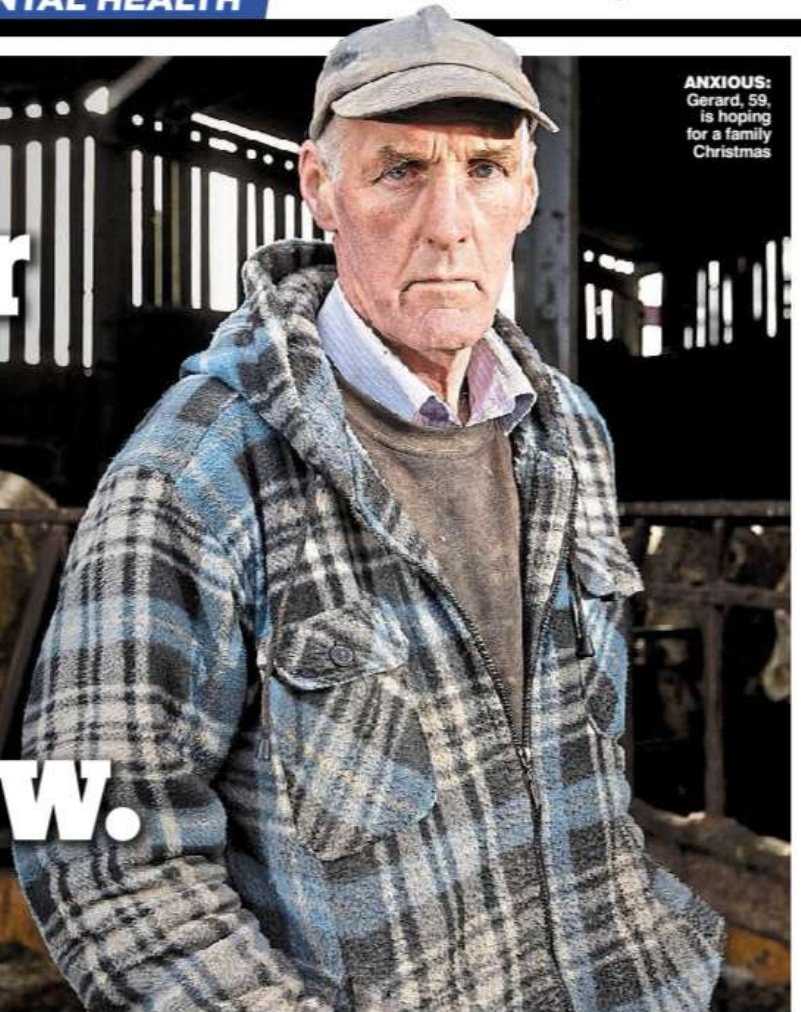


# I used to meet other people... even the shops are closing now. It is bleak



**ANXIOUS:** Gerard, 59, is hoping for a family Christmas

By Niamh Griffin

LOCKDOWN isolation continues to bite in the farming community, with one man working alone on his farm saying the virus has shattered his normal life.

His fears are supported by organisations working with the thousands of farmers who toil alone all day and now face silent evenings too.

Gerard Campbell, 59, is one of the 25,455 cattle farmers in Ireland and, like many, works mainly alone. His county of Monaghan was hit hard by recent Covid-19 infections. People lived under Level 3 and then 4 restrictions in the weeks before Level 5 was imposed nationwide. He said: 'I used to meet people from other farms all the time at different things but even the shops are closing now. It is bleak.'

He used to go to his local pub for conversation - tough drink driving laws put an end to this even before Covid. His favourite weekly activity was attending country-and-western dances but they were held

## Covid has left many farmers totally isolated with no social contact from dawn till dusk

in a local hotel, now shuttered.

The Tydavnet man said: 'I miss the dances especially, it is always a good place to meet a good mix of people. You would meet up on Saturdays there, I like jiving and you would meet good dancers there.'

'I would go back there after Covid but you don't know if the people will all go back. It would be 12 months I suppose off by the time this is over,' he said.

His biggest fear is that visiting restrictions will not be lifted before Christmas. He is very close to his brother and sister who live nearby. But fear of getting sick and not being able to feed his cattle has changed that relationship, he said.

'I have not been in my sister's house since this started. I've been talking to my young nieces and nephews on the phone but I haven't seen them. It is very hard.'

Gerard added: 'We hope it is lifted after this six weeks, and that we can all hope to enjoy Christmas together. The evenings are getting dark now, it will be like this till Christmas.'

One of the hardest things was not being able to attend a funeral for a

**'I go into the Oratory and say a few prayers'**

friend who passed away. He takes solace in going to the church even though Masses are cancelled again, saying: 'I still go, I go into the Oratory and say a few prayers.'

He sells his cattle direct to the factories, but used to attend the local mart to meet his friends and

do business. Marts went from limited numbers to completely online this month.

Emma Dillon, an economist with Teagasc said: 'Many farmers are isolated now. More than a quarter of cattle farmers in Ireland are single-person households, they would be predominantly located in the west and along the western seaboard.'

'Many of these farmers are not interacting with other people on a daily basis and you can imagine how much more difficult it is now.'

Research Teagasc carried out in 2015 found older farmers tend not to own smartphones so even when there is internet access, they are not availing of the supports.

'It is a two-fold problem, we know this. There are farmers who don't want to go to the mart for fear of Covid and then there are a lot of

those farmers who are not online,' she said.

Séamus Boland at the National Rural Network said: 'It's been a terrible year. We have a volunteer programme in each county, they're hearing some people since this Level 5 came in feel vulnerable. They feel they are at risk, they are confining themselves.'

'There is depression, loneliness, and a feeling they are completely left behind.'

He said closing marts, churches, bingo or dance halls, sports matches and pubs meant every avenue for casual conversation is shut. 'There is a helpline but my argument is that no-one rings a helpline to say I am lonely. There are people who will only talk to someone who is known to them,' he said.

He echoed Ms Dillon's worries about broadband access, saying: 'The broadband is very shaky, last week a number of [online] marts collapsed so you are adding another worry. There is a psychological and well-being cost to this thing, I'm afraid we are forgetting it.'

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## Virus outbreaks in two key psychiatric wards

HSE mental health staff are battling Covid-19 outbreaks on the psychiatric wards in two large Dublin hospitals and private services have been contacted for support.

The units are located in Tallaght and St James' hospitals, but are run by the HSE mental health services. The same service runs a unit based in Naas hospital in Kildare and last week the Irish

By Niamh Griffin

Mail on Sunday reported on a Covid-19 outbreak there also.

A HSE spokeswoman confirmed the outbreaks but she did not say how many patients or staff were ill, only that an outbreak is called when two positive contacts are present. These units are run by the HSE Dublin South, Kildare &

West Wicklow Community Healthcare (CHO7) service.

A source familiar with the situation said: 'Apparently there are no free psychiatric beds available in Dublin and patients may need to be admitted to Waterford or Limerick.'

The HSE spokeswoman did not say which units outside Dublin had been contacted as emergency standby, but said it was normal

practice to contact other services when the beds in a unit were full or unavailable.

She said: 'The HSE is working with all national mental health units as well as private service providers to facilitate capacity and continuation of appropriate care for service users.'

Patients are receiving individual help, she said, to make sure they understand and can cope with the

situation as well as the normal Covid supports. All staff and patients have been tested and contact tracing is ongoing.

Families or next of kin have been updated by phone by clinical staff working on all three units.

In February, the Mental Health Commission warned that psychiatric in-patient units in Ireland run at 89% capacity even when all units are on stream.