

When Demography Meets Culture: Interactions Between Family Dynamics and Living Arrangements

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Short abstract. In Spain, fertility rates are lower and family formation occurs later than in Sweden; yet, Spanish households tend to be larger on average. Using Swedish register data (2019) and Spanish ECEPOV data (2021), we compare intergenerational co-residence levels from both the children's and parents' perspectives, accounting for kin availability. We analyze how co-residence varies by gender, age, education, marital status, and other sociodemographic characteristics, and decompose cross-national differences into compositional and behavioral components. Preliminary results suggest that Swedes tend to leave the parental home at an earlier age, and older adults live independently. In Spain, delayed home-leaving and intergenerational co-residence remain prevalent. We argue that this reflects enduring differences in family systems despite similar demographic change.

Background and motivation. Sweden and Spain are two contexts characterized by persistently low fertility rates (Lozano et al., 2024; Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). The second demographic transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe, 2010, 2014) has traditionally been a theoretical lens for understanding family-demographic change and attitudinal shifts towards individualistic and secular values, associated with very low fertility. Both countries exhibit several indicators typically associated with the SDT: delays and decoupling of marriage and childbearing, relatively high divorce rates, and a rise in cohabitation (Andersson & Kolk, 2016; Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2013; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). Yet, when examined through the lens of **living arrangements**, many differences emerge between the two. Minimal household structures characterize Sweden (Hobson et al., 2023; Oláh et al., 2023), while intergenerational co-residence remains a key feature of the Spanish family system (Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008).

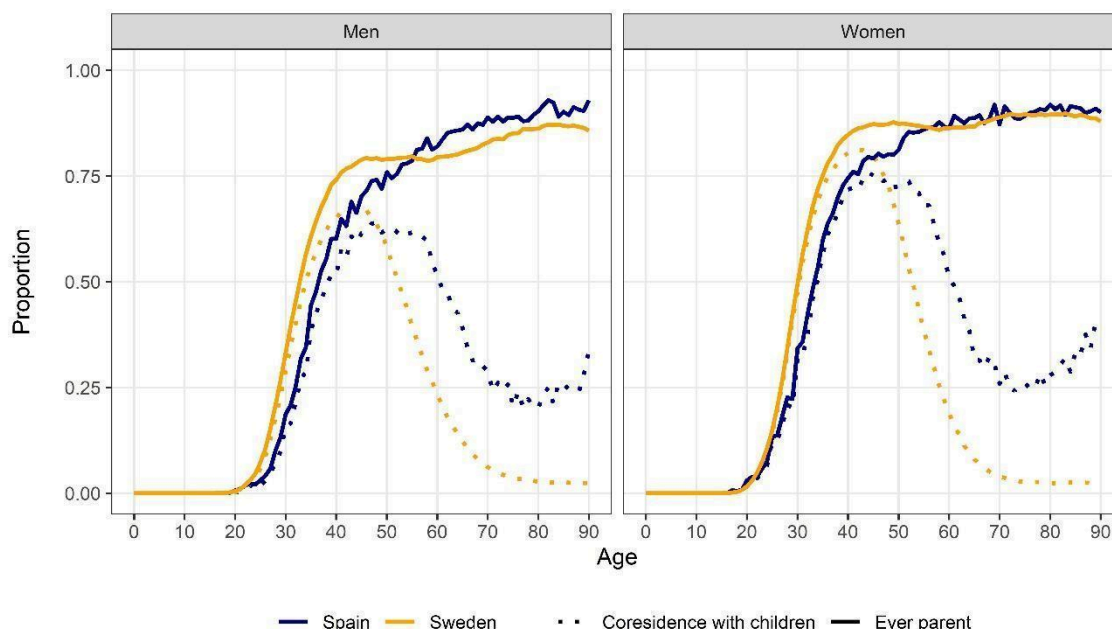
Historically, European family systems have been divided along a north–south gradient: Nordic countries like Sweden have greater individualistic values and earlier residential independence, whereas Southern European countries such as Spain have maintained stronger intergenerational ties and family-centered residential patterns (Reher, 1998). Despite converging demographic outcomes, such as very low and delayed fertility, these countries display enduring contrasts in household composition and co-residence norms, reflecting enduring cultural legacies and the historical continuities of distinct family systems (Padyab et al., 2019).

In this paper, we identify co-residence patterns from both the children's and parents' perspectives across the ages, while controlling for the availability (“supply”) of kin. Family demographers have long emphasized that studies of living arrangements should account for the availability of kin with whom individuals could potentially co-reside (Ruggles, 2012; Wolf, 1994). In a context of increasing availability of older adults due to improvements in health and longevity (Bloom et al., 2010; Christensen et al., 2009), and fewer children due to decreasing fertility, there could be growing potential for intergenerational co-residence (Bengtson, 2001). However, cultural norms and family systems influence these dynamics. Comparing Sweden and Spain provides us with insights into how, despite seemingly similar family changes, family systems and cultural norms continue to shape living arrangements.

Data and analytic strategy. We use Swedish register data (2019) from Statistics Sweden and the Spanish Survey of Essential Characteristics of Population and Households (ECEPOV-2021) from the National Institute of Statistics (INE). Both contain individual-level data on family and demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, age, and education). For Sweden, we include all Swedish-born individuals with two Swedish-born parents¹ (over 7 million). For Spain, we use a nationally representative sample of Spanish-born individuals with two Spanish-born parents (over 300K), covering about 75% of each country’s population. Our main variables are: (1) *availability of kin* (parents alive and children ever born) and (2) *living arrangements* (co-residence with mother, father, or children). We estimate the share of individuals with living parents or children, and the share living with them.

Preliminary results. Figure 1 presents patterns of co-residence with children (dotted line) and the availability of children (solid line) by age and gender in Spain (blue) and Sweden (yellow). Childbearing occurs earlier in Sweden, whereas in Spain it is more delayed. But differences between countries go beyond fertility timing. Marked contrasts emerge when examining the prevalence of co-residence with children during midlife and at older ages. In Sweden, individuals typically begin co-residing with children in their late 20s, with prevalence peaking between ages 40-50, when over 60% of men and over 75% of women live with children, and then declining rapidly with age. In Spain, by contrast, co-residence with children plateaus at its peak (ages 40-60) due to delayed home-leaving among young adult children and decreases gradually thereafter, remaining highly prevalent among older adults. By age 60, approximately 50% of Spanish individuals still live with their children, compared with about 25% in Sweden. At older ages, most Swedish men and women live independently, whereas in Spain, intergenerational co-residence remains comparatively high, with around 25% of individuals sharing a household with their offspring.

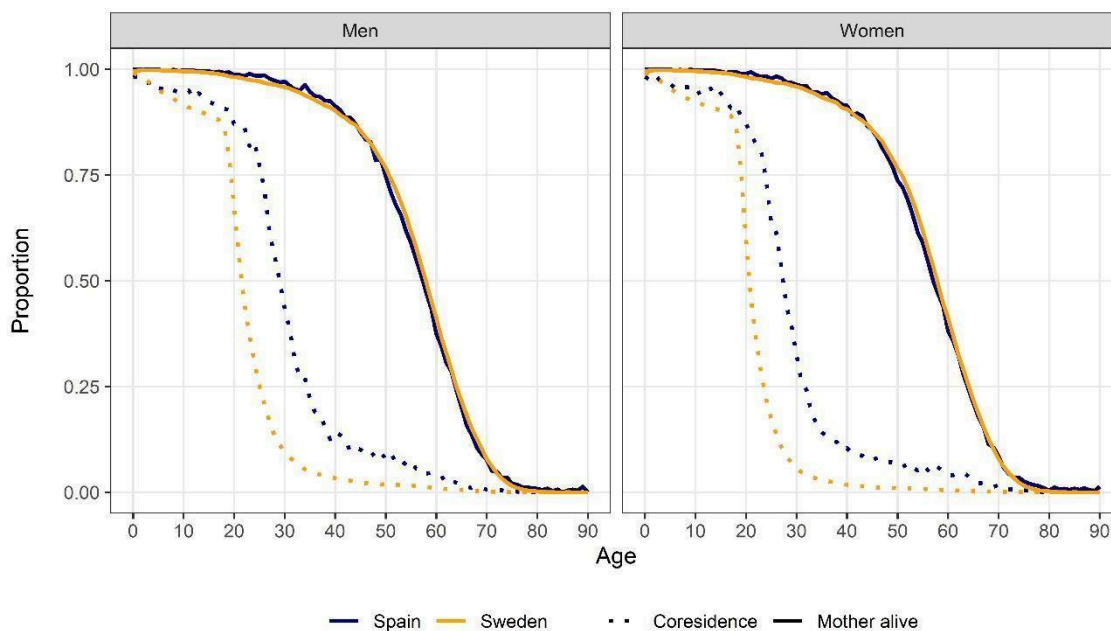
Figure 1. Co-residence with children and availability of children



¹Migrants are excluded from the analysis because parental information is not available for foreign-born individuals in the Swedish register data. For consistency and comparability, we apply the same restriction to the Spanish sample.

Figure 2 takes the children’s perspective and shows patterns of co-residence with the mother (dotted line) and mother’s survival (solid line). At very young ages, co-residence with the mother is nearly universal in both countries. In Sweden, we observe a rapid decline from around age 18, reflecting an early and rapid departure from the parental home. At age 25, only about 25% of individuals live with their mother. In Spain, by contrast, home-leaving occurs later. Cross-national differences are significant. While only 25% of 25-year-olds in Sweden co-reside with their mother, more than 80% do so in Spain. Indeed, although co-residence in Spain declines thereafter, levels remain consistently higher than in Sweden. For example, at age 30, approximately 10% of Swedes live with their mother, compared with about 40% in Spain. After 40, co-residence is non-existent in Sweden, while in Spain it is about 10-15%. Gender differences follow a similar pattern in both countries, with higher shares of men living with mothers and moving out later than women. Nevertheless, the overall cross-national contrast remains evident: at all ages, co-residence with the mother is substantially more prevalent in Spain, while it is relatively uncommon in Sweden.

Figure 2. Co-residence with mother and mother alive



Discussion and next steps. Findings indicate that levels of intergenerational co-residence in Sweden and Spain vary substantially. In Sweden, co-residence with children peaks earlier and declines rapidly as children leave home, while in Spain it remains high well into later adulthood. These contrasts reflect the strength of “strong vs. weak” family systems (Reher, 1998) as well as differences in welfare-state support, more comprehensive in Scandinavian countries (Padyab et al., 2019). The higher prevalence of co-residence with children in Spain, particularly at older ages, has been linked to the central role of the family as a provider of unpaid care (Fernández-Carro, 2016). More independent living in Sweden may also be associated with stronger institutional support and more individualistic cultural norms (Padyab et al., 2019).

From the children’s perspective, leaving the parental home occurs earlier in Sweden. Home-leaving is considered a key event in the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg et al., 2005). In addition to family systems and welfare-state provisions, residential autonomy may be associated with union formation (moving out when marrying) and to economic

conditions, particularly employment (Albertini & Kohli, 2013). Examining family dynamics through living arrangements reveals that, despite overall similarities in fertility and other family behaviors, the nature of family systems and kin ties continues to differ markedly across Southern and Northern European countries such as Spain and Sweden.

Next steps: we will examine social and demographic correlates of co-residence with parents and with children. Preliminary analyses show reverse patterns: highly educated Spanish young adults are the ones extending co-residence with parents, while in Sweden, it is the less educated who do so. We will apply a decomposition model to quantify the contributions to differences between Sweden and Spain corresponding to composition and to rates of co-residence.

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