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Loneliness Epidemic

May 5, 2023 – Volume 33, Issue 16

Can it be substantially abated?
By Alan Greenblatt

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Introduction

Large numbers of people are feeling lonely, both in the United States and around the world. This has been an issue for years, but isolation early in the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem, causing some to say loneliness is a public health epidemic. It has been associated with mental and physical health problems, including increased risk of dementia and premature death. Many of the ways people have historically gathered and shared community, such as through religious services, marriage, service club participation and child-rearing, have been declining for decades. Some are calling for a revival of these social institutions to help combat loneliness. At the same time, social media has grown in popularity, which some experts argue can trigger greater feelings of alienation rather than actual connection. Now, with nearly a third of the U.S. workforce still remote, there is concern that Americans may grow even more isolated. The issue has the attention of policymakers who want to help, but there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Patrons use their laptops at a cafe in Brooklyn, N.Y., in January 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the shutdown of such community gathering places, exacerbating what public health officials say is an epidemic of loneliness. (Getty Images/Robert Nickelsberg)

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Overview

Jacob Dickerman is having a difficult time making friends at college, even as he finishes his third year. In part, that is because he spent nearly the entire first half of his time at the University of California, Santa Cruz, taking classes online due to COVID-19 lockdowns. He lived at home with his parents, 250 miles from campus, throughout his freshman year. "If I had the proper dorm experience, I probably would have made more connections," he says.

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Dickerman, 20, now lives alone in a small Santa Cruz apartment off campus. A musician in a university orchestra, he has started to socialize after practice with a few other players but still turns to his parents when he needs to confide in someone. After his grandmother died, Dickerman inherited her board games but has not been able to play them "because you need at least two people," he says.

Dickerman's experience is not unusual. Young adults are currently the loneliest Americans, surveys show. A December 2021 poll conducted for Cigna, a health insurance company, found that 79 percent of adults aged 18 to 24 said they felt lonely, the highest of any age group. Forty-two percent of that same group also said they "always" felt left out, compared to 16 percent of those aged 55 and older.[1]

A man sits alone looking at a river on a cold snowy day. Polls show growing numbers of people, most notably those in the 18-24 age range, feel lonely. (Getty Images/ClassicStock/H. Armstrong Roberts)

"Loneliness falls with age, with younger people typically reporting greater loneliness," says Andrew Clark, research director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris, the largest fundamental science state agency in Europe, and a professor at the Paris School of Economics. "We also find greater loneliness for women and minority groups, with the pandemic most likely having exacerbated pre-existing feelings of being left alone or abandoned by others."

According to the Cigna poll, the share of Hispanic and Black U.S. adults who said they were lonely was 10 percentage points or higher than the overall survey average, at 75 percent and 68 percent, respectively. However, women only had slightly higher feelings of loneliness (59 percent) than men (57 percent). Data on loneliness for people identifying as nonbinary was not reported.[2] (See Short Feature.)

The COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about remote learning and work on a mass scale, as well as periods of enforced isolation for most Americans, certainly contributed to feelings of loneliness. But such widespread sentiments existed long before the pandemic hit in 2020. In fact, in 2017, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote that, not only the United States, but the entire world was suffering from an "epidemic of loneliness."[3] (See Short Feature.)

Murthy's efforts to draw national attention to loneliness has continued. In early May, his office released an urgent public health advisory and revealed a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection. The framework comprises six pillars and several recommendations to help reduce loneliness and isolation in the United States and improve communal connections. "Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter," the advisory stated.[4]
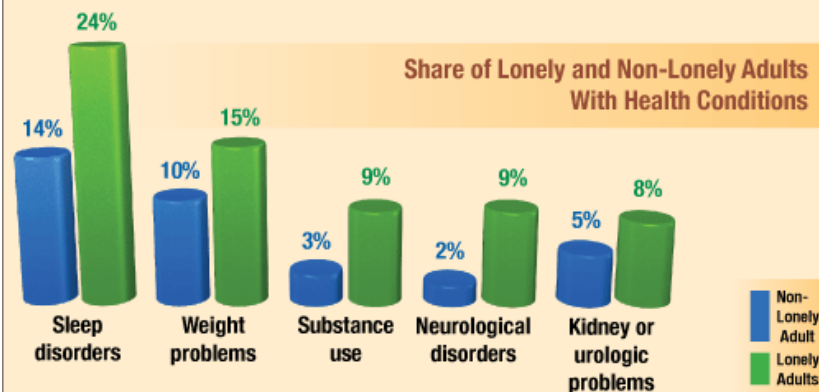
Measuring loneliness is difficult because it is so subjective, and there is still some stigma attached to it. Not everyone wants to admit that they are struggling to make connections. Humans have always experienced loneliness, but it has only become a matter of rigorous, ongoing scientific study over roughly the past generation. However it is measured — whether by polls, psychological questionnaires or other assessments — each method shows that loneliness and social isolation have grown during the 21st century. In 2021, the average American spent two hours and 45 minutes per week with friends, a 58 percent decline compared to the previous decade, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.[5]

"If you ask people today what they value most in life, most will point to family and friends," Murthy wrote. "Yet the way we spend our days is often at odds with that value."[6]

It is important, however, to emphasize that feeling lonely is not the same as being alone. Many people seek out and thrive in solitude, and spending time among other people is not necessarily a cure for loneliness. Think about being in a major city or at a party where you do not know anyone. Being lonely means, in essence, that your desire for companionship is not being met to your satisfaction, whether temporarily or persistently. "Loneliness is the subjective feeling that you're lacking the social connections you need," Murthy wrote.[7]

Lonely Adults More Likely to Have Health Issues

U.S. adults who feel lonely are more likely to also have a variety of physical health ailments compared to those who are not lonely, according to a December 2021 survey of almost 2,500 Americans by Cigna, a health insurance company. Difficulty sleeping was the most common condition, experienced by about a quarter of lonely adults but only 14 percent of non-lonely adults. Research has long tied loneliness to a range of physical and mental health issues.

Share of Lonely and Non-Lonely Adults With Health Conditions

Condition	Non-Lonely Adult	Lonely Adults
Sleep disorders	14%	24%
Weight problems	10%	15%
Substance use	3%	9%
Neurological disorders	2%	9%
Kidney or urologic problems	5%	8%

Note: Survey conducted Dec. 13-19, 2021.

Source: "The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults," Cigna, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/bde7tfy7

Long Description

A growing scientific consensus contends that loneliness can cause harm to mental and physical health. For example, loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide. One widely cited study from 2010 found that lack of social connections was as bad or worse for a person's mortality and longevity than other health-related factors such as physical inactivity, air pollution or smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness has been associated not only with higher risk of premature death, but a 50 percent increase in the risk of developing dementia, 29 percent increased risk of heart disease and 32 percent increased risk of stroke.[8]

Harvard University has been conducting a longitudinal study of the health of individuals since 1938. It found, among other things, that the quality of relationships is key, Robert Waldinger, a psychiatrist and the current director of the study, said. "When we gathered everything we knew about [the study subjects] at age fifty, it wasn't their middle-aged cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old; it was how satisfied they were in their relationships," he said. "The people who were most satisfied in their relationships at age fifty were the healthiest at age eighty."[9]

Part of the reason for the physical health effects of loneliness is that being alone is associated with hypervigilance, which leads to disrupted sleep and the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol. "People who are more isolated than they want to be find their health declining sooner than people who feel connected to others," wrote Waldinger and Marc Schulz, associate director of the Harvard project, in their new book on lessons from their study. "Lonely people also live shorter lives."[10]

There is no single explanation for what is causing the loneliness epidemic. Some people blame declining attendance of religious services and decreasing marriage and fertility rates, which some conservatives argue must be revived to curb America's trend toward loneliness. Others point to social media and its distractions from being present or paying attention to those with you. More recently, remote work — which appears to be here to stay in some industries — has become a lasting concern. But many employees say they prefer working from home, in part, because the lack of a commute means they have more time to spend with family and friends.

"Modern societies are organized in a way that does not provide opportunities to establish meaningful social relations," says Francesco Sarracino, an economist who studies loneliness at the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies of Luxembourg.

Americans have become more individualistic and less concerned with community, which has made them more isolated, says Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard who studies social and civic engagement. "Over the last 50 years, we've become steadily more polarized politically, steadily more unequal economically, steadily more self-centered, steadily more socially isolated and less socially connected," he says.

Political scientist Theda Skocpol observed similar characteristics in 2003 when she wrote: "The universe of very large American membership organizations today is much less concerned with brotherhood, sisterhood, fellow citizenship and community service than ever before in the nation's long history."

How to create a more connected society is a complicated issue.

Richard Weissbourd, a Harvard psychologist, points out that not everyone shares the same experience of loneliness. "Young people feel from social media that so many other people are having fun and they feel left out," he says. "That's a different experience than a senior citizen who is really isolated all day, or a parent of a young child, who is just looking for some adult company."

Work colleagues enjoy lunch together in front of their Washington, D.C., office building. Some workers and company executives worry about the lack of in-person co-worker bonding due to the rise of remote work. (Getty Images/The Washington Post/Katherine Frey)

Whatever the causes, the increase in loneliness — and its health effects — is a matter of growing concern for policymakers. Federal government agencies are funding public outreach and community-based efforts to connect people, such as isolated seniors, with different support services.

No one thinks loneliness is an easy problem to solve at scale. Even at an individual level, changing life circumstances can be difficult. Quality friendships take time to foster. Researchers found that it takes about 30 hours spent together to make a casual friend, 50 hours to make a general friend, 140 hours to make a close friend and 300 to make a best friend. So to be effective, any governmental or nongovernmental programs designed to foster such relationships must promote sustained attendance from a consistent group of participants, rather than one-off events with a different group of people each time. [11]

Loneliness itself can create a kind of self-perpetuating circle. "Severely lonely people feel so threatened that they are preoccupied with their own emotional safety and have little energy for empathy or concern for others," Murthy wrote, thus, hampering their ability to forge connections. [12]

As scientists, researchers, health advocates and policymakers consider causes and possible responses to the high levels of loneliness in society today, here are some of the questions being debated:

Should traditional social institutions be bolstered?

In 2019, during his first speech on the Senate floor, Josh Hawley, R-Mo., warned about an "epidemic of loneliness and despair." He blamed a culture of individualism divorced from a sense of shared purpose and traditional social institutions. "Today's youth must make their way in a society increasingly defined not by the genuine and personal love of family and church, but by the cold and judgmental world of social media," Hawley said. [13]

For decades, many Republicans have called for a return to "traditional family values," blaming a myriad of social ills on the increase in divorce rates and the decrease in marriage, fertility and church attendance rates. Since family ties and religious worship have been central to building community and kinship throughout most of human history, many believe their decline over the past half-century or more has contributed to widespread loneliness and social isolation. (See Pro/Con.)

"For many Americans, religion is less a matter of theological commitment than a rich source of community," Putnam and co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett, a social researcher, wrote in their 2020 book *The Upswing*. "Religious institutions have long been the single most important source of community connectedness and social solidarity in America." [14]

People attend services at a Las Vegas chapel in May 2020. Many Republicans say declining attendance at religious services has eroded community and family bonds. Others say religion is not a solution for loneliness. (Getty Images/Ethan Miller)

Places of worship are not just about religion, but also community, hosting events where people gather to study the bible or other religious texts, volunteer, raise funds and celebrate other social occasions. Not only has religious attendance declined, but so has participation in secular organizations such as labor unions, service clubs such as Boy and Girl Scouts, and other local voluntary and civic groups. Practically every way in which Americans have formally gathered has seen declining numbers.

Part of the reason for the decline in service organization membership is Americans' lack of trust. Over the past half-century, trust in all manner of public institutions, including churches, courts, government and the media — as well as trust in other people to do the right thing — has declined: [15]

- The fastest-growing religious affiliation in the United States today is "none," making up 29 percent of U.S. adults in 2021, up from 16 percent in 2007. [16]

- One in five U.S. marriages ended in divorce in 1950; today, it is more than 40 percent. [17]

- The average number of children born per U.S. woman dropped from three to two between 1976 and 2018. [18]

"Religion and family constitute important protections against loneliness," Putnam says. "There's been a decline in family, not just in the traditional sense, but even living together. And I do agree that religion is an important buffer against loneliness."

However, not everyone agrees that religion or family is a solution for loneliness. There are stark examples of why some people do not want to marry or participate in organized religion, ranging from domestic violence to widespread sexual abuse by religious leaders. Such issues typically were not discussed publicly or reported in the early to mid-20th century but have been widely exposed since.

"Rebuilding will require self-examination on the part of religious institutions or a willingness to change," says Seth Dowland, a scholar on religions at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash. "There are a healthy number of people who have been driven out of the church because of their sense that the church is political. In the case of gender or sexual minorities, they don't feel welcome in the church." In those instances, organized religion can make someone feel more isolated, not less. While churches do provide community, Dowland says, whether they reduce loneliness is another question.

Parents Had Largest Loneliness Surge During COVID-19

Feelings of loneliness rose 181 percent overall during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its mandatory lockdowns and social distancing, according to a survey by The Roots Of Loneliness Project, an advocacy group. But loneliness rose the most — up 229 percent — among people living with children. People living with other adults but no kids experienced a 183 percent increase, and those living alone had the lowest increase, up 134 percent.

Percentage of People Feeling Lonely, by Living Arrangement

Before COVID-19
During COVID-19

	Alone	With Others, No Children	With Children
Before COVID-19	28.9%	19.3%	16.7%
During COVID-19	67.7%	54.7%	55%

Note: Survey was conducted April 22-May 14, 2020.

Source: Alison Huff, "[Survey] Loneliness Tripled During COVID-19 & Social Distancing," The Roots Of Loneliness Project, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/ytndmnvp

Long Description

Scandinavians have especially low rates of church attendance — much lower than the United States, notes Christian Bjørnskov, an economist at Aarhus University in Denmark who studies loneliness. Yet those countries typically score high on rankings of world happiness and low on loneliness rankings. "It's not about church, it's about having some kind of social connection," he says.[19]

Meanwhile, some say part of the reason for the decline in marriage and childbirth rates is not because people do not want to marry or have children, but because there are more obstacles today to doing so. Lyman Stone, the research director at Demographic Intelligence, a consulting firm in Charlottesville, Va., argues that governments should do more to remove such barriers by methods such as abolishing the greater income tax burden that sometimes falls on married couples filing returns jointly. "Most people say they want family, kids, community, and many of them are not getting it," Stone says. "We can't all have a yacht, but it seems we all should be able to have a family, if we want one."

That includes LGBTQ individuals. Studies have shown that older LGBTQ people have been more prone to loneliness than straight Americans because of a historical lack of spouses or long-term partners. The decline in social stigma about such relationships and the legality of same-sex marriage since 2015 may address this dynamic, although experts say it is still too early to say for sure.[20]

In general, nothing has come along to replace these institutions on a mass scale. Individuals can find community through other pursuits, whether playing sports or visiting nursing homes, but the amount of time spent pursuing activities in the company of others has been trending downward. Some point to the fact these traditional in-person connections are being replaced by virtual spaces, particularly for younger generations.

"Social media was like a nuclear bomb on teen social life," said Chris Said, a data scientist and psychologist. "I don't think there's anything in recent memory, or even distant history, that has changed the way teens socialize as much as social media."

Psychologist Jean Twenge has analyzed social media and mental health for years. Her research revealed that the amount of time teens hung out with friends each week "nosedived" starting in 2010. At the same time, social media use skyrocketed. "Now, in the most recent data, 22 percent of 10th grade girls spend seven or more hours a day on social media," Twenge told *NPR*.[21]

Others contend social connection needs are being met — just by nontraditional means. "Some have suggested that increasingly tribal political identities have taken the traditional space of religion, along with fitness and exercise classes, and 'workism' or careerism," reported *Vox*'s Karen Turner.[22]

Additionally, many — particularly Millennials and Gen Z — are turning to other forms of spiritual practice in place of organized religion. A 2019 survey of Americans found that 45 percent of respondents said they feel a sense of community through their spirituality, 42 percent said through work, 32 percent said the internet, 25 percent said fitness and 19 percent said politics.[23]

Does social media enhance friendships?

In the early days of the pandemic, Tim Page felt trapped in his Manhattan apartment as the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths skyrocketed in New York City. "I was basically alone in my apartment for about six months," he says. So Page, a critic and retired music professor, found

company through Facebook. He continues to use social media as a tool to connect with others, swapping ideas about a wide variety of interests — everything from silent film to opera recordings — with friends scattered across time zones from California to the Balkans. "I feel very much connected and very happy," Page says. "Because I can be very shy personally, I've often wanted to write things to people rather than have the in-person meeting."

A woman browses on her smartphone at home. Some say social media has helped them stay connected, but others question whether such activity leads to political tribalism and isolation. (AP Photo/PA Wire/Yui Mok)

Page, 68, is emblematic of many older individuals who find and maintain connection through social media. Many people have found online communities conducive to reaching others who share their interests or life experiences, breaking down geographic barriers, uniting individuals across demographics and providing greater accessibility for those who may not be able to physically meet in person due to a disability or medical condition.

"I did a research synthesis, and we found that elderly people who learn to use the internet and social media became happier," says Ruut Veenhoven, a sociologist at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. This is widely true of many social media users, not just older people, he says. "The more connections people have, the better." But Veenhoven says this is not true for "excessive users," who are constantly online and hardly see other people in real life.

That seems to be particularly the case with younger generations, who tend to use social media more often. A number of studies have found that people who are "extremely online" — spending more than two hours a day on social media — can end up feeling lonely or depressed. One widely cited 2018 study from the University of Pennsylvania found that college undergraduates who limited their use of social media apps Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat to 30 minutes a day quickly saw significant reductions in their feelings of depression and loneliness, compared with those who did not change their social media behaviors. "At least with some of these most popular, image-heavy sources of social media, we know they cause negative affect and isolation," says Stone.[24]

Data show it is often the *type* of online connection that matters. "When social media is used to actively engage with others, it may help to reduce a sense of isolation, while if instead used passively, may increase perceptions of loneliness and being disconnected from others," says Clark, the researcher in Paris.

Social media can trigger "FOMO," or fear of missing out. If a friend's social feeds are carefully curated, it may feel as if they are constantly celebrating milestone occasions, taking terrific trips and so forth, making a person compare their own average days to that friend's best days, potentially triggering feelings of inadequacy or melancholy. "Social media provides idealized realities," says Sarracino, the scholar in Luxembourg. "It's only *me* who's not going to Thailand or whose pictures are always crap."

Some studies have found a correlation between the widespread adoption of smartphones and increasing loneliness among young people. One international study published in 2021 found young adults who used social media multiple times a day had greater "emotional loneliness," defined as dissatisfaction with intimacy of relationships and feelings of attachment.[25]

Multiple school districts around the country, from Seattle to Bucks County, Pa., certainly see social media as an issue, filing lawsuits against major platforms alleging they are manipulating children and contributing to their loneliness, depression and suicidal thoughts.[26]

At the federal level, Hawley filed a bill that would set the minimum age required to access social media at 16, while also calling for a comprehensive study about the mental health effects of being online.[27]

But the effects of social media on teens are not all negative, and the platforms can sometimes actually help combat loneliness. "Research suggests that young people form and maintain friendships online," Mitch Prinstein, chief science officer at the American Psychological Association, a professional member organization, said in his testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee in February on the internet's effects on children. "These relationships often afford opportunities to interact with a more diverse peer group than offline, and the relationships are close and meaningful and provide important support to youth in times of stress." [28]

Ultimately, forming friendships does not have to be an either-or situation. While online connections are no substitute for getting together in real life, the two methods of communication can together form an "alloy," says Putnam of Harvard, each making the other stronger. Electronic networks do not have to serve as a poor substitute for in-person encounters, but rather can help facilitate and foster them, he says.

"Most Americans have both some real face-to-face connections and some social media connections," Putnam says. "Indeed, it's very rare that we have only one kind. Most of the people we know online are people we know in real life."

Does remote work exacerbate loneliness?

One lasting effect of COVID-19 has been the rise of remote work. Before the pandemic, 5 percent of U.S. working hours were performed remotely. After spiking to 60 percent during early COVID-related shutdowns in 2020, that share has settled down to about 30 percent, where it has remained fairly steady for about two years. [29]

Activist Robin Kupernick works from home in Arvada, Colo., in 2022. Remote work rose to around 60 percent during COVID-19 shutdowns and has settled at around 30 percent today. (Getty Images/The Washington Post/Melina Mara)

Millions of people who used to chat in-person with their colleagues about work, weekend plans and where to go for lunch are now separated, connecting mostly or only through digital platforms. "As humans, we thrive on talking with people, meeting with people, engaging in person with people," says Tracey Crouch, a member of the British Parliament who served as the United Kingdom's first minister for loneliness. "So, undoubtedly, there is an impact when those things are taken away."

Some workers, especially those without children, feel more isolated and lonely as a result. "Working alone all day every day, particularly when my partner is in the office, is tough," a 30-year-old woman told the *BBC*. "Sometimes, I won't see anyone all day, which can be very lonely. I've found that instead of taking breaks to chat to people in my office, I pick up my phone." [30]

Fifteen percent of remote workers struggle with loneliness, according to a worldwide survey conducted last year by the social media business management firm Buffer, while an additional 21 percent said they stay at home too much because they have nowhere to go. By comparison, before the pandemic, Buffer conducted the same study in 2019 and found that 21 percent of remote workers said loneliness was their "biggest struggle." [31]

"There's a future where you never leave your home and, after COVID is over, the most dangerous thing will be loneliness," Brian Chesky, CEO and co-founder of the vacation and home rental website Airbnb, said last fall. [32]

People who do not work physically among others miss the everyday contact, says Bjørnskov of Aarhus University. People derive much of their job satisfaction from contact with others, he says. "Most of that is the social relations you have with your colleagues every day, or your customers, or your students or whoever you see." Work is a huge source of social capital and connection for many Americans.

"Workplaces are very important for efficiency and productivity, but also are very important for people's well-being," Sarracino says. "Having a good relationship with your colleagues is very important for your own well-being."

Businesses are also growing more concerned about loneliness and the mental well-being of their employees. Last year, the consulting firm Ernst & Young surveyed 5,000 of its workers in the United States and four other countries and found that 82 percent were or had felt lonely in their jobs. "In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated $154 billion annually," stated Murthy's recent advisory on loneliness. In response, a number of corporations have appointed chief happiness or chief people officers, who organize co-worker sports teams and book clubs, offer career coaching and generally try to make "workers feel more like humans and less like resources," reported *The Wall Street Journal.* [33]

But there is also a school of thought that says remote work can help improve individuals' social connection and work-life balance, such as having adequate time to forge deeper, more meaningful connections with friends and family. Many remote workers are resisting calls to return to the office for a variety of reasons, including to spend more time with their families.

"Most people who choose to work remotely have family at home, which means they're not going from human contact to no human contact, but contact with family members who they probably love," says Stone, of Demographic Intelligence. Stone co-authored a recent study that found people who work remotely are more likely to get married than people who work physically in offices or other workplaces, in part because it is easier to relocate. The study reported that remote work is also associated with an increase in fertility, particularly for women over age 35 and for those who have already had at least one child. [34]

A recent survey from a pair of sociologists also found that one-fifth of men in the United States are performing more child care duties than they did prior to the pandemic, with a quarter doing more household chores. Sharing these types of tasks more can help partners, especially women who can still be tied to traditional gender roles, feel more supported and less alone in their responsibilities. "On its own, remote work is not going to turn the tide of cultural change, but it's a countervailing factor for some women," Stone says. [35]

However, a 2021 study by Harvard Business School found that parents and married spouses are more likely to say they want to return to the office, compared to workers who are childless and single. [36]

Remote work is also preferred by many people of color. When the pandemic began, Mary Smith was working as a project manager in Irving, Texas. She found working remotely to be a relief. As a Black woman, she had frequently endured insulting comments at work about her hair, clothing and demeanor. When her boss ordered her to return to the office, Smith decided to quit. She found a new job she could do remotely and started a virtual co-working group as well. "My co-workers are my best friends because I had the freedom to choose," she said. [37]

As Smith's experience suggests, members of marginalized communities, including disabled and LGBTQ people, have found that remote work has freed them from receiving many biased comments. One 2021 survey found that only 3 percent of remote Black knowledge workers wanted to return to jobs on-site, as opposed to 21 percent of their white peers. [38]

The mass switch to remote work is in its early phases, Putnam says, and its effects will take decades to play out. But he doubts it will lead to an increase in social isolation, since people will be able to make connections with those they care most about. "Remote workers are not necessarily more isolated from other people," he says. "They could easily be more connected with their neighbors, or the people they go jogging with, and certainly their families."

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Background

Evolutionary Need for Social Connection

The physiological effects of loneliness are rooted in 250 million years of mammalian evolution. Living in herds offered a distinct advantage, with social adaptations central to making humans a dominant species. Humans who strayed were vulnerable to attack from larger species. Interaction with others tells our bodies that we are safe, reducing physical stimulation and increasing our sense of well-being, according to Waldinger and Schulz, who direct the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Homo sapiens' "bodies and brains had evolved to encourage cooperation. They survived because they were social," they wrote. [39]

Getting separated from others, by contrast, sends urgent signals to the brain to find a group. In every pre-agricultural society, "against harsh odds they barely survive, but the fact that they survive at all, they owe to the dense web of social contacts and the fast number of reciprocal commitments they maintain," wrote neuroscientist John T. Cacciopo and author William Patrick in their 2008 book *Loneliness.* [40]

Loneliness experts often point to the exceptional good health enjoyed by members of tight-knit, sometimes isolated groups who live communally, such as ultraorthodox Haredi Jews in Israel or Hutterites, who mostly live in religious colonies in the American West. These groups provide mutual aid to everyone within the community, including child care, transportation, meals and financial aid. Studies find their life expectancy is higher than in neighboring communities — Haredi men typically

live three years longer and Haredi women live one and a half years longer than other Israelis of similar socioeconomic status, for example, and members report feeling less loneliness.[41]

Members of the Hutterite religious community, who mostly live in colonies in the American West, hoe a field in Northeast Alberta, Canada, in 1963. Loneliness experts say such groups who live in tight-knit communities have exceptionally good health due in part to their social structure. (Getty Images/National Film Board of Canada/Contributor)

In early America, most people had isolated lives on separate farms, but they also were "joiners." In his 1837 book *Democracy in America*, French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville noted the propensity for Americans to join associations, which he saw as a check against individualism, declining into selfishness and a disregard for the common good. "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite," he wrote.[42]

That unity, of course, had its limitations. Joining associations did not prevent early Americans from dividing along various lines, including race, gender, politics or geography, culminating in civil war. And later in the 19th century, Social Darwinism, a corruption of the theory of evolution put forward by naturalist Charles Darwin in 1859, delivered a further blow to communitarianism by promoting the idea of "survival of the fittest." Social Darwinism was used as a justification by both individuals and countries for promoting their own economic advantage, favoring the individual over the broader collective society and elites over those living in poverty.

In addition to this philosophical dressing, individualism was promoted by the Industrial Revolution, which among other things, led many Americans to leave farms for work at factories in cities, where they lacked the social ties they had at home. As a result, Americans began dissociating during the Gilded Age, the period from the 1870s to the 1890s. Much like today, church attendance, marriage rates and fertility all declined.[43]

"America at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century was very socially isolated, very politically polarized, very unequal economically and culturally very self-centered," says Putnam, the Harvard scientist.

Rise and Fall of Social, Service Clubs

By the end of the 19th century, however, Social Darwinism was being answered by the Social Gospel movement, which grew out of Christian evangelism and called for Jesus' teachings about caring for others to address U.S. social and economic problems created by unfettered Gilded Age capitalism.[44]

The causes and concerns of the Social Gospel movement overlapped with the Progressive Movement of the time, which endorsed "a cooperative ideal of mutual assistance," in the words of educator and activist Jane Addams. The political arena grew more skeptical about individualism and more concerned with the common good.[45]

The dawn of the 20th century saw an explosion of voluntary, community-based associations. Many popular social groups for young people — including the Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, 4-H and Boys & Girls Clubs — were founded during the first decade of the 20th century. Half of all mass membership groups in the country's history (those that attracted 1 percent or more of the U.S. population) were founded between 1870 and 1920, including the American Red Cross, the environmental activist group the Sierra Club and the NAACP, the nation's oldest civil rights organization.[46]

Many of these groups grew fast in popularity. The first Rotary Club, an advocacy group where members regularly met for lunch and took up local causes such as supporting schools or promoting clean water, started in Chicago in 1905; by 1911, there were Rotary Clubs in every major U.S. city. These clubs offered "sociability in a box," according to Putnam and researcher Romney Garrett, with handbooks laying out the rules and structures of each organization.[47]

Such groups were mostly segregated by race and gender (and sometimes religion). So, different demographic groups had to create their own associations. Many immigrants embraced the model of the voluntary association, while U.S. sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois highlighted the importance of Black organizations, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, which advocated for economic and social justice for African Americans.[48]

An early photo of the Tri-City NAACP Branch in Fairfield, Calif. The early 20th century saw a sharp increase in the number of service clubs that provided connections for people. However, they were often segregated, partly leading to the establishment of the NAACP in 1909, the nation's oldest civil rights organization. (Screenshot/Tri-City NAACP)

At the same time, religious attendance rebounded and membership and support for labor unions increased. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies in response to the Great Depression of the 1930s were communitarian in spirit, creating programs such as Social Security. Various forms of civic and social engagement continued to trend upward through the immediate period following World War II and into the 1950s.

"Across lines of race and gender, most Americans belonged to one or more of these groups [religious organizations, parent groups, fraternal organizations, etc.], and our national rate of civic involvement was at or near the top of the world rankings," Putnam and Romney Garrett wrote.[49]

U.S. society changed in profound ways during the 1960s. For one thing, television had become pervasive. Because watching TV kept people at home, it decreased the number of social gatherings and eroded organizational participation — as did, over the long run, the vast social change movements of the 1960s, including the gay, civil and women's rights movements. These mass movements helped shift people's attention from local concerns to more national issues. The number of national nonprofit organizations doubled between 1968 and 1997. But compared to locally based voluntary groups, which routinely held in-person meetings, national nonprofits often called on members to do nothing more than write checks and read newsletters from the privacy of their own homes.[50]

During the 1970s, which journalist Tom Wolfe famously dubbed the "me decade," many Americans shifted from thinking about ways to change the world to advancing or improving their own lives. Many of the ways people gathered or acted collectively went into decline as a result:

- Union membership, which peaked at almost 35 percent in 1954, fell to 20 percent in 1983 and then 11 percent by 2013.[51]

- Between 1960 and 1980, the divorce rate more than doubled.

- The share of Americans who never attended church tripled between 1971 and 2016 (from 11 to 31 percent among white Americans and from 6 to 20 percent among Black Americans).[52]

Study of Loneliness Emerges

In 1970, sociologist Philip Slater wrote that Americans were seeking greater privacy but felt "more and more alienated and lonely" when they achieved it. In sociologist Robert Weiss' 1973 seminal book, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, he warned that loneliness was being neglected by the scientific and medical fields as a topic of research and study. The issue is "more often commented on by songwriters than social scientists," he noted. Weiss "conceptualized loneliness as perceived social isolation" and developed a theory of loneliness in which he identified six social factors that can lead to loneliness if neglected: Social integration, attachment, nurturance, acknowledged worth, reliable alliances and guidance in times of stress. [53]

The scientific community started to heed Weiss' call. Researchers at UCLA devised a Loneliness Scale in 1978 to provide some data uniformity in surveys. It instructed participants to rate on a four-point scale how they felt about each of 20 statements, such as "There is no one I can turn to," and "No one really knows me well." At the University of Chicago, Professor John Cacioppo was a pioneer in the field of social neuroscience, examining what happens inside the brain due to loneliness. Among his findings was an evolutionary picture of loneliness, revealing that humans undergo stress, or a fight-or-flight response, when they find themselves either alone or in groups where they do not feel welcomed or understood. [54]

In the meantime, it became far more common for women to work outside the home, which was a boon in terms of creativity and earnings but often disruptive at home, as both husbands and wives had to adjust to changing gender roles. In 1969, California Gov. Ronald Reagan signed the nation's first no-fault divorce law. This allowed married couples to split without having to cite specific problems such as adultery or "mental cruelty." Almost all other states quickly followed suit. [55]

As a result, the U.S. divorce rate peaked during the 1980s. While it has since come down some, the rate remains higher than it was in the 1950s. "Two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women, so when you're talking about changes in divorce rates, in many ways you're talking about changes in women's expectations," said William Doherty, a marriage therapist and professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota. [56]

Although loneliness is often described by researchers and the media as increasing, it is sometimes unclear whether researchers working in different fields, including psychology, sociology and neuroscience, are looking at comparable data. Public opinion surveys are imperfect measures, but comparing polls conducted by the same firms during the later years of the 20th century certainly does not show a spike. Polls conducted by market research company Harris in 1985 and 2000 found that the share of respondents who said they had been lonely in the past month remained flat. Similarly, Gallup polls from 1981 and 1990 each showed roughly one in five adults reporting they felt "lonely or remote from other people" in recent weeks. [57]

A family watches television together in 1960. Civic and social engagement began to decline in the 1960s with the advent of television, which kept more people at home. (Getty Images/Keystone Features/Hulton Archive)

Increasing evidence of the physiological effects of loneliness began to draw widespread attention. Robert Putnam's 2000 book about declining social capital in America, *Bowling Alone*, also served as a societal warning. As more research came out on the damaging outcomes of loneliness to an individual's mental and physical health, focus turned to how to fix the problem. "Just as we did when we made a national commitment to cut smoking rates in this country, we should explore approaches to reducing isolation and loneliness," Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins said in 2017. [58]

The loneliness problem was about to get worse. Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007, and by 2012, a majority of Americans owned a smartphone. At the same time, researchers and psychologists such as Twenge noticed rates of loneliness increasing alongside ubiquitous smartphone usage. She hypothesized that smartphones and social media were a direct cause. However, other researchers were skeptical of her claims at the time, *NPR* reported. A decade later, more data underscores her initial findings. **59**

Smartphones and the internet have changed all manner of social interactions, from the mundane to the profound. Where people once found potential dates at parties or through friends, now more than half of Americans under the age of 30 have used dating apps and websites. Shopping online has also reduced encounters with other people. Even when shopping or dining in person, individuals may be interacting with an app or an electronic kiosk, rather than another human being. **60**

COVID-19 Isolation

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there was hope that the collective experience, however traumatic, would revive the communitarian spirit. People checked in on neighbors and made a point to reach out or reconnect with friends and family on Zoom or other online platforms. Hyperlocal groups for mutual aid or sharing, such as the Buy Nothing movement, blossomed. **61**

But while lots of people were prioritizing helping others and seeking connection, others refused to sacrifice personal needs for the larger society. Millions of Americans refused to alter their behavior in response to the fact that wearing masks or getting vaccinated would help protect the lives of others, particularly the elderly and immunocompromised. The country grew divided over mandated public health orders and restrictions. **62**

Monthslong stay-at-home orders and lockdowns naturally increased isolation, although it may have had smaller effects on individuals who already felt lonely. Regardless, the sudden life disruption was a shock to the psyche when the ability to work, study, socialize and celebrate in-person was taken away. The pandemic also reconfirmed how much humans still need to engage with each other beyond a screen. **63**

"To the extent that people still had this fantastic belief that the internet was going to solve everything, that ended on Nov. 26, 2020, Thanksgiving Day, when everybody realized that Zooming with your grandmother was not the same as hugging your grandmother," Harvard's Putnam says.

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Current Situation

Federal Actions

In May, Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general, proposed a "national framework to rebuild social connection and community in America." His ideas include supporting programs in schools that help children build healthy relationships, community programs that foster social engagement and improvements in workplace design to promote connection. He also called for people to disengage from technology when it is divisive or distracts them from being fully present with others in real life, as well as encouraging individuals simply to reach out to one another more.

"We need to acknowledge the loneliness and isolation that millions are experiencing and the grave consequences for our mental health, physical health and collective well-being," Murthy wrote. "Given these extraordinary costs, rebuilding social connection must be a top public health priority for our nation." **64**

Loneliness is a problem not only for the individual, but also for the society they are a part of. Governments need to be concerned about loneliness because of the mental and public health consequences, says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychologist at Brigham Young University. "We do have very strong evidence of the physical health effects of this, including increased risk for premature mortality, cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes and dementia," she says. "It's a public health issue, and there are also economic costs that go along with that." She points to a study from *AARP*, Stanford and Harvard that found loneliness increases health care spending from Medicare alone by $6.7 billion annually. **65**

The issue is increasingly on policymakers' radar. In 2021, the U.S. House approved $250 million in funding for grants for agencies that work with seniors and other community-based organizations to address social isolation and connect seniors with support services. "Not everyone has the social support they need, and isolation can lead to poor physical and mental health," said Rep. Linda Sánchez, D-Calif., who sponsored the proposal. "This bill would ensure community organizations have the tools and resources to meet the needs of all seniors, especially those most at risk of experiencing social isolation or loneliness." However, the proposal died in the Senate. **66**

A downtown Boston office building sits nearly empty on March 13, 2020. The rise of remote work emptied many downtown areas, causing numerous retail and restaurant establishments to close. Some cities are still struggling to revive. (Getty Images/The Boston Globe/David L. Ryan)

The Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Administration for Community Living, a federal agency that connects older Americans and those with disabilities to services in their communities, have formed a public-private partnership, working with nonprofit groups to conduct outreach to people who are socially isolated. The program, known as Commit to Connect, provides networking opportunities and training for local organizations that work to connect individuals with programs and resources in areas such as health, technology and recreational or social programs. [67]

The United Kingdom and Japan are the only nations with ministries for loneliness. Some advocacy groups, while falling short of calling for a loneliness secretary in the United States, believe that a national strategy to combat loneliness is required. For the foreseeable future, however, the federal role will likely be limited to supporting local initiatives, predicts Putnam, the *Bowling Alone* author. "It's not a national policy, saying 'be friendly to one another,'" he says. "It's more likely to be federal dollars to fund local, private, nonprofit initiatives to try out many different ways, in Poughkeepsie or L.A. or Atlanta, to come together face-to-face, especially with an eye toward making friends."

Local Responses

Nearly every city and county in the country runs parks and recreation programs, many of which offer activities geared toward seniors or youth, such as sports, jobs training and meal delivery services. In recent years, this avenue has become a more common solution for local leaders to tap into to help address loneliness and isolation in their constituencies.

A poll of 126 U.S. mayors conducted in 2021 found that mental health and trauma topped their list of concerns about potential long-term effects of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, Craig Moe, the mayor of Laurel, Md., created the program Chat with a Senior Citizen to help connect seniors who felt isolated. The city sent out messages to residents three times a week, reminding them to call older relatives and friends, while coordinating weekly calls to seniors from volunteers. [68]

Many U.S. cities have programs directing residents to mental health services to help provide social connection and curb loneliness:

- Chicago, which has tripled mental health funding since 2019, runs a campaign called Un*Spoken that counsels people about loneliness and helps them find emotional support. [69]

- In San Francisco, the nonprofit Community Living Campaign matches seniors and people with disabilities to employment opportunities and support services, running programs ranging from exercise to emergency preparedness. In 2021, the campaign reported that 93 percent of its participants felt less isolated, 84 percent now knew neighbors they could turn to for help and 99 percent said they felt healthier. [70]

- In Midland, Mich., community organizers launched a program in 2021 called Friendly Connections. It aims to help reduce residents' loneliness and develop friendships. A "Connections Coach" matches two people (one of whom is a program volunteer with training) based on their common interests, and the pair chat on the phone a few hours per month. [71]

In addition to running activities and programs, local officials are growing more concerned about how design and architecture can affect people's ability and willingness to connect with one another. In February, New York Mayor Eric Adams appointed transit advocate Ya-Ting Liu as the city's first

chief public realm officer, who ensures parks, plazas and other public spaces are more welcoming and user-friendly. Boston and Los Angeles also provide such a role. "In New York City, the public realm is everyone's living room," said Liu "It's where we eat, play and gather." [72]

Ya-Ting Liu, New York City's first chief public realm officer, works to ensure public spaces are more welcoming and foster social gatherings. (Screenshot/Twitter)

City planning and design can "inadvertently create loneliness," says Crouch, the British MP. "Our planning system needs to recognize that building these huge communities without any communal space is a very bad thing," she says. By contrast, there are examples of design that encourage people to linger in public spaces and interact with one another, such as pedestrian-only "streeteries" where people can dine and drink on city streets, or movable chairs in parks and airports that allow individuals to create their own conversation spaces.

School districts are also trying to make classrooms and common areas more inviting, such as by creating more inviting outdoors spaces or setting up quiet areas for group study. "The school environment is so often ignored in terms of how it makes students and teachers and the community feel," said Claire Latané, an environmental design professor at California State Polytechnic University. [73]

These efforts are happening at a challenging time for cities. The rise of remote work has meant downtowns have become a lot emptier than they were before the pandemic, with fewer office workers translating into lost income or retail closures. Coffeehouses historically have served as important "third place" community centers, but now some major coffee chains have removed seating from many of their outlets, offering takeout or drive-through service only to cut down on space and improve efficiency. [74]

Although remote work has dealt a blow to central business districts in major cities, it has led many Americans to move to smaller cities, often helping to revitalize their town centers. "For small town downtowns, remote work has been amazing," says Stone of Demographic Intelligence. "For a lot of small towns, the shift to remote work has revitalized a lot of their Main Street core."

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Outlook

"This Problem Is Going to Get Worse"

One thing that makes Crouch hopeful is that, although her appointment as the world's first loneliness minister received global attention, it was not ridiculed. "One thing that I've always been really, really happy about is that no one's mocked it," she says. "This is not a laughing matter, and I think that because people have experienced it at some point in their journey, or recognize that they could experience it at some point in their life, people don't joke about it. So, I am optimistic because I think everyone wants to work together in order to ensure that there is a connected society."

Harvard's Weissbourd is optimistic that younger Americans today, despite having high rates of loneliness, anxiety and depression, may prove to be happier over the course of their lifetimes, since research shows people tend to become happier as they age. But he notes that today's young people bring different expectations to questions of family life than earlier generations because of their experiences.

Stone, of Demographic Intelligence, says he doubts that fertility in the United States will rise much in the future, although it may stabilize after a long period of decline following the Great Recession of 2007-09. In terms of other factors that may contribute to loneliness, he says, "Barring some kind of big regulatory change, I don't think we're going to see a big turn away from social media. A lot of the loneliness effects from insidious comparison on Instagram will continue for a while."

Psychologists such as Dominic Packer of Lehigh University predict that the long trend showing high rates of loneliness will continue, "unless society does something about it." No one has a silver bullet answer, although there are any number of initiatives taking place at all levels of government, not to mention among nonprofits and businesses.

"We conclude very strongly from the evidence of the early 20th century that social change of the kind we need is going to be a bottom-up process, not a top-down process," Putnam says. "Initiatives are likely to be found at the grassroots. It's likely to be young people who lead a new revolution and, along the way, solve the problem of loneliness."

It is possible that people will return to raising family, attending religious services and joining service clubs. But new ways of gathering may look very different than what has been tried in the past. For instance, more Americans are not only sharing co-working spaces but co-living arrangements, either by sharing the same space with other adults or inhabiting apartments that offer communal amenities. [75]

"Institutions persist in societies for as long as individuals find them useful," says Clark, the Paris School of Economics researcher. "There is always a danger of paternalism when some higher authority states what kinds of institutions societies 'should' have."

In his recent national advisory, Murthy warned of the possible future ramifications if the United States does not invest in social connection and reduce loneliness. "If we fail to do so, we will pay

an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country."[76]

Putnam says the bottom line is that in order for people to thrive as individuals, they have to care about other people. That extends beyond the question of loneliness and social isolation. Holt-Lunstad, the Brigham Young psychologist, has closely studied loneliness and worries that media and political attention focuses more on loneliness than the broader issue of social connection. Not everyone is lonely, but everyone needs connection. "Loneliness is just one aspect of lacking social connection," she says. Focusing exclusively on combating loneliness, as opposed to helping people more broadly improve their social connections, would be a mistake, Holt-Lunstad argues.

As always, prevention is paramount, but often overlooked. "This problem is just going to continue to get worse, because we may be only focusing on a very narrow subset of the population, focusing our efforts when the problem has already become severe," Holt-Lunstad says.

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Pro/Con

Should traditional social institutions be revived to combat loneliness in America?

Pro

Patrick T. Brown
Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center. Written for *CQ Researcher*, May 2023

America, we often hear, is going through a loneliness epidemic. Whether social isolation has actually gone up in recent decades, or whether we've just become better at measuring it, there is no shortage of political and cultural indicators showing that too many in our country feel that they are missing a community to which they can fully belong.

Some try to fill that belonging-shaped hole in the human heart with political activism or online communities; some, tragically, with drugs and other substance abuse. But the social statistics — and lessons from the long span of human existence — do not lie. People do best, on any number of indicators, when they have something to live *for*: most often a stable family, marriage and an engaged community life.

Take, for example, the much-discussed "deaths of despair," mortality caused by alcohol-related disease, suicide or drug overdoses. They are, disproportionately, deaths of the unattached male. In 2020, single, never-married men made up about one-third of all men aged 25 to 54 but composed two-thirds of that demographic's drug-related deaths. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show drug-related deaths among married men without a bachelor's degree aged 25-54 just about doubled from 2010 to 2020. For their never-married counterparts, however, the number nearly quintupled.

The opioid epidemic defies silver-bullet solutions, but the stark difference in mortality numbers provides a clear example of how outcomes differ for married and unmarried adults. And social ills, including child poverty, adverse childhood experiences and gun violence, are sadly more common in communities with low rates of marriage and hollowed-out institutions of civil society, according to the Social Capital Project, such as religion, community organizations and civic engagement. Communities that could benefit most from the stability of two-parent households and active social and religious organizations are, unfortunately, the most likely to have the lowest levels of intact marriages and thriving community life.

Of course, policymakers can't wave a magic wand and make individuals get married, start

Con

Ricci Levy
President & CEO, Woodhull Freedom Foundation. Written for *CQ Researcher*, May 2023

Traditional social institutions have fed into the problem of isolation long before the pandemic. In 2020, only 47 percent of people in the United States belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, Gallup reported. Spirituality is still important to people, polls found, but formal membership in a faith-based organization is not.

The story is the same with marriage. According to a Pew Research Center survey, a nonpartisan organization, just 47 percent of all U.S. adults have ever been married or in a committed relationship for more than five years. Meanwhile, 26 percent of survey respondents said they are unmarried and not looking for a romantic partner. But relationships do still matter to people. Today's relationship landscape includes cohabitation, open relationships, consensual nonmonogamy, co-parenting, polyamory, platonic life partners and others.

One could look at the declining participation in traditional institutions and at the levels of mental and emotional distress people are experiencing today and see the church and conventional family as institutional solutions that need to be shored up. But that would be mistaking correlation for causation. Rather, these institutions can be a significant cause of distress for people whose values and identities are stigmatized within those contexts. For example, many religious organizations frown on sexual relations outside of heterosexual monogamous marriage. People who don't conform often must either closet themselves or leave the group — causing isolation, not solving it.

Fortunately, there are many other locations for community building, such as coffee shops, gyms, libraries, community centers and even social media platforms. Like churches, they can offer a strong source of belonging. Such places often create opportunities for people to mix with others who are different from themselves, building ties across a wider range of groups.

Fantasies about the perfection of marriage, the sanctity of the nuclear family and the magic of religious institutions are, perhaps, the biggest fairytales of our time. For some (diminishing) number of people, they are the core of a happy

families or find meaning in volunteering, community building or religion. But they can, at the very least, lay more groundwork for making those things more possible, such as getting rid of tax and benefit policies that penalize marriage.

Americans of all stripes suffer from loneliness and alienation. But making it more likely for more individuals to find meaning in family and active community involvement deserves a prominent place on the national agenda.

life. For too many others, these concepts are the cause of distress.

To shore up these institutions that stigmatize and oppress those who don't conform as a way to combat social isolation is like trying to put out a fire with a flame thrower. Instead, we should expand our definitions of family and open our eyes to the many ways that people connect with one another. Only then can we create inclusive and supportive communities that can provide solidarity, rather than isolation.

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Discussion Questions

Here are some issues to consider regarding the loneliness epidemic:

- Why are younger people more likely to say they feel lonely compared to older generations?

- How does loneliness affect mental and physical health?

- Do you think traditional social institutions and service clubs should be revived? Why have participation rates in these groups declined? Do you belong to any?

- How does looking at social media feeds make you feel? Do you experience FOMO?

- When did the scientific community begin studying loneliness and why?

- Should the government actively be involved in combating loneliness?

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Chronology

1870s–1890s	U.S. society becomes more individualistic.
1873	During the Gilded Age, a period of extreme wealth and income inequality, people move away from community-based institutions; church attendance, marriage rates and fertility all decline.
1877	Journalist Emile Gautier coins the term Social Darwinism, a concept that promotes the worth of individuals over society as a whole.
1890s	In response to the excesses of Gilded Age capitalism, Protestant churches form the Social Gospel movement, calling for practices of caring for others and helping fellow citizens.
1900s–1950s	U.S. service clubs and associations boom; the Progressive Movement ushers in more communal policies and ideologies.
1901	President Theodore Roosevelt boosts the Progressive Movement by focusing on collective society and reforms supporting the common good.
1905	Chicago businessmen found the first Rotary Club, a service organization dedicated to fixing local issues. By 1911, Rotary clubs exist in every major U.S. city.
1910	A third of all adult U.S. men belong to service clubs.
1920	Participation in voluntary, community-based associations explodes, with half of all American mass membership groups formed since 1870.
1954	Labor union membership in the United States peaks at 35 percent, representing nearly 25 million workers.
1957	Weekly U.S. church attendance peaks at 51 percent, or 85 million people.
1960s–1980s	Technological developments and social movements lead Americans to become more isolated; the scientific community begins studying loneliness.
1960	Ninety percent of U.S. households own a television, encouraging their owners to spend more time at home.
1966	The number of nationwide nonprofits grows as social and civil rights movements focus on national issues, rather than local concerns.

1973	Sociologist Robert Weiss warns that scientific and medical research is neglecting the topic of loneliness and lists six social factors that can lead to loneliness.
1978	Researchers at UCLA devise a four-point Loneliness Scale around 20 questions to help provide data uniformity.
1980	The U.S. divorce rate doubles compared to 1960.
1990s–2000s	Researchers find new evidence that loneliness causes health problems; the internet and social media emerge.
1994	World Wide Web debuts, sparking more people to buy personal computers for browsing at home.
2000	Robert D. Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* sparks a national conversation about declining social capital, in which individuals are less connected to community networks.
2004	Mark Zuckerberg invents Facebook, which eventually becomes the world's most dominant social networking platform.
2006	A study finds that individuals who were socially isolated as children have greater risk of cardiovascular disease as adults.
2010s–Present	Loneliness becomes a widespread policy concern; COVID-19 forces social isolation.
2010	A study finds that loneliness is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day…. Sixty percent of nursing home residents say they never have any visitors.
2012	A majority of Americans own smartphones for the first time.
2013	A study finds that the average adult has only one real friend, and three-quarters of Americans are dissatisfied with their friendships.
2017	U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declares a worldwide "epidemic of loneliness."
2018	The United Kingdom appoints Tracey Crouch as the world's first minister for loneliness…. Forty-five percent of 30- to 44-year-old Americans are married, down from 80 percent in 1960.
2020	Schools and businesses shift to remote functions during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in extended periods of enforced isolation around the world.
2021	The average American spends two hours and 45 minutes per week with friends, down 58 percent in a decade.
2022	One in three Americans report that they never attend religious services, compared to one in four before the pandemic…. Polls show declining trust in major institutions, such as organized religion and organized labor, as participation in traditional social organizations continues to decline.
2023	Seattle and other school districts sue social media platforms, claiming they have contributed to students' mental health woes…. Study shows that 30 percent of work is performed remotely, up from 5 percent before the pandemic (January)…. U.S. Surgeon General Murthy releases a national advisory and framework calling for urgent action to address loneliness and improve social connection (May).

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Short Features

Men Struggle with Maintaining Close Friendships

Why is male bonding in the United States on the decline?

Billy and Rory became friends at the end of high school, bonding during a senior trip to Mexico. They lived in an apartment together during their 20s and 30s in Massachusetts. By their 40s, however, the two men had lost touch, though Billy still thought of Rory as his best friend. When he decided to reach out to Rory to reconnect, he found out that his friend had moved to Austria without telling him.

Billy realized he barely saw any of his friends anymore. All he really knew about them was what their kids looked like on Facebook. "I had been forced to admit I had no truly active friendships,"

Billy Baker, a journalist for *The Boston Globe*, wrote in his book *We Need to Hang Out: A Memoir of Making Friends.* [1]

Baker wrote an article for the newspaper in 2017 about the difficulty men have in maintaining friendships that became one of the most popular pieces it ever published. He received thousands of emails from around the world, with people (mostly men) sharing vulnerable and often distraught thoughts about their own lack of friendships. "I heard from young people saying they felt like they had a thousand 'friends' and none at all," Baker wrote. "I heard from older people telling me I didn't know the half of it." [2]

Decline in Friendship Higher Among Men

The percentage of U.S. men with a large number of close friends fell between 1990 and 2021, while the share of men without close friends grew fivefold, according to two different surveys. For instance, 40 percent of men said they had 10 or more close friends in 1990, compared to 15 percent in 2021. While women also experienced a decline in close friendships, it was not as prominent as among men. Data on nonbinary people's friendships was not reported.

Percentage of U.S. Men and Women With Close Friends, 1990 v. 2021
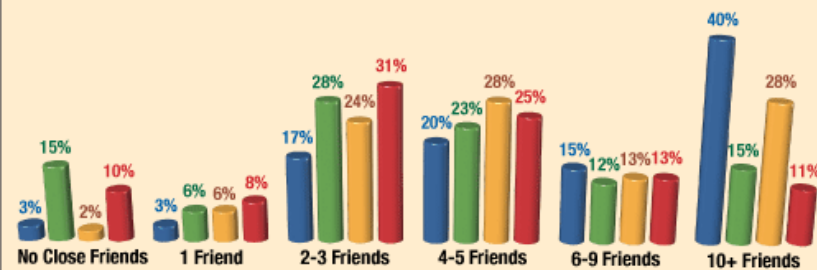
Note: 1990 survey data from Gallup; 2021 survey data from American Perspectives Survey.

Source: Daniel A. Cox, "Men's Social Circles are Shrinking," Survey Center on American Life, June 29, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/mvepf2nc

Long Description

The data supports this reader feedback. Fifteen percent of U.S. men reported having no close friendships in 2021, with only 27 percent having six or more close friends, according to the Survey Center on American Life at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. That is five percent more than the 10 percent of women in the same survey who reported having no close friendships. By contrast, back in 1990, a majority of men (55 percent) said they had at least six close friendships. While women have also experienced a decline in the number of friendships, the fall off has not been as steep as the decline for men. Data on nonbinary people's friendships was not reported. [3]

While friendship is in decline for everyone, men appear to be less resilient in creating or maintaining such relationships. Thus, the male "friendship recession" has grown worse in recent decades as broader trends push against close social bonding, including the rise of social media, Americans working longer hours and parents spending more time with children and less time with peers.

Apart from quantity, there are also questions about the quality of men's friendships: Whether they provide emotional support. U.S. culture, by and large, does not tend to encourage boys or men to be emotionally vulnerable or open. At the extreme end, toxic masculinity teaches boys not to express their emotions — because doing so is a feminine trait — and instead finds value in acting tough or even violent, especially among straight men. Some argue that toxic masculinity can contribute to loneliness, because it puts pressure on men to act a certain way to be accepted by their peers and society. Failure to do so, "can lead them down a path of disconnection from others … leading them further into isolation," wrote Brittney-Nichole Connor-Savarda, CEO of *Emotional Intelligence Magazine.* [4]

This social disconnection, some say, also puts a burden on straight men's partners. "For generations, men have been taught to reject traits like gentleness and sensitivity, leaving them without the tools to deal with internalized anger and frustration," wrote Melanie Hamlett, a journalist, comedian and public speaker. "Unlike women, who are encouraged to foster deep platonic intimacy from a young age, American men — with their puffed-up chests, fist bumps, and awkward side hugs — grow up believing that they should not only behave like stoic robots in front of other men, but that women are the only people they are allowed to turn to for emotional support — if anyone at all."

Efforts have been advancing in the United States to fight toxic masculinity and break this cultural pattern, involving everything from celebrities to local programs. For example, the Boys to Men workshop in Philadelphia offers a five-week crash course for boys ages 12-17, where they are

taught about nontoxic masculinity, encouraged to share their feelings and learn about positive relationships, among other lessons.[5]

But this still-pervasive male culture also means that certain men may lack a support system for times when they cannot lean on their female romantic partner, something that may help explain why they are six times more likely to leave a spouse with cancer than women are. One study published last year by a group of academic psychologists found that men tend to seek friendships that offer them some sort of gain, such as wealth, status or mating opportunities, while women more often seek friendships for emotional support.[6]

A 2000 American Psychological Association study conducted by University of California researchers found that while men and women under stress both receive a natural hit of oxytocin, a hormone that counters the "fight-or-flight" urge, women are more likely to deal with that stress response by, as the researchers called it, "tend and befriend." In other words, to gather together with their social networks. The researchers said this befriending pattern could be tied to the evolutionary bio-behavioral "attachment-caregiving system" that ties back to infant and mother interactions for "optimal social, emotional, and cognitive development."[7]

Although some studies do find gender differences when it comes to friendship or loneliness, Brigham Young University psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad suggests that such differences are overblown by the media. Meta-analyses that aggregate multiple studies about friendship and gender find virtually no difference by gender, she says. "You might find differences in how we prefer to fill that need, but there are not any kind of fundamental differences in terms of that need," she says.[8]

Christian Bjørnskov, an economist who studies social isolation at Aarhus University in Denmark, agrees. Men get as much happiness from social relations as women do, he says, even though they do not maintain relationships in the same way.

— Alan Greenblatt

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Is Loneliness a Western or Worldwide Problem?

More data is needed to understand the extent of the issue, experts say.

Jo Cox was concerned about the pervasiveness of loneliness she was seeing in her country. A member of the British Parliament who experienced feeling isolated herself, she believed that the problem was serious and pervasive enough to require both formal study and government response. Tragically, she was murdered in 2016 shortly after she helped establish an agency on the issue. The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission continued its work in her honor, collaborating with 13 nonprofits to highlight the scale of the problem in the United Kingdom. In 2017, the commission presented a report recommending that the British government establish an office to address loneliness and create a national strategy to address the problem.[9]

Tracey Crouch, center, was appointed Britain's first minister for loneliness in 2018, a position created by Parliament to lead the country's efforts to address factors contributing to loneliness. (Getty Images/PA Images/Mike Egerton)

Parliament agreed, and Tracey Crouch was appointed as the first minister for loneliness in 2018, drawing international attention. (The position represented an expansion of the portfolio of the ministry for sport and civil society.) Japan created a ministry for loneliness in 2021. [10]

The U.K. minister serves as a point person in government to lead the nation's strategy on addressing factors contributing to loneliness. "It actually crosses a lot of different policy areas, and it needed somebody in government to pick up all those different strands and tie them together in one strategy," says Crouch. [11]

Other British initiatives to tackle loneliness include the Royal Mail directing postal workers to check on isolated people during their rounds by asking a few questions and logging the answers, which are then reviewed by a volunteer or local official. If the person is deemed lonely, they are connected to community programs dedicated to these issues. The U.K. has also increased funding for community spaces, and the National Health Service has "social prescribing," connecting people to activities, groups and services in their areas that can have a positive effect on mental health issues, including feeling lonely and isolated. [12]

In many other countries, problems of loneliness and social isolation look similar to those in the United States, as these issues have become prevalent around the world, particularly in recent years. There are studies on aspects of loneliness in numerous individual countries throughout Asia and Latin America; however, there is relatively little data available for certain regions or continents as a whole, such as Africa and the Pacific Islands.

"We've mostly just looked at Western countries," says Richard Weissbourd, a family psychologist and faculty director of the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard University, which focuses on child-raising issues. "It's hard to get good data on [loneliness] in many countries."

Some are trying to bridge that gap. Last year, a team of Australian researchers published a study looking at loneliness in 113 countries. They found there was enough data to make comparisons among adolescents (with the prevalence of loneliness ranging from 9.2 percent in Southeast Asia to 14.4 percent in the Eastern Mediterranean), but not among adults, where their study was limited to Europe, because there was not sufficient data available. [13]

"There are fewer studies that are being published out of low- and middle-income countries," says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychologist at Brigham Young University. She is leading a group for the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection, an international consortium of national organizations, to promote research in the field in lower-income countries.

Ruut Veenhoven, a sociologist at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and director of the World Database of Happiness, argues that residents of "modern," wealthy nations are generally more satisfied, because they enjoy greater personal freedoms, such as the ability to divorce or navigate more career opportunities.

People living in more developed nations are "a bit spoiled," says Christian Bjørnskov, who studies loneliness at Aarhus University in Denmark. Because they are often not, broadly speaking, facing existential threats such as famine or war, they are able to devote greater attention to issues of mental health, such as loneliness, and are more likely to receive treatment for them, he says.

But Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues believe it is important to be better equipped with data and knowledge about loneliness on a global scale. "We want to help foster greater global collaboration and information sharing and identify whether there might be any kind of cultural variability," Holt-Lunstad says.

— Alan Greenblatt

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The Next Step

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Contacts

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A pioneering lab in the field of social neuroscience, focused on researching associations between social and neural development.

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endsocialisolation.org
A nonprofit group that lobbies and conducts research to increase public awareness of social isolation and works to promote connection among Americans.

Harvard Study of Adult Development
151 Merrimac St., Boston, MA 02114
617-643-7403
adultdevelopmentstudy.org/
One of the world's oldest ongoing studies of adult life, tracking changes in physical and mental health of thousands of individuals.

The Roots Of Loneliness Project
rootsofloneliness.com
An online publication of individual accounts of loneliness along with educational content and resources.

Office of the Surgeon General
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 200 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20201
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hhs.gov/surgeongeneral
Leads the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, overseeing 6,000 health professionals and issuing public advisories and recommendations regarding physical and mental health.

Survey Center on American Life
1789 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036
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americansurveycenter.org/
Part of the American Enterprise Institute; conducts original survey research exploring aspects of U.S. life, including loneliness.

UCLA Relationships and Health Laboratory
1285 Franz Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095
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