

“We Are Spending Scary Amounts of Time Alone. Can We Stop Ourselves?”

BY BRYCE WARD

The covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on our social lives. Cancellations, closures and fear of a potentially deadly infection led us to hunker down and avoid acquaintances, co-workers and extended family. Time spent with friends went down. Time spent alone went up.

Thanksgiving was not spared. Americans spent 38 percent less time with friends and extended family over the Thanksgiving weekend in the past two years than they had a decade prior.

And now for the scarier news: Our social lives were withering dramatically before covid-19. Between 2014 and 2019, time spent with friends went down (and time spent alone went up) by more than it did during the pandemic.

According to the Census Bureau’s American Time Use Survey, the amount of time the average American spent with friends was stable, at 6½ hours per week, between 2010 and 2013. Then, in 2014, time spent with friends began to decline.

By 2019, the average American was spending only four hours per week with friends (a sharp, 37 percent decline from five years before). Social media, political polarization and new technologies all played a role in the drop. (It is notable that market penetration for smartphones crossed 50 percent in 2014.)

Covid then deepened this trend. During the pandemic, time with friends fell further — in 2021, the average American spent only two hours and 45 minutes a week with close friends (a 58 percent decline relative to 2010-2013).

Similar declines can be seen even when the definition of “friends” is expanded to include neighbors, co-workers and clients. The average American spent 15 hours per week with this broader group of friends a decade ago, 12 hours per week in 2019 and only 10 hours a week in 2021.

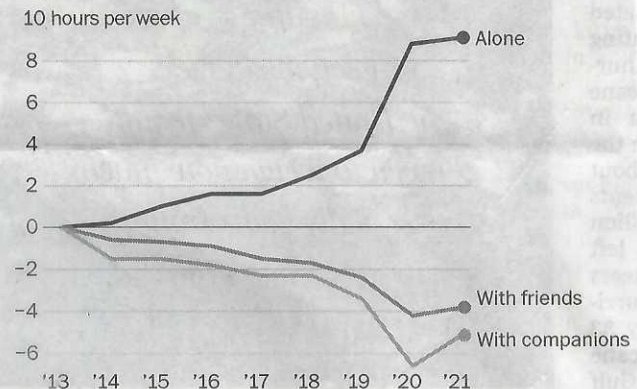
On average, Americans did not transfer that lost time to spouses, partners or children. Instead, they chose to be alone.

No single group drives this trend. Men and women, White and non-White, rich and poor, urban and rural, married and unmarried, parents and non-parents all saw proportionally similar declines in time spent with others. The pattern holds for both remote and in-person workers.

The percentage decline is also similar for the young and old; however, given how much time young people spend with friends, the absolute decline among Americans age 15 to 19 is staggering. Relative to 2010-2013, the average American teenager spent approximately 11 fewer hours with friends each week in 2021 (a 64 percent decline) and 12 addi-

Who Americans spend their time with

Americans 15 and older are spending a lot more time alone than they did in 2013. The trend started before the pandemic.



Note: 2020 numbers are not fully comparable to other years because the pandemic impacted data collection.

Source: American Time Use Survey

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tional hours alone (a 48 percent increase).

These new habits are startling — and a striking departure from the past. Just a decade ago, the average American spent roughly the same amount of time with friends as Americans in the 1960s or 1970s. But we have now begun to cast off our connections to each other.

It is too soon to know the long-term consequences of this shift, but it seems safe to assume that the decline of our social lives is a worrisome development. Spending less time with friends is not a best practice by most standards, and it might contribute to other troubling social trends — isolation, worsening mental health (particularly among adolescents), rising aggressive behavior and violent crime. Americans rate activities as more meaningful and joyful when friends are present. Friends and social connections build on themselves and produce memories and fellowship. They also boost health and lead to better

economic outcomes.

We can hope, as covid-related barriers recede, that people will change course. Time with friends *did* increase in 2021 after the vaccine rolled out; however, at the end of 2021, it was still an hour below the 2019 level. Furthermore, a Pew Research Center survey made public in August suggests that covid might have changed us permanently — 35 percent of

Americans say that participating in large gatherings, going out and socializing in-person have become less important since the pandemic.

The potential harms of these trends are sufficient to demand that Americans devote some resources to understanding and reversing them.

You can help reverse these trends today without waiting for the researchers and policymakers to figure it all out. It's the holidays: Don't skip time with your family. Go to that holiday party (or throw

one yourself). Go hang out with friends for coffee, or a hike, or in a museum, or a concert — whatever. You will feel better, create memories, boost your health, stumble across valuable information — and so will your companions.

Put effort into building relationships that you can count on in good times and bad because, as the song goes, that's what friends are for. Besides, you just might have a good time.

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