

# Developing a theory of social isolation and loneliness in a cohort of older male drug users

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## Background

The link between injecting drug use and premature mortality and morbidity is well documented. The research investigating the association between problem drug use, morbidity and mortality have tended to focus on lifestyle and environmental risk factors. There has been much less investigation of social and community networks and their impact on morbidity and mortality in people who inject drugs.

The majority of people with a drug problem (PWDP) in Scotland are male and over half of this group are aged over 35 years. Problem drug users over the age of 35 experience poorer health outcomes than their age-equivalent peers in the general population, in reality their health resembles those 15 years their senior.

It has been found that PWDP report being socially isolated and experience loneliness; however there has been no in-depth analysis carried out to investigate in what way loneliness and social isolation are experienced, and to what extent people feel that being lonely or socially isolated increases their risk of morbidity and mortality.

## Aim

To develop a theory of social isolation and loneliness in older men who have a drug problem (MWDP) in Glasgow.



## Objectives

- To examine how men with drug problems in Glasgow experience their day-to-day lives.
- To explore if men with drug problems in Glasgow experience social isolation and/or loneliness and assess the impact of this on their quality of life and drug use.
- Building a theory around social isolation and loneliness for further study

## Methods

### Inclusion criteria:

Male  
Glasgow resident – lives in either of the three sectors of Glasgow: North East, North West or South  
Over 35 years of age  
Current drug user – uses drugs at least 5 times per week

### Study design:

- An inductive qualitative study design
- Semi-structured interviews
- Qualitative data gathered on: daily routine and interactions, social network, experience and impact of social isolation and loneliness
- Grounded theory approach was utilised in which themes emerged from the data
- Emerging themes coded and processed via constant comparison

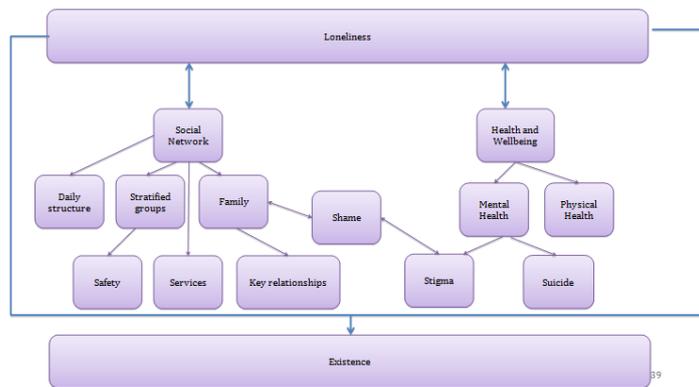
**Ethical Approval** sought and obtained from University of Glasgow College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences Ethics Committee

## Conclusion

Social isolation and loneliness is experienced by older drug using males in Glasgow and this is directly related to and has a complex relationship with their drug use. They believe that loneliness and social isolation has a direct impact upon their mental health as an indirect impact upon their physical health via increased problematic drug use.

## Findings

Figure 2: Thematic framework: social isolation and loneliness in older men who have a drug problem in Glasgow.



A theory of social isolation and loneliness in older men who have a drug problem in Glasgow was developed. The main themes were: loneliness, existence, social network and health and wellbeing.

What emerged from the interviews was an association between drug use, social isolation and loneliness that resulted in a perception of having an existence as opposed to a fulfilling life. It was clear that daily routine and social network centered on drug use.

Participants described different levels of 'friendship', they had no friends; only drug-using acquaintances and very limited (if any) contact with family.

Participants were able to identify that being isolated and/or lonely had a negative impact on their mental health.

Most exhibited an ambivalent attitude to life or death resulting in high-risk drug taking as well as suicidal ideation. There was a history of suicide attempts.

Participants found it challenging to distinguish between boredom and loneliness but in either case found that drug use helped with these negative feelings but also exacerbates them. Key support staff were identified by participants as being able to improve their 'existence'.



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