

PRIORITY AREA

Social and Intergenerational Connectedness

Reducing isolation and loneliness in later life through efforts that strengthen meaningful social bonds, including those that span generations

Long-Term Vision

In selecting Social and Intergenerational Connectedness as a Priority Area, RRF envisions that older people will be valued by and connected to family, friends, neighbors, and community members of all ages. As a result, they will have a strong sense of purpose and well-being that contributes to their independence as well as their emotional and physical health.

Background on Topic

The Foundation recognizes that social isolation and loneliness are distinct constructs. Isolation is the objective, or quantifiable lack of social contact or support, while loneliness is the subjective feeling or perception of being alone. Older persons may experience social isolation without loneliness and vice versa.

Meaningful social connections are fundamentally important to the health and well-being of all people. Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness due to ageism and to changes in their social networks and health status. The onset of disabling chronic conditions, including sensory loss and mobility limitations, often makes it more difficult to sustain relationships. Role shifts, such as stepping away from the workforce, and loss of family and friends can further contribute to social isolation and feelings of loneliness.¹ Factors driving the Foundation's decision to prioritize projects addressing isolation and loneliness include:

- Social isolation and loneliness impact a large segment of the population; 40% of older adults in a nationally representative survey reported feeling lonely,² and 24% were socially isolated.³
- Adults who are lonely or isolated report poorer physical health,⁴ and studies show they are at increased risk for dementia⁵ and reduced life expectancy.⁶

¹ DiJulio, B., Hamel, L., Muñana, C., & Brodie, M. (2018). Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey. The Economist & Kaiser Family Foundation.

² Perissinotto, C. M., Cenzer, I. S., & Covinsky, K. E. (2012). Loneliness in older persons: a predictor of functional decline and death. *Archives of internal medicine*, 172(14), 1078-1084.

³ Cudjoe, T. K., Roth, D. L., Szanton, S. L., Wolff, J. L., Boyd, C. M., & Thorpe, R. J. (2018). The epidemiology of social isolation: National health and aging trends study. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*.

⁴ Cornwell, E.Y., Waite, L.J. (2009). Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and health among older adults. *J Health Soc Behav*. 50(1):31- 48. doi: 10.1177/002214650905000103. PMID: 19413133.

⁵ Lara, E., Martín-María, N., De la Torre-Luque, A., Koyanagi, A., Vancampfort, D., Izquierdo, A., & Miret, M. (2019). Does loneliness contribute to mild cognitive impairment and dementia? A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Ageing research reviews*.

⁶ Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 227-237.

- Specific populations are at heightened risk of social isolation and loneliness, including those in rural communities, persons aging with disabilities, the very old, and those from diverse communities (e.g., non-English speakers, LGBTQ older adults)

RRF recognizes the important relationship between social connectedness and intergenerational bonds. Research suggests that ageist language, which separates generations, contributes to the isolation and minimization of older adults.⁷ Studies also show that meaningful intergenerational programming may reduce social isolation and enhance physical and mental well-being in older adults.

Funding Opportunities

While addressing social isolation or loneliness is essential, there is much we still need to know and do to effect change. At the same time, there are programs and services already in place on which we can build to more broadly address these problems.

Examples of funding opportunities for this Priority Area include (but are not limited to):

- research on best methods to find and engage isolated older adults, including projects that intentionally enhance the social potential of programs such as Meals on Wheels, telephone reassurance, and peer support groups;
- innovative research, interventions, or advocacy focused on preventing social isolation and loneliness;
- application of developed and acceptable technologies with potential to bring isolated older adults into community;
- replication of proven models for social and intergenerational engagement, including friendly visitation, service learning, volunteerism, and intergenerational housing; and
- proposals that intentionally address social isolation or loneliness in older persons as the primary outcome of interest, or that strive to decipher the mechanisms that encourage social connectedness in older persons.

Note: Projects funded through this priority area may address social connectedness and/or meaningful intergenerational relationships. They need not address both concepts to fit within this priority area.

⁷ Frameworks Institute. Framing Strategies to Advance Aging and Address Ageism as Policy Issues. Frame Brief (2017).