

# Living arrangements among older people: an overview of trends in Europe and the USA

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**This article compares the trends in living arrangements of older people in several European countries and in the United States. Trends and cross-country variability in several factors that could account for these cross-national differences, including marital status, fertility, labour force participation and attitudes, are also examined.**

**In most countries the proportion of older people living alone increased substantially between 1970 and 1990. However the increase in living alone stabilised or even declined between 1990 and 2000 in most of the countries analysed indicating a possible reversal in the trend. Increases in proportions of older women who are married and reductions in the proportions childless may partially explain this.**

**Considerable variability in both trends and levels of older people's living arrangements was seen especially between north-western and southern European countries. These variations mirrored contrasts in attitudes towards residential care and parent-child coresidence between the countries.**

## INTRODUCTION

Since World War II there has been a dramatic rise in the proportion of older people living alone throughout Europe, as well as in other industrialised countries.<sup>1-3</sup> However, recent work in Italy and the United States showed a reversal of earlier trends toward solitary living among older unmarried women.<sup>4,5</sup> Our first aim here is to examine trends in the living arrangements of older people in a range of European countries to see whether the reversal in the trend toward solitary living among older individuals is a cross-national phenomenon.

Many countries in Europe and North America have experienced similar socio-demographic trends (that is declines in marriage and childbearing; rising divorce and cohabitation; and increases in female labour force participation). The impact of these changes on the household composition of older people, however, differs considerably across countries. Cross-national analysis may therefore provide a greater understanding of the relationship between different demographic regimes, cultural traditions and policy contexts and living arrangements for older people.

Our aims are to investigate i) trends in the living arrangements of older people; ii) trends in the determinants usually associated with living arrangements across the different countries, such as demographic, socio-economic, and attitudinal factors; and iii) offer possible explanations as to why persistent differences in the living arrangements of older people across countries remain.

This research is based on the following participant countries in a European Science Foundation (ESF) network, 'Family support for older people: determinants and consequences' (FAMSUP): Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom,

## Box one

### DATA

A FAMSUP database has been created that is largely comprised of data from nationally representative surveys, censuses, or official publications provided by FAMSUP members. Other sources include:

- Eurostat's (Statistical Office of the European Communities) New Cronos database; <http://europa.eu.int/newcronos/> (access restricted to subscribers)
- Eurobarometer Surveys; [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/)
- Council of Europe publications on demographic developments in Europe; [http://www.coe.int/t/e/social\\_cohesion/population/demographic\\_year\\_book/](http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/population/demographic_year_book/)
- Rowland's (1998) working paper on cross-national trends in childlessness (full reference Figure 4); <http://eprints.anu.edu.au/archive/00001341/01/73.pdf>
- Santini's (1995) study of fertility patterns in Italy (full reference Figure 4);
- the U.S. Census Bureau's International Data Base (IDB); <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbnew.html>
- Iacovou's (2000) study of the living arrangements of older Europeans using European Community Household Panel data (ECHP); <http://ideas.repec.org/p/ese/iserwp/2000-09.html>
- International Labour Organisation (ILO) <http://laborsta.ilo.org/>

and the United States (USA). Future work will include new network members from Belgium, France and Poland. We use data from a range of international and national sources, the latter provided or verified by members of the FAMSUP network. Full details are given in Box 1. Throughout the analyses the countries have been divided into two broad groups representing i) north-western Europe and the USA – United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA and ii) central and southern Europe – Austria, Germany, Italy and Portugal.

### POPULATION AGEING: SUMMARY MEASURES OF AGE-SEX COMPOSITION

Table 1 shows selected summary measures of the population composition for the countries considered in this study. Rapid population ageing

across all the countries shown for the period 1970–2002 is evident from the proportion of people aged 65 and over and aged 80 and over. The most striking increases in the relative size of the older population have occurred in Italy and Portugal, where the percentage of people aged 65 and over rose from 10.8 and 9.2 respectively in 1970 to 18.2 and 16.5 in 2002. In contrast, Austria, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom already showed high proportions of older people in 1970, with subsequent more modest increases in these proportions during the last three decades when compared with the southern European countries. For example, the United Kingdom's percentage aged 65 and over rose from 13.0 in 1970 to 15.6 in 2001. Differences in the speed of population ageing (that is, increases in the proportion of the population aged 65 and over) are mainly due to dramatic reductions in fertility in the southern European countries.

In addition to fertility declines, reductions in mortality rates have occurred, especially at older ages. Mortality improvements at older ages, in addition to the size of cohorts born eight or more decades earlier, affect the percentage of people aged 80 and over. In all countries the proportion of persons over age 80 increased between 1970 and 2000. In both northern (Sweden, Germany) and southern European countries (Italy, Portugal) this percentage more than doubled. For example, Sweden's percentage of people aged 80 and over increased from 2.3 to 5.2 per cent over this period, and Italy's percentage increased from 1.8 to 4.1 per cent. In the other countries the increase in the proportion of people aged 80 and over was by less than 2 percentage points.

In most developed countries the older population is predominantly female, largely a result of sex differences in mortality. Table 1 shows the sex ratios for the countries considered in 2002. The most extreme imbalance is found in Germany, due to the more severe effects of the two world wars on this country. At age 65 and over, there are just 64 men for every 100 women in Germany and only 36 men for every 100 women at age 80 and over. The least imbalanced sex ratios are found in Sweden (74 and 55 men per 100 women for ages 65 and over and 80 and over respectively) and in Portugal (72 and 55). A sex imbalance at older ages is likely to affect marital status and household composition, issues that we address below.

### BACKGROUND

#### Trends in the living arrangements of older people

The main focus of this article is on trends in the living arrangements of older people in Europe since 1970. Historical studies of household composition among older people in Europe in periods earlier than this indicate low levels of older men and women living alone in comparison

Table 1

Basic ageing indicators for the countries considered

	Percentage 65 and over		Percentage 80 and over		Sex ratio in 2002*	
	2002*	1970	2002*	1970	Males/Females 65 and over	Males/Females 80 and over
United Kingdom	15.6	13.0	4.0	2.3	71.1	46.3
Netherlands	13.7	10.1	3.3	1.7	70.1	44.4
Sweden	17.2	13.6	5.2	2.3	73.9	54.7
United States	12.4	9.9	3.3	1.8	70.0	50.0
Austria	15.6	14.0	3.8	2.1	62.2	40.1
Germany	17.1	13.5	3.9	1.9	63.7	36.4
Italy	18.2	10.8	4.1	1.8	68.9	47.4
Portugal	16.5	9.2	3.5	1.3	72.3	56.7

\* 2001 in Italy and UK; 2000 in the USA.

Source; EUROSTAT New Cronos Data Base, US Census Bureau

## Box two

### DEFINITIONS

Cross-national studies face the problem of comparability of definitions among the countries analysed. In this article we allowed each data provider to choose the best definition for the national context, keeping the definition constant throughout the period analysed.

For living arrangements there are several specifications:

- Living alone means a one-person household
- Living with partner only means living with a spouse or a cohabitee
- Living with offspring means with any child regardless of their marital status and age
- Living with others is the residual category.

with today, although even these levels are high in comparison with those found in non-western populations. For example, in pre-industrial England never more than around 5 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women aged 65 years and over lived alone; about half of older men and over one third of older women (married and unmarried) lived with a child.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, studies conducted in Austria and Britain show few households with large numbers of relatives other than a spouse and unmarried children in the 17th through the 19th centuries.<sup>7</sup> In southern Europe, a higher incidence of multigenerational households prevailed in comparison with north-western Europe, albeit with considerable within-region variations.<sup>8,9</sup>

Research examining trends in the household composition of older people in the 20th century (starting in the 1950s, where data are available, through the early 1990s) shows increases in the proportions of older people living alone in Europe and North America.<sup>2,3,10,11</sup> However, variations in household composition have remained: multigenerational households continue to be more prevalent in southern than in north-western Europe. More recent research in Italy and the USA, shows a reversal of earlier trends toward solitary living among older unmarried women.<sup>4,5</sup> This reversal was attributed to the following factors:

- rises in the proportions of older people living in couple-only households, due to both increases in the survivorship of partners, and consequent rises in the proportions married among the young elderly age groups;
- increases in the availability of kin with whom older people may coreside, a result of high fertility among cohorts born in the 1930s and 1940s compared with those born around the turn of the last century;
- later ages at leaving the parental home among the younger generation in southern Europe, a result of longer periods of education, later marriage and a later stable working career.<sup>12</sup>

Many European countries experienced increases in their institutionalised population in the 1980s. In Britain, increases in institutionalisation during the 1980s followed an expansion in the use and provision of institutional care, and were seen as an unintended consequence of policy changes which increased financial help available for those moving to residential and nursing homes.<sup>13,14</sup> The policy response to this expansion was new legislation implemented in 1993 (the 1990 National Health Service and Community Care Act) which was intended to reaffirm the objective of allowing older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Sweden, the Netherlands, and a number of other countries

have also implemented explicit policy objectives to reduce institutional care use. The recent decline in institutionalisation in the USA has been attributed, in part, to increased use of home care and the development of new housing types, including 'assisted living' units.<sup>15</sup>

### Determinants of living arrangements of older people

Demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors have all been advanced as important determinants of residence patterns. The trend toward greater residential independence among older people reflects, to a large extent, positive developments. For example, recent improvements in male longevity have meant that older women are more likely to remain living with a spouse in later life.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, declines in disability at older ages shown in some studies may have led to greater residential independence.<sup>17,18</sup> Finally, improvements in the financial situation of older people are associated with increases in solitary living in many industrialised countries.<sup>2</sup>

There are, however, other factors which are widely believed to have an impact on the household composition of elderly people. Trends in nuptiality and fertility play a central role in affecting living arrangement choices among older people. Spouse availability is an important influence on living arrangements, and is determined in large measure by past first marriage patterns, and the incidence and duration of widowhood and divorce.<sup>16</sup> For example, the oldest old in comparison with the younger old were much less likely to marry throughout much of north-western Europe and the USA, thereby reducing the availability of the usual source of help and support in later life: a husband or wife.

Many studies have shown a positive association between fertility and living arrangements (that is, older individuals with more children are less likely to live alone than those with fewer children).<sup>19</sup> Low levels of fertility among earlier cohorts throughout Europe and North America mean that older people born after the mid-1930s today are generally advantaged in terms of availability of at least one child compared with their predecessors born early in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Higher proportions childless and small family sizes among those born since the mid 1950s or 1960s, however, have led to rising concerns among policy makers that intergenerational coresidence may decline, potentially increasing the demand for formal care services among frail older people lacking intra-household support.

Those studies that have examined the effect of smaller family sizes on co-residence with children in later life, however, have shown that reduced fertility has only a modest impact on living arrangements; in many cases fertility declines have been a consequence of a reduction in the proportion of larger families.<sup>21</sup> In Italy, the crucial factor for co-residence appears to be having at least one surviving child.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, fewer children may result in greater postponement of residential independence among young adults both through a reduced influence of the 'crowding' effect on decisions to leave the parental home, and through greater access to parental resources. Parents may also invest more in their only child in order to keep him or her in close proximity. A recent study showed that parental housing assistance in Italy played an important role in later proximity between parents and children, and that the effect was reduced in larger families.<sup>22</sup>

There are several socio-economic characteristics that play an important role in the choice of living arrangements among older people. Higher levels of education and financial resources tend to increase the likelihood of residential independence among older people. Researchers have suggested that increased income promotes independent living since privacy and autonomy, both of which are highly valued, can be achieved with adequate financial means.<sup>10</sup> The positive association between better financial conditions and solitary living, however, is not found in all

studies.<sup>11</sup> Home ownership and high education (two proxies for higher social status) were found to be strongly positively associated with parent-children coresidence in Italy but not in Great Britain.<sup>23</sup> In addition, rising female labour-force participation has led to concerns that increasing commitments outside the home will conflict with women's ability and willingness to co-reside with elderly relatives in need of care.<sup>24</sup> However, most studies have shown that individuals, especially women, appear to add elder care and other family responsibilities to their portfolio of daily tasks without cutting back substantially on paid work or other competing obligations.<sup>25,26</sup>

There are numerous similarities in the demographic circumstances of older women across the countries considered, and therefore differences in living arrangements are likely to be at least partially explained by other factors. It has been suggested that culturally influenced norms concerning family responsibilities and obligations are extremely important in affecting living arrangements among older people. A 'familistic culture' has been used to explain the strong family ties evident in southern Europe.<sup>27,28</sup> In a familistic society, personal utility and family utility are considered the same: the structure of the family and the relationships among family members are influenced by the strong ties that link them together. For example, intergenerational co-residence in Italy tends to continue until children leave the parental home to get married; and even then children normally live close to their parents.<sup>29</sup> In north-western Europe there is a stronger individualistic culture, involving looser and less geographically close family ties and greater emphasis on individualistic relationships (for example, recent research has shown that friends are becoming more important in older people's 'personal communities' and there is a greater preference for independent living).<sup>30</sup>

Cultural values, reflected in differences in the desirability of intergenerational contact, frequency of contact with kin, and provision of care to older relatives, are likely to induce variations across countries in patterns of household composition. Research using the 1992 twin Eurobarometer surveys, which focused on attitudes toward older people, showed that more elderly people in southern European countries (for example, Italy and Portugal) desired greater contact with young people than in northern Europe (for example, Netherlands and the United Kingdom).<sup>31</sup> In addition, numerous studies using both the 1992 Eurobarometer data,<sup>31-33</sup> and data from the 1986 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on social networks,<sup>34,35</sup> have shown that the actual frequency of family contact among older people is less in north-western Europe when compared with southern Europe, even after adjusting for distance to mother. The 1986 ISSP data showed that 32 per cent of Italians who lived close to their mother saw her every day compared with 11 per cent of British, 20 per cent of German, and 17 per cent of Austrian respondents.<sup>34</sup>

The 1992 Eurobarometer data also showed that women in north-western European countries were less likely to be caring for a dependent than their southern European counterparts. For example, 7 and 10 per cent of women aged 50-64 were providing co-resident care for an ill, handicapped or elderly household member in the Netherlands and Britain respectively, compared with 17 per cent in Italy and 24 per cent in Portugal.<sup>33</sup> Given empirical evidence of lower levels of both desired and actual kin interaction in north-western Europe when compared with southern Europe, it is likely that differences in values and norms play an important role in determining the higher levels of solitary living among older people in northern European countries. Nevertheless, according to the Eurobarometer survey, there is still a strong feeling of reciprocity and altruism among young adults and older people alike – a third of the young people interviewed in the European Union think that their generation has a responsibility towards older people and just 5 per cent say that they would not like to have to take care of elderly relatives.<sup>36</sup>

In the following sections we will investigate trends in determinants – demographic, cultural and socio-economic factors – that have traditionally been used to explain changes in the living arrangements of older people in order to examine how they may help us explain differences across the countries considered.

## RESULTS

### Living arrangements

Figure 1 shows trends over the past 30 years (1970-2000) in the proportion of women aged 65 and older in the private household population living alone for the countries considered. For those countries with a complete time series we observe an increase in the proportions of older women living alone between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s: the proportion of women living alone in this time period almost doubled in Italy (from 22 to 40 per cent), increased consistently in Great Britain (from 34 to 48 per cent) and in the Netherlands (from 28 to 41 per cent), while on the other hand showed only a moderate increase in Sweden and in the USA. Conversely in the 1990s there was a levelling off in the trend of older people living alone (Sweden, USA and Britain), and for certain countries a decline in this trend was evident (Italy, Germany and Austria). Portugal and the Netherlands are exceptions, with the proportion of older people living alone still increasing. In Portugal, though, the proportion is much lower in comparison with the other countries considered. For those countries with a complete time series, Sweden and Germany maintained the highest proportion of older women living alone and Italy the lowest.

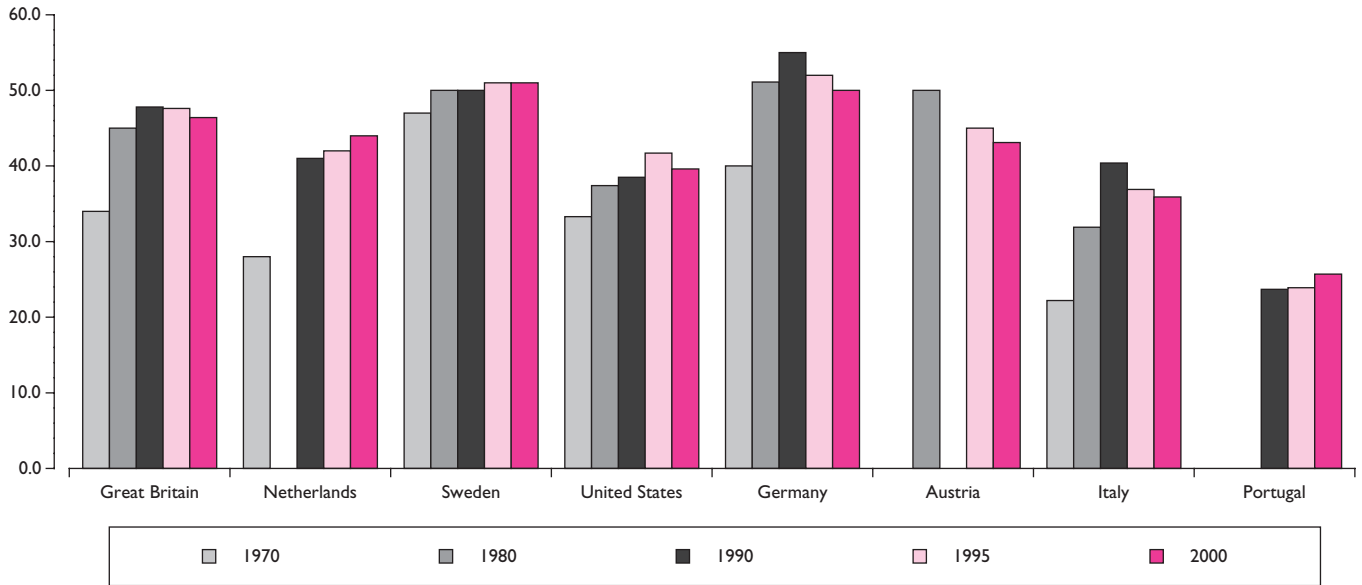
Figure 2 shows in greater detail the household composition of men and women aged 65 years and over in the countries considered using the most recently available source of data. Living alone or with a partner only is far more common for men in Sweden and the Netherlands (98 and 89 per cent are in this type of living arrangements compared with 68 and 65 per cent in Portugal and Italy). Figures for women are very similar with 97 per cent of Swedish women living alone or with their husbands only compared with only 60 per cent in Portugal. Conversely the proportion of older people living with children or in other types of living arrangements is higher in southern Europe. Almost one third of the Italian and Portuguese (and to a lesser extent Austrian) older women live with children compared with only 2 and 6 per cent of their Swedish and Dutch counterparts. Britain and Germany have an intermediate position with the proportion of older women living with children varying between 10 and 20 per cent. Italy, Portugal and Britain show a higher proportion of older women living in other kinds of living arrangements, especially with siblings in the case in Italy.

Although only a minority of older people live in institutions, among the 'oldest old' the proportion is quite high and varies widely across Europe. Figure 3 shows the proportion of people aged 85 and over in communal establishments. Declines in institutionalisation among older people have occurred in the Netherlands, Italy, Britain, Sweden and in the USA, while the proportion in institutions has increased in Austria and, most clearly, in Portugal. Despite different trends between the countries, the proportion of older people resident in communal establishments is lowest in the central and southern European countries (Italy, Portugal and to a lesser extent, Austria) for both time periods. In Britain and the USA the proportion is relatively low compared with the Netherlands and Sweden.

**Figure 1**

**Proportion of women aged 65 and over living alone in private households: 1970–2000**

Per cent living alone

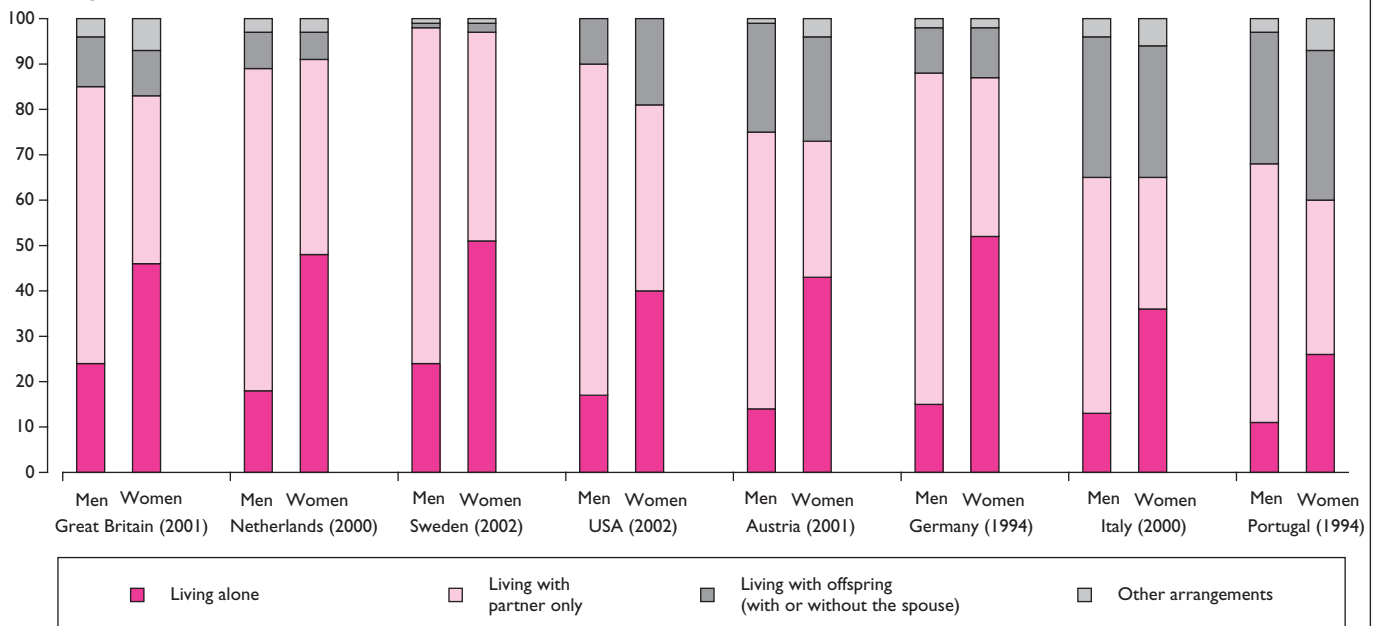


Sources: Great Britain: 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 Censuses; 1994 General Household Survey (GHS).  
 Italy: 1971, 1981, 1991 Censuses; 1994, 2000 ISTAT's Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie Italiane.  
 Netherlands: 1970, 1980 Prins, C.J.M. (1990). Strong growth of one-person households among the Elderly; 1990 CBS (Central Bureau voor de Statistiek) Monthly Statistics, 1990, 10-11; 1995, 2000 CBS Statline; <http://www.cbs.nl/en/figures/statline/index.htm>  
 Sweden: 1970, 1989, 1997 European Community Household Panel (ECHP); 2000 Statistics Sweden level of Living Survey.  
 US Current Population Reports, P-20 series; <http://www.bls.gov/cps/home.htm>  
 Portugal: 1991, 2001 Censuses; 1995 from Kinsella and Velkoff 2001.  
 Germany: 1970, 1980 (West Germany only). 1991, 1996, 2000 Statistisches Bundesamt (HRSG): Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

**Figure 2**

**Population aged 65 and over by living arrangements and sex: household population**

Percentages

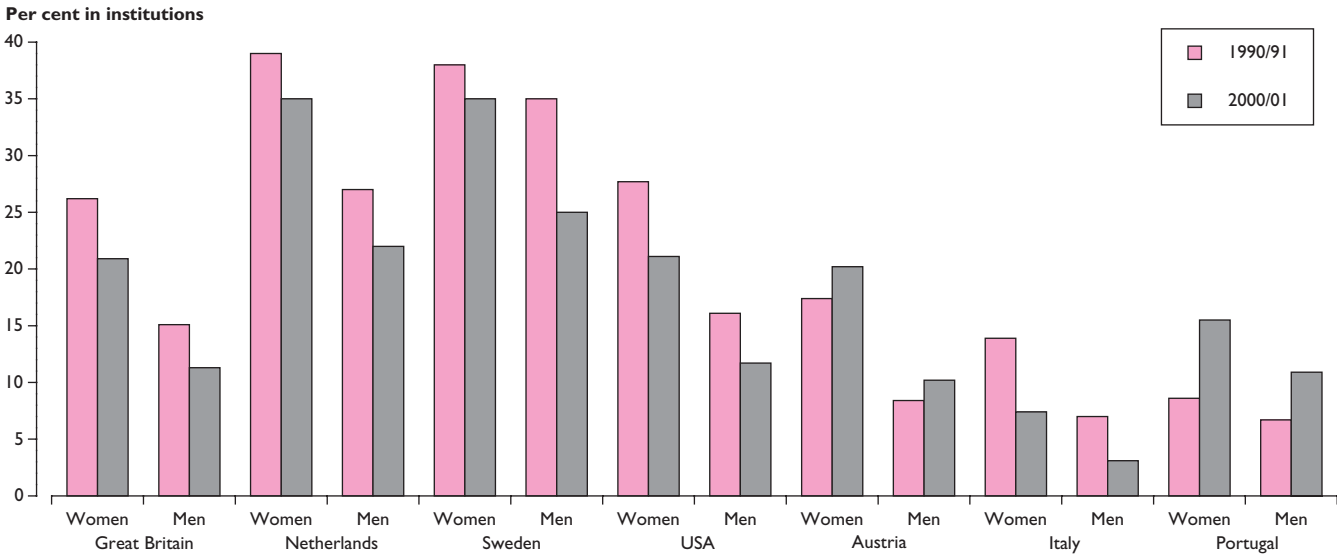


Sources: Great Britain GHS 2001; the Netherlands CBS statline, Persons in independent household by age and sex 2000; Sweden Level of Living Survey 2002; U.S. Census Data; Austria 2001 Microcensus; Portugal and Germany, Iacovou (2001); Italy Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie 2000 (authors' calculations).



**Figure 3**

**Proportion of people aged 85 and over resident in communal establishments by sex: 1990/91 and 2000/01**



Note: Different definitions of communal establishments have been used in the censuses and surveys on which the data are based. These definitions include different types of communal living arrangements (e.g. old-age homes, long term care facilities and for Portugal religious establishments). Consistent definitions for each country have been used for the two time periods.

Sources: National census data (1991 and 2001 for Great Britain, Italy, Austria and Portugal; 1990 and 2000 for the Netherlands and the US); 1990 and 2000 Sweden Hemma Pa Aldre Dar (HPAD). Data are not available for Germany.

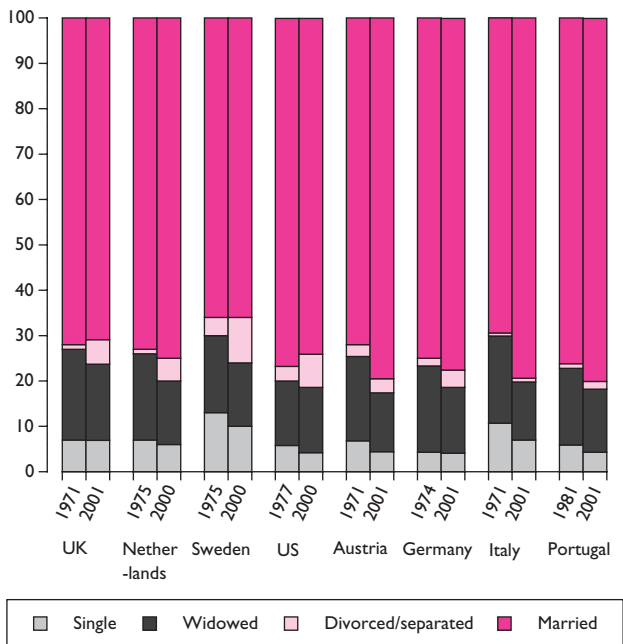
**Marital status**

During the last three decades, the proportion married among men and women aged 65 and over increased in almost all the countries considered (Figure 4a and 4b). The increase in the proportion of older married women from 1971 to 2001 has been small in some countries (for example, Netherlands and Sweden), whereas it has been over 9 per cent in others (for example, Italy and Austria). The increase in the proportion of married men is less marked, and for some countries is negligible (for example, Sweden and the Netherlands).

According to these marital status trends, the proportion of older women who have a spouse is higher today compared to 30 years ago, while for men it has not changed significantly. For this reason we find more older women living as a couple in recent years, especially in southern Europe. This rise in the proportions married at older ages partially reflects improvements in life expectancy which have increased the probability that spouses will survive together into old age. The small proportions of divorced older people in Portugal and Italy reflect the late introduction of divorce legislation in the 1970s. The reduction in the proportion of

**Figure 4a**

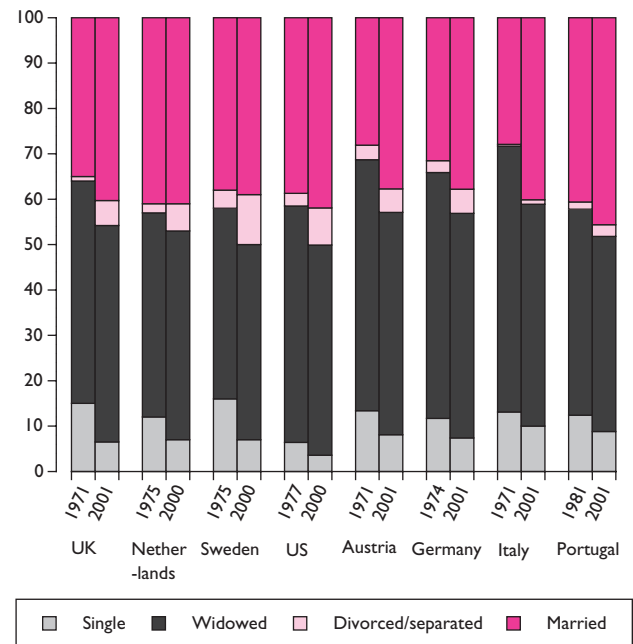
**Changes in marital status distribution over time, men aged 65 and over**



Source: National census data

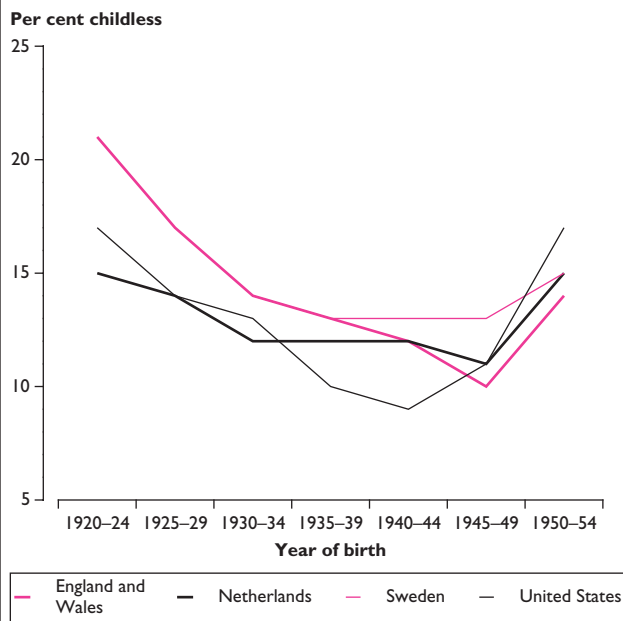
**Figure 4b**

**Changes in marital status distribution over time, women aged 65 and over**



Source: National census data

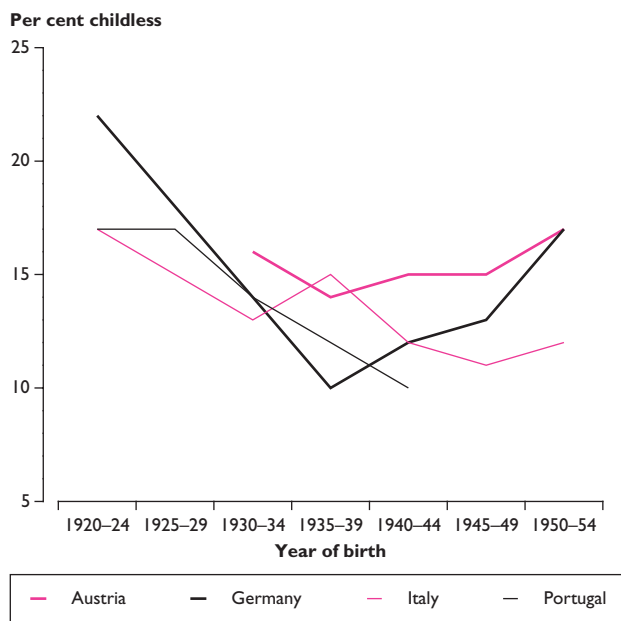
**Figure 5a** Percentage of childless women by age 45 by cohort



Note: Austria and Germany by age 40.

Source: Rowland, D.T., 1998, "Cross-National Trends in Childlessness", Working Paper in Demography, N.73, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University; Santini, A., 1995 "Continuità e discontinuità nel comportamento riproduttivo delle donne nel dopoguerra", Working paper, N.53 dipartimento di Statistica, Università di Firenze; Portuguese 1991 Census.

**Figure 5b** Percentage of childless women by age 45 by cohort



married older men in the United Kingdom and in the USA is mainly due to a corresponding increase in the proportions divorced.

In summary most countries have experienced an increase in the proportion of married women, and this may partially explain the decrease in the proportion of older women living alone in recent years. This seems to be the case for all countries except for the Netherlands and Sweden.

**Fertility levels and timing**

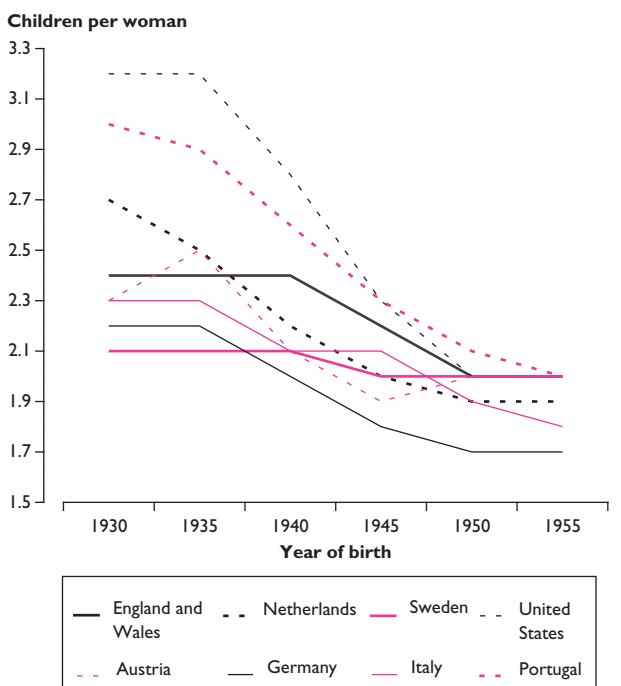
In many north-western European countries (for example, Germany, the Netherlands and England and Wales), cohorts born in the 1920s are characterised by higher levels of childlessness when compared with the generations born in the mid-1930s and 1940s (Figure 5a and 5b). This may contribute to the low levels of intergenerational co-residence with offspring among those aged 65 and over presented in Figure 2.

When the cohort fertility rate (by age 45) is considered (see figure 6), there is a similar trend across the countries. Thus very old people today are likely to experience a greater scarcity of support from children when compared with cohorts born in the 1930s and 1940s who experienced higher fertility levels. Two exceptions should be noted: the fertility rate dropped most dramatically in Portugal (from 3.0 to 2.0 children per woman for the cohorts born in 1930 and 1955 respectively) while it remained basically unchanged in Sweden (Figure 6). However, while the number of children among future cohorts of elderly people appears to be decreasing, the proportion of people aged 80 and over with at least a surviving child (that is, those at greatest risk of needing support) is rising.<sup>20</sup> The decrease in the number of children has not appeared to hinder coresidence in Italy and Portugal.

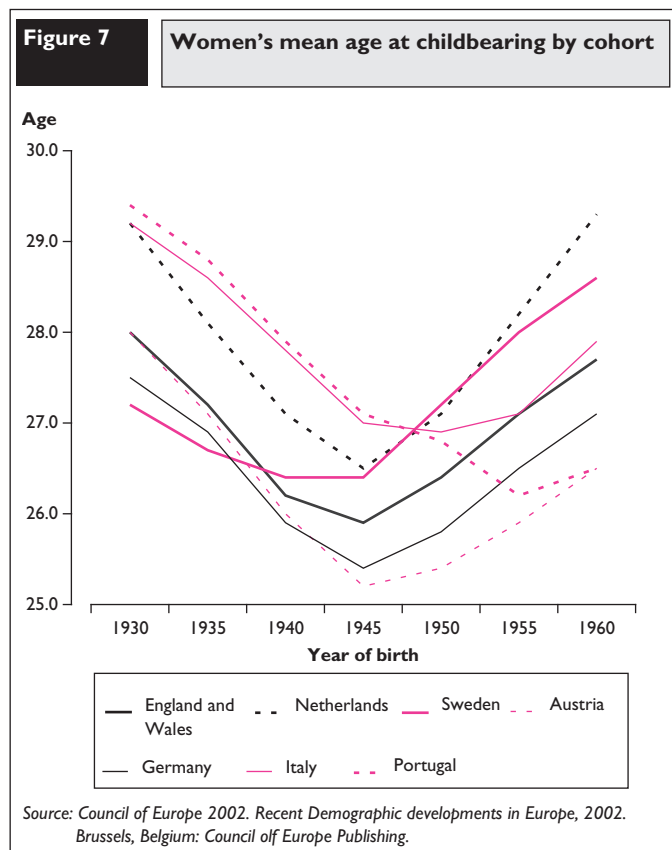
If we consider the timing of fertility, again similar patterns occur across European countries. Cohorts born after 1950 show very similar mean ages at childbirth compared to cohorts born in the 1930s (Figure 7). This pattern shows how the mean generation length (that is, difference between mother's and child's age) among women born in the 1930s

will be similar to that experienced by generations born in the 1950s. The timing of fertility (in particular, age of the mother at the last birth) determines to a large extent whether or not young adult children are still in the parental home when parents reach their 50s and 60s, although trends in home leaving are also important. In all the countries considered mean age at childbirth has decreased for the cohorts born between 1930

**Figure 6** Women's completed family size by cohort



Source: Eurostat New Cronos; for the USA Heuser database (<http://opr.princeton.edu/archive/cpft/>)



and 1945 (later for Portugal and Italy) and then increased again, but not to the level of the 1930 cohort (except for the Netherlands and Sweden).

It can be concluded that trends in demographic factors (notably marital status and childlessness level) may help to explain the trends towards stabilisation or decline in older people living alone in the countries selected for this article. More recent fertility trends, however, may work in the opposite direction for the future cohorts of older people.

**Female labour force participation**

Among women aged 45 to 59 in northern European countries and in the USA in 2000, at least 75 per cent were economically active (88 per cent in Sweden and 75 per cent in the USA); a slightly lower figure (55 per cent) is apparent for Portugal (Table 2). In addition, whilst a high proportion of employed women in this age group in northern Europe are working part-time (78 per cent in the Netherlands and 48 per cent in the United Kingdom), the majority of employed women in Italy (85 per cent) and in Portugal (80 per cent), even within this age range, are working full-time (New Cronos Database).

**Table 2** Trends in women's labour force participation (women aged 40-59)

	1970	1980	1990	2000
United Kingdom	51.1	62.7	64.9	68.3
Netherlands	20.5	26.4	39.3	45.2
Sweden	49.9	75.1	87.6	88.2
United States	52.1	58.2	70.2	74.9
Austria	46.0	46.6	47.9	48.3
Germany	48.1	51.1	58.8	62.2
Italy	25.5	30.1	33.6	37.4
Portugal	17.3	40.6	50.6	55.4

Source: International Labour Organisation, Laborstat (<http://laborsta.ilo.org/>)

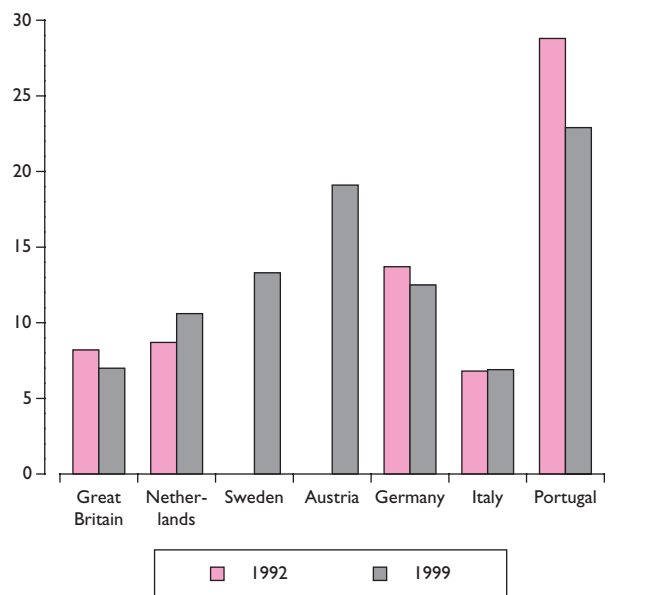
While female labour force participation is increasing for every country, the ranking of the countries has remained about the same. It should be noted, however, that the differences between the countries have grown in 2000 compared to 1970, with Sweden at the top (with 88 per cent participation) and Italy at the bottom (with 37 per cent participation) of the ranking. As more females participate in the labour force, a variety of ways of providing informal care to older people may be required in Sweden. Although 20 per cent of women in Italy are employed, this may not prevent them from coresiding with their elderly parents. Co-residence may even be an attractive option given the need for childcare and few state facilities for working mothers in southern Europe.

**Attitudes**

Data from the Eurobarometer surveys were used to examine changes in attitudes toward the acceptability and desirability of family and institutional care for frail older people. Figure 8 shows the proportion of people aged 40 to 64 who reported that older people should go into a residential or nursing home when they need personal care. Swedish, Austrian and Portuguese adults were more likely to consider the option of a residential or nursing home for frail older people (13 per cent of the Swedes against just 7 per cent of the Italians). There has been little change in these attitudes over time (that is, between 1992 and 1999) and there are few differences between the generations (that is, between those aged 40 and under compared with those aged 40 to 64; not shown).

Despite the common feeling of responsibility toward older people, there is considerable variation among people aged 40 to 64 as to whether or not co-residence is considered as an option in response to the potential needs of their own frail elderly parents. Figure 9 shows that 42 per cent of Italians think it would be best for an elderly father or mother who lived alone and could no longer manage on his or her own to move in with them or one of their siblings compared with 30 per cent of British and 9 per cent of Swedish respondents. In Sweden and the Netherlands residential care or formal home care are more likely to be an option for

**Figure 8** Attitudes of 40-64 year olds towards the appropriateness of residential/nursing home care for older people needing personal care\*



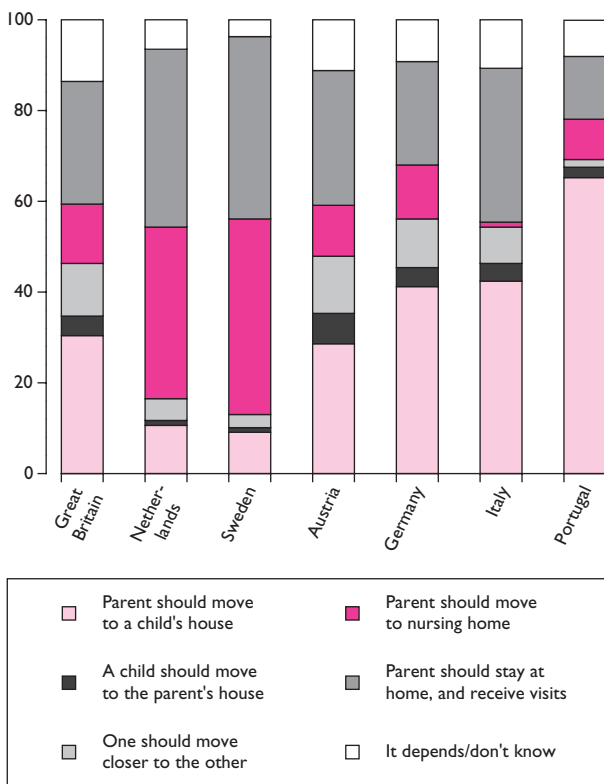
\* Note: Results are derived from the question: 'Some people say that elderly people needing personal care should go into residential/nursing homes. Others say that the social services should help them remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Which comes closest to your own opinion?'

Source: Eurobarometer 1992 and 1999 (authors' calculations)



Figure 9

**Attitudes of 40–64 year olds towards the residence and proximity arrangements appropriate for their own elderly parents who can no longer manage alone**



\* Note: Results are derived from the question: "Let's suppose you had an elderly father or mother who lived alone. What do you think would be best if this parent could no longer manage to live on his/her own?"

Source: Eurobarometer 1998 (authors' calculations)

older people in need than coresidence with children. These figures point to the sharp differences between the northern (Sweden, the Netherlands), western (Britain, Germany and Austria) and southern European (Italy and Portugal) countries. It is important to remember that attitudes may reflect both cultural norms regarding filial responsibility and differences in the policy environments across the selected countries, reflecting variations in the availability, cost and quality of institutional care.

## SUMMARY

The first aim of the article was to examine the differences in living arrangements of older people in Europe and the USA. Three types of living arrangements were considered: living alone, living with others and living in residential care. All countries experienced an increase in the proportion of older people living alone up to the early 1990s; however, most countries experienced a slowdown in this trend for the most recent period. When older people are not living alone or with a spouse, the most common alternatives seem to be living with offspring or in other arrangements in southern Europe (Portugal, Italy) or in residential care in northern European countries (Sweden, the Netherlands). The other countries (Britain, Germany, USA and Austria) represent an intermediate position on these options.

The second aim was to examine differences in the trends in demographic, socio-economic, and cultural factors over time. Trends in divorce differed between the countries, with the southern European countries having relatively low proportions of divorced older people. In most other countries divorce has increased, although the proportion of married older

people has also increased for nearly all the countries considered, so that the proportion of older people living with a spouse had increased despite the rise in divorce.

Cohort fertility levels have decreased in almost all the countries we studied. Still, for coresidence having one child may be enough.<sup>37</sup> In all countries, the proportion of women in the labour force increased over time, but the increase was larger for some countries than for others. Sweden has the most women in paid employment, though the majority of them work part-time, and Italy the least. Finally, there were large differences in attitudes toward residential care and coresidence, but little change in attitudes over time. Again, there are large differences between northern (Sweden, the Netherlands) and southern (Italy and Portugal) European countries, with the other countries taking an intermediate position.

The third aim was to consider to what degree the differences in trends in demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors explain the differences in trends in living arrangements among the countries. A stabilisation or even a decrease in the proportion aged 65 and over living alone is likely to occur due to the increase in proportion of married individuals in all countries and lower level of childlessness.

Finally, the differences in cultural values may help explain differences in residential care and in coresidence between the countries, and they seem very important for every country considered. In particular, the contrasts in attitudes between northern and southern European countries mirror the contrast in solitary living among their older populations.

## DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The phenomenon of population ageing and, in particular, the fertility declines responsible for this trend, have prompted concerns among commentators and policy makers that family support for older people may decline. Currently, among most European countries, family members provide the great majority of care received by older people.<sup>33</sup> There is nevertheless considerable variation across countries, with a higher proportion of older people receiving care and living with family members in southern Europe. Moreover, there has been little change over time in attitudes towards elder care according to Eurobarometer Survey data. Still, at present the older age groups are comparatively rich in family resources; the low-fertility cohorts of the future may face a diminished supply of family caregivers and co-residents. Furthermore, Europe and other industrialized countries have witnessed dramatic changes in family life in the postwar period known as the 'second demographic transition' (that is, changes in fertility patterns and in family formation and dissolution). These recent trends are less evident among current elderly cohorts but will become more apparent in the future. This means that in the future older people are likely to experience even greater diversity both in family life and in their living arrangements than previous generations.<sup>38</sup>

The demographic trends reviewed above have other important public policy implications as well. For example, the living arrangements of older people may influence (and be influenced by) housing policy. The countries studied here have adopted a wide variety of policies affecting housing choices, including subsidised housing costs, direct provision of housing units to the poor, favourable tax treatment of interest, housing allowances, and controls on rental costs. The trend towards smaller households – among persons of *all* ages – has implications for transportation, commodity packaging, and per-capita usage of energy and natural resources.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, while older people may enjoy greater autonomy and independence when living alone, they may be placing themselves at greater risk for adverse health outcomes, including premature death. Perhaps one of the most striking instances

of these elevated risks is found in the excess deaths attributed to the extraordinarily high temperatures of August 2003 in France and the 1995 heatwave in Chicago.<sup>40,41</sup>

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## Key findings

- After a large rise in solitary living among older people in Europe and the USA between 1970 and 1990, in the 1990s the levels stabilised or even declined, depending on the country.
- An increase in the proportion of married older people has occurred, especially in southern Europe, and among women more than men.
- Present generations of older people in the countries studied are less likely to be childless when compared with previous and subsequent generations.
- Levels of solitary living among older people were highest in north-western Europe and lowest in southern Europe and the USA.
- Attitudes toward the acceptability and desirability of intergenerational coresidence and institutional care vary greatly across the countries considered, and they may partly explain the differences in living arrangements between countries.

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