

The nature of living alone in Australia

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In an earlier Australian Family Trends facts sheet (No. 6; de Vaus & Qu, 2015) we described those who live alone and how the rates of living alone have changed both in Australia and internationally. We saw the way in which living alone is linked to gender, age, marital status, marital separation, widowhood and measures of advantage and disadvantage. These factors influence levels of living alone in that they create a pool of people available to live alone. This paper sheds further light on living alone by investigating the nature of living alone and what it means to the individuals involved. In particular, we consider the duration for which people live alone; that is, whether living alone is a short-term transition between more enduring living arrangements or a long-term alternative to family living arrangements. Rather than simply mapping whether or not people live alone, we will put living alone within the context of a person's life course. By seeing where living alone "fits in", we should be in a better position to understand what it means.

We also explore the more subjective side of living alone. In particular, we describe some of the cultural values that underlie living alone and the extent to which people like living alone. What reasons do people offer for living alone? Do they live alone because they value the things it can promote—independence, privacy and a certain degree of freedom? Or do they live alone because of circumstances such as the requirements of their work or the lack of a partner? How do people experience living alone? Would they prefer to be living with someone?



This paper draws on two large-scale national surveys. It draws on 12 years of data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) longitudinal survey¹ and tracks people as they move into and out of lone living arrangements. In so doing, it identifies types of living arrangements both before and after living alone, and shows the duration of periods of living alone. The paper also draws on the 2008 Living Alone in Australia Survey² to provide a window into the more subjective aspects of living alone.

Duration of living alone

For most people, living alone is only one of a variety of residential arrangements they may experience during their adulthood. A person may never live alone or may do so just once or on repeated occasions. While snapshots of living alone rates at particular time points (see de Vaus & Qu, 2015) indicate increasing living alone rates over the years and point to the prevalence of living alone in different groups, they do not reveal much about the nature of these spells.

Some discussions of living alone seem to assume that people who live alone do so for extended periods and that living alone reflects a rejection of family-based living arrangements. For example, the eminent sociologist, Frank Furedi (2002) argued that:

These shifts [to living alone] represent not merely a demographic but also a cultural phenomenon. The growth of the new singles lifestyle—especially in large urban environments—indicates that conventional forms of adult relationships have lost some of their appeal ... The home-alone phenomenon is underwritten by profound social and cultural forces. The real issue is not what individuals choose to do, but the strong cultural pressures that have weakened the foundation for durable relationships. The fact that so many people in their 20s, 30s and 40s have opted for the single life indicates that there must be a problem with traditional ways of relating to one another.

But are people who live alone "opting for the single life"? Rather than representing a long-term lifestyle, is living alone an arrangement that is more often a relatively short-term arrangement as people move from one family living arrangement to another?

Now, for the first time in Australia, HILDA and the 2008 Living Alone in Australia Survey enable us to begin to answer these questions.

¹ The HILDA survey was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS), and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either DSS or the Melbourne Institute.

² The Living Alone in Australia Survey was a national probability telephone survey conducted in 2008 under a grant to David de Vaus from the Australian Research Council.

How many people have ever lived alone?

Living alone is not a permanent living arrangement for most people. While some people live alone for a large part of their life, living alone is often a transitional living arrangement, such as for the period between young people moving out of home and establishing their own family, between relationship breakups, or following the death of a partner later in life.

While about 13% of adults in private dwellings aged 20 years and over were living alone at the time of the 2011 Census (de Vaus & Qu, 2015), far more people live alone at some point in their life. Table 1 indicates the proportions of people in different age groups who had ever lived alone in 2008, using results from the Living Alone in Australia Survey and based on people's accounts of past periods of living alone. This table shows:

- In every age group the rates of ever having lived alone were much higher than the current rate of living alone, as would be expected.
- The likelihood of ever having lived alone was lowest for the youngest age group. This is hardly surprising, since the youngest group had fewer years in which to experience a spell of living alone.
- Of those in their 20s, 30% reported that they had had a period of living alone—five times higher than the rate currently living alone.
- For those aged over 30, at least 40% had, at some point, lived alone.
- Women aged 30–59 had much lower rates than men of ever having lived alone, while older women had higher rates than men of ever having lived alone.

The much higher rates of ever having lived alone than the current rates of living alone in all age groups reflects the fact that many people live alone for a period and then move on to other, multi-person household living arrangements (although moving on to other arrangements is much less common among older people who live alone). The sections that follow provide some insight into periods of living alone, many of which come to an end. They provide a picture of where living alone “fits in” to a wider life course.

For how long do people live alone?

HILDA data show that many spells of living alone are quite short-lived. Table 2 reports how many people who commenced living alone were still doing so at various intervals after commencing to live alone. It shows that:

- 77% lasted 1 year (therefore almost a quarter (23%) ended within a year);
- 54% lasted for 3 years (therefore almost half (46%) ended within 3 years); and
- 37% lasted for 9 years (therefore almost two-thirds (63%) ended within 9 years).

In Australian Family Trends No. 6 (de Vaus & Qu, 2015), we reported that women who live alone are typically older than men who live alone, and older people living alone are likely to be widowed. This link between gender, age and marital status flows through to the different lengths of living-alone spells of men and women (Table 2):

- Women were more likely than men to have longer living-alone spells.
- While only a third (32%) of male living-alone spells lasted for 9 years, 42% of female living-alone spells lasted this long.
- Between the 3-year and 5-year living-alone spells, half of the men and women who had been living alone were no longer living alone.

Table 1: Proportions who had ever lived alone and were currently living alone, by gender and age, 2008 and 2011

Age	Ever lived alone (2008)			Currently living alone (2011 census)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
20–29	31.2	29.4	30.3	7.1	5.5	6.3
30–39	50.9	32.4	41.6	9.7	6.4	8.0
40–49	55.6	38.8	47.1	10.9	6.6	8.7
50–59	50.0	36.3	43.1	13.1	12.1	12.6
60–69	41.5	40.4	40.9	14.7	20.3	17.5
70–79	39.6	42.2	41.0	16.3	31.3	24.3
80+	34.9	65.1	53.2	22.3	41.4	34.0

Source: Living Alone in Australia Survey, 2008 (weighted); Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing 2011 using Table Builder Pro

Table 2: Duration of living-alone spells, by gender, 2001–12

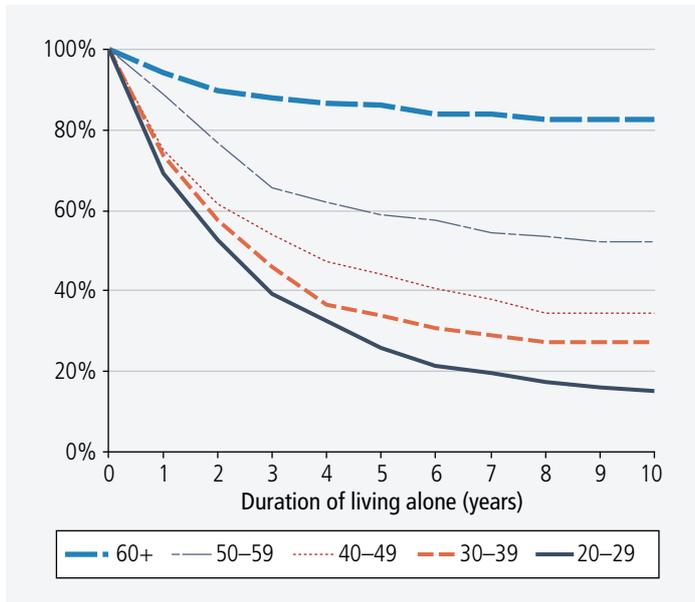
Duration (years since commencing)	Men (%)	Women (%)	All (%)
0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1	77.4	77.0	77.2
2	62.7	65.0	63.8
3	51.9	56.3	53.9
4	44.9	52.0	48.2
5	40.2	48.6	44.1
6	37.0	45.7	41.1
7	34.1	44.5	39.0
8	32.3	42.7	37.2
9	32.3	41.6	36.6
No. of spells	1,953	1,651	3,604
No. of respondents	1,626	1,430	3,056

Note: Differences in the duration of living alone between men and women were statistically significant, using the log-rank test ($p < .01$). The transition from living with others to living alone is between two consecutive waves (e.g., living with others in Wave 2 and living alone in Wave 3); however, the exact time the transition took place is unknown. Therefore, the duration could be less than one year between 0 and 1 for some respondents.

Source: HILDA Waves 1–12

Is the duration of living alone linked to life stage?

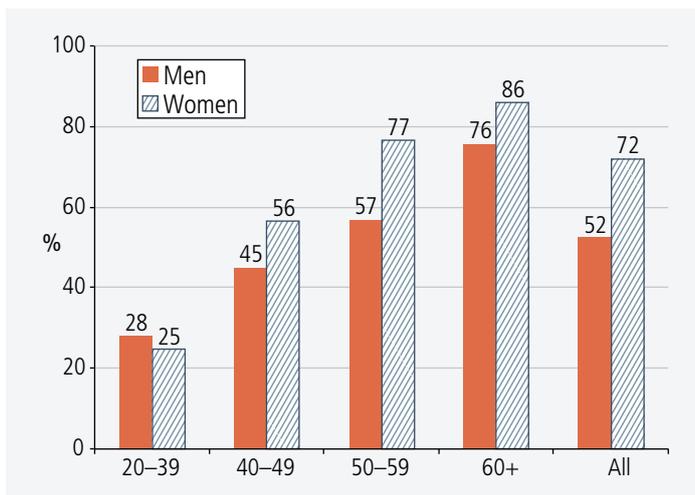
The length of time for which people live alone depends on the age at which they begin to live alone. The older a person is when they begin to live alone, the greater the chance is



Note: No. of spells—20–29 = 1,427; 30–39 = 561; 40–49 = 509; 50–59 = 421; 60+ = 538. Differences in living-alone durations were statistically significant across age groups, using the log-rank test ($p < .001$).

Source: HILDA Waves 1–12

Figure 1: Proportions of living-alone spells remaining, by age at start of living alone, 2001–12



Notes: Percentages are based on weighted data. Unweighted sample sizes—men: 20–39 = 137; 40–49 = 135; 50–59 = 191; 60+ = 505; women: 20–39 = 96; 40–49 = 89; 50–59 = 185; 60+ = 820. Chi-square tests (design-corrected) were applied to test the association between responses and age groups ($p < .001$ for men and women separately), and between responses and gender overall ($p < .001$).

Source: Living Alone in Australia Survey 2008

Figure 2: Proportions living alone who expected to be living alone in 5 years, by age and gender, 2008

that they will still be living alone 10 years later. Figure 1 reports the duration of living-alone episodes at each year following commencement.³ It shows:

- For those who commenced living alone when they were 60 or older, most (82%) were still living alone (without any apparent interruption) 10 years later.
- At the other end of the age continuum, the duration of living alone among younger people aged 20–29 had a dramatically different survival trajectory. Of those who began a period of living alone in their 20s:
 - only 69% were still living alone a year after commencing to do so;
 - only 39% lasted for 3 years; and
 - after 10 years, only 15% of this group continued their living-alone spells apparently uninterrupted (i.e., 85% were no longer living alone).
- The duration of living alone increased with each decade of age. That is, the duration of living alone was shortest among those commencing a living-alone spell in their 20s. Those in their 30s remained in a living-alone spell for longer, followed by those in their 40s, and then by those in their 50s and those who were 60 years and older.

Was Furedi (2002) correct when he asserted that “people in their 20s, 30s and 40s have opted for the single life”? The pattern of younger people living alone for relatively short spells, with longer spells being much more a later life pattern, suggests that Furedi has misread what living alone represents among younger age groups. If they are opting for the single life, it is only a short life as a single—not a lifelong choice. Shortly, we will examine what people living alone are doing before they live alone and when they stop living alone.

For how long do people expect to live alone?

Another way of assessing whether people living alone are opting for a singles lifestyle is to ask them for how long they expect to be living alone. Figure 1 showed that the older people are, the longer their spells of living alone will last. When participants were asked in the 2008 Living Alone in Australia Survey how long they expected to live alone for, a similar pattern was observed: the older people were, the more they expected to still be living alone in 5 years’ time (Figure 2).

- Among younger people (aged 20–39), only about a quarter saw living alone as continuing for another 5 years—most anticipated that they would be living with someone by then.
- Among those aged 60 and over, about 80% of those living alone expected to still be living alone in 5 years’ time.

³ Since the age-related patterns for men and women are very similar, the analysis by life stage does not report male and female patterns separately.

- Except for younger people, women who lived alone were considerably more likely to expect that they would still be living alone in 5 years' time. Whether this was because more women wanted to continue to live alone or because they anticipated that they were unlikely to find someone to live with is uncertain.

Why do people live alone?

Do people live alone by choice or due to circumstance?

People live alone for many reasons. Some live alone due to circumstance and not by choice, while others live alone because they prefer to do so. So, how often do people live alone because of their circumstances and how often by choice?

The most common reasons given for living alone revolve around the personal values that it promotes. A large majority of people who lived alone in the 2008 Living Alone in Australia Survey gave explanations that reflect the values of individualism (Table 3). Both men and women ranked the following individualistic values most highly:⁴

- enhances privacy (83%);
- promotes independence (82%);
- facilitates freedom (82%);
- builds self-reliance (65%); and
- reduces the demands of others (64%).

Even though there were some differences in the extent to which different age groups mentioned these reasons for living alone, these reasons were the dominant factors for young and old alike.

More instrumental and circumstantial factors played a role, but were less common drivers of living alone (Table 3). Among the more common circumstances that led to people living alone were:

- other household members left (partner and/or children) (41%);
- partner was unable to live at home or had died—especially for older people (35%);
- partner lives elsewhere for work or other reasons (16%); and
- unable to find someone to share with (15%).

While these circumstantial factors might be thought of as “negative” reasons for living alone, there was another reason for living alone that was less driven by circumstance. This reason related to the *risk* of living with others—of relationships being too risky—and this was offered by 41% of both men and women. Risk was a less common reason among younger people, but featured among almost half of those aged 40–59 and was also mentioned quite often by those aged over 60 (data not shown). The concern that relationships break down and lead to both emotional and

financial damage contributed to many people's decision to live alone. The greater frequency with which this was given as a reason by middle-aged and older men and women may reflect past experiences of relationship breakdown and consequent caution among these people.

Would people living alone prefer to be living with someone?

The preferences of those who live alone reflect the importance for many people of values as a driver for living alone. A substantial majority of those who lived alone in the 2008 Living Alone in Australia Survey said that they preferred to live alone. Figure 3 (page 6) shows that:

- women who lived alone preferred to do so more than do men (76% compared to 56%); and
- older women who lived alone were particularly likely to prefer to live alone (83%).

Taken overall:

- two-thirds of those living alone preferred to live alone; and
- only a quarter of those living alone preferred to live with others.

There was no evidence that younger people who lived alone did so from preference while older people did so

Table 3: Reasons given for currently living alone, by gender, 2008

Reasons	Men (%)	Women (%)	All (%)
Individualistic values			
Enjoy quietness and privacy	80.6	84.0	82.5
Independence	78.6	84.1	81.6
I can do what I want when I want	79.6	83.1	81.5
Opportunity for self-reliance	61.5	67.5	64.8
Less demanding	62.0	65.2	63.8
Don't need to take others into account	50.6	51.8	51.2
Circumstances			
Partner or other household members left	39.6	42.1	40.9
Easier to keep focused on my work or study	42.6	29.8	35.7
Partner unable to live at home or has died	21.3	46.8	35.3
Can't afford to move	16.9	17.3	17.1
Partner lives elsewhere for work or other reasons	22.4	11.4	16.4
Can't find someone to share with or who wants to live with me	20.8	9.7	14.7
Other			
Being in a relationship is risky	40.9	41.2	41.1
Mean number of reasons	6.2	6.3	6.3
No. of respondents	968	1,190	2,158

Note: Percentages are based in weighted data and the sample sizes are unweighted. Reasons allowed multiple responses.

Source: Living Alone in Australia Survey 2008

⁴ The ranking is based on the frequency with which respondents indicated that a particular factor was linked to them living alone.

from circumstance. If anything, Figure 3 suggests that older people who lived alone were more likely than others to do so from preference.

Of course, when interpreting these preferences one needs to be mindful of the frame of reference people are using when expressing their preference. For example, when 83% of older women say they prefer to live alone, it is not clear

to what extent this preference is their absolute (first) preference or that it reflects a preference to live alone compared to some (unstated) alternative such as with adult children or in residential care.

What living arrangements precede living alone?

Further insight into some of the circumstances surrounding living alone can be gained by exploring the living arrangements of people before and after they live alone. Placing spells of living alone within the context of a wider life course sheds light on where living alone fits in and thus helps better understand what living alone may signify.

Table 4 shows the living arrangements of people prior to commencing a spell of living alone. The prior living arrangements mainly cover one form or another of family living and show the extent to which living alone results from moving out of the parental home, from relationship separation or follows widowhood. It also shows the extent to which living alone follows some form of non-family living arrangement.

In most cases (89%), living alone follows a form of family living.

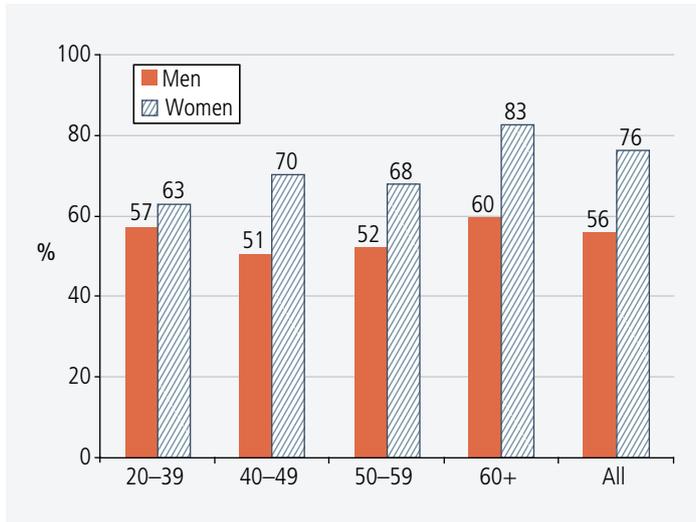
- 38% of living alone spells follow a relationship separation.
- 30% follow leaving the parental home or after living with other family members.
- 11% are the result of all children having departed a single-parent household.
- 9% are the result of becoming widowed.

This suggests that increases in relationship breakdown will increase the overall levels of living alone—either immediately after the relationship breakdown or later when all children have left the single-parent household.

The other main living arrangement prior to living alone is with parents or other family members. As people delay partnering and leave home beforehand, the pool of people liable to live alone increases.

The living arrangements prior to living alone differ for men and women (see Table 5).

- A much larger percentage of women than men (14% compared with 5%) live alone as a result of becoming widowed.
- Far fewer women than men (28% compared with 47%) live alone following a relationship breakdown. This is due to far more women continuing to have their children live with them after separation.
- Far more women than men (17% compared with 6%) commence living alone following the departure of their children from their single-parent household. This is because far more single-parent households are headed by women than men.



Notes: Percentages are based on weighted data. Unweighted sample sizes for men across age groups (from left): 137, 135, 191, 504 for men; 96, 88, 185, 820 for women. Chi-square test (design-corrected) is applied to test association between responses and age groups (not significant for men, and $p < .001$ for women separately), and between responses and gender (for all, $p < .001$).

Source: Living Alone in Australia Survey 2008.

Figure 3: Proportions of persons living alone who prefer to live alone, by age and gender, 2008

Table 4: Prevalence of different living arrangements before living alone

Living arrangements before living alone	%
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	12.1
Living with a partner without children	17.1
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	9.0
<i>Subtotal (relationship separation)</i>	<i>38.2</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	11.1
Living at parental home	22.4
Living with related family members	8.0
Living with unrelated persons	11.2
Living with a partner and subsequently becoming widowed	9.1
Total	100.0
No. of spells	3,490

Note: ^a Based on the reports that respondents had lived with someone between the last and current interviews for at least one month (this duration specified in Wave 2–Wave 9) or at least three months (the duration specified since Wave 10), it was unclear whether any children were involved with the relationships.

Source: HILDA Wave 1–Wave 12

- The proportion living alone after leaving the parental home (or with other family members) is broadly similar for both men and women.

How does age link to prior living arrangements?

Living arrangements prior to living alone, unsurprisingly, differ depending on the age at which a person commences living alone. Table 5 describes the living arrangements of men and women at different ages immediately before they commenced living alone.

Among those in their 20s, living alone mainly follows leaving home and relationship separation. Specifically:

- Living alone most commonly follows the move out of the parental home (43% of men and 45% of women).
- About a third of living alone spells follow relationship breakdown (35% of men and 31% of women).
- Living alone follows a period of living with non-family members (e.g. mainly group households) for about 15% of men and 16% of women.
- The pattern of prior living arrangements is broadly similar for young men and women.

Table 5: Prevalence of different living arrangements before living alone, by age and gender						
Living arrangements before living alone	Age at starting living alone					Total
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
Men (%)						
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	7.3	35.0	36.9	23.8	3.2	19.1
Living with a partner without children	14.5	16.6	14.7	23.8	23.0	16.6
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	13.2	13.9	9.9	5.4	3.2	11.1
<i>Subtotal (relationship separation)</i>	<i>35.0</i>	<i>65.5</i>	<i>61.5</i>	<i>53.0</i>	<i>29.4</i>	<i>46.8</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	0.1	3.5	14.3	20.8	9.6	6.0
Living at parental home	43.4	13.6	8.6	7.1	2.1	24.0
Living with related family members	7.1	5.0	5.7	6.0	9.1	6.5
Living with unrelated persons	14.5	12.1	9.6	7.1	4.8	11.6
Living with a partner and subsequently becoming widowed	0.0	0.3	0.3	6.0	44.9	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of spells	821	397	314	168	187	1,887
Women (%)						
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	1.3	9.3	14.6	3.5	0.0	3.9
Living with a partner without children	19.0	28.9	14.6	18.3	10.5	17.5
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	10.7	8.1	9.6	2.0	0.3	6.6
<i>Subtotal (relationship separation)</i>	<i>31.0</i>	<i>46.2</i>	<i>38.7</i>	<i>23.7</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>28.0</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	1.1	7.5	41.7	48.6	13.3	17.2
Living at parental home	44.5	15.6	3.0	5.1	1.7	20.5
Living with related family members	7.6	10.4	6.5	11.7	13.6	9.7
Living with unrelated persons	15.7	20.2	9.1	3.5	4.2	10.9
Living with a partner and subsequently becoming widowed	0.2	0.0	1.0	7.4	56.5	13.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of spells	620	173	199	257	354	1,603

Note: ^a Based on the reports that respondents had lived with someone between the last and current interviews for at least one month (this duration specified in Wave 2–Wave 9) or at least three months (the duration specified since Wave 10), it was unclear whether any children were involved with the relationships.

Source: HILDA Wave 1–Wave 12

Among those in their 30s, leaving the parental home becomes a less common driver for living alone compared to those in their 20s. Instead, living alone most commonly follows relationship separation (especially for men) and leaving a group household (especially for women).

The prior living arrangements of those beginning to live alone when in their 40s is similar to that for men and women in their 30s with one main exception. Among those in their 40s a sizeable percentage of living alone spells commences when the last of the children in a single-parent household leaves home. In particular:

- 14% for men (compared to just 4% among men in their 30s); and
- 42% for women.

When people commence living alone in their 50s, the principal reasons are relationship separation (especially for men) and children leaving single-parent households (especially for women).

Among both men and women aged 60 and older widowhood was the stand out factor leading to living alone, although relationship separation continued to be an important factor.

Taken overall, living alone commences following predictable changes in living arrangements as the life course unfolds.

What living arrangements follow living alone?

Many spells of living alone end relatively quickly (Table 2) and only about a third last for 10 years or longer. These longer-term spells of living alone are disproportionately found among older people following the death of their partner. So while the move to live alone usually means moving out of some form of family living (especially leaving

the parental home and following separation), the bulk of living alone spells are temporary. To what extent do people move into family-based living arrangements following a period of living alone?

With the exception of older people who live alone following widowhood, most people who live alone for a period resume some form of family living.

The most common reason people stop living alone is because they have formed a new live-in family-style relationship. Table 6 shows:

- 60% of living alone spells ended when the person formed a new live-in relationship.
- 11% of living alone spells ended when people resumed living with their parents.
- 10% of living alone spells ended when single parents and their daughters/sons resumed living together.
- Just 11% of living alone spells ended due to people moving to live with *non*-family members.

How do age and gender affect the way in which people stop living alone?

Men and women tend to stop living alone in different ways and these differences between men and women are accentuated in different age groups. In other words, age and gender work together to produce some distinctive age/gender differences in the way in which people stop living alone (Table 7).

- Among those in middle age and older, men are much more likely than women to stop living alone because they have formed a new relationship. For example:
 - Among those in their 40s who stopped living alone, 64% of men did so because of a new relationship compared to 51% of women.
 - Among those ceasing to live alone in their 50s, 72% of men did so because of a new relationship compared to 37% of women.
 - Among those who stopped living alone in their 60s or later, 57% of men did so because of a new relationship compared to just 17% of older women.
- Women are more likely than men to stop living alone because an adult child resumes living with their parent or the mother moves in with their adult child (15% of women stopped living alone for this reason compared to 6% of men).
- Women are more likely than men to stop living alone as a result of resuming to live with other family members (not including their children or returning to live with their parents). This may involve living with siblings, cousins, grandchildren or other relatives or be due to their parents moving into the adult daughter's home). This gender difference was particularly evident among those aged 40 and older.

Table 6: Prevalence of different living arrangements after living alone

Living arrangements after living alone	%
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	9.7
Living with a partner without children	40.2
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	10.2
<i>Subtotal (forming a relationship)</i>	<i>60.1</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	10.0
Living at parental home	11.2
Living with related family members	8.0
Living with unrelated persons	10.7
Total	100.0
Number of spells	2,696

Note: ^a Based on the reports that respondents had lived with someone between the last and current interviews for at least one month (this duration specified in Wave 2–Wave 9) or at least three months (the duration specified since Wave 10), it was unclear whether any children were involved with the relationships.

Source: HILDA Wave 1–Wave 12

- Among those in their 40s who stopped living alone, 9% of women began living with another family member compared to 3% of men.
- Among those in their 50s, 16% of women stopped living alone as a result of beginning to live with another family member compared to 7% of men.
- Of those aged 60 and older who stopped living alone, 40% of women did so as a result of living with another family member while just 12% of men did so. Much of this is due to older widows beginning to share with their adult children and other family members.

Main points

Living alone is part of a dynamic and varied life course. For most people, living alone does not reflect a long-term decision for a singles lifestyle or a rejection of relationships and family living. While values such as independence, autonomy and privacy as well as concerns about the risks of relationship breakdown are important motivations for living alone, these things are balanced by the desire for belonging and intimacy that can be derived from relationships and family living. For many people these two desires—

Living arrangements after living alone	Age at start of living with others					Total
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
Men (%)						
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	6.5	19.8	25.3	14.3	2.5	13.8
Living with a partner without children	43.0	38.8	29.3	51.4	46.9	40.5
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	14.3	15.2	9.5	6.4	7.4	12.5
<i>Subtotal (forming a relationship)</i>	<i>63.7</i>	<i>73.7</i>	<i>64.0</i>	<i>72.2</i>	<i>56.8</i>	<i>66.8</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	0.3	3.0	16.6	12.1	22.2	6.3
Living at parental home	16.6	8.7	7.5	0.7	1.2	10.5
Living with related family members	5.6	5.4	3.2	7.1	12.4	5.7
Living with unrelated persons	13.8	9.2	8.7	7.9	7.4	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of spells	589	369	253	140	81	1,432
Women (%)						
Living with a partner & children (dependent or non-dependent)	3.4	9.0	7.6	3.0	0.7	4.6
Living with a partner without children	45.8	50.0	35.2	31.3	15.6	39.9
Living with a partner (unknown whether with children) ^a	9.1	9.0	8.3	3.0	0.7	7.3
<i>Subtotal (forming a relationship)</i>	<i>58.4</i>	<i>68.0</i>	<i>51.0</i>	<i>37.3</i>	<i>17.0</i>	<i>51.8</i>
Single parent with children (dependent or non-dependent)	5.5	5.5	25.5	32.1	34.1	14.6
Living at parental home	19.4	8.5	4.1	7.5	2.2	12.1
Living with related family members	4.9	5.5	9.0	15.7	40.0	11.0
Living with unrelated persons	11.8	12.5	10.3	7.5	6.7	10.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of spells	526	200	145	134	135	1,140

Note: ^a Based on the reports that respondents had lived with someone between the last and current interviews for at least one month (this duration specified in Wave 2–Wave 9) or at least three months (the duration specified since Wave 10), it was unclear whether any children were involved with the relationships.

Source: HILDA Wave 1–Wave 12

autonomy and belonging—are held in tension. For some this is reflected in the moves in to and out of periods of living alone.

While our earlier paper (Australian Family Trends No. 6) focused on the characteristics of those who live alone, this paper sheds further light on living alone by concentrating on characteristics of periods of living alone (duration and where these periods fit in the life course) and on the subjective motivations for living alone. Several key findings have emerged.



- For most people living alone is a relatively short-term arrangement that acts as a transition between other family-based living arrangements.
- The older people are when they commence living alone the longer the period of living alone.
- Young people who live alone usually do so for relatively short periods prior to forming families or between relationships.
- Women who live alone express a stronger preference than comparable men to continue to live alone.
- Men are more likely than women to commence living alone due to relationship breakdown.
- Women are more likely than men to begin to live alone following either widowhood or the last of their children leaving their (single-parent) home.
- Men are more likely than women to cease living alone as the result of a new relationship.
- Women are more likely than men to stop living alone as the result of living with other family members. This is especially the case as people grow older.
- In general, people who live alone say they prefer to live alone but at least among the younger age groups, most do not anticipate living alone in the longer term.
- Values that promote independence and autonomy are strong drivers of living alone. At the same time the most common reason for ceasing to live alone is the formation of a new relationship.

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