

# Will you be old and 'unbefriended?'

July 6 2018, by Stephanie Chamberlain

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For the first time in Canada's history, [more people are living alone or without children](#), according to the 2016 Census. Coupled with increasing life expectancy and geographic mobility, the chance of [aging without a partner or children](#) is significant.

Individuals who have no family caregivers are known as "elder orphans." When they become incapacitated (often due to a dementia), they are

known as [the "unbefriended."](#)

In a [new study](#), members of the pan-Canadian [Translating Research in Elder Care \(TREC\) research program](#) reviewed academic research and unpublished reports to understand what information was available on unbefriended older [adults](#) in Canada and the United States.

## **Public guardians**

Since the unbefriended lack a willing or capable family support system, they often require a public guardian. [Public guardians are case workers](#) whose job is to make legal and personal decisions for people who are alone and incapacitated.

For many without a family caregiver, this protects against abuse and neglect.

However, [the public guardianship system is plagued with challenges](#), including long wait times and large [guardian](#) caseloads. Unbefriended [individuals](#) are likely to live in long-term care (LTC) facilities.

Research from the United States estimates that between [three to four per cent of LTC residents are unbefriended](#) and this number is expected to grow.

## **Alarming lack of data**

After reviewing thousands of abstracts and more than 100 papers, we found little information on this vulnerable group.

Studies from the U.S. indicated that unbefriended older adults were childless or had fewer children. They were more cognitively impaired

than individuals with family guardians.

We found no Canadian studies or reports.

Our findings reveal an alarming lack of data on individuals who are unbefriended and living in LTC facilities. We do not know [the consequences of public guardianship on their quality of care](#) or quality of life.

Unbefriended older adults are exceptionally vulnerable to poor quality of care. Without family or friends who are familiar with their wants and needs, it is unclear if they receive treatment that is in line with their values and desires.

Researchers have questioned the quality of care these individuals receive, suggesting they are [at risk of overtreatment or undertreatment](#).

## **A growing population**

Since our review found no Canadian studies or reports on the characteristics or health of unbefriended older adults, we have no idea how Canada may or may not compare to the U.S.

As a result, we are conducting research to estimate the prevalence and the unmet needs of unbefriended older adults in LTC facilities.

One thing is clear: This population is likely to grow. Research on the health and care needs of unbefriended older adults, and the potential health impacts of public guardianship, are urgently needed. Without such studies, we are unable to adapt our continuing care system to meet the needs of this unique population.

We cannot solely rely on our children and other [family](#) members to care

for us as we age. We need health and social systems that are prepared to care for our most vulnerable.

Further inquiry is imperative to examine guardianship services for [older adults](#) in Canada and around the world.

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