

Ageism and Age Equality

(Great Britain)

September 2023

Everyone should live with dignity and respect. Older people are equal members of society and should not be subjected to ageist attitudes, stereotyping or age discrimination.

Ageism

Negative attitudes towards older people and ageing are pervasive in our society. These attitudes are based on negative stereotypes and prejudice about older people and result in discrimination. Ageism can take many forms - you might be overlooked when you apply for a job, have poorer access to medical care and treatment, or be denied financial products, such as insurance, due to your age. And as services increasingly move online, some older people face digital barriers to accessing essential services, including benefits.

The Covid-19 pandemic response further highlighted and exposed systemic ageism. Policies such as the blanket application of Do Not Resuscitate Orders (DNCRP) and restrictions affecting visiting in care homes had a particular impact on older people.ⁱ

Ageism can take place at the institutional level (e.g., in the policies and systems enacted by institutions, whether intended or not), at the interpersonal level (e.g., by ignoring someone because of their age), or it can be self-directed (e.g., you might think you are too old or too young to apply for a specific job).ⁱⁱ

Research shows that the impact of ageism can affect both individuals as well as society more broadly. As a result of ageism, older people may be excluded from opportunities and society fails to benefit fully from the valuable resources that older people offer – as potential employees, volunteers, elected representatives and in many other roles. As with other forms of discrimination, ageism can also lead to and deepen existing inequalities and divisions in our society.

Age UK is clear that the discrimination against people on the grounds of their age, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity is wrong. A priority for our future work will be to ensure that older people are protected against discrimination.

Intersectionality and multiple discrimination

Ageism intersects with and compounds the impact of other forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism and ableism, leading to increased levels of disadvantage. Research shows, for example, that experiences of racism and racial discrimination across a person's life is linked to poorer health outcomes in older age.ⁱⁱⁱ

Public Policy Proposals

- Research has firmly established that a powerful way to overcome prejudice is to foster close relationships with others who are seen as belonging to a different group. Governments should support initiatives that promote greater intergenerational contact to combat ageism.
- More research is needed about the extent of ageism in different settings, including on how ageism impacts older people who may experience high levels of multiple discrimination.
- The Government must retain the Public Sector Equality Duty contained within the Equality Act 2010 and do more to make public bodies use the duty to meet the challenges and opportunities of our ageing society.
- Public bodies should make sure that services remain accessible to older people that are unable to access or use the internet and offer effective offline communication channels alongside digital options.
- As multiple discrimination of protected characteristics can be intersectional and/or additive, including where age intersects with other characteristics such as gender and race, Section 14 of the Equality Act covering combined discrimination, should be brought into force.
- The Government must reconsider the financial services exemption from the ban on harmful age discrimination.
- The media industry must be challenged to replace stereotypical images of older people with positive messages that reflect the diversity of the older population and recognise the contribution they make both in economic and social terms. We call on the newspaper Editors' Committee to amend their Code of Practice and add a requirement to avoid prejudicial or pejorative references to a person's age.
- The Equalities and Human Rights Commission should ensure that addressing age discrimination is at the heart of its work.
- The Government must ensure that planning for future emergencies or pandemics has older people at its heart, and that no-one experiences a negative outcome because of their age.
- We urge the Government to retain existing UK equalities legislation and ensure that any post-Brexit legislation does not reduce the rights of older people.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and crosscutting themes such as age equality and human rights.

www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/

ⁱ Age UK Written evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights on Human Rights in Care Homes <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/40781/pdf/>

ⁱⁱ United Nations Global Report on Ageism, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Stopforth, Dharmi Kapadia, James Nazroo, Laia Bécaries, 'The enduring effects of racism on health: Understanding direct and indirect effects over time', SSM - Population Health, Volume 19, 2022