

IDEAS

Even College Students Have Stopped Hanging Out

The loneliness crisis comes to campus.

By Rose Horowitz



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If anyone were to be immune to America's loneliness epidemic, it would be college students. For years, Americans have been going to fewer parties and spending more time alone. But college has historically been about socializing—or, let's just say it, partying—as much as it has been about education. It's where young people escape parental supervision, move in with roommates, and encounter thousands of potential new friends.

But the anti-social century has arrived on campus. Today's students spend much less time socializing than past generations did. In 1994, 32 percent of college seniors spent more than six hours a week partying. By 2026, that was 21 percent, according to an analysis of survey data by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. The percentage who spend more than six hours a week socializing face-to-face with friends fell from 74 to 65 percent over the same period. Meanwhile, the share of first-year students who reported feeling frequently isolated from campus life has more than doubled in the past two decades. (These surveys are not nationally representative, but they line up with what professors, administrators, and students told me they have observed anecdotally.)

Nationally, college students report higher rates of loneliness than adults do. On the National Survey of Student Engagement, run out of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, more students report having positive interactions with professors than with peers. A rising senior at MIT told me that, despite being involved in Greek life and athletics, he eats alone most days. "I feel like I'm somebody who seeks social interactions," he said, yet "I would say I am alone at least four or five days a week." (He spoke anonymously because he didn't want to be perceived as criticizing MIT when he still needs letters of recommendation from the faculty.) University leaders now find themselves in the odd position of encouraging students to spend more time goofing off with friends.

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Researchers who track social interaction have developed theories as to what's going on. The first is that smartphones and social media are to blame. Much of the increase in

loneliness occurred during the 2010s, at the same time that the iPhone was becoming ubiquitous, Daniel Eisenberg, a professor of health policy and management at UCLA, told me. Hours spent on social media crowded out time that people might previously have devoted to social interactions. And it's easy for students to feel that their social life pales in comparison with what they see in highlight reels on Instagram and TikTok.

Meanwhile, extracurricular activities, once a mainstay of campus social life, have mutated into a way to stand out to employers in an era of grade inflation. Especially at elite universities, clubs now more closely resemble jobs than socializing opportunities. Finance and consulting clubs require students to submit résumés, sit for interviews, and prepare mock cases or deliverables. Improv, a cappella, and even some volunteering clubs accept only a distinguished few. Cat Moore, who spent six years as the University of Southern California's director of belonging, told me that students were busier than ever with extracurriculars, jobs, and internship applications. Even when they tried to build in time for socializing, it frequently tipped into networking. "USC had over 1,000 student clubs, yet their loneliness is out of control," Moore said. "So the answer is not more clubs. The answer is not more programming."

The coronavirus pandemic seems to have had a lasting effect on in-person interaction on campus. This is partly a matter of psychology. Many current college students were in middle school when classes and activities went remote. They missed out on a crucial period of learning to interact with other people, Ryan Patel, an assistant director of psychiatry at Ohio State University, told me. "When you lose practice doing those things, it can affect your ability to do them now," Patel said. College administrators have started to pick up on students' stunted social development. Justin Schwartz, the chancellor of University of Colorado Boulder, told me that he and his colleagues now have to support students through challenges that many would previously have faced in adolescence, such as trying alcohol for the first time and having their first romantic relationships—and accompanying heartbreaks. From 2019 to 2024, the share of college students (252) who never had sex rose by 10 percentage points, according to the National College Health Assessment.

The pandemic also led to changes in how universities operate. Universities now routinely offer remote courses, and professors are under pressure to record and post videos of their lectures. Before the pandemic, 15 percent of undergraduates were completely remote. As of 2024, according to federal data, that number was 24 percent. “Along the way, you’ve lost social interactions that you may have had with people,” OSU’s Patel said. “You walk down the hall and you pass by somebody, you hold the door open for someone, you go to the dining hall to eat, you walk over to class and you see people along the way—these kinds of social interactions, that just fell off.” The rising senior at MIT said that because lectures are posted online and grades are dependent mostly on exams, fewer than a quarter of his classmates are likely to attend a lecture on any given day. “I have a class where, on paper, I should have five of my friends in that class,” he told me. “But then I show up, and I just go the whole week without seeing my friends, really, which is tough.”

Of course, college, where many students are away from their family and friends for the first time, has always made some people feel lonely. And some of the apparent rise in loneliness could reflect a change in how students label their feelings, as opposed to a change in actual circumstances. “I don’t think there’s any question that loneliness has increased among young people,” Richard Weissbourd, a senior lecturer at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, told me. But he also thinks that the shift is partly a result of students viewing normal desires for more friends as unusual or even pathological. Previous generations might have felt similarly disconnected but chosen not to identify themselves as lonely. “This is the most psychologically literate and articulate generation in history,” he said. “People are much more proficient at and much more inclined to label their emotional states.”

Ellen Cushing: Americans need to party more

This tendency creates a challenge for college leaders who hope to address high rates of loneliness. At USC, for example, Moore developed a course to teach students how to make friends, which MIT now uses. Drawing attention to the problem risks inflating the number of students who repo (252) ; normal, even important, for

students to struggle as they adjust to a new environment, UCLA's Eisenberg told me. That helps them grow.

Some administrators have explored more creative solutions. Brian Casey, the president of Colgate University, told me that he had new footpaths built across lawns on campus to increase the odds of students physically encountering one another. He has invested in landscaping to beautify the grounds and encourage students to hang out outside. And he has insisted that new buildings be designed with more common areas to all but force students to interact. "The more I can get students to run into each other, the better," he said.

Whether through similar interventions or because the pandemic has further receded from view, there are some signs that student loneliness is beginning to decline. The Healthy Minds Study, which Eisenberg helps administer, has documented a slight drop over the past few years, to pre-COVID levels. The National College Health Assessment has tracked a similar trend, the American College Health Association's chief research officer, Mary Hoban, told me. But even if numbers are returning to their pre-pandemic baseline, that's about half of all students reporting being lonely. "It's still wildly high," she said. "We've got a problem and need to address it." All that partying college students used to do? It might have served a purpose after all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rose Horowitch

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Rose Horowitch is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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