



Brothers and Sisters

Findings from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study

The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) began in 1957 as project with modest goals: the state of Wisconsin simply wanted to predict the demand for higher education among high school seniors. In 1962, social scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found the questionnaires which had been completed five years earlier, and realized that they had potential to help better understand the choices that young adults make about their education, work, marriage, and family lives. During the 1970s WLS scientists wanted to investigate how much similarity brothers and sisters from the same family might have in their education and careers. During the 1975 telephone interview with the class of 1957 graduates, we asked for the names of all the graduate's brothers and sisters. In 1977 for 2,100 families, we invited one brother or sister of each graduate to join the study. These siblings were selected randomly unless the 1957 graduate had a twin brother or sister -- who was always selected. Throughout this report we use the word "graduate" to refer to the original study member who graduated from a Wisconsin high school in 1957 and "sibling" to refer to the graduate's selected brother or sister.

Combining the answers of the graduates with those of their brothers and sisters provided an unprecedented and extremely powerful tool to answer questions about the effect of family background on the early adult years. This technique proved

so successful that in the next telephone interview in 1994 we re-interviewed as many of the original 2,100 siblings as we could, and in addition we invited another 3,100 brothers and sisters to join the study. Most recently, between October 2004 and December 2006, we interviewed 4,271 siblings.

Throughout the 50 years of the WLS we have shared the findings of our study with the 1957 graduates and their families. Our most recent report, *The Class of 1957 at Age 65: A First Look*, was mailed to our graduate participants in January of 2007. This report focuses on the brothers and sisters of Wisconsin's class of 1957. The goal is to describe the answers that brothers and sisters gave to our questions; to compare and contrast the experiences of graduates and siblings; and to explore the relationships between the graduates and their brothers and sisters.

In 2007, the WLS siblings ranged in age from as young as 37 to as old as 89 but the average age of the siblings was 66 years old. The chart on the next page shows the ages of the siblings.



Currently, 79 siblings are the same age as the graduate, sixty-nine years old in 2007. Most, but not all of these are twins of the graduate. Among the rest of the siblings, 60 percent are younger than the graduate and 40 percent are older. Because, on average, older persons are more likely than younger persons to die, there are a greater number of younger than older siblings in the study. For about nine percent of siblings, their graduate brother or sister has died.

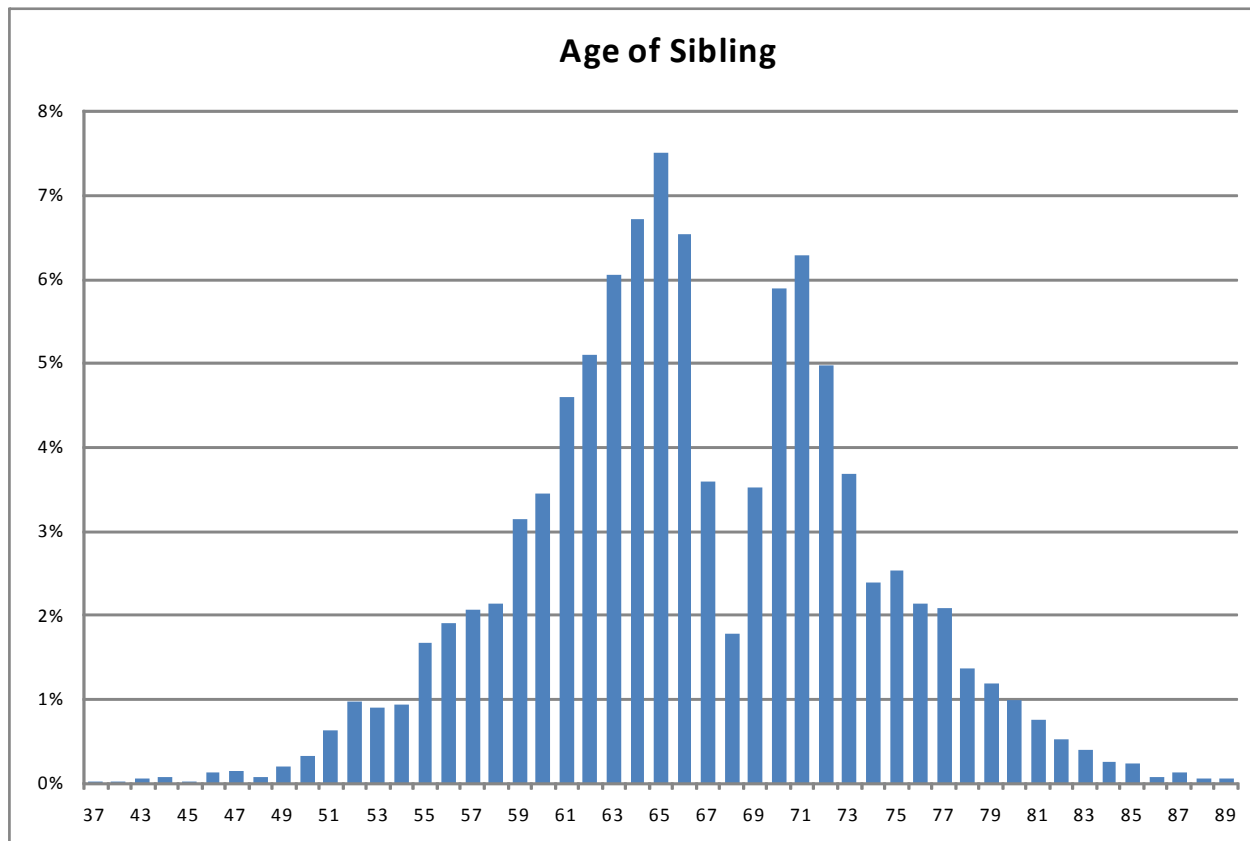
Where are the Siblings?

Like the graduates, 68% of WLS siblings currently live in Wisconsin. After Wisconsin the most common states of residence are Minnesota (four percent), California, Illinois, and Florida (three percent each). When you look at the combined location of the graduate and the sibling, half of the pairs are both living in Wisconsin,

35 percent have only one member in Wisconsin, and 14 percent have neither member in Wisconsin.

Family Life

The family lives of WLS siblings closely resemble those of the graduates. Like the members of the class of 1957, most of the siblings are married (77 percent) and among the currently married most (80 percent) are in their first marriage. The graduates are slightly more likely than their sibling to be in their first marriage (65 percent versus 61 percent). This difference is explained by more spousal deaths among older siblings and more divorce among younger siblings. The average age at first marriage for both graduates and siblings was 23. Like the graduates, nearly all of the siblings have children (91 percent) and the majority of those (58 percent) have two or three children.



dren. Sibling parents are slightly more likely to have only one child (nine percent) compared to graduate parents (six percent). Following the societal trend of declining family size across the twentieth century, older siblings have 3.5 children on average, compared to 3 children for graduates and 2.5 children among the younger siblings.

Work Life

In the early years of the WLS, questions about jobs and work were a major focus. Although the jobs people held in the past can have long lasting effects on later-life health and well-being, by now for most of the WLS participants a regular work schedule is a thing of the past. About half of the graduates had completely retired by the age of 65 and we suspect that many more have retired since then. Whether the graduate's siblings were working when we last talked to them depended highly on their age. Only 25 percent of older siblings were working at the time of the last interview compared to 68 percent of younger siblings.

Military Service

National data show that back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, more than half of eligible men served in the military, however at the start of the twenty-first century fewer than five percent of individuals aged 18-20 serve. These national data line up closely with the WLS data. Among male WLS graduates, 58 percent have ever served in the military. A slightly higher percentage of older brothers served (69 percent) and a slightly lower percentage of younger brothers served (45 percent). Very few women, either graduates or siblings, have served in the military. Less than one percent of female grads and older sisters and only one and one-half percent of younger sisters have served in the military.

With a few exceptions, the military veterans of the class of 1957 served during the Cold War. However some of the brothers of the graduates were eligible to serve during the Korean or Vietnam Wars. We used WLS data to investigate the effects of military service immediately after high school on college attendance. We found that for those who had done well academically in high school and had hoped to go to college, military service slightly decreased the odds of attending college. However, among men who did not plan to go to college and who did less well in high school, military service increased the odds of attending relative to those who did not serve.

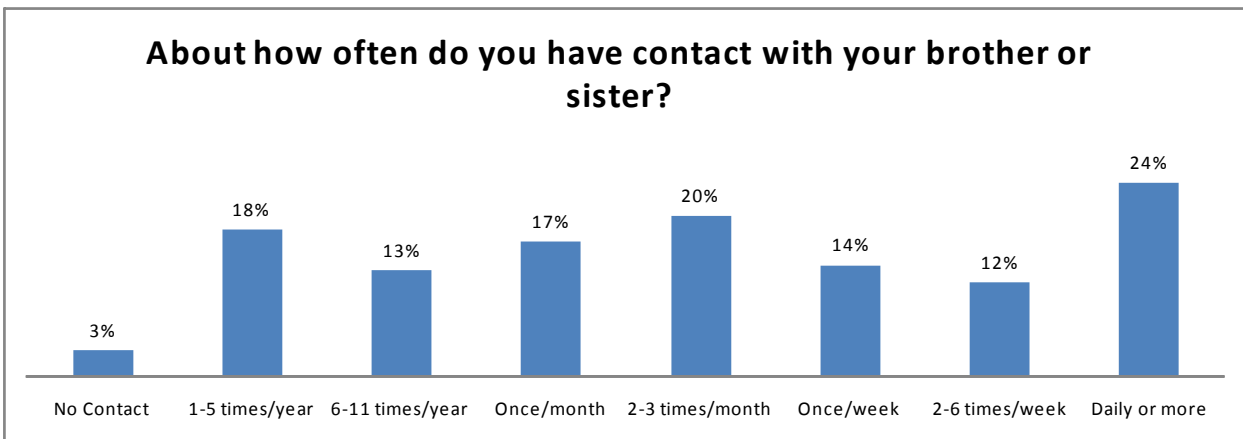
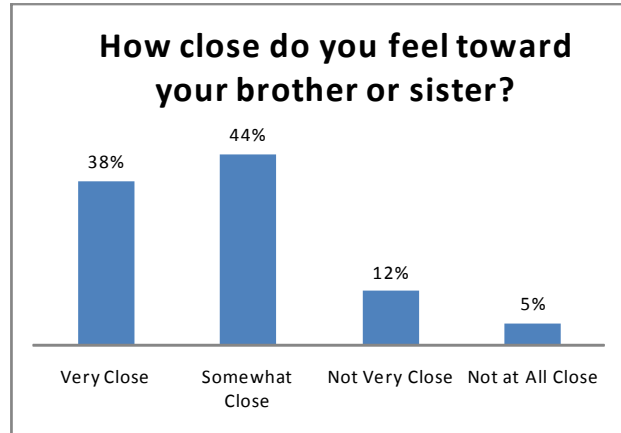
Brothers and Sisters in Late Adulthood

Next we turn to the relationships between siblings and graduates in later adulthood. Because the WLS collects information on only one sibling pair per family we cannot get a complete picture of all sibling relationships within families. In other words we can't assume that the relationship between the graduate and his or her randomly selected brother or sister is identical to the relationship between every sibling pair within the family. Still, our information on the graduate and the randomly selected sibling can be used to get a general picture of the relationships between brothers and sisters in late adulthood.



Sibling Closeness and Contact

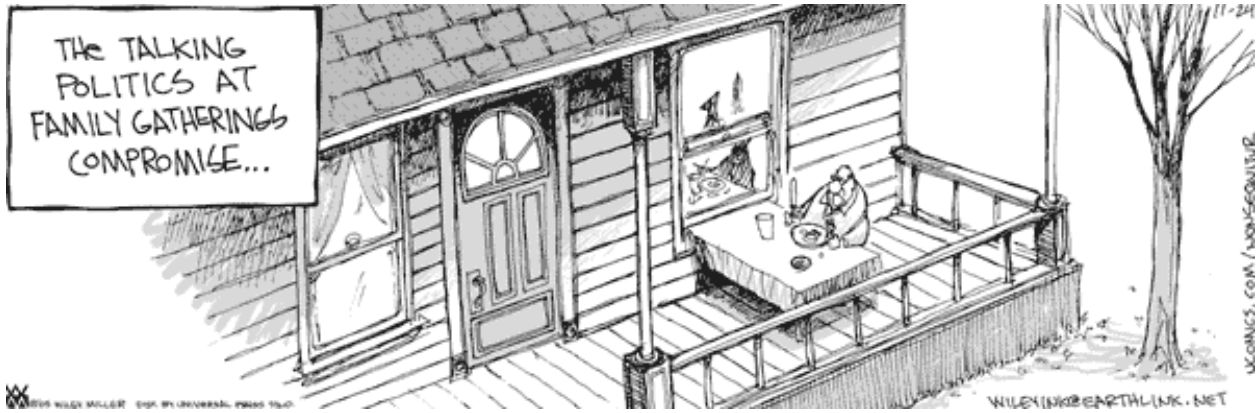
In general, brothers and sisters in the WLS have frequent contact and feel close to each other. Over a year-long period, 87 percent of siblings report contacting the graduate at least once a month either in person, by letter, by e-mail, or by telephone. Additionally, the majority of siblings feel “somewhat” or “very” close to the graduate (83 percent).



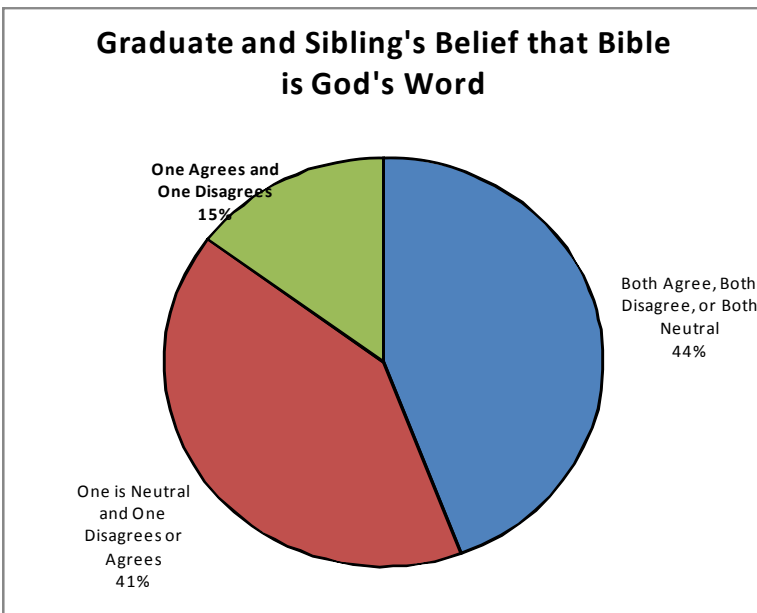
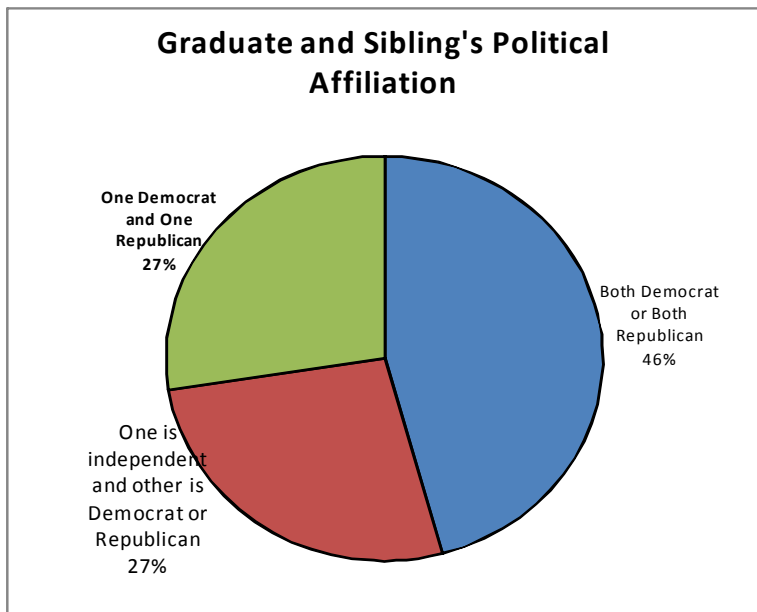
Politics and Religion

Current popular culture is full of stories of families where adult siblings have opposing views concerning politics and religion. We used the WLS to see how common it is for siblings to have different views and to examine whether these differences are associated with different levels of contact and closeness. For example, we looked to see whether or not the sibling and graduate report different political affiliations and different personal beliefs concerning the Bible.

Twenty-seven percent of the graduate/sibling pairs are mixed politically, where one was a Democrat and one was a Republican; in another 27 percent of pairs, one is an independent, while the other is a Republican or Democrat.



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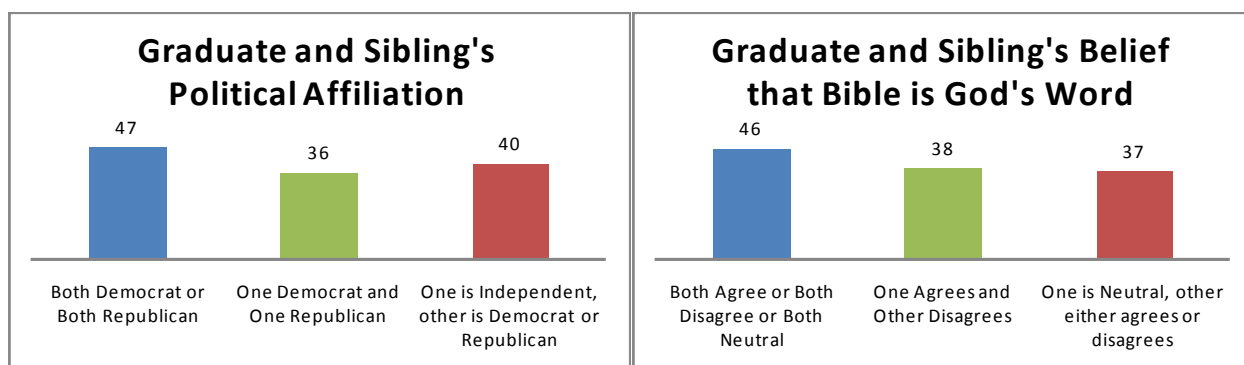


Fifteen percent of graduate/sibling pairs have different personal beliefs regarding the Bible. That is, one member of the pair reports he agrees or strongly agrees that “the Bible is God’s word and everything happened or will happen exactly as it says,” while the other member disagrees or strongly disagrees.

Although there is some evidence that differences in political or religious beliefs are associated with less frequent contact and a lower degree of closeness between the sibling and the graduate, the differences are not large. As shown in the bar charts on the top of the next page, siblings who differ from the graduate in political party affiliation or in personal belief about the Bible have slightly less frequent contact with the graduate.



Average Number of Contacts between Sibling and Graduate in Past 12 Months



Preparing for End-of-Life Health Care

Like the graduates, most of the siblings (62 percent) have made some plans for the types of medical treatment they would want if they became seriously ill. Older siblings are more likely to have made these plans (70 percent) than younger ones (56 percent). Most people say they will rely on their spouse or their children for help making decisions on end-of-life care, but a small proportion of WLS participants (3 percent of males and 6 percent of females) report talking to a sibling regarding their preferences. Very few (less than one percent) have a formal document giving a sibling authority to make decisions about their own medical care. However, among graduates who are single and do not have any children, one-third have appointed their sibling to make health care decisions on their behalf.

Computer and Internet Use

Like the graduates, six out of ten sibling participants surf the internet from home. Older siblings are less likely to have home access to the internet (47 percent) than are younger siblings (70 percent). Among siblings who do have access to the internet from home, older siblings spend more time surfing the net (6 hours 48 minutes per week on average) than do younger sib-

lings (5 hours 46 minutes per week on average). At first this seems surprising since most people think of surfing the net as an activity for younger people. However in this case the difference simply reflects the proportion of people who are no longer working and therefore have more time to surf from home.

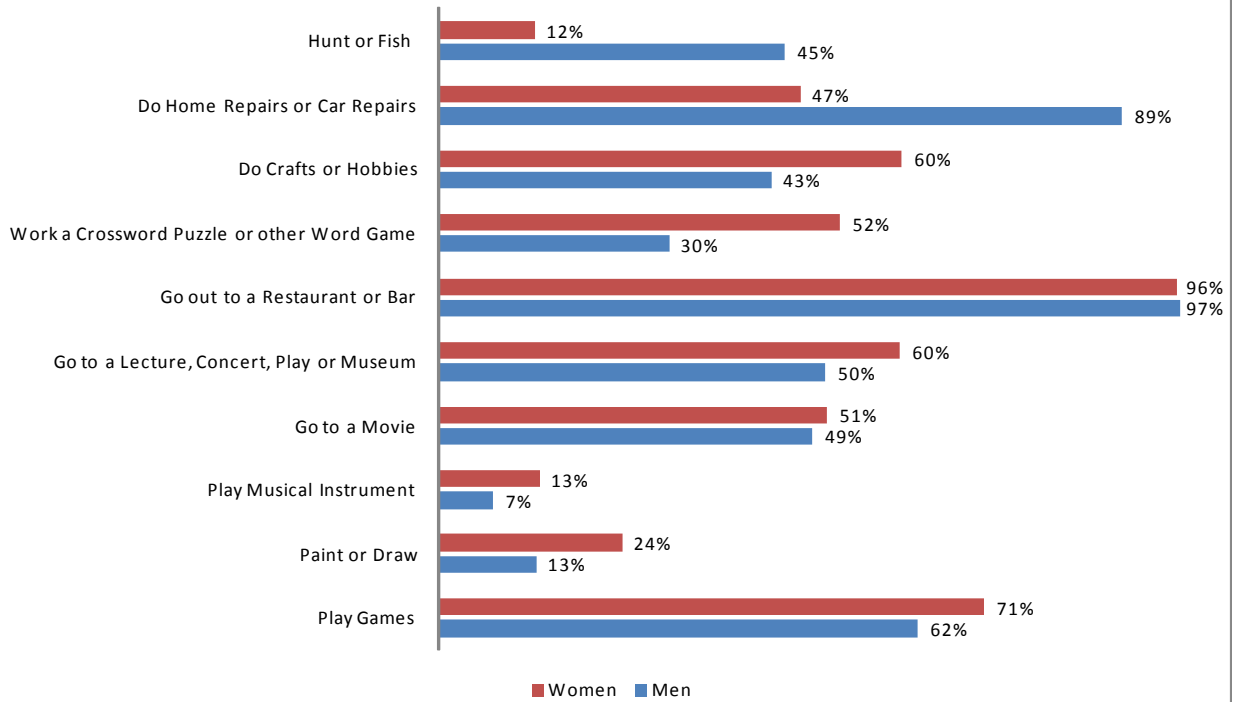
Leisure and Hobbies

The graph below shows the proportion of WLS siblings who participated in a variety of activities or hobbies over the course of a year. Almost everyone went out to a bar or a restaurant, but only seven percent of men and 13 percent of women played a musical instrument.

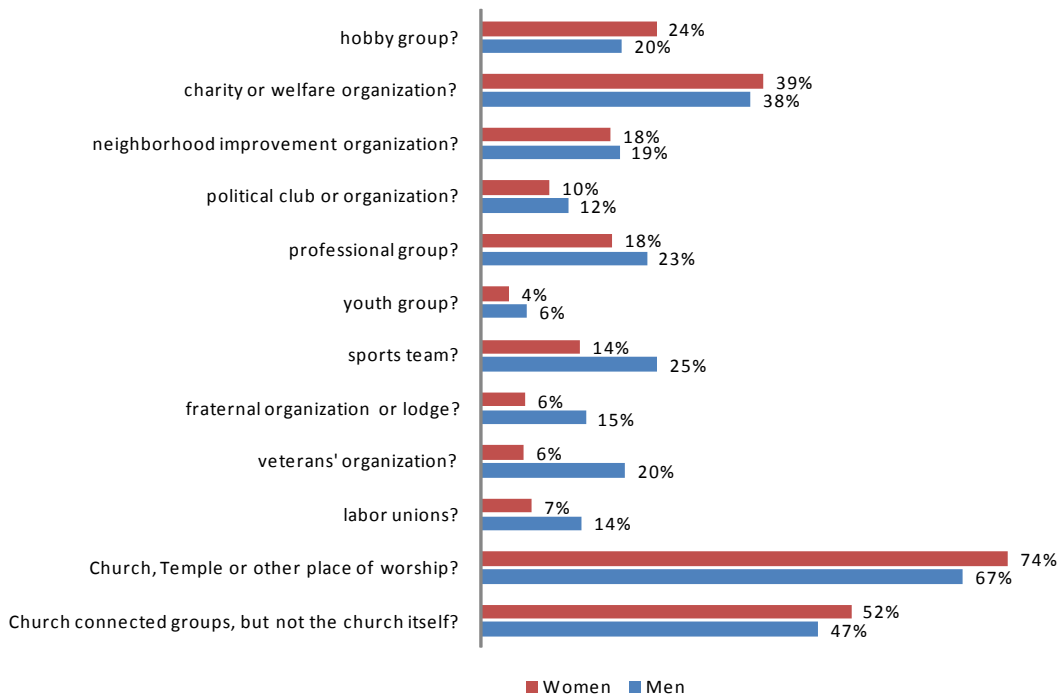
Community Involvement

We also present the proportion of WLS siblings who are involved in a variety of community organizations. The most common type of involvement is a church or a church connected group. Although the majority of WLS siblings are in their 60s, roughly 15 percent of women and 30 percent of men are involved with sports teams, and nearly one-quarter are involved in professional organizations – suggesting the vitality and engagement of adults even after many have left the paid work force.

During the Past Year Did You Ever:



During the past 12 months were you involved in a:



To the outside world we all grow old. But not to brothers and sisters. We know each other as we always were. We know each other's hearts. We share private family jokes. We remember family feuds and secrets, family griefs and joys. We live outside the touch of time. ~Clara Ortega

The staff of the WLS hopes that you have enjoyed reading our report and again we want to thank you for your continued participation in the study.

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Photos are of Bob Hauser, current director of the WLS, his brother Michael Hauser, and their father Julius Hauser.

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