

# Living-Apart-Together (LAT) relationships in Australia: an overview

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**Abstract**

Research on the nature and pattern of contemporary relationship formation and dissolution has almost exclusively focused on unions such as cohabitation and marriage in which the two partners share a common household. However, changing demographic trends mean that a substantial proportion of the population does not live with a romantic partner. In this paper we describe the characteristics of individuals in non-residential unions and investigate whether these unions are a stepping stone towards cohabitation, or whether they are more permanent arrangements. Using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, we estimate that 24 per cent of the population aged 18 and over that is not cohabiting or married identify themselves as being in an intimate ongoing relationship. While non-residential unions are most prevalent among young people, they are experienced by individuals at all stages of the life course including by single parents and previously married people aged 45 and over. We find that the meaning of these relationships varies greatly by life course factors such as age, and previous relationship history. While the younger generations frequently anticipate moving into a common residence with their partner in the future, among the older generations living apart from a partner appears to be a more permanent arrangement allowing a combination of both intimacy and autonomy.

**Key words:** Relationships, partnerships, Living-Apart-Together

**Introduction**

The past few decades have seen substantial changes in relationship formation and dissolution patterns in Western countries, including the postponement and decline of marriage and the increasing popularity of cohabitation. With these changing trends

there have also been questions raised as how to best define relationship status. In the past the distinction was between those who were married versus those who were single (never married, separated, divorced or widowed). Today a tripartite model is typically used, differentiating between those who are single, cohabiting or married (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Hakim 2004; Roseneil 2006). In this model, those who are not living in the same residence as a partner are classified as single or unpartnered.

However, a growing body of research is now accumulating on another form of partnership that is not easily accommodated within this tripartite relationship model: that of people who are in 'living-apart-together' (LAT) relationships, or where people identify themselves in a relationship with someone with whom they do not live with (Trost 1998). It is difficult to estimate how common this relationship type is, as individuals in these unions are essentially 'hidden populations', not registered in any official statistics (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003). There are many questions as to how these relationships should be defined and accommodated at both a conceptual and theoretical level. Some of the questions raised include: what are the characteristics of the individuals involved; what is the meaning of the relationships themselves; and is it a transitional stage before a living together relationship, or a completely new form of partnership (Haskey and Lewis 2006:38)?

This paper uses data from the 2005 wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey to examine living-apart-together relationships in Australia. The aim is to provide an estimate of the prevalence of these relationships, to investigate the characteristics of individuals in these unions, and to examine how the meaning attached to these unions relates to life course factors, such as age and previous relationship history.

## **Background**

### **A new phenomenon?**

According to Levin (2004) the LAT relationship is a 'new family form', which existed in the past, but which in recent years has become much more prevalent and visible in society. Due to the lack of historical data on LAT relationships, it is difficult to know with certainty if there has been a real rise in the prevalence of non-residential unions, or if this form of relationship is simply attracting more popular attention than before (Ermisch and Siedler 2008). Evidence from a Swedish poll conducted in 1993, 1998 and 2001 appears to show an increase in the prevalence of non-residential relationships (Levin 2004), and increases between 1982-1997 have also been reported for Japan (Iwasawa 2004). However no increasing was found between 1991 and 2005 in a study using German data (Ermisch and Siedler 2008). There are good reasons to believe that non-cohabiting unions have become increasingly common in recent years, since there has been an increase in the proportion of the population that is neither cohabiting nor married. At the same time the recent academic and media interest in these relationships has certainly made them more visible.

Until recently the majority of research on LAT relationships originated from Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden and Norway (Levin and Trost 1999) where this type of union is socially recognized and accepted as a distinct type of relationship termed '*särbo*'<sup>1</sup> (Borrel and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003:50). Recently research has also started accumulating from a growing list of countries including France

(Beajouan, *et al.* 2008), Germany (Asendorpf 2008); Spain (Castro-Martin, *et al.* 2008), United Kingdom (Haskey 2005; Haskey and Lewis 2006; Ermisch and Siedler 2008), Canada (Milan and Peters 2003), the United States (Strohm, *et al.* 2008) and Japan (Iwasawa 2004). Direct international comparisons of the prevalence and characteristics of LAT relationships are difficult to make however, not only due to the differences in the samples and dates of the surveys, but also to differences in the definition of LAT used in the different studies. The relatively recent emergence of scholarly interest in non-coresidential unions, means that there is still a lack of consensus regarding their precise definition.

### **Definition**

A particularly important definitional issue concerns the boundary between casual dating relationships and more committed LAT relationships. There is some agreement that more casual and fleeting relationships should be differentiated from committed non-coresidential unions, and often different terms are used to make a theoretical distinction between the two. For example, Haskey (2005) terms the former ‘those who have a partner who usually lives elsewhere’ and the latter, ‘Living Apart Together’ (LATs). Similarly Trost (1998) uses the terms ‘steady going couples’ versus the more committed living-apart-together couples. But trying to categorize respondents into these groups is difficult. Various factors, for example the length of the relationship or the age of the individuals involved have been taken as proxy indicators of the level of seriousness of the relationship. For example Castro-Martin *et al.*, (2008) only focus on LAT relationships that have lasted more than two years. Haskey (2005) uses a number of ways to try and estimate the ‘true’ number of living apart relationships, with one example excluding relationships of young adults who were still living at home.

### **Transitory or permanent arrangements?**

An important theoretical question regarding LATs relates to the meaning of these partnerships and whether they are a transitory step taken before entering a live-in relationship, or whether they are a more permanent arrangement. A closely related distinction is whether partners are living apart voluntarily, through an active choice, or involuntarily due to various circumstances (Levin 2004). Previous research suggests that the meaning of LAT relationships and the reasons why individuals enter them, depends very much what stage of the life course an individual is at (Beaujouan *et al.* 2006; Strohm *et al.* 2008).

LAT relationships appear to be more provisional and involuntary among younger cohorts. The geographic location of places of work or study, as well as financial and housing factors may constrain or prevent young people from moving into a joint residence with their partner. Also young people living at home are unlikely to have acquired the financial ability to set up a joint residence with their partner (Castro-Martin, *et al.* 2008). Involuntary non-residential relationships may also be the result of caring responsibilities for children or elderly parents (Levin 2004). While these circumstances prevent individuals from moving in together, the possibility to cohabit is there if and when circumstances change.

Alternatively, LAT relationships can be more permanent arrangements that allow for intimacy but also autonomy and independence, and this appears to be particularly the case for older individuals (Levin 2004). Other reasons for actively wanting to live apart include the feeling of not being ready to live with someone, and concern about children (Beaujouan *et al.* 2008). Qualitative evidence also suggests that those who are voluntarily living apart include individuals who have gone through a divorce or a

relationship breakdown, experiences which have left them particularly ‘risk averse’ (de Jong Gierveld 2004; Levin 2004; Roseneil 2006).

## **Data**

To investigate the prevalence and characteristics of non-residential unions in Australia we use Wave 5 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey conducted in 2005/2006. HILDA is a large-scale nationally representative longitudinal survey that is conducted on an annual basis, interviewing all members of a household aged 15 and over.

For the first time in Wave 5, as part of the international Gender and Generational Survey, respondents who were not married were asked “*Are you currently in an intimate ongoing relationship with someone you are not living with?*” For those in a non-resident union, further information was then collected, including: the date the relationship started, whether a definite decision to live apart had been made and by whom, the geographic distance to the partner, and the frequency of contact. Respondents were also asked if they intended to live with their partner during the next three years, and if they planned to marry. The questions were asked of both heterosexual and same-sex couples and we include both types of couples in this study<sup>2</sup>. The total sample size is 12,759 but we restrict the sample to those aged 18 or more, resulting in 12,066 respondents, of which 974 were in a LAT relationship.

## **Method**

The analysis is undertaken in three main parts. The first part describes the prevalence and characteristics of LAT respondents compared to those who are single, cohabiting

or married, using weighted percentages and summary statistics. The second part looks at three key characteristics of LAT relationships: the duration, the frequency of contact, and the geographical distance between partners. We then use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and cluster analysis to identify a typology of different profiles of respondents with similar demographic characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

MCA is a method for identifying patterns among three or more categorical variables (Greenacre 2007). The aim is to convert a contingency table where the rows are observations and the columns categorical variables into a low-dimensional (typically two-dimensional) space or map<sup>4</sup>. The interpretation of the results is based on the proximities as described graphically on the map. In this case we examine the interrelationship between four key demographic variables of individuals in non-residential relationships: their sex, age, presence of children, and previous relationship history. Age is grouped into four categories representing those who are 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45+. The presence of children is described by a three category variable: no children, at least one resident child, or only non-resident children. Previous relationship history is also divided into three categories: previously married, previously de-facto but never married, and never de-facto or married.

Based on the results of the MCA, we use Ward's method of cluster analysis on the coordinates of the observations to identify homogeneous groups of respondents with similar demographic characteristics. We then investigate how these four groups differ in their answers to three key questions: whether or not they have made a definite decision to live apart, whether they intend to live together within the next 3 years and whether or not they intend to marry. This allows us to see whether their relationship is voluntary or involuntary and the degree to which it is seen as a transitional or permanent arrangement<sup>5</sup>.

## Results

### Prevalence of LAT relationships & characteristics of individuals in LAT unions versus other relationships

Diagram 1 shows the distribution of the sample according to their relationship status (single, married, cohabiting or LAT) by age. While the proportion that are in a LAT relationship or in a cohabitation declines with age, the proportion in a marriage increases. Since these are cross-sectional results, the pattern is influenced by both cohort and age effects. In total, of those aged 18 and over, 36 per cent were not in a couple relationship, a figure that is similar to the 39 per cent estimated by the 2006 Census (ABS 2009). Around 9 per cent of the total sample was in a non-cohabiting union, representing 24 per cent of those who were not cohabiting or married.

**Diagram 1. Relationship status by age (18-75+)**

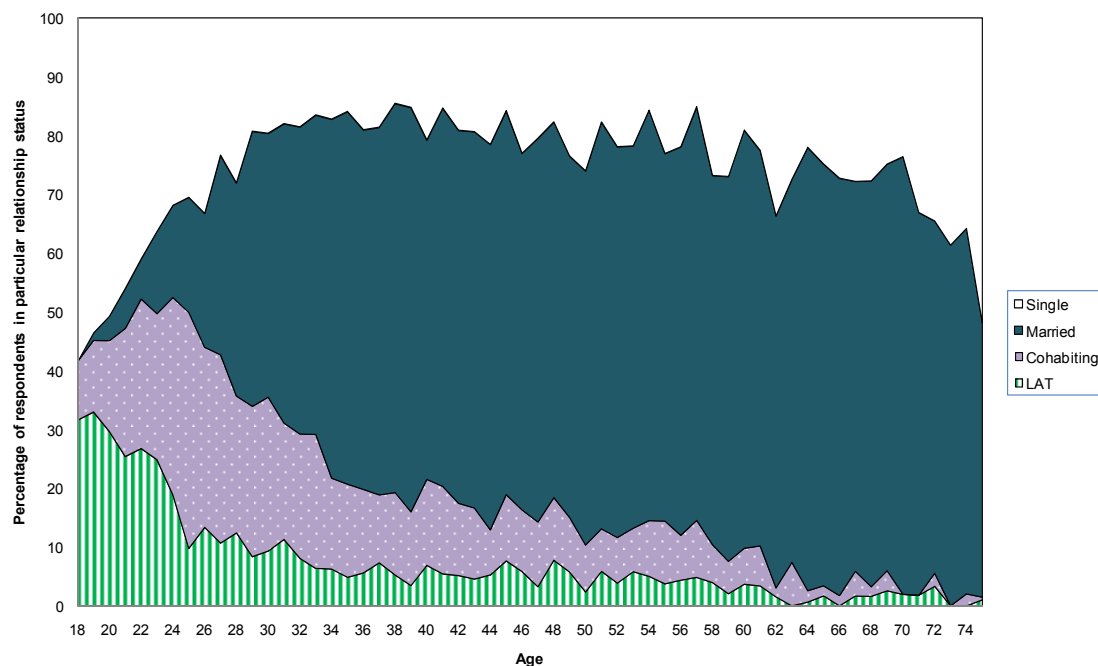




Table 1, presents the weighted percentages of several key demographic and socio-economic relationship variables by relationship status. Compared to those who are single, cohabiting or married, those in a LAT relationship differ on several key characteristics. Overall individuals with a non-residential partner had the youngest age profile, and they were also the most likely to be childless and never married. Their marital and fertility history is of course closely related to their young age profile.

The education profile of the LATs was similar to both cohabiting and married individuals although a lower proportion of the LATs had a highest education level that was at year 11 or below. This could also be partly explained by a cohort effect, since younger people have higher education levels than older cohorts. However, other studies have also found LAT relationships to be more prevalent among those with higher educational levels (Haskey and Lewis 2004, Castro-Martin, *et al* 2008), possibly explained by the fact that individuals with higher education are more likely to have jobs that require a degree of travel and mobility, and they may also be more able to afford to have two separate residences (Haskey and Lewis 2006). Among young individuals LAT arrangements may also suit those who prioritize the professional career (Castro Martin *et al.* 2008).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics by relationship status (weighted column percentages)**

	Single	LAT	Cohabiting	Married	Total
<b>Age group</b>					
18-24	24.6	44.1	16.1	1.3	12.6
25-29	10.0	14.2	18.9	5.2	8.6
30-34	7.7	14.0	18.6	9.5	10.3
35-39	6.9	5.8	11.4	10.9	9.5
40-44	7.2	6.0	10.6	11.9	10.0
45+	43.7	15.9	24.5	61.2	49.0
<b>Number of children</b>					

0	54.6	72.7	50.4	11.2	32.1
1+	45.4	27.3	49.6	88.8	67.9
<b>Ever married</b>					
Yes	43.1	20.9	28.3	100.0	70.6
No	56.9	79.1	71.7	0.0	29.4
<b>Employment</b>					
Employed	55.4	81.9	78.8	62.2	63.7
Unemployed	5.2	4.0	2.9	1.4	2.8
Not in the labour force	39.4	14.0	18.3	36.4	33.5
<b>Highest education</b>					
University	15.6	21.8	23.3	22.4	20.6
Certificate/Diploma	26.0	30.1	33.6	31.6	30.1
Year 12	21.2	30.0	17.1	11.7	16.4
Year 11 or below	37.2	18.1	26.0	34.3	32.9
Total percentage	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N (unweighted)	3,290	974	1,509	6,293	12,066

### **Characteristics of LAT relationships: Duration, frequency of contact and geographic distance between partners**

The majority of LAT relationships were of a relatively short duration; nearly 40 per cent had started less than 12 months before the survey. The median duration was 1.5 years, and the mean was 2.4 years. The cross-sectional nature of the data makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about the tempo of transitions out of non-cohabiting relationships but the results seem to indicate a high degree of transitions either through separation, or with a move to cohabitation. Still a substantial proportion (28%) were in relationship that had lasted more than three years.

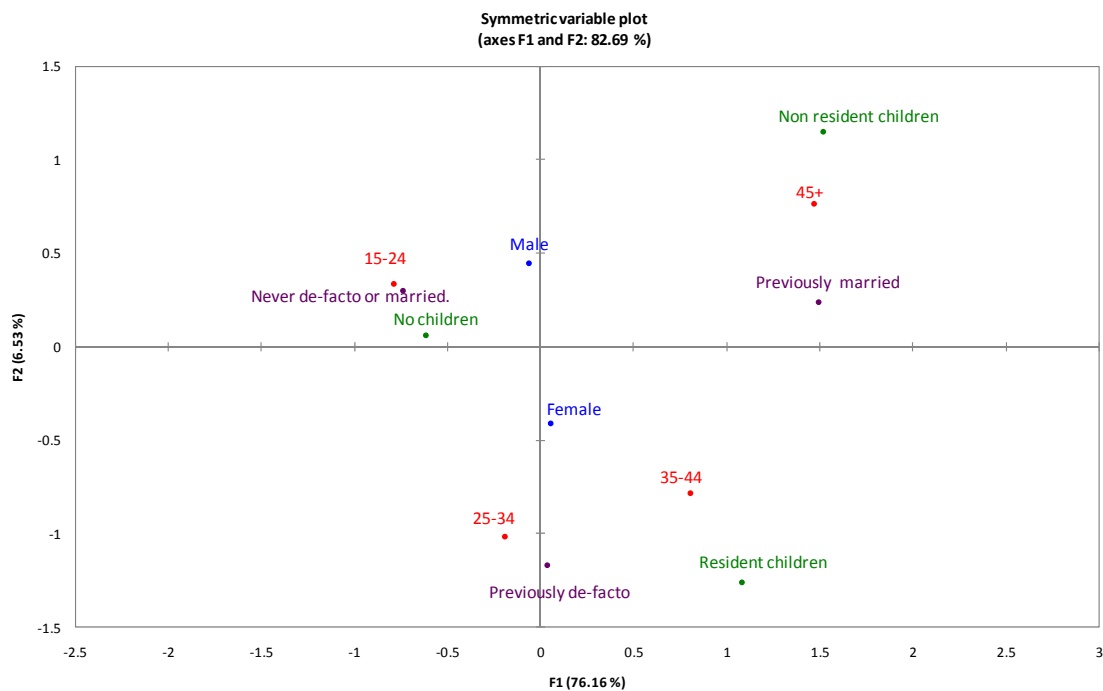
Despite not sharing the same residence, the frequency of contact between partners was high and around 75 per cent met at least three times a week, and many of these on a daily basis. The high degree of contact was related to the close geographical location between partners; around 77 per cent lived in the same city, and 15 per cent in

different cities but the same state. Only a minority were in a long distance relationship with a partner that lived in another state (2%), or overseas (5%).

### **Results of Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) & Cluster analysis**

Diagram 2, presents the two-dimensional symmetric variable plot from the MCA with the two axes, representing the first and second factor respectively. Based on the proximity between different levels of the variables, some distinct profiles of LATs can be identified visually. In the top right hand quadrant are those with non-resident children, aged 45 and over and who have been previously married. At the lower end of the map, there is a less distinct group that is aged between 25-44, predominantly female, previously de-facto and with resident children. Finally in the top left quadrant, are those aged 18-24 years, with no marital or cohabitation experience and with no children. The results of the MCA using HILDA data are strikingly similar to the results obtained by Beaujouan, *et al.* (2008) using the French version of the GGS.

### **Diagram 2. Symmetric Variable plot from MCA**



Cluster analysis on the coordinates of the observations resulted in the four clusters shown in Table 2. The table shows the distribution of the four clusters using the same variables as in the Table 1. The first cluster is very homogenous and is primarily made up of those aged 18-24, with no children, and with no previous history of marriage or cohabitation. The second cluster is made up of mostly female respondents, aged between 25-34, the majority of which are childless and have no marriage history but have experienced at least one cohabitation in the past. The third group consists of older individuals aged 30 or older, most of which have been married. Over 80 percent in this group have had at least one child, the majority of which were still resident in the household. The final and fourth cluster is also relatively homogeneous, consisting of those aged 45 and over, previously married and with primarily non-resident children.

### **Cluster differences in decision to live apart, and intentions to cohabit and marry**

#### **Definite decision to live apart**

Some insight into the meaning of LAT relationships can be gained from seeing whether or not individuals had made a definite decision to live apart from their partner. If there was a definite decision to live apart, this could be taken to imply that the arrangement is one of choice rather than constraint. Table 3 shows a clear differentiation between the different clusters in whether or not they had made a definite decision live apart. Over 70 per cent of the older respondents, who had been previously married, had made a positive decision to live apart, compared to fewer than half of the under 25s.

However, it is difficult to know with certainty if a definite decision to live apart was related to choice or circumstances. For example, young adults still living at home, may have stated a definite decision to live apart because lack of financial resources prevent them from moving in with their partner at that particular point in time.

Further insight is available by examining whose decision it was to live apart, where there had been a definite decision to do so. Most people indicated that it was a joint decision between them and their partner. The single parents were most likely to state that the decision to live apart was solely theirs, followed by the older group. While the responses of the single parents are not surprising, it is interesting that in the other groups where the decision was not joint, individuals usually stated that it was *their* decision alone even though we would expect the decision to be roughly equally divided between the two partners.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics by cluster (percentages)**

	<b>Cluster 1</b>	<b>Cluster 3</b>	<b>Cluster 3</b>	<b>Cluster 4</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>Under 25s</b>	<b>Young adults, prev defacto</b>	<b>Single-parents</b>	<b>Older , prev married</b>	

<b>Sex</b>					
Male	62.6	27.7	48.3	64.7	53.3
Female	37.4	72.3	51.7	35.3	46.7
<b>Age group</b>					
18-24	75.2	15.0	2.0	0.0	44.1
25-29	12.6	32.4	5.4	0.0	14.2
30-34	9.4	34.6	11.5	0.0	14.0
35-39	1.9	9.6	15.2	0.0	5.8
40-44	0.9	8.5	20.2	0.0	6.0
45+	0.0	0.0	45.7	100.0	15.9
<b>Number of children</b>					
0	100.0	74.1	19.1	0.0	72.7
1+	0.0	25.9	80.9	100.0	27.3
<b>Ever married</b>					
Yes	0.0	0.0	73.2	100.0	79.1
No	100.0	100.0	26.9	0.0	20.9
<b>Employment</b>					
Employed	84.8	78.4	82.1	68.9	81.9
Unemployed	5.1	4.4	1.5	1.7	4.0
Not in the labour force	10.1	17.2	16.5	29.4	14.0
<b>Highest education</b>					
University degree	19.7	27.9	22.6	18.8	21.8
Certificate/Diploma	25.2	38.7	33.0	37.6	30.1
Year 12	40.0	21.3	16.5	12.4	30.0
Year 11 or below	15.1	12.2	27.9	31.3	18.1
Total percentage	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N (unweighted)	474	184	219	97	974
Within-class variance	0.06	0.25	0.42	0.16	

**Table 3. Cluster differences in whether there has been a definite decision to live apart, and intentions for the future of the relationship (percentages)**

	<b>Under 25s</b>	<b>Young adults, previously defacto</b>	<b>Single parents</b>	<b>Older and previously married</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Definite decision to live apart?</b>					
Yes	48.3	60.9	67.1	72.9	57.4
No	51.7	39.1	32.9	27.1	42.7

<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>474</i>	<i>184</i>	<i>219</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>973</i>
<b>Whose decision to live apart</b>					
Respondent	11.4	15.3	23.1	17.1	16.0
Respondent's partner	2.2	3.6	4.8	7.1	3.8
Both respondent and partner	86.5	81.1	72.1	75.7	80.3
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>229</i>	<i>111</i>	<i>147</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>557</i>
<b>Intend to live together within next 3 years</b>					
Yes	68.8	78.7	53.3	32.2	63.7
No	31.2	21.4	46.7	67.8	36.3
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>468</i>	<i>178</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>946</i>
<b>Likelihood of marrying/ re-marrying</b>					
Unlikely/very unlikely	5.7	12.1	44.0	68.1	21.7
Not sure	23.3	30.8	24.1	16.5	24.2
Likely/very likely	71.0	57.1	31.9	15.5	54.1
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>473</i>	<i>182</i>	<i>216</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>968</i>

#### **Intention to live together in next 3 years**

A clearer picture of whether the LAT arrangement was permanent or transitory is available by looking at whether or not respondents had any intention to start living together with their partner within the next 3 years. Overall around 64 per cent of respondents planned to live together, although there was large degree of inter-cluster variation in responses. The young adults had the highest stated intentions of cohabiting at 79 per cent, while the lowest intentions were found among the older group, at 32 per cent.

It is difficult to tell whether a negative answer reflects an uncertainty that the relationship would continue, or instead a preference to maintain the relationship but to continue to live in separate residences. It may be speculated that among the young adults a negative intention may reflect an uncertainty about the future of the relationship while for older adults, who generally had relationships of the longest duration, it could indicate a preference to keep the current living arrangements.

It is also interesting to note that there was not always a close link between having made a definite decision to live apart and intentions to not live together at all. For example, while 61 per cent of young adults had made a decision to live apart, around 79 per cent did intend to move in together within the next 3 years.

### **Intentions for marriage**

Respondents were also asked about their plans for marriage in the future. There was no explicit mention in the question on marriage whether the future marriage was to the current LAT partner or to a hypothetical future partner. We assume that the majority would answer with respect to their current partner. As with the intention to cohabit, responses to the marriage question also varied greatly among the groups. Among the under 25s group, 71 per cent thought that they were *likely or very likely* to marry in the future, and attitudes towards marriage were also positive among young adults who had previously been cohabiting. On the other hand, single parents and older respondents, both usually previously married, had much lower intentions. Around 68 per cent of the older respondents said they were unlikely or very unlikely to remarry in the future.

### **Discussion**

The results from HILDA closely resemble the ones from other international studies. In particular, we find that older respondents, most of whom were widowed or divorced, were the most likely to be 'voluntarily' living-apart-together and to have little intention to transition to into a cohabitation. While we do not know the reasons behind the choice, the wish to maintain a degree of independence and autonomy is likely to be an important consideration (Beaujouan *et al.* 2008).



The single parents most closely resembled the older respondents in their decision to live apart and their future plans for coresiding. Again we do not know the reasons behind the decision, although it is possible that they did not want to disrupt the home environment of their resident child(ren) by bringing a new partner into the home or by moving into another residence. Around half of the single parents did however envisage living with their partner in the next 3 years. At this time the resident children may have grown accustomed to the partner, or they may have grown up and left the household.

Young adults who had previously been in a *de facto* relationship, were much more likely to intend to cohabit within the next 3 years, and to marry in the future. This group may also have felt the greatest normative pressure to consolidate their relationship by living in a common residence. For those under 25, the single parents, and the older previously married couples the pressure to move in with their partner is unlikely to have been felt as strongly. Indeed, these groups may even have felt a social pressure *not* to live with their partner.

The under 25s groups was more evenly divided in terms of whether a definite decision had been made to live apart. In this group the arrangement may be more a matter of circumstances and practical or financial constraints rather than choice. At this age, and with no previous experience of living with a partner, they may also not feel ready to take the step to move in with their partner.

## **Conclusion**

Changing demographic trends mean that a substantial proportion of the population is now not living with a partner. Research on the nature and pattern of contemporary relationship formation and dissolution has almost exclusively focused on unions such

as cohabitation and marriage in which the two partners share a common household. The high percentage of individuals who are typically single but have a partner has made it increasingly important to study the diversity of relationships that exist both inside and outside of the household. At the moment, our understanding is limited by the cross-sectional nature of most quantitative studies. Longitudinal data on LAT relationships would allow us to study their duration and their eventual outcomes as separations or cohabitations. It is important to not only understand more about these relationships in their own right, but as Casper *et al.* (2008) note, a greater understanding of why new relationship types such as LATs are formed can also provide some insight into reasons for changing relationship trends such as the postponement and avoidance of marriage.

**Notes:**

- 1 *sär* stands for apart and *bo* for live.
- 2 There were 18 same-sex couples in the HILDA sample.
- 3 This strategy was used by Beaujouan, et al. (2008) who analyzed the French Gender and Generation Survey (GGS).
- 4 We use the XLSTAT software to perform the Multiple Correspondence and cluster analysis <<http://www.xlstat.com/en/home/>>
- 5 An alternative analysis strategy would be to have each of the three key topics of interests (whether relationship is due to a definite decision to live apart; intention to live together in next 3 years, intention to marry) as the dependent variable and to see how key demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as age, number of children, and employment influenced the dependent variable. This strategy was not used because of the high degree of multicollinearity between age and the other independent variables, making it difficult to separate out the effects of age the other variables. For example younger respondents are much more likely to have never had a previous live-in relationship, and to not have children while the opposite is true for older respondents.

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