

Changes in Loneliness among Oldest-old Chinese

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Abstract. This study examined the changes in loneliness assessments among the oldest-old in China from 2008 to 2011, and its association with health and social support factors. Data came from the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey (CLHLS), from two waves in 2008 and 2011. Descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression methods were used in the analyses. Percentage of respondents who needed institutional care and assistance in basic activities of daily living (BADLs) increased over the 3-year period. Over this period, self-reported health assessments reflected apparent waning health among the respondents, but there were no distinctive patterns in loneliness assessments. A slight majority reported worsened assessments in loneliness and self-reported health. Multinomial logistic regression results revealed that changes in physical limitations (resulting in the need for assistance) and health were highly associated and in tandem with the changes in loneliness. Living alone contributed to worsened levels of loneliness but living with household members did not improve the assessment of loneliness among the oldest-old. Those not married (majority widowed) were more likely to report improved assessments of loneliness, as compared to those who were currently married and living with their spouse.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is associated with higher risks of psychological disorders, mental health problems, depression or suicide [1-4]. Loneliness may occur in people of all ages, but this condition is especially prevalent among older persons. Older persons are more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness as they are likely to have fewer social contacts due to poor health and physical limitations [5, 6]. Loneliness is also known to be caused by lack of emotional support in social relationships [7]. Older persons whose children have left home are more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and those living alone are typically more depressed and lonely [8, 9]. Adult children provide the most important support and social contact in old age and their frequent care and affection may alleviate loneliness among older persons [10, 11].

China provides an excellent setting for further study of loneliness among older persons. The country's older population, as well as the oldest-old (aged 80 and above), have been projected to increase rapidly in decades to come [12, 13]. Past research in China has found that the prevalence of loneliness varies across studies, depending on the sample and measurement. Social support is an important factor related to loneliness, and the family is the main provider of support followed by friends [14].

Thus, health problems and social support are known factors affecting the feelings of loneliness. Though, to our knowledge, there has been no study on how these factors influence the change in loneliness assessments over time, less so in very late life. Thus, this study aims to examine the changes in loneliness, and its association with health and social support related factors among the oldest-old.