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The Future of Family Support for Thai
Elderly: Views of the Populace

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Abstract

Future cohorts entering the old age span will have fewer and more dispersed children at the same time the steady decline in coresidence with children is certain to continue. These changes pose important challenges to the traditional family system of old age support and care defined mainly in terms of filial obligations of adult children and for which coresidence was a lynchpin. This study examines how near elderly parents and persons in their adult children's ages view these changes and how they might to deal with them. A mixed method approach is used based on quantitative data from national surveys and qualitative data from open-ended interviews and discussions. The results reveal widespread awareness that family size has substantially declined and that increased migration related to education and employment opportunities are resulting in fewer adult children living with or near their aging parents. At the same time they also reveal strong normative support for having children live with or nearby aging parents and widespread preference for children as main care providers. Given that personal care requires geographical proximity, a disjuncture appears to exist between norms and the changing empirical reality. Although adult children generally proclaim a willingness to care for parents when the need arises, it remains an open question if these intentions will materialize. Government programs to assist in home based care and paid care arrangements may relieve some pressure on adult children but are likely to be only a partial solution. Financial support does not require physical proximity and thus greater dispersion of children may not necessarily threaten filial material support. However it seems likely that formal sources of support through newly established welfare benefits available to almost all elderly and expanding retirement benefits for working age persons could reduce dependence on children for filial financial support. Many near elderly parents express concerns about becoming a burden to their children and wish to maintain their independence as long as possible. If circumstances change and allow them to work to later ages this could also help substitute for filial material support. In the end, parents and their adult children are unlikely to stand by passively as the world about them changes. Thus as needs emerge, individuals are likely to exercise human agency to adapt in their own ways to the new circumstances to minimize negative impacts and maximize potential benefits.

Introduction

Thai fertility rates declined rapidly between the mid 1960s to below replacement levels by the 1990s as survival rates to older ages improved substantially. As a result the Thai population has started to age rapidly. According the 2010 assessment of the United Nations Population Division, the percent of the total population that is 60 and older, the age range that is typically associated with old age in Thailand, reached 13% by 2010 and is projected to increase to 24% by 2030 and to 32% by 2050 (United Nations 2011). As a result, the ratio of persons in economically active ages to persons past working ages is in precipitous decline. UN projections indicate that the ratio of the population aged 15-59 to that in aged 60 and above will decline from 5.2 to 2.5 between 2010 and 2030 and further to only 1.7 by 2050.

On the family level, the number of living children of persons entering the elderly age range is falling as more older persons are surviving to advanced ages when dependence on others for care and support is necessary. According to the 2011 Survey of Older Persons, those aged 50-54, i.e. those who will pass age 60 in the next decade, have an average of only 2.1 living children compared to 4.5 among persons currently 75 and older. Moreover since the total fertility rate has been below 2 for over a decade, family sizes of elderly are expected to continue to fall for some time into the future (Prasartkul et al. 2011).

Not only will the future elderly have far smaller families than today's elderly but increased migration of their children will further reduce the number sufficiently nearby to provide long-term personal care. This is clearly indicated by the increased *percent* of children of persons 60 and older that live outside their parents' province which rose from 28% in 1995 to 39% by 2011. The increased migration in combination with reduced family size is impacting coresidence with children. Between 1986 and 2011 the share of persons 60 and older that live with at least one child has declined steadily from 77% to 56% according to national surveys (Knodel 2012).

Meanwhile, social, economic and political change, including expanding coverage of pension and welfare programs, may cause shifts in the norms related to filial obligations. At the same time, improved health of older persons is enabling them to survive to increasingly advanced ages. In the absence of significant increases in either mandatory or voluntary retirement ages, this

translates into additional years during which older persons will need to depend on means other than their own work to provide for their material support. In addition, it is unknown as to the extent that the additional years of life will be ones in good health as opposed to a lengthened period during which there is need for personal care and medical attention (He, Muenchrath and Kowal 2012).

In Thailand, as in much of Asia, the family and particularly adult children have traditionally played the predominant role in providing old age care and support. Thus a critical issue is how the changing demographic, political and normative context will affect family care and old-age support in the coming years. How aware is the next generation of elderly, their adult children, and the relevant personnel in the communities in which they live of the changing situation and the challenges it poses? How do they view the role of the family and particularly that of adult children and how it might change in the future? Answers to these questions can potentially be useful for informing policies and programs aimed at addressing the needs of future elderly and their families and at helping them adapt to the changing circumstances as they unfold. The present report addresses these questions using a mixed method approach that relies on quantitative data from two recent national surveys and qualitative data from individual and group open-ended interviews and focus group discussions.

Study Methods

Quantitative data relevant to the issues being addressed are provided by the 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues, two surveys conducted by the National Statistical Office. Each survey interviewed a total of 9,000 persons aged 18-59 in rural and urban areas in all major regions within Thailand including Bangkok. The surveys covered a wide range of issues related to aging including expected sources of support, preparations for care and support in old age, perceptions of elderly, and views and expectations concerning family assistance in old age. For convenience these are referred to as NSO adult surveys in the remainder of this report to distinguish them from other NSO adult surveys that focused on the older population.

Qualitative data come from the research project entitled “The Future of Family Support for Thai Elderly: Perspectives from Family and Community” centered at the Faculty of Nursing at Chulalongkorn University. For convenience this project is referred to as the FFS project in the remainder of this report. Data collection took place over the period from March 2011 to February 2012 in various locations in all four major regions and Bangkok and used a mixture of open-ended interviews, focus groups discussions, and group interviews with several targeted categories of persons. More specifically, the subjects for this research were parents aged 50-59 who had one or two children, adults who had no more than one sibling and whose parents were aged 50-59, community officials, and local health services staff and volunteers.¹ The volunteers included both general village health volunteers as well as ones associated with the Home Care Service Volunteers for the Elderly program.² For convenience, these target groups are referred to as near elderly parents, adult children, community officials, health staff, health volunteers, and home based care volunteers in the remainder of the report.

Persons aged 50-59 were targeted because they constitute the age cohort that will pass age 60 in the next decade and thus enter the age range defined as elderly in Thailand. The limit to those with one or two children was imposed as this is the typical family size of persons in this age group and involves being faced with less availability of children for support and care compared to the current generation of elderly Thais.³ Also adults with no more than one sibling and with parents in this age range were selected because they correspond to the grown children of this group of older parents that are of central interest for the research. Note that these adults with parents in their 50s were not the children of the near elderly parents included in the study. The other categories of research subjects were included to represent views of key players who will have a role in determining and implementing the community response to the changing situation of elderly members in the coming years.

¹ In total the field work consisted of 5 focus groups and 22 interviews with parents in their fifties, 15 interviews with adults who had parents in their fifties, 3 group interviews with home based care volunteers, 2 group interviews with village health volunteers, and 4 interviews with local officials.

² This program was initiated in a pilot phase by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in 2002 and has been rapidly expanding with the intention of achieving universal coverage by 2013 (Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute, no date).

³ For example, according to preliminary results of the 2011 National Survey of Older Persons in Thailand, 60 percent of parents age 50-59 have either 1 or 2 living children (16% have 1 and 44% have 2).

One main goal of the interviews and discussions was to probe the extent of public recognition that the future elderly will differ from the current generation with regards to family size, proximity of adult children and other matters that are relevant to family support in old age. A second key goal was to explore if and how those about to enter older age and adult children of such persons plan to deal with the changed circumstances facing them. An additional goal was to learn how key players within local communities view the situation and what role the community can play in assisting future elderly and their families to adapt to the changing context in which intergenerational relations will take place. This last topic, however, is not treated in the present report.

As with almost all qualitative research, the relatively small number of interviews and discussions involved and the purposive and convenience nature of the selection of subjects means no claim of representativeness for the results can be made. Nevertheless, the qualitative data is helpful for gaining more in-depth insights into the issues being investigated.

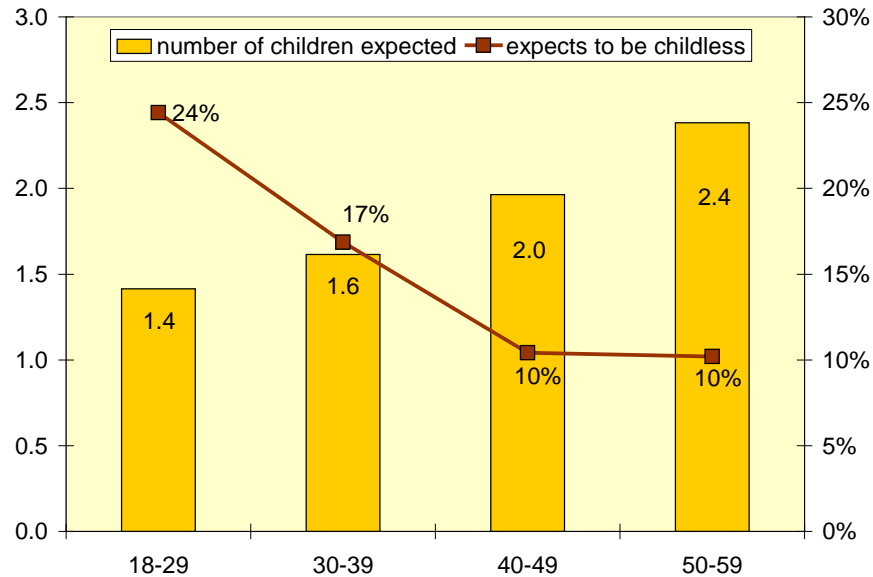
Awareness of changing situation

Population aging. The 2011 NSO adult survey included a question asking respondents if they were aware that Thailand is an aging society. Only 45% responded affirmatively. This differed only modestly by age group and between urban-rural residents with only 41% among persons in their 50s and 43% of rural respondents saying they knew Thailand was aging. This lack of awareness that the Thai population is aging is likely attributable to the rather abstract nature of the concept. It should not belie the fact, as our qualitative data reveals, that there is widespread awareness of the more concrete facts that family size has declined radically and that more children are migrating away from their parental localities to seek work as the economy rapidly transforms.

Fewer children. The 2011 NSO adult survey clearly suggests that the trend towards smaller families is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. As Figure 1 indicates, younger cohorts want progressively smaller families including increased portions who intend to remain childless. Thus compared to the near elderly in their 50s, among who only 10% have no children, almost one fourth of respondents aged 18-29 say they do not intend to have children. According to their

expectations, this group of young adults will average only 1.4 children in their lifetime. Thus quite low fertility is likely to persist and family sizes of successive cohorts entering older ages will continue to decline for at least several decades.

Figure 1. Number of expected children and percent expecting to be childless, by age



Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

FFS project results make clear that virtually everyone interviewed or included in the discussions were fully aware that family size has already declined sharply and many could readily articulate reasons why this was so. Frequently mentioned were the rising costs of raising children, often citing the need for children to receive considerably more education than in the past and the costs this entailed, as key reasons underlying the trend.

People nowadays have fewer children than those in the past. My generation thinks more about our economic situation when we want to have children. We realize that now it is difficult to earn our living. For this generation, we have to send our children to school... When I was young, ... people may have finished only 4th grade and quit school to work but now our children must be educated. [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

“Now people don’t have many children because of the high cost of living, for example, the school fee for my child. Even ... with only one child I feel the expense of my daughter’s schooling is very high. I almost cannot afford it. Besides, there’s no one to take care of the children since both parents have to work.” [Adult (migrant child), Bangkok].

Increased migration. There is also close to uniform recognition that children are more likely than in the past to migrate away from the parental locality and that this is linked to the changing nature of employment in an economy in which agriculture is of declining importance.

“It’s very common for people around this area to go to work elsewhere. Many households are like that... There were not many 10 years ago but there are more now. This is because people have more chances to study. In those days, people had less chance to continue their study since universities were far away. Wages in the area were low.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“Today the young generation is less likely to stay home because no work is available and land is limited so only their parents can work. Most of them find more comfortable jobs elsewhere and earn more. Parents want their children to work elsewhere for their own future and better life.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“In those days when there were no factories, children who finished education would work in the field nearby their house farming, growing vegetables or sugar cane, or selling things. Now that agriculture is declining and being replaced by factories, people are unlikely to live in their hometown.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“Some people in my area went to Bangkok to work... to be construction workers, factory workers, or general laborers. They left grandchildren to be taken care of by their parents. There are many of such cases around here... In the past, there were not many because people still had a lot of farm land that they could give to children to work. Moving out to work elsewhere was not common in the past.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Migration of children is often viewed in a positive light benefiting both the adult children and their parents under current circumstances when parents are still reasonably healthy and able to work.

“Now most parents like their children to continue their studies and learn more. It’s for the children’s future.” [Village health volunteer, South]

“If children stay here... the whole family will be in trouble. We’ll get poorer and worse off than before. Farming gives us little income. We’ll never have prosperity out of that. When children get higher education they hope to have a better job with high salary. Then, they will support their parents to have a better life... When we’re not well or ill they can at least send money for parents to see the doctor. We’ll have money to buy medicine.” [Near elderly parent, North]

One reason migration is not viewed more negatively is the ability to keep in contact with migrant children by phone calls now that cell phones are almost universal in Thailand. According to the 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand, 96% of persons aged 50-59 lived in a household with a cell phone. Previous research has documented that phone contact between older age parents and children who live away is very common (Knodel et al. 2007; Knodel and Chayovan 2008).

FFS project results clearly confirm this. Virtually all the near elderly parents with migrant children as well as the adult children who lived away from their parents mentioned they had frequent phone contact. In many of the cases, phone contact was daily. Comments by the near elderly parents suggested that this fulfilled much of their need for social contact with their children that lived at a distance.

“Giving me a phone call is already good enough when children cannot come. They may come only during weekend or holidays... My children like to call every evening to ask did the father come back home yet, something like that. If anything happens even at two or three o’clock in the morning they will come right away. [Near elderly parent, North]

“My son calls me everyday to ask “What are you doing? Have you eaten yet?” Even though he’s very busy whenever he’s available he would call me... I’ll feel glad with just a call from him. It’s OK if he’s not able to come. His voice on the phone can make me feel happy.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“I call both of them (parents) everyday. Mostly, it’s me who calls, but sometimes they call me, too. Everyday...it’s I who bought them a mobile phone.” [Adult child, North]

“I want my children to feel comfortable with their life. If they cannot come they can call me. Now, we can see faces of each other on the phone. Anyway, I think my children won’t let me live alone.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Increased longevity. In contrast to widespread recognition that family sizes have declined and migration of adult children has increased, most near elderly parents and adult children that were interviewed did not recognize that older persons are living to more advanced ages than in the past. In fact, a majority expressed just the opposite belief citing increased risks from various environmental factors, shifts to unhealthy diets, the AIDS epidemic and perceptions that diseases such as cancer and hypertension have increased.

“People nowadays) like to eat a lot of fat that could result in a lot of illness. Some people have diabetes. People in old time had longer lives. They didn’t eat much meat and vegetables were safe from chemicals.” [Near elderly parent, South].

“People in those days had longer lives. They had long life without illness. People nowadays also have long life but they have illnesses like high blood pressure, cholesterol, etc.” [Near elderly parent, North].

“I’m not sure (if people live longer). It could be different from the past because of pollution, environmental deterioration that occurs more now. This could ruin not only our mental health but also our physical health.” [Adult child, Northeast]

Only a few recognized that improved circumstances including better nourishment and health services have had a positive influence on longevity.

“People now have long life. Look at my grandmother, she is 96. My mother... likes to have supplementary food... is healthy without any illness... Also, now it is convenient to go to see doctors. The community hospital and the municipality office occasionally arrange activities for old people including physical check ups.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

The lack of recognition that longevity is increasing is likely attributable to the less obvious nature of the trend compared to declining family size and increased dispersion of adult children as well as the need to think in aggregate terms to recognize it. Moreover, wider exposure to the mass media which tends to treat negative developments as particularly newsworthy likely increased awareness of existing health risks. In addition, increased health services including preventative health messages to increase public awareness of risks and how to minimize them may distort perceptions of their prevalence.

Normative change. Some persons in the interviews perceived that filial obligation to older age parents is declining although among near elderly this was often qualified by adding that their own children were not like that. Several persons stressed that the sense of filial commitment depended on upbringing and that if parents raised their children properly, the children would provide care and support them in old age. Some commented that young people today, presumably referring to teenagers or pre-adolescents, are spoiled and do not obey their parents as in the past. The internet, computer games and mobile phones were cited as bad influences.

“Compared to children in old days, the ones nowadays are worse (have less filial piety) ... Partly it may be because of changes in our society. I’ve seen this from children of other people but my children are not like that.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“If you ask me which generation between this and earlier ones give more financial support to parents my answer would be the earlier generation. This is because the earlier generation had better training to do so. The next generation could be worse. However, it may be possible that people want to (give support to parents) but they are not able to.” [Adult child, Central]

“I think filial piety, or care and concern from children to parents are still the same as they were in those days. As children see parents take care of grandparents they would do the same things to their parents. Children should absorb the same feeling from parents.” [Adult (migrant child), Bangkok]

“There are a lot of bad influences to spoil children. New technologies, like computer games, mobile phones, internet make things worse. If parents are not able to give children these new technologies they’ll create some problems for the parents. These kinds of things spoil children and the ones who really spoil children are parents.” [Near elderly, Bangkok]

Overall, statements that adult children no longer provide support or care were largely absent in FFS project interviews and discussions. Only rarely were such cases of neglect cited. To the contrary, frequent mention was made that there were few if any cases of elderly in the community that were deserted by their children. Quite a few referred to a popular television program that often features cases of deserted or neglected elderly and denied that this exists in their locality or region.

“There are no cases (here) of deserted parents as we see on the TV program ‘Circle of Life’. Children may have gone to work elsewhere but they come to visit the parents and they send money back home unlike cases (on TV) in which children totally disappeared.” [Health volunteer, Northeast]

“In my hometown there are no old people who are deserted like we’ve seen on TV... There are quite a number of cases of children that go to work elsewhere and leave their children to be taken care by grandparents. Children may work in factories but go back and forth to hometown during farming season.” [Adult (migrant) child, Bangkok]

“We don’t have any case like the ones in the ‘Circle of Life’ TV program. Southern people wouldn’t be that way. There is no such case around here. Children will take care of parents. Although some children may have gone elsewhere to work, other children live with parents.” [Near elderly parent, south]

Old Age Support and Care: General Opinions

When considering old age support, it is important to recognize that it involves different aspects including material assistance, personal care and social contact. Distinguishing among these can be important since the ability of children to provide different types of support varies with their location relative to parents (Litwak and Kulis 1987). Services dependent on frequent face-to-face contact over long durations, such as long-term care for frail elderly, clearly require residential proximity and are most at risk from the dispersion of adult children. At the same time, monetary transfers can be readily implemented over any distance including even from abroad, while social contacts and emotional support in the absence of face-to-face interaction can be sustained over the phone, by email or text messaging. Also, some services require physical presence only for short durations, such as care during acute illness. Thus, short visits of children who live at a distance and take temporary leave from work can suffice and are increasingly enabled by modern, faster means of transport.

The 2007 and 2011 Surveys of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues included numerous opinion questions related to old age support. Some of the questions in the surveys relate to specific aspects of support while others refer to support in a generic sense. Given important differences in what influences the ability of children to provide differing types of support, interpreting responses to the generic questions is more problematic without knowing which aspects of support the respondent is taking into account when answering.

Living arrangements. Many aspects of well-being of older persons are influenced by their living arrangements. In Thailand, as in most of East and Southeast Asia, living with or nearby adult children has been the predominant pattern although, as noted above, has declined substantially in recent decades. Coresidence with one or more adult children, typically in a stem family configuration, has been a long standing norm in Thailand and traditionally viewed as an essential way for families to meet the needs of older dependent members (Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai 1995).

A question concerning where older persons should live in relation to their children and grandchildren was included in the 2011 NSO adult survey. The results, summarized in Table 1,

indicates there is virtually unanimous consensus that older persons should either live with or near children and grandchildren with 80% indicating coresidence is most appropriate. Also there is almost no difference by age cohort. Thus despite the ongoing decline in coresidence, the vast majority of Thais still believe that ideally older age parents should live with or nearby their children. These results strongly suggest that normative change has yet to adjust to behavioral change with respect to living arrangements.

Table 1. Opinion about where older persons should live in relation to children and grandchildren, 2011

Current age of respondent	in same house	next door or nearby	elsewhere	total
18-29	80%	19%	1%	100%
30-39	79%	20%	1%	100%
40-49	81%	18%	1%	100%
50-59	81%	19%	1%	100%
total	80%	19%	1%	100%

Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues
Differences between age groups are not statistically significant.

Given the widespread positive attitudes that still prevail towards coresidence as documented in the 2011 survey it is unsurprising that FFS project qualitative data reveal that the most common concern for well-being in old age regarding smaller families and increased migration of adult children is the increased risk that no child will coreside or live nearby when parents are no longer able to care for themselves.

“If children co-reside with us we’ll feel warm. We can ask for their help right away. If they live elsewhere and in the meantime we cannot help ourselves how can we ask them to be back?” [Near elderly parent, Central]

“Now people have fewer children... When they get older they feel they have too few children and none of their children are at home because the children were allowed to move out to work and get ahead.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“In the future, older people are likely to have less chance of having children live with them. It won’t be the same as in the past. Now, children are likely to scatter from parents; just leave grandchildren with grandparents while they go to work elsewhere. Older people who don’t have children living with them and cannot help themselves will face difficulties. Besides children, who will help them?” [Adult child, Central]

“Children have to go to study elsewhere and when they have education they’ll have to work elsewhere as well. This is the overall picture... When children go far away for their education they may find spouses over there. Even though we’ll try to have children live with us..., something may happen and things won’t go as planned.” [Village health volunteer, South]

Both the 2007 and 2011 NSO adult surveys asked if older person should live in old age homes. There was little support for this idea in either survey. For example in the 2011 survey, only 7% agreed and excluding the small proportion that was unsure, over 90% of respondents disagreed. FFS project results, however, reveal a much more mixed set of reactions. While some viewed living in a home for the aged as the ultimate sign of the lack of filial support, others viewed it less negatively. Some considered it more neutrally as simply one alternative in the case children were unable to coreside with parents who could no longer care for themselves. Several persons even saw positive aspects to living in a home for elderly in the sense that it would provide opportunities to socialize with other older persons and hence avoid loneliness.

“My children won’t let me be there (in an old age home) because they are afraid of losing their reputation. Some of my children have good financial status. If they let me be there other people would gossip saying (to my children) you are good looking and rich, why do you send your parents there” [Near elderly parent, South]

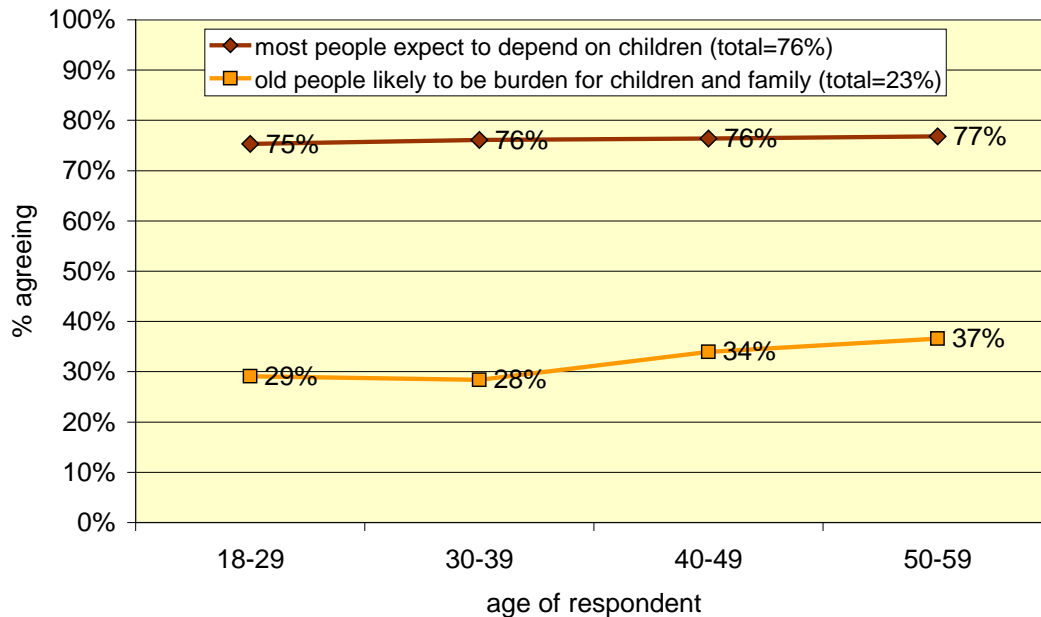
“If people really don’t have anyone (to care for them) they may want to live there. At least, they’ll be taken care of; don’t have to be alone.” [Adult child, Bangkok]

“I won’t go. A nursing home for elderly? I have never seen one actually, only on T.V., the place where old people are dropped... In the end when I can no longer do anything, my siblings are old or passed away, and my son tells me I have to live in there (nursing home), I have to go, I have to yield.” [Near elderly, North]

“There’s one good thing about living there (in home for the aged). You’ll have friends your age. It could be boring if we just live at our house. If we live there we’ll have chances to meet other people around our age so that we won’t feel lonely. If we live at our house we’ll meet only the ones who live with us.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

Filial support. The 2011 NSO adult survey included two general questions about opinions concerning filial support. One asked whether or not the respondent thought that most people generally expect to depend on children in their old age. The other asked whether older persons are likely to be a burden for adult children, grandchildren and family. The results are shown in Figure 2 according to the age of respondents.

Figure 2. Percent agreeing with general statements about filial and family support in old age, by age of respondent, 2011



Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

Fully three fourths of respondents regardless of age thought that most people expect to depend on children in old age with almost no difference evident between different age groups. Moreover, among those who did not indicate they agreed, approximately a third indicated that they were unsure (not shown). Thus the survey indicates that agreement with the norm of filial support remains quite widespread. In addition, only a minority of respondents agreed that elderly would be a burden for children and family. However, this view is somewhat more common among older respondents and especially those in the near elderly ages 50-59. The question concerning older persons as a burden to the family was also included in the 2007 NSO adult survey and the percent that agreed declined slightly since then from 36% to 32% for the overall samples.

FFS project qualitative data provide information that helps interpret the widespread agreement that older persons expect to depend on children as revealed in the survey results. It has long been noted in commentaries about Thai values that filial support to parents in old age is viewed as a form of repayment due to parents for having borne, cared for and raised an individual. This concept of parent repayment is deeply rooted in the secular and religious cultures and has been firmly entrenched in the broad normative structure of Thai society for uncounted generations

(Phillips 1965; Engelmajert and Izuhara 2010). This does not mean that a sense of obligation to support and care for parents might not change. Numerous spontaneous comments by both near elderly parents and adult children, however, suggest that widespread acceptance of this general view still prevails.

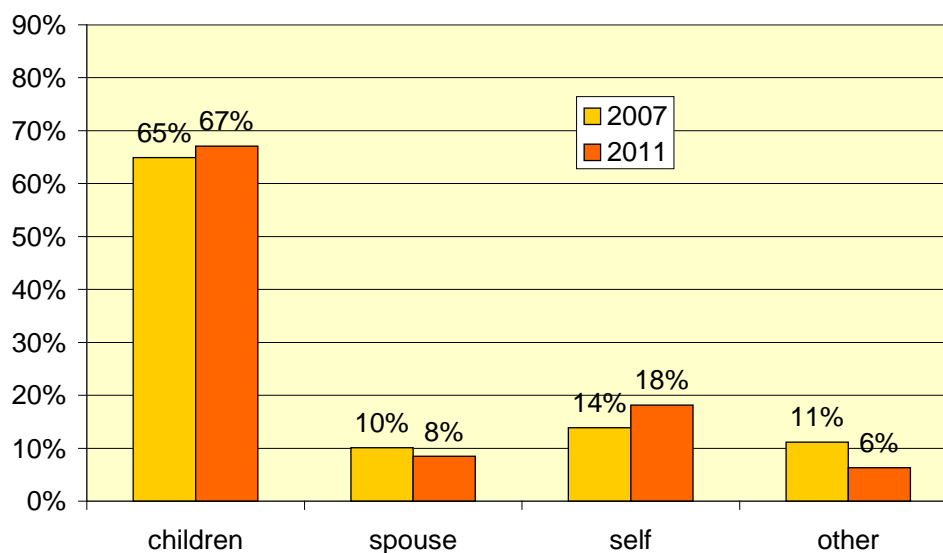
“Since parents worked hard before, now they should get a more comfortable life. In other words, parents raised and gave us support, at a later stage we have to give them support.” [Adult child, Bangkok]

“(Support and care for parents)... has been the culture from old times that has been kept until now. Parents give their life to children. When children are young we raise them up and when we’re old it’ll be their turn to take care of us.... I think it has to be this way. [Near elderly parent, North]

“I know how hard it was for them to support our education and spending. They raised us and took care of us. They could do so for us, so why can’t we for them? They are by no means our burden.” [Adult child, North]

Personal care. The vast majority of persons interviewed in the two NSO adult surveys agree that at some point older persons need a care provider. Virtually no change is evident between the two surveys (87% in 2007; 86% in 2012). Likewise, large majorities agree that person should prepare for care provider in old age (86% in 2007; 83% in 2011). Both surveys asked respondents who should be the main person to care for the elderly. Results are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Opinion about who should be the main provider of care for the elderly

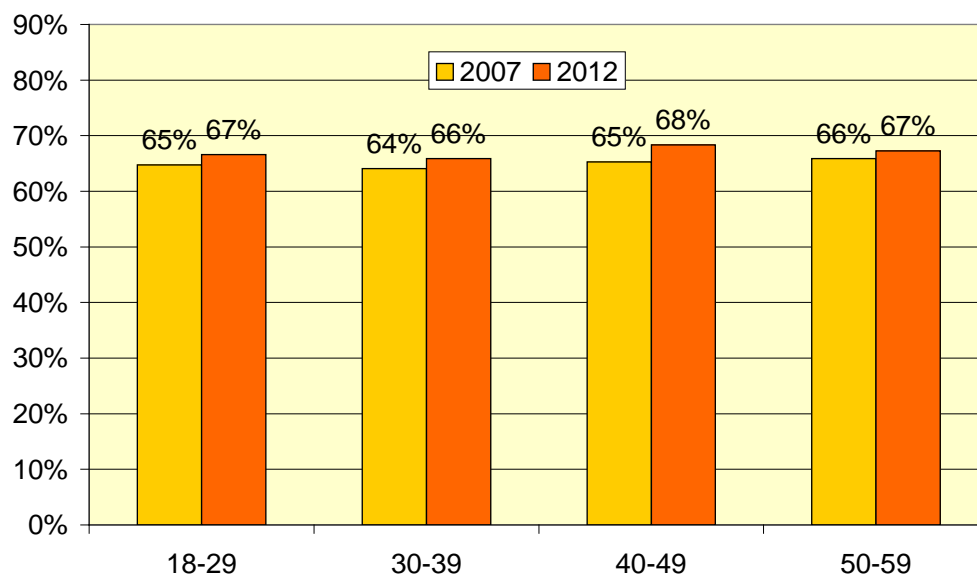


Sources: 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues
 Note: Other includes relative, government and other.

In both surveys, children were cited as the ones who should be the main carer by about two thirds of respondents, well ahead of all other available choices. The percent that indicated old persons should mainly take care of themselves increased modestly between the two surveys but nevertheless remained below 20%. Spouses were cited by no more than 10% in each survey.

Role of children. Figure 4 shows the percent who indicated that the main carer should be children for the different age groups of respondents. There is a virtual lack of differences across age groups in either survey in the percentage citing children as the most appropriate carer for older persons. This is particularly striking given, as discussed above, that the younger cohorts indicated they will have fewer children than the older ones and that these children are likely to be increasingly geographically dispersed.

Figure 4. Percent saying main carer of elderly should be children, by age of respondent



Sources: 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

In the FFS project qualitative data, as illustrated by the quotations regarding parent repayment, there is considerable evidence that children are thought to have an obligation to care for parents when parents can no longer care for themselves. Other statements also confirm that many consider the children the most appropriate persons to be main caregivers for elderly parents. However there is also recognition that this may be difficult for adult children if they have families of their own.

“When my old age comes and I won’t be able to help myself, the one who will take care of me must be my child. I think I can depend on my child but right now he is just too young (to be sure). Whatever will be, he must live with us because we have only him.” [Adult (migrant child), South]

“If children have their own families to be responsible for, how can we force them to give support and care to us?... Everyone wants to depend on children... It’ll be good if children are concerned about us. Deep in my heart, I want to depend on them but if one day in the future, they don’t support us we’ll be sad and unhappy.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

In response to being asked if taking care of elderly parents could be a burden for children, virtually all adult children we interviewed denied this. A common response was that caring for one’s elderly parents is an obligation that children willing accept and not considered as a burden by them.

“It’s my responsibility to pay my parents back. It’s really not a burden. Just to see them smile or to hear them laugh on the phone, I already feel happy and good. I don’t think it’s a burden... It’s a responsibility of children to (give support and) take care of parents and it’s a responsibility of parents to (give support and) take care of children.” [Adult child, North]

“When they didn’t have enough money for our schooling they had to work harder as hired laborers, didn’t have a comfortable job like mine now. I pay them back by sacrificing myself taking care of them. I don’t think it is a burden. No matter how old or frail they’ll be, I’m very pleased to take care of them.” [Adult child, Northeast]

However, when interpreting the virtually unanimous agreement among the adult children that we interviewed that old-age care and support of parents is not a burden it is important to bear in mind that their parents are only in their 50s and still mostly healthy and as well as economically active. Thus at present the parents require minimal if any personal care and are able to contribute to their own support.

Less sanguine views were more common among the near elderly. A number of them referred to their current or past experience in caring for their own parents. Given that such care included periods when parents are at quite advanced ages, some near elderly in contrast to the adult children actually experienced providing care and support when parents were no longer in good health or able to support themselves. Their comments are thus more likely to reflect a realistic

understanding of the demands that could be involved. In several cases, reference was made to how care for aging parents competed with raising their own family. Still, although they acknowledge that caring for parents in old age can be a burden, some mention it is nevertheless an emotionally fulfilling task.

“What I’ve been doing is a burden. A big one. I have to be responsible for everything. Even a pill. I do it all... But if I don’t do it, I would feel uncomfortable. If I do it, I feel more comfortable at heart.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“(Looking after my mother is) a big burden. I am so tired because she had bedsores around the buttocks and smells... I try to dress the wound, apply the wet pack and feed her everyday. I feel so tired but deeply happy because I have a chance to look after her and repay her my gratefulness.” [Near elderly parent, North]

When discussing whether the provision of support and care by their own children to themselves would be a burden, some near elderly parents thought it was the natural thing for children to do and that the children would accept it as such. But more common were expressions of concern for their children especially if the children had their own families. Some who recognized that old age care can be a burden for their children said they wanted to minimize the extent this would be so or even avoid it completely while others felt that despite in being a burden it was still an obligation.

“(Giving parents support and care is) a big burden. In my mind, I don’t want to be a burden for my children. On the wedding day of my daughter, I told her that she can support me if she wants; if she doesn’t want to, I wouldn’t force her to do so. She hasn’t given me (financial support) since she has her own family’s burden. I understand her situation. In those days, during the time to raise my children, I had the same big burden.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

It may be (a burden), if children have their own families. It wouldn’t be a problem if they are alone. If they are married it may create problem. [Near elderly parent, Central]

“Is it a burden for children? Partly, it is. It’s a burden but anyway children should take care of parents. It’s a responsibility of all Thai.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

Non-filial care arrangements. The FFS project explored attitudes expressed towards alternatives to children providing personal care when parents were no longer able to care for themselves. There was virtually uniform agreement that ideally it would be better to have a

child as a personal caregiver then anyone else. At the same time there was recognition among many that this was not always possible. In such situations, other family members such as grandchildren or siblings are typically favored as alternative caregivers.

Attitudes with respect to paid carers depended in part on the nature of their role. Paid carers who fill in for a coresident adult child during the hours when the child is away working or assists when the child is present are viewed as acceptable. Situations in which a paid carer is a full-time replacement for an adult child that lives elsewhere tended to be viewed less favorably.

Among the adult children that were interviewed, the idea of hiring a paid caregiver as a substitute for an absent child was widely viewed in a negative light.

“I don’t think about hiring someone to take care of parents... No matter who will be caregiver they are not children. I don’t think they (parents) can live with anyone else besides children.” [Adult child, Bangkok]

“I don’t think a paid caregiver can substitute for children for giving care to parents. If children cannot return to live with parents because of their work or having their own families they may have to leave parents to be taken care of by relatives. I don’t like the idea of hiring a caregiver. If we have to do so we must hire someone we know well who we can trust to take good care of our parents.” [Adult child, Central]

“It may be convenient to have a paid caregiver but it won’t be the same in terms of psychological well-being. For parents, the most important thing is how they feel in their heart.” [Adult child, North]

Considerably more mixed views concerning paid caregivers were expressed by the near elderly parents. While most would prefer a child, the idea of a paid caregiver that assisted a coresident child during working hours was not objectionable. Many even thought that having a full-time caregiver when children are no longer living nearby was a tolerable if not an ideal arrangement. A number of near elderly parents indicated they understand the difficulty that long term personal care could be for children, especially for children that lived elsewhere. Several mentioned they would appreciate if the costs of a paid carer could be covered by adult children. At the same time some mentioned even though they might accept a paid caregiver that relatives would be a more preferable alternative to children.

“We may have to hire a paid caregiver to live with us. We wouldn’t put a burden on other people and wouldn’t bother our child who has no sibling. Our child will have her own family, I’m talking about the future, and she wouldn’t have time to give us care.” [Near elderly parent Central]

“If my son has enough money to hire someone to take care of me when I’m bed-ridden and disabled, we have to get (a paid caregiver) then. If he has money and hires one for me, I have to accept it. I won’t be able to go anywhere and no one will take care of me then.” [Near elderly parent North]

The Thai government is developing a number of programs intended to help with the provision of care to older persons. Some are in a relatively limited pilot stage (Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute, no date). The program that at the time of the FFS project fieldwork was in the most advanced stage was the Home Care Service Volunteers for the Elderly Program which is scheduled to become operational in all local areas by 2013. Neither the near elderly parents nor the adult children interviewed in the FFS project mentioned this program or others that are less widespread as a possible solution to their potential need for long-term care. Indeed not very many were aware of this particular program. The only government program that came up in a few conversations about long-term care were occasional references to possibly going to a home for the aged are very limited in number.

It is perhaps not surprising that the government programs related to long term care are not salient for the near elderly persons and adult children since they are not current targets for them. In addition, while the volunteer program might provide some social support and occasional practical assistance in an older person’s home, it is probably unrealistic to think about such community based volunteers as a solution to long-term care needs for old age persons who are bed-ridden or require daily attention and who have no one else to provide it.

Self-reliance and work. The two NSO adult surveys indicate there is considerable support for the idea that it is good to be self-reliant in old age. Approximately three-fifths of respondents in both surveys, 58% in 2007 and 60% in 2012, endorsed the view that older persons should depend on themselves in all ways. Somewhat consistent with the idea of self dependence, surveys also revealed that only a minority of respondents agreed that older person should stop working (39% in 2007 and 35% in 2012) implying that most respondents believe that it is good

for older persons to help support themselves. In addition over 90% in both surveys agreed that persons should prepare financially for old age. In addition, all but 10% in 2007 and 12% in 2011 reported that they had at least thought about accumulating savings or property for old age over half said they had acted on this intention.

FFS project results suggest that these views may reflect a combined desire for respondents to avoid being a burden to their children in the future and a desire to reduce uncertainty concerning the extent to which family members will provide needed support.

“I think I would like to live at my house and have a small shop selling a little of this and that or selling food... If we have a very high hope to rely on them (children) and if they disappoint us we’ll be very sad and unhappy... If they are concerned and willing to support us they will. If they aren’t we’ll have to accept it and try to help ourselves as much as we can.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

“I’ve tried to tell everyone that we shouldn’t expect to depend on children since they will have their own burden. Just try to have them finish their education and be responsible for themselves. We shouldn’t expect to rely on them as long as we can take care of ourselves and are strong enough to earn our living.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

“Children have to give us support. In the meantime, we have our own support by saving money to be used when we are old. We should have our own saving money so that we don’t overburden our children.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“I’ll depend on my children when I’m old but if we still are able to support ourselves I won’t. I’ll not force my children... As long as we are able to help ourselves we don’t want to take their time and be their burden.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Most near elderly parents appear to wish to continue working as long as their health permits although many indicated they would prefer to work at a reduced pace. They cited various reasons for doing so including those just cited. A few indicated it was primarily motivated by a need for income but more commonly they cited a desire to remain active and keep busy or to have social contact to avoid loneliness and boredom as reasons.

“I would like to work as long as I can... In fact, I enjoy working. It could be lonely to stay at home. My husband also works very hard and enjoys his work. I think he’ll keep doing it without ending.” [Near elderly parents, Central]

“I think I will give up selling food at the market in the morning because I have to get up since 3 a.m. to prepare the food... Then I think I will sell drinks in front of my house to ease loneliness and no need to get up so early because I am getting older and my health does not allow.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“I want to work as long as I can. I don’t want to stay still and no matter how old I am I will work. It’s not difficult to run our shop since it’s our own shop and can do as long as we want... If we do not do any work our mind will not be at rest. We should be a useful old person.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Old Age Support and Care: Personal Expectations

Sources of income. Both the 2007 and 2011 NSO adult surveys asked respondents if they expected to receive income during old age from each of a number of potential sources which they anticipated would be their main source of income. Results are summarized in Table 2 comparing results for the total sample for the two surveys and by age of respondents for the 2011 survey. The most common source expected is one's own work. Regardless of survey or age group, a large majority expect income from work. This is consistent with findings reported in Table 1 above indicating that most respondents opposed the view that older persons should stop working. Moreover, the percent expecting income from work increased from 83% to 87% between the two surveys. In addition, younger persons are more likely than near elderly persons in their 50s to expect income from work. Together these findings suggest that the idea of increased self reliance in old age may be gaining acceptance.

Over three fourths of respondents overall in both surveys indicated they expect to receive income from children in old age. This is consistent with findings in Table 1 showing widespread agreement that older persons expect to depend on children in old age and confirms that expectations of filial material support in the future remain high. However, the percent who expect income from children is highest among the near elderly suggesting that expectations of filial material support may be on the decline. Large majorities anticipate that they will receive income from their savings or property. As with the high percentage expecting income from their work, this appears to be consistent with the findings in Table 1 that most respondents agree that older persons should depend on themselves.

Table 2. Sources of income expected during old age

	Total sample (ages 18-59)		By age of respondent 2011			
	2007	2011	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
<i>% who expect to receive income in old age from:</i>						
own work	83%	87%***	87%	89%	88%	83%***
spouse	68%	69%	69%	71%	69%	65%***
children	79%	77%	73%	73%	79%	81%***
grandchildren	41%	39%	40%	33%	37%	45%***
relative	42%	40%	42%	38%	39%	40%
savings, property	79%	81%	82%	82%	81%	79%*
retirement benefits	23%	22%	30%	23%	20%	18%***
govt. allowance	48%	72%***	71%	72%	72%	75%*
<i>Expected main source of income (% distribution)</i>		**				***
own work	27%	34%	39%	35%	32%	30%
spouse	7%	7%	6%	7%	7%	6%
children	33%	30%	24%	24%	32%	38%
grandchildren	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
relative	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%
savings, property	23%	22%	25%	26%	20%	17%
retirement benefits	4%	3%	2%	3%	4%	3%
govt. allowance	4%	4%	3%	4%	5%	4%
total	100%	100%	39%	35%	32%	30%

Sources: 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

* = the difference between the two surveys/age groups is statistically significant at the .05 level;

= at the .01 level; *= at the .001 level.

The most striking difference between the results in the two surveys is the very marked increase in the percent who expect to receive income from government allowances for elderly persons. This corresponds to the substantial expansion of the program starting in 2009 that made such coverage close to universal rather than targeted only to those in greater need (Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute, no date).

Somewhat surprising are the substantial minorities of respondents who indicate they expect to receive income from grand children or relatives given that representative surveys of older persons find that only small minorities report receiving such income (e.g. Knodel and Chayovan 2008).

Results on the expected main source of income indicate that for the overall sample own work and children are the two most frequently mentioned, although savings and property were also cited by a substantial share. Overall, the percentage whose main expected source was own work increased between the two surveys while the percentage citing children declined somewhat. The percentage that expects their own work to be their main income source declines with the age of the respondent while the percentage citing children increases with age. In addition, the percent that expect to mainly to depend on savings and property is higher for younger respondents than for older ones. These differences again suggest that the extent of dependence on children for material support may be on the decline while reliance on oneself may be increasing.

The 2011 NSO adult survey includes questions about whether the respondent is married or expects to marry and whether the respondent has or expects to have children. Since income from a spouse can only be expected for persons who marry and income from children only for persons who have children, it is of interest to examine expectations among those who are married or expect to marry and for those who have or expect to have children. Table 3 examines the relationship between age and expected income from spouses and children, the two key family members that loom large in support in old age, taking these considerations into account.

Table 3. Percent expecting income from spouse and children in old age, by age, 2011

Dependent variable and current age	Expects income from spouse in old age		Expects income from children in old age	
	All	Married or expects to marry	All	Has or expects to have children
<i>Expects any income</i>	***	***	***	***
18-29	69%	75%	73%	81%
30-39	71%	76%	73%	81%
40-49	69%	73%	79%	85%
50-59	65%	68%	81%	87%
total	69%	73%	77%	84%
<i>Expects as main source of income</i>			***	***
18-29	6%	7%	24%	27%
30-39	7%	8%	24%	26%
40-49	7%	8%	32%	35%
50-59	6%	6%	38%	41%
total	7%	7%	30%	33%

Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

***= the difference between the two surveys is statistically significant at the .001 level.

Results for all respondents show little consistent relationship with age and the percent that expect at least some income from their spouse in old age. However when only those who are married or expect to marry are considered, the younger cohorts are somewhat more likely to expect support from a spouse compared to older cohorts. At the same time, there is little relationship between age and the expectation that a spouse will be the main source of income either for the total sample or for those who are married or expect to marry. Regardless of age, only a very modest percentage of respondents indicated that they expect their spouse to be their main source of support.

Expectations of income from children show a more consistent relationship with age. Although overall expectations of some income from children are high, the younger cohorts are less likely to expect income from children both among the total sample and among those who have or expect to have children. Even more pronounced is a tendency for younger cohorts among those who have or expect to have children to have lower expectations than older cohorts that children will be their main source of support.

Personal care. As noted above, long term personal care requires geographical proximity and thus is intimately linked to living arrangements and migration. Unlike with respect to income sources, the two NSO adult surveys did not ask respondents' about their own expectations concerning their personal care in old age. Instead, the surveys included more general questions asking if respondents had ever thought about with whom they would live and about who would take care of them in old age and if they had done anything to prepare for these matters. Among respondents aged 50-59 in the 2011 survey, i.e. in the ages of the near elderly parents in the FFS project, all but 19% replied that they had at least thought about who would be their caregiver and all but 18% had thought about their future living arrangements. In addition, 44% indicated they had done something to prepare for each of these matters. As results from the attitudinal questions reviewed above reveal, high percentages of respondents agreed that children should take main responsibility for caring for older persons. Thus expectation of filial personal care is apparently reasonably high. This is also the impression that FFS project results convey although with a number of qualifications.

Adult children's perspective. Virtually all of the adult children interviewed in the FFS project indicated they plan to provide personal care when their aging parents are no longer able to care for themselves. If they were not living nearby when the need arose, most indicated that they would return home to fulfill this filial obligation. At the same time, several expressed concern about potential difficulties in earning a livelihood if they return to their parental locality. For a few this concern has them considering bringing their parents to live with them rather than returning to where the parents currently live.

“At present, my parents can take care of themselves and I don’t have to worry about them. When they are real old I have to go back anyway. My husband has the same idea as mine. Now he has only his mother and he would like to go back to take care of her since neither of her 2 children lives with her.” [Adult child, Bangkok]

“If they (parents) are ill we’ll have to return home. We have to leave our job here and go to live with them since they have no one. We are their children, we have to do so. We may have to find another job in the hometown to be near them; wouldn’t desert them to be alone... In case we cannot go back or we cannot leave our job here, we’ll have to bring them here to live with us so that we wouldn’t have to worry about ourselves and our parents.” [Adult (migrant child), South]

When adult children were asked if they expected their own children to care for them in the future there was a more mixed reaction. Given that the need for personal care is far in the future and that either they have not yet started a family or their children are very young, few had likely given serious consideration to this issue. Nevertheless several were able to respond when asked.

Interviewer: “Have you ever thought that your children should give you support and care when you are old?”

Respondent: “I don’t have that much hope. I’m not sure that I can raise my child in the way I want. If my child wants to take care of me, let the child do it. If not, it’s OK.”
[Adult child, Bangkok]

“When that time comes my daughter should take care of us. If we raise our daughter the same way our parents did to us, my daughter should take care of us. She should think the same way we do... As children see parents take care of grandparents they would do the same things to their parents. Children should absorb the same feeling from parents.”
[Adult (migrant child), Bangkok]

Near elderly parents' perspective. Although the majority of near elderly parents interviewed indicated that they hope for a child to care for them in old age, actual expectations that this will occur were more mixed. Some parents were confident their children would provide care and several had already discussed the matter with their children. Several others expressed ambivalence due to concern about burdening their children with the responsibility. Still others were considering alternative arrangements to rely on relatives, to hire a paid care giver or even to go to an old age home. Their reasons they cited for considering alternatives were either to relieve the burden on their children or to allow the possibility that filial care would not be forthcoming.

Deep in my heart, I expect my children to take care of me. I have talked to them. Once I pointed to an old woman who walked alone to the market and said don't let me be like that when I'm old. My child said, no way that I'll let you be like that. I'll take good care of you at home." [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

"If that time comes, one of my children, maybe the daughter, will come back. I've talked with my children and my children said that if it's really needed they'll come back to take care of me" [Near elderly parent, North]

"My daughter told me to go to live with her but I thought we are too different in terms of generation. If I go to live with her when I'm 60 or 70 she may ask why I didn't come when I was still strong; I'll be just be a burden if I come to her when I'm frail." [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

"Our child will have her own family, I'm talking about the future, and she wouldn't have time to give us care. At least, if we have a lump sum of money we'll be able to find someone to help take care of us." [Near elderly parent, Central]

As noted above, some adult children who live at a distance think that it might be better to bring parents to live with them rather than to return to the parents' locality to provide care. Reactions of near elderly parents to the idea were mixed with a few expressing willingness to do so but others this was clearly a less preferred or even an unacceptable solution.

Interviewer: "In case of not living with children and they want to hire someone to take care of you, can you accept it?"

Respondent: "Yes, I can. But, if I can choose I'd better go to live with them. Children are better than paid care giver. Children give better care and no one can beat children." [Near elderly parent, South]

“We wouldn’t go to live with children because we are not familiar with a new surrounding. We are used to our countryside where the air is fresh and clean. To go to live with them in a square room or in a sub division, I definitely don’t want it. It’s congested. I’ve already told my children that if the time that I couldn’t do anything by myself comes I still want to live here. If I have to die I want to die here. No matter what will happen, I wouldn’t go to live with them.” [Near elderly parent, North]

Discussion and Conclusions

The number of older persons in Thailand and their share of the population will increase substantially during the coming decades. Primary responsibility for the care and support of older persons has traditionally rested with the family through a system defined mainly in terms of filial obligations of adult children. Future cohorts entering the old age span will have fewer and more dispersed children to depend on while at the same time likely survive to increasingly older ages. These trends pose important challenges to family, community and state if the well-being of older persons is to be sustained and improved. FFS project results suggests that there is little popular recognition that people are living longer but at the same time there is widespread awareness that family size has substantially declined and that increased migration related to education and employment opportunities are resulting in fewer adult children remaining in geographical proximity to their aging parents.

Living arrangements and particularly coresidence of older persons with at least one adult child has been integral to the family support system that prevailed during the past. National survey data, however, has documented a steady and substantial reduction over the last decades in coresidence with children reflecting declining family size and increased migration of adult children. There can be little doubt that the trend away from coresidence will continue in Thailand given that the forces behind it remain very much in place. At the same time, the NSO adult surveys and the FFS project both show strong support for having children live with or nearby aging parents as well as a widespread preference for children to be the main care provider when a parent is too old to carry on without assistance. Given the necessity of physical presence in order to provide personal care, the decreasing availability of children who coreside or live nearby suggests a disjuncture between the changing empirical reality and normative preferences both with respect to living arrangements and personal care.

In judging the extent to which changing living arrangements threaten filial personal care it is important to recognize that such care is usually needed for a rather limited period of time towards the end of the elderly age span. Thus most persons aged 60 and older, whether or not coresident with children, do not require such care. FFS project results show that adult children often state their intentions to either return to their parental home or bring their parents to live with them if and when the parents need personal care and no sibling is fulfilling the role. Such migratory moves are likely to be one way in which families adapt to the need for personal care of elderly members. Still it is unclear to what extent such moves will occur when the actual need arises. Some parents will be very reluctant to leave their home communities to join one of their adult children especially if the parents live in a rural area and the child lives in a large city. In addition, the lack of a viable livelihood in the parental locality as well as obligations to their own conjugal family may prove to be a bigger concern when the time comes than adult children now recognize.

Relying on paid caregivers as substitutes for children is also a potential solution affordable and acceptable to the parties involved. So far, national surveys of the older population find that paid caregivers for elderly persons are quite rare (Knodel and Chayovan 2012). If current trends towards improved income for older persons and their children continue, more older persons and their families may be able to afford such care. Even when paid caregivers could be afforded, however, concern about having someone unknown in this role may discourage trusting an outside person to fulfill such an intimate role. FFS project results indicate that relatives may often be preferred to paid professional caregivers as alternatives to children. Thus, one arrangement that may become more common could be to pay a relative in the parental locality or a trusted neighbor to take the role of caregiver if a child was unable to return. An example of this was observed during the FFS project fieldwork.

FFS project results indicate that a fair share of near elderly parents have concerns about becoming a burden to their children and wish to maintain their independence as long as possible. For those who are married, it may become more common for spouses to care for each other. In addition, when reaching old age, improvements in the physical environment as well as increased use of mobility aids may enable the period of independence to be extended.

The Thai government is taking the challenges of population aging seriously and may well play a larger role in the future in terms of care provision for the elderly. Programs such as the expanding home based care volunteers project may enable the need for family care to at least be postponed. Yet it is hard to see how volunteer home based care programs can realistically meet the need for personal care when it is required on a sustained full time basis (Chen & Thompson 2010). Also it is unlikely that government-sponsored institutional homes for the elderly will make much of a dent in any emerging unmet need for family care. At present there are only a few thousand residents in government homes for the elderly. Moreover attitudes remain quite unfavorable towards institutionalization of older persons as a solution. While private nursing homes may expand some, negative attitudes among adult children and their parents as well as affordability will likely limit this as a major solution for at least sometime to come.

With respect to social contact, the greater dispersion of children will reduce face-to-face interaction but does not prevent contact in other forms. The spread of cell phones has made contact with children who live at a distance very easy and very common. Near elderly parents in the FFS project seemed pleased to be able to keep in touch with their children in this way. Future advances in communication technology as well as the spread of home computers are likely to increase the ability of parents to keep in contact with their adult children who live at a distance and further mitigate the effect on social contact of increased dispersion of adult children. Improved long distance transportation will also facilitate the possibility of bringing together elderly parents and absent children when the need and desire to meet arise.

Financial support does not require physical proximity and thus greater dispersion of children does not necessarily threaten filial material support. The NSO adult surveys indicate that large majorities of adults expect to receive income in old age from their children and that substantial minorities still expect the main source of their income to be from children. Although future elderly will have fewer children to provide such support, higher education and changing employment patterns are likely to increase their children's earnings and their children's ability to provide financial support and thus could compensate for their lesser numbers. In addition, the recently expanded welfare allowance program for older persons together with the Social Security system and other government initiatives that are expanding retirement benefits for working age

persons could reduce the need to depend on children and substitute for filial financial support. Such increased formal support can also be important to counteract the growing proportion who are childless and thus for whom filial support is clearly unavailable.

Increased economic activity among older persons may also provide a substitute for filial material support in the future. Both the NSO adult surveys and FFS project results indicate that there is considerable support for the idea that older persons should remain self-reliant as long as possible. In addition, FFS project results suggest that some near elderly parents view the chance to continue to work favorably especially if at a moderated pace seeing. National surveys of older persons, however, found that only a relatively modest share of among non economically active older persons indicated they would be willing to work (Knodel, Chayovan and Prachuabmoh 2011). One barrier to remain economically active among government employees is that the official mandatory retirement age is set at 60. Raising or eliminating this age limit could facilitate increased employment not only among older persons in government but also in the private formal sector by helping establishing a new general norm about the appropriate age to retire.

In conclusion, assessing the future of family support for older persons in Thailand (and elsewhere) involves numerous sources of uncertainty. The economic, social, political and technological environments in which Thais live out their lives are constantly changing, often in substantial ways. In addition, future elderly will differ considerably from those of today not only in terms of the number and location of their children but in other important respects as well. They will be better educated, likely be in better health, have different employment histories and far more will be covered by some form of formal retirement benefits. At the same time, a growing proportion of elderly in the future will be childless and increased numbers will have remained unmarried and have no spouse. Perhaps most importantly, parents and their adult children as well as those who will be childless in old age are unlikely to stand by passively as the world about them changes. Thus they will be exercising their own human agency to adapt to the new circumstances in ways that minimize negative impacts and maximize potential benefits.

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