



# PUTTING SOCIAL BACK INTO SDOH: DISPARITIES IN SOCIAL CONNECTION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG MEDICARE ADVANTAGE BENEFICIARIES

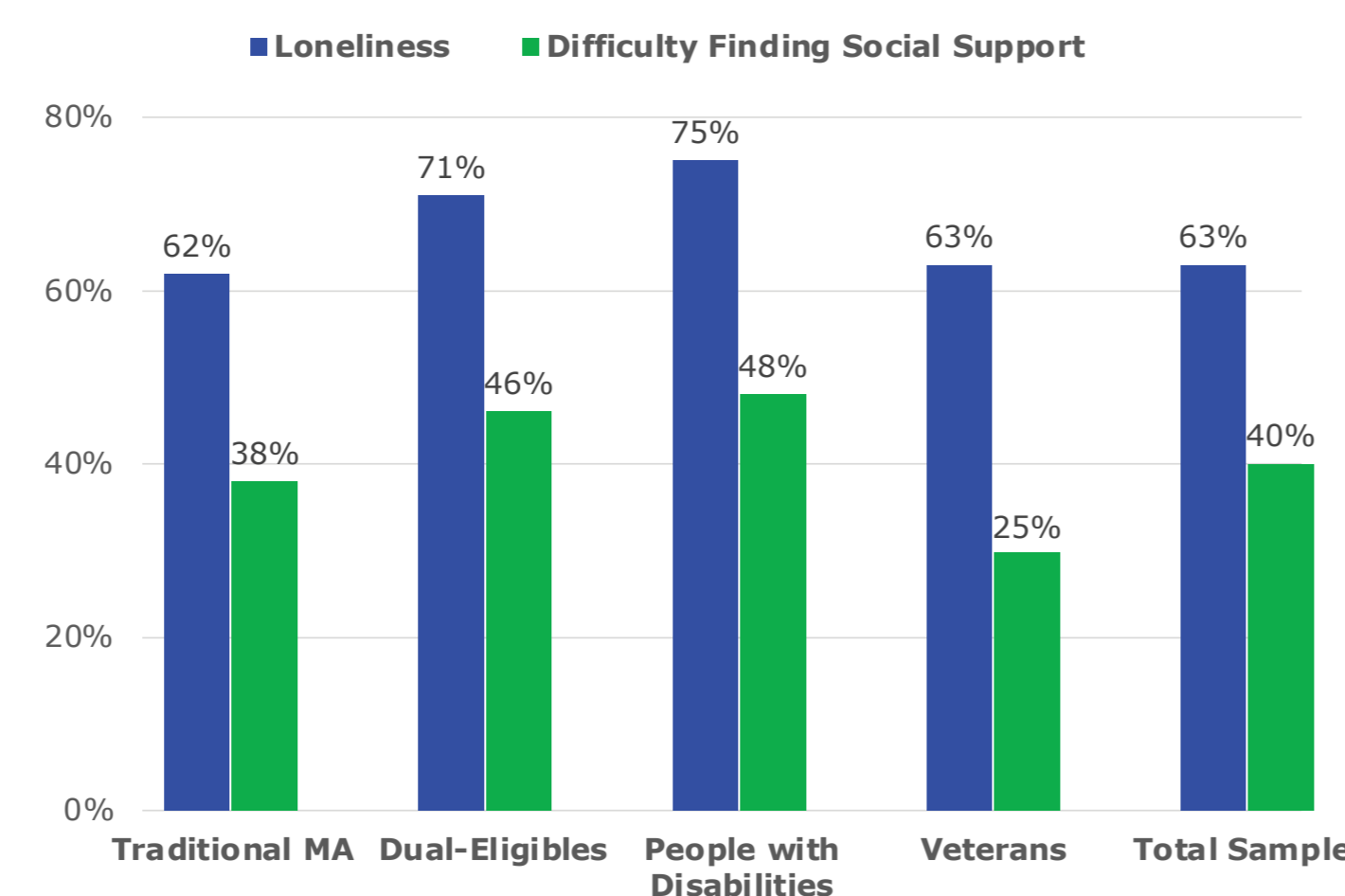
Kelsey C. McNamara, MPH<sup>1</sup>

Jill Bongiorni Meadows, BA<sup>1</sup>

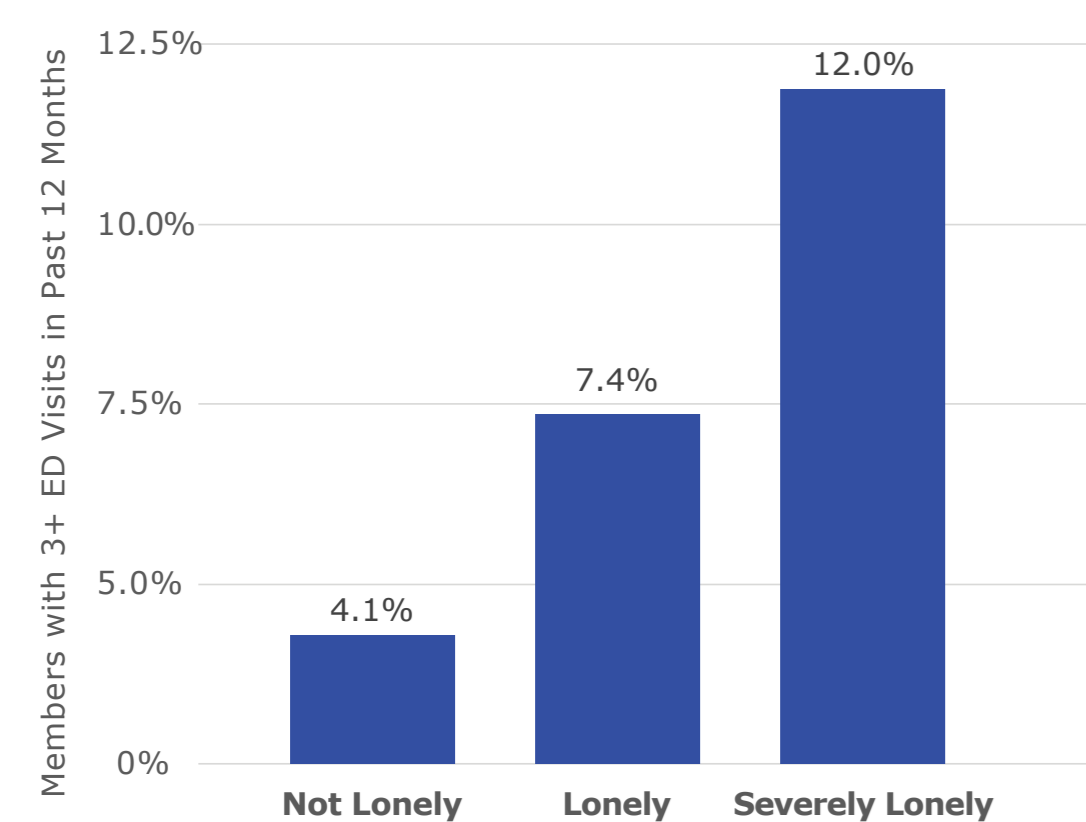
1. Papa Inc, Miami, FL

Variable	n (%)
N (%) with available data	28,588 (100)
Average Age	73
Male	8,8862 (31)
<b>Subpopulations</b>	
Traditional MA	20,012 (70)
People with Disabilities	4,860 (17)
Dual-Eligibles	3,716 (13)
Veterans	69 (.03)
States Represented	37

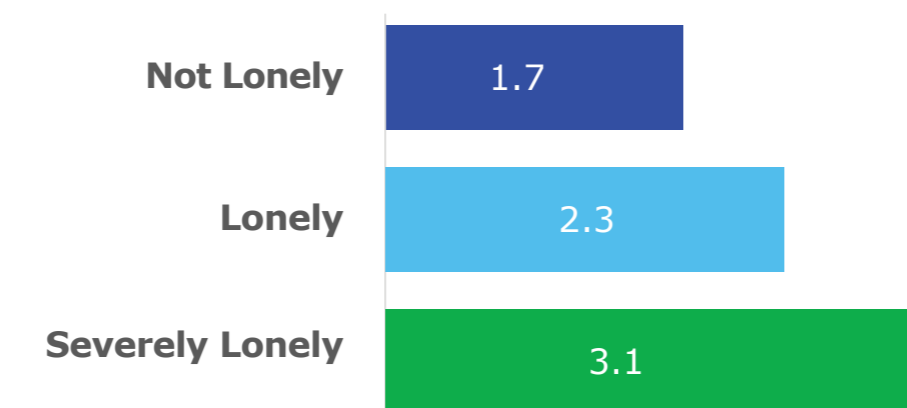
**Exhibit 2. Prevalence of Loneliness and Lack of Social Support**



**Exhibit 3. Prevalence of High Emergency Department Utilization by Loneliness Status**



**Exhibit 4. Average Number of Unmet Social Needs**



## INTRODUCTION

As the industry places even greater focus on social drivers of health (SDOH), transportation, food, and housing insecurity are routinely a main focus. However, social connection and social support are often left out of SDOH and health equity directives, all while loneliness and social support can add or detract from individual and population health to the same degree as other more commonly discussed SDOH. The purpose of this epidemiological study was to highlight unmet needs and disparities in social connection and social support among a large Medicare Advantage (MA) population.

## METHODS

**Study Design:** Retrospective cohort study

**Study Population:** 28,588 MA members who were screened for a companion care program between January–June 2023

• Subpopulations were identified in the dataset using the following: “People with disabilities” those <65 years of age; “Dual-Eligibles” those enrolled in both Medicare and Medicaid; “Traditional MA” is a discrete cohort and excludes the previous two cohorts.

**Companion Care Program:** Papa is an end-to-end nationwide care network that pairs older adults and others in need of support with a vetted individual to provide companionship and assistance with everyday tasks. Health plans that provide Papa as a benefit send a list of members to Papa. Members are called and informed of Papa’s services. If they are interested in learning more, members are administered a social needs survey.

### Survey Questions:

- **Social Needs:** structured social needs questions
- **Loneliness:** UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale
- **Reliability of Social Support:** single question, “On a scale of 1-4, if you were sick, how easily could you find someone to help you with your daily chores or to pick up prescriptions or groceries?” (1—very difficult, 2—somewhat difficult, 3—somewhat easy, 4—very easy)

**Statistical Analysis:** descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson’s chi-square tests, with significance set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## DISCUSSION

### Conclusions

- A high prevalence of loneliness was reported across the entire MA sample and suggests loneliness should not be ignored.
- People with disabilities reported the highest prevalence of loneliness and most difficulty finding social support. Poor outcomes for dual-eligibles highlights another at-risk population. These findings support the populations of interest that CMS has selected as part of its Health Equity Index focus.
- Greater loneliness was associated with more unmet needs and higher ED utilization. People with severe loneliness were 3 times more likely to be high ED utilizers.
- Achieving health equity goals, and ultimately improving outcomes for some of the most historically marginalized members, will require an individualized and holistic approach to health and social care.

### Limitations

- Sample might not be representative based on contracted health plans as well as who picks up the phone and answers the enrollment screener.
- The identifiable Veteran sample was quite small and might not represent the complete cohort.

### Health Equity Implications

- Loneliness is an important social driver of health that is often overlooked. In connection with CMS’ Health Equity Framework priority area #2, this study emphasizes two areas of opportunity:
  - Social connection and social support as a cause of disparities and the need to include them in core health equity directives
  - The need to understand differences in social connection and social support among MA subpopulations in order to guide interventions and policy

### CONTACT

kmcnamara@papa.com; jmeadows@papa.com