

## Executive Summary

The pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has disrupted people's lives, families, communities, and, to a greater extent, the economies and sustainability of the world's nations. While the virus can be transmitted to any person at any age, considerable evidence shows that the risk of more severe illnesses and mortality increases sharply with advancing age. Countries with an old-age population structure are therefore more likely to experience greater levels of infections and deaths.

Thailand has one of the oldest populations in Southeast Asia, with 19.2% of the total population aged 60 years and over in 2020. The Thai government has given serious attention to controlling the pandemic situation. A state of emergency was declared on March 26, 2020, right after new COVID-19 cases spiked to 111 in one day. This was followed by curfews and various public-health measures to contain the spread of the virus. These measures have been proved successful; the death tolls as of April 23, 2020 was 50, and the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among Thai citizens was 2,521, of which 10.1% were older persons aged 60 and over.

Great success comes with high price however. The COVID-19 crisis seems worsening the already weak economy of Thailand. As a result of effective lockdown measures, economic activities have declined. Job and income losses have been increasing and worsening household welfare. None have suffered other than those already living in vulnerability and insecurity. Among them, older persons have been recognized as one of the most severely affected populations by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, evidence shows that the well-being of Thai older persons has continually improved over the past decade due to the government's efforts to develop policies and measures to support these people. Many older Thais have continued to work and increasingly live independently, on their own or with their spouse only. Despite this improved situation, many remain vulnerable and depend on the government's old-age allowance (OAA). With the COVID-19 crisis, those who were working are likely to lose their jobs and those already vulnerable even in normal times are likely to struggle even more. This emphasises the specific challenges and needs faced by older persons, as well as the need to plan and implement responses specifically targeted at older persons. In order to support the responses to older persons' needs effectively, the government and non-governmental agencies need an evidence-based assessment of older persons' situation during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown period.

The *Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons in Thailand* survey, conducted in July 2020, is the very first survey that directly focuses on older persons. It aims to provide a unique source of information based on systematically collected data. The survey targeted individuals aged 60 years and older, and collected information on economic status, living arrangement, and the physical and psychological health of the respondents before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. It also assessed their knowledge, practices and sources of information regarding COVID-19. Even though the lockdown measures had been relaxed at the time of the survey, it was still recommended to avoid face-to-face interactions. Advantages and disadvantages of other data-collection modes were considered, and finally the researcher decided to create an online survey using the Google Forms tool. The survey employed a multistage sampling technique. The questionnaires were sent out to all older persons living in sampled communities and villages via the messaging application LINE. When a survey participant lived alone; was vulnerable, dependent or illiterate; or had no smartphone or internet access, a local intermediary would serve as an interviewer. A total of 1,230 interviews were completed in both urban and rural areas located in nine provinces and five regions across Thailand.

Overall, the mean age of older respondents was 69.7 (SD=7.4) years; 55.4% were women, 68.7% had completed basic or compulsory education (4–6 years), and 63.7% were married. The average number of living children per respondent was 2.8. Concerning socio-economic status, 47.2% had worked in the past 12 months, 94% received the government's OAA, 45% had annual income less than 20,000 Thai baht, and 46.6% reported that their income was either sometimes or always inadequate before the COVID-19 outbreak. In terms of living arrangements, 67% co-resided with at least one child, while 5.5% lived alone and 12.0% lived with their spouse only.

### **Key findings**

- During the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown period, virtually all the older persons surveyed remained at their usual residence. Less than 2% had someone move into their household, and only 1% reported relocation.
- 81% of older persons who had worked in the past 12 months experienced work-related difficulties during the COVID-19, of which 36% became unemployed, lost vendor spaces, or were forced to accept lower salary. Older persons in urban areas were more likely to experience difficulties than those in rural areas.
- The percentages of older persons who received income from work, children and interest decreased during the COVID-19 outbreak. The percentage citing OAA as their main income source increased significantly, from 40% to 56% during the outbreak. At the same time, the percentage who reported work as their main income source decreased substantially, from 40% to 22% during the pandemic.
- 58% indicated that their income was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, 60% of which relied mainly on income from work. Older persons living in urban areas were more likely to experience low income than those in rural areas.
- The percentages indicating that their income was at least adequate substantially decreased from 54% to 37%. A third of the older respondents with adequate income indicated that their income was no longer adequate during the COVID-19. Among those whose income was sometimes inadequate, a quarter indicated that their financial status had worsened during the COVID-19.
- 80% indicated that their health was about the same as before COVID-19. About a fifth felt that their health was worse than before; this proportion was higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Only small percentages (4–8%) reported that their health problems became worse during the COVID-19.
- A fourth of older persons experienced one of the selected psychological symptoms either sometimes or always during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common symptom was feeling worried (57.2%), followed by loss of appetite (47.3%), loneliness (25.0%) and unhappiness (23.3%). The percentages varied little by gender but were significantly higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Older persons living alone were more likely to feel lonely than those in other living arrangements.
- The issues that most commonly worried older persons were their personal and family financial status, worse health due to missed medical appointments, and fear that they and their family members would contract the COVID-19 virus.
- About half experienced difficulties in maintaining each of the selected routine activities. The percentages varied with gender and area of residence. Older men and rural residents were more likely than their counterparts to experience difficulties in their routine activities.
- One fourth of older persons reported their life satisfaction was lower during the COVID-19 outbreak. Older persons in urban areas were twice as likely as their rural counterparts to

- report lower life satisfaction.
- Virtually all respondents indicated that they received information regarding the COVID-19 outbreak from at least one of the selected sources. Television/radio and family were the two primary information resources for older persons.
  - Nearly all of the older persons were aware of their own risk of developing more serious illness if they contracted COVID-19, and they also knew about the transmission and prevention of viral infection. Fewer than half knew about the length of the incubation period and the appropriate duration of quarantine. The majority of older persons complied with health recommendations, including wearing a face mask, avoiding leaving the house and socially distancing from others.
  - 75% received the government's cash support of 5,000 Thai baht for 3 months through one of the three cash-transfer programs for farmers, low-income people and older persons.

At this point, it may be premature to conclude the extent of the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on older persons, particularly the economic consequences, which usually take some time to fully unfold. The findings offered in this report show that many Thai older persons are experiencing higher economic insecurity in their later life. One out of four Thai elders are experiencing at least one psychological symptom, indicating a higher risk of new or worsening mental-health problems. A particularly striking result is that elders in urban areas are more vulnerable than their rural counterparts in many aspects of well-being.

The COVID-19 crisis shows that the government's OAA programs serve as the foundation of economic security for older adults, but the benefit is relatively low, and it is insufficient even in normal times. As Thailand continues through the COVID-19 crisis, safeguarding the economic security of older persons requires policy effort on many levels. Policies and measures to support people and businesses affected by the COVID-19 outbreak must take into account the older population that wants to work and relied on income from work.