

Social exclusion among shift workers and older people

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Older people and those who work non-standard hours are less likely to feel integrated into society, according to a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

"Feeling part of society usually involves participating in certain activities such as sports, the arts, volunteering or [social networking](#)," says Dr Matt Barnes who led the research. "Our research shows that [older people](#) and those who work unusual hours face particular barriers to participating in such activities."

The study points out that the Government promotes work as the best route to personal well-being, with worklessness going hand in hand with low income and [social exclusion](#). Yet, Dr Barnes' research shows that working uncommon hours can also have implications for people's opportunities to engage and feel integrated in society.

Two-thirds of workers work at unusual times. Although shops and other facilities are beginning to adapt, such workers still find their [leisure time](#) constrained by the limited availability of services, as well as other people with whom to spend their free time.

Compared with people who work a standard week (Monday to Friday, between 8am and 7pm), these workers spend less time on face-to-face social and relational activities, particularly if they work in the evening or at the weekend. On average, evening workers spend six hours 43 minutes on participatory activities per week and Sunday workers just over five

hours, compared with over eight hours for those who work normal hours.

"By getting people to keep a diary and analysing the way they spend their time over a 24 hour period," says Dr Barnes, "we have been able to understand how they 'participate' and what might be done to create greater social inclusion."

The study also found that older people face barriers to participatory activities. Over one million older people experience poor social relations and social exclusion.

Spending time with friends is an important way of building social networks and support. They can be crucial for older people dealing with life-changing events such as retirement, bereavement or illness – each of which can pose an increased risk of social isolation. Spending time with people outside the household can also provide the elderly with a sense of independence.

The study found that older people who live alone spend a lot of time with friends and acquaintances, but on average, they can also spend eleven hours alone on a week day and ten and a half hours alone at weekends (excluding sleep).

Over a third of the time that older people spend with their friends is devoted to participatory activities - most often social networking such as visiting or receiving visitors, celebrating birthdays and catching up over the phone. Religious activity and doing acts of kindness involving friends are also important participatory activities.

The research also showed that women are more likely than men to spend time with friends on social networking activities. Their ability to participate, however, is limited by housework, caring for others and personal care.

"It is clear that social participation is important for an improved quality of life, both in older age and among those still working," says Dr Barnes. "Improving the accessibility of public transport and other facilities and services would go a long way towards increasing social inclusion in Britain."

These results suggest that local government and charities need to recognise that social participation is important to improve people's quality of life. "Local governments can encourage public leisure complexes and public transport services to operate wider hours or 24/7. Charities could be more aware of these groups when arranging social clubs targeting shift workers and elderly people", Dr Barnes concludes.

More information: The study 'Making time use explicit in an investigation of social exclusion in the UK' was carried out by Dr Matt Barnes, Lizzie Becker, John d'Souza and Andreas Cebulla of the National Centre for Social Research.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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