Social inclusion, social circumstances and the quality of life of visually impaired older people

This publication summarises findings from research by Professor James Nazroo and Dr Anna Zimdars of the School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA).

Summary Findings

Older people with a visual impairment:

- are more likely to have a range of other, additional, physical health problems than sighted people
- are more likely to be in poor socio-economic circumstances
- participate less in social, civic and cultural activities than sighted people
- have similar levels of contact with members of their social network as sighted people, but the quality of their relationships tends to be poorer
- are more likely to score negatively on measures of well-being than sighted people, but this is entirely explained by their greater likelihood of being in poor circumstances
The Background
This study set out to understand the drivers of well-being for older people with visual impairment. It uses data from ELSA, which covers those aged 50 and older living in private households. It first examines whether the self-reported measures of visual impairment in ELSA are accurate. It then analyses the relationship between visual impairment and factors such as health, economic position, housing circumstances, etc., to obtain information about the relationship between visual impairment and well-being.

Findings

Prevalence of visual impairment
- Among the population aged 50 and older, 4% of people report that they have poor vision or are registered blind, with a further 12% saying that their vision is fair, rather than good, very good or excellent.
- Such self-reported measures of visual impairment tend to identify correctly almost all of those without visual impairment, but more people are classified as visually impaired on the basis of self-reports than following clinical assessment. Self-reported measures of visual impairment may thus identify a greater proportion of the population as having a visual impairment.

Health and economic circumstances of those with visual impairments
- Those with less than good vision consistently score lower than those with good or excellent vision on other health measures, such as general health, the frequency of falls and difficulties with activities of daily living.
- People with only fair or poor vision are more likely to be poor in terms of wealth, to rent rather than to own accommodation, and to be in routine or semi-routine employment classes.
Social networks and social participation

- Those with poor or fair vision have a similar frequency of interactions with family and friends to those with good or better vision.

- However, the quality of social interactions, such as spousal relationships, relationships with children and not having negative social relationships, is poorer for those with visual impairment compared with those who have good or better vision.

- Those with visual impairments are significantly less likely to use written forms of communication with members of their social networks, such as email or letters.

- Those with less than good vision are less involved in social, civic and cultural activities (organisational membership, voting, volunteering, theatre trips, having a hobby) than those with good or better vision.

Housing and neighbourhoods

- Visual impairment is associated with a higher tendency to live in accommodation where there is overcrowding.

- Those with fair or poor vision are more likely than those with good or excellent vision to live in properties where there are physical problems, such as damp.

- Those with visual impairment also scored higher on having negative feelings towards the area in which the individual lives (vandalism, rubbish, feeling of belonging, trustworthiness of people in the area).
Well-being

- We examined three outcomes related to well-being:
  - quality of life
  - psychological health
  - depression

Vision is strongly related to all three. Compared with those with good or excellent vision, those with fair vision were between two and three times more likely to score negatively on these measures, while those with poor vision were between three and five times more likely to do so.

- The relationship between visual impairment and well-being is explained by other factors that we have previously shown to be associated with vision status, such as other health outcomes, economic position, social networks and social participation.

Study limitations

- Although this is a nationally representative sample, it covers only those who live in private residences. The circumstances of those living in institutions were not explored and those with visual impairments are more likely to be in institutions than in private residences.

- The data presented are cross-sectional, i.e. they present a snapshot in time, so causal relationships cannot be assigned with any certainty. For example, it is equally possible that economic disadvantage leads to visual impairment (as it relates to other forms of ill-health and disability) as visual impairment leads to economic disadvantage. Assessing such relationships over time, using longitudinal data, would be an important step in understanding causal processes and improving our ability to target policy in the most effective ways.
Conclusions
This study demonstrates that having fair or poor vision is associated with a more frequent experience of negative outcomes than those experienced by people with good or better vision. Those with visual impairment are also much more likely to report indicators of low quality of life, poor psychological well-being and depression. However, this difference was explained by negative outcomes in other dimensions of people’s lives (health, economics, social networks and participation), not by visual impairment per se. Such findings indicate the considerable inequality faced by those with a visual impairment. This is a matter of great concern and something which should be carefully considered by those involved in developing policy in this area.

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How to obtain further information
A report in the form of an Occasional Paper entitled ‘Social inclusion, social circumstances and the quality of life of visually impaired older people’ by Professor James Nazroo and Dr Anna Zimdars, is available from:

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**Background on Pocklington**

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a leading provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss in the UK. Each year we also fund a programme of social and public health research and development projects.

Pocklington’s operations offer a range of sheltered and supported housing, residential care, respite care, day services, resource centres and volunteer-based community support services.

We strive to improve continuously the quality standards in our operational centres to meet the changing needs and expectations of our current and future service users. We are proud to be an Investor in People and a Positive about Disability organisation.

Our research and development programme aims to identify practical ways to improve the lives of people with sight loss by improving social inclusion, independence and quality of life, and improving and developing service outcomes as well as focusing on public health issues.

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In this publication, the terms ‘visually impaired people’, ‘blind and partially sighted people’ and ‘people with sight loss’ all refer to people who are blind or who have partial sight.