Key challenges when evaluating loneliness prevention

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Aims of the presentation

• What do we mean by evaluation?
• What are the key challenges of social care evaluations? What about interventions aimed at reducing loneliness?
• Which principles should drive our evaluations?
• SSCR study on prevention
What are the aims of an (economic) evaluation?

• To understand whether something is good?
  • Does it improve things?
  • Does it help people?
• So we want to understand the “effectiveness” of an intervention/scheme
  • Health status
  • Quality of life
    • Of the person with needs
    • Of their family and friends
  • Social participation
    • Opportunities to socialise
    • Workforce participation
Is something worth doing?

• Is doing something **worth the effort?**
• Is the effect worth the resources that are required?
• Is it worth the cost?
  • Cost of the intervention
  • Cost of the other support services
    • Social care
    • Health care
    • Social security benefits

• So we want to understand the “cost-effectiveness” of interventions
  • Compared with other possible uses of available resources, is the intervention worth doing?
Understanding cost-effectiveness

• Very simple aim! measure and compare
  • Effects of the intervention (its outcomes)
  • Costs of the intervention
• Answers the question:
  compared with other possible uses of available resources, is the intervention worth doing?

• Implementation can be (very) challenging
  • Measurement of outcomes and costs
  • Long-term nature of the relationships
  • Problems with the identification of the impact of the intervention
Identifying and measuring outcomes

- Outcomes are **complex**
  - Outcomes usually need to be multi-dimensional
  - Each dimension can be difficult to assess
  - Isolation vs. loneliness

- Sometimes the only change to be expected is **deterioration**

- There are multiple and sometimes **competing** perspectives on outcomes
  - Maximising independence vs. minimising risk of harm
  - Improving the wellbeing of carers vs. service users

- Importance of process outcomes
  - Empowerment
  - Choice
Social care outcomes (ASCOT) domains

• Personal cleanliness and comfort
• Food and nutrition
• Safety
• Clean and comfortable accommodation
• Occupation
• Social participation and involvement
• Control over daily living
Impact of needs and services on Days Living at Home

Understanding outcomes requires controlling for risk factors

Source: Davies and Fernandez (2000)
Impact of needs and services on Days Living at Home

Source: Davies and Fernandez (2000)
Home care and day care effect on Days Living at Home

Risk factors might affect the impact of services

- Home care, user cannot do heavy housework
- Day care mild/sev cog imp
- Day care others

Source: Davies and Fernandez (2000)
Home care and day care effect on Days Living at Home

Source: Davies and Fernandez (2000)

- **Home care, user cannot do heavy housework:** 56.9% of recipients
- **Day care mild/sev cog imp:** 43.1% of recipients
- **Day care others:** 93% of recipients

Graph showing the relationship between level of service (£/week) and number of extra days. The graph includes data points for different levels of care services.
Heterogeneity of social care needs

- Physical health / disability
  - Problems with Activity of Daily Living (ADLs)
    - (housework, cooking, washing, feeding, transfer...)
- Mental health
  - Cognitive impairment
  - Depression
- Informal support networks
  - Amount of support
  - Nature of the interrelationship
  - Informal carers as resources and co-clients
- Other environmental factors
  - Housing
  - Safety
  - Local deprivation
- Personal traits
  - Self assurance
  - Aggressiveness
Social care linked to a complex network of support services

Do we have the right incentives in the system?
The Production of Welfare

**Need-related factors**
- User and carer characteristics
  - Dependency
  - Mental and physical health problems
  - Informal care support
- Environmental factors
  - Housing environment
  - Neighbourhood

**Outcomes**
- Loneliness
- Quality of life (users & carers)

**Services**
- Information and advice
- Befriending services
- Infrastructural investment
- Social care services
  - (home care; day care; meals; direct payments...)

We need a better understanding of the production of welfare process.
Long-term effects and costs

- Social care problems are often long-term
- Interventions are also often long-term
- The outcome effects of interventions are often slow to materialise
- And so too are some of the costs
Two key questions:
- Which interventions reduce the risk of loneliness?
- What are the consequences of reducing loneliness?

Further impacts on loneliness, health status, and service use.

Social care use:
- Other services...

Quality of life:
- Social isolation
The prevention evaluation challenge

Final outcomes

Quality of life

Service use

Social care

Other services

Time
Key principles for the evaluation of prevention (including loneliness prevention)

• Map all relevant resources use (intervention and other services)
• Map all relevant outcomes
• Map risk factors likely to affect isolation/loneliness
• Follow the intervention for a sufficient period of time
• Use methods which help identify the impact of the intervention
Identifying the effect of the intervention: controlling for needs and other confounders...

• Experimental set-ups
  • Random allocation of intervention to intervention group
  • Random allocation at the individual level or at the group level (e.g. geographical clustering)

• Difference in difference set-ups
  • Staged implementation (e.g. by area) with pre and post implementation data available
  • Disentangling the effect of policy changes through time from the effect of the intervention
  • Control, Intervention, before and after
  • Ideally individual level, but might be helpful at aggregate level too

• Matching strategies
  • Using alternative sources of data (from other areas; from national surveys)

• Regression methods
  • More powerful but more complex to apply
  • Can be used with some of the strategies above
  • Can identify strategies for improving targeting of resources
Generating and using evidence for policy and service development

• Matching evaluation strategies to policy scenario
  • Building business case before a *new intervention*
  • Evaluation of a new *scheme being implemented* or *piloting* of new ideas
  • Evaluation of *existing services*. Analysis at the margin.

• The *methods* and *data requirements* will *depend* on the nature of the intervention/aims of the evaluation

• Need to *integrate evaluation approach* into policy development process
Integrating evaluation activity into policy and practice processes

• Improving our *understanding of the relationship between needs, resources and loneliness*
  • *Is possible!*
  • *Key* to targeting interventions appropriately

• Increasing efforts *to summarise evidence* to help service development

• Potential for *strategic partnership* between research and policy and practice community
  • Common research objectives
  • Access to large amounts of new evidence
  • Opportunities to co-produce service/policy development