



Breaking Down the Wall

Barriers to social inclusion amongst older Australians

**A summary of a report by Northside Community Service
May 2010**

“Breaking Down the Wall: Barriers to social inclusion amongst older Australians”.

A summary

OBJECTIVES

This project set out to explore the key factors preventing social and community participation of older people living in the Inner North of Canberra. The objectives of the research were to:

- Provide improved quantitative and qualitative data about social inclusion among older people in the Inner North, to inform policy development;
- Explore and develop more appropriately targeted strategies to enhance current service provision to older people in the Inner North by non-government and government agencies;
- Increase community connectedness among the volunteer researchers; and,
- Increase the self-esteem among the volunteer researchers.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed four main methods:

- Analysis of the demographic profile of older people living in the inner North;
- A review of ACT, National and international literature on social inclusion and exclusion of older people;
- Consultations and interviews with a total of 63 older community members in the inner North; and,
- A survey of 220 older community members in the inner North.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Women constituted almost 70% of responses to the participants in this project. Participants were spread across all age groups with 46% aged between 80 and 89 years. Indigenous and CaLD populations were well represented with 5% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 17% as a ‘a person from a culturally and linguistically diverse background’. Furthermore 16% identified as ‘a person with a disability’ and 15 % as ‘a carer’.

A majority of respondents (42%) identified as being married, followed by 31% identifying as widowed. An additional 15% identified as being single and 12% as divorced or separated.

Superannuation was the main source of income for 34% of respondents with a full and part pension being the main source of income for 33% and 18% of respondents respectively.

Only people living independently in their own homes were surveyed. The most common living arrangements were those living alone (46%) and with their spouse/partner (39%).

FINDINGS

Social interaction

The majority (80%) of participants were regularly involved in groups, clubs or programs within their local community. Participation in social groups was the most common activity across all age groups and gender, followed by education and learning groups, and neighbourhood or community groups.

Women were more likely to participate in social activities 1-2 times per fortnight, whereas among men the most common level of social interaction was 2-4 times per fortnight.

Extent of social exclusion

The majority (73.9%) of participants indicated that they experienced social exclusion on some level. Females tended to feel socially excluded more than males with the most common barriers being:

- Lack of knowledge of services and social groups;
- Lack of confidence;
- Transport problems; and,
- No-one to go out with.

The most common areas where assistance was required were:

- Improving access to services and social groups;
- Developing social support networks and contacts;
- Locating community organisations; and,
- Improving knowledge of services and social groups

Barriers preventing social inclusion

Health and Disability

Health issues were identified as a barrier to social inclusion amongst 41% of participants. Low energy and mobility issues were also common barriers to social inclusion amongst participants. Furthermore, independence was an important aspect of life amongst all participants and many felt that health problems did affect their independence.

Most of the participants indicated that they experience an age-related disability. The most common age related disability experienced amongst participants was arthritis, followed by vision impairment, hearing impairment and the need for a mobility aide.

Marital Status

Older people who were widowed and single showed to be much more vulnerable to social exclusion than those who had been married or divorced. Almost 20% identified the 'loss of a partner or a close friend' as a barrier to participating in social activities. Many widowed participants lived alone and indicated that they had experienced difficulty socialising as a result of the loss. For some, widowhood also meant losing their transport options.

Retirement

Almost 94% of participants identified as being retired. Overall, retirement was seen as a positive experience, with 87% of participants indicating that it enabled social inclusion and participation. The value of pre-retirement planning and how it related to social inclusion and participation was also investigated. Of the 30% who indicated that they would have liked more support and assistance with pre-retirement planning, the issues identified were:

- More assistance with locating community organisations, social groups and services (94%)
- More assistance developing support networks (72%)
- More support identifying activities to develop and maintain skills (76%)
- More assistance with financial preparations (67%)

Transport

Participants were clear that adequate access to transport options were essential to social inclusion and their quality of life. Over half (57%) still own and drive their own cars, 38% use public transport and 27% use community buses as their main mode of transport. Only 3% use taxis, and 8% indicated other means of transport such as friends and family driving them. Over a third indicated they have problems with accessing transport, in the main public transport and community buses.

Housing and Infrastructure

Some participants indicated that there were insufficient housing options near local shops and transport routes. Some also expressed dissatisfaction with appropriate public housing options for older people. Some lived in units that were too big and others who lived on the ground floor, felt unsafe.

Furthermore, some noted that the local community did not have adequate age-friendly infrastructure and indicated a desire for more shaded seating options in parks, shops and the city as well as a need for improved footpaths given that many frail, older community members were at risk of falls.

Access to information and staying informed

Over half of the participants (57%) reported never using the Internet - of these, almost half indicated lack of access or the cost as being the main reasons. Strategies to increase use of the internet would need to take into account that many of those participating:

- Have relatively minimal knowledge of the Internet;
- Are distrusting of information on the Internet in general; and
- Experience language and cultural barriers.

Access to services

Many respondents indicated that they were not satisfied with the amount of knowledge available to them about services and social activities. Some indicated that they did not know where to start looking if they needed information and that they found information hubs overwhelming at times.

Community Connections

Strong connections with the local community can often prevent social exclusion. When asked if participants felt that they were part of their local community and if they felt connected, the most common response was 'neutral'. There appeared to be no correlation between the experience of social exclusion and a feeling of connection to the local community.

While only a small percentage (2%) of participants 'strongly disagreed' with the statement 'I feel safe in my community', and 9% 'disagreed' with the statement, safety was a recurring theme in the discussions. Participants indicated that they were cautious of robbery and violence, and at the very least they acknowledged the importance of taking care while out of the house.

Being a Carer

15% of participants identified as being a carer. Among these, there is a strong relationship between social exclusion and caring for someone. Some 27% had never felt socially excluded – a situation that can be attributed to the higher level of support they received from family and friends, and the time available to attend to their personal needs. As the time carers had to respond to their own needs increased, the level of social exclusion decreased.

Being Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD)

Many of the barriers to social inclusion identified amongst the CaLD participants were similar to that of the general community such as; lack of knowledge of services and social groups, transport problems, health, low energy, mobility, loss of a partner or close friend and attitudes towards seniors.

A major issue for CaLD people is the language barrier. Many do not speak English and of those that can, many are shy and lack confidence in their English proficiency. Furthermore, when attempting to access services the language barrier prevented some participants seeking services as they could not understand what they were being told leading to confusion and frustration.

Some participants indicated there was a need for more information about services in their own languages and it is believed that interpreters are scarce and not easily accessible. Participants indicated they would like more ethnic specific services and social options.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Ten older Indigenous community members (7 females and 3 males), aged between 45 and 64 participated in this study. This is not an adequate sample to derive conclusive results, and further exploration of the issues should be conducted.

A low level of social exclusion was observed. The majority (75%) of indigenous participants indicated that they 'occasionally' experienced social exclusion, while the other 25% indicated they 'rarely' felt excluded. This can be attributed by the high level of interaction with family and friends, and a strong sense of community. But it was also noted that common barriers such as; financial constraints, transport and attitudes impacted on their ability to socialise outside of their local community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were asked to consider what gaps in services prevented them from being socially included, what assistance they needed, and what future strategies and programs agencies should focus on. These are summarised in the following – full details can be found in the main report.

Principles to consider when developing projects

Several common themes on how to better interact with older people and to address the issue of social exclusion arose.

- Services and social supports need to be flexible and patient with older people. Services that are inflexible and impatient are ineffective as socially excluded people need time and support to regain control of their lives.
- Assumptions should not be made that all older people have a desire for increased social participation in community life and activities. This is not always the case and people who do not participate in community life do not always feel isolated or excluded.
- For some older people who seek new contacts, simply bringing them together in structured groups is not sufficient to alleviate the feeling of exclusion. Some older people expressed that, although they met new people through groups or activities, they developed few friendships.
- Forcing people into social groups may cause further social exclusion. Initially, frequent short visits may be more beneficial to get them used to social interactions.
- Often socially excluded people are not aware of services and social support. Older people who do not receive support from family or case managers often do not know how to seek out assistance or social support.
- Older people who are prone to or are already socially excluded may not have the skills or knowledge to ask for help or be comfortable in accepting services or visits or assessments from professionals.
- Older people should be engaged in the planning and implementation of projects, rather than have them chosen for them.
- Older people need to be provided with a simple entry point to services and help, preferably with one (1) point of contact.
- Older people need to feel empowered to make decisions about their lifestyle, social participation and the services they access. Services should be flexible to the needs and desires of older people.
- The time of day the social activity is held is important. It is important to have activities run during the day as transport can be a limiting issue. Some older people living alone feel more excluded and lonely in the afternoon, early evening and on holidays. Thus, activities run in the afternoon and on holidays would be beneficial
- Low cost social options should be provided. It is important to remove any financial barriers for low income earners.

Needs and desired assistance

Participants were asked to identify what areas they thought should be the focus of interventions to address social inclusion. Following is an abbreviated list of the themes identified. For details of requirements under each theme please refer to the full report.

- Increased knowledge about social and community activities;
- Information Technology;
- Community participation and social networks;
- Transport & Infrastructure;
- Support for single and widowed people;
- Encouraging independence and perceptions of older people; and,
- Pre-retirement planning.