

# Mapping Singlehood Across the Life Course

## A Longitudinal Comparison of Germany and the UK

Elke Claessens & Dimitri Mortelmans

### Introduction

A consistent increase in singlehood is being noted worldwide, influenced by demographic changes, evolving social norms, and individual preferences (Esteve et al., 2020; Kislev, 2024; Rauer & Jäger. Considering ongoing demographic ageing and increasing social inequality, singlehood represents a crucial facet of the new realities facing European societies, reshaping intergenerational support, housing demand, and social care provision. Yet, the empirical mapping of this trend remains complex. Firstly, singlehood is a multi-faceted phenomenon, varying in form, life-course timing and duration. For example, “unmarried” does not imply “unpartnered”, which, in turn, does not equal “living alone”. Meanwhile, the framing of singlehood varies by life stage, from identity formation and individual exploration in early adulthood (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023) to the (re)claiming of autonomy in later life (Park et al., 2022). Secondly, cross-country differences in norms and policy definitions of singlehood further complicate measurements of “the” single population, and highlight the role of context in shaping singlehood (Bergström & Brée, 2023). This understanding is, in turn, crucial to unveiling and addressing stigma and inequities related to any form of singlehood – a challenge that is increasingly coming to the forefront of policy considerations (Sim & Edelstein, 2025).

Describing singlehood trends with respect to variety in form, timing, and duration requires both operational flexibility and a life-course perspective. Acknowledging that singlehood realities are age- and time-dependent, evolving both within and across cohorts (Rauer et al., 2024), is thus vital to comprehensively mapping singlehood trends. Concurrently, we must remain aware that these trends are embedded in particular contexts. Simply outlining various types of singlehood spells over time remains meaningless in terms of understanding the drivers behind singlehood when not explicitly acknowledging the backdrop against which the trend has been (and is still) taking place (Bellani et al., 2017; Kislev & Marsh, 2023). However, as of now, data limitations restrict the simultaneous implementation of this demanding combination of operational flexibility and a longitudinal perspective across multiple countries. While several studies have analysed relational patterns through a life-course lens (e.g., Jung, 2023; Park et al., 2022; Wahrung et al., 2024), data that allow for the empirical assessment of singlehood beyond a “crude” (e.g., unmarried) or “singular” (e.g., either living alone or being unpartnered) interpretation from a cross-national perspective remain scarce.

This study posits a novel mapping of singlehood trends, which incorporates the necessary i) multi-faceted operational approach, ii) longitudinal life-course perspective and iii) cross-country comparative framing. As a crucial backdrop, we build on the operational framework designed by

Mortelmans et al. (2023), which details singlehood concurrently through the dimensions of partnership and living situation, giving way to three singlehood types: partnered and living alone, unpartnered and not living alone, and unpartnered and living alone. We incorporate consecutive work by the same authors (in review), which identifies the German Family Panel and the UK Understanding Societies panel as capable of assessing singlehood at the highest level of detail (i.e., all three singlehood types of the operational framework). This introduces Germany and the UK, respectively, as country contexts that allow longitudinal comparisons of singlehood trends from a rich operational framework.

The contrast between these two countries is also theoretically meaningful, as both represent distinct family-policy regimes, cultural attitudes toward independence, and trajectories of demographic change. Indeed, studies indicate that the dynamics underlying the steady rise in singlehood in both Germany and the United Kingdom differ markedly (El-Awad et al., 2025). In the UK, singlehood largely reflects the growth of solo-living households, especially among older women and younger men (Demey et al., 2014; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Khan et al., 2018), whereas Germany displays a more diversified singlehood landscape shaped by an East–West divide (Fulda, 2016; Wagner & Cifuentes, 2014). Furthermore, Germany is home to a research and data infrastructure that has long identified non-residential partnerships (LAT) and cohousing singlehood –reflecting a broader recognition of partnership fluidity (Mortelmans et al., 2023). These contrasts make Germany and the UK particularly valuable comparative cases for examining how demographic and cultural contexts shape the prevalence and diversity of singlehood within Europe’s trend toward delayed partnership and pluralised living arrangements.

Our research aims are threefold. First, in recognition of the different life stages that shape the prevalence of singlehood, we conduct a detailed comparison of the temporal patterning of the three types of singlehood in Germany and the UK. Second, we analyse differences in the distribution of singlehood types within each country through a simultaneous age and cohort approach. Third, we explore the contextual (country-)level factors that aid in understanding the observed differences and outline the drivers underlying country-specific singlehood trends.

## **Data**

This study draws on four longitudinal household and family panels from Germany and the United Kingdom. The German Family Panel (PAIRFAM) and its successor, the Family Research and Demographic Analysis Panel (FReDA), currently cover 17 years (2008-2025) of detailed relationship histories, enabling the study of singlehood trajectories across birth cohorts ranging from 1971 to 2003. In the UK, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS, 1991-2008) and its successor, Understanding Society (2009 onwards), provide harmonised life course data that span more than three decades. Due to their sufficient empirical level of detail for operationalising the three singlehood types, the pooled

German and UK datasets offer directly comparable baselines for mapping singlehood trajectories and transitions, both within and across cohorts, in two distinct national contexts.

**Method**

Following Mortelmans et al. (2023), we classify singlehood by combining partnership and living arrangement data, distinguishing (1) committed LAT singles (partnered but living alone), (2) cohousing singles (unpartnered, living with others), and (3) solo-living singles (unpartnered, living alone). This is achieved by combining partnership information (“Do you have a steady partner?” and “Do you live with them?”) with household grid data to classify single respondents (aged 14 and above) accordingly, followed by the construction of annual life-course sequences of singlehood statuses.

Analytically, we first describe the distribution of singlehood types by age group and birth cohort, calculating the mean proportion of years spent in each singlehood type up to successive age thresholds. This sequence-based approach standardises trajectories by age, allowing both within-cohort (life-course) and between-cohort comparisons. To visualise these dynamics, we employ sequence plots, depicting the age-specific distribution of singlehood types within cohorts and countries, and age-profile line charts, plotting the proportion of individuals in each singlehood type by age, with separate lines for Germany and the UK. Finally, we estimate multinomial logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of belonging to each singlehood type as a function of age, cohort, and country (including age-cohort interactions), while controlling for gender, education, labour market status, parenthood, and region. This combined descriptive and model-based design captures operational diversity, life-course development, cross-cohort and cross-national differentiation, providing the first harmonised longitudinal mapping of singlehood trajectories in Germany and the UK.

**Preliminary and expected findings**

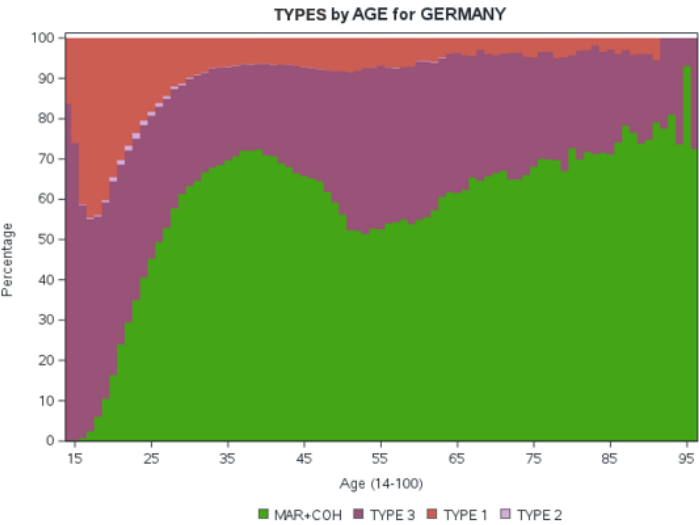


Figure 1a. Proportion of singlehood types by age - Germany

Sequence plots (Figures 1a and 1b) display preliminary visualisations of aggregated age distributions, which combine respondents across all cohorts to illustrate the prevalence of the three singlehood types by age in each country. Committed LAT singlehood (Type 1, in red) peaks in early adulthood and declines toward midlife in Germany (Figure 1a), while remaining more stable by age in the UK (Figure 1b).

Although difficult to discern in the Figure due to limited counts, cohousing singlehood (Type 2, in pink) is concentrated among younger adults in Germany and displays a bimodal age pattern in the UK, appearing both at younger and older ages. Finally, during mid-life (30 to 45), solo-living singlehood (Type 3, in purple) is similarly proportioned in Germany and the UK.

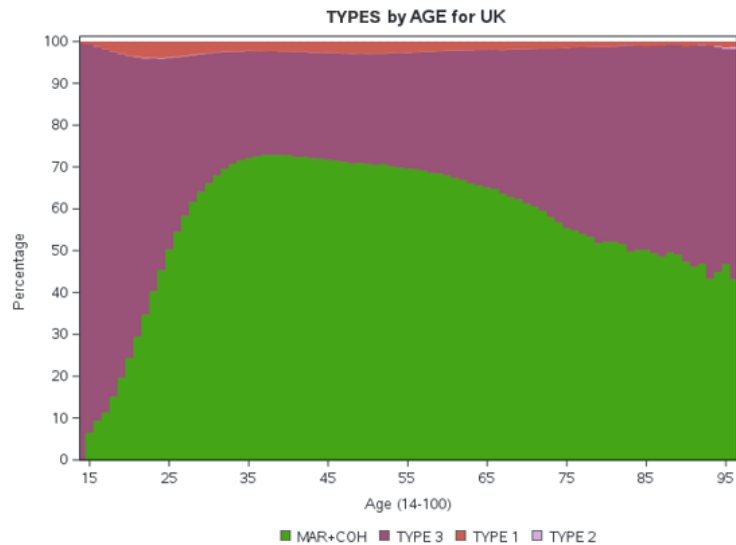


Figure 1b. Proportion of singlehood types by age - UK

Notable, however, is the steep decline in legal partnerships (marriages and cohabitations, in green) alongside a rise in solo-living singlehood in Germany around the age of 40, followed again by a slow increase (and volatility at higher ages due to decreasing sample sizes). In contrast, for the UK, a gradual decline is visible in the legally partnered status (in green), mirrored by an increase in solo living singlehood (Type 3, in purple). While preliminary, these aggregated patterns suggest temporal differences that are potentially indicative of sociocultural variations in separation and repartnering. This will be further refined in cohort analyses which disentangle generational and period effects.

When extending the analyses to cohort comparisons, we expect to find a rising diversity of singlehood over time, with greater heterogeneity in singlehood pathways (including longer LAT spells and later partnership entry) among younger cohorts than among older ones. The age at which specific types of singlehood are most prevalent is thus likely to also portray a shift across cohorts, reflecting delayed transitions and changing partnership norms. We further posit that German and UK patterns are converging, even though national differences may sustain some divergence in the timing and form of singlehood. In this respect, the multinomial logistic regression models will be vital to identifying contextual and compositional effects. Based on previous findings, we expect higher educational levels to correlate with longer periods of committed LAT singlehood, reflecting greater economic and geographic autonomy – a pattern that may be stronger in Germany due to greater cultural acceptance of non-cohabiting partnerships. This also relates to female solo living, which we expect to be more prevalent in Germany.

In further elaborating on the current study, we expect our analyses to illuminate the importance of conceptualising singlehood as multidimensional and dynamic, to understand not only the diversification of singlehood across the life course, but also how it affects larger demographic and societal realities.

## References

- Bellani, D., Esping-Andersen, G., & Nedoluzhko, L. (2017). Never partnered: A multilevel analysis of lifelong singlehood. *Demographic Research*, 37, 53–100. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2017.37.4>
- Bergström, M., & Brée, S. (2023). Not a single meaning: Definition and evolution of singlehood in France and the United States. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15(3), 465–484. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12519>
- Demey, D., Berrington, A., Evandrou, M., & Falkingham, J. (2014). Living alone and psychological well-being in mid-life: does partnership history matter? *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 68(5), 403–410. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2013-202932>
- El-Awad, U., Eves, R., Hachenberger, J., Entringer, T. M., Goodwin, R., Realo, A., & Lemola, S. (2025). Mapping life satisfaction over the first years of cohabitation among former singles living alone in UK and Germany. *Journal of personality*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.70013>
- Fulda, B. E. (2016). The diversity in longitudinal partnership trajectories during the transition to adulthood: How is it related to individual characteristics and regional living conditions? *Demographic Research*, 35, 1101–1134. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.37>
- Jamieson, L., & Simpson, R. (2013). Solo-living with and without Partnering and Parenting. In *Living Alone* (pp. 57–87). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137318527\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137318527_3)
- Jung, J. (2023). Partnership trajectories and their consequences over the life course. Evidence from the German Life Study. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 55, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2022.100525>
- Khan, H. T., Hafford-Letchfield, T., & Lambert, N. (2018). Single women living alone in later life: Evidence from Understanding Society data. In *Sexuality, Sexual and Gender Identities and Intimacy Research in Social Work and Social Care* (pp. 155–175). Routledge.
- Kislev, E., & Marsh, K. (2023). Intersectionality in studying and theorizing singlehood. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15(3), 412–427. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12522>
- Mortelmans, D., Claessens, E., & Thielemans, G. (2023). Defining and measuring singlehood in family studies. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15(3), 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12520>
- Park, Y., Page-Gould, E., & MacDonald, G. (2022). Satisfying singlehood as a function of age and cohort: Satisfaction with being single increases with age after midlife. *Psychology and Aging*, 37(5), 626. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000695>
- Rauer, A., Jager, J., & Vuolo, M. (2024). Relationship and singlehood trajectories during the transition to older adulthood over the past 40 years. *Research in Human Development*, 21(1), 50–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2024.2330284>
- Sim, L., & Edelstein, R. (2025). Cross-cultural differences in the links between familial support and strain in married and single adults' well-being. *Personal Relationships*, 32(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.70027>
- Wagner, M., & Cifuentes, I. V. (2014). The pluralisation of living arrangements – a continuous trend? *Comparative Population Studies*, 39(1), 73–98. <https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2014-03de>
- Wahring, I. V., Neyer, F. J., Hoppmann, C. A., Ram, N., & Gerstorf, D. (2024). Men and women transitioning to singlehood in young adulthood and midlife. *Psychology and Aging*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000859>