



Prevalence of Social Isolation among Older Persons in Egor Local Government, Edo State: Implications for Social Work

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Abstract. The issue of social isolation among the elderly is a significant global health challenge, as it has been linked to negative outcomes such as higher mortality rates, mental health concerns, and declining cognitive abilities. The main aim of the study was to explore the prevalence of social isolation among older persons in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State: Implication for social work intervention. This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach, interviewing 8 elderly participants in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, to explore the effects of social isolation, employing the SIWOPI scale, thematic content analysis, and ethical protocols to ensure data validity and participant welfare. The first finding reveals that social isolation is prevalent among older adults in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, negatively impacting their mental and physical well-being, though not all individuals fully recognise its contribution to their loneliness. The second finding highlights the importance of family, community support, and educational engagement in reducing isolation, with strategies like transportation services and intergenerational activities being recommended to promote social participation. This research highlights the negative impact of social isolation on older adults in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, calling for community-based programmes, family involvement, improved transportation, public awareness campaigns, and enhanced social work services to promote social inclusion and improve their quality of life.

Keywords: Older persons, Prevalence, Social Isolation, social work interventions

1. Introduction

The issue of social isolation among the elderly is a significant global health challenge, as it has been linked to negative outcomes such as higher mortality rates, mental health concerns, and declining cognitive abilities (Vanderweele et al., 2019;

Domènech-Abella et al., 2024). In the context of developing nations, rapid changes such as urbanisation and modernisation are exacerbating isolation, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where traditional family systems are eroding (Omorogiuwa, 2020; Mavesa et al., 2020). In Nigeria, the elderly population faces increased isolation due to migration and shifting cultural norms, contributing to mental health struggles such as depression (Odu et al., 2021). Ensuring the overall well-being of older people, encompassing social, physical, economic, and emotional dimensions, is essential for a thriving society (World Health Organization, 2023; Okoye, 2024).

In Nigeria, older individuals are increasingly vulnerable to social isolation due to numerous factors that negatively impact their well-being (Omorogiuwa, 2020). Ebingbo et al. (2019) highlight how certain life experiences may isolate the elderly, especially in Nigeria, where social safety nets are limited. Additional challenges, such as age-related bias, poverty, and health concerns, worsen the hardships faced by older individuals (Okoye, 2004). In Benin Metropolis, isolation, emotional withdrawal, and socio-economic problems are common issues for the elderly (Omorogiuwa, 2016).

The absence of family support and the loss of loved ones can further intensify isolation, especially when caregiving is unavailable (Tanyi et al., 2018). Social isolation may lead to physical and mental health problems, such as depression and loneliness, particularly for older individuals with low incomes (Qualls, 2017; Omorogiuwa, 2016). While many studies examine the effects of social isolation on the elderly, there is a lack of research specifically targeting the Egor local government area of Edo State, which this study seeks to explore (Omorogiuwa, 2020).

Despite the growing phenomenon of older persons' isolation in various communities in Nigeria, much

effort has not been intensified and explored on the social work interventions to mitigate the prevalence of older persons' isolation in our society. Moreover, since there is a lack of reports on elderly isolation in our various communities, the professional intervention to wade into this trend remains unexplored, especially in areas where people are not adequately informed about the professional roles of Social Workers to enhance their well-being and overall quality of life of the older persons in such pathetic conditions.

1.1 Research Objectives

The specific objectives were to:

- explore the prevalence of social isolation on the social wellbeing of older persons in Egor local government area of Edo State.
- explore the social work interventions to address the impact of social isolation on the wellness of older persons in Egor local government area of Edo State.

2. Review of the Literature

The prevalence of social isolation is a critical issue that adversely affects the social well-being of the older persons. The link between social relationships and mental health indicates that increased loneliness and isolation are associated with a decline in psychological health within this age group Mishra et al., (2023). In particular, older individuals experiencing isolation often undergo life changes such as retirement or the loss of family members, which can lead to reduced mobility and deteriorating physical health. This reduction in social interaction can create a cycle, further affecting their mental well-being and limiting their autonomy and control over their environment (Mishra et al., 2023). Social isolation is often defined as a lack of social connections and shrinking networks, with some experts emphasising the involuntary nature of this condition (Nicholson, 2012; Biordi & Nicholson, 2013).

The concept of social well-being encompasses the ability to form meaningful connections, maintain robust support systems, and avoid social isolation (Davis, 2019). When family, friends, and significant others provide limited social support, it adversely affects the well-being of older individuals in Nigeria, extending beyond psycho-social challenges to include other factors (Omorogiuwa, 2016). A strong network of family, friends, and community members can significantly enhance the social well-being of older Nigerians (Alzua et al., 2023), as their inclusion in decision-making and being treated with respect fosters a sense of belonging and improves well-being (Egharevba, 2023). Additionally, factors

such as economic security, access to basic necessities, and a stable income are essential for ensuring the social well-being of older persons in Nigeria (Mishra et al., 2023).

Social workers play a vital role in addressing these issues, employing various approaches to minimise isolation and encourage social interaction within this at-risk group. Solutions must be tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of older individuals, particularly those who are housebound or have limited access to essential services. Study emphasises the necessity of both governmental and community-based efforts aimed at empowering older people (Egharevba, 2023). Johnson et al. (2019) highlight that providing essential resources such as transport services, social venues, and educational initiatives can foster social engagement among elderly populations, particularly refugees and immigrants who may face additional challenges to social integration. These interventions should also facilitate support groups that enable older individuals to connect and share experiences, helping to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

Local organisations have also demonstrated that offering technology training can be beneficial. Jiménez and others discuss how tailored technological solutions can reduce isolation by promoting communication between housebound older adults and their loved ones (Jiménez et al., 2021). However, it is essential that these interactions are rewarding, to avoid exacerbating feelings of isolation. Social workers must ensure that such technologies are implemented effectively. Gardiner et al. (2016) suggest that solitary-focused activities can be a useful intervention, particularly for older adults who are less inclined to participate in traditional group settings

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted George Vaillant's social support theory propounded in 1974. The theory emphasises the critical role of emotional, informational, and practical assistance in fostering well-being, particularly for those unable to access such help independently. This theory is especially relevant to elderly individuals experiencing isolation, a condition that can negatively impact their quality of life (López-Cerdá et al., 2019). Social support is multifaceted, offering emotional, informational, and practical aid from various sources, such as family, friends, professionals, and the wider community (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Effective support can lead to improvements in both physical and mental health, strengthen resilience, and enhance self-esteem and social connections. However, the impact of this support is influenced by its source and how well it

aligns with the person’s individual needs (Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

Using a social support framework allows social workers to identify and address gaps within the social networks of elderly people. They can assist by linking older adults to community resources, promoting social interaction, and providing emotional and psychological support (Yeh & Liu, 2003; Kuhirunyaratn et al., 2007; Wang, 2016; López-Cerdá et al., 2019). The theory underscores its importance by demonstrating that emotional support can alleviate feelings of loneliness and anxiety, while practical support helps with everyday tasks the elderly may find challenging (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). This framework offers a comprehensive understanding of how social support mitigates the harmful effects of isolation on older adults’ well-being.

4. Methodology

4.1 Area of study and Population

The study setting is Egor Local Government is one of the Local Government Areas in Edo State. The justification for chosen this area of study (Egor Local Government) was born out of the researcher’s discretion and judgement regarding the characteristics of the research participants who would best provide the data needed to answer the study’s research questions. According to the National Population Commission’s projection, the total population of Egor Local Government Area of Edo State is estimated to be around 429,897 in 2024. The older persons (aged 65 and above) population in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State is projected to be 12% of the total population, which is 51, 588 at 3.3% population growth. The categories of the older persons (aged 65 and above) that was interviewed were majorly older adults who are victims of social isolation either currently or in the recent past in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State. Equally, the older persons who come from diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of education, income, and cultural backgrounds, and may have different experiences and perspectives on phenomenon of older persons social isolation were interviewed.

4.2 Research Design, Sample Size and Technique

The research design adopted for this study is phenomenological resign design. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique because it allows the selection of desired elements. The purposive sampling was utilised to obtain data from the participants with in-depth knowledge and experiences about the trend under investigation. Equally, cluster sampling was used to select three wards from the study area. The rationale for adopting purposive sampling was that participants possess the criteria the researcher requires in the study. Purposive sampling also connected the researcher directly to the participants who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. Twenty-one research participants from three wards of the study area was purposively selected and used for In-depth interviews (IDI).

Hence, the sample size for this study was 8. Crosswell et al. (2020) found that the sample size for phenomenological studies should be between 7 and 30 participants and should be in order to reach saturation. Thus, the researcher used 8 participants as a sample size, which implies that seven participants was purposively selected from three wards of the local government area of the study. Older adults in the area of study who were victims of social isolation either currently or in the recent past was included in the study. In the inclusion process of the category of the participants, the researcher ensured that such participants were those whom the phenomenon under investigation has adversely impacted their well-being before they could be included in this study. However, older people from intact families who have been adequately cared for by their family or caregivers were excluded from this study.

5. Results

5.1 Background Information of Interviewees

This study explores the personal characteristics of the participants, with a particular focus on their socio-demographic profiles. Factors such as gender, marital status, religion, and level of education were considered significant for achieving the goals of the study. The relevant information and figures are displayed in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees

Variables	Frequency (N = 8)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	3	37.5%
Female	5	62.5%
Marital status		

Married	2	25%
Single	1	12.5%
Widowed	5	62.5%
Level of education		
No Formal Education	2	25%
Tertiary	3	37.5%
SSCE	2	25%
Primary	1	12.5%
Religious Affiliation		
Christianity	5	62.5%
Islam	2	25%
ATR	1	12.5%

Researcher (2024)

The data on social isolation and the well-being of older adults in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, highlights key demographic factors affecting social isolation. Women, who make up 62.5% of the sample, may face more isolation due to cultural factors, while married individuals (25%) tend to have stronger support systems compared to singles (12.5%), who may be more vulnerable to isolation. Education also plays a role, with 37.5% holding tertiary qualifications and 25% having secondary education, which could foster social engagement, unlike the 25% lacking formal education. Religion is significant, with Christians (62.5%) possibly benefiting from stronger social networks, while smaller groups like Muslims (25%) and ATR practitioners (12.5%) may still receive community support.

5.2 Presentation and Analysis of the Research Questions

Prevalence of Social Isolation on the Social Wellbeing of Older Persons in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State

Social isolation among elderly individuals in the Egor Local Government Area of Edo State is a significant issue affecting their overall social well-being. A notable number of participants mentioned feeling overlooked and disconnected from their families and communities, which has led to emotional struggles. One participant remarked, *I began to notice that I was being left out when my children stopped visiting regularly. At first, I thought they were just busy, but over time, I realised that I had become invisible to them. The loneliness started affecting my health, and I felt abandoned.* (MRS A, 69 years, female, 26/11/24).

This emphasises how the gradual reduction of social support can have negative effects on older people, making them feel isolated and emotionally distant. The emotional burden of being socially isolated is evident in the comments from individuals who have spent long periods living alone. Another respondent mentioned, *I realised I was isolated when I no longer received visits from my neighbours or friends. The few times*

I tried to reach out to them, they were always too busy. It became clear that I was on my own, and that isolation left me feeling worthless and depressed. (MR B, 69 years, male, 26/11/24).

The lack of social interaction and difficulty in maintaining meaningful connections is a major factor in feelings of neglect among older people, making them more prone to poor mental and physical health. Consequently, social isolation stands out as a critical issue that impacts the overall well-being of elderly residents in the community. When it comes to recognising their situation, several older individuals in Egor Local Government Area admitted to being unaware of how social isolation affects their social well-being. As one person remarked, *I don't really know much about social isolation, but I feel lonely sometimes when my children are not around.* (MRS C, 72 years, female, 26/11/24).

This demonstrates a limited understanding of the effects isolation can have on emotional and social health, which could discourage elderly people from seeking help or participating in community activities that offer support. One more participant added, *I've heard of social isolation, but I'm not sure how it connects to my own life.* (MRS C, 72 years, female, 26/11/24).

This highlights a divide between the general awareness of social isolation as a concept and the personal realisation of how it affects one's well-being. On the other hand, some elderly individuals have a more thorough understanding of their social isolation and its impact on their overall health. One participant mentioned, *I feel disconnected from the world around me, and it really affects how I feel every day.* (MRS D, 66 years, female, 26/11/24).

This shows that certain individuals are highly aware of their isolation, recognising it as a significant factor in their emotional and social well-being. Another participant mentioned, *It's hard to stay positive when there is no one to talk to, and I feel this is affecting my health.* (MRS A, 69 years, female, 26/11/24).

Such responses indicate that older individuals who are aware of their isolation may also recognise its detrimental effects, highlighting the need for enhanced support systems and awareness campaigns.

The Social Work Interventions to Address the Impact of Social Isolation on the Wellness of Older Persons in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State

Based on the data provided, it appears that the majority of older persons in Egor Local Government Area rely on family and community ties as their primary support systems. One participant shared, *I depend on my children and my wife. They make sure I am not left alone, and we spend time together. Sometimes we go to church, and that makes me feel less isolated.* (MR K, 75 years, male, 26/11/24).

This highlights the importance of family and religious activities in combating social isolation. The fact that 66.67% of respondents are married supports the idea that many older persons benefit from these close-knit support structures, which play a crucial role in their emotional and social well-being. However, a significant portion of the older population (33.33%) is single, and they may experience higher levels of social isolation. A 68-year-old female respondent commented,

I live alone since my husband passed away, and my children are far away. I mostly talk to my neighbors, but it doesn't feel like enough. I wish there were more activities for people like me to engage with. (MRS L, 68 years, female, 26/11/24).

This illustrates the challenges faced by older single persons in maintaining social connections, suggesting that more structured community activities might help alleviate these feelings of isolation. Programs focused on fostering friendships and offering social outlets could be beneficial for individuals who lack family members nearby. The educational background of respondents, with a significant proportion having tertiary education (33.33%), suggests that some older persons may have the resources to engage in activities outside their immediate family circles. One participant with a tertiary education remarked,

I have attended seminars on aging, and they were very helpful. It gave me a chance to meet other people and share experiences. It also encouraged me to be more involved in community events. (MRS M, 68 years, female, 26/11/24).

This statement underscores the potential for educational programs and community engagement initiatives to enhance the social well-being of older persons. Such interventions could promote not only intellectual stimulation but also the development of a broader social network that helps reduce feelings of isolation. To address the impact of social isolation, social work interventions could include promoting intergenerational programs, offering

transportation services for those unable to attend community activities, and creating safe spaces where older persons can engage in group discussions and hobbies. A participant shared,

I noticed that anytime I am among people around my age, I feel relaxed. Also, I always look forward to this types of gatherings. (MR I, 72 years, male, 26/11/24).

This points to a need for practical interventions such as transportation assistance and community outreach programs that facilitate greater mobility and access to social opportunities. Through such initiatives, social workers can help reduce isolation and improve the quality of life for older persons in the community.

6. Discussion of Findings

The first finding reveals that social isolation is a prevalent issue among older adults in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, with many participants expressing feelings of neglect, emotional strain, and a lack of social relationships, all of which adversely affect their overall well-being. Some individuals acknowledged the emotional burden of isolation, recognising its harmful impact on both their mental and physical health, while others did not perceive how it contributed to their sense of loneliness. These findings align with previous studies, such as Domènech-Abella et al. (2024), which emphasise the importance of social connections in reducing loneliness, and Cacioppo et al. (2009), which underscore the significance of social engagement in enhancing well-being. However, research by Crosswell & Waite (2009) suggests that the relationship between social isolation and loneliness is not always straightforward, as some older adults may not feel lonely even when isolated.

The second finding highlights the crucial role of family and community support systems in combatting social isolation among older adults, focusing on the benefits of close family ties and religious participation. Single older adults, however, experience more severe isolation, as demonstrated by the account of a 68-year-old female participant, reflecting findings in studies such as Domènech-Abella et al. (2023) which note that a strong social network reduces loneliness. Moreover, educational programmes and community engagement, as illustrated by a respondent with higher education, can foster social connections and intellectual involvement, helping to counter isolation, as Lakey & Cohen, (2000) also observed. Social work strategies, such as providing transportation services and promoting intergenerational activities, could help address mobility issues and increase social participation, as suggested by Nicholson (2012),

Berkman and Glass (2000), and Cacioppo et al. (2009).

7. Conclusion

In summary, this research highlights the significant impact of social isolation on the well-being of older adults in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State. The findings reveal that social isolation negatively affects their mental, physical, and social health, contributing to feelings of loneliness, depression, and a lack of support. The study emphasises the need for targeted interventions, such as community-based activities and family involvement, to reduce isolation. It also underscores the crucial role of healthcare professionals and social workers in identifying and supporting individuals at risk. Ultimately, the research calls for both government and non-governmental action to promote social inclusion and enhance the quality of life for older adults.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

Community-Based Support Programs: Establish local community centres or social clubs specifically for older persons, where they can engage in regular social, recreational, and educational activities. These programs can reduce feelings of loneliness and enhance emotional well-being by fostering a sense of belonging and social connection.

Family and Caregiver Training: Provide training for family members and caregivers on the importance of social inclusion and how to reduce the risk of social isolation among older persons. This can include advice on communication, emotional support, and involving older adults in family and community activities.

Improved Access to Transportation: Create initiatives to ensure older persons have better access to transportation, making it easier for them to attend social events, medical appointments, and other community activities. This will help combat the mobility issues that often contribute to isolation.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch campaigns to raise awareness of the negative effects of social isolation on older persons and the importance of maintaining social connections. The campaigns can educate the public on how to identify and address signs of social isolation among older adults.

Enhanced Social Work Services: Strengthen the role of social workers in the community by providing training on identifying and addressing

social isolation in older persons. Social workers can be key in connecting isolated older adults with appropriate support services and resources.

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