Online Action & Offline Effects
How Online Social Networking Sites Can Reverse the Shrinking Network Finding

Study: 25% of Americans have no one to confide in

Americans have a third fewer close friends and confidants than just two decades ago — a sign that people may be living lonelier, more isolated lives than in the past.

In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them, says a study in today’s American Sociological Review. In 2004, that number dropped to two, and one in four had no close confidants at all.

“People usually don't see that kind of big social change in a couple of decades,” says study co-author Lynn Smith-Lovin, professor of sociology at Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Close relationships are a safety net, she says. “Whether it’s picking up a child or finding someone to help you out of the city in a hurricane, these are people we depend on.”

Also, research has linked social isolation and loneliness to mental and physical health problems.

The study finds fewer contacts are from clubs and neighbors; people documented in the 2003 book Bowling Alone by Robert Putnam, a Harvard sociologist, had three times as many close confidants as those in the 2004 study.

The percentage of people who confide only in family increased from 11% to 20%, the study found. “If something may have lost your safety net,” Smith-Lovin says.

The study is based on surveys of 1,537 people in 1985 and 1,467 in 2004 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Not everyone sees such a dire picture. People still have other friends of Toronto says. “We have a lot of ties that aren’t super strong but are

What is your secondary mode of communication with these people?

As people encounter new circumstances – new devices, economic restructuring, social fashions, and so forth – they adapt in ways that sustain their key relationships.”

— Claude S. Fischer

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