



## Aging Population and Empty Nest Syndrome in the Process of Demographic Transformation: Social Reflections of Family Isolation

### *Demografik Dönüşüm Sürecinde Yaşlanan Nüfus ve Boş Yuva Sendromu: Ailede Yalnızlaşmanın Toplumsal Yansımaları*

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#### Abstract

The family, a deeply rooted social institution, has undergone significant changes over time due to biological, social, economic, and cultural factors. One major factor driving these changes is the demographic transition, which refers to the shift from high birth and death rates to lower ones. This transition reshapes population structures and, consequently, family dynamics. Declining birth rates have contributed to global population ageing, and the traditional extended family model is increasingly being replaced by nuclear or single-person households. These changes have weakened social support networks. A natural result is the growing number of elderly individuals living alone—often because their children have moved away for education, work, or marriage, or because they never had children. This phase of life, marked by role loss and difficulty adapting, can lead to emotional distress known as Empty Nest Syndrome. As family structures continue to evolve, older adults are experiencing this condition. This study explores how demographic transition and changing family dynamics contribute to the rise of Empty Nest Syndrome among the elderly. In the literature review, databases such as Google Scholar, DergiPark, ULAKBİM, Elsevier, and Taylor & Francis were used, and searches were conducted using keywords such as “empty nest,” “demographic transformation,” and “old age.” In addition, data from TurkStat (Turkish Statistical Institute), UN reports, and relevant books were also included in the study.

**Keywords:** Ageing, demographic transformation, empty nest syndrome

**Paper Type:** Review

#### Öz

Köklü bir sosyal kurum olan aile, biyolojik, sosyal, ekonomik ve kültürel etkenler nedeniyle zamanla önemli değişiklikler geçirmiştir. Bu dönüşümde etkili olan başlıca faktörlerden biri, doğum ve ölüm oranlarındaki azalmayı ifade eden demografik geçiştir. Bu süreç, nüfus yapısını ve aile dinamiklerini yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Doğum oranlarındaki düşüş, nüfusun yaşlanmasına ve geleneksel geniş aile yapısının çekirdek ya da tek kişilik hanelere dönüşmesine yol açmıştır. Bunun sonucu olarak, sosyal destek ağları zayıflamış ve yalnız yaşayan yaşlı bireylerin sayısı artmıştır. Bu durum, çocukların başka şehirlerde yaşaması veya çocuk sahibi olunmaması gibi nedenlerle ortaya çıkmakta; rol kaybı ve uyum sorunlarıyla birlikte “Boş Yuva Sendromu”na yol açabilmektedir. Bu derleme çalışması, demografik dönüşümün ve değişen aile yapılarının yaşlılar arasında Boş Yuva Sendromu'na etkisini incelemektedir. Literatür taramasında Google Scholar, DergiPark, ULAKBİM, Elsevier ve Taylor & Francis veri tabanları kullanılmış; “boş yuva”, “demografik dönüşüm” ve “yaşlılık” gibi anahtar kelimelerle arama yapılmıştır. Ayrıca TÜİK verileri, BM raporları ve konuyla ilgili kitaplar da çalışmaya dâhil edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yaşlılık, demografik dönüşüm, boş yuva sendromu

**Makale Türü:** Derleme

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## Introduction

Demographic transition, which is fundamentally a process, refers to changes in birth and death rates within a society and is shaped by the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of populations, resulting in significant differences in population structure. Prior to the twentieth century, the age structure of the global population was relatively stable, and the proportion of individuals aged 65 and over was low. However, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, this situation began to change due to the increase in life expectancy at birth. With this rapid population growth, societies entered another stage of the transition process, characterized by low birth and death rates (Yüceşahin, 2011, p.11).

The total fertility rate, which represents the average number of children a woman can have during her reproductive years (ages 15–49), has been on a declining trend. Globally, the total fertility rate dropped from 3.3 in 1990 to 2.3 today. Moreover, in more than half of the world's countries, the fertility rate has fallen below the replacement level of 2.1, which is required to maintain a stable population without immigration (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2024, p. 9). In Türkiye, fertility rates are also declining rapidly. The rate, which was 2.38 children per woman in 2001, has been decreasing steadily and fell to 1.48 in 2024, remaining below the replacement level of 2.10 for the past eight years (Turkish Statistical Institute [TurkStat], 2025c).

This phenomenon, known as demographic transition, has also brought about changes in the social structure. One of the oldest and most fundamental institutions of society—the family—has also been affected by this transformation. In this process, the importance placed on the family institution and forming a family has decreased compared to the past. Nonetheless, even in countries where the tendency to form a family is at its lowest, the family continues to retain its status as the fundamental unit of society.

As a reflection of modernization, transformations have occurred in demographic structures just as they have in science, technology, health, and other areas. Before the demographic transition began, life was short, birth rates were high, and populations were young. The processes first led to a decline in mortality, followed by a decline in birth rates, causing population growth rates to first rise and then fall, eventually leading to longer life spans and aging populations (Lee, 2003, p. 167). As a result of increased life expectancy, the global elderly population has been rising rapidly. The proportion of elderly people worldwide is projected to increase from 10% to 16% by 2050 (UNDESA, 2022, p.7).

Türkiye's population is also aging rapidly. According to data released by the TurkStat (2025a), the proportion of elderly individuals in the total population rose to 10.6% in 2024. Population projections estimate that this proportion will reach 23.1% by 2050 (TurkStat, 2024).

Within this growing demographic, a specific group known as "empty nest elders" is emerging. These are elderly individuals who live alone either because their children have left home or because they never had children (Chen, Yang and Aagard, 2012, p. 520). This group, called empty nest elderly, lives alone because their children leave home for reasons such as education, marriage, work, etc. or because they do not have children. Today, as a result of the changes in the family structure, the number of empty nesters is increasing rapidly. In particular, the shift from traditional extended families to nuclear or even single-parent families has led many elderly individuals to live alone. In Western European countries and the United States, the decline of multigenerational households has resulted in more elderly people living alone (UNDESA, 2020 p. 12).

The empty nest phenomenon is defined as the stage in the family life cycle when the youngest child leaves home and no longer lives with the parents (Crowley, Hayslip and Hobdy, 2003, p. 240). In this natural stage, parents lose their child-rearing roles and, as children leave home for education, work, or marriage to start their own lives, parents no longer share the home

with their children, which may cause a sense of emptiness and role loss (Salsabila and Uyun, 2024, p. 12). This condition, known as Empty Nest Syndrome, represents a significant psychological adjustment process for parents and has both positive and negative effects (Mount and Moas, 2015, p. 248).

Some elderly individuals experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome view it as an opportunity to enhance their potential, while others struggle to adapt and suffer a decline in their quality of life. Especially in cases of illness, poverty, or lacking family support, the absence of a caregiver can significantly lower the quality of life for elderly individuals (Silverstone and Hyman, 2008, p. 147). The aim of this study is to evaluate the changes in family dynamics during the demographic transition process and how these changes affect Empty Nest Syndrome.

## **1. Demographic Transformation and Ageing**

The demographic transition, a model based on the classification of countries' populations according to different combinations of births and deaths, was first proposed by Warren Thompson in 1929 (Kirk, 1996, p. 361). Thompson analysed demographic statistics worldwide between 1908 and 1927, and as a result of this study, he classified countries into three groups according to their birth and death rates: those experiencing rapid decline, those experiencing less decline and those experiencing no decline (Thompson, 1929, p. 961).

This theory, which was developed by Thompson, signaling the transition from a period of high birth and death rates to a new stage in which the death rate decreases and population growth is consciously managed by fertility (Yüceşahin, 2011, p. 12), was made more comprehensive in the following years with studies by Adolphe Landry, Kingsley Davis, Dudley Kirk and Frank Notestein (Hirschman, 2001, p. 116). One of the most striking results of this transformation is the decrease in birth rates, the increase in average life expectancy and the subsequent increase in the population aged 65 and over in the total population.

The total fertility rate, has been on a downward trend worldwide (UNDESA, 2024, p. 28). In Türkiye, which is in the process of global ageing, the proportion of child and young population is decreasing rapidly on the one hand, while the proportion of elderly population is increasing significantly on the other (TurkStat, 2025b). Fertility rates also show a significant decline. According to the birth statistics released by TurkStat (2025c), while the total fertility rate was 2.38 children in 2001, it has been on a continuous downward trend since 2014 and declined to 1.48 in 2024. In the same period, the share of the elderly population in the total population increased to 10.6 per cent in 2024 (TurkStat, 2025a). As a result of these developments, Türkiye has been included in the class of “very old countries”. According to population projections, the proportion of elderly population is expected to reach 23.1 per cent in 2050 (TurkStat, 2024).

This transformation in the age structure of the population causes changes in the social structure. As a result of all these, the life experiences, psychosocial status, position and roles of elderly individuals in the family also undergo changes. In this context, Empty Nest Syndrome, which is directly related to increasing life expectancy and is generally experienced by middle-aged and older individuals, is an important psychosocial process that is experienced more intensely by the elderly, especially due to the weakening of social support networks and increased risk of loneliness.

## **2. Empty Nest Syndrome: Definition, Causes and Characteristics**

Significant changes have been occurring in the social structure due to demographic transformation. One of these changes is the “Empty Nest Syndrome”, which has profound effects on the family, the cornerstone of society. Social and biological changes that happened in the 21th century have caused changes in the family life cycle and have influenced the development of different phase, which is called empty nest period (Borland, 1982, p. 117). Rather, it is seen as a transitional period that many people go through (Badiani and De Sousa, 2016, p. 136) and a phase of the family life cycle, is a consequence of rising life expectancy and did not emerge until 1900

(Deutscher, 1964, p. 52). It shows that this syndrome is related to social and demographic factors rather than biological conditions.

Just as birds fly away from the nest; when children reach adulthood, they leave the house where they live with their parents for reasons such as marriage, work, education, etc. (Mansoor and Hasan, 2019, p. 55). At the end of this process, which is also called the post-parenting period and is a natural part of the family life cycle, the household where children are no longer present is called the 'empty nest' (Bouchard, 2014; Dennerstein, Dudley and Guthrie, 2002) and this period is called the 'empty nest period'. However, some researchers state that these concepts represent a pessimistic perspective and argue that the concept of 'post-parenting period' should be used instead of 'empty nest period' (Raup and Myers, 1989, p. 180). Bouchard (2014, p. 70) also stated that this concept is controversial by stating that the home where parents continue to live is not actually empty. This concept is considered to be controversial because it implies the end of parental roles and this is not valid for societies with strong family ties and lifelong parent-child relationships. As a matter of fact, even if children leave home, parental roles do not end and social, emotional, economic etc. support continues. For this reason, the concept of 'empty nest' has preferred in this study as it is more appropriate to the cultural context.

Although this situation is a natural process of the family life cycle and an expected, natural and inevitable process for many parents, it causes deep psychological effects on some parents (Sussman, 1955, p. 338). While some parents whose children leave home and try to cope with their absence (Mansoor and Hasan, 2019, p. 59) consider this process as an opportunity to unleash their potential and ensure active participation in society, some parents may experience problems in adapting to this process. This situation, which negatively affects the quality of life of the person, is called 'Empty Nest Syndrome' in the literature and was defined by Salsabila and Uyun (2024, p. 16) as the state of feeling empty by parents who experience loss of their roles in child rearing as a result of the children leaving home. This syndrome, which emerges during the post-parenting transition (Borland, 1982, p. 117), is characterised by maladaptive reactions such as sadness, guilt, psychosomatic symptoms, depression, anxiety and anger (Badiani and De Sousa, 2016, p. 135). It is considered that this situation, which can create challenging effects on the psychological resilience of individuals, can be experienced much more severely, especially in conditions where social support systems are inadequate.

On the other hand, despite the existence of such reactions regarding the empty nest phase, there are disagreements in the literature concerning the validity and definition of the Empty Nest Syndrome as an actual syndrome. Although research on the subject increased particularly in the 1970s (Bouchard, 2014, p. 70), individuals' susceptibility to this syndrome varies. That is, while divorce rates increase in some families during this period, others may take steps that strengthen their relationships (Kalkandeler Özdin, 2024, p. 133).

Since the period when children leave home often coincides with a stage in which parents begin to age, and is related to an increased life expectancy, this syndrome is considered to be directly associated with aging. The recent increase in the old-age dependency ratio supports this relationship. The old-age dependency ratio, which indicates the number of elderly people per one hundred working-age individuals, was 13.4% in 2019 and rose to 15.5% in 2024 (TurkStat, 2025a). According to a projection by the Turkish Statistical Institute (2024), which assumes the continuation of the current demographic structure, this ratio is expected to continue increasing in the coming years, reaching 19.5% in 2030, 26.5% in 2040, 45.5% in 2060, 61.9% in 2080, and 61.6% in 2100. Due to general health deterioration linked to aging and insufficient social support, older individuals in the empty nest period are more likely to experience physical, psychological, and social problems (Gao, Wei, Shen, Tang and Yang, 2014, p. 1821).

### **3. Changing Family Structure, Loneliness and Its Effects on Society**

Family maintains its importance in almost every period from past to present. Consequently, many definitions have been made to date regarding the concept of family, which

serves as a bridge between the individual and society, which is the building block of society. As stated by Demiröz (2003, p. 85), these definitions are based on various criteria. Some approaches focus on the needs of family members, some approaches consider the family structurally and define it as an institution, and some approaches include cultural elements and consider the family as a social system.

Özgüven (2014, pp. 24-25) defines the family as an institution with biological, psychological and sociological functions established by two adults of the opposite sex in accordance with legal and ritual ties. With this structure, the family fulfils many functions such as reproduction, protection, shelter, loving and being loved, sharing love, being dependent or independent, belonging, acquiring status, trust, self-realisation, care and education of children, transferring social traditions and ideals, acquired goods and property to new generations and responds to many biological, psychological and social needs of the individual. According to Sağlam (2011, p. 8), the family is the smallest social organisation of the society and also an educational institution. Children gain their first feelings, behaviors, thoughts and education in their families. It is known that the mother and father are also the first educators of the child. Children first get to know the outside world and themselves with the help of their parents. Family is an association whose members do not exist separately but as a whole with their children and in close relationship with each other. In addition, while European Americans define the family with the concept of nuclear family consisting of people connected to each other by blood, African Americans state that the family is constituted by the alignment of extensive kinship and community networks (Özabacı and Erkan, 2013, p. 1).

The definitions indicate that, the concept of family and the way the individuals who make up the family come together vary across different cultures and historical periods, and it is not possible to speak of a single family type. Each society has a unique family structure according to its characteristics, values, culture and marriage types (Bayer, 2013, p. 102). Hence, it is not feasible to make a definition of family that covers all societies and times. Because material changes such as industrialisation and technological developments also cause cultural changes in societies. As a logical outcome of this situation, the concept of family varies from time to time and from society to society. However, in general terms, the family can be defined as the smallest building block of society formed by the coming together of two persons of opposite genders.

In traditional societies, the extended family model, which consists of family members such as grandfather, grandmother, mother, father, uncle, aunt and allows many generations to live together, is widespread, while the nuclear family model, which consists of fewer members, including mother, father and child(ren), has become widespread with the industrialisation process. This situation, which shows the outcomes resulting from changes in the social structure and economic sphere on the family, can lead to the weakening of social support systems and individuals experiencing loneliness more intensely at various phases of the family development process, according to Gökler and Atamtürk (2021, pp. 172-173).

Family life cycle is a model that deals with the phases those families, which are a system (McGoldrick, Carter and Garcia-Preto, 2005, p. 1), go through over time. Just as individuals go through various developmental stages throughout their lives, families also go through different stages over time (Çamur Duyan, 2003, p. 33). Each of these stages creates different psychological, social and emotional effects on family members.

Evelyn Duvall (1958, p. 337) systematised the phases that families go through over time according to the combination of the total count of individuals in the family, the age of the oldest child, the school status and the status of children before they join the family and after they leave home. Accordingly, the eight basic stages of the family life cycle are as follows:

1. Newly established families (newly married couples without children)
2. Families with children (families with young children)

3. Families with preschool children (oldest child aged 2.5-6 years)
4. Families with school-age children (oldest child aged 6-13)
5. Families with children in adolescence (oldest child aged 13-19)
6. Families whose children leave home (from the first child to the last child leaving home)
7. Middle-age families (empty nest period)
8. Ageing families (from retirement to the death of one or both spouses)

While each stage is characterised by different roles, responsibilities and emotional changes for individuals, social transformation deepens the sense of loneliness, especially in the empty nest and old age stages, and leads to the weakening of family support mechanisms. In this period, which is called the empty nest period, elderly individuals not only remain physically distant from their children but also have to struggle with the biological, psychological, social and cultural difficulties that come with old age. While in the traditional extended family structure, elderly individuals undertake functions such as care and guidance within the family, the decrease in these roles with the transition to the nuclear family structure today causes elderly individuals to feel excluded both within the family and in society. In this respect, the family life cycle provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the stages in which individual loneliness intensifies and its social consequences.

Loneliness, which is generally considered an individual condition, is in fact a multidimensional phenomenon fundamentally linked to social structure and social policy. Changes in living conditions, values, and family structures; the increase in intergenerational conflicts; and the diminishing influence of parents on the family institution are among the reasons why older adults today are beginning to live alone and are becoming increasingly isolated (Arasan Doğan, 2020, p. 103). Alongside all these factors, the differentiation of roles and responsibilities assigned to individuals based on gender also emerges as another factor influencing loneliness. In traditional societies, the roles and responsibilities assigned to women within marriage are at the center of their lives (Atchley, 1977, p. 187). Traditionally, the differing roles and responsibilities assigned to mothers and fathers as parents cause their reactions to children leaving home to vary. According to this understanding, mothers spend more time and effort on child-rearing compared to fathers, and as a natural result, develops stronger bonds with their children (Mitchell and Lovegreen, 2009, pp. 1653-1654). Consequently, when children leave home, mothers experience more distress than fathers (Glenn, 1975, p. 108) and feel loneliness more deeply.

As a result, the changes experienced in family structure affect not only individual lifestyles but also social support mechanisms directly. In this context, loneliness should be addressed not merely as an individual issue, but as a social problem with broader societal dimensions.

## **Conclusion and Evaluation**

In this study, the impacts of the demographic transformation process, which is an important factor on the population structure, on the family structure are analysed and the 'Empty Nest Syndrome', which is becoming more and more important in this context, is discussed. This study aims to contribute to the relevant field by compiling the existing body of knowledge in the literature on the subject. As a literature review, it is based on secondary sources and does not include any field data. The literature on this topic is predominantly composed of international sources. Although there are some studies conducted in Türkiye in this context, they are mostly in the form of literature reviews (Erkan and Uyar, 2021; Kalkandeler Özdin, 2024; Selman and Uçar, 2017; Sun, 2024). However, existing research has revealed that although the Empty Nest Period is a phase within the family life cycle, parents' experiences during this time vary depending on several factors such as age, cultural and social characteristics, and economic conditions (Mitchell and Lovegreen, 2009, p. 1666). Therefore, the limited amount of field data on the subject has

caused the literature to remain at a theoretical level and created a knowledge gap regarding how this syndrome is experienced in the context of Türkiye. In this regard, future studies are recommended to focus on parents' experiences of this process in different regions and to conduct research that is sensitive to biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual differences.

Demographic transformation process changes not only the age structure of the population but also the social structure. Information in the relevant literature shows that factors such as the aging of the population and the decrease in birth rates cause radical changes in the family structure and reshape the relationships between parents and children. This situation causes radical changes in the family structure, which is called the basic building block of society and is necessary for individuals to maintain a healthy development. In the historical process, the abandonment of the traditional extended family model and the transition to the nuclear family structure, the decrease in birth and death rates have caused significant changes in the family structure. These changes cause various transformations in the family life cycle and may trigger the Empty Nest Syndrome, which manifests itself as a sense of loneliness, identity confusion and emotional difficulties in parents, especially when children leave home. This situation leads to the emergence of new crises in social life and within the family, which is considered the fundamental unit of society. In particular, the decline in the number of family members weakens the supportive role of younger generations towards elderly family members, giving rise to issues such as elder care challenges and elderly loneliness (Abudureyimu and Hu, 2019, p. 141). In this context, it is recommended to establish social support mechanisms that encourage the participation of elderly individuals in social life, promote intergenerational solidarity, and offer a holistic approach to combating loneliness.

This syndrome, which overlaps with the transition to old age, can make this period more sensitive by causing significant changes in life roles, identity perception and social relationships. Research shows that this process is experienced more intensely in women; however, social support systems are effective in successfully passing through this process. In this framework, considering the ageing of the population and the changes in the family structure, it is considered that social policies should be implemented to prepare parents for this transition period. Indeed, individuals' awareness of the family life cycle plays a significant role in effectively coping with potential challenges that may arise (Sun, 2024, p. 105). In this context, informational campaigns about the characteristics of the empty nest period can be conducted under the coordination of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, in collaboration with local governments, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In conclusion, Empty Nest Syndrome, which is a reflection of demographic transformation and changing family structure, is a process with both individual and social aspects. For this reason, it is important to carry out awareness-raising activities at both individual and social levels and to raise awareness on the subject.

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#### ETİK ve BİLİMSEL İLKELER SORUMLULUK BEYANI

Bu çalışmanın tüm hazırlanma süreçlerinde etik kurallara ve bilimsel atıf gösterme ilkelerine riayet edildiğini yazar(lar) beyan eder. Aksi bir durumun tespiti halinde Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi'nin hiçbir sorumluluğu olmayıp, tüm sorumluluk makale yazarlarına aittir. Bu çalışma etik kurul izini gerektiren bir çalışma olmadığı için Kurul adı, tarih ve sayı no gibi bilgiler mevcut değildir.

Bu çalışma başka kurumlar tarafından desteklenmemiştir.