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LIVING APART TOGETHER

Sourcebook: National survey of people who Live Apart Together (LAT), Britain 2011

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1. The project: Living Apart Together: a multi-method analysis

This research project examined the nature and experience of Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships in contemporary Britain.¹ Currently people who are 'living apart together' (LATs) constitute about 10% of the British adult population - over a quarter of those who do not live with a partner. Similar figures are recorded for other countries in Western Europe.

Living apart together therefore has considerable implications for our understandings about families and relationships. Is LAT a new way of doing intimacy in contemporary societies, where marriage and cohabitation are increasingly decentred? Or is LAT simply another stage on the well-established route to cohabitation and marriage, which if anything would reinforce their central normative position? What are the policy and legal implications of LAT? To answer these questions we need a fuller understanding of the nature and experience of LAT, and this was the task of the research project.

The project used a multi-method analysis to pursue these issues. It employed:

- (1) a representative national survey on reasons for living apart, motivations, attitudes, experiences and practices;
- (2) a purposive qualitative sample, drawn from the national survey, using semi-structured interviews to assess discursive accounts of LAT, its meanings and understandings, and to examine the survey results in social context and;
- (3) a purposive psychosocial sample, also taken from the national survey, using the biographical-narrative interpretive method (BNIM) to examine the psychic benefits, conflicts and ambivalences of living apart together.

This report presents the results of the national survey. Project publications are listed at the end of this report.

¹ The research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), grant number RES-062-23-2213.

2. Methodology

The national survey of people in LAT relationships in Britain for 2011 (hereafter ‘the survey’) combined data from three statistically representative general population surveys. These were the NatCen Social Research Omnibus, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and the Office for National Statistics Omnibus. All three constituent surveys used face-to-face interviews, and were based on random probability sample designs in which interviewers were sent to a randomly selected list of addresses and then required to randomly select an individual to take part. The combined sample covers Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland).²In total there were 5,869 productive interviews across the three surveys.

The question that defined individuals as ‘LAT’, asked of those not currently married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership in all surveys, was:

*Are you currently in a relationship with someone you are **not living with here?***

On two of the three surveys, (BSA and NatCen Omnibus), we also checked the co-residential status of respondents who said they were married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership.³

Our question – with respondents themselves defining the word “relationship” – was designed to be wide enough in scope to include all types of LAT, and yielded a total of 572 people in the three surveys. These LAT respondents were then asked a set of questions on the following topics:⁴

1. Length of relationship, **2.** Relationship history, **3.** Likelihood of living together, **4.** Geographical distance from partner, **5.** Term used to describe partner, **6.** Whether they see themselves as a couple, **7.** Reasons for living apart, **8.** How often they meet, **9.** How they keep in touch, **10.** How difficult it is to share costs, **11.** How difficult it is to arrange time together, **12.** Attitudinal Likert scale questions about LAT and relationships (concerning relationship stability, emotional security, freedom for career, freedom with friends and family, relationship limitations, financial security, future security), **13.** Who would care for respondent if ill in bed, **14.** Who would respondent turn to for advice for a difficult problem, **15.** Sexual exclusivity in cohabitation and for LAT partners.

Standard socio-demographic information for LAT respondents was also collected on each of the three constituent surveys (sex, age, marital status, housing tenure, highest educational qualification, region, disability, economic status, household composition). These data were then combined into a single LAT survey dataset.⁵ This will be archived at the UK Data Service.⁶

² The sparsely populated northern Highlands and Islands of Scotland - less than 1% of the British population – were not sampled.

³ “Earlier you told me that you are currently in a relationship. Can I just check (you may have told me this already), does your partner live here or somewhere else?” Those who said their partner lived somewhere else were defined as LATs for the rest of the module.

⁴ A small number of questions were simplified or omitted for the ONS survey (taken last), where responses to the 2 previous surveys had shown little variation. The BSA survey had an additional question on ‘the ideal relationship’, asked of all respondents – not just LATs.

⁵ The differences in the survey estimates were in line with that expected for samples of these sizes. Of the 36 LAT module variables tested only 2 showed significant differences between the three constituent surveys.

⁶ Data from the project will be available at: www.data-archive.ac.uk

3. Socio-demographic description of LAT: Britain 2011

3.1. Prevalence

People who live apart together (n= 572 unweighted; 533 weighted), after weighting, make up 9% of the full sample.⁷ This was the same proportion as a comparable survey for Britain in 2006 (Duncan and Phillips 2010). This constitutes 22% of all ‘single’ adult people not in a cohabiting, co-residential relationship (i.e. including divorced, separated, widowed and ‘never married’ single people). If people who are widow(er)ed are excluded from this group (as they have not ‘chosen’ to be single after being married), the proportion rises to 26% of non-cohabiting respondents.

3.2. Regional distribution

There is no significant regional difference in the distribution of LATs; the regional distribution of LATs approximately matches the general population. See Table 1.

However, we only have information for the 11 GB Standard Regions. More fine-grained spatial analysis might well pick out local concentrations and sparseness.

Table 1. Regional distribution, 2011

Region	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
North East	6	4
North West	11	11
Yorkshire and Humberside	10	9
East Midlands	6	7
West Midlands	9	9
Eastern	11	10
South West	6	9
London	16	13
South East	14	14
Wales	5	5
Scotland	8	9
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

3.3 Gender and age

The LAT sample was split equally in terms of sex (49% male, 51% female), the same proportions as found in the full adult sample in British Social Attitudes (BSA) 2011.

⁷ The calculation is based on the BSA survey only (LATs/all adults).

LATs are relatively young compared to the total adult population (measured by the full BSA sample). The majority, 61%, are under 35 compared to 29% of the total population. Nonetheless, 11% of LATs are aged 55 or more. See Table 2.

Table 2. Respondent's age, 2011

Age categories	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
16* to 24	43	12
25 to 34	18	17
35 to 44	15	18
45 to 54	14	17
55 to 64	6	15
65+	5	21
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

**The BSA survey interviews adults aged 18 and over, while the LAT survey also included 16 and 17 year olds*

3.4 Marital / civil status

LATs are much more likely than the general population to be classified as 'single', and much less likely to be classified as married. They are also more likely to be divorced or separated, and less likely to be widowe(er)ed. Some of these large differences will reflect the relative age distributions. See Table 3.

Table 3. Respondent's civil status, 2011

Civil status	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
Single	70	21
Divorced	18	7
Separated	6	2
Married	3	62
Widow(er)ed	3	7
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

3.5 Sexuality and relationship

Three per cent of LATs reported being in a same-sex relationship, while 97% reported being in a heterosexual relationship. There are no comparable figures available for the total population.

However, based on 2001 census figures Duncan and Smith estimated that 0.3% of co-residential couples were in same sex relationships (Duncan S and Smith, D.

'Individualisation versus the geography of new families' 21st Century Society: the Academy

of *Social Sciences Journal*, 1, 2, 167-190). Even allowing for significant underestimate in the 2001 census, it appears that LAT couples are more likely to be in same-sex relationships.

3.6 Ethnicity

The ethnic composition of LAT roughly corresponds with that of the total population. See Table 4 (as the sample is relatively small the analysis is at an aggregate level).

Table 4. Respondent's ethnicity*, 2011

Ethnicity	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
White	85	88
Asian	5	7
Black	5	4
Mixed/ other	4	1
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3287</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3288</i>

**Answer selected by respondent, using a showcard*

3.7 Household type

The majority of LATs live in a household where there are no children present: a third are in single person households (double the equivalent proportion of all adults), while 41% live with at least one other adult. A quarter (24%) live in a household with child(ren), compared to 32% of all adults.⁸ See Table 5. Women were more likely to live in a household with child(ren) than men (33% as opposed to 15%).

Table 5. Respondent's household type, 2011

Household type	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
Single (adult) household	33	17
1 adult, with child(ren)	11	4
2 or more adults, no child(ren)	41	50
2 or more adults, with child(ren)	13	28
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

⁸For this survey, 'children' are defined simply by their age (under 16 for ONS and NatCen Omnibus, under 18 for BSA). Therefore, the presence of a child in the household does not necessarily mean that they are the son or daughter of the LAT respondent. Similarly, adult children of the respondent are not separately identified here, whether or not they are living in the household. If they live in the household, they will be counted as an adult; if they live elsewhere they will not be included at all.

3.8 Education and socio-economic status

Overall LATs are better educated to A level, and less likely to have no qualifications than the population as a whole (29% versus 16%, and 7% versus 19% respectively). See Table 6. However, this is likely to be due to LATs' younger age profile⁹

Table 6. Respondent's educational qualifications, 2011

Educational qualifications	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
Degree	18	20
Higher education below degree level	11	10
A level or equivalent+	29	16
O level or equivalent++	19	17
CSE or equivalent+++	7	6
Foreign or other qualification	5	2
No qualification	7	19
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

+ school leaving aged 18

++ basic school qualification aged 16

+++lower level qualification aged 16

There is a rough correspondence between LATs and the overall population in terms of socio-economic status (using the National Statistics Socio-Economic classification based on occupation). See Table 7. The two exceptions - a lower LAT proportion in professional and managerial jobs and a higher proportion in 'not classifiable' – which includes students, also suggests correlation with age.

Table 7. Respondent's socio-economic classification, 2011

NS-SEC 5 classes	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
Managerial and professional occupations	29	35
Intermediate occupations	14	13
Small employers and own account workers	6	8
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	9	9
Semi-routine and routine occupations; never worked and long-term unemployed	33	29
Not classifiable	10	5
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>3311</i>

⁹ There are significant differences between the 3 constituent surveys for this variable.

3.9 Housing Tenure

LATs are more likely to rent and less likely to own their housing than the general population. This is likely to be partly a function of their relative age distributions. See Table 8.

Table 8. Respondent's housing tenure, 2011

Tenure	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
Owens outright	14	31
Owens on a mortgage	37	34
Private renting	24	15
Social renting*	24	18
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533	3295
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572	3298

* Housing association or local authority

3.10 Health

On average LATs are healthier than the overall population. This is likely to be correlated with age. See Table 9.

Table 9. Respondent's health, 2011

Health status	LAT survey %	BSA: all adults %
No health problems	83	72
Non-limiting long-standing physical or mental health condition or disease	9	12
Limiting long-standing physical, mental health condition or disease	9	16
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533	3311
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572	3311

3.11 Religiousness

LATs are less religious than the general population, both in terms of nominal religious affiliation (Table 10) and active attendance at services (Table 11). So while 57% of LATs say they have no religious affiliation, the same is true for just 46% of all adults. Of those who do have an affiliation, LATs appear more likely to never or practically never attend services (64% and 58% respectively). Both measures are likely to be correlated with age.

Table 10. Nominal religion: respondent's stated affiliation, 2011

Affiliation	LAT survey* %	BSA: all adults %
No religious affiliation	57	46
Christian	36	46
Non-Christian	7	7
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>287</i>	<i>3311</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>320</i>	<i>3311</i>

* BSA survey only

Table 11. Active religion: service attendance for those belonging to a religion*, 2011

Attendance at religious services	LAT survey* %	BSA: All adults %
Once a week or more	10	14
Less often but at least once in two weeks	0	2
Less often but at least once a month	6	6
Less often but at least twice a year	9	10
Less often but at least once a year	6	6
Less often than once a year	4	5
Never or practically never	64	58
Varies too much to say	1	0
<i>Weighted Bases</i>	<i>216</i>	<i>2708</i>
<i>Unweighted Bases</i>	<i>245</i>	<i>2750</i>

*BSA survey only

Base: all those who say they belong to a religion, or who were brought up in a religion

4. Status of LAT relationship

4.1. Length of LAT relationship

Living apart together is fairly evenly spread by length of relationship; it is not just a feature of short-term relationships, and can be long term. A fifth (19%) had been in their relationship for 6 years or more – the same proportion as in relationships of less than 6 months. See Table 12.

Table 12. Length of LAT relationship, 2011

Length of Time*	LAT survey %
Less than 6 months	19
1 year (incl. 6+ months)	24
2 years	17
3 - 5 years	22
6+ years	19
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572

* Respondents were asked to give the length of their relationship to the nearest year, so “1 year” would include relationships that had lasted 6 months, and those that had lasted 1 year and 5 months.

4.2. Previously living with current LAT partner

A significant minority, almost a fifth, had lived with their current LAT partner previously. See Table 13. Of this group, 15% were married, 12% separated, 12% divorced, 2% widowed and 59% single. While single respondents are the largest single category, in fact it is married and separated respondents who are disproportionately more likely to have lived with their partner in the past (as they account for 15% and 12% of LATs who have lived with their partner in the past, compared to just 3% and 6% of the full LAT sample).

Most of those (two-thirds) who had previously lived with their current LAT partner had lived apart from their partner for 2 years or less.

Table 13. Previously living with current LAT partner, 2011

Whether previously lived with current LAT partner	LAT survey %
Not previously lived with current LAT partner	82
Previously lived with current LAT partner	18
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572
Current legal status of those who previously lived with current LAT partner	All previously lived with current LAT partner %
Married	15
Separated	12
Divorced	12
Widow(er)ed	2
Single	59
<i>Weighted bases</i>	93
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	104

4.3. Likelihood of living with current LAT partner in future

Around half of LATs think they are likely to live with their current LAT partner in the next 2 years, and just under a half think this is unlikely. Those saying “unlikely” could be thinking either that their LAT status (i.e. living apart) will be fairly long-term, or alternatively that it will not lead to cohabitation. See Table 14.

Table 14. Perceived likelihood of living with partner in next 2 years, 2011

Likelihood of living with partner in next 2 years	LAT survey %
Very likely	25
Fairly likely	24
Fairly unlikely	29
Very unlikely	17
Don't know	5
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572

4.4. Describing LAT partners

How people describe their partner can give another indication of the nature of the LAT relationship. See Table 15. A high proportion (62%) chose “girlfriend / boyfriend” – a term which has traditionally been seen as indicating a relatively new or provisional relationship, or a looser and less formalised one. Only 22% of the total sample said they use “partner”, which is often taken to indicate more permanent relationships. Other descriptions which might indicate the longer-term (‘other half’, ‘husband/ wife’, ‘fiancé(e)’, ‘significant other’) were chosen by small minorities of respondents. Nevertheless, ‘husband/ wife’ reached 5% although only 3% responded that they were actually married. The proportion using

'fiancé(e)' matched that giving 'waiting to get married' as their reason for LAT (3%, see table 29).

Table 15. How respondents describe their partner, 2011

Description	LAT survey %
Girlfriend/boyfriend	62
Partner	22
Other half	7
Husband/wife	5
Fiancé(e)	3
Significant other	2
Lover	1
Other	3
No particular description	5
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572

We can check our assumptions about the language used by partners by cross-tabulating this against the length of relationship (Table 16) and the respondent's age (Table 17).

While it is true that the term 'girlfriend/boyfriend' is more commonly used for newer relationships of less than a year (70%), it certainly is not restricted to these: 59% of those in a 3-5 year relationship chose this response. However, by the time the relationship has lasted six years or more, the proportion using this term drops dramatically to 26%, and the term 'husband/wife' is nearly as popular – 21%. Nonetheless, even for this longer-term category, only a minority of 37% chose 'partner'.

Table 16. How respondents describe their partner by length of relationship, 2011.

Description of partner	Length of relationship, %					
	Less than 1 year	1 year	2 years	3-5 years	6+ years	Total
Girlfriend/boyfriend	70	76	77	59	26	62
Partner	11	14	15	32	37	22
Other half	5	9	7	6	6	7
Husband/wife	-	1	1	2	21	5
<i>Weighted bases</i>	100	125	89	113	102	532
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	97	122	94	120	138	572

- = no respondents

Differences by age are even more striking: while 86% of 16-24 year olds used 'boy/girlfriend', only 20% of the 55s and over did the same. Even so, just 28% of this age group used partner. There was also a significant class difference, with professionals less likely to use 'boy/girlfriend' and manual/ routine workers less likely to use 'partner'.

Table 17. How respondents describe their partner by age, 2011

Description of partner	Age, %					
	16 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	55+	Total
Girlfriend/boyfriend	86	64	44	36	20	62
Partner	8	18	34	53	28	22
Other half	9	6	8	2	5	7
Husband/wife	0	6	6	5	18	5
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>227</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>533</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>572</i>

Partly ‘boy/girlfriend’ may remain the most popular term for LAT partner because of a lack of an appropriate vocabulary in English to describe longer term or more committed LAT partners. In the qualitative interviews this sort of respondent often used the term reluctantly in lieu of anything better. Although “partner” may be the preferred official or academic term, it is not a particularly popular description even for long-term or older LATs.

4.5. LAT as a couple

The large majority of survey respondents, thought of themselves as “a couple” (79% always or usually did), and felt other people saw them this way too (84%). Very few (7%) said they rarely or never see themselves as a couple. See Table 18.

Table 18. LAT as ‘a couple’, 2011

	Do they think of themselves as a couple %	Do other people think of them as a couple %
Always/usually	79	84
Sometimes	13	9
Rarely/never	7	6
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>533</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>572</i>

There is little variation by length of relationship or age, suggesting that couple identification is not a proxy for a long-term relationship or for the respondent’s life stage.

5. Attitudes about LAT

5.1. LAT and sexual exclusivity

Nearly all respondents felt that sexual exclusivity in LAT relationships was important— 87% thought it would be ‘always wrong’ or ‘mostly wrong’ if a person who did not live with their partner had sex with someone else. This was little different from views about exclusivity in co-residential relationships (89% said the same about this situation). See Table 19.

Table 19. Respondents’ attitudes towards sexual exclusivity, 2011.

	Person living with partner having sex with someone else %	Person not living with partner having sex with someone else %
Always/mostly wrong	89	87
Sometimes wrong	6	8
Rarely/not wrong	3	3
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572	572

5.2. Attitudes about LAT as a relationship

As Table 20 suggests, respondents were more likely to have positive attitudes (figures shown in bold) about LAT relationships than negative ones. Emotional assessments of LAT were the more positive – 46% disagreed that living apart limits the extent to which they can have a close relationship (29% agreed), 54% disagreed that LAT “makes me feel less secure when I think about the future” (19% agreed) and most emphatically, a majority of 66% disagreed that living apart “puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down” (only 13% agreed).

Assessments about LAT enabling practical autonomy were less clear-cut, although still positive. Thus 50% agreed LAT gives freedom to be with friends and family (23% disagreed), 47% agreed LAT gives greater financial independence (25% disagreed), and 39% agreed that LAT “gives more freedom to develop my career” (31% disagreed).

Apparently contradicting these positive assessments more respondents (42%) disagreed that LAT made them ‘feel more emotionally safe and secure’ than agreed (19%). This might suggest that living apart together affects emotional security, however, given other responses it is possible that respondents assessed LAT as not much different (‘more’ in the question) from living together. Indeed 38% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Table 20. Attitudes about LAT as a relationship, 2011

Living apart from my partner...	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %
... puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down	13	20	66
...means I feel more emotionally safe and secure	19	38	42
...gives me more freedom to develop my career	39	29	31
...gives me more freedom to be with my friends and family	50	27	23
...limits the extent to which we can have a close relationship	29	24	46
...gives me greater financial independence	47	28	25
...makes me feel less secure when I think about the future	19	26	54
<i>Weighted bases: 533</i>			
<i>Unweighted bases: 572</i>			

Positive views shown in bold

It is apparent that there are fairly mixed views for most of the statements, many respondents choosing the middle option (neither agree nor disagree) and, for many questions, small majorities. Similarly, the extreme answers (agree strongly and disagree strongly, not shown in Table 6) were usually chosen by fewer than 10% of respondents. The exception is the first question asking whether “living apart puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down”. Here, 26% disagree strongly, showing the strength of feeling about this statement. Apart from this first question, all this suggests that views on LAT in relationship to these topics are not particularly strong. The questions implicitly ask about living *apart* as compared to living *together*, and it seems that by and large most respondents did not see living apart as very different in terms of risk, emotional security, or closeness. Some respondents, however, saw relative advantages in living apart for practical autonomy.

5.3. The ideal relationship

For one of the constituent surveys (the British Social Attitudes Survey) we were able to ask the full sample of the general public (LAT and non-LAT) what type of relationship they would regard as ideal “at this time of your life”. See Table 21.

The findings reflect the strong normative position of co-residential relationships, with 60% of all respondents choosing marriage/civil partnership (and living together) and a further 12% choosing unmarried cohabitation. Despite that, 8% said that they would prefer to be ‘in a relationship and not living together’ (close to the proportion of LATs in the sample overall – 9%). Nine per cent said no partner at all, with another 3% saying not in a relationship, but occasional partners, and 4% had no ideal / none of these answers.

We might expect a close match between the respondent’s current relationship status and her/his answer to this question about their ideal relationship. However, this correlation

seems to be influenced by the continuing strong normative position – the ‘gold standard’ – of marriage, and some ambiguity about less established relationship forms. So while 96% of married respondents chose ‘married’ as their ideal, just 67% of cohabiting respondents chose cohabitation, and only 56% of those living apart chose ‘LAT’. Indeed, 20% of actual LATs would ideally like to be married and living with their spouse, and another 12% in unmarried cohabitation. This presumably reflects the fact that many LATs are constrained from living together, or see LAT as a transition to co-residence.

Table 21. Ideal relationship, by relationship status, 2011

Ideal relationship	Current relationship status, %						
	Married	Cohabiting	Sep- arated	Widow- (er)ed	Single, never married	LAT	BSA: all adults
Married (or in CP) and living with my spouse/CP	96	29	22	34	14	20	60
Not married, but living with my partner	1	67	8	1	11	12	12
Married (or in CP) and not living with my spouse/CP	0	0	2	0	-	4	1
In a relationship, and not living with my partner	0	-	11	5	13	56	8
Not in relationship, but occasional partners when feel like it	0	0	8	3	12	2	3
No partner at all	-	-	32	35	31	1	9
Have no ideal / None of these	1	1	12	12	11	3	4
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>1451</i>	<i>349</i>	<i>213</i>	<i>166</i>	<i>426</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>2841</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>1290</i>	<i>294</i>	<i>302</i>	<i>277</i>	<i>414</i>	<i>266</i>	<i>2845</i>

- = no respondents; 0 = <0.5%

Base: BSA respondents

6. LAT Relationship practices

6.1. Distance living apart

Most LAT couples live near one another, with around two-thirds living within 10 miles (16km) of each other. Indeed nearly one fifth – 18% – lived within a mile (1.6km). Small proportions had partners who lived a considerable distance away, including 8% with partners living outside the UK. See Table 22.

Table 22. Distance partner lives from respondent, 2011

Distance	LAT survey %
Up to 1 mile	18
Over 1, up to 5 miles	29
Over 5, up to 10 miles	17
Over 10, up to 50 miles	19
Over 50 miles (inside the United Kingdom)	9
Outside the United Kingdom	8
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572

6.2. Frequency of face to face contact

Most LAT partners have frequent contact with one another. As many as 68% of respondents saw each other several times a week, 21% every day and only 16% saw their partner less than once a week. Frequency of personal contact declined with the distance the partner lived from the respondent. See Table 23.¹⁰

Table 23. Frequency of face to face contact by distance living apart, 2011

Frequency of contact	Distance partner lives from respondent, %						Total
	Up to 1 mile	1 to 5 miles	5 to 10 miles	10 to 50 miles	Over 50 miles, in UK	Out-side UK	
At least once a day	44	26	17	11	-	1	21
At least several times a week	50	63	64	38	1	5	47
At least once a week	2	10	19	36	29	4	16
Less than once a week	3	1	-	14	68	90	16
<i>Weighted bases</i>	98	156	92	102	46	40	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	106	157	90	116	60	43	572

- = no respondents, 1 mile = 1.6 km

¹⁰Small base sizes (<100) in some categories means the findings for those groups should be taken as indicative.

6.3. Frequency of telephone and electronic contact

Most respondents alleviated the constraints of geographical distance by means of frequent electronic contact; 86% contacted each other by phone, text, email or the internet at least once a day – 55% several times a day. This high level of electronic and telephone contact was fairly constant by distance they lived apart. Even 90% of those living within one mile of their partner (18% of the survey sample) contacted each other in these ways at least once every day, but so did 85% of those living more than 50 miles (80km) apart in the UK and even 72% of those with partners abroad.¹¹ See Table 24.

Table 24. Frequency of telephone / electronic contact by distance living apart, 2011

Frequency of telephone / electronic contact	Distance partner lives from respondent, %						
	Up to 1 miles	Over 1, up to 5 miles	Over 5, up to 10 miles	Over 10, up to 50 miles	Over 50 miles, in UK	Outside UK	Total
At least once a day	90	87	85	87	85	72	86
At least several times a week	6	10	7	11	9	20	10
At least once a week	1	3	4	2	4	4	3
Less than once a week	0	0	5	1	-	4	1
<i>Weighted bases</i>	98	156	92	102	46	40	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	106	157	90	116	60	43	572

6.4. Ways of keeping in touch when apart

When LAT couples are apart, verbal communication appears more popular than text-based, with talking on the phone/via the internet being more frequently mentioned as the most often used method than email or text (54% versus 41%). See Table 26. However, the two forms of communication are virtually the same in terms of popularity once we add in the '2nd most often used' method.

Older LATs are more likely to talk to each other rather than to use email or texting, which is most popular in the 25-44 age group. See Table 25.

¹¹Small base sizes (<100) in some categories means the findings for those groups should be taken as indicative.

Table 25. Ways of keeping in touch most often used by age

Ways of keeping in touch	Age,%				
	16 to 24	25 to 44	45 to 54	55+	Total
Talking on the phone/the internet	50	48	65	68	54
Email or text	40	50	34	22	41
Other	9	2	1	8	6
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>227</i>	<i>175</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>533</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>234</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>572</i>

6.5. Ease or difficulty in making practical arrangements

For most couples who live apart, neither making practical arrangements about meeting up, nor about finance, is a particular problem. Just 11% say sharing costs for joint activities is 'very' or 'fairly difficult', although twice as many – 24% – say the same about arranging to spend time together (see Table 26).

Table 26. Ease or difficulty of making practical arrangements with partner, 2011

	Sharing costs for joint activities %	Arranging time together %
Very/fairly easy	72	64
Neither easy nor difficult	15	11
Very/fairly difficult	11	24
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>533</i>	<i>533</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>572</i>	<i>572</i>

This difference is perhaps not so surprising, as the effects of geographical distance will be most felt for meeting up. Indeed, difficulty in arranging time together is closely related to the distance partners live apart. As many as 46% of those living over 50 miles apart in the UK, and 69% of those with partners living abroad, find making arrangements for meeting up 'very' or 'fairly difficult' (though these percentages should only be seen as indicative due to small base sizes). Conversely, only 18% of those living less than 1 mile apart find arranging meeting up difficult, with 73% finding this 'very' or 'fairly easy'. See Table 27.

Table 27. Ease or difficulty of arranging to spend time with partner by distance, 2011

Ease/difficulty arranging time	Distance						Total
	Up to 1 mile	Over 1, up to 5 miles	Over 5, up to 10 miles	Over 10, up to 50 miles	Over 50 miles (in the UK)	Outside the UK	
Very/fairly easy	73	75	66	64	46	22	64
Neither easy nor difficult	9	9	16	16	5	10	11
Very/fairly difficult	18	16	18	20	46	69	24
<i>Weighted bases</i>	<i>98</i>	<i>156</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>533</i>
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>157</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>572</i>

6.6. Care when ill or troubled

The provision of personal care by LAT partners for each other appears to be variable, as Table 28 suggests. Only 20% say their partner would look after them when ill in bed, while when it comes to who they would turn to with an upsetting problem this reaches 34%. The questions asked were:

Now we'd like to ask you about some problems that can happen to anyone. Suppose you had an illness and had to stay in bed for some time. Who would be most likely to care for you?

And suppose you were very upset about a problem and hadn't been able to sort it out. Who would you be most likely to turn to?

This is an important difference compared to the patterns found for married or cohabiting partners, according to a 2001 survey in Britain (Park and Roberts 2002)¹². For as many as 92% of married and cohabiting respondents in the 2001 survey said their partner would look after them when they were ill in bed. Similarly - although somewhat lower – almost 2/3rds of married/ cohabiting people would turn to their partner if they felt 'a bit down or depressed'. In this respect LAT partners resemble single people in the 2001 survey more than married and cohabiting people in that other family and friends (who sometimes live at the same address) tend to replace partners (who live elsewhere) for care. In the case of direct partner care, therefore, living together does seem to make a difference and many LAT couples have different expectations about partner involvement than co-residential couples.

¹²Park, A. and Roberts, C., 2002. The ties that bind. In: A. Park, J. Curtice and C. Bromley, eds. British social attitudes: the 19th report. chapter 9. London: Sage. The questions asked in the 2001 and 2011 surveys, while similar, are not identical (the question text and answer options were different, and the questions were fielded on a different interview mode – self-completion in 2001, and face to face in 2011) so we can only use broad comparisons as an indication of similarity and difference.

Table 28. Living Apart Together: physical and emotional care, 2011

	Who would care for respondent if they were ill and had to stay in bed for some time %	Who would they turn to if they were very upset about had a problem they were unable to sort out %
Partner	20	34
Family member	53	34
Friend/neighbour/someone they live with	22	27
Other / No-one	4	4
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572	572

There were some gender and class differences in interpersonal care: for illness in bed men were more likely than women to say their partner would provide care (26% and 14% respectively), while women would say 'family' (62% versus 44% of men). At the same time LATs in managerial/professional occupations were more likely to say 'partner' (28% versus 17% of routine/manual workers and long-term unemployed), and those in routine/manual occupations and the long-term unemployed were more likely to say 'family' (61% versus 44% of managerial/professionals).

7. Reason for living apart

Table 29 presents the reasons respondents gave for living apart together. Respondents could choose any number of reasons from 16 available options, or state their own reason (some of which were recoded to the pre-given codeframe). The distribution of these responses is shown in the 'all reasons' column in Table 29. Respondents who chose more than one reason (half of the total) were then prompted to choose a 'main' reason for living apart. The distribution of these main reasons, together with the only reason chosen by the remaining half, is shown in the 'only/ main' column in Table 29.

For both 'all' and 'only/main' categories we have grouped reasons into five main categories: too early/ not ready, financial constraint, situational constraint, obligated preference and preference.

Table 29. Reasons for living apart together, 2011

Reason	All reasons* %	Only/ main reason %
Too early / not ready		
We are not ready to live together/it's too early in our relationship	41	29
We haven't thought about living together	14	3
Financial constraint		
We can't afford to live together	28	17
It would affect my/my partner's benefits	4	1
Situational constraint		
My partner has a job elsewhere	13	8
My partner is studying elsewhere	5	3
My partner is living in an institution (care home/prison)	1	1
Obligated preference		
Because of my or my partner's children	7	5
We have other responsibilities	9	3
Preference		
We are waiting until we get married/ have a Civil Partnership	5	3
I prefer not to live with my partner (s/he wants to live with me)	8	4
My partner prefers not to live with me (I want to live with them)	2	0
We both want to keep our homes	13	5
It's just how things are	19	5
We just don't want to live together	8	5
Other/ None		
	11	8
TOTAL	*	100
<i>Weighted bases</i>	533	533
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	572	572

*Respondents could choose more than one option

The most popular reason chosen for living apart together was that it was too early in the relationship to cohabit, or that the couple was not yet ready to do so, or simply had not thought about cohabitation (with 31% of only/ main reasons). This implies many LATs saw their relationship as being at an early stage. Further along this path were the small number who preferred to wait as LAT before getting married (coded under 'preference') – 3% gave this as their only/ main reason.

Another third (30%) of respondents chose financial or situational constraints impeding cohabitation as their only/ main reason. These were couples who ostensibly wanted to cohabit now, but found difficulties in doing so. If circumstances changed, these respondents would probably move in together. Of these, affordability issues were most often cited (17% of only/ main reasons). Only a small proportion admitted to concerns about benefit payments, at 4% of all reasons chosen and just 1% of all only/main reasons.

A relatively small proportion chose 'situational constraints' - where living apart was a response to the demands of employers, educational institutions or other organisations like care homes or prison - 12% of only/ main reasons. Of these just 8% had partners with jobs elsewhere. This is in some contrast to some popular accounts of why people live apart.

Many respondents chose various 'preference' reasons for living apart together, but after selecting a main reason this was reduced to 30%. In fact of these 7% (after rounding) were 'obligated preference' – respondents preferred not to live together because of obligations to others, usually to their own or their partner's children (5%), or because of other family responsibilities like caring for elderly relatives (3%). The remainder (22%) chose more personal preference reasons for LAT – they were waiting to get married/ civil partner, they wanted to keep their own homes, they preferred not to live with their particular partner, they simply did not want to live together, or LAT was just how things were. Finally, 8% gave other (unclassifiable) main reasons or no reason.

Project publications

Duncan, S., Carter, J., and Phillips, M., Roseneil S., Stoilova, M (forthcoming) 'Why do people live apart together?' *Families, Relationships and Societies*

Duncan, S., Carter, J., and Phillips, M., Roseneil S., Stoilova, M (2013) *Living Apart Together: uncoupling intimacy and co-residence*, Briefing Paper, <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/living-apart-together/>

Duncan, S., Carter, J., and Phillips, M., Roseneil S., Stoilova, M (2012) 'Legal rights for people who live apart together?' *Journal Social Welfare and Family Law*, 34, 4

Duncan, S and Phillips, M. (2010) 'People who live apart together (LATs) - how different are they?' *Sociological Review*, 58, 1, 112-134