

April 2006

ELSA UPDATE



Study findings make a difference



Welcome to this second ELSA Update. We bring you news and a preview of the fascinating findings emerging from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which follows the health and lifestyles of people aged 50-plus and their partners.

The ELSA wave that ended in August 2005 was a great success, thanks to your help. More than three-quarters of the 12,100 people in the study were interviewed and many also had a visit from an ELSA nurse. Even if you were unable to take part this time, we look forward to seeing you again in the future.

Public launch for Wave Two Report

We are exploring the data you have provided to find out about the ageing process and what it means for public policy. Many of you tell us you enjoy taking part and that you feel it is

important to do something positive to help improve prospects for future generations. We are now looking at what the study tells us about many areas including social exclusion, wealth, long-term illness, eyesight and mobility.

Some early conclusions have already spurred the government to action. Inside this Update you can read more about patterns of social exclusion identified by research that influenced a government action plan to end inequalities for older people. And the Pensions Commission has called ELSA “vital” for understanding retirement trends.

We plan to publish a report looking at findings from wave two in July, when we will also invite academics, government officials and the media to a public launch. We hope to invite some ELSA respondents to this event.

New findings from the study

The information we collected from the second wave will show how things have changed for older people in England over the past two years. Analysis is being carried out using ELSA data by the National Centre for Social Research, University College London, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Imperial College London, the University of Cambridge and many others. Here we highlight some of their top findings since our last Update in 2004.

Plan to tackle social exclusion

Research using ELSA data that identified seven key risk factors which can lead to older people being excluded from society has been used to inform a government action programme to tackle the problem. In an innovative study, researchers from the National Centre for Social Research and the University of Sheffield found that half of older people experience at least one form of social exclusion and 7% experience three types or more. Key risk factors included living alone, depending on benefits, being 80 or over and

having no telephone or car. These could lead to forms of exclusion which reduce quality of life, such as being unable to get to the shops or doctor and being cut off from family or friends. The government's programme of action was outlined in 'A Sure Start for Later Life – Ending Inequalities for Older People', which can be found, with more details of the ELSA research, at www.odpm.gov.uk/researchandstatistics.

Eyesight and quality of life

ELSA is one of the first studies to look at visual impairment in a nationally representative sample. Researchers at University College London found a need for policies to address disadvantages faced by those with poor vision. Poor eyesight can influence health, quality of life, mobility and the ability to look after oneself and take part in social activities, as well as economic well-being. On the other hand, older people with poor eyesight tend to have good social networks and access to informal care. The ELSA findings demonstrate the need for better diagnosis and treatment of sight

problems and better strategies to screen older people for visual impairment.

Impact of long-term illness

Researchers at Imperial College London looked at how the chance of having a poor quality of life changes depending on whether you have a long-term illness or disability and how severe it is. Those with a chronic illness have an 11% greater chance of a poor quality of life, they found. But if the illness imposes limits on everyday activity, the chance of having a poor quality life rises to over

68%. Based on these findings, researchers have called for amendments to the government's new contract for GPs to take account not just of long-term medical conditions but also whether they lead to impairment.

Our walking tests could help doctors

Do you remember the walking test we asked you to do? Researchers at Exeter's Peninsula Medical School think it could be used, along with the physical exercises we asked you to do during the nurse visit, to identify health problems earlier and help prevent them progressing. Providing the first large-scale information on this in England, ELSA should clarify whether the tests are good enough to help in medical care.

Researchers at Cambridge and Exeter Universities examined walking problems among younger ELSA respondents. Fortunately, only 8% of women and 9% of men among those of you aged 50 to 64 reported a lot of difficulty or inability to walk a quarter of a mile. The main reasons for mobility difficulties include lung disease, stroke, or leg or back pain.

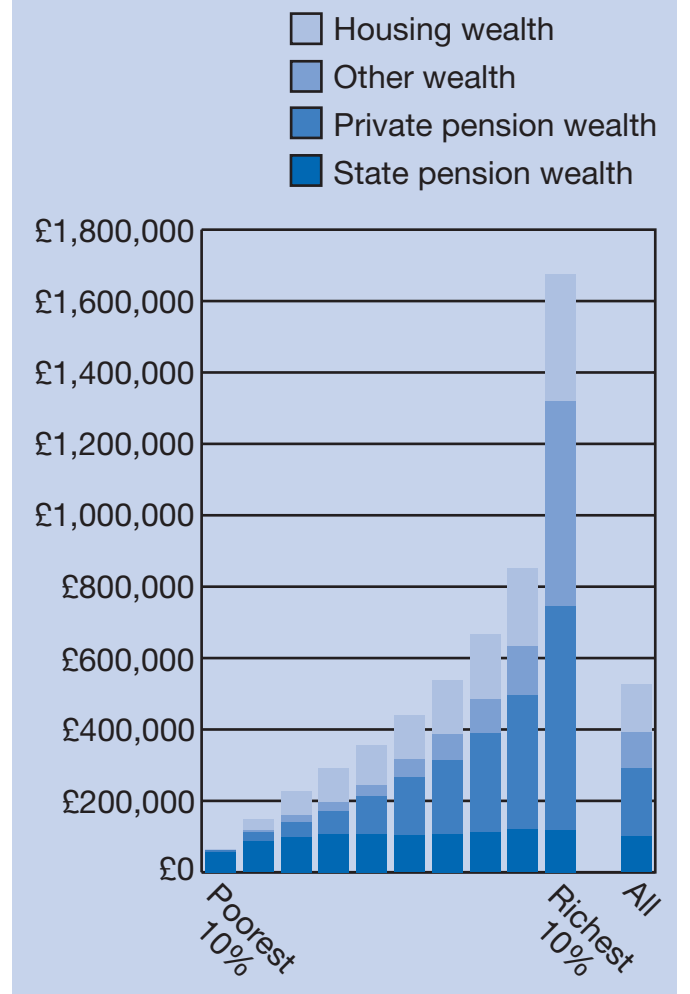
Ups and downs of getting older

Your information has been immensely important in showing the rich diversity of later life experiences. People's health is as likely to get better as it is to get worse and ELSA respondents spend their retirement in increasingly varied ways, from voluntary work or employment to holidays abroad. However, for some, retirement comes as an unexpected shock and a cause of ill-health. We are encouraging government and employers to see how these shocks can be reduced, to ensure a healthy retirement for all.

Insight into wealth

Analysts at the Institute for Fiscal Studies have revealed that after retirement most (89%) of the younger ELSA respondents are likely to have

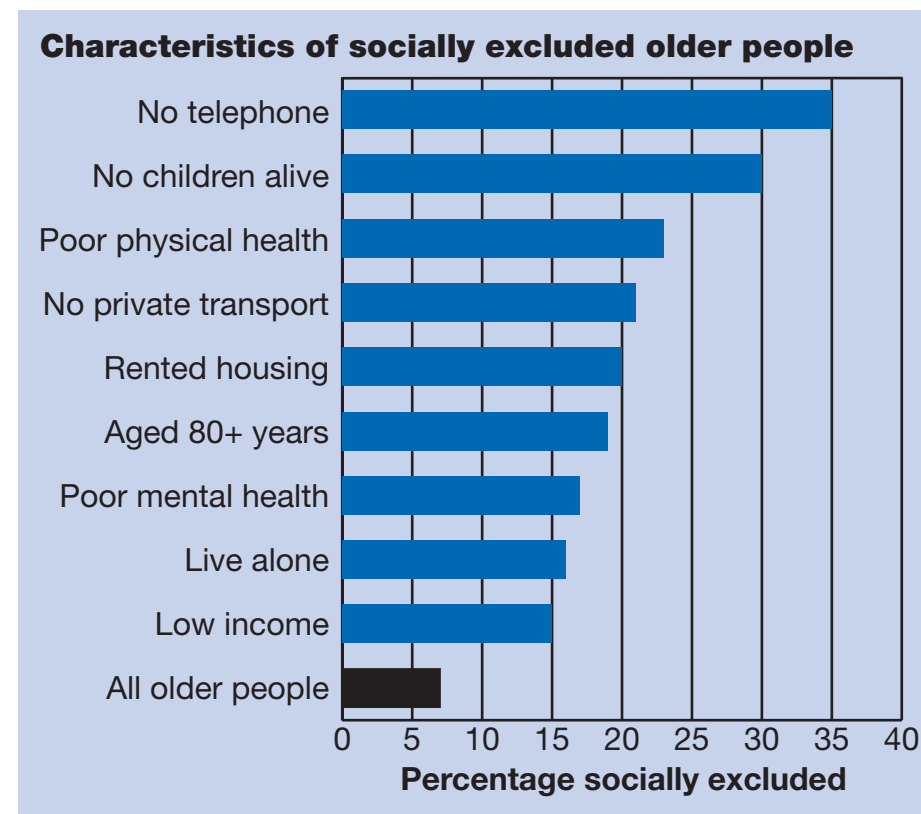
Average total wealth of ELSA respondents



resources that could give them an income at least two-thirds the size of their current one. While a tenth of individuals below the state pension age are in families with total wealth over a million pounds, the same proportion have total wealth of less than £110,000. Researchers have presented these findings to the Department for Work and Pensions and the No. 10 policy unit.

Pensions Commission praises ELSA

The Turner report into financial provision for retirement has singled out ELSA for praise. It said: "The ... ELSA project is vital in collecting data to monitor trends in pension accumulation and retirement trends ...but another important element will be the information it collects on both physical and mental health issues".



Taking part

ELSA's third wave looks at your past

Interviews for ELSA begin again in April 2006 and will continue for about a year so that as many respondents as possible can take part. The third wave won't include a visit from a nurse, though we plan to do this again in the future. This time, if you are willing, the interviewer will arrange a separate visit to ask about your past life – to ask for example where you lived when you were growing up and what you did for your first job. A National Centre for Social Research interviewer will be in touch with you to make an appointment but if you have any queries please call our number below.

Keeping ELSA young!

Welcome to those of you who have become ELSA study members for the first time. Every four years we will invite a small group of people to join the study to make sure that all ages are represented in the research.

Behind the scenes

We want to say a special thank you to the respondents who met in London or Leeds for our first ELSA Participants' Meetings in 2005. You answered many questions about the way the study was conducted and gave us much helpful information for future improvements. Over 200 respondents also help us develop and road-test our interview before each stage of the project and we wish to express our thanks to them too for their vital input.

Funding obtained until 2011

We are delighted to have secured funding for four more years of ELSA. This has been promised by the United States National Institute on Aging and the UK Government departments that funded ELSA's first two waves. Many of our researchers have also gained extra funding for more detailed data analysis, which we hope will influence future government policy.

Meet the team

In this issue we introduce a few of the many people involved in ELSA.



Professor Sir Michael Marmot is the study's Principal Investigator, based at University College London. With a particular interest in inequalities in health, he oversees the study's development with the help of the ELSA management team.



Felicia Huppert is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at Cambridge University and is responsible for the questions on memory and concentration. Felicia looks at how different factors affect psychological well-being and cognitive functioning in later life.



James Banks is Deputy Research Director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and is part of the ELSA management team. He is the person behind the questions about your work and pensions and his main research interests are household spending, savings, and retirement.



Audrey Hale heads the team that looks after ELSA in the National Centre for Social Research offices at Brentwood. She works with Sue Hobbs who responds to your queries and answers the ELSA helpline, and with the team that keeps everything organised and looks after our interviewers and nurses.

Please keep in touch!

Your contribution to the study is really valued. If you would like to update your contact details or have any questions about the study, please call 0800 652 4569. You can also write to us at Kings House, 101-135 Kings Road, Brentwood, Essex CM14 4LX or email us via the ELSA respondents' website at <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/elsa>.