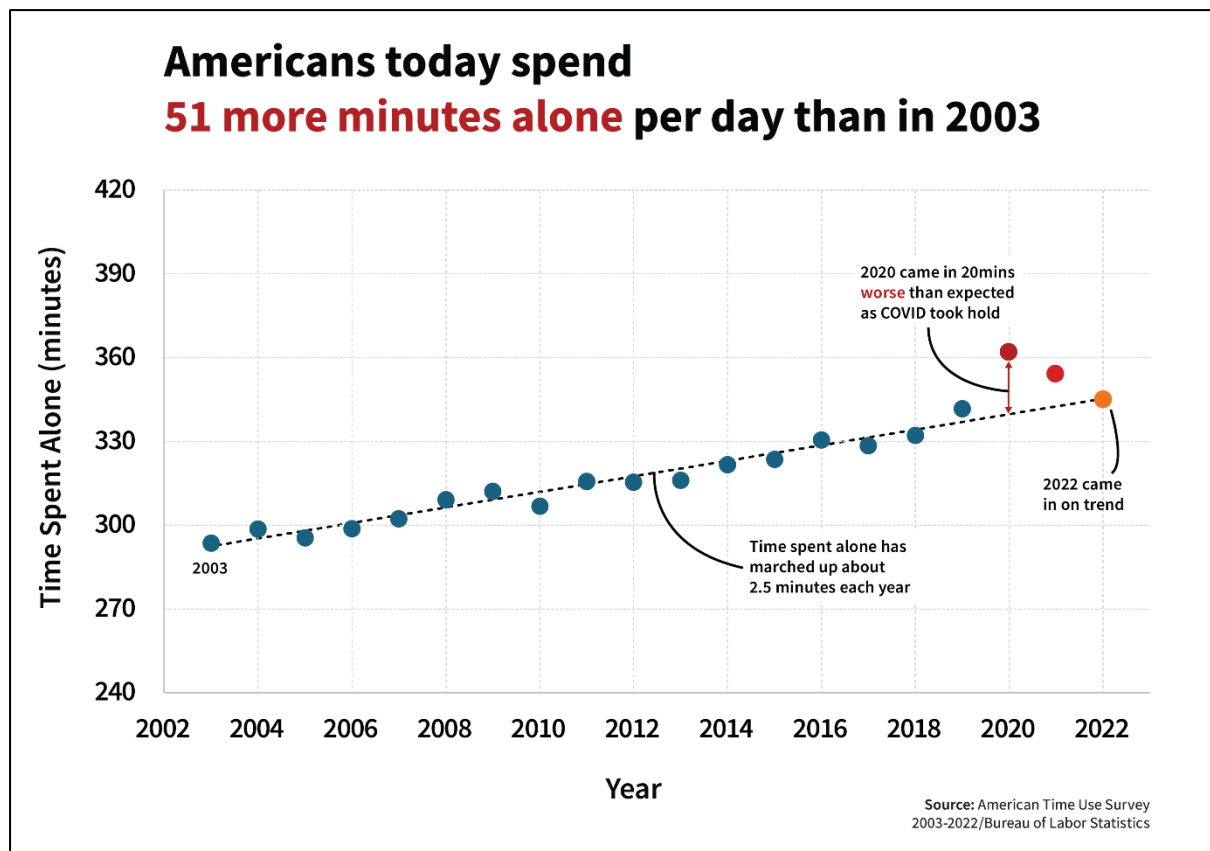


In Spring of 2023, the Vivek Murthy, United State's surgeon general, published an unprecedented op-ed in the New York Times declaring that the America had become “a lonely nation”¹. A formal public health advisory followed, citing the “epidemic of loneliness”² in no uncertain terms as a public health crisis. The knock-on effects of loneliness are profound, increasing the incidence of a litany of physical ailments beyond its most obvious and pernicious threat to mental health. It is easy to understand how the pandemic lockdown has exacerbated loneliness; but the real story is more sobering, loneliness in America has crept up insidiously for decades at an eerily steady pace. This essay explores the shape of loneliness in America. How much time are we spending alone? When? Who is more alone? And what do we spend more time alone doing now than before? The visualisations here exploit a remarkable data set collected each year by the Bureau of Labour Statistics: the American Time Use Survey. Each year the agency surveys roughly 8000 Americans across the year in a representative nationwide sample asking a simple question: what did you do yesterday? The visuals you see here chart those minute by minute records of American lives since 2003. Of the hundreds of variables recorded by the survey, the key is in just one: who was with you when you did this activity? The bureau offers up to twenty-six options to respond to this, but increasing more Americans select “Alone”. Tracking this lets us unravel whether America really is a “lonely nation”.

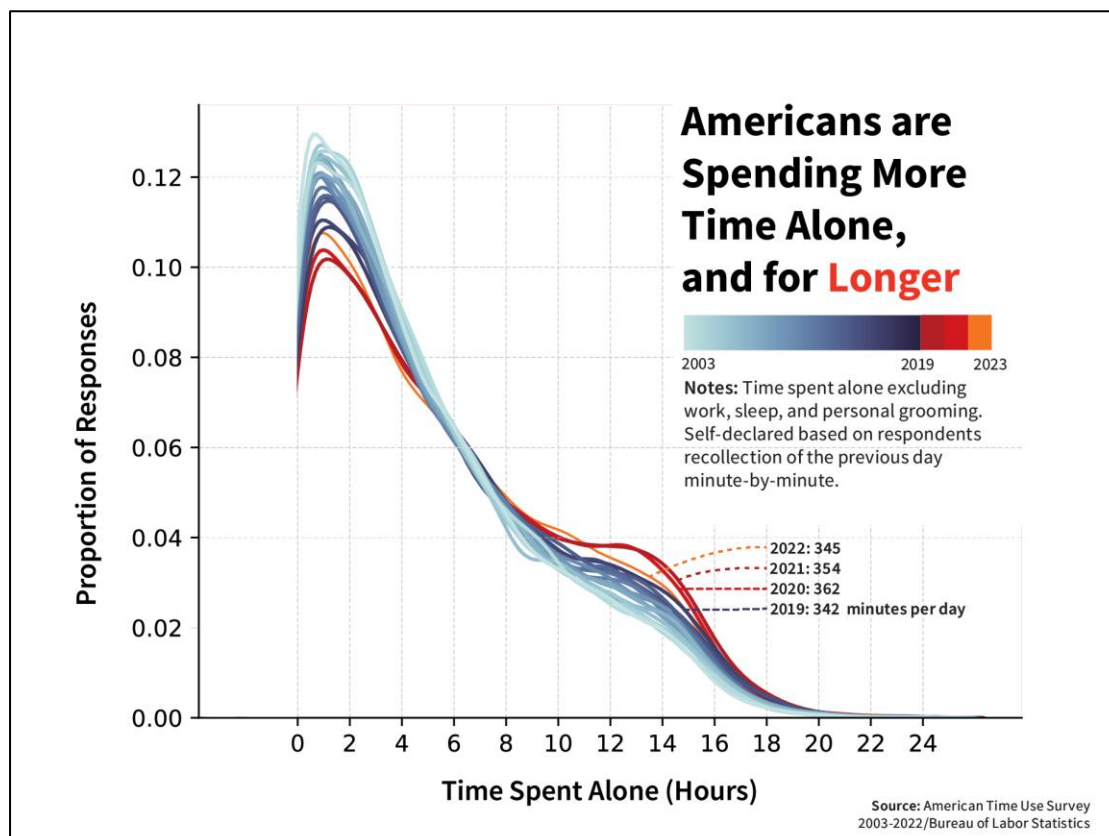


¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(23\)00957-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)00957-1/fulltext)

What does an epidemic of loneliness look like? One answer is how much more time are Americans spending alone today than before. In 2003, Americans spent an average of 293 minutes alone. This excludes time spent sleeping or other largely individual activities like personal grooming. By 2022 this had risen to 345 minutes. Here it is helpful to note that loneliness is subjective feeling of disconnectedness while social isolation is an object measure of being physically alone. A person can be socially isolated but not lonely and vice versa. The time use survey only gives us insight into social isolation. Loneliness is typically a product of social isolation though, and the latter is linked to the wellbeing concerns that make us ultimately interested in loneliness³. The science of what constitutes too much (or even too little) time alone is also fuzzy⁴. What the data tells us unequivocally though is that Americans are spending far more time alone now than twenty years ago. At large, this means that more Americans are more likely to be spending an unhealthy amount of time alone.

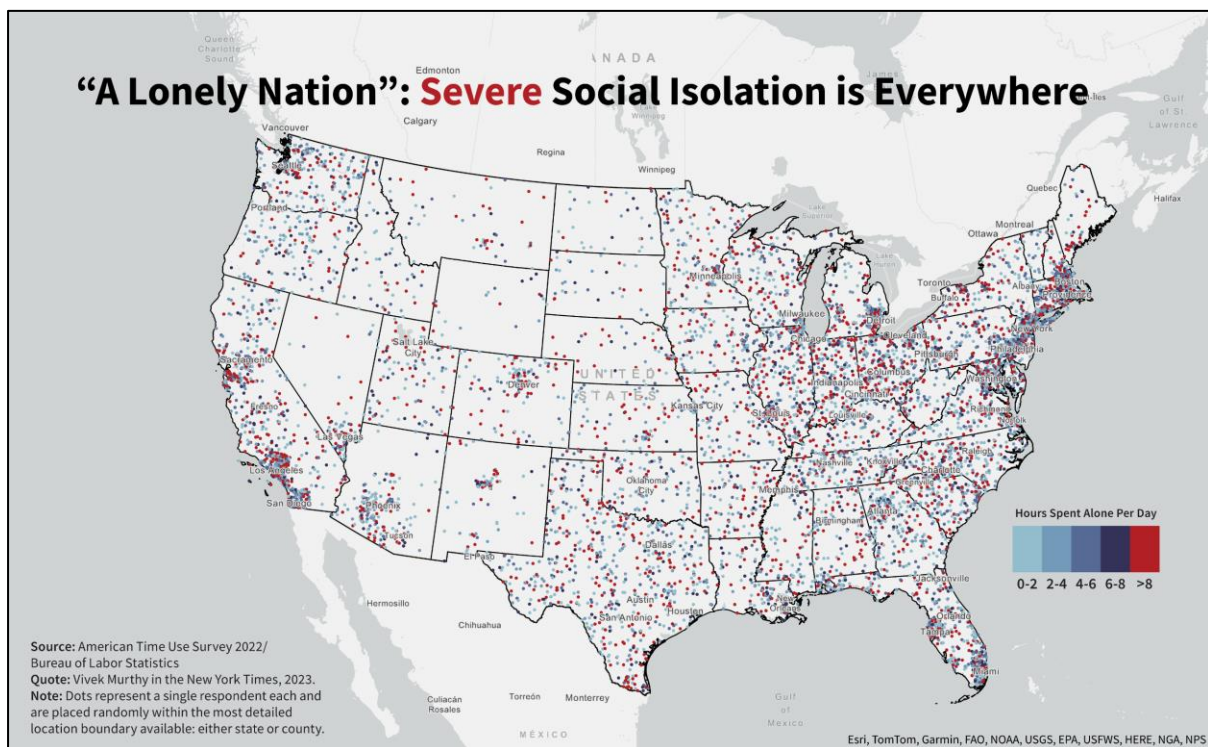
For a health crisis to be an epidemic, it needs to affect a large swath of a community at a particular time. Even if the average time American's spend alone has risen, if this were concentrated in a particular subgroup or geography, it would still be of concern but not an epidemic.



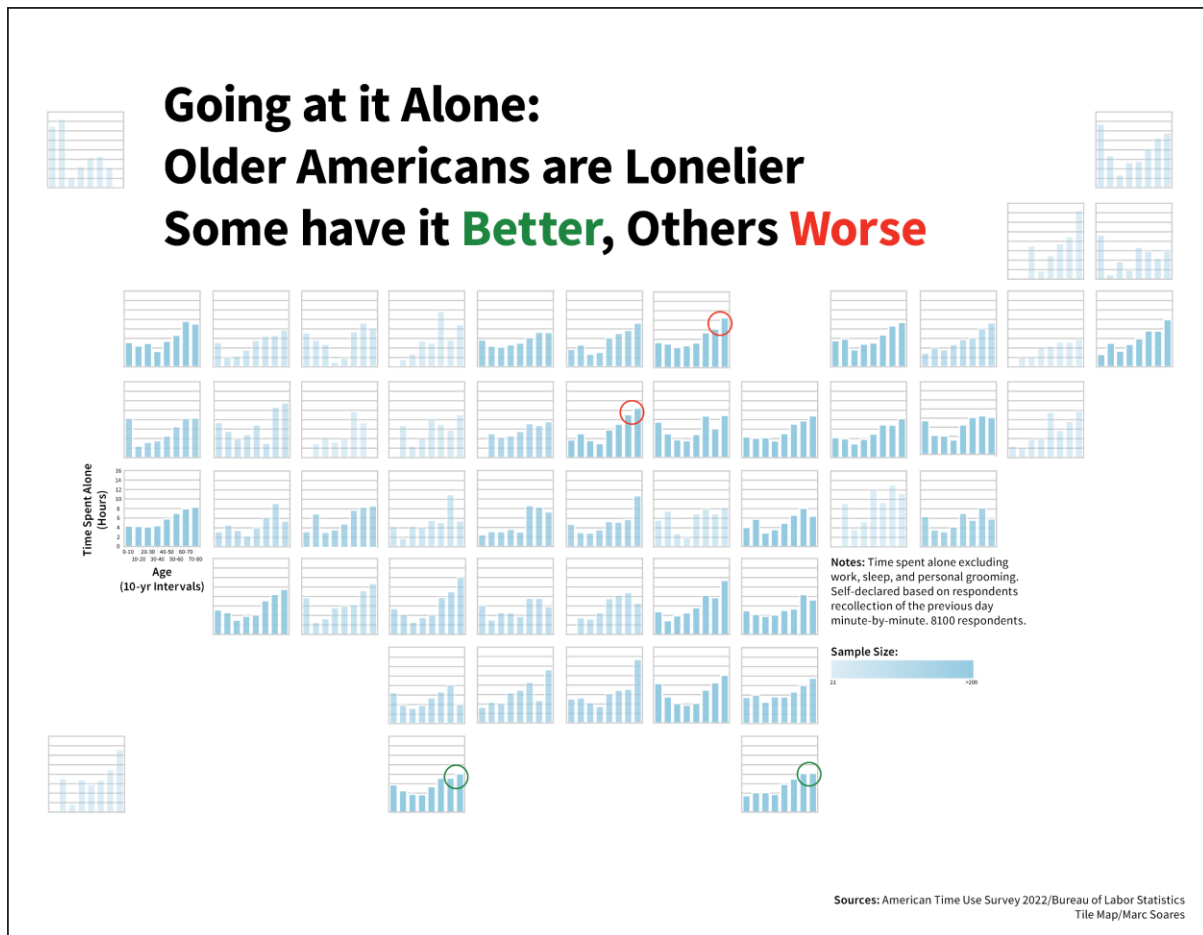
^{3, 4} <https://www.vox.com/even-better/23744304/how-much-social-interaction-do-you-need-loneliness-burnout>

Unlike measurements like height, social isolation is not normally distributed. Predominantly, the highest concentration of Americans is on the far left of the distribution spending very little time alone, less than four hours a day. This declines gracefully until another concentration of people spending 8+ hours a day alone. From 2003 to 2022 however, significantly fewer Americans are now very social engaged, and many more are now spending a lot of time alone each day. This trend was supercharged during the pandemic years with 2022 showing a reversal vis-à-vis 2020 but no improvement compared to the long-run worsening trend. The bottom line is that fewer and fewer Americans can be called definitively not social isolated.

Not only are more Americans in that eight hours and up bucket, but they can also be found nationwide. The survey is designed to be nationally represented, so it may not necessarily tease out hyper local distinctions. Though from what we know now, social isolation has proliferated geographically.

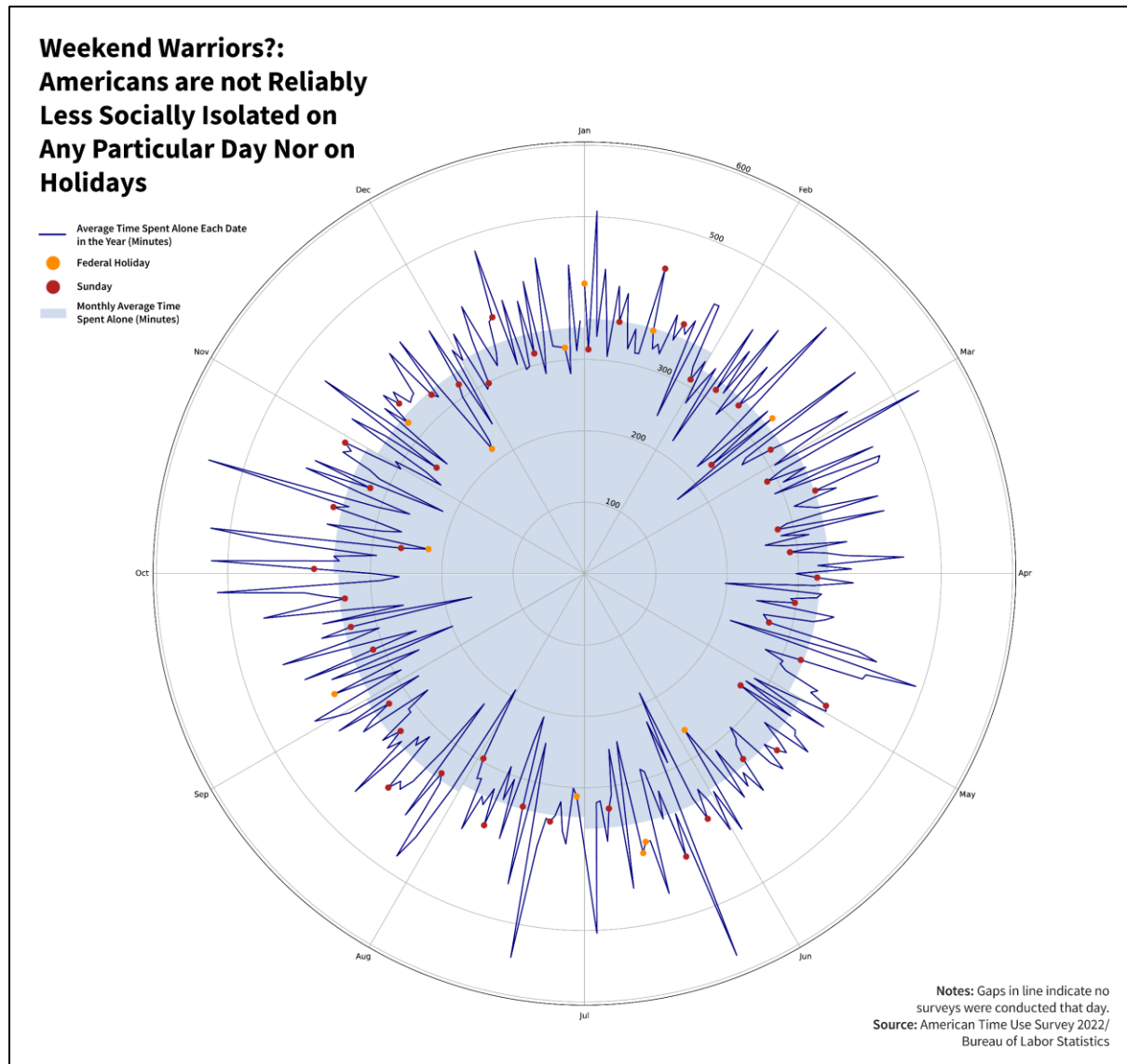


Another axis of community is age. The picture is complicated by some states having far too few respondents for meaningful analysis. But we can see is that social isolation has a U-shape across age. Americans are least isolated in their twenties and thirties then most of all in their golden years. The some states the elderly are palapably worse off than in others. But even in the sates were we have greatest sample coverage, we have too little respondents of each age range to discern why the disparity exists. Yet, the story remains, of what we can see, there is no geography or age group spared by the rising tide of social isolation.

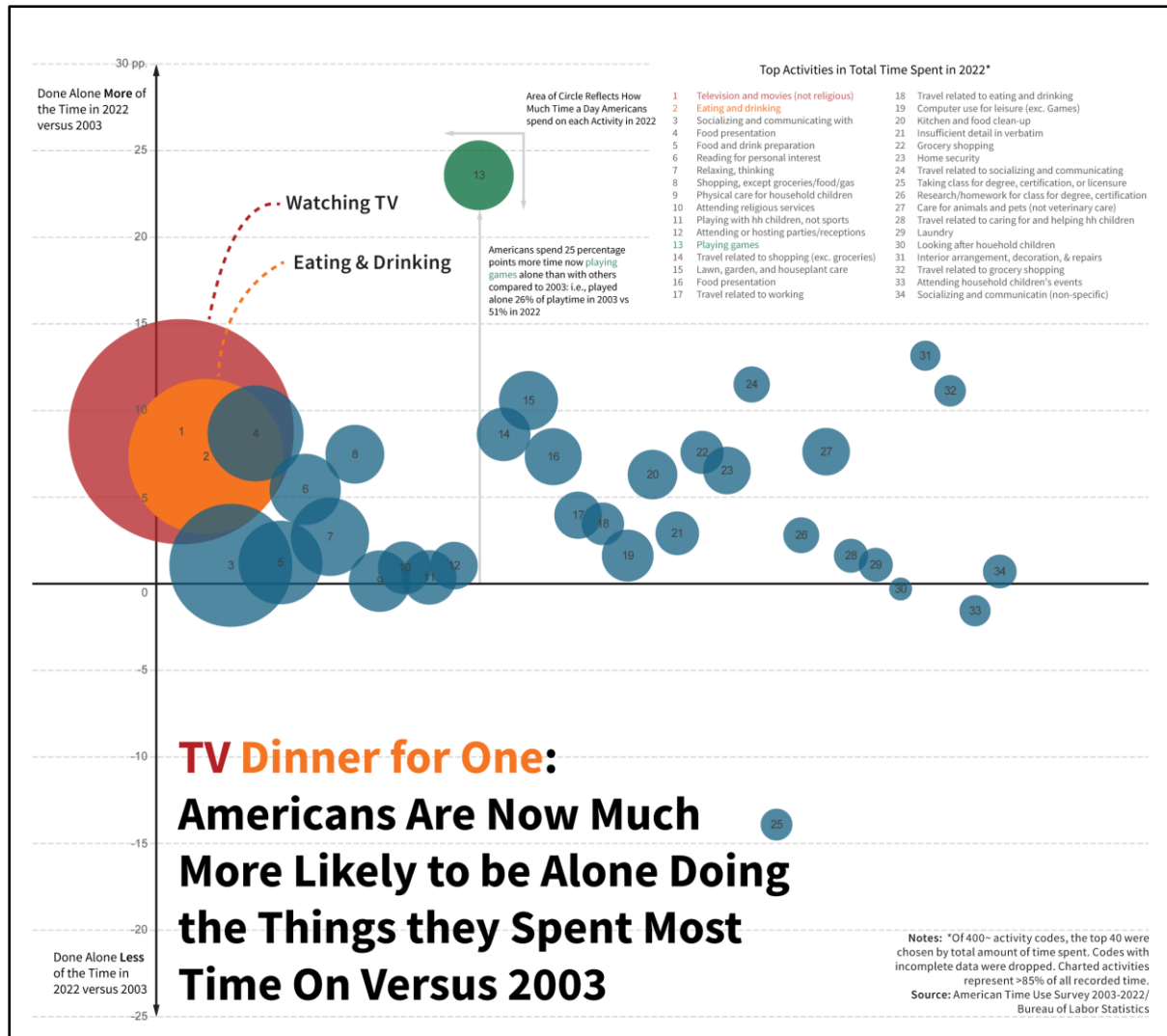


Epidemics speak of time too. To be an epidemic a condition has to be elevated and persistent for a period of time. If social isolation were a pandemic flash in the pan or if it was only on Mondays Americans were especially isolated, it would still warrant care but we might shy away from declaring America “a lonely nation”. Looking at social isolation data across each day in 2022, average social isolation varies insignificantly month-to-month. Day to day, the movement is erratic revealing little in the way of trends. Intuitive guesses like the impact of holidays, weekends versus weekdays, or even particular days like Sunday compared to all other days, all fall flat⁴. Holidays appear just as likely to come in above average (New Year’s Day) as below average (Thanksgiving). Social isolation is all-week, year-round, at home or on the job.

⁴ T-tests were run on all these comparisons, all were highly insignificant.



We know now Americans across age, space, and time are getting more isolated. Is this the same story within individuals? Is isolation creeping into all aspects of life or are we especially lonely only doing certain things? The data suggests the former. Of the activities that account for over eighty-five percent of total time spent, a supermajority has become appreciably more likely to be done alone than with others. Further, the things we spend the most time on, like watching tv or eating and drinking, have become clearly more solo affairs too. Thus, it is not the case rising isolation is a quirk of measurement. Put together that Americans are more likely to be alone doing largely any activity plus certainly so for the activities they spend the most time on and it becomes clear that rising isolation has pervaded American life.



Using rhetoric normally reserved for plagues and pollution, the Surgeon General casted America's eyes onto an ailment that has crept into the fabric of American life in recent decades. Social isolation is not confined to specific days, regions, age groups, or activities; rather, it has become a ubiquitous feature of the American experience. America has become a lonely nation; while we figure out what now, it seems right to now also ask who with?