

Overcoming isolation: the viewpoints and strategies of older people



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As a member of the research team

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National Collaborative Project

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- Professor Laurie Buys, (QUT)
- Professor Gill Lewin, (Curtin University of Technology)
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LINKAGE PARTNERS



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ARC Linkage Project
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Background

- Social engagement and social capital declining in society
- Older people vulnerable to decline in social engagement / participation in community
 - Changes that occur this stage of life
 - Living alone
 - Away from family
 - Fewer older people have children
 - Caring responsibilities
 - Privacy, self reliance, independence

When quality and quantity of social relations become inadequate, people characterised as suffering social isolation

Social connections / relationships necessary for wellbeing

Methodology

- One off self complete survey
- Small scale longitudinal study
- Qualitative interviews to gain a life course perspective
- Focus groups with service providers



Methodology: survey sections

Living
arrangements /
transport

Wellbeing (with
regard to SI)

Contact with
family / friends

Community
involvement

Health

Perceived social
support

Provision / receipt
care

Quality of life

Demographics

Incidence SI: Friendship Scale

(Hawthorne 2006; 2008)

Level of Isolation	Per cent	
Very socially isolated	7.2	17.8
Isolated	10.6	
Some social isolation / some social support	14.2	
Socially connected	25.0	
Very or highly socially connected	43.0	68.0
TOTAL PERSONS	1467	

Incidence SI: perceived isolation last five years

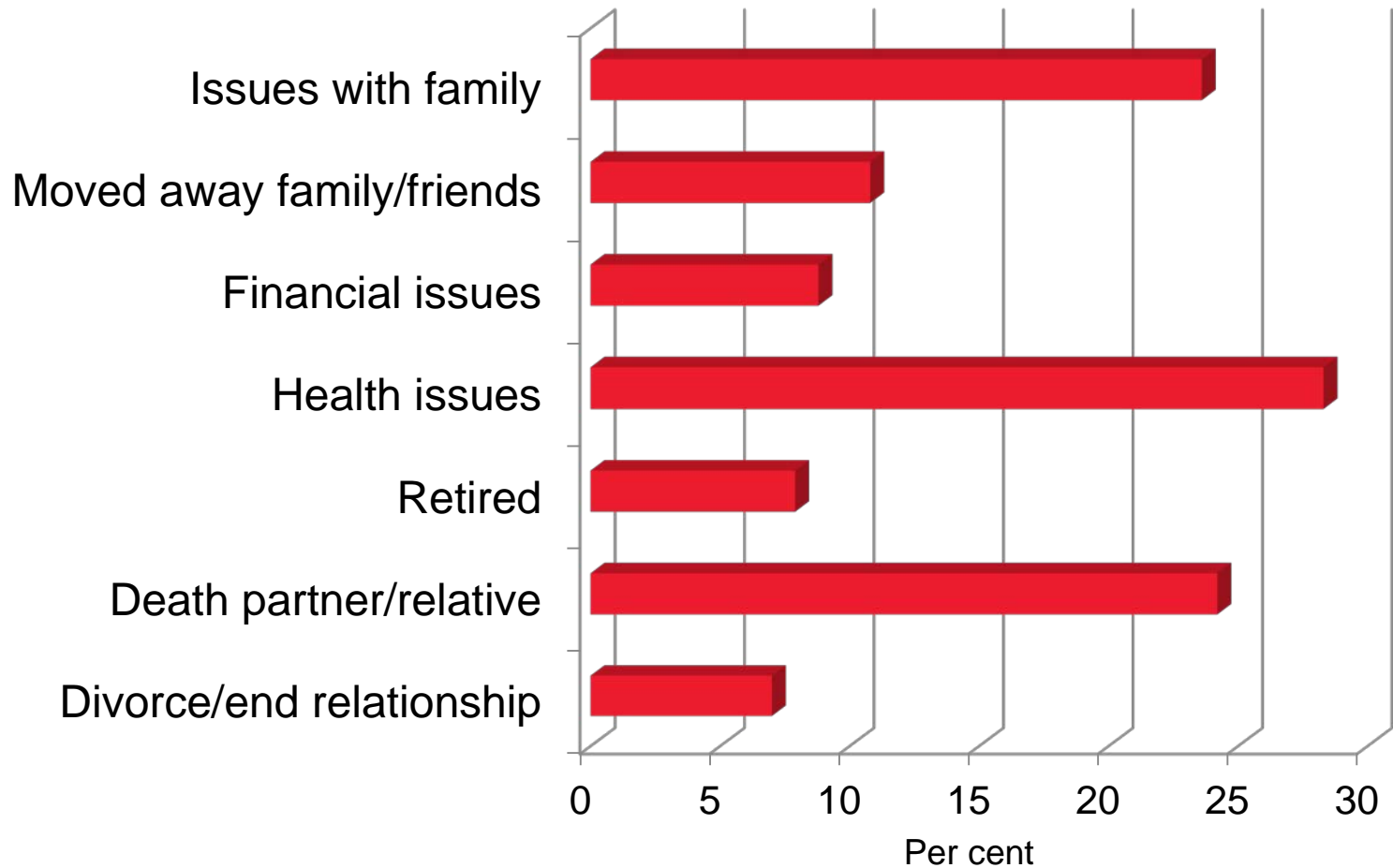
Felt isolated over last five years	Per cent
No	56.8
Yes, currently feel this way	12.7
Yes, not feel this way now	30.5
TOTAL PERSONS	1434

43.2 % of older people identified as being lonely or socially isolated over the last five years

Time felt this way: last five years

Length of time felt this way	Have felt SI / lonely last 5 years (not now)	Currently feel SI / lonely
Short time	48.3	1.5
Few months	13.9	14.1
Over a year	16.1	16.1
Several years/long time	16.5	66.3
Don't know	5.3	2.0
TOTAL PERSONS	454	199

Reasons for feeling socially isolated / lonely

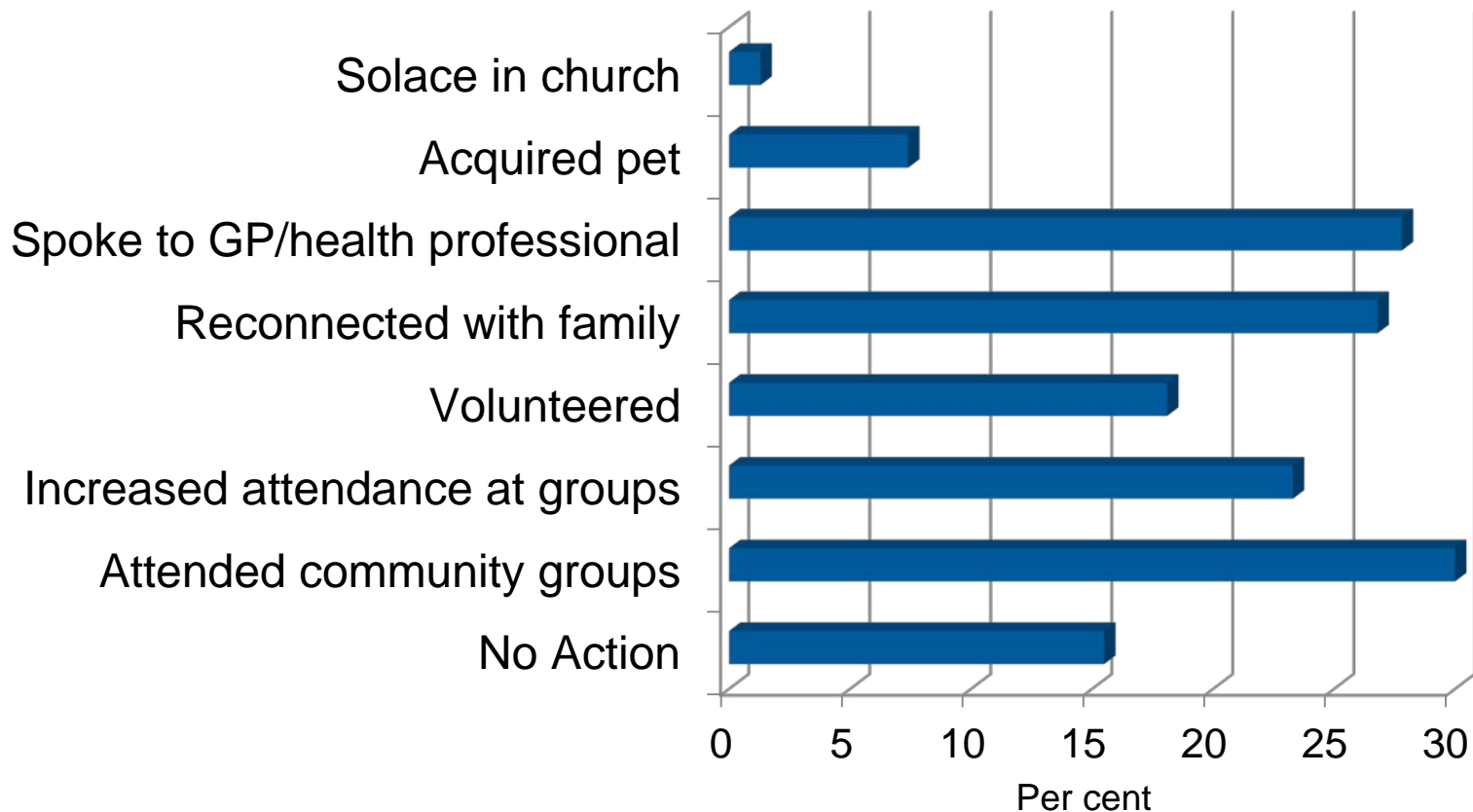


Reasons for feeling socially isolated / lonely

“For many people it is not about having no friends, family or community, it is a feeling of being isolated from mainstream, being looked upon and spoken about as dependent, a ‘burden’. Older people have much to contribute, much to learn, have diverse interests and differing intellectual abilities, as in the general population. You don’t become an old person only interested in playing bowls and volunteering out of choice. You become it because society no longer wants or demands anything else. This is the most isolating thing for me” (Female 65-69)

“Old age: we become an invisible ghost in the crowd, no one anymore looks into your eyes, you just don't exist....until you approach someone for something, shopping, a street directions etc. But...at the local Jazz Club older ladies still pick me up for a dance....and a smile” (....the old Italian still romantically alive...! (Male 80-84)

Actions taken to overcome feeling socially isolated / lonely



Reason taken no action

- Physical and mental health issues
- Being a full time carer
- Mobility issues – loss of driver’s licence; inability to drive
- Finances
- A lack of self esteem

“I feel I have nothing to contribute” (Female 85-89)

“Lack of confidence and ability to trust others” (Male 70-74)

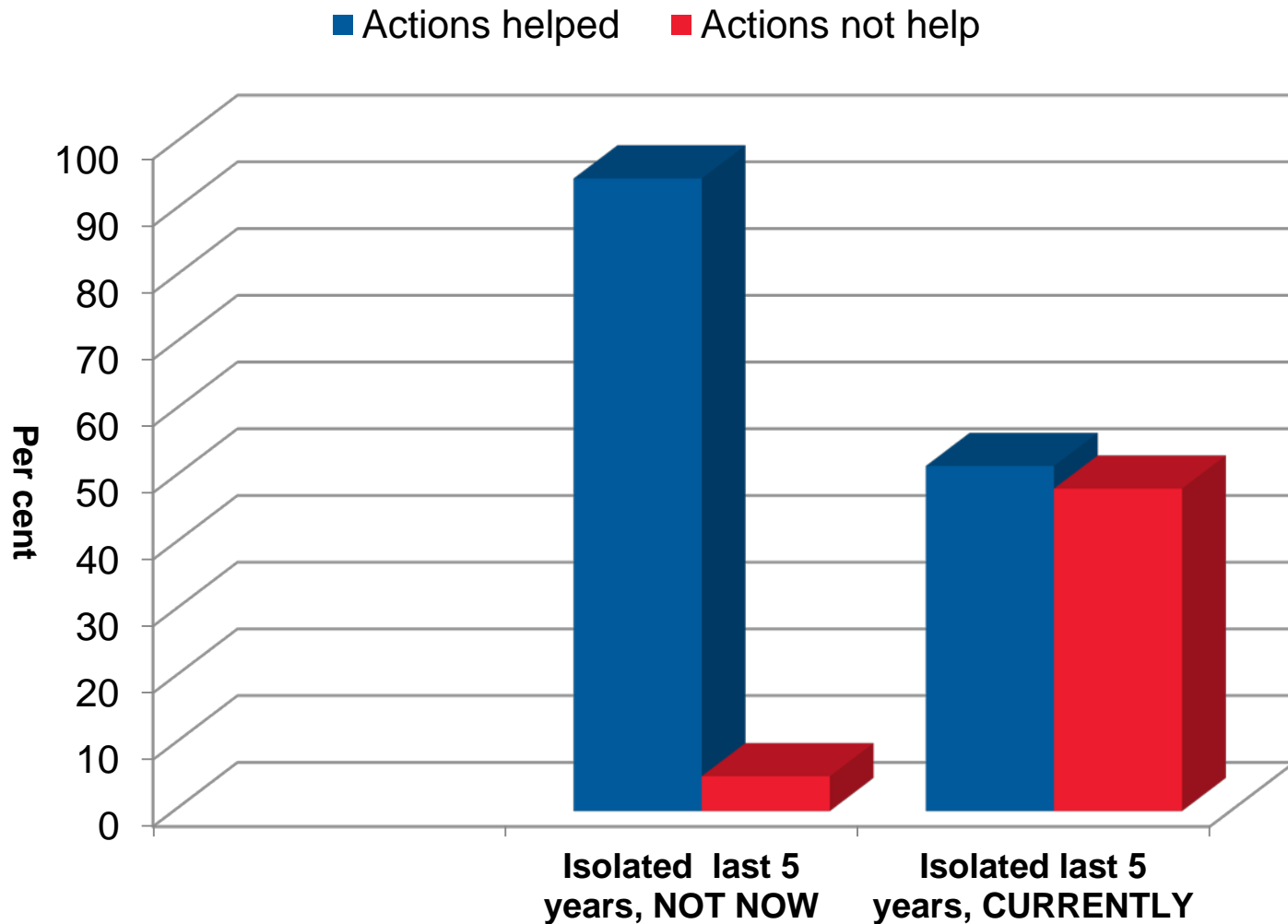
- Don’t know how/where to seek assistance

“Don’t know where to start” (Male 70-74)

“Don’t know how” (Female 80-84)

“Too hard basket. Started to accept fact” (male 70-74)

Effectiveness of actions taken



Reasons actions not worked

- Family issues
 - “rejection by family” (Female 75-79)*
- Health
 - “No idea, or maybe because I am not in the best of health and they are not interested in socializing with me (I am 80 y.o.)” (Male 80-84)*
- Death
 - “Bereavement cannot be corrected by activities.” (Male 85-89)*
- Caring responsibilities
 - “My position as a carer makes it difficult” (Male 65-69)*
- Limited opportunities
 - “I live in a small rural town, not many services, no public transport” (female 80-84)*
 - “In my living place council has no activity to help older people – there is no working pensioner club, with meals, there are not group trips by council buses like in the past” (Female 80-84)*
- Finances
 - “Losing my job created financial problems” (Female 75-79)*
 - “Cost of travel” (Female 65-69)*
- Other
 - “People like their privacy , and dislike infringements” (Male 80-84)*

Strategies to help stay connected

“Going out of my home most days, even if just for a walk.” (Female 70-74)

“Keep in the community as long as you possibly can. Keep contact with all age groups and still feel part of the community. Do something that makes you feel as if you are doing something useful. And never put off tomorrow what you can do today.” (Male 80-84)

“A certain amount of self-confidence. Local community involvement. The Christian Church.” (Male 65-69)

“By trying to connect/reconnect to new activities I put myself in a position that makes me feel full of energy and occupy my leisure times without getting bored or lonely.” (Male 70-74)

“Just as we direct our activities and education to get a job early in our life, we need to devote a similar amount of time to determine what our remaining life should be after retirement....in the areas of finance, health, domicile, travel plans and community involvement.” (Male 75-79)

Strategies to help stay connected

“Using the internet...I have several communities of friends that only exist in virtual space... In many ways I am more a part of and connected to this community than the holiday town I live in. On overseas trips I have met some of them in person – its great to have a community you belong to around the world you call friends.” (Female 65-69)

“...Having a community visitor once a week plus a carer one hour daily.” (Male 75-79)

“There are plenty of groups and organisations out in the community and it is only a matter of people looking for them and getting involved. However a lot of older people just lack the confidence to approach any new group/organisation for fear they will not fit in. The established groups/ organisations or sporting bodies need to have a very social person whose responsibility it is to make any newcomer welcome. I found especially with older men that unless they feel welcome on the first few visits they seldom return.” (Male 65-69).

“The Men’s shed movement is proving to be wonderful organisation for men to stay connected and find that they can make a contribution and be a valued member of the community.” (Male 70-74)

“Marrying a younger woman :)” (Male 65-69)

Conclusions and future considerations

- People are not adverse to identifying as feeling socially isolated or lonely
- Length of time feeling isolated and lonely; can be long term and this influences outcomes
- In general there are a wide variety of opportunities for people to be involved in their community
- Difficulties for the community and service system are for people who have health issues or limited or no contact/support from family and friends, have financial issues and are more confined to home
- Impact of Consumer Directed Care