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Widowhood

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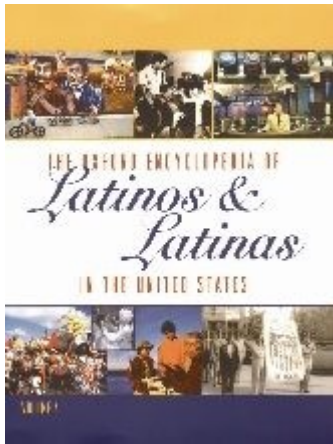
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Widowhood

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The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States

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Widowhood.

The number of widows as a percentage of the population has risen throughout the United States. The percentage of elderly women who were once married to men rose from 18 percent in 1940 to 62 percent in 1990. Elderly Latina widows number as high as 70 percent of all Latinos and Latinas over the age of seventy-five. These statistics suggest that Latinas who were once married to men are most likely to be unmarried for a large proportion of their adult lives. Latinas are rarely married to the same man for a lifetime, and the opposite, being single or being widowed, is more likely to characterize Latinas' lives in their senior years. Although the most common household arrangement for adult Latinas is still marriage, followed by divorce or separation, followed by widowhood, another sizable portion of the Latina adult population remains "never married." That percentage ranges from 14 percent to as high as 20 percent of all adult Latinas. Unmarriedness, as part of the life cycle, is important in the Latina population. Evidently widowhood as a stage of unmarriedness requires discussion because it is a defining characteristic for many Latinas, whether elderly or not, and because it is often ignored in public policy and as a social phenomenon.

Widowhood is a concept that needs to be understood broadly and historically in the context of an overall setting of familial and household arrangements. For women of Euro-American descent, a more consistent pattern of childhood, adolescence, adulthood (and child rearing), followed by widowhood was and is typical. For Latinas in the United States, the typical or standard living arrangements vary, both in terms of marital status (from widowhood to never married) and in terms of household (nuclear, extended, or unrelated). The percentage of Latina and Latino households that include unrelated females is higher than it is for Euro-American households (10 to 20 percent versus 5 to 10 percent), as is the percentage of households with unrelated males or unrelated females. Historically speaking, from 18 to 20 percent of the adult, Spanish-surnamed, female population was widowed. The numbers of widowers, men whose wives have died, was and is considerably smaller, ranging from 5 percent to 10 percent. These statistics matter in another way. Several regional studies suggest that widows, unrelated persons in a household, and women of color who are living without males of similar age, tend to cluster as a whole in poverty, tend to have less formal education, and tend to be in poorer health than the population as a whole as a result of either their poverty or their isolation from mainstream institutions. In other words, widowhood has an economic

consequence as well as a social one.

On the positive side, Latina widows tend to live longer than Euro-American widows, rarely live alone, and tend to outlive Latino widowers. Regional studies, for example in Arizona, show one source of support for Latina widows is the Catholic Church. The widows surveyed in this study indicated broad mechanisms of emotional and financial assistance, including their involvement in the church, the high esteem in which they were held by neighbors and family or relatives, and the decision-making power they manifested within their households due to a degree of freedom in making critical economic decisions.

In sum, while widows incur economic consequences as a result of their unmarriedness, their social capital or value within their communities often increases on the basis of their changed marital status. Comparisons across regions and across national-origin groups have yet to be made, but the preliminary information on widows indicates that their status is not entirely bleak or consigned to the bottom of the social hierarchy. On the contrary, interviews with Latina widows suggest that they manage to move beyond the grief of losing a spouse toward an acceptance of a different role within their families or communities. Immigrant status, formal educational levels, sources of income or pensions, and physical proximity to blood relatives also factored in as considerations about how well or how poorly Latina widows will fare. Their higher percentage in the U.S. Latina and Latino population, compared to other groups—unmarried, single, married, or divorced—makes information about them critical to the overall portrait of Latina and Latino family life in the United States.

See also [Census](#) and [Familia](#).

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