

Older people – keeping active and involved



In many societies, old age is associated with wisdom and experience, and older people occupy a clear and respected position in the social order. In today's European Union, this is not always the case. The results of Eurofound's second European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS 2007) show that older people run the risk of being socially excluded. The highest proportion of people reporting a feeling of being 'left out of society' is in the over-65 age bracket. Compared to younger age groups, a much higher proportion in this group feels that 'life has become so complicated today that I almost can't find my way'. Feeling excluded reduces quality of life and is associated with poorer physical and mental health.

'I feel left out of society' – almost one in 10 citizens over the age of 65 surveyed in 2007 either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement. For the new Member States, this figure was above 16%.

Making ends meet

It is not necessarily economic hardship that leads to a feeling of being left out, but difficulties in making ends meet can play a role. For the EU27 as a whole, generally people between the ages of 35 and 49 are those who most frequently report that they find it hard to live on the household's monthly income. However, in the new Member States, almost

In the NMS12, deprivation increases significantly with age: the deprivation index doubles if you compare the young, aged 18–34, with those aged 65 years and older.

70% of persons over 65 years report difficulties in making ends meet every month. Material conditions certainly have an influence on perceived social exclusion, as EQLS data clearly show. Higher levels of lifestyle deprivation (not being able to afford a number of items, like new clothes or a warm meal with meat or fish every second day) tend to be associated with higher levels of perceived social exclusion. In the EU15, people over the age of 65 are only slightly more likely to experience deprivation than their younger counterparts. Again, the picture is different for the new Member States.

Living alone

The proportion of older people living alone is increasing rapidly. In this respect, gender differences are apparent: women's longer life expectancy, together with the persistence of an age differential between spouses, means that women over 65 are more than twice as likely as men to be widowed and to be living alone. According to the EQLS, widowed persons experience a higher level of social exclusion than married people. However, living alone does not, in itself, imply isolation. The majority of older people over the age of 65 have regular contacts with their children not living at home, with more than 60% reporting having face-to-face contact more than once a day or per week. And more than 80% have direct contacts with friends or neighbours daily or several times a week.

Staying at work for longer

In 2008, the average age of exit from the labour market was 61.4 years. The ambitious target to progressively increase the age at which people stop working by about five years, agreed by the Council in 2001, is unlikely to be met by any Member State. Many have made progress, but often not by more than a few months since 2001. Exceptions are the Netherlands, where the average exit age went up from 60.9 years in 2001 to 63.2 in 2008 and Poland, where it went from 56.6 years in 2001 to 59.3 in 2007 (although the employment rate of older workers actually declined), according to Eurostat.

The average EU employment rate for the 55 to 64 year age group stood at 45.6% in 2008. There is wide variation across countries, ranging from 29.1% in Malta to 70.1% in Sweden.

Why do people decide to retire even before reaching the official retirement age? Ill-health and – increasingly – mental illness are some of the reasons for retiring early. However, for many healthy people, it seems to be a question of cultural tradition: custom more than anything dictates that statutory retirement age is the best time to retire – and earlier if financially possible – even though people are now living longer and are in better health than before. The age of onset of disability has been in constant retreat for decades; it was around 60 years in the 1930s but had climbed to over 70 years for men and 75 years for women by the 1990s.



Some companies who value the personal qualities of older workers and the skills acquired during their career as an important asset have looked at innovative ways to keep them in employment longer. Creating favourable working conditions is a key factor. Some companies have put measures in place that promote or protect general physical and mental health – beyond the requirements of occupational health and safety rules. Maintaining employability through training is important as are measures that allow for reconciliation of work with care or other family responsibilities.

The key issues for keeping people in work longer are to prevent burn-out, which may occur at any age, to maintain employability and to value the contribution made, ensuring motivation and rewards from work.

Winding down gradually

Moving from full-time employment to being at home all the time can be problematic. Phased retirement schemes that allow employees from a certain age onwards to gradually reduce their hours may be part of successful age management. Long-term working time accounts offered by companies can facilitate this process. A gradual decline in hours spent at work leaves time to explore other possibilities for employing time usefully.

The European Company Survey (ECS 2009) shows that only 6% of companies in the EU offer long-term working time accounts, which can facilitate a reduction in working time in the run-up to retirement.

Paid work is just one aspect of active ageing. Political involvement and involvement in civil society are other aspects. Increasingly, older people are taking on care responsibilities, not least for their own grandchildren.

Volunteering

Volunteering – an organised activity to help others and improve personal quality of life without personal, financial or material gain – is an important avenue for older people to participate in society. Research findings show that this activity – both in terms of its extent and also its forms – varies widely across Member States. According to the results of the Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) conducted in 2006–2007, those aged between 65 and 74 are especially active in countries where volunteering is – in general – popular. The survey, which covered 12 EU Member States and Switzerland, shows that in the Nordic countries, Switzerland, Belgium, France and Germany more than 15% of people belonging to this age group participate in volunteering; in the Netherlands, this proportion is even higher at more than 30%.

Volunteering by older people is less common in countries where older people tend to provide much informal help within their families, as is the case in Italy, Poland or Greece; it appears to be less developed in the New Member States.

Getting involved

Voluntary activities are very diverse across countries. Older people tend to participate to a lesser extent in recreational groups or organisations, which are often linked to children's activities, attracting primarily parents with small children. According to data from an EU-wide survey (EU-SILC 2006), older people participate less in these activities than in religious organisations or churches (18.3% against 24.5%). In addition to religious-based activities, elderly people are extensively involved also in the health sector and in social services. This ties in with older people's declared motivation for volunteering: making friends and maintaining social contacts, in addition to the desire to help others and do something useful, which are in fact motives shared by all age groups.

Further information

This fact sheet forms part of the Eurofound resource pack, *All aboard – leaving social exclusion behind*.

The pack looks at the key issues behind social exclusion and explores initiatives across Europe that seek to create a fully inclusive society.

For a copy of the pack or further information on this topic, please email: integration@eurofound.europa.eu

To view the resource pack online, and all other Eurofound materials on this topic, please visit: www.eurofound.europa.eu/resourcepacks/integration.htm

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