

# Loneliness in Older Adults: The Unspoken Pandemic Under COVID-19

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## Loneliness Under COVID-19

- Loneliness is a “discrepancy between desired and actual interpersonal relations” (Wong et. al, 2017).
- Older adults experience high levels of social isolation (a lack of interpersonal contact) under COVID-19 due to safety precautions and government regulations (Gaeta & Brydges, 2020).
- Social isolation is highly correlated with loneliness, making older adults even more vulnerable to mental and physical decline (Gaeta & Brydges, 2020).
- Loneliness interventions are limited due to socially distanced care or disrupted health services (World Health Organization, 2020).

## What Barriers Exist in Caring for Lonely Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

### • Ageism

- Ageism refers to discrimination and attitudes against older people and ageing (Sue & Sue, 2016).
- It results in negative self-perceptions in older adults, such as labels of weak or unproductive (Center of Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- Ageism predicts worse health behaviors, increases vulnerability to psychological distress, and poses a threat to resilience in older adults (Levy et. al, 2018).
- The annual cost of ageism in health care for the United States is \$63 billion (Levy et. al, 2018).

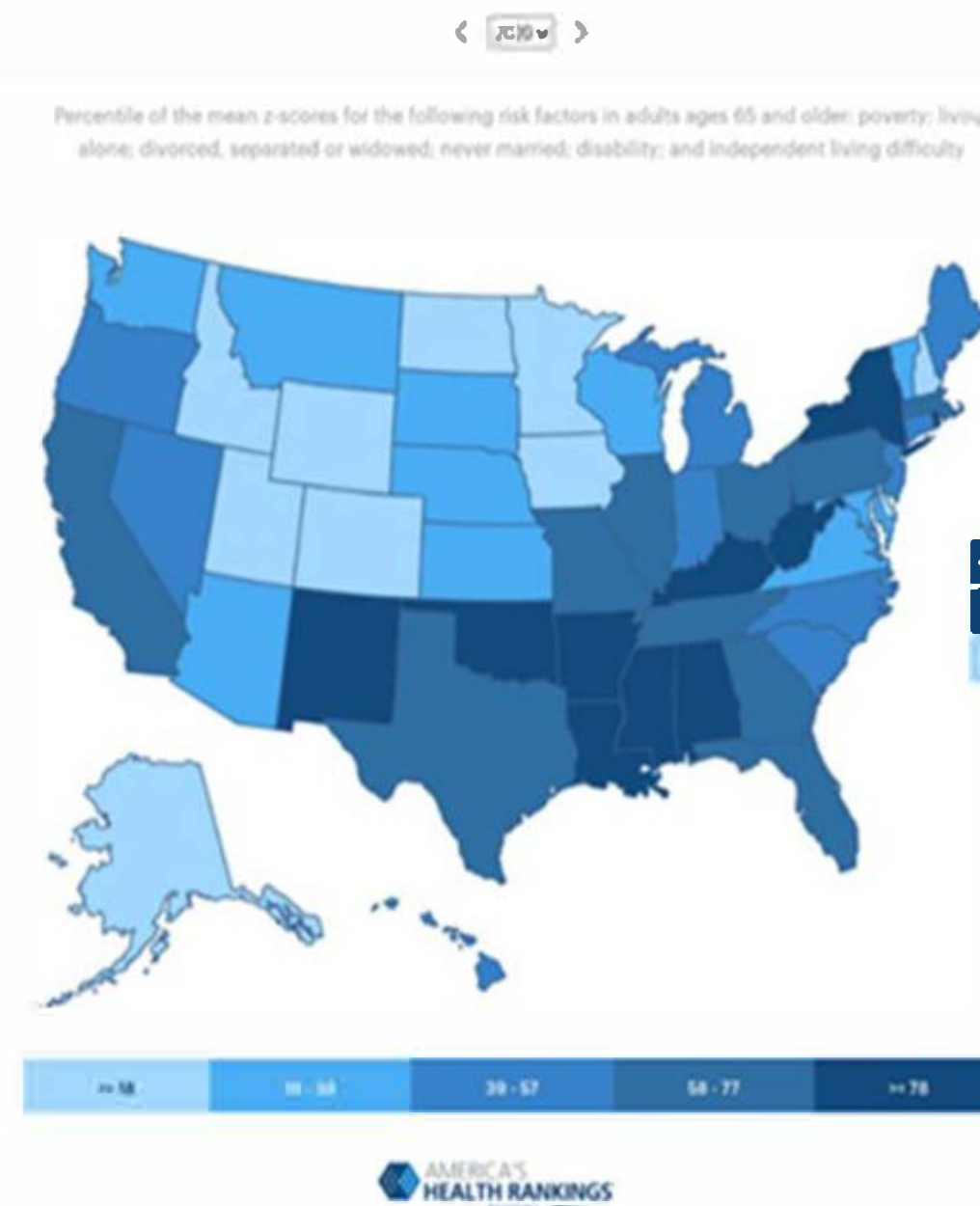
### • Vulnerability

#### • Physical/Medical

- Older adults are at risk for comorbidities, leading them to have high or deadly complications from COVID-19 (Center of Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
- Restrictions to medical care during COVID-19 are due to impaired mental health and social distancing measures reducing access (Wong et al., 2020).
- Older adults make up 80% of the COVID-19 mortality rate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021b).

#### • Social/Emotional

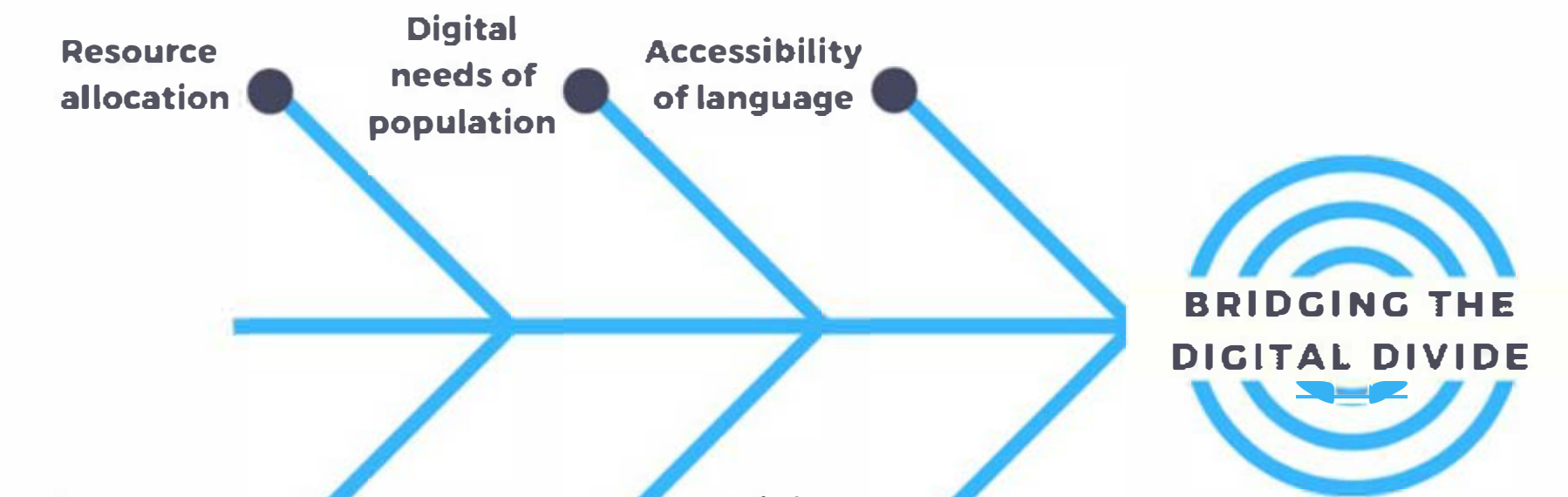
- Elder abuse reports have increased during COVID-19, especially among older adults who live in assisted care centers (National Center of Elder Abuse, n.d.).
- Social isolation is a predictor of elder abuse, which has been prevalent due to COVID-19 social distancing measures (National Center of Elder Abuse, n.d.).
- Rates of loneliness have elevated during COVID-19 and promote loneliness as a public health crisis for older adults (Center of Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
- Loneliness in older adults impacts chronic health conditions, compromises the immune system, and leads to poor mental health, including depression, anxiety, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease (Eldercare Locator, n.d.).



The figure displays risk factors of social isolation for older adults in the United States during 2020 (United Health Foundation, 2021).

## • The Digital Divide

- COVID-19 has reduced the safety of physical social interactions among older adults and care providers, requiring digital innovation to meet mental health needs (Fang, et al., 2019).
- Interventions for loneliness through digital modalities are inaccessible to many older adults due to financial resources, digital literacy disparities, and differing attitudes toward the Internet (Fang et. al, 2019).



Adapted from: Fang, M. L., Canham, S. L., Battersby, L., Sixsmith, J., Wada, M., & Sixsmith, A. (2019). Exploring Privilege in the Digital Divide: Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice. *The Gerontologist*, 59(1), e1-e15. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny037>

## How to Support and Advocate

- Explore “inside-world” coping strategies with older adults (Kharicha et. al, 2019).
- Destigmatize loneliness and affirm older adults that loneliness is not something to “cure” but to manage. (Kharicha et. al, 2019).
- Build and identify resilience to increase coping capabilities (Grossman et. al, 2021).
- Recognize global effects of ageist attitudes on social alienation of older adults (World Health Organization, 2021).
- Engage in research efforts about efficacious treatments for this population, including reminiscence narrative therapy, treatment of comorbid anxiety & depression using CBT, digital group interventions, psychoeducation about ageism, and increasing social interaction (Shapira et. al, 2021; Siverová & Bužgová, 2018; Kharicha et. al, 2019).



Impacts of COVID-19 (Gerontological Society of America, 2020).

## Resources

- Eldersource (Duval County)
- Eldercare Locator (United States)
- World Health Organization (International)

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