



Transgender Senior Isolation and Loneliness

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This document will look to survey and address the issue of isolation and loneliness within transgender seniors. The contents of this document will be divided into three sections. The first section will go over the empirical research surrounding transgender isolation. The second section will talk about the attempts that have been made thus far to mitigate the issue. The third and final section will offer further suggestions to prevent isolation within transgender seniors.

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Section I: Empirical Research on Transgender Isolation

Preliminary Notes on the Data

First, it is worth noting what exactly is meant when we talk about isolation and loneliness. According to a study done by the *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM)*, social isolation is the limited or lack of social contact with others, while loneliness is the perception of social isolation or the subjective feeling of being alone.

To further explicate this distinction, one can be socially isolated while not necessarily feeling lonely. [As the National Institute of Aging \(NIA\) states](#), “about 28 percent of older adults in the United States, or 13.8 million people, live alone... but many of them are not lonely.”

For instance, a senior is socially isolated insofar as they are physically separated from other people, but are not lonely insofar as they do not have the distressed feeling of being alone or separated.

Furthermore, one can be lonely without necessarily being socially isolated. The [NIA states that](#) “some people feel lonely despite being surrounded by family and friends.” In other words, a senior who isn’t physically separated from others isn’t socially isolated, but can feel lonely insofar as they have the distressed feeling of being alone or separated.

Second, it is also worth noting how many people are facing this particular issue. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 54 million senior citizens living in the United States; this accounts for 16.5% of the nation’s population. A [report by the Williams Institute at UCLA](#) notes that about 0.5% of seniors in the U.S. identify as transgender. However, this statistic only captures the seniors who *openly* identify as transgender, and it is most likely that there are many more transgender seniors who have not been open about their identity.

Isolation and Loneliness in Transgender Seniors

Unfortunately, there is not much research that focuses specifically on transgender seniors, including research on the isolation and loneliness they face. As such, we will overview data that looks on their individual identities, isolation and loneliness in senior communities and in transgender communities. At the end of this subsection, we will make an inference about transgender seniors based on the data on the individual groups.

A [report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) found that one fourth of seniors are considered socially isolated. Although loneliness and isolation in itself is troubling, there are also problematic health issues that arise from them. The effects on health due to isolation and loneliness will be addressed in the next subsection.

Those who are transgender are more likely to feel lonely than the general population. According to [an article by AARP](#), “midlife and older adults who identify as LGBTQ are more likely to be lonely (49%) compared to those who do not (35%).”

In addition, the feelings of loneliness felt by transgender folk is worse than that of non-LGBTQ people. According to a [2021 publication on LGBTQIA+ Australians](#), “Overall, LGBTQIA+ adults experienced higher levels of loneliness... than the non-LGBTQIA+ comparison group. LGBTQIA+ adults also reported lower perceived social support and were at higher risk of social isolation than the non-LGBTQIA+ group.”

Although there is not enough research that focuses on social isolation and loneliness on transgender seniors in particular, we infer based on the above data: transgender seniors are more at risk for social isolation and loneliness than transgender youth and non-LGBTQ seniors.

Transgender seniors belong to two relevant groups: Transgender people and senior people. Given that both of these groups by themselves are more

likely to face social isolation and loneliness, then those who belong to both groups at once will be more vulnerable.

As the [2021 publication on LGBTQIA+ Australians points out](#), “socially vulnerable groups such as the elderly, migrants, and asylum seekers are more susceptible to the effects of loneliness.” Based on the additional aforementioned research, we can add transgender people to this list of socially vulnerable groups that are more susceptible to the effects of loneliness. Thus, transgender seniors who are part of two groups, which by themselves are more susceptible to isolation and its effects, may be more at risk than transgender youth and non-LGBTQ seniors.

The Effects of Isolation on Health

[Various studies have shown](#) that senior folk who suffer from isolation and loneliness are more at risk for debilitating health conditions. This includes issues such as:

- ***Cognitive Decline***
- ***Dementia***
- ***High blood pressure***
- ***Depression***
- ***Premature Death***

[According to Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health research network member Talen Wright](#) in 2020:

- A Spain study found ***“that trans women in particular reported higher levels of social loneliness and anxiety”***
- The same study found that ***social loneliness was the main predictor of poor mental health for transgender people***

According to [a study in the Journal of LGBT Youth](#), “being transgender often creates another set of mental health risk problems resulting from rejection by family, peers, and society, as well as any internal conflict they may experience, which are layered upon existing problems. Such problems include feelings of isolation and loneliness experienced by many transgender individuals.”

Senior Abuse

[According to the NASEM](#), “Elder abuse, which can affect an older adult’s physical health, mental health, and quality of life, is burgeoning globally, and isolated or lonely individuals can be more vulnerable to mistreatment.” Furthermore, “elder abuse can lead to housing displacement or disruption, worse physical health, or, in extreme cases, even death.”

Given this information and the fact that transgender folk already face [“shocking amounts of violence and discrimination,”](#) it may be the case that the abuse that transgender seniors are victims of abuse in a two-fold manner due to being transgender and due to being seniors.

Section II: Current Isolation Prevention Measures

[According to the NASEM study](#), “The United Kingdom’s Campaign to End Loneliness... identified a variety of approaches that held the most promise, grouping them into four types of interventions: foundation services, direct interventions, gateway services, and structural enablers.” This document will use this classification when referring to the types of interventions.

Foundation Services

Foundation Services involve the steps that come before direct intervention:

- 1) *Reaching Individuals*
- 2) *Understanding the Loneliness*
- 3) *Supporting Lonely Individuals*

The first step involves identifying individuals that are at risk for social isolation and loneliness. As the study says, “reaching individuals includes using data to identify individuals at high risk; training individuals in a community to recognize signs of loneliness, make referrals, and provide support; and linking interventions to health care.”

The second step involves understanding the loneliness of the particular individual, as addressing loneliness in seniors varies on a case-by-case

basis. As the study notes, “understanding the nature of an individual’s loneliness and developing a personalized response includes guided discussions in which the individual’s circumstances, needs, and wishes are identified.”

The third step involves giving targeted seniors the resources needed to address their isolation or loneliness. As the study says, “supporting lonely individuals to access appropriate services includes providing links to a ‘trusted buddy or mentor.’” To further support the buddy system, transgender seniors may find comfort by participating in a telephone buddy system. According to a [2020 study in the *Clinical Social Work Journal*](#), “evidence suggests that LGBTQ + [older] adults may actually benefit from telephone buddy programs.”

Direct Interventions

There are also interventions that tackle the issue of social isolation and loneliness in a more direct manner. The *NASEM* study gives a couple of examples that involve direct interventions, including “supporting individuals to reconnect with and/or maintain existing relationships, fostering and enabling new connections, and helping people to change their thinking about their social connections.”

The [Suicide Prevention Resource Center also points out](#) that changing the attitudes and thoughts of those that are socially isolated or feel lonely can help. An example of this they point out is cognitive behavioral therapy, which can help those change their mindset about their social situation. Furthermore, they state that “increasing nonjudgmental acceptance through mindfulness meditation may assist in developing more helpful social perceptions and behaviors.”

Gateway Services

Some seniors may find themselves in social isolation or feeling lonely due to not having the resources or capacity to address their issue. An example

of lacking a resource involves not having the means to visit or connect with others.

The *NASEM* study mentions how Gateway Services could address such particular issues. “Gateway services are services such as transportation and technology that can affect social connection. In particular, the lack of access to such services could also impede the effectiveness of broader interventions.”

Structural Enablers

The *NASEM* study states that “Structural enablers are defined by the campaign as approaches that consider the environmental factors needed within communities to help reduce loneliness. These approaches are often used in conjunction with other interventions and include working with an asset-based community development approach, promoting volunteerism, and using age-friendly approaches.”

Section III: Further Suggestions for Combating Transgender Isolation

Updated Research on Trans Seniors Isolation and Loneliness

As mentioned in *Section I* of this document, transgender seniors may suffer exacerbated social isolation and/or loneliness due to being part of two groups that are at risk for such issues. Not much research has been done that targets the trans senior population, so we suggest updated research that focuses on the particular group.

Considering Social Isolation and Loneliness in Health Care

[An article by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) points out how “loneliness and social isolation are rarely considered or addressed in health and mental health care settings.” Fortunately they also say that loneliness

and social isolation “are among the most modifiable risk factors for mortality and morbidity.”

As such, we recommend that health care settings take into consideration the effects that social isolation and loneliness have on one’s physical and mental health, especially in transgender seniors who are more at risk for such issues due to being both transgender and being seniors.

Cooperation between Health Care and Social Service

Just mentioned is the fact that social isolation and loneliness is not considered in health care settings. What might explain this fact is that such issues are addressed by social services rather than health care providers.

As such, [the NASEM study](#) suggests that “health care providers, organizations, and systems should partner with social service providers, including those serving vulnerable communities, in order to create effective team-based care (which includes services such as transportation and housing support) and to promote the use of tailored community-based services to address social isolation and loneliness in older adults.”

Further Financing on Interventions

According to the *NASEM* study, “current interventions are largely supported by volunteers, with much of the financial support coming from grants and donations. This is an unsustainable financing model.”

As such, we recommend that more funding or an allocation of resources be put into social isolation and loneliness interventions, especially since these issues have outcomes ranging from debilitating health issues to death.

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