

Household composition and well-being

Introduction

Demographic and socioeconomic changes have shifted household structures in Europe. The number of single-person households has increased; the number of households with children has decreased; household types have diversified with alternative family forms; and the economic crisis has meant an increase in multigenerational households and young adults living at home. This report illustrates the diversity of household types in the EU, how they have changed over 10 years and how household structure relates to subjective well-being and social exclusion.

Policy context

Social policies (such as housing and family policies) are mostly the competence of Member States. However, EU-level policies (the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Work–Life Balance Directive, and the Council recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems) recognise family diversity and hence impact households. A policy concern of most Member States is demographic ageing and decreasing fertility; and some governments have introduced policies or legal rights as a response to increasing household diversity – for example, recognising cohabitation, same-sex marriage or blended families.

Key findings

- The proportion of single-person households is increasing. A large proportion of these households are older women who have lost their (male) partner. However, this trend is expected to slow as joint survival of couples increases.
- Single-person households are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion; single people of middle and older age, especially, have worse health and subjective well-being than those living with partners. Older people living alone have better well-being than their younger counterparts.

- Cohabitation of unmarried partners has increased significantly in most Member States. In eastern and southern Member States, cohabitation is still primarily a route to marriage; in Nordic and western European countries, it is often a permanent arrangement.
- Cohabiting partners have poorer subjective well-being than married partners.
- Many countries have introduced some rights to property and benefits for cohabiting couples; in most, formal registration is required.
- Couples without children have better living conditions and work–life balance than couple parents. However, they have worse subjective well-being. Over the age of 65, there is less correlation between well-being and having no children, although an association is observed between being without children, and greater social exclusion and lower happiness.
- Same-sex couples have, on average, similar material living conditions to opposite-sex couples, but a higher incidence of chronic illness. This might be due to mental health problems tied to discrimination. They also experience greater social exclusion and are less likely to turn to family or friends for support.
- The proportion of retired-couple households is expected to increase further with rising male life expectancy. Retired couples are happier, more satisfied and more optimistic than retired people in other types of households and have better material living conditions, especially women.
- Gender differences after retirement are substantial. Women are at greater risk of poverty in older age. Many countries respond to this with survivor pensions and factoring maternity leave into pensions. However, people who have been married remain at an advantage after retirement, especially women.
- The absolute and relative number of nuclear families is declining in most countries. Parents in nuclear families have the best subjective well-being and highest optimism of respondents across all household types.

- Most nuclear families are dual-earning and have the most unbalanced allocation of unpaid work: women do the most housework, and many have problems with work-life balance. Fathers do more hours of paid work than men without children and often have associated work-life balance issues.
- The proportion of lone-parent households has increased in the EU. Lone parents are at higher risk of poverty and deprivation, and have difficulties budgeting due to single incomes and lower employment rates.
- Working lone parents are the most likely to have issues with work-life balance despite working shorter hours. Both lone fathers and lone mothers do more housework than parents in couples.
- Lone parents have worse subjective well-being and social exclusion than couple parents. Social support from family and friends is important for lone parents' subjective well-being.
- Blended families are rarely recognised in family policy, but their numbers are increasing. Parents in blended families have better outcomes in terms of well-being and living conditions than lone parents. Children's well-being in these households depends on the quality of relationships with parents and step-parents.
- Multigenerational households are most common in eastern Member States. Parents and grandparents in these households have worse well-being than their peers in other households.
- The number of young adults living with their parents increased between 2007 and 2017.
- Subjective well-being is worse among young adults living with their parents than those living independently, especially among over-25s. However, the parental home provides protection against poverty and can maintain mental well-being, especially for unemployed young adults.
- Non-family households, mostly found in urban areas, are more at risk of poverty than other households. People in non-family households are younger, more likely to be immigrants and often have issues with accommodation. However, their well-being is similar to other households.

Policy pointers

- Older people living alone have better well-being than those living with their children, although this may be due to a range of factors (such as poor health or low income). Policies can aim at helping older people live independently; meanwhile, living in community with other older people or with younger people can reduce social exclusion and delay the need for residential care.
- Policies recognising cohabitation after living together have been introduced in some countries. These may provide protection against poverty for financially dependent partners. Introducing such rights may also decrease gender differences in material well-being in older age.
- Recognising same-sex couples and providing equal family rights contributes to their social acceptance; this may result in increased social support and better well-being and may have a positive effect on household formation among LGBT people.
- Extending leave rights for fathers and increasing affordable childcare places may improve work-life balance for parents.
- Policies for lone parents have concentrated on employment; however, some evidence suggests that conditions related to seeking work on income support have increased stress for lone parents. A major barrier to lone parents' employment is availability of affordable childcare.
- Recognising blended families may help the formation of new households for lone parents following separation, while recognising that step-parents may contribute to improving child well-being in blended families.
- Policies helping young adults to move out of the parental home and live independently may improve subjective well-being.
- Co-living schemes can provide young people with affordable independent accommodation, and reduce loneliness and social exclusion, including for older people, if these projects are made affordable.

Further information

The report *Household composition and well-being* is available at
<https://eurofound.link/ef19040>

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