



UNITED NATIONS



COVID-19 and its impact on inequality in old age



BOX VIII.1**COVID-19 and its impact on older adults**

COVID-19 death rates correlate with patients' ages. The older a person is, the greater their chance of dying from the disease. The death rate for people over 80 years of age is five times greater than average, and as the virus continues to spread in developing countries and overloads their health-care and social protection systems, the death rate among older people is climbing.

There are various reasons why older persons are more vulnerable. Underlying conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes make it harder for them to recover once they have been infected with the virus. In addition, the ageing process entails wear and tear on the body that usually makes it more difficult to fight off new infections; this is especially true after age 75 because the immune system is less robust than it is in younger persons (Huenchuan, 2020).

Less visible but no less important factors include impacts unrelated to the health status of the older population. These include the loss of social safety nets or support networks; limitations on health care unrelated to COVID-19; the possibility of neglect or abuse in medical institutions or care facilities and by family members in cases where people are being cared for at home; increasing poverty as people lose their livelihoods or become unemployed; the negative impact on mental health and well-being of prolonged isolation and a more limited ability to connect with other people by digital means; and stigmatization and the possibility of discrimination in cases where medical personnel may have to decide whether to administer life-saving therapies or not.

Older women are more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic than older men because they tend to live longer and, by the time that they reach 80 years of age, are more than twice as likely as men of their age to live alone and therefore to need help in the home.

Four top-priority policies and programmes for assisting this sector of the population during the pandemic:

- Strengthening social inclusion and solidarity mechanisms while social distancing measures are in place. Maintaining physical distance is essential in order to protect older persons, but it should be coupled with social support and special attention, along with measures to help older persons make use of digital technologies.
- Integrating attention for older persons into socioeconomic and humanitarian responses to COVID-19. This calls for increased funding for humanitarian actions but also for efforts to address the structural factors that have left older people behind and made them more vulnerable to the crisis.
- Increasing older persons' participation in decision-making on issues that affect them, addressing and combating the stigmatization of old age and upgrading systems for the compilation of statistical data and information that lend greater visibility to this population group and the inequalities that its members face.
- Ensuring that difficult decisions about the health of older persons are guided by a commitment to dignity and to the right to health based on the fact that all lives are of equal value.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of United Nations, "The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons", *Policy Brief*, May 2020 [online] <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/COVID-Older-persons.pdf>, and S. Huenchuan, COVID-19: *recomendaciones generales para la atención a personas mayores desde una perspectiva de derechos humanos* (LC/MEX/TS.2020/6/Rev.1), Mexico City, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2020.

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