

Loneliness, Isolation, and Social Connection Fact Sheet

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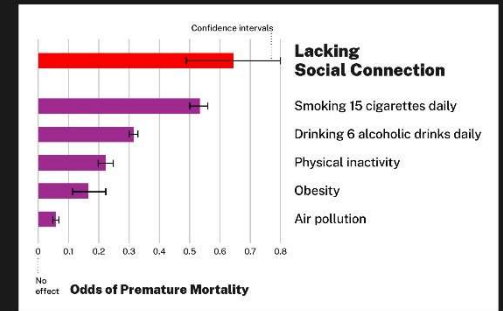


Office of the
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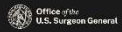
Fast Facts

- Approximately half of US adults report experiencing measurable levels of loneliness.¹⁻³
- Loneliness and social isolation are more widespread in the US than many other major health issues, including smoking (12.5%), diabetes (14.7%), and obesity (41.9%).⁴⁻⁶
- Social connection has been on the decline for decades, since long before the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - In 2021, almost half of Americans (49%) reported having three or fewer closer friends, compared to 27% reporting the same in 1990.⁷
- Anyone at any age and from any background can experience loneliness and isolation, but some groups, including people with poor physical or mental health, disabilities, financial insecurity, those who live alone, single parents, and younger and older populations, face unique barriers to building and maintaining social relationships and may be at higher risk for social disconnection.^{2,8,9}
- Recent studies show that social isolation and loneliness are a growing problem particularly among youth.
 - The rate of loneliness among young adults has increased every year between 1976 and 2019.¹⁰
 - Among young people ages 15 to 24, time spent in-person with friends has declined by nearly 70% over the past two decades, from roughly 150 minutes per day in 2003 to 40 minutes per day in 2020.⁸
 - While social isolation is most common among older adults, young adults were almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely than those over the age of 65 in 2021.²

Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



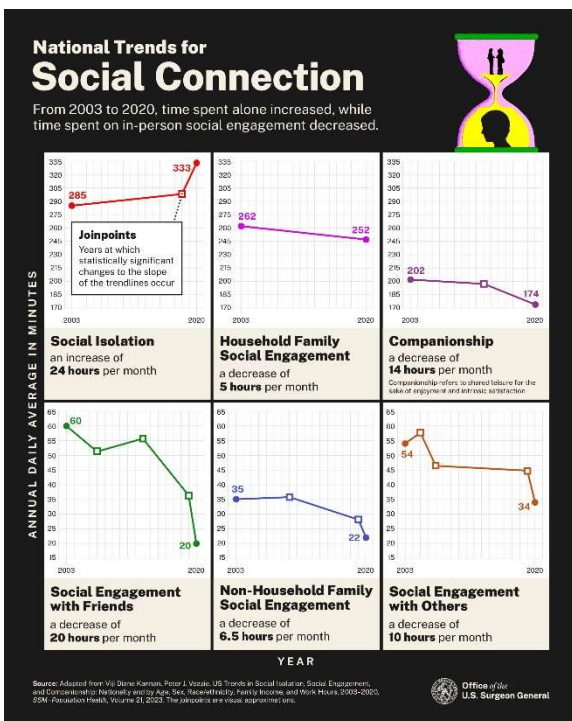
Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sborra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychologist*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



Social Connection is a Fundamental Human Need

Social connection is a fundamental human need as essential to survival as food and water. Lacking social connection has serious health consequences, including increased risk for coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, depression and anxiety, and premature mortality.

- Poor social connection is associated with a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease and a 32% increase in the risk of stroke.¹¹
- Chronic loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of developing dementia by approximately 50% in older adults.¹²
- People who are less socially connected may have weaker immune responses and increased susceptibility to the development of severe illness when exposed to infectious diseases.¹³⁻¹⁵
- Adults who report feeling lonely often are more than twice as likely to develop depression as compared to adults who report rarely or never feeling lonely.¹⁶
- Social connection may be one of the strongest protective factors against self-harm and suicide among people with and without serious underlying mental health challenges.^{17,18}



Why do loneliness and isolation affect our health so strongly?¹⁹⁻²⁴

- Levels of social connection influence some biological processes, like inflammatory responses, stress hormone regulation, and immune system functioning, which have direct health impacts.
- Levels of social connection influence psychological processes, like the perception of stress, meaning, and purpose, which have direct health impacts.
- Levels of social connection influence behaviors, like physical activity, smoking, sleep, and medication adherence, which have direct health impacts.

Socially connected individuals and communities also experience better non-health outcomes.

- Children and adolescents who enjoy positive relationships with their peers, parents, and teachers may experience improved academic outcomes (e.g., improved school attendance, grades, and academic achievement test scores).²⁵
- Increased connection in the workplace is associated with higher employee job satisfaction, creativity, competence, and better job performance.²⁶⁻³⁰
- Diverse social networks that facilitate interaction and relationship-building among people of differing socioeconomic status (SES) may provide opportunities for individuals from lower SES backgrounds to gain stronger footing in the labor market and obtain higher-paying jobs. Such bridging, cross-class ties are among the most important predictors of upward economic mobility with positive impacts across generations.^{31,32}
 - For example, if children of low socioeconomic backgrounds had the share of high socioeconomic friends comparable to that of the average child with a high socioeconomic background, these children would increase their incomes in adulthood by an average of 20%.³¹
- Social connection is an important social determinant of community well-being, including (but not limited to) population health, community resilience when natural hazards strike, community safety, economic prosperity, and representative government.³³⁻⁴⁰
 - More connected communities typically enjoy better health outcomes than less connected communities. Increases in community social connection are associated with reduced burden of disease and risk for all-cause mortality as well as decreased hospital readmission rates.^{35,41-45}
 - Highly connected neighborhoods are more likely to prepare for and recover more quickly from natural hazard events.^{36,46,47}
 - Social interactions with neighbors and other community members – like small gestures such as smiling at a passerby or brief conversations at the bank, post office, grocery store, or local coffee shop – can foster a sense of interpersonal trust and create and maintain norms of reciprocity.^{48,49} This can also increase empathy by enhancing understanding with one another, supporting the development of shared identities and affiliations, and facilitating cooperation and beneficial interactions across individuals and groups.^{50,51}
 - There is also emerging evidence that civic engagement helps to develop empathy.⁵² Moreover, in a positive cycle, research suggests that greater civic engagement can lead to policies and programs that better reflect the will of a community's residents, which in turn can promote continued and increased civic engagement.^{34,53-55}

Societal Consequences of Loneliness and Isolation: Negative Social Connection and Polarization

Our fundamental human need for belonging is so strong that we may seek it out even in ways that may be unhealthy to ourselves or to our broader community, such as by participating in organized crime or joining other harmful groups.

- We tend to view our own group as more favorable and deserving than members of other groups.⁵⁶ This can result in distrust and rejection of outsiders.⁵⁷
 - One consequence of the natural tendency for people to build and maintain relationships with those who are like themselves is the risk for exacerbating polarization in our discourse and in society – potentially leading to poorer outcomes for broader society.⁵⁸⁻⁶⁰
- The nature, size, and diversity of our *core discussion networks* – the circles of people with whom we have conversations on timely but difficult topics are important to how individuals form opinions, attitudes, and awareness of differing perspectives.⁶¹ They ultimately foster political tolerance.⁶²
 - Generally, the size and diversity of core discussion networks have been shrinking substantially over the recent decades.⁶³
 - One survey of 1,055 U.S. adults during the 2016 U.S. presidential election found that core discussion networks were smaller than in any other observed period and that the proportion of individuals with the same political preference within core discussion networks was higher than reported previously.⁶⁴
 - A recent survey found that a majority of individuals (64%) believe that people are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about issues on which they disagree.⁶⁵
 - Almost 6 in 10 U.S. adults report that it is “stressful and frustrating” to talk about politics with people who hold different political opinions.⁶⁶



A National Strategy to Advance Social Connection

Fulfilling connections are a critical and often underappreciated contributor to individual and population health and longevity, safety, prosperity, and well-being.

- The Surgeon General’s framework for a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection includes six foundational pillars and a series of key recommendations, organized according to stakeholder group, to support a whole-of-society approach to advancing social connection.
- Individuals and organizations can use this framework to propel the critical work of reversing worrisome trends in loneliness and isolation and strengthening social connection and community.



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