

Trends in kinlessness (2009-2023) among people aged 65+ in five ethnic groups in the Netherlands

Introduction

Recent demographic changes, including declining marriage, fertility, and mortality rates, lead to growing numbers of older adults with few close family members across many Western societies (Verdery, 2017). Older adults with neither a partner nor living children have been referred to as *kinless*. Given the central role of close kin in the provision of informal care to older persons with health limitations (Messerli et al., 1993; Wolff & Kasper, 2006), it has been argued that kinless older adults are at risk of becoming so-called “elder orphans” or “solo agers”, i.e., older persons living alone and having a deficient support system (Carney et al., 2016; Carr & Utz, 2020). Consistent with this reasoning, kinlessness has been identified as risk factor for unmet care needs (Taylor et al., 2023) and for receiving lower quality end-of-life care (Mair et al., 2023). Kinless older adults also experience poorer psychosocial wellbeing compared to partnered parents (Penning, Wu, & Hou, 2024), although these negative effects are mitigated by social connections with distant kin and non-kin relationships (Mair, 2019; Tosi & Van den Broek, 2025).

Drawing on rich family network data covering the full population of the Netherlands, we estimate the prevalence of kinlessness among adults aged 65 and older, and investigate how it evolved between 2009 and 2023. We moreover consider differences between the native Dutch population and four large groups of non-European migrants. Our study contributes to the kinlessness literature in three ways. First, while most previous studies focus on cross-national differences in kinlessness, for instance showing that the prevalence of kinlessness is low in some Eastern-European countries and high in some Western-European and Southern-European countries (Pittavino et al., 2025), studies on changes over time remain rare. Most studies assume that there is a growing prevalence of kinlessness around the world, but this assumption is seldom tested (for an exception focusing on the United States, see Margolis & Verdery, 2017).

Second, the Netherlands has an increasingly diverse older population combining different migration backgrounds with rapid demographic changes, such as high divorce and remarriage rates and fertility decline. Thus, we zoom in on older people of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Dutch Caribbean origin in the Netherlands in comparison to their native Dutch counterparts without a migration background. These groups, constituting four of the country's largest groups of Non-European migrants (Nicolaas & Van Roon, 2022), have been growing notably over the past decades and are projected to continue to do so in the foreseeable future (Conkova & Van den Broek, 2024).

Family patterns in these groups have been marked by earlier transitions to marriage and high divorce rates (De Valk, Liefbroer, Esveldt, & Henkens, 2004; Van Huis & Steenhof, 2003). Dupont et al. (2021) noted that, at least in the Netherlands' neighboring country Belgium, remarriage rates were high among Turkish and Moroccan migrants. In addition, these two migrant groups have been also characterized by very high fertility (Garssen & Nicolaas, 2008). Although these rates have declined substantially over time, they have remained somewhat higher than those of the native Dutch population (Çayci, Zemouri, & Van den Broek, 2023; Geel, Nicolaas, & Van Roon, 2024). These demographic idiosyncrasies may affect the likelihood of kinlessness in later life. This is particularly important given that, compared to their native Dutch counterparts without a migration background, older non-European migrants in the Netherlands score poorly on a broad range of health indicators (Conkova & Lindenberg, 2018; Reus-Pons, Kibele, & Janssen, 2017; Van den Broek, 2024a) and that their norms of filial obligation tend to be stronger (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2012). Consequently, members of these groups may rely particularly strongly on close kin to have care needs met.

Third, we use full population data rather than survey data to provide a more accurate description of kinlessness. Most previous studies rely on surveys, which may yield biased estimates of the proportion of adults without a partner or children, as they typically focus on community-dwelling populations. Since kinlessness is a risk factor for nursing home entry (Plick, Ankuda, Mair, Husain, & Ornstein, 2021), excluding institutionalized individuals likely underestimates its prevalence.

Data and methods

We draw on administrative data from the Netherlands available through Statistics Netherlands' System of Social-Statistical Datasets (Bakker, Van Rooijen, & Van Toor, 2014) and the family network modules for the years 2009-2023 that Van der Laan et al. (2023) created based on the administrative registers. Following prior work (e.g., Pittavino et al., 2025; Tosi & Van den Broek, 2025), we define kinlessness as the combination of being childless and not having a partner. In addition to presenting absolute numbers of kinless older adults and crude kinlessness rates, i.e., the number of kinless individuals per 1,000 persons age 65+, for every year from 2009 to 2023, we calculated age standardized kinlessness.

Summary of main results

Figure 1 shows considerable increases in the Dutch population over the 2009-2023 period in the absolute numbers of older men and women living without a partner. Increases in the absolute numbers of older people without living children were smaller. There were only rather modest increases in the absolute numbers of kinless older adults.

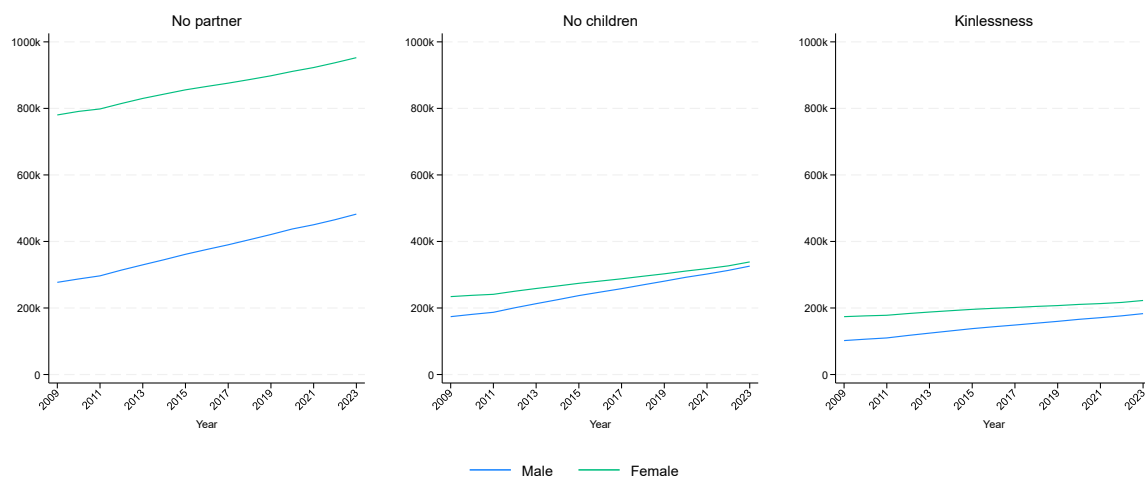


Figure 1. Trends in living without a partner, absence of living children and kinlessness among women and men aged 65+; full population; absolute numbers.

Moving to relative terms rather than absolute numbers, Figure 2 shows that, for the full population, the likelihood of kinlessness increased slightly for men over the 2009-2023 period, whereas it decreased for women. Few differences between age-standardized and crude kinlessness rates were found for the full population. Note that kinlessness rates estimated based on our administrative data were clearly higher than earlier estimates based on survey data (5.2% in 2018; Pittavino et al., 2025), underscoring that selectivity (either by design (e.g., sampling only community-dwelling older adults) or through selective unit non-response) can lead to downward bias in estimating kinlessness rates when relying on surveys.

Kinlessness in three of the four non-European migrant groups considered differed notably from the results reported for the full population. The prevalence of kinlessness was considerably lower among Turkish-born and Moroccan-born older adults in the Netherlands. In contrast, kinlessness was highly prevalent among women and, particularly, men of Dutch-Caribbean origin.

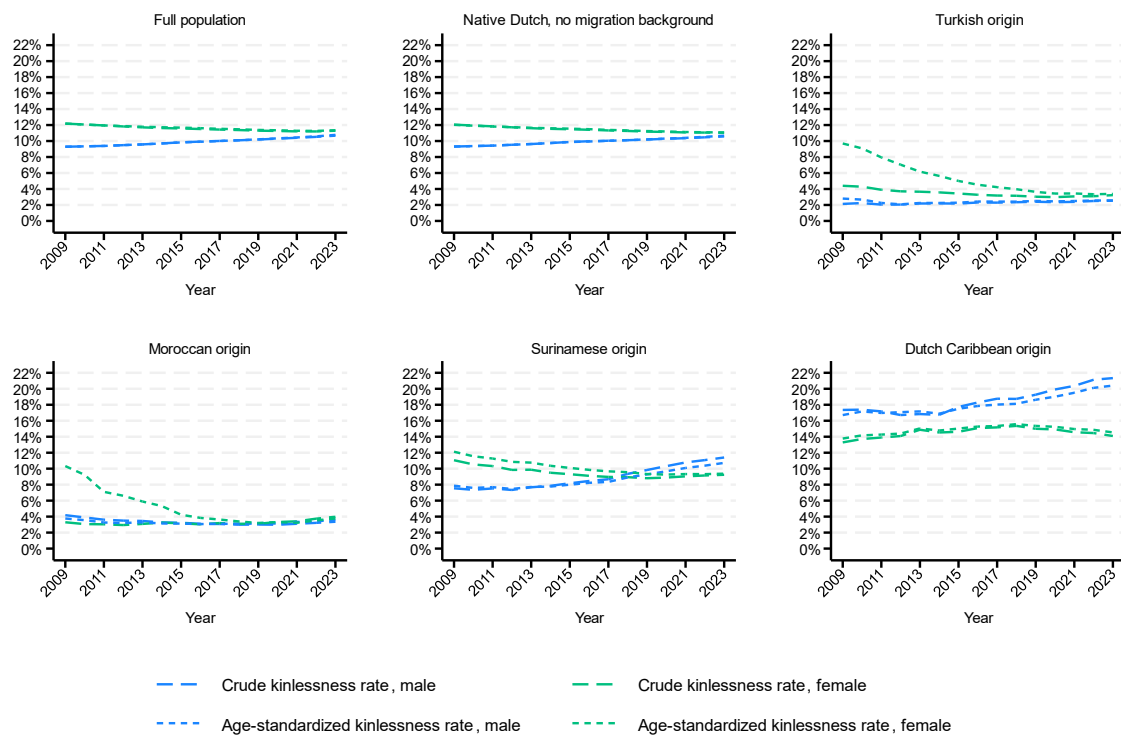


Figure 2. Crude and age standardised kinlessness rates for women and men aged 65+ by year; full population and by ethnic group.