# Living arrangements of non-partnered pensioners in Europe: alone or with others?

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## Introduction

European societies are facing a population ageing process which entails political challenges to handle social and economic changes. Active ageing concept and policies have been developed to promote elderly's labour and social participation as well as their autonomy and independent living. This study focuses on the latter, analysing through the last decade the living arrangements of the elderly who do not live with a partner. It considers several countries from Nordic, Central and Southern Europe showing different residential patterns.

Living with a partner ensures residential autonomy even after health deterioration, since normally the healthier partner becomes the care supplier. Elderly who do not live with a partner are supposed to choose whether they live alone or with others. Yet, as they become older they may confront difficulties to maintain their living independence. The main hypothesis is that meanwhile health and wealth allow it; the probability of living alone is higher than living with other relative or non-relative people. However, previous research has stated different residential patterns among European regions: coresidence is much common in Southern that in Central and, more especially, Northern countries. The question driving this research is whether the higher or lower proneness to live with other people instead of living alone observed in these European regions is cultural or there are structural or period factors that could explain these substantial differences. This paper examines individual and contextual characteristics of those people – who are not living with a partner and aged 65 to 95 –living with others regarding those living alone.

To do so we use the four available waves of Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) from 2004/5 to 2010/1, a timespan that allows checking the effects of the economic crisis. We consider the 10 countries that participated in all these four issues: Austria, France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Netherland, Denmark, Sweden, Italy and Spain.

## Data and Methods

SHARE is a biannual panel survey launched in 2004/5 and addressed to population aged 50 and over living in households. The first wave included 11 European countries and other countries were added or

excluded in the following waves carried on in 2006/7, 2008/9 and 2010/1. At every new issue the representative sample of population is refreshed with cohorts entering age 50. The third wave, called SHARELIFE, is a special issue that contains retrospective information about family formation, fertility and labour history but leaves out other relevant information for our study such as income and functional ability to develop activities of daily life (ADL).

SHARE has a hierarchical structure with four levels: country, household, individual and observation. After selecting people aged 66 to 95, only one individual from each household was picked out. Therefore, the household level is not present in this analysis. The final subsample comprises 8,883 individuals observed in 16,541 occasions. The information is organised into 10 countries (3rd level) for which an individual from every household was picked out (2nd level), who was observed along a maximum of 4 observations (1st level) while the person has stayed into the range of ages.

Using logistic regression for panel data we analyse the ratio between the probabilities of living with others regarding that of living alone. The ratio of coresidence is evaluated following a step by step procedure that first examines the effects of age, sex country of residence and observation period. After controlling for these variables, the influence of other independent variables is investigated: educational attainment, number of children, difficulties to develop ADL and income level.

**Results**

The regional disparities in coresidence ratio appear when including in the model only the country of residence. Netherland, Denmark, Switzerland and Sweden are the countries where people are less prone to live with others (estimating the proportion of coresidence, it is about 5-8%), while coresidence is much common in Italy (31.5%) and Spain (41.9%), and the central countries lay in between without showing significant differences among them.

A general age pattern was found, with little divergences among the older old in Italy and Sweden. Coresidence slightly decreases from age 65 to 70 reaching stability at around a 10% and increasing dramatically from age 80 up to around 25% at age 95. However, this age pattern will be eroded when considering ADL limitations.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of coresidence ratio through time: after a small decline there is a shift of the trend in 2008/9 that grows noticeably with the expansion of the economic crisis. Once the period is considered, gender becomes significant because women had higher ratio of coresidence in all the periods but in 2010/1, when hardships seem to have a stronger impact on men's living arrangements. This shape appears to be common to all countries.

After controlling for demographic and contextual variables, we investigate the influence of other variables of interest. The educational attainment showed the expected protector effect: the higher the educational level, the lower the ratio of coresidence. Few particularities were found, the most remarkable is the fact that during the 3rd period, at the starting point of the crisis, those with medium education increased their ratio of coresidence, as if they were the first ones to be beaten by the crisis.

Since most times coresidence implies living with children, the number of children was included expecting that the more children available, the more likely to live with one of them. This pattern was founded in the last period, but before the economic crisis the ratio of living alone was higher for those people with 2 children than for those with only 1 (Figure 2). The interaction between the number of children and the period cancelled the interaction with gender showed in figure 1.

*Fig 1. Evolution of the ratio of coresidence by sex.*

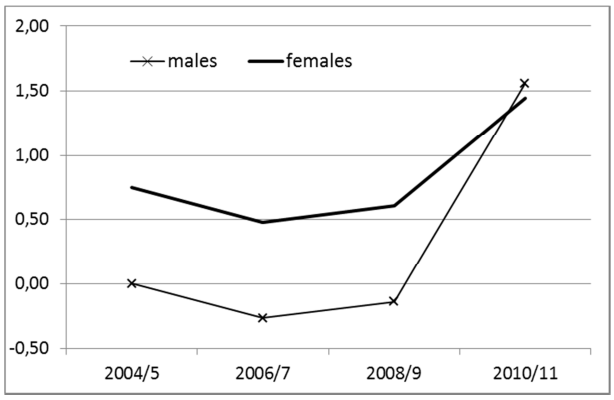
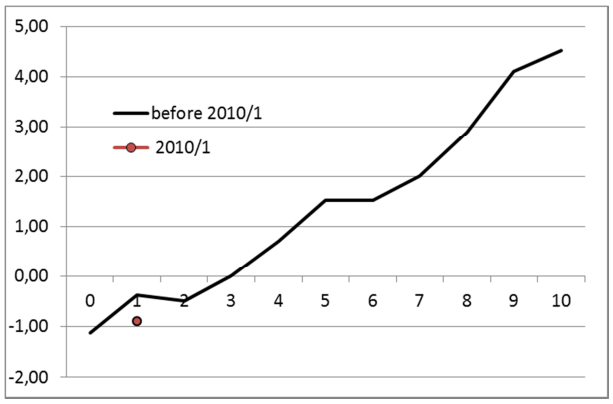



*Fig 2. Coresidence ratio by number of children.*




Finally, the influence of three new variables was examined: difficulties to develop activities of daily life (both ADL and IADL) and income level. These variables were not collected in SHARELIFE, losing thereby the features of the 3rd period (2008/9). ADL and IADL are correlated, and consequently IADL effect overrides the ADL influence. IADL limitations are what definitely shape the ratio of coresidence, especially for those with 5 or more IADL limitations. The inclusion of this variable erodes the age pattern previously found. It is not ageing by itself, but the individual ageing process and decline on IADL abilities. The loss of ability to cope with daily life is what more determines the likelihood of living with others.

When including the income level the period effect disappears even in its interactions, which confirms the impact of the economic crisis. For people above the median of income (measured within the subsample for each country and period) the ratio of coresidence is much lower (coefficient= -0.45) in all countries but in Spain, where it increases the ratio by 0.46, being the richer more prone to coresidence; perhaps to give more than to receive help from others.

As table 1 shows, after controlling for all the above mentioned variables, the distance in coresidence ratio between European regions enlarges. Therefore, the observed residential patterns are no explained by the structural or contextual factors considered in this study.

**Discussion**

One would say that idiosyncratic cultures, the Mediterranean familism versus the Nordic individualism, underlie the interregional dissimilarities on residential patterns described. Nevertheless, it is plausible to think that while in Nordic countries the social public services allow the elderly to live alone until they need continued assistance because the loss of functional autonomy, the lack of these services in Southern Europe would force them to live with other people. Some results provide evidence that would support the latter interpretation. The fact that 1) severe limitation in IADL is the factor that has the

greatest impact on the probability of coresidence, 2) the economic crisis has triggered a shift on the trend and an increase of coresidence, and 3) both higher educational and higher income levels entail a lower ratio of coresidence, suggesting higher freedom of choice in Nordic countries rather than familism in Southern Europe.

The effect of the economic crisis has given rise to a noticeable upturn of coresidence ratio in all countries that hit before those with medium level of education and deleted differences among sexes. This could be due to a stronger impact of hardships among men than among women. Yet, one should also consider that coresidence could be response to the worsening conditions of live of children, which would have affected the elderly parents regardless their gender.

The residential patterns described seem to respond to the diversity of care regimens depending on divergent regulations. In Nordic countries the State has the responsibility to assist the elderly, while in central and southern countries from responsibility lies primarily on the Family. The spread of the crisis has led to increased coresidence of older people in all the countries considered. However, it is expected that the erosion of social protection as well as rising unemployment will have a greater impact and longer-term consequences in those countries where the crisis is fiercer.

*Table 1. Final model for the ratio of coresidence.*

| | Coefficient | p-value |
|---|---|---|
| Denmark | -3,66 | 0,00 |
| Netherland | -2,71 | 0,00 |
| Sweden | -2,68 | 0,00 |
| Switzerland | -1,71 | 0,00 |
| Belgium | -0,61 | 0,06 |
| France | -0,54 | 0,06 |
| Germany | -0,37 | 0,32 |
| Austria | 0,00 | ref. |
| Italy | 2,86 | 0,00 |
| Spain | 3,61 | 0,00 |
| | | |
| age | -1,06 | 0,00 |
| quadratic age | 0,01 | 0,00 |
| | | |
| gender (female) | 0,39 | 0,07 |
| | | |
| low educational attainment | 0,00 | ref. |
| medium | -1,00 | 0,00 |
| high | -1,13 | 0,00 |
| medium education in Switzerland | 0,72 | 0,03 |
| | | |
| without children | 0,00 | ref. |
| 1 child | -1,46 | 0,00 |
| 2 children | -0,36 | 0,18 |
| 3 children | -0,49 | 0,06 |
| 4 children | 0,74 | 0,02 |
| 5+ children | 1,86 | 0,00 |
| | | |
| None IADL limitation | 0,00 | ref. |
| 1-3 IADL lim. | 0,54 | 0,00 |
| 4 IADL lim. | 1,07 | 0,01 |
| 5+ IADL lim. | 8,41 | 0,01 |
| interaction age and 5+ IADL lim. | -0,07 | 0,08 |
| | | |
| Income level above the median | -0,46 | 0,01 |
| no information on income | -0,20 | 0,31 |
| interaction above the median in Spain | 0,46 | 0,02 |
| | | |
| Constant | 37,72 | 0,00 |

| | Coefficient | standard error |
|---|---|---|
| /lnsig2u | 2,88 | 0,10 |
| sigma_u | 4,23 | 0,21 |
| rho | 0,84 | 0,01 |