

National Council On Ageing And Older People



AGE AND ATTITUDES Ageing in Ireland Fact File No. 13

The vast majority of older people are fit and well, with many asserting that they ‘feel young’, irrespective of what age they happen to be. Nevertheless, older people in general are often portrayed in the media and elsewhere as being frail or ill, as suffering mental deterioration, as being poor and dependent, as being rigid of thought or unable to learn new skills. Such inaccurate stereotyping of older people leads to ‘ageism’, a term which describes various forms of prejudice towards older people, all of which are totally unjustifiable. Indeed, the negative personality traits which are often used to describe older people are to be found in some people of all ages and at all stages of life. Regrettably, the combination of negative and stereotypical attitudes about ageing and older people has the effect of marginalising older people, causing many to endure unacceptable limitations in their lives.

Research shows that ageist attitudes in children can begin as early as eight years of age, the result of influences both from within the family and from outside. The term ‘attitude’ is itself difficult to define, despite its common usage. In essence, an attitude is an internal aspect of personality which explains, to a greater or lesser extent, the way a person thinks and feels. While it is interesting to know people’s attitudes to older people and ageing, one must bear in mind that attitudes are not always accurate predictors of behaviour. However, in the absence of accurate data on how people behave towards older people, and on the actions of older people themselves, attitude surveys are the nearest proxy.

Most of the following information is taken from a 1992 Eurobarometer survey of attitudes in twelve European Union countries, in which 12,800 persons of all ages and an additional 5,000 persons aged 60 years or more were interviewed about issues surrounding older people and ageing.¹ Information from a 1993 survey carried out by the Council of 909 community-residing older people is also included.² Additionally, information from a 1999 Council study *Income, Deprivation and Well-being Among Older Irish People* and a 2000 study of older people in the community *Health and Social Services for Older People* (HeSSOP) will also be used.^{3,5}

Respect for Older People

- When asked in the Eurobarometer survey how people over 60 years should be described, 41.9% of Irish older people opted for ‘senior citizens’. This was by far the most popular term: the next most popular was ‘retired’ (14.4%).

- In the EU as a whole, ‘senior citizens’ was also the most popular term among people over 60 years (30.9%) but the term ‘older people’ was also quite popular (27.4%).
- Some 44% of older Irish people say they have been treated with more respect as they have grown older. This was the highest proportion among the EU as a whole, where the average was 30%. Only 21% of older Irish people reported they had been treated less well.
- A total of 81.9% of Irish older people agreed that younger people are helpful towards older people. Again this was the highest rate observed in EU, where the average was 58.2%.
- Older Irish people are relatively well disposed towards younger generations. In this country 46% reported having a lot of contact with young people compared to 36% for their average EU counterpart.
- More than half the Irish older people surveyed agreed that older people are admired and respected by younger people. This was the opposite of results for the EU as a whole, where 63% of older people disagreed with the proposition. In a study in 2000 of older people in the community, only 8% of the 937 older people surveyed agreed that ‘generally, people treat me with less respect due to my age’.³

Income

- In the 1993 Council study, nearly half (47%) of the older people interviewed reported some difficulties in making ends meet. The amount of difficulty reported was fairly constant across household types and in both rural and urban areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Older people’s assessments of their households’ ability to make ends meet on current income, 1993

	Great difficulty	Some difficulty	A little difficulty	Fairly easily	Easily	Very easily	Total
	Per cent						
Urban single	1.9	8.4	33.8	41.6	11.7	2.6	100
Urban married couple	2.2	13.7	25.9	40.3	14.4	3.6	100
Urban other type	4.4	21.3	30.1	31.6	8.8	3.7	100
All urban	2.8	14.2	30.1	38.0	11.7	3.3	100
Rural single	3.0	16.3	23.7	43.7	11.1	2.2	100

Rural married couple	3.7	13.4	31.3	40.3	9.0	2.2	100
Rural other type	5.2	18.0	23.2	41.8	9.8	2.1	100
All rural	4.1	16.2	25.7	41.9	9.9	2.2	100
All single	2.4	12.3	29.1	42.5	11.3	2.4	100
All married couple	2.9	13.7	28.9	40.1	11.6	2.9	100
All other types	4.8	19.1	26.0	38.2	9.3	2.7	100
All older persons	3.4	15.3	27.9	40.2	10.6	2.7	100

Source: Fahey (1994)

- The 1992 EU survey found that only 13.6% of Irish older people rated the pensions they receive as completely adequate, while 20.3% rated pensions as very inadequate.
- When asked in the 1992 survey what level of minimum resources should be provided to older people by the State, the most common response (62.6%) among all Irish age groups was 'something closer to the average wage for people still in work'. This was also the most common response in the EU as a whole (57.2%). Only 4.9% of all Irish people thought that 'just enough to make ends meet' should be provided.
- The 1999 Council study *Income, Deprivation and Well-being Among Older Irish People* sought to examine the sources of income in elderly households and the level of income received, both absolutely and relative to the rest of the Irish population. The elderly are extremely reliant on social welfare pensions, though for some, occupational pensions also contribute a significant amount.⁵
- The study found that elderly households are more likely to be found at the bottom of the income distribution and are more likely to be in poverty than the general population.⁵
- In the HeSSOP study, when asked what could be changed or provided which would make their life easier, some respondents focused on the inadequacy of old age pensions. Others felt that older people should not have to pay tax. Financial concerns were a central issue for many people.³

Work

- In the 1992 EU survey, a very high proportion of Irish people of all ages thought that older workers were discriminated against with regard to job recruitment (74.7%),

promotion (63.3%) and training (69.3%). This view was held equally by younger and older age groups. Similar figures were observed for the EU as a whole.

- Some 62% of all Irish citizens favoured government legislation to stop age discrimination at work. Again this was similar to the EU average.
- Half (50%) of the Irish general public said they thought retired older people should be allowed to take paid employment. Almost 40% of all Irish people said they thought older people should be able to retire when they liked after having worked a minimum number of years.
- The notion that older people should give up work to make way for younger people has very little support from the Irish general public. Only 8.2% agreed strongly with this idea compared to the 40.8% who disagreed strongly.
- The 1999 Council report found that there are many older people who are not currently in work who would like to be. Flexible employment options for older people may be a benefit to both the older person as well as the employment market.⁵
- The *HeSSOP* study found that of those who were currently not working, 10% said that they would like to work either part-time or full-time.³

Housing

- The 1993 survey of Irish community residents found that 93.3% of older private householders were very satisfied (64.2%) or fairly satisfied (29.1%) with their accommodation.
- Only 6.6% of older private householders reported dissatisfaction. Less than 2% described themselves as being very dissatisfied with their accommodation.
- Rural households containing older people and members of other generations were most likely to report being very dissatisfied with their accommodation (2.6%).
- Levels of satisfaction have risen since a 1977 survey, when only 55% of all older people were very satisfied and 11.3% were either fairly or very dissatisfied.⁴
- Only 9.2% of those interviewed in 1993 showed any desire to move house, even among those living in poor accommodation. Only 3.5% would definitely like to move and single people living alone were more likely (4.8%) to wish to move.
- Some 84% of the older people surveyed considered their home 'about the right size', 10.7% considered their homes 'rather too big' and 3.4% 'rather too small'. Single people (18%) were twice as likely as married couples (9.4%) to consider their homes as being rather too big for their needs.

- Rural households containing older people and people from other generations were most likely to consider their homes as being far too small (4.1%).

Health and Social Services for Older People

- The *HeSSOP* study examined health and social service provision from the perspective of community-dwelling older people needing and/or using these services.³
- An impressive 96% of older people reported being satisfied or very satisfied with different aspects of care from their GP.
- Hospital services were highly rated by the respondents with in-patient and out-patient services both highly rated (93% satisfaction rate with each). Though rehabilitation was only used by four respondents, all respondents were satisfied with the service. Accident and emergency was rated significantly lower than the other services with almost 17% of older people in the community indicating that they were ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’ with the service.
- Satisfaction with both the medically-based and the more socially-orientated day services was high. Home services, therapies, out-patient services and respite care also received quite high ratings of satisfaction. Personal care attendants received an 83% satisfaction rating, hearing services 88%, and social worker services 67%.

Long-Term Care Preferences of Older People

- Respondents in the HeSSOP Study were also asked about their long-term care preferences.³ In the event that they might need to adjust or change their home environment in order to remain fairly independent in the future, the majority of respondents (87%) rated that remaining in one’s current home with family members taking care of all needs and the health board providing respite services was most acceptable. Of all eleven long-term care options, this was the most favoured.
- When asked to rate the acceptability of moving from their current residence to another residence, respondents found ‘a granny flat’ living situation the most acceptable of five options. Equal numbers found moving to a family member’s home backed up with respite care (26%) and sheltered housing (26%) as acceptable. Living in a private nursing home was rated as more acceptable (34%) than living in a State-run nursing home (25%) or a residential home (20%). However, around half of all respondents said that they would not accept any of these options.
- The vast majority of respondents (76%) reported that they had not discussed their preferences for long-term care with their family or someone else they trusted.

Care for Older People

- As part of the 1992 EU survey, older people were asked whether families are less willing to care for older relatives than they used to be. The majority of older Irish people (52.2%) agreed with this proposition, but this was the lowest level of agreement in the EU as a whole, where the average was 67.4%. Little variation by age or sex was noted.
- Of EU citizens that expressed an opinion, 90% supported the principle of community as opposed to residential care for older people needing personal care. Ireland showed a similarly high level of support.
- Compared to several of our EU partners, Ireland has a high dependence on informal care for older people. One possible disadvantage to this is the tendency to allow decisions about older people to be made by friends and relatives. When asked who was the best person to decide on services for older people, 41.5% of all Irish citizens chose 'a relative or close friend'. This was the highest rate in the EU where the average was 27.8%. Only 22.3% of Irish people thought that older people themselves should decide compared to an EU average of 33.7%.
- When asked how long-term care for older people should be financed in the future, the most popular option for Irish citizens was 'public provision of care financed through taxes' (44%). For all EU citizens the average was only 33.9%.
- The next most popular option for Irish citizens was compulsory public insurance (19.3%) which was significantly lower than the EU average of 36.6%. Only 9.7% of Irish people supported the use of private insurance.

Older People and Public Life

- In the HeSSOP Study of older people living in the community, the morale of the people interviewed tended to be high with 64% of older people agreeing with the statement 'I feel I still contribute to my community and society as much as I would like to'.³
- The 1992 EU survey found that 87.7% of all the Irish people surveyed believed that 'older people should stand up more actively for their rights'. All Irish age groups showed this strong level of agreement and the EU average (82.6%) was also high.
- Well over half (60%) of all Irish citizens believed that the government should do more to meet the needs of older people. Again, this opinion was shared by all age groups, and by the EU as a whole (more than 75% agreed).
- Irish older people showed a higher than average desire for knowledge about the role of older people in public and political life. Almost 40% wanted to be better informed

about how older people organise themselves in Ireland. This compares to an average of only 25% for all older EU citizens.

- Nearly 20% of older Irish people wanted information about the activities of older people in other EU countries.
- Just 16% of older Irish people say they would join a political party formed specifically to further their interests. This compares to an average of 22% for all older EU citizens surveyed.

Reference Material

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Useful Contacts

Age & Opportunity, Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Avenue, Marino, Dublin 9. Telephone 01 837 0570, fax 01 837 0591, email ageandopp@indigo.ie.

Irish National Senior Citizens Parliament, 32 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Telephone 01 878 2541.

National Federation of Pensioners' Associations, 31 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Telephone 01 874 8221.

Retired Workers Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 19 Raglan Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4. Telephone 01 668 0641.

National Council on Ageing and Older People
22 Clanwilliam Square
Grand Canal Quay
Dublin 2
01 676 6484/5
01 676 5754
email : info@ncaop.ie
www.ncaop.ie