



Policy Brief on Ageing

Older Persons in Vulnerable Situations

The full Policy Brief featuring policy examples from the UNECE region is available here:



Vulnerable situations, their causes and mitigating factors

At any age, intersecting factors such as poverty, disability, social isolation and exposure to abuse can increase the risk of vulnerability and weaken resilience in the case of adverse events. One in five persons were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union in 2020. The risk of vulnerability can be increased by the intersection of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Vulnerability evolves over time, with individuals transitioning in and out of vulnerable situations. Building coping capacities and resilience necessitates access to resources like income, health, and social connections. Unfortunately, these resources are often unequally distributed.

Policy challenge

Older persons have a greater risk of exposure to some conditions, such as frailty or cognitive impairments. This can have a negative impact on their coping strategies and resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, natural disasters, and war are examples of adverse events that have disproportionately affected vulnerable persons, including many older persons. Often, the capacities and vulnerabilities of older persons remain invisible as their voices are less heard and their needs less known due to a lack of data and research, and their involvement in decision-making.

A key challenge, therefore, is to inform, design and implement comprehensive policies that protect vulnerable older persons from adverse outcomes, enhance resilience and allow them to fulfil their full potential in later life. Preventing the accumulation of vulnerabilities requires a life-course-oriented, gender-responsive and human rights-based approach.

Suggested strategies

- Ensure adequate income and access to affordable housing.
- Provide affordable, accessible and quality health and long-term care services.
- Increase opportunities for social participation and reduce loneliness and social exclusion.
- Prevent all forms of violence, abuse and neglect.
- Promote the collection of disaggregated data and research on vulnerabilities among older persons.
- Involve older persons in decision-making.

Policy strategies to support older persons in vulnerable situations

Ensuring adequate income and access to housing

To ensure adequate incomes countries can provide allowances for older persons with low pensions, single pensioners or surviving spouses. To support older job seekers countries may provide tax subsidies, reduced social insurance contributions, training allowances, counselling or retraining. In order to provide access to affordable housing countries can increase the supply of affordable housing and provide financial assistance to low-income households. Another policy strategy is to provide targeted measures for particularly vulnerable groups as well as measures to prevent individuals from becoming homeless. To provide financial support during the current cost of living crisis countries have introduced energy price caps for households, one-off payments to eligible households, additional payments to pensioners and discounts to care home energy bills.

Providing health, long-term care, and community services

Many countries in the UNECE region are adopting strategies for integrated care. Integration of health and social care, and across different healthcare settings, can provide continuity of care and support, as well as increased empowerment, for older persons with complex and chronic conditions as their situation changes. Person-centred care can support individual autonomy and enable older persons to live where they would like for longer, most often in their own homes. Expanding the availability of home and day-care centres is one important strategy to improve access to long-term care services.

Prevention of violence, abuse and neglect

Preventing harm in care settings is critical to ensure older persons can live safely and many countries have taken measures to raise awareness and improve legislation and procedures to protect victims. Countries in the region have also organized information campaigns, and increased awareness through workshops or cultural events. Countries have also implemented standards for adult safeguarding, safe spaces as well as ombudspersons.

Reducing loneliness and encouraging social participation

Policy strategies for reducing loneliness and encouraging social participation in the UNECE region include strategies for active and healthy ageing, walking groups, programmes providing emotional and informational support to older persons and support for refugees and migrants.

Recommendations

To address the challenges faced by older persons, it is important to take a multi-faceted approach that involves both short-term and long-term strategies. In the short-term, there is need for measures that provide immediate relief to older persons in vulnerable situations. This can include providing financial assistance and providing access to health and long-term care.

In the long-term, taking a comprehensive approach to address the challenges faced by older persons will likely be most successful. This can include developing policies that promote social inclusion, eliminate discrimination, and ensure access to essential services. Older persons need to be involved in the design and implementation of these policies to ensure that they meet their specific needs and preferences. At the same time, it is crucial that policymakers have timely and relevant (age-disaggregated) data at their disposal to design effective policy strategies supporting older persons in vulnerable situations.

The policy recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by older persons can be grouped into four main areas: ensuring adequate income and access to affordable housing, providing affordable and quality healthcare and long-term care services, preventing abuse and violence, and increasing opportunities for social participation while reducing loneliness and social exclusion.

In conclusion, a comprehensive approach is needed to address the challenges faced by older persons to prevent and mitigate adverse effects of vulnerable situations. By implementing the policy strategies outlined in this brief, governments and other stakeholders can ensure that older persons are not left behind and that their rights and well-being are protected.

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The UNECE Policy Briefs on Ageing are prepared by the Population Unit in collaboration with the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing.

With the Policy Briefs, UNECE seeks to foster information exchange and policy dialogue to advance evidence-informed policy making in the field of ageing.