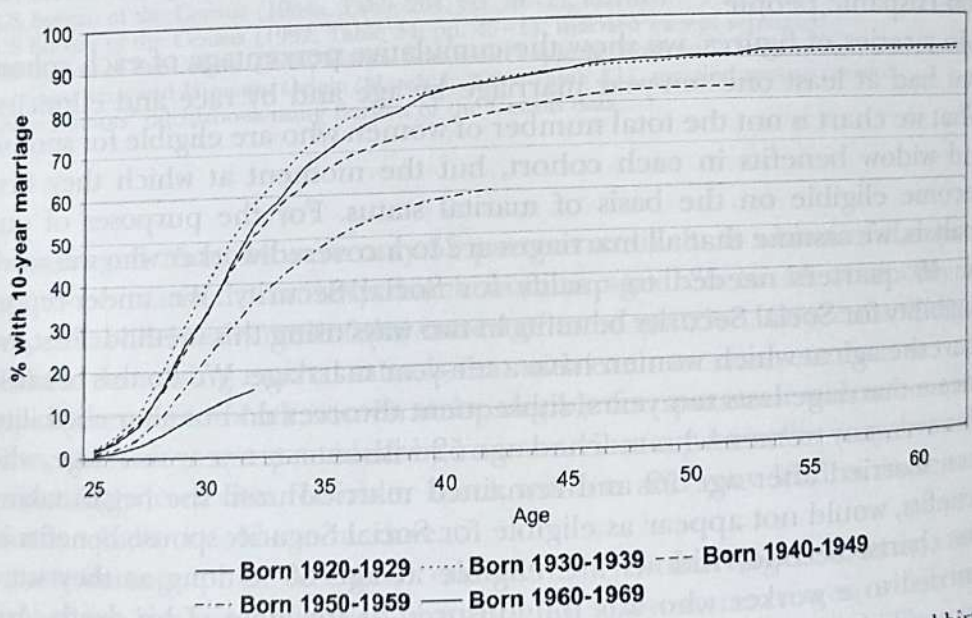

Figure 1: Cumulative percentage of women with ten-year marriage, by age and birth cohort

been married for at least ten years and would be qualified for Social Security spouse or widow benefits.

Figure 3 depicts women born between 1930 and 1939 and shows a pattern very similar to the earlier cohort. Much like those in the previous birth cohort, by the time they reach old age, 93 percent of white, 84 percent of black, and 87 percent of Hispanic women have had a ten-year marriage.

Figure 4 depicts women born between 1940 and 1949. The oldest of these women were only age 55 in the 1995 CPS, so we only chart their marital patterns through age 52. The marital trajectories are similar to those for the earlier two cohorts, but the curves flatten out earlier and the race gap is beginning to be apparent. By age 52, 85 percent of whites and 81 percent of Hispanics, compared to only 72 percent of blacks, had a ten-year marriage. (Looking back to those born between 1930 and 1939, by age 52, 92 percent of whites, 86 percent of Hispanics, and 84 percent of blacks had a ten-year marriage.) Thus, by the 1940–49 cohort, we see rising marital rates for Hispanics and declining rates for everyone else. The retreat from marriage is under way for whites and in full force for blacks.

Figure 5 depicts marital patterns for women born between 1950 and 1959, followed until age 42. In this figure, we see the race gap in marriage most clearly. Hispanics are marrying earliest and are most likely to remain married until at least their tenth anniversary, though whites catch up by age 42. The rate of marriage is slightly lower for Hispanics and dramatically lower for whites and African Americans when compared to the earlier cohorts. The slope of the lines flattens earlier and at a lower point for all

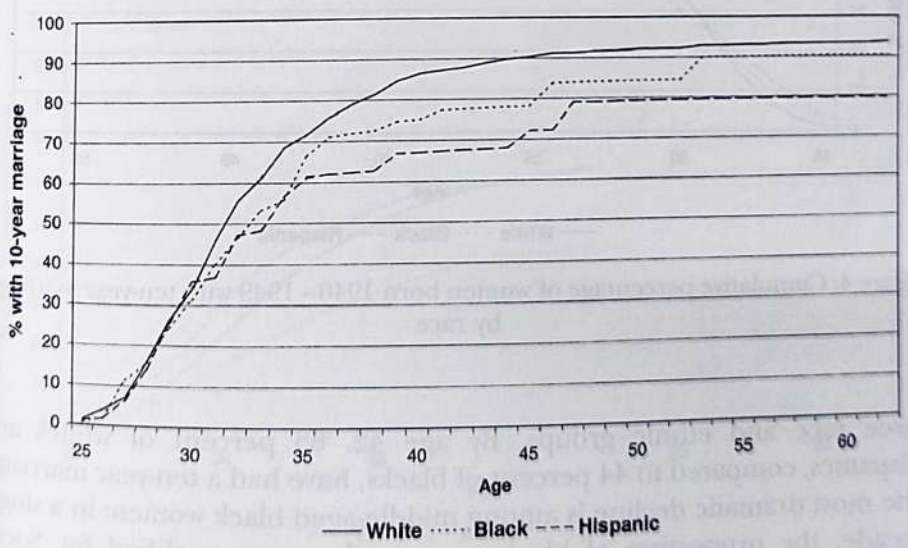

Figure 2: Cumulative percentage of women born 1920–1929 with ten-year marriage, by race

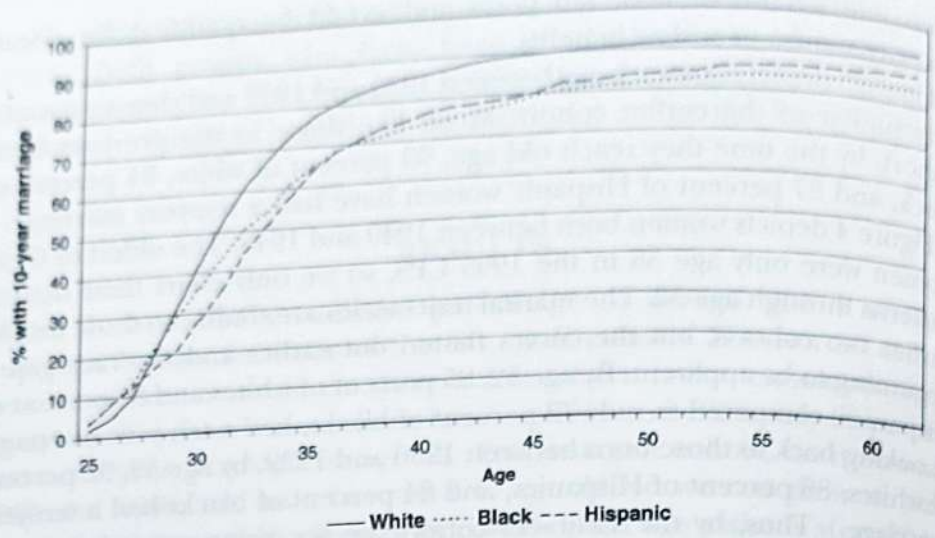

Figure 3: Cumulative percentage of women born 1930 – 1939 with ten-year marriage, by race

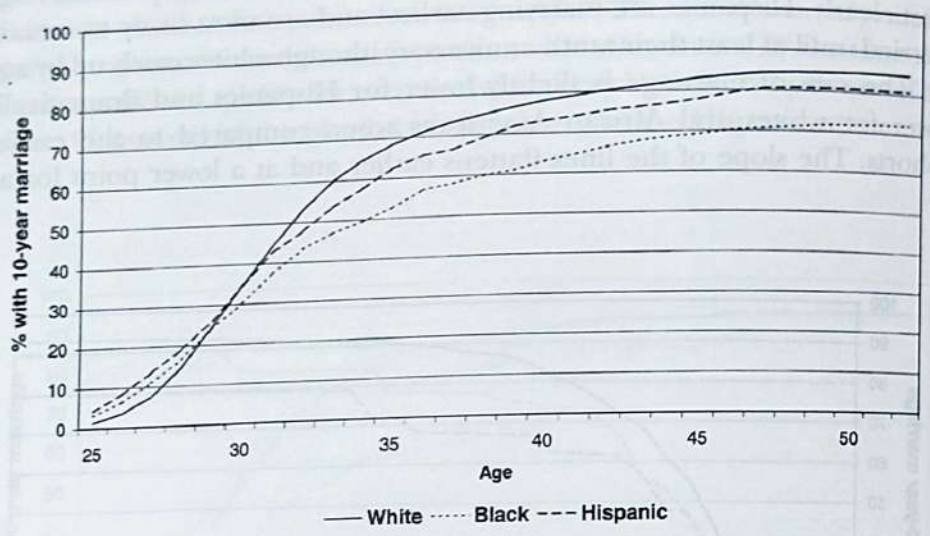

Figure 4: Cumulative percentage of women born 1940 – 1949 with ten-year marriage, by race

three race and ethnic groups. By age 42, 63 percent of whites and Hispanics, compared to 44 percent of blacks, have had a ten-year marriage. The most dramatic decline is among middle-aged black women: in a single decade, the proportion of black women who were qualified for Social Security spouse and widow benefits by age 42 dropped by nearly one-fourth, from 67 to 44 percent.

The proportion of women who are either currently married or have had at least a ten-year marriage at some point in their lives will surely be somewhat higher by the time this 1950s birth cohort reaches retirement age, but we find no reason to believe that the increases will be more than a few percent. If we look at past cohorts to see what percentage of women became eligible for spouse and widow benefits after the age of 42, we find that the figure is dropping rapidly. In the 1920s cohort, 13 percent of blacks became eligible between ages 42 and 62. In the 1930s cohort, only 8 percent of blacks became eligible between ages 42 and 62. In the 1940s birth cohort, less than 6 percent of black women became eligible between the ages of 42 and 52.

Finally, Figure 6 depicts women born between 1960 and 1969. The oldest of these women was only age 35 during the 1995 CPS; therefore, we can only chart their marital histories through age 32. Among women born between 1960 and 1969, 19 percent of Hispanic, 16 percent of white, and only 8 percent of black women had a ten-year marriage by age 32. Divorce rates have, however, stabilized (Goldstein 1999), and most people are marrying at some point in their lives. But for the purposes of gaining eligibility to Social Security spouse and widow benefits, a ten-year marriage is required. When this group of women reaches old age, the proportion qualified for spouse or widow benefits may well be lower than ever in the history of the program.

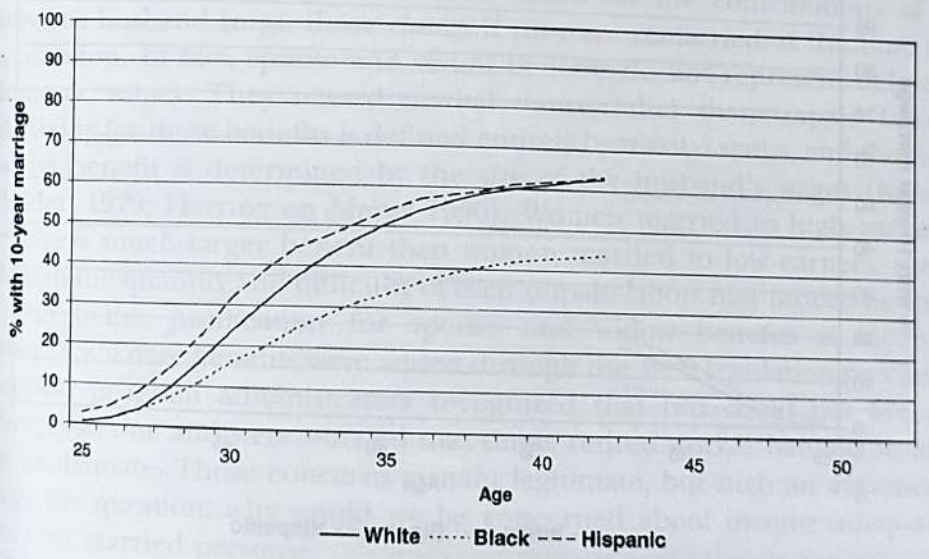

Figure 5: Cumulative percentage of women born 1950–1959 with ten-year marriage, by race

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Spouse and widow benefits have been subject to considerable criticism over the last two decades. First, the increase in women's labor force participation has led to an increase in dual eligibility (Harrington Meyer 1996). A growing share of women is qualified for retired worker and spouse benefits that are nearly identical. If the spouse benefit is the larger of the two, that means they have contributed to the Social Security system throughout their work lives but receive the same spouse or widow benefit they would have received had they not contributed at all. Second, the spouse benefit is criticized for rewarding single-earner families at rates higher than dual-earner families. Marilyn Flowers (1979) and Richard Burkhauser and Timothy Smeeding (1994) give examples of how the benefit formula is set so that single-earner couples often receive larger benefits than dual-earner families with identical household earnings. The explanation is simple: single-earner couples are receiving an additional noncontributory benefit, whereas dual-earner couples who split the earnings are each receiving their retired worker benefit. In the latter case, no one in the household is receiving a noncontributory benefit. Third, noncontributory benefits are more likely to go to white than black women. In an analysis of Social Security data from 1991, Harrington Meyer (1996) found that white and black women were equally likely to receive noncontributory widow benefits but that white women were nearly twice as likely as black women to receive

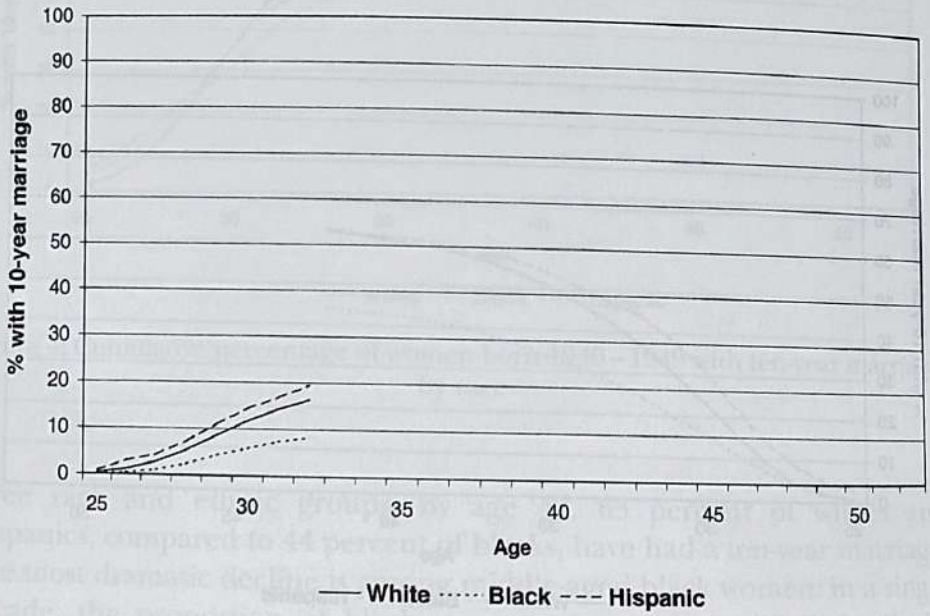

Figure 6: Cumulative percentage of women born 1960–1969 with ten-year marriage, by race

noncontributory spouse benefits. Moreover, the average monthly noncontributory benefit that white women received was more than 25 percent larger. Finally, all retired worker beneficiaries receive smaller benefits than they otherwise would to create a surplus that funds noncontributory benefits. In other words, unmarried men and women subsidize the unearned benefits of spouse and widow beneficiaries. Noncontributory benefits subsidize a traditional family form that is no longer typical (Harrington Meyer 1996).

Our paper adds a new concern about these noncontributory benefits. The previously documented retreat from marriage is pronounced, particularly for African American women. The implications of this trend for Social Security spouse and widow benefits are only beginning to be explored. In this paper, we show that a smaller percentage of each successive cohort will have a ten-year qualifying marriage. We also show that this trend is more pronounced among black women than whites and Hispanics, leading to a growing race gap in marriage and in eligibility for noncontributory benefits.

Despite this growing controversy, some policy analysts suggest that spouse and widow benefits could be regarded as a form of delayed or *de facto* wages for unpaid domestic labor performed by many women throughout their lives (Flowers 1979; Robert Myers 1982). However, current eligibility rules are unrelated to the performance of domestic labor. Women who perform unpaid care or domestic work within a marriage for nine but not ten years receive nothing. Those who perform it outside of a marriage receive nothing. Those who are married for ten years but hire others to perform domestic labor are as eligible as those who perform the unpaid work themselves. Those with children are as eligible as those without children. Women who are eligible for benefits based on the contributions of a previous husband forgo those claims if they are remarried at the time of application. In fact, spouse and widow benefits do not represent delayed domestic wages. They reward marital status rather than unpaid labor. Eligibility for these benefits is defined entirely by marital status, and the size of the benefit is determined by the size of the husband's wages (Karen Holden 1979; Harrington Meyer 1996). Women married to high earners receive a much larger benefit than women married to low earners, even though the quantity and difficulty of their unpaid labors may indeed be less.

The better justification for spouse and widow benefits is income adequacy. These benefits were added through the 1939 legislation precisely because program administrators recognized that two could not live as cheaply as one and were worried that single retired worker benefits would be inadequate. Those concerns remain legitimate, but such an argument begs the question: why would we be concerned about income adequacy only for married persons?

Many proposals to reform Social Security debate increasing the widow benefit or implementing earnings sharing (Richard Burkhauser and Karen

Holden 1982; Burkhauser and Smeeding 1994). Efforts to increase the widow benefit usually involve giving less money to a couple while the husband is alive and then more to the widow once he has died. Earnings sharing credits each spouse in a marriage with having earned one-half of the annual household income, regardless of who actually did earn the income. Such proposals are worth considering, but they are problematic precisely because they are aimed at increasing benefits to married women. What these proposals fail to take into account is the economic well-being of women without lengthy marriages. Such proposals further entrench marital status as an eligibility requirement, failing to take into account either the retreat from marriage or the growing race gap in marital rates.

Other analysts suggest that the US consider the European practice of implementing childcare or family care credits that either allow women to drop more zero years from their earnings history or actually insert a value in foregone wages into their earnings history (Burkhauser and Holden 1982; Glasse, Estes, and Smeeding 1999; Melissa Favreault, Frank Sammartino, and Eugene Steuerle 2002). The problem with proposals that link economic security to the provision of unpaid labor is that most bolster economic security only for women and men who are able to stay at home. For those without an alternative source of income, they are generally of little use. They would provide economic security for the growing share of women who balance unpaid and paid work simultaneously only if benefits accrue regardless of marital or work status.

The distributional effects of Social Security spouse and widow benefits are already in opposition to the efforts of the larger program to make the income distribution more equal. They will only become more so as more recent cohorts reach retirement age. Women with lengthy marriages, particularly if they are not employed, are disproportionately rewarded with noncontributory benefits, while those without lengthy marriages and those who were employed throughout all or most of their adult lives are not (Harrington Meyer 1996). Changing trends in marriage and employment are causing Social Security policy to exaggerate, rather than alleviate, inequality between different groups of older women. What was once an important safety net for lower income retirees has emerged as a marriage bonus with the greatest value for traditional – and disproportionately white – single breadwinner married couples in higher income brackets. Moreover, the decision to distribute noncontributory benefits on the basis of marital status means that gay and cohabitating relationships, as well as marriages lasting less than ten years, remain unrecognized and are not used to establish eligibility for these benefits.

One alternative mechanism for distributing benefits is to establish a fairly high minimum benefit. Throughout most of its history, Social Security had a minimum benefit, which ranged in value from $20 in 1940 to $110 in 1982. Congress eliminated the minimum benefit because of concerns that

some beneficiaries were double- and triple-dipping. Some military and federal government employees retired from these venues with full pensions and then worked enough years under Social Security to receive the minimum pension. The elimination of the minimum, however, adversely affected many low-income women, blacks, and Hispanics who were neither military nor government employees (Harrington Meyer 1996). Although Social Security has a special minimum benefit at present, the eligibility requirements are so stringent that only a fraction of beneficiaries are eligible. Restoration of a minimum benefit that is broadly available would remove the links to marital status or the performance of unpaid domestic labor. Pam Herd (2002) and Paul Davies and Melissa Favreault (2004) show that even a modest minimum benefit is more effective than a childcare credit at reducing poverty and inequality among low-income beneficiaries. If the minimum were set equal to the federal old-age poverty line, it would be nearly equivalent to the maximum spouse benefit and thereby eliminate the need for such a benefit. The redistributive effect of a fairly generous minimum benefit would depend to a great extent on the mechanisms used to fund it. Such mechanisms are worth exploring by future researchers precisely because a minimum benefit approach would create an income floor that is independent of marital or employment history and reduce inequality in old age.

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