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## **Senior Single Households in Vienna**

Shrinking Households in the Ageing Society

### **Summary**

#### **Research Background**

It is a major issue of social politics in central and western European cities to enable the older citizens to live as long and autonomous and self-reliant as possible in their homes. This implies restructuring and reorganising and continuous rethinking of the complex sector of social services and health care. It also affects the housing provision system in many ways. While architects and housing providers are increasingly concerned about designs and standards for new dwellings appropriate to the changing needs and daily living competences of older people, the vast majority of them live in the existing old housing stock where modern mainstream policies want to keep them as long as possible.

This study focusses on family households in their late stages, i.e. when households shrink after children have left and partners have separated – due to whatever reason. The single-phase of previous family households is becoming ever longer as life-expectations are still increasing. Consequently, these older singles are nowadays spending a much longer part of their life alone in homes which used to be inhabited by a larger household. But it is not only the size of the home which gradually may turn inappropriate to the needs of an older single and her or his maintenance-abilities; moreover, the shrinking of the household is usually accompanied by a shrinking household-income while housing costs may level off or, more likely, increase. In order to extend the living at home, old dwelling equipment, perhaps even the entire configuration of the apartment, may need to be changed or customised to the declining abilities of the ageing single inhabitant and his or her physical and mental competences. In addition, not only the apartment but also the building, the whole housing estate, the near surroundings and the technical and social infrastructure and the local amenities ought to be reviewed and seen through the eyes of the older single.

#### **Objectives and Methods**

The main objectives of the study are

- to investigate the quantity and the structure of senior households in Vienna;
- to investigate the size, the location, and the structure of their homes;
- to explore how the senior inhabitants judge their homes, their dwelling environment, and the urban quarter they live in;
- to collect from the senior singles ideas for improvements and necessary adaptations of their homes and houses and the area they live in;
- to ask the senior singles about their options and alternatives to their current dwelling situation.

The findings should contribute to the further improvement of the Vienna housing subsidy system by delivering some quantitative and qualitative aspects to the complex issue of ageing in the city.

The main method applied in the study was the analysis of recent statistical material on population, households, and dwellings in Vienna; this was complemented by qualitative in-depth interviews with seniors and with representatives of social service organisations. Additionally, some findings were compared with results from other recent investigations in the same field.

### Major Findings

- More than one third of Vienna's population (2008) of 1,68 million is 50 years of age or older, women being a significant majority of 57 percent. While only 21 percent of the less than 50 years old ones live as singles, the analogous rate among the seniors is much higher: 36 percent.
- Of all households (412.800) with seniors (50 or more years old) almost half are single households (202.600). The other senior households (210.200) consist half and half of either only seniors („pure“ senior-households) or seniors and younger ones („mixed“ senior households).
- Seniors live generally in larger apartments in Vienna than non-seniors; this is particularly true for the single households. While a good quarter of the advanced aged singles (80 years and older) inhabit homes with more than 90 m<sup>2</sup>, this is the case just for 10 percent of non-senior-singles. At the same time 25 percent of them live in apartments less than 45 m<sup>2</sup>. The homes of senior singles also have more rooms than those of young singles. One fifth to one quarter of senior singles live in 4-room-apartments; only 9 percent of the non-singles live in such large homes.
- There seems to be a positive correlation between general contentedness with the inhabited home and the age of the person asked. Explicit dissatisfaction is rarely found. Contentedness decreases significantly amongst seniors when the apartment is situated in a noisy surrounding of the house.
- Viennese seniors are in general rather content with the public green in their quarter; however, critique is frequently expressed because of the lack of benches and other facilities to sit down and have a rest.
- Rapid changes of local amenities (disappearing little shops) and – in parts – a growing not-german speaking neighbourhood is often realised by the aged as a loss of „feeling-at-home“.
- Seniors have astonishingly little criticism for certain deficits in the house, but do make suggestions or propositions for improvements, e.g. duration of staircase- and corridor lighting, maintenance of door-openers, anti-slip-protections on staircase-edges, grab-rails in toilets and bathrooms, wider doors in lifts, toilets and bathrooms etc.

The shrinking of family households down to one person at the entrance to the senior age is mostly a process over a longer period of time. Children leave home not at once. Later on, however, it is very often a suddenly happening occurrence – death, separation or divorce from the partner – which cause the shift from a pair to a single house-

hold. At this stage of life such incisive incidents usually have a much stronger impact on the left behind older person. The sudden aloneness combined with normally declining daily life competences makes life at home not necessarily easier. However, only few seniors and aged people confront themselves with dwelling alternatives or visions of leaving their home and having to cope with an unfamiliar situation somewhere else.

Between the beginning of a senior single life and a possible future in a nursing home various dwelling-modes with different degrees of services have been developed in recent times. These services should support and help living at home independently and in familiar surroundings. To make future use of them – if they are offered, available and affordable - older people are far more aware of and are able to imagine a kind of home-support for themselves much easier than thinking about a change of their place of residence and facing the loss of the home where they have been living for so many years or even decades. There is very little readiness and willingness for this kind of incisive change among the older people in Vienna. As a consequence, it has to be considered that much effort must be put into the adaptation of homes and houses and living quarters to the needs and changing abilities of the older ones.



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