

Study finds older adults' life satisfaction varies by immigrant status, living arrangement and social disposition

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Do older adults who live alone feel less satisfied with their lives? A new analysis of about 12,000 respondents aged 65 and older reveals that what

matters for Canadian older adults' life satisfaction is not living alone per se. Rather, personality-based social dispositions play a key role in how older adults feel about living alone. In addition, the role these dispositions play tend to differ between Canadian-born and immigrant older adults.

The study was [published](#) in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. Its research was based on Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA).

The researchers found that despite the existence of the wide range of personality characteristics, [older adults](#) can be grouped into two overarching types of social dispositions: socially dependent and social independent. Socially dependent older adults are, on average, much more introverted than their socially independent counterparts. In addition, they are significantly less agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable and open-minded.

"The intuitive view of living alone being bad for older adults' life satisfaction over simplifies reality," says the study's first author, Jing Shen, a research affiliate at the Institute of Life Course and Aging, University of Toronto.

"Individual social disposition moderates how one's living arrangement is related to life satisfaction. Socially independent individuals, who have the ability to pursue, build and maintain meaningful social relationships independently, tend to have a more positive view about living alone than their socially dependent counterparts, who are likely to form their networks passively through unavoidable repetitive interactions due to spatial proximity."

The opposite roles these two types of social dispositions play in life satisfaction among older adults who live alone become even more salient

when immigrants are distinguished from their Canadian-born counterparts.

"We were fascinated to find out that the life-satisfaction gap between [immigrant](#) and Canadian-born older adults mainly exists between the socially-independent, older adults who were born in Canada and live alone and the socially-dependent immigrants who live alone," says co-author, Hongmei Tong, an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work, Faculty of Health and Community Studies, MacEwan University.

"More specifically, the trend of higher life satisfaction among the Canadian-born who live alone is mainly observed among those who are socially independent, whereas for immigrants, lower life satisfaction of those who live alone mainly exists among those who are socially dependent."

The study also reveals other factors associated with older adults' life satisfaction for both immigrants and non-immigrants. "It turns out that not all types of social support are equally important for life satisfaction," says senior author Esme Fuller-Thomson, Director of the Institute for Life Course & Aging and Professor at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

"For example, having someone to talk to is far more important for life satisfaction than instrumental social support, such as receiving help with cooking and house chores."

Other factors associated with higher life satisfaction among older adults include being socially well connected, participating frequently in [social activities](#), having higher household income as well as being physically healthy.

The study sheds light on [social policies](#) that could potentially narrow the

life-satisfaction gap between immigrant and Canadian-born older adults.

"Lower [life satisfaction](#) among socially-dependent older immigrants who live alone, might be improved by having easier access to socialization programs such as neighborhood drop-in centers and a wider range of social life outside of their households," says Jing Shen.

More information: Jing Shen et al, Penalty Versus Premium: Social Disposition Differentiates Life Satisfaction Among Living-Alone Immigrant and Native-Born Older Adults—Findings From the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA), *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00914150241268089](#)

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