The Demography of Living Alone in Mid-Life: A Typology of Solo-Living in the United Kingdom

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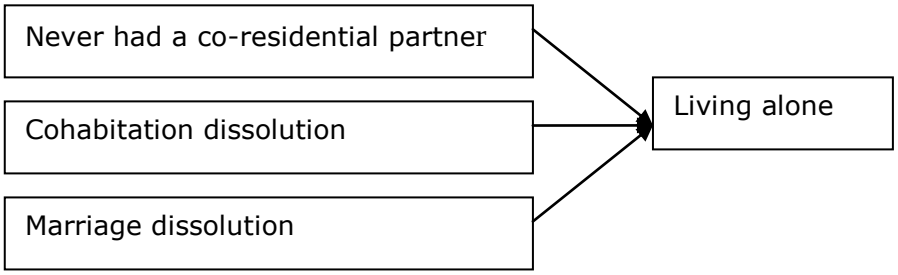
Abstract

Living alone in mid-life is on the rise in the United Kingdom, especially among men. The delay of family formation, increases in partnership dissolution rates and the rising incidence of childlessness are probably key factors in explaining the rise in living alone in mid-life over time. Demographic, economic and sociological theories have related these changes to the rise in women's economic independence and to ideational changes, such as individualisation and a stronger emphasis on self-actualisation. Although overlooked in the literature, the growing economic uncertainty facing a group of economically disadvantaged men is likely to be equally important. However, there has been scant attention for changes in the living arrangements of the middle-aged in the literature, reflecting a gap in our knowledge of this specific stage in the life course. The main aims of this study are therefore to examine the trajectories into living alone in mid-life and how these differ by gender and socio-economic status, as well as to develop a typology of those living alone. We first use data from the General Household Survey (GHS) for the years 1984-2009 to describe changes over time in living alone. We then use data from Understanding Society (USoc) to investigate the partnership history, kin availability and socio-economic status of middle-aged (age 35 to 64) men and women living alone. We examine the degree of heterogeneity in the population living alone by making a distinction between never and ever partnered men and women living on their own. In the final part of the analysis, we use Latent Class Analysis to construct a typology of those living alone based on partnership history, socio-economic status, gender and age.

1. Introduction

Between 1961 and 2010 the percentage of British households that consist of only one person increased from 12% to 29%, around 7.5 million households today (Beaumont, 2011). Historically the rise in one-person households has predominantly been driven by population ageing and increasing life expectancy. However, in recent years, the increase in living alone has been greatest among those below pensionable age (Chandler *et al.*, 2004) and especially among middle-aged men (Beaujouan & Ní Bhrolcháin, 2011; Demey *et al.*, 2011). There is a great deal of heterogeneity in the routes into solo-living (see Figure 1) and it is unclear to which extent living alone is a result of choice or constraint, the postponement of partnership formation, or of partnership dissolution. This paper examines the changing demography of living alone in mid-life and identifies whether there have been shifts in the dominance of different sub-groups of those living alone – for example whether there has been a rise in highly educated young women pursuing careers, or whether the increase is associated with less educated men who are more likely to be living in poor health and economic inactivity.

FIGURE 1. *Routes into solo-living*



2. Theoretical background

Historically, women's economic dependency upon a male breadwinner meant that women could less afford to live alone. However, increases in women's participation in the labour force and improved relative earnings meant that there are now decreased economic returns to marriage (Becker, 1981). According to Second Demographic Transition theory (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995), changing gender roles coupled with increased secularization, a shift towards individualization and post-materialism has resulted in the postponement of marriage, increased

marital dissolution, smaller family sizes and increased living alone. In the sociological literature, solo-living has often been cited as an end product of increasing individualisation and fragmentation of the life course (see for example, Giddens, 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). As discussed by Wasoff *et al.* (2006) and Jamieson *et al.* (2009), commentators have portrayed solo-living in both optimistic and pessimistic terms. For instance, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) emphasize the way in which more individualised and atomised existences make people more desperate for love and coupledom, but, at the same time, changing social pressures have made it increasingly difficult for partnerships to live up to individual's expectations. In contrast, authors such as Giddens (1991) argue that living alone reflects the desire of individuals (especially women) to develop more equal and deeper relationships and to redraw of boundaries in personal life.

The theoretical literature has highlighted women as the key to the change in patterns of solo-living, for example citing the increased participation of women in higher education and careers. But, as Jamieson *et al.* (2009) highlight, more men live alone than women. Furthermore, the characteristics of men living alone differ from women – they tend to be younger and are more likely to have never married. The role of men's economic uncertainty in the postponement of marriage was highlighted over 20 years ago by Oppenheimer (1988) and remains especially relevant today in the context of high youth unemployment and labour market uncertainty (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). More recent research in the UK has shown that transitions to partnership formation are delayed for a sub-group of economically disadvantaged young men, who either remain living with their parents or live alone (Stone *et al.*, 2011). The United Kingdom is quite distinct among European countries in the extent to which childbearing takes place outside co-residential unions meaning that many young men who live alone are in fact non-resident fathers. At the same time, household transitions following partnership dissolution are highly gendered, with women more likely to co-reside with children from dissolved unions. We suggest therefore, that more insight into the processes involved for both genders is required. In this paper we focus on the stages in the life course where couple families predominate and hence examine solo-living among men and women aged 35 to 64.

3. Research Questions

This paper sets out to address the following research questions:

1. What are the partnership trajectories into living alone in mid-life? What proportion has never partnered, ever partnered and ever re-partnered?;
2. What proportion has children?;
3. What are the socio-economic characteristics of never and ever partnered men and women living alone in mid-life?;
4. Can different types of middle-aged people living alone be empirically distinguished?

4. Data and methods

The analysis is based on two key data sources. The first, the General Household Survey (GHS), is a nationally representative repeated cross-sectional survey. Information concerning residents is collected within the household grid. The advantage of the GHS is that it allows us to examine, over a considerable period of time (1984-2007), the current living arrangements of adults.

The second data source, Understanding Society (USoc), is a household panel survey aiming to follow up 40,000 households annually (http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/understanding-society). All adults aged 16 and over are interviewed. In wave one, conducted in 2009-10, various socio-economic information including economic activity status, occupation, educational attainment, and housing circumstances, was collected. In addition, respondents were asked to recall the dates of birth of their children and asked to provide the dates of entry and exit from any co-residential partnerships that they had. Finally, respondents were also asked about their current relationship with kin and non-kin outside of the household. Using these data we are able to distinguish those living alone according to their socio-economic background, trajectories into living alone, and whether they have any non-resident children.

The first three research questions are answered using descriptive analyses from USoc. For the fourth question we undertake a cluster analysis of data from USoc. Latent Class Analysis (Clogg, 1995; Hagenaars & McCutcheon, 2002) allows us to test whether different typologies of solo-living can be identified *e.g.* “never married educated, high earner females”; ”economically disadvantaged never married male”; “young, unemployed non-resident father”. The indicators used to identify

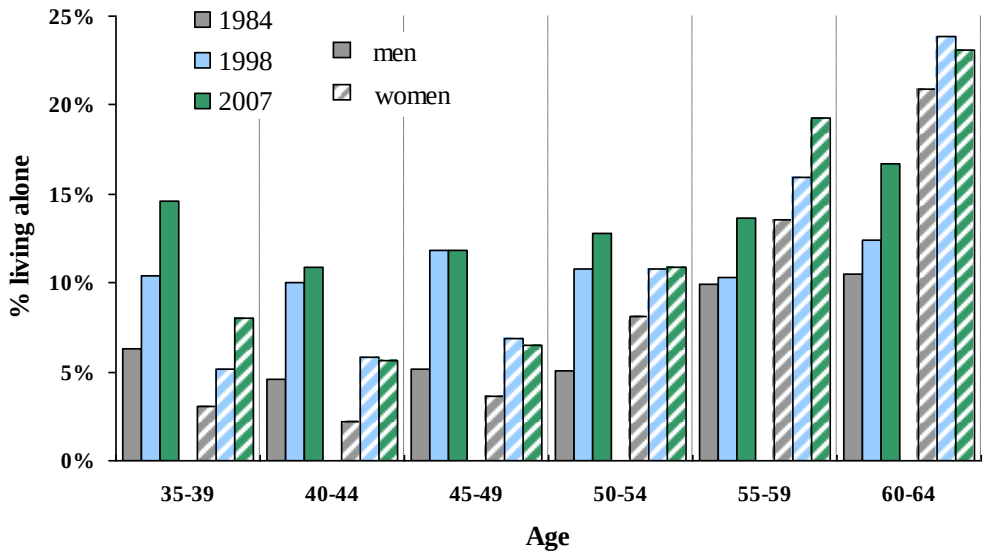
clusters are age group, partnership history, non-residential children, educational level, current economic activity, housing tenure and general health.

5. Results

5.1. Trends in living alone over time

The prevalence of solo-living in mid-life has increased for all groups between 1984 and 2007, but particularly among men. For example, among men aged 35-39 the percentage living alone increased from 6 per cent to 15 per cent. It is not just younger cohorts who are increasingly living alone – among men aged 55-59 an increase from 10 per cent in 1984 to 14 per cent in 2007 is seen. Among women aged in their 60s less change is seen reflecting the higher marriage rates for cohorts in the 1940s as compared with the 1920s cohorts.

FIGURE 2. *Percentage living alone in mid-life by age and gender, 1984, 1998 and 2007*



Source: General Household Survey.

5.2. Partnership history

Table 1 shows the partnership histories of middle-aged men and women living alone at the time of the survey by ten-year age groups. At age 35 to 44, one third of those living alone have never been in a co-residential partnership, and, amongst those who have ever partnered, the majority have ever

cohabited but have never been married. Amongst those who have ever been married, there are more who have never cohabited than there are who have ever cohabited.[1] Having had multiple partnerships is relatively common amongst those living alone in early middle age: more than one third (36 per cent) of men and almost one third of women (30 per cent) in this age group have experienced more than one partnership. These findings illustrate that the partnership histories of those living alone in early mid-life are diverse, and also that this diversity would not be captured by focussing on legal marital status. For instance, at least three quarters are single, but most have ever experienced a co-residential partnership, and there will most likely also be a group who have cohabited after a marriage who may describe themselves as currently single rather than separated, divorced or widowed. The analysis also shows that, apart from a small difference in re-partnering, the partnership histories of men and women in this particular age group are very similar.

In the 45 to 54 age group, more men than women living alone have never partnered (25 versus 19 per cent) or have ever cohabited but never married (29 versus 16 per cent), while substantially more women than men have ever been married (65 versus 47 per cent). Amongst the ever married, more than twice as many men, and more than three times as many women have never cohabited. There are two possible reasons for the latter gender-difference: first, men may be more likely to experience a free-standing cohabitation before marrying, and second, men may be more likely to re-partner. Indeed, more men than women in this age group have experienced more than one partnership (37 versus 30 per cent respectively).

[1] It is important to note that for those who have ever been married and ever experienced a cohabitational episode, this cohabitation can have occurred before or after the marriage. In other words, they have cohabited, dissolved the cohabitation, and then married; they have re-partnered after marital dissolution; or a combination of both.

TABLE 1. *Partnership history of those living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) and gender (column percentages)*

	Males				Females			
	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
Never partnered	31	25	24	26	33	19	11	18
Ever partnered	69	75	76	74	67	81	89	82
Once	*31*	*38*	*46*	*39*	*36*	*50*	*55*	*50*
More than once	*36*	*37*	*28*	*34*	*30*	*30*	*34*	*32*
N	547	632	586	1765	340	513	801	1654
Never partnered	31	25	24	27	33	19	11	18
Ever cohabited & never married	43	29	13	28	41	16	5	15
Ever married	26	47	63	46	27	65	84	67
Ever married & never cohabited	*16*	*32*	*51*	*33*	*16*	*51*	*69*	*53*
Ever married & ever cohabited	*10*	*14*	*12*	*12*	*11*	*13*	*15*	*14*
N	547	632	585	1764	340	513	801	1654

Notes: weighted percentages and unweighted sample sizes, estimates may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding, the category "Ever partnered" includes those with missing values on the number of previous partnerships and the category "Ever married" includes those with missing values on previous cohabitation status.

Source: Understanding Society (2009-10).

In late middle age (age 55 to 64), where living alone is more common among women than among men, gender-differences in partnership histories are most marked. More than twice as many men as women have never partnered (24 versus 11 per cent respectively) or have ever cohabited but have never been married (13 versus 5 per cent respectively), while more than eight out of ten women have ever been married, compared to six out of ten men. Few of the ever married have ever cohabited, although it is a more common experience among ever married men than among ever married women. Of those living alone in this age group, more than one fourth experienced more than one partnership.

5.3. Non-residential children

Table 2 shows the proportion of middle-aged men and women living alone who have at least one non-residential child. We make a distinction between those with no non-residential children, at least one non-residential child aged under 16, and those with one or more non-residential children all aged over 16.

At age 35 to 44, one third of men living alone have at least one non-residential child, of which most have at least one non-residential child aged under 16. In contrast, less than one fifth of women living alone in this age group have a non-residential child and very few have a non-residential child aged under 16. These findings suggest that men and women living alone in early mid-life are predominantly childless, especially women, and also that dependent children are more likely to live with their mother than their father. Those women who are living alone and have children probably entered motherhood at a relatively young age. At age 45 to 54, one half of men and women living alone have non-residential children. Of those who have at least one non-residential child, one third of men have at least one aged under 16 but very few women have. This suggests that these women make the transition into living alone once their children leave the maternal home. In the 55 to 64 age group, the proportion without non-residential children is almost double as high for men than for women (48 versus 27 per cent respectively). This is line with the finding of the previous section that considerably more men than women living alone in late middle age have never partnered.

TABLE 2. *Percentage of those living alone with non-residential children, by ten-year age groups (35-64) and gender (column percentages)*

	Males				Females			
	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
None	68	54	48	56	81	48	27	44
Yes, at least one under 16	26	17	3	15	7	2	1	2
Yes, none under 16	7	29	49	29	12	51	72	54
N	549	633	585	1767	342	513	801	1656

Notes: weighted percentages and unweighted sample sizes.

Source: Understanding Society (2009-10).

5.4. Socio-economic status

Table 3 and Table 4 show the socio-economic characteristics of never and ever partnered middle-aged men and women living alone. The figures suggest that we can differentiate between two groups of men living alone in mid-life: on the one hand, more never than ever partnered men aged 35 to 44 are higher educated and are contributing towards their current employer's pension scheme. On the other hand, less never partnered than ever partnered men aged 45 to 64 are working full-time, while more have no qualifications. For instance, less than three out of ten never partnered men aged

55 to 64 are working full-time, compared to four of ten ever partnered men. Nevertheless, more never partnered than ever partnered men aged 45 to 64 own their home.

Differences in socio-economic status between never and ever partnered middle-aged women are more marked than among men. In particular, a considerably higher proportion of never partnered solo-living women aged 45 to 64 are higher educated, are owner-occupiers, and have an occupational pension than ever partnered solo-living women in this age group. This is in sharp contrast with the socio-economic characteristics of middle-aged men living alone: the findings thus suggest that never partnered men living alone in later mid-life are considerably more economically disadvantaged than women.

TABLE 3. *Socio-economic and health status of never and ever partnered males living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) (column percentages)*

	Never partnered				Ever partnered			
	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
Educational level								
No qualifications	18	23	41	27	14	18	33	22
Some qualifications	48	52	44	48	62	59	46	56
Higher education	34	24	15	25	23	23	21	22
N	175	156	144	475	372	475	442	1289
Current economic activity								
Employed full-time	68	56	27	51	66	65	40	57
Employed part-time	4	7	11	7	4	5	10	7
Not employed	28	37	62	41	30	29	50	36
N	174	154	143	471	368	471	438	1277
Housing tenure								
Owner-occupier	53	58	60	57	49	52	51	51
Social housing	26	25	34	28	24	25	32	27
Rented	21	17	6	15	28	23	18	22
N	174	156	143	473	371	475	440	1286
General health								
Not in good health	20	30	39	29	23	31	39	31
In good health	80	70	61	71	77	69	61	69
N	175	156	144	475	372	474	440	1286

Notes: weighted percentages and unweighted sample sizes.

Source: Understanding Society (2009-10).

TABLE 4. *Socio-economic and health status of never and ever partnered females living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) (column percentages)*

	Never partnered				Ever partnered			
	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
Educational level								
No qualifications	10	18	17	15	11	23	35	28
Some qualifications	45	38	57	47	47	59	51	52
Higher education	45	44	26	38	42	19	14	20
N	114	104	88	306	226	409	713	1348
Current economic activity								
Employed full-time	72	58	30	53	67	57	30	44
Employed part-time	8	11	12	10	9	11	15	13
Not employed	20	31	59	36	24	32	55	44
N	112	103	88	303	225	407	707	1339
Housing tenure								
Owner-occupier	60	67	82	69	51	52	62	57
Social housing	21	24	17	20	24	32	29	29
Rented	20	9	2	10	25	16	9	14
N	112	104	88	304	226	409	711	1346
General health								
Not in good health	21	30	28	26	22	34	36	33
In good health	79	70	72	74	78	66	64	67
N	113	104	88	305	226	409	712	1347

Notes: weighted percentages and unweighted sample sizes.

Source: Understanding Society (2009-10).

5.5. Latent class analysis

Finally, we investigate whether different types of people living alone in mid-life can be identified. The method we use for this purpose is Latent Class Analysis (LCA), which is a type of cluster analysis for categorical data. The input variables for the LCA are age groups, partnership history, non-residential children, socio-economic characteristics and health. The analysis consists of two steps: the first step is to determine the number of clusters, while in the second step we are interested in the size and main characteristics of the cluster. We estimate separate models for men and women since we expect that pathways into living alone in mid-life differ in important ways between men and women.

Table 4 and 5 show several criteria for determining the number of clusters for men and women respectively. The most common criterion used in the literature is the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). The optimal cluster solution is given by the model with the lowest BIC. On the basis of this, we arrive at a six-cluster solution for men as well as for women. However, two of the six clusters for women are very similar and to not seem to add substantial information to the five-cluster solution. We will therefore discuss the six-cluster solution for men and the five-cluster solution for women.

TABLE 4. *Latent Class Analysis model overview (men)*

number of clusters	BIC(LL)	Number of parameters	L^2	degrees of freedom	p-value
1	18917.66	12	2880.2171	959	0.00
2	18113.70	25	1981.0116	946	0.00
3	17555.67	38	1327.7421	933	0.00
4	17384.57	51	1061.3926	920	0.00
5	17268.27	64	849.8527	907	0.91
6	17226.10	77	712.4372	894	1.00
7	17257.37	90	648.4559	881	1.00
8	17313.24	103	609.0869	868	1.00
9	17380.54	116	581.1367	855	1.00
10	17446.32	129	551.6765	842	1.00

TABLE 5. *Latent Class Analysis model overview (women)*

number of clusters	BIC(LL)	Number of parameters	L^2	degrees of freedom	p-value
1	15060.37	12	2541.4994	959	0.00
2	13979.59	25	1367.4179	946	0.00
3	13642.68	38	937.1970	933	0.46
4	13576.86	51	778.0790	920	1.00
5	13516.10	64	624.0102	907	1.00
6	13506.86	77	521.4675	894	1.00
7	13575.07	90	496.3707	881	1.00
8	13636.80	103	464.8018	868	1.00
9	13703.51	116	438.2005	855	1.00
10	13770.29	129	411.6844	842	1.00

Tables 6 and 7 show the cluster size and the conditional probabilities for each of the variables and clusters for men and women respectively. For instance, cluster 1 contains 30 per cent of male respondents living alone, and respondents in this cluster have a high probability of being aged 35-44, to have never married, to not have non-residential children, to have some qualifications, to be employed, to be owner-occupiers and to be in good health. Two other clusters which group relatively young men living alone in mid-life are cluster 4 and 5, which contain 13 per cent and 11 per cent of men respectively. The main difference between cluster 1 and 4 is that those in cluster 4 have a higher probability of having ever married and to have at least one non-residential child aged under 16. Cluster 5 mainly groups solo-living men with relatively low socio-economic status and in poor health.

The three remaining clusters mainly groups solo-living men in later mid-life. The largest cluster is cluster 2 (21 per cent) and in this cluster there is a high probability of being aged 55-64, to have ever married, to have at least one non-residential child aged over 16, to have some qualifications, to be employed, to be owner-occupiers and to be in good health. Cluster 6 is relatively similar (10 per cent), but mainly contains those with relatively low socio-economic status and in poor health. The final cluster is cluster 3 which groups 14 per cent of men living alone in mid-life, and in this cluster there is a high probability of being aged 55-64, to have never experienced a co-residential partnered, to have a relatively low socio-economic status and to be in poor health.

For women, cluster 2 corresponds to cluster 1 for men, cluster 1 to cluster 2, and cluster 3 to cluster 6. Interestingly, the cluster analysis groups about 10 per cent of women and in this cluster there is a high probability of being aged 55-64, to have never partnered, to not have non-residential children, to have some qualifications, to not be employed, to be owner-occupiers and to be in good health. The final cluster for women seems to group several smaller groups of women living alone in mid-life with a variety of characteristics.

TABLE 6. *Cluster size and conditional probabilities (men)*

	cluster 1	cluster 2	cluster 3	cluster 4	cluster 5	cluster 6
Cluster size	0.30	0.21	0.14	0.13	0.11	0.10
Age group						
35-44	0.51	0.00	0.03	0.55	0.64	0.01
45-54	0.40	0.41	0.27	0.45	0.35	0.27
55-64	0.09	0.59	0.70	0.00	0.01	0.72
Partnership history						
Never partnered	0.43	0.00	0.67	0.04	0.28	0.01
Ever cohabited & never married	0.42	0.06	0.24	0.29	0.55	0.04
Ever married	0.15	0.94	0.09	0.66	0.16	0.95
Non-residential children						
None	0.99	0.13	1.00	0.01	0.66	0.14
Yes, at least one under 16	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.87	0.21	0.06
Yes, none under 16	0.01	0.83	0.00	0.13	0.14	0.80
Educational level						
No qualifications	0.03	0.21	0.46	0.11	0.43	0.50
Some qualifications	0.57	0.57	0.43	0.71	0.48	0.40
Higher education	0.40	0.22	0.12	0.18	0.09	0.09
Current economic activity						
Employed	0.94	0.81	0.31	0.91	0.06	0.02
Not employed	0.06	0.19	0.69	0.09	0.94	0.98
Housing tenure						
Owner-occupier	0.73	0.69	0.45	0.53	0.03	0.17
Social housing	0.06	0.08	0.46	0.11	0.80	0.68
Rented	0.21	0.23	0.09	0.37	0.17	0.15
General health						
In poor health	0.01	0.02	0.20	0.03	0.29	0.49
Not in poor health	0.99	0.98	0.80	0.97	0.71	0.51

TABLE 7. *Cluster size and conditional probabilities (women)*

	cluster 1	cluster 2	cluster 3	cluster 4	cluster 5
Cluster size	0.36	0.24	0.21	0.10	0.09
Age group					
35-44	0.01	0.56	0.00	0.01	0.54
45-54	0.31	0.35	0.22	0.22	0.40
55-64	0.68	0.09	0.78	0.77	0.06
Partnership history					
Never partnered	0.00	0.38	0.00	0.61	0.28
Ever cohabited & never married	0.03	0.38	0.04	0.09	0.32
Ever married	0.96	0.24	0.96	0.31	0.40
Non-residential children					
None	0.11	0.97	0.07	1.00	0.49
Yes, at least one under 16	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.15
Yes, none under 16	0.88	0.02	0.91	0.00	0.36
Educational level					
No qualifications	0.13	0.01	0.72	0.20	0.38
Some qualifications	0.69	0.47	0.27	0.53	0.52
Higher education	0.18	0.52	0.01	0.27	0.10
Current economic activity					
Employed	0.75	0.96	0.11	0.28	0.26
Not employed	0.25	0.04	0.89	0.72	0.74
Housing tenure					
Owner-occupier	0.76	0.77	0.26	0.83	0.01
Social housing	0.15	0.05	0.60	0.17	0.73
Rented	0.09	0.18	0.14	0.00	0.26
General health					
In poor health	0.05	0.01	0.38	0.14	0.38
Not in poor health	0.95	0.99	0.62	0.86	0.62

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