



Oakland County Task Force on COVID-19 Impact on Seniors' Isolation, Loneliness and Health

OAKLAND TOGETHER LIFELINE PILOT PROGRAM

December 2022

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Red Cross described loneliness as a “hidden epidemic.” Prolonged social isolation has harmful economic, health, and social consequences. People experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation have a greater risk of developing heart disease or stroke. They also have a higher rate of mortality and experience more depression and anxiety, according to the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention. In 2020, 56% of older adults reported feeling isolated from others, which was more than double the results of a 2018 poll. Research shows that older adults who remain socially engaged, improve the quality of their life. They have better emotional well-being and mental health. Their health and physical fitness improve. They are more likely to have a sense of purpose and live longer.



On April 29, 2020, the Board of Commissioners created the Oakland County Task Force on COVID-19’s Impact on Seniors’ Social Isolation, Loneliness and Health to serve as the leading resource for combating social isolation and loneliness in older adults through education, advocacy, and collaboration. The Task Force, chaired by Commissioner Kristen Nelson, created the Oakland Together Lifeline Pilot Program and was awarded \$120,000 of federal CARES Act funding to American House Senior Living Communities. The organization used that funding to purchase 100 Amazon Echo Show devices in late 2020 and conduct a pilot program to research the potential impact of smart devices on senior isolation.

56%

older adults who
reported feeling
isolated in 2020

This pilot program was designed to expand technology access to a targeted audience of older adults living in select senior living facilities in Oakland County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals of the program included reducing the impact of social isolation, expanding access to critical services during periods of social distancing quarantines and providing for a means of touchless communication with facility staff.

In the fall of 2020, members from the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, Oakland County Information Technology Department, Oakland County Health Division, Amazon, American House Senior Living Communities, and the Area Agency on Aging 1-B (AAA 1-B) formed a working group to develop a plan about how to implement the Oakland Together Lifeline Pilot Program.

A total of 100 Amazon Echo Show devices were distributed to four American House Senior Living Communities in Rochester Hills, Troy, West Bloomfield, and Milford to enable senior residents to communicate with loved ones through phone and video calls during facilities closures.

The Information Technology Department created training materials, such as application and device set up, a manual on how to use the device, information packets on cyber security awareness, FAQs, and a sheet of voice commands frequently used by seniors. It also completed user testing prior to rollout.

PROGRAM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Chris Ward – Former Chief of Staff, Board of Commissioners

EJ Widun – Chief Technology Officer, Oakland County Information Technology Department

Tim Porter – Business Analyst, Oakland County Information Technology Department

Barbara Winter – Senior Policy Analyst, Board of Commissioners

Jim McGuire – Former Director of Research & Policy, AAA 1-B

Stephanie Hall – Research & Advocacy Specialist, AAA 1-B

Danielle Norman – LLMSW

Jaqueline Sarcona – Former Michigan Regional Director of Life Enrichment, American House Senior Living Communities

Tina Abbate Marzolf – Former Corporate Strategist & President, American House Foundation

Karen Sosnick Schoenberg – Principal, American House Senior Living Communities

Darcy Santos – Corporate Director of Life Enrichment, American House Senior Living Communities

David Frerichs – Principal Engineer, Amazon Alexa

Eric Hill – Account Executive, State and Local Government, Amazon Web Services

The Area Agency on Aging 1-B (AAA 1-B) facilitated creation of questionnaires to survey senior users before, during, and after using the device to determine its impact on feelings of social isolation and loneliness. AAA 1-B also conducted these surveys and created reports throughout the program based on the results, including the final report which is appended as Appendix A.

Isolation levels among participants reduced as the project progressed. Through surveys, most respondents indicated that Alexa (the voice agent on the Amazon Echo Show device) helped connect them to family and friends. It also helped them with online shopping, online banking, and emails. Because of the pilot program, participants had more weekly interactions with people outside the site after their initial surveys. The participants also shared that, in a typical week, they talked to Alexa each day up to 3 times a day. Participants used Alexa for more than

communication. Listening to music, asking questions, and searching for information were on the list of top activities.

The highest percentage of participants indicated that having the device made them feel more secure if they needed help. This came to be true when a resident of Village Rochester Hills needed medical assistance after staff had gone home for the evening. The Michigan Regional Life Enrichment Director at that time, Jacqueline Sarcona, described how the Echo Show device helped a resident in need of medical attention. Currently, all four American House locations have a device at their front desk to help with any possible future medical emergencies.



I had set up an Echo Device at our front desk so the residents could have an additional way to communicate with the office staff. I also thought it would be great to “check in” on residents to get eyes on them as opposed to a phone call or sending someone to the apartment. Even though this device was located at our front desk, the device was linked to my LED staff cell phone. Whenever a resident calls the front desk via the device, my phone would ring through my Alexa app. Each time my phone rang, I would pick it up and look to see who was calling but would let the front desk answer the call with the device. Sometimes when the office staff was busy, I would answer the call if the same residents had called multiple times. On this evening, the office staff had gone home for the day. I was also at home. I hadn't been near my phone as it was up in my bedroom on the charger. However, when I went upstairs, I heard my phone ding telling me I had a text message. I saw that I had 2 missed calls and 1 message from the Echo Show device. I checked the message and it said, “Please send medical to my apartment.” I then looked at the missed calls from a few minutes prior and they were from the same person. I immediately tried to call the resident but got no answer. I quickly got in contact with our onsite Medical Team, and they went over to check on the resident. I received a call a little while later stating that the medical staff called an ambulance for the resident as they needed immediate medical care.

The resident used the device to try to inform the front desk they needed help; however, staff had gone home for the evening. Since the device was linked to my cell phone which I took home at night – I was able to intercept the calls/message and alert the appropriate staff to get the resident emergency care. Had those devices not been in place and linked to my phone that day – I'm not sure the outcome would have been the same.

Jacqueline Sarcona, ADC, CDP
Michigan Regional Director of Life Enrichment





ALEXA SATISFACTION STORIES

"I am so happy with my Alexa Echo! It's so helpful with recipes. Answering my concerns about baking. Giving me a weather report, daily news. It's my dictionary. I can ask is most anything about definition of words. Informs me what's on TV for the night or day."

"My hearing is very bad. Having phone calls where I can see their face and read their lips (no mask) is a blessing..."

"I just feel like I have a new friend 'Mo.'"

"Not having to look up everyone's phone (numbers) and playing music."

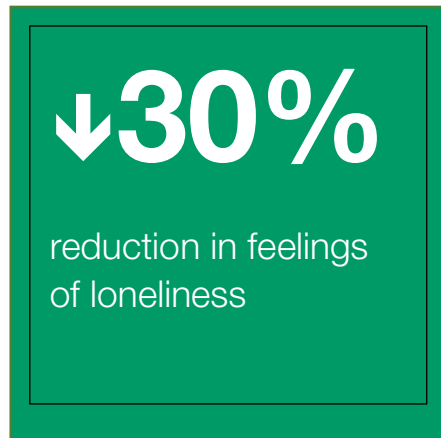
"I do not know that there is just one favorite thing. I just love Alexa, she's like having a good friend with you all the time. She talks when you want, she's quiet when you want, she knows just about everything, and she can play and listen to music with you. I don't know what I would do without her now!"

"I can have a sing-along with the greatest (Sinatra, etc...)"

"I think that seeing all the places around the world, especially places that I have been, it warms my heart!! Tells me what time it is and keeps me in touch with family and friends."

Setting up residents with devices was not a small task. The American House staff, particularly Life Enrichment Directors, patiently and repeatedly assisted residents to teach them how to use their devices. A few hurdles were identified that might prevent learning and discourage some seniors from using smart devices, such as:

- Need for a steady, preferably high-speed, internet connection
- Need for an email address and to remember passwords
- Need for an Amazon account
- Need to own a sufficiently capable smart phone
- Need for an alternative voice and text phone number if using a relative's phone to set up the device



Despite a few limitations, such as COVID-19 restrictions and a small sample size, the Oakland Lifeline Together surveys suggest that residents of American House Living Communities experienced a 30% reduction in feelings of loneliness during the state's stay-home order and restrictions on visiting senior living facilities. This pilot program is an excellent example of how technology can be used to ease the burden of social isolation felt not only by our senior population during the COVID-19 pandemic, but by anyone.



APPENDIX A



Answers you can trust

Senior Isolation Project Final Report

October 2022

Compiled by [Danielle Norman-Goyette, MSW](#)

As of September 22, 2022, there are currently

99

unique participants

92

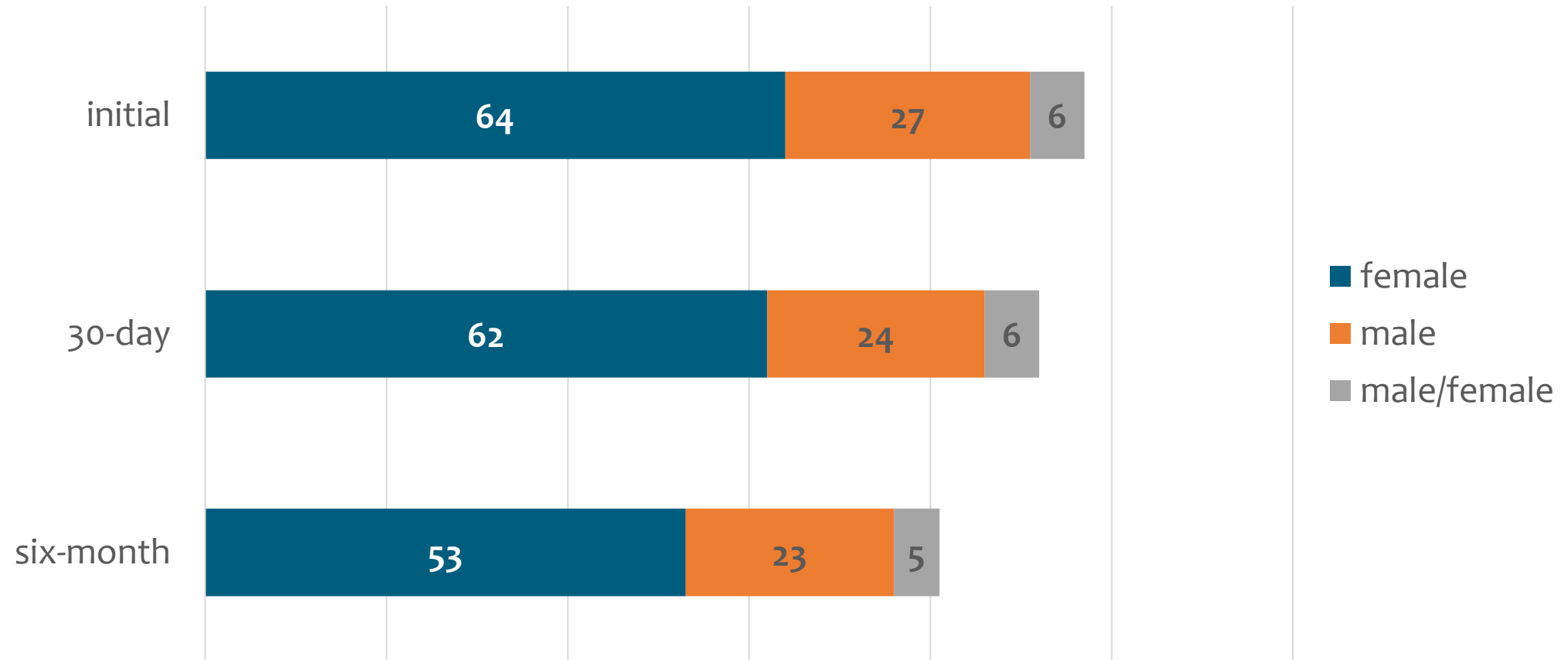
have filled out initial & 30-day surveys.

81

have filled out six month surveys or interviews.

Sample sizes for each question are noted when applicable due to unresponsiveness, invalid answers, and/or dropped out participants

Participants are still largely female.



On average for both surveys, participants
are about

82
years old

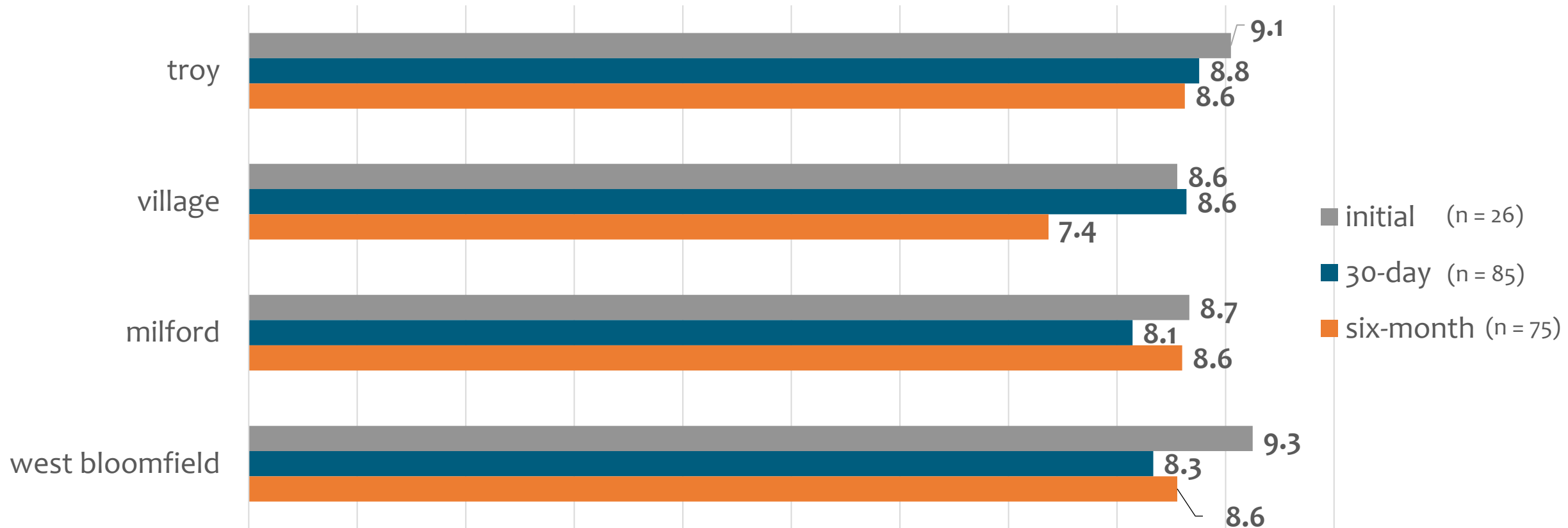
54
years old
Lowest Age

85
years old
Mode

97
years old
Highest Age

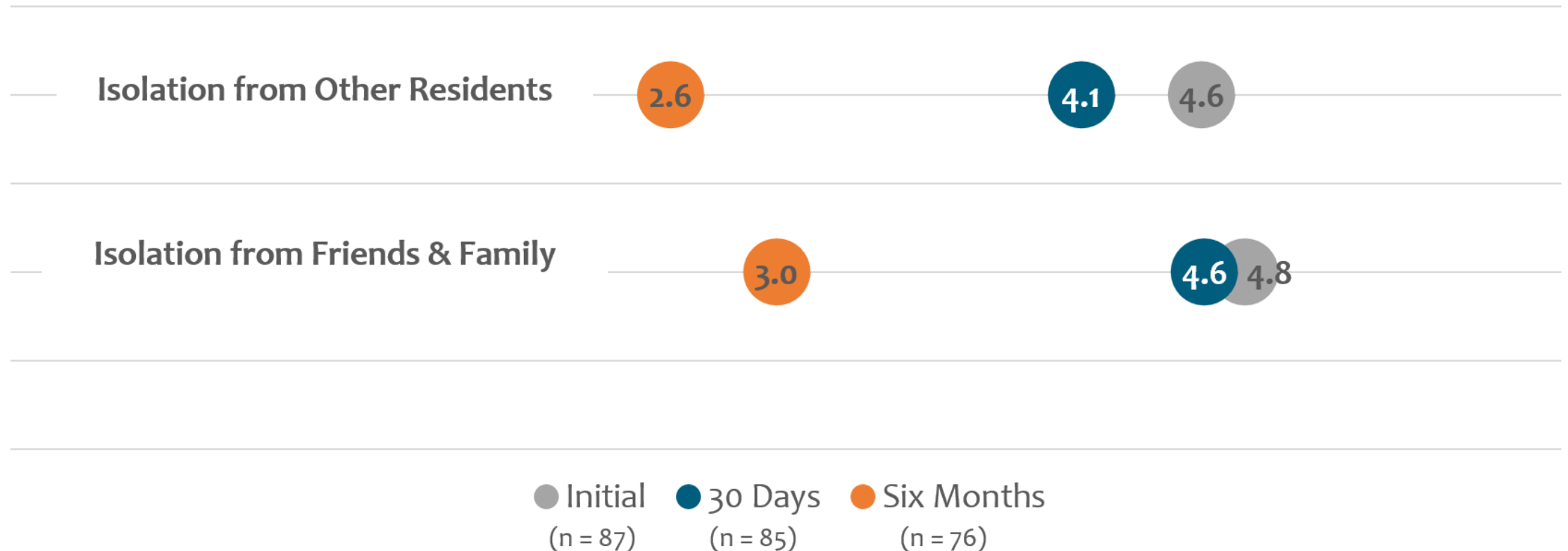
Satisfaction levels were high overall, although they varied slightly over time.

“On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with Alexa?”
1 = Very Dissatisfied, 10 = Very Satisfied



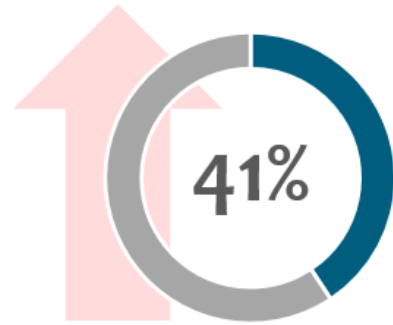
Isolation levels among participants typically reduced as the project progressed.

“On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate how isolated you feel from
... your family/friends | ... other residents?”
1 = Not Very Isolated, 10 = Very Isolated

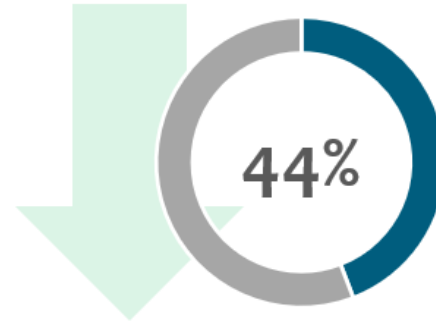


If we dig deeper into changes in isolation levels from family and friends...

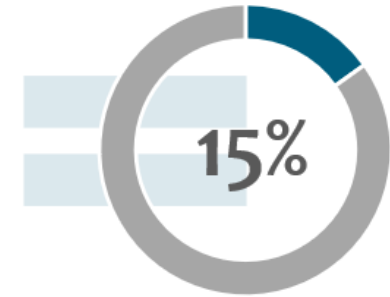
**Initial to
30 Days**
(n = 86)



Residents reporting
increase in isolation.



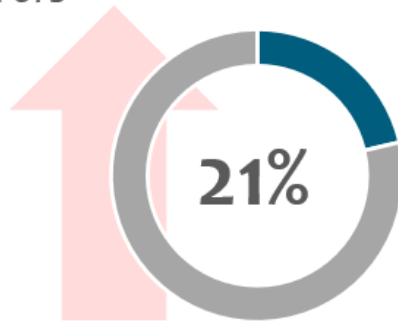
Residents reporting
decrease in isolation.



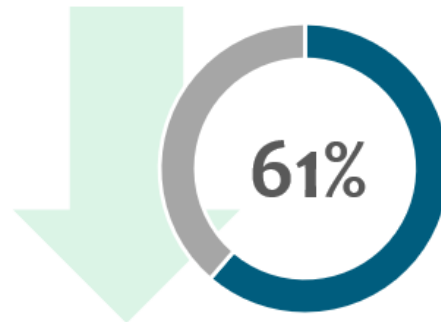
Residents reporting the
same level of isolation.

**Percentages may not add up to
exactly 100% due to rounding errors*

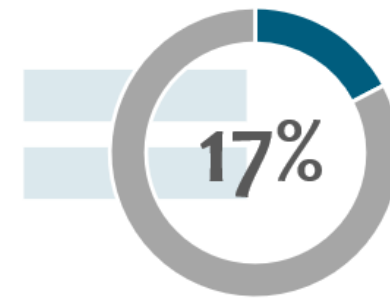
**30 Days to
Six Months**
(n = 75)



Residents reporting
increase in isolation.



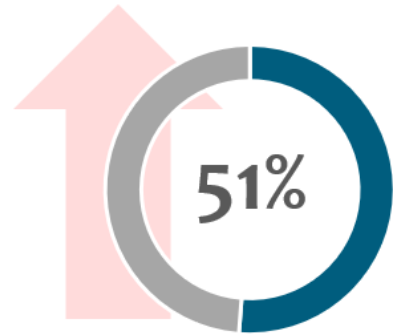
Residents reporting
decrease in isolation.



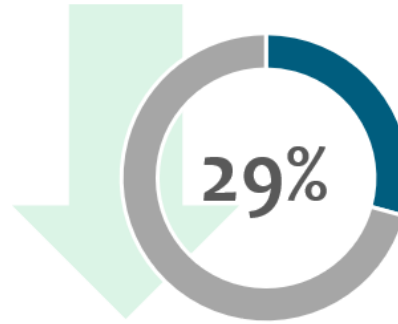
Residents reporting the
same level of isolation.

If we dig deeper into changes in isolation levels from other residents...

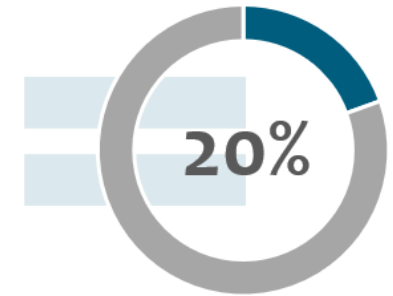
**Initial to
30 Days**
(n = 82)



Residents reporting
increase in isolation.



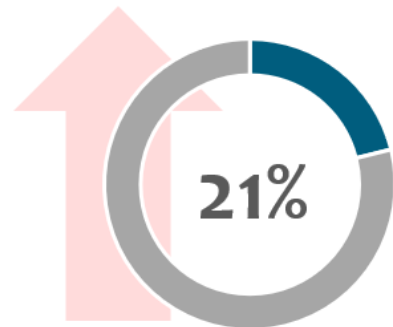
Residents reporting
decrease in isolation.



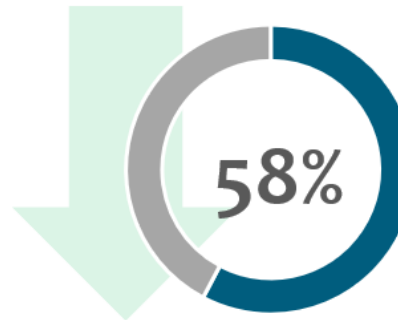
Residents reporting the
same level of isolation.

**Percentages may not add up to
exactly 100% due to rounding errors*

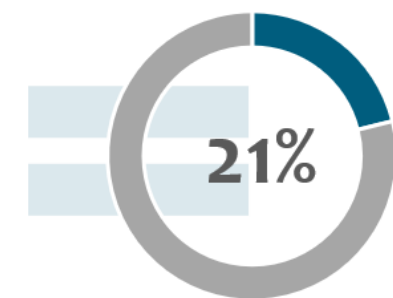
**30 Days to
Six Months**
(n = 71)



Residents reporting
increase in isolation.



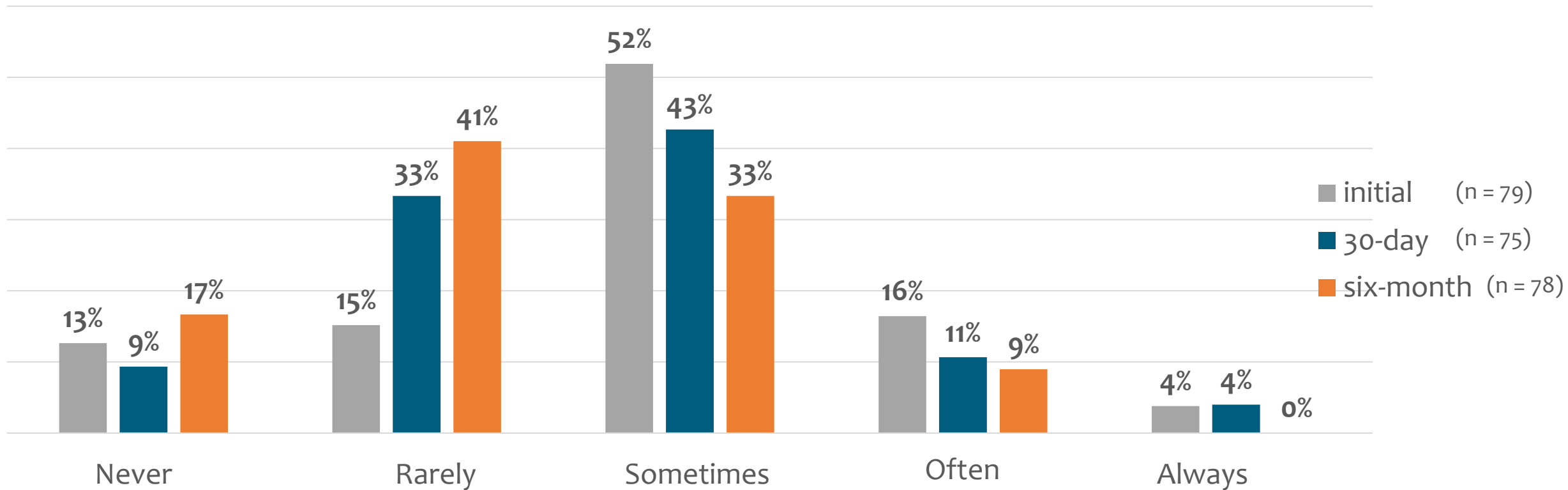
Residents reporting
decrease in isolation.



Residents reporting the
same level of isolation.

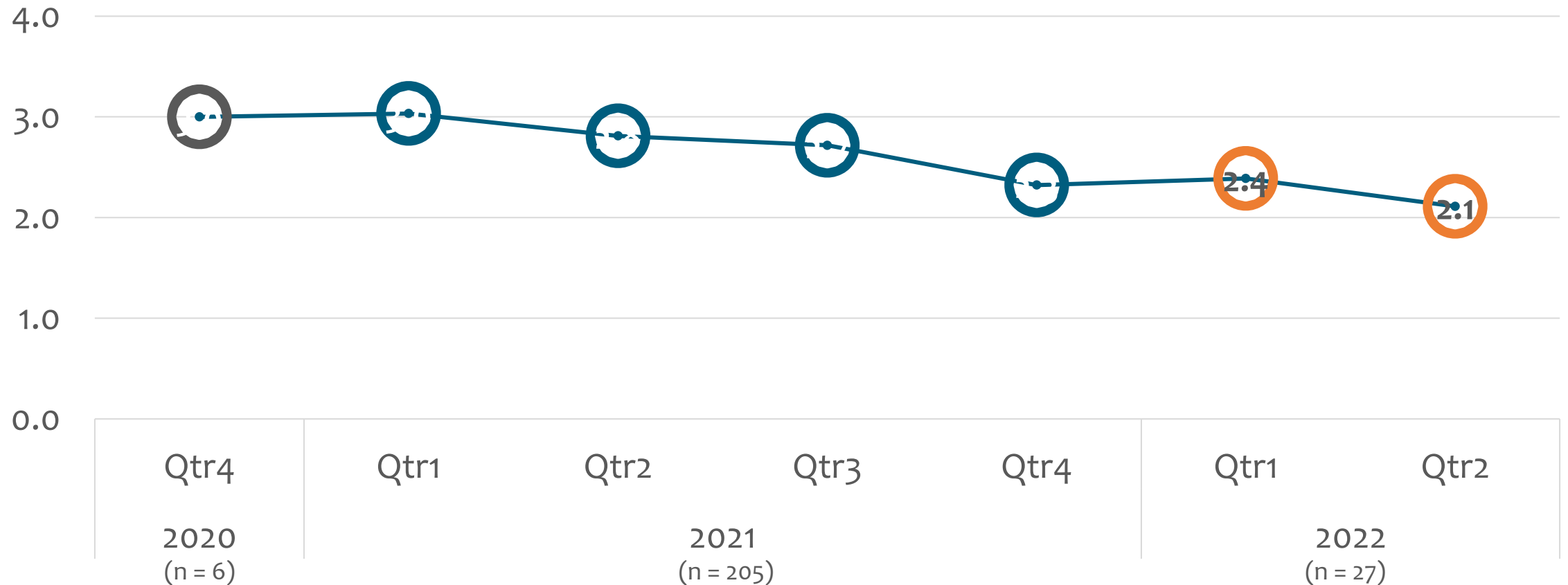
Average feelings of loneliness decreased over the entire project timespan.

“How often do you experience feelings of loneliness?”



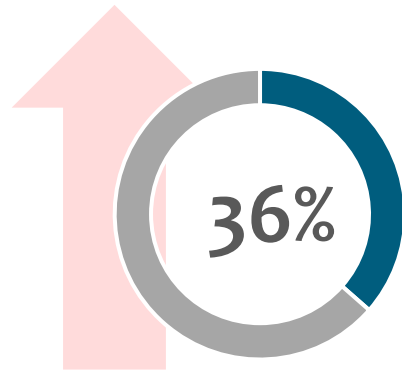
If quantified where Never = 1 and Always = 5, the average dropped from 2.84 to 2.67 to 2.35.

For comparison purposes, the average loneliness decreased from
3.00 in 2020 to **2.71 in 2021** to **2.30 in 2022**

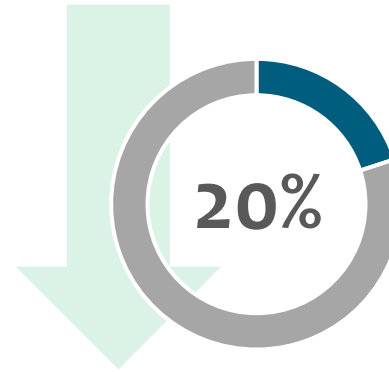


If we dig deeper into changes in loneliness levels, most participants reported the same level of loneliness.

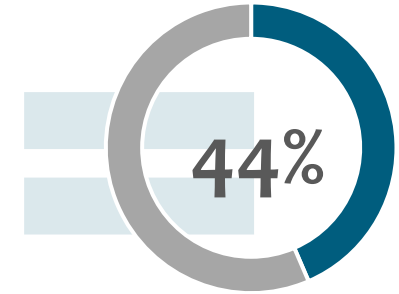
**Initial to
30 Days**
(n = 85)



Residents reporting
increase in loneliness.



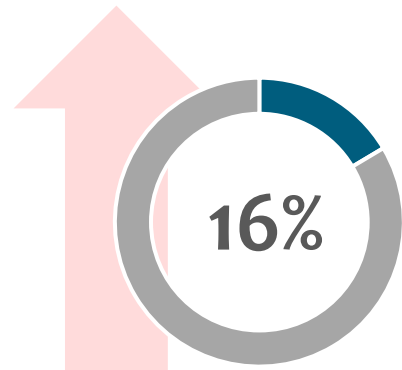
Residents reporting
decrease in loneliness.



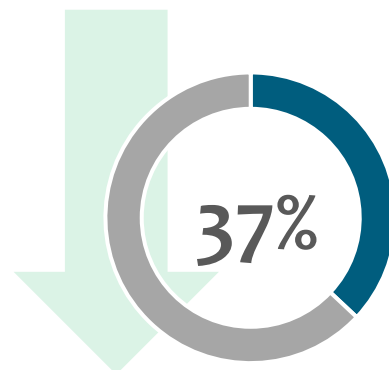
Residents reporting the
same level of loneliness.

**Percentages may not add up to
exactly 100% due to rounding errors*

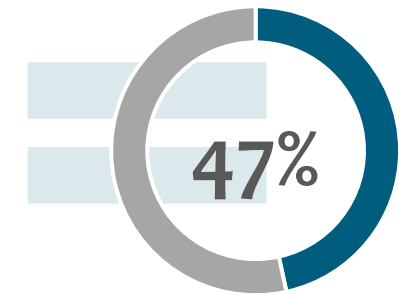
**30 Days to
Six Months**
(n = 73)



Residents reporting
increase in loneliness.



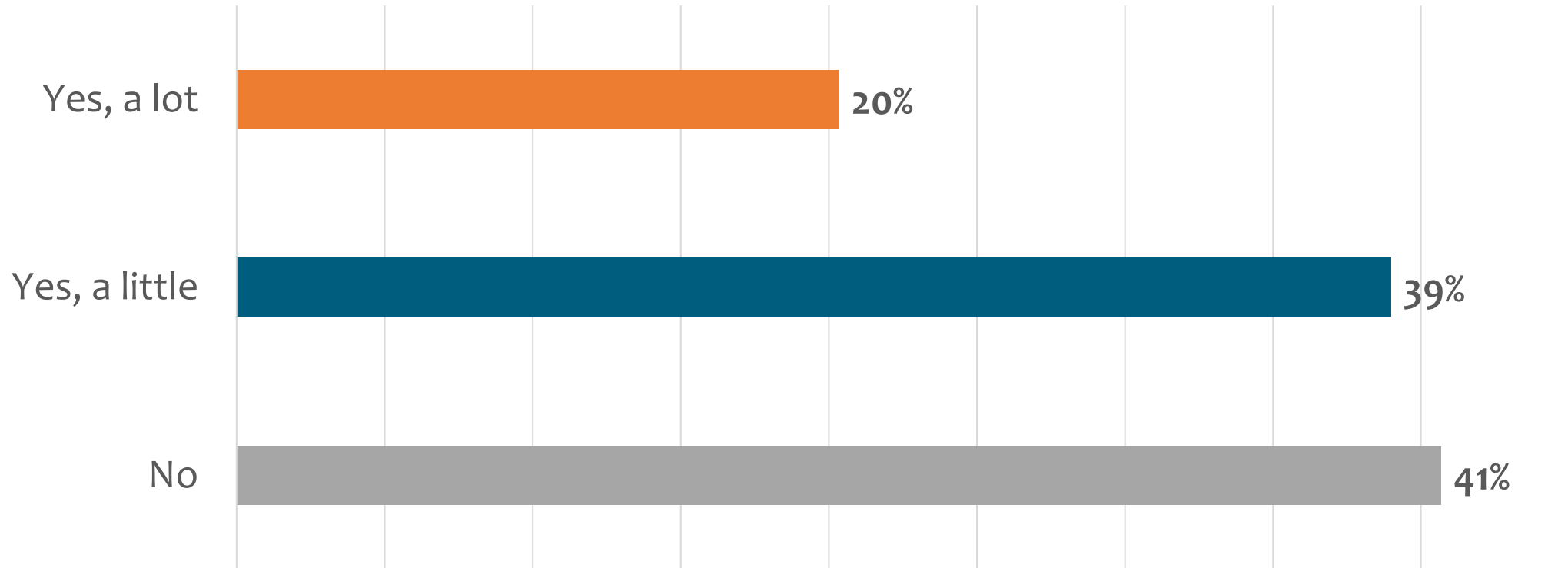
Residents reporting
decrease in loneliness.



Residents reporting the
same level of loneliness.

Most six month respondents think that Alexa helped connect them to family and friends to some degree.

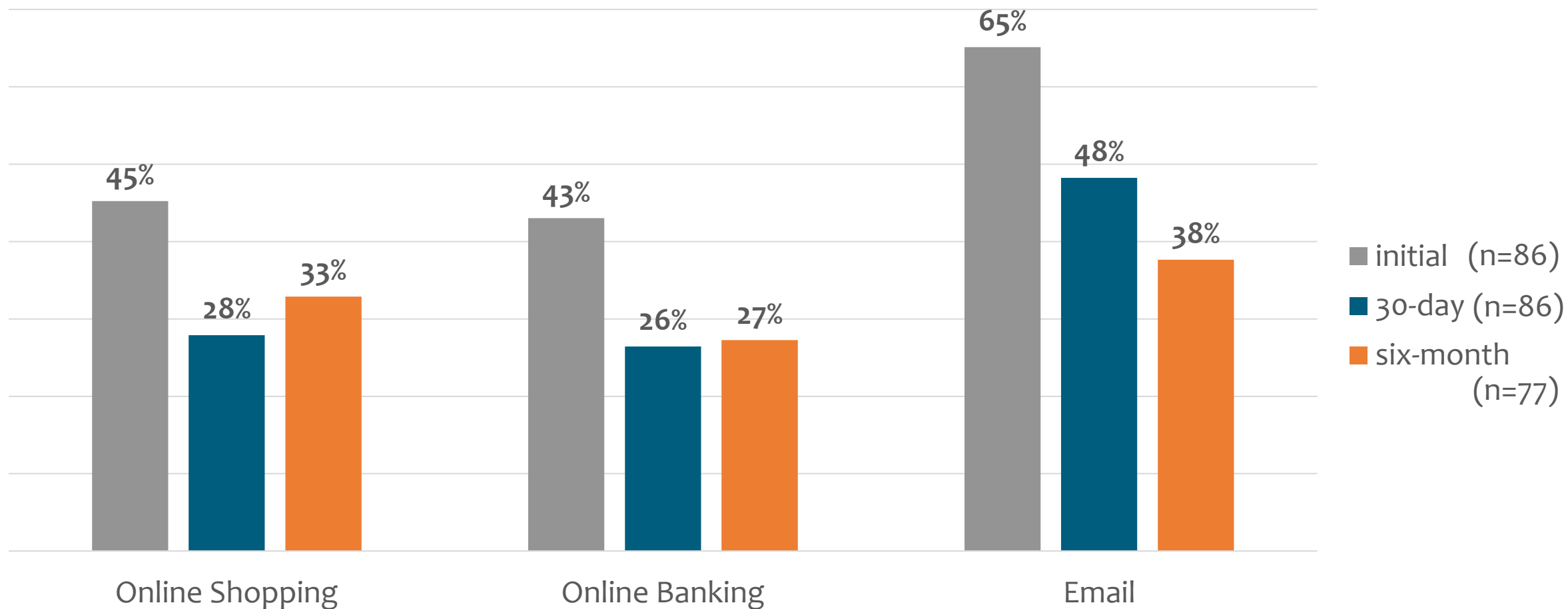
Has your use of the Alexa device made you feel more connected with family and friends?



(n = 79)

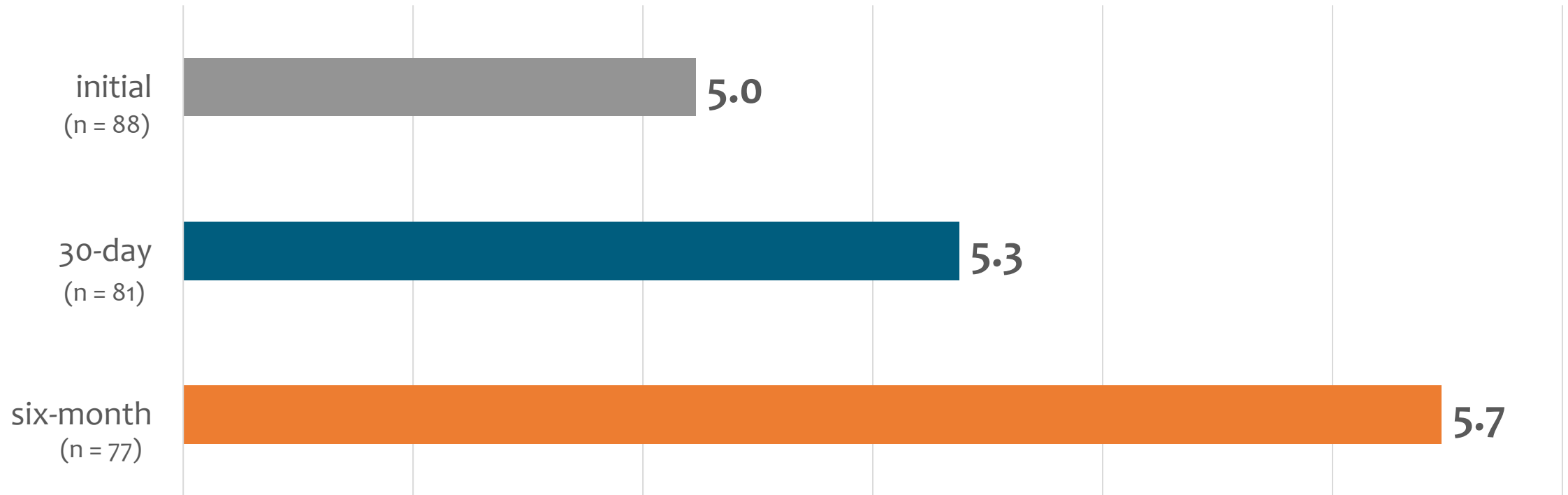
All types of online activities either decreased or held steady.

“Please mark if you do any of the following activities”

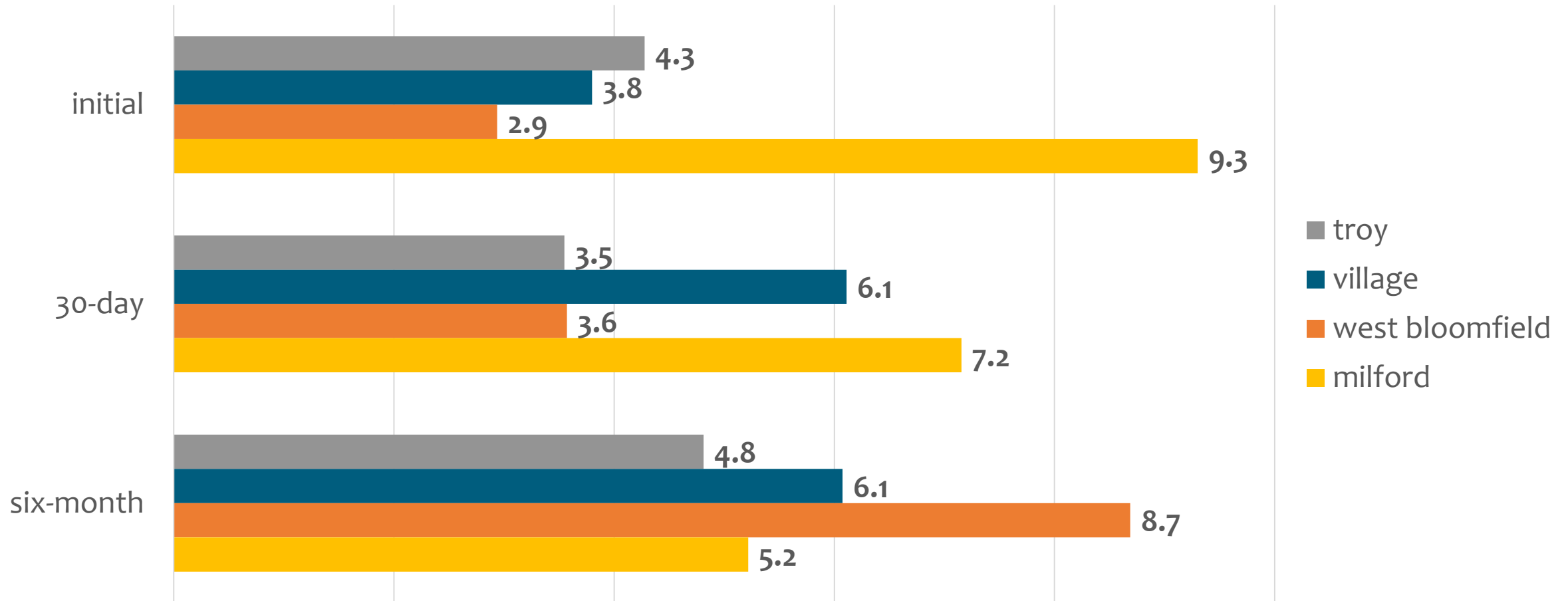


Participants had more weekly interactions with people outside the site after their initial surveys.

“In the past week, about how many times have you interacted with family or friends from outside the building?”

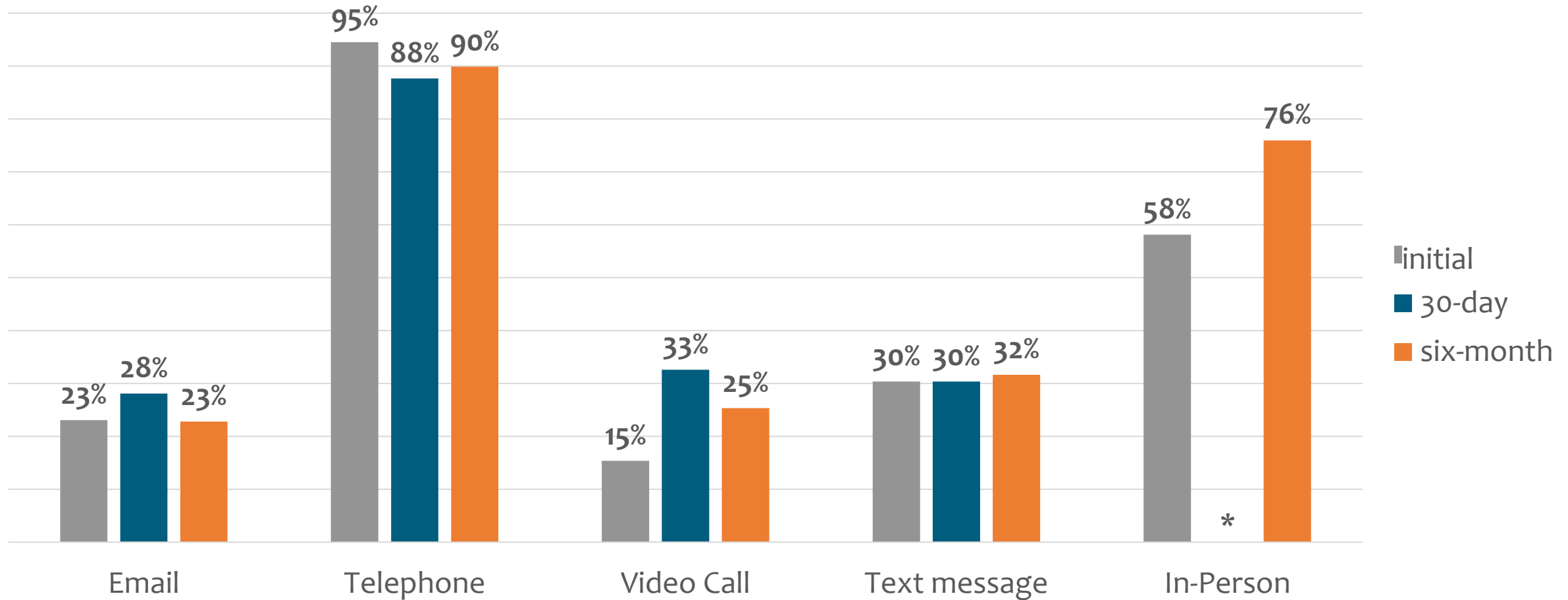


Village had a large increase in interactions, while Milford overall had a high level of interaction that decreased over time.



Participants' usage of all virtual communications either held steady or increased

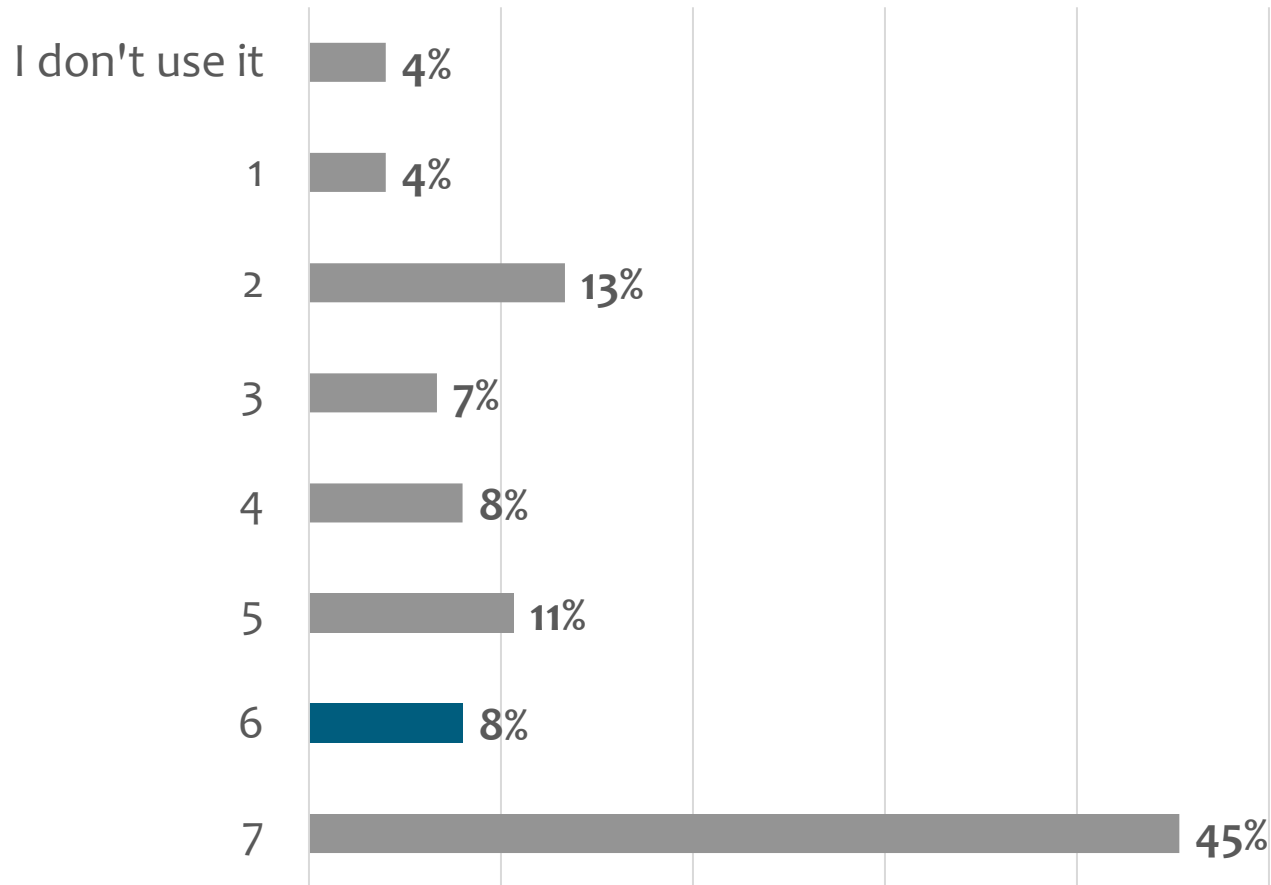
“Check all of the ways that you have interacted in the past week.”



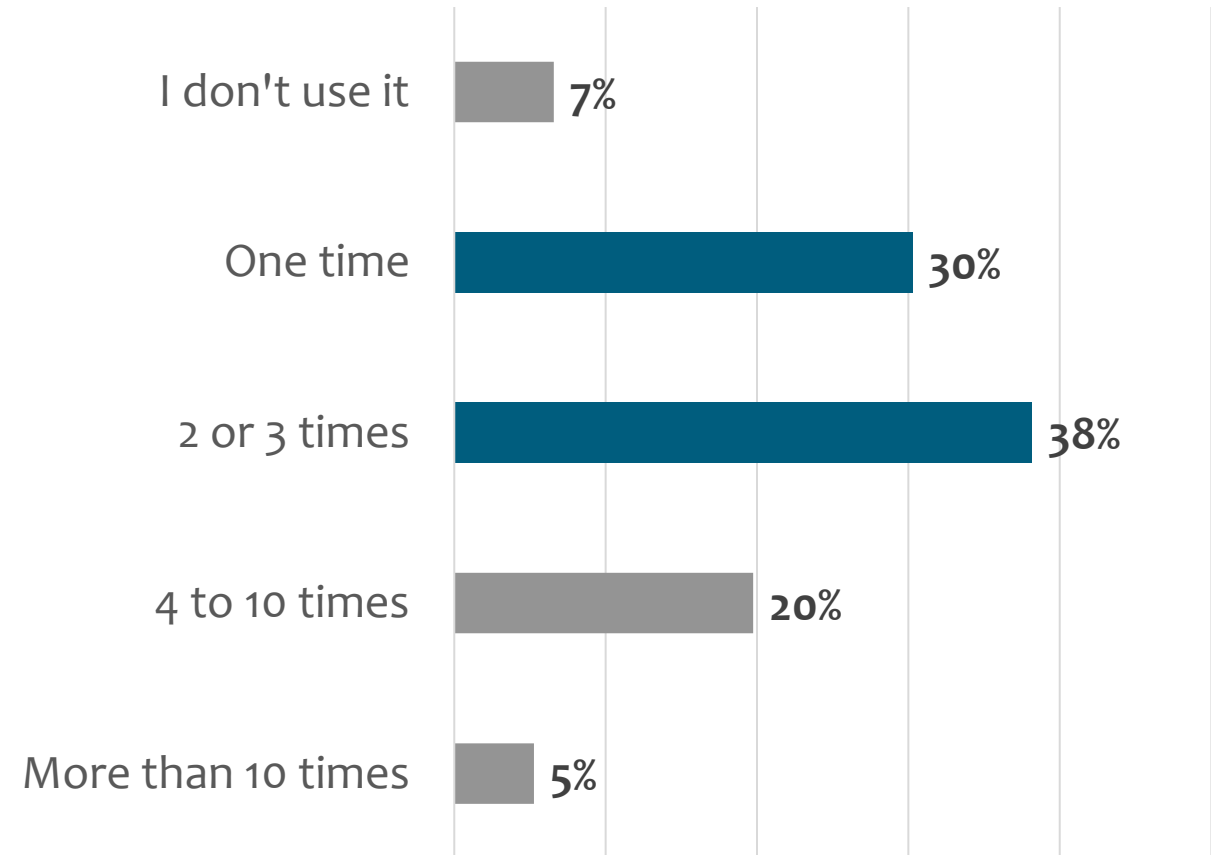
* In-Person not an option for 30-day survey.

Six month participants report somewhat frequent use of their Alexa device.

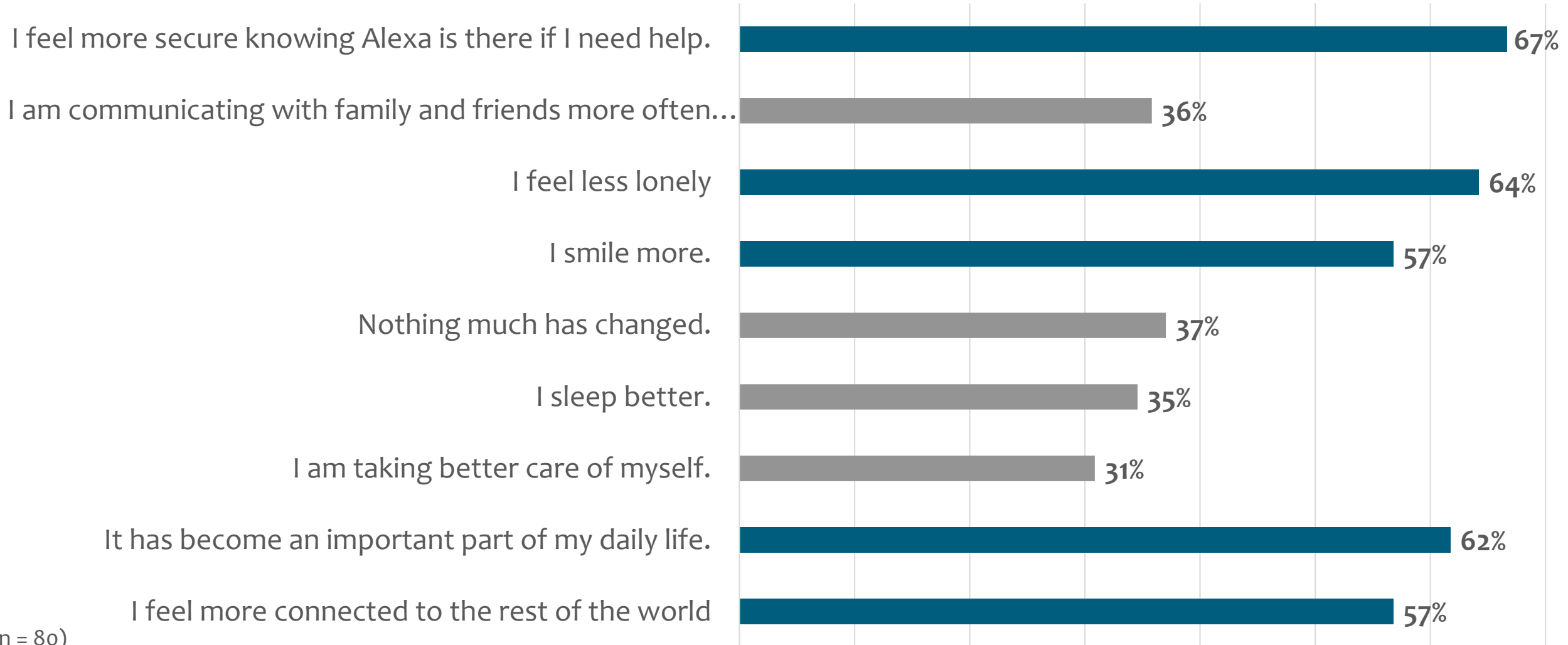
“In a typical week, how many days do you talk to Alexa?” (n = 72)



“In a typical day, how many times do you talk to Alexa?” (n = 76)

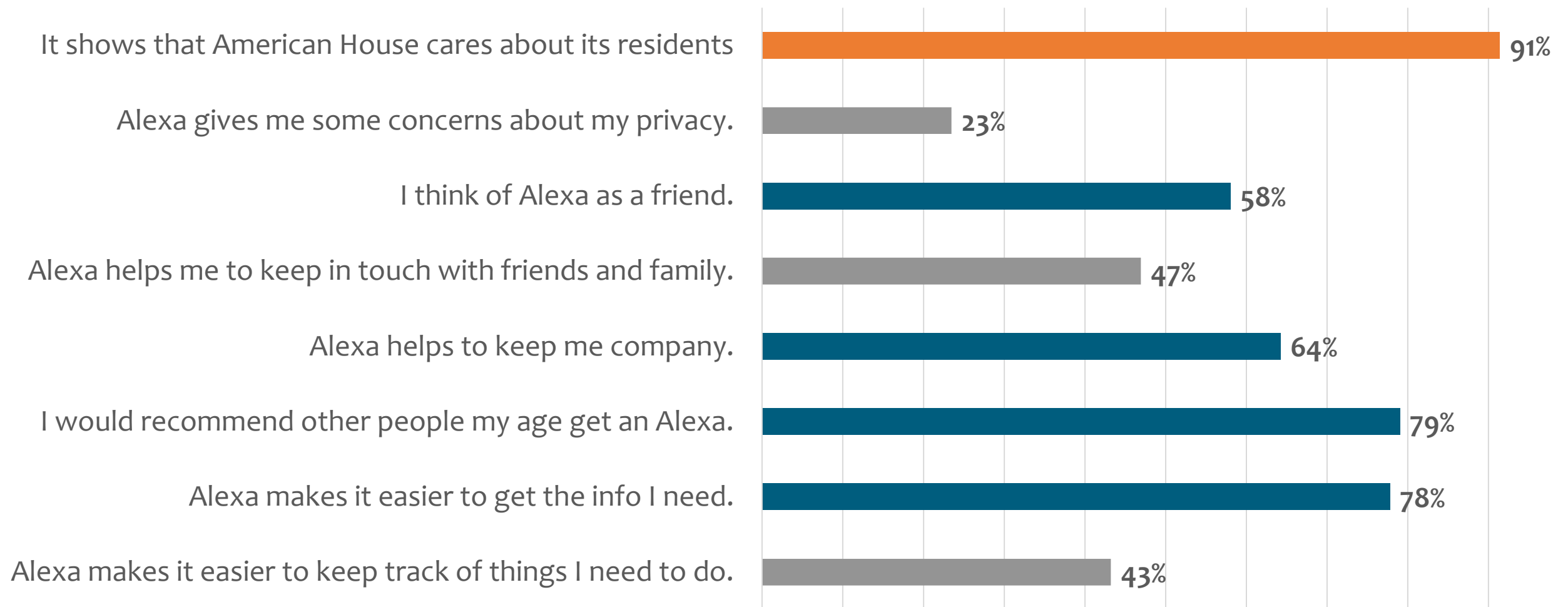


When asked if the following statements are true since the beginning of the project, six month participants said...



(n = 80)

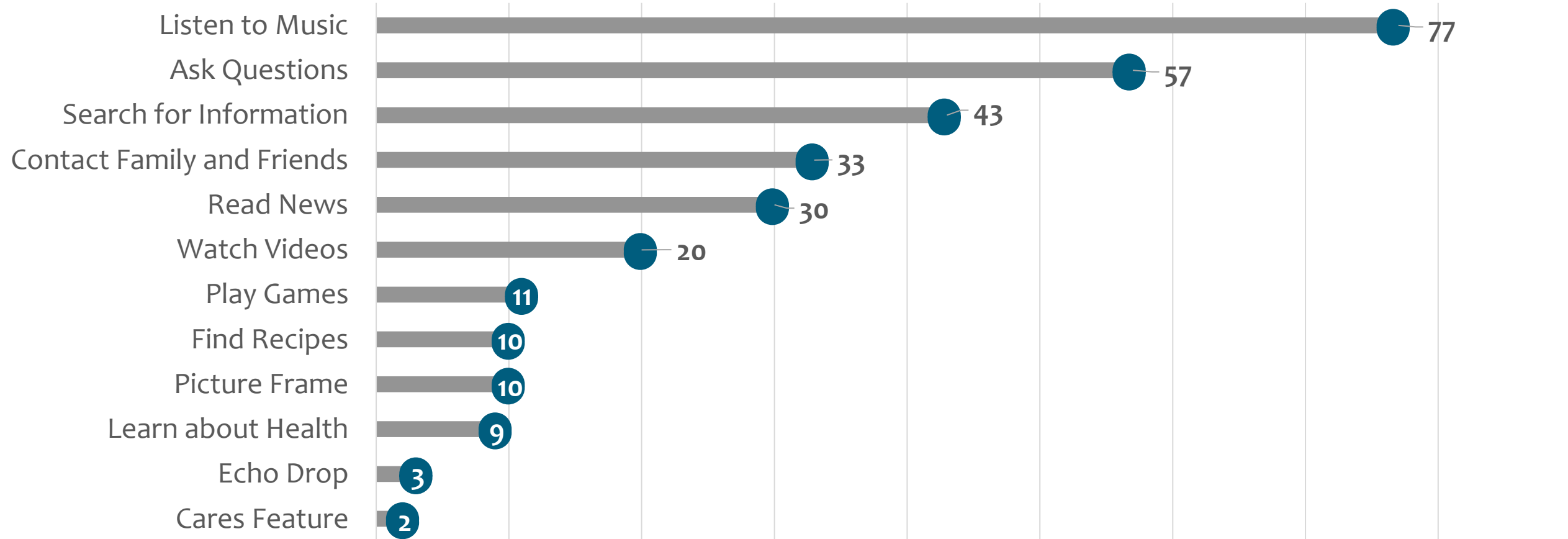
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(n = 80)

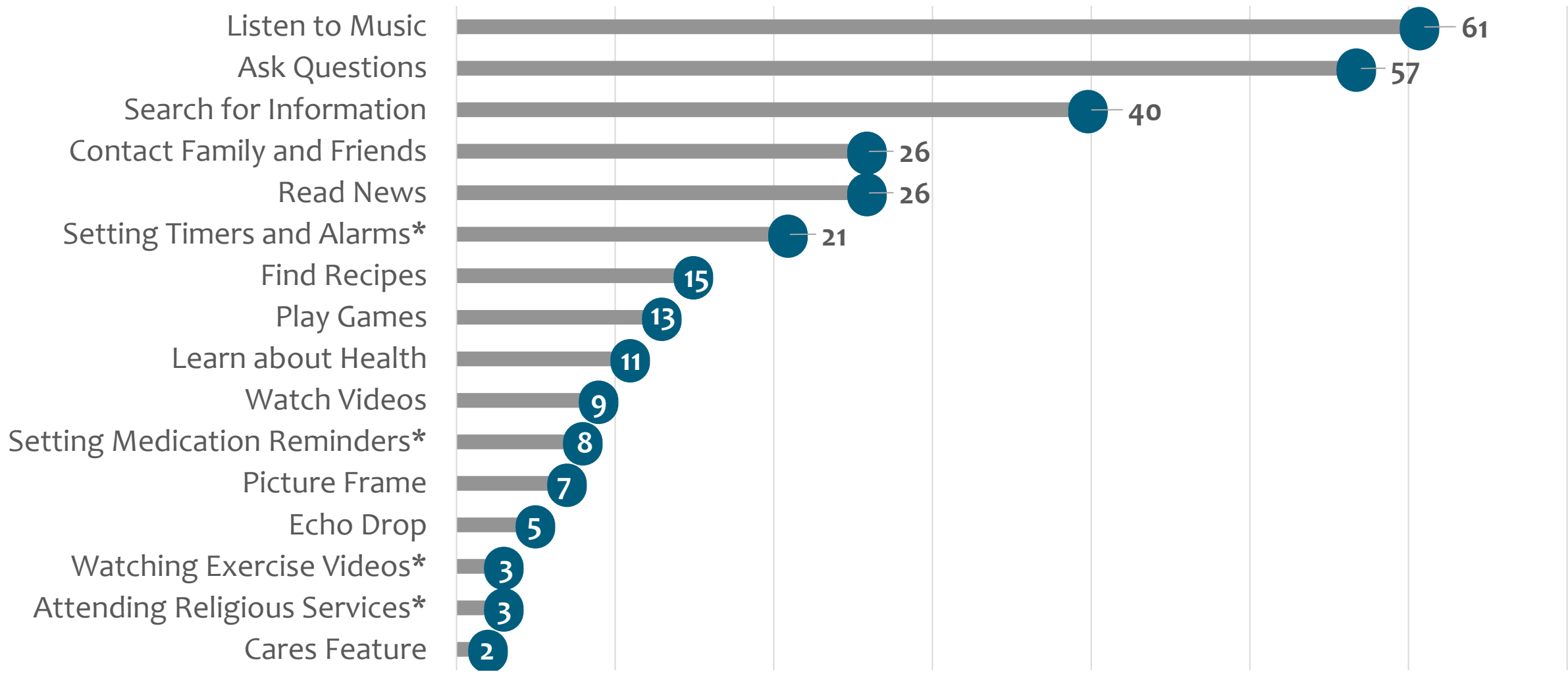
Participants used Alexa for more than communication, with “listening to music” topping the list.

Which of the following activities do you use Alexa for?
(30-Day Responses; n = 83)



The same trend continues for six month participants.

Which of the following activities do you use Alexa for?
(Six Month Responses; n = 75)



* New options added for six month surveys/interviews

Limitations and Considerations

- Timeline of COVID Restrictions
- Not a large sample size, further exacerbated by invalid or missing responses
- Potential misunderstanding/misreading of certain questions



Questions and
Thoughts?