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# Social Isolation Increases from Adolescence through Later Life but Varies by Gender, Age, and Partnership Status

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## INTRODUCTION

Substantial evidence shows that people who are socially isolated experience worse mental and physical health and are more likely to die compared to their less isolated peers.

Sociologists define social isolation as having few social relationships (for example, with a spouse/partner, parents or child) or infrequent social contact with other people (for example, with neighbors).

The negative health impacts of social isolation affect both men and women. Social isolation also unfolds over the life course and perhaps in different ways for men and women. Therefore, it is important to identify who is most at risk of isolation, when, and why. In this research brief, the authors report on a recent study [1] that explores the gendered patterns of social isolation from adolescence to old age.

They draw on the concepts of *constrained choice* and *gender-as relational* to explore these gendered patterns. They argue that gender differences in social isolation likely exist and vary over the life course. In addition, these gendered patterns must be considered in the context of marital/partnership histories that shape the lives of men and women in different ways.

The constrained choice perspective stresses that individual choices are influenced by structural forces such as public policy, laws, community ties, and family and work relationships. These social forces create expectations that men should be physically and emotionally strong, self-reliant, and less attentive to their social relationships. In comparison, social forces create the conditions and expectations that urge women to be more attentive to social relationships and to read and respond to the emotions and needs of others, both at home and in the workplace. Research supports this perspective: women typically maintain more connections than men to family members, friends, and neighbors and are more involved in the community.

The gender-as-relational perspective stresses that how men and women express their gender plays out in their social interactions within different relationships. In particular, the ways in which men and women are socially connected or isolated may be influenced by whether or not they are in a marital/intimate relationship. Research supports this perspective as well: among married people, both men and women are more likely to name their spouse as their closest confidant. However, men are less likely than women to have a close relationship with anyone other than their spouse.

The authors analyze data from two national longitudinal surveys—the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (respondents ages 12–42) and the Health and Retirement Study (respondents ages 50 and older) – to explore patterns of social isolation beginning in adolescence as well as how these patterns change from young adulthood to later life for people depending on their marital/partnership histories. They measure social isolation by analyzing an index of people’s social connection across several domains, including family, friends, and the community. They focus on three marital/partnership groups: never married (i.e., never married or cohabiting at baseline and continuously thereafter), stably partnered (i.e., married or cohabiting throughout the study period), and disrupted partnerships (i.e., transitioned to widowhood/divorce/disrupted cohabitation during follow-up).

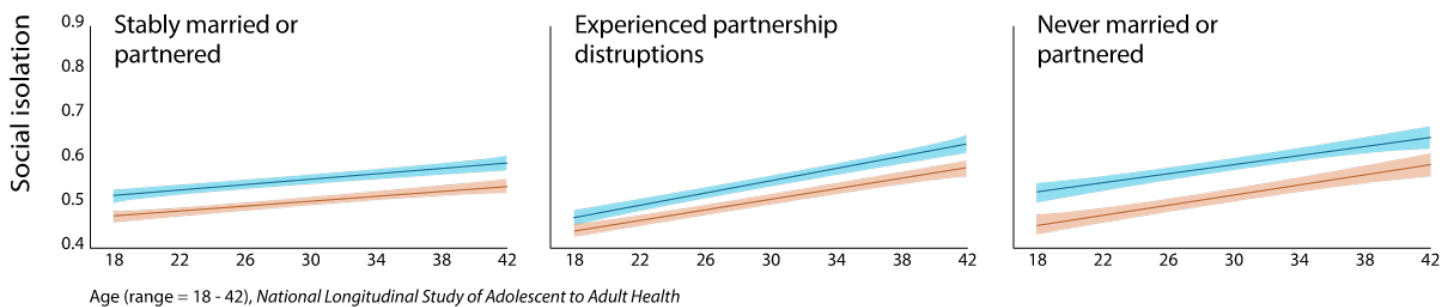
## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Social isolation increases for everyone over the life course:** Levels of social isolation increase from adolescence through later life for both men and women.
- ▶ **Men experience more social isolation than women:** Boys/men are more isolated than girls/women throughout most of the life course.
- ▶ **Gender differences in social isolation vary by age and marital/partnership status** (see Figure).
  - ▶ Women are less socially isolated than men across all age and partnership categories with one exception: after age 62, married women are more socially isolated than married men in their 60s.
  - ▶ Among men, the never married/partnered and those with histories of disrupted relationships (widowed, divorced, or no longer cohabitating) experience more social isolation than married/partnered men.

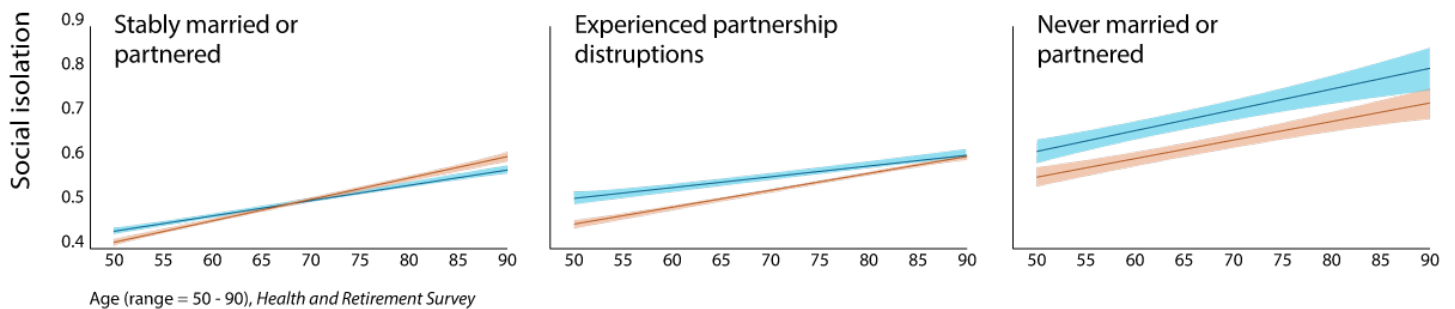
## Men are more socially isolated than women across nearly all age and partnership categories

The only exception: married women over age 62 are more socially isolated than married men in their sixties

### Adolescents to Midlife



### Midlife to Old Age



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Social isolation is profoundly detrimental to the health and well-being of both men and women. Identifying who is most at risk for social isolation is a public health imperative if we are to reduce the isolation of vulnerable Americans. Rising rates of mental health problems and suicidality among youth, as well as increased isolation associated with the COVID pandemic, underscore the problem of social isolation in the United States.

This research brief reports on evidence of a lifelong process of steadily declining social connection for men and women that begins in very young adulthood.

Although there have been recent calls for more public health attention to social isolation in the United States, very little attention has been directed toward isolation as it emerges in the early life course or toward predictors of social isolation throughout the life course.

Policy efforts should focus on identifying those most at risk (for example, based on gender, race, and state in the life course) and to fostering and supporting a community of social connection from childhood through the end of life. In addition, increasing social isolation for older partnered women warrants greater attention from practitioners and policy makers.

## REFERENCE

[1] Umberson, D., Lin, Z., & Cha, H. (2022). Gender and social isolation across the life course. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. Published online ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465221109634>

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Umberson, D., Lin, Z., & Cha, H. (2022). Social isolation increases from adolescence through later life but varies by gender, age, and partnership status. *CAPS Research Brief 1(2)*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/42860>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

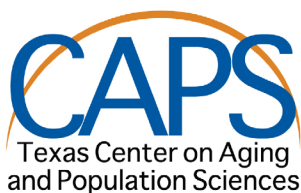
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported, in part, by grant R01AG69969 from the National Institute on Aging (PI, Debra Umberson); grant P30AG066614 awarded to the Center on Aging & Population Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin by the National Institute on Aging, and grant P2CHD042849 awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute on Aging or the National Institutes of Health.

This brief is published in partnership with UT Austin's Population Research Center, which provides CAPS with high-quality services and resources to facilitate large-scale, population-based aging research.

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