

Widows Living Alone

by Irwin Bess

The death of a spouse can be very stressful, particularly for many older women who may have devoted most of their lives to their husband, children and home. They are suddenly alone — often for the first time ever — and in addition to the emotional adjustment, they also have to decide about new living arrangements. With many years of life ahead, widows have a number of options such as living on their own, sharing a home with family or friends, or moving into a seniors' residence.

According to the 1995 General Social Survey, 75% of Canada's 887,000 widows aged 65 and over lived alone. Most of these widows had left home before age 25 to marry and have children. They remained married to the same man for an average of 39 years, and were widowed at the average age of 63. As of 1995, most (82%) had been widowed for at least four years. This article examines some of the characteristics that appear to predispose widowed women to live on their own, with particular emphasis on the extent of their contact with family and friends.

Half of senior widows still live in the home once shared with their husband

Although the majority of widows have at least one son or daughter, most do not live with their children.¹



Living with family may provide emotional and economic support, but it raises a number of other practical questions such as the widow's involvement in day-to-day decisions about household and family activities, and the effect on her friendships, lifestyle and privacy.² Thus, a widow may feel that sharing a home would jeopardize her independence while increasing the likelihood of conflicts with her children, many of whom have children of their own.

This argument finds some support in the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), which found that three in four Canadian widows aged 65 and over

1. Connidis, Ingrid Arnet. 1989. *Family Ties and Aging*. Toronto: Butterworths.
2. According to the 1996 General Social Survey, 17% of widows living with a married son or daughter felt that they had little to no control over day-to-day decisions affecting their lives, while less than 4% of those living alone felt that way.

(about 661,000) lived by themselves. Another 11% (about 95,000) lived with an unmarried adult son or daughter, while a further 11% shared a home with a married adult child and their families. The remainder (36,000) lived with siblings, other relatives or friends.

Some researchers contend that newly widowed women should not leave the home they shared with their husband for at least one year, since its many family memories and traditions can provide stability and emotional security; but they also warn that the therapeutic value of living alone in the family home may diminish over time and delay the transition to independence.³ Nevertheless, slightly more than half (53%) of widows living alone in 1995 still occupied the home they had shared with their husband, and the large majority of these women (92%) had been widowed for more than three years. Homeowners were particularly well-grounded in their neighbourhood: among widows living by themselves, those who owned the family home had resided there for an average of 29 years, while widows in rental housing once shared with their husband had lived there for about 12 years.⁴

After the death of their husband, widows may see less of other couples with whom they previously had close contact; similarly, they may sense increasing emotional distance from their husband's friends and family as the years pass. For example, when respondents to the 1996 GSS were asked how many relatives they felt close to emotionally (excluding their children), widows living alone reported an average of only four relatives, compared to an

average of six for married women. To compensate for the diminution of their previous social network, widows who live alone may look to strengthen their emotional ties with friends.

Three-quarters of senior widows living alone said they felt most close emotionally to a neighbour

Supportive relationships are key to dealing with the changes wrought by widowhood.⁵ Whether continued residency in the family home helps or hinders long-term adjustment to widowed life, staying in the neighbourhood can help to maintain these relationships. Living alone is often balanced by frequent social contact, and senior widows seem to depend on a network of other women their own age. About one-half of widowed women living on their own in 1996 had a strong attachment to four or more friends; in fact, three-quarters of senior widows living alone said they felt most close emotionally to a neighbour. Being close friends with a neighbour allows frequent social contact, help with household tasks and emotional support during stressful times. Homeowners were likely to have more close friends

than widows who rented, probably reflecting the length of time most had lived in the same residence.

Children and grandchildren living nearby may also provide a stable source of support for widows on their own.⁶ According to the GSS, well over half (59%) of widows living by themselves in 1995 reported at least one adult child residing within 10 kilometres and almost one-fifth had a child within 50 kilometres. Although daily visits from a son or daughter were more common for widows in only fair or poor health (28%) than for those in good to excellent health (17%), weekly visits were equally frequent regardless of health status (43% and 45%, respectively).

Who is most likely to live alone?

A number of factors are significantly associated with a widow's living arrangement at age 65 and over. A statistical technique called logistic regression estimates the likelihood that, when the

5. Lopata, Helena Z. 1996. *Current Widowhood: Myths and Realities*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

6. Martin Matthews, Anne. 1987. "Widowhood as Expectable Life Event," in *Aging in Canada*, Victor W. Marshall (ed.), Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

CST What you should know about this study

The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted since 1985, gathers data on social trends and policy issues of current or emerging interest. It covers all persons aged 15 and over residing in private households in the ten provinces. This study uses data primarily from the 1995 GSS, which focused on the family, marital histories and contact with children. Analysis is based upon over 600 female respondents representing 887,000 women age 65 and over in private households who were widows at the time of the interview. Additional analysis was supported by data from the 1996 GSS focusing on community and social support, as well as data from the 1996 Census.

3. Hartwigsen, Gail. 1987. "Older Widows and the Transference of Home," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 25, 3.

4. Over one-half (55%) of widows living alone in 1995 owned their dwelling.

Current age	
<i>65 to 69</i>	1.0
70 to 74	1.0
75 to 79	1.7*
80 and over	3.7
Age at widowhood	
<i>Before age 65</i>	1.0
Age 65 to 74	3.0
Age 75 and over	1.2*
Number of living children	
<i>Had raised no children or has no living children</i>	1.0
One or two	0.2
Three or more	0.1
Experience living alone before age 60	
<i>Never</i>	1.0
For at least three consecutive months	8.9
Occupying residence previously shared with husband	
<i>No</i>	1.0
Yes	1.0*
Health status	
<i>Fair to poor</i>	1.0
Good	2.1
Very good to excellent	2.5
Limited in amount of physical activity can do at home	
<i>No</i>	1.0
Yes	1.3*
Income	
<i>Above \$20,000</i>	1.0
\$10,000 to \$20,000	0.5*
Less than \$10,000	0.2

Note: Reference group shown in italics. An odds ratio close to 1.0 for the comparison group means there is little or no difference between widows in the comparison group and the reference group, when the effects of other factors shown in the table are controlled for.

* Not statistically significant.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey.

effects of other factors are controlled for, widows with certain characteristics will live alone as opposed to living with family or friends.

Many people assume that widows who live alone tend to be younger seniors. This is not the case. In fact, the odds that widows aged 80 and over would live alone was close to four times greater than those for widows aged 65 to 69, perhaps because the older group has lost other kin with whom they might have lived.

A woman's age at the time of her husband's death also influences the likelihood of living alone in the senior years. Women who lost their husband between the ages of 65 and 74 are three times more likely to live by themselves than women who lost their husband before they were 65. This finding supports other research which has found that women widowed younger in life may adjust to widowhood differently.⁷ Women experiencing their husband's death at a younger age may still have dependent children at home. Also, women widowed early in life may not be able to benefit from a social network that could support them living independently, since they are probably the first of their friends and acquaintances to be widowed.

The overwhelming majority of widows who do not live alone are sharing a home with their adult sons or daughters, so there is a strong relationship between kin and living arrangement. Depending on the number of children they have, widows with children were only 10% to 20% as likely to be living by themselves as childless widows.

Although living independently requires some basic physical capability — taking care of personal needs, moving about in the home, and so on — having some activity limitations did

7. McPherson, Barry. 1990. *Aging as a Social Process: An Introduction to Individual and Population Aging*. Toronto: Butterworths.

not affect the likelihood that a widow would live on her own, after controlling for other factors. However, general overall health was an important determinant; the odds were over twice as great for widows in good to excellent health as for those whose health was fair to poor.

Widows now in their senior years tend to be an economically vulnerable group because most did not work outside the home during their married life; in fact, two-thirds of their children reported in the 1995 GSS that their mother had never been employed in the paid workforce while they were growing up. Many widows rely on public pension plans, survivor benefits or income support programs. Not

surprisingly, the odds of living alone are lowest among widows with low incomes: compared with widows whose total annual personal income was over \$20,000, those with an income below \$10,000 were only one-fifth as likely to be living on their own.

The experience of living alone before being widowed may be yet another predictor. A widow will have many accomplishments to her credit, including raising her children, volunteer work and/or career. However, many had never lived by themselves for three consecutive months or more.⁸ Compared with these widows, the odds of living alone at 65 and over were nine times greater for those who had lived on their own before age 60.

Summary

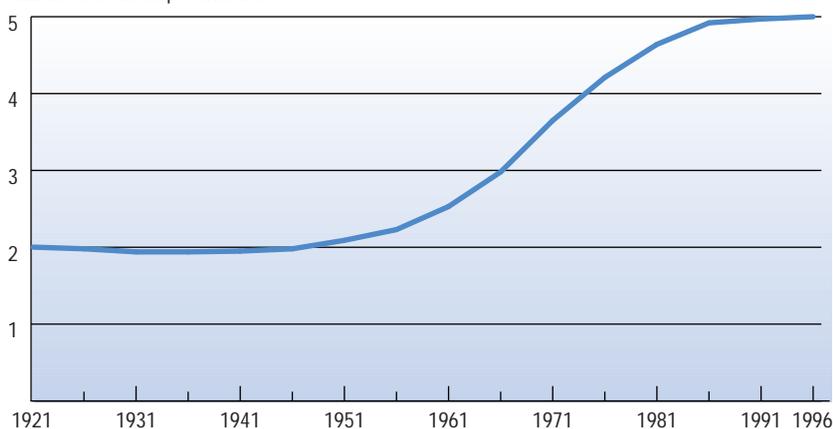
Becoming a widow often forces older women to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of sharing a home against those of living by themselves. Certainly, living on one's own can be a lonely and difficult experience at times. But the majority of widowed women aged 65 and over do live on their own, perhaps because they have strong support networks: many of them have lived in the same home for a long time and have close relationships with friends and their adult children. The belief that older widowed women living by themselves are isolated from supportive social relationships appears to be mistaken.

8. According to the 1995 General Social Survey, about 23% of senior widows who were living with others had never lived alone for 3 months or more.

CST Widowers

Men represent a small proportion of all senior widowed persons. In 1996, only 11% of senior men, compared with about 46% of senior women, were widowed. Over the century, the gap between the number of widowed women and men aged 65 and over has widened substantially, from about two widows for every widower to about five to one by 1996 (887,000 women and 164,500 men in private households). The rising ratio is due to a combination of factors, including greater female life expectancy and age differences at marriage (according to the 1995 GSS, widows had been about five years younger than their husbands).

Number of widows per widower



Sources: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 91-535E, 1990; 1991 and 1996 Censuses of Population.



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