

Household size and composition around the world

1. The household: A fundamental unit of society

A household is a group of persons who make common provision of food, shelter and other essentials for living. Households are at the centre of many demographic, social and economic processes, since decisions about childbearing, living arrangements, education and health care, labour force participation, migration and savings often are made at the household level.

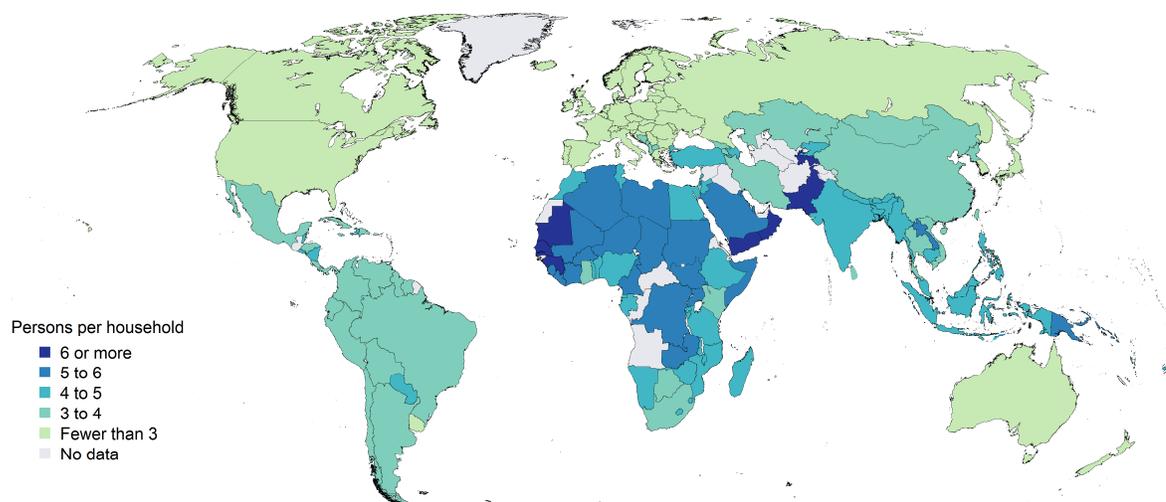
The characteristics of households, including their size and composition, are closely associated with sustainable development, poverty and well-being in general, as well as with patterns of consumption are shaping the human impact on the environment. This brief summarises estimates of household size and composition of the newly compiled United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition 2017.¹

2. Average household size across the globe ranges from 2 to 9 persons per household

Small average household sizes, of fewer than three persons per household, were found in most countries of Europe and Northern America. For example, households in Monaco and in Serbia averaged 1.9 and 2.9 persons, respectively, with 2.6 persons per household in the United States of America (figure 1). Some countries in Eastern Asia and the Caribbean exhibited small average household sizes as well: in Japan and Montserrat, the average number of persons per household was 2.4 and 2.0, respectively.

Large average household sizes, of greater than five persons per household, were observed across much of Africa and the Middle East. The largest household sizes were found in Senegal and Oman, averaging 9.0 and 8.0 persons, respectively.

Figure 1. Average household size around the world, most recent estimate since 2000

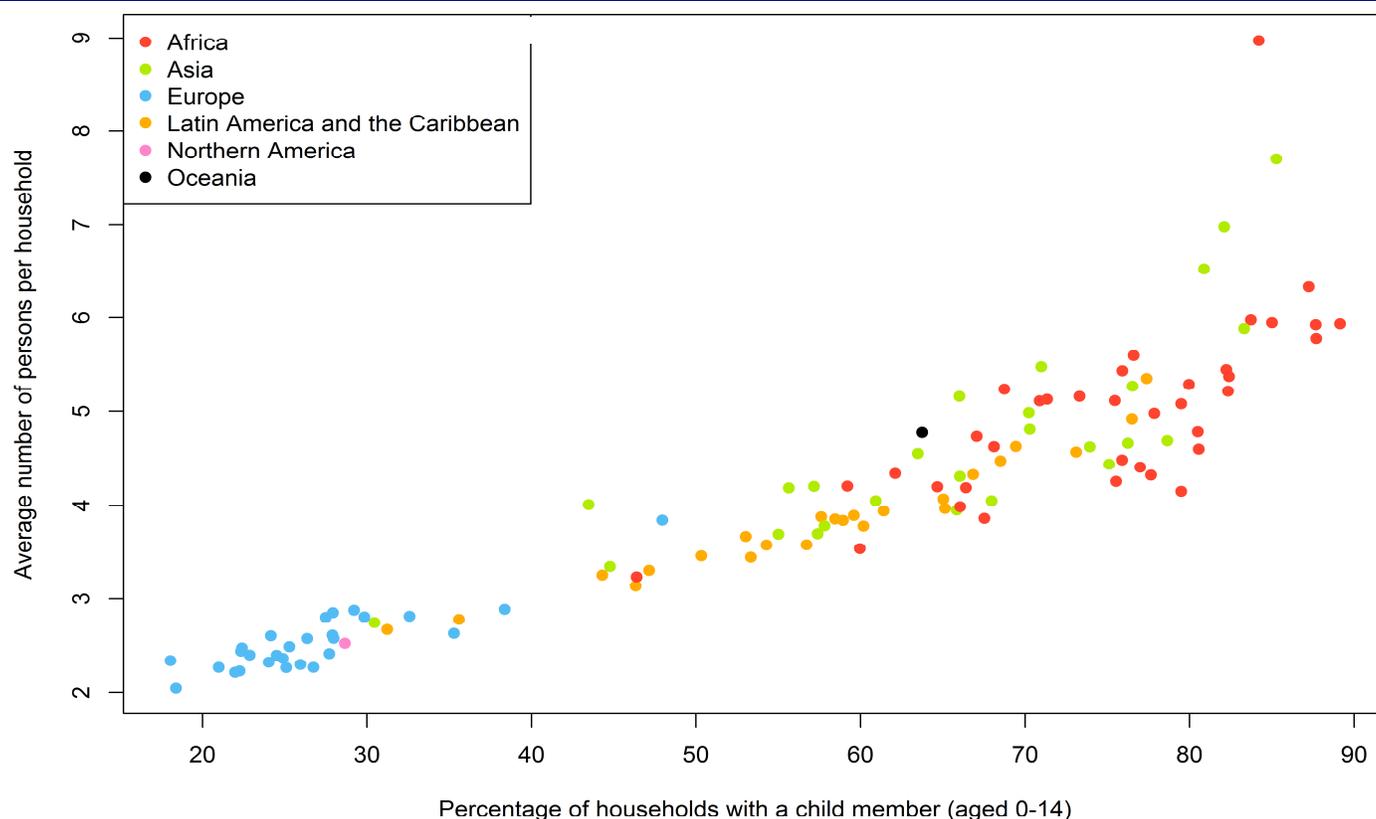


Data source: United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition 2017.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

Figure 2 Average household size and percentage of households including at least one child (aged 0-14 years)



Data source: United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition 2017.

3. Average household size has declined nearly everywhere, mirroring the fall in fertility rates

In France, for example, average household size fell from 3.1 persons per household in 1968 to 2.3 in 2011, at the same time that the total fertility rate fell from 2.6 to 2.0 live births per woman. In Kenya, the average household size fell from 5.3 persons per household in 1969 to 4.0 in 2014, concurrent with total fertility decline from 8.1 to 4.4 live births per woman. In addition to fertility, trends in household size are influenced by trends in health, longevity and migration; cultural patterns surrounding intergenerational co-residence, home leaving, cohabitation, marriage and divorce; and socioeconomic factors that shape trends in education, employment and housing markets.

4. With declining household size, a smaller share of households includes children

The presence of one or more children in the household has important implications for the household's priorities, particularly with respect to the demand and allocation of resources for education and health care. In the countries of Africa and Asia with the largest average household size, the overwhelming majority of households—more than 80 per cent—include at least one child (figure 2).

By contrast, in most of Europe and Northern America, only a minority (less than 40 per cent) of households include children. In Bulgaria and Germany, less than one household in five counts a child among its members.

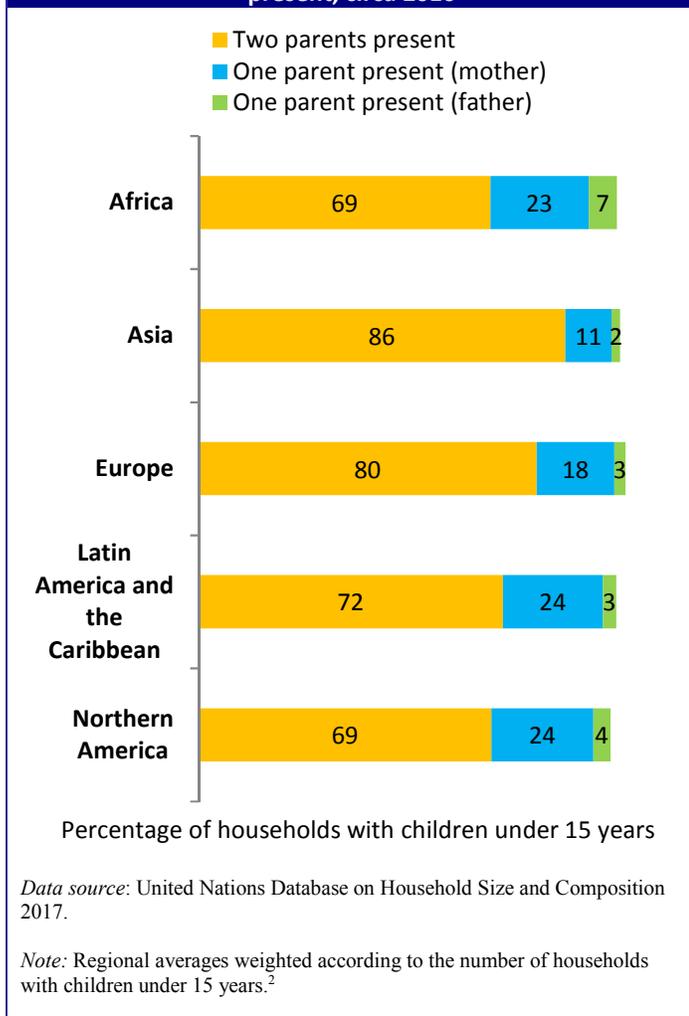
5. Most households with children include two parents, with notable differences across regions

The prevalence of two-parent households among households with children under age 15 is higher in Asia (86 per cent) and Europe (80 per cent) (figure 3) than in Latin America and the Caribbean (72 per cent), Africa (69 per cent) and Northern America (69 per cent). Two-parent households are less prevalent in countries that have suffered high rates of adult mortality due to HIV/AIDS, including Swaziland, Namibia and South Africa, where less than half of households with children have two parents present.

6. Lone-parent households comprise a minority of households with children in all regions

Lone-mother households³ account for nearly a quarter of households with children in Africa, Northern America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Such households are less common in Asia (11 per cent of households with children) and in Europe (18 per cent) (figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of households with children under age 15 years having two parents present or with one parent present, circa 2010



Lone-father households are rare, comprising between 2 and 4 per cent of households with children in almost all regions. The sole exception is Africa, where lone-father households represent 7 per cent of households with children.

The prevalence of one-parent households is influenced by marital and non-marital fertility, by marriage, cohabitation and union dissolution, by migration, adult mortality, war, conflict, and incarceration, by social attitudes and norms regarding gender, parenting and living arrangements, and by other factors as well.

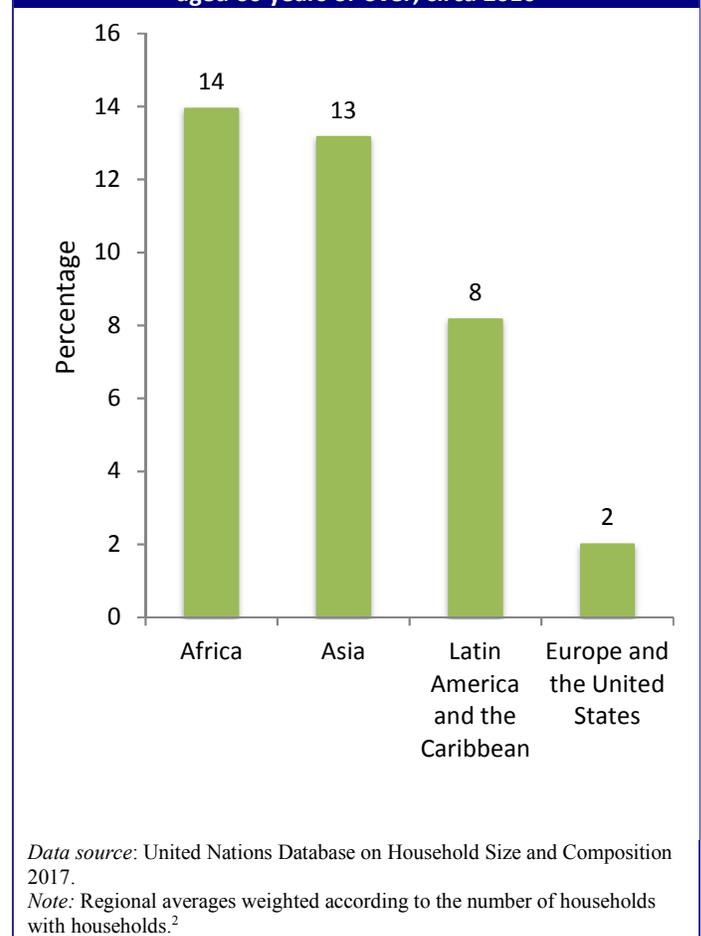
7. Co-residence of children and older persons is more common in Africa and Asia

Many of the households that include both a child under age 15 and an older person aged 60 or over are “multi-generational households”, reflecting co-residence of

members of three or more generations. Others are “skipped generation households”, reflecting co-residence of older persons with grandchildren, but without adult children. Figure 4 refers to all households with both a child under 15 years and an older person aged 60 years or older, and thus includes both multi-generational and skipped-generation households.

For countries of Europe and the United States of America, households with both a child (under age 15 years) and an older person (aged 60 years or over) remain rare, accounting for around 2 per cent of all households (figure 4). While more common in countries of Africa and Asia, only a small minority of households in those regions (14 and 13 per cent, respectively) include both children and older persons among their members. Considering all countries with available data, the percentage of households that include both a child and an older person is highest in Senegal at 37 per cent and lowest in the Netherlands at 0.2 per cent.

Figure 4. Percentage of households with both a child, under 15 years of age, and an older person, aged 60 years or over, circa 2010



8. Trends in household size and composition will affect progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Without other changes, the global trend towards smaller household size could slow progress towards the achievement of Goal 12 (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns), since average household size is inversely proportional to per capita energy use.⁴⁻⁹ Larger households tend to consume more energy overall compared to smaller households, but their per capita energy consumption tends to be lower since certain goods, such as personal vehicles and large household appliances (like refrigerators, central heating systems and air conditioners), are typically shared among members of a household.

Even though residential energy consumption accounts for a small fraction of total greenhouse gas emissions (around an eighth of the total in the United States, for example¹⁰), tracking changes in household size and associated consumption patterns will be an important part of efforts to realize both Goal 12 and Goal 13 (take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts).

Thus, whereas a decline in fertility always leads eventually to slower growth in the number of persons, the growth in the number of households may continue if the reduction in household size counteracts the impact of the reduction in population growth. Under such circumstances, efforts to expand access to adequate housing, water, sanitation, transportation and energy services will remain very important as well as challenging.

Preparing for an increasing number of households is also key to achieving Goal 7 (ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all). If the growth of households and of population continues to be concentrated in cities, a robust increase in the number of households may also affect the achievement of Goal 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable).

The composition, or membership, of households has important consequences also for the well-being of families and individuals. For this reason, understanding differences between populations in patterns of household composition and associated changes over time will also be relevant for efforts to achieve Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere), as well as Goal 2 (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture) and Goal 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages). Evidence from several developed countries indicates that children's experience of poverty is heavily influenced by family structure: in short, lone-mother households are, on average, much more vulnerable to

poverty than two-parent households.^{11,12} Moreover, some studies have linked older persons' psycho-social health and life satisfaction to the composition of their households.¹³⁻¹⁸

NOTES

1. The *United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition, 2017* is available on the Population Division's website, at www.unpopulation.org.
2. The number of households with children under 15 years was estimated by multiplying the percentage of households with children by total number of households in each country. The total number of households was estimated by dividing the total population estimated in *World Population Prospects: the 2017 Revision* by the estimate of the average household size of each country. The estimates of the percentage of households with children and the average household size were obtained from the *United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition, 2017*.
3. In a lone-mother household, the mother of one or more children under age 15 years is present without the father. The number of such households is expressed as a percentage of households with children under 15 years of age.
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