

Measuring National Well-being - Older people and loneliness, 2013

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Abstract

This is the part of a series of short articles examining the well-being of older people. It provides an analysis of reported feelings of loneliness by people aged 52 and over using 2009–10 data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA).

Introduction

Loneliness is a complex and usually unpleasant emotion which typically includes anxious feelings about a lack of connectedness or communality with others. As such, loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people. Research has shown that loneliness is widely prevalent throughout society among people in marriages or relationships, and among those who have families and successful careers (Peplau et al, 1982). Loneliness has also been described as social pain — a psychological mechanism meant to alert an individual to feelings of isolation and motivate him/her to seek social connections (Caciopone et al, 2008). One way of thinking about loneliness is as a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social interaction, while solitude is simply the lack of contact with people. People can be lonely while in the middle of a crowd. Conversely, one can be alone and not feel lonely. Loneliness is therefore a subjective experience; if a person thinks they are lonely, then they are lonely.

Key points

Information from English Longitudinal Study of Ageing in 2009-10 for those aged 52 and over:

- Two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents reported being lonely hardly ever or never, 25 per cent said they felt lonely sometimes and only 9 per cent said they felt lonely often.
- A higher percentage of those aged 80 and over reported feeling lonely some of the time or often when compared to other age groups (46 per cent of those aged 80 and over compared to the average of 34 per cent for all aged 52 and over).
- Those who report feeling lonely sometimes or often are much more likely to report a lower level of satisfaction with their lives overall.
- Two in every five individuals who lived alone reported that they hardly ever or never felt lonely.
- People who had been widowed, separated or divorced or those who were in poor health were more likely to report feeling lonely.

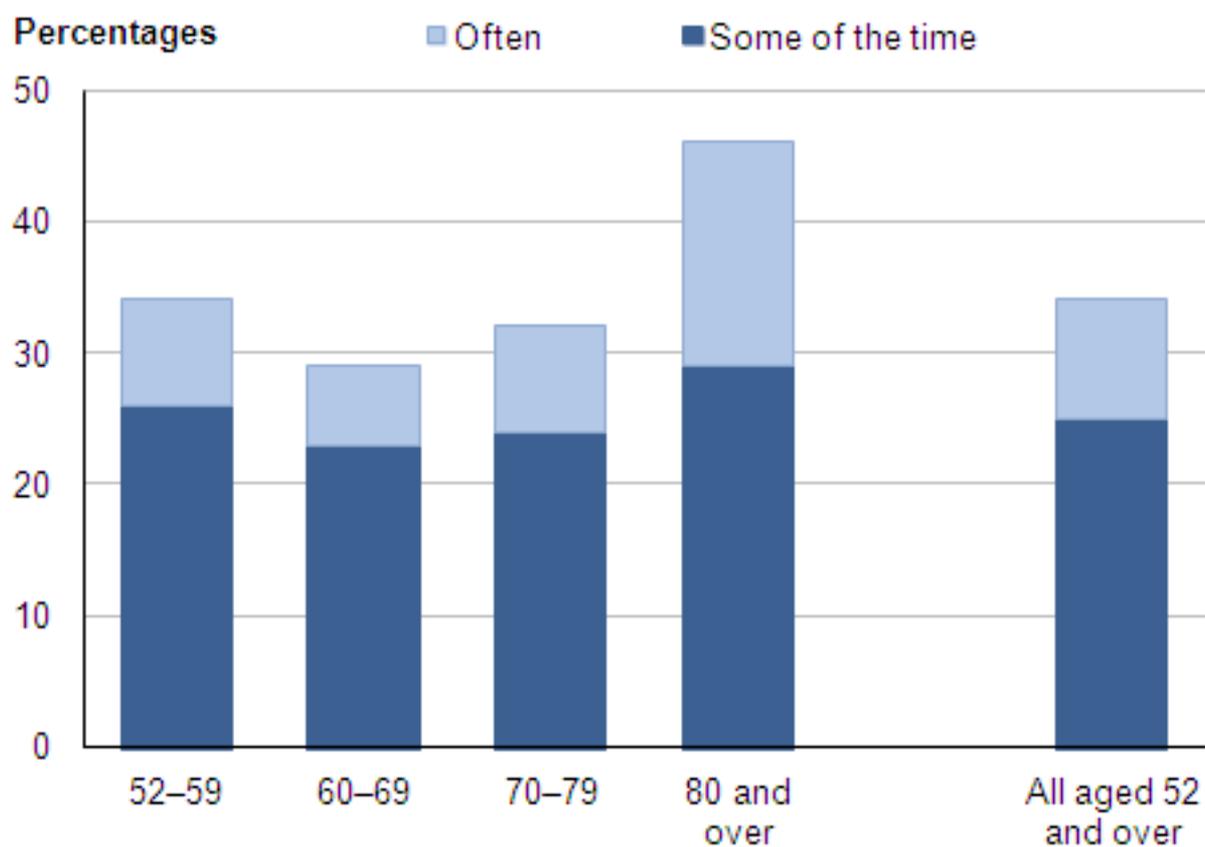
- There is a strong association between reported feelings of loneliness and reported limitations in performing daily activities.
- Limitations in daily activities together with other changes in circumstances such as loss of partner or losing touch with friends as age increases are likely to contribute to the increase in reported feelings of loneliness in the oldest age groups.
- In all age groups a higher percentage of women than men reported feeling lonely some of the time or often, the differences were larger in the older age groups
- Some of the difference between women and men in reported loneliness could be explained by the characteristics of the sample who responded to this survey: in the older age groups there were considerably more women than men and women were more likely than men to be widowed.

Frequency of feeling lonely by age and sex

In 2009-10 one question asked on the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) was how often individuals felt lonely. About 46 per cent of those aged 80 and over reported being lonely often or some of the time compared to about third (34 per cent) of all aged 52 and over. Those aged 80 and over were also considerably more likely to report being lonely often than other age groups: 17 per cent of this oldest age group reported being lonely often compared to an average of 9 per cent of all respondents (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Frequency of feeling lonely by age group (1), 2009–10

England

**Notes:**

1. Respondents were asked 'How often do you feel lonely' and responded 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'
2. Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

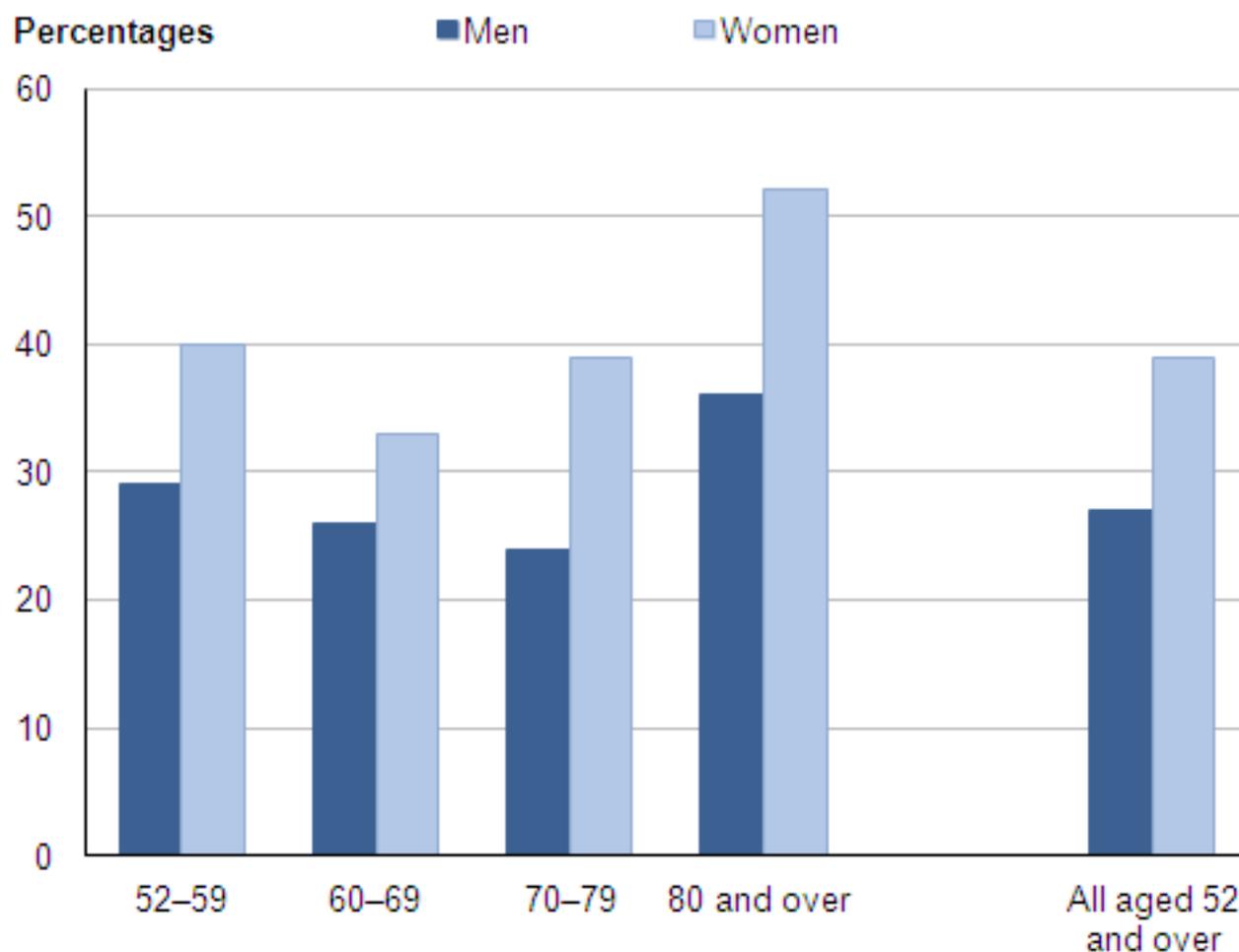
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A higher percentage of women than men reported feeling lonely some of the time or often in each age group: 39 per cent of all women aged 52 and over reported this frequency of feeling lonely compared to 27 per cent of men. **(Figure 2)** In this survey the characteristics of the respondents also vary by age and sex which may explain some of this difference. See 'Loneliness and other characteristics' for further discussion.

Figure 2: Feeling lonely: by age group and sex (1), 2009–10

England

**Notes:**

1. Respondents were asked 'How often do you feel lonely' and responded 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'
2. Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

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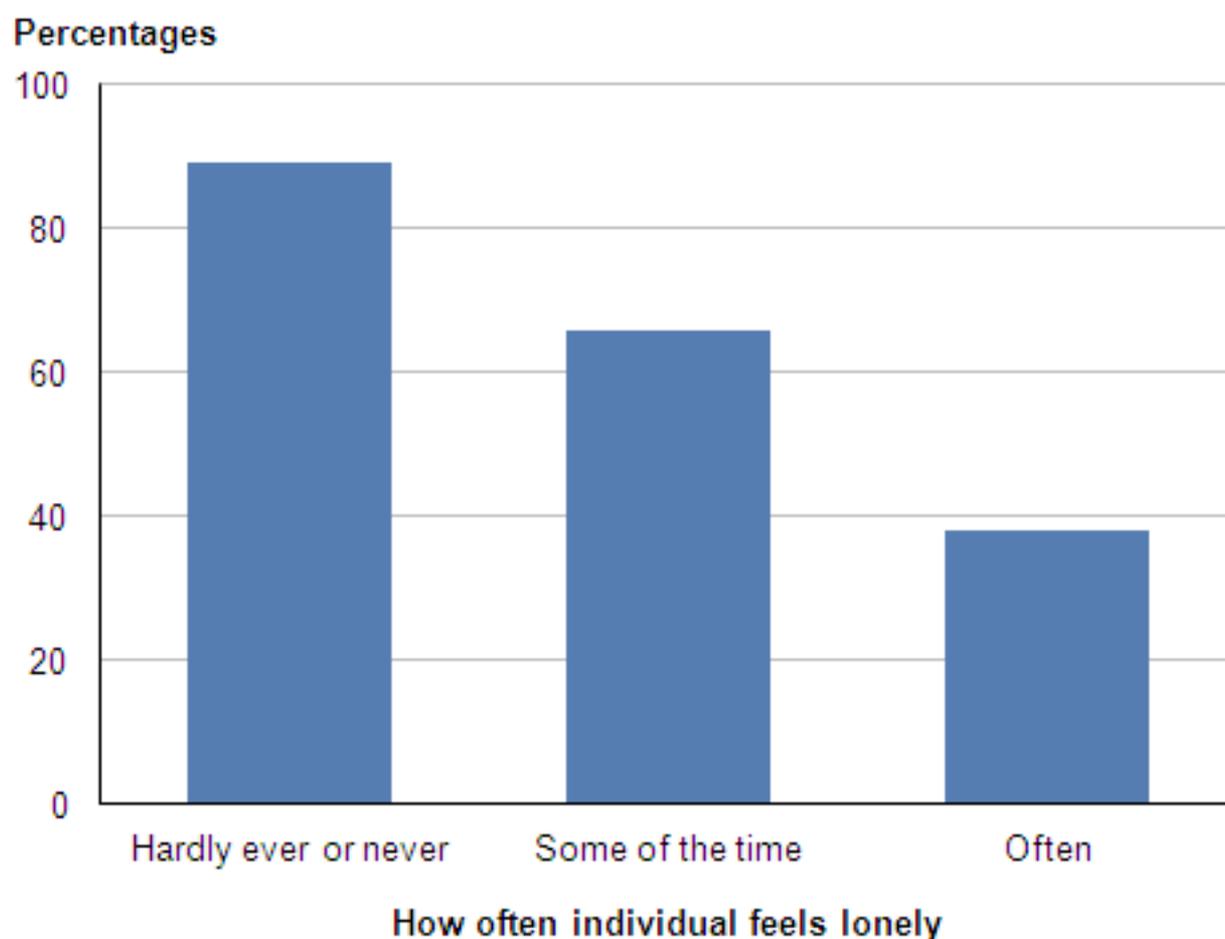
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Frequency of feeling lonely and life satisfaction

Another question asked in ELSA was about how satisfied individuals were with their lives overall. The reported frequency of feeling lonely is strongly related to respondents' views of their own lives: the percentage of respondents who reported very positive views of satisfaction with their lives overall is highest for those who hardly ever feel lonely (89 per cent) and lowest for those who report feeling lonely often (38 per cent) (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Satisfaction with life overall: by frequency of loneliness (1), 2009–10

England

**Notes:**

1. 'Satisfaction with life overall' includes those who responded that they were strongly agree, agree or slightly agree that they were satisfied with their life
2. Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

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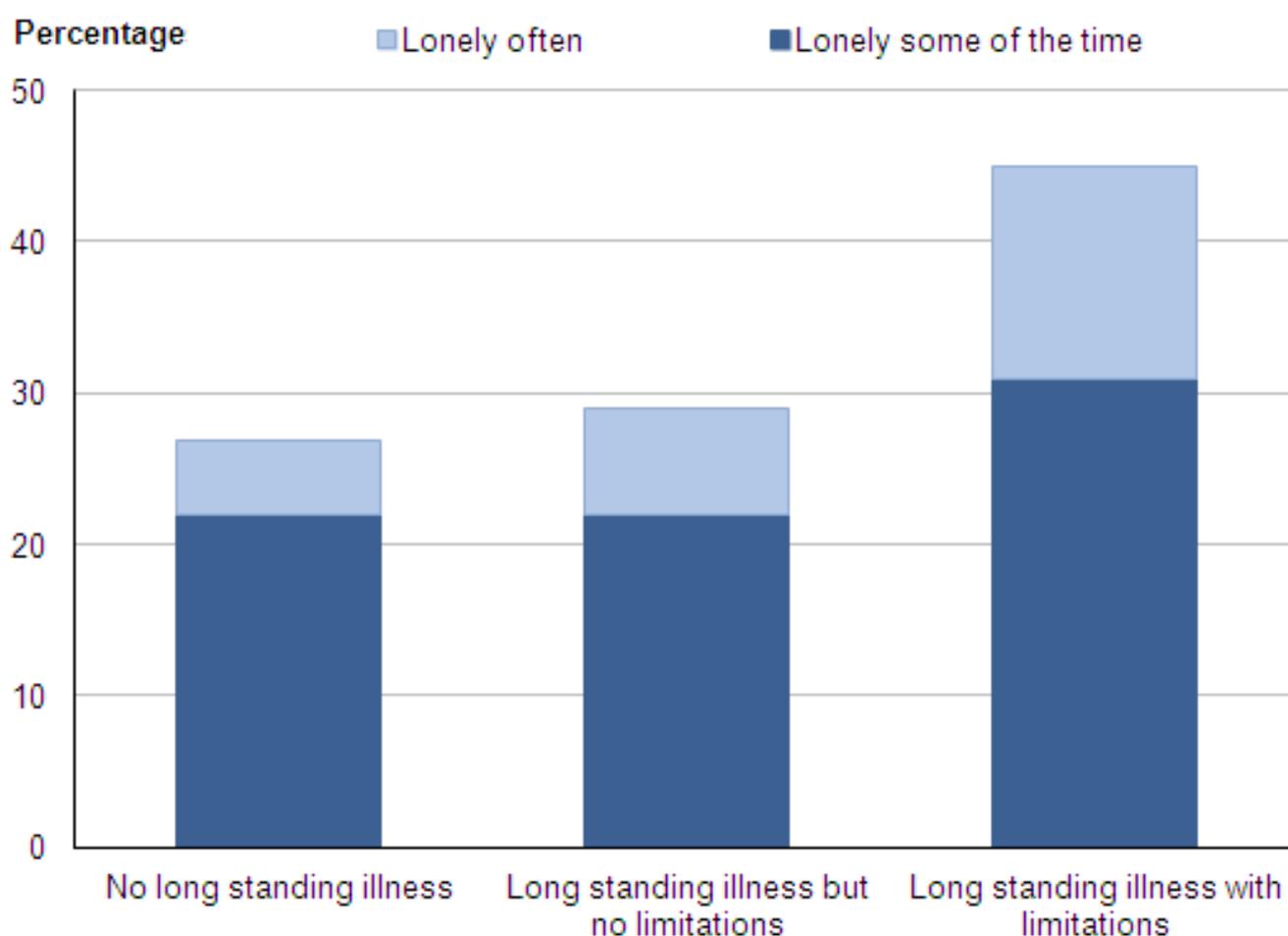
Impaired activities of daily living and feeling lonely

An analysis of well-being and health related issues based on data from respondents to Wave 4 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) showed that limitations in activities of daily living (ADL) were a major correlate of well-being as measured by elevated depressive symptoms in middle-aged and older people (Demakakos, McMunn and Steptoe, 2010). The differences in loneliness associated with impaired ADL were among the greatest observed in this analysis irrespective of age.

The data analysed here show that there is a considerable difference in the percentage of those who report feeling lonely some of the time or often according to whether any reported long standing illness is also said to limit daily activities. About 27 per cent of those who did not report that they had any long standing illness said that they had been lonely some of the time or often compared to about 29 per cent of those with a long standing illness which did not limit their activities. However, nearly 45 per cent of those with a long standing illness that did limit their activities reported feeling lonely some of the time or often (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Frequency of loneliness (1): by status of long standing illness (2), 2009–10

England



Notes:

1. Respondents were asked 'How often do you feel lonely' and responded 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'
2. Respondents were asked whether they had a long standing illness and whether it limited their daily activities such as pushing a vacuum cleaner
3. Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

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Loneliness and other characteristics

As was reported at the beginning of this paper feeling lonely is not the same as being alone. Indeed some individuals welcome and prefer solitude to being with others all of the time. However, both living arrangements and marital status are related to feeling lonely. One in five (20 per cent) of those aged 52 and over who lived on their own reported being lonely often and an additional two in five (39 per cent) reported being lonely some of the time. Of course those who live on their own are more likely to be single, widowed, separated or divorced and a relatively high percentage of these groups report that they were lonely often or some of the time, with a particularly high percentage of those who were widowed (63 per cent). The percentage of those who reported poor health and being lonely some of the time or often (59 per cent) was nearly three times the percentage of as those who reported excellent health and loneliness some of the time or often (21 per cent) (**Table 1**).

Table 1: Frequency of loneliness (1): by marital status, number of people in household and reported health status, 2009–10

England (Percentages (2))

		Hardly ever or never	Some of the time	Often
Marital status				
	Married, remarried or in a legal partnership	77	19	4
	Single, that is never married	57	30	13
	Separated or divorced	49	37	14
	Widowed	38	41	22
Household size				
	1	41	39	20
	2	76	19	4
	3	69	26	5
	4 or more	67	25	8
Health status				
	Excellent	80	18	3
	Very good	76	20	4

Good	67	25	7
Fair	52	33	14
Poor	41	36	23
Limiting long standing illness or disability			
No long standing illness	73	22	5
Long standing illness but no limitations	71	22	7
Long standing illness with limitations	55	31	14
All aged 52 and over	66	25	9

Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

Table notes:

1. Respondents were asked 'How often do you feel lonely' and responded 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

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The age and sex differences in feelings of loneliness which were discussed in the section 'Frequency of feeling lonely by age and sex' might be explained by the distribution of other characteristics of the respondents to ELSA. The Survey is longitudinal (the same households are interviewed during each wave) so that this sample for Wave 5 reflects the changes over time that result from men tending to die at a younger age. There are a much higher number of women than men in the older age groups and a much higher percentage of women than men have been widowed.

The distribution of characteristics within the sample might explain some of the variation in reported frequency of feeling lonely. The percentages of both men and women in all age groups are very similar for each reported health status. However, women in this sample were more likely than men to be widowed in each age group, but particularly in the 70-79 and 80 and over age groups. As approximately four in five of those who are widowed also lived on their own at the time of the Survey, women were also more likely to live on their own. Losing one's partner and living alone can result in a reduction in an individual's social interaction and, therefore, an increase in feelings of loneliness (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Marital status and household size: by selected age groups and sex, 2009–10

England (Percentages (1))

		Men 70–79	Women 70–79	Men 80 and over	Women 80 and over
Marital status					
	Married, remarried or in a legal partnership	75	53	65	22
	Single, that is never married	6	4	1	6
	Separated or divorced	8	11	3	5
	Widowed	11	32	31	67
Household size					
	1	21	39	31	68
	2	70	55	63	27
	3	8	4	3	4
	4 or more	2	2	2	1

Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 5, 2009–10

Table notes:

- Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

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Background notes**1. The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)**

This is an interdisciplinary data resource on health, economic position and quality of life as people age. The primary objective of the ELSA is to collect longitudinal multidisciplinary data from a representative sample of the English population aged 50 and older. It collects both objective and subjective data relating to health and disability, biological markers of disease, economic circumstance, social participation, networks and well-being.

For more information see [<http://www.ifs.org.uk/ELSA/data>]

Data used in this analysis

The data in this analysis is from the adult self completion questionnaire of ELSA Wave 5 of the Survey and has been weighted using the self completion individual cross-sectional weight

Throughout this article 'agree' refers to those who strongly agree or agree and 'satisfied' refers to those who report being completely, mostly or somewhat satisfied.

2. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html or from the Media Relations Office email: media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk

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This document is also available on our website at www.ons.gov.uk.

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