Subsidized Senior Housing: 
A Study of Social Convoys and Computer Use

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Abstract. Subsidized senior housing is of interest because, increasingly, older adults are being cared for in community rather than congregate care settings. The current study will involve 35 interviews with senior housing residents, 10 of which have been completed and are the basis for this paper. The goals of the study are to determine whether computer use is associated with larger social networks and less social isolation.

1. Introduction

The aging population is growing at a rapid pace, and with it, grows concerns of how to increase the quality of the later half of their lives. There is a current push to “age in place,” rather than institutionalize, and subsidized senior housing is an option available for older adults to help maintain their independence. Senior housing is different from nursing home or assisted living communities because less care is provided to residents. Subsidized senior housing is “means tested” and available to only low-income residents.

The current study assesses the degree of social isolation residents of subsidized senior housing experience. Social isolation poses concerns for older adults and has been found to be associated with increased morbidity and mortality. [1]. The current study will explore whether social isolation is a risk factor for residents of subsidized senior housing.

If social isolation is a potential risk factor, computers have been researched as a possible protective factor to reduce isolation. One qualitative study provided an intervention for 43 residents of assisted living communities in using computers [2]. By learning about how to socialize using a computer, residents reported they were able to connect with others from their past and often overcome spatial boundaries, which limited their contact with previous friends, family members, and religious organizations. Using the computer to communicate also helped residents feel more connected with the “outside world,” making them feel less socially isolated. This study will explore whether computer use was associated with less social isolation among residents of subsidized senior housing.

2. Methods

Ten residents were randomly selected at a subsidized senior housing location in the mid-west. The facility requires that a person must be 62 years or older and qualify for housing assistance based on financial need. Average age of participants was 74.2 years-of-age. Participants were personally invited to participate in the study by the researcher and service coordinator at the location. Participants were interviewed at a location of their choice and interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The proper ethical guidelines and IRB approval were followed.

Antonucci’s Hierarchal Mapping Technique

The Antonucci’s Hierarchal Mapping Technique was used to assess the residents’ social networks [3]. This technique has been used successfully with older adults. With the convoy method, participants were asked to name and place people who are important to them into one of three circles (see figure 1).
Lubben’s Social Network Scale (LSNS)

LSNS measures social isolation and is made up of ten items each of which has a 5-point Likert scale-type response option [4]. Three items refer to family networks, three to friend networks and four to confidant relationships, with a participant’s total score adding up to a score between 0 and 50. One sample question is “How many relatives do you see or hear from at least once a month?” The LSNS has demonstrated adequate internal consistency for research purposes (Cronbach alpha = .70).

Current Use of Computers

In order to assess computer use, participants were asked whether or not they currently use a computer. Those who do not use a computer were also asked whether or not they would be interested in using the computer in the future.

3. Results

Of the ten residents who were interviewed, twenty percent were isolated, 20 percent were at high risk of social isolation, 30 percent were at moderate risk of social isolation, and 30 percent were at low risk of social isolation. Sixty percent of participants reported they used a computer while 40 percent reported they did not. Of those who reported no computer use, 66.7 percent reported they would be interested in using a computer in the future. An independent samples test was performed comparing the social isolation scores of computer users and non-users. There was no significant difference in social isolation of computer users (M=22.33, SD= 6.47) and non-users (M=28.25, SD= 7.93), t(8)=-1.30, p=.23. Higher scores meant more isolation.

Other aspects of the structure of social convoys and their association with isolation were explored. A significantly negative correlation was found between the size of a participant’s social network and social isolation (r=-.83, p=.003), indicating residents with a larger social network are less isolated. These findings may be an indication of this population’s independence. A significantly negative correlation was also found between the number of residents in a participant’s social convoy and their level of social isolation (r=-.73, p=.012), indicating residents with more residents in their social network are less isolated. Residents of subsidized senior housing are independent older adults, which may be contributing to their interactions with a more diverse social network.

The current study explored if social isolation was a risk factor to residents of subsidized senior housing, and whether or not computer use was associated with less social isolation. Forty percent of participants were isolated or at high risk for isolation, indicating that social isolation is a risk factor. Computer users were less isolated than non-users. When this study is completed this difference will likely be statistically significant because of the increased sample size.

4. Acknowledgements

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5. References

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