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People ageing without children or family: out of sight, out of mind

There's a widespread assumption that family will support their relatives as they age. But what happens to those without children? Robin Hadley, one of the founders of Ageing of Children, explains the challenges, not least of which is a lack of data.

While precarity in ageing is increasingly recognised in academia, people ageing without children are not widely acknowledged as a group and end up being dismissed as a “non-category”. This means they are in danger of being invisible to academics, policymakers and other institutional stakeholders.

And yet, in the Western world, childlessness affects one in four men and one in five women. In the UK the numbers of people ageing without children aged over 65 years is projected to rise to above two million by 2030. These are not insignificant numbers.

Why does this matter so much? “If you are not counted, you don't count” has become a mainstream saying: few acknowledge that it was written by Horace Sheffield ⁽¹⁾ to encourage the African American electorate to vote. More recently, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) campaigners in America have highlighted the importance of completing the census because of the link to state funding of food, health and housing support ⁽²⁾. The LGBTQIA community has high rates of accommodation precarity, homelessness and poverty ⁽²⁾ and is also more likely to be childless – especially gay men⁽³⁾.

The popular management mantras, “If you can't measure it, you can't manage it” and “What gets measured gets managed” ⁽⁴⁾ lead to the question: who gets counted? And, when it comes to measuring groups, who decides who is included and who is excluded? Who is structurally excluded and/or made to feel invisible?

One such group currently being excluded are those ageing without children.

Mind the (care) gap...

Which brings us neatly onto the global trend of increasingly ageing populations, which has significant implications for both individuals and institutions alike, given the demand for care in later life ^(3, 5, 6). Moreover, there is a growing “care gap”, with demand outstripping supply – a gap set to widen further into the future. In the UK, this has led to increased reliance on informal support as formal care services funding has been cut, the entry criteria for statutory support raised and the provision of low-level support reduced. Moreover, this is

happening at a time when many voluntary organisations are seeing their funding reduced or ended, meaning that advocacy and home-based services have been withdrawn.

For the majority of older people, unpaid care is carried out by their adult children and/or spouses or partners: in fact, the social health and care system in the UK is almost completely reliant on family members to perform the bulk of adult informal care. As stated in the 2022 report by the House of Lords Committee on Adult Social Care ⁽⁷⁾ A “gloriously ordinary life”: spotlight on adult social care” it is often the adult childless who are viewed as available to care for their older parents and/or other family members.

... And the (data) gap

Data drives, or should drive, policy. But in the UK currently there is a significant gap in the population data upon which public bodies base current and future policy ⁽⁸⁾.

Let’s start with what we know. In 2020 The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published two reports on the increase in the age of mothers’ first birth⁽⁹⁾ and a predicted tripling in the number of older childless women by 2045 ⁽¹⁰⁾.

It is important to realise that these reports are based on the mother’s fertility data given at birth registration and thus does not account for those who are childless for other reasons. For example, people may be functionally childless ‘by-choice’, ‘by-circumstance’, ‘by familial disruption’, ‘by estrangement’, ‘chosen’; and parents may be ‘functionally childless’ (through bereavement, estrangement, geographical absence, miscarriage and stillbirth).

Importantly, the omission in statistics of people ageing without children from the datasets which current and future policy and practice are based means health and care services at all levels will be under increased pressure from a known but uncounted and structurally excluded population.

Moreover, in both reports there are no equivalent statistics on men. This is because the number of children a father already has is not collected at the registration of a birth (see above). It is essential to note the impreciseness of the data on men compared to the accurate data on women and the failure to acknowledge there are more childless men than childless women. Parity in data collection is essential for both institutions and individuals alike.

The lack of a safety net

The overriding issue for those ageing without children/family is that if and/or when they do require support, they do not have the safety net of family. Consequently, many of those ageing without children/family are concerned on who will care for them when they need support ^(8, 11, 12, 13, 14).

The inevitable apprehensions include:

- Financial implications: you may not have anyone to help you access support and you may need to rely on your own financial resources.
- Social support: you may become more reliant on others for emotional and physical support. Consequently, the size and dynamics of your familial and social network may become critical to your quality of life. You may need to draw on paid carers and/or rely on institutional services.
- Health and Care: paucity of support may mean you do not access health and/or care services (or those services do not connect with you). For example, if you are admitted into hospital/care you may have concerns about pets and property.
- Death: you may be worried about your funeral arrangements and if your wishes will be carried out ⁽¹⁵⁾.
- Legacy: your family name may end and heirlooms, family stories and traditions are not passed on.

As the ONS reports emphasize, childlessness has serious implications for the provision of services across all ages – particularly for those older people who need access to support as they age. Because the details of people ageing without children are excluded, we will not know how many lack access to care and/or support from family members. And until we have that data, a significant section of society will face an increasing array of challenges.

Robin is an Associate Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, an Early Career Researcher and founder member of the campaign group Ageing Without Children. His sole-authored auto/biographical book, "How is a man supposed to be a man? Male childlessness a Life Course Disrupted", (New York, Berghahn Books) has won critical acclaim. Robin has published several academic papers and contributed chapters in edited books and his research has been widely published in international and national media.

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For those who cannot access the papers behind publishers’ paywalls, some pre-publication draft copies are available via the [Manchester Metropolitan University Research Repository](#) and Robin’s [SSRN](#) page (formerly known as Social Science Research Network).