MAKING CARING COMMON PROJECT

Loneliness in America: Just the Tip of the Iceberg?

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Introduction

Loneliness has been all over the news in recent years, including a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story,[1] and a Surgeon General Advisory declared it an epidemic. But crucial questions beg for better answers. Most basically, what exactly is loneliness? How do Americans describe it, and how might the answer to this question inform solutions? What, more specifically, are the psychological, community and societal factors that may be driving loneliness, and what personal and societal strategies might prevent and mitigate it?

Over the last four years, Making Caring Common has sought to answer these questions. In the fall of 2020, several months into the pandemic, we conducted a national survey that found that 36% of all Americans felt lonely frequently or almost all the time or always, what we called "serious loneliness." Perhaps most painfully, almost 40% of our lonely respondents reported that no one in the past few weeks took more than just a few minutes to ask how they are doing in a way that expressed genuine caring.[2]

This past May, we conducted a follow up national survey with YouGov to explore various aspects of loneliness more deeply, including the emotional, social, and existential dimensions of loneliness, who or what Americans blame for loneliness and the types of personal and community solutions they endorse. We also sought to dig deeper into what might be causing loneliness, mainly drawing on respondents' views themselves.

The following summarizes our findings. Perhaps most concerning, we found that loneliness for many people may be the tip of the iceberg, a response to a troubling brew of feelings, often including anxiety, a sense of not mattering in the world and meaninglessness. That means that our public and private efforts to prevent and alleviate loneliness are likely to be far more effective if they focus not just on generating social connections but on addressing these underlying feelings. The final section of this report takes up several prevention and mitigation strategies.

Key Findings

1. **Twenty-one percent of respondents reported suffering serious loneliness, and respondents are experiencing high rates of both social-emotional and existential loneliness.** High percentages of lonely adults reported social-emotional loneliness, for example, not feeling part of meaningful groups (67%) and not having enough close friends or family (61%). Similarly high numbers of respondents reported existential loneliness, for instance, 65% of lonely adults reported feeling fundamentally disconnected from others

[1] See Matt Shaer's August 2024 cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*, Why is the Loneliness epidemic so hard to cure? Maybe because we aren't thinking about it the right way.
[2] See our previous report, Loneliness in America: How the pandemic has deepened an epidemic of loneliness and what we can do about it).

or the world and 63% reported their place in the world does not feel important or relevant.

2. **Striking numbers of respondents don't feel "part of this country" – 19% of all respondents and 40% of lonely respondents.** Non-parents (24%) were more likely than parents (16%) to feel they aren't part of the country. Asian (34%), Black (32%), and multiracial (28%) respondents were more likely than white (15%) or Hispanic (16%) respondents to feel this disconnection. Younger adults (18-29 year olds) were most likely and adults 65 and over were least likely to report feeling disconnected from the country, and Democrats and Independents were more likely than Republicans to report this disconnect.
3. **Loneliness may be the tip of the iceberg**. Loneliness may not only be the cause but the result of a wide range of troubling feelings that often interact in complex ways. Respondents who reported loneliness were far more likely to report anxiety, depression, a lack of meaning and purpose and the sense that their place in the world is not important. For example, 81% of lonely adults reported anxiety or depression, and about 75% of lonely adults reported having little or no meaning or purpose. While it's difficult to precisely determine causality, it's likely that causality goes both ways, i.e., while loneliness can certainly induce and deepen anxiety, depression and feelings of meaninglessness, these feelings can also induce and deepen loneliness. Respondents identified specific ways these negative feelings contribute to their loneliness. For example, 60% of those who felt lonely reported, "My insecurity or my mental health gets in the way of connecting with people." Not feeling "seen" or feeling judged and/or misunderstood by others, the sense that the world is off the rails, can all also inflate our needs for human connection and generate loneliness. As Matthew Shaer puts it in the *New York Times*, citing our research, "When we talk about loneliness, what we're actually talking about are all the issues that swirl perilously underneath it: alienation and isolation, distrust and disconnection and above all, a sense that many of the institutions and traditions that once held us together are less available to us or no longer of interest."
4. **The problem is not simply social isolation.** It's well known that isolation isn't the same as loneliness. People can be surrounded by others and still feel deeply lonely. The lack of quality relationships is just as big a problem as the lack of quantity. One of our respondents reported, for example, having lots of family around but not feeling appreciated by them, and another of being "surrounded" by people "who only are present in my life because [I] am useful." Fifty-seven percent of respondents who were frequently or always lonely also reported not being able to share their true selves (compared to just 25% of those occasionally or never lonely).
5. **When we asked respondents who or what they think contributes to loneliness in America, technology (73%) topped the list, followed by families not spending enough time together (66%) and people working too much or being too busy or exhausted (62%).** About 60% of adults also blamed mental health challenges, excessive individualism, and people lacking relationship skills.

6. **Most Americans don't blame individuals for their loneliness.** Respondents were far more likely to blame "our society" (65%) or people in general being "too focused on themselves or their small circles" (60%) for loneliness than "lonely people themselves" (40%).
7. **While most respondents don't blame individuals for loneliness, they do tend to think that individuals are part of the solution.** High percentages of respondents cited individual or personal solutions to loneliness; "taking time each day to reach out to a friend or family member" (83%), "learning to love myself" (80%), being "more forgiving or positive towards people" (77%) and "helping others" (75%). High percentages also endorsed societal solutions, including "more activities or fun community events that bring people together" (75%), "public spaces that are more accessible and connection focused" (75%) and "political and community leaders who promote compassion" (69%).

The following describes in more detail this data and suggests strategies for preventing and alleviating loneliness.

Loneliness rates, overall and by key demographics

When asked, "In the past 30 days, how often have you felt lonely?" 21% of adult respondents said "frequently" (15%) or "almost all of the time/always" (6%). Respondents aged 65 and over were much less likely to be lonely (10%) compared to other age groups. The most lonely respondents were 30-44 year olds (29%) followed by 18-29 year olds (24%) and 45-64 year olds (20%). Men and women were about equally likely to be lonely (20% and 21%, respectively). Nor did we find significant differences in loneliness rates across political ideology (21% Democrats, 20% Independents, 19% Republicans) or race/ethnicity in general (20% White and Asian, 21% Hispanic, 22% Black). However, adult respondents with two or more racial identities were significantly more likely to report loneliness – a whopping 42%.[3]

We didn't find significant differences in loneliness by education levels but we did by income level. Those making less than $30K a year were most lonely (29%),[4] compared to those making more than 100K (18%). Nineteen percent of those making between $50-100K and 21% of those making $30-49K were lonely. Figure 1 demonstrates the overall prevalence of loneliness and differences in rates for demographic groups that were statistically significant.

[3] About 50 respondents indicated that they identify with two or more races. For those identifying with another race/ethnicity not shown, the rates of loneliness were 17%.

[4] Note, about 350 survey respondents had this income bracket (under $30K), the lowest income category out of the four "reduced" categories we derived for meaningful sub-sample comparisons.

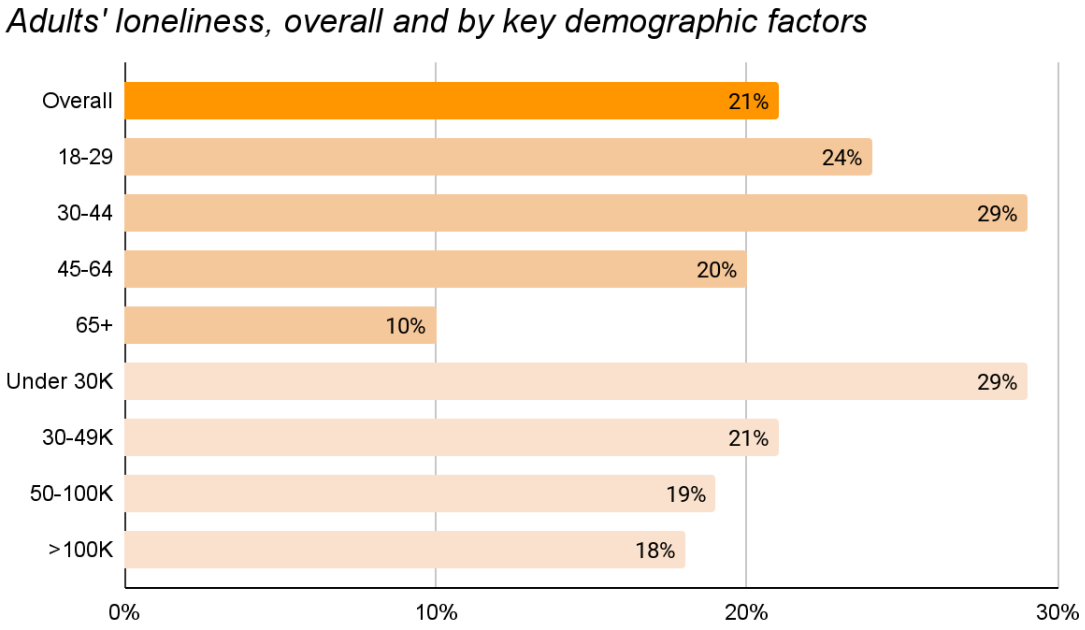

Figure 1. Percentages of adults (overall) who reported feeling lonely, along with specific rates of loneliness by age and income – the only significant differences we detected across key demographics. We measured loneliness with our core item, "In the past 30 days, how often have you felt lonely?" and considered respondents lonely if they selected "frequently" or "almost all of the time/all of the time" on a 4-point Likert scale (the other two options were "never" and "occasionally").

Mental health rates, overall and by loneliness

As Figure 2 demonstrates, lonely adults reported much more anxiety and depression (67% and 68%, respectively) than those who reported feeling occasionally or never lonely (24% and 18%, respectively). Further, 81% of lonely adults are anxious *or* depressed, compared to 29% of less lonely adults.[5] Anxiety, depression and loneliness appear to often fuel each other. For example, in a separate, brief survey of adult Americans that we conducted in August, facilitated by the non-profit More in Common, we found that about one-fifth of respondents picked the statement "When I feel lonely, I start to get anxious or depressed" but approximately another 20% picked the opposite statement, "When I'm anxious or depressed, I start to feel lonely." More adults, or 36%, said they don't know what causes what.[6]

[5] We also found that 42% of anxious or depressed adults reported feeling lonely, compared to 6% who reported neither anxiety nor depression.

[6] It is also worth noting that the prevalence of serious loneliness for this adult sample of Americans was 23%–just slightly higher than our national YouGov sample, for which the loneliness prevalence was 21%.

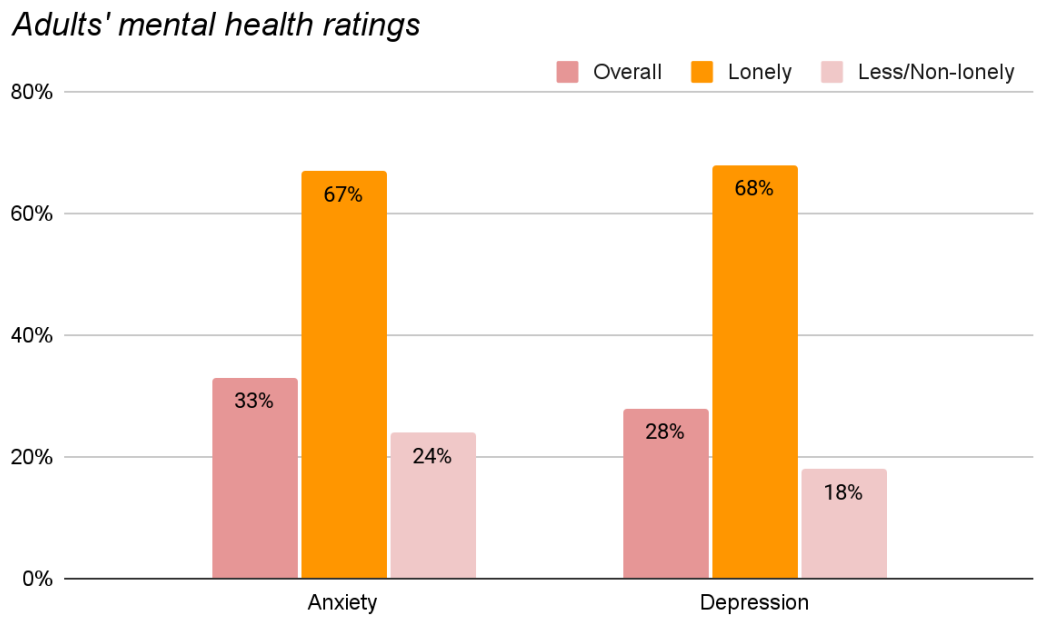

Figure 2. Percentages of adults, overall and based on levels of loneliness, who reported anxiety or depression. We measured anxiety and depression using the GAD-2 and PHQ-2 measures, respectively, and the order of items for each was randomized. For the loneliness comparisons, lonely adults said "frequently" or "almost all of the time/all of the time" to feeling lonely in the past 30 days, and less/non-lonely are those who said "never" or "occasionally." This applies to all subsequent figures with these comparisons.

What types or dimensions of loneliness do Americans experience most?

Guided by previous work highlighting the need to better understand various types or dimensions of loneliness,[7] we created seven items to develop a more nuanced understanding of dimensions of loneliness. As we demonstrate in Figure 3, respondents were most likely to report lacking community (34%) with 67% of lonely adults responding "pretty true" or "very true" to the statement, "I don't have meaningful groups or communities that I am really a part of." Sixty-one percent of lonely adults reported that they don't have enough friends or family they're truly close with or meaningfully connected to, followed by 56% who "don't really have a person to rely on for deep emotional support." We also found evidence of existential loneliness, or a fundamental sense of disconnection from others or the world. Sixty-three percent of lonely adults said their

[7] For instance, loneliness expert and pioneer John Cacioppo and his colleagues (2015) discussed important differences between social or relational loneliness ("the perceived presence/absence of quality friendships or family connections"), intimate or emotional loneliness ("the perceived absence of a significant someone … a person one can rely on for emotional support during crises, who provides mutual assistance, and who affirms one's value as a person"), and what they termed existential or collective loneliness ("a person's valued social identities or "active network" … wherein an individual can connect to similar others at a distance in the collective space").

place in the world "doesn't feel important or relevant," and 65% said they "feel fundamentally separate or disconnected from others or the world." Almost one in five of all adult respondents, and 40% of lonely adult respondents, reported feeling like they are not "really part of this country." Democrats and Independents were more likely than Republicans to report this disconnect.[8]

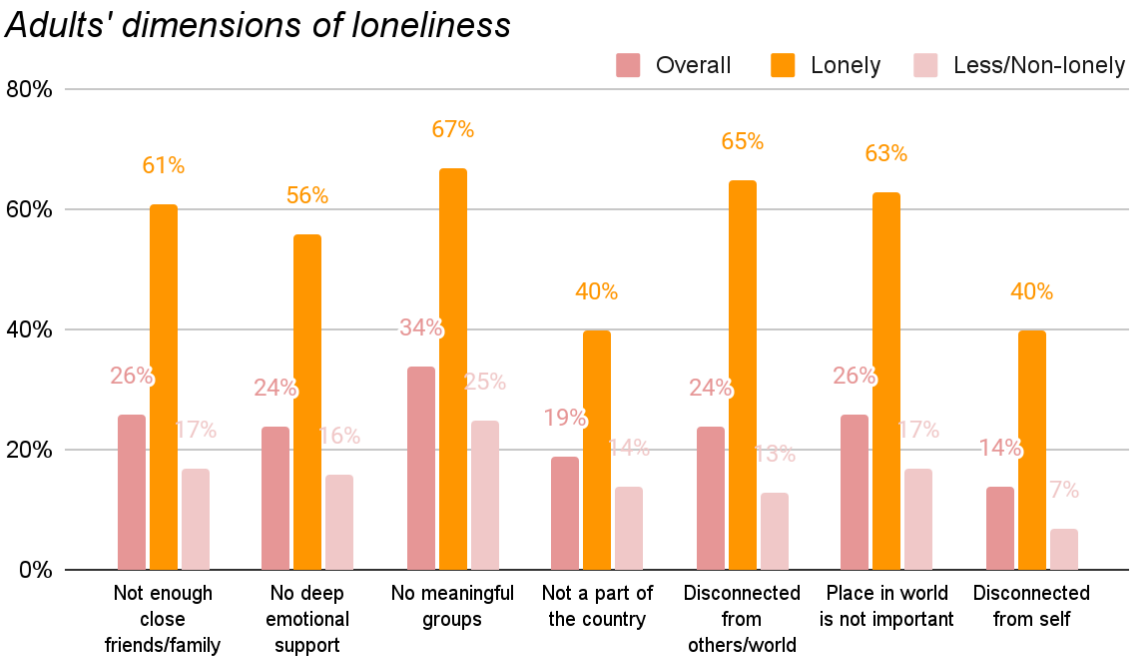

Figure 3. Percentages of adults, overall and based on levels of loneliness, who responded with "Pretty true" or "Very true" (out of a 4-point scale) to each item, the question being, "To what extent is each statement below true for you?" Based on a factor analysis, we found that the first three items represent the *social-emotional* dimension and the last four items represent the *existential* dimension. The order of matrix or grid items was randomized.

Personal barriers to making meaningful connections

Many respondents identified personal barriers that affect their relationships. High percentages of lonely Americans reported that they "don't really know how to develop close friendships" (45%) and that they're "too busy or tired to reach out to people consistently" (44%). Sixty percent of lonely Americans say that their insecurity or mental health "gets in the way of connecting with people," followed by 57% who admit that they "don't really share my true self with others" (see Figure 4).

[8] Non-parents (24%) were also more likely than parents (16%) to feel they aren't part of the country. Asian (34%), Black (32%), and multiracial (28%) respondents were more likely than white (15%) or Hispanic (16%) respondents to feel this disconnection. Younger adults (18-29 year olds) were most likely and adults 65 and over were least likely to report feeling disconnected from the country.

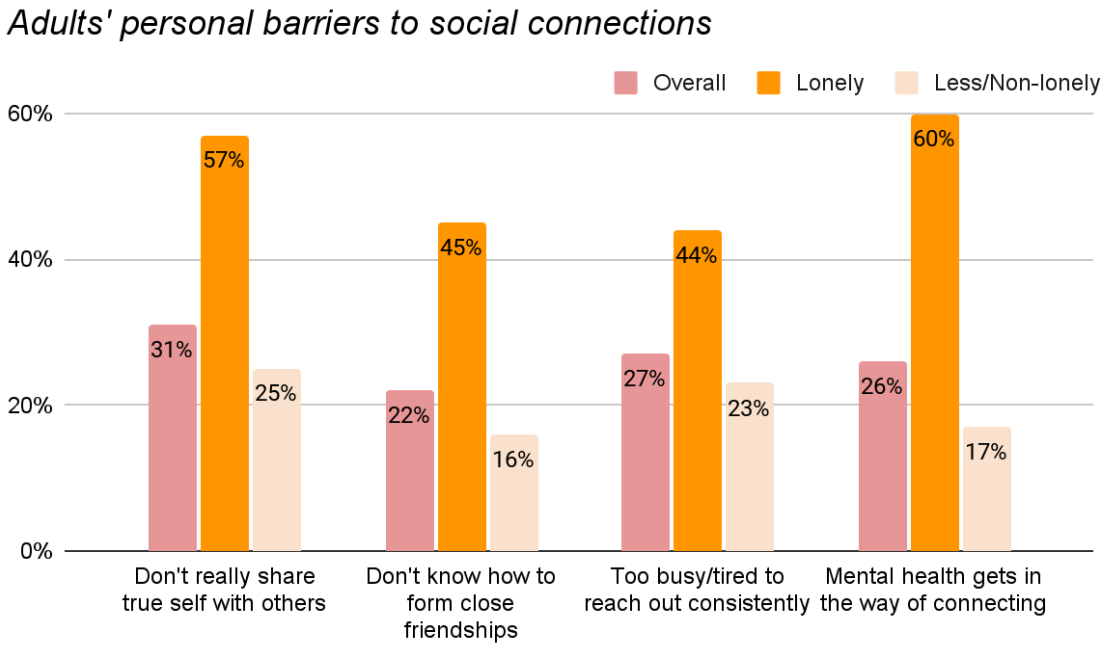

Figure 4. Percentages of adults, overall and based on levels of loneliness, who responded with 'Pretty true' or 'Very true' (out of a 4-point scale) to each item, the question being: "Generally speaking, how true is each statement about you?" The order of matrix or grid items was randomized.

Who or what do Americans hold responsible for loneliness in this country?

Drawing on reports and articles outlining various possible causes of loneliness,[9] we came up with a list of 12 possible culprits[10] and asked survey respondents the extent to which they think each contributes to loneliness in America (we combined responses for those who indicated "Contributes quite a bit" and "Contributes a lot"). Figure 5 shows that almost three-quarters of Americans blame technology; "People are so distracted by or used to technology that their in-person interactions are suffering," followed by "families lack[ing] quality time together, like eating regular meals together" (66%) and people working too much or being too busy or exhausted (62%). The role of mental health also came up as a top contributor, with 60% of respondents agreeing that "People are struggling with mental health challenges that are hurting

[9] For instance, these were just some of the main sources we referenced: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023; Barreto et al, 2021; Hill, 2023; KFF, 2022; Pew, 2018; The Belonging Barometer, 2024; The Foundation for Social Connection; Volpe, 2024; U.S. Surgeon General Advisory, 2023.

[10] To more simply understand who or what Americans blame for loneliness, we also categorized the potential culprits into fewer choices and asked respondents to select up to three they think play the largest role. Generally consistent with their responses to the list of 12 possible culprits, the majority selected social media and technology (67%), followed by a deterioration if family life (47%), individuals lacking relationship and coping skills (42%), financial problems and consumerism/capitalism (38%), lack of community (32%), and work life or the changing nature of work (31%). About 6% of respondents said "something else."

their relationships." Fifty-eight percent also agreed that "We live in a society that is too individualistic, i.e., too focused on individual well-being, success and competition," followed by "People lack skills in forming or keeping relationships" (57%). Lonely individuals, compared to those less or not lonely, were significantly more likely to select most sources of blame, *except* technology and not feeling connected to religion or spirituality.

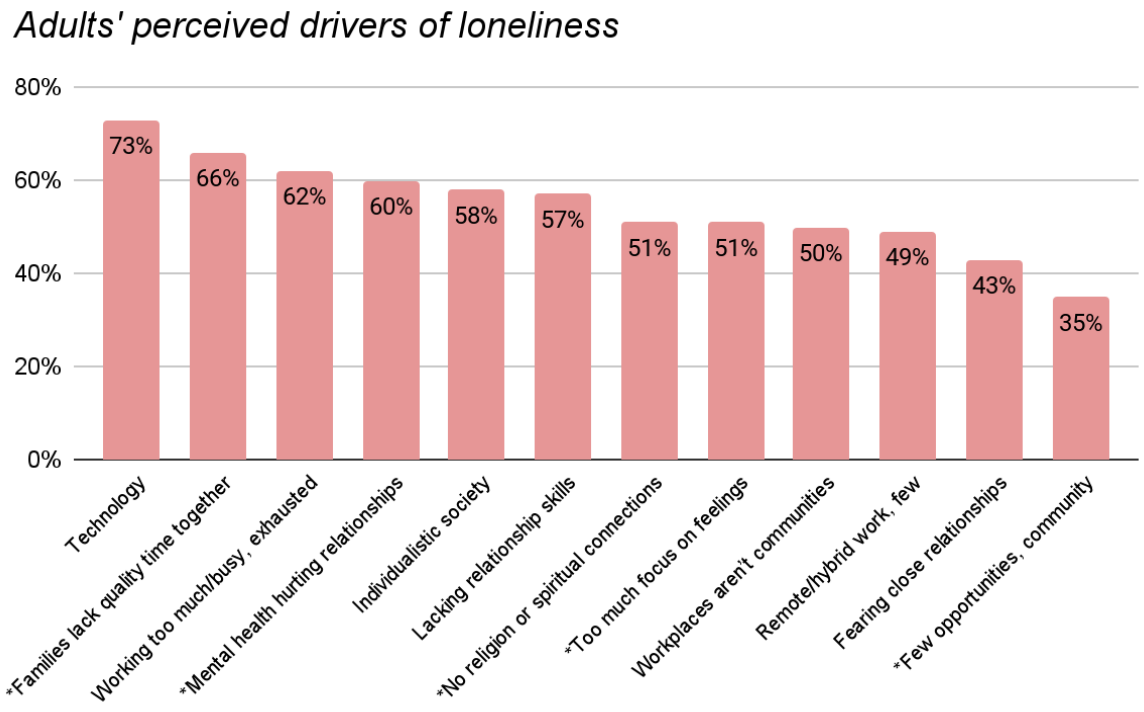

Figure 5. Percentages of adults who said "Contributes quite a bit" or "Contributes a lot" (out of a 4-point scale) to each of the items listed, in response to the question: "Below, we list some possible reasons for loneliness in America. Please rate how much you think each of these contributes to loneliness in America, **NOT** why you feel lonely." The order of matrix or grid items was randomized. *Connotes items given in a separate matrix so as to reduce item burden. Note, we asked this of ALL respondents, irrespective of current loneliness levels.

In many of these cases, though, it is unclear which "people" our respondents hold responsible. For instance, are lonely people the ones lacking relationship skills, or do people in general lack these skills, like not knowing how to empathize with others? Future research needs to explore these sources of blame with more nuance and specificity.

When we asked lonely adults, in an open-ended question, what the underlying reasons are for their loneliness, by far the predominant theme was lack of meaningful relationships. For instance, one person said, "No one cares about me, [I] am surrounded by people who only are present in my life because [I] am useful" and another confessed,"I don't have personal friends who I like and trust." Lack of sufficient contact with people also came up frequently, followed by

feeling alienated or mistreated as well as having mental health issues (often combined with something else, like poverty or fear related to world events).

Finally, we assessed the extent to which Americans endorse three different "blame narratives" about loneliness.[11] Sixty percent of respondents blamed "People in general" for being too focused on themselves and 65% blamed "Our society" (see Figure 6). A smaller percentage (40%) blamed lonely people themselves.[12]

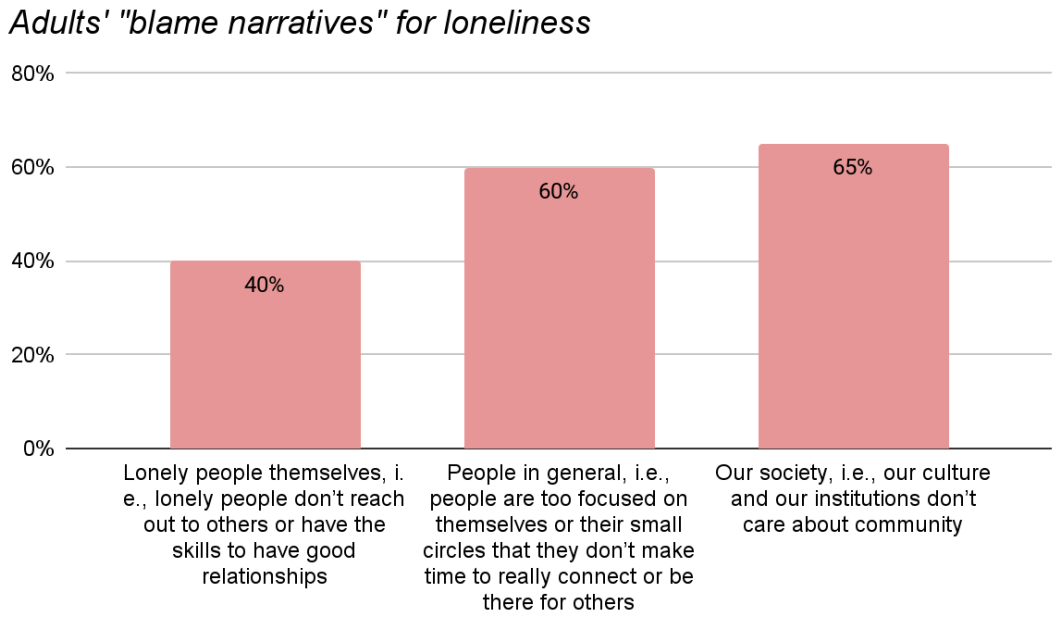

Figure 6. Percentages of adults who responded with "Quite a bit" or "A lot"' (out of a 4-point scale) to the question, "How much do you blame each of the following for why there is loneliness in America?"

What solutions for loneliness do Americans find most important?

While Americans reported that technology and being overworked are among the social factors that contribute most to loneliness, the majority of Americans endorsed three specific *personal* solutions (see Figure 7). Eighty-three percent reported that "taking time each day to reach out to

[11] For instance, there is literature on loneliness that discusses the "lonely brain" and how lonely individuals tend to go into self-preservation mode to protect themselves from perceived rejection, disconnection, or critical evaluation, and some of the research has suggested that means less empathy, more defensiveness, and more numbing (see Finley & Schaefer, 2022 for a review). Indeed, in the popular press there are many mentions of lonely people lacking empathy, suggesting that lonely individuals are to blame (e.g., listen to Jay Shetty's *On Purpose* podcast episode with Brian Chesky, one of the co-founders of AirBnB).

[12] Lonely respondents were slightly more likely to blame lonely people or themselves (44%) than those who didn't report feeling as lonely (38%) but they were also significantly much more likely to blame 'people in general' and 'our society.'

a friend or family member" is most important for reducing their loneliness, followed by "learning to love myself" (80%) and "learning how to be more forgiving or positive towards people, e.g. assuming good intentions of others" (77%). Seventy-five percent reported "finding ways to help others." We generally found no differences in what lonely adults reported compared to those less or not lonely.[13]

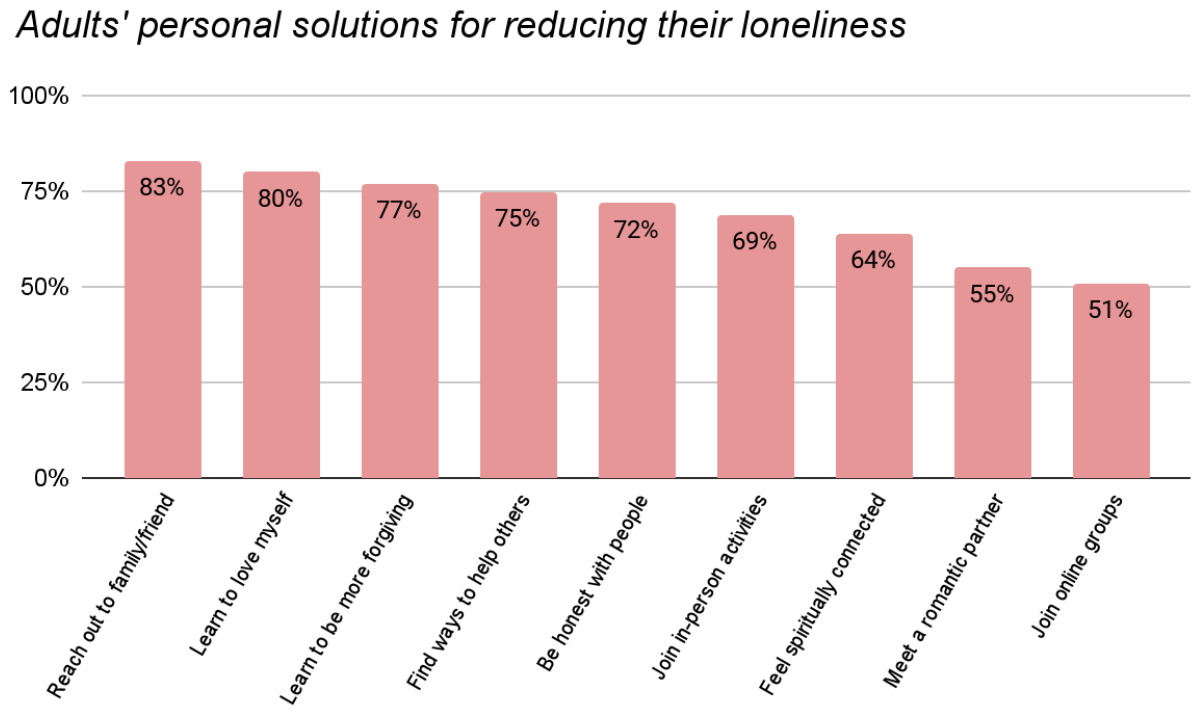

Figure 7. Percentages of adults who responded with "Quite important" or "Very important" (out of a 5-point scale for which the 5th option was "I don't know") to the question, "How important do you think each of the following are for reducing your loneliness?" The order of matrix or grid items was randomized. Note, we asked this of ALL respondents, irrespective of current loneliness levels.

In a separate question, we also asked how important certain social solutions are for reducing loneliness and strengthening our communities *in general* (not pictured). Seventy-five percent reported "more activities or fun community events" as well as "public spaces that are more accessible and connection-focused, like green spaces and playgrounds." Sixty-nine percent prioritized "political and community leaders who promote compassion and connection as community values/norms," followed by 66% who think it's important for such leaders to raise awareness about opportunities for social connection. Sixty-five percent reported that it is important to have "public policies, like housing, education, and transportation policies, that bring people together" and while the fewest (43%) selected "more technology-focused policies that

[13] We found no significant differences in the solutions endorsed by lonely versus less or non-lonely adults, with the exception of "having more ways to meet a romantic partner" - 68% of lonely respondents selected this, compared to 52% of those less or non-lonely.

help connect people," this was also the *only* option that significantly more lonely respondents selected (49%) compared to those less or not lonely (42%).

To what extent do Americans feel a lack of meaning and purpose–and how is this linked to loneliness?

Lonely adults were much more likely to report lacking meaning (69%) and a sense of purpose (67%) compared to those less or not lonely (32% and 36%, respectively).[14] When asked where they find meaning, over 70% of respondents overall reported they find it in each of these areas; "understanding myself better," "friendships," "relationships with family members," and "helping others." Lonely individuals were just as likely to find meaning in these areas as their less or non-lonely counterparts, with one exception – family relationships. Whereas 63% of lonely respondents said they find meaning in relationships with family members, 81% of those who didn't report feeling as lonely said they find meaning in such relationships. Lonely individuals were also significantly *less* likely to find meaning in romantic life (53%), spirituality (52%), recreational activities or hobbies (48%) and work or school (36%).

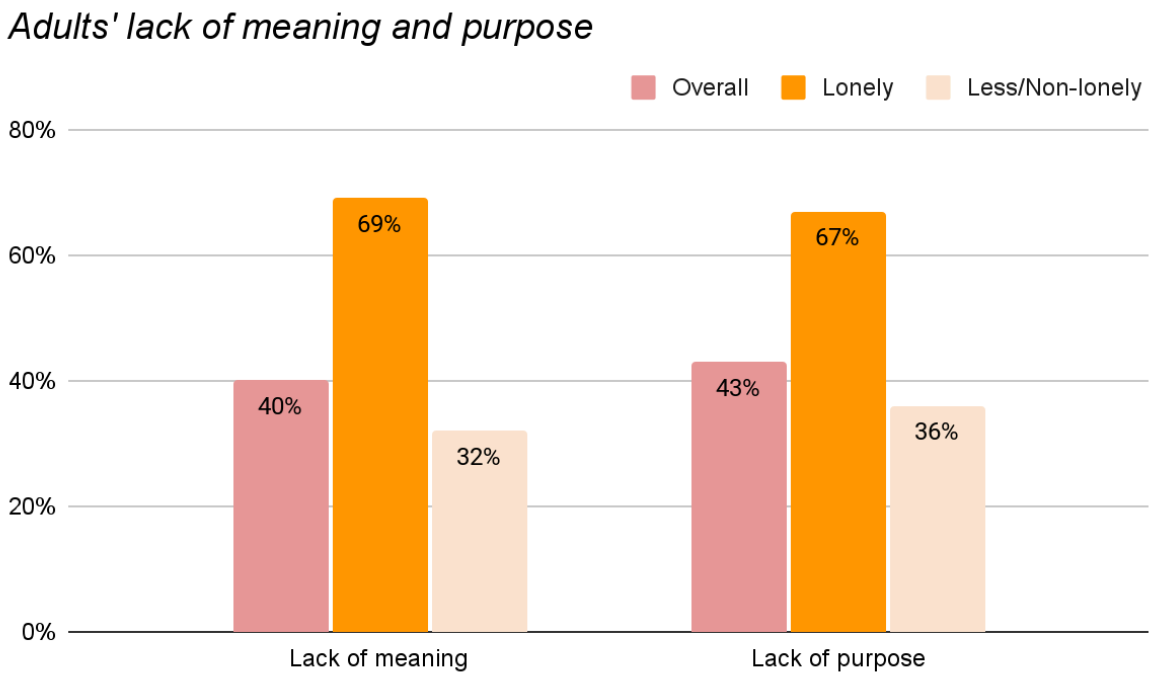

Figure 8. Percentages of adults, overall and based on levels of loneliness, who responded with "Not at all true" or "A little true" (out of a 4-point scale) to the statements; "I have felt like my life is meaningful" (recoded into "lack of meaning" above) and "I have felt a sense of purpose in life" (recoded into "lack of purpose" above) when asked, "To what extent would you say the following have been true?"

[14] About 75% of lonely adults reported lacking meaning *or* purpose.

Preventing and Mitigating Loneliness

We have described elsewhere various strategies for preventing and mitigating loneliness, including building a social infrastructure that enables lonely people to find meaningful community groups and disseminating strategies for reframing or otherwise addressing negative and self-defeating thoughts that often beset lonely individuals (e.g., see our first report on loneliness). The data shared here on what adults identify as personal solutions suggest other, specific strategies will be helpful as well, including culturally relevant and accessible guidance in giving others more grace and being more honest with others about one's needs. Further, much more needs to be understood about what strategies might benefit the large numbers of lonely Americans who report needing to learn to love themselves.

Our data also reinforces the role that all of us have to play in reducing loneliness. There's only so much lonely people can do if the ones they feel close to are distracted by technology or so overworked or exhausted that they can't devote quality time together – amongst the main sources of blame cited by our respondents. Encouragingly, the solution people endorsed most, including lonely adults, is available to almost all of us: "taking time each day to reach out to a friend or family member."

Our new data also point to the importance of our public and private leaders focusing on the "swirl" of feelings underneath loneliness, such as anxiety and depression and the lack of meaning and purpose. See here and here for our recent reports on the mental health of young adults, teens and parents/caregivers. Each of these reports lists a set of recommendations along with carefully vetted programs and resources. To promote purpose and meaning, for instance, we argue that adults ought to be more intentional about helping young people discern what is meaningful to them, and we debunk the myth that each of us has a "calling" or a single, organizing purpose that will power our lives. We also make the case that service, especially working on common problems in groups, is important in both alleviating loneliness and finding meaning and purpose. Two-thirds of our adult respondents–and slightly more lonely adults–reported that "finding ways to help others, such as doing community service or caring for others" would reduce their loneliness. Stay tuned for an upcoming article on the many ways public and private leaders can both help people create social connections and cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose.

Methodology

In the beginning of 2024, Making Caring Common continued to further examine the literature on loneliness, digging deeper into reports like the Surgeon General's 2023 Advisory, initiatives like the Foundation for Social Connection and peer-reviewed articles on measurement, belonging, social connections, and spirituality. We designed our 42-item survey (including matrix or grid questions with various items each) over the course of the spring, seeking feedback from key stakeholders and advisors.

In May 6-14, 2024, YouGov launched our survey with 1,608 adult respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1,500 adults in the United States (U.S.) to produce the final dataset. Data cleaning comprised cleaning out the top 2% of speeders and skippers, as well as suspicious looking open ended responses (e.g., bot-like or spam responses, like button mashing). The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The sampling frame is a politically representative "modeled frame" of US adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote.

The dataset was then weighted to the respective sample frame using propensity scores. The matched cases from the general population and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function for the general population sample included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, region and 2020 presidential vote choice. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weight for the general population was post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice as well as a multi-variable stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories) and education (4-categories).

In efforts to understand some of the data with more nuance, we conducted a brief survey in August of 2024 with More in Common's *Americans in Conversation* (AIC) panel. Their sample was recruited via Prodege, an online survey vendor who set specific quotas based on target demographics reflecting the Census and other partisan quota targets. AIC consists of a politically and demographically diverse and representative online community of about 200 Americans with whom MIC can engage continuously. They generously make the platform available to partners to provide rapid response insights at key moments (as well as for planned longer-term purposes), and for us, the key moment was wanting to learn more based on our findings from the May 2024 YouGov survey. Thus, we developed another, much more brief survey to provide additional insights on loneliness and the nature of adults' social connections. More in Common then launched our survey with their AIC panel on August 21-26, 2024, garnering responses from a total of 193 adults.