

# All by ourselves: Growing numbers of Canadians are aging without a partner or children nearby

*Learning to cope with the health threats exacerbated by loneliness is urgent*

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Susan

Southcott in her Ottawa home, for a story about people who are aging without a spouse or children nearby. There are a growing number of people in this situation, and researchers say individuals and society have to pay attention as more people grow old alone. Monday, Feb. 13, 2023. PHOTO BY ERROL MCGIHON /POSTMEDIA

## Article content

Sometimes you don't know what you're getting into until you're already there, says Susan Southcott.

She grew up in Ottawa, lived in Montreal and France, got an MBA and travelled extensively before moving to Los Angeles in 1984 with her first husband, a marriage that ended in divorce.

Her second marriage ended 30 years ago with the death of her husband, leaving her with a four-year-old son.

To be a widow so young was unexpected, but not a shock, she said. “He wasn’t the healthiest guy. I never thought he would get old. He was someone who never expected to get old.”

Her friends rallied around her and she continued to work as a food stylist, a career that last 34 years.

Then her mother died, 10 years ago, and her father started to show signs of dementia shortly thereafter. Southcott was often on flights back and forth from California to Ottawa to check in on him, until she decided it was best to move back to Ottawa full-time to be with him. But just as those plans were in motion in 2018, her father died.

Southcott, now 69, decided she was going to make the move, nonetheless. Her son opted to stay in California.

“There was no undoing the plan,” she said. “What didn’t go to my son and didn’t fit into the car was left on the street.”

And just like that, she was in Ottawa, alone.

Growing numbers of Canadians are “kinless,” an older adult with neither a spouse nor living children. Others, like Southcott, are not technically kinless, but have kids who live far away.

Sometimes called “solo agers” — and less charitably, “elder orphans” — it is one by-product of shrinking families, and a pressing policy concern.

Meanwhile, a pilot project will soon be underway in Ottawa to help the growing number of locals who could soon be part of this difficult trend.

Canada is among the nations with the highest prevalence of kinlessness in the world, alongside Ireland, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Geriatrician Dr. Samir Sinha, director of health policy research at the National Institute on Ageing, has growing numbers of patients who are kinless. This is particularly common in some segments of the population, such as people who are LGBTQ+, who are less likely to have a partner and may be estranged from their families. There are also people who are not technically kinless, but are still isolated.

“Family structures are changing,” said Sinha, the director of geriatrics at Mount Sinai Hospital and University Health Network in Toronto. “I have increasing numbers of patients who have never married or had children. Or if they did marry, they outlived their spouse.”

In 2007, about 7.2 per cent of people 45 and older in Canada did not have a partner or a child, said Rachel Margolis, a demographer at Western University. By 2011, that had increased to approximately 10 per cent.

Margolis and American researcher Ashton Verdery projected the numbers of older adults without living kin in the United States to 2060 using demographic microsimulation. By that time, those without living children in the U.S. will number 21.1 million people, they concluded.

At the same time, loneliness is a growing population health threat. Since the majority of care for older adults comes from family, kinlessness is a “potentially critical demographic” trend for society, the institutions that provide services for older adults, as well as for those who find themselves kinless, they warned.

People have to think about the possibility that they may become kinless over time — and what they will do about it, said Sinha.

“We have to help people build social networks that are meaningful to them, places where people can gather to build new networks,” he said.

“I have patients who say: ‘I have a will.’ I tell them: ‘I don’t care what happens after you cross the rainbow bridge. I want to know what you are planning for the last hundred yards.’ ”

Friends, acquaintances and neighbours can serve as “elastic ties” for older adults without family. Research shows that there is some “substitution” happening in social relations among those who are kinless, said Margolis.

But that alone may not fully make up for a lack of family ties. Substituting friends or community involvement for family works well into middle age, but declines as people age, ties with work colleagues unravel, same-age friends die and health problems make involvement more difficult.

Childless and unpartnered older adults are the most likely to report being lonely. Middle-aged and older people without children or a partner are less likely to be involved in the community, particularly men. Being widowed increases the risk of dying, possibly because of a lack of companionship and healthy habits such as shared meals, said Margolis.

“Your social health is just as important as your physical health.”

The social dynamics of kinless people also work differently from those with partners and children. Kinless adults communicate with relatives less frequently than those with either a partner or children or both, and instead interact with friends more often. This is especially true of university-educated kinless people. It suggests to researchers that kinless people are not “substituting” in siblings, cousins and other relatives for the decreased social relations that can come without having children.

“It takes more effort for kinless people to set up and maintain a social life,” said Margolis.