

Living alone

In 2009, there were around two million people aged 15 years and over who were living alone.¹ The proportion of people living alone increased over the two decades to 2006. However, over the last few years this trend has stalled. The longer-term increase was associated with delayed partnering, divorce and separation, as well as lower fertility rates, and a decline in extended families. Living alone becomes more common as people age, particularly for women, who tend to outlive their husbands. People living alone may be at risk of social isolation, which can have a negative impact on people's mental and physical wellbeing. While people generally value some time alone, people who spend a lot of time alone may become socially isolated. The Australian Government's social inclusion agenda recognises the importance of all people having the opportunity to be engaged in society, in ways such as being involved in their local community, connecting with their family and friends and having access to services they need.²

This article looks at the characteristics of people who live alone, and compares them with those who live with other people, in terms of their levels of social interaction, mental health and general wellbeing.

Living alone

Over the last couple of decades, the proportion of the population aged 15 years and over living alone (in private dwellings) increased from 9% to 12%, and over the next 20 years is projected to increase to 16% (3.1 million).³ Living alone becomes more common with age, in 2006 peaking at around age 90 for both men and women. In both 1986 and 2006, men were more

Data sources and definitions

This article uses data from a number of ABS sources: Censuses of Population and Housing; 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey; 2006 Time Use Survey; and the 2006 General Social Survey. Data on health and wellbeing are drawn from the 2007 Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing and the 2007–08 National Health Survey.

Living alone census data exclude people who were not at home on census night and/or those living in non-private dwellings such as nursing homes. In 2006, 2% of people aged 15 years and over lived in non-private dwellings (7% of people aged 65 years and over lived in non-private dwellings).

likely to live alone than women, until around 55 years of age when it became increasingly more common for women to live alone.

This long-term overall increase in the prevalence of living alone is in part due to the ageing of the population, but also to the increasing propensity of younger and middle aged people to live alone. Older women were generally less likely to live alone than two decades earlier. This shift is related to increases in life expectancy, which have also narrowed the gap between men and women. This has led to both partners living to an older age on average, and so the length of time spent in the widowed state has decreased for both men and women at age 60 (see *Australian Social Trends 2007*, ['Lifetime marriage and divorce trends'](#)).

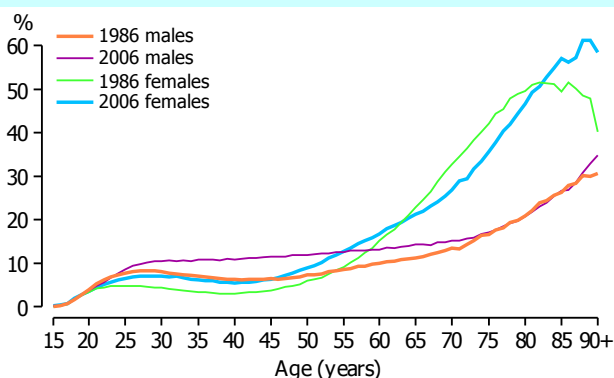
Over the last twenty years, the proportion of people living alone increased from 9% to 12%.

Who lives alone?

...relationship history

Changes in the age and sex patterns of living alone are also related to transitions in couple relationships, with people having more freedom to end relationships or remain single (see *Australian Social Trends March 2009*, ['Couples in Australia'](#)). In 2006–07, there were around 750,000 people aged 25–44 years who had never been married or in a de facto relationship. Around one-third (35%) of these never partnered people lived by themselves. People this age who had ever partnered were much less likely to be living alone (7%).

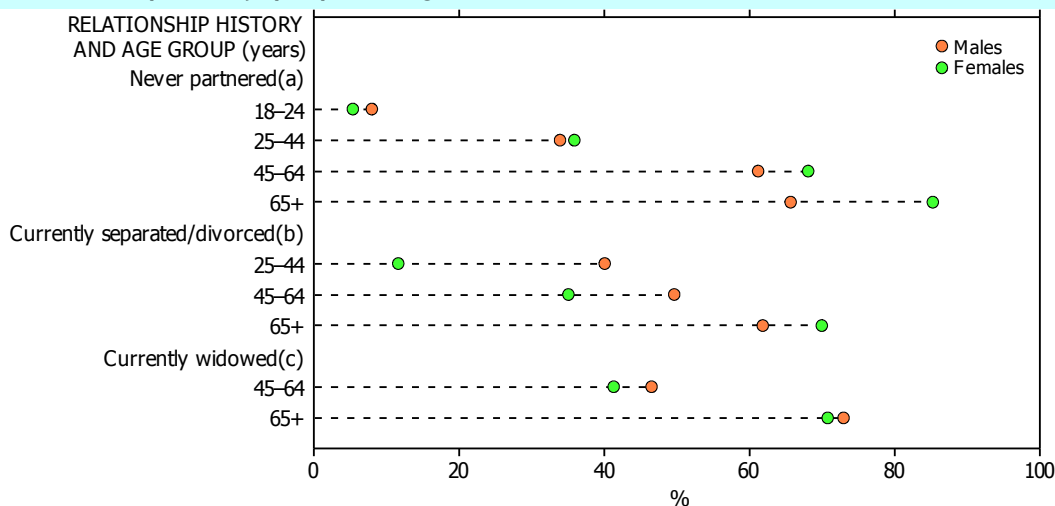
People living alone(a)



(a) Excludes people living in non-private dwellings and people who were not at home on census night.

Source: ABS Censuses of Population and Housing

Relationship history, people living alone –2006-07



(a) Includes de facto and registered married relationships.

(b) Estimates for 18-24 years are not shown as they have a relative standard error greater than 50% and are considered too unreliable for general use.

(c) Estimates for 18-24 years and 25-44 years are not shown as they have relative standard errors greater than 50% and are considered too unreliable for general use. Estimate for men aged 45-64 years has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics Survey

In the 45–64 years age group, there were around 230,000 people who had never partnered. Almost two-thirds (63%) of these people were living alone. Among people of this age who had ever partnered, 12% were living by themselves.

Significant life events, such as a relationship breakup or the death of a partner, may place people at risk of experiencing social isolation. Following a breakup people often experience a period of time in which they live alone. Almost half (49%) of men and 31% of women aged 18 years and over who were currently separated or divorced (from a registered marriage) lived alone. Of separated or divorced people aged 25–44 years, 40% of men and 12% of women lived alone. Men are more likely to live alone after a breakup because they are less likely than women to become lone parents. Around one-fifth (21%) of men aged 25–44 years who were living alone had at least one child (aged under 18 years) who lived elsewhere, but could possibly stay with them some of the time.

In 2006–07, 71% of widowed people aged 65 years and over lived by themselves. These widowed people made up 68% of people this age who lived alone (45% of lone men and 78% of lone women were widowed).

Spending time: alone or with others?

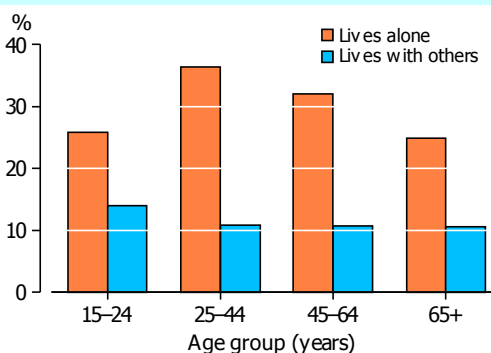
In 2006, people aged 15 years and over who were living alone spent, on average, 9.5 waking hours a day by themselves (equivalent to 61% of their waking hours). People aged 25–44 years who were living alone spent on average around

7.5 hours in solitude each day (48% of their waking hours). In contrast, lone people aged 65 years and over spent on average 11.5 hours a day alone (74% of their waking hours).

Looked at another way, people aged 65 years and over who lived alone spent on average 4 hours each day in the presence of others. However, there was a small proportion who had very little face to face contact with others, with 5% spending half an hour or less with others on any given day, and a further 12% spending no time with others.

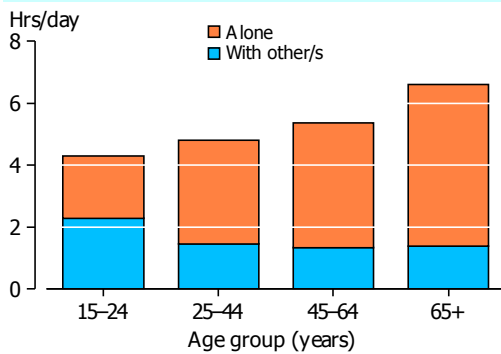
Lone women aged 65 years and over were more likely to have daily face to face contact with someone from outside their household compared with those living with others (26% and 17% respectively). Among men aged 65 years and over, the proportion who had daily contact was about the same regardless of whether they lived alone or with others (around 18%).

People who would prefer less time alone – 2006



Source: ABS 2006 Time Use Survey

People living alone, free time spent alone or with others(a) – 2006



(a) Average hours per day by all people.

Source: ABS 2006 Time Use Survey

People living alone were almost three times as likely as people living with others to say that they would prefer to spend less time alone (29% compared with 11%). While lone older people generally spent more time on their own than people in other age groups, they were not more likely to prefer less time alone. The preference for less time alone was most common among those aged 25–44 years who lived alone, and tended to be a stronger preference among lone men than among lone women.

...free time alone

The amount of waking time spent alone by people is influenced by many things other than their living arrangements, such as their working arrangements and travel time. Looking at the amount of free time (such as leisure and recreation activities) spent in solitude, people living alone spent on average 4.5 hours of their free time by themselves each day. The amount of free time spent alone increased with age, from an average of 2 hours a day for lone people aged 15–24 years, to almost 5.5 hours for those aged 65 years and over.

Time use

Primary activity is any activity that respondents described in the Time Use Survey (TUS) as their 'main activity' at a given time. Unless otherwise specified TUS data refer to the primary activity at the time.

Waking time excludes sleeping and naps, but includes sleeplessness.

Free time includes social and community interaction and recreation and leisure activities. It is the amount of time left once the following activities have been taken out of a person's day: necessary time (such as sleeping, eating and personal care); committed time (such as housework, child care or shopping); and contracted time (such as work or education).

For more information on time use data see [How Australians Use Their Time, 2006](#) (ABS cat. no. 4153.0).

Loneliness

Living alone or spending a lot of time alone does not necessarily equate to being 'lonely'. People who have active social lives may still report 'loneliness', which may indicate that they are dissatisfied with the quality of their social connections.⁴

Information from the 2002 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA) suggest that there is a gender gap in loneliness.⁵ People aged 15 years and over were asked about their perceived levels of support and friendship (or 'social loneliness') for example whether they have someone to lean on or confide in. Their responses suggested that men tend to be more lonely than women from early adulthood to their seventies.

This research focused on people aged 25–44 years. It found that in this age group, men living alone and lone fathers are at the greatest risk of experiencing loneliness. While men generally reported lower levels of support and friendship than women, men living alone reported substantially lower levels than women living alone. However women living alone reported similar levels of support and friendship to women living with others. The lowest levels of support and friendship of men in any living arrangement were among lone fathers with young children. This research suggests that men are at a greater risk of social isolation if they live in households without other adults.

This research also identified 'emotional loneliness'. Men aged 25–44 years living alone were the most likely to agree with the statement 'I often feel very lonely' (33%).

Among women living alone, 23% said they often felt very lonely. Lone mothers reported the highest levels of emotional loneliness.⁵

Almost half (46%) of people aged 15 years and over who were living alone spent over 90% of their free time by themselves. Among those aged 65 years and over who were living alone, 54% of men and 45% of women spent over 90% of their free time by themselves.

Contact via telephone or email

In 2006, people aged 18 years and over who lived alone had more frequent contact with family and friends via phone and/or email, than those who lived with others. For example, 72% of lone 18–24 year olds, compared with 62% of people this age who were living with others, had at least daily telephone, and/or email contact with family or friends outside the household.

However, of lone men aged 65 years and over, just 22% had daily contact of this sort, compared with 32% of older men who were living with others. In contrast, older women who were living alone were more likely than those living with others to have daily contact (43% compared with 30%).

People aged 18 years and over, selected measures of social and community participation – 2006

	Males		Females	
	Lives alone	Lives with others	Lives alone	Lives with others
	%	%	%	%
Has daily face to face contact with family and/or friends(a)	21.9	18.5	26.2	20.2
Has daily telephone/email/mail contact with family and/or friends(a)	34.7	36.3	48.0	43.5
Has attended a cultural or leisure venue and/or activity in the last 12 months(b)	77.8	88.4	83.0	91.1
Has attended a sporting event in the last 12 months	52.3	60.9	30.1	46.8
Did voluntary work during the last 12 months	23.2	33.0	30.5	37.3
Able to get support in times of crisis from persons outside the household	89.8	92.8	95.6	93.9
Disagrees or strongly disagrees that most people can be trusted	37.5	30.1	31.4	29.0
Employed (limited to those aged 18-64 years)	72.3	85.7	68.5	68.8
	'000	'000	'000	'000
Total aged 18-64 years	699.1	5 684.7	545.5	5 847.9
Total aged 18 years and over	914.8	6 638.5	1 027.1	6 726.6

(a) For 'Lives with others', refers to family and friends who they do not live with.

(b) Such as museums, zoos, botanic gardens, libraries, concerts, theatre and dance performances and cinemas.

Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey

Social and community participation

People living alone had lower rates of attendance at cultural or leisure venues, and sporting events during the last 12 months, compared with those living with others.

Engagement in voluntary work was also less common among people living alone, compared with people living with others. This difference is related to higher rates of volunteering among people with children (see *Australian Social Trends 2008*, '[Voluntary work](#)').

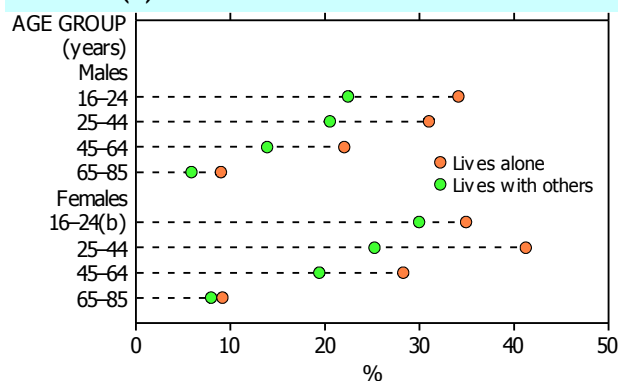
People's feelings of safety and trust in the community may have an impact upon their participation. However, whether people lived alone or with others did not have an impact on their levels of community trust. Just over one-third (34%) of lone people aged 18 years and over said that they disagreed that 'most people can be trusted'. A similar proportion of people who lived with others said the same thing (30%). There was also no difference between those living with others and those living alone in the proportion of people who said they felt unsafe at home alone at night (7%) or during the day (2%).

Regardless of whether they lived alone or lived with others, almost all (93%) people aged 18 years and over said that they would be able to get support from people outside their household in a time of crisis.

Mental and physical wellbeing

While the mental wellbeing of some people living alone may be related to their living circumstances (for example following a relationship break-down) other people may be living alone as a consequence of mental health issues. In 2007, lone people aged 16–64 years were more likely than people living with others to have had at least one mental disorder in the last 12 months (29% compared with 21%). This pattern was particularly pronounced among women aged 25–44 years. (For more information on mental health see *Australian Social Trends March 2009*, '[Mental health](#)').

People aged 16-85 years with a mental disorder(a) – 2007



(a) Selected mood, anxiety and substance use disorders within the previous 12 months.

(b) Estimate for lives alone has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

Source: ABS 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing

Lone people aged 16–64 years were also more likely than people living with others to have experienced high to very high levels of psychological distress during the four weeks prior to interview (15% compared with 10%). Among those aged 45–64 years, the proportion of people living alone who reported high to very high levels of psychological distress was higher than for those living with others (15% compared with 9%). The proportion of people who said they had experienced high to very high levels of psychological distress was similar for those aged 65 years and over, regardless of whether they lived alone or lived with others (5 to 6%).

Based on information from the 2007–08 National Health Survey, lone people aged 25–64 years were more likely than those living with others to assess their health as being fair or poor (20% compared with 12%). Whether younger and older people lived alone or with others did not make a difference to the proportions who said they had fair or poor health. Men and women followed a similar pattern.

Economic wellbeing

All other things being equal, the living standards of people living alone are generally lower than those of others. This is because people living alone do not benefit from the economies of scale generally available to people living with others, for example food and electricity costs are more affordable when shared with others. In recognition of this, from September 2009 the single age pension was given an additional increase, bringing it up to two-thirds of the couple rate.⁶

...source of income

Data from the 2007–08 Survey of Income and Housing showed that just over two-thirds (68%) of lone men aged 65 years and over had a government pension or allowance as their current main source of income, similar to the proportion of men this age who lived with others (63%). The majority (80%) of lone women aged 65 years and over relied on a government pension or allowance for their main source of income. This was also the case among women of this age who lived with others (75%).

Lone men aged 45–64 years were over twice as likely as men living with others to have a government pension or allowance as their main source of income (26% compared with 11%). The majority (81%) of these lone men were receiving a disability pension, as were 70% of men this age who were living with others and relied on a government payment for income. Among lone women aged 45–64 years, 28% said that a government payment was their main

source of income, compared with 21% of women this age who lived with others. These lone women were almost twice as likely as women living with others to be recipients of a disability pension (59% compared with 30%).

...superannuation

In the context of Australia's ageing population, superannuation has an increasingly important role to play in boosting retirement savings and relieving some of the need to provide financially for a growing number of retirees. In 2007, 47% of lone men aged 55 years and over had superannuation coverage, much lower than men living with others (63%). Women of this age who lived alone were also less likely than those living with others to have superannuation coverage (33% compared with 45%).

People with higher superannuation balances when approaching retirement are better able to self-fund a comfortable retirement lifestyle without relying on the aged pension. This is particularly an issue for older women, who have a greater life expectancy and are more likely to live alone in old age than men. For the minority of women aged 55 years and over who were living alone and had some superannuation, the median superannuation balance was \$61,500.

However, overall women living alone had a higher median superannuation balance, compared with women living with others (some of whom may have had less of an

Superannuation coverage and balances – 2007

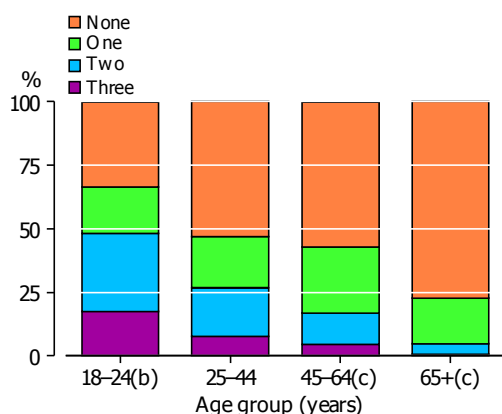
	Has coverage		Median balance(a)	
	Lives alone	Lives with others	Lives alone	Lives with others
	%	%	\$'000	\$'000
Age group (years)				
Men				
15-34	83.2	74.1	14.4	6.9
35-44	84.7	91.1	33.6	42.0
45-54	81.1	89.0	41.4	70.0
55 and over	46.7	63.4	71.2	98.0
Total	67.5	76.9	32.0	31.6
Women				
15-34	85.9	69.6	10.6	5.8
35-44	93.3	83.4	45.2	22.0
45-54	83.5	83.7	47.4	29.6
55 and over	33.3	44.9	61.5	52.0
Total	51.3	68.7	34.1	17.6

(a) Of people with one or more superannuation account in the accumulation phase. Balances are limited to three accounts per person, and calculated on known values only.

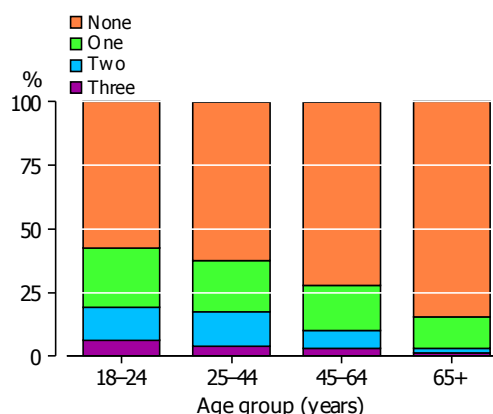
Source: 2007 Survey of Employment Arrangements, Retirement and Superannuation

People aged 18 years and over, number of types of financial stress(a) experienced – 2006

LIVES ALONE



LIVES WITH OTHERS



(a) Whether could raise \$2000 in a week for an emergency; whether experienced cash flow problems in the last 12 months (such as could not pay bills, rent or mortgage on time, went without meals or sought financial help from friends or family; whether took a dissaving action in the last 12 months (such as reduced home loan repayments, took out a personal loan or sold assets)).

(b) Estimates have a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution. However differences between 'Lives alone' and 'Lives with others' are significantly different.

(c) Estimates for three types have a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey

opportunity to accumulate superannuation if their labour market participation was affected by childrearing or other caring responsibilities). For women aged 45–54 years who were living alone, the median superannuation balance was \$47,400 (those living with others had a median balance of \$29,600). For men aged 45–54 years who were living alone the median superannuation balance was \$41,400, lower than for those living with others (\$70,000).

...financial stress

In 2006, people living alone were more likely than those living with others to have experienced more than one form of financial stress during the last 12 months, such as being unable to quickly raise \$2,000 in an emergency, having a cash flow problem like being unable to pay a bill, and taking a dissaving action such as reducing home loan repayments. For example, 13% of people living alone aged 45–64 years reported experiencing two forms of financial stress, compared with 7% of people in this age group living with others. Greater resilience to sources of financial stress comes with age, as older people may have more economic resources to draw on in the form of assets. People aged 18–24 years, in particular those living alone, showed a greater degree of financial stress than people in the older age groups.

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed – Electronic Delivery, October 2009*, Table FM2, cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, ABS, Canberra.
- 2 Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008, *Social Inclusion Principles: Summary*.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, *Household and Family Projections Australia 2001 to 2026*, cat. no. 3236.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 4 Franklin, A. and Tranter, B., 2008, *Loneliness in Australia*, Paper No. 13, Housing and Community Research Unit, University of Tasmania.
- 5 Flood, M., 2005, *Mapping Loneliness in Australia*, Discussion Paper Number 76, The Australia Institute.
- 6 The Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, *Secure and sustainable pension reform: three million Australian pensioners benefit from reforms*, Press release no. 058, 12 May 2009.