



# CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

RESEARCH BRIEFING

NUMBER 1

June 2001

## CRFR RESEARCH BRIEFING SERIES

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships was set up in January 2001 with the support of a research development grant from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. It involves a consortium of universities in Scotland. CRFR is committed to producing research and commentary on families and relationships relevant to Scotland and to disseminating such work widely. We plan to produce a range of publications and to hold different types of events to promote collaboration across sectors, to stimulate debate and to enhance the dissemination of research. A core strand of these efforts is the **CRFR Research Briefing Series**. Research Briefings will provide the opportunity for short, accessible reporting of primary research; literature reviews; commentary on demographic and social trends; and think pieces on topical issues. We plan to develop the Series over time, with the members of the CRFR network of researchers, policy makers and practitioners contributing ideas, developing briefings, and working with CRFR staff on short articles.

**This first Research Briefing focuses on solo-living – that is the increasing trend towards one person households, and the personal and social implications of this trend for those at different stages of the lifecourse.**

---

## SOLO-LIVING IN SCOTLAND: Trends and Issues

### Key Points

- **Solo-living describes the household structure of many individuals at different stages of the lifecourse.**
- **Those who live on their own may do so involuntarily, temporarily or by lifestyle choice.**
- **Men and women who live alone may be single, separated, divorced or widowed.**
- **31% of all households in Scotland consist of one adult. This proportion is projected to rise to 38% by 2012.**
- **In 1999 over 700,000 people in Scotland lived alone.**
- **The family and friendship networks of adults living alone are likely to vary by age, ethnicity, gender, marital and partnership history and socio-economic circumstances.**
- **There may be some health disadvantage for some of those living alone.**
- **There are important policy consequences of living alone especially for community care but also for social security, pensions, employment, health and housing.**

## Why is solo-living important?

Solo living has become more commonplace. This change has occurred in the context of other substantial changes to family and household structures over the past thirty years.

Solo-living is a phrase used to denote a particular household structure – an adult living in a one person household. However, the circumstances, meaning and context of solo-living will all be highly variable. For example, we might see a young adult in their mid-twenties living alone having left the area in which she or he grew up. Solo-living here might be perceived as highly desirable, a symbol of economic and social independence, but also perhaps a prelude to partnership formation, cohabitation and marriage. A small minority of those who start living alone in their 20s will remain solo in middle-age, for some as a positive choice, for others as an unintended outcome. For those who begin living alone in middle-age, the situation may be quite varied – a recently divorced or separated adult in their middle years may experience solo-living as an unwelcome loss or as a liberation from unwanted ties. At a later stage a sense of loss may be particularly common for older adults, recently bereaved, living alone for the first time in their lives. Not only does experience vary across the lifecourse, but also in other ways, for example by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic circumstances.

Historically, cultural stereotypes have influenced attitudes and perceptions of solo-living. These are both positive and negative, and are certainly gendered: the 'spinster' who has forsaken marriage to care for her parents; the 'bachelor' eschewing marriage for the carefree life. There are more negative portrayals of never-married women than of men, and this may impact differentially on the experience of solo living for all men and women. There is a tendency to see those living alone as removed from conventional family life and marginal or peripheral to the mainstream, although this may not reflect actual experience. Expectations still exist that individuals will marry, albeit at a later stage than previously.

The reality of solo-living across the lifecourse is diverse: solo-living may be involuntary or temporary, or it may be a conscious life style choice. Although there are now more people living alone, it may be that the roles of these individuals are not clearly defined, and that we are not always well prepared for managing solo-living.

## Who lives alone in Scotland?

Almost one third of all Scottish households (31%) consist of one person (nearly 706,000 people in Scotland in 1999). Data published in Scottish Social Statistics 2001, show that there has been a large increase in the number of lone adult households, where the adult is under pensionable age – from 6% in 1971 to nearly 15% of all households in 1999. Although the number of lone pensioner households has not increased so rapidly, they now account for nearly 16% of all households. There are now more one person households than households with dependent children (28%). Projected changes in household composition suggest the growth in solo-living will continue, and that by 2012, single person households will comprise 38% of all households; 17% male, and 21% female. But, this overall trend is not uniform across the whole population; for example, there are fewer one person households amongst ethnic minority populations.

However, we also need to understand better who these individuals are, for being a one person household covers a range of statuses and circumstances (see Table 1). Men who live alone are spread more evenly across the life course than women; as the table below shows, 37% are aged 60 or more. Women living alone are more heavily concentrated in the older years; 64% are aged 60 or more. More young men than women live alone despite men leaving the parental home slightly later. This is mainly because men marry or cohabit later than women. Slightly higher proportions of men than women remain never married in later life. There are more men living alone in the middle years because divorce and separation less often result in living alone for women when dependent children are involved. There are many more women living alone in later years because of men's higher mortality rates.

Other important differences amongst those who live alone are further illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, which compare men's and women's routes into solo living. For example, in the 60-74 age group, widows predominate among women (66%) but amongst men, the never married (25%) and the divorced and separated (25%) together outnumber widowers (46%).

**Table 1: Men and women living alone by age (%)**

	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-59	60-74	75+	All in sample
Men	5	18	16	22	23	14	100 (1767)
Women	4	9	6	16	33	31	100 (2739)
Both	5	12	10	19	29	25	100 (4506)

**Table 2: Men's routes into solo-living across the life course: marital status of solo men by age (%)**

	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-59	60-74	75 plus	All Ages
Never married	95	84	63	38	25	11	47
Widowed	3	-	-	7	46	80	24
Divorced/ separated	1	12	33	50	25	6	25
Other	1	4	3	5	4	3	4
All in sample	100( 92)	100(323)	100(288)	100(397)	100(412)	100(254)	100(1766)

**Table 3: Women's routes into solo-living across the life course: marital status of solo women by age (%)**

	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-59	60-74	75 plus	All Ages
Never married	97	84	67	26	15	15	30
Widowed	1	1	3	21	66	81	51
Divorced/ separated	1	14	27	50	17	3	18
Other	1	1	2	2	1	1	1
All in sample	100(116)	100(241)	100(165)	100(444)	100(914)	100(859)	100(2739)

Sources for Tables 1-3: derived from the Scottish Household Survey, 1999. The Scottish Household Survey is financed and deposited in the UK Data Archive by the Scottish Executive and conducted in partnership with System Three Social Research and MORI Scotland. They bear no responsibility for the further analysis or interpretation of the data.

## Social networks and social support

Studies such as the British Household Panel Study show that people living on their own are often actively a part of wider networks of family and kin, and are typically involved in other personal relationships. These networks are likely to be varied and may be experienced as more or less satisfactory by those living alone. The patterns of family and personal relationships of one adult households are little researched. However, the relative importance of family relations and friendships will vary across the lifecycle. There is some evidence that friendship is especially important for childless older people and that friends are particularly significant in younger adults' networks.

Divorce and separation disrupt social relationships. There may be changes to social networks, and joint friendships and family relationships often alter. Financial arrangements may radically change, and we know that divorced women are a particularly disadvantaged group economically. Those who have experienced divorce and separation may not retain networks from their partner's side, and friendships may fail to be maintained. On the other hand, those who have become widowed may retain their previous networks, and be able to draw on both their own,

their late partner's and other networks created during the partnership.

Support can have both positive and negative aspects: there is some evidence to suggest that women tend to have larger networks involving both the giving and receiving of social support. On the other hand, men tend to rely on one confiding relationship, although may have many other social relationships.

## Health-related issues

It has long been noted that there are differences in the health of those in different marital status categories, with lower mortality rates amongst married people. Despite enormous social changes, these observations persist, and those who are single, widowed, divorced or separated seem to experience worse health, with the differences between those who are married and the rest being greater for men than for women. The range of evidence now available on the relationship between marital status and health suggests the pattern of difference is quite complex. For example, health is affected by economic and material circumstances. Evidence from the Scottish Household Survey suggests that people living alone are more likely to be found in the poorer sections of the population, and are at greater risk of other forms of social exclusion.

Marriage may provide economic advantages, as well as offering protection through social support and health promoting activities. Evidence shows that marriage may be more beneficial to men's health than women's. This may be related to their different experiences of support, with men relying mostly on their partner for such support, and women drawing support from wider social networks.

### Policy concerns

The increase in numbers of adults who are expected to live on their own across the lifecourse or at different life stages has important policy consequences, notably in the areas of social and community care, social security, especially pensions, health provision, planning and housing policy and provision, and employment policies. This growth in solo-living is occurring at the same time as many governments are considering how to contain the costs of state funded welfare provision, and to promote personal responsibility for welfare needs across the life course through private investment strategies and familial obligations.

Community care policies often rest on the expectation that most social care will be provided by co-resident kin, usually spouses but also adult children. The persistence of such expectations continues alongside increasing numbers of adults living alone, particularly in old age, and more people remaining childless. It is therefore not clear from where an adequate supply of familial carers will be drawn. Will family obligations to provide care and support extend to non-resident kin, wider kin networks and through more complex family

structures? Will new ties and obligations to other relationships and friendship networks emerge? We shall only be able to answer those questions if we have greater in-depth understanding of the experience of solo-living across the lifecourse.

Greater numbers of people living on their own may generate increasing demand for health services and impose greater strains, for example, on mental health services. With smaller households, the same size of population needs more dwellings, so that changes in household structure can produce housing shortages even if the size of the population as a whole does not increase significantly. With fewer people living with co-resident partners, there will be less pooling of earnings and pensions, with particularly adverse consequences for women. If women especially, but also others with lower earning capacities, cannot draw on the resources of other family members to achieve economies of scale across households and build up pensions and insurance for future needs, standards of living may fall, and there may be a need for higher levels of labour market participation and rewards, and income transfers through welfare benefits systems.

Solo living is an increasingly significant feature of the social landscape in Scotland. People who live alone are a varied population, and it is important that we learn more about their experience and understanding of solo living, and about their family and social networks. Solo living also raises many important issues for policy and practice.

---

**Authors:** Lynn Jamieson, Fran Wasoff, Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, Debbie Kemmer

**Design:** Monika Strell, Vivienne McFarlane

---

### CRFR Research Briefing Series

CRFR Briefing 1: Solo-living in Scotland: Trends and issues

June 2001

CRFR Briefing 2: Demographic Trends in Scotland

September 2001

CRFR Briefing 3: Parenting

November 2001

If you are interested in writing a briefing, or have ideas you would like to share, please contact our Research Liaison and Information Officer at the address below. Further copies of Research Briefing 1 are also available at the address below and on our website.

---

### Contact details:

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh  
23 Buccleuch Place  
Edinburgh EH8 9LN

**Tel:** 0131-651-1832

**Fax:** 0131-651 1833

**E-mail:** crfr@ed.ac.uk

**Website:** www.crfr.ac.uk