



MRS Guidance Note: Age bands for researching over 65s

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MRS has produced this Guidance Note to help MRS members recognise the importance of introducing age bands into their demographic age screening questions. Often people talk about the 'older population' (aged 65 and over) as a homogeneous group. However, just using an over 65 age band can cover two separate generations, who will have different reference points and life experiences. Therefore, it is important to consider dividing the over 65s into separate categories which will be more representative of how the individuals in this age group actually think and feel.

Researchers can use this guidance to support their understanding of the reporting rules contained within the MRS Code of Conduct.

Legal and Regulatory Obligations

Under the MRS Code of Conduct 2014 it is important to allow participants to express their views in the way that they prefer. Breaching this requirement can leave your activities open to investigation under the MRS disciplinary process.

Rule 6 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by the member's professional activities.

Rule 33 (c) of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take reasonable steps to ensure ... c. that participants are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know/prefer not to say where appropriate.

Suggested Age Bands:

Statistics from the UK Office of National Statistics indicate that there are currently 11.4 million people aged 65 or over in the UK.¹ The population is ageing rapidly with life expectancy steadily increasing. It is important that people in this age group are able to fully express their views in the way that they wish including age. Using an age band that groups all participants over the age of 65 into a single category may mean that participants are unable to do so and may also over simplify results and obscure important differences in behaviour or responses from persons in this age group.

Researchers conducting research should endeavour to ensure that the research is age-friendly and inclusive. Participants may feel that being grouped into a broad over 65 age category does not give full respect to their contribution to the research. Additionally they may feel that they are being patronised by the research as a general over 65 category that implies that there is no difference in the responses that a person of 66 may make to those of a person over 90. This could lead to participants becoming disengaged from the research process.

MRS suggests that researchers consider using the age bands used by the ONS census (appendix 1) or 10 year age bands (such as 65-74, 75 years and over) as appropriate when researching over 65s. Many clients whose products/services target the over 65 age group would value the breakdown in the age banding to help them further understand what is important to each category. This would also be an important issue for researchers involved in social research projects looking at services targeted at an older demographic group or more generally at population ageing.

Bearing in mind that the older population may experience increased vulnerability, the MRS Best Practice Guide on Research Participant Vulnerability provides further advice.

<http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS%20Researching%20Vulnerable%20Participants%20best%20practice%20note.pdf>

Appendix 1

An example of over 65 age bands used in the ONS Census:

65 - 69

70 - 74

75 - 79

80 - 84

85 - 90

90+

ⁱ Mid-2014 Population Estimates UK Office for National Statistics, 2015.