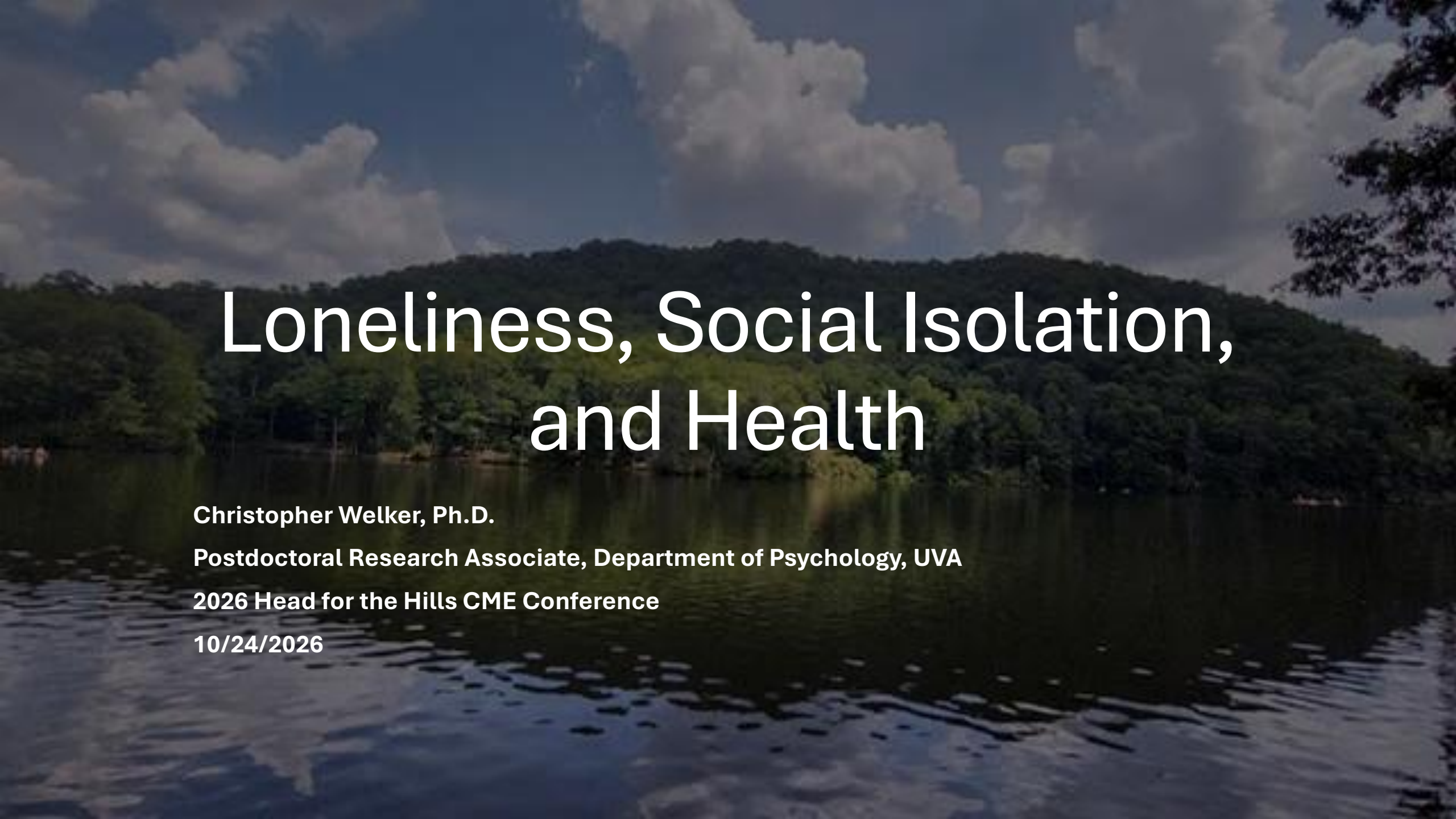


# Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Health

**Christopher Welker, Ph.D.**

**Postdoctoral Research Associate, Department of Psychology, UVA**

**2026 Head for the Hills CME Conference**

**10/24/2026**

I have no financial relationships to disclose

# Learning goals

1

**Define** and **differentiate** social isolation from loneliness

2

**Compare** and **contrast** the causes and consequences of social isolation and loneliness

3

Raise awareness of current **interventions** designed to counteract loneliness and social isolation

# Loneliness Epidemic?

# Americans are lonely and it's killing them. How the US [illegible] new epidemic.



**Adrianna Rodriguez**
USA TODAY

Published 5:09 a.m. ET Dec. 24, 2023 | **Updated 1:06 p.**

FORBES > INNOVATION > HEALTHCARE

# Battling Loneliness: The New Public Health Crisis

**William A. Haseltine** Contributor ⓘ

*William A. Haseltine, Ph.D., covers genomics and regenerative medicine*

re

PBS NEWS WEEKEND

# How a growing [illegible] loneliness is affecting Americans' health

Feb 24, 2024 5:30 PM EST

ET

S CONSIDERED

ncent Acovino, Christopher Intagliata

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

# Outline

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**Define** and **describe** loneliness and social isolation

**Consequences** of loneliness and social isolation

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# What is social isolation?



# What is loneliness?

## Loneliness

- **Psychological perception** that current level of socializing does not equal ideal level of socializing

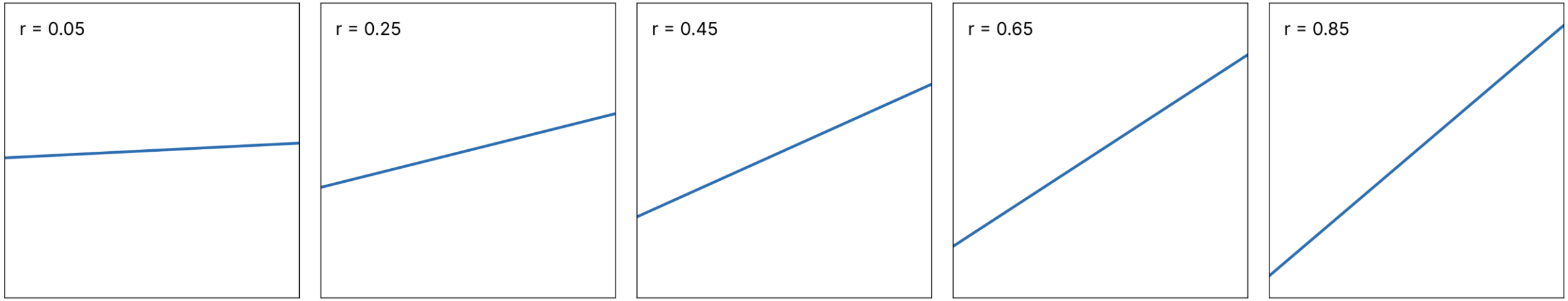
## Social Isolation

- **Objective** lack of social connection

Perissinotto et al., 2019, JAGS

# Interrelatedness of social isolation and loneliness

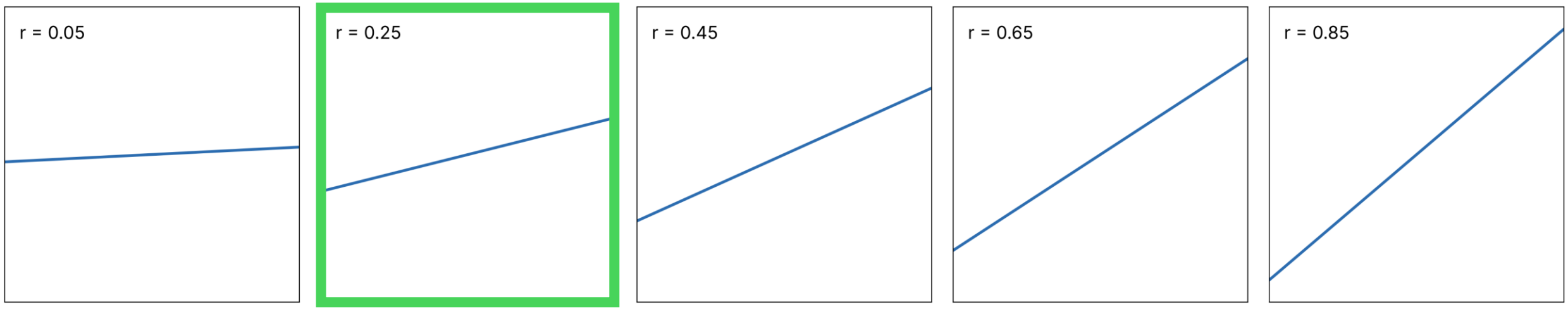
**Which plot shows the empirical relationship between loneliness and social isolation?**




Taylor, 2020, Clinical Social Work Journal
Palmer, 2020, International Psychogeriatrics
Cornwell and Waite, 2009, Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences

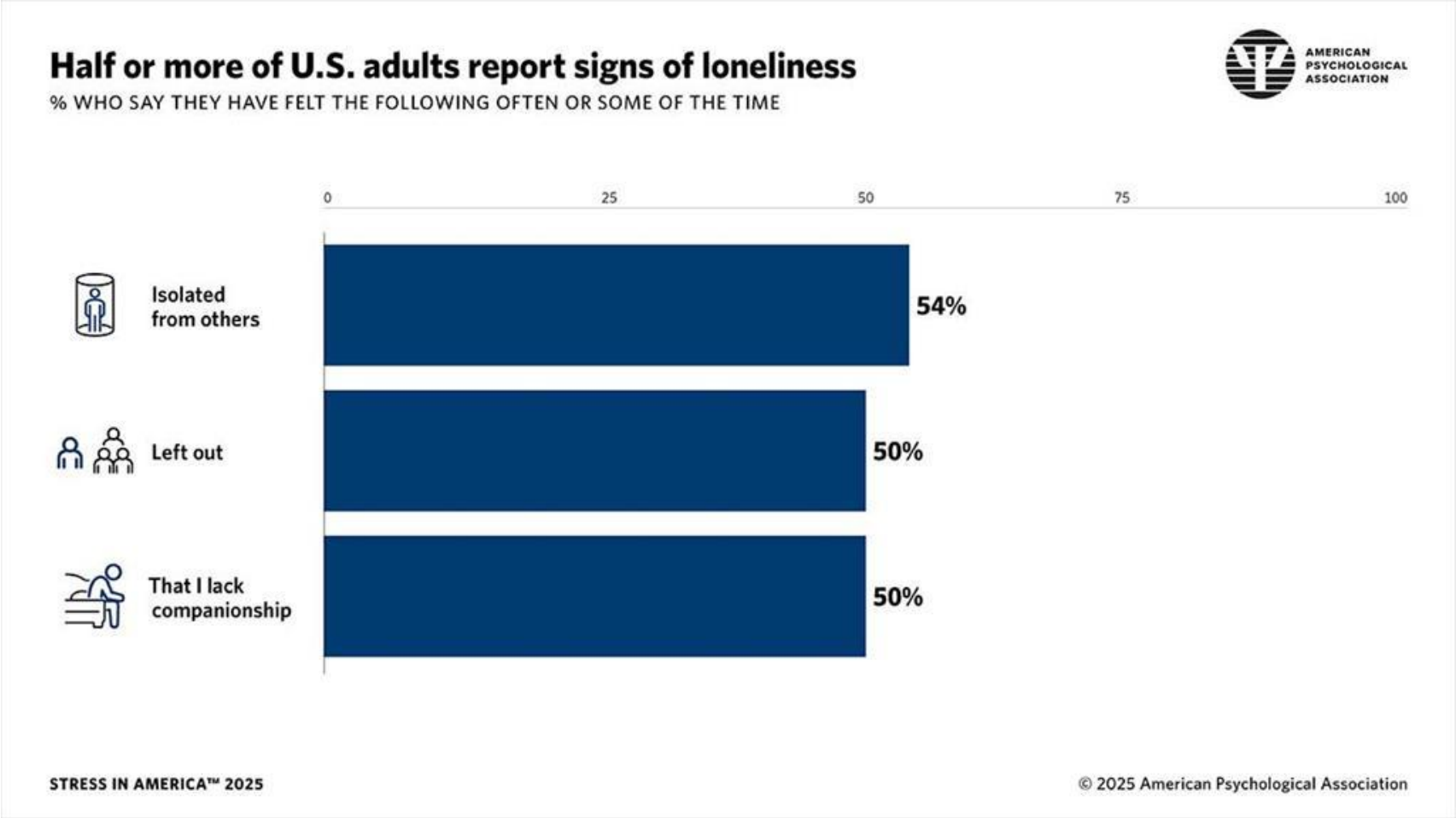
# Interrelatedness of social isolation and loneliness

**Which plot shows the empirical relationship between loneliness and social isolation?**

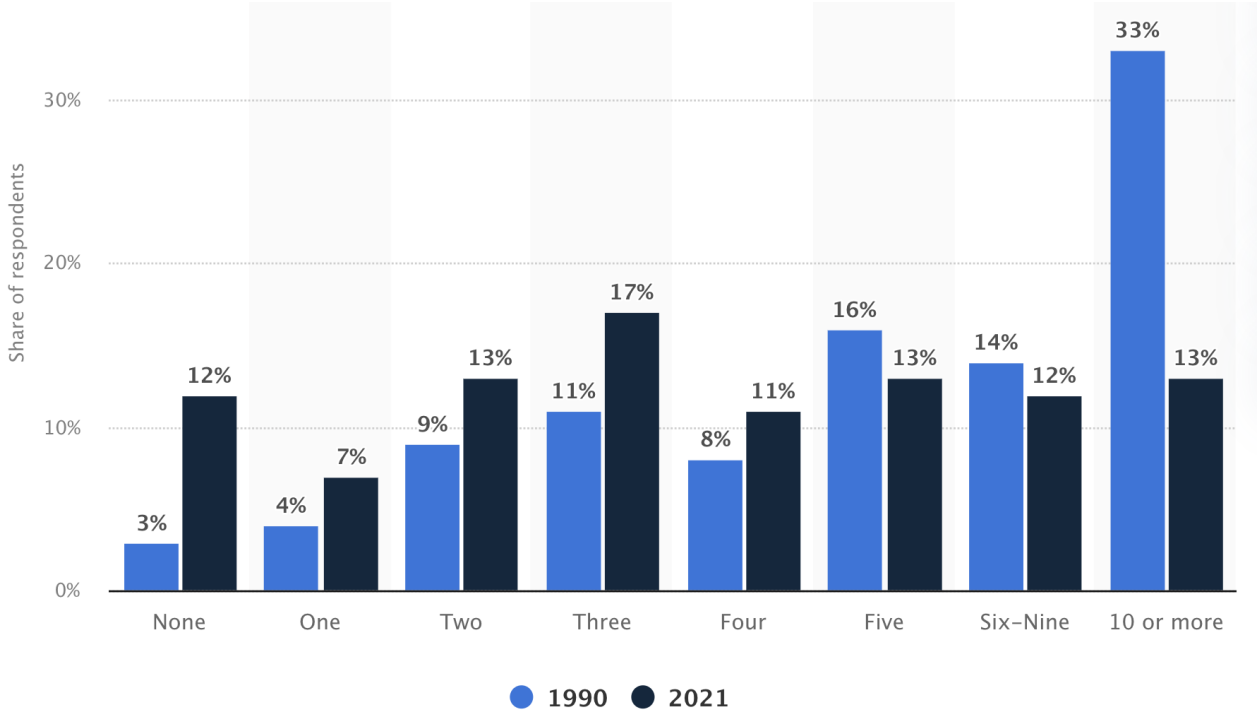



Taylor, 2020, Clinical Social Work Journal
Palmer, 2020, International Psychogeriatrics
Cornwell and Waite, 2009, Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences

# Prevalence of loneliness



# Prevalence of social isolation




American Perspectives Survey, May 2021; Gallup, 1990

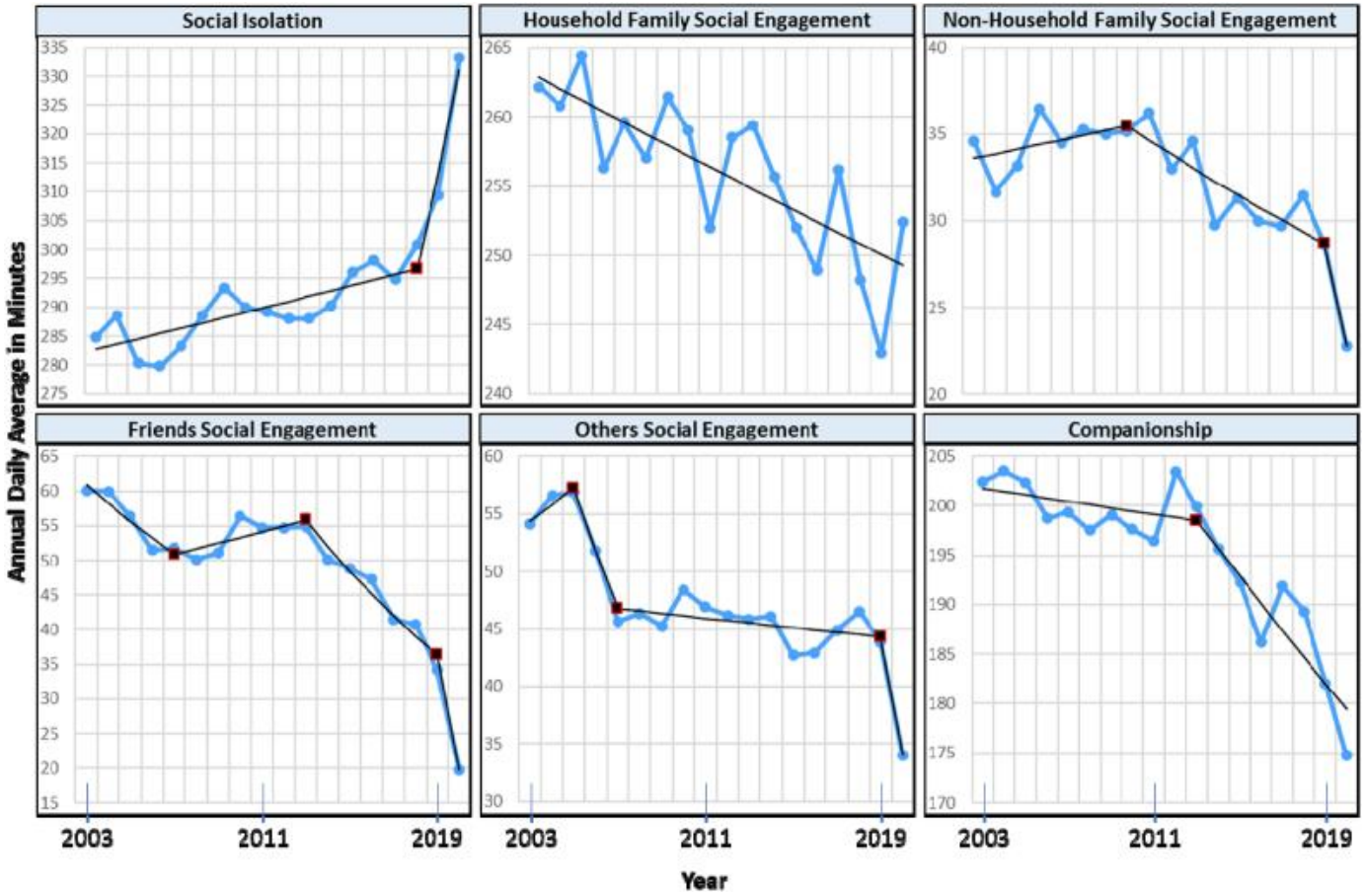
# Trends in loneliness

- Hard to assess, as **loneliness only started to be included in panel data recently** (last 15 years)
  - Luhmann et al., 2022, Nat Rev Psych
- Some data suggests that it is **decreasing/holding steady** (2014-2018)
  - Hawkley et al., 2022, Int J Behav Dev
- Some data suggests it is **increasing**
  - Twenge et al., 2019, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships



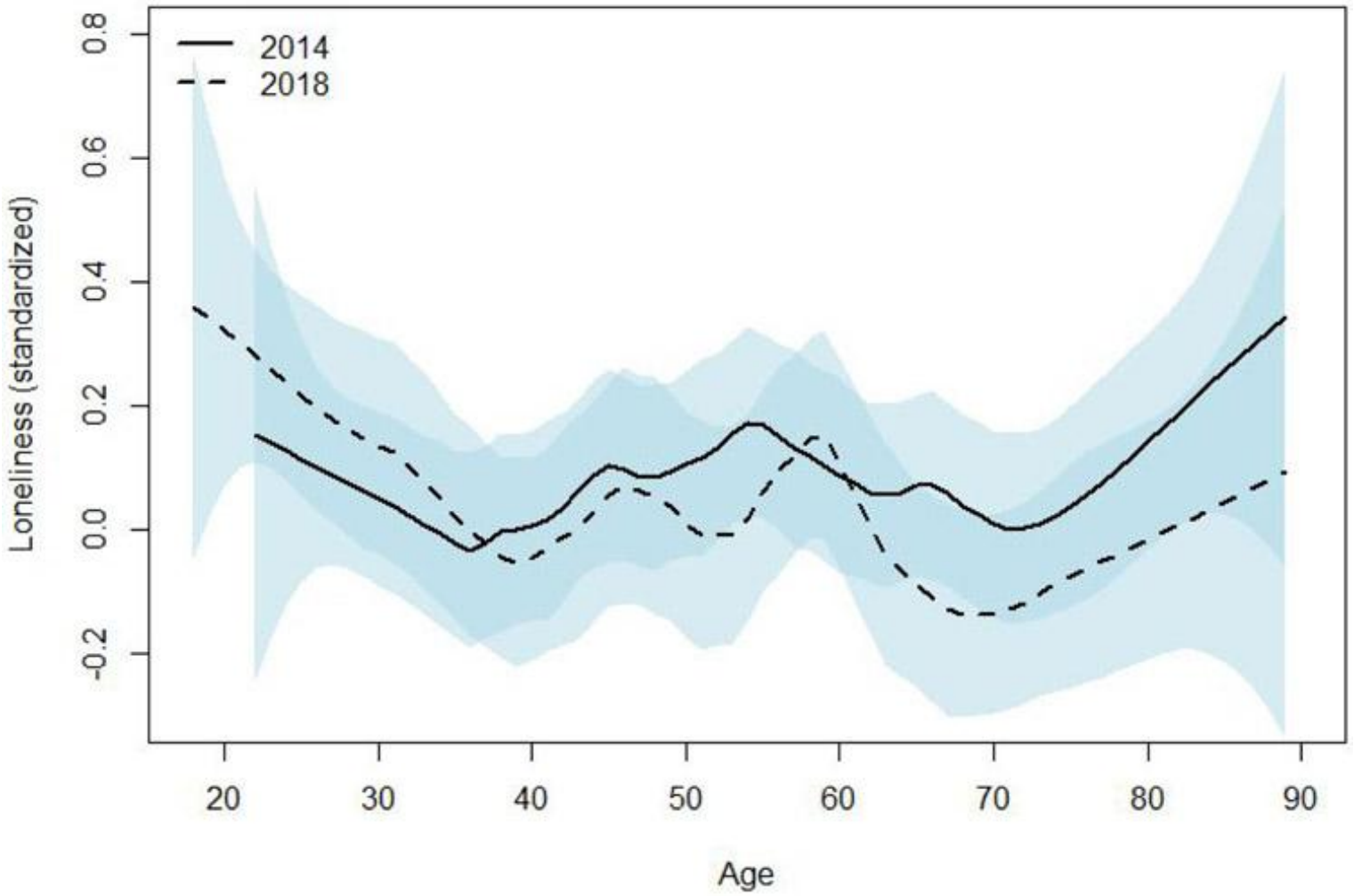

Twenge et al., 2019, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

# Trends in social isolation



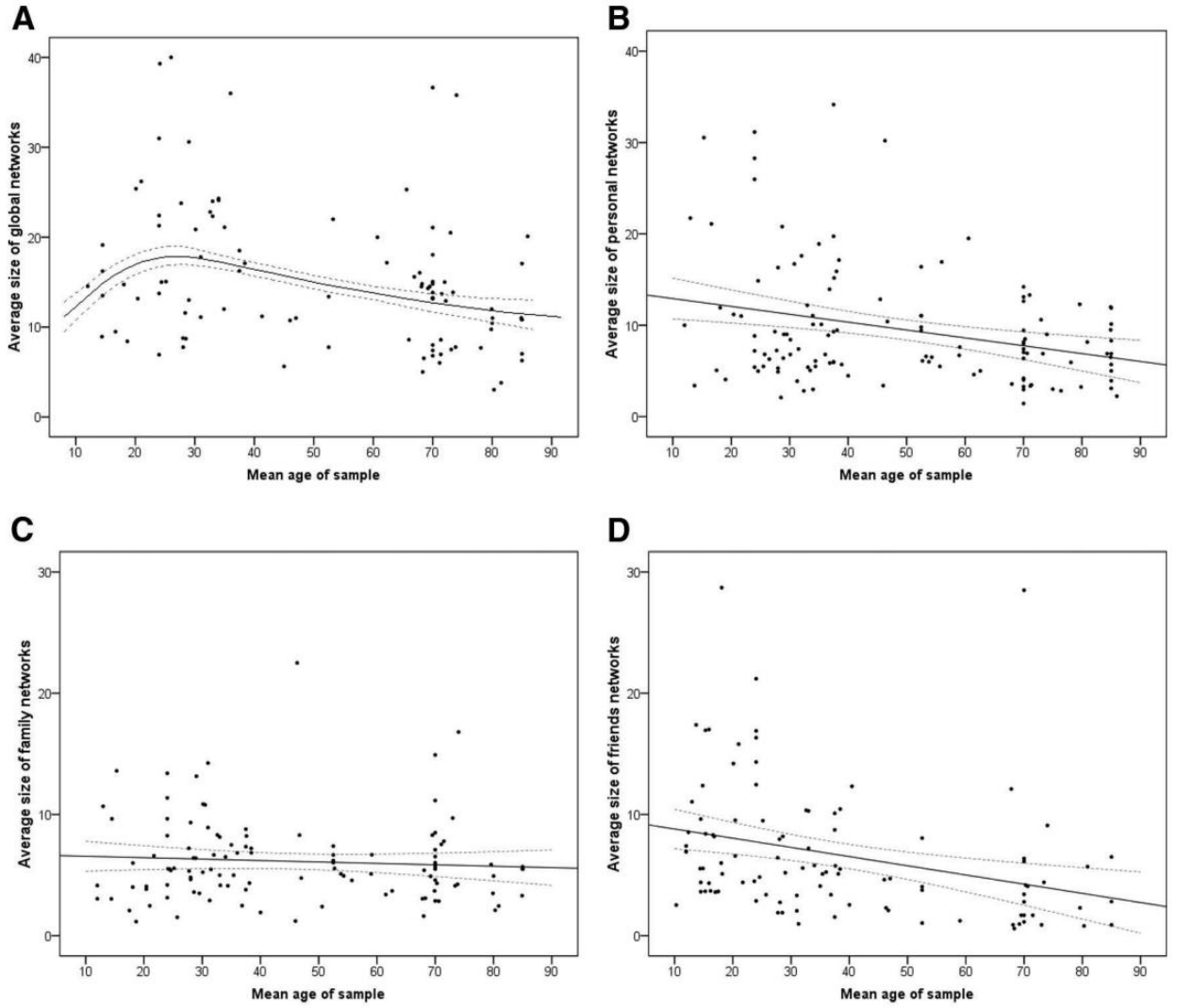

Kannan & Veazie, 2022, SSM – Population Health

# Loneliness over the lifespan




Hawkley et al., 2022, Int J Behav Dev

# Social Isolation over the lifespan




Wrzus et al., 2013. Psychological Bulletin

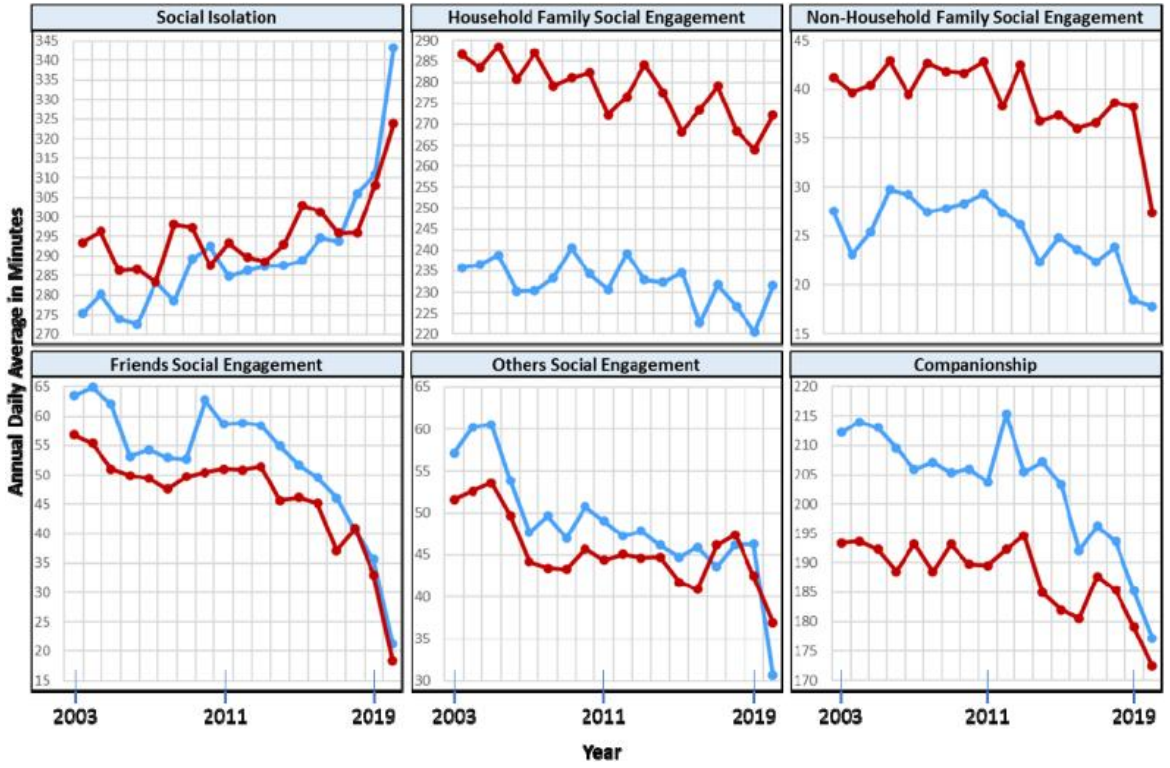
# Gender differences in loneliness and social isolation

**Who has heard of the Male Loneliness Epidemic?**

# Gender differences in loneliness and social isolation

## Mixed evidence for differences in social isolation

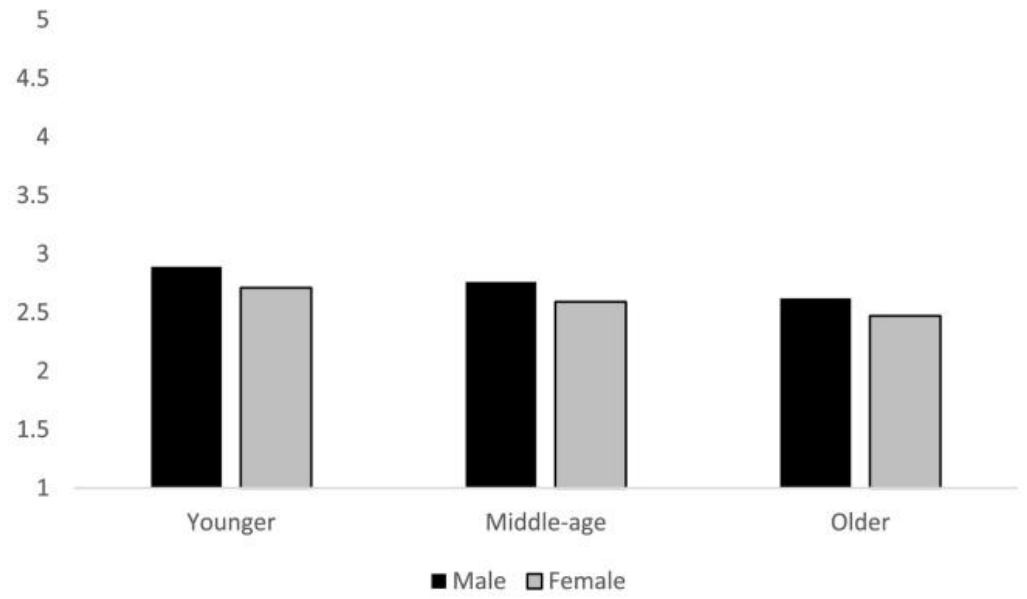
Red = Women
Blue = Men




Kannan & Veazie, 2022, SSM – Population Health

# Gender differences in loneliness and social isolation

Minimal/weak evidence for gender differences in loneliness




Maes et al., 2019, E J Personality

# Takeaways

- **Social Isolation** = objective; **Loneliness** = psychological
- Both are **highly prevalent** and **increasing** over time
- **Social Isolation** peaks in later life; **Loneliness** peaks in early and late life
- No consistent gender differences for either

# Outline

**Define** and **describe** loneliness and social isolation

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# Outline

**Define** and **describe** loneliness and social isolation

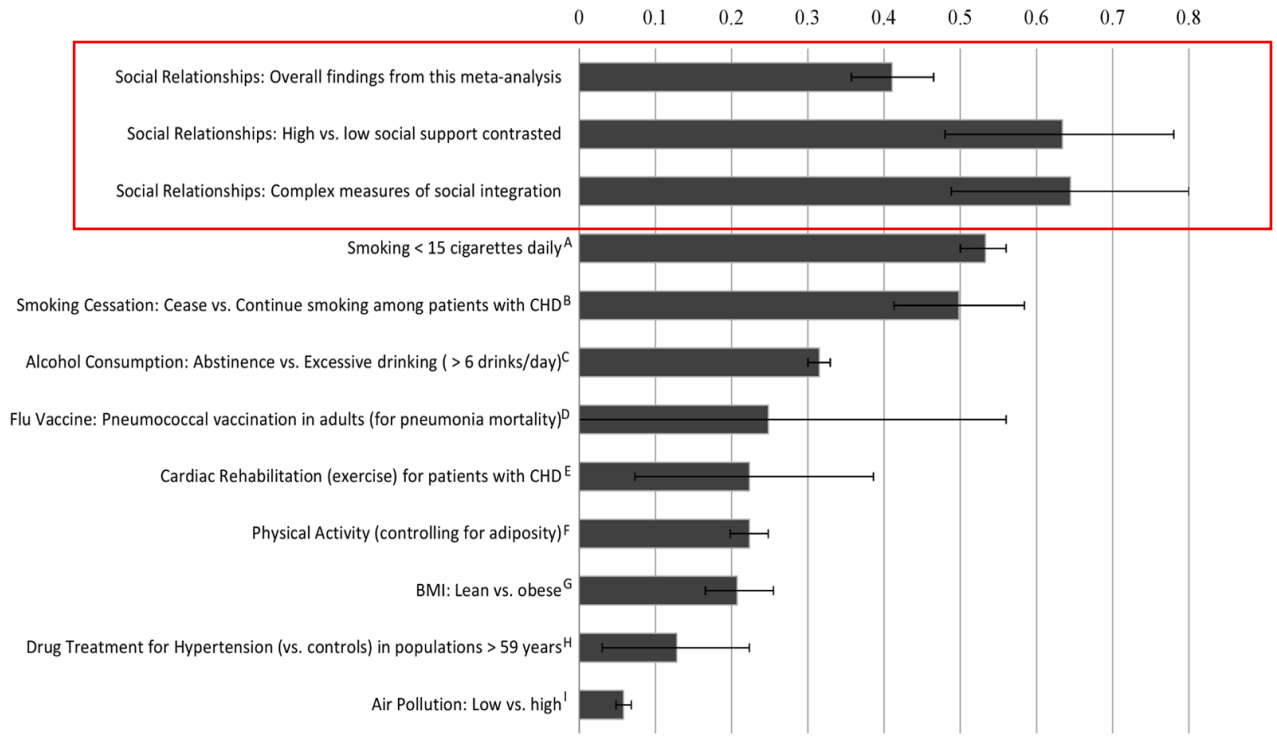
**Consequences** of loneliness and social isolation

**Causes** of loneliness and social isolation

**Interventions** for loneliness and social isolation

# Consequences of loneliness

- Increase the risk for **premature death** by 26% (similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day)
- 29% increased risk of **heart disease**
- 32% increased risk of **stroke**
- May increase **susceptibility to viruses** and **respiratory illness.**

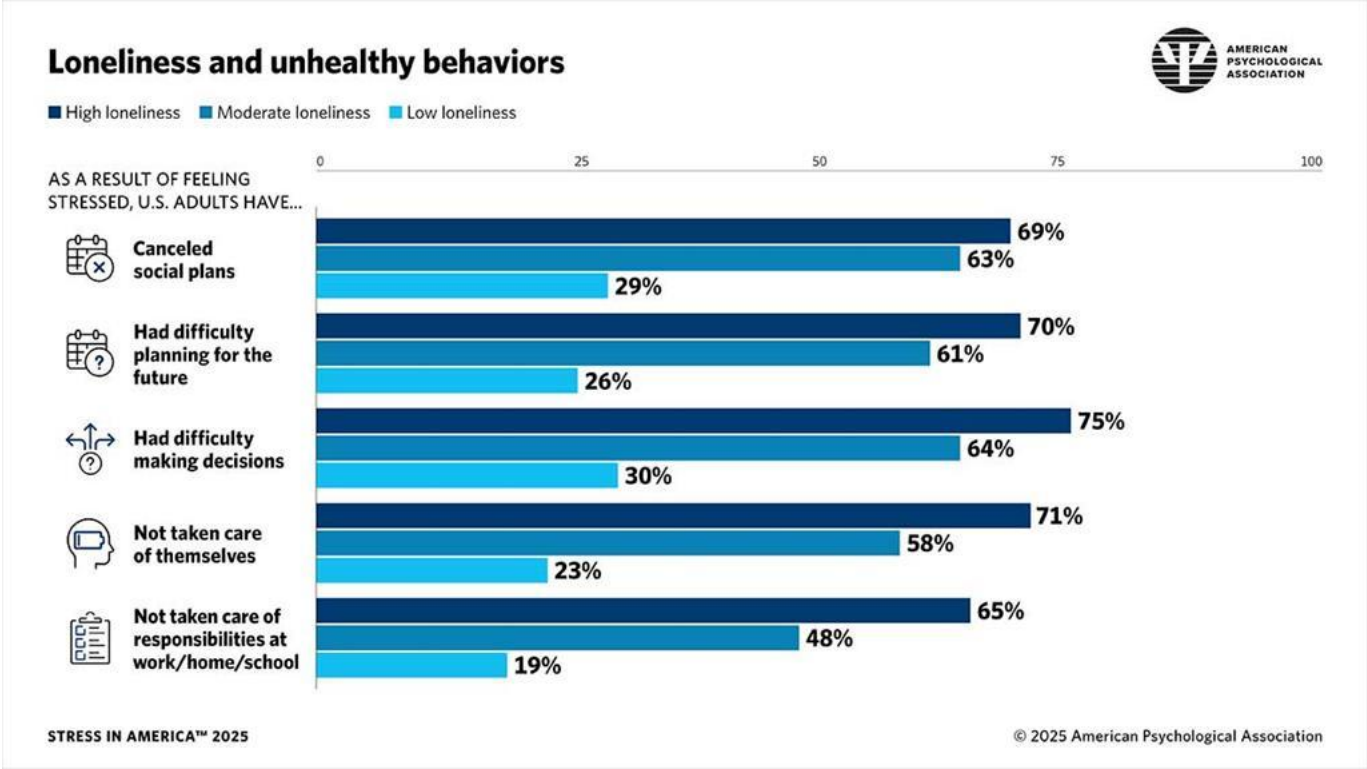



Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Mann et al., 2022

# Consequences of loneliness

Loneliness is a risk factor for:

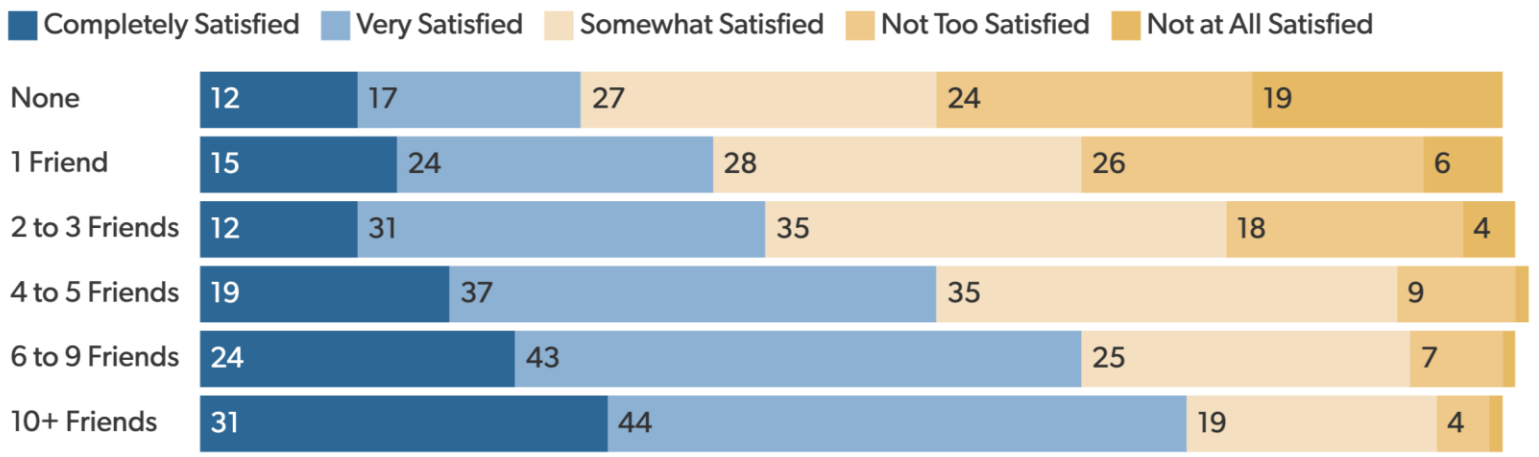
- **Depression**
  - Cacioppo et al., 2006, Psychology and Aging
- **Anxiety**
  - Ernst, 2025, Curr. Opin. Behav. Sci.
- **Dementia**
  - Luchetti et al., 2026, Nature Mental Health



# Consequences of social isolation

Social isolation is a risk factor for:

- All-cause **mortality**
  - Steptoe et al., 2013, PNAS
- Worse **survival** after heart attack or stroke
  - Hakulinen et al., 2018, Heart
- **Dementia**
  - Shen et al., 2022, Neurology
- **Unhealthy behaviors** (e.g., smoking, physical inactivity)
  - Banks et al., 2011, IFS




Cox, 2021, Survey Center on American Life

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# Causes of loneliness and social isolation



Structural



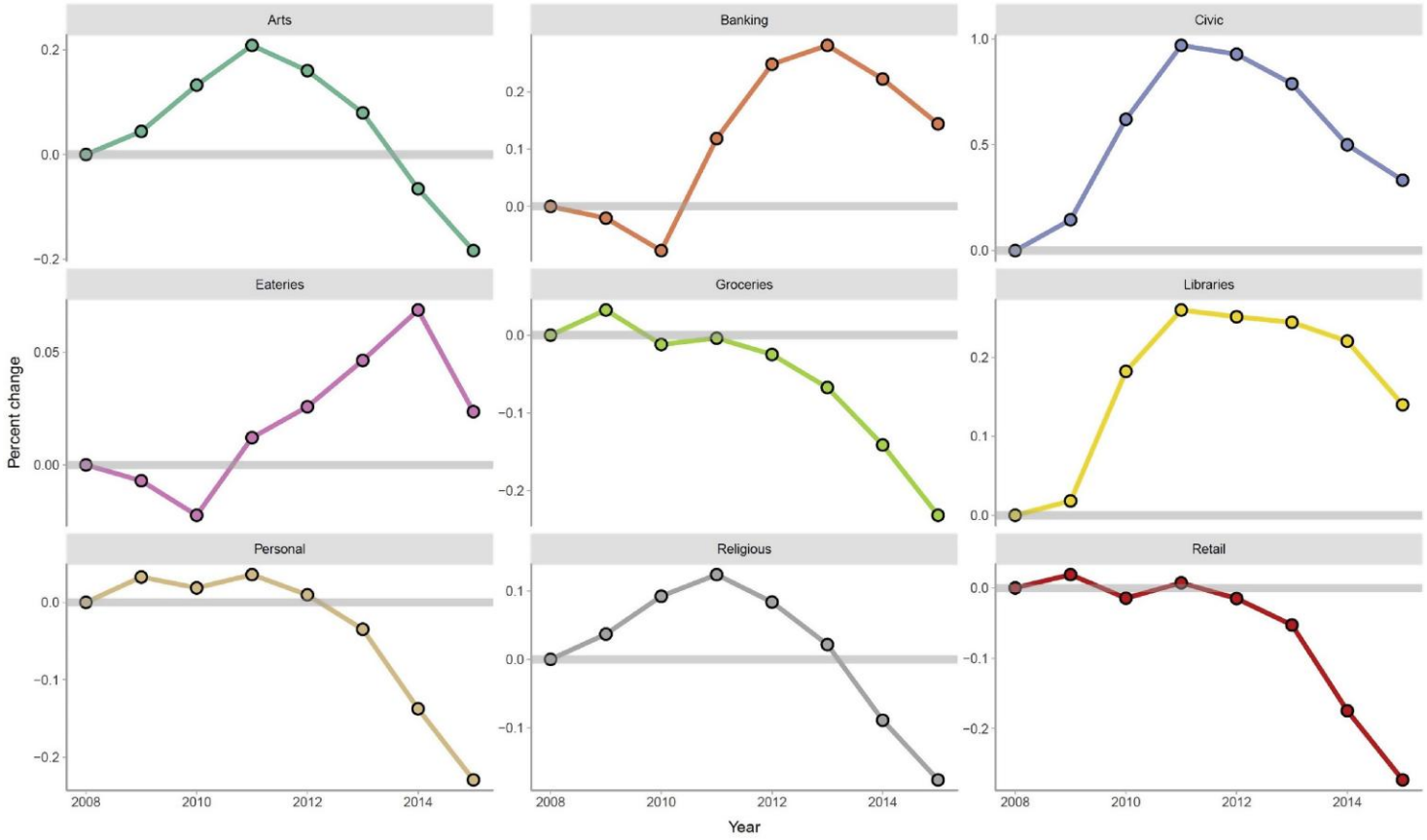
Cultural



Psychological

# Structural

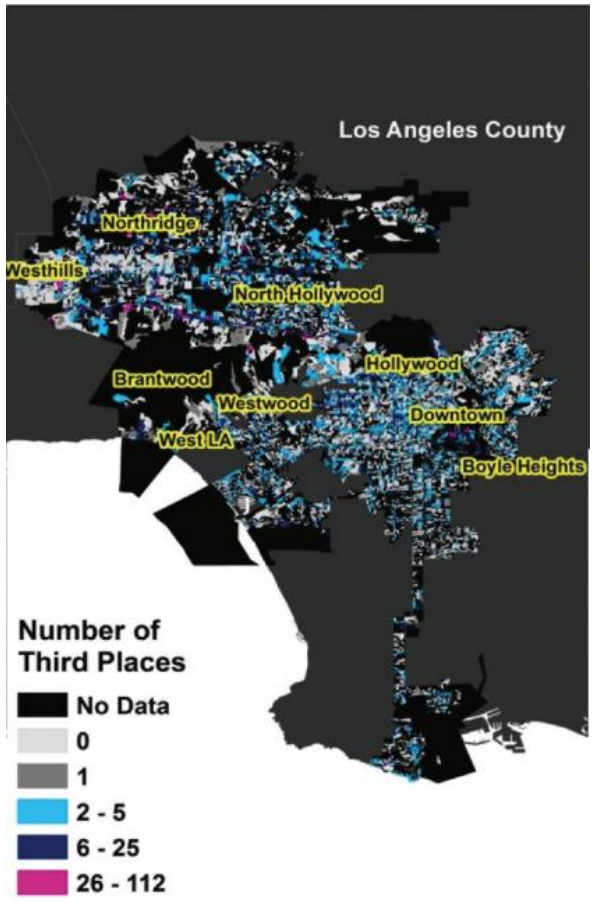
- Loss of third places

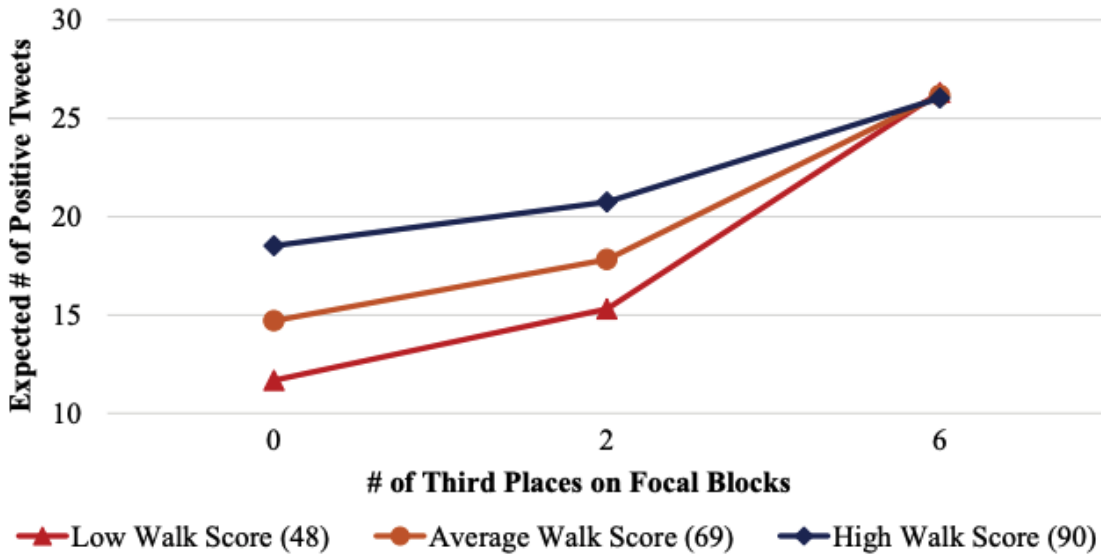



Finlay et al., 2019, Health & Place

# Structural

- Loss of third places

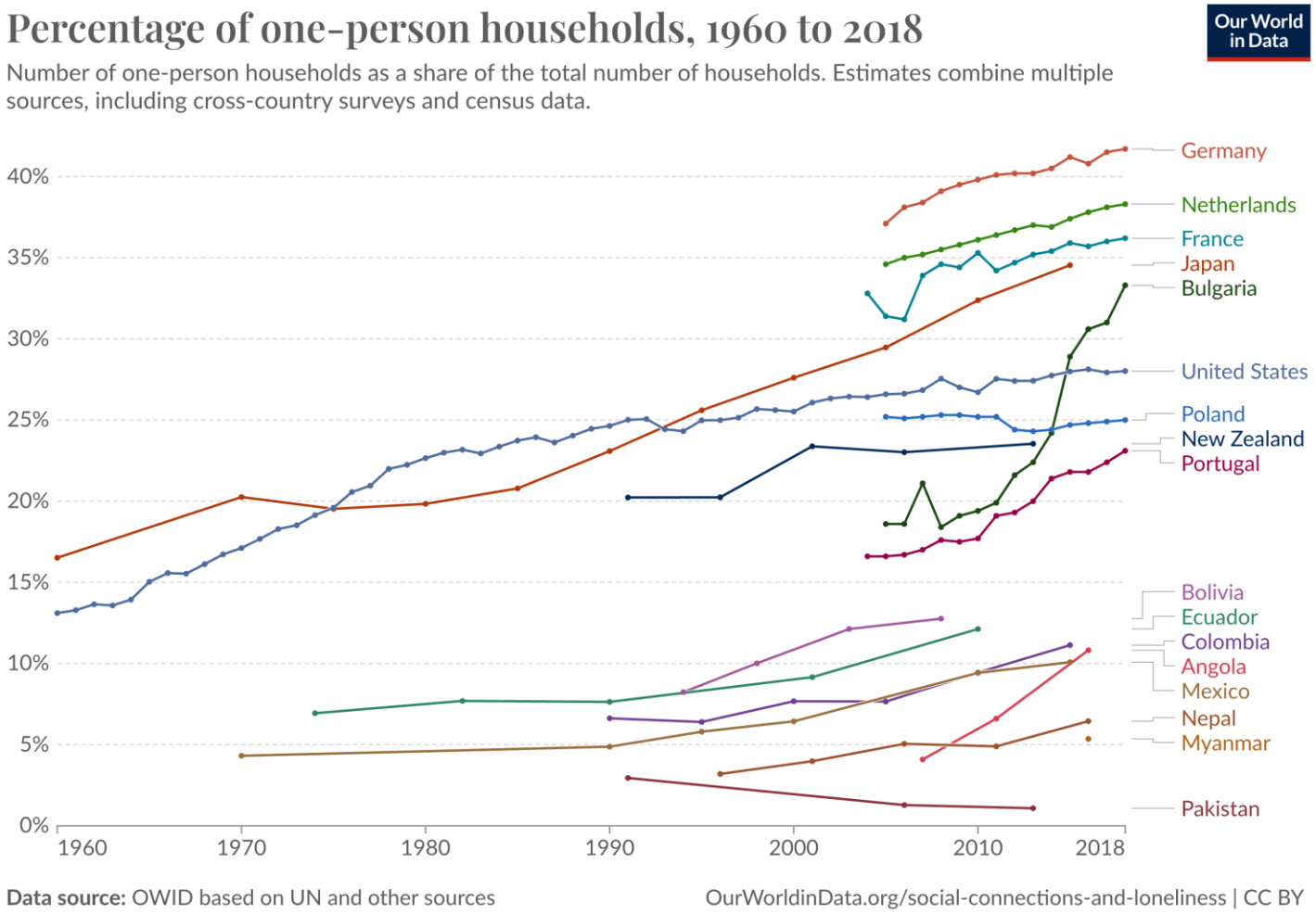



Lee, 2024, Cities & Health

# Structural

- Loss of third places – even more important when we live alone



# Cultural

- Smartphones and passive media

**Displacement?**

Face-to-face (F2F) interactions (and voice and video calls) predict lower loneliness. (Hall, Dominguez, & Mihailova)

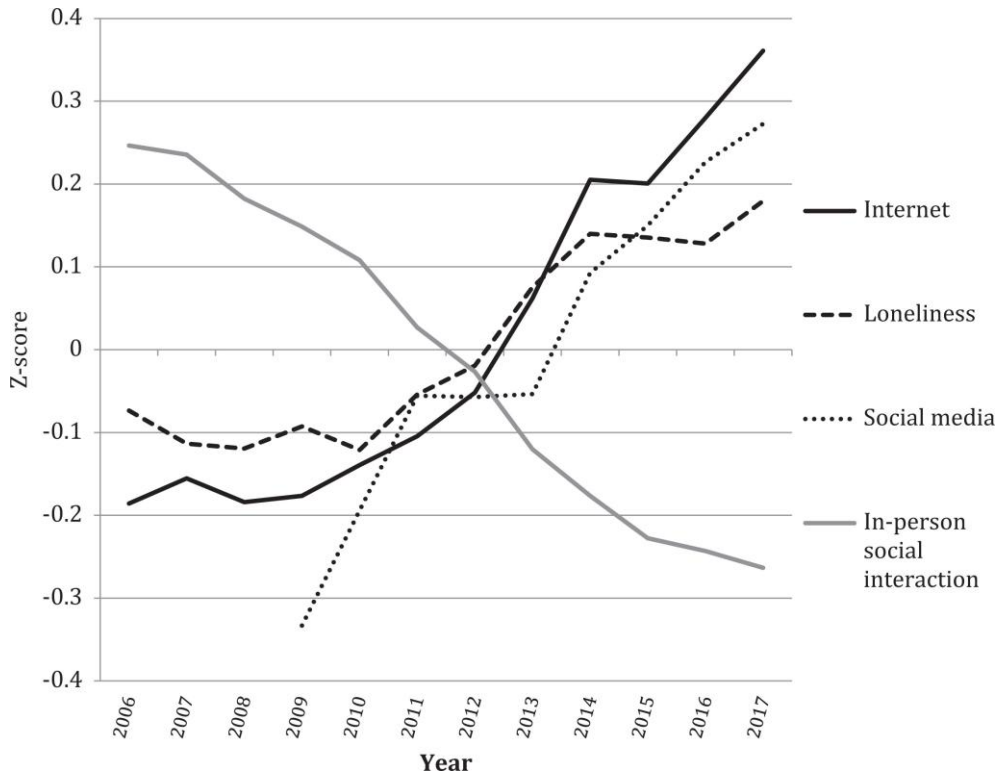
People have fewer F2F interactions on days they use phones more (Verduyn et al., 2021) but heavy users are not more isolated

**Interference?**

Smartphones reduce enjoyment during F2F (Dwyer, Kushlev, & Dunn, 2018) and reduce smiles between strangers (Kushlev et al., 2019)

**What about social media?**

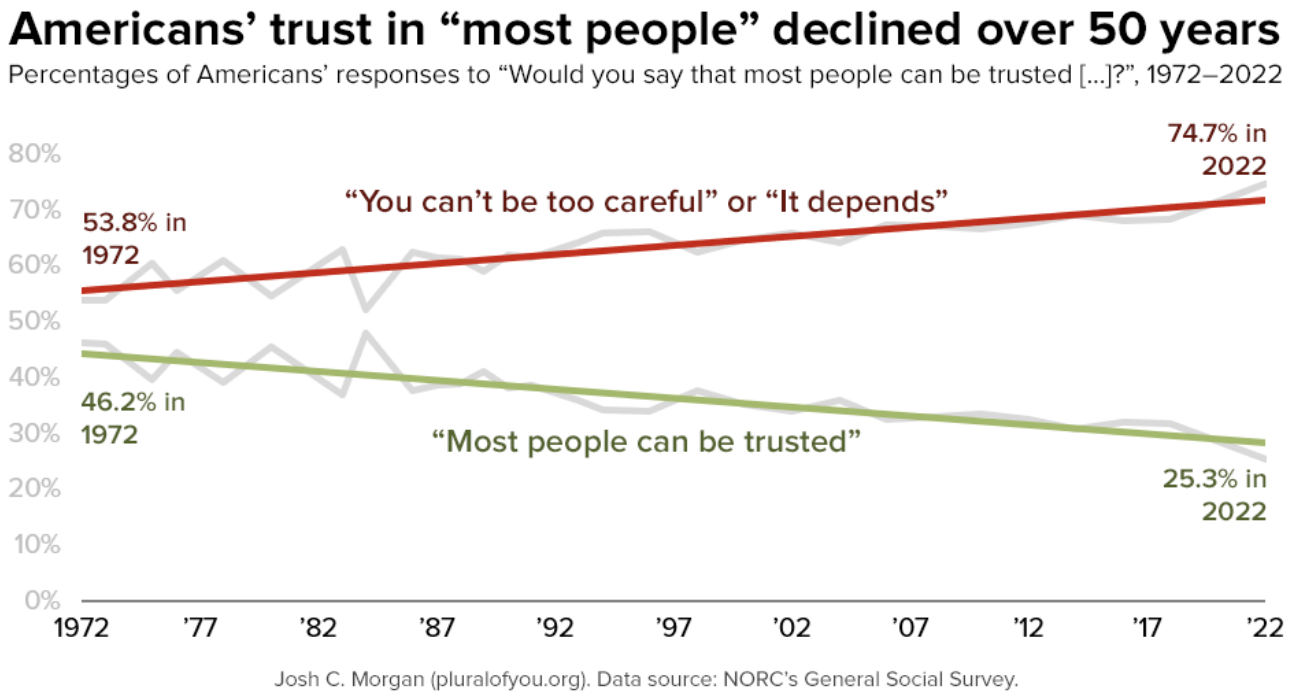
Not for average user (Hall, 2024) but "problematic" social media use predicts loneliness (Marttila, Koivula, & Räsänen, 2021)




Twenge et al., 2019, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

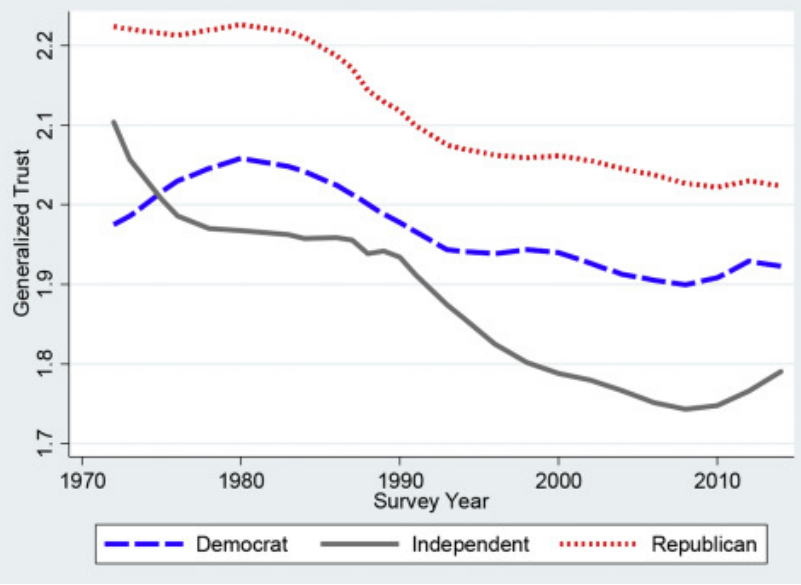
# Psychological

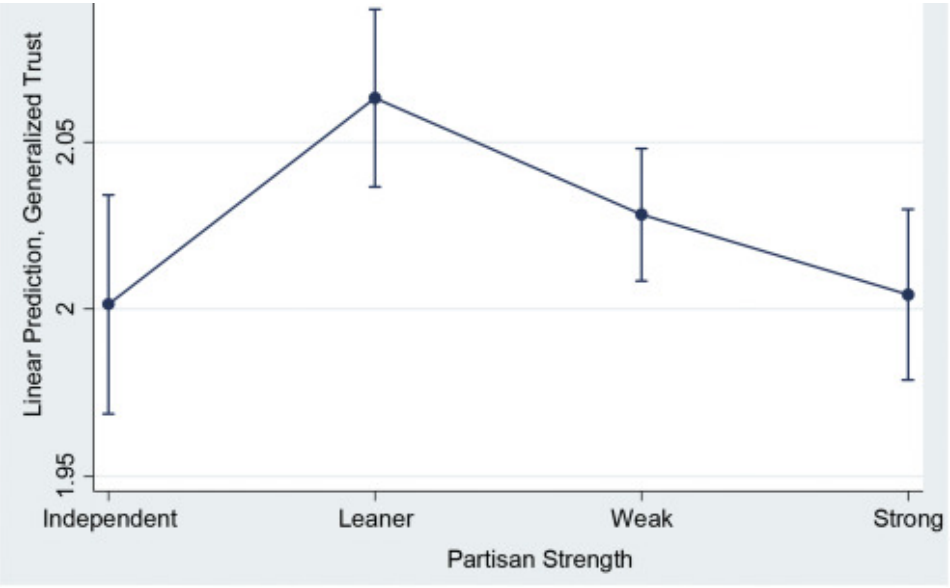
- Generalized trust



# Psychological

- Generalized trust

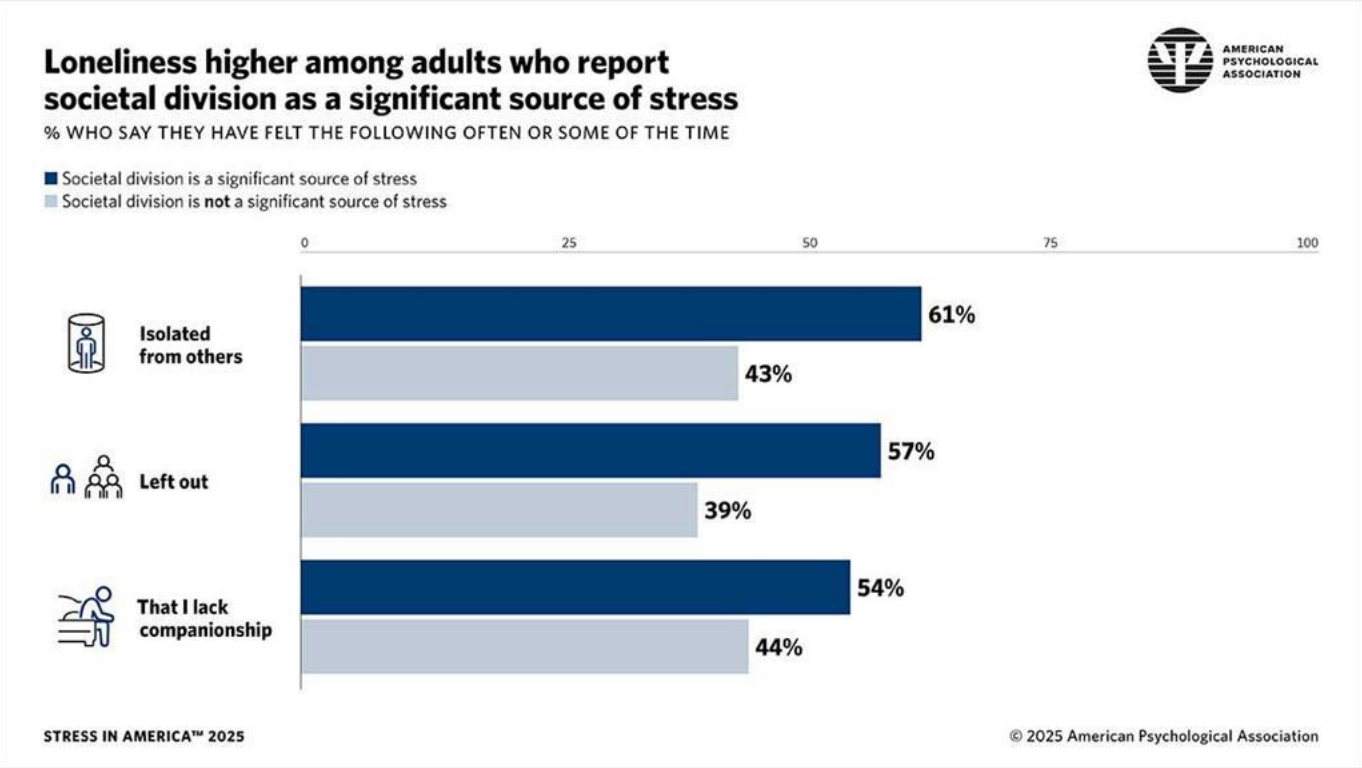



Hooghe & Oser, 2017, Social Science Research

# Psychological

- Generalized trust



# Outline

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# What can we do?

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

American Psychologist

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https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001578

# Are Loneliness Interventions Effective for Reducing Loneliness? A Meta-Analytic Review of 280 Studies

Mathias Lasgaard[1, 2], Pamela Qualter[3], Claus Løvschall[1], Lisbeth Mølgaard Laustsen[1, 4], Michelle H. Lim[5, 6], Sigrid Engelbrecht Sjøl[1], Lauren Burke[3], Emely Ek Blæhr[1, 7], Helle Terkildsen Maindal[8], Anne-Sofie Hargaard[1], Robin Christensen[9, 10, 11], and Julie Christiansen[1, 2]

# Types of Interventions

| | |
|---|---|
| **Social support** | ”Provide care and companionship while fostering a sense of connection”<br>“Offering emotional and/or instrumental support” |
| **Social network** | “Expand participants’ social networks by creating opportunities for social interaction” |
| **Social and emotional skills training** | “Improve participants’ social and emotional skills” |
| **Psychological interventions** | “Therapy or counseling services aiming to address cognition, attention, behavior, or emotions” |
| **Psychoeducation interventions** | “Increase knowledge about loneliness through educational input” |

Lasgaard et al., 2025, American Psychologist

# Takeaways

- **All interventions reduced loneliness**
  - Effects were small to moderate
  - Psychological interventions had the largest effects
- No perfect solution, but **lots of options**
- Many interventions are **time-intensive**

# Practical Steps

- **Awareness**
  - Help patients and other providers learn about loneliness and social isolation

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- **Assessment**
  - Have patients fill out quick surveys to assess loneliness and social isolation

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  - Have patients fill out quick surveys to assess loneliness and social isolation
    - **Loneliness** = UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004, Research and Aging)

# The UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale

Scale 3

This scale comprises 3 questions that measure three dimensions of loneliness: relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation. The questions are:

1. **How often do you feel that you lack companionship?**
2. **How often do you feel left out?**
3. **How often do you feel isolated from others?**

Hughes et al., 2004, Research and Aging

# Practical Steps

- **Awareness**
  - Help patients and other providers learn about loneliness and social isolation

- **Assessment**
  - Have patients fill out quick surveys to assess loneliness and social isolation
    - **Loneliness** = UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004, Research and Aging)
    - **Social Isolation** = Lubben Social Network Scale (Lubben et al., 2006, Gerontologist)

**FAMILY:** Considering the people to whom you are related by birth, marriage, adoption, etc.

1. How many relatives do you see or hear from at least once a month?
   ☐ none ☐ one ☐ two ☐ three or four ☐ five thru eight ☐ nine or more

2. How many relatives do you feel at ease with that you can talk about private matters?
   ☐ none ☐ one ☐ two ☐ three or four ☐ five thru eight ☐ nine or more

3. How many relatives do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?
   ☐ none ☐ one ☐ two ☐ three or four ☐ five thru eight ☐ nine or more

**FRIENDSHIPS**: Considering all of your friends including those who live in your neighborhood

4. How many of your friends do you see or hear from at least once a month?
   ☐ none ☐ one ☐ two ☐ three or four ☐ five thru eight ☐ nine or more

5. How many friends do you feel at ease with that you can talk about private matters?
   ☐ none ☐ one ☐ two ☐ three or four ☐ five thru eight ☐ nine or more

6. How many friends do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?
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Lubben et al., 2006, Gerontologist

# Practical Steps

- **Awareness**
  - Help patients and other providers learn about loneliness and social isolation
- **Assessment**
  - Have patients fill out quick surveys to assess loneliness and social isolation
    - **Loneliness** = UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004, Research and Aging)
    - **Social Isolation** = Lubben Social Network Scale (Lubben et al., 2006, Gerontologist)
- **Resources**
  - Help connect patients to educational material and local community social groups

# Outline

**Define** and **describe** loneliness and social isolation

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**Interventions** for loneliness and social isolation

# Learning goals

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2

**Compare** and **contrast** the causes and consequences of social isolation and loneliness

3

Raise awareness of current **interventions** designed to counteract loneliness and social isolation

# Summary

- **Loneliness** and **Social Isolation** are distinct phenomena
- **Common causes** have led to both, but they carry **different consequences**
- Many interventions exist, but there is **no perfect solution**
- We can help by raising **awareness**, practicing consistent **assessment**, and providing local **resources**