

Social Impact of Home Library Services on Older Adults at Risk of Social Isolation and Loneliness

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Abstract

This study measures the social impact of home library services on older adults at risk of social isolation and loneliness. Social impact of services, social isolation and loneliness have been studied extensively with the broader social sciences literature. However, the breadth of research on these topics within Library and Information Science is brief. This study uses mixed methodology to measure loneliness in older adults and correlate positive impacts of library services delivered to older adults who are homebound due to age, illness, or mobility issues. By measuring the social impact of home library service, public libraries can be better prepared for strategic planning, justifying these services to stakeholders, and directing funding and support appropriately to continue to offer these important services to this vulnerable population.

Keywords: Seniors, Older Adults, Home Library Service, Social Isolation, Loneliness

Introduction and Purpose Statement

Recently, there has been a growing public health concern around the prevalence of social isolation, particularly among elderly people. The World Health organization recognizes that people facing social isolation are more at risk of serious illness and that broadly social isolation both shortens lives and reduces quality of life (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 2). In response to this public health crisis, the Commission on Social Connection was instituted by the World Health Organization in 2023. In the United States and across the globe the population aged 60 and older is growing rapidly. Public library services and programs can help reduce social isolation for older adults in their communities by providing opportunities for social connection. However, as people age,

they begin to face more physical challenges. Many older adults cannot easily access library services due to mobility issues. This section of the aging population may be among the most at risk of social isolation. Libraries will need to continue to offer relevant and innovative services to meet the future needs of the aging population. Home Library Services can positively impact feelings of social connectedness in elderly people most at risk by making library services accessible. This study will evaluate the social impact of home library service on adults 65 and over with mobility issues who are at risk of social isolation. In the decades to come, libraries will need to provide evidence to stakeholders to help adequately fund and plan for programs and services that will have the most significant return on investment for their communities.

Research Question

What social impact does home library service provide older adults at risk of social isolation or loneliness due to age, illness, mobility, or disability?

Literature Review

Background

The American Library Association recognizes that to meet the needs of older adults, libraries need to “develop innovative practices to meet the unique circumstances of the older population” (American Library Association, 2024). Home Library Service (HLS) offers library customers who may have difficulty leaving their home due to age, illness or mobility issues a way to access library services, including borrowing materials through a selection and delivery service. In 2000, the Australian Library and Information Association adopted guidelines that give Home Library Services priority equal to other library services and aim

to support social inclusion by providing “access to the resources and services of the public library, regardless of their circumstances” (Australian Library and Information Association, 2000). There is a gap in the current LIS literature to measure and explain how these services, often targeted towards older adults and vulnerable populations, impact lives. With an eye towards concerning trends of aging populations and a public health crisis around loneliness, Library and Information Science (LIS) can use social impact assessments to help plan and measure the impact of library services on their communities. The results can hopefully support an evidence-based approach to help secure adequate funding and support the aging population by providing innovative services well into the future.

The State of Loneliness

Research shows that loneliness is a serious global public health concern and in older adults may be influenced by health, social network, and satisfaction with neighborhood amenities (Kemperman et al. 2019). Loneliness has been identified to cause serious consequences for mental health and wellbeing and is “associated with a 26% increase in the risk of premature mortality” (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). In November of 2023, the World Health Organization announced the Commission on Social Connection to help address loneliness as a serious public health threat (World Health Organization, 2023). The same year the Office of the US Surgeon General issued a report that names social connection as a fundamental human need, “as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter” (2023). Research around loneliness has existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but attention has been only heightened since. During the pandemic, many

libraries turned to online programming, and this move towards technical environments has “the potential to exacerbate feelings of social disconnection among older [library] patrons” (Dalmar & Mitrovica, 2022).

The State of the Aging Population

Due to the baby boomer generation, the proportion of the population aged 60 years and older is growing rapidly. Between 2015 and 2050 the world’s population over 60 years of age will almost double from 12% to 22% (World Health Organization, 2015). In the United States, this population segment is expected to increase by 47% by 2050 (Mather & Scommegna, 2024). There is an urgent need for libraries to plan and secure adequate funding for specialized services to attend to this growing population's future needs.

Measurement Tools

In previous studies of loneliness, the de Jong Gierveld Scale has been a widely used measurement tool that utilizes an 11-item self-report measure of social loneliness (Bartlett et al., 2013). This scale has also been simplified to a shorter 6-item scale that is suitable for use in large surveys (De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006). In a study by Coyle and Dugan the Hughes 3-Item Loneliness Scale was used that asked research participants how often they feel they lack companionship, how often they feel left out and how often they feel isolated from others (2012). Relevant to this current research, the Bartlett study aimed to investigate how participation in community programs might affect levels of loneliness and used a method of measuring loneliness at various stages both prior to and after participating in programs (Bartlett et al., 2013). This study will utilize a similar approach to compare segments of the population not currently participating in home library services.

Social Sciences and Library and Information Sciences Literature

There is some evidence in the research to suggest there is a relationship between loneliness and social isolation. Findings in a recent comprehensive longitudinal study on aging in Canada indicate that the largest gaps in social supports were for those individuals who were both socially isolated and lonely (Menec et al., 2020). The results of a study in the Netherlands revealed that feelings of loneliness are directly related to satisfaction with an individual's social network and indirectly related to satisfaction with local amenities and services (Kemperman et al. 2019). However, it is important to note that loneliness and social isolation are distinct and do not always directly correlate. Research on the risk factors for early mortality identifies social isolation as quantitatively measurable while regarding loneliness as a "subjective emotional state" and therefore requires subjective measurement strategies (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). This study's primary aim is to measure the impact of home library services on older adults experiencing loneliness, but there is a relevant connection to social isolation by the nature of these services being primarily aimed at homebound individuals.

Social impact studies have been done across a wide variety of disciplines for decades (Shields, 1975). However, within LIS there have been few recent studies that attempt to measure the social impact of library programs and services. In 2014, The International Organization for Standardization published ISO 16439:2014, which defines terms for library impact assessments. This set of impact assessment standards came out of a need to move beyond traditional quantitative reporting of service outcomes to justify to stakeholders the value library service provides communities (Poll, 2012). The tools for

these types of assessments in LIS are available but have not been widely employed in the research. A recent study of the social impact of Polish public libraries was initiated in response to the trend of closing libraries in rural areas – where benefits from library services were found to be most significant (Paul, 2019). Roy and Simons' study attempts to envision the future trends related to the public libraries' impact on fostering social connection. The study makes recommendations that libraries should assess ways to support the current and future social needs of the community isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Roy & Simons, 2022). These results further evidence the importance within LIS to measure and assess social impact.

In LIS, the recent approach to the research has been to examine the types and accessibility of library programs and services through quantitative methodology. In 2020, a study of library services to seniors across the US found that programs and services for older adults across the United States are uneven (Lenstra, Oguz & Duvall, 2020). These programs are often not available where they are most needed, such as in rural areas. Similarly, the results of an analysis of 25 public library websites found accessibility and access issues related to available programs and services (Dalmer & Mitrovica, 2022). The gap that this study hopes to address is measuring the impact of the programs and services offered using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

A unique Korean research study attempted to determine the perception of social impact from librarians across several types of libraries. It asked respondents about how the library contributed to health and well-being and revealed that 70.6% of respondents agreed that libraries have an expanded social role and contribute to quality of life. The

highest percentage of agreement with these statements came from public librarians (Noh, 2016). Perception can be an indicator of social impact, but libraries need to employ an evidence-based approach to properly align services with community needs to help secure adequate funding for programs and services. This current study will attempt to provide a solid foundation for building this evidence and a framework to apply to other areas of library services.

Summary

We know the population is aging at a rapid rate and that specialized library services for seniors will be increasingly important. Home Library Services, offered by public libraries across North America and the world bring library services to individuals who would otherwise have no access due to illness, age, or mobility issues. This population is especially at risk of social isolation and loneliness (Kemperman et. Al, 2019). While this study does not explore the impact of other library services, it is the hope that the principles can be more universally applied to other related LIS studies in the future. There is a great need within LIS to more effectively demonstrate the impact of library services to provide evidence to stakeholders of these essential services. It is critical that libraries remain relevant by continuing to engage in new opportunities, offering specialized services to meet the aging population's needs and addressing the threat of loneliness and social isolation in their communities.

Research design

This study's purpose is to determine the social impact of home library services on older adults at risk of social isolation and/or experiencing loneliness. Going into the study

we know the population is aging (World Health Organization, 2015) and loneliness has been identified as a public health concern (World Health Organization, 2023). The research aims to inform strategic planning and ongoing and enhanced support for specialized library services aimed at older adults. This basic research study will use mixed methods, a survey, and one-on-one interviews. Some reasons to use a mixed method approach include triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion (Connaway & Radford, 2021). A mixed method approach can assist with avoiding bias that may not be obvious from just using a single method (2021). Interviews with participants will provide social impact statements and help to inform the range of loneliness measurements obtained through quantitative survey results.

Pilot Study

The quantitative portion of this study will utilize the widely accepted and reliable 11 item de Jong Gierveld Scale to measure social loneliness through a self-report method survey (Bartlett et al., 2013). Although a widely accepted scale to measure loneliness in studies of this type, this research will use a pilot study to help ensure both the survey and interview questions are being understood by participants and provide an opportunity to correct any issues before proceeding with the full study. The pilot study will help determine if there are any associated problems with the 11 item de Jong Gierveld Scale in this study and if the shortened 6 item scale may be a more appropriate measurement tool in this environment. Finally, the pilot study will also help inform what challenges may exist with finding participants for the study, especially within the control group that currently is not or has never participated in home library services.

Setting and participants

This research study will be conducted as a joint study by three public libraries in the Greater Toronto Area – Toronto Public Library, Mississauga Public Library and Hamilton Public Library. This study will utilize three distinct control groups – participants that have utilized home library services for over 12 months, participants that have used home library services for less than 12 months and participants that currently do not or have never used home library services. The study will contact participants for the first two control groups through their regular participation in home library service programs at their respective public libraries. Contact for the third control group will be done through more broad community outreach measures. The interviews are expected to happen in the participants' homes where possible due to mobility and other associated health issues with the participant groups. All researchers and study assistants will complete a vulnerable sector screening before being employed for the study. Where a participant lives in a congregate residential facility, interviews will take place within the institution.

Instrumentation

The quantitative portion of this study will use the widely accepted and reliable de Jong Gierveld Scale, that measures social loneliness across an 11 item, self-report method (De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006). The scale measures multiple dimensions of loneliness – emotional, social, and overall loneliness (2006). The research will determine if there are any significant findings in relation to the type of loneliness a participant may have recently experienced. A sample of this survey can be found in Appendix A. The qualitative portion of the study will take the form of one-on-one interviews where participants will be asked to

respond to 8 questions about their feelings towards the social benefits of services offered to them by their public library. For participants not in the library customer control group they will be asked a series of related questions that will measure participation and social benefits gained from common activities. Interviews will be recorded, for later transcription and coding, with the participants' written consent.

Data Processing and Analysis

Interviews will be transcribed from recordings where present and both transcriptions and recorded notes will be coded and correlations and theme between survey and interview within the control groups will be noted. Processing the results of the survey involves counting the neutral and possible answers on items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10 to determine an emotional loneliness score with 0 being the complete absence of loneliness and 11 being extreme. Neutral and negative answers on questions 1, 4, 7, 8, and 11 determine the social loneliness score are graded similarly from 0 to 11 (Gierveld, & Tilburg, 2006). For accessibility reasons the survey will be administered in multiple formats. The electronic format through Survey Monkey will be coded to assess scores upon completion. Surveys administered in a physical or verbal format will be manually scored.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants may freely withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Every participant's contribution to this study will remain fully anonymous. Before providing informed consent, participants will be given the opportunity to review the study documentation and ask any questions they may have before proceeding. Study documentation will also be provided in alternate accessible

formats upon request. Special considerations will be made as the participant group is a vulnerable population. Participation in the study does pose moderate risk as questions may be triggering events for some individuals who have lost spouses or family and are living alone. Participants will receive regular check-ins and the interviewer will request formal permission to proceed at multiple intervals throughout the interview. Participants that withdraw from the study will not have their contributions included in the final study, and any documentation, recordings or other source material contributed by their participation will be disposed of securely.

Internal and External Validity

The study limit threats to internal validity by performing a pilot study to ensure that results being received is the data required to prove or disprove the hypothesis that home library service has a positive social impact on older adults at risk of social isolation and/or loneliness. The study will investigate participants' involvement in other social activities that may contribute to their overall social wellbeing in addition to receiving regular library service at home and measure the likely degree of social impact from library services.

Summary

Studies of the relationship between social isolation and loneliness and impacts on health and wellbeing are not new and are found widely throughout the broader social sciences literature (Coyle & Dugan, 2012). However, this type of study could represent a new body of knowledge to help inform strategic plans and services within Library and Information Science. It is the hope of the research team that the results of this study can

be widely applied across the discipline to help inform strategic directions of public library services going forward to help support our aging population.

Anticipated Results

By measuring the social impact of home library services, public libraries can be better equipped to develop strong strategic plans that can adequately support this vulnerable population in the coming decades. By understanding the importance of bringing library services to older adults who are at risk of social isolation and loneliness, libraries can develop services and direct appropriate levels of funding to support home library services.

Limitations

This study may be limited by a small sample size and as such may be difficult to generalize its findings to the wider population or even other research studies. Also, the study does not seek to include a control group of participants not using Home Library Services because they were unhappy with the service or did not suit their needs. Such a control group may be determined to be statistically insignificant. As such, the study may have some bias towards participants who are overall satisfied with the service.

Appendix A

Statement	Measurement
There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems	Social
I miss having a really close friend	Emotional
I experience a general sense of emptiness	Emotional
There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems	Social
I miss the pleasure of the company of others	Emotional
I find my circle of friends and acquaintances too limited	Emotional
There are many people I can trust completely	Social
There are enough people I feel close to	Social
I miss having people around	Emotional
I often feel rejected	Emotional
I can call on my friends when I need them	Social

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