

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



LIVE ON



Registered charity number 219279
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The issues of loneliness and social isolation are increasingly recognised as public health hazards, which are approaching crisis levels. Research has shown that loneliness and social isolation are linked to higher blood pressure, poorer sleep, depression and increased risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Although the terms social isolation and loneliness are sometimes used interchangeably, the two concepts are generally considered to be separate, although closely related. Loneliness refers to a subjective, unwelcome feeling arising when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that a person has, and those that they want.

Social isolation is a more objective measure of the number of contacts or social interactions an individual has across groups, communities and services. While many people happily choose to isolate themselves from others, social isolation that is an unintended or unwanted state is considered a negative experience.

Prevalence rates of loneliness and social isolation in the Armed Forces community (AFC)¹ are currently unknown. However, research with the UK ex-Service community has shown that 1 in 6 report some relationship or isolation difficulty, and 1 in 12 report feeling lonely (TRBL, 2014). Findings also indicated that isolation may affect a range of demographics within the AFC, including middle and older aged veterans, and those who have experienced relationship breakdown.

Research into loneliness and social isolation amongst the UK AFC remains scant. In order to investigate these issues further, The Royal British Legion established a research project to explore loneliness and social isolation within the AFC.

Method

A mixed-methods approach was undertaken for this research. Following a desk-based rapid review of the relevant literature, qualitative and quantitative strands of research were carried out, consisting of:

1. Twelve teledepth interviews with members of the AFC to explore key aspects of loneliness and social isolation in relation to causes, triggers and barriers for seeking help.
2. Three focus groups with veterans and friends and family of serving and veteran personnel. These groups built upon previous interviews by exploring the language and interpretation of loneliness and social isolation, barriers to support, and the support needs of the community.
3. Semi-structured interviews carried out with 11 professionals in the fields of loneliness and social isolation. Interviews explored how loneliness and social isolation manifest, their triggers, support needs and delivery.
4. An online survey disseminated via SurveyMonkey to members of the AFC, completed by 4,897 respondents.

Risk factors for loneliness and social isolation

Risk factors for loneliness and social isolation can be complex and multifaceted, depending on a person's life experiences and how life events may have contributed to their situation. General risk factors for loneliness and social isolation include:

- life transitions (eg parenthood, retirement);
- age (particularly middle and older age);
- gender;
- relationship breakdown or bereavement;
- poor physical and/or mental health, injury or disability.

¹ The Armed Forces community consists of: serving personnel, Reservists, Veterans, and their respective family members/dependants.



50%

of survey respondents said exiting the Armed Forces caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated in the past



50%

of survey respondents said moving to a new area caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated in the past



BEREAVEMENT

was the greatest cause of loneliness amongst survey respondents

ALMOST 70%

of survey respondents agreed that it would be helpful to learn tips for conversation about loneliness and social isolation

ALMOST 70%

of survey respondents agreed that loneliness and social isolation are issues in the Armed Forces community

1 **IN** 4

survey respondents indicated that they feel lonely and socially isolated 'always' or 'often'

Experiences of loneliness and social isolation in the AFC

One in four survey respondents indicated that they feel lonely and socially isolated always or often. The majority of respondents indicated that they sometimes feel lonely (37.1%; n=1,805) and socially isolated (30.4%; n=1,444). The majority of survey respondents agreed that loneliness and social isolation are an issue in the AFC (69.7%; n=3,496).

When presented with specific life events that may have caused feelings of loneliness and social isolation in the past, half of survey respondents indicated that exiting the Armed Forces caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated (50.7%; n=2,101). This rose to 65% when filtered for veteran responses only. Half of survey respondents also indicated that moving to a new area caused them to feel lonely and/or isolated in the past (50.3%; n=2,085).

Bereavement was the most common cause of loneliness, while moving to a new area was the most common cause of social isolation. Exiting the Armed Forces was the most common cause of both loneliness and social isolation (28%; n=1,167).

Triggers of loneliness and social isolation in the AFC

A number of potential triggers for loneliness and social isolation in the AFC were identified across the various strands of this research:

1. Increased volume of life transitions

Given the mobile nature of Forces lifestyle, members of the AFC are likely to experience more transitions than the civilian population. This may translate to increased vulnerability to loneliness and social isolation. Half of survey respondents (50.3%; n=2,085) indicated that moving to a new area caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated in the past. Members of the AFC also experience unique stressors such as deployment and long periods of separation from family.

2. Armed Forces culture

Findings indicated that some elements of Armed Forces culture can contribute to loneliness and social isolation. In particular, a culture of self-reliance and the avoidance of help-seeking appear to limit opportunities and abilities to speak about the issues, or seek support for them. Some members of the AFC also experience a perceived lack of understanding of Forces life from the civilian community. This can heighten feelings of loneliness and social isolation for some, who may struggle to integrate and form connections with civilians as a result.

3. Relationship issues

Many elements of Forces lifestyle can put relationships under strain. Specific issues include long periods of separation from a partner and difficulties with family re-integration upon a partner's return. Spouses or partners with children may particularly struggle with feelings of loneliness or isolation during periods of separation, when they can often be de facto single parents. Furthermore, some partners may not have support networks nearby, including other members of the AFC who have an understanding of their situation. Where relationships breakdown, both partners may be vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation due to loss of social networks, difficulty adjusting to living alone, and loss of military identity or standing in the military community.

4. Accommodation

Many members of the AFC find that living on patch provides them with an invaluable support network, as well as access to welfare support. However, some struggle to integrate with tight-knit communities on patch and can experience exclusion and isolation. Members of the AFC who choose to live in privately rented accommodation may find it difficult to access information or support, and can sometimes feel isolated from both military and civilian communities. Interviews with policy professionals highlighted concerns around the Future Accommodation Model, particularly around integration into the civilian community, the establishment of friendships and social connections in a new area, and the ability to seek dedicated support as a member of the AFC.

5. Exiting the Forces

Survey findings suggested that exiting the Forces may be a particularly vulnerable time for members of the AFC. Many are concerned about integration into civilian society, as well as the loss of military friendships and identity. Childless couples may particularly struggle to make new social connections after exit, as there may be fewer opportunities for engaging with new people. A perceived lack of civilian understanding of military life may also act as a barrier to making new connections. Personnel who are unexpectedly discharged from the Forces may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation due to the sudden loss of identity, stability and support. Many can feel abandoned by the military and experience isolation from both communities.

6. Health, ageing and injury

Forty per cent of survey respondents indicated that injury, illness or disability caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated in the past (41%; n=1,720). Changes to health can be a key trigger for loneliness and isolation due to associated consequences such as sudden discharge from Service, changes to family roles, and potential loss of friendships or social networks. Older veterans may be at increased risk of loneliness and isolation due to worsening health, retirement and increasing instability of social ties. Bereavement was the

third most common cause of loneliness and/or isolation among survey respondents (45%; n=1,863), and the most common cause of loneliness overall (25%; n=1,020). Carers can also be vulnerable to loneliness and isolation as they adapt to their new roles – particularly if the transition is sudden, such as injury during Service.

Coping methods

Evidence for the effectiveness of the internet and social media as a coping tool was mixed. While online platforms are an important source of support and socialising for many, findings also indicated that the internet can operate as an 'isolation tool' for some. Policy professionals referred to anecdotal evidence of rumour-mongering and 'policing' online, with some members of the AFC preventing expression of negativity about Forces life. Furthermore, although online communication is useful for families during periods of separation, it may also contribute to a sense of isolation and 'missing out' for the serving partner.

A culture of heavy drinking and using alcohol to cope with emotions appears to pervade in the AFC. A number of interview participants referred to the use of alcohol as a coping tool, something that appears to be encouraged in place of speaking out about emotional issues. This drinking culture appears to be a large barrier to help-seeking. It can also be carried over to civilian life after exiting the Forces, contributing to social isolation and preventing support-seeking for these and other issues.

Some members of the AFC appear to withdraw socially and emotionally as a way to cope with feelings of loneliness and social isolation. This may be linked with the culture of self-sufficiency previously mentioned. Individuals may also experience feelings of guilt and a lack of control over their situation. These can contribute to withdrawal and may prevent help-seeking for the issues.



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Barriers to help-seeking

Stigma appears to be a large barrier to seeking help for loneliness and social isolation in the AFC. The majority of survey respondents who indicated that they wouldn't feel able to have a conversation about loneliness and isolation said this was because they would feel awkward or embarrassed (62.2%; n=1,227). Some of this stigma appears to stem from aspects of the military culture of self-sufficiency, as mentioned previously.

Other barriers to help-seeking include some distrust of in-Service welfare and a lack of language and skills for identifying and speaking about loneliness and social isolation. Some members of the AFC also appear to be unaware of their entitlement to support, such as Reservist families. Others hold a belief that they are not as entitled to support as others.

Support needs

There appears to be appetite amongst members of the AFC for skills to identify and talk about loneliness and social isolation. The majority of survey respondents agreed that it would be helpful to learn tips for conversation about these issues (69%; n=3,379). When asked about types of support, survey respondents indicated a preference for emotional support as well as activities based around a shared interest. However, both professionals and members of the AFC highlighted the importance of tailoring support to an individual's needs and tastes. This is further supported by the limited evidence around 'what works' for interventions for loneliness and social isolation, both for the general public and the AFC. More research is required, particularly with members of the AFC. This includes research into the prevalence of the issues, what works with this population, and the experiences of loneliness and social isolation for minority groups in the AFC.

Recommendations

The findings outlined in this report highlight gaps in the evidence base around loneliness and social isolation, as well as key areas for support for the AFC. Based on these gaps, we outline a series of recommendations:

Research and measurement

1. *We recommend the incorporation of questions or measures for loneliness and social isolation into the Tri-Service annual surveys: AFCAS (Armed Forces), RESCAS (Reserves) and FAMCAS (Families) surveys.*

There is a lack of data about loneliness and social isolation within the AFC in the UK, particularly in relation to serving personnel and their families. This limits knowledge of the prevalence of the issue and the ability to identify trends and related factors. This also limits effective development and targeting of interventions around loneliness and social isolation. Annual measurement of these issues will provide some data to fill in these gaps.

2. *We recommend the funding of a robust research programme examining the prevalence and causes of loneliness and isolation across the Armed Forces community.*

Accurate data on the prevalence of social isolation and loneliness remains unknown within the demographics of the AFC. Several gaps in knowledge remain of the experiences of specific groups (eg Reservists), and the impact of new military policies on loneliness and social isolation (eg the Future Accommodation Model). We recommend the funding of a robust research programme focusing on the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation in the AFC. This programme should include specific strands on the experiences of minority groups including:

- foreign and Commonwealth families;
- LGBT personnel;
- carers within the AFC.

We recommend that the MoD specifically fund research into causes of loneliness and isolation amongst serving personnel. Resources should also be allocated for longitudinal research to track Service leavers from exit to explore trends in loneliness and isolation over time.

We further recommend that the Covenant Reference Group consider making loneliness and social isolation priorities for the Covenant Fund, to explore prevalence of the issues and support research into what interventions are most effective with the AFC.

3. *We recommend that the MoD monitor impact on loneliness and social isolation in the pilot of the Future Accommodation Model (FAM).*

The FAM will significantly change the accommodation offer for serving personnel. A pilot of FAM is due to be launched in December 2018 and to run for three years across a number of locations in the UK. Findings from this report indicate that patch life provides a form of social support for many members of the AFC. Findings also highlighted that moving to a new area can cause loneliness and social isolation due to a lack of social connections, uncertainty of where to seek support, and a perceived lack of understanding from the civilian community. In light of this, we recommend that the MoD monitor loneliness and isolation as part of the pilot of FAM, to establish whether the policy has an impact on these issues.

4. *We recommend that local and devolved governments adopt common definitions of loneliness and social isolation, and also ensure that their work on these issues reflects the specific needs of the Armed Forces community.*

The terms loneliness and social isolation are often used interchangeably; however, it is important to recognise that they are distinct concepts. While we welcome plans to tackle loneliness and social isolation across the UK, we recommend that local and devolved governments adopt common definitions in order to align measurement criteria, to ensure data is comparable and that it can be used to track progress across regions. We further recommend that the devolved governments are mindful of the specific needs of the Armed Forces community, and that these needs are addressed clearly in terms of resource and delivery.

5. *We recommend that all local authorities include loneliness and social isolation in their Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), or equivalent, and that they consider how additional initiatives could be targeted at members of the Armed Forces community.*

Findings from this report suggest that members of the AFC may be at increased risk of loneliness and social isolation. In response to this, we firstly recommend that all local authorities commit to defining and understanding the issues of loneliness and social isolation in their area. Within this, we also call on local authorities to link in with existing assessments carried out in relation to the needs of the AFC at a local level. This could enable local authorities to recognise and respond to the issues of loneliness and isolation locally, as well as to explore the provision of additional initiatives or tailored interventions to members of the AFC, as required.

Education, prevention and support

6. *We recommend the introduction of a module on social resilience for all serving personnel as part of resettlement provision, with a focus on loneliness and social isolation and preparation for transition out of the Forces.*

This module should be included in resettlement programmes delivered as part of resettlement provision. The module should focus on social resilience and include: education around the triggers of loneliness and social isolation in the Forces; how to spot signs and have conversations about them; and signposting for professional support. Briefings or packs on loneliness and social isolation should also be provided to family members to help them prepare for periods of separation, moves to new areas, and final transition out of the Forces.

7. *We recommend the incorporation of specific questions about loneliness and social isolation into the HARDFACTS Assessment and Monitoring Tools.*

The HARDFACTS Monitoring and Assessment Tools are periodically used to monitor personnel progress and assess Service leavers before they are discharged, to identify any issues that might require resolution as they are discharged and establish themselves in civilian life. The tools cover a range of areas including health, accommodation and family. We recommend that questions relating to loneliness and social isolation are incorporated into these tools, to monitor and support personnel who may be experiencing these issues, and to assess whether Service leavers need additional support around these before and after discharge.

8. *We recommend that the MoD fund relationship support for couples experiencing issues related to Service.*

Findings from this project indicate that the pressures of Service life can lead to relationship issues and breakdown – a key risk factor for loneliness and social isolation. Findings also suggested that some members of the AFC lack trust in in-Service Welfare and are reluctant to ask for support over fears about confidentiality and barriers to promotion. We recommend that the MoD fund free or subsidised relationship support, to be provided by independent organisations. This should include investment in counselling and preventative relationship education through a blended approach, to ensure personnel or families living overseas are able to access it.



References

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