PLANNING FOR PEOPLE, NOT CARS

Decreasing Social Isolation in Cities

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made it evident that social isolation is damaging, especially to mental health. With social distancing, classes and work going remote, we lost a lot of our day-to-day interactions which instilled a sense of loneliness in many people. Humans are a social species, and the pandemic highlighted how we need daily interactions. However small or insignificant these interactions may seem, we need them in order to feel like we are a part of a community. During the pandemic, you could no longer bump into your friends out and about on campus or get to know your classmate sitting next to you. Spaces that were designed to be full of life, like downtown shopping centers, parks and college campuses turned desolate. When visiting these spaces during the pandemic, their emptiness could make you feel even more alone. The pandemic clearly exacerbated the effects that social isolation can have, but surprisingly, social isolation was already increasing in urban areas before the pandemic.

Social isolation can be defined as the absence of social interaction on the individual level with people like family, friends or neighbours and also in a broader sense within society at large according to the U.S. Institute of Medicine Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention. Social isolation might seem to be more of a problem in rural areas where less people live, however, social isolation can occur anywhere. It might seem easy to get to know people in a city full of millions of them, but a 2018 study conducted by WSP Global Inc. found that 75% of the London residents studied did not know the names of more than three neighbors. Looking only at those who live in apartments, three-quarters didn't know the name of anyone on their block. Only around 60% of the individuals studied meet socially with friends, family or work colleagues once a week or more, meaning that the remaining 40% did not have this consistent social interaction.
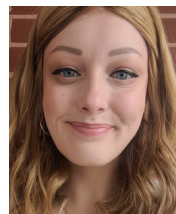
There are some social causes to consider when looking at why social isolation occurs in cities. The 2019 census results found that there has been a rise in the number of one-person households. This is in part due to the aging baby boomer population; many older individuals are living alone due to the loss of a spouse and children growing up and moving away. There are not a lot of intergenerational living arrangements in the United States, and many people do not live near their parents as they age. Social isolation in cities is especially bad for vulnerable populations, including the elderly who have less ability to do things on their own.

Another social factor is our increased reliance on technology. With the pandemic, we saw jobs and schools move remotely which greatly reduced day to day interactions. Many jobs have not moved back in person, and some never will. Now it is easier than ever to work from home, get your groceries delivered and shop online. And as convenient as this might be, the social interactions missed as these day to day interactions got moved online cannot be replaced.

Social isolation and loneliness leads to worse mental health, with one study conducted by the University of Chicago finding that the ventral striatum, a region of the brain associated with rewards and critical to learning, is less active in lonely people compared to non-lonely people. The study also found that the temporoparietal junction, a region associated with taking the perspective of another person, is much less activated in lonely people. Loneliness not only impacts brain function and mental health, but also physical health. A Cigna study conducted in 2018 looking at over 3.4 million people found that loneliness increases

the risk of early death by 30%. A prolonged feeling of loneliness can trigger chronic conditions like strokes, heart diseases, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, depression, anxiety and schizophrenia.

While social factors like an increasing reliance on technology and more individuals living alone might be hard to address, thinking about how our cities are planned and designed can provide some solutions to the increasing social isolation in urban areas. This article will focus specifically on American cities, but will draw solutions implemented in other countries that could be utilized in the U.S. Unfortunately, when these issues are not addressed in the planning process of cities, social isolation in cities can be made worse. The promotion of social wellbeing can be overlooked when thinking about what a city needs, with few plans having a specific goal of decreasing social isolation.

Trouble arises when cities are planned for cars and not people. After WWII, many Americans found themselves living in suburbs rather than cities. Urban areas began to sprawl and continued to stretch farther out from urban cores. People's commutes became much longer, especially since many of the first suburbs were just housing and did not have amenities like grocery stores and pharmacies. To get anywhere, it was necessary to drive. As cities sprawled, Americans became increasingly dependent on cars. This dependency changed the way American cities looked. Highways needed to be placed through cities to allow for a quicker commute for those living in the suburbs. In many cities, houses were torn down to build these highways; they would cut through neighborhoods, breaking up communities in the process. Instead of having walkable streets that promote social interaction, these neighborhoods became places that were undesirable to walk and socialize in. Even if a highway was not placed through a neighborhood, the rest of the city could still feel its effects by increased traffic. A study done on street traffic and social isolation by the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative found that someone living in places with heavy traffic have ⅓ fewer connections than someone living on a street with less traffic.

If the way our cities are designed exacerbates loneliness and social isolation, what can be done in the planning process to address this? One solution is to plan for walkability rather than to plan around traffic networks and flow. Designing a neighborhood around walkability is planning for sociability, which provides the opportunity to run into neighbors or have a safer space due to reduced traffic speeds to spend time with family and friends outdoors. Streets would not be designed just for cars, but also for people as well.

A new development in Poundbury, England is trying to do just that. This community was designed to promote social bonds by having housing layouts that encourage walking by having deliberately winding streets. The community also has built things to be "human scale" meaning that spaces are defined according to human measurements so nothing is too oversized, and there are not overwhelming distances between spaces. Another important aspect of Poundbury is that people are working near where they live. This is uncommon in suburban areas where people have long commutes both to work and to other communal places like restaurants and shopping centers. Poundbury uses mixed-use development to create a social hub in the community rather than people needing to leave the area to access those spaces.

While many cities will not be able to re-plan their cities around people rather than cars, there are some ways that cities can encourage more walking and therefore social interaction. A way to do this is to include more "third places." Third places were first defined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg, and are defined as a place that is distinct from first and second places. A first place includes where you live and a second place includes where you work or go to school. So third places are spaces like community gardens, libraries, public pools, cafes, farmers markets and parks.

These spaces are intended for people to gather and therefore promote social interaction, even if that social interaction is just simply saying hello to someone else at the dog park. Third places serve to create a sense of community, which many people feel they lack in larger urban areas. Having easy, walkable access to third spaces is important. If someone has to drive to get to a park or a farmers market, they are a lot less likely to go. The goal of third spaces is for people to become connected with their local neighborhood through repeated incidental interaction.

Social isolation can have a major impact on physical and mental health, which many of us witnessed as social isolation increased with the pandemic. Our urban spaces need to be places that promote community, rather than spaces that make it harder to have social interactions. By planning for people rather than cars, hopefully our urban spaces will become less lonely and isolating. When walking through a city, it should feel full of life rather than traffic.