

AARP FOUNDATION ISOLATION FRAMEWORK PROJECT

HIGHLIGHTS

AARP Foundation is working to win back opportunity for struggling Americans 50+ by being a force for change on the most serious issues they face today: housing, hunger, income and isolation. When it comes to isolation, our priority is to help those who have become overwhelmed and cut off reconnect to their families and communities, so they can be a source of help and hope for others.

Isolation puts millions of Americans at risk of poor health and prolonged loneliness. In light of the recent economic downturn the magnitude of the problem has increased and job losses, lost homes and other setbacks add to existing triggers for crisis.

AARP Foundation is working to create an improved understanding of the extent of isolation, along with a better understanding of the many risk factors that result in an individual becoming or feeling isolated. Our goal is to work collaboratively with the many organizations that share our interest so that together we can truly understand how people get onto a *pathway to isolation*.

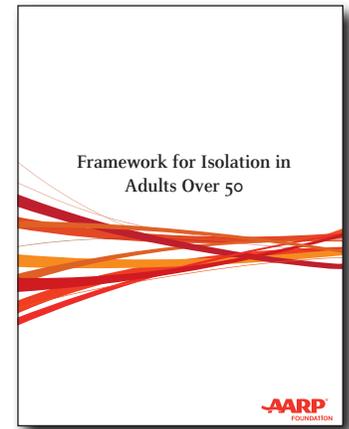
Isolation among Americans 50+ appears to be growing, and, as a result, there is a lot of research that has been conducted to understand the many factors that put Americans on the pathway. However, because the risk factors are many, studies often present varied perspectives given the competing factors that contribute to isolation. AARP Foundation is committed to working with these organizations to build on lessons learned to date, make clear how risk factors align and work together to educate Americans about this complex and emerging dynamic. Our ultimate goal is to identify innovative and measurable solutions that work to get Americans 50+ reconnected. The good news is that there appear to be many ways we can strengthen or repair the broken connections that lead to isolation—from improving public transportation to using technology to get people back in touch.

To inform this conversation, AARP Foundation commissioned ResearchWorks to conduct an in-depth examination of isolation research to serve as a starting point for a discussion about how we *understand, define, measure* and *solve* isolation. The key findings and recommendations presented below are based on this review, which included a comprehensive analysis of scientific literature and expert interviews from a variety of disciplines already active in studying isolation.

Key Findings & Recommendations

1. **This is an emerging issue that has fostered a variety of perspectives.** A range of disciplines—including sociology, psychology, social work, epidemiology/public health, gerontology, social neuroscience, medicine, public policy and urban planning—have already made strides in defining, measuring and tackling isolation, reaffirming not only that isolation is a growing problem but also one that needs to be addressed from multiple angles.
2. **Our challenge – to arrive at an improved definition of isolation.** Given the abundance of research across these many disciplines, no one definition, measure or solution to isolation exists.
3. **We must work together to identify those in need of help.** Given variations in definitions and measurements, it is currently difficult to determine the prevalence of isolation. However, current estimates indicate that isolation could impact up to 17 percent of Americans 50+.
4. **The research presents a great opportunity to arrive at a shared perspective.** While a variety of definitions for isolation exist, a synthesis of research suggests that a unifying definition lies in combining notions of subjective and objective conceptualizations (that is, an individual's subjective perception of being isolated plus objective, quantifiable variables external to the individual such as amount of participation in social activities). While, we are not entirely certain there can be one definition that fits all cases, based on the synthesis of the scientific research, the following is a first step in creating a unifying definition of isolation:

Isolation is the experience of diminished social connectedness stemming from a process whereby the impact of risk factors outweighs the impact of any existing protective factors. A person's lack of social



connectedness is measured by the quality, type, frequency and emotional satisfaction of social ties. Social isolation can impact health and quality of life, measured by an individual's physical, social and psychological health; ability and motivation to access adequate support for themselves; and the quality of the environment and community in which they live.

5. **A combination of factors leads to isolation.** This issue isn't the result of a single cause or factor but rather a variety of interrelated factors that exist at the individual, community and societal levels. It's the relationship between risk factors (such as living alone) and protective factors (such as a strong social network), along with an individual's context and history, that can help pinpoint how and why isolation occurs.
6. **A variety of approaches to intervention are needed.** Just as many definitions for isolation exist, so too is there a great deal of diversity among intervention designs, target populations and outcome measures for interventions. The most common interventions reviewed fall into group and one-on-one categories and have been implemented with people living in community settings (as opposed to residential care settings.) These interventions have aimed to reduce loneliness and depression, increase social network size, improve quality of supports and increase frequency of social contacts.
7. **Yet, there are few proven measures.** The measures of isolation that have been validated include those that measure loneliness or social network composition and quality. These key findings present AARP Foundation with some clear opportunities to take the lead in developing new and more effective solutions to isolation. As a first step, AARP Foundation will work in collaboration with the many organizations that are equally concerned about isolation. AARP Foundation will also continue an open dialog with national leaders, organizations and grant makers about how we can move forward to repair broken connections that lead to isolation. In doing so we will work to:
 - understand who and where the isolated are;
 - arrive at a shared definition for isolation that makes clear the many risk factors that foster isolation;
 - identify effective solutions to eliminate isolation while identifying where gaps remain; and
 - educate Americans about this emerging issue and how we can work together to identify opportunities to address this emerging issue for Americans 50+.

Developed for AARP Foundation by
Katie Elder, MPA
Jess Retrum, Ph.D.



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