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Social Isolation Growing in U.S., Study Says

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The Number of People Who Say They Have No One to Confide In Has Risen

By [Shankar Vedantam](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Americans are far more socially isolated today than they were two decades ago, and a sharply growing number of people say they have no one in whom they can confide, according to a comprehensive new evaluation of the decline of social ties in the United States.

A quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal troubles, more than double the number who were similarly isolated in 1985. Overall, the number of people Americans have in their closest circle of confidants has dropped from around three to about two.

The comprehensive new study paints a sobering picture of an increasingly fragmented America, where intimate social ties -- once seen as an integral part of daily life and associated with a host of psychological and civic benefits -- are shrinking or nonexistent. In bad times, far more people appear to suffer alone.

"That image of people on roofs after Katrina resonates with me, because those people did not know someone with a car," said Lynn Smith-Lovin, a Duke University sociologist who helped conduct the study. "There really is less of a safety net of close friends and confidants."

If close social relationships support people in the same way that beams hold up buildings, more and more Americans appear to be dependent on a single beam.

Compared with 1985, nearly 50 percent more people in 2004 reported that their spouse is the only person they can confide in. But if people face trouble in that relationship, or if a spouse falls sick, that means these people have no one to turn to for help, Smith-Lovin said.

"We know these close ties are what people depend on in bad times," she said. "We're not saying people are completely isolated. They may have 600 friends on Facebook.com [a popular networking Web site] and e-mail 25 people a day, but they are not discussing matters that are personally important."

The new research is based on a high-quality random survey of nearly 1,500 Americans. Telephone surveys miss people who are not home, but the General Social Survey, funded by the National Science Foundation, has a high response rate and

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conducts detailed face-to-face interviews, in which respondents are pressed to confirm they mean what they say.

Whereas nearly three-quarters of people in 1985 reported they had a friend in whom they could confide, only half in 2004 said they could count on such support. The number of people who said they counted a neighbor as a confidant dropped by more than half, from about 19 percent to about 8 percent.

The results, being published today in the American Sociological Review, took researchers by surprise because they had not expected to see such a steep decline in close social ties.

Smith-Lovin said increased professional responsibilities, including working two or more jobs to make ends meet, and long commutes leave many people too exhausted to seek social -- as well as family -- connections: "Maybe sitting around watching 'Desperate Housewives' . . . is what counts for family interaction."

Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard and the author of "Bowling Alone," a book about increasing social isolation in the United States, said the new study supports what he has been saying for years to skeptical audiences in the academy.

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