

# **Staying Connected:** Social Engagement and Wellbeing Among Mature Age Australians

**March 2013**

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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

# **Staying Connected:** Social Engagement and Wellbeing Among Mature Age Australians

**March 2013**

## Foreword

This National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre research report entitled *Staying Connected: Social Engagement and Wellbeing Among Mature Age Australians* explores wellbeing amongst senior Australians. The report, authored by researchers from the Australian National University, also examines how wellbeing differs between age groups and other demographic characteristics, and how it relates with a range of measures of social engagement. Data for the research were sourced from the first wave of the national longitudinal survey *Social Activity and Wellbeing of Older Australians*, which surveyed over 2,000 members of National Seniors Australia aged 50-89 years.

The report finds that older people (i.e., those aged 70-89 years) have the highest overall life satisfaction of those surveyed, as well as comfort with their standard of living and feelings of freedom about decisions regarding how they live their lives. This is despite having poorer self-reported health than younger counterparts. Furthermore, the quality of their social interactions is important in explaining this cohort's higher wellbeing. As an example, the authors note that this older age group, compared with people aged in their fifties, are more likely to state that they socialise as much as they want to and that they have all the friends they want or need.

In contrast, the report identifies some of the reasons for lower average wellbeing of people aged in their fifties. These include potential stressors such as workforce participation, having multiple dependents, and caring responsibilities (for both children and parents). A lack of companionship was also more commonly cited by this age group than amongst people aged above 70-89 years.

This research report is part of the ANU Social Networks and Ageing Project (SNAP). Further research from the SNAP project will explore online social connectedness amongst senior Australians.

Dr Tim Adair  
Director  
National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre  
March 2013

## Acknowledgements

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This report was written by Heather Crawford and Heather Booth and is based on the research of Heather Booth, Tim Windsor, Pilar Rioseco, Heather Crawford, Cindy Bradley, Lin Chen and Robert Ackland.

The report presents results from the 2010-11 survey, *Social Activity and Wellbeing of Older Australians*, conducted by researchers at the Australian National University (ANU) in collaboration with National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre. Additional support for the survey was provided by Academic Surveys Australia and NEC.

The survey is part of the ANU Social Networks and Ageing Project (SNAP), which is supported through an Australian Research Council Linkage grant<sup>1</sup> in partnership with National Seniors Australia.

The project team are grateful to the respondents – members of National Seniors Australia – who voluntarily gave their time in completing the survey questionnaire. We hope that the survey results will ultimately benefit seniors in Australia.

The views expressed in this report are those of the project team, and are not necessarily shared by the survey's sponsors.

<sup>1</sup> The role of online social networks in successful ageing: benefiting from 'who you know' at older ages (H. Booth, R. Ackland and T. Windsor; 2009-2012) – Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP09909674).

## Contents

Foreword.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Data .....	3
Sample Design .....	3
Weighting .....	3
The Later Life Context .....	4
Social Engagement .....	9
Subjective wellbeing .....	17
Conclusion.....	20
References.....	22
Appendix.....	24



# Staying Connected

## Introduction

Australia's population is ageing – the proportion of people aged 65 years and over was 14% in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) and is projected to increase to at least 23% in 2056 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The ageing population is expected to present challenges to health, aged care and retirement income systems. In response, much policy attention is focused on alleviating these pressures through preventive health initiatives, increasing productivity and removing barriers to workforce participation for mature age Australians (Australian Government, 2010; Cubit & Meyer, 2011; Productivity Commission, 2011; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012).

Another perspective on the ageing population focuses on the wellbeing of seniors. Subjective measures of wellbeing have become increasingly important as studies have found that many people assess themselves to be ageing more successfully than objective measures of health and physical functioning would suggest (Strawbridge, Wallhagen & Cohen, 2002). Social engagement and social support are widely regarded as being found to be important determinants of health (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000) and participation in social activities is also found to be important to health and wellbeing in later life (Grundy & Sloggett, 2003; Giles, Metcalf, Glonek, Luszcz, & Andrews, 2004; Giles, Glonek, Luszcz, & Andrews, 2005; Windsor & Anstey, 2010; Adams, Leibbrandt, & Moon, 2011).

This report addresses the social engagement and wellbeing of mature age Australians. The results presented here are based on data from the *Social Activity and Wellbeing of Older Australians* survey. The report describes levels and patterns of social activity and engagement with family members and with friends both in face-to-face interactions and through various media including online methods. The measures of wellbeing are subjective and include life satisfaction, level of comfort with standard of living, self-rated health and indicators of good or poor mental health and self-determination.

An improved understanding of the factors associated with senior wellbeing can help individuals make informed choices across a range of areas of their life. It can also assist governments and the health and social sectors to develop and promote programs to support positive ageing.

The report first considers the context for social engagement and wellbeing, including paid work and retirement, voluntary work, household composition and caring. Family structures and responsibilities change over the later life course, and retirement is an important milestone. However, the effect of retirement on wellbeing is not clear (Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, Rose, & Cartwright, 2010). Participation in voluntary work, often greater after retirement, is generally beneficial for health, possibly because it offers opportunities for social engagement (Onyx & Warburton, 2003). In contrast, caring roles, especially when more intensive, tend to be associated with poorer mental and physical health (Edwards & Higgins, 2009).

To better understand how later-life transitions are related to wellbeing, this report focuses on examining differences in wellbeing among three age groups of seniors – those in their fifties, those in their sixties, and those in their seventies or eighties. Notable differences in wellbeing by sex or by other characteristics are also presented.

## Data

The data on which this research is based was drawn from the national longitudinal survey *Social Activity and Wellbeing of Older Australians*. The purpose of the survey was to explore aspects of wellbeing for mature age Australians, in particular the role of social networks and social participation. Two waves of data have been collected, the first in late 2010/early 2011 and the second in March-June 2012. This report focuses on findings from the first wave of the survey.

## Sample Design

Survey respondents were selected from the membership of National Seniors Australia (NSA). The eligible survey population comprised persons aged 50-89 years residing in all states and territories of Australia. Steps were taken to sample only one member per household. Two methods (online and postal) were used to administer the questionnaire. Stratification was by method, sex and age. A total of 10,000 members were contacted by email and invited to complete the questionnaire online, while 2,500 members were sent the postal questionnaire. Both groups were given the option of completing the questionnaire by the alternative method if they preferred. The overall response rate was 17.0% (with approximate response rates of 11.4% for the online method and 39.4% for the postal method).

## Weighting

The sample size at the first wave of the survey was 2,123 respondents. For analytical purposes, the sample was weighted by sex, age group and area (Capital city, Balance of State) so that the reported results were broadly representative of the older Australian population by sex, age group and area.

Table A.1 (see Appendix) compares the proportion of respondents in each sex, age and area category with the corresponding proportions in the Estimated Resident Population in June 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The age-sex distribution after weighting appears in Table A.1 in parentheses. A major difference in the two distributions is sample under-representation of people aged 50-54 years and 80 years and over, and of males in Balance of State. There is also sample over-representation of people aged 60-69 years and females in Capital cities.

## The Later Life Context

Ageing involves multiple life course transitions, including changing household composition as children leave home and as family deaths occur; retiring from paid work; becoming a grandparent; relocating for lifestyle or own care reasons; and for some, taking on the role of caring for elderly parents or a spouse. Such transitions can affect wellbeing in different ways (Glaser, Price et al., 2009) and are therefore an important part of the context in which to consider individual ageing and wellbeing. This section describes the characteristics of the sample, including marital status, relationship status and household composition, education, work status and retirement, voluntary work participation and informal caring.

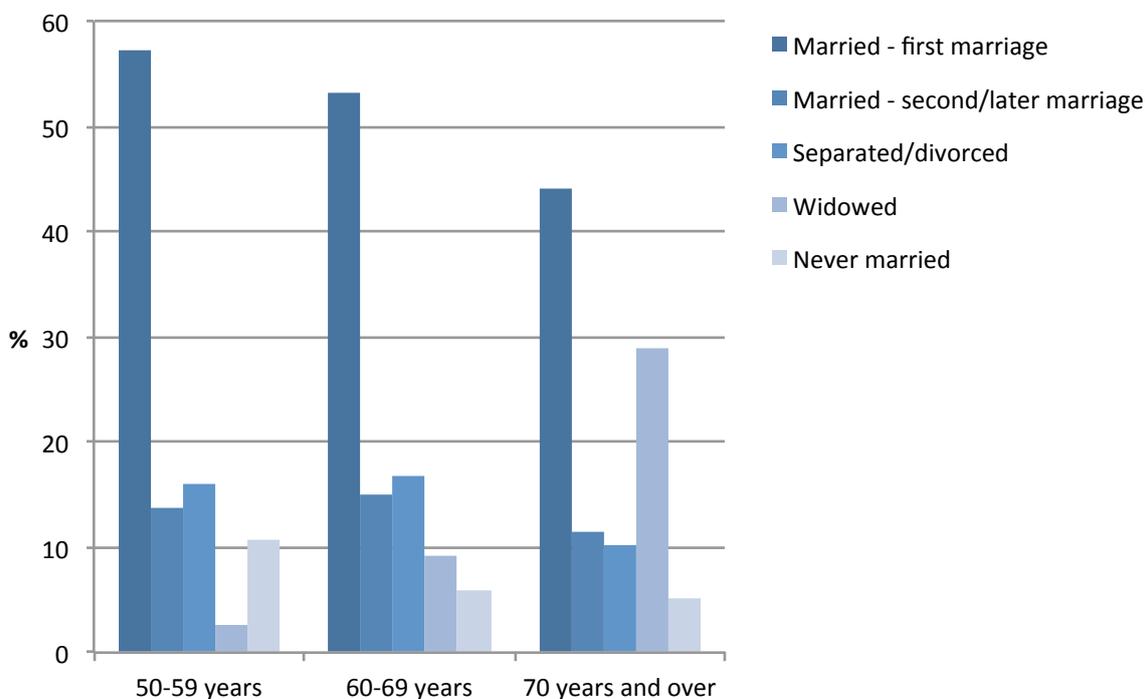
### Marital status

Two thirds (66%) of respondents were married: 52% were in their first marriage and 14% were in a second or subsequent marriage. Fifteen per cent were separated or divorced, 12% were widowed, and 8% had never married.

These proportions differed across age groups (Figure 1) mainly as a result of widowhood. The proportion of respondents who were widowed increased from 3% among those aged 50-59, to 9% among those aged 60-69 and 29% among those aged 70 and over. The proportion of respondents who were married to their first spouse declined with age, but 44% of the oldest age group were still in this situation.

Among those in their fifties or sixties, about 16% were separated or divorced, compared with 10% among those aged 70 and over. The proportion who had never married was highest in the youngest age group: 11% of respondents aged 50-59 had never married, compared with 6% of those aged 60-69 and 5% for those aged 70 and over.

**Figure 1:** Marital status by age group (%)



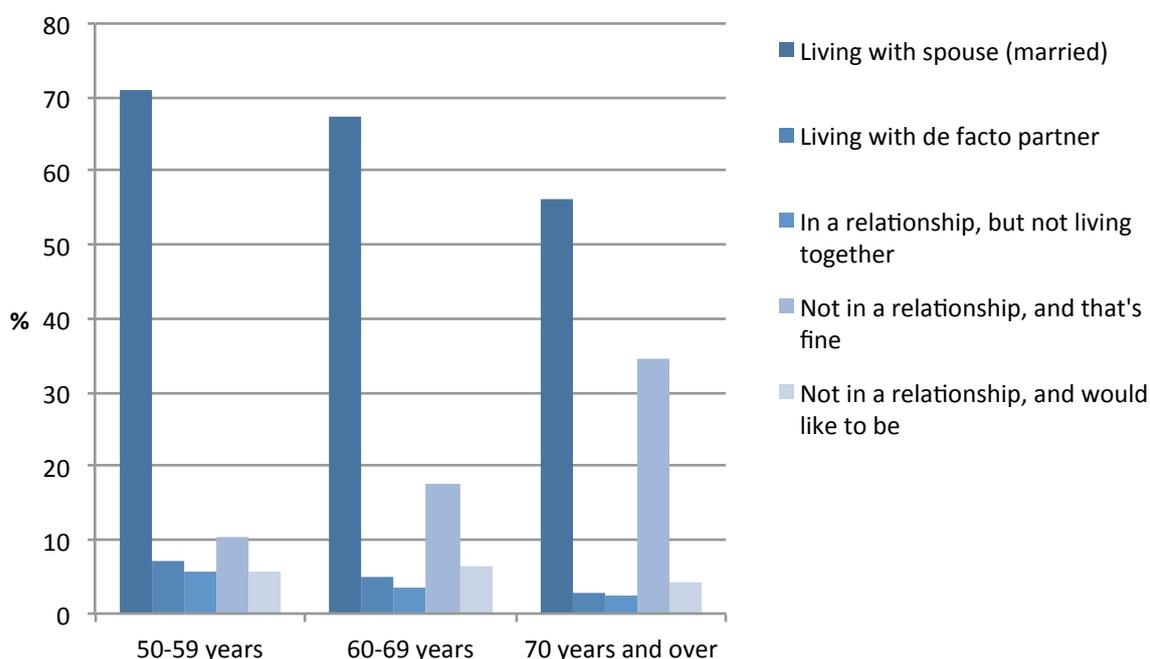
## Relationship status

Relationship status encompasses a broader definition than marital status. In addition to the 66% who were married (and living with their spouse), 5% were living with a de facto partner and 4% were in a relationship but not living together. Thus, 75% of respondents were in a relationship. Of the remaining 25%, 20% reported that they were *not in a relationship, and that's fine*, and 5% reported that they were *not in a relationship, and would like to be*.

Figure 2 shows relationship status by age group. In line with changes in partnering behaviour in the post-war period, the proportion living with a de facto partner was largest among those aged 50-59 (7%) and smallest among those aged 70 and over (3%). Similarly, those in a relationship but not living together comprised 6% of those aged 50-59 but only 2% of those aged 70 and over.

The proportion of respondents who were not in a relationship increased with age, from 16% among those aged 50-59 to 39% among those aged 70 and over. The proportion of respondents who reported they were *not in a relationship, and that's fine* also increased with age, from 10% among those in their fifties, to 18% among those in their sixties and 35% among those aged 70 and over. However, among those who were not in a relationship, over a third (36%) of those in their fifties reported that they would like to be in a relationship; a much higher proportion than the corresponding 11% of those aged 70 and over.

**Figure 2:** Relationship status by age group (%)



## Household composition

Household composition differed across age groups. The most notable difference was the elevated proportion of the oldest age group who were living alone. Almost 40% of respondents aged 70 and over were living alone, compared with 23% of those in their sixties and 16% of those in their fifties. This is in line with increasing widowhood with age.

The proportion living only with a partner (this includes spouse) was smallest among those in their fifties (47%). A quarter of this age group were living with both a partner and at least one child, indicating they were not yet 'empty-nesters'. In comparison, at age 60-69 the proportion living only with a partner was greater (57%) and the proportion living with a partner and

child(ren), was smaller (10%), reflecting the transition to the ‘empty-nest’ stage of life. Among those aged 70 and over, 49% were living only with a partner, while very few (4%) were living with a partner and child(ren), and most of the remainder were living alone.

### Education

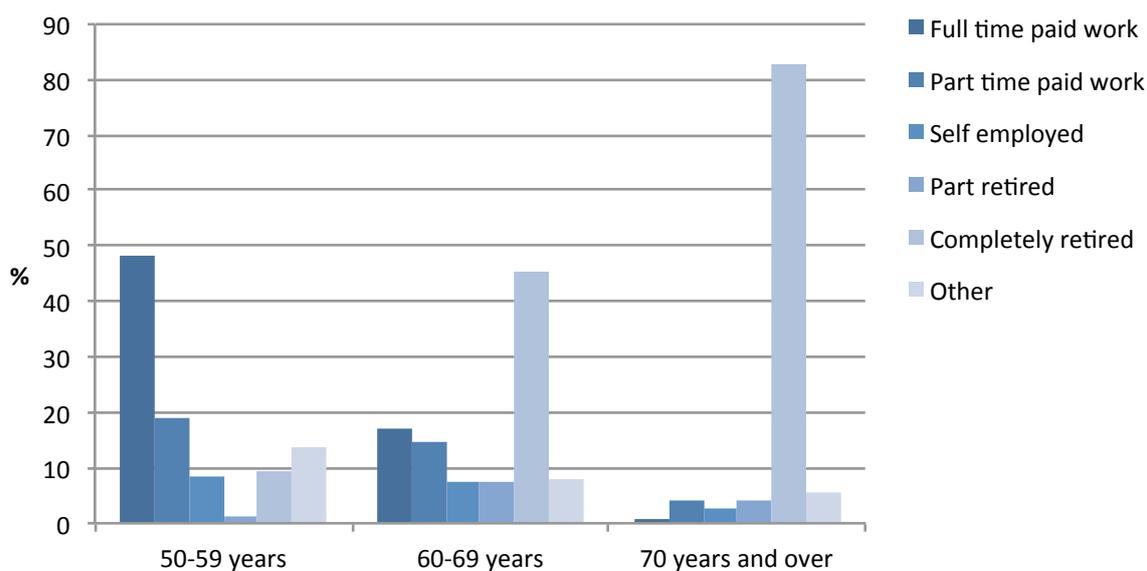
About 50% of respondents reported having completed a certificate/diploma or university degree or higher (Figure A.1 – see Appendix). Thirty three percent of respondents have obtained a school/intermediate certificate or higher school/leaving certificate. Ten per cent of respondents had no school certificate or other qualification, and seven per cent had a trade apprenticeship. The proportion with a university degree was slightly higher among males at 29%, compared with 26% of females. Fifteen per cent of males had completed a trade apprenticeship compared with very few females. Instead, 23% of females had a school or intermediate certificate compared with 14% of males, and 16% of females had a higher school or leaving certificate compared with 11% of males.

### Work and retirement

As expected, the proportion of respondents who were in paid employment decreased with age and the proportion who described themselves as *completely retired* increased with age.<sup>2</sup> The majority (76%) of those aged 50-59 years were employed, comprising 48% in full-time employment, 19% in part-time employment, and 9% self-employed. Ten per cent of this age group described themselves as *completely retired*.

Among respondents aged 60-69 years, 45% described themselves as *completely retired*, while 83% of the oldest age group described themselves in this way. Thus, 55% and 17% respectively of these age groups were potentially in some way economically active in the paid labour force. Among those aged 60-69, 17% were in full-time employment, 15% were in part-time employment and 7% were self-employed. Among the oldest respondents, only 1% were in full-time employment but 4% were in part-time employment and 3% were self-employed (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Work status by age group (%)



<sup>2</sup> Survey respondents were asked “What is your current work status?” and could mark as many of the following categories that applied to them: In full-time paid work; in part-time paid work; completely retired; partially retired; self-employed; disabled/sick; doing unpaid work; homemaker; studying; unemployed; other. For the purposes of this report, respondents were assigned to a single category, in the following order of priority: in full-time paid work; in part-time paid work; self-employed; partially retired; completely retired; other (all remaining categories). Typically respondents reported being both in part-time paid work and partially retired, or similar combinations.

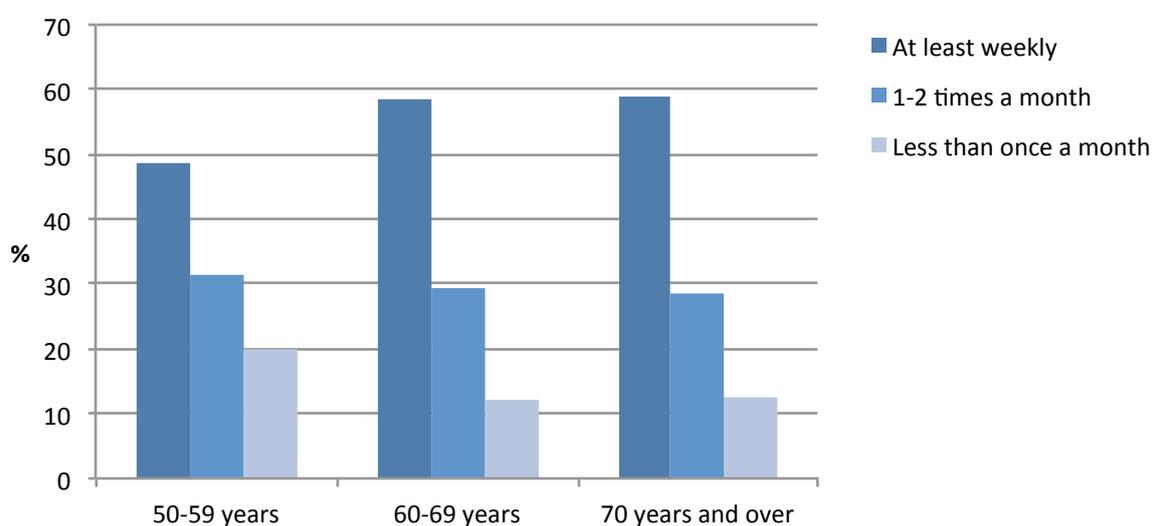
Among respondents who were not employed full-time, 13% had looked for paid work in the 12 months prior to the survey. However, a much larger proportion (28%) said they would be interested in following up a suitable opportunity for casual paid work if one came up. As expected, these proportions were greater among younger respondents. The proportion who had looked for paid work in the previous 12 months (among those not employed full-time) was 24% at age 50-59, 15% at age 60-69 and 4% at age 70 and over (Figure A.2). The (perceived) availability of work is an important factor in seeking work. If a suitable opportunity for casual work came up, 46% of those aged 50-59, 30% of those aged 60-69 and 13% of those aged 70 and over, who were not employed full-time, said they would follow it up. These results are consistent with other research findings that there is a substantial pool of underutilised labour among mature age Australians, at least among those in their fifties and sixties (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012).

### Voluntary work

The proportion of respondents who had participated in voluntary work in the 12 months prior to the survey was 43%. Respondents in the age groups 60-69 or 70 and over were more likely to have participated in voluntary work than those aged 50-59; close to half of the older age groups had done voluntary work in the previous 12 months, compared with a third of the youngest age group (Figure A.3).

Among respondents who had participated in voluntary work, the number of hours of voluntary work undertaken in the four weeks prior to the survey did not vary significantly across age groups, despite different levels of involvement in paid work. Of those who had volunteered at some time in the 12 months prior to the survey, 13% had not done any hours of voluntary work in the previous four weeks, 61% had done between 1 and 20 hours, and 17% had done between 20 and 40 hours. However, there were differences across age groups in how often respondents participated in voluntary work. Those in their sixties and those aged 70 and over more commonly reported that they had participated in voluntary work at least weekly during the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with those in their fifties (Figure 4). Thus, older respondents are more likely to be engaged in voluntary work, and once engaged, invest the same amount of time but participate on a more regular basis compared to younger respondents. These age differences are consistent with the higher level of participation in full-time paid employment among younger respondents.

**Figure 4:** Participated in voluntary work in 12 months prior to the survey – frequency of participation during that time, by age group (%)



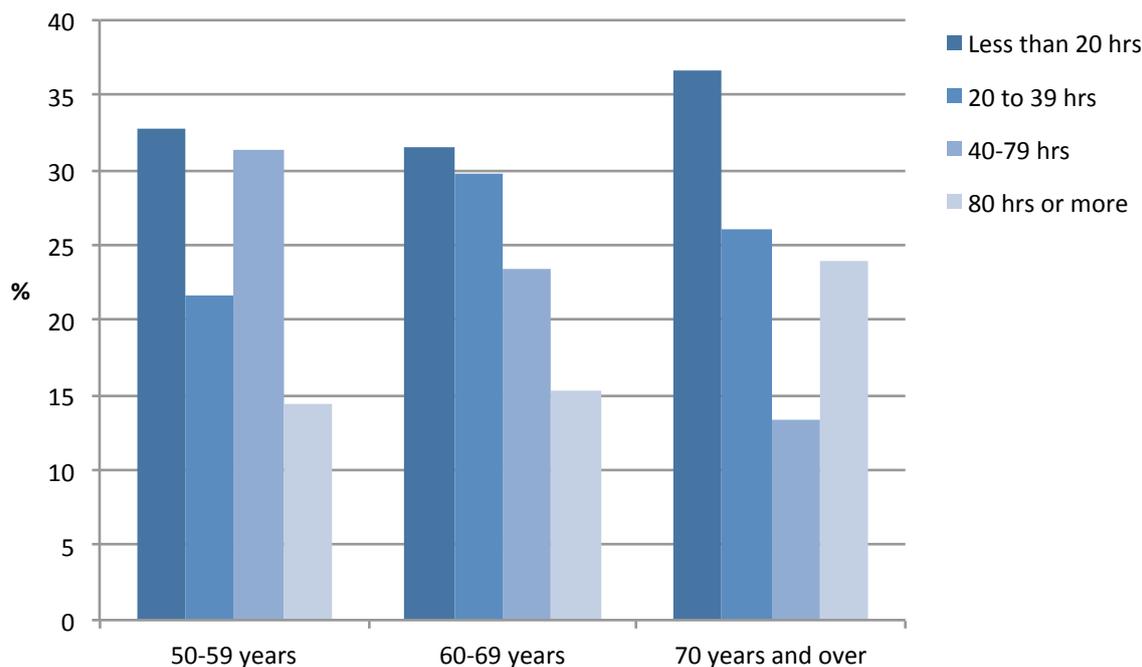
### Caring

Overall, 11% of respondents identified themselves as being a carer for a spouse or partner, parent, other relative, friend or neighbour. This proportion did not vary across age groups. However, the carer’s relationship to the person being cared for tended to differ across age groups. Among carers who were in their fifties, 51% were providing care to parents or parents-in-law and another 26% were providing care to their spouse or partner (there were very few cases in this sample where respondents were providing care to both a parent and a partner). In contrast, 60% of carers aged 70 and over were caring for a spouse or partner. Only 3% of respondents in this age group had parents who were still living.

Figure 5 shows hours of care provided to others by age group. A relatively high proportion of respondents (24%) aged 70 and over had provided 80 hours or more of care in the previous four weeks, reflecting the large proportion caring for a spouse or partner.

Five per cent of respondents reported that they were currently receiving care and most (71%) were being cared for by their spouse or partner. The proportion receiving care was 4% for those in their fifties, 5% for those in their sixties, and 8% for those aged 70 and over.

**Figure 5:** Provided care in four weeks prior to the survey – hours of care provided, by age group (%)



## Social Engagement

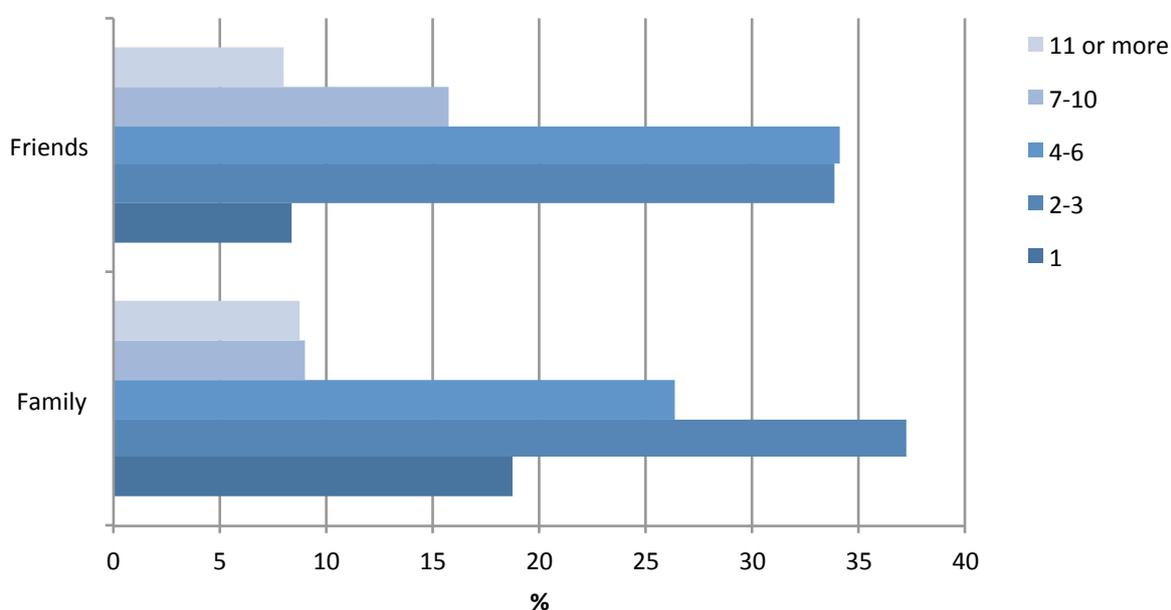
Almost all respondents were socially active. Most (96%) engaged in social activities with family and friends in person. Other methods of keeping in touch (such as telephone/mobile, email and SMS) were also used. While 67% of those in their fifties felt they socialised as much as they wanted to, at older ages the proportion was even higher (76% for those in their sixties, 79% for the those aged 70 and over). A similar pattern is seen in relation to having all the friends they wanted or needed (46% for the fifties; 56% for the sixties; and 62% for those aged 70 and over). Most respondents had family or friends they could call on for support, but a small percentage reported often or always having feelings of social isolation.

### Patterns of engagement

Most respondents had contact with ex-household adult family members or friends, or both, in the four weeks prior to the survey. A majority (67%) had spent time with both family members and friends (Figure A.4). About 14% spent time with family members only, and similarly, about 15% spent time with friends only. Only 4% of respondents had not spent any time with ex-household adult family members or friends in the four weeks prior to the survey.

There were some differences in the patterns of respondents' social activities according to whether these were with family members or with friends. Respondents tended to spend time with friends more often than with adult family members. Of those who spent time with friends, 58% did so on four or more different occasions in the four weeks prior to the survey, compared with 44% of those who spent time with family members (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** Spent time with adult family members or with friends in the four weeks prior to the survey by number of occasions



In contrast, respondents tended to spend more time (hours) with family members than with friends: 26% of those who spent time with family members in the four weeks prior to the survey spent 20 hours or more together, compared with 17% of those who spent time with friends (Figure A.5).

Table 1 shows the percentages of respondents engaging in specific activities with family members and with friends (among those who had spent time together). These activities are ranked according to percentage engaging in the activity with family members, thereby highlighting differences in the percentage engaging in each activity with family members and with friends.

Socialising at each other’s homes was a common activity with family members (60%). However, eating or drinking out was the most common activity with friends (68%). It was more common for respondents who spent time with family members to be involved with helping with daily activities or tasks (35%), than for respondents who spent time with friends (15%). In contrast, respondents who spent time with friends more commonly engaged in activities outside the home (25% vs 15%). For example, among those who spent time with friends, 17% reported going to the cinema, theatre, concert, a cultural event together, while only 10% reported this as an activity with family members.

Considering all social activities whether with family members or with friends, there was little variation across age groups in the frequency of engagement in most activities. One notable exception was going to a place of worship. Among those aged 70 and over, the proportion who had been to a place of worship (either with family or friends) was 26%, more than double that for respondents aged 50-59 (12%).

**Table 1:** Engagement in social activities with family members and friends (%)

Social activity engaged in	With family	With friends
Socialising at their home	60	52
Socialising at respondent's home	58	51
Eating or drinking out	45	68
Attending a family party or get-together	42	42
Helping with daily activities or tasks	35	15
Shopping or personal services	23	17
Respondent was staying overnight with or near them	20	8
They were staying overnight with or near respondent	20	7
Outdoor activity – not at home	15	25
Indoor activity – not at home	11	25
Going to a place of worship	10	16
Cinema, theatre, concert, cultural event	10	17
Going on a holiday (overnight)	9	8
Going to a show, sport or spectator event	8	10

*Note: Denominators are numbers of respondents who spent time in the four weeks prior to the survey (1) with family members and (2) with friends.*

### Using technology to keep in touch

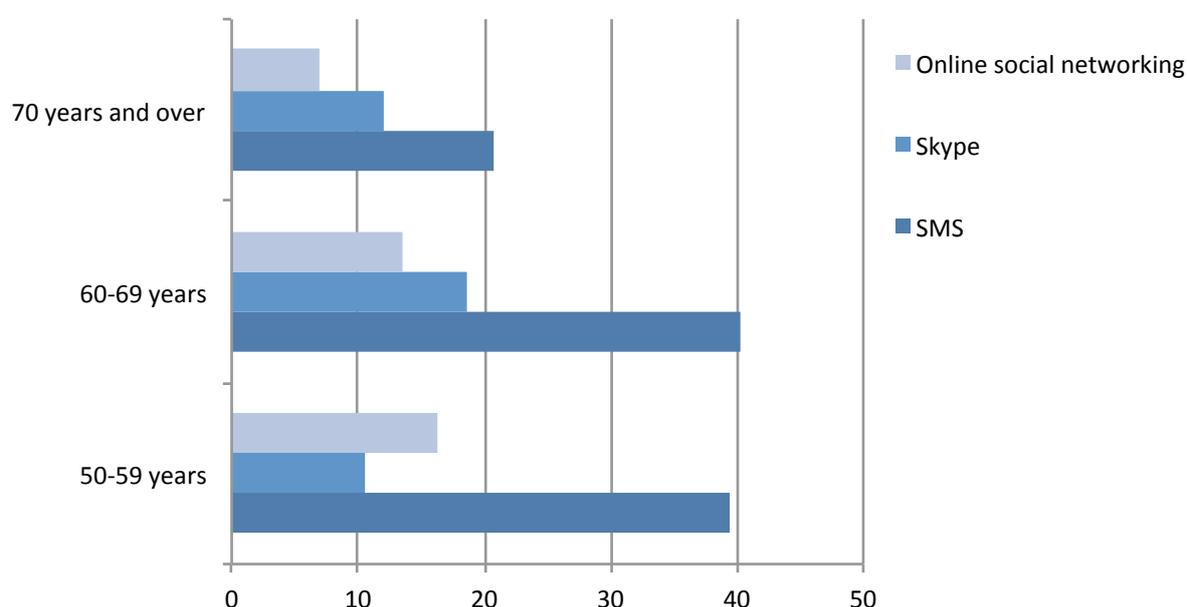
Most respondents kept in touch with people whom they had not seen during the four week period prior to the survey through various methods. Table 2 shows a variety of methods that respondents used to keep in touch with family members and friends. The telephone/mobile was the most popular way of keeping in touch, followed by email and SMS. The traditional mailed letter was used by greater proportions of respondents for keeping in touch with friends, whereas Skype was used by a greater proportion for keeping in touch with family members.

**Table 2:** Use of technology and other methods to keep in touch (%)

Contact method	With family	With friends
Telephone/mobile	94	89
Email	64	71
SMS	34	31
Skype	14	10
Mailed letter	13	17
Online social networking	13	12
Instant messaging	5	3

Note: Denominators are numbers of respondents who kept in touch other than in person in the four weeks prior to the survey (1) with family members and (2) with friends.

There were some age differences in the proportions using the newer technologies to keep in touch, whether with family members (see Figure 7) or with friends. Respondents aged 70 and over were less likely than those in the two younger age groups to use SMS or online social networking websites. However, some older respondents have embraced Skype; those in their sixties were more likely to have used Skype than those in their fifties or those aged 70 and over. Not surprisingly perhaps, the use of mailed letters was more common among older respondents; 18% of those aged 70 and over had kept in touch with family using mailed letters, and 25% with friends.

**Figure 7:** Kept in touch with family members in the four weeks prior to the survey – use of selected methods, by age group (%)

### Lower social engagement

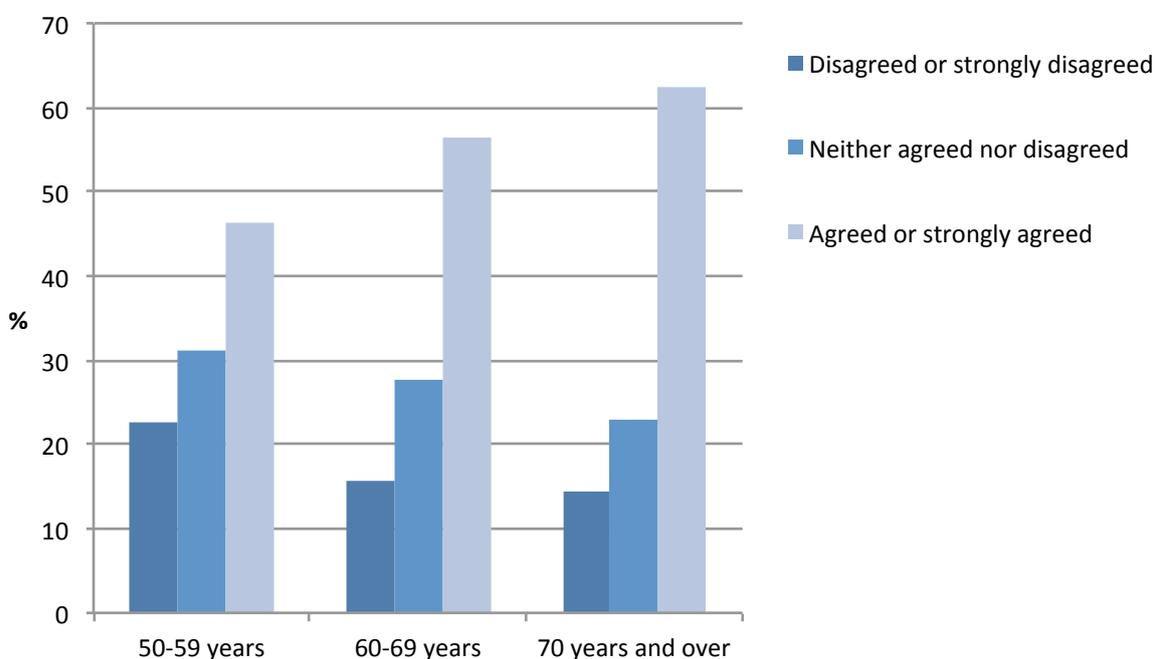
Not all respondents reported social engagement commensurate with levels that are generally regarded as beneficial to wellbeing. Almost one third (30%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they pretty much kept to themselves and did not have a lot of social contacts, and 36% agreed or strongly agreed that there were not many people that they were close to. These proportions did not vary across age groups, but males were more likely than females to report that they pretty much kept to themselves and did not have a lot of social contacts (35% vs 25%) and that there were not many people that they were close to (42% vs 31%) (Figures A.6 and A.7).

### Satisfaction with social activities and interactions

Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they socialised as much as they wanted to. This proportion increased with age (Figure A.8). This may be related to decreasing participation in paid employment and changing family responsibilities with increasing age.

Compared with the high proportion socialising as much as they wanted to, a somewhat smaller proportion (54%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had all the friends they wanted or needed, suggesting some interest in expanding their social networks. Indeed, a substantial minority (18%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had all the friends they wanted. The proportion agreeing that they had all the friends they wanted increased for each age group (Figure 8).

**Figure 8:** Proportion (%) of respondents indicating that they had all the friends they wanted or needed by age group



Respondents rated the quality of their relationships highly. Most respondents (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that “people are generally pretty friendly towards me”, and this proportion did not vary across age groups (Figure A.9). When focusing on people they interacted with, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that “I really like the people I interact with”, and 84% agreed or strongly agreed with the stronger statement that “I consider the people I regularly interact with to be my friends”.

Again, there were marked differences across age groups. Compared with the two older age groups, fewer respondents in their fifties reported that they really like the people they interact with (82% for the fifties; 90% for the sixties; and 92% for those aged 70 and over). This may be due to greater involvement in paid work, where they have less choice about whom they interact with. More respondents aged 70 and over reported that they considered the people they regularly interacted with to be their friends (78% for the fifties; 84% for the sixties; and 92% for the 70 and over).

### Barriers to social engagement with family members or friends

Distance was the major barrier restricting respondents' social activities outside the household. A much larger proportion of respondents reported distance as a barrier at least sometimes to their social activities with family members (66%) than with friends (44%). This reflects the importance of migration in family social dynamics.

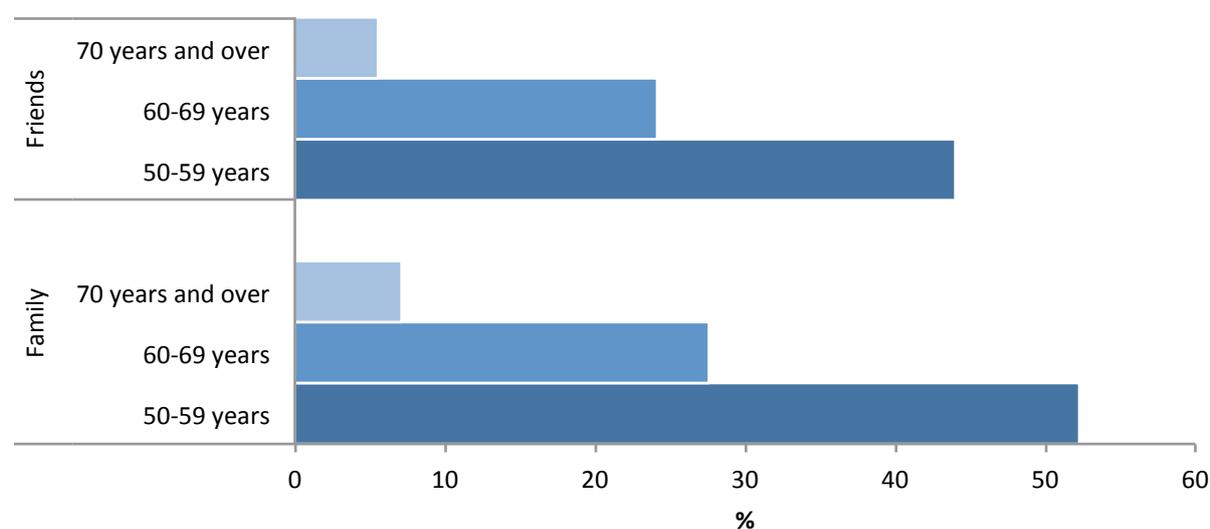
Other barriers were reported much less frequently. The respondent's work hours and financial situation were each reported as a barrier at least sometimes by about a third of respondents. Almost 20% of respondents reported family tensions as a barrier restricting social activities with family members at least sometimes, while 15% reported the lack of a companion to accompany them as a restriction on social activities with friends at least sometimes (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Barriers restricting social activities at least sometimes (%)

Barrier	With family	With friends
Distance	66	44
Respondent's work hours	32	27
Respondent's financial situation	29	30
Respondent's transport difficulties	20	13
Family tensions	19	Not applicable
Respondent's caring responsibilities	18	15
Respondent's health or disability	17	16
Lack of a companion to accompany respondent	Not applicable	15

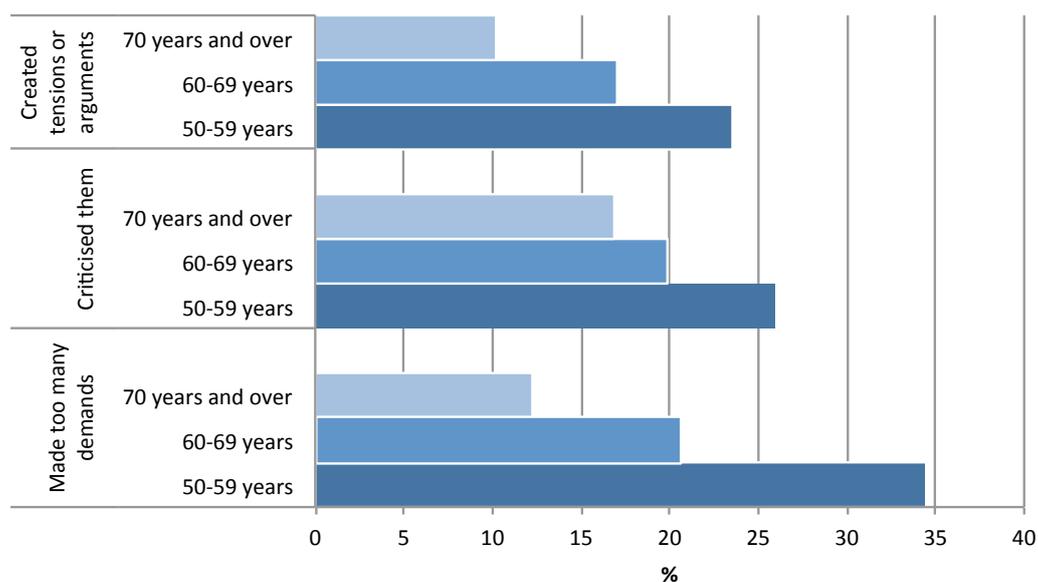
Some barriers, including distance, caring responsibilities and own financial situation, were reported equally frequently by respondents in different age groups. However, the proportions reporting other barriers decreased by age, most notably for respondent's work hours. This was a barrier to social engagement with family members or with friends at least sometimes for much larger proportions of those aged 50-59 than of those aged 70 and over (Figure 9).

**Figure 9:** Reported that social activities with family members or with friends were restricted at least sometimes by respondent's work hours, by age group (%)



Family tensions were also reported less frequently as a barrier to social engagement by older respondents. The proportion of respondents aged 70 and over who reported that their social activities with family members were restricted at least sometimes by family tensions was 11%, less than half that of respondents aged 50-59 (26%). This may be related to changing family dynamics as age advances. The proportions reporting that ex-household adult family members made too many demands on them, criticised them, or created tensions or arguments with them also decreased with increasing age (Figure 10).

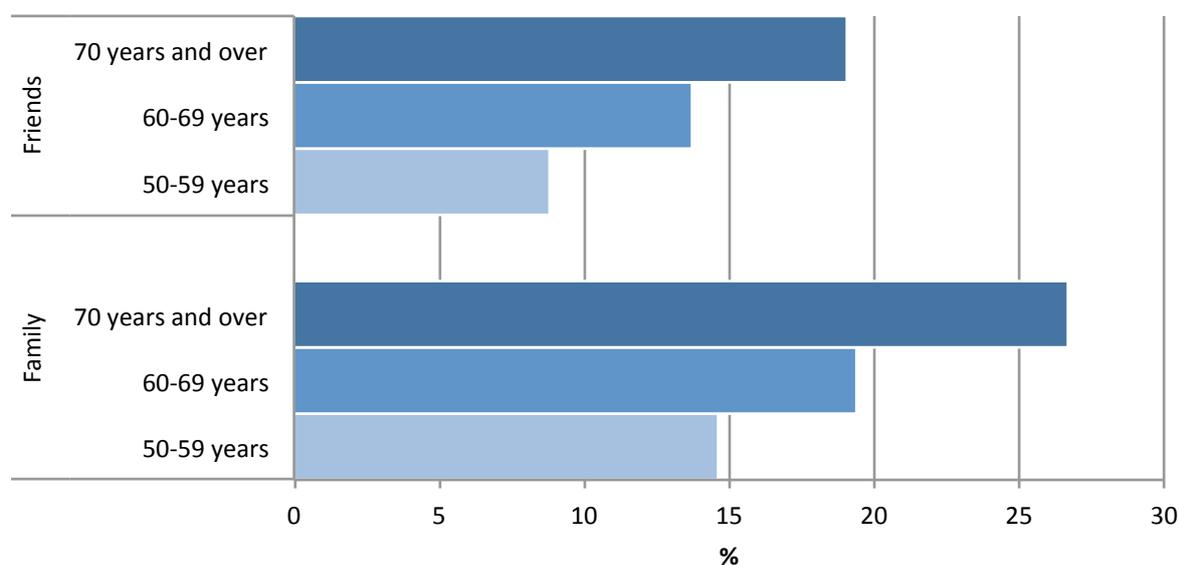
**Figure 10:** Reported that at least sometimes, family members not living with them created tensions or arguments, criticised them or made too many demands on them, by age group (%)



In contrast, some barriers were reported by an increasing proportion of respondents as age increased. The proportion who reported that their health or disability was a barrier to social participation at least sometimes was greater among those aged 70 and over than among those aged 60-69 or 50-59. Even so, the proportion of the oldest age group reporting health or disability as a barrier to social activities with family or with friends (about 22% in each case) was smaller than the proportions reporting the barriers of distance (64% for activities with family members and 42% with friends) or financial situation (26% with family members and 31% with friends).

*Not having someone to accompany them* was also a barrier affecting a larger proportion of older respondents; 22% of those aged 70 and over felt that their social activities with friends were restricted by the lack of a companion at least sometimes, compared with 10% of those aged 50-59 years. *Transport difficulties* was reported in similar proportions; 19% of those aged 70 and over reported this as a barrier at least sometimes to social activities with friends compared with 9% of those aged 50-59 (Figure 11). More specifically, the percentage of respondents who reported driving a car in the four weeks prior to the survey was higher for those aged 50-59 (95%) compared to those aged 70 and over (85%). Transport difficulties also tended to be a more frequent barrier to social engagement with family members (20%) than with friends (13%). This is consistent with distance as a barrier and with generally greater travel times to visit family members, particularly parents or siblings, than friends (Booth & Rioseco, 2011).

**Figure 11:** Reported that social activities with family members or with friends were restricted at least sometimes by respondent's transport difficulties, by age group (%)



### Social support from family and friends

The majority of respondents had received various forms of support from their social networks in the four weeks prior to the survey (Table 4). The likelihood of receiving each of the forms of support listed in Table 4 did not vary significantly by age group. Overall, there was a slight tendency for more respondents to receive support from family members than from friends.

**Table 4:** Types of social support received from family or friends, by age group (%)

From Family/Friends	Type of social support	Age group (yrs)			Total
		50-59	60-69	70 and over	
From Family	Received useful information	77	78	77	77
	Received practical help	60	63	67	63
	Discussed a decision of respondent's	54	55	61	56
	Confided in	52	54	59	55
From Friends	Received useful information	74	78	78	76
	Received practical help	57	60	63	59
	Discussed a decision of respondent's	51	52	50	51
	Confided in	53	53	51	53

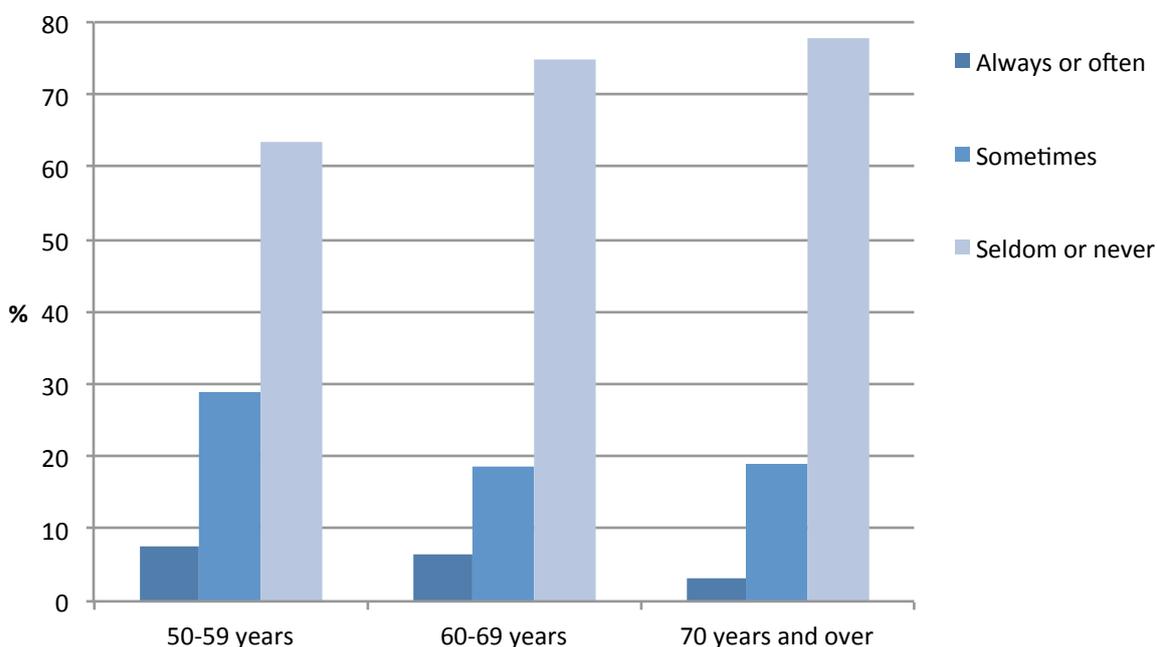
More generally, the vast majority of respondents felt that they could call on family members or friends for help if needed:

- 94% felt close enough to at least one *family member* (living elsewhere) to call on them for help
- 92% felt close enough to at least one *friend* to call on them for help
- 91% felt they could turn to at least one *family member* when they had an important decision to make
- 85% felt they could turn to at least one *friend* when they had an important decision to make
- 90% felt they could talk to at least one *family member* about their private matters
- 86% felt they could talk to at least one *friend* about their private matters.

### Social isolation

Social isolation was relatively rare. Only 6% of respondents reported that they always or often felt isolated from others. This proportion decreased with age; 3% of those aged 70 years and over felt isolated from others always or often, compared with 8% of those in their fifties. Further, the majority of respondents reported that they seldom or never felt isolated from others, and this proportion increased with age from 64% of those aged 50-59 to 78% of those aged 70 and over (Figure 12). Those living alone were more likely to experience feelings of social isolation at least sometimes; about 40% of those living alone felt isolated at least sometimes, compared with 25% of those who were not living alone.

**Figure 12:** How often felt isolated from others, by age group (%)



A similar pattern was found for feeling a lack of companionship. Ten per cent of respondents said they always or often felt that they lacked companionship. Those in their fifties were more likely than those aged 70 and over to report always or often feeling a lack of companionship; 12% of those aged 50-59, 10% of those aged 60-69 and 7% of those aged 70 years and over. Respondents living alone were more likely to report that they always or often felt they lacked companionship; 17% of those living alone compared with 7% of those not living alone (Figure A.10). Males living alone were more likely to report that they lacked companionship (27%) than females living alone (13%).

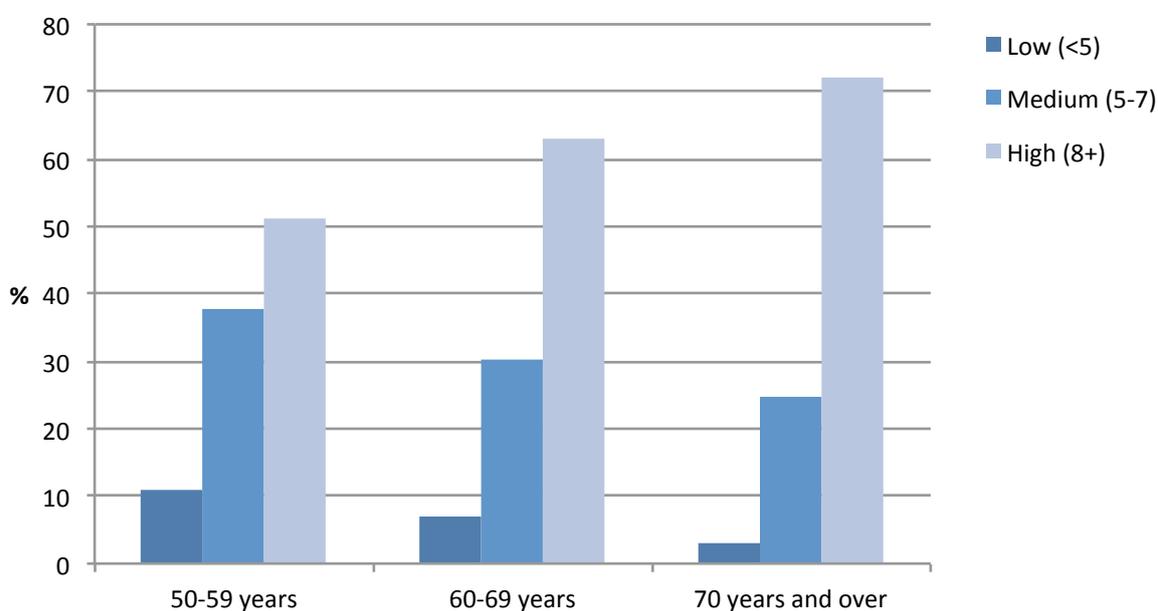
## Subjective wellbeing

Most respondents had high levels of life satisfaction, were comfortable with their standard of living, reported being in good physical and mental health and felt they could be themselves and express themselves. While those aged 70 and over were less likely than those in the younger age groups to rate their health highly, they were more likely to have high levels of life satisfaction and to be comfortable with their standard of living.

### Life satisfaction

Many respondents rated their life satisfaction highly. The scale for rating how satisfied respondents were with their lives ranged from 0 to 10, with 0 being *totally dissatisfied* and 10 being *totally satisfied*. Overall, 61% of respondents rated their life satisfaction highly (8 or higher). Just over half of those in their fifties rated their life satisfaction highly and the proportion increased with age (Figure 13).

**Figure 13:** Life satisfaction by age group (%)

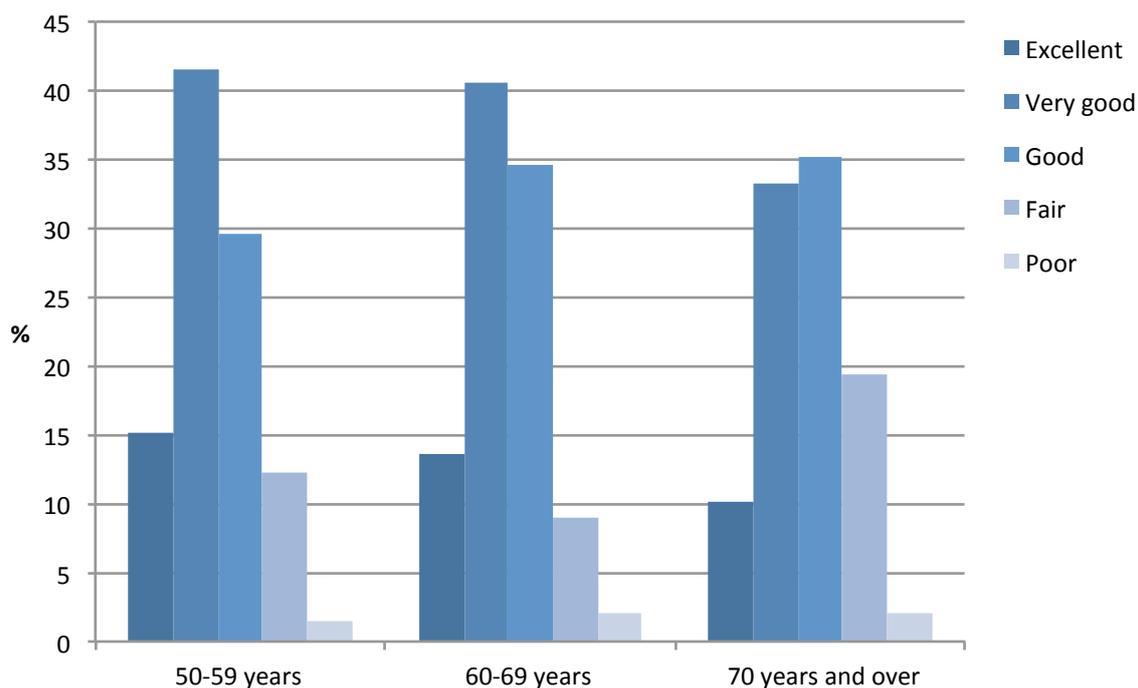


### Comfortable with standard of living

The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable with their standard of living. Being comfortable with own standard of living increased with age; the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable with their standard of living was largest for those aged 70 and over (90%) than those aged 60-69 (86%) or 50-59 (81%) (Figure A.11).

### Self-rated health

Most respondents reported that they were in good health; 85% rated their health as good, very good or excellent. The proportion rating their health as excellent or very good decreased with age, while the proportion rating their health as good increased. Among those aged 70 and over, almost 20% rated their health as fair, compared with 12% of those in their fifties and 9% of those in their sixties. Overall, the proportion of respondents rating their health as poor was very small (2%) and is similar across age groups (Figure 14).

**Figure 14:** Self-rated health by age group (%)


### Mental health

Respondents were asked how much of the time in the four weeks prior to the survey they had been a very nervous person; felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer them up; had felt calm and peaceful; had felt downhearted and blue; and had been a happy person. These five questions comprise the Mental Health Index (MHI-5) from the 36-item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36) (see Friedman et al., 2005). In addition, respondents were asked how much of the time in the four weeks prior to the survey they had felt pressured or felt competent at what they do.

Just under half of respondents (47%) reported feeling calm and peaceful *all or most of the time*. Larger proportions reported that they had been happy *all or most of the time* (59%) and that they had felt competent at what they do *all or most of the time* (73%). These proportions were smaller among those in their fifties, compared with those in the two older age groups. At the same time, respondents in their fifties were more likely than those in the older age groups to report that, for *at least some of the time*, they felt very nervous, or that they were in a low mood, or that they felt pressured (Table 5).

**Table 5:** How often experienced feelings indicative of good or poor mental health (%)

	Age group (yrs)			Total
	50-59	60-69	70 and over	
Felt calm and peaceful all or most of the time	39	51	55	47
Had been happy all or most of the time	51	63	66	59
Felt competent at what they do all or most of the time	67	76	76	73
Had been very nervous at least sometimes	22	15	12	17
Felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer them up at least sometimes	17	12	7	13
Felt downhearted and blue at least sometimes	26	17	14	20
Felt pressured at least sometimes	55	39	25	42

## Self determination

At least three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt free to decide how to live their lives (76%), felt free to express their opinions and ideas (85%), and felt that they could be themselves in daily situations (86%). These proportions tended to increase with age (Table 6). Those in their fifties were less likely than those in their sixties, or those aged 70 and over, to agree that they felt free to decide how to live their lives or to express their opinions and ideas. This may reflect greater work and family demands faced by those in the younger age group. Respondents aged 70 and over were more likely than those in their fifties or sixties to feel that they could be themselves in daily situations.

**Table 6:** *Agreed or strongly agreed with statements about self-determination (%)*

Agreed or strongly agreed that ...	Age group (yrs)			Total
	50-59	60-69	70 and over	
... they felt free to decide how to live their life	69	78	83	76
... they generally felt free to express their ideas and opinions	79	88	91	85
... they could be themselves in daily situations	82	86	91	86

## Conclusion

This report has highlighted considerable differences by age in the levels and patterns of social engagement of mature age Australians and in their wellbeing. The results from the *Social Activity and Wellbeing of Older Australians* survey show that respondents aged 70 and over have the highest levels of subjective wellbeing among mature age Australians. Compared with those in their fifties and sixties, larger proportions of those aged 70 and over had high levels of life satisfaction, were comfortable with their standard of living, and felt free to decide for themselves how to live their lives. Further, those in their fifties reported lower levels of mental health on all of the indicators reported.

At the same time, respondents aged 70 and over more commonly reported poorer self-rated health than those in their fifties and sixties. Thus, on average, older adults appear to attain good levels of subjective wellbeing in spite of declining health. This finding is consistent with other Australian research findings that chronic health conditions do not preclude people from ageing well (Parslow, Lewis, & Nay, 2011) and that subjective wellbeing is lower among people in midlife than in older age (Windsor & Anstey, 2010; Windsor, Burns, & Byles, 2012). The results are in line with existing research indicating that the subjective wellbeing of mature age Australians depends not so much on their health as on a range of contextual and social factors – among which social engagement plays an important role.

These age differences in wellbeing may be partly attributable to the different life contexts at different ages. While the youngest respondents were more likely to be partnered – a factor associated with greater wellbeing (Verbakel, 2012) – they were also subject, to a greater extent, to the potential stressors of workforce participation, unemployment, sharing their household with children, and caring for elderly parents. In contrast, the oldest respondents were to a large extent retired, and were engaged to a greater extent and on a more regular basis (than the youngest age group) in voluntary activity, with likely beneficial effects for their own wellbeing (Onyx & Warburton, 2003). Though older respondents were more likely to live alone, they were less likely to report feelings of social isolation, previously shown to be the stronger of these two determinants of wellbeing among older adults (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Further, while a higher proportion of the oldest age group provided care for their partner and had provided 80 or more hours of care in the previous four weeks, the overall levels of care were both quite low (about 1 in 10) and fairly equal across age groups. On balance, the life context of the oldest respondents appeared to be more conducive to wellbeing than that of the youngest.

Higher levels of wellbeing at the oldest ages may also be related to greater satisfaction among these respondents with their level and pattern of social engagement. Negative aspects of social engagement are detrimental to wellbeing (e.g., Rook et al., 2012). Several such factors known to be related to increased wellbeing were found to be more common among those aged 70 and over. These include socialising as much as they want to, having all the friends they want or need, and interacting with friends. The oldest age group also had higher levels of attendance at a place of worship, a factor that is positively related to wellbeing (Barkan & Greenwood, 2003). In contrast, respondents in their fifties were more likely to feel isolated from others and more likely to feel a lack of companionship. They were also more likely to report that their social activities were restricted by family tensions and by their work hours.

In focusing on differences by age, the report has highlighted the importance of contextual factors and the ways in which important differences related to life transitions are associated with both social engagement and wellbeing. However, this analysis is restricted to a cross-sectional approach, and its findings may not apply within cohorts over time. Seniors now aged 50-59 may not enjoy the same levels of wellbeing after reaching age 70 as seniors now aged 70 and over currently enjoy. The overall picture of more satisfactory social engagement and greater wellbeing at the older ages is welcome in relation to current older seniors but is also a warning regarding the wellbeing of the youngest seniors.

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## Appendix

Appendix tables can be found at [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au)

Table A.1 Proportion of survey respondents by sex, age and area (%) (corresponding Australian population proportions in parentheses)

Figure A.1 Highest education qualification (%)

Figure A.2 Not working full-time – interest in working, by age group (%)

Figure A.3 Participated in voluntary work in 12 months prior to the survey, by age group (%)

Figure A.4 Whether spent time with adult family members or friends in the four weeks prior to the survey, by age group (per cent)

Figure A.5 Spent time with adult family members or spent time with friends in the four weeks prior to the survey – duration of visits (%)

Figure A.6 Whether agreed that *I pretty much keep to myself and don't have a lot of social contacts*, by sex (%)

Figure A.7 Whether agreed that *there are not many people that I am close to*, by sex (%)

Figure A.8 Whether agreed that *I socialise as much as I want to*, by age group (%)

Figure A.9 Agreed or strongly agreed with statements about social interactions, by age group (%)

Figure A.10 How often felt a lack of companionship, by whether living alone (%)

Figure A.11 Whether agreed that *I am comfortable with my standard of living*, by age group (%)

## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL SENIORS PRODUCTIVE AGEING CENTRE**

The National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre is an initiative of National Seniors Australia and the Department of Health and Ageing to advance research into issues of productive ageing. The Centre's aim is to advance knowledge and understanding of all aspects of productive ageing to improve the quality of life of people aged 50 and over.

The Centre's key objectives are to:

- Support quality consumer oriented research informed by the experience of people aged 50 and over;
- Inform Government, business and the community on productive ageing across the life course;
- Raise awareness of research findings which are useful for older people; and
- Be a leading centre for research, education and information on productive ageing in Australia.

For more information about the Productive Ageing Centre visit [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au) or call 03 9650 6144.



**GPO Box 461, Melbourne VIC 3001**  
**E: [info@productiveageing.com.au](mailto:info@productiveageing.com.au)**

**P: 03 9650 6144 F: 03 9650 9344**  
**W: [www.productiveageing.com.au](http://www.productiveageing.com.au)**