

Dr Robin Hadley – Written Evidence (LBC0114)

People ageing without family

I am a 'mediated' childless man. I am 60 years old, married, working class and was desperate to be a dad but through a range of circumstances, I regretfully did not become one. However, my experience led me to research into the impact of involuntary childlessness on older men. This submission makes the case for institutional recognition of those ageing without children and/or family to support them. In the Western world, on average, childlessness affects and one in four men (Präg *et al.*, 2017) and one woman in five over 45 years old (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015; Archetti, 2019). Dykstra and Hagestad (2007, p. 1288) argue that the older childless are seen as vulnerable 'a group at risk of social isolation, loneliness, depression, ill health, and increased mortality' compared to the 'social support, health and well-being' formed by the intergenerational parent-child family alliance. Children are a bridge to a wide range of informal and formal social communities. Recently, the Office for National Statistics (2020) report, 'Living longer: implications of childlessness among tomorrow's older population' forecast a tripling of older childless women aged 80 by 2045. The report heavily emphasised the impact the increase this in the number of childless older people on health and social care services. Nonetheless, the ONS (2020) report is fundamentally flawed: there are no accurate figures for the 49% of the population that is male. This is because only women's fertility history is collected at the registration of a birth. Although this terrible method of data collection is widespread across the world, it is a national disgrace and benefits no one.

The older childless and those without familial support are a hidden population because most research does not view them as a category: they have been systematically excluded from general population data gathering and analysis. Consequently, they are invisible to policy makers, institutions, and health and care service providers. This group cuts across all class and sociological categories and includes BAME, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual or Allied people. Typically families typically provide the bulk of informal care and presently there is about 1 million people aged 65 and over without an adult child to support them (Beth Johnson Foundation/Ageing Without Children, 2016) and this is set to rise to over 2 million by 2030 (McNeil and Hunter, 2014). A contemporary literature review of older non-parents and social isolation (Křenková, 2019) found that compared to parents, non-parents had higher levels of social isolation and their social networks provided less support than equivalent people who are parents. This raises concerns because the older childless have reduced capacity to access informal care and enter formal care at younger ages and at lower levels of illness than parents (Albertini and Mencarini, 2014). Moreover, people ageing without family support are not disadvantaged when they feel in good health. However, problems arise when their independence is challenged through bereavement, economically, illness and/or frailty. Childless older people are over represented in residential care facilities (Wenger, 2009; Dykstra, 2009; Koropeckyj-Cox and Call, 2007). Those that have no contact with their children (functionally childless) are *de facto* ageing without children and/or family. Furthermore, because that data is not

routinely collected, the percentage of people ageing without children or family support in residential care is difficult to estimate.

There are many reasons why a person is ageing-without-family: choice, class, child bereavement, economics, education, gender, infertility, family break-up, relationship issues, socio-economic status, sexuality, upbringing and many more (Hadley, 2019; Hadley, 2018c; Hadley, 2018b; Hadley, 2018a). The worry is that if policy makers do not recognise people ageing without family support as a group then data will continue not to be gathered – the very data policy makers use to influence and build policy. In the very near future health and care agencies are going to be challenged to provide services for a significant population of ‘known unknowns’.

It is vitally important this group of people is recognised in the next few years because if they are not the long-term implications for both individuals and institutions are dire. Horace Sheffield’s (1979) wrote ‘If you don’t get counted, you don’t count.’ In the case of people ageing without family support this can be adapted to ‘If you don’t get counted, you don’t count. And if the people who do the counting won’t count you – then you truly count for nothing.’

I include this poem because I feel it shows the life-long impact of not being a parent (2018d).

No candle

No candle to light, no cake to cut, no nappies smelly, no teeth to keep, no hand to squeeze, no stories read, no surprise to feign, no plays to see, no shoes to clean, no sports-day drama, no parties to piece/police, no presents to buy, no amends to make, no scrapes to clean, no kiss-it-betters, no tears to dry, no hearts to mend, no embarrassment to give, no graduation photos snapped, no ‘Can you help with this?’ No now-empty nest, no grandchild to hold, no legacy to give, no one to call, no one to catch the fall, no wishes heard, no life-lived described, few tears shed, no candle lit.

Robin Hadley (2018d)

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