

Trajectories to living alone at midlife in Canada: A comparison by gender and over time

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Brief Abstract

Living alone is on the rise in Canada and in other Western countries. In Canada, five population groups are identified as having greater risk of poverty: lone parents, unattached persons aged 45-64, recent immigrants, persons with work-limiting disabilities, and Aboriginal populations. This study focuses on men and women aged 45 to 64 living alone, who according to the 2011 Census of Canada are about 1.4 million.

Using the 1995 and 2007 General Social Surveys (GSS), we examine the changes in living alone that have occurred over this period. With the information on 6 family life events – cohabitation, marriage, birth of a child, separation, divorce, and widowhood – we derive the types of pathways to solo living of men and women, and compare the distributions over the two periods.

Having established the trend, we use the more current data from the 2007 GSS to examine the demographic, cultural, and socio-economic profiles of men and women living alone in comparison to those living with someone to validate whether indeed at mid-life, persons who are living alone are more vulnerable to poverty. We then focus on persons living alone to examine by pathway types to solo living the differences in social and economic profiles, their social networks, and their well-being.

Extended Abstract

Living alone is on the rise in Canada and in other Western countries. Some of the factors that favour living alone are the societal affluence and social security system that make solo living affordable, and the continuing trend toward individualization (Klinenberg, 2012). In effect, solo living is a consequence of changes brought about by the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Beaujot, 2000). This includes the delayed transition to adulthood, the widespread popularity of cohabiting unions that are more likely than marriage to end in separation, the increase in divorce rates among the married, and the fewer children born per woman that leaves fewer children to live with. Another factor that contributes to the rise in solo living, especially at older ages, is the added years in life expectancy of men and women.

Life course perspective guides many studies of solo living, including the concept of linked lives and how living alone at later life is influenced by factors that happen early in life (Hays and George, 2002; Vartanian and McNamara, 2002). Many studies on living alone focus on the later stages of family life (see for example, Victor *et al.*, 2000). This is understandable since the probability of living alone increases as children move away from home and spouses die. This is particularly true for women whose probability of re-marrying is lower than that of men. Another common feature of studies on living alone is the focus on the consequences of living alone, among which are poverty, loneliness, and isolation (Segraves, 2004; Victor *et al.*, 2000; Vartanian and McNamara, 2002).

In “Vulnerability to persistent low income”, Hatfield (2004) identified five population groups that were at greater risk of poverty in Canada: lone parents, unattached persons aged 45-64, recent immigrants, persons with work-limiting disabilities, and Aboriginal populations. This study focuses on men and women aged 45 to 64 living alone, as part of a larger research program that examines family and life course factors that increase the vulnerability and resilience of individuals.

As in other age groups, the proportion of men and women aged 45 to 64 living alone has been increasing. About 321,360 men (or 10.6% of men aged 45-64) and 385,445 women (or 12.4% of women aged 45-64) were living alone in 1996. By 2011, the Census of Canada counted 681,100 (14.4%) men and 676,575 (13.5%) women were living alone. Over the period of 15 years, the increase in the proportion of men living alone is greater than that of women.

In this paper, using the General Social Surveys (GSS) in 1995 and 2007, we examine the trends in the pathways to living solo by gender. These pathways are determined using the information on experience of 6 family life events – cohabitation, marriage, birth of a child, separation, divorce, and widowhood. Having established the trend, we use the more current data from the 2007 GSS to examine the demographic, cultural, and socio-economic profiles of men and women living alone in comparison to those living with someone to validate whether indeed at mid-life, persons who are living alone are more vulnerable to poverty. We then focus on persons living alone to examine by pathway types to solo living the differences in social and economic profiles, their social networks, and their well-being.

Data and Methods

The General Social Survey conducted in 1995 and 2007 by Statistics Canada included all persons in Canada 45 years and older excluding residents of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, and full-time residents of institutions. Both surveys gathered information on family histories. In addition, the 2007 survey gathered information on well-being, retirement, social networks, care giving and care receiving, housing, education and health.

In this study we use the information on men and women aged 45 to 64. Descriptive statistics, mainly cross tabulations, are used in the comparison of characteristics by living arrangements. We used binary logistic regressions for the multivariate analysis of well-being, using the variables described below.

Using both the 1995 and 2007 GSS:

Living arrangement variables:

- Using the information on 6 family life events – cohabitation, marriage, birth of a child, separation, divorce, and widowhood – we obtain different types of persons living alone after experiencing these events. Out of the different types, we create separate categories for the most predominant types

Using the 2007 GSS:

Demographic, cultural, and socio-economic variables:

To describe the characteristics by type of living arrangements, we used the following variables

- Demographic variables – 5-year age groups, and marital status
- Cultural variables – Religion, Religious attendance, Visible minority status, Immigration status,

and Region of Residence

- Socio-economic variables – Education, Personal income, Work status in the past 12 months, and Urban/Rural indicator for Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, with other provinces identified as a separate category

Except for marital status that is highly correlated with living arrangement, we use all the above variables in the multivariate analysis that examines the effect on well-being by the two types of living arrangement – Living alone and Living with someone.

Social networks variables:

As indicators of social network, we use the variables derived from questions about relatives, friends and neighbours as follows:

- In the past month, how often did you see your relatives (other than people you live with)? Was it: 1...every day? 2... a few times a week? 3... a few times a month? 4 ... once a month? 5 ... not in the past month?
- In the past month, how often did you communicate with your relatives; whether by telephone, internet/e-mail, fax or letter (remember to exclude people you live with)?
- In the past month, how often did you see your friends (that is, people you feel at ease with and can talk to about whatever's on your mind)?
- In the past month, how often did you communicate with your friends, whether by telephone, internet/e-mail, fax or letter?
- Would you say that you know: 1 ... most of the people in your neighbourhood? 2 ... many of the people in your neighbourhood? 3.... a few of the people in your neighbourhood? 4... none of the people in your neighbourhood?

We also use the length of time lived in the current dwelling.

Well-being Indicators:

Our indicators of well-being are based on the following questions:

- General state of health: In general, would you say your health is: 1...excellent? 2...very good? 3...good? 4...fair? 5...poor?
- Life satisfaction: Using a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means “Very dissatisfied” and 10 means “Very satisfied”, how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?
- Happiness: Would you describe yourself as being usually happy and interested in life, somewhat happy, somewhat unhappy, unhappy with little interest in life or so unhappy that life is not worthwhile?

Some Tentative Conclusions

Our analysis of information gathered through the 2007 General Social Survey tentatively confirms what are generally known about the differences between people living alone and those living with someone, mostly with their partner and/or their children. People living alone, on the average, have lower socio-economic status (indicated in the study by lower personal income and greater likelihood of being unemployed) and hold less traditional values (as more of them belong to the non-visible minority or are

non-immigrants). Their social network also differs from those living with someone in that they are less likely to be in frequent contact with relatives and they know fewer people in their neighbourhood.

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