



MediaBook

Summary

Source	Media	Headline	Date	Page
Irish Times	PRESS	Most over 50s healthy, happy with life, financially secure and living close to family	10-May-2011	1
Irish Times Health Plus	PRESS	Taking the long view of ageing in Ireland	10-May-2011	3
Irish Independent	PRESS	The rise of the 'granny nannies'	10-May-2011	5
Irish Examiner	PRESS	Project aims to shine light onto ageing	10-May-2011	7
Irish Examiner	PRESS	Ireland's over-50s disprove sad and lonely stereotype	10-May-2011	9
Irish Times Special Supplement	PRESS	Older people leading the way in volunteering	09-May-2011	10



Most over 50s healthy, happy with life, financially secure and living close to family

Seven out of 10 own their home, ageing study shows

JAMIE SMYTH

Social Affairs Correspondent

FOUR OUT of five people over 50 say they are happy and in good health. Most are also financially secure – with a quarter of over 50s households able to give €5,000 or more to their children over the past decade.

A major study of the health, wealth and lifestyle of people aged 50 years and over published yesterday by Trinity College Dublin paints a positive picture of life for older Irish adults today.

The research, based on interviews and health assessments with more than 8,000 people, suggests that stereotypical views that older people don't enjoy life, are lonely or are a drain on society are far from the truth.

Findings from the *Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing* show one in eight older adults enjoys a disposable income of €1,000 per week and a quarter of older households were wealthy enough to give a financial or material gift worth €5,000 or more to their children within the past decade.

The average size of the gift was €60,000, although gifts worth more than €200,000 have been recorded by researchers. The most common amount paid to children was €20,000, which may reflect parents helping their children with deposits for houses.

In comparison, just 9 per cent of people over 50 received similar gifts from their children. Seven out of 10 people over 50 own their own home and have paid off the mortgage. Some 13 per cent own a second home.

However, the study highlights a sharp divide between rich and poor with 29 per cent of older households living on weekly incomes of between €201 and

€300. One fifth of people over 50 hold debts of an average of between €6,000-€10,000. There is a wide difference in the income, labour and health outcomes depending on the education levels attained by people.

For example people with a third-level qualification hold average savings worth €60,000, four times as much as those with only a primary education.

Some 35 per cent of people educated to primary level aged 50-64 rely solely on State transfers as a source of income. This compares to 6 per cent of people in the same age group with a third-level qualification.

About half of primary educated older adults are employed between 50 to 64 years, compared to 70 per cent of those with a third-level qualification.

Individuals with a primary education also report higher levels of chronic lung disease compared to individuals with third-level education. Widespread fears of increasing levels of social isolation among older people are not borne out by the study, which found 90 per cent of people over 50 visit friends or family at least once a week. Three-quarters of older adults live in close proximity to at least one of their adult children

Some 6 per cent of women and 7 per cent of men are socially isolated, says the report.

Half of 50-64-year-olds with surviving parents help their parents with household tasks and a quarter of all 50-64-year-olds provide personal care to elderly parents. The average amount of time spent on providing help to elderly parents is 10 hours per week, according to the survey.

The importance of family and

spouse support for older people is highlighted by the low levels of State support with just 3.5 per cent of people over 50 receiving State-funded home help services.

However, the report highlights the huge amount of support provided by people over 50 years to their adult children. More than one-third of older adults provide practical household help including shopping and household chores to their adult children and nearly half provide care to grandchildren.

The report, based on health assessments and interviews between 2009 and 2011, shows 79 per cent of people say their health is excellent or very good. However, the study also shows three-quarters of people aged over 50 are either overweight (44 per cent) or obese (34 per cent). Cardiovascular diseases are the number one killer. Hypertension, angina and stroke are the most common illnesses in men. Osteoporosis, arthritis and high cholesterol are more common in women.

The proportion of people with high blood pressure increases from 29.7 per cent for those aged 50-64 to 53.7 per cent for those aged 75 and over.

Analysis: HEALTHplus





Taking the long view of ageing in Ireland

Social Affairs Correspondent

Initial findings of the most comprehensive study of older people in the Republic shows they are enjoying a good quality of life

JAMIE SMYTH,

THREE-QUARTERS of people aged 50 years and over rate their health as excellent or good and are enjoying their lives. But the most comprehensive study of older people ever undertaken in the Republic shows high levels of obesity and significant numbers fighting depression.

The study's initial findings also show a number of undiagnosed illnesses among the 8,000 men and women surveyed, as well as high medication levels, particularly among those aged 75 and over.

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, which is being carried out by Trinity College Dublin in collaboration with researchers from other colleges, is assessing the health of the over-50s during a 10-year period until 2018.

Its initial findings, which are based on health assessments and interviews between 2009 and 2011, provide a generally positive picture of the health, lifestyle and quality of life of older adults.

They also show higher levels of education and wealth are likely to lead to better outcomes in later life.

Four out of five people over 50 years say they feel "life is full of opportunities" and 79 per cent of those aged 50-65 years say their health is excellent. This falls to 66 per cent for those aged 75 years and over, but this still suggests most older people are living healthy and fulfilling lives in Ireland.

The study found cardiovascular and non-cardiovascular diseases are common in older adults with the prevalence of most chronic conditions increasing with age.

Hypertension, angina and stroke are most common in men. Osteoporosis, arthritis and high cholesterol are more common in women.

One in 20 older adults report angina or a prior heart attack, while one in three report doctor diagnosis of high blood pressure.

The groundbreaking nature of the study, which for the first time in Ireland includes health screening as well as in-depth interviews, is underlined by its ability to pinpoint a number of undiagnosed health problems among participants.

In the case of hypertension, for example, 58 per cent of cases in men went undiagnosed. The rate for women was slightly lower at 49 per cent.

Similar problems were detected in a large number of undiagnosed cases of osteoporosis, a worrying finding that will give policymakers food for thought.

The study has also uncovered high medication use among older adults. One in five people over 50 years are taking five or more medications regularly. This rises to half of all people over 75 years, increasing the risk of drug-drug interaction.

Older adults with medical cards are more than twice as likely to be in the polypharmacy category – taking five or more drugs regularly – as adults without cover or with medical insurance.

This finding should provide policymakers and health professionals with opportunities to improve drug safety among older adults.

The study shows the obesity crisis in

Ireland is impacting on older adults as much as the younger generation. Three-quarters of people aged over 50 years are either objectively overweight (44 per cent) or obese (34 per cent).

Poorer individuals and those with lower levels of education have the highest levels of obesity. They also exercise less than wealthy and educated people, according to the study, which shows half of those aged 75 years and over report low levels of physical activity.

Despite the positive outlook of most older adults, depression is common among the over-50s, with one in 10 reporting clinically depressive symptoms. Some 13 per cent of older adults also report clinically significant anxiety symptoms.

Failure to diagnose depression is a big problem, with 78 per cent of older adults displaying objective evidence of depression not reporting a doctor's diagnosis of it.

Depression is associated with disability, increased use of medication and unemployment. Nearly two-thirds of older adults with depression have a disability or long-standing illness.

The study shows cognitive impairment rises sharply with age, with 35 per cent of people aged over 80 years reporting being affected by this. This compares to 4 per cent of 50-64 year olds.

The survey highlights high levels of memory impairment with 42 per cent of adults over 80 years of age forgetting to carry out actions they had been instructed to perform. This finding raises concerns about activities such as remembering to take medication, pay bills or take safety precautions.

The prevalence of disabilities rises with age from less than 10 per cent of those between 50 and 64 years to nearly 30 per cent of those over 75 years. The most common primary helper for people with disabilities is their spouse.

Widespread fears expressed about the breakdown of family and increasing isolation of older people in recent decades may be somewhat overdone.

The survey highlights the important care and support role played by the children of elderly parents, as well as the high level of financial and childcare support provided by the elderly to their adult children.

Three-quarters of people aged over 50 years live in close proximity to at least one of their children, while some 70 per cent of those most in need of support – aged over 75 years – have a child living in the country.

Three-quarters of adults aged over 50 years, who have elderly parents who are still alive, visit them at least several times a month.

Half of 50-64 year olds with surviving parents help them with household tasks and a quarter of all 50-64 year olds provide personal care to elderly parents.

The average amount of time spent on providing help to elderly parents is 10 hours per week, according to the survey.

The critical importance of family support for older people is highlighted by the low levels of State support, with just 3.5 per cent of people over 50 receiving State-provided home help services.

But care and support within families works both ways, particularly when it comes to finance.

Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of older households have given large financial or material gifts worth more than €5,000 to their children in the past 10 years. In contrast, just 9 per cent of people aged over 50 years have received financial transfers from their children.

Older people also provide a range of non-financial help to their adult children.

Almost half of all 50-64 year olds provide care to grandchildren and a third provide practical help such as shopping and household chores.

The elderly provide a great deal of voluntary help within their communities, with almost a quarter giving some form of help to neighbours and friends, on average for eight hours per month.

A minority (6 per cent of women and 7 per cent of men) of people aged over 50 years suffer from social isolation. This is most prominent among people who have poor health.

The survey charts a link between loneliness and a wide variety of negative mental and physical health outcomes, such as depression, nursing home admission and mortality.

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“One in five people over 50 years are taking five or more medications regularly. This rises to half of all people over 75 years, increasing the risk of drug-drug interaction



Four out of five people over 50 years say they feel "life is full of opportunities", according to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing.



The rise of the 'granny nannies'

More adults are being bailed out by ageing parents

Eilish O'Regan
Health Correspondent

ELDERLY parents are bailing out their adult children with gifts of cash or assets, while regularly helping to care for their grandchildren too.

The rise of the "granny nannies" is confirmed in a comprehensive study on ageing published yesterday.

Nearly half of respondents cared for their grandchildren and over a third helped their children with practical household chores.

And a quarter "gifted" €5,000 or more to their children within the past 10 years, with the average rated at €20,000.

In contrast, just 9pc of older people received any financial help from their children. When this happened, the average was €2,347.

However, the Revenue Commissioners last night warned that children who receive a financial gift from their parents may be liable for capital acquisitions tax.

Around 8,000 men and women aged over 50 were questioned about their health, financial circumstances and quality of life over the past two years as part of **Trinity College** Dublin's Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA).

Lead researcher Virpi Timonen said the findings showed the older generation were less of a burden and more of a "bounty" than stereotypes claim.

More than a third of over-50s even give practical household help to children who are not living with them, including shopping and basic chores.

Over 70pc of those aged 75 and over - who are most likely to need care and support

themselves - live with one of their children. But the most common carer for older people is their spouse, with just 3.5pc getting home help services from the HSE.

Up to 12pc of those who need support with daily living activities are receiving no formal or informal help, making them a particularly vulnerable group.

The average weekly household disposable income is €747, but for half of those surveyed it is just under €400. One in eight has disposable income of €1,000 or more.

A quarter of the households depend on state payments and pensions for their income, but a majority own their home and have paid off their mortgage.

Savings and financial assets - other than property - vary with educational levels, from an average of €14,000 for those with a primary education to €60,000 for those who went to third level.

The findings also reveal concerns about unmet health needs and show that older people have a high prevalence of anxiety and depression.

It found 10pc would meet the criteria for depressive symptoms, but just one in five of these had been diagnosed with the illness.

One in four had high blood pressure - and it was undiagnosed in 58pc of men and 49pc of women. Even among those who knew they had the condition, 42pc of men and 41pc of women were not being adequately treated.

The prevalence of disabilities rises with age: less than 10pc for those aged 50 to 64 but 30pc among the over-70s.

Lonely

The €29m study, funded by

Atlantic Philanthropies, Irish Life and the Department of Health, also hit back at stereotypical myths that older people were lonely and a drain on their family.

Overall, more than eight in 10 said they enjoy their lives and look forward to each day feeling "life is full of opportunities".

The study also revealed that pensioners aged between 65 to 74 were the happiest people, even as the country plunges into a deep recession.

TILDA also linked higher levels of education and wealth with better outcomes later in life - with more men and women with third-level education working until retirement age than early school leavers.

A quarter of households were dependent on the State.

Age Action said the survey shines a light on the valuable role older people play, supporting their families and their communities.

Health Minister James Reilly said any challenges by the expected increase in the proportion of older people in our population can be successfully met by planning. "An ageing population does not necessarily mean a sicker population," he said. "Advances in medical science that may be possible using the TILDA data has enormous potential to lessen the burden of disease among older people."

A quarter of households depend on state payments and pensions for income, but a majority own their home and have paid off their mortgage.

IN NUMBERS

- A quarter of elderly parents 'gifted' €5,000 or more to their children within the past 10 years
- **Half of 50-64-year-olds who have surviving parents provide 10 hours' help a week with household tasks**
- The average weekly household disposable income is €747
- **One in 10 is clinically depressed**
- Three-quarters are overweight or obese
- **40pc of people aged 50-69 have no private health insurance**

Ageing myths

- "Older people don't enjoy life" – more than eight in 10 say life is 'full of opportunities' and look forward to each day
- "Older people are a drain on families and society" – a quarter have given money and assets to children, and one in two regularly helps with grandchildren
- "Older people are lonely" – just 6pc of women and 7pc of men are socially isolated, but not all are lonely





Project aims to shine light onto ageing

by Caroline O'Doherty

THEY may hope to have property and other possessions to pass on but a group of Ireland's over-50s have already left possibly their most valuable legacy in a test tube.

More than 8,000 people who agreed to take part in a groundbreaking study of the lives of the country's older people have also donated blood samples for use in medical research for the next 20 years.

The collection, from volunteers in The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), is a potentially priceless databank of information for scientists who rarely get such a large pool of samples to study or check new discoveries against.

TILDA researcher Prof Rose Anne Kenny, of Trinity College Dublin, said the samples represented a very rich data source that, together with the rest of the project, would attract attention internationally.

"Ireland could become a global hub for research into ageing and older people which would not only be a way of improving services for this age group but could also have commercial applications in terms of the pharmaceutical, technology and biotech industries. It could generate employment."

The 322-page initial report from the project is a mine of information as it contains statistics on health, welfare and standards of living not previously gathered in such detail.

Participants will be revisited to see what has changed in their lives as they age, allowing the researchers to build up an ever more detailed picture of the ageing process and how it affects quality of life. Just as importantly, it will hope to identify what changes imposed on older people affect their lives and in what way.

Professor Alan Barrett of the Economic and Social Research Institute, who is also a director of the project, cited planned changes to Ireland's already relatively high retirement age as an example.

"In 2014 the state pension age will be increased to 66 and by 2021 it will be 67. The result of this study shows that policy that affects everybody has very, very different impacts.

"The social welfare pension rate is also going to come under pressure because of the economic situation, but we now know that for 26% of older people, state transfers are their only source of income, that's something policy makers need to consider."

Future reports expect to capture some of the impact of the economic meltdown.

When participants were first visited in 2008, 70% of them owned their own homes and were mortgage-free, on average valuing their homes at €150,000-€300,000.

Those values are likely to have fallen considerably when next queried and researchers will be eager to know if people are re-mortgaging to help offspring struggling with arrears.

Already the report has revealed that older people make a huge contribution to their families. One finding shows that up to the age of 75, older people provide more practical help such as child minding or household chores to their offspring than they receive in return.

Eamon Timmins of Age Action said the report had helped shine a light on the role older people play.

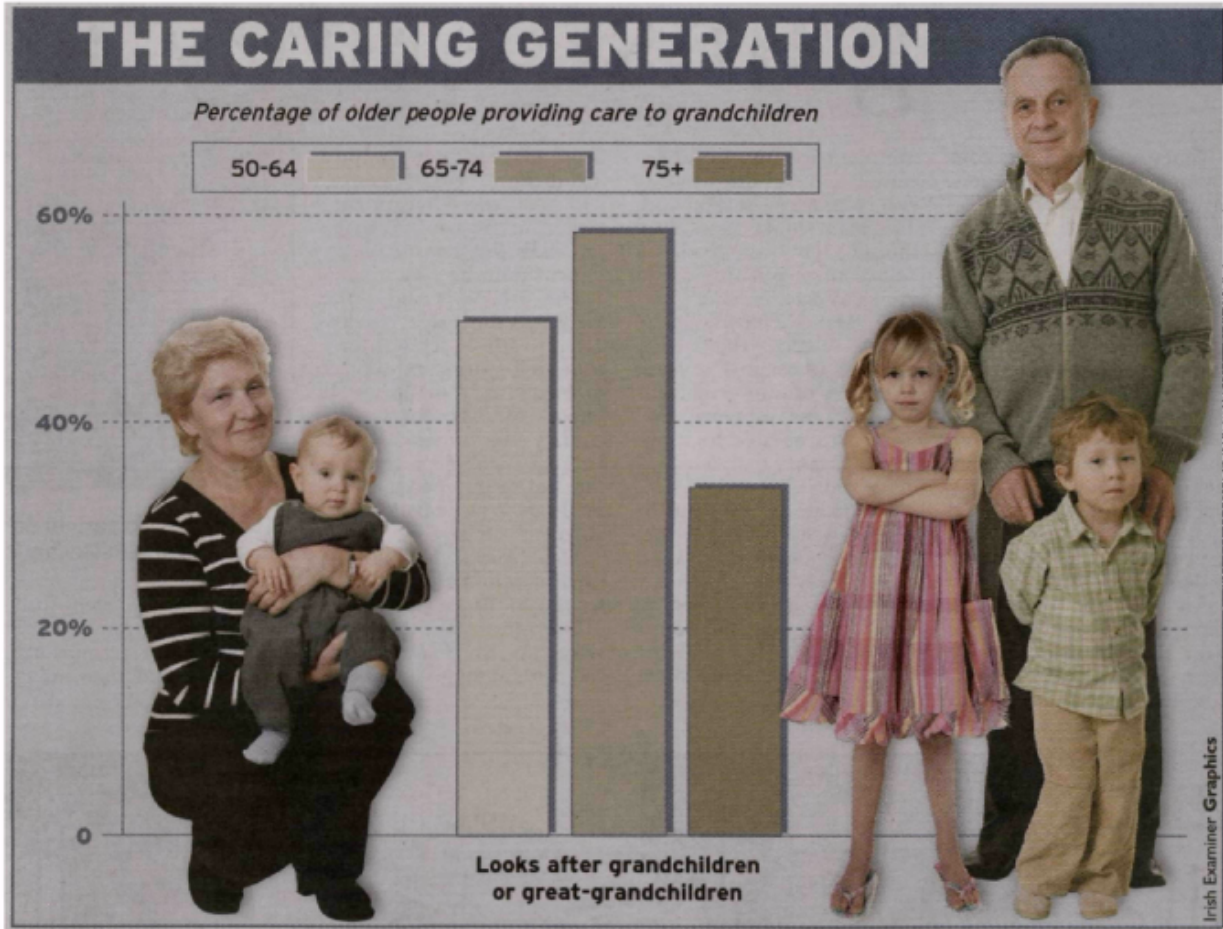
"This is the demographic bounty which older people provide to society which is often over-looked."

● The full report is available at www.tilda.ie.

Over-50s: A snapshot

- 38% have only primary education.
- 22% emigrated at some time in the past.
- 75% have at least one child living close by.
- 90% visit family and friends at least once a week.
- 60% attend religious services at least once a week.
- 6% are socially isolated.
- 24% have given at least €5,000 in cash or gifts to their children in the past 10 years.
- 9% received cash or gifts from their children but the value was most likely €1,000.
- 33% provide practical help to their adult children with household chores.
- 50% provide care for grandchildren.
- 75% rely on cars as their main mode of transport.
- 20% smoke.
- 75% are overweight or obese.
- 58% of men and 49% of women with high blood pressure are undiagnosed.
- 78% of those who have symptoms of depression are undiagnosed.
- 3.5% receive state-provided home help services.
- 12% of those with disabilities receive no state or informal help with daily activities.
- 62% of men and 46% of women aged 50-64 are working.
- 16% of men and 8% of women aged 65-74 are still working.
- 50% of households live on less than €400 per week.
- 70% have their

own home and are mortgage-free.
■ 26% depend on welfare as their sole source of income.





Ireland's over-50s disprove sad and lonely stereotype

by Caroline O'Doherty

STEREOTYPES of older people as sad, lonely and a burden on society are proven outdated by a study that shows Ireland's over-50s are happier, better integrated and more financially independent than usually thought.

People aged over 50 scored an average 75% of the highest score in the happiness ratings, while just one-in-17 suffer social isolation.

They are also more likely to have given large financial or other gifts to their children in the past 10 years than to have received them from their offspring. Giving €20,000 was most common, compared to €1,000 their children gifted them.

Dr Virpi Timonen of Trinity College Dublin, one of the research team, said: "We think that older people are lonely, older people don't enjoy life, older people are a drain on their family and society. These findings rebut the stereotypes."

The findings are the first from the €29 million study, which began in 2006 and is monitoring the lives of more than 8,000 over-50s in the largest exercise of its kind ever undertaken here.

TILDA, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, is co-funded by the state, Irish Life and philanthropist Chuck Feeney, and will continue until 2018.

It wasn't all good news, as the study discovered high levels of undiagnosed health problems, most notably that 58% of men and 49% of women with high blood pressure did not know they had the condition.

Also, only 20% of those researchers found to have clear symptoms of depression had received medical treatment for the illness.

Trinity College Dublin's Prof Rose Anne Kenny, lead researcher on the project, said: "There is a huge unmet health need which is not a problem we are raising — it's an opportunity to identify earlier these diseases."

Health Minister James Reilly welcomed the study, which he said would help the Government meet the challenges of managing an ageing population.



Older people leading the way in volunteering

A new study reveals that older Irish people volunteer more frequently than their younger counterparts, writes **Joanne Hunt**

ONE IN FIVE Irish people aged 65 to 74 volunteer at least once a week, a new study has found.

Published today, the results from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Aging (Tilda) show that of all Irish adults aged 50 and older, 15 per cent volunteer at least once a week, 11 per cent at least once a month and 16 per cent at least once a year.

The frequency of volunteering within the group varies by age, with Irish people aged 65 to 74 likely to volunteer more frequently than their younger counterparts aged 50-64. The group is also more likely to volunteer than those aged 75 and over.

While the study found no difference in the levels of volunteering between older men and women, it said volunteering levels are greatest amongst older people with higher levels of **education**.

Commenting on the findings, professor of gerontology at **Trinity**

College Dublin Rose Anne Kenny, the principal investigator for the €29 million Department of Health project said: "The aim of the study is to get a better understanding of what it's like to get older in Ireland and to be older in Ireland."

In the study, Prof Kenny noted a strong association between voluntary work and well-being, with volunteering in later life a "predictor of better self-rated health, physical activity and life satisfaction".

Volunteering is also linked to reduced depression, hypertension and mortality among older people.

"The lowest average quality of life scores are found within the population that never volunteers, regardless of age group," the study found.

The study's authors say that separate research on volunteering and older people shows that older people who have higher education and income and who are married are more likely to

volunteer than those who are unmarried or are of lower educational and economic means.

With the EU setting itself a target to increase the average healthy lifespan by two years by 2020, and with volunteering found to have positive benefits for health, steps to better engaging older people in volunteering activities will be key.



Prof Rose Anne Kenny of Trinity College Dublin. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónail