

# Research Update

## Ageing well?

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### Introduction

Ageism against older people has become a major issue of debate in the past ten years. This is partly due to the growing number of older persons (defined as aged 50 years or over) in our society and the fact that they are represented by increasingly strong and articulate pressure groups. There has also been a parallel series of debates focusing on ageism within different policy contexts, including the equality/human rights agenda, declining economic activity rates amongst people between the age of 50 years and state retirement age, and pensions policy.

This Research Update is based on data from the 2003 **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** module on attitudes to older people. Whilst some small-scale qualitative work has been conducted in Northern Ireland (Evason and Whittington, 2003), this module was the first attempt to address the topic with a representative sample of adults from across Northern Ireland. It therefore constitutes a significant addition to our understanding of what has become an increasingly important field of inquiry.

### The treatment of older people

Respondents were asked if older people were treated differently from the general population because of their age. As Table 1 indicates, there is a strong sense that ageism is a problem in our society, as nearly one half (48%) of respondents considered

that older people are treated worse. The views of younger adults and the very elderly were somewhat more positive. These variations may be a consequence of more limited experience on the one hand and a frame of reference which reaches back to earlier experience of lower living standards and poorer social provision. One point of interest is the strength of feeling amongst those in the 50-59 years age group, of whom a clear majority (57%) thought that older people are treated worse. Women within this age group were particularly likely to support this view: 63% compared with 50% of men. This may be explained by women's broader experience as carers.



**Table 1: Do you think that older people are, on the whole, treated better or worse than people in the general population in this country because of their age?**

	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65-74	75+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better	18	11	8	6	11	9	21	11
Worse	35	51	48	57	52	45	36	48
The same	40	34	42	36	36	43	41	38
Don't know	7	3	2	1	2	3	2	3

Respondents were then asked if they thought that people treat them with more respect or less respect as they get older. Table 2 shows that those in the younger and oldest age groups felt that they were accorded more

respect, with respondents within the 50-59 years age group being the least positive. One possible explanation is the experience of ageism in the workplace.

**Table 2: As you get older, do you find that people treat you with more respect or less respect?**

	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65-74	75+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
More respect	36	22	29	15	16	21	34	24
Less respect	25	36	35	44	42	39	33	36
Same	31	40	36	39	42	38	32	38
Don't know	9	2	1	2	0	2	1	3

## Adequacy of provision for older people

When asked if the authorities in Northern Ireland do all they should for older people, the majority of respondents considered that not enough was done to support and assist older people. As Table 3 shows, the 50-59 years age group was most likely to express dissatisfaction with provision. Of particular note is the strength of feeling amongst women in this age group, with 81% taking the view that authorities do not do enough.

**Table 3: Do you think that the authorities in Northern Ireland do all they should for older people, do too much, or do not do enough?**

	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65-74	75+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Do all they should	15	17	21	20	23	25	41	20
Do too much	2	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Do not do enough	63	74	72	77	74	71	53	71
Don't know	20	9	8	3	3	4	5	8

Respondents who responded negatively to this question were asked in what way the authorities did not do enough. Better pensions and financial benefits were most frequently cited issues (43%), followed by crime and security (27%), healthcare (19%) and social care (19%). For example, typical comments included:

*"Benefits are not high enough and health and auxiliary care needs improved"*

*"Access to health care is not good enough ... benefits in general could be improved."*

*"Better benefits and access to better protection from criminals."*

Not surprisingly given these responses, more specific questions relating to pensions and other benefits indicated considerable dissatisfaction. Eighty five per cent of respondents thought that the basic state pension of £77.45 in return for a full

contribution record was a poor deal. When asked to take into account the other benefits provided for pensioners, the overwhelming majority (79%) still considered that financial provision made by the state for pensioners was inadequate or very inadequate.

**Table 4: What do you think are the main problems facing older people in Northern Ireland today? (% naming each problem)**

	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65-74	75+	All
Fear of crime	68	72	78	74	72	78	66	73
Loneliness	39	51	57	53	57	53	49	52
Making ends meet	33	52	44	53	51	45	40	47
Access to healthcare	33	33	36	33	34	34	19	33
Keeping warm in winter	30	34	35	40	36	32	14	33
Lack of respect	20	26	21	23	17	20	17	22
Transport	15	14	12	15	10	13	9	13
Getting employment	11	13	7	12	8	5	4	10
All of these	14	19	13	18	14	12	15	16

## Problems facing older people

Respondents were asked to indicate what they thought were the main problems facing older people. Fear of crime was selected by a clear majority in all age groups followed, at some distance, by loneliness and making ends meet (Table 4). In addition, 16% of respondents said all of these. Interviewees could select as many items as they wished. The average number of items identified was 4.06 but this rose to 4.48 for those in the 50-59 years age group. Here again, this group seems particularly concerned and anxious.

## Ageism and health care

The Life and Times survey explored perceptions and experiences of ageism in several policy areas, including health care and employment. There has been considerable concern in the UK that older people may be treated less favourably by the NHS (for a fuller discussion see Evason and Whittington, 2003). Confirming this, Life and Times data indicate a widespread perception that age may affect quality of care, both in terms of the attitudes of providers and the treatment offered (See Table 5). For example, nearly half of respondents (46%) thought that age had an impact when it came to waiting lists for tests and operations.

**Table 5: Do you think that health and social care workers treat older people differently with regard to...(%saying 'yes')**

...their attitudes to them?	42
...the treatment of their illnesses?	42
...placing them on waiting lists for tests and operations	46

More directly, 11% of interviewees aged 50 years and over reported feeling that they personally had been treated "with less dignity and respect" by health and social care professionals because of their age, and 8% thought that their age meant that they had not been offered treatment that might have helped them. Moreover, 24% of all respondents reported feeling that a friend or relative had been treated with less dignity and respect, and 18% thought a friend or relative had not been offered treatment. Women in the 40-59 years age group were significantly more likely to report that a friend or relative had been treated with less dignity and respect due to their age, and this again may relate to their heavier involvement in caring.

## Ageism and employment

Life and Times data indicate that 38% of males and 36% of females in the 50-59 years age group are not in employment. The extent to which combating ageism in the workplace will alter this position is unclear. However dealing with such discrimination is central to current policies to encourage people to remain in employment up to - and beyond - state retirement age. It is therefore of interest that the majority of respondents considered that older people in their 50s and 60s are treated less favourably by employers when seeking work, and those in the 50-59 years age group were most likely to express this view (see Table 5). However, further analysis by age and gender revealed that those most likely of all to do so were men in the 40-49 years age group, with 77% supporting this proposition.

There is also a widespread perception that older workers are discriminated against when it comes to recruitment (66%), promotion (63%) training (58%), and status or position in their organisation (49%). Again, the strongest views were held by men aged 40-49 years. For example, three quarters of this group (76%) thought that older

workers were treated less favourably with regard to promotion. However, while only 6% of respondents aged 50 years or over reported that they themselves had experienced age discrimination, this figure rose to 11% for men in the 50-59 years age group. The most reported forms of employment discrimination related to failure to secure a job because of age (24%), the employer preferring younger workers (23%) and the employer's poor attitude to older people (17%).

**Table 6: Do you think that people in their 50s and 60s who are looking for work are generally treated better or worse than younger people by prospective employers?**

	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65-74	75+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better	6	3	4	3	4	3	4	4
Worse	57	69	68	72	59	65	54	66
Same	14	20	21	19	24	13	20	18
Don't know	23	9	7	7	13	19	23	12

More broadly, one in ten respondents (9%) reported that a friend or family member had been subjected to employment-related ageism. This related to promotion (31%), redundancy/enforced retirement (16%) and to recruitment (15%).

Individual responses included: *"I tried for a job and was told I was too old."*  
*"I was made redundant because of my age. It wasn't put that way but I know it was the reason".*

*"I was told I would not get promotion when I came to 50".*

*"My dad was forced into retirement."*

*"My mother is treated very poorly by her employer and from what she tells me it has a lot to do with her age."*

Given the intention to outlaw age discrimination in employment in 2006, it is interesting that a majority of respondents (53%) thought that such discrimination was already illegal.

Related to this, legislation to outlaw such discrimination has the support of 74% of respondents.

## Ageism and financial services

It can be argued that a weakness of the proposed legislation on ageism is that it is confined to employment and does not cover goods, facilities and services. Life and Times data suggest that there is a case for addressing this deficiency. Just over one half of

respondents (52%) agreed with the statement that older people (aged between 50 years and retirement age) are treated less favourably by the financial sector because of their age. A higher percentage (64%) also believed that people over retirement age were treated less favourably. Respondents in the youngest and oldest age groups (18-24 years and 75+) were less likely to agree.

In all, 8% of those aged 50 years or over reported that they had been treated less favourably by this sector, with the proportion rising to 11% for those aged 65-74 years. Being refused a loan or credit was mentioned most frequently (by 25% of respondents), followed closely by being refused insurance (21%). There was also some reference to difficulties with loans, credit and mortgages as well as other or more general responses such as *"They don't have time for you"*, *"They talk down to you."* and *"They write you off."*

There was confusion over whether it is illegal for someone providing goods and services to refuse someone access to those goods or services simply because they are older. Four out of ten respondents (42%) thought that such discrimination is currently illegal. Seven out of ten respondents (71%) were in favour of such action being outlawed.

## Conclusion

The Life and Times data indicate that there is a widespread perception that older people are treated less favourably generally in our society because of their age. Overall, the data suggest a need for, and support for, policies which give combating ageism a central position in broader strategies addressing discrimination.

Of particular interest are the responses of those in the 50-59 years age group, whose views and concerns stand out from other age groups. These findings are not entirely surprising. This is the generation that has lived through the

transformations of the worlds of work, pensions and the welfare state that have occurred over the past quarter of a century. They are the pivot generation: under pressure to care for elderly parents; under pressure to provide child care and other assistance to their children; and under pressure to keep working themselves - perhaps coping with ageism as they do so - to provide for their retirement.

## References

Evason, E. and Whittington, D. (2003), *Older People in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Help the Aged.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2003, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

## Key Points

- 48% of respondents considered that older people are treated worse than the general population due to their age.
- 71% of respondents thought that not enough was done to support and assist older people.
- The basic state pension is seen as a poor deal.
- Crime is perceived to be the main problem facing older people.
- Respondents felt that older people are discriminated in relation to health and social care, employment and financial services.

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