

Reconnecting our communities: Social flourishing on the far side of “our epidemic of loneliness and isolation”

Brendan Case · Ian Marcus Corbin · Ron Ivey · Jonathan Teubner
Erika Bachiochi · Richard Cowden · Flynn Cratty · Tyler J. VanderWeele

Abstract: In 2023, then-US Surgeon General (SG) Vivek Murthy published a public health advisory, which describes “our epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” details the public health burden posed by these trends, and highlights some strategies for ameliorating it. SG Murthy’s report offers a thorough symptomology of the current crisis, and proposes six “pillars” to structure public-health responses to it, each of which is reasonable and important in its own right. As helpful as these are, there are arguably additional key causes of loneliness and social isolation that merit further attention, including median wage stagnation; the decline of childhood free play and independence; and the growing isolation of America’s elderly as households shrink. Moreover, some of the epidemic’s most damaging aspects, such as the decline of marriage and religious participation, likewise merit more detailed attention than they receive in the Advisory. The report’s six pillars could thus also be supplemented with several other urgently needed approaches as well, including reviving widely shared economic prosperity; restoring some of children’s lost independence; encouraging multi-generational households; and exploring public policy levers for promoting marriage and religious participation. Our aim in this review is to call attention to some of what is underemphasized in the SG’s report, in the hope of building on his important Advisory to develop a yet more comprehensive account of the drivers of the decline of belonging in contemporary America, and of a path back toward a richly connected society.

Keywords: social flourishing; loneliness; social isolation; social disaffiliation; belonging

1. Introduction

In May 2023, the US Surgeon General (SG) Vivek Murthy published a public health advisory, which describes “our epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” details the public health burden posed by these trends, and highlights some strategies for ameliorating it. He resumed this theme emphatically in his “Parting Prescription for America,” published in January 2025, shortly before his term ended, whose key theme is “community as the formula for fulfilment” (Murthy, 2025). As the nation’s “doctor-in-chief,” the SG has a unique ability to galvanize public and academic discussion of challenges to public health. As such, his office’s focus on social connection is a seminal development, bearing comparison with SG Luther Terry’s 1964 advisory regarding the dangers of tobacco and nicotine consumption, which marked a turning point in the nation’s use of cigarettes (Schroeder and Koh, 2014). In fifty years, perhaps we will look back on his 2023 advisory as a similarly signal call to action against the crisis of loneliness and isolation, an epidemic with manifold causes and dire effects on our flourishing.

SG Murthy's report offers a thorough symptomology of the current crisis, and proposes six “pillars” to structure public-health responses to it, each of which is reasonable and important in its own right. These include (1) strengthening social infrastructure in local communities; (2) enacting pro-connection public policies; (3) mobilizing the health sector; (4) reforming digital environments; (5) deepening our knowledge; and (6) building a culture of connection. We think all of SG Murthy's proposals are worth pursuing and could go a long way toward addressing contemporary social disaffiliation. Nonetheless, we also think that the report does not fully address some of the epidemic's key causes, such as the declining economic prospects of the middle and working classes, and also does not adequately address some of its most damaging aspects, such as the decline of marriage and religious participation. We thus think that SG Murthy's six pillars should be supplemented with several other urgently needed approaches.

Our aim in this article is to synthesize important evidence from a range of fields, including economics, psychology, public health, and public policy, for the importance of several aspects of the current crisis which are relatively or entirely neglected in the SG's report. We should stress that this is not a systematic review of all of the available evidence on each of the topics addressed herein, but rather a summary of important bodies of evidence—drawing wherever possible on meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and longitudinal studies—which are neglected in the SG's fairly comprehensive review of the evidence in other areas. Elsewhere, we have carried out a fuller review of major institutional pathways to flourishing, including not only social connection, but also happiness, health, meaning and character (VanderWeele, 2017). That review of experimental, quasi-experimental, and longitudinal studies suggested family, work, education, and religious community as major societal determinants of these aspects of flourishing, once again including social connection. We believe that family, religious community, and in many ways employment were not adequately addressed in the SG's advisory. Our hope is to help researchers and policymakers alike develop a yet more comprehensive account of the drivers of the decline of belonging in contemporary America, and of a path back toward a richly connected society, characterized, not merely by the absence of loneliness and isolation, but by true social flourishing, in which every person enjoys (both subjectively and objectively) life-giving relationships and communities.

2. American anomie: The landscape of social disaffiliation today

SG Murthy begins by emphasizing that contemporary America is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of loneliness and social isolation. We will define “loneliness” as “the *subjective* perception of feeling socially disconnected,” and “social isolation” as “the *objective* lack of social interactions (e.g., smaller social network)” (Hong et al., 2023). Finally, we will define “social disaffiliation” as the decline of participation in *institutionalized* communities, whether clubs, religious communities, political parties, or even marriage. While the SG does not identify social disaffiliation as a distinct dimension of the current crisis, it is arguably its most important dimension, both for its public health and civic consequences, as we detail below.

The data are disconcerting: from 2003 to 2020, the average American's self-reported time spent with friends and in “social engagement with others” decreased by two-thirds and one-third, respectively, while time spent in social isolation increased by 17%. Related trends are equally discouraging: marriage- and birth-rates are near all-time lows, religious affiliation is down from 70% in 1999 to 45% in 2024, and volunteering and other forms of civic participation are in long-term decline as well. These trends are concentrated among the very old, who are especially isolated, and the young, who have become our loneliest demographic (Murthy, 2023, p. 13-16; Gallup, 2024). (NB: Tracking long-term trends in loneliness is complicated by a lack of

longitudinal datasets and inconsistent measurement approaches (Luhmann et al., 2023); as such, social isolation and disaffiliation will be our focus in what follows, rather than loneliness (its subjective side.)

Murthy stresses—following the work of Julianne Holt-Lunstad, who served as a key scientific advisor in the report's drafting—that social disconnection and loneliness predict increases in unhappiness, depression, anxiety, and even mortality (Czajkowski et al., 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2023). Further, it is a key driver of suicide (Rico-Urbe et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2021; Troya et al., 2019), which over the past several decades has risen at alarming rates, along with other “deaths of despair,” caused by alcohol poisoning and drug overdose (Case and Deaton, 2020; Murthy, 2023, p. 24-30).

3. Drivers of decline

The Advisory devotes substantial attention to some of the drivers of contemporary social isolation and disaffiliation. However, certain key causes of the crisis are arguably not given adequate consideration, including economic stagnation, the decline of play, the increase in elderly Americans living alone, and a range of forces disrupting family formation and decreasing religious participation. SG Murthy notes the significant effects of declining family formation and religious participation on loneliness and social isolation, but only comments, “The reasons people choose to remain single or unmarried, have smaller families, and live alone over time are complex and encompass many factors” (2023, p. 15). This is true, but it does not shed much light on the concrete drivers of family breakdown today.

This is in contrast, for example, with SG Murthy's insightful treatment of the role of digital technology, especially social media platforms, in crowding out flesh-and-blood relationships and replacing them with less fulfilling and at times even pathological forms of interaction. There is now strong evidence that the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media in the last fifteen or so years has been a major driver of loneliness—as well as of anxiety, depression, and suicidality—among young people, and especially adolescent girls, with strong dose-response effects evident both for the intensity of daily use and for the age of adoption (Murthy, 2023; cf. also Haidt, 2024; Twenge, 2023; Twenge et al., 2022; Capraro et al., 2025). SG Murthy is thus amply justified in his call for tighter restrictions on adolescents' access to these technologies and platforms, and there are promising signs of bipartisan efforts to implement such reforms both at the state and federal levels. Other key drivers of the epidemic of social disaffiliation however are not discussed in such detail. Thus, in a similar spirit, we would like to offer further discussion of five other of its potential causes in the United States.

3.1 *Economic stagnation and social disintegration*

One important driver of social disintegration is arguably the economic conditions faced by the middle and working classes. Only once across the report's 82 pages are economic factors invoked as a potential cause of social (dis)connection, rather than as one of its outcomes, namely in Murthy's observation that social infrastructure—i.e., the “physical assets,” “programs,” and “transportation networks” that influence the formation of social connection in a community—is influenced by “broader social policies, cultural norms, the technology environment, the political environment, and macroeconomic factors” (p. 18).

There is good reason to think that economic factors are critical drivers of many aspects of social disaffiliation (Case and Deaton, 2020; Eberstadt, 2016; Lind, 2023; Putnam, 2015; Wilson, 1987). Fostering strong families, rich friendships, and deep participation in communal life (religious, civic or otherwise) requires at least four economic foundations: adequate time for

leisure and social life, financial stability, low levels of financial stress, and the dignity of socially-valued work. In a recent study of belonging in the U.S., lower socio-economic status was the greatest predictor of alienation from one's community over any demographic factor (Argo and Sheikh, 2023). So too, Case & Deaton (2020) argue that “the loss of good jobs for less educated Americans” has triggered a cascade of social pathologies, amounting to “the slowly unfolding loss of a way of life,” which in turn partly explains the rising epidemic of deaths of despair (p. 146).

In recent decades, each of these four foundational elements has been eroded for the bottom half of Americans by declining real median wages, which have proven unable to keep up with the rapidly rising costs of housing, healthcare, and other critical needs (Cass, 2023), which, among other factors, have fostered soaring growth in personal debt. Declining wages only tell part of the story, however, since these are typically found in the growing sector of low-skilled, “dead-end” jobs with unpredictable schedules and tenuous contracts (Lind, 2023; Rodgers, 2023). Growth in this sector in turn is potentially due to lower investment in technical and vocational education at the expense of college and university education (Cass, 2022).

At the top of the income ladder, by contrast, asset values and salaries have grown exponentially, and tax liabilities have declined significantly for top earners. For decades, monetary policy and tax policy have largely benefited the top of the economy (Ivey and Shirk, 2021). Moreover, church and civic clubs used to be a pathway for the bridging connections between classes and helped draw people out of precarity. As wealth concentration increased, however, these pathways have increasingly been privatized, with, e.g., municipal youth sports teams losing ground to expensive private clubs (Jennings and Pressler, 2023). This loss of solidarity has created a vicious cycle of social breakdown and distrust across classes.

Lind's (2023) *Hell to Pay*, published just a day before the Surgeon General's report, offers a helpful synthesis of some of these trends. As Lind argues, and as we elaborate in the remainder of this section, over the past fifty years, a combination of corporate labor arbitrage, union-busting, and credential-inflation has depressed the average American's real earnings. These diminished economic prospects in turn depressed marriage- and birth-rates and hollowed out the mass-membership civic institutions which once pervaded American life, so leaving us profoundly vulnerable to loneliness, isolation, and *anomie*.

There is a growing body of evidence, as in the work of Raj Chetty and his team at Opportunity Insights, that rising economic inequality—both owing to rising income and wealth among top earners and stagnating wages within lower earnings brackets—diminishes social mobility and erodes social solidarity (Chetty and Hendren, 2018; Chetty et al., 2018; Chetty et al., 2022). For his part, Lind (2023) traces a slow, national transition from a high- to a low-median-wage economy, crystallized in two statistics: while as late as “1985, a typical male American worker could pay for the housing, healthcare, education, and transportation of a family of four on thirty weeks of salary,” by 2018, “it took fifty-three weeks to do so”—a significant challenge, given that there are only fifty-two weeks in a year (p. 83).

Lind relies here on calculations by *American Compass's* Oren Cass, whose “cost of thriving index” (COTI) “measures the number of weeks a typical worker would need to work in a given year to earn enough income to cover the major costs for a family of four in the American middle class in that year,” including the four categories Lind outlined above, plus the recent addition of food as a separate category (Cass, 2023). (*American Compass's* most recent update provides an even more dismal portrait of the middle class's purchasing power, with the COTI for the median male American worker having risen from 53 weeks of income in 2018 to 62.1 weeks in 2022 (Cass, 2023, p. 1)).

The COTI is intended to be a more realistic measure of the changes over time in Americans' purchasing power than the inflation-adjusted statistics which are commonly cited in this connection. As Cass notes,

Measures of inflation try to detect the change in cost for the exact same set of things. That's enormously important data if you are trying to assess the broader economy's behavior. But it tells you little about the cost of living as experienced by someone trying to support a family, who cannot simply continue to buy the same things, and who would not remain in the middle class if he did. When inflation-adjusted figures report that a 2022 earner could afford roughly what a 1985 earner could, that assumes the 2022 earner still plans to drive a 1985 car, live in a 1985 house, watch a 1985 television, and receive 1985 medical care. That's not possible, nor is it what being "middle class" in 2022 means. Consider instead the costs of a 2022 car, a 2022 house, a 2022 television, and 2022 medical care—the things a 2022 middle-class family should be able to afford—and the picture looks quite different (p. 2-3).

The stagnation of median male wages has had important spillover effects on women and children as well as men. Although 16% of married women now serve as their family's primary breadwinner (Fry et al., 2023), 50% of American mothers with children under 18 (and 29% of American fathers) say they would prefer staying home with the kids full-time, compared to 45% of such women (and 71% of men) expressing a preference for working outside the home (Brenan, 2019; Greco, 2023). Today, as Richard Reeves (2022) observes, the mothers most likely to reduce their working hours to spend more time at home with children are those "with the highest-earning husbands," suggesting significant economic constraints on families' ability to choose to keep one parent at home (p. 46). Moreover, many communities have fallen into a "two-income trap," as assortative mating among the highly-educated produces dual-income couples who bid up the cost of big-ticket items such as houses, cars, and university tuition, and so increasingly price single-earner households out of those markets (Warren and Warren-Tyagi, 2004). Many more Americans would like to have a single-income family than can afford to do so given current median wages.

This change was wrought in part by declining worker bargaining power, driven by the erosion of unionization; the growth of wage-suppressing measures, such as "salary bands" or "no-poach agreements" (Lind, 2023, p. 23-33); and the growing prevalence of markets characterized by monopoly, oligopoly, or monopsony (Azar et al., 2022; Tepper, 2018; Wilmers, 2018). It also owed much to the outsourcing of manufacturing to low-wage settings following the trade liberalization effected by the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 (Autor et al., 2016, 2021; Lind, 2023, p. 34-44).

These trends have given rise in turn to a vicious cycle of credential inflation, in which workers seek to improve their economic prospects by investing ever-more time and money in licenses and degrees in order to enter occupations which formerly had fewer (or no) formal educational requirements for entry or promotion (Lind, 2023, p. 83-95). Credential inflation itself, however, has been exacerbated by America's shift in recent decades toward an increasingly myopic focus on college enrollment as the sole acceptable outcome of primary and secondary education (Cass, 2022, p. 1-3). Whereas OECD member states enroll an average of 42% of their "upper secondary school" students in technical or vocational training, America has "no distinct vocational path at upper secondary level," having instead opted over the last fifty years, as Cass notes, for a de facto "college-for-all" system, which sidelines most students' needs and desires for an overwhelming

focus on the mere 18% of Americans who ultimately obtain a job which required their bachelor's or higher degree (p. 10).

The stagnation of median wages and the credentials arms-race it sparked exacerbates trends toward social disaffiliation, not least by “lead[ing] many Americans to delay, and sometimes forgo, marriage, family formation, and childbearing” (Lind, 2023, p. 95). Declining real wages mean that less-educated men become less “marriageable,” increasingly struggling to attract and keep spouses (Doar et al., 2018; Reeves and Pulliam, 2020, p. 97-98; Wilson, 1987), while rising educational attainment has meant that the well-off marry and have children later, if at all, since two lucrative and rewarding careers substantially increase a couple's opportunity cost of procreation.

Fewer well-paying, unionized jobs also mean less socializing in union halls and less free time to apportion among coaching Little League or attending religious services. Low-wage jobs subject to “just-in-time” scheduling make it harder to maintain a regular social calendar, never mind obtain adequate childcare. And fewer marriages and children mean less religious participation—in one study, the strongest predictor of increased religious service attendance in adulthood was having a child enter kindergarten (Schleifer and Chaves, 2019)—which in turn means less volunteering (Kim and Dew, 2019).

As the economic historian Karl Polanyi (2001) has suggested, modern economists seem to be historically exceptional in imagining commerce as potentially disembedded from all social relationships, communal goals, and religious or philosophical frameworks. Only given such an assumption can the notion of shareholder supremacy—that the only responsibility of a business is to maximize profits—seem even vaguely sustainable (Ciepley, 2017). The rise of a disembedded, shareholder economy has created an environment in which one can run a socially destructive business—pushing addictive, life-wrecking opioids into impoverished areas, charging 400% interest on payday loans to the poor, tweaking apps for ever greater addictiveness via the stimulation of negative emotion—and be considered a “successful” businessperson. Those who fall prey to these offerings may rightly intuit that they inhabit a society that does not care about them, wherein powerful actors are not only allowed, but even encouraged to exploit them.

3.2 The decline of children's independence and the mental health crisis

In addition to economic factors, two other factors that arguably merit greater attention in any account of the etiology of the epidemic of social disaffiliation are the decline of unsupervised play and the changing living situation of the elderly, which are key drivers of loneliness and isolation among younger and older Americans, respectively. Not coincidentally, these are the two demographics which, as the Advisory stresses, are most severely burdened by the current crisis.

On the first point, there is growing evidence that the sharp decline since the 1970's of children's unstructured play and other independent activities is an important contributor to the mental health crisis among young people (Gray et al., 2023; Gray, 2013; Haidt and Lukianoff, 2018). Recent decades have seen sharp declines across the developed world, but especially in the United States, in “children's freedom to engage in activities that involve some degree of risk and personal responsibility away from adults” (Gray et al., 2023). (“Children” here means anyone under age 18, though of course prudence dictates that the degree of freedom accorded a child will increase gradually as she ages, and will vary according to her capacities and surroundings.) “Free play,” in which kids play with one another without adult direction, is increasingly crowded

out by school—the average school year increased by five weeks from 1950-2010, even as time spent in recess declined—and adult supervised extra-curricular activities (Gray et al., 2023).

Increasingly anxious parenting has also played a role, arguably driven in part by a transition to family structures with fewer children in whom parents invest more intensively and for longer, in what Twenge (2023) calls the “slow-life strategy.” “In England,” for instance, “license to walk home alone from school”—often in the company of other kids from the neighborhood—“dropped from 86% in 1971 to 35% in 1990 and 25% in 2010, and license to use public buses alone dropped from 48% in 1971 to 15% in 1990 to 12% in 2010” (Gray et al., 2023). And finally, flesh-and-blood socializing of all kinds is on the decline among adolescents; according to the Monitoring the Future study, in 2020, high school seniors “went out with friends” 1.9 times per week, down from 2.9 times per week in 1976 (Gray et al., 2023, p. 292).

Some aspects of this transition do not necessarily reflect an absolute decline in social connection (its “structure” in the SG’s sense) but primarily one in its “function” and “quality” in the life of children (Murthy, 2023, p. 11). Interacting with other kids in class or at soccer practice is no substitute for the boundary-testing, confidence-building excitement of climbing trees or cycling around the neighborhood surrounded by friends and with no adults in sight. Free play matters both for the subjective joy it brings kids, who consistently depict it as contributing to their happiness, and for the opportunities it affords to develop skills in conflict resolution, healthy risk-tolerance, and a strong internal locus of control (Gray et al., 2023, p. 3-5). It is no small surprise that kids who are increasingly deprived of opportunities for fun and independence—even if their care is lovingly oriented towards safety—would become more depressed and anxious.

There are, no doubt, many causes of the mental health crisis among youth, several of which SG Murthy discusses, including the use of social media (Murthy, 2023; Office of the Surgeon General, 2021; Capraro et al., 2025), but the decline of free play and independence should arguably be added to the list as contributing factors, both to declines in mental health and to declines in social connection.

3.3 Shrinking households & the isolation of the elderly

A third additional factor in the rise of social disaffiliation specifically concerns older Americans, who—as the Advisory indicates—are our most socially isolated demographic (Murthy, 2023), with those 65 and older spending 1405 more hours per year in social isolation than 25-34 year-olds (Kannan and Veazie, 2023, p. 5-6). This is arguably due in large part to the fact that 27% of Americans 65 and older live alone, compared to 4% of Americans aged 18-24, and 8.5% of those aged 25-44, and compared with only 11% of the elderly in the Asia-Pacific region, or 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wu, 2017). (The oft-cited figure that 29% of American households now consist of a single person (Murthy, 2023, p. 15) can easily obscure the fact that only about 13% of the total American population actually lives alone (Wu, 2017), since a three-person household has triple the population of a one-person household. The proportion of the elderly living alone is thus much higher than the national average.)

The link between living alone and social isolation is intuitive, and a correlation between the two has been documented in many populations (Chou and Chi, 2000; Ge et al., 2017; Lim and Kua, 2011; Smith and Victor, 2019). Nonetheless, Perissinotto and Covinsky (2014) are right to caution that living alone by no means entails being socially isolated, or automatically threatens physical health or other aspects of flourishing. Indeed, Ennis et al. (2014) found that living alone was associated with a slightly lower risk of hospitalization, although, as Perissinotto and Covinsky (2014) note, this might be due to reverse causation: particularly among Americans, for

whom multi-generational households are not the norm, “older persons often choose to move in with family or others when they develop functional impairments that make independent living difficult.” Establishing causation is not straightforward in this case; still, it seems reasonable to recognize living alone as one common pathway to social isolation, and to seek to reduce the former where this is possible.

Changes in household composition represent one of the longest-running trends influencing social disaffiliation today; while in 1850, about 68% of white Americans over 65 lived with their adult children, that figure had fallen to about 28% by 1950, and had reached a low of 13% in 1990, before rebounding slightly by 2000 (Ruggles, 2007). In 2020 (and calculated using a slightly different methodology), only 6% of all Americans over 60 lived in “extended family households,” including three or more generations (e.g., grandparents, parents, and minor children), compared to 50% of the elderly in the Asia-Pacific region and Sub-Saharan Africa. (Another 15% of older Americans live with one adult son or daughter) (Ausubel, 2020).

This trend toward smaller households consisting of only one or two generations has many causes, some of them arguably desirable, such as increased income—and dramatically increased social provision from Social Security and later Medicare—allowing elderly Americans to support themselves in their own homes for longer, or increased longevity rendering the elderly more independent until later in life. In some respects, however, elderly isolation flows from broader societal and cultural shifts: increasing geographic and economic mobility over the twentieth century meant that more and more children moved away from their hometowns (and parents) as adults, while the spread of a culture of “expressive individualism” (or the rise of the “buffered self”) has made Americans of all ages less willing to embrace unchosen obligations, whose paradigm is the parent-child bond (Bellah et al., 2007; Henrich, 2020; Snead, 2020; Taylor, 2007). Whatever goods flow from these changes—and it would be foolish to deny that they are many—they negatively affect the elderly in certain ways, as well as other vulnerable groups. There is also a loss of something special for the flourishing of younger generations: the multi-generational wisdom, traditions, and stories that help create a sense of belonging, emotional stability and resilience for our children (Drury et al., 2016; Silverstein and Marengo, 2001).

3.4 The decline of religious community

As noted above, the Advisory comments on the decline in religious affiliation and religious service attendance, which for centuries had served as a pillar of social connection and community. Religious affiliation is down from 70% in 1999 to 47% in 2020 (Murthy, 2023), while religious service attendance, after decades of hovering around 40%, has dramatically fallen from 43% in 1999 to 30% in 2020 (Gallup, 2023). About 40 million Americans have stopped regularly attending religious services at some point in their lives, most of them in the past 25 years (Davis et al., 2023, p. xxii). There is now also a large body of evidence linking religious service attendance to higher social support, lower loneliness, greater marital stability, and greater non-religious community participation (Strawbridge et al., 2001; Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2016; VanderWeele, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Koenig et al., 2024) and of course religious community itself constitutes a form of social participations in its own right. The declines in religious service attendance thus has also likely substantially affected loneliness and social isolation in this country.

Numerous potential causes for declining service attendance and affiliation have been proposed, with varying levels of empirical evidence supporting these various explanations (Cowden et al., 2022; Denton and Flory, 2020; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Van Tongeren and DeWall, 2021). A critical factor is certainly the overall decline in religious conviction, with 29% of

Americans in 2021 reporting no religious affiliation, up from only 16% as recently as 2007 (Smith, 2021). The intellectual changes underlying this transformation range from the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution and the “mechanistic” metaphysics by which it was frequently interpreted (Taylor, 2007; Israel, 2015; Gillespie, 2008), to such recent factors as the Cold War’s end making it “more culturally acceptable to be both American and non-Christian,” widely-publicized clergy abuse scandals undermining the credibility of religious institutions, or the rise of the “Religious Right” in America driving political liberals and centrists away from Christianity altogether (Davis et al., 2023, p. 6).

Other potential factors include experiences of suffering or sense of abandonment by God; a sense of complacency bred by increasing material self-sufficiency; an increased desire for autonomy and freedom from constraints; conflict between sexual/gender identity and religious teachings; less desire for, or concern, with transcendence; negative media portrayals of religion; falling marriage rates and birth rates; and the COVID pandemic. The significance of and interrelations among these potential causes are the subject of ongoing debate by intellectual historians and social scientists; as such, they largely lie beyond the scope of this paper. Whatever the causes, however, every decade, more and more Americans join Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach, watching as the “Sea of Faith’s” “long, melancholy, withdrawing roar” exposes “the naked shingles of the world.”

Nonetheless, many of those who have desisted from religious participation in recent decades still describe themselves as committed religious believers. For instance, while 30% of respondents in the Gallup poll cited above reported attending services at least almost every week, 46% said that religion was “very important to them,” and 46% also reported being a “member of a church or synagogue” (Gallup, 2023). One of the most striking findings reported in Davis, Graham, & Burge is that 51% of “casually dechurched” evangelicals—who gradually drifted away from church attendance, rather than leaving because of some significant wound or grievance—reported being either “somewhat” or “very willing” to resume service attendance, with many noting that they don’t attend services because no friends or family members have invited them (Davis et al., 2023). “For hundreds of thousands of dechurched evangelical Christians, all they need [to resume attendance] is a personal invitation to a decent church community” (Davis et al., 2023, p. 28).

This gap between belief and action, however, is also likely caused in part by the concrete incentives that inform people’s “choice architecture” in relation to religious participation (Thaler et al., 2013). For instance, there is some evidence that the repeal of once ubiquitous “blue laws” enforcing the closure of businesses on Sunday has depressed religious service attendance, since they “increase the opportunity cost of religious attendance by offering alternatives for work, leisure, and consumption” (Hungerman and Gruber, 2008). (A related factor which is particularly pressing for many families today is the “growth of [children’s] extracurricular activities and sports demanding Sunday morning attendance” (Davis et al., 2023).) Comparing ten states which repealed their Sunday-closing laws over the period 1973-1998 to six states which had repealed them prior to 1973, Hungerman and Gruber (2008) concluded that “repealing the blue laws reduced attendance by 0.21 index points, or about 5 percent of the sample mean,” with an even stronger “15 percent decline in the prevalence of [weekly service attendance],” even after controlling for relevant variables such as age and education (p. 15-16).

3.5 *The decline of marriage*

The Advisory also briefly notes the sharp declines in rates of marriage, which have dropped from 64 per 1000 American women in 1960 to 14.9 per 1000 in 2021 (Vital Statistics of the United States,

1960; Washington and Anderson, 2023). Here too, the causes are diverse, and merit closer scrutiny. Of course, not all of these causes are necessarily appropriate targets for policy measures and interventions, but it is important to at least better understand how the various changes came about. There is moreover notable evidence from large longitudinal studies that marriage itself has important effects on social support and social connection (Gallagher and Waite, 2000; Marks and Lambert, 1998; VanderWeele, 2017; Chen et al., 2023); and of course marriage and family life constitute important forms of social participation in their own right, with marriage also still being a desired goal for a large portion of Americans. Understanding the trends in the decline of marriage rates is thus important.

One factor in declining marriage rates is the set of “marriage penalties” in federal and state means-tested welfare programs, most of which were instituted during or after the Johnson administration’s “War on Poverty” beginning in 1965. These penalties, which result from the loss of benefits subsequent to marriage, can “reach tens of thousands of dollars [per year] when the full set of benefits lost across all programs is calculated” (Paris and Hall, 2023, p. 2). As such, they serve as a disincentive to marriage for the very people who might most benefit from the support it provides (Kearney, 2023, p. 175; Gennetian and Miller, 2004; Micheltmore, 2018). For instance, Micheltmore (2018) estimates that “single mothers who expect to lose earned income tax credit benefits upon marriage are 2.5 percentage points less likely to marry their partners and 2.5 percentage points more likely to cohabit compared to single mothers who expect no change or to gain earned income tax credit benefits upon marriage,” although, as Leguizamón, Leguizamón, & Alm (2025) stress, these effects differ markedly by race, such that “low-income Black households experience on average a 22 percent larger EITC marriage penalty than low-income white households, even when their family income levels are largely the same.” And in a study of the effect of marriage penalties in tax law on marriage rates across Swiss cantons (Switzerland’s highly federal cantonal system offers something of a natural experiment for the effects of differing tax policies), Myohl (2023) wrote, “Using a subsample of couples who got married between 2012 and 2019, I find that a 1 percentage point (pp) higher marriage tax as a percentage of net joint income decreases the probability that a couple is married by 13.7%.”

Another and likely more important factor in declining rates of marriage concerns the broader economic situation within which couples decide for or against marriage, notably including the decline in men’s median earnings, as discussed above. In this connection, Kearney (2023) notes that the decline of manufacturing employment in recent decades has stripped many men—and the communities they live in—of jobs that have historically paid relatively high wages to workers without college degrees... In affected communities, marriage rates fell, more children were born to unmarried mothers, and more children were living in poor households” (p. 16). This has simultaneously been accompanied also by a rise in women’s economic prospects, with 40% of women now earning more than the average man, up from just 13% in 1979 (Reeves, 2022, p. 41), offering women greater prospects for economic independence. In and of itself, this is arguably a favorable development. However, taken together, these trends will often render men relatively less attractive as potential mates, resulting in declining marriage rates (Autor and Wasserman, 2013; Carbone and Cahn, 2014; Cherlin, 2010; Kearney, 2023, p. 90).

Even before these changes in economic life and social policy took effect, however, marriage in America was already being reshaped by the advent of orally administered, hormonal contraceptive pills, first approved for sale by the FDA in 1960, just before marriage rates began their precipitous decline. Controversial though this issue is, we should not neglect the ways in which the “markets” for sex and marriage have been transformed by this then novel technology, which removed a strong impetus for marriage by allowing men and women to reliably break the

connection between sexual activity and fertility for the first time in our species' history (Bachiochi, 2021, p. 283-304; Perry, 2022, p. 6-7; Regnerus, 2017).

4. Some connections matter more than others

A further respect in which the existing literature on social connection and health points to the need for expansion and supplementation to the SG's Advisory is its apparent indifference regarding the types of social connection which Americans enjoy. For instance, in a section on declining rates of marriage and birth, the SG does not call for efforts to reverse either trend, but instead proposes that we “cultivate ways to foster sufficient social connection outside of chosen traditional means and structures” (2023, p. 15). The Advisory also downplays the role of marriage in comparison with the research literature on which it draws. For instance, its Figure 1, which visually depicts a threefold typology of social connection, is adapted from one developed by Holt-Lunstad, which includes references to “marital status” and “marital quality” (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). These references were broadened in the Advisory to “marital/partnership status” and to “relationship satisfaction” (Murthy, 2023, p. 11). The overall implication would seem to be that it matters little whether people are bound to one another through vows of marriage or religious faith, or instead through co-habitation and cooking classes.

However, the empirical literature suggests otherwise. Rich and meaningful connections are possible in many settings, to be sure, but the evidence suggests that religious community on average more strongly promotes various of dimensions of health and human flourishing than other forms of social participation (Li et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2017). The evidence from rigorous longitudinal studies for effects on flourishing is also strong for marriage (Marks and Lambert, 1998; VanderWeele, 2017; Chen et al., 2023). This is of course consistent with there being many people whose lives are made worse overall by religious community or marriage, and many who flourish without participation in either institution (Kislev, 2020).

The data are particularly striking with regard to religious community. Regarding religious participation and public health, Balboni et al. (2022) offers a thorough summary of the evidence, which offers a systematic review of the empirical literature on religion and spirituality in relation to serious illness, including an assessment of the evidence by a Delphi panel of eight subject-matter experts. The review's key consensus statements noted, e.g., that “a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies indicated that service attendance was associated with reduction in all-cause mortality (hazard ratio, 0.73; 95% CI, 0.63–0.84),” that “77% of studies evaluating religious service attendance found a statistically significant, beneficial association with measures of depression,” and that “a majority of studies found a beneficial and significant association between spirituality and several measures of substance use, including use, recovery, and initiation” (p. 190).

Weekly service attenders are roughly 34% less likely to engage in problematic alcohol consumption than never-attenders (Chen et al., 2020), while teenagers who are active in their religious congregations are 33% less likely to use illegal drugs and 40% less likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection than those who never attend services (Chen and VanderWeele, 2018). Weekly service attendance is also associated with a 50% reduction in one's risk of divorce (Li et al., 2018), 27% reduction in depression (Li et al., 2016a), and an 84% reduction in suicide compared to never attending (VanderWeele et al., 2016). Perhaps most striking, over sixteen years of follow up, weekly attenders saw a one-third reduction in all-cause mortality compared to never-attenders (Chen et al., 2020). In study after study—including of cardiovascular disease (Chang et al., 2017), all-cause mortality (Li et al., 2016b), and suicide (VanderWeele et al., 2016)—religious service attendance has proven a stronger predictor of beneficial outcomes than any

other social variable, including friendship, civic participation, marital status, or even the combined effect of these other factors.

While these are associations, they come from rigorous longitudinal analyses controlling for baseline outcomes and a host of other confounding factors, thereby supporting evidence for causality (VanderWeele, 2021). Moreover, Balboni et al. (2022) note that sensitivity analysis for unmeasured confounding suggest very substantial unmeasured confounding, above and beyond the covariates already controlled for, would have to be present to explain away the associations from the meta-analyses of longitudinal studies. Yet further evidence for causality comes from quasi-experimental study designs within the economics literature, including those exploiting within-school variation in adolescents' peers suggesting a causal relationship between religious participation and lower rates of depression (Fruehwirth et al., 2019), and another, using the repeal of blue laws, indicating evidence for a protective causal effect on the incidence of these "deaths of despair" i.e. death by suicide, poisoning, and alcoholic liver disease (Giles et al., 2023).

Moreover, there is much evidence that religiosity (both as a matter of conviction and of participation) generally biases people toward pro-social or more broadly moral behaviors. In one study, for instance, the incidence of reported domestic violence was found to be about 60.7% higher among men who did not attend church, compared to regular attenders (Ellison and Anderson, 2001). So too, charitable giving (to secular as well as religious causes) is about 3.5x higher among regular service attenders than never attenders, (Brooks, 2007; Haidt, 2012, p. 308-311; Putnam and Campbell, 2010, p. 461).

In experimental settings, religious believers (particularly those, such as Christians, Jews, or Muslims, who believe in an omniscient and omnipotent God and in a final judgment) consistently show higher levels of trustworthiness, generosity, and cooperation than unbelievers, especially but not only when cooperating with co-religionists (Haidt, 2012, p. 308-309; Ruffle and Sosis, 2006; Tan and Vogel, 2008). And observational evidence corroborates these results; as Henrich (2020) notes, "across countries, the belief in a contingent afterlife," i.e., in a final judgment by God or reincarnation in accord with the law of karma, "is associated with greater economic productivity and less crime...The higher the percentage of people who believe in a contingent afterlife (hell and heaven) in a country, the lower the murder rate. By contrast, the greater the percentage of people who believe only in heaven, the *higher* the murder rate" (p. 146-47).

The empirical evidence for the importance of marriage is likewise robust. Meta-analyses and other studies have indicated notable effects of marital status on lower mortality risk (Manzoli et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2007). Chen et al. (2023) examined how the decision to marry affected a cohort of roughly twelve thousand female nurses over 25 years, and found that, even after controlling for demographic and behavioral factors, as well as for the risk of adverse outcomes from subsequent divorce, the decision to marry predicted greater subjective well-being, better health, and a 35% reduction in death for any reason (Chen et al., 2023). And a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of the effects of marital status on health found substantial protective effects for both sexes, but stronger protections against premature death for men compared with women (Schoenborn, 2004; Wang et al., 2020). The effects of marriage on men in particular likely might relate in part to the fact that marriage and fatherhood act as (in Henrich's words) a "testosterone suppression system," decreasing their levels of the hormone which more than anything else accounts for men's heightened propensities for lust, violence, and general risk-taking (Henrich, 2020, p. 268).

The significance of marriage is further underscored by the fact that, as Henrich (2020) notes, "marriage represents the keystone institution for most (not all) societies, and may be the most primeval of human institutions" (p. 72). The core problem underlying the institution is that

children are a frequent (if unpredictable) outcome of sexual relations between men and women, a fact which men can ignore much more easily than can women. Marriage (and especially lifelong monogamy) creates strong social norms in favor of men assuming responsibility for their children and for supporting those children's mothers—in a sense, for making their sex lives more like the female norm, closely tied to commitment and children. The institution equally benefits husbands as well, in the first instance by offering them (as Henrich helpfully if coarsely puts it) “preferred sexual access and stronger guarantees that [his mates'] kids are in fact his kids” (Henrich, 2020, p. 72). However significant those material considerations might be, however, they are surely not the most important part of the story: at its best, marriage offers men and women alike a unique combination of intimacy, mutual commitment, and deep investment in the lives of others, which makes it not only an adaptive institution for slow-maturing, pair-bonding primates like us (Henrich, 2015, p. 146-50), but also a frequent source of daily joy and lifelong meaning for its participants.

Marriage is also “the most reliable institution for delivering a high level of resources and long-term stability to children” (Kearney, 2023, p. 15), who have in consequence been systematically disadvantaged by its erosion in recent decades. Contrary to all expectations, the “sexual revolution” that followed the advent of hormonal birth saw out-of-wedlock births spike from 5% in 1960 to 40% of all births in 2022, even though 87% of women still say they would prefer to be married before having children (Stone, 2023). This shift occurred in part because, even as the Pill prevented many pregnancies, its widespread adoption made casual sex so much more common that its typical failure rate of 10.8% over 24 months produced a large increase in unplanned pregnancies (Perry, 2022, p. 165-66; Polis et al., 2016). (Also important, as Reeves (2022) observes, was the collapse during and after the 1960's in the cultural norms around “shotgun weddings” for unmarried parents-to-be (p. 55; Akerlof and Yellen, 1996)).

Rising divorce rates have meant that fewer children now live with both of their biological parents (Kearney, 2023; Perry, 2022, p. 25-26; Wilcox, 2009). Divorce is on average detrimental to the health and well-being of spouses (Aseltine and Kessler, 1993; Chen et al., 2023; Shor et al., 2012; VanderWeele, 2017), but has even worse average effects on children (Amato, 2001, 2010; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Maier and Lachman, 2000; D'Onofrio et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2007). To be sure, it is sometimes necessary to end a marriage, as in cases in which a spouse is abusive or neglectful, and we should endeavor to support the flourishing of single, widowed, and divorced parents and their children. Moreover, the impact of single-parent households on child wellbeing outcomes will be mediated by many factors besides family structure, likely including maternal education (Mensch et al., 2019), warmth (Chen et al., 2019), and attachment style (Mónaco et al., 2019), as well as the family's financial resources and wider social support.

Nonetheless, these various trends are concerning from the standpoint of children's welfare. Children of unmarried parents see their fathers—who matter for many aspects of their intellectual, emotional, and social development beyond mere financial support (Reeves, 2022, p. 207-208)—much less than do children of married parents: “within 6 years of their parents separating,” Reeves notes, “one in three children never see their father, and a similar proportion see him once a month or less” (p. 61). Children who are raised by a single parent are also 5 times as likely to be poor than those raised by married parents (Kids Count Data Center, n.d.), and are far more likely to have been incarcerated by the end of their twenties: 24% of 28-year-old black men and 18% of white men who were raised by a single parent have been to jail, compared to 14% and 8% of those who were raised by their married biological parents (Wilcox, 2021).

Children of unmarried parents are also at an elevated risk of neglect or abuse, not least because they are at greater risk of living (or spending considerable time) with an adult man to whom they are not related (e.g., their stepfather or their mom's significant other). As Vanderminden et al. (2019) note, "Families with two biological parents had lower rates [of child neglect] (4.29% in the past year) than other household configurations (range from 7.95% to 14.10%; $p < .05$)". This greater propensity for stepparents and other non-relatives to abuse children is sometimes called the "Cinderella effect," after the fairytale character who was abused by her stepmother. "Fatal baby batterings, in particular, have been found to exhibit Cinderella effects on the order of 100-fold or more in many studies in several countries, including Britain" (Daly, 2022; Finkelhor et al., 1990). The result of these changes in family structure is thus not only fewer marriages, but fewer children growing up in nurturing or even safe households.

In short, marriage and religious communities are likely so widespread in human culture because they serve important purposes and have no obvious alternatives, at least within our cultural repertoires. The evidence canvassed above gives us good reasons for fostering norms which favor, or at the very least, which do not hinder, people from entering these important forms of social connection. And it further suggests that diagnoses of our epidemic of social disaffiliation which do not highlight the importance of the decline of marriage and religious community are majoring in the subject's minors.

5. Additional routes to social flourishing

Along with the additional causes and dimensions of the epidemic of social disaffiliation, we also would like to put forward some corresponding additional responses which might help to lead us from disaffiliation to genuine "social flourishing," characterized by abundant and meaningful connections. Each of the six "pillars" which Murthy advocates as a response to social disaffiliation is good in itself. Again, these were to (1) strengthen social infrastructure in local communities; (2) enact pro-connection public policies; (3) mobilize the health sector; (4) reform digital environments; (5) deepen our knowledge; and (6) build a culture of connection.

The combination of these six approaches will certainly help address numerous aspects of social disaffiliation. However, given the critical role played by economic factors, the decline of free play in childhood, the alienation of the elderly from their families, and the declines in marriage and religious life, we believe it will be difficult to adequately address the crisis without sustained efforts to raise median wages, revive a culture of independent in-person play, reduce the isolation of the elderly, and re-invigorate American families and religious communities.

5.1 Increasing workers' earnings and input

How we might reorient the economy toward broadly-shared human flourishing is of course an enormous topic, and fully addressing it is well beyond the scope of this paper. Good work is being done in this area by critics of economic liberalism emerging from the Right and Left alike, including *American Compass's* recent comprehensive "handbook" on "Rebuilding American Capitalism" (Cass et al., 2023), as well as Michael Lind's detailed policy proposals for strengthening worker bargaining power and ultimately increasing wages, including via the revival of private-sector unions and the end of corporate labor arbitrage (Lind, 2023).

One relatively neglected approach which is worth highlighting here, however, is that of promoting worker ownership, which gives workers a sense of shared purpose and destiny, along with a share of monetary upside. With notable exceptions, including farmers' cooperatives such as Organic Valley, worker-ownership is relatively rare among U.S. firms, but there are good international models which we could emulate. In the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna (centered

on Bologna), for instance, “two out of three citizens are members of a cooperative,” and “per capita income is 30% higher than the national average and 27.6% higher than the EU average” (Lind, 2023, p. 73-86; Restakis, 2010, p. 201-202, 227-28). Promoting worker cooperatives might be expected to have benefits beyond shared economic growth as well: Putnam et al. (1994) showed that Emilia-Romagna's high rate of “civic participation,” not only in worker cooperatives, but also in “all sorts of local associations—literary guilds, local bands, hunting clubs,” and so on, was an important causal factor in explaining the region's highly effective political institutions (p. 97 *et passim*). Another important model for worker-ownership even of large firms is found in Spain's Mondragón Corporation, which has tens of thousands of employees (Médaille, 2014, p. 122-24, 224-26). Happily, U.S. lawmakers are increasingly interested in worker ownership; in May 2023, a bipartisan and bicameral group of federal legislators introduced The Employee Equity Investment Act in Congress, which “would return a greater share of American profits to American workers, by supporting the sale of businesses to their employees.”

5.2 *Getting kids out of the house—and grandparents back into it*

On the issue of improving the mental health of children via the revival of free play and genuine independence, the organization “Let Grow,” led by Lenore Skenazy, has led the way both in developing networks of schools and parents committed to fostering independent children, as well as in legislative advocacy at the state level. One key initiative is the passage by individual states of “Reasonable Childhood Independence” legislation—now law, following the advocacy of Let Grow, in eleven states—which clarifies that child protection laws do not prevent parents from “giving children independence as long as they are reasonable and prudent” (<https://letgrow.org/legislative-toolkit/>). To be effective, however, such legislation likely needs to be paired with sustained campaigns to persuade anxious parents that, attention-grabbing headlines notwithstanding, children are in fact much less likely to be abducted or assaulted today than they were decades ago, when independent play was more common (Haidt and Lukianoff, 2018, p. 163-81).

If the adolescent mental health crisis commends getting kids *out* of the house, the isolation of the elderly invites getting them back *into* it—if the elderly are more than twice as likely as the rest of us to live alone, then one natural response would be to increase the share of multi-generational households, among other initiatives to increase social connection in this cohort (q.v. Sandu et al., 2021, p. 6-9). However, this is a particularly challenging policy objective, since it seems to be so heavily influenced by shared values, notably the West's distinctive commitment to individual autonomy, a conviction doubtless shared by many older adults as well as by their children. The doors in this case are principally locked on the inside; the many daily sacrifices and loss of agency which older parents and their adult children must accept in living together, or even near one another, can be significant.

One potentially easy fix, however, would be to change to zoning laws, many of which prohibit the construction of so-called in-law apartments. The pandemic helped to accelerate the demand for such changes, which are proceeding in many localities (e.g., City of Boston, 2023). Nonetheless, while these and related policy tweaks might help at the margins, they are unlikely to turn the tide of elderly isolation in the absence of a reconsideration within American culture of the relative trade-offs concerning belonging and freedom.

5.2 *Reviving marriage and religious community*

There are also difficult questions concerning how we might go about reversing the long-term declines of religious participation and marriage. Admittedly, as with the challenge of boosting

median wages, these are wracking problems, and no obvious solution to them has yet been found. Nonetheless, there are some good prospects which merit further study and exploration on a pilot basis, perhaps allowing individual States to serve as “laborator[ies], and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country” (Brandeis, 1932).

With regard to the promotion of marriage, we might start by eliminating the “marriage penalties” in federal and state means-tested welfare programs and in the tax code discussed above (p. 7). Greater efforts could also be made to support existing marriages as well. Two broad policy initiatives might plausibly help in this regard: first, we could institute a national policy of paid family leave for new parents (Olafsson and Steingrimsdottir, 2020); the United States is the only country in the OECD which has no such policy (OECD Family Database, 2023, p. 3), and this lack leaves many married couples with newborn children struggling to piece together childcare even as they juggle sleepless nights and ongoing work commitments (Petts et al., 2020). And second, and relatedly, we could increase means-tested cash transfers to parents of young children to help them find the right childcare solutions for their family, whether by sending children to daycare or preschool, or by allowing one parent to spend more time at home (Cass and King, 2021).

Addressing marital problems before they become so severe that divorce seems like another option that could help sustain marriages. We might, for instance, better fund the federal Healthy Marriages and Responsible Fatherhood program, which supports interventions aimed at promoting marital health and engaged fatherhood, many of which have proven effective under rigorous assessment (Hawkins, 2019). At present, it receives an annual \$150 million appropriation, which is only about one tenth of one percent of the \$230 billion annual budget of the Department of Education (Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood, 2024; USASpending.gov, 2024). Dissemination of evidence-based online marriage support programs could also potentially allow for broad outreach (VanderWeele, 2017; Doss et al., 2016). Churches and other religious organizations likewise also offer marriage support services.

How and in what ways might social engagement within religious institutions reasonably be promoted? Some important allied efforts, such as social prescribing, are already implicitly covered in the SG's “pillar” of “mobilizing the health sector” to address social disaffiliation (Murthy, 2023, p. 50). Although approaches of “social prescribing,” discussed by Murthy, could be employed with respect to religious communities as well, a universal “prescription” is not advisable here. People make religious commitments on the grounds of values, systems of meaning, truth claims, evidence, relationships, experiences, etc. However, for those who do already positively identify with a religious tradition, communal participation could potentially be encouraged in a sensitive and responsible manner, and participation in other forms of community life could likewise be encouraged for those who are not religious (VanderWeele et al., 2022).

The federal and state governments already indirectly subsidize religious life through their extension of tax-exempt status to religious communities. Nonetheless, governments could begin to do more to promote religious participation through public messaging about the effects on flourishing of religious participation (in an appropriately inclusive sense), which might well encourage many of the nearly 50% of Americans who identify with a religious tradition but don't actively participate in it to consider returning to their faith communities.

More controversially, we should also consider the potential for more collective efforts to revive religious participation. In this regard, the past might hold the key to the present. If the repeal of Sunday-closing laws has depressed religious service attendance, for instance, cities or counties could explore reviving them. (Sunday is the natural choice in a country in which most

people retain at least nominal affiliations with Christianity; in areas in which a majority of citizens are Jews or Muslims, however, perhaps Saturday or Friday could be the designated day of rest.) This idea is not as radical as it might at first appear: such laws were not only once common throughout the United States, but also remain common in parts of the developed world, including Germany, France, and Israel (Gesetz über den Ladenschluß, n.d.; Reuters, 2015; Friedman, 2017). Moreover, they have the added benefit of serving as pro-worker measures to ensure that everyone, including wage-laborers, has a regular day of rest not only for worship, but also for time with family and friends.

Even apart from the political and cultural headwinds facing any effort to revive Sunday-closing laws, such reforms would doubtless have to be reimagined for a society in which many consumption and leisure activities have migrated online and into the home, from movie theaters to streaming services or from malls to Amazon. Nonetheless, even partial and local efforts—which were upheld as constitutional in the Supreme Court's *McGowan vs. Maryland* (1961)—could bear fruit, and could build momentum toward more coordinated state or federal action targeting border-crossing, Web-based technologies.

Moreover, as Putnam & Garrett (2020), note, membership in American religious communities experienced striking growth, along with membership in many civic institutions, in the first half of the twentieth century, rising from 45% in 1890 to 80% in the 1960s, before beginning its long decline to roughly 50% in 2018 (p. 110). Putnam & Garrett argue that the “leading indicator” in this shift was a “communitarian turning” among American religious communities, exemplified in the “Social Gospel” movement and church-led social activism, including the temperance movement (p. 108-110).

The sharpest increases in church membership and attendance alike, however, occurred in the post-war period, and seem to have been driven in part by the Baby Boom (“then, as now, getting married, settling down, and raising children were associated with more regular churchgoing” (Putnam and Garrett, 2020, p. 111), but also by what Nicholas Spencer (2023) has called “a program of state-sponsored spiritual stimulation,” as part of the exigencies of the Cold War against the officially atheist Soviets (p. 468). As Spencer notes, the post-war federal government

took an active interest in the nation's spiritual health, or at least in its spiritual identity. In 1952, the government established a National Day of Prayer and, two years later, it added 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance. 'In God We Trust' was put on postage stamps and the following year on currency, and by 1956 it had formally replaced *E pluribus unum* as the national motto. The campaigns worked, after a fashion. During the 1950s, a record number of Americans attended religious services and church membership rose from 88 million in 1951 to 116 million a decade later (Spencer, 2023, p. 468; cf. also Putnam and Garrett, 2020, p. 112).

In this connection, Putnam & Garrett emphasize that “it was not simply religious fervor that brought people to church in postwar America. For many of the families packing the pews, religious attendance was less an act of piety than an act of civic duty, like joining the PTA or Rotary, whose membership rolls...were also exploding in these same years” (Putnam and Garrett, 2020, p. 112). This civil-religious partnership—if not a simple “civil religion”—was embodied emblematically in President Eisenhower's laying the foundation stone in 1958 for the headquarters of the National Council of Churches in New York City (Douthat, 2013).

Teasing apart genuine causation from mere correlation is not straightforward in this case—perhaps the government was at least partly responding to the independently rising religiosity of the people, for instance. And of course, even as religious participation has declined, America has retained the religious veneer imparted to it by the revised Pledge, motto, and Day of Prayer.

Nonetheless, it seems significant that this extraordinary rise in religious participation occurred amid both bottom-up and top-down efforts at promoting it.

American governments—from cities up to the federal government—are of course significantly constrained, both constitutionally and by public opinion, in their ability to directly promote religious participation. A return to 1950s-style civil religion is not likely, and of course even many religious Americans would have principled grounds for resisting it. Nonetheless, some recent developments—notably the Supreme Court's recent overturning in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. 507 (2022) of its former restrictions (established in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971)) on state funding of religious schools—offer localities greater room for maneuver in using state funds in a non-sectarian and non-discriminatory fashion to promote religious participation.

Finally, and perhaps most challenging of all, we need to find ways to better convey, in a generous and inclusive spirit, that institutions such as marriage and religious community still profoundly matter for human flourishing, and in fact are, on average, more important than comparable (or rival) institutions and practices. The importance of strong social norms favoring institutions such as marriage and religious communities is underscored by a 2018 study conducted by Kearney and Wilson and summarized by Kearney in *The Two-Parent Privilege*. Kearney and Wilson used the surge of jobs for non-college-educated U.S. men created by the shale-oil fracking boom to test the hypothesis “that an improvement in men's economic position would lead to an increase in marriage and a reduction in non-marital childbearing” (Kearney, 2023, p. 91).

“To our surprise,” she notes, “increasing male earnings had no overall effect either on marriage rates or rates of out-of-wedlock births,” although “in places where very few births occurred outside marriage before the start of fracking, the local fracking boom led to a sizable increase in births only to married women, not to unmarried women,” while “in places where a sizable share of births occurred to unmarried women before the fracking boom, the economic boom led to relatively equal increases in births to unmarried and married women” (Kearney, 2023, p. 94). They concluded that social norms around marriage and childbearing matter alongside economic conditions, and that “reversing recent trends in family structure will likely require both economic and social changes” (Kearney, 2023, p. 96).

The conviction that all relationships or communities are created equal is a prime example of a “luxury belief,” namely “ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes” (Henderson, 2022). The well-educated and well-off are the most likely of all Americans to have stable marriages and to enjoy the social, moral, and spiritual support of a religious community (Case and Deaton, 2020, p. 165-84), but the key institutions they dominate—the academy, prestige media, the entertainment industry, and major corporations—are lukewarm at best in their professed attitudes toward marriage or religion. Nonetheless, the evils fostered by the collapse of marriage and religious communities arguably weigh most heavily, not on the most advantaged Americans, but on poor and less-educated men, women, and children. We need professors, pundits, and producers who are married or religious to be more willing to publicly endorse what they practice in private.

6. Conclusion

Our aim in this document on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation is intended merely to broaden the analysis and set of recommendations found in the SG's Advisory. Several of the topics that are well-covered in the Advisory, such as the epidemic's scale or public health costs, we have not touched upon here. Rather, we hope to have shown that since the scope of the crisis

is so wide, its resolution will require yet more thoroughgoing and potentially costly efforts—though often ultimately healing and humanizing ones—to supplement those that the Advisory so helpfully suggests.

Authors

Brendan Case
The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4277-8075>
Brendan_case@fas.harvard.edu

Ian Marcus Corbin
Harvard Medical School; The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

Ron Ivey
The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

Jonathan Teubner
The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4644-7214>

Erika Bachiochi
The Ethics and Public Policy Center

Richard Cowden
The Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9027-4253>

Flynn Cratty
The School of Civic Life and Leadership, the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4878-0267>

Tyler J. VanderWeele
Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University
Departments of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6112-0239>

Author contribution statement

Case produced a first draft of the article. Each of the co-authors provided substantive edits and comments on that draft, which Case incorporated into a final revision ahead of submission.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

AI statement

AI was not used in drafting this article.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the helpful comments and feedback on an earlier draft of this article by Ying Chen and Christina Hinton.

Publishing Timeline

Received 11 February 2025

Revised version received 1 September 2025

Accepted 2 September 2025

Published 3 October 2025

References

- Akerlof, G.A., & Yellen, J.L. (1996). *An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Births in the United States*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-analysis-of-out-of-wedlock-births-in-the-united-states/>.
- Amato, P.R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15 (3), p. 355. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.15.3.355>.
- Amato, P.R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), p. 650-66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>.
- Amato, P.R., Sobolewski, J.M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 66 (6), p. 900-21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088878>.
- Argo, N. & Sheikh, H. (2023). The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America. *Over Zero/The American Immigration Council*. <https://www.projectoverzero.org/s/The-Belonging-Barometer.pdf>.
- Aseltine, Jr. R.H., Kessler, R.C. (1993). Marital disruption and depression in a community sample. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, p. 237-51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137205>.
- Ausubel, J. (2020). "Older people are more likely to live alone in the U.S. than elsewhere in the world". *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/03/10/older-people-are-more-likely-to-live-alone-in-the-u-s-than-elsewhere-in-the-world/>.
- Autor, D.H., Dorn, D., & Hanson, G.H. (2016). The China shock: Learning from labor-market adjustment to large changes in trade. *Annual Review of Economics* 8, p. 205-240. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080315-015041>.
- Autor, D., & Wasserman, M. (2013). Wayward sons: The emerging gender gap in labor markets and education. *Third Way Report, 20013*. <https://blueprintlabs.mit.edu/research/wayward-sons-the-emerging-gender-gap-in-labor-markets-and-education/>.
- Autor, D., Dorn, D., & Hanson, G. H. (2021). On the persistence of the China shock (No. w29401). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4114342.
- Azar, J., Marinescu, I., & Steinbaum, M. (2022). Labor market concentration. *Journal of Human Resources*, 57 (S), S167-S199. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.monopsony.1218-9914R1>.
- Bachiochi, E. (2021). *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Balboni, T.A., VanderWeele, T.J., Doan-Soares, S.D., Long, K.N.G., Ferrell, B., Fitchett, G., Koenig, H.G., Bain, P., Puchalski, C., Steinhauser, K.E., Sulmasy, D.P., & Koh, H.K. (2022). Spirituality in Serious Illness and Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 328 (2), p. 184-197. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2022.11086>.
- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. (2007 [1985]). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press.
- Brandeis, L. (1932). *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262.
- Brenan, M. (2019). Record-High 56% of U.S. Women Prefer Working to Homemaking. *Gallup*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267737/record-high-women-prefer-working-homemaking.aspx>.
- Brooks, A. (2007). *Who Really Cares? The Surprising Truth about Compassionate Conservatism*. Basic Books.

- Cacioppo, J.T., Fowler, J.H., & Christakis, N.A. (2009). Alone in the crowd: the structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97 (6), p. 977. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016076>.
- Capraro, V. et al. (2025). A Consensus Statement on Potential Negative Impacts of Smartphone and Social Media Use on Adolescent Mental Health (May 16, 2025). HEC Paris Research Paper No. MKG-2025-1567, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5256747>.
- Carbone, J., & Cahn, N. (2014). *Marriage Markets: How Inequality Is Remaking the American Family*. Oxford University Press.
- Case, A. & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
- Cass, O. (2022). A Guide to College-for-All. *American Compass*. <https://americancompass.org/a-guide-to-college-for-all/>.
- Cass, O. (2023). The 2023 Cost-of-Thriving Index. *American Compass*. <https://americancompass.org/2023-cost-of-thriving-index/>.
- Cass, O. & King, W. The Family Income Supplemental Credit. *American Compass*. <https://americancompass.org/the-family-income-supplemental-credit/>.
- Cass, O., et al. (2023). Rebuilding American Capitalism: A Handbook for Conservative Policymakers. *American Compass*. <https://americancompass.org/rebuilding-american-capitalism/>.
- Chang, S.C., Glymour, M., Cornelis, M., Walter, S., Rimm, E.B., Tchetgen, E., ... & Kubzansky, L. D. (2017). Social integration and reduced risk of coronary heart disease in women: the role of lifestyle behaviors. *Circulation Research* 120 (12), p. 1927-1937. <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCRESAHA.116.309443>.
- Chase-Lansdale, P.L., Cherlin, A.J., & Kiernan, K.E. (1995). The long-term effects of parental divorce on the mental health of young adults: A developmental perspective. *Child Development* 66 (6), p. 1614-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131900>.
- Chen, Y. & VanderWeele, T.J. (2018). Associations of religious upbringing with subsequent health and well-being from adolescence to young adulthood: an outcome-wide analysis. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 187, p. 2355-364. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwy142>.
- Chen, Y. Kubzansky, L., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2019). Parental warmth and flourishing in mid-life. *Social Science and Medicine* 220, p. 65-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.10.026>.
- Chen, Y., Kim, E.S., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2020). Religious service attendance and subsequent health and well-being throughout adulthood: evidence from three prospective cohorts. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 49, p. 2030–2040. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyaa120>.
- Chen, Y., Mathur, M.B., Case, B.W., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2023). Marital transitions during earlier adulthood and subsequent health and well-being in mid- to late-life among female nurses: an outcome-wide analysis. *Global Epidemiology* 5, p. 100099. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloepi.2023.100099>.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2010). *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. Vintage.
- Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. (2018). The impacts of neighborhoods on intergenerational mobility I: Childhood exposure effects. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133 (3), p. 1107-1162. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjy007>.
- Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Jones, M. R., & Porter, S. R. (2018). The opportunity atlas: Mapping the childhood roots of social mobility (No. w25147). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/nbr/nberwo/25147.html>.
- Chetty, R., Jackson, M. O., Kuchler, T., Stroebel, J., Hendren, N., Fluegge, R. B., ... & Wernerfelt, N. (2022). Social capital I: measurement and associations with economic mobility. *Nature* 608 (7921), p. 108-121. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04996-4>.
- Chou, K.L., & Chi, I. (2000). Comparison between elderly Chinese living alone and those living with others. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 33 (4), p. 51-66. https://doi.org/10.1300/J083v33n04_05.
- Ciepley, D. (2017). The Corporate Contradictions of Neoliberalism. *American Affairs* 1 (2), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/05/corporate-contradictions-neoliberalism/>.
- Cowden, R.G., Nakamura, J.S., Chen, Z.J., Case, B., Kim, E.S., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2022). Identifying pathways to religious service attendance among older adults: A lagged exposure-wide analysis. *Plos one* 17 (11), p. e0278178. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278178>.

- Cox, D. (2023). "America's 'Friendship Recession' Is Weakening Civic Life." *American Storylines*: <https://storylines.substack.com/p/americas-friendship-recession-is?>
- Czajkowski, S.M., Arteaga, S.S., & Burg, M.M. (2022). Social support and cardiovascular disease. *Handbook of Cardiovascular Behavioral Medicine*. Springer, p. 605-630.
- D'Onofrio, B.M., Turkheimer, E., Emery, R.E, Maes, H.H., Silberg, J., & Eaves, L.J. (2007). A children of twins study of parental divorce and offspring psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48 (7), p. 667-75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2007.01741.x>.
- Daly, M. (2022). "Cinderella effects" in lethal child abuse are genuine and large: A comment on Nobes et al. (2019). *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 151 (11), p. 2968–2976. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001230>.
- Davis, J., Graham, M., & Burge, R. (2023). *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Zondervan.
- Denton, M. L., & Flory, R. (2020). *Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford University Press.
- Doar, R., Streeter, R., & Wilcox, W.B. (2018). Work, skills, community: Restoring opportunity for the working class. *Opportunity America: Brookings/AEI*. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Work-Skills-Community-FINAL-PDF.pdf?x91208>.
- Doss, B.D., Cicila, L.N., Georgia, E.J., Roddy, M.K., Nowlan, K.M., Benson, L.A., & Christensen, A. (2016). A randomized controlled trial of the web-based OurRelationship program: Effects on relationship and individual functioning. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 84 (4), p. 285–296. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000063>.
- Douthat, R. (2013). *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. Free Press.
- Drury, L., Hutchison, P., & Abrams, D. (2016). Direct and extended intergenerational contact and young people's attitudes towards older adults. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 55 (3), p. 522-543. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12146>.
- Eberstadt, N. (2016). *Men without Work: Our Invisible Crisis*. Templeton Press.
- Ellison, C.G. & Anderson, K.L. (2001), Religious Involvement and Domestic Violence Among U.S. Couples. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 40, p. 269-286. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8294.00055>.
- Elnnis, S.K., Larson, E.B., Grothaus, L. et al. (2014). Association of Living Alone and Hospitalization Among Community-Dwelling Elders With and Without Dementia. *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 29, p. 1451–1459. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-014-2904-z>.
- "Expanding ADU Access in Boston" (2023). <https://www.boston.gov/departments/housing/addition-dwelling-units>.
- "Families with related children that are below poverty by family type in the United States" (2024). <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/55-families-with-related-children-that-are-below-poverty-by-family-type?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-53/true/1729/994,1297,4240/346>.
- Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I.A., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics, and risk factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 14 (1), p. 19-28. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134\(90\)90077-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(90)90077-7).
- Friedman, S. (2017). The Shabbat Wars: A Guide for the Perplexed on the 'Status Quo' ... and a Possible Solution. *The Israel Democracy Institute*. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/14015>.
- Fruehwirth, J.C., Iyer, S., & Zhang, A. (2019). Religion and depression in adolescence. *Journal of Political Economy*, 127(3), 1178-1209. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701425>.
- Fry, R., Aragão, C., Hurst, K., & Parker, K. (2023). In a Growing Share of U.S. Marriages, Husbands and Wives Earn About the Same" *Pew Research Reports*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/04/13/in-a-growing-share-of-u-s-marriages-husbands-and-wives-earn-about-the-same/>.
- Gallagher, M., & Waite, L. (2000). *The Case for Marriage*. Doubleday.
- Gallup (2023). Religion. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.
- Gallup (2024). How Religious Are Americans? <https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx>.

- Ge L., Yap, C.W., Ong, R., & Heng, B.H. (2017). Social isolation, loneliness and their relationships with depressive symptoms: A population-based study. *PLoS One* 12 (8), p. e0182145. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0182145>.
- Gennetian, L.A., & Miller, C. (2004). How welfare reform can affect marriage: evidence from an experimental study in Minnesota. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 2(3), p. 275-301.
- “Gesetz über den Ladenschluß” (n.d.). <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/ladschlg/>.
- Giles, T., Hungerman, D.M., & Oostrom, T. (2023). Opiates of the Masses? Deaths of Despair and the Decline of American Religion (No. w30840). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w30840>
- Gillespie, M. (2008). *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gray, P. (2013). *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Hachette.
- Gray, P., Lancy, D.F., & Bjorklund, D.F. (2023). Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children’s Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2023.02.004>.
- Greco, I. (2023). Reframing Family Policy. *National Affairs* 56 (Summer). <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/reframing-family-policy>.
- Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin.
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Doubleday.
- Haidt, J. & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin.
- Hawkins, A.J. (2019). Are federally supported relationship education programs for lower-income individuals and couples working?. *American Enterprise Institute*. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/are-federally-supported-relationship-education-programs-for-lower-income-individuals-and-couples-working-a-review-of-evaluation-research/>.
- “Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood Program” (2024). <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage-responsible-fatherhood>. Accessed 10/4/2024.
- Henderson, R. (2022). “Luxury Beliefs Are Status Symbols.” *Substack*. <https://robkhenderson.substack.com/p/status-symbols-and-the-struggle-for>.
- Henrich, J. (2015). *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Henrich, J. (2020). *The WEIRDest People in the World: The West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Peculiarly Prosperous*. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Holt-Lunstad, J. (2018). Why social relationships are important for physical health: A systems approach to understanding and modifying risk and protection. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69, p. 437-458. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011902>.
- Holt-Lunstad, J. (2021). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors: The power of social connection in prevention. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 15(5), p. 567-573. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15598276211009454>.
- Holt-Lunstad, J. (2022). Social connection as a public health issue: The evidence and a systemic framework for prioritizing the “social” in social determinants of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 43, p. 193-213. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732>.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Robles, T.F., & Sbarra, D.A. (2017). Advancing social connection as a public health priority in the United States. *American psychologist*, 72(6), p. 517. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000103>.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), p. 227-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352>.
- Hong, J.H., Berkman, L.F., Chen, F.S., Shiba, K., Chen, Y., Kim, E.S., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2023). Are loneliness and social isolation equal threats to health and well-being? An outcome-wide longitudinal

- approach. *Social Science and Medicine - Population Health*, (23), p. 101459.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101459>.
- Hungerman, D. M., & Gruber, J. (2008). The Church Versus the Mall: What Happens When Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 123, Issue 2, May, p. 831–862. <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2008.123.2.831>
- Israel, J. (2015). *A Revolution of the Mind*. Princeton University Press.
- Ivey, R. & Shirk, T. (2021). Ending America’s Anti-Social Contract. *American Affairs* 5 (3).
<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/08/ending-americas-antisocial-contract/>.
- Jennings, R. & Pressler, S. (2023). “How companies sell you on the promise of ‘community.’” *Vox* (May).
<https://www.vox.com/culture/23726136/community-privatization-corporations-sam-pressler>.
- Kannan, V.D., & Veazie, P.J. (2023). US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship—nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours, 2003–2020. *SSM-Population Health*, 21, p. 101331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101331>.
- Kearney, M. (2023). *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kim, Y.I. & Dew, J. (2019). Religion and Volunteering in Marital Relationships. *Review of Religious Research* 61, p. 323–340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-019-00382-1>
- Kislev, E. (2020). Social Capital, Happiness, and the Unmarried: A Multilevel Analysis of 32 European Countries. *Applied Research Quality Life* 15, p. 1475–1492. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1007/s11482-019-09751-y>
- Koenig, H.K., VanderWeele, T.J., & Peteet, J.R. (2024). *Handbook of Religion and Health, 3rd Edition*. Oxford University Press.
- Leguizamón, J.S., Leguizamón, S. & Alm, J. Race, marriage, and the earned income tax credit. *Review of the Economics of the Household* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-025-09775-4>.
- Li, S., Kubzansky, L.D., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2018). Religious service attendance, divorce, and remarriage among U.S. nurses in mid and late life. *PLoS ONE* 13 (12), p. e0207778.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0207778>.
- Li, S., Okereke, O.I., Chang, S.-C., Kawachi, I., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2016a). Religious service attendance and depression among women – a prospective cohort study. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 50, p. 876–884. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-016-9813-9>.
- Li, S., Stampfer, M. J., Williams, D. R., & VanderWeele, T.J. (2016b). Association of religious service attendance with mortality among women. *JAMA internal medicine*, 176 (6), p. 777–785.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.1615>.
- Lim, L.L. & Kua, E.H. (2011). Living alone, loneliness, and psychological well-being of older persons in Singapore. *Currents of Gerontological Geriatric Research*, p. 673181. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2011/673181>.
- Lind, M. (2023). *Hell to Pay: How the Suppression of Wages Is Destroying America*. Penguin Random House.
- Luhmann, M., Buecker, S. & Rüsberg, M. (2023). Loneliness across time and space. *Nature Review of Psychology* 2, 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00124-1>.
- Maier, E.H. & Lachman, M.E. (2000). Consequences of early parental loss and separation for health and well-being in midlife. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 24 (2), p. 183–189.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/016502500383304>.
- Manzoli, L., Villari, P.M., Pirone, G., & Boccia, A. (2007). Marital status and mortality in the elderly: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Science and Medicine* 64, p. 77–94. (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.08.031>.
- Marks, N. F., & Lambert, J. D. (1998). Marital status continuity and change among young and midlife adults: Longitudinal effects on psychological well-being. *Journal of family issues*, 19 (6), p. 652–686.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/019251398019006001>.
- McDermott, R., Fowler, J. H., & Christakis, N.A. (2013). Breaking up is hard to do, unless everyone else is doing it too: Social network effects on divorce in a longitudinal sample. *Social Forces*, 92(2), p. 491–519.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sot096>.
- Médaille, J. (2014). *Toward a Truly Free Market: A Distributist Perspective on the Role of Government, Taxes, Health Care, Deficits, and More*. Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

- Mensch, B.S., Chuang, E.K., Melnikas, A.J., & Psaki, S.R. (2019). Evidence for causal links between education and maternal and child health: systematic review. *Tropical Medicine & International Health*, 24 (5), p. 504-522. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tmi.13218>.
- Micheltore, K. (2018). The earned income tax credit and union formation: The impact of expected spouse earnings. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 16, p. 377-406. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2610682>.
- Mónaco, E., Schoeps, K., & Montoya-Castilla, I. (2019). Attachment styles and well-being in adolescents: How does emotional development affect this relationship?. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16 (14), p. 2554. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16142554>.
- Murthy, V. (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/n/surgepidlonliness/>.
- Murthy, V. (2025). My Parting Prescription for America. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/my-parting-prescription-for-america.pdf>.
- OECD Family Database (2023). "PF2.1. Family Leave Systems." https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf.
- Office of the Surgeon General (2021). Publications and Reports of the Surgeon General. *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory*. US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Olafsson, A. & Steingrimsdottir, H. (2020). How Does Daddy at Home Affect Marital Stability?, *The Economic Journal*, 130 (629), p. 1471-1500. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa009>.
- Paris, B., & Hall, J. (2023). "How Welfare Programs Discourage Marriage: The Case of Pre-K Education Subsidies." *Backgrounder 3742*. <http://report.heritage.org/bg3742>.
- Perissinotto, C.M. & Covinsky, K.E. (2014). Living Alone, Socially Isolated or Lonely — What are We Measuring?. *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 29, p. 1429-1431 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-014-2977-8>.
- Perry, L. (2022). *The Case against the Sexual Revolution*. Polity.
- Petts, R., Carlson, D., & Knoester, C. (2020). If I [Take] Leave, Will You Stay? Paternity Leave and Relationship Stability. *Journal of Social Policy*, 49(4), p. 829-849. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000928>.
- Polanyi, K. (2001 [1944]). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times*. Beacon Press.
- Polis, C. B., Bradley, S. E., Bankole, A., Onda, T., Croft, T., & Singh, S. (2016). Typical-use contraceptive failure rates in 43 countries with Demographic and Health Survey data: summary of a detailed report. *Contraception*, 94(1), p. 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2016.03.011>.
- Putnam, R. (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R. & Campbell, D. (2010). *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R. & Garrett, S. (2020). *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R., with R. Leonardi & R. Nanetti (1994). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Reeves, R. (2022). *Of Boys and Men*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Reeves, R. & Pulliam, C. (2020). "Middle class marriage is declining, and likely deepening inequality." *The Brookings Institution* (March 11). <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/middle-class-marriage-is-declining-and-likely-deepening-inequality/#:~:text=One%20potential%20explanation%20for%20the,before%20having%20their%20first%20child.>
- Regnerus, M. (2017). *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*. Oxford University Press.
- Restakis, J. (2010). *Humanizing the Economy: Co-Operatives in the Age of Capital*. New Society.
- Reuters (2015). "France passes law to open up Sunday shopping." <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-sunday/france-passes-law-to-open-up-sunday-shopping-idUSKBN0LI0U520150214>.

- Rico-Urbe, L.A., Caballero, F.F., Martin-Maria, N., Cabello, M., Ayuso-Mateos, J.L., & Miret, M. (2018). Association of loneliness with all-cause mortality: A meta-analysis. *PLoS One*, 13(1): e0190033. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190033>.
- Rodgers, W. (2023). "The New Challenges to Economic Equity in 2023." *The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2023/feb/new-challenges-economic-equity-2023>.
- Ruffle, B.J., & Sosis, R. (2006). "Cooperation and the in-group-out-group bias: A field test on Israeli kibbutz members and city residents," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 60(2), p. 147–163, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2004.07.007>.
- Ruggles, S. (2007). The Decline of Intergenerational Coresidence in the United States, 1850 to 2000. *American Sociological Review* 72 (6), p. 964-989. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200606>.
- Sandu, V., Zólyomi, E., & Leichsenring, K. (2021). Addressing loneliness and social isolation among older people in Europe. *Policy Brief*, p. 1-16. <https://www.euro.centre.org/publications/detail/4127>.
- Schleifer, C., & Chaves, M. (2017). Family Formation and Religious Service Attendance: Untangling Marital and Parental Effects. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 46(1), p. 125–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124114526376>.
- Schoenborn, C. (2004). Marital status and health, United States 1999-2002. US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, No. 351. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e609172007-001>.
- Schroeder, S.A., & Koh, H.K. (2014). Tobacco control 50 years after the 1964 surgeon general's report. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 311(2), p. 141-143. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.285243>.
- Shaw, R.J., Cullen, B., Graham, N., et al. (2021). Living alone, loneliness and lack of emotional support as predictors of suicide and self-harm: A nine-year follow up of the UK Biobank cohort. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 279, p. 316-323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.10.026>.
- Shor, E., Roelfs, D.J., Bugyi, P., & Schwartz, J.E. (2012). Meta-analysis of marital dissolution and mortality: Reevaluating the intersection of gender and age. *Social Science & Medicine*. 75(1), p. 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.03.010>.
- Silverstein, M., & Marenco, A. (2001). How Americans enact the grandparent role across the family life course. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22 (4), p. 493-522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251301022004006>.
- Smith, G. (2021). "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.
- Smith, K. & Victor, C. (2019). Typologies of loneliness, living alone and social isolation, and their associations with physical and mental health. *Ageing & Society*, 39(8), p. 1709-1730. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X18000132>.
- Snead, C. (2020). *What It Means To Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*. Harvard University Press.
- Spencer, N. (2023). *Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science and Religion*. OneWorld.
- Stone, L. (2023). Putting Things in Order: Relationship Sequencing Preferences of American Women." *Institute for Family Studies*. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/putting-things-in-order-relationship-sequencing-preferences-of-american-women>.
- Strawbridge, W.J., Shema, S.J., Cohen, R.D., & Kaplan, G.A. (2001). Religious attendance increases survival by improving and maintaining good health behaviors, mental health, and social relationships. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 23(1), 68-74.
- Tan, J.H.W., & Vogel, C. (2008). "Religion and trust: An experimental study," *Journal of Economic Psychology* 26 (6), pp. 832-848. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2008.03.002>.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.
- Tepper, J. (2018). *The Myth of Capitalism: Monopolies and the Death of Competition*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Thaler, R.H., Sunstein, C.R., & Balz, J.P. (2013). Choice architecture. *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy*, 25, p. 428-439. <https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.4195.2321>.
- Troya, M.I., Babatunde, O., Polidano, K., et al. (2019). Self-harm in older adults: systematic review. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 214(4), p. 186-200. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2019.11>.

- Twenge, J. (2023). *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents-- And What They Mean for America's Future*. Atria Press.
- Twenge, J.M., Haidt, J., Lozano, J., & Cummins, K.M. (2022). Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls. *Acta psychologica*, 224, p. 103512. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512>.
- "USASpending.gov" (2024). "Department of Education."
<https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-education?fy=2024>.
- Van Tongeren, D.R., & DeWall, C.N. (2021). Disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation: An integrative framework for the study of religious deidentification. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/rel0000434>.
- Vanderminden, J., Hamby, S., David-Ferdon, C., Kacha-Ochana, A., Merrick, M., Simon, T.R., Finkelhor, D., & Turner, H. (2019). Rates of neglect in a national sample: Child and family characteristics and psychological impact. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 88, p. 256-265.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.11.014>.
- VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), p. 8148-8156. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>.
- VanderWeele, T.J. (2021). Can sophisticated study designs with regression analyses of observational data provide causal inferences?. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 78(3), 244-246.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.2588>
- VanderWeele, T.J., Balboni, T.A., & Koh, H.K. (2022). Invited commentary: religious service attendance and implications for clinical care, community participation, and public health. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 191(1), 31-35. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwab134>.
- VanderWeele, T.J., Li, S., Tsai, A.C., & Kawachi, I. (2016). Association between religious service attendance and lower suicide rates among US women. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 73(8), p. 845-851.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.1243>.
- "Vital Statistics of the United States: Vol. 3: Marriage & Divorce" (1960).
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiBxJm-pCAAxXgkYkEHQ7nCfkQFnoECA0QAaw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fnhchs%2Fdata%2Fvsus%2Fmgdvdv60_3.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3DJB3iFxyPgk_QGP4SXOWJ&opi=89978449.
- Wang, Y., Jiao, Y., Nie, J., O'Neil, A., Huang, W., Zhang, L., ... & Woodward, M. (2020). Sex differences in the association between marital status and the risk of cardiovascular, cancer, and all-cause mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of 7,881,040 individuals. *Global Health Research and Policy*, 5(1), p. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-020-00133-8>.
- Warren, E. & Warren-Tyagi, A. (2004). *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke (with Surprising Solutions that Will Change Our Children's Future)*. Basic Books.
- Washington, C. & Anderson, L. (2023). Is Your State in Step with National Marriage and Divorce Trends? *United States Census Bureau*. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/07/marriage-divorce-rates.html>.
- Wilcox, B. (2021). Less Poverty, Less Prison, More College: What Two Parents Mean for Black and White Children. *IFS Blog*. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/less-poverty-less-prison-more-college-what-two-parents-mean-for-black-and-white-children>.
- Wilcox, W.B. (2009). The evolution of divorce. *National Affairs*, 1(1), p. 81-94.
<https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>.
- Wilcox, W.B., & Wolfinger, N.H. (2016). *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos*. Oxford University Press.
- Wilmers, N. (2018). Wage Stagnation and Buyer Power: How Buyer-Supplier Relations Affect Workers' Wages, 1978 to 2014. *American Sociological Review* 83 (2), p. 213-242.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418762441>.
- Wilson, W.J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Wood, R.G., Goesling, B., and Avellar, S. (2007). The Effects of Marriage on Health: A Synthesis of Recent Research Evidence. *Mathematica Policy Research*, Princeton.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254430076_The_Effects_of_Marriage_on_Health_A_Synthesis_of_Recent_Research_Evidence_Princeton_NJ_Mathematica_Policy_Research.

Wu, H. (2017). Twenty-Five-Year Trends in Living Alone in the U.S., 1990 & 2015. *Family Profile* 18.

<https://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/wu-living-alone-united-states-1990-2015-fp-17-18.pdf>.