

Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness
of Seniors

**Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and
Social Connectedness of Seniors Residing in Metro Vancouver**

For Seniors' Advisory Committee, City of Vancouver

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	III
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. Background on Social Isolation	1
B. Overview of Problem and Purpose	1
C. Methods of Inquiry	1
D. Limitations of the Study.....	2
E. Scope of Investigation	2
F. Overview of Conclusions	2
II. DATA SECTION.....	3
A. The Extent Financial Restrictions Limit Seniors' Participation in Community-based Social Programming	3
B. The Extent Accessibility Limits Seniors' Participation in Community-based Social Programming	4
C. The Extent Overall (Mental and Physical Health) Limit Seniors' Participation in Community-based Social Programming	5
D. The Extent Perception of Community Limit Seniors' Participation in Community-based Social Programming.....	7
E. The Extent Awareness of Available Resources and Programs limit Seniors' Involvement in Community-based Social Programming	9
III. CONCLUSION	10
A. Summary of Factors Affecting Community Engagement and Social connectedness Among Seniors	10
B. Recommendations for Promoting Community Engagement and Social Connectedness	10
IV. APPENDIX.....	11
A. Survey Questions	11
V. WORK CITED	12

LIST OF FIGURES-

Figure 1- Why do I feel isolated?	(3)
Figure 2- Are you satisfied with your involvement in your community?	(4)
Figure 3- Pick the main factor affecting your involvement in community events and initiatives? (Select all that apply)	(4)
Figure 4- What type of health-related needs and conditions affect your involvement in community events and initiatives?	(5)
Figure 5- Have you participated in any community events/initiatives?	(6)
Figure 6- Do you feel safe in your community?	(7)
Figure 7- How do your relationships with your fellow community members affect your involvement in community events and initiatives?	(7)
Figure 8- How do you find out about current events and programs occurring in your community? (Select all that apply)	(8)

ABSTRACT

Social isolation is an enhancer of issues faced by seniors (i.e. homelessness, poverty, abuse, mental health and etc.), but more importantly it is the causative agent behind their development. The unproportionate response and lack of proactive measures addressing this issue, enable it to persist and worsen the social, physical and economical condition of seniors. Therefore, this investigation was conducted to identify factors affecting the community engagement and social connectedness of seniors residing in Vancouver. These were identified to be the following: accessibility, awareness, overall health, perception of community and financial situation.

The identification of these factors was used to formulate comprehensive recommendations that holistically tackle the issue of social isolation among seniors by promoting community engagement and social connectedness. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Prioritizing the development of community programs that function at a local grassroots level
2. Supporting awareness campaigns that educate families, loved ones and society in general of complex and interconnected ways social isolation affects the overall quality of life of seniors.
3. Including seniors in the planning process of community programming and resources.
4. Educating seniors on ways to navigate the developing technological world via workshops and educational programs.
5. Funding the expansion of local community spaces such as centers and outdoor parks to provide accessible spaces for social interactions.
6. Conducting further research into how social isolation affects specific groups of seniors in Canada (ex. LGBTQ, Aboriginal, rural groups) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how social isolation differs in severity and impact.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social isolation among seniors is on the rise and its impact can be felt by communities all over Canada. This phenomenon is defined by the lack of engagement in one's community, an inadequate support system, feelings of unfulfillment and an absence of belonging. It is characterized by the complex interplay of personal, community and societal factors that holistically impact social cohesiveness, public cost and individual well-being. Existing literature describes a direct link between social isolation and deteriorating physical and psychological health (Social Development Canada, 2017). Furthermore, it shows social isolation is most prevalent amongst seniors.

In an urbanized metropolis like Vancouver where growth and progress are valued above community and social connections, ramifications of social isolation are heightened and can go unaddressed. Social isolation is known to be an enhancer—as well as the underlying basis, of many other serious obstacles faced by seniors such as homelessness, domestic abuse, medical complications and poor mental health. These corresponding social issues are of great public concern, and saturate a substantial portion of available resources and limited funding designated for senior care. Therefore, taking active steps to recognize and address the ramifications of social isolation will greatly ease the reliance on government funded programs, shelters and non-profit organizations.

B. OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

There are a few major implications of this problem: firstly, social isolation is broad in its scope, it is an enhancer of issues faced by seniors (i.e. homelessness, poverty, abuse, mental health and etc.), but more importantly it can be the causative agent behind their development. Secondly, the unproportionate response and lack of proactive measures enable it to persist and worsen the social, physical and economic condition of seniors, over time. This ultimately results in an increased reliance on government subsidized care programs and depletion of limited public funds. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation is to identify factors affecting community engagement and social connectedness among seniors, in order to develop an actionable guideline that outlines effective strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting and sustaining seniors' involvement in their communities.

This inquiry exists to address need for prevention-based approaches, with the hope to utilize its findings to proactively address the social and wellness needs of seniors residing in Metro Vancouver. The purpose of this report closely aligns with Vancouver's Seniors' Advisory Committee's established mandate of enhancing the access and inclusion for seniors in their communities. The intention here is that the council will take the findings of this report into consideration and act on the proposed recommendations by not only relaying them to Vancouver City Council but also by actively advocating for their implementation.

C. METHODS OF INQUIRY

The primary data sources included insights gained from previous work with Brightside, specifically in collaboration with the community development team. Brightside is a non-profit organization that provides affordable housing for seniors and people with disabilities. They offer independent living options for seniors and hope to address many senior specific social problems by enhancing social connectedness within their residences. Additionally, seniors residing in

Vancouver were recruited using community connections and outreach, to complete a standardized survey inquiring about community engagement.

Secondary sources included existing academic literature, government publications and relevant reports exploring detriments of social isolation and mitigating effect of community engagement.

D. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The sample size was limited as some of the resident buildings were unable to distribute the surveys in time to meet submission deadline. In total, there were 20 respondents, participants ranged from diverse group of residence buildings located across Vancouver. Due to small sample size, data was corroborated using secondary sources, to provide accurate conclusions.

Additionally, a planned interview with a community development expert specialized in senior programming, was unable to occur due to last minute scheduling conflicts. However, an informal exchange of ideas still occurred and resulting input was used for guidance purposes.

E. SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

The following areas of inquiry are used to lead the investigation into factors affecting community engagement and social connectedness among seniors.

1. To what extent do financial restrictions limit seniors' involvement in community and social programming?
2. To what extent does accessibility limit seniors' participation in community based social programming and initiatives?
3. To what extent does individual mental and physical health limit seniors' participation in community based social programming and initiatives?
4. To what extent does perceptions of community deter or encourage participation in community based social programming and initiatives?
5. To what extent awareness of available programs and resources encourage participation in community based social programming and initiatives?

E. OVERVIEW OF CONCLUSIONS

Following factors were identified through survey findings and information derived from secondary sources.

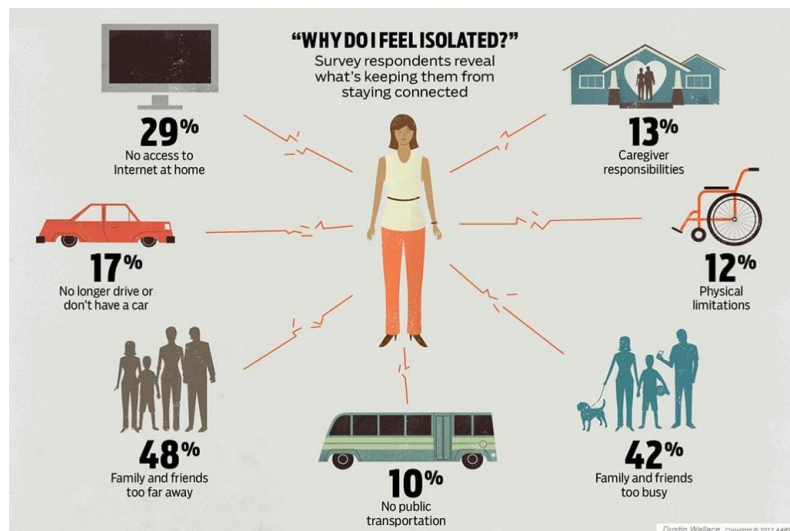
1. Accessibility
2. Awareness
3. Health
4. Perceptions about community
5. Financial situation

II. DATA SECTION

The survey utilized was developed to test extent proposed factors impact the community engagement of seniors in Vancouver. These proposed factors were first validated through reviewing existing literature and then through survey responses (Malone, 2014). Community engagement here was mostly limited to participation in group community event and programs. The findings of the survey along with information from secondary literature sources were used to identify the following determinants as significant to seniors' participation in community-based social programming.

Figure 1: "Why do I feel isolated?" (Malone, 2014)

The factors identified here are via responses to a standardized survey conducted by Golden Heart Senior Care. These findings visualised in this figure were used as a guide for the survey. The identified factors were adapted to this report to test their significance for seniors residing in Vancouver



A. THE EXTENT FINANCIAL RESTRICTIONS LIMIT SENIORS' PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

The survey used did not directly collect data regarding this area of inquiry however, financial barriers that come with living in poverty have been linked to enhanced experiences of social isolations. Low income has been associated with poor quality of life as well as adverse health outcomes. More significantly, poverty and low income have been found to be more common among older adults (Social Development Canada, 2017).

Living with low income decreases accessibility to resources and social programming that are essential in providing spaces for social interaction and community engagement. One study concluded that social isolation was 29% more likely to occur among seniors with low income than seniors living with higher income (Vandenbroucke, 2012). Financial insecurity has also been connected with decreased self-esteem and self-worth, both of which are known contributors of social isolation (Pinquart and Sörensen, 2000).

Financial barriers that arise from living with low income and poverty have widespread effects, they work in combination with other factors identified in this report to holistically impact the overall social, physical and mental health of seniors.

The findings listed above are derived from existing literature and paint a strong correlation between income and likelihood of being at risk for social isolation. Financial barriers work in tandem with other factors to promote isolation and feelings of loneliness among seniors. Addressing the consequences of income insecurity that many seniors are victims of, can be a

Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness of Seniors

proactive approach to comprehensively treating a myriad of issues that result from or cause social isolation. Therefore, the financial situation of seniors was identified as determining factor that influences their participation and involvement in community events and initiatives.

B. THE EXTENT ACCESSIBILITY LIMITS SENIORS' PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

There were a few survey questions that either directly or indirectly correlated accessibility-based limitations to a decrease in community engagement and social connectedness among seniors.

FIGURE 2: Are you satisfied with your involvement in your community?

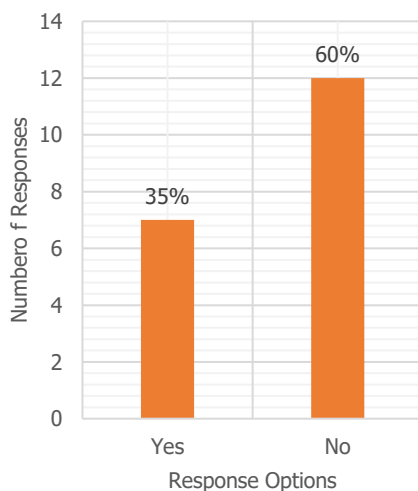
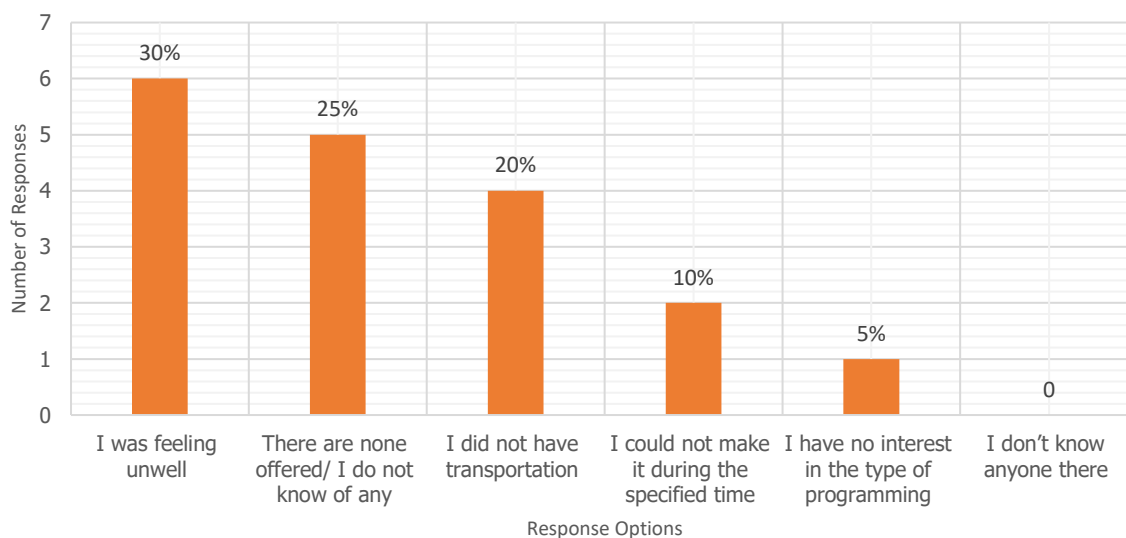


Figure 2: The first part of a two-part inquiry, questioned survey respondents if they were satisfied with their level of involvement within their communities. A significantly higher portion of responses (60%) indicated that they were not satisfied with their current level of involvement in community events and social interactions.

Figure 3: The second part of the inquiry questioned respondents what proposed factors were most significant in impacting their involvement in community events and initiatives. The graph below visualizes number of responses to each factor. Significant portion of the responses either listed lack of events or lack of transportation as factors impacting involvement in community.

FIGURE 3: Pick the main factor affecting your involvement in community events and initiatives? (Select all that apply)



Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness of Seniors

Limitations such as not having transportation options to access community events and initiatives or not having any community programming available, are access-based limitation that impact involvement of seniors in social events and initiatives. Seniors are at a higher risk for marginalization and exclusion due to these types of accessibility-based limitations (McPherson, 1998). Being unable to simply arrive at spaces of social interactions and community programming, has been shown to be one of the driving factors prompting social isolation among seniors (World Health Organization, 2015).

Overall the findings of this survey as well secondary sources verify that accessibility-based limitations are significant factors impacting seniors' levels of community engagement and social connectedness.

C. THE EXTENT OVERALL HEALTH (MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH) LIMIT SENIORS' PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

This area of inquiry investigated the impact overall health has on seniors' ability to participate in community programming that promotes social interactions.

A two-part inquiry directly questioned the relation between overall health and participation in community events, the first part is visualized in figure 3. Figure 3 indicates factors impacting involvement in community events and initiatives, a significant portion of respondents (60%) identified "feeling unwell" as a factor limiting their participation.

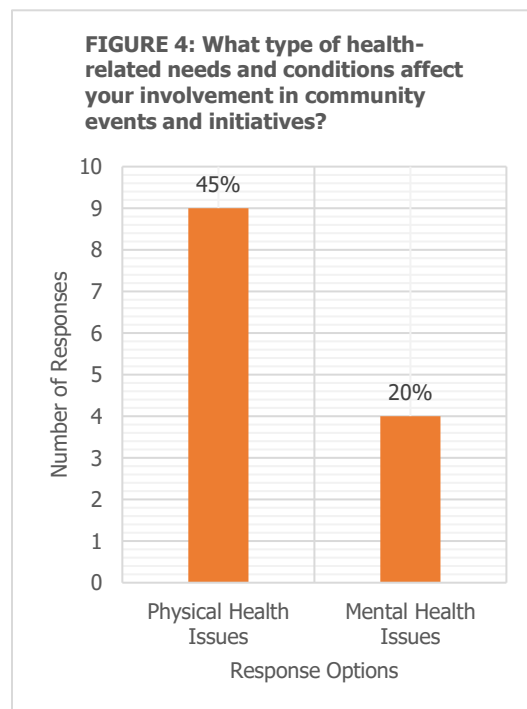


Figure 4 depicts the number of responses indicating either physical health issues (9/20) or mental health issues (4/20) as factors impacting their involvement in community events and initiatives. 45% of total respondents listed physical health limitations and 20% of total respondents listed mental health limitations.

Studies show that health limitations are one of the leading causes for social isolation among older adults. It has been found that adults with poor health conditions are at significantly higher risk for suffering from social isolation. A report conducted in British Columbia investigated this connection, by comparing the risk of being socially isolated for individuals with good outcomes to individuals with poorer health outcomes. Findings indicated that individuals with poorer health outcomes were more likely to feel excluded from their communities and outcast by social connections (Kobayashi, 2009).

Furthermore, physical health issues are closely linked with enhancement of accessibility limitations. Deteriorating physical health can lead to mobility issues that restrict access to transportation options such as public transportation, driving, and even simply walking. A study investigating the link between transportation access and community involvement, showed that seniors who were restricted to only taxis or accessible transit shuttles (due to mobility

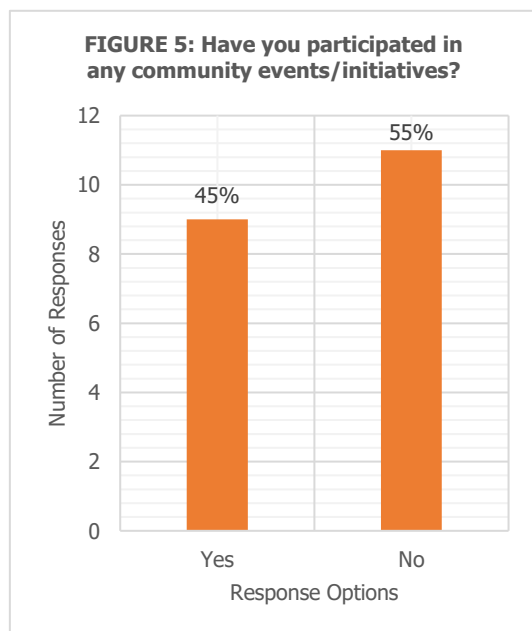
limitations), had the lowest rates of social participation (Turcotte, 2012). Lack of available transportation options results in decreased access to spaces of social interaction and community engagement. The deeply interconnected way that poor health and accessibility restrictions negatively affect seniors increases risk of being marginalized and isolated from communities and existing social connections.

Another study linked individuals (not specifically seniors) suffering from chronic illnesses with higher risks of developing isolation. This connection was made after accounting for other factors such as living arrangements, age, gender, race and sex. This connect can be extended to be applicable for seniors due to the extensive control measures used (Ramage-Morin and Gilmour, 2013).

Mental health contribution to the progression of social isolation is mainly through the stigma associated with it. Often individuals who are suffering from mental health conditions, are unwilling to seek help or reach out for support due to internalized negative connotations associated regarding mental health. This is concerning as mental health is a powerful catalyst for the progression of social isolation. The stigma can influence individuals to distance themselves from crucial support networks at their time of need (MacCourt, 2011). This is seen in findings from BC Ministry of Health that show that reveals significantly higher rates of loneliness and isolation among seniors suffering from mental health conditions (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004).

Overall, through existing literature review and survey findings, overall senior health is extensively supported as a factor influencing social participation and community involvement.

D. THE EXTENT PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY LIMIT SENIORS' PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL PROGRAMMING



This area of inquiry was indirectly investigated through the survey. Figure 5 shows the results of an initial question inquiring if respondent had ever participated to in any community events. If respondents answered 'No', a follow-up question was asked regarding if the respondent felt safe in their communities. The results of this question are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5: 45% of total respondents indicated that they have participated in community events. 55% of respondents indicated that they had not participated in community events and initiatives, these 55% percent then responded to a follow-up as shown in figure 6.

Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness of Seniors

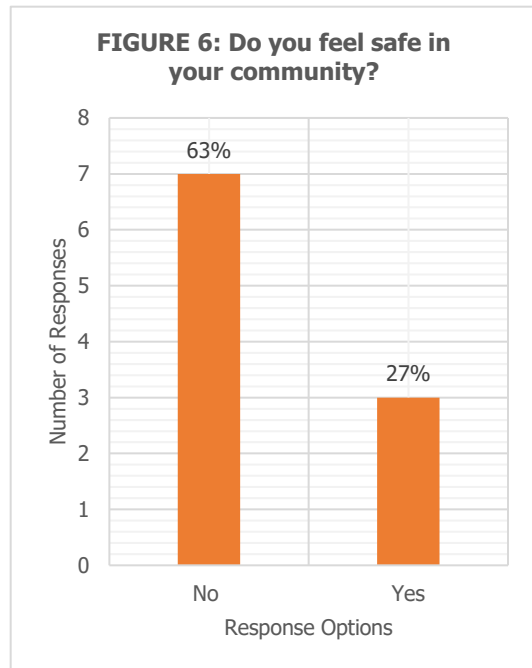


Figure 6: 63% of respondents that indicated they have not participated in community events, say that they do not feel safe within their communities. This is significantly higher than the ones indicated they did feel safe within their communities.

An individual's perception of their community has been shown to impact the likelihood of their participation and involvement within said community. This has been correlated not specifically for seniors but individuals in general. Existing studies have linked a decreased sense of safety can lead to higher chances of social isolation. (Abbott and Sapsford, 2005).

Positive perceptions of one's residential surroundings can foster positive relationships within community. Both literature and survey findings support that positive relationships within communities motivate individuals to further participate and get involved in their communities. This can be directly observed in Figure 7 below.

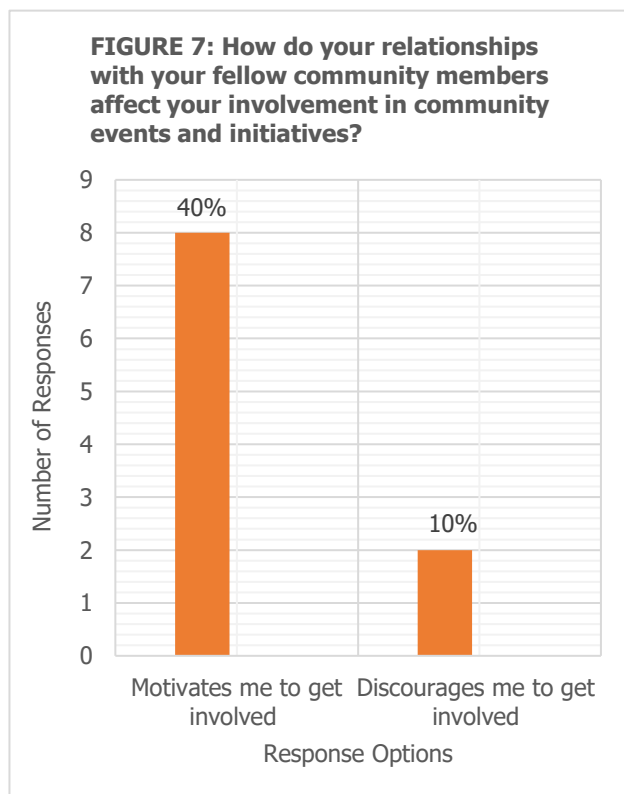


Figure 7: presents the result of a question inquiring how existing relationships with fellow community members influence their participation in community events and initiatives. Note, this is a follow-up to a previous question in which the participants indicated that their relationships with their community members do impact their involvement in social community events. There were 10 respondents to this specific question. An increased portion of responses (40% of total respondents), indicate that relationships with community members motivate them to get involved and only 10% of total respondents indicate that it discourages them to get involved.

Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness of Seniors

Overall, the way one perceives their community can impact the likelihood of their involvement and participation within said communities. Therefore, perception of community has been identified as a determinant of senior's community engagement and social connectedness.

E. THE EXTENT AWARENESS OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS LIMIT SENIORS' INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

This area of inquiry investigates the effect awareness of available resources and programming has on the community engagement and social connectedness of seniors. In figure 3, 25% of respondents indicated that there are either no available social community programming or they do not know of any, as the main reason for lack of participation. This is significant even, though it is not clear that if the lack of involvement is due to either availability or awareness, because regardless if programs and resources are available or not, if seniors are not aware of them then its unlikely they can take advantage of them.

A review conducted by the government of Canada states that socially isolated seniors are unable to seek appropriate resources due to difficulties "navigating the system". Consequently, they are not aware important events or programs catered to them by the government or non-governmental organizations (Social Development Canada, 2017). The system as mentioned above, is in reference to the means of accessing information that advises on the availability of these resources. This system with the advancement of technologies is being increasingly shifted online, leaving behind many seniors who lack experience navigating the online world.

This can be somewhat derived through survey responses visualized in Figure 8 as well.

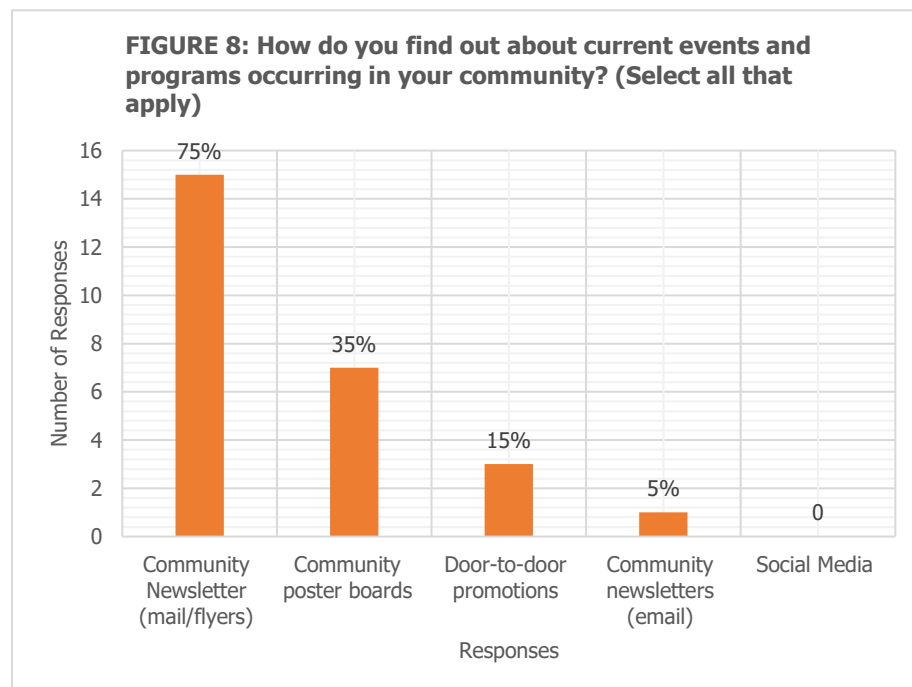


Figure 8: The majority of the responses indicated non-online based means of promotion as their main source of information regarding available community programming and resources. Therefore, it is likely that events and programming that are being promoted through online sources are not effective in reaching out to demographics like seniors.

Overall, awareness of available community-based programming and events is an essential factor impacting participation of seniors in their communities.

III. CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY OF FACTORS AFFECTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS OF SENIORS

Seniors are an integral part of our society and are crucial in creating and sustaining healthy and vibrant communities. Promoting community engagement, encourages seniors to actively participate and contribute to their communities. This mobilization of seniors is extremely beneficial to the development of community initiatives and programs. The aim of this report was to identify factors that are controlling elements of seniors' level of community engagement and social connectedness, to enable development of targeted preventative approaches combatting them. As such the following factors were identified:

1. Accessibility-

Accessibility to community-based programs that promote engagement and social interactions at a local level. This includes the general availability of these types of programs and access in terms of transportation.

2. Awareness-

Awareness of available programs and resources that target seniors to promote community engagement. Mode of promotions used for these programs and resources interplay with awareness.

3. Health-

Overall health of seniors, considering both physical and mental health issues.

4. Perceptions about community-

Perception and beliefs about local community, specifically feelings of safety and security in relation to one's community. Presence of existing relationships within community contribute to this.

5. Financial barriers-

Works in combination with other factors, specifically with regards to accessibility and health

B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

The overall goal of these recommendations is to holistically address the different factors contributing to the development of social isolation among seniors. These recommendations work in tandem with each other to promote the creation of age-friendly communities.

1. Prioritizing the development of community programs that function at a local grassroots level, provide seniors with accessible opportunities to form social connections within their communities. When these types of resources are offered at closer proximities, the likelihood of forming connections that can be sustained outside of formal programs increase. This strategy is effective in combatting limitations that arise from not having access to reliable transportation and proximal resources.
2. Supporting awareness campaigns to educate families, loved ones and society of the complex and deeply interconnected ways social isolation affects the overall quality of life of seniors. Specifically, there needs to more emphasis placed on recognizing key warning signs that are indicative of social isolation. This is crucial in enabling earlier identification of the problem and intervention at a more preventable and mitigatable stage.
3. Including seniors in the planning process of community programming and resources. Their perspective is integral in developing effective strategies and action plans that aim

to promote community engagement and social connectedness. The factors identified in this report are significant but the multifaceted they affect and marginalize seniors is still not well understood. Therefore, it is essential that this gap in knowledge is mitigated by direct insight from seniors themselves.

4. Educating seniors on how to navigate the online systems via workshops and educational programs is essential in addressing accessibility and awareness limitations. Including seniors in the rapidly developing technological world will provide the means to stay connected with loved ones that are not easily accessible otherwise. Furthermore, it will enhance awareness by facilitating access to information regarding available resources, social events and community programs.
5. Funding the expansion of local community spaces such as community centers and outdoor parks will provide seniors in the area with accessible spaces for social interactions. Additionally, prioritizing the development of these types of spaces in lower income neighborhoods will help uplift seniors residing in this area. Community spaces facilitate the formation of positive relationships between community members and will help to improve seniors' sense of belonging and overall perception of their community.
6. Conducting further research into how social isolation affects specific groups of seniors in Canada (ex. LGBTQ, Aboriginal, rural groups) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how social isolation differs in severity and impact.

The provided recommendations are formulated with consideration to practicality and applicability. Taking the progressive steps for their implementation will result in the overall inclusion of seniors within their communities. These strategies do not demand a substantial increase in funding for their application. Contrarily, over time due to their preventative nature, they will lessen the heavy burden on seniors specific social programming and resources.

IV. APPENDIX

A. SURVEY ETHICAL INTRODUCTION

I am an undergraduate student at UBC engaged in a technical writing project. The purpose of this survey is to obtain primary data for an analysis and evaluation of factors affecting community engagement and social connectedness among seniors. The aim is to utilize this data to develop a comprehensive guideline that outlines effective strategies to promote and sustain seniors' involvement in their communities. The final formal report will be addressed to Vancouver Seniors' Advisory Committee and ultimately Vancouver City Council. The data gathered from this survey will be processed and interpreted to provide recommendations to the listed agencies. The survey is comprised of 17 questions either multiple-choice or short answers and it should take less than 10 minutes of your time. Your responses are voluntary and anonymous. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey and for providing your input.

B. SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What type of events and programs have you seen occur or advertised in your community recently?
 - a. Community Gardens
 - b. Community BBQ
 - c. Holiday Parties
 - d. Social Gatherings/Neighbourhood House
 - e. Information Workshops

Identification of Factors Affecting the Community Engagement and Social Connectedness
of Seniors

2. Have you participated in any community events/initiatives? Yes/No a. If so which ones?
 - a. Community Gardens
 - a. Community BBQ
 - b. Holiday Parties
 - c. Neighbourhood House/Social Gatherings
 - d. Information Workshops
 - e. Other _____
3. Are you able to participate in community events and initiatives? Yes/No a. If no, why?
(Select all that apply)
 - a. I was feeling unwell
 - b. They are none offered/ I don't know about any
 - c. I did not have transportation
 - d. I could not make it during the specified time
 - e. I don't know anyone there
4. Pick the main factor affecting your involvement in community events and initiatives?
 - a. There are none offered/ I don't know if any are offered
 - b. I have no interest in the type of programming offered
 - c. I was feeling unwell
 - d. I did not have transportation
 - e. I could not make it during the specified time
 - f. I don't know anyone there
5. Are you satisfied with the types of community events and programs that you have access to? **Yes/No**
6. Do you enjoy interactions with your neighbours or community members? **Yes/No**
7. Do you feel safe in your community? **Yes/No**
8. Can you rely on your neighbours for help during an emergency? **Yes/No**
9. Do your relationships with your fellow community members affect your involvement in community events and initiatives? **Yes/No** → *If so how?*
 - a. Motivates me to get involved
 - b. Discourages me to get involved
10. Are you satisfied with the type and quality of events offered in your community?
Yes/No
11. Are you satisfied with your involvement in your community? **Yes/No**
12. After participating in initiatives organized in your community are you more inclined to volunteer in any future community events? **Yes/No**; → *If yes how?*
 - a. I am happy with my current level of involvement
 - b. Attend more events
 - c. Become part of a recreation club that meets weekly
 - d. Volunteer on a committee

13. Are there any specific health related needs and conditions that affect your involvement in community events and initiatives? **Yes/No** → If so what are they?
14. What type of events would you like to see implemented in your community?
15. How do you find out about current events and programs occurring in your community?
 - a. Community newsletters (email)
 - b. Community Newsletter (mail/flyers)
 - c. Community poster boards
 - d. Social Media
 - e. Community Centers
 - f. Door-to-door promotions

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