

Research Note

Is it too difficult for young adults to become autonomous?

by Terry Ward, H el ene Calers and Manos Matsaganis

Abstract:

Leaving the parental home and establishing a household of their own is a key step to young people gaining autonomy. This process (obviously linked to fertility and demographic trends) is influenced by, and has important implications for, public policy in a variety of areas, including employment, education, housing and social protection.

A closer look at this process shows two distinct phenomena at work that need to be interpreted. On the one hand, the timing of young people leaving home continues to vary considerably between European countries, partly reflecting the persistence of different cultural norms. On the other hand, young people throughout Europe (and beyond) tend to leave home at a later stage than their counterparts a few decades before, possibly indicating common obstacles of an economic nature.

If examined together, these two phenomena suggest complex interactions between cultural norms and economic risks and opportunities shaping individual behaviour. In general, the decision to leave the parental home can be usefully thought of as choice under constraints.

Disentangling the elements of "choice" from those of "constraints" is not an abstract question. To the extent that the decision to leave home is determined by individual preferences, policy intervention to alter individual behaviour would widely be regarded as inappropriate. On the other hand, to the extent that the current situation is mostly the by-product of economic developments and the prevailing policy and institutional environment which frustrate the efforts of young people to achieve autonomy, then policy intervention would seem to be wholly legitimate. In the latter case, the scope for policy makers to facilitate such efforts might be considerable.

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Is it too difficult for young adults to become autonomous?¹

1. The Issue

It has long been assumed that young people attach great value to autonomy, privacy and independence. As a consequence, their desire for emancipation from their parents has been taken as given. In turn, the timing of the decision of young people to leave the parental home was widely thought to follow a “modernisation” pattern.

More specifically, as traditional and “familistic” social norms gave way to more liberal and permissive ones (in short, as societies became more modern), young people were expected to leave home at an earlier age. Besides, as the influence of religion on people’s private lives waned throughout Europe, and all societies became more secularised, a certain degree of convergence was anticipated: as southern countries “modernised”, northern patterns of young people leaving home at an earlier age were expected to become gradually more common.

In practice, the latest evidence (summarised below) tends to contradict the “modernisation of the life course” thesis. Many young Europeans nowadays live with their parents longer than in the case of previous generations. Moreover, this trend seems to be more pronounced in countries where leaving home already tended to occur later than elsewhere, so giving rise to greater divergence rather than convergence between countries.

These facts are striking, and to some extent counterintuitive, but do they justify policy intervention? Does it matter that young people in some countries tend to leave the parental home earlier than in others, or that the average age at leaving home has generally gone up in recent decades?

The answer to the above questions hinges crucially on a better understanding of the forces delaying the decision to leave home. It may well be that the main reason many young people leave home at a later stage than elsewhere (or than in the past) is that families have become more “democratic” and parents less strict. In that case, there would seem to be little scope for policy – indeed, policy intervention to alter individual behaviour could be seen as inappropriate.

If, on the contrary, the current situation is simply the by-product of economic developments (especially in the labour and housing markets), frustrating young persons’ efforts to achieve autonomy, then policy intervention would be legitimate. The case for policy intervention would be strengthened further if wider considerations pointed to the need for action. Such considerations include, in particular, the aim of strengthening economic competitiveness through achieving a better balance between the demand and supply of the skills offered by young people on the labour market and, from a longer-term perspective, facilitating an increase in fertility rates in the face of a prospective decline in population across the EU by making it easier for young people to set up home independently of their parents. On the whole, the available evidence suggests a complex interaction between individual preference, cultural norms and economic risks and opportunities, which constrain the choice open to young people. Disentangling the elements of “choice” from those of “constraints” is difficult and has implications for policy.

2. The facts

There is considerable evidence to indicate that young people are becoming independent of their parents at an older age. More young people are spending longer in education and beginning their working careers later. At the same time, the rising costs of accommodation, reduced access to social protection benefits and increased difficulties of finding a secure job reinforce the problems of leaving the parental home (Youth Forum, 2004).

The main facts on the age at which young people leave the family home and the factors affecting this are summarised below.

¹ The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the European Commission.

Previous studies

Earlier studies, largely based on data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) – which was conducted over the period 1994-2001 and which was limited to the EU15 countries – indicate wide differences between EU Member States in the age at which young people typically set up home independently of their parents. In particular, they reveal a sharp divide between northern and southern Member States in the proportion of people living alone and in households with children. In the former, therefore, households without children are in the majority once people reach 55, while in the south, they remain in the minority until around 65 (Cuyvers and Kalle 2002).

In addition, in Denmark and Finland, half of all young men have left home before the age of 22, while in southern countries, this does not occur until after the age of 28 (Iacovou, 2001), though women leave the parental home earlier than men in all the countries covered by the ECHP.

These findings are confirmed by the Fertility and Family Survey on men and women born around 1960 in 16 European countries, which found significant differences in the age of leaving home between northern and southern countries, with those in central and eastern Europe resembling the latter (Billari et al, 2001).

A number of studies have also detected a tendency for the age of leaving home to increase since the 1980s. One of the earliest found that in the Netherlands, the median age for the cohort born in 1960-69 was 23, compared to just over 21 for the cohort born in 1950-59 (Keilman, 1987). Studies for other countries indicated that such an increase seems to have occurred in Italy, Spain and Greece between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, as well as France, Germany and, for young women in the UK over the same period. (Fernández Cordón, 1997). More recently, a comparison of two cohorts 10 years apart in 21 European countries revealed that the proportion of women who have left the parental home by their 25th birthday has fallen everywhere except Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Czech Republic and, Hungary, with especially marked reductions. (Billari et al, 2005).

Studies for the US show that the tendency to postpone leaving home is not confined to Europe. There, the share of young adults aged 18-24 living in the parental home increased from 42% to 45.5% in the 20 years 1960 to 1980 but with little change after that (Goldscheider, 1998). The evidence for the US is also that ethnic origin has an effect, with men aged 18-29 in the black community living with their parents rising from 39% in 1970 to 54% in 1984, while for men in the white community, the increase was much less –from 39% to 41% (Glick and Lin, 1986).

The latest evidence

Data from the EU Labour Force Survey, which unlike the ECHP, cover all EU25 Member States together with the candidate countries, are reasonably up to date (the latest data are for 2005) and cover a much larger sample of the population, broadly confirm the findings of earlier studies:

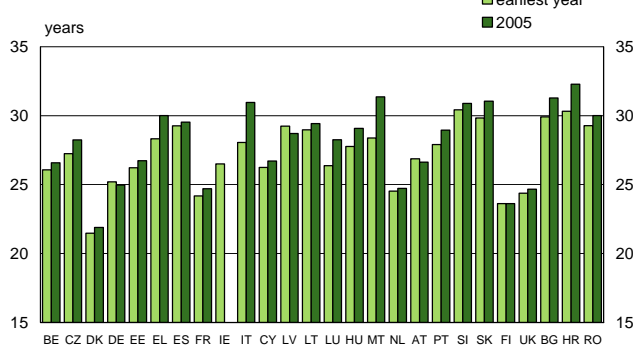
- the age at which young people leave home and start to live independently from their parents varies markedly across Europe;
- it is generally higher in the southern countries and in the new Member States than in the northern countries of the EU;
- it is higher for men than for women throughout Europe;
- it has tended to rise over the past 10-20 years in most countries.

These differences and general tendencies reflect both the underlying economic circumstances – especially labour market conditions – and the way that they have tended to change over time and the social norms and attitudes which exist in different parts of the EU. These in turn are both reflected in and conditioned by the varying levels of support outside of the family available to young people seeking to embark on an independent life.

Mean age of young people leaving home

According to the latest data from the EU Labour Force Survey (2005), the mean age at which young people leave the parental home varies for men from 22 in Denmark to 31 in Italy, Malta and Slovakia. In all northern – or non-southern – EU15 countries, it is under 27 (just under in Belgium and Austria), in southern countries, it varies from 29 (in Portugal) to 31 and in the new Member States, from 27 (in Estonia and Cyprus) to 31. In the three candidate countries for which data are available, it is lowest in Romania at 30 and highest in Croatia, at just over 32 (Figure 1).

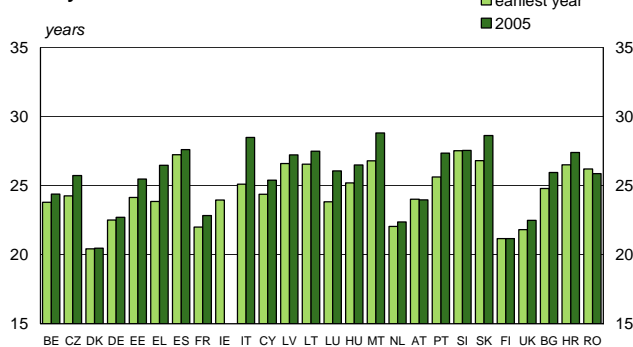
1 Mean age at which men leave the parental home, earliest year available and 2005



earliest year available: 1985 for BE, DE, EL, FR, IE, IT, LU, NL, UK, 1990 for ES, PT, 1995 for AT, 1998 for CZ, EE, SK, RO, 2000 for CY, HU, MT, SI, 2002 for DK, LV, LT, BG, HR, 2004 for FI
 LU: 2004 data / no data for IE in 2005 / no data for PL and SE

For women, the mean age is lower in all countries, varying in the northern EU15 from just under 21 (in Denmark, and just over in Finland), to just over 24 (in Belgium) and in the south, from just under 27 (in Greece) to just under 29 (in Italy), while in the new Member States, it ranges from just under 26 (in the Czech Republic, Estonia and Cyprus) to just under 29 (in Malta and Slovakia). The mean age also falls within this range in the three candidate countries, in all of which it is much lower for women than for men (4-5 years lower) – at around 26 in both Bulgaria and Romania and just under 28 in Croatia (Figure 2).

2 Mean age at which women leave the parental home, earliest year available and 2005



earliest year available: 1985 for BE, DE, EL, FR, IE, IT, LU, NL, UK, 1990 for ES, PT, 1995 for AT, 1998 for CZ, EE, SK, RO, 2000 for CY, HU, MT, SI, 2002 for DK, LV, LT, BG, HR, 2004 for FI
 LU: 2004 data / no data for IE in 2005 / no data for PL and SE

Young women, in general, therefore, tend to leave home around two years younger than men (the range is from just under 1½ years younger in Denmark, Estonia and Cyprus to around 3½ years younger in Greece and Slovenia). This in part reflects the younger age at which women get married, though a significant proportion of women leave home either to live alone or to share a house with other people (ie not necessarily in a couple relationship).

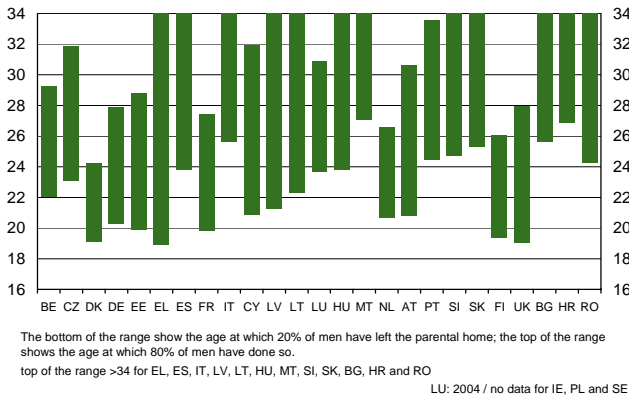
The age range over which young people leave home

The mean age of leaving the family home gives only a partial insight into the transition of young people from living with their parents to living independently. In practice, many leave home at a younger age than the mean while many are significantly older. Indeed, even as an indication of the average age, the mean can be misleading since more people tend to leave home below this age than above it.

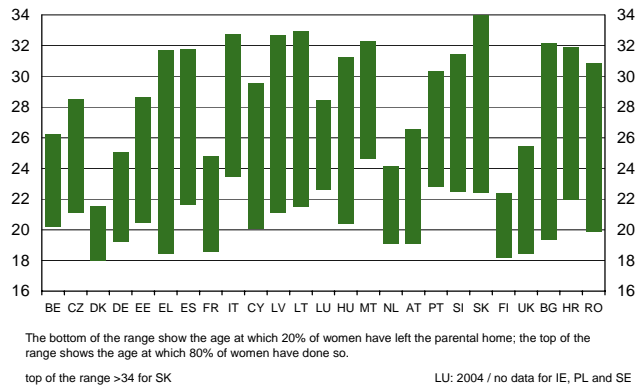
The median age of leaving home – ie the age at which 50% of young men and women no longer live with their parents – is, therefore, in general some 1-2 years below the mean age (which means just under 20 for women in Denmark and Finland and 27-28 in Italy, Malta and Slovakia and around 21 for men in the former two countries and just over 30 in Italy and Greece, where exceptionally the median age is higher than the mean for men). Differences between countries, as well as between men and women, however, are much the same as in the case of the mean age.

The age range over which most young people leave home varies between countries broadly in line with the average age, in the sense that it is wider in countries where the average age when leaving is relatively high than in those where it is low. Whereas 60% of young women leave home over the space of 3-4 years in Denmark and Finland (and men over the space of 5-7 years), in Italy and Slovenia, this takes place over 9 years and in Greece, over 13 years (for men, over a period of 10-11

3 Age range at which men leave the parental home, 2005



4 Age range at which women leave the parental home, 2005

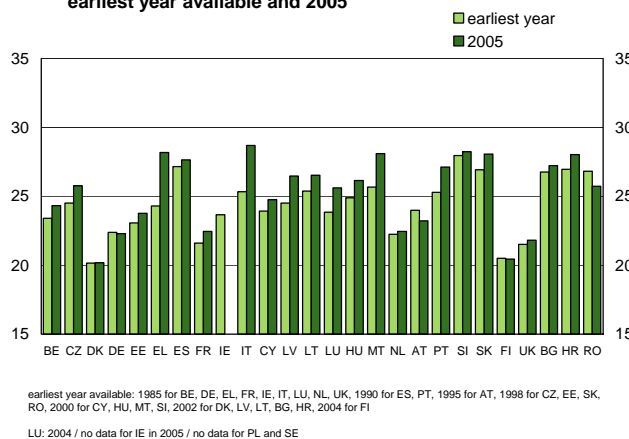


years in the former, and one of 17 years in Greece) (Figures 3 and 4).

Trends in the age of leaving home

The median age at which young people leave home has tended to rise over time for both men and women, though there are signs of a slowdown in the rate of increase over the past 10 years. Indeed, in Germany and Austria, the median age for men and women fell over the 10 years 1995 to 2005, even if by relatively little for women, while it remained broadly unchanged for men in Belgium, Spain, France and Portugal and for women in Belgium and the Netherlands. On the other hand, in Greece and Italy, the median age of young people leaving home increased by one year or more over this period. There were also significant increases in the new Member States over the period for which data are available (7 years in the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia, 5 years in Hungary and Slovenia), with the sole exception of men in Estonia (Figure 5).

5 Median age at which young people leave the parental home, earliest year available and 2005

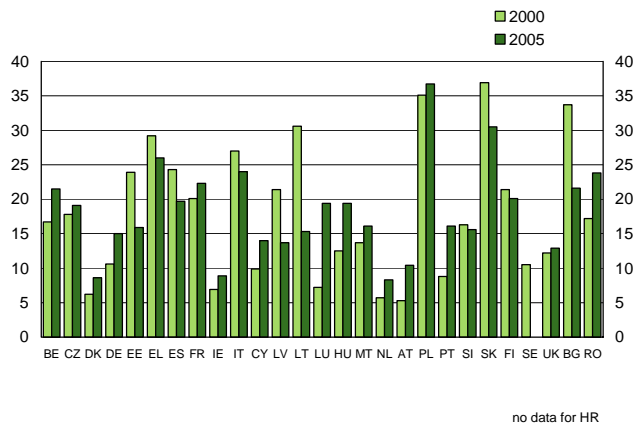


These changes may reflect growing difficulties for young people to live independently in the latter countries in the form of relatively high rates of unemployment among them and the problems of making the transition from education into a working career. Such difficulties tend not to be fully reflected in the rate of unemployment among young people since this depends on the number entering the labour market, which is likely to be affected by the possibilities of finding a job. In other words, young people in many cases can decide to remain in education rather than actively look for work. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate is at least indicative of labour market conditions.

In the Czech Republic and Hungary, therefore, the unemployment rate among those aged under 25 averaged 19% in 2005, up from 13% in 1998 in the former and from 12% in 2000 in the latter, while in

Slovakia, it was just over 30% as against 25% 7 years earlier. In Slovenia, the rate was lower but still around 16%, much the same as over the preceding 5 years. In Greece and Italy, though the rate fell between 1995 and 2005 (by 2-3 percentage points in the former and 6 percentage points in the latter), it was nevertheless around 25% in 2005. These relatively high rates of unemployment are a symptom, in turn, of relatively low rates of net job creation in the countries concerned, which tend to affect those entering the labour market more than those already in employment, as well as the specific problems of young people making the transition from education into work (Figure 6).

6 Unemployment rates of those aged under 25, 2000 and 2005



These problems are, in part, reflected in the fact that half of young people aged 15-24 in Italy who were actively looking for work in 2005 had been doing so for one year or more and almost half (47%) in Greece, in both cases less than 10 years earlier but only slightly so (by 2-3 percentage points). In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, the proportions were lower, but still around 36-37% (in Slovenia, it has fallen sharply in the recent past, from over 50% in 2003, while in the other two countries, it has risen a little), in Estonia, almost 45% and in Slovakia, over 60%.

At the same time, in some of the countries in which the median age of leaving home has changed by relatively little or has fallen in recent years, labour market conditions have improved over the past 10 years, but not in all of them. It is true of Spain, where the unemployment rate of those under 25 halved between 1995 to 2005 (from almost 40% to just under 20%) and France, if less so (the rate falling from 27% to 22%). In Belgium, Germany and Portugal, on the other hand, the unemployment rate has remained much the same over this 10-year period and in Austria, it has almost doubled (from just under 6% to over 10%).

This suggests that the age when young people leave the parental home is subject to more influences than simply economic circumstances and the ease or difficulty of finding employment, though these undoubtedly have an effect. These influences include the extent of participation in education, the growth of which may well be an important factor underlying the increase in the age at which women leave home, and the support available outside the home, in the form, for example, of access to social benefits, as well as social norms and general attitudes. The latter encompasses such factors as the desire to get married and raise a family, the age at which both typically occur having tended to rise over the years throughout Europe, in part reflecting the increased participation of women in the work force and their greater ambition to pursue working careers.

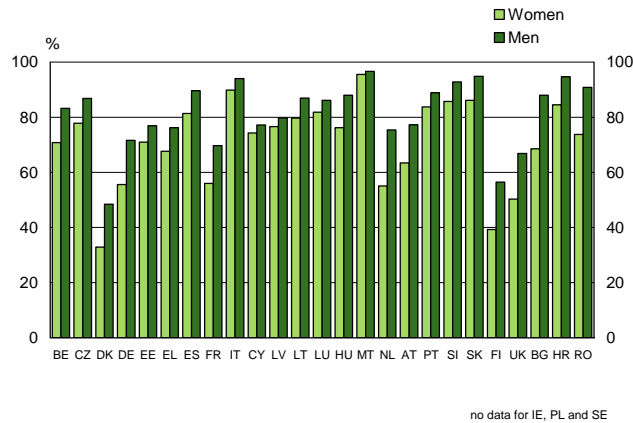
The postponement of marriage and having children, however, has potentially conflicting implications for the age at which young people leave home. While, on the one hand, it might mean them being able to remain living with their parents for longer, on the other, the pursuit of a working career might itself entail them moving out of the local area. Data from the Labour Force Survey provide an insight into both the household circumstances of young people setting up home independently of their parents and whether or not they are in employment. Equally, they throw light on what those who remain living in the family home are doing.

Employment and household circumstances of young people aged 18-24

The proportion of young women aged 18-24 living with their parents in 2005 varied from 33% in Denmark and 39% in Finland to 90% in Italy and 95½% in Malta, with the figure being over 80% in Spain, Luxembourg and Portugal and over 75% all the new Member States, except Estonia and Cyprus, where it was only slightly below, as well as in Croatia. In Germany, France, the Netherlands

and the UK, it was 50-56% and in the other countries for which data are available, between 63 and 71%. The proportion of men was higher in all countries than that of women (some 12 percentage points more on average), ranging from 63% in Denmark and 70% in Finland to 94-96% in Italy, Malta, Slovakia and Croatia and over 85% in Spain, Portugal and most new Member States plus all three candidate countries for which there are data (Figure 7).

7 Men and women aged 18-24 living in parental home, 2005



More than half of those remaining in the family home were in education or training, either on a full or part-time basis, in Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary and Slovenia. A significant proportion, however, were employed in all countries, but especially in those where education is often combined with working, frequently in a part-time job or as an apprentice (Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, where the proportion was over two-thirds).

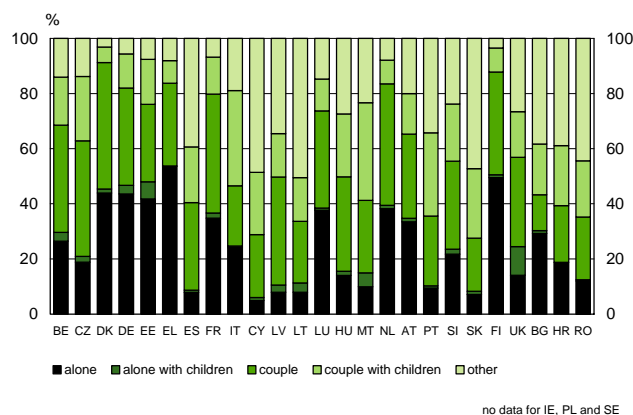
Nevertheless, as might be expected, substantially more of those living away from their parents were in employment in most countries – more than half in all but Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovakia – while many fewer of them were in education or training. Under 20% in the majority of cases. In all countries apart from Greece, moreover, most of those who had moved away from home were living with other people, either in a couple or larger household. This was particularly true of women (Table 1 and Figure 8).

Table 1. Activity of young people aged 18-24, 2005

	BE	CZ	DE	EE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT	NL	AT	PT	SI	SK	FI	UK	BG	HR	RO
Employed	37.6	37.3	53.9	42.3	34.5	48.9	39.2	60.4	35.5	55.8	41.1	31.0	34.6	30.3	60.6	73.9	62.6	46.6	40.1	35.9	63.6	67.8	31.4	34.7	36.7
Unemployed	9.2	7.9	10.1	10.3	11.6	11.4	10.6	5.3	9.7	8.0	8.0	6.1	5.2	7.0	9.9	5.6	6.1	7.9	6.3	13.6	15.0	7.7	8.8	16.8	8.4
Inactive	5.7	8.2	7.1	8.6	7.4	5.8	5.9	7.4	11.0	8.5	8.4	8.1	2.4	10.4	6.1	3.8	5.8	5.2	4.8	6.1	3.6	6.0	22.8	5.3	11.9
In education/training	47.6	46.6	28.9	38.7	46.4	33.9	44.3	26.9	43.7	27.7	42.5	54.8	57.7	52.4	23.3	16.8	25.6	40.3	48.8	44.3	17.8	18.5	37.1	43.2	43.0

Note: no data for DK, LU, PL and SE

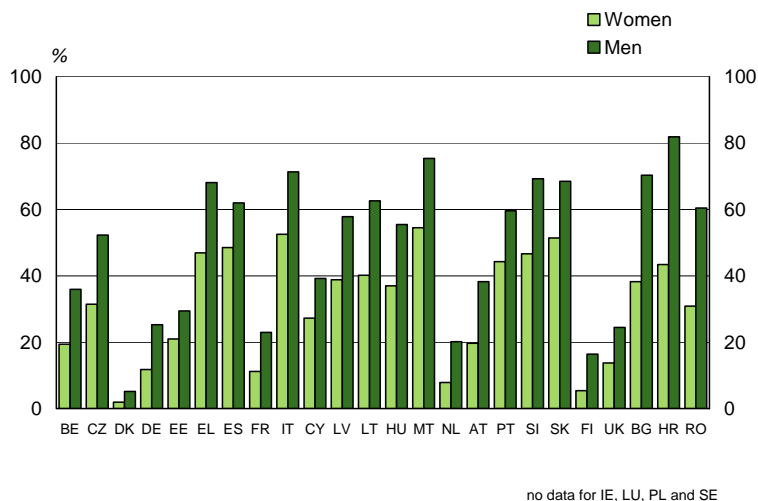
8 Household characteristics of men and women aged 18-24, 2005



Employment and household circumstances of young people aged 25-29

Under half of young people aged 25-29 lived with their parents in 2005 in most European countries. The exceptions are the four southern Member States, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia and Slovakia, as well as Bulgaria and Croatia. In Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Finland and the UK, the proportion was under 20% (under 5% in Denmark). In all countries, even more than for the younger age group, significantly more men lived in the family home than women (some 13 percentage points more on average). (Figure 9)

9 Men and women aged 25-29 living in parental home, 2005



no data for IE, LU, PL and SE

Relatively few of those aged 25-29 living in the family home were in education or training – under 10% on average and over 15% only in Germany and Italy – though in all countries apart from the Netherlands and Finland, a slightly larger proportion of women than men. Most of those concerned were in employment – over two-thirds in all countries except Germany, France, Italy and Finland – and in this case, a larger proportion of men than women, except in Denmark, Latvia and the UK.

The situation was similar for those in this age group no longer living with their parents, though even fewer were in education or training (only just over 3% on average and over 5% only in Germany) and more were employed (over 75% on average) (Table 2).

Table 2. Activity of young people aged 25-29, 2005

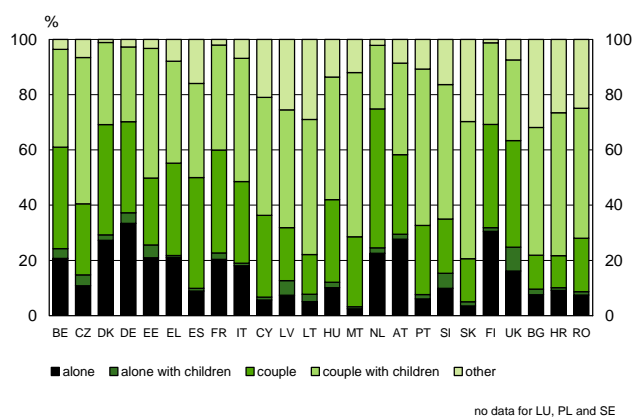
	BE	CZ	DE	EE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	CY	LV	LT	HU	MT	NL	AT	PT	SI	SK	FI	UK	BG	HR	RO
Employed	78.4	73.0	69.7	77.3	71.8	74.7	74.9	82.4	63.9	83.5	76.4	79.0	70.8	76.8	85.1	81.1	78.4	81.6	66.7	81.1	83.1	65.4	69.4	74.3
Unemployed	9.4	7.0	10.3	5.8	12.4	9.6	9.9	3.5	9.2	5.7	6.8	4.9	6.4	4.5	3.7	5.0	8.4	6.4	13.8	8.6	4.3	8.3	15.1	7.2
Inactive	7.9	15.6	10.9	15.1	10.8	9.2	9.9	10.0	16.2	9.1	14.4	11.3	17.6	17.1	6.5	7.9	5.7	4.4	15.6	4.4	7.8	22.6	8.9	14.7
In education/training	4.3	4.4	9.0	1.7	4.9	6.4	5.3	4.1	10.6	1.7	2.4	4.7	5.2	1.6	4.7	5.9	7.5	7.6	3.8	5.8	4.8	3.7	6.7	3.8

Note: no data for DK, LU, PL and SE

Being in education or training, therefore, does not seem to be a major reason in general for people in this age group continuing to live in the family home. Indeed, only around half of those aged 25-29 in education and training lived at home, on average, in 2005, though the proportion varied markedly between countries. It was over 85% in Spain, Italy, Portugal and Slovakia, where the implication is that it might be difficult for those who are still students to move away from home, even if the numbers concerned are relatively small, but under 20% in the Netherlands, Finland and the UK. Most of those living with their parents are in employment and, accordingly, potentially at least self-sufficient.

As for the younger age group, most of those aged 25-29 not living with their parents live with someone else rather than alone, either as part of a couple or in a larger household. In 2005, under 20% on average lived alone, just over 15% of them with a child (though over 30% of the women living alone had a child and 57% in the UK). However, the proportion living alone varies significantly between countries. In particular, it was around 25% or more in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and the UK, as well as in Estonia, but under 15% in all the other new Member States as well as in Spain and Portugal and the three candidate countries (Figure 10).

10 Household characteristics of men and women aged 25-29, 2005



This suggests perhaps that it is more difficult to live alone in the latter group of countries than in the former group, particularly when allied with the fact that a much smaller proportion of people in this age group in these countries live independently of their parents.

Of those living as a couple, just over half had children, though again there were significant variations between countries, the proportion being over 60% in Italy and two-thirds or more in Portugal and in all the new Member States, except Cyprus (where it was marginally below) as well as in all three candidate countries. In Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and the UK, by contrast, it was under 45%. In the former group of countries, therefore, having children seems to be a more important reason for moving away from the parental home than elsewhere in the EU.

Accordingly, without the motivation to move away which children represent, more young people remain living with their parents, irrespective of whether or not they have a job, which adds weight to the supposition that it is more difficult to set up home independently in these countries. By the same token, this difficulty is a potentially important factor behind the evident tendency for people to postpone having children until they are older and have more income.

At the same time, while the relative number of people aged 25-29 who no longer live with their parents has declined over the past 10 years in most countries for which data are available (specifically over the period 1995-2005 and over the 7 years 1998-2005 in the case of the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia) – the exceptions are Germany, Austria and Spain, in each of which there has been a small rise – the proportion who live alone has increased (in terms of both the age group and those no longer with their parents) in all the countries except Portugal and Slovakia, where it has remained unchanged. In most cases, however, the increase has been relatively small (2-3 percentage points over the 10 years) and the proportion of the age group living alone was still under 10% in 2005 in all four southern EU countries and in all the new Member States except Estonia. In Spain and Portugal as well as in Cyprus, Malta, Lithuania and Slovakia, it was under 5%, in contrast to 30% or just under in Germany, Denmark and Finland and over 20% in the Netherlands, Austria and the UK.

While there appears to be a tendency towards more young people wanting to live alone, therefore, the seeming difficulties of doing so have limited the extent to which it has manifested itself in many parts of the EU.

Other evidence on underlying factors

Economic (in)dependence

It has been suggested that a scarcity of economic opportunities is the key reason young people in some countries delay leaving home (Fernández Cordón, 1997; Goldscheider, 1998).

Evidence from two Eurobarometer surveys seems to support this argument. In 2001, the proportion of young adults (aged 15-24) declaring to be economically dependent on their families ranged from a low of 19% in Denmark and 21% in the UK, to a high of 71% in Greece and 74% in Italy. Furthermore, 20% of young people who had a job said they received “most of their income” from their parents. Between 1997 and 2001, the importance of income support from parents seems to have increased (in some cases significantly) in all EU-15 countries, except Ireland and Finland. Overall, in 2001 more

than one in two young people said they received most of their income from their parents or family, 7% more than in 1997 (EC, 2001).

Access to social benefits

Other evidence, again from the ECHP, suggests that the importance of employment (and income) varies by welfare regime (Aassve et al, 2002). In southern Europe, employment and income seem to be very important factors in the decisions of young adults to leave home. The effect is stronger for men, while women are less reliant on work and their own income (i.e. finding a partner is more important), especially in Italy and Spain. In continental Europe, employment and income are also important, but the effects are less clear and there are significant variations.

The effect of employment and income in the UK is modest – or at least, it was at the time – a finding attributable to the importance of leaving home to go to university, which many young people do and which seems to be a major triggering factor. In Nordic countries, the effect of employment and income also seems to be small, though this appears to be attributable to access to relatively generous benefits. These findings, however, need to be interpreted with caution given the very small sample on which they are based.

Going to university

The relationship between leaving home and undertaking further or higher education also varies widely across countries. Leaving home to continue their education is customary for a significant proportion of young people in countries where there is broad access to higher education and where attending the local university is not the norm or where studying is interrupted by periods of paid employment. In Sweden, for example, 55% of men and 72% of women leave home while still in education. By contrast, only around 10% of young people leave home before completing their studies in Belgium and only around 15% in Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (Billari, 2001).

Housing prospects

Access housing is a further factor potentially affecting the decision of young people to leave home. The fact that in central and eastern Europe many young persons get married or cohabit while still living with their parents may be an extreme example, but it illustrates the extent of housing problems in many countries (Billari et al, 2001). Some direct evidence is provided by the 2001 Eurobarometer survey cited earlier, which asked young people why they did not move out of the parental home sooner. A substantial proportion of those aged 15-24 (especially in Spain, but also in Sweden) responded they could not afford to do so. Housing constraints specifically were mentioned most frequently in the Netherlands (Billari, 2004).

In general, in countries where leaving home occurs early, young people are more likely to move to rented accommodation, often in the public sector (Iacovou, 2001). The opposite is true in southern Europe where rates of owner-occupation are high (67-68% in Portugal and Italy, 76-78% in Spain and Greece) and the availability of social-rented stock is low (none in Greece, 8-10% in Spain and Portugal, 23% in Italy). In Spain, in particular, the structure of the housing market and the cost involved reinforces the pattern of young people living with their parents until their late 20s or early 30s (Holdsworth and Irazoqui Solda, 2002). The difficulty of meeting housing costs could, therefore, make it problematic for young people to start a family and lead to this being postponed (Mulder, 2005).

The issue of access to housing demonstrates the difficulties involved in disentangling cause and effect in this area. The fact that there is a shortage of affordable accommodation to rent in the southern countries in particular, can be regarded either as a major constraint on young people leaving home at an earlier age or as a symptom of them not wanting to leave home earlier or not being able to because of other reasons. The housing market, therefore, either reflects existing social norms or is a factor helping to determine these (Iacovou, 2001).

Parental income

In general, the effect of parental income on leaving home is uncertain. On the one hand, higher income implies that parents are better placed to help their children achieve independence; on the other, higher income, and the comfort and other benefits it brings, may persuade children to remain living in the parental home longer. The evidence from the ECHP suggests that in southern Europe, high parental income may tend to delay young people leaving home (though the effect is only significant for men in the top quartile), while in Germany, men with high-income parents are more

likely to leave home sooner. Elsewhere, however, parental income appears to have no systematic effect one way or the other (Aassve et al, 2002).

Nevertheless, a recent study of students in England and Wales suggests social class may be a factor, in that students from families with no tradition of higher education seem to be more likely to go to a local university and to continue living with their parents (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). More generally, high parental income appears to be relatively strongly associated with leaving home for education purposes.

The relationship between parental income and the age at which young people leave home has interesting implications. In particular, if a high parental income in south European countries is associated with a lower probability of leaving home at an early age, then the reasons for remaining at home may include a preference for family attachment as well as socio-economic constraints (Iacovou, 2001).

3. Conclusions

The ability of young people to live independently of their parents and the age at which this occurs are legitimate concerns for policy both at national and EU level. Both are influenced by the policy and institutional framework in place in different countries. Measures to improve the possibility of young people becoming autonomous at an earlier age can contribute to them taking a more active role in society and so help to counteract some of the problems linked to an ageing of the population (Youth Forum, 2004). Moreover, such measures might also help to arrest the fall in fertility rates and so the decline in population itself. Some of the measures in question relate to relieving the cost to people of having children, which is a closely related issue addressed in another research note which considers the measures concerned. These measures are, therefore, not considered here.

As the analysis indicates, the difficulties faced by young people to become independent of their parents seem to vary markedly across the EU. They seem particularly significant in most southern and central and eastern European Member States. Policies to promote youth autonomy in these countries might beneficially draw on the experience and practice elsewhere, though they need at the same time to be tailored to their particular circumstances.

To stand most chance of being effective, such measures need to address the whole range of factors at present limiting the ability of young people to live independently. While much of the responsibility must lie with individual Member States, there is significant scope for action at the EU level.

- **Employment policies.** Improving the prospects of young workers in the labour market in large measure hinges on expanding the demand for labour, which depends in turn on the pursuit of economic policies for sustaining growth. Job growth in itself, however, may not be sufficient, since the evidence is that a significant proportion of those in their late 20s or even early 30s living with their parents are in fact already employed. The ability of young people to move out of the parental home may not be enhanced much if most jobs open to them are poorly paid, overly precarious or short-term. The emphasis, therefore, as in the EU Employment Strategy, needs to be on increasing the availability of better quality jobs as well as more jobs *per se*.
- **Education policies.** Strengthening the employment prospects of young adults also depends on schools, colleges and universities offering the right skills and qualifications and ensuring wide access to the education and training they provide. Encouraging mobility, increasing the number of young people who move between countries and regions within countries to study, can contribute both to raising the quality of education and their ability to live independently.. As such it might help to counter the effect of the expansion of higher education in many Member States of increasing the number of young people remaining in the parental home. This, however, needs, to be accompanied by appropriate housing policies (see below) to make mobility possible. EU-level action implemented as part of the Bologna Process, aimed at creating a European area of higher education, is highly relevant both to improving the quality of education and increasing student mobility.
- **Housing policies.** The ability of young people to move out of the parental home is highly dependent on the availability of affordable housing, which seems limited in many countries. A range of possible policy measures could be used to increase availability, including more flexible mortgages, the extension of housing benefits, giving higher priority to the young in social housing and expanding student accommodation.

- **Social policies.** The bias of social protection systems towards the elderly in many countries is understandable given the increase in population above pensionable age, but it has absorbed resources which might otherwise have gone to the support of young people. The bias seems especially marked in countries where young people tend to remain in the parental home longer than elsewhere. Particular areas of concern are the limited access of young people to unemployment benefits, housing benefits and social assistance, which makes it difficult for them to afford to live away from home. Consideration of possible policy reform in this regard could be encouraged by the Social Inclusion Process at EU-level.

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