Lifestyle

Caring for the 'kinless'; Number of older adults with no close family, kids, partners is rising

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Lynne Ingersoll and her cat, Jesse, spent a quiet Thanksgiving together in her small bungalow in Blue Island, Illinois.

A retired librarian, Ingersoll never married or had children. At 77, she has outlived her parents, three partners and her two closest friends.

When her sister died four years ago, Ingersoll joined the ranks of older Americans considered "kinless": without partners or spouses, children or siblings. COVID-19 largely suspended gatherings with friends, too. Now, she said, "my social life consists of doctors and store clerks - that's a joke, but it's pretty much true."

Like many older adults, Ingersoll has an array of health problems: kidney disease, asthma, heart disease, arthritis that makes walking difficult. She's managing, but "I can see a time when that's not going to be true," she said. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do about it."

An estimated 6.6% of American adults 55 and older have no living spouse or biological children, according to a study published in 2017 in The Journals of Gerontology: Series B. (Researchers often use this definition of kinlessness because spouses and children are the relatives most apt to serve as family caregivers.)

About 1% fit a narrower definition: lacking a spouse or partner, children and biological siblings. The figure rises to 3% among women over 75.

Those aren't high proportions, but they amount to a lot of kinless people: close to 1 million older Americans without a spouse or partner, children or siblings in 2019, including about 370,000 women over 75.

"We assume that everyone has at least some family, but that's not the case anymore," said Rachel Margolis, a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario and co-author of the study.

Several factors have fostered increased kinlessness. Baby boomers have lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates than their parents, and more have remained childless. The rise of so-called gray divorce, after age 50, means fewer married seniors, and extended life spans can make for more years without surviving family.

Among older couples, cohabitation has increased as an alternative to marriage, but those seniors are less likely than married couples to receive care from their partners.

In addition, seniors who are Black, female and have lower levels of wealth have higher rates of kinlessness.

The growing number of kinless seniors, who call themselves "elder orphans" or "solo agers," worries researchers and advocates because this group faces numerous disadvantages.

A study of middle-aged and older adults in Canada found that those without partners or children (the study included no data on siblings) had lower levels of self-reported mental and physical health and higher levels of loneliness.
They were less likely to participate in activities like sports, cultural or religious groups, or service clubs - a predictor of later cognitive impairment.

Kinless Americans die earlier. Margolis and her co-authors, using data from the University of Michigan Health and Retirement Study, found that a decade after respondents' initial interviews, more than 80% of seniors with partners and children had survived, compared with about 60% of those without either.

At the end of life, researchers at Mount Sinai in New York reported, people without partners and children had received less caregiving each week and were likelier to have died in nursing homes.

"Getting old is hard under the best of circumstances and even harder if you're going it alone or with weak social ties," said Dr. Deborah Carr, a sociologist and researcher at Boston University.

On the other hand, Joan DelFattore, 76, a retired English professor at the University of Delaware, said, "I had a sense from an early age that I simply didn't see myself as a wife and mother. ... I went about constructing a single life."

DelFattore, who is in good health, still writes and researches, and she periodically teaches a graduate course. She stays in contact with friends, walking several times a week with one of them, and remains close to cousins in New Jersey, with whom she spent the holidays.

And she dislikes "the cultural perception that old people being without immediate family has to mean that you're needy, you don't have support."

Sociologists call that strategy "substitution" - turning to friends and neighbors for the connections that families traditionally have provided.

A study of sole family survivors, the last members of the families they grew up in, found that, for unclear reasons, they were disproportionately likely to lack spouses or partners and children, and thus were doubly vulnerable.

Having family is no guarantee of help as people age. Estrangement, geographic distance and relatives' own declining health can render them unwilling or unable to serve as caregivers.

In the absence of any broad public program, experts suggest a variety of smaller solutions to support kinless seniors.

Shared housing and co-housing, providing safety and assistance in numbers and community, could grow. The village movement, which helps seniors age in place, might similarly expand. Revised family-leave policies and caregiver- support programs could include friends and neighbors, or more distant relatives.

However governments, community organizations and health care systems address the issue, there's little time to waste. Projections indicate that kinlessness will increase greatly as the population cohorts behind the baby boom age.

"Younger people are less likely to marry and have children, and they have fewer siblings," said Susan Brown, a sociologist at Bowling Green State University and an author of the study of sole family survivors. "How will they navigate health declines? We don't have a good answer. I'm not sure people are paying attention."

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Lynne Ingersoll, 77, holds her cat Jesse at her home in Blue Island, Illinois. Ingersoll is considered "kinless": without a partner, offspring or siblings. Jamie Kelter Davis/The New York Times 2022 | Joan DelFattore, 76, believes older folks can be supported even without close family. Karsten Moran/The New York Times

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