

Aging Texas Well Issue Brief: Social Engagement and Recreation



The majority of ATW survey respondents reported that social engagement, especially close relationships with family and friends, as well as recreation and leisure activities, were important to them.

**Texas Department
of Aging and
Disability Services**

www.dads.state.tx.us

As people age, social engagement and recreation have a significant impact on overall health, well-being, and functional independence. This issue brief presents results from the Aging Texas Well Indicator Survey 2008 (ATW survey) and other related research regarding the areas of social engagement and recreation in people 60 and older.*

Social engagement, the interaction between individuals, family and community, is related to mental and physical health. In the ATW survey, older Texans reported that close relationships with family and friends were either very important (90 percent) or somewhat important (8 percent). Moreover, 91 percent of those interviewed report recreation and leisure activities were either very important (55 percent) or somewhat important (36 percent). The ATW survey also shows both **social engagement** and **recreation** are associated with other ATW survey areas including mental health, physical health, transportation, and financial resources.

Findings on Social Engagement

The ATW survey uses four measures of social engagement: loneliness, telephone contacts, face-to-face interaction, and leaving home. When those surveyed were asked, “Is loneliness a problem for you?” 25 percent reported loneliness was a problem while the majority (75 percent) did not. In addition, more people thought of loneliness as a minor problem (18 percent) than as a major problem (7 percent).

In the ATW survey, responses regarding loneliness differed by gender and marital status. More women than men reported loneliness was a problem. Those who were widowed, separated, or divorced were more likely to acknowledge loneliness than those who were married or never married. Unmarried men reported greater loneliness than did

* In 2004 and 2008, Texas conducted the Aging Texas Well Indicators Survey. This survey seeks to objectively measure the self-reported status of Texans over age 60 in 16 major life areas. The 2008 survey, conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of North Texas, included over 1,000 Texans age 60 and older. Only statistically significant findings are reported in these issue briefs. The full 2008 survey report is available online at www.dads.state.tx.us/news_info/publications/studies/ATWIndicators2009.pdf.

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unmarried women. Widowers were lonelier than widows. Those who described themselves as lonely also more often reported living alone and in general had less education than those who did not report loneliness. No association was found between loneliness and ethnic/racial differences or age group differences.

For Texans 60 and older, loneliness relates to both mental and physical health. In the ATW survey, both mental health and physical health are defined by self-ratings and self-reported physician diagnoses. For these older Texans, better mental health was associated with less loneliness. In addition to mental health, many physical health areas addressed in the ATW survey were found to be associated with loneliness. Survey respondents with arthritis, lung or breathing problems, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and blindness or cataracts more often reported loneliness than those without these physical problems.

Loneliness was similarly found to be associated with transportation and financial problems. Respondents who report loneliness also report higher dissatisfaction with the way they get around town; a greater frequency of cancelling appointments or activities due to a lack of transportation; a lack of knowledge about transportation assistance; longer wait times for rides; and financial problems related to transportation.

In addition to loneliness, other indicators of social engagement were the frequency of telephone contact with family members, friends, or neighbors; face to face interaction; and leaving the home. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported daily phone contact, while 25 percent reported weekly phone contact, and very few reported only monthly phone contact with others.

Ninety-one percent of respondents report spending daily or weekly face-to-face time with others. Of these, 54 percent have daily interaction, 37 percent have weekly interaction, and 7 percent have only monthly interaction with others. Additionally, the ATW survey found the majority of those 60 and older who spend daily face-to-face time with family, friends and neighbors report no problems with transportation.

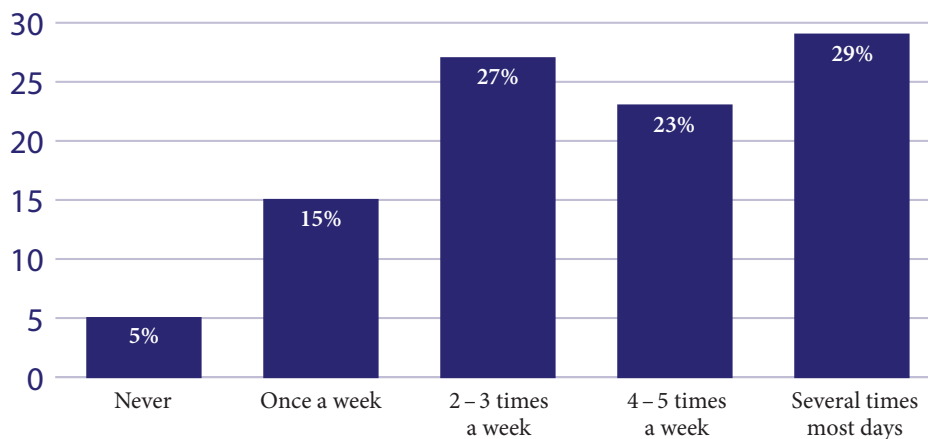
When older Texans participating in the ATW survey were asked how frequently they left their home or property in a typical week, almost 80 percent reported leaving the home several times a week, and 95 percent reported leaving the home once a week or more. Overall, almost 30 percent of those surveyed go out several times most days, 50 percent leave the home several times a week, and 15 percent leave the home once a week (see Figure 1 on next page). In addition, those who left their homes more often also reported better mental health than did those who leave home less often.

On the ATW survey, the vast majority of older Texans stated they are satisfied with their social interaction. However, in both 2004 and 2008, one-quarter reported loneliness.

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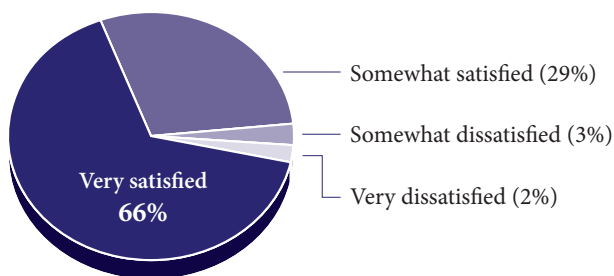


Figure 1: Frequency of leaving home



For older Texans surveyed, overall satisfaction with social interaction depends on daily phone conversations with family and friends, good mental health, frequent face-to-face contacts with others, the ability to leave their homes often, physical health in key areas, few transportation problems, and living with others. As shown in Figure 2 below, 95 percent of respondents are satisfied with their social interaction.

Figure 2: Overall satisfaction: interaction with friends, family, neighbors and others in the community



Findings on Recreation

In the 2008 ATW survey, recreation encompasses activities of personal interest that provide enrichment and enjoyment. The activities may be done alone or with other people.

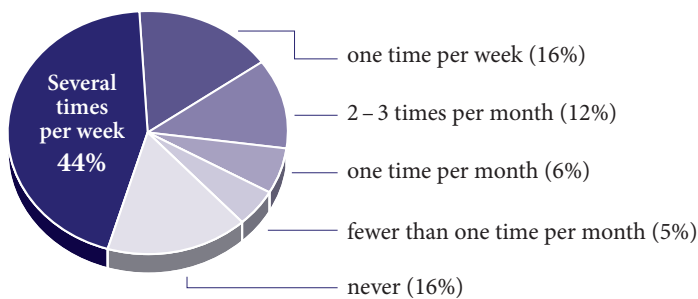
As Figure 3 on the next page shows, 60 percent of survey respondents participate in recreational activities once a week or more. Further, 44 percent of older Texans

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surveyed report they participate in recreational activities several times a week. However, more than one-fifth (21 percent) participate in recreational activities less than once a month or not at all.

Figure 3: Frequency of participation in recreation activities



Eighty-six percent of older Texans surveyed report satisfaction with their recreational activities. Fifty percent are very satisfied, and 36 percent are somewhat satisfied with their current level of recreation and leisure activities. Women were far more likely to participate in recreational activities than men. Those with higher incomes were more satisfied with recreation activities and participated in them more often than did those with lower incomes. According to the National Health Statistics Report, engaging in social activities such as visiting friends, attending clubs or meetings, and going to parties was more likely if finances were available.⁸

Approximately 28 percent of older Texans surveyed report they do not know where to go to find new or different recreational activities. This is especially true for older minority populations, older people with lower income, and older people with lower educational levels. Similar to the ATW survey findings in the area of social engagement, satisfaction with recreation and leisure activities was found to be associated with better mental and physical health, fewer transportation problems, and fewer financial issues with transportation.

Social Engagement and Recreation Issue Analysis

A growing body of research shows that social engagement and recreational activities are related to both mental and physical health. Social engagement may be a critical aspect of successful aging that influences overall health, well-being, and functional independence.⁶ Social engagement and leisure activities were found to promote

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health, reduce disability, and lower mortality risk. In addition, more frequent participation in social activities is associated with a decreased rate of decline in motor function in old age.²

In other studies, loneliness was one important indicator of social engagement found to be associated with poorer mental health and physical health. Specifically, loneliness was associated with risk of late-life dementia.⁹ Consistent with the ATW survey showing an association between loneliness and high blood pressure, a nationwide study found loneliness to be related to age-related differences in systolic blood pressure.⁴

The research literature shows both situational and perceived isolation affect physical health and mental health. In fact, socially disconnected older adults have worse mental health if they simply “feel isolated.” These results suggest older adults who are able to tolerate socially isolating circumstances or adjust their expectations so that they do not feel isolated fare better than those older adults who do not.³

Social connectedness may be more important to the health and well-being of older adults than is the perceived availability of social support. When efforts to enhance social relationships are focused on opportunities to develop friends and companions, older adults tend to feel socially engaged in society.¹ Additionally, those with poor social connections and social disengagement are at increased risk of cognitive decline and/or dementia.¹⁰

Social engagement and recreational activities were found to be related to physical health outcomes as well as mental health. The activity of “going outdoors” was found to improve health and functional status.⁵ More frequent participation in social activities is associated with decreased decline in motor function in old age and may possibly delay poor health outcomes.²

Particular groups of older people, such as those with lower socioeconomic status, poor physical or mental health, and fewer social network ties, experience greater disability and functional decline. Again, social engagement was found to be a critical aspect of successful aging.⁶

Current Initiatives

The majority of ATW survey respondents place high value on social engagement and recreation and additional studies show both social engagement and recreation are associated with good mental and physical health. Consequently, policy and program

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initiatives that seek to impact these areas of life can be extremely important. Three current program initiatives in Texas address the growing older population's need for social interaction.

Experience Corps is a national model program developed by the non-profit organization Civic Ventures. This program trains and places volunteer older adults in public elementary schools to improve students' academic achievement. While targeting social engagement and community involvement for aging Texans through one-to-one tutoring, small group academic help and assisting teachers, the program has been proven to improve academic achievement of the young while benefiting the older adults. The cornerstone of this program builds on Erik Erikson's late adult stage of generativity, which involves the transfer of knowledge and wisdom to younger generations. The program has created new roles for seniors in public elementary schools that increase physical activity, social engagement, and cognitive stimulation. Experience Corps has provided programs for 13 years and currently operates in 20 cities, including Beaumont, Texas and Port Arthur, Texas. More information regarding the Experience Corps program can be found at www.experiencecorps.org/index.cfm.

At the state level, the Aging Texas Well Community Assessment Toolkit – 2009 is now available throughout Texas to help communities build their capacity to serve a rapidly growing and changing aging population. The toolkit addresses the areas of social engagement and recreation along with other important life areas. The toolkit directs communities to evaluate their supports and services to ensure aging well in Texas includes community support for people so they can be “active and engaged in their communities.”

In addition, community assessment worksheets guide communities to examine recreation and well-being indicators as well as community supports and service indicators. Examples of recreation and well-being include a variety of active and passive recreational and leisure activities, Texercise teams or support for the Texercise program, facilities for recreation, cultural events and intellectual stimulation within the community. To view the Aging Texas Well Community Assessment Toolkit – 2009 please view www.agingtexaswell.org/communityassessment/index.html.

At the local level, the Area Agency on Aging of Tarrant County, funded by the United Way of Tarrant County, has developed the “Neighbor Helping Neighbor: Improving Social Integration” program to reduce senior isolation. This program targets adults who have experienced loss and loneliness and live in communities with high concentrations of older adults living alone and with high poverty rates.

The local Neighborhood Resource Coordination Group (NRCG) is one of several partners in the program and delivers a range of services. NRCGs include church

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leaders and volunteers, city personnel, postal workers, senior center managers, and nonprofit organizations. Typical services to address social integration include transportation, shopping assistance, home repairs and modifications, yard work, bereavement and grief counseling and telephone outreach and reassurance. To date, 3,000 older people in 11 communities have been served by this innovative program. Based on the Duke Older Americans Resources and Services scale, more than 80 percent of participants have decreased their level of isolation by one level. For more information please view www.scstc.org/NHN.

Although this issue brief focuses on interpersonal social engagement and recreation, some states have looked at encouraging social engagement of older adults through work and volunteerism.⁷ Future Aging Texas Well issue briefs will discuss older Texans' participation in and perceptions of both volunteerism and employment.

Social engagement and recreational activities are important to everyone, and this does not change as we grow older. The 2008 ATW survey results, along with national, state, and local model initiatives and programs, show how Texas is making progress toward providing social engagement and recreational activities that can improve the physical and mental health of older people.

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