

UNTETHERED

A PRIMER ON SOCIAL ISOLATION



DAVID T. HSU



UNTETHERED

is a primer on social isolation
for leaders and problem-solvers
thirsty for change.

Overview

Social isolation isn't new. It's a huge, stubborn reality that we've been waking up to, generation after generation. So what's different now?

UNTETHERED follows a hunch: So many of us, across diverse swathes of society, know how it feels to be constantly tethered to technology yet increasingly untethered from other people. Social isolation is now experienced as the new normal. It's the reality on the tip of everyone's tongue, but we aren't just ready to talk about it – we're eager for solutions.

Intended for community leaders, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists, UNTETHERED is a primer for people with an appetite for complex challenges. The primer's goal is to provide a lens for recognizing different manifestations of social isolation — as a basic lack of social ties, as a distinct lack of belonging, and also as part of how people experience social exclusion and polarization. These forms of isolation are all around us, and they have far-reaching health, economic, and political consequences. Older adults as well as children, adolescents, families living in poverty, affluent professionals, our veterans, our newest immigrants, entire urban and rural neighborhoods across red states and blue. All are affected.

And yet this tidal wave of isolation moves like a ghost – hard to see, easy to neglect. If we are to meaningfully combat it, a sustained surge of innovation will be required. UNTETHERED thus concludes by highlighting several fronts of the fight ahead: the built environment, technology, civic engagement, and beyond.

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“A great paradox of our hyper-connected digital age is that we seem to be drifting apart.”

– Dhruv Khullar, M.D., M.P.P. *The New York Times* (2016)



Why this? Why now?

I'm trained as a social scientist, but I don't claim to be an expert on social isolation. The term entered my lexicon in the spring of 2017, and I've been chewing on it ever since. In part, it helped me understand my own experience, but there was a bigger reason. Simply broaching the subject in conversation with friends and strangers was opening the floodgates. Just those two words – “social isolation” – were causing tears to flow. People are ready to confront social isolation.

Who is this primer for? I wrote UNTETHERED with community leaders, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists in mind — but there is something in here for all problem-solvers and concerned citizens. Social isolation is one of those bedrock realities that influences so many issues, from health and caregiving to economic inequality, immigration, criminal justice, technological innovation, the health of our cities, and the deep divisions that plague civic life in America. Ever present, ever frustrating, it is an easy subject to avoid entirely. Yet at a moment when bringing people together (in networks, communities, and movements) is such a vital step towards making things better, we need to take a closer look at what's keeping people apart.

Why a primer? Most of us have a gut understanding of what social isolation means, but to get further one has to brave a dense and sprawling literature. For example, a true curriculum on social isolation would have to span social neuroscience, psychology, sociology, political science, urban studies, geriatrics and gerontology, and dozens of important studies from John Cacioppo's *Loneliness* to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*, Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort*, and Jane Jacob's *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, to name a few. But I wanted a primer, not a curriculum, so I've tried to radically condense the material and connect the dots.

My hope for UNTETHERED is that it will help you see your own work – perhaps even your mission – in a new light. You are educators, technologists, execs at Fortune 500 companies, coffee shop owners, activists, parents, politicians, funders, and citizens. You are building communities everyday. But as the novelist Sara Baume put it, “Community is only a good thing when you're a part of it.” I've been surprised to learn just how many people feel left out.

- David Hsu, Los Angeles

At a moment when bringing people together (in networks, communities, and movements) is such a vital step towards making things better, we need to take a closer look at what's keeping people apart.



What is Social Isolation?

TETHERED: To be **tethered** is to lead a life enriched by a mix of strong and weak ties. Strong ties are the friends and family members you confide in, lean on, and instinctively desire to mark life's occasions with. Weak ties are contacts known via your circle of friends, job, neighborhood, merchants, faith community, or recreational activities.¹ The average person cultivates 3-7 very strong ties as part of one's "intimate network" (family and closest friends), 6-34 moderately strong ties as part of one's "effective network" (ties to deal with everyday life), and 100-400 weaker ties as part of one's "extended network" (people who we bring into our effective network as needed).²

Both kinds of ties help us to thrive, but weak ties hold outsized value when it comes to feeling engaged in society. They are "indispensable" for accessing relationships, resources, and "knowledge of the world" beyond one's immediate circle.³ Under the right circumstances, they deliver "small moments of intimacy" that can buoy one's spirits and leave a lifelong impression.⁴

UNTETHERED: To be **untethered**, then, is to lack the ties we need and desire. There are many factors that constrict opportunities to form fulfilling ties in the first place.⁵ Perhaps it's because of where one lives, lack of time or money, or not belonging to any particular group. It could also be caused by loss of a loved one, moving to an unfamiliar place, or outright discrimination based upon age, race, or physical ability.

Of course, "untethered" literally means that you're no longer tied down. While this might register as a blessing to some ears (eg. when relationships are genuinely constricting), it is a curse for anyone who's familiar with the challenges of finding belonging, growing older, and navigating a deeply divided society.⁶ These days, many of us want to be more tethered — not less. To understand why and what to do about it, we need to take a closer look at social isolation.



“Social isolation is the distancing of an individual” from a wider network of relationships.⁷ It’s the heightened sense of having limited access to worlds beyond one’s own.

This definition purposefully holds a wider range of experiences than more narrow definitions allow for.⁸ Social isolation can be moderate or extreme. It can be temporary or chronic. It often involves physical separation but not necessarily so. It has objective elements (eg. the size of one’s network and frequency of interaction within it) and subjective elements (eg. whether those ties are meaningful). Importantly, many experts distinguish between social isolation and loneliness, since the latter describes the emotional or psychological state of someone for whom a lack of social ties becomes threatening.⁹ Isolation raises the prospect of loneliness, but it is entirely possible for someone to be isolated without feeling lonely.

Contributing Factors

Societywide, local, and individual factors combine to produce isolation.¹⁰



Living alone.



Growing older.



Having limited mobility.



Lower income.



Major changes in one’s social circle (eg. loss of a spouse, partner, or friend).



Major changes in one’s role (eg. becoming a caregiver).



Language or cultural barriers.



Identified with a group that faces discrimination.



Certain mental or physical health disabilities.



Current or past incarceration.



Lacking access to neutral public spaces (eg. parks, sidewalks, plazas, cafes).



Not participating in religious, civic, social, or shared interest groups.



Living in a home or neighborhood that is geographically distant.



Certain occupations which tend to exacerbate isolation.



How and how much time one spends on smartphones, social media, and other media.



Having a long commute.



Campbell Boulanger

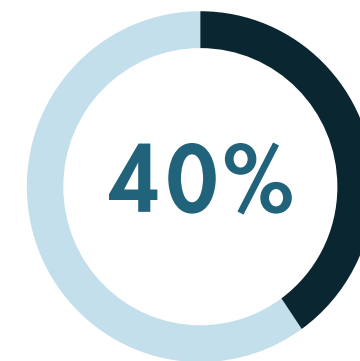


How Big of a Problem is it?

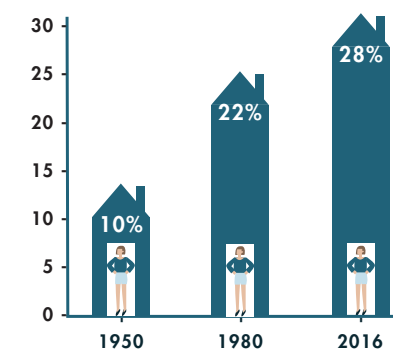
Reliable statistics on the prevalence of social isolation are scarce, and the ones we have are contested due to disparate definitions, metrics, and methods. Here are suggestive numbers:



Nearly 1 in 4 Americans in 2004 said they have zero people in their network with whom to discuss important matters, up from 1 in 10 in 1985.¹¹



40% of adults in America report feeling lonely on a regular basis.¹²



28% of all American households in 2016 were single-person, up from 22% in 1980 and 10% in 1950.¹³



Caricatures of Social Isolation

Our tendency to collapse social isolation into caricatures such as these reveals a powerful bias: We assume that isolation is largely a consequence of individual choices, failures, or traits. It's important to see that these are skewed portraits.



THE HERMIT

Social isolation conjures images of hermits and recluses – individuals who choose to exist in a state of complete or near-complete lack of contact with the rest of society. In reality, spatial separation is just one dimension of social isolation. Sociological, cultural, and economic dimensions may loom just as large. Just ask city-dwellers from New York City to Hong Kong; one can live in tight proximity to others yet still lack (or neglect) opportunities to form fulfilling social ties.¹⁴



THE PARIAH

Pariahs are individuals who are deliberately isolated because of their offending behavior or moral standing. As the practices of incarceration and solitary confinement highlight, “estrangement from the group” is “the harshest punishment that is imposed on a human being short of death.”¹⁵ The use of isolation as punishment creates a powerful stigma, but it’s crucial to remember that this is just one very narrow manifestation of social isolation.¹⁶



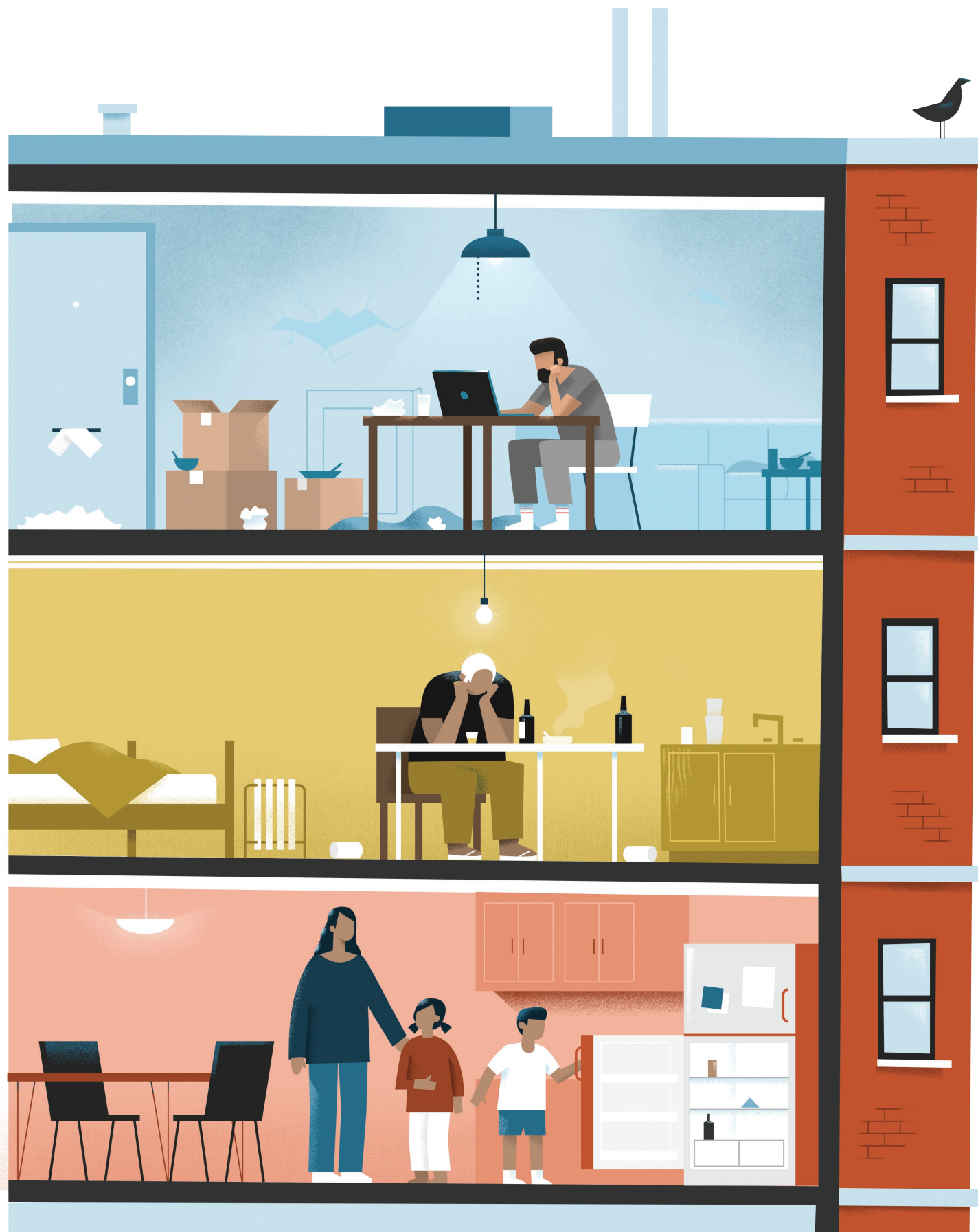
THE LONER

It’s easy to conflate social isolation and loneliness, but they don’t always occur together. Loneliness is “the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy.”¹⁷ So one can absolutely be lonely but not isolated (eg. having plentiful social ties that lack meaning), or isolated but not lonely (eg. having strong intimate ties with family or close friends but lacking ties to a larger network).¹⁸



THE INTROVERT

One might assume that isolation reflects individual personality, character, or disposition, but social isolation transcends individual traits. It’s usually not simply about being introverted or extroverted, misanthropic or people-loving. Indeed, many causes of isolation stem from one’s social and physical environment (see page 13) — how easy or hard it is to get around, how communities care for older adults, or the availability of groups that foster a sense of belonging.¹⁹



Consequences

The Long Arms of Social Isolation

HEALTH - ONE IS THE DEADLIEST NUMBER

A growing body of research reveals the harmful effects of social isolation on a panoply of health outcomes.²⁰ Social neuroscientist John Cacioppo has shown that the bumps of daily life are disproportionately stressful for people who lack social connections.²¹ Specifically, Cacioppo and his colleagues identify different physiological pathways by which stress causes inordinate “wear and tear” among people who are lonely, weakening one’s capacity for self-regulation and fueling damaging patterns of sleep deprivation, binge eating, substance abuse, and addiction.²² A lack of social contact is also a risk factor for cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s, heart disease, depression, and suicide; the AARP recently reported isolation among older adults accounts for \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually.²³ The takeaway is clear: “One is the deadliest number.”²⁴

ECONOMIC - TRAPPED IN POVERTY

In a labor market where referrals are the leading way employers hire and the leading way people discover jobs, a lack of social contacts creates a severe handicap.²⁵ Indeed, researchers emphasize the outsized role that social contacts play for jobseekers from underrepresented groups relative to non-minority peers.²⁵ This means that economic mobility depends not only on jobseekers’ own ability to obtain referrals to higher-wage jobs but also on there being more equitable minority representation at all stages of the employer’s hiring process.

When it comes to residential segregation, social isolation and the extreme concentration of poverty tend to reinforce one another to create vicious “poverty traps”

marked by chronic unemployment. The concentration of unemployment, in turn, is a recipe for deadly violence.²⁷ In Chicago’s poorest and most intensively segregated neighborhoods, of Englewood, Riverdale, and Fuller Park, where unemployment rates reach 40 percent, homicide rates are 48, 37, and 63 per 100,000 versus Chicago’s overall rate of 16.²⁸

Additionally, poverty traps make it exceedingly difficult to build or maintain even a slim financial surplus. Whereas social ties typically enlarge one’s prospects for amassing further wealth in more affluent communities, to have plentiful social ties in a high poverty neighborhood can sometimes have the opposite effect as daily economic shocks are absorbed by community members with any surplus wealth.²⁹ Under such conditions, there are good reasons to pull away from one’s neighbors or leave the neighborhood altogether. The mixture of social isolation and extreme poverty doesn’t just fix itself.

POLITICAL - REAPING STALEMATES

Writ large, the division of society into increasingly isolated groups – whether by ideology, income, race, or way of life – creates a polarized political climate that undermines the prospects for cooperative political bargains. Instead of finding common ground to reach sorely needed solutions, elected officials from state assemblies to Capitol Hill are instead incentivized to stand their ground. The consequence of a fragmented, polarized America is that its citizens reap a neverending series of “stalemates, fiscal cliffs, and failed grand bargains.”³⁰

Varieties of Social Isolation

Isolation manifests in different ways, so it's useful to ask, "Who's isolated from whom?" Four main experiences of social isolation emerge from this heuristic. Each one presents its own set of challenges and opportunities for impact.



1. LACK OF SOCIAL TIES

This is the most basic form of social isolation. Everyone has either experienced it or knows someone who does. Within this category, the undersupply of social ties might track life's stages (eg. adolescence, bearing a child, retirement and aging) or other common circumstances (eg. where we live, all-consuming job(s), patterns of technology usage) that restrict our opportunities to form them. The next three varieties derive from this one.

2. LACK OF BELONGING

When social isolation manifests as a lack of belonging, continuing to accrue social ties isn't likely to help. What's missing is a social group such as a faith community, civic association, neighborhood, shared interest group, club, or tribe that facilitates ties through a pattern of repeated interaction. This form of isolation is a key one to track as more Americans identify as secular, spend their time online, and decline to join once-popular voluntary organizations.³¹

3. SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion occurs when individuals are denied opportunities that are normally available to others because of their skin color, appearance, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, gender, religion, economic status, or criminal history. In the context of exclusionary practices, isolation can be understood as both a powerful tool and an intended consequence. This is most glaring when segregation is used to physically separate people based on their social distance.³²

4. POLARIZATION

Polarization occurs when society divides into two sharply contrasting groups — for example, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, older and newer immigrants, urban and rural. In a polarized environment, the sense of isolation comes from the fact that opportunities to interact with people from "the other side" are either actually limited, perceived as limited, or seen as treacherous. Media and social media "echo chambers" reinforce this.³³

I. Lack of Social Ties

Social isolation in its most basic form manifests as disconnectedness with parts or the whole of society.



I work pretty much all the time. When I first got here, I thought, “I just want to focus on my career” but now it’s been almost five years and still I hardly know anyone outside of work.



My kids have all moved away. I’ve got an empty nest. When I was working and raising our family, I didn’t think of anything else, but now I suddenly see what I’m missing.



I came to America three years ago with my son. My English is bad and I haven’t met others from our country. I’m concerned that my son will have a hard time making friends here.

These are fictional personas. Photos (top to bottom) by Alex Holyoake; Aris Sfakianakis; Joey Pilgrim.

“We have this hunger, almost like a scrambling, to find more meaningful ways to connect with other people and with ourselves.”

- JESSE ISRAEL, FOUNDER OF THE BIG QUIET

The experience of heightened social disconnectedness can feel both natural and nagging. Natural because there is a normal ebb and flow of social ties that follows life’s contours — whether during one’s teenage years, moving to a new place, parenthood, the loss of a loved one, or aging. (Indeed, researchers find that on average, one’s active social circle peaks around age 25, diminishes until a plateau between 45-55, then steadily erodes thereafter; around age 39, women’s social circles tend to eclipse men’s in size.³⁴) Even so, there can be a nagging sense that one’s social world is unnaturally constricted, that it is smaller than it should be. Since social isolation is often the product of larger sociological factors beyond the individual, it’s not simply ameliorated by bootstrapping one’s way out, like “networking at a trade show.”³⁵

Social media can seem an alluring way to cope with feelings of social disconnectedness, but there is an important difference between using social media to cultivate meaningful relationships and clawing for connections via “social snacking” (voraciously consuming high quantities of low quality connections) or “random sociability” (forming connections indiscriminately).³⁶ Recent research shows that heavy social media users ages 19-32 (logging in more than 58 times per week) were about three times more likely to report feeling socially isolated than light users (logging in less than 9 times per week); the study doesn’t parse out whether this is because

isolation drives people to social media, social media drives people to isolation, or both — but the finding is troubling either way.³⁷ “On a deeper level,” notes Jesse Israel, founder of the mass meditation community The Big Quiet, “as our generation is connecting less with religion and more with technology, we have this hunger, almost like a scrambling, to find more meaningful ways to connect with other people and with ourselves.”³⁸

Poverty, limited mobility, certain physical and mental disorders, and language barriers can all further constrict a person’s opportunities to form social ties. For example, having a lower income is a strong predictor of social isolation (real and perceived) and social exclusion.³⁹ Older adults who reside in lower income neighborhoods are especially vulnerable, as revealed in the chilling “social autopsy” of the 1995 heat wave that left 700 (mostly senior) Chicagoans “dying alone.”⁴⁰ Among young adults with an autism spectrum disorder, nearly 1 in 3 have virtually no social contact whatsoever beyond their primary caregiver.⁴¹ The consequence is a society in which poorer, older, and disabled Americans are kept systematically out of sight, out of mind.⁴²

2. Lack of Belonging

Social interactions that are too fragmented, infrequent, or fleeting create a thirst for belonging.



When I was growing up, I'd go to church two, three times a week, and it was my community. But I haven't been for more than a decade and haven't found anything to take its place.



The only place I can really say I belong is my company. It's where I work, hang out, meet new people, eat most of my meals, and exercise. I love it and hate it at the same time.



I keep busy and am always doing things - yoga, volunteering, talks at the library. But it gets tiring after a while and it's hard to form real relationships that go beyond small talk.

These are fictional personas.
Photos (top to bottom) by
Matthew Smith; Marius
Ciocirlan; Cristian Lozan.

“The absence of belonging is so widespread that we might say we are living in an age of isolation.”

- PETER BLOCK, *COMMUNITY: THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING*

Everyone has a different way of expressing what belonging means. For the war journalist Sebastian Junger, to belong is to have a tribe of people with whom you'd instinctively share your last scraps of food.⁴³ For some people, belonging simply boils down to knowing that someone is expecting you to show up — and notices when you don't. Among people who don't belong to a faith community, civic association (eg. Rotary, Elks, Lions), fraternal or sororal organization, or social club, there may be a lingering sense that nobody (outside of one's employer) is ever expecting you to show up. After all, what the aforementioned institutions excel at is the art of repeated social interactions; they offer “patterned ways of living together,” which refine weaker ties into stronger ties marked by trust, safety, and reciprocal exchange of resources.⁴⁴

Much has already been said about the discovery that younger generations aren't exactly flocking to these stalwart institutions. In *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam points to an armada of contributing factors: television, pressures of time and money, growing mobility, and the waning power of World Wars to bring Americans together, to name a few.⁴⁵ In *Diminished Democracy*, fellow political scientist Theda Skocpol explains that membership in large civic associations began declining during the 1960s and 70s just as professionally managed advocacy groups like the AARP and NRA — better equipped for a country grappling with greater racial integration, gender equality, immigration, and secularism — flourished.⁴⁶ Both analyses arrive in a similar place: Old ways of belonging need to be remade for new generations.

By 1972 one religion scholar characterized “the current spiritual quest among the young” as “a renewed search for community.”⁴⁷ According to one influential interpretation, *Habits of the Heart*, Americans were busy improvising the experience of “belongingness” in “the lifestyle enclave” (eg. arts, sports, nature appreciation), a domain at the time judged as “too evanescent, too inherently restricted by membership, and too slight in their hold on their members' loyalty” to adequately substitute for more meaningful forms of public solidarity.⁴⁸ A 2015 report by two Harvard theologians, *How We Gather*, similarly chronicles the search for more authentic community among “unaffiliated millennials,” who are experimenting with everything from group fitness to dinner parties and summer camp for adults.⁴⁹ Whether at work, on the web, or via consumption, the search for belonging remains very much alive.

3. Social Exclusion

Isolation can also function as a powerful tool of discrimination.



I've been living in an old folks home. The place itself is fine, but what grates on me is the feeling that I'm expected to just stay here and stay out of the way.



Been home for almost six years, but in many ways it feels like I'm still in prison. I try to keep to myself because I don't want people to find out about my past. I can't live a normal life.



I can't hide my disability. I learned at an early age that it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and there are always so many explanations for why I'm not invited or included.

These are fictional personas.
Photos (top to bottom) by
Hermes Rivera; Toa Heftiba;
Patrick Fore.

“The farther apart two groups are on a social dimension, the greater their spatial separation in the urban landscape.”

- DOUGLAS MASSEY, STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Social exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are systematically denied opportunities that are normally available to the rest of society, usually in connection with a person's skin color, appearance, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, gender, religion, economic status, or criminal history. This act of turning away from someone is doubly pernicious since it can turn the experience of being discriminated against into a strong pressure to self-exclude.⁵⁰ Resulting patterns of isolation can be staggering in breadth and depth. Nowhere is this more evident than under segregation, which reinforces social distance with spatial separation by law (*de facto*) or everyday practice (*de jure*).⁵¹

Consider the United States' system of mass incarceration, which today holds approximately 2.3 million people in federal, state, and local prisons, and locks up black Americans for drug offenses at a rate six times that of white Americans (despite nearly identical rates of drug use).⁵² Men and women home from prison enter what legal scholar Michelle Alexander describes as “a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion” that persists in blocking individuals trying to secure a job, a place to live, welfare, or everyday resources and relationships that make social re-integration possible; it is “The New Jim Crow.”⁵³

Or consider age segregation. “Since the middle of the last century,” according to the founder and CEO of Encore.org Marc Freedman, “forces in American

society have labored mightily to separate us by life stage, shunting older people to nursing homes, senior centers, retirement communities and other old-only enclaves” — creating an “age apartheid” that is “utter, complete and shocking.”⁵⁴ 92 percent of older American workers say age discrimination in the workplace is very common or somewhat common, while nearly 2 out of 3 adults say they have experienced age discrimination at work, usually beginning in their fifties.⁵⁵ Yet age segregation remains “one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world — especially in the United States.”⁵⁶

Men and women who face multiple levels of exclusion — such as elders living in low-income or highly segregated neighborhoods — are among the most vulnerable in society. “Of all seniors living alone and below the poverty line,” sociologist Eric Klinenbun notes, “one out of three sees neither friends nor neighbors for as much as two weeks at a time.”⁵⁷ To be untethered to such a degree is a man-made disaster — one that natural disasters have repeatedly revealed.⁵⁸

4. Polarization

A polarized society is divided into two increasingly isolated worlds.



As a conservative Christian, I feel like it's basically impossible these days to engage in real conversation without being labeled an ignorant bigot.



Unfortunately, I've had to teach my children that we have to keep to ourselves. You never know who thinks we aren't welcome here.



I'm obviously stuck in a liberal bubble. You laugh, but I literally don't know anyone who comes remotely close to the people I'm hearing about and reading about right now.

These are fictional personas.
Photos (top to bottom) by
Haley Phelps; Jerry Kiese-
sewetter; Ihor Malyskyi.

"Over three decades, people separated by education, income, race, and way of life."

- BILL BISHOP, THE BIG SORT

These days, we talk about political polarization – the growing separation of people who identify as liberal versus conservative — but polarization also unfolds along class, racial, religious, and cultural lines. It is a societywide phenomenon, one that manifests in the context of divided friendships, families, neighborhoods, and skewed social networks. Polarization becomes a distinct form of isolation when one's social circles are not just constricted but skewed, so much so that opportunities to encounter the "other side" are either truly scarce or seen as treacherous.⁵⁹

One reason polarization is so vexing is that it tends to manifest along multiple dimensions at once. For example, a recent survey shows that the rural-urban divide in America is a dense amalgamation of sharply contrasting political ideology, religious and racial identities, economic means, and way of life.⁶⁰ Political scientists similarly highlight the way metrics of political partisanship, income inequality, and demographic change (eg. percentage of Americans who are foreign-born) have surged together over many decades.⁶¹ Presented with the choice of embracing "the other" or retreating to self-made cocoons, Americans have chosen the latter in a decades-long process of residential self-segregation that Bill Bishop has labeled "The Big Sort" because of the way people clustered into isolated islands based upon education, income, and race.⁶² Whereas in 1976 less than a quarter of Americans lived in counties where the presidential election was a landslide, by 2004 "nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties."⁶³

The sense of being isolated as a group (due to perceived preferential treatment for another group) is part of what makes polarization so combustible. Indeed, J. D. Vance opens *Hillbilly Elegy* with a description of working class whites as being "more socially isolated than ever" and concludes on the same theme — that "rich and poor; educated and uneducated; upper-class and working-class...increasingly occupy separate worlds."⁶⁴ According to sociologist Arlie Hochschild, there is a deeper story in which "strangers step ahead of you in line" and then turn back to call you "an ignorant redneck."⁶⁵ The real threat isn't the story itself — it has been with us along — but the unchecked animosity it can fuel in a society where "us" and "them" have grown so untethered.



The Task Ahead

The idea of combatting social isolation evokes the legend of Sisyphus, who the gods burden with a crushing boulder to push uphill, only to have it come tumbling down *ad infinitum*. Like other seemingly intractable challenges, social isolation is unlikely to be solved once-and-for-all. Yet the magnitude of its ravages across society's most vulnerable populations demands that each generation push the boulder.

The opportunity in this moment is unrivaled. The internet age has nurtured a deep hunger for more meaningful social connections – a reality which social media giants now readily acknowledge.⁶⁶ Concurrently, the number of entrepreneurs-philanthropists prepared and motivated to tackle social dilemmas has exploded.⁶⁷ So what can be done?

The following pages highlight five fronts of the fight against social isolation. Though subjective and far from exhaustive, they indicate the diversity of approaches required to tackle this multifaceted issue. Moreover, since social isolation is a problem with systemic causes – poverty, racial segregation, age discrimination – the most effective approaches to social isolation will need to tackle the malady and its root causes in concert.

The Built Environment

Our built environment is a powerful mediator of opportunities for cultivating social ties. As the urban activist Jane Jacobs observed, “In city areas that lack a natural and casual public life, it is common for residents to isolate themselves from each other to a fantastic degree.”⁶⁸ In contrast, cities with thriving sidewalks, public gathering spaces, and public transit can function like a gracious host, encouraging the sort of open, repeated interactions among residents that foster a sense of belonging.

Consider the relationship between so-called first places (home), second places (work), and third places (the neutral spaces where we socialize, including coffee shops, parks, hiking trails, bars and restaurants, bookstores, and gyms).⁶⁹ Whereas some people spend the majority of their free time moving between in isolation, others experience these places as a more seamlessly integrated community. The rise of co-working and co-living spaces like WeWork/WeLive, for example, blurs the lines with a dramatically changed workforce in mind.⁷⁰ By 2020, fully 40 percent of American workers will be part of a gig economy that encompasses different stripes of freelance and contingent labor.⁷¹ For those who can afford it, these newer manifestations of communal working and living promise to be buttresses against isolation; as one co-living startup puts it, “Living at Common means you’re always invited.”⁷²

Beyond the creative class, the harder question is whether innovations to the built environment will reach and meaningfully benefit populations at risk of isolation, including older adults and residents of lower income neighborhoods. Today, assisted living facilities carry a hefty median price tag of \$45,000 per year; meanwhile, the over-65 U.S. population is set to grow from 48 to 79 million Americans between 2015 and 2035.⁷³ This aging boom will require creative, large-scale disruption, but as Encore.org’s Marc Freedman points out, the answer cannot simply be more of the same. Instead of new guises for continuing to segregate Americans by age, Freedman argues that we should be investing public and private dollars in “bright spots” that combat social isolation by co-locating facilities (eg. senior centers and child-care centers) for older and younger generations.⁷⁴ Many of the organizations below are advancing solutions in a similar vein to create a built environment capable of breaking patterns of isolation.

We’re rethinking the order of our first, second, and third places.



Matthew LeJune

PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

is helping communities and cities to transform public spaces through collaborative “placemaking.”

SIDEWALK LABS

is developing urban solutions to enhance affordability, mobility, inclusiveness, and sustainability.

AARP AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

is promoting livable places for all ages by recognizing a network of U.S. cities, towns, and counties.

REIMAGINING THE CIVIC COMMONS

is demonstrating in 5 U.S. cities how revitalized public spaces can counter social and economic fragmentation.

GENERATIONS UNITED

is equipping people to establish “shared sites” used concurrently by children and older adults.

INVESTING IN PLACE

is advocating for transportation investments that serve Los Angeles’ most vulnerable neighborhoods.



Rui Silvestre

MEETUP, OPENSports, & SHAPR are examples of online services designed to facilitate offline, face-to-face social interactions.

GRANDPAD is a tablet that makes it easier for older adults to make calls, send emails, share photos, and hail rides.

TIME WELL SPENT is mobilizing consumers, employees, and policy-makers for more humane tech that requires less screen time.

LYFT & UBER are each piloting programs to make ride-hailing more accessible to people without smartphones.

HAPPY is an app that's connecting people to "compassionate listeners" for 24/7 emotional support.

AARP INNOVATION FUND is leveraging \$40 million to invest in technologies that will improve the lives of older adults aging in place.

Technology

The most important two words for thinking about technology's effects on social isolation: *It depends*. It depends on what technologies, products, and interfaces we're talking about. It depends on who is using them, how we are using them, and how much. This makes sweeping pronouncements, which either blame or exonerate technology, a tough sell. "All the evidence points in one direction," notes one author of the 2009 Pew Internet Personal Networks and Community study, "People's social worlds are enhanced by new communication technologies. It is a mistake to believe that internet use and mobile phones plunge people into a spiral of isolation."⁷⁴

Again, it depends. On average, American adults (18 and older) clock 4-5 hours of smartphone screen time per day and iPhone users unlock their devices 80 times per day.⁷⁵ According to Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist and founder of the nonprofit Time Well Spent, it's not just that humans are spending too much time tethered to their devices, apps, and notifications, it's that many popular services deliberately use "design techniques to keep people hooked."⁷⁶ These techniques are powerfully redefining our social lives. The more we are "always on," sociologist Sherry Turkle suggests, the more we are likely to be "increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone."⁷⁷ The point is that it doesn't have to be this way. Humans can push for human-friendly technologies.⁷⁸

We'll know that the push for human-friendly technology is going well when it yields a bigger, better range of products that can be deployed in service of our most isolated populations. Too many tech innovations that hold the potential of enhancing our social livelihoods, mobility, and access to vital services fail to reach older adults and lower income communities. Sometimes the challenge is product design but more often it hinges on a combination of cost, business strategy, and socio-cultural barriers. For example, just 4 percent of American adults over 65 and 10 percent of adults with household income less than \$30,000 have ever used a modern ride-hailing service like Lyft or Uber.⁷⁹ Both companies are making an effort to do better, but without a much larger public-private partnership, the people who stand to benefit most from such disruptive technologies will remain stuck in the mobility crisis.⁸⁰

We're growing more conscious of how tech can fuel or fight isolation.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement traditionally refers to voter outreach programs, volunteerism, and citizen-led policy-making initiatives intended to turn a “nation of spectators” into more “active participants in building and strengthening their communities.”⁸¹ Both the purpose and process of civic engagement are highly germane to problems of social isolation. Since isolated citizens are the very ones at risk of disenfranchisement and civic disengagement, the aim of bringing them into the democratic fold is fundamentally about mending broken community bonds. At the same time, there is nothing quite like the transformative experience of working together toward a greater good for breaking patterns of isolation.⁸²

To unlock this potential, we have to demand that civic engagement programs be more than just window dressing for conferring legitimacy on governing bodies. According to the Foundation Center, approximately 200 foundations made voter outreach grants totaling \$150 million to some 500 nonprofits between 2011 and early 2016, on top of an estimated \$200-300 million disbursed each year for civic participation writ large and \$10 billion spent directly by political parties and candidates to get out the vote.⁸³ Dollars aren’t the issue. Too many civic engagement programs are susceptible to the sort of “superficial glad-handing” one expects to find “networking at a trade show.”⁸⁴ People know when they’re getting civic engagement, neutered.

Today’s most innovative civic entrepreneurs are embracing greater ownership, authenticity, and even unpredictability. For example, Eric Liu’s Citizen University is evangelizing a stronger understanding of “civic power” while aggressively convening and training citizens to wield it in their communities. In Los Angeles, the Goldhirsh Foundation’s LA2050 grant-making project is inspiring “an outbreak of civic activism” notable for the degree to which it asks Angelenos to step up and for the impact it has had on that city’s sense of possibility.⁸⁵ On the opposite side of the spectrum are civic engagement initiatives like The People’s Supper and the Chicago Community Trust’s “On the Table” series that are facilitating a level of intimacy and raw honesty atypical for this genre. Both of these programs are bringing Americans together to break bread and break the stigma of stepping across polarized divides.⁸⁶ In the process, they are helping to redefine what it means for citizens to show up.

We’re realizing the costs of treating democracy like a spectator sport.



Victor Lozano, image of Glenn Ligon’s *Double America 2*.

CITIZEN UNIVERSITY

is training Americans to exercise civic power together and create communal rituals around voting.

THE PEOPLE’S SUPPER

is fighting polarization by bringing people together to break bread across dividing lines.

LA2050

is a grantmaking program of the Goldhirsh Foundation that challenges Angelenos to shape their city’s future.

GENERATION TO GENERATION

is a campaign by Encore.org that is mobilizing adults 50+ to help younger generations thrive.

GOLDEN

is promoting a renewed culture of volunteerism by matching people to volunteer opportunities.

TIMEBANKS USA

is building a culture of mutual support via independent TimeBanks that allow 1:1 exchanges of time and talent.



Laura Dex

The New Hospitality

Food. Drink. Shelter. Hospitality is a very old industry, but its rapid evolution during the internet age suggests that it could play a powerful role in the fight against social isolation. How? “Human encounters with strangers are universally governed by a principle of exclusion that must be negotiated away socially for the interaction to proceed.”⁸⁷ In its most elemental form, hospitality is the art of making strangers less strange through rules and rituals capable of bringing otherwise isolated members of different tribes together around one table, under one roof.⁸⁸ The restaurateur Danny Meyer simply describes hospitality as the way an interaction between two people makes them feel.⁸⁹ A society in which there’s a cornucopia of ways for everyday people to help strangers feel belonging is a society that’s equipped to ward off isolation.

We are only beginning to see how this unfolds. Today, beyond professional hoteliers, over 600,000 hosts in the United States alone use Airbnb to welcome guests, and dozens of enterprises are building similar peer-to-peer models to offer homemade meals, a helping hand, and caregiving.⁹⁰ The New Hospitality, which is characterized by a dramatic reduction of the risks posed by exchanging resources with strangers, has a democratizing effect. As more and more citizens become “hospitalitarians” of one form or another, our sense of openness to the appropriateness and desirability of engaging strangers may expand.⁹¹

One way to unlock this potential is for the New Hospitality to seed and scale win-win solutions for people at risk of isolation. Already, Airbnb’s fastest-growing host demographic is adults 60+, and its Open Homes initiative organizes hosts to provide free temporary shelter for refugees and evacuees.⁹² At the same time, a flurry of medium-term and longer-term home-sharing solutions are sprouting up to meet the huge demand of empty nesters and baby boomers in search of additional income and friendly company, on the one hand, and also younger generations of cash-strapped, debt-burdened Americans who have all but given up hopes of homeownership. Here, the burning question is whether the New Hospitality can develop solutions that meaningfully reach lower-income communities where a shortage of affordable housing and social isolation are most pressing.

We’re finding new ways to practice the old art of welcoming strangers.

NESTERLY

is helping older adults to rent spare bedrooms to vetted younger adults looking for medium-term housing.

MIRY’S LIST

is welcoming refugee families with supplies, suppers, and travel debt relief crowdourced by neighbors.

NO ONE EATS ALONE

is a student-led lunchtime program of Beyond Differences that promotes a culture of social inclusion in schools.

AIRBNB

through its Open Homes program organizes hosts who offer free temporary shelter to refugees and evacuees.

OUR FAMILY DINNER

is bringing young adults together in small dinner groups that gather weekly or bi-weekly across 30 cities.

SILVERNEST

is a homesharing service that helps baby boomers and empty nesters connect with potential housemates.

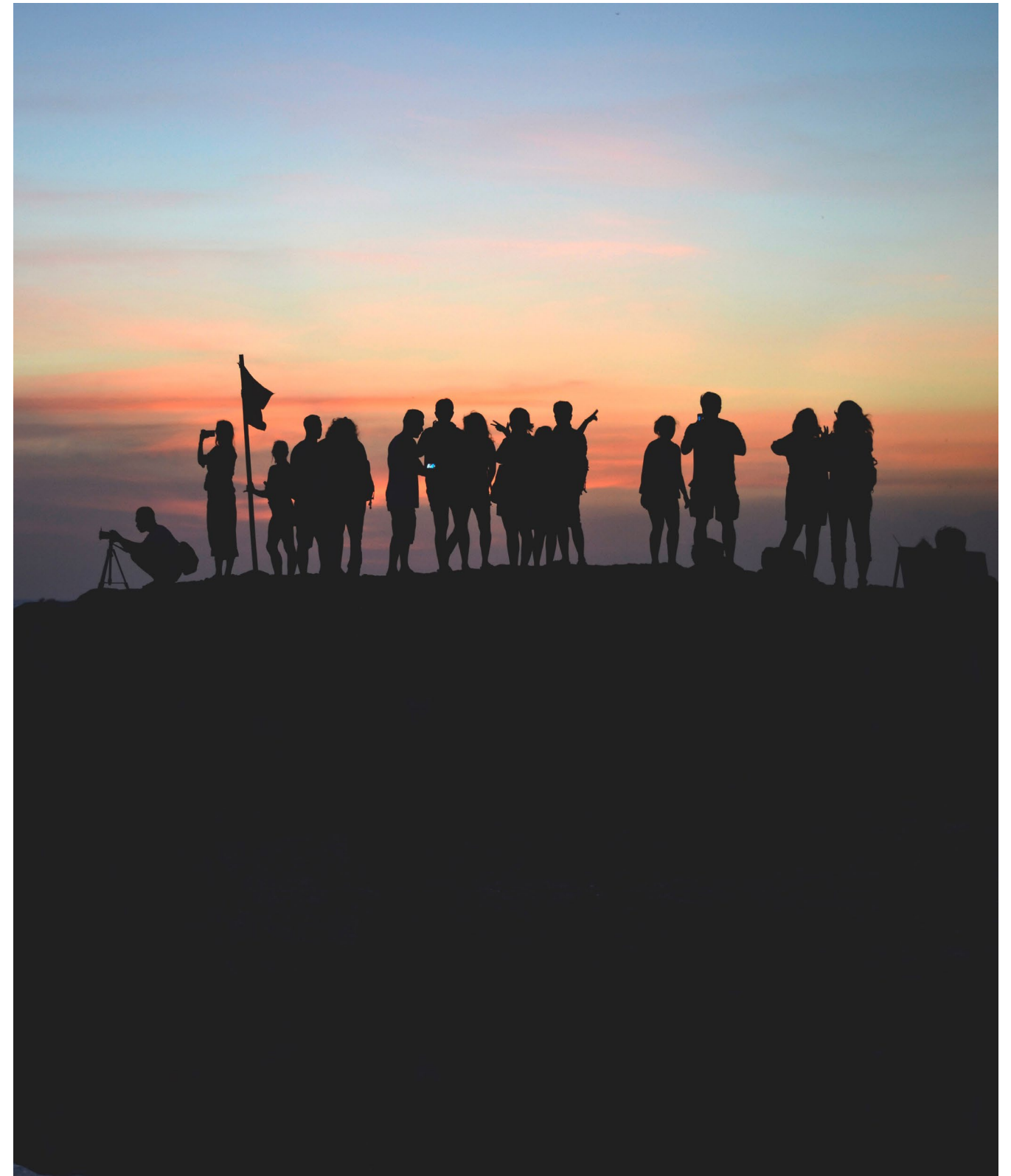
The New Institutions

In 1868, an English performer arrived alone in New York and almost immediately began gathering fellow itinerant performers. In 1905, a Chicago lawyer with a bohemian spirit reacted to the shallowness and snobbishness of the city's preeminent clubs by organizing his own comrades. Thus began the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks ("Elks") and the Rotary Club, which went on to become two of the largest civic associations to define mainstream American social life in the twentieth century.⁹³ More than anything else, these institutions provided members with "patterned ways of living together" which enriched friendships, careers, community life, and served as a bulwark against isolation.⁹⁴

To generations that are less religious, significantly less homogeneous, and no longer haunted by the shared trauma of World War, institutions like Elks and Rotary are dinosaurs. Indeed, declining memberships suggest that many of them are dying off – some suddenly, most slowly.⁹⁵ "Our challenge now," Robert Putnam wrote in *Bowling Alone*, "is to reinvent the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Boy Scouts or the settlement house or the playground or Hadassah or the United Mine Workers or the NAACP."⁹⁶ It is not safe to assume, however, that the New Institutions will closely resemble their forebears.⁹⁷ They might have brick-and-mortar or not. They might have members or not. They might scale or not at all. But they'll be recognized by how they make us feel: less anonymous, less out of control, less untethered.

Too many of the New Institutions that have emerged so far (eg. social clubs, fitness clubs, and work-play spaces) are essentially fixtures of the New Gilded Age, where belonging is a luxury item and exclusion is its animating principle. Social isolation will not be solved with a \$20,000 activation fee. It will take a great deal of outright experimentation to figure out the various forms that New Institutions will have to take in order to enlarge the "circle of human concern" and reach larger, more diverse swathes of America.⁹⁸ Here is where some people marvel at the ingeniousness of certain American evangelical faith communities, which pair sprawling congregations with shared interest groups and hyper-localized small groups to create "one-stop-shopping" for human connection.⁹⁹ But if you're not inclined to join a church, much less a mega-church, what is there for you? That remains a radically open question – and a huge opportunity.

We're reaching for the future of belonging.



Javier Allegue Barros

LEAN IN CIRCLES

are bringing women together through 34,000 small, localized groups intended for peer support.

THE BIG QUIET

is staging massive meditation (and conversation) experiences that offer more meaningful ways to connect.

WEWORK

has acquired Meetup in an effort to make shared working spaces a bigger part of how social groups gather.

SUNDAY ASSEMBLY

holds meetings in 70 cities for secular congregations to sing songs, hear speakers, and form community.

EVERYBODY

is breaking the mold of exclusive fitness clubs with "America's most radically inclusive gym."

THE WING

is opening brick-and-mortar clubs for women in New York, DC, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.



Clockwise from top left: Annie Spratt; Andre Hunter; Toa Heftiba; Cristian Newman.



CONCLUSION

Innovation for a Society of Strangers

It would be easy to neglect social isolation entirely. Day in and day out, we would just continue normalizing our society of strangers. Younger and older people would live worlds apart. The affluent would keep to themselves while the poor fend for themselves. Entire neighborhoods segregated by race and way of life would become the norm. Red America and blue America would avoid eye contact at all costs. To live in a society of strangers is simply to keep our heads down, focused on our individual paths.

To fight social isolation is, by contrast, to embrace the reality that “we’re all just walking each other home.”⁹⁷ It will require all-hands-on-deck: advocates for the most isolated among us; passionate community-builders from every sector; entrepreneurs obsessed with building new and refurbished solutions for this age-old problem; visionary funders to advance the agenda; artists and storytellers with a gift for continually revealing our condition. ***What will your role be? How will your organization respond?***

ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

is combatting social isolation via a new \$2.5 million grant program to adapt global solutions for the United States.

AARP FOUNDATION

has elevated social isolation as one of its four focus areas and begun seeking out innovative solutions.

MOTION PICTURE & TELEVISION FUND

is piloting The Daily Call Sheet, which trains volunteers to make routine phone calls to isolated industry members.

UNTETHERED

www.ReadUntethered.com

Notes

1. For an influential discussion of strong and weak ties, see Granovetter (1973) 1361, which defines the strength of an interpersonal tie according to a “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie.”
2. See Massey (2005), which cites the work of Gamble (1999) and Milardo (1992) regarding the constitution and average sizes of one’s intimate, effective, and extended networks.
3. Granovetter (1973), 1378, 1371.
4. Smith (2017), 64.
5. Page 6 of Untethered and AARP (2012) for a survey of factors contributing to social isolation among adults over 50.
6. Twenge (2017) on smartphones, NCOA (2015) on aging, and Junger (2016) on belonging.
7. This paraphrases the definition proposed by Biordi & Nicholson (2009), “Social isolation is the distancing of an individual, psychologically or physically, or both, from his or her network of desired or needed relationships with other persons. Therefore, social isolation is a loss of place within one’s group(s).” See AARP Foundation (2012).
8. The Wikipedia entry on social isolation reflects a popular skewed image of social isolation as “a state of complete or near-complete lack of contact between an individual and society.” These days, most experts define social isolation using both objective and subjective terms. The AARP Foundation’s (2002) definition, for example, focuses on “the experience of diminished social connectedness” based on the “quality, type, frequency, and emotional satisfaction of social ties.” The North American Nursing Diagnosis Association’s definition in Carpenito-Moyet (2006) is “a state in which a person or group experiences or perceives a need or desire for increased involvement with others but is unable to make that contact.”
9. Biordi & Nicholson (2009) 88: “To maintain clarity, loneliness should be considered the subjective emotional state of the individual, whereas social isolation is the objective state of deprivation of social contact and content...Therefore, loneliness refers to the psychological state of the individual, whereas social isolation relates to the sociologic status...Loneliness is only one aspect of social isolation.”
10. Many of these factors are gleaned from AARP Foundation (2012).
11. McPherson, et al. (2006); see Hampton, et al. (2009) for a contrarian assessment.
12. Murthy (2017) and AARP (2010).
13. U.S. Census Bureau (2013). Importantly, Klinenberg (2013), 185 emphasizes that the “extraordinary rise of living alone is not in itself a social problem. But it is a dramatic social change that’s already exacerbating serious problems for which there are no easy solutions,” including “social isolation for the elderly and frail.”
14. For an especially compelling reflection on perceived social isolation (eg. loneliness) among city-dwellers, see Laing (2016).
15. Massey (2005), 4.
16. Goffman (1986).
17. Weiss (1975), 15.
18. Cacioppo & Patrick (2009); Biordi & Nicholson (2009).
19. AARP Foundation (2012).
20. Cacioppo & Hawkley (2003), S40.
21. Cacioppo & Patrick (2009), especially chapter six on the “wear and tear of loneliness,
22. Ibid, 99-108. See also Hari (2016) on the links between social isolation and addiction.
23. Donovan, et al. (2016); Holt-Lunstad, et al. (2010); on Medicare spending, see AARP (2017).
24. Friedler, et al (2015).
25. LinkedIn Talent Solutions (2015).
26. Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo (2006); Elliott (1999).
27. Houseman (2016).
28. Shihadeh (2009); unemployment statistics by neighborhood from Heartland Alliance (2015).
29. Massey (2005), 278-279.
30. Barber & McCarty (2015), 37.
31. Thurston & ter Kuile (2015) on non-religious communities; Lipka & Gecewicz (2017) on “spiritual but not religious”; Perrin (2015) on being online “almost constantly”; Putnam (2001) on civic associations; Durkheim (1897) on the sociological and economic sources of individual anomie.
32. Massey (2005), 168.
33. Brady, et al. (2017) on Twitter echo chambers; Schmidt (2017) on Facebook echo chambers.
34. Bhattacharya, et al. (2016).
35. Cacioppo & Patrick (2009), 269.
36. Gardner, Pickett & Knowles (2005) use the term “social snacking” to describe strategies people use to feel more connected even if the quality of the connection is very low. See also Turkle (2012) and Cacioppo & Patrick (2009), 258-260 on this theme. See Weiss (1975) 17 for a discussion of “random sociability.”
37. Primack, et al. (2017). In addition, those who used social media more than 2 hours per day were twice as likely to report perceived social isolation as those who used social media less than half an hour per day.
38. Cass (2016).
39. Stewart, et al. (2009); Stewart, et al (2007).
40. Klinenberg (2001, 2002).
41. Orsmond, et al. (2013).
42. My use of the phrase “society of strangers” pays homage to Lofland (1973) which uses the phrase “world of strangers.”
43. Junger (2016). Block (2009) is an earlier influential study.
44. Bellah (1992), 4.
45. Putnam (2001), chapters 10-15.
46. Skocpol (2004).

47. Proudfoot (1972), 97.
48. Bellah (2007), 291-292.
49. Thurston & ter Kuile (2015).
50. Goffman (1986).
51. Massey (2005), 168.
52. Wagner & Rabuy (2017) for prison population statistics; Emery (2016) for analysis of incarceration rates for drug offenses.
53. Alexander (2012), 2, 13, 162.
54. Freedman (2016).
55. AARP (2014).
56. Nelson (2004), ix.
57. Klinenberg (2002), 50.
58. Nedelman (2017).
59. Stein (2001).
60. DelReal & Clement (2017), based on a new Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll.
61. McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal (2008), especially chapter one.
62. Lofland (1973), 180 and Jacobs (1961), 65, both discuss the idea of retreating from strangers. Bishop (2009), 14 (cites the marketing expert J. Walker Smith’s observations about Americans’ extraordinary ability to “wrap themselves into cocoons entirely of their own making”), 37.
63. Bishop (2009), 5-6.
64. Vance (2016), 4, 252.
65. Hochschild (2016), 222.
66. See Isaac (2018) and Ginsberg & Burke (2017).
67. See Callahan (2017), citing the fact that in 1982, only 13 of the Forbes 400 richest Americans were billionaires; today all 400 are billionaires. See also Ditkoff & Kelley (2017), citing the fact that over half of business schools today have some kind of social entrepreneurship or social innovation program.
68. Jacobs (1961), 65.
69. Oldenburg (1999) on third places.
70. Grozdanic (2016) on co-working/co-living.
70. Ellison (2015); Freelancers Union (2014).
71. Marketing copy at www.common.com, accessed October 31, 2017.
72. JCHS (2016); Genworth (2017). See also Poo (2016) on implications of the aging boom.
73. Freedman (2016) notes that Singapore’s \$3 billion Action Plan for Successful Aging, released in 2015, specifically calls for “co-locating eldercare and childcare facilities.”
74. The Pew study is Hampton, et al. (2009), and the quotation comes from the November 4, 2009 blog post announcing the findings, available at www.pewinternet.org.
75. Perez (2017); Naftulin (2016).
76. Thompson (2017).
77. Turkle (2012), 19.
78. See www.timewellspent.io.
79. Smith (2016).
80. Transportation for America (2011).
81. National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998); PACE (2017).
82. Milken Institute (2016) describes approaches to engaging older adults in purposeful service. See also Smith (2017).
83. Born (2016) on foundation grant-making for voter education, registration, and turnout.
84. Cacioppo & Patrick (2009), 269.
85. See www.citizenuniversity.us and www.la2050.org. Their work recalls Putnam (2004) and the idea of creating a “positive epidemic” in which civic engagement is the norm rather the exception.
86. See www.thepeoplesupper.org, www.makeamericadinneragain.com, and www.onthetable.com.
87. Massey (2005), 15, citing Mauss (1950).
88. Simmel (1908) and Bolchazy (1977), a thought-provoking study of hospitality’s “humanizing force” in early Rome.
89. Meyer (2008).
90. “Airbnb Fast Facts,” published August 5, 2017.
91. The term “hospitalitarian” comes from Meyer (2008) and the elements everyday decision to engage strangers – desirability, legitimacy, and appropriateness – come from Lofland (1973).
92. See “Airbnb Fast Facts,” published August 5, 2017 and www.airbnb.com/welcome.
93. Klein (2011), chapters 1-2; Carvin (2011), 244-245, 250. Skocpol (2004), 26-28 lists 58 organizations that have each claimed more than 1 percent of the American adult population.
94. Bellah, et al. (1992), 4.
95. Flores (2014).
96. Putnam (2001), 401.
97. Thurston & ter Kuile (2015).
98. See the work of John A. Powell via www.johnpowell.org, www.haasinstitute.berkeley.edu, and www.otheringandbelonging.org.
99. Cacioppo & Patrick (2009), 253-254; Wuthnow (1994) on the role of small support groups.
100. Dass & Gorman (1985), 217.

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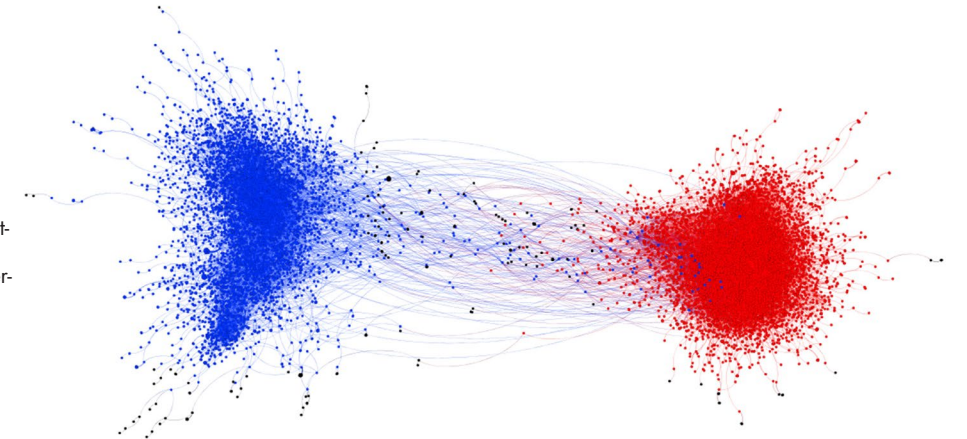
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Figure. This network graph from a study by Brady, et al. (2017) depicts the polarized nature of retweeting activity on Twitter, with blue representing a liberal mean ideology and red representing a conservative mean ideology.



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“No man is an island.”

John Donne (1624)

“All men are islands...
This is an island age.”

Hugh Grant (2002)

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