



Topic Brief: Social Isolation

Date: 10/4/2023

Nomination Number: 1063

Purpose: This document summarizes the information addressing a [topic nomination](#) submitted on July 17, 2023, through the Effective Health Care Website. This information was used to inform the Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) Program decisions about whether to produce an evidence report on the topic, and if so, what type of evidence report would be most suitable.

Issue: The nominator would like to know whether the negative health impacts of social isolation are due to isolation itself or to the factors that initially contributed to social isolation, such as bullying and family dysfunction.

Findings:

The EPC program will not develop a new product about this topic because the nomination lacks sufficient detail to be developed further; and because the EPC program does not conduct primary research, which would likely be the appropriate avenue to address this question.

Background

According to the CDC, social isolation and loneliness are widespread issues in the United States and pose threats to American's mental and physical health. Social isolation, or a state of lacking relationships with others and having little social support, and loneliness, a state of feeling alone or disconnected from others, have been linked to increased risk for heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression and anxiety, addiction, suicidality and self-harm, and other conditions.¹ Research suggests that loneliness has a greater impact on certain groups of people, including low-income adults, young adults, older adults, adults living alone, people with chronic disease and disability, immigrants, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning communities.¹ The causes of loneliness are myriad and dependent upon individual circumstances, but chronic loneliness is most likely to set in when individuals lack the emotional, mental, or financial resources to satisfy their social needs, or lack a social circle that can provide these benefits.²

A 2020 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that more than one third of American adults 45 and over feel lonely, and almost one fourth of adults 65 and older are considered socially isolated.³ It is estimated that loneliness costs the United States economy approximately \$406 billion annually, in addition to roughly \$6.7 billion a year in Medicare costs for socially isolated older adults.¹

Assessment Methods

We assessed nomination for priority for a systematic review or other AHRQ EHC report with a hierarchical process using established selection criteria. Assessment of each criteria determined the need to evaluate the next one.

1. Determine the *appropriateness* of the nominated topic for inclusion in the EHC program.
2. Establish the overall *importance* of a potential topic as representing a health or healthcare issue in the United States.
3. Determine the *desirability of new evidence review* by examining whether a new systematic review or other AHRQ product would be duplicative.
4. Assess the *potential impact* a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.
5. Assess whether the *current state of the evidence* allows for a systematic review or other AHRQ product (feasibility).
6. Determine the *potential value* of a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.

Related Resources

We identified additional information during our assessment that might be useful. Many of these resources were published in the last three years and are therefore contextualized within the COVID-19 pandemic.

- A 2020 AHRQ report titled “[Addressing Social Isolation for Older Adults During the COVID-19 Crisis](#)” does not address the nomination’s primary question but may be of interest to the nominator.
- A rapid systematic review published in 2020 titled “[The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19](#)” may also be of interest to the nominator.
- An article from the Tulane University School of Public Health provides useful information about the impacts of social isolation and loneliness, as well as tips to prevent and mitigate their harms: [Understanding the Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health \(tulane.edu\)](#).

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Risks of Social Isolation and Loneliness. 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/emotional-wellbeing/social-connectedness/loneliness.htm#print>. Accessed on October 3 2023.
2. Novotney, A. The Risks of Social Isolation. In Monitor on Psychology. American Psychological Association. May 2019. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>. Accessed October 4 2023.
3. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. Washington (DC); 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32510896>.

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Conflict of Interest: None of the investigators have any affiliations or financial involvement that conflicts with the material presented in this report.

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