

Age UK is the new force combining  
**AGE** and **HELPTHEAGED** **WE WILL**  
*Concern*



## ***A Snapshot of Ageism in the UK and across Europe***



## **About Age UK**

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With more people needing our services than ever before, Age Concern and Help the Aged have joined forces, combining almost 120 years of experience. Together, we are Age UK. The Age UK family includes Age Scotland, Age Cymru and Age NI and, additionally, many local Age Concerns are changing their name to Age UK.

We are the new voice for millions of people in later life. We believe that by combining our time and our talents, our services and our solutions, and with your help, we can do more to enrich the lives of many, both at home and abroad. By joining forces, we will ensure that more of our funds go where they're needed. We are now one of the most powerful and influential organisations in the UK.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

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The meaning of longevity has changed a great deal since Alexander the Great allegedly stood on the Hindu Kush weeping that there were no worlds left to conquer, before returning to Babylon to die aged 33 from natural causes.

Most Europeans now enjoy a life expectancy twice that of Alexander; some three times. But it seems that an increase in the number of older people has been accompanied by an increase in age discrimination. This extensive study using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2008<sup>1</sup>, seeks to shed light on an ageing continent by comparing data from 28 countries across the European region.

While race and gender, for example, have for some time been prevalent equality issues in Europe, a new player has more recently emerged – age discrimination. This will be a top order issue for the 21st century. Most developed countries see life expectancy increasing, and the need to continue working longer is inevitable if pension promises are to be sustainable. These trends have significant implications for the labour market, workplace technologies, consumer behaviour, social security systems, national health arrangements, and economic growth as a whole.

The ESS, a survey of nearly 55,000 individuals from across all age groups, sought to collect more data on age discrimination, in four general areas:

- At what age are people seen as young or old?
- Were experiences of discrimination noticed, and if so were they benevolent or hostile?
- Do people accord different levels of social status to different age groups? If so, which groups have higher or lower status?
- What is the quality and quantity of intergenerational contact?

The purpose of this report is to support policy work which is pressing for age discrimination measures in the UK and the EU. Following the Employment Directive in 2000, which addressed workplace discrimination, the Council of Ministers has been discussing a comprehensive Equal Treatment Directive. In the UK, the Equality Act was passed in 2010, but component parts to address age discrimination in the provision of goods and services are not expected to be implemented until 2012. The Act has laid a statutory duty on public sector bodies to promote equality, and this research helps to highlight some of the age prejudice which could be challenged by this new duty.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)

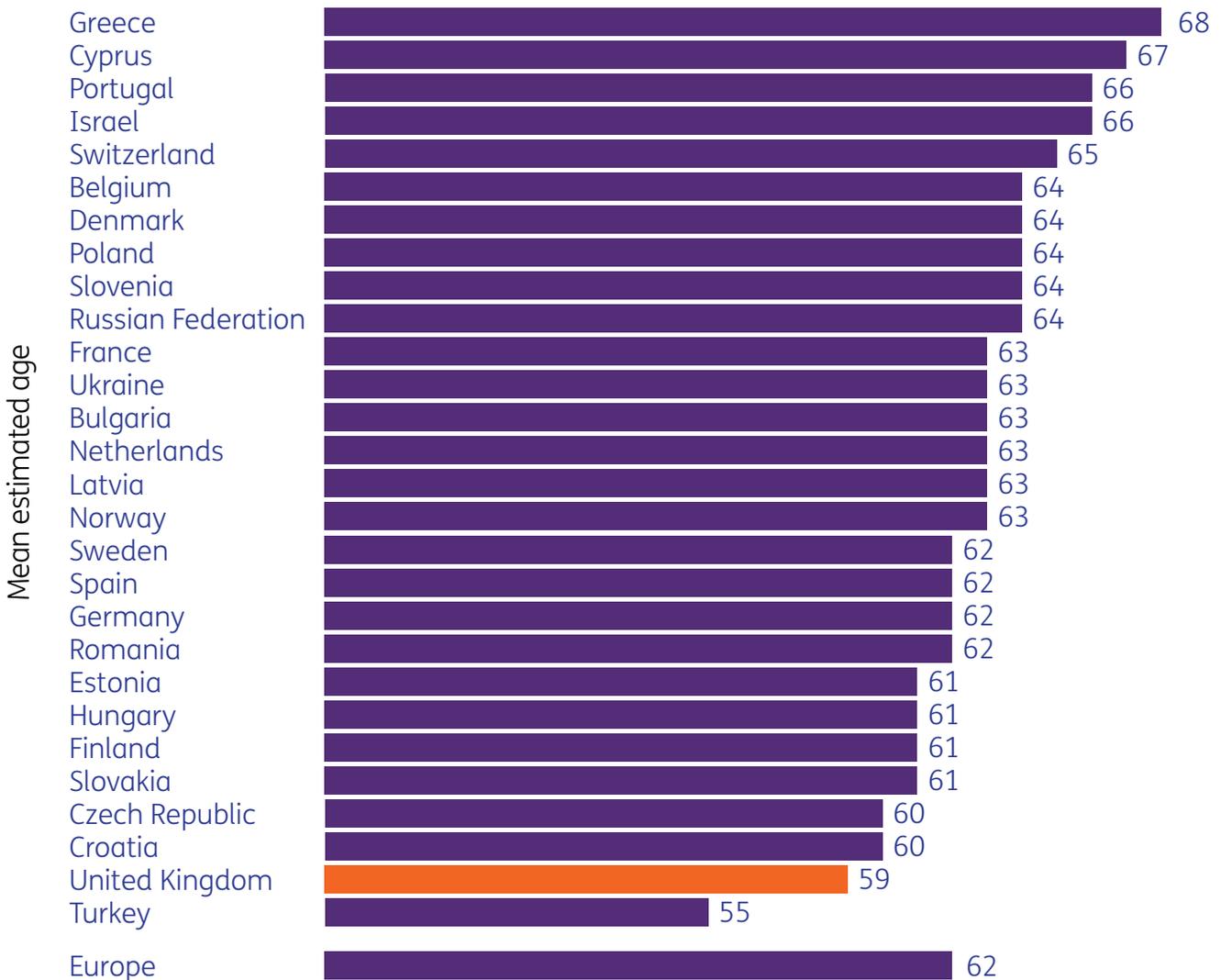
# Young or old?

Unlike gender or race, which group people into distinct categories, age is a continuum. The survey explored how Europeans categorise each other according to age by asking people to give an age at which they thought old age started and when they felt youth ended.

The mean age at which old age is perceived to start is 62, rather below today's pension age in many countries. There was less consensus around when youth ended, ranging from 34 in Norway to 52 in Greece, with a mean of 40. This means that across Europe we have a wide range of perceptions of the length of mid-life. Portugal and Scandinavia top the list at 30 years.

In Cyprus and Romania it is a mere 15 years, with a mean of 22 years across all countries. People also see themselves as young, or old and this can affect their behaviour. Perceptions of oneself as young or old can lead to self-limiting behaviour ('I am too old for this' or 'I am too young to do that'), or indeed can underpin judgements made on the abilities and competence of others. More pertinently, perceptions of others can feed into other limiting practices – for example, the insurance industry's surcharging of older motorists and travellers. These assessments are therefore not just mildly interesting, but may foreshadow a fundamental cause of ageism and age discrimination.

Figure 1: **Perceived start of old age within ESS countries (mean estimated age).**





## Experiences of age discrimination

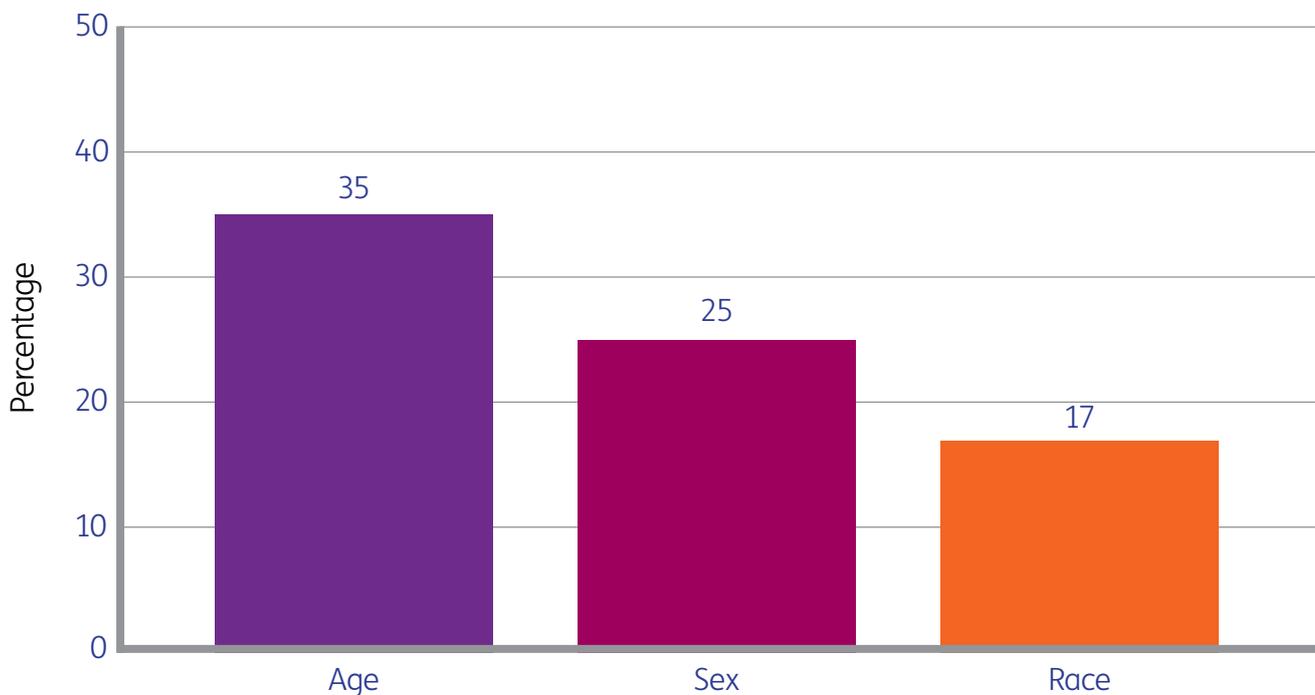
Just under half of all respondents (44.4 per cent) saw age discrimination as a very or quite serious issue. Turks and Danes were the least concerned by age discrimination, but in five countries over 60 per cent saw it as serious. (In the UK, the figure was 64 per cent – second behind France with 68 per cent.)

Age discrimination is the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe for every age group. Those in the 50–64 age group were most likely to see it as serious, but the greatest incidence of perceived unfair treatment was among the 15–24-year-olds.

This appears to reflect people feeling ignored or patronised. In the UK and elsewhere, there was an emphasis on subtle prejudice (lack of respect) rather than blatant insults and abuse. Assuming that being on the receiving end of this behaviour has a corrosive effect on a person's character, it is not surprising that older people feel disempowered and not taken seriously, both of which have consequences for their self-esteem, performance and well-being. Other research<sup>2</sup> has shown that older people with more positive self-perceptions live 7.5 years longer than those with more negative ones.

Figure 2: **Percentage of people across ESS countries who had experienced unfair treatment because of their age, sex and race – includes individuals who did not indicate 0 on a scale that ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (very often)**

### Unfair treatment



2 B. R. Levy, M. D. Slade, S. R. Kunkel and S. V. Kasl (2002). 'Longevity Increased by Positive Self-perceptions of Aging'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83: 261–70

### **Positive and negative attitudes and perceived status**

The distinction between subtle and blatant prejudice is not the only one. Prejudice can also be benevolent or hostile (although neither are particularly attractive). Younger people are more likely to be seen as friendly and competent, and older people seen as principled and worthy of respect (although in the UK older people out-scored younger people on all these attributes). Perceptions of the competence of those over 70 (on a scale of 0 to 4) ranged from 3.02 in Hungary down to 1.87 in Poland, with the UK just below the European mean (2.44) on 2.35. Those under 20 attracted envy, and those over 70 pity and sympathy. These stereotypes feed into behaviour and performance – older people show a decline in cognitive and mathematical ability if their competence is being compared to younger people.<sup>3</sup>

Most people feel more positive towards their own age group than other groups. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely negative and 10 extremely positive, people over 70 attract more positive feelings than people in their 20s (exceptions being Turkey, Croatia and Greece). The UK had the lowest average score for positive attitudes towards young people across Europe, with a mean score of 6.1 compared to the European mean of 7.1. Such feelings and prejudice may be openly expressed (as in Ukraine, Russia and Slovakia), or more frequently kept private, as in the UK. But this more open expression of age prejudice in some countries does perhaps set it apart from other forms of prejudice and discrimination, such as race or gender.

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***Age discrimination is the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe.***

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<sup>3</sup> D. Abrams et al. (2008) 'Threat Inoculation: Experienced and imagined intergenerational contact prevents stereotype threat effects on older people's math performance', *Psychology and Aging*, 23: 934–9

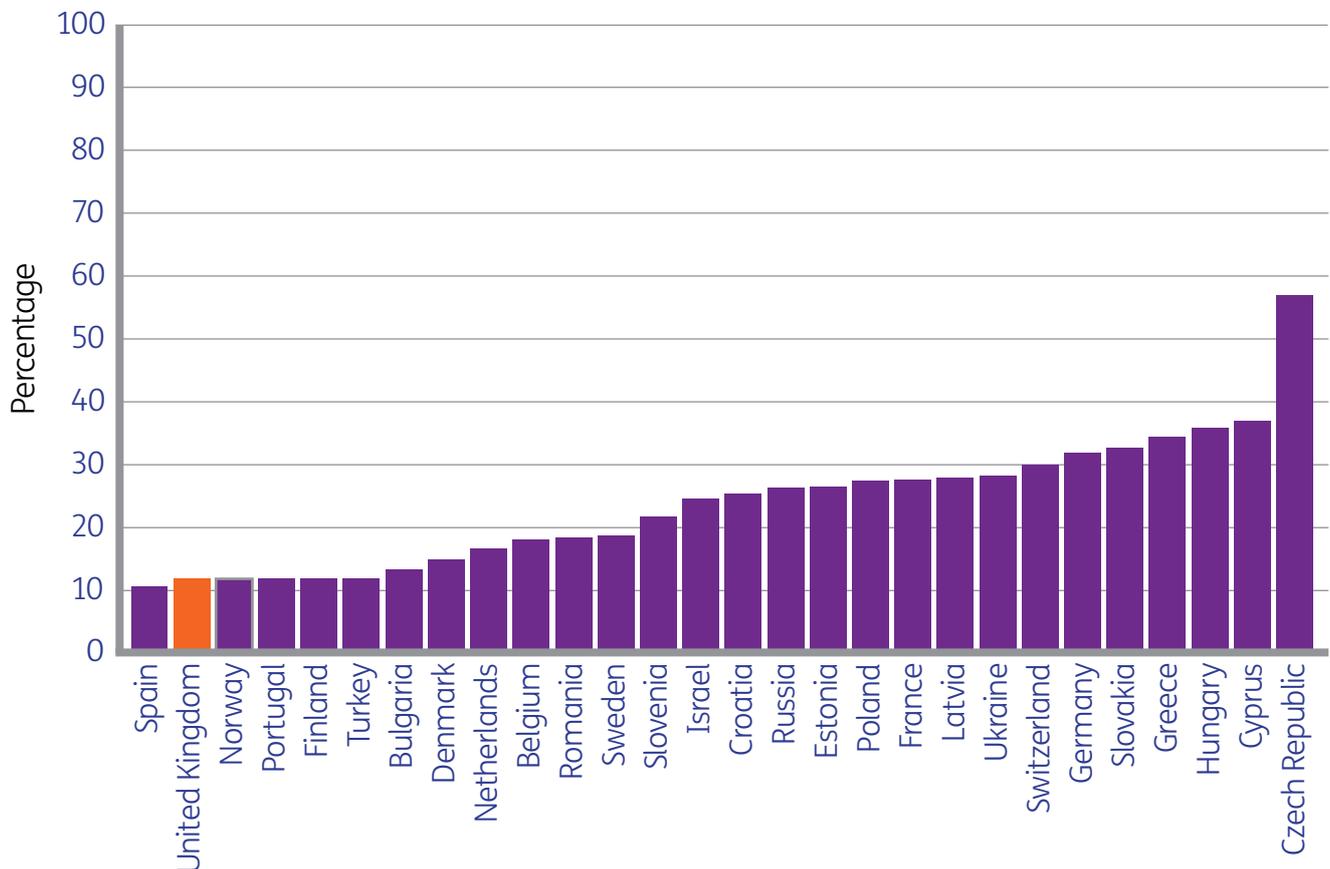
### Are young or old seen as threats to society?

Seeing age (young or older) as a threat is an important component of prejudice, although the nature of this threat differs. Younger people are seen more as a tangible threat, for example, as perpetrators of crime, whereas older people are seen as a burden on health and public services and thus as an economic threat. Figure 3 shows some differences in attitude between countries across Europe. For example, 11 per cent of Britons took the view that older people are a burden on health services compared to 56 per cent of Czechs.

The survey looked particularly at the threats perceived in relation to employment, given the general pressures to raise pension ages. Older respondents of working age are the most worried about employers favouring younger workers in their 20s. Among the 28 countries, the UK was roughly in the middle, with 49.7 per cent of respondents of all ages sharing this opinion. Across all countries, there was agreement that younger people (aged 30) were more acceptable as a boss than a 70 year old.

Figure 3: **Percentage of respondents who see those over 70 as a burden on health care services within ESS countries – includes scores between 6 and 10 on a scale that ranged from 0 (no burden) to 10 (a great burden).**

### Perceived burden on health services from people over 70 within countries.



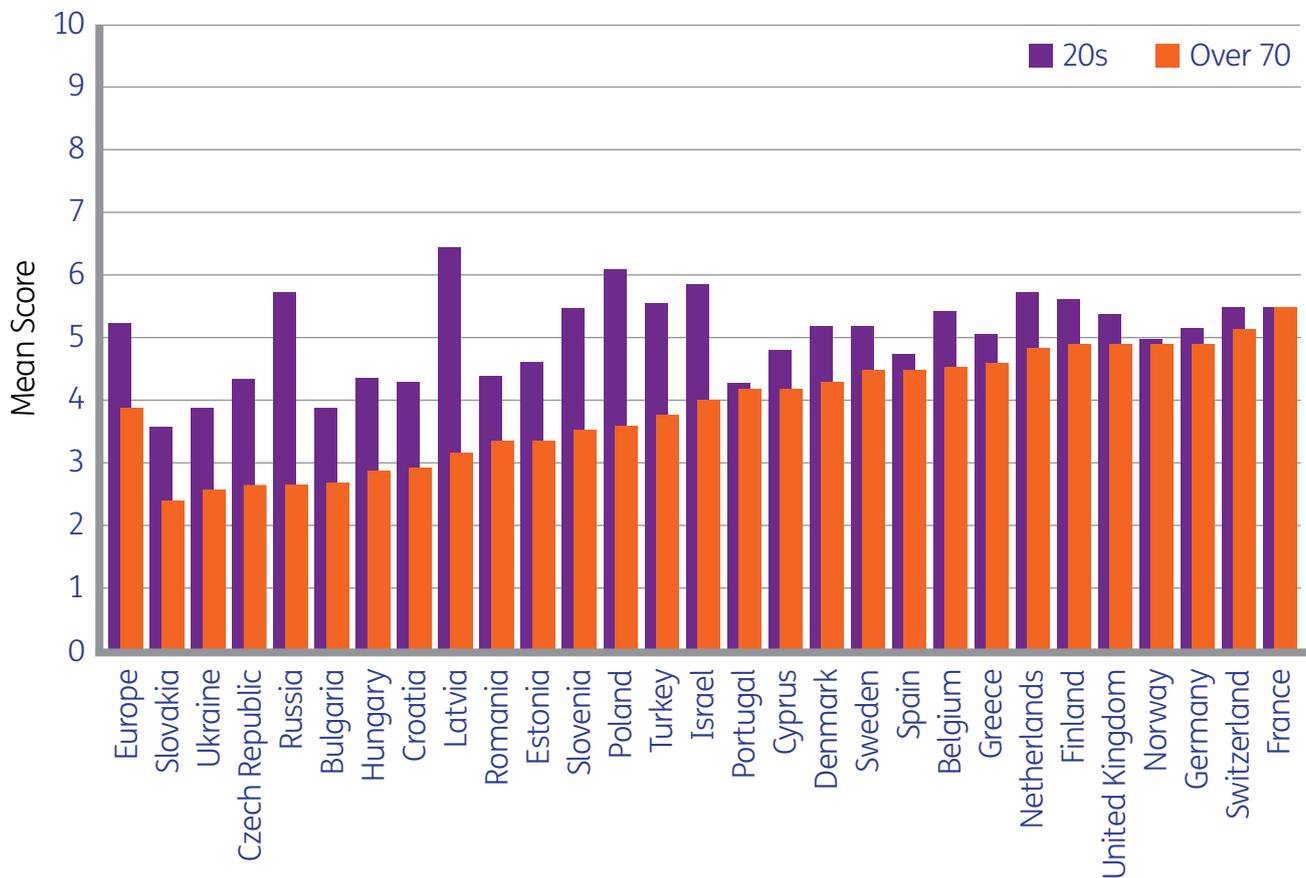
People over 70 were less likely to be seen as making an economic contribution than those in their 20s, with the lowest scores in Slovakia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. Meanwhile France took the most positive view (with the UK in fifth place) in a rather low-scoring contest.

As the UK will begin officially abolishing its retirement age shortly, it will be interesting to see if these negative findings about the standing of older people change in the future.

While the general perceptions of status tend to place those in their 40s above those in their 20s, and both above 70+ year olds, this negativity about older workers could be an important issue in the employment market as people are encouraged to work longer.

Figure 4: **Perceived economic contribution for people over 70 and people in their 20s. Within ESS countries, scores were on a scale that ranged from 0 (contribute very little economically) to 10 (contribute a great deal economically).**

**Perceived economic contribution within countries.**



### Intergenerational contact

Using people’s confidence about discussing personal matters as a litmus test of intergenerational relationships, the survey looked at three different contexts, friendships, families and the workplace.

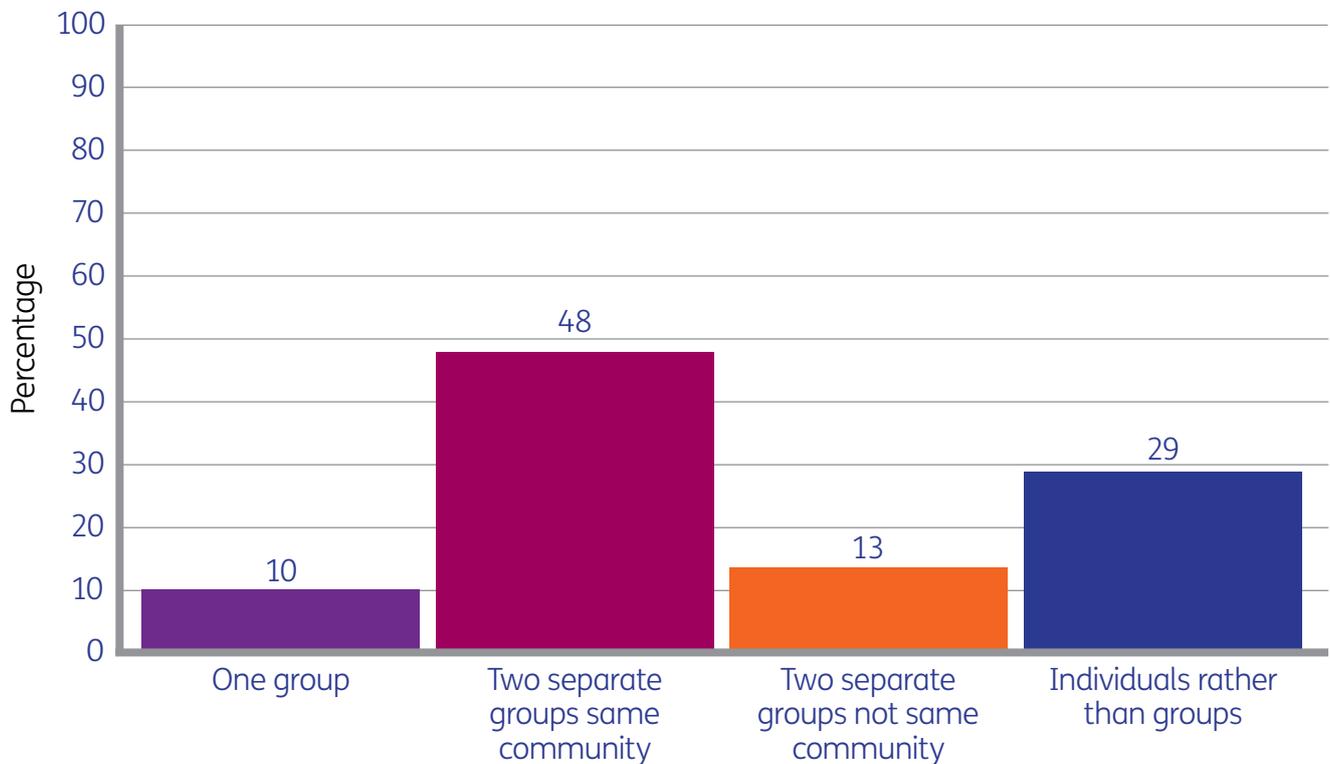
When it comes to **friendships**, most countries showed that people tend to have friends among people of similar age and tend to feel more comfortable with their peers. It is striking that 80 per cent of people aged 15–24 have no friends in their 70s, and over 70 per cent of people over 75 had no friends in their 30s. The majority of respondents are members of families that contain children or grandchildren between the

ages of 15 and 30, and relatives over 70. Across Europe, people feel quite comfortable talking across the generations. More people in the UK have **family members** over 70 than have children or grandchildren under 30, and 88 per cent of respondents talk confidently to both groups, so their family intergenerational contact is positive.

In the **workplace**, perhaps unsurprisingly, all survey respondents had more contact with those in their 20s compared with the over-70s. Those under 64, perhaps predominant in the paid workforce, spend more time with colleagues under 20, while those over 65 – who are perhaps more involved with voluntary work – spend more time with those over 70.

Figure 5: **How individuals see people in their 20s and people over 70 across ESS countries (percentages by perception).**

#### Perceptions of 20s and over 70.



If, on balance, intergenerational contact seems to be at least modestly promising, most people do not see younger and older people as part of a common group with a shared ethos. Rather, they are seen as two separate groups with distinctive attributes within one community. Although this is a somewhat negative conclusion, the different age groups also regard each other as individuals (led by Croatia and Sweden at over 40 per cent, through the UK and the European mean of about 30 per cent, to Poland, Estonia and Hungary at about 15 per cent), which mitigates a tendency to display prejudice to age groups as a whole.

A body of research<sup>4</sup> has firmly established that a very powerful way to overcome prejudice is to foster close, honest and personal relationships with others who are seen as belonging to a different group. Creating the opportunity to build these relationships is key. We need to be alive to trends which appear to be supportive of age segregation, and seek initiatives which can bring different generations together around issues of shared interest and importance.

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***We need initiatives which can bring different generations together around issues of shared importance.***

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<sup>4</sup> T. F. Pettigrew and L. R. Tropp (2006) 'Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes – A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5): 751–83

# Conclusion

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This survey shows how much work needs to be done to address age discrimination and age prejudice. The story is not all negative. Most of Europe (including the UK) is beginning to understand and accept the dynamics of an ageing society, but if we are to release the potential of our older population and see these citizens as contributors and shapers of our societies in the future, there is still a great deal to be done. This is not mere altruism about our older citizens. The prize is a world where an active older population, enjoying better health and well-being, are more engaged as shoppers and consumers, are participating in community endeavours and enterprises, and are helping to build the social and economic capital of the country.

The attitudes to employment have the most serious implications because working longer has become an imperative to address imbalances in our economic models. But the survey also shows that this is not the only issue.

We need to be looking at the wider picture which shows the somewhat negative perceptions (and self-perceptions) of older people. These perceptions flow from a media and advertising world obsessed with youth, and from stereotypes of older people which still characterise them as frail, out of touch, and irreconcilably grumpy. The positive point to build on is that in most personal contexts, older people are seen as individuals rather than lumped into one homogeneous group, and from there we can proceed without the encumbrance of historic concepts and generalisations.

The survey has shown that age discrimination is a significant problem if we are to ensure that the barriers constraining older people are set aside.

Legislation has an important role to play, and in Britain, implementing the remaining parts of the Equality Act by 2012 must be achieved without delay. Public and private sector providers must use the intervening time to gear up to a change which is inevitable, and although justifiable exemptions are permissible, there should be no widespread exemption for the financial services industry which has, for too long, mainly used age as a proxy for risk.

Legislation is not the sole remedy. Leadership must come and standards must be set by champions in the political, civic and media worlds, arguing for a positive view of ageing. And the public sector equality duty – potentially a very powerful lever – must be used imaginatively and positively. Whatever the purpose of public action, it should aim to maximise the opportunity for older and younger people to feel actively involved.



## Further reading

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