

Loneliness Among Rural and Underserved Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lindsay R. Wilkinson¹, Julie Masters¹, Christopher M. Kelly¹, Miechelle McKelvey², Ladan Ghazi Sadi², and Toni L. Hill³

¹Department of Gerontology, University of Nebraska-Omaha

²Department of Communication Disorders, University of Nebraska-Kearney

³Department of Family Studies, University of Nebraska-Kearney

INTRO

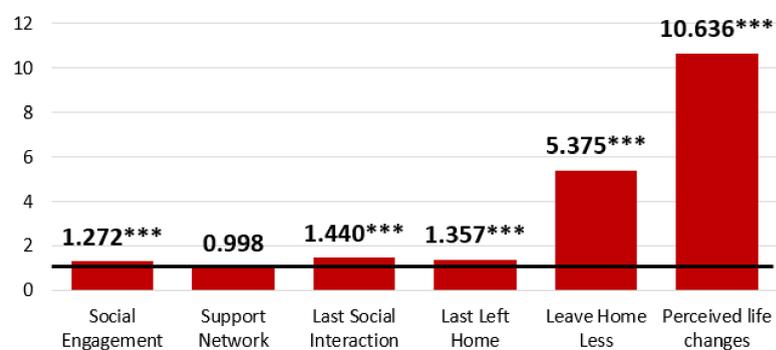
- Nebraska has more people age 75 and older than under the age of five. While older adults are most vulnerable to the medical complications of COVID-19, they are also deeply influenced by the unintended consequences of social distancing and sheltering in place. This study aims to increase understanding of loneliness among older adults living in rural and underserved areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

- Collected data in July 2020 from 1852 Meals on Wheels/Home-Delivered Meals recipients across Nebraska's eight Area Agencies on Aging.
- Logistic regression models were used to estimate the impact of COVID-19 and its associated safety precautions on feelings of loneliness. The analytic sample was comprised of 1711 respondents with valid responses on the outcome variable.

RESULTS

Correlates of Feeling Lonelier Due to COVID-19



DISCUSSION

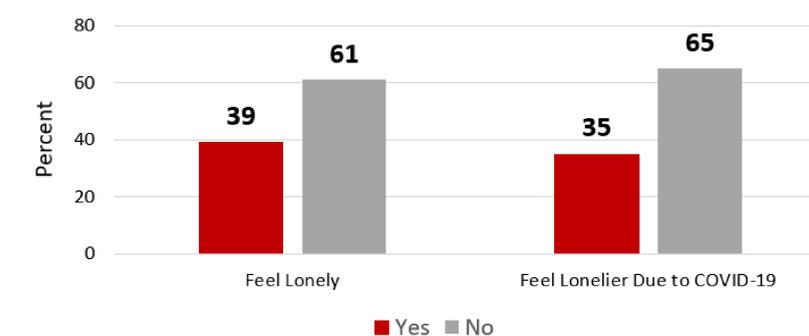
- Despite the presence of a strong support network, older people still experience loneliness as a consequence of social distancing. Of particular interest are those living in rural and underserved areas, which calls for coordinated intervention.

COVID-19 is more than physical symptoms. For older adults living in rural and underserved areas, the pandemic and its associated safety precautions have magnified feelings of loneliness.

KEY VARIABLES

- Feel lonelier now*: "How do you think COVID-19 has impacted your feeling of loneliness?" Binary variable, with 1 equal to "I feel lonelier."
- Social engagement*: "When restrictions are not in place, what community places do you frequently attend?" A count variable was created using the following four items: (1) place of worship, (2) library, (3) senior center, and (4) other.
- Support network*: "Who can you call if you need help or would like to visit by phone or video chat?" A count variable was created using the following four items: (1) family, (2) friends, (3) care manager, and (4) other.
- Last social interaction* and *last left home* capture the duration of time since respondents last interacted with someone by phone/video chat or in person and left their home to do something other than get the mail or newspaper, respectively. Both are ordinal variables ranging from 1 "within the last day" to 5 "over a month ago."
- Leave home less*: "Compared to your pre-COVID-19 life, how often do you leave your home?" Binary variable, with 1 equal to "less now."
- Perceived life changes*: "Has your life changed because of COVID-19?" Binary variable, with 1 equal to an affirmative response.

Loneliness in the COVID-19 Era



FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

- Department of Gerontology, University of Nebraska-Omaha.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- We gratefully acknowledge Nebraska's eight Area Agencies on Aging and the older adults who participated in this study for their support.