

# Agewell Research & Advocacy Centre

## AGEWELL STUDY ON ISOLATION IN OLD AGE (January 2010)



**NATIONAL**

**Agewell Foundation**

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## ISOLATION IN OLD AGE - A national study

### INTRODUCTION

The experience of isolation or loneliness occurs in all human beings but it becomes a complex problem in Old Age. It is known that isolation is not a necessary accompaniment to ageing and that ageing is not solely responsible for the progress of isolation in older persons. However, there is a deep relationship between ageing and isolation.

Isolation is associated with a number of physical, social and psychological conditions. Generally it is believed that older persons living alone or with their spouses feel isolated. But today older persons living in nuclear or joint families also feel loneliness or isolation due to various reasons, particularly due to lack of social integration, less or no interaction amongst family members, etc.

With fast changing socio-economic scenario living conditions of the people all across the country have changed dramatically. Older persons find it very hard to cope with new socio-economic settings. Feeling of isolation and alienation with a sense of social marginalization is becoming a major problem for majority of the older persons. Thus, ever deepening sense of isolation/loneliness is diffusing the sheen of gracefulness of Old Age.

**Research & Advocacy Centre** at Agewell Foundation (*a consortium of over 1500 NGOs and 6500 volunteers spread across 540 districts of India, committed to initiate better interaction between generations and extend a helping hand*) has recently carried out a nationwide survey to study and identify / understand the problem of isolation in Old Age.

Agewell volunteers' network spread across the country worked as interviewers for the survey. The interviews were conducted during the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> week of January, 2010

## OBJECTIVE

The study was carried out with the objective to identify the level of isolation and loneliness in Old Age, while going through the conditions older persons across the country are forced to live in.

The study was also designed to look out for the responsible causes of isolation in old age and its consequences on the health of the elderly in particular and society in general.

## METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE DESIGN

Comprehensive interviews were undertaken by managing time-bound schedules to collect information /impression/views from selected older persons from across the country

Under the survey a representative sample of 10000 older persons (approx. 5000 each from rural and urban areas) was interviewed spread across 20 states of the country.

### Sample Respondents

The populace of 60+ years was randomly selected as per the 4 groups as given under;

	Old Men	Old women	Total
Category I : Rural	2500	2500	5000
Category II : Urban	2500	2500	5000
Total	5000	5000	10000

In each group the target was to include every sections of the society, specifically –

- Retired older persons
- Non-pensioners/labourer farmers
- Housewives
- Literate
- Illiterate
- Financially secure
- BPL family

## Sample Units

The sample units were selected based on random sampling but taken care to incorporate the representative views of the country from five divisions as per following;

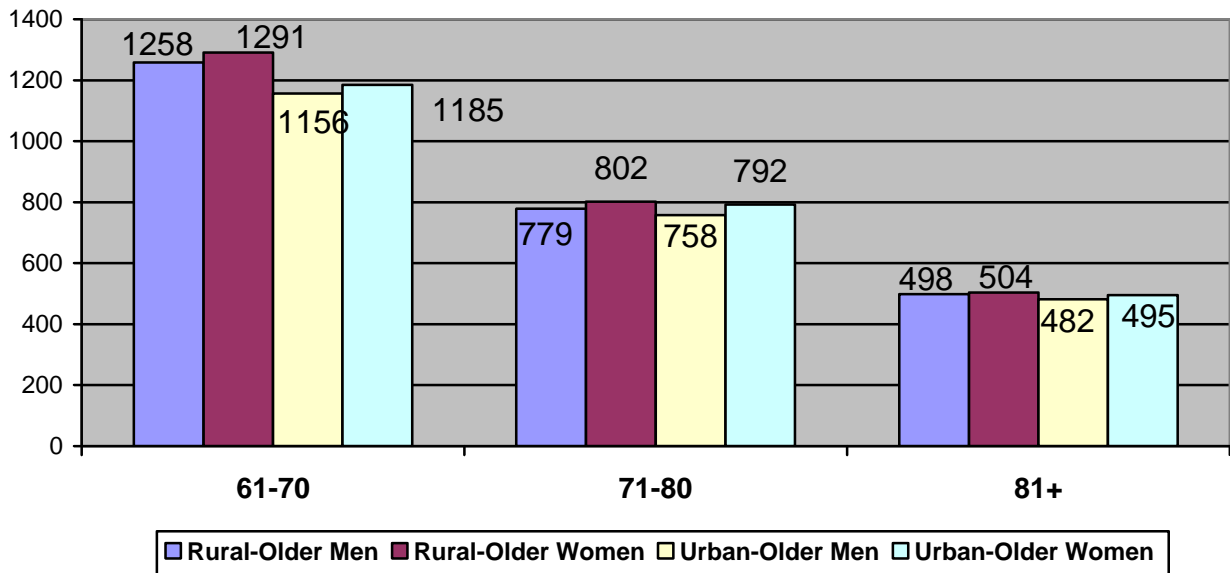
<b>S. No</b>	<b>Type of sample</b>			
	State	No of sample districts	No of sample blocks*	No of respondents
	<b>Region 1 – North India</b>			
<b>1</b>	Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi	20 (Approx.)	50	<b>2145</b>
	<b>Region 2 – South India</b>			<b>0</b>
<b>2</b>	Andhra Pradesh Tamilnadu Kerala, Karnataka	20 (Approx.)	50	<b>1979</b>
	<b>Region 3 – East India</b>			<b>0</b>
<b>3</b>	West Bengal, Orissa, Assam	20 (Approx.)	50	<b>1971</b>
	<b>Region 4 – West India</b>			<b>0</b>
<b>4</b>	Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat	20 (Approx.)	50	<b>1960</b>
	<b>Region 5 – Central India</b>			<b>0</b>
<b>5</b>	Madhya Pradesh, Bihar Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh	20 (Approx.)	50	<b>1945</b>
	<b>All India Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>10000</b>

\* 2-3 blocks were selected from each district for the study randomly, one from a block headquarters and the others from rural area.

## Age-group wise classification of respondents

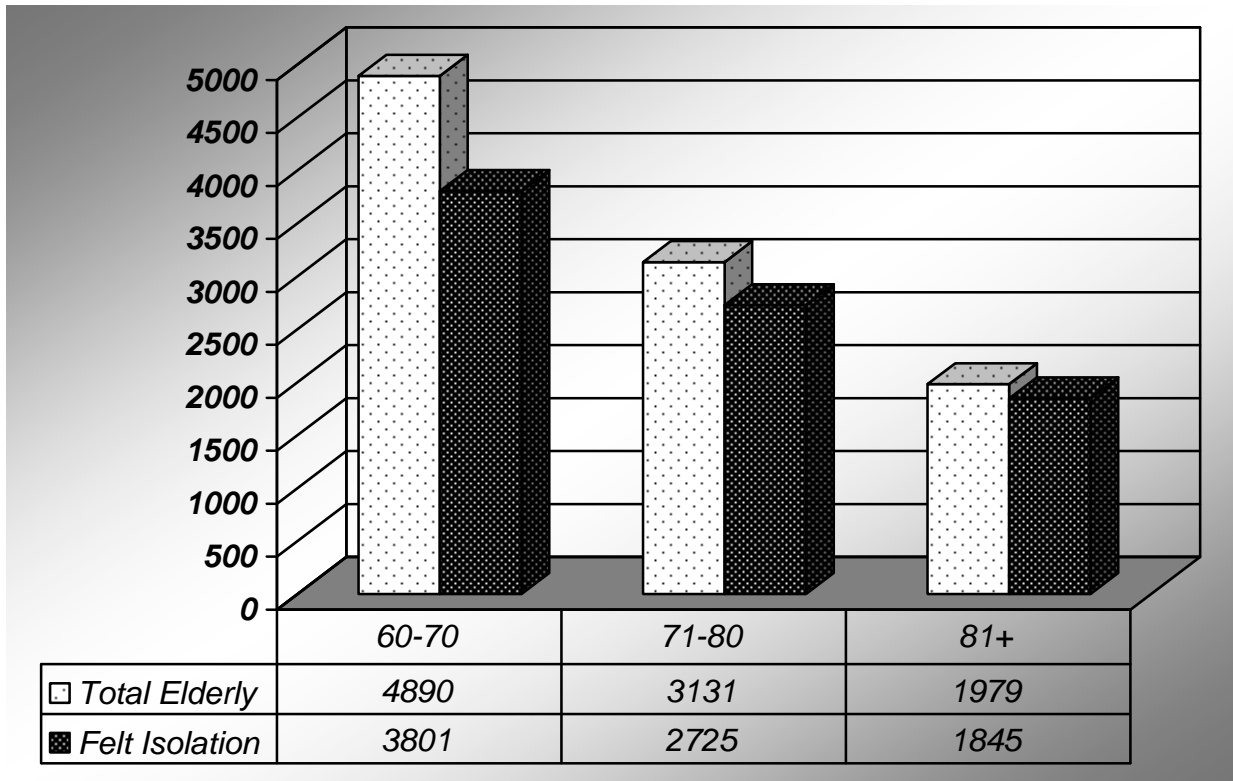
Respondents were further categorized in age group to understand the problem of isolation in old age better

Categories	61-70 Years	71-80 Years	81+ Years	Total
Rural-Older Men	1258	779	498	2535
Rural-Older Women	1291	802	504	2597
Urban-Older Men	1156	758	482	2396
Urban-Older Women	1185	792	495	2472
	<b>4890</b>	<b>3131</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>10000</b>



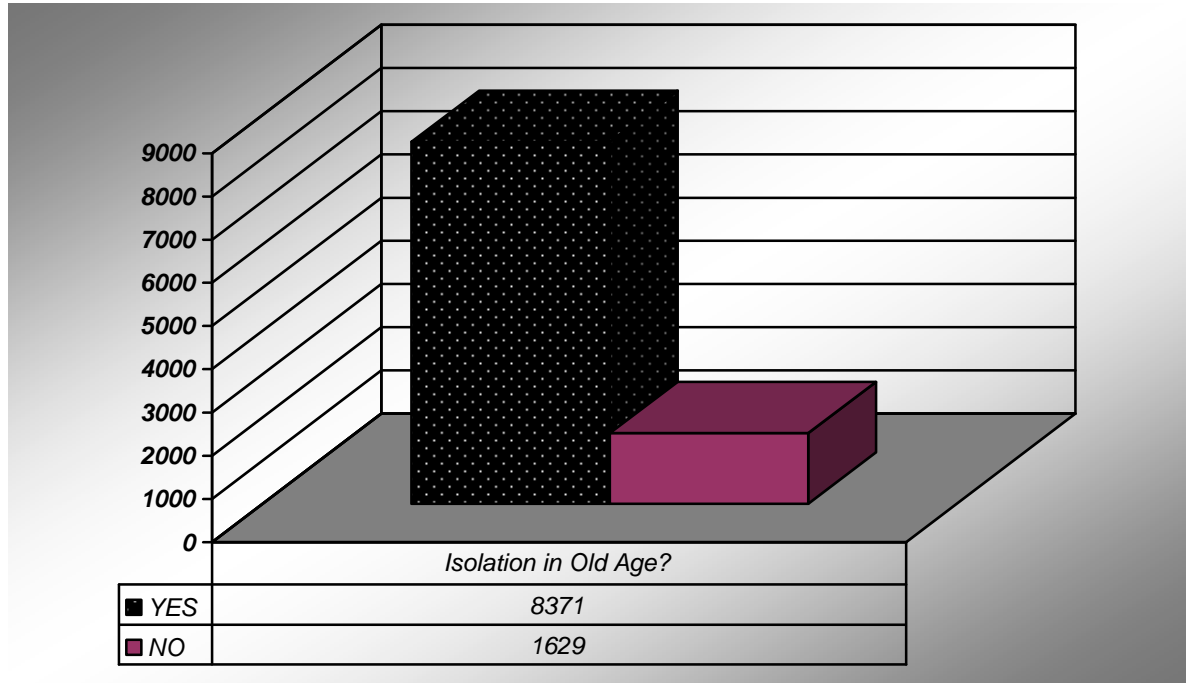
- ❖ Process of marginalization of older persons, thus creating isolation in old age has caught its speed over the past few decades.
- ❖ It was found that older persons in the age group of 80+ elderly are feeling more isolation or loneliness in comparison to older persons in lower old age groups. Over 93% elderly in this age group were found in complete isolation.
- ❖ In the age group of 60-70 years 77.7% older persons also reported that they are going through a phase of isolation. They said that even after their active

life they are being isolated in many ways. In age group of 70-80 years 87% older persons were found complaining of isolation and loneliness in old age.

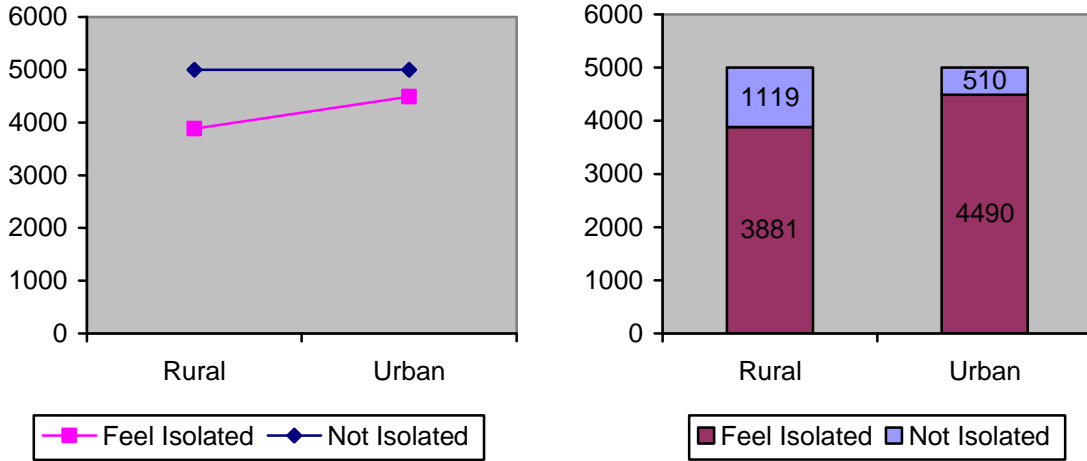


## MAJOR FINDINGS

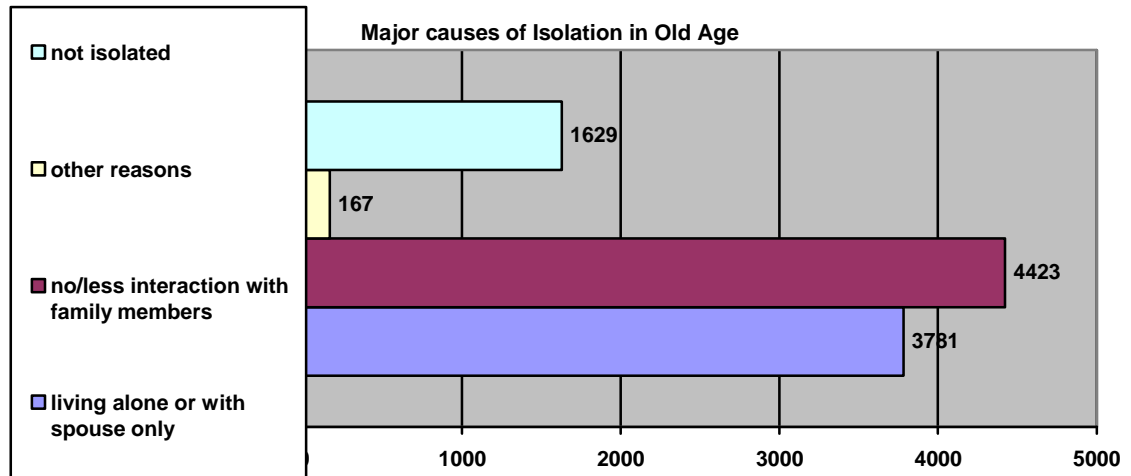
- ❖ 83.71% older persons were found isolated in old age (60+). 8371 older persons out of total 10000 older persons contacted by Agewell volunteers said that they feel isolated or experience loneliness in their present life.



- ❖ Level of isolation in old age of older persons living in urban areas was quite higher upto 89.8% in comparison to older persons of rural areas, where 77.62 % people reportedly feel isolated.
- ❖ 4490 older persons contacted in urban areas were feeling isolated wherein rural areas only 3891 older persons were found living with a sense of isolation.
- ❖ In rural areas 1119 older persons said that they are not feeling any kind of isolation or loneliness whereas in cities only 510 older persons said they were not isolated.



- ❖ Majority of older persons (44.23%) said that no/less interaction with family members or within society is major cause of their state of isolation or loneliness.
- ❖ 37.81 % elderly feel isolated because they were living alone or with their spouse only.





## Types of Isolation

### 1. Social isolation

It is the persistent withdrawal or absence or avoidance of social interaction. People feel isolated when others ignore their presence or do not give them due importance.

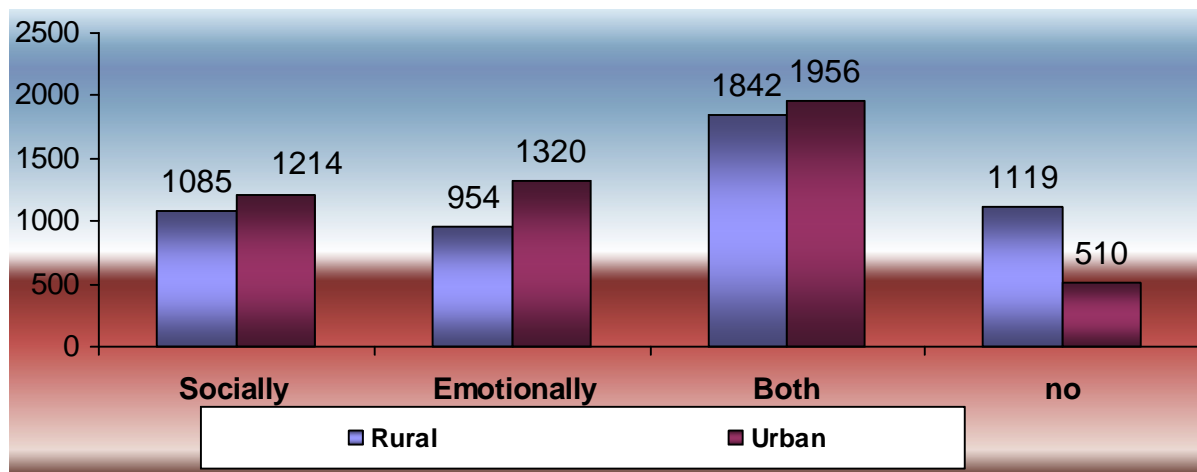
### 2. Emotional isolation

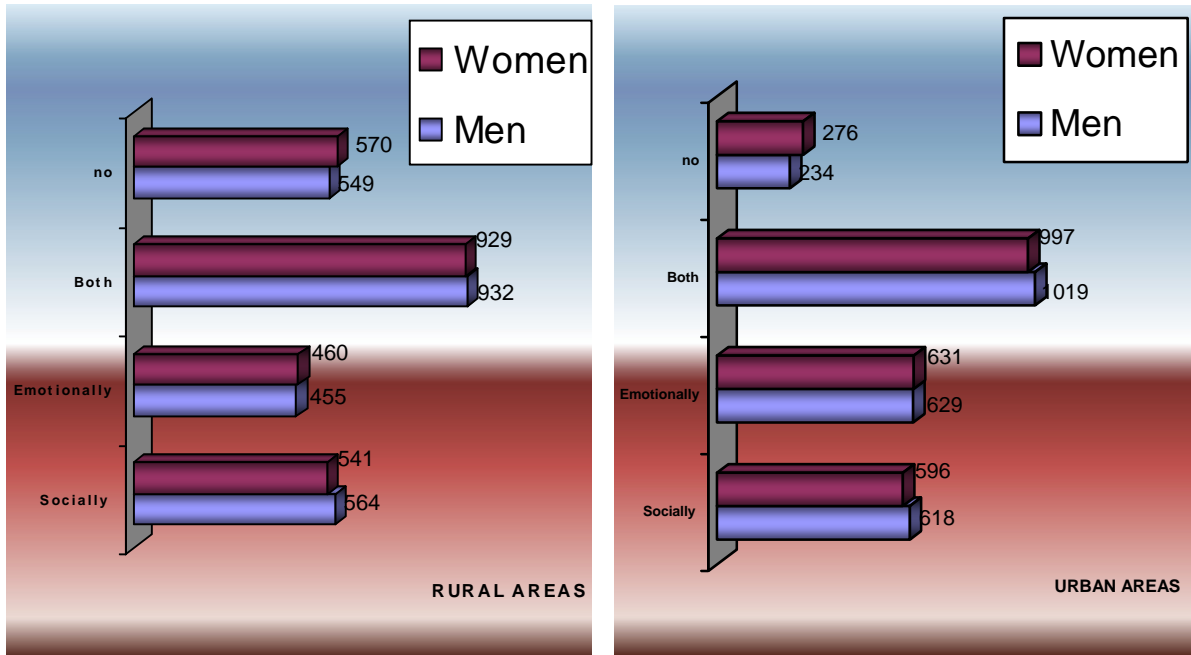
It is a condition of isolation when the people are emotionally isolated, but may have a supportive social network

For the study we have divided elderly in two categories;

- **Socially isolated elderly:** Mainly due to their physical and social conditions
- **Emotionally isolated elderly:** Due to their strained interpersonal relationships of circumstances.

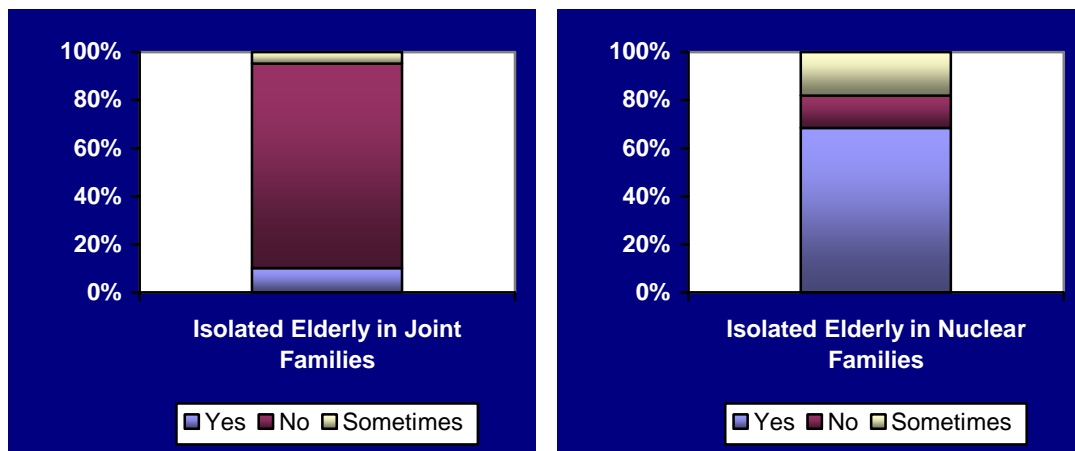
- ❖ In rural areas 36.84 % older persons were reported isolated socially as well as emotionally.
- ❖ In rural areas 21.7% older persons were found socially isolated and 19.08% older persons were emotionally isolated.
- ❖ In urban areas 39.1% older persons were reported isolated socially as well as emotionally. Here older persons were much affected by emotional isolation (26.4%) than social isolation (24.28%).



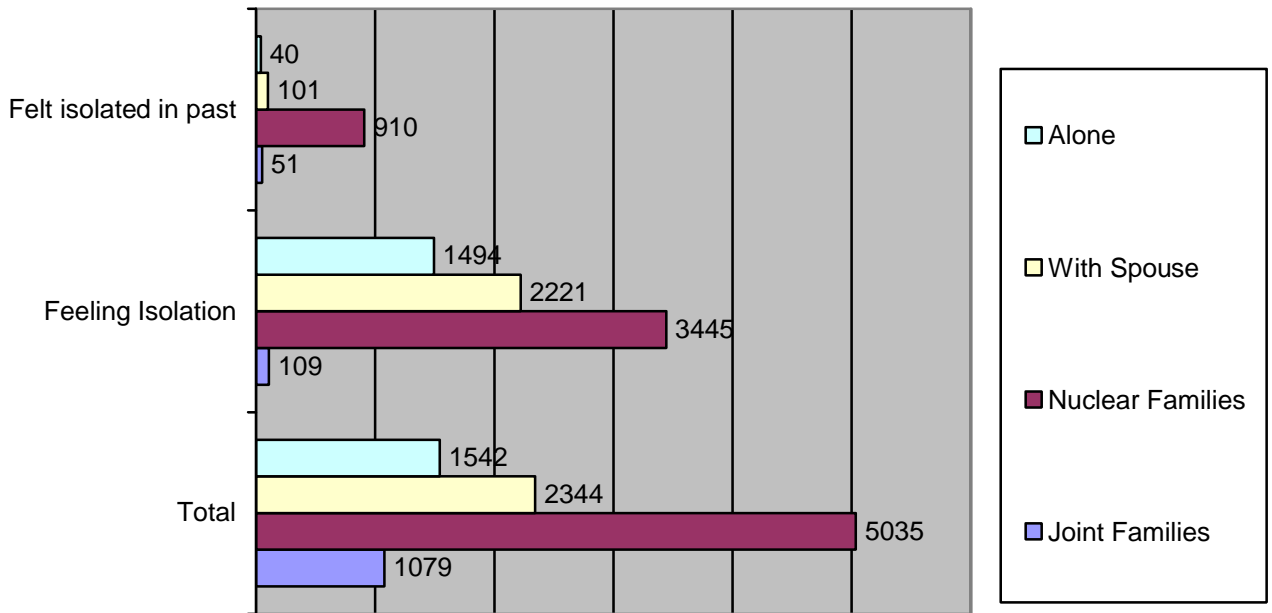


**Level of Isolation as per family structure**

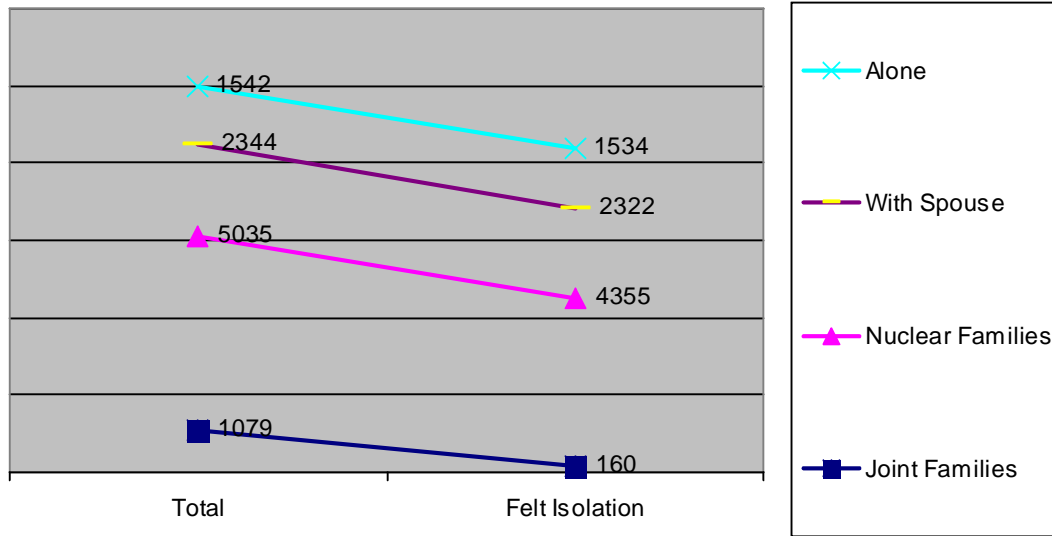
- ❖ When asked about their views on isolation in their life, just 10.1% older persons living in joint families accepted that they consider themselves isolated, within their joint families.
- ❖ In nuclear families about 68.4% older persons said that they are living in isolation, because they do not get adequate company of their family members.



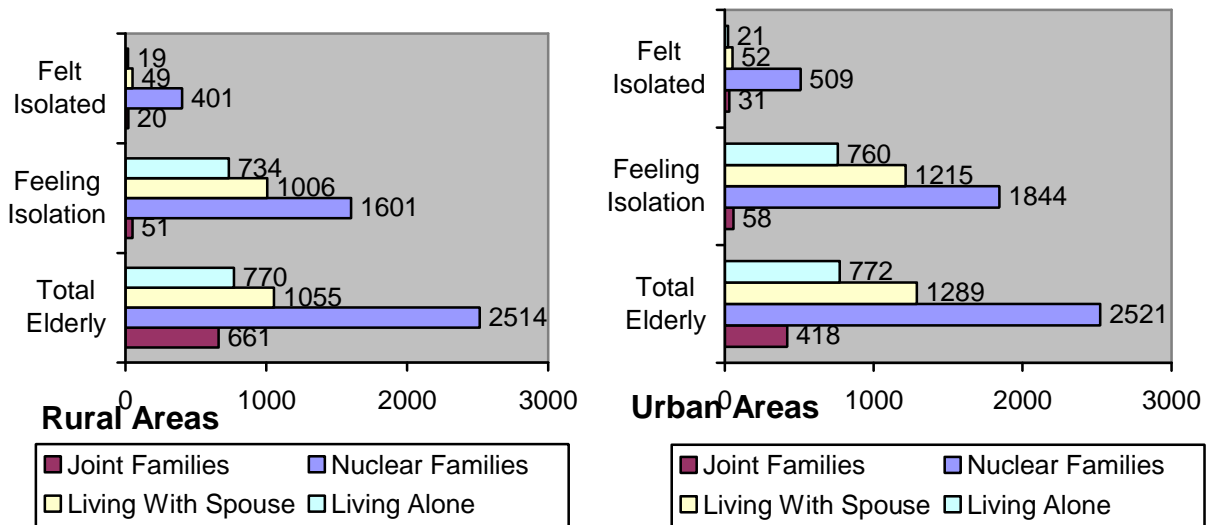
- ❖ Elderly living alone or with their spouses are most affected by isolation syndrome. Approx. 95% elderly living with their spouses & 97% elderly living consider themselves isolated.
- ❖ Out of 1542 elderly living alone 1494 elderly persons said that they are facing problem of isolation.
- ❖ Obviously, level of isolation in old age was found quite higher in cases of elderly living alone or with their respective spouses only.



- ❖ Situation was good in joint families, but even after warmth of traditional joint families, elderly were found affected by isolation within family.

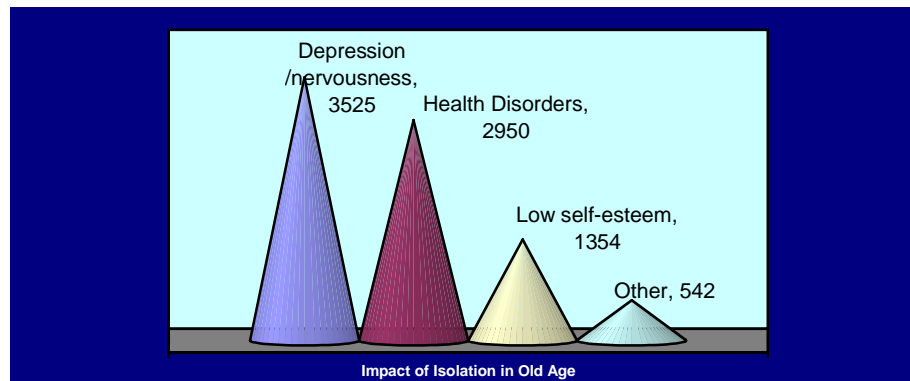


❖ When data obtained from rural & urban areas was analysed separately, it was also found that not as many elderly consider themselves isolated as their counterparts living in urban areas.



## Impact of Isolation & Loneliness in Old Age

- ❖ Majority of older persons reportedly complaining about isolation & loneliness in old age (42%) said that they are facing depression due to isolation & loneliness.
- ❖ Every third older person facing loneliness was found in bad health condition because of loneliness and less interaction with people. 35.24% older persons said that their health have deteriorated further since they fell alone.
- ❖ Due to isolation in old age, 16.1% older persons were found feeling unsecured in their lives.



### A. Isolation

Due to isolation in their life, elderly were found affected with the following problems

- Nervousness & anxiety
  - Panic & aggressive nature
  - Eating disorders leading to health disorders
  - Addictions & substance abuse
  - Feeling of insecurity
  - Financial imbalance
- 21.3 % older persons reportedly accepted that they feel nervousness and anxiety when they feel isolated. At the same time 17.69% older persons said that their nature has turned aggressive and they live in panic.

- Another 15% older persons have developed eating disorders due to their isolation.
- 16.1% elderly got their financial matters disturbed due to isolation related problems.

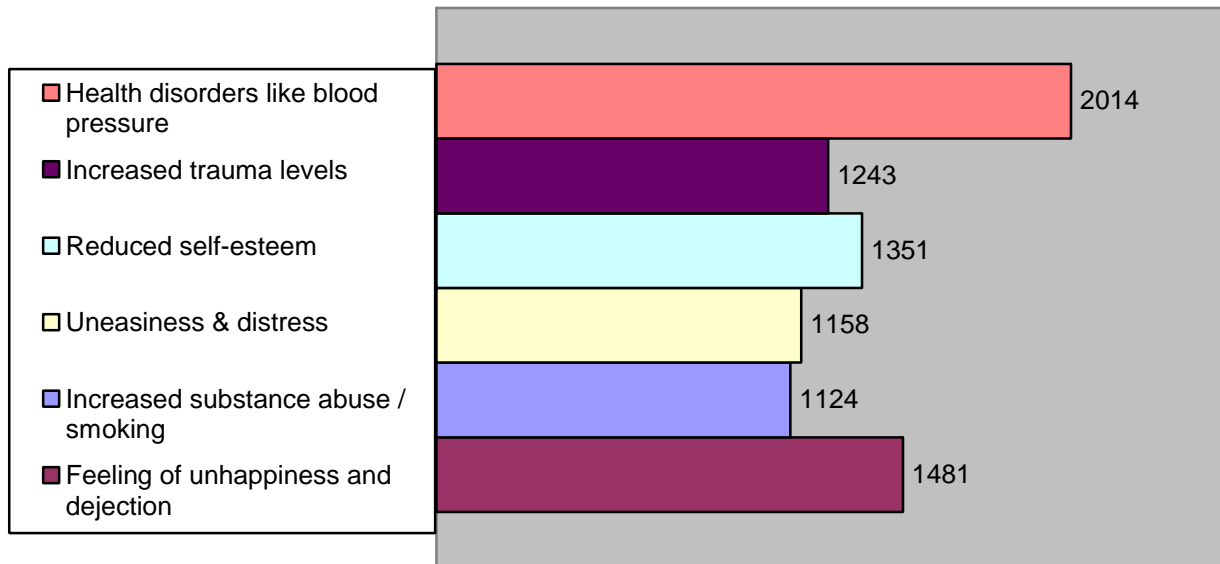


## **B. Loneliness**

Due to loneliness in their life, older persons were found suffering from the following;

- Feeling of unhappiness and dejection
  - Increased substance abuse / smoking
  - Uneasiness & distress
  - Reduced self-esteem
  - Increased trauma levels
  - Health disorders like blood pressure
- When older persons were asked about impact of loneliness on their life, approximately one-fourth older persons facing loneliness (24.1%) said that they have developed health disorders, 17.69% older persons said that they feel unhappiness and dejection in loneliness.

- 16.14% older persons were found with low self-esteem due to loneliness in their life. In absence of social interaction their interpersonal skills were found at lowest level.

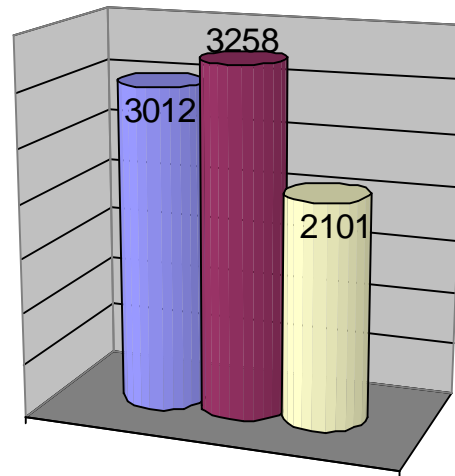


### Assessment of mental state of isolated elderly

When the survey team attempted to understand the state of mind of older persons facing isolation, some revealing and surprising facts emerged. It was found that older persons have started adjusting their lives accordingly.

- ❖ 35.98% of isolated elderly accepted that they are happy with their kind of life. Whereas 38.9% of isolated elderly said that they are somewhat happy with their life in old age. Only one-fourth (25.1%) isolated older persons was not found happy with their life.

### Old people found in the state of isolation



Isolated elderly

■ Happy ■ Somewhat happy ■ Not happy

- ❖ When volunteers tried to understand the happiness in isolation, it was that majority of isolated older persons (53.0%) were self-conscious. They were self-conscious towards the following,
  - a. Their physical appearance
    - i. Gray hair or baldness
    - ii. Wrinkles on the body, particularly on face
    - iii. Poor eyesight/ hearing ability
    - iv. Other old age related problems like weaker teeth, leaning back, etc.
  - b. Social appearance
    - i. No knowledge of modern technology like computers, mobile, internet, TV, etc.
    - ii. Being ignored at public places/functions, etc.
  - c. Financial appearance
    - i. Less / no income
    - ii. Less income generation ability
    - iii. No employment

During the survey it was noticed that older persons, living in isolation, wanted to interact with younger generations, but they resist themselves because they don't want to see themselves as ignored or unwanted, realizing younger generation's unpredictable attitude towards older persons.

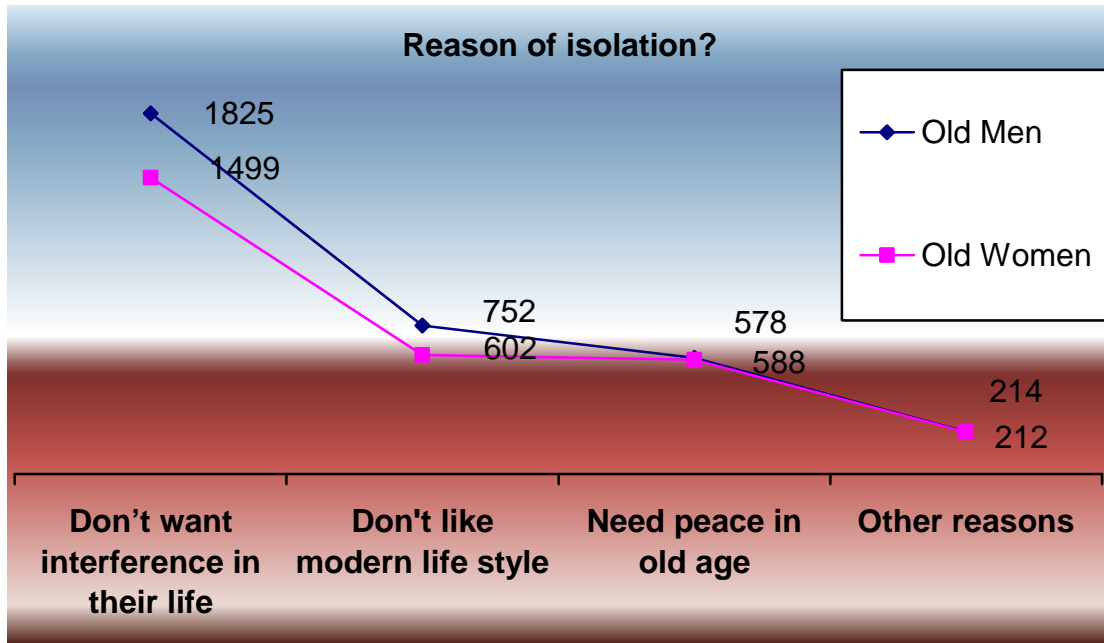


In other words, majority of older people live in their own world, which is full of their past sweet and sour memories of their success and failures, their romance or adventure in their lives.

- ❖ Approximately 1/5<sup>th</sup> (21.59%) isolated but happy older persons like living alone or isolated because they don't like modern life style. They had criticized west-oriented culture throughout their lives, that why they want to live within their own set parameters.
- ❖ 18.6% older persons accepted that they want to live with peace of mind, that's why they don't want to involve themselves into other's life and live alone happily.

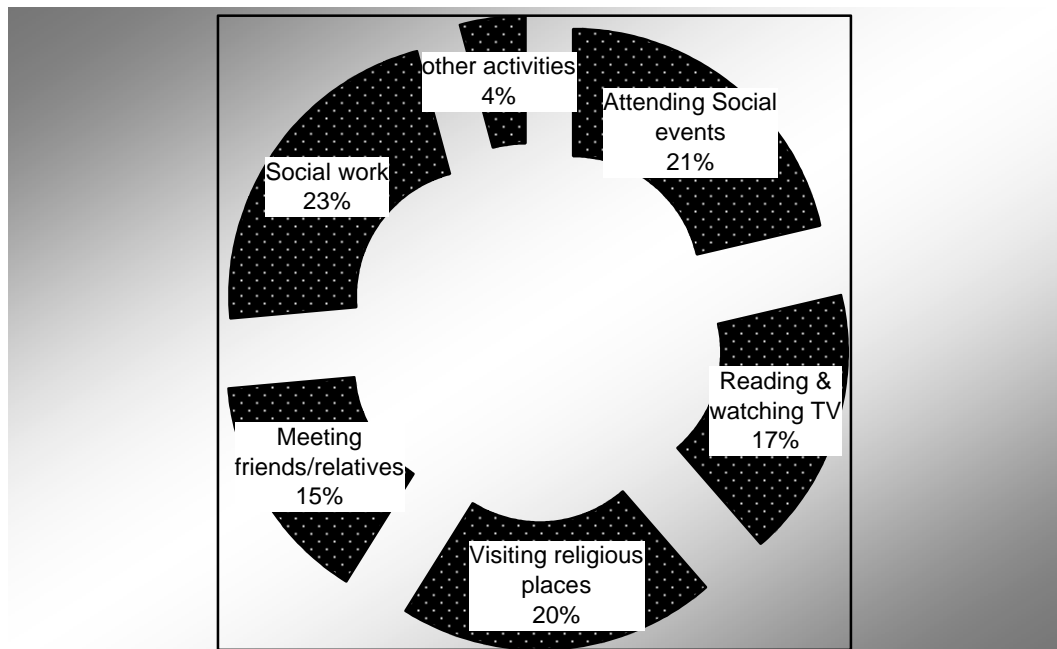


According to report older men are found more prone to isolation in old age in comparison to older women. Women were found less self-conscious towards their changed appearances, therefore they were found friendlier in whatever situations.



Paradoxically, it was found that isolated older persons keep themselves busy with various types of activities that in turn keeps them happy as well.

- ❖ 21.36% older persons attend or like to participate in social events happening around their residences. 20.12% said that they like to visit their friends/relatives to keep themselves busy. Interestingly 22.0% older persons keep or wanted to keep themselves busy with some kind of social work.



## **Observations**

- In spite of active participation of older persons in family's financial matters as well as social obligations and having originally possessed major part of the household/land property, they are ignored by younger family members.
- Social interaction is one of the major factors that determine level of isolation in old age. In rural areas people have more social interactions and less pain of isolation or loneliness.
- **Older persons in urban areas have limited access to social interactions, due to various reasons; consequently they face lower self-esteem and decline in interpersonal skills. They are also found to be more self-conscious.**
- Older persons living in joint families and even in nuclear families have limited or no interaction with their own family members. Interpersonal relations are not found healthy in many cases. This is yet another reason of their loneliness in old age.
- Isolation or loneliness in old age is critical, as it leads depression/nervousness causing many diseases. It does not only weaken their mental health but also affects physical health in old age.
- From the study it was also established that older persons in large number like isolation in old age due to various reasons. They want to live their kind of life in old age.
- Elderly women were found less isolated than elderly men due to their inner strengths, like patience, fine-tuning with family/society members, etc.

## Representative statements from older persons

*“At the age of 75, when I need family support, I am forced to live alone. My sons are settled in towns but they have no place for their parent.”*

- Ashok Kumar Bhadoria (75 years), Jhansi, UP

*“Neighbors and relatives often visit me, but I hardly could share my loneliness with them.”*

- Bimla Devi, a 80 year-old-widow, Gaya, Bihar

*“In a big family of 7 members, there is no one to whom I can share few moments. They are busy with their businesses and I am busy with my loneliness.”*

- Mohd. Hanif Khan, a 69-year-old person from Mumbai

*“After demise of my wife, my life is filled with sound of silence and color of darkness”*

- Abinash Biswas, 74-year-old person from Burdwan, West Bengal

*“I had worked hard for the welfare of my children, but now they have no time for me, instead they treat me as a burden on their family.”*

- Rukmani P Iyer, 85-year-old widow from Chennai

*“ I am quite happy with my isolation. I can live with my own state of affairs not on conditions set by others for me”*

- Pran Kapoor, 69-year-old person, New Delhi

## **Conclusion**

Ever-changing socio-economic scenario of the country has resulted in emergence & popularity of nuclear family system in both, rural and urban areas. Due to heavy migration of younger generation in search of better opportunities, older persons are compelled to live in their houses without their young family members. In absence of their children & grand-children, they felt themselves completely isolated and alone.

As majority of Older Persons had spent their active life in joint families, they find it very difficult to live alone or with their spouses alone. However, a trend of living in isolation, particularly in old age is emerging. This process was seen faster in metros.

So far as Isolation in Old Age is concerned, whereas in rural areas older persons are the major victims of governments developmental policies favoring urban areas, in urban areas elderly are affected due to lack of social & interpersonal interaction among family/ society members.

There is an urgent need to focus on speed up of the developmental projects in rural areas, so that younger generations could seek suitable job opportunities nearby their residences. At the same time, in urban areas, developing social & interpersonal interactions among older persons is urgently required.

On the other hand, older persons need to be motivated and encouraged about how to live happily in isolation.

In short, our older generations never left alone their children, when they were in crisis, how can younger generation leave their elderly alone, when they need them urgently?

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