

THE CLASS OF 1957 AT AGE 65: A FIRST LOOK

“Life should begin with age and its privileges and accumulations, and end with youth and its capacity to splendidly enjoy such advantages.”

-Mark Twain

To Wisconsin's High School Class of 1957 and their families:

In 2007, many Wisconsin high school graduates from the Class of '57 will gather for their 50th class reunions, where they'll reconnect with old friends and share updates about their families, jobs, hobbies, and plans for the future. Nearly one-in-three of these Class of '57 graduates also have been sharing their opinions and experiences with a University of Wisconsin research study for almost five decades now. These men and women, members of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), were randomly selected to participate in the study and have generously shared their time with researchers by participating in in-depth phone interviews and completing mail surveys. The WLS began as a modest project to help the state of Wisconsin prepare for the growing numbers of high school students who were seeking post-high-school education in the late 1950s. Since then, the WLS has provided social scientists and policy makers with valuable information on education, employment, health, family life, and aging. One of the longest-running social science studies ever undertaken, the WLS is highly respected by scientists worldwide.

This report is written for the Class of '57 respondents and for their brothers, sisters, and spouses who also participated in our study. We want to share some of the highlights of our study, and we also want to let you know that your participation has helped researchers better understand the many challenges people face as they age. Because we are still collecting and processing answers to the questions we asked of brothers, sisters, and spouses, most of this report focuses on the Class of '57 graduates. In the future, we will share with you a second report that compares the graduates with their family members. If you have access to the Internet and would like to share this report with your friends or family, you may download a copy of this report and an earlier report sent after our interviews in 1993-1994 at wisls.info. The WLS receives financial support from the National Institute on Aging, which is part of the National Institutes of Health, and from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Although our study depends on these sponsors, it would not be possible without your participation. We are very grateful for the time you have given us over the years, both on the phone and by answering our mail questionnaires.

Our study began with a focus on high school seniors' plans for post-high-school education. At that time, we focused primarily on family background, experiences in high school, and future plans for college, work, military service, and marriage. We also asked about high school activities and friendships. However, as members of the Class of '57 matured, married, and found jobs, the focus of the WLS changed as well. In the 1970s, we asked questions about careers, marriage and children, and community activities. Then in 1977, we began to collect information from brothers or sisters of graduates. Around 11 years ago, when the graduates of 1957 were roughly 54 years-old and most brothers and sisters were between 44 and 62 years old, we came to you again to collect information on your work, family, health, and plans for the future—including retirement.

We started calling once again in the summer of 2003 and completed the telephone portion of our most recent graduate interviews in the summer of 2005. Most members of the Class of '57 are now in their mid 60s, and their brothers, sisters, and spouses are mostly between the ages of 55 to 73. Once again, the focus of the WLS

has changed, as your lives change. The most recent wave of the study asked questions about family life, health, work and retirement, experiences with doctors and the health care system, and finances. We also investigated special topics, asked of a small random sample of the overall WLS. For instance, some of you have been asked about volunteering, religion, hobbies, computer and internet use, and your plans for the future.

A great number of you have asked how many of the Class of 1957 graduates and their family members are in our study. Our original sample, randomly selected in 1957, included 10,300 graduates, or roughly one-third of everyone who graduated from a Wisconsin high school in 1957. Back in 1993 we completed a telephone interview with 8,500 graduates, or roughly 87 percent of graduates who were still alive in the early 1990s. We also contacted 4,800 brothers or sisters of graduates in 1994. For our current surveys in 2003-2005, we completed phone interviews with 7,300 graduates or 88 percent of living original respondents. For those of us in the survey research field, these numbers are very impressive. Very few studies have followed the same group of people so successfully and for such a long time. Now it is time for us to share some of our findings from the study. Because we are just beginning to work on some of the topics, we will not report on every question that we asked. Our very first interviews took place in June 2003. Some graduates have been waiting for this report for almost three years while others only completed their interviews last summer. We hope you will enjoy what you read and take pride in your personal contribution to the "Wisconsin Idea": the belief that the University should do research that ultimately benefits each and every Wisconsin resident.

Future Participation in the WLS

The WLS has been and will continue to be an important scientific research tool for years to come. We hope to talk to members of the Class of '57 and their families again in 2010, and we have many exciting research plans for the future. We are hoping to talk with children of graduates and their siblings to learn more about how lives have changed across generations. Also, we might ask some of you to participate in an in-depth study of physical health. We take great care to protect your privacy, and you always have the right to refuse any of our requests. Once again, we are extremely grateful for your participation in the past. We hope you find this report interesting and informative, and we invite you to give us feedback or ask more questions about our studies.

A Special Message to the Class of 1957

WLS research team members want to continue being a part of Wisconsin's Class of 1957. The 50th reunions of the Class of '57 are soon approaching, and we hope to be invited to the parties! If you would like to have one of the WLS team members come to give a brief presentation on the WLS and answer questions, we will try our best to be there. We also want to help you spread the word about upcoming reunions. Once you know the details of your reunion, please email us at wls@ssc.wisc.edu or call us toll free at 1-800-622-9025. If you like, we will post your information on a website (wisls.info) we're developing just for this purpose. If you don't have access to the Internet and want to know if information about your reunion has been posted, give us a call and we'll check for you. And please, do let us know if you want us to visit your reunion. There are over 400 different schools represented in the WLS, and team members are available to travel. It's not likely we'll be able to make them all, but we'll do our best!



Robert M. Hauser
Vilas Research Professor of Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison

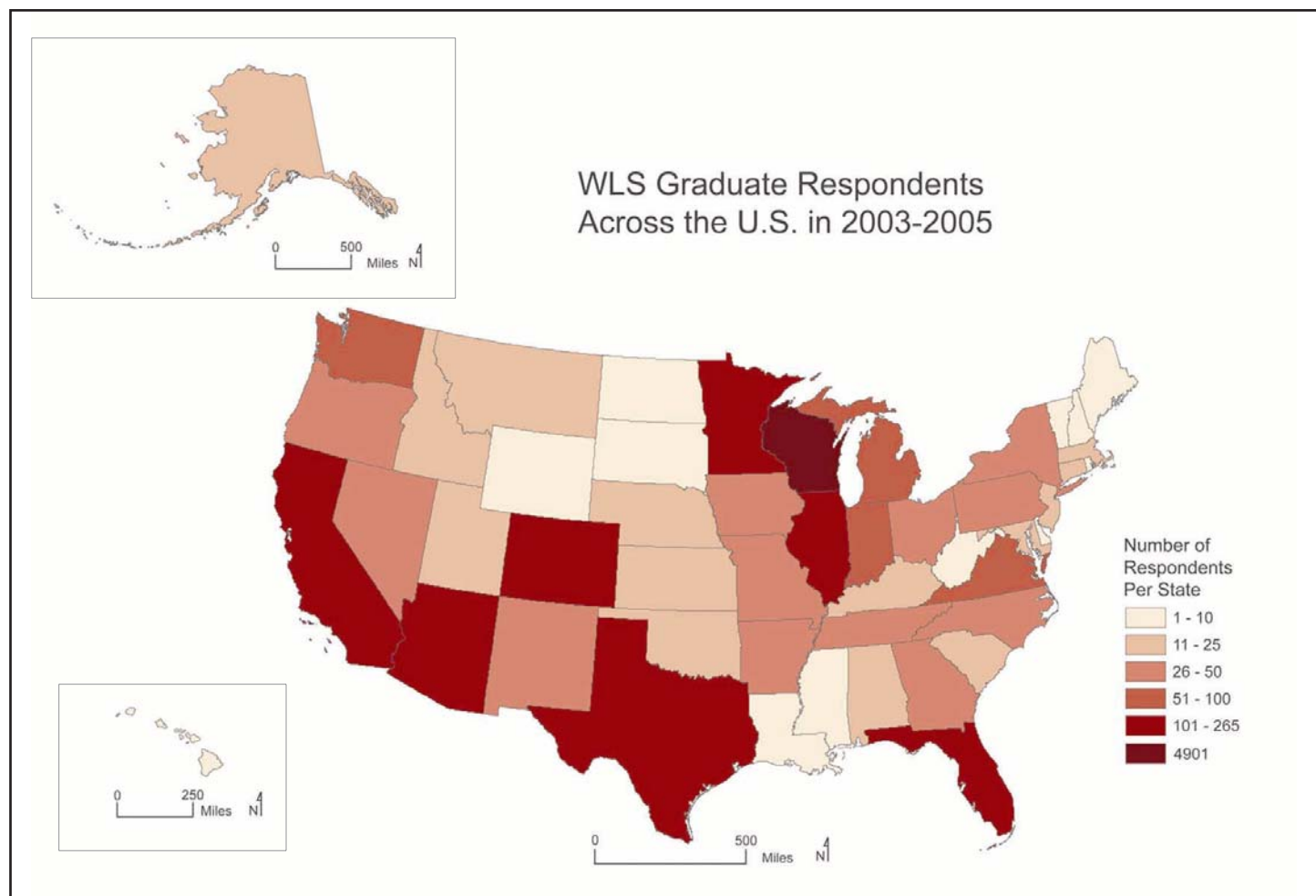
WHERE IS THE CLASS OF 1957 NOW?

When talking to others about our study, we are frequently asked, “How many members of the Class of 1957 are still living in Wisconsin?” Most graduates have stayed right here in Wisconsin. At the time of our last interviews, more than 70 percent of graduates were living in the Badger State. That’s not to say everyone stayed close to home. WLS participants live in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and eight foreign countries. Next to Wisconsin, the most popular states among our graduates are Minnesota (four percent), and Florida, California, Illinois, and Arizona (roughly three percent each). Most 1957 graduates who are no longer living in Wisconsin had already left by 1975 (79 percent). Most 1957 graduates are alive and well, but a small fraction of them (12.6 percent) are no longer living. Between 1957 and 2004, at least 738 male and 465 female graduates have died. The major causes of these deaths are cancer (43 percent), heart disease or strokes (30 percent), and injuries (9 percent).

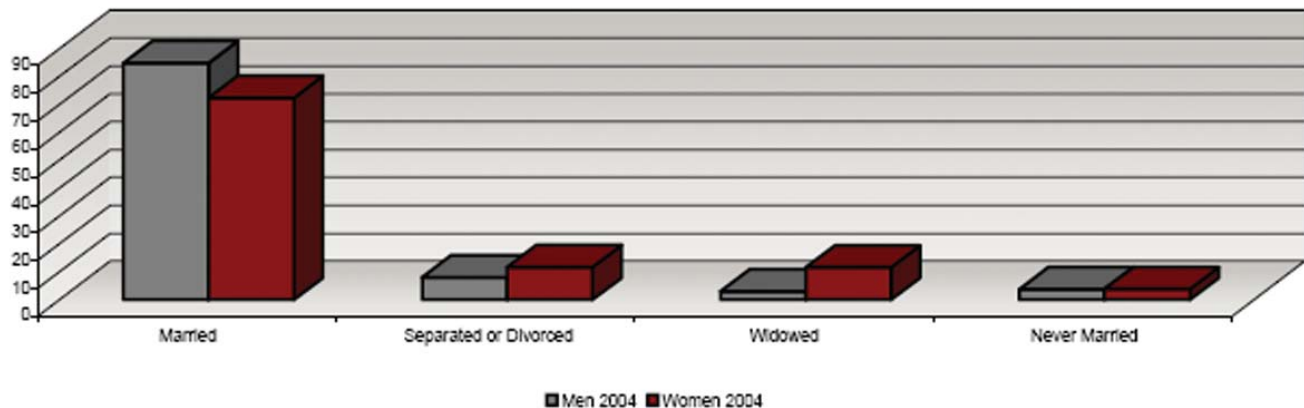
FAMILY LIFE

Marriage

Most WLS participants have enjoyed long and happy marriages, while a small group found new loves well into their 50s and 60s. Nearly 80 percent of graduates are now married, and most married graduates (81 percent) have been married only once. Five percent of married graduates wed their current spouse when they were in their 50s or older; for most, it was a second marriage following widowhood or a divorce. The average marriage has lasted for 37 years, yet we found considerable variation; some graduates recently celebrated their 50th while others their first wedding anniversaries. Only about one in 25 graduates has never married. We found that men are far more likely than women to be married, while women are much more likely than men to be widowed. More than 85 percent of men, but just 72 percent of women, are currently married. Three percent of men and 12 percent of women were widow(er)s in 2004. We see this difference



**2004 Marital Status of Graduates, by Gender
(Percent)**



because men tend to die younger than women, and men are more likely than women to remarry after they become divorced or widowed.

Not only have most graduates enjoyed long marriages, most are happily married. Nearly all married participants (98 percent) said they and their spouses share either “very similar” (58 percent) or “somewhat similar” (40 percent) outlooks on life. Similarly, we found that 83 percent of currently married graduates reported being “very close” with their spouses.

Married graduates also reported little conflict with their spouses. Nine out of 10 felt at least “somewhat satisfied” with four important aspects of marriage: the day-to-day support and encouragement they receive, the consideration shown by their spouse, the ways they and their spouses make decisions, and their spouse's personality. A slightly lower proportion—8 out of 10—were satisfied with the way disagreements are settled and with the quality of their spouse's listening to them. In general, men offered slightly more positive assessments of their marriages than women; more men said they are satisfied with their spouse's personality and with their marital relations. Wives were more likely than were husbands to report household chores as being somewhat or very unfair to them (24 versus 3 percent, respectively). Nonetheless, when asked how often they had an open disagreement about household tasks, just 13 percent of husbands and wives reported having disagreements at least once a month. A similar proportion of graduates reported having at least monthly disagreements about money (12 percent),

spending time together (12 percent) and sex (10 percent). Husbands were more likely to report ever having an open disagreement regarding sex (42 percent) than were wives (30 percent).

Parents and Children

By the time most Americans reach their early 60s, few have living parents. This pattern was confirmed among the graduates. Only five percent of the fathers and 22 percent of the mothers of the 1957 graduates were still alive at the time of the 2004 interview. Of those graduates who had a living parent, most felt that their parent's health had declined from good to fair since our previous conversation in 1993.

Meanwhile, nearly all graduates (93 percent) have children. Roughly half of WLS participants (53 percent) have two or three children, while one-third have four or more. Just six percent are the parents of an only child. We wanted to learn more about how parents interact with their children, so we asked a subsample of graduates a series of questions about one of their children; this child was randomly selected from all of the graduate's children. We found that parents and children have frequent contact; two-thirds said they typically write, telephone or visit with their child at least once per week.

A theme of the “American Dream” is that every generation should “do better” than their parents. When the WLS participants thought about their children's successes, many were proud to report that their children have sur-

passed them in their education and, to a lesser extent, in their work lives. Slightly more than half the graduates felt their child has done better than they have in terms of education (58 percent), work (55 percent), and finances (57 percent). The WLS participants also believed they have been more successful than their parents. When we asked men to compare themselves to their fathers, and women to their mothers, a large majority reported they have done better or much better in terms of work (74 percent) and finances (80 percent) than their parents when they were the same age the graduate is now.

Because the WLS is such a large sample, we had a unique opportunity to explore the challenges facing parents who have a child with a developmental disability (such as autism, Down syndrome, or epilepsy) or a long-term mental health condition (such as schizophrenia or chronic major depression). Roughly three percent of the sample reported that at least one of their children has one of these two types of conditions. Children with these health conditions often have work and family experiences that are quite different from their peers. These children are less likely to have married, more likely to live with another family member or in a group home, and are less likely to be working (compared to adult children without such a condition).

Nonetheless, 62 percent of the adult children with a developmental disability and 42 percent of adult children with a long-term mental health condition currently work, and approximately three-fifths of them have relied on some kind of employment assistance such as a job coach or rehabilitative specialist. The parents of these children, however, live quite similarly to other parents. Most are still in their first marriages and they have three to four children on average, yet they are slightly more likely to both be working compared to parents who do not have a child with this disability. This perhaps reflects a greater need for additional income among some of these parents.

Nearly all members of the Class of '57 feel close to both their parents and to their children (90 and 95 percent, respectively of those with parents and children). There is no evidence for a "generation gap," within WLS families. Most WLS participants share a similar outlook on

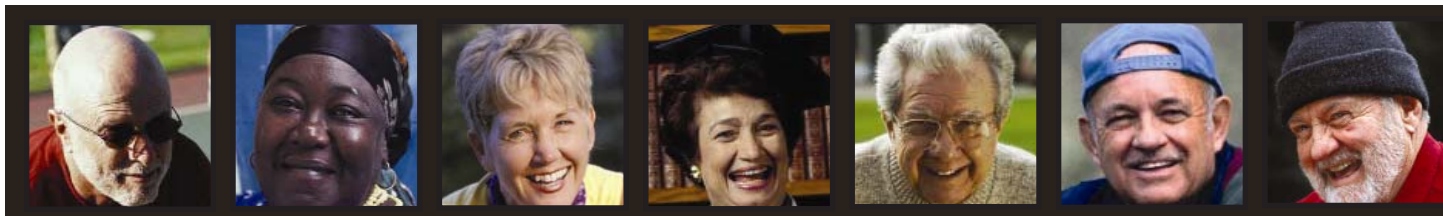
life with their parents (85 percent) and with their children (92 percent).

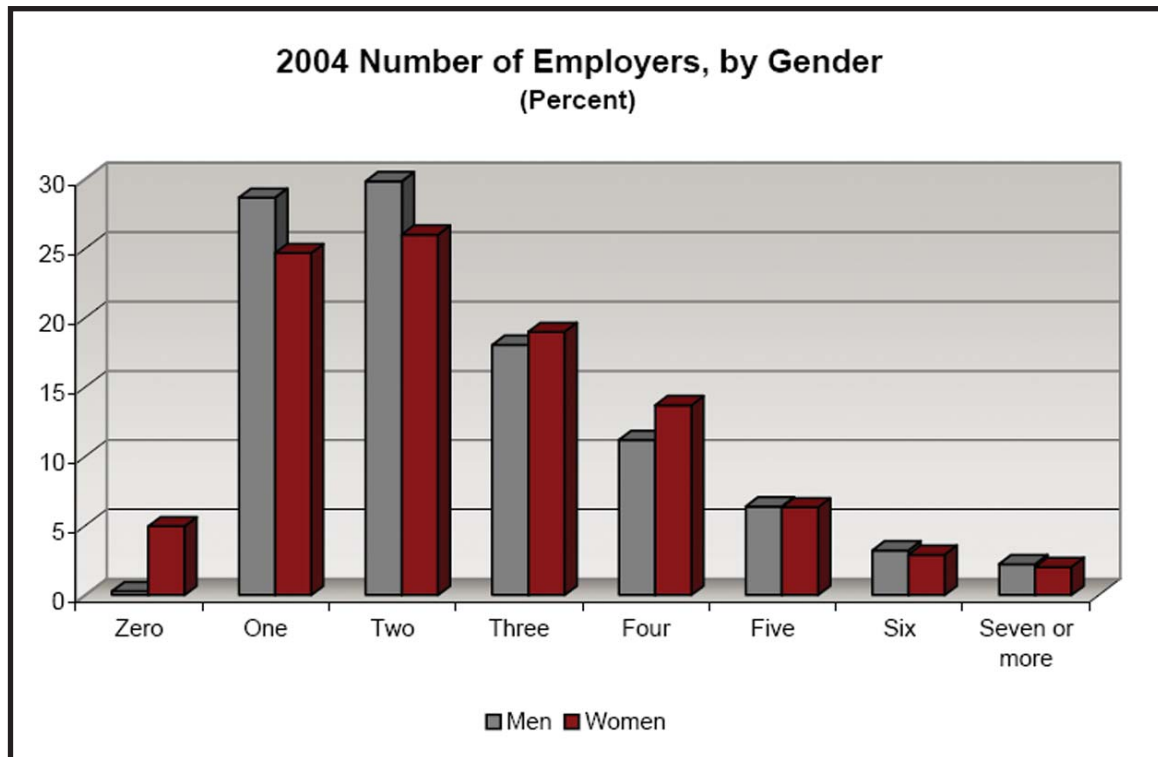
WORK AND RETIREMENT

When it comes to work, the WLS participants are dispelling common myths. The first myth is that workers today are no longer "loyal" and jump from employer to employer. Perhaps this characterizes younger workers, but it is not the case for WLS graduates. One in four worked for only one employer between 1975 and 2004. Only 15 percent of graduates had more than five employers during that same 29-year period. The WLS graduates are stable not only in terms of where they work, but they're also stable in what they do. Nearly half of the men in the sample (47 percent) and one-fifth of the women held the same job (or the same general set of tasks and responsibilities) for at least 25 years.

A second myth is that once people reach their early 60s, they stop working for pay and devote their days to hobbies and relaxation. A large number of WLS graduates are not stopping work; rather, some graduates are cutting back on their hours, while others are still working and plan to work for years into the future. Roughly half of WLS participants are completely retired, while one-quarter of men and one in five women are partly retired; the rest are "not retired at all." Among those who are still in the labor force, 28 percent said they do not plan to retire. Of those planning retirement, 58 percent plan to stop working within three years and 74 percent within five years.

A third myth is that once couples retire, their new-found "togetherness" creates strains for the marriage. To the contrary, we found just three percent of married graduates felt their relationship with their spouse had gotten worse since retirement, whereas 33 percent reported an improvement in spousal relations. This improvement in marriage may reflect a rise in the standard of living enjoyed by retired couples. Among those who said their standard of living improved after retirement, 52 percent reported a better relationship with their spouse, whereas only 30 percent of those whose standard of living stayed the same or got worse reported better spousal relations.





receiving retirement benefits at any time, and among those who provided a specific eligibility age, the median age of eligibility is 62 years. Usually an individual's largest financial investment is his or her home. The majority of graduates (92 percent) own their own homes and a majority of them (65 percent) have paid off their mortgage. Leaving out pensions, the medi-

FINANCIAL MATTERS

The WLS graduates shared with us information about their earnings, assets, and the types of resources they either gave to or received from their family members. In many ways, the experiences of the WLS graduates are similar to men and women throughout the United States. Men's earnings are substantially higher than women's. Among those working full-time in 2004, the median income is \$48,000 for men and \$30,000 for women.¹ Like other Americans in their 60s, a large and increasing proportion of the WLS graduates are relying on Social Security as a source of income; nearly all graduates who were 65 or older in 2004 (90 percent) reported some income from this source.

Many graduates have prepared for their retirements through savings or investment plans; the majority of graduates (91 percent) reported either they or their spouse have retirement savings in the form of traditional pensions or in plans such as 401(k)s or IRAs.² While more than half of the graduates have already started receiving retirement benefits (63 percent of men and 48 percent of women), a sizable majority (66 percent) has kept at least some plans untouched.

Thirty percent of graduates reported that they could start

an value of all assets such as equity in houses and businesses and other financial investments increased from \$190,000 to \$327,000 in constant (2004) dollars over the last decade.

WLS graduates have both given money to and received money from family members. About half have received an inheritance (mostly from parents or parents-in-law) of at least \$10,000, with a median value of \$40,000. Aside from inheritances, 17 percent of WLS graduates received a cash gift worth at least \$1,000 at some point in their life. Mostly, these gifts were also from their parents or parents-in-law (85 percent). As their parents had done for them, a significant portion of graduates with living children gave \$1,000 or more to their children (41 percent). WLS graduates also made significant gifts to charitable organizations. About 67 percent of men and 60 percent of women in the WLS sample reported giving more than \$500 to charity in the last year. Among graduates who did make donations, men reported a median gift of \$2,000, while women reported a median gift of \$1,500.

¹ Median income is the level at which half the sample earns more and half the sample earns less.

² These are retirement plans that workers set up on their own. Contributions are invested and not taxed until withdrawn. A Roth IRA is a special kind of IRA in which contributions are taxed as they are made, and withdrawn income is tax-free.

HEALTH INSURANCE

Almost all graduates (94 percent) have access to health insurance and in 2004, 40 percent of graduates were covered by Medicare, the federal government's health insurance program targeted primarily to people over the age of 65. On the whole, sample members were satisfied with the health care they receive. Two-thirds said the overall quality of the care and services they receive is either excellent or very good. Prescription drug coverage for older adults has received a lot of attention in the news lately. Fortunately, only a handful of WLS participants reported difficulty in obtaining their prescription drugs. Just five percent of men and seven percent of women reported taking less medication than prescribed or having delayed filling a prescription because of the cost. The majority, however, require such drugs; nearly 77 percent of men and 82 percent of women take at least one prescription drug every day, and more than 20 percent take five or more prescriptions each day. About half of WLS respondents pay \$200 per year or less on out-of-pocket expenses for prescription drugs and 25% pay \$500 or more per year.

HEALTH AND HEALTH HABITS

As most adults age, they find their health starts to worsen. Although the WLS graduates are no exception, most study participants continue to enjoy quite good physical and mental health. Eighty-five percent reported that their

current health is either excellent or good. In addition, a full 70 percent of graduates described their current health as equal to or better than 10 years ago. We do see, however, an increase since 1993 in the proportion of graduates reporting specific health symptoms such as aching muscles, fatigue and lack of energy. Many common tasks are becoming harder to perform without strain or assistance, especially for women. While only two percent of men and eight percent of women reported having difficulty carrying 10 pounds—such as a bag of groceries, 10 percent of men and 39 percent of women have trouble carrying 25 pounds. Additionally, 21 percent of men and 29 percent of women reported being at least somewhat limited in moderate activities, such as pushing a vacuum cleaner, bowling, or playing golf. A full 29 percent of men and 44 percent of women indicated troubles with vigorous activities, like climbing several flights of stairs. Because of these conditions, graduates have had to cut back on some activities. Strikingly, 47 percent of men and 52 percent of women reported that pain limited their normal work at least a little bit in the past month either inside or outside the home.

Like many Americans, the majority of 1957 graduates would be defined as overweight according to government health guidelines. But, most are aware of the health risks associated with this condition and are trying to lose weight. The average woman in our study is 5'4 1/2" tall and weighs 160-165 pounds, while the average man is 5' 10 1/2" and weighs around 200 pounds. The typical grad-

WLS investigator named one of TIME Magazine's 100 most influential people of 2005



Richard Davidson, right, with the Dalai Lama and Buddhist monk Geshe Sopa.
Photo: Jeff Miller/ University Communications.

“Davidson, 54, has been able to demonstrate precisely how meditation alters brain function. His research legitimizes, for scientists as well as monks, the study of internal states of consciousness by linking them to the objective reality of electrical activity in the central nervous system.”

*-ANDREW WEIL, M.D., TIME MAGAZINE
Sunday, Apr. 30, 2006.*

uate gained 5.5 pounds since 1993. When asked directly, a majority of both men (59 percent) and women (70 percent) consider themselves currently overweight. According to current medical definitions of excess weight, this perception is warranted. Among men in our sample, only 18 percent are at a normal weight, while 48 percent are overweight and 34 percent obese. Among women, 32 percent fall into the normal weight category, 37 percent are overweight, and 30 percent obese. Most of the women (51 percent) and many of the men (39 percent) are actively trying to lose weight through exercise and cutting calories and fat. Women spend 46 hours and men spend 29 hours per month engaging in light physical activity such as walking, gardening, or housework. Men spend 8.5 hours per month engaging in more vigorous physical activity such as jogging, swimming, biking, or playing team sports while women spend 7.5 hours doing such things.

Tobacco use behaviors have changed a great deal over the years. Fifty-six percent of the class have smoked cigarettes in their lifetime. In 1993, about 31 percent of graduates were smoking cigarettes, yet this proportion declined to just 21 percent in 2004. Of the 31 percent of respondents who reported smoking in 1993, just under half (44 percent) have since quit. Graduates who currently smoke cigarettes, however, have typically done so for over 45 years.

Wisconsin is a state known for high levels of alcohol consumption, so it is not surprising that we found relatively high levels of social drinking among WLS participants. Moreover, we found little evidence that WLS participants decreased their alcohol consumption as they moved from their fifties to their sixties. At both times, roughly three-quarters of members of the class of 1957 reported having an alcoholic beverage in the previous month. The proportion of people who reported having alcohol on 20 days or more in the previous month increased from 13 percent in 1993 to 18 percent in 2004. This increase in near-daily or daily drinking could be a response to widely publicized news articles about the positive health consequences of regular, moderate drinking. Whatever its cause, it appears that participants with higher levels of education are more likely to increase their drinking to more than 20 days a month.

MENOPAUSE PANEL ADVISES, WAIT IT OUT

-From The Capital Times, Thurs Mar 24, 2005

Women's Health and Menopause

In 1993, the WLS was one of only a handful of social science studies to collect information on menopause. In 2004, the WLS continued its commitment to women's health issues, and asked questions about women's experi-

Let Research Guide Health Decisions

The News About The Risks of Hormone Replacements Highlights The Importance of Medical Research - And Research By Patients Themselves

- From Wisconsin State Journal, Sun July 28, 2003

ences with hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Sixty-two percent of women in the WLS said that they'd taken hormones for menopausal or aging symptoms, though of these, fewer than one in four are currently taking hormones. Women gave many reasons for their decision to start HRT. Fifty-seven percent considered their doctor's recommendation to take hormones a "very important" reason, and health concerns (such as preventing osteoporosis and heart disease) were also very important to many women (48 percent and 34 percent, respectively). Forty-five percent of women rated relieving menopausal

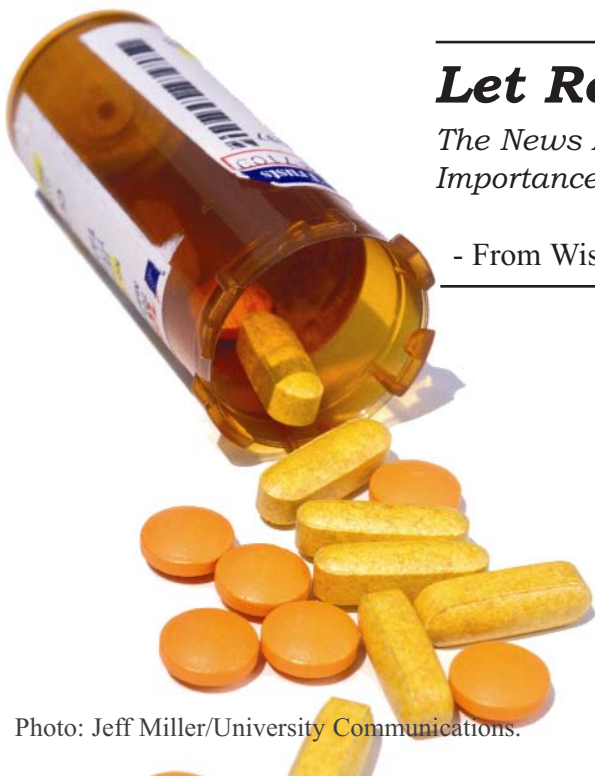


Photo: Jeff Miller/University Communications.

symptoms such as hot flashes and night sweats as a “very important” reason for initiating hormone therapy. Slightly less often, women listed relieving mood swings, depression, or anxiety as very important (21 percent). Very few women (fewer than seven percent) considered regulating periods, improving sex life, or keeping youthful to be very important reasons for taking hormones.

Although most women had high hopes, and took hormone supplements because of their promise of good health, most women have since stopped their regimens. A full 78 percent of women who were once taking hormones have stopped doing so, and only 9 percent of these have since resumed. Public controversy about the benefits and safety of HRT clearly played a role in women's decisions to discontinue hormones: 61 percent of women said news stories on this topic were a “very important” influence on their decision. Most women who stopped taking hormones did so at age 63, which coincided closely with the widely publicized discontinuation of the Women's Health Initiative post-menopausal hormone therapy trial in mid-2002. Fear of possible long term effects (69 percent) and of possible side effects (64 percent) were the two most frequently given reasons for stopping hormone therapy. Despite these fears, however, fewer than 17 percent reported that they actually experienced any undesirable side effects first-hand. Nearly half (49 percent) reported that their doctor's advice to discontinue was very important. A minority of women reported that they stopped HRT because they were feeling better, because they felt that the hormones didn't help them, or because they simply didn't feel like taking them.

Preparing for End-of-Life Health Care

In 2005, public debate about artificially extending the life of Terri Schiavo raised America's awareness of end-of-life issues. Many of the WLS graduates are aware of the importance of end-of-life decision making, and have taken steps to prepare for their own end-of-life care. The majority (61 percent) of WLS graduates reported that they have made some plans for the types of medical treat-

COURT WON'T HEAR CASE OF BRAIN-DAMAGED WOMAN

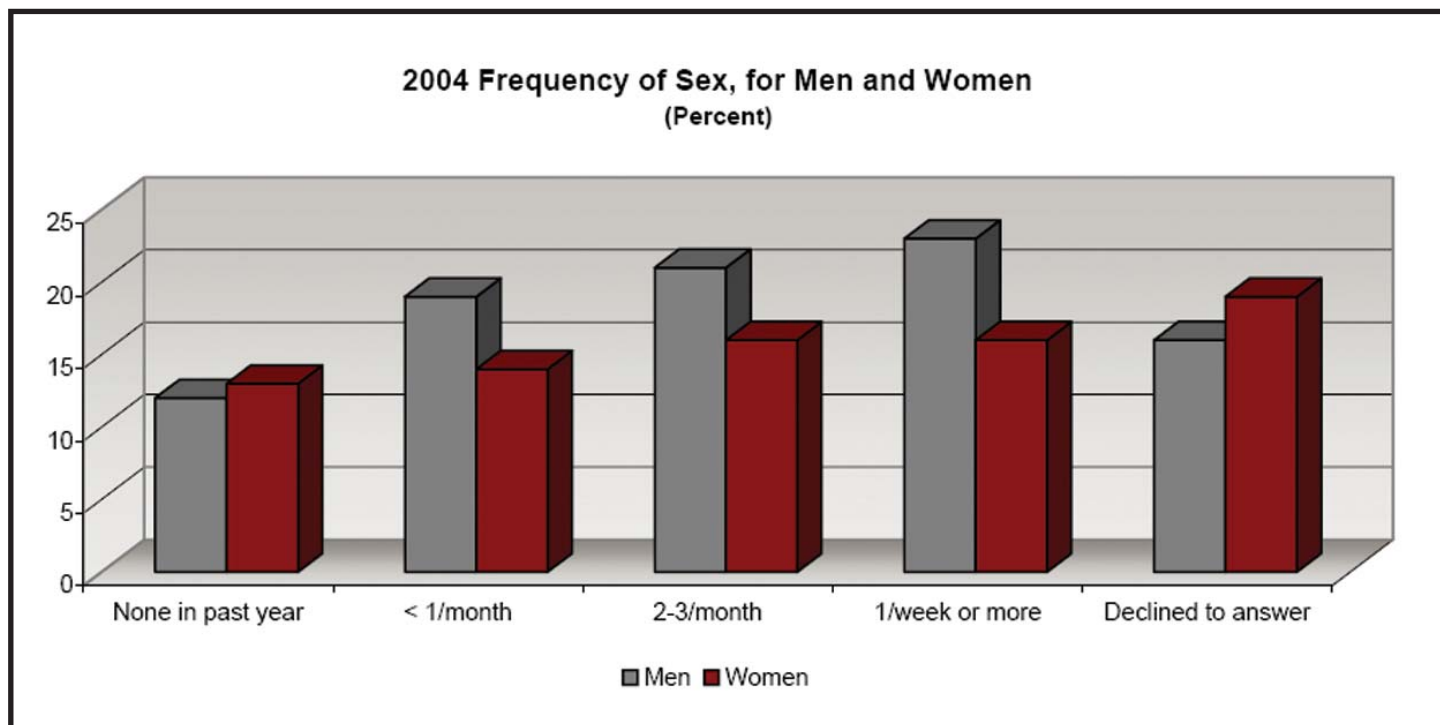
-From Wisconsin State Journal, Tue Jan 25, 2005

ments they want (or don't want) to receive if they become seriously ill. Although the majority of both men and women reported that they have made plans, a higher proportion of women than men did so (64 percent versus 57 percent, respectively). Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) have discussed their health care plans with others, with women slightly more likely than men to do so (77 percent and 70 percent, respectively). Out of those people who had such discussions, 73 percent shared their plans with spouses and 62 percent with children. Although a higher proportion of men than women had discussions with spouses (83 percent versus 65 percent), a higher proportion of women than men had discussed their plans with children (72 percent and 48 percent).

Slightly more than half (52 percent) of the graduates have appointed a durable power of attorney for health care (DPAHC). A DPAHC is a person legally appointed to make health care decisions for a patient in the event that he or she is incapacitated. Of those who named a DPAHC, 56 percent named their spouse, while 35 percent gave this authority to their child, child-in-law, or grandchild. Roughly equal proportions named other relatives (five percent), or non-family members (four percent). Less than three percent named siblings or some other relative. Similarly, less than two percent named their attorney or a friend as DPAHC, while less than one percent appointed health care providers or clergy as their health advocate. A much higher proportion of men than women reported that their spouse has such authority (67 percent versus 47 percent), reflecting that men are more likely than women to be married at ages 64-65. In contrast, women are more likely than men to name one of their children as DPAHC (43 percent versus 24 percent). Graduates also were asked whether they have a living will. A living will is a formal document that specifies the medical treatment a dying patient would like to receive in the event that he or she is incapacitated. Slightly more than half (54 percent) of the graduates reported that they have a living will.

Schiavo Dies, But Dispute Lives On Husband, Parents Spar Over Burial

-From Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Fri April 1, 2005



Sexual Relationships

In 2004, the WLS included for the first time a series of questions about sexual activity. Most scientific studies of sexual activity focus on younger people, so the WLS is making a groundbreaking contribution to this field of research. Graduates who were married or who said they had a sexual partner were asked how often they had sex, and their feelings about their sexual relationship.

Men reported slightly higher levels of sexual activity than women. Twenty-three percent of men and 16 percent of women reported having sex at least once per week; yet roughly equal proportions of men and women (12 and 13 percent, respectively) have not had sex in the past year. A sizeable proportion of men (16 percent) and women (19 percent) preferred not to answer this question. We also asked how physically pleasurable and emotionally satisfying their sexual relationship was in the past year. About two-thirds of the men and one-half of the women rated their sexual relationship as pleasurable and satisfying. However, the majority also said that their sexual activity has declined in the recent past. Fifty-four percent of men reported a decline in sexual activity. When asked to explain this decline, most pointed to physical factors including their own (40 percent) or their partner's physical changes (31 percent), or their own illness (27 percent). Thirty-four percent attributed the decline to their partner losing interest. Among women who reported a decline or end to sexual activity, 41 percent said the change was due

to their own (27 percent) or their partner's physical changes (39 percent), or to their own illness (16 percent). One-third attributed the decline to their own loss of interest, and 25 percent to their partner losing interest. Thus, both men and women attributed declining frequency to physical factors, although men were much more likely to cite a partner's loss of interest (35 percent) than women (10 percent).

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CLASS OF 1957

The WLS asked questions about several sensitive topics in the last interview, including questions about childhood abuse, serious health problems, and deaths in the family. We are extremely grateful that almost all graduates responded to these questions, so we are able to share some of what we have learned from them.

Childhood Abuse

A significant minority of the Class of 1957 reported violence and abuse in their homes when they were growing up. Twenty percent grew up in a home with an alcoholic or a problem drinker. Many respondents reported physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in their youth, although the frequencies of such reports vary based on the intensity of the abuse. For example, one-third of respondents said they experienced at least "a little" verbal abuse from one or both of their parents. Men were more likely than women to report having experienced at least "a little"

physical abuse by one or both parents (38 and 33 percent, respectively). Conversely, women were more likely than men to report being sexually abused as a child.

Approximately nine percent of women reported at least “a little” sexual abuse from anyone, compared to fewer than three percent of men. Three percent of women and one percent of men reported experiencing physical, as well as sexual and emotional abuse as children. We also asked one question about witnessing physical abuse and found that 14 percent of participants reported seeing a parent or sibling being beaten at home. Slightly more men than women reported witnessing this family violence.

Serious Health Concerns

WLS graduates have experienced difficulties in adulthood as well as in childhood. Adults in their 60s and older commonly face two major concerns: serious health problems and deaths of loved ones. The two most frequent illnesses striking older adults today are cancer and heart disease, and the WLS respondents (and their families) are no exception. The majority of graduates (56 percent) said that either their parent or one of their brothers and sisters, currently alive or deceased, has been diagnosed with cancer, yet only 11 percent of graduates reported ever having had cancer themselves. A sizeable proportion of graduates have been diagnosed with heart disease (15 percent) or diabetes (12 percent). Fourteen percent of graduates had either a parent, brother, or sister diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease.

Mental health conditions also are a concern for members of the Class of 1957. Twenty-seven percent of women and 15 percent of men have ever had a period of depression lasting two weeks or longer. Of those who reported ever being depressed, only one percent experienced their worst or most recent depression period during their teen years and exactly half of male and female graduates told us they had experienced their worst or most recent period by age 51. While half of men and women (55 percent and 49 percent respectively) who were ever depressed said that they have had just one such spell, an additional 41 percent of women and 34 percent of men reported having had two to five such experiences.

Deaths of Loved Ones

Death is a natural part of life, yet most adults hope death comes at the end of a long and meaningful life. Most

expect to die before their children, to live about as long as their spouse, and to survive until middle age with two living parents. Moreover, most hope death is painless and occurs under peaceful conditions. In the WLS, we explored the conditions under which parents and spouses died. We asked graduates to tell us about the death of a parent if their parent died in the 10 years prior to interview. Roughly half (52 percent) reported that a parent spent his or her last days at a nursing home, while 23 percent were in the hospital and 19 percent were at home.

Six percent of graduates experienced the death of their spouse in the 10 years prior to the 2004 interview. Roughly one-third of them reported that their spouse died suddenly, usually from a heart attack, stroke or accident. Two-thirds said their spouse died with at least some forewarning. Of those widow(er)s whose spouse died after some forewarning, 45 percent reported that their spouse spent his or her final days at home, while 40 percent were in the hospital, and 14 percent in a nursing home or hospice. When asked about their deceased spouse’s death, 36 percent of bereaved graduates said their spouse experienced no pain; 50 percent reported severe or moderate pain during the last week of his or her life.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Class of 1957 continues to be active in their communities and generous with their time and talents. Fifty percent reported attending religious services at least weekly. Although several dozen different religious preferences and specific denominations are represented in the WLS, approximately 40 percent of graduates are Catholic, about half are Protestant, and one percent are Jewish. Among Protestants, about half are Lutheran. In 2004, about two out of three graduates maintained the same religious preference their family had when they were in high school.

The WLS graduates are also a politically engaged group. A large majority (84 percent) said they voted in the November 2002 election, either at the polls or by absentee ballot. Of graduates who reported their political leanings, more identified themselves as conservative (46 percent) than liberal (18 percent), though these proportions varied by gender. Overall, men were more likely than women to describe themselves as conservative (54 versus 39 percent).

The Class of 1957 continues to give back to their communities. Over the last decade, 57 percent of graduates have

volunteered and 15 percent volunteered regularly. Volunteers most frequently said they worked for a religious organization (60 percent of volunteers), followed by national or local organizations (47 percent), and education or school groups (29 percent). More women than men reported volunteering over the past 10 years (60 percent versus 52 percent), although men and women volunteered in nearly equal numbers during the past 12 months. Graduates do not only donate their time; nearly 50 percent have donated blood at least once in their lifetime and 17 percent donated blood in the past 12 months.

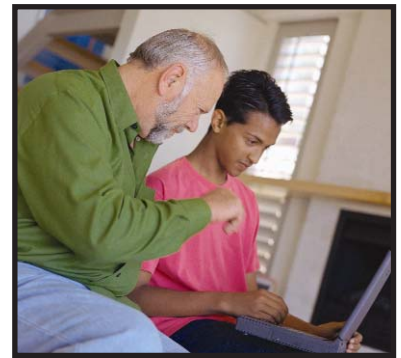
COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE

One of the most sweeping changes in American life in the past decade has been the spread of Internet access into homes. Although the stereotype of the “typical” Internet user is the technologically-savvy college student, we found that people in their 60s have also ventured into cyberspace. More than three-quarters of WLS graduates have a personal computer in their homes. Of those who have a personal computer in their homes, over 90 percent have household Internet access, and more than five out of six WLS graduates who have household Internet access use the Internet some of the time. In all, almost 60 percent of WLS graduates use the Internet from home, and over one-third use the Internet from home for at least two hours per week.

Men and women are equally likely to use the Internet (60 percent versus 57 percent), yet they use the Internet for different purposes. During a typical week, men spend more time surfing the web than women do (6.4 hours versus 4.4 hours), but women spend more time than men e-mailing (4.7 hours versus 4.2 hours). Once people get the Internet in their home, they appear to keep using it. Only three percent of WLS graduates with computers reported having discontinued Internet access. Graduates who do not have Internet access

emphasized their choice in the matter more than either a lack of resources or skills. About a third of these graduates said the reason for either not having a computer or not having the Internet is that they do not think they would

be useful, compared to 19 percent who said they wouldn't know how to use the computer or Internet and 12 percent who said they are too expensive.



LEISURE AND HOBBIES

Many adults in their early 60s look forward to retirement when they can swap paid work for hobbies and other leisure activities. The WLS participants reported a wide array of social, creative, and sports activities that fill their non-work hours. Nearly everyone (97 percent) talked to a friend or relative for at least an hour per week in the year prior to being interviewed. Others spend their time reading, playing games, painting or drawing, playing a musical instrument, attending lectures or concerts, or doing puzzles. Given the well-rounded lives of Wisconsin's Class of 1957, it's not surprising most look back at their accomplishments with a sense of pride. Ninety-three percent said they have been successful financially and educationally. A full 97 percent said their family lives have been successful and that they have been “very” or “somewhat” successful at work.

We investigators in the WLS have shared the successes and challenges of Wisconsin's Class of 1957, and we hope to continue to learn their stories in years to come.

*“Wrinkles should merely indicate
where the smiles have been.”*

-Mark Twain