

Caring responsibilities in middle age: Evidence from the 1958 National Child Development Study at age 55

By Matthew Brown, Brian Dodgeon and Alissa Goodman



National Child Development Study (NCDS) age 55 survey

NCDS follows the lives of more than 17,000 individuals born in Great Britain in a single week in 1958. The NCDS age 55 survey ran from September 2013 to March 2014. More than 9,100 cohort members took part, with two thirds doing so online and the remainder by telephone. Data from the age 55 survey will be available to download from the UK Data Service in early 2015.

Introduction

This briefing provides a first look at findings from the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) age 55 survey to consider the extent to which this age group is 'sandwiched' between generations – providing care for elderly parents or in-laws, while also caring for children

or grandchildren. The briefing illustrates how a number of major social trends are shaping the caring and family roles of people in their mid-50s today, and looks at the potential impact of caring responsibilities on employment, health and quality of life.

Key findings

- Overall, as many as two thirds of 55-year-olds in our sample have some kind of caring responsibility, whether for parents, in-laws, children under 18 who are living at home, or grandchildren. A significant number of individuals combine multiple caring roles, with nearly one in five regularly helping both older and younger relatives.
- Caring for elderly parents is an important concern. Nearly half (48%) of all 55-year-olds provide regular support for a parent or in-law, spending an average¹ of three hours a week helping them. However, 12 per cent of those providing regular help spend 10 or more hours a week looking after their parents or partner's parents.
- More grown-up children are staying at home. Over one in three (36%) 55-year-olds have children aged 18 or over living with them. One in seven (14%) have a child aged under 18 in the household. The average age of children at home is 21.
- Grandparents are an increasing source of informal childcare. Almost four in ten (38%) 55-year-olds have at least one grandchild. Nearly six in ten (57%) grandparents reported that they look after their grandchildren without their parents being there at least once a month, providing an average of 8 hours' care a week.
- Caring responsibilities can have a significant impact on people's lives. Spending more than 10 hours caring for parents or grandchildren a week is associated with poorer health and self-rated quality of life and, among women, a lower probability of being in full-time work.

¹ The measure of average used in this briefing paper is the median. If we order all people according to the hours that they spend helping a relative, the median number of hours is the middle number – such that half the cohort spend more hours helping than the median number, and half the cohort spend less hours.

Caring for elderly parents and in-laws

People are living for longer than they did a few generations ago. At a society-level, this raises the question of how to care for an ageing population², while for many people in their mid-50s an important concern is how to care for elderly parents.

At age 55, just over three in five (61%) NCDS cohort members had at least one living parent (compared to almost three quarters at age 50). Just under two thirds (64%) of those with a living parent reported that they regularly or frequently helped them. The most common types of help were giving

lifts (45%), shopping (38%), decorating, gardening or house repairs (33%), dealing with personal affairs (29%) and cooking or providing meals (21%). Fifteen per cent of people helped their parents with washing, ironing or cleaning and 7 per cent provided help with basic personal needs. More than four in ten (43%) NCDS cohort members who had a partner with at least one living parent helped their in-laws.

Overall, just under half (48%) of all cohort members reported that they spent some time in a typical week helping a parent or

a partner's parent. The average amount of time spent helping was three hours a week but for some this was considerably higher. Twelve per cent of those providing regular help spent 10 or more hours a week looking after parents or in-laws.

At age 55 it was uncommon for cohort members to live with parents – only 2 per cent shared a home with a parent or a partner's parent. However, among this small group, caring responsibilities were high, with on average 10 hours a week spent providing help to parents living at home.

Children living at home

Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics³ showed that a quarter of 20-34 year olds in the UK live with their parents, a proportion which has risen sharply since the economic downturn. Having children later in life also means a significant

number of people still have dependent teenagers at home when they reach their mid-50s.

At age 55, almost half (45%) of NCDS cohort members had at least one child living

at home. While 14 per cent of cohort members said they had a child under 18 in the household, more than one in three (36%) had at least one child over 18 who still lived at home. The average age of children at home was 21.

Looking after grandchildren

Grandparents are an increasing source of informal childcare.⁴ Many people are becoming grandparents in their 50s and a significant proportion devote a lot of time to looking after grandchildren so that parents can go out to work.

At age 55, 38 per cent of cohort members have at least one grandchild (33% of men and

42% of women). Just under six in ten (57%) grandparents said that they spend some time looking after their grandchildren without their parents being there each month (51% of grandfathers and 61% of grandmothers). Grandmothers in particular provided very regular childcare, with 42 per cent looking after grandchildren at least once a week compared to 32 per cent of grandfathers.

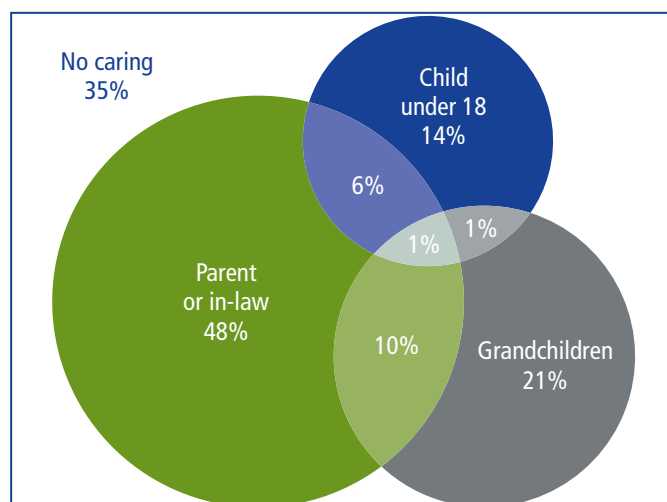
Among those providing regular care for grandchildren, the average amount of time a week spent doing so was 10 hours for grandmothers and eight hours for grandfathers. However, one in ten offering regular help provided care for 35 hours or more every week.⁵

Combining caring roles

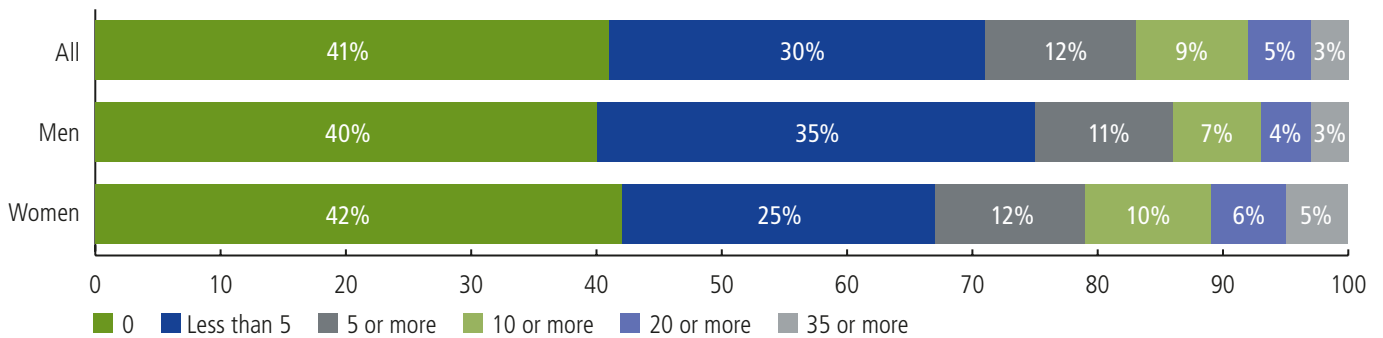
Overall, around two thirds of NCDS cohort members had some form of regular caring responsibility, for either grandchildren, parents or dependent children under the age of 18. Nearly a fifth of all cohort members (17%) were 'sandwiched', with caring responsibilities for both an older and a younger relative.

While around two in five NCDS cohort members (41%) spent no time caring for either parents or grandchildren, many women, in particular, devoted a significant amount of time to care-giving. Just over one in five women (21%) spent more than 10 hours a week caring for others (not including any time taken up by looking after children living at home), compared to 14 per cent of men.

► Percentage of all cohort members with caring responsibilities for parents, grandchildren, and children under 18



► Total hours per week spent caring for parents or grandchildren



Quality of life and employment among carers

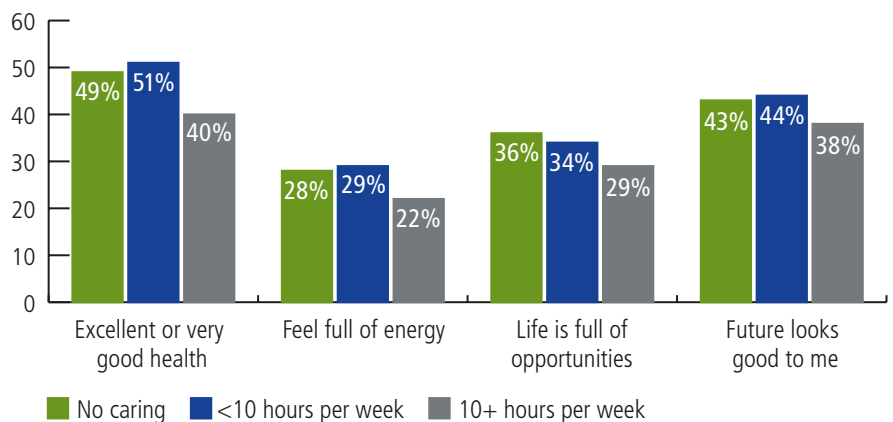
People in this age group are clearly contributing enormously to society through their caring roles. But what impact is caring having on their own lives?

This is a complex question to answer, as it is difficult to determine whether caring has a direct effect on employment and wellbeing (for example, whether caring responsibilities cause poor health) or if associations can be explained by other factors. However, we can start by looking at patterns found in the data.

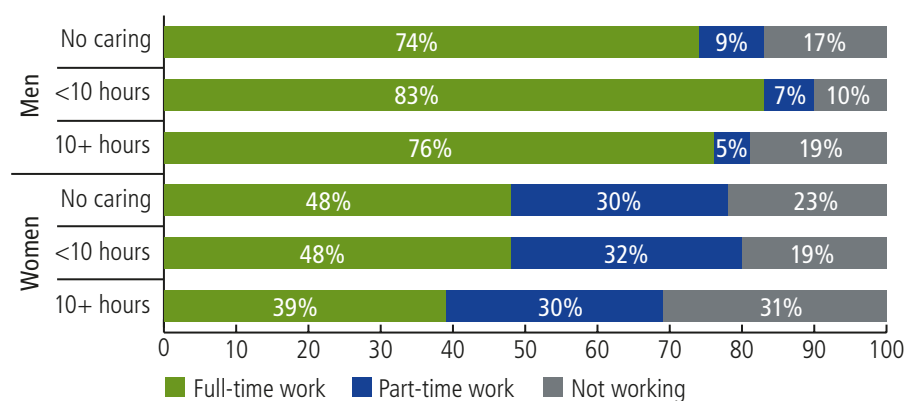
At age 55, those who spent 10 or more hours a week caring for grandchildren, parents or both (but not including time spent looking after children at home) were considerably less likely to report that their health was 'excellent' or 'very good' (40%) than those who provided less than 10 hours' care (51%) or no hours (49%). Similarly, they were less likely to say that they often felt full of energy, that their lives were full of opportunity, or that the future looked good. However, it is important to acknowledge that many grandparents will greatly enjoy looking after their grandchildren, and caring for other family members can be rewarding in many ways.

There are potentially also economic implications associated with caring for others, particularly for women. Women who provided 10 or more hours of care a week for parents and/or grandchildren were much less likely to be employed full-time (39%) than those who provided less than 10 hours' care (48%) or those who had no caring responsibilities (48%). They were also significantly more likely not to be working⁶ than those spending less time helping others. However, we don't know whether they have stopped working in order to take on caring responsibilities, or whether they are able to spend more time helping their relatives because they are not employed.

► Health and wellbeing by caring responsibilities



► Employment status by caring responsibilities⁷



² Commission on Funding of Care and Support (2011), Fairer Funding for All – The Commission's Recommendations to Government (<http://www.dilnotcommission.dh.gov.uk/our-report/>).

³ Office for National Statistics (2013), Young adults living with parents (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/young-adults-living-with-parents/2013/sty-young-adults.html>).

⁴ Nuffield Foundation (2012), The role of informal childcare: understanding the research evidence (http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/The_role_of_informal_childcare_SUMMARY_20_03_12.pdf).

⁵ If grandparents looked after children overnight they were asked to include hours when grandchildren were sleeping.

⁶ This category includes people who are not working for any reason, for example because they are retired, unemployed or have never worked.

⁷ Where totals do not equal 100% this is due to rounding.



Conclusions and recommendations

The findings here suggest that many men and women in their mid-50s have multiple caring responsibilities, providing support to both parents and children or grandchildren. Major social trends, such as rising life expectancies and the increasing number of grown-up children staying at home, are having a significant impact on the caring and family roles of people in this age group, and may also be affecting their health, wellbeing and employment.

Given these pressures on people in their 50s, a number of important policy priorities stand out. For example, encouraging employers to adopt family friendly working policies towards older employees will make it easier for them to maintain working lives while also helping their own parents or grandchildren. Better financial support for those providing care would ease the risk of hardship. Finally, strong support for the mental health of people in their 50s is particularly important for those with multiple caring demands.

Future Research

The findings presented here have focused on a snap-shot of information collected in the NCDS age 55 survey. NCDS has gathered a wealth of information spanning the lives of its cohort members and this briefing aims to alert researchers and policymakers to the potential of the study for advancing understanding of how our social roles and responsibilities are evolving.

Future research could look in more detail at how caring responsibilities affect physical and mental wellbeing, and interact with employment and decisions about retirement. Men and women in this generation will be affected by the rise in state pension age to 66. How will staying in work for longer affect their caring roles and impact upon their health? It will also be important to understand how caring responsibilities change as people get older, for example as many may provide or receive care from their partners in future years.



About the 1958 National Child Development Study

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) follows more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week in March 1958. Since the birth survey in that year, there have been nine further surveys of the cohort members at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46, 50 and 55. The next survey is due to take place in 2018 when the cohort members will be aged 60.

For over 50 years, NCDS has gathered information on diverse aspects of the cohort members' lives and has had a significant impact on policy across a wide range of areas, including education, inequality and poverty, social mobility and health. The study will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

NCDS is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

► www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/ncds



Centre for Longitudinal Studies
Following lives from birth and through
the adult years – www.cls.ioe.ac.uk

CLS is an ESRC resource centre based at
the Institute of Education, University of London

