

Main results of the survey
HOMOSEXUALITY AND OLD AGE
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*"The LGBT community has stepped up in the past
to address coming out, AIDS, and civil rights.
The next wave has to be aging."*

(A man in his sixties, interviewed in *The aging and health report* – quot.)

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This short document presents the main results of the national survey *Homosexuality and Old Age*, carried out online in view of the conference of the same name held in Rome on November 28th, 2012 by SPI-CGIL and Equality Italia.

It does not intend to contextualize or analyze in detail the issues faced by the survey, but rather to open up a number of evidence-based paths for reflection and work.

We hope this small study, carried out on a voluntary basis only, will promote further investigation on the aging of LGBT people.

It is our belief that this issue must find a place on our agenda in the near future, and that our community will prove its self-awareness and dignity in the way it handles it.

a) Introduction

Context

In Italy there are no extensive scientific studies on how LGBT elders live, or what they think. The survey *Homosexuality and Old Age* contributes to filling this gap and aims at collecting statistical data on how LGBT people of all ages interact with the dimensions of aging – both their own aging, and that of others.

It's the first time, in our country, that the opinions of LGBT people on these issues are collectively gathered.

It must be said that in other Western countries this topic has not been addressed at length either, as confirmed by the recent *policy paper* produced jointly by ILGA Europe and AGE Platform Europe: *Equality for older lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe* (November 2012).

Methodology

Homosexuality and Old Age is a quantitative survey carried out by way of a short, online, anonymous and self-administered questionnaire.

The survey was promoted through several channels, particularly on the Web and on social networks, with the collaboration of the associations *Equality Italia* and *Lambda di Torino*, and of the *Over55 LGBT* group.

Questionnaires were collected over a period of a little less than two weeks, between November 7th and November 24th, 2012 (17 days).

Each person was asked 19 questions (18 of them were of the closed-ended kind, whereas the last one was of the open-ended kind), in Italian; on average, 5 minutes were required to go through the full questionnaire; there were no compulsory questions.

Target: LGBT people of all ages, in Italy and abroad. In some analyses, we have filtered the sample by generation or provenance; such cases are clearly stated.

Sample

2,034 questionnaires were collected; 1,932 were determined to be valid and analyzed.

We have used two validation criteria:

- That the questionnaire was in fact filled out by someone in the target population
- And that the respondent answered at least two of the closed-ended questions

The distribution of the main dimensions of the valid questionnaires is as follows:

- *Identity*: 74.2% homo/bisexual men; 24.9% homo/bisexual women; 0.6% trans people; 0.3% other
- *Geographic area*: 29.5% Northwestern Italy; 31.1% Northeastern Italy; 21.8% Central Italy; 13.9% Southern Italy and Islands; 3.8% foreign countries

- *Age*: respondents were aged 18-82; the average age was 37.2; 31.4% were aged 18-29; 28.4% 30-39; 24.0% 40-49; 10.9% 50-59; 5.4% 60-plus

We will use the above-mentioned three dimensions as independent variables throughout our analysis.

Cautions

The survey under discussion is a handy but simplified tool, aimed at a public that isn't necessarily expert and/or motivated.

Therefore, it doesn't always address issues in depth and it sometimes groups together situations that are actually diverse. Furthermore, it doesn't collect information useful to understand the characteristics of respondents' environment or, more importantly, the reasons for their opinions.

Also, as is frequently the case, the available sample depicts Central and (even more so) Northern Italy more accurately than it does Southern Italy, and young adults and adults rather than older adults and elderly people.

The results presented here are to be taken as indications not so much of specific situations, as much as of general trends.

Finally, it is worthwhile stressing the fact that *Homosexuality and Old Age* does not describe the condition of LGBT elders: an analysis of this matter would require different (i.e. face-to-face, qualitative) research tools, which we hope will be used in the near future.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to all the people who have filled out the questionnaire, and to those who have promoted it in their circles, through their own channels.

A heartfelt thank you goes to Prof. Luca Pietrantoni, of the Psychology Department of the University of Bologna, for his expert advice and collaboration.

b) Results

The survey addresses four broad thematic areas:

- Exposure – The degree to which LGBT elders belong to the network of respondents; questions in this category aim to estimate the group’s level of social and daily visibility
- Preferences – Respondents’ assessments of the age of the people they prefer to engage with, both in general terms and for sexual purposes
- Expectations – Respondents’ predictions of their own old age and the expected features of this stage of their life
- General opinions – Respondents’ views of the life conditions of LGBT elders, both in the present and in the past/future

Before discussing the results of the survey, it needs to be clarified that, in order to collect consistent data, the questionnaire instructed respondents that for the purposes of the survey “People are defined as ‘elders’ at the age of 60 and after.”

Exposure

→ *Have you ever met LGBT elders in Italy?*

Just under 3 in 4 respondents claim to have met an LGBT elder at least once in Italy; just under 1 in 5 respondents claims to have never encountered such people and about 1 in 20 respondents doesn’t know or can’t remember (table 1).

Tab. 1
Have you ever met LGBT elders in Italy? (%)
(In the table: only respondents based in Italy)

Yes	73.3
No	19.8
I don’t know/I can’t remember	6.9
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

The group’s degree of social visibility is thus rather high.

It is even more so among male respondents (78.3% of male respondents vs. 59.8% of female respondents answered in the affirmative) and in Central and Northern Italy, rather than in Southern Italy (affirmative answers totaled 63.2% in Northwestern Italy, 55.6% in Northeastern Italy, and 63.3% in Central Italy, vs. 47.1% in Southern Italy and Islands). As expected, social visibility increases with the increased age of respondents: among those aged 18-29, 54.8% answered ‘Yes’; among those in their thirties, 74.3%; among those in their forties, 85.3%; among those in their fifties, 87.6%; and among those aged 60 or more, 94.7%. On the one hand, it is interesting to note that even among younger respondents the group’s visibility garners the absolute majority of positive

answers; on the other hand, it stands to be pointed out that about 1 in 20 LGBT elders refers that he/she has never met other LGBT people in his/her age group.

→ *Do you personally know LGBT elders in Italy?*

Just under 6 in 10 respondents claim they personally know at least one LGBT elder (table 2). The absolute majority of respondents answer in the affirmative in this case too, but the number drops, as expected, by roughly 15 percentage points from the previous question (cf. table 1). The number of people who answer ‘No’ rises to 37.8% (+18%) and the number of those who answer ‘I don’t know’ drops to 3.8%.

Tab. 2
Do you personally know LGBT elders in Italy? (%)
 (In the table: only respondents based in Italy)

Yes	58.4
No	37.8
I don't know	3.8
TOT	100

As seen previously, the more “exposed” sub-groups are men, rather than women (63.5% of the former answer ‘Yes’ vs. 43.8% of the latter), respondents of Central and Northern Italian regions, rather than those living in other parts of the country, and respondents of a more advanced age. Among those aged 18-29, 31.8% answer ‘Yes’; the number is 59.4% among those in their thirties, 73.6% among those in their forties, 83.6% among those in their fifties, and 91.6% among those aged 60 or more.

→ *Do you regularly spend time with LGBT elders in Italy?*

Addressing in further detail the issue of social and daily exposure of LGBT elders, we asked respondents whether they regularly socialize with them. For the first time, the balance between the number of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ answers tips (table 3): over 3 in 4 people claim they do not; only 22.5% state that their circle comprises people from the generation under discussion.

Tab. 3
Do you regularly spend time with LGBT elders in Italy? (%)
 (In the table: only respondents based in Italy)

Yes	22.5
No	75.6
I don't know	1.9
TOT	100

In this case too, the ‘Yes’ answer was more common among homo/bisexual men than among women (25% vs. 15.6%). The same is true of people who live in Central and in Northern Italy, as opposed to people who live in Southern Italy and Islands. Finally, as expected, this kind of exposure increases linearly with the age of respondents: the ‘Yes’ answer is given by 7.2% of respondents aged 18-29, 19% of those in their thirties, 27.5% of those in their forties, 44.5% of those in their fifties, and 62.2% of those aged 60 or more.

Preferences

→ *In general, who do you prefer to spend time with?*

People older than me | People my age | People younger than me | Age doesn't matter

The margin is slim, but the absolute majority of respondents (50.6%) state that age is not important when it comes to the people they spend time and socialize with (table 4). Other preferences, in decreasing order, are for people of the same age (27.5%), older people (13.6%), and younger people (8.2%).

Tab. 4

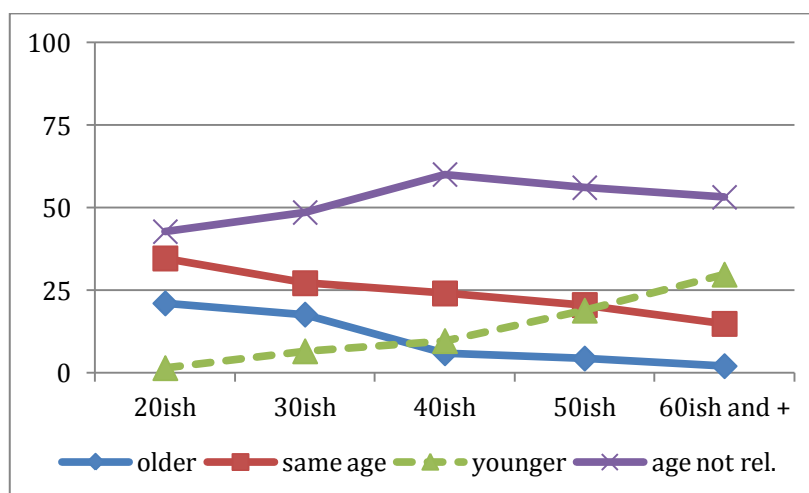
In general, who do you prefer to spend time with? (%)
(In the table: only respondents based in Italy)

People older than me	13.6
People my age	27.5
People younger than me	8.2
Age doesn't matter	50.6
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

The geographic area of residence doesn't have a direct impact on this variable. Gender and age do. The number of male respondents who prefer to spend time with people their own age or younger is significantly greater than the number of female respondents who hold the same opinion; the absolute majority of female respondents, conversely, answer that age doesn't matter (64.6% vs. 45.8%).

Fig. 1

In general, who do you prefer to spend time with? (Answers broken down by ten-year age groups) (%)
(In the figure: only respondents based in Italy)



As regards age, figure 1 reveals a composite trend:

- The 'non-relevance' answer always garners the majority of answers
- The answer expressing a preference for people of the same age is second among respondents in all brackets up to the one made up of people in their fifties, whereas among

respondents in their sixties it comes in third. In general, this preference is indirectly proportional to age

- The answer expressing a preference for people younger than oneself is directly proportional to age: virtually absent among respondents aged 18-29, it comes in second among respondents aged 60 or more. The answer stating a preference for people older than oneself follows an opposite trend. It is among respondents in their forties that these two preferences swap places: respondents aged 18-39 are more likely to seek out the opportunity to spend time with people older than themselves, whereas respondents who are over 40 more frequently prefer to spend time with people younger than themselves

→ *In general, who do you think is sexier?*

People older than me | People my age | People younger than me | Age doesn't matter

Table 5 delves deeper into age-related preferences by touching on the issues of affectivity and sexuality.

Compared to the results shown in table 4, the 'non-relevance' answer drops sharply here, although it still reaches the relative majority. Meanwhile, the other three available answers are met with a virtually equal level of approval.

Tab. 5

In general, who do you think is sexier? (%)

(In the table: only respondents based in Italy)

People older than me	22.9
People my age	22.6
People younger than me	21.6
Age doesn't matter	32.9
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

In this case, respondents display a particularly broad and varied range of opinions.

Broken down by the independent variables, the scenario is similar to that discussed with regard to the previous question.

The geographic area of residence is not significant.

Female respondents answer that age doesn't matter more frequently than male respondents (46.4% vs. 27.8%), and that they prefer younger people less frequently than male respondents (8.7% vs. 26.2%).

As regards the age and gender of respondents, figures 2 and 3 display scenarios that in some respects are similar, and in others are different, between the two sexes.

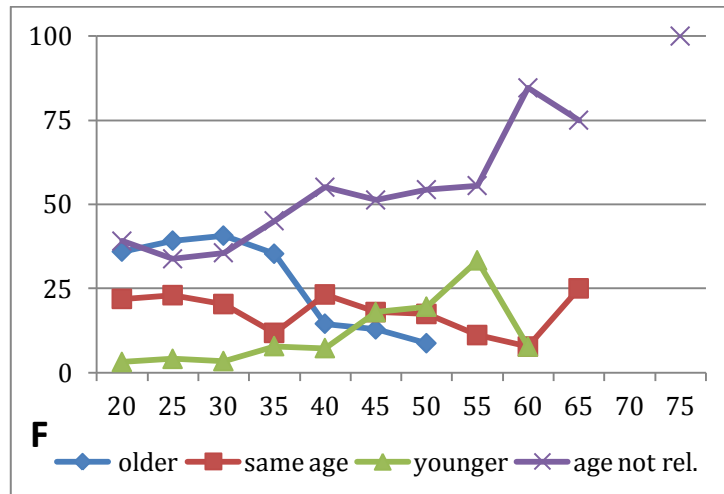
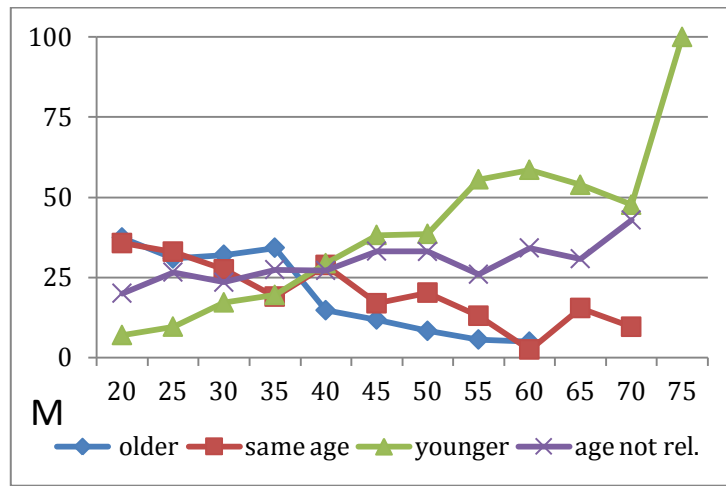
- First of all, the "non relevance" position increases with age in both sub-samples, but the direct proportionality is much more distinct among women than it is among men. Among female respondents, it reaches the relative majority beyond the age of 30, and the absolute majority beyond the age of 40
- The preference for people of the same age follows a slightly decreasing trend among men, and remains substantially stable among women. Excluding outliers, in the male sample the number drops from 35.7% of respondents in their twenties to 2.4% of those in their sixties; in the female sample, the number drops from 21.9% of respondents in their twenties to 7.7% of those in their sixties
- The preference for people older than oneself is indirectly proportional to the age of respondents in both sub-samples. The preference for people younger than oneself follows the opposite trend, particularly among male respondents. This stance is held by the relative

majority of male respondents over the age of 45 and by the absolute majority of male respondents over the age of 55

- The distribution of the answers seems to change radically among men when they reach the age of 40; it changes in time for women too, but no specific watershed age emerges in their sub-sample

Figg. 2 and 3

In general, who do you think is sexier? (Answers broken down by five-year age groups) (%)
 (In the figures: only respondents based in Italy;
 male respondents in figure 2, female respondents in figure 3)



Expectations

→ Do you ever think about your old age?

93.5% of non-elderly respondents claim they think about their old age at least sometimes; almost 4 out of 10 people claim they think about it frequently, whereas a little over 1 in 20 respondents see the notion of old age as absolutely remote (table 6).

Tab. 6
Do you ever think about your old age? (%)
(In the table: only respondents based in Italy, no older than 59)

Yes, often	38.4
Yes, only sometimes	55.1
No, never	6.2
Other	0.2
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

In all of Italy, people are of a similar opinion on the matter. Likewise, respondents of both genders share the same view. As expected, however, age makes a difference, though not so much that it flips the balance of the answers: 8.9% of respondents aged 18-29 claim they never think about their old age, as opposed to 0.6% of those in their fifties, 56.4% of whom say they think about it often.

→ *Do you worry about getting old?*

Almost 55% of non-elderly respondents are worried at least moderately about getting old; 37.7% are a little worried, and 7.8% aren't worried at all (table 7).

Tab. 7
Do you worry about getting old? (%)
(In the table: only respondents based in Italy, no older than 59)

Yes, very much	14.9
Moderately/Somewhat	39.6
A little	37.7
Not at all	7.8
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

Male respondents are slightly more worried than female respondents: 56.2% of the former are very or moderately worried, in contrast with 51.5% of the latter. It is also noteworthy that respondents' age does not seem to condition this kind of thought in a linear way, as detailed in table 8. This result, which to some extent is unexpected, confirms that these kinds of thoughts are substantially universal and cut across all age groups.

Tab. 8
Do you worry about getting old? (Answers broken down by ten-year age groups) (%)
(In the table: only respondents based in Italy, no older than 59)

	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
Very much/moderately	52.9	52.5	58.0	56.1
A little/not at all	47.1	47.5	42.0	43.9
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Finally, in this case too the place of residence turns out to be inconsequential.

→ *Imagine yourself as an elderly person. Compared to the way you feel today, do you think you'll be more or less: lonely | happy | worried | satisfied?*

We asked young and adult respondents to compare the lives they imagine they will have as elderly people with their present lives, with regard to 4 parameters, 2 of them positive, and 2 of them negative: loneliness, happiness, worry and satisfaction.

Table 9
Compare your life as an elderly person with your life today (%)
 (In the table: only respondents based in Italy, no older than 59)

	More than today	Like today	Less than today	I don't know	TOT
Lonely (-)	49.7	15.3	10.3	24.2	100
Happy (+)	13.6	28.1	31.9	26.4	100
Worried (-)	41.5	19.6	24.1	14.8	100
Satisfied (+)	26.8	23.1	24.5	25.6	100

The results shown in table 9 depict a multifaceted scenario:

- First of all, about 1 in 4 respondents answers “I don’t know” to three of the four questions; the quota drops by 10 percentage points with regard to how worried they think they will be as elderly people
- The relative majority of respondents believe loneliness and worry will characterize their old age
- The scenario is particularly varied when it comes to the positive aspects: respondents’ main expectation is that they will be relatively unhappy, yet also rather satisfied, during their third and fourth age. With regard to this last variable, the sample appears to hold an especially broad range of opinions, all of which are equally represented

→ *Imagine yourself as an elderly person. In general, how do you think your life will be, compared to the way it is today?*

Better | The same | Worse | I don't know

As shown in table 10, a moderately pessimistic stance prevails in this case too: 37.7% of respondents imagine their lives as elders will be worse than their current lives, and only 22.7% imagine they will be better.

Tab. 10
In general, how do you think your life as an elderly person will be? (%)
 (In the table: only respondents based in Italy, no older than 59)

Certainly better than today	2.8
Probably better than today	19.9
The same as today	18.2
Probably worse than today	31.0
Certainly worse than today	6.7
I don't know	21.4
TOT	100

Female respondents, relatively more than male respondents, don’t know and at the same time show greater optimism for their future.

It's interesting to note, further, that as the age of respondents increases their pessimism also increases, while, conversely, their optimism and uncertainty decrease. Among respondents aged 18-29, those who believe their lives as elderly people will be better than their present lives are 34.3%; among respondents in their fifties, the number drops to 11.2%. On the contrary, among the former those who believe their lives as elderly people will be worse than their present lives are 25.8%, whereas among the latter the number spikes to 50.3%.

General opinions

In the last part of the questionnaire, we asked respondents to abstract from their personal experience and to express general opinions on the life conditions of LGBT elders.

→ *In general, do you think being an LGBT elder, rather than a heterosexual elder, is an advantage or a disadvantage in Italy today?*

The first question asks respondents to evaluate whether being an elderly person belonging to a sexual minority is, broadly speaking, positive or negative: is being an LGBT elder, as opposed to a heterosexual elder, an advantage or a disadvantage?

Tab. 11
In general, do you think being an LGBT elder, rather than a heterosexual elder, is an advantage or a disadvantage in Italy today? (%)
 (In the table: all respondents)

Always an advantage	1.0
It depends, but mostly an advantage	3.0
Being LGBT is neutral	17.0
It depends, but mostly a disadvantage	51.8
Always a disadvantage	22.2
I don't know	5.0
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

Answers are largely oriented toward the negative pole: more than 7 in 10 respondents, with no significant differences between male and female, or areas of the country, believe being LGBT is a disadvantage.

Age, while not statistically significant, reveals some noteworthy trends, however:

- Consensus on the disadvantage decreases as age increases (76.4% of respondents aged 18-29 vs. 58.6% of those aged 60 or more)
- Consensus on the advantage increases as age increases (3.3% vs. 13.1% respectively), as well as the one on neutrality (15.2% vs. 25.3%)

Younger respondents, in contrast to older adults and elderly respondents, have a relatively more pessimistic view of the third age of LGBT people.

→ *In general, what do you think the condition of LGBT elders in Italy is like today, compared to 10 years ago?*

→ *In general, what do you think the condition of LGBT elders will be like in Italy in 10 years?*

Tables 12 and 13 reflect an optimistic view on the historical evolution of the life conditions of LGBT elders: 57.2% of respondents believe that these have improved in the recent past, and 69.3% think they will improve in the near future.

Tab. 12

In general, what do you think the condition of LGBT elders in Italy is like today, compared to 10 years ago? (%)
(In the table: all respondents)

It has certainly improved	16.7
It has probably improved	40.4
It is the same	30.5
It has probably got worse	4.6
It has certainly got worse	2.0
I don't know	5.7
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

Tab. 13

In general, what do you think the condition of LGBT elders will be like in Italy in 10 years, compared to today? (%)
(In the table: all respondents)

It will certainly improve	16.5
It will probably improve	52.9
It will stay the same	18.2
It will probably get worse	4.4
It will certainly get worse	1.5
I don't know	6.6
<i>TOT</i>	<i>100</i>

49.6% of respondents are of the opinion that there has been an improvement in the past, and that there will continue to be an improvement in the future; only 2.1% believe the opposite to be the case.

Homo/bisexual men and homo/bisexual women share essentially the same views on the matter, as do respondents from Northern, Central and Southern Italy.

Young and young adult respondents are slightly more optimistic, both as regards the past and, even more so, as regards the future, than older adult and elderly respondents.

c) Conclusions

The survey *Homosexuality and Old Age* is explorative, and, as such, does not allow for definitive results.

That said, it is nonetheless possible to set forth some interesting conclusions, which may be used as starting points to carry out more consolidated social research in the future. We hope that a national study, based on an adequate methodology and aimed specifically at describing how LGBT elders live and what they think, will soon be carried out in Italy too.

- The picture this survey portrays of the relationship between LGBT people and aging is one of lights and shadows. On the one hand, it strongly undermines some stereotypes and simplifications found in part of the public opinion: it's not true, for instance, that LGBT elders are invisible and/or totally isolated, nor is it confirmed that LGBT people think only about their present, as if clinging to a forever-young lifestyle; in other words, aging is not a taboo. On the other hand, it underlines several potentially critical aspects, including the fact that people belonging to different generations spend little time and don't socialize with each other, and respondents' expectation that loneliness will be a distinctive trait of their old age.
- This portrait is homogenous throughout the country, with the exception of the dimensions of so-called "exposure." Indeed, the available analyses depict a more explicit and recognizable LGBT community, even in its generational relationships, in Central-Northern Italy, rather than in Southern Italy and Islands.
- As expected, social networks are formed mainly by people of a similar age. That said, the sexual and affective component tends to promote "bridges" between age groups and seems to offer fair opportunities to all members of the LGBT community.
- Finally, the doubt remains as to whether these conclusions are specific to LGBT people or apply to society at large.

d)

Further reading

Here is a list of documents we have consulted for the purposes of this survey.

The list certainly is not comprehensive of all the material, mostly in English, that is becoming available on these issues: scientific articles and research reports, newspaper articles and reportages, artistic works, collections of personal diaries, and oral accounts.

- *Equality for older LGBTI people in Europe* – ILGA Europe & AGE Platform Europe (2012); policy paper: www.ilga-europe.org/media_library/euro_letter/2012/november/diversity/joint_policy_age_and_sog_i
- *Imagined communities: initiatives around LGBTQ ageing in Italy* – Ross C. (2012); essay, in *Modern Italy*, Volume 17, Number 4, 1 November 2012, pp. 449-464(16)
- *LGBT retirement homes step up in response to homophobia and mistreatment of LGBT elders* – Fonseca (2012); online article: www.autostraddle.com/lgbt-retirement-homes-step-up-in-response-to-homophobia-and-mistreatment-of-lgbt-elders-151747/
- *The aging and health report. Disparities and resilience among LGBT adults* – (2011); report: www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resource.cfm?r=419
- *The housing and support needs of older LGBT people in Scotland* – (2005); report: www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1125/0086626.pdf
- *Una ricerca su omosessualità e terza età* – Pietrantonio L. and others (2003); essay: www.salutegay.it/pazienti/dati_e_ricerche/bisogni/terzaeta_pietrantonio.pdf
- *Visible Lives. Identifying the experiences and needs of older LGBT people in Ireland* – 2011; report: <http://archive.equal-jus.eu/1059/>
- *We don't have any of those people here* – 2010; research paper: <http://grai.org.au/2010/07/we-dont-have-any-of-those-people-here-research-papers/>

Further, an interesting source of information is provided by the list of answers to the following open-ended question, posed at the end of this online questionnaire: *Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the condition of LGBT elders in Italy?* 355 respondents have left a comment to this effect.

The material thus collected is available online, at the following address: www.lelleri.it/sondaggio-anziani [in Italian]

Bologna, December 18th, 2012