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Housing Choices in Later Life: A New Perspective on Retirement-Age Mobility

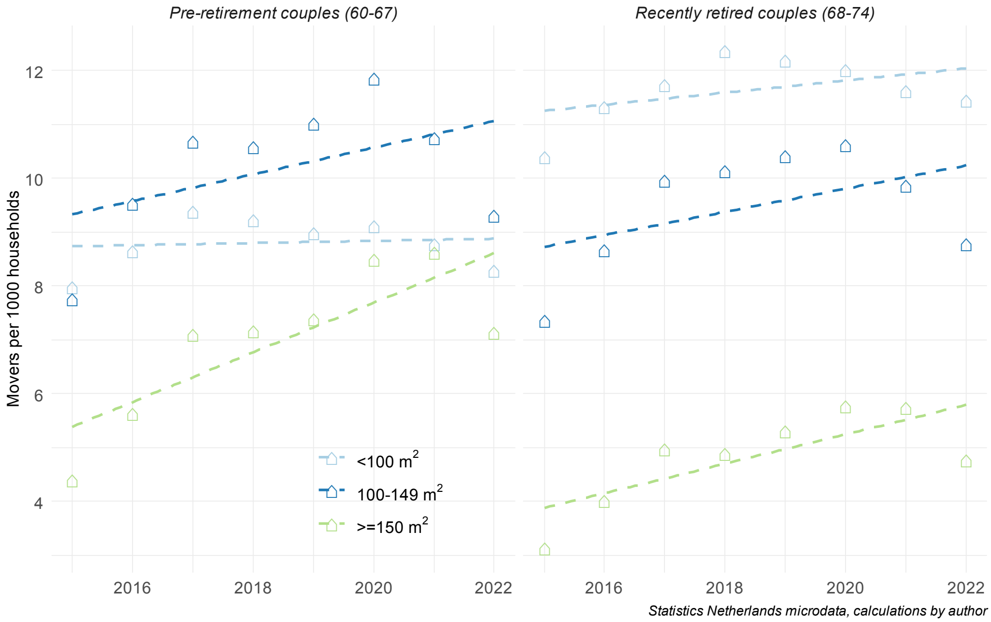
Aat's research has traditionally centered on the earlier stages of the life course. This strong emphasis on youth, however, tends to overlook the increasingly critical role that older adults play in today's aging society. The present contribution draws inspiration from Aat's own recent behavior in the housing market. Like many of his contemporaries, Aat resides in a spacious house of nearly 200 m², meaning he has approximately 100 m² to himself. In contrast, a third of coupled individuals in their twenties live in a house less than 75 m² (effectively about 30 m² per person) in the Netherlands (Mandemakers, 2024).

As individuals grow older and children leave the family home, their houses may begin to feel oversized. While many older adults express a desire to downsize, this intention is often hindered by emotional attachment to their home and neighborhood, as well as the scarcity of suitable smaller housing nearby. These factors contribute to the common pattern of residential inertia among older adults, where homes gradually become ill-suited to their changing needs—akin to wearing a coat that has grown too large.

Yet Aat defies this pattern. Rather than downsizing, he recently moved into a generously sized semi-detached house in a suburban setting—an unexpected, perhaps even paradoxical, choice. Is Aat an outlier, or might he be indicative of an emerging, previously unidentified trend among semi-retired individuals?

To this end, I analyze Dutch registry data spanning the years 2015 to 2022 to assess the likelihood of residential mobility among couples nearing or entering retirement. Two groups are examined. The first, termed 'pre-retirement couples,' includes households in which the oldest partner is aged 60 to 67 and no children under 18 reside at home. The second group, 'recently retired couples,' comprises couples where the oldest partner is aged 68 to 74, likewise without co-residing minors. This framework allows for a nuanced comparison of housing mobility patterns during the transitional phase into retirement.

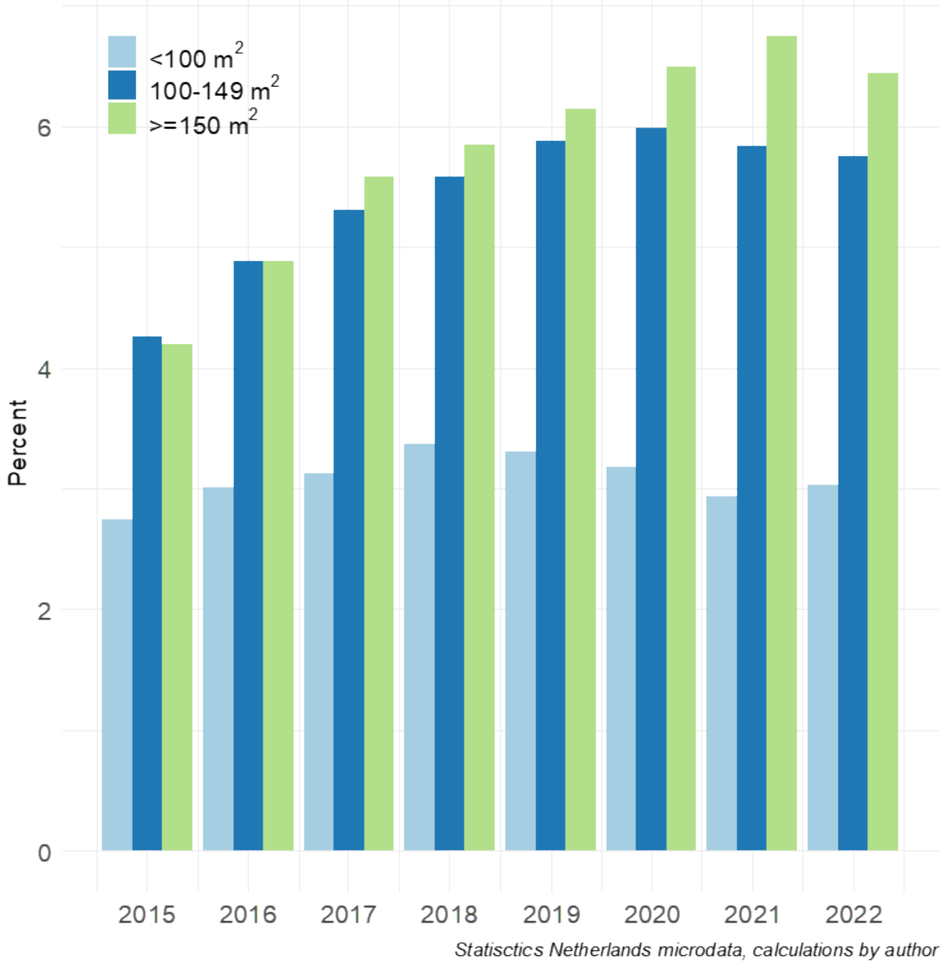
Figure 1. Trends in likelihood of moving by size of the new home



Not an anomaly

Figure 1 depicts trends in residential mobility for these couples. We see that Aat is not just a statistical anomaly; rather, his behaviour appears indicative of a broader trend. Couples approaching retirement (left panel) are increasingly likely to move to large houses. The annual probability of moving to a house of 100–149 m² increased from about 9 to 11 per 1,000 couples, while for the largest houses (150 m² and above), it nearly doubled from 5 to 9 per 1,000. In contrast, the probability of moving into a small house (<100 m²) has remained relatively stable. The 'recently retired' group (right panel) exhibits a similar pattern, though this group also saw a modest increase in the likelihood of moving into smaller dwellings.

Figure 2. Trends in share by semi-retired couples of newly occupied houses



A bigger piece of the pie

It appears that semi-retired couples increasingly prefer large houses—or are more capable of fulfilling such outsized preferences. An alternative explanation might be that the availability of large houses has grown. However, when we examine the share of newly occupied medium and large houses taken by semi-retired couples, we observe that this group nearly doubled its share over the eight-year period—from about 4 percent to more than 7 percent, as is depicted in Figure 2, which combines both groups of couples for clarity.

Importantly, this shift is not due to an increase in the number of semi-retired couples either: the share of pre-retired couples remained stable at about 7.8% of all households, while the share of recently retired couples rose only slightly from 5.9% to 6.1%. Thus, semi-retired couples are claiming a larger slice of the available housing stock, leaving fewer opportunities for younger generations.

Older people tend to have a more favourable housing situation than the young. The trends uncovered in this contribution show that this inequality is not only driven by residential inertia among older adults, but is partly due to purposeful moves of semi-retired couples into large houses. Many thanks to Aat for unknowingly drawing attention to this emerging dynamic.

References

Mandemakers, J.J. (2024) Woningkrapte raakt vooral alleenstaande jongeren. *Demos: bulletin over bevolking en samenleving 40*(10), 1-3.