

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

HOLIDAY JOY OBSCURES LONELINESS EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA

The holiday hubbub is all around us — and with it, scenes of happy people, celebrating with loved ones. But the joyful imagery obscures a very real problem in our country: an epidemic of loneliness that's affecting mental and physical health and even life expectancy.

Mental health professionals define loneliness as a gap between the level of connectedness that a person wants and what they have. It's a subjective feeling (and different from social isolation, which measures a person's contacts). The two aren't always connected: People can have a lot of contacts and still be lonely.

The pandemic gave us all an opportunity to experience both loneliness and isolation. And for most, it was hard.

As it turns out, our brain considers social interaction to be a basic need — just as our bodies need food to survive, according to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University.

Holt-Lunstad was commenting on a study, published in Nature Neuroscience, that found similarities in brain scans between participants who had been socially isolated or deprived of food for 10 hours. Their brains "lit up" in a similar manner — for the isolated person, when shown a picture of people laughing together; for the hungry person, when shown a big plate of pasta.

Holt-Lunstad is often cited for describing the risk effects of loneliness and isolation as the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Disconnection takes a toll in other ways, including an increased risk of dementia, heart disease and stroke; more emergency department visits; and higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

With more than 40 percent of people aged 65 and older experiencing loneliness, according to a University of California, San Francisco study, it's no wonder that many in the health care industry have recommended that it be diagnosed and treated just like any other disease or

chronic condition.

Simona Valanciute is president and CEO of San Diego Oasis, a nonprofit organization that provides opportunities for older adults to continue their learning, stay well and find meaning in their lives through involvement in the community.

Valanciute said recently that the problem of loneliness and social isolation among older adults is worse than ever. It makes sense: The average 65-year-old lives an additional 20 years, and nearly one-third live alone. They lose their spouses and friends; distant or busy family members aren't always available to provide care and companionship. Some can't afford — or don't know how to use — the technology that keeps so many of us connected.

As Valanciute wisely observed, our longevity is both a gift and a curse.

Oasis brings people together, in person or online, to engage with each other in a safe space, while enjoying shared interests. They offer a variety of physical fitness

classes, including drum beating (which delivers a full cardio workout).

But perhaps most importantly, Oasis is giving older adults a sense of purpose through their intergenerational tutoring program. Participants help students in grades K-4 enhance their reading and writing skills. Their most senior volunteer has been tutoring students for 20 years now. She's 94.

While we commonly think of loneliness as an elder problem, it's also plaguing our youth. Loneliness among adolescents around the globe has skyrocketed since a decade ago — and it may be tied to smartphone use, a study by the Journal of Adolescence found. In 36 out of 37 countries, feelings of loneliness among teenagers rose sharply between 2012 and 2018, with higher increases among girls.

We're seeing its effects in our work at the National Conflict Resolution Center. When youth enter our program (which offers an alternative to the justice system when harm is caused), we conduct an assessment to identify

the root causes of the misbehavior. The No. 1 culprit — by a wide margin — is social isolation.

So, just as Oasis is pairing older adults with elementary school students, I imagine pairing them with adolescents and teens — for whom technology is second nature — to bridge the digital divide. As Valanciute noted, many young people today are never around older adults; without that interaction, they are less likely to think that old people matter.

Intergenerational matching holds great promise for addressing the epidemic of loneliness. But in the midst of the holiday hubbub, there is something each of us can do, like checking in on a neighbor who lives alone or calling a relative across the country.

Your small investment of time could be their biggest holiday gift.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit nccrconline.com

PARK

FROM **B1** and multipurpose field, according to results from a city survey.

A total of 184 people — Chula Vista residents, business owners and students — took the survey that asked them to "reimagine" the park. Participants offered feedback on possible short- and long-term solutions.

Nearly 70 percent said they did not want the park to reopen on a temporary basis while the city worked on proposing a permanent use.

Those that favored a short-term opening said they would like access Monday through Friday from 3 p.m. to dusk and Saturdays from noon to dusk. About 70 percent said they wanted access to the walking path, 52 percent said the multipurpose



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T FILE

Because of crime and homelessness issues, Chula Vista closed Harborside Park for 90 days on Aug. 31, later extended an additional three months.

field, 42 percent said the basketball court and 28 percent said the skate park.

The city also listed four potential long-term solutions and asked participants to rate them. The highest to lowest ranked: a new recreation center, keep it a park, a new senior center and affordable homes.

Many residents said they didn't like seeing affordable housing as an option. Stacey Kurz, the city's Housing and Homeless Services director, said housing would be in addition to the park and not a replacement.

"The reason that we asked that question was because one of the concerns that we have found in the process of Harborside and other parks that we've had issues at is that when there's no eyes there 24 hours a day, problems can erupt and they're not taken care of in an

efficient manner," she said.

With a recreation center as the highest ranked, Kurz said the housing question was dropped and instead asked participants what features they would like to see there. Most said classrooms for programs, a swimming pool, a playground and an exercise park.

The park closure has had some impact on its surroundings, according to residents and businesses, which the city has acknowledged. Security has increased at the adjacent county building, the school has installed cameras and a nearby mobile home park is working to institute a neighborhood watch.

Some homeless individuals who were staying at Harborside Park relocated to nearby areas and others left for other cities.

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EL CAJON

FROM **B1** the city, which officials have said puts undue strain on local resources.

There have recently been more arrests near some hotels accepting vouchers, although police data does not show an exact correlation between vouchers and crime.

The city initially threatened to fine places accepting high numbers of vouchers, but backed down the same day the state attorney general threatened to sue.

El Cajon has 16 motels and 2 hotels, which together have almost 1,000 rooms.

Officials said facilities shouldn't have to call police or firefighters more than one time per room, per year. Said another way, a 10-room motel would ideally ask for help no more than 10 times a year,

a standard detailed in a 2005 report by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Only four places are currently under that limit, officials said. Five were close to the line while nine were notably above.

The city's analysis covered calls for service from both fire and police departments during recent 12-month periods.

After Tuesday's 4-0 vote, staffers must now hammer out more specific rules for owners. Leaders said they would first warn, and work with, motels creating a "public nuisance" before threatening to revoke licenses.

Officials cast the plan as a way to ensure residents and visitors alike are protected. Goble gave an example of domestic violence victims from outside the city who use vouchers in El Cajon.

"Those people deserve a healthy, safe place to be

while they're escaping a dangerous situation," he said.

Goble added that he wasn't concerned the plan would discourage people from calling during real emergencies because four places had already found a way to meet the proposed standard without prodding from the city.

"You'll be more motivated not to rent your room to high school kids to have parties, you'll be more motivated to not rent your rooms for prostitution purposes," said City Manager Graham Mitchell. "This program, if it's set up right, will give them more responsibility to be selective of who they are renting to without being discriminatory."

California's attorney general had previously said fining hotels accepting vouchers was a form of income discrimination.

On Tuesday, City Attorney Morgan Foley said the new plan sidestepped that concern by focusing on renters' behavior, not their source of income.

The changes could similarly pressure organizations issuing vouchers, like Equus, to ramp up the support they offer participants, officials said.

"If you're a property owner and you're allowing homeless vouchers — now, all of a sudden, you have an incentive to ensure that Equus, or whoever, is doing the wrap-around services," Mitchell added.

Mayor Bill Wells also asked for more data on medical emergencies at local hotels to distinguish between, say, heart attacks and drug overdoses. Council members said they'd continue to dig into the numbers.

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NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T FILE

The Regional Task Force on Homelessness says the number of newly homeless is continuing to rise.

DATA

FROM **B1** two months in the past year, the number of people falling into homelessness outpaced the number of people who found housing every month.

While the 984 people who became homeless in November looks grim, the number was the lowest of any month since the task force began compiling data in October 2021. It also was a significant drop from the 1,343 people who became homeless for the first time in October, when 647 people found housing.

The wide difference wasn't unusual, as the numbers over the past year sometimes have fluctuated significantly. Before November, July had the lowest number of people falling into homelessness for the first time with 1,095, while the highest number was in May with 1,650.

Regional Task Force on Homelessness Chief Executive Officer Tamara Kohler has said it's unclear why the numbers fluctuate over the months, and more analysis will have to be done.

She also said service providers throughout the county have reported that economic needs are behind the numbers, with more people seeking food from pantries, help in paying utility bills or other assistance that may prevent them from falling into homelessness.

"We put out this report because if we stop doing prevention, the numbers are just going to continue to increase," she said. "It's really important that we still are focused on prevention and we double down on it. It's needed now more than ever, which also means a lot of our service providers need the community to help them with those basic needs."

Of the 625 people who found housing in November, 187 were seniors, 124 were veterans and 61 were transitional-age youths. A total of 59 families were among those who found housing.

The number of people who found housing included 448 who rented a room, 116 who moved into permanent housing and 99 who moved in with a family member.

Service providers throughout the county have said they have seen a dramatic increase in the number of newly homeless people.

In North County, Brother Benno's outreach manager Darryl Harris said monthly expenditures to help homeless people in Oceanside have increased from \$20,000 to \$55,000 in the past six months, causing the nonprofit to cut back on its homeless prevention services.

At SBSCS, which serves the South County area from National City to the border, Child Well-being and Family Wellness Department Director Valerie Brew said the organization has assisted more homeless people in the past five months than it did in the previous 12. During the fiscal year that ended June 30, SBSCS helped 135 homeless people; since then, they have already helped 189, she said.

The latest task force report showed that the 114 agencies that provide assistance for people in need had about 27,000 active clients last month. Of those served, about 8,200 were 55 or older, 1,900 were transitional-age youths 18-24, and 3,900 were veterans. The agencies reported serving about 2,400 families in need.

In November, the task force received \$5 million from the Bezos Day 1 Families fund, the largest private gift ever to the organization.

The fund was launched in 2018 by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos to recognize organizations that help move families from homelessness and shelters into permanent housing with services to achieve stability.

Kohler said the money would be used to help families struggling with homelessness throughout the county.

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SMOLENS

FROM **B1** Senate.

"The percentage trusting elections was higher at 61 percent," according to the researchers.

But the partisan gap was even greater than before.

Democrats' trust in elections grew from 65 percent before the election to 83 percent after. Confidence among independents also increased, from 44 percent to 58 percent.

The post-election survey showed just 46 percent of Republicans had trust in the U.S. election system, compared with 48 percent before the election. Republicans and some independents especially were concerned about the counting of mail ballots and that votes may be illegally cast.

Not surprisingly, much of this is explained by the 2020 presidential election. Then-President Donald Trump and his allies disputed Democrat Joe Biden's victory, claimed the election was stolen, and fomented the Jan. 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol aimed at overturning the results. The Republican president also had regularly cast aspersions on mail-in ballots.

Reflecting on Morning Consult polls over the last two years and their current data, UC San Diego researchers noted a dramatic partisan shift in trust of elections.

Before the 2020 vote, 65 percent of Republicans said they trusted the election system, compared with 48 percent of Democrats. That flipped immediately after the election. Democrats' confidence pretty much



ADRIANA HELDIZ U-T FILE

Yan Fan, with the Election Integrity Project California, observes ballot counting Nov. 8 in San Diego.

hovered around mid-60 percent over the next two years, then jumped to 83 percent after this year's midterms.

Republicans' trust dipped below 40 percent and rose almost to 50 percent as the 2022 election approached, then tailed off to 46 percent. Independents tracked along with Republicans following an upward blip after the 2020 election. Then their confidence rose to 58 percent following the 2022 midterm election.

The partisan gap was even wider when voters were asked specifically about the 2022 election, according to the Yankelovich survey. More than twice as many Democrats as Republicans considered the November results accurate. Meanwhile, Republicans were five times more likely than Democrats "to suspect significant fraud," according to the researchers.

Independents largely landed between members of the two parties on both questions.

The survey sample in-

cluded 3,038 people drawn to reflect the voting-age population along race, ethnicity, age and gender lines. Researchers said they used two "attention-check" questions to make sure online respondents were reading the survey carefully, and removed those who failed the attention check from the sample.

The more educated people were, the more likely they had faith in the midterm election, as did those at higher income levels. Asian Americans and Blacks had higher levels of confidence in the midterm election than Latinos and Whites, though majorities of all those groups expressed trust in the election.

While the potential for illegal voting and inaccurate tallies were of concern among Republicans, so was the integrity of election officials. Only 44 percent of Republicans said fraud among election officials "almost never occurs / occurs infrequently." Seventy-one percent of Democrats and 54 percent of independents expressed that view.

Voter education may be able to improve confidence. The researchers showed one of two videos discussing election processes and safeguards, and found they boosted confidence by at least a couple of percentage points.

"These findings provide rigorous evidence that public information campaigns can be effective at restoring trust in American elections," the researchers wrote.

"Although the two to three percentage point shifts that we observe in our survey experiment are not in themselves large enough to overcome the deficits in trust evident for some groups in our survey, these are simply the results of viewing a single two-minute video."

They wrote that these past two years of debates over elections might have solidified views, but that "a lengthy campaign addressing different types of election integrity concerns could be much more impactful."

Election education efforts moved Democrats, Republicans and independents in the same direction. Not much seems to do that these days.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to Michael Beschloss, historian (@BeschlossDC).

"U.S. House has voted to expel bust of Chief Justice Roger Taney, architect of heinous 1857 Dred Scott decision, from its place in U.S. Capitol in favor of one of Justice Thurgood Marshall, also of Maryland."

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