

# When Children Go First: How Many Older Swedes Lose an Adult Child?

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## Objectives

We assess how common it is for older persons to lose *adult* children and how this has shifted historically. Loss of an *underage* child was common until recently: in 1935 on average 18 % of mothers had lost at least one small child. (Long marriages and unions with many children had much higher risks.) Today the risk is less than one percent, but little is known about the risk to lose an *adult* child.

## Method

We use demographic sources and survey data to estimate risks to lose children in different ages.

## Results

Family networks of older Swedes have become tighter: older people increasingly have partners, siblings, children and other off-spring, and even parents, although many people presume the opposite tendency. That may have numbed us for the potential loss of family.

During the high fertility period 1720-1900 about half of all mothers lost small children, and a third lost adult (16+ years) children. About 22 % of older mothers (50+) had no surviving child left when they died themselves, more among the many who gave birth to few children. (It is a myth that “all” parents had so many children historically.) On the *availability* of children we note that 40 % of old mothers had no child or surviving children had moved out of the parish, thus unable to provide (regular) help to their old mother/parents. In year 2010/11 70 % of the 75+ have one or more children within 20 km distance (64 % of persons with children). This suggests stable availability of offspring, or improvements due to modern communications. Probing loss of *adult* children with contemporary

survey data is problematic. Of women born in 1940 3.4 % have so far lost an adult (20+) child, of women born in 1950 1.4 % (2010). Among two cohorts of survivors in the longitudinal level-of-living surveys aged 43-65 at baseline in 1968 and 1974, 10-11 % had lost one or more adult children at follow-up in 2002 and 2010/11 resp. Smaller surveys give estimates from 5 % for 50-74 year olds, to 16 % of the 80+. This suggests historically decreasing risks of death of adult children, but the risk is still sizeable. Possibly as many as 4 out of 10 of today's older persons will lose one or more of their adult children before they die themselves.



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