

THE NORTHERN IRELAND SONAR

Geo-Demographic
System **2025**



ATLAS
MAPPING.

INTRODUCTION

Sonar is a truly unique segmentation system that divides the population of Northern Ireland into 30 mutually exclusive groups according to the types of neighbourhoods in which they live.

The **main data source** used to create these clusters was the **2021 Census**.



The 30 Sonar codes are organised into 5 broad lifestage groups, which are:

GROUP A
Pre-Family

GROUP B
Young Families

GROUP C
Older Families

GROUP D
Empty Nesters

GROUP E
Retired

This is the first character of the three-character Sonar code.

GROUP 1
Affluent

GROUP 2
Comfortable

GROUP 3
Less Comfortable

GROUP 4
Struggling

This is the second character of the Sonar code.

This is the second character of the three-character Sonar code. Thus, from the first two characters, it is possible to identify the lifestage group and the wealth quartile. For example, the Sonar code C11 – “Established Professionals”.

The C represents an older family group, while the second digit represents wealth quartile 1, which indicates the most affluent 25% of the country. The third and final digit is just the numbering of clusters within each combination of lifestage and affluence. It only serves to create a unique code for each cluster.

GROUP A:

PRE-FAMILY

This group of clusters tends to consist of young singles and childless couples, who are mainly concentrated within major urban areas. Many are living in **rented accommodation or are first-time buyers.**

8.6%

Because they tend to be young or strongly career-oriented, geographical mobility is very high. Again, because of their age, households within this lifestyle are often students, of which there has been an increase since the 2011 Census.

A11 – Highly Educated Young Professionals (18)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.9%**

Lifestage: **A**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

This is a cluster that is strongly biased towards city centre neighbourhoods. They consist of young, hardworking individuals on the first rungs of their career ladder. The group contains a very high number of professionals working in finance and the public sector. They tend to live in rented properties, making the most of city life and enjoying going to theatres, restaurants, art galleries, and cinemas, as well as visiting the health club.

A21 – First Time Buyers (10)

Percentage of Total Households: **2.5%**

Lifestage: **A**

Wealth Quartile: **2**

These are mainly suburban areas clustered to the East of Belfast, where couples are settling down, getting married, and buying their first homes. Many are in professional or managerial occupations, often within the public sector. Many are first-time buyers, and properties tend to be flats or terraced properties.

A31 – Students (30)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.2%**

Lifestage: **A**

Wealth Quartile: **3**

Heavily concentrated in the South of Belfast, just over half of all residents in this group are students. As you would expect, this is a very young group, with just over 40% of all residents aged 20-24. Some live in halls of residence, but many are in private rented accommodation that is often within walking distance of the university or college. It is noteworthy that a sizeable minority have come to Northern Ireland for study reasons.

[Group A continued >>](#)



GROUP A:

8.6%

A41 - Struggling Single Renters (15)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.0%**

Lifestage: **A**

Wealth Quartile: **4**

There are many young singles in this group with above-average numbers in their late twenties and thirties. Many are private renters living in terraced properties or flats. The group has above-average representation in elementary or routine occupations, working in distribution or public administration roles. Levels of unemployment and deprivation are significantly higher than average, and given their age, a surprising number report health problems.

GROUP B:

YOUNG FAMILIES



This grouping tends to consist of families with younger children, **a stage in life that can be financially challenging.**

It may be difficult for both partners to work, and it is often the case that the primary breadwinner is still relatively young and does not command a very high salary or wage. Moreover, there could be a mortgage to pay as well as all the new and additional costs associated with nursery provision and care for the family. For those who cannot afford a place of their own or pay commercial rent, council accommodation is often the only alternative; in such cases, the accommodation may be of quite poor quality

12.0%

B11 – Settling Down (21)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.9%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

There are many married couples in these semi-detached suburban areas, predominantly close to Belfast. For many, family formation has yet to begin, but a sizeable minority of couples have very young children aged 0-4. In many households, both partners are often working in administrative, managerial or associate professional roles. This is a highly educated group.

B12 – Family Oriented Professionals (23)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.4%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

These areas are concentrated around Antrim, where many young professional couples with children reside. Properties tend to be larger, detached, or semi-detached, and are often purchased on a mortgage. This is a highly educated group working in professional and managerial occupations usually in the public sector.

B21 – Younger Mortgagees (22)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.3%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **2**

Geographically, these are suburban areas within easy commuting distance of Belfast, where much of the property is semi-detached. Approximately two-thirds of all properties are in owner-occupation, but most households are still paying off their mortgages. There are also above-average numbers of private renters. The number of children is significantly higher than the national average. For many households, both adults often work in the public sector in lower managerial roles.

[Group B continued >>](#)

GROUP B:

YOUNG FAMILIES

B22 – Young White-Collar Couples (24)

Percentage of Total Households: **0.6%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **2**

These are areas where many young couples with children live. Properties tend to be semi-detached or terraced and are being bought on a mortgage. This is a reasonably well-qualified group with many working in associate professional or white-collar occupations.

B31 – Small Town Communities (17)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.2%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **3**

Geographically, these are reasonably small communities concentrated in Newry and Armagh. There are above-average numbers of families. Many of the properties are semi-detached, with many in owner-occupation, but there are also above-average numbers of private renters. The communities exhibit a diverse spread of occupational groupings and industries in which residents work.

B41 – Lone Parent Hardship (26)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.6%**

Lifestage: **B**

Wealth Quartile: **4**

With many single parents, these are areas where life is a struggle. Much of the accommodation is socially rented from housing associations, and levels of deprivation and unemployment are significantly above the national average. For those in employment, many are employed within the caring and service sector.

GROUP C:

OLDER FAMILIES

This grouping tends to consist of families, containing **many middle-aged couples with school-aged children.**

31.9%

For professional and white-collar groups, this is a time of life that often represents a rise in earnings, as they now hold more senior and responsible positions. It is also a time when the burdens of looking after the family can be at a maximum, and hardship is very real.

C11 – Hard Working Professionals (16)

Percentage of Total Households: **2.0%**

Lifestage: **C**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

These are affluent suburban areas spread throughout Northern Ireland. They are home to many professional couples with older children, who are keen to provide a comfortable and prosperous lifestyle for their children. As a result, it is common for both partners to work. Properties tend to be detached and larger, and two-car ownership is well above the norm.

C21 – Commuting Couples (14)

Percentage of Total Households: **4.2%**

Lifestage: **C**

Wealth Quartile: **2**

This group contains many families living in small towns. Much of the accommodation is semi-detached, with about 30% of households owning their homes and around 44% still buying a house on a mortgage. It is common for both partners to work, and many are employed in the public sector, with managerial and lower professional roles. Commuting to work is common practice.

C31 – Self-Employed Skilled Tradesmen (19)

Percentage of Total Households: **6.1%**

Lifestage: **C**

Wealth Quartile: **3**

Geographically, these are rural areas where above-average numbers of traditional families with children live. Many properties are detached, with a mix of households that own their properties and those where they are still paying off the mortgage. Many commute and are self-employed skilled tradesmen. Car ownership levels are well above the norm.

[Group C continued >>](#)

C32 – Rural Communities (20)Percentage of Total Households: **6.4%**Lifestage: **C**Wealth Quartile: **3**

Geographically, these are small rural communities with a mix of ages. Levels of owner occupation are high, with many owning their home. Properties are mainly detached and slightly larger than those in more urban areas. There are many skilled tradesmen and small employers often working in agriculture. Being very rural, levels of car ownership are incredibly high.

C41 – Unskilled Labour (25)Percentage of Total Households: **3.2%**Lifestage: **C**Wealth Quartile: **4**

For many, work is routine or semi-skilled, often in manufacturing occupations. Properties tend to be terraced and are usually rented from either private sector landlords or the NI Housing Executive. Levels of deprivation, including unemployment and a lack of qualifications, are significantly above the national average.

C42 – Struggling Social Renters (27)Percentage of Total Households: **5.9%**Lifestage: **C**Wealth Quartile: **4**

These are areas spread throughout the country where deprivation is extremely high. There are significantly above-average numbers of unemployed people. Those who are working are often unskilled. Single parenthood is common. Much of the property is terraced and socially rented.

C43 – Inner City Hardship (29)Percentage of Total Households: **4.1%**Lifestage: **C**Wealth Quartile: **4**

Heavily concentrated in parts of Belfast and Londonderry, these are areas where deprivation is extremely high. The levels of deprivation and hardship are among the highest in the country. Unemployment rates are at 26% among adults. Many properties are terraced and in social renting.

GROUP D:

EMPTY NESTERS

In general, this is a growing group that represents areas with more older households, **often at the peak of their careers**, and where children have left home.

Many have now paid off their mortgages, and this gives them the freedom to undertake major home improvements, go on a long-planned special holiday, or help their kids financially. It is also a chance to renew those neglected hobbies and interests. However, not everybody is affluent, and this group does also contain some poorer clusters.

25.1%

D11 – Established Professionals (1)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.7%**

Lifestage: **D**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

These are leafy suburban areas, often located in areas such as Belfast South and North Down. Properties tend to be detached and larger, with many occupied by long-established older professionals at the peak of their careers. Levels of wealth and consumer activity are well above the national average, and this is a group that enjoys a high standard of living.

D12 – Senior Public Sector Managers (2)

Percentage of Total Households: **2.8%**

Lifestage: **D**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

With a strong bias towards Belfast South and East, these areas contain many semi-detached properties. Nearly all the properties are in owner occupation and are split between being owned outright and mortgaged. There are many professionals/associate professionals working in public administration, education or health.

D13 – Professional and White-Collar Workers (3)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.5%**

Lifestage: **D**

Wealth Quartile: **1**

This is another group of prosperous households spread throughout the country. For many, the family are on the cusp of leaving home. Households often have two adults in employment and in managerial or professional roles. Properties tend to be larger and well-maintained. Over 80% of all properties in this group are detached. Nearly all properties are in owner-occupation and are relatively evenly split between being owned outright and still paying off the mortgage.

[Group D continued >>](#)

GROUP D:

EMPTY NESTERS

D21 – Empty Nesters (5)Percentage of Total Households: **3.9%**Lifestage: **D**Wealth Quartile: **2**

These areas are spread throughout the country and are often quite rural. They are home to many older couples who now own larger, detached properties. There is a mix of occupational groupings with both professionals and skilled tradesmen. Many are commuters.

D31 – Settled Elders (11)Percentage of Total Households: **3.2%**Lifestage: **D**Wealth Quartile: **3**

There are many households in these areas where the householder is aged 55 or over. Properties are often semi-detached, with many, but not all, having paid off their mortgage. Many are in suburban areas to the South of Belfast and in the suburbs of Londonderry. There is a mix of occupational groups. These are traditional areas where some are struggling to make ends meet.

D32 – Working Hard to Make Ends Meet (12)Percentage of Total Households: **3.6%**Lifestage: **D**Wealth Quartile: **3**

Spread throughout the country, this group consists of households living in smaller terraced and semi-detached properties. Levels of home ownership are slightly below the national average, while levels of private renting are slightly above. The workforce is a little older, with many working in semi-routine and routine occupations. Catering and construction are industry sectors where many find employment.

D41 – Industrial Heritage (13)Percentage of Total Households: **4.8%**Lifestage: **D**Wealth Quartile: **4**

With many smaller terraced properties, these areas were once the industrial heart of the country. Many are rented from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, but there are also properties where the tenants, in the past, have exercised the right to buy and are now homeowners. Measures of deprivation and hardship are well above the national average.

GROUP E:

RETIRED

This group of clusters consists of older people who have retired. This is **one of the fastest-growing sections of the population**. Upon retirement, many couples face a choice: do they move to a more desirable area, or do they stay in the home they have lived in for many years?

22.0%

Some choose to move and live out retirement in another location, often by the sea or close to family, but others remain in the family home either through choice or expediency. This is one of the key differences between the groups. Another is household composition: does more than one person still live in the family home, and how active are they? Can they still maintain the house and garden, and do they still run a car? Financially, this group are often portrayed as affluent because they have paid off the mortgage and their children have all grown up, but the reality is that for all too many, old age is a struggle with inadequate resources to pay for anything but life's essentials and health issues to deal with.

E11 – Comfortable Elders (8)

Percentage of Total Households: **2.2%** Lifestage: **E** Wealth Quartile: **1**

These areas are typically found within small towns and villages, where many elderly residents reside in flats that they own outright. There are also above-average numbers of professionals. This is a group that enjoys a reasonably high standard of living.

E12 – Older Home Owning Couples (4)

Percentage of Total Households: **4.9%** Lifestage: **E** Wealth Quartile: **1**

Many retired couples in reasonably good health own their homes. The properties tend to be detached and relatively modest in size but are often situated in rural areas with gardens.

E21 – Rural Retreats (7)

Percentage of Total Households: **5.4%** Lifestage: **E** Wealth Quartile: **2**

These tend to be more rural areas to the South of Belfast with many older retired couples. Properties tend to be large and detached. Around 54% of all households have paid off the mortgage, meaning that for many, life is reasonably comfortable, and they can afford to pursue hobbies and take holidays.

[Group E continued >>](#)

E31 – Semi-Detached Suburban Older Couples (6)

Percentage of Total Households: **4.9%**

Lifestage: **E**

Wealth Quartile: **3**

This group is more likely to be found in traditional suburban areas with older couples, many of whom are still working. Children tend to have left home. Properties tend to be semi-detached, with a mix of those who have paid off their mortgages and those who still must do so. Occupationally, many work in lower managerial and intermediate type occupations.

E41 – Older Single Person Households (28)

Percentage of Total Households: **3.4%**

Lifestage: **E**

Wealth Quartile: **4**

These areas are characterised by many single households, mainly older individuals. A minority of younger, childless single households also reside here. Nearly 74% of households have no children. Properties tend to be small flats that are rented from housing associations. About 54% of households have no adult at work, and other measures of deprivation are above the norm as well.

E42 – Elderly Social Renters (9)

Percentage of Total Households: **1.2%**

Lifestage: **E**

Wealth Quartile: **4**

These are suburban residential areas with many elderly residents living in small flats that are socially rented, often from housing associations. Many are widowers, struggling with health needs and the cost of living.



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