

AGEING STUDY CALLS FOR STRONGER POLICY FOR OLDER GENERATIONS

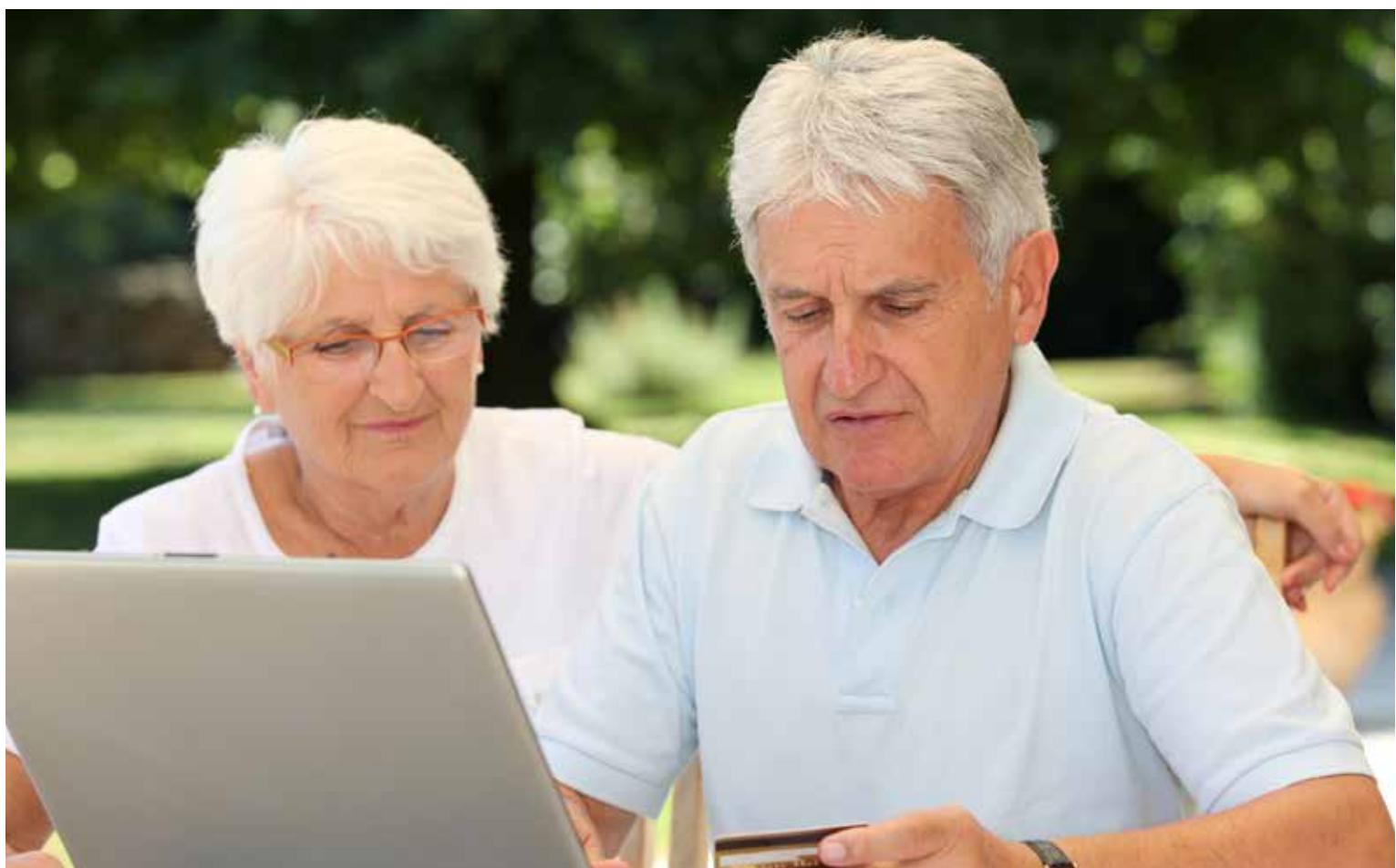
It is estimated that by 2025, a quarter of New Zealand's population will be aged over 65, constituting a need for greater awareness, policy and planning to ensure this changing demographic is cared for, included and connected with society. Massey University psychologists Professors Fiona Alpass and Christine Stephens are leading the conversation in this space, conducting a longitudinal study to uncover the needs of this diverse group of people.



The study, which Massey's Health and Ageing Research Team (HART) began in 2006, follows over 1,000 kiwis aged 50 and above. It tracks them throughout their progression into retirement examining different aspects of their lives along the way. Recent waves in the study have observed inclusion, contribution and connection of older generations with their communities, as well as the on-going ripple effects of the Christchurch earthquakes.

"This study is really integral to the future of New Zealand. It's not healthy for society if we effectively exclude 25% of the population and it's great that the government, who are funding the study, have realised the urgent need to learn more about this population and what these demographic changes will mean. What's needed now is for better, more robust policy in areas such as housing, employment and healthcare," says Professor Stephens, a HART researcher from Massey's School of Psychology.

Key findings from the studies demonstrate the effect of socioeconomic status on a number of factors affecting older generations.



"We can't analyse anything without taking into consideration the socioeconomic status of our participants. Poorer people are generally more susceptible to being lonely, isolated and less healthy. Our data aligns with other international studies that also show how wellbeing and social support are connected with socioeconomic status. It becomes a chicken-and-egg situation for these people. If they live in unsuitable places they are unable to participate in the same way. Likewise, if they have poor support they are more susceptible to depression and other illnesses.

Rather than focussing on employment issues only, the government needs to consider these factors and look at how to address them. No change will result in a higher numbers of disaffected old people who are neglected and living in poor conditions. It is unrealistic to expect everyone to continue working well into their 70s. For those who have spent their lives in physical labour, for example, they might lose the ability to do their jobs and then what?" says Professor Alpass, fellow HART researcher from the School of Psychology.

Other issues highlighted in the study include the need for a new approach to housing. Many New Zealanders plan to move in older age. The study recognised that aside from retirement villages, there are not a lot of appropriate and affordable options for older people, especially for those who do not own their own home.

It observed the role of the internet in enhancing social networks and relationships, but also recognised the potential for this to lead to an increased digital and socioeconomic divide between those who have access and those who don't.

"Older people could be in danger of being excluded from society. There is a traditional mindset that when people retire they drop out and go to enclaves with fences around them. In time they become afraid of the community.

We need a solution that is inclusive and integrates with society," says Professor Alpass, whose research focus centres on work and care for older generations.

In tandem with this study is a retrospective data collection driven by Dr Mary Breheny, from Massey's College of Health. The survey will look at the lives of the participants before the age of 50. It will draw connections between experiences earlier on in life and their effects on older people now and in the future.

Between 2016 and 2018, the larger longitudinal study will focus more closely on the housing situation, social networks and health care. Professors Alpass and Stephens hope to build a strong team of researchers who can assist with analysing the data. They also aim to strengthen international connections in order to compare data and best practice approaches to supporting older generations.

Professor Fiona Alpass is a co-leader of Massey University's Health Ageing and Research Team (HART). She supervises a number of PhD students and has a strong focus on work and care for older generations.

Professor Christine Stephens is a co-leader of Massey University's Health Ageing and Research Team (HART). She supervises Master and Doctorate level students and her research focuses on the connection between housing, social networks and wellbeing.