



Ageing in Europe



# Newsletter

Special Issue 28, Summer 2020:  
COVID-19 situation in Europe

This special issue of the Newsletter of the ESA Research Network on Ageing in Europe (RN01) is focused on the COVID-19 situation in Europe. We present selected research projects and initiatives (including call for papers) across Europe that are related to COVID-19 in the context of old age. We also welcome a commentary on challenges for PhD students during a pandemic.

## Editorial Board

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## Experiences of the pandemic among marginal older people in Switzerland and the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

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In many countries, political authorities have instituted measures to contain COVID-19 and especially to protect so-called 'vulnerable' groups. These strategies target older people, based on the consideration that the risk of dying from COVID-19 is especially high for them. Our research aims to explore how people aged 65 and over experience these measures and the fact of being labelled as vulnerable. Based on fieldwork taking place in the Swiss Alps and in different regions of the U.S., it focuses in particular on older people who were already facing social and economic precarity prior to the pandemic, and whose daily lives are now also shaped by their belonging to an 'at risk' group in the context of the COVID-19.

We are conducting a series of 50 semi-structured interviews with marginalized older people. Some of them have limited access to the internet; in such cases, we contact them by phone. For others, interviews are done online (e.g., with Zoom). All interviews are

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recorded and anonymized. Finding respondents in this context is challenging, in part due to the pandemic. But in addition, it can be more difficult to construct the rapport and trust with marginalized groups that we need to conduct interviews successfully. Consequently, we are obtaining our respondents with the support of local social and care organizations and individuals who serve as intermediaries helping to facilitate contacts between scientists and possible interviewees, and explaining to the latter the aims of the research. By doing so, they reassure older people and motivate them to participate. During interviews, we discuss such topics as (1) how participants perceive the measures meant to protect older people from COVID-19; (2) how they experience physical isolation and the consequences for their social integration; (3) how they perceive the relaxation of certain measures as well as the use of apps aimed at tracing the population.

Preliminary results reveal that the measures aimed to protect older people from COVID-19 can reinforce the marginalization that some had experienced prior to the pandemic. Several factors likely influence this. For instance, we find that most of the Swiss interviewees rarely or never use new internet technologies, which restricts their access to information and limits their possibilities for maintaining contact with their families and friends. By contrast, a minority can navigate the web easily, and feel like this helps them to feel less lonely and more included in social life, because they can use those tools (e.g., Whatsapp, email or Skype) to chat in groups and share ideas. They can also access online services (e.g., libraries that lend books online or an online gym class) as well as information. We also find that the loneliness that many older people experience in this context and their feeling that they are particularly subject to restrictions can make them think that they need to behave differently based on their new, at-risk status, i.e. not appear in public spaces, even to get basic needs such as food. Sometimes, they interpret this situation as going beyond the context of the pandemic, and reflecting a broader rejection of older people by the rest of the society. Finally, we identify a tendency to 'reverse the risk'. Some interviewees understand the measures targeting older people to mean not that they are a 'person at risk' and therefore 'in danger', but instead that they are themselves 'dangerous people', i.e. they are an important vector of transmission. As a result, whilst our respondents generally find that the measures are needed, often, the fear of contaminating others is greater than their fear of being contaminated.