

# Ageing Europe - introduction

Statistics Explained

This introduction is one of a set of statistical articles that forms Eurostat's flagship publication *Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU*. The publication provides a broad range of statistics that describe the everyday lives of the European Union's (EU) older generations.

## Why does population ageing matter?

There were 90.5 million older people — defined here as those aged 65 years or more — living in the EU-27 at the start of 2019; this equated to approximately one fifth (20.3 %) of the total population. During the next three decades, the number of older people in the European Union (EU) is projected to follow an upward path, peaking at 129.8 million inhabitants in 2050; their relative share of the total population will also gradually increase and is projected to reach 29.4 % in 2050.

Population ageing has resulted primarily from a long-term fall in fertility rates and increased life expectancy (longevity), the latter reflecting a number of different factors, including:

- reductions in child mortality ;
- advances in public health and medical technologies;
- increased awareness of the benefits linked to a healthy lifestyle;
- a move away from heavy labour towards tertiary occupations;
- improved living conditions.

These changes have led to a growing number and share of older people and this process of demographic ageing can, in many ways, be considered a success story. For a large number of people there is much to look forward to in later life — especially if these extra years are in relatively good health. Older people are quite often more satisfied with life and many feel a stronger connection to their families, friends and local communities.

The growing number and share of older people within society poses a range of economic challenges. Some analysts suggest that population ageing will likely exert downward pressure on economic growth, reduce labour supply, lead to higher (age-related) social costs and impact on the sustainability of government finances. These arguments are centred on the assumption that the old-age dependency ratio — in other words, the number of older people relative to the size of the working-age population — will continue to rise. As this ratio increases, there is a decline in the size of the workforce that is potentially available to take care of the older generations and this has already led to an increased burden on government finances, changes to the statutory retirement age and lower levels of pension provision.

Other observers argue that population ageing need not impede economic growth and that it may instead provide a stimulus for developing new goods and services, for example, housing or transport adapted to the needs of an ageing population, or a range of new social care services. Furthermore, it is increasingly common to find a growing share of older people facing fewer risks (than younger generations) from poverty or social exclusion ; this pattern has become all the more apparent in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis, with real wages

stagnating or falling for much of the working population. In some EU Member States, this had led to a growing proportion of older people being relatively well off, which could result in a 'demographic dividend', insofar as ageing populations may choose to spend more. By contrast, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has in general had a much greater impact on the health of older people, as the risk of illness and death increases with age. Older people, particularly those in residential care, are more likely to face the challenges associated with a lack of personal contact with other family members, friends and acquaintances.

## Defining older people

There are different ways of defining older people, while public perception as to what constitutes being old can differ widely. Statistics on ageing generally categorise older people as being above a certain age threshold. Indeed, the [United Nations \(UN\)](#) noted in *World Population Ageing 2019* that older people are commonly defined as those aged 60 or 65 years or more, while the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) states that older people in developed world economies are commonly defined as those aged 65 years or more. The WHO also uses an alternative definition, whereby an older person is defined as someone who has passed the median life expectancy at birth.

A practical approach has been taken within *Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU*. The following terminology is employed:

- older people — those aged 65 years or more;
- very old people — those aged 85 years or more.

The principal focus of this publication concentrates on older people (aged 65 years or more). Nevertheless, some sections — for example, the transition from work into retirement — present data covering people aged 55 years or more. Furthermore, the constraints of official statistics in general — and more specifically the various surveys that have been employed as sources of information — have a practical impact on the information presented.

Survey-specific requirements for each of the main sources determine the availability and choice of age groups available; this explains why some sections refer simply to a broad age range covering older people aged 65 years or more, whereas other sections might present data mainly for 10-year age groups, covering people aged 55-64 years, 65-74 years, 75-84 years and 85 years or more.

## EU policy

With populations ageing across the EU, [pensions](#), [healthcare](#) and [long-term care](#) systems risk becoming financially unsustainable, as a shrinking labour force may no longer be able to provide for a growing number of older people. Active ageing is the [European Commission's](#) policy directed towards 'helping people stay in charge of their own lives for as long as possible as they age and, where possible, to contribute to the economy and society'. Policymakers hope to address these challenges by turning them into opportunities, with a focus on extending working lives and providing older people with access to adequate social protection and, where necessary, supplementary pensions.

Living longer does not necessarily mean living a healthier, more active and independent life — this is all the more important given the growing number of older and very old people in the EU. The [European innovation partnership \(EIP\) on active and healthy ageing](#) was created in 2011 and aims to foster innovation that will promote active ageing and raise healthy life expectancy.

Furthermore, as an increasing number of older people reach an age where declining physical and mental health makes them dependent on help from others, there are considerable implications for long-term care expenditure. The [European pillar of social rights](#) stresses the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-based care and community-based services. It also underlines that everyone in old age should have a pension that is commensurate with their contributions and the right to resources that ensure living in dignity.

The [Social Protection Committee](#) is an advisory policy committee to the Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). It has looked at ways of providing adequate and sustainable long-term care in ageing societies, through investing in preventative care, rehabilitation, age-friendly environments, and more ways of delivering care that are better adjusted to people's needs and existing abilities; these developments could potentially create many more jobs in the long-term care sector and much greater demand for a wide range of age-related goods and services, including assistive technology.

Every three years, the European Commission communicates on ageing from a monetary perspective through a report on economic and budgetary projections — the latest of these was released in 2018. The publication provides information on age-related expenditure projections, based on Eurostat population projections; it highlights the budgetary impact of ageing on the sustainability of EU public finances.

As part of the European Commission's work on a 'new push for democracy' which forms part of its priorities for the period 2019-2024, a report was released in June 2020 in relation to the '[Impact of Demographic Change in Europe](#)'. It highlights the profound changes that have taken place following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lasting impact that the pandemic is likely to have on the way we live and work together (at a time when the EU had already been going through a period of profound demographic and societal change). The report presents the main drivers of demographic change and the impact they are having across the EU. It launches a process aimed at identifying specific actions and solutions, mindful of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, to support people, regions and communities that are most affected and to enable them to adapt to changing realities.

#### For more information:

- [Active ageing](#)
- [EIP on active and healthy ageing](#)
- [European pillar of social rights](#) :
- [Delivering on the European pillar of social rights](#)
- [European social protection committee](#)
- [2018 Ageing report: policy challenges for an ageing society](#)
- [The impact of demographic change in Europe](#)

### Structure of this publication

*Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* focuses on the most recent data available, usually for 2018 or 2019 (although some older data are presented from surveys that are only carried out every four or five years). It also provides information of change over time: a majority of these findings go back in time to look at recent developments, although they are supplemented by a set of [population projections](#) shown through to 2050. The findings are supported by a range of tables, figures and maps which are designed to highlight inter-generational variations.

**Chapter 1** looks at [population](#) developments: all of the EU Member States will experience population ageing in the coming decades, however, the size of this demographic challenge will vary considerably as will the drivers of population ageing. Is the ageing process driven by low [fertility](#) rates and/or increases in [life expectancy](#) and will it be further amplified by [net migration](#) (more people emigrating than people immigrating)?

**Chapter 2** provides information on housing and living conditions for older people. A relatively high share of older people in the EU live in [rural areas](#) ; this distribution may have an important bearing on policymakers when assessing access to various services for older people. The type of [household](#) in which older people live also plays an important role in determining their quality of life, risk of poverty, or the services that they require, with a growing number of older people living alone.

**Chapter 3** looks at issues related to health and [disability](#) . Health is an important measure of well-being: this is particularly true for older people in relation to their personal independence and participation in local communities. As older people have different [healthcare](#) requirements, health systems will need to adapt and it is likely that there will be a considerable surge in demand for long-term care (in residential facilities) and services covering diseases that typically affect older people (for example, arthritis, mental health / dementia, and sensory impairment).

**Chapter 4** presents information on the transition from work into retirement. Economic [activity rates](#) for older people in the EU have gradually increased during the last three decades. Work-life balance is a concept that is relevant to older workers as they plan their exit from the [labour force](#) : a growing number benefit from flexible working patterns that allow them to remain in work until a later age, increasing their income and reducing their reliance on support from taxpayers.

**Chapter 5** provides information on [pensions](#), income, and expenditure. As people age, their spending patterns are transformed: for example, older people tend to devote a higher proportion of their expenditure to health, food or the home in which they live, and a lower proportion to transport, clothing and footwear. Older people are relatively well off in several of the EU Member States: indeed, they are often found to have a lower risk of poverty than other age groups. This inter-generational divide is likely to grow in the coming years, with some evidence that younger generations find it increasingly difficult to finance their studies, enter the home ownership market, and save adequately for their retirement, and at the same time may expect to continue working to a later age.

**Chapter 6** concludes by presenting information on the social life and opinions of older people. Retirees who are fortunate to be in good health are much more likely to take part in a range of activities, such as returning to education, continuing or taking up a hobby, travelling or playing sports. Alongside participation in a diverse range of activities, another factor that can have an important influence on the well-being of older people is the frequency with which they have regular contacts with family and/or friends. The subjective well-being of older people may be analysed through self-reported measures of overall life satisfaction. In conclusion, it is particularly inspiring to note that some age groups of older people had higher levels of life satisfaction (compared with other age groups) in several western and northern EU Member States.

## A short reading guide

*Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* is available in two formats on [Eurostat's website](#): as an online publication via [Statistics Explained](#) and as a PDF file.

### Coverage and timeliness of the data

The data presented within *Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* were extracted during July 2020; the publication was drafted during August 2020.

*Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* contains statistics for the [Member States of the EU](#) and, where available, data are also shown for the United Kingdom and [EFTA countries](#) (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). The EU-27 aggregate is only presented when information was available for all of the EU Member States; any incomplete totals that were created have been systematically footnoted. As such, any time series for the EU-27 systematically refer to a sum or an average for the 27 Member States at the time of drafting, regardless of when they joined the EU. For a small number of data sources (such as data from older Eurobarometer public opinion surveys), EU totals or averages are only available for the EU as it was composed before the withdrawal of the United Kingdom, in other words for the EU-28. In these cases, data for the EU-27 have been estimated by adjusting the EU-28 data to remove the population-weighted data for the United Kingdom.

The geographical descriptions used to group EU Member States, for example, 'northern', 'eastern', 'southern' and 'western' are not intended as political categorisations. Rather, these references are made in relation to the geographical location of the Member States, as listed within the geography domain of [Eurovoc](#), the European Commission's multilingual thesaurus. The northern Member States are often distinguished between the [Baltic Member States](#) (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and the [Nordic Member States](#) (Denmark, Finland and Sweden).

Throughout the publication, a billion is used to mean a thousand million and a trillion to mean a thousand billion.

### Data sources

A large number of different sources were used to compile the information presented in this publication. As a result, the latest available reference year may vary across figures, tables and maps — as each aims to show the freshest information. The most common recent reference period is 2018 or 2019, although it was necessary to go back to earlier reference periods for some infrequent surveys, ad-hoc modules or one-off studies. If data for a particular reference period were not available (at the time of data extraction) for a particular country, then efforts were made to fill figures, tables and maps with data for previous reference periods (these exceptions are footnoted).

Eurostat's data are published with accompanying metadata that provide background information on each source, as well as specific information (flags) for individual data cells. These flags provide information pertaining to the status of the data, for example, detailing whether a value is estimated, provisional or forecasted. Such flags and breaks in series are indicated, as appropriate, in the footnotes provided under each figure, table or map.

In particular cases, use has been made of sources from outside of the [European statistical system](#) ; these are systematically credited in the source under each figure, table or map. The most common use of such sources concerns information provided in [Eurobarometer public opinion surveys](#) that are produced by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication. These surveys provide qualitative studies on the motivations, feelings and reactions of selected age groups towards a given subject (this source was principally used in Chapters 5 and 6).

Although a majority of the data presented in *Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* concern information for the EU Member States, the United Kingdom and EFTA countries, there are some figures and tables that provide international comparisons with non-member countries (these are mainly located in Chapters 1 and 2). The principal source of information for these global comparisons is the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in the United Nations — with demographic statistics from the [World Population Prospects 2019](#) .

### **Access to data and other information on Eurostat's website**

[Eurostat's database](#) may have fresher (or more disaggregated data) due to the continuous nature of data collection and processing (resulting in updates and new reference periods being added throughout the year). The online data code(s) below each figure, table or map helps users to locate the freshest data.

Many terms and abbreviations in the publication may be linked to [glossary pages](#) on Eurostat's Statistics Explained website.

The simplest way to find more information on the broad range of topics that appear within *Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU* is through [Eurostat's website](#) . It provides users with free access to data, publications and methodological information. The website is updated daily with the latest and most comprehensive statistical information available on: the EU-27 and the euro area, the individual EU Member States, the United Kingdom, EFTA countries, [candidate countries and potential candidates](#) , as well as some other non-member countries.

## **Other articles**

### **Online publications**

- [Ageing Europe — looking at the lives of older people in the EU](#)

### **Categories of articles**

- [All articles on population ageing](#)

## **Dedicated section**

- [Population and demography](#)

## **Methodology**

### **Metadata**

- [Population](#) (ESMS metadata file — demo\_pop\_esms)
- [Population projections](#) (ESMS metadata file — proj\_esms)

### **Further methodological information**

- [Population statistics](#)
- [Population projections](#)

## External links

- [European Commission — the impact of demographic change in Europe](#)
- [European Commission — the 2018 ageing report](#)
- [European Commission — population ageing in Europe](#)
- [United Nations — World population highlights — 2019 report](#)
- [United Nations — World population ageing — 2019 report](#)