How do neighbourhoods matter? Older adults' social connectedness during the pandemic:
Research summary

Overview

Loneliness was on the rise before the COVID-19 pandemic with an estimated 1 in 4 older adults experiencing loneliness. Has physical distancing during the pandemic intensified loneliness—especially for people 55+ years? Prolonged loneliness can have serious negative health impacts.

Social connectedness can protect against loneliness and make us healthier, happier, and live longer.

At the onset of the pandemic we knew little about how physical distancing impacted the social connectedness of older adults. To address this gap, researchers at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University partnered with the West End Seniors' Network (WESN) to listen to and learn from older adults. This report summarizes our study.

Research goals

1. Better understand how older adults navigated the early pandemic in effort to maintain well-being;
2. Identify individual, interpersonal, and neighbourhood factors that influenced older adults' social connectedness, and;
3. Inform strategies to support older adults most at-risk of loneliness.

What is social connectedness?

Social connectedness is a feeling of closeness with other people. Meaningful interpersonal relationships with qualities of trust, belonging, support, and reciprocity foster social connectedness.

Who participated?

- We enrolled 31 cisgender* older adults via the WESN email listserve.
- Most participants were economically secure and racially identified as white.
- Most participants lived in multi-unit housing (apartments) in the West End or Downtown.
- Two-thirds (68%) of participants lived alone, 4 times higher than the Vancouver average.

*Cisgender (or 'cis') describes a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were given at birth.

71% of participants felt a strong sense of belonging to their local community, yet 39% experienced high levels of loneliness.

Connections with neighbours helped prevent prolonged loneliness.

Key findings

When we asked participants about what mattered for social connectedness, their responses often centred on neighbourhood-based social relationships. Relationships with neighbours increased in importance during the pandemic, in part because most participants' family members lived outside their neighbourhoods and were harder to see. All participants stayed close to home during the early pandemic.

Participant demographics

Characteristics	#	%
Under 75 years	17	55
Over 75 years	14	45
Cis men	4	13
Cis women	27	87
White	25	84
Jewish	3	10
Chinese	1	3
South Asian	1	3
Lives alone	21	68
Lives w/ partner	10	32

Three dimensions of the neighbourhood environment influenced social connectedness:

1. Immediate neighbours

Participants gave and received practical and social support from their neighbours. Josephine said:

"I realized how much I have built a community [in my building]. I had people I could rely on. And I knew if I needed anything, that -- they were just a phone call away."

Many participants strengthened pre-existing social ties, while others formed new friendships. Neighbours ran errands and left food in doorways. They met 'at a safe distance' on rooftops, lawns, and hallways for affirming face-to-face interactions.

2. Neighbourhood organizations

Many participants felt that the closure of indoor activities impacted them negatively, especially those people who previously relied on neighbourhood organizations to connect with others. Sally stressed why organized groups were important to her:

"I don't have a nuclear family. I don't have a husband. I don't have children...I have no grandchildren. So, these other groups give me a sense of belonging."

A few participants expressed concern that the closure of in-person support services will have the greatest negative impact on socially isolated older adults with economic and/or language barriers. Some participants volunteered in telephone outreach, where they had weekly conversations with peers. In those calls, volunteers heard stories of hardships but also optimism and perseverance. Ruth explained how volunteering added to her own well-being:

"... it really gives me a lift to talk with them. Because they enjoy talking to me. But, you know, I'm not there to talk, really. I'm there to listen."

3. Outdoor pedestrian spaces

Outdoor walking spaces both helped and hindered participants' social connectedness. Many participants underscored that getting out of their small apartments was essential for their well-being. They walked alone or with a few trusted neighbours, most often along the Stanley Park Seawall.

Across themes, participants experienced barriers to social connectedness.

Some participants explained that they enjoyed walking pre-pandemic but now found it stressful given COVID-19 transmission concerns. They chose routes and time-of-day to avoid people.

Other participants experienced multiple barriers to social connectedness.

They "barely saw anyone" and intentionally avoided people (neighbours included) for fear of contracting COVID-19. For these participants, chronic health conditions, building restrictions imposed by managers, solitary living and/or lack of family compounded feelings of isolation and loneliness. A few participants commented on the psychological toll of the pandemic. Larry explains,

"You get overloaded with news that inevitably shows a death total. As a senior, there is almost an unearthly feeling to this time period we are going through. Sort of a bizarre copy of a medieval time, during the Black Death or some other era."

Some participants felt daunted to leave their houses except when absolutely necessary.

What did we learn?

- Older adults who experience social, physical, *and* economic barriers were most likely to be negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic over the longer term.

- Fostering social networks before emergency circumstances is important; people who were already familiar with their neighbours were more likely to give and receive support in times of distress.

- Volunteer-based organizations supported isolated older adults in vital ways.

- Managers and residents in multi-unit housing play an important role in social connectedness; shared apartment spaces where people interacted regularly built community resilience.

Recommended Actions

We call on government funders, city officials, neighbourhood organizations, and multi-unit housing managers to:

- Prioritize policies and programs that recognize the diverse needs of older adults, who may face multiple barriers to social participation;

- Support neighbourhood efforts to provide accessible opportunities for in-person, telephone, or virtual social-engagement, and;

- Encourage neighbourhood and multi-unit housing design that promotes social interactions among neighbours.

Access full article

Callista A. Ottoni, Meghan Winters, Joanie Sims-Gould, "We see each other from a distance": Neighbourhood social relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic matter for older adults' social connectedness. Health & Place. Volume 76, 2022, 102844, ISSN 1353-8292.

Available open access (free):
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102844

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