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# Older adults' experience of ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Dr Mark Ward and Professor Rose Anne Kenny  
The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)

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The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing  
Trinity College Dublin  
Dublin 2

Tel: +353 1 896 2509

Email: [tilda@tcd.ie](mailto:tilda@tcd.ie)

Website: [www.tilda.ie](http://www.tilda.ie)

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## Introduction

Despite the fact that the vast majority of older adults are not physically, cognitively or mentally impaired, age-related stereotypes persist. These stereotypes commonly portray older adults as physically and cognitively weak. Importantly, the experience of negative stereotypes about older adults and ageing can negatively affect individuals. Experimental studies have shown that when confronted with negative stereotypes, older adults can experience a reduction in physical ability, slow walking speed, altered heart activity, reduced memory performance and in some cases a diminished will to live (Roberston, 2016).

Sadly, there have been many examples during the COVID-19 of potentially harmful ageist attitudes. There are numerous examples in print and online media of older adults being viewed not only as more susceptible to infection and severe consequences of infection, but also as vectors of COVID-19 and therefore posing a risk to others. An extreme example of this suggested that COVID-19 “might (from an economic perspective) even prove mildly beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents” (Jeremy Warner, ‘Does the Fed know something the rest of us do not with its panicked interest rate cut?’ *Daily Telegraph* March 3rd). Such a narrative can only add to the stress currently experienced by older adults. Some of this type of ageist language and attitudes also pervaded health policy both here and elsewhere (Vervaecke and Meisner, 2020).

## Method

This research brief is based on 3,614 Self-Completion Questionnaires completed by participants of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). This study population consists of community-dwelling adults aged 60 years and older. Data were collected between June and October 2020.

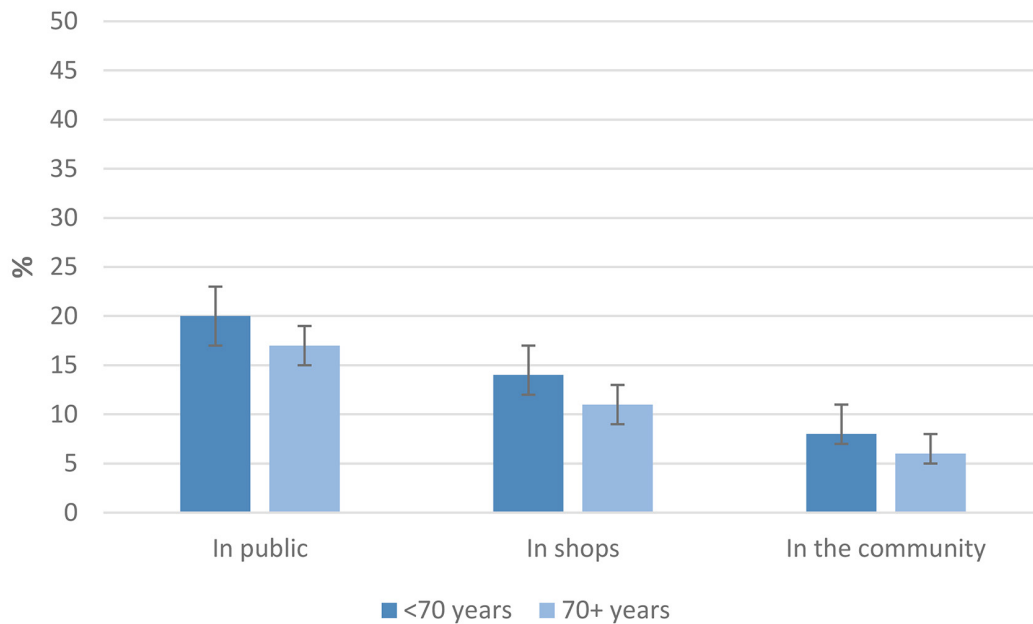
## Results

Participants were asked how they feel people aged 70 and over have been treated by the general public in public spaces such as parks and walkways, in shops, and in their local community.

Overall, 18% feel that the over 70s are treated negatively or very negatively in public spaces, 13% in shops, and 7% in the local community. As shown in Figure 1, there is little difference between participants who are older or younger than 70 years in the percentage reporting negative treatment, but there was some evidence

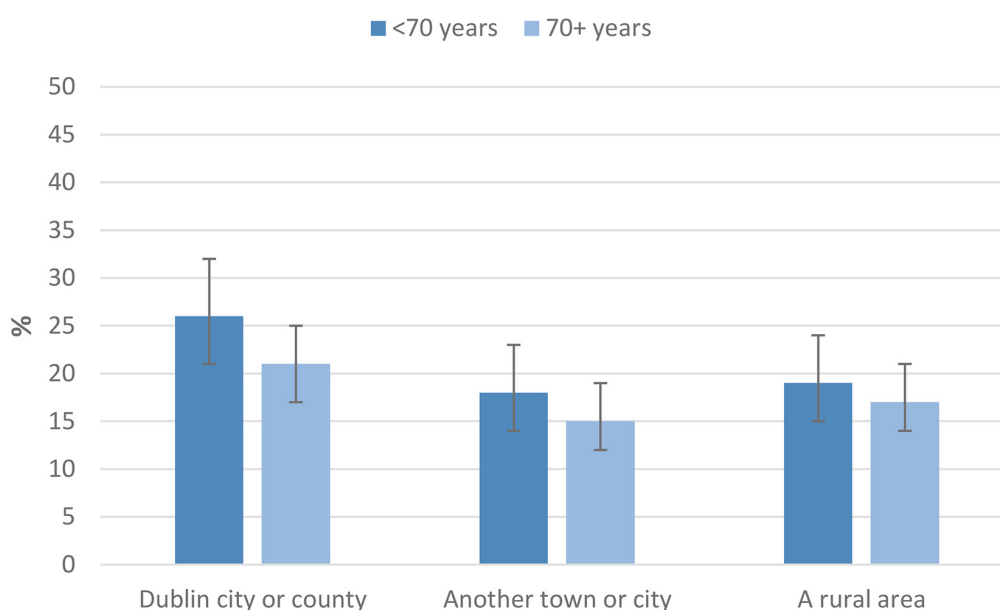
the under 70s tending to feel that the over 70s are treated negatively in each of the three settings. A higher percentage of participants feel these attitudes occur in public places rather than in their local community.

*Figure 1. Percentage of adults aged under and over 70 years who felt that people aged 70+ are treated negatively or very negatively*



Overall, 19% of older adults feel that people aged 70 and older are treated negatively or very negatively in at least one of the three settings. As shown in Figure 2, older adults who live in Dublin city or county are the most likely to feel that the over 70s are treated negatively in at least one of the three settings considered, however, this is not significantly higher than those in either rural locations or another town or city.

Figure 2. Percentage of adults aged under and over 70 years who felt that people aged 70+ are treated negatively or very negatively in at least one setting (public, shops, community) by location

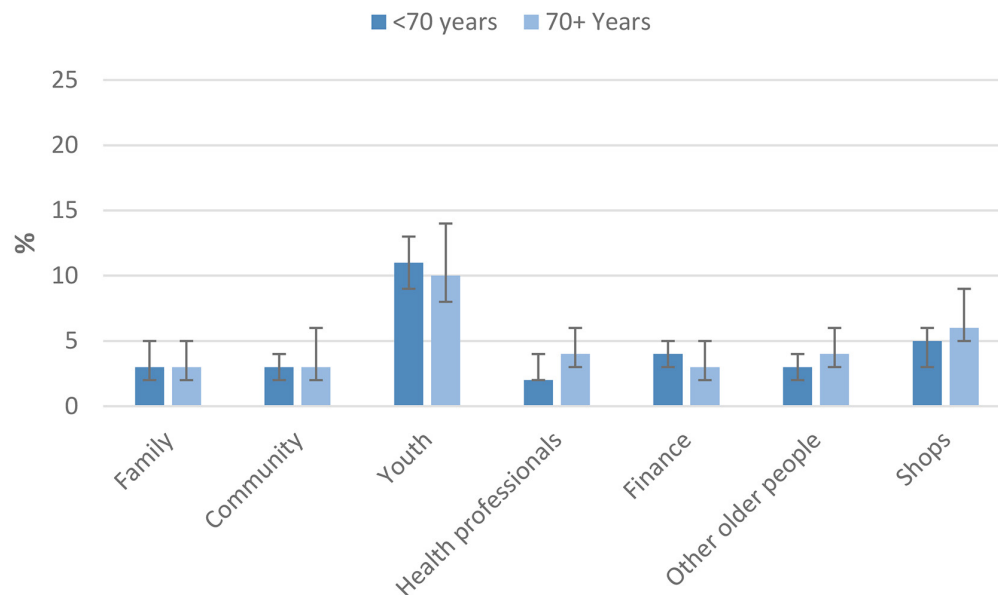


### Experience of negative attitudes or behaviours

Participants were also asked Have you personally experienced negative attitudes or behaviour towards you on the basis of your age from any of the following? Your family, people in your local community, younger people, health professionals providing services, those providing services in the financial sector, other older people, and shops.

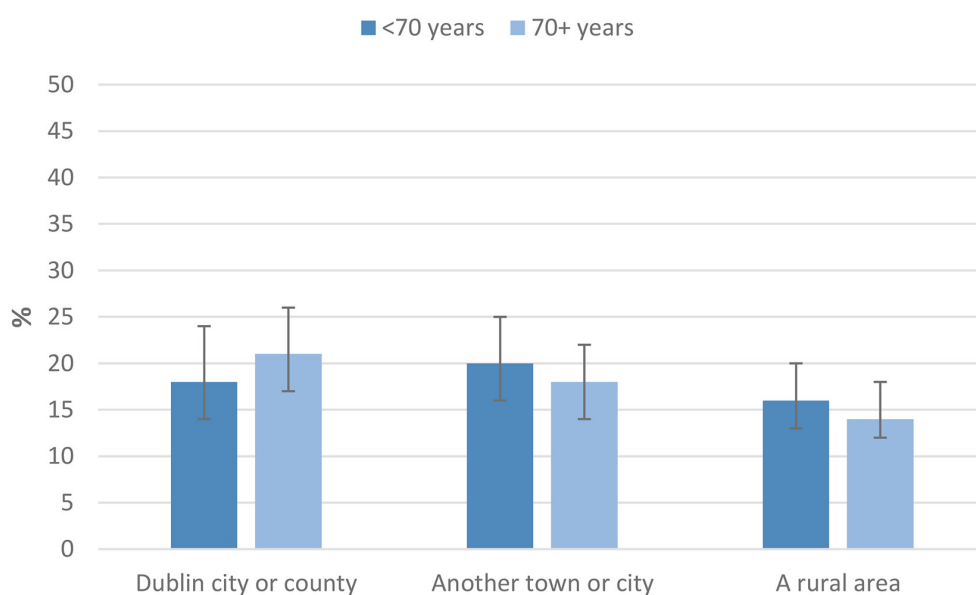
A large majority of older adults did not report any negative attitudes or experiences. A minority did however report experiencing negative attitudes or behaviours from different groups. As shown in Figure 3, 10% of older adults reported these attitudes from young people while 5% reported this experience in shops. Less than 5% experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from family, in their community, from health professionals, financial institutions, or other older adults. Older adults experience of negative attitudes and behaviours is similar among the under and over 70s.

**Figure 3. Percentage of adults aged under and over 70 years who have personally experienced negative attitudes or behaviour towards them on the basis of their age**



Overall, 18% of adults aged 60 and older personally experienced negative attitudes or behaviour towards them on the basis of their age, in at least from at least one of the groups considered. As shown in Figure 4, there are no differences between the different age groups or locations in the experience of negative attitudes or behaviours.

**Figure 4. Percentage of adults aged under and over 70 years who have personally experienced negative attitudes or behaviour towards them on the basis of their age, by location**



## Conclusion

Overall, one-in-five feel that that people aged 70 and older are treated negatively or very negatively in at least one of the three settings, in shops, in public, or in the community. These negative attitudes are more likely in public settings rather than the local community.

When asked about their personal experience of negative attitudes or behaviour towards them on the basis of their age, 18% of adults aged 60 and older experienced this attitudes or behaviours in at least one of the contexts considered here. These negative experience are most likely to come from younger people.

The results described here also demonstrate that it is crucial that older adults are given a voice to describe their own experiences and perceptions if we are to better understand how they experience their lives and, importantly in the current context, the impact that the COVID-19 virus and policies to control its spread, have affected their lives and their wellbeing.

## References

Vervaecke and Meisner. Caremongering and Assumptions of Need: The Spread of Compassionate Ageism During COVID-19. *Gerontologist*. 2020 Sep 12;gnaa131. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnaa131.