

# The Changing Well-being of Thai Elderly

## A summary report

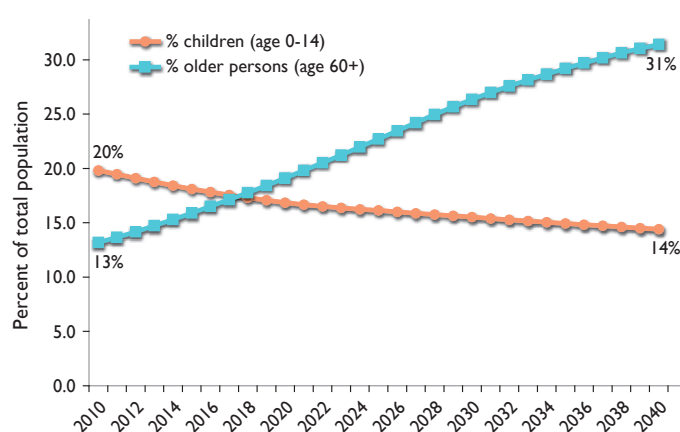


Thailand has already experienced, and will continue to experience, rapid ageing. Since 1960, the number of older people (60 and over) in the Thai population has increased fivefold. As a result of substantial fertility decline since the 1960s and the increasing longevity of older people, the older population now accounts for 13% of Thailand's population.

Those aged 60 and over are projected to increase to almost one third of the population within three decades and reach 20.5 million people by 2040 (*see figure*). Surveys by the National Statistics Office (conducted in 1994, 2002, 2007 and 2011), as well as research by independent agencies and the academic community, have resulted in an evidence base on the dynamics of ageing and the well-being of older persons. This report focuses on the results of the 2011 survey but also draws

on earlier surveys to outline the situation of older persons in Thailand.

Percentage of total population under age 15 and age 60 or older, 2010-2040

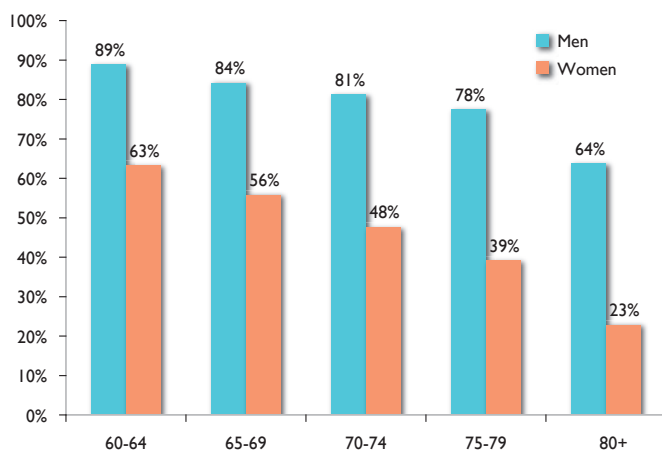


Note: Results shown are based on the assumption that fertility will remain constant at 1.62 between 2010 and 2040.  
Source: Projections prepared for National Economic and Social Development Board for the 11<sup>th</sup> Socioeconomic Plan

# Social characteristics of older persons

The 2011 survey reveals that 60% of older people in Thailand are married and live with their spouse. Most men 60 and older are married and live with their spouse; however, older women are almost as likely to be widowed as living with a spouse. As the figure below illustrates, this gender difference increases with age and is most pronounced among persons 80 and older, among whom only 23% of women have a spouse compared to over 60% of men. This gender difference reflects a combination of higher male mortality, a tendency for men to marry women younger than themselves, and higher remarriage rates among men than women in case of marital dissolution.

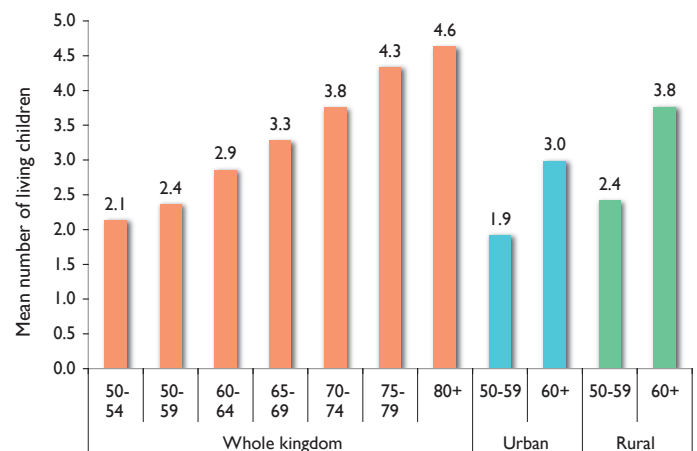
Percentage currently married by age and gender, 2011



Source: 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand.  
Note: Currently married also includes those who live apart from their spouse.

Adult children, both those that coreside with their parents and those that live elsewhere, are important providers of material support as well as other forms of assistance to their older-age parents. This implies that older people without children must rely on others, including the government, for such assistance. The impact of fertility decline over past decades is evident in the lower number of living children among younger members of the population aged 50 and older (*see figure*). Current low fertility levels mean that family sizes will be smaller among the future generations of older people, and this

Mean number of living children by age and residence of respondent, 2011



Source: 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand  
Note: Numbers of children include adopted and step children in addition to own biological children.

trend is likely to have implications for future material and social support provided by adult children for their old age parents.

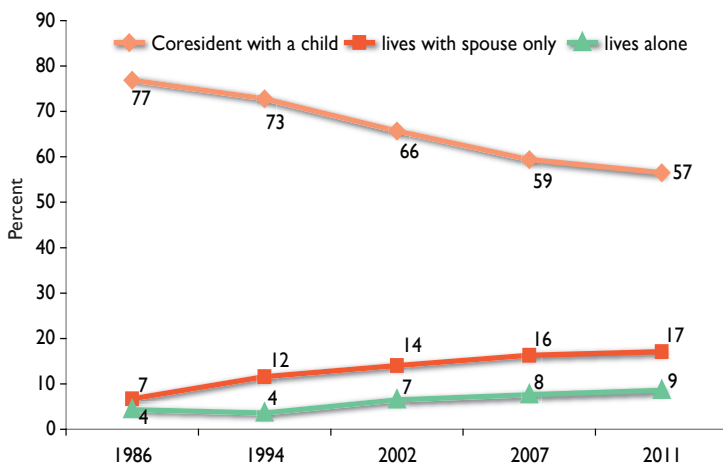
Education is an important factor in the well-being of older persons, as reading and writing is critical for access to information and employment opportunities. Educational attainment is lower with each successive age group and reflects the expansion of the educational system in Thailand over time. The percentage with no formal education increases from 6% among those aged 60-64 to over a fourth among those 80 and older. Older people living in urban areas are better educated than their rural counterparts, and men received more formal education than women during earlier times. However, among younger adults this gender difference has recently reversed, foretelling that the situation will be also eventually reverse among future older persons.

The survey indicates that 95% of the older Thais profess Buddhism as their religion, and it has been documented that with advancing age Thais turn increasingly to religious activities to prepare for old age and death.

# Living arrangements

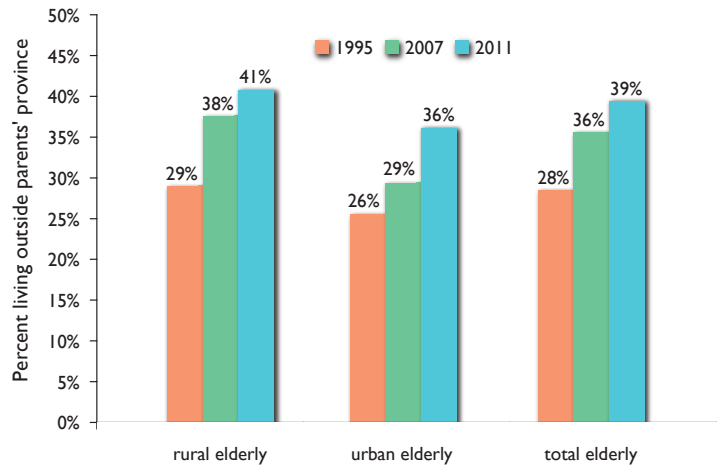
Coresidence (living together) with one or more adult children is a long-standing practice in Thailand and has traditionally been viewed as an essential way to meet the needs of older dependent members. Coresidence is especially important for those living without a spouse. Although coresidence can benefit both generations, the balance typically shifts over the life course and at advanced ages elderly persons become largely dependent on others for care and support. Despite continuing widespread favorable views for living with children in Thailand, there has been a clear decline in coresidence during the last two and a half decades, falling from 77% in 1986 to only 57% by 2011. Between 1994 and 2011 living in three or more generation households decreased substantially from 47% to 34% while living in one generation households increased from 19% to 31%. In addition, the percentage of persons aged 60 and above who live alone or only with a spouse has increased steadily since 1986, so that the share of Thais 60 and older that live independently (i.e. alone or only with a spouse) more than doubled from just 11% to over 25% by 2011 in just 25 years.

Selected measures of living arrangements of persons 60 and older, 1986 to 2011



Sources: 1986 Survey of Socio-economic Consequences of Ageing of the Population in Thailand; 1994, 2002, 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand; 2002 Labor Force Survey, 2nd round.

Percentage of children of persons 60 and older that live outside their parents' province, 1995, 2007 and 2011



Sources: 1995 Survey of Welfare of Elderly in Thailand; 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand

Living independently does not necessarily mean geographical isolation from children (or other relatives). Results from the 2011 survey show that roughly 30% of elders that live alone and those that live only with a spouse have a child living next door and about 50% have a child living nearby (same village/municipality). In some cases independent living among the elderly is the result of being childless, especially for those that live alone, among whom 16% have no living children. Results from national surveys also reveal that migration of adult children is extensive and has increased substantially in recent years. As the figure above shows, the percentage of children of persons aged 60 and older that lived outside their parents' province rose from 28% to 39% during the last decade and a half.

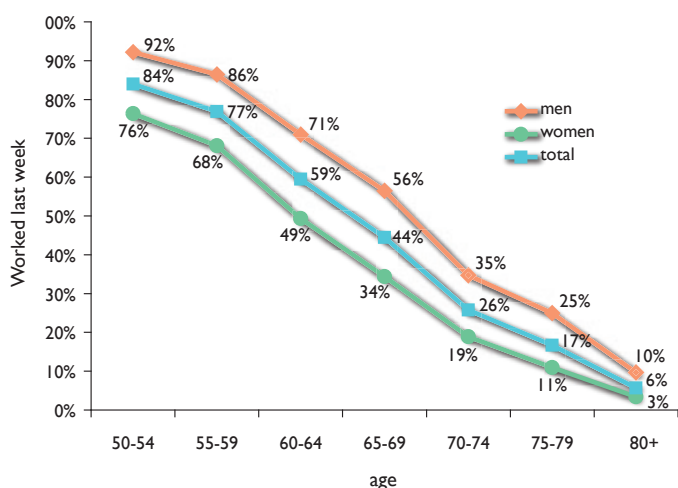


# Work and material well-being

While the official retirement age in Thailand for government workers and some private sector firms is 60, retirement age does not always mean cessation of economic activity. According to the 2011 Survey of Older Persons, 38% of all respondents aged 60 or older reported that they worked during the previous week (50% of men and 29% of women, as shown in the figure). Two clear patterns are evident by age and gender. First, the percentage who worked declines steadily after age 50 for both men and women. Second, men are more likely than women to have worked, with the relative difference more pronounced for each subsequent age group.



Percentage that worked in previous week by age and gender, 2011

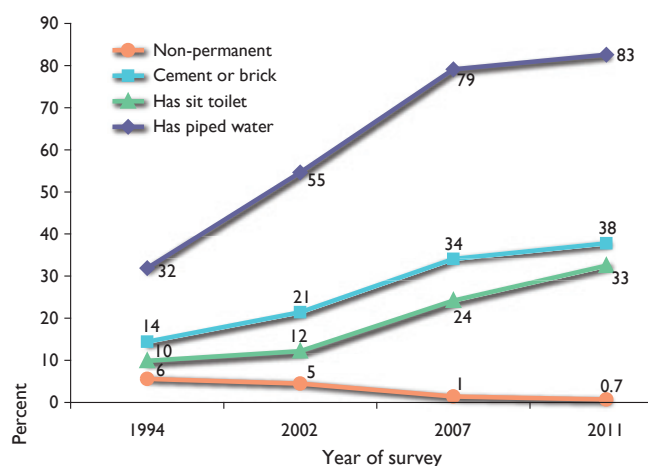


Source: 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand

Survey results indicate little change between 1994 and 2002, but in 2011 distinctively higher percentages of older persons reported having worked in the previous 12 months. In all three surveys the percentage of older people in rural areas that worked is substantially higher than among those in urban areas. This likely reflects a greater tendency among persons who work in agriculture (especially if self-employed) compared to those working in the formal sector to reduce their work in stages rather than to switch from full activity to no activity all at once.

The material well-being of older persons has improved considerably over the past few decades along several dimensions. The quality of a person's housing is important for their comfort as well as a reflection of their economic status. Between 1994 and 2011, there is a clear trend towards living in better constructed houses with better materials. Living in a dwelling unit with access to a sit toilet more than tripled from only 10% in 1994 to one third of older persons by 2011. In addition, having piped water in the dwelling unit rose from just under a third in 1994 to over 80% by 2011.

Characteristics of dwelling units of persons 60 and older, 1994, 2002, 2007 and 2011



Sources: 1994, 2002, 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand  
 Note: Dwellings of non-permanent material include houses of reused material. Calculations of percentages living in non-permanent housing and in cement or brick housing are based on denominators that exclude a small number who live in single rooms or undetermined dwellings. Sit toilets refer to ones with toilet bowls regardless of whether they have mechanical flushing.

Household possessions also reflect economic well-being. Surveys spanning 1986 to 2011 reveal a substantial increase in important possessions in the households in which older Thais live. Televisions have become virtually universal, as have refrigerators and washing machines. Moreover, over 80% of older people live in households with some form of motorized vehicle, up from less than a third in 1986. One striking change is the increase from only 15% of older persons living in a household with a telephone in 1994 to almost 90% in 2011 living in a household that had at least a cell phone. This change is particularly important as it increases the ability of older-age parents to keep in contact with children living elsewhere as well as to call for help in emergencies.

Percentage of elderly living in households with various possessions, 1986, 1994, 2007 and 2011

All persons 60 and older				
	1986	1994	2007	2011
Television	47.7	83.7	95.7	98.6
Video/DVD	--	17.3	63.0	66.2
Refrigerator	24.5	52.5	87.4	92.5
Phone <sup>(a)</sup>	--	15.4	76.0	88.8
Air conditioner	1.4	7.0	16.0	18.2
Washing machine	--	14.7	48.0	60.5
Computer	n.a.	n.a.	17.1	22.5
Motorcycle	27.8	45.9	67.2	74.6
Car/truck/van	7.1	16.7	30.9	34.5
Any motor vehicle <sup>(b)</sup>	31.2	52.4	75.4	81.5

Sources: 1986 Survey of Socio-economic Consequences of Aging of the Population in Thailand; 1994, 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand

<sup>(a)</sup> Refers to either a landline or cell phone in 1994 and 2007 but only to cell phone in 2011

<sup>(b)</sup> Motorcycle, car, truck or van

## Intergenerational exchanges

Similar to the rest of Southeast Asia, informal systems of social and economic exchange within families are crucial for maintaining the well-being of older people in Thailand. In the 2011 survey as well as preceding ones, children are most commonly reported as the main source of income for older persons. In addition, the percentage of older parents that report receiving money increases with the age of the respondents, as does the size of funds transferred. Women are more likely than men to report receipt of any income from their children.

Nevertheless, between 2007 and 2011 the share that reported children as their main income source declined from 52% to 40%, as shown in the table. Equally noteworthy is the substantial increase from 3% to 11% between 2007 and 2011 in the share of respondents that cited old age allowances as their main income source. This apparently reflects the major expansion of the government's Old Age Allowance in 2009 to a virtually universal social pension of approximately US\$ 20-30 per month. Also the percentage that

Main source of current income among persons 60 and older, 1994, 2007 and 2011

Main income source (percent distribution)	1994	2007	2011
work	31.5	28.9	35.1
pension <sup>(a)</sup>	4.0	4.4	6.0
old age allowance	0.0	2.8	11.4
interest/savings/rent	1.7	2.9	2.6
spouse	4.6	6.1	3.1
children	54.1	52.3	40.1
relatives <sup>(b)</sup>	2.4	2.3	1.5
other	1.7	0.5	.2
total	100	100	100

Sources: 1994, 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand

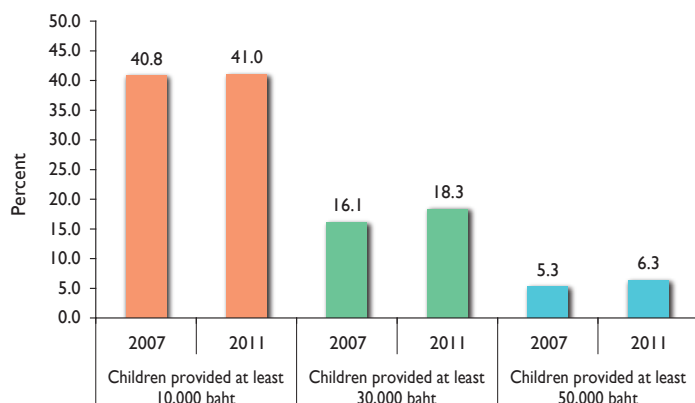
<sup>(a)</sup> 2007 and 2011 include lump sum payments on retirement

<sup>(b)</sup> Relatives for 2007 and 2011 combines categories parents, siblings and other relatives; for 1994 relatives combines categories siblings and other relatives as there was not separate category for parents.

cites work as their main income source increased noticeably.

It does not appear that the decline in the percentage of older persons that cite children as their main source of income reflects a major decline in overall support from children. Among older per-

Percentage who received income from children during the prior year by total amount received, among person 60 and older who have at least one child, 2007 and 2011



Source: 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand  
 Note: At the time of the surveys US\$1 equaled about 32 baht in 2007 and about 30 baht in 2011

sons with living children, the share that reported receiving any income from children declined only modestly and still remains over 80%. Moreover, the percentage that received at least 10,000 baht in the past year remained at 41% while those receiving the relatively large amounts of at least 30,000 baht or at least 50,000 baht increased slightly between the two surveys. The fact that fewer older persons cited children as their main income source in 2011 than 2007 suggests an increase in income from other sources, especially the Old Age Allowance. For some older people, the allowance exceeds the amounts that children provide and hence displaces children as their largest income source.

Survey results from 2007 and 2011 provide evidence of social contact through visits and phone calls between parents and their non-co-resident children. Most parents see one of their children at least monthly. This reflects the large number of children that move out of their parents' household but remain close by. Interestingly, seeing a non-co-resident child at least monthly as well as at least once during the year increased between the two surveys, especially in the case of parents whose children all lived outside the parents' own locality. This may reflect improving transportation both in

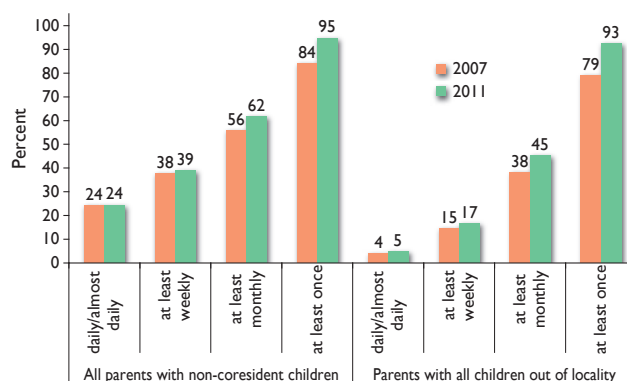
terms of road networks and expanding means of transportation including omnipresent vans and less expensive air fares.

Telephone contact between parents and non-co-resident children is also frequent, especially in the case of parents whose children are all living outside their locality. Increased telephone contact provides yet another indication that intergenerational solidarity is not deteriorating despite the fact that older persons are less likely to report children as their main source of income. Only a tiny fraction (0.5%) in both years had no contact and no remittances at all and thus appear to have been abandoned or deserted by their children.

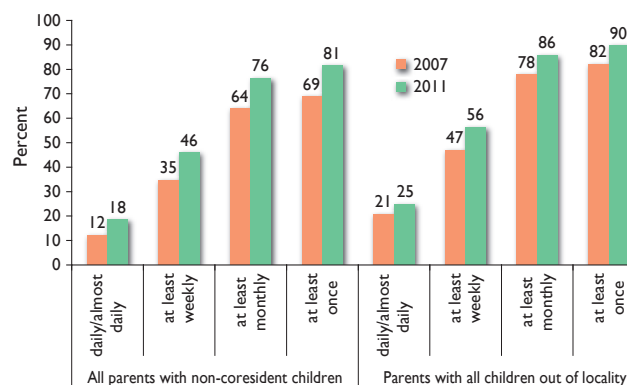
Older-age parents who live with children perform a variety of useful services such as prepar-

Contact between parents 60 and older and non-co-resident children, 2007 and 2011 – A and B

A. Percentage of all parents aged 60 or over according to frequency of visits with at least one non-co-resident child



B. Percentage of parents aged 60 or over according to frequency of phone contact with at least one non-co-resident child



Source: 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand

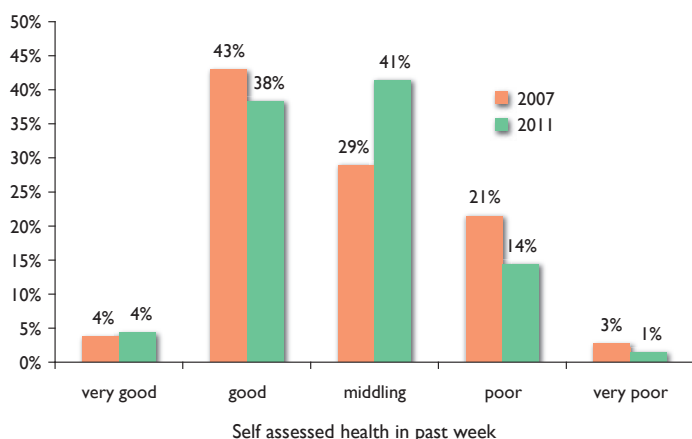
ing meals, helping with other household chores and minding the house. In the 2011 survey, over 90% reported doing one or more essential household chores at least sometimes and 65% do one or more of them regularly. In addition, assistance with the care of grandchildren can greatly facili-

tate the ability of the grandchildren's parents to engage in economic activity especially outside the home. Overall more than one fourth of persons 60 and older reported that they had provided at least occasional care in their household to a grandchild under age 10.

## Health

Health is a key concern for older people, reflecting not only the increased risk of mortality but also the increased likelihood of functional limitations and chronic illness with age. In order to assess overall health, survey respondents were asked to assess their own general health during the past week.

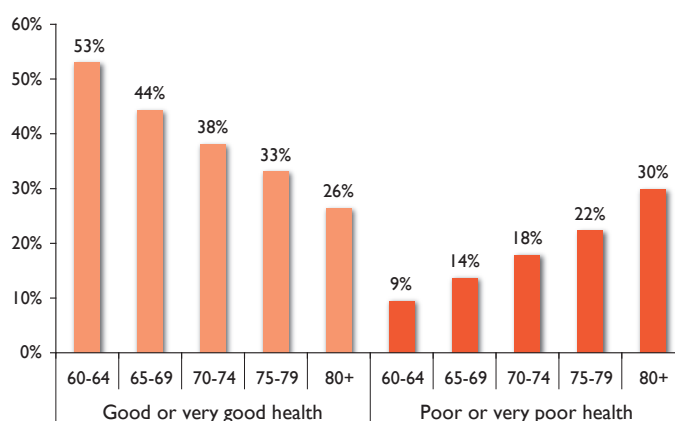
Self-assessed health in the past week among persons 60 and older, 2007 and 2011



Source: 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Older Persons in Thailand

In each survey respondents were recorded as falling into one of five categories ranging from very good health to very poor health. As seen in the figure below, only small minorities fell in the two extreme categories. The most striking difference between the two surveys is the substantial increase in the proportion that fall in the middle category, implying that their health is neither unusually good nor unusually poor. Even though the proportion that indicates their health as good declined somewhat between the two surveys, a considerably greater decline is evident for the percentage that indicated their health was poor or very poor. Thus although the results are somewhat mixed they point more to an improvement in overall health than a deterioration.

Percentage reporting good and poor self-assessed health in past week by age, 2011



Source: 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand

The percentage that rates their general health as good or very good declines sharply with age while the percentage that indicates their health is poor or very poor increases sharply with age. Overall, favorable assessments exceed unfavorable ones for every age group except the oldest age category.

The percentages reporting numerous health problems also increases consistently with age and problems are more frequently reported by women than by men. In addition, rural older persons are more likely than urban to report problems with their health.

Overall only 15% of persons 60 and older indicated that they needed someone to assist them with their daily living activities. This increases relatively slowly with age until 75 but more sharply thereafter. The fact that the large majority of older persons indicated that they can care for themselves underscores the fact that personal care is needed by only a minority of persons 60 and old-

er. The increased need with advancing age shows that the need for care tends to be concentrated at advanced ages, most likely towards the end of life, with few rural–urban differences.

Daughters are most frequently cited as the main person that provides care to older persons. Overall, approximately 85% of older persons receiving assistance in their daily living activities cite a child or child-in-law, or a spouse.

The fact that paid caregivers are rarely mentioned either as providing any care or as the main care provider is of interest particularly because in the future the availability of adult children to provide care will be restricted by the smaller family sizes and dispersion of children.

Health problems by age, gender and area of residence, 2011

	Total	Age			Gender		Type of area	
		60-69	70-79	80+	Men	Women	Urban	Rural
% in poor or very poor health	15.8	11.3	19.6	29.9	13.7	17.5	15.0	16.3
% who were ill sometime during the past 5 years	60.7	55.2	67.1	71.6	55.2	65.1	65.0	58.6
<i>Vision (% distribution)</i>								
sees clearly without glasses	52.6	59.0	46.4	35.9	53.9	51.7	47.8	55.0
sees clearly with glasses	29.3	30.0	29.7	23.7	31.4	27.6	38.7	24.5
does not see clearly	17.7	10.7	23.5	38.9	14.3	20.4	13.1	20.0
blind	0.4	0.2	0.4	1.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Hearing (% distribution)</i>								
hears clearly without aid	85.4	92.6	80.8	58.5	86.4	84.6	86.4	84.8
hears clearly with hearing aid	2.1	1.8	2.3	2.7	1.9	2.2	2.4	1.9
does not hear clearly	12.2	5.4	16.7	37.0	11.3	13.0	10.9	12.9
deaf	0.3	0.1	0.3	1.8	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.4
total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
% who fell in last 6 months	8.6	7.4	9.7	11.8	7.0	9.8	8.2	8.7
% with problem controlling urination	27.3	20.9	32.5	47.3	23.5	30.3	25.6	28.2
% with problem controlling defecation	24.3	18.9	28.4	42.3	21.5	26.5	22.4	25.3
% with any incontinence problem	28.4	22.0	33.5	48.3	24.6	31.3	26.8	29.1

Source: 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand

## Conclusion

The well-being of Thai older persons has continued to improve between 2007 and 2011. The fundamental traditions of society still remain largely in place. As older persons become less able to work and their health worsens, they rely largely on their families to provide material support and care. This assistance, however, is becoming more of a challenge for family members, particularly for care and practical support for activities of daily living, as family sizes have reduced and younger people migrate away from their home locality for work.

Despite the improving situation, in planning for the future it is important to keep in mind that major challenges loom in the future as population ageing accelerates. Moreover, even with the country's economic development, many older people in Thai society remain highly vulnerable. This is particularly true with respect to elderly in rural areas compared to urban elderly. The country therefore needs to continue preparing for these inevitable changes.



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