

## **Report on 2008 Study on Public Perception and Attitudes towards Ageing and Seniors**

1 Seniors in Singapore are valued and respected by the population in general, according to the findings of the *2008 Study on Public Perception and Attitudes towards Ageing and Seniors*. The study also revealed that despite changing times, 79% of Singapore residents believe the family should be the primary care-giving units for elderly members.

2 The aim of the study was to examine some of the existing attitudes and perceptions towards ageing and the seniors among broad demographic groups. It also set out to gain a deeper understanding of seniors' relationships with friends and extended family, the roles they were perceived to play in society, and the implications of these on their overall well-being. The goal was to identify areas where Council for Third Age (C3A) – and other stakeholders in the seniors sector – could make a difference in seniors' overall engagement in society and well-being.

3 The study, which was commissioned by C3A in November 2008, consisted of 2,000 face-to-face close interviews with Singapore citizens and permanent residents aged 16 years old and above, using a structured survey form and conducted at respondents' homes. The profile of the respondents was representative of the total Singapore resident population across five demographic classifications: gender, age, race, house type and economic status.<sup>1</sup> In order to gather more in-depth information about the reasons behind the formation of certain attitudes or perceptions, focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising a total of 63 participants from five age bands were also conducted as part of the study.

4 The key findings are as appended below.

### **4.1 Seniors Are Valuable and Valued**

4.1.1 The message from the general public to seniors according to the survey is that they are both valuable to and highly valued by society, for their life knowledge, skills and experience, with 87% believing that seniors could play an active role in society<sup>2</sup>. The perceived value of seniors was high with 91% of respondents (aged below 50) agreeing that seniors had valuable life experiences to share with the younger generation<sup>3</sup>. Seniors also provide an invaluable source of caregiving as 71% of respondents (aged 50 and above) shared that they were willing to look after their grandchildren.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Slides 2-3

<sup>2</sup> Slide 4

<sup>3</sup> Slide 5

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4.1.2 Seniors in the oldest demographic group, however, had significantly less positive perceptions about themselves. Only 68% felt they “can play an active role in society”; even fewer (56%) felt that seniors “are not weak and ill”<sup>5</sup> (see Table 1).

Table 1:

All respondents	Respondents aged 65 and above
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 87% of respondents felt that “senior citizens can play an active role in society”</li> <li>• 69% of respondents felt that “seniors are well-integrated with the rest of society”</li> <li>• 63% of respondents felt that “seniors are not weak and ill”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 68% felt that “seniors citizens can play an active role in society”</li> <li>• 58% felt that “seniors are well-integrated with the rest of society”</li> <li>• 56% felt that “seniors are not weak and ill”</li> </ul>

4.1.3 It is plausible that their less optimistic outlook and perception of seniors could be attributed to their poorer perceived personal health since only 56% of this cohort of respondents felt that seniors were not weak and ill. External factors such as rapid technological advancements may further exacerbate this feeling of isolation with the rest of the society.

4.1.4 Extracts from Focus Group Discussions:

(a) *“I must admit that in my younger days, my thoughts of the older people were different from my thoughts today. As you grow older, you are wiser, you gain more experiences and life changes you... I used to find them naggy and disturbing at times, but now I feel differently.”*  
- Respondent from the 25-34 age group

(b) *“These younger generations are not so into relations; they are more into talking through phone or SMS or e-mails, so interpersonal skills are not there. They cannot talk face to face with a senior and this is a real challenge.”*  
- Respondent from the 50-64 age group

## 4.2 Family Comes First

4.2.1 The survey reveals a clear consensus on the importance of maintaining strong relationships between generations, with 93% of all respondents agreeing to this statement<sup>6</sup>. Close to 80% of the general population aged below 50 years old also agreed that family should be

<sup>5</sup> Slide 7

<sup>6</sup> Slide 8

the primary care-giving unit and first line of support for seniors, and expressed willingness to play their part in caring for seniors<sup>7</sup>.

4.2.2 However, perceptions on family obligations to seniors varied across the different age groups, with the youngest group (16-24 years) showing the least willingness to care for seniors (67%), as compared to 77% for the general population<sup>8</sup>. They also had the lowest relative score when it came to seeing the family as the primary care-giving unit for seniors (70%), as compared to 79% for the general population<sup>9</sup>.

4.2.3 A number of factors could contribute to this: pre-occupation with academic pursuits or career-building; inadequately equipped – both financially and emotionally – to take on such obligations, etc. These factors suggest that such attitudes could be tied to life stage and could therefore be transient. Lending weight to this, the next older age group – the 25-34 year-olds – expressed greater willingness to take on family obligations.

4.2.4 On the other hand, this could also suggest a possible paradigm shift where future seniors are envisaged to be more independent and self-sufficient.

4.2.5 Most people surveyed – both young and old – considered the family an important source of support and advice in “crunch times”, e.g. when important decisions have to be made, during illnesses<sup>10</sup>. However, the perceptions of respondents aged 65 and above revealed a somewhat different, and perhaps less rosy, story. For example, only 63% of these respondents said they could rely on family members if they fell ill, compared to 75% for the 50-64 age group (see Table 2).

Table 2:

S/N	Questions	Respondents who agree with the following statements			
		Total	50-54 years	55-64 years	65 years & above
1.	I would talk to family members if I need to make important decisions	85%	90%	88%	75%
2.	I would turn to family members for assistance if I faced with difficulties in doing things	72%	79%	76%	61%
3.	I can rely on family members to take care of me if I get ill	71%	75%	75%	63%
4.	I can count on my siblings and/or nieces and nephews if I am in need	52%	54%	54%	48%

<sup>7</sup> Slide 9

<sup>8</sup> Slide 10

<sup>9</sup> Slide 10

<sup>10</sup> Slides 11 and 12

4.2.6 Another point to note is that positive perceptions of seniors among younger respondents and healthy family relationships are positively correlated. For example, 76% of those who agreed with the statement “seniors are well integrated with society” would consult senior family members on important decisions, as compared to just 61% for those who did not agree with this statement (see Table 3).

Table 3:

S/N	Questions	Seniors are well integrated with society	
		Agree	Disagree
1.	I would consult senior family members for advice when making important decisions	76%	61%
2.	I would turn to older family members for advice when I face difficulties in life	70%	48%
3.	I talk to a relative who is a senior at least once a week	47%	39%
4.	I update my parents/ relatives who are seniors on current affairs and government policies which impact them	47%	32%

#### 4.2.7 Extracts from Focus Group Discussions:

- (a) *“I feel that our parents have brought us up so the least that we can do is to take care of them when they are old... but today’s children I find our young stars totally different. They don’t think the way that we do. To them, other things come first, not their parents first.”*  
- Respondent from the 50-64 age group
- (b) *“After I used all my CPF funds to pay for my son’s education abroad, he graduated and became a citizen overseas and I have never received a cent back... My friends tell me that I am stupid but I just think, well, never mind – as a parent I just did my duty and thought that my children will support me too. But I do not blame my child, although I am not rich and have a hard life now...”*  
- Respondent from the 65 & above age group

### 4.3 Social Networks and Family Bonds Increase Sense of Well-being

4.3.1 For the 50 and above age group, a strong network of good friends and close family bonds correlates positively to higher overall life satisfaction. Those who expressed less satisfaction with their lives in general had significantly lower percentage scores when it came to supportive friends and family members, especially when in need or if

they were ill. Of the respondents who expressed satisfaction with life, 72% had friends whom they could count on for support. For respondents who were less satisfied with life, only 56% had friends whom they could count on for support. See table 4<sup>11</sup>.

Table 4:

S/N	Questions	Respondents who were generally more satisfied with life	Respondents who were generally less satisfied with life
1.	I would talk to family members if I need to make important decisions	88%	79%
2.	I would turn to family members for assistance if I faced with difficulties in doing things	81%	59%
3.	I can rely on family members to take care of me if I get ill	79%	59%
4.	I have friends whom I can count on for support if I am in need	72%	56%

#### 4.3.2 Extracts from Focus Group Discussions:

*“You can see no matter in which family background, everyone communicates with their grandparents, they are like pillars of support... in terms of grandparents in the family, the people who are older than you, they are very important.”*

- Respondent from the 16-24 age group

## 4.4 Active Ageing: Expanding Participation

4.4.1 According to the survey, seniors (aged 50 and above) were primarily active in the domestic sphere with 69% taking care of grandchildren and helping with household chores. Over one-third were involved in special interest groups (32%), and half of the seniors surveyed regularly participated in physical activities with friends three times or more a week. Seniors were also active outside their family and social circles with 40% having worked or provided voluntary services in the last six months. And they embraced new skills and interests with 41% revealing that they learnt or did something new/interesting in the last month.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Slide 13

<sup>12</sup> Slide 14

4.4.2 In terms of engagement through work, 57% of all respondents felt that seniors should continue to work past the current retirement age of 62, while 51% indicated they would work either part-time or full-time beyond 62<sup>13</sup>. Among respondents aged 55 and above, the median retirement age was 65 years<sup>14</sup>.

4.4.3 Extracts from Focus Group Discussions:

- (a) *“I walk every morning – 5 kilometres and I feel that I’m better than some of the younger guys, so I think it’s all in the mind. Try not to retire. When we say retirement, that means you stay at home and you get sick and that’s the problem.”*  
- Respondent from the 50-64 age group
- (b) *“There should be more emphasis on seniors working because I feel that we can work better, are more trustworthy and do not change jobs often. We also have more experience and I think we can be a source of good education for the younger people.”*  
- Respondent from the 50-64 age group

## 4.5 Better Preparedness for Ageing Increases Life Satisfaction

4.5.1 Respondents (aged below 50) were asked six questions relating to preparedness for ageing.<sup>15</sup> Those who were better prepared registered greater life satisfaction and better perceived personal health. For example, 95% of the respondents who answered yes to all the six questions reported satisfaction with their perceived personal health and 81% in the area of overall satisfaction with life. In comparison, for those who had not started any preparations, only 75% reported satisfaction with their perceived personal health and 64% in the area of overall satisfaction with life<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Slide 16

<sup>15</sup> The six questions were:

1. I have a financial plan to ensure that I am financially secure in my old age.
2. I exercise regularly so that I am less likely to fall sick during my old age.
3. I adopt a balanced diet so that I can have a healthy lifestyle in my old age.
4. I cultivate good relationship with my family and relatives so that I have their support when I grow old.
5. I cultivate a strong social network so that I will have companions when I grow old.
6. I have started planning for my old age.

<sup>16</sup> Slide 17

4.5.2 Currently, only 49% of the respondents (aged below 50) have started planning for their senior years<sup>17</sup>. The detailed breakdown by age bands is shown in Table 5:

Table 5:

S/N	Age Band	% who have started planning for senior years
1	16-24	28%
2	25-34	48%
3	35-44	63%
4	45-49	58%

4.5.3 Based on the findings, a significant take-away is the relatively low level of preparedness for their senior years among those in the 45-49 age band (58%).

## 4.6 Majority Wants to Grow Old in Singapore

4.6.1 Statistics show that as the respondent's age increased, the willingness to spend his/her senior years in Singapore also increased. Although 24% of all the respondents did not feel that it was affordable to spend their retirement in Singapore, majority of the respondents (74%) stated that they would want to grow old and/or spend their retirement years here<sup>18</sup>.

4.6.2 However, one noteworthy point is that although the willingness to grow old and retire in Singapore grew with increasing age, there was a dip when it reached the cohort aged 65 and above. This could be due to affordability issue – while 61% of those aged 55-64 years felt that it was affordable to grow old in Singapore, only 47% from the cohort aged 65 and above shared similar sentiments. It could also be that they might not have planned for their senior years due to a lack of awareness of the need and/ or the ability to do so in their younger years<sup>19</sup>.

4.6.3 Nevertheless, the fact that majority of the respondents wanted to grow old and/or spend their retirement years in Singapore reflects that in spite of challenges, such as rising costs of living, seniors who had established strong familial relationships and social networks within the community were likely to look forward to growing old and retiring in Singapore, as it is where home is.

<sup>17</sup> Slide 17

<sup>18</sup> Slide 18

<sup>19</sup> Slide 19