



Solo living across the adult lifecourse

Summary of key findings

- Solo living has become a common phase in the lifecourse with one person households now making up one-third of all households in Britain
- Solo living is a rising trend, with the percentage of 16-59 year olds living alone in Britain trebling from 5% in 1971 to 16% of all households in 2002
- Solo living is proportionately more common amongst older people. Older women are twice as likely to live alone as older men. Young men (aged 25-44) are twice as likely to live alone as young women
- Solo living amongst adults aged 30-74 is higher in Scotland (18%) than the rest of Britain (15%) and solo dwellers are more likely than others to be urban based
- The marital status of those living alone varies significantly by gender and age, with men more likely to never have been married, whilst women more likely to live alone following the end of a relationship or death of a partner
- There is a high expectation of childlessness amongst solo women, with 46% of women aged 30-39 living alone expecting to have no children
- Although those living alone report less interaction with family, friends and neighbours, the differences are small
- Solo living is often a temporary phase in the lifecourse, although there are far more transition into solo living than out of it
- The transition into solo living is more likely to cause unhappiness than living alone itself
- People living alone are less likely than those living with others to own or have a mortgage on their house. Most people living alone live in accommodation with more than one bedroom
- While most people living alone have consumer durables such as a fridge, washing machine and telephone, they are less likely than those living with others to have them
- Those living solo report poorer health than those living with others and are more likely to smoke and drink
- There are lower rates of economic activity amongst those of working age living solo than those who live with others and those who have made a transition into solo living report they are financially worse off afterwards
- The rise in solo living has important implications of policies on community and social care, pensions, employment, health and housing. Policies that rely on family and household economies of scale and informal care could be affected by the rise in the incidence of solo living

Solo living is a rising trend in Britain, with one-person households now making up one third of all households. While living alone is not a new phenomenon, the proportions of people living solo, whether as a lifestyle choice or as the consequence of social and economic circumstances, has made this a significant demographic group. This ESRC funded Solo Living Project has investigated the rising numbers of adults living in one-person households in Britain. Through secondary analysis of large, nationally representative datasets, namely the cross-sectional General Household Survey (GHS), the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) and the longitudinal British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the research has studied the solo living population as a group, as well as in relation to gender and age. The study has created snapshots of solo living in contemporary society and developed an understanding of the social and economic factors involved in transitions in and out of solo living.

Why study solo living?

The rise in solo living is related to wider changes in families and relationships in recent decades such as later marriage, increased cohabitation, increased divorce and cohabitation breakdown, and later parenthood. Living alone may be a lifestyle choice to live without a partner or family, or may be the result of relationship dissolution. While the proportion of one-person households continues to rise, solo living is still perceived as a departure from normal family life. This can be understood either optimistically or pessimistically in relation to families and relationships. Viewed pessimistically, the increasing levels of living alone can be considered as symptomatic of a loss of connection to others flowing from excessive individualism (Bauman 1995; Bellah et al 1985; Putnam 2000) or a pervasive sense of risk (Beck 1992). In contrast with such diagnoses of solo living as undermining both family life and the integration of society, it can be read as an aspect of the changes in personal life which are more optimistically celebrated as a democratisation of personal life (Giddens 1992; Skolnick 1991). In this reading, living alone is not about selfishly cutting off others but creating a base from which equal and intimate relationships with others can be sustained. Evidence of both the circumstances of those who live alone, including the nature and balance of family, friendship and other types of relationships, and the routes people take into and out of solo-living is highly relevant to wider debates about the changing nature of intimacy (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998; Smart and Neale 1999) and social solidarity (Crow and May 2001).

Main Findings

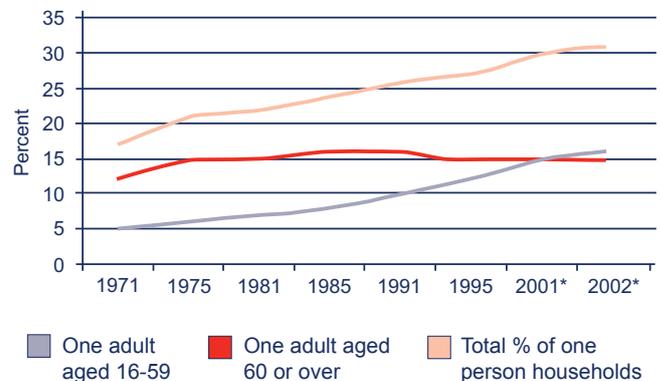
Solo living is a rising trend

One-person households are a rising phenomenon. The total proportion of one-person households has nearly doubled between 1971 and 2002, from 17% to 31% of all households. The rise in solo living has been particularly great amongst adults of working age, trebling from 5% in 1971 to 16% of all households in 2002 (ONS). There has been a slight increase in the proportion of adults aged 60 or above living alone, rising from 12% in 1971 to 15% in 2002 of all households.

While the increase in living alone is greater amongst adult aged less than 60, the proportion living alone is still far higher amongst those aged 60 and above. In 2002, around 12% of those aged 30-59 lived alone, with over twice that proportion, 25%, of those aged 60-74. This is not surprising as older adults, especially women, are widowed following the death of their partner.

The analysis of the General Household Survey (GHS), the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) all showed that the incidence of solo living is slightly higher in Scotland than in the rest of Britain. While 15% lived in one-person households in Britain (GHS 2002), 18% lived alone in Scotland. Moreover, solo living was slightly higher amongst women in Scotland than men.

Trends in solo living in Great Britain: one person households as a proportion of all households 1971-2002



Source: ONS 2004; Table 3.2

Differences by age and gender

The likelihood of living alone varies by gender and age. The proportion of women living alone aged 65 and over is unsurprisingly, much higher than that of men since women are more likely to out live their spouses: 34% of women in Britain aged 65-74 lived alone in 2002, almost double that of men in the same age range (18%). Of those aged 75 and over, 60% of women lived alone compared to 29% of men. Routes into solo living for older people vary according to gender. The majority of women over working age live alone due to the death of their partner, while older men are equally as likely

to have never been married, separated/divorced or widowed.

The rise in solo living has been especially significant for adults of working age, with men being more likely than women to live solo. 16% of men aged 25-44 were living alone, a rate that is twice as high as that of the 8% of women of the same age living solo. Moreover, men are more likely to live alone because they never cohabitated with a partner, whereas women are more likely to live alone through relationship dissolution or widowhood.

Marital status

Marital status is an important issue when seeking to understand the rise of solo living in the context of debates about growing individualism and the transformation of intimate relationships. Are people living alone because they have not partnered or because a relationship has ended? The overall majority of men in Britain living solo (2001) aged 30-59 are likely to be single, never married (58%). This does not necessarily mean they are not or have not, been in a significant or cohabiting relationship, but that they have not married. In contrast, while 39% of women aged 30-59 living solo were single never married, 46% were married and separated or divorced.

Childlessness

Solo thirtysomething women have higher levels of expected childlessness than those living with others.

In the General Household Survey, women (but not men) were asked about their expectations of having children in the future. A much higher proportion of women over 30 living alone expect to remain childless (47% of those aged 30-39 in 2001) compared with their peers living in family-households (many of whom already have children), only 12% of whom expect to have no children.

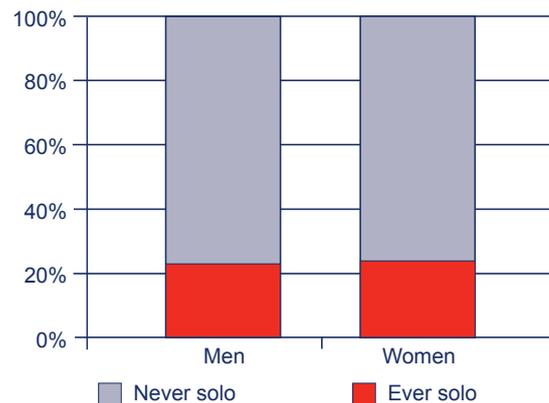
Social networks: similarities rather than differences

People living alone have often been portrayed negatively as less integrated into society, with less connection to family, friends and the local community than those living in households with other people. This research found that this is not necessarily the case and certainly not to the extent that such negative portrayals suggest. Using measures of social capital based on links with family, friends and community found in the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) 2001 and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), we found that the similarity of those who live alone to those who live with others is more striking than their differences. While those living alone tend to report less interaction with family, friends and neighbours, the differences are small. People living alone may not be living beyond the boundaries of the family, but rather the household boundaries of the family itself may now have become blurred.

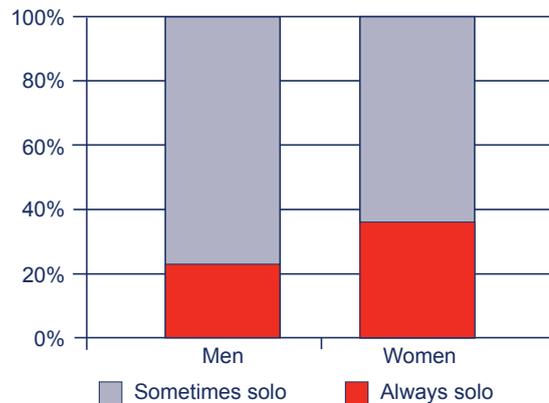
Transition in and out of solo living

The study analysed 11 waves of the longitudinal British Household Panel Survey (1991-2002), revealing that of those who were aged 30-74 in all sweeps, 23% of men and 24% of women had lived alone at some stage. Of those that lived alone at some stage, only 23% of men and 36% of women were solo for all 11 years. The remaining 77% of men and 64% of women had made at least one transition in or out of solo living. It was also found that transitions into solo living were more common than transitions out of solo living.

Proportion of people aged 30-74 in all sweeps who ever lived solo by gender as a % of their age cohort, UK 1991-2001



Proportion of those who ever lived solo aged 30-74



For this group who had lived alone at some stage during the previous 11 years, it was more common for both men and women to have made a transition into or out of solo living than to have remained solo throughout, although men are even more likely to make a transition than women.

Implications of the rise in solo living

The rise in solo living has significant policy implications:

- Those living alone do not benefit from the economies of scale or pooling of risk found in multi-person family households. The cost of living for those living alone will therefore be higher, which is relevant to policies on social security benefits and pensions

- High rates of solo living may change requirements for housing - its size, type, tenure, affordability and location
- People living alone may have less access to informal care and family support when needed. With the risk of less informal care and support, demands on welfare provision could increase
- A higher incidence of solo living and lower rates of partnership formation may contribute to declining fertility in contemporary society
- The population of working age living solo is generally less economically active than those who live with others. Moreover, people living on their own report poorer health, and are more likely to smoke and drink
- This research shows that the rise in solo living is a significant trend, with implications for our understanding of families and relationships. It also provides evidence for policy makers to consider how the rise in solo living will affect policies on community care, social security, pensions, employment, health and housing

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