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Descriptive Finding

Sociodemographic variation in family structures and geographic proximity between adult children and parents in Europe

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Abstract

BACKGROUND
Family structures shape caregiving dynamics and are considered key drivers of inequality. While research often focuses on partners and children, recent studies highlight the role of grandparents and parents of adult children in shaping informal labor demands. However, sociodemographic differences in multigenerational structures remain understudied. Most research focuses on multigenerational coresidence, despite evidence that geographic proximity alone is often sufficient to enable multigenerational support.

OBJECTIVE
This study explores age variation in multigenerational family structures, defined by the intersection of partnership status, parenthood, and adults' geographic proximity to their parents. It examines differences across gender, socioeconomic background, migration status, and welfare regimes in Europe between 2020 and 2022.

METHODS
Using the 10th wave of the European Social Survey, the age prevalence of family structures across groups is investigated through multinomial logistic regression.

RESULTS
Analysis reveals variation in the age distribution of multigenerational structures across all groups. At younger ages, lower socioeconomic background (SES) individuals are more likely to live in multigenerational structures, while higher SES individuals tend to delay parenthood and migrate, increasing their likelihood of parenting without nearby parents at older ages. Migrants face the greatest risk of parenthood without parents nearby. Welfare regime differences align with the fertility and social support patterns of each regime.

CONTRIBUTION
This study emphasizes the importance of considering relationships beyond the household when analyzing family structures and their implications. It highlights sociodemographic

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variations in multigenerational structures, which can influence the informal labor demands associated with different nuclear family arrangements and contribute to inequalities.

1. Introduction

Support from family members, along with the socially expected responsibilities to them, can significantly shape an individual's well-being, economic prospects, and life course. Therefore, family structure, defined by the presence of children and the availability or absence of partners to share costs and labor, is viewed as either a source or a marker of disadvantage (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). As a result, the uneven distribution of family structures – especially single parenthood – across social groups has been addressed as a key driver of socioeconomic disparities (Berghammer et al. 2024; Esteve and Reher 2012; Fomby and Johnson 2022).

However, recent decades have seen increased interest in kin beyond parents and children (Albertini et al. 2022; Alburez-Gutierrez et al. 2022), particularly multigenerational vertical ties, i.e., grandparents (Bengston 2001; Grundy and Henretta 2006; Mare 2011; Leopold and Skopek 2015). Grandparents can provide crucial informal support, and as they age and require care themselves they may also add to the responsibilities of family members, shaping how nuclear family structures impact individual outcomes (Albertini et al. 2022; Ridley and Bowen 2005; Zanasi and Sieben 2024). Despite this, little research examines social group differences in the distribution of multigenerational family structures, especially considering non-coresident parents of adults – that is, grandparents when their children enter parenthood.

Existing studies on multigenerational families often focus on the coresidence of adult children with their parents (Dykstra et al. 2014; Dykstra and Komter 2012; Glaser et al. 2018; Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023; Jappens and Van Bavel 2012; Pilkauskas 2012; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018; Pilkauskas, Amorim, and Dunifon 2020; Pittavino, Arpino, and Pirani 2025; Ruggles 2007, 2009; Ruggles and Heggeness 2008), even though multigenerational coresidence is rare in contemporary Western societies. Instead, parental support for adult children and grandchildren is often contingent on geographic proximity, which is typically sufficient to enable it (Hank and Buber 2009; Hünteler and Mulder 2020; Schoeni, Cho, and Choi 2022; Zanasi et al. 2023).

Few studies have documented differences in the number and type of distant non-coresident kin, including grandparents, across social groups, countries, and life courses (Alburez-Gutierrez, Mason, and Zagheni 2021, Alburez-Gutierrez, Williams, and Caswell 2023; Andersson and Kolk 2023; Daw, Verdery, and Margolis 2016; Dykstra

and Komter 2006; Grundy, Murphy, and Shelton 1999; Kolk et al. 2023; Murphy 2008; Puur et al. 2011). While these studies have innovatively highlighted the importance of the extended family, they overlook how different kin coexist, resulting in specific family configurations. Research suggests that the role of kin also depends on their simultaneous presence (e.g., Albertini et al. 2022). For instance, a living parent has different implications for childless individuals, partnered parents, and single parents (Arpino, Pronzato, and Tavares 2014; Arpino and Gómez-León 2020; Brenna 2021). By focusing on configurations defined by the simultaneous presence of different kin, family structures contextualize the relevance of each relative.

This article investigates social differences in the prevalence of family structures, defined by the intersection of parenthood, partnership, and the geographic proximity of adult children to their parents. It examines these differences by age across gender, social background, migration background, and welfare regimes in Europe between 2020 and 2022.

Only few data sources include kin beyond the household, though some have been used to map generational structures (e.g., Hünteler 2022) and examine variation in adults' geographic proximity to parents (Choi et al. 2020; Chan and Ermisch 2015; Hank 2007; Tomassini, Wolf, and Rosina 2003). The scarcity of data on non-coresident relatives and social background has constrained efforts to capture social variation in multigenerational structures beyond selected periods and contexts.

At the population level the prevalence of multigenerational structures can be computed or simulated, with reasonable assumptions, from the age-specific demographic rates of the generations involved (Caswell 2019; Murphy 2004). However, these estimations across social groups are difficult as they require data on mortality and fertility for multiple generations by group, information on social mobility and assortative mating, and assumptions regarding how rates and group interactions produce group differences. How macro rates result in micro-level kin patterns is not straightforward (Herlofson and Hagestad 2011).

This study overcomes these limitations by leveraging the 10th European Social Survey (ESS), an international survey collecting information on living parents, geographic proximity, and social background.

2. Family structures and multigenerational ties beyond the household

In these descriptive findings, family structures indicate the structural configurations of relatives in which ego is embedded, each associated with varying levels of actual or potential informal labor and child-rearing obligations. Literature on family structure and the well-being of children and mothers mostly distinguishes between single-parent households and two-parent households (McLanahan and Percheski 2008) to highlight the disproportionate burden that falls on single parents, especially single mothers. The basic elements of this classification are parenthood and partnership, and their intersection defines the typologies of two-generation family structures: single persons, childless couples, couples with children, and single parents (Cracolici, Giambona, and Cuffaro 2014; Innstrand et al. 2010; Keilman 1988; Maia and Sakamoto 2016; Wu et al. 2024).

In this literature, single parenthood is commonly defined as coresidence with a minor child but without a partner (McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Nieuwenhuis 2021). Coresidence and the age limit for the child being considered as dependent are crucial elements of the operationalisation of family structure, reflecting the idea that in contemporary societies, primary child-rearing responsibilities typically fall on coresident parents of underage children. Defining parenthood through coresidence captures the reality that the majority of caregiving responsibilities fall on parents who live with their children and emphasizes the distinct challenges faced by those raising children alone (Albertini and Garigga 2011; Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2015). While support from a non-coresident parent may exist, parents without a coresident partner remain at a significant disadvantage, as they face most daily demands alone. Although single parents could be further classified based on the level of support from non-coresident parents, this is not always straightforward and would create numerous subgroups.

The imposition of an age limit on the dependent child marks the point at which child-rearing obligations diminish as children gain independence. While support may continue during adulthood, the burden and obligation decrease as children age (Craig and Sawrikar 2009; Kalenkoski, Ribar, and Stratton 2007; Pailhé, Solaz, and Tanturri 2019). Setting an upper age limit is crucial for analyzing caregiving responsibilities across life stages and identify when parents are relieved of obligations as children gain independence. For instance, an upper age limit clarifies that earlier fertility relieves individuals of caregiving responsibilities sooner, whereas later fertility extends obligations to older ages.

A multigenerational perspective expands on this approach by recognizing the influence that parent of adult children can have on their children's actual or potential primary child-rearing responsibilities. However, unlike parents of minors, the support from and to grandparents is typically not defined by coresidence (Albertini and Tosi 2018; Zanasi et al. 2023), although geographic proximity is necessary as most support

requires physical presence (Hünteler and Mulder 2020; Nichols and Junk 1997). In this study, multigenerational ties are therefore defined by the presence of a geographically nearby parent. Parents of adult children are considered for their role in influencing and modifying the actual or potential informal labor and child-rearing burden associated with ego's family structure.

The intersection of the relationships – between coresident partners, coresident children, and nearby parents – results in the structures in Table 1. These structures are associated with a wide spectrum of potential care responsibilities. At one extreme, parents with a partner and a nearby parent experience the highest potential for care support and obligations. At the opposite extreme, lone individuals have no potential support from or obligations to the specific relatives considered here. These patterns can be reinforced by the number of each relative; for simplicity, the analysis is limited to the presence of at least one relative of each kind.

Table 1: Multigenerational family structures defined by coresidence with partner and children and residential proximity to parents

Coresident partner	Coresident child	Nearby parent	Family structure
Partner	Child	Parent	*Couple with dependent child and nearby parent*
		No parent	*Couple with dependent child and no nearby parent*
	No child	Parent	*Couple without dependent child, with nearby parent*
		No parent	*Couple without dependent child or nearby parent*
No partner	Child	Parent	*Single parent with nearby parent*
		No parent	*Single parent without nearby parent*
	No child	Parent	*Single without dependent child, with nearby parent*
		No parent	*Single without dependent child or nearby parent*

3. Data and methods

This study uses data from the 10th wave of the ESS, collected between 2020 and 2022. The sample includes individuals aged 18 or older, with the oldest respondent being 90. Records missing values for age or gender (1,165) were excluded. Observations missing information on living parent (1,007) and their geographical distance (1,383) were also removed, resulting in a baseline sample of 44,816 individuals.

The data include Finland and Sweden as Nordic countries; Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, and the Netherlands as Continental countries; the United Kingdom and Ireland as Anglo-Saxon countries; Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal as

Mediterranean countries; and Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia as Eastern European countries.

Family structures were defined using the categories in Table 1. Individuals responsible for a child are those living with at least one child under 18, including step, adopted, and foster children. Individuals in a couple are those with a coresident partner. This definition does not account for non-coresident partners who may provide childcare support. However, the single parents are too few to disaggregate further.

Parents' availability is defined as having at least one living parent within 45 minutes' drive. This distance is used because care support requires physical presence (Hünteler and Mulder 2020), and 45 minutes approximates the average commuting time in Europe (Giménez-Nadal, Molina, and Velilla 2022). All specifications were tested without proximity restrictions (Online Appendix). Without proximity restrictions, nearly all individuals of child-rearing age have a living parent. It is also important to note that the data exclude information on parents-in-law, likely underestimating multigenerational structures for individuals with a partner. Unfortunately, no recent European-level data include in-law information.

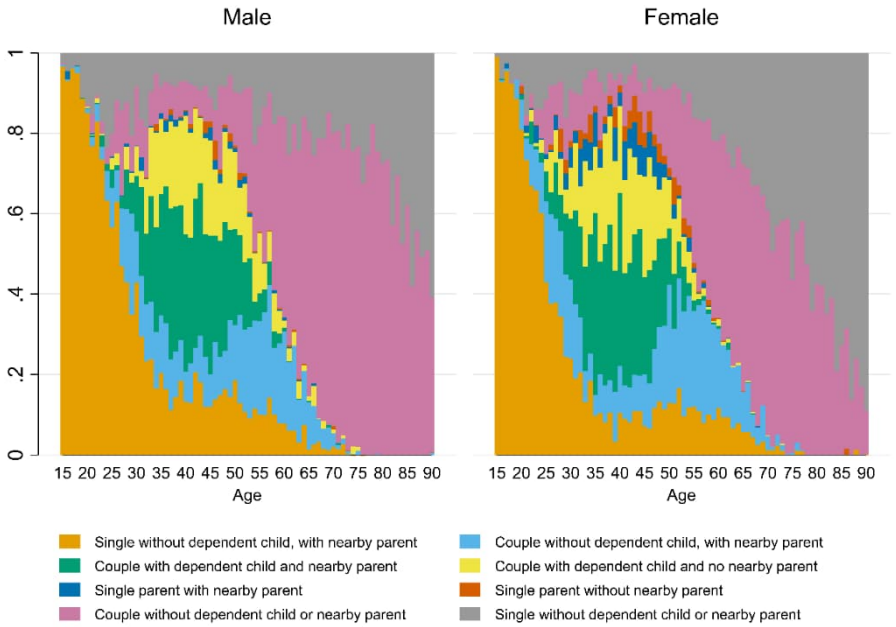
To examine sociodemographic variation in the prevalence of each family structure, a categorical variable representing the eight typologies in Table 1 is regressed on age groups, interacted with variables representing socioeconomic background, welfare regime, and migration background, in separate models. Multinomial logistic regression is used, adjusting for country and gender in pooled data with sampling weights and robust standard errors. Results are presented as predicted probabilities of each structure by age and stratifying variable.

Socioeconomic background is measured by the highest parental occupational class when the respondent was 14. Parental occupation is used because respondents' own occupation and education at younger ages may be unavailable or not indicative of their status. ESS parental occupational class is organized into three categories: Higher SES, including professional, technical, and higher administrator roles; Mid SES, including clerical, sales, service, and skilled workers; and Lower SES, including semi-skilled, unskilled, and farm workers. Records missing parental occupation (2,952) were excluded. Parental education was also used as a robustness check, yielding similar conclusions. However, six countries lacked parental education data. Migration background was categorized as migrant (born abroad), second generation (one foreign-born parent), and native (both parents native-born). Descriptive statistics are in Table A-1 in the additional online appendix.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of family structures by age and gender. The results reflect expectations based on life-course progression. Young individuals are predominantly single and childless, living close to their parents. As age advances, individuals become more likely to be in a couple, have children, and lose their parents or move away from them. After age 30, the majority of individuals are coresident with a partner.

Figure 1: Distribution of multigenerational family structures by age and gender



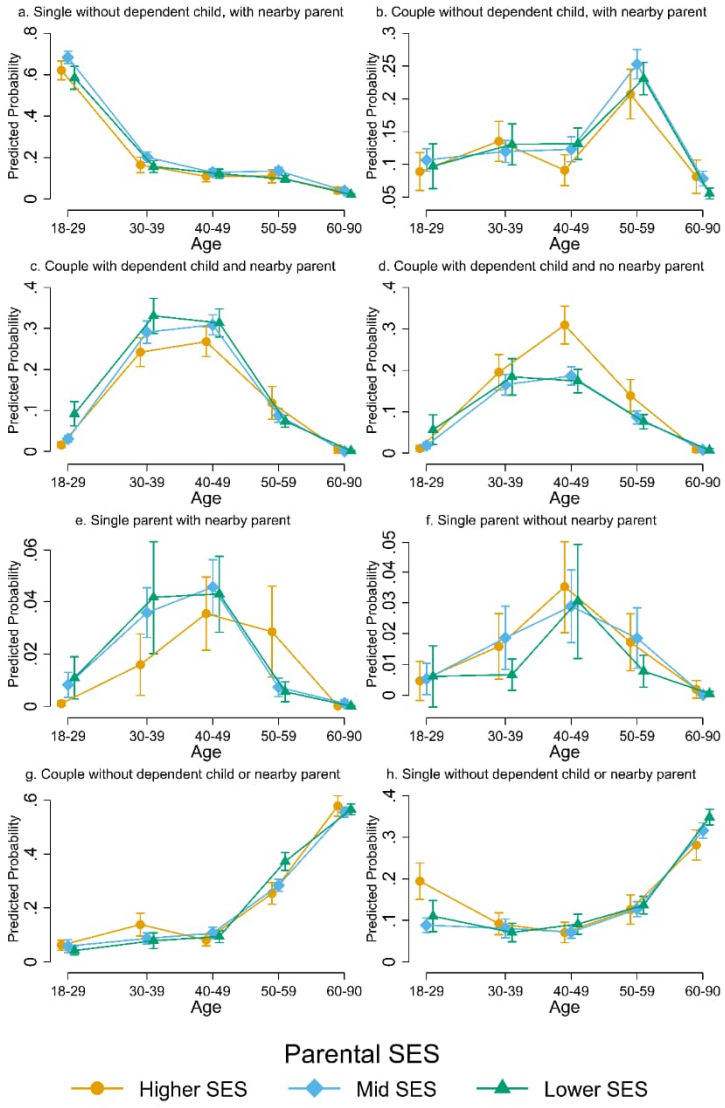
The greatest family structure diversity is between the working ages of 30 and 60. Here the majority of people have one dependent child, and many live in a multigenerational structure. Single parents are a small fraction and predominantly women. Multigenerational structures are concentrated at working ages. Figure A-1 shows the same distribution regardless of parental proximity. Parentless parents are extremely rare and basically anyone with a child has a living parent.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of each typology by age and social background, adjusted for gender and country. Higher-status individuals are less likely to be in multigenerational structures during working ages (panel c, Figure 2) and more likely to be parents with no nearby parent (Figure 2, d). They are also less likely to be single parents with nearby parents (Figure 2, e). Finally, they are more likely to be single without a child and a parent at early ages (Figure 2, h). For all other typologies, no major differences emerge. If we consider family structures regardless of parental proximity (Figure A-4), social differences disappear except for the parenthood postponement of higher SES. This suggests that most social gradients in multigenerational structures depend on geographical mobility combined with fertility timing.

Figure 3 shows the same family typologies by welfare regime, controlling for gender. Mediterranean countries display their distinctive features. At most ages, individuals in Mediterranean countries have the lowest likelihood of being distant from their parents, especially when becoming parents (Figure 3, d). They also show lower levels of single parenthood. The same features but less pronounced are also visible for Eastern European and Continental countries. Completely opposite, Anglo-Saxon countries display the lowest levels of multigenerational structures (Figure 3, c) and the highest levels of parentless parents at younger ages (Figure 3, d). Anglo-Saxon countries also show the highest level of single parents at early ages. In Nordic countries, high fertility results in high levels of parents both parentless and with parents nearby (panels c and d, Figure 3).

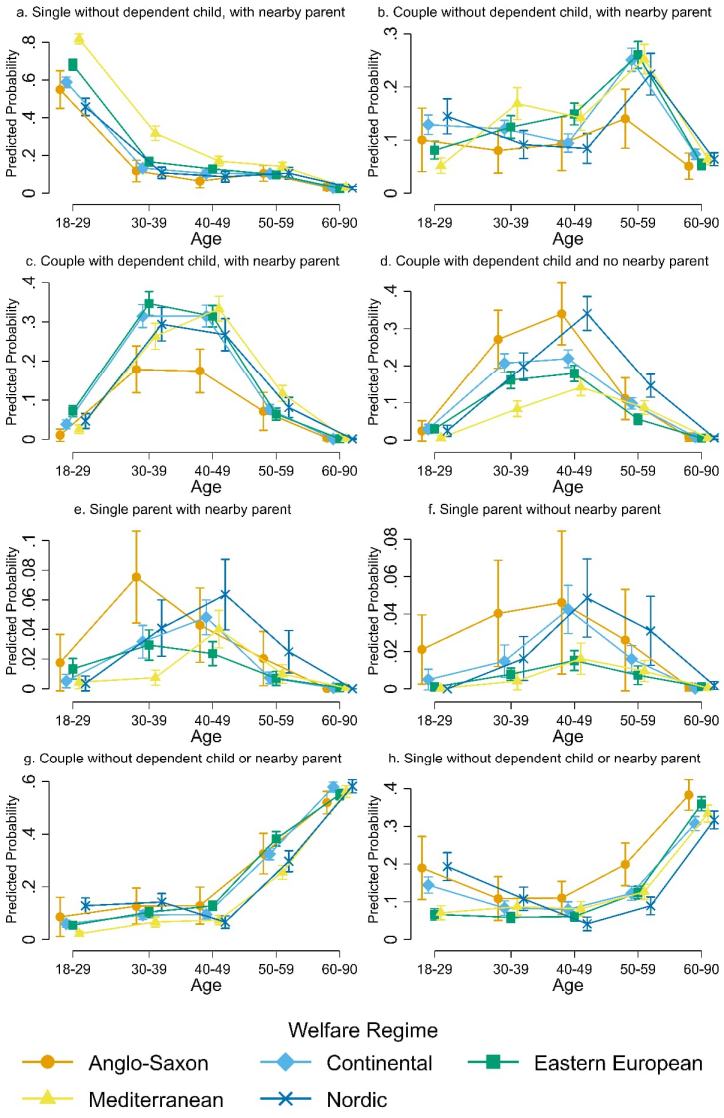
Figure 4 shows family structures by migration status. Migrants show the lowest shares of family structures defined by parental proximity. For all other characteristics, migrants are similar to both natives and second generations. Second-generation migrants show remarkable similarities to natives in all typologies. Notably, the migrant–native difference in the presence of multigenerational ties is entirely explained by geographical distance(Figure A-6) .

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of different family structures by socioeconomic background and age



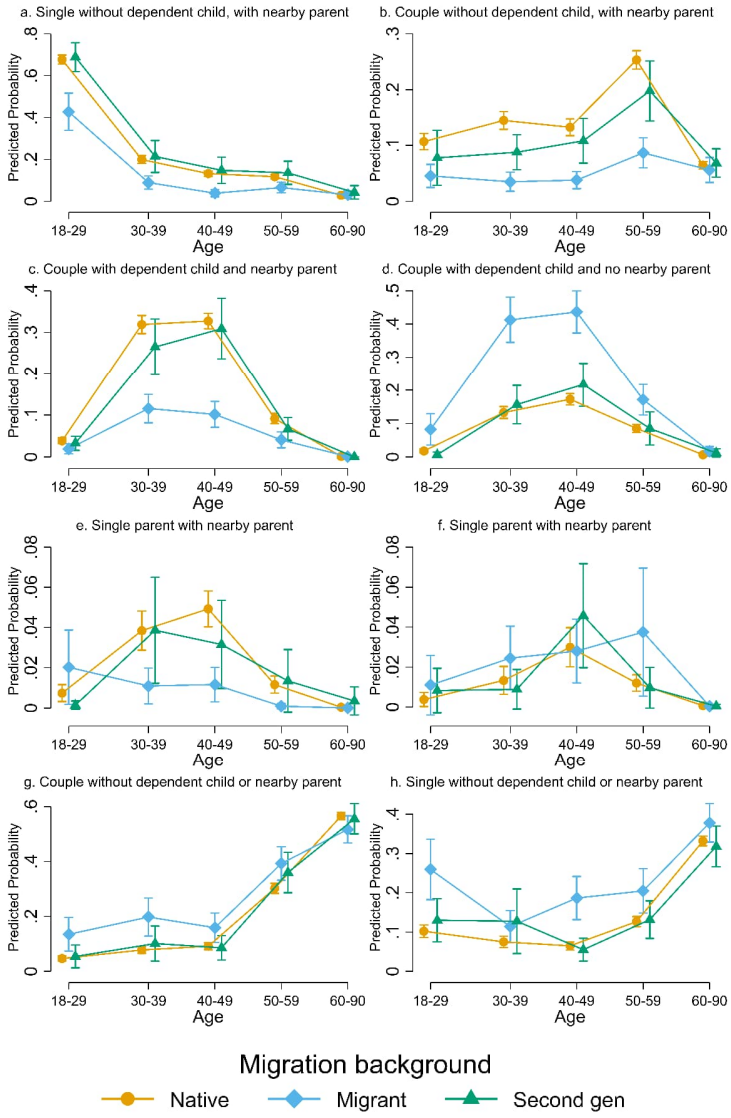
Note: Predicted probabilities through multinomial logistic regression adjusted for sex and country. Sampling weights applied.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of different family structures by welfare regime and age



Note: Predicted probabilities through multinomial logistic regression adjusted for sex and country. Sampling weights applied.

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of different family structures by migration status and age



Note: Predicted probabilities through multinomial logistic regression adjusted for sex and country. Sampling weights applied.

5. Conclusions and limitations

This study reveals significant social differences in the prevalence of multigenerational family structures and the ages at which they prevail across social and demographic groups. Limitations include the exclusion of parents-in-law and the fact that data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have led to estimates differing from those in non-pandemic periods due to increased mortality and residential relocations. Moreover, family structure has been used to represent the three-generational framework within which caregiving might take place; however, it does not directly measure whether caregiving occurs. Whether family structures translate into actual social support or caregiving demands from parents and partners depends on several factors and varies significantly by context, social background, and gender (Ophir and Polos 2022; Vargha, Binder-Hammer and Donehower 2023). Beyond information on the proximity of bio-legal relatives, there is need for data collecting detailed information on the actual flow of support.

Very few international data sources collect information on the geographic proximity of parents to adult children. Notable exceptions are SHARE, which focuses on individuals aged 50 and over, Kinmatrix (Leopold et al. 2024), and the Gender and Generation Survey. While sharing some of the ESS limitations, these data often include less precise information on socioeconomic characteristics, especially parental SES. Some national sources collect information on parental proximity, which has been used to map national multigenerational patterns. These include the German Ageing Survey and Socioeconomic Panel (Hagge and Schacht 2024; Hünteler 2022), the US PSID (Choi et al. 2021), the UK Understanding Society (Chan and Ermisch 2015), Family and social subjects in Italy (Tosi 2017), and some national register data (e.g., Andersson and Kolk 2023). However, as highlighted by this study, informal support practices vary significantly across countries, underscoring the need for internationally comparable data.

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