

# A Twenty-First Century of Solitude?

## Time Alone and Together in the United States

Enghin Atalay\*

April 8, 2022

### Abstract

This paper explores trends in time alone and with others in the United States. Since 2003, Americans have increasingly spent their free time alone, on leisure at home, and have decreasingly spent their free time with individuals from other households. These trends are more pronounced for non-White individuals, for males, for the less educated, and for individuals from lower-income households. Survey respondents spending a large fraction of their free time alone report lower subjective well-being. As a result, differential trends in time alone suggest that between-group inequality may be increasing more quickly than previous research has reported.

---

\*Atalay: Research Department, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, [atalayecon@gmail.com](mailto:atalayecon@gmail.com). I thank Sarada and Roc Armenter for helpful comments. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia or the Federal Reserve System. Philadelphia Fed working papers are free to download at <https://philadelphiafed.org/research-and-data/publications/working-papers>.

# 1 Introduction

In this paper, I examine individuals' time spent alone and with others. The predominant mode of analyzing time allocation involves modeling and measuring what activities individuals spend their time on (Becker, 1965; Ghez and Becker, 1975; Aguiar and Hurst, 2007). But humans are social animals: Our well-being depends not only on the goods and services we purchase in the market and the time we allocate to different activities, but also on the emotional support, material and behavioral assistance, and information we receive from others in our social networks (Umberson and Karas Montez, 2010; Thoits, 2011; Jackson et al., 2017). To the extent that individuals differ in the emotional, instrumental, and informational support received from others, conventional income, consumption expenditure, and even time allocation measures may miss a key component of well-being.

I study who individuals spend their time with using the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). For each year between 2003 and 2020, survey respondents were asked to provide detailed information of the previous day's activities: how, where, and with whom the survey respondent spent their time. For each individual, I compute the share of individuals' time that is spent alone or with others; for activities performed with others, I separately measure who individuals spend their time with. Furthermore, I measure time spent alone and with others both in the aggregate and by type of activity. Finally, using a well-being supplement to the 2012 and 2013 ATUS, I evaluate the potential importance of these trends in time spent alone.

Americans increasingly spend their free time alone.<sup>1</sup> Between 2003 and 2019, the share of time spent alone increased from 43.5% to 48.7%. It then further increased, in 2020, likely to a large extent a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, to 50.7%. These trends exist with and without controls for observable demographic characteristics. Increases in time spent alone mirror, in the aggregate, time spent with individuals from outside of the respondent's household, which has declined from 21.9% in 2003 to 17.3% in 2019, then to 12.3% in 2020.

Trends in time alone vary substantially across demographic, educational, and income categories. At the beginning of the sample, individuals with high school education or less spent a slightly smaller fraction of their time (42.9% vs. 43.9%) alone relative to college-educated individuals. By 2019, alone time in the high-school-or-less group was 4.7 percentage points higher than in the college-or-more group. A similar differential trend exists between individuals in low-income households (a 3.4 p.p. increase in alone time) relative to those in high-income households (a 7.0 p.p. increase), and between non-Hispanic White individuals (a 3.5 p.p. increase) versus non-White individuals (a 8.6. p.p increase). Moreover, these differential trends exist with or with-

---

<sup>1</sup>The ATUS asked, consistently, throughout the 2003 to 2020 period, respondents with whom activities took place excluding time at work, time sleeping, and time on personal grooming activities. As a result, the measures I develop will focus on non-work, non-sleep, non-personal time—in short, “free time.”

out controls for observable characteristics – age, urban status, employment status, etc. – that are correlated with individuals’ time spent alone.

I explore precisely what activities account for these differential trends. While all demographic groups increasingly spend their free time enjoying leisure at home – and, in particular, watching television – with whom this leisure is enjoyed varies across demographic groups: Less educated, non-White individuals increasingly spend their at-home leisure time alone. A significantly smaller fraction of their leisure time occurs outside of the house and with others.

Reported life satisfaction is negatively correlated with time spent alone. Furthermore, reported happiness during a (non-work) activity is consistently lower when it is performed alone. This latter relationship holds both within individual – comparing subjective well-being among two activities performed by the same person, one alone and the other not – and within the same activity – comparing two activities of the same type, one performed by an individual who was alone and the other by someone who was not. Since time spent alone has increased most sharply for less educated, non-White, lower-income individuals, these trends in time alone may represent a salient source of increasing well-being inequality. In a final step of the analysis, I provide a back-of-the envelope calculation to gauge the importance of differential trends in time alone. I find the extra increase in alone time, for individuals with high school education or less compared to those with college education or more, corresponds to a decline in well-being equivalent to a 10-18 percent reduction in household income (depending on the measure of subjective well-being used). These estimates should be treated with caution: As I discuss in Section 5, comparisons across groups based on subjective well-being measures are tenuous; the relationships among well-being measures, income, and time alone are correlational. Nevertheless, these results indicate that who individuals spend their time with is an important, previously unmeasured channel of increasing inequality across households.

Section 2 places these results in the literature. Section 3 describes the dataset and measures of how and with whom individuals spend their time. Section 4 presents trends in time alone while Section 5 considers the implications of these trends for inequality in subjective well-being. Section 6 concludes.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Literature Review

This paper contributes to literatures exploring (i) long-run trends in time use and their implications for inequality across households, and (ii) the causes and consequences of increasing social isolation.

---

<sup>2</sup>In the appendices, I provide additional detail on variable definitions (Appendix A) and supplementary analyses to Sections 4 and 5 (Appendices B and C, respectively).

Within the first literature, [Aguilar and Hurst \(2007\)](#) study trends in leisure between 1965 and 2003. Over that period, both the average and dispersion in the amount of leisure time increased.<sup>3</sup> Leisure increased most for lowest-income households, implying that income-based measures of inequality may overstate the increase in welfare inequality. Second, [Aguilar et al. \(2021\)](#) apply time use data to argue that recent declines in young males' employment are due, in part, to a decline in labor supply that can be traced back to improvements in the quality of television and video games. This contrasts with research focusing on reductions in labor demand, an interpretation consistent with reductions in young males' socioeconomic status over the last few decades (e.g., [Autor et al., 2019](#)). Third, [Boerma and Karabarbounis \(2021\)](#) employ data on households' time spent in home and in market production, in conjunction with a model of time use, to infer productivity at home and in the market. They identify substantial home-production efficiency differences, implying that welfare inequality may be larger than previously thought. Similar to these papers, this paper re-examines trends in inequality with time use data. In contrast, it adds information about not only what activities individuals pursue but also with whom individuals spend their time.

A second literature assesses trends in social isolation and considers its implications for individuals' mortality and well-being ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#); [Case and Deaton, 2017, 2021](#); and [Appau et al., 2019](#)) and the development of social capital ([Putnam, 1995, 2000](#)). Within this section literature, and closer to the focus of the current paper, are analyses of surveys on time spent alone: [Twenge et al. \(2019\)](#); [Drotning \(2020\)](#); [Hamermesh \(2020\)](#); [Burlina and Rodríguez-Pose \(2021\)](#); and [Anttila et al. \(2020\)](#).<sup>4</sup> [Drotning \(2020\)](#) and [Hamermesh \(2020\)](#), as in the current paper, also measure time spent alone using the ATUS. [Drotning \(2020\)](#) documents that – across racial and ethnic groups – Black men spend the most time alone, while Hispanic women spend the least time alone. Writing at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Hamermesh \(2020\)](#) argues that, since married individuals' subjective well-being increases in time with their spouse while single individuals' well-being decreases with time alone, COVID-19-related lock-downs are likely to reduce the well-being of single relative to married individuals. [Twenge et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Anttila et al. \(2020\)](#), respectively, document decreasing socialization among U.S. high schoolers and Finnish

---

<sup>3</sup>[Aguilar and Hurst \(2016\)](#) find that these trends continue up to 2013.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to various time use surveys, social scientists have employed the General Social Survey (GSS) to measure social isolation, drawing mixed conclusions on their trends. [McPherson et al. \(2006\)](#) study trends in the number of distinct individuals that respondents report having important discussions with, finding that this number declined by nearly one-third between 1985 and 2004. However, [Fischer \(2009\)](#) suggests measurement of discussion networks in the 2004 GSS may be fragile. In addition to the questions on discussion networks, the GSS asks respondents how often they spend the evening socializing with neighbors, with friends living outside of their neighborhood, or with relatives: never, once a year, several times a year, monthly, several times a month, weekly, or daily. [Clark \(2015\)](#) finds no trends in these measures. Compared to the GSS, the American Time Use Survey has at least two advantages. It permits an analysis of trends in socialization within the household – including with one's children and partner – and across households in a consistent manner. And, at least compared to the question regarding socialization in the evenings, it includes a measure of socialization that exists on a continuous scale.

adults. Relative to existing work, the contribution of the current paper is to document trends in the individuals people spend their time with in the US, to explore heterogeneity across groups in these trends, and to gauge the implications of this heterogeneity for inequality across households.

### 3 Dataset and Variable Definitions

This paper employs data from the American Time Use Survey ([Hofferth et al., 2020](#)), a product of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Since 2003, this dataset draws on a sample of participants of the Current Population Survey (CPS) in their eighth survey month. ATUS survey participants are asked in detail to recall how they spent the previous day: minute-by-minute, where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing. In addition, since it can be linked to the CPS, the data contain rich demographic information on the survey respondent, including information on the participants’ educational background, their household composition, and their labor market status. The only restriction I make is to drop individuals who are younger than 18 years old, approximately 5.5% of the original sample. Throughout the analysis, I apply the ATUS sampling weights.

In measuring with whom individuals spend their time, I consider two alternate categorizations. In a first categorization, I consider whether an activity is conducted (a) alone, (b) with other individuals from the respondent’s household, or (c) with other individuals outside of the respondent’s household. Since the ATUS allows respondents to list multiple individuals with whom the respondent spent their time, a given activity may potentially fall in groups (b) and (c) simultaneously.<sup>5</sup>

A second categorization focuses on familial and interpersonal identities with whom each activity is conducted. In this second categorization, for each activity, I count whether the activity was performed (i) alone, (ii) with a spouse or partner, (iii) with a child in the household, (iv) with a non-spouse, non-child relative, (v) with a friend, or (vi) with any other individual (“an acquaintance”).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>The ATUS definitions depend on physical proximity. A person is categorized as alone if they are the only person in the room, even if they are on the phone with someone else, answering an e-mail from a friend, or engaged in other forms of virtual socialization. In Appendix B, I measure trends in time spent alone (according to the ATUS measures) in activities with an on-line social component. I find that these activities account for at most a small increase in the average amount of time individuals spend alone, and none of differential trends in time alone that exist across demographic groups.

<sup>6</sup>Specifically, a *spouse or partner* refers to a “Spouse” or an “Unmarried Partner”; a *child* refers to an “Own Household Child”, a “Grandchild”, a “Foster Child”, or an “Own Non-Household Child”; an *other relation* refers to a “Parent” (living in the household), a “Brother or Sister”, an “Other Related Person”, or a “Parent” (living outside of the household); a *friend* refers to a “Housemate or Roommate”, a “Roomer or Boarder”, an “Other Non-related Person” (living in the same household), “Friends”, or “Co-workers, colleagues, clients” (non-work activities only). *All other individuals* — “Neighbors and Acquaintances,” “Other Non-household children under 18”, “Other non-household adults over 18”, “Boss or manager” (at work), “People whom I supervise” (at work), “Co-workers” (at work), and “Customers” (at work) — are placed in a final category.

For each individual  $i$  in the ATUS sample, I compute  $x_{\theta,it}$  as the share of their time spent with individuals in category  $\theta$  (with the understanding that  $\theta$  may index the “alone” category). In computing this average, I include only activities for which the respondent was asked with whom they spent their time, and additionally exclude time spent at work.<sup>7</sup> I refer to  $x_{\theta,it}$  as the share of “free time” spent with individuals in category  $\theta$ .

In addition to measuring with whom individuals spend their time, I consider the types of activities respondents pursue. I group activities into the following seven categories: (i) time at work, (ii) leisure at home, (iii) leisure outside of the home, (iv) eating, (v) home production, (vi) childcare activities, and (vii) miscellaneous activities. See Appendix A for the list of activities within each of these categories.

Table 1 summarizes the sample: It contains 18 years of data, covering time diaries for 210,000 individuals. The first year of the sample, 2003, had approximately twice as many observations as in other years. Panel A presents the average time spent within activity categories, looking within the approximately 11 hours per day for which the ATUS asks respondents who they were with. Over our sample period, leisure at home grew from 3.8 hours per day in 2003 to 4.1 hours per day in 2019, further increasing to 4.6 hours per day in 2020. (Since time use in 2020 is uniquely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, throughout the paper I will tend to report values for both 2019 and 2020 when describing the end of the sample.) Between 2003 and 2019, time spent on childcare and leisure outside of the home declined, each by about 10%. In 2020, leisure outside of the home fell further, from 1.2 to 0.5 hours per day. So, overall, there was a transition of leisure from outside of the home to within the home, with most of these changes occurring during the pandemic.

Panel B of Table 1 provides an initial glimpse at time alone, time with individuals from other households, and time with individuals from the respondent’s household. At the start of the sample, individuals spent approximately 43.5% of their free time alone. This figure was lower for females relative to males, White relative to non-White individuals, and younger relative to older individuals. There was little, if any, educational gradient. The fraction of individuals’ time spent alone increased by 7.2 percentage points (to 50.7%), with about 2.0 percentage points of the increase occurring between 2019 and 2020. The increase in time alone is concentrated in individuals with no college education (a 7.5 p.p. increase between 2003 and 2019, a 10.4 p.p. increase between 2003 and 2020), younger individuals, individuals from lower-income households, and non-White indi-

---

<sup>7</sup>The ATUS refrains from asking its respondents with whom they spend their time for certain sets of activities. These include private activities, such as sleeping, showering, and getting ready to sleep. In addition, the ATUS only included information on with whom respondents spent their time at work beginning in 2010. For this reason, to maintain consistency throughout the 2003 to 2020 sample, I omit time at work when calculating  $x_{\theta,it}$ . Between 2010 and 2019 there were essentially no trends in work time that is spent alone. In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the alone share of work time increased by 13 percentage points, with greater-than-average increases in alone time for highly educated individuals, and with no differences between men and women, young and old, or White and non-White individuals.

viduals. Furthermore, time spent with individuals from other households declined considerably, with little change in time spent with individuals from the respondent’s own household.

But to what extent do these changes reflect changes in the composition of individuals or activities that have occurred within the sample period? I address this question in the following section.

## 4 Trends in Time Alone and with Others

In this section, I examine trends in how and with whom survey respondents spend their time. I first demonstrate that individuals’ non-working, non-personal time is increasingly conducted alone, then explore heterogeneity in the extent to which alone time has increased over time. I then examine the channels of substitution: What types of interactions have diminished over the twenty-first century to make way for increasing time alone?

To begin, I apply a regression specified by Equation 1, below:

$$x_{a,it} = \beta_{a,t} + \beta'_a \mathbf{X}_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{a,it}, \quad (1)$$

where  $x_{a,it}$  equals the fraction of non-working, non-personal time that is spent alone by individual  $i$ , sampled in year  $t$ ;  $\beta_{a,t}$  are year fixed effects, and  $\mathbf{X}_{i,t}$  is a vector of controls. The top left panel of Figure 1 presents estimates of Equation 1. The green circles plot estimates of  $\beta_{a,t}$ , with the day of the week that the survey was administered and the month of the survey as only two sets of controls included in  $\mathbf{X}_{i,t}$ . (The day-of-week controls are necessary as individuals’ time use patterns differ markedly between weekdays and weekends. In addition, there is some slight seasonality to the share of alone time which month fixed effects pick up.) Relative to 2003, the fraction of time spent alone increased by 5.2 percentage points by 2019, and an additional 2.0 percentage points between 2019 and 2020.<sup>8</sup> Some of the differences in time spent alone may be due to changes in the demographics of the sample: Since 2003, survey participants have become older, more educated, less likely to be White, less likely to be employed, and so on. The hollow squares within Figure 1 indicate that changes in the demographic composition account for some of the trends in time alone. Controlling for age, race, and sex reduces the 2003 to 2020 increase in the fraction of time spent alone to 6.0 percentage points. Additional controls for education, metropolitan status (whether the individual lives in the center city within an MSA or not), employment status, and the number of individuals within the household have a minimal effect.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>In Appendix Table B.1, I consider trends in alone time directly before and during the first calendar year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though there is considerable noise with monthly averages, the share of time spent alone was higher by approximately 2 percentage points in May-December 2020 relative to January-March 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Whether to include certain controls – such as the number of individuals in the household – is open to debate.



As Table 1 indicated, trends in time alone differ according to education, gender, race, age, and family income. To assess these differential trends more formally, I modify Equation 1, allowing the regression coefficients to vary according to the demographic characteristics of the individual. In addition, I consider whether increasing time alone reflects substitution away from time spent with individuals from the same household or away from time spent with individuals from other households. Within Equations 2 through 4, “a” is short for alone, “o” for time spent with individuals from other households, and “s” for time with individuals from the same household as the respondent:

$$x_{a,it} = \beta_{a,g(i),t} + \beta'_{a,g(i)} \mathbf{X}_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{a,it} , \quad (2)$$

$$x_{o,it} = \beta_{o,g(i),t} + \beta'_{o,g(i)} \mathbf{X}_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{o,it} , \text{ and} \quad (3)$$

$$x_{s,it} = \beta_{s,g(i),t} + \beta'_{s,g(i)} \mathbf{X}_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{s,it} . \quad (4)$$

The top right, bottom left, and bottom right panels of Figure 1 present estimates of  $\beta_{a,g(i),t}$  with  $g$  representing different demographic group categories. All regressions include controls for age, race and ethnicity, education, sex, metropolitan status, and employment status, each interacted with the group  $g$ . Between 2003 and 2019, the alone share of free time increased by 4.6 percentage points more for high school-educated than college-educated individuals; by 4.6 percentage points more for non-White individuals relative to non-Hispanic White individuals; and by 2.8 percentage points more for low-income versus high-income households. Relative to the overall amount of time that most individuals spend alone (approximately 40-50 percent of their free time; see the first row of panel B of Table 1), these differential trends are substantial.<sup>10</sup>

If Americans are spending more of their time alone, with whom are they spending less time? Figure 2 presents estimates of  $\beta_{o,g(i),t}$  (in the top left and bottom left panels) and  $\beta_{s,g(i),t}$  (in the top right and bottom right panels). On average, essentially all of the increase in time spent alone is due to a reduction in the amount of time spent with individuals outside of one’s household.

However, for understanding differential growth rates in alone time across demographic groups, both time spent with others inside and outside of the household are important. Between 2003 and 2019, time spent with individuals from other households decreases by 2.6 percentage points

---

Declines in household size may represent a manifestation of increasing social isolation, and not an immutable characteristic – like age or race – that we wish to “control” for. Nevertheless, the fact that our  $\beta_{a,t}$  coefficients are unchanged with the inclusion of household size as a covariate signifies that our results are not merely a reflection of declining household sizes, a pattern documented in [Klinenberg \(2013\)](#) and [Doepke and Tertilt \(2016\)](#), among others.

<sup>10</sup>In Appendix Figure B.1, I study two other cuts of the data: by sex and by age. Between 2003 and 2019, applying controls for age, education, metropolitan status, etc., the share of free time spent alone increased by 2.9 percentage points for females and 5.0 percentage points for males. Furthermore, the alone share increased substantially more for younger individuals: by 6.1 percentage points for individuals between 18 and 39 years old, 2.5 percentage points between 40 and 59 years old, and 3.0 percentage points for individuals at least 60 years old.



more for high-school-or-less than for college-educated individuals. For time spent with individuals from the same household, this differential is 2.5 percentage points. Similarly, non-Hispanic White individuals' alone time has declined relatively less both due to smaller declines in time spent with individuals from other households and because – in contrast to other races and ethnicities – their time spent with individuals from their same household has increased.<sup>11</sup>

What activities account for increasing alone time, especially among less educated individuals, among males, and among non-White individuals? To address this question, I re-estimate Equation 2 with a new dependent variable: the share of free time that is spent alone while pursuing leisure at home. Leisure-at-home time increased for all demographic groups. However, less educated individuals and non-White individuals increasingly spent this leisure-at-home time alone. Between 2003 and 2019, the share of free time spent alone pursuing leisure at home increased by 4.4 p.p. for high-school-or-less individuals (compared to 0.7 p.p. for college-educated individuals) and 4.1 p.p. for non-Hispanic White individuals (compared to 2.2 p.p. for White individuals); see the top two panels of Figure 3. These differences are largely due to increasing time spent alone watching television, at least between individuals of differing education levels: Between 2003 and 2019, the fraction of time spent alone watching TV increased for those with at most high school education by 2.7 p.p. (relative to those with a college degree).<sup>12</sup> Again, these are exceptionally large differentials, amounting to 2 to 3 hours per week of increased TV watching alone.

In the bottom panels of Figure 3, I present trends in time that is spent at leisure outside of the household *and* with other individuals. Leisure time with others outside of the household decreased for all demographic groups, but with exceptionally large decreases for those with a high school education or less, low-income households, and non-White individuals.

As time together is necessary to build and develop deep interpersonal relationships (e.g., [Roberts and Dunbar, 2011](#) and [Hall, 2019](#)), these trends portend a deterioration in social ties, especially across households and especially for less educated and non-White individuals. While establishing causality remains a challenge in certain contexts, economists, sociologists, and psychologists have each argued that these social ties are a key contributor to success in the labor market, to health, and

---

<sup>11</sup>In Appendix Figures B.2 and B.3, I apply a second categorization, exploring time use with friends, with one's spouse or partner, with one's children, or with other relations. Among these four groups of companions, time with friends fell the most: by 5.2 percentage points between 2003 and 2019 and by 6.7 percentage points between 2003 and 2020. Furthermore, time spent with friends declined significantly less for White relative to non-White individuals. Time spent with one's spouse or partner was flat overall, but the net change was considerably higher for college-educated relative to high-school-or-less individuals. There was also a differential trend between college-or-more and high-school-or-less individuals in time spent with children, but this is smaller than in the share of time spent with one's spouse or partner.

<sup>12</sup>I do not aim to determine the direction of causality (if any) between increased television usage and increased time alone. It could be that improvements in television quality induce individuals to watch more TV, which (since it is a relatively solitary activity) leads to more alone time. Alternatively, reduced opportunities for socialization may be inducing individuals to spend a larger fraction of their free time alone.

to overall well-being (Granovetter, 1973; Diener and Seligmann, 2002; and Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). In light of this, what do the trends presented in this section imply for inequality in well-being across households?

## 5 Implications for Well-being Inequality

In this section, I explore the implications of these trends in alone time for well-being inequality. Briefly, I present the relationship between time spent alone and subjective well-being. Then, to provide a point of comparison, I relate subjective well-being with household income. The main conclusion from this exercise is that increases in time spent alone, and differential increases in time spent alone, represent a salient deterioration of well-being, on average, and an important source of increasing well-being inequality.

As is now well-appreciated, subjective well-being measures are difficult to compare across individuals and time: Bond and Lang (2019) and Bloem (2021) argue that, since survey responses are ordinal variables, comparisons across groups are sensitive to monotonic transformations. Furthermore, economists disagree over the interpretation to ascribe to well-being measures.<sup>13</sup> For these reasons, the results of this section are necessarily more speculative. Nevertheless, they will indicate that the differential trends in time use documented in Section 4 account for a substantial increase in well-being inequality.

In 2012 and 2013, the ATUS included a well-being module in which respondents were asked two sets of questions, one related to individuals' assessment of their day-to-day activities ("emotional well-being") and a second related to individuals' assessment of their longer-term well-being ("life satisfaction"). Regarding the first set of questions: for up to three randomly chosen activities within the survey day, respondents rated – on a scale of 0 to 6 – their happiness, tiredness, sadness, pain, stress levels, and their perceived meaningfulness during the activity.<sup>14</sup> Second, survey respondents were asked about their overall life assessment, using a question called the "Cantril ladder" (Cantril, 1965). Specifically, respondents were asked:

*Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top.*

---

<sup>13</sup>Kahneman et al. (2004), Kahneman and Thaler (2006), and Krueger and Schkade (2008) argue that – despite some well-known biases involved (e.g., the focusing illusion, see Kahneman et al., 2006) – subjective well-being measures provide “a useful complement to traditional welfare analysis” (Kahneman and Thaler, 2006, p. 22). In contrast, in their comment of Stevenson and Wolfers (2008), Becker and Rayo (2008) argue that well-being is just one argument in agents' utility functions; it is not a representation of agents' utility. Much of the disagreement over the usefulness of subjective well-being measures hinges on the extent to which individuals' choices reveal their true preferences or suffer from systematic behavioral biases, which would blur the revealed preference approach.

<sup>14</sup>See <https://www.bls.gov/tus/wbmquestionnaire.pdf> for the questionnaire. These questions were also included in a 2010 ATUS well-being module. For the exercises in this section, I will restrict my analysis to the two-year period in which both measures of well-being were included in the survey.

*The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. If the top step is 10 and the bottom step is 0, on which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?*

The two measures not only are conceptually distinct — one asks respondents for an overall evaluation of their lives, while the other characterizes emotions during recent activities — but also differ in their relationships with individuals’ life circumstances. For example, [Deaton and Kahneman \(2010\)](#) report that while the relationship between log(income) and emotional well-being plateaus at higher income levels, life satisfaction (as measured by the Cantril ladder) is increasing throughout the income distribution. Another contrast is, while unemployed individuals report lower life satisfaction, there is no relationship between emotional well-being and unemployment ([Knabe et al., 2010](#)).

I evaluate how the average of these well-being measures varies with the fraction of time individuals spend alone. First, I use  $c_{it}$  to refer to the Cantril ladder score of individual  $i$  in year  $t$ . Second, following [Kahneman et al. \(2006\)](#), [Krueger and Schkade \(2008\)](#), and [Stone et al. \(2018\)](#), for each individual  $i$  in year  $t$ , I compute  $u_{it}$  (the “U-index”) as the duration-weighted fraction of time that an “unpleasant” emotion (tiredness, sadness, pain, or stress) has a score greater than reported happiness during the activity. In computing this average, I include both work and non-work activities, though the main results would be similar only computing the U-index based on non-work activities.<sup>15,16</sup>

For respondents to the 2012-2013 well-being module, I compare  $c_{it}$  and  $u_{it}$  to the fraction of the respondent’s free time that is spent alone,  $x_{a,it}$ . Since these variables may systematically vary with individuals’ age, employment status, and other characteristics, I first (separately) regress  $c_{it}$ ,  $u_{it}$ , and  $x_{a,it}$  against the demographic controls employed in Figure 1, then compute the residual from each of these regressions. Call  $\tilde{c}_{it}$ ,  $\tilde{u}$ , and  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$  the residuals from these regressions. Finally, to place the subjective well-being measures on a common scale, I divide  $\tilde{c}_{it}$  by its sample standard

---

<sup>15</sup>In Appendix Table C.1, I report the average U-index for different (non-work, non-personal) activities, both when conducted alone or with someone else. Leisure time outside of the home and eating, when enjoyed with others, are the lowest U-index activities; watching TV alone is the highest U-index activity. These differences also survive when comparing within-individual assessments of various activities (i.e., based on a regression with survey-respondent fixed effects); see Appendix Table C.2.

<sup>16</sup>The relationships among  $c_{it}$ ,  $u_{it}$ , and  $x_{a,it}$  (without computing residuals) are similar to those presented in Figure 4. See Figure C.1. Furthermore, the ATUS well-being module contains two measures of the respondent’s health: whether the respondent took pain medication on the previous survey day, and whether the respondent had high blood pressure in the last five years. The relationships within Figure 4 are robust to the inclusion of these variables as additional controls. Finally, when applying the explanatory variables employed in Figure 4 and a linear probability model, there is no conditional correlation between the two measures of physical health and the fraction of free time spent alone; see Table C.3. So, the importance of time alone as a predictor of well-being is not merely a reflection of the well-known relationship between physical health and subjective well-being.

deviation, and call the resulting variable  $\hat{c}_{it}$ . Also let  $\hat{u}_{it}$  refer to  $\tilde{u}_{it}$  divided by its standard deviation.

The top panel of Figure 4 plots  $\hat{c}_{it}$  and  $\hat{u}_{it}$  against  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ , illustrating that a greater share of time alone corresponds to lower subjective well-being. According to this figure, a 5 percentage point increase in alone time – roughly the differential in 2003-2019 growth in alone time for high-school-or-less relative to college-educated individuals – corresponds to a 0.017 standard deviation decrease in the Cantril ladder score, and a 0.018 standard deviation increase in the U-index.

Are these differences large or small? I use households' log income (call this  $y_{it}$  and its residual-on-observables  $\tilde{y}_{it}$ ) as a rough benchmark.<sup>17</sup> In particular, I seek the household income level that has the same predicted change in  $\hat{c}_{it}$  and  $\hat{u}_{it}$  as the 5 percentage point difference in  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ . According to the bottom panel of Figure 4, a regression of  $\hat{c}_{it}$  on  $\tilde{y}_{it}$  would yield a slope of approximately 0.17. As a result, our 5 percentage point differential in alone time has the same association with life satisfaction (measured by  $\hat{c}_{it}$ ) as a 10 log point difference in household incomes.<sup>18</sup> A similar calculation, using  $\hat{u}_{it}$  instead of  $\hat{c}_{it}$ , would indicate that a 5 percentage point differential in alone time corresponds to a 18 log point difference in household income. So, the relative increase in alone time among less educated, non-White, lower-household-income individuals indicates that inequality may be increasing more rapidly than conventional measures suggest.

Of course, these numbers should be treated with a great deal of caution and modesty. The relationships between income, alone time, and subjective well-being presented in Figure 4 are not based on any experimental or quasi-experimental variation. As discussed at the beginning of the section, the interpretation of subjective well-being measures is contentious. Acknowledging these limitations, the goal of this section has been more modest: simply to suggest that existing analyses ignoring who individuals spend their time with may not fully capture increasing trends in inequality. To make this point, identification based on quasi-experimental variation is not crucial. Furthermore, in response to the concerns identified by [Bond and Lang \(2019\)](#) and [Bloem \(2021\)](#), in Appendix Figure C.2 I confirm that the relationships given in Figure 4 are robust to various transformations and alternate variable definitions.

## 6 Conclusion

Americans increasingly spend their free time alone. These shifts are concentrated in leisure activities – with time alone and at home replacing time outside of the household and with others – and among individuals with less education and with lower household income, and those who

<sup>17</sup>The ATUS reports household income in 16 intervals. I drop the lowest interval (\$0 to \$4,999) and highest interval (greater than \$150,000) when producing Figure 4. For the other 14 intervals, I set the income as the midpoint within each interval.

<sup>18</sup>To arrive at this number, divide 0.017 (the standard deviations of  $\hat{c}_{it}$ , corresponding to a 5 percentage point alone time differential) by 0.17 (the slope of the relationship between  $\hat{c}_{it}$  and household income).

are younger, males, and non-White individuals. Finally, given that time alone is associated with lower subjective well-being, increases in solitude among lower-income households suggest that conventional income measures may be understating the extent to which welfare inequality has been increasing over the last two decades.

While these trends in time use preceded 2020, clearly the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a dramatic increase in time alone. As the pandemic abates, will it leave a permanent impact on how, where, and with whom Americans spend their free time? Furthermore, time allocation across activities differs markedly—in overall levels, in country-wide trends, and in within-country dispersion ([Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla, 2012](#)). But are there analogous cross-country differences in the growth and dispersion in whom people spend their time with? In particular, is increasing social isolation among lower-income, less-educated households a uniquely American phenomenon? These are exciting questions for future research.

## References

- Aguiar, M., Bils, M., Charles, K., and Hurst, E. (2021). Leisure Luxuries and the Labor Supply of Young Men. *Journal of Political Economy*, 129(2):337–382.
- Aguiar, M. and Hurst, E. (2007). Measuring Trends in Leisure: The Allocation of Time over Five Decades. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122(3):969–1006.
- Aguiar, M. and Hurst, E. (2016). The Macroeconomics of Time Allocation. *Handbook of Macroeconomics*, 2:203–253.
- Anttila, T., Selander, K., and Oinas, T. (2020). Disconnected Lives: Trends in Time Spent Alone in Finland. *Social Indicators Research*, 150(2):711–730.
- Appau, S., Churchill, S. A., and Farrell, L. (2019). Social Integration and Subjective Wellbeing. *Applied Economics*, 51(1):1748–1761.
- Autor, D., Dorn, D., and Hanson, D. (2019). When Work Disappears: Manufacturing Decline and the Falling Marriage Market Value of Young Men. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 1(2):161–178.
- Becker, G. S. (1965). A Theory of the Allocation of Time. *Economic Journal*, 75:493–517.
- Becker, G. S. and Rayo, L. (2008). Economic Growth and Subjective Well-being: Re-assessing the Easterlin Paradox: Comment. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2008(1):88–95.
- Bloem, J. R. (2021). How Much Does the Cardinal Treatment of Ordinal Variables Matter? An Empirical Investigation. *Political Analysis*, pages 1–17.
- Boerma, J. and Karabarbounis, L. (2021). Inferring Inequality with Home Production. *Econometrica*, 89(5):2517–2556.
- Bond, T. N. and Lang, K. (2019). The Sad Truth about Happiness Scales. *Journal of Political Economy*, 127(4):1629–1640.
- Burlina, C. and Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2021). Alone and Lonely: The Economic Cost of Solitude for Regions in Europe. Technical report.
- Cantril, H. (1965). *Pattern of Human Concerns*. Rutgers University Press.
- Case, A. and Deaton, A. (2015). Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife Among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(49):15078–15083.

- Case, A. and Deaton, A. (2017). Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2017(2):397–443.
- Case, A. and Deaton, A. (2021). The Great Divide: Education, Despair, and Death. Technical report.
- Clark, A. K. (2015). Rethinking the Decline in Social Capital. *American Politics Research*, 43(4):569–601.
- Deaton, A. and Kahneman, D. (2010). High Income Improves Evaluation of Life but Not Emotional Well-Being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(38):16489–16493.
- Diener, E. and Seligmann, M. E. P. (2002). Very Happy People. *Psychological Science*, 13(1):81–84.
- Doepke, M. and Tertilt, M. (2016). Families in Macroeconomics. *Handbook of Macroeconomics*, 2:1789–1891.
- Drotning, K. (2020). Time Spent Alone in the United States by Gender and Race-Ethnicity. Technical report.
- Fischer, C. S. (2009). The 2004 GSS Finding of Shrunk Social Networks: An Artifact? *American Sociological Review*, 74(4):657–669.
- Ghez, G. R. and Becker, G. S. (1975). *The Allocation of Time and Goods over the Life Cycle*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Gimenez-Nadal, J. I. and Sevilla, A. (2012). Trends in Time Allocation: A Cross-country Analysis. *European Economic Review*, 56(6):1338–1359.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6):1360–1380.
- Hall, J. A. (2019). How Many Hours Does It Take to Make a Friend? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(4):1278–1296.
- Hamermesh, D. (2020). Life Satisfaction, Loneliness and Togetherness, with an Application to Covid-19 Lock-downs. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 18:983–1000.
- Hofferth, S. L., Flood, S. M., Sobek, M., and Backman, D. (2020). American Time Use Survey Data Extract Builder: Version 2.8 [dataset] College Park, MD: University of Maryland and Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D060.V2.8>.



- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., and Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2):227–237.
- Jackson, M. O., Rogers, B. W., and Zenou, Y. (2017). The Economic Consequences of Social-Network Structure. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55(1):49–95.
- Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., and Stone, A. (2004). A Survey Method for Characterizing Daily Life Experience: The Day Reconstruction Method. *Science*, 306:1776–1780.
- Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., and Stone, A. (2006). Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion. *Science*, 312:1908–1910.
- Kahneman, D. and Thaler, R. H. (2006). Anomalies: Utility Maximization and Experienced Utility. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20(1):221–234.
- Klinenberg, E. (2013). *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. Penguin.
- Knabe, A., Rätzl, S., Schöb, R., and Weimann, J. (2010). Dissatisfied with Life but Having a Good Day: Time-use and Well-being of the Unemployed. *Economic Journal*, 120(547):867–889.
- Krueger, A. B. and Schkade, D. A. (2008). The Reliability of Subjective Well-Being Measures. *Journal of Public Economics*, 92(8-9):1833–1845.
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., and Brashears, M. (2006). Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades. *American Sociological Review*, 71(3):353–375.
- Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6:65–78.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Roberts, S. G. B. and Dunbar, R. I. M. (2011). The Costs of Family and Friends: An 18-month Longitudinal Study of Relationship Maintenance and Decay. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(3):186–197.
- Stevenson, B. and Wolfers, J. (2008). Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2008(1):1–87.

- Stone, A. A., Schneider, S., Krueger, A., Schwartz, J. E., and Deaton, A. (2018). Experiential Wellbeing Data from the American Time Use Survey: Comparisons with Other Methods and Analytic Illustrations with Age and Income. *Social Indicators Research*, 136(1):359–378.
- Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms Linking Social Ties and Support to Physical and Mental Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 52(2):145–161.
- Twenge, J. M., Spitzberg, B. H., and Campbell, W. K. (2019). Less In-Person Social Interaction with Peers Among U.S. Adolescents in the 21st Century and Links to Loneliness. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(6):1892–1913.
- Umberson, D. and Karas Montez, J. (2010). Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51:S54–S66.

# Tables and Figures

Table 1: Summary Statistics

| Panel A: Hours, by Activity  |  | 2003       | 2019  | 2020  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
|------------------------------|--|------------|-------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-----------|
| Childcare                    |  | 0.51       | 0.45  | 0.46  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Eating                       |  | 1.23       | 1.18  | 1.13  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Home Production              |  | 1.76       | 1.67  | 1.85  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Leisure At Home              |  | 3.79       | 4.06  | 4.65  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Leisure Outside              |  | 1.36       | 1.20  | 0.45  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Other Non-Work Time          |  | 2.61       | 2.43  | 2.15  |                             |       |       |                           |       |       |        |       |       |           |
| Panel B: Share, by Companion |  | Time Alone |       |       | With Indivs. from Other HHs |       |       | With Indivs. from Same HH |       |       | Count  |       |       |           |
| Demographic Group            |  | 2003       | 2019  | 2020  | 2003                        | 2019  | 2020  | 2003                      | 2019  | 2020  | 2003   | 2019  | 2020  | All Years |
| Entire Sample                |  | 0.435      | 0.487 | 0.507 | 0.219                       | 0.173 | 0.123 | 0.402                     | 0.383 | 0.396 | 19,757 | 9,183 | 8,536 | 210,370   |
| ≤High School                 |  | 0.429      | 0.504 | 0.533 | 0.220                       | 0.162 | 0.117 | 0.401                     | 0.368 | 0.368 | 8,465  | 2,923 | 2,659 | 80,303    |
| Some College                 |  | 0.445      | 0.499 | 0.528 | 0.238                       | 0.190 | 0.136 | 0.372                     | 0.352 | 0.362 | 3,772  | 1,547 | 1,391 | 38,326    |
| ≥College                     |  | 0.439      | 0.467 | 0.480 | 0.207                       | 0.177 | 0.124 | 0.419                     | 0.408 | 0.430 | 7,520  | 4,713 | 4,486 | 91,741    |
| Young (Age≤49)               |  | 0.389      | 0.438 | 0.452 | 0.241                       | 0.185 | 0.136 | 0.429                     | 0.424 | 0.441 | 11,684 | 4,183 | 3,841 | 112,842   |
| Old (Age≥50)                 |  | 0.510      | 0.544 | 0.570 | 0.184                       | 0.160 | 0.108 | 0.357                     | 0.337 | 0.346 | 8,073  | 5,000 | 4,695 | 97,528    |
| Low HH Income                |  | 0.469      | 0.539 | 0.567 | 0.219                       | 0.168 | 0.126 | 0.354                     | 0.324 | 0.325 | 6,840  | 3,856 | 3,301 | 78,000    |
| Medium HH Income             |  | 0.417      | 0.472 | 0.501 | 0.221                       | 0.170 | 0.122 | 0.422                     | 0.400 | 0.404 | 6,144  | 2,811 | 2,654 | 67,620    |
| High HH Income               |  | 0.400      | 0.434 | 0.449 | 0.223                       | 0.184 | 0.121 | 0.448                     | 0.444 | 0.465 | 4,424  | 2,516 | 2,581 | 51,644    |
| Male                         |  | 0.445      | 0.509 | 0.531 | 0.217                       | 0.161 | 0.116 | 0.386                     | 0.367 | 0.374 | 8,573  | 4,172 | 3,914 | 92,003    |
| Female                       |  | 0.426      | 0.466 | 0.485 | 0.221                       | 0.185 | 0.130 | 0.416                     | 0.399 | 0.418 | 11,184 | 5,011 | 4,622 | 11,8367   |
| White, Non-Hispanic          |  | 0.439      | 0.474 | 0.498 | 0.218                       | 0.178 | 0.126 | 0.404                     | 0.399 | 0.407 | 14,495 | 6,252 | 5,783 | 143,389   |
| Non-White                    |  | 0.465      | 0.551 | 0.569 | 0.236                       | 0.161 | 0.116 | 0.344                     | 0.314 | 0.333 | 3,237  | 1,804 | 1,652 | 40,592    |
| White, Hispanic              |  | 0.372      | 0.460 | 0.464 | 0.200                       | 0.168 | 0.120 | 0.470                     | 0.407 | 0.437 | 2,025  | 1,127 | 1,101 | 26,389    |

Notes: Panel A presents time spent in non-work activities (hours per day) for which a survey respondent provides information on the identity of “with whom” the activity was performed. This is equal to the total amount of time for the first four categories. “Other Non-Work Time” includes sleeping, personal grooming and other activities where the respondent does provide not this information. The total amount of “Other Non-Work Time” is 11.27 hours per day in 2003, 11.00 hours per day in 2019, and 11.12 hours per day in 2020. Panel B provides the fraction of free time that is spent alone, with individuals from other households, or with individuals from the same household. Since activities may be simultaneously performed with individuals from other households and individuals from the same household, the three shares may sum to greater than 1. “Low”, “medium,” and “high” income refer to terciles of family income within the sample year.

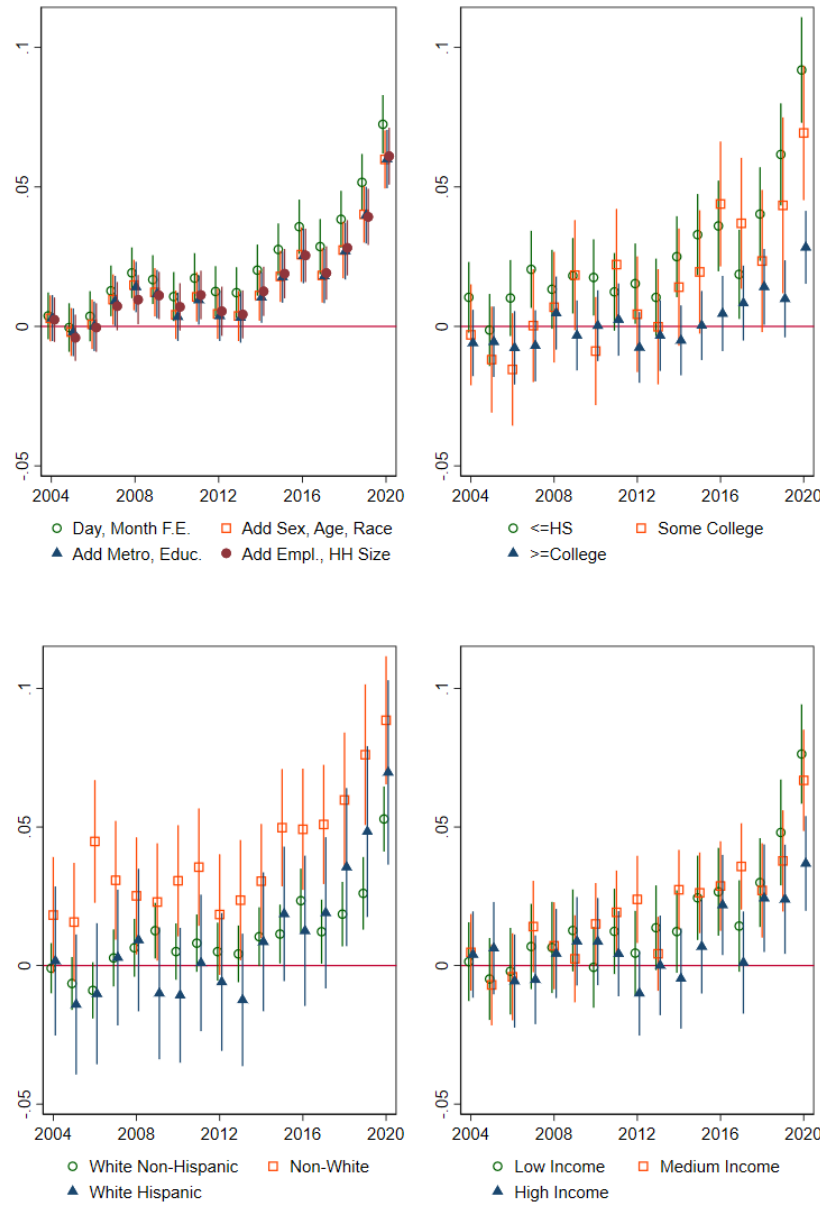


Figure 1: Estimates of trends in time alone

Notes: The top left panel presents estimates of  $\beta_{a,t}$  from Equation 1; 2003 is the omitted (reference) year. The basic set of controls includes a day-of-week fixed effect and a month fixed effect. “Age” is a categorical variable, describing the age of the respondent: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70 or older; “race” is a category variable, whether the respondent identifies as a non-Hispanic White, a Hispanic White, or a non-White individual; “education” is a categorical variable, with less than or equal to high school education, some college education, or college education or more as the three categories; “metro status” is an indicator for whether the household is in the central city of an MSA; “employment” has five categories: employed at work, employed and absent, unemployed on layoff, unemployed and looking for a job, or not in the labor force; “HH Size” refers to the logarithm of the number of individuals in the respondent’s household. In the other three panels, I present estimates of  $\beta_{a,g(i),t}$  with 2003 again representing the reference year. In these three panels, I apply the most extensive set of controls that were used in the top left panel. 1.96 standard-error confidence intervals are based on robust standard errors.

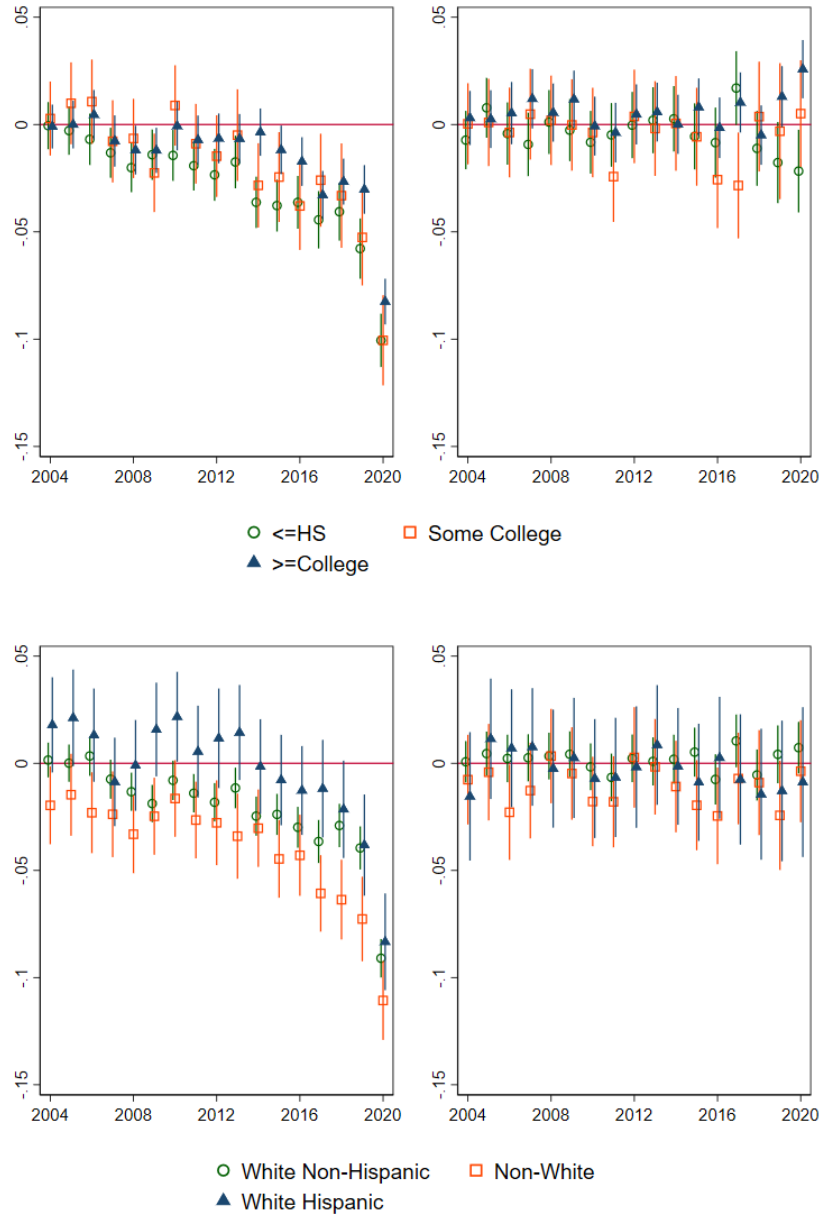


Figure 2: Estimates of trends in time spent with individuals outside and inside the household

Notes: In each panel, I plot estimates of  $\beta_{o,g(i),t}$  and  $\beta_{s,g(i),t}$  from Equations 3 and 4; 2003 is the omitted (reference) year. In the top two panels, individuals are grouped according to their educational background; in the bottom two panels, individuals are grouped according to their race and ethnicity. In the top left and bottom left plots, the dependent variable is the fraction of free time spent with individuals outside of the respondent's household; in the top right and bottom right plots, the dependent variable is the fraction of time spent with individuals from the respondent's household. See the notes for Figure 1 for the additional controls included in the regression.

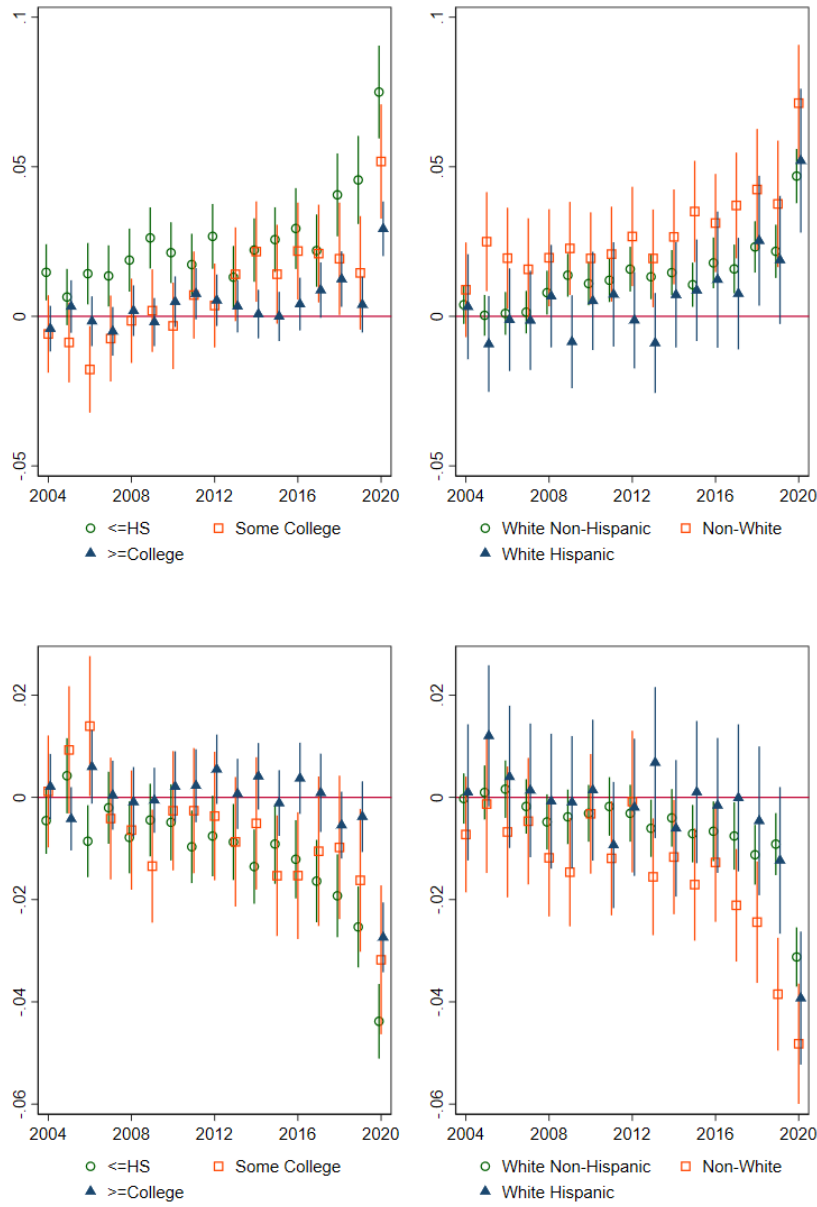


Figure 3: Estimates of trends in time spent on leisure: Home alone versus with others and out of the home

Notes: The top panels present the coefficients of year dummies on the fraction of free time that is spent on leisure at home, alone. The bottom panels present the coefficients of year dummies on the fraction of free time that is spent on leisure outside of the household and with others. In each panel, 2003 is the omitted year. See the notes for Figure 1 for the additional controls included in the regression.

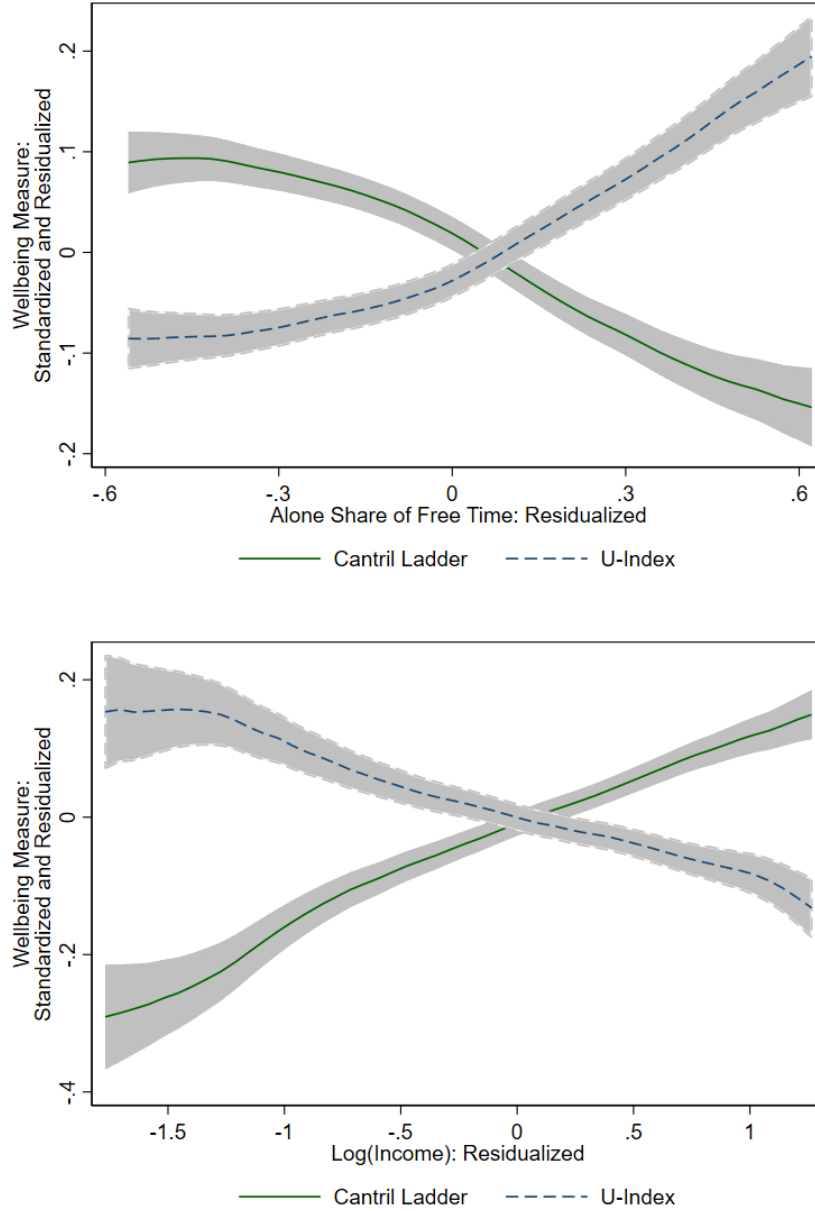


Figure 4: Relationship between well-being and alone time

Notes: To compute “Alone Share of Free Time: Residualized”,  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ , I first regress the share of free time that is alone against year fixed effects, survey month-of-year and day-of-week fixed effects, education group fixed effects, sex fixed effects, age group fixed effects, metropolitan status fixed effects, employment status fixed effects, and race/ethnicity fixed effects. For the definitions of these fixed effects, see the notes from Figure 1. I then take the residual from this regression. For the Cantril ladder score and the U-index, in separate regressions I regress each of these measures against the same set of fixed effects listed above. I take the residual from each of these two regressions. I “standardize” each of these two residuals by dividing by their respective standard deviations. The sample in these two regressions include only the 20,847 respondents to the well-being module with a non-missing Cantril ladder score and a non-missing U-index. In the bottom panel, I replace “Alone Share of Free Time” with log household income. For readability, in producing the top panel, I omit the bottom and top one percentile of  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ . In producing the bottom panel, I omit the top and bottom one percentile of  $\tilde{y}_{it}$ .



## A Additional Details on the Sample Construction

In this appendix, I provide the correspondence between individual activities and the seven categories listed in Section 3.

- “work” includes activities with a code between 50101 and 50199;
- “leisure” includes activities with a code between 120101 and 12999 (socializing, relaxing, and leisure), with a code between 130101 and 130299 (participating in sports, exercise, or recreation plus attending sports or recreational events), with a code between 140101 and 14999 (religious or spiritual practices), or with a code between 181201 and 181299 (travel related to socializing, relaxing, and leisure);
- “home production” includes activities with a code between 20101 and 20599, with a code between 20701 and 20799 (vehicle maintenance and repair), with a code of 20902 (household and personal organization and planning), or with a code between 180201 and 180299 (travel related to household activities);
- “child care” includes activities with a code between 30101 and 30399 (caring for and helping household children plus activities related to household children’s education plus activities related to household children’s health) or with a code between 180301 and 180304 (travel related to household children);
- “eating” includes activities with a code 110101 (eating and drinking), 110199 (eating and drinking, n.e.c.), 110201 (waiting associated with eating and drinking), 110299 (waiting associated with eating and drinking, n.e.c.), or 119999 (eating and drinking, n.e.c.); and
- “miscellaneous” includes all other activities.

I further split “leisure” based on the location of the activity, whether it takes place at home or not.

Among the activities for which respondent provides the identity(ies) of the companion, the most commonly occurring are shopping, except groceries, food and gas; travel related to working; grocery shopping, insufficient detail in verbatim; research/hw for class for degree; travel related to shopping, except for groceries, food and gas; and health-related self-care. These seven activities comprise more than two-fifths of the “miscellaneous category.”

## B Analysis Supplementing Section 4

This appendix compiles additional figures and tables supplementing those in Section 4. I first present trends in time alone within 2020; heterogeneity in 2003 to 2020 trends in time alone for

male and female individuals and young and old individuals; and 2003 to 2020 trends in time with one's spouse or partner, with one's children, with other relatives, and with friends. Finally, I confront the hypothesis that the results presented in Section 4 solely reflect substitution of in-person for virtual socialization.

First, Table B.1 presents the share of free time spent alone for each month within 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted data collection for nearly two months, between March 18, 2020 and May 9, 2020. To reduce noise in averages for March, I combine values from February and March. For the same reason, I combine data from May and June. Overall, data from within 2020 suggest that alone time increased within the year by approximately 2 percentage points, with greater increases for lower-education individuals and those from lower-income households. However, there is meaningful statistical variability from month to month, clouding some of these comparisons.<sup>19</sup>

Table B.1: Trends in Time Alone: 2020

| Demographic Group | Jan.  | Feb./<br>Mar. | May/<br>June | August | Sept. | Oct.  | Nov.  | Dec.  |
|-------------------|-------|---------------|--------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Entire Sample     | 0.505 | 0.480         | 0.491        | 0.500  | 0.503 | 0.519 | 0.539 | 0.522 |
| ≤High School      | 0.518 | 0.488         | 0.531        | 0.543  | 0.523 | 0.517 | 0.567 | 0.569 |
| Some College      | 0.513 | 0.477         | 0.498        | 0.535  | 0.516 | 0.583 | 0.512 | 0.575 |
| ≥College          | 0.489 | 0.476         | 0.459        | 0.457  | 0.485 | 0.499 | 0.524 | 0.466 |
| Age≤39            | 0.431 | 0.431         | 0.411        | 0.449  | 0.432 | 0.500 | 0.470 | 0.496 |
| Age∈[40,59]       | 0.510 | 0.478         | 0.484        | 0.532  | 0.493 | 0.459 | 0.554 | 0.471 |
| Age≥60            | 0.595 | 0.546         | 0.597        | 0.540  | 0.583 | 0.616 | 0.595 | 0.612 |
| Low HH Income     | 0.538 | 0.534         | 0.559        | 0.553  | 0.581 | 0.596 | 0.577 | 0.587 |
| Medium HH Income  | 0.532 | 0.449         | 0.484        | 0.485  | 0.490 | 0.502 | 0.549 | 0.532 |
| High HH Income    | 0.439 | 0.452         | 0.422        | 0.456  | 0.445 | 0.459 | 0.481 | 0.441 |

Figure 1, in the body of the paper, plots trends in alone time and its heterogeneity in these trends by education, by household income, and by race and ethnicity. Figure B.1 considers two additional sources of heterogeneity, by sex and by age. At the beginning of the sample, in 2003, male respondents' share of free time spent alone was approximately 2.0 percentage points higher than for female respondents. Up to 2017, changes in the two sexes' time spent alone tracked one another closely. In the final four years of the sample, the male-female gap in alone time diverged by approximately 4 percentage points. The right panel of Figure B.1 separates the alone share of free time by age, with the largest increases in alone time experienced by younger individuals.

<sup>19</sup>One complicating factor, throughout 2003-2020, is some seasonality in the alone share, which increases each October and November by approximately 1-2 percentage points compared to December and January. The regressions in Figures 1-3 account for this seasonality with month fixed effects, but this is something I cannot incorporate here.

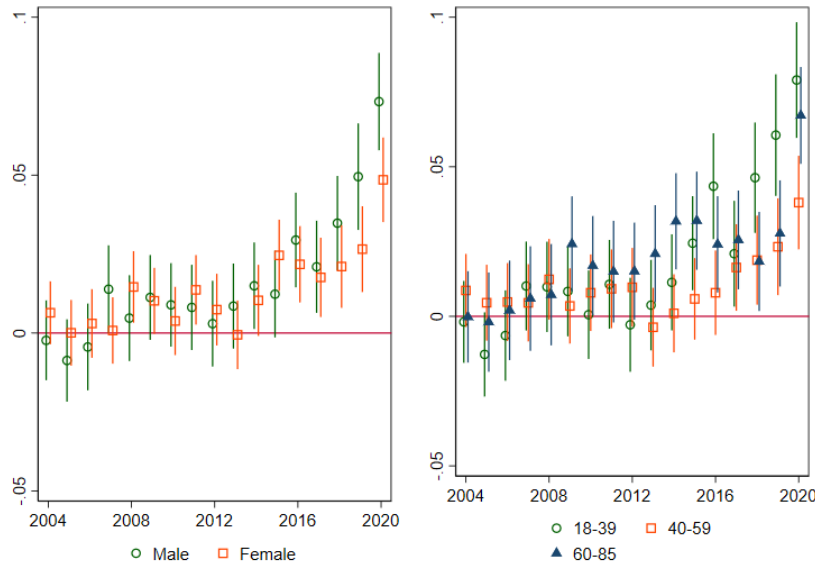


Figure B.1: Estimates of trends in time spent with groups of individuals

Notes: This figure presents estimates of  $\beta_{a,g(i),t}$ , with  $g$  referencing either gender (left panel) or age (right panel.) See the notes for Figure 1 for additional information.

In Figures B.2 and B.3, I consider heterogeneity – by education and by race and ethnicity – in time spent with spouses, children, friends, and other relatives. These figures build on Figure 2 in Section 4, which showed that time spent with individuals from other households declined markedly between 2003 and 2020 (while time spent with individuals from the same household was relatively flat). Individuals from other households include friends, parents and siblings, coworkers, and other acquaintances. Figures B.2 and B.3 demonstrate that time spent with spouses and children (who tend to reside in the same household as the respondent) and time spent with other relatives (who tend to reside in other households) were flat over the sample period. Time spent with friends – precisely, friends or coworkers/clients/colleagues (in non-work activities) – declined considerably. At the beginning of the sample, individuals spent 10.8% of their free time with friends. This declined by almost half, by 5.4 percentage points, between 2003 and 2019 and then declined even further in 2020.

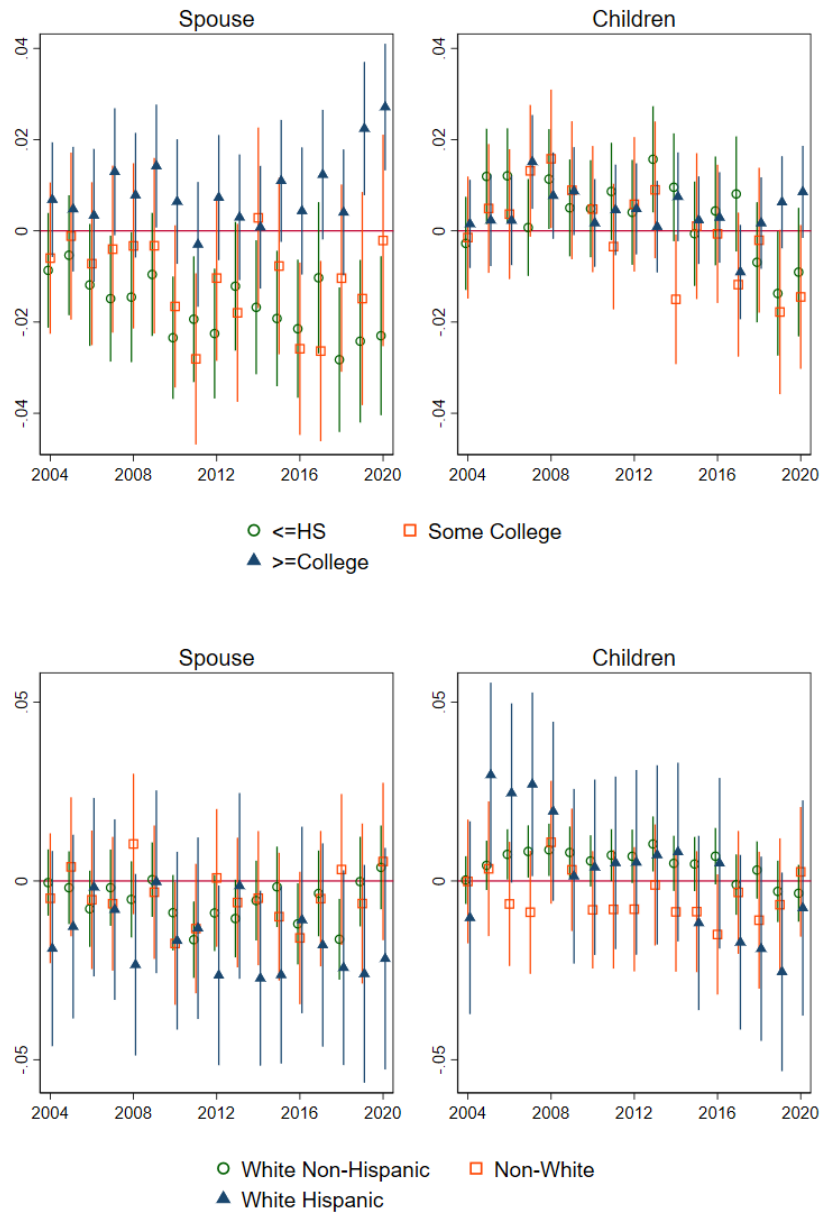


Figure B.2: Estimates of trends in time spent with groups of individuals

Notes: See the notes for Figure 1 for the list of controls and footnote 6 for the definition of time spent with friends, or time spent with other relations.

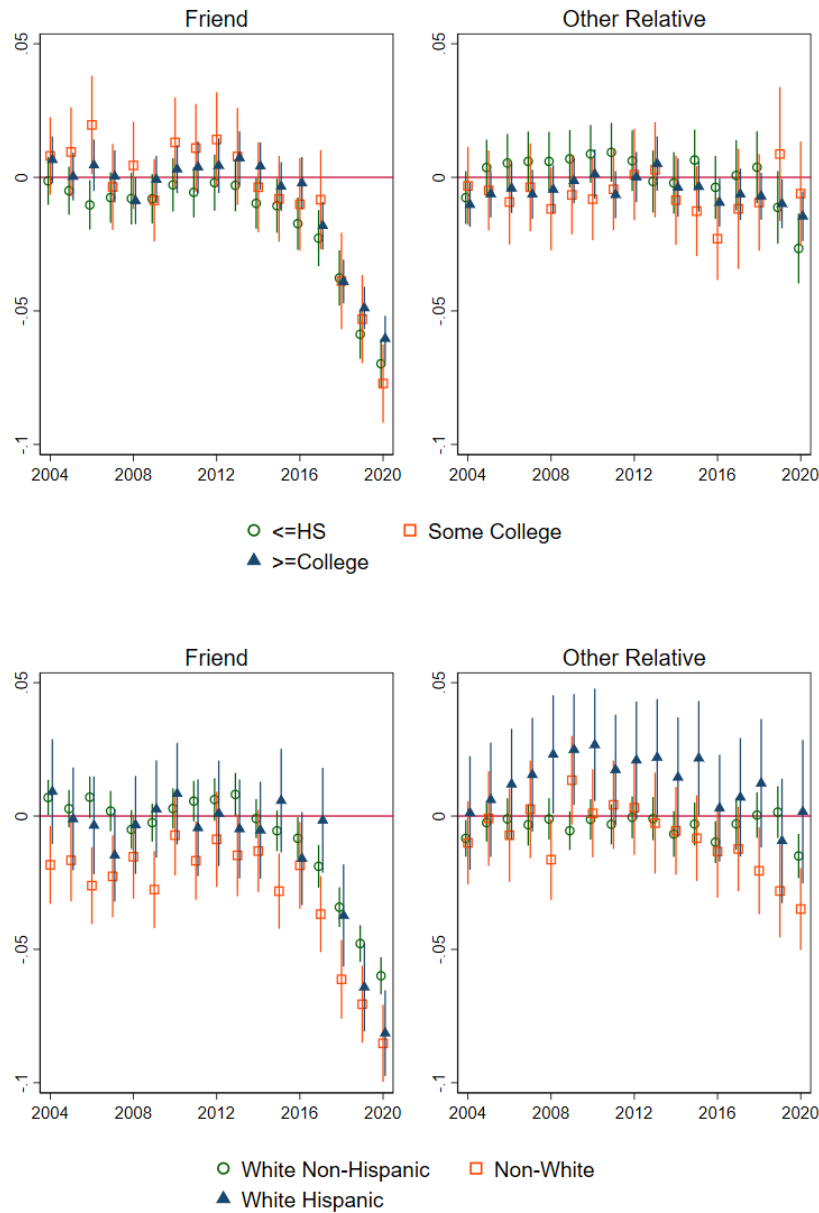


Figure B.3: Estimates of trends in time spent with groups of individuals

Notes: See the notes for Figure 1 for the list of controls and footnote 6 for the definition of time spent with spouses/partners or time spent with children.

Finally, in Figure B.4 I consider trends in the share of time spent alone while answering e-mails (activity code 020904), on the computer (activity code 120308), using the telephone for social purposes (activity codes 160101 and 160102), or playing games (activity code 120307). While not in close physical proximity, individuals may potentially be relating to other individuals while engaged in these activities. To the extent that individuals are increasingly pursuing these activities, and to the extent that individuals form and maintain meaningful social ties during these activities,

the measures used in this paper may be overstating the decline in social isolation experienced during the sample period. Between 2003 and 2019, I find no trend in the amount of time individuals are alone and answering e-mails, on the computer, or on the telephone (top panels of Figure B.4). Compared to White individuals, non-White individuals may be increasingly alone and engaged in these activities. However, these differences are modest. In the bottom panels of Figure B.4, I present trends in time spent alone and playing games. (Video games are included within this category. As some of these video games are played on-line with other individuals, they may conceivably represent a form of socialization.) The amount of time spent alone and playing games increased by approximately 0.8 percentage points between 2003 and 2019, and an additional 0.5 percentage points between 2019 and 2020. However, in contrast to the results presented in Section 4, there is no systematic increase in time spent alone while playing games between individuals with at most a high school degree and college-educated individuals, or across different ethnic and racial groups. In sum, it does not appear as if the increase in time alone, or the differential increase in time alone across demographic groups, is due to a substitution between in-person and virtual socialization.

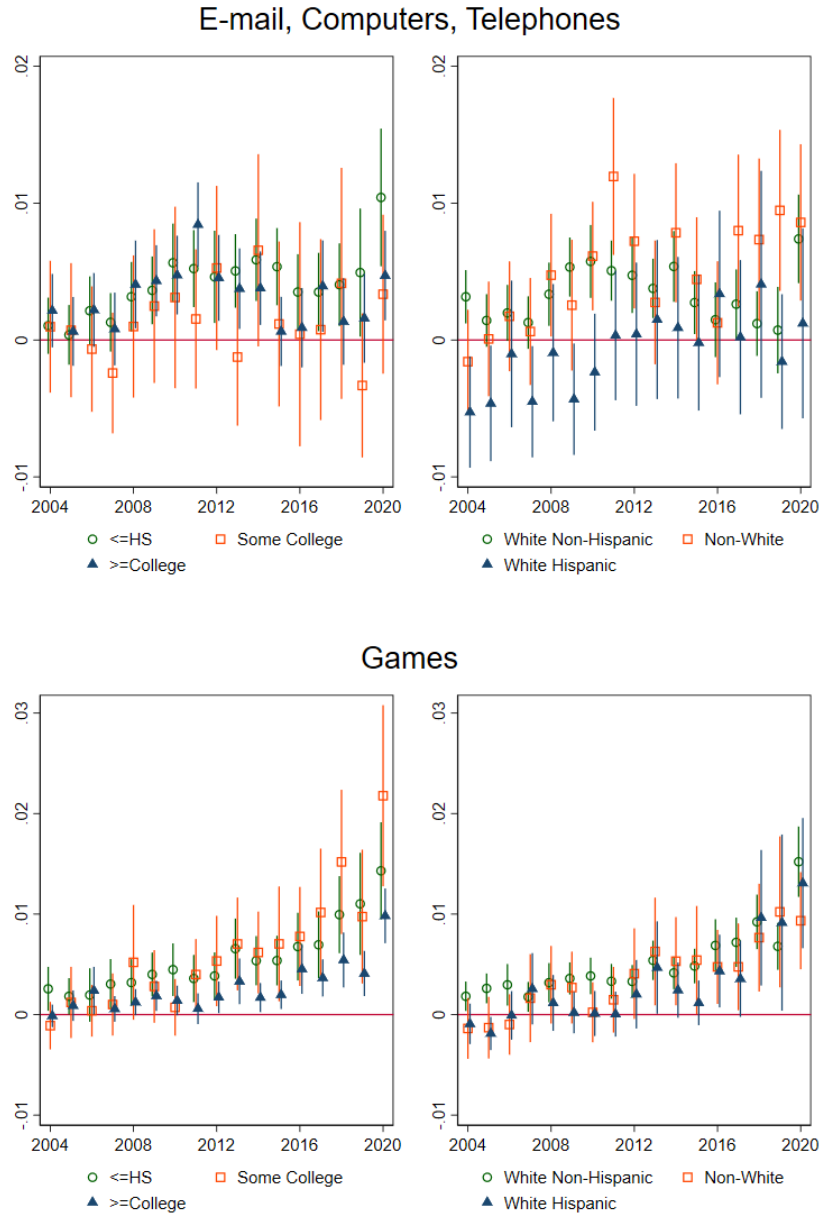


Figure B.4: Estimates of trends in time spent alone in “virtual” activities

Notes: See the notes for Figure 1 for the list of controls.

## C Analysis Supplementing Section 5

This appendix compiles additional figures and tables supplementing those in Section 5. I first present emotional well-being measures by activity type and alone status. Second, I present the relationship between health measures in the well-being module to time spent alone. Finally, I reproduce Figure 4 (a) without controlling for demographic characteristics and (b) by applying



alternate measures of subjective well-being.

Table C.1 presents summary statistics from the 2012-2013 well-being module of the ATUS. It lists average reported happiness, average net affect, and the U-index for different categories of non-work time. Among the different categories, leisure outside of the home and eating have relatively high happiness and net affect, and a relatively low U-index. Home production and other non-work time (which includes a lot of traveling to and from other activities) have relatively low happiness and net affect, and relatively high U-indexes. For each activity category, time alone has lower happiness and net affect, and higher U-indexes. Notably home production with others is associated with higher emotional well-being relative to leisure at home alone.

Table C.1: Emotional well-being measures by activity group

|                     | Net Affect |      | Happiness |      | U-Index |      | Share of Total Non-Work Time |      |
|---------------------|------------|------|-----------|------|---------|------|------------------------------|------|
| Alone               | No         | Yes  | No        | Yes  | No      | Yes  | No                           | Yes  |
| Non-Work Time       | 3.44       | 2.68 | 4.66      | 4.08 | 0.18    | 0.27 | 0.55                         | 0.45 |
| TV                  | 3.06       | 2.56 | 4.41      | 4.01 | 0.22    | 0.29 | 0.10                         | 0.11 |
| Leisure At Home     | 3.27       | 2.68 | 4.55      | 4.07 | 0.19    | 0.27 | 0.16                         | 0.18 |
| Leisure Out of Home | 3.99       | 3.31 | 4.97      | 4.46 | 0.12    | 0.20 | 0.10                         | 0.02 |
| Eating              | 3.81       | 2.97 | 4.83      | 4.22 | 0.12    | 0.23 | 0.09                         | 0.03 |
| Home Production     | 3.02       | 2.80 | 4.41      | 4.14 | 0.23    | 0.23 | 0.06                         | 0.10 |
| Childcare           | 3.78       | 3.28 | 4.98      | 4.60 | 0.15    | 0.19 | 0.03                         | 0.00 |
| Other Non-Work-Time | 3.01       | 2.36 | 4.44      | 3.90 | 0.23    | 0.32 | 0.11                         | 0.11 |

Notes: The sample includes the 91,230 activities for which the respondent was asked with whom the activity was performed, the sampling weight was non-missing, and the happiness, stress, pain, tiredness, and sadness scores are all also non-missing. The affect score is the difference between the happiness measure and the arithmetic mean of stress, pain, tiredness, and sadness scores. The U-Index equals 1 only if the happiness score is the lowest among the five emotional well-being measures. “TV” is a component of leisure at home.

Do the differences reported in Table C.1 reflect differences in the pleurability of the different activity categories, or differences in the disposition of survey respondents who tend to engage in those activities? To address this question, I estimate a regression with activity-individual level observations, different well-being measures as the dependent variable, and activity-by-alone-status indicators as additional explanatory variables. In sum specifications, I include person fixed effects as controls; in others I do not. For specifications with respondent fixed effects, the coefficients on the activity-by-alone status characterize within-individual differences in subjective well-being across different groups of activities. Table C.2 reports the results from this regression. As with Table C.1, Table C.2 indicates that time spent alone is associated with lower subjective well-being. The within-activity differences are somewhat smaller, about half as large, when person fixed effects are included. (For instance, the average net affect for leisure at home is 0.58 points higher when

someone else is present according to the regression without respondent fixed effects, and 0.32 points higher in the specification with respondent fixed effects.) In sum, even holding fixed the individual respondent, activities conducted alone are less pleasurable.

Table C.2: Emotional well-being measures by activity group

|                         | Net Affect |         | Unhappiness |         | Happiness |         |
|-------------------------|------------|---------|-------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| Leisure at Home         | 0.252      | 0.167   | -0.039      | -0.017  | 0.108     | 0.095   |
| *Not Alone              | (0.031)    | (0.026) | (0.005)     | (0.006) | (0.022)   | (0.021) |
| Leisure at Home         | -0.331     | -0.153  | 0.036       | 0.029   | -0.377    | -0.192  |
| *Alone                  | (0.031)    | (0.027) | (0.005)     | (0.006) | (0.021)   | (0.022) |
| Leisure Out of Home     | 0.971      | 0.507   | -0.116      | -0.050  | 0.531     | 0.350   |
| *Not Alone              | (0.035)    | (0.030) | (0.006)     | (0.006) | (0.024)   | (0.024) |
| Leisure Out of Home     | 0.291      | -0.037  | -0.036      | 0.016   | 0.013     | -0.044  |
| *Alone                  | (0.059)    | (0.046) | (0.010)     | (0.010) | (0.041)   | (0.037) |
| Eating                  | 0.796      | 0.467   | -0.110      | -0.058  | 0.386     | 0.264   |
| *Not Alone              | (0.036)    | (0.026) | (0.006)     | (0.006) | (0.025)   | (0.021) |
| Eating                  | -0.042     | -0.009  | -0.006      | -0.007  | -0.222    | -0.079  |
| *Alone                  | (0.050)    | (0.035) | (0.009)     | (0.008) | (0.034)   | (0.028) |
| Home Production         | 0.010      | -0.211  | -0.005      | 0.016   | -0.029    | -0.166  |
| *Not Alone              | (0.040)    | (0.031) | (0.007)     | (0.007) | (0.027)   | (0.025) |
| Home Production         | -0.219     | -0.357  | -0.003      | 0.032   | -0.301    | -0.311  |
| *Alone                  | (0.035)    | (0.028) | (0.006)     | (0.006) | (0.024)   | (0.022) |
| Childcare               | 0.763      | 0.479   | -0.083      | -0.053  | 0.535     | 0.405   |
| *Not Alone              | (0.050)    | (0.040) | (0.008)     | (0.009) | (0.034)   | (0.032) |
| Childcare               | 0.266      | 0.251   | -0.044      | -0.027  | 0.160     | 0.183   |
| *Alone                  | (0.187)    | (0.123) | (0.032)     | (0.027) | (0.128)   | (0.099) |
| Other Non-Work Time     | -0.657     | -0.357  | 0.089       | 0.052   | -0.540    | -0.316  |
| *Alone                  | (0.034)    | (0.027) | (0.006)     | (0.006) | (0.023)   | (0.022) |
| Person Fixed Effects    | No         | Yes     | No          | Yes     | No        | (0.031) |
| N                       | 91,230     | 90,098  | 91,230      | 90,098  | 91,230    | -0.331  |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.041      | 0.756   | 0.022       | 0.591   | 0.022     | (0.031) |

Notes: The table presents regression results, regressing activity-level emotional well-being measures against interactions of types of activity and whether the activity is alone. The omitted group is “Other Non-Work” activities performed not alone. In addition, the regression includes person fixed effects. The sample is smaller than in Table C.1 as there are approximately 4,000 survey respondents who only report their affect in activities for which they do not have one surveyed non-work activity with information on whether the activity was performed alone. Since the regression includes person fixed effects, these observations are dropped. Observations are weighted by the product of the ATUS sample weights and the duration of the activity.

In Table C.3, I consider whether measures of health are related to those of time spent alone. I regress two measures that are recorded in the 2010, 2012, and 2013 well-being modules in which individuals are asked whether they took pain medication in the previous day and whether they had

high blood pressure in the previous five years. I estimate a linear probability model with each of these two health measures as outcomes and the share of free time spent alone as an explanatory variable. I also include the other controls applied in Figure 4. There is no statistically significant relationship between the fraction of time spent alone and high blood pressure. Time spent alone and pain medication is marginally statistically significant, with a greater fraction of time alone slightly negatively related to taking pain medication. This negative relationship is inconsistent with alone time simply serving as a stand-in or predictor for the already-well-documented rise of deaths of despair ([Case and Deaton, 2015, 2017](#)).

Table C.3: High blood pressure, pain medication, and alone time

|                          | High BP           | Pain Medication   |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Alone Share of Free Time | -0.005<br>(0.011) | -0.020<br>(0.011) |
| Age: 30-39               | 0.086<br>(0.007)  | 0.049<br>(0.010)  |
| Age: 40-49               | 0.197<br>(0.009)  | 0.118<br>(0.011)  |
| Age: 50-59               | 0.338<br>(0.010)  | 0.191<br>(0.011)  |
| Age: 60-69               | 0.457<br>(0.011)  | 0.197<br>(0.013)  |
| Age: 70-85               | 0.486<br>(0.013)  | 0.195<br>(0.014)  |
| Non-White                | 0.075<br>(0.008)  | -0.048<br>(0.008) |
| White Hispanic           | -0.018<br>(0.008) | -0.046<br>(0.010) |
| Some College Educ.       | -0.020<br>(0.008) | -0.007<br>(0.009) |
| College Education        | -0.056<br>(0.007) | -0.042<br>(0.007) |
| Log HH Size              | -0.034<br>(0.006) | -0.031<br>(0.007) |
| Employed, Absent         | 0.040<br>(0.019)  | 0.081<br>(0.021)  |
| Unemployed, On Layoff    | -0.005<br>(0.038) | 0.003<br>(0.039)  |
| Unemployed, Looking      | 0.026<br>(0.012)  | 0.018<br>(0.014)  |
| Not in Labor Force       | 0.078<br>(0.008)  | 0.116<br>(0.009)  |
| N                        | 33,149            | 33,149            |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>  | 0.200             | 0.073             |

Notes: Each column presents a linear regression with a health measure – either taking pain medication or having high blood pressure – as the dependent variable, the alone share of the free time as an explanatory variable, and the other controls used in Figure 4 as other controls. Included in the regression but not in the table (to fit the regression on a single page) are the day of the week the survey was taken, the month of the year the survey was taken, the year the survey was taken, the sex of the respondent, and whether the respondent lived in the center city of an MSA. The omitted category for age includes people aged 29 or less; the omitted category for race/ethnicity includes White non-Hispanic individuals; the omitted category for education includes those with high school education or less; the omitted category for employment includes those who are employed and at work.

Figure 4 presents conditional correlations between subjective well-being measures, time spent alone, and log household income, conditioning on the day of the week the survey was taken, year (whether the survey year was 2012 or 2013), sex, education, race and ethnicity, employment and metropolitan status, log household size, and age. Figure C.1 reproduces these relationships without these controls. The relationships are nearly identical.

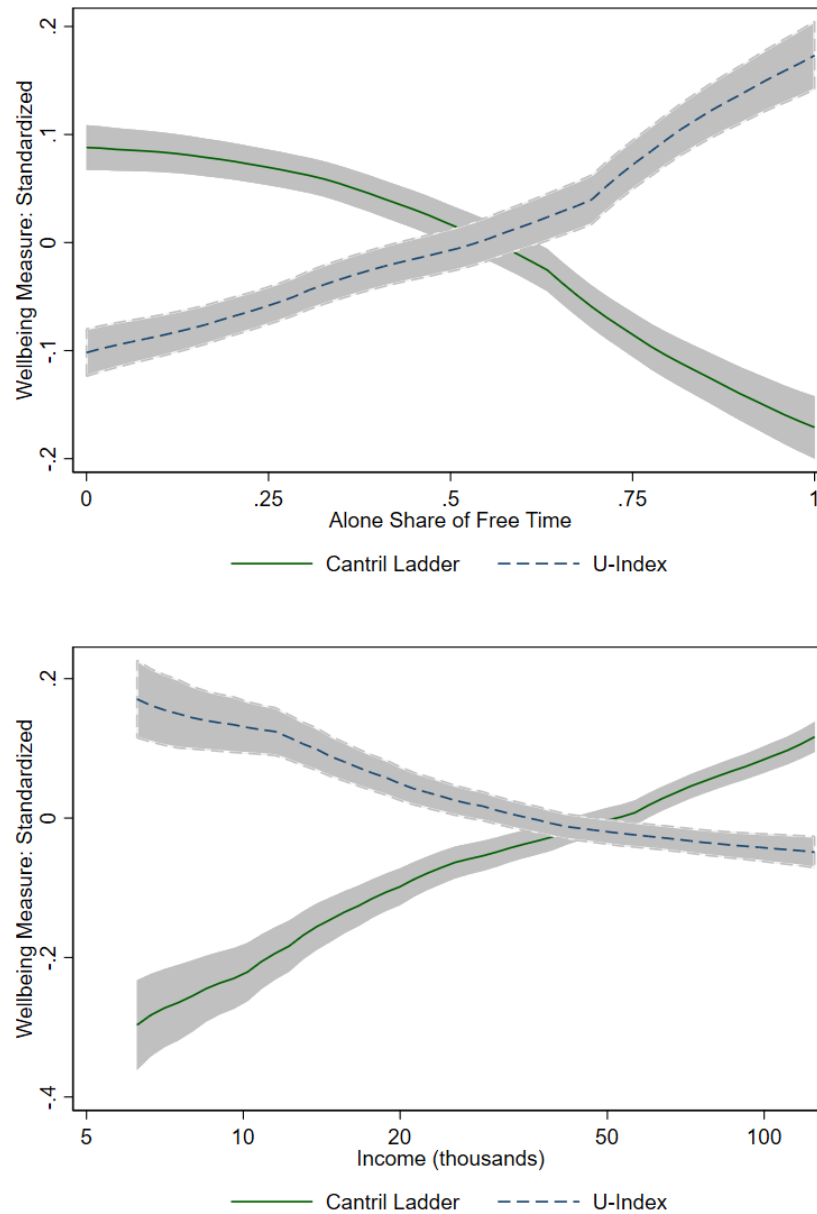


Figure C.1: Relationship between well-being and alone time—sensitivity analysis

Notes: See the notes for Figure 4. In contrast to that figure, I do not apply the regression-then-take-residual procedure described in that caption.

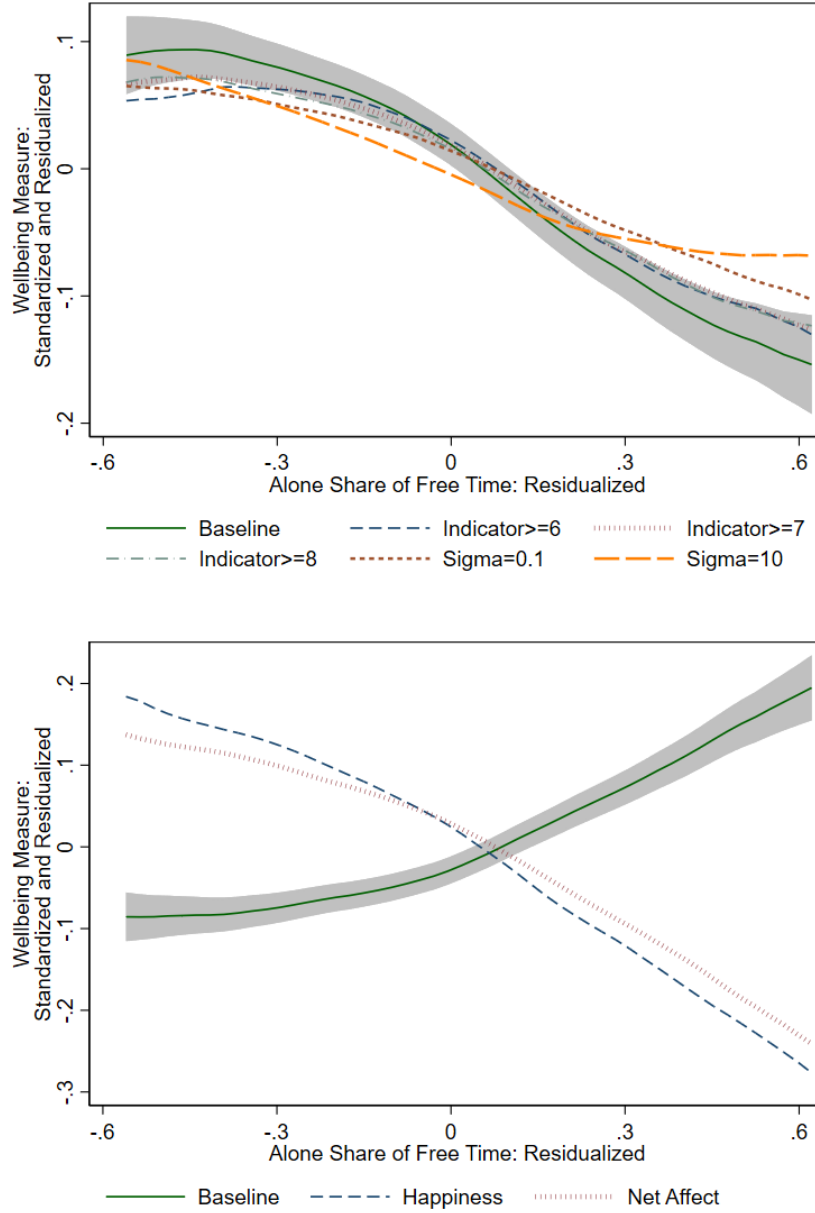


Figure C.2: Relationship between well-being and alone time—sensitivity analysis

Notes: In the top panel, I consider the sensitivity of the relationship between alone time and life satisfaction (according to the “Cantril ladder” measure). The baseline measure applies no transformation to the data. The “Indicator $\geq 6$ ” replaces  $c_{it}$  with  $\mathbf{I}\{c_{it} \geq 6\}$ , with analogous transformations applied for “Indicator $\geq 7$ ”, and “Indicator $\geq 8$ ”. Finally, the “Sigma=0.1” transformation replaces  $c_{it}$  with  $10 \left(\frac{c_{it}}{10}\right)^{0.1}$  with an analogous transformation applied for “Sigma=10”. After performing these transformations, I apply the same residualization and standardization described in the notes of Figure 4. The bottom panel considers alternate measures of everyday emotional well-being: happiness and net affect. Net affect equals the difference between happiness and the mean of the individual’s reported pain, sadness, stress, and tiredness. In producing this plot, I omit the bottom and top one percentile of  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ .

Finally, Figure C.2 assesses the sensitivity of Figure 4 to transformation of the Cantril lad-

der measure and alternate definitions of emotional well-being. First, I replace  $c_{it}$  with various indicators:  $\mathbf{I}\{c_{it} \geq 6\}$ ,  $\mathbf{I}\{c_{it} \geq 7\}$ , and  $\mathbf{I}\{c_{it} \geq 8\}$ .<sup>20</sup> Second, under the recommendation of Bloem (2021), I apply two alternate transformations, replacing  $c_{it}$  with  $10 \left(\frac{c_{it}}{10}\right)^\sigma$  for  $\sigma \in \{0.1, 10\}$ . (Bloem, 2021 considers values of  $\sigma$  below 0.1 or above 10 to be extreme and implausible.) For each of these five transformations, I compute the conditional relationship between the transformed  $c_{it}$  and the fraction of free time spent alone (conditioning on the same set of controls applied in Figure 4). The  $10 \left(\frac{c_{it}}{10}\right)^{10}$  transformation results in a weaker relationship with  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$  for above-median values of  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ ; the  $\mathbf{I}\{c_{it} \geq 6\}$  transformation results in a weaker relationship with  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$  for below-median values of  $\tilde{x}_{a,it}$ . However, across all five transformations, life satisfaction is significantly negatively related to time spent alone.

In the bottom panel of Figure C.2, I consider two alternate measures of emotional well-being: the average happiness reported in the activities within the respondent's time diary, and the net affect (defined as the difference between the positive and negative emotions). Except for the fact that the U-index is a measure of low emotional well-being, while the other two variables provide a measure of high well-being, the three measures paint a consistent relationship of the relationship between well-being and time alone.

---

<sup>20</sup>Within the sample, 22.7% of respondents report a Cantril ladder measure of 5 or lower, 11.1% report  $c_{it} = 6$ , 18.3% report  $c_{it} = 7$ , and 25.0% report  $c_{it} = 8$ . The remaining 23.0% of the sample report either a 9 or a 10. So, the cut-offs around 6, 7, and 8 surround the center of the life satisfaction distribution.