

Seniors Living Alone in Canada: New Insights on Well-being from Time Use Data¹

■ Gaby Novoa

The growing population of older Canadians living alone has raised questions about the potential impacts on their well-being, health and social connections. There have been debate and mixed findings in the literature on the well-being, social connectedness and health of older people, with studies finding both positive *and* negative outcomes.

In “Does Living Alone Mean Spending Time Differently? Time Use and Living Arrangements Among Older Canadians,”² Xiangnan Chai and Rachel Margolis provide new insights into the well-being of older Canadians who live alone by using General Social Survey (GSS) data on Time Use.

With a focus on factors related to healthy and active aging, such as communication and connection with others, physical activity, self-care and caregiving, this study explores patterns of time use and subjective experiences of time use to assess the evidence related to concerns about the well-being of the growing number of seniors living alone.

Subjective experience is an important dimension of life satisfaction

Census data show that 1.4 million Canadians aged 65 and above lived alone in 2016, accounting for more than one-quarter of the senior population (26%). With more seniors living alone than any other age group, there has been some debate on the potential impact on their well-being. Some research has found positive benefits of this living arrangement, such as greater motivation to participate in social activities and reports of stable mental health, while others have found evidence of negative consequences, such as reported social isolation, unhealthy food choices, and a greater likelihood of smoking and experiencing depression.

Chai and Margolis use data from the GSS to systematically compare the patterns *and* experiences of time use of older Canadians who live alone with those who live with others – the



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first study to do so. They measure objective time use in minutes per day that older Canadians spend on care work, socializing and leisure activities, but also their self-reported (i.e. subjective) experiences with, and feelings on, their time use.

Regardless of whether they are more or less socially connected than their counterparts who do not live alone, how people *feel* about how they use their time can affect their well-being. Exploring these subjective experiences can provide insights into the impact of living arrangements.

KEY FINDING 1: Older Canadians living alone are communicative and connected

GSS data show that older Canadians³ living alone actually report spending *more* time communicating with others than respondents in all other living arrangements. For example, they reported spending an average of 64 minutes per day on social communication (i.e. activities such as socializing or communicating in person, or socializing using any type of technology such as telephone, email, social media or Skype). This compares with 54 minutes for those living with a spouse only, and all other living arrangement groups reported much less time socializing. These results imply that those living solo are maintaining relationships and social networks.

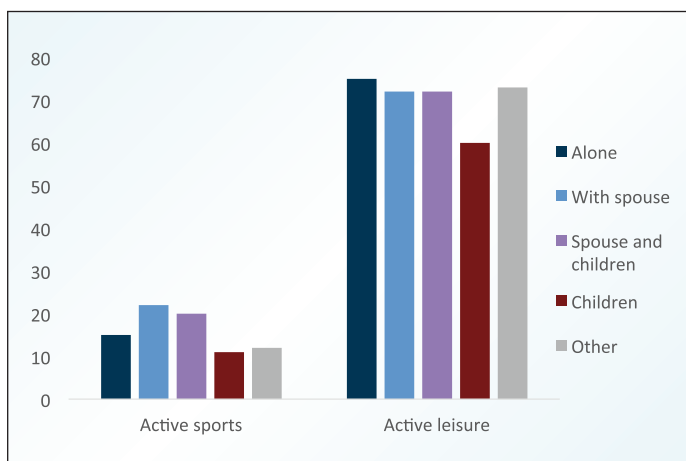
Regarding subjective perceptions about time use, older adults living alone were not more likely than any other living arrangement group to report feeling as though they do not spend enough time with friends and family.

KEY FINDING 2: Living alone is not necessarily detrimental for active aging

Analyzing eating, drinking and physical activity, the study finds no major discrepancies between older Canadians living alone and those who live with others. While the authors do find that respondents living alone spent an average of about 17 minutes less on eating and drinking per day than those who live with a spouse only, the amount of time spent at meals is comparable with groups of people in other living arrangements.

The study finds no significant differences of daily time spent on active sports and active leisure based on living arrangements (see Figure 1). Evidence shows, therefore, that living alone is not necessarily detrimental for active aging.

Figure 1. Average time in minutes spent on active leisure among adults aged 65+, by living arrangement, 2015



Data: Statistics Canada: General Social Survey on Time Use, 2015



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Research to date on the implications of living alone is largely varied, suggesting both positive and negative effects (or perhaps no differences at all).

KEY FINDING 3: Less time on caregiving and housework, and perhaps less time feeling stressed

The study highlights that, while living with other people – whether they’re partners, children, or both – could increase daily pressure and stress, older Canadians living alone may take on a reduced amount of responsibility, leaving them feeling less rushed or burdened by tasks that other surveyed Canadians describe as “stressful and straining.”

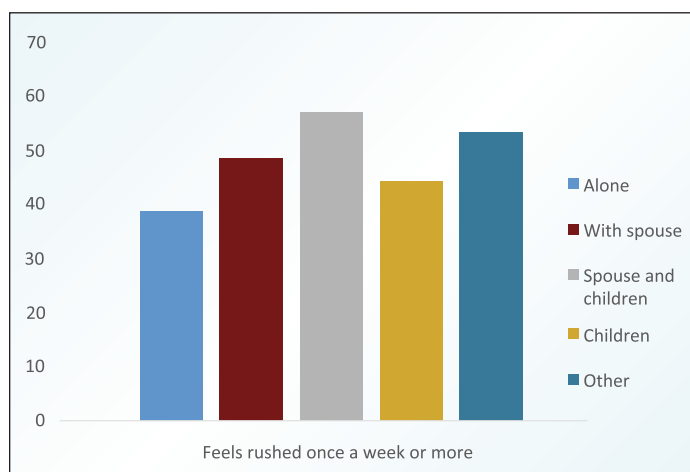
The GSS data revealed that older Canadians living alone spent much less time caregiving for others: 1 to 4.5 hours less than other groups. The findings also suggest that living solo may lessen the pressure to allocate time on housework, with those living alone spending 22 minutes less on these tasks, compared with those living with only their spouse.

KEY FINDING 4: Subjective perceptions reveal older Canadians living alone feel less “pressed for time”

Older Canadians living alone were no more likely than those in other living arrangements to cite negative feelings toward how they use their time. Subjective perceptions among those living alone do, however, stand out for two indicators in comparison with other groups: they are less likely to feel rushed once a week or more (compared with those living with a spouse or with a spouse and children) and they are the *least* likely to want more time alone (compared with all other groups).

Reported feelings of stress among older adults living alone are similar to those living with a spouse. Meanwhile, older adults living with children only, or with a spouse and children, were significantly more likely to report feelings of constant stress. Moreover, those living with a spouse, or spouse and children, were more likely to report feeling like they have “no time for fun” or that they feel rushed (see Figure 2). Those living alone were

Figure 2. Proportion of adults aged 65+ reporting that they feel rushed once a week or more, by living arrangement, 2015



Data: Statistics Canada: General Social Survey on Time Use, 2015

therefore less likely than those in different living arrangements to report feeling pressed for time regarding feelings of constant stress, lacking time for fun and feeling rushed.

Research to date on the implications of living alone is largely varied, suggesting both positive and negative effects (or perhaps no differences at all). By centring their analysis on time use, including how older Canadians *feel* about their time use, Chai and Margolis provide valuable new insights into active aging and the well-being of seniors in Canada. In analyzing both objective and subjective measures of time use on the impact of living alone, this study finds no significant evidence that the well-being of these older Canadians is at risk.

Gaby Novoa is responsible for communications at the Vanier Institute of the Family.

Access the article “Does Living Alone Mean Spending Time Differently? Time Use and Living Arrangements Among Older Canadians” by Xiangnan Chai and Rachel Margolis

¹ Research recap of article by Xiangnan Chai and Rachel Margolis, “Does Living Alone Mean Spending Time Differently? Time Use and Living Arrangements Among Older Canadians,” *Canadian Studies in Population* 47(1-2) (February 4, 2020). [Link: https://bit.ly/39u1uv3](https://bit.ly/39u1uv3).

² Chai and Margolis, “Does Living Alone Mean Spending Time Differently? Time Use and Living Arrangements Among Older Canadians.”

³ This study examined gender differences in the relationships between time use and living arrangements, but these relationships did not vary by gender more than chance, so they were not reported.

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