

Two's a crowd: Living alone in New Zealand



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Contents

Purpose	4
Overview	5
Key findings	6
Rates of living alone in New Zealand	7
Characteristics of people who live alone	8
Many older people live alone.....	8
Living alone associated with marital status.....	9
Total personal income of people living alone less likely to be low.....	10
Ethnicity plays a role in likelihood of living alone.....	11
Most people living alone are homeowners.....	11
Older women more likely to live alone.....	12
Likelihood of living alone increases with age.....	12
People living alone less likely to be employed.....	13
Social advantage and disadvantage of living alone	15
Living alone affects overall life satisfaction.....	15
People living alone experience more feelings of loneliness.....	15
People who live alone have more face-to-face contact with family and friends.....	16
People living alone more likely to feel unsafe.....	16
People who live alone less likely to experience crime.....	17
People living alone rate their health status lower.....	18
Younger people who live alone report better health.....	18
Conclusion	19
Characteristics of people living alone.....	19
Social outcomes.....	19
References	20
Tables	21



Purpose

Two's a crowd: Living alone in New Zealand explores the socio-economic characteristics and social well-being of New Zealanders who live alone, using data from the [1986–2013 Censuses](#) and [2014 New Zealand General Social Survey \(NZGSS\)](#).

Living alone is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common around the world. In many countries like Sweden, the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, more than one-quarter of all households have just one resident (Klinenberg, 2012). In New Zealand, the proportion of people who live alone is relatively low in comparison, but the number has been increasing since 1986 and is projected to continue to grow.

Despite the increasing incidence of people living by themselves, we do not yet fully understand why they choose to do so. Increasing numbers of people who live on their own have implications for the well-being of individuals and society as a whole, so there is much interest in understanding who lives alone and why. For the public sector and the service agencies that provide support to those who live by themselves, living alone is a trend of increasing concern and interest. The lifestyle comes with financial inefficiencies that may adversely affect a person's economic outcomes. People who live alone may also be at greater risk of social isolation, which can have negative impacts on their social outcomes.



Overview

In 2013, 11 percent of New Zealand's population, or 355,000 people, lived alone.

Age, marital status, income, household tenure, and ethnicity are the key characteristics that contribute to the likelihood of living alone. Nearly half of people living alone were aged 65 or older. Most of them were separated, divorced, or widowed. People living alone were more likely to own their homes; they were also likely to be women.

In terms of social well-being, living alone has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, people who lived alone reported lower life satisfaction and felt lonelier than those who lived with others. On the other, they were less likely to have been victims of crime. Despite our usual perceptions, living alone does not necessarily mean a person is socially isolated. Our findings show that people who lived alone had higher rates of face-to-face contact with family and friends than those who lived with others.

Living alone has implications for the individual and society in general. While many people live alone because they have to (due to personal circumstances such as divorce or the death of a partner), for others it is a lifestyle choice. This report shows that within the single category of 'living alone' there is great diversity in people's socio-economic and demographic characteristics and their social outcomes.



Key findings

Although the number of people living alone in New Zealand has steadily increased since 1986 (from 204,000 to 355,000 people in 2013), the proportion has changed little since 2001.

- Age, marital status, household tenure, and ethnicity are some of the key characteristics of people who live alone.
- Majority (63 percent) of people who lived alone were divorced, separated, or widowed.
- In 2013, the median age of people living alone was 62 years. In comparison, the median age for the total population was 38.
- Living alone was more common for women than men: women made up 57 percent of those living alone.
- Pacific peoples and Asians were less likely to live alone than people of other ethnicities.
- Six out of 10 (62 percent) people who lived alone owned or partly owned their own home. In comparison, only 50 percent of those who lived with others owned or partly owned their own home.
- Living alone has advantages and disadvantages in terms of social well-being.
- People living alone (59 percent) were less likely than those living with others (64 percent) to report an overall life satisfaction rating between 8 and 10 on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 is the lowest and 10 the highest level of satisfaction).
- People who lived alone were more likely than those not living alone to say they had felt lonely, at least occasionally, in the last four weeks (50 percent compared with 34 percent). This was true for both men and women regardless of age.
- People who lived alone had higher levels of face-to-face contact with family living in other households (61 percent) than those not living alone (51 percent).
- People who lived alone were less likely to be victims of crime: 11 percent of those who lived alone had been the victim of crime in the last 12 months, compared with 14 percent of those living with others.



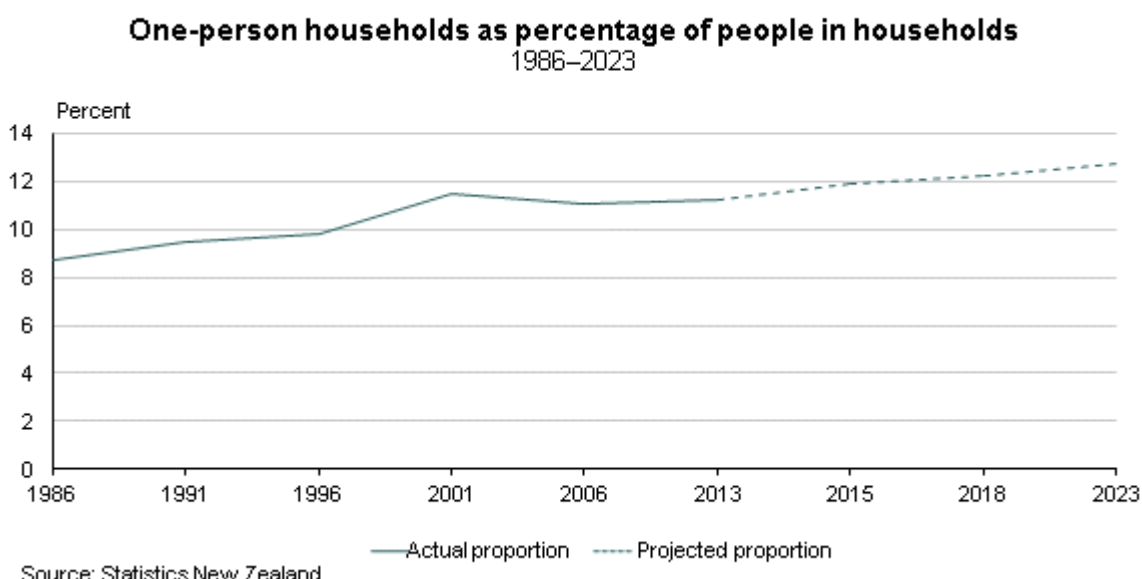
Rates of living alone in New Zealand

This section looks at the number and proportion of people living alone in New Zealand, and whether these figures are rising.

Using data from the 1986 to 2013 Censuses, [three](#) facts stand out:

- The number of individuals living alone steadily increased from 204,000 people in 1986 to 355,000 in 2013.
- The proportion of one-person households increased from 9 percent in 1986 to 12 percent in 2001.
- Since 2001, no significant increase occurred in the proportion of people in one-person households.
- We projected the proportion and the number of people living alone using simple regression analysis and the [national population projections table](#) for different scenarios. (Simple regression analysis allows us to summarise and study the relationships between two variables of interest.) Results showed the number of New Zealanders living alone is projected to increase from 355,000 people (11 percent of the population) in 2013 to between 491,000 and 522,000 people (13 percent of the population) in 2023 (see figure 1).

Figure 1





Characteristics of people who live alone

“I think it’s very healthy to spend time alone. You need to know how to be alone and not be defined by another person.” – Oscar Wilde

We identify the characteristics of New Zealanders who live alone. Doing this can help answer the following questions:

- Is living alone driven by losing a partner (widowhood)?
- How much does marital separation affect the rates of living alone?
- At what ages are people more likely to live alone?
- Are women more likely to live alone?
- Are people who live alone financially stable, and live alone because they can afford to?

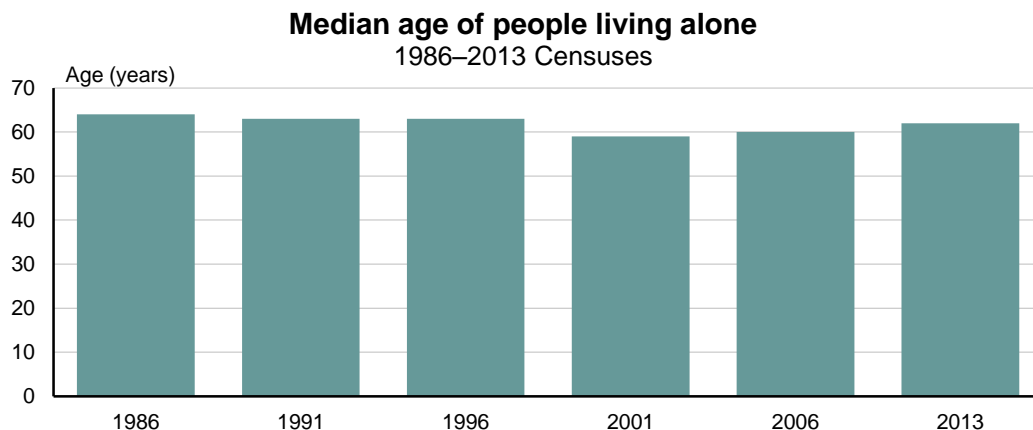
Multiple regression analysis (a technique used for predicting the unknown value of a variable from the known value of two or more variables) found four key characteristics associated with people living alone:

- marital status – divorce, separation, or widowhood can force people to live alone; they do so because of personal circumstances.
- personal income – some people choose to live alone because they can afford to do so; they live alone by choice.
- ethnicity – people whose ethnicity does not accept the practice or lifestyle of living alone will tend to live with others rather than by themselves.
- housing tenure – people who own or partly own their own home may prefer to live alone.

Many older people live alone

The likelihood of living alone increases with age. Of those who lived alone in 2013, nearly half (44 percent) were aged 65 or older (65+), including 25 percent who were 75 or over (75+). At the other end of the spectrum, only 10 percent of people who lived alone were under 35 years, including 3 percent who were aged 15–24 (see table 2 in the ‘Available files’ box).

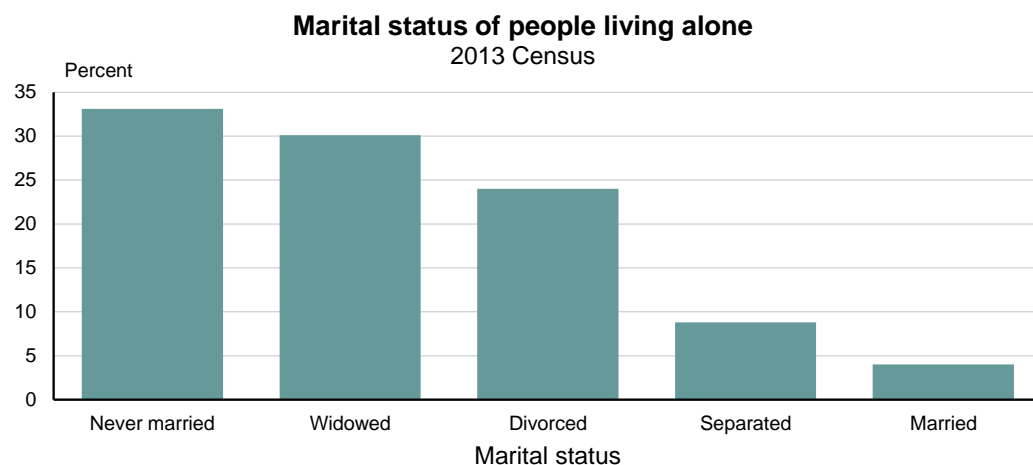
In 2013, the median age of people living alone was 62 years, while that for the total New Zealand population was 38. In general, the median age of people who lived alone has changed little since 1986 (64 years) (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Source: Statistics New Zealand

Living alone associated with marital status

Many people live alone due to personal circumstances or life changes, such as a change in marital status. Of the 355,000 New Zealanders who lived alone in 2013, almost one-third were widowed (30 percent), one-quarter (24 percent) were divorced, and 9 percent were separated (see figure 3). In comparison, most people who lived with others were either married or have never married (including those never in a civil union).

Figure 3

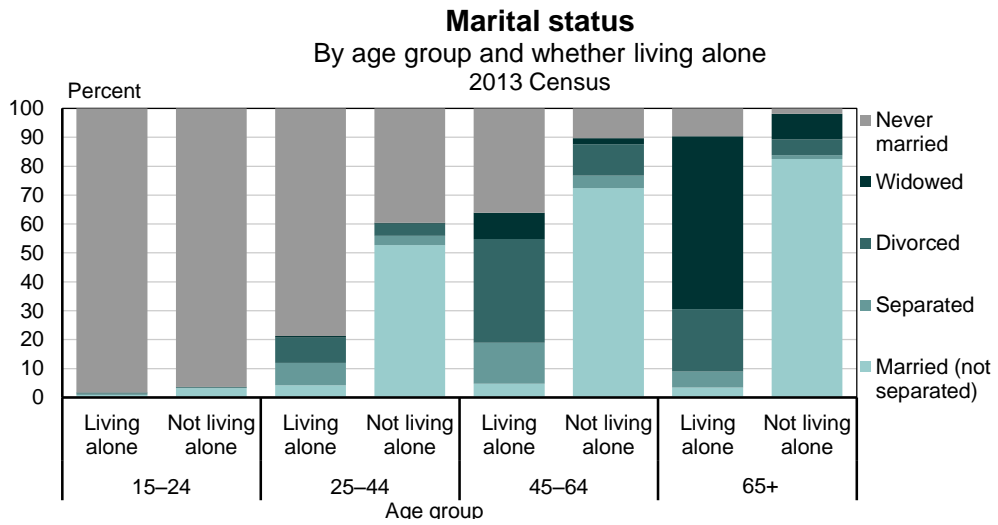
Source: Statistics New Zealand

People aged 15–24, whether living alone or with others, were more likely to never have been married (see figure 4). For people aged 25–44, the proportion of living alone and never married (79 percent) was twice that of those living with others and never married (40 percent). Choosing to marry later in life may be a reason for this – in 2014, the median age at first marriage was 30.2 years for men and 28.7 years for women, up from 27.5 and 25.5 years, respectively, in 1994.

Marital breakdown was one reason why the growth in the number of people living alone was concentrated in the 45–64-year age group. Separations and divorces were a significant component of the living alone population: half of those aged 45–64 and more than one-quarter (27 percent) of those aged 65+ were separated or divorced. In contrast, most people aged 45 years and over (45+) who lived with others were married.

The death of a partner was most likely to affect older people – nearly 60 percent of those aged 65+ who lived alone were widowed.

Figure 4



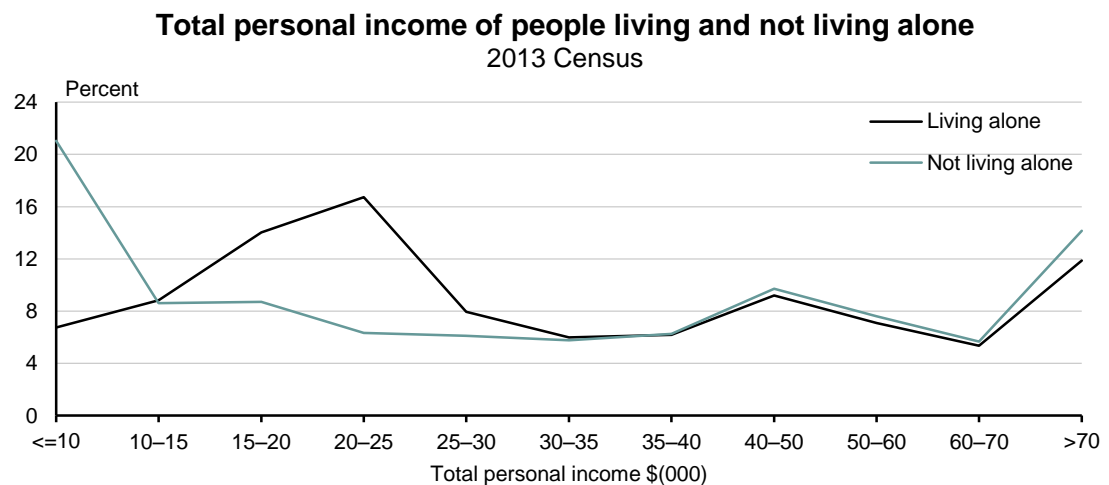
Total personal income of people living alone less likely to be low

People who lived alone were less likely to have low personal income: only 7 percent of those who lived alone had a total personal income below \$10,000, compared with 21 percent for those who lived with others (see figure 5).

The range of total personal income for people living alone was more likely to be between \$10,000 and \$35,000. People living with others were more likely to have a total personal income above \$35,000.

The median total personal income of both people living alone and not living alone was in the \$25,001–\$30,000 income bracket.

Figure 5

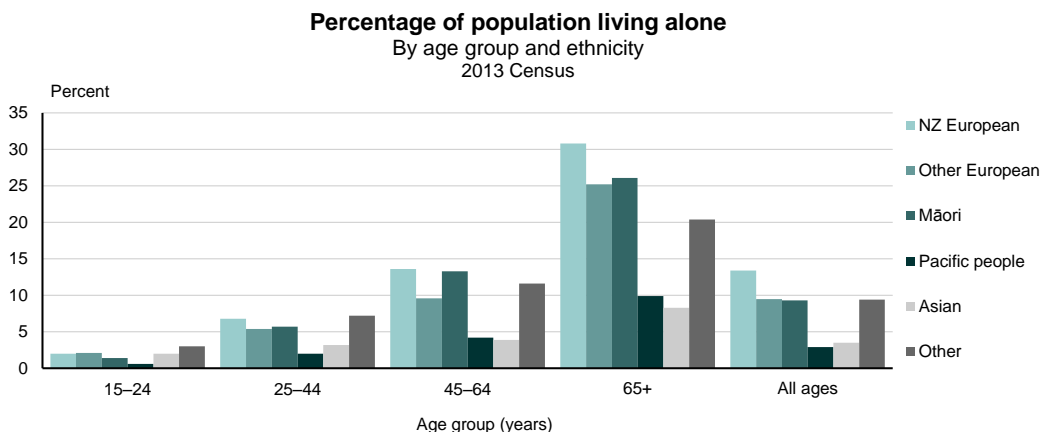


Ethnicity plays a role in likelihood of living alone

Ethnicity contributes to the likelihood of a person living alone – norms sometimes affect living arrangements, and for some ethnic groups, living alone is not common practice.

NZ European and Other European were the ethnic groups with the highest rates of people living alone (13 percent and 10 percent, respectively). Māori followed at 9 percent. Pacific people (3 percent) and Asian (4 percent) had the lowest living-alone rates (see figure 6).

Figure 6

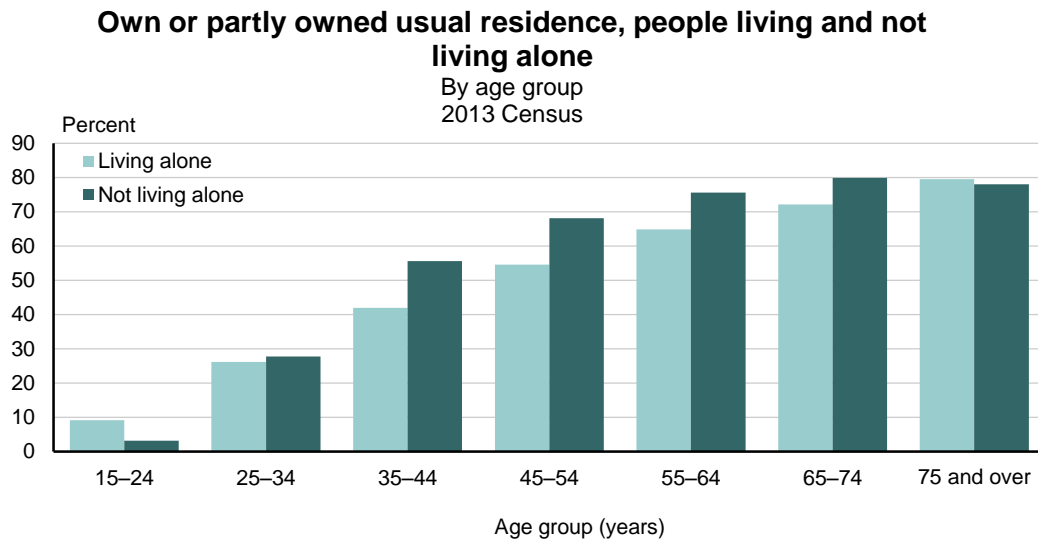


Source: Statistics New Zealand

Most people living alone are homeowners

Six out of 10 (62 percent) people who lived alone owned or partly owned their own home. This is higher than that for those living with others (50 percent).

People who live alone may acquire their own house at a later age than those who don't live alone. More than half of those aged 45–54 who lived alone owned or partly owned their own home (see figure 7). The same proportion occurred for people living with others, but at a younger age group (35–44). A possible explanation to this is that sharing financial obligations makes it easier to buy a house.

Figure 7

Older women more likely to live alone

The age profile of women who live alone is different to that of men. On average, women who lived alone were significantly older than men who did so. In 2013, 51 percent of women aged 75+ lived alone, compared with just 25 percent of men (see table 8 in the 'Available files' box). Conversely, just 20 percent of women under 55 years were living alone, compared with 28 percent of men.

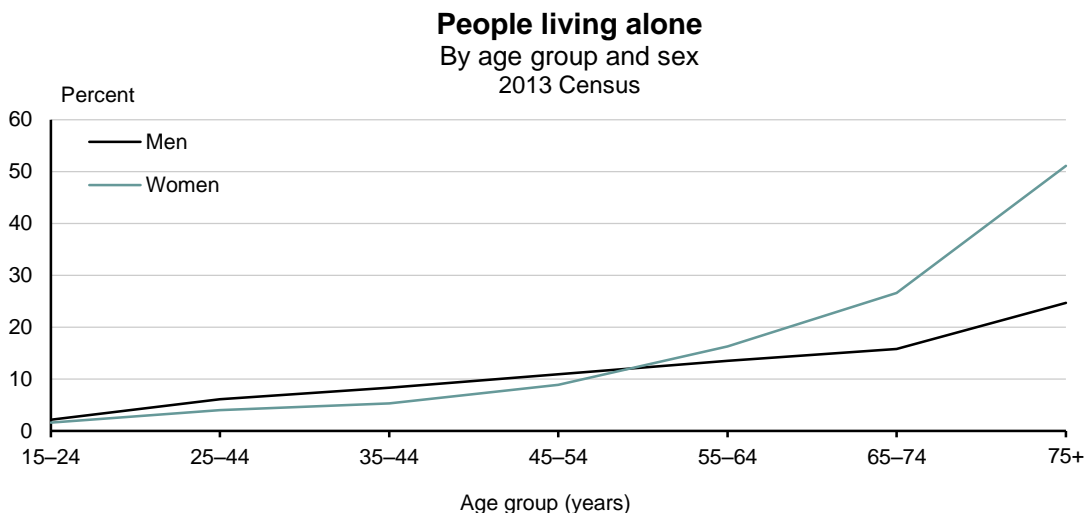
Living alone was more common among women than men. In 2013, 12 percent (204,000) of women aged 15 years and over (15+) lived alone, compared with 10 percent (151,000) of men. Of the 355,000 New Zealanders who lived alone, 57 percent were women.

Likelihood of living alone increases with age

Overall, the chances of living alone increase as both men and women grow older. For example, 6 percent of men aged 25-34 were living alone in 2013. By age 55-64, this had doubled to 14 percent, and then rose to 25 percent at age 75+ (see figure 8).

The rates of living alone increased more sharply for women than for men in the older age groups. The gap was largest in the 75+ age group. Younger women were less likely than men of the same age to live alone. From age 45 onwards the likelihood increased, and by age 55 years and over (55+) the likelihood was much higher than for men. By 75+, 51 percent of women lived on their own. The difference in longevity between men and women may be a factor. In 2012-14, life expectancy at birth was 83.2 years for females and 79.5 for males (Statistics NZ, [2015](#)).

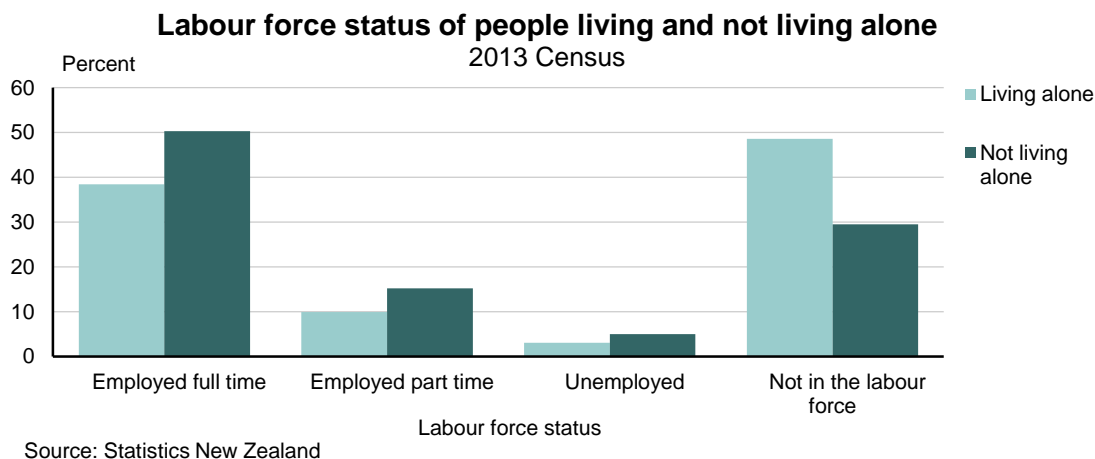
Figure 8



People living alone less likely to be employed

The proportion of people employed (both full-time and part-time) was higher for those living with others than those living alone (66 percent compared to 48 percent) (see figure 9).

Figure 9



Both men and women who lived alone were less likely to be employed full-time (49 percent and 31 percent, respectively) than men and women living with others (62 percent and 40 percent, respectively, were employed full time). This difference can be partly explained by the age profile of those who live alone – a large proportion are old enough to be entitled to superannuation and are no longer working.

Younger women who lived alone were more likely to be in the labour force than women who lived with others. One-quarter of women aged 15–24 who lived alone were not in the labour force, compared with 40 percent of women of the same age group who lived with others.

For middle-aged men (45–64 years) who lived alone, 62 percent were employed full time, compared with 78 percent of men who lived with others. A further 24 percent of men who

lived alone were not in the labour force, compared with 13 percent of those who lived with others.



Social advantage and disadvantage of living alone

“The idea exists that it is not good for individuals to live alone given that humans are fundamentally social beings.” (Koopman-Boyden, Cameron, Davey, & Richardson, 2014)

This section looks at the social outcomes of people who live alone. The information on overall life satisfaction, feelings of loneliness, safety, crime, and self-rated health status come from the 2014 NZGSS.

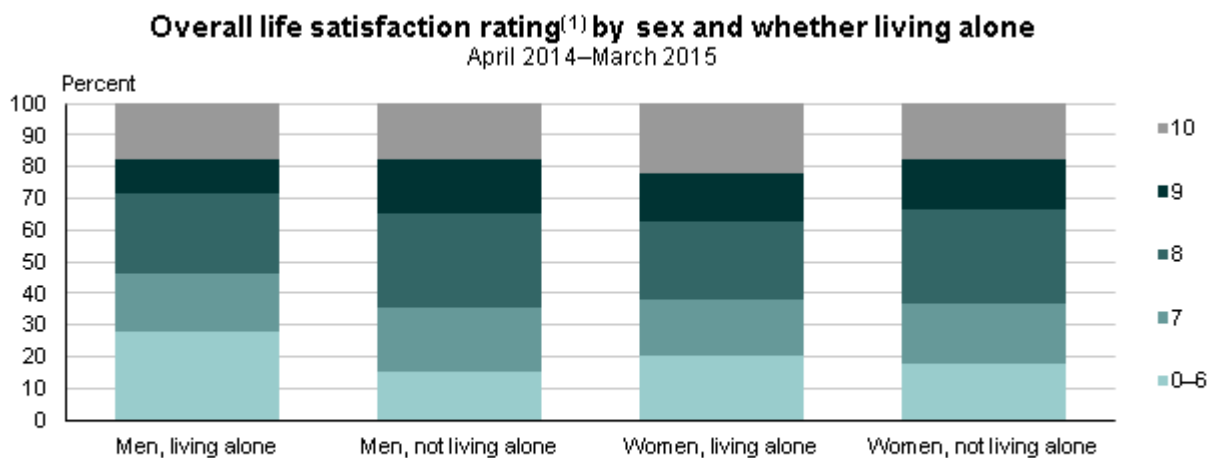
Living alone affects overall life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is self-measured on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is the lowest and 10 is the highest level of satisfaction.

While most people rated their overall life satisfaction at 8 or higher, people living alone were less likely than those living with others to report this (59 percent compared with 64 percent, respectively).

Men living alone were less likely to rate their overall life satisfaction at 8 or higher, than women who lived alone (see figure 10). Men and women aged 25–64 who lived alone were less likely to feel satisfied with their lives than those who lived with others. At age 65+ the proportions satisfied with their lives were similar for those living alone and living with others.

Figure 10



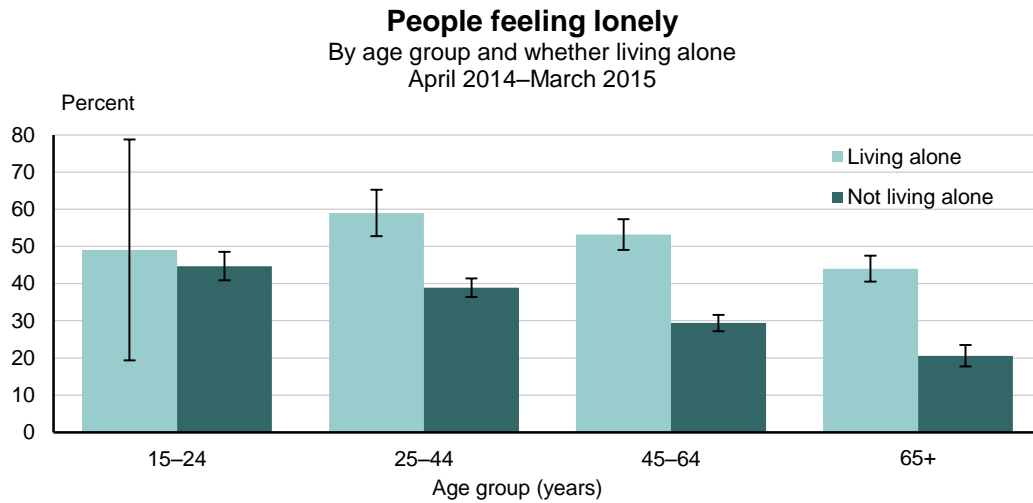
1. Based on a scale where 0 is completely dissatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

People living alone experience more feelings of loneliness

People who lived alone were more likely than those not living alone to say they had felt lonely, at least occasionally, in the last four weeks (50 percent compared with 34 percent, respectively). This was true for both men and women regardless of age (see figure 11).

Men and women aged 25–44 who lived alone were the most likely to have felt lonely, at least occasionally, in the last four weeks. However, feelings of loneliness decreased as people got older (see table 11 in the ‘Available files’ box).

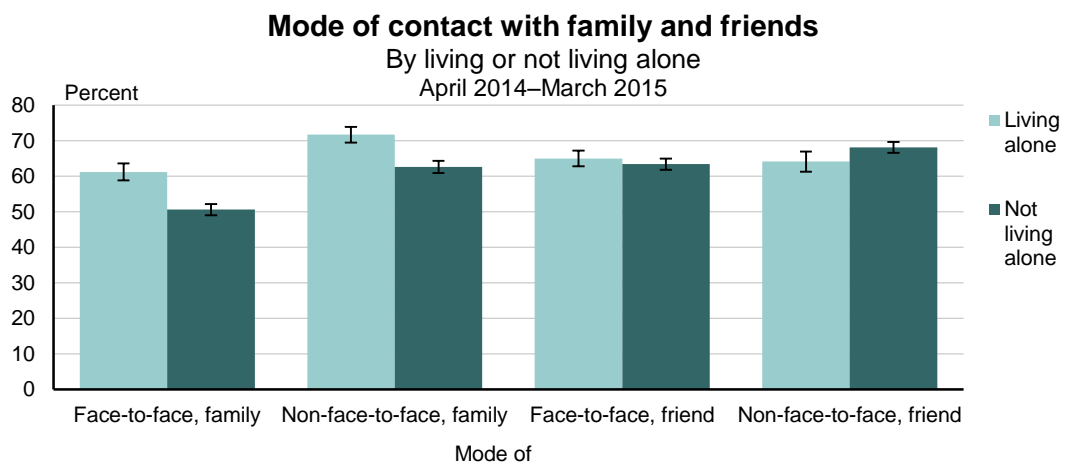
Figure 11

Note: Error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

People who live alone have more face-to-face contact with family and friends

People living alone may be at risk of social isolation, which has a negative impact on social outcomes. However, results from the 2014 NZGSS showed that the proportion of people having face-to-face contact with family living in other households was higher for those living alone (61 percent) than those not living alone (51 percent) (see figure 12). A similar finding was true for non-face-to-face contact (video, phone, or written communication) with family who lived in other households.

Figure 12

Note: Error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

People living alone more likely to feel unsafe

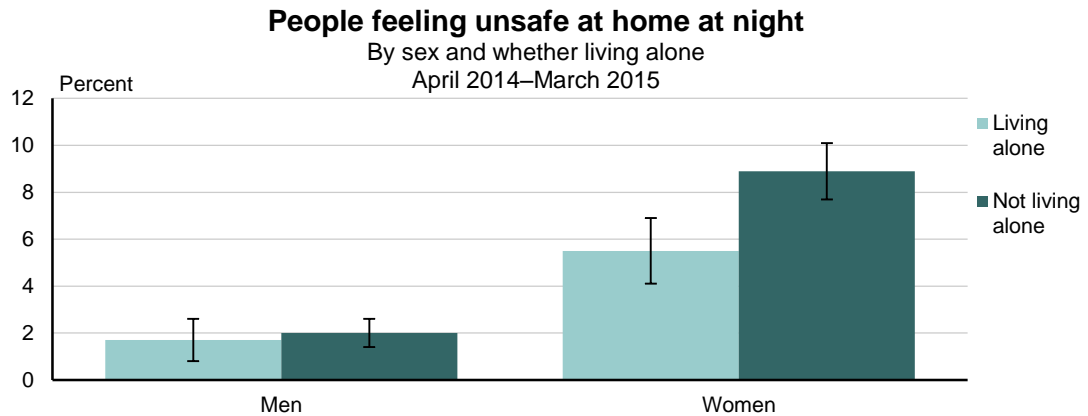
In this section we look at whether people feel safe when staying home alone at night.

Men, whether they live alone or with others, feel safe when they spend a night alone at home. Only 2 percent each of men living alone and not living alone felt unsafe (see figure 13).

Women who lived alone were more likely to feel unsafe when home alone at night than men who lived by themselves (6 percent compared with 2 percent).

For women, those living alone were more likely to feel safe staying home alone at night than women living with others. A smaller proportion of women living alone (6 percent) felt unsafe home alone than those who lived with others (9 percent).

Figure 13



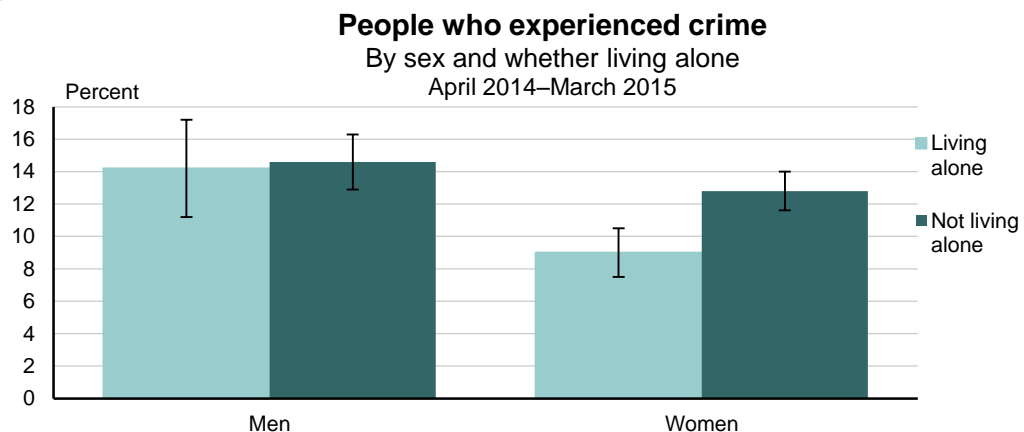
Note: Error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

People who live alone less likely to experience crime

Just over 1 in 10 (11 percent) of people living alone had been a victim of crime in the last 12 months. This is 3 percentage points lower than those who lived with others. Women who lived alone were less likely than men living alone to experience crime (9 percent compared with 14 percent) (see figure 14). Women living alone were also less likely to experience crime than women who lived with others.

Figure 14



Note: Error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

People living alone rate their health status lower

People living alone were less likely to rate their health status as very good to excellent than people living with others (51 percent compared with 62 percent). The same was true regardless of sex: men or women living alone were less likely (51 percent each) to rate their health status as very good to excellent than men or women who live with others (62 percent each) (see figure 15).

Figure 15



Note: Error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

Younger people who live alone report better health

Results show a different picture for younger people who live alone. People aged 15–24 years who lived alone were more likely to report very good to excellent health status than their counterparts who lived with others. Nearly all men and women aged 15–24 and living alone rated their health as very good to excellent (90 percent of men and 92 percent of women) (see table 15 in the 'Available files' box). In comparison, for people of the same age group and living with others, only 69 percent of men and 72 percent of women said their health was very good to excellent.

Less than half of men in the older age groups who lived alone reported very good to excellent health (47 percent of those aged 45–64 and 42 percent of those 65+). For men who lived with others, the rates were 61 percent for men aged 45–64 and 47 percent for those 65+.



Conclusion

The proportion of people living alone in New Zealand is low compared with other countries, but the number has been increasing and is projected to continue to grow.

The rising trend of people living alone has implications for the well-being of individuals and society, so there is much interest in understanding who lives alone and why.

Characteristics of people living alone

Age, marital status, income, household tenure, and ethnicity are the key characteristics that contribute to the likelihood of living alone. Nearly half (44 percent) of people who lived alone were aged 65 or older, and most (63 percent) were separated, divorced, or widowed.

Although total personal income is associated with living alone, our findings showed that the median income of people living alone (\$25,001–30,000) was the same for those living with others.

Among ethnic groups, Pacific peoples and Asians were less likely to live alone. Cultural norms on living arrangements may be a reason for this.

People living alone were also more likely to be homeowners; they were likely to be women; and they were less likely to be employed.

Social outcomes

Living alone has advantages and disadvantages for social well-being. People who live alone are perceived to be at greater risk of social isolation, which can have negative impacts on social outcomes.

People who lived by themselves had a lower rate of overall life satisfaction and were more likely to feel lonely than people living with others. However, they were less likely to have been victims of crime.

Living alone does not necessarily mean being socially isolated. People who lived alone had higher rates of face-to-face contact with family and friends than those who lived with others.

Understanding the characteristics and social well-being of people who live alone will help government and non-government agencies develop the policies and services appropriate for them.



References

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Koopman-Boyden, P, Cameron, M, Davey, J, & Richardson, M (2014). [Making active ageing a reality: Maximising participation and contribution by older people 2014](#). Retrieved from www.waikato.ac.nz.

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Statistics New Zealand (2015). [New Zealand Period Life Tables: 2012–14](#). Retrieved from www.stats.govt.nz.



Tables

The following tables are not included in this document but are available in Excel format from the 'Available files' box.

1. One-person households as percentage of people in households: 1986–2013 Censuses
2. Age distribution of people living alone: 2013 Census
3. Marital status of people living alone: 2013 Census
4. Marital status of people living alone, by age group: 2013 Census
5. Total personal income of people living and not living alone: 2013 Census
6. Ethnicity of people living alone by age group: 2013 Census
7. Own or partly own usual residence, people living and not living alone by age group: 2013 Census
8. People living alone by age group and sex: 2013 Census
9. Labour force status of people living and not living alone, by age group and sex: 2013 Census
10. Overall life satisfaction of people living and not living alone by sex: NZGSS 2014
11. Feelings of loneliness by people living and not living alone, by age group and sex: NZGSS 2014
12. Mode of contact with family and friends for people living and not living alone: NZGSS 2014
13. Feeling unsafe at home at night, people living and not living alone by sex: NZGSS 2014
14. Experience of crime, people living and not living alone by sex: NZGSS 2014
15. Health status of people living and not living alone, by age group and sex: NZGSS 2014