Marital status is an important demographic characteristic of an older population because it is strongly related to the level of social support available in later life. Individuals who are married are more likely than others to have another person readily available to provide support and help when needed. Seniors who have ever been married are also more likely to have adult children who may be available for support. The Census Bureau definition of marital status does not tell us about the many unmarried seniors who have partners or close friends who provide significant support and assistance.

Most seniors in Massachusetts as well as in the United States as a whole have been married at some point in their lives. Few—typically under 10%—have never married. The larger share of people age 65 and over in both the United States and Massachusetts are currently married (50.5% USA and 48.1% MA) (Figure 1).
The percentage married is high for all age groups, but declines with age (Figure 2). The percentage divorced and separated refers to those who had experienced marital disruption and not remarried at the time of the 2007 American Community Survey. Divorce or separation is low for all age groups but also reflects the increasing share of marriages ending in divorce in recent decades. The percentage divorced or separated is considerably higher for the younger cohorts than for the oldest-old.

In Massachusetts, the majority of men and women between the ages of 65 and 74 are currently married (51% of women and 74% of men) but this proportion is lower for older seniors, especially those aged 85 and over (12% of women and 51% of men) (Figures 3 & 4). At all ages, but especially among the oldest-old, women are less likely than men to be currently married. The majority of women age 75 and over is widowed, having outlived their spouses.
Fig 3: 2007 Marital Status by Age, Female Massachusetts Residents

Source: Calculated by the Gerontology Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, using microdata from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey.

Fig 4: Marital Status by Age, Male Massachusetts Residents

Source: Calculated by the Gerontology Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, using microdata from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey.