

INTRODUCTION AND MAIN FINDINGS

The steady rise in the number of elderly persons in Israel, which is expected to intensify over the next two decades, emphasizes the need for research on the quality of life of persons aged 60 and over. At the end of 2002, there were about 860 thousand persons aged 60 and over in Israel, who constituted about 13% of the country's total population. Projections indicate that by 2010 the elderly population will exceed one million, and by 2020 there will be 1,400,000 people aged 60 and over in Israel, bringing their percentage of the country's overall population to 16%.

In a comprehensive investigation of the elderly population in Israel who reside in the community¹, the Central Bureau of Statistics conducted interviews with about 5,000 people aged 60 and over throughout the country in 1997-1998. This sample was selected to represent the overall population aged 60 and over in Israel who live in the community. The findings of this survey provide an updated picture of the situation in many areas of life among that population. The survey covered a broad age group, and participants responded to questions on a wide variety of topics related to the life and environment of individuals in face-to-face interviews.

Participants were asked about their personal functioning, their state of health, use of health services, relationships with family and friends, occupational history, sources of income, housing conditions, leisure activities, etc. Based on the participants' responses to the questions, an attempt was also made to determine their attitudes toward several issues, as reflected in the extent of their satisfaction in areas such as: relationships with family and friends, area of residence, leisure activities, and life in general. Participants were also asked about their feelings of loneliness, and provided self-assessments of their health.

Additionally, as part of this survey a representative sample of the elderly Jewish population in Israel was asked, for the first time, about their exposure to the Nazi

¹ Even though the percentage of elderly persons hospitalized in institutions increases with age, over 90% of the elderly population in Israel live in households in the community (see the publication *Population of Institutions*, Publications of the Census of Population and Housing 1995, No. 4).

regime and about where they were during World War II. The main findings of the survey are presented in this publication.

MAIN FINDINGS

Examination of the results of the survey conducted among persons aged 60 and over who live in the community² in Israel in 1997-1998 reveals considerable differences between the sexes, changes with advanced age, and unique characteristics that distinguish the various population groups in Israeli society³: Jewish veteran residents, Immigrants of 1990 and after, and Arab residents.

The following are selected findings, presented according to four main categories of topics: General Characteristics, Daily Life, Personal Functioning and State of Health, and Holocaust Survivors.

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Type of household: Most persons aged 60 and over who reside in the community live with family members. However, the type of household varies according to sex, age, population group, and marital status. The percentage of women living alone is at least twice that of men, and the difference between the sexes increases as a function of age.

Place of residence: 80% of the persons aged 60 and over among the population of veteran Israelis (Jews and Arabs) own the dwellings they live in. By contrast, only one-third of the persons aged 60 and over who immigrated in 1990 and after purchased the dwellings they live in.

In most of the dwellings, there are provisions for heating and hot water in the winter. One-third of the households reported damage to the windows, walls, and pipes.

² Not including residents of institutions, but including residents of sheltered housing.

³ Every difference presented in this publication is statistically significant, with a 95% confidence level that the difference actually exists in that population and was not the result of a sampling error. See Appendix 1: "Research Methodology" (Hebrew only).

Persons aged 60 and over and their offspring: The majority of persons aged 60 and over (94%) are parents. Most of them live near their children, whom they see frequently (the frequency of gatherings was found to be higher for Arabs than for Jews). Patterns of mutual help were found to exist between parents and offspring, and the level of satisfaction expressed by the persons aged 60 and over was found to be very high (94%).

Income level: Over 40% of the persons aged 60 and over reported a monthly income that is no greater than half of the average wage in the economy. Women's income level was found to be much lower than that of men in the same age group. Arabs aged 60 and over reported much lower income than did Jewish residents (long-term and new immigrants). Level of income was found to decline with increased age.

Less than half (48%) of the men aged 65 and over, and less than 20% of the women aged 65 and over receive a pension from a place of work in Israel.

Knowledge of Reading, Writing, and Conversation in Hebrew: In 1998, 11% of the persons aged 60 and over in Israel (76 thousand) were illiterate. However, the rates of illiteracy varied by sex and population group: 70% of the Arabs (34 thousand), 7% of the long-time Jewish residents (Israeli-born and immigrants up to 1989 – 37 thousand), and 4% of the new immigrants (who arrived in 1990 and after – 6 thousand) reported that they do not know how to read or write (i.e., they are "illiterate"). Women reported higher levels of illiteracy (over twice as high) than did men.

Over half of the new immigrants who immigrated in 1990 and after, and 65% of the Arabs aged 60 and over reported that they do not speak Hebrew at all.

Work: Even though almost all of the men aged 60 and over who participated in the survey (99%) reported that they had worked at some time in their lives, the proportion of women in the civilian labour force varies according to population group: most of the women who immigrated in 1990 and after (94%) reported that they had worked in the past (mainly abroad). By comparison, 76.5% of the Jewish women who were long-term residents in Israel, and only 10% of the Arab women aged 60 and over reported that they had worked out of their home at any time in the past.

The most prevalent occupations of the men aged 60 and over were: skilled agricultural workers, manufacturing, and construction (35%), clerical workers (13%), and sales workers (13%). Twenty-five percent of the women aged 60 and over worked in sales, and another 21% were unskilled workers.

Of the persons 60 and over who reported that they had worked in the past, 31% of the men and 19% of the women had been employed in manufacturing.

II. DAILY LIFE

Leisure activities: Jewish long-term residents of Israel, and immigrants who arrived in 1990 and after reported similar patterns of leisure activity, which were mainly oriented toward the individual. For example, they use the media extensively and on a daily basis, they attend cultural performances, and they engage in a hobby regularly. Arab persons aged 60 and over reported leisure time activity that is oriented toward social activities in their immediate environment. For example, they visit neighbors and friends as well as attend prayer services frequently.

Physical activity: 40% of the men and 32% of the women aged 60 and over reported that they engage in regular physical activity. It should be mentioned that physical activity is most common among the Jewish population. The number of persons in this population who engage in physical exercise was reported to decline as a function of age. Walking is the most frequent form of exercise, as reported by 67% of all elderly people who indicated that they engage in physical activity.

Regarding **eating habits**, no differences were found by sex or age, although there were differences between population groups: A higher percentage of Jewish long-term residents of Israel reported that they eat dairy products daily (87%) than did other population groups. A higher percentage of immigrants who arrived in Israel in 1990 and after reported that they eat vegetables (91%), fruit (88%) and meat (65%) daily, than did other population groups, and 34% of the Arab population aged 60 and over reported that they eat legumes every day (a higher rate than among the Jewish population).

Smoking: Among the population aged 60 and over, smoking habits vary considerably according to sex, population, and age. A higher percentage of men than

women in all population groups smoked in the past. However, the difference between the sexes was smaller among Jewish long-term residents. The percentage of men who had smoked at any time in their lives was similar for all populations groups (over 60%), but the percentage of those who had stopped smoking was higher among Jewish men. 41% of the Arab men reported that they still smoke, compared with only 16% of their Jewish counterparts. The percentage of persons aged 60 and over who never smoked in their lives was found to increase as a function of age.

Exposure to violence: The results of the survey indicate that about 9% of the population aged 60 and over (about 60,000 persons) had been exposed to an incident of theft or violence against them during the year that preceded the interview. Most of the cases were burglaries in the elderly person's home or theft without the victim's knowledge (e.g., stealing their wallet or pickpocketing). About 3,000 (0.4%) of them had been physically assaulted (stabbed or hit).

Feelings of loneliness: Despite the differences in the reports of persons aged 60 and from different population groups (Jewish long-term residents, immigrants of 1990 and after, and Arabs) with regard to family structure, geographic proximity to their children, and frequency of gatherings with their children, neighbors, and friends, no difference was reported in feelings of loneliness among people aged 60 and over from different population groups. Differences were found between the sexes (a higher percentage of women than men reported loneliness), and feelings of loneliness increased as a function of age.

Level of Satisfaction: The majority (94%) of people aged 60 and over expressed satisfaction with their relationships with their children; 87% reported that they are satisfied with the treatment they receive from their sick fund; and 83% reported that they are satisfied with their place of residence. With regard to leisure time, the overall level of satisfaction was lower than in other areas (65%). Altogether, 76% of the people aged 60 and over expressed general satisfaction with their lives. Women expressed lower rates of satisfaction than did men.

III. PERSONAL FUNCTIONING AND STATE OF HEALTH

Level of daily functioning: Nearly 9% of the people aged 60 and over in Israel who live in the community reported limited functioning in carrying out one or more **Activities of Daily Living (ADL)**, such as dressing, washing, eating independently, sitting down and getting up from a chair, or getting in and out of bed. Another 15% of them reported that they have difficulty carrying out one or more of those activities. The percentage of elderly persons with limitations in ADL was found to increase as a function of age. The percentages of disability reported by men and women aged 80 and over were 5 times greater than among their counterparts aged 70 to 74.

Activities related to maintaining a household (Instrumental Activities of Daily Living – IADL) such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, and other errands (going to the bank, post office, etc.) are more difficult for elderly people, and the difficulty was found to increase as a function of age. Specifically, 30% of the people aged 60 and over reported limitations in performing one or more instrumental activities of daily living, and another 25% reported difficulty performing all of those activities independently. The percentage of women who reported IADL limitations was 1.5 times greater than that of men in the same age group.

Need for additional help with ADL or IADL: One out of five people who have limitations or difficulty performing one or more activities of daily living (ADL) reported that they need additional help. Almost half of those with limitations or difficulty performing one or more instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) reported that they need additional help.

Mobility: Most people aged 60 and over are able to move outside of their homes at least 400 meters. However, mobility declines considerably as a function of age, mainly among people aged 80 and over. One out of three women aged 80 and over are unable to walk more than 400 meters, whereas one out of five men aged 80 and over reported that they are unable to walk that distance.

Falls: Over 30% of the persons aged 80 and over reported falling in or outside of their homes during the half-year prior to the interview (three times higher than the rate of falls reported by persons aged 60-64). No significant differences were found between the sexes or between different population groups.

Hearing and vision impairment: Almost one-third of the persons aged 60 and over reported impaired vision (more women than men). About one-fourth of the persons aged 60 and over reported impaired hearing (more men than women). Impairments in vision and hearing were found to increase as a function of age: 22% of the people aged 60 and over reported that their vision had never been tested, and 65% had never had a hearing test.

Chronic conditions: Over 50% of the women and 40% of the men aged 60 and over reported that they had been medically diagnosed with high blood pressure. About one-fourth of the men aged 60 and over reported that they had been diagnosed with heart disease. The percentage of men with heart disease was higher than among women, although the difference between the sexes diminished with increasing age. About 20% of the people aged 60 and over were diagnosed with diabetes, and 22% of the women in that age group reported that they had been diagnosed with osteoporosis.

Self-assessments of health: About 60% of all survey participants aged 60 and over provided negative assessments of their health (either “not so good” or “not good at all”). The percentage of negative assessments was found to increase with age. The percentage of women who provided negative assessments of their health was higher than among men. A higher percentage of Jewish long-term residents of Israel provided positive assessments of their health, compared with Arabs and new immigrants who arrived in Israel in 1990 and after.

Use of health services: 45% of the people aged 60 and over reported that they had visited a family doctor, and 22% had seen a nurse during the two weeks preceding the interview. Almost half the persons aged 60 and over had visited a specialist who is not a family doctor during the half year preceding the date of the interview, 18% of them had been to the hospital emergency room, and 18% of them had been hospitalized during that period. The percentage of men who went to the emergency room and were hospitalized was higher than that of women, and the number of hospitalizations was found to increase as a function of age. Over one-third of the persons aged 60 and over reported that they had never visited a dentist.

IV. HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

Some questions in the survey were worded to identify Holocaust survivors in Israel. This was the first time that a representative sample of the population of elderly Israelis living in the community had been asked about their exposure to the Nazi regime.

The survey findings reveal that in 1998, over one-third (35%) of the Jewish population aged 60 and over in Israel (i.e., over 223 thousand persons) reported that they had lived in a country that was under the Nazi regime or in a country that had been under the direct influence of the Nazis.

Over half of the participants in the survey who had been directly exposed to the Nazi regime (over 116 thousand persons aged 60 and over living in Israel in 1998) reported that they had experienced one or more of the following situations: 59 thousand had lived in a ghetto, 40 thousand had lived in hiding, 50 thousand had been in a labour camp, and 42 thousand had been in a concentration camp.