



# **BETWEEN LONELINESS AND BELONGING**

Lifelong experiences of  
(dis)connection among  
older immigrants

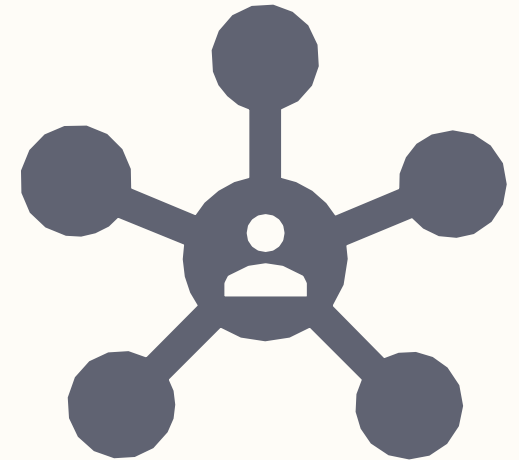
Sharon Koehn, PhD (Gerontology, SFU; Sharon Koehn  
Research Consulting)

Multicultural seniors in age-friendly North Shore  
communities webinar, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020

# Social isolation vs. loneliness

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- **Social isolation** (no or few meaningful ties) to social participation – *objective*: size of the person's social network.
- **Loneliness** to belonging – *subjective*: the feeling that the number or intimacy of social relationships is not enough
  - But social isolation also seems to have some subjective components



# Canadian government response

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Social isolation of Seniors (Vol I): Understanding the  
Issue and Finding Solutions

Social Isolation of Seniors (Vol II) Ideas exchange  
event toolkit

**FEDERAL/PROVINCIAL/TERRITORIAL MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR SENIORS**



# Recent immigrants (in Canada < 5 years) at greater risk

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More likely to experience risk factors identified for all older adults (e.g., higher levels of poverty, lack of awareness of services),



Experience unique challenges, such as lack of charter language (English/French) ability



# Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants

*A narrative-photovoice project 2014-2017*

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McGill

School of Social Work  
École de service social

SFU

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
ENGAGING THE WORLD

# Risk factors for social isolation and loneliness (1)

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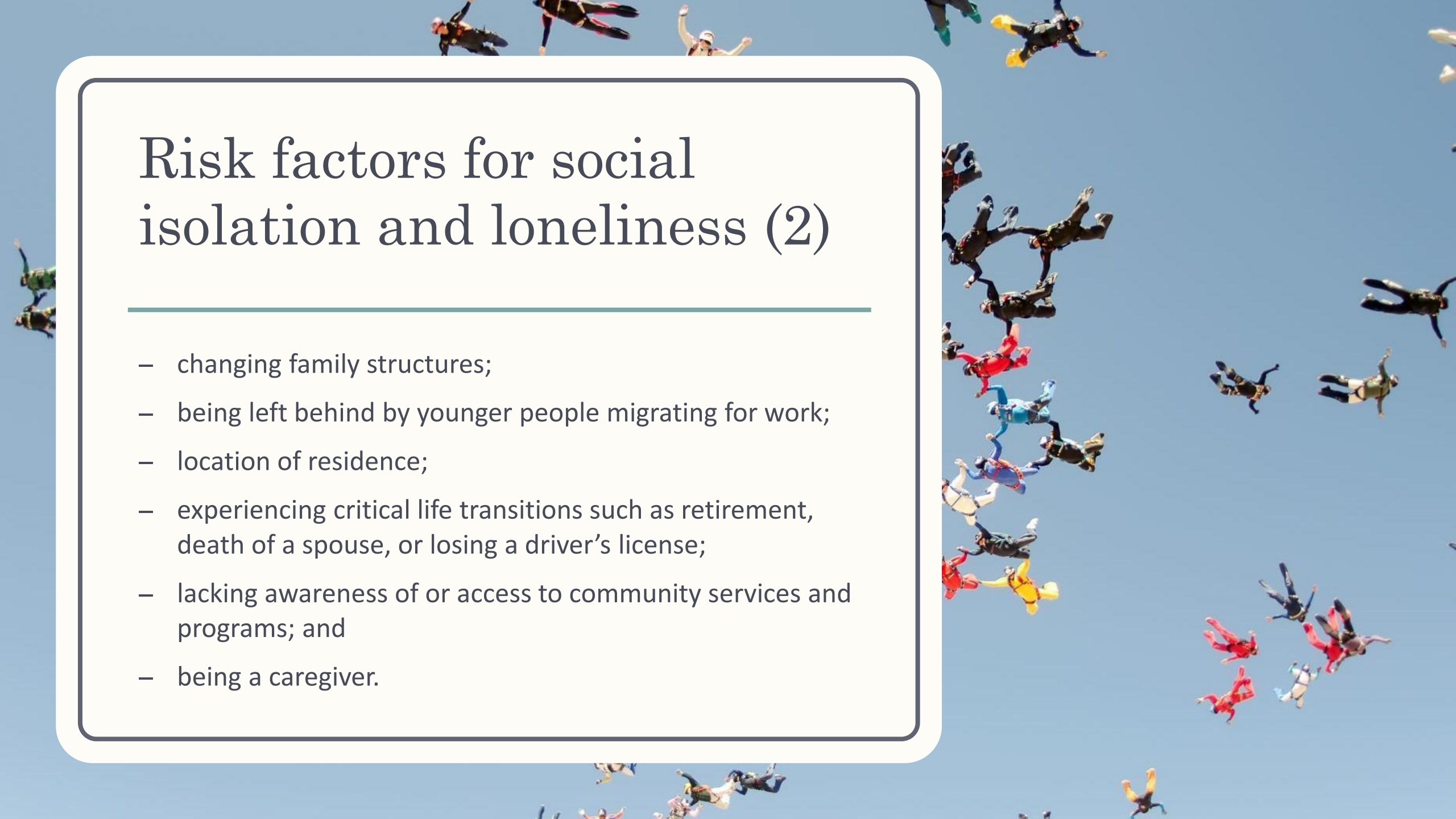
- living alone;
- being age 80 or older;
- having compromised health status;
- having multiple chronic health problems;
- having no children or contact with family;
- lacking access to transportation;
- living with low income;



# Risk factors for social isolation and loneliness (2)

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- changing family structures;
- being left behind by younger people migrating for work;
- location of residence;
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver's license;
- lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs; and
- being a caregiver.





# Storytelling

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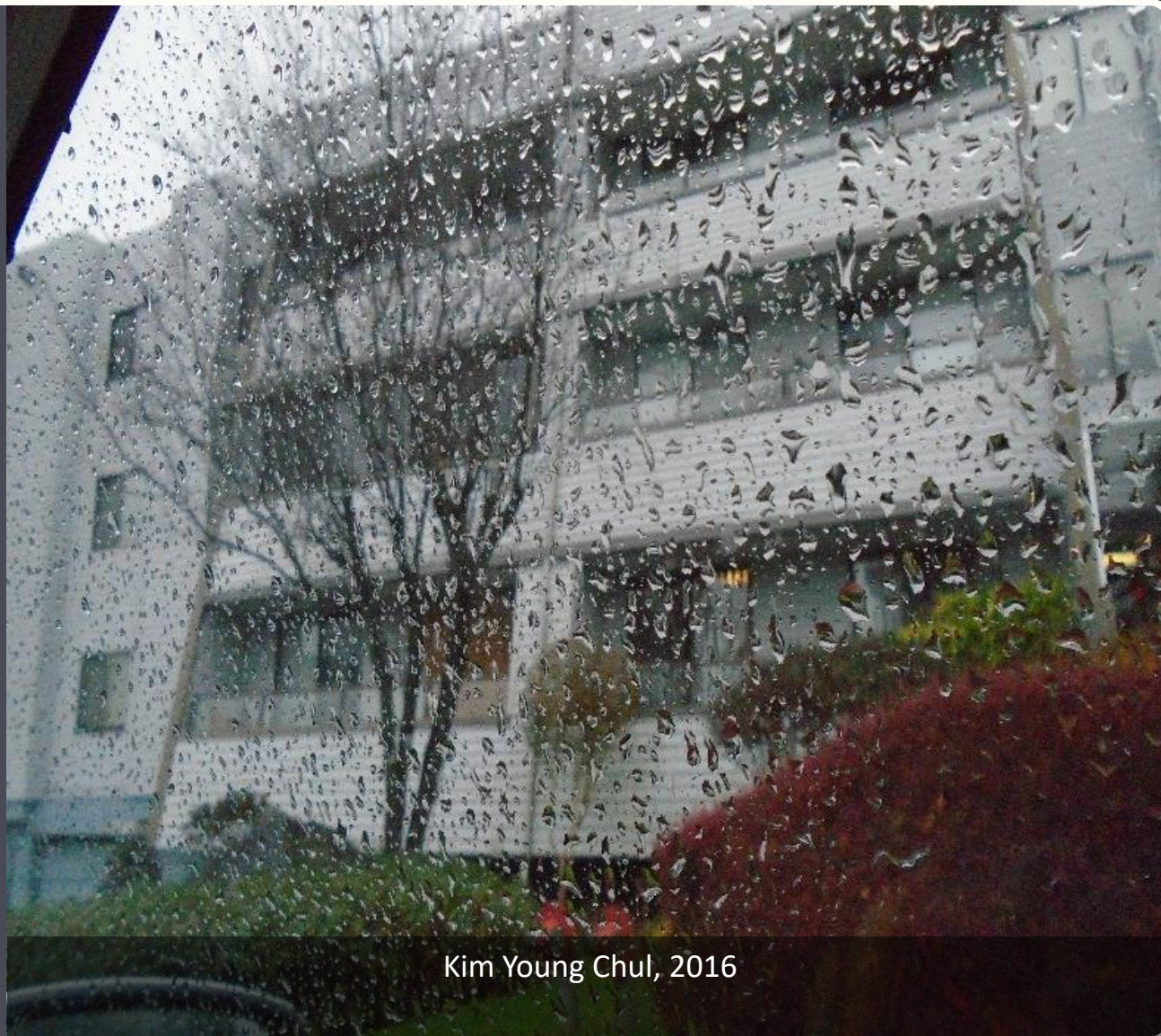
2 case studies



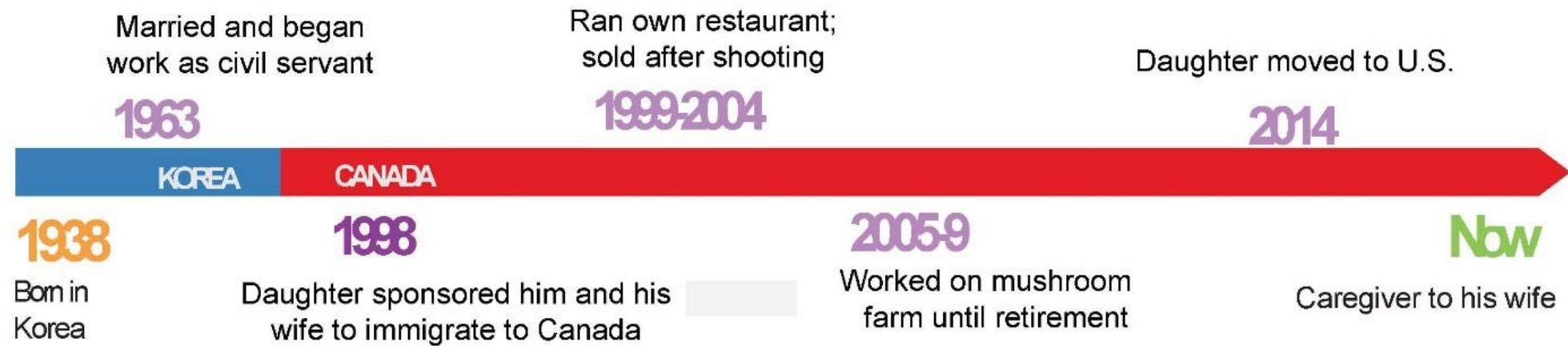
# Kim Young Chul, 77

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“In Canada, the most difficult part  
is finding a place to rent”



Kim Young Chul, 2016





“Without [my daughter], every single thing is a challenge.”



# Mr Kim's risk factors (1)

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- ~~— living alone;~~
- ~~— being age 80 or older; [getting close]~~
- having compromised health status;
- having multiple chronic health problems;
- having no children [close by] or contact with family;
- lacking access to transportation;
- living with low income;





# Mr Kim's risk factors (2)

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- changing family structures;
- being left behind by younger people migrating ~~for work~~;
- location of residence;
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, ~~death of a spouse~~, or losing a driver's license;
- lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs;
- being a caregiver.



# Immigrant-specific barriers

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- Lack of English
  - Money for interpreters
  - Pay for English courses
  - Citizenship disqualifies him for free EAL classes
  - “It’s inconvenience, difficult. But let’s say I feel like disabled. ...No communication....I can’t [be] involve[d].”
  - Takes classes at immigrant-serving organizations; studies at library
  - Hampers navigation to housing



A group of nine women of various ages are smiling together indoors. The group includes several young women and one older woman with white hair on the right. They are dressed in casual clothing, with some wearing traditional or patterned garments. The background shows a simple interior with a white wall and some decorative elements like green triangular flags in the top left. The text "Family and Support" is overlaid in the center in a white serif font, with a green underline under the word "Family".

# Family and Support





Divine |



# Ill health and support network

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- Relied on a network of friends; no family nearby
- Depression from dependency (“burden”) – support group
- Struggles to establish eligibility for services (compensation, caregivers)
- Rehabilitation, surgeries, medications
- Return to Philippines for family support – too expensive

# Divine's risk factors (1)

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- living alone;
- ~~being age 80 or older;~~
- having compromised health status;
- having multiple chronic health problems;
- having no children [close by] or contact with family;
- living with low income;
- lacking access to transportation;





# Divine's risk factors (2)

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- ~~— changing family structures;~~
- ~~— being left behind by younger people migrating for work;~~
- location of residence;
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, ~~death of a spouse, or losing a driver's license;~~
- ~~— lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs;~~
- ~~— being a caregiver.~~

Two white birds, possibly egrets or herons, are shown in flight against a clear, light blue sky. The bird in the foreground is lower and more to the left, with its wings spread wide. The second bird is positioned higher and further to the right, also in flight. The overall scene is serene and minimalist.

# Factors specific to migration that increase risk of social isolation (1)

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- **Language barriers** – not all immigrants can take classes as newcomers due to conflicting responsibilities, but classes are no longer free after 5 years. Few services in origin languages for some minorities, e.g. Korean.
- **Family** – often assumed that immigrant families “take care of their own” but migration (and pre-migration circumstances, e.g. war, unstable employment) can separate families and not all immigrants have children
- **Migration policies** – long period of dependency following sponsorship\*/domestic worker rules limits opportunities





## Factors specific to migration that increase risk of social isolation (2)

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- **Caregiving** – grandchildren (esp. sponsored immigrants) +/- or spousal
- **Lack of awareness of services** – language barriers + unfamiliarity with social structure and variety of services
- **Housing** – location limited by affordability/accessibility – late-life immigrants (esp. sponsored) often have low income, limited choices
- **Transportation** – language + sensory impairment/disability adds to difficulty of getting driving license; language barriers can inhibit transit use



**Community supports**, esp. in own language – includes immigrant serving agencies, multicultural clubs in community centres and religious institutions



**Charter language capability** – classes needed at any stage of migration trajectory



**Subsidized housing** close to community supports and public transit



**Pensions** (prior to end of sponsorship period, now 20 years)

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## What helps?



**Babysitting services** in conjunction with community programs for immigrant older adults



**Low-cost/free culture and language appropriate respite care** for caregivers (volunteers?)



**System navigator** outreach to assist immigrant older adults with finding needed services

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What helps?



Son Jung Suk ignores the rain to connect with friends

# Thank you!

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Researchgate