

What's in a Statistic?

Hi! My name is Helen Sloop, and I recently completed a summer internship with the UCEDD. During my internship, I reviewed data from the NCI Oregon Adult In-Person Survey of people with I/DD. The survey was conducted by the UCEDD as part of the National Core Indicators Project. The NCI survey helps provide information about people with I/DD to the public and helps inform service improvement. The In-Person survey is conducted with a random sample of 400+ adults who receive at least one paid service from the state disability services. There are all kinds of questions and different types of data.

While I was looking at the data, one Oregon statistic caught my eye.

- 16% often feel lonely

In the NCI survey, it is considered that someone “often feels lonely” when they report feeling lonely more than half the time. This means that 16% of adults with disabilities feel lonely more than half the time. Compared to the national average, 10%, the Oregon statistic was 6% higher. When I saw this statistic, I started to pay more attention to the statistics around it and what they meant, and how they could connect to the statistic about loneliness.

- 75% have friends and can see them when they want
- 59% want more help to meet or keep in contact with friends

I think that loneliness often stems from the fact that someone is not able to see their friends very much. According to the survey, over half (59%) of disabled adults in Oregon want to have more help to meet or connect with friends. Something that could be happening to the 16% who feel lonely often is they might not have very many friends that they can see. There are also barriers when it comes to seeing friends, especially for disabled people. Transportation can be difficult, and setting up a time when people are able to meet can be a challenge as well. Another thing that could be happening is social isolation. For some disabled people, it could be hard to engage socially due to barriers with speech or stigma surrounding their disability.

No one wants to be lonely, it is not fun to feel like that. During my internship, I learned that studies have shown that there are health risks that come with being lonely. For example, being lonely can raise stress hormones and inflammation. Higher levels of these can raise the risk for other diseases as well, such as arthritis and dementia. This could affect disabled people who find it hard to get out of the house to do things such as go to the doctor for a checkup.

There are growing concerns for lonely seniors as well. After all, almost one fourth of disabled adults in Oregon are 55 or older. Along with all of this, loneliness is not an issue just one person can face. A good way to fight loneliness is to go out into the community, but that can be hard for older people and disabled people. Random acts of kindness are a simple way to be involved in the community in a way that matters. Even simple things like holding the door open for someone or helping someone carry their groceries can improve their day. If we can address loneliness by giving back to the community and addressing it as an issue that we all need to face, I think that we could improve the quality of life for senior Oregonians and Oregonians with disabilities.

For more information visit <https://www.ohsu.edu/university-center-excellence-development-disability/national-core-indicators-nci> or contact Alice Miller at longley@ohsu.edu or 503-494-2946.