

# **More Lonely Abroad? Loneliness Among Mid-Life and Older Indian Migrants in the Uk Compared to Host and Origin Populations**

Dr Mengxing Joshi

Population and Health Research Group, School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews  
[mm525@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:mm525@st-andrews.ac.uk)

## **Background**

Loneliness is increasingly recognised as a global public health concern, with mounting evidence linking it to adverse health and social outcomes. Within high-income countries, research consistently shows that ethnic minority/immigrant populations are at greater risk of loneliness compared to their ethnic majority/native-born counterparts. However, a crucial gap in this literature remains: no study has examined how loneliness levels among immigrants compare not only to host-country populations but also to non-migrant populations in their countries of origin.

Victor et al. (2012) were the first to explore loneliness among ethnic minority older adults in the UK. Since then, research in this area has grown (Joshi et al., 2024). Yet, the question they raised over a decade ago remains largely unaddressed: “*How do levels of loneliness [of immigrants] compare with those demonstrated by older people in the countries of origin?*” (Victor et al., 2012, p.74).

## **Aim and Research Questions**

This study responds directly to that question, aiming to examine and compare the prevalence and predictors of loneliness across three older adult groups: Indian migrants living in the UK, Indians residing in India, and White British adults. Furthermore, it seeks to develop hypotheses for future research by situating the findings within broader conceptual and theoretical frameworks on loneliness, migration, and social wellbeing. Furthermore, it also aims to generate hypotheses for future research on ageing, migration and social wellbeing based on conceptual and theoretical discussion.

To address these aims, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Do Indian migrants living in the UK report higher or lower levels of loneliness compared to Indians residing in India and White British adults?
2. To what extent do established predictors of loneliness—such as general health, socioeconomic status, social participation, and living arrangements—differ in their associations with loneliness across these three groups?
3. What potential explanations for differences in loneliness across the three groups can be drawn from existing conceptual and theoretical literature, and how might these inform future research hypotheses?

## **Methodology**

This study uses harmonised, nationally representative data from two sources: the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) Wave 1 (2017–2019) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) Wave 9 (2017–2019). The analytic sample includes individuals aged 45 and above from three groups: Indian migrants in the UK (n = 277) and White British adults (n = 19,463), drawn from UKHLS, and Indians residing in India (n = 67,454), drawn from LASI. Variables were harmonised across datasets, and the two datasets were pooled for comparative analysis. The outcome variable is loneliness, captured through a harmonised binary measure derived from self-reported items in each study. Key independent variables include demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, employment status, partnership status), health status (self-rated general health), and social factors (living alone, social participation, and religion).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to compare the prevalence of loneliness and its associated factors across the three groups. Second, binary logistic regression models assessed group differences in loneliness (RQ1), controlling for covariates. Third,

stratified logistic regression models were estimated separately for each group to examine variation in predictors of loneliness (RQ2). Survey weights were normalised within each dataset to account for sampling design and enable valid pooled analysis. Finally, findings were interpreted in light of existing literature on ageing, migration, and loneliness to explore conceptual explanations and propose future research directions (RQ3).

### Key Arguments and Evidence

#### 1. Indian migrants in the UK report significantly higher levels of loneliness than both Indians residing in India and White British adults.

Victor et al. (2012) proposed two hypotheses regarding expected loneliness levels among immigrant populations: (1) that loneliness prevalence would be similar across migrants and their non-migrant counterparts in the country of origin due to shared cultural backgrounds, or (2) that migrants might experience lower loneliness than their counterparts in the country of origin as a result of adaptation to British cultural norms, an individualism society where loneliness is generally less prevalent.

The findings of this study challenge both assumptions. Descriptive results show that 45% of Indian migrants in UK report loneliness, compared to 33% of Indians residing in India and 32% of White British adults (Figure 1). Logistic regression analyses, controlling for key demographic, health, and social factors, further confirm that Indian migrants in UK are significantly more likely to report loneliness. Compared to them, Indians in India (OR = 0.463, 95% CI: 0.354–0.605) and White British adults (OR = 0.458, 95% CI: 0.350–0.599) have lower odds of loneliness.

These results underscore the importance of examining loneliness in a transnational framework and suggest that neither cultural similarity nor adaptation alone adequately explains loneliness risk among ageing migrant populations.

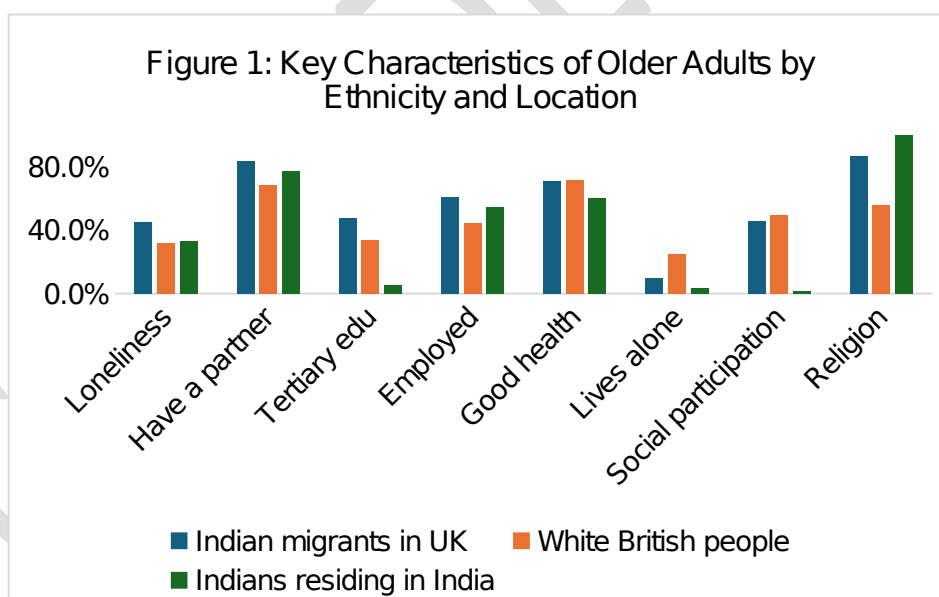


Table 1: Summary of significant predictors of loneliness across three groups

	Indian migrants in UK	White British adults	Indians residing in India
Age		Sig	
Sex		Sig	
Have a partner		Sig	Sig
Education			Sig
Employment		Sig	Sig

Self-rated general health	Sig	Sig	Sig
Lives alone		Sig	Sig
Religion			Sig
Social participation		Sig	

*Notes: This table indicates which predictors of loneliness were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) in stratified binary logistic regression models conducted separately for each group. "Sig" denotes a significant association between the predictor and reported loneliness within each group. Full model results, including odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and model fit statistics, will be presented in the full paper.*

## **2. The predictors of loneliness differ across the three groups studied, highlighting the need for context-specific understanding of loneliness risk.**

Self-rated general health emerges as the only consistent predictor across all groups, reaffirming the well-established link between poor health and heightened vulnerability to loneliness. In contrast, other factors show notable variation (Table 1). For example, living alone is a significant risk factor for loneliness among White British adults and Indians residing in India, but not for Indian migrants in the UK. Social participation is significantly associated with reduced loneliness only for White British adults, but not for the other groups. Education and religion show significance only in the Indian India group. These differences suggest that the mechanisms driving loneliness may be shaped by social context, migration experiences, and cultural meanings of social connection—supporting the need for disaggregated approaches in both research and policy.

Notably, aside from health, none of the commonly cited predictors are significantly associated with loneliness among Indian migrants in UK. While this may partly reflect limited statistical power due to small sample size, it may also signal that conventional predictors—established largely in general or majority populations—fail to capture key dimensions of loneliness risk for ageing migrants. This points to the potential importance of migration-specific or culturally embedded factors (e.g., experiences of discrimination, cultural dislocation, transnational family ties), calling for future research and interventions tailored to the unique circumstances of older migrants.

## **3. Despite higher socioeconomic status, Indian migrants in the UK report the highest loneliness, suggesting that beyond traditional risk factors, structural exclusion, disrupted social ties, identity strain, and unmet expectations may contribute to loneliness.**

One observation is that Indian migrants in UK, tend to have higher education levels, better employment status, and stronger partnership rates than their Indian counterparts, and even more favourable profiles than the White British majority (Figure 1). This may reflect immigration selection, where individuals with greater financial, social, or human capital are more likely to migrate, as well as the positioning of Indians in the UK as a 'model minority'—a group often perceived as demonstrating strong upward socioeconomic mobility." However, they still report significantly higher levels of loneliness, which is somewhat counterintuitive

These apparent advantages do not translate into lower loneliness risk. While the current datasets limit the ability to test explanatory mechanisms directly, several theoretical and empirical perspectives from the literature offer insight into this paradox.

First, socioeconomic mobility does not necessarily shield individuals from social exclusion. Even well-educated and employed migrants may face discrimination, cultural insensitivity in services, and limited access to meaningful social resources. The framing of Indians as a "model minority" within the UK context may further obscure these struggles, masking emotional vulnerability and making structural exclusion harder to detect or address.

Second, migration often disrupts long-standing forms of social embeddedness (Ryan et al., 2008). In India, older adults—even those of lower socioeconomic status—are frequently supported by

multigenerational households and tightly knit community networks. Indian migrants in UK may lose access to these embedded forms of social support, facing instead a more individualised and less cohesive social environment. The absence of extended family ties and familiar cultural rituals can exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Third, Indian migrants may experience identity strain as they navigate life between cultures. Often, they are not fully accepted into the dominant British culture, nor are they seamlessly connected to their cultural roots in the same way they might have been in India. This sense of “in-betweenness” can erode feelings of belonging (Koehn et al., 2022). At the same time, the pressure to succeed or appear well-integrated may suppress expressions of emotional need, reinforcing the invisibility of their loneliness.

Finally, loneliness among Indian migrants may reflect a mismatch between expectations and lived experience. Migrants with higher levels of social, financial, or educational capital may anticipate greater social inclusion or fulfilment in the host society. When these expectations are unmet—due to racism, exclusion, or cultural dissonance—the resulting loneliness may be especially acute. In this view, loneliness emerges not only from external circumstances but from the emotional gap between what life was expected to be and what it has become.

These interpretations highlight the complexity of loneliness in migrant populations and underscore the need for future research that incorporates variables capturing discrimination, cultural identity, expectations, and transnational social ties. Understanding loneliness among migrants requires looking beyond traditional socioeconomic indicators and engaging with the nuanced social and cultural dynamics of migration and ageing.

### **References:**

- Joshi, M., Finney, N., & Hale, J. M. (2024). Loneliness and social isolation of ethnic minority/immigrant older adults: A scoping review. *Ageing & Society*, Published online 2024.
- Koehn, S., Ferrer, I., & Brotman, S. (2022). Between loneliness and belonging: narratives of social isolation among immigrant older adults in Canada. *Ageing & Society*, 1-21.
- Ryan, L., Sales, R., Tilki, M., & Siara, B. (2008). Social networks, social support and social capital: The experiences of recent Polish migrants in London. *Sociology*, 42(4), 672-690.
- Victor, C., Burholt, V., & Martin, W. (2012). Loneliness and ethnic minority elders in Great Britain: an exploratory study. *Journal of cross-cultural gerontology*, 27(1), 65-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-012-9161-6>