



OLDER ADULTS' MENTAL HEALTH SHOWS SOME SIGNS OF RESILIENCE AMID THE ONGOING PANDEMIC.

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists into late 2020, findings from the new NSHAP-COVID Study show that many older adults are resuming in-person interactions. Older adults, who are known to be at higher risk for COVID-19, would be expected to be particularly careful about potential exposure to the virus. Yet the data show that 53% of older adults report no change in their frequency of in-person contact with family not living with them compared to before the pandemic, and a small share report increasing their in-person social contact with family and friends living outside of their household.

The NSHAP-COVID Study—an extension of the National Social Life, Health and Aging Project (NSHAP) conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago—surveyed community-dwelling adults who are part of the NSHAP panel in fall 2020. Preliminary results from the first 1,284 respondents (interviewed from September 14 to October 26, 2020) aged 55-99 are presented here, and compared to data collected from the same respondents in 2015–16.

Overall mental health and indicators of loneliness show that older adults are no worse off now than they were in 2015–16—an indication of their resilience despite the pandemic. However, other aspects of mental health are worse now than before the pandemic.

Only 9% of older adults report having fair or poor overall mental health in 2020 during the pandemic, similar to the 7% who reported the same in 2015–16. Compared to 5 years ago, during the pandemic, respondents are equally likely to report lacking companionship at least sometimes and are now slightly *less* likely to report feeling left out at least sometimes (both of these outcomes are indicators of loneliness).

But general happiness has declined. Compared to 5 years ago, roughly half as many older adults now report they are very or extremely happy, and more report at least sometimes feeling depressed or isolated (another indicator of loneliness).

Three Things You Should Know

About the NSHAP-COVID Study among older adults:

- 1) Fewer than half report less frequent in-person contact with outside-the-household family members (39%) and friends (44%) now, compared to before the pandemic.
- 2) Compared to 5 years ago, a similar proportion now lack companionship at least sometimes (33% vs. 31%), but fewer feel left out at least sometimes (30% vs. 24%).
- 3) Compared to 2015–16, fewer now report they are very or extremely happy (58% vs. 28%), and more report feeling depressed (27% vs. 43%) and isolated (26% vs. 44%) at least sometimes.

Other key findings from the study include:

- About one in five older adults have had no in-person contact with family (19%) and friends (21%) living outside the household during the pandemic.
- Twenty-seven percent of older adults have increased the frequency of video calls to communicate with family members not living with them since the pandemic started; 20% have done so with friends not living with them.
- Seventy-nine percent of older adults are using at least one technology-mediated means of communication with friends outside of their household at least once a week, whether via phone calls, messages, or video calls.

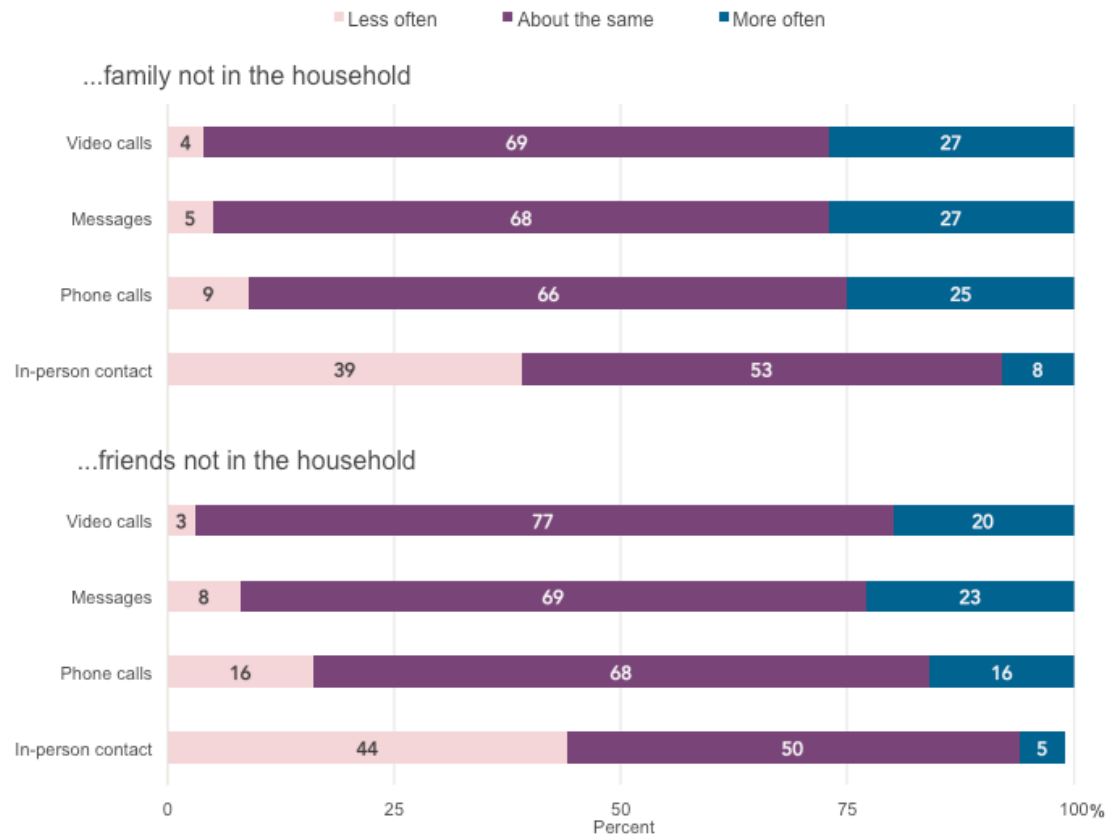
A LARGE SHARE OF OLDER ADULTS REPORT REDUCING THE FREQUENCY OF THEIR IN-PERSON CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS SINCE THE PANDEMIC STARTED, BUT OVER HALF REPORT AN UNCHANGED OR EVEN INCREASED FREQUENCY OF IN-PERSON CONTACT.

Although social distancing guidelines recommend that Americans reduce non-essential contact with people outside of their household, a majority of older adults (53%) report having in-person contact with family members outside of their household just as often now as they did before the pandemic started, and 8% say they've increased the frequency of their in-person contact with family members. Similarly, half of older adults have in-person contact with friends outside of their household just as often now as before the pandemic, with fewer (44%) reporting they've reduced the frequency of in-person contact. Maintained or even increased frequency of in-person contact among older adults during the pandemic is likely a mixture of noncompliance with COVID-related guidelines, necessary in-person interactions involving caregivers, interactions that are appropriately distanced (using masks, staying 6 feet or more apart), and interactions involving two or three households that are sharing a social bubble (a "quaranteam") to allow meaningful social activity.

At the same time, technology-mediated contact is more prevalent during than before the pandemic. Forty-six percent of older adults say they are more frequently communicating with family members outside of their household via phone calls, messages, and/or video calls—modes of contact that do not risk exposure to COVID-19. Video calls have been widely touted as a means for older adults to maintain social contact during the pandemic, and the use of this mode of contact has grown; about a quarter of the population (27%) have increased their frequency of video calls with family members, and a fifth (20%) with friends. Thirty-five percent of older adults have increased their frequency of contact with friends via one or more of these three technological modes.

At least half of older adults have not reduced their frequency of in-person contact with friends and family not living with them during the pandemic.

Percent who report they are now using the following with...



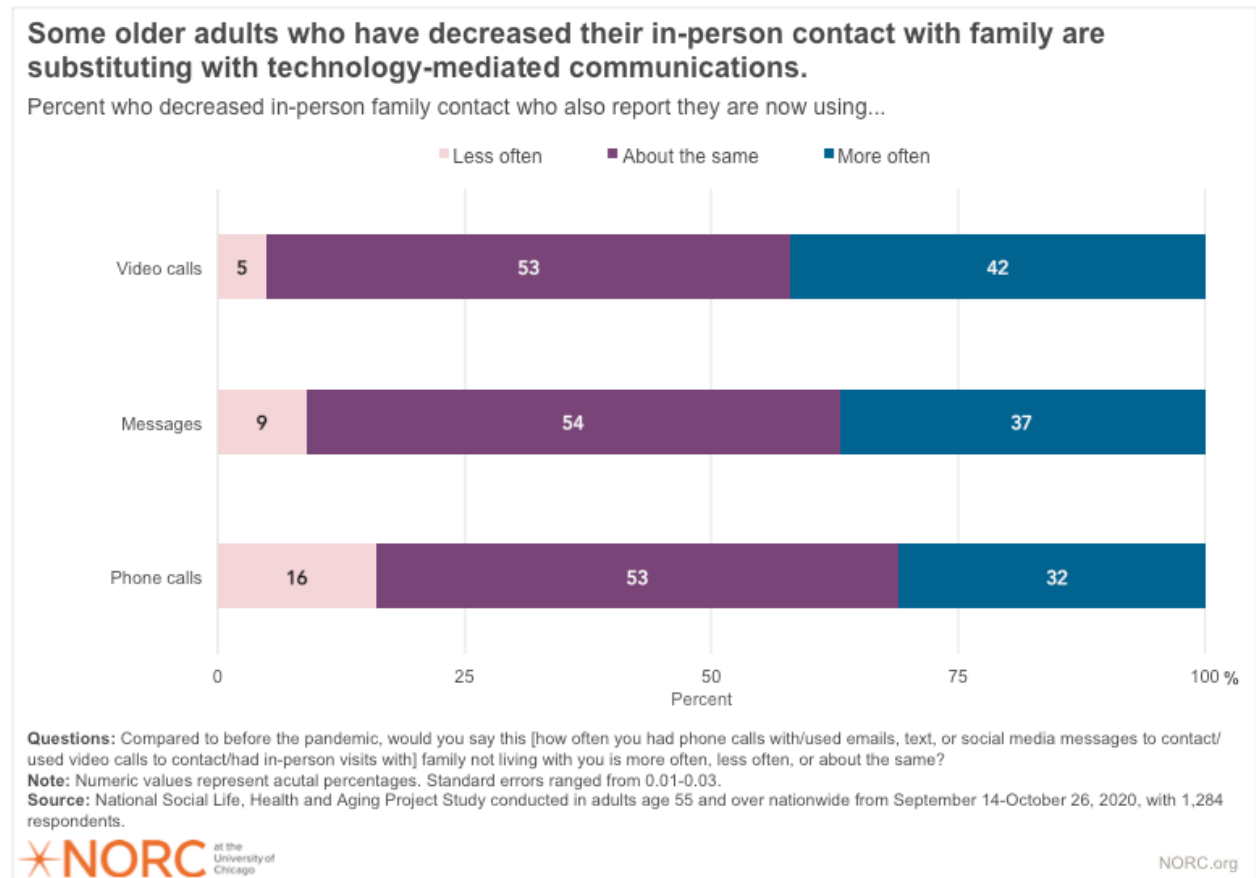
Questions: Compared to before the pandemic, would you say this [how often you had phone calls with/used emails, text, or social media messages to contact/used video calls to contact/had in-person visits with] family/friends not living with you is more often, less often, or about the same?

Note: Numeric values represent actual percentages. Standard errors ranged from 0.01-0.02.

Source: National Social Life, Health and Aging Project Study conducted in adults age 55 and over nationwide from September 14-October 26, 2020, with 1,284 respondents.

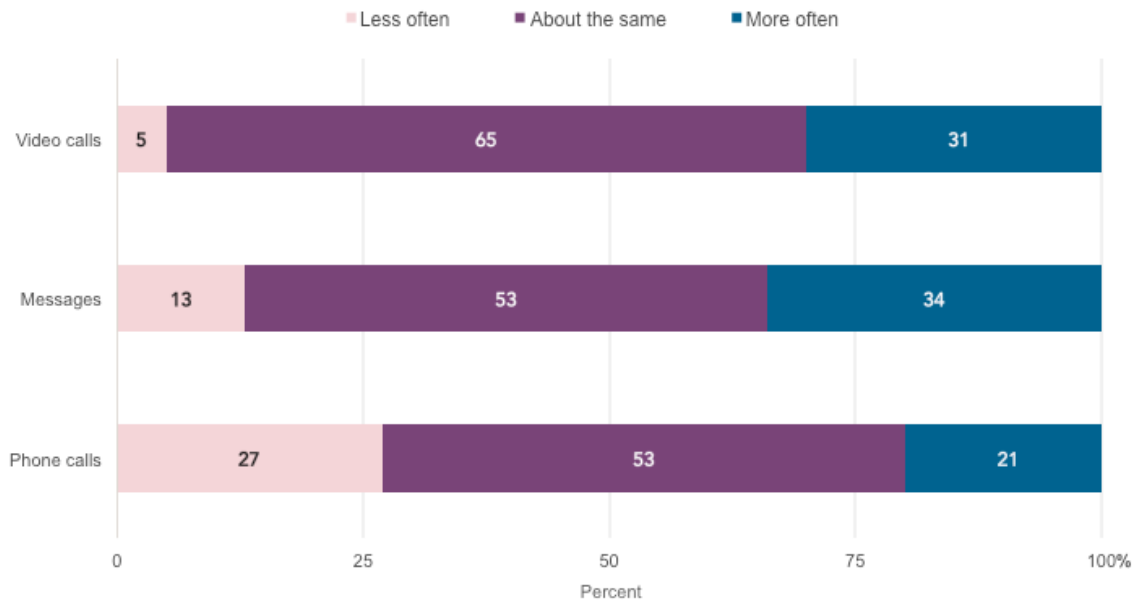
There are signs that older adults are substituting technology for in-person communication. Of the older adults who have decreased in-person contact with family living outside of their household, about a third or more report an increase in how often they are communicating with their family members, with video calls seeing the largest prevalence (42%), followed by messages (37%), and phone calls (32%). Sixty-two percent report increasing their contact with family by one or more of these modes of communication.

The same pattern exists for communicating with friends. Among those who have decreased in-person contacts, 50% report increasing their communication via technology instead.



Some older adults who have reduced their in-person contact with friends are substituting with technology-mediated communications.

Percent who decreased in-person contact with friends who also report they are now using ...



Questions: Compared to before the pandemic, would you say this [how often you had phone calls with/used emails, text, or social media messages to contact/used video calls to contact/had in-person visits with] friends not living with you is more often, less often, or about the same?

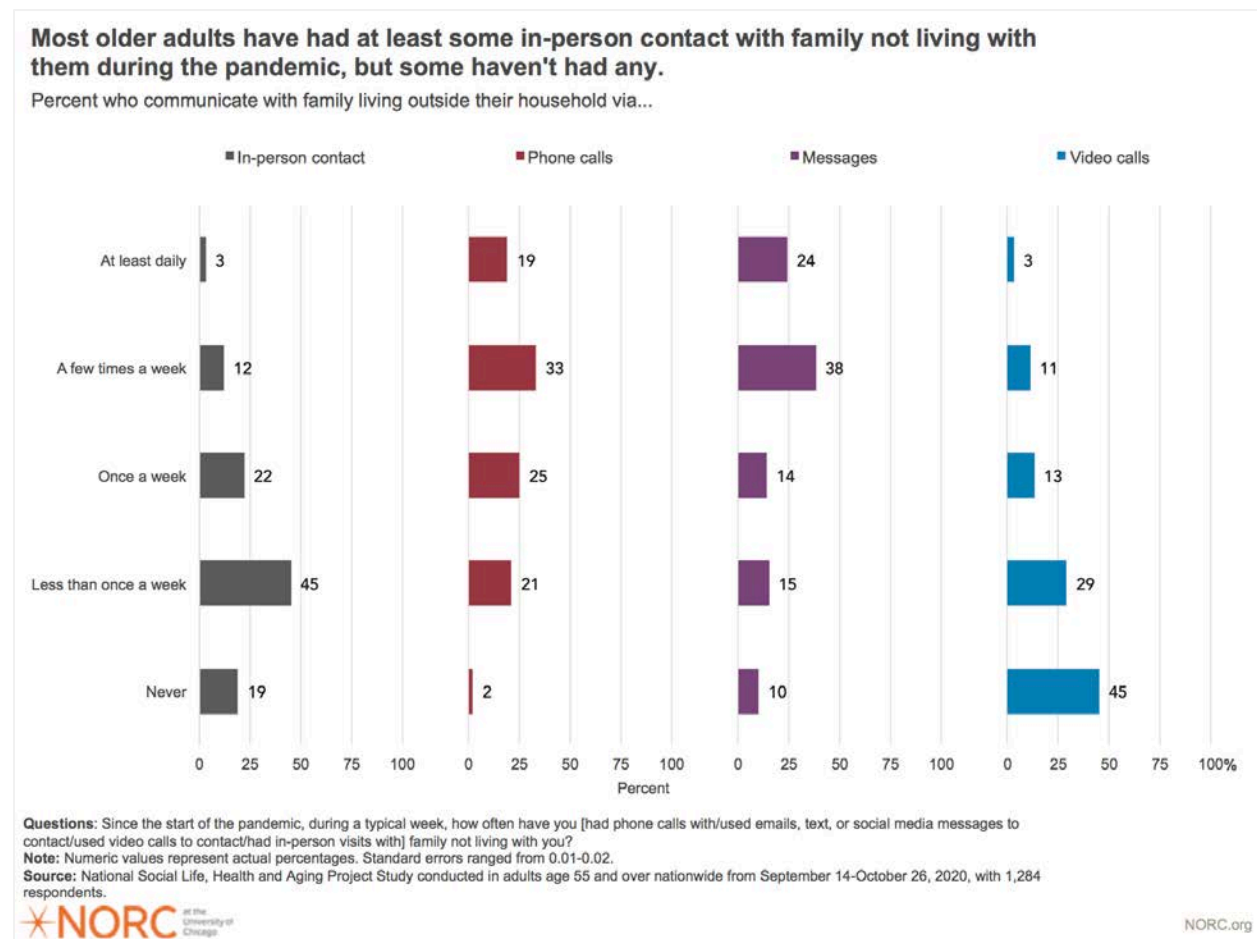
Note: Numeric values represent actual percentages. Standard errors ranged from 0.01-0.04.

Source: National Social Life, Health and Aging Project Study conducted in adults age 55 and over nationwide from September 14-October 26, 2020, with 1,284 respondents.

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS OF OLDER ADULTS REPORT HAVING LESS THAN WEEKLY OR NO IN-PERSON CONTACT WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY DURING THE PANDEMIC, BUT MOST REPORT USING TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED METHODS AT LEAST WEEKLY TO CONTACT FRIENDS AND FAMILY OUTSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD.

Although 37% of older adults report at least weekly in-person contact with family who do not live with them, nearly two-thirds (64%) have had only infrequent in-person contact with family. Most older adults (45%) have had less than weekly in-person contact with family members outside of their household, and about one in five (19%) have not seen these family members in person at all since the start of the pandemic.

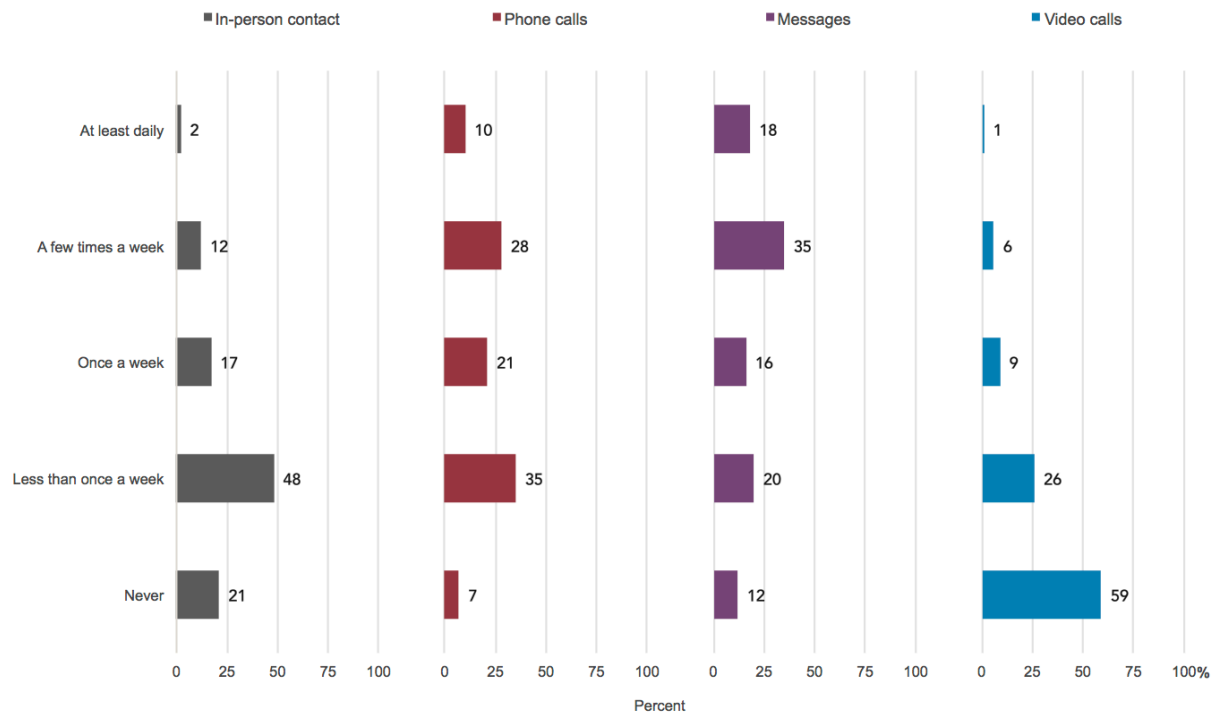
However, at least three in four older adults report contacting family members outside their household via messages (email, text, or social media) and phone calls (75% and 77%) at least once a week, and more than half of older adults (55%) report using video calls to communicate with family members not living with them since the pandemic started. In all, 88% of older adults are using at least one technology-mediated means of communication to contact family once a week or more, whether via phone calls, messages, or video calls.



About one in five older adults (21%) have had no in-person contact with friends living outside the household during the pandemic, and another 48% report less than weekly in-person contact with friends. However, most older adults report at least weekly contact with friends via messages (email, text, or social media) or phone calls (68% and 58%, respectively). Forty-one percent of older adults have used video calls at some point during the pandemic to communicate with friends outside the household. In all, 79% of older adults are using at least one technology-mediated means of communication to contact friends once a week or more, whether via phone calls, messages, or video calls.

Most older adults have had at least some in-person contact with friends not living with them during the pandemic, but some haven't had any.

Percent who communicate with friends living outside their household via...



Questions: Since the start of the pandemic, during a typical week, how often have you [had phone calls with/used emails, text, or social media messages to contact/used video calls to contact/had in-person visits with] friends not living with you?
Note: Numeric values represent actual percentages. Standard errors ranged from 0.00-0.02.
Source: National Social Life, Health and Aging Project Study conducted in adults age 55 and over nationwide from September 14-October 26, 2020, with 1,284 respondents.



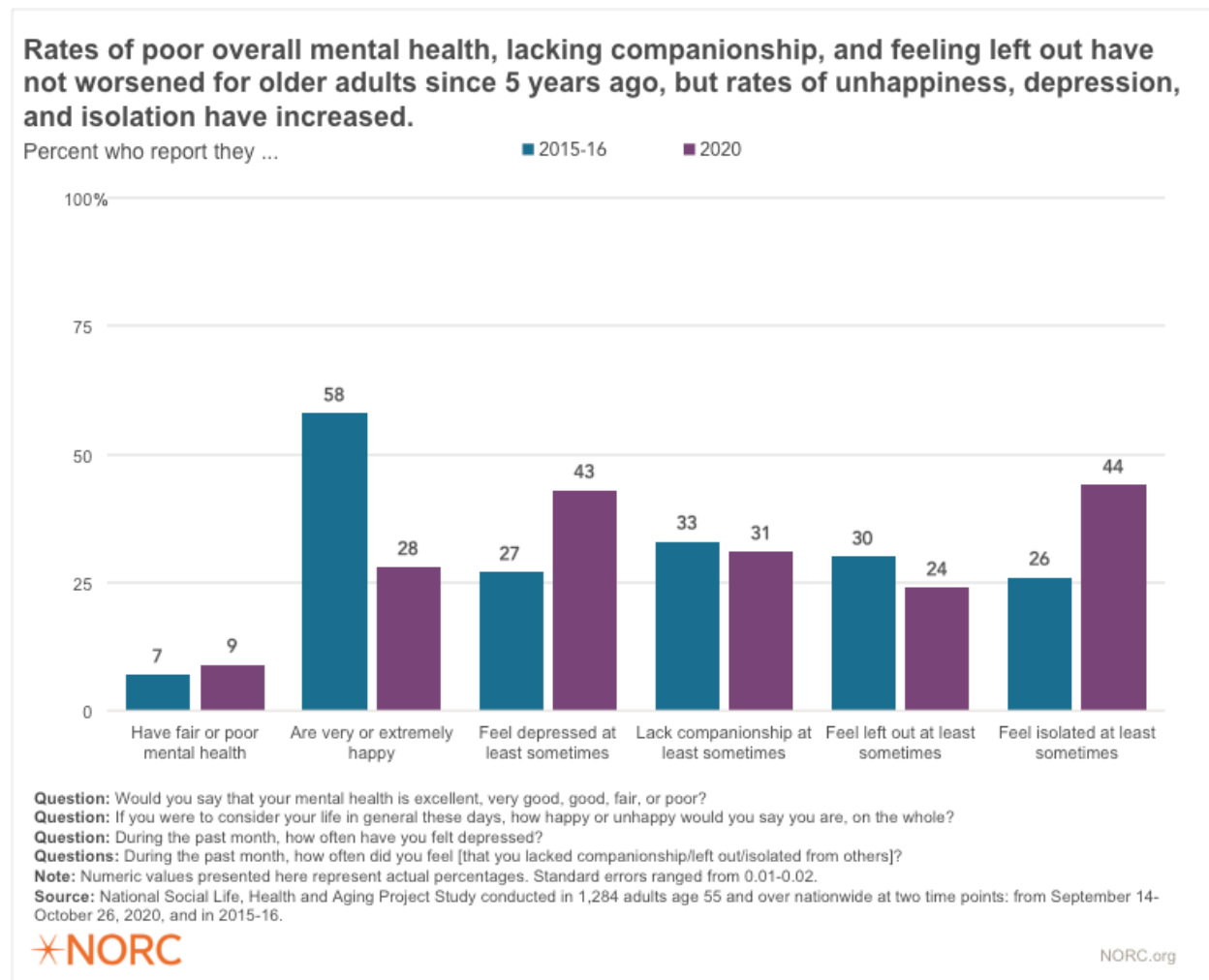
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OLDER ADULTS' MENTAL HEALTH SHOWS SIGNS OF RESILIENCE, BUT IS WORSE OFF IN SOME ASPECTS DURING THE PANDEMIC THAN IT WAS 5 YEARS AGO.

Compared to data collected from the same respondents 5 years ago, rates of fair or poor mental health have not meaningfully increased amid the pandemic (9% in fall 2020 compared to 7% in 2015–16). In addition, the percentage of older adults who report lacking companionship at least sometimes has not changed from 2015–16 (33% vs. 31%), and reports of feeling left out have actually decreased from 2015–16 to now (30% vs. 24%).

However, rates of some psychological indicators have worsened among U.S. older adults during the pandemic; compared to 5 years ago, about half as many now report they are very or extremely happy (58% vs. 28%), and more report at least sometimes feeling depressed (27% vs. 43%) or isolated (26% vs. 44%).

As shown in the Appendix, for each of these findings, changes (or lack of changes) in mental health indicators over time were not merely due to the fact that respondents were all 5 years older in 2020 than in 2015–16. The differences between the pandemic subsample in 2020 and in 2015–16 are constant across the entire age range. In addition, although only a subset of the NSHAP respondents participated in the pandemic substudy, in 2015–16, the pandemic subsample was only slightly different from the full sample.



STUDY METHODOLOGY

The NSHAP-COVID Study was designed to examine the social, psychological, and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community-dwelling older adults in the U.S. This study was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago with funding from the National Institute on Aging (Grant AG043538-08S1).

The NSHAP-COVID Study is an extension of the ongoing National Social Life, Health and Aging Project (NSHAP). NSHAP began in 2005-6 with a probability sample of 3,005 community-dwelling U.S. adults born 1920–47 (Cohort 1). A second wave of data was collected in 2010–11 (n = 3,377) from surviving respondents and their co-resident spouses or partners (regardless of age). A third wave of data was collected in 2015–16 (n = 4,777) from all surviving respondents, adding a new cohort (Cohort 2) of U.S. adults born 1948–65 and their co-resident spouses or partners (regardless of age). Details on the NSHAP sampling design and methodology are provided at <http://www.norc.org/nshap>.

All NSHAP respondents from prior waves were invited to participate in the NSHAP-COVID Study. Respondents were sent a letter inviting them to complete a web-based questionnaire, with the option of calling a toll-free number if they preferred a telephone interview. This report uses data from respondents who completed the survey within the first 6 weeks of its launch date on September 14. By October 26, 2020, 1,338 had completed the survey—1,201 via the web and 137 via telephone interview.

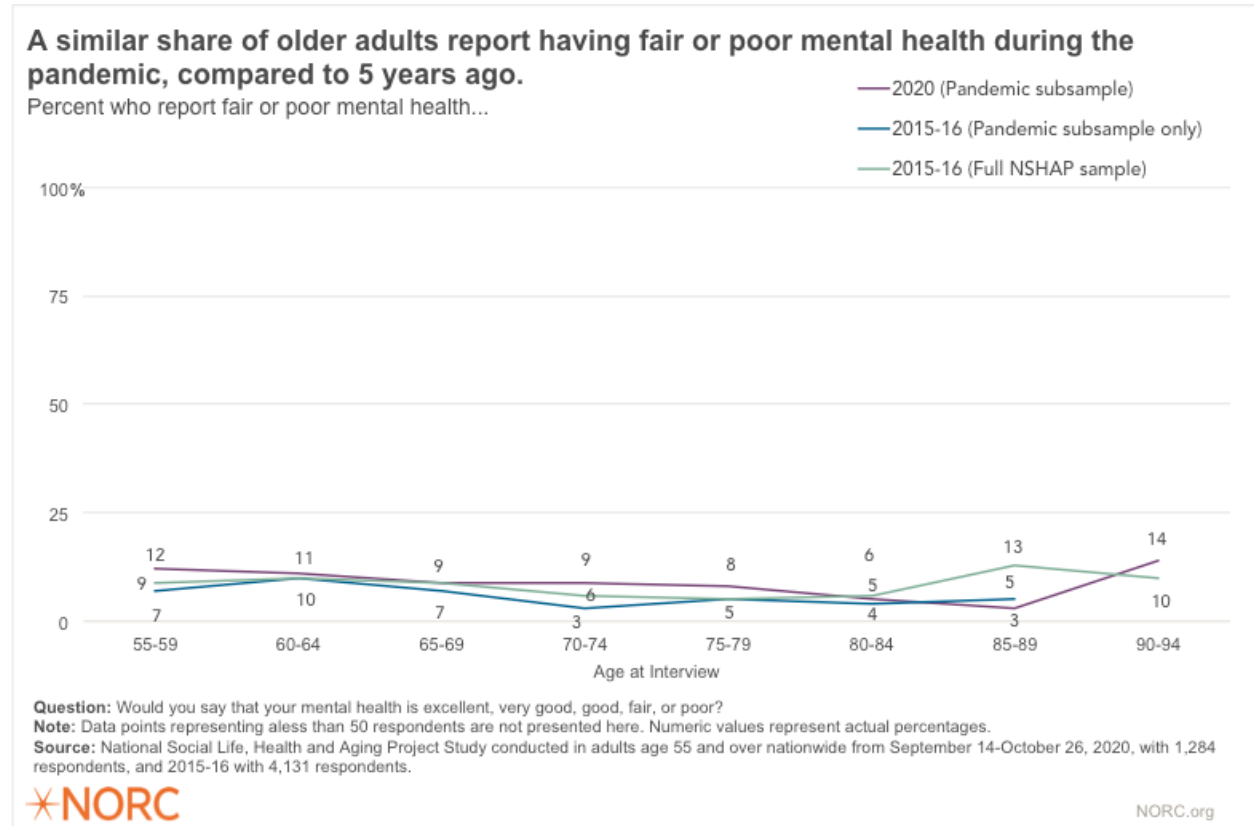
The web-based questionnaire and the interviews were provided in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference.

NSHAP-COVID Study respondents ranged in age from 37 to 99 years. This report focuses on older adults, defined as those 55 years and older. Excluding 49 individuals younger than 55 and five for whom no corresponding data were available in Wave 3 left an analytic sample of 1,284. Comparisons with data collected in 2015–16 were used to draw inferences about the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; these include both within-person comparisons and age-specific comparisons with the entire NSHAP sample.

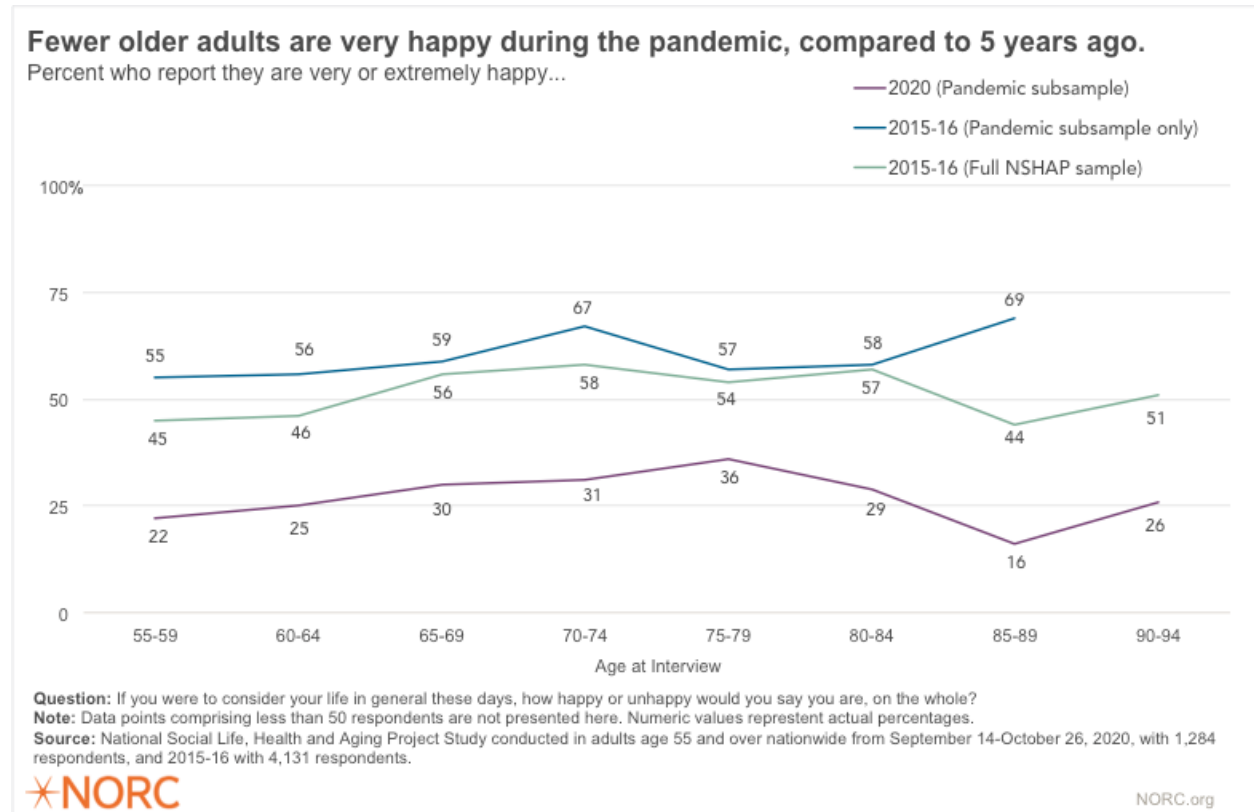
The NSHAP sample consists of two multistage area probability samples. The Cohort 1 sample was drawn from surplus cases screened by the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) in 2004, and was restricted to U.S. adults born 1920–47 living in households (the institutionalized population and homeless were excluded). The Cohort 2 sample was drawn from the 2010 NORC U.S. national sampling frame and was restricted to home-dwelling adults born 1948–65 and their co-resident spouses or partners. Weights were calculated by starting with the base weight for each cohort (i.e., the reciprocal of the probability of selection accounting for partners), adjusting these to account for partners whose birthdates led them to be eligible for both cohorts, and applying a non-response adjustment based on age and urbanicity. Standard errors and design effects were calculated using these weights, as well as information on sample stratification and clustering. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

APPENDIX

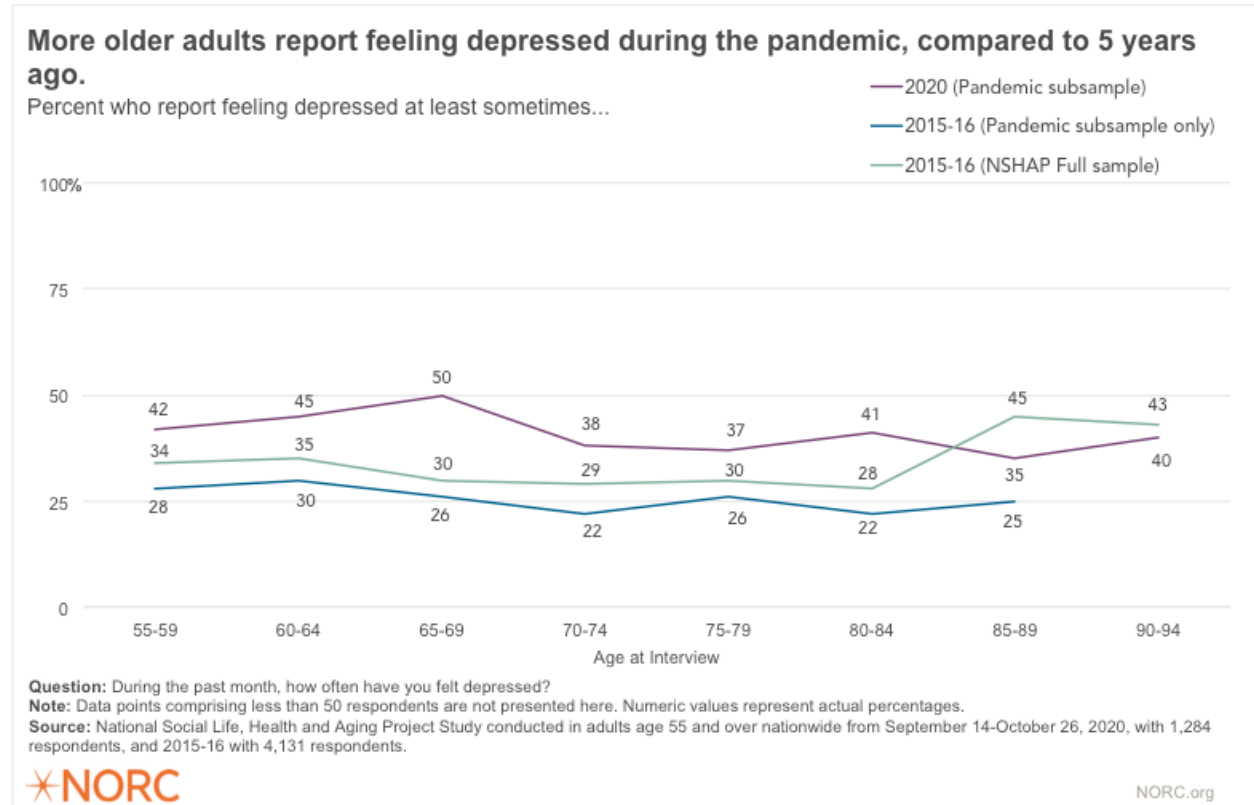
Older adults in this study (pandemic subsample) were not more likely to report fair or poor mental health in 2020 than they were in 2015–16, and this was true across the age range. Moreover, although only a subset of NSHAP respondents participated in the COVID substudy, those who did reported similar rates of fair or poor mental health in 2015–16 to the full NSHAP sample.



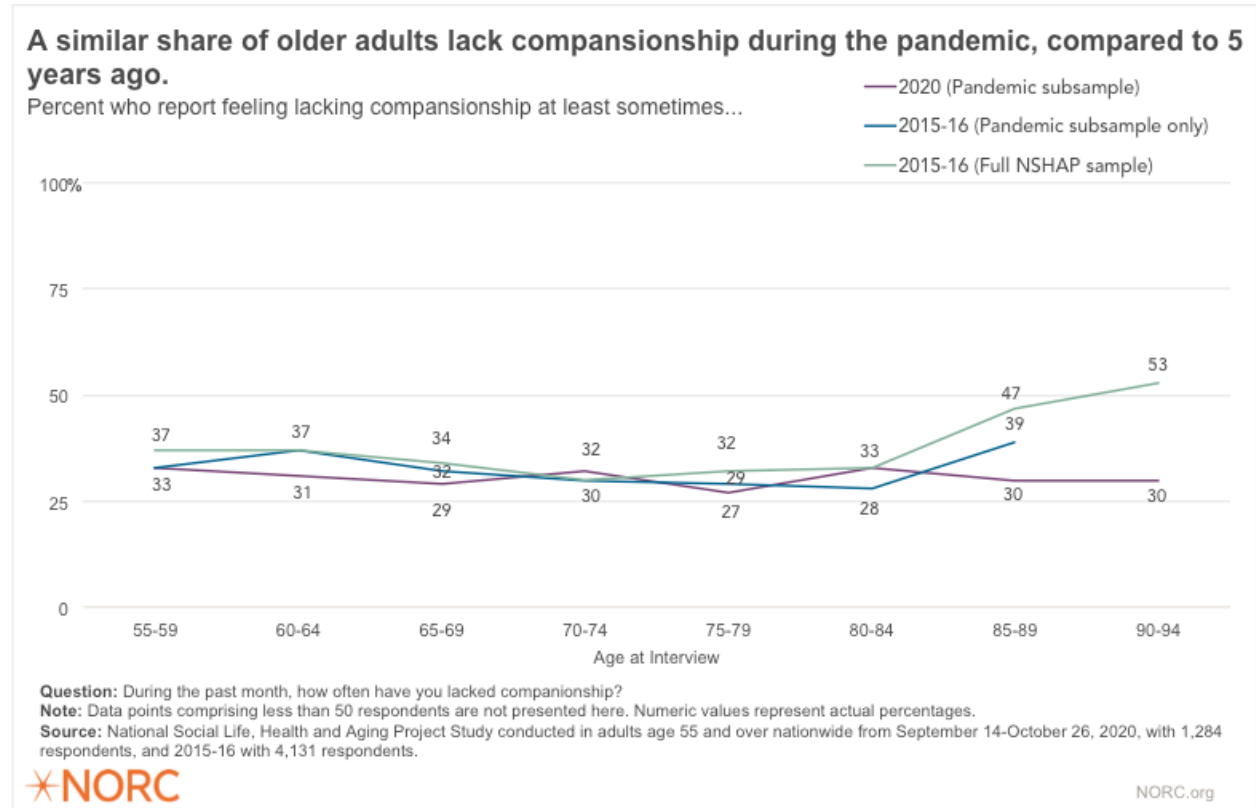
Half as many older adults report being very or extremely happy during the pandemic compared to 5 years ago—a difference evident across the entire age range. For example, 25% of adults aged 60–64 in 2020 report being very or extremely happy, compared to 55% of this same group (pandemic subsample) in 2015–16 (when they were aged 55–59). This difference was not merely due to the fact that respondents in 2020 were all 5 years older than in 2015–16; although there is some change in happiness with age, the difference between the curves for the pandemic subsample in 2020 and 2015–16 remains roughly constant. Finally, although those in the pandemic subsample were slightly more likely to report being happy in 2015–16 than the full NSHAP sample, these differences are small relative to the differences between 2015–16 and 2020.



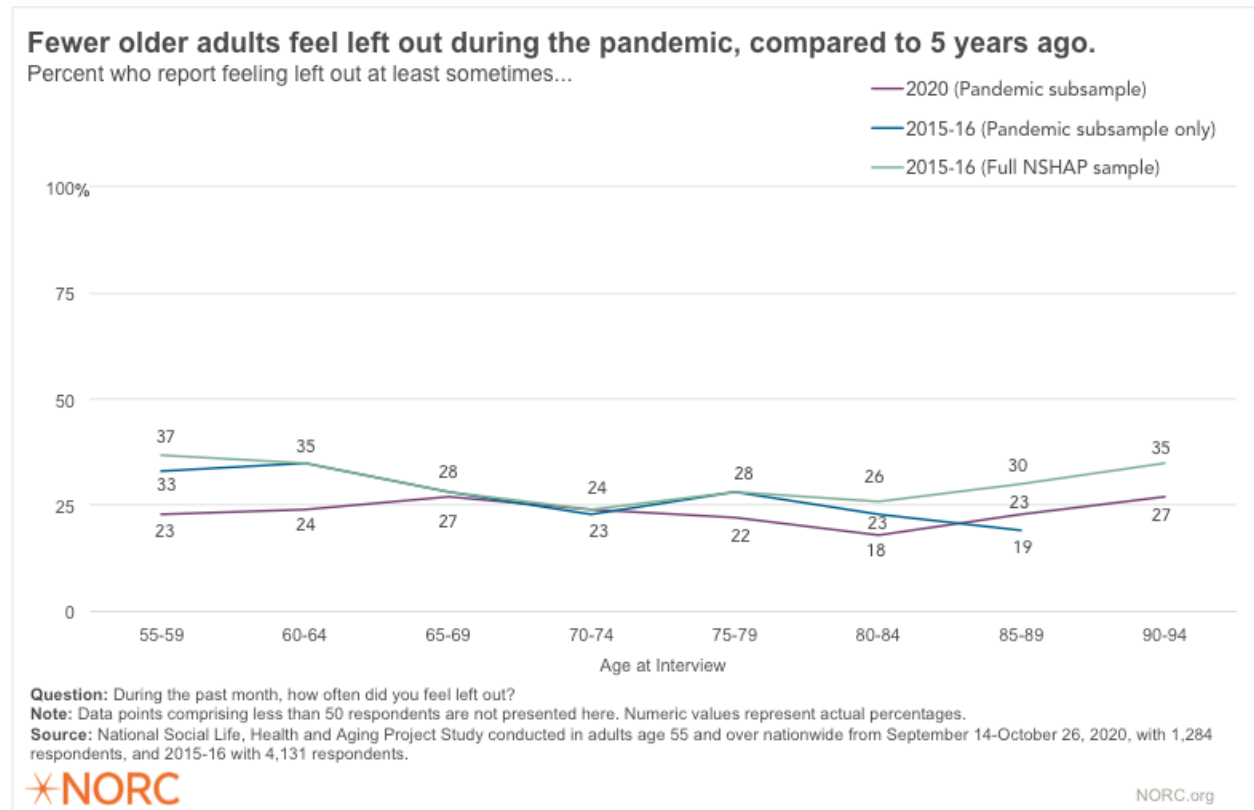
Rates of feeling depressed sometimes, occasionally, or most of the time increased over the past 5 years. For example, 37% of adults aged 75-79 in 2020 report feeling depressed at least sometimes as compared to 22% of this same group (pandemic subsample) in 2015-16. The difference between the curves for the pandemic subsample in 2020 and 2015-16 exhibits some variability across the age range, such that increases in rates of feeling depressed become larger with age until about 69 years of age, after which the difference shrinks and remains roughly constant into oldest old age. Finally, although those in the pandemic sample were somewhat less likely to report feeling depressed at least sometimes in 2015-16 than the full NSHAP sample—particularly in the oldest group (when 85-89 years old)—these differences pale in comparison to the increase in the prevalence of at least sometimes feeling depressed in 2020.



Despite ongoing social distancing guidelines across the nation, overall, older adults are no more likely now than 5 years ago to report a lack of companionship. This degree of similarity is roughly constant across the entire age range. A lack of companionship becomes more prevalent in older age, particularly after age 85, and this pattern is similar for the full sample and the pandemic subsample. In combination, the overlap among all three curves until oldest old age underscores the absence of any meaningful difference in the share of older adults who report a lack of companionship during the pandemic.



In comparing the same older adults in 2015–16 and again in 2020 (pandemic subsample), rates of feeling left out decreased—a difference that was relatively consistent across the entire age range until about age 85. Moreover, even though the pandemic sample is only a subset of the full sample, rates of reporting feeling left out in 2015–16 did not differ between these groups, indicating that the decrease in rates of feeling left out is a reliable finding. Social opportunities that were curtailed during the pandemic may have contributed to a lower likelihood of older adults feeling left out.



Reports of feeling isolated at least sometimes have increased among older adults over the past 5 years across the older adult age range. For example, 46% of 65-69 year-olds in 2020 report feeling isolated at least sometimes, compared to 31% of this same group (pandemic subsample) in 2015-16. Moreover, the pandemic subsample does not differ from the full sample in rates of isolation across the age range, at least until oldest old age (after about age 85), and the increased prevalence of feelings of isolation during the pandemic are therefore reliable estimates of what older adults in the U.S. are experiencing. Indeed, the word, "isolated," may have triggered responses consistent with actual isolation experienced when socially distancing from others. An increase in feelings of isolation in this context could therefore be expected.

