

How many people live alone in France?

Laurent Toulemon and Sophie Pennec*

According to the 2007 census, 14% of the French population lives alone. What age groups are most concerned? Is there any difference between men and women? Is this proportion increasing? Laurent Toulemon and Sophie Pennec provide answers to these questions and explain that being counted as living alone in a dwelling actually covers a range of situations, since one in ten persons in this category do not live alone all the time.

◆ According to the 2007 census, one French inhabitant in seven lives alone

Of the 61,795,000 inhabitants of metropolitan France (mainland France and Corsica) counted in the 2007 census, 8,764,000 were recorded as living alone (5.2 million women and 3.6 million men). The proportion of persons living alone has increased steadily over the last fifty years, rising from 6% in 1962 to 14% in 2007 [1,2]. More women than men are concerned, but the gap is narrowing. In 1962, twice as many women as men lived alone (8% versus 4%, Table 1). Between 1962 and 2007 the proportion of men living alone tripled (from 4% to 12%) while that of women doubled (from 8% to 16%).

◆ Persons living alone counted in the census: a wide variety of situations

The category "lives alone in his/her dwelling" covers a wide variety of situations that are not always clearly identified in the census. Conventions are used in the census to define dwellings and to draw up lists of persons living in each dwelling. The situation of persons counted as living alone in the census can be described more accurately by comparing census results with data from household surveys. Most of them do indeed live alone

in their dwelling, but one in ten live part of the time with other people, either in their main residence or in another usual residence (Box 1).

◆ Living alone is more frequent at certain ages

A comparison of men's and women's situations by age reveals large differences between the sexes (Figure 1). The family transitions which lead to a situation of living alone vary considerably by sex and, above all, by age. Daughters leave the parental home earlier than sons, and also form unions at younger ages; slightly more women than men live alone at age 20.

Table 1 - Percentage of men and women living alone, based on census data since 1962

Year	Men	Women	Overall
1962	4.0	8.2	6.1
1968	4.2	8.5	6.4
1975	5.1	9.8	7.5
1982	6.3	11.4	8.9
1990	7.9	12.6	10.3
1999	10.4	14.6	12.6
2007	12.0	16.2	14.2

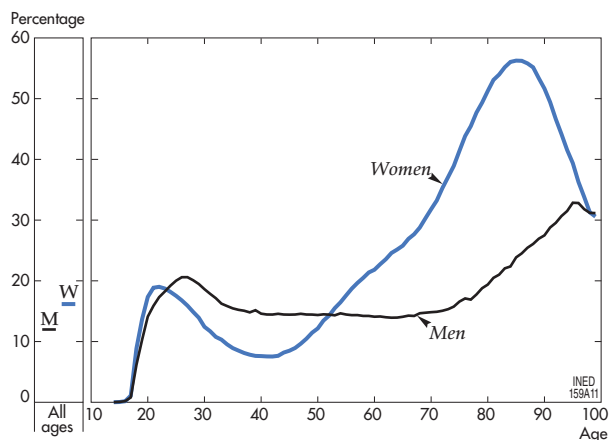
Source: INSEE, population censuses, metropolitan France (IPUMSi, see Box 2).

(L. Toulemon and S. Pennec, *Population & Societies*, 484, INED, December 2011)

* Institut national d'études démographiques.

In adulthood, the proportion of women living alone declines after age 22, falling to a minimum of below 8% at age 40, before rising sharply again at the oldest ages. For men, the proportion peaks at 20% around age 26 then

Figure 1 - Percentage of men and women living alone in 2007, by age



Source: INSEE, 2007 census.
(L. Toulemon and S. Pennec, *Population & Societies*, 484, INED, December 2011)

falls, remaining at a steady 15% up to age 70. The sharp rise with age in the proportion of women living alone (8% at age 40 and 55% at age 80) results from higher rates of widowhood for women than for men, and the departure of children from lone-parent families. Conversely, men live alone more frequently than women before age 50, notably after a separation; at these ages, mothers separated from their partner more often live with their children. From age 52, the proportion of women living alone overtakes that of men, as the number of widows increases.

◆ A growing proportion of young adults and older women in the last half century

The situations that cause people to live alone at different ages have evolved over time (Figure 2). In 1962, most persons living alone were elderly, and mainly elderly women. Few young people lived alone, as they often left the parental home to marry, either immediately or shortly afterwards. Between 1962 and 1982, as time spent in education increased and young men and women became

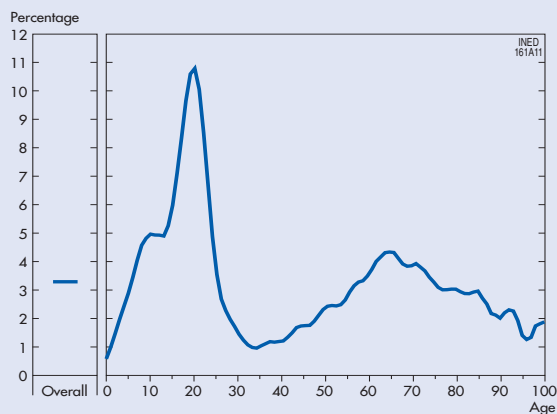
Box 1

Do persons counted as living alone in the census always live alone?

The census counts dwellings and the inhabitants of these dwellings. In census-based databases, each individual is assigned to just one dwelling [1]. However, a non-negligible proportion of persons share their time between several usual residences [6]. According to the household surveys conducted by the French statistical office (INSEE) using a different and more detailed information collection method (see Box 2) an estimated 3.3% of the population concerned.

Among children, as the proportion whose parents are separated increases with age, "multi-residence" also increases with age. It reaches a peak at age 20, when one in nine young adults share their time between more than one usual residence

Figure 4 - Percentage of persons with more than one usual residence, by age



Sources: INSEE surveys which used the table of dwelling occupants in 2006 and 2007 (smoothed data).
(L. Toulemon and S. Pennec, *Population & Societies*, 484, INED, December 2011)

(Figure 4). Multi-residence is very rare around age 35 (below 1%) but becomes more frequent thereafter, reaching 4% at age 65 before falling again at the highest ages. The differences between men and women are small [6].

While the census identifies persons who "usually" live alone (in their main residence), surveys divide persons "living alone" into four categories (Table 2). The simplest category comprises persons who always live alone in a single dwelling. They represent 12.5% of inhabitants, plus a further 0.2% who always live alone but in two or more residences, making a total of 12.7%. A further 1.5% of individuals sometimes live alone. Some have two dwellings and live alone in one of them (0.6%); others live in just one dwelling and are alone only part of the time because they live with people who are sometimes in the dwelling and sometimes elsewhere (0.9%).

Hence one in ten persons who live alone are only "intermittently" alone. Persons with two dwellings generally live with other people in at least one of these dwellings: at all ages, the persons concerned are less often "always alone" than those with just one dwelling.

Table 2 - Distribution of individuals by situation in dwelling and number of usual residences (%).

Situation in dwelling	Number of dwellings		
	One	More than one	Overall
Lives: - always alone	12.5	0.2	12.7
- sometimes alone	0.9	0.6	1.5
- never alone	83.3	2.4	85.8
Overall	96.8	3.2	100.0

Sources: INSEE surveys which used the table of dwelling occupants in 2006 and 2007.

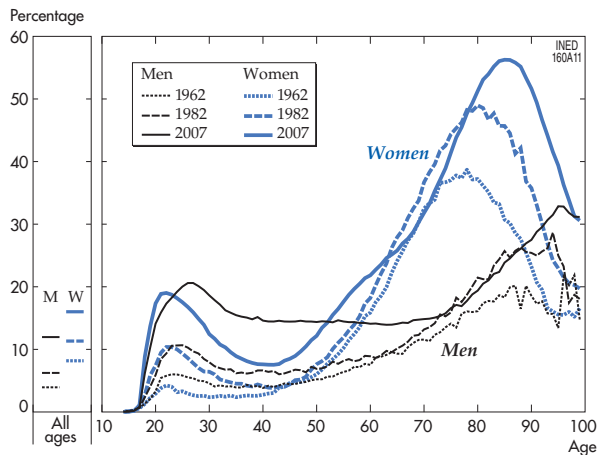
Note: For consistency with Table 1, persons enumerated in communal establishments are included among persons not living alone.

(L. Toulemon and S. Pennec, *Population & Societies*, 484, INED, December 2011)

more independent, a growing number of persons in their 20s now lived alone.

Between 1982 and 2007, as the age at entry into first union increased, the proportion of young people living alone doubled [3]. Separations also became more frequent, resulting in fewer couples and a rising proportion of persons living alone, up to age 60 for

Figure 2 - Percentage of men and women living alone, by age, censuses of 1962, 1982 and 2007



Source: see Table 1.

(L. Toulemon and S. Pennec, *Population & Societies*, 484, INED, December 2011)

women and age 70 for men [4]. Between ages 60 and 80, the effect of lower mortality – and hence fewer widows and widowers – is cancelled out by the increase in separations. At advanced ages – above 80 years for women and 90 years for men – the proportion of persons living alone continues to rise. This reflects the steady increase in the age at which older adults move into retirement homes, along with a sharp decrease in the proportions of elders living with their children: the autonomy of older adults is enhanced by better health and a higher standard of living [5].

◆ More persons living alone in the census than in surveys

The proportion of persons counted in the census as living alone in their dwelling (14.2%) is identical to that obtained in surveys by adding together persons who always live alone (12.7%) to those who live alone only part of the time (1.5%, see Box 1). It is as if these persons were always enumerated in the dwelling where they live alone, even if they also usually live elsewhere. The estimation based on the Labour Force Survey (13.3%) gives an intermediate figure, corresponding to the proportion of persons living alone “on the survey date” (13.4%). In short, only a rather vague figure can be given

Box 2

Sources

The census

Individuals are asked to complete the census form in their main residence, i.e. the dwelling where they live for most of the year. In dwellings which are the main residence of at least one person, one of the occupants draws up a list of permanent occupants of the dwelling and a list of “non-permanent” occupants who are normally enumerated elsewhere: adult children living elsewhere as students, persons living temporarily in the dwelling but whose main residence is elsewhere, persons usually living in the dwelling but in a communal establishment for more than one month at the time of the census. Each permanent occupant then fills in an individual census form. Information from these forms is used to compile statistics about the population. The 2007 census results are based on the forms completed from 2005 to 2009. Persons living in a communal establishment (workers’ hostel, student residence, retirement home, long-stay hospital, religious community, accommodation centre, prison, military barracks) are enumerated separately, as are mobile home occupiers, sailors and homeless persons.

Census data can be downloaded from the Internet

A series of datasets based on individual census data collected from 2006 to 2008 can be downloaded from the INSEE website (<http://www.recensement.insee.fr>). In addition, individual data from many countries of the world, including France, are accessible and downloadable on the Internet, thanks to the efforts of the University of Minnesota for the

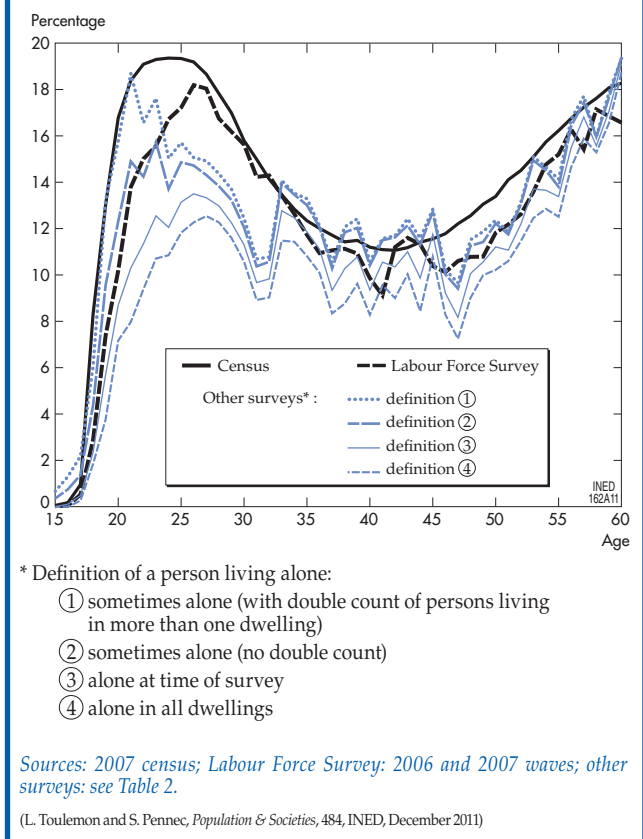
IPUMS-I project (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International, <https://international.ipums.org/international>).

INSEE surveys use a new table of dwelling occupants

Since 2004, most INSEE surveys (except the Labour Force Survey) are based on a list of dwelling occupants that includes all persons usually living in the dwelling, even if they also live elsewhere and if the dwelling where the survey takes place is not their main residence. This list contains information on each occupant’s other dwellings, if any, and their usual pattern of presence in each one. To compare survey results with those of the census of January 2007, we use here the surveys of 2006 and 2007: statistical survey on income and living conditions (SRCV, 2006 wave); survey on living environment and security (CVS, 2006 and 2007 waves); permanent survey on living conditions (EPCV, 2006); transport survey 2007. The survey samples comprise 150,200 persons in all. The patterns of time sharing between several dwellings are very varied, and may be weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, annual, etc. Persons considered to have more than one residence are those who spend at least one month per year in a second dwelling. To make our estimates, each survey is given the same weight, and each sample is weighted to represent the population as a whole. The resulting data, collated and prepared by Thomas Denoyelle, were kindly supplied to us by the INSEE Statistical Methods unit.

The Labour Force Survey only contains one question on the possible existence of a second usual residence, and identifies very few situations of multi-residence. The 2006 and 2007 waves of the Labour Force Survey are accessible via the Quetelet network.

Figure 3 - Percentage of persons living alone, by age, 2007 census and various INSEE surveys



for the actual proportion of persons living alone. Surveys probably underestimate them, since persons living alone are more difficult to contact in surveys, but perhaps respond more readily for the census. Moreover, certain couples with two homes may be enumerated separately, and considered in the census as living apart, possibly alone, whereas in surveys they report living together in their two dwellings.

It is around age 20 that the survey and census estimates diverge the most (Figure 3). Double counts are especially frequent in the census just after age 18 [7], and often concern young people who live alone part of the time. It is possible that all young people aged below 21 living alone in a dwelling are enumerated in that dwelling, even if they also live elsewhere (and are therefore counted twice in the census). This may explain the very high census count. The intermediate position of the Labour Force Survey may be due either to more exhaustive coverage of dwellings thanks to the use of cluster sampling (contiguous groups of dwellings are included in the sample, so interviewers can be more persistent in seeking to contact persons living alone), or to the omission in certain dwellings of persons who also live elsewhere because the questions are less detailed than in other surveys.

Improved methods are therefore needed to address this problem. Detailed information on the occupancy patterns of all persons in a dwelling, including information on all usual residences, must be recorded to obtain a more

accurate measure of the number of persons living alone. Data from the 2011 Family and Housing survey conducted in conjunction with the census will enable us to better understand how persons with several usual residences are counted.

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ABSTRACT

According to the 2007 census, one in seven inhabitants of mainland France and Corsica lives alone. This proportion has increased steadily over the last fifty years, rising from 6% in 1962 to 14% in 2007. A larger proportion of women than men live alone. They leave the parental home earlier than sons, and also form unions at younger ages. While one woman in five lives alone at age 20, the proportion falls to below 8% at age 40 before rising sharply at advanced ages, to reach 55% at age 80. One in ten persons counted in the census as living alone, do not in fact live alone all the time. They may have two homes and live alone in just one of them, or have just one home but share it with other people part of the time.