

# Older and home alone in lockdown: how has support from family, friends and neighbours changed?

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POLICY BRIEFING

JUNE 2020

This paper provides the first insight into the receipt of help and support amongst older people aged 70 and over during the first four weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown when this group had been explicitly advised to stay at home and minimise contact with others.

The good news is that these research results indicate that the majority of older people received support from the wider community. During the pandemic lockdown, a significant proportion of older people received an increased level of help from existing caregivers or received support from new caregivers. This was especially the case amongst those living alone or with a partner also aged 70 and over.

However, there is also evidence that older people with difficulties in performing key activities of daily living faced a higher risk of receiving less care and support during the lockdown, raising the spectre that some older people are not receiving adequate social care. This policy briefing provides an overview of the key findings of a SocArXiv article available at: <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/962dy>

## Key Points:

- *In the first four weeks of lockdown, for older people aged 70 and over, who they lived with influenced the likelihood of receiving informal care.*
- *Two-thirds (67%) of all survey respondents aged 70 and over received support from family, neighbours or friends who did not live in the same household.*
- *One in five people aged 70 and over living alone did not receive any support from informal sources outside their household.*
- *Older people who were most in need, i.e. living alone and reporting need for help, were more likely to receive help than those reporting need and living with others.*
- *However, 17% of older people living alone who reported two or more difficulties with personal care tasks did not receive any external informal assistance. Therefore there may be a small but vulnerable group of incapacitated older people whose needs for daily living are not being met.*

## Introduction

Since December 2019 a new coronavirus has emerged, resulting in a global pandemic. The epidemic has led to a range of public health actions being taken to control the spread of the virus.

Amongst these, the single most critical measure has been to foster a degree of physical distancing, reflecting the fact that the coronavirus spreads when an infected person sheds small droplets containing the virus into the air.

On 23 March 2020 the UK went into lockdown in an unprecedented attempt to limit the spread of coronavirus. The government mandated all those who could to work at home, closing all but essential shops, and advising the population to stay at home and limit contact with other people outside their household.

Individuals with specific medical conditions were identified as clinically extremely vulnerable and strongly advised to stay at home at all times and ‘shield’, avoiding all face-to-face contact.

All older people aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions, were deemed to be clinically vulnerable, advised to stay at home as much as possible and avoid any contact with non-household members.

Lockdown has brought disruption to daily life for the whole population. Individuals aged 70 and over have, however, faced particular challenges in navigating how to secure food and other essentials and manage their health and care needs without leaving their home.

In the UK, as in other countries, support received by older individuals living in the community is provided by a range of sources. These include informal sources such as one’s family and friends, formal statutory sources such as the local council, or formal paid sources such as a privately paid carer. Historically, family members have provided the majority of informal care in later life, with much lower proportions of older people receiving regular help from friends or neighbours.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the printed press and media has cited many positive news stories highlighting how communities have come together to provide support to those shielding or isolating.

## The study

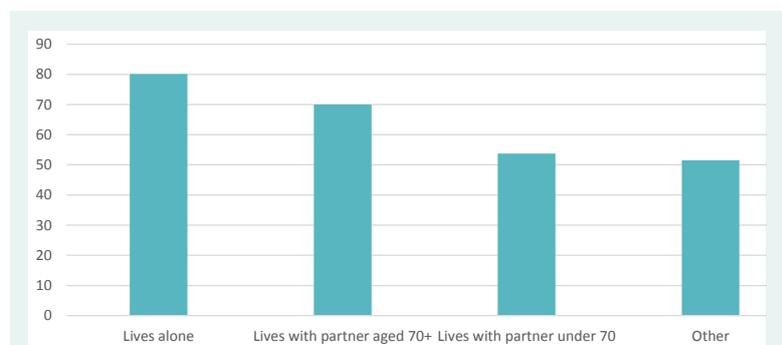
This study uses new data from the Understanding Society Covid-19 survey collected in April 2020 that we linked to Understanding Society Wave 9 data collected in 2018/19. This allows us to compare the extent of support received by individuals aged 70 and over in the first four weeks of

lockdown from family, neighbours or friends not living in the same household, with the support they received prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The research distinguishes between different types of households as who is in the household is likely to make a difference to the support received. Given the guidance not to leave home and not let others into the household, those older people living alone or living only with a partner also aged 70 plus are more likely to be particularly vulnerable.

## Main findings

In the first four weeks of lockdown, two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents aged 70 and over reported that they had received support from family, neighbours or friends who did not live in the same house.

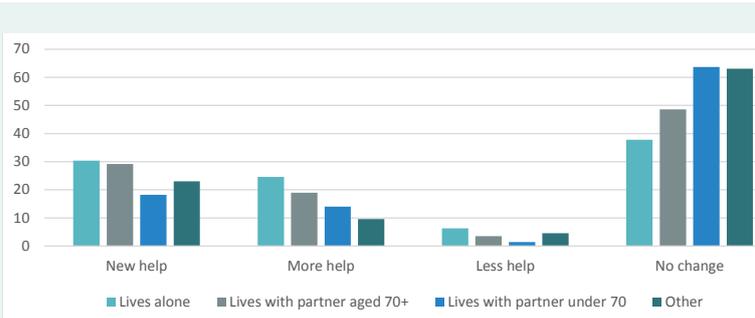
The proportion of older people receiving support varied according to the type of household they lived in. Four in five (80%) of older people living alone reporting having received support, while for those living only with a partner also aged 70 plus, 70% received support. This fell to just over half of those living with a partner younger than 70 years old (54%) and those living with others (52%). Although this paints a positive picture, it nevertheless illustrates that one in five people aged 70 and over living alone did not receive any support from informal sources outside their household (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Percentage of older people aged 70+ receiving support from outside the household in the last 4 weeks by household type**

When asked to compare their current help and support with that received prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, just over a quarter of respondents aged 70 and over (27%) reported receiving help from family, friends or neighbours who did not previously provide help. Just under a fifth (17.7%) reported receiving more help from some people who had previously helped.

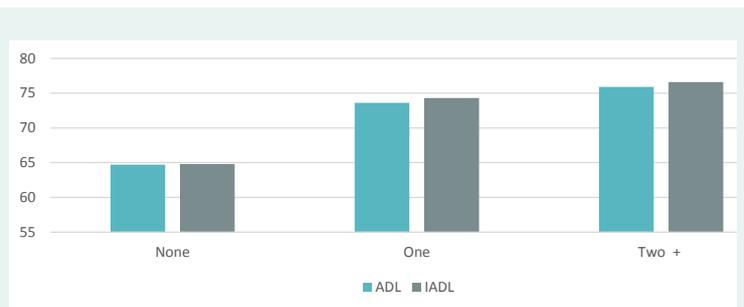
Only a small minority (4.1%) reported receiving less help, and around half (51%) reported no change in care receipt. Once more, there were significant differences by household type, with those living alone or only with a partner aged 70 and over more likely to report receiving support from family, friends or neighbours who had not previously helped, or receiving more help from someone people who previously helped. Concerningly, we found that older people living alone were the most likely to report receiving less help compared to those living in other household types (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Percentage of older people aged 70+ reporting changes in receiving help and support during last 4 weeks by household type**

To capture ‘needs’ unrelated to the pandemic and the associated lockdown, we looked at respondents’ care needs prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. We did this by investigating whether the respondents reported difficulties performing activities of daily living (ADLs), these are everyday tasks generally involving functional mobility and personal care, such as bathing, dressing, toileting and eating, and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs). IADLs are life functions necessary for maintaining a person’s immediate environment e.g. shopping, cooking, laundering, housecleaning or gardening.

We found a clear association between difficulties in performing activities of daily living and receipt of support. Respondents who reported difficulties in performing two or more ADLs or IADLs prior to the pandemic were much more likely to receive help than those with no such difficulties (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Percentage of older people aged 70+ receiving support from outside the household in last 4 weeks by reported difficulty with activities of daily living before the Covid-19 pandemic**

Amongst those older people aged 70 and over reporting difficulty with two or more IADLs, 94% of those living alone received support from outside the household, compared to 88% of those living with a partner also aged 70 and over (who technically should also be shielding), 69% of those living with a partner aged under 70 and just 44% of those living with other adults.

From these results, it appears that those ‘most in need’, i.e. those living alone and with ‘need’, were most likely to receive help with instrumental activities of daily living, such as shopping. However, 17% of older people living alone who reported two or more difficulties with personal care tasks, i.e. with ADLs, did not receive any external informal assistance.

## Policy implications

Previous research has shown that statutory social services are being increasingly concentrated on those with the highest level of need.

There is a danger that during the pandemic those older people with more moderate needs may slip under the radar of the formal safety net. With non co-resident informal carers unable to visit during lockdown, there may be a small but vulnerable group of incapacitated older people whose needs for daily living are not being met. This in turn may contribute to continued unmet need for social care, or manifest itself in falls and other unanticipated visits to hospital A&E - negating the benefits of shielding during lockdown.

**Authors**

**Maria Evandrou**  
(University of Southampton, CRA, CPC)

**Jane Falkingham**  
(University of Southampton, CPC)

**Min Qin**  
(University of Southampton, CPC)

**Athina Vlachantoni**  
(University of Southampton, CRA, CPC)

**Edited by Becki Dey & Teresa McGowan**  
(University of Southampton, CPC)

**ESRC Centre for Population Change**

Building 58  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Southampton  
SO17 1BJ

Tel: +44 (0)23 8059 2579  
Email: [cpc@southampton.ac.uk](mailto:cpc@southampton.ac.uk)

 [@CPCpopulation](https://twitter.com/CPCpopulation)

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