



Student Name: Audrey Asantewaa Boansi

Student ID: 2018137

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Lecturer Name: Dr. Laila Surani

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INTRODUCTION

The growing aged population worldwide is becoming a significant concern for governments and countries to ensure their mental and physical well-being. According to NHS England, individuals aged over 65 years can be considered elderly (NHS, 2023). Although a strict definition may not be applied as the ageing process in different people is observed to be diverse. On the other hand, elderly people are individuals aged over 65 years in Japan. As per the age distribution of the UK, it can be observed that the elderly population in the country has increased to 18.92% as of 2021 from 18.72% in 2020 (Statista, 2023).

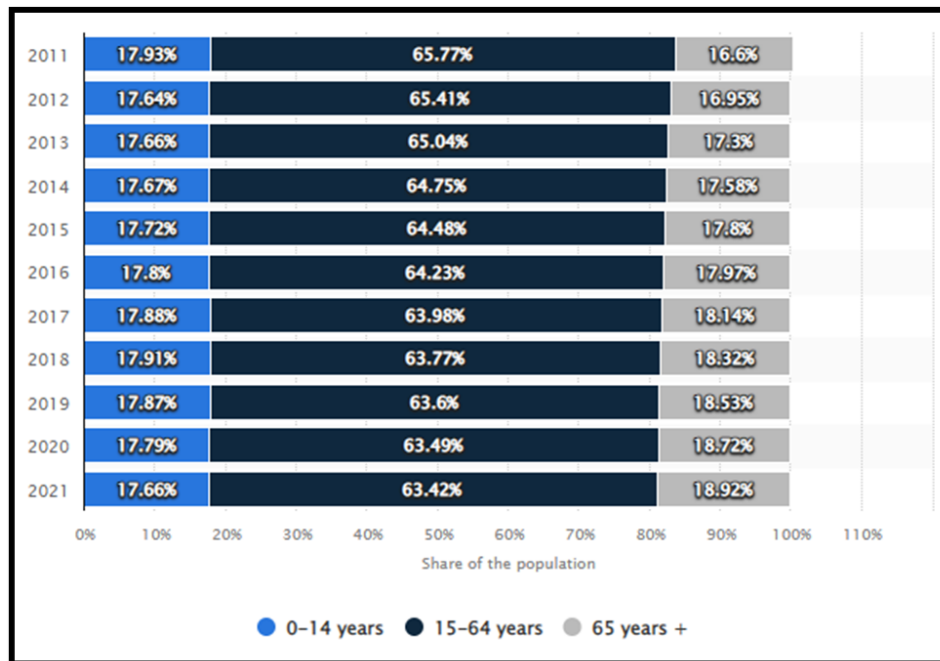


Figure 1: Age distribution in the UK

(Source: Statista, 2023)

In the case of Japan, the country stands second among all other countries in terms of the elderly population. 29% of the population in Japan is elderly second to Monaco which has 36% of its elderly population (Statista, 2023). Therefore, the following study will focus on drawing a comparison between the UK and Japan in terms of social isolation and loneliness among elderly individuals.

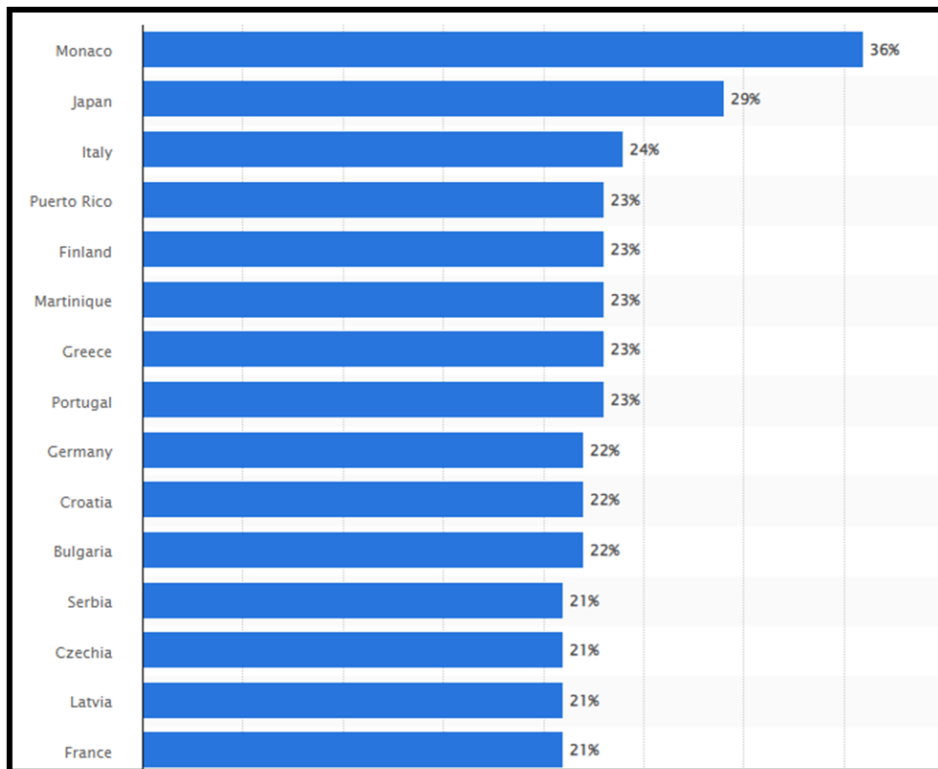


Figure 2: Countries with the largest elderly population

(Source: Statista,2023)

Loneliness can be regarded as the state of the mind or feelings experienced by individuals if their needs for relationships and social contact are not met. The major reasons behind loneliness include isolation, poor self-awareness, social anxiety and challenges with assertiveness. Generally, there are multiple types of loneliness such as a lack of shared values and emotional intimacy along with a lack of physical connection and self-intimacy. Loneliness has been conceptualised by Robert Weiss as a “perceived social isolation” and he has also described loneliness to be “a gnawing, chronic disease which lacks redeeming features. According to Weiss's theory of loneliness, the lack of six social needs identified by the author can lead to feelings of loneliness (Wolters *et al.*, 2023). The needs are “social integration, attachment, reassurance of worth, attachment, nurturance, guidance in stressful situations and reliable alliance”. Furthermore, social isolation can be considered as the absence of relationships with others, contacts and social interactions. Loneliness and social isolation can be observed highly among elderly individuals. In recent years the outbreak of the pandemic and the social isolation caused due to long periods of lockdown has led to major psychological challenges due to loneliness.

Comparison between two countries

“Impact of isolation and loneliness on the older individuals living within a care setting”

Care settings aim to provide patients with their overall needs to improve their physical and mental well-being. Care settings play a major role in curing patients who suffer from various diseases. With age, the number of diseases and physical challenges increases significantly. As a result, elderly individuals are required to get access to proper care settings to ensure their health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2020). However, social isolation and loneliness in care settings can be major challenges for elderly people in maintaining their physical as well as psychological well-being. According to WHO, loneliness and social isolation among elderly individuals are widespread. 20 to 34% of older individuals located in countries such as Europe, China, the USA and Latin America are experiencing loneliness. Age-related health problems are clearly worsened by loneliness and social isolation. A reduced lifespan may be the outcome of the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness on elderly people's physical and mental health as well as their quality of life. (Kasar and Karaman, 2021). In the case of the UK, with the increasing number of elderly individuals, care homes in the country have faced challenges in fulfilling their needs and preferences. Furthermore, issues such as lack of adequate funding and shortage of skilled workers are also major challenges for the care sector in the UK to help elderly individuals to deal with loneliness and social isolation. Elderly people's risk of dying early might also be increased by a lack of social relationships in care settings. The growth in social isolation and loneliness among those residing in care institutions is a significant effect of Covid-19 on older people's mental health and overall well-being. As per the data published by the UK government, the prevalence of moderate-level loneliness among individuals residing in care homes and residential settings was 61%. The prevalence of severe loneliness among these people was 35% (Gov, 2023). On the other hand, the healthcare system of Japan is considered to be the best among all countries. The healthcare system of the country has various benefits such as efficiency, and availability of care services. The single-person household system followed in the country is a major reason for social isolation and loneliness among Japanese people. Furthermore, long hours of work and major reliance on technology have also created difficulties for older people in the country to mitigate loneliness and social isolation. The mental health of older individuals in Japan has also been majorly affected due to the pandemic outbreak. The lockdowns imposed by the Japanese government created challenges for older adults residing in their homes or care settings to overcome challenges caused due to social isolation and loneliness. According to the discussion above, it can be gathered that loneliness and social isolation are key problems older people living in care facilities or homes confront in both the UK and Japan. Among older adults in these nations, the Covid-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on social isolation and loneliness. Dementia and other serious mental health issues can be brought on by social isolation. It can also increase the chances of dementia in older adults by 50% (Manca *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, poor social relationships can result in an increase in the chances of heart disease risks along with a 32% increased risk for stroke. Additionally,

social isolation and loneliness can lead to higher rates in terms of anxiety, suicide and depression. Loneliness can significantly increase the risk of individuals from premature death. As a result, social isolation and loneliness can result in physical inactivity, obesity and smoking.

“Current policies and legislation aiming to reduce or dealing with isolation and loneliness among the elderly population in the UK”

The primary legislation which focuses on improving social welfare and health across the UK is “**The Care Act 2014**”. The legislation focuses on promoting the individual well-being of older individuals in the UK. Furthermore, “**The Care Act 2014**” prevents the need for support and care for older adults. It also emphasises the integration of health services with support and care to enhance the overall quality of health and care services in the country (Legislation, 2023). Additionally, the legislation safeguards adults from being neglected by others ensuring the availability of the necessary support and care services according to their requirements. With ageing individuals start losing their mental capacity to make appropriate decisions regarding their health care and support requirements. As a result, the chances of being neglected increase in the case of aged individuals.

The UK has effective legislation which helps older adults in protecting their right for making decisions regarding their care and health needs. The “**Mental Capacity Act 2005**” focuses on protecting and empowering individuals who are incapable of making appropriate decisions regarding their treatment and care (Aspinwall-Roberts *et al.*, 2022). The legislation includes regular decisions made by aged elderly individuals along with major decisions such as admission to a hospital. Thus, the legislation helps the UK government in addressing the mental health and needs of elderly people in the country more effectively. “Better Care Fund and Loneliness” is another major policy in the UK which helps the UK government in reducing isolation and loneliness across society. “**Integrated Personal Commissioning**” has allowed the UK government to reform social and health care which is concentrated on improving support and services designed for mitigating loneliness.

On the other hand, Japan has also developed and implemented several policies and legislation to improve the well-being and health of older adults in the country. The changing social systems and growing utilisation of technology have created challenges for the country in tackling issues such as social isolation and loneliness. “**The National Health Insurance Law 1938**” has allowed the Japanese government to establish a national health insurance system for all Japanese residents. It is a residence-based insurance program for retired, self-employed, non-employed and farmers (Japanhpn, 2023). The policy is also administered by municipalities voluntarily. In 1972, the Japanese government implemented the “**Free health care for Those 70 and over**” policy. It has allowed the government to retract free care

provision for individuals aged more than 70. The “**Long Term Care Insurance Law**” helped the Japanese government to implement a social insurance program covering care for older individuals in the country facing health complications.

The implementation and enactment of the “**Act for Mental Health and Welfare 2004**” have led to cooperative activities between healthcare as well as welfare which are aimed to develop effective support systems for individuals facing mental health disorders and complications (Stogner *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it can be observed that the Japanese government has made noticeable efforts towards improving the support and care for older adults in the country. Furthermore, to tackle mental health challenges caused due to loneliness and social isolation, the Japanese government has also implemented policies to provide health care and support to aged individuals free of cost.

“Local, national and global provision for services for elderly individuals aligned with current policy and initiatives”

In the case of the UK, the local governments play a major role in ensuring the quality of care and support provided to older adults. The local governments are responsible for working at the ground level to interact with older adults and address their care needs and demands. The “**Care Act 2014**” focuses on improving the overall quality of care and support for older adults in the country. The legislation also requires local governments in the country to address all requirements of patients and older adults in their area (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2019). They also need to ensure the availability of the necessary services for older adults. Furthermore, the national government of the UK also monitors the effective implementation and enactment of all healthcare and mental health legislation. The UK government ensures the overall quality of healthcare and support services throughout the country with the help of NHS UK and its guidelines. Furthermore, the national government also monitors the implementation of legislation such as the “**Mental Capacity Act 2005**” to protect the decision-making rights of older adults (Bartlett, 2022). Thus, the national government of the UK ensures the quality of the healthcare provided to older adults along with offering the necessary support to overcome the complications of mental health challenges caused due to social isolation and loneliness.

On the other hand, the healthcare structure of Japan is amongst the best around the globe. To improve healthcare quality and availability, the Japanese government has developed and implemented national health insurance for all residents of the country through the legislation “**The National Health Insurance Law 1938**”. Furthermore, the government has also implemented “**Free health care for Those 70 and over**” which provides free healthcare and treatment to older adults who are aged above 70. Local governments in Japan are required to follow nationally implemented regulations and health policies to improve healthcare and support quality for aged individuals (Mori *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the local governments in

the country also take the responsibility to address the issues faced by elderly people in their respective areas.

To overcome mental health challenges caused due to social isolation and loneliness, the Japanese government has also enacted the “**Act for Mental Health and Welfare 2004**”. It has helped the government to develop and implement collaborative systems to provide support to these adults in overcoming their mental health complications. Along with these national governments, WHO is also actively working towards improving the mental health condition of elderly people in different countries. The organisation is developing and implementing appropriate guidance for the effective intervention of reducing loneliness and social isolation. WHO has also focused on conducting research on the topic to strengthen the evidence for intervention methods which can work out (Who, 2023). Additionally, the organisation is also trying to establish a global political condition which will prioritise loneliness and social isolation among older people.

“Prospective future of the care for elderly individuals”

As per the above discussion, it is evident that loneliness and social isolation among elderly people have become a major concern in both the UK and Japan due to the growing old age population. Both countries are actively contributing towards the improvement of their support and care towards these groups of adults to help them in mitigating physical and mental health challenges caused due to social isolation and loneliness. The supervision over the appropriate implementation and enactment of policies and legislation in the UK and Japan should be considered. It can help these countries in ensuring the effective implementation of their health policies and legislation aimed to reduce the negative impacts of social isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, national governments can focus on collecting information regarding the current challenges which are faced by elderly people in their countries (Sheikh *et al.*, 2021). The UK and Japanese governments can conduct surveys to collect the necessary information from elderly people to understand their challenges. With the help of this, the governments of these countries should be able to identify areas for further improvement in their legislation as well as policies. Thus, the UK and Japanese governments can focus on implementing essential changes and improvements to their policies and legislation. Thus, it can further improve the support and care to help elderly people.

“Utilisation of technology for the care provision for elderly individuals”

The usage and implementation of technology can be a comprehensive way which can improve the provision of care for elderly individuals in Japan and the UK. The growth in the utilisation of various technological accessories and equipment can lead older adults to overcome challenges caused due to loneliness and social isolation. The pandemic outbreak has resulted in a significant increase in the usage of digital technologies. The growing usage of digital

technologies have transformed e-commerce and social networking platforms (Amalia and Melati, 2021). One of the major reasons behind loneliness among elderly people is the lack of connection to families and friends. To help the elderly in overcoming this challenge, social media can be a key component. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and so on can help elderly adults in staying connected with their families and friends. Furthermore, it can also be used by the government in taking feedback from elderly population regarding their issues and challenges. It can help the government in introducing changes and improvements in policies and practices to further improve the well-being of these elderly individuals. Additionally, the rising usage of the internet can also help elderly adults in coming across new people while gaining access to a variety of possibilities to overcome loneliness (Zamir *et al.*, 2020). The advancement of technology and introduction of advanced health tracking systems can help elderly individuals and their family members in tracking health and take appropriate steps before any emergency.

RECOMMENDATION

As mentioned above technology can be a key component for elderly adults in mitigating the issues and challenges caused due to social isolation and loneliness. However, a significant number of elderly individuals face challenges in operating technological devices or using social media platforms. As a result of this technology gap between generations, elderly adults fall behind in gaining access to new technologies along with their possibilities. Along with it, the pandemic outbreak, prolonged lockdown and increasing technological usage have severely increased social isolation towards elderly individuals. To overcome these challenges following strategies can be implemented.

- The government of the UK and Japan can focus on providing free training over television regarding the utilisation of digital technologies. It can help the government in reducing the technology gap between generations. Family members can also take a major role in helping the elderly members in getting accustomed with new technologies and devices (Tun *et al.*, 2021). Family members and relatives can also help elderly people in learning and understanding the functioning of new technologies. It can help them in staying connected with their elderly family members. Furthermore, it can also help these elderly individuals in seeking help and support during emergency situations effectively through the utilisation of technologies.
- Family members should be aware of the needs and preferences of elderly people. Family members and relatives can interact with the elderly members on a regular basis while identifying as well as resolving their issues and challenges as well (Ali *et al.*, 2021). It can help elderly people in overcoming the thought of being socially isolated improving their well-being.

- The government of the UK and Japan should conduct surveys on the current challenges and issues faced by the elderly people in their countries. It can help the governments in understanding the areas of improvements in these policies and legislation. Thus, the governments can implement the necessary changes and improvements in this legislation to further improve the quality of care and support received by elderly individuals to overcome loneliness and social isolation

CONCLUSION

The above study has focused on the mental and physical health complications faced by elderly adults in the country due to loneliness and social isolation. It has been observed through the study that the ageing population is higher in Japan compared to the UK. Loneliness and social isolation majorly affect the mental as well as physical health of elderly individuals. Social isolation and loneliness also increase the chances of heart risks and early deaths along with suicidal tendencies as well. The Covid-19 has even intensified the impact of social isolation and loneliness among elderly individuals. Both the UK and Japan have implemented effective policies and legislation to improve the well-being of adults. Furthermore, the local and national governments of these countries also take responsibility for addressing the challenges and issues faced by elderly people while helping them to overcome loneliness and social isolation. Technology can be a key component for both these governments in helping their elderly population in mitigating challenges caused due to social isolation along with loneliness.

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