

A New Kind of Village: Reflections on the social challenge of loneliness

Ratio and The [Law Family Commission on Civil Society](#) supported by [Pro Bono Economics](#), organised a [podcast and an event](#) to think afresh about loneliness, and the role civil society has to play in solving it. This note summarises the insights of our presenters – you can watch the full event or listen to the podcast by clicking the link above.

Living alone is increasingly common, as Eric Klinenberg finds in his book *Going Solo*.¹ Most do so happily. People who live alone —think young as well as old— tend to be more social. They volunteer more.

The problem comes, as Dan Perlman finds in his much-cited work with Anne Peplau,² when our actual social network falls short of our ideal social network. It is, triggered by the kinds of loss and social disruption experienced in the pandemic, *as Heather Fraser notes*.

The question of whether loneliness is on the rise or not is contested. Eric Klinenberg warned against hysterical talk of an epidemic of loneliness. Yet most agree that at least one in 20 adults are experiencing loneliness at any one time,³ roughly three million people in the UK.

As Debbie Weekes-Bernard noted, for some the experience of loneliness is intense, and for some groups, often the least expected, such as black women and members of the LGBT community for example, it is hidden.

The impact on health and well-being is not contested and is significant. Julianna Holt-Lunstad's widely respected meta-analysis finds that loneliness is a killer, as risky as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁴

The conversations in the podcast and the event pivoted on the idea that since loneliness is a social phenomenon, it needs a social solution.

How can civil society help?

As the Law Family Commission on Civil Society has explored in [Third Pillar, not Gap Filler](#), it is not just civil society's *raison-d'être* of tackling social ills that put it in a strong position to tackle challenges like loneliness. Inherent in civil society's function, as distinct from markets and state, is its ability to generate networks of relationships, creating spaces where people are likely to come together around shared interests and ideals.

Maff Potts and the Association of Camerados have been creating contexts that connect strangers, public living rooms, teepees in hospital foyers with measurable impact on altruism and mutual aid.⁵ The idea is mirrored in Charlie Howard's Problem Solving Booths,⁶ [the Men's Shed Association](#) and Levee Chavez's Subway Therapy.⁷

The extraordinary response to the pandemic indirectly tackled loneliness. Mike Wilson leads the Pembroke House Settlement serving a community of 45,000 in Walworth South London. In the crisis, food was the excuse to link people in new ways, to each other, but also to a deep sense of community. Early on they found that people shielding because of their poor health were getting help they didn't need. These people had a robust social network. But others in apparently good health were desperate, single mothers for example suddenly cut off from the informal economy. And it was the connections generated civil society that helped fill the gap.

Eric Klinenberg⁸ sees this kind of work as the foundation for social policy. He asks that society invests in social infrastructure —libraries, parks, playgrounds, places where social connections

occur and communities can be built— as much as it invests in physical infrastructure such as transport and housing. It points to smarter thinking about natural points of connection like ‘third spaces’⁹ between home and work like pubs and cafés, and ‘fourth spaces such as bus stops’¹⁰ .

All of this might seem blindingly obvious but it stands against 30 years of trying to fix individual ills one case at a time. Three decades of services, as [Adam Lent observed](#), institutionalising the human instinct to help one another. New Local¹¹ is capturing the work of innovative public servants, GPs for example, who tend to the places where their patients live as well as the patients.

Connection is not, as Liz Slade from the Unitarian Church reflected, simply an issue of being nice. Our collective sense of the world is contested, and that which is contested is the source of much unhappiness. A healthy community makes space for difficult conversations.

The pandemic will leave its legacies, some as yet undetected. Traces of change are apparent from the contributions to the podcast and event. Potentially a shift from psychological to social explanations; from fixing individuals to connecting communities; from a narrow focus on civil society organisations to the place of civil society as a whole. If loneliness is a social problem, it requires a social solution. All three sectors have a roll to play – from public policy initiatives, to supporting employee wellbeing. But the trust-based relationships and community building that differentiate civil society mean it is uniquely well placed to address this particular social challenge.

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References

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