Identifying and supporting digitally excluded older people: the INCLUDE study

Liz Graham[1], Caroline Brundle[1], Kate Best[1], Jessica Johansson[1], Thomas Atkinson[1], Andrew Clegg[1], Anne Forster[1], Marilyn Foster[2], Sara Humphrey[3], Alison Iliff[4], Claire Walker[5]

[1]Academic Unit for Ageing and Stroke Research, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust / University of Leeds; [2]Lay Member; [3]Bradford District and Craven Health and Care Partnership; [4]North East and Yorkshire Region Office for Health Improvement and Disparities; [5]Age UK Leeds

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NHS Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Background

Digital exclusion is a super social determinant of health as it can affect many areas of life that influence health and wellbeing - for example, making appointments, banking, contacting family.

Older people are especially vulnerable to digital exclusion - for example, it can impact loneliness, poor housing and poor health.

Many voluntary and community organisations offer digital support or training, but this is not offered systematically and does not always reach those who are most in need of support, so exacerbating health inequalities.

The INCLUDE research study is designed to explore digital exclusion amongst older people and identify how their needs might be met.
It commenced in November 2023 and is due to complete in August 2026.

Aims

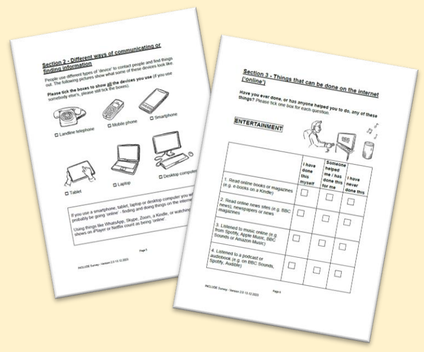
i) Using survey methods, develop a replicable method for identifying digitally excluded older people so that offers of support can be targeted.

ii) Refine then test an intervention (or interventions) to meet their needs.

Here we describe methods and early findings of the survey work.

Method

In March 2024 we sent a postal survey, via GP practices, to almost 6,000 people aged 65+ living in Bradford District and Craven.



It included questions about internet use (including 22 different online activities) and potential predictors of digital exclusion (e.g. age, ethnicity, socioeconomic deprivation, frailty). To increase inclusion, we telephoned some non-responders and attended community groups.

Preliminary findings

3,299 people aged 65+ completed the survey: **a response rate of >50%**

Characteristics

The majority of postal or phone respondents were White British. Most community group respondents were of Asian ethnicity. Age and gender characteristics are presented in the table below.

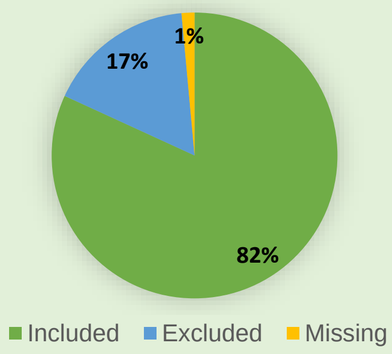
We defined digital exclusion as respondents not engaging in any online activities by themselves. **17%** of the respondents were **digitally excluded**.

Age and gender of all respondents

Characteristic	Postal / phone respondents N* (% of 2973)	Community group respondents N* (% of 315)
Age		
65-74	1538 (52.1)	231 (72.6)
75-84	1098 (37.2)	71 (22.6)
85+	315 (10.7)	12 (3.8)
Gender		
Female	1603 (54.2)	140 (44.4)
Male	1357 (45.8)	175 (55.6)

* 11 completed surveys are yet to be processed or were not suitable for analysis

Digital Exclusion status



Predictors of digital exclusion

Strongest predictors:
- Asian ethnicity*
- Frailty*
- Living in an IMD quintile 1 (most deprived) area*

Other predictors:
- Age*
- Living alone
- Health problems
- Using a walking aid
- Eyesight difficulties
- Hearing difficulties
- Memory difficulties
- Mood difficulties
- Not working
- English not first language

* Variables available in electronic health records

Impact

A predictive model, developed using survey data, will be implementable in primary care electronic health records, allowing identification of digitally excluded older adults to enable the targeting of support. This will contribute to a reduction in health inequalities, and increased independence and quality of life for older people.

Next stage of the project

With older people and providers of digital support services, we will co-produce a new approach to supporting older adults who are identified as being at risk of digital exclusion to get online.
More details can be found here: https://ageingstrokeresearch.org/research-projects/include/

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