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Introduction

Lack of Social Connectedness and Its Consequences

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Isolation, loneliness, and a lack of social connections mark the lives of millions of older adults. Elders can be ignored in public settings—one 80-year-old writer labelled herself and other elders as invisible or "the glass people"—and they are literally invisible when confined to dank urban apartments or sparsely-populated rural countrysides. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have come to focus attention on this little-recognized and dangerous condition facing so many older people. The articles in this issue of *Public Policy & Aging Report* bring attention to this issue, call for its reframing, and detail a series of initiatives that, if replicated, hold promise for lessening isolation among older adults.

Lisa Marsh Ryerson describes AARPs *Connect2Affect* initiative, which combines research and collaboration toward identifying solutions to reduce loneliness among older Americans. Regarding transportation, AARP is working with Lyft to study whether a ride-hailing app can improve health care in older adults. Regarding technology, it is testing a theory that an interactive device with built-in speech recognition will make it possible for elders to get reminders about community information and develop new interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the AARP Foundation is funding a pilot program to assess the efficacy of a person-to-person "warm line" service centered on older individuals. Finally, AARP, working with The Gerontological Society of America and N4A, is seeking to build a more robust body of research centered on loneliness; toward that end, it has supported University of Chicago researchers in developing *A Profile of Social Connectedness in Older Adults*, which has identified a series of causes and correlates associated with older adult loneliness.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad frames the prevalence and severity of loneliness as an unrecognized public health problem. Through her and colleagues' own meta-analyses and other research literature, she concludes that there is now substantial evidence that being socially connected significantly reduces the risk for premature mortality and that lacking social connectedness significantly increases risk. Moreover, these risks exceed those associated with many risk factors that receive substantial public health resources: obesity, air pollution, smoking, and physical inactivity. Data and trends pointing to substantial and growing levels of loneliness are numerous: living alone, being unmarried, not participating in social groups, and living in smaller households. Data also link lack of social connectedness to physical and mental health outcomes and to limitations in functional status. Finally, social isolation may be particularly threatening to older adults in that chronic exposure to risk factors increases with the passage of time. Put differently, to a separate literature speaking to "cumulative economic disadvantage" in old age, we can now add "cumulative connectedness disadvantage."

I-Shian Suen, Tracey Gendron, and Meghan Gough report on two-stage research assessing social isolation and the role of the built environment in promoting or limiting its occurrence. Assessing social isolation based on social satisfaction, they employed existing data from the *No Wrong Door* initiative, a collaborative undertaking of several Commonwealth of Virginia departments. They found 2 of 12 risk factors statistically associated with social satisfaction: trauma-transiton (e.g., death of someone close, family conflict, major illness, crime victim) and depression-anxiety (e.g., feel alone, afraid, sad, life not worth living). The second stage of their research was to establish the connection, if any, between social satisfaction and the built environment. In examining the spatial relationship between distribution of socially satisfied and dissatisfied cases, they found an almost non-existent spatial relationship between the two groups. Further, when determining the effect of environments that are more walkable and have better accessibility, they again found very weak relationships. Gendron and Gough conclude that the apparent lack of a relationship between the built environment and social isolation is "significant and troubling given the plethora of evidence demonstrating that the built environment has profound impacts on physical and mental health outcomes." Because further examination found methodological limitations of the built environment data available to them, the authors call for further research based on assessment tools that include richer data on the built environment and its potential effect on social satisfaction.

James Lubben sees social isolation as "a potent killer" and urges policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to invest resources and design interventions to preclude this dire consequence. He notes three theories that tie isolation to ill-health: social ties provide individuals with social support, such ties encourage people to adhere to better health practices (e.g., give up smoking), and social ties may affect the immune system by buffering the impact of stress. Lubben then turns to the critical question of measuring social isolation and posits both primary (family, friends, neighbors) and secondary groups (membership groups and social clubs) to be relevant in understanding major measurement approaches. Social researchers have tended to focus on the latter and clinical researchers on the former. Yet older adults' self-perception of isolation is another potential focus for assessment, some having suggested that measures of loneliness can be based on perceived social isolation. Lubben concludes with policy recommendations (developing communities, such as the Village model; have Medicare begin to cover hearing aids; initiate public education campaigns such as AARP's *Connect2Affect*), practice interventions (including assessment of isolation as part of geriatricians' screening protocols), new research on the causes of isolation, and, intriguingly, including social capital resources as well as financial ones in retirement planning strategies, where rugged individualism may not be what the doctor ordered.

Lenard Kaye focuses particular attention on the social isolation that may be experienced by rural elders, where individuals are separated by great distances and children may have gone off to explore life in the big city. Rural elders are known for trumpeting their stoicism and independence, but these traits—especially among men—may harbor negative social consequences in old age. Kaye goes on to identify a series of local movements and programs that can mitigate isolation among rural and small-town elders. These include a student-led visitation program in Maine, a wellness program in Colorado, Meals-on-Wheels programs nationwide, the Senior Companion program of Senior Corps, and a program setting up garden beds at low-income congregate housing sites in Maine. Kaye speaks highly of the Age Friendly community movement and concludes by cautioning against a heavy reliance on technology in addressing isolation: while technology may increase connectivity and the capacity for autonomous living, it may also reduce the integrity of social relationships.

Sara Czaja calls attention to the role technology can play in lessening isolation and loneliness. She cites developments in sensoring and monitoring technologies, including the installation of an unobtrusive home-based assessment platform. Internet and smartphone technologies have been shown to clearly enhance the social connectivity of older adults, although results are mixed concerning the impact of access to the internet on well-being and social outcomes for older adults. Czaja and colleagues evaluated the impact of a specially designed computer system (PRISM) on outcomes related to well-being and engagement. When compared to a control condition that presented the same information in hard-copy binder format, those who received PRISM reported significantly decreased loneliness and increased social support. In concluding, Czaja calls for further research centered on these information and communications technologies and for allied interventions to address the lack of access to such technologies due to lower socioeconomic status, mobility limitations, and—in concurrence with Kaye—older adults living in rural areas.

Though expressing concerns about the paradoxes of technology in addressing social isolation, Thomas Kamber reports on a series of innovative uses of technology developed by OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) to successfully address the problem. Early on, OATS designed technology training for older adults with little computer experience in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, which now spreads across New York City, signing up thousands of elders at the City's 250 senior centers. Research about the program conducted by the New York Academy of Medicine found that 65% of participants interviewed six months after completion of the program reported continued improvements in social engagement. Another initiative, supported by a $2.5 million grant from the Broadband Technology Opportunities program of the Department of Commerce, enabled OATS to build 24 technology labs around the city. And through "Connecting to Community," in partnership with three other organizations, OATS designed a six-month training initiative wherein 100 isolated individuals in two cities would receive an iPad and free broadband at home while agreeing to attend two classes per week for 26 weeks on how to increase social engagement using digital tools. Assessment by AARP found improvement across a range of social isolation measures. A Senior Planet Exploration Center in Chelsea continues to host activities tied to technology and isolation.

Whereas Kaye found isolation in rural America, Elena Portacolone finds it in the densely-populated and crime-ridden inner-city. In Richmond, California, she and her colleagues identified a series of personal (poor health and poverty), social (crime), and physical (decaying buildings and streets) factors isolating vulnerable elders. In her contribution here, Portacolone recounts the situation of Marie Davis, a 95-year-old African-American woman of low-income and limited mobility. Her neighborhood had changed, leaving her estranged, and her series of home care aides had created various messes and demanded money of her. As a result of these and other environmental insults, Davis felt the victim of events beyond her control. Portacolone draws a series of implications from this and similar cases: there may be a tipping point which researchers celebrating the resilience of today's elders should be aware of; the vagaries of well-being of elders living in geographic proximity to each other are stunning and, for the vulnerable, depressing; and the availability, reliability, and quality of health and social services are heavily impacted by inner-city environments. A fleeting reference to high-quality elder services made available in Copenhagen, Denmark, leads Portacolone to conclude that policy and practice can create interventions that put to shame the circumstances in which Davis lives.

Connie Corley, Maureen Feldman, and Scott Kaiser, highlight the work of the Motion Picture and Television Fund (MPTF) in addressing social isolation among elders from the entertainment industry, and the MPTF's work with other service organizations in the Los Angeles area. They discuss the design and workings of the Daily Call Sheet, an intervention supported through a grant from the AARP Foundation that connects volunteers with older adults at risk for social isolation. The initiative involves initial in-person evaluations and then daily phone calls to those at risk. The MPTF is also a founding member of the Greater Los Angeles Social Isolation and Loneliness Coalition, consisting of 20 organizations bringing concerted attention to this pressing issue. Corley's conclusion cleverly speaks to the locale of MPTF and images of aging by observing: "increasing social connection in Hollywood will . . . spur much needed innovative yet practical solutions; an interesting plot twist for an industry and city with a reputation for promoting the promise of staying young forever!"

One of this issue's spotlight articles highlights findings from IBM's Institute for Business Value's report, *Loneliness and the Aging Population, How Businesses and Governments can Address a Looming Crisis*. Lilian Myers and Nicola Palmarini conducted 50 interviews with experts from six countries across a range of disciplines and professions. At the heart of the loneliness challenge, they see a fragmented and incomplete stakeholder ecosystem, disconnection among operations of multiple-point solutions, and myths that older adults will not use technology. They call for interventions at the individual, community, and national levels toward engaging in innovative thinking, disruptive organizational and business transformations, and employment of new technologies. They conclude by asserting that meaningfully addressing loneliness will take "a new kind of village": one that crosses and integrates a host of social and economic sectors.

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