

# Ethnicity and Inclusive Ageing: Study Findings and Recommendations



## Summary

- Recognising the UK's increasingly diverse ageing population, the study focused on inclusion and exclusion from the perspectives of racially minoritised older people. It used mixed methods and a place-based, lifecourse approach to explore ethnicity and ageing in Rotherham and Sheffield.
- Statistical analysis revealed how ethnicity interacts with other characteristics, including gender and class, resulting in significant inequalities in work, education, housing and health that have cumulative effects on wellbeing in later life.
- Qualitative research involved two-stage biographical interviews with 80 racially minoritised older people, participatory creative workshops, and engagement with local stakeholders.
- Research findings highlighted that racially minoritised older people have strong connections to place and want meaningful roles in shaping local communities.
- The impact of racism over the lifecourse and in later life was evident. Participants described how the fear or experience of racism affected their everyday lives, access to services and wellbeing.
- The findings confirmed that community organisations play a vital role in providing inclusive spaces and supporting older people, but are underfunded and undervalued. Older people welcomed opportunities to connect with people from different ages and backgrounds, as a means of building mutual understanding and tackling loneliness and isolation.
- Insights from the research provide recommendations for designing services and developing communities that are inclusive and make effective use of resources.

## Introduction

Against a backdrop of prevailing societal ageism, policy agendas designed to foster more inclusive ageing have gained traction in recent years, as the population ages. These agendas increasingly acknowledge the importance of a lifecourse perspective, understanding later-life positionings as cumulative of advantage and disadvantage over time. But, older people's lifecourses have been treated in homogenised ways. This means that vital intersections between ageing and ethnicity, and between ageism and racism, have been missed. The result is that the needs of racially minoritised older people often go unrecognised and their voices unheard.

The "[Ethnicity and Unequal Ageing](#)" project addressed the urgent need to understand inclusion and exclusion from the perspectives of racially minoritised older people. Providing policymakers, service providers and practitioners with evidence-based insights into what can be done to promote inclusive ageing helps:

- Design services that meet everyone's needs
- Foster inclusive communities
- Support more effective use of resources

# Aims and Approach

## Research aims and objectives

Working in partnership with racially minoritised communities, the project aimed to transform understandings of inclusive ageing and inform policy and practice. The key objectives were to:

- Explore how older people from different racially minoritised backgrounds experience social inclusion and exclusion
- Analyse how ethnicity intersects with other characteristics to affect experiences of inclusion and exclusion over the lifecourse
- Examine how place affects experiences of inclusion and exclusion
- Identify steps to promote inclusive ageing across racially minoritised groups

## Our approach

The project was an exciting co-produced and cross-sectoral collaboration with community researchers, local organisations and people with lived experience, to shape and undertake the research, engaging groups whose views are seldom heard. We adopted an [intersectional](#), place-based, lifecourse approach, to examine exclusion and inclusion of older racially minoritised people.

## Methods

The research used a novel mix of methods, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative participatory methods.

**Quantitative analysis:** We applied advanced quantitative techniques to analyse data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, focusing on intersections of different social characteristics to measure inequalities in work-life trajectories and physical and mental health. We also analysed 2011 and 2021 Census data to produce [reports](#) highlighting disparities in ageing and ethnicity in relation to education, housing and employment in Rotherham and Sheffield.

Primary data collection in Rotherham and Sheffield involved:

**Biographical interviews:** We conducted two-stage interviews with 80 individuals (aged 50+) from Muslim, African, Roma and Irish backgrounds. We used 'go-along' interviews' (also known as walking interviews); followed by life-history interviews to reflect our place-based lifecourse approach.

**Creative co-production:** We held 12 participatory arts-based workshops (theatre, dance, poetry, ceramics) in each location. Forty participants collectively explored inclusive ageing, culminating in [exhibitions, performance and documentaries](#).

**Stakeholder engagement:** We undertook 15 individual interviews and three group meetings with local and regional policymakers, service providers and practitioners. These explored service provision for older racially minoritised people from the perspectives of stakeholders.

# Findings

## Quantitative analysis

Our analysis of longitudinal data revealed how ethnicity interacts with characteristics including gender and class, resulting in unequal experiences in employment and physical and mental health across the lifecourse. We identified distinct work-life trajectories among ethnic groups and revealed widening physical health gaps, with notable generational differences in mental health.

We also used Census data to produce [place-based reports](#) on ageing and ethnicity for Rotherham and Sheffield. Key findings were:

- Almost 1 in 5 people in the region are now aged 65 and over, with those aged 80+ representing the fastest-growing age group.
- Rotherham is home to 252 distinct ethnic groups and Sheffield is home to 286 distinct ethnic groups. While older age groups remain predominantly White British, in the last decade there has been growing diversity among the older population in both Rotherham and Sheffield. This diversity will increase as more people from different ethnic groups reach retirement, contributing to a more diverse older population in both places over the next decade.
- Ageing is not an equal process. Ethnicity remains a powerful marker of inclusion with clear disparities across housing, education and employment. However, patterns are not even, reflecting complex histories of migration and racialisation.
- Racially aggravated crime quadrupled in the decade to 2022.

## Qualitative research

Qualitative findings highlighted four recurring themes in narratives of inclusion and exclusion:

### 1) Significance of the local

“ We should all be trying to create a better place where we can grow old together ”

[Research participant]

Older people considered local places inclusive when they had a sense of 'belonging', being 'respected' and feeling valued.

Safety was paramount, with participants avoiding certain places due to experiencing or fearing racist harassment or violence. Local neighbourhoods, estates and communities were viewed as more inclusive than city centres, where affordable social spaces for older people are limited, or large retail parks, which can be inaccessible. Changes in places affected older participants' experiences of inclusion over time. Austerity and under-investment had contributed to decline in neighbourhoods, with fewer shops, cafes and shared spaces, and poorer public transport. This resulted in the depletion of infrastructure that supports meaningful social connections, leading to concerns about high levels of loneliness and isolation.

Older racially minoritised populations have strong connections to place. They wanted meaningful roles in shaping local communities, rather than what they saw as 'tokenistic' consultation.

## 2) Impact of racism on ageing experiences

“ I’ve had some bad experiences with racism and it’s not only me, so many people ”

[Research participant]

The cumulative impact of racism across the lifecourse shaped older people’s everyday routines and practices. Participants discussed hostilities ranging from rudeness, unkindness or lack of care or attention, to direct aggression when using shops, public transport or going for walks in their local area.

Racism also shaped their experiences in education, employment, health care, housing services, public transport, leisure facilities and other services, impacting wellbeing in later life. Participants expressed disappointment at the lack of progress in tackling racism in recent years. Some felt that the gains from multicultural policies, which had fostered inclusion in previous decades, had been eroded.

## 3) Community organisations as anchors of inclusive ageing

“ If we didn’t exist, all these people would go to the local authority... and we are doing it free of charge ”

[Community organisation leader]

Community and civic organisations led by racially minoritised groups are vital for supporting older people. Often established decades ago to provide spaces to socialise, preserve heritage and respond to racism and lack of

government support, these anchor organisations play a key role in supporting diverse communities. For example, they provide health information, advocacy, legal and financial advice, translation and interpretation for older people. They tackle loneliness through community activities, affordable lunches and outreach to isolated residents.

Despite their essential support for older racially minoritised groups, often filling the gaps in statutory provision, these organisations are struggling financially and many have closed due to lack of funds. They commonly felt that their contribution to local communities is not adequately resourced and that they are not treated as equal partners with other stakeholders.

## 4) Connecting within and across generations

“ We need more spaces for people of all ages and social groups to come together ”

[Research participant]

Older people valued connections with friends, family and wider communities. They welcomed opportunities this project brought to engage with people from different ages and backgrounds they would not normally meet. Similarly, younger people who attended [performances](#) were enthusiastic about sharing experiences with older generations from different backgrounds. These connections were identified as a means of tackling loneliness and isolation across the generations, sharing knowledge and fostering a sense of belonging. They were considered especially valuable at times of transition in older people’s lives and for recently arrived racially minoritised older people who face the challenge of building their lives in new places.

## Participatory Research Practice: Immediate Impacts

### Commitment to sensitive engagement and creative coproduction delivered immediate benefits in Rotherham and Sheffield

**Inclusion and wellbeing:** Evaluation showed bringing people from diverse ages and backgrounds together for creative workshops built mutual understanding, reduced loneliness and led to ongoing friendships and self-led activities.

**Community cohesion:** The performances and exhibitions at local venues generated positive feedback from residents and stakeholders, who reported better understanding of experiences of older racially minoritised groups.

**Capacity building:** Training and employing a team of community researchers was effective in making connections with older populations and developing local skills, networks and employment opportunities.

**Sustainability:** Collaboration enhanced capacity and financial sustainability among community organisations. Utopia Theatre continued to run inclusive ageing workshops. Sheffield and District African and Caribbean Community Association secured National Lottery Community Fund to provide community day care.

## Recommendations

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### Develop policies that reflect diversity, lived experience and lifecourse dynamics

- Develop a clearer picture of ageing populations at local, regional and national level by examining how multiple characteristics affect ageing.
- Understand how ethnicity intersects with gender, class, migration history and religion in everyday life to help make services and spaces inclusive for all older people.
- Take a strategic, long term approach across broad-ranging policies to promote inclusive ageing across the lifecourse.
- Embed anti-racist practices across services and spaces for older people to challenge all forms of racism.

### Support community organisations

- Support the role of community organisations as anchors of inclusion, providing advocacy, inclusive spaces and connections across communities and institutions.
- Adequately resource these groups by reducing bureaucratic complexity and rules geared towards large organisations.
- Improve the effectiveness of expenditure to foster inclusive ageing by moving from small project-based pots towards more sustainable core funding for community organisations.
- Facilitate regular collaboration between community organisations and local authorities.

### Foster inclusive, age-friendly places and services

- Prioritise safe, accessible, affordable spaces and inclusive public transport in local planning.
- Recognise the time, resources and skills that older people from racially minoritised groups continue to contribute to their neighbourhoods.
- Facilitate and resource meaningful inclusion of older racially minoritised communities in service design and decision-making that builds on their knowledge and lived experience.
- Focus more attention on the experiences of racially minoritised older people in community safety strategies.

### Promote inclusive ageing through language

- Recognise the practical, community-building and expressive roles of language in promoting inclusive ageing. See our [briefing on language provision](#) for details.

### Catalyse meaningful connections

- Support opportunities for meaningful connections across diverse older groups and younger generations to tackle loneliness and isolation.
- Use arts and creative activities to bring people of all ages and backgrounds together to foster mutual understanding and promote inclusive ageing.
- Build on what works well to cultivate self-sustaining peer networks.

### Contact

Professor Majella Kilkey, University of Sheffield.  
Email: [M.Kilkey@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:M.Kilkey@sheffield.ac.uk)

### Further information available at:

<https://www.ethnicityandunequalageing.ac.uk/>

<https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/series/ethnicity-and-unequal-ageing>

### Ethnicity and Unequal Ageing Project Research Team

Investigators: University of Sheffield: Majella Kilkey, Jo Britton, Dan Holman, Lois Orton, Aneta Piekut, Alan Walker; University of Birmingham: Matt Bennett; University of Liverpool: Mark Green; Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance: Azizzum Akhtar; Sheffield and District African-Caribbean Community Association: Olivier Tsemo; Office for National Statistics: Jesse Ransley. Research Associates at The University of Sheffield: Rashida Bibi, Helena M. Constante. Community Researchers at The University of Sheffield: Muetesim Abdel, Anmol Ahmed, Yasmeen Ali, Saraya Begum, Olga Fuseini, Gambia Gambia, Lucka Ginova, Sithule Mguni, Hawa Yatera.

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