and independence — or loneliness?

The number of single person households in the UK is growing. Is this a sign of increasing confidence

the number of households with dependent children (those rising

Families stay together?

While the UK population is rising, the number of households in the UK has actually been falling recently for the first time in more than two decades (Figure 2). In times of economic constraint, rising unemployment, low pay and rising housing costs, the number of single parent and single person households has fallen slightly, while the number of households with dependent children (those rising births again) has increased. Perhaps parents with small children who may have split up in better economic times are forced to stay together longer.

Changing population structure

Recent UK population data suggest a remarkable rise in the domestic birthrate. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) more babies are being born in the UK than at any time since 1973. On average, British-born women give birth to 1.89 children while foreign-born UK residents have 2.28 children. This suggests that in-migration is good for UK population growth: ONS project the UK population to be 73 million by 2037 (Figure 1).

Why is this sociologically important? Well, the ‘baby boomers’ born in the UK in the early 1970s (Figure 3). The percentage of UK households that contain one person (29%) is just above the figure in the USA and Canada, but similar to the European average of 30%. Singletons are on course to be the biggest UK household type by 2031. These changes are partly down to an ageing population — women are more likely to survive their male partners in old age and live longer alone. But they are also about younger people in insecure and more individualistic times adopting less simple and less linear life-stage patterns by choosing to live alone longer. Younger women, especially, have more choices about family and households today: in 1996, 3.9 million UK females lived alone, a figure projected to rise to over 6 million by 2020.

Households by size in 2013

Of the 7.7m people living alone in 2013, 46% are women.

Singletons

However, the trend towards proportionally more single person UK households remains strong. Today almost three in ten of all UK households are made up of a solitary individual — a major shift from the situation in the late 1970s (Figure 3). The percentage of UK households that contain one person (29%) is just above the figure in the USA and Canada, but similar to the European average of 30%.

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Loneliness

But what about people who struggle to cope with living alone? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (JRF) ‘Living with loneliness’ project is researching people in four neighbourhoods in Yorkshire to try to help combat loneliness (Figure 4).

The responsibility of being a carer

Being older

The environment, including the built environment

Disability and having a disability

Moving house/moving to a new neighbourhood and new area

Loneliness and being on your own

Bereavement and loss

Loneliness and loss of community

Individual and family issues/illness

Lack of friends

Lack of social and cultural cohesion

Lack of community facilities

Being a lone/single parent

Poverty/bankruptcy and financial stress

Bullying and peer pressure

Being a parent

Fear

Life transitions/changes

Being a lone/single parent

Isolation and feeling isolated

Lack of intergenerational interaction

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Figure 4 Factors in producing experiences of loneliness

John Williams is a managing editor of Sociology Review.