



Cardus Backgrounder

June 29, 2020

Loneliness and Social Isolation

This backgrounder is intended to provide context for Cardus’s focus on loneliness and social isolation. Cardus research is intended not only to raise awareness and provide insight into a particular area of public life, but also to stimulate action and behavioural changes that have a positive impact on social flourishing.

Loneliness and social isolation were major problems before COVID-19. But in the context of a pandemic in which social distancing requires how, when, and where we interact with others, it is even more important to understand how they function in our society and what can be done about it.

What are some of the effects of isolation and loneliness?¹

- Thirty-three percent of Canadians do not have family or friends they can count on to provide financial assistance in an emergency.
- Eighteen percent are not certain who they might be able to depend on for emotional support in a personal crisis.
- Twenty-three percent of the population report being both “very lonely” and “very isolated.” Single Canadians, visible minorities, LGBTQ2 persons, and Indigenous persons are over-represented in this group.
- Loneliness triggers physiological reactions that contribute to weakened immune-system defenses and increased inflammation.²

¹ Public opinion data cited is from a Cardus-commissioned Angus Reid Institute survey conducted in the spring of 2019. Full results and details are available at “A Portrait of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Canada Today,” June 17, 2019, <http://angusreid.org/social-isolation-loneliness-canada/>.

² Honor Whiteman, “Loneliness Alters the Immune System to Cause Illness, Study Finds,” *Medical News Today*, November 24, 2015, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/303084>.

- Loneliness is linked to the increased use of antidepressants, increased use of the medical system, and suicidal behaviour.³
- Loneliness contributes to lower job performance and makes it more difficult for colleagues to be supportive, which can lead to a negative cycle in the workplace and a broader range of negative economic and social outcomes.⁴
- Baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) report lacking companionship, feeling left out, and feeling more isolated than any other generation, implying that negative public effects are likely to increase in the coming years.⁵
- There is a correlation between higher social-media use among young people and higher levels of loneliness, contributing to youth depression and unhappiness.⁶
- Recent research in Italy has suggested that social isolation is linked to several outbreaks of COVID-19 in elderly populations.⁷

Loneliness and social isolation are not good things. It is not good for us to be alone; we are social creatures. We instinctively attach to our parents after birth. Growing up is much better when we are surrounded by friends and not bullies. We are able to feel that we belong and are valued as part of a community that we care about and that cares about us. For young people, when a community of peers is supplemented by the mentorship of trusted adults who have their best interests at heart, they receive the benefits and advantages of having wider and deeper personal and social networks, increased personal enjoyment, and a greater likelihood of positive future outcomes such as a successful adulthood.

But none of this is guaranteed.

Although forced social distancing due to this pandemic has provided the immediate context for thinking about social isolation and loneliness, it is important that we consider this issue well beyond the challenges of this immediate crisis. The social circumstances that build community and promote flourishing are not available for all in our society. Even when they are, it is not certain that a loneliness-free adulthood will follow. From the neighbourhood to the workplace, from individual

³ Victoria Carmichael, "Opinion: An 'Epidemic of Loneliness' Threatens Canadians' Health," *Montreal Gazette*, May 16, 2018, <https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-an-epidemic-of-loneliness-threatens-canadians-health>.

⁴ Sigal Barsade and Hakan Ozelik, "The Painful Cycle of Employee Loneliness, and How It Hurts Companies," *Harvard Business Review*, April 24, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/04/the-painful-cycle-of-employee-loneliness-and-how-it-hurts-companies>.

⁵ Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, "The Loneliest Generation: Americans, More Than Ever, Are Aging Alone," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-loneliest-generation-americans-more-than-ever-are-aging-alone-11544541134>.

⁶ Jean Twenge, "Teens Have Less Face Time with Their Friends—and Are Lonelier Than Ever," *The Conversation*, March 20, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/teens-have-less-face-time-with-their-friends-and-are-lonelier-than-ever-113240>.

⁷ Giuseppi Liotta et al., "Is Social Connectedness a Risk Factor for the Spreading of COVID-19 Among Older Adults? The Italian Paradox," *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 5 (May 21, 2020): e0233329, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233329>.

life circumstances to general economic and political conditions, from our sense of purpose and fulfillment in life to our ability to cope with challenges, complex interactions of circumstances can conspire and result in some—and of late, an increasing number of—Canadians living with the despair of loneliness.

The British government has recently appointed a minister of loneliness who is implementing a “loneliness strategy” to ameliorate the problem, and there have been [calls for a similar appointment in Canada](#). Part of the solution has been to empower doctors to provide “social prescriptions,” in which particular activities are prescribed just as pharmaceuticals are.

This is not a new discussion, and Cardus is seeking to contribute to the conversation in community, learning from and building on the good work that many are already doing in this space. Rather than replicate the work of others, we hope to delve into some dimensions that may be neglected or overlooked. Cardus’s aim is to translate research insights into useful conversation starters that can challenge the leaders of institutions to consider how we might do things differently for the benefit of all. As a think tank rooted in two thousand years of Christian social thought, we understand this imperative to proceed from the biblical command to love our neighbours.

Ideally, the attention and collective effort of those focused on this issue will contribute to a lessening of loneliness and social isolation in Canada in the future.

Increasing Understanding

It is important to distinguish between loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is an emotion that is felt when one does not have the quality of relationships that one desires. Being lonely isn’t anything new. The biblical account of creation records God saying, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:18). The blessings of human interaction, as well as the curses that flow from broken relationships and alienation, have always been part of the human story. In addition, recent neurobiological research suggests that humans are hardwired to crave social connection. When human connection is missing for too long, we hunger for it, much as we do for food when we are deprived of it.⁸ Humans need intimacy and community. Its absence is disturbing, often harmful, and in the spotlight now as a major public issue.

Whereas loneliness is a feeling, social isolation is a more objective term that describes the number and nature of the networks that connect people to one another. Social isolation is more tied to social structures and norms, such as how many people live together in a household, how free one is to interact with neighbours and co-workers, and the distance between ourselves and others that makes various human connections either possible or impossible.

⁸ Scott Barry Kaufman, “Forced Social Isolation Causes Neural Craving Similar to Hunger,” *Scientific American*, May 19, 2020, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/forced-social-isolation-causes-neural-craving-similar-to-hunger/>.

An impressive body of literature explores the distinction and interaction between loneliness and social isolation and their impact on various populations.⁹ In the Canadian context, efforts seem to have focused more on the implications of social isolation on seniors and mental health. It has been implicit in the debate about medical assistance in dying, as well as for the concerns for various marginalized communities.

Big Question

The default response to a problem like loneliness and social isolation is to focus on solutions. We want to “fix it” and are tempted to look for the five-step formula that promises to eradicate them. While not dismissing the possibility that some immediate steps may mitigate the situation for some sufferers, rising loneliness and social isolation are complex phenomena that resist easy fixes. We must recognize that they arise from deeper and structural issues in society. We don’t expect to solve loneliness and social isolation through a platform of policy proposals or moralistic prescriptions.

Polling evidence from 2019 in Canada suggests that the most likely safeguards against social isolation in society are participation in a faith community or belonging to an intact family.¹⁰ Survey results indicated that “those who are more isolated are much less likely to have regular experience with religious communities.” Other major findings included that those who suffer the least from loneliness and social isolation are those Canadians who are married with children, and those who do not live alone.

However, the causes of family breakdown and a decline in participation in religious communities add further complexity to this problem. The incidence of increasing loneliness also correlates with the relative strength or weakness and vibrancy of various social institutions. Trust in government and organizations, voting participation rates, and involvement in community associations aren’t the first things usually associated with social isolation. We think, however, there are strong grounds to believe they are connected.

Human relationships are not simply connections between two individuals. They take place within a social context. Our institutions and culture either encourage or discourage the sorts of relationships that meet human needs. The typical architecture of North American suburbia, with automatic garage-door openers and fenced-in backyards, conspire to minimize encounters with neighbours.¹¹

⁹ For a major review and application to particular populations, see for example Diana Luskin Biordi and Nicholas Nicholson, “Social Isolation,” in *Chronic Illness: Impact and Interventions*, ed. Ilene Lubkin and Pamala Larsen, 8th ed. (Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2013), 85–115; Martin Turcotte, “Trends in Social Capital in Canada,” Statistics Canada, May 20, 2015; and *Kinship and the City: Urban Loneliness and the Built Environment* (Birmingham, UK: Future Spaces Foundation, 2019).

¹⁰ Angus Reid, “A Portrait of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Canada Today,” Angus Reid Institute, June 17, 2019, <http://angusreid.org/social-isolation-loneliness-canada/>.

¹¹ For more, see David Greusel, “Intentional Isolation in Suburbia,” *Comment*, Summer 2018, 13.

Themes

In highlighting loneliness and social isolation as a topic for Cardus to focus on, there are several themes that need to be explored.

Alienation

Within the Christian tradition, there is a theological framework for “alienation” that considers it not only as estrangement from each other in a social sense but also as a relational rupture arising from sin and evil. Humankind’s primeval rebellion against God has translated into deep fractures between people, and between people and nature. Passages such as Romans 8 are regularly invoked to explain that the presence of evil affects the whole of the created order. The entire scriptural record, however, is permeated with this theme. The Ten Commandments could well be understood as an inverse statement of human alienation. Krzysztof Kieslowski’s remarkable film series *The Dekalog* (1998) provides just such an examination, a kind of modern lexicon of the tragedy of what is described in Genesis.

Autonomy

One of the drivers of increasing aloneness is the powerful large-scale forces that blur and discount the individual while simultaneously advancing and pressing a message of independence. It is a cultural promise of the fulfilled self on the one hand, while on the other it removes nearly every resource required for understanding ourselves in the context of the true, the good, and the beautiful. We cannot get to the heart of the issues involved without engaging these foundational questions and cultural power dynamics.

Arts as an Ally

Solutions are to be found not only in conventional policy spaces but also in other movements for social change, and here the arts can be looked to for insights and as an ally. To take one example, Olivia Laing, author of *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, makes use of the role that artists play in signalling new cultural possibilities. Laing describes in visceral ways the effects of a society that has traded human being for power, status, and material gain. She has an artist’s understanding of the dynamics, the heart and soul, of loneliness. As another example, Andy Warhol reflected on his use of technology to buffer emotional and social pain, learning that pain could be eased by carrying a camera, tape recorder, or other device that allowed him to watch or record or mediate others. The implications for our present moment and daily lives are clear and obvious: today we live in a hyper-buffered world with mobile technology always on, always with us, buffering even in the physical presence of others. It is trivial to comment on what any brief walk along a downtown street, pause in a café, or trip on transit reveals about our digital armour. Warhol may have used technology in a novel way in his day, but now we are all buffered by devices that absorb our attention.

Communications

One of our challenges is to develop a shared vocabulary to speak about and engage with our difficulties and deficits, social isolation and loneliness included, in a society that lacks a robust appetite or capacity for close, civil engagement across deep differences and conflicting ways of life. How do we care for the needs of strangers? We also have an aversion to facing loneliness squarely. Laing says, quoting psychiatrist Frieda Fromm Reichmann, “Loneliness, in its quintessential form, is of a nature that is incommunicable by the one who suffers from it.”¹² The image that Laing uses is of being encased in a block of ice: you can see and are aware of others, but you are frozen and unreachable. Our common reaction to a lonely person is to think that he or she just needs more people, or needs to get a hobby, or join a group, or learn more social skills, or other such self-directed behavioural changes. It is peculiar that isolation feels highly individual, something we experience in our own unique way. But Laing insightfully notes what research is shining light on; we suffer alone but do so en masse. “Though it feels entirely isolating, a private burden no one else could possibly experience or share, it is in reality a communal state inhabited by many people.”¹³

Academic research into loneliness suggests that people who are chronically lonely (who have deep feelings of isolation despite changing circumstances and over long periods of time) may have trouble with social clues. This creates a posture of “hypervigilance,” a tendency to interpret any social slight as total rejection. When we overdo the vigilance, we introduce greater susceptibility to psychological difficulties such as depression and challenging interpersonal dynamics that can lead to social withdrawal.¹⁴

Trust and Institutions

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, Canada has moved from a trusting country to a non-trusting one.¹⁵ This shift is tied to our increasing celebration of personal autonomy, and to our increasing distance from social institutions. When we live life as “I” instead of “we,” we end up walking through life alone. There is no one to provide what we need and want. Autonomy can be a self-defeating pursuit. So, to treat social connection as prescribed medication is essentially to recognize that we’ve gone too far in celebrating the self. It is also a recognition that our social institutions—family, school, faith community, workplace, union, neighbourhood—have become so weak that we need urgently to build them up again. A greater awareness and understanding of loneliness and social isolation may spur us to rebuild the social institutions and the architecture of community that we all need and rely on, often without realizing it.

¹² Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (New York: Picador, 2016), p. 24.

¹³ Laing, p. 43.

¹⁴ John T. Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo, “Social Relationships and Health: The Toxic Effects of Perceived Social Isolation,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, February 1, 2014, 8: 58-72. doi:10.1111/spc3.12087.

¹⁵ Edelman, “2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report,” January 19, 2020, 7, <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>.

Cardus Lens

Every approach to a big question brings with it certain assumptions or starting points. Cardus is a think tank that desires to translate the richness of the Christian faith in ways that can contribute to social flourishing. We understand that we live in a society where there is significant social difference in almost every dimension. But our understanding of what it means to be human, of what the purpose of living together is, and of what we might be able to do together as a society directs how we seek to address practical social questions like those of loneliness and social isolation.

In Western societies, proposals for action often default primarily to government as the catalyzing actor, or to emphasis on the individual. Cardus's mission self-consciously focuses on all of the institutions of civil society. There are three lenses that shape our Cardus approach to this particular issue of loneliness and social isolation.

A Christian Anthropology

We understand that human dignity and worth are based on the *imago Dei* (the image of God) stamped on each and every human person. It is not utility, merit, or ability that gives us our worth, but our humanity. Human beings have been created for fellowship with God and with each other. To love and be loved is not a nice “add-on” that is good if you can get it. It is a basic part of our humanity. This requires us to be attentive to inclusiveness and solidarity and to the ties that bind us to one another. All human persons have dignity, simply because they are human persons, without further qualification. This is a unique understanding from ancient Jewish and Christian sources, which has shaped our Western culture.

Respect for Institutions

Connections between people do not just happen person to person, but through networks and institutions. In the social ecosystem we all share we have a variety of natural relationships that together contribute to our sense of belonging. They can help us to overcome the loneliness that we would feel without them. Family, neighbourhood, workplace, and faith and community groups, the connectedness that we feel in each, are different and need to be understood in their specific contexts. Yet in each one there is an institutional dimension that contributes to our ability to feel connected. Overcoming loneliness and social isolation cannot occur without paying attention to the health of those institutions that are powerful builders of community.

Interdisciplinary

Themes like social isolation and loneliness direct our thinking toward the sociological, psychological, and physical dimensions of life. While these important dimensions need to be considered, there are a host of other factors, including technology, architecture and urban design, the law, and religion that can intensify or reduce this problem.

Conclusion

In various ways, this new explicit focus on loneliness and social isolation as a Big Question emerges from work that Cardus is already engaged in. Whether it is studying the non-economic dimensions of work, the role that various institutions play in local communities, or the range of daycare options available to parents, Cardus research has already been considering social connectedness, its presence, and its absence. This Big Questions project endeavours to turn the implicit considerations that emerge from our various programs into an explicit conversation about a theme that is of increasing cultural and social importance in our day.

This project will link research in our various programs that have social-isolation dimensions, commission articles to carry on the discussion in more specific terms, convene conversations where the follow-up questions can be discerned, and engage the broader community of research.

Marina Keegan's valedictory Yale essay in 2012, "The Opposite of Loneliness," was widely shared because it captured the hunger and the hope for connection that is basic to our human existence:

We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life. What I'm grateful and thankful to have found at Yale, and what I'm scared of losing when we wake up tomorrow and leave this place.

It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table.¹⁶

Ideally, research and conversation results in action and impact. The aim of a think tank isn't just to think but to translate that thinking into ideas and strategies that result in changed behaviour. Isolation and loneliness are experiences that are far too common for far too many. We don't have the capacity to come alongside each person, but we do hope that the words that emerge not only captivate the minds of those who read them but also tug at the hearts and spark the will to do something different. And even if the exact prescriptions that emerge aren't perfect for the situation, the very fact that others are also thinking about the problem and proposing less-than-perfect solutions is itself evidence that there are others who care, and that we are not alone.

¹⁶ Marina Keegan, "Keegan: The Opposite of Loneliness," *Yale News*, May 27, 2012, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2012/05/27/keegan-the-opposite-of-loneliness/>.