



COVID-19 AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

EXPERIENCES OF OLDER PEOPLE LIVING IN AREAS OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION

Aims of the research

- To work with community organisations and activists in selected areas, examining *responses to COVID-19 and strategies for contacting and supporting older people who were at risk of social exclusion*. The organisations and individuals approached included a diverse range of groups, working across a range of neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester.
- To examine the *impact of social distancing measures on everyday life among older people*.
- *To contribute to evidence to assist local, regional, and national policies* which aim to increase support for older people and organisations working on their behalf.

Findings from the literature review carried out for the study

- Neighbourhood inequalities have deepened in the context of COVID-19
- Evidence for widening inequalities between ethnic groups
- New forms of inequality may develop, e.g. through the digital divide
- Importance of gardens and green spaces has increased during the pandemic
- Rise of ageism as a consequence of COVID-19
- Certain groups may be especially vulnerable to discrimination, e.g. those from the LGBTQ+ community
- Evidence for negative impact of the pandemic on mental health
- Impact of the loss of rituals and diminished contact with those who have been bereaved



Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group

COVID-19 and Social Exclusion: Experiences of older people living in areas of multiple deprivation

Since March 2020, the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG) has been working to develop new insights into the challenges facing older people and community organisations in the context of COVID-19.

The research was funded by the *Centre for Ageing Better, Manchester City Council, the National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better programme via the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations, and Policy@Manchester.*

How did we do the research?

The research team collaborated with community stakeholders across the region to examine the impact of the pandemic on people aged 50 and over, during the course of the national lock downs from March 2020 to March 2021. Community organisers assisted in finding individuals willing to be interviewed for the research, identifying people who were already at risk of social exclusion.

We have been especially concerned with examining the effect of COVID-19 on people living in low income neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester, where issues relating to limited social infrastructure, social isolation, and environmental pressures of different kinds, were apparent even before the pandemic took hold.

- *The first stage of the research comprised 21 interviews with a range of organisations, including statutory service providers, community and voluntary sector centres, neighbourhood associations, and local government initiatives supporting older people.* The report describes

their experiences in developing services to support older people, areas of innovation, difficulties encountered during the pandemic, and their views about the future.

- *The second stage of the research involved telephone interviews with an initial sample of 102 older people.* Each participant was invited to be interviewed on three occasions by a member of the research team or partner organisation, examining experiences associated with COVID-19 over the period from Spring and Autumn of 2020 to Winter 2020/21. The study sample comprised of four broad ethnic/identity subgroups: White British, White British LGBTQ+, Black African and Caribbean, and South Asian.

What were our research questions?

- How do older people at risk of social exclusion experience *'social distancing'*? How has social distancing *affected everyday life* and support networks?
- What *resources* (individual or community level) do older people draw on when negotiating the experience of social distancing?

- What has been the impact of *social distancing* over time?
- What types of support services exist or could be developed to alleviate the *impact* of social distancing on older people experiencing *exclusion and isolation*?

Our study has provided unique insights into the lives of older adults, and the impact of COVID-19 had on everyday life. The research highlights the challenges people have faced when forced to 'stay apart' from family and friends. We examine how experiences have varied according to household composition, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

What are some of the findings from our research?

A first observation is that, in many respects, older adults were like other age groups during the pandemic, managing as best they could, given the limits posed on physical and social relationships.

Many were highly creative and adaptable, devising ways of spending time, whether through

re-discovering interests in poetry and writing, craft activities, or befriending others through counselling via the medium of the telephone or online platforms.

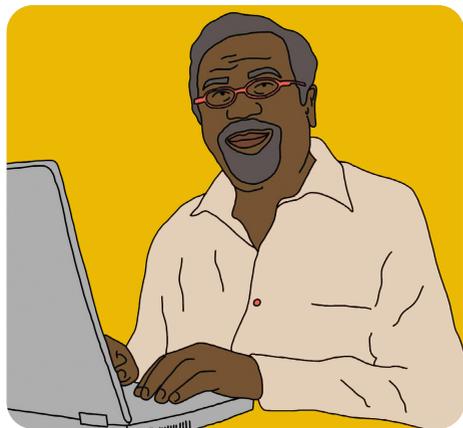
In this regard, our participants demonstrated a strong sense of agency, autonomy and creativity in managing what was an undoubted crisis affecting their daily lives.



"I mean I've reflected on...what I've found is that because I've nursed a husband and then my son having his operation, it's been a long haul and I've been amazed at what I could come up with and particularly now we're stuck at home, different ways to cook meals, different ways to walk the same journey".

(Doris, 86-year-old White British woman who is the sole carer for her son)

Adapting to, and exploiting **the benefits of technology**, was crucial for many of those interviewed. Indeed, an important finding from our work has been how the use of platforms such as Zoom has entered into the language and rhythms of daily life: people spoke of it opening up opportunities to engage with family and friends in other countries; as a medium for sustaining their involvement in different social activities; and as a source (particularly for the LGBTQ+ community) for reaffirming identity at a time when traditional ways to socialise were unavailable.



"The experience has been amazing to link via formats such as Zoom. It has opened more doors and links beyond my locality. It has also built new friendships around the globe".

(Jumman, 57-year-old Bangladeshi man)

Equally, it was clear that those without access to online media were disadvantaged in a variety of ways, notably in being unable to maintain contact with friends who were themselves confident in using digital media, and in being deprived of services and activities which were only available online.

Differences in the use of technology through the pandemic has, we suggest, introduced new forms of inequality within the older population, which is likely to have renewed significance in the years ahead.

We also noted the importance of access to **gardens, parks and communal spaces** in maintaining well-being for many of our participants in providing some relief from the pressures of lock down, those with access to a garden and/or a nearby park found these spaces especially beneficial.

Indeed, an important priority coming out of the pandemic, will be redressing the impact of **unequal access to green space such as parks, gardens and other open areas.**

Another observation from our research concerned the important **role of religion** in structuring time and giving meaning to our participants. In many cases, faith and prayer were central to the organisation of everyday life; in some cases, also providing a framework for making sense of the pandemic itself.



"My spirituality prepares me to cope with anything life throws at you and gives me hope that everything will get better and that everything happens for a reason. My faith helps me to try and not be miserable".

(Maliha, 59-year-old Pakistani woman)

One of the advantages of our study was being able to identify **changes affecting people over time**, the period of our research covering three successive lock downs.

For some people, there was little change to report, especially for those already isolated; routines had, in many instances, been developed which at least provided some structure to daily life. For others, however, there were substantial changes which had begun to affect the quality of people's lives.

Ageing under lock down

An important finding from our research concerned a degree of **physical and mental deterioration**, affecting some of our participants, over the duration of the research.

Some of our participants spoke of the impact of restricted mobility over a number of months, as a result of being confined to their house or flat. In some cases this resulted in reduced confidence in getting around their neighbourhood or re-starting exercise routines.

In cases such as these, the pandemic seemed to have increased awareness about ageing itself, but often in a negative rather than positive way.

A related issue concerns the extent to which the pandemic may have *increased* feelings of vulnerability amongst certain groups.

An example from our research concerned those who had received a letter advising them to shield. Our evidence on this is that such guidance could have a devastating effect. It was indeed a shock for some to be told they were 'vulnerable'. This was not part of their self-image or how they defined themselves as a person.

This may be another example where the pandemic will have a long-term (and potentially negative) impact on how many people think about their health and well-being coming out of lock down.

Perceptions of vulnerability may also be traced to other sources: people feeling they had become a 'burden' on their family or even on society itself; amongst our South Asian and Black African and Caribbean groups, racism may also have played a role in creating a sense of marginality or precariousness.

Social isolation under lock down

Another finding from our research concerned the social isolation arising from the pandemic, evident in particular groups, with particularly striking examples from some of the South Asian women interviewed, and from White British men living alone. The lived experiences of social isolation were distinctive for each group but raise important questions for community support more broadly.

Amongst South Asian women, there were powerful expressions of the anguish caused by successive lock downs, these resulting in feelings of depression, anxiety, and being a 'prisoner in your own home'.

Such sentiments were invariably driven by the increased pressures women felt as carers. Responsibilities – for example caring for a sick husband – had remained the same but support had weakened with social distancing and pressures on statutory services.



"Worst thing is to be alone and caged at home like prisoners... really felt that this is the worse thing which can happen to someone because even our loved ones can't come near us. My sons didn't come to our room because our results came positive. I used to look forward talking to them or sitting with them. I felt that everyone had left us....I can't put my feelings into words".

(Yasmin, 64-year-old Pakistani woman)

Single men living alone presented a contrasting set of issues, but with similar experiences of intense isolation amongst some of those we interviewed. The context was one of people going into the pandemic with relatively 'shallow' social networks, poor physical health, and low incomes.

The additional pressure created by COVID-19 concerned the closure of vital social

infrastructure which the men had often relied upon for support – community centres, local cafés, libraries, and pubs.

The loss of these 'third places' had a considerable impact, and was a reminder of the importance of their eventual restoration, especially within inner-city neighbourhoods.

Family and friends under lock down

What do we know, based on our interviews, about the impact of the lock downs on *intimate ties*? To what extent has the pandemic affected relationships with family and friends?

Our research indicated the strains affecting friendships, arising from the impact of social distancing.

'Not having much to talk about' was a typical comment, but it illustrated a wider problem that the activities which sustain friendships – confiding, laughing together, sharing interests, providing emotional and instrumental support – could often only happen on a virtual basis.

Again, this worked in some cases for those who could access (or who had already accessed prior to the pandemic) technology as a way of maintaining relationships. But for many, digitally included and excluded alike, keeping friendships going in the pandemic was a challenge.

For certain groups, the loss of friends may indeed be one important and negative side-effect of the pandemic. And not being able to 'hug' and have 'physical' contact with family and friends, was greatly missed by many of those who we interviewed.



"What's more difficult? I can't just hug my nieces and my nephews".

(Layla, a 56-year-old African Caribbean woman).

If friends became, in some cases, more distant, family was certainly centre-stage for many of those we interviewed.

Again, this was often the case amongst those most digitally connected, Zoom and WhatsApp being drawn upon to maintain regular contact. And use of the internet to maintain **transnational ties** - almost certainly a feature of life before the pandemic - was an important element in the daily lives of some of our Black African and Caribbean and South Asian participants.

However, for those women with significant caring responsibilities - our group of South Asian women were an obvious example - separation from sons and daughters was a major source of anxiety.

Neighbourhoods under lock down

With people deprived of their usual support networks, social relationships in the immediate neighbourhood assumed greater importance during lock down.

The experience of these varied for different participants and between neighbourhoods

In some cases, localities with more transient populations, or those which had undergone substantial change due to gentrification or urban regeneration, produced deeper feelings of alienation, with individuals less inclined to draw on the support of those living around them.

In others, there was evidence for strong neighbourhood attachments which relied on informal social ties between neighbours which provided much needed support and access to resources for older people.



Based on our research findings, our report puts forward a number of recommendations in relation

to policy and practice in the community:

1. Community renewal

Our research, supported by national studies, underlines the extent to which COVID-19 has ravaged neighbourhoods already damaged by austerity and the loss of social infrastructure (shops, day centres, libraries).

Coming out of the pandemic, it will be vital to focus on the *restoration of, and access to*, those community spaces which give meaning and vitality to neighbourhood life. The evidence is overwhelming that living in neighbourhoods with limited access to such resources is associated with *poorer physical and mental health*.

- **Re-building social infrastructure of all kinds, and supporting older people to re-engage with these spaces, must be a priority, and the best way of strengthening the informal – or ‘natural’ – neighbourhood networks around which communities are maintained.**

A key part of this work must also include *strengthening the community organisations* around

which the response to COVID-19 has been built. Despite (or because of) their many successes, organisations are likely to need a commitment for adequate funding in order to survive or meet the range of needs which are likely to emerge after three successive lock downs.

Enhanced support will be especially important for *equalities-focused organisations* working with minority groups, who have made a major contribution in providing support to people experiencing considerable suffering as a result of COVID-19.

During the initial response to the pandemic, many of these organisations demonstrated their detailed knowledge of the communities in which they work, and being able to identify those most at risk.

This knowledge and expertise needs to be brought closer into strategic decision-making, with more support given to allow further collaboration between different community organisations.

- **Given the importance of community organisations, we would suggest work should be**

carried out examining the range of additional resources they are likely to need to assist recovery coming out of the pandemic.

This might also be linked with discussions across Greater Manchester aimed at sharing lessons learnt in responding to the pandemic, identifying gaps in support which have emerged over the three lock downs, and making decisions about priorities for intervention over the short- and medium-term.

We would also see community renewal as a process which needs to come from above as well as *below* (through developing and engaging with local leaders and community organisations).

An effective *community-centred approach* will require the integration of both elements, but also entail that the kind of mutual aid networks that have developed over the course of the pandemic (and which are likely to continue to be needed) will be properly supported in the various neighbourhoods across the region.

Community renewal must also be embedded in tackling *systemic discrimination* affecting different groups within society. COVID-19, as numerous reports have made clear, has exposed and exacerbated *long-standing inequalities affecting Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups* in the UK.

But much of this was predictable given available knowledge about poverty, co-morbidities, poor quality housing, and low incomes, affecting many of those in South Asian and other communities.

- **The question is why there was a failure to develop preventative forms of community-centred working with BAME groups from the beginning of the pandemic. Such targeted work, involving community leaders wherever possible, will certainly be essential over the medium and longer term.**

However, as suggested earlier, this type of initiative will require additional sources of funding to support what are financially constrained organisations even in ‘normal times’.

Older people from the LGBTQ+ community will be another important group who may be experiencing greater vulnerability as a result of the pandemic. This may be especially the case where there has been a weakening of social networks, arising from the loss or closure of community meeting spaces.

2. Responding to social isolation

Greater Manchester, notably through the work of *Ambition for Ageing*, has developed a strong programme of interventions around the issue of social isolation in later life.

We think an emphasis on this theme will continue to be important but that, given the changing conditions produced by the pandemic, may require new types of initiatives and interventions. An observation from our interviews, was that the pandemic may have led to a loss of confidence in social participation amongst some individuals and groups who were already facing isolation.

This will require innovative forms of community engagement to reach out to people, with good

neighbourhood groups, voluntary organisations, and informal leaders within neighbourhoods, all having a vital role to play.

In addition, the different pressures on communities and individuals which emerged during the course of the pandemic have led to new dimensions of exclusion, suggesting the need for more reflection on possible changes in the way in which social exclusion is defined and understood by particular groups.

A related issue concerns recruiting 'community advocates' for those in the community who may be unable to ensure their voices are heard. There are increasing numbers in the population who may be vulnerable to having their interests ignored at times of crisis such as those associated with COVID-19.

In this situation, and given the long-term pressures facing health and social care, advocates within communities will be important to prevent isolated individuals being denied appropriate treatment and support.

These could be drawn from existing organisations, for example local Age UK branches, and Good Neighbour and befriending groups.

3. Targeting socially excluded groups

An important task for local authorities, voluntary groups, and neighbourhood organisations, will be tackling experiences of *exclusion*, which manifest themselves differently in everyday life, and which have intensified during the pandemic.

For example, our research has highlighted the challenges facing women from the South Asian community, men and women living alone, and those who had poor physical and/ mental health before the pandemic began.

- **Community organisers – formal and informal – know best who needs support within their neighbourhoods. But the work ahead will be difficult: there is likely to have been a substantial increase in need as a result of the pandemic – especially amongst those with limited social networks who have spent a large part of the year confined to their own homes.**

There is a task here for social research in examining some of the changes which have affected the older population in Greater Manchester as a result of COVID-19. For example exploring the following questions:

- **Who are the individuals and groups most disengaged from their social networks?**
- **Are there particular resources, the absence of which have been especially significant in increasing social exclusion?**
- **Are there new forms of discrimination emerging which are affecting some groups more than others?**
- **Has differences in access to, and confidence in, use of the internet, accelerated the exclusion of some groups over the course of the pandemic?**

We would suggest that these questions – and others – should be considered in a programme of research, sponsored by the Greater Manchester Ageing Hub in co-operation with community organisations.

We would also suggest older people themselves be co-

investigators in any study, recruited from representative groups across the region.

Finally, a key lesson from our work is that there will be significant variations within the older population, especially in respect of adjusting to life after lock down. The challenge will be learning about new forms of exclusion introduced by the pandemic, and recognising ways in which existing ones may have deepened.

We hope our report, and the voices of the older people and organisations within it, will make a contribution to the task of documenting and understanding the events over the past two years, and recovering from the social crisis which has resulted from the impact of COVID-19.



Community participation is vital for developing effective responses to COVID-19

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This report is based on research undertaken by members of the **Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group**

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