Finding lonely older people

Susan Davidson, PhD

Research Manager

Age UK

Scale of the problem

12.04% or 1.2 million older people (65 and over in England) are persistently/chronically lonely

6.87% or 800,000 older people (65 and over in UK) have no close friends

1.7% or 200,000 older people (65 and over) have not had a conversation with friends or family for a month

3.1% or 360,000 older people (65 and over) have not had a conversation with friends or family for over a week

8% said they felt lonely most or all days during the last 2 weeks, which was the highest for any age group (3%-5% of other ages were).

3.5 million people aged 65+ live alone

9% of older people feel trapped in their own home

Effects of loneliness

Reduced or low quality of life

Genetic damage and lower immunity to disease

Health effects similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day

Negative health behaviours, e.g. smoking, alcohol etc.

Higher risk of hypertension and poor self-rated physical health

More prone to depression

More prone to cognitive decline and dementia

Excessive use of health services-hospital admission, A&E contact, GP consultations

So how do we find older people who need help?

Research has identified a number of loneliness risk predictors, including

- living alone
- widowhood
- low income
- retirement
- age
- ethnicity
- sexual orientation
- poor health
- mobility limitations
- cognitive impairment
- sensory impairment
- material deprivation of area of residence
- neighbourhood characteristics such as structures of buildings and streets, the provision of local amenities, territorial boundaries, residential turnover, area reputation, neighbourliness (i.e. frequency of contacts with neighbours), crime level, and local policies

Data source

English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), a representative longitudinal survey of people aged 50 or over living in the community in England.

Loneliness. ELSA includes one self-rating loneliness scale: respondents are asked how often they feel lonely, with options 1 = "Hardly ever or never", 2 = "Some of the time" and 3 = "Often"

ELSA variables

Marital Status
Hearing
Housing Tenure
Self-reported Health
Age group
Gender
Educational Level
Eye conditions
Rurality/Urban & Town/Village & hamlet
Loneliness
Deprivation Index
Pets
Household size
Quantity and quality of social contacts

N=4,041

Statistically significant factors

- self-reported health status

- marital status

- household size

- housing ownership

- activities of daily living (ADLs)

- multiple health conditions

These are the ingredients of loneliness…

Problem:

How do we use this to find people at risk of being lonely?

Too few people in ELSA to map to see where they live

Solution?

Census

- Has a lot of people!

But

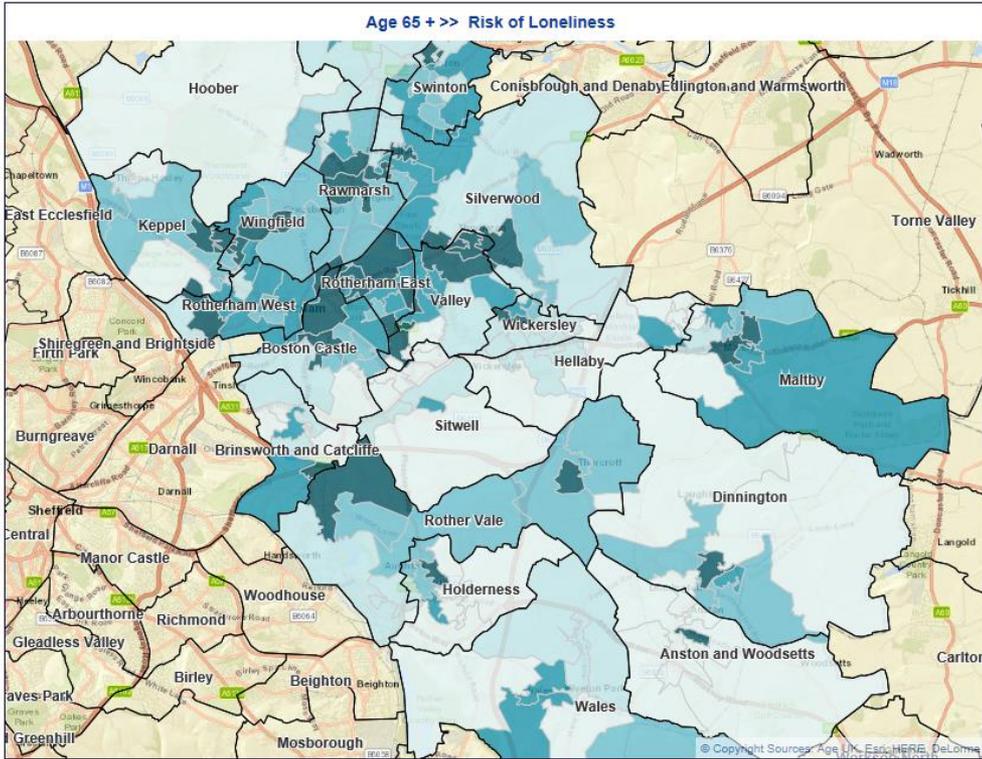- Not all of the loneliness ingredients

- Only updated every 10 years

Individual risk of loneliness

Factor	Odds ratio
Health poor	10.1
Health fair	5.9
Widowed	3
Household size =1	2.6
Health good	2.9
Divorced/separated	1.7

www.ageuk.org.uk/loneliness-maps

Age UK Wirral