



**Highlights from National Seniors Australia's
research reports 2020-24
funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care**

NOVEMBER 2024

Introduction

National Seniors Australia is a member-based, not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation representing Australians aged 50 and over.

Every year we are funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC) to survey thousands of older people on diverse topics relevant to their lifestyle and wellbeing.

This document showcases the topics we have researched with that funding from 2020 to October 2024.



For several years now, the Department of Health and Aged Care has funded National Seniors Australia to represent the views of older Australians to government through advocacy and research activities.

During the heart of the COVID-19 crisis, the department also funded us to provide practical support to older Australians via our targeted helpline and a novel assertive outreach program into new and emerging CALD communities.

Our research report series is one of the major outputs of this funding. This document summarises and showcases the research we completed with DHAC funds between 2020 and October 2024.

Every year we exceeded our commitment by publishing between five and seven research reports with DHAC funds.

In most cases these reports were based on one of our National Seniors Social Surveys (NSSS) of thousands of older Australians. The exceptions are some of our COVID-themed reports, which were completed outside the NSSS program to respond to the urgent needs of the time.

The topics we covered in that period ranged across diverse aspects of older people's lives and interests.

Healthcare and aged care were two obvious focal points, with 16 reports published on these. Topics within these areas included private health insurance, experiences of dementia, vaccination attitudes, and healthcare affordability.

We also examined other important aspects of older people's wellbeing in 15 research reports, including preparedness for ageing; views on voluntary assisted dying; digital engagement levels; contributions via paid work, volunteering, and caring; financial and housing stresses; exposure to ageism; diverse aspects of social inclusion; and ideas for improving community support.

All reports are linked in the text or can be downloaded at <https://nationalseniors.com.au/research/reports>.

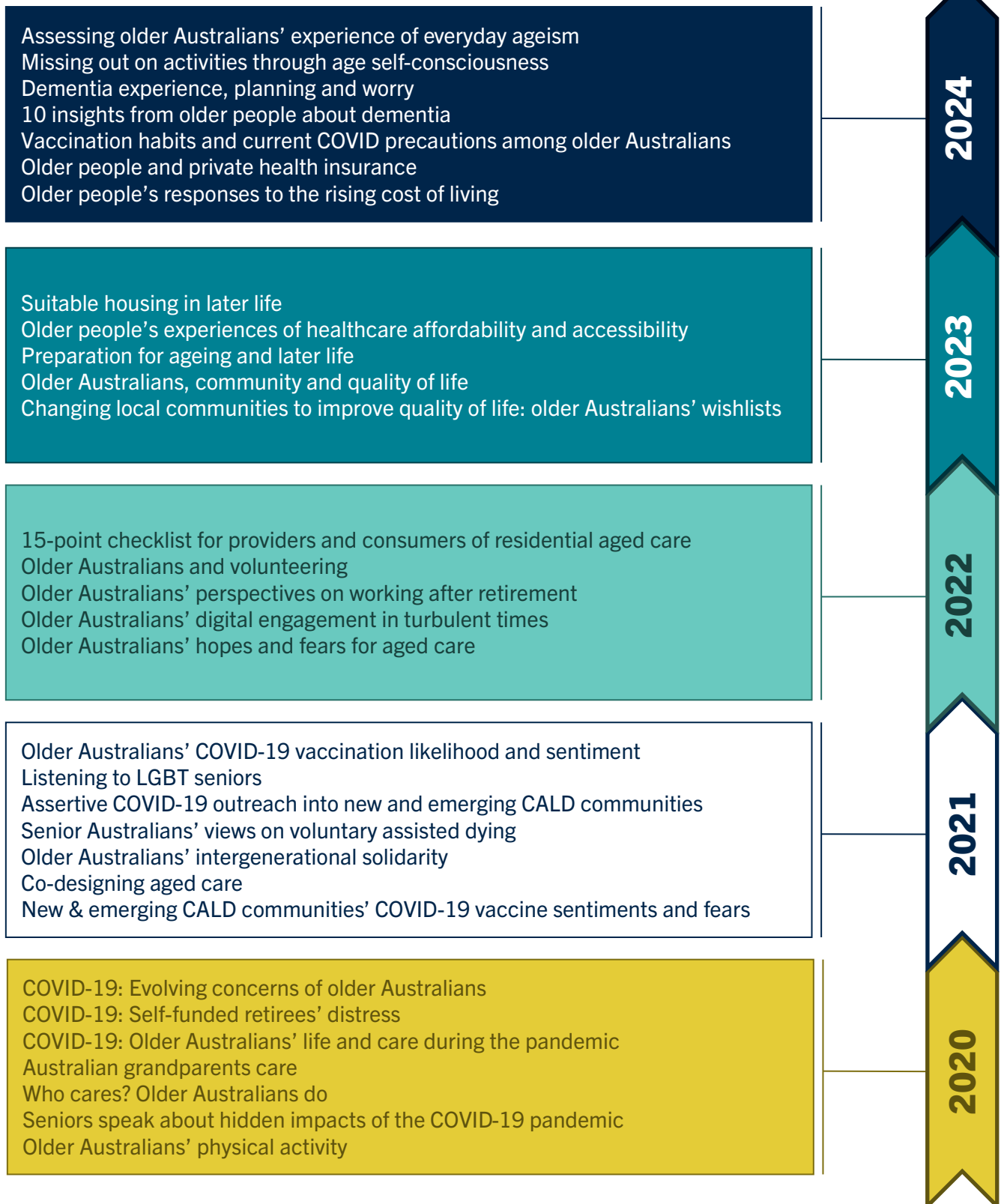
Dr Diane Hosking
Head of Research

Dr Brendon Radford
Director of Policy and Research

Research reports timeline

In the following pages the research reports are organised thematically for easy browsing, but this page offers a chronological approach – simply click the report title to read about it.

To return to this timeline, click the coloured arrows icon on any page.



Healthcare affordability and accessibility



In 2023, in the middle of the cost-of-living crisis, National Seniors surveyed nearly 6000 older people about their access to healthcare – and its affordability.

In one question we asked about 12 specific kinds of healthcare, and whether respondents had ever gone without them in recent years because of the cost.

For every single type of healthcare – including GP visits and prescription medication – at least 5% of people had gone without on one or more occasions.

The percentage was highest for dental checkups (20%), dental treatment (24%), and mental health appointments (26%).

The consequences for some people were dire. Comments included this from an 81-year-old person:

“As I cannot afford minor medical treatment, I have to go to hospital for all other incidents and leave this till I have to be transported.”

2024 2023

Private health insurance experiences

In 2024 we conducted a comprehensive survey of older people’s experiences with private health insurance.

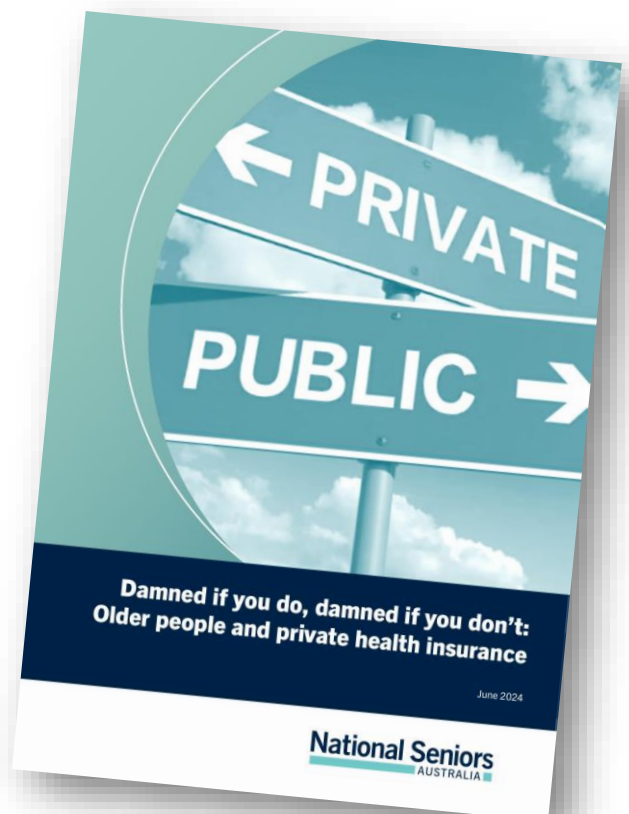
It showed many older people go without other things in life – from groceries to visiting grandchildren – to keep their private health insurance.

That’s mostly because it offers them peace of mind and a sense of control. For some, it also offers financial benefit.

However, many told us the costs are beginning to outweigh the benefits. Premiums are rising but returns are shrinking. In some cases, private patients are hit with huge out-of-pocket costs, even at top levels of cover.

The complexity and confusing nature of private health policies are a barrier to shopping around.

Some older people have responded by reducing their cover. For others it is just too much, and they have dropped their cover altogether.



Vaccinations and COVID measures

Four years into the COVID pandemic, the department asked us to survey older people on what **COVID measures and precautions** they were continuing to employ to protect themselves and others.

This included asking people whether they accessed COVID boosters whenever they became available, and if not, why not. In total, 78% said they did.

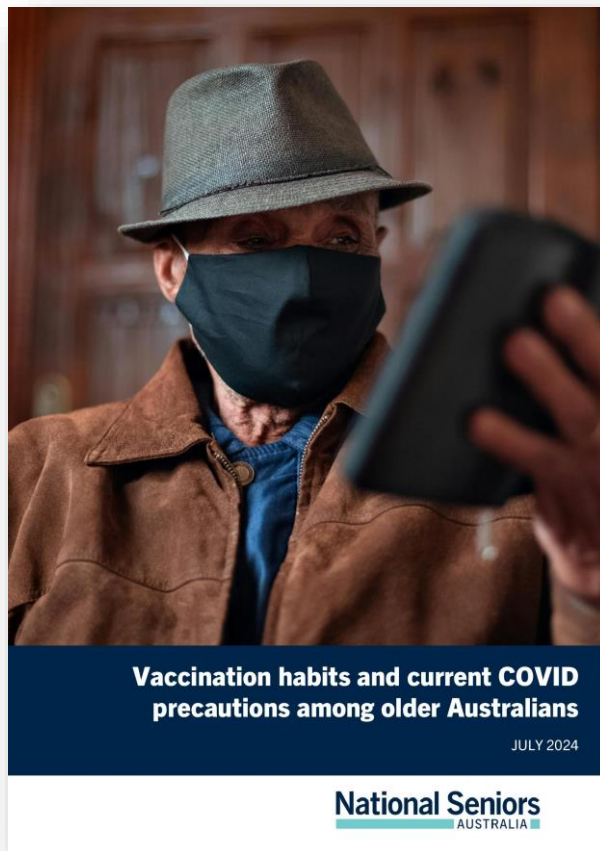
Side effects, feeling it is no longer needed, and disagreeing with COVID vaccination were the main reasons people do not get more COVID boosters.

The fact that one can still become ill with COVID after being vaccinated, and logistical barriers to getting vaccinated, were other important reasons some respondents do not keep up with COVID boosters.

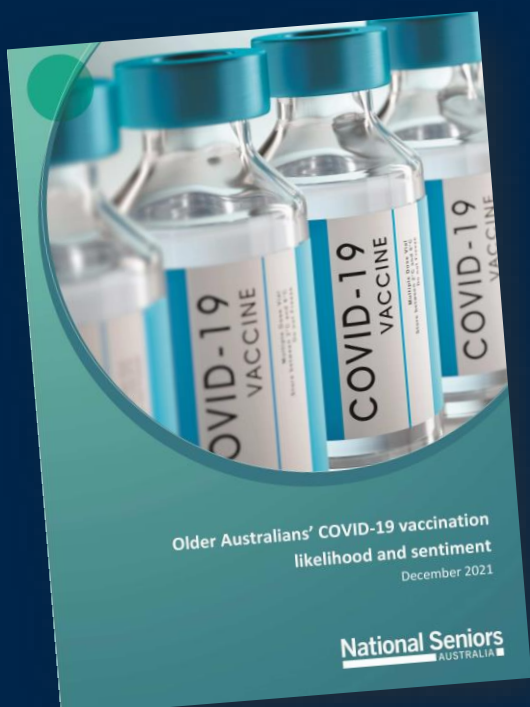
Three-quarters of respondents do take one or more COVID measures in their everyday lives, but they make risk assessments when determining how necessary and important precautions are.

We also asked people whether they access annual flu vaccinations and if they were vaccinated for shingles.

Age was a strongly significant factor for all three vaccinations, with more older people vaccinated.



Early COVID vaccination attitudes



In February 2021, the first phase of the national COVID vaccination strategy was rolled out in Australia.

In response, National Seniors undertook research that month to find out what older people were thinking and feeling about the new vaccines and getting vaccinated.

While 86% of respondents said they were likely to get vaccinated, people also expressed concerns about potential adverse reactions, long-term effects, vaccine ineffectiveness, and more.

This survey question plus another research project into vaccine attitudes among seniors within new and emerging CALD communities formed our feedback to the department about what was needed to encourage COVID vaccination among older people.

Dementia experiences, plans and worry

In anticipation of the National Dementia Action Plan, we included a module on dementia in the 2024 National Seniors Social Survey.

In Dementia Action Week 2024 we will launch two reports produced from this module.

The first showed that older people who have personal experience with dementia are more likely to seek out information about it and to plan for a future with dementia for themselves or a loved one.

It also described the reasons why two thirds of those surveyed worry about developing dementia and some of the misconceptions contributing to that.

The second report is comprised of verbatim quotes from respondents, who were invited to share insights they had learned about dementia which they thought others should know too.

Their comments were grouped into ten themes, including how to act when a person has dementia, the impacts it has on others, and factors related to risk and prevention.



2020 2024

Physical activity and barriers to it

In the 8th NSSS, National Seniors asked older people how often they **exercise**, whether alone or with others, if they'd like to do more, and what barriers stopped them.

Around two thirds said they wanted to do more.

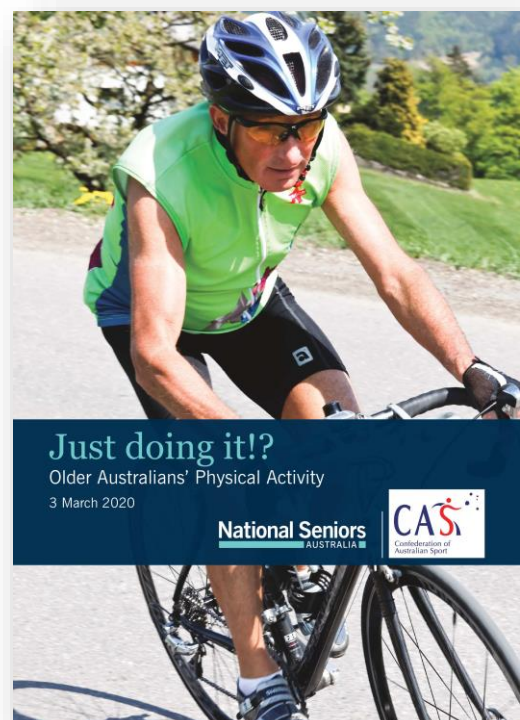
Health problems were major blocks for many. Notably, the pain caused by exercise was a barrier for 26% of respondents and health conditions hindered over 27%.

A lack of motivation was even more of a problem, with 32% identifying it as a barrier.

Others included mobility problems (21%), feeling too tired (18%), and having no one to exercise with (20%).

National Seniors co-published the report with the Confederation of Australian Sport, who own the Australian Masters Games.

We were the Healthy Ageing Partner of the Games in 2019 and 2021, marking a commitment to helping older people enjoy a healthy, connected later life.



Residential aged care hopes and fears

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety strongly influenced our research.

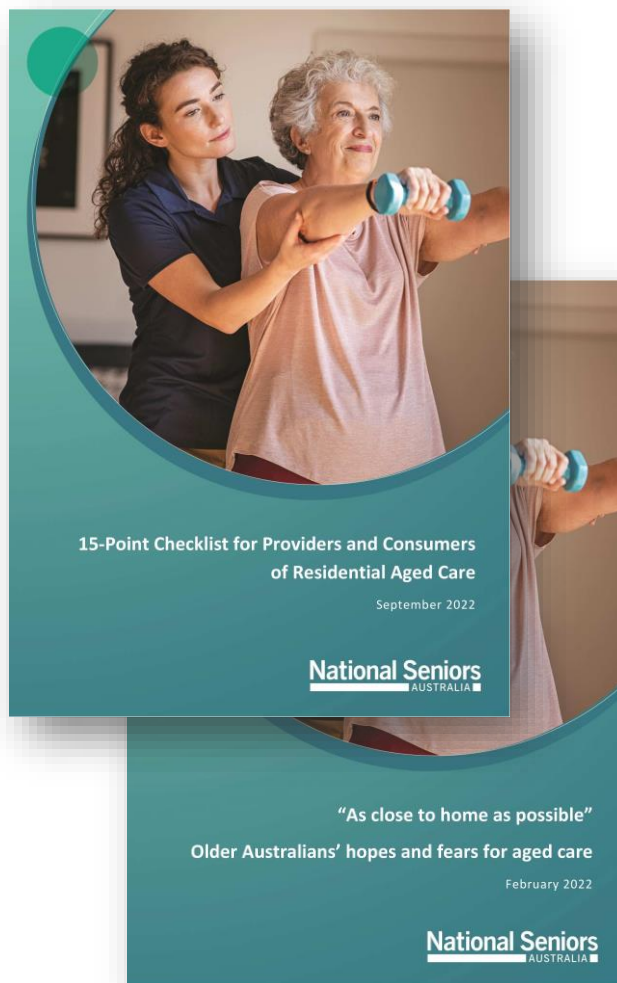
In 2022 we published a [114-page report](#) on older people's hopes and fears about residential care.

It details how abuse and neglect in residential care affected people's aged care planning. It describes five kinds of information and guidance people want when accessing aged care. It also spells out how residential care could change to make it a more desirable option for people, with hundreds of survey respondents' suggestions for change represented within 12 themes.

We later published a practical spin-off document: a [15-point guide for aged care consumers](#) to use when seeking an aged care facility, to ensure it meets their needs.

We have used this research in numerous submissions to government committees working on improvements to different aspects of aged care. We presented the major findings in 2022 at the 11th Annual Australian Healthcare Week meet and the ACCPA national conference.

In a rare acknowledgement of direct impact, one Department of Health and Aged Care public servant wrote to us saying, "I have found your reporting on the views of Australian seniors this year invaluable, thank you, and look forward to further insights."



2021 2022



CO-DESIGNING AGED CARE:

VIEWS OF 4,562 OLDER AUSTRALIANS

9 JUNE 2021

National Seniors AUSTRALIA



The meaning of 'co-design' in aged care

We addressed another part of the aged care picture with a survey question on co-design.

We asked older people what they thought the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety meant when its Final Report suggested aged care innovations be co-designed with older people.

Responses ranged from 'I don't know' and 'government waffle' to a strong desire to be actively involved in making aged care better.

We presented the major findings in 2022 at the 11th Annual Australian Healthcare Week meet and the ACCPA national conference. They were also used in several submissions concerned with aged care reform.

Factors accompanying ageing preparedness

In the 10th NSSS we included a module about ageing attitudes and preparedness, building on well-established gerontological research on these topics.

Among the older people who responded, 68% said they felt prepared for ageing, but 57% had concerns about it and 31% felt there is nothing positive about it.

Our analysis showed that people who feel there are positives to ageing are 340% more likely to feel prepared for it.

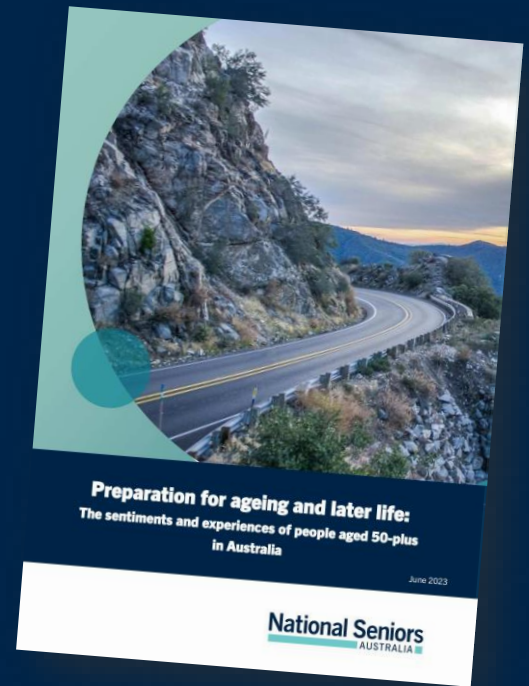
On the other hand, those with concerns are 60% more likely to feel unprepared, or on the fence about their preparedness.

In an interview with the ABC about this research, National Seniors' Head of Research Dr Diane Hosking was asked if a positive attitude can change life outcomes.

The research showed that this might be the case, but it's unclear if people with a positive attitude already feel more prepared, or if feeling positive about ageing motivates people to do something about their future.

The research also showed that people who were more prepared had greater resources in terms of better health and more money. As with many aspects of later life, those factors make a big difference.

We presented this work in a [paper](#) at the 2022 Australian Association of Gerontology conference.



2021 2023

Views on voluntary assisted dying



Every state in Australia and the ACT now have [voluntary assisted dying](#) (VAD) legislation and the NT is considering it.

But in 2021 only Victoria had legislation in place, when National Seniors asked thousands of older Australians whether VAD should be accessible to people with a terminal illness who met the Victorian eligibility criteria. A huge 86% said yes.

We also asked if VAD should be accessible to people with a non-terminal illness who met the other criteria, and 67% agreed.

In comments people talked passionately about their reasons for supporting or opposing VAD, and we found surprising commonality between the two sides.

For example, whether pro or anti, some people simply wanted to reduce suffering, and others on both sides agreed on the need for strong regulation to avoid unethical use.

Our report received considerable media coverage when released and continued to have public relevance afterwards.

Deakin University researchers referenced it in a 2022 article for *The Conversation* about VAD rights, and the (now) ACT Senator David Pocock also referenced it in his 2022 electoral material. Numerous pro-VAD organisations cite it on their websites.

We ourselves adapted it into a [poster](#) for the 2022 Australian Association of Gerontology conference.



Digital engagement and dilemmas

The internet, social media, smart phones, and ubiquitous home computers have changed life for all of us in countless ways.

National Seniors research investigated **older people's experiences with the digital transition** in our 2021 survey. It repeated some questions from our 2018 survey, enabling a comparison of the timeframes – including before and after COVID.

The comparison showed older people's average digital ability level increased markedly in that time. Most striking was the ability to use a smart phone, which rose from 49% to 63%.

However, their average level of comfort with digital technologies decreased. Written comments from survey participants suggested this was nothing to do with ability or confidence. The discomfort was with the social and ethical impacts of technology.

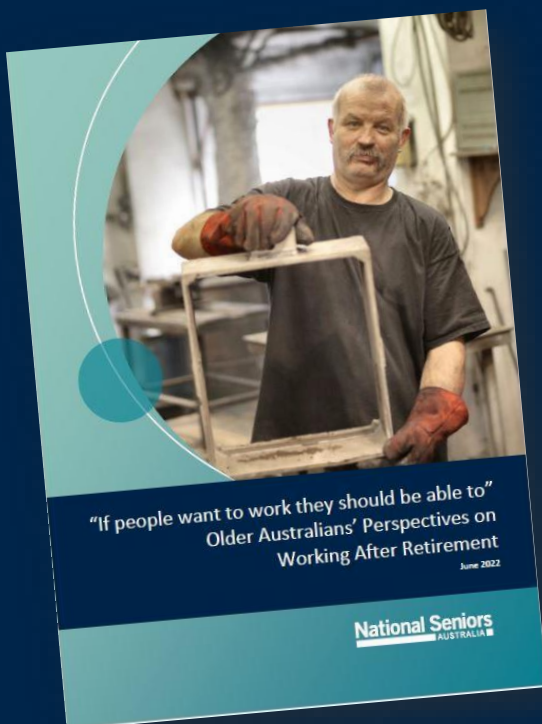
People were also frustrated with the digital transition being too fast and – especially with COVID – inescapable.

Our 'Netflix good, self-checkouts bad' media release based on these results was picked up enthusiastically.



2022 2022

Post-retirement work barriers



National Seniors has campaigned hard to change pension rules about work during the past few years. We have seen some success in the government's relaxation of the work bonus rules.

That campaign was built on research. In 2022 we surveyed thousands of older people about their **work status and aspirations**, including 1249 retirees receiving the Age Pension.

We found that 16% of pensioners had already re-entered the workforce at some point in the past, and another 20% would consider re-entering in the future.

In both cases the most common motive was money, with 60% nominating this as a reason. But pension rules were a barrier.

These statistics became the core of former Chief Advocate Ian Henschke's campaigning, receiving nationwide media attention.

The survey also asked participants what they thought were the barriers to post-retirement work.

The top response was ageism, with almost 1100 people directly mentioning it in comments, and a further 844 implying it.

These responses led us to include a full module on ageism in the 2024 NSSS. The results of that module will be published later this year.

Managing (or not) the cost of living

The 2023 National Seniors Social Survey was in large part focused on the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on older Australians.

Several questions invited respondents to write about how the crisis was affecting them and how they were managing to respond to it. We reproduced many of these in a 2024 report.

Comments emphasised the heartbreaking realities of poverty and the sacrifices people have had to make to stay afloat. They included:

“After everything is taken from my pension I'm lucky if I have \$60 and that is my food money for 2 weeks.” (72, F, NSW)

“I retired due to ill health when I was 65, before our mortgage was paid off. We can no longer afford to pay for our house and must now sell it.” (69, M, WA)

“I can't afford fresh vegetables and fruits as they don't last long enough.” (68, F, TAS)

“[I] could never be able to rent a house or flat. no health insurance. just waited 570 days for orthopaedic appointment. Minimal food. do not drink alcohol or smoke. drink water and tea. use only 1 teaspoon of tea leaves per day.” (69, F, QLD)



Older People's Responses to the Rising Cost of Living

JANUARY 2024

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA

2023 2024

Housing affordability and suitability

As part of the cost-of-living theme we surveyed older people about their [housing situation](#).

Respondents were asked if they were concerned about their ability to afford suitable housing affordability during the 12 months following the survey, and during the remainder of their lives.

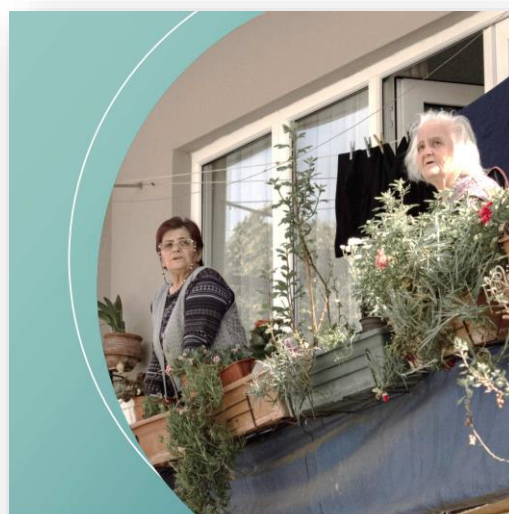
One third (34%) were concerned for the short term, with the level of concern ranging from 'only slightly' (20%) to 'quite' (9%) to 'acutely concerned' (5%).

The figure almost doubled when respondents considered the rest of their life (65%).

People who rented were 9 times more likely than everyone else to be 'quite concerned' or 'acutely concerned'. Those with a mortgage were 4 times more likely to feel that way.

We also asked whether respondents' homes were suitable for ageing, and only 44% said they were.

Another quarter (26%) said the home would be suitable with modifications. But 10% were unable to make modifications, in some cases because they were renting.



“I want my own base to live and feel grounded”
Suitable Housing in Later Life

OCTOBER 2023

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA



The challenges of caring for other adults

A module in the 8th National Seniors Social Survey asked older people about [the care they provide to other adults](#) in their lives.

Over a fifth (22%) said they provided regular care of this kind. The largest portion cared for partners, then parents, and adult children.

Over half (53%) of them described the level of care they provided as 'moderate' or 'high', with 17% providing high level care.

Many carers wrote about the extensive care their loved one needed, with comments including "totally dependent" and "you name it".

When asked what supports they would like, carers mentioned aspects of practical assistance such as more hours of paid care, wellbeing support including respite, and government intervention including better leave provisions.

The policy impact of this report continued well after its publication.

National Seniors drew on its findings in our submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care in 2022.

Our fellow advocacy organisation Carers Australia also drew on personal stories from our report in their submission to the 2022 Productivity Commission Carer Leave Inquiry.



2020 2020

Grandparenting patterns and rewards



The 8th NSSS also asked older Australians two survey questions about [grandparenting](#) – whether they cared for grandkids, and if so, how often.

On first glance, there were no statistically significant differences by binary gender, with 27% of women and 26% of men undertaking grandparent duty.

But 93% of the men who cared for grandkids did so as part of a couple, compared to just 57% of the women.

This suggests there is a gendered aspect to grandparenting, as most male grandparents don't have to do this unpaid care alone, while many more women do.

But people's free-text comments captured the challenges and the joys of grandparenting irrespective of gender or any other trait. They included:

"Becoming a grandparent at 80 years of age is physically tiring but brings a lot of joy into my life."

"The downside, is that it is all about being energetic and the day after babysitting, the wife and I check out our backs and joints for pain level!"

A wishlist for improving communities

In early 2023, National Seniors published two reports from our 2022 NSSS module on communities.

The first detailed older people's thoughts and feelings on community – how they defined theirs, whether it provided older people with good quality of life, and whether they thought active community participation contributed to wellbeing.

The second, aimed at local councils, spelled out a 15 item wishlist for improving communities.

Distributed nationally via the Australian Local Government Association, the wishlist included items such as better pathways and transport, improved communication given the decline of local newspapers, and more activities for seniors.

The Inside Local Government news website published an op-ed by National Seniors' Senior Research Officer Dr Lindy Orthia about this report. It called for councils to use it to consult with older residents on what they want and need.

The report inspired older community members in Wangaratta, Victoria (and perhaps elsewhere), to lobby their local council for more direct representation of older people and their concerns.



2022 2023



Volunteering benefits

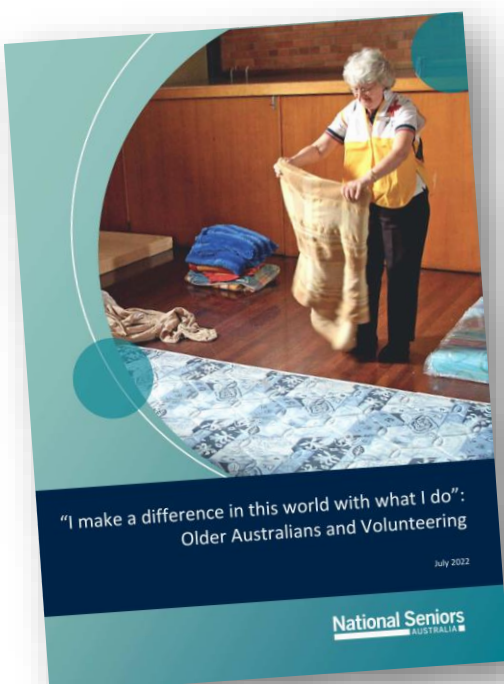
At the same time as we surveyed older Australians' thoughts on community, we asked about their **volunteering activities**.

A huge 50% of respondents said they regularly volunteered. Of course, people who volunteer may also be more likely to complete a survey.

Whatever the reason, our analysis found that volunteers were more likely to feel satisfied with how they spend their time, to have positive feelings about ageing, and to believe their community offers a good quality of life.

In our report, we honoured the 2022 Senior Australian of the Year Ms Val Dempsey – a long-time volunteer with St John Ambulance and an advocate for volunteering – by inviting her to write the foreword.

She wrote, "The rewards, the special moments that provide personal growth and awareness are yours to treasure."



LGBT seniors' experiences and concerns

In 2017 the government launched the aged care diversity framework which includes a mandate to ensure lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, and intersex (LGBTI) people's needs are met by the aged care system.

In 2021, as part of our commitment to the framework's implementation, National Seniors published a research report about older LGBT people's experiences based on survey and interview data.

The report illustrated discrimination and prejudices older LGBT people face in aged care, the health system, and society at large. It drew attention to a need for greater LGBT inclusion and representation in the ageing sector.

The research team collaborated with members of the Silver Rainbow project to ensure LGBT people and perspectives were incorporated at all stages of the project.

One action arising was Silver Rainbow training for National Seniors staff about how to better meet LGBTI elders' needs.

National Seniors also committed to other actions to enhance the place of LGBT people within our organisation, imagery, and publications.

The report was co-published with LGBTIQ+ Health Australia.



2021 2021

Intergenerational solidarity



The media loves pitting older people against younger. But this report shows intergenerational solidarity is alive and well.

In 2019, National Seniors asked older Australians if there were any issues affecting younger people that they were particularly concerned about.

Most didn't criticise younger people, they empathised.

A third (870 people) expressed concern about younger people facing unemployment and poor job security. A quarter (750) were concerned about housing affordability and the cost of living for younger people. Those were the top answers out of 10 major themes we identified.

There seemed to be a majority consensus that younger people are living in more a demanding and competitive environment than that of yesteryear.

Older people generally want to ensure younger people are adequately cared for and inherit a world in better shape than they found it.

Experiences of everyday ageism

The 2024 version of the NSSS included a large module on ageism. We will ultimately produce four research reports on this theme based on the module. At the time of writing, we have published two of these.

The first report approached ageism from a quantitative perspective using a tool called the Everyday Ageism Scale. This scale has been validated in the peer-reviewed literature and is widely used to evaluate ageism's impact on important aspects of life such as health.

The scale includes 10 questions that broadly cover three types of ageism: ageist representations in the public world, interpersonal assumptions people make about other individuals, and negative expectations of ageing (a form of internalised ageism).

Our report found that people from socially or financially disadvantaged groups were more likely to experience everyday ageism.

Feeling finances were tight, having less in savings and investments, being in poorer health, being a member of a diversity group, being 85 or older, feeling lonely sometimes and feeling discontented with how one's time is spent were all associated with higher scores on the scale.



Elements of Ageism 1

Assessing older Australians' experience of everyday ageism

OCTOBER 2024

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA

2024

Missing out with ageism

The second ageism report was based on a qualitative question which asked respondents if there were any activities they had chosen not to participate in because of self-consciousness about their age.

Some respondents showed this was indeed the case for them, that self-consciousness about their age stopped them from going to live music events, participating in exercise, and more.

Body image problems were an issue for some, who did not want to expose their ageing bodies to the world.

Others had experienced ageist bullying and mockery when participating in activities they enjoyed, discouraging them from continuing. The behaviours included being laughed at and told to act their age.

We will publish the third and fourth ageism reports – on age-based discrimination and ageist assumptions respectively – later in 2024 or early 2025.



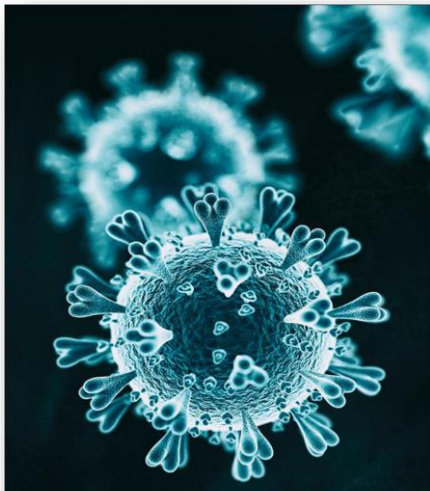
Elements of Ageism 2

Missing out on activities through age self-consciousness

OCTOBER 2024

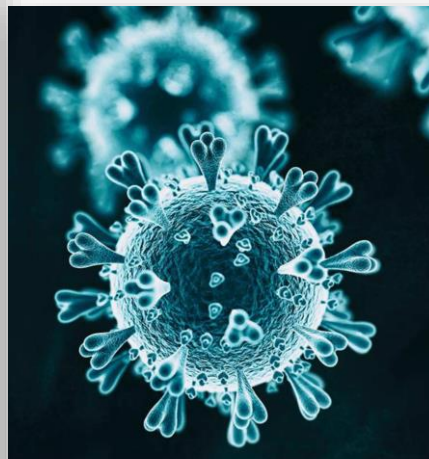
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AUSTRALIA





COVID-19:
Older Australians' life and care during the pandemic
July 2020

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA



COVID-19:
Self-funded retirees' distress
2 September 2020

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA



COVID-19 (3)
Evolving concerns of Older Australians
November 2020

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA

COVID impacts and response

In 2020 the National Seniors research team joined the world in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on what older people were going through, needed, and worried about.

We responded with practical assistance through a phone helpline for members and a DHAC-funded assertive outreach program directed at seniors in new and emerging CALD communities.

We formally reviewed in the latter in [an important 2021 report](#). It highlighted the unique needs and experiences of older people in CALD communities that do not even have the same infrastructure and networks as older, more established CALD communities, let alone the resources of non-CALD communities.

We also produced four research reports amidst the COVID crisis, spaced across 2020, reporting on older people's concerns and wellbeing during different phases of the pandemic.

The [first](#), a brief report published in March, highlighted people's desire to see more community support for people living alone, carers, seniors who contracted COVID, and those doing it tough financially.

The [second](#) was a more formal report and added to the mix practical matters such as a need for clearer guidance, access to personal protective equipment, and assistance with digital communication.

The [third report](#), published in September, focused on the situation of self-funded retirees who had experienced major income drops due to the market downturn but were ineligible for government benefits.

The [final report](#) was different and addressed a suite of issues, based on a survey we conducted in June and again in July/August. The two time periods allowed us to compare changes in people's concern levels about them.

Some things changed dramatically in that short period. Notably, people's concern about their own mental health rose from 45% to 63%.



Methods

The reports reviewed in this document were mostly based on data collected through the annual National Seniors Social Survey (NSSS), with the exception of the 2020 COVID topics.

The ultimate aim of each report is to present the views and experiences of older Australians to the Australian community at large, to government, and to other relevant stakeholders.

We routinely communicate research findings in diverse, accessible formats through traditional and social media, and with relevant networks of researchers, policy makers, and industry.

The research also informs National Seniors' advocacy

activities and submissions to government inquiries.

About the NSSS

National Seniors has conducted the NSSS every year since 2012, aside from 2020. In 2020 we conducted targeted COVID research instead.

The survey topics reviewed in this document were devised by the National Seniors research team in consultation with the Department of Health and Aged Care.

Topics responded to policy issues, public discourse, and gerontological research. As part of the design process, we engaged with hundreds of National Seniors members, to determine

topics of greatest concern to older people.

NSSS survey questions are a mix of point and click multiple-choice questions and free-text comment boxes, to yield both quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

We also collect extensive demographic information to assist in our interpretation of the results' social meanings.

We analyse data in-house. We determine the structure of each report during analysis in response to the survey results.

Every NSSS wave receives ethics approval from Bellberry Ltd prior to implementation.

Sample

The NSSS is open to anyone aged 50 or older living in Australia. Participation is anonymous.

The sample size differs for each NSSS wave. However, it always includes:

- a mix of ages, from people in their 50s to people in their 90s and often centenarians
- people from every state and territory in Australia
- people from regional, rural, and remote locations as well as metro areas
- people from a range of lifestyles, backgrounds, health situations, and wealth categories.

The approximate sample sizes for the five NSSS waves represented in this document were:

NSSS-8 (2019)	~4400 people
NSSS-9 (2021)	~5400 people
NSSS-10 (2022)	~3900 people
NSSS-11 (2023)	~5800 people
NSSS-12 (2024)	~4900 people

National Seniors Australia has offices in
Brisbane/Meanjin and Canberra/Kambri.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the
land and waters in which we operate, the Turrbul
and the Ngunnawal and Ngambri Peoples.

We honour and value their continuing cultures,
contributions, and connections to Country, and
pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

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