

Ageing, Social Capital and Social Support

Submission by the
Australian Institute of Family Studies
to the
House of Representatives Committee on Ageing
'Inquiry into long-term strategies to address
the ageing of the Australian population
over the next 40 years'

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Executive Summary

In the context of broad family changes, the aims of this Submission are to highlight the importance of a range of social networks as key mechanisms of support and connectedness for the ageing Australian population, and to discuss key factors and issues associated with different levels of support networks available to elderly and ageing Australians.

The Submission draws on a range of work conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, including primary data analysis using data from the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Project* (FSAC) survey, focusing on the 433 respondents aged 55 years or over. Using a social capital framework, analysis of these data is used to inform the extent to which the ageing and elderly population across Australia are connected to a range of networks, including family, informal, civic and institutional ties.

In sum, the findings indicate relatively high levels of connection among older people to family and kinship networks, friendship groups and neighbours, civic groups, as well as to institutions *overall*. Yet at the same time they highlight differences in the levels of social connections available to older persons across this range of social realms, which have important implications for the likely levels of support available to them as they age. This brief analysis points to the need to further investigate inequalities and differences in support networks, and the way these impact on the lives of older persons in the long term.

Family and kinship ties

Despite dramatic family changes over the past decades, family and kinship networks remain important support networks for Australians over work force age. Previous Institute research indicates family and kinship networks are important sources of financial, practical and emotional support, and are available in varying degrees to the majority of the older population (see for example Millward 1998; D'Abbs 1991).

The FSAC data show that while family and kinship networks feature in the lives of most older persons, the size of networks varies. These data and previous research indicate there are important differences in the extent to which family and kinship networks are available, and are able to provide support, based on their:

- Proximity to older persons;
- Financial resources;
- Ethnicity;
- Family structure and experience (for example including divorce).

Combined these findings indicate that those least able to engage in family exchanges of support include divorced fathers, the childless, those whose families live too far away, recent migrants, those with chronic health problems, and people on low incomes.

The implications of these findings are that there is a diversity of levels of family and kinship support available to older persons, in a range of circumstances, and that it cannot be assumed all older persons have family networks available to them.

Wider informal networks

Where family and kinship ties are non-existent or tenuous, friendship and neighbourhood links may form a critical part of a person's informal support network.

The FSAC data show friendships and neighbourhood ties continue to form a significant part of the informal networks of people well into old age. However, previous Institute literature also shows that the readiness of people to engage in exchanges of support in friendship and neighbourhood networks varies. Specifically, previous literature suggests that where people feel least able to reciprocate in exchanges of support, they are least likely to draw on help when they need it (D'Abbs 1991: 123).

As part of a long-term strategy of support for the ageing population, more needs to be known about the role of friendship and neighbourhood ties as supports for older persons.

Links with the community

In addition to informal types of relationships, being actively engaged in community life has also been found to have positive benefits for older persons, including establishing relationships that may assist people as they age and their needs increase.

Despite an apparent decline in volunteering over the life course (using the ABS definition), the FSAC data show that ongoing connections to or involvement in a range of civic groups remain an important part of life for the vast majority of elderly and ageing members of the community.

A key question about the effectiveness of civic group infrastructure as providing both a support vehicle and positive ageing experience for older persons is

whether access and participation in civic life is equally distributed among the older population. The FSAC data also point to differences in the extent to which older persons are able to engage in civic life, according to factors including health and financial wellbeing.

Greater understanding of the different levels of connections older persons have to community life, and the implications of this on levels of support is needed.

Institutional relationships

The ties people have with institutions, systems and organisations in every day life or in the case of emergencies form a critical part of a system of supports.

The FSAC data indicate that older persons on average have relatively high levels of connection to a range of institutions, however that their levels of confidence in many of these institutions is low to moderate only overall (in line with levels of confidence reported by younger populations).

Given the likelihood that confidence in institutions will impact upon older people's take up of services, and engagement in the community, more information is needed about factors affecting the links older people have with institutional life. This is particularly so as earlier Institute research indicates differences in institutional ties and perceptions of them relate to financial wellbeing, education and ethnicity, among others.

1 Introduction

Changing values governing family life and associated demographic changes including declining levels of fertility, coupled with medical and health advances leading to increased longevity mean the Australian population is ageing (for discussion see Weston et al 2001; de Vaus 2002). A recent Briefing Paper published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS or 'the Institute') highlights the fact that as well as increasing in average age, the shape of the Australian population is increasing in cultural diversity as well as in a diversity of family forms and experiences (Weston et al 2001). Among other consequences, these changes have important implications for the extent to which family and kinship supports will be available for older persons, in an ageing Australian population. Along with income arising from paid work, and state provision of social security, informal networks and other forms of social connections form a critical part of a safety net and social infrastructure for ensuring quality of life for older Australians.

In this context, the aims of this Submission are to highlight the importance of a range of social networks as key mechanisms of support and connectedness for the ageing Australian population, and to discuss key factors and issues associated with different levels of support networks available to elderly and ageing Australians. As well the Submission aims to highlight some of the consequences of these differences and the impact these may have on the positive ageing of the population in the long term. The Submission aims to draw attention to the need for greater understanding of the mix of supports available to older persons in different circumstances, as part of a long term strategy for addressing issues arising from an ageing Australian population.

The Submission draws on a range of work conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies during the course of several years, around issues of social support and family ties, ageing and diversity, fertility and other relevant family trends.

As well the Submission includes primary data analysis using data from the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Project* (FSAC) survey, some of which is not yet published elsewhere. Using a social capital framework, the FSAC survey focuses particularly upon the types and quality of relationships respondents have in family, friendship, neighbourhood networks, as well as people's engagement in civic life including in group memberships and volunteering, and their confidence in, and connections to, a range of institutions. The key advantage of these data is the emphasis upon different types of social relationships. The survey was undertaken nationally using a random sample, and a total of 1506 individuals aged 18 years or over

participated¹. Of these, 433 were aged 55 years or over at the time of the survey (see Table 1).

Table 1. Age categories of Families, Social Capital and Citizenship survey sample, aged 55 years and over.

Age	Frequency	Per cent
55-59	123	28.4
60-64	78	18.0
65-69	82	18.9
70-74	76	17.6
75+	74	17.1
Total	433	100.0

Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

These data provide detailed information about the extent to which the ageing and elderly population across Australia are connected to a range of networks, including informal, civic and general as well as institutional ties – as well as being able to provide rich demographic analysis about differences in levels of connection relating to economic resources, health, region and location, culture and ethnicity, among others. Brief summary information about this subsample of older respondents (those aged 55 or over) is presented throughout this Submission, along with other Institute research and existing literature, to highlight the diversity of connections available to people of these ages as well as the differences in levels of connections among the elderly and ageing population.

2 Social capital and social support

There is a well documented literature indicating that social relations are important for providing individuals with identity, social roles and social supports. While not all people seek social supports, and relationships are not always positive, where networks are well functioning, the positive impacts of social connections are well known. These include increased happiness, health and longevity. Additionally, social support networks can alleviate hardship and even poverty.

Recently, much of this work has been linked to ‘social capital’. The concept of social capital provides a framework for conceptualising social relationships that focuses upon both the structure and quality of social ties, and can be defined as *networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and*

¹ For more information about the *Families, Social Capital & Citizenship Project* refer to the AIFS web site for a project summary: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/research/>. See also Hughes and Stone (2002) for a fieldwork report of the survey.

reciprocity and which lead to outcomes of mutual benefit. Hence, social capital is a concept that draws our attention to the relationships people have with others, the relationships people have with the community at large, and people's relationships with various institutional systems (see Stone 2001 for discussion of conceptualisation of social capital). The concept that has attracted much policy and academic interest in Australia in recent years, as social capital is said to lead to numerous potential benefits for individuals, families and communities (see Winter 2000 for discussion of the uptake of the concept in Australian public policy).

One of the key advantages of the social capital concept is that it incorporates social relationships across a range of social realms. Whereas much of the social support literature has typically focused upon family and other informal ties, social capital draws our attention to civic and institutional ties in addition to informal networks as important aspects of the social structure. Another advantage of the concept is that it highlights the quality of relationships – typically in terms of trust and reciprocity – as important ingredients of sustainable social ties.

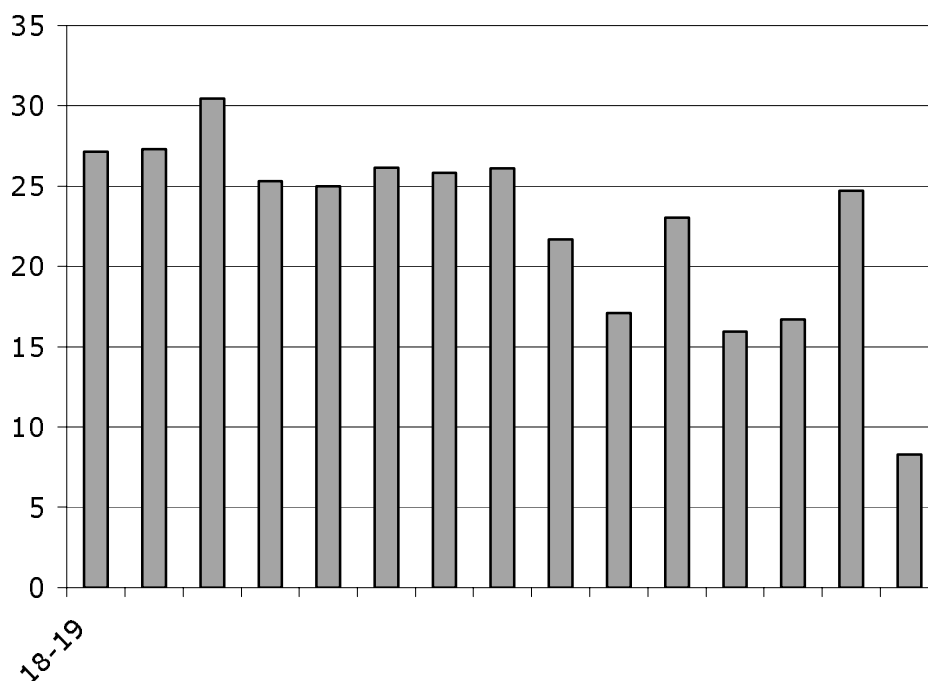
While much of the literature about various types of support networks has not been conducted within a social capital framework *per se*, this work is broadly compatible with the social capital approach. Combined, these literatures point to the importance of social ties within family life, broader informal networks and to civic and institutional links as important aspects of a social infrastructure. Ageing and elderly persons receive various benefits and supports through this range of social ties, and also contribute to them. However, as the evidence presented below shows, the extent to which these various types of relationships feature in the lives of elderly and ageing Australians varies.

2.1 Family and kinship ties

Despite dramatic family changes over the past decades, family and kinship networks remain important support networks for Australians over work force age. Family and kinship networks are important sources of financial, practical and emotional support, and are available in varying degrees to the majority of the older population (see for example Millward 1998; D'Abbs 1991).

The FSAC data indicate, however, that the overall size of family and kinship networks tends to fluctuate with age ($P=0.000$) (see Figure 1). While there are some exceptions (most likely due to the small sample of persons in elderly age categories), these results suggest family networks overall decrease by around 10 members from the time a person is in their young adulthood, until the time they are aged between 55 and 85 or over.

Figure 1. Average size of family and kinship networks, by age categories (N=1500).



Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

Despite this, all 433 people aged 55 or over who participated in the FSAC study had some types of connections with either family or kin. Of these, around 80 per cent had at least one member of their kinship or family network living either with them or within 30 minutes of them (using their usual mode of transport).

The extent to which these networks are proximate to ageing and elderly Australians is likely to have a critical impact on the likelihood of exchanges of support between older persons and their families. Indeed, in terms of the actual rates and extent of exchanges of support between older persons and their families, previous Institute research highlights the importance of family networks, but also shows how exchanges of support vary according to several key factors – including the proximity of family ties.

In a study of intergenerational exchanges in later life Millward (1998) reports on a survey of 721 Australians aged between 50 and 70 years. The survey focuses on the intergenerational exchanges that occur between elderly parents and their adult children and indicates a high level of expectation on the part

of respondents that they would receive help from their adult children (where they have them) in times of illness, emergencies, or to confide in.

In brief, that study and others highlight several key factors that differentiate the nature and levels of supports available to ageing and elderly populations. In addition to the physical proximity of family and kinship networks, these include:

- socio economic status of older persons – where those who were least well resourced had least support available to them;
- ethnicity and culture – as cultural norms governing the obligations and types of relationships that exist between generations and kinship groupings vary across cultures such that some populations exchange lower than average supports and others have higher than average exchanges of supports. Additionally the distance between generations can make exchanges of supports difficult (see Batrouney and Stone 1998; de Vaus and Qu 1998);
- family structure and change – where for people who have experienced divorce or separation for example, exchanges of support can be minimal, most notably for men (see Millward 1999).

In sum, this research suggests those least able to engage in family exchanges of support include divorced fathers, the childless, those whose families live too far away, recent migrants, those with chronic health problems, and people on low incomes.

Additionally, even where family networks are available and capable of providing support to older generations, previous Institute research shows that the extent to which support is given is not unconditional. Levels of support will be affected by the factors described above as well as normative views about appropriate and adequate levels of support. This work shows that while most people believe they should help family members, there are limits to the extent of help they believe is appropriate – indicating on their own, family networks cannot typically provide all the assistance required by elderly Australians (see de Vaus 1996).

As well as receiving support, there is considerable evidence that elderly and ageing Australians continue to provide assistance and play key roles in family and kinship networks into their later years – but that this is also changing. Due to the increasing longevity of the Australian population, combined with delayed child bearing, many people in the early stages of ageing face situations in which they have responsibilities for assisting with their own children (often in their early adult years) as well as their elderly parents. For these people, known as the ‘sandwich generation’, caring responsibilities as

well as employment commitments will affect their own ageing experience. In the later life study Millward found, for example, those in their fifties and sixties provided most of the assistance in both generational directions (Millward 1998: 39; see also Weston et al 2001 for discussion).

2.2 Wider informal networks

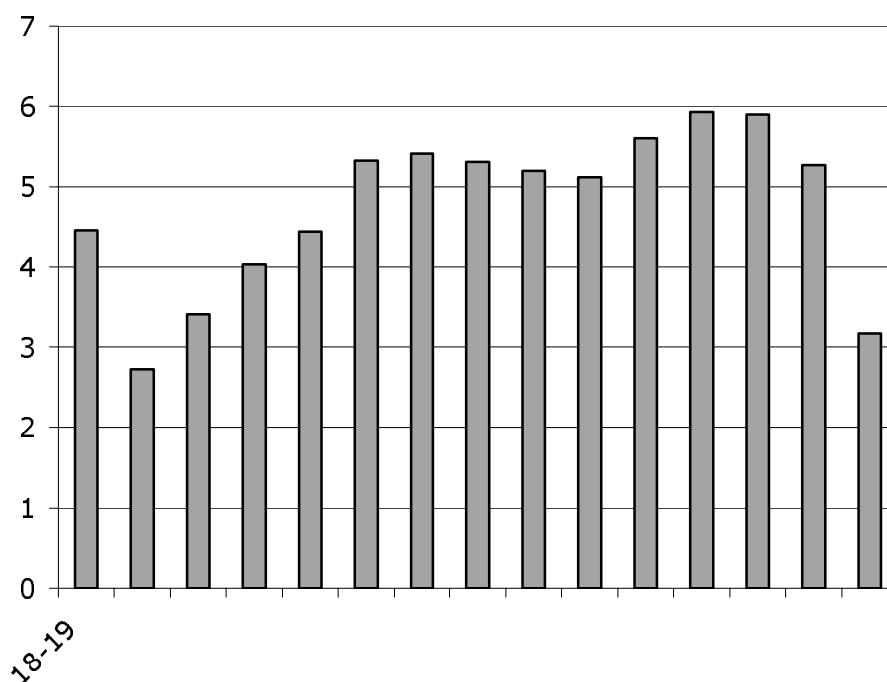
Just as relationships in families are changing, so too are the types of relationships people have with other members of their informal networks, such as neighbours and friends (see for example Pahl 2000). Where family and kinship ties are non-existent or tenuous these relationships can form a critical part of a person's informal support network.

The FSAC survey asked respondents about the extent and nature of their friendship networks and neighbourhood ties. By asking respondents to name the friends they felt they saw regularly or could rely on, results indicated that while those who were youngest in the survey appear to have slightly larger friendship networks, there were no systematic or statistically significant differences in the total size of friendship networks that were related to age, overall. For those aged 55 or over, the mean number of friends reported was 27, compared with 29 friends on average among those aged 18 years or over, suggesting that friendships remain an important part of the informal networks for people as they age.

With decreasing physical mobility for most elderly people, neighbours are also likely to be important. The survey asked respondents how many of their neighbours they knew personally, well enough to know the names of or have a conversation with.

The data indicate neighbourhood ties become most strong around the ages of 40-44, most likely at a time associated with fairly stable family life, housing and most likely home ownership (Figure 2) and that these relationships remain quite consistent throughout adult life for most people – decreasing only as people age to 80 years and over.

Figure 2. Average number of neighbours known personally, by age categories (N=1500).



Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

While previous Institute research highlights the role of family and kinship networks in providing support in the informal realm, that research also highlights the exchanges made between friends and neighbours. Typically, this is ‘least demanding’ in nature, compared with the exchanges of supports that more typically occur within family and kinship networks, and comprises exchanges of practical support, including houseminding, and small amounts of help around the home (for discussion see D’Abbs 1991; Millward 1998). However that work also shows that the readiness of people to engage in exchanges of supports in friendship and neighbourhood networks varies. Specifically, previous literature suggests that where people feel least able to reciprocate in exchanges of support, they are least likely to draw on help when they need it (D’Abbs 1991: 123).

2.3 Links with the community

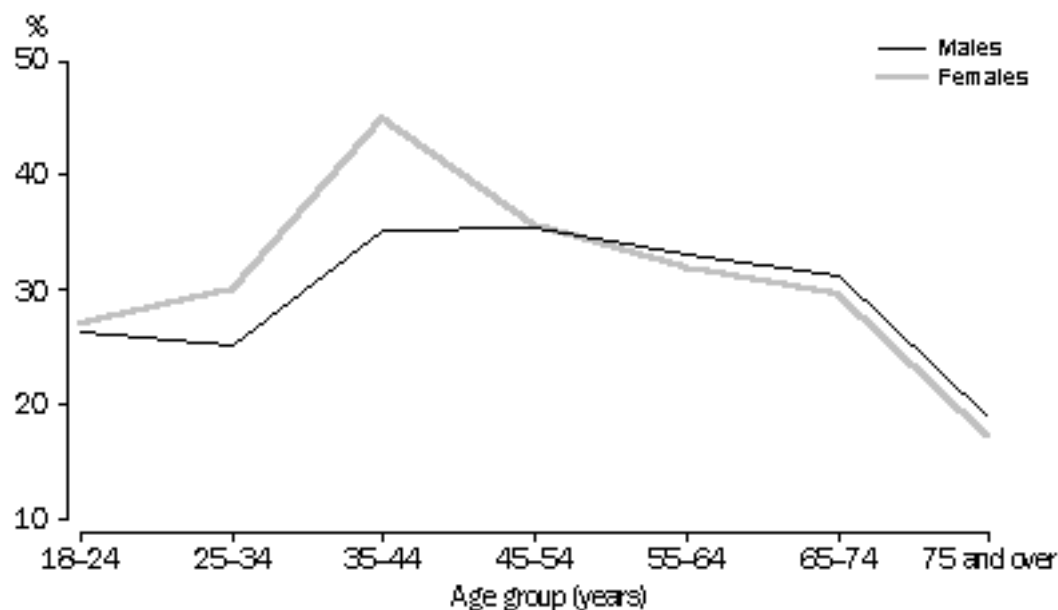
In addition to informal types of relationships, the benefits of links to more formalised aspects of community life are well documented. For those who volunteer, these include the possibility of contributing to the community, learning new skills, gaining a sense of worth, meeting people, and so on.

Being actively engaged in community life has also been found to have positive benefits for health (see for example Baum et al 2000).

It is also likely that engaging in the community in this way is mutually beneficial, and that by helping in the community, older people may establish relationships that in time will assist them as they age and their needs increase.

One popular measure of participation in the community is levels of volunteering. Recent reports from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2002) indicate that while overall levels of volunteering are high, rates of voluntary work decrease with age (Figure 3). Specifically, in its study of voluntary work the ABS found that those who were most likely to engage in voluntary work were mothers with relatively young children (ABS 2002). Notably, and in contrast with popular images of older persons as volunteers, ABS analysis of volunteering levels by age indicate relatively low levels of voluntary work being undertaken by older persons, in comparison with younger members of the community. As can be seen from Figure 1, rates of volunteering among those aged 75 and over drop to around 20 per cent.

Figure 3. Voluntary work in Australia in 2000, showing age and sex.



Source: ABS 4441.0 Voluntary Work, Australia

Notes: Voluntary work is defined by the ABS as someone who, in the last 12 months, willingly gave unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group.

Despite the apparent decline in volunteering over the life course (at least using the ABS definition), the FSAC data show that ongoing connections to or involvement in a range of civic groups remain an important part of life for the

vast majority of elderly and ageing members of the community. While volunteering *per se* may become difficult with age, when asked whether they had been members of or involved in a range of types of civic groups in the last 12 months, results indicated levels of group engagement remained high among survey respondents, into their older years.

As Table 2 shows, over 80 per cent of those aged 55 or over in the FSAC sample reported being a member of or involved with at least one type of civic group in the last 12 months. The types of groups most likely to attract older persons include sporting and hobby groups (45 per cent), environmental, welfare and charity groups (52 per cent) and education and arts groups (29 per cent). Together, these findings indicate that older persons form a strong part of the life and infrastructure of particular types of civic groups.

Table 2. Number and percentage of respondents aged 55 years or over belonging to or involved with at least one of range of civic groups in the last 12 months (N=433).

	Number respondents belong to group	% respondents belong to group
Number	356	82.2
Church/religious affiliation ¹	135	31.3
Child/parenting groups	38	8.8
Sporting/hobby groups	194	44.8
Trade/professional groups	60	13.9
Political groups	31	7.2
Environment/welfare groups	223	51.5
Educational/arts groups	127	29.3
Self help groups	55	12.7
Other groups	115	26.6

Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

Notes: 1. Attends church/religious affiliation is included where respondents attended church/religious affiliation at least monthly.

As well as age differences, the ABS analysis of volunteering highlighted differential rates of volunteering according to gender (women slightly more likely to volunteer than men) and work force status (those in paid work more likely to volunteer).

A key question about the effectiveness of civic group infrastructure as providing both a support vehicle and positive ageing experience for older persons is whether access and participation in civic life is equally distributed among the older population. That is, is civic life more important or more accessible for some older persons than others? Using the FSAC data, the impact on levels of civic group involvement of respondents' health status,

country of birth, subjective assessment of financial wellbeing and educational qualifications, respectively, were explored. These are a few of the key differences we might expect to find in the population, and are consistent with differences found in levels of informal networks and exchanges, above:

- While health status was significantly related to levels of civic group involvement for the whole survey population (those aged 18 years or over), this relationship was not significant when we considered those aged 55 years or over alone. That is, age and health effects together interact with levels of civic engagement.
- The country of birth of respondents did not appear significantly related to civic group engagement (although note other literature does point to differences between cultural groups – a point that warrants further investigation).
- Educational qualifications were significantly related to levels of civic group involvement for the whole sample, but did not distinguish groups of older persons.
- The data do, however, point to a financial effect across the entire sample, including for older persons, whereby those who reported they were ‘just about getting by’, ‘finding it quite difficult’ or ‘finding it very difficult’ were significantly less likely to engage in civic group life than those who reported they were ‘doing alright’ or ‘living comfortably’.

This brief analysis points to the need to further investigate inequalities and various cultural differences and the way they impact on the capacity of older persons to engage in civic group life, and to benefit from these interactions.

As well as actual engagement in civic group life and voluntary work, the way people feel about other community members *in general* – whether they know them or not – has also been argued to be an important part of social capital. For example it is thought that a general sense of trust and reciprocity in the community relates to the likelihood of people cooperating with others and that these feelings influence the extent to which people are likely to participate in civic groups and general community life. Respondents to the FSAC survey were asked a series of questions (based on modified versions of World Values Survey items) about the extent to which they believed people in general as well as people in their local area could be trusted, as well as the extent to which they believed people were willing to help each other out (see Stone and Hughes 2002 for full discussion).

As Figure 4 shows, when these items are combined into an overall scale of generalised trust and reciprocity, we see a clear and significant ($P = 0.000$)

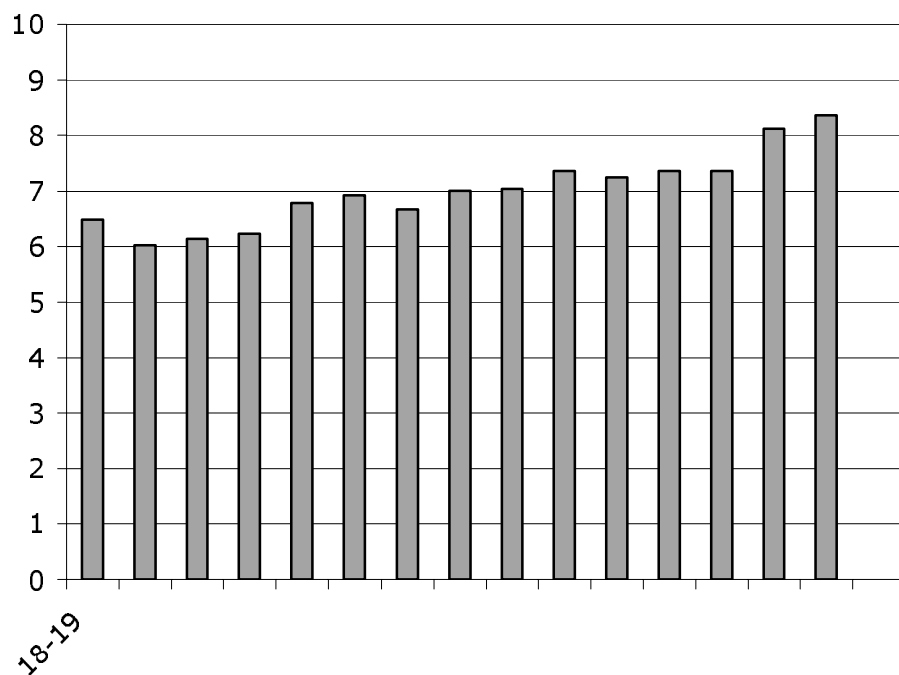
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relationship between the levels of trust and reciprocity respondents report, and their life stage. While all people are relatively positive overall, results show those who are most positive are the oldest members of the sample. While it is difficult to know from these data whether this is a cohort effect (in that the older group of respondents have always been more positive, even when younger) or an age effect (in that people become more positive with age), this finding is a positive one, given that these feelings are argued to facilitate the extent to which people will participate in general community life, as well as to their overall sense of personal wellbeing.

Figure 4. Mean level of generalised trust and reciprocity (on scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high) reported by respondents, showing age categories of respondents (N = 1496).



Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

These generally high levels of trust and reciprocity expressed by elderly respondents for people in general, reflect the positive feelings most older respondents in the sample reported about various aspects of their neighbourhoods, including the extent to which they identified with the local area, the extent to which they felt well informed, as well as the overall levels of sense of satisfaction with the safety of their local neighbourhoods – in contrast with popular media images of fearful, frail elderly persons. It must be noted again, however, that these results are average scores only – with

some people reporting lower levels of generalised trust and reciprocity and satisfaction with aspects of their neighbourhood, overall.

Earlier work from the FSAC project has found that these feelings are related to the socio economic status of the area in which respondents live (where respondents in poorer areas report lower scores), to urban and regional differences (where rural and regional respondents record lower scores, and tend to trust people they know personally), to their ethnicity (where, for people from some cultures respondents record higher scores than respondents born in Australia and lower scores in other cases), health status (where poor health is associated with lower recorded generalised trust and reciprocity scores) and levels of financial wellbeing (where people who are struggling financially record lower scores than respondents who are getting by or doing well financially) (see Stone and Hughes 2002 for details). It is likely these differences also feature in the lives of people as they age, such that we would expect to find differences in levels of generalised trust and reciprocity among the older population according to factors such as health, financial wellbeing and neighbourhood quality.

2.4 Institutional relationships

The ties people have with institutions, systems and organisations in every day life or in the case of emergencies form a critical part of a system of supports. Arguably, having positive interactions with systems and institutions increases in importance with age, given the decreasing capacity of individuals to rely on themselves, and the likelihood that individuals will require increased level of service intervention upon ageing.

While the FSAC survey did not ask directly about experiences of a range of services, it did ask respondents to report on the extent to which they felt they knew someone in a range of types of institutional and organisational settings to whom they could approach for information or advice if they needed to do so. While the FSAC data overall showed respondents had varied levels of institutional connectedness relating to their socio economic status, ethnicity and degree of attachment with the labour force, among other factors (see Stone and Hughes 2002 for full report), the findings at Table 3 indicate a relatively high level of overall connectedness reported by FSAC sample members aged 55 years or over. While it is likely that some elderly and ageing persons have few institutional ties while others have relatively high levels of connectedness, these findings are relatively positive overall.

Table 3. Number and percentage of respondents aged 55 years or over with ties to a range of institutions (N=433).

	Number respondents had institutional ties	% respondents had institutional ties
Has any institutional ties	383	88.9
Ties to church/religious affiliation	135	31.3
Ties to police force	191	44.1
Ties to legal system	260	60.0
Ties to media	101	23.3
Ties to trade unions	75	17.3
Ties to government	189	43.6
Ties to political parties	141	32.6
Ties to universities	166	38.3
Ties to big business/corporations	157	36.3

Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

As well as links to institutions, it has also been argued that positive experiences of institutions, and general levels of trust or confidence in these, can impact on the extent to which individuals will engage in their communities and the general life of society (discussed in the previous section).

Using a modified version of items from the World Values Survey, respondents to the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* survey were asked the extent to which they had confidence in a range of institutions and organisations, on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 equals no confidence and 10 equals complete confidence. Results at Table 4 indicate low to moderate levels of trust in institutions overall among the population aged 55 years or over – although the levels of confidence reported by people of these ages did not differ greatly from those who were younger. Results at Table 4 also indicate that for the 55 years or over population, there are differences in levels of reported confidence for different types of institutions. Most notably, levels of confidence in the police are high overall, as are levels of confidence in the churches, public service, local government and legal system. Lowest levels of confidence are recorded for trade unions, the media, big business (corporations) and the federal government.

Table 4. Average levels of confidence in a range of institutions (on scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high), reported by respondents aged 55 years or over (N=433).

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Trust in legal system	5.24	2.4557
Trust in churches	5.97	2.7260

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Trust in police	7.32	2.1500
Trust in media	4.24	2.3111
Trust in unions	4.21	2.3515
Trust in federal government	4.64	2.7199
Trust in state government	5.19	2.5496
Trust in local government	5.28	2.6356
Trust in public service	5.52	2.2869
Trust in big business	4.56	2.4484

Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, AIFS 2001.

3 Ageing with diverse social supports: key issues and implications

This Submission has highlighted family and kinship networks as important sources of support for older and elderly Australians, and has also referred to the valuable role older persons play in family and kinship networks. It was demonstrated that people overall have relatively high levels of connection with family groups into their old age. However, it has also highlighted key differences and disadvantages in relation to levels and availability of family support.

Using data from the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Project*, the Submission has also highlighted other aspects of the social structure not often included in policy discussion around support for and the contributions of older persons. It has also pointed to friendship and neighbourhood networks as potential sources of support, that form an ongoing part of informal networks for people into later life. As well, despite apparently declining rates of voluntary work with age, the Submission has highlighted the importance of civic and community groups in the lives of older persons – but has pointed to some differences in the extent to which older persons engage in civic groups relating to their financial and other circumstances. This is an aspect of the social structure about which little is known, especially as it features in the lives of older persons in different settings and circumstances.

The Submission has also briefly explored the relationship older persons have, on average, with a range of types of institutions, thought to increase the likelihood of their civic and political engagement. It has shown that while older persons have relatively high levels of connection with a range of different institutions and organisational types, confidence in institutions is low on average.

The implications of these findings are that a mix of various types of social networks is likely to feature in the lives of most older persons, and needs to be better understood as a core part of the support network that will assist

members of the Australian population as they enter later life. While family and kinship networks have been a main focus of the support literature, more information about the range of different types of relationships older persons have – and their meaning – is required. As well, we know relatively little about the implications for older persons of having limited access to some of these types of supports. It is possible that strong relationships in one sphere of life may compensate for a deficit in another. It is also possible that engagement in one sphere of life may facilitate engagement in others – for example, where older persons develop friendship networks through engagement in community groups. Of more concern is understanding the implications of having only tenuous connections in a range of social spheres for people as their needs increase with age.

What this Submission has not focused upon, but which is also worthy of greater understanding as part of a long term strategy for the ageing population, is the ongoing contribution of older persons to the informal, community and institutional life of Australia. Apart from immediate benefits to society are the likely long term pay offs. Consistent with the notion of reciprocity and social capital, by contributing to these types of connections, older persons are likely to strengthen those relationships that may in turn be available to help them as they age. Again, however, it is important to realise the different capabilities of people in different circumstances to engage in various types of networks, and to be mindful of the differential access and participation older persons have across a range of social ties in terms of long term ageing strategies.

Additional Institute research

This Submission has drawn upon some recent Institute research as well as primary data from the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Project*. In addition, a range of other research on ageing and issues relevant to the ageing population is currently being undertaken or planned by the Institute. This includes:

- Understanding the role of older parents via child care and grandparenting, using the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children ('Growing Up in Australia' Project).
- Family Trends Monitoring – ongoing analyses of family trends affecting the social, cultural and economic circumstances of families, and available in summary form from the Institute website.
- Institute links to the Household, Income and Labour Force Dynamics Survey (HILDA), including a feature on older persons in the Wave 3 (year 2003) data collection.

- Ongoing research into issues affecting fertility being conducted across various research programs at the Institute.
- Research into the financial wellbeing of older persons post-divorce.

Additionally, is previous research of the Institute, including research around issues of retirement, and various aspects of wellbeing in later life.

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