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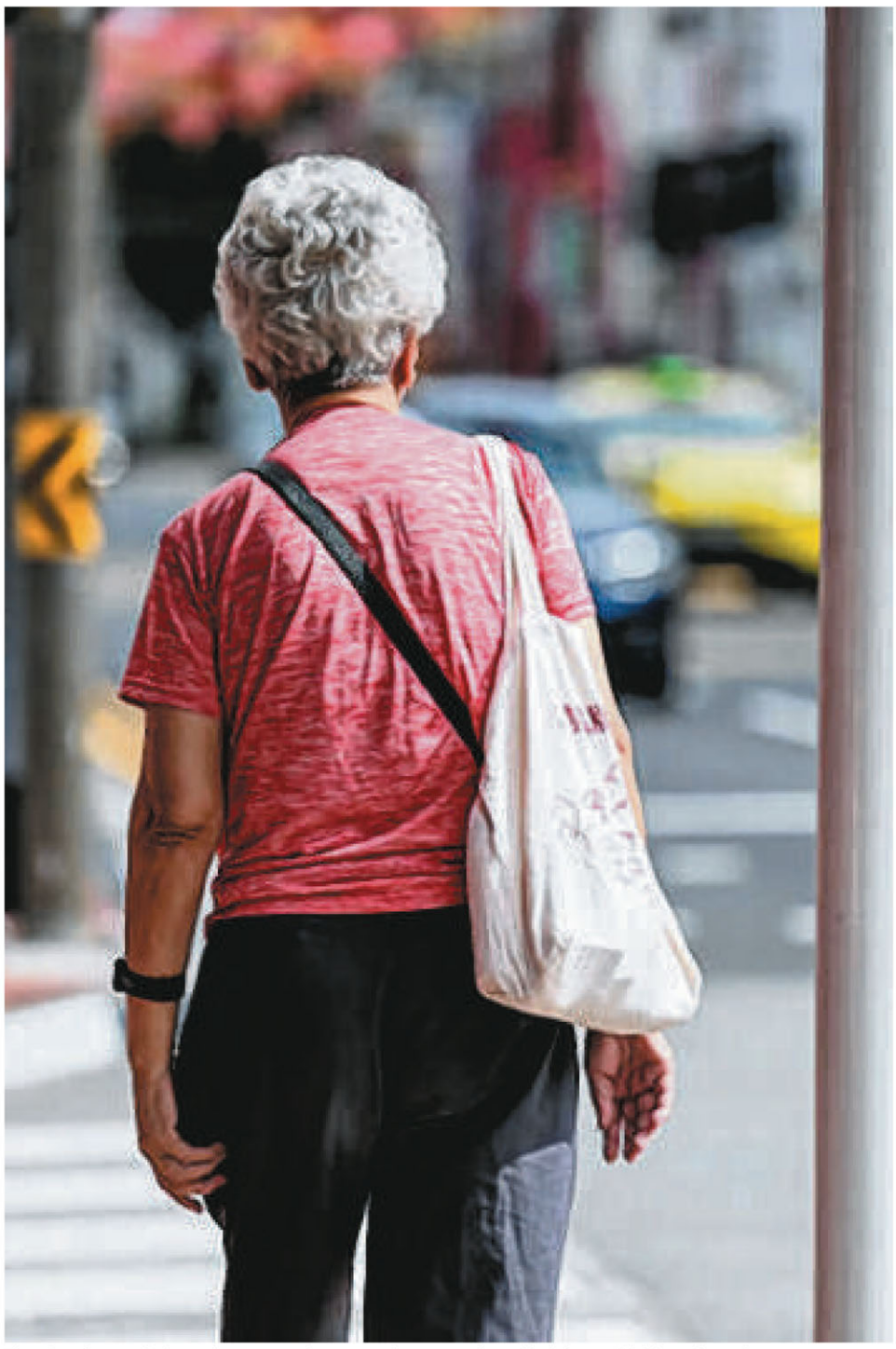
When seniors live alone, it doesn't mean they are lonely

Research in Singapore shows that some can live by themselves and have active social lives. This has policy implications on addressing loneliness.

Vincent Chua, Elaine Ho and Feng Chen-Chieh



The writers' research shows that many seniors are ageing across places. Their lives unfold through regular movement across neighbourhoods and districts. They are "ageing in networks" and home functions as a base, not a boundary. ST FILE PHOTO

Living alone in later life is widely seen as a signal of social risk. It is a convenient marker: easy to identify, easy to count, easy to target. In policy discussions, the one-person household often stands in for loneliness itself.

While it may not cause immediate harm, this shorthand can quietly – and sometimes inaccurately – shape who gets noticed, who gets missed, and how support is delivered.

Because living alone is visible in administrative data, it often becomes a default targeting criterion –influencing who receives visits, who is flagged as "at risk", and where resources are directed. Support tends to be organised around the home: check-ins, monitoring and doorstep services. These measures are essential for some seniors. But for many others, they address the wrong vulnerability.

Our study of nearly 1,200 older Singaporeans between 60 and 92 years of age – published as Ageing In Networks: Living Alone But Connected in the academic journal Ageing & Society in October 2025 – shows that many seniors who live alone are socially active, mobile and embedded in wider networks of family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

To be clear, it is true that seniors who live alone are, on average, more likely to report loneliness. This echoes findings from Duke-NUS and other studies. But our research also shows that this risk is significantly reduced when older adults remain connected beyond the household – through regular face-to-face contact, online communication and travel outside their immediate neighbourhoods to meet others. For these seniors, living alone is not a condition of isolation but an arrangement that coexists with active social lives unfolding across the city.

Loneliness among seniors remains a serious issue, with well-documented consequences for health and well-being. But it does not map neatly onto household size. Some older adults living with family experience profound isolation, while others living alone maintain strong, reliable ties. When living arrangements are treated as a proxy for loneliness, policy risks overlooking both realities – and responding too late, or in the wrong place.

AGEING ACROSS PLACES

Much of our public language around ageing remains anchored in the idea of "ageing in place". The concept emphasises stability and remaining in one's home for as long as possible. These are important goals, particularly in a rapidly ageing society. But the phrase also subtly suggests that ageing happens mainly at home, or within the immediate neighbourhood.

Our research points to a different reality. Many seniors are ageing across places. Their lives unfold through regular movement across neighbourhoods and districts. They are "ageing in networks". Home functions as a base, not a boundary.

Older adults in our study often travelled several kilometres to sustain relationships. Some crossed the island – east to west, north to south, etc. for religious gatherings, shopping trips, keeping up with long-standing friendships.

Others structured their weeks around volunteering commitments or social activities. These journeys were not occasional excursions; they were central to maintaining social ties.

Looking at ageing through social networks rather than households shifts the policy question because the issue is no longer simply about who lives alone, but about who has people to meet, activities to engage in, places to go and the means to get there. Seen this way, the implications for how we think about loneliness are immediate.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We offer three implications for policy:

First, transport policy becomes social policy when an older adult's ability to travel independently in later life determines whether a weekly lunch group survives. Many older adults who live alone are not sedentary. They are mobile, socially active, and wish to remain so even as frailty increases. Their capacity to sustain relationships depends less on what happens inside the home than on whether movement remains easy, affordable and predictable. When routes change or accessibility declines, social routines quietly unravel.

Second, digital inclusion becomes social policy when messaging platforms and video calls sustain everyday contact for those living alone. For many seniors, digital tools are not optional extras but essential to maintaining relationships. Rapid technological changes can be especially challenging for seniors who live alone, who may lack younger family members to support them. Community efforts to improve digital literacy – from using messaging apps to navigating online services – help live-alone seniors keep pace with technological change and preserve social ties that might otherwise weaken with distance or declining mobility.

Third, live-alone seniors could feel marginalised by family-centred programmes and assumptions, which can overlook their perspectives on independence and non-family sources of fulfilment. Many may prefer flexible, low-pressure ways of connecting with others rather than structured or obligation-based participation. It may be better to promote social fulfilment without requiring rigid commitment. Although this could be harder to measure and track, it may better reflect how some live-alone seniors wish to engage. These "weak ties" remain socially valuable and can be activated when live-alone seniors face emergencies or periods of needs.

These interventions are not defined by novelty or spectacle, yet they are key to sustaining social connection among those who live alone. Their importance is often overlooked because they fall outside the traditional frame of "living alone".

A network perspective allows loneliness to be addressed more precisely. Rather than assuming vulnerability based on household size, it points to better indicators of disconnection: shrinking mobility, loss of routine, thinning social ties or the absence of regular social touchpoints. It also brings into view seniors who may be lonely despite not living alone – a group easily missed when co-residence is taken as evidence of support.

Outreach efforts frequently prioritise seniors who live alone for home-based checks, while changes in mobility or routine – missed activities, declining travel or withdrawal from regular gatherings – receive less systematic attention. Yet these disruptions may signal disconnection and emerging loneliness more accurately than living arrangements themselves and we need to track them.

Living alone should not be treated as a diagnosis. It is a living arrangement – one that can signal risk in some cases and resilience in others. If efforts to address loneliness continue to rely too heavily on household type, they will remain reactive and partial. If instead they follow the pathways seniors actually travel – physical, social and digital – they can support connection where it is made and intervene where it quietly unravels.

The difference is not philosophical or theoretical. It is practical – and measurable. And it begins by recognising that living alone is not the same as being lonely.

• Vincent Chua is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore. Elaine Ho and Feng Chen-Chieh are Full Professor and Associate Professor respectively at the faculty.