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FOUR DECADES OF SWEDISH COHOUSING – WHAT CHANCES OF A REAL TAKE-OFF?

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Abstract

An analysis of Swedish cohousing trends during the post-1945 unfolding welfare society exposes several factors making the Swedish experience different from those of other European countries. A growing urban-based movement challenged the public housing sector to respond to new demands. Several new 'intentional' cohousing units emerged, mainly through public housing agencies. Many activists moved in and resigned from earlier engagement in the cohousing movement.

The movement has now re-emerged under the name The Swedish National Association Cohousing NOW – in Swedish Kollektivhus NU. Government interest is linked to rapidly growing needs for care and safety among older citizens. The current privatisation of public services etc. are notable constraints on the process. Cohousing as a way to adapt to environmental demands is as yet little recognised. As an answer to demands for social sustainability it is gradually gaining attention. A new concept, "Cohousing for the second half of life", has been adopted as a model for cohousing adapted to the 'ageing' process.

Historical, structural, political and attitudinal dimensions influencing future prospects are discussed.

Introduction – the argument

International exchange is a very valuable way to see and evaluate one's own experiences and understandings. This was confirmed when the Swedish Cohousing organisation in May 2010 arranged an *International Collaborative Housing Conference*, in Stockholm. 150 participants from 20 countries shared and compared their national experiences. Wide differences were explored and ways to overcome these and strengthen international collaboration were sought. Still, my most profound impression as co-organiser of the conference was that recipes for progress on cohousing would make sense only if they are well adapted to culture and institutions in the individual country.

Culture matters. Culture reflects and influences politics, institutions, the balance between formal and informal, public and private – dimensions of crucial

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importance for the organisation of the housing market, the scope for alternatives to mainstream living arrangements. Sweden, Denmark and Norway are close in history and languages. People move between the three countries in search of work or for leisure and enjoyment. Still, *Scandinavia* is in no way homogenous.

In Denmark, a society balancing between a class of conservative rural farmers and an urban liberal middle class, civil society is thriving with ideas and their realization. The well-known *Freetown Christiania* in central Copenhagen is through trade and seasonal labour movements linked to a network of more or less collective rural communities. Closer to mainstream society, the non-profit national membership organisation *Ældre Sagen*² (DaneAge) is engaged in popularizing various forms of collective living for seniors, as well as projects open for all generations. With a current membership of close to 600 000 and over 200 local chapters, *Ældre Sagen* has grown to a powerful actor in local and national politics. In 2010, there were around 350 collective housing communities for senior citizens, and around 140 with people of all ages (Kähler 2010 p.95). While at present about one percent of people above 50 years live in collective housing, many more would like to find housing that offers togetherness, reciprocity in support and enjoyment.

Norway was once part of the Danish kingdom. Its peculiar geography, with fjords penetrating deep into its mountainous areas, has led to a scattered population with isolated communities and serious infrastructure challenges. 'Collective housing' is rare; no national or local organization appears to have emerged so far. Similar conditions seem to prevail in *Finland*, just east of Norway and Sweden.

With its close historical contacts to the three other countries, *Sweden* offers an altogether different story. This paper aims to trace the origins of and the particular route taken by the Swedish co-housing movement in recent decades. The basic argument is that history matters, in terms of both structure – institutions, regulations, practices – and agency – the actions for change by individuals and collectives. Never colonised, nor predominantly feudal, in its history, Sweden displays a gradual and peaceful transition from power of the few (royalty, nobility, land owners) to power of the many (democracy). Such was the character of the transition, that it led the country to a long and stable period of progressive government, changing public opinion about the role of the state, and equally forming the perspectives of "what is possible" among the political leadership.

'Social engineering' is a catchword that fairly well describes the climate within which reforms were decided on and implemented, among them experiments in cohousing. The prime agency of social engineering was the state, influenced by and drawing on progressive elements of civil society. This interdependence was crucial for the first major experiments in cohousing, today it is a threat, given

² <http://www.aeldresagen.dk/MEDLEMMER/DETGOERVIFORDIG/OMOS/ENGLISH/Sider/Default.aspx>

the general retreat or withdrawal of the state under current neo-liberal ideologies and political practices. Whether and how the cohousing movement will handle that challenge is still an open matter.

First phase: the state vs civil society

With the parliamentary victory of the social democratic party in the early 1930s, Sweden entered a new era whose impact is still recognisable right through more than two decades of neoliberal politics. Born on the strength of workers' organisation, in a sense social democratic politics came to be formulated and implemented *for* rather than *with* the majority of voters. This was possible because the state delivered – jobs, health care, education, modern housing. Never invaded by the Nazi troops in World War II, Sweden was well set to reap the fruits of Europe's reconstruction and create a modern welfare society. Earlier agreements with the main industrial enterprises ensured peace on the labour market, provided workers around the country agreed to leave their homes and growing unemployment and move to the major urban regions where employment was offered.

In return, the government organised a major drive to raise the construction of new suburban dwellings to earlier unseen levels. Non-profit public housing companies were created in all cities and towns, to lead the work and provide models for good housing. Generally offered the best land for exploitation and favourable credits at low interest levels, their mandates were to make good housing accessible even for low income earners. Most construction took place in the urban fringe of agricultural or open land, while closer to city centres whole neighbourhoods were erased (because of poor and low quality housing) and replaced with middle-class housing.

Such radical transformation required tough leadership, and in some places local 'bosses' emerged from the ranks of social democracy to steer development. Depending on their openness for alternative ways of living, options for creative thinking on how to live varied very much between cities and towns. That this was true for local government offices as much as for civil society actors, is evidenced in studies of the period (see eg. Egerö 1979).

At the time when the social democrats came to power – 1932 – a major issue had begun to raise concern in the country: the fall in child-bearing and the prospect of a population decline over time. The transition to smaller families had started many years earlier and gained impetus by the so-called Great Depression that affected all of Europe. The leading social democrats and intellectuals Alva and Gunnar Myrdal saw continued fertility decline as a challenge for national politics, and proposed welfare policies directed especially to the needs of (poor) families with children. This came to be a major determinant of the unfolding welfare programme, and opened for attention to women's affairs, not least women's entry into the (formal) labour market.

In the 1930s, the majority of Swedish urban workers were still housed in very simple multi-storey buildings without central heating and other amenities. To provide good homes became a central issue. This work had already started in 1923, when the Stockholm Tenants' Association created *HSB (Hyresgästernas sparkasse - och byggnadsförening*; "the Savings and Construction Association of the Tenants") as a cooperative association for housing. A similar answer to housing shortage – and unemployment - during the war years was the initiative taken by the building workers' unions to establish *Riksbyggen*. Its first housing association was registered in 1941.

These associations could provide housing only to workers who had some savings to invest. While HSB and Riksbyggen were a part of the workers' movement of the time, they offered only a part-answer to the housing shortage.³ The poor needed other solutions. These were to be provided by the non-profit public housing companies, wholly or majority-owned by the local councils and offering tenant housing only. Their growing importance is documented by the fact that at their height they owned and managed close to one million homes or around half of all rented homes.⁴

Was social democracy ever amenable to social innovations?

Socialist movements are in no way similar everywhere. Their formation and change is subject to local cultural and social influences as much as to the grand ideas that bring them into life. In Sweden, the trade unions had formed and consolidated their collective power in sometimes open and violent conflicts with the capitalists. The issue of revolution or reform was a burning question already at the creation of the social democratic party in 1889. The leadership was a strong defender of 'power through the ballot' – the parliamentary way to power. During the years before and through World War I dissension grew within the party, especially with its youth wing. Many of those who hesitated came to join the reformist line, influenced not least by the violent character of the 1917 Russian revolution. In 1921 the radical wing broke away and formed what came to be the communist party of Sweden.

This development also meant that the creative atmosphere surrounding the Russian revolution during its early years got lost for the Swedish social democrats. Their main goal, formed in a dialectic interaction between the 'possible' – in parliament – and the 'utopian' as envisioned by radical elements of the party, came to be synthesized in the word *folkhemmet*, the "home for all"

³ The investment was part of the overall financing of house projects, and made the tenant a co-owner of his/her local association. For many years, buying and selling of homes was regulated in accordance with an index of living costs. However, as the post-war housing shortage opened for black market dealings, this regulation was eventually lifted. Today these homes are highly priced, and many housing companies – including the public companies – sell of their housing stock to tenants forming similar associations. The home is a marketable good.

⁴ A few years back their non-profit status was changed, ostensibly in order to avoid improper effects on the building market. Today they are commercial actors, and as such often interested in selling off their stock, especially those built during the years of mass production, mainly the 1960s and -70s. In addition they are no longer holding back on prices and rent levels, and – as commercial actors – careful in their attitude to innovations.

where class conflicts gradually give way for sentiments of care, justice and solidarity, as the leading prime minister of the time has been interpreted.⁵ The drastic changes brought about by rapid urbanization, changing family patterns etc. basically were left without answers. Except in one respect: women's and children's situation and options.

Collective housing could have been an innovation nurtured by these conditions. It was not. Undoubtedly, the large-scale Russian collectivisations during Stalin's rule lent negative connotations to the term itself. More important however was that the values attached to the family as the basic social entity of care and reproduction never came to be challenged by the social democrats. Growing economic wellbeing – each worker his own home, his own Volvo – most likely consolidated rather than challenged the 'family' as an untouchable institution.

In this perspective, it should be no surprise to learn that the social housing experiments that took place occurred outside the sphere of the state, in interaction between private constructors and a radical elite (for the following details, see Vestbro 2010a). In the early 1930s the idea of collective housing was developed by Alva Myrdal and architect Sven Markelius. In 1932, Myrdal wrote in the Swedish journal *Tiden*: "Urban housing, where twenty families each in their own apartment cook their own meat-balls, where a lot of young children are shut in, each in his or her own little room – doesn't this cry for an overall planning, for a collective solution?"

However, the leading modernists soon realised that support for collective housing was not forthcoming from the organised labour movement, except its women's association. The support Markelius had hoped to get for three large buildings in suburban Stockholm was never offered. Fortunately, his personal contacts in the private sector secured support for Sweden's first functionalist cohousing unit, built on a small plot in central Stockholm. Ready in 1935, it had 54 small apartments, each equipped with a dumb-waiter from a ground floor restaurant, where a small shop and one of the first kindergartens with Alva Myrdal's pedagogic principles was also housed. Next to the dumb-waiter was a laundry chute, used by the residents to send their washing for treatment by staff of a laundry in the basement. (Vestbro 2010a p.47).

The house was a rational answer to practical problems of middle class families with both adults working. It was not organized to facilitate contacts and cooperation between neighbours, who could meet only if they chose to dine in the restaurant.

The early proponents of cohousing expected that the social democratic government, HSB and similar organisations would encourage cohousing, but their calls were left unattended. Instead it was the private constructor Olle Engkvist who took up the idea. Inspired by Markelius' project, during the following 20

⁵ Per Albin Hansson (prime minister 1932-46). He held that one of the most important tasks of democracy was to "put an end to class consciousness" in preference for what could be called a "citizenship spirit" characterized by values such as those just mentioned.

years his firm built six cohousing units in Stockholm. Engkvist's model, with service offered by employed staff and compulsory meal tickets, dominated the discussion about cohousing up to the end of the 1970s.

His last and biggest co-housing project, the Hässelby "family hotel" in the outskirts of Stockholm, was built in the mid-1950s. There were 328 apartments, a restaurant kitchen, a large dining hall run like a restaurant, a smaller dining room, a room for parties, a club-room with its own cafeteria, a staffed reception and many different facilities. It was suitable only for well-to-do tenants and, with costs for employed staff rising, the arrangement came to an end in the mid-70s.

New radicals make new demands – and are listened to

Sweden was in no way excluded from the "1968" student movements in Europe. Educational institutions came under attack, political formations mushroomed, peace and solidarity organisations reached far and wide in our society. Some students changed life course to become blue-collar workers, others moved out to form rural communes. In most cities, collectives sprung up where sizeable flats or villas could be accessed. Many of these communes and collectives suffered from high turnover and did not last very long. Such experiences forced the question how collective living should be organised to be more stable and robust even with some turnover among members. The best and most concrete answer was to come from a group of professional women, who had visited Denmark and other countries in search of models.

Among the progressive formations in civil society during this period were several formed by and for women. Their demands focused on the multiple roles of women – as workers, caretakers, responsible for daily tasks at home etc. One of them was a group of mainly architects, who during the 1970s elaborated a new framework (or, with today's language, concept) for cohousing which they presented in a small booklet under the name *Bo i Gemenskap* (acronym BIG - "Live in community"). It consisted of a house design with small-size self-contained flats and common space for cooking, eating and being together, with shared responsibility for the running of the common space, joint meals and other common undertakings.

The booklet came to be used as a guiding manual for close to 20 new cohousing units in and around Stockholm, built by a municipal housing company as directed by the local government under social democratic rule. Around the country, altogether about 50 cohousing units saw the light during the 1980s and 90s. Some were experiments, for instance linking an old people's wing to a cohousing unit. Altogether, the cohousing units came to "swallow" a majority of those who had been working hard for such arrangements, and their voices were no longer heard so much in the public sphere. Other reasons, such as the slowdown in economic growth and the virtual end to migration from rural areas, contributed to changing the stage. Municipal housing queue systems were closed down, with them the special queues for those interested in cohousing. A culture of 'individualism' began to make inroads on the *folkhem* sentiment of togetherness.

However, the game was not yet over. Some foresighted activists, alerted by growing general concerns over our "ageing population" and seeing the limited capacity of public organs to handle the needs of rising numbers of old people, in the early 1990s developed a new cohousing model. The proposed innovation was to limit access to a unit to people "in the second half of their lives", i.e. over 40 years and with no children in the household. This idea, to enable people still in their working ages to engage in creating mutual support systems of value after retirement turned out to be beneficial. The first building of this kind, *Färdknäppen* (meaning "One for the road") in central Stockholm, was ready in 1993. Similar cohousing units have since been built both in Stockholm and in several other cities, with varying degrees of self-management paid back with lower rents.

The *Färdknäppen* model has become a topic of inspiration and debate for both public and private housing companies searching for ways to offer senior citizens care, support and [social] security. Few are however prepared to invest on a broader scale in proper cohousing. There is a general lack of confidence within these agencies in the ability of future residents to take collective responsibility for public space and public functions. The various cases of senior housing produced recently are generally based on access to employed staff and residents paying for all services. Which in my understanding means a return to the Engkvist model of some decades back; pseudo-variants of cohousing whose inhabitants enjoy the company of neighbours and have access to various services – provided they can and will pay for such improvements.

This orientation is sometimes seen as resulting from the embryonic demands by currently retiring cohorts of the 1940's 'baby boom'. Visible among the radical movements of the 1970s, members of these cohorts were driving the cohousing agenda in the late 70s and early 80s. Today, the trend can be interpreted as a desire to replace the earlier work community with some new forms of housing offering a degree of community. Several housing companies are currently developing multi-storey flat houses with ground floor cafés and meeting rooms, often run by an employed caretaker.

If we define cohousing as community living with shared responsibility, such housing solutions fall outside the definition.

A new ageing boom

In all of Western Europe, the proportion of older people is since many years increasing. In Sweden, the expansion of the group 65 years or older was temporarily revised during the 1990s. A new expansion has been started, expected to last until the early 2030s. It reflects the entry in retirement of the big birth cohorts of the 1940s and the latter part of the 1960s.

Older people will over time make up a distinctly greater proportion of the population. Around 2030, those 65 years or older are expected to make up one quarter of the national population, a drastic change compared to today's 17 %.

Source Statistics Sweden 2010

Second phase: The state withdrawing; market forces emerging

While seen as a major achievement, the many cohousing units built since the BIG model was published have meant little more in terms of the major trends on the housing market than the one-off project by Markelius half a century earlier. Firstly, their distribution over the country is extremely uneven – the vast majority are found in Stockholm and Gothenburg, a few more in southern Sweden and virtually none elsewhere. Secondly, the cohousing households number only a small fraction of one percent, certainly visible in some circles but completely unknown for most Swedes – as is the communal way of living itself. Cohousing remains marginal, something many people might appreciate if they get to visit a cohousing unit but which many such visitors still say is not compatible with their understanding of themselves.

For contractors and housing agencies, cohousing units represent an economic risk that few are prepared to test. Should the communal activities that require a common kitchen, a joint dining room and other amenities die out, who will then carry the cost of those amenities? Considerations which have led housing companies to build cohousing units with 'normal' flats when cohousing flats for reasons of cost need to be smaller and simpler. The result tends to be kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy: Good designs for functional cohousing are sacrificed while higher than normal housing costs make the flats affordable only to better-off people with less interest in collective living.

Many of the public housing companies have earlier been prepared to risk rebuffs, as they have seen a response to demands for cohousing from well organised would-be tenants to be part of their societal responsibility and mandate. When the political signals from local governments were positive, concrete results did not take long to come. This was the situation during the 1980s, the golden period of cohousing in Sweden while also the beginning of the end to the Swedish welfare system. Changing international economic conditions, and a brief period of economic downturn during conservative rule in the early 1990s, led the returning social democratic government to start a series of reforms that have been described as reflecting much of the neo-liberal ideologies spreading in Europe. Privatisation – the selling out of state property and the opening of social services for private ("risk capital") contractors has come to be a major feature of conservative and social democratic politics since then.

This paradigmatic shift reflects a wider trend in Europe – the market orientation of the EU (see eg Judt 2010). The Swedish membership in 1995 opened for systematic attacks on the whole state-society relation built during social democratic rule. The EU principle of free market competition has dealt a serious blow to services such as energy, telephone, railway, post, health, education and other services provided by non-profit public sector agencies. Under this principle, any non-market condition such as subsidies is to be removed. This applies even to the Swedish public housing companies, which today can no longer act as a stabilising factor on the rent levels, nor deliver 'good housing' if this is in conflict with profit-making. Although some of these agencies maintain an interest in

cohousing solutions, the majority appear to be open only for senior housing solutions for better-off clients, similar to those in Denmark, Netherlands and the USA (see various contributions in Vestbro ed. 2010).

Cohousing for whom?

With all its emphasis on support to families with children, the social democratic welfare programme failed to prevent a gradual social movement towards new life forms without or with very few children. Shared by all “over-developed” countries, this movement entails later entry into adult life, family formations and childbearing postponed, and an increasing number of people living alone. In Sweden, since the 1960s the proportion of households consisting of only one person has more than doubled, and seven households out of ten are childless (see table below). One less often discussed aspect of this trend is the way kinship networks are affected: The existence of cousins, aunts and uncles is due to one’s grandparents having many children. With the one-child family, the kin tree is deprived of its branches. And kin matters even in our modern world, as a basic social security when employment, personal relations and friendships are more fluid and unstable.

The transition to life styles with less room for children goes along with a culture of individualism and self realisation, at odds with the ‘*folkhem*’ consensus.⁶ Its significance for alternative housing models such as cohousing is however not straightforward. On the one hand, individualism and openness to change (of partner, of habitat, of job etc.) works against engagement in a community where the sharing of tasks and responsibilities is a must. On the other, social fluidity and ‘atomisation’ is a serious challenge for many. In today’s Sweden, loneliness is a social problem of growing magnitude. One answer could be to create facilities for ‘living together’.

“To belong”, be part of a group or a community, is a basic human need. The challenge is to find responses that people would accept. A public housing company in southern Sweden began experimenting in ways to reduce destruction and violations in their housing areas. Small-scale experiments were started where neighbours in the same housing unit were invited to do garden work on the grounds of the house. The results were at times remarkable – in terms not only of good neighbourliness but also of less of destructive actions.

Cohousing would seem to be an attractive alternative for single person households in need of community. It would seem an ideal way of living for families with small children, not least those run by a single adult. Older people with few friends and their kin living elsewhere would find a cohousing unit a haven of opportunities to meet younger generations and feel good from sharing communal tasks. Still, cohousing as an option is simply not there – neither in public demands for housing nor in political programmes of the democratic

⁶ It has been argued that the very construction of the welfare system as a direct contract between the state and the individual has made this possible, by allowing the citizens to decide over their lives independently of other actors such as family and employer (see e.g. Berggren and Trägårdh 2006).

parties. The website of *Kollektivhus NU* lists the groups formed with the aim to arrange cohousing; less than a dozen over the whole country. Available data on cohousing units tell a similar language – although a few new units are underway or just ready, the general trend is in no way distinctly positive.

The association reports on an inventory it made in 2006. 52 cohousing units were traced. 10 had been entirely “de-collectivised” while another 17 appear to maintain parts of the original functions. 25 of the 42 with all or part of their cohousing still there, are examples of the *BIG* model described above, and 6 of these are of the *Färdknäppen* type, i.e. open for households 40+ with no children at home. Altogether the cohousing units have around 2000 dwellings or 0.05 percent of the national housing market. (Vestbro undated)

The cohousing movement under new conditions

The majority of today’s activists in *Kollektivhus NU* are middle-aged or retired. We may still live the confidence and enthusiasm that for a period brought so much of progress in social reform and innovations. Our actions are most likely still founded in a belief that the state is there to respond to our demands, if only they are well articulated and visible for the responsible departments, transferring them to the board rooms and the executives of housing companies.

The generation to which the cohousing movement turns its attention, the children of the 1940s *baby boom* generation, find themselves in a very different ideological and political environment from that of their parents. Their view of the role of the state, and of what it means to be 'radical' or 'progressive', indeed of what is possible, should bear few similarities. It remains to be proved that *cohousing* as a model for community organisation in the 21st century, is likely to be viable, and then for whom it is so.

In a macro perspective, no proof should be necessary. Growing economic differentiation and a reappearance of *poverty* in the midst of our affluent societies demand house forms designed to keep living costs down – one characteristic of cohousing at least in principle. Further, our growing awareness of the life style changes we have to do to reduce environmental depletion and climate change should lead us to reduce our individual consumption of energy and non-renewable resources – easier to do in the context of cohousing where the strength of the community could give support for change to its members. Finally, with media frequently reporting on the worsening conditions for elderly in institutions, the widening imbalance between needs and resources related to steadily growing numbers of seniors ought to make housing solutions where these seniors are encouraged to take care of one another increasingly attractive for the authorities.

Yet there are reasons for caution. Some have been discussed above. Another, possibly more profound, dimension of change in the political landscape could be added, a change working against social innovations such as cohousing. In its heydays, the international socialist movement aspired to the development of a citizenship where the common good of society would take precedence over more

egocentric interests. In Sweden under social democratic rule, these aspirations found their political expressions in a variety of public campaigns aimed to influence the whole society to more desirable behaviours, more healthy life styles etc. Various organisations offering 'adult education' could access sufficient financial state support to expand their supply of 'good' courses, meetings and other forms of influence.

Today, only fragments remain of this once so important part of the Swedish *folkhem*. This vehicle of change of people's mindsets has lost out against the neo-liberal winds of change. The effects are there for us all to see: campaigns to influence our behaviour in the face of climatic threats are pathetic, reduced to nil by a the loud voice of a persistent market hammering on us to consume – journeys to Thailand, new cars, new kitchens and new electronics.

Cohousing is bound to continue to exist in Sweden and elsewhere – there will always be groups who want to challenge the prevailing order, who see alternative social arrangements as better answers to the challenges of the time, and who are sufficiently free of social bonds to 'mainstream' life styles to create the alternatives they have formulated. The Swedish *BIG* model will become only one of a growing variety of cohousing forms, adapted to changing conditions and new demands. The cohousing movement faces the challenge of making alternative housing arrangements become part of 'everyday life' or mainstream thinking among politicians, housing companies and the architect profession.

Patience and perseverance will be required. In a long-term perspective, odds are favourable. Today however, with economic recession as the immediately threatening cloud on the horizon and gradual climate change forming a glooming background, neither the state – meaning political parties, parliament and government – nor 'public opinion' should be expected to give cohousing the attention it deserves.

Table: Swedish household types 1960 – 2008, from two different sources*, per cent

Household type	Census data			Special surveys	
	1960	1975	1990	1991	2008
Single adult	20.2	29.9	39.6	44.1	44.2
Couple without children	n.a.	31.1	30.2	24.7	25.9
Others without children	n.a.	7.7	6.2	1.6	n.a.
Sum	[60.7]	68.7	76.0	70.4	70.1
Single with	n.a.	3.5	3.9	5.1	5.2

child(ren)					
Couple with child(ren)	n.a.	28.0	20.5	22.4	19.6
Sum	[39.3]	31.3	24.0	27.5	24.8
Unspecified		2.1		5.1	
Total	100	100	100	100	100

* Sources: Censuses 1960 – 1990; Statistics Sweden household surveys etc. NB the latter are not necessarily internally comparable. According to data in 2008, of the two categories “without children” 35 - 40% are households in ages of retirement (65+).

n.a. = not available

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