

# How has mid-life changed in Britain since the 1980s?

Changing living arrangements in mid-life reflect historical changes in the occurrence and timing of life events such as marriage and parenthood as well as increases in life expectancy. This briefing summarises research, published in Population Trends No. 145, which investigates changes over time in the presence of kin and living arrangements across the life course and the changing demographics of those in mid-life. The work shows how the marital status, educational level, activity status and housing tenure of those aged 45-64 in Britain have changed over the past quarter century.

## Key Points

- Among those in mid-life, fewer have a child or grandchild, while more have a parent or grandparent than ten years ago.
- Amongst those in early mid-life who have children, more are living with dependent children today compared to 25 years ago.
- Living alone in mid-life is on the rise, especially among men.
- Fewer people in mid-life are married, while more are divorced.
- The socio-economic position of the middle-aged has improved, and differences between men and women have narrowed.

## Introduction

The large baby boom cohorts born in the late 1950s and early 1960s are now in their fifties and sixties. As well as a growth in the number of people in mid-life, socio-economic and demographic changes such as rising female labour force participation, declining early retirement, increases in the age of parenthood and improvements in longevity have combined to increase the complexity of the social and economic roles occupied by men and

women in mid-life. The research summarised here provides new evidence as to how these changes are reflected in kin availability, living arrangements and the socio-economic characteristics of those in mid-life. Examination of the baby boomers in mid-life today provides an early indication of the likely circumstances of the future large cohorts reaching old age. Knowledge of the resources of the future elderly is important for policy making, for example, in areas related to retirement income, housing as well as health and social care.

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### What is mid-life?

Mid-life can be seen as a specific stage in the life course, just as adolescence, young adulthood or old age. It is usually situated between the birth of the last child and retirement. As a result, age boundaries of mid-life may vary between socio-economic groups, between societies and over time. Typical events during mid-life include re-entering the labour market after childbirth, simultaneously caring for younger children and older parents, children leaving the parental home as well as partnership breakdown and re-partnering. In this study, we were amongst others interested in changes in kin availability, living arrangements and marital status within the larger context of changing partnership and fertility patterns. We have therefore defined mid-life as those aged 45-64.

### The study

The research involves the secondary analysis of large, nationally representative datasets. Changes in kin availability over the past decade are captured by comparing data from the 2001 wave of the British Household Panel Survey with data from the 2009 wave from Understanding Society. These two surveys are unique in that they ask respondents to report the presence of both co-resident and non co-resident kin e.g. children, parents, or grandparents. Changes in living arrangements and the socio-economic profile of those in mid-life are identified using repeated cross-sectional data from the General Household Survey for the period 1984 to 2007.

### Kin availability

Figure 1 shows the most recent data on kin availability by age in 2009. In the 20-44 age group, more than 80%

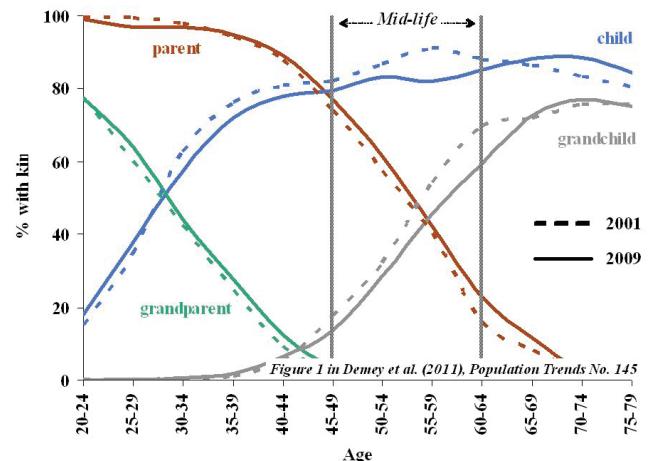


Figure 1: Kin availability in 2001 and 2009

have at least one parent, while those with at least one grandparent decreases from more than 75% in the 20-24 age group to less than 15% in the 40-44 age group. Among those aged 40-44, more than three quarters have at least one child. In mid-life (age 45-64), the proportion with at least one parent drops from more than 75% in the 45-49 age group to less than 25% in the 60-64 age group. At the end of mid-life, the majority are grandparents. In old age (age 65-79), more than 80% have at least one child and more than 70% have at least one grandchild.

### Living arrangements

Figure 2 shows women's living arrangements by five-year age groups in 1984 and 2007. For instance, an adult aged 20-24 living with his parents corresponds to the living arrangement "couple, independent children". A "dependent" child is aged less than 16, whereas an "independent" child is aged 16 or over. Living arrangements differ by age and gender. First, as age increases, there is a move from living

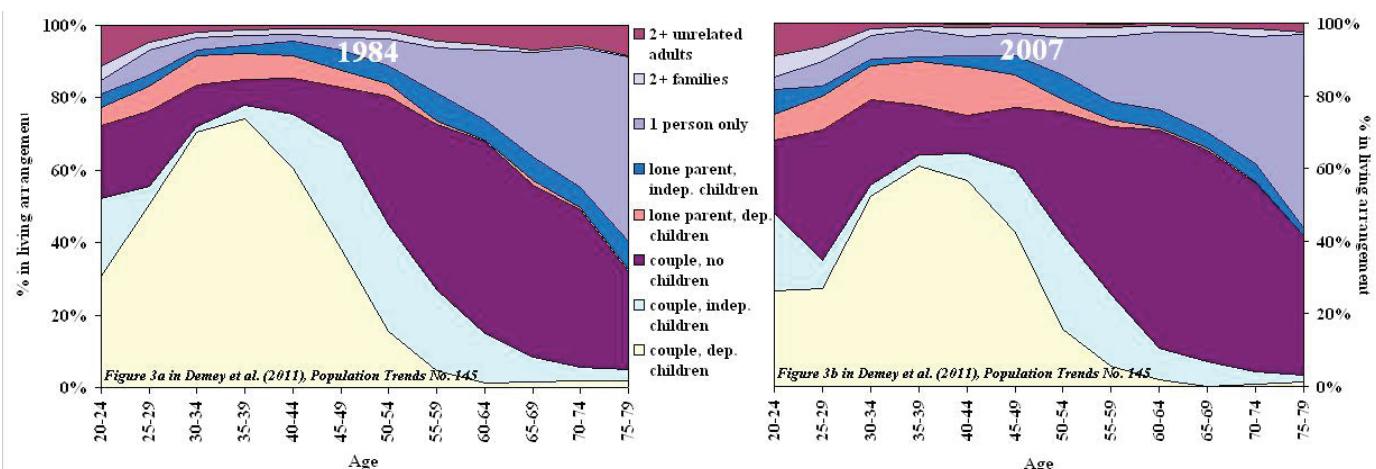


Figure 2: Living arrangements in 1984 and 2007 (females)

with a partner and dependent children to living with a partner and independent children and finally to living with partner and no children. Second, in 1984, the proportion living alone among those aged 30-44 was at least twice as high for men than for women, but for those aged 60-79 it was at least twice as high for women than for men.

There have been several changes in living arrangements over time. Due to the delay in childbearing, fewer people are living with dependent children in their twenties and thirties in 2007 compared to 1984. Furthermore, there has been a noticeable rise in living alone over time, especially among men. As a result, in 2007, living alone was considerably more common among men aged 30-49 than among women of a similar age. In addition, gender differences in living alone above age 50 have narrowed substantially, nevertheless, women of this age were still more likely to live alone than men. Reasons for the rise in living alone among men are complex and are currently being investigated at the Centre for Population Change.

### Marital status and socio-economic characteristics

Fewer men and women were married and more were divorced or single in 2007 than in 1984. Furthermore, in the 45-54 age group, more men than women have remained single, while more women than men were divorced. The socio-economic position of middle-aged British men and women has improved markedly over time. There has been an increase over time in those with higher education and the proportion who are owner-occupiers.

Figure 3 shows how the proportion of men and women who are no longer economically active increases over mid-life. Around nine out of ten men aged 45-54 are economically active compared to around six out of ten men aged 55-64. Among women there has been an increase in the proportion in employment between 1984 and 2007.

In mid-life, more men than women are economically active, although the increase in female labour market participation rates over time has led to a narrowing gender difference in those that are employed. Nevertheless, a considerably

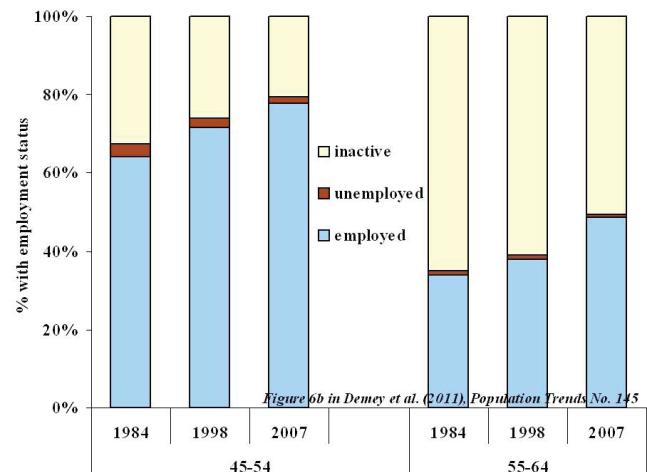


Figure 3: Employment status in mid-life in 1984, 1998 and 2007 (females)

larger proportion of mid-life women are economically inactive, especially in the 55-64 age group, where even in 2007 the majority were not participating on the labour market.

### Policy implications

The results of this study suggest that the lives of mid-life women have become more complex. Middle-aged women are more likely to be employed as well as to simultaneously provide support to their children and older parents. Policies need to reflect this increased complexity of family relationships in mid-life.

The research also highlights that, despite the Government's encouragement for those over 50 to remain employed, one third of men and one half of women aged 55-64 were economically inactive in 2007. Policies need understand the reasons for labour market inactivity in late mid-life and its implications for inequalities in future retirement income.

One of the key changes in the past 25 years has been the rise in living alone among men. This raises questions about the changing roles of men and the implications of these changes for, amongst others, informal care relationships and support needs in old age.

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