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Author

Marshall, Lia

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Neighbors and Neighborhoods: Addressing Older Women's Risk for Social Isolation



Lia W. Marshall, PhD, MSW

**“I feel my world getting smaller
and smaller.”**

- Female Participant, Age 77

Issue

With the rapid growth in elderly populations, it is increasingly important for cities to support their older residents' well-being and productivity by providing the infrastructure and services needed to create environments that address the physical and social changes associated with aging. Though most older adults can remain mobile by driving, normal and pathological declines in older adults' physical and cognitive functioning may reduce their driving frequency and consequently their mobility.¹ As a result, for many older adults, the local neighborhood becomes an increasingly important place where social connections to friends and neighbors can be made.

Women experience aging differently from men; as a result, they are at greater risk of becoming socially isolated (as the above quote exemplifies), which can have significant adverse mental and physical health consequences², including lowered quality of life and higher levels of mortality. Given the growing proportion of older women in the U.S. this is a significant social issue that demands further attention. Despite the breadth of studies focusing

on older women's social well-being, though, little research has addressed issues of older women's constrained mobility, its relationship to the built environment, and their perceptions of social isolation.

This brief is based on a research study that aimed to better understand the lived experiences of older women who are socially isolated or at risk of social isolation. The overall goal was to explore how older women understand their social well-being and their mobility.

Research Approach

The study recruited 20 adult women over the age of 65, who lived alone in Los Angeles County, for individual in-depth interviews about their obstacles to, and opportunities for, social contact in the context of their mobility and the built environment. The interviewees were recruited through a social isolation and loneliness prevention program administered by an organization based in Southern California serving a large population of older adults. Eligible participants were community-dwelling (i.e., non-institutionalized), had no documented cognitive decline, and were able to understand and speak English.

Many older women live alone, have limited financial resources, and poor physical health, all of which may affect their mobility. As a result, being able to maintain social

contacts became critical to sustaining their social lives. This in turn, required them to confront barriers present in the built environment and the use of public transportation.

Key Findings

1. Losses within social networks (due to death, moving, conflict, etc.) were associated with social isolation despite their mobility.
2. In the face of mobility and transportation challenges, including safety concerns, financial limitations, availability, basic needs such as acquiring food and medical appointments were prioritized compared to social well-being.
3. Participants became increasingly neighborhood-bound, which demonstrates the importance of accessible neighborhoods which offer more opportunities to participate in social life.

Conclusions

This research highlights the impact of the built environment and public transportation on the ability of older women to remain socially connected and maintain social capital. Counties like Los Angeles — whose residents have a diverse range of mobility needs — continue to face challenges in providing accessible transportation for older adults and those with disabilities. If in the future, many older adults choose to stop driving and if alternatives such as public transit, paratransit, and ride-hailing are not accessible because of availability, convenience, cost,

and safety factors, successfully aging-in-place may not be possible.

Door-to-door transportation service may be a viable alternative with the advent of new technology. Two cities in Southern California, Monrovia and Santa Monica, are currently piloting paratransit programs by partnering with ride-hailing companies to better serve their population of older adults. These public-private partnerships between Lyft and the municipal departments of Transportation show early signs of success, particularly for those older adults on a fixed income. On-demand, door-to-door service, which meets older adult needs in terms of accessibility, cost, and safety can substitute for rail and bus transportation, particularly in suburban areas, where public transit is not available. Originally scheduled for release in December 2020 but now delayed, an executive order by the governor of California calls for the creation of a 10-year Master Plan on Aging, which will include the state plan, local blueprint, data dashboard, and best practice toolkit. The blueprint for Los Angeles, presently under development, and the master plan, are open for input from community members and experts. Therefore, now is the opportune time for professionals and the public to recommend statewide public-private partnerships to serve the mobility needs of older adults. If the state were to institutionalize these partnerships, it could help reduce the risk of social isolation for many older Californians.



¹Taylor, B. D., & Tripodes, S. (2001). The effects of driving cessation on the elderly with dementia and their caregivers. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 33(4), 519-528.

²Lunaigh, C. O. and Lawlor, B. A. (2008). Loneliness and the health of older people. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 23: 12(1213-1221)

Further Reading

Marshall, L. W. (2020). *Older Women At Risk for Social Isolation: Intersections of Mobility & Social Well-Being* (Publication No. 27744323). [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2nc7v6xg#main>