

## Aging Alone in Malaysia: Social Challenges and Legal Protections

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**Abstract:** According to The Japan Times, nearly 28,000 elderly individuals in Japan will die alone in the first half of 2024. This alarming trend is not unique to Japan; many countries, including Malaysia, are facing the challenges of an aging population. As Malaysia approaches becoming an aging nation, issues affecting the elderly, particularly those living alone, demand urgent attention. While not all elderly people face the same circumstances, some enjoy stable finances or live with their family, while others live in isolation due to various factors, such as remaining unmarried, widowhood, or estranged familial ties. Some are simply separated by their distance from their children, who live elsewhere. The growing number of elderly individuals living alone has raised concerns about social neglect and the risk of dying unnoticed. The aim of this article is to examine the issue and challenges faced by the elderly living alone and to assess the legal framework that protect their rights in Malaysia. Using a doctrinal legal research approach, the authors examined the legal frameworks in Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom on the rights and protections of elderly living alone. The findings reveal significant legal gaps in protection and social support available for elderly living alone in Malaysia. This article proposed the need to strengthen the existing legal framework, enhance social supports and foster community initiatives for elderly living alone, ensuring that no one is forgotten.

**Keywords:** Aging; Elderly; Living alone; Exploitation; Abuse and Neglect

### 1. Introduction

Malaysia's elderly population has shown an increasing trend. In 2024, it was estimated that there would be approximately 3.9 million elderly individuals aged 60 and above. Of this total, 1.85 million were men, while the remaining were elderly women. Perak leads other states with the highest number of elderly individuals, followed by Sarawak, Kedah, Penang, and Negeri Sembilan. National survey data reveals that a significant percentage of older adults in Malaysia live independently.<sup>1</sup> In Peninsular Malaysia, there is an estimated one in every hundred elderly people. Likewise, in the 5th Malaysia Population and Family Life Survey, nearly 9 percent of the elderly lived alone.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these patterns were supported by the National Household Income and Expenditure Survey, which reported that approximately 6 percent of the elderly live alone. A nationwide cross-sectional study using stratified cluster sampling was conducted between June and

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<sup>1</sup> Tengku Aizan Hamid et al., "Do Living Arrangements and Social Network Influence the Mental Health Status of Older Adults in Malaysia?", *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021): 624394, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.624394>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

October 2018 on 3,977 individuals aged 60 years and above, and it was found that approximately 6.3 percent of them were living alone.<sup>3</sup>

The number of elderly individuals living alone is expected to increase significantly as Malaysia becomes an aging nation by 2030. This figure is expected to increase due to changes in family structure, urban migration, and the increase in participation of women in the labor force. These changes undermine children's ability to care for their elderly parents. These factors are in addition to widowhood and being single, which resulted in them living alone. Elderly individuals who live alone face a higher risk of loneliness, isolation, neglect, and accidents without timely assistance. If an accident is fatal, death may go unnoticed for days or weeks.<sup>4</sup> Online newspaper reports highlighting the number of elderly individuals who passed away alone have struck a chord, prompting the question of what will happen when we reach old age. Those who are fortunate enough to have families are surrounded by loving and caring for them. However, not everyone was fortunate.

On December 24, 2024, *Sinar Harian* reported that a 68-year-old man was found dead at home. A friend of the deceased, sensing something was wrong, and contacted the Fire Department for assistance.<sup>5</sup> On November 3, 2024, *Astro Awani* reported that a 61-year-old man was found dead at his home in Kuala Krai after being alerted by the public. According to the police, the body was already decomposing and emitting a foul odor, with black fluids seeping out. Investigations revealed that the patient was unmarried and had been living alone.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, on January 10, 2025, *Kosmo* reported that the decomposed body of a 68-year-old man was discovered at his home in Alor Setar. His neighbors, noticing a strong stench and realizing that they had not seen him for several days, grew suspicious and investigated.<sup>7</sup> However, death of an elderly person living alone is not necessarily an indication of neglect by family members. This is because in many cases, elderly individuals have been living alone for quite some time. Nevertheless, as a proactive approach in the future, it is important to ensure that elderly individuals, especially those living alone, are continuously monitored by relevant parties, including the local community.

The phenomenon of elderly individuals living alone is not unique to Malaysia; rather, it is observed in almost every country worldwide. For example, in Singapore, it is estimated that approximately 122,000 elderly individuals will be living alone by 2030, which is nearly 60 percent higher than the figures recorded in 2023.<sup>8</sup> In the European Union,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Rajvinder Singh, Prompted by choice to be independent, such lifestyle isolates individuals from access to help in emergencies, Malaysian Coalition on Ageing, 26 July 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Warga Emas Meninggal Dunia Seorang Diri di Rumah," *Sinar Harian*, July 22, 2024

<https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/703722/berita/semasa/warga-emas-meninggal-dunia-seorang-diri-di-rumah>.

<sup>6</sup> "Warga Emas Ditemukan Mati Seorang Diri dalam Rumah di Kuala Krai," *Astro Awani*, November 3, 2024, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/warga-emas-ditemukan-mati-seorang-diri-dalam-rumah-di-kuala-krai-494646>.

<sup>7</sup> "Jasad Warga Emas Dijumpai Terbaring, Mereput Dalam Rumah." *Kosmo! Online*, January 10, 2025. Accessed [August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025]. <https://www.kosmo.com.my/2025/01/10/jasad-warga-emas-dijumpai-terbaring-mereput-dalam-rumah/>

<sup>8</sup> Nur Syuhrah Hassan, "Lebih Ramai Warga Emas Tinggal Sendirian, Kesunyian," *Berita Harian* (Singapura), November 17, 2024. <https://www.beritaharian.sg/singapura/lebih-ramai-warga-emas-tinggal-sendirian-kesunyian>.

approximately 32 percent of people aged 65 years and older live alone.<sup>9</sup> In Japan, it is projected that the number of elderly people living alone will reach 23.3 million by 2050.<sup>10</sup>

Living alone is an option opted for by those who are single, widowed, or couples without children. This lifestyle is chosen because they appreciate their independence, autonomy, privacy, the opportunity for self-growth, and freedom from family conflicts.<sup>11</sup> This choice is not an issue when they are young; however, the situation changes when they reach old age because of changes in their physical health and social circumstances. This may lead to loneliness, isolation, and an increased risk of emergency intervention.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Malaysian society's culture and customs emphasize the importance of family relationships. It is considered taboo in society for elderly parents to live alone. In Malaysia, it is a common customary practice for elderly individuals to live with their family members. Studies have found that those who live with their families tend to experience greater life satisfaction than those who live alone.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this backdrop, it is pertinent to examine the legal responsibilities of the government towards elderly who are living alone. It is important to highlight at the outset that Malaysia currently does not have a specific statute dealing exclusively with older persons. However, several existing statutes provide protection to the elderly in various aspects, albeit in a piecemeal manner. Thus, this article examines the legal aspects concerning the absence of specific legislation and considers how the government should address the well-being of older persons, including the roles of both the State and the community.

The article is divided into nine (9) sections. Section 2 discusses the literature review on elderly living alone, the doctrine of *Parens Patriae* and the legal frameworks for Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Section 3 analyses social challenges faced by elderly living alone in Malaysia. Section 4 touches on the doctrine of *Parens Patriae*. Section 5 explains the relevant statutes on elderly in Malaysia while section 6 deals with the legal protection of the elderly in Malaysia whereas section 7 provides a comparative perspective. Section 8 offers comparative perspectives from Singapore and the United Kingdom. The last section of this article forwards proposals for reforms to strengthen the legal and social protections for elderly who are living alone.

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, *Ageing Europe – Statistics on Housing and Living Conditions*, Eurostat, 2020.

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Ageing\\_Europe\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_housing\\_and\\_living\\_conditions](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_housing_and_living_conditions).

<sup>10</sup> Reuters, "Japan's Elderly Population Living Alone to Jump 47% by 2050 – Research," *Reuters*, April 12, 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-elderly-population-living-alone-jump-47-by-2050-research-2024-04-12/>.

<sup>11</sup> So Im Ryu et al., "Factors Related to Self-Confidence to Live Alone in Community-Dwelling Older Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study," *BMC Geriatr* 21, 291 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-021-02214-w>.

<sup>12</sup> Debasree Das Gupta et al., "Association between living alone, depression, and falls among community-dwelling older adults in the US", *Preventive Medicine Report* Volume 20 (2020) 101273. Doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2020.101273.

<sup>13</sup> Hadi Kooshiar et al., "Living Arrangement and Life Satisfaction in Older Malaysians: The Mediating Role of Social Support Function," *PLoS ONE* 7 (2012): e43125. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0043125>.

## 2. Literature Review

A study conducted by Nik Norliati and Suriati found that 35 percent of respondents who lived alone felt lonely.<sup>14</sup> The choice to live alone may be voluntary<sup>15</sup> because they were single, financially independent, or involuntary when they lost their spouse, separated from their children due to economic migration,<sup>16</sup> or did not want to burden their children. This situation has a lower emotional support system, being isolated and lonely, which may lead to stress, depression, and subsequently, other health issues, including falls. Internationally, these findings have been discussed by various researchers such as Pawinee et al.,<sup>17</sup> Das Gupta et al.,<sup>18</sup> and Luo et al.<sup>19</sup> As such, it is important for the elderly who live alone to have a support system of services that assists them in their daily routine or chores of caring for themselves. These services can be provided by the government or the community, excluding their families. Aziz et al.<sup>20</sup> discussed ways to provide social support, especially emotional support, to older adults to reduce challenges and obstacles in their lives. Raffiza et al.<sup>21</sup> compared the social support systems of Malaysia and Japan. The authors were of the view that it is important to have a comprehensive and inclusive social care system that includes incentives for caregivers who provide support to the aging population. The findings of this study are beneficial for policymakers and healthcare providers aiming to tackle the challenges associated with an aging society.

The doctrine of *parens patriae* is relevant in discussing the state's responsibility to provide care and support for vulnerable groups, including the elderly. James discusses the ambiguity of this concept.<sup>22</sup> He identified three distinct coherent conceptions of the state's *parens patriae* role: the fiduciary conception, the special heed conception, and the subgroup conception. He was of the view that when the State acts as *parens patriae* in making decisions for these vulnerable groups, the State acts as a fiduciary devoted to the welfare and well-being of those groups, not for society or the community at large. In Malaysia, the government utilizes *parens patriae* to protect the elderly against abuse and neglect through relevant statutes on care and nursing homes. Protection is also provided through social support for older adults.

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<sup>14</sup> Nik Norliati Fitri Md Nor & Suriani Ghazali, "Loneliness And Its Impact To The Health of Elderly In Rural Pahang", *International Journal of Environment, Society and Space* 4(1) (2016)9-37.

<sup>15</sup>Jessica. G. Abell and Andrew Steptoe, "Why Is Living Alone in Older Age Related to Increased Mortality Risk? A Longitudinal Cohort Study", *Age and Ageing* 50, no. 6 (November 10, 2021): 2019–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afab155>.

Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung, "Living Alone: One-Person Households in Asia", *Demographic Research* 32 (2015): 1099–1112, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26350146>

<sup>16</sup> Natalie Evans et al., "Social Support and Care Arrangements of Older People Living Alone in Rural Malaysia", *Ageing and Society* 38, no. 10 (2018): 2061–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X17000472>.

<sup>17</sup> Pawinee lamtrakul and Sararad Chayphong, "Exploring the Influencing Factors on Living Alone and Social Isolation among Older Adults in Rural Areas of Thailand", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 21 (2022): 14572. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114572>.

<sup>18</sup> Debasree Das Gupta et al., "Association between living alone, depression, and falls among community-dwelling older adults in the US", *Preventive Medicine Report* Volume 20 (2020)101273. Doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2020.101273.

<sup>19</sup> Juan Luo et al., "Loneliness or Sociability: The Impact of Social Participation on the Mental Health of the Elderly Living Alone", *Health & Social Care in the Community*, Volume 2024, 1-12. Doi:10.1155/2024/5614808.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Aziz Marzuki et al. "Social support by communities for older adults in Malaysia", *Nurture: Volume 17, Issue 3, (2023) 272-280. DOI: 10.55951/nurture.v17i3.315.*

<sup>21</sup> Nurul Raffiza Norzehan et al., "Social Support In Caring For Elderly People: A Conceptual Comparison Analysis Between Japan and Malaysia", *International Journal for Studies on Children, Women, Elderly and Disabled*, Vol. 18, (Jan 2023) 11-18.

<sup>22</sup> James G. Dywer, "Clarifying Parens Patriae", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (May 2025) 340-378.

Few studies have been conducted on elderly people living alone in Singapore. Jesmine et al.<sup>23</sup> concluded that elderly persons living alone in rental flats valued self-reliance and independence. They are resilient and resourceful. They created their own coping strategies to address their healthcare needs instead of pursuing formal medical consultations.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Jon Barrenetxea et al. touch on how social disconnection is not limited to older adults who are living alone but could also affect those who are living with others. Living alone influenced social disconnection; however, researchers have explored the impact of the surrounding environment on loneliness among elderly Singaporeans. Wee et al.<sup>25</sup> highlighted the elevated risk of loneliness among the elderly in Singapore's public rentals, and the surrounding environment played a role in elevating it.

The United Kingdom also faces the challenge of elderly people living alone. Catherine et al.<sup>26</sup> examined the differences in the health and well-being of women who lived alone and those who cohabit. The authors found that women who live alone are older, socially isolated, and rarely involved in volunteering, compared to those who cohabit. Paul opted to discuss loneliness among elderly men living alone.<sup>27</sup> The findings found that older men use their masculinity to cope with their loneliness by not talking about it, moving on, or keeping themselves busy with hobbies and other interests. Jessica and Andrew<sup>28</sup> discuss how living alone is linked to a 20 percent increased risk of mortality after considering age, sex, socioeconomic status, depression, chronic illness, health behaviors, mobility, and loneliness. Therefore, targeted assistance can be provided by identifying those individuals at the greatest risk.

The above discussion shows that elderly people living alone face loneliness, social disconnection, and isolation, which increases their vulnerability. Therefore, it is important to provide them with formal and informal social support systems to mitigate their vulnerability. The doctrine of *parens patriae* reaffirms the state's obligation to provide care and protection for vulnerable groups, including the elderly living alone.

### 3. Method

This qualitative study explored the social issues and legal protection of elderly people aged alone in Malaysia. It utilizes document analysis and secondary data review of broad knowledge of the problem at hand. This analysis focuses on the salient features of Malaysian laws, policies, reports, and guidelines on elderly care, social welfare, and ageing. Specifically, it gleans through policy goals, implementation of policies, and assessment reports on policies. The review will also examine judicial rulings regarding

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<sup>23</sup> Jesmine Mei Gene Lee et al., "Health-seeking behaviour of the elderly living alone in an urbanised low-income community in Singapore". *Singapore Med J.* 61(5) (May 2020)260-265. doi: 10.11622/smedj.2019104.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Barrenetxea et al., "Social Disconnection and Living Arrangements among Older Adults: The Singapore Chinese Health Study", *Gerontology* 68(3) (2020) 330-338. Doi: 10.1159/000516626.

<sup>25</sup> Liang En Wee et al., "Loneliness amongst Low-Socioeconomic Status Elderly Singaporeans and its Association with Perceptions of the Neighbourhood Environment", *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 16(6) (2019) 1-9.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Forward et al., "Older Women Living Alone in the UK: Does Their Health and Wellbeing Differ from Those Who Cohabit?", *J Popul Ageing* 16(1) (2023)103-119. doi: 10.1007/s12062-021-09344-4.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Willis, "Loneliness, coping practices and masculinities in later life: Findings from a study of older men living alone in England", *Health and Social Care on the Community*, (2022) e-2874-2883.

<sup>28</sup> Jessica G Abell, Andrew Steptoe, "Why is living alone in older age related to increased mortality risk? A longitudinal cohort study", *Age and Ageing*, Volume 50, Issue 6, (2021) 2019-2024. Doi: 10.1093/ageing/afab155.

abuse, neglect, or disputes in elderly care. Additionally, the study will critically assess scholarly papers, publications, and reports on aging, elderly care, and social policy within the Malaysian, Singaporean, and United Kingdom legal systems. The inclusion of viewpoints from other jurisdictions will enable the study to discuss the issues of the elderly living alone in Malaysia in a broader context and forward recommendations for possible improvements and best practices that are potentially adoptable in other nations. Overall, the study aims to assist in the formulation of more effective policies and legal protection for the elderly living alone in Malaysia and hence ensure their safety, dignity, and welfare in the throes of the growing old.

#### 4. Social Challenges of Aging Alone in Malaysia

Living alone is neither a new topic nor an issue. One-person households (OPH) have emerged as the most rapidly expanding household type globally, driven by structural institutional changes, demographic transitions, and evolving labor migration patterns over the past few decades.<sup>29</sup> This trend also extends to other Asian countries. However, it might not be an issue if those living alone are healthy and able to take care of themselves, even during their golden years. This allows them to enjoy life and be able to do their normal chores or routine. Nevertheless, others may not be fortunate. These unfortunate people live in isolation, loneliness, and limited social connections, and they end up dying unnoticed. Their passing was discovered when they failed to be contacted or a foul smell was detected. It is indeed an unfortunate situation when this happens to the elderly; more so, thinking of what they had to endure in the final moments of their lives. They could have been saved, but assistance did not reach them, not because it was unavailable but because society was unaware that they needed help.

Elderly people living alone can be divided into two groups, namely those who live alone due to changes in Malaysia's demographic patterns, particularly the economic migration from rural areas to urban areas, forcing them to be separated from their children. However, this group of elderly individuals is still considered to have family members who care for them. The other group consists of those without a family who will continue to live alone as they enter old age. When elderly individuals live alone, they indirectly reduce their interaction with others. This situation can contribute to an imbalance as they lack a social support group that can provide immediate emotional support when needed. If this occurs, it can lead to other health issues.<sup>30</sup> In addition, studies show that besides those who have lost their spouses, younger individuals who are divorced or unmarried live alone.<sup>31</sup>

The elderly living alone encounter distinct challenges as they age, and support systems change in Malaysia. Aging is a natural phenomenon; however, living alone creates social, psychological, and economic barriers that can immensely affect the quality of life of the

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<sup>29</sup> Wei-Jun Jean Yueng and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung, "Living Alone: One-Person Households in Asia", *Demographic Research* 32 (2015): 1099–1112, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26350146>.

<sup>30</sup> Rui Hong Teo et al., "Global Prevalence of Social Isolation among Community-Dwelling Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis", *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 107 (2023): 104904, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2022.104904>.

<sup>31</sup> Wei-Jun Jean Yueng and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung, "Living Alone: One-Person Households in Asia", *Demographic Research* 32 (2015): 1099–1112

elderly in Malaysia. Isolation is one of the biggest challenges encountered by the elderly living alone in Malaysia. With the breakdown of traditional family frameworks and many more individuals moving to urban centers because of work or education, many elderly people are left living in the absence of a constant company of children or relatives. In a society where multi-generational households have always been characterized as the norm, the disruption caused by this development leaves many older individuals enduring the emotional burden of living alone. A lack of routine conversations and interactions with loved ones leads to extreme loneliness and, in turn, adversely affects mental and physical health. Social isolation, according to previous studies, can lead to depression and anxiety, and even cause a decrease in life expectancy.<sup>32</sup>

Economic security is one of the biggest challenges faced by the elderly living alone in Malaysia. Most of these elderly people depend on fixed remuneration, either pensions or savings, or on their children's support. However, they tend to fall short of covering their living expenses as they increase year by year.<sup>33</sup> For those lacking sufficient finances, living alone in one's elderly years can stall the fulfilment of basic needs such as healthcare, shelter, and diet. Additionally, many elderly people have problems accessing low-cost healthcare to control chronic diseases and avert health complications.<sup>34</sup> In Malaysia, households headed by the elderly have the highest poverty rates. This is largely due to the restricted availability of finances arising from compulsory retirement, lack of sufficient social security benefits, and poor retirement planning, thereby inhibiting the financing of the elderly.<sup>35</sup> This economic burden is likely to generate a negative spiral of stress, ill health, and loneliness.

While Malaysia's public healthcare system is generally inexpensive compared to many other nations, the elderly living alone tend to struggle to access the system themselves. Older people in these situations may face problems getting medical care owing to limited mobility, communication barriers, lack of knowledge about healthcare procedures,<sup>36</sup> poverty, unavailability of a reliable transport system, or financial constraints.<sup>37</sup> Numerous elderly people living alone also have increased risks of coping with chronic conditions, as they do not have the support of family members who could normally assist them in their daily activities, medication, or other medical needs.<sup>38</sup> This solitude also tends to hamper general well-being and promote mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mazura Mokhtar et al., *Kesunyian dan Hubungan Sosial di Kalangan Warga Tua di Semenanjung Malaysia* (paper presented at Konferensi Akademik [KONAKA 2012], 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Jariah Masud et al., "Financial Practices and Problems amongst Elderly in Malaysia", *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 20, no. 4 (2012): 1065–84.

<sup>34</sup> Jafri Malin Abdullah et al., "Healthy Ageing in Malaysia by 2030: Needs, Challenges and Future Directions", *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences* 31, no. 4 (August 2024): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.21315/mjms2024.31.4.1>.

<sup>35</sup> George B. Curtis, "The Checkered Career of *Parens Patriae*: The State as Parent or Tyrant?", *DePaul Law Review* 25, no. 4 (1976): 895, <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol25/iss4/5>.

<sup>36</sup> Jafri Malin Abdullah et al., "Healthy Ageing in Malaysia by 2030: Needs, Challenges and Future Directions", *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences* 31, no. 4 (August 2024): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.21315/mjms2024.31.4.1>.

<sup>37</sup> Natalie Evans et al., "Social Support and Care Arrangements of Older People Living Alone in Rural Malaysia", *Ageing and Society* 38, no. 10 (2018): 2061–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X17000472>.

<sup>38</sup> Mazura Mokhtar et al., *Kesunyian dan Hubungan Sosial di Kalangan Warga Tua di Semenanjung Malaysia* (paper presented at Konferensi Akademik [KONAKA 2012], 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Rose Jacob, "Aging and Current Trends in Malaysia", *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice* 4, no. 3 (July 2016): 57–61.

Older persons living alone are more at risk during emergencies as they are likely to experience an increased likelihood of falls, medical emergencies, or any other type of emergency due to the lack of prompt support.<sup>40</sup> Studies have indicated that elderly people living alone have fewer chances of receiving timely medical or social assistance during emergencies, thus exposing them to a high risk of poor outcomes.<sup>41</sup> In the worst scenarios, the vulnerability of this kind in the past has resulted in fatalities, and a few of the elderly were found dead weeks after their condition went unnoticed or unreported, indicating the need to create intervention and support systems to protect them from risks.<sup>42</sup> These incidents underline the need for an integrated emergency readiness measure involving the elderly living alone, including enhancing support networks and systems of checks and balances.

## 5. The Concept of *Parens Patriae*

Recognizing that the number of elderly individuals living alone is increasing, especially among those who have never married and have no relatives willing to care for them, the responsibility falls back on government assistance. The concept of *parens patriae* is relevant to this context. Historically, the idea of *parens patriae* has been used to describe the king as the father and guardian of the people.<sup>43</sup> This idea posits that the monarch had a duty to protect those who could not defend themselves, such as minors, the mentally ill, and individuals in vulnerable situations, effectively acting as guardians for their best interests. Over time, this concept has evolved to become more closely linked with the state, particularly in legal and constitutional contexts. In these frameworks, the government, rather than a single ruler, is responsible for acting in the best interests of citizens concerning public welfare and justice.<sup>44</sup> Although this concept is commonly associated with cases involving children, other vulnerable groups may also require protection from the government, such as the elderly, who are living alone and unable to care for themselves. They may struggle with daily activities to care for or manage their health. Without assistance or companionship, these individuals may become more vulnerable and isolated, harming their well-being and quality of life. Therefore, it is essential to provide the necessary support and care to ensure safety and overall health.

Currently, Malaysia does not have a fully enforced *parens patriae* doctrine that requires the government to care for the vulnerable elderly. Nevertheless, under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, the government provides social and financial support through welfare aids. Financial support includes a monthly allowance of RM600.00, a one-off payment of RM600 for poor single elderly people without a spouse or children, and an additional RM200.00 monthly of Rahmah Basic Assistance

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<sup>40</sup> Jon Barrenetxea et al., "Emergency hospital admissions among older adults living alone in the community", *BMC Health Serv Res.* 21(1) (3 Nov 2021)1192. doi: 10.1186/s12913-021-07216-3.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy J Donovan, Dan Blazer, "Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Review and Commentary of a National Academies Report", *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry.* 28(12) (Dec 2020)1233-1244. doi: 10.1016/j.jagp.2020.08.005.

<sup>42</sup> Khaticha Kalpa et al., "Health Risk Appraisal in Older People 1: Are Older People Living Alone an 'At-Risk' Group?", *British Journal of General Practice* 57, no. 537 (April 2007): 271–76, PMID: 17394729, PMCID: PMC2043328.

<sup>43</sup> George B. Curtis, "The Checkered Career of *Parens Patriae*: The State as Parent or Tyrant?", *DePaul Law Review* 25, no. 4 (1976): 895, <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol25/iss4/5>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

(*Sumbangan Asas Rahmah*) to purchase essential goods without cash transactions.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Welfare Department also provides social assistance for the elderly living alone, such as the Home Help Programme and the Caring Unit for the Elderly (*Unit Penyayang Warga Emas*). The Home Help Programme allows volunteers to support the elderly who live alone through visits, companionship, meal preparation, and household chores.<sup>46</sup> The caring Unit for the Elderly provides transportation services to elderly individuals who need to visit<sup>47</sup> hospitals and clinics for medical appointments and treatments. In addition, the welfare department assists in caring for the elderly through the establishment of day care centers, activity centers for the elderly, and old folk homes.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from government support, the elderly in Malaysia also receive support from their communities. Community support refers to support from friends, neighbors, non-governmental organizations, or other individuals, excluding their family,<sup>49</sup> which enables the elderly to lead a normal and prosperous life.<sup>50</sup> Community support typically encompasses social, physical, emotional, and psychological support. The community provides care for the elderly through the establishment of day care centers, registered nursing homes, care homes, retirement homes, and villages.<sup>51</sup> These services are free or for a fee depending on the service provider. A charitable or non-profit organization offers free services, while a company may impose a range of fees for its services. In addition, services such as home care, volunteerism, transportation, and educational programs are provided.<sup>52</sup> These services complement government services. In this context, the community and government have taken responsibility for caring for the elderly. These shared responsibilities of caring for and protecting the elderly are crucial, as Malaysia prepares itself to become an aging nation.

## 6. Legal Protections of the Elderly in Malaysia

Generally, all individuals in Malaysia are protected by the supreme law of the country, the Malaysian Federal Constitution. Article 8 of the Federal Constitution provides equality before the law, which applies to all citizens regardless of age. In general, the inclusion of such an expression in the Federal Constitution means that no individual can be discriminated against based solely on their age. Senior citizens must be given the same

<sup>45</sup> Edwin Oh Chun Kit, MALAYSIA BUDGET 2025 Strengthening Social Protection for Malaysia's Ageing Population: Progress Achieved but Gaps are Present, Institute of Strategic & Policy Research, at <https://insap.org.my/budget-2025-insap-comment-strengthening-social-protection-for-malaysias-ageing-population/>

<sup>46</sup> Arfa Yunus, Tarrence Tan and Gerard Gimino, Government to ramp up digital literacy, support services for elderly living alone, *The Star*, 29 July 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Welfare Department Website.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Neil Chadborn et al., "Improving community support for older people's needs through commissioning third sector services: A qualitative study", *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 24(2) (2019) 116-123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1355819619829774>.

<sup>50</sup> Emily A Greenfield, "Age-Friendly Initiatives, Social Inequalities, and Spatial Justice". *Hastings Cent Rep.* (Sept 2018) 48 Suppl 3: S41-S45. doi: 10.1002/hast.912.

<sup>51</sup> Obinna Francis Onunkwor et al., "A cross-sectional study on quality of life among the elderly in non-governmental organizations' elderly homes in Kuala Lumpur", *Health Qual Life Outcomes* 14:6 (2016 Jan 12) 1-10. doi: 10.1186/s12955-016-0408-8; Filzah Md Isa et al., "Exploring the facet pf elderly care centre in multiethnic Malaysia", *PSU Research Review* Vol 6, No. 1(2022) 17-38. Doi: 10.1108/PRR-05-2020-0013; Azlina Md Yassin et al., "Potential Development of Retirement Village in Malaysia", *International Journal of Property Sciences* 8(1) (2018) 40-51. Doi: 10.22452/ijps.vol8no1.4.

<sup>52</sup> For example, *Homage, My Aged Care, Makcik Teman, Hati.my, Malaysian Humanitarian Foundation.*

space and opportunities as other members of society and measures must be taken to ensure that they have access to the services provided.

As previously stated, Malaysia currently does not have specific legislation relating to elderly persons. However, general laws such as the Penal Code protect any person against acts that may cause harm or danger to the body or mind. In the context of family, the Domestic Violence Act of 1994 protects senior citizens as well as other family members from various forms of abuse. It also includes provisions related to Protection Orders, Interim Protection Orders, and other suitable remedies. This Act indirectly illustrates the use of the *parens patriae's* approach to protecting elderly individuals from abuse and neglect. Additionally, there is an Act known as the Mental Health Act 2001, which provides protection and care for elderly individuals who have mental health issues and require assistance and protection. It also includes the right to treatment and appointment of a proxy to assist in decision-making. At the same time, the Destitute Persons Act 1977 also provides for circumstances in which the authorities may take any person including elderly individuals who are begging or homeless and place them in the relevant institutions by court order. This is another instance in which the government acts as *parens patriae* to protect citizens in need of care. In addition, the Destitute Persons Act 1977 provides that anyone who falls within the definition of a destitute person, including those aged 60 and above, may apply for voluntary admission to a welfare institution.

Living arrangements for the elderly are subject to specific regulations only when they reside in a nursing home or care institution and not when they live alone in their own home. The Care Centers Act of 1993<sup>53</sup> governs the registration, control, and inspection of care centers for the elderly, including homes. The Act mandated that the centers be registered with the welfare department<sup>54</sup> to ensure that they meet the minimum standards of care, safety, and hygiene for the well-being of the residents. This reaffirmed the government's role under the doctrine of *parens patriae*. The Private Aged Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 2018<sup>55</sup> was passed in 2018 to govern elderly care facilities, including nursing homes. It requires facilities to be licensed by the Ministry of Health to ensure standards of care and safety. Unfortunately, this Act has yet to be enforced, and as such, these facilities fall within the purview of the Care Centers Act of 1993. Elderly persons living alone in their private homes face a high risk of being overlooked. Most of the time, they are capable of caring for themselves, so the government or community may not perceive a need to intervene. Consequently, unless an adverse event occurs, they may remain largely invisible to the community.

## 7. Comparative Perspective

The comparative perspective discusses the analytical benchmarks to evaluate the adequacy of the legal protections for the elderly living alone. These benchmarks include the legal threshold warranting the State intervention, the protection mechanisms that

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<sup>53</sup> Act 506.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, section 4.

<sup>55</sup> Act 802.

are rights or welfare-based, and the preventive measures within the legal frameworks of the United Kingdom and Singapore.

### 7.1. Threshold for State intervention - Comparative Legal Analysis

The provisions in the United Kingdom (UK)<sup>56</sup> mandates that local authorities conduct assessments of the elderly to determine their needs. The assessment process consists of three phases: identifying needs, evaluating eligibility, and creating a care plan, which will be revised periodically to accommodate changes in circumstances.<sup>57</sup> The threshold is low since it emphasizes the appearance of need or the need of the elderly. For older adults with decreased cognitive function, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 which applies only in England and Wales, provides a legal framework for assessing their decision-making capacity and for implementing interventions such as Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA) or the Court of Protection's decision.<sup>58</sup> Where abuse, in the form of financial, emotional, or physical abuse, is suspected, safeguarding procedures have to be activated, frequently requiring multi-agency input under the direction of Safeguarding Adults Boards (SABs).

Although family members are under no legal requirement to care for older relatives, individuals with legal authority, for example, under an LPA, are obligated to act in the best interests. Housing legislation, such as the Housing Act 1996 (replaced in Wales by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 in respect of homelessness and housing duties), makes it possible for older people to obtain reasonable accommodation and house adaptations under schemes such as the Disabled Facilities Grant, especially where the home surroundings present hazards.<sup>59</sup> Central to these legal safeguards is the protection of fundamental human rights under the Human Rights Act 1998, including the rights to privacy, autonomy, and freedom from degrading treatment.<sup>60</sup> Thus, although older people might prefer or need to live alone, the legal framework works to make this happen safely, with dignity and without undue intrusion into their independence.

The population of residents aged 65 and above living alone in Singapore has been gradually rising from 58,000 in 2018 to 79,000 in 2022.<sup>61</sup> This figure is projected to grow further as the population continues to age and the average household size declines.<sup>62</sup> However, the elderly living alone in Singapore face both challenges and opportunities, underlaid with legal provisions ensuring their well-being. Singapore emphasis on the family-first with the support of the State welfare model, Singapore does not have a general statute that imposes a duty on the State to interfere in the life of older persons unless they fall within the meaning of a destitute person under the Destitute Persons Act (Cap. 78) or a vulnerable adult under the Vulnerable Adult Act 2018 (No.27 of 2018). If an older person is destitute, the State has the obligation to provide the basic needs,

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<sup>56</sup> Section 9 of the Care Act 2014 for England, in Wales, section 19 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, in Scotland, section 12 A of the Public Bodies Social Work (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014<sup>1968</sup>, and in Northern Ireland, by Article 15 of the Health and Personal Services Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act Order 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Deb Barnes et al., "Personalisation and social care assessment - the Care Act 2014", *BJPsych Bulletin* 41, no. 3 (2017): 176–180. <https://doi.org/10.1192/pb.bp.116.053660>.

<sup>58</sup> Sections 2,3,9, 15-20 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Section 23 and 24 of the Housing Act 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Article 3 and 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Health Singapore, "Seniors Staying Alone," *Ministry of Health Singapore*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/newsroom/seniors-staying-alone>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

including shelter, food, and other basic needs. An older person who is a vulnerable adult will be given protection suitable to their needs. For this, the State's obligation is triggered by the risk of harm or unmet care needs. The State intervention only applies when the family fails to fulfil their responsibility.

The family-first approach can be seen in the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 secures child support for parents who cannot take care of themselves, allowing older individuals to seek recourse in the event of default by their children. On the other hand, the Mental Capacity Act 2008 supports older persons at risk of losing their mental capacity to appoint an agent to act for them to make decisions for them, ensuring they are free from abuse or exploitation. Multiple Government sponsorships and welfare schemes have been provided to older people. The Silver Support Scheme makes quarterly payments to poorer older persons, while community care services, such as subsidized home care, food-at-home, or home-delivered food, address loneliness and ensure the care of older persons living alone.<sup>63</sup>

Legal protection against elder abuse and neglect is afforded by legislation such as the Protection from Harassment Act 2014 and the Women's Charter 1961, and cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation are investigated through the Adult Protection Team (APT). Despite these protections, older persons living alone face challenges such as loneliness, concealed abuse, and a lack of information regarding legal services. This necessitates ongoing legal reforms, increased public education, and support at the community level to address these challenges. Legal reforms would strengthen abuse reporting procedures and make seniors more able, who would then be able to navigate the legal landscape. A holistic model that integrates legal protection, government support, and support at the societal level is critical for older adults living alone in Singapore.

## 7.2. The protection mechanisms are rights or welfare-based

Based on the discussion of the threshold for the State interventions, the protection mechanism in the UK is rights-based, using welfare as the vehicle to deliver the rights. These rights are further supported by other legislation such as the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. An older person could bring an action against the State for the failure to comply with the duty under the respective statutes<sup>64</sup> or through direct or indirect discrimination,<sup>65</sup> human rights claims,<sup>66</sup> and a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.<sup>67</sup> Singapore, on the other hand, is predominantly welfare-based since the State's role is to support the family that is the primary carer of the elderly. As a welfare-based model, the focus is on overcoming the issues at hand, and not on autonomy. The intervention is as and when it is needed.

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<sup>63</sup> Central Provident Fund Board, "Silver Support Scheme," *Central Provident Fund Board*, accessed August 3, 2025, <https://www.cpf.gov.sg/member/retirement-income/government-support/silver-support-scheme>.

<sup>64</sup> Sections 7 and 9 of the Care Act 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Sections 13 and 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Sections 136 and 197 of the Equality Act 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Sections 13 and 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

<sup>67</sup> Sections 26A and 26B of the Local Government Act 1974.

### 7.3. The preventive measure

The United Kingdom legislation treated living alone as a risk factor warranting proactive duties on the part of the State by providing or arranging services, facilities, or resources before the eligibility of the thresholds is met or before requiring formal care.<sup>68</sup> The assistance includes safeguarding against self-neglect or environmental hazards,<sup>69</sup> and supporting housing and an extra case to enable them to live alone independently.<sup>70</sup> Singapore opted to introduce welfare and community-based prevention programmes by recognising the right of the elderly to live alone with the support and cooperation of the community. The State established Community Networks for Seniors (CNS) and Silver Generation Office (SGO) to cater to their needs, promote active ageing by combining health and social supports.<sup>71</sup> Aside from that, the State further supports the elderly who are living alone through special housing designed for them, including integrating technologies to ensure their well-being.<sup>72</sup>

Malaysia's approach to elderly living alone is similar to Singapore's concerning the threshold for intervention. Even though Malaysia adopts a welfare-based approach as protection mechanisms, it emphasises community welfare and family support without the backing of any legislation. Indeed, Malaysia can draw valuable insights from these jurisdictions by reviewing the regulatory response to protect the elderly who live alone. Malaysia does not have a clear legal framework that provides interventions for elderly people living alone. In addition, the law should also take into account the role of community members through local organisations or associations in assisting to address issues relating to elderly persons living alone. For example, the establishment of an Elderly Welfare Team, similar to those introduced under the Child Act 2001 through recent amendments, may be considered. Another option is the introduction of a statutory reporting mechanism within relevant elder-related legislation, requiring members of the community to relay information concerning elderly individuals in need of protection or assistance to the appropriate authorities, including Social Welfare Officers.

## 8. Discussion

The inclusion of the elderly living alone in Malaysia is an urgent social and legal concern. Research studies, as noted in this article, have indicated that the number of senior citizens who are likely to live alone is increasing. This is a result of demographic changes, the changing family structure, and the increased number of urban migrants. Not only is this phenomenon detrimental to the physical and emotional well-being of the elderly, but it also highlights the urgent need for Malaysia to pay serious attention to this issue, particularly as the number of older persons living alone continues to rise.

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<sup>68</sup> Sections 2 and 9 of the Care Act 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Sections 42 to 46 of the Care Act 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Disabled Facilities Grants (Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration) Act 1996.

<sup>71</sup> Press Release: Integration of Health and Social Services to support Seniors, 19 February 2018 at <https://www.moh.gov.sg/newsroom/integration-of-health-and-social-services-to-support-seniors/>.

<sup>72</sup> Belinda Yuen, Emily Soh "Housing for Older People in Singapore: An Annotated Bibliography", Springer Briefs in Aging (2017). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-3194454-4.

Malaysia does not yet have a specific law for the elderly, and without proactive measures, cases of older persons dying alone in their homes may become increasingly common. The examples of the bodies of the elderly who are discovered dead in their houses reported by Sinar Harian are horrible to look through and are illustrative of neglect, either on the part of the family and society or on the shortcomings of the system.<sup>73</sup> This incidence illuminates the susceptibility of older people who live in isolation and indicates an urgent need to monitor and become involved in the community. Although Malaysian cultural values are of a family orientation based on the traditions of filial piety and multigenerational coexistence, the contemporary circumstances of children moving to other cities to pursue careers and the preference for independent, self-contained lives among the elderly make this system of assistance ineffective.

Legally, the principle of *parens patriae* is of great interest.<sup>74</sup> The idea of applying this principle to the elderly is that this principle is usually applied to minors, but it just shows how the state takes care of and protects other vulnerable people who have no family members or other social factors.<sup>75</sup> Currently, Malaysia does not have specific legal provisions to cater to the elderly living alone in their own homes. Building on practices in the UK and Singapore, this concept can be operationalized through mandatory welfare checks, expanded social services, and stronger community support networks to safeguard older persons living alone. In Malaysia, where governance structures differ, support may be mobilized through Senior Citizens Activity Centers (*Pusat Aktiviti Warga Emas* - PAWE), Residents' Associations, and Village Development and Security Committees (*Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung* – JKKK), with the District Social Welfare Department tasked with regular welfare checks. In general, the initiative introduced appears to take the form of a government program or policy. However, the existence of a specific Act would enable this responsibility to be more effectively mobilized through community involvement, thereby ensuring continuous monitoring of individuals who live alone.

Malaysia should also consider enacting provisions that focus on decision-making capacity and legal guidance to act on behalf of the elderly. Elderly people who live alone are normally able-bodied but still have different needs that require assistance from the government. They should be applauded for their independent living, which helps reduce the government's expenditure on providing long-term care. Nevertheless, their independence must be complemented by other interventions when needed to avoid them being invisible and only becoming visible upon their death. Equally important is that the role of the community, including family members, should be empowered to address the challenges of an aging nation, particularly for those living alone. It would be difficult for the government to address welfare issues in isolation; however, these challenges

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<sup>73</sup> Nik Amirulmumin Nik Min, "Pasangan Warga Emas Ditemui Meninggal Dunia dalam Rumah," *Sinar Harian*, June 14, 2025, <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/733788/berita/semasa/pasangan-warga-emas-ditemui-meninggal-dunia-dalam-rumah>.

<sup>74</sup> Esther K. Hong "A Reexamination of the *Parens Patriae* Power." *Tennessee Law Review* 88, no. 2 (2021): Article 2. <https://ir.law.utk.edu/tennesseelawreview/vol88/iss2/2>; George B. Curtis, "The Checkered Career of *Parens Patriae*: The State as Parent or Tyrant?", *DePaul Law Review* 25 (1976): 895, <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol25/iss4/5>.

<sup>75</sup> The Latin phrase, *parens patriae*, means "parent of his or her country," and is defined as "the state in its capacity as provider of protection to those unable to care for themselves."; Carl Rixey, "The Ultimate Disillusionment: The Need for Jury Trials in Juvenile Adjudications", *Catholic University Law Review* 58, no. 3 (2009): 885, <https://scholarship.law.edu/lawreview/vol58/iss3/9>.

become more manageable with the active involvement of the community in which the elderly reside.

Furthermore, according to the reviewed literature, loneliness and depression cause serious psychological issues in elderly people, which can lead to poor health.<sup>76</sup> This is combined with restricted socialization and the weakening of support systems, resulting in emotional and mental health problems.<sup>77</sup> Studies also reveal that social isolation leads to higher mortality in the population and is not just a social problem, but also a health problem.<sup>78</sup> Malaysia has various programs and initiatives that support older people, including those living alone. This fact cannot be denied; however, the challenge lies in ensuring that such measures are adapted to local cultural norms and social relationships. Addressing policy shortfalls requires a more comprehensive approach, which includes strengthening legal frameworks to prevent mistreatment and neglect, instituting community-based elderly care programs, raising awareness of loneliness among older persons, and introducing health and welfare facilities specifically designed to meet the needs of those living alone. Confronting the growing issue of elderly persons living alone in Malaysia demands a multidimensional strategy encompassing legal reform, community participation, and transformation in societal attitudes. By acknowledging and responding to these challenges, Malaysia can better safeguard the dignity, safety, and overall well-being of its ageing population.

## 9. Conclusion

Malaysia is currently heading towards an aging nation, and the exception of the elderly living alone should not be ignored anymore. However, even as many elderly still lead satisfied lives with their families or on a bedrock of financial security, there are increasing numbers of elderly experiencing isolation, vulnerability, and, in some heartrending instances, lonely deaths that go unnoticed. For example, in Japan, the National Police Agency stated that 28,330 elderly people residing alone died in their houses between January and June 2024. Worse still, 17.3 percent of such occurrences, represented by about 4913 individuals, took two or more weeks before the authorities could realize that they had passed away. This silent crisis demanded immediate and robust intervention. In this article, we have discussed the rights and legal safeguards available to the elderly, as well as the elderly living alone, and the significant vacuum areas that need to be addressed. We also hope that both the findings and the recommendations in this paper will serve to arm and implement more substantive legal regimes and inclusive policies that do not merely seek the protection of the elderly but also their dignity and ensure that they live their remaining years with honor and respect.

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<sup>76</sup> Siti Zuhaida Hussein et al., "Loneliness and Coping Strategies Among Older Adults in Johor: A Qualitative Approach", *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences* 20, no. 5 (September 2024): 13–21.; Nik Norliati Fitri Md Nor, "Loneliness and Its Impacts to the Health of Elderly in Rural Pahang", *International Journal of Environment, Society and Space* 4, no. 1 (2016): 29–37.; Kohei Suzuki et al., "Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation amongst Elderly People through Local Co-Production in Japan", *Social Policy & Administration* 55, no. 4 (2021): 674–686

<sup>77</sup> Deborah Witt Sherman et al., "A Systematic Review of the Relationship between Social Isolation and Physical Health in Adults", *Healthcare* 12 (2024): 1135, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12111135>.

<sup>78</sup> World Health Organization, "Social Connection Linked to Improved Health and Reduced Risk of Early Death," *WHO*, June 30, 2025, <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-06-2025-social-connection-linked-to-improved-health-and-reduced-risk-of-early-death>.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The author(s) declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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