

# MARIN COUNTY OLDER ADULT COMMUNITY SURVEY

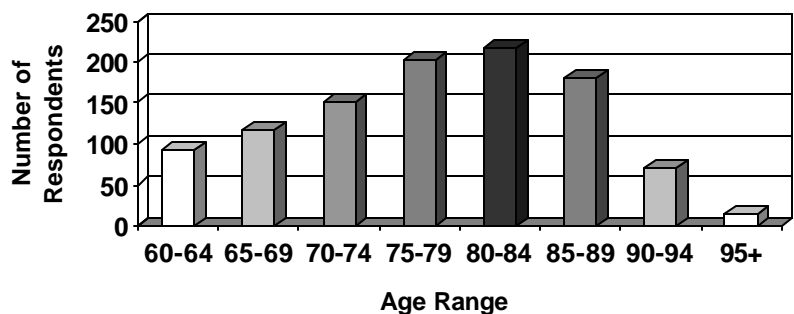
Every four years, the Marin County Division of Aging conducts a community survey of the needs and characteristics of Marin's older adults. In December 2004, 3,770 copies of our Older Adult Community Survey were distributed as follows: 1,850 mailed to households; 610 to low-income senior residences; 400 to the Brown Bag supplementary grocery program; 400 to senior centers; 100 to the multicultural program, translated into both Spanish and Vietnamese; 200 at the Marin Senior Information Fair; 90 to the Blind and Visually Impaired of Marin, and 120 to members of the Marin County Commission on Aging for further distribution. We included return paid postage for those mailed, and to Brown Bag Program recipients. A total of 1,047 surveys, or a significant 28%, were returned. We also posted the survey on our website and 24 responses were collected on-line, bringing the total to 1,071. The survey cannot be considered representative of the general older adult population in Marin, as we specifically targeted our survey to a small convenience sample of lower-income older adults; people who might benefit from the programs we support in the community. We were gratified with comments such as this one, "I'm pleased to see you are exploring these often hidden private issues for many seniors."

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

We sampled individuals aged 60 years and over. The oldest respondent was 101, and the average age was 78 years old.

- ◆ Most respondents were women (69%), compared to 56% of the general population over 60 in Marin.
- ◆ 38% were widowed and 30% were married.
- ◆ 57% lived alone, compared to 31% of the general population over 60 in Marin.
- ◆ We over-sampled renters, with 54% of our survey respondents being home-owners, compared to 79% of the general Marin County population over 60 who own their own homes.
- ◆ The median income range was \$791 - \$1,500 monthly, compared to a median monthly income of \$2,679 for the general county population over age 60.

Age Distribution of Survey Respondents



n=1,047

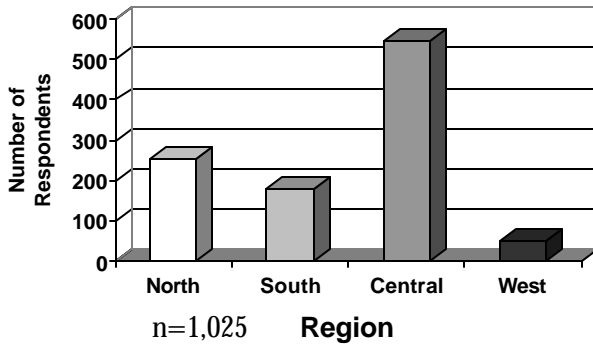
- ◆ Our survey sampled a more ethnically diverse population than the population over age 60 in Marin County, as the following table shows:

Race/Ethnicity	Survey Sample	County <sup>1</sup>
Caucasian	83.4%	91.1%
African-American	3.5%	1.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.3%	3.4%
Hispanic	6.9%	3.1%
Native American	0.4%	0.1%

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**GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS**

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Over a third (35%) of respondents lived in San Rafael, 25% lived in Novato. Respondents were from the following towns: Corte Madera, Fairfax, Greenbrae, Larkspur, Ross, San Anselmo, San Rafael (Central); Novato (North); Mill Valley, Sausalito and Tiburon (South); Bolinas, Forest Knolls, Inverness, Marshall, Olema, Point Reyes Station, San Geronimo, Stinson Beach and Woodacre (West).

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**PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED**

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The top five issues, compared to the last community survey, were:

2004/05	2000/01
1. Prescription drug costs	1. Energy/Utilities
2. Enough money to live on	2. Transportation
3. Loneliness	3. Enough money to live on
4. Home maintenance/repair	4. Home care
5. Cost of home care/Transportation	5. Loneliness

Prescription drug costs and home maintenance/repair were added to our survey in 2004, so it is difficult to compare their relative importance since our last survey. Prescription drug costs have been getting attention in the media and the legislature recently. It is a problem with no easy solutions. One respondent commented, *“Last year I spent over \$5000 on drugs for myself and sick wife. I now buy major drugs in Canada.”* The energy crisis was a big problem four years ago, and while this problem has not gone away, it is not getting as much attention. This comment summarizes the problem that many older home-owners face in Marin, *“My home was built in 1928, I have problems finding competent and affordable repairs persons.”*

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<sup>1</sup> 2000 U.S. Census

Other issues remain constant problems. Many comments about the lack of transportation highlighted how basic this service is, from making shopping and going to church possible, as well as combating loneliness with an outing to play Mah Jong. While our survey didn't ask about dental health, there were several comments about access to, and high cost of dental health.

Many expressed their gratitude for the community services that do exist, such as *"Whistlestop is a God-send to older folks,"* and *"My home care worker is my lifeline, without them I could not live at home."*

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### FUNCTIONAL STATUS

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Few respondents reported problems with personal care activities (Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)), such as eating, dressing, and bathing. The most prevalent ADL problem, for 19% of respondents, was getting to the bathroom in time. Other daily activities (Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs)) posed more of a problem. The biggest problems were housework (for 38% of respondents), shopping (33%), and using transportation (28%). Over half (52%) used their own car to get around, though 27% reported driving a car was a problem. Preparing meals was also a problem for almost a quarter (24%) of respondents.

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### NUTRITIONAL HEALTH

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There are older adults in our community who don't eat well, and those who wonder where their next meal is coming from. One respondent to our survey commented, *"Grocery prices are so high, I can't afford fresh produce, I buy whatever is on sale."* There are many causes of poor nutritional health: low income; chewing or swallowing problems; ability to shop or cook; health issues, depression, dementia and medications that affect appetite. Nutritional health can have a profound effect on overall health; poor nutrition leads to increased weakness and frailty, susceptibility to disease, confusion and disorientation, and can impact the effectiveness of medications.

We used the Nutrition Screening Initiative (NSI), a national tool, developed in 1989 by the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Dietetic Association. A 1993 national NSI survey of geriatric doctors, nurses, and administrators of hospitals, nursing homes, and home care agencies found that one in four elderly patients suffer from malnutrition as do one-half of elderly hospital patients, and two in five nursing home residents.<sup>2</sup> In Marin, we discovered that an alarming **39%** of our survey respondents were at **high** nutritional risk and another **34%** were at **moderate** risk of malnutrition.

The Older Americans Act nutrition program in Marin only serves approximately 2% of the older population. Many older adults do not qualify for the food stamp program, and others do not use it perhaps due to the stigma of accepting a government handout. We need to educate consumers about community resources, such as the home delivered and congregate meal program, the Brown Bag program, food pantries and food stamps, as well as promote healthy diets.

*"I am afraid of losing the help I have right now because of the cuts going around. I don't want to end up in the street."*  
Survey respondent, aged 61.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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## HEALTH STATUS

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While most respondents reported their health to be good (41%) and their quality of life to be good (52%), there were some significant findings.

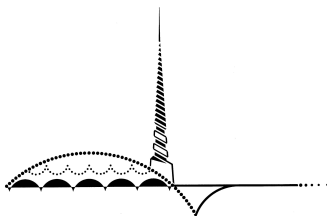
*“Age has made it hard to cope with daily living.” Survey respondent, aged 82.*

- ◆ More than a third (35%) reported feeling depressed often in the past month.
- ◆ 39% reported a fall during the past year, with 16% of falls resulting in a broken bone.
- ◆ 23% had called 911 at least once during the year.
- ◆ 65% take three or more prescribed or over-the-counter drugs daily.
- ◆ 4% drink 3 or more alcoholic drinks every day; considered “at risk” drinking. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recommends that those aged 65 and older drink no more than one drink per day and no more than two drinks on any occasion.
- ◆ 7% reported abuse; 4% physical or psychological abuse, and 3% reported misuse of their money by others.
- ◆ 39% receive care from family, friends or a paid helper, and 15% are caregivers. *“I am a caregiver and don't have enough time to do all I want to do.”*
- ◆ Most (94%) have a primary care doctor.
- ◆ 30% had trouble exercising.
- ◆ 11% eat fewer than two meals a day.
- ◆ Only 6% were smokers.

*“Everything is fine now. The concern is about when I no longer am able to work and if Social Security and MediCare will fill the gap and that property tax not be increased to where I can no longer afford to live in Marin.”*

*Survey respondent, aged 64.*

We thank the many individuals who participated in our survey. The results have been invaluable to our planning, and have been incorporated into the Division of Aging's four-year *Area Plan for Aging Services in Marin County, FY 2005-2009.*



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