

## Is Caring Associated with Increased Mortality in Northern Ireland?

### Key Findings:

- at the 2001 Census 14% (162,884) of the population described themselves as caregivers: of these 59% provided 19 or fewer hours per week; 15% provided 20-49 hours; and 26% provided 50 or more hours;
- the majority of caregivers were females (more so at higher levels of care), married and aged 35-64;
- those providing over 50 hours of caregiving per week were more disadvantaged than non-caregivers;
- caregivers report lower levels of long term limiting illness than non-caregivers but higher levels of poor general health;
- overall caregivers had lower mortality risks than non-caregivers however the risk of mortality amongst caregivers increased with amount of time spent caring.

### BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Relatively little is known about the effects of caring on physical health and subsequent mortality. This research examined the self-reported health of informal carers and their mortality in the subsequent four years. The term informal caring describes those who provide care or assistance (without pay) to those who are ill or need help with personal activities of daily living.

### METHODOLOGY

The Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS) was used to link deaths from 2001-2005 to those 16 and over, enumerated at the 2001 Census and not living in communal establishments. Prevalence of caregiving was determined using the 2001 Census question on providing care and, if so, how many hours per week<sup>1</sup>. Study members were analysed in relation to individual (age, sex, marital status and household socio-economic position) and area characteristics (population density and deprivation levels derived at Super Output Area government administrative level). The health status of study members was assessed using two measures of self-reported health - the presence of limiting long term illness and general health in the twelve months prior to the census.

Descriptive, multivariate logistic and mortality analyses were undertaken separately for males and females.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- support for caregivers is a government priority - they are a heterogeneous group and initiatives cannot assume they have identical needs; different interventions will be required depending on how they respond to the caring role;

<sup>1</sup> Do you look after, or give any help or support to family members, friends, neighbours or others because of: long term physical or mental ill-health or disability; problems related to old age?

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- whilst this research does not exclude the possibility of ill health effects of caring for some sub-groups of carers, it does suggest that some of the positive aspects of caring have been under-reported; too much focus on the negative aspects of caring may mean the carer experience is misunderstood in terms of satisfaction and meaning and a reduced risk of mortality.

**Table 1: Distribution of Caring Role by Age and Sex**

Sex	No Care	1-19 hrs	20-49 hrs	50+ hrs
	%	%	%	%
Male	49.1	42.0	38.6	38.0
Female	51.9	58.0	61.4	62.0
Age				
16-34	37.2	23.1	22.6	14.9
35-64	45.7	68.5	67.1	64.4
65+	17.1	8.5	10.4	20.8

**Table 2: General Health Status by Care-giving Role, Age & Sex (Fully Adjusted Cox Proportional Hazard Ratios \*\*\* = p<0.001)**

	No Care	1-19 hrs	20-49 hrs
Female < 65			
GH=Good	1.00	0.90	1.02
GH=Fair/Poor	1.00	0.59***	0.64***
Female 65 +			
GH=Good	1.00	0.48***	0.81
GH=Fair/Poor	1.00	0.60***	0.69***
Male < 65			
GH=Good	1.00	0.80	1.06
GH=Fair/Poor	1.00	0.70***	0.91
Male 65 +			
GH=Good	1.00	0.67***	0.95
GH=Fair/Poor	1.00	0.71***	0.73***

1.00 = reference category, <1.00 = decreased risk, >1 = increased risk

### NORTHERN IRELAND MORTALITY STUDY (NIMS)

The NIMS, a sister study to the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS), is a record linkage study which links 2001 Census returns to subsequently registered mortality data. Both studies allow exploration of health and socio-demographic characteristics to provide an insight into the status of the NI population. They can be used in analyses of, for example, social inequity, population trends, mortality studies and the impact of new public health policies and the planning of services. The data will interest a variety of researchers and policy-makers UK-wide.

The NILS Research Support Unit provides information, advice and support for potential academic and government research users of the NILS and NIMS databases. For further information please go to our website at [www.nils-rsu.census.ac.uk](http://www.nils-rsu.census.ac.uk).

This research brief is based on O'Reilly D, Connolly S, Rosato M & Patterson C (2008) *Is caring associated with an increased risk of mortality? A Longitudinal Study*. Soc. Sci. & Medicine. 67, 1282-1290 For further information please go to: [NILS-RSU-Publications](http://NILS-RSU-Publications).