

Social isolation and the aging population sociology essay



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America has recently become a nation that values aging close to family, friends, and the community that they have known all their lives. Long gone are the days when buying an recreational vehicle and traveling around to play golf and migrate to places like Florida and Arizona are the affordable thing that everyone can do. According to AARP, today 9 out of 10 adults 65 years old and over would prefer to stay in their home and community for as long as possible rather than move (AARP, 2000). The participants of the AARP survey stated that even if they needed home care or extra help, 82% would still prefer to not move from their residences. This new experience is called "aging in place". According to the Journal of Housing for the Elderly and Senior Resource, "aging in place" is when someone does not have to move from their current home in order to get services and supports in response to their changing needs (Senior Resource. com, 2010) . Staying independent and living at home for as long as possible seems to be the situation of choice. What happens to those who chose to do remain independent but does so alone and with little social supports?

Social Isolation: The Problem

Social isolation is a problem. Although it is not only a problem among the aging, they are one of the most vulnerable populations that it affects. Although it can be a risk factor, living alone does not necessarily mean that one will become socially isolated. However, some of the factors that can influence social isolation are living alone, fragile health, having little opportunity to see other people, living on small fixed incomes, having limited or no access to services or personal care, having a disability or mental illness, little to no transportation, and being lonely (United Way). Barriers

such as having little to no social supports, the inability to travel, vision problems, loss of spouse and friends, and the inability to get the help one needs in an emergency can contribute to a person becoming isolated. This could lead to, in an extreme case, loss of life but to a less but still important, case of depression, lack of services, and decline in health. To define social isolation in the older population is difficult because the factors that cause it vary from person to person, as well as how it shows in each individual.

Income

Seniors who are of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be depressed, have declining health, and have less social encounters than a senior with a higher income. Seniors with higher incomes are more likely to afford to pay for things such as personal home care, travel & leisure expenses, good health insurance and transportation, affordable housing, and social events. They are usually able to pay for specialized home services so that others are able to take care of them in their home.

Race & Ethnicity

Influence of cultural traits could attribute to senior social isolation. According to the US Census, older people within the Hispanic and African American communities tend to live alone and have lower incomes than other groups (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). These are just two risk factors of social isolation.

Religion

Studies have found that spirituality and religion tends to have a positive effect on people and their social interactions. Religion affiliation and beliefs

helps decrease depression and serve as a protective factor against symptoms consistent with having depression (Law, 2009). People who attend church tend to have a social group and participate in church centered activities with others in their community.

Sexual Orientation

Seniors who are of the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) are more likely to separate from their family of origin and relocate to a different area due to issues within the coming out process (Smith, 1997). However, according to Linda Woolf of Webster University, research shows that the majority of factors related to aging are similar between the aging heterosexual and homosexual population (Woolf, 1998). The factors that are risk factors for social isolation and that tend to be the case are living far from family, living alone, or having no children.

Disabilities

Physical, emotional, and mental challenges can affect even the most socialized person. When people age, they are less likely to maintain a state of wellness and become less able to move around, work, travel, or engage in social activities. In 2007, almost a third of the 65 years old and over indicated they had a disability (U. S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Gender

Women seem to have more friends and supports that are more social than do men. Women are generally better at bonding and exploring relationships. The women who form multiple meaningful relationships are also at risk of losing them because they are three times more likely to be widowed, live

alone, and unable to drive (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009) . According to the 2009 US Census report, women are also less likely to be married, have a spouse present, and more likely to be divorced. According to a recent report to the Committee on Aging, NYC Council,

“ the elderly person living alone is often a widowed women in her eighties who struggles alone to make ends meet on a meager income. Being older she is more likely to be in fair or poor health. She is frequently either childless or does not have a son or daughter nearby to provide assistance when needed. Lacking social supports, she is high risk for institutionalization and for losing her independent life style” (Gusmano & Rodwin, 2006).

Access to Services

Those who are socially isolated have less access to services because they are unable or unwilling to leave their home. People who live alone are at a disadvantage because they are unable to get the transportation they need to get services. Those who do have transportation to get to services might have other issues that contribute to their isolation such as a mental illness or being of low socioeconomic status.

Causes and Corroborating evidence of the problem

People who live alone or are reclusive do not automatically become socially isolated however, they are at higher risk of becoming socially isolated.

According to Karl Pillemer’s theoretical social model (Figure 1), there are three parts to a social network. In order for a person to have a functional social network there must be a balance between interacting with family, friends, society, and accepting losses like relocation, death, and retirement.

He states, “ Gains in one level of the network may compensate or substitute for losses in the other”. He goes on to say, “ In this schema, family and friends, as well as participation in the meso-network, are hypothesized to provide social support to maintain the emotional and practical functions of living daily” (Phillemer, 2000). For example, having many friends can help a senior not become isolated when they experience the death of a spouse. Social isolation can result with the threats and disruptions shown in this model are too much for a senior to handle.

Current Impact

Demographic Data

The U. S. Census has been able to track information about age, sex, income, education, and ethnicity from those who respond. People socially isolated are among those who are less likely to respond to surveys so they are less likely to be accounted. Data has not been gathered for those who are social isolated amongst the seniors in America. However, in 2008, America had a population of 36. 8 million people that were ages 65 years and older which is expected to double by 2010 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). The U. S. Census projection indicates that by 2050, people who are 65 years and older will make up 20% of the total population. This projected future demographic change requires us to look at how we are currently addressing social isolation with this population and when we find challenges, present them as opportunities for change.

Impact of Social Isolation

Seniors and their families have become more independent while seniors also want to be less of a burden to those around them. America is in a state of individualism, which has started to consume what it means to be a part of a community. Victims of isolation in emergencies like the deaths in the recent heat waves and the total isolation of seniors in 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina have forced communities to start to recognize the issue of isolation in general (O'Brien, 2003). Communities and organizations are in collaboration to start to prepare formal plans to assist those in the community with special needs, coordinated better community services, develop systems to identify and locate older citizens, and initiating more research concerning social isolation amongst seniors (O'Brien, 2003).

Efforts to address Social Isolation

There are many national and local initiatives being made to address social isolation from creating programs and clubs where seniors can be visited or can come out of their homes and interact with other seniors. The Red Hat Ladies is an example of a social club meant for those 50 years and older. YMCA is an example of a community organization that caters programming towards seniors to encourage socializing and physical activity. Meals on Wheels is an example of a national program that serves meals to homebound seniors unable to cook. Senior companion programs offered by numerous agencies send volunteers into senior homes to provide a friendly visitor to seniors who otherwise would be isolated.

Potential Contributing Factors

Social isolation seems to have varying causal factors. Some of these factors can be contributed to life-altering transitions that can put strain on a person's social network such as retirement, declining health, and the death of a spouse, partner, or friend. Common factors influencing senior isolation are both person and community based. Individual factors include family support, living arrangements, social relationships, income, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, health and ability to travel, access to information and services, and personal feelings and attitudes. The community factors include " social environment, ageism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and social capital" (United Neighborhood Houses of New York, 2005).

The main causal factor seems to seniors living alone, with low incomes, and having minimal social networks. Using this data, the opportunity for change will be to look at current community models of successful NORC programs (Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities) to see how they are affectively addressing the social needs of their seniors.