What can we learn from the impact of COVID-19 on older people?

OVERVIEW

- Older people were disproportionately affected by the emergence and spread of COVID-19, whether in hospital, the community or in care homes.
- More than 80% of the global COVID-19–related deaths between 2020 and 2021 occurred among people aged 60 years or older.
- COVID-19 raised particular concerns for older age groups. This was especially the case for those living alone, those from marginalised backgrounds, people with long-standing illnesses and individuals living in communities affected by high levels of deprivation.
- The pandemic is likely to have a long-term impact on the way certain people think about their health and well-being, their use of shared spaces and their social relationships more generally.
- The book outlines recommendations in relation to developing a 'community-centred approach' in responding to future variants of COVID-19, as well as making suggestions for how to create post-pandemic neighbourhoods.
- Policymakers must engage closely with communities in order to ensure the redistribution of financial resources in favour of lower-income areas to tackle the deep-seated inequalities which COVID-19 exposed.

CONTEXT

Over the period between March and December 2020, twice as many years of life were lost in the very poorest areas of the country compared with the wealthiest. Ethnic inequalities were a feature across all waves of the pandemic, with rates of death highest amongst Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups.

Although the effects of COVID-19 have been examined in various ways, its broad social and cultural determinants have been given much less consideration in research. Despite the burgeoning literature on the pandemic, there are few detailed accounts of everyday life under COVID-19.

To fill this gap, this book provides new insights into the challenges facing older people in the COVID-19 pandemic. The research draws upon novel qualitative longitudinal research which recorded the experiences of a diverse group of 102 people aged 50+ from Greater Manchester, as well as 21 community organisations collected over a 12-month period during the pandemic.
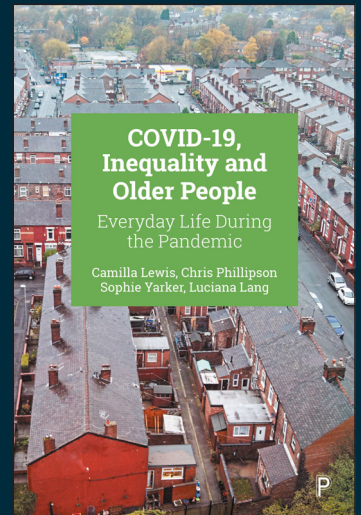
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FINDINGS

- COVID-19 created new pressures for people of all ages throughout the world but raised particular concerns for older age groups. This was especially the case for those living alone, those from marginalised backgrounds, people with long-standing illnesses, and individuals living in communities affected by high levels of deprivation.
- COVID-19 exposed areas of strength, creativity and innovation among various community and mutual aid groups.
- The book highlights the challenges older people faced when forced to 'stay apart' from family and friends and identifies changes affecting people over time through three successive lockdowns.
- For older people themselves, there were a variety of reactions to the pandemic. Few were left untouched by its profound effects on the routines and relationships which comprise daily life. The book conveys the challenges and responses across the different organisations and groups of older people interviewed, examining both the impact of social distancing and the various responses to it.
- The authors call for greater attention to the impact of the pandemic on older people to counter negative social attitudes towards ageing where the older population is increasingly presented as a 'burden' on communities.
- COVID-19 amplified existing insecurities, as people struggled to cope with long-term illnesses in the context of pressures from reduced health and social care support. Extending this argument further, our findings also suggest that the pandemic has introduced new vulnerabilities, exacerbating further the precarious lives of some groups of older people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

To counter the long-term impact of COVID-19, close engagement with communities should be emphasised, in order to ensure the redistribution of financial resources in favour of lower-income areas. To achieve this, four areas will be essential:

- Local authorities should undertake assessments of additional resources needed by voluntary organisations, given the intense pressures to expand the scope of their work with the current cost-of-living crisis adding to COVID-19-related issues. This is especially the case in low-income areas where the pandemic had the most damaging impact.
- Mobilising community participation will be vital in the next phase of the pandemic, in particular: supporting volunteers within neighbourhoods; assisting new and existing mutual aid groups; ensuring accessible meeting places – the closure of pubs, libraries and community centres have depleted for many localities the social networks which sustain community life.
- Given pressures on health and social care, community advocates will be needed for those requiring services but who lack someone to speak on their behalf. This may be especially important for groups – such as those from minority ethnic communities and older adults – who may experience various forms of discrimination in accessing services.
- The pandemic highlighted the importance of digital exclusion. More traditional means of communication about future pandemics will most probably be necessary (for example, leaflets in different languages through doors; advertising in shops) to complement digital communication and related approaches. At the same time, policy makers must encourage training and support for older people and review the benefits of moving an increasing range of services online rather than face-to-face.