

Growing old alone

The rise of social isolation as Canada ages

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academics define social isolation as a reflection of reduced social networks and a lack of social contact. They add that it is a particular problem at older ages.”¹

Social isolation among the elderly has real health consequences. Research shows that social isolation is as strong a factor in early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and alcohol consumption.² It is also a factor in the development of chronic illnesses such as “chronic lung disease, arthritis, impaired mobility, and depressive symptoms.”³

Canada is getting older. Statistics Canada predicts that the number of Canadians over 65 will outnumber those 14 years and younger for the first time in Canadian history somewhere between 2015 and 2021.⁴

As a result:

- Decision-makers need to be aware of the physical/health ramifications of social isolation in order to inspire action on the local level to build community
- Seniors interested in growing old in their own community should investigate the founding of Beacon Hill Village as well as the Village to Village Network, which represent the larger movement across the United States⁵
- Teachers might consider pairing their class with pen pals in a local senior’s home
- Interested community groups can investigate the possibility of starting events or creating volunteer opportunities for seniors. Care should be taken to encourage and foster community between volunteers and attendees, whatever the nature of the event
- Families can consider their own partnerships with the seniors around them, particularly those who live far away from extended family

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WHAT IS SOCIAL ISOLATION?

Social isolation is spreading because Canada is getting older. Life as an older Canadian can be lonely. Death and disability can shrink social circles, cutting a person off from regular social contact. Family no longer lives nearby as a matter of routine. Continued, deepening isolation can lead to increased health complications, difficulties with activities of daily living and even hastened death.

What exactly is social isolation? A 2013 study by Andrew Steptoe at University College, London (UK), defined it as “an objective and quantifiable reflection of reduced social network size” and lack of social contact.⁶

Steptoe notes that it is a particular problem at older ages, when financial and mobility limitations exist alongside the death of friends and family to decrease the number of social contacts.⁷ These elements come together uniquely in those of older age.

According to a 2006 Canadian study, “A situation of social isolation involves few social contacts and few social roles, as well as an absence of mutually rewarding relationships with other people.”⁸

The study also draws attention to old age as a factor. “This situation can occur at any age, but it is generally accepted that in older age it is often a result of retirement and the loss of daily contacts related to work, from death of family members or friends, or through a change of residence that may be necessitated by declining health coupled with the absence of regular caregivers.”⁹

AGING CANADIANS

Over the next few decades, record numbers of Canadians will reach older age due to the aging of the Baby Boomers. That process has already started: Statistics Canada noted in November 2013 that “[s]ince July 1, 2011, the number of seniors grew at an average annual rate of 4.2%. By comparison, the average annual rate for the five previous years was 2.8%. This proportion should continue to rise rapidly in the coming years as an increasing number of baby boomers will reach the age of 65.”¹⁰

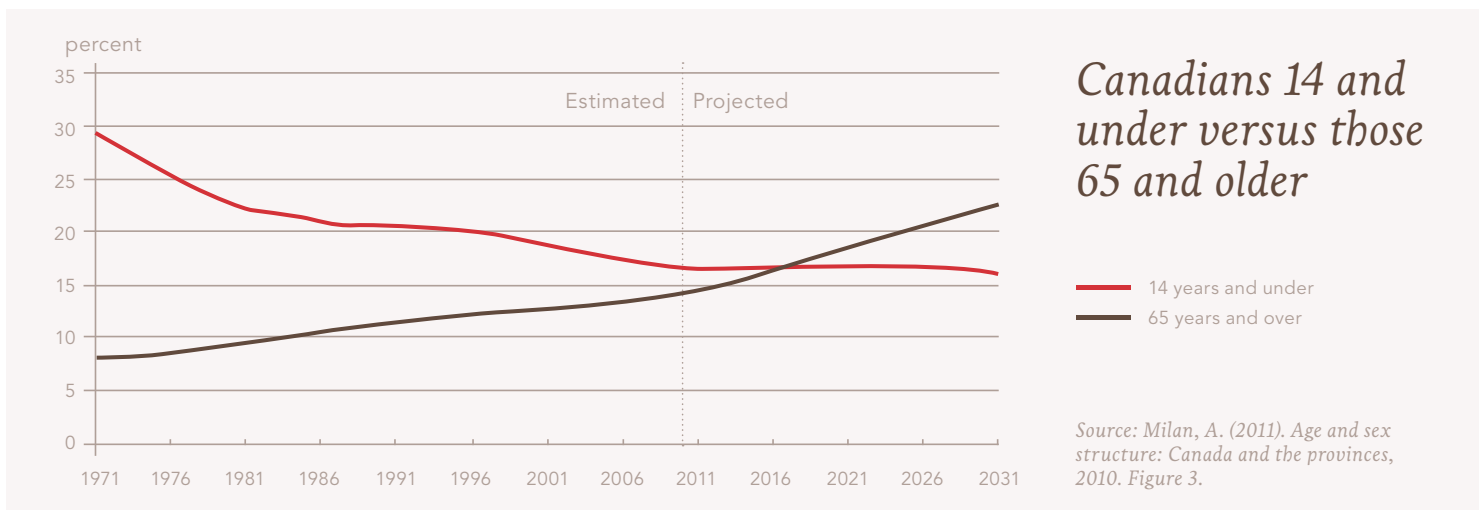
The oldest Baby Boomers reached 65 in 2011. The 2011 Census found that out of all age groups the fastest growth rates were for ages 50 to 65 and 85 to 100.¹¹ Statistics Canada has projected that the proportion of people aged

65 years and over will overtake the proportion of children aged 14 years and under for the first time in Canadian history sometime between 2015 and 2021.¹²

It goes without saying that people don’t suddenly become isolated the day after they turn 65. Within the next 30 to 40 years, however, the ranks of people 85 and over will expand dramatically.

SOCIAL ISOLATION TODAY

For an idea of how widespread social isolation might become over that timeframe, we need an idea of how widespread it is today. A 2012 Statistics Canada study found that 20% of seniors participated in no frequent



1. Steptoe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P., and Wardle, J. (2013). Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women. *PNAS*, Vol. 110, no. 15, p. 5977. Retrieved from <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2013/03/19/1219686110.full.pdf+html>
2. Holt-Lunstadt, J., Smith, T.B., and Layton, B.L. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*, p. 12. Retrieved from <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000316>
3. Steptoe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P., and Wardle, J. (2013). Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women, p. 5797.
4. Milan, A. (2011). Age and sex structure: Canada and the provinces, 2010. See Share of children decreases. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-209-x/2011001/article/11511-eng.htm>
5. Information on Beacon Hill Village can be found at www.beaconhillvillage.org/. The Village to Village Network can be found at <http://www.vtvnetwork.org/>
6. Steptoe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P., and Wardle, J. (2013). Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women, p. 5977.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Keefe, J., Andrew, M., Fancey, P., and Hall, M. (2006). A profile of social isolation in Canada, p. 1. Retrieved from http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2006/keefe_social_isolation_final_report_may_2006.pdf
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
10. Statistics Canada. (2013, November 25). The Daily. Canada's population estimates: Age and sex, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/131125/dq131125a-eng.htm>
11. *Ibid.*, Figure 2.
12. Milan, A. (2011). Age and sex structure: Canada and the provinces, 2010. See Share of children decreases. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-209-x/2011001/article/11511-eng.htm>

social activities.¹³ “Frequent social activities” are defined as weekly or monthly participation in a variety of activities.¹⁴

While a lack of participation in social activities is not in and of itself social isolation, it is a sign of lack of engagement in life outside of a person’s home. Those who are not engaged with the community around them can more easily become isolated from that community.

If even close to 20% of Canadian seniors are now socially isolated and that percentage remains even close to constant going forward, the number of isolated older Canadians will swell for the foreseeable future as the Baby Boomers retire and reach older age.

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Clearly, social isolation is a problem for those seniors living in it. It also has consequences for all those who love and appreciate the presence of parents and grandparents in family and community life.

What kind of problems can result from social isolation in the life of senior Canadians? Research shows that isolation can contribute to disease, difficulties in doing the necessary activities of daily life, and even earlier death.

Stephoe found that social isolation was associated with longstanding illnesses such as “chronic lung disease, arthritis, impaired mobility, and depressive symptoms.”¹⁵ It is perhaps not hard to understand how being con-

stantly alone and without support could foster depressive symptoms.

Chronic illness can compound isolation by limiting mobility or even endurance of normal social interactions.

Loneliness associated with social isolation also has consequences for daily living. A 2012 study by professors at the University of California found that loneliness leads to a decline in the ability to carry out activities of daily living, as well as difficulty in upper extremity tasks (such as reaching for items in upper cupboards) and stair climbing.¹⁶

The loss of independence due to inability to carry out such activities would represent another setback in the ability to look after oneself. Accepting help for such tasks could also be difficult for someone used to being independent. Without necessary support, such declines could necessitate moving out of a person’s home into a supported living environment.

Related consequences of social isolation go beyond illness and inability to do daily tasks. A 2010 review of studies of social isolation concluded that social isolation is as strong a factor in early death as alcohol consumption and smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.¹⁷

Another study by investigators from Stanford, UC Berkley and UC San Francisco found that social isolation is associated with the risk of death similar to smoking and stronger than high blood pressure.¹⁸ This study concluded that “the power of isolation as a marker of poor health cannot be ignored.”¹⁹

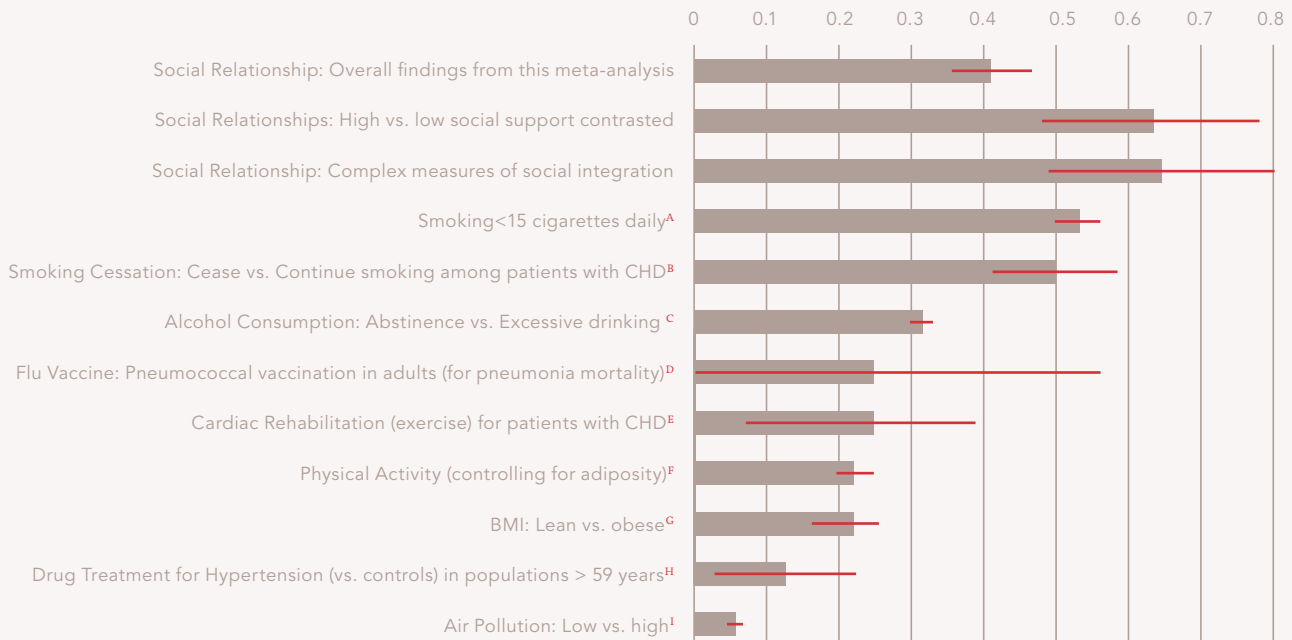
13. Gilmour, H. (2012). Social participation and the health and well-being of Canadian seniors. See Table A. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2012004/article/11720-eng.htm>

14. *Ibid.*

15. Steptoe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P., and Wardle, J. (2013). Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women, p. 5797.

16. Perissinotto, C.M., Stijacic Cenzer, I., and Covinsky, K.E. (2012). Loneliness in older persons: A predictor of functional decline and death. *Arch Intern Med.* Vol. 172, No. 14, pp. 1078-1083.

Comparison of odds of decreased mortality across several conditions



Source: Holt-Lunstadt, J., Smith, T.B., and Layton, B.L. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review, Figure 6.

A 2010 meta-analysis of 148 studies of the influence of social relationships on the risk of mortality found that those “with strong social relationships are likely to remain alive longer than similar individuals with poor social relations.”²⁰

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO COMBAT SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG SENIORS?

Thankfully, there are solutions available for avoiding isolation in older age. The following examples provide some ideas for how to decrease social isolation. They center on the need to foster connections between people through which community can grow.

17. Holt-Lunstadt, J., Smith, T.B., and Layton, B.L. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*. See Figure 6, p. 14. Retrieved from <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000316>
18. Pantell, M., Rehkopf, D., Jutte, D., Syme, S.L., Balmes, J., and Adler, N. (2013). Social isolation: A predictor of mortality comparable to traditional clinical risk factors. *American Journal of Public Health*. Vol. 103, No. 11, p. 2058.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., and J. Bradley Layton, J.B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. p. 9.

BEACON HILL VILLAGE

This grassroots non-profit community organization was founded in 2002. It describes itself as “a member-driven organization for Boston residents 50 and over, provides programs and services so members can lead vibrant, active and healthy lives, while living in their own homes and neighborhoods.”²¹

It is run by seniors for seniors, organized to serve anyone over 50 and provides a range of supports as well as social activities. Concerts and day trips around the region are organized regularly. The village has four full time staff and relies on volunteers to provide its services. 80 percent of members pay a regular annual fee for membership and 20 percent pay a highly subsidized fee for people of low or moderate income.²² A news report on the village noted that it was founded with an \$80,000 investment and needs to raise \$200,000 per year over and above fees from members to continue operating.²³ The concept has spread across the US, with 120 communities now existing across that country representing 20,000 people in 39 States and another 125 under development. There are also 3 villages internationally in Victoria, BC, the Netherlands and Australia.²⁴

STUDENT SENIOR PEN-PAL PROGRAMS

Jennifer Derwey, now a resident of Halifax, Nova Scotia, was a nine-year-old living in small town Alaska far from extended family when her teacher arranged a pen-pal program between her class and the local senior’s home.²⁵

She remembers that her class of approximately 20 kids was very involved. “Each had a senior resident assigned to us. We wrote on a weekly or monthly basis from the start of school up until Christmas break. The letters were collected and delivered by my teacher. The project ended with our school busing us to the senior home for a lunch with our pen-pals just before Christmas break,” says Jennifer.

The benefits to Jennifer’s class and their pen-pals were evident at the Christmas lunch. “When we were finally able to meet them in person, we had an understanding of who they were through their letters that subdued an otherwise awkward generational gap. The Christmas lunch was full of chatter and the singing of carols.” Jennifer also remembers that her pen-pal “with great joy, played Santa and handed out small gifts to each of the children.”

The benefits were many. “As a child growing up away from extended family, this experience was one of my first memories interacting with the elderly. So many children in North America are growing up without family geographically nearby, and I think this was a fantastic opportunity for exposure to an entire group of people I might never have had the honor of communicating with if it weren't for this program.”

Jennifer remembers how much it taught her about how to write as well. “We were learning penmanship, reading, spelling, grammar, letter writing, etc.,” she says. Yet the

21. Beacon Hill Village. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.beaconhillvillage.org/>

22. Personal e-mail communication with Judy Willet, national director of the Village Network, January 15, 2014.

23. Suarez, R. (2013, August 8). There's no place like home: Seniors hold on to urban independence into old age. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health/july-dec13/aging_08-08.html

benefits transcended school. “The most important thing I learned was that my senior pen-pal was a whole person, with a whole history and a whole lifetime of experiences.”

SPAGHETTI DINNERS

Four churches in southern Ontario have been offering monthly spaghetti dinners in their communities for over a year. One such dinner has been happening in Richmond Hill, a community north of Toronto, at the McConaghey Seniors Centre.

Alice Mawhinney, a Richmond Hill resident, organizes these evenings with the goal of allowing “neighbours (to) get to know each other without cost being a limiting factor.”²⁶ The location was chosen to allow easy access, as it is close to the centre of Richmond Hill and is accessible by public transit.

One off events of this nature might serve to draw isolated individuals out of their homes, but would do little to foster community on an ongoing basis. The monthly dinners allows for returnees who will recognize and be recognized as a familiar face in subsequent meals. Volunteers encourage returnees by giving attendees the opportunity to share contact information so they can be notified of the next event.

Volunteers also sit and eat with attendees, allowing community to form in that way as well.

Furthermore, the organizers of these meals have opened volunteering to anyone who is interested. Several seniors



Some of the Richmond Hill spaghetti dinner volunteers

are part of the volunteer team, and working together as a team allows the volunteers to build community amongst themselves.

“There is a real need for something like this in the community, because people are so lonely,” Alice remarks.²⁷ By encouraging return attendance and welcoming seniors into the volunteer team, community meals like this can surround formerly isolated seniors with caring community even between events.

Canadians need to realize that helping our senior neighbours and friends avoid the perils of social isolation is a responsibility we all share. When seniors are able to contribute their wisdom and experience to the broader community, we all benefit.

24. Personal e-mail communication with Judy Willet, national director of the Village Network, January 15, 2014.

25. All quotes from Jennifer Derwey are from personal e-mail communication, December 16, 2013.

26. Personal e-mail communication with Alice Mawhinney, December 18, 2013.

27. *Ibid.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » *Decision-makers need to be aware of the physical/health ramifications of social isolation in order to inspire action on the local level to build community*
- » *Seniors interested in growing old in their own community should investigate the founding of Beacon Hill Village as well as the Village to Village Network, which represents the larger movement across the United States²⁸*

Community members should work to create opportunities for seniors to be active participants in the broader community as an integral part of that community.

For example:

- Teachers should consider pairing their class with pen pals in a local senior's home. Some form of meeting between your class and the seniors should take place at the end of term
- Interested community groups can investigate the possibility of starting events or creating volunteer opportunities for seniors. Care should be taken to encourage and foster community between volunteers and attendees, whatever the nature of the event
- Families can consider their own partnerships with seniors around them, particularly when they live far away from extended family 🍁

28. Information on Beacon Hill Village can be found at www.beaconhillvillage.org/ The Village to Village Network can be found at <http://www.vtvnetwork.org/>