

“It’s no exaggeration
to say that reading
can transform
British society...”

A SOCIETY OF READERS

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DEMOS

Executive Summary

Demos carried out research over the summer of 2018 to assess the potential impact of reading on several great challenges of our time: loneliness, mental health problems, dementia and social (im)mobility. If left unchecked, our research shows, these challenges will grow into insurmountable problems.

Building on existing data, we forecast the effect these problems will have on society by 2030. For example, by 2030, we will still be struggling to improve social mobility. The attainment gap – a key measure for social mobility - is closing so slowly that it could take half a century or more to close. The attainment gap for the most deprived students will not budge at all. Between now and 2030, this will have affected over 1.5 million pupils.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the age distribution, we may expect more and more of us to eventually develop dementia. By 2030, an extra 134,000 places in care homes will be required for dementia patients, putting tremendous pressure on quality of care. There will also be demand for over 1 million informal carers. Even conservative estimates suggest that the cost would be as high as *£38 billion* – a 58 per cent increase compared to now. Under these conditions, preserving dignity and quality of life for older citizens will be one of the greatest challenges the nation has ever faced.

By 2030, the loneliness epidemic will take on disastrous proportions with 7 million lonely people in the over-60 age group alone. Two million of them may expect to see their lifespans shortened by loneliness. Across other age groups, too, we expect loneliness to rise because of long-term trends towards living alone. Loneliness will also put increasing pressures on public finances. On the current trajectory, loneliness among older people will cost almost 2 billion pounds by 2030.

Could something as simple as reading truly make a difference when the scale of the issue is quite so momentous? The short answer is yes.

Many people already use reading to ward off loneliness – and usually quite successfully, as studies find that regular readers tend to be less lonely.¹ Other research found that 95 per cent of people who are blind or partially sighted read (through an audiobook, or another technology) at least once a week to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation.² Books can also give groups a way to talk through their thoughts and feelings in an indirect way.³ The power of book-based social contact is borne out by evaluations of reading programmes. In a national reading befriending programme including isolated and vulnerable older people, 88 per cent of participants appreciate the increased social contact from reading-inspired conversation.⁴

Books have also been shown to be beneficial in supporting mental and physical health. Reading significantly improves common symptoms of both depression and dementia.⁵ Reading keeps the mind active, which may even delay the onset of dementia. In addition, books can help us understand our own and others' conditions. For example, many public libraries and schools have a dedicated, signposted section with self-help books, memoirs and fiction to better understand conditions such as ADHD, anxiety and depression. 75 per cent of school pupils reported a better understanding of mental health after such a dedicated book collection on mental health and wellbeing was made available.⁶

When it comes to social mobility, reading can work as a powerful boost to life chances. Reading for pleasure is one of the most important predictors of test scores at age 16, regardless of background.⁷ In fact, children from disadvantaged backgrounds who read often tend to score better than more privileged pupils who do not read at all.⁸ Reading and being read to from a young age sets some pupils up for a successful school career before they have ever entered the building, while others have to do without such cultural activities. Book gifting programmes, summer reading programmes and schemes to boost parents' engagement with books can all help. For example, school children on free school meals make 3 months' additional learning progress after receiving a summer book pack.⁹

The great challenges described in this report will create dividing lines in society, straining existing solidarities. In a worst case scenario, the social, political and financial pressures of these challenges will pit the young against the old, the privileged against the disadvantaged and the healthy against the ill. This report shows that books can bring us back together in surprising ways. Of course, reading is no panacea. But upon review of the evidence, there is simply no excuse to not take reading seriously as part of the solution.

Notes

¹ Toepoel, V. (2013). 'Ageing, leisure, and social connectedness: how could leisure help reduce social isolation of older people?', *Social indicators research*.

² Creaser, C. Spacey, R. E. Hicks, D. (2012). 'Assessing the impact of reading for blind and partially sighted adults.' RNIB, The Reading Agency, Loughborough University.

³ Shipman, J., & McGrath, L. (2016). Transportations of space, time and self: the role of reading groups in managing mental distress in the community. *Journal of Mental Health*, 25(5), 416-421.

⁴ Renaisi (2018). 'Reading Friends: Test phase evaluation report'. London: Renaisi.

⁵ On dementia see Billington, J. Carroll, J. Davis, P. Healey, C. Kinderman, P. (2013). 'A literature-based intervention for older people living with dementia'. *Perspectives in public health*; Wilson, R. S., Boyle, P. A., Yu, L., Barnes, L. L., Schneider, J. A., & Bennett, D. A. (2013). Life-span cognitive activity, neuropathologic burden, and cognitive aging. *Neurology*, 10-1212.

⁶ Polley, M. & Kovandzic, M. (2017). 'Evaluation of the Reading Well for young people Scheme'. London: University of Westminster.

⁷ Sullivan, A., & Brown, M. (2013). Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading. *CLS Working Papers*, 2013(13/10).

⁸ Kirsch, I., De Jong, J., Lafontaine, D., McQueen, J., Mendelovits, J., & Monseur, C. (2003). *Reading for change: Performance and engagement across countries: Results of PISA 2000*. Paris: PISA.

⁹ Maxwell, B. Connolly, P. Demack, S. O'Hare, L. Stevens, A. Clague, L. (2014). 'Summer Active Reading Programme Evaluation Report and Executive Summary' *Education Endowment Foundation*.