

# United States Senate

December 13, 2024

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We write to request the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a study to identify which federal programs monitor loneliness and social isolation and how those programs collect and utilize this information. While growing research shows that loneliness is an increasingly common experience with negative effects for individual and societal health, we have a limited understanding of which federal programs are working to address loneliness, how the federal government defines and monitors the prevalence of loneliness, and what strategies agencies are already employing to combat the harmful effects of loneliness.

The United States is experiencing a crisis of social connection, isolation, and loneliness. Today, approximately half of US adults report experiencing loneliness. In 1990, 3% of Americans reported having no close friends; by 2021 that figure had climbed to 12%. The average American spent 8% more time alone in 2019 than they did in 2003. These data points, combined with other research and scholarship, led the Surgeon General to issue a public health advisory on the growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation.

Healthy social relationships are the foundation of human happiness, and a lack of social connection can be devastating. The Surgeon General's advisory outlines the serious health effects associated with disconnection. Studies show that isolation and loneliness increase the risk of heart disease and stroke by 29% and 32% respectively, while also increasing the risk of developing dementia by 50% among older adults.

Despite the growing acknowledgement that loneliness and social isolation are a problem, there are still no standardized metrics that allows us to monitor these trends. The lack of standardization in data collection is largely due to the diversity of definitions that are found in scientific literature, which leads to inconsistencies in how loneliness and isolation are understood and measured. This variety in data collection methods across studies leads to fragmented data that makes it difficult to draw reliable comparisons. Lacking centralized and uniform definitions and protocols to monitor these metrics limits our ability to effectively address and monitor these important public health issues.


To better understand how the federal government can address the crisis of social isolation, we ask that the GAO to answer the following questions:

1. Which federal programs, if any, monitor loneliness and isolation?

2. How do these programs define or measure loneliness and isolation, and in what ways do these definitions and measurements vary across programs?
3. How do these programs use the information they collect on loneliness and isolation to address these problems or otherwise improve the services they provide?
4. What steps can Congress take to improve the work of agencies in addressing social isolation and loneliness?

We request answers to these questions by May 1, 2025. Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,



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Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator




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Pete Ricketts  
United States Senator



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Mike Flood  
Member of Congress



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Ami Bera, M.D.  
Member of Congress