

Tackling the climate and housing crises: Promoting compact living in Europe

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Future European Union housing policy must address the twin challenges of providing adequate housing for all while drastically reducing current levels of resource use. Voluntary reductions in living space could make a significant contribution to achieving these goals.

To facilitate this, the EU should promote the construction of smaller

apartments set in attractive neighborhoods and enable the more flexible use of existing housing stock, according to a new study [published](#) in *Buildings & Cities* co-authored by scientists from the Research Institute for Sustainability—Helmholtz Center Potsdam (RIFS).

"Construction and energy use in housing are major contributors to climate change. Reducing per capita living space would reduce related greenhouse gas emissions, in particular from heating. We wanted to understand the conditions in which this could occur in Europe," explains RIFS Director Doris Fuchs, co-author of the study.

The researchers investigated the acceptance, motivation, and anticipated effects of voluntary reduction in living space in five EU countries: Germany, Latvia, Sweden, Spain and Hungary. The research was conducted under the auspices of the EU 1.5° Lifestyles consortium, which is coordinated by the RIFS.

A number of questions are addressed in the study, including: What could motivate Europeans to live in smaller spaces? What impact would downsizing have on neighborhood and [community engagement](#) or consumption practices, for example? What changes in society could improve people's well-being in smaller living spaces?

The researchers gained insights through interactive workshops with citizens and stakeholders from civil society, science, business, politics and the media in the five countries.

Few citizens willing to voluntarily downsize living space

In Europe the average per capita living space increased by 16% between 2000 and 2018. However, there are major differences between the

individual countries: In Latvia, the average per capita living space is 29.6 square meters, whereas in Sweden it is 48.7 square meters.

"Nevertheless, respondents in all countries expressed similar concerns about downsizing their living space—in particular that it would result in a loss of personal freedom and privacy—and described housing markets as challenging. Home-owners widely view their properties as long-term investments that confer a particular social status," says first author Matthias Lehner (Lund University).

At 42%, the willingness to reduce living space was highest among workshop participants in Spain, while in Hungary just 15% of participants expressed a willingness to downsize. Communal living arrangements were even less popular than smaller apartments across all of the countries studied. Hungarian participants cited negative experiences of communal living during the Soviet era as a relevant factor.

Enabling environments could encourage compact living

Despite the many challenges involved, European citizens would be willing to embrace smaller living under the right circumstances, explains Fuchs. "Many participants expressed a preference for centrally-located apartments in green, friendly, and safe neighborhoods with access to services and leisure facilities, coupled with communal amenities and public spaces to compensate for the reduction in private living space and improve their overall quality of life."

According to the researchers, if the EU wants to promote a reduction in per capita [living space](#), it should encourage the construction of smaller apartments in neighborhoods that afford citizens a good quality of life.

Measures could also be introduced to facilitate the more efficient use existing housing stock, for example by dividing or merging apartments for different household sizes, promoting shared apartments, and improving sustainability through renovations.

This would require appropriate legislation and economic incentives for construction and planning. The study also notes that "soft values" are important in building a good community, and politicians should support initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion and inclusion.

More information: Matthias Lehner et al, Living smaller: acceptance, effects and structural factors in the EU, *Buildings & Cities* (2024). [DOI: 10.5334/bc.438](https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.438)

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