

Solo living is a potential environmental time bomb

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One-person households are the biggest consumers of land, energy and household appliances in England and Wales, with men between the ages of 35 and 45 being the worst offenders, according to UCL (University College London) research.

The report, published online today in the journal 'Environment, Development and Sustainability', concludes that the current rise in solo living, combined with the group's increasing affluence and consumption, is likely to cause a consumption crisis. This must be countered by providing environmentally-friendly lifestyle choices for this emerging group, such as collective housing, relocation schemes and ecological homes, according to the report.

Dr Jo Williams, UCL Bartlett School of Planning, said: "Current trends show that one-person households are growing more rapidly than other types of household. Previously, the typical one-person householder was the widow, often on a tight budget and thrifty. The rise in younger, wealthier one-person households is having an increasingly serious impact on the environment. But we have identified possible opportunities which arise out of the group's expansion and diversification.

"For example, the rise in one-person households is expected to account for 72 per cent of annual household growth between 2003 and 2026 according to government statistics¹. This means that, as part of the planned housing programme for England and Wales, there is a real opportunity to house this group in ecological new builds that are

prestigious, well-designed, state-of-the-art and environmentally sound.

“Regretful loners’, who are forced into living alone by circumstance, create demand for more collaborative lifestyles, such as more widespread co-housing schemes, where you have private space such as a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen but share some living and storage areas. It allows people to share household chores such as cooking; DIY and gardening; share goods such as tools; and consume less energy.”

The report suggests that design, fiscal and awareness-raising solutions including ecological homes, collective housing forms, the introduction of occupancy tax (a tax on inefficient use of space) and more widespread relocation packages, educational programmes and targeted advertising campaigns, could be used to significantly reduce the future environmental impact of one-person households.

In the UK the number of one-person households has risen significantly over the last 30 years. Between 1971 and 2001 there was a 12 per cent shift from 18 per cent of households being one-person households to 30 per cent in 2001. Experts believe that the figure will rise to 38 per cent – over a third of all households – by 2026.

One-person householders are the biggest consumers of energy, land and household goods, such as washing machines, refrigerators, televisions and stereos, per capita. They consume 38 per cent more products, 42 per cent more packaging, 55 per cent more electricity and 61 per cent more gas per capita than four-person households. In households of four or more, people produce 1000kg of waste each, compared with those living alone, who create a massive 1600 kg of waste annually. They also produce more carbon dioxide per person.

The typical one-person household now is a far cry from its predecessor – the over 60s. The fastest growth in one-person householders is amongst

those aged between 25 and 44 and particularly amongst never-married men aged 35 to 44. Every week, the latter group spends 39 per cent more on household goods; every year, consumes 13 per cent more energy and on average uses 6 per cent more space than one-person households aged over 60.

In the study, Dr Williams consulted housing providers such as large housing associations and property developers as well as one-person households about alternative new builds and lifestyles. The report cites a need for change in government policy to encourage people to live more space-efficiently by constructing more suitable accommodation in the social and private sectors, extending relocation packages to the private sector and introducing an occupancy tax which would be levied on people using too much space.

One-person households are now wealthier than ever and, with the right advertising, may be willing to put money into more environmentally-friendly homes and products according to the research. There is also an opportunity to encourage high-tech, prestigious ecological new builds but property developers cite a need for more stringent statutory eco-standards for housing.

¹ These figures are from ODPM, 2006

Source: University College London

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