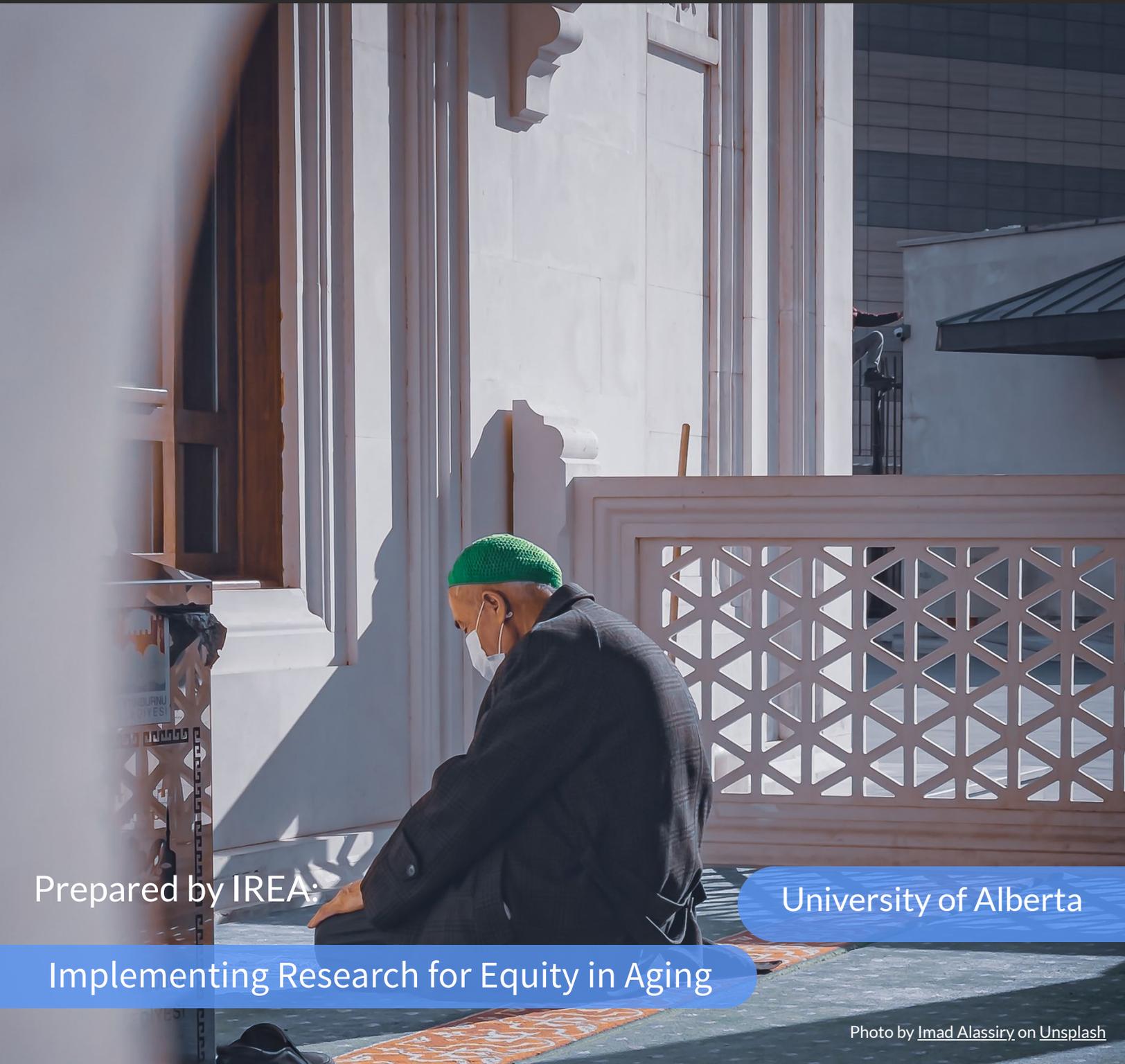


# RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF MUSLIM SENIORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Prepared by IREA:

University of Alberta

Implementing Research for Equity in Aging

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## Lead Researcher

**Dr. Jordana Salma**

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta

Email: [irea@ualberta.ca](mailto:irea@ualberta.ca) | Telephone: 780-492-7555

## Research Team

**Dr. C. Allyson Jones**

Professor, Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine, University of Alberta

**Dr. Hongmei Tong**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work, MacEwan University

**Dr. Bukola O. Salami**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta

**Shahriyar Khan**

Multicultural Liaison Officer, City of Edmonton

**Selma Karout**

Seniors Program Coordinator, Al-Rashid Mosque

**Khadija Abdi**

Student, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

**Esra Ben Mabrouk**

Student, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

**Amyna Ismail Rehmani**

MN Student, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta

**Chérifa Loubna Laouad**

Research assistant/Community Liaison

**Tianqi Zhao**

MSc Student, School of Public Health, University of Alberta

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The Pandemic has severely limited seniors' involvement in their local mosques. Mosques are spaces where seniors congregate to find spiritual comfort and social support. Leadership at Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, Alberta, reported a decline in the wellbeing of seniors during the pandemic. This one-year project began in April of 2021 with the primary goal of supporting Muslim seniors in the local community.

A survey and phone interviews were used to gather information on Muslim seniors' experiences during the pandemic and identify urgent needs. Data collected was analyzed and shared with the mosque leadership to inform senior-focused programming. A key finding was seniors' experiences of loneliness and social isolation during pandemic lock-downs and the desire to return to in-person mosque-based activities.

A community liaison was hired at the mosque to support the return of seniors to in-person activities. The mosque initiated several social, health and religious activities for seniors. This report provides an overview of the findings from the survey and interviews and a summary of the activities completed to date with Al-Rashid Ladies Seniors Group.

# PROJECT OBJECTIVES



To explore the experience of Muslim seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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To identify gaps in support and services for Muslim seniors.

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To identify feasible, community-driven interventions to decrease social isolation in Muslim seniors.

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## MUSLIMS IN EDMONTON

Over one million Muslims live in Canada, with about 100,000 in Alberta.<sup>1</sup> Muslims are united by their belief in God's (Allah's) oneness as revealed by the prophets. Muslims in Edmonton do not form a single homogenous group. Many Muslims follow Islamic teachings that value close family relationships and family-centered elder care.<sup>2</sup>

In Edmonton, the majority of Muslims are people who have been raised Muslim their entire lives. Muslim immigrants came to Canada for a variety of reasons. Some come to Canada for reasons of higher education, better employment, or family reunification, while others come for safety and security.

The survey collected information on the experiences and needs of seniors in the community.

## PANDEMIC IMPACTS

Pandemic restrictions related to social distancing and the higher health risks for seniors exposed to COVID-19 infections meant that many Muslim seniors lost access to their mosque-based support systems. Mosques are avenues for social and spiritual support. Congregational prayers, religious study groups, social gatherings, and access to information and services that is culturally, linguistically and religiously sensitive are all potential benefits for seniors attending their local mosques.

## Senior & COVID-19 Pandemic

Al-Rashid Mosque is a local non-profit organization with strong community roots. Al-Rashid Mosque is an institution driven on meeting the needs of Muslims from diverse ethnocultural groups in the city. The Mosque provides a variety of services and programs for families, seniors, and youth.

Leadership at Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton is concerned that Muslim seniors who attend the mosque for daily prayers and weekly social events were more isolated during the pandemic. Language barriers, mobility challenges, and low digital literacy further contribute to the isolation of the most vulnerable seniors in this community.

To support community resilience during the pandemic with a focus on seniors from Muslim ethnocultural communities in Alberta, we considered the following questions:

1

What are the experiences and related needs of Muslim seniors living in Alberta during COVID-19 pandemic?

2

How can a mosque-based community liaison help address social isolation of Muslim seniors in the community?

## Recruitment:

Al-Rashid Mosque's mailing list was used to contact seniors living in the community who were involved with mosque activities before the pandemic. Additionally, an information booth was used during Friday prayers to advertise the study and invite community members to participate.

## Setting and Population:

This study was conducted in Edmonton, Alberta with a focus on the congregation of Al-Rashid Mosque. Seniors were older adults, 55 years of age and older, living in the community and who attended the mosque (before or during the pandemic). Stakeholders were community members who supported Muslim seniors as volunteers, caregivers, or staff working at a mosque in Alberta.

## Data collection process:

The data collection process consisted of two phases:

Phase 1: A "check-in" survey with seniors in the community was initiated. The survey was used to collect information about the impact of the pandemic on seniors. The brief survey was, also, utilized to "check in" on seniors by asking about any immediate needs and concerns that could be addressed by the mosque. In total 88 seniors participated in the survey.

Phase 2: Sixteen individual interviews with seniors and stakeholders were completed to gain an in-depth understanding of pandemic experiences. These interviews occurred via phone and/or ZOOM.

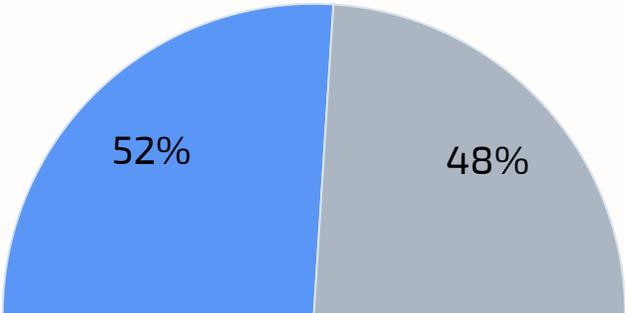
## Data Analysis

A thematic data analysis approach was completed by the research team where the main ideas about seniors' experiences and needs were documented and reported.



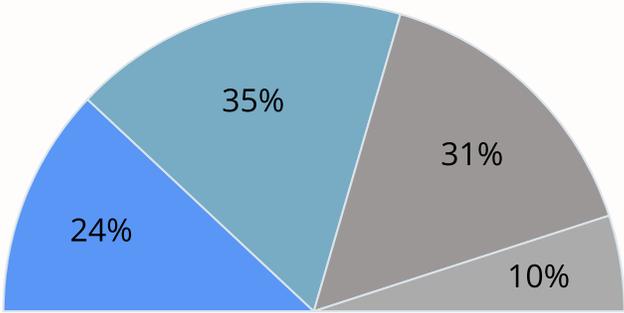
A total of 94 respondents participated in the survey, 88 of them were included for the analysis process. Among the 88 respondents, there were 46 women and 42 men. The majority of respondents were aged between 56-64 years old. There was very small number of respondents aged 76 years and above. The sample has a fair distribution in terms of gender, but age was not equally distributed among these groups, especially for those aged 76 years old and above.

### Gender Distribution



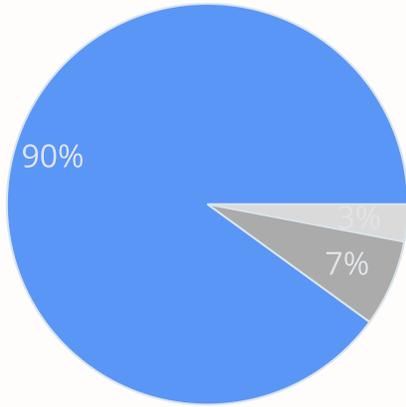
Female 52% Male 48%

### Age Distribution



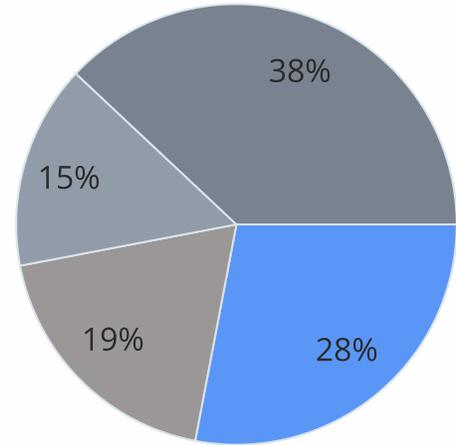
55 years and under 24%  
56-65 years old 35%  
66-75 years old 31%  
76-85 years old 10%

## Years In Canada



- Less than 5 years 3%
- 5 to 10 Years 7%
- More than 10 years 90%

## Place of Birth

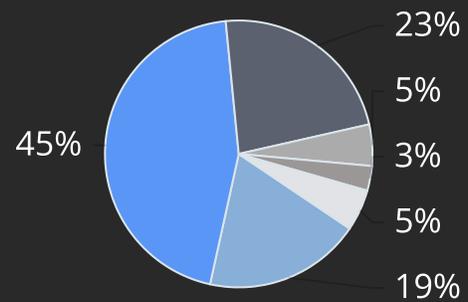


- Lebanon 28%
- Somalia 19%
- Ethiopia 15%
- Other 38%

Among the 88 respondents, 2 were born in Canada and 86 were born outside of Canada. Many of the respondents were from Lebanon, Somalia and Ethiopia. Other respondents reported immigrating from other countries such as Kenya, Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, and Tunisia.

84 respondents who were born outside of Canada reported their immigration status when they first arrived. Many of the respondents were sponsored by a family member, came as refugees, or were economic immigrants. The majority resided in Canada for more than 10 years.

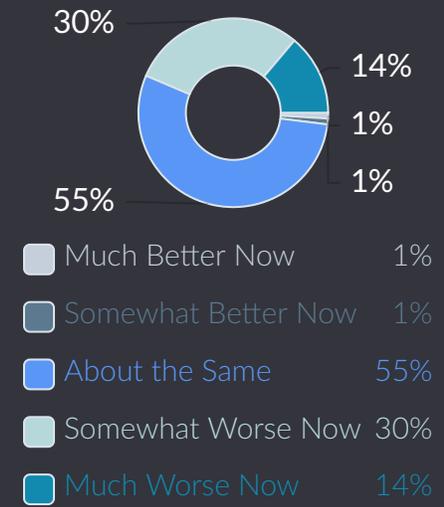
## Immigration Status



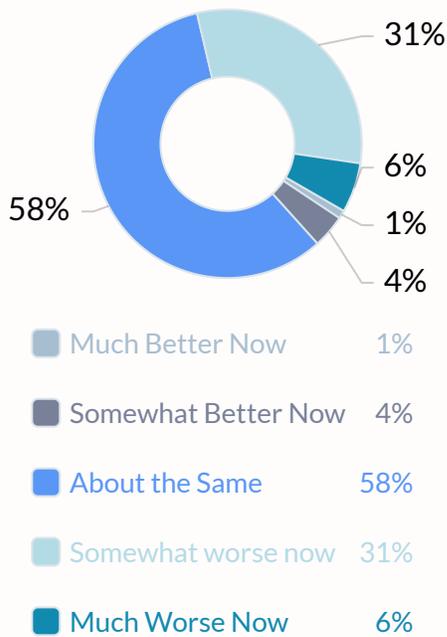
- Economic Immigrant 19%
- Sponsored by family 45%
- Refugee 23%
- Super visa or visting visa 5%
- Super permit 3%
- Other 5%

The survey assessed seniors' physical health during the pandemic. The majority of the respondents reported approximately no change during the pandemic. However, 44% of the respondents reported worse physical health status during the pandemic.

## Physical Health Status

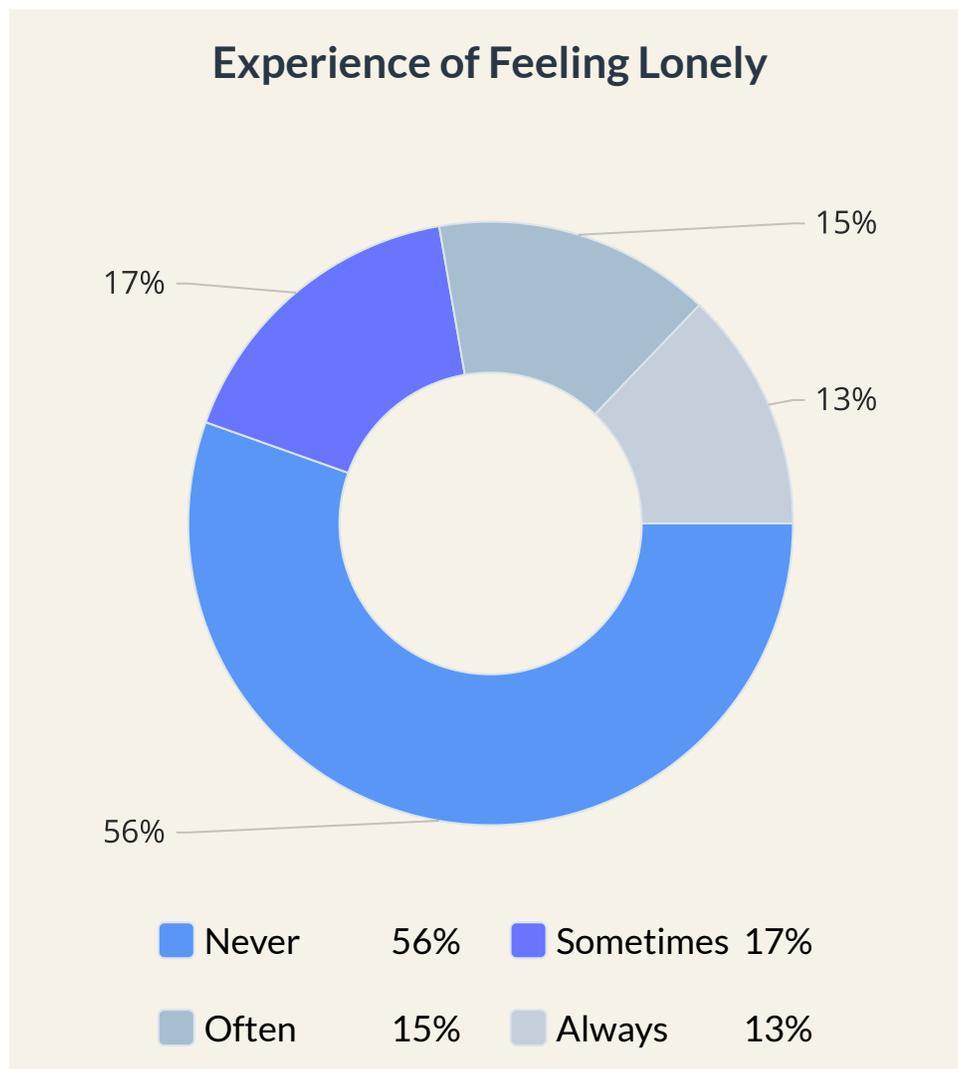


## Mental Health Status



Many of the respondents reported having about the same mental health status during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. However, 37% of respondents reported having somewhat worse mental health during the pandemic.

*"Seniors in the community require support regarding mental health and guidance on how to spend quality time doing mindful activities."  
(interview with senior)*



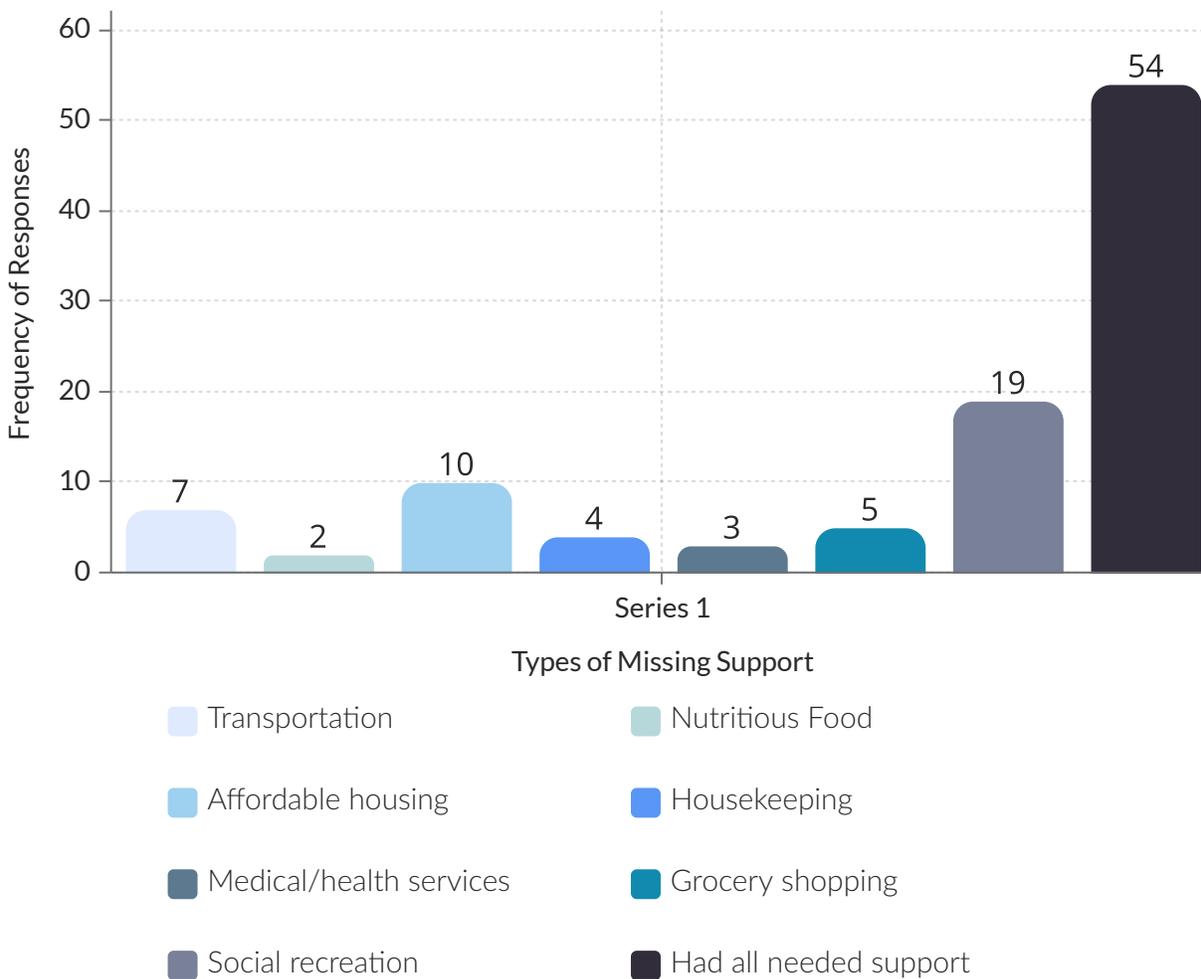
Feeling lonely was a common experience reported by seniors.

"Not being able to meet children and grandchildren, not being able to socialize normally gave rise to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Although technology helped to connect to family virtually, the "human contact" part was missing." (interview with senior)

Nearly more than half of the participants reported they had never experienced loneliness.

"The senior group from the mosque hosted activities regularly on zoom like chair yoga which gave a chance to socialize and interact with other senior members. It was beneficial for seniors suffering from loneliness as it allowed them to express their feelings and to learn something too." (interview with senior)

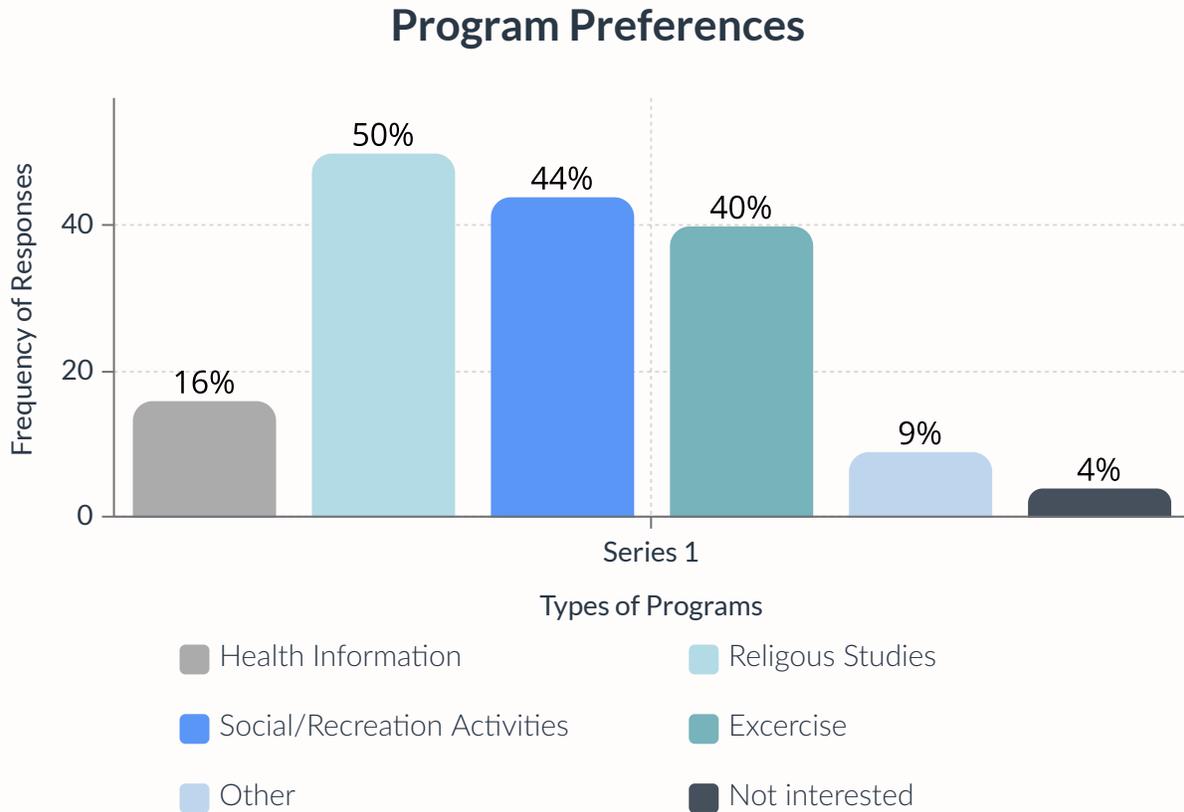
## Missing Support During the Pandemic



The survey assessed missing support during the pandemic. Most of the respondents reported having the support they needed. "I did not need support from anyone as I was independent and digitally literate." (individual interview, senior)

However, some respondents reported support was missing due to transportation barriers: "I had difficulty moving around due to fear of using the bus, so a lack of transportation made it harder to get groceries as I could not order online." (individual interview, senior)

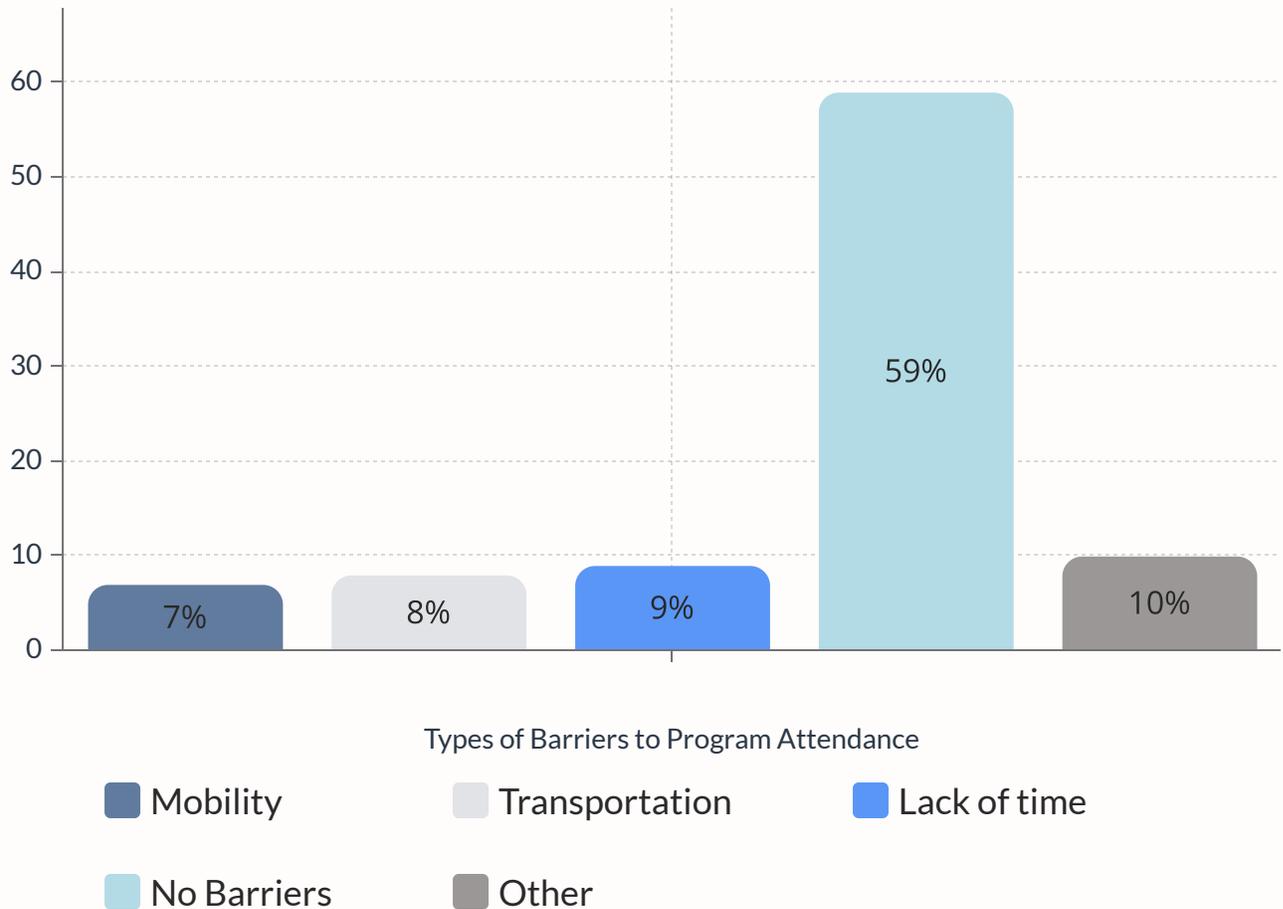
Others reported lack of support for grocery shopping, medical services, housekeeping, and affordable housing and food.



Religious studies is the most desired program by respondents at the Al-Rashid Mosque. Social recreation services and exercise programs were also popular choices. Many of the respondents reported they would love to see more programs happening for seniors in the mosque.

"Al-Rashid Mosque operated an online reservation system during the pandemic giving members an opportunity to engage in religious activities from time to time. The mosque offered very 'successful and strong' online programs for the Muslim community like Salah and Sermons which is vital for seniors in the community as attending the mosque is an important activity in their life which was disrupted." (interview with stakeholder)

## Barriers to Program Attendance before Pandemic



Many of the respondents reported they did not have barriers attending programs prior to the pandemic. However, mobility, transportation, lack of time, health issues, technology and language are common barriers some of the respondents experienced during COVID-19 pandemic.

"Attendance at the mosque dropped due to restrictions, miscommunications/rumors regarding vaccines for COVID. Some senior members experience difficulty with technology to register for programs run by the mosque leading to the inability to engage in programs."(interview with stakeholder)

Since its beginning in 2015, dedicated volunteers of this program have worked to decrease isolation and loneliness in the community. The community liaison supported a number of social, recreation, and spiritual activities with seniors attending the group after pandemic restrictions were lifted in Alberta. All activities were chosen by seniors and the list below was funded through the SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant:

- Paint night event
- Muttart Conservatory field trip
- Lawn Bowling field trip
- Weekly exercise program led by fitness instructor Dounia Mouallem (ongoing).

The Al-Rashid Ladies Seniors Group, with the support of a community liaison, was successful in re-engaging many community seniors in mosque activities:

- *“I am really happy when I am with them (at the program). They like me and I like them...when you go there you find a community of women around you.”*
- *“everyone that comes feels part of the family.”*
- *“Mosque is a space for belonging, our little group.” (interviews with seniors)*





Our results show that most of the seniors who participated in this report rated their mental and physical health as being the same before and during the pandemic. Many seniors, also, reported experiencing no barriers to attending programs offered at the mosque and reported having most of their main needs met in the community. The majority of respondents in this study were younger seniors which likely influenced these results. The survey did reveal that some seniors reported missing supports in the community and poorer mental and physical health during the pandemic.

To enhance the wellbeing of seniors in the community, we present the following recommendations:

- Develop programs aimed at engaging seniors in their local mosque communities.
- Assist seniors with transportation which is a significant barrier to attending a mosque.
- Further explore the needs of the oldest community members (70+) who might not be as engaged in the mosque due to multiple barriers.

1. Salma, J. & Salami, B. (2020). We are like any other people but we don't cry much because nobody listens: The need to strengthen aging policies and service provision for minorities in Canada. *The Gerontologist*, 60(2), 279-290. Doi: 10.1093/geront/gnz184
2. Statistics Canada (2017). Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.pdf?st=ixKYOblv.Unspl>