

Deaf Seniors

A Profile of Deaf Seniors in New South Wales – 2009
(Summary and Recommendations)



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FOREWORD

Deaf Seniors – A Profile of Deaf Seniors in New South Wales – 2009 is an update of the 1999 survey which looked at the profile and potential needs of Deaf seniors in NSW. This study was designed to review earlier demographic information and provide updated information about the older members of the Deaf Community residing in New South Wales.

The information contained in this report highlights the needs of Deaf seniors and will assist the Deaf Society of NSW with strategic planning for future services. It will also enable the Deaf Society to make further representations to various government departments and generic service providers on behalf of Deaf seniors to improve access to services to better meet their needs.

I congratulate the research team, staff and volunteers for their efforts in conducting this survey and producing this information report.

The success of this survey would not have been possible without the co-operation and involvement of older members of the Deaf community. I would like to sincerely thank them, as well as those people who assisted with the organisation and conduct of the consultations, held throughout New South Wales.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'G' followed by a horizontal line.

Anthony Gorringe
President

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1 INTRODUCTION

The number of older people in Australia is going up. Older people are also living longer. This means that older people need an income for a longer time, somewhere to live for a longer time and more health services. Deaf seniors also have unique needs for communication because they use Australian Sign Language (Auslan).

Deaf seniors are a significant part of the Deaf community. If the population of older people is increasing then we expect the population of Deaf seniors to be increasing too. This is why in 1999 the Deaf Society of NSW (DSNSW) surveyed and collected information about Deaf seniors living in NSW (Bonser, 1999). Ten years have passed and DSNSW has decided to update the 1999 survey.

We can compare 1999 and 2009 survey results and see what is different and what is the same.

The information collected will be used to:

- find out what Deaf seniors want and need
- plan for future services and programs
- provide information to government and others
- lobby government for better services

Note that the capitalised word 'Deaf' is used in this report to mean those who identify with a community of deaf people who use Australian Sign Language (Auslan) to communicate. The uncapitalised word 'deaf' is used to mean people who have little or no hearing and does not indicate if the person identifies as Deaf or hard of hearing.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009, 142 surveys were given out to Deaf seniors over the age of 55 in several different locations in NSW where Deaf people meet. The 1999 survey had answers from 128 Deaf seniors over the age of 50. The surveys asked questions about different parts of their lives. Some of the questions were the same as the 1999 survey (Bonser, 1999) and some were different. The focus of the 1999 survey was on living arrangements. This survey was broader and looked at access to services and technology as well.

DSNSW serves deaf people who use sign language as their main form of communication. Therefore most of the deaf people surveyed use sign language and identify as members of the Deaf community. The groups and communities we contacted where deaf people meet also use sign language.

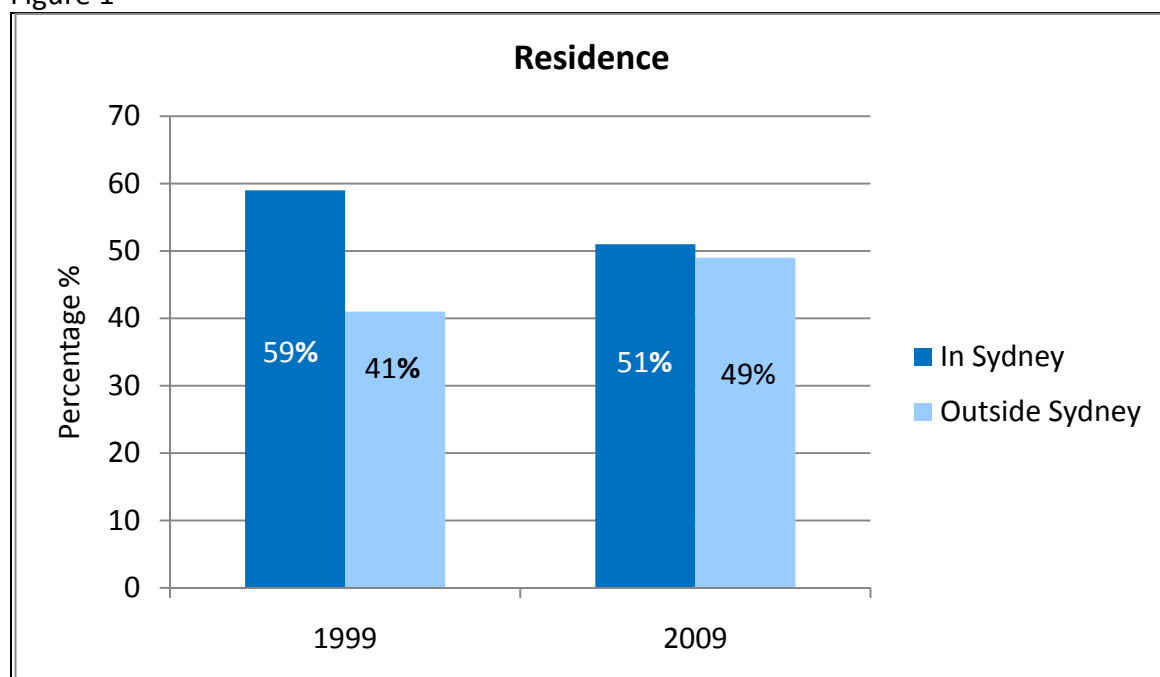
Below is a summary of the results under the categories that were surveyed.

Residence

We asked Deaf seniors about where they lived. We compared their responses with the general 'hearing' population, the Deaf community and the answers from the 1999 survey.

The 2009 survey found a larger percentage of Deaf seniors living outside Sydney than the 1999 survey as seen in Figure 1. This is a reminder that Sydney should not be the focus for services and that other areas need to have services too.

Figure 1



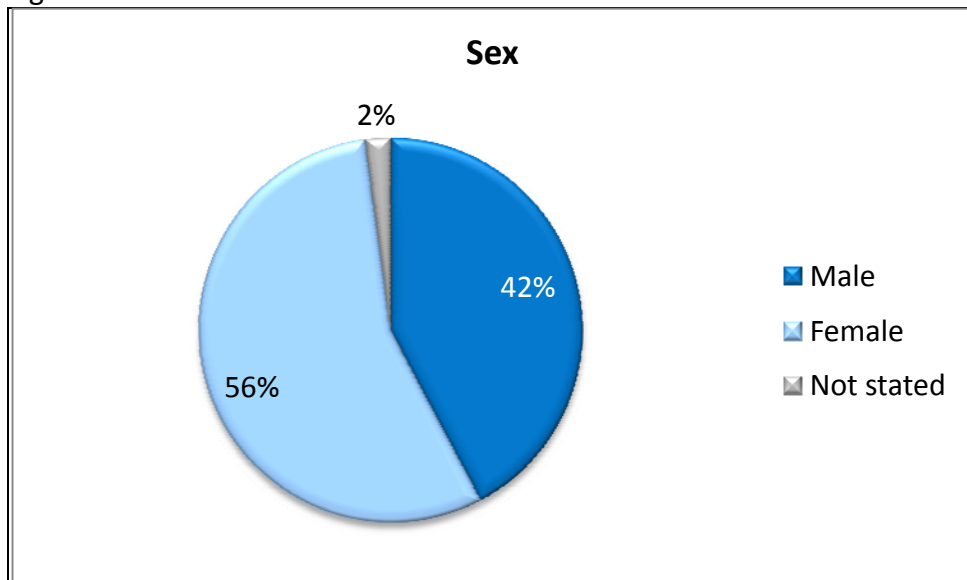
The 2006 census shows that in NSW most people live in Inner Sydney. The next biggest group live in Western Sydney. In the Deaf community however, more people live in Western Sydney (Willoughby, 2009). The 1999 survey also showed this. Answers from the 2009

survey show more Deaf seniors living in Inner Sydney and other regions suggesting a possible movement of Deaf seniors out of the Western Sydney area.

Sex

Both the 1999 and 2009 surveys show that there were slightly more female Deaf seniors than males. Figure 2 shows the 2009 percentages. This result is the same in the general hearing population (ABS, 2006). As females get older, they die at a slower rate.

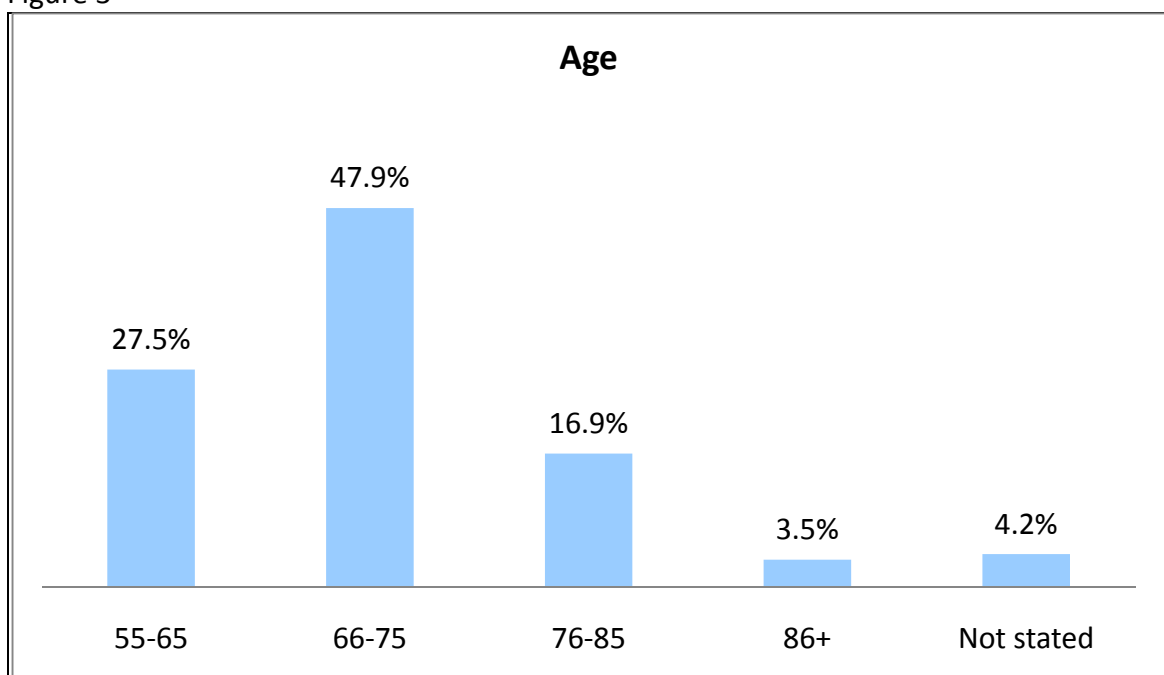
Figure 2



Age

In both 1999 and 2009 the largest age group for people completing the survey was those aged between 66 and 75. Figure 3 shows the 2009 age breakdown.

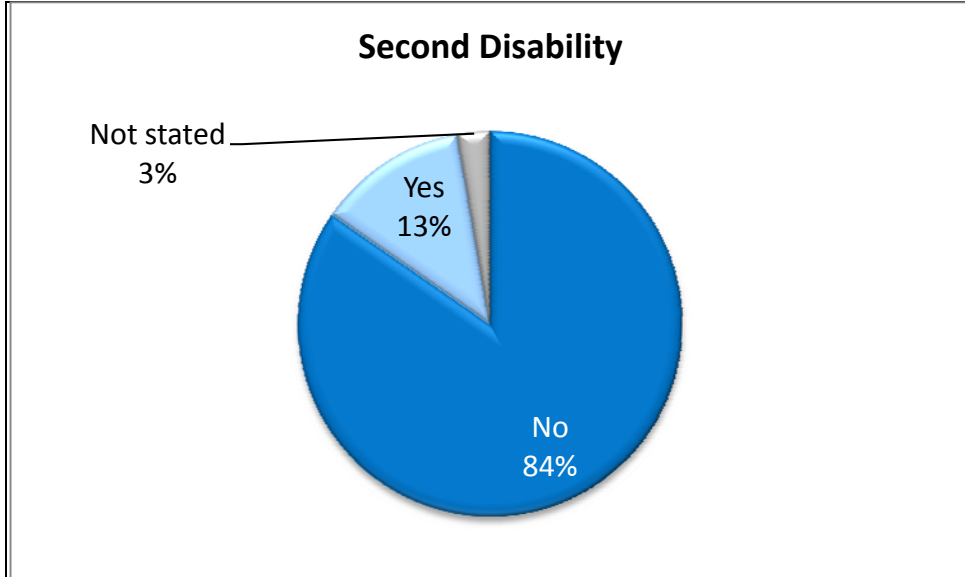
Figure 3



Second Disability

Deaf seniors were asked if they had another disability (not deafness). 13% of Deaf seniors said they had a second disability – see Figure 4.

Figure 4

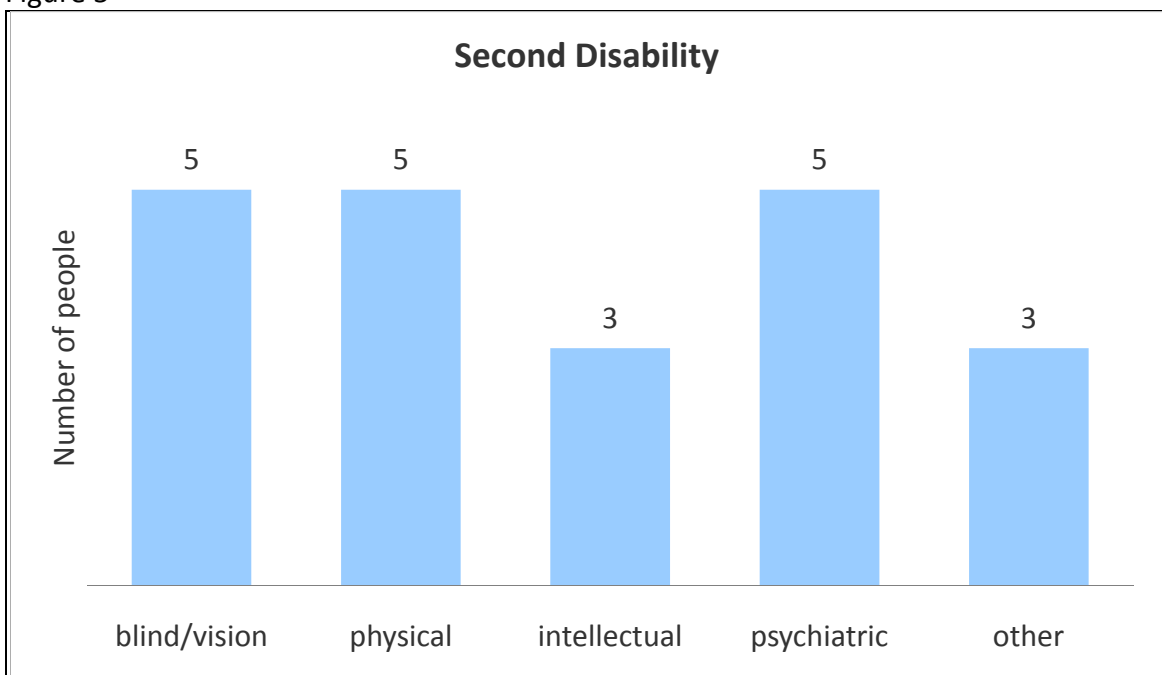


The four main disabilities were:

- blindness/vision impairment,
- physical disability,
- psychiatric disability and
- intellectual disability.

Figure 5 shows that of the 13%, 5 people were blind or had vision difficulties, 5 had a physical disability, 3 had an intellectual disability and 5 had a psychiatric disability.

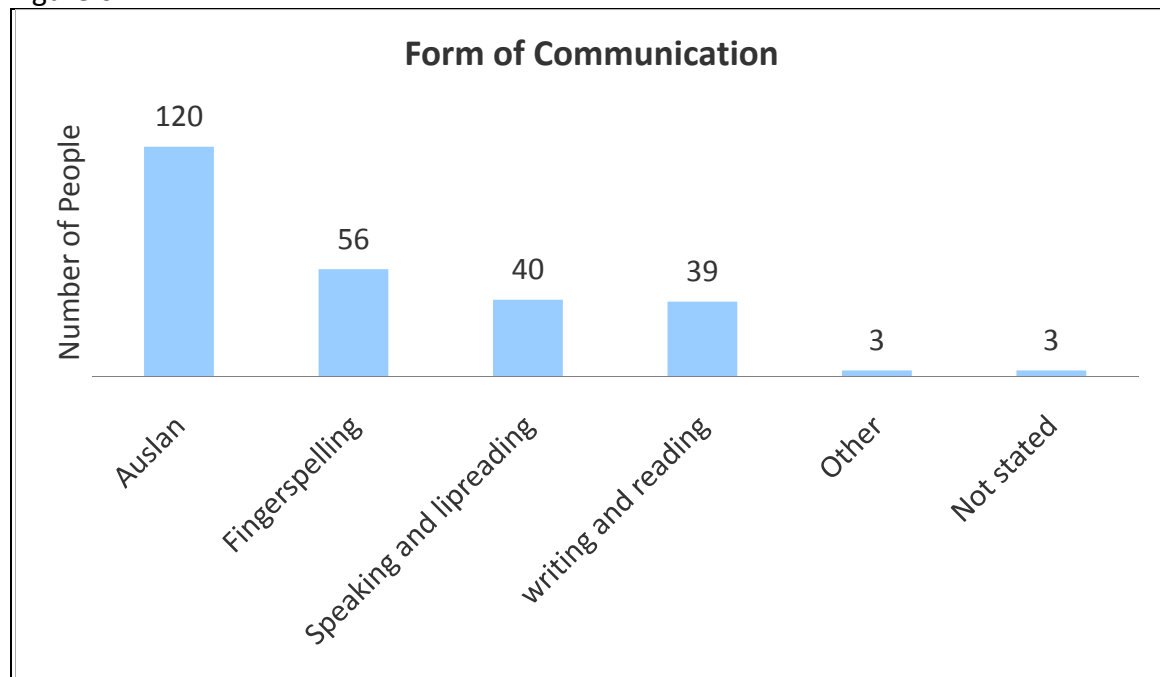
Figure 5



Form of Communication

Deaf seniors were asked how they communicate. The options for deaf people are Auslan, Fingerspelling, speaking and lipreading and writing and reading. Compared with the 1999 survey, there is an increase in the proportion of people who said Auslan was their main form of communication. This is probably because Auslan is more recognised and known than it was ten years ago. Auslan as a language has more status and is more understood. Figure 6 shows the popularity of each communication method in 2009 (more than one answer possible).

Figure 6



Relationship Status

Deaf seniors were asked about their relationship status. Most had married. Figure 7 shows that 90% had married. This includes those who were widowed or divorced with 9% who had never married.

Figure 7

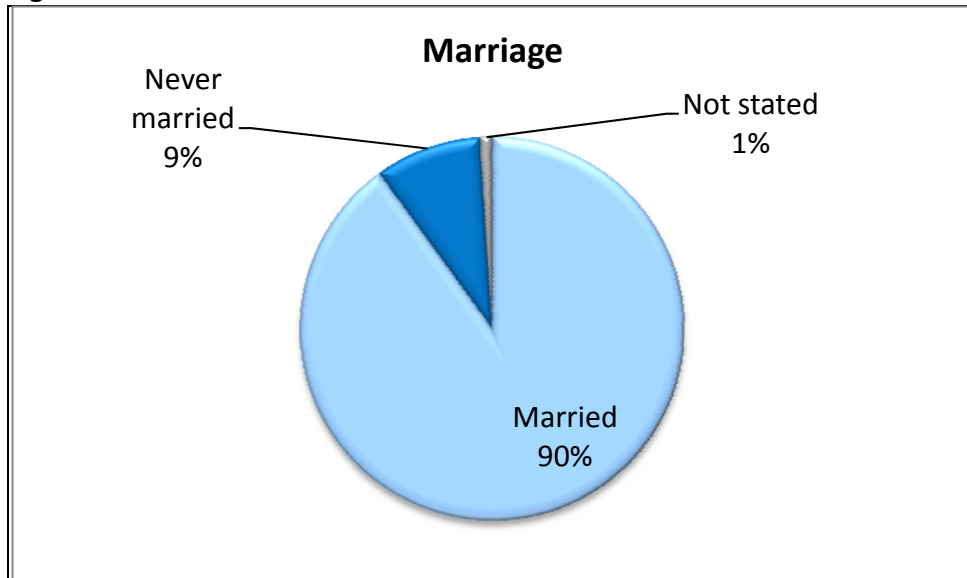
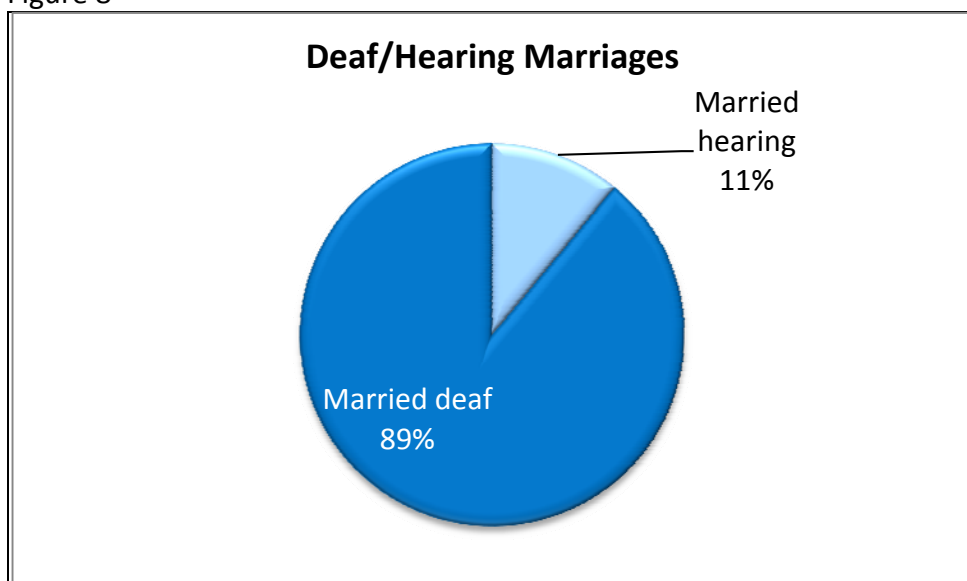


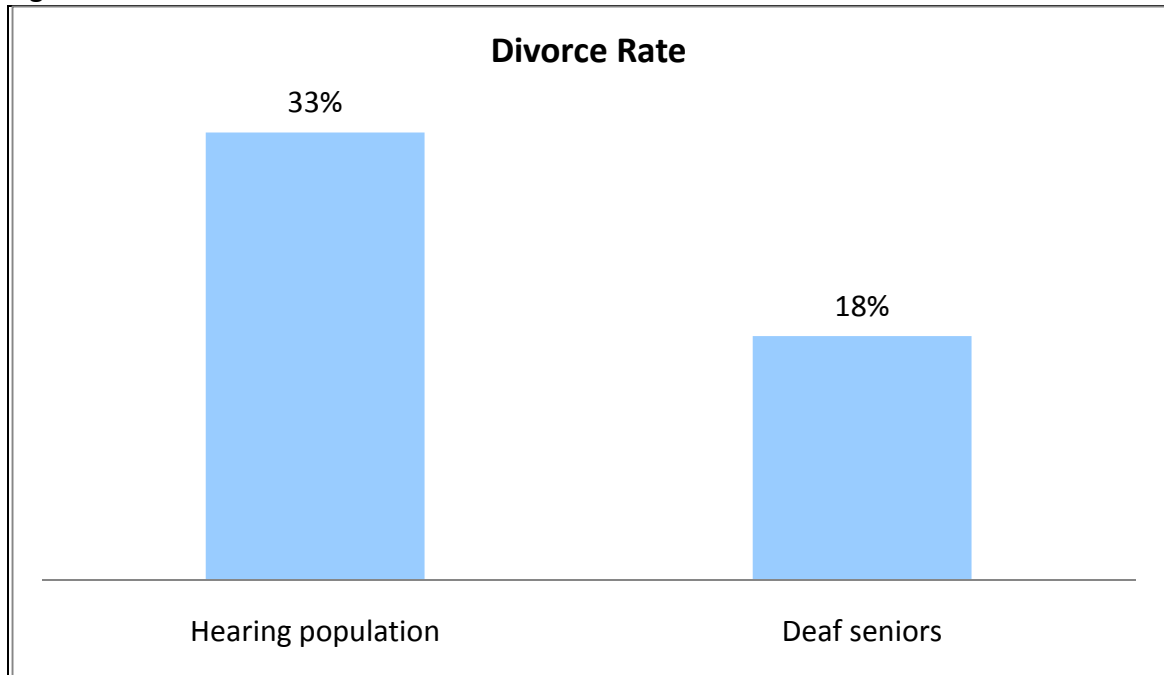
Figure 8 shows that 89% of those currently married are married to other deaf people. This high rate of marriage to other deaf people is common in Deaf communities around the world (Johnston, 1989). The common language and culture are highly valued and make strong bonds between deaf people.

Figure 8



These strong bonds are also shown in the divorce rate. Figure 9 shows that the general hearing population has a divorce rate of 33% (ABS, 2006). Because of the different norms for the 65+ generation we would expect the divorce rate for that group of people to be much lower than 33%. The lower divorce rate among Deaf seniors compared with the general hearing population could be because of the strong bonds of language and culture, or that Deaf women are less empowered due to education and financial independence or that Deaf seniors have a more traditional view of marriage being a bond that is not easily broken.

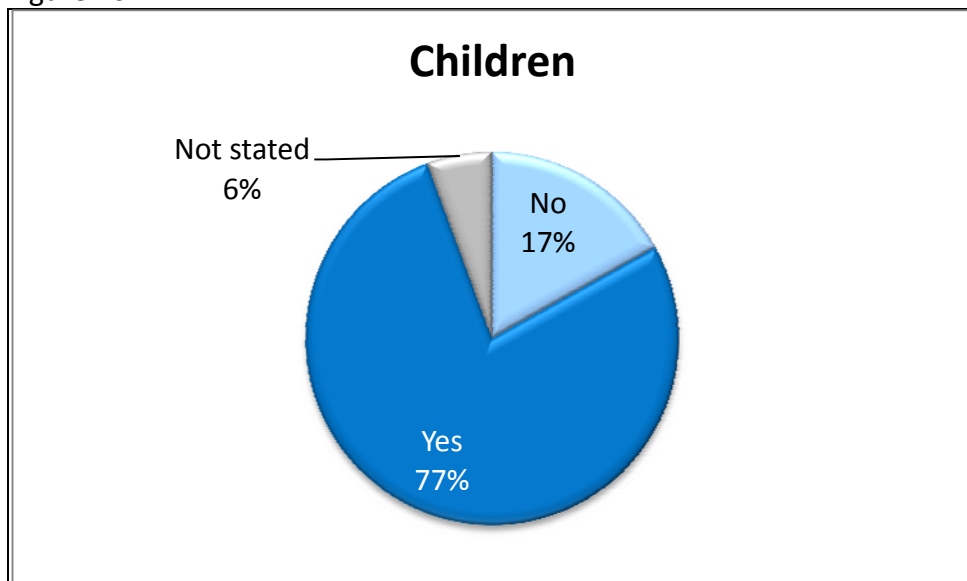
Figure 9



Children

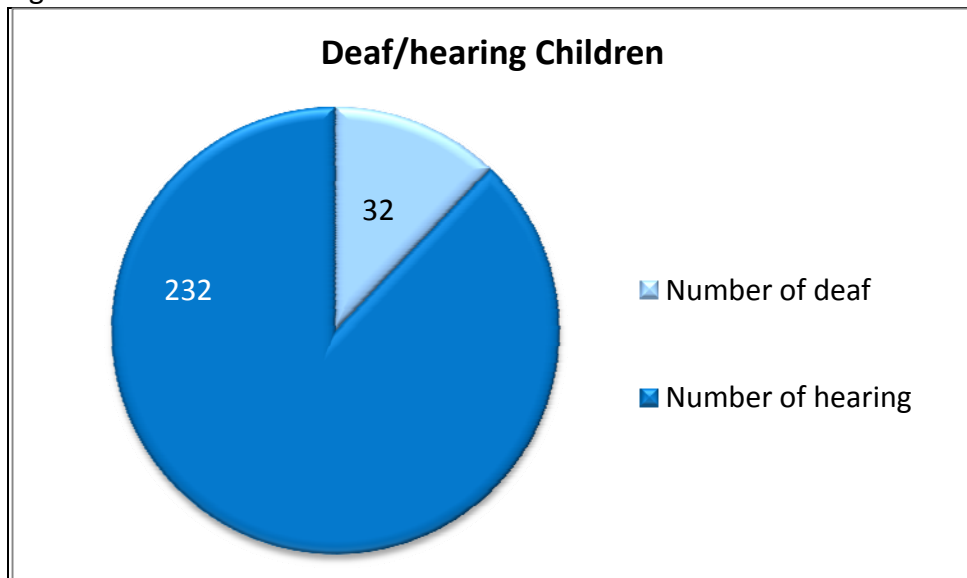
Most Deaf seniors had children (82%). See Figure 10.

Figure 10



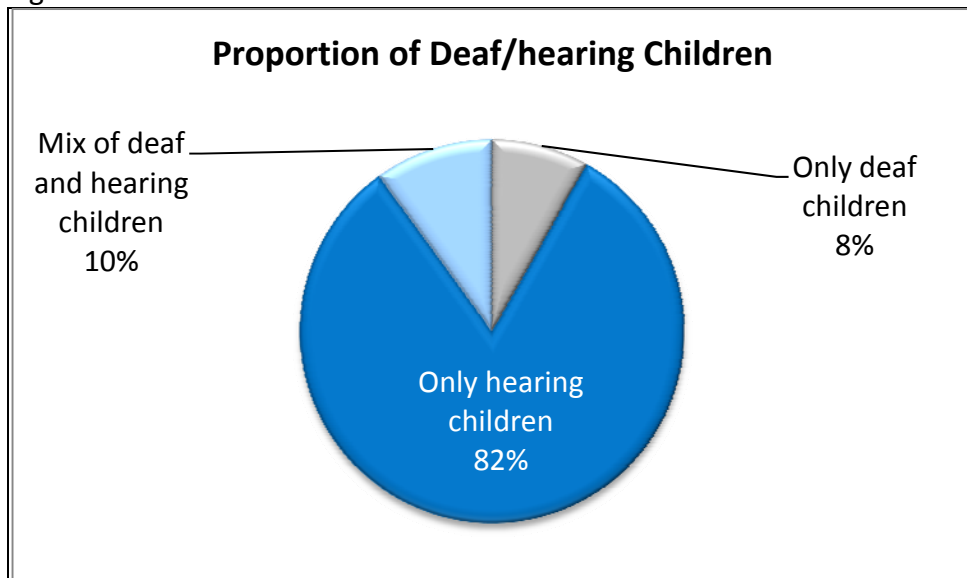
Most of those children were hearing. See Figure 11. Those with children reported a total of 232 hearing children and 32 deaf children. These results are similar to those from the 1999 survey.

Figure 11



See Figure 12 for the percentages of who had deaf children only, who had only hearing children and who had a mix of both. If we add up the percentages of those with only deaf children and those who had a mix, we have about 18%. It is said only about 5% of deaf parents give birth to deaf children which is a worldwide pattern (Johnston, 1989). If we halve our rate of 18% to show the percentage of parents who give birth to deaf children we have 9%.

Figure 12

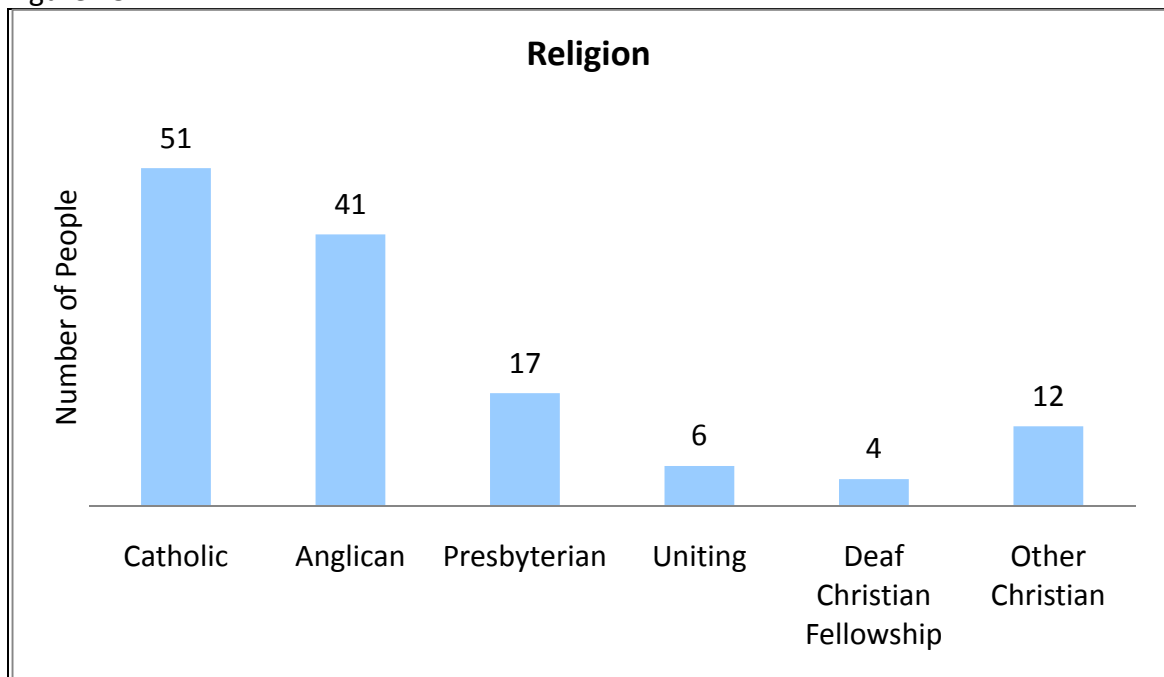


Religion

Deaf seniors were asked which religion they identified with. Their answers do not show anything about going to church or the practice of their religion. The question was asked to see if there was any pattern with service providers who are connected with a particular religion. The survey found 92% of respondents were Christian. In the 2006 census 78% of

Australians aged between 60 - 79 years said they were Christian. Figure 13 shows that for the 2009 survey, most Deaf seniors said they were either Catholic, Anglican or Presbyterian.

Figure 13



Income and Employment

Figure 14 shows that 9% of Deaf seniors were working. The 91% who were retired includes people who volunteer and those who do home duties.

Figure 14

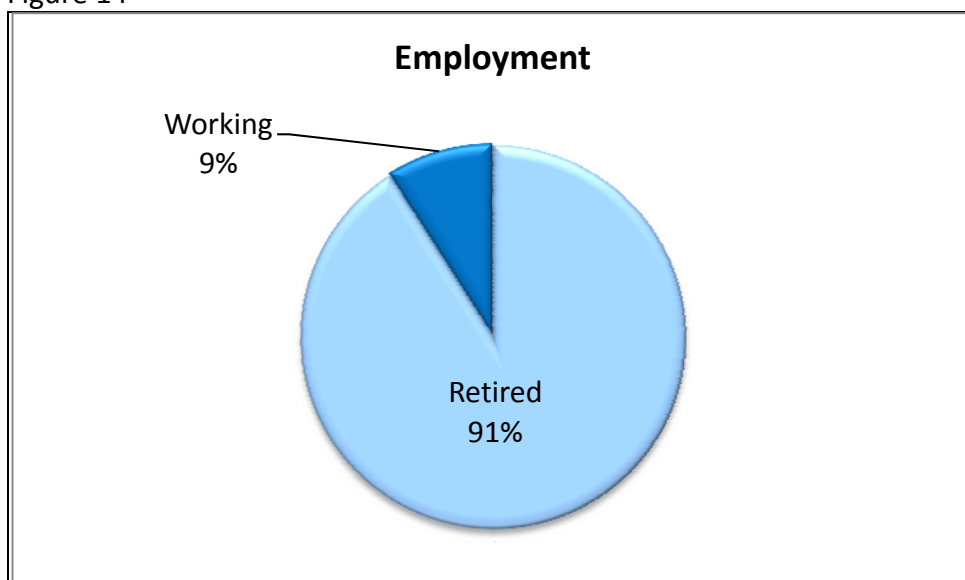
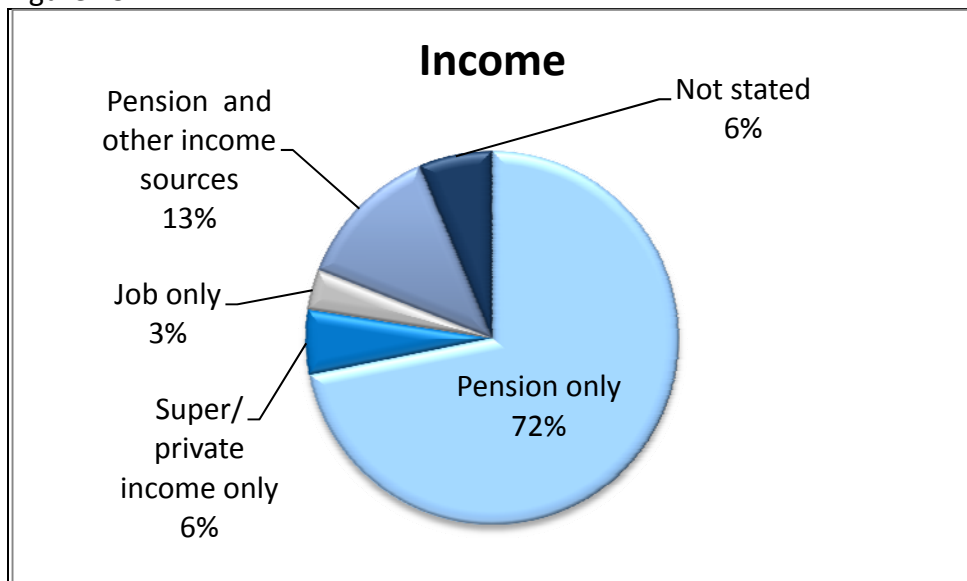


Figure 15 shows that 72% of Deaf seniors relied on a government pension - as their sole source of income. Only 23% had income from other sources like rent, investments and superannuation. In the general hearing population at the age of 65 and over, there were

66.67% relying on government pensions and allowances as their main source of income (ABS, 2009).

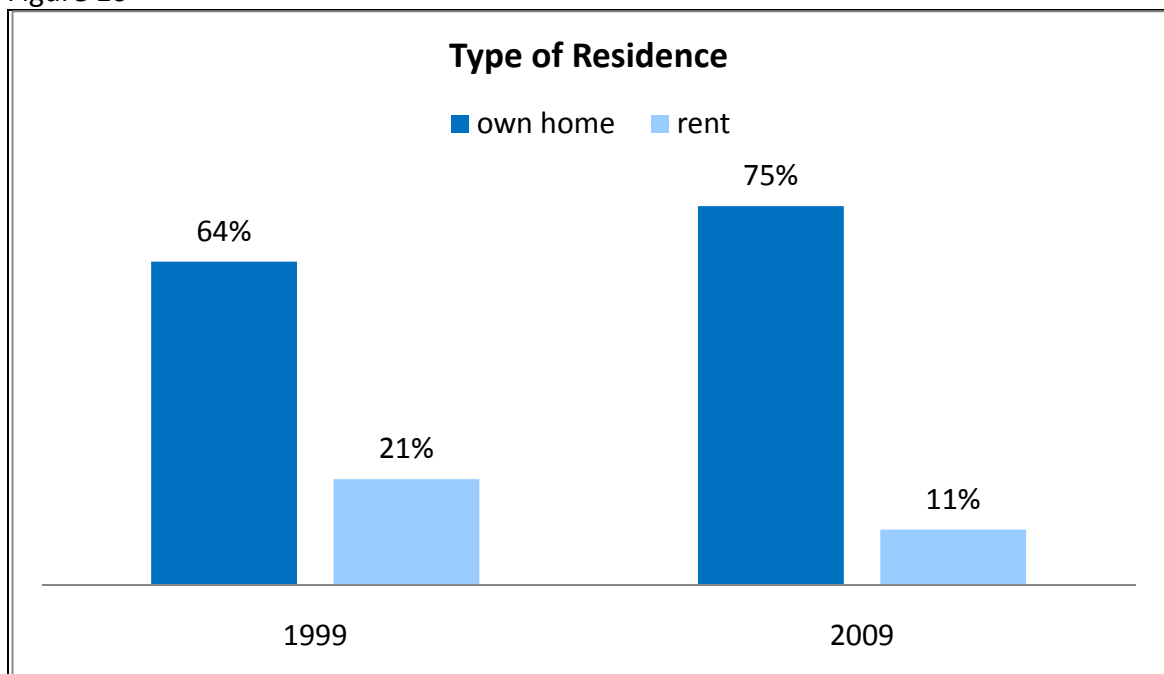
Figure 15



Type of Residence

Figure 16 shows that most Deaf seniors owned their home or flat in both 1999 and 2009 surveys. However in the 2009 survey more owned their own home or flat and fewer rented. In 2009, 75% owned their own home compared with 64% in 1999.

Figure 16



Choice of Residence

This question asked Deaf seniors to list the top five reasons that would help them decide where to live in the future if they were not able to stay in their own home. This meant they had to predict their future which many found hard to do. The top five reasons that help in deciding where to live were:

- 1) being near the shops,
- 2) liking the area/community,
- 3) being near other deaf people and friends,
- 4) being close to transport, and
- 5) being near family.

Future Choice of Residence

This question asked Deaf seniors to think about where they would like to live in the future. Most chose to stay in their own home for as long as possible (65%). This is considered the best option for keeping people's health and well being at a high level.

If this was not possible and Deaf seniors had to move to a place with higher level care, the top three items that were rated most important for them were:

- good transport,
- being close to shops, and
- being close to family.

The question tried to find out if Deaf seniors would prefer to live with other deaf people in a Deaf-friendly place or if they would prefer to be near family. There were contradictions in the answers however and it was not clear how important it was for them. There were too many items for them to consider when thinking about what they want for the future. Many of them did not answer the questions asked in this section.

Sign Language Interpreters

This question asked about using sign language interpreters. 80% of Deaf seniors said they used sign language interpreters. Some of the respondents who don't use interpreters told us that they get family members to interpret for them. Deaf seniors said they used sign language interpreters mostly for medical appointments as these are free. Very few Deaf seniors said they paid for sign language interpreters and if they did it was for financial and legal services mostly. Deaf seniors are only using sign language interpreters when they are provided for free and this is in the medical area mostly.

Technology Use

This question asked about using technology to help with communication and access. Most Deaf seniors said they used fax and text messages on their mobile phones to communicate. 80% said they used fax and 69% said they used text messages (sms). Other forms of technology were not used much. There was a lot of interest shown by Deaf seniors wanting to learn to use video technology, email, the internet and webcams.

Future Concerns

This question tried to find out what concerns Deaf seniors have. Most answered that their biggest concern in 2009 was understanding letters, forms and written material. In the future, they said their biggest concern was for access to sign language interpreters.

Services

This question asked about what services Deaf seniors use or don't know about. The services most people were unfamiliar with and wanted to know more about were:

- the Older Person's Legal Centre,
- the Seniors Information Service,
- electricity vouchers,
- taxi subsidy,
- Telecross, and
- the alarm service.

For services provided at the Deaf Society of NSW, the most used or widely known services were:

- the Drop In service where staff can assist to translate and interpret letters and forms, and
- the sign language interpreting service.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this report show that more needs to be done to meet the needs of Deaf Seniors in NSW. The Deaf Society of NSW thus commits to:

- 1) meet and try to persuade the appropriate government department/s to pay for training for staff whose clients are deaf and use Auslan. Training would be in sign language, communication strategies and cultural awareness.
- 2) look for opportunities to train staff in nursing homes and other aged care services so they know how to communicate with Deaf seniors and are sensitive to Deaf culture.
- 3) provide workshops and give information to Deaf seniors on the Seniors Information Service, Telecross, the Alarm Service, electricity vouchers, taxi subsidy and the Older Person's Legal Centre.
- 4) lobby the relevant departments of the Commonwealth and State governments and local authorities to make sure that Deaf people can live at home for as long as possible.
- 5) work with other organisations such as Deaf Australia to lobby the relevant departments of the Commonwealth and State governments and local authorities to

make sure that Deaf people can get sign language interpreters for all aspects of their lives especially for private legal services, financial services and social events.

- 6) lobby appropriate government departments and other organisations for resources to make sure that the needs of Deaf people with other disabilities are met.
- 7) visit Deaf seniors groups regularly to provide information and promote technology that they are not accessing such as the D-link video relay, internet, email, SMS and webcams.
- 8) look at ways to overcome any difficulties experienced by Deaf people in accessing services such as Telecross or the Seniors Information Service such as providing the information in sign language.
- 9) consider providing and developing services and/or activities that address Deaf senior's concerns about the future in the areas of access to professional sign language interpreters, health services, loneliness, transport and understanding letters and forms.
- 10) consider further research and analysis into the issues at point nine which will help develop services.
- 11) lobby the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care to release funding for further research and services in line with the concerns and needs of Deaf seniors.
- 12) survey Deaf seniors currently in hostels or nursing homes about their needs and priorities especially about what makes hostels or nursing homes deaf-friendly and what their communication needs are.

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