

## Affects of divorce on Baby Boomers

### No happy ending for divorced boomers

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AUSTRALIA'S first wave of baby-boomer divorcees are far less happy as they approach retirement and suffer more physical and mental health problems than their married friends.

No matter how many years have passed since their split, members of the growing grey army of over-55 divorcees without a new partner are likely to be less satisfied with life than a married person. And to confirm it is divorce that has the negative effect on wellbeing, divorced women who remain single are less happy than widows in the same situation.

Groundbreaking research to be presented later this week by the Australian Institute of Family Studies paints a disturbing picture of the long-term impact of divorce on the emotional health and circumstances of those in their mid-50s and above.

The report, *Divorce and the Wellbeing of Older Australians*, will be unveiled at the Australian social policy conference in Sydney. It has telling implications for government policy on health and welfare in coming decades, co-author Matthew Gray says.

Dr Gray, the institute's deputy director, said the consequences of divorce on younger people had been studied before, but little was known about the impact of separation on those who were in or near retirement. "Until recently the numbers of divorced older people was relatively small, but it has grown rapidly in recent times. The baby boomers are moving through and they are more likely to be divorced than previous generations, mainly due to shifting social norms and no-fault divorce," Dr Gray said. "We are talking about a significant section of the population here. In 1996, 9.6 per cent of those aged 50-59 had been divorced. In 2006 it was 15 per cent, and it is likely to continue to grow even faster in the future."

Using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, Dr Gray and his co-authors, including leading social sciences professor David de Vaus, examined a series of wellbeing measures for divorced and married Australians over 55, including social connections and support, life satisfaction, and mental and physical health. "When it came to questions about overall satisfaction with life, the neighbourhood you live in, etcetera, those who had been divorced reported worse outcomes than those never divorced. It was particularly so for women," Dr Gray said. "For

instance, the statement 'I often feel very lonely' was put to married and never divorced women, and divorced and still single women.

"In the first group, 67 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, compared with 50 per cent for the second group. Statistically, that is a fairly big difference."

Dr Gray said women reported "significantly worse physical and mental health if they were divorced and still single".

The research followed work published by the same team in February that covered the financial consequences of divorce for older people. The study concluded that "older divorced single Australians are much more likely to experience material hardships than the married never-divorced", with home ownership, asset levels and income all lower for divorced people.

The two research papers showed that "there are negative financial consequences of divorce in older age, and divorce has a negative effect more generally on wellbeing later in life," Dr Gray said. "But it is not all negative. If people remarry following divorce, a lot of their financial position can be recovered, and those who have remarried look pretty similar on most measures of wellbeing to their long-term married friends."