



Social Isolation of Older People in Regional Australia: the research agenda

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Who is at risk of social isolation?

- Those socially isolated in mid-life will experience further isolation as they grow older
- Key life events or transitions can lead to social isolation e.g. losing a partner
- Age discrimination can intensify isolation – e.g. poor transport, local health services and fear of crime
- Groups at risk:
 - 65+ from CALD background – 23% of population by 2011
 - Geographical isolation – 36% of older people live outside of major cities
 - Chronic illness
 - Low socio-economic status

Social Inclusion as a Policy Concept

“The process by which efforts are made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstances, can achieve their potential in life”

UK Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2007

Attempts to achieve a balance between individuals’ rights and duties, and to increase social cohesion

Life course approach to minimise social exclusion

Australian policy context

- Social Inclusion Unit established by the Rudd Govt in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
 - The first priority of the unit is “targeting jobless families with children to increase work opportunities, improve parenting and build capacity”
 - To date, the unit has shown little interest in older people.
- The new Productive Ageing Package (DEEWR 2010-2014) is focused on workforce productivity issues rather than addressing the health or wellbeing of older people.

Victorian context

- Positive Ageing Plans have been implemented or are being prepared in 96+% of all Victorian LGAs – supported by OSV and facilitated by MAV/COTA.
- PAPs have a strong focus on social isolation as a core issue for older people. How will they inform action at the local level?
- New “Ageing in Victoria” whole-of-government State plan due to be rolled out soon.

Previous Research

- The Queensland Cross-Government Project to Reduce Social Isolation in Older People (CGPRSIOP) piloted 5 interventions across Queensland:
 - Social Inclusion Project - Brisbane City Council
 - Culturally Appropriate Volunteer Services - Multicultural Devel. Assoc.
 - Steady Steps Falls Prevention Program - Fitness Queensland Assoc.
 - Connecting Points Project - Hervey Bay City Council
 - Seniors Connecting - Greenvale State School P&C
- The project was one of the first large scale government initiatives to involve formal evaluation and has produced literature reviews and best practice guidelines.

See www.communityservices.qld.gov.au/seniors/isolation/

CGPRSIOP Literature Review

Warburton and Liu (2007). Social isolation and loneliness in older people: A literature review

- Successful interventions to reduce social isolation in older people require understanding and strategic action at the levels of individual, neighbourhood, community, and society.
 - Individual - we need to know how isolation and loneliness is perceived and experienced by older people and what their most urgent needs/expectations are.
 - Neighbourhood - the creation of an age-friendly environment and the strengthening of existing social networks.
 - Societal - action to reduce social inequalities and discrimination against older people.

The current research agenda

- Updating the 2007 CGPRSIOP literature review (Dr Megan Coyle)
- 30 relevant research articles identified between 2007 and 2010, including intervention studies, surveys, focus groups and analysis of secondary data.
- A review of the grey literature is now taking place.
- Work still in progress, but some initial findings emerging:

Lit review – initial findings

- **Country of origin**

- Australia 5
- Canada 4
- Hong Kong 4
- Finland 3
- Ireland 3
- Also US, UK, Finland, Asia

- **Source of publication**

- Nursing related journals 6
- Ageing and Society 5
- Ageing and Mental Health 3
- J Cross-Cultural Gerontology 3



Lit review – Australian research areas

- Retaining connections post-retirement - focus groups with older men
- Social isolation in Chinese Australians - community survey and focus groups
- Older residents in a new master planned housing estate – semi-structured interviews
- Older people in a social support group – focus groups
- Older internet users - online questionnaire

Literature Review – Key themes

1. The experience of social isolation in older Asians - 9 projects
 - Particular focus on the shame that is often felt by older Asian nursing home residents because they are seen as having been abandoned by families. This effect was noted to be greater in Korea than Japan in a cross-cultural comparison study.
 - Singapore older people living alone reported preferring this to living with others – so the social stigma may not be as great.
 - Interest in cross-cultural differences in isolation and older people (Korean Americans, Koreans vs Japanese, Chinese Australians).



Literature Review – Key themes cont.

2. Increasing focus on social isolation in people receiving care, especially those in residential care
3. The use of the internet as a networking tool
 - Australian project found that those using ICT to communicate had lower levels of loneliness, whereas those using ICT to find new friends were more lonely.
4. Place and ageing
 - Australian study on the experience of older people in a master planned community found that a Leisure Group played an important role in facilitating new relationships.



Lit review – Key themes cont.

- There has been no research identified since 2007 which specifically looked at social isolation issues in rural and remote settings.
- So there is a clear evidence gap to be addressed.

Developing a regional agenda

Developing a local research agenda in partnership with LGAs, service providers, and older people themselves. Topics being discussed include:

- 1. Social isolation in rural Australia.**
- 2. Service- based interventions (building on CGPRSIOP)**
- 3. The use of art and design workshops to reconnect older residents in bushfire affected communities**
- 4. The health & wellbeing benefits of learning in later life**

1. Social isolation in rural Australia.

- Living in rural Australia can bring with it issues such as geographic isolation, reduced access to services, and greater loss of connection to family.
- We are interested in the extent to which this impacts on social isolation, e.g.
 - Comparative studies of the risk factors in rural and urban settings.
 - Research targeting social isolation in older farmers, including examining critical time points for intervention.
 - The impact of moving off the farm – either into residential care or to “down size”.



2. Service-based interventions

- Many learnings from the CGPRSIOP and we propose to build on this in Gippsland, focusing on rural and regional issues.
- Interventions will be determined in conjunction with local partners.
- Interventions will be run over a longer period than the original CGPRSIOP to allow any effects to be registered and ensure the sustainability of the intervention.

3. Art and design workshops:

The OSV has made funding available for the provision of learning opportunities for older people in fire affected communities as a means of building social connections.

- **We propose a series of art and design workshops focusing on images of bushfire recovery and will evaluate the impact on social isolation and quality of life.**

4. The health & well-being benefits of learning in later life

Proposed local replication of UK study on *Older People & Lifelong Learning* by Alex Withnall. The aims of this work are to:

- **Scope the range of learning opportunities currently available to older people in the region;**
- **Understand the potential for lifelong learning to contribute to healthy ageing by facilitating social connections, ongoing cognitive development etc; and**
- **Understand the determinants of involvement in lifelong learning including motivations, barriers and facilitators.**



Next steps

- **Discussions with local partners are continuing**
- **Comments and suggestions welcomed**



Discussion