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NEWS RELEASE

Canada is at growing risk of a loneliness crisis as its population ages

New report calls for national strategy to enhance social connections for Canadians as they age

TORONTO, June 21, 2022 — A new report from the National Institute on Ageing (NIA), funded by the [RTOERO Foundation](#), warns that swelling numbers of older adults experiencing social isolation and loneliness could have widespread social and economic costs for Canada if nothing is done to address it.

The report, [Understanding Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Older Canadians and How to Address It](#), finds that older adults are at higher risk of experiencing both *social isolation*, an objective lack of contacts, family or friends, and *loneliness*, a negative feeling related to unfulfilled social needs, as they age. This is because of challenges that are more likely to occur later in life, such as declines in health and mobility and the loss of loved ones. In addition, changing demographic trends — including lower fertility rates, higher divorce rates and fewer intergenerational living arrangements — mean that older adults have fewer family members to rely on than in past generations. They are also less likely to be comfortable using technologies such as video calling and social media to stay connected.

A lack of consistent definitions and measurement standards for social isolation and loneliness makes it difficult to understand the full scope of the problem in Canada. Estimates suggest that 12 per cent of Canadians aged 65 years and older feel socially isolated and 24 per cent report low social participation. Similarly, about 25 per cent of older women and 20 per cent of older men report feeling lonely at least some of the time. Some groups may be particularly vulnerable to these conditions, including older adults living in rural and remote communities, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, caregivers and those with lower incomes.

While Canadians of all ages report feeling lonely or socially isolated, the effects can be devastating for older adults. Both social isolation and loneliness have been linked to a range of poor health outcomes among older adults. The health effects of prolonged social isolation have been found to be equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and adults over 50 experiencing social isolation or loneliness are 50 per cent more likely to develop dementia, 32 per cent more likely to have a stroke, and at a 45 per cent greater risk of premature death. This can also have wider costs for the health-care system. For example, social isolation has been linked to increased hospitalization, emergency department visits and use of primary-care services, as well as longer hospital stays.

Community and non-profit organizations have been at the forefront of delivering programs and services to support older adults, and many have run successful initiatives to combat loneliness at the local level. But while Canada has previously launched several national initiatives to address social isolation and loneliness,

few sustainable, long-term strategies have been adopted. To that end, the NIA recommends that the Canadian federal government create a national strategy to comprehensively address the growing issue of social isolation and loneliness in older Canadians.

“Acknowledging social isolation and loneliness at a national level will help to raise awareness and create opportunities to develop best practices to support national, regional and local programming and interventions,” said Dr. Samir Sinha, Director of Health Policy Research for the NIA.

A national strategy to address social isolation and loneliness would be based on six key objectives:

1. Adopt consistent national definitions and focus on clearly identifying the actual scope of social isolation and loneliness in Canada
2. Raise awareness, de-stigmatize and promote best practices for older Canadians who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness
3. Raise public and health-provider awareness about the risks of social isolation and loneliness to people of all ages, including the adverse health effects
4. Ensure research efforts continue to focus on understanding the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Canada, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of interventions to address it at the local, regional and national levels
5. Build the collective capacity of organizations to address social isolation and loneliness and improve overall service delivery
6. Prioritize equity, accessibility and inclusion-based approaches to addressing social isolation and loneliness

“It is important to fully understand the prevalence and consequences of social isolation and loneliness in Canada, and to work to implement effective, evidence-based strategies to reduce their impacts and better support healthy ageing,” said Mike Prentice, Executive Director, RTOERO Foundation.

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About The National Institute on Ageing

The [National Institute on Ageing](#) is a think tank at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) focused on the realities of Canada’s ageing population. Follow us on Twitter [@NIAgeing](#) and support our call for a National Seniors Strategy [@NSS Now](#).

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