



**THE CASE FOR MEALS ON WHEELS:
AN EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTION TO
SENIOR HUNGER AND ISOLATION**
RESEARCH BRIEF

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MEALS **on** WHEELS
AMERICA

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THE GROWING THREATS TO AGING AMERICANS

We all expect certain things to happen as we age. We'll have more aches and pains. Our hair will turn gray. We'll tell the same story over and over again, just like our grandparents did. What we don't anticipate, however, is the food insecurity and isolation that can accompany the aging process. Unfortunately, around 10 million seniors face hunger or the threat of it. One in four live alone. Additionally, almost 95% of older adults have at least one chronic condition, with almost 80% having two or more.

Seniors experiencing food insecurity report being in poor physical or mental health for an additional three days per month compared to their food-secure peers. Lack of access to regular, nutritious meals contributes to higher rates of depression, gum disease, asthma, diabetes, congestive heart failure and heart attacks. Loneliness, too, brings its own set of dangers associated with increased risks of heart disease, stroke and even death. Combined, these health risks result in significant care costs for seniors themselves, as well as for Medicare, taxpayers and the health care industry as a whole. The growing population of Americans aged 60 or older, rising health care costs and ongoing inflation make it more important than ever to address the escalating crisis around food access and loneliness.

BACKGROUND & RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

For more than 50 years, Meals on Wheels has supported our nation's seniors through a network of local community-based programs. These providers serve as a lifeline to those struggling with food insecurity, nutrition challenges, mobility, loneliness and countless other difficulties of aging. Each day we hear anecdotes of how Meals on Wheels has touched people's lives. And, for every positive story there's an opportunity to apply real numbers to the impact Meals on Wheels has on those who benefit from services. We looked at 38 studies conducted between 1996 and 2023, and from them we can draw strong associations between receiving Meals on Wheels and experiencing positive health and well-being outcomes.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS & KEY FINDINGS

The review of 38 selected studies found a link between receiving Meals on Wheels and experiencing the following primary health and well-being outcomes:

- 1. REDUCED USE OF COSTLY HEALTH CARE SERVICES.** Several studies found that Meals on Wheels program participants needed fewer visits to the emergency room or saw fewer hospital stays or readmissions.
- 2. REDUCED NURSING HOME USE AND INCREASED ABILITY TO AGE IN PLACE.** Access to medically tailored and home-delivered meals allow individuals to stay in their own homes rather than transferring to a nursing facility for nutritional support. Nearly all (92%) home-delivered meal participants said that the meals help them continue to live independently, according to the 2022 national survey of Older Americans Act Title III home-delivered meal participants.
- 3. REDUCED HEALTH CARE COSTS ATTRIBUTED TO REDUCED HOSPITAL AND NURSING HOME SPENDING.** In line with outcomes one and two, their reduced health care and nursing home use also meant Meals on Wheels participants spent less on health care. One study found that among individuals receiving medically tailored meals, average medical expenditures were 40% lower per month for those receiving meals than for a matched group not receiving meals (\$843 vs. \$1,413).

4. **INCREASED FOOD SECURITY.** Several studies concluded that home-delivered meal participants worried less about having enough to eat. Those individuals who received breakfast and lunch deliveries, rather than just lunch, benefited even more.
5. **IMPROVED DIET QUALITY.** Home-delivered meals led to higher-quality diets among participants, as measured by nutrient intake, calories, vitamins and other indicators. Participant feedback reinforced that meal delivery helped them eat healthier, more nourishing foods.
6. **REDUCED OR SLOWED DECLINE IN NUTRITIONAL RISK.** Program participants threatened by malnutrition saw improvement in their nutritional risk scores. Individuals benefited from both improved dietary intake and improved food security.
7. **REDUCED SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS.** Several studies found a link between home-delivered meals and reduced social isolation or loneliness, particularly among participants who lived alone. These benefits resulted from contact with drivers during meal deliveries and opportunities for social connection via other Meals on Wheels programs.
8. **REDUCED FALLS AND INCREASED HOME SAFETY.** Several studies found Meals on Wheels participants experienced fewer falls and minimized exposure to hazards in the home, outcomes attributable to safety checks provided at meal delivery and a reduced need to cook in the kitchen.

Though less prevalent across all studies analyzed, the review also found participants, to some degree, enjoyed greater physical health, improved mental health and well-being, and greater financial security. Some studies also identified positive benefits for staff and volunteers.



IMPACT IN WORDS FROM THE MEALS ON WHEELS COMMUNITY

Behind every data point is a real person with real stories. Here are some of the responses from individuals surveyed across the 38 studies.

PERSPECTIVES FROM MEALS ON WHEELS CLIENTS

“...I love this program. It makes me feel alive, like someone cares. And I know I’m not the only lonely senior.”

“If we didn’t have Meals on Wheels...we’d be spending everything we have on food... [it would be] not a question of having a couple extra dollars in the bank... but having no extra dollars in the bank.”

“My wife and I are handicapped. We can handle things better and stay at home longer with home-delivered meals.”

“I don’t think I’d eat so many vegetables on my own. When you retire you get kind of spoiled. Ice cream starts looking like a vegetable. So, I’m staying healthy in many ways because of the balanced diet.”

PERSPECTIVES FROM MEALS ON WHEELS VOLUNTEERS

“A lot of them will tell me, ‘I just could not live alone if you weren’t bringing my meals to me.’”

“You get to know the people on your route ... as you get to know the people, you can tell just from talking to them for a few minutes, whether they’re doing well or not doing well.”

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review of 38 studies establishes Meals on Wheels as an evidence-based, cost-effective solution that reduces the use of health care services, prevents nursing home admissions and generates substantial cost savings to individuals and U.S. taxpayers. By delivering nutritious meals, fostering social connections and providing safety checks, Meals on Wheels helps older adults maintain their health, independence and community engagement.

Moreover, study recommendations outlined in the report provide guidance for program planning, encourage the expansion and enhancement of services and offer inspiration for future studies. Several studies noted the need for government investment in Meals on Wheels, including sustained Older American Act (OAA) funding, expanded OAA funding to cover more older adults who need Meals on Wheels and those on waitlists, and federal and state investment in Meals on Wheels generally.

Additionally, several of the reviewed studies highlighted the cost savings of strengthening partnerships with health care organizations, emphasizing their potential to enhance clients’ well-being. Notably, partnerships have been explored in various forms, such as providing medically tailored meals to health plan participants and integrating home-delivered meals into care transition programs for patients upon hospital discharge. By fostering these

health care partnerships, Meals on Wheels can further extend its impact and contribute to better outcomes for older adults while reducing the burden on the health care system. As a crucial recommendation, increasing and nurturing these collaborations is a vital part in expanding Meals on Wheels services to more older adults who need them.

Meals on Wheels America is committed to updating and expanding on these findings, and conducting further research to explore the life-changing impact our organization’s services have on the lives of the older adults we serve.

METHODOLOGY

We employed diverse search strategies to identify studies exploring the impacts of receiving Meals on Wheels. Our investigation encompassed research previously identified by Meals on Wheels America, studies referenced in published reviews, citations within relevant studies, curated research collections and thorough internet searches. The assessment covers a broad spectrum of research designs and publication formats, including peer-reviewed journal articles and organizational reports. We excluded studies that narrowly included only participants with specific conditions (e.g., people with diabetes) or specific supplementary services (e.g., telehealth, vitamin D intervention) not part of typical meal programs. Additional details about our methodology, including how we selected studies, extracted study information and appraised the quality of the evidence, is included in the full research report.

ABOUT MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA

Meals on Wheels America is the leadership organization supporting the more than 5,000 community-based programs across the country dedicated to addressing senior isolation and hunger. Through the delivery of healthy meals tailored to the needs of older adults, the door opens to address social connection, safety and much more – all of which is proven to support America’s seniors to live nourished lives with independence and dignity. By providing funding, leadership, education, research and advocacy support, Meals on Wheels America empowers its local member programs to strengthen their communities, one senior at a time.

