

Older men at the margins: a study of older men's experiences of seeking social engagement and combating loneliness in later life.

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Overview

1. Background – why focus on **older gay men**?
2. Aims of the project
3. Research design – what we did.
4. Some findings – what we found.

Project in partnership with Age UK.

**Funded by NIHR School for Social Care Research
2016-2019**



Loneliness – a new social ‘epidemic’?

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Mark Easton
Home editor
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🕒 11 February 2018

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Loneliness

A subjective experience



individual sees a discrepancy between the number and/or quality of relationships that they have, and the number/quality that they would like to have

Social isolation

Objective state

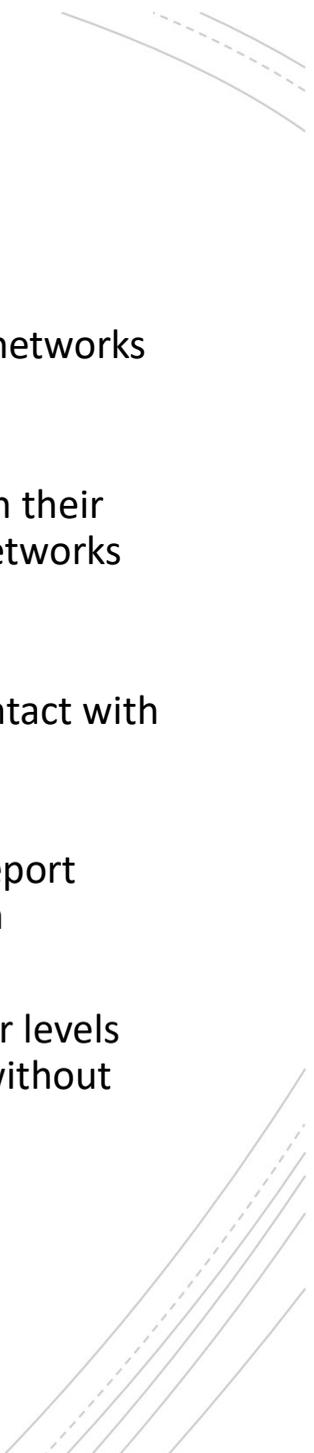


referring to the absence of contact with other people

can include separation from community involvement, and lack of access to services



Why focus on older men?

- Women more likely to have wider social networks than men across their lifetime.
 - Older men are more likely to be reliant on their (female) partner for maintaining social networks than older women.
 - Older men less likely to have monthly contact with friends
 - Greater percentage of older men (50+) report moderate to high levels of social isolation
 - Older men without partners report higher levels of loneliness and isolation than women without partners
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Why focus on older **gay** men?

- LGB adults (55+) in GB **more likely to be single, more likely to live alone, less likely to be parents and less likely to see family members regularly** in comparison to heterosexual peers
- LGB adults living alone or with others report greater loneliness than those living with a partner – not the same level of protection against loneliness as living with a partner
- Some LGB older people actively create ‘families of choice’.
- **No evidence about gay and bisexual men’s experiences of loneliness – separate from ‘L’ & ‘T’**

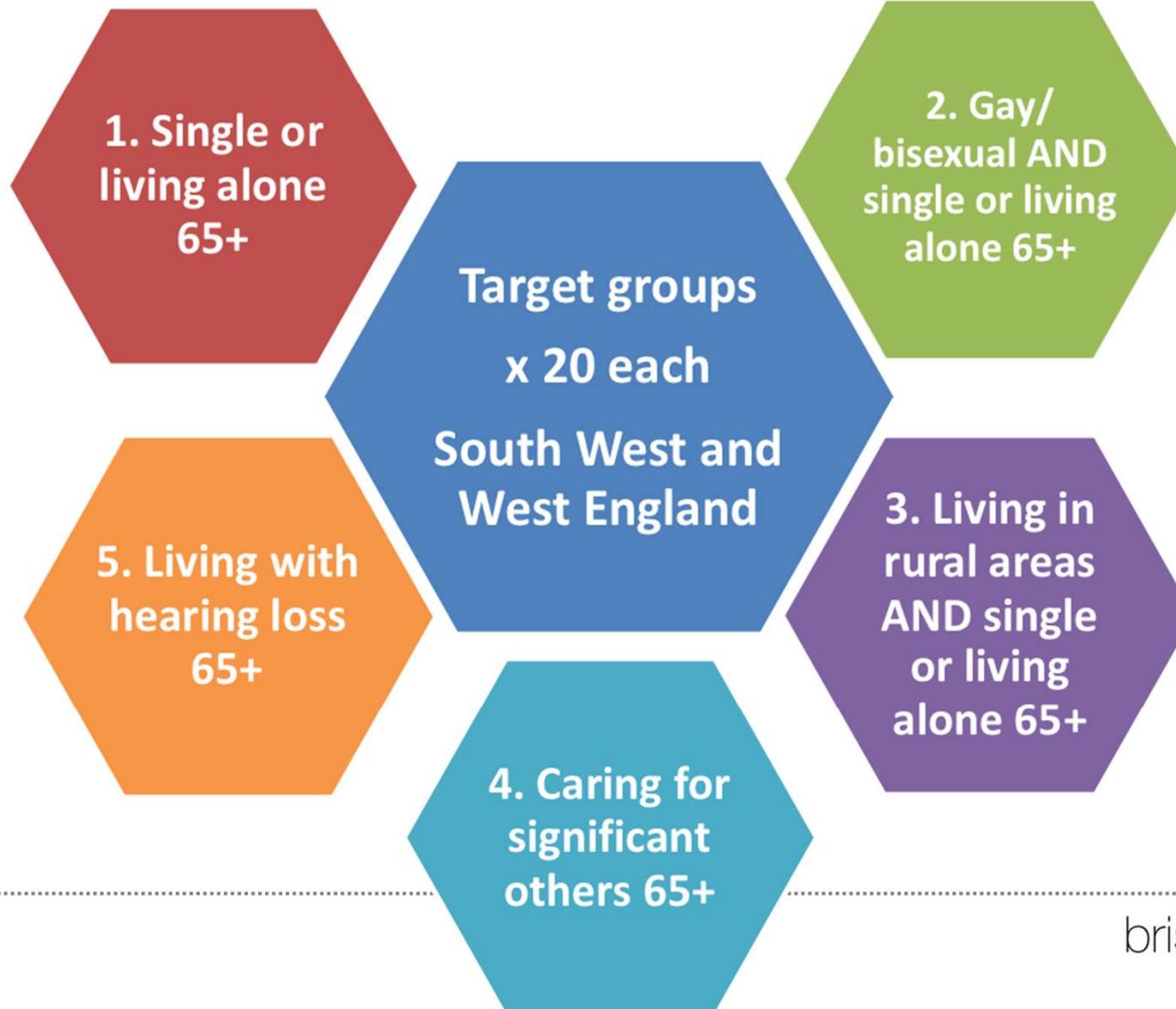




Older Men at the Margins study (2016-18)

Overarching objective:

To develop an in-depth understanding of the formal and informal ways in which hard-to-reach groups of men (65+ years) seek to maintain social engagement in later life and combat loneliness. Includes experiences of participation in group interventions targeted at reducing loneliness for older men.



Research
design:
qualitative,
cross-
sectional



Recruitment sources – men’s groups, clubs (mixed/ men only), older people’s community services and forums



Method – Semi-structured interviews (single)



Analysis – Thematic using framework analysis

Who did we interview?

Gay men who are single or living alone	Men who are single or living alone in rural areas	Men who are single or living alone in urban areas	Men who are carers for significant others	Men who are living with hearing loss
Number: 21 Ages: 65-85	Number: 22 Ages: 69-88	Number: 22 Ages: 65-95	Number: 25 Ages: 68-92	Number: 21 Ages: 65-92

What did we find?



21 gay men took
part

15 had experienced
loneliness earlier or
in their current life

6 had not
experienced
loneliness

Negative connotations attached to loneliness *and* ageing

In their loneliness talk, men (gay & straight) convey perceptions of:

- Being socially discarded
- Not having a purpose
- Being of little value to others ('feeling like nobody cares')
- Cut off from broader society.

Emotional loneliness

Seeking companion: *It's not just the physical thing of being physically alone, it's the emotional thing that is important. I miss that opportunity for intimacy, for ordinary everyday affectionate gestures and acts and the lack of opportunity to do something spontaneous and enjoy it with someone else.* [M21, 68, gay, single]

Security I think probably is the word there.....You've got that backup if you like, that security, knowing that somebody is there for you. [M70, 77, single]

Reasons for loneliness

- **Generally associated with** ... living alone, relocation, lacking a partner, bereavement, illness, partner being in care, lacking friendships, 'being a lone wolf'.
- **For gay men associated with** ... having never felt comfortable being 'out' or 'coming out' to others, receiving a HIV diagnosis, current partner not being 'out', having no local LGBT community near their place of residence (LGBT isolation).

‘Coming out’ and degrees of loneliness

- Not being ‘out’ as a younger gay man
- Feeling able to ‘come out’ to other gay men only

I mean, it’s the reason why I’ve been on my own, well, since I left my family in ’73. I was in the closet for so long. I did see a lot of straight people then. That was, like, office colleagues, you know. So we’d go out drinking. But my private life was entirely non-existent, as far as relationships are concerned. [M67, 69, in a relationship, living alone]

Generational differences

Maintaining silence - not being out in the 1950s/ 1960s:

...Yes, I was beginning to feel more and more isolated before this, as I moved into my 20s and 30s. All my peers were getting married, they were all heterosexual, but I was the odd man out. I think the general assumption was, "Poor old [name], he can't make it with the birds." Birds meaning women, but little did they realise that [name] didn't want to make it with the birds. So, in those days, one had to keep it quiet. [M68, 85, single]

Challenges of discussing loneliness and emotional distress

Silence and shame associated with loneliness

Not speaking to others about emotional difficulties
(inc. partners)

*That's my feelings, I've kept private. Not through a sense of not wanting to discuss things with people, **but a feeling that either they're not interested in you personally, or that you will be embarrassed by talking about intimate things like that.** So it's either one of those two things. [M63, 67, single]*

Social separation, ageism and loneliness

Older age impacting on forming relationships:

- finding interested men – being a ‘minority in a minority’
- desiring younger men – difficult to sustain relationships
- feeling like younger gay men are disinterested in older men’s lives
- Not wanting to be in groups with just other ‘old men’.

Being a 'minority in a minority'

I'm a minority within a minority because, first of all, I'm gay - which is a minority group - but secondly, I'm old. It means I'm a minority amongst the gay people because a lot of young people don't want old men around. Can't be bothered with old men. [M86, 74, single]

Yes, for whatever reason, I like younger guys, that's all there is to it, and that's even more of a problem, in that I occasionally find somebody who's happy, but not long-term. [M78, 68, single]

Ageism in gay/ LGBT social spaces

- (Mis)perceived as an **older** gay man – less desirable, less interesting, ‘dirty old man’
- LGBT spaces = younger people
- Feeling invisible in gay social spaces....

*It is pointless my going to a club, or a discotheque, or anything. I am, you know, just... **The expression that we use is invisible**, and that is it. You stand there, and you might as well not be there. You are not even seen. Well, you are seen, of course, and ignored. [M72, 68, single]*

Participation in groups

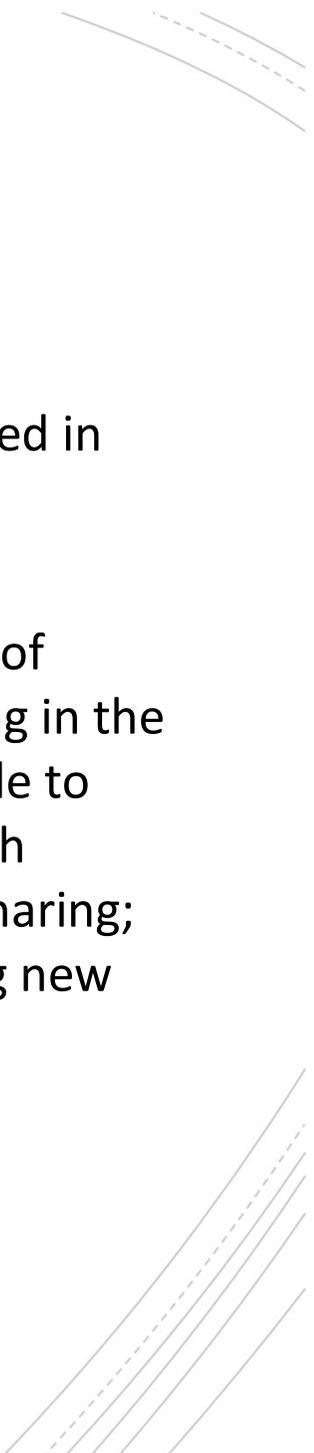
- Importance of joining new groups, clubs and societies to avoid isolation, particularly following a break-up or bereavement
- Helping others and giving something back - frequently mentioned by several gay men, e.g. charity work or volunteering
- Lifelong learning - learning new, interesting things





Valuing shared experiences in groups

13 men involved with and participated in local LGBT groups

- **Reasons for participating:** sense of belonging; feeling accepted; being in the company of other men; being able to share similar life-experiences with others; safe space for problem-sharing; meeting new people and forming new friendships
- 

Importance of gay social spaces for men

*It's not easy to meet new people of the same sexual orientation. When you're younger, you go along to the bars, to the nightclubs. But, to go there as somebody who was in his 50s, heading towards 60, it's not the place to be, really. **So, that's why I thought, "No, the better option is to join things," and that's what I did. In the city, in [...], there's a lot going on, a lot going on.There are all kinds of things, gay [...] groups.***

[M73, 65, single]

The problems with groups

- Feeling excluded - gay spaces (bars, clubs) not always welcoming to older men
- LGBT-groups tend to be in bigger cities – distances to travel
- Older LGBT groups – **too many older members, not enough younger members**. Call for mixed-age groups.

But there was also a lot of synergy between generations. I think that's one of the great problems of LGBT life, is that each generation is separate, in a sense. [M71, 70, single]

Positive dimensions to being older and gay

- Finding alternative communities and friendships to 'heterosexual family life'
- Confidence increasing about 'coming out' to others in later life

I mean, I do my best to come out to all and sundry, when it is safe to do so, to try to and further the cause, to make them aware that we are here, and that we're just as good as they are. But I still feel I have security within the gay community. [M68, 85, single]



Planned activities and outputs with Age UK

- research summary report
- 'factsheet' for older people, families, friends
- practice guidance for professionals /practitioners on what works with running groups for older men
- short digital films exploring this topic – with Beeston Media
- **Launch event at Age UK office, Monday 29th April 2019 (right here!)**





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