

Older Americans are more socially engaged than many people may think

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A new University of Chicago study shows that older people remain vital and active members of society as they age, despite a popular notion that they are more likely to be socially isolated.

A research team found that although older individuals have fewer intimate relationships, they may respond to social loss by becoming more likely to volunteer, attend religious services and spend time with their neighbors than those in their 50s.

“A person’s social network will inevitably shrink a little as they retire, as they begin to experience bereavements, and so on. That is where the stereotype comes from,” said University researcher Benjamin Cornwell.

“But that stereotypical image of the ‘isolated elderly’ really falls apart when we broaden our conception of what social connectedness is. In our study, we looked at other forms of social involvement as well and found that older adults are more socially engaged in the community than we thought,” he said. The study, the first systematic, nationally representative look at both social networks and community involvement among older Americans, revealed these details of social involvement:

-- About three-quarters of older adults between the ages of 57 and 85 socialize with their neighbors, attend religious services, volunteer or attend meetings of other organized groups on at least a weekly basis. Those in their 80s were twice as likely as those in their 50s to engage in one of these activities.

-- Whereas about 50 percent of people in their 70s and 80s socialize with neighbors on at least a weekly basis, about 40 percent of people in their 50s and 60s do. In fact, people in their early 80s are more than twice as likely to socialize with their neighbors than people in their late 50s.

-- About 50 percent of those in their 70s and 80s attend religious services on at least a weekly basis, compared to 40 percent of people in their 50s and 60s. People in their 70s are twice as likely to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis as people in their late 50s, and those in their 80s are nearly 50 percent more likely to do so.

-- About 22 percent of people in their 70s and 80s volunteer on a weekly basis, compared to about 17 percent of those in their older 50s. People in their 70s and 80s are about 36 percent more likely to volunteer on at least a weekly basis than people in their 50s.

Cornwell, Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center on Demography and Economics of Aging at the University of Chicago, is the lead author of the paper, “The Social Connectedness of Older Adults: A National Profile,” published in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*. Other authors are Edward O. Laumann, the George Herbert Mead Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, and L. Philip Schumm, Senior Biostatistician in the Department of Health Studies at the University of Chicago.

The study was based on in-home interviews with 3,005 people, ages 57 to 85, between July 2005 and March 2006, as part of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project supported by the National Institutes of Health. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago conducted the survey.

Laumann said the research provides a new way of looking at how people

relate to society as they age. Additional time spent on social activities isn't necessarily a response to older Americans having more time, he said, or the result of a different perspective among older Americans as compared with baby boomers, many of whom are in their late 50s.

“In this light, we may better understand the greater involvement of the oldest adults in civic activities not as an outcome of generational differences in commitment to community or civic spirit, but as an effort to regain control over their social environments,” he said.

Cornwell said, “The new image of the older American is this: Far from being helpless isolates, they are actually extraordinary adaptive creatures. Not only are older adults exceptionally adaptive to social loss, but we speculate that they may also be more proactive than younger adults in establishing ties to the community. In short, they appear to be more socially engaged.”

Source: University of Chicago

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