



The German Ageing Survey (DEAS)

A Longitudinal Study
on the Second Half of
Life in Germany

1

Introduction

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) is a nationally representative, comprehensive long-term study on people in their 'second half of life', meaning those aged 40 and over. The first survey was conducted in 1996, the second in 2002. The third and current survey was held in 2008.

DEAS is funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). A study of people in their mid and late adulthood is an important source of information for political decision makers, the general public and for scientific research.

The study focuses on two main perspectives:

- **Actual life situation:** How do people live in the second half of their lives and how greatly do the life situations of these people differ?
- **Change in life situations:** How have life situations in the second half of life changed over the period 1996-2008? In which areas of life has the situation improved and in which has it deteriorated, in which areas are the situations of individuals becoming similar and in which do differences between people increase?

The time series and longitudinal data of DEAS can supply answers to the questions raised by societies today and reveal the trends in societal development. The following pages contain a selection of new DEAS findings. Answers to the following questions are included:

- How financially secure are the older people of today? Are there signs of an increase in private old age provision?
- What is the health situation of people in the second half of life? Will the coming birth cohorts of older people be healthier than the generation before them?

- How old are people when they retire? Has retirement age risen over the past few years?
- How good are the relations between the generations? What role does grandparenthood play for older people?
- To what extent have living arrangements changed? Can people without partners or without children rely on friends to support them in difficult phases of life?

We shall outline some of the key elements in DEAS before going on to answer these questions.

What is the point of a longitudinal study on ageing and old age in Germany?

Due to the longtime and ongoing rise in life expectancy Germany is about to develop into a society of long lives. Old age has increasingly become a distinct life phase that often lasts several decades. Ageing and old age change as society itself alters. Seen from this perspective, DEAS is a key instrument for observing what ageing and old age mean today and will mean in the future and what socio-political intervention will be needed.

With its regular survey of people over 40 years, DEAS provides unique data on the long-term study and analysis of the ageing processes that are part of a changing society. It is only by studying how people grow old and how economic, social, political and cultural conditions influence the ageing process that we can gain reliable knowledge on how society, political measures and each separate individual can contribute towards a good life in old age. DEAS collects information on a wide range

of aspects and thus enables us to gain a comprehensive picture of objective life situations and the subjective assessments people have in the second half of their lives. This includes areas described in this document such as financial security, intergenerational relations and a number of other issues such as housing, the need for support and long-term care and individual images of ageing.

DEAS is based on three fundamental findings from research on ageing, meaning research on the ageing process and old age as part of the life course.

These are:

1. Ageing is embedded in societal development and is subject to change.
2. Ageing is multifaceted. There are a whole range of options as to how people age and what their life is like in old age. The opportunities and risks involved in a good old age are unequally distributed among the population.
3. People differ as to what they consider to be a good life in old age. High quality of life does not result 'automatically' from positive living conditions. Of equal importance is how people subjectively view and assess their situation. This assessment is also reflected in people's individual image of old age and hence in how they experience growing older themselves.

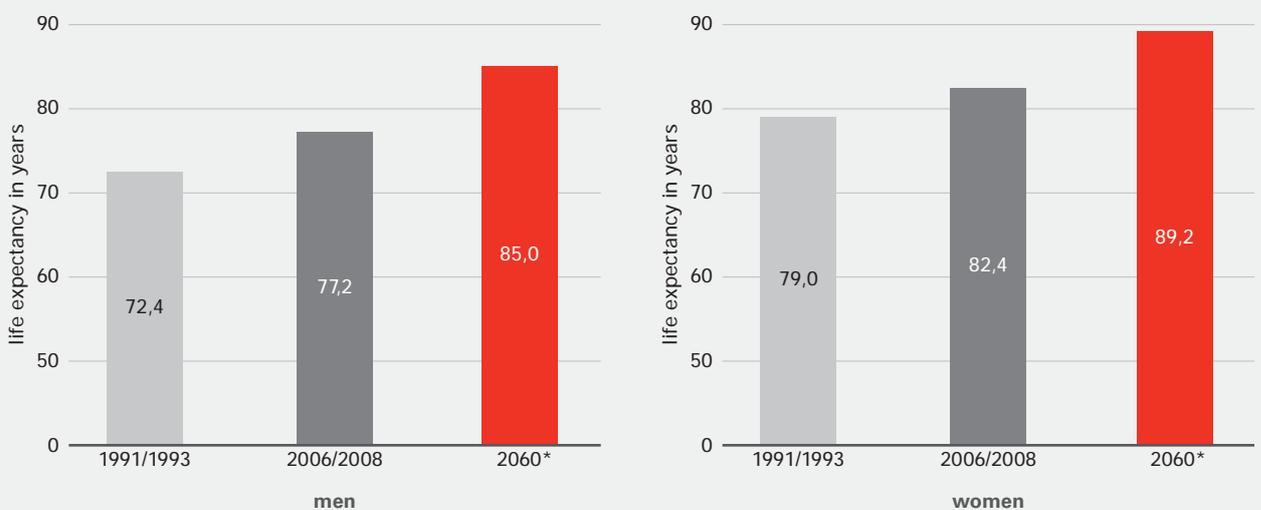
a) Ageing is embedded in societal development

How people age and how long they live can differ enormously and changes according to developments in society. In the past century, average life expectancy almost doubled (see Figure 1).

The reasons for this include better medical treatment and a period of peace in Germany that lasted for over sixty years after the Second World War. The marked rise in life expectancy over the past decades aptly illustrates the fact that ageing is not only a physiological process but something that is embedded in social conditions. From the historical point of view, the fact that people today can expect a longer life and experience old age as a life phase that can be planned for and structured is a new phenomenon.

Each birth cohort and each generation is moulded in the course of its life by specific values and experiences as well as prevailing social and political conditions. Those born, for example,

Figure 1 | Increase of average life expectancy at birth.



Source: Official mortality statistics for Germany, life tables 1991/1993 and 2006/2008 (destatis 1994, 2009); * Data basis for 2060: 12th coordinated population projection for Germany, variant L1 (destatis, 2009).

during the National Socialist era and Second World War grew up in a different environment to the post-war generation. Reforms like those of the past decades affecting health, pensions and social and labour market policies are changing societal conditions of ageing and the life course. Ageing has to be viewed against the backdrop of this kind of social architecture. This framework is subject to change and the consequences for an ageing population can only be assessed by means of exact longitudinal studies of ageing in Germany.

b) The many faces of old age

Older people are often addressed in public discourse as a uniform group with common aims and interests. This assumption ignores the reality of life for older people in Germany today. Our life situation in old age will be shaped by our personal biography up to that point, by our life style and preferences and the attendant opportunities and risks. There are hence often vast differences between older people who are the same age.

The high degree of diversity and dissimilarity between older people is also the result of the structural social advantages and disadvantages experienced by groups of people, in other words by social inequality. Generally speaking, people with a higher educational level have better and more varied opportunities of enjoying a good old age than those who are less educated.

There is insufficient evidence on whether social differences intensify or diminish with age. An important question to be asked is to what extent

social differences accumulate over a life time and thus increase inequality in old age. It is in any event important to ascertain which population groups are particularly vulnerable and in what areas of life and if they are in need of social support.

c) A good life in old age

Quality of life in the second half of life is multifaceted. It is the outcome of the interplay between very different aspects of key life areas such as the financial situation, health, work, social participation outside the workplace and social inclusion in family and non-family relationships.

A good life in old age is perhaps easier for those with enough money, who enjoy good health, have a family and circle of friends and are active in or outside the workplace. But people's lifestyles and preferences differ right through to old age and there is no uniform concept of what constitutes a good life. People whose circumstances are objectively comparable can come to quite different conclusions when asked if their life is good or not so good.

In order to obtain a satisfactory picture of quality of life in old age, DEAS collects not only objectively measurable factors such as income or number of diseases diagnosed. Questions are also asked about how people perceive and assess their life situation subjectively. This personal assessment is very important for the quality of life of older people. It is older people in particular who are required to cope with the changes and losses brought about by age and adapt to a changing life situation. ■

How is the DEAS longitudinal study organised?

There have now been three survey waves – in 1996, 2002 and 2008 during which more than 14,100 East and West German women and men aged between 40 and 97 were interviewed. Since 2002 people who have already taken part in one survey are being questioned again. At the same time a new group of 40-85 year olds was included in the study on each occasion.

The first survey was held in 1996 on a national scale with around 5,000 people aged 40-85 selected by a stratified random sample from the registered population. The respondents are a representative cross section of the population, so that the DEAS findings can be applied to the population as a whole. In 2002 again, some 5,000 people were interviewed, some of them for the second time. Then in 2008, 8,200 people aged between 40 and 97 were interviewed, over 2,000 of whom had taken part in 1996 and/or 2002.

In each of the three DEAS waves to date, a new group of 40-85 year olds was interviewed. This

is currently making possible to study social change over a period of twelve years. Different birth cohorts can be compared when they reach the same age. People can, for example, be compared who had reached an age from 40-45 in the years 1996, 2002 or 2008. This is equivalent to the 1951-1956 cohorts in the 1996 survey, the 1957-1962 cohorts in 2002 and the 1963-1968 cohorts in 2008. As the same people could be interviewed within one or two six year periods, changes in individual life courses can be traced. This enables us to see how personal life situations change as people grow older. The findings described in this document concentrate on a study of current life situations in 2008 and an analysis of social changes.

Since the end of the first survey wave carried out by the Free University Berlin and the University of Nijmegen (NL), DEAS has been conducted by the German Centre of Gerontology in Berlin. The infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences in Bonn is responsible for drawing the samples and collecting data. ■

How can the DEAS longitudinal study contribute at the policy and societal level?

Society and political decision makers can play a key role in people experiencing a good old age in Germany. There is no doubt that the rapid rise of life expectancy is a success story for society and clear evidence that the ageing process can be positively influenced. What is now necessary is for our knowledge on ageing and old age to be expanded and spread more widely, something to which government policies and society, as well as each and every individual, can also contribute. In this way distortions and wrong assumptions in the public discourse on old age can be put into perspective.

For example, the theory of excessive population ageing or the 'old age burden' on society can be challenged with scientific findings. At the same

time, we should not play down the significance of old age with an over optimistic perspective, since ageing and old age frequently involve many losses. This makes it all the more important to do all we can to make the ageing of our society and of each member of society as positive as possible.

Raising awareness on the significance of ageing and old age can begin with children and young people. But the corporate sector and the health system should also be developing a realistic picture of the opportunities and limits of old age today. And it is particularly important to address older people themselves since they are prone to identify with the negative stereotypes of old age, both as individuals and a group. ■

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS)

The German Ageing Survey is a comprehensive study of the second half of life, meaning mid- and late adulthood. The study aims to provide scientifically sound information helpful for political decision makers and relevant sections of the general public as well as providing data to be used in scientific research. The study was conducted to date in 1996, 2002 and 2008. The DEAS is funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The authors are responsible for the contents of this publication.

This document is based on the following book:

Motel-Klingebiel, A., Wurm, S., & Tesch-Römer, C. (Eds.). (2010). Altern im Wandel. Befunde des Deutschen Alterssurveys (DEAS). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

This document is free of charge and not for sale.

The following documents summarizing main results are available online at

<http://www.dza.de/EN/DEAS-Press-Information>

- The German Ageing Survey (DEAS):
A Long-Term Study on the
Second Half of Life in Germany
- Material Security
- Health and Well-being
- Participation in Society:
Employment, Voluntary Work and Education
- Living Arrangements and Partnership
- Intergenerational Family Relations in
Transition

A brochure containing the press information listed above is published as part of their public relations work by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (www.bmfsfj.de).

You may obtain further information on this topic from the German Centre of Gerontology (DZA) and online from www.german-ageing-survey.de ■

Editor:

**German Centre
of Gerontology (DZA)**

Manfred-von-Richthofen-Straße 2
12101 Berlin

Telephone +49 (0)30 - 260 74 00

Fax +49 (0)30 - 785 43 50

www.dza.de