

Residential independence of older people in Spain. An approximation based on an analysis of households¹

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Introduction

Older people households are currently undergoing a great transformation in Spain. Their number is rising—as a consequence of the aging of population—and their structure and composition are diversifying. The increasing life expectancy at old ages and the improved health conditions of older people are leading to greater residential independence. Also, the decrease in fertility, together with rising childlessness and an increase in the breaking of unions, are giving rise to a greater variety of forms of cohabitation at old ages.

The growing number of single-person households, the increasing presence of couples with no other live-in persons at home and the formation of complex households are all a reflection of the growth of the population who find themselves in the latest stages of their family-life course. Life expectancy rose continuously throughout the 20th century and it has not stopped growing in the 21st century. The differences in average life expectancy between men and women lead to the presence of a greater proportion of widowed women at older ages and to greater demographic weight of single-parent households. However, in the last decades, there has been a significant evolution that should also be stressed: the life expectancy gap between men and women has started shrinking (Meslé, F., 2006; González Salgado et al., 2018), which is checking the growth of single-parent households, both for men and for women between 65 and 80 years of age, and is bringing about an increase in the number of older persons living in union (Rogeró, J., 2015) and, in many instances, an extension of the ‘empty-nest’ condition.

The improvement of older people’s health has not only caused an increase of life expectancy, but also of the number of years that people live in good health; and this has led to an increase of their autonomy and residential independence (Rojo-Pérez; F., Fernández-Mayoralas, G. 2018). It is only when disability, immobility and advanced old age arrive that people stop living in their usual home. To this evolution, it must be added that there has been a broad spread of retirement and welfare pensions in Spain, which has granted older people greater financial and residential independence (Wolf, D. 1995). It must also be highlighted that there exists a large proportion of elderly persons who own their place of dwelling, to which they feel strongly attached by an extended time of residence and the presence in their environment of well-known and highly appreciated neighbours; this, together with their need for autonomy and residential privacy and independence, makes them reluctant to leave their homes (López Doblas, J.; Díaz Conde, M.P., 2013).

The socioeconomic traits of the elderly are also determinants of their ways of cohabitation (Miret, P., Zueras, P., 2015). The availability of financial resources encourages the preservation of residential independence, and so does the possession of a high educational level (Palloni, A., 2001). In general, a higher educational level is connected with greater life expectancy free from disabilities.

Factors such as the number of children affect the probability of living with one (or more) of one’s descendants in the old age. Thus, having descendants has a buffering effect against living alone at older ages (Reher, D.; Requena, M., 2017). On the contrary, separation and divorce negatively affect the chance to live with one’s descendants (Albertini, M., Garriga, A., 2011).

All these processes, which are common throughout the Western world, display certain specificities in Southern Europe and, more specifically, in Spain, where several studies show the effects on such specificities of strong family ties (Reher, D., 1998) and the establishment of a welfare state (Esping-Andersen, G., 2016).

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Objectives

In this paper, we study the forms of cohabitation of people older than 65 based on the analysis of household types in Spain and on the observation of such variables as sex, age (above/under the age of 80), marital status, level of education, forms of housing tenure, and municipality size, and using as a source the Household Continuous Survey 2018—complemented with data from previous censuses—, in order to contribute to the determination of the factors connected with older people’s residential independence.

Methodology and sources

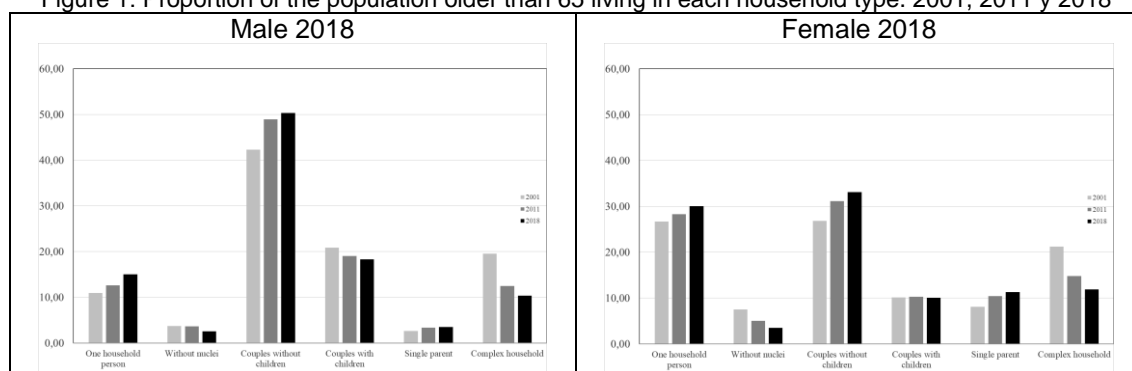
Our source in this study is the microdata comprised in the Household Continuous Survey [Encuesta Continua de Hogares] for year 2018. These include information about social and demographic variables of both households and the people making them up: marital status, educational level, form of housing tenure and family relationships. One of the main limitations of our source is the short time interval that it covers (from 2013 on), which makes it unsuitable for the study of changing patterns. For this reason, it is complemented with data coming from the 2001 and 2011 censuses. The main advantage of the Survey is that the information it provides is updated for year 2018, which means an improvement when compared with the decennial periodicity of the censuses.

In the first section, we compare the evolution of the elderly population living in different types of household from 2011 to 2018; then, we characterize each type of household by the basic sociodemographic traits of the elder people living in them; finally, we use logit regression to analyse the propensity of older people to form different types of household as a function of the aforementioned variables.

Results

The initial results of our analysis of households show an increase in residential independence of older persons. People older than 65 live mostly in childless-couple households, with more than 50 percent of men and 33 percent of women living in such a type of household according to the Household Continuous Survey (see table 1; figure 1).

Figure 1: Proportion of the population older than 65 living in each household type. 2001, 2011 y 2018



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses and microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018

For men, the most common form of residence is to live in a childless-couple household, followed by living in a household with a couple and children (18 percent of men live in this type of household). For women, on the contrary, it is single-person households that take second place in our ranking, with a proportion similar to that of living in a childless-couple household: over 30 percent of women live in households with no other live-in person.

Table1: Distribution of the population older than 65 by household type. 2001, 2011, 2018

	2001	2011	2018		2001	2011	2018
One person household	10,94	12,58	15,11	One person household	26,67	28,31	29,80
Without nuclei	3,72	3,66	2,21	Without nuclei	7,47	5,04	3,61
Couple without children	42,28	48,91	50,89	Couple without children	26,84	31,16	33,10
Couple with children	20,84	19,05	18,09	Couple with children	10,15	10,25	10,03
Single parent	2,65	3,32	3,68	Single parent	8,09	10,43	11,20
Complex household	19,57	12,48	10,02	Complex household	21,19	14,82	12,25
Total	100,00	100,00	100,00	Total	100,00	100,00	100,00

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses and microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018

The changes that took place between 2001 and 2018 show: (a) a rise in the number of childless couples, which can be partly explained by the increase in the number of years that people live without the decease of their couple taking place, with the consequent extension of the empty-nest stage; (b) a rise in the occurrence of single-person households, which may reflect the longer duration of the living-alone stage at the end of life; (c) a slight increase in the number of single-parent households; (d) a fall in the number of complex and multiple households, which amounts to a greater incidence of residential independence.

Men and women follow differentiated residential patterns throughout their life courses (Gielverd, J.; de Valk, H.; Blommesteija, M. 2000), patterns that have gradually evolved over the last two decades. The residential patterns of men (table 2) show that they live mainly in households made up of couples with children until the age of retirement and, according to our data, this stage of life has only extended in time: up to the age of 60-65 in 2001 (Population Census), and up to the age of 65-69 in 2018 (Continuous Household Survey). After that age, the male population lives mostly in childless-couple households, which may reflect an empty-nest condition. It is from the age of 80 on that we witness a decrease in the proportion of men living with their partner and a rise in the incidence of complex households (extended and multiple ones), which shows an strategy of “family reunification” when the lack of autonomy derived from old age becomes evident. If the proportion of men older than 80 living in complex households was 23.53 percent in 2001, this went down by a half in 2018, to only 11.8 percent, according to the data from the Continuous Household Survey. As age increases, the proportion of men living in single-person households rises too; additionally, this went up from 13.95 percent of men over 75 in 2001 to 17.02 in 2018, which only highlights the important incidence of residential independence among older people in Spain.

In the case of women, their residential patterns are different from those of men. Until the ages of 60-65, the main type of household is that formed by a couple with children. From that moment on, the female population lives mostly in childless-couple households: whether in 2001 the proportion of women living with their husband or partner was prevalent between the ages of 65 and 75, with a rate of 33.67 percent of women, in 2018 this type of household extended its preeminence to the ages of 60-80, and its proportion rose to 43 percent.

Contrary to men, the dominant form of residence of women between the ages of 75 and 90 is the single-person household; 34.93 of women lived by themselves 2001. In 2018, such dominance moved up to the ages of 85-89, where the incidence of single-person households was 42.10 percent. Women’s greater life expectancy may explain this large disparity between both sexes, since a large proportion of these women living alone were widows (López Villanueva, C., Pujadas, I. 2018). The rate of complex households among women was over 30 percent for ages older than 80 in 2001; in 2018, it was under 18 percent.

Table 2: Proportion of people over 65 (5-year clusters) by household type. 2001 y 2018

Male 2001										Female 2001									
	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90 y más	65-80	>80	>85		65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90 y más	65-80	>80	>85
One household person	8.56	9.69	11.58	14.64	18.61	22.94	9.70	16.68	10.94	15.74	23.88	32.51	38.18	37.84	30.74	23.23	36.96	26.67	
Without nuclei	3.31	3.57	3.68	4.13	5.15	7.40	3.49	4.78	3.72	4.99	6.44	8.05	9.70	11.37	13.88	6.35	10.84	7.47	
Couples without children	35.95	45.01	49.30	46.81	38.18	23.09	42.40	41.74	42.28	33.64	33.71	27.07	16.75	7.99	2.47	31.82	11.91	26.84	
Couples with children	30.56	21.09	14.57	10.67	8.00	5.13	23.33	9.30	20.84	19.45	11.07	5.96	3.13	1.43	0.48	12.80	2.21	10.15	
Single parent	2.42	2.23	2.47	3.20	4.43	6.92	2.36	3.36	2.65	7.75	7.51	7.82	8.64	9.71	10.94	7.69	9.30	8.39	
Complex household	19.17	18.41	18.40	20.55	25.63	34.52	18.72	23.53	19.57	18.43	17.38	18.60	23.60	31.66	52.43	18.12	30.40	21.19	
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Male 2018										Female 2018									
	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90 y más	65-80	>80	>85		65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90 y más	65-80	>80	>85
One household person	13.30	13.86	13.00	16.57	22.21	27.85	13.35	19.80	15.05	18.39	24.37	31.27	38.01	42.10	37.60	23.91	39.28	29.05	
Without nuclei	2.12	1.82	2.11	2.27	3.87	3.58	1.95	2.95	2.21	2.14	2.80	3.16	4.54	5.56	8.89	2.84	5.63	3.64	
Couples without children	46.70	54.88	56.51	54.09	45.22	29.43	51.92	48.13	50.92	43.28	42.84	36.28	25.29	13.94	4.60	41.24	17.95	33.45	
Couples with children	24.51	18.67	16.04	12.95	10.38	9.04	20.42	11.64	18.11	17.20	11.89	9.23	5.64	3.00	1.20	13.23	4.00	10.14	
Single parent	3.21	2.57	3.25	4.28	5.66	11.41	3.00	5.62	3.63	8.89	8.96	9.77	13.48	16.62	19.99	9.15	15.65	11.32	
Complex household	10.16	8.60	9.09	9.85	12.66	18.68	9.37	11.87	10.03	10.09	9.14	10.28	13.04	18.79	27.73	9.82	17.49	12.38	
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses and microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018. INE

People’s marital status is another one of the determinants of the type of household they live in at an old age, and it also affects the differences between men and women. The most common marital status of men older than 65 is married (76.54 percent); women, on their part, are split between married ones (48 percent) and widows (41.24 percent). Half the elderly men (49.73 percent) live in childless-couple households and are married (table 3). As for women, slightly under one third of them (32.74 percent) live in single-person households and are married; over one fifth of them (22.37 percent) live in single-person households and are widows.

However, despite all the differences, when we analyse the proportion of the population by marital status and household type (figure 2), we perceive a symmetrical tendency, both in men and women, to set up homes.

Table 3: Distribution of the population older than 65 by marital status and household type with respect to their age group. 2017

Male 2001					
	Single	Married	Widower	Divorced	Total
One household person	3,15	0,95	6,01	0,83	10,94
Without nuclei	2,04	0,45	1,05	0,20	3,72
Couple without children	0,20	41,73	0,21	0,13	42,28
Couple with children	0,05	20,68	0,05	0,05	20,84
Single parents	0,16	0,20	2,20	0,09	2,65
Complex household	1,38	14,61	3,35	0,22	19,57
Total	7,00	78,62	12,86	1,53	100,00

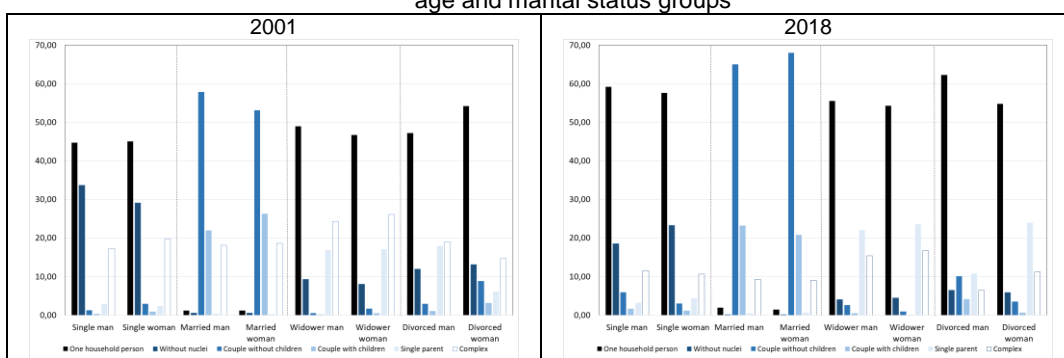
Female 2001					
	Single	Married	Widower	Divorced	Total
One household person	3,93	0,54	21,61	0,59	26,67
Without nuclei	2,97	0,26	4,10	0,15	7,47
Couple without children	0,11	26,46	0,23	0,04	26,84
Couple with children	0,03	10,05	0,06	0,01	10,15
Single parents	0,25	0,17	7,44	0,22	8,09
Complex household	1,52	8,30	10,73	0,24	20,79
Total	8,81	45,77	44,18	1,25	100,00

Male 2018					
	Single	Married	Widower	Divorced	Total
One household person	4,27	1,46	6,48	2,84	15,05
Without nuclei	1,34	0,11	0,47	0,29	2,21
Couple without children	0,43	49,79	0,30	0,46	50,92
Couple with children	0,12	17,75	0,05	0,19	18,11
Single parents	0,23	0,39	2,58	0,49	3,69
Complex household	0,83	7,10	1,80	0,30	10,03
Total	7,22	76,54	11,68	4,56	100,00

Female 2018					
	Single	Married	Widower	Divorced	Total
One household person	3,69	0,68	22,37	2,31	29,05
Without nuclei	1,49	0,05	1,85	0,25	3,64
Couple without children	0,19	32,74	0,37	0,15	33,45
Couple with children	0,07	10,01	0,03	0,03	10,14
Single parents	0,28	0,31	9,72	1,01	11,32
Complex household	0,68	4,33	6,90	0,47	12,38
Total	6,41	48,13	41,24	4,22	100,00

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses and microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018. INE

Figure 2: Proportion of population older than 65 by marital status and household type with respect to their age and marital status groups



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses and microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018. INE

The initial results obtained from the characterization of households of people above 65 years of age (table 4) show: (a) there is high feminization and advanced aging of single-person households, with a strong presence of these in rural municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants and urban centres with over 500.000; these people show a tendency to live in rental houses and have higher educational levels; (b) childless-couple households have little incidence among the oldest sectors of the population; they are more common among men than among women, with a prevalence of housing ownership; (c) households of couples with children are more common among the male population and the population under 80 living in a home of their ownership with a mortgage still pending to be paid off; (d) complex households are prevalent among women and are made up of older people; they show greater incidence in small and middle-sized municipalities and their residents have changed their place of residence later than 2009.

Table 5: Logit regression of household types of people older than 65 by municipality size, educational level, year of arrival, form of housing tenure, nationality. 2018

Resident population in single-person households				Resident population in couples without children households			
	B	Sig.	Exp(B)		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
>80 years old	0.633	0.000	1.884	>80 years old	-0.670	0.000	0.512
Female	0.864	0.000	2.372	Female	-0.700	0.000	0.496
Municipality size <2000	0.118	0.000	1.125	Municipality size <2000	-0.075	0.000	0.928
Municipality size 2000-10000	-0.029	0.000	0.971	Municipality size 2000-10000	-0.032	0.000	0.968
Municipality size > 500000	0.215	0.000	1.239	Municipality size > 500000	-0.041	0.000	0.960
University education level	0.243	0.000	1.275	University education level	0.018	0.000	1.018
Arrival in 2009 or later	-0.735	0.000	0.480	Arrival in 2009 or later	0.148	0.000	1.159
Home ownership with mortgage	-0.519	0.000	0.595	Home ownership with mortgage	-0.535	0.000	0.586
Rental housing	0.443	0.000	1.558	Rental housing	-0.679	0.000	0.507
Nationality of birth (not Spanish)	-0.131	0.000	0.877	Nationality of birth (not Spanish)	-0.418	0.000	0.658
Constante	-2.007	0.000	0.134	Constante	0.314	0.000	1.368

Resident population in couples with children households				Resident population in complex households			
	B	Sig.	Exp(B)		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
>80 years old	-0.917	0.000	0.400	>80 years old	0.598	0.000	1.819
Female	-0.637	0.000	0.529	Female	0.220	0.000	1.246
Municipality size <2000	-0.026	0.000	0.975	Municipality size <2000	0.033	0.000	1.034
Municipality size 2000-10000	-0.106	0.000	0.899	Municipality size 2000-10000	0.201	0.000	1.223
Municipality size > 500000	-0.115	0.000	0.891	Municipality size > 500000	-0.216	0.000	0.806
University education level	-0.027	0.000	0.973	University education level	-0.297	0.000	0.743
Arrival in 2009 or later	-0.737	0.000	0.478	Arrival in 2009 or later	1.104	0.000	3.017
Home ownership with mortgage	0.189	0.000	1.208	Home ownership with mortgage	1.007	0.000	2.738
Rental housing	-0.159	0.000	0.853	Rental housing	0.501	0.000	1.651
Nationality of birth (not Spanish)	0.089	0.000	1.093	Nationality of birth (not Spanish)	0.766	0.000	2.151
Constante	-1.257	0.000	0.284	Constante	-2.284	0.000	0.102

Source: Compiled by the authors based on microdata from the Household Continuous Survey 2018. INE

Conclusions

The values show a tendency towards residential independency of older people, with an increase in their propensity to form single-person, childless-couple and single-parent households, which extend their duration in time, while complex households show a clear decline. Despite all the changes, we see a great presence of family households in the last stages of the old age, although “family reunification” takes place at increasingly older ages.

Further, more detailed analysis of the characteristics of older people’s households will allow us to deepen our knowledge of the incidence of residential independence at older ages. In the future, the continuation of our study will give us a chance to deepen our explanatory analysis of the determining factors that contribute to the formation of each different type of households.

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