

# Living on your own: Social integration, quality of life and aspirations for the future

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- The important subgroup of working-age solo-living adults with a disability or health problems points to a need to evaluate whether services and welfare benefits are adequately meeting the needs of this group of people.
- The good informal support networks of people interviewed for this project may mean that many will draw on friends and wider family for assistance in older age. If these networks wane with ageing and/or the small proportion lacking informal social support

grows, currently mainly disadvantaged men, then demands on formally provided elder-care services will be escalated beyond projections based on present levels of demand.

- It is significant challenge to planners, designers and developers to accommodate the growing solo-living population without increasing the per head carbon footprint and match the ideal of affordable housing sufficiently spacious to accommodate over-nighting family and friends.

## References

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Office of National Statistics (2009) Population Trends 138. [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_population/Pop-trends-winter09.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/Pop-trends-winter09.pdf)

For further discussion of the findings of this study, see:

Jamieson L, Wasoff F and Simpson R (2009) 'Solo-Living, Demographic and Family Change: The Need To Know More About Men', Sociological Research Online, Volume 14, Issue 2/3, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/2/5.html>

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## Living on your own: Social integration, quality of life and aspirations for the future

The General Registrar Office for Scotland predicts an increase in the proportion of one-person households from 35% of all households in 2006 to 44% in 2031. This trend is common across many societies and has implications for a range of social provision such as income support, pensions, health, housing and transport. This briefing outlines some of the findings of an ESRC funded project, Rural and Urban Solo Living, which investigated the experiences of people who live on their own.

- The working-age solo-living adults in this study come from a variety of social circumstances and different local settings
- Most people live on their own in urban areas, but the trend of increase is also evident in rural areas
- A higher proportion of people living alone are disadvantaged, such as having poorer health, lower incomes and/or fewer qualifications, and this is more likely for men
- Amongst women living alone, a higher proportion than average are high earners
- The majority of those living alone want to live with a partner in the future, including those who hope to have children in the future
- About half of the women and a third of the men, described themselves as in a relationship
- There are a variety of ways people come to be living alone. Planned routes include leaving the parental home, whilst others end up living alone because a relationship has broken down
- Most who did not choose to live alone, came to appreciate living alone and the freedom and control it makes possible. Those who set out to live alone do not see themselves as pioneers of social change
- Most interviewees did not think of living alone as an alternative lifestyle, but many acknowledge that the longer they live alone, the more difficult it may be to live with a partner
- Rather than being sad or lonely, most people have a sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with solo-living. The majority of those interviewed have supportive relationships with family and friends, many have strong ties to their community
- The few solo-living interviewees who were socially isolated were more likely to be men than women, and living on low incomes and in poor health

## The study

The two-year Rural and Urban Solo Living study investigated differences in experiences of solo living by gender, whether they live in a rural or urban setting and socio-economic circumstances. It looked at the circumstances, experiences and expectations of men and women aged 25-44 living alone in different locations across Scotland.

In-depth telephone interviews were carried out with 140 men and women from across Scotland. Thirty-five took part in follow-up face-to-face interviews, mainly in their own home. Statistical analysis of the Scottish

Household Survey for the years 2005/6 (GRO 2008) was undertaken to compare the circumstances of those living alone with those who live with others.

## Solo living and social change

There are two main reasons for the increase in the proportion of working-age adults living alone:

- a set of social changes that influence young women's and men's expectations about leaving home and the appropriate time to find a partner
- high rates of divorce and separation among those who live together

## Debate and stereotypes

Academic and popular literature has sometimes speculated that the trend is driven by individualism, with negative consequences both for those living alone and wider society. While positive accounts of living alone are also evident, solo living is often portrayed as symptomatic of loneliness and isolation and a wider dislocation of people from relationships with others around them.

Either way, it is clear the trend has implications for a range of social provision such as income support, pensions, health, housing and transport. Despite this speculation and the significance of solo living, it has only recently become the focus of research, and evidence remains limited about how solo living is experienced by those living alone.

Stereotypes of people living alone often confuse solo living and 'singleness'. Solo living is a residence arrangement, not a legal marital or partnership status. Those living alone may be in couple relationships or actively parenting children living elsewhere.

Solo-living adults are not homogeneous, but have diverse socio-demographic characteristics and circumstances. There are also considerable differences by locality. While solo living is predominantly urban, the trend of increase is also evident in rural areas.

## Routes to solo living

One route into solo living is relationship breakdown. Other routes into solo living are from the parental home, or transitional housing (such as student residences, shared flats or bedsits). Whereas previously leaving home would have been associated with marriage (and remains so elsewhere, e.g. southern Europe), in recent years young adults in northern and western Europe often spend a period living independently, and for some this may become a more settled solo-living household.

## Gender issues

Forty years ago, the majority of people living alone in the UK were over retirement age, and widows predominated. Since then, the number of working-age people living alone has grown to match the number of pensioners and the number of men more rapidly than women. Under the age of 55, more men live on their own than women (ONS 2009). Gender differences in the incidence of solo living are in part explained by prevailing patterns of childcare, whereby mothers are more likely to remain living with their children than fathers following divorce or separation, and therefore to become lone parent rather than one-person households.

## Advantage and disadvantage

The analysis of statistics showed that a higher proportion of those living alone are disadvantaged compared to those living with others, particularly among men. For example, 12% of solo-living men were unemployed compared with 5% of men living with others. Working age solo-living men and women are around three times as likely as their counterparts living with others to be permanently sick or

disabled (19% compared to 5% of men and 15% compared with 4% of women).

On the other hand, a higher proportion of solo-living women are highly educated (32% have degrees, compared to 23% of women living with others) and in professional and managerial occupations (48% compared to 36% of women living with others).

## Finances

The financial resources of those living alone differ from those living with other adults in two main ways:

- financial risk cannot be pooled within the household
- their own resources need not be stretched to meet expenses of other household members

Solo-living adults are by definition single-income households and, as with lone parents, a high proportion, albeit a minority, live on very low incomes. Over a third (36%) of solo-living men and women have an annual household income of £10,000 or less, compared with less than 10% of men and women living with other adults. Less than a fifth of those living alone have a household income over £20,000, compared with over two-thirds of men and women living with other adults.

## Housing

Owner occupation is the most common form of housing tenure amongst solo-living adults, with rather more solo-living women (53%) than men (45%) owning or buying their own property. Solo-living men are more likely than solo-living women and those living with others to rent in the private or public sector. Levels of owner occupation are much lower in comparison with those living with others.

Those living alone are much more likely than others to live in a one-bedroom home. Nevertheless, in terms of bedroom standard and exclusive use of household space, solo-living adults are relatively advantaged in terms of the size of their accommodation. Participants identified the importance of this space for sustaining of familial and social networks. Many participants regularly have friends or family to stay.

Friends, family, lots of people come to Edinburgh to stay, so it's fairly regular ... I would say once a month, yeah.

(Albert, 38, urban)

For some non-resident fathers the lack of space to accommodate children was a real issue:

It's difficult because I only have a one-bedroomed flat ... I've got a collection of blow up beds, if I have the kids staying over then it's just impossible to move because it's quite a small flat ... it's like a war zone in here at the weekends sometimes.

(Steven, 41, urban, non-resident father)

## A shift away from family life?

### Living with a partner

This research found that those living alone do not typically reject the concept of living with a partner or parenthood.

A considerable proportion of working-age solo-living adults in Scotland have been married, around two-fifths (41%) of women and a third of men (35%). In the interview sample of 140 men and women, over half had previously lived with a partner. While a few were convinced they did not want to ever live with a partner again, the overwhelming majority wanted to recreate the benefits of living with a new partner, but without rushing or repeating earlier mistakes.

Half of the women and a third of the men interviewed had a current partner. For the majority this was potentially a long-term, possibly co-residential relationship but a minority saw it as temporary, unsuitable for co-residence, or too new to classify. Of those currently without a partner, the majority continued to see living with a partner as a future ideal. Overall, only a few wanted a partnership that did not involve living together. Those who saw advantages in partners not living together included those preferring their own space, particularly women who no longer anticipated having children, rural gay men seeking low visibility and parents wanting to preserve time and space for their children.

Well, I'd prefer to live with the man of my dreams, but since he's not here, I live alone.

(Sue, 34, rural)

It's not in a way a chosen lifestyle, it's just that I haven't met anyone who I get on with and who is single ... I suppose I'm an optimist on that front and I just think, 'Oh yeah, it'll happen'.

(Neil, 40, urban)

## Parenthood

The interview sample included 24 fathers and 4 mothers (including 2 grandmothers). Half of the fathers with dependent children were very involved in their lives; however some had no or little contact with their children.

Both men and women believed that living with a partner was a pre-requisite to their having children in the future. Women who were not seeking a partner they wanted to live with, mainly aged 35-44, had either given up on or noted they had never wanted children.

Amongst solo-living men, a sense of the burden of providing for children was evident in considerations about whether to have (more) children.

Always, from when I was a young man I wanted more than one child, but then circumstances dictate that I would need to be in a substantially better financial position.

(Nathan, 40, urban, father)

## A lifestyle?

Although not all of our interviewees chose to live alone, most came to appreciate the freedom and control it makes possible, even when living in social housing on low incomes

It's my own place, you know what I mean? Nobody can tell me what to do and when to go out and come back and such like.

(Robert, 42, urban)

Those who set out to live alone do not see themselves as pioneers of social change but as making normal practical moves.

I was earning enough to be able to finally move out and get my own place.

(Simon, 31, urban)

Not thinking of solo-living as an alternative life-style, and professing willingness to live with a partner could coincide with thinking that the longer you live alone the more unlikely and difficult it will be to live with a partner.

Even if a girlfriend ... moved in ... how would I handle that? Because I'm so used to staying there by myself.

(Andrew, 43, urban)

Those in their 40s in rural areas typically saw remaining alone as likely.

## Strong attachments to people and place

People who live alone are often portrayed as having weaker links to family, friends and community. However, this research shows that most solo-living adults had rich social networks and some had strong ties in their localities. For those living close to where they had grown up, family ties were an important part of their attachment to 'place'.

Migrants to rural localities, more often women, also often had strong local ties. Some respondents suggested that their local attachments complicated the possibility of living with a partner because of unwillingness to move and the absence of locally-rooted partners.

Some solo-living adults had experienced considerable mobility and had a more detached attitude to their locality and local people. This was particularly so for men in urban areas who had moved there for work.

However their lack of local ties did not mean they were without social ties. Most maintained strong friendships and family relationships. The use of digital communications to maintain social networks, including contact with family members abroad, challenges a narrow view of 'community' as locally based.

A small number of solo-living adults, primarily men had very limited social networks. Factors such as long working hours, health problems and/or very limited disposable income could impact negatively on their capacity to sustain social ties. However solo living in itself is not a harbinger of social isolation or disassociation from people or place. Most solo-living adults sustain rich social networks contributing to their sense of wellbeing, and satisfaction with solo living.

## Policy implications

- Because of the link between relationship breakdown and living alone, there are a growing number of mothers and fathers who don't live together but are part of their children's lives. This raises issues about support for parents who live apart and also about the need for affordable and flexible housing to accommodate caring relationships of children across households.