



KAISER PERMANENTE RESEARCH: SOCIAL NEEDS IN AMERICA

June 4, 2019 – New research commissioned by Kaiser Permanente finds that safe housing, balanced meals, transportation and social support are essential to Americans' health and well-being but that Americans across demographic segments face challenges meeting these needs, leading to significant negative impacts on physical and mental health. Americans overwhelmingly want their doctors or medical service providers to help address their social needs, including assessing needs and linking them with community resources. With a third of Americans lacking confidence in their ability to identify and utilize community resources themselves, medical professionals have a key role to play in helping patients maintain their overall health, addressing challenges that go beyond the doctor's office.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Kaiser Permanente engaged KRC Research to administer a 15-minute blinded online questionnaire. The primary survey audience was a sample of 1,006 U.S. adults 18 years and older, demographically matched to represent the U.S. population based on Census data. Additionally, oversamples were conducted of the safety net population, defined as households falling under 138% of the federal poverty line (n=500 total) and the Kaiser Permanente service regions (Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Mid-Atlantic, Northern California, Pacific Northwest, Southern California, Washington, n=~250 within each region). To ensure total market representation, the survey was offered in both English and Spanish.

This memo highlights key insights from the national sample of this survey.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Across demographic segments, Americans struggle with unmet social needs¹. A third of Americans are frequently or occasionally stressed over providing for their families' housing, food, transportation, or social support needs.

- Social needs are a significant source of stress for American families:
 - 39% frequently or occasionally experience stress over meeting their family's needs for food/balanced meals;
 - 38% experience stress over social relationships needs;
 - 35% experience stress over meeting housing needs; and,
 - 32% experience stress over transportation needs.
- Americans are stressed over meeting their families' needs. Housing and food costs combined make up nearly half of the average American's budget, and health care spending accounts for 9% of their budget. If faced with a \$500 emergency expense, more than one-in-ten Americans (13%) would need to redirect funds from their food

¹ See appendix A for a further explanation of how social needs are defined.

budget to cover the expense. Fewer than half (44%) could cover the expense from a dedicated emergency fund or cash they have on hand.

- The most commonly reported social needs food insecurity and social isolation, and these needs are most prevalent among younger and lower-income Americans. Still, social needs in these areas persist across income and age categories.
- Social needs related to housing and transportation, while less prevalent than challenges related to food insecurity and social isolation, are still sources of stress for many Americans.
- Unmet social needs are prevalent even among families at the highest income levels (\$125k or more) – 40% of these families experience at least one unmet social need in the past year.

Social needs rival traditional health care considerations in importance. Americans take a holistic view of health, believing that safe housing, reliable transportation, healthy meals and supportive social relationships are nearly as important as access to doctors and medication.

- Overall, 92% of Americans believe access to doctors is important to overall health, 89% believe the ability to pay medical bills and copays is important, and 87% believe access to prescription medications is important to overall health.
- Health isn't determined by a doctor's visit alone. Americans are united in their belief that stable housing (89%), balanced meals (84%), reliable transportation (80%), or supportive social relationships (72%) are important to overall health.
- The importance of social needs transcends demographics. These needs are viewed as important by the majority of Americans, regardless of age, income, race, or gender.

Americans lack self-efficacy in accessing resources to address their social needs and are largely unaware as to whether their community has resources available to individuals or families in need.

- Over a third of Americans (35%) lack confidence that they could identify the best resource if they or a family member needed to use community resources relating to transportation, food, housing, or social isolation.
 - This is likely driven by the fact that many Americans are unsure of what resources are available in their community for individuals or families in need. A majority of Americans are not sure if their communities have transportation vouchers (57%), housing counseling centers (55%), housing vouchers (54%), volunteer driver programs (53%), or subsidized or free group physical activity/exercise classes (53%) available to those in need.
 - Even among the more well-known community resources; including government food assistance, food banks, and senior centers; a noteworthy number are not sure of the availability in their community. Eighteen percent of Americans are unsure if senior centers are available, 17% are unsure about food banks, and 16% are unsure if government food assistance is available.
- Given this lack of awareness, it is not surprising to see that over 3 in 10 Americans lack confidence they could effectively utilize community resources to meet their needs (31%) while a similar number lack confidence that they would know where to go for information on community resources (32%).

- Americans experiencing unmet social needs are less confident in their ability to access and utilize community resources than those who are not experiencing unmet needs. More than a third of those with unmet needs lack confidence in their ability to identify the best resource (39% lacking confidence), know where to go for information (35%), effectively use the resource (37%) and complete the necessary steps to access the resource (36%).

Medical service providers are a key conduit to accessing resources to reduce social needs. Americans want medical providers to ask about their social needs and help connect them with resources.

- Medical providers are a key source of information on community resources. Four in ten (42%) would turn to their medical services provider when looking for information on community resources to help with social needs. In fact, asking a medical service provider is the third most common way people would seek information, following an internet search and friends/family. Additionally, one in three (30%) Americans would turn to their health insurance provider for this information.
- Americans are supportive of medical service providers assessing social needs during visits, regardless of whether or not they are personally experiencing challenges.
 - 93% of Americans feel that their medical provider should ask about access to food and balanced meals;
 - 83% feel that their medical provider should ask about safe and stable housing;
 - 78% feel that their medical provider should ask about social relationships and isolation; and
 - 77% feel that their medical provider should ask about transportation to work, school, appointments, or activities.
- A majority (51%) of Americans say it would make them feel supported if their medical provider were to ask them about issues relating to transportation, housing, food, and/or social relationships. Another 39% say they would feel listened to or heard. Only a small group would feel annoyed (10%) or nervous (10%) if a medical provider were to inquire about their social needs.
- If they or a family member were in need, 80% of Americans would find it helpful for their medical provider to share information about community resources, recommend specific resources, follow up, and help them apply for resources

More than a quarter of Americans have endured health risks stemming from unmet social needs, and Americans with unmet social needs are significantly more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health than their counterparts without unmet needs.

- 28% of Americans reported experiencing a barrier to health in the past year due to a social need:
 - 21% prioritized paying for food or rent over seeing a doctor/medication;
 - 17% couldn't go to the doctor/pick up medication because they lacked transportation;
 - 13% were sick and had no one who could help; and

- 9% couldn't see a doctor regularly because they didn't have stable housing.
- Additionally, Americans who report experiencing unmet social needs in the past year are twice as likely to rate their health as fair or poor (16%) compared to those who did not experience an unmet social need (6%).
- Americans who experienced an unmet social need in the past year reported an average of two extra days of physical illness in the past month (5 days on average) compared to those who did not experience an unmet social need (3 days on average).
- Americans who experienced an unmet social need in the past year reported an average of four extra days of poor mental health in the past month (6 days on average) compared to those who did not experience an unmet social need (2 days on average).
- The social needs most closely associated with physical and mental health outcomes are social support and transportation. One in five Americans (20%) with unmet needs in these areas rates their health as fair or poor.

APPENDIX A: DEFINING SOCIAL NEEDS

Respondents were considered as having experienced an unmet social need in the past year if they met one or more of the following criteria. These criteria were categorized into housing, transportation, food security, and relationships needs based on a battery of 19 possible needs. Respondents who said they ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ had access to one of these possible needs are considered to have a ‘need’ within one of these categories. The following tables show that data in greater detail.

Housing Needs

Experienced one or more of the following ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ in the past 12 months:

- had access to a bathroom that could be used to meet basic hygienic needs (e.g. shower, brushing teeth)
- had the ability to store medications as instructed by a medical services provider (e.g. refrigerator for insulin)
- had the ability to wash clothing on a regular basis
- had stable housing that was owned, rented, or stayed in as part of a household
- had a safe place to stay that was free from violence

Transportation Needs

Experienced one or more of the following ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ in the past 12 months:

- had transportation to attend social, community, or religious events
- had transportation to work and/or school
- had transportation to destinations such as shopping, the grocery store, and the bank
- had transportation to medical appointments

Food Security

Experienced the following ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ in the past 12 months:

- could afford to eat balanced meals

And/or experienced one or more of the following ‘sometimes’, ‘often’, or ‘always’ in the past 12 months:

- sometimes felt that there wasn’t enough money for food
- cut portions or skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money for food
- ate less than one should because there wasn’t enough money for food

Relationships

Experienced one or more of the following ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ in the past 12 months:

- felt content with my/our friendships and relationships
- had enough people around who I/we could ask for help at any time

Table 1: Social Needs by Gender and Generation

Social Needs (showing % who sometimes, rarely, or never have access)	Total	Gender		Generation				
		Male	Female	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer	Silent/ Greatest
Housing	21%	23%	19%	35%	29%	21%	13%	14%
Had the ability to store medications as instructed by a medical services provider [e.g. refrigerator for insulin]	13%	15%	12%	23%	16%	15%	10%	7%
Had the ability to wash clothing on a regular basis	9%	9%	9%	12%	15%	9%	4%	4%
Had a safe place to stay that is free from violence	8%	8%	8%	9%	15%	9%	3%	1%
Had stable housing that was owned, rented, or stayed in as part of a household	8%	9%	7%	8%	13%	8%	4%	3%
Had access to a bathroom that could be used to meet basic hygienic needs [e.g. shower, brushing teeth]	7%	9%	6%	14%	11%	9%	3%	2%
Transportation	26%	27%	25%	52%	35%	24%	18%	16%
Had transportation to attend social, community, or religious events	16%	16%	16%	22%	22%	18%	10%	9%
Had transportation to work and/or school	16%	15%	16%	33%	17%	14%	13%	13%
Had transportation to medical appointments	13%	14%	11%	29%	19%	12%	7%	4%
Had transportation to destinations such as shopping, the grocery store, and the bank	13%	12%	13%	21%	18%	16%	6%	3%
Food Security	48%	43%	53%	81%	73%	50%	28%	13%
Sometimes felt that there wasn't enough money for food	34%	28%	39%	60%	52%	37%	18%	7%
Could afford to eat balanced meals	28%	25%	31%	33%	40%	32%	19%	10%
Cut portions or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food	28%	26%	30%	53%	47%	31%	13%	4%
Ate less than one should because there wasn't enough money for food	28%	26%	30%	62%	47%	28%	12%	3%
Relationships	44%	40%	47%	47%	51%	51%	36%	24%
Had enough people around who [I/we] could ask for help at any time	36%	32%	40%	20%	43%	41%	31%	22%
Felt content with [my/our] friendships and relationships	28%	26%	30%	35%	32%	36%	22%	13%
Any Social Needs	68%	65%	71%	88%	84%	74%	53%	43%
No Social Needs	32%	35%	29%	12%	16%	26%	47%	57%

Table 2: Social Needs by Income

Social Needs (showing % who sometimes, rarely, or never have access)	Income						
	Under \$25k	\$25-49k	\$50-74k	\$75-99k	\$100- 124k	\$125- 150k	\$150k+
Housing	35%	21%	19%	16%	18%	12%	11%
Had the ability to store medications as instructed by a medical services provider [e.g. refrigerator for insulin]	25%	14%	10%	9%	10%	5%	8%
Had the ability to wash clothing on a regular basis	15%	10%	7%	6%	10%	2%	5%
Had a safe place to stay that is free from violence	13%	10%	3%	7%	7%	7%	5%
Had stable housing that was owned, rented, or stayed in as part of a household	15%	8%	4%	6%	7%	-	4%
Had access to a bathroom that could be used to meet basic hygienic needs [e.g. shower, brushing teeth]	13%	8%	4%	6%	8%	2%	6%
Transportation	48%	31%	15%	19%	18%	11%	12%
Had transportation to attend social, community, or religious events	31%	19%	10%	10%	8%	10%	6%
Had transportation to work and/or school	33%	14%	9%	13%	12%	6%	8%
Had transportation to medical appointments	20%	18%	7%	9%	11%	3%	7%
Had transportation to destinations such as shopping, the grocery store, and the bank	25%	14%	6%	8%	13%	5%	6%
Food Security	74%	57%	41%	38%	38%	16%	23%
Sometimes felt that there wasn't enough money for food	53%	46%	27%	21%	18%	15%	18%
Could afford to eat balanced meals	48%	35%	24%	20%	26%	3%	11%
Cut portions or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food	50%	35%	22%	17%	16%	12%	15%
Ate less than one should because there wasn't enough money for food	51%	34%	21%	17%	12%	15%	15%
Relationships	63%	52%	39%	34%	31%	20%	28%
Had enough people around who [I/we] could ask for help at any time	48%	46%	33%	28%	24%	15%	25%
Felt content with [my/our] friendships and relationships	42%	29%	30%	23%	17%	17%	19%
Any Social Needs	91%	79%	66%	63%	54%	40%	40%
No Social Needs	9%	21%	34%	37%	46%	60%	60%