



Briefing on the growth in one person households

Trends, causes and issues arising

The Government's recent projections for numbers and types of household confirm that there has been, and will continue to be, large increases in the number of people living alone. This study, by The New Policy Institute and the Institute for Public Policy Research, analyses the trends and their possible implications.

- The number of people living on their own has more than doubled since 1971. Around 14% of the population in England now live alone compared with 6.5% in 1971.
- Most of the growth has been among those of working age – from 1 million living alone in 1971 to 3.5 million now. A much greater proportion of working age adults now live alone than used to be the case.

The growth in people living alone is a matter of potential concern because:

- it has tangible implications for the overall consumption of housing and other resources which tend to increase in proportion to the number of households rather than to the total population;
- the state of living alone is more precarious in that many people living alone will be wholly reliant on themselves for their income and may not have support available when adverse events occur;
- at least for those of working age, poverty is much more prevalent among people living alone than for those who are cohabiting with a partner.

The policy issues arising which need attention include:

- housing options: ensuring the availability of affordable housing for people who want to leave their parental home or who have separated plus safety nets for home owners who lose their incomes;

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- housing supply: reviewing the requirements in terms of overall amount of housing and mix in terms of size of dwellings and tenure – these are all affected by the growth in living alone;
- homelessness policy: all people without dependent children are entitled to accommodation in Scotland, but not in England or Wales;
- benefits policy: government policy for working age people without children is currently much less favourable than for people with children;
- resource consumption and energy use: clearly part of the wider environmental debate but with living alone being an important driving factor;
- the extent of, and possible policy response to, isolation, lack of support and other matters of social exclusion – such issues remain relatively unexplored;
- the implications for community cohesion, participation and social interaction.

In this paper:

- ‘Living alone’ means that there is no one else living in the person’s home. This includes children and so, in this terminology, lone parents do not live alone.
- The term ‘single’ is used to describe any adult who does not have a partner with whom they are cohabiting (whether married or not). It includes people who have a partner with whom they are not cohabiting.

This distinction between ‘living alone’ and ‘single’ is important because only half of single people live alone, with the other half living with relatives or friends.

Trends

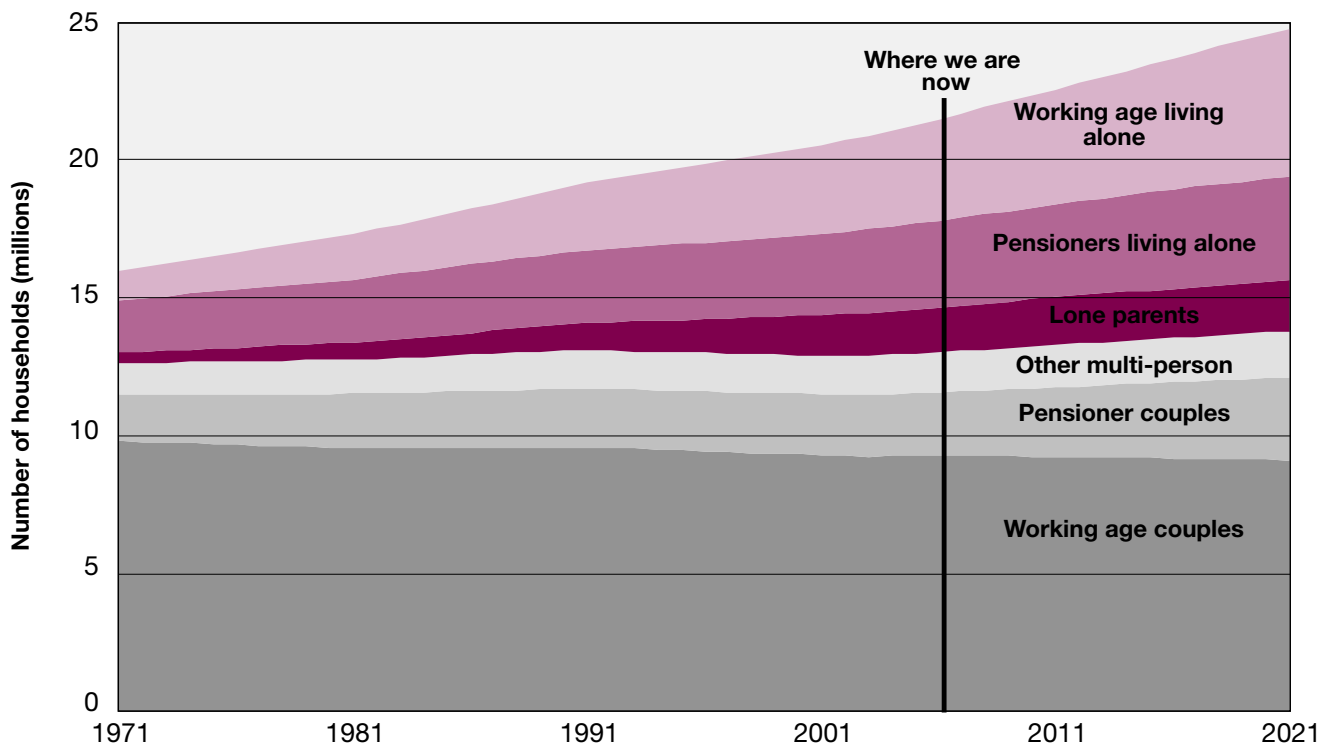
In 1971, there were around 3 million people in England living on their own. By 2005, this number had more than doubled to nearly 7 million and it is projected to rise still further to around 9 million by 2021. This increase has come about despite a relatively stable population so, for example, around 14% of the population in England currently live alone compared with 6.5% in 1971.

The phenomenon of growing numbers of people living alone is fundamentally different for people of working age and for people of pensionable age.

For pensioners, the number living alone has been growing largely because the total number of pensioners has been growing rather than because a substantially greater proportion of pensioners are now living alone.

By contrast, the number of people of working age who live alone has trebled since 1971 – from 1 million to 3.5 million – even though the number of other working age households has remained broadly unchanged. In other words, a much greater proportion of working age adults now live alone than used to be the case.

Figure 1
Trends in the number of households by household type
- England



Source: NPI calculations using ODPM live tables and 2005 Household Projections; England.

The fastest growth in living alone has been among those aged 30 to 44 (up from 8% in 1981 to 25% in 2005). More men live alone than women, largely because of relationship breakdown and the counterpart to some of the men living alone is women living with their children.

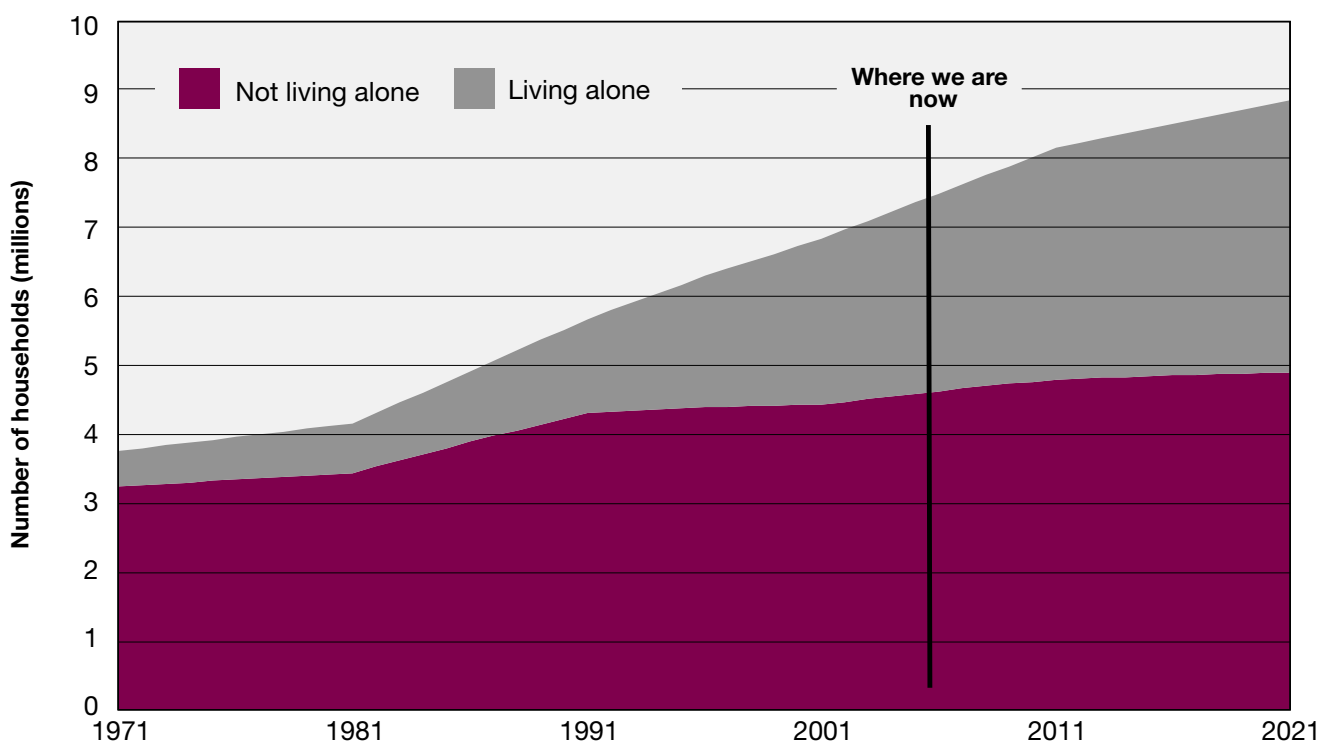
Why has this increase in one person households happened, is it a matter of concern and what are its implications?

These are complicated questions which deserve further research. This briefing provides the initial findings of analysis by the New Policy Institute (NPI) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

Causes

The growth in working age people living alone is the result of a range of factors, the interactions between which are complex and seemingly not fully understood and agreed. It does, however, seem to be clear (figure 2) that, as well as fewer people cohabiting with a partner, the proportion of these people who are living alone (rather than with parents, friends etc) is growing.

Figure 2
Trends in the number of adults aged 20 to 64 who are not cohabiting and have never married – England



Source: ODPM 1999 Household Projections, tables 12 and 13.

There is no clear consensus from either the academic literature or the statistical data about:

- the extent to which the increasing numbers who are not cohabiting is due to people being less likely to start cohabiting, waiting until later in life before doing so, or being more likely to separate;
- how much of the growth in living alone at working age is being driven by choice and how much by necessity (at pensionable age, it is clearly mostly by necessity and due to bereavement);
- precisely what sociological changes underlie the growth in living alone.

Unless the phenomenon is fully understood, it is difficult to see either how future trends can be predicted or a proper understanding of its implications developed. One potential area for future research is therefore the development of a thorough, comprehensive and authoritative analysis of the reasons why more people are living alone.

A matter of concern?

It should not be assumed that:

- living alone is necessarily a bad thing: it is probably a matter of choice rather than necessity for many people, particularly those of working-age;
- living alone necessarily means that the person lacks support: they may have others on whom they can rely for both economic and emotional support;
- the fact of living alone is always the key issue: some of the issues are actually related to the wider subject of being single (eg the impact on household income of losing one's job) while others are more related to the issue of not having any dependent children (eg levels of out-of-work benefits);
- it is only those who are living alone that are of potential concern: for example, another group is those currently living with their parents who are unable to leave for economic reasons.

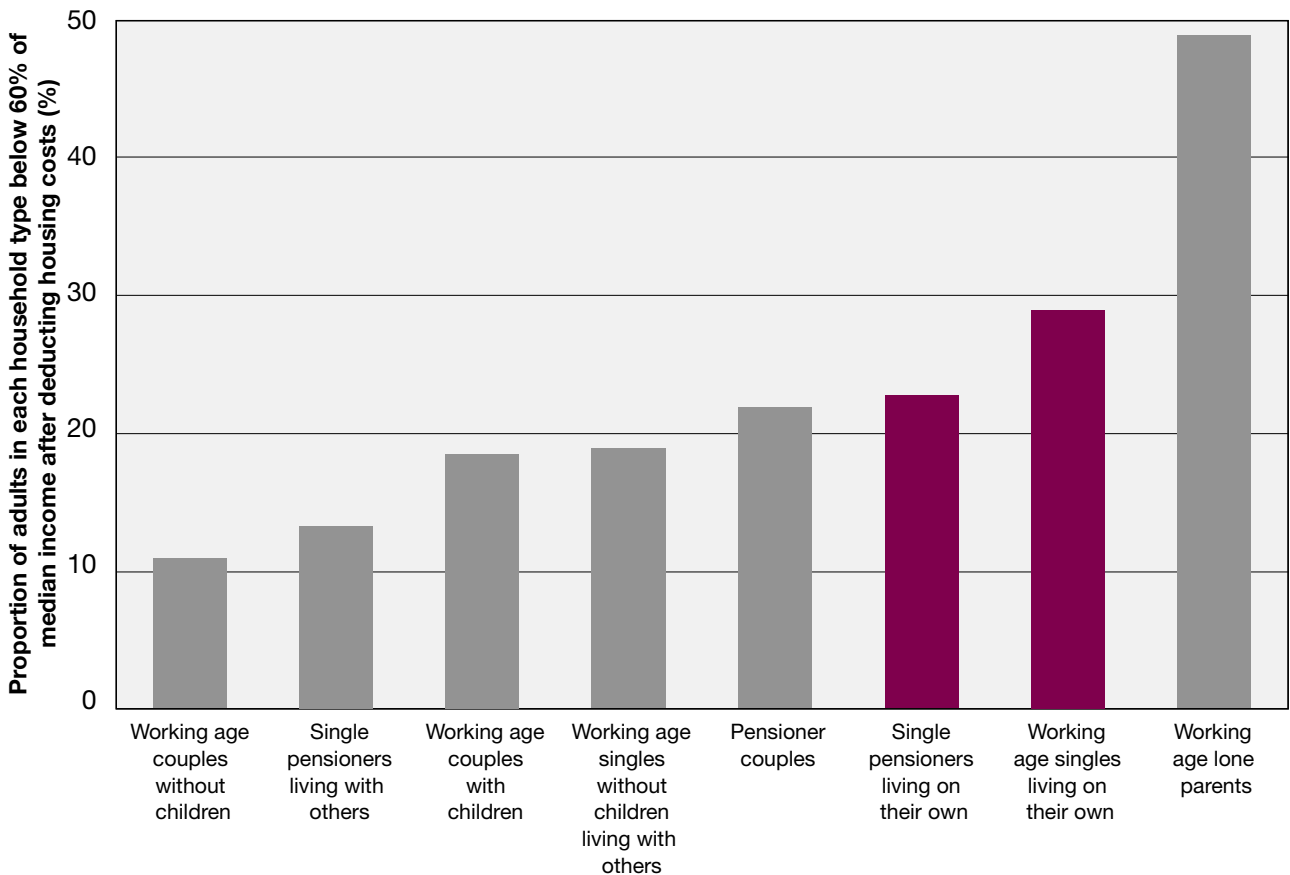
That said, there are a number of reasons why the growth in the number of people living alone is a matter of potential concern.

First, it has tangible implications for the overall demand for, and consumption of, housing and other resources which tend to increase in proportion to the number of households rather than to the total population. This trend therefore has significant social and environmental repercussions.

Second, the state of living alone is more precarious, in that many people living alone will be wholly reliant on themselves for their income and may not have support available when adverse events occur. This may mean some groups are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

Third, at least for those of working age, poverty is much more prevalent among people living alone than for other household types except for lone parents (figure 3).

Figure 3
Poverty rates for selected household types – Great Britain



Source: *Households Below Average Income, DWP*; the data is the average for the years 2001/02 to 2003/04.

It is suggested that the particular groups of people living alone about whom there is potentially the greatest concern are those where:

- there has been a major adverse event in the person’s life, either causing the living alone (eg bereavement, separation) or following the living alone (eg job loss); and/or
- the person has a low income, and thus a low standard of living, whether the original decision to live alone was by necessity or choice.

Groups which meet one or both of these criteria include:

- those who are living alone because of bereavement;
- those who are having to live alone because of relationship breakdown;
- those of working age who lose their job (plus all those who are without work);
- those who were living with relatives who no longer wish to accommodate them;
- those who leave some form of institutional care without clear prospects.

Implications

For disadvantaged people living alone

People living alone are a very heterogeneous group. For example, while those who are well paid will have a high standard of living, those who are not working or who are on low incomes will typically have a very low standard of living and may spend disproportionately higher sums of money on basic living costs, such as household bills.

Of pensioners living alone 20% are in poverty, but this proportion has halved over the last decade and is no longer higher than the rate for pensioner couples. By contrast, 30% of working age people living alone are in poverty, the same as a decade ago, and a much higher rate than either working age singles living with parents/friends (20%) or couples with children (10%).

A working age person living alone is often wholly reliant on themselves for their income and consequent standard of living. So, for example, if they lose their job then their household income immediately drops to a very low level. Furthermore, there are no obvious housing options for low income people living alone if their existing housing is no longer adequate: they cannot afford to buy and often experience difficulty in accessing social housing.

In this context, the policy issues arising for disadvantaged people living alone include:

- housing options: the availability of affordable housing for people who want to leave their parental home or who have become single as the result of separation plus safety nets for those who are home owners who lose their incomes;
- homelessness policy: all people without dependent children are entitled to accommodation in Scotland but not in England or Wales;
- benefits policy: government policy towards both out-of-work and in-work benefits for working age people without children are currently much worse, in terms of both amounts and trends, than for people with children.

Due to the overall growth in living alone

As well as the problems of who those are disadvantaged, there are also issues arising from the *total* growth in people living alone. These mainly arise because, whereas some things (eg food) are consumed in proportion to the population, others (eg homes, essential household goods, cars, and energy use) are more proportional to the number of households.

In this context, the policy issues arising because of the overall growth of people living alone include:

- housing supply: the requirements in terms of overall amount of housing and mix in terms of size of dwellings and tenure are all affected by the growth in living alone;
- resource consumption and energy use: clearly part of the wider environmental debate but with living alone being an important driving factor;
- the extent of, and possible policy response to, isolation, lack of support and other matters of social exclusion: while it is well known that such issues are important for older people, the policy framework is still much less clear than that for income poverty among older people; for people of working-age, the issues are relatively unexplored.

Questions for future research

- Why are more people living alone? What sociological factors underlie the growth and how are these likely to change in the future? How much is by choice and how much is by necessity?
- How do the attitudes and aspirations of those who are living alone differ from those of other household types?
- How does the growth in living alone affect community cohesion, participation and social interaction?
- What are the housing aspirations of one person households, how do these change over the lifecycle, and to what extent are they being adequately reflected in the housing market?
- To what extent is increased resource consumption an inevitable consequence of the growth in living alone?
- What policy responses will be necessary to ensure that the rise of living alone does not lead to an increase in social isolation and a fall in social capital?

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For further information

The working papers from both the New Policy Institute and the Institute for Public Policy Research are also available from the Foundation's website at www.jrf.org.uk.