

## KEY FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF RURAL SENIORS ACROSS THE U.S.

### Key Findings about Feelings of Loneliness and the Potential for Social Isolation Among Rural Seniors

1) **Most rural seniors are dealing with multiple health conditions and issues. Though a majority tend to evaluate their own health as fairly positive overall, at least one in four report themselves to be in fair or poor health.**

- Roughly one in four (27%) rural seniors say their own health is fair (21%) or poor (6%). Another 34% say their health is good, and a combined 39% rate their health as very good (29%) or excellent (10%).
- We asked rural seniors if 11 different health issues apply to them – from arthritis (a condition 55% of rural seniors say applies to them) to cancer (8% applies) and including unspecified mental illnesses (1% applies).

<i>Health Problems Ranked by % Yes</i>	<b>% Yes, Applies to Me</b>
Arthritis	<b>55%</b>
High blood pressure	<b>49%</b>
Vision loss	<b>38%</b>
Hearing loss	<b>36%</b>
Diabetes	<b>29%</b>
Heart disease	<b>26%</b>
Loss of mobility for any reason	<b>23%</b>
Depression	<b>14%</b>
Asthma	<b>12%</b>
Cancer	<b>8%</b>
Any other kind of mental illness	<b>1%</b>

- Of all rural seniors, 34% have four or more of these health issues, while 40% have two to three of them, and only 26% of rural seniors have just one or none.
- Among the 34% of rural seniors with four or more health problems, a 45% plurality rate their health as fair or poor, 36% rate it good, and just 18% rate it as very good or excellent.

2) **About a third (32%) of rural seniors report at least three of nine indicators of social isolation apply to them.**

We used the nine indicators of social isolation shown in the table\* below:

Social Isolation Matrix Items % Among Rural Seniors		Lubben Scale	Berkman Scale	Duke Scale	Theoretically Supported
Do not attend church/synagogue	40%		X	X	
# friends you can talk to about private matters (2 or less)	35%	X	X	X	
Most days you do not see friends or family	29%		X		
Widow or widower	25%				X
Live alone	25%				X
# friends you could call on for help (2 or less)	23%	X	X	X	
No member of family within driving distance	14%				X
# friends you hear from at least once a month (2 or less)	10%	X	X	X	
Do not have people to turn to for support	5%			X	

\* This table indicates conceptual alignment between items in this survey with indicators of isolation measured in scales validated in social research. The survey did not attempt to replicate full scales nor exact item wording except for on the three questions selected from the Lubben Social Network Scale, which is validated for older adults (Lubben *et al.* The Gerontologist. 2006; 46:503-513).

Then, we separated rural seniors into four groups based on their combined responses:

- **Most Isolated** -- Thirty-two percent (32%) report that **THREE OR MORE** of the nine isolation markers apply to them.
- **Two Isolation markers** -- Twenty-five percent (25%) report that only **TWO** of the nine isolation markers apply to them.
- **One Isolation marker** -- Twenty-five percent (25%) report that only **ONE** of the nine isolation markers apply to them.
- **Not Isolated** -- Just 18% of the rural seniors report that **NONE** of the nine isolation markers apply to them.

In addition to attitudes on isolation, there are demographic and behavioral differences between the least and most isolated rural seniors based on this matrix. And, more often than not, the differences are incremental as you move along the matrix showing there is a correlation between some attitudes and behaviors and these markers of isolation.

On isolation...

- The most isolated (3+/9) report feelings of loneliness at a higher rate (32%) compared to the not isolated (0/9) (3%).
- The most isolated are LESS likely to say isolation has negative impacts on health (58%) compared to the not isolated (73%).
- The most isolated are more likely to want state elected officials to do more to meet the needs of seniors (73%) than the not isolated (57%).

<b>% Report Feelings of Loneliness</b>	<b>3+ out of 9 (32%)</b>	<b>2 out of 9 (25%)</b>	<b>1 out of 9 (25%)</b>	<b>0 out of 9 (18%)</b>
Feel lonely	<b>32%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>3%</b>
Loneliness has negative impacts on health	<b>58%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>73%</b>
Elected officials should be doing more to address needs	<b>73%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>57%</b>

Demographic differences...

- The most isolated are 63% female, compared to 45% female among the not isolated.
- The most isolated are more likely to have a high school education or less (61%) than the not isolated (51%).
- The most isolated more likely to be poor/working class (39%) than the not isolated (31%).

<b>% Report Feelings of Loneliness</b>	<b>3+ out of 9 (32%)</b>	<b>2 out of 9 (25%)</b>	<b>1 out of 9 (25%)</b>	<b>0 out of 9 (18%)</b>
Female	<b>63%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>45%</b>
High School or Less	<b>61%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>51%</b>
Poor/Working Class	<b>39%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>31%</b>

Behavioral differences...

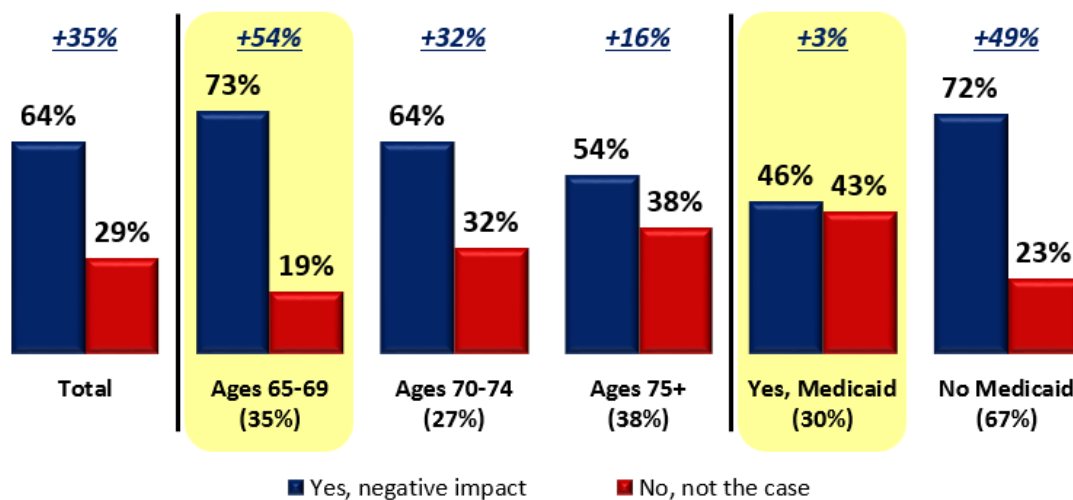
- The most isolated are more likely to keep the TV on all day (62%) compared to the not isolated (38%).
- The most isolated are less likely to be on social media (27%) compared to the not isolated (45%).

% Report Feelings of Loneliness	3+ out of 9 (32%)	2 out of 9 (25%)	1 out of 9 (25%)	0 out of 9 (18%)
Keep TV on all day	62%	49%	47%	38%
Use online social media	27%	48%	48%	45%

**3) Sixty-four percent (64%) of rural seniors see a direct connection between feelings of loneliness and isolation and negative impacts on physical health.**

- Among all rural seniors, 64% believe that loneliness or social isolation a person can experience in old age usually has a negative impact on their physical health.
- Seniors under 70 are most likely to believe there are negative health impacts of loneliness (73% agree).
- Rural seniors on Medicaid are least likely to believe there are negative health impacts of loneliness (46% agree).

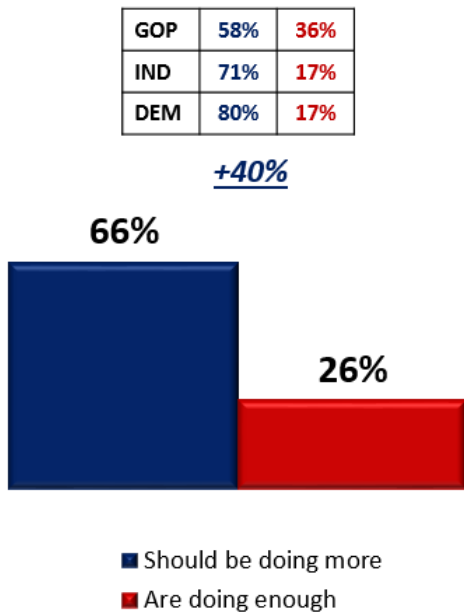
*Impact of Loneliness or Social Isolation on Health by Age & Medicaid*



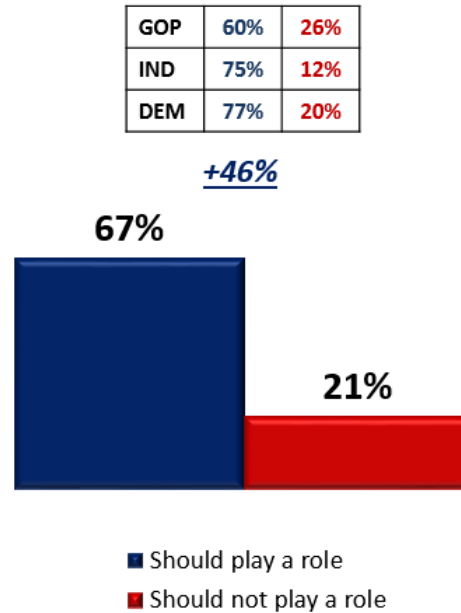
**4) Majorities of rural seniors would like to see more from elected officials in their state and the business community to help address their needs.**

- Two-thirds (66%) of rural seniors say officials in their state need to be doing more to address the needs of older residents in rural communities (**Summary on final page of document**).
- Eight in ten (80%) self-described Democrats, 71% of self-described Independents and 58% of rural seniors who identify as Republican say elected state officials should be doing more to address rural seniors’ needs.
- Another two-thirds (67%) of rural seniors say businesses and corporations have a role to play in addressing the needs of seniors in rural communities.

*Elected State Officials Addressing Rural Senior Needs*



*Businesses Addressing Rural Senior Needs*



**Understanding America’s Rural Seniors**

**1) Rural seniors are a relatively small cohort when it comes to national policy.**

The U.S. Census says there are 48 million seniors in America and roughly one in four -- or 12 million Americans over 65 -- live in rural or small towns. Although rural seniors’ actual numbers are very large, as a group they may be easy to overlook when it comes to national policy because they only account for roughly 5% of the population.

**2) There are many indicators in this survey to suggest the seniors we are able to reach in a phone survey are comfortable and connected in their community.**

- Rural seniors are among the most likely people in America to be long-term residents in their community. As a result, they are very attached to their community and have strong social networks.
- Most also have people to turn to for support (95%), drive themselves around (88%) and live within driving distance to family (86%).
- The rural seniors we interviewed are not significantly worse off than most Americans their age.
  - ✓ 90% or more report being satisfied with their personal relationships, ability to get around their community, their family life, and their quality of life;
  - ✓ 88% report satisfaction with their social lives;
  - ✓ 79% report a generally positive disposition on most days;
  - ✓ 74% report exercising regularly; and
  - ✓ 60% attend church regularly.

**3) Seniors in general have lower levels of formal education and about a third of rural seniors report being poor/working class, but these seniors still report higher economic satisfaction.**

- While rural seniors have lower levels of formal education (55% have a high school education or less), that doesn't mean they haven't experienced upward mobility.
- Even as a third (32%) describe themselves as poor or working class, still 82% are satisfied with their own personal financial situation and over 90% own their own home.

**4) Rural seniors' top concerns about their community are drug addiction, poverty and public transportation.**

- Drug addiction is the main concern to rural seniors in their community. Poverty and access to public transportation are also top concerns.
- Some items that are less of a concern are access to doctors and hospitals and high-speed internet, with majorities of seniors not seeing these as issues at all.

## Survey Methodology

On behalf of Tivity Health, Public Opinion Strategies conducted a telephone survey among N=400 seniors living in mostly or completely rural counties across the United States as defined by the U.S. Census. The survey was conducted July 17-21, 2018. The margin of error for N=400 is  $\pm 4.9\%$ .

## Summary of Open-end Responses

1. Healthcare:
  - Rural seniors want lower cost health care services
    - o Hospital bills are too high
    - o Prescription medicine is too expensive
  - A couple mentions of wanting better hospitals/doctors in their area
2. Transportation:
  - Rural seniors want to be able to get to where they need to go whether it be services that pick-up seniors at their homes or more general improvements in public transportation
    - o Many mention not being able to get to their doctor
    - o Others mention wanting to get to senior centers, the airport, the grocery store, or even a voting center
  - Some also mention they would like to see improvements to transportation infrastructure in their area (roads, highways, bridges)
3. Social Security/financial security:
  - Rural seniors want to be able to get by more easily on social security
    - o Many mention cuts to social security or feeling like the money they receive isn't enough to live on
  - Many want lower taxes, specifically their property tax
  - Some mention increases in cost of living including food, housing, health care, car insurance, and TV bills
4. Social Interaction:
  - Many mention wanting more opportunities for activities, entertainment and/or socializing whether it's at a new senior center or at a community gathering
  - Other ideas specific to seniors were
    - o Meals on Wheels
    - o Checking in on seniors at their homes
    - o Senior education (health-related or otherwise)
5. Infrastructure:
  - o Not being near enough to things like grocery stores or good hospitals
  - o Availability of food (or healthy food, specifically for diabetics)
  - o Wanting faster internet to be available in their area