



REVERA REPORT ON AGEISM:

# Independence and Choice As We Age

Sheridan | Centre for  
Elder Research

revera® 



# Table of Contents

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<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>5</b>
Thomas Wellner, President & CEO, Revera Inc.	
Pat Spadafora, Director, Sheridan Centre for Elder Research	
<b>COMMENTARY</b>	<b>7</b>
Hazel McCallion, Chief Elder Officer, Revera Inc. & Chancellor, Sheridan	
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>ABOUT US</b>	<b>18</b>
Revera Inc. Sheridan Centre for Elder Research	

There has never been a better time to bring attention to the impact of ageism on our society.

## Foreword

In 2012, Revera embarked on a mission to tackle ageism with the launch of Age Is More ([www.AgeIsMore.com](http://www.AgeIsMore.com)), an initiative that challenges the negative attitudes and stereotypes faced by older adults, and celebrates their ageless spirit. As part of that initiative, research conducted with the International Federation on Ageing revealed that ageism was the most tolerated form of social prejudice in Canada when compared to gender or race-based discrimination.

New research conducted by Revera and the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research reveals that while there has been some improvement in people's attitudes toward older Canadians, ageism continues to be a pervasive problem that persists today.

As our population ages and life expectancies continue to rise, much attention has been focused on how Canada will pay for the escalating costs of caring for the older generation. This is a legitimate concern, and worthy of the attention it attracts. However, as we confront the stressors that accompany this demographic shift, we should be equally concerned about how this growing cohort is reacting to our efforts to support them in their daily lives. Are we being helpful or hurtful in how we approach older adults?

The latest *Revera Report* explores this issue and examines the roles that independence and choice have in our lives, and specifically delves into the impact of ageism when it comes to providing care and support for older adults.

The report identifies a number of troubling warning signs and reveals that many well-intentioned Canadians, through their attitudes and approach to supporting and caring for older adults, are in fact depriving their elders of independence and

self-worth. These behaviours include a worrisome gap in how young and old Canadians view the importance of seniors' independence, blind spots in how younger generations assess the way their actions towards the older generation will be perceived, and even, upon self-reflection, confessions of ageism by no fewer than one in four Canadians.

But there's hope. Addressing and reversing negative stereotypes and assumptions about older adults is something all Canadians can do immediately and at no cost, and the positive outcomes are well documented. For example, a growing body of evidence from the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at Yale University reveals that those who hold more positive age stereotypes behave differently as they age from those with more negative stereotypes. In fact, those with a positive outlook are more likely to recover fully from severe disability,<sup>i</sup> and live longer by an average of 7.5 years.<sup>ii</sup>

There has never been a better time to bring attention to the impact of ageism on our society. Age should not be a barrier to independence, choice and control over one's life. It's time to change the perception of aging.

The *Revera Report on Ageism: Independence & Choice As We Age* identifies, quantifies and explores this vital issue, and concludes with recommendations for individuals, policy makers and organizations to improve the lives of older Canadians.

**Thomas Wellner**  
President & Chief Executive Officer,  
Revera Inc.

**Pat Spadafora**  
Director,  
Sheridan Centre for Elder Research



“My strong belief is that every person, young and old, can live a life of purpose.”

## Commentary

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Here in Canada, we take pride in our diversity and acceptance of people from all walks of life, and we are known around the world for our kind, empathetic and helpful spirit. However, we are falling short of this well-earned reputation when it comes to our approach to a large and growing segment of our population: our seniors.

It is my strong belief that every person, young and old, can and should live a life of purpose. To do this each person deserves respect, choice and independence. Which is why it's disappointing to see these survey results showing that ageism continues to be an ongoing problem in our society. But I have hope that with greater awareness, co-operation and a strong commitment to change, we can take essential steps to ensure Canadian seniors age happily and well.

As Revera's Chief Elder Officer, I'm proud that we are once again challenging the negative stereotypes older Canadians face through the *Revera Report on Ageism: Independence and Choice As We Age*. This new knowledge reminds us that older Canadians want what everyone else wants: independence, respect and the choice to live their lives as they please.

**Hazel McCallion**  
Chief Elder Officer, Revera Inc.  
Chancellor, Sheridan

## Key Findings

Ageism continues to be widespread in Canada, and tops the list as the most tolerated form of social prejudice by a wide margin when compared to gender or race-based discrimination.

“MOST TOLERATED” FORM OF PREJUDICE



Q: Please rank the following social prejudices(isms) using the numbers 1,2,3 according to which ones you think are the most tolerated in Canada today.

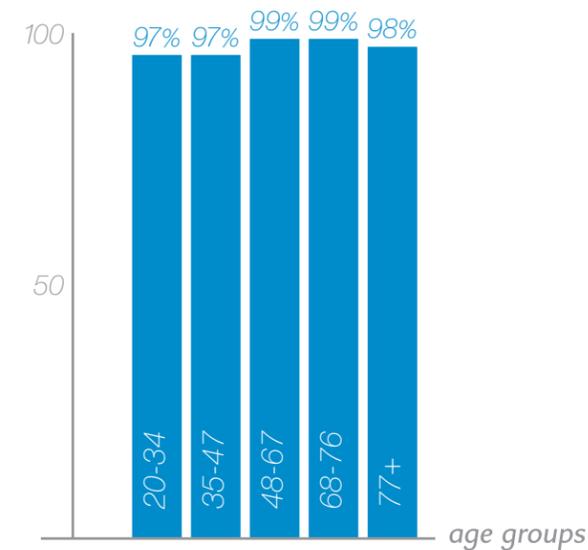
- When asked to choose the “most tolerated” form of social prejudice in Canada, more than four in ten Canadians (42%) cite ageism; more than double that of racism (20%) and sexism (17%).
- Fully one in four (25%) Canadians admit they have treated someone differently because of their age, and, interestingly, the percentages barely deviate from Generation Y to Boomers.

Ageism is the most tolerated form of social prejudice.

Canadians strongly agree that independence is important at any age, and older adults in particular see this as a top priority.

- When asked to comment on the importance of independence for people of all ages, a large majority of Canadians (89%) agree it is important or very important.

INDEPENDENCE IS IMPORTANT



Q: How important is it for you to maintain your independence?

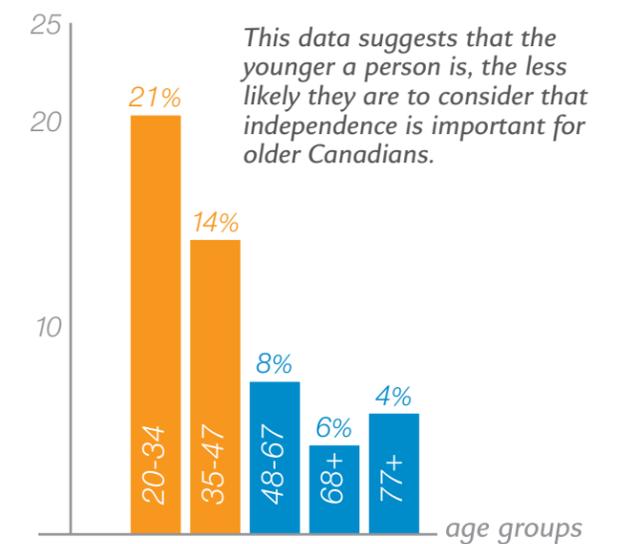
- Almost unanimously Canadians of every age cohort agree that maintaining independence is important to them personally, whether they are 20-34 years old (97%), 35-47 years old (97%), 48-67 years old (99%), 68-76 years old (99%) or 77 and older (98%).

“It’s important to be independent all your life, you have to start young and learn day by day. It’s one of the things that makes you feel good, when you can make your own decisions or when you can do things that you want to do and not be told what to do.”

—Barbara McGregor, Age 91

Notwithstanding a universal appreciation for independence, when asked to assess the importance of independence to older people ages 75+, a troubling divide emerges between young and old Canadians.

INDEPENDENCE IS NOT IMPORTANT



Q: How important do you think independence is for individuals in the following age group — Age 77+.

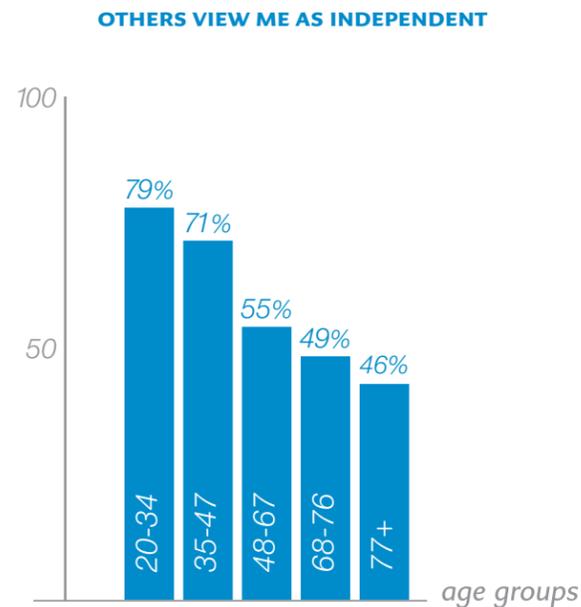
- When asked to assess the importance of independence to the lives of people 77-89, there is a significant difference in agreement between young and old. Specifically, young adults 20-34 years old are more than five times as likely to say that independence is not important (21%) than those 68-76 (4%) and more than three times as likely as those 77+ (6%). 8% of those 48-67, and 14% of those 35-47 also agree.

“We need to reframe aging as a time of continued activity, growth and enjoyment.”

—Dr. Todd D. Nelson<sup>iii</sup>



The respect and independence we expect with aging doesn't necessarily materialize.



Q: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: "As I get older, I believe others view me as more independent."

"The loss of ability typically associated with aging is only loosely related to a person's chronological age. There is no "typical" older person... Though most older people will eventually experience multiple health problems, older age does not imply dependence."

—Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization

- When presented with the statement "as I get older, others view me as more independent", younger adults 20-34 are very likely (79%) to agree, as are those ages 35-47 (71%). However, this perception drops among those 48-67 (55%) and 68-76 (49%), and hits its lowest level of agreement among those 77+ (46%).
- In a related finding, 51% of Canadians ages 77+ report that others assume they can't do things for themselves — in stark contrast to just 15% of those in both the 48-67 and 68-76 cohorts who report a similar experience.
- While "financial security" tops the list of attributes that make Canadians of all ages feel independent, mentioned by six in ten respondents (59%), "making my own decisions" follows next (25%).

Well-intentioned efforts to help by family and friends may be hindering older adults from maintaining the independence they want, and reveals a blind spot in the way younger generations assess and deliver support to older adults.

- A large majority (87%) of Canadians agree that making decisions for someone else, because of their age, without consulting them can be viewed as ageism, and almost the same percentage (83%) agree that it's not acceptable to assume what older people want.
- When Canadians of all ages are asked how they feel about themselves when they make decisions on behalf of another adult in their lives, one third say it makes them feel "helpful," (32%) and more than one quarter say they feel "responsible" (26%). This is in sharp contrast to how those 77+ say they feel when choices are made for them, with almost three out of ten (28%) using words like "controlled," and close to two in ten (18%) saying it makes them feel "annoyed."

"Several participants said that as they got older, their children started acting more like a parent toward them. Regardless of whether these actions came from a place of caring, they still negatively impacted the older adults' sense of independence."

—Pat Spadafora, Director, Sheridan Elder Research Centre

"I take pride in being independent and having a mind of my own. And, I would find it very insulting for people to assume that they can make decisions for me."

—Agnes Comack, Age 94

Independence and choice are inextricably connected.

- Canadians of all ages almost unanimously agree (97%) that it is very important to have choices in life, and more than nine out of ten (92%) respondents ages 77+ agree that the more choices they have, the more independent they feel.
- Similarly, a large majority of respondents (85%) agree that making choices for someone limits their independence. And, while more than three quarters of people (77%) say it is better to help older adults make choices than make choices for them without involving them in the process, one in four (26%) respondents 77+ report that, because of their age, people make choices for them without asking their preference.

"The focus group participants described a way for families to balance the need to make decisions on behalf of an older adult with the older adult's desire for independence; even if decisions are being made for them by family members, the opportunity to provide input into the situation can help older adults retain their feelings of independence."

—Dr. Lia Tsotsos, Principal Researcher, Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

"If I'm still able to make decisions for myself and think through what I want to do, then I'm a person of worth."

—Margaret McPherson, Age 88

A young man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark sweater, is smiling and holding the hand of an older man with white hair, also smiling. They are in a room with framed pictures on the wall. The young man is wearing several colorful beaded bracelets on his left wrist.

# Ageism is getting old.™

## Canadians weigh in on ways to enable independence.

To gauge how respondents felt society should best approach the goal of increasing the independence of all Canadians, they were asked to rank their top two solutions. Different approaches to tackling the issue, from government funding and services, to education, innovation and infrastructure were offered.

Not surprisingly, and in keeping with Canada's proud history of universal health care, the majority of respondents defer to a government solution. Interestingly, the second most popular solution was grounded in education, which supports other findings in this study pointing to the need to improve awareness to combat ageism.

### The responses were:

Improve **health care** and **social services** (57%);

**Educate Canadians** to help reduce stereotypes (22%);

**Develop new technologies** that will help Canadians live independently (15%);

Improvements in **transportation** systems (6%).

# Canadians' desire for independence does not diminish with age.

According to Statistics Canada, the number of Canadians over the age of 65 is estimated to double by 2036, and the number of people ages 80 and above will continue to increase rapidly in the coming years, particularly between 2026 and 2045 as the baby-boom cohort ages. According to the projections, the portion of the population ages 80 and above would increase from 1.4

million in 2013 to between 4.0 and 4.9 million by 2045, representing about 10% of the total Canadian population.<sup>iv</sup> This rapid demographic shift is unprecedented, and adds urgency to the need to challenge the negative stereotypes and assumptions about aging and older people, and ultimately stop ageism.

The data collected for this report highlights that Canadians' desire for independence does not diminish with age, and that well-intentioned support for older adults often crosses the threshold between being helpful and hurtful.

Older people are invaluable resources to their families, communities and the broader society. Societies thrive when people of all ages have the opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways throughout their lives. For this reason, Revera and the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research have collaborated on recommendations for individuals, policy makers and organizations aimed at ending ageism and specifically protecting the independence and choice of Canada's older adults.



### For Individuals:

**1. Involve older adults in as many decisions as possible.** The vast majority of Canadians say they feel more independent when they have choices. Instead of making decisions for older adults, decisions should be made by or with them. By asking more questions and offering choices, even in seemingly trivial matters, situations can be approached in ways that empower older individuals. One in four (26%) respondents 77+ report that, because of their age, people make choices for them without asking their preference.

**2. Avoid making assumptions about what older adults want or can do.** More than half of Canadians 77 years of age and older feel others assume they can't do things for themselves. By removing this prejudice and allowing older adults to try things themselves, they will feel less frustrated and

more independent. Support can always be offered, but should not be automatically delivered.

**3. Maintain open and honest dialogue.** The essence of human relationships is interdependence — needing or accepting help is a fact of life for people of all ages. However, the way help is offered and delivered can be the difference between ageism and supportiveness. Open and honest dialogue about independence, and interdependence, allows each party to understand each other's concerns, needs and emotions.

**4. Recognize one's own stereotypes and prejudices.** Most people want empathy, not sympathy. While younger generations may not consciously behave in ageist ways, it is important that they reflect on their own attitudes about aging, and how their behavior might be perceived by others. Simply remembering

that older adults value choice and independence — regardless of their abilities — can encourage inclusiveness.

**5. Foster intergenerational relationships.** Like other social prejudices, ageism is often rooted in a lack of awareness and understanding of others that manifests into inaccurate and unfair assumptions based on age. By nurturing existing intergenerational relationships or creating new ones, the simple act of spending time with others of different ages is a valuable way to combat ageist beliefs. This also helps us regain the respect we have lost for our elders, one that is still alive in other cultures. Older adults have a wealth of wisdom to pass on to the next generation; seeking their advice and counsel enables us to learn from the past and make a better future.



#### For Older Adults:

By not accepting self-limiting beliefs and unintentionally contributing to outdated age-based stereotypes, you can help others to remember that you are uniquely you. Don't let yourself be defined by a number.

where personal care and health-related financial support from the government can be used instead of funding agencies making these decisions. The Ontario Retirement Communities Association (ORCA) embarked

on a journey to identify exceptional global self-directed care models through a research study with the Centre for Health Sector Strategy at the Rotman School of Management and has revealed that this approach has been implemented with great success in other jurisdictions, including Australia and the United Kingdom. These models have empowered older adults, giving them more choice and autonomy in arranging their care delivery, provided increased access to the benefits of congregate living, and streamlined the provision of home care in retirement homes.

**3. Incorporate the concept of ageism into the curriculum of our elementary and secondary school systems.** As the most widely tolerated form of discrimination, it is imperative that we begin to change our mindset on what it means to age — at an early age — in the same

way as society has banded together to combat racism, sexism and most recently, bullying.

#### For Organizations:

**1. Continue the growth of Age Friendly Communities and mandate consumer facing businesses to have age friendly policies in place.** Developed by the World Health Organization, Age Friendly Communities is a movement that encourages cities around the world to adapt structures and services to meet the needs of older people with diverse abilities. By encouraging independence, accessibility and inclusiveness, the ultimate goal is to promote active, healthy aging and to increase participation from older people in society. Simple actions that local businesses can take to be age friendly include:

- Improve accessibility: make physical changes such as installing automatic doors with accessible buttons and providing courtesy parking for older adults.
- Encourage respect: ensure employees are not dismissive or impatient with older adults and make a concerted effort to treat them as valued customers by providing goods and services that specifically cater to their needs.

- Adapt for varying abilities: for example, provide chairs that are sturdy and stable, and that are not too low or too soft; ensure signage, menus and labels have large print.

**2. Invest in the development of innovations and new technologies that will support older people's desire for independence as they age.** Adults regardless of their age want to remain independent as long as possible. As the population ages, there has never been a greater opportunity for businesses to harness this knowledge to create innovations that meet the needs of an aging population. Innovation can take many forms including new products and services that address the needs of people with varying abilities.

**3. Recognize older adults as their own consumer market with diverse needs and interests.**

Those 50 and older are considered the most affluent consumer group in Canada which provides a unique opportunity to Canadian businesses. However, it is important to consider that older adults are not a homogenous group. Like any other group within society, the interests of older people are diverse and this should be reflected in business and marketing strategies.

For more information visit [AgelsMore.com](http://AgelsMore.com)

This research examines how Canadians interpret the role of independence and choice.

## Methodology

The *Revera Report on Ageism: Independence and Choice As We Age* explores the perspectives of Canadian men and women over the age of 20 and examines how these Canadians interpret the role of independence and choice both at their current age and how they imagine these factors playing out at other stages of their lives. Given the focus of the study, the researchers ensured that a robust sample of respondents ages 77+ was achieved (593 respondents) to accurately report the views of Canada's oldest cohort.

This report utilized both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups and semi-structured, individual interviews) methodologies. In addition to questions related to demographic profile, the survey measured opinion in three key areas: independence, choice and age discrimination. The survey was based, in part, on background research about choice and independence including previous survey instruments created by the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research.

The research was conducted from October 8th to December 21st, 2015. A total of 1578 (English) and 425 (French) online surveys were completed including an additional 413 hard copy surveys for an overall total of 2416 surveys. An additional 294 surveys were excluded from analysis due to missing age and/or gender information. Qualitative phone interviews were conducted with 12 individuals; in addition, 24 older adults participated in four focus groups. A probability sample of the same size would yield a margin of error of 2 per cent at a 95 per cent confidence level.

The *Revera Report on Ageism: Independence and Choice As We Age* builds upon Revera's previous reports including the *Revera Report on Ageism* and the *Revera Report on Ageism: A Look at Gender Differences*.



## About us

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### Revera Inc.

Revera is a leading owner, operator and investor in the senior living sector. Through its portfolio of partnerships, Revera owns or operates more than 500 properties across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, serving more than 50,000 seniors. The company offers seniors' apartments, independent living, assisted living, memory care, and long term care. With approximately 45,000 employees dedicated to providing exceptional care and service, Revera is helping seniors live life to the fullest. Through Age is More, Revera is committed to challenging ageism, the company's social cause of choice. Find out more at [ReveraLiving.com](http://ReveraLiving.com), [Facebook.com/ReveraInc](https://www.facebook.com/ReveraInc) or on Twitter [@Revera\\_Inc](https://twitter.com/Revera_Inc)



### Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

The Sheridan Centre for Elder Research is an organization that develops innovative approaches and creative interdisciplinary partnerships that focus on enhancing the lives of older Canadians. The Centre does this by providing a unique environment for conducting applied research into areas of practical concern and immediate relevance to older adults and their families. The Centre for Elder Research was launched in 2003 at the Oakville, Ontario campus of Sheridan College. The Centre has an established track record in applied research and a reputation as a leader that challenges traditional thinking, creating possibilities that transcend historical boundaries.

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<sup>i</sup> Levy BR, Slade MD, Murphy TE, Gill TM, Association Between Positive Age Stereotypes and Recovery From Disability in Older Persons (Journal of the American Medical Association. 2012) 308(19):1972-1973.

<sup>ii</sup> Levy BR, Slade MD, Kunkel SR, Kasl SV, Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging (Journal of Personal and Social Psychology. 2002 Aug) 83(2):261-70.

<sup>iii</sup> Nelson, T.D., Promoting Healthy Aging by Confronting Ageism (American Psychologist. 2016 May-June) 71(4):276-272.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-520-x/2014001/hi-fs-eng.htm>, Accessed April 5, 2016.

“Creative aging is about possibilities, freeing ourselves of limiting beliefs about aging and embracing the reality that individuals continue to grow, learn and contribute to their communities throughout the life journey.”

—Pat Spadafora  
Director,  
Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

**AGE IS  
MORE**

[AgelsMore.com](https://AgelsMore.com)