



Older People's Experiences of Solitary Home Confinement in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A new research project led by José de São José (University of Algarve-UAlg and CICS.NOVA, Portugal), together with colleagues Carla Amado (UAlg and CEFAGE-UAlg), Sérgio Santos (UAlg and CEFAGE-UAlg), Patrícia Coelho (UAlg) and Ana Teixeira (UAlg), in collaboration with Virpi Timonen (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland).

Home confinement of their citizens (“lockdown”) was one of the key public health measures adopted in many countries around the world to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendation to “stay at home” was disseminated by health authorities and media. Home confinement as a public health measure to tackle pandemics is not new, as it was used in past pandemics (e.g. SARS, Ebola and Influenza H1N1). However, while in these past pandemics home confinement was recommended to those who were in contact with people confirmed (or suspected of being) infected, in this new pandemic, home confinement was, in many countries, recommended to the entire population. The older age group was subject to particularly strong recommendations regarding self-confinement. This prompted us to develop studies aimed at capturing the lived experience of home confinement in the context of this pandemic, particularly among older people who live alone. According to Eurostat data, in 2019, about 40% of single households in the European Union were composed by an older person.

The overall objective of this study is to understand, in-depth, the lived experience of solitary home confinement by older people in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal. The specific research objectives are: (1) to understand the daily lives (and associated contexts) of older people before home confinement; (2) to understand the daily lives (and associated contexts) of older people during home confinement; (3) to understand the changes in the lives of older people that resulted from home confinement, as well as the meanings and consequences of these changes; (4) to examine the extent to which the experience of solitary home confinement is shaped by gender, age, and educational level.

It is expected that this study will contribute to understanding the experience of solitary home confinement by older people, as well as to the discussion of public policy measures that can help prevent / mitigate potential negative impacts of this kind of confinement.

This is a qualitative study, including an initial round of telephone semi-structured interviews, telephone diaries over a period of seven consecutive days, and a final round of telephone semi-structured interviews. The initial interviews and diaries have already been completed. The collected data will be analyzed according to the procedures of Framework Analysis.

The sample was gathered through a combination of convenience, snowballing and purposive sampling. It consists of 25 Portuguese older people (aged 65 and over), men and women, living alone, with different ages and educational levels. At the time of the initial interviews and diaries, the participants were not diagnosed as being infected with COVID-19, were not in quarantine due to contact with someone infected with COVID-19 and had no acute symptoms of other diseases. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

The self-isolating requirement directed at older adults in particular (in some countries, termed ‘cocooning’) has sparked lively debate about its merits and disadvantages, and with the help of the empirical data that speaks to the experiences of older people themselves, we look forward to contributing to these conversations.

If you wish to get in touch with the project team, please email jsjose@ualg.pt

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