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The Changing Face of Living Alone, 1880-2010

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The growth in one-person households in the United States since the late 1800s is one of the largest changes in household composition during this time. While in 1880, about 4 percent of all households contained one person, this rose to 27 percent by 2010 (see Figure 1). This extraordinary growth reflects a variety of factors, including gains in life expectancy, improved health at older ages, improved economic well-being of the older population, an increasing age at first marriage in the latter 20th century, and shifts in the acceptability of young women living alone.

Two major themes that are repeated within the literature that explores the reasons for the increase in one-person households are the idea that Americans prefer “privacy” in living arrangements, and that increasing economic resources are often used to “purchase” this privacy in the form of living alone. Beresford and Rivlin (1966) interpreted the increase in older adults living alone to be part of the same trend as for younger people; both groups prefer privacy if they can afford it. Similarly, Ruggles (2007, 2009) found that as economic opportunities for the younger generation increased, they tended to move out and live on their own rather than coreside with their parents. Looking at increases in living alone among elderly widows, McGarry and Schoeni (2000) found that increasing income, especially Social Security benefits were the single most important determinant of type of living arrangement among this group, accounting for nearly half of the change. They noted that those who had higher incomes were more likely to live alone, which they interpreted as a preference for privacy. While fertility declines over the century were tested and confirmed as playing a role in the increase in one-person households (Kobrin 1976, Kramarow 1995) they were generally found to play a smaller role than increasing economic resources (Ruggles 1994, McGarry and Schoeni 2000).

Researchers who have examined the increase in one-person households have also noted that there is diversity among those who live alone. Kobrin (1976) found that living alone was concentrated among the youngest and oldest adults, with much of the increase in one-person households among older women and younger men living alone before they married. Marketers have also noticed that those who live alone include several component groups, including affluent young adults as well as elderly widows—a group many people may picture when thinking about who lives alone (American Demographics 1993, 2003). Glick (1994) also notes a group of middle aged adults living alone, the majority of whom were never married, college educated, childless, employed, and in good health. Klinenberg's recent book (2012) also details several groups within those who live alone, from the affluent younger population to the financially precarious older population.

But while we do know those who comprise one-person households are a diverse group, little is known about how the demographic composition of this group has shifted over a longer period of time. While in 2010, 55 percent of one-person households were women living alone, in 1880, 66 percent were men living alone. In 1880, 12 percent of one-person households contained black men, while just 6 percent did in 2010. White women made up 31 percent of one-person households in 1880, but 58 percent in 1970.

We propose to explore changes in the basic demographics of one-person households since 1880. Using IPUMS data along with the full 2010 Census file, we will use logistic regression models to explore what demographic characteristics are associated with those who live alone, and how this has changed over time. We also propose to quantify the magnitude of the shifts in the proportion of households that contained one person. We hope to provide a context for changes in the composition of one-person households over the course of the 20th century and to the present, as well as describing changes in the

slope of the increase over the 20th century. Looking at Figure 1, it appears that while there was slow growth from 1880 to 1930, the change accelerated between 1950 and 1980, when the percentage of households with one person rose from 10 percent to 23 percent. This corresponds with a time of economic expansion in the US.

Figure 2 shows the composition of one-person households by age and sex. While the majority of one-person households currently are women, this was not true until 1940. The high proportions of young men living alone in the earlier centuries likely reflect young immigrants coming to the US who had not yet sent for their families, or not yet formed families. While women age 65 and over made up a third of one-person households in 1970, by 2010, their share decreased to one quarter. This likely reflects increases in life expectancy for men, so that women may spend fewer years as widows after their husbands die.

While race has been conceptualized and measured in various ways across the 20th century, it is interesting to look at a crude measure such as that shown in Figure 3. What a descriptive graph such as this does not do is to control for the shifting racial composition of the country across this time period. Similarly, in Figure 4, which shows one-person households by sex and educational attainment, what is missing is the notable increase in educational attainment over this period, especially for women.

We propose to model these demographic shifts in order to tease out which demographic groups saw the largest increases/decreases in making up one-person households. We will use the IPUMS data for 1880-2000 (perhaps adding in earlier years if available), and the full 2010 decennial data, which are not yet publically available. In preliminary logistic regression models predicting whether householders live alone (not including 2010 data), the odds of a householder in 2000 living alone were 8 times higher than odds

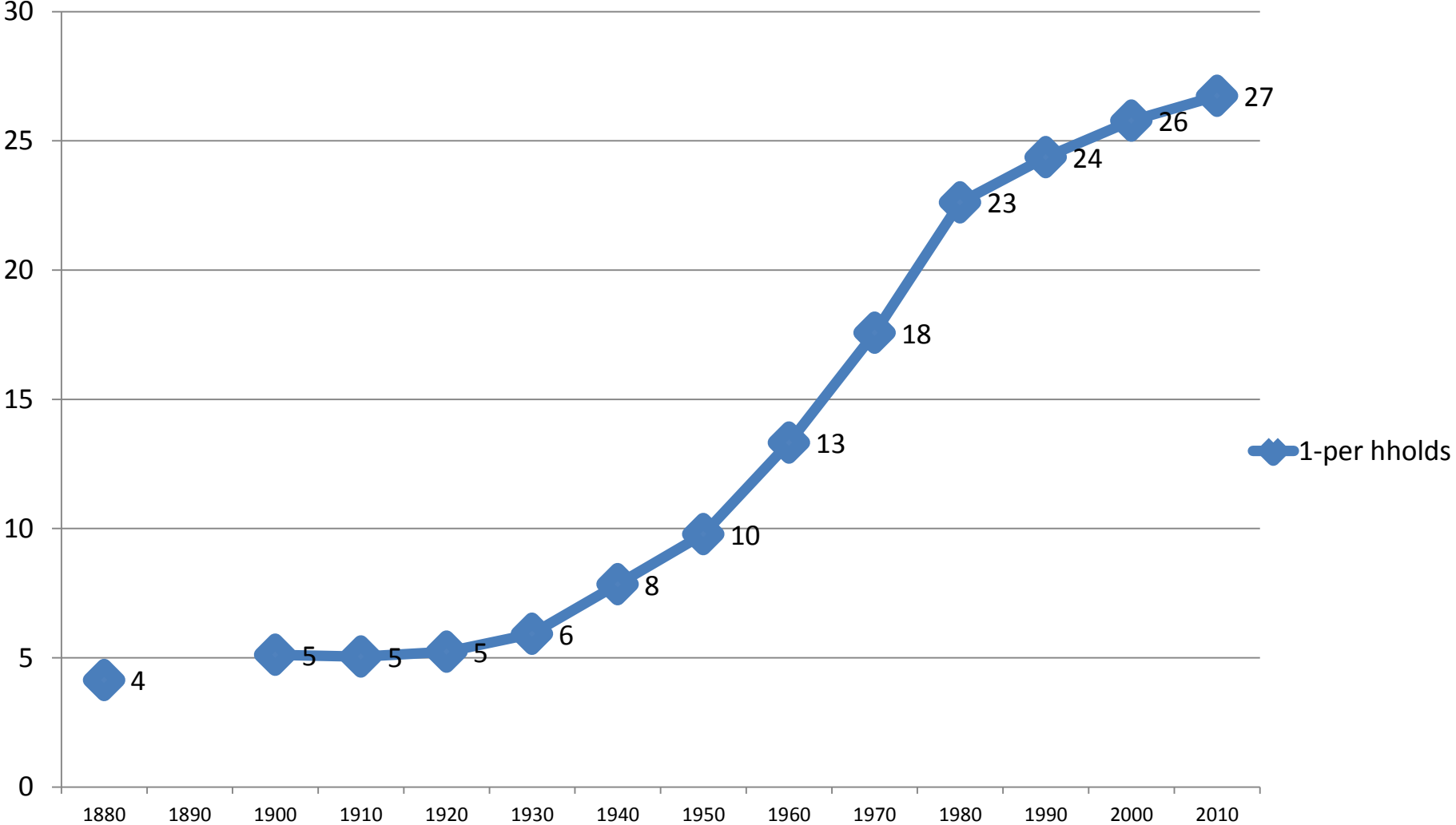
for householders in 1880. With only race (white—omitted, black, other) and age (continuous) in the model, black householders were more likely to live alone, as were older householders. When modeling age as distinct groups, householders age 75 or older had odds of living alone that were 3.7 times that of householders age 35-64. While educational attainment is only available in the decennial census from 1940 through 2000, a preliminary model shows that householders with at least a bachelor's degree have odds of living alone that are about 1.5 times that of those with less than a high school degree.

We plan to incorporate macro level variables in the analysis in order to control for demographic shifts that may be related to the composition of the population living alone, such as the gap in life expectancy between men and women, and the racial mix of the country. For example, when the gap in life expectancy between men and women is larger, with wives expected to survive their husbands for a longer time, we would expect more women to be living alone. But as the gap in life expectancy decreased later in the 20th century, this may have contributed to a shrinking share of women among one-person households, since they would remain in a married couple household for longer. The U-shaped trend in the gap in life expectancy between men and women may be associated with the U-shaped change in the proportion of women age 65 to 74 who lived alone. Similarly, as the proportion of the population who was white decreased over the 20th century, we might expect a similar decrease in the share of one-person households who were comprised of a white person.

References

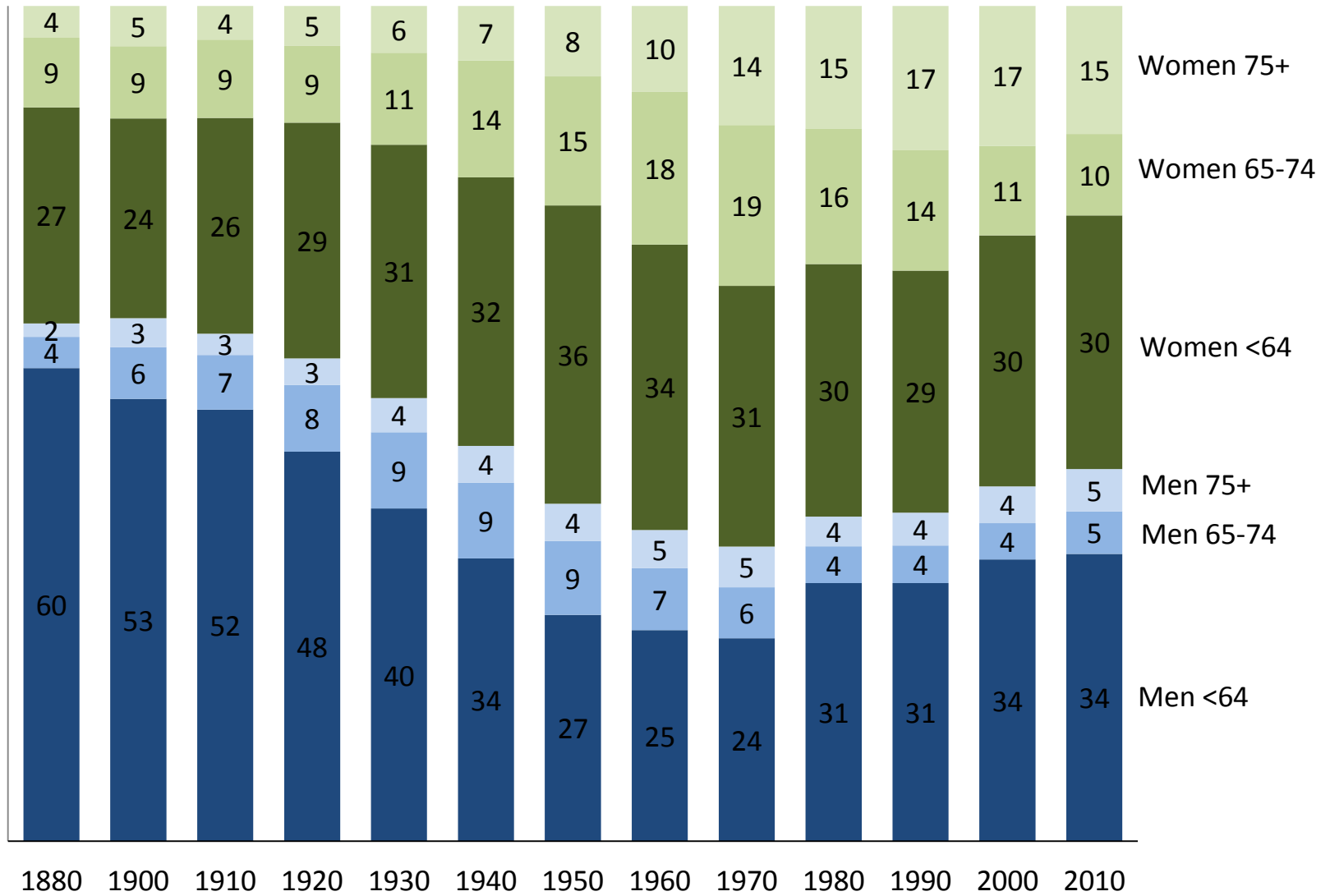
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Figure 1. Percent of Households that are One Person



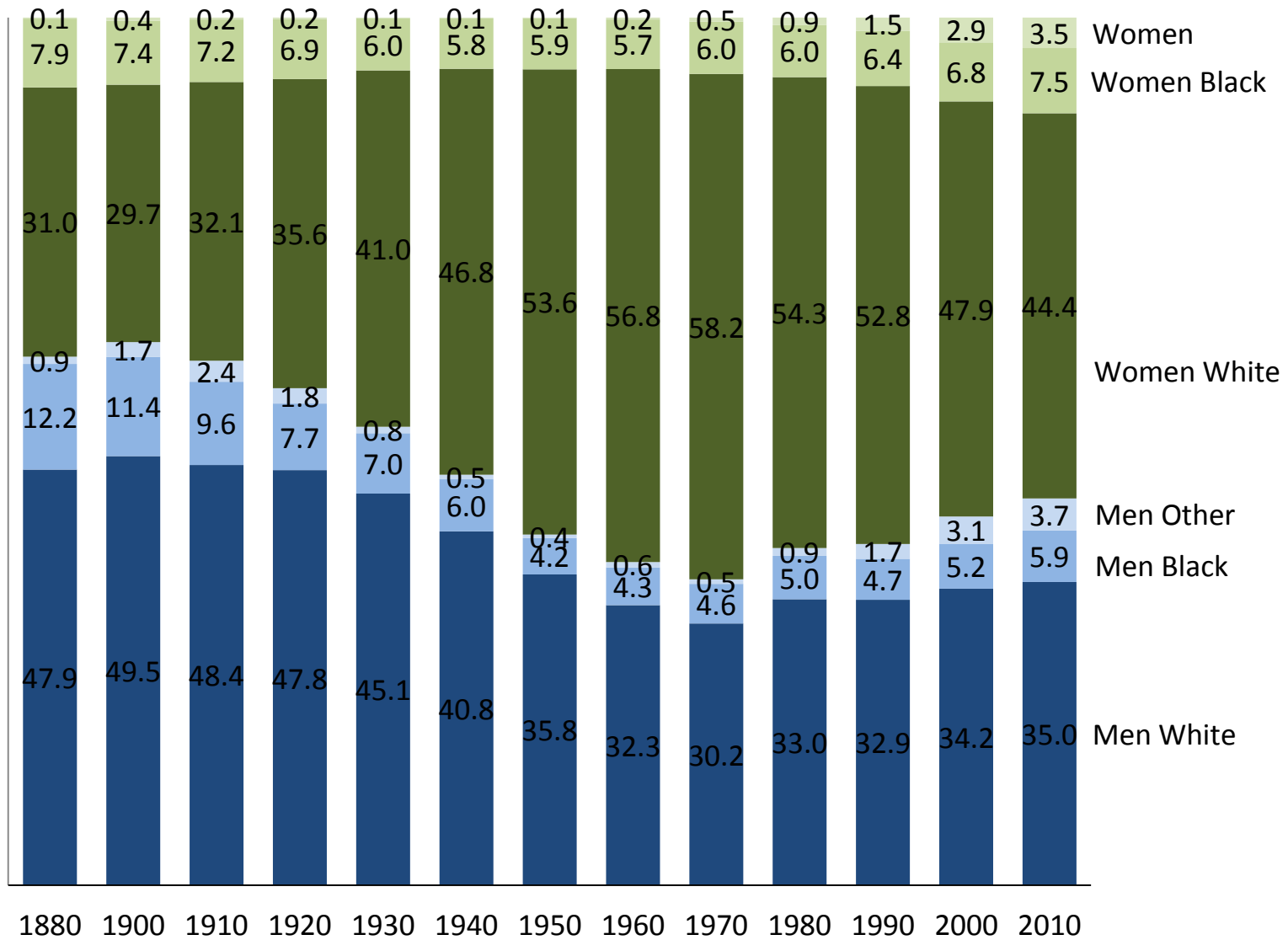
Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS), 1880-2000, 2010 Census

Figure 2. One-person households by age and sex, 1880 to 2010 (%)



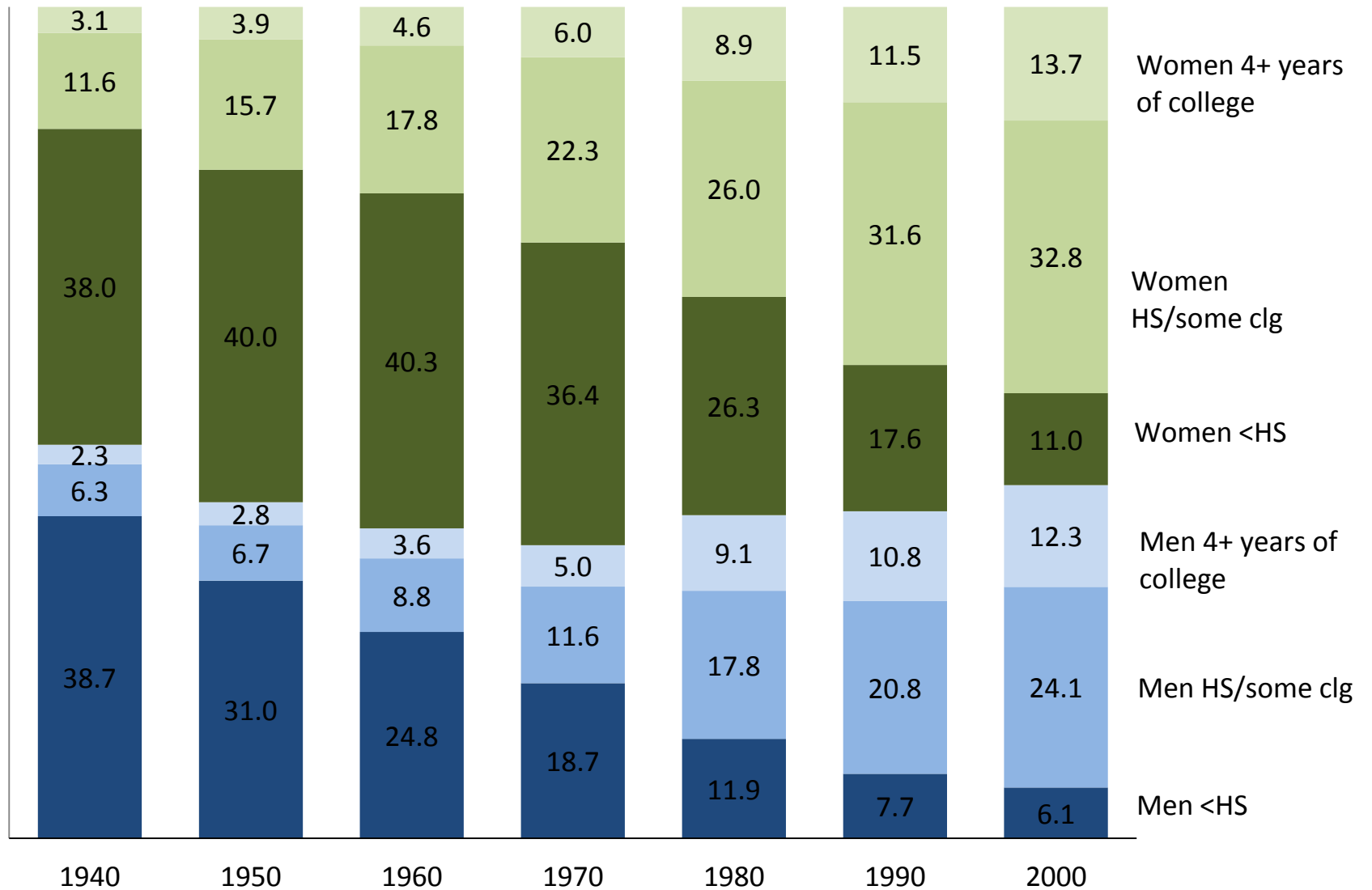
Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) 1880-2000, 2010 Census.

Figure 3. One-person households by race and sex, 1880 to 2010 (%)



Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) 1880-2000, 2010 Census.

Figure 4. One-person households by education and sex, 1940 to 2000 (%)



Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) 1940-2000.

