Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men

Brian Beach, Research Fellow
International Longevity Centre – UK
@ilcuk
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- Explored the experiences of social isolation and loneliness among older men
- Review of existing evidence
- Analysis of latest data from ELSA
- Interviews and focus groups
Topics for Today

- Why look at older men? How do they differ from older women?
- What do we mean by social isolation and loneliness?
- How prevalent are social isolation and loneliness among older men?
- Why do older men experience social isolation and loneliness differently than women?
- What do we know about the most isolated and loneliest older men?
- What lessons can be learned about how to improve services to address social isolation and loneliness among older men?
Why look at older men?

- Previous evidence suggests that older men and women experience social isolation and loneliness in different ways, and that men are less likely to seek help and support, e.g. medical services.
- Women tend to use support services more – *are they failing older men?*
- Male-specific programmes have grown in number and scope, while providers need a better understanding of best practices and what works – *are current programmes effective?*
- Women have received greater focus in ageing research and policy debates – *are men being left out?*
Women make up more of the ‘oldest old’...

**Figure 1: Proportion of age group by gender (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–79</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>47.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>39.6</td>
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What do we mean by social isolation and loneliness?

- **Loneliness**: a subjective perception in which a person feels lonely

- **Social isolation**: broadly refers to the absence of contact with other people

- **Social exclusion**: refers to being marginalised; closely related to social cohesion
Social isolation and loneliness among older men

- 13.9% of men aged 50+ reported a **moderate** to **high** degree of social isolation
  - 29.9% were **not** isolated
- 8.1% of men aged 50+ reported a **high** degree of loneliness
  - Over half (52.2%) were **not** lonely
Differences between men and women

- Overall, men reported more social isolation but less loneliness than women

Social isolation: While women are more likely to outlive their partners, a lack of contact with children, family, and friends explains higher isolation among men.
Differences between men and women

- **Loneliness:** Despite appearing more isolated, men report being less lonely
  
  – Are older men alone but not lonely?
  
  **OR**
  
  – Are older men under-reporting loneliness?
Loneliness, partnerships, & living alone

- When we take partnership into account, a higher proportion of older men without partners report loneliness.
- Over time, the number of older men living alone could be expected to grow by 65% to around 1.5 million men aged 65+
Other factors impacting the most isolated older men

- **Living arrangements**
  - Renters are more likely than homeowners to report moderate to high isolation rather than no isolation

- **Income**
  - Men with higher income are more likely to report no isolation
Other factors impacting the loneliest older men

- Health
  - Poorer general health
  - Limitations with I/ADLs
  - *However, NOT just chronic illness or disability*
  - Depression

- Informal care responsibilities

- Marital status (not being married or cohabiting)
What older men want from services

- A service for people – not for lonely older people
  - Some men may not acknowledge they need such services
- Services appealing to men’s interests and passions
  - Services can appear or feel ‘feminised’
- User-led involvement and engagement
  - Encourages effective recruitment, buy-in, & follow-up
Examples of best practice

- **Men in Sheds** – shared space for hands-on DIY activities

- **Walking Football** – open to everyone, but particularly attracts men aged 50+
  - Incorporates both social and physical activity

- **Culture Club** – more intellectual activity focused on learning
  - Built around group’s interests, who help select speakers
How might services be improved?

- Better engaging older men through their partners
- Better support in preparation for retirement
- Referrals through health services to proper support
- Think about older men who have moved, especially those into institutional care
Areas of further work

- Older men in care homes
- Engaging older men with dementia
- Addressing living alone among the oldest old
- Other hard-to-reach groups: ethnic minorities, LGBT
- Adapting to changing relationships: divorce/re-marriage
- The potential for technology
Some concluding thoughts

- Health and loneliness have a complicated relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most lonely</th>
<th>Least lonely</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28% reported poor health</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53% had I/ADLs limitations</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55% are depressed</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some concluding thoughts

- Health and loneliness have a complicated relationship
- Loneliness is not an inevitable consequence of ageing
Some concluding thoughts

- Health and loneliness have a complicated relationship
- Loneliness is not an inevitable consequence of ageing
- Socio-economic disadvantages appear to be a main driver for social isolation – suggesting a life course perspective needed
- Key transitions – in particular the loss of one’s partner – play an important role in older men’s experiences of social isolation and loneliness
Many thanks

Brian Beach
Research Fellow
International Longevity Centre – UK (ILC-UK)

brianbeach@ilcuk.org.uk

02073400440
Twitter: @ilcuk

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