

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STRANDED AGEING TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO NATIONALS IN THE UNITED STATES DUE TO COVID-19 BORDER CLOSURES

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced governments throughout the world to implement public health measures, such as border closures, to reduce the importation of the virus. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of ageing nationals from Trinidad and Tobago who were stranded abroad due to the Covid-19 border closures. This population has not been studied to date, and this study presents an original argument that Covid-19 has caused increased vulnerabilities in a population which experienced different risks before the pandemic. Findings show five main themes: the impact of Covid-19 on living conditions, psychological harm, social isolation, coping skills, and reliance on social support networks. The findings show the importance of strengthening social support mechanisms and practice models to support ageing people stranded abroad. The findings also underscore the need for policymakers to consider the harmful impact of public health measures on ageing populations before designing responses.

Keywords: COVID-19, ageing, Caribbean, stranded nationals, border closures

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Stranded Ageing Trinidad and Tobago Nationals in the United States due to COVID-19 Border Closures

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the lives of individuals, communities, and societies across the world (World Health Organisation, 2020). The crisis forced governments to implement public health measures to reduce the spread of the disease. These measures, including closure of borders and restrictions on individuals entering territories, were aimed at containment and reducing the importation of the virus and infections to other citizens. According to the International Organization for Migration (2020), by July 27, 2020, 219 territories and states had adopted a total of 74,680 Covid-19 -

related entry restrictions. The UN Committee on Migrant Workers and UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants (2020) stated that the border closures caused by Covid-19 were having unequal effects on nationals who may be abroad and their families located in other parts of the world. While some studies show that Covid-19 disproportionately impacts older adults (Daoust, 2020; Vahia et al., 2020), little is known about the impact of these border closures on elderly nationals who are stranded in another country. This study therefore fills this gap by exploring the impact of the border closures and immigration restrictions on ageing, that is, persons 60 years and older, Trinidad and Tobago nationals who have been stranded in the United States of America (U.S.) and the specific ways they have been affected by the pandemic. Currently, no other study has examined this population of concern. This understanding is critical as it uncovers challenges affecting the ageing population who were unable to return to their country of citizenship.

Contextualising Border Restrictions on Trinidad and Tobago

The first manifestation of Covid-19 related border restrictions in Trinidad and Tobago limited the entry of non-citizens for 14 days beginning on March 17, 2020. Non-nationals who desired to enter the country were required to seek authorisation from the Ministry of National Security and self-quarantine for 14 days. The government then enforced a total lockdown of its borders on midnight of March 22, 2020 to all individuals, including citizens. Citizens desiring to return to Trinidad and Tobago were required to apply for exemptions for re-entry. In recognition of the hardship nationals may face abroad, the government on August 5, 2020, authorized the release of \$200,000 U.S. dollars to several Trinidad and Tobago embassies to help nationals stranded abroad.

Local newspapers carried stories of many frustrated nationals who were unable to receive exemptions to return to the country due to lengthy bureaucratic processes (Kong Soo, 2021). While the government has since re-opened borders, other measures have been put in place to contain the importation of the virus by requesting some travellers enter being fully vaccinated, testing, and instituting quarantine measures.

In response to the border closures of the citizen's home country, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2020) indicated that visitors stranded in the U.S. were eligible to file applications for a change of status or to extend their current visa. In these cases, visitors were encouraged to file before the expiration of the visa. However, in the cases where the visas were expired, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2020) claimed that the pandemic would be taken into consideration when deciding whether to extend arrangements.

Literature Review

Current studies on border control relative to infectious diseases or pandemics have mainly focused on the impact of the border closure on economies (Boyd et al., 2017; Boyd et. al, 2018) and the effect of Covid-19 border closures on economic globalization and value chains (Hameiri, 2021; Gereffi, 2021). While there are some studies which examine Covid-19 and the elderly, there is no literature which explains the impact of border control on ageing populations. Existing studies which investigated the experiences of the elderly and Covid-19 include older adults' mood and expectations regarding ageing before and during the global pandemic (Whatley et al., 2020); religiosity and ageing

in times of Covid-19 (Hill et al., 2020); social isolation and ageing (Gorenko et al., 2020; Plagg et al. 2020); elder mistreatment (Elman et al., 2020); reduced economic and social support to the elderly (Ekoh et al., 2020); and external perceptions of ageing during the pandemic (Seifert, 2021). Many studies have also been conducted on the intersections of health, medicine, and ageing (Davoodi et al., 2020; Bianchetti et al., 2020; Niu et al., 2020).

Banerjee (2020) and Dahlberg (2021) argue that the process of ageing is associated with several psychological, social, and environmental vulnerabilities. Older adults may experience decreasing immunity and thus increased chances of infection. Cognitive deficits amongst older people might present them with other challenges in understanding the public health and safety measures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, older people institutionalised in residential care may be more exposed to risks which make them vulnerable to Covid-19 infections, including living in small spaces and lack of adequate supervision (Banerjee, 2020). Additionally, research has shown that the pandemic has influenced the mental health and psychosocial well-being of the elderly. These impacts include anxiety about health and dying, depression, stress, and insomnia (Girdhar et al., 2020). Social distancing and isolation may also lead to deleterious effects on the mental health of the elderly as it can trigger feelings of loneliness.

Santini et al. (2020) reported that the disconnectedness caused by social distancing presents risks of depression and anxiety to older adults. Radwan et al. (2020), Plagg (2020), and Ekoh et al. (2020) found that public health and social measures that encourage spatial distancing may reduce the contact that the elderly have with their social support networks such as children living nearby, community centres, adult day-care, and religious meetings; this has resulted in reduction of the material support to the elderly. Literature also shows the positive effects of exercise as a coping strategy for elderly during the pandemic (Girdhar, 2020).

Presently there are no studies which describe the effects of the Covid-19 border closures on ageing people who are unable to return to their country of citizenship. However, the brief literature review highlighted studies which examined the impact of Covid-19 on ageing populations, providing a contextual understanding of how older people have been experiencing Covid-19.

Method

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research seeks to explore how individuals and groups experience a phenomenon, how they “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Therefore, a phenomenological design was appropriate for this study as it allowed for the exploration of the experiences of ageing nationals as they shared how they lived and made meaning of the phenomenon of being stranded abroad due to the Covid-19 border closures.

Ten men and 10 women were recruited as participants in this study. Participants met the criteria of being Trinidad and Tobago nationals, over the age of 60, who were unable to return to Trinidad and Tobago before the Covid-19 border closures. Participants would also have had to apply for an exemption to return following the border closure via the stipulated process, which is, sending an email request to the Minister of National Security. Participants who were excluded from the study were those

who were under the age of 60, possess dual citizenship or resident status in the U.S., or those who did not apply for an exemption to return.

Participants were recruited for this study using purposive sampling with snowballing techniques. The researcher first contacted a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in the U.S. which provided support to nationals who were unable to secure exemptions to return to Trinidad and Tobago. The initial contact was made via a WhatsApp message and then details of the study, including the aims, objectives, and criteria for selection of participants were shared with the organisation via email. The organisation was asked to share the information with its members. Interested participants directly contacted the researcher by WhatsApp, telephone call, or email. Individuals were screened to ensure they met the inclusion criteria and provided with informed consent forms which they completed and submitted via email or WhatsApp. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the various measures to protect their confidentiality. Participants also shared the information with other persons they knew who were stranded in the U.S.; those willing to participate in the study contacted the researcher.

Data was collected between March 1, 2021 and April 14, 2021 using semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted via WhatsApp calls. Participants gave permission to audio record their interviews. Each participant chose a pseudonym for the purpose of the study. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed manually and analysed using content analysis.

Results

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic Details of Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Employment status	Date of Departure from Trinidad	Primary Purpose of Travel	Current living status
Ann Marie	Female	61	Entrepreneur	November 18, 2019	Needed medical attention	Living with cousin who is a U.S. citizen
Joan	Female	60	Post-retirement contract (Government agency)	February 14, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen
Mary	Female	80	Retired	March 01, 2020	Visiting relatives abroad	Living with relative who is a U.S. resident

Name	Gender	Age	Employment status	Date of Departure from Trinidad	Primary Purpose of Travel	Current living status
Hope	Female	65	Entrepreneur	January 29, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen
Mona	Female	67	Retired	March 9, 2020	Tourist	Living with a friend who is a U. S. resident
Lisa	Female	72	Retired	January 15, 2020	Needed medical attention	Living with relative who is a U.S. resident
Joy	Female	65	Retired	March 3, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is an undocumented migrant
Anita	Female	61	Retired	December 12, 2020	Child-care for ailing grand daughter	Living with daughter who is a U.S. citizen
Debbie	Female	60	Retired	February 23, 2020	Needed medical attention	Living with relative who is a U.S. resident
Jacinta	Female	72	Retired	February 25, 2020	Visiting relatives abroad	Living with relative who is a U.S. resident
Wayne	Male	60	Retired	March 10, 2020	Attending daughter's wedding	Living with newlywed daughter (U.S. resident) and family
Johnny	Male	65	Entrepreneur	February 25, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is a U.S. resident

Name	Gender	Age	Employment status	Date of Departure from Trinidad	Primary Purpose of Travel	Current living status
Dale	Male	65	Retired	February 17, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is an undocumented migrant
Brian	Male	62	Retired	November 30, 2020	Needed medical attention	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen
Boss	Male	70	Retired	February 23, 2020	Visit with relatives abroad	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen
Michael	Male	79	Retired	January 4, 2020	Needed medical attention	Living with a friend who is a U.S. resident
Mark	Male	71	Retired	March 1, 2020	Visit with relatives	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen
Rakesh	Male	62	Retired	March 7, 2020	Tourist	Living with relative who is undocumented
Joseph	Male	60	Retired	March 9, 2020	Tourist	Living with friend who is undocumented
Joel	Male	62	Retired	February 26, 2020	Needed medical attention	Living with relative who is a U.S. citizen

Note. The term *undocumented migrant* refers to foreign-born persons who were legally admitted to the country but overstayed time permitted by immigration authorities, or whose travel visa has expired.

Demographic Information

Participants

Data was collected from 10 men and 10 women, ages 60–80 years, who were stranded in the U.S. after the Covid-19 border closure. The status of the participants included retired (n=16), entrepreneurs (n=3), and one participant held a government post-retirement contract.

Primary Reasons for Travel to the U.S.

The primary reasons for travel abroad included the need for medical attention (n=6), travel as a tourist (n= 8), visiting relatives abroad (n=4), providing child-care to grandchildren (n=1), and attending a wedding (n=1).

Request for Exemptions

At the time of the data collection, all participants stated that they had submitted letters of request for exemptions to return to Trinidad and Tobago. Sixteen participants stated that they submitted more than two letters of request. Eighteen participants claimed to have received a response saying their requests were being given due attention. Two participants received exemption letters from the government to return to Trinidad and Tobago. However, several factors including the excessive cost of the repatriation flights, short period of time granted for the return, and need for Covid-19 tests to be conducted up to 72 hr prior to the return flight, prevented them from returning.

Challenges experienced by Ageing Nationals in the U.S.

Participants expressed that they faced multiple challenges because of not returning to Trinidad and Tobago. It is important to note that participants were asked to discuss how they viewed their experiences of vulnerability and risk before the border closures. All participants claimed that they did not view themselves as a vulnerable population before the pandemic. However, they all stated that following the border closure, they viewed their situations as presenting multiple risks to their economic, social, psychological, and physical well-being. Major themes which emerged were the economic hardships, physical challenges, psychological and emotional challenges, and social isolation.

Living Conditions

All participants in the study claimed to experience challenges to their living conditions, which included their ability to provide financially for themselves and challenges with housing. The data showed that persons traveling to the U.S. were on limited budgets which were planned for a specific duration of time. The findings indicated that the economic hardship led participants to become reliant on family, friends, and NGOs to meet the financial demands to support their extended stay abroad. According to Rakesh, this also placed a financial burden on family and relatives:

[Access to] money was really hard. When I leave Trinidad, I only planned to spend one month. So I had enough money to last me comfortable for one month and a little extra. I didn't know the borders could close-off just so. I don't know when I am coming back home. So, I stay at my cousin's house. But this causes financial stress on them too.

Unlike Rakesh, who has no medical issues, other participants who went for medical reasons explained that the cost of follow-up care was expensive in the U.S. and their sources of income were based on pensions which were provided to them in Trinidad and Tobago dollars. According to Joel:

I came up here for a medical procedure to be done. But my plan was to return to Trinidad once I was medically cleared for follow-up because to stay would mean I have to pay too much. The exchange rate is TTD [Trinidad and Tobago dollars] 6.78 to USD [U.S. dollars] 1.00. But now I

am stuck here, I am forced to beg for money from my family here and in Trinidad and Tobago to survive.

Fourteen participants in the study also revealed that they had pre-existing medical conditions, which required that they purchase prescription medication.

Eight participants also explained their financial challenges were complicated by the economic situation and shortage of foreign exchange in Trinidad and Tobago. Mary, Jacinta, and Boss claimed that they were in contact with family members in their home country who were willing to send them financial aid. However, their families were presented with challenges in getting U.S. dollars from the banks. Jacinta explained her situation:

My daughter has a job in marketing back home. She said sometimes she had to put her name on a list in her bank to get U.S. dollars. There is a shortage and the banks also put limits on credit cards.

The economic challenges and the uncertainty of her financial dependency were summed up by Joy:

I have no money. I rely on everybody to help me out- friends, family, strangers, people in churches- everybody. You don't know when you will get exemptions to go home- you don't know how long you have to keep begging people for money. If I get an exemption, I don't know how I will buy ticket.

Living Arrangements. All participants in the study at the time of data collection were living with relatives or friends in the U.S. However, the situation regarding the living arrangements differed based on the contacts and networks of the participants. When the borders closed, Joseph stayed in a small hotel which his daughter booked with her credit card. Since the closure of the borders, he continued to stay at the hotel for three additional weeks until his daughter could no longer support the payments. He was forced to leave the hotel. He explains:

I know I am a burden on my daughter. But when I realise she couldn't afford to pay for the hotel, I told her I met a friend from Trinidad and was invited to stay in his home. The truth is I started to live in the park or anywhere I could rest my head. Whatever money she sent me, I used it for food. But then she got suspicious. When I told her the truth two weeks later, she contacted everyone we knew and ask if they had a relative here that I could stay by.

For Joel, Michael, and Jacinta, their stay with friends and relatives allowed them temporary peace of mind. However, they felt that they were burdening their friends and relative, as there was no definite date of return for them and they did not have resources to contribute to those who have been supporting them. Joel stated:

I do not know when I will be returning. The truth is I have been living with a relative and they have been nice to me, but I am seeing them stressed out too because I am occupying their space and I am not sure how long I will be here. It is hard on me and on them because I cannot contribute to supporting myself. Sometimes there are tensions which comes up, I feel it, but nobody says anything bad to me.

The experience was different for participants who stayed with relatives or friends who were undocumented. They claimed that, in addition to the challenges they experienced, living with an undocumented person steepened their fear of raids and detention. According to Dale:

I am staying with a person who doesn't have his papers [undocumented immigration status]. He is under pressure sometimes to make ends meet. But I [am] frightened that the police or immigration doesn't make a raid and we end up in a detention centre. You hear all kinds of crazy things like that in the media.

Eleven of the participants also felt that their housing arrangements were tenuous for two reasons. Firstly, these participants thought that they were overly reliant on other people who could change their minds and put them out. Secondly, they missed the liberty to do as they pleased, as they would have done at home.

Psychological and Emotional Challenges

The participants in this study shared that they experienced psychological and emotional challenges because of being stranded in the U.S. This included frustration and depression exacerbated by loneliness and separation from their family and friends in Trinidad and Tobago. Mona uses words such as "feeling locked out," "abandoned," "stranded," and "heartbroken" to describe her state of mind. Other psychological challenges experienced by the participants included fear of contracting Covid-19 in a foreign country and feelings of anger towards their own government as well as rejection as they felt they were kept stranded because of government policies.

Depression and Loneliness

All participants claimed to be experiencing depression which was caused by loneliness and separation from their loved ones. Mary explained her depression was caused because she was battling feelings that she may never return to her country and see her friends and family. She explained:

As an 80-year-old, I am not sure what will happen and when. I come here to visit family. Although I am 80, I was healthy. But since the pandemic and closed borders, I wonder if I will ever be allowed to return home before I die. I worry about dying here. What will happen to me? I feel depressed. I am lonely, I miss home. I miss talking to my children and my grandchildren and the people in my church. I am so lonely that I cry.

Dale also stated:

I am old, but I am the man of the house. And I left my wife and children behind, I miss them. I feel lonely without them. This Covid thing real mash up my joy. I am stranded here, and I feel the frustration when I speak to my wife and children even more, because I know they are holding it together for me, but I know they are broken up about this.

Ann Marie, Mona, Brian, and Rakesh claimed that their depression and anxiety prevents them from sleeping at night. Brian states "my experience is that I go to bed and can't sleep until 4:00 a.m. Sometimes I don't sleep at all. I worry about going home, about whether I can make it through."

Anger and Feelings of Rejection

All participants expressed that they experienced feelings of anger towards the government for closing the borders and instituting what they considered to be unfair entry requirements. The anger shifted to feelings of rejection as 10 of the participants claimed that they felt that they have been neglected. Participants used words such as "abandoned," "rejected," "neglected," and "denied" to describe how

they felt about being unable to return to Trinidad and Tobago. According to Wayne “on a personal side I feel a huge rejection from our government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we are not allowed to come home.” This is exacerbated by their feelings that the process of acquiring permission to re-enter the country is burdensome and privileges some persons instead of others. According to Johnny:

We don't really know how people are being selected for exemptions to return. We don't know if they [the government] are looking for a special criteria, or if they are granting exemptions based on a first-come, first-serve basis. As an elderly person, I would think I would be first in line to return, because being here as an old person is hard. But I am angry about this! If there is no transparency, then how can I plan? When do I even think I can be on a flight back home.

Hope feels abandoned by the government and feels hurt she has not been allowed to return. Hope states:

I use to be happy to be from Trinidad and Tobago. Now I feel like I have been rejected. I have applied several times for exemptions to return. Twice I received acknowledgement letters saying my request was being processed. I feel hurt and rejected.

Living in Fear

All participants in this study expressed their fear of contracting Covid-19 while living in the U.S. The source of the fear is the high rates of infection of Covid-19 and subsequent associated deaths. Twelve of the participants disclosed that they had existing medical conditions which can further complicate their health and well-being if they were to contract Covid-19.

Joel highlighted the inequalities which existed in health services to foreign nationals in the U.S. and claimed that there are barriers to accessing health care. Joel summed up this point:

I am very afraid of contracting Covid-19 here [United States]. If I get the virus here, there is no way I can afford health services. I don't have travel insurance or medical insurance at home. So this means I must find the money to pay for my healthcare if I contract Covid-19. It is frustrating and depressing here. Every day I feel more and more depressed.

Exiled

Brian, Anita, Hope, and Joy used the word “exile” to describe how they felt about their inability to return to Trinidad and Tobago. When asked to clarify what exile meant, Brian responded:

Well it means just that. Like when you are not allowed home because of something you did wrong. I don't understand what I did wrong, but I feel exiled. It's like being kept away from your own country because they don't want you there.

Exile for Anita meant:

Being banished. Like you lose your connection to your country. I read the posts on social media, and I see my own country men and women... I see where they make comments that the government should leave us because they don't want any virus. That is almost like hate language... towards your own fellow citizens. So I feel like an exile and it is not only because of government. It is many people too.

Here Anita also raises issues of condemnation by citizens in Trinidad and Tobago, who are not aware of their challenges and are fearful that opening the borders will result in the importation of the virus.

Social Challenges

Participants believed that the public health and social measures meant to restrict the spread of the Covid-19 virus also had a negative effect on them. Seventeen of the participants identified feelings of isolation and separation as major challenges affecting them. Having left behind friends and social circles, the participants shared that the pandemic restrictions prevented social activities and socialising. Three participants, Dale, Joan, and Mona believed that the cultural differences between life in Trinidad and Tobago and life in the U.S. also perpetuated the social challenges. According to Joan:

With the pandemic we have to stay inside most of the times. I don't really know plenty people here. So, it's kind of boring. Life back home is different. Everybody knows everybody in the street or village. Even in the pandemic, I know neighbours might visit neighbours, or send some food. In the United States, the culture is different. People go about their business and don't always stop to make friends. I miss my friend circles and my social circles too. Like my women's church group and the family time.

Mark agreed that most elderly people were affected by the social distancing measures, regardless of whether they were in their own country or abroad. However, he explained that the social networks which offered protection to the elderly in their own country were not present for those stranded abroad. He stated:

I think no matter where you live, as an elderly person, the Covid would affect you. Especially make you feel lonely and isolated with all the social distancing. But if you live in your own country at least you will have the access to the things that protect you against isolation. Like your children living close or your friends and social groups. You don't have those things here, and the isolation makes the stay here even worse.

Ways of Coping

The study sought to explore the methods of coping used by stranded ageing Trinidad and Tobago nationals in the U.S. The central themes showed that participants used digital technologies and spirituality as ways of coping with the challenges of being stranded abroad. Eleven participants identified the use of social media technologies as a way of reducing the space between themselves and their loved ones in Trinidad and Tobago. These participants shared that the frequent use of WhatsApp and Facebook allowed them to keep in contact with family members and friends. They also shared that they had more time to use and learn the technology, so they learnt skills in making use of digital resources. Digital technology also provided them with opportunities to stay in touch with current affairs in Trinidad and Tobago via online newspaper platforms and virtual radio programmes. However, nine of the participants had limited access to social media and claimed they were unfamiliar with the use of digital technologies. These participants used the telephone to maintain contact, but the calls were infrequent because of the cost.

Spirituality was also used as a way of coping with the challenges brought about by the border closures. Michael expressed that he was able to cope thus far by placing his faith in a higher being. This, he claimed, reduced his anxiety about death and dying and helped him to cope with the uncertainty of return. He stated:

Well, I pray. When I start panicking about not having money or where to stay or when I miss my family, I just start to pray I call on my God to deliver me. My faith has helped me through this ordeal... when I have no idea when I can go home or how people back home are making it. So far, my God has not failed me yet.

Debbie has used the practice of yoga and meditation to reduce her levels of anxiety and stress. She claims

I do yoga and I meditate often. This is a skill I picked up from YouTube because I needed to find a way to cope with the frustration. I try deep breathing before I go to sleep, it helps a lot.

Sources of Support

This study found that all participants were aware that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago extended humanitarian assistance to nationals who are unable to return due to the closure of the country's borders. A total of 14 participants applied for the grant, however, only three participants were able to access the grants, and six participants claimed that they did not apply for several reasons including being dissuaded by the information that the grants were limited and would be processed on a case-by-case basis or the belief that there would be preferential treatment in the disbursement of the funds. Participants also described the process of applying for the grant as restrictive and inaccessible by most elderly who did not have the ability to download forms and meet deadlines stipulated in the application process.

Other sources of support received came from organisations which supported Trinidad and Tobago nationals in the U.S., church-based organisations which were connected to the Caribbean diaspora, food banks, and charitable persons. Participants also claimed that they received help in the form of food hampers from individuals in the U.S. who had a connection to the Caribbean, such as persons who were migrants or had relatives in the Caribbean.

Discussion and Implications for Social Work

The present study's findings show that the experiences of ageing nationals stranded in the U.S. have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 border closures. This study contributes to research in the fields of social work and immigrant older adults, as well as the Covid-19 research in the Caribbean. The findings shows that Covid-19 has added to the risks of older adults and show that the related public health restrictions have led to the creation of a new vulnerable group in the Caribbean, and perhaps in other parts of the world.

One of the themes generated in this research highlighted the challenges to the living conditions of the participants. These include financial vulnerability and the negative impact on their living conditions, including reliance on others for housing, challenges in accessing medicine, and meeting their material needs. This theme is present in literature related to the elderly (Daoust, 2020, Ekoh et al., 2020), however, the inability to return home has steepened the vulnerabilities of ageing nationals

stranded abroad. The participants in this study were particularly troubled by the economic crisis in Trinidad and Tobago which limited their access of U.S. dollar transfers from family members and the foreign exchange rate which prevented family members from accessing funds to transfer abroad. Their dependability on others for housing also presented a challenge. Participants who shared housing accommodations with undocumented family members expressed steepened anxieties because of fear of raids and detention. The fact that stranded individuals applying for visa extensions were required to declare their address and who they reside with was perceived as a threat to undocumented family members who provided them with temporary shelter.

The present study's findings also show how the psychological and emotional impact of the Covid-19 pandemic were amplified for stranded ageing nationals. While other studies detail the psychological and emotional impact of Covid-19 on the elderly (D'cruz & Banerjee, 2020; Dahlberg, 2021; Santini et al. 2020), this study shows how some of the elderly also feel a sense of rejection and exile by the government and people of Trinidad and Tobago for not allowing them to return.

Social isolation is also a theme discussed in literature about ageing and the Covid-19 social distancing measures (Gorenko et al., 2020; Plagg et al., 2020; Radwan et al., 2020; Ekoh et al., 2020). Ageing nationals remaining in their home country have the benefit of being in the same country with their social networks. The border closures and inability of ageing nationals to return to Trinidad and Tobago have presented different risks to ageing nationals, since they have left much of their traditional social support networks behind. This is nuanced by the difficulty in developing other supportive network during a pandemic and in another country.

Despite the challenges facing stranded ageing nationals, which were amplified due to the pandemic, some participants were able to use strategies to cope with the adversities. These coping strategies include spirituality, exercise, and meditation. The use of digital technologies was also used by participants who had access to the internet and felt comfortable with its use. Participant also benefited from emotional and material support from social networks such as churches, NGOs, community organisations, and other agencies.

Implications for Future Research

Covid-19 public health measures, including the closure of international borders have amplified the challenges of nationals abroad. While this study provides insights into the lived experiences of the elderly who were stranded abroad and provided a descriptive analysis of their experiences, there is need for further research to be conducted from a rights-based approach. The human rights approach will broaden the scope of this study to examine the structures of the society and national and international policies which contribute to challenges faced by ageing nationals who are stranded abroad. According to Ife (2012), a rights-based approach challenges researcher to examine private troubles as public issues and go beyond addressing individual needs into changing oppressive policies that challenges access to basic human rights.

This study was exploratory in nature and focused on the experiences of the general population of elderly nationals stranded abroad. There is a need for further research to be conducted with other vulnerable groups of nationals stranded abroad, including women, children, and persons living with

disabilities. By focusing research on these different groups, researchers can develop an understanding of the intersectional experiences of special populations.

There is also a need for research on the nature of support rendered to stranded ageing Trinidad and Tobago nationals in the U.S. This study uncovered that some support was received by nationals abroad from NGOs and other concerned organisations. This investigation should also extend to understanding the support and provisions made by insurance companies through travel insurance, if any. An outcome could be for amendments to address individuals stranded due to pandemics.

Implications for Social Work

This article presents an exploration of the experiences of stranded ageing nationals from Trinidad and Tobago in the U.S. This population has not been studied by any other researcher to date, and therefore presents an original argument as to the imperatives for social work to address the needs of this population. The research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic and the public health and safety measures, in this case border closures, have presented risks to a population which was previously not associated with social risks.

The study shows the need for a “wraparound” model in social care to be established during the pandemic for stranded travellers and the families who are in their home country. While current social work support may be provided either internationally or nationally, a wraparound model promotes transnational care. This requires that care be provided from multiple providers in multiple geographical settings for both the stranded traveller and the families, such as children, in their home country.

This study also shows the need for the use of a strengths-based approach, rather than the use of a medical model. The strengths-based approach will allow for positive partnership amongst all stakeholders in addressing the needs of this population, rather than a focus on pathologies or problems associated with failures and illnesses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only impacted public health, but also created new social problems. Therefore, understanding of the lived experiences of this population can further inform social workers as to the expressed and felt needs of this population. Social work should address the range of issues indicated in the findings of this study beyond traditional approaches used for intervention with ageing populations, as this situation is new and unique. The findings will help policymakers to formulate appropriate interventions and policies to assist this high-risk group.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. The main limitation is the use of telephone interviews to collect the data. This, at time, posed some difficulties for the participants’ hearing and being heard clearly. To minimize this limitation, the researcher spoke slowly, and repeated as many times as possible as necessary to be heard. The researcher also asked the participants to repeat anything that they said that was not audible.

Another limitation of this study is that all participants were in the U.S. As a result, one should be cautious in generalising the findings to persons stranded in other countries or representing the experiences of all Trinidad and Tobago nationals who are stranded in the U.S. due to the border closures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The profession of social work is committed to practice approaches which uphold the value of social justice, fairness, and equity. It is crucial to recognize the vulnerabilities, challenges, and social inequities which persist in the lives of older people who have not been able to return to their country. The findings in this study emphasizes the need for social workers to give critical attention and support to the elderly, and for future public health planning to analyse the negative impact of instituting border control as a method of containment. Policymakers have focused their attention on using a medical model of disease management to generate policies, without understanding that these containment measures may create new vulnerable groups.

There is a need for measures to be implemented to address the challenges of elderly nationals stranded abroad. These recommendations include the need for support for the elderly to improve their living conditions, psychosocial support for dealing with the trauma and emotional effects of being stranded abroad, and the need for the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to develop a return support and processes which identifies the older persons stranded abroad as a vulnerable population and provide support subsequent to their return as part of the overall Covid-19 plan for citizens.

In conclusion, social workers and practitioners providing services to stranded elderly nationals must act in ways that champion the social justice and human rights needs of the population. Social work practice, too, should take on a transnational approach, or wraparound model that will connect the intervention with families which may be in different countries due to the pandemic. The findings also underscore the need for policymakers to consider the potential harmful impact of public health measures on ageing populations before designing responses. Further, the protection for persons who are stranded abroad, and even once they make their return, should be monitored for any residual medium to long term negative impact to their well-being. Interventions aimed at improving the conditions of ageing stranded nationals must go beyond addressing the physical needs of the population, but also include meeting their mental health, social, and economic health.

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