

Policy Brief

May 2023

## LISTEN UP: EXPANDING MEDICARE OUTREACH FOR HEARING AIDS AMONG BLACK OLDER ADULTS



### Executive Summary

Black older adults have disproportionately lower usage of hearing aids compared to the general population. Black adults do not perceive themselves as susceptible to hearing loss and lack the knowledge that would prompt them to pursue hearing aids. Untreated hearing loss in Black adults is related to negative healthcare outcomes and a myriad of health costs. Medicare must act to educate Blacks on the risk of untreated hearing loss including increased risk of dementia.

**Keywords:** Hearing loss, hearing healthcare, health disparities, health equity

### INTRODUCTION

While regulatory changes to Medicare, such as the annual wellness visit, have led to improved access to hearing aids by more older adults<sup>1</sup>, Black Americans have been left behind in hearing aid adoption and utilization at the same rates as White counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

Older Black adults' usage of hearing aids is influenced by a variety of factors<sup>3</sup>. Black adults' perception of hearing loss and lack of knowledge about the risks associated with untreated hearing loss is the community's greatest barrier to hearing aid use.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of hearing aid ownership among Black older adults is associated negative health

outcomes and a myriad of costs – to people, families and Medicare.<sup>5, 6</sup>

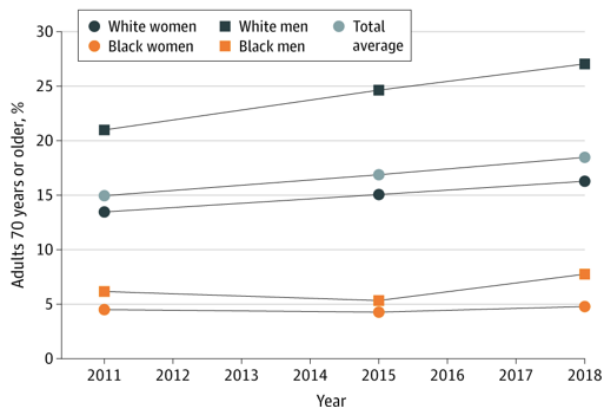


## COMPELLING RESEARCH

### Black Older Adults Left Behind in Hearing Aid Ownership<sup>2</sup>

While overall hearing aid ownership amongst U.S. older adults rose from 15.0% in 2011 to 18.5% in 2018, Blacks did not experience similar gains. While hearing ownership among Whites increased by 4.3%, Blacks only realized a 0.8% increase in hearing aid usage. When stratified by gender White men's hearing aid ownership increased by nearly 30% compared to Black women, who saw the smallest increase at 6%.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1.** Trends in Hearing Aid Use in U.S. Older Adults from 2011-2018<sup>2</sup>



The cause of this disparity is not related to hearing healthcare access, as Black adults have been found to be 58% less likely to use hearing aids than White counterparts, despite being 68% more likely to have a recent hearing test.<sup>7</sup>

### Black Older Adults' Perceptions Drive Hearing Aid Usage<sup>4</sup>

Hearing loss is not deemed as serious among Black adults. In one study, Black adults rated the seriousness of hearing loss to be a 5.5 on a scale of 1-10<sup>4</sup>. Respondents also did not view themselves at risk of acquiring hearing loss in the future, rating 4.5 in perceived susceptibility of hearing loss. Among those recognizing perceived severity of hearing loss, they were willing to pay more out of pocket for a hearing aid.

**Figure 2.** Willingness to by a hearing aid and perceived seriousness of hearing loss<sup>3</sup>



### Blacks with Hearing Loss Have Greater Risk of Cognitive Decline<sup>4</sup>

A multiethnic sample of older adults with hearing loss indicated a 70% increased risk of dementia.<sup>4</sup>

While Black older adults have a lower prevalence of hearing loss than Whites, they have greater adverse cognitive health outcomes.

Black adults living with hearing loss have a 162% greater risk of developing dementia compared to a 61% risk amongst Whites.

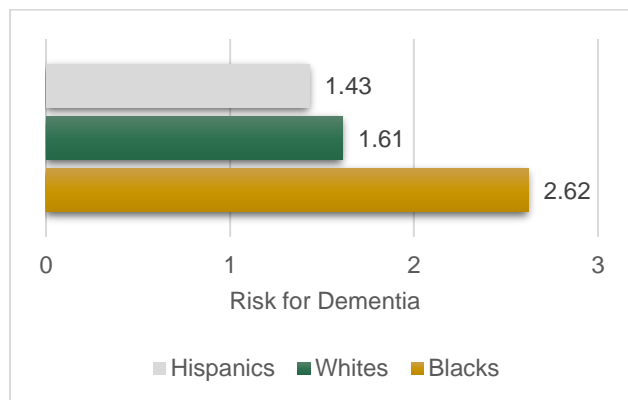
Hearing aid use has been found to be one of the greatest protective factors against cognitive decline and dementia.<sup>8</sup>

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*Black older adults living with hearing loss have more than double the risk of developing dementia than Whites.<sup>4</sup>*

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**Figure 3.** Race, hearing loss, and risk of dementia.



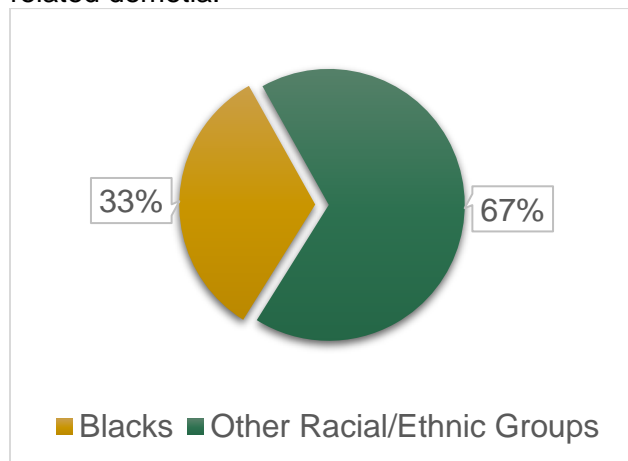
*Blacks account for 33% of dementia healthcare costs while only being 13% of the U.S. population.*

### Increased Costs of Dementia for Black Older Adults<sup>5</sup>

Research suggests increased economic and familial costs of dementia associated with hearing loss. The combined medical and caregiving costs associated with the care of all persons in the U.S. with dementia were estimated to exceed \$500 billion in 2020.

Black older adults make up 33% of these costs, despite being only 13% of the U.S. population.

**Figure 3.** U.S. Costs for Alzheimer's and related demetia.<sup>5</sup>



## POLICY CONTEXT

Medicare coverage, Title XVIII of the Social Security Act, is managed by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services and administered through the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. It is under the legislative jurisdiction of the Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Committee on Ways and Means in the House of Representatives and the Senate Finance Committee.

The Over-the-Counter Hearing Aid Act of 2017 permitted the sale of FDA approved hearing aids in pharmacies and drug stores in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> This policy provides additional access to hearing healthcare for Black adults; however, they may not perceive the need to do so.

The Medicare Hearing Aid Coverage Act of 2023 was introduced by Representative Dingle on January 10, 2023 to provide additional resources for hearing healthcare for older adults.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

To amend Medicare law, to include hearing aid outreach by providing information about hearing aid benefits, coverage of hearing aids, and risks of untreated hearing loss. This can be easily implemented by incorporating information in the Explanation of Benefits, which are received by all Medicare beneficiaries via the U.S. Mail. The risks of untreated hearing loss can be listed and presented similarly to the risks associated with other health conditions presented in the Medicare Preventive Care handbook.

Educating Black older adults about hearing aid usage can lessen the disparity and decrease the economic costs associated with hearing loss.



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