

Good Neighbours

Measuring Quality of Life in Older Age

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New research at St George's, University of London, has found that quality of life in old age is driven by psychological and social factors, rather than objective indicators, such as home ownership, income or education. The research, which was led by Professor Ann Bowling, using a newly developed measure of wellbeing, suggests that policies aimed at improving the quality of life of older people should focus on providing facilities that support neighbourliness and social interaction and help people to feel in control of their own lives.

The research also found that people from ethnic minorities had significantly lower levels of wellbeing, despite tending to be younger than other groups surveyed.

Until recently, most measures of quality of life have been based on the opinions of outside experts. This research employs a new questionnaire which reflects the results of a series of face-to-face interviews with over 1000 people aged 65+ conducted over an eight-year period. It is hoped that the new measure will contribute to better policy decisions concerning the wellbeing of older people.

Key Findings

The main factors contributing to a good quality of life in older age were:

- Psychological factors such a sense of optimism and realistic expectations;
- Good health and mobility;
- Engaging in a large number of social activities and feeling supported;
- Good community facilities and infrastructure such as transport;
- Feeling safe in one's neighbourhood;
- Having a sense of control over one's life;
- Maintaining independence and an adequate income.



Developing the new measure of QoL used in this research

The new measure of QoL in older age has been in development since 1999 when 1000 people randomly selected by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) were interviewed about their views on the key elements of a good quality of life. The face-to-face interviews were repeated four times over the following eight years.

In 2007-8 over 500 more people were added to the group and a third sample representing a more ethnically diverse group (Indian, Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese) was added from the Ethnibus database.

The results of 2007-8 surveys showed large variations in the proportion of people reporting a high quality of life.

The highest number was found in the new ONS British sample aged 65+ (36% with a high OPQOL score), compared to just 12% of the older follow-up sample (now aged 72+), and only 2% of the Ethnibus sample aged 65+.

How QoL in old age can be improved: the policy implications of the research

- The survey results highlight the importance to older people of living in a neighbourly and safe area, and of having good local facilities to promote friendly and helpful relationships with other people.
- They also emphasise the value of participating in social or voluntary activities as a way of 'keeping busy' - and to stop people 'worrying', 'feeling alone', or 'dwelling on the past.'

Recommendations

- People could be encouraged to involve themselves in social activities, and build up their support networks from a young age onwards - so that they have a stock of such social resources in later life.
- People could also be encouraged to develop positive thinking, and direct their perceptions upwards; they need to learn to be, and to feel, more in control of their everyday lives.

Conclusion

Society needs to work harder, and in partnership with local people, to promote local communities with good facilities, including health care and access to transport, with opportunities for social participation and networking, and environments which are perceived to be safe. These factors, including adequate pensions, can lead to the experience of enhanced QoL in older age.

