



# LONELINESS AMONG OLDER MEN IN WESTERN AND EASTERN EUROPE

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**Friends of the Elderly Ireland** is a volunteer-based charity, established in 1980, that plays a vital role in addressing the needs of an ageing population. Friends of the Elderly is committed to promoting positive ageing by offering support and opportunities for social enrichment and friendship. They are dedicated in trying to alleviate loneliness and isolation felt by so many older people today.

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The report does not represent the collective views of TASC, but only of the respective authors. The responsibility of TASC is limited to approving its publication as worthy of consideration of the global progressive movement.

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## About the Report

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This report, led by TASC, was commissioned by *The Friends of the Elderly* in Ireland. Marking the 20th anniversary of the EU's Eastern Enlargement, the research focuses on loneliness among older men in Ireland, Poland, and Romania. Therefore, linked organisations of the Friends of the Elderly in Poland and Romania took part in writing the report, through local researchers in their country.

The report provides insights into the causes of and solutions to loneliness among older men, which will benefit organisations providing services to older people. It will also aid in the development of social prescribing policies and improve government participation in supporting older populations.

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Readers of this report are welcome to cite it and are encouraged to contact the authors for further insights or collaboration.



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



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## Executive Summary

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With rising life expectancy and a rapidly ageing population, loneliness and isolation among older adults are expected to grow. The EU, second only to Japan in terms of demographic ageing, had nearly 95.7 million people aged over 65 in 2023, representing 21.6% of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Older men over 65 accounted for 9%, or 41.3 million, of Europe's total population.<sup>2</sup> This research explores loneliness among older men in Europe, focusing on Ireland, Poland, and Romania—marking 20 years since the EU's Eastern Enlargement. Using mixed methods and comparative analysis, it investigates: Do older men feel lonely? What influences this? Are there cross-country differences? And what helps reduce loneliness?

The findings show that loneliness remains a widespread and persistent issue among older adults in Ireland, Poland, and Romania, driven by factors such as living alone, deteriorating health, and a lack of meaningful social connections. In Ireland, approximately one-third of older people report feeling lonely, particularly those who are single or managing chronic conditions.<sup>3</sup> Although community-based initiatives like Men's Sheds, hobbies, and digital communication provide some support, many still experience emotional isolation, even when they maintain contact with family or live in shared environments. In Poland, loneliness is also common, especially among the oldest adults and the widowed. Despite the availability of senior programmes, participation is low, and while strong family bonds offer some protection, friendships tend to be shallow, and social engagement is often hindered by distrust or financial concerns. Romania reports some of the highest levels of loneliness in the EU, with rates reaching up to 60% in urban areas. Limited interpersonal contact and underdeveloped support systems are key contributing factors, despite a desire among older people for connection and companionship.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population structure and ageing*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

<sup>3</sup> Aware (2023) *Aware's older adult research reveals high rates of depression and anxiety*. Available at: <https://www.aware.ie/survey-older-adults/> [Accessed 14th December 2024]

The study also revealed several more specific findings that were common to all three countries:

### **1. Social structures play an essential role in mitigating loneliness.**

Interviews from all three countries highlight the vital role of strong social networks in reducing loneliness among older men. Connections with family, friends, and community groups, through clubs, centres, or volunteering – provide crucial support and foster inclusion. Ireland reports the highest engagement of men over 65 in voluntary activities, while rates in Poland and Romania remain low.

### **2. Mobility and public transportation challenges affect all three countries.**

Limited mobility and inadequate public transportation are common challenges across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, particularly affecting older adults in rural areas. In these regions, scarce public transport and heavy reliance on private vehicles create significant barriers, especially for those who are no longer able to drive. These mobility constraints reduce opportunities for social participation and increase the risk of isolation. While informal support networks may help mitigate these issues in Ireland, structural obstacles remain more entrenched in Poland and Romania, despite efforts to introduce innovative solutions.

### **3. Older adults in Ireland, Poland, and Romania face similar economic challenges.**

Older adults in all three countries rely mainly on State Pensions, though their financial security varies. Irish seniors in the current study generally report greater stability, supported by stronger welfare systems and home ownership, while those in Poland, and especially Romania, face tighter budgets and higher poverty risks. Public healthcare is available in all three, but access remains uneven, with affordability and long wait times a particular issue in Romania. Financial strain and service access are key concerns, especially in Eastern Europe.

### **4. Despite national differences, digital inclusion among older adults in Ireland, Poland, and Romania is gradually improving, but there are still challenges.**

Across all three countries, older adults value technology's role in reducing isolation but continue to emphasise the irreplaceable role of in-person contact. In Ireland, older men show increasing digital engagement, and most interviewed participants use the internet regularly, aided by family members, though hesitancy persists. Initiatives like *Age Action's Getting Started* programme, and *Friends of the Elderly's*

Tech Clubs and *Hi Digital* programmes can also help older people stay connected, independent, and included in an increasingly digital society. In Poland, despite widespread internet access, older adults, particularly those with lower education, struggle with digital skills, often viewing technology as secondary to face-to-face interaction. Romania faces the steepest barriers, with the EU's lowest digital literacy rates among seniors, but many older adults still use technology for connection and support, even while acknowledging skill gaps and risks.

### **5. The way older people are treated and how openly issues like loneliness are discussed is strongly influenced by cultural norms and perceptions of ageing.**

Across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, perceptions of ageing and respect for older men vary, shaped by cultural norms, historical context, and personal relationships. In Ireland, while ageing is often viewed through a lens of vulnerability, many older men feel respected by their communities, particularly by younger generations. Polish participants reported mixed experiences, with respect often linked to age, status, or individual interactions, and societal views on ageing still evolving. In Romania, traditional values emphasising strength and self-reliance can hinder emotional openness, and outdated perceptions of ageing persist. Across all three countries, respect for older men is present but uneven, and open discussions about issues like loneliness or ageing often depend on trust and the strength of personal connections.

Based on the findings, we recommend a multi-faceted approach, highlighting six key areas of intervention (see next page). Each area involves collaboration among various societal actors such as the state, media, community, and civil society.



## Addressing Loneliness among Older Men

### Recommendations

- 1. Improve public perceptions of ageing and mental health.** To encourage greater inclusion and understanding, efforts should focus on promoting positive portrayals of older adults in media and raising public awareness to help shift societal attitudes.
- 2. Raise awareness of available services and supports.** This includes informing older adults about their rights, healthcare, financial advice, and social or cultural activities.
- 3. Enhance social structures for older men.** Policies should fund inclusive community spaces such as clubs, men's sheds, cultural centres, volunteering opportunities, adult education, and intergenerational programmes. At the same time, outreach efforts should raise awareness and encourage participation.
- 4. Improve digital connectivity and literacy.** Along with improving digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, digital training programmes for older adults can help them stay connected with friends, family, and relevant services and activities. The training should be practical, accessible, and tailored to older adults' needs, with a focus on building confidence and everyday digital skills. At the same time, it is vital to respect the preferences of those who choose not to go digital and ensure that non-digital options remain available.
- 5. Enhance access and mobility by improving public transportation and local mobility support.** This requires targeted policy interventions and sustained investment to improve transport access and enhance the quality of life for older people in rural communities.
- 6. Ensure economic security by reviewing pension systems and promoting training to enhance financial resilience.** Financial security is vital for older people, not just for basic needs like food and energy, but also for maintaining health, independence, and a dignified, active social life. Pension policies should better address the cost-of-living challenges. Disparities in pension entitlements between professions, such as those in the military and agriculture, should be evaluated to ensure fair and adequate support across all sectors. Additionally, tailored financial resilience training for older adults is recommended, covering areas such as budgeting, preparing for emergencies, saving strategies, reducing household costs, and making the most of available entitlements to maximise income.

Across all three countries, each area of intervention requires coordinated action across different sectors, reflecting the complexity and interdependence of the factors that influence loneliness in older men. Policies should adopt a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach that ensures all interventions are properly prioritised and supported. Ageing-related policies and services should be co-designed with older adults to enhance their relevance and effectiveness and should include robust monitoring and evaluation through ongoing feedback mechanisms.

Although based on a small sample, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of loneliness among older people in Ireland, Poland, and Romania. It offers an important snapshot of current realities and highlights key areas for action—some of which may also be relevant to older men in other countries, with potential benefits for society as a whole. Further and ongoing research of this kind, which actively centres older people's voices, perspectives, and lived experiences, can deepen understanding and support more effective, tailored responses.



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# Introduction

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Older adults often experience loneliness and isolation<sup>4</sup> due to declining health, reduced mobility, retirement, and other age-related changes or losses. These experiences are further influenced by societal factors such as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against older people.<sup>5</sup> Gender also plays a role, with men often experiencing greater levels of isolation than women.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have also led to increased feeling of loneliness and social isolation among older people.<sup>7</sup>

A lack of strong social support networks, resulting in loneliness and social isolation, has been shown to negatively impact the wellbeing of older adults, while poor self-rated health, functional impairments, and chronic illnesses are all linked to higher levels of sense of loneliness. Overall, loneliness has been strongly associated with a significantly reduced quality of life.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe, more than 75 million European adults meet with family or friends at most once a month. 30 million adults frequently feel lonely, and the prevalence of

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<sup>4</sup> Victor, C.R., Scambler, S.J., Bowling, A. & Bond, J. (2005) 'The prevalence of, and risk factors for, loneliness in later life: A survey of older people in Great Britain', *Ageing and Society*, 25, pp. 357-375.

<sup>5</sup> Sandu, V., Zólyomi, E. and Leichsenring, K. (2021) *Addressing loneliness and social isolation among older people in Europe*, Policy Brief 2021/7. Vienna: European Centre. Available at: <https://www.euro.centre.org/publications/detail/4127> [Accessed 14th October 2024]

Shiovitz-Ezra, S., Shemesh J., McDonnell-Naughton, M. (2018) 'Pathways from Ageism to Loneliness', pp. 131-147 in Ayalon, L. & Tesch-Römer, C. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, Cham: Springer Open.

<sup>6</sup> O'Connor, N., & Murphy, M. A. (2022) *The State of Ageing in Ireland 2022 – Reframing Ageing*. Dublin, Age Action Ireland. Available at:

[https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/reframing\\_ageing\\_state\\_of\\_ageing\\_in\\_ireland\\_2022\\_published.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/reframing_ageing_state_of_ageing_in_ireland_2022_published.pdf) [Accessed 14th October 2024]

<sup>7</sup> Stolz, E., Mayerl, H., & Freidl, W. (2021) 'The impact of COVID-19 restriction measures on loneliness among older adults in Austria', *European journal of public health*, 31(1), 44-49.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaa238> [Accessed 14th October 2024]

Losada-Baltar, A., Jiménez-Gonzalo, L., Gallego-Alberto, L., Pedroso-Chaparro, M. D. S., Fernandes-Pires, J., & Márquez-González, M. (2021) "'We Are Staying at Home': Association of Self-perceptions of Aging, Personal and Family Resources, and Loneliness with Psychological Distress During the Lock-Down Period of COVID-19', *The journals of gerontology. Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences*, 76(2), pp. 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa048> [Accessed 12th December 2024]

Santini Z., & Koyanagi A. (2021) 'Loneliness and its association with depressed mood, anxiety symptoms, and sleep problems in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic' *Acta Neuropsychiatrica*, 33(3), pp. 1-10. doi: 10.1017/neu.2020.48

<sup>8</sup> Ward, M., Layte, R., & Kenny, R.A (2019) *Loneliness, social isolation, and their discordance among older adults: Findings from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)*. Available at: [https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report\\_Loneliness.pdf](https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report_Loneliness.pdf) [Accessed 12th December 2025]

loneliness is higher in Eastern and Southern Europe than in Western and Northern Europe.<sup>9</sup>

With higher life expectancy, and the problem of loneliness and isolation is expected to increase due to population ageing.<sup>10</sup> The EU provides one of the most distinctive examples of demographic ageing, after Japan.<sup>11</sup> This population ageing in the EU is primarily driven by declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. In 2023, in the European Union (27 countries), there were almost 95.7 million people over 65, accounting for one-fifth of the total population of 448.8 million.<sup>12</sup> Of this population, 41.3 million, or over 9%, were men.<sup>13</sup>

The current research examines loneliness among older men in Europe, focusing on Ireland, Poland and Romania as case studies – as part of marking the 20th anniversary of the EU's Eastern Enlargement. Using mixed methods and comparative analysis, the research aims to answer the following questions:

- Do older men in Europe feel lonely, and what influences this feeling?
- Are there differences in loneliness among older men in Ireland, Poland, and Romania?
- What can help them feel less lonely?

The analysis is based on existing data about demographics, social structures, economic factors, cultural norms, historical context, and technology access, as well as interviews with 25 older men in these countries, who shared their personal experiences of loneliness and social engagement. The comparative approach will contribute to policy recommendations regarding ways to address loneliness among older men.

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission (2018) *Science for Policy Brief: Loneliness – an unequally shared burden in Europe*. Available at: [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fairness\\_pb2018\\_loneliness\\_jrc\\_i1.pdf](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fairness_pb2018_loneliness_jrc_i1.pdf) [Accessed: 12th December 2024]

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Ageing Europe - statistics on population developments* (Data extracted in July 2020). Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing\\_Europe\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_population\\_developments](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments) [Accessed 15th December 2024]

<sup>12</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population structure and ageing*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>13</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

## Methodology

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Given the sensitive nature of this research topic and the challenges associated with measuring it solely through quantitative methods, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach to ensure a more comprehensive understanding.

First, we conducted a secondary analysis of existing data for each country, using both national and international data sets, such as Central Statistics Offices, the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat), and relevant reports produced by civil society organisations. The analysis includes an overview of the main relevant policies, to understand governmental approaches to elderly care and loneliness; economic indicators such as pension systems, employment rates, and healthcare affordability; and cultural attitudes towards ageing and masculinity, as well as the political history influencing current social structures and support systems. The analysis relies on data available in each country, and therefore, there may be some differences in the type of data that was found and the way it is presented.

At the second stage, we conducted interviews and small focus groups with 25 men aged between 60 and 92: nine in Ireland, eight in Poland, and eight in Romania. These interviews explore personal experiences of loneliness, social engagement, and access to services. Special efforts were made to reach isolated men through collaboration with local community organisations and outreach programmes.

The interviews and focus groups took place between October 2024 and January 2025. Each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. The sessions were conducted in a supportive and non-judgemental environment, providing a safe space for participants to share their individual experiences. Throughout the entire process, an emphasis was given to follow the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), TASC GDPR privacy policy<sup>14</sup> and TASC's Vulnerable Persons Policy.<sup>15</sup>

The interviewers in each country were instructed to obtain informed consent from participants prior to their participation. Before giving consent, participants were provided with a detailed summary of the project, including its aims, objectives, research methods, and an outline of what their participation would entail.

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<sup>14</sup> TASC GDPR Privacy Policy Statement (2020). Available at: [https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/gdpr\\_privacy\\_policy\\_statement\\_tasc\\_approved\\_bm\\_180920.pdf](https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/gdpr_privacy_policy_statement_tasc_approved_bm_180920.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> TASC Research with Vulnerable Populations Policy (2024). Available at: [https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/research\\_with\\_vulnerable\\_populations\\_policy\\_tasc\\_v\\_171124.pdf](https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/research_with_vulnerable_populations_policy_tasc_v_171124.pdf)

Interviewers were asked to explain to participants that they were free to skip any questions they did not want to answer or felt uncomfortable answering. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage without providing a reason. Additionally, they were informed about how their data would be handled before the interview, and only information essential to the research was collected during the interviews.

With the permission of the participants, the conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded. Selected quotes will be presented here for each country and for each aspect of the research, using pseudonyms.

Finally, an analysis of findings from Ireland, Poland, and Romania aims to identify commonalities and differences in experiences of loneliness and factors contributing to it. Based on the analysis, we will provide recommendations aimed at addressing loneliness among older men.

The partnership with local organisations in Poland and Romania, which are linked to *Friends of the Elderly* in Ireland, allowed access to older men with whom they work. We acknowledge the possibility of selection bias, as those involved in social activities and use social services are perhaps likely to be more sociable to begin with, and may feel less lonely as a result. Within these limitations, our aim was to get a variety of participants, including more rural or isolated men in each region.

The partnership with local organisations also allowed to conduct interviews with older men in their country, in their own language, making the conversation more accessible for them. The familiarity of the interviewers with the local context and culture enabled them to focus on relevant issues, spot nuances while interacting with the participants, and interpret their responses and findings more accurately within the broader social and cultural framework. The local researchers' understanding of the context of their country, as well as their proficiency in the local language, also contributed to the secondary analysis based on national datasets.

# Cross-Level Analysis

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This section includes an analysis of each country this research focuses on – Ireland, Poland, and Romania. The analysis presents key information and statistics, along with insights gathered from participants about their personal experience. The analysis is structured around key aspects we examined in each country - such as population, social structures for older people, policy frameworks related to elderly care, economic indicators, cultural attitudes towards ageing and masculinity, the political history shaping current social structures and support systems, and access to technology. For each country, we concluded by addressing the research question – do older men feel lonely, and what can be done to mitigate this feeling?

## 1. Ireland

### 1.1 Population

In 2023, 15.2% of Ireland's 5.2 million population, 800,515 people, were 65-year-old or over. 47% of them, 377,406 people, were men, representing 7% of the total population.<sup>16</sup> The percentage of men aged 65 and older in Ireland across age groups decreases with advancing age: the majority (32%) are between 65 and 69 years old, 27% are between 70 and 74, 20% are between 75 and 79, 12% are between 80 and 84, and 9% are 85 or older. Eurostat data for 2023 [Figure 1] shows the age division for both genders, and separately for men.<sup>17</sup>

In the recent years, between 2016 and 2022, all counties recorded an increase in average age. The highest increase in population was seen among those over 70s. The number of people aged 85 years and over increased by 25%. The oldest populations are based in Mayo, Kerry, Roscommon and Leitrim.<sup>18</sup>

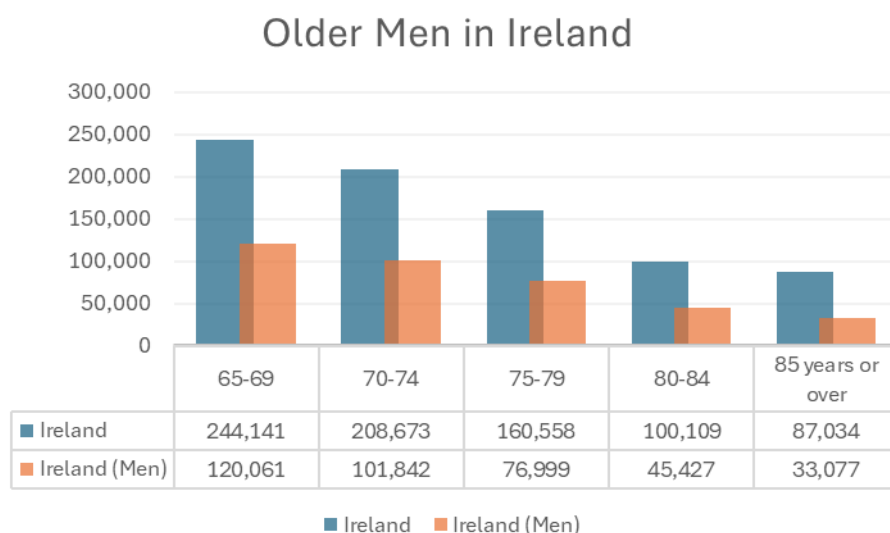
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<sup>16</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

<sup>17</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS 2 region*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 18th June 2025]

<sup>18</sup> Central Statistics Office (2023) *Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/> [Accessed 10th December 2024]





**Figure 1:** older people in Ireland, by age and gender  
Source for data: Eurostat, 2024

The percentage of population over the age of 65 is expected to rise significantly in the coming decades, and it is projected to grow by more than 1 million people by 2057, from 781,000 in 2022 to 1.9 million in 2057. The overall population is projected to grow to 6.4 million over the same period, an increase of 1.2 million. The highest increase will be among people aged 85 and over, whose number is expected to triple between 2027 and 2057.<sup>19</sup>

The life expectancy in Ireland in 2023 was 82.9 years, amongst the highest in EU. The life expectancy of males was 81.1 years, whereas females' life expectancy was 84.6 years.<sup>20</sup> In 2022, people in Ireland were expected to have 11.6 healthy life years after the age 65, which is 2.8 years more than the EU average healthy life years for this cohort, 9.1 years.<sup>21</sup> Healthy life years at age 65 is 11.3 among men in Ireland.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Press Statement for International Day of Older Persons* (published 30th September 2024). Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2024pressreleases/pressstatementforinternationaldayofolderpersons/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>20</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS 2 region*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 18th June 2025]

<sup>21</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Press Statement for International Day of Older Persons* (published 30th September 2024). Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2024pressreleases/pressstatementforinternationaldayofolderpersons/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>22</sup> Department of Health (2022) *Health in Ireland Key Trends 2022*. Available at: <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/635562> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

More than 50% of the men at the age of over 65 years in Ireland have a long-standing illness or health problem.<sup>23</sup> Yet, according to Health Ireland Survey 2024, 69% of the men over 65, similar to women, rate their health in 2023 and 2024 as good or very good, marking a slight increase from 66% in 2019.<sup>24</sup> Similar percentages were found also in *Aware* report (2024): 40.8% of this population describe their health status as good, and 30.5% describe it as very good. 28.7% describe it as fair, bad, or very bad. 25.8% of men between the ages of 65 and 74 years perceive some long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health problems, and 12.3% perceive severe limitations. Among men over 75 years, the findings are 30% and 13.4% respectively.<sup>25</sup> Older people with chronic illnesses suffer more from higher depression rates.<sup>26</sup>

In 2017, almost third of Ireland's population (31.4%) lived in rural areas, compared to 27.3% in the EU.<sup>27</sup> In 2024, the urban population of the Republic of Ireland was approximately 3.48 million (65%), while the rural population was around 1.89 million (35%).<sup>28</sup> Among small towns (1,500-10,000 people), Ballyshannon in Donegal and Dingle in Kerry had the oldest population, with an average age of 44.4 years; Clonmel in Tipperary was the oldest among towns with a population of 10,000 or more, with an average age of 40.8 years.<sup>29</sup>

The participants in the current research were nine men aged 65 and older, who were recruited through Men's Sheds in Ireland. Four of them are from North and South of Dublin, and the other five are from more further areas – two from County Meath, and three from County Longford. We acknowledge the possibility of

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<sup>23</sup> EU-SILC, Eurostat in Department of Health (2022) *Health in Ireland Key Trends 2022*. Available at: <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/635562> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>24</sup> Department of Health (2024) *Healthy Ireland Survey 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d1ab3-healthy-ireland-survey-2024> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>25</sup> EU-SILC, Eurostat in Department of Health, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> *Aware* (2023) *Aware's older adult research reveals high rates of depression and anxiety*. Available at: <https://www.aware.ie/survey-older-adults/> [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>27</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Distribution of population by degree of urbanisation, dwelling type and income group (EU-SILC survey)*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_LVHO01\\_\\_custom\\_1762022/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LVHO01__custom_1762022/default/table?lang=en) [14th November 2024]

<sup>28</sup> Statista (2025) *Urban and rural population of Ireland from 1960 to 2022*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1403779/urban-and-rural-population-of-ireland/> [Accessed 10th September 2025]

<sup>29</sup> Central Statistics Office (2023) *Census of Population 2022 – Profile 1: Population Distribution and Movements – Key Findings*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp1/censusofpopulation2022profile1-populationdistributionandmovements/keyfindings/> [14th November 2024]

selection bias, as those involved in Men's Sheds activities are likely to be more sociable to begin with, and may feel less lonely as a result.

## 1.2 Social Structures

According to the Central Statistics Office, in 2022 74,022 men over 65 in Ireland lived alone in private households – an increase from 59,163 in 2016. 8,430 males aged 65 years and over (compared to 15,019 females in this age) were in a nursing home, children's home, or a residential facility. 1,757 males in this age were in hospitals (a similar number to female – 1,991).<sup>30</sup>

In 2019, 84% of older people aged 75 years and over shared that they find it easy or very easy to get help from neighbours and 75% of them have at least three people they could count on if they had a serious problem.<sup>31</sup>

According to Eurostat data (2024), 19.6% of men over 65 years old in Ireland engaged in formal or informal voluntary activities or active citizenship. The figures for Ireland are above the EU average (11.8%).<sup>32</sup>

Involvement in the community can include not just volunteering or civic activism, but also engagement in community organisations or activities, as well as membership in faith communities.<sup>33</sup> Organisations such as *Friends of the Elderly* in Ireland supports older adults through companionship and social connection programmes. They offer social clubs and events that foster meaningful relationships, encourage engagement, activity, and community-building.<sup>34</sup> Religious affiliation often provides individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, forming tight-knit communities. Over 3.5 million people, 69% of the population in Ireland, reported that their religion was Roman Catholic. There was

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<sup>30</sup> Central Statistics Office (2022) *Nursing homes and communal establishments – Housing Older Persons Information Hub*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-opi/olderpersonsinformationhub/housing/nursinghomesandcommunalestablishments/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>31</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Press Statement for International Day of Older Persons* (published 30th September 2024). Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2024pressreleases/pressstatementforinternationaldayofolderpersons/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>32</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_scp19\\_custom\\_18043240/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_scp19_custom_18043240/default/table) [Accessed 14th December 2024]. According to the data for Ireland, there was a decrease from 2015, when the percentage was over 25%. However, the 2015 data for Ireland are marked as being of low reliability.

<sup>33</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Friends of the Elderly Ireland (2025) *Our services*. Available at: <https://www.friendsoftheelderly.ie/our-services> [Accessed 1st September 2025]

an increase of 187% in the number of people with no religion in Census 2022 compared with 2011, across all ages. Over 100,000 more people aged 45 or over have no religion, an 88% increase since 2016.<sup>35</sup>

When looking at involvement in community and the services and activities that it offers, it is important to note that many households in Ireland are dependent on cars, especially in rural areas. Those who drive or use by public transport report greater participation in social activities and volunteering compared to those who rely on lifts from others. Older people's participation in community life can be significantly reduced following a loss of the ability to drive, inability to afford a car, or the death of a spouse who was the household's driver.<sup>36</sup> It was found that older drivers are less lonely than non-drivers. However, non-driving men are more likely to report intimate social relationships, as their reliance on others for lifts may provide opportunities for social interactions with others.<sup>37</sup>

Most of the respondents in this research in Ireland live alone. They were asked how comfortable they feel to request help from their neighbours, and most of them said that although their relationships with their neighbours are generally ok, they would not necessarily ask them for help: "I don't usually need anything from my neighbours. I get my own groceries. I don't really need anything. So, I'm quite satisfied with living quietly on my own" (Tom, 74-year-old, lives alone north Dublin). Other participants mentioned that if they need any help or want to ask for a favour, they would prefer to call a family member or a friend. One of the respondents feels a that there is more sense of alienation:

*"Ireland has changed, and lot of people don't speak anymore. Even when you say hello at them, they don't even answer you. [...] I worked in a butcher shop, always talking to the customers, so I'm not afraid to speak to people."* – Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford

The respondents were also asked about their level of involvement in their community. Most of them were contacted through Ireland's Men's Sheds, and they are involved in activities for the community, such as cleaning, building benches for the use of the community, and other activities together with schools or with migrants. Joining social groups such as the Men's sheds already suggests a certain

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<sup>35</sup> Central Statistics Office (2023) *Census of Population 2022 – Summary Results*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/> [14th November 2024]

<sup>36</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Donoghue O., Orr J., Leahy S., & Kenny R.A. (2017) *Transport patterns in community-dwelling adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland*. Road Safety Authority. Available at: <http://tilda.tcd.ie/assets/pdf/TransportTopicReport2016.pdf> [Accessed 10th March 2025]

degree of community engagement and involvement, as reflected in their responses:

- *"I wouldn't mind being involved in the community. I go to the men's shed every Wednesday. My friends are there, and we have a men's breakfast, a game of pool. [...] I've gone over there about five years. Other than that, I don't have much interaction with people as such. But I am very outgoing, very friendly in a sense."* – Stephan, 65-year-old, Dublin
- *"We're involved because we're in the shed, and ageing doesn't matter. To us it's a part of life [...] We are involved in our community action in the local community school, and we are manufacturing a big mosaic up there with the young students. And it was great to be with children, teenagers, in the secondary school. It was great to be associated with them."* – James, 75-year-old, County Meath
- *"I'm in the Men's Shed, and I'm involved with Tidy Towns<sup>38</sup> in the village [...] We do whatever we have to do, as in, in picking up litter and pulling weeds of planters, and putting stuff in the planters and the general tidiness of the village. I also help with putting up the Christmas lights in the village. [...] I keep myself busy because I worked all my life. [...] You're helping other people, or you're making life better it's a way of passing the time and getting through it."* – Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford

### 1.3 Policy Review

Ireland has implemented several policies and initiatives to support the wellbeing of its population aged 65 and over. The 2025 budget introduced measures for older adults to alleviate their living costs, including: a weekly pension increase of €12; one-off payments such as €300 fuel allowance lump sum and a €200 living alone allowance lump sum; a €250 energy credit; free public transport for individuals over 70 and their companions.<sup>39</sup>

Earlier, in May 2024, further safeguards for older people were introduced, to ensure that those who receive home care support will be assured of the same minimum standard of care wherever they live. This can impact approximately

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<sup>38</sup> Super Value Tidy Town is an annual contest that rates and rewards local areas on their environment and community development. See: <https://www.tidytowns.ie/>

<sup>39</sup> Department of Social Protection (2024) *Budget 2025*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e8315-budget-2025/#supports-for-pensioners> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

57,000 people who receive home care, which enables them to live in their own homes and communities for as long as possible.<sup>40</sup>

The National Positive Ageing Strategy (2015-2019) aimed at changing attitudes towards ageing and promote a more inclusive society that values older people, addresses their needs, including loneliness, and encourage active participation in communities.<sup>41</sup>

Focusing on policy responses to population ageing in Ireland, the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI) was established. It was a collaboration between the HSE Health and Wellbeing Division, the Department of Health, the *Atlantic Philanthropies* and *Age Friendly Ireland*. All the partners recognised the value of research to improve and maintain the health and wellbeing of older people. They published a research strategy for the years 2015-2019 with a total funding of €525,000, to support and promote research that aims to improve people's lives as they age.

Loneliness is also an issue which has been increasingly recognised as a significant public health concern in Ireland. The response to it is reflected, for example, in an initiative in 2019 by the Minister of State for Mental Health, Jim Daly, to launch a €3 million mental health fund to assist community organisations in addressing loneliness. In 2019, Ireland also launched the Community and Voluntary Support Grant Scheme for Older People, providing €1 million in funding to community groups that help older people maintain social connections and independence.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, a Taskforce to combating loneliness was established in collaboration with *ALONE*, to 'coordinate a response to the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation in Ireland' and '...increase awareness about the issue and to produce a set of recommendations for Government, state agencies, and all policy makers'.<sup>43</sup>

In 2023, the Department of Health set up the 'Hello Again World' campaign, designed to help older adults re-establish their social connections and reduce

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<sup>40</sup> Department of Health (2024) *Minister Butler introduces further safeguards for Older People*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4436c-minister-butler-introduces-further-safeguards-for-older-people/> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>41</sup> Department of Health (2013) *The National Positive Ageing Strategy Positive Ageing – Starts Now!* Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/11714/d859109de8984a50b9f2ae2c1f325456.pdf> [Accessed 9th January 2025]

<sup>42</sup> Gov.ie (2019) *Minister Daly launches new Community and Voluntary Support Grant Scheme for Older People* [online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2889ec-minister-daly-launches-new-community-voluntary-support-grant-scheme-/> [Accessed 9th January 2025]

<sup>43</sup> Ward, Layte, & Kenny, 2019, *Alone* (2024) *A briefing from the Loneliness Taskforce*. Available at: <https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Loneliness-Taskforce-2024-political-briefing.pdf> [Accessed 14th December 2024]



feelings of loneliness. The campaign encourages activities that promote engagement, like sports, volunteering, and community events. It specifically addresses older adults, including men who may be more vulnerable to social isolation.<sup>44</sup> The campaign was criticised by *Alone*, the national charity that enables older people to age at home, whose CEO, Seán Moynihan, explained that:

*"While we welcome the renewed focus on this issue, the issue of loneliness requires significantly more than saying 'hello again' in order to alleviate the health problems that it causes. We would urge the Department to engage with ALONE and the members of the Loneliness Taskforce so that we can work together towards resolving this challenge in a meaningful way."*

When the respondents were asked about significant events in Ireland which may have affected the way older people are supported today, most of the participants could not point to significant events (e.g., wars, political changes) that shaped the way older people are supported these days.

*"I think we're too far removed from the big events in the world for it to affect our pensions, or how we're treated in this country. I think we're lucky to be in Ireland and not America or somewhere like that. My view is we're doing very well. We're only 100 years old as a nation. We have got this standard of living that is comparable to Germany, to Britain, to any of the bigger countries in the world, or in Europe anyway. And we're doing very well, and with no natural resources." – James, 75-year-old, County Meath*

One of the respondents referred to COVID-19 pandemic and the government-mandated lockdowns as a period that significantly contributed to increased loneliness and social isolation in Ireland.

## 1.4 Economic Factors

### 1.4.1 Poverty Risk

As people age, they often encounter new expenses related to health, transportation, and housing. These costs are frequently substantial one-time

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<sup>44</sup> Gov.ie (2023) *Ministers and Chief Medical Officer advise older people how to reconnect with their communities as they launch online resource*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0545c-ministers-and-chief-medical-officer-advise-older-people-how-to-reconnect-with-their-communities-as-they-launch-online-resource/> [Accessed 9th January 2025]



payments that may be difficult to afford on a limited weekly income. According to surveys, one in five older couples and two in five older individuals living alone would struggle to cover a one-time expense exceeding €1,200. This leads to considerable stress and anxiety, and many older people will deprive themselves of essentials such as heating or social activities, as they fear of big future expense.<sup>45</sup>

Housing costs are an issue, especially for people renting in the private sector in their 60s. Most older persons aged 65+ own their home: 80.8% own their home outright, 5.7% are repaying a mortgage or loan on their home, and the "majority" of 9,370 households in arrears are in "deep arrears" of over two years' payments. Several hundred others live in adverse circumstances, such as homeless accommodation, Direct Provision or prison.<sup>46</sup>

At least 48% of older adults in Ireland live in housing that does not meet the UN adequacy standard. The most significant issue is that half of their homes have a Building Energy Rating of E, F, or G. Additionally, an estimated 20% of older households cannot afford essential maintenance or repairs. At least 10% lack the financial means to adapt their homes for improved accessibility for individuals with disabilities or impairments. Furthermore, 13.3% of people over 65 years old live in homes with structural issues such as leaking roofs, damp walls, damaged floors, or decaying window frames.<sup>47</sup>

The median equivalised nominal disposable income for those aged 65 years was €25,986 in 2023, an increase from €22,027 in 2020 (CSO, 2024). While many older men may own homes, they may still face financial challenges, including limited disposable income, making it difficult to engage in social opportunities.

13.3% of the people aged 65 years and over in Ireland (both genders) were at risk of poverty in 2024, compared to 8.3% in 2023, 20.1% in 2022, and 12.8% in 2021. The consistent poverty rate of 65 years and over (both genders) is 2% in 2024, compared to 1.4% in 2023, 3.5% in 2022 and 2.3% in 2021.<sup>48</sup> Older people who live alone are more likely to be at risk of poverty.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Income and Poverty – Older Persons Information Hub*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-opi/olderpersonsinformationhub/incomeandpoverty/poverty/> [Accessed 14th November 2025]

According to CSO (2024), an individual is defined as being in consistent poverty if they are identified as being at risk of poverty and living in a household deprived of two or more of the eleven basic deprivation items (as listed in the deprivation indicator).

<sup>49</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

3 in 10 people aged 66+ rely on social protection for over 90% of their income, and a further 4 in 10 people aged 66+ rely on it for more than half of their income. As a result, older people highly value the Irish State Pension, as well as non-cash supports such as Medical Cards and the Free Travel Pass.<sup>50</sup> GP Visit Card is available for anyone aged 70 or older and for those who pass a means test.<sup>51</sup> Some people with Medical Cards or GP Visit Cards also pay for health insurance, At the same time, others may have neither a Medical Card nor private health insurance.<sup>52</sup>

#### 1.4.2 Pension System

Incomes for older people are often limited, and State Pension serves as the primary source of income for most of them.<sup>53</sup> Unlike in many other countries where the payments from contributory State Pensions are related to income, the state contributory pension in Ireland is only weakly related to social insurance contributions, being related to the number of contributions, not their value.

To receive a state contributory pension, a person must be aged 66 or older and must have been paying PRSI before the age of 56 and must have a minimum number of weekly contributions of 10 years' worth, i.e. 520 contributions (TASC, 2024).<sup>54</sup> The maximum state contributory pension payment only differs from the maximum state non-contributory pension by a notional €10, which is supposed to maintain "the contributory principle" of having a link between benefits paid and contributions made.<sup>55</sup>

Those aged 65 and over often rely on State Pensions (contributory or Non-contributory) as their primary income source, which is about two-thirds of gross income.<sup>56</sup> Their reliant on this source of income is greater than the rest of Western

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Eurostat (2025) *At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold and household type*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_LI03\\_\\_custom\\_2468799/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LI03__custom_2468799/default/table?lang=en) [Accessed 25th January 2025]

<sup>50</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Citizens Information (no date). *GP visit cards*. [online] Available at: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/medical-cards-and-gp-visit-cards/gp-visit-cards/> [Accessed 25th January 2025]

<sup>52</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> The maximum payment is €289.30. Rates are graduated downwards depending on a person's social insurance payment history. See Gilmore, O. (2024) *Still Stuck in the Gap Pensions Auto-enrolment from a gender and care lens*. TASC Report for National Women's Council. Available at: [https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc\\_still\\_stuck\\_in\\_the\\_gap\\_pensions\\_report\\_2024\\_12.pdf](https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_still_stuck_in_the_gap_pensions_report_2024_12.pdf) [Accessed 9th January 2025]

<sup>55</sup> Gilmore, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan, V. & Layte, R. (2011) 'Income and asset levels of older people'. in: A. Barrett, G. Savva, V. Timonen and R.A. Kenny, eds. *Fifty Plus in Ireland 2011: First Results from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing*. Dublin: The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, pp. 243–264. Available at: <https://www.doi.org/10.38018/TildaRe.2011-00.cq> [Accessed 30th January 2025]

Europe, because of lower levels of occupational and private pension coverage.<sup>57</sup> Pension as a source of income is particularly important for lower income groups.<sup>58</sup> Due to administrative rules relating to household composition, older persons often lose out on pension income and other welfare entitlements if they move in with family or if family moves in with them.<sup>59</sup>

### 1.4.3 Employment Rate

Many individuals in their 60s leave the workforce, often due to long-term illness, disability, or the decision to retire. However, this trend is also influenced by a lack of suitable employment opportunities. Additionally, many employment contracts still enforce mandatory retirement at the age of 65, a practice that is still legally permissible.<sup>60</sup>

In Ireland, there was an increase of 57% in the number of people aged 65 years and over in employment between the second quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2024 - from 78,100 people to 122,300 people. 82,100 people, 65% of those who were in employment in the second quarter of 2024, were male. They usually worked an average of 30.8 hours per week, a decrease of 3.52 hours compared with the second quarter of 2019.<sup>61</sup>

Apart of one respondent, who works as a farmer, all the respondents are retired. Several own their own home. Most of them were positive about their financial situation and overall seem happy with their pension payment and benefits for which they are entitled: "I get on great now. I'm renting out of the corporation. I have the medical card. Financially, I'm sort of great"; "I have an army pension and the old age pension; so financially I'm okay". Another respondent, who served in the defence forces in the UK for eight years, seems to even be able to go on vacation, share some of his money with his family, and donate it:

*"I get my pension, my living alone allowance, my fuel allowance, the old benefits and bonuses. And I always have my little RAF pension*

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<sup>57</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Mulligan, E., Wijeratne, D., & Maher, M. (2019) *Pensions in Ireland: The Perspectives of Irish Citizens and Implications for Pensions Systems and Reforms in Ireland and other EU Member States*. Institute for Life course and Society, NUI Galway. Available at: [https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report\\_Loneliness.pdf](https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report_Loneliness.pdf) [Accessed 30th January 2025]

<sup>59</sup> Age Action (2023) *Spotlight on Income in Older Age*. Available at: <https://www.ageaction.ie/spotlight-income-older-age> [Accessed 14th November 2024].

<sup>60</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Press Statement for International Day of Older Persons* (published 30th September 2024). Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2024pressreleases/pressstatementforinternationaldayofolderpersons/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

*and my two works pensions backing me up, and I'm actually able to give some of that to my grandchildren [...] a weekly pocket money. And they are grateful for that. [...] And I contribute to two charities small amount, 15 Euros a month to each of them. [...] I am in this situation where for the last two years I've been able to go on holiday."* – James, 75-year-old, County Meath

However, in some cases, respondents were more hesitant when asked about their financial situation. It could be that discussing their financial matters evoked emotions such as embarrassment or pride, especially when their situation is challenging. They use the benefits that they are entitled to, cut unnecessary expenses, and receive help from their relatives:

*- "I don't have a big pension. I have the State Pension, and fortunately, my two children could give a monthly allowance, which tops up my pension to something that I could live on. I'm okay. A holiday now would be stretching a little bit, but my expectations are kind of not that grandiose."* – Paddy, 76-year-old, County Meath

*- "I'm working, but I'm getting the pension, the old age pension. I don't smoke. We don't drink, only one night a week. Just come to town, and that's to talk to people. I don't use much diesel; I'm not paying a big fortune for diesel every year to heat the house. That means an awful lot."* – John, 73-year-old, County Longford

## 1.5 Cultural, Historical, and Political Context

### 1.5.1 Perception of Ageing

In Irish society, perceptions and attitudes towards older people are multifaceted, reflecting both respect and challenges. Dominant social constructions of ageing can impact older people's behaviour and the way that society behaves towards them. One of the ways to learn about perception of ageing in Ireland, is by looking at the representation of older people in the media and cultural products.

For example, a report by *Age Action*<sup>62</sup> refers visual ageism, a term coined to describe "the social practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way".<sup>63</sup> According to this report,

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<sup>62</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Loos E., & Ivan L. (2018) 'Visual Ageism in the Media'. In: Ayalon L. and Tesch-Römer C. (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*. Cham: Springer. doi: [10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_11)

representations of older people often use images suggesting frailty or disability, even though this is not most older people's experience.

Older people in Irish newspapers are often portrayed as dependent and separate from mainstream society. They are categorised usually into five distinct identity types: 'victims,' 'frail, infirm and vulnerable,' 'radicalized citizens,' 'deserving old,' and 'undeserving old.' Notably, the portrayal of older people as healthy and autonomous is largely absent.<sup>64</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults were portrayed in Ireland's public broadcaster's online news as the face of COVID-19, with the virus's threat their age groups tied to depictions of them as vulnerable and powerless. They were also portrayed as a burden to the healthcare system and as representing a risk to healthcare workers in nursing homes and acute settings, as well as a burden for the family and the rest of the public.<sup>65</sup>

In a study with older men in Ireland, conducted by O'Neill and Ní Léime (2022), participants identified media representations as influential on the perceptions and lives of older men in Ireland. While some participants noted that more recent media offers more complex and diverse portrayals, gaps, underrepresentation, and stereotyping were still highlighted. Schrage-Früh and Tracy (2022) also identify shifts in representations of older men in Ireland from the early twentieth century to the present. Based on analysis of a broad range of literary and visual texts, they argue that there is a shift from depictions of authority figures – often reflecting patriarchal dominance and oppression – to more nuanced, complex, and heterogeneous representations of older men's embodied subjectivities and vulnerabilities.

Societal attitudes can have tangible effects on the health and wellbeing of older individuals. The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing indicates that older adults with negative attitudes towards ageing experience slower walking speeds and worse cognitive abilities over time, even after accounting for other health factors.<sup>66</sup> One of the initiatives to combat negative perceptions and promote a more inclusive

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<sup>64</sup> Fealy, G., McNamara, M., & Treacy, M.P. (2012) 'Constructing ageing and age identities: A case study of newspaper discourses', *Ageing & Society*, 32(1), pp.83–102. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X11000321> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>65</sup> Beasley, S., & Timonen, V. (2023) 'Representations of older people in Irish public broadcaster's online news coverage during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic'. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 31(3), pp. 305–323. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/07916035231183664> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>66</sup> Robertson, D. (2016) *How negative attitudes towards ageing affect health in later life*. Trinity College Dublin: TILDA Research Brief. Available at: [https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/research-briefs/pdf/2016\\_Research%20Brief\\_Ageing%20Perceptions.pdf](https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/research-briefs/pdf/2016_Research%20Brief_Ageing%20Perceptions.pdf) [Accessed 29th January 2025]

society was launched by the *Alliance of Age Sector*. Their "Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism" report (2023), emphasises the importance of addressing ageism in Ireland, highlights the nature and impact of ageism, and offers evidence-informed strategies to reduce it.

### *1.5.2 Pubs' Place in Social Life in Irish Society*

Pubs have historically served as a key social outlet in Irish society. Cabras (2016) describes pubs in Ireland as "significant incubators for the development of human relationships and social networking across the whole country" (p. 282). Insofar as pubs serve such a central role in Irish communities, their closure may pose a threat to social connectedness among those who rely on pubs for socialising. Pub closures are increasingly common, especially in rural areas, where their role is particularly important due to the common lack of other activities and social outlets. In fact, in many rural areas, pubs are the only spaces allowing for this kind of social engagement, community-building, and communal activities (Cabras, 2016). With the progressive, generational decline of pub culture in Ireland, as well as differences in ageing across rural and urban areas, this socialising function of pubs is particularly relevant to older people. Accordingly, the closure of pubs particularly threatens the social functioning and connectedness of older people.

A further challenge associated with pub culture in Ireland concerns its placement of alcohol as central to socialisation. If the pub is the primary hub for socialisation, then consuming alcohol becomes the primary activity. Of course, alcohol-free options exist at pubs, but social norms and peer pressure may discourage patrons from availing of these. In addition, people recovering from alcohol addiction may need to avoid pubs to maintain their sobriety and therefore lose this key social outlet.

According to Healthy Ireland survey conducted by Ipsos B&A (2024), 70% of men aged between 65 and 74 years consumed alcohol during the year previous to the survey, 63% drink at least once a month, 50% at least once per week, and 33% drink several times a week. The percentages are a bit lower for men aged 75 and over: 59% of them consumed alcohol in the previous year, 50% drink at least once a month, 43% drink at least once a week, and 31% drink multiple times a week. As for excessive use of alcohol, 32% of men aged 65-74 years and 17% of men over 75 binge drink on a typical drinking occasion. According to Eurostat data for 2019, 3,1% of the men over 65 years old report that they drink at least once a week, 11,5% drink every month, 14% drink less than once a month, and 68,4% never drink or not in the



year previous to the survey.<sup>67</sup> The percentages for women at these age groups are lower in all frequencies of drinking.<sup>68</sup> The findings about smoking habits show that in 2024, 12% of the men aged 65-74 years and 5% of men over 75 years old are smokers.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.5.3 Migration and the Risk of Loneliness

Migration has also been identified as increasing the risk of loneliness among older people in Ireland. In 2014, the Irish charity *ALONE*, which supports older people facing loneliness and isolation, reported an increase in demand for its services due to older people's children and grandchildren emigrating at increasing rates.<sup>70</sup> These challenges are likely to reemerge in the present day as emigration in Ireland is once again on the rise, with April 2023 to April 2024 seeing the highest emigration figure since 2015.<sup>71</sup> On the other side, older men who emigrated in their youth and have returned to Ireland also face higher levels of social isolation (Barrett & Mosca, 2012).

The participants in this research were asked about their experiences of perceptions of ageing within their communities and Ireland more broadly. When asked whether they think that older men are respected and valued in their community, the responses were mostly positive:

- *"The young crowd are very good. Most of the youngsters are well educated in this area. I've never seen them been disrespectful to the to me anyway."* – Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford

- *"I think I live in a good town that cares for aging people. I would guess that it's heavily weighted towards people who are retiring at this stage."* – Paddy, 76-year-old, County Meath.

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<sup>67</sup> Eurostat (2022) *Frequency of heavy episodic drinking by sex, age and educational attainment level*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth\\_ehis\\_al3e\\_\\_custom\\_16141395/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_ehis_al3e__custom_16141395/default/table?lang=en) [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>68</sup> Ipsos B&A (2024) *Healthy Ireland Survey 2024: Summary Report*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2024.pdf> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>69</sup> Ipsos B&A, 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Breatnach, S. (2014) 'Ireland's new 'lonely' generation as emigration increases', *The Irish Post*. Available at: <https://www.irishpost.com/news/irelands-new-lonely-generation-one-person-leaves-ireland-every-six-minutes-23437> [Accessed 7th February 2025]

<sup>71</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Population and Migration Estimates*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2024/keyfindings/> [Accessed 7th February 2025]



- *"People respect you for your age. And I found that with the kids, they were all totally accepting and respectful."* – James, 74-year-old, County Meath

- *"The young people don't care about it. Some of them are good, they're not all bad. When you treat them with respect, they show you respect."* – Sean, 66-year-old, South Dublin

Two of the participants agreed that the Irish society is becoming more and more open recently, when it concerns to feeling comfortable to talk about loneliness. One of them, who lost his wife two years ago, said: "My people, even us, I wouldn't even think of talking about it when it happened to me now, three and a half years ago" – Martin, 84-year-old, North Dublin

## 1.6 Access to Technology

The implementation of Ireland's Digital Connectivity Strategy<sup>72</sup> is in progress, with significant advancements toward meeting coverage and connectivity quality goals. Launched in 2020, the National Broadband Plan is set for completion by 2027, aiming to provide high-speed broadband access to all premises across Ireland, including rural areas.<sup>73</sup>

While Ireland has made significant advances in digital infrastructure<sup>74</sup>, older men are less likely to be digitally literate compared to younger generations. A few years ago, six in ten (62%) adults aged 60 or older were considered 'digitally excluded' either because they did not use the internet or had 'below basic' digital skills, limiting their ability to access public services online.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (2022). *The Digital Connectivity Strategy for Ireland*. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/242271/96f1b6ad-b766-4ecb-95a1-bd3c9236f90b.pdf> [Accessed 18th April 2025]

<sup>73</sup> Gov.ie (2025) *National Broadband Plan*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c1b0c9-national-broadband-plan/> [Accessed 18th April 2025]

<sup>74</sup> See for example: the [Digital Decade Report 2024](#), according to which Ireland has 72.9% basic digital skills coverage (an annual growth of 1.7% from previous year), compared to the EU average of 55.6%. This figure means that Ireland has achieved 91.1% of the overall target for the EU 2030 goal, aiming that 80% of the EU population possess at least basic digital skills. See: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/106713> and on <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/latest/briefs/ireland-snapshot-digital-skills>.

<sup>75</sup> Age Action (2021) *Annual Report 2021*. Dublin: Age Action. Available at: <https://www.ageaction.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Age-Action-Annual-Report-2021.pdf> [Accessed 15 December 2025]

Digital literacy programmes such as *Age Action's 'Getting Started'* aim to increase digital skills among older adults in Ireland.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, *Friends of the Elderly* run technology clubs that offer individual guidance by Transition Year students and interns helping participants improve their digital skills and confidence. *Hi Digital*, their partnership with Vodafone, offers accessible learning opportunities ranging from drop-in classes and basic tech support to creative initiatives such as Kindle Book Clubs.<sup>77</sup>

In recent years, there seems to be some improvement, as according to CSO (2025)<sup>78</sup>, in 2024, 85% of those aged 60-74 used the internet within last 3 months (compared to 75% in 2020). 2% (in 2020 - 5%) of them have used it, but not in the last 3 months. 12% never used it (in 2020 - 21%). Among the 75-year-olds and over, 54% used the internet within the last 3 months (in 2020 - only 44%), 5% used in but not in the last 3 months (7% in 2020), and 41% never used it (in 2020 - 50%).

8 out of the 9 interviewees in the current research seem to be either digital savvy or at least use internet and social media regularly. They see the advantages of technology, which helps them to connect with their family, friends in the men's shed, or to find content on topics which they are interested in. Some of them use social media such as Facebook, others use video calls to talk with their family, or to receive photos with updates from them.

*"I think we're all [in the men's shed] technically competent. We use WhatsApp. We used it during COVID. We use Zoom [...] Because of our backgrounds in electronics, we're still comfortable with the technology. Some of it is beyond me, such as Tik Tok. But we use Facebook and WhatsApp extensively." – James, 74-year-old, County Meath*

Two of the respondents expressed interest in learning more about social media to be more connected and do more online:

*"I use technology, but I find it hard to pick it up. I'm not that good. I'm registered for a course on smartphones. I'm able to make calls and I'm able to text, but I wouldn't be able to buy a ticket to go somewhere."*

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<sup>76</sup> Age Action (2024) *Digital Literacy – Programmes*. Available at: <https://www.ageaction.ie/get-help/programmes/> [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>77</sup> Friends of the Elderly (2025). *Celebrating Digital Learning Together!* Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/friendsoftheelderly/posts/pfbid02qDJP2VvydpK49QLNMSQ57qGZxCMDzNKh7zrg7XBCNMukTfbg8HmfVASjPb6zvqRLI> [Accessed 1st September 2025]

<sup>78</sup> Central Statistics Office (2024) *Individuals aged 16 years and over, use of the internet classified by broad frequency of use (% of individuals)*. Available at: <https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA76> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

*I have to get my daughter to do it. [...] I'm nervous about going into social media. That's why I hope to learn – so I will be able to do more stuff online, or to be more connected, I will be able to look at stuff and not be nervous about it.” – Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford*

One interviewee shared that he is dating a woman whom he met online, and another, who is interested in religion, set up zoom meetings with groups from all over the world, and sends them a daily message on WhatsApp. Only one interviewee said that he does not use WhatsApp, and that he does not know how to use it. He also does not use the internet. Instead, to connect with friends, he just rings them up.

## 1.7 Sense and Thoughts about Loneliness

According to a report by *The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing*<sup>79</sup>, social isolation and loneliness in Ireland can be associated with older age, poorer health, rurality, and infrequent contact with friends.<sup>80</sup> Other factors can be personal characteristics, socio-environmental factors such as barriers to outdoor social participation<sup>81</sup>, as well as access to transport.<sup>82</sup>

A recent report by *Aware* (2024), the national mental health organisation, reveals significant mental health challenges such as high rates of depression and anxiety among older adults in Ireland, aged 65 and over. The survey highlights widespread feelings of loneliness and social isolation, with about one-third of older adults reporting a sense of lacking companionship, loneliness, or isolation. Approximately one-third of respondents show symptoms of mild to moderate depression, with individuals living with chronic illnesses being particularly affected (51% compared to 23%). Higher rates of depression are also reported among those who are single or living alone (45%). Similarly, 40% of respondents experience mild to moderate anxiety, following similar trends among those with chronic illnesses

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<sup>79</sup> Ward, Layte, & Kenny, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Drennan J, Treacy M, Butler M, Byrne A, Fealy G, Frazer K, et al. (2008) 'The experience of social and emotional loneliness among older people in Ireland', *Ageing and Society*, 28(8), pp. 1113–1132. doi:10.1017/S0144686X08007526.

<sup>81</sup> Rantakokko, M., Iwarsson, S., Vahaluoto, S., Portegijs, E., Viljanen, A., & Rantanen, T. (2014) 'Perceived environmental barriers to outdoor mobility and feelings of loneliness among community-dwelling older people', *The journals of gerontology. Series A, Biological sciences and medical sciences*, 69(12), pp. 1562–1568. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/glu069> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

<sup>82</sup> Donoghue et. al, 2017.

and females. Alarmingly, 14% of the participants have had thoughts of ending their lives within the past year.<sup>83</sup>

The respondents in the current research also reported a sense of loneliness, either for themselves, or for other older people in Ireland.

- *"I'm lonely. **Everything's very good, until you go to your own house and close your door.** And that's two things have been a comfort to me when I'm at home: football, and television. But imagine, 100 years ago, when someone had nothing inside the door, near the fire, and that was it. We have a lot."* – Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford
- *"Some of them are lonely. Some of my neighbours now are going into homes with dementia. They're not keeping in touch with their people. And they're being left there or isolated. Some of them drink."* – Sean, 66-year-old, South Dublin

One participant, divorced, expressed his wish to find a female partner, which he is not pursuing due to his concerns regarding losing his property as a result:

*"There's a lot of lonely men in Ireland anyway. I've been talking to men, and they're lonely. And men in Ireland are afraid to meet a partner, because [...] they're afraid that they'll meet a woman and she'll live with them for a while, then take the land and the house off the man, and he's out. [...] I'd just like to meet somebody, but I'm afraid I'll end up losing another house."* – John, 73-year-old, County Longford

The respondents also addressed the influence of geographical location and social structures on loneliness. Tom, a single person who lives alone, and Frank, widowed, say:

- *"I think in rural Ireland [...] it's quite possible for both men and women, living in isolated areas perhaps 10 miles from the city centre, to feel lonely."* – Tom, 74-year-old, North Dublin
- *"The person I'd be mostly worried about, would be the person that lives on their own and they have no family close by, or have maybe not much contact with family. Because everyone is different [...] for some, it's hard to talk for anyone else, but you can see it in some people that their head is down, especially coming towards Christmas,*

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<sup>83</sup> Aware, 2023.

*anniversaries. You know that they're not in the best of form, but what can you do for them? Only talk, say hello? And I speak to everybody.*"  
– Frank, 74-year-old, County Longford

However, sometimes even living in a community with older people is not always enough, as one of the respondents mentioned:

*"Yeah, they do [older men are lonely]. But I live in a retirement village. There's over 60 units, and we have an afternoon tea on Wednesdays. And we've got about four guys who come down, I know the rest of them are up there behind closed doors. Never seen them."* – Paddy, 76-year-old, County Meath

The participants mentioned several situations and activities which help them in feeling less lonely. Firstly, good relationships with family members, especially if they live nearby, seem to help reduce loneliness. The respondents agreed that technology helps to stay in touch with family and friends, which strengthen these relations. Nevertheless, several testified that despite ongoing connection and good relations with their family and friends, sometimes it is not enough, and they still feel lonely when they come back to an empty house. For example, Martin, one of the widowed participants, said:

- *"I lost my wife before three and a half years [...] so there was a tough time. One step forward and two back. But I'm winning now, I don't go backwards anymore. **Loneliness is a terrible thing. I think it can destroy if you let it. You could easily go into yourself,** you get lost in your own [...] All this had been gone now, the men's shed came along and helped me" [...] Don't give up whatever you do. And the shed has helped me to do that big way."* – Martin, 84-year-old, North Dublin

Martin was not the only participant who mentioned how significant is the Men's shed in his life. Paddy said:

- *"I came across an expression that **girls talk face to face and have done since puberty. Guys talk shoulder to shoulder, rather the side of their mouth, and they'd rather be doing something.** My friend dragged me down to the shed. My wife died eight years ago, so I spent five years pretending life was normal, but when it came down to the shed here, **I met some guys who are in the same position as I am,***

***and that realisation is a powerful medicine. Ultimately, this allowed me to move on.*** – Paddy, 76-year-old, County Meath

Apart from men's sheds, participants mentioned other hobbies, such as sports or gardening, which can serve as therapy and provide an opportunity to be in the fresh air. In general, several participants mentioned that keeping busy helps you feel less lonely, as Martin (84-year-old) concluded: "When you wake up in the morning, be prepared to do something". Other interviewees, widowed as well, seem to agree with that approach:

- *"It's very hard to know how to approach these [lonely] people [...] because they have their own thoughts on it, and they don't want to join, or they don't want to get involved. But it's good that most people, will get involved with some organisation, even if it's only the football or other club."* – Steve, 72-year-old, County Longford
- *"I keep active. Anything I can do, I'll do it. Just keep active. Get out and meet people in your area. Join the men's shed. Join anything."* – Sean, 66-year-old, South Dublin

Finally, three of the respondents mentioned pets as a source of comfort and a great company which can reduce the sense of loneliness: "Our little doggy was great comfort for me when my wife passed. Then I sold our house and now I live in a building where pets are not allowed" (Paddy, County Meath). Studies that focused on pets and their ability to reduce a sense of loneliness yield limited evidence. The findings of one study indicated limited support for a relationship between pet attachment and quality of life in the study group (Watt & Pachana, 2007). Another study found that owning a pet significantly influences later reporting of loneliness in women, and vice versa - reported loneliness influences pet ownership in later waves. However, in both directions, the findings were limited to women, with effects for men minimal or non-existent.<sup>84</sup>

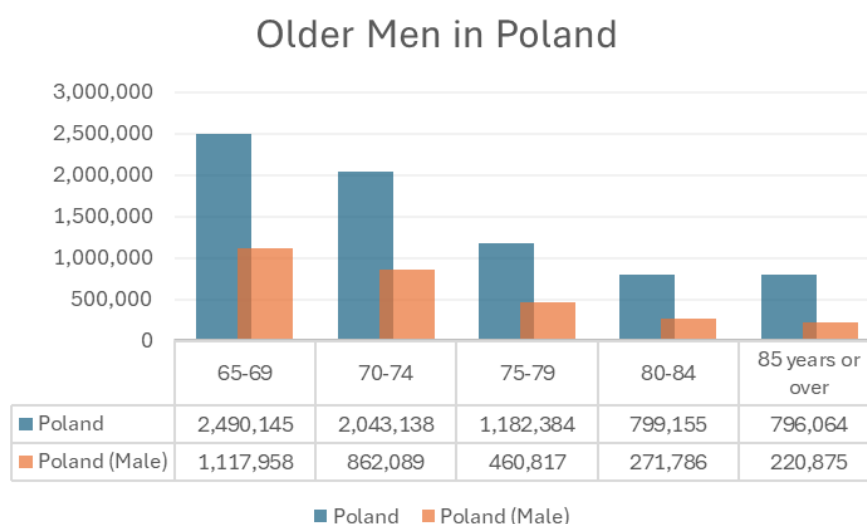
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<sup>84</sup> Pikhartova, J., Bowling, A. & Victor, C. (2014) 'Does owning a pet protect older people against loneliness?' *BMC Geriatrics*, 14(1), pp.1-10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2318-14-106> [Accessed 14th August 2025]

## 2. Poland

### 2.1 Population

According to Eurostat data, in 2023, 7.3 million people, almost 20% of Poland's 36.8 million population, were 65-year-old or over. 40% of this group, 2.9 million people, were men, representing almost 8% of the total population in Poland. The percentage of men aged 65 and older in Poland across age groups decreases with advancing age: the majority (32%) are between 65 and 69 years old, 27% are between 70 and 74, 20% are between 75 and 79, 12% are between 80 and 84, and 9% are 85 or older. Eurostat data [Figure 2] shows the age division for both genders, and for men.<sup>85</sup>



**Figure 2:** Older people in Poland by age and gender.

Source: Eurostat, 2024, based on data extracted in July 2020

The percentage of older people in Poland is projected to reach 30% by 2060, an increase of 2.5 million compared to 2022. Meanwhile, the total population is expected to decline to 32.6 million, a decrease of 4.8 million (12.7%) from 2022.<sup>86</sup>

As in many other countries, male mortality rates in Poland are higher than those of females. However, the gap is significantly higher than in most European nations.

<sup>85</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

<sup>86</sup> Statistics Poland (2023) *Resident population projection for Poland 2023-2060*. Available at: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/population/population-projection/resident-population-projection-for-poland-2023-2060,5,1.html> [Accessed 14th December 2025]



The average life expectancy in 2023 was 78.4 years, 74.6 for men and 82.1 for women.<sup>87</sup> Higher mortality among men compared to women is observed in almost all age groups.<sup>88</sup>

In 2023, almost 64% of people aged 60-year and over lived in cities, which are 28% of the general urban population. 26% of the older population lived in two voivodships (counties): Mazowieckie and Śląskie. In rural areas, 23.4% of the inhabitants were aged 60 and over.<sup>89</sup>

The participants in this study were eight men, aged 60 to 92, recruited through a Polish Public Benefit Organization, *the Association of Little Brothers of the Poor*. All the respondents but one live alone and are either widowed, divorced, or never married. The respondents were selected from both urban and rural areas.

## 2.2 Social Structures

There are significant differences between older women and men in Poland in terms of the proportion who live in a relationship, alone with children, or alone without children. Among single people aged 65 and over, the share of women living alone (40.4%) is more than twice that of men (19.9%).<sup>90</sup>

Almost two-thirds of households composed exclusively of people aged 60 and over live in apartment blocks and similar multi-family buildings. In 2021, 63.8% of senior households lived in such buildings, and 36.1% in single-family (e.g. detached or semi-detached) homes. Older people in cities are much more likely to live in multi-family homes (79.1% of households composed exclusively of people aged 60 and over in 2021) than in rural areas (16.8%). In 2021, further improvement was noted in the equipment of seniors' apartments with technical installations. Almost

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<sup>87</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS 2 region*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 18th June 2025]

<sup>88</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *Life expectancy of Poland in 2023*. Available at: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/population/life-expectancy/life-expectancy-of-poland-in-2023,2,17.html?pdf=1#> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

<sup>89</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>90</sup> Gałosz, T. (2023) *W Polsce samotność ma twarz seniora*. Termedia [Polish] Available at: <https://www.termedia.pl/mz/W-Polsce-samotnosc-ma-twarz-seniora,52751.html#:~:text=Dzi%C5%9B%20samotno%C5%9B%C4%87%20w%20Polsce%20ma,szczeg%C3%B3lny%20spos%C3%B3b%20dotyka%20ludzi%20starszych> [Accessed 20th January 2025]

all apartments occupied by seniors had a water supply, 99.1% were equipped with hot running water, 98.8% with a flush toilet, and 98.5% with a bathroom.<sup>91</sup>

As of 2023, there were 2,138 stationary social welfare facilities in the country, with a total of 132.6 thousand places. Of these, 30.5% were facilities providing 24-hour care to disabled, chronically ill or elderly people. In total, in 2022, there were 82.9 thousand people aged 60 and older residing in these facilities (Statistics Poland [GUS], 2024). A 2024 report by Greenberg Traurig and CRBE<sup>92</sup> noted the shortage of residential care homes for the elderly in Poland. Relative to the total elderly population, the number of beds in such homes (both publicly and privately) is among the lowest in the EU – up to seven times lower than in other countries, such as the Netherlands, Malta, or Belgium.<sup>93</sup> Given the aging population of Poland, this may cause significant challenges in the coming years.<sup>94</sup>

According to Eurostat data (2024), 4.4% of men over 65-year-old in Poland are engaged in formal or informal voluntary activities or active citizenship. There seem to be a decrease from 10% in 2015, although the reliability of the data for that year is low, and in any case lower than the EU average.<sup>95</sup>

Older people participate in activities and cultural events across the country, in almost 4,000 cultural centres, clubs, and community centres. In 2023, most older adults, like in previous years, joined senior citizen clubs and attended universities for seniors run by these institutions. They made up 62% of all members over 60 in various groups and clubs. People in this age group also joined tourist and sports and recreational activities, and they were 11.2% of all the population taking part in the activities.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Piekut, M. (2015) *Polskie gospodarstwa domowe - dochody, wydatki i wyposażenie w dobra trwałego użytkowania*. [online] Pw.edu.pl. Wydawnictwo SGGW. Available at: <http://repo.pw.edu.pl/info/book/WUT09dbfedde22043c2b78a0a8ce6613547/> [Polish] [Accessed 9 Jan. 2025]

<sup>92</sup> CBRE Group, Inc. (Coldwell Banker Richard Ellis) is an American commercial real estate services and investment firm.

<sup>93</sup> CBRE (2024) *Rośnie popyt na domy dla seniorów. Mamy ich niemal najmniej w Europie* [Polish]. Available at: <https://biuroprasowe.cbre.pl/288671-rosnie-popyt-na-domy-dla-seniorow-mamy-ich-niemal-najmniej-w-europie> [Accessed 30th January 2025]

<sup>94</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January 2025]

<sup>95</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_scp19\\_custom\\_18043240/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_scp19_custom_18043240/default/table) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>96</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *Activity of centres of culture, cultural centres and establishments, clubs and community centres in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3310/4/7/1/activity\\_of\\_c](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3310/4/7/1/activity_of_c)

Participation and involvement in community's activities can be affected by their level of accessibility. Older adults in rural Poland often face limited or no access to regular transport services, which contributes to social isolation and restricts access to essential services and opportunities.<sup>97</sup> Although there are ongoing efforts to improve rural transport infrastructure, there are still significant gaps. Community-led initiatives such as the Smart Village programme<sup>98</sup> are emerging as potential strategies to combat transport exclusion and improve mobility through localised, innovative solutions.<sup>99</sup>

The attitude of Polish residents towards faith varies depending on age. The number of believers (declarations: deeply religious and believers) increases with age. The highest percentages were recorded among the oldest residents of Poland (75 years and older) - 90% and in the age group of 55-64 - 86%.<sup>100</sup> The influence of age is most visible in the case of deeply religious people. The percentage of deeply religious people in the youngest of the analysed age groups is less than 5% and is more than three times lower than among people aged 65-74 and six times lower than among people aged 75 and older - 29% deeply religious.<sup>101</sup>

**Participants in this research:** Although a large proportion of older people in Poland live in multi-family buildings, most of the participants in this study reported having little connection to their neighbours. Stanisław, 86-year-old from Łódź, a widower who lives alone, said: "I don't know my neighbours, you can't see them, people are distrustful nowadays". Witek, 60-year-old from Łódź, who lives alone, said: "I only know one neighbour [...] We rarely see each other".

Similarly, Tadeusz, a divorced 77-year-old from Łódź, also does not know his neighbours. He has not left his apartment in the last three years, and explained:

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[entres\\_of\\_culture\\_cultural\\_centres\\_and\\_establishments\\_clubs\\_and\\_community\\_centres\\_in\\_2023.pdf](#) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>97</sup> Żukowska, S., Chmiel, B., & Połom, M. (2023) The Smart Village Concept and Transport Exclusion of Rural Areas: A Case Study of a Village in Northern Poland. *Land*, 12(1), 260. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12010260> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

<sup>98</sup> A broader European Union effort to support rural development by leveraging digital technologies, innovation, and community-led strategies to improve the quality of life in rural areas. See European Commission (2024) *Smart Villages*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages_en.html) (Accessed: 10th April 2025).

<sup>99</sup> Żukowska, Chmiel, & Połom, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> For comparison, the lowest percentage of believers was recorded in the age group of 25-34 (74%) and 16-24 (75%). These age groups are also characterised by the relatively highest percentages of non-believers (approximately 5% each) and religiously indifferent (approximately 7%-8%).

<sup>101</sup> Bednarczyk, R., & Czekalski, R. (2023) *Aktywność religijna seniorów*. Ministry of Education and Science [Polish]. Available at: <https://rob.uksw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ekspertyza-02-21-12-1.pdf> [Accessed 9th January 2025]

"Neighbours change, older people die, younger people move in, new people that I don't know anymore." Władek, 83-year-old, who lives with his partner in Łódź, actually knows his neighbours, but admitted that they don't talk much. Two participants did report a sense of community with their neighbours, albeit to varying degrees:

- *"I know my neighbours well, we have regular meetings of tenants, the administration of the block creates a lot of opportunities for integration."* – Henryk, 92-year-old, Łódź, widowed, lives alone
- *"With neighbours: we connect in case of a need, when necessary, we talk about everyday topics, sometimes they ask me to look after the apartment or waters the flowers when they are on holiday."* – Miecio, 77-year-old, a village in Lublin area, never married

In terms of requesting help, most of the participants try to remain as independent as possible. Two participants who don't have families, said:

- *"I am alone, I am only visited by a caregiver from the association (paid help), and I have been in the MBU (Little Brothers of the Poor) for half a year. A volunteer visits me, and I am happy with these meetings, I can talk to her about topics that interest me. I order medication at the clinic, if I need anything more, I order a teleconsultation [...] **I try to be self-sufficient.**"* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź, divorced, lives alone, has not left his apartment in the last 3 years
- *"I don't have a family. [...] I don't have anyone to ask for help. I don't need it. **I don't need anything, so I don't ask anyone for help,**"* – Władek, 83-year-old, Łódź, lives with a partner

Those who do have a family, also prefer to be independent as possible, or to pay someone, rather than ask for favours:

- *"My family is busy. I can ask my grandson for help. **I prefer to rely on paid help;** a lady comes to me to cook dinners and to clean. When I'm sick, I call a doctor I know. [...] People have access to various help, some are willing to use it, but some are embarrassed and do not want to try."* – Henryk, 92-year-old, Łódź, widowed, lives alone
- *"I have someone to ask for help, extended family or neighbour. I also help them. **I try to be self-sufficient; I rarely ask for help.**"* – Józef, 71-

*year-old, a village in Northern Poland, never married, lives alone*

However, the two youngest participants, one of them lives alone, did report asking for and receiving help from their families:

- *"When I need, my brother helps me, **I ask for it, it's normal for me.**"* – Witek, 60-year-old, Łódź
- *"**My family helps me all the time.** They do my shopping; they give me money for the phone and cigarettes. My sister is very good, she cooks dinner, does the laundry."* – Kazik, 61-year-old, Łódź

### 2.3 Policy Review

In 2018, The Council of Ministers adopted the "Social Policy for the Elderly 2030" (Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy [Polish], 2018). This is the first government document to consider the needs of dependent seniors. The document is a historic study, as all the programmes on senior policy that have been in force so far have been framework-based. "Social Policy for the Elderly 2030" includes detailed solutions in all the most important areas of life of the elderly, including safety, health, counteracting loneliness, active participation in social life, as well as adapting infrastructure to the needs and capabilities of older people. The creation of a comprehensive programme in the field of senior policy and the elderly aims to systematise and streamline the activities of public institutions for the elderly in Poland. These solutions will also contribute to a significant improvement in the quality of life of the elderly while maintaining broadly understood safety and independence for the longest possible time.

Areas including activities for older people in general are shaping a positive perception of old age in society; participation in social life and supporting all forms of civic, social, cultural, artistic and sports activity; creating conditions enabling the use of the potential of older people as active participants in economic life and the labour market, adapted to their psychophysical capabilities and family situation; health promotion, disease prevention, access to diagnostics, treatment and rehabilitation; increasing physical safety - counteracting violence and neglect towards older people; creating conditions for solidarity and intergenerational integration; education for old age (care and medical staff), to old age (the whole society), through old age (from the youngest generation) and education in old age.

Most of the respondents in the current research could not point out specific events which influenced the way older people in their country are being treated. One

exception was one respondent who mentioned the establishment of day care homes, which now allow "many opportunities to meet" (Kazik, 61-year-old, Łódź, lives alone).

One respondent expressed an interest in cultural events but has stopped participating in them. While we don't know why he is avoiding them, it might suggest that the effects of the "social policy for the elderly" aren't felt by this participant:

*"I don't go out at home, and I don't take part in anything anymore. I used to be very active. I took part in many artistic initiatives. I was a member of the Friends of the Opera, and there were interesting meetings with musicians and singers and trips to the Poznan Opera. I cooperated with my colleague Marcel [...]. Marcel ran the theatre, and I co-created this theatre and played roles, we worked with students, young people."* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź

There is a feeling that maybe older people don't need support as much as others - other groups should be prioritised. The respondents also emphasised that the support they wish for is not only caregiving activities, but also "presence and support". 77-year-old Miecio, who lives alone in a village, was asked if, based on his experiences, thinks that older men in Poland receive enough social support. He responded "I don't know. Other groups need support, e.g. large families." Józef, 71 years old who lives alone in a village says:

*"A nursing home may be the solution; full care is provided for the pension. When families disperse, you (government) have to take care of the elderly, not leave them alone. The state should build such a 24-hour care programme, I can't imagine that my children will have to take care of me. Schools are being demolished, and they could build nursing homes. Day care facilities will not solve this problem. **I am very afraid that I will be a burden to my family.**"* – Józef, 71-year-old, lives in a village in North Poland

## 2.4 Economic Factors

### 2.4.1 Poverty Risk

The risk of poverty varies by gender. Among those aged 60 and older, nearly one in five women and one in seven men have incomes below the relative poverty line. For individuals aged 75 and above, the poverty risk increases slightly for women

but declines significantly for men. At this age, one in five women and one in ten men face the risk of poverty. Poverty among older adults is mainly women's poverty: 64% of those aged 60 and over at risk of poverty are women, and this proportion rises to over 79% among those aged 75 and older.<sup>102</sup>

In terms of living conditions, in 2023 households with older people, like other households, reported a more positive perception of their financial situation. The percentage of households rating their situation as good or quite good increased, while those describing it as bad or rather bad declined. However, households with older members remained less optimistic compared to those without. Among households with older people, 47.1% reported a good or quite good financial situation, while this figure was lower at 42.1% for households consisting exclusively of individuals aged 60 and older. 5.7% of households with older people and 7.1% of those solely comprising older individuals described their financial situation as bad or rather bad.<sup>103</sup>

The financial situation of individuals aged 60 and older is strongly influenced by their level of debt. According to the Credit Information Bureau (CIB), the number of older people holding various forms of credit declined in 2023. Older adults accounted for 16.9% of consumer credit borrowers, a decrease of 0.3 percentage points compared to the previous year. Similarly, they made up 3.2% of mortgage credit borrowers, down from 3.4% in 2022. Additionally, the proportion of older people with credit cards and authorized overdrafts has slightly decreased from 30.2% in 2022 to 29.7% in 2023.<sup>104</sup>

As per healthcare affordability, Poland operates a universal healthcare system ("Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia" - National Health Fund), which is available to most of the population, including those who are retired. Additionally, those who can avail of the National Health Fund may receive certain medications at a reduced rate or free of charge. However, access to public healthcare in Poland is not without challenges. In 2023, 91.6% of those aged 60 and over reported that they accessed healthcare whenever they needed to, with no significant gender-based

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<sup>102</sup> Uścińska, G. (2023) *Sytuacja materialna seniorów w Polsce*. Ministry of Education and Science [Polish]. Available at: <https://rob.uksw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ekspertyza-12-21-12-1.pdf> [Accessed: 30th January 2025]

<sup>103</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>104</sup> Statistics Poland (2023) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2022*. Warsaw: Statistics Poland. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/5/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2022.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/5/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2022.pdf) [Accessed 15th January 2025]



differences. Among the remaining 8.4%, the primary barrier was waiting times (52.7%). Prohibitive cost (for example, because the healthcare they needed wasn't covered under the public system) accounted for 12.2% of cases.<sup>105</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Pension System

The retirement age in Poland is 60 years for women and 65 years for men. Individuals reaching this age can choose to retire or continue working; delaying retirement can result in higher pension benefits due to longer contribution periods.<sup>106</sup> The Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) is the main body managing pension contributions and disbursements. Contributions are collected from employees, employers, and self-employed individuals, forming the basis for future pension benefits.<sup>107</sup>

The main source of income for the older people in Poland are pensions and annuities.<sup>108</sup> Most seniors receive benefits from the Social Insurance Fund. At the end of 2023, there were 620,700 thousand people aged 60 and more receiving a retirement pension, 2.4% more than a year before. Women constituted 60.8% of this group.<sup>109</sup> In 2023, social benefits accounted for 85.3% of the disposable income per capita in households composed exclusively of older individuals. The majority of these benefits came from pensions, with retirement and other pension payments making up 81.5% of total disposable income. Earnings from employment contributed 9.7% to the average disposable income of older adults, while income from self-employment outside of private farming in agriculture accounted for 2.7%.<sup>110</sup>

All employed persons in Poland are required to pay a contribution to their pension, which functions as a percentage tax on their income. Once retired, the pension received depends on the contributions paid to date. Thus, the higher a person's salary when employed, the higher their pension will be. At present, the minimum

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<sup>105</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>106</sup> Gov.pl. (2024) *Old-age pension – step by step*. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/your-europe/old-age-pension--step-by-step?> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>107</sup> The Social Insurance Institution (2024) Available at: <https://lang.zus.pl/> [Accessed 14th November 2024]

<sup>108</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>110</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of households in 2023 on the basis of results of the Household Budget Survey*. Available at: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/living-conditions/living-conditions/the-situation-of-households-in-2023-on-the-basis-of-results-of-the-household-budget-survey%2C12%2C23.html?> [Accessed 29th January 2025]

monthly pension entitlement is 1781zł (approx. €423).<sup>111</sup> However, to be eligible for this minimum payment, the person must have worked for at least 20 (for men) or 25 (for women) years prior to retirement. The largest number of older people who are eligible to retirement pension worked in sections Trade; repair of motor vehicles (16.5% of all employed retirees aged 60 and more) and in Human health and social work activities (14.5%).<sup>112</sup>

Those who do not meet this requirement receive a payment relative to how long they had worked for. For comparison, the current minimum monthly salary (after taxes) is 3511zł (approx. €834). Recent years have seen the introduction of a "13th" and "14th" pension payment, in addition to the 12 monthly payments paid over the course of the year. The aim is to improve the protection of older people against poverty. All people receiving a pension are entitled to the 13<sup>th</sup> payment, at the rate of the minimum monthly pension (i.e. 1781zł). The 14<sup>th</sup> payment is needs-based and paid only to those on low pension rates (the threshold varies year-on-year).<sup>113</sup>

Some pensioners may be entitled to additional payments which increase their pension. These depend on the person's circumstances and health status and are available to, for example, those over 75 who are not in residential care; widows and widowers; war veterans; those who fulfilled certain non-combatant roles during World War II; and survivors of political repression.<sup>114</sup>

For older individuals in need of financial assistance, cash benefits from social assistance serve as an additional source of income. One of the primary forms of support is permanent allowances. In 2022, 75,600 people aged 60 and older received these benefits, with the vast majority (87.0%) being seniors living alone. That year, the total amount of permanent allowances paid to older adults reached 391.5 million Polish Zloty (zł), with 94.9% allocated to seniors in single-person households. Compared to the previous year, the number of beneficiaries decreased by 4.6%, while the total value of benefits increased by 6.9%.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Social Insurance Institution [Polish; ZUS] (2024). Available at: <https://www.zus.pl/swiadczenia/renty/kwoty-najnizszych-swiadczen-emerytalno-rentowych#> [Accessed 29th January 2025]

<sup>112</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>113</sup> Gov.pl (2023) *Seniors will receive the 14th pension every year - the "fourteenth" becomes permanent*. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/seniors-will-receive-the-14th-pension-every-year---the-fourteenth-becomes-permanent> [Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> January 2025]

<sup>114</sup> Social Insurance Institution [Polish; ZUS], 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Statistics Poland, 2023.

### 2.4.3 Employment Rate

53.6% of the retired men in Poland aged between 65 and 69 were employed in 2023. The percentage is less than half, 25.6% for men aged 70 and 74, 8.9% for men between 75-79-year-old, 2.1% for men between 80-84-year-old, and 0.7% of the men aged 85 and more.<sup>116</sup>

The economic activity of older people in 2023 remained largely unchanged from 2022. 7.9 million individuals aged 60–89, representing 84.6% of this age group, were economically inactive. Meanwhile, the number of economically active individuals in this demographic was 1.4 million. The activity rate for people aged 60–89 declined slightly from 15.8% in 2022 to 15.4% in 2023, while the employment rate among seniors also saw a minor decrease, from 15.5% to 15.2%.<sup>117</sup>

The main reason for the economic inactivity of older people in 2023 was retirement (90.6% among those aged 60-74 - 84.5% of men, and 93.5% of women who are economically inactive), followed by illness or disability (5.8% - 11.1% of men, and 2.5% of women).<sup>118</sup> No significant differences were found between those living in rural or urban areas.<sup>119</sup>

At the same time, employed retirees (individuals receiving retirement pensions while remaining in the workforce) constitute a significant segment of the labour market in an aging society. Until the end of 2023, Poland had 568,800 employed retirees aged 60 and older, with women making up 56.9% of this group. Compared to 2022, the number of employed retirees in this age group increased by 4.5%, indicating a growing interest among seniors in remaining economically active.<sup>120</sup>

The financial situation of participants varied. While some stated that their pension is sufficient to cover their – often modest – lifestyles and living expenses, others struggle financially and feel that more could be done to support the elderly:

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<sup>116</sup> Statistics Poland, 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>118</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>119</sup> Statistics Poland (2022) *Labour market status of the population - preliminary results of the National Census 2021*. Available at: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/national-census/national-population-and-housing-census-2021/national-population-and-housing-census-2021/labour-market-status-of-the-population-preliminary-results-of-the-national-census-2021.7.1.html> [Accessed 15th January 2025]

Piekuć, M. (2015) *Polskie gospodarstwa domowe - dochody, wydatki i wyposażenie w dobra trwałego użytkowania*. [online] Pw.edu.pl. Wydawnictwo SGGW. Available at: <http://repo.pw.edu.pl/info/book/WUT09dbfedde22043c2b78a0a8ce6613547/> [Polish] [Accessed 9 Jan. 2025]

<sup>120</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

- *"I live modestly but I have enough for everything, I haven't left the house for 3 years, the needs are not big."* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź
- *"I do not use social welfare; I have a good financial situation, and I am independent. I worked until retirement age. My pension is relatively high because I worked abroad for many years. I'm not complaining, because it's enough for everything. Many people complain about low pensions, when they worked for few years or did not have a job, there are many people in a difficult situation, but I cannot complain."* – Henryk, 92-year-old, Łódź
- *"I worked until my wife's illness, then I was on a pension, I am crippled and have only one eye. I have enough money for everything I need. I have a car. I even go on holidays and rehabilitation holidays."* – Stanisław, 86-year-old, Łódź

The linking of social welfare supports and pensions to prior employment and earnings was highlighted as having a substantial impact on both our participants' and the general populations' financial circumstances.

- *"I retired early, I worked in the army, in a furniture factory. The pension is sufficient, I even have some left, I don't cry that I don't have enough money."* – Władek, 83-year-old, Łódź
- *"I worked professionally for many years as a farm worker. I retired at the appointed time. My brother helps me financially, if I were alone, I would not have enough. Medicines are expensive but my brother will pay for them."* – Witek, 60-year-old, Łódź
- *"I have been receiving sickness benefit in the last 20 years. I didn't work much, I got sick, I worked for 2.5 years as an upholsterer and in production. The sickness benefit could be higher; I don't have many years of work."* – Kazik, 60-year-old, Łódź
- *"The pension covers basic needs: housing, food, basic shopping. There is not much money. [...] If two people live together and are healthy, two pensions are enough. Living alone and illnesses are very expensive. There are small actions that help, 13th and 14th pensions. I am a pensioner, and I have free public transport tickets."* – Józef, 71-year-old, a village in Northern Poland

## 2.5 Cultural, Historical, and Political Context

People in Poland are characterized by a positive attitude towards older people, appreciation of their life experience, empathy, and willingness to share acquired knowledge. At the same time, they more often draw attention to the negative behaviours of this age group, causing irritability and reluctance to establish close relationships with them. In Poland, there is a noticeable tendency for the level of respect and appreciation of the role of the older generation to increase with age, with women being characterised by greater liking and appreciation for seniors compared to men. However, the conclusion indicating that earlier and current positive references to grandparents, good intergenerational relations are of great importance for shaping positive attitudes towards seniors.<sup>121</sup>

Studies also confirm that young people have a rather sad image of old age, perceiving older people as lonely, isolated, sick, and requiring care. Another way of perceiving older people results from the fear of constant, exhausting care for seniors. The image of an old person is often based on one's own experiences, gained in contact with a senior known personally.<sup>122</sup>

**Alcohol consumption among elderly:** A survey regarding alcohol consumption in 2020 found that with age, people in Poland consume less alcohol. At the same time, the vast majority of older people drink (65.1% in total) – in the group up to 75 years of age, 70.1% reach for alcohol, and among people 76+, this value drops to 39.3%. Of the entire group of older respondents, 31.3% indicated that they had not consumed alcohol in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 3.6% were declared lifelong abstainers.<sup>123</sup> According to Eurostat data for 2019, among men over 65-year-old, only 1.3% of the men over 65-year-old report that they drink at least once a week, 12.4% drink every month, 26.6% drink less than once a month, and 59.7% never drink or not in the year previous to the survey.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Adamczyk, M.D. (2016) *Postawy Polaków wobec osób starszych i starości*. In: M. Halicka, J. Halicki and E. Kramkowska, eds., *Starość. Poznać, przeżyć, zrozumieć*. Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, pp. 119–138. [Polish] Available at: [https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/11877/1/M\\_D\\_Adamczyk\\_Postawy\\_Polakow\\_wobec\\_osob\\_starszych\\_i\\_starosci.pdf](https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/11877/1/M_D_Adamczyk_Postawy_Polakow_wobec_osob_starszych_i_starosci.pdf) [Accessed 29th January 2025]

<sup>122</sup> Podhorecka, M., Husejko, J., Pyszora, A., Woźniewicz, A., & Kędziora-Kornatowska, K. (2022) 'Attitudes Towards the Elderly in Polish Society: Is Knowledge About Old Age and Personal Experiences a Predictor of Ageism?', *Psychology research and behavior management*, 15, pp. 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S342800>

<sup>123</sup> Stopuzalezniom.pl (2023) *Alcohol among seniors, or drinking patterns among people aged 60+* [Polish] Available at: <https://stopuzalezniom.pl/artykuly/czy-pije-ryzykownie/alkohol-wsrod-seniorow-czyli-modele-picia-u-osob-60/> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2025]

<sup>124</sup> Eurostat (2022) *Frequency of heavy episodic drinking by sex, age and educational attainment level*. Available at:

For most of the respondent in the 2020 survey focusing on alcohol consumption, the reason for abstinence is the harmful effects of alcohol on health (almost 91%), as well as financial issues (82%). Almost 80% of people admitted that they cannot drink alcohol because of the medications they are taking and because "their health does not allow it".<sup>125</sup>

When older people consume alcohol, it is most often in the company of friends and family, and 23% believe that alcohol "improves" parties and celebrations. 18% of respondents believe that alcohol improves mood (4.4% drank because they were depressed or to forget about problems), 17.4% think that the drug also has a positive effect on health. 17% "like the feeling" after drinking, and 11.7% drink to fit in with the company. The report's results also confirm that women drink less, and less often than men. The latter are also more likely to drink risky. The drinking pattern of older people in Poland compared to other countries is characterised by low frequency but large amounts of alcohol consumed during a single drinking session.<sup>126</sup>

**Education:** Among the 55-74 age group in Poland, the proportion of people who are only educated to a lower secondary level or less is relatively small – 10.5%, compared to 29.5% of this age group across the entire EU, or compared to 28.2% in Ireland and 26.7% in Romania. However, the proportion of 55–74-year-olds who are educated to a tertiary level is also relatively low - 18.5%, compared to 23.2% in the EU or 34% in Ireland. Over two-thirds of this age group in Poland completed their education at the upper secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary level, and the overwhelming majority of these received vocational (rather than general) secondary education.<sup>127</sup> Considering these education rates in Poland, it is interesting to note the growing proportion of older people who are engaging in education or informal learning — which can also help reduce loneliness: in 2022, almost a third of 60–69-year-olds engaged in some form of formal or informal education or learning, compared to 6-7% in 2016. Men are more likely to declare engaging in this kind of learning than women.<sup>128</sup> In recent years, there has been a rise in educational activity among older people. Nearly one-third of individuals

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[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth\\_ehis\\_al3e\\_custom\\_16141395/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_ehis_al3e_custom_16141395/default/table?lang=en) [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>125</sup> StopUzależnieniom, 2023.

<sup>126</sup> StopUzależnieniom, 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Educational Attainment Statistics*. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational\\_attainment\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_statistics) [Accessed 29th January 2025]

<sup>128</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]



aged 60–69 reported engaging in learning in 2022, whether through formal, non-formal, or informal education. Among those aged 60–64, 33.9% participated in educational activities, while the percentage was slightly lower at 29.6% for those aged 65–69.<sup>129</sup>

From the responses in this study, it seems that ageing is not a common topic of conversation, but it appears to be becoming more frequent.<sup>130</sup> The participants were asked about perceptions of older people in their society, and their experience about being respected was mixed:

- *"I notice that the young people give up their seats to me. In the club, they often ask me for advice, we talk, I don't feel any barrier with the young people, they are happy to talk to me."* – Józef, 71-year-old, a village in Norther Poland
- *"Veterans and war heroes are respected. Others are forgotten, they are not flaunted, unknown heroes, their experiences are not highlighted. It depends on their character. I have no such aspirations. Many people heroes are quiet, no one highlights their merits."* – Miccio, 77-year-old, a village in Lublin area
- *"People don't really think about old age, maybe there used to be more respect for the elderly, young people don't respect the old. Now, I don't really have this respect, I don't get in their way."* – Stanisław, 86-year-old, Łódź
- *"Young people tend not to respect their elders. They do not give way to old people."* – Kazik, 61-year-old, Łódź

## 2.6 Access to Technology

Over 93% of households in Poland have access to the Internet; however, this access does not directly correlate with the level of digital competence. According to the latest 'Information Society in Figures' report, only 12.6% of individuals aged 65–74 possess basic or intermediate digital skills, while over 23% have minimal or no ICT proficiency.<sup>131</sup> Older adults remain the most digitally excluded group, with limited participation in the digital sphere. This exclusion poses a barrier to

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<sup>129</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>130</sup> There are movies or books where old people are main characters, either by American productions, but also Polish ones: [Gang Zielonej Rękawiczki](#) and [Vika \(2023\)](#).

<sup>131</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *Information society in Poland 2024*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3417/2/14/1/information\\_society\\_in\\_poland\\_2024.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3417/2/14/1/information_society_in_poland_2024.pdf) [Accessed 1st September]



sustainable development within the information society, leading to unequal access to resources that improve quality of life across age groups.<sup>132</sup>

The low digital competence in Poland is especially visible compared to older residents of the European Union. In 2023, only 15.5% of people aged 60-74 in Poland had at least a basic level of digital literacy, with this figure being higher among men (18.3%) than women (13.2%). Among the 60-74 age group, 59.2% reported using the internet at least once a week, with this figure dropping to 51.9% when the 60-64 age group is excluded. Senior citizens used the Internet primarily to read online news, newspapers, or magazines (50.5%) followed by seeking health-related information (39.8%) and information about goods and services (37.2%).<sup>133</sup>

There were 78.7% of the analysed households with access to the Internet (Statistics Poland, 2024). Among older people there is a systematic increase in the share of people using the Internet. In 2023, 61.9% of population aged 60-74 (63.8% of females and 59.4% of males) used the Internet in the three months preceding the survey. Comparing to the previous year, this means an increase by 0.8 pp. The share of persons in this age group using the Internet was still much lower than in the group of younger people (aged 16-59), among whom 95.1% used the Internet. Among the people in the analysed age group, the share of Internet users who had at least basic general digital skills was 15.4%.<sup>134</sup>

The percentage of older people who do not use the Internet differed slightly between women and men (34.1% vs. 35%). However, there is a significant variation in this percentage when taking into account education. Among people aged 60-74 with primary or lower secondary education, as many as 71.5% have never used the Internet. The percentage of seniors with secondary education who do not use the Internet was 36.7%, and with higher education – 2.5%. This is noteworthy, considering the mentioned low rates of tertiary/higher education among the elderly in Poland. The most frequently indicated reasons for not using the Internet by people aged 60-74 (in the last 3 months) include a lack of such a need and a

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<sup>132</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *Information society in Poland 2024*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3417/2/14/1/information\\_society\\_in\\_poland\\_2024.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3417/2/14/1/information_society_in_poland_2024.pdf) [Accessed 1st September]

Tomczyk, Ł., & Kielar, I. (2024) 'Empowering the elderly in the information society: Redefining digital education for Polish seniors in the age of rapid technological change', *Educational Gerontology*, pp. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2024.2439908>

<sup>133</sup> Statistics Poland (2024) *The situation of older people in Poland in 2023*. Available at: [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the\\_situation\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_in\\_poland\\_in\\_2023.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3618/1/6/1/the_situation_of_older_people_in_poland_in_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15th January]

<sup>134</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

lack of appropriate skills. In 2021, among all people aged 60–74, the percentage of seniors who did not use the Internet for these reasons was 27.4% and 23.1%, respectively. Too high costs or lack of appropriate equipment were barriers for only 1.3% and 6.8% of people in the age group analysed.<sup>135</sup>

In 2023, 59.2% of people aged 60–74 used the internet regularly, defined as at least once a week. Within this age group, regular internet use was slightly more common among women (61.4%) than men (56.4%). The frequency of internet use showed a strong correlation with the level of education: only 24.3% of seniors with primary or lower secondary education used the internet regularly, compared to 56.4% with secondary education and 93.1% with tertiary education.<sup>136</sup>

In 2023, older adults most commonly access the internet using smartphones (55.3%) and laptops (30.8%). Among individuals aged 60–74, private internet use was mostly reading online news, newspapers, and magazines (50.5%); searching for health-related information for themselves or loved ones (39.8%); looking up details about goods and services (37.2%), sending and receiving emails (34.2%), and using instant messaging apps (32.9%).<sup>137</sup>

In 2023, 31.1% of people aged 60–74 used websites or apps provided by public administration services within the 12 months prior to the survey. In comparison, 68.3% of individuals aged 16–59 used such services, more than twice the rate of older adults. Among those aged 60–74, 17.7% accessed personal information held by public authorities, while 17% searched for information on public administration websites. Additionally, 14.8% submitted completed tax returns online, 13.3% received official correspondence or documents through their online accounts, and 13.1% downloaded or printed official forms. Older adults shop online significantly less often than younger age groups. In 2023, 27.6% of individuals aged 60–74 made online purchases within the 12 months preceding the survey. In the three months prior to the survey, 18.7% of people in this age group bought goods or services online.<sup>138</sup>

In the current research, the respondents don't seem to experience major challenges in accessing new technology. Seniors treat technology as a support in daily activities – mainly they call doctors, order medicaments. They still prefer traditional ways of connecting with people. They preferred to conduct the interviews in-person, rather than on the phone – as they want to see the other

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<sup>135</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>136</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>137</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

<sup>138</sup> Statistics Poland, 2024.

person they are speaking with. For example, two participants, widowers who live alone, said:

- *"I have a phone, but mainly to call someone. I bought a laptop 15 years ago, and I could do everything. I know everything I need. I don't use instant messaging, but I used to date online a bit. These were interesting conversations until late hours, with interesting people, but nothing came out of it."* – Stanisław, 86-year-old, Łódź
- *"I use a phone, I have a computer with internet, I used a computer at work, so I know how to use it. I also attend a computer course for seniors. Not everyone is interested in technology. Seniors are a closed group, and they don't like new things. They like to meet people in person best. And technology cannot replace this."* – Henryk, 92-year-old, Łódź

However, Tadeusz, a divorced man who lives alone, prefers spending time enjoying TV rather than surfing the web:

- *"I only have a phone and a TV. I don't need to use the Internet or a smartphone. Technology helps to fill the time if someone has interests. There are interesting documentaries and historical programmes on TV, you can see beautiful places on the nature channel or listen to classical and jazz music on the music channels. It fills my day."* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź

## 2.7 Sense and Thoughts about Loneliness

Existing research indicates that loneliness is prevalent among the elderly in Poland, especially those aged 80 or older. A recent study by the Polish branch of *Friends of the Elderly* explored isolation and loneliness among the 80+ population of Poland. They found that 60% of this population are widowed, 58% live alone, and 26% frequently feel lonely. Among those who report frequently experiencing loneliness, 73% live alone and 13% never leave their home. Poor health status is a major barrier to leaving the home. Only 6% avail of "senior's clubs" - groups aiming to provide social, educational, and recreational opportunities for older people – suggesting that such clubs do not adequately engage with those who need them most. Among the 41% who reported never experiencing loneliness, the majority are

married and/or do not live alone, suggesting that an older person's living situation and relationship status has a key impact on their experiences of loneliness.<sup>139</sup>

The findings of this study also highlight the crucial role of the family in the lives of older people in Poland, with 94% of respondents stating that family relations are (very) important to them. They maintain close contact with their family members, often calling one another everyday – even those that they live with. While friendships are also important, these serve primarily as opportunities for socialisation, rather than functioning as close, trusting relationships. Respondents discuss trivial, everyday matters with their friends but are unlikely to turn to them for emotional support or to share their difficulties.

The relationship between loneliness and wider (mental) health and wellbeing among the older people in Poland is evident in this research. Specifically, those experiencing frequent loneliness face crisis situations more often, such as health problems, loss of independence, feeling unsafe, and feeling that they are not needed. They are less likely to take steps to tackle their loneliness and have a more pessimistic outlook, perceiving the world as an unsafe, unfriendly place. Most avoid their loneliness through passive activities such as watching television or listening to the radio.

None of the Polish interviewees in this research admit that they are lonely. They pointed out every relation, activity, or person who is helping them. Even if they don't have many such relations, they proudly list their friends, family members, and so forth.

Two main solutions were suggested by the respondent in the current research for reducing feelings of loneliness. The first is interests – if people have interests, hobbies, or passions, this will keep them busy and reduce their loneliness. According to their interest, and if their health allows it, the respondents are active in their local community: agricultural club, beekeepers clubs, gym, sport club, artistic groups, sport group activities, tenants meeting, social and NGO activities for lonely seniors. They take part in activities according to their interests so to have interests is crucial.

Secondly, connection with people also stems from their personality. Tadeusz, who lives alone and has not left his flat in the last three years said:

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<sup>139</sup> Stowarzyszenie mali bracia Ubogich (2023) *Samotność wśród osób 80+*. Warsaw. Available at: [https://www.malibracia.org.pl/assets/RAPORT\\_2023/Samotnosc-wsrod-osob-80+-Raport-z-badania\\_zapis\\_2023.pdf](https://www.malibracia.org.pl/assets/RAPORT_2023/Samotnosc-wsrod-osob-80+-Raport-z-badania_zapis_2023.pdf) [Accessed 7th February 2025]

- *"I've been living in the city for 30 years, and I don't really see lonely men. [...] I live alone, but thanks to my interests (books, art, music, paintings) **I am not lonely. I'm not bored; I still have a lot of curiosity about life.**"* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź

While some prefers to limit their relations, others like to talk and interact, they have many contacts and can easily call a friend, visit somebody, or even meet new people. They cherish every relationship, and every possibility to talk and meet others.

- *"Organizations such as Little Brothers of the Poor and others help seniors a lot in mitigating the feeling of being unnecessary and forgotten. There are many opportunities to meet or learn something new."* – Henryk, 92-year-old, Łódź, widowed, lives alone
- *"There are some lonely people. Only the presence of another person can help those who are lonely. I do not feel lonely, but **men are often lonely, sometimes but they rarely talk about it**"* – Witek, 60-year-old, Łódź, lives alone

Concerns about being in a new relationship were sometimes raised, and may lead to isolation and loneliness among some older people:

- *"Older people attach great importance to money, they are cunning, and for this reason they are distrustful, they do not let people into the apartment. When you get married, people have nothing and together they build from scratch, and everything is shared. In old age, everyone has their own property and money, and they want it to stay this way. They will not build anything together, and therefore they do not want to get involved in a relationship."* – Stanisław, 86-year-old, Łódź
- *"**Often in the senior's family, there is a fear of new partners.** There are many examples of pretended love, for financial gain; hence the fear of seniors when it comes to new relationships. [...] It is worth finding a person with a similar mentality, someone 'on the same wavelength.' Another person can help in the fight against loneliness."* – Tadeusz, 77-year-old, Łódź

### 3. Romania

#### 3.1 Population

In 2024, there were over 3.8 million people aged 65 and older in Romania, accounting for 20% of the country's 19 million population. Of these, 1.5 million were men, representing 8% of the total population and 40% of those aged 65 and older.<sup>140</sup> The demographic aging process continued in 2023, with the share of elderly persons (aged 65 and over) increasing by 0.3 percentage points, from 19.7% in 2023 to 20.0% in January 2024.<sup>141</sup>

The distribution of men aged 65 and older across age groups [Figure 3] decreases with advancing age: the majority (36%) are between 65 and 69 years old, 29% are between 70 and 74, 17% are between 75 and 79, 10% are between 80 and 84, and 8% are 85 or older. Over 52% of the men over 65-year-old in Romania live in urban areas, whereas almost 48% live in rural areas.<sup>142</sup>

In 2023, the average life expectancy at birth in Romania was 76.4 years, with a notable difference between genders: the life expectancy for men was 72.6 years, whereas for women, it was 80.4 years. Romania's life expectancy is among the lowest among the EU Member States in 2023, and five years below the EU average (81.4 years).<sup>143</sup>

The ageing population in Romania is rapidly increasing. Romania's population is expected to decrease to 16.4 million by 2050 and 15.7 million by 2060, as birth rate to remain low and migration is expected to continue.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, life

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<sup>140</sup> National Institute of Statistics (Romania) (2025). *TEMPO-Online time series*. Available at: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table> [Accessed 17 September 2025].

<sup>141</sup> Institutul National de Statistica / National Institute of Statistics (2024) *Popularia rezidenta la 1 ianuarie 2023, in crestere cu 9,1 mii persoane*. Available at: [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com\\_presa/com\\_pdf/poprez\\_ian2023r.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/poprez_ian2023r.pdf) [Accessed 30th January 2025]

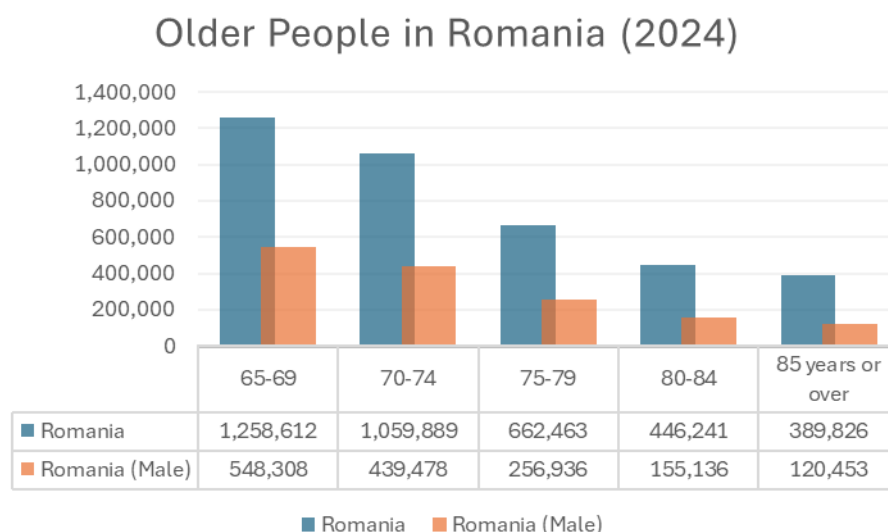
<sup>142</sup> National Institute of Statistics (Romania) (2025) *TEMPO-Online time series*. Available at: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table> [Accessed 17 September 2025].

<sup>143</sup> Eurostat (2025). *Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS 2 region*. [online] Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025]

National Institute of Statistics (2025) *POP217B - Life expectancy by ages, sex and development regions*. Available at: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table> [Accessed 12th February 2025]

<sup>144</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00002/default/table?lang=en&category=t\\_proj](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00002/default/table?lang=en&category=t_proj) [Accessed 10th February 2025]

expectancy is expected to increase, and so is the percentage of people aged 65 or older, which is expected to rise to 27.7% by 2050.<sup>145</sup>



**Figure 3:** Older people in Romania by age and gender.

Source for data: [National Institute of Statistics](#), 2025)

In 2022, 73.3% of Romania ns said they felt their health was very good or good, which is higher than the EU average of 68.0%. Like in other EU countries, men (77.7%) reported better health than women (69.3%), and people with higher incomes (80.4%) felt healthier than those with lower incomes (66.9%). However, in Romania, people consistently rated their health better than the EU average, regardless of gender or income level.<sup>146</sup>

The participants in this research, aged between 69–80-year-old, are retired urban residents. Most of them are beneficiaries of the community programme provided by the *Never Alone – Friends of the Elderly Association*, which may to some extent, affect their sense of loneliness.

<sup>145</sup> European Commission (2025) *Reform of long-term care services for older people*. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/projects/reform-long-term-care-services-older-people\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/projects/reform-long-term-care-services-older-people_en) [Accessed 10th February 2025]

<sup>146</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies (2023) *Romania: Country Health Profile 2023*, State of Health in the EU, OECD Publishing, Paris/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, Brussels. Available at: [https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/2023\\_chp\\_ro\\_english.pdf](https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/2023_chp_ro_english.pdf) [Accessed 17th April 2025]



### 3.2 Social Structures

According to a national qualitative and quantitative study for the *Never Alone – Friends of the Elderly* association, 30% of the older people who reside in urban areas of the country live alone. Rural areas of Romania largely retain strong community values, with neighbours forming small yet very supportive and effective networks. However, in urban areas, many older people report that over the past 50 years, they have gone from knowing most of their neighbours, regularly interacting and helping each other, and enjoying a close-knit community - to a situation where no one knows each other, people barely say hello, and there is essentially no community—particularly in apartment buildings. This, coupled with the loss of old friends, neighbours, and family, has resulted in a growing number of older adults in urban areas who have very low social engagement or no social support system.<sup>147</sup>

According to Eurostat data (2024), only 1.4% of men over 65-year-old in Romania engaged in formal or informal voluntary activities or active citizenship, only a small increase from 2015, when it was 1.3%. This figure is significantly lower than the EU average (11.8%).<sup>148</sup>

Older people in rural areas in Romania must depend on personal vehicles. The shortage of reliable public transport contributes to mobility poverty, restricting access to essential services, and social activities.<sup>149</sup> These challenges are further aggravated by broader infrastructure shortcomings, with Romania's transport system ranking low in quality due to poor planning and underutilized funding.<sup>150</sup>

In terms of religiosity, 86% of the people in Romania identified themselves as Orthodox Christians, 5% as Catholic, less than 1% Muslims, and 1% are unaffiliated. 95% of the adults in Romania said they believe in God.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Kantar Romania (2021) *Explorarea singuratatii in randul seniorilor din Romania*. Retrieved from Niciodata Singur: <https://niciodatasingur.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Studiu.pdf> [Accessed 17th April 2025]

<sup>148</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_scp19\\_custom\\_18043240/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_scp19_custom_18043240/default/table) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>149</sup> Pozsar, M. (2023) *Mobility Poverty Overview in Central and Eastern Europe*. Available at: [https://focus.si/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Romania\\_en.pdf](https://focus.si/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Romania_en.pdf) [Accessed 10th April 2025]

<sup>150</sup> De Rosa, D., & Soo Kim, Y. (2018) *Romania: Thriving cities, rural poverty, and a trust deficit*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/romania-thriving-cities-rural-poverty-and-a-trust-deficit/> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

<sup>151</sup> Pew Research Center (2017) *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

The participants in this research frequently interact with their family on a weekly or daily basis. Some of them also interact with friends, but on a lower frequency: "We go out for coffee, but very rarely"; "I rarely interact with friends, most of them are deceased"; "I don't interact much with friends; friendships are difficult to maintain in big cities". When it comes to interaction with neighbours, the connections are even weaker: "I know my neighbours but only says hello to them in passing"; "there are only some superficial interactions, no visiting one another"; "my neighbours are suspicious, reserved".

Some of the participants take part in community events, but such activities usually remain limited: "I am part of multiple communities that organise activities for the elderly, and I usually attend workshops such as gymnastics or dance"; "I avoid crowded places and I'm fearful of conflicts; I have not had the opportunity to be a part of many events".

### 3.3 Policy Review

The Legal Framework for social services in Romania is the Social Assistance Law (Law No. 292/2011), which provides the framework for the social protection of those aged 65 and over. The law highlights the right to social assistance services and benefits aimed at preventing and overcoming situations of need, reducing social exclusion, and enhancing their quality of life. It also provides older people access to various services, including home care, day centres, residential care facilities, and counselling services, tailored to meet their specific needs.

Older persons with insufficient income are eligible for financial aid, such as social pensions or allowances, to ensure a minimum standard of living. The law also tasks local authorities with developing community-based services that promote active aging and social participation among older people. It encourages partnerships between public institutions and non-governmental organizations to diversify and improve the quality of services available to older people. Finally, the law ensures that measures are in place to safeguard older people from abuse, neglect, and discrimination, and that their dignity and autonomy are respected.

Decision No. 1492/2022 of December 14, 2022, led to the approval of the National Strategy on Long-Term Care and Active Ageing for the period 2023–2030, which has been adopted and is enforced.

The strategy aims to improve access to adequate long-term care services for Romania's growing population of older people, allowing them to live independently long as possible. The strategy focuses also on active aging and financial sustainability. It focuses on integrating health and social care, developing a skilled workforce, supporting informal caregivers, and expanding community-based services. The strategy also emphasises innovation and policy development to improve service quality and accessibility (European Commission, 2025).<sup>152</sup>

Currently, Romania has 973 social services licensed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection for elderly individuals. These services include residential care, home care, informational services, community-based support, and day centre programmes.<sup>153</sup> In 2021, only 1.3% of the Romanian older adults were beneficiaries of these kinds of services.<sup>154</sup>

One of the most important issues in the current social service system of Romania is that more "impractical" problems, such as loneliness and social isolation are not considered to be relevant problems needing intervention by the state. Most of the social services catering to the elderly in Romania focus on the financial and health aspect, mostly because the highest rates of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU were recorded in Romania (34%) in Eurostat 2021.

Among the participants in this research, access to social services is minimal, though those benefiting from services such as *Never Alone* services report high satisfaction. Respondents perceive a lack of adequate social support for older adults in Romania. The interviewees note only slight improvements, if any at all, in support systems for older adults over time. Three of them mentioned opening of centres for older people, where they can spend time with other people.

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<sup>152</sup> European Commission (2025). *Reform of long-term care services for older people*. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/projects/reform-long-term-care-services-older-people\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/projects/reform-long-term-care-services-older-people_en) [Accessed 10th February 2025]

<sup>153</sup> *Harta Serviciilor Sociale din România / The Map of Social Services in Romania* (2025). Accessed: <https://serviciisociale.ro/> [29th January 2025]

<sup>154</sup> Digi24 (2021) "Doar 1,3% dintre vârstnicii din România beneficiază de servicii sociale. Raluca Turcan: "Acestea sunt cifre ale sărăciei" [Romanian]. Available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/doar-13-dintre-varstnicii-din-romania-beneficiaza-de-servicii-sociale-raluca-turcan-acestea-sunt-cifre-ale-saraciei-1685413> [Accessed: 15th June 2025].

## 3.4 Economic Factors

### 3.4.1 Poverty Risk

Older people (aged 65 and over) are reported to have been living in relative poverty at a rate of 86.6%. The Romanian government defines poverty as an income less than 60% of the national median.<sup>155</sup>

**Healthcare affordability:** Romania's healthcare system is funded primarily through salary contributions, with exemptions for non-working categories, such as retirees, unemployed individuals, and those receiving social benefits. In 2020, only about 36 % of those covered paid contributions.<sup>156</sup> Despite the mandatory nature of the system, around 12% of the population remained uninsured in 2020, particularly in rural areas and marginalised groups.<sup>157</sup> They are entitled to a minimum benefits package, covering only life-threatening emergencies, treatment for infectious diseases and care during pregnancy.<sup>158</sup>

Older individuals, while covered, face significant health challenges. Only 10% of those aged 75 and over reported having good or very good health in 2022, compared to slightly higher rates among those aged 65-74 (30.5% for men and 23.2% for women). Moreover, Romania spends the least per capita on health among EU countries, compounding accessibility and affordability issues. Older people in Romania also report shorter life expectancy and fewer healthy years compared to EU averages, with significant limitations in daily activities such as dressing or bathing being more prevalent than in other European countries.<sup>159</sup>

In Romania, reported unmet healthcare needs are more than twice the EU average. According to the 2022 EU-SILC survey, 4.9% of Romanians faced barriers to medical care due to costs, travel distance, or long waiting times, with three-quarters citing cost as the main reason. This rate was more than double the EU average of 2.2%. There are significant gaps by income, as only 1.8% of those in the highest income quintile reported unmet needs, compared to 9.1% in the lowest quintile. A similar trend is observed in dental care, where unmet needs declined

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<sup>155</sup> Institutul National de Statistica / National Institute of Statistics (2024) *In 2023, Unul din Cinci Romani Era Afectat de Saracie*. Available at: [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com\\_presa/com\\_pdf/saracia\\_si\\_excluziunea\\_sociala\\_r2\\_023\\_0.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/saracia_si_excluziunea_sociala_r2_023_0.pdf) [Accessed 30th January 2025]

<sup>156</sup> Scîntee, G.S., Mosca, I., & Vlădescu, C. (2022) *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Romania*. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

<sup>157</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.

<sup>158</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.

<sup>159</sup> Institutul National de Statistica / National Institute of Statistics (2019) *Tendinte sociale*. Bucuresti: Editura Institutului National de Statistica.

from 10.9% in 2012 to 5.2% in 2022, though income-related differences remain substantial.<sup>160</sup>

### 3.4.2 Pension System

Since September 2024, Romania introduced significant amendments to the public pension system with Law 360/2023, aiming to encourage longer workforce participation among those with over 25 years of contributions. While according to the previous regulation, the standard retirement age was 65 for men and 63 for women, the new regulation introduces gradual adjustments to equalize the retirement age for both genders - and as stated in Article 47 of Law 360/2023, the standard retirement age will now be 65 for both men and women.

As of the second quarter of 2024, Romania's pension system encompassed approximately 4.98 million beneficiaries, with an average monthly pension of 2.427 lei (488 euros). This reflects a 13.8% increase compared to the same period in 2023. Most of these pensions are distributed through the public social insurance system, which includes State Pensions, survivor's pensions, and disability pensions. Despite recent increases, the average pension remains modest relative to the national average wage, posing challenges for retirees in maintaining their standard of living.<sup>161</sup>

### 3.4.3 Employment Rate

There is no relevant data in Romania about the employment rates of older adults aged 65 and over. However, in 2019, 48% of Romanians aged 55 to 64 were active in the labour market, a proportion that had steadily increased from 39% in 2005.<sup>162</sup> Despite this significant growth of nearly 10%, Romania remained among the European countries with the lowest employment rates for older adults. By 2019, the country had not yet met the Lisbon Strategy target of achieving a 50% employment rate for older adults by 2010. Additionally, in 2017, 37% of Romania's total pensioners were aged 45 to 64. This high percentage illustrates the pressure

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<sup>160</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Institutul National de Statistica / National Institute of Statistics (2024) *Pensia medie lunara a inregistrat o crestere in trimestrul II 2024 fata de trimestrul I 2024*. Available at: [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com\\_presa/com\\_pdf/pensii\\_tr2r2024.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/pensii_tr2r2024.pdf) [Accessed 7th February 2025]

<sup>162</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Employment rate of older workers, age group 55-64*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem050/default/bar?lang=en> [Accessed 15th April 2025]

on the Romanian pension system and partly explains the low employment rate among people in this age group.<sup>163</sup>

**Results:** Most of the respondent own their homes or apartments. There were mixed responds on whether pensions are sufficient. Most of the respondents said that that their pension covers everything they need and that the system as unsupportive of their wellbeing. Some said that it covers the essentials, but they are merely getting by. Only a few admitted that they can't do much with the money that they get. The responses were mixed also regarding the accessibility and affordability of health services. Most of the participants have access to medical services and treatments at low cost. However, waiting times for accessing medical services are very long, and private services are often expensive.

### 3.5 Cultural, Historical, and Political Context

In terms of cultural, historical, and political context in Romania, two main aspects are important to mention. First, Eastern European Culture is one promoting strong, independent and resourceful people, especially among men. Many have a strong bias against psychologists and psychiatrists.<sup>164</sup> As it happens in many other cultures, men are not encouraged towards having good mental health habits, there is a notable lack in promoting introspection, being in touch with their feelings or communicating about them. This, of course, in time, leads to a more closed off, inflexible and isolated elderly man.

Having experienced a proletarian society for nearly five decades, Romania continues to grapple with the lingering social and cultural prejudices of that era. There remains limited recognition of the fact that average life expectancy has increased significantly, and that individuals now entering retirement are expected to remain active members of society for, on average, an additional 20 years.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Confederația Patronală Concordia (2019) *Analysis of the Romanian Survey of the "AGEGAP" Project*. Available at: [https://agegap.eu/assets/images/AGEGAP\\_NATIONAL\\_RO\\_EN.pdf](https://agegap.eu/assets/images/AGEGAP_NATIONAL_RO_EN.pdf) [Accessed 7th February 2025]

<sup>164</sup> Gough B. & Novikova I. (2020) *Mental health, men and culture: how do sociocultural constructions of masculinities relate to men's mental health help-seeking behaviour in the WHO European Region?* Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe (Health Evidence Network (HEN)).

<sup>165</sup> Economic Policy Committee - Ageing Working Group (2023) *2024 Ageing Report. Romania - Country Fiche*. Available at: [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a9702deb-0d2c-4540-a03c-65e2b4736c23\\_en?filename=2024-ageing-report-country-fiche-Romania.pdf](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a9702deb-0d2c-4540-a03c-65e2b4736c23_en?filename=2024-ageing-report-country-fiche-Romania.pdf) [Accessed 14th April 2025]

It is also noteworthy that according to Eurostat data in 2019, the highest prevalence of heavy episodic drinking at least once a month among alcohol drinkers in Romania is 55%, the highest in the EU) occurs among men.<sup>166</sup>

Second, it is the drinking habits in Romania. In 2019, around 35% of the population reported episodes of heavy drinking at least once a month, which is nearly double the EU average (18.5%).<sup>167</sup> Excessive alcohol consumption is a major problem among Romanian men Adult. There is a strong gender gap in heavy drinking, with more than half of men (53.1 %) but fewer than one in five women (18%) reporting this behaviour in 2019.<sup>168</sup> Among men over 65-year-old, 17% drinks at least once a week, 20.4% drinks every month, 33.8% never drinks or have not drunk during the year previous to the survey.<sup>169</sup> The percentage of Romanian adults who smoked daily was similar to the EU average, with approximately one in five being regular smokers.<sup>170</sup>

Overall, the interviewees in Romania feel that older men are respected and valued in their community, although some of them were less unequivocal, saying that older men are “mostly” respected. There were also those who don't feel that older men are respected. When asked whether older men in their community talk openly about loneliness or personal difficulty, the answers ranged between “yes”, “mostly”, and “not really”, and were spread quite evenly between the respondents. One of the participants explained: “these kinds of topics are not often discussed. Men rarely open to talk about these issues”. Two participants mentioned that the level of openness depends on the quality of connection with the people you talk with, and that it is easier to talk with friends and people that they trust.

### 3.6 Access to Technology

Digital transformation has become increasingly important in Romania's political agenda in recent years and is now supported by substantial EU funding. While some ongoing initiatives are beginning to show positive results, the widespread benefits for citizens and businesses—such as digital education and inclusion,

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<sup>166</sup> Eurostat (2022) *Frequency of heavy episodic drinking by sex, age and educational attainment level*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth\\_ehis\\_al3e/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_ehis_al3e/default/table?lang=en) [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>167</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.

<sup>168</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.

<sup>169</sup> Eurostat, 2022.

<sup>170</sup> OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023.



enhanced competitiveness and innovation, and more efficient and transparent public services—are still limited.

According to the Special Eurobarometer 'Digital Decade 2024', only 59% of Romania's population believes that the digitalisation of everyday public and private services simplifies their lives. This is among the lowest rates in the EU, significantly below the EU average of 73%.<sup>171</sup> The result for basic digital skills coverage in Romania in 2023 was the lowest in the EU, with less than 28% of its population, compared to the EU average of 55.6%.<sup>172</sup> Among the older population in Romania, the numbers are even lower, with only 4% of the population between 65- and 74-year-old has "at least basic digital skills", and it can be assumed that for people older than 74-year-old the results are lower.<sup>173</sup>

Almost all the participants in the current study believe that technology could help older people to cope with feelings of loneliness. Almost all of them use technology daily, and it enables them to maintain connections with family and friends and find online information on topics they find interesting. However, some of the respondents mentioned that they are positive towards technology, as long as it does not become the only way to connect with people, and other emphasised the importance of face-to-face encounters with their friends, and some even prefer them: "the presence of people near me is more important".

When asked "are you facing challenges in accessing and using technology?" the responses were mixed, with more respondents feeling comfortable using technology for their needs. One respondent admitted that sometimes there are certain digital skills that he does not have, and only one respondent finds it difficult to use modern technologies. One respondent mentioned the risks of using technology, such as exposure to scams.

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<sup>171</sup> European Commission (2024) *Digital Decade: 2024 Country Reports*. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-2024-country-reports> [Accessed 12 March 2025]

<sup>172</sup> European Commission (2023) *Romania: a snapshot of digital skills*. Available at: <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/latest/briefs/romania-snapshot-digital-skills> [Accessed 12 March 2025]  
Eurostat (2024) *Skills for the digital age*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Skills\\_for\\_the\\_digital\\_age](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Skills_for_the_digital_age) [Accessed 12th March 2025]

<sup>173</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) *Fundamental rights of older people: ensuring access to public services in digital societies*. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/mt/publication/2023/older-people-digital-rights?page=3&pid=b4172da9-4eba-4d9d-a88b-bb965602f628#read-online> [Accessed 12th March 2025]

### 3.7 Sense and Thoughts about Loneliness

Research indicates that older Romanians often experience social exclusion, which negatively impacts their mental wellbeing. According to data from 2016, Romania faces higher levels of loneliness among the 65 and older population than any other country in the EU. Approximately one-third of people aged 65 and older in Romania reported feeling lonely more than half the time, most of the time, or all the time, compared to 18% across the EU as a whole.<sup>174</sup> This exclusion is linked to limited social interactions and inadequate support systems.<sup>175</sup>

More recent data from a study by Kantar Romania demonstrates an increase in these figures over time.<sup>176</sup> Among the 65+ respondents, 60% of those living in urban areas often experienced loneliness and one in four experienced high levels of loneliness. Three in ten did not have anyone to rely on in times of need. Marinescu and Balica (2019) predicted that loneliness among elderly Romanians will "become an endemic situation" in the nearby future, highlighting the importance of interpersonal communication in mitigating this challenge.

The participants suggested several activities that they think would help older men in Romania feel less lonely. Many of them emphasised the importance of socializing, meeting new people, and conversations on topics which they are interested in. They also recommended participating in local organised activities, being involved in the community, or being part of a club for older people – all potential ways to meet new people and make friends. Mental and physical health were also mentioned as an important step to reduce loneliness, as well as connection with family members, and spending time with a people that they love.

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<sup>174</sup> Sandu, V., Zólyomi, E. and Leichsenring, K. (2021) *Addressing loneliness and social isolation among older people in Europe*, Policy Brief 2021/7. Vienna: European Centre. Available at: <https://www.euro.centre.org/publications/detail/4127> [Accessed 14th October 2024]

<sup>175</sup> Precupetu, I., Aartsen, M., & Vasile, M. (2019). Social Exclusion and Mental Wellbeing in Older Romanians. *Social Inclusion*, 7(3), pp. 4-16. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i3.2008>

<sup>176</sup> Seniorinet (2022) *Niciodată singur and their study on loneliness among older people*. Available at: <https://seniorinet.ro/niciodata-singur-and-their-study-on-loneliness-among-older-people/?lang=en> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> February 2025]

## Discussion and Recommendations

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This study examined loneliness among older men in Ireland, Poland, and Romania, three countries representing different parts of the EU. Using mixed methods, it explored how older men experience loneliness, what factors shape it, how these experiences differ across countries, and what can be done to reduce social isolation.

**In Ireland**, loneliness among older adults is influenced by factors such as rural isolation, health conditions, living alone, and limited social engagement. Recent studies reveal that about one-third of older people report feeling lonely or lacking companionship, with those living alone, managing chronic illness, or single being particularly affected.<sup>177</sup> Participants in this research echoed these findings, describing feelings of loneliness despite maintaining contact with family or living in retirement communities. Many noted the emotional gap that remains after returning home to an empty house.

Several coping strategies were highlighted, including involvement in Men's Sheds, maintaining hobbies, using technology to stay connected, and having pets. While community-based activities and family support help, loneliness often persists without proactive social interaction. Some participants expressed fears about new relationships, especially related to property or financial concerns. Ultimately, meaningful social engagement, accessible community structures, and emotional connection, not just physical presence, are essential in addressing loneliness among older Irish men. Pets were mentioned by several participants as an invaluable company, and in case of dogs - they also encourage physical activity and meeting neighbours through walks.

**In Poland**, loneliness among older adults is widespread, especially among those over 80, widowed, or living alone, with nearly 26% frequently feeling lonely and 13% never leaving home due to poor health. Although "senior's clubs" exist, only 6% participate, indicating limited outreach. Living arrangements and family relationships play a central role in mitigating loneliness—most older adults maintain daily contact with family and value these connections highly. Friendships, though appreciated, are generally superficial and not a source of emotional support. Respondents in this study did not admit to feeling lonely, instead emphasising relationships, hobbies, and community involvement as protective

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<sup>177</sup> Aware (2023) *Aware's older adult research reveals high rates of depression and anxiety*. Available at: <https://www.aware.ie/survey-older-adults/> [Accessed 14th December 2024]

factors. They noted that maintaining interests, such as art, music, or club participation, and having an outgoing personality are key to avoiding loneliness. Some also identified barriers to forming new relationships later in life, such as financial concerns and distrust, which can reinforce isolation despite a desire for connection.

**In Romania**, older adults experience some of the highest levels of loneliness in the EU, with one-third of those aged 65+ reporting frequent loneliness as early as 2016, and more recent data showing even higher rates—particularly in urban areas, where 60% often feel lonely and 30% lack support in times of need. This chronic social exclusion is linked to limited interpersonal contact and weak support systems. Study participants emphasised the importance of meaningful social interaction, suggesting that organised activities, community involvement, clubs for older people, and maintaining strong family connections could help alleviate loneliness. Mental and physical health were also seen as crucial to reducing feelings of isolation.

The findings show that across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, loneliness among older men is shaped by common factors such as living alone, poor health, and limited meaningful interaction—despite some differences in context and support systems. In all three countries, emotional isolation persists even when family contact exists, highlighting a shared need for deeper social connection. Ireland and Poland show the importance of family and hobbies, though participation in formal social programmes remains low, especially in Poland. Romania stands out with the highest reported levels of loneliness, particularly in urban areas, due to weaker support systems. Overall, the findings point to a shared need for more accessible, emotionally meaningful community engagement to effectively address loneliness in older age.

Building on the findings, we recommend a multi-faceted approach, highlighting six key areas of intervention to address the root causes of loneliness among older men in the studied countries.

## **1. Strengthen Social Structures for Older Men**

Social structures play an important role in providing support for older men and in mitigating loneliness. Research has shown a link between the wellbeing and quality of life of older adults and their active participation in society and social

connections.<sup>178</sup> Engaging in community and leisure activities outside the home is essential for maintaining both health and social wellbeing.<sup>179</sup> While all three countries have frameworks that provide practical support (e.g., pensions, home care), emotional wellbeing and relational support remain underdeveloped. Additionally, other factors—such as access, mobility, or even a lack of awareness of existing services—can impact effectiveness.

**In Ireland**, older male population shows increasing trends in independent living with varied levels of community engagement. As of 2022, over 74,000 men aged 65+ lived alone, and while most reported access to support from neighbours. Formal and informal volunteering rates among older men in Ireland exceed the EU average (19.6% compared to EU average of 11.8%, see *Figure 4*).<sup>180</sup> Involvement in faith communities, clubs, community and civic groups contributes to a sense of purpose and belonging. However, participation in such activities is often limited by transport accessibility, particularly in rural areas where car dependency is high. One of the solutions for such cases can be programmes such as the Friendly Call service or *Home Visitation Programme* by the *Friends of the Elderly*, offering regular in-person visits by volunteers to provide companionship, conversation, and emotional support to older adults who may feel lonely or isolated.<sup>181</sup>

The responses of the Irish interviewees in the current research correspond with the data on the general population. They largely live alone and maintain limited interaction with neighbours, preferring to contact family or friends when in need. Still, their engagement in initiatives like the Men's Sheds suggests meaningful community involvement, often through activities that contribute to local life, such as village clean-ups or projects with schools. While some respondents expressed a growing sense of alienation in contemporary Irish society, many found community connections and personal fulfilment through structured social groups,

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<sup>178</sup> O'Connor & Murphy, 2022.

<sup>179</sup> Siegrist, J. & Wahrendorf, M. (2009) Participation in socially productive activities and quality of life in early old age: findings from SHARE. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 19(4), pp.317–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506809341513>

House, J. S., Landis, K. R. & Umberson, D. (1988) Social relationships and health, *Science*, 241(4865), pp.540–545. DOI: [10.1126/science.3399889](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.3399889)

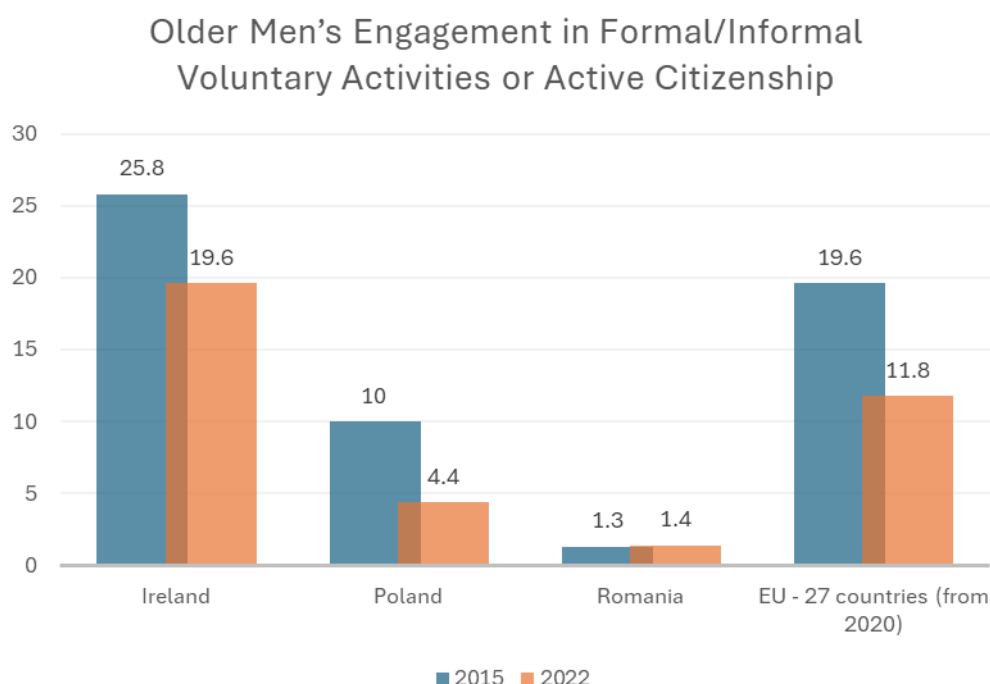
<sup>180</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment*. Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_scp19\\_\\_custom\\_18043240/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_scp19__custom_18043240/default/table) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>181</sup> Friends of the Elderly Ireland (2025) *Our services*. Available at:

<https://www.friendsoftheelderly.ie/our-services> [Accessed 1st September 2025]

which play a vital role in maintaining social ties and emotional wellbeing as they age.



**Figure 4:** Older Men's Engagement in Formal/Informal Voluntary Activities or Active Citizenship. For EU countries – the data for 2022 is marked as estimated, For Ireland and Poland – the data for 2015 are marked as low reliability. Source: Eurostat, 2024.

**In Poland**, the social structures surrounding older adults in Poland reveal contrasts by gender, geography, and household type. Most senior households are concentrated in multi-family urban buildings, though many experience limited interaction with neighbours. While infrastructure in senior housing has improved, formal care facilities remain limited relative to demand, with Poland ranking among the lowest in the EU in terms of available beds. Despite participation in cultural activities and senior clubs, formal and informal civic engagement among older adults, especially men, remains relatively low (4.4%) compared to EU averages.

Findings from the interviews in Poland highlight a strong preference for independence and a reluctance to seek help, even when support is available. Most older adults reported minimal neighbourly contact and a sense of social isolation, particularly in urban environments. However, some respondents maintained limited but functional community ties, often relying on paid caregivers or family

when needed. Younger participants were more open to receiving help, particularly from family, indicating possible generational shifts in attitudes toward dependency and care. These insights underscore the importance of expanding accessible, community-based services and fostering inclusive neighbourhood environments to support aging in place with dignity and connection.

**In Romania**, social structures for older people reveal a stark contrast between rural and urban areas. While rural communities still maintain strong neighbourly ties and supportive networks, urbanisation has eroded traditional forms of social cohesion. Many older adults in cities report a significant decline in social connection, transitioning from close-knit, interactive communities to isolated living environments where neighbours rarely speak. This social fragmentation, combined with the loss of family and friends, has led to rising levels of social disengagement and limited support networks among older adults, especially in urban settings. National data reflect low levels of formal civic engagement, with only 1.4% of Romanian men aged 65+ participating in volunteering or active citizenship, well below the EU average.

Despite high levels of religiosity and family-oriented values, most identifying as Orthodox Christians and regularly interacting with family, older adults report limited social interactions beyond their immediate family. Friendships are infrequent and often strained by distance or loss, while relationships with neighbours tend to be superficial or marked by suspicion. Some older adults do participate in structured community events such as workshops or physical activities, but these engagements remain relatively limited. The overall picture suggests that while familial support is still present, broader community engagement and social inclusion for older adults, particularly in cities, remain a significant challenge.

The interviews across all three countries make it clear that strong social structures play a crucial role in reducing loneliness among older men. Engagement with family, friends, neighbours, and like-minded individuals provides essential social support. Activities in clubs and community centres that address also older population and help them developing social connections and integrating in local communities. Community involvement can take many forms: participation in local organisations or activities, as well as belonging to specific groups such as faith, national, ethnic, or linguistic communities. This can also include volunteering, and among the three countries, the percentage of men over 65-year-old who engage



in voluntary activities or active citizenship in 2022 is highest in Ireland, and Poland and Romania are among the lowest.<sup>182</sup>

It is recommended to promote policies that fund and promote community spaces that go beyond basic care, such as men's sheds, cultural centres, or peer support networks, to create opportunities for connection and belonging. Day centres, volunteer programmes, and intergenerational partnerships should be supported as key infrastructure for active ageing. Since some participants mentioned pets as a source of comfort, purpose, and reduced loneliness, promoting pet-friendly public spaces and accommodations could be a positive step in this direction. At the same time, activities and services should include outreach campaigns, ensuring that older people are aware of them and feel welcome to join.

## 2. Enhance Access and Mobility

Reliable public transportation, particularly in rural areas, is vital for maintaining independence and enabling older individuals to participate in community life. Improved transport services can enhance access to essential services such as healthcare, cultural events, and social clubs, helping to mitigate isolation.

**In Ireland**, many households, particularly in rural areas, rely heavily on private cars. Older adults who can drive or use public transport tend to engage more in social activities and volunteering than those who depend on others for transportation. Participation in community life often declines when older people lose the ability to drive, cannot afford a car, or experience the death of a spouse who previously handled driving. Research indicates that older drivers tend to feel less lonely than non-drivers. Interestingly, however, non-driving men are more likely to report close social connections, possibly because relying on others for lifts creates additional opportunities for meaningful interaction.

**In Poland**, public transportation in rural areas often falling short in meeting the needs of residents, particularly older adults. Many rural communities experience limited or non-existent public transport services, leading to social exclusion and restricted access to essential services.<sup>183</sup> While there are initiatives aimed at

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<sup>182</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_scp19\\_custom\\_18043240/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_scp19_custom_18043240/default/table) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

<sup>183</sup> Żukowska, Chmiel, & Połom, 2023.

improving rural public transportation in Poland, significant gaps remain. Innovative approaches, such as the *Smart Village* initiative<sup>184</sup>, are being explored to address transport exclusion through community-based solutions.<sup>185</sup>

**In Romania**, while some urban areas provide accessible and affordable public transportation, significant disparities remain, particularly in rural regions. This forces residents to rely on personal vehicles or informal arrangements—an especially challenging situation for older adults who may not drive or own a car. The lack of reliable public transportation contributes to mobility poverty, limiting access to essential services and social activities.<sup>186</sup> These issues are worsened by broader infrastructure deficits, as Romania's transport system ranks low in quality, with poor planning and underutilized funding exacerbating the problem.<sup>187</sup>

The problem of mobility and public transportation is common to all three countries. Older people in rural areas face substantial barriers to mobility due to limited public transport and a heavy reliance on private vehicles. These challenges reduce social participation and increase the risk of isolation, especially for those no longer able to drive. While older adults in Ireland seem to use some informal support networks, Poland and Romania face more deep-rooted structural barriers to mobility, despite efforts to introduce innovative solutions. Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments and policy interventions to enhance mobility and quality of life for rural populations.

### 3. Ensure Economic Security and Fair and Adequate Pension Systems

Ensuring financial security for older individuals is crucial not just for essentials like food and energy, but for overall quality of life. Income levels often shape our ability to care for our homes and health, maintain dignity, stay independent, and participate in community and social life.

**Ireland's** older population faces mixed economic conditions. While the poverty rate for people aged 65+ has declined in recent years, many still experience financial strain—especially those living alone or renting privately. Significant one-

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<sup>184</sup> European Commission (2024) *Smart Villages*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages_en.html) (Accessed: 10th April 2025).

<sup>185</sup> Żukowska, Chmiel, & Połom, 2023.

<sup>186</sup> Pozsar, 2023.

<sup>187</sup> De Rosa, & Soo Kim, 2018.

off expenses like home repairs or healthcare are common sources of stress. Though most older people own their homes, almost half live in housing that fails to meet UN adequacy standards. State pensions serve as the primary income source for many, particularly those without occupational or private pensions. Social protection benefits such as Medical Cards and free travel are highly valued, especially given that nearly 3 in 10 older adults rely on social transfers for over 90% of their income. In recent years, the number of older adults in employment has increased, especially among men, but many still exit the workforce due to health issues, lack of opportunities, or mandatory retirement policies. In the current research, most participants are retired and report managing well financially—often due to pensions and state supports. A few receive help from their children or carefully manage spending. While many feel content with their financial situation, discussing money sometimes brought up discomfort or reluctance, highlighting the nuanced experiences of financial security among older people in Ireland.

**Poland's** older population faces diverse economic realities, with women more likely to experience poverty—especially beyond age 75. In Poland, most seniors rely on pensions tied to previous employment, with additional supports like the “13th” and “14th” payments helping those on low incomes. Employment among retirees is modest but growing. The interviews highlight this mixed picture: some older men manage well on pensions or with family support, while others face financial difficulty due to limited work histories. Access to public healthcare is common, but long waits remain a challenge, prompting some to pay privately.

**In Romania,** older adults face notable economic challenges, including a high poverty risk (86.6% living in relative poverty) and limited access to affordable healthcare, particularly in rural areas. Although the state healthcare system provides basic coverage for retirees, many still encounter barriers such as cost, distance, and long waiting times—issues more pronounced among lower-income groups. Health outcomes for older Romanians are poor compared to EU averages, with low self-reported health and high levels of unmet medical needs. While recent reforms to Romania's pension system aim to equalise retirement age and encourage longer workforce participation, average pensions remain modest, affecting retirees' financial security. Most of the respondents own their homes and have provided mixed responses about the sufficiency of their pensions and healthcare affordability—some felt their pensions met basic needs, while others struggled with financial constraints or limited access to services. Employment among older adults remains low, with Romania still below EU targets despite gradual improvements.

To conclude, Across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, older adults share some common economic challenges, particularly around limited income and reliance on State Pensions. In all three countries, pensions are the main source of income, though adequacy varies: Irish older adults generally report better financial stability due to stronger social supports and housing ownership, while many in Poland and especially Romania face tighter constraints, with Romanian seniors showing the highest poverty risk. Access to public healthcare is available in all three, but long waiting times and affordability, particularly in Romania, remain significant barriers. Employment among older adults is modest across countries but growing, especially in Ireland and Poland. While Irish participants tend to report greater financial comfort, Polish and Romanian older men more often highlight struggles with cost of living and service access, reflecting broader structural differences in welfare and healthcare systems.

Therefore, pension policies should be reviewed to address the cost-of-living challenges faced by retirees. Differences in pension entitlements between professions—such as military personnel and agricultural workers—should be assessed to ensure fair and adequate support across all sectors. At the same time, it is recommended to offer tailored training for older people focused on financial resilience. This training can cover topics such as budgeting, planning for unexpected events and crises, saving, tips for reducing bills, and making full use of entitlements to maximise income.

## **4. Improve Public Perceptions of Ageing, and Mental Health**

The responses of the interviewees in Ireland, compared to those of the interviewees in Poland and Romania, exposed differences in the level of openness and willingness to share their personal situations and experiences with loneliness. These differences can reflect cultural norms but also differences in levels of awareness and perceptions about ageing, and about loneliness. Media portrayals around aging and around loneliness significantly influence public attitudes and self-perception among older men.

**In Ireland**, ageing is often framed through a lens of vulnerability and dependency, with media and public discourse frequently portraying older people as frail or burdensome, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants in Ireland felt that older men are generally respected and valued in

their communities, particularly by younger generations, though a few noted that respect often depends on how older people treat others in return. Several also observed that Irish society is becoming more open to discussing issues like loneliness, though personal comfort with such conversations still varies.

**In Poland**, attitudes toward older people are generally positive, marked by appreciation for their experience and empathy, though younger people often associate ageing with loneliness, illness, and dependency. Respect for older adults tends to increase with age, and women show more positive attitudes than men. Among the participants in the current research, ageing was not commonly discussed, though it is becoming a more frequent topic. Views on societal respect for older people were mixed: some participants felt valued and engaged by younger generations, while others perceived a decline in respect and recognition, especially for those without formal titles or heroic status. Overall, experiences varied based on personal interactions, suggesting that respect for older adults in Polish society is inconsistent and often dependent on context or individual relationships.

**In Romania**, cultural and historical norms emphasise strength and self-reliance, particularly among men, leading to stigma around mental health and discouragement of emotional expression. Romania is still affected by old social attitudes from its communist past, including a lack of awareness that people now live much longer and can remain active for about 20 years after retirement. This contributes to social isolation and emotional inflexibility in older men. Most respondents felt that older men are respected and valued in their communities, though some expressed more cautious or mixed views. When it came to discussing loneliness or personal difficulties, responses varied, with many noting that such topics are rarely spoken about openly. Several participants highlighted that openness depends on trust and the quality of relationships, making it easier to talk with close friends.

Overall, attitudes toward aging and older men vary across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, shaped by distinct cultural, social, and historical contexts. While respect and value for older men are generally acknowledged in all three countries, the nature and consistency of this respect differ, often influenced by personal relationships and societal norms. Ireland shows increasing openness to conversations about loneliness, Poland reflects a mix of appreciation and concern about aging-related challenges, and Romania faces lingering stigma around emotional expression and mental health. These insights highlight the importance

of culturally sensitive approaches to promoting the wellbeing and social inclusion of older men in diverse European societies.

How ageing, as well as loneliness, are depicted in the media greatly shape both public views and how older men see themselves. Therefore, improving positive public representations and perceptions of aging in the media, as well as raising awareness about the importance of mental health, can help destigmatize loneliness and promote proactive social engagement. Public awareness campaigns—similar to successful initiatives in Ireland, whether led by the state or civil society—and incorporating these messages into school education can contribute to shifting cultural norms and perceptions.

## 5. Enhance Digital Literacy and Connectivity

Digital inclusion of older adults has been a focus of interest among policymakers, educators, the wider public, and older adults themselves for more than two decades.<sup>188</sup> Although digital communication is more complex and demanding than traditional methods like phone calls, the use of instant messaging and social media platforms allows older adults to engage in richer, multimedia interactions. These tools help them move beyond age-related communication norms and can also reduce communication costs.<sup>189</sup> Improving digital literacy among older people can strengthen connections with family and friends, particularly those living at a distance. Digital tools also facilitate local social interactions, encouraging community participation and even fostering romantic relationships, which can contribute to emotional wellbeing.

**Ireland** has made considerable progress in digital infrastructure, but despite these improvements, digital exclusion remains an issue among older adults: as recently as a few years ago, 62% of those aged 60+ were considered digitally excluded. However, recent CSO data (2025) show steady improvements—85% of those aged 60–74 and 54% of those 75+ reported using the internet in the past three months. Several Initiatives have already recognised the growing need for digital support among older people in Ireland. One example is Age Action's *Getting Started* programme, which helps bridge this gap.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, *Friends of the Elderly* operate

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<sup>188</sup> Tomczyk & Kielar, 2024.

<sup>189</sup> Tomczyk & Kielar, 2024.

<sup>190</sup> Age Action (no date). *Getting Started: Free Digital Literacy Programme*. Available at: <https://www.ageaction.ie/product/start-a-getting-started-class-in-your-area/> [Accessed 10th April 2025]

technology clubs that provide one-to-one guidance through an intergenerational approach, with Transition Year students and interns helping participants build digital skills and confidence. *Hi Digital*, their partnership with Vodafone, offers accessible learning opportunities ranging from drop-in classes and basic tech support to creative initiatives such as Kindle Book Clubs. Such initiatives should be further developed and funded, to help older people stay connected, independent, and included in an increasingly digital society.<sup>191</sup>

In this study, 8 out of 9 older male interviewees reported regular use of the internet and social media, primarily for staying in touch with family and communities like Men's Sheds. Some were very confident with tools like WhatsApp and Zoom, while others expressed interest in learning more but remained hesitant. A few used online platforms for social or spiritual engagement, while one participant relied solely on phone calls due to lack of digital literacy. Overall, the findings highlight gradual progress in digital inclusion among older Irish men, though challenges remain.

**In Poland**, despite over 93% of Polish households having internet access, older adults remain the most digitally excluded group, with only 12.6% of those aged 65–74 possessing basic digital skills and over 23% having minimal or no ICT proficiency. Regular internet use is more common among seniors with higher education, with only 24.3% of those with primary education using the internet weekly, compared to 93.1% with tertiary education. While barriers such as cost or equipment are low, many seniors cite lack of need or skills as reasons for not engaging online. In our study, most participants used technology to support daily tasks—such as contacting doctors or ordering medicine—but preferred traditional, face-to-face communication and often viewed technology as supplemental rather than essential. Though attitudes toward technology are generally positive, there remains a strong preference for in-person social interaction, and a noticeable hesitation to adopt newer digital tools.

**In Romania**, digital transformation is gaining momentum, supported by EU funding, but its benefits for citizens—particularly in areas like digital inclusion and public service efficiency—remain limited. Romania has the EU's lowest rate of basic digital skills, with just 28% of the general population and only 4% of those aged 65–74 possessing such skills. Despite this, most older respondents in the

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<sup>191</sup> Friends of the Elderly (2025). *Celebrating Digital Learning Together!* Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/friendsoftheelderly/posts/pfbid02qDJP2VvydpK49QLNMSQ57qGZxCMDzNKh7zrg7XBCNMukTfbg8HmfVASjPb6zvqRLI> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025]



study reported using technology daily to stay connected and access information, and many viewed it as helpful for combating loneliness. While generally positive about digital tools, participants stressed the continued importance of in-person interaction, and some acknowledged challenges such as occasional skill gaps or concerns about online scams.

Despite national differences, digital inclusion among older adults in Ireland, Poland, and Romania is gradually improving, though significant challenges remain. Across all three countries, older adults value technology's role in reducing isolation but continue to emphasise the irreplaceable role of in-person contact.

A previous study, on the social needs of community-dwelling older adults who identified as at risk of social isolation, and the potential role of social technology in fulfilling those needs, revealed a diverse range of social needs—including connectedness, autonomy, and status—shaped by personality, life history, and available resources. While social technology currently plays a modest role, it holds promise as a tool to support social connection; thus, interventions should focus on both strengthening immediate social environments and improving access to broader social networks.<sup>192</sup> Another study on older adults' experiences with social technology through interviews with 20 individuals aged 65+ across England, Scotland, and Wales, found that while participants regularly used social technology for connection, their engagement was shaped by barriers such as low self-efficacy, fear, lack of social capital, and physical limitations. The results highlighted the need for targeted support to enhance digital inclusion and maximise the social benefits of these tools.<sup>193</sup>

Enhancing older adults' participation in social and digital life requires a comprehensive approach through non-formal education.<sup>194</sup> A digital training programme for older adults should focus on building confidence and practical skills for everyday use. It should cover basic device handling, internet navigation, and communication tools like email, video calls, and messaging apps. Essential

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<sup>192</sup> Ten Bruggencate, T., Luijkx, K. G., & Sturm, J. (2019) 'When your world gets smaller: How older people try to meet their social needs, including the role of social technology', *Ageing and Society*, 39(8), pp. 1826–1852. doi:10.1017/S0144686X18000260.

<sup>193</sup> Wilson, G., Gates, J. R., Vijaykumar, S., & Morgan, D. J. (2023) 'Understanding older adults' use of social technology and the factors influencing use', *Ageing and Society*, 43(1), pp. 222–245. doi:10.1017/S0144686X21000490.

<sup>194</sup> Mackowicz, J. & Wnek-Gozdek, J. (2016) "It's never too late to learn"—How does the Polish U3A change the quality of life for seniors?', *Educational Gerontology*, 42(3), pp. 186–197. doi: 10.1080/03601277.2015.1085789.  
Tomczyk & Kielar, 2024.

topics include online safety, managing passwords, recognising scams, and ensuring privacy. The training should also introduce useful online services related to health, finances (such as online banking, bill payment), and appointment booking. Encouraging engagement through social media, photo sharing, and accessing news or entertainment can help older adults stay connected and independent. Overall, the programme should be tailored, supportive, and accessible, promoting digital inclusion and wellbeing.

Training tailored for older people can help build both basic and advanced digital skills. However, current initiatives, often delivered by universities of the third age, senior clubs, or NGOs, face several challenges. These include limited access in rural and small-town areas; a lack of geragogical<sup>195</sup> training among instructors, which is tailored for older adults; and outdated course content that doesn't reflect current digital opportunities.<sup>196</sup>

Community-based support can be established through local centres or workshops where older individuals can receive hands-on training, learn from each other, and enjoy ongoing assistance with technology use. Such support can be delivered in cooperation with local development companies, libraries, or social clubs, such as the Men's sheds.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the benefits of digital technology, some older adults prefer not to adopt it—and their choice should be respected. Accessible, non-digital alternatives must remain available to ensure everyone can access essential services.

## 6. Advance Comprehensive Policies across Key Areas

Policymakers should adopt a coordinated and holistic approach to loneliness among older men, ensuring that all areas of intervention are adequately prioritised and supported. This is particularly important given the size of this group in each of the studied countries, and across Europe as a whole. In 2023, over 41 million men aged 65 and older, more than 9% of the EU population, were recorded.<sup>197</sup> Similar

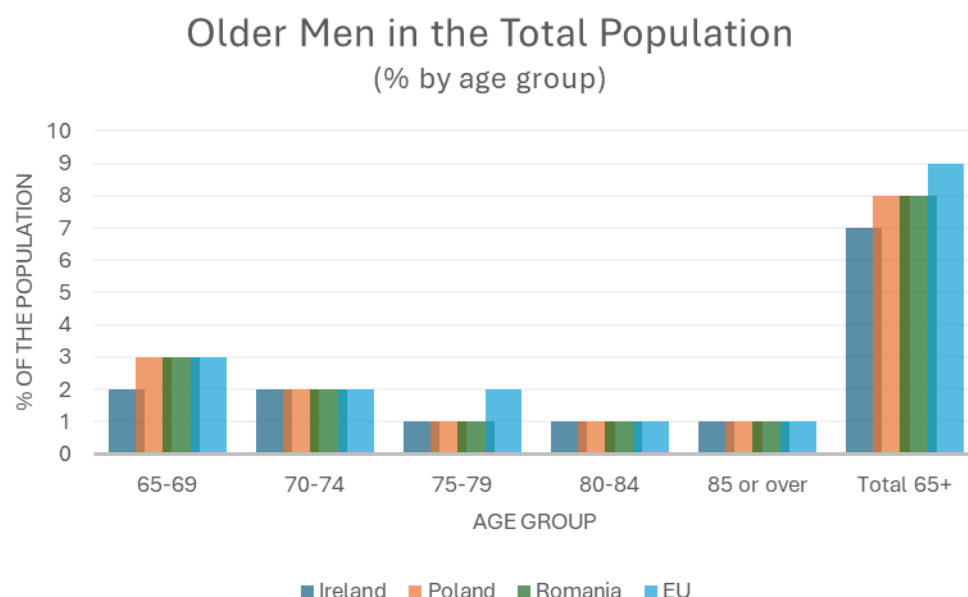
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<sup>195</sup> Geragogy is a "new direction in pedagogy that specializes in the education of older adults, taking into account their specific needs and developmental characteristics". See more in: Karkach, A., & Semigina, T. (2024) *Geragogics: Promoting Active Aging Through Education and Social Integration*. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5038710> [Accessed 22nd April 2025]

<sup>196</sup> Tomczyk & Kielar, 2024.

<sup>197</sup> Eurostat (2024). *Population structure and ageing*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) [Accessed 14th December 2024]

proportions, between 7% and 8% of the population, were found in Ireland, Poland, and Romania, with the highest share among men aged 65–69 [Figure 5].<sup>198</sup>



**Figure 5:** Older Men in the Total Population (% by Age Group). Source: Eurostat, 2024.

Policies need to address the trends in population growth, as well as increased life expectancy. The range of the percentage of persons aged 65 or over in the population across Europe will increase from 16% to 22% in 2020 to a range of 22% to 34% in 2050.<sup>199</sup> Among the countries in the current study, Ireland has the highest life expectancy (and one of the highest in Europe)<sup>200</sup>, and Romania has the lowest.<sup>201</sup>

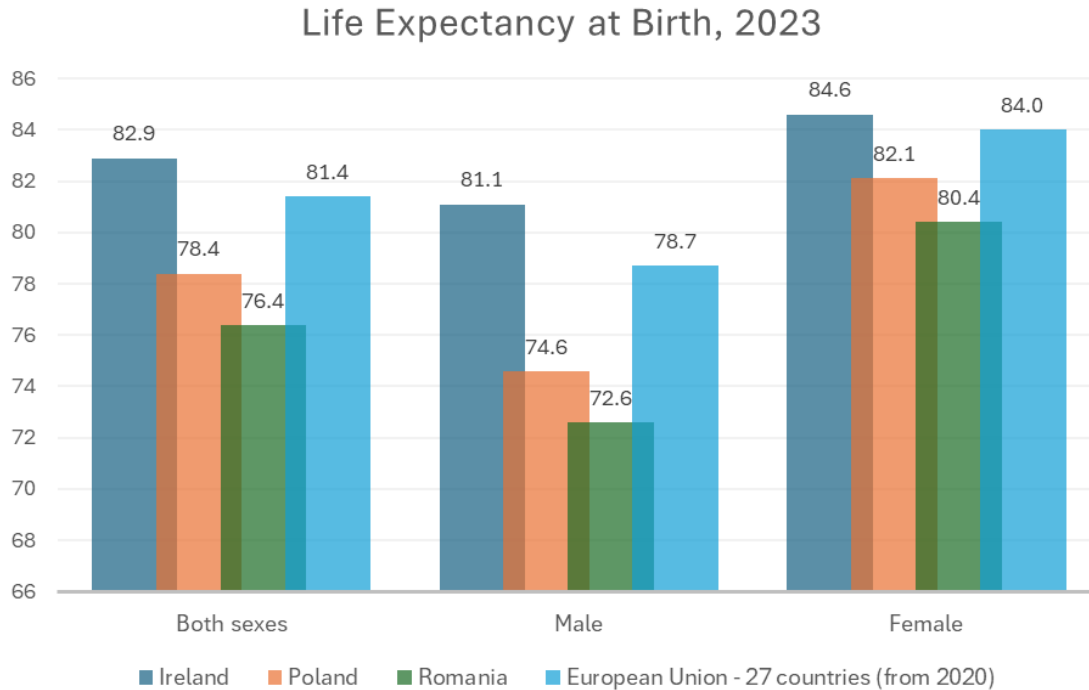
<sup>198</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

<sup>199</sup> FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) *Fundamental rights of older people: ensuring access to public services in digital societies*. Based on Eurostat (2020) *Data browser – Demographic balances and indicators by type of projection*. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/mt/publication/2023/older-people-digital-rights> [Accessed 21 January 2025]

<sup>200</sup> Central Statistics Office (2025) *Women and Men in Ireland Hub – Health: Life Expectancy and Mortality*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-wmi/womenandmeninirelandhub/health/lifeexpectancyandmortality/> [Accessed 23rd April 2025]

Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age and sex, annually*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 23rd April 2025]

<sup>201</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age and sex, annually*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 23rd April 2025]



**Figure 6:** Life Expectancy at birth in Ireland, Poland, and Romania. Sources: Eurostat and the Central Statistics Office in Ireland.<sup>202</sup>

The Active Ageing Index (AAI) is a tool used to measure the untapped potential of older people for active and healthy ageing at both national and subnational levels. It assesses how independently older adults live, their participation in paid employment and social activities, and their overall capacity to age actively. According to the AAI, Ireland ranks 6th with a score of 38.6, while Romania and Poland rank significantly lower—24th (29.6) and 27th (28.1) out of 28 countries, respectively.<sup>203</sup> These disparities, along with the common challenges faced by older individuals in all three countries, highlight the need for continued efforts to strengthen social support systems and improve economic security for the elderly.

**Ireland** has introduced a range of policies to support older adults, particularly in relation to cost of living, home care standards, and promoting positive ageing.

<sup>202</sup> Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS 2 region*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_r\\_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demomreg) [Accessed 23rd April 2025]

Central Statistics Office (2025) *Women and Men in Ireland Hub – Health: Life Expectancy and Mortality*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-wmi/womenandmeninirelandhub/health/lifeexpectancyandmortality/> [Accessed 23rd April 2025]

<sup>203</sup> UNECE/European Commission (2015) *Active Ageing Index 2014: Analytical Report*. Prepared by A. Zaidi (Centre for Research on Ageing, University of Southampton) and D. Stanton. Geneva: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; Brussels: European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

Measures include increased pensions, one-off payments (fuel and energy allowances), and free transport for those over 70. Initiatives like the National Positive Ageing Strategy and the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI) aimed to shift societal attitudes, promote inclusion, and fund research on ageing. Loneliness has been increasingly recognised as a public health concern, with targeted responses such as the 2019 €3 million mental health fund, the Community and Voluntary Support Grant Scheme, and the Taskforce on Loneliness. The 2023 "Hello Again World" campaign sought to encourage reconnection but faced criticism from ALONE for lacking depth in addressing loneliness's root causes. Respondents in the study had limited awareness of major historical events influencing current supports for older people, although one referred to the positive trajectory of Ireland's living standards compared to other countries. The COVID-19 pandemic was noted by another as a major factor contributing to social isolation and loneliness among older adults.

**In Poland**, "Social Policy for the Elderly 2030," adopted in 2018, is the first detailed government framework aimed at addressing the needs of dependent older adults. It outlines actions across health, safety, social inclusion, labour participation, and infrastructure adaptation, aiming to enhance the quality of life and independence of older people. Key focus areas include promoting intergenerational solidarity, counteracting loneliness, and supporting civic, cultural, and physical engagement. However, most research participants were unaware of specific events or policies influencing how older people are treated, suggesting limited visibility or impact. While one participant mentioned improved opportunities due to day care centres, others expressed concern that older adults may not be prioritised for support. Several emphasised the need for more than just caregiving—highlighting the importance of emotional presence and meaningful engagement. One respondent voiced fears of becoming a burden and called for 24-hour state-supported care facilities, noting that day care alone is not a sufficient solution.

**In Romania**, social service framework for older adults is grounded in the Social Assistance Law (Law No. 292/2011), which guarantees access to benefits and services such as home care, counselling, and residential facilities, with an emphasis on preventing exclusion and promoting dignity. The 2023–2030 National Strategy on Long-Term Care and Active Ageing further aims to expand community-based care, support caregivers, and integrate health and social services. However, despite the existence of 973 licensed elderly services, only 1.3% of older Romanians were beneficiaries in 2021. Challenges persist, particularly around addressing issues like loneliness and social isolation, which are not

officially prioritised. Respondents in this study reported limited access to social services, though those who do benefit—such as from *Never Alone* initiatives—expressed satisfaction, and a few noted the recent emergence of community centres for older people.

The findings show that Ireland, Poland, and Romania have all introduced policies to support older adults, with shared concerns around care, inclusion, and loneliness. The data gathered on each country show commitment, although the approaches are different, and their impact vary. Ireland focuses on financial support and positive ageing campaigns, Poland offers a structured national strategy with limited public awareness, and Romania emphasises legal entitlements but struggles with low service access and limited focus on loneliness.

Across all three countries, loneliness and social isolation are ongoing, yet under-addressed issues. While Ireland has taken steps with campaigns and funding, critiques highlight the need for more systemic responses. Romania and Poland, despite having national ageing strategies, often neglect loneliness as a policy focus. Governments should formally recognise loneliness and social isolation as a public health concern and embed targeted, evidence-based interventions within national ageing strategies. This includes sustained funding, dedicated community programming, and intergenerational initiatives that foster meaningful engagement.

**At the same time, states and civil society organisations should work together to increase visibility and accessibility of services and policies.** In both Poland and Romania, research participants demonstrated limited awareness of ageing-related policies, which suggests a gap in communication and outreach. Governments should invest in better dissemination of information about available services—particularly in rural or underserved areas—and ensure that policies translate into tangible, accessible benefits. This can include local information campaigns, outreach by community workers, and accessible digital or in-person navigation services tailored to older populations.

**Finally, ageing-related policies and services should be co-designed with older adults, to ensure relevance and impact, and they should include better monitoring and evaluation, by ongoing feedback mechanisms.** Respondent insights across all three countries show that older adults have clear preferences and ideas—for example, fearing dependence, or preferring in-person engagement. Therefore, governments and NGOs should include older adults in

the development and assessment of programmes to ensure they align with real needs and lived experiences. Especially in under-resourced areas, strategies should be tailored to local contexts. Regular evaluations and participatory research can help adapt services to evolving demographic, social, and emotional realities.



## Conclusion

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This research examines loneliness among older men in Europe, with a particular focus on Ireland, Poland, and Romania—twenty years after the EU's Eastern Enlargement. Through a mixed-methods approach and comparative analysis, it explores key questions: Do older men experience loneliness? What factors contribute to it? How do experiences differ across countries? And what measures can help alleviate loneliness?

Loneliness among older adults is a persistent issue across Ireland, Poland, and Romania, shaped by factors like living alone, declining health, and limited meaningful social interaction. With rising life expectancy, loneliness and isolation are expected to grow alongside Europe's ageing population.<sup>204</sup> The EU, after Japan, is one of the fastest-ageing regions, driven by low fertility and increased longevity.<sup>205</sup> In 2023, 95.7 million people in the EU were aged 65+, with over 41 million older men – more than 9% of the total population.<sup>206</sup> In 2023, men aged 65 and over made up 7% of the population in Ireland and almost 8% in Poland. A similar percentage, of 8% of the population, was found also in Romania in 2024.<sup>207</sup>

In Ireland, about one-third of older adults report loneliness, especially those who are single or managing chronic illness.<sup>208</sup> While community activities such as Men's Sheds, hobbies, and technology offer some relief, many still experience emotional isolation, even with family contact or in communal settings. Similarly, in Poland, older adults, especially those over 80 or widowed, face widespread loneliness, though few participate in available senior programmes. While family ties are valued and help mitigate loneliness, friendships are often superficial, and social

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<sup>204</sup> European Commission (2018) *Science for Policy Brief: Loneliness – an unequally shared burden in Europe*. Available at: [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fairness\\_pb2018\\_loneliness\\_jrc\\_i1.pdf](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fairness_pb2018_loneliness_jrc_i1.pdf) [Accessed: 12th December 2024]

<sup>205</sup> Eurostat (2024) *Ageing Europe - statistics on population developments* (Data extracted in July 2020). Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing\\_Europe\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_population\\_developments](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments) [Accessed 15th December 2024]

<sup>206</sup> Eurostat (2024). *Population structure and ageing*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) [Accessed 14th December 2024]  
Eurostat (2024) *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo\\_pop](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop) [Accessed 14th December 2025]

<sup>207</sup> Eurostat, 2024.

National Institute of Statistics (Romania), 2025.

<sup>208</sup> Aware (2023) *Aware's older adult research reveals high rates of depression and anxiety*. Available at: <https://www.aware.ie/survey-older-adults/> [Accessed 14th December 2024]

barriers like distrust or financial worries limit deeper connection. In Romania, loneliness levels are among the highest in the EU, with particularly acute rates in urban areas where up to 60% of older adults report frequent loneliness. Weak social support systems and limited interpersonal contact contribute to this, despite a clear desire for connection.

Across all three countries, findings underline the importance of accessible community structures, emotional engagement, and maintaining interests as key to addressing loneliness—mere physical presence or occasional contact is not enough without deeper social and emotional ties.

*Figure 7* presents a comprehensive strategy for addressing loneliness among older men, structured around six interconnected areas of intervention, based on the recommendations presented in the previous section. These recommendations are not standalone but are mutually reinforcing, and their success relies on the coordinated efforts of multiple actors, including the state, media, community, and civil society.



Figure 7: Addressing Loneliness among Older Men

1. **Improving public perceptions of ageing and mental health** serves as a foundational step, aiming to shift cultural narratives by promoting positive images and normalising conversations around mental wellbeing. This task falls heavily on the media and civil society, supported by state policies and school education. By influencing how older men are viewed and how they see themselves, this recommendation underpins broader efforts to foster inclusion and reduce stigma.
2. **Raising awareness of available services and supports** ensures that older men know their rights and have access to essential services, such as healthcare, financial advice, and social or cultural opportunities. Here, state institutions play a key role in service provision, while media, community networks, and civil society organisations help disseminate this information and reach isolated individuals.
3. **Enhancing and budgeting social structures for older men**, such as clubs, Men's Sheds, volunteering, and intergenerational programmes, to create spaces for meaningful engagement. This area depends primarily on community initiatives, civil society programming, and supportive state policies, reinforcing a sense of purpose and belonging for older people.
4. **Improving digital connectivity** is both a practical and symbolic measure—facilitating access to information and relationships in an increasingly digital world. It links closely to awareness-raising and social participation and requires infrastructure investment from the state, as well as digital literacy support from community and civil society groups.
5. **Enhancing access and mobility** addresses physical barriers to participation by calling for improved transport systems and local mobility initiatives. Without accessible mobility options, other efforts—such as attending social events or accessing services—are undermined. State and community efforts are essential to implement this recommendation effectively.
6. **Ensuring economic security** forms a crucial underpinning of the entire framework. Financial precarity can intensify isolation and limit access to services or opportunities for engagement. This area relies on state-level pension reform, media and civil society efforts in financial literacy, and advocacy for equitable economic structures.

Across all three countries, and across all areas of action, policies should take a comprehensive approach, tailored to local contexts, ensuring that all areas of intervention are adequately prioritised and supported. Policies and services related to ageing should be co-designed with older adults to ensure they are relevant and effective. They should also incorporate stronger monitoring and evaluation through continuous feedback mechanisms.

*Figure 7* visually emphasises the interconnectedness of all six recommendations. For instance, digital connectivity is not just about technology—it enables access to services, supports social participation, and can improve mental health. Likewise, economic security influences access to transport, digital tools, and community engagement. The overlapping roles of the various actors highlight that no single sector can address loneliness alone—collaboration across public, private, and community domains is essential to creating a supportive, age-friendly society. Across all recommendation, states should take a comprehensive and coordinated approach, prioritising and supporting all areas of action to effectively address the issue.

Although based on a small sample, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of loneliness among older people in Ireland, Poland, and Romania. It offers an important snapshot of current realities and highlights key areas for action—some of which may also be relevant to older men in other countries, with potential benefits for the entire society. Further and ongoing research of this kind, which actively centres older people's voices, perspectives, and lived experiences, can deepen understanding and support more effective, tailored responses.

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