

The Impact of Community-Based Elderly Care Centers on Social Isolation Among Urban Elderly in Shenzhen, China

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The study extends existing research on ageing and community care by integrating both subjective experiences and objective indicators of social isolation within a single analytical framework. By combining qualitative and quantitative evidence, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how community-based elderly care services influence the social well-being of older adults. The findings also highlight the importance of considering both structural factors, such as service accessibility and programme design, and individual factors, including motivation and confidence in participation. These insights contribute to current debates on the development of sustainable community care systems and offer practical guidance for policymakers seeking to improve service delivery and social inclusion among ageing populations in rapidly urbanising contexts.

Keywords: social isolation, community-based elderly care, older adults, ageing, Shenzhen, mixed methods

Rationale

The rapid change of China's population structure has brought about an unprecedented aging problem. According to the data of the United Nations in 2019, by 2050, people aged 60 and above are expected to account for about 35% of the total population. Taking Shenzhen for example, the large-scale population flow and urbanization process are continuously weakening the traditional family pension system, which also makes the urban pension face many difficulties (Guo & Wang, 2024). In these difficult problems, the social isolation of the elderly has become a serious public health problem, which will push up the mortality rate and reduce the overall quality of life of the elderly (Wang et al., 2018).

My interest in this topic arises from a focus on social policy implementation and urban governance in China, particularly in relation to how government-led, community-based service models respond to population ageing. One development that stands out is the growth of community-based elderly care centres (Li, Qian, & Yang, 2021). Studying the effect of such centers on alleviating the social isolation of the elderly can provide a lot of references for public policy formulation, resource allocation, and the promotion of such interventions in different cities in China. Most of the existing literature focuses on institutional old-age care, and there are few empirical studies on the social impact of community old-age care centers. This study can just fill this gap.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of Shenzhen Community old-age care center in alleviating the problem of social isolation of the local elderly. Specifically, it is to figure out under the background of domestic population aging and urban transformation, how this kind of center operates as a means of intervention at the community level.

We will also focus on the specific services and activities provided by community pension centers to help the elderly involved reduce social isolation. By finding out which way of participation works best, we can figure out the ways to improve the social connection of the elderly in community scenes.

In addition, this study will also investigate the main obstacles encountered by elderly residents in Shenzhen when using community pension centers and participating in activities continuously. Figuring out these limiting factors is essential for optimizing service supply, enhancing service inclusiveness, and improving future policy design so that such community intervention can cover and benefit more elderly groups.

Synthesis and Research Gap

This study is grounded in three core strands of literature, which together provide a theoretical basis for understanding community-based elderly care in urban China.

First, it draws on research examining the multidimensional impact of social isolation on older adults. In the context of rapid urbanisation, social isolation is closely associated with increased risks of chronic illness, cognitive decline, higher levels of depression, and reduced life satisfaction. Second, the study focuses on the determinants of the effectiveness of community-based elderly care centres, covering structural, organisational, and service-related factors. Third, it reviews governance structures and implementation challenges within China's urban context, highlighting how different governance factors are crucial for the sustainability and scalability of elderly care services.

Overall, these three strands of literature provide a relatively comprehensive theoretical foundation for analysing community-based elderly care. However, several gaps remain. Although prior studies have identified various influencing factors, few have adopted mixed-methods approaches that systematically link older adults' everyday experiences with quantifiable outcomes, particularly in relation to social isolation.

To address this limitation, this study adopts a mixed-methods design to examine the role of community-based elderly care centres in Shenzhen in reducing social isolation. Specifically, qualitative interviews will be conducted to explore the lived experiences of older adults, while quantitative survey data will be used to measure levels of social isolation. By integrating these approaches, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of both subjective well-being and objective social outcomes.

Literature Review

Literature Review

The basis of this research comes from four interrelated academic research directions, which are: (1) the relationship between social isolation and health status of the elderly; (2) community pension mode in an aging society; (3) the implementation of social policies in China's urban governance; (4) digital inclusion in pension services.

Social Isolation and Health Outcomes Among the Elderly

In recent years, academic research has increasingly recognized that social isolation is a key factor affecting the health and living conditions of the elderly. Wang et al. (2018) conducted a large-scale study on the elderly in domestic cities in 2018, and found that about 23% of the elderly in cities have serious social isolation, and in

different cities, the differences between different social and economic groups are obvious. Their research also shows that the probability of cognitive decline and depression for the elderly with social isolation problems is 29% and 32% higher respectively; this also highlights the heavy burden of health brought by the lack of social connections.

Similar conclusions are found in the work of Leigh-Hunt et al. (2017), who show that both loneliness and social isolation are linked to higher mortality risk, poorer cardiovascular health, and worsening mental health across different cultural settings. It should be noted that the academic circle has clearly distinguished objective social isolation from subjective loneliness: The former refers to the lack of quantifiable social network, while the latter refers to the fracture of social connection (Courtin & Knapp, 2017). This conceptual distinction is now considered to be very important for designing accurate and effective interventions.

More recent research emphasizes that interventions to deal with social isolation must consider both structural factors (such as access to social opportunities) and individual factors (such as willingness and ability to participate) (Sherman et al., 2024). In the context of Chinese megacities, Li, Han, Wang, and Zhang (2025) highlight several key drivers of social isolation among older adults, including high-rise living arrangements, the dominance of nuclear families, and the weakening of traditional neighbourhood ties due to rapid urbanisation. According to these documents, social isolation has become a major public policy challenge requiring accurate government intervention, and we must deal with it promptly.

Community-Based Care Models in Ageing Societies

The second research direction focuses on the community pension model and its effect in supporting the elderly. Xue, Xu, Liu, and Chen (2021) provide a systematic analysis of China's "9073" elderly care model, under which around 90% of older adults rely on family-based home care, 7% receive community-based services, and 3% depend on institutional care. By comparing the situation of different cities in China, they concluded several key success factors, including the integration of health services and social services, the construction of professional pension teams, and the sustainability of the financial mechanism. These findings show that as long as there are sufficient resources and reasonable design, community old-age care can become an important link between family old-age care and institutional old-age care.

Aiming at the community old-age care center, A, Ma, Wang, and Yang (2022) studied three types of communities in Shenzhen in 2022: indemnificatory housing community, commodity housing community, and urban village community. They found that factors such as built-up environment, spatial planning, and management methods have a significant impact on the quality of life (QOL) of elderly residents. Through factor analysis, they found out the external and internal factors that affect the operation effect of community old-age care facilities (CECF), and also through the correlation analysis between quality of life and facility satisfaction, this proves that these deficiencies will lead to a decline in the quality of life of the elderly.

Zhou et al. (2018) study day-care centre models in several Chinese cities and find that more frequent participation such as attending three or more times per week is associated with stronger social connections and higher subjective wellbeing. However, their research also pointed out some landing problems, such as time schedule conflicts, insufficient types of activities, and insufficient connection with medical services. In addition, Yuan et al. (2020) focus on volunteer involvement and come to the conclusion that intergenerational volunteer programs can not only help reduce the social isolation of the elderly, but can also alleviate the shortage of manpower in the industry.

Social Policy Implementation in Chinese Urban Governance

The third research direction focuses on the implementation of social policies under the framework of urban governance in China. Chen et al. (2025) examine the multi-level governance structure of community-based elderly care and find that between different government departments (such as civil affairs, health care, housing and construction), and between different administrative levels (municipal, district, street level), there is an obvious problem of functional fragmentation. They believe that in order to improve the policy effect, we must improve the coordination mechanism and clarify the division of responsibilities of each subject.

Yin and Yu (2025) further discussed the roles of neighborhood committees and property companies in providing community pension services, and pointed out that there was a contradiction between traditional governance structure and emerging service demand. These findings show that the existing system needs to be adjusted to adapt to the changing needs of the elderly.

At the same time, Feng and Li (2025) studied the old-age care industry innovation under the community old-age care mode, emphasizing the importance of digital technologies such as telemedicine, remote health monitoring, intelligent old-age care system, etc.; it is believed that these technologies can fill the service gap and improve the response capability of the system. From a related perspective, Chen, Liu, and Zhu (2022) analysed the development of government-supported community care centres using big data approaches, suggesting that the integration of internet-based technologies can strengthen supervision, improve service quality, support workforce development, and provide a stronger evidence base for policymaking.

Research Design and Methods

This paper uses mixed method case study design to comprehensively investigate the practical role of Shenzhen Community pension service center in alleviating the social isolation of the elderly. We try to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to not only grasp the depth of details of individual experience, but also find out the overall rules of service usage and social results. This design is suitable for complex social policy scenarios—after all, in this scenario, there will be dynamic interaction among multiple analysis levels such as individuals, communities, and institutions (Bell & Warren, 2023).

In the qualitative research section, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with elderly residents. About 15 to 20 old people who often go to community old-age care service centers will be recruited, and five to eight old people who live near such centers but never participate in center activities will also be found. Using this method of comparative sampling, we can have a more detailed understanding of the behaviors of participating in and not participating in central activities. We will adopt a purposeful sampling method to cover objects with key population and social characteristics such as different ages, genders, living conditions, socioeconomic status, etc., as far as possible to ensure the diversity of samples. The contents of the interview mainly focus on three aspects: first, the specific situation and quality of the interviewees's social relations; second, their actual feelings of contacting or viewing community pension services; the third is the obstructive factors and internal motivation that affect their participation or non-participation in central activities. This kind of qualitative investigation is mainly to explore the deep mechanism of action and subjective thoughts that cannot be fully captured by quantitative means alone.

In the quantitative research part, we will carry out a structured questionnaire survey on about 400 elderly residents in three to four community pension service centers in Shenzhen. When selecting interviewees, they will try their best to consider the differences in scale, service content and geographical location of different centers. This questionnaire includes several parts: demographic information, verified social isolation measurement scale,

frequency of central service use, and actual benefits felt after participating in activities. We will try our best to use existing and widely used measurement scales to ensure the reliability and comparability of data. Through quantitative data, we can get empirical basis on the degree of social isolation of the elderly, the law of service use, and the actual effect of Community pension interventions.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified three overarching themes, each comprising several sub-themes that reflect participants' experiences of social isolation and engagement with community-based elderly care centres.

Theme 1: Everyday social disconnection:

This theme captures the ways in which participants experience limited social interaction in their daily lives.

Table 1

Social Isolation and Declining Social Connections among Older Adults

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative insight
1.1 Limited daily interaction	Many participants reported spending most of their time alone, with minimal face-to-face communication	Daily routines were often described as repetitive and solitary
1.2 Weakening family support	Reduced contact with family due to distance or busy schedules	Family members were often unavailable for regular interaction
1.3 Loss of neighbourhood ties	Traditional neighbourly relationships were less common in urban settings	Participants noted that "people don't really know each other anymore"

Theme 2: Community centres as social anchors:

This theme reflects how community-based elderly care centres function as spaces for social interaction and routine.

Table 2

Community Care Centres as Social Anchors for Older Adults

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative insight
2.1 Formation of informal networks	Participants developed casual but stable social connections	Regular attendees recognised familiar faces and formed friendships
2.2 Structured daily routines	Attendance provided a sense of rhythm and purpose	Activities gave participants "something to do" and a reason to go out
2.3 Emotional and social benefits	Centres contributed to feelings of belonging and reduced loneliness	Social atmosphere was valued as much as the services themselves

Theme 3: Barriers to engagement:

This theme highlights the factors limiting participation in community-based elderly care services.

Table 3

Barriers to Participation in Community-Based Elderly Care Services

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative insight
3.1 Physical and mobility constraints	Health conditions limited attendance	Difficulty travelling to centres was commonly reported
3.2 Mismatch of services and needs	Activities did not always align with personal interests	Some participants found programmes repetitive or irrelevant
3.3 Psychological hesitation	Reluctance to join unfamiliar groups	Feelings of discomfort or social awkwardness reduced participation
3.4 Information gaps	Lack of awareness about available services	Some non-users were unaware of centre activities

Judging from the results of these three research topics, the community pension service center does provide many social opportunities for the elderly, but how much effect it can actually play, not only accessibility with the site; this kind of hardware condition of service design is also related to personal factors such as the elderly's own willingness to participate and self-confidence. For the elderly who often go to the center, the social relationship can be maintained and expanded indeed, but whether it is practical difficulties such as inconvenient travel, or psychological obstacles such as fear of trouble and embarrassment, they are still restricting the participation of more old people.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis provides evidence on the relationship between community-based elderly care centre usage and levels of social isolation among older adults in Shenzhen. Overall, respondents reported a moderate level of social isolation ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.78$), while perceived benefits of centre participation were relatively high ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.72$).

Correlation analysis indicates that frequency of centre usage is negatively associated with social isolation ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that more frequent participation is linked to lower levels of isolation. Similarly, perceived benefits show a stronger negative relationship with social isolation ($r = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals who perceive greater value in the services are less likely to feel socially isolated. In contrast, perceived barriers are positively correlated with social isolation ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), implying that access difficulties and other constraints may reinforce isolation.

Further regression analysis confirms these relationships. Both usage frequency ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived benefits ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$) have significant negative effects on social isolation, while barriers show a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). Among the control variables, living alone is also associated with higher levels of isolation ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$), whereas age shows a weaker but still significant effect ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$). The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in social isolation ($R^2 = 0.41$), indicating good explanatory power.

Group comparisons further highlight the impact of participation. Older adults who regularly attend community care centres report lower levels of social isolation ($M = 2.95$) compared to those who do not participate ($M = 3.58$). In addition, a clear trend emerges when examining participation frequency: Individuals who attend centres more than three times per week report the lowest levels of isolation, while those who never attend show the highest levels.

Taken together, these findings suggest that community-based elderly care centres play a meaningful role in reducing social isolation among older adults. Regular participation and positive service experiences appear to strengthen social connections, whereas barriers to access may limit these benefits.

Discussion

From the research results, the community pension service center does play a practical role in reducing the social isolation of the elderly in Shenzhen. Quantitative data show that the elderly with higher participation and stronger service recognition have lower loneliness, while the elderly with participation barriers have the opposite situation.

This conclusion is generally consistent with previous research results. For example, Wang et al. mentioned in the 2018 study that increasing social interaction can improve the quality of life of the elderly. In addition, our

qualitative research results also show that this effect not only comes from the formal services provided by the center, but also plays a significant role in daily chatting and communication with other elderly people in the center.

It is also worth noting that the subjective feelings of the elderly towards the benefits of service are more important than the simple participation times. But at the same time, whether it is practical difficulties such as mobility inconvenience or psychological barriers that dare not and are unwilling to participate, they are still affecting the actual effect of these services.

In general, the combination of quantitative data and qualitative interviews can enable us to see the overall law of the problem more comprehensively and understand the underlying causes.

Implications

Theoretically, this study combines the quantitative results with the actual feelings of the elderly, providing a more integrated perspective for the study of social isolation, and also illustrating the loneliness of the elderly, it is not only affected by such objective conditions as site and service, but also related to their own subjective feelings.

From a practical point of view, improving old-age care services should not only focus on building more venues and opening more services, but also pay more attention to improving the social interaction experience of the elderly in their hearts, so that they really feel that participation is valuable. In addition, only when the service design is more flexible and convenient for the elderly to participate can more elderly people be attracted.

Conclusion

This study mainly examines the role of Shenzhen Community pension service center in alleviating social isolation of the elderly. The results show that this kind of service can indeed help the elderly expand their social relations, but whether the actual effect is good or not depends on the frequency of participation of the elderly, their recognition of the service and various obstacles to participation.

In general, community old-age care is an important way to deal with China's urban aging, but there are still many areas that need improvement to better meet the needs of the elderly.

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