

Virtual contact in pandemic prompts misery in people over 60

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People over the age of 60 living in the UK and the US who had more virtual contact during the pandemic actually experienced a greater increase in loneliness, new research finds.

The study showed a notable increase in loneliness in the US and a decline in general mental well-being in the UK following the outbreak of COVID-19.

The research also found that virtual interaction—such as phone calls, texting, online audio and video chat, and [social media](#)—which largely replaced, where possible, in-person contact during the pandemic was not helpful on its own as an alternative for face-to-face interaction, and virtual interaction was associated with greater loneliness.

In both countries, [older adults](#) who admitted to having more frequent in-person interaction with families and friends between households during the pandemic had better general mental well-being, but virtual interactions, through telephone and [digital media](#), were not associated with general mental well-being in either the UK or the US.

The research, "COVID-19, Inter-household Contact and Mental Well-being among Older Adults in the US and the UK," is published in *Frontiers in Sociology* today.

The study was undertaken by Sociologists Dr. Yang Hu, of Lancaster University, and Dr. Yue Qian, at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

They analyzed national data from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council-funded Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey and the U.S. Health and Retirement Survey.

The data was collected from 5148 older people aged 60 or over in the UK and 1391 in the US who were surveyed both before (2018–2019) and during (June 2020) the pandemic.

This study is among the first to comparatively assess the association

between social interactions across households and mental well-being in the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our findings show that despite rapid digitisation in the UK and elsewhere, virtual means of social interaction cannot replace in-person contact in supporting older people's mental [health](#)," explains Dr. Hu.

"This has to do with a complex set of factors, such as digital access, device affordance, tech know-how, and potential digital stress among the aging population."

The pandemic severely curtailed face-to-face contact between households, particularly for older adults (aged 60 and above), due to their high risk of falling severely ill if infected by COVID-19.

This research examines how different forms of interactions between family and friends living in different households related to older adults' mental well-being during the pandemic.

The research showed:

- Face-to-face contact between family and friends living in different households was important for the over 60s' mental well-being in both the UK and the US.
- Although virtual communication has increased considerably during the pandemic, it was not a 'qualitatively equivalent alternative' for in-person contact.
- Virtual contact, when used on top of face-to-face contact, helped bolster mental well-being.
- Patterns were very similar in both the UK and the US, despite the different contexts and pandemic responses.

These findings provide an important evidence base for informing policy

developments and for supporting the mental health of older people during the pandemic.

The study suggests that public health policymakers and practitioners should address the looming mental health crisis cascading from the pandemic into the aging population.

The findings also outline the limitations of a digital-only future and the promise of a digitally-enhanced future in response to population aging in the longer term.

"Policymakers and practitioners need to take measures to pre-empt and mitigate the potential unintended implications of household-centered pandemic responses for mental well-being," said Dr. Qian.

"Beyond the context of the [pandemic](#), the findings also indicate the need to enable strong inter-household ties to bolster public mental health in the long run."

More information: COVID-19, Inter-household Contact and Mental Well-Being Among Older Adults in the US and the UK. *Frontiers in Sociology*. doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.714626

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