

Relationships Australia Monthly Website Survey

July Survey: Ageism, caring for the elderly and the abuse of older people

Key Findings

- 1** People recognise blatant forms of ageism, however some more subtle ageist views prevail.
 - 88% agreed that everyone has the right to be cared for in their old age (figure 6).
 - 73% of survey respondents felt that age-related restrictions for Covid-19 would have been appropriate (figure 4).
 - 46% thought that people's cognitive abilities get worse in their old age (figure 6).
- 2** Many respondents know someone who has been abused in their old age, yet few know what to do about this issue.
 - 61% of respondents think that the abuse of older people is common in Australia (figure 3). This is up from 2016, where only 25% showed concern for the issue (in a [similar survey](#) conducted by Relationships Australia).
 - 43% of respondents knew someone who had been affected by the abuse of older people. 29% knew a victim/survivor and 14% said they knew the perpetrator of abuse (figure 7).
 - 48% of respondents were unsure of where to seek help (figure 3). These figures remained the same even for those who had previous experience with the abuse of older people (figure 9).
- 3** Respondents' *perceptions* of care-giving roles appear worse than other respondents' *actual experiences*.
 - 56% of carers said they receive enough support for their role, whereas only 9% of people who had no contact with carers thought they received enough support (figure 18)
 - 77% of carers enjoy their role, whereas 62% of future carers were looking forward to their role (figure 15).
 - 56% of carers have felt frustrated by their role. 76% of people who had no contact with carers thought it would be challenging (figure 16).
 - 56% agreed that they sometimes questioned their responsibility for their position, whether or not the carer was related to the older person (figure 19).

Introduction

This survey was launched on June 15 to mark *World Elder Abuse Awareness Day*. Elder abuse, or the abuse of older people, refers to the physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse of older people, as well as neglect (WHO 2002). 'Older people' is usually defined as those 65+, but it can refer to those aged 50+ in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ALRC 2017).

Evidence about the prevalence of the abuse of older people is limited. The Australian Institute of Family Studies is currently conducting a prevalence study to address this. Early reports, using international indications, have suggested that between 2% and 14% of older Australians experience abuse in any given year, with the prevalence of neglect possibly higher (Kaspiew, Carson & Rhoades 2016).

Available evidence suggests that the abuse of older people is most often intra-familial and intergenerational (Kaspiew et al. 2015). Further, carer stress is often posed as a contributing factor to the abuse of older people (Brandl & Raymond 2012). As people age, they increasingly rely on their family and support networks to complete tasks. The stress of a caring role, combined with the increased vulnerability of the cared for, can create fertile ground for abuse. For example, the digitalisation of financial services means many older people rely on carers to assist them with banking and other financial tasks. As such, financial abuse is considered the most common type of abuse of older people in Australia (Kaspiew et al. 2016).

Other research has found that even when abuse is reported, there is a lack of understanding and awareness about the issue. Reports of sexual abuse can be dismissed as the recall of a childhood sexual assault, or the older woman having a urinary tract infection, dementia or delirium (Mann et al. 2014). More detailed prevalence studies and other research into the abuse of older people is necessary to better understand this phenomenon.

The abuse of older people is considered a manifestation of ageism. Ageism is used to justify the abusive behaviour and allows people to overlook or minimise the consequences of the abuse. During the Covid-19 pandemic, age has played a defining role in commentary. It has been central to the way restrictions have been mandated and as such, has led to ageist comments in the media and society more generally.

This ageist mindset that undervalues older people has extended into the aged care services (Tracey 2020). The *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* has been set up to look at the quality of aged care services in Australia. These issues have been exacerbated by the experiences of people in aged care homes throughout the pandemic. There appears to be a lack of access to high quality aged care services in Australia, yet a recent study conducted by Flinders University for the Royal Commission found that 90% of Australians would support increasing government funding to aged care facilities to ensure universal access to high-quality services (Ratcliffe 2020). Further, most respondents said they would be willing to make co-contribution payments if they needed to access aged care services in the future. Other research prepared for the Royal Commission has shown that many people have little exposure to older Australians and very few know an older Australian receiving care (Ipsos 2020; Roy Morgan 2020). Research papers 4 and 5 from the Royal Commission will be referred to throughout this report.

Despite the widespread recognition that the state of aged care in Australia needs to change, ageist views have persisted throughout the pandemic. The Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) has noted that many of the restrictions aimed at stemming Covid-19 address all 'older people' above arbitrary cut-off ages, suggesting they would "most-likely not survive a Covid-19 infection" (BMJ 2020;368). Rather, AAG argues that age should be understood as correlated with other underlying risk factors, rather than an inherent risk.

Similarly, Every Age Counts, an advocacy campaign addressing ageism in Australian society, has said that older people's heightened susceptibility to the virus is sometimes seeing them blamed for the community-wide restrictions. "The implication that older people's lives are more expendable than other members of the community, their contributions less valuable, their deaths less tragic" is evidence of this (2020).

This survey explored people's views on ageing and age discrimination, age-based Covid-19 restrictions, their understanding of the abuse of older people, and their experiences as carers for older people.

Previous Research by Relationships Australia

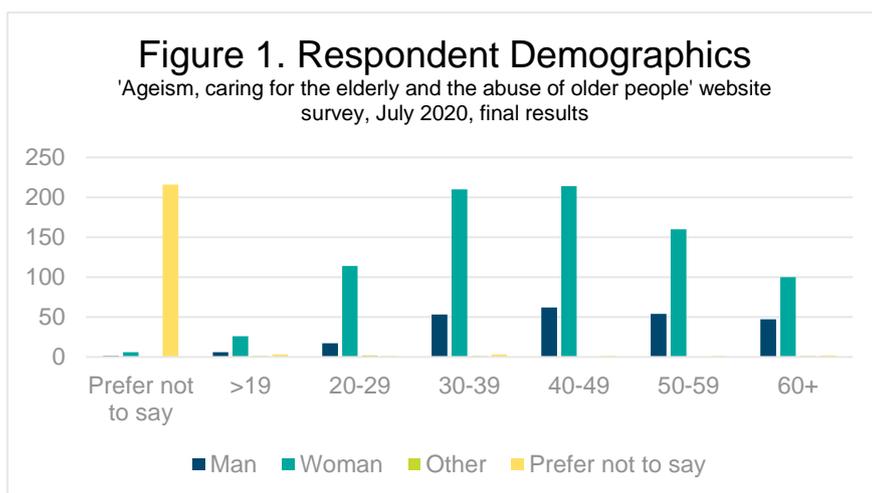
Relationships Australia is committed to supporting clients who have experienced ageing-related family relationship issues, including the abuse of older people. Relationships Australia is a leading provider of relationship support services, we have a variety of [Senior Relationships Services](#) that assist older people and their families to prevent and resolve family conflict, have difficult conversations, plan for the future, improve communication skills, make decisions that protect the interests, rights and safety of family members and reduce the risk of elder abuse, including emotional and financial abuse.

In conjunction with these services, we have conducted monthly survey research into people's experiences with and understandings of the abuse of older people. [This survey](#), conducted in 2016 (n=1650), found that:

- Around 10% were very concerned about the abuse of older people,¹ around 15% were a little concerned and 75% were not concerned about the abuse of older people.
- Respondents felt that entitlement/greed (65%+), poor physical/mental health of the older person and abuser and financial problems of the abuser (40%+) were the greatest contributing factors the abuse of older people.
- Responders perceived that the most likely to perpetrate the abuse of an older person was the partner/spouse, carer or domestic helper or the son of the victim/survivor.
- When responding to a situation where an older person was being abused, respondents would most likely undertake a combination of speaking to the older person, abuser, extended family or friends, and reporting suspicions to the police or community organisation.

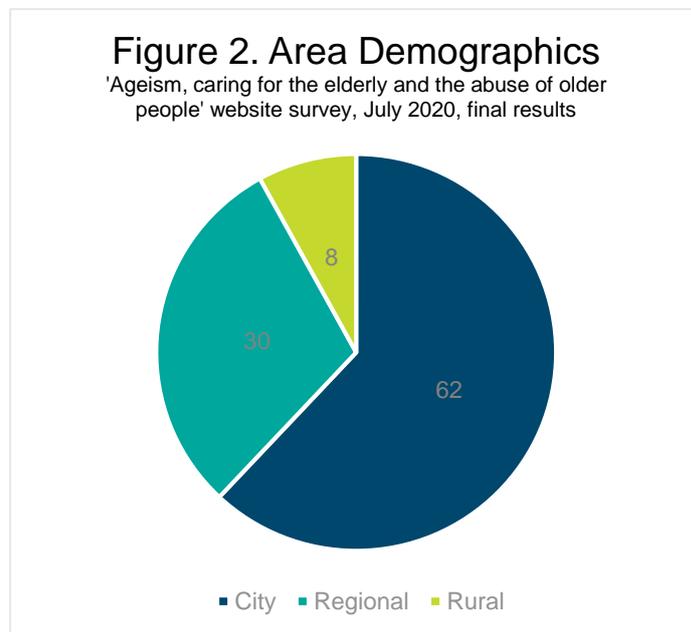
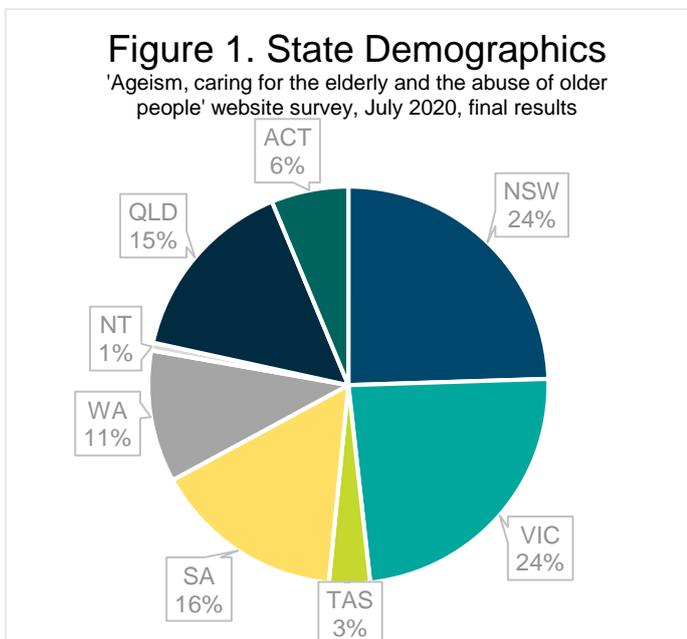
2020 Survey Results

1304 people responded to Relationships Australia's survey, conducted in June and July of 2020 (figure 1). As for previous surveys, the demographic profile of survey respondents remains consistent with our experience of the groups of people that would be accessing the Relationships Australia website.

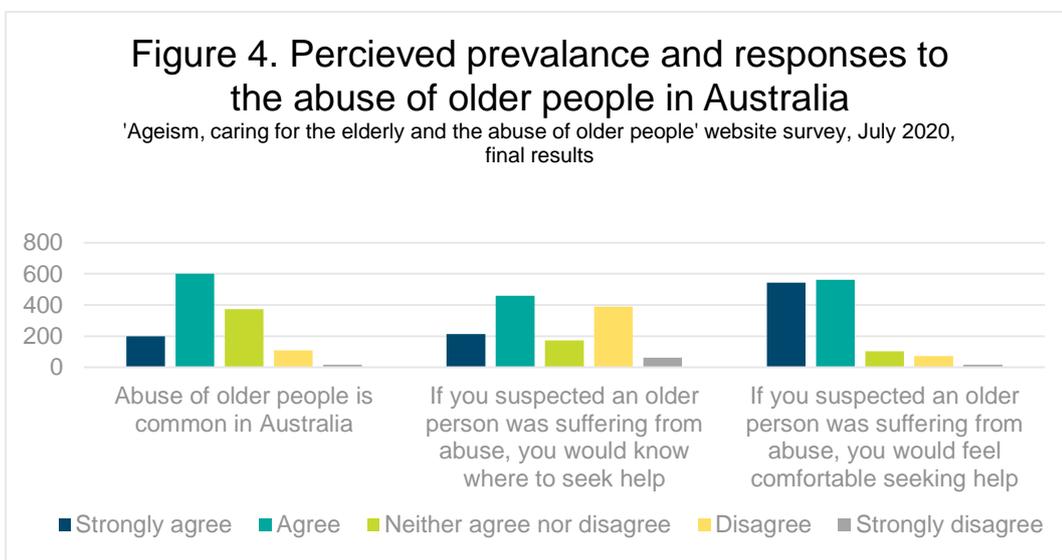


¹ This 2016 survey used the term 'elder abuse', Relationships Australia now uses the term 'abuse of older people'.

We received responses from every Australian state and territory (figure 2). 62% of respondents resided in cities, 30% in regional areas and 8% in rural locations (figure 3).



The survey began by asking a series of questions exploring people’s perceptions of the prevalence of the abuse of older people in Australia and their responses if they became aware of someone suffering from abuse.



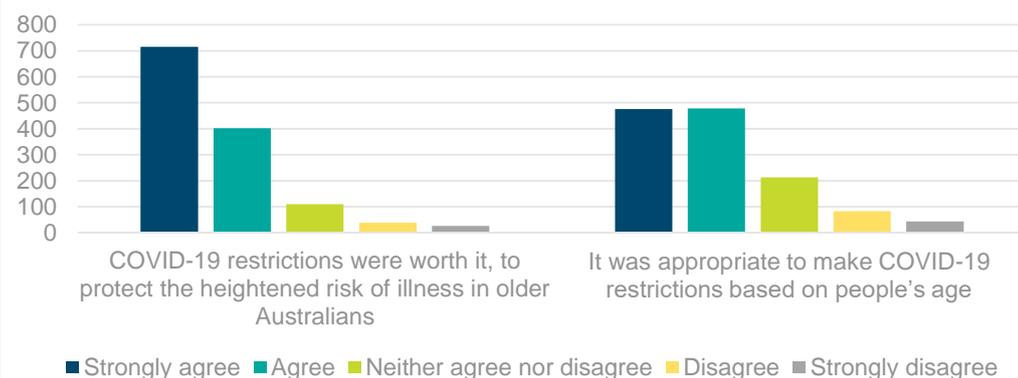
61% agreed that the abuse of older people is common in Australia. 29% were unsure and 11% disagreed. This suggests that there is a far greater level of awareness (increased by 36%) about the abuse of older people than when a similar survey was conducted by Relationships Australia in 2016 (Mance 2016).

However, the third of people who selected the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ suggests that there remains some ambivalence or confusion about the subject.

When responding to the abuse of older people, 85% said they would feel confident in seeking help, but only 52% felt confident in knowing where to seek help, 30% were somewhat unsure and 5% felt very unsure of where to seek help. This suggests that despite community confidence in seeking help, there is a lack of understanding and awareness about where to go if you suspect an older person is being abused.

Figure 5. COVID-19 and age-related responses

'Ageism, caring for the elderly and the abuse of older people' website survey, July 2020, final results



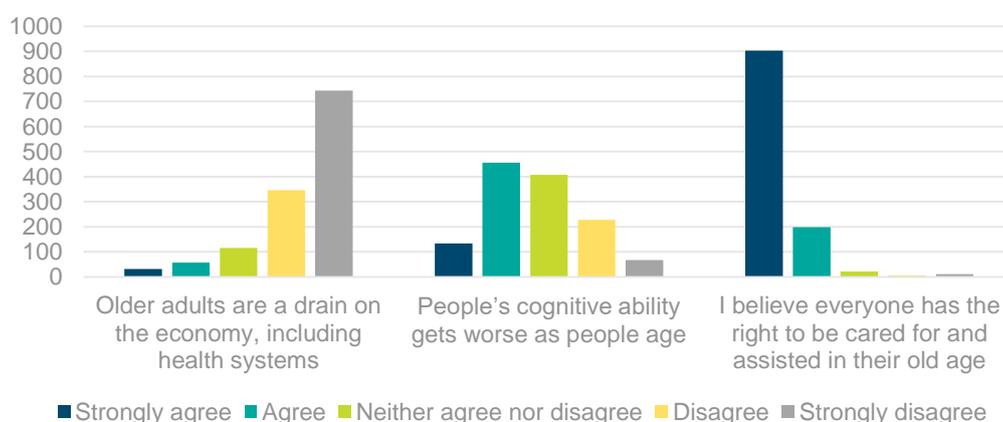
Much discussion around Covid-19 has related to age, and the risk factors for certain cohorts within society. There have been age-specific recommendations and ample discussion about the risk of illness 'targeting' those above a certain age. Despite some advocates misgivings about the ageist nature of this

messaging, 73% of survey respondents felt that age-related restrictions would be appropriate. Similarly, 86% of respondents felt that restrictions were worth it, to protect the heightened risk of illness in older Australians. This suggests that although many may believe that people above a certain age may not survive infection, they are willing to forego their own freedoms to protect older people in the community.

Due to the strong correlation between ageist attitudes and the abuse of older people, it is important to understand people's views towards ageing. Respondents demonstrated strong support for older people's rights, with 88% agreeing that everyone has the right to be care for and assisted in their old age (figure 6).

Figure 6. Age discrimination and ageing attitudes

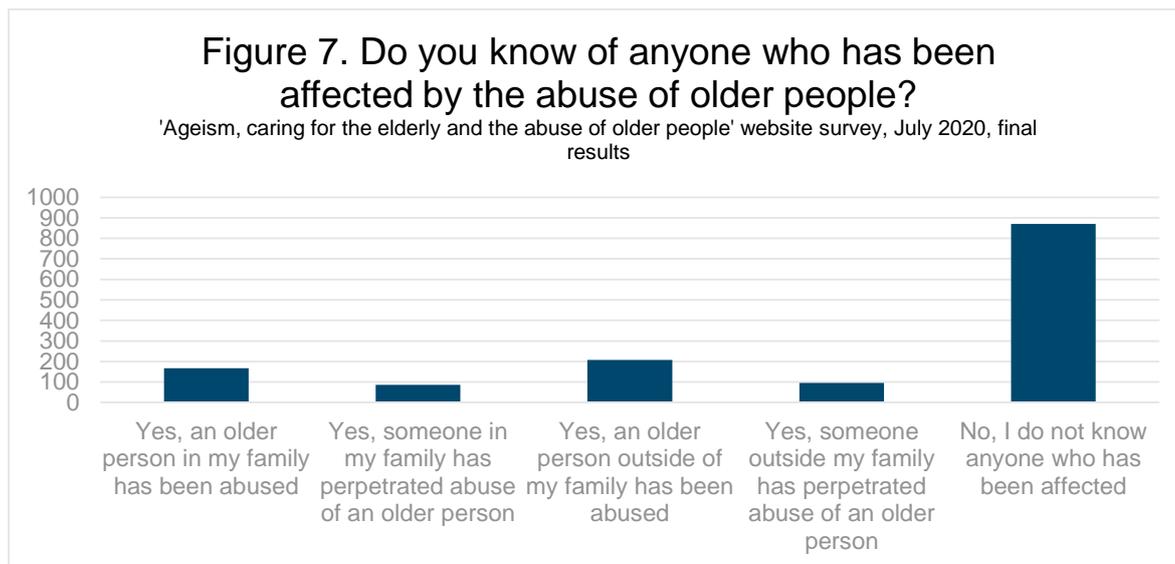
'Ageism, caring for the elderly and the abuse of older people' website survey, July 2020, final results



Despite this, 46% agreed that people's cognitive abilities get worse in their old age (figure 6). While some people's cognitive abilities may decline with age, sweeping generalisations such as this are damaging, as these stereotypes contribute to a generalised prejudice against people based on their

age. However, 84% of respondents strongly disagreed with the sentiment that older adults are a drain on the economy and health systems (figure 6). Combined with the questions about Covid-19, this suggests respondents are aware of the possibility of health issues which occur in older Australians, are willing to make sacrifices to mitigate these risks during a pandemic, yet do not see older Australians as a burden on the economy or healthcare system.

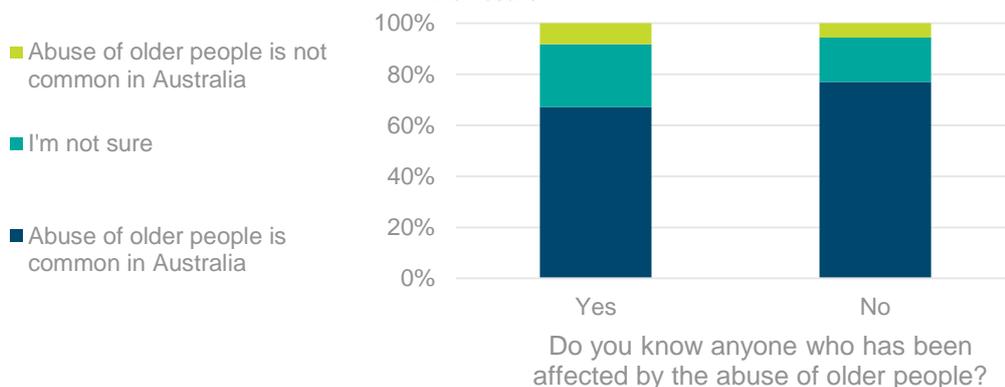
Prevalence of the abuse of older people



43% of respondents knew someone who had been affected by the abuse of older people (figure 7). 29% knew a victim/survivor and 14% said they knew the perpetrator of abuse (it should be noted that people may have selected that they know both the victim/survivor and abuser from a single incident). People were more likely to know a victim/survivor than an abuser and more people know of abuse perpetrated within their family rather than outside of it. Given the shame that can be associated with abuse, this is somewhat expected, as discussions about the behaviour may be kept private and people may feel uncomfortable identifying the abuser.

Figure 8. Experience with abuse does not always change people's perceptions about the prevalence of the issue

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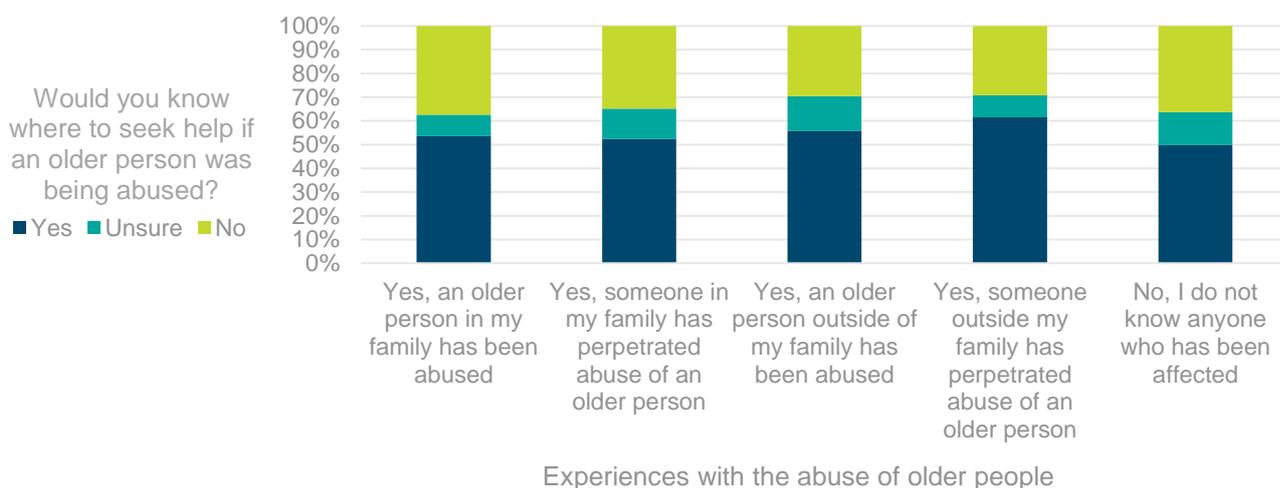


Despite the fact that almost half the respondents had experience with the abuse of older people, figure 8 demonstrates that this experience only had a small effect on people's perceptions of the prevalence of this kind of abuse. People who had experience with the abuse of older people were less likely to

agree that this issue was common (68% versus 77%). This suggests that people who have experience with this kind of abuse may continue to see their experience as an outlier, rather than a trend affecting many Australians. This perpetuates this shame and stigma which further deters reporting and help-seeking.

Figure 9. Experiences with abuse does not significantly increase the likelihood people will know where to seek help

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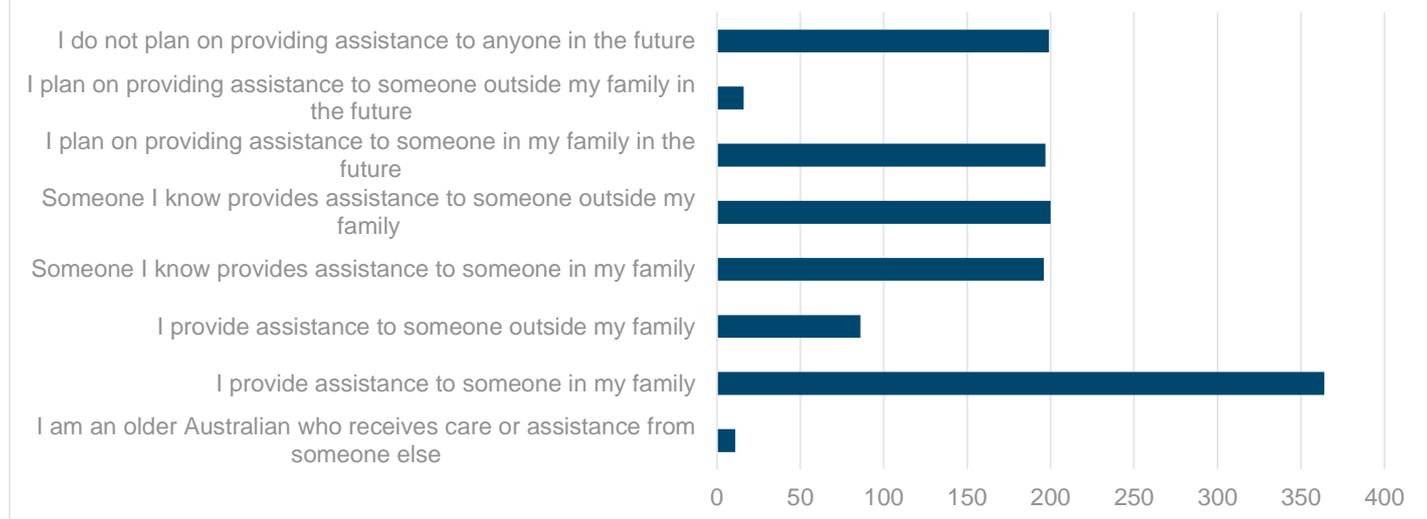


Although almost half of respondents had had experience with the abuse of older people, figure 9 suggests that many still feel unsure about where to seek help. Those who knew someone outside their family who had been the perpetrator of abuse were most likely (61%) to know where to seek help. Those who had no experience with the abuse of older people were least likely (50%) to know where to seek help; however, this was only slightly below those who had experienced abuse within their family (52%).

Caring roles:

Figure 10. Prevalance of care-giving and recieving among respondents

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As a result of the intra-familial and intergenerational nature of the abuse of older people, as well as the prevalence of carer-perpetrated abuse, we asked questions which explored people’s roles as carers now and in the future. Over 350 people said they currently provide assistance to someone in their family, 86 provide assistance to someone outside their family, 396 people knew someone who provided assistance to someone else and a further 213 planned on providing assistance to someone in the future. There are 11 people currently receiving care or assistance. These respondents were asked questions based on their experiences with care. Those who did not know anyone who received care and did not plan on providing assistance to anyone in the future were asked about their perceptions of care-giving roles.

Thoughts on care-giving:

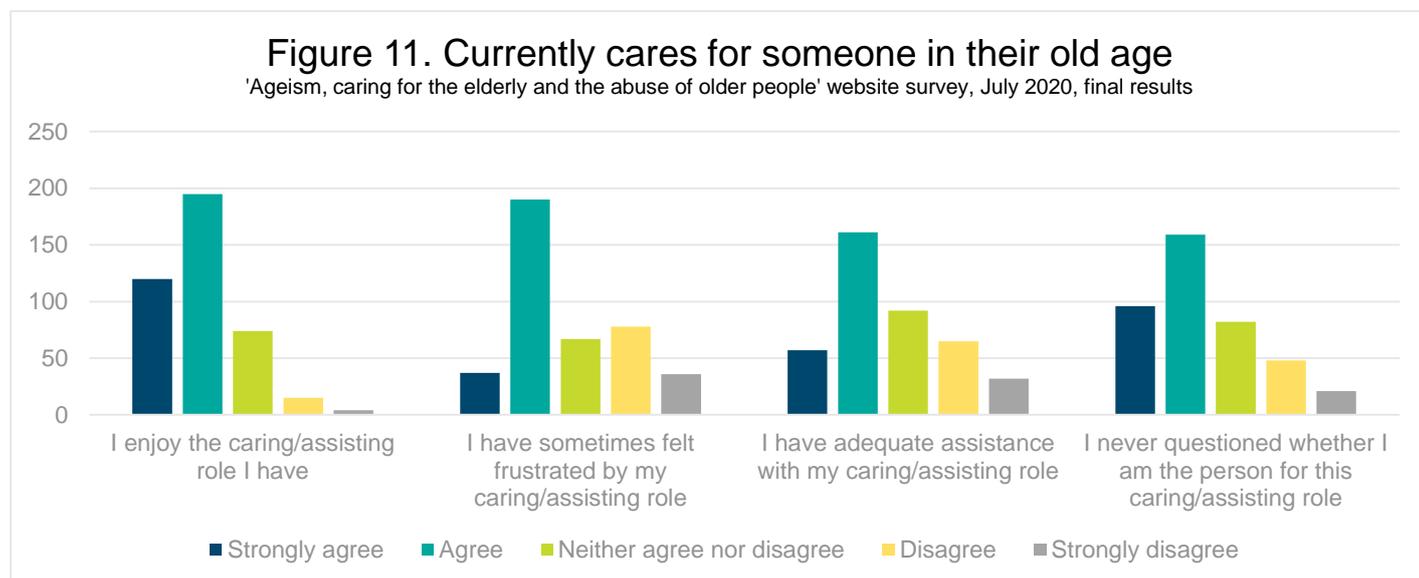


Figure 11 illustrates the responses of those who currently provide care or assistance to someone in their old age. The results show that the majority enjoy their caring role (77%) and although 53% feel that they have adequate assistance with their role, over half (56%) have at times felt frustrated by their role. 63% agreed that they do not question whether they are the right person to be fulfilling their caring/assisting role.

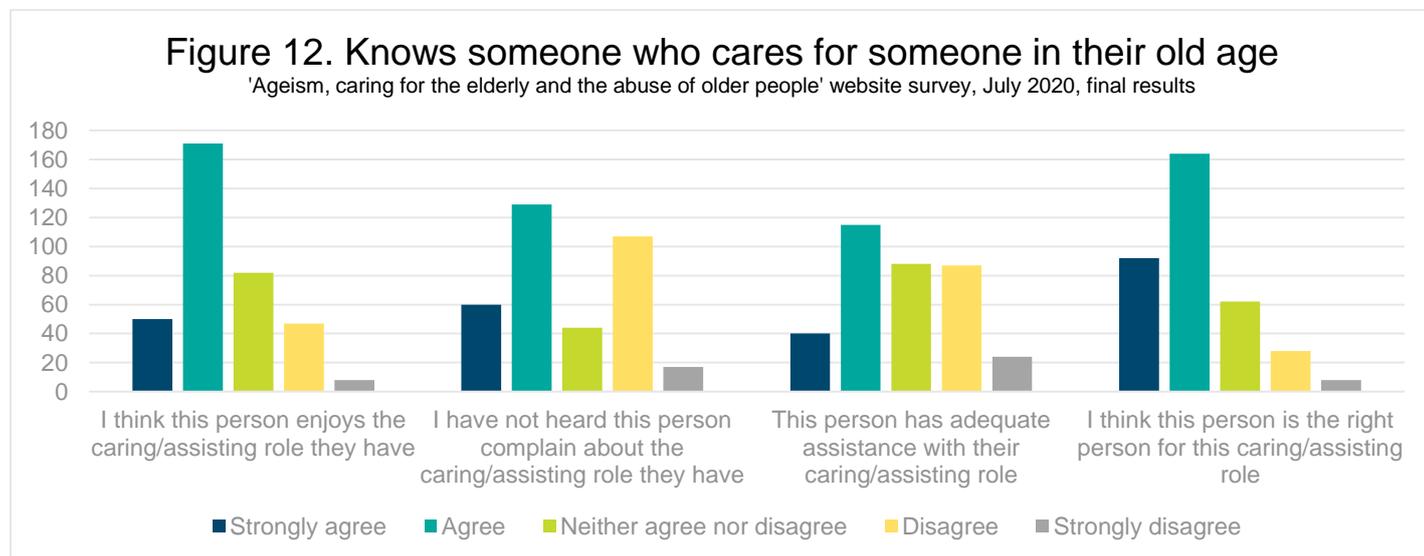


Figure 12 illustrates the responses of those who know someone who provides care for someone in their old age (this included responses from people currently receiving care). 62% said they thought the person enjoyed their caring role, however 35% said they had heard the person complain about their caring/assisting role. Assistance with caring was more divisive; 43% felt the person had adequate assistance while 31% said that they did not agree that the person had enough support. Despite this, 72% felt that the person they knew was the 'right' person for the job.

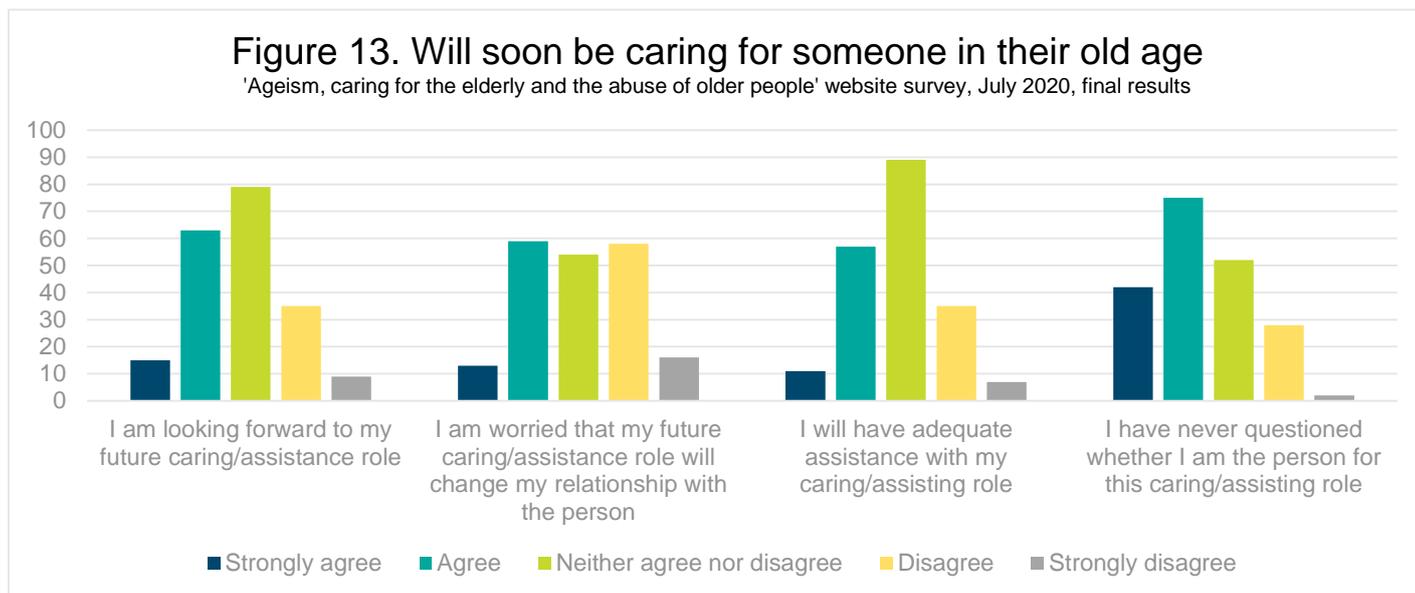
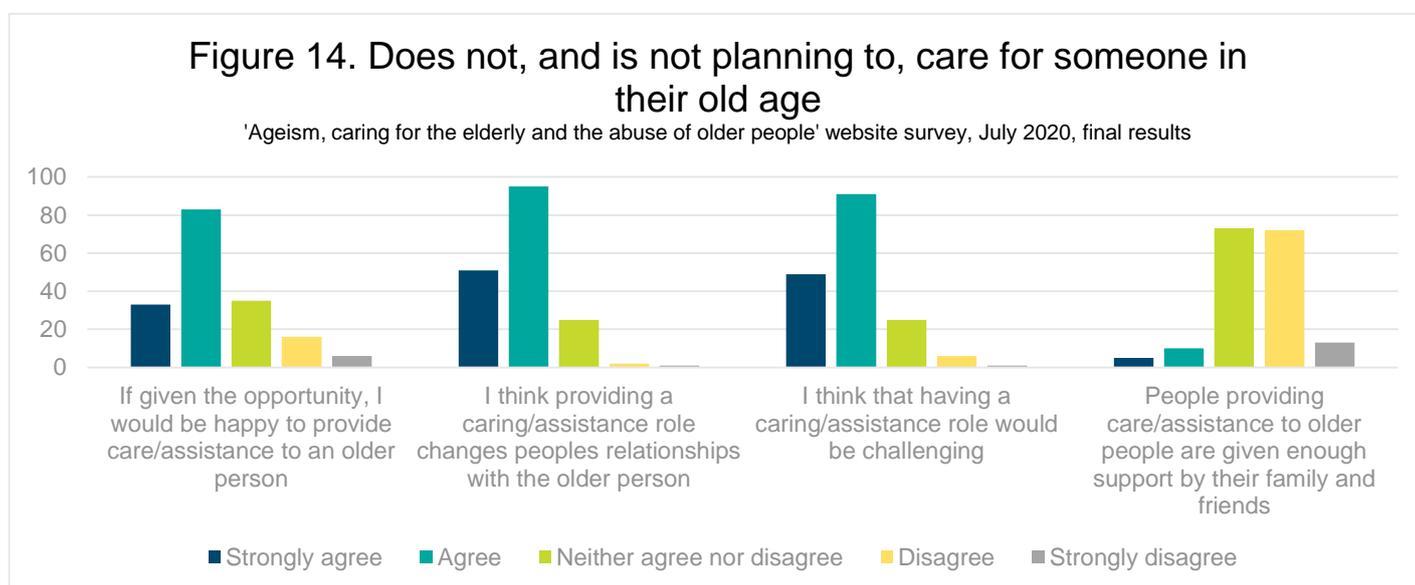


Figure 13 reveals the responses of those who plan on caring for someone in their old age in the future. Majority (39%) were unsure how they felt about their future caring role. Similarly, 44% were unsure if they would have adequate assistance with this role. This suggests that although the role may already be assigned, for many, more detailed plans are yet to be made. People were split about whether this role would change their relationship with the cared for, while 29% agreed it would, 29% disagreed. Finally, despite a lack of clarity around the caring role for many, 37% agreed and 21% strongly agreed that they were the right person for this future role.



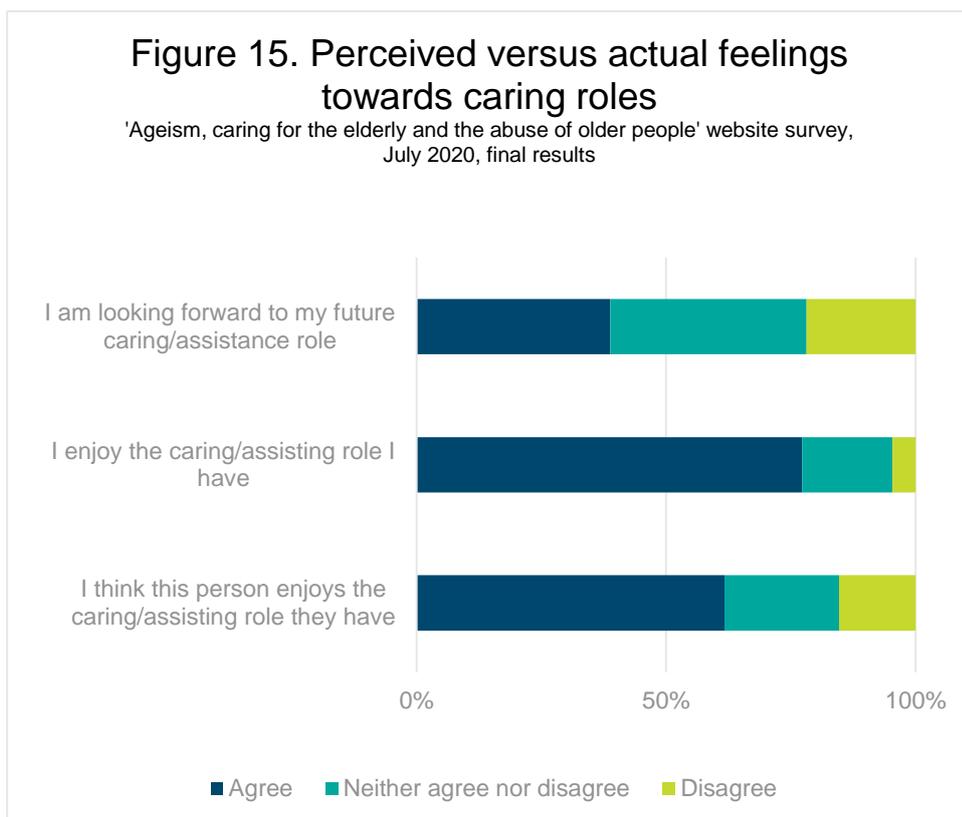
Lastly, those who had no carers in their lives and did not plan on becoming one themselves were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of caring for people in their old age (figure 14). 67% felt that if given the opportunity, they would be happy to provide care/assistance to an older person. Despite this, 84% felt that this position changes people’s relationship with the older person. 49% felt that carers are not given enough support in their role and consequently, 76% felt that this role would be challenging.

This was mirrored in the Ipsos report that demonstrated that most older Australians would like support from their family to live independently in their own homes, with things like cooking, cleaning and shopping (2020:23). Whereas most would prefer paid care for higher-level assistance for dressing, eating and nursing care. Overall the report found there was an over-emphasis on the medical aspect of care by younger respondents. This leads younger people to perceive care as consisting mainly of higher-level jobs as mentioned above and subsequently, fearing the toll this would take on the relationship to the older person. This suggests a misconception about what care of older Australians involves, partly due to the lack of contact many have with older Australians.

A comparison of the different sub-groups shows that, in general, people’s perception of caring roles is worse than the experiences of carers themselves.² Those who currently had a caring role showed the most positive relationship with their position (77% agreed that they enjoy their caring role), while those who knew someone who had a caring role (39%) or anticipated one in the future (62%) showed the lowest levels of support. This could suggest that people find more enjoyment from caring than expected, or people who complete caring roles did not feel comfortable sharing their grievances in this survey.

Figure 15. Perceived versus actual feelings towards caring roles

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² This was also reflected by the Ipsos report that found that “overall the community’s perception of care is very negative” and in some cases, worse for those who have no experience with care, and/or have never visited an aged care facility (2020:3).

Figure 16. Perceived versus actual carer frustration

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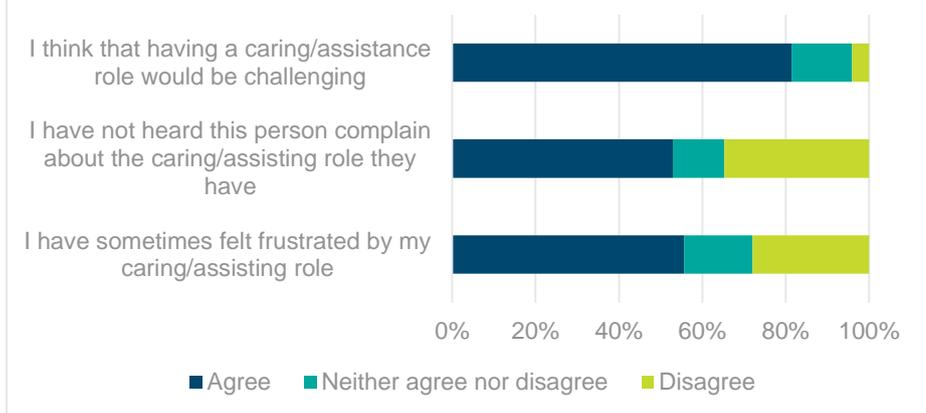


Figure 16 illustrates that there was a similar discrepancy in peoples' perceptions of carer frustration. 35% of respondents (who knew a carer) had heard them complain about their position, while 56% of carers said they had felt frustrated by their position. This suggests that while carer frustration affects a majority, there is a lack of awareness about the extent of this frustration in the close contacts of those carers. Further, those responses which came from people currently receiving care were more likely to report (55%

compared to 47% from close contacts of carers) hearing the carer complain about their position. This suggests that some people receiving care are confronted with the carer's frustrations, more so than the other close contacts of the carer (however, it should be noted that this was a small sample size, n=11).

Interestingly, figure 16 shows that those who had no close contacts with carers demonstrated the highest recognition of the difficulties associated with caring (76% thought it would be challenging). It should be noted that questions varied for different cohorts and while a carer may feel challenged, this may not translate to frustration and vice versa. Yet, across the questionnaire, the cohort of people who knew no carers and had no future plans of caring for someone anticipated in the greatest challenges and fears.

Figure 17. Changes to relationships as a result of caring for the elderly

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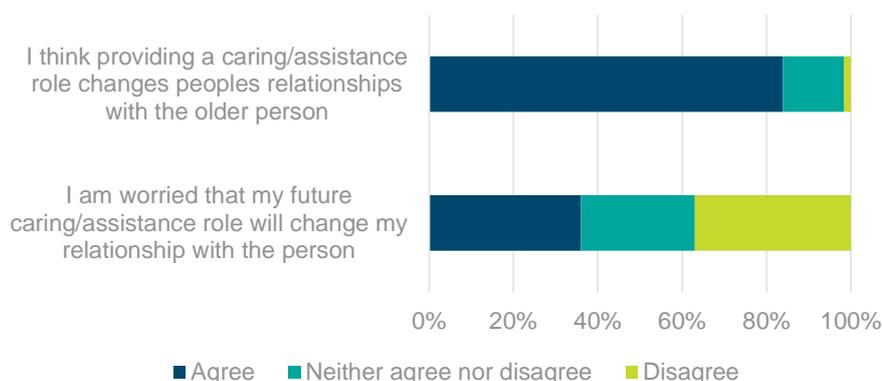


Figure 17 looks at the perceptions people have about the changes to relationships that occur when caring for the elderly. People who were planning on providing care to someone in the future were less likely to foresee a change in the relationship (36%) due to this caring arrangement than those who knew no carers and had no plans for caring (84%). Again, this suggests that those who have little experience with caring for the elderly may predict greater challenges than those who are preparing to be carers. However, since 25% said they were unsure about the effect this would have on their relationship, this suggests many may not have thought about this aspect of their future caring role.

Figure 18. Percieved versus actual support given to carers

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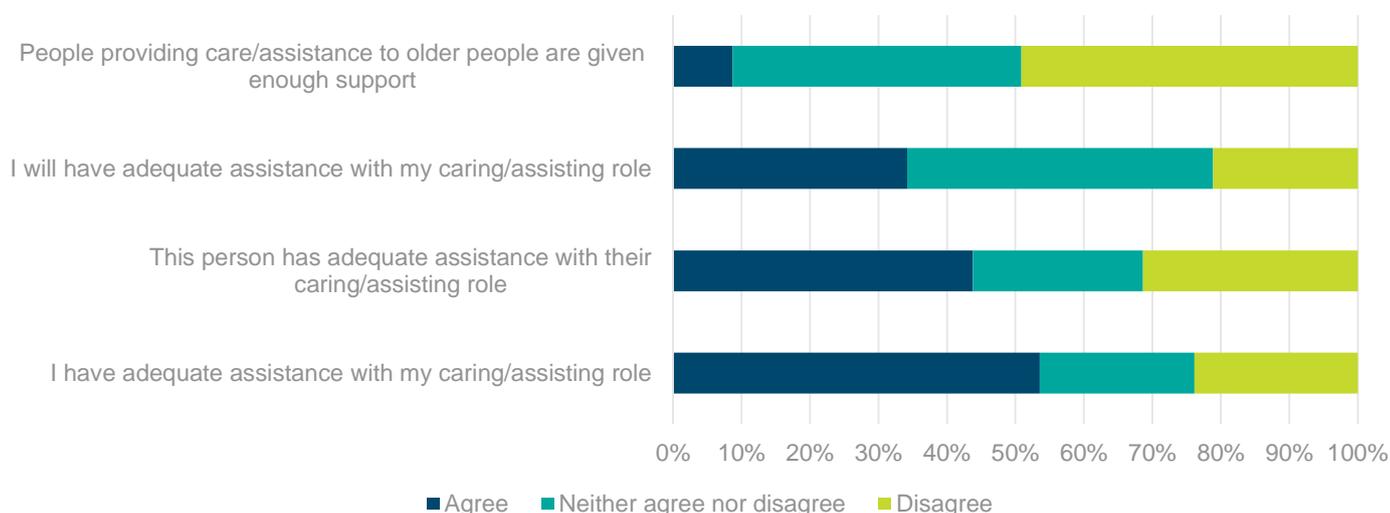
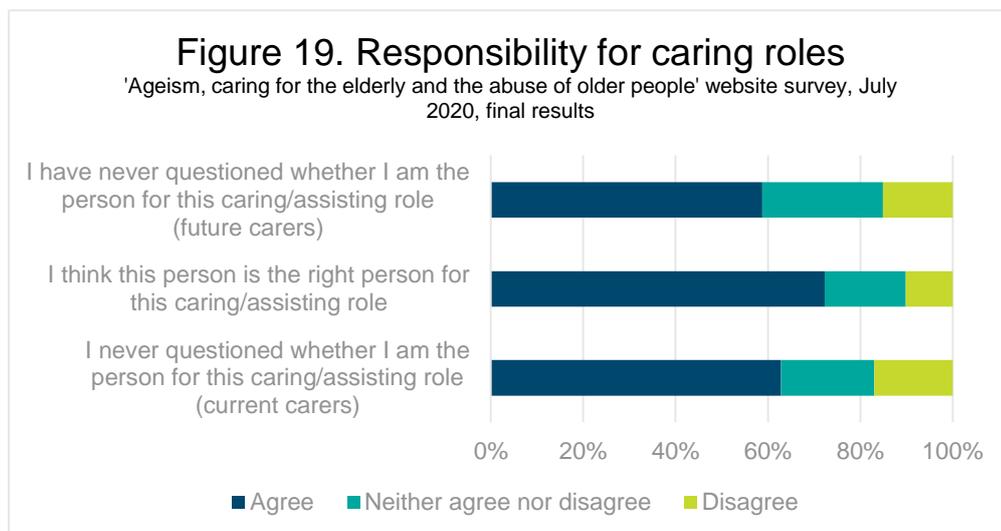


Figure 18 demonstrates the discrepancies between the perceived versus actual reporting of support given to carers of older people. The closer someone was to a caring position, the more likely they were to report that they received enough assistance. Over half of current carers (56%) said they get enough support with their position, while only 43% of people who knew a carer thought they received adequate support. 34% of future carers predicted they would have enough support, while a mere 9% of people who had no contact with carers perceived that carers have adequate assistance. Again, this suggests that there is a generalised perception that carers are not adequately supported, a sentiment which was not supported by the carers who completed this survey.

Figure 19 explores people’s perceptions of responsibility for the caring roles they, or a close contact, fulfil. People who currently cared for someone (18%), received care (18%) or identified as a future carer (17%) were more likely to question whether they were the right person for the role than those who knew someone providing care (10%).



Interestingly, there was no difference between those who cared for someone in their family, versus someone outside their family, with 56% of carers from both categories agreed that they sometimes questioned their responsibility for the position. This suggests that the family-relationship has little effect on the responsibility respondents felt over their caring position.³

Conclusion:

This survey is a preliminary look at people’s views on ageing and age-based Covid-19 restrictions and how these concepts relate to the abuse of older people as well as the experiences of carers for older people. It provides some interesting results which suggest that while people have the potential to recognise ageism in our society, some ageist views prevail. Covid-19 has amplified these issues. Further, people’s experiences with the abuse of older people does not appear to have had an effect on their perception of the enormity of the issue, nor does it equate to knowing where to seek help if the issue arose again. Lastly, respondents’ *perceptions* of the challenges associated with care-giving roles appear worse than other respondents’ *actual experiences*. More research needs to be done to fully understand these findings, and for this reason, Relationships Australia welcomes the work of the Aged Care Royal Commission, and the study being conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies into the abuse of older people across Australia.

You can read more about our [Senior Relationships Services](#) and [variety of other services on our website](#).

³ This finding was also reflected in figure 15. In both categories, those caring for someone within their family versus those caring for someone outside of their family, 49% said they enjoyed their role.

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