

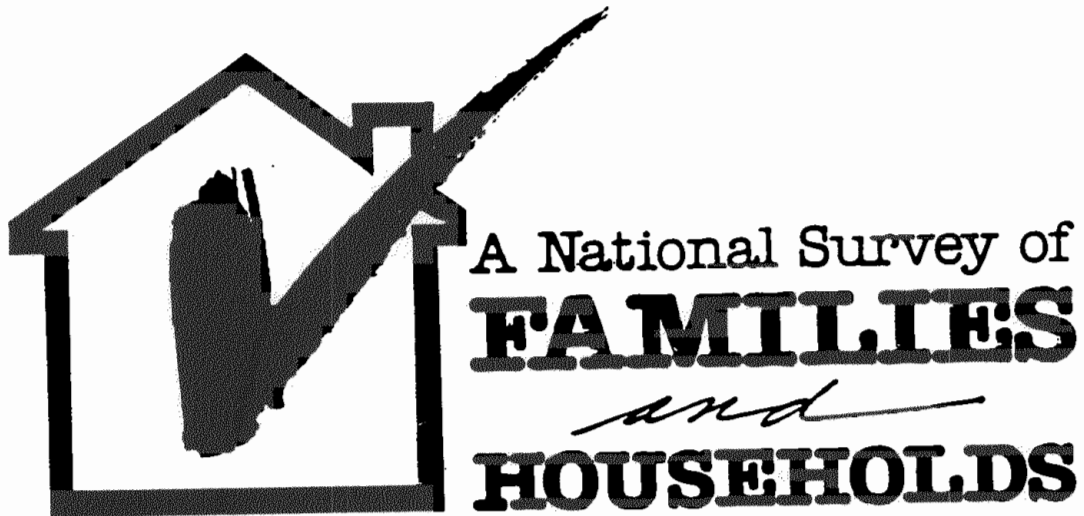
Center For Demography And Ecology—
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The Death of Parents and the Transition to Old Age

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The Death of Parents and the Transition to Old Age

This paper is about those demographic events that happen, on average, about two-thirds of the way through the life span (Olshansky et al., 1990). The last child leaves home. For women, menopause begins. One becomes a grandparent. The last living parent, usually mother, dies. Among birth cohorts currently alive, these events center in the early fifties. The median age for the various events is fairly tightly confined, ranging from age 49 for women becoming a grandparent to about age 55 for the death of the last parent. Of course, men become grandparents at a slightly older age than do women but the median ages for the other processes are not very different between the sexes.

These events are part of a transition in the circumstances of most people; a change in relationship and responsibility to both the younger and the older generations. The years immediately preceding these events are often described as a time of considerable responsibility in both generational directions (Clausen 1986). Then one's own children are still at home making the demands on time, attention and support associated with adolescence and early adulthood. At the same time, a parent - surviving a spouse's death - is increasingly likely to need financial, emotional, or simply practical assistance. The events described here tell of the end of those responsibilities.

In the following pages we investigate these events as they are represented in the National Survey of Families and Households. We alternate between retrospective cohort experience and cross-sectional representation of life course experience, paying attention to when cross-sectional patterns may be misleading because of cohort change. We find that these transitions tend to characterize distinct aspects of middle age in a way that

does not flow directly into other events in later life. They are separated by five or ten years from the age at which men currently leave full time work and by perhaps 25 years from those events of old age such as widowhood, increased loss of other cohort members, and the onset of chronic illness.

Data

The NSFH, conducted during 1987 and 1988, is a national sample survey that covers a wide variety of issues on American family life. It involved interviews with 13,017 respondents, including a main cross-section sample of 9,643 persons aged 19 and older, plus an oversample of minorities and households containing single-parent families, stepfamilies, recently married couples, and cohabiting couples. In each household, a randomly selected adult was interviewed. In addition, a shorter, self-administered questionnaire was administered to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the primary respondent. Interviews averaged about 100 minutes, although interview length varied considerably with the complexity of the respondent's family history. Topics covered included detailed household composition, family background, adult family transitions, couple interactions, parent-child interactions, education and work, economic and psychological well-being, and family attitudes (detailed description provided in Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988).

Death of Father and Mother

The social implications of the death of a parent vary over the life course. Parental loss during childhood has substantial effects on both socialization (Heatherington et al., 1983) and resources for education and launching (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Raley,

1991). Death of a parent during middle adulthood has emotional and psychological consequences that are gaining increased attention (Umberson, 1990). Further, the experience of losing a parent in middle age is likely to be seen as a life-stage transition.

Parental loss may also be a trace marker of a period of preceding concern and dependency poorly captured in cross-sectional measures. For example, we find that over a quarter of persons in later middle age have had a parent live with them (Bumpass, 1990). This experience is largely missed in cross section because it typically lasts less than a year and often ends with either the death or the institutionalization of the parent. Especially in later middle age, when the widowed parent is older, the parent's loss of spouse is likely to increase the needs of the parent for assistance from children. Further, the death of a parent in middle age, when retirement age is becoming increasingly salient, re-enforces the growing sense of one's own mortality and growing older (Brim, 1976)

The death of the second parent is an especially clear symbolic marker, representing the succession to status as the elder generation within the family. There are countervailing aspects to this transition, one side of which our culture allows only tacit recognition. On the one hand there is the loss of an important source of emotional support, bereavement, and the recognition one can no longer return to the parental home. On the other, especially when parental death was preceded by a long period of illness or dependency, there can be an associated release from worry and obligations. The social context of middle age is clearly different for those with no living parents, and a significant minority of these will have received an inheritance at a time when it might

have a more substantial impact on their life course. Among those who had no surviving parent, thirty percent of middle aged persons in the NSFH had received an inheritance compared to six percent of those with one parent still living.

Let us begin by looking at the timing of the death of parents in the life course as reported in the NSFH. The NSFH includes a question to primary respondents, "Is your mother still living?" If mother is deceased, respondent is asked, "In what year did she die?" Similar questions are asked about the respondent's father.

Figure 1 presents data on the cumulative proportion of respondents experiencing the death of each parent by the given age, as reported by 10 year birth cohorts in the NSFH centering on the year indicated in the figure. The data are aggregated over the sexes of respondents since there is little reason to believe that the experience should occur at different ages for men and women. Table 1 reports the cross-sectional differences by age in parental survival and age of living parents. We see the expected cohort change in Figure 1, in particular in the decline of early orphanhood. There is little cohort difference, especially for father loss, by middle age. This may reflect cohort differences in age of fathers at birth more than anything else, but it suggests that the age differences we see in cross-section are likely to provide a reasonable approximation to cohort experience.

Of course fathers die at earlier ages than do mothers. Half of respondents have experienced the death of their father by about age 43 while the similar figure for mothers is after age 50. The approximate ten-year difference is attributable to the less favorable mortality experience of men and the later average age of fathers at the respondent's

birth.

Even for more recent cohorts, about one out of ten had lost a parent by age 25, but the loss of a parent is clearly an event that is concentrated in middle age. By the end of middle age the majority have lost both parents. Panel 3 of Table 1 provides a helpful perspective as well on the changing meaning of having surviving parents at different points in the life cycle. On the one hand, relevant to the literature on the "sandwich" generation (Brody, 1981), we see that relatively few members of a cohort have very old parents at any point. The proportion with a parent over age 80 peaks at about one-quarter during late middle age, though about half of persons in early middle age have a parent over age 70. The changing nature of this experience is illustrated by the last panel of this table, as the proportion of these surviving parents who are very old increases markedly with age. While only a quarter of persons in late middle age have a parent over age 80, in the last panel of Table 1 we see that the majority of those with a surviving parent have very old parents.

A useful check on the quality of the NSFH retrospective histories is provided by comparing these estimates to ones presented by Winsborough (1980), based on vital statistics data for age of parents at the birth of children and a cohort life table dating from the middle 1960s. The analytic problem goes back to Lotka's (1931) work on orphanhood, was extended by Goodman, Keyfitz and Pullum (1974, 1975), and most recently has been addressed by Goldman (1977).

Winsborough's estimates are compared to NSFH data in Table 2. The NSFH data show a somewhat later pattern for death of mother than Winsborough estimated but, in

general, the figures are quite close. We might expect that Winsborough's procedure would overestimate experienced mortality because the cohort life tables used did not foresee the marked improvement in mortality in older ages achieved in the late 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, it seems likely that the NSFH data would underestimate parental mortality through its retrospective questions, and consequent left censoring, if age at death is correlated over generations. Thus, the truth about the experience of these birth cohorts may lie between these two estimates which are, in fact, not very disparate.

Death of First Parent and Last Parent to Die

Although a case can be made for the differing practical and psychological consequences of the death of father and of mother, perhaps the most basic issue for contemporary intergenerational responsibility is the death of the first parent and then the death of the last parent. For the NSFH data we have calculated the age at death of the first parent to die and age at death of the second parent to die. We take the death of the first parent as the initiation of potential responsibility to the older generation, while death of the second signals its end.

Figure 2 shows age differences in the survival of both, one, or neither parent. The first quartile of decline for the survival of both parents occurs to NSFH respondents prior to the age of 30, at about the beginning of the second third of the life span. By about age 41, half of respondents have lost one parent and by about age 48, three-quarters have done so. Thus death of the first parent is a fairly drawn out process for a cohort, assuming the experience of the cross section is not far from the experience of a cohort. The event centers around the middle of life, its interquartile range is 18 or 20

years.

Twenty-five percent of respondents have lost both parents by about age 48, fifty percent by age 54 and 75 percent by age 62. This second loss centers about 13 years later in the life course than the first loss and is more compact in its occurrence, having an interquartile range of 14 rather than 18.

Between the death of the first parent and the second parent lies the period of potentially increased responsibility to the older generation. From a cohort perspective, the duration of this process - the time from the first quartile of the death of the first parent to the third quartile of the death of the last parent - covers the middle third of the life span. Of course, individuals proceed through this process at a different, more rapid pace. The percentage having only one living parent reaches nearly fifty percent of respondents around age 47.

Thus having a widowed parent is a family circumstance that is highly concentrated in middle age. This is even more the case when we take into account the joint survival of parents and parents-in-law. For married persons, and especially for married women, generational concerns are affected by the needs of in-laws. Almost three-quarters of married midlife women have either a widowed parent or a widowed parent-in-law.

Relationships with Parents

For those with living parents, Figure 3 provides several measures of support interactions, as well as a residential indicator. The percentage of respondents who live close to a parent declines gradually with age, largely as a stochastic result of the

progressive moves of children. On the other hand there is a slight rise in the propensity to live proximate to a parent during the early 50's and a marked increase in the early 60's, when (as we have seen) these surviving parents have become very old. This includes the coresidence we noted earlier, but also may include residential relocation of both parents and children in response to parental needs.

Caring for an ill parent increases in a smooth fashion but with a small peak in the early 50's and a larger one in the early 60's, peaks which match those of residential propinquity.

The more nearly dotted lines on Figure 3 display the proportion respondents with a living parent receiving and providing an array of kinds of practical support ranging from babysitting and housework to moral support. While the flow of financial assistance is primarily from parents to children (not shown), the balance of payments in other kinds of assistance from the point of view of the respondent/child occurs at about age 35, when an equal fraction of respondents are giving and receiving help. Thereafter, children are progressively more likely to provide help to than to receive help from their parents.

Summarizing this material on death of parents we can assert that the sequential death of parents produces a potential demand on children's resources. The period of time during which this process is operative covers the middle third of life, as a substantial fraction of respondents provide assistance to their parents. The period ends with the death of one's last parent, a process which is, as we will see, nearly congruent with that of achieving an empty nest.

Relationships with Children

The other part of middle age responsibility is toward one's children. It is clear that the process of emancipation continues some time after children move out, but children's exit from the household does mark a significant change in levels of dependency (Aquilino, 1990). For those with children, Figure 4 presents several child-related measures including the proportion of respondents with an empty nest. One-quarter have an empty nest by the late 40's, half by the late 50's.

That twenty-five percent of people in their early 60's have adult children living at home seems a remarkable amount of co-residence. Nest-emptying is a process, and children often return home even after marriage. For example, over a third of recently separated or divorced women reported that they had returned to live for a spell with their parents following the marital disruption. The effect of our high levels of marital disruption on the context of parenting in middle age is illustrated by the increasing proportion with age who have a separated, widowed, or divorced child (of course most of these are not widowed). In addition, of course, many children return for economic reasons (even while married), and because of events such as unmarried childbearing.

Grandparenthood clearly gets underway early in middle age and the majority are grandparents long before retirement. One-quarter are grandparents before age 45, half by around age 50 and three-quarters by the late 50's.

Summarizing the foregoing, it is clear that, for many people, the responsibilities of parenthood continue into the children's adult years. It is not clear that the distribution of this process has changed very markedly. It seems likely that the return

of adult children to the parental household may have substituted for the late-born child who may have previously been the last to leave.

Overview

Figures 5 and 6 provide an overview of the key parental transitions separately for men and women in the context of transitions associated more clearly with the elder years.

Figure 5 graphs a number of the major processes for women. The solid line traces the percent having lost one parent - one indicator of the beginning of the intergenerational squeeze. The fiftieth percentile level for this variable comes at about 40. By about age 48 most women have suffered this loss.

In the middle years, two concomitant processes begin. The proportion of women having grandchildren is shown in the dashed line. The crossed line is an estimate of the process of menopause. These data are not from NSFH but estimated from Rossi¹. Both processes reach their median age around age 50. Both processes move through their interquartile range fairly quickly in the years between 45 and 55.

Indicators of the end of the intergenerational squeeze - loss of the second parent and having an empty nest - both reach their median age at 54. The first quartile for the empty nest process is a few years earlier at 46 than that for the death of the second parent which comes at 48. The third quartile for each variable is about age 62.

¹Calculated from Wentz, "Management of the Menopause," in Jones, Wentz, and Burnet (eds.), Novak's Textbook of Gynecology, 1988, Figure 15.1, and from estimates made by A. Rossi from Figure 1, in S.M. McKinlay and J.B. McKinlay, "Health Status and Health Care Utilization by Menopausal Women," p. 247, in a personal communication to Larry Bumpass.

Reduction in labor force participation is not included in this graph because, for women, this is a measure for which cohort change makes cross-sectional relationships clearly misleading. The proportion working full-time declines regularly with age, whereas the labor force histories of women in their early 60's make it clear that there was no such reduction in their labor force participation until after age 60.

Processes associated more directly with growing old, such as widowhood, the loss of age mates, leaving the work force, and growing disability are clearly separated in time from the more family-related midlife processes.

For women, the beginning of the intergenerational squeeze is in full tide around age 40. Its end is in full tide around age 55. If widowhood is taken as an indicator of the beginnings of the processes of old age, then that process is not in full tide until the early 70's.

Figure 6 is for males. The death-of-first-parent process is the same for males and females as is the death-of-last-parent process. Men become grandparents at slightly older ages than do women. They also achieve an empty nest at slightly older ages. Thus, the intergenerational squeeze is in full swing for men at about age 40, as it is for women. The ending of that phase is at its median a year or two later for men at perhaps age 55. Cutting back from full time work has its median about five years after that for the end of the generational squeeze.

Concluding Remarks

In the foregoing we have focused on the middle of life as a time of responsibility for both the younger and older generations. One can treat the end of that period - a

period which may take up the middle third of life - as a kind of release, an opportunity for satisfying personal goals rather than the needs of others (Jung, 1930). An alternative reading of this period might be as one of successive loss of relationships with parents and children. Perhaps it makes little difference whether one takes our more optimistic view or a gloomier one. Either way, there appears to be a contemporary change after the middle 50's.

What about cohort changes in these processes? We initially intended to write our paper about a limited number of such changes. We quickly realized, however, that we knew little enough about the family demography of this period of the life course to make a wise choice for processes to investigate in greater detail. Thus the rampant descriptive nature of this paper. From previous work, however, we know that the median age at death of mother is likely to rise for younger cohorts. Winsborough initially thought that as the timing of this process approached that of men's retirement, there might be an opportunity for strengthening the culturally defined transition to old age at around 65. We currently believe that is in error. An increasing age at death of the last parent is likely to move the period of intergenerational responsibility a few years later in the life course and perhaps separate it more from the empty nest process. This seems to us likely to make "transitions" less apparent and hence less likely to be made real socially.

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Table 1. Distribution on Whether Parent Living and Age of Living Parent for Birth Cohorts: 1987-88 NSFH

Mother's Age							
Cohort	Central Age	Not Living	Under 50	50s	60s	70s	80+
1915-24	67	90%	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%
1925-34	57	66	0	0	0	15	19
1935-44	47	36	0	0	21	34	9
1945-54	37	18	0	25	42	13	1
1955-64	27	7	28	46	17	1	0

Father's Age							
Cohort	Age	Not Living	Under 50	50s	60s	70s	80+
1915-24	67	98%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
1925-34	57	90	0	0	0	8	2
1935-44	47	66	0	0	8	19	7
1945-54	37	35	0	11	36	15	2
1955-64	27	17	14	43	22	4	0

Oldest Parent's Age							
Cohort	Age	No Parent Living	Under 50	50s	60s	70s	80+
1915-24	67	89%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%
1925-34	57	62	0	0	1	13	24
1935-44	47	28	0	0	17	41	14
1945-54	37	10	0	15	49	22	3
1955-64	27	3	16	48	28	4	0

IF SURVIVING PARENT:

Cohort	Age	50s	50s	60s	70s	80+
1915-24	67	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%
1925-34	57	0	0	2	34	64
1935-44	47	0	0	23	57	19
1945-54	37	0	17	55	25	3
1955-64	27	16	50	29	5	0

Figure 1: Cumulative percent with mother death, and with father death, by birth cohort; life-table estimates, 1987-88 NSFH

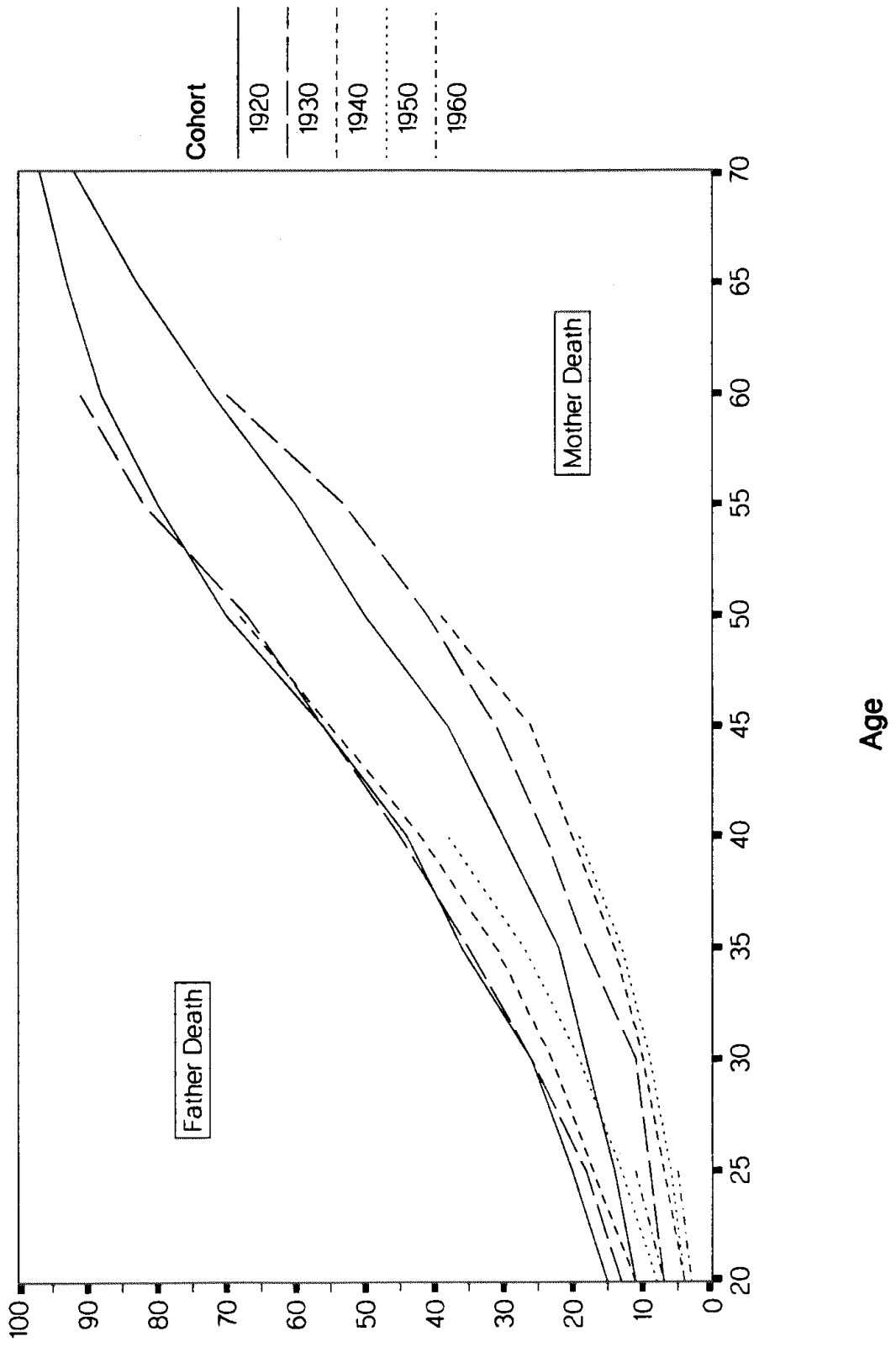


Figure 2: Percent with both parents, no parents, and one parent surviving, by age

Among persons age 30-64, 1987-88 NSFH

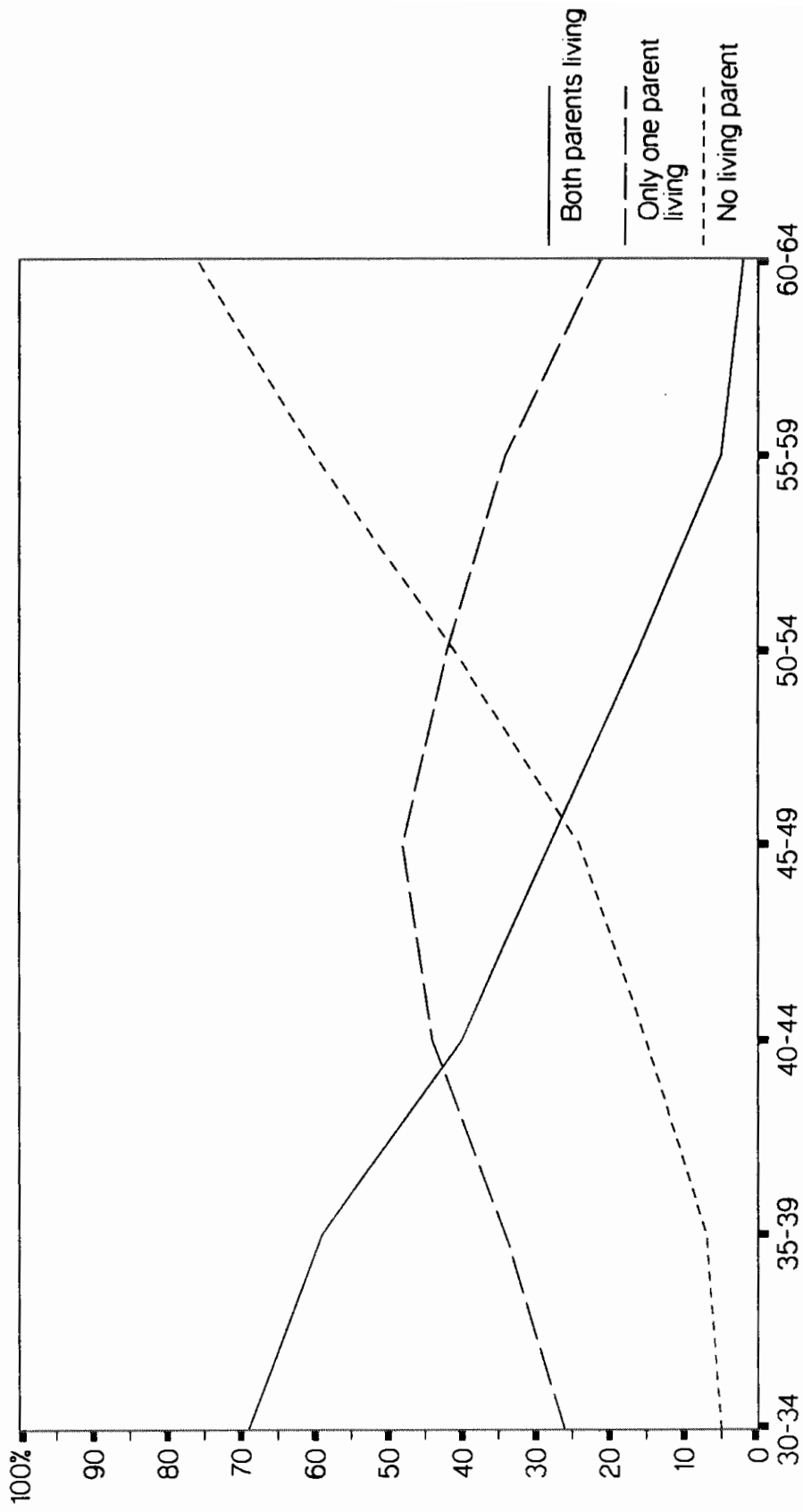
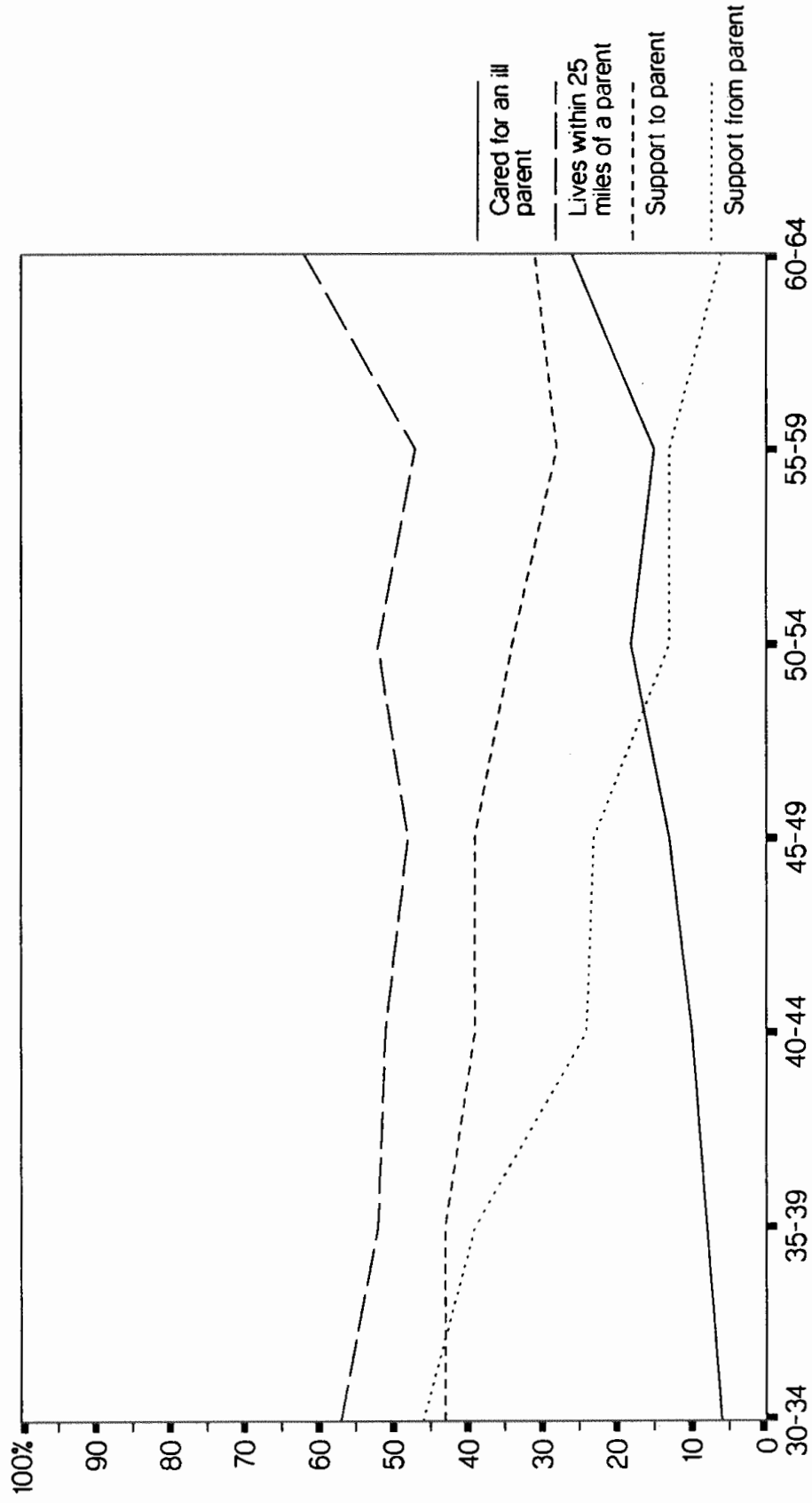


Figure 3: Percent within 25 miles of a parent/cared for ill parent in last 12 months/gave support to parent/received support from parent

Among persons age 30-64 with a surviving parent



Age

Support includes help with childcare, transportation, repairs, housework, and moral or emotional support in past 30 days.

Figure 4: Percent of parents with empty nest, with grandchildren, and with a divorced, separated, or widowed child

Among parents age 30-64

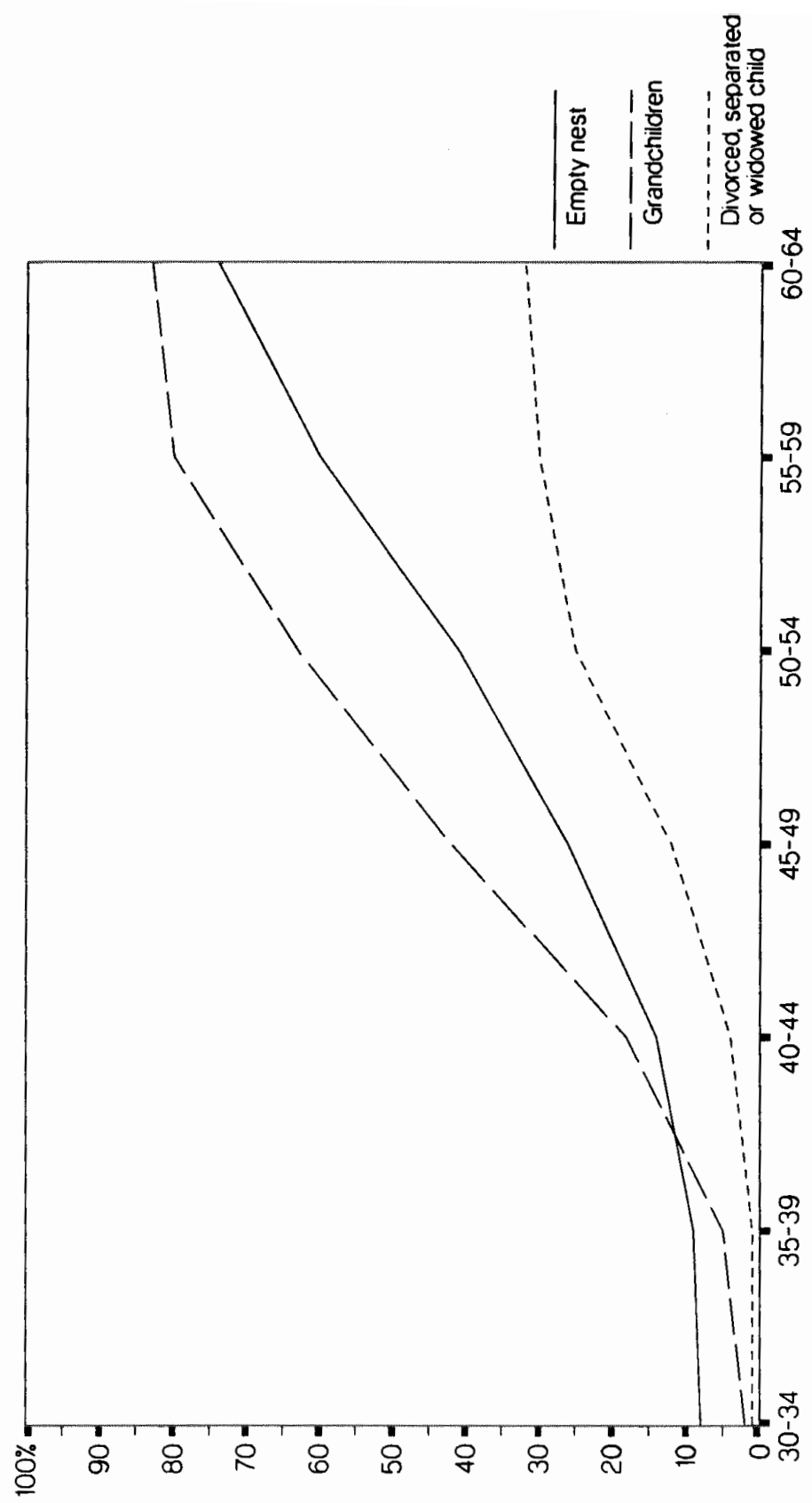


Figure 5: Percent with one parent dead, both parents dead, with grandchildren, empty nest, widowed, and cohort survival

Women, 30-64, 1987-88 NSFH

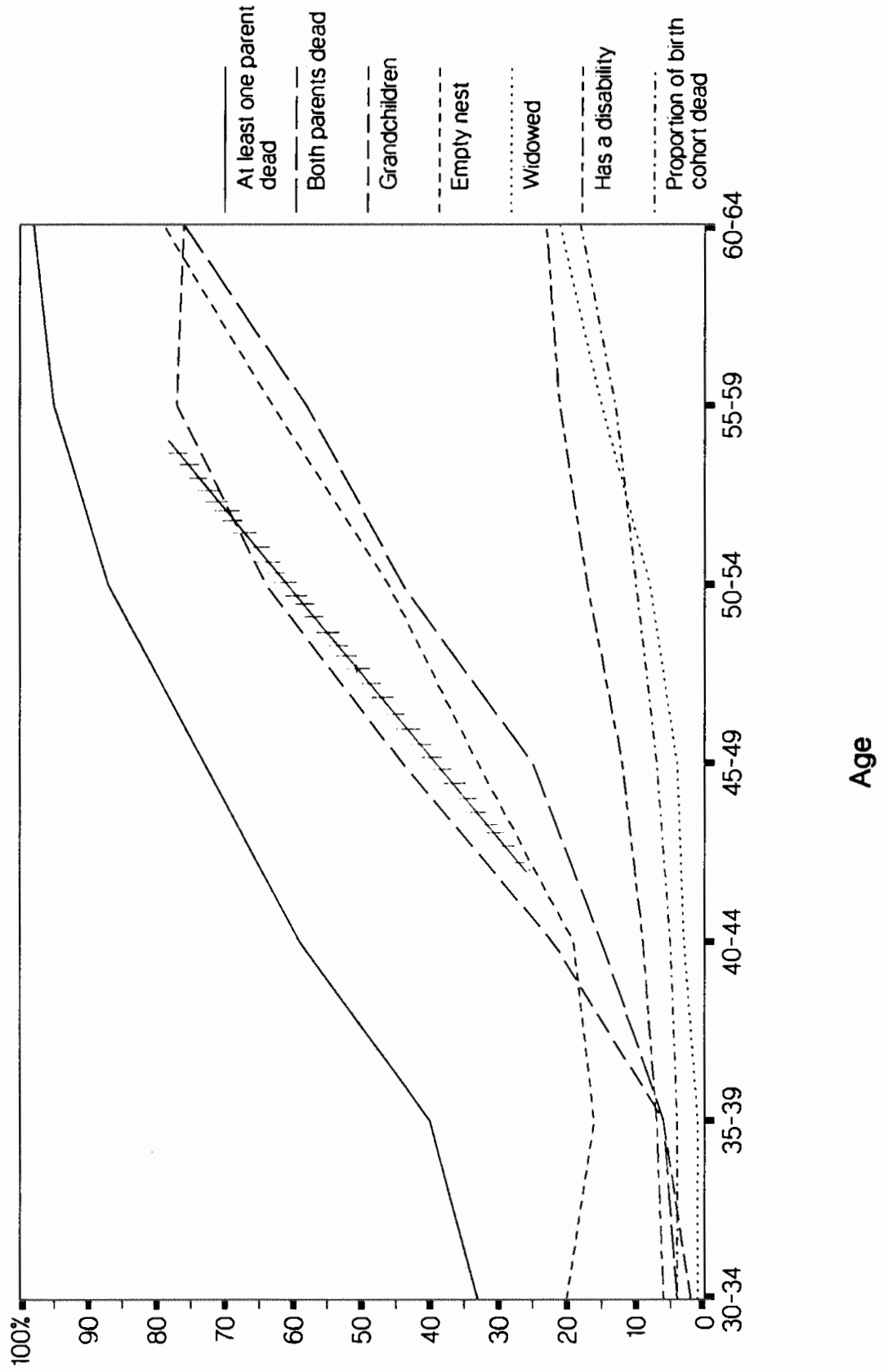
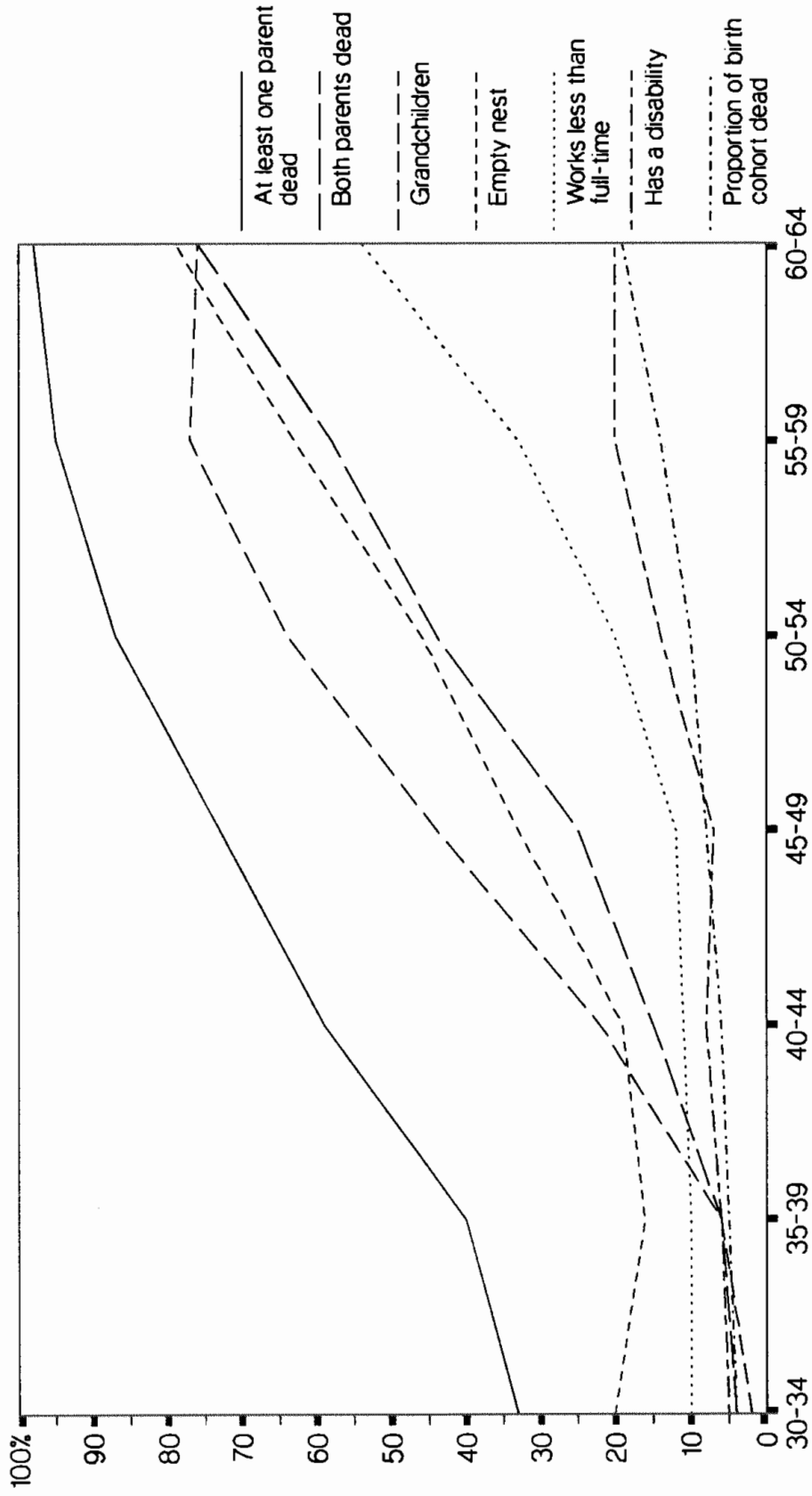


Figure 6: Percent with one parent dead, both dead, grandchildren, empty nest, work less than full-time, has a disability, and cohort survival

Men, 30-64, 1987-88 NSFH



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