KINSHIP PATTERNS AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION:
OLDER UNMARRIED HUNGARIAN WOMEN, 1984 *

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Abstract. Household composition of older unmarried women in Hungary is analyzed using data from the 1984 microcensus. The principal determinants of household composition investigated are kin availability – the number of living children, siblings, and parents – health status, marital status, age, and income. A multinomial logit model distinguishing among five household types reveals that number of children, severe disabilities, age and income are all strongly related to household composition. Trends in fertility and mortality patterns suggest that kinship patterns will change in coming years; these results imply that household composition will, in turn, change as well.

Résumé. Relations de parenté et structure des ménages : Les femmes hongroises très âgées et sans conjoint, en 1984

La structure des ménages de femmes très âgées et sans conjoint est analysée ici à l’aide des données du micro-recensement hongrois de 1984. Les principaux facteurs qui jouent sur la structure des ménages sont la disponibilité des relations de parenté – nombre d’enfants vivants, de frères et soeurs et de parents – l’état de santé, l’état matrimonial, l’âge et le revenu. Un modèle logit multivarié qui distingue quatre types de ménages, montre que le nombre d’enfants, l’invalidité, l’âge et le revenu sont des variables fortement liées à la structure du ménage. L’évolution de la fécondité et de la mortalité suggère que les réseaux de relations de parenté changeront dans les années à venir : cela implique que la structure des ménages, à son tour, est amenée à se modifier.

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1. Introduction

In Hungary, as in many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, the population has been becoming more aged for many years. The phenomenon of population ageing is projected to continue for several decades. For example, the percentage of the population aged 60 and over in Hungary rose from 11.3 in 1950 to 18.2 in 1985; the most recent projections by the United Nations (1988) indicate a further rise, to 24.2 percent, by 2025. The increasing numerical importance of the elderly has tended to focus the attention of scholars and policy makers on issues relating to the living conditions of the elderly. Their household structure and family relations have received particular attention; in the case of Hungary's older population, for example, the importance of family relations has been stressed by Cseh-Szombathy (1983, 1987) and Klinger (1986).

Accompanying the trend towards a more elderly society has been a trend towards smaller households, in the population at large but also among the elderly population. Several recent papers – for example, Keilman (1987), Link (1987) and Schwartz (1988) – have documented the trend towards smaller households in postwar Europe. An intriguing question, of course, is whether there is an association between population age structure – that is, its age-composition – and the size distribution of households containing elderly people. A rather simple argument suggests that there is such an association: population ageing is, to a great extent, the consequence of reduced fertility; when those cohorts whose reduced fertility caused the ageing, themselves reach old age, they have fewer living children, on average, than do preceding elderly cohorts; with relatively few children, the traditional norm of providing support for one's older parents is strained and cannot be fulfilled, and this leads to an increased incidence of independent or isolated living patterns for the elderly. This argument, and empirical evidence consistent with it based on U.S. data, was presented in an influential paper by Kobrin (1976). More recently the argument has been shown to be supported by postwar European data as well (Wolf (1987a)). The general question raised then is that of how household composition is affected by kinship patterns – not only the number of living children, but the number and composition of kin networks including siblings, parents, and possibly more distant consanguineal relatives, and the corresponding relatives of spouses (and former spouses).