

Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades

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Have the core discussion networks of Americans changed in the past two decades? In 1985, the General Social Survey (GSS) collected the first nationally representative data on the confidants with whom Americans discuss important matters. In the 2004 GSS the authors replicated those questions to assess social change in core network structures. Discussion networks are smaller in 2004 than in 1985. The number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled. The mean network size decreases by about a third (one confidant), from 2.94 in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004. The modal respondent now reports having no confidant; the modal respondent in 1985 had three confidants. Both kin and non-kin confidants were lost in the past two decades, but the greater decrease of non-kin ties leads to more confidant networks centered on spouses and parents, with fewer contacts through voluntary associations and neighborhoods. Most people have densely interconnected confidants similar to them. Some changes reflect the changing demographics of the U.S. population. Educational heterogeneity of social ties has decreased, racial heterogeneity has increased. The data may overestimate the number of social isolates, but these shrinking networks reflect an important social change in America