**A SHAREABLE SERIES**

# Community Solutions to the Loneliness Epidemic

**Volume 1, 2019**

**SHAREABLE**

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# Community Solutions To the Loneliness Epidemic

**Volume 1, 2019**

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# I. Overview/ Opinion

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# Introduction: How our loneliness hurts us all, and what we can do about it

**by Neal Gorenflo**

## I graduated from college during a recession in the early 1990s, but it wasn't just the unlucky economic timing that hurt me.

I didn't have the typical college experience. I worked my way through a commuter college. My extracurricular activity was limited. Partly due to this, my social world collapsed after graduation. I found myself working in a socially isolating retail job and living with roommates with whom I had little in common. For a couple of years I scrambled, usually unsuccessfully, to find friends and dates. I was very lonely and desperately unhappy as a result. It was one of the lowest, most painful periods of my life.

At the time, I thought this a personal failure. I thought I was solely responsible for my miserable situation. Little did I know then that I wasn't alone in my loneliness. I was part of social trend that now has become a grave crisis. Today, the average American has only one confidant. That's down from three since 1985. This means that most people have just one friend with whom they can discuss important life matters. Because one is the average, many people have no one to confide in.

# Today, the average American has only one confidant. That's down from three since 1985.

This sharp increase in social isolation parallels trends in other industrialized nations including Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. In fact, just last year the U.K. created a new government position with an eerie title that could've come straight out of Orwell's "1984" — a Minister of Loneliness. It was created because "more than nine million people in the country often or always feel lonely," according to a 2017 report. That's about one lonely Brit in every seven. The irony is that while we're more connected than ever — the average Facebook user has 338 friends — we're also more alone than ever.

In the U.K. and elsewhere, the epidemic of loneliness is viewed as a health crisis. It's worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It's associated with a greater risk of heart disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. It increases the pressure on an already strained healthcare system.

But the effects likely go well beyond this serious (and even deadly) threat to the health of individuals worldwide. Healthy social

networks support community resilience, prosperity, and effective government. Sociologist Robert Putnam warned us about the dangers of declining social capital in his seminal 2000 book, "Bowling Alone." He showed us with hard evidence that states with high social capital have less violent crime, greater health, higher standardized test scores, more prosperity, and lower rates of tax evasion.

## In the U.K. and elsewhere, the epidemic of lonliness is viewed as a health crisis. It's worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

So it turns out that social isolation doesn't just create a collection of sick individuals, but also a sick society. Unfortunately, we didn't heed Putnam's warning or follow his prescriptions. We now live in a world in which the social fabric is in danger of fraying beyond repair. Racial, economic, and political polarization are at levels that we couldn't have imagined even just a few years ago. Authoritarianism is on the rise the world over. Social media, now pervasive, exploits our relationships for commercial gain, sows division, and distracts us. Our ability to understand each other, talk to each other, and work together seems dangerously degraded. This is at a time when we need to work together more than ever in order to combat the existential threats of climate change and extreme wealth inequality.

## What are we to do?

There is much that can be done — and we must do it together. Shareable invites you to explore solutions with us by first reframing these problems as a crisis of society, not just of health. We'll look at the key drivers of loneliness, social isolation, and civic disconnection. Then we'll explore some of the top responses from around the world.

We'll do this through a series of articles and a **live forum the evening of April 10 at San Francisco State University** where we'll engage in a dialogue around the question: "How can we respond as a community to reduce social isolation?" We'll go beyond the typical approaches to look at how sharing, civic engagement, the solidarity economy, communal housing and workspaces, and other social innovations can help us reweave the social fabric. At the end, you'll have gained a new understanding of the issue, new potential collaborators to tackle the issue with, and a well-rounded playbook in e-book form to use and share with the world.

Desmond Tutu said it best: "A person is a person through other persons." We hope this exploration will renew our understanding of humans as social beings who develop through relationships and meaningful engagement in society. As Yuval Noah Harari argued in his book, "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind," our unique talent as a species is our ability to flexibly collaborate in large numbers. We should be designing our communities, organizations, and governments to better develop and take advantage of this powerful gift.
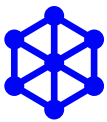
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# How community involvement can counter our loneliness crisis

**by Terry Collins**

**Jennifer Grygiel teaches hundreds of college students each week and connects with millions on television, yet still has suffered from feeling socially isolated.**

After a few years teaching social media at Syracuse University, Grygiel (who uses they/them pronouns) noticed their social circle was shrinking. They then made a conscious decision to split time between their remote cozy campus in upstate New York and a more vibrant community nearly four hours away in a bustling Brooklyn neighborhood.

"I'm not ashamed to say that I was feeling so alone that it was terrifying," Grygiel says. "I said to myself, 'I have to make this work.' Now, I have two communities where I really need to invest in both." Grygiel says despite the fact that they have a great job, it's worth regularly making the long commute to spend time in a bigger city with larger cultural, art and LGBTQ scenes.

As many of Shareable's articles on our current loneliness crisis show, the antidote to loneliness and social isolation is community involvement and engagement, whether that manifests as civic engagement, more solidarity at work, or more informal social connections. Even though we live in a technologically advanced world that can put us in touch with anyone almost anywhere, research reveals that we are more disconnected than ever. One study showed the average American has just one friend, down from three in 1985.

## Whether it's due to our socioeconomic status, political beliefs, the rise of social media and smartphones, experts say social isolation is not only a serious health problem but also a societal crisis.

Republican Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse, who has written extensively about loneliness, says while we're more prosperous, better informed and more connected, we're also unhappier, more isolated and less fulfilled. "Our world is nudging us toward rootlessness when only a recovery of rootedness can help us," he says. "We're hyperconnected and we're disconnected."

Whether it's due to our socioeconomic status, political beliefs, the rise of social media and smartphones, experts say social isolation is not only a serious health problem but also a societal crisis. This epidemic of loneliness has probably already undermined our communities, civic life, and economy. For instance, the disturbing divisiveness and anti-democratic impulses we currently see in public life in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere could be partly attributable to increased levels of social isolation. Things could get worse if not addressed.

## Taking loneliness seriously

There are no quick-fix solutions to loneliness, but governments are starting to take the issue more seriously. It's so serious, in fact, that the United Kingdom last year appointed a ['Minister for Loneliness'](#) after a report in 2017 revealed that more than nine million people often or always feel lonely. China, Denmark, Japan and other countries are reporting increased loneliness levels. And the authors of a recent Oxford University [article](#) found that 49 percent of the time people spent participating in civic activities was solitary.

Battling isolation will take a collective effort requiring us to become more engaged, empathetic, and even a bit vulnerable, says [Dr. Survat Bhargave](#), an Atlanta-based psychiatrist who has written at length about social isolation. "We need to feel like we belong. We need social connectedness. This is why we are here on this earth," says Bhargave during a phone interview, his voice rising for emphasis. "But I know for some that it's easier said than done."

Shareable is exploring solutions to our crisis of social isolation, loneliness, and civic disconnection through a series of stories. One details how reconnecting people in [civic projects](#) encourages discussion, debate, and collaboration. Another suggests we need to [band together](#) to create a climate of justice. A third describes how

simply sharing a meal with strangers can help us connect with new communities.

Why are these efforts needed? Because we have fewer relationships and our disengagement with others is increasing. For example, nearly half of the respondents to a Cigna survey of 20,000 Americans last year said they either sometimes or always feel alone or left out. The groups most affected by loneliness and social isolation include those making less than $30,000 a year, African Americans and Hispanics, according to a Pew Research Center survey released last year.  Another finding of the Pew study: nearly three in 10 Americans are dissatisfied with their family life or feel lonely all or most of the time.

## Nearly three in 10 Americans are dissatisfied with their family life or feel lonely all or most of the time.

It is possible to feel lonely and not be socially isolated (for instance, if you have unrewarding relationships) and be socially isolated but not feel lonely. Loneliness usually describes the feeling that can result from a gap between someone's desired level of social connections and their actual experience. Social isolation occurs when people have very few contacts, something that may not be a problem for all who experience it.

"Bowling Alone" author and Harvard sociology professor Robert Putnam points out that we interact less frequently with our family and neighbors than our grandparents did. We also tend to make fewer friends, belong to fewer organizations and support fewer causes than previous generations.

"We just allow ourselves to think that many other things are far more important and we've taken our eyes off of the ball in investing in human relationships," former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said during a [conference](#) last year. "And that has consequences."

## How social media contributes

We can look to a multitude of reasons why we are less socially connected. Social media is one obvious example. While platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube give us a sense of information and connectivity, our addiction to technology is compromising our interpersonal connections, some experts argue.

"The social fabric of our community is being obliterated," says Grygiel, who adds that the term "friend" has been compromised due to technology. While users may have thousands of "friends" and "followers" on social networks, a majority of those people are merely acquaintances. Technology is actually weakening our social ties and creating artificial distance between people, Grygiel says.

"The art of intimacy is being lost," says [Shireen Mitchell](#), a New York-based technology analyst, diversity strategist and social media expert who has spoken extensively nationally about isolation. She believes technology, especially social media, is a major reason why loneliness is growing, especially among young people. Members of Generation Z from ages 18 to 22, and Millennials ages 23 to 37 reported feeling the loneliest, according to the Cigna survey.

Grygiel encourages her students to make more interpersonal connections instead of Facetiming each other or using social media. "I don't want them waking up saying, 'I'm lonely' because they spent too much time on their screens instead of learning how to be sociable," Grygiel says.

The Syracuse instructor points to MIT professor, psychologist and author Sherry Turkle's 2011 book, [Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other](#) as one guide to these issues. In the bestselling book, Turkle writes that technology "makes it easy to communicate when we wish, and to disengage at will," whereas face-to-face interaction requires more engagement and makes more demands. Young people prefer to deal with strong feelings from the safe haven of the internet, says Turkle, and are drawn to connections that seem low risk and always available.

While technology may offer us the freedom to connect with people and work from anywhere, "we are also prone to being lonely everywhere," Turkle concludes in her book. "Relentless connection leads to a new solitude. We turn to new technology to fill the void, but as technology ramps up, our emotional lives ramp down."

## For each extra 10 minutes added to their trips, Putnam says, commuters had at least 10 percent fewer social connections.

Even casual interaction is decreasing, Grygiel says. Instead of chatting with others sharing their experience of waiting in line or riding on the bus or train, many people now tend to look down at their phones. Even the experience of commuting by bus, train or single-occupant car can add to isolation. For each extra 10 minutes added to their trips, Putnam says, commuters had at least 10 percent fewer social connections, leading to increased isolation and overall unhappiness.

"It's becoming harder and harder to form bonds. How do we know what we have in common?" Grygiel said. "Seriously, we need to put the phones down and say 'Hi,' to each other."

## Changing demographics, changing neighborhoods

Our neighborhoods and communities aren't what they used to be. As a result, there are more lonely people in America.

Single-individual households now make up 28 percent of all house-holds, a dramatic increase since 1965, when they were 15 percent. What's vanishing are blocks of close-knit families that would have daily interaction. These families protected the neighborhood, looked out for each other's homes, mowed and plowed neighbors' lawns and sidewalks without asking, held barbecues together and practically helped raise each other's kids.

**Single-individual households now make up 28 percent of all households, a dramatic increase since 1965, when they were 15 percent.**

African Americans are most affected by this trend, as they are more likely than any other ethnic group to live alone, putting their house-holds more at risk for loneliness and feelings of  social isolation.

Allison Abrams, a New York-based licensed psychotherapist and contributing writer for several national publications and websites recently wrote that as civic engagement declines, so does civ-il engagement. Smartphones have helped erode civility, and it's become common to ignore emails and texts instead of responding promptly, she says: "This type of dismissive behavior has become the norm. And norms are what shape societies."

Americans are more likely than people in other countries to move from one city to another for a job or other reasons. But moving multiple times to pursue a career and financial security can leave people lonely and unfulfilled.

Abrams suggests Americans' readiness to pull up their roots and relocate is connected to the American idea of rugged individualism. She cites the point sociologist Philip Slater's four-decades-old book, "The Pursuit of Loneliness" made: The root of disconnection in America is what Slater called "the collective obsession with the success of the individual."

## Identifying groups most at risk

Late last year, a team led by health expert Dr. Dilip Jeste, a psychiatry and neurosciences professor at the University of California, San Diego published a loneliness study that found a majority of participants had "moderate to high levels of loneliness."

Three age groups in particular were most affected. Study participants in their 20s, mid-50s, and mid-80s were more likely to experience "moderate to severe loneliness," in part due to increased stress related to life transitions that often occur around these ages, he said. The spike in disconnectedness at certain ages points to an important distinction between loneliness, which may be temporary, and social isolation, which can last for weeks, maybe even years, Jeste says.

"So, if I'm feeling lonely, feeling isolated, I need to think about why," he says. "Is it because I don't have people around me, or that people are around, but I can't connect with them?"

While Americans are living in a period of extraordinary prosperity, it's also a time of unprecedented upheaval and anxiety, wrote

Sasse, the junior Republican Senator from Nebraska in his recent book, [Them: Why We Hate Each Other](). "There is a terrible mismatch here." One reason for this could be the inequitable distribution of economic gains. Although the U.S. economy has more than doubled in real terms since 1980, incomes since then have stagnated for the bottom half of the population even as they more than tripled for the top 1%.

"Our communities are collapsing, and people are feeling more isolated, adrift, and purposefulness than ever before," he says. "We're in crisis."

## Possible solutions to social isolation

Avoiding or addressing social isolation and loneliness is possible. Putnam encourages people to become more social, join more community groups and volunteer. The [American Psychological Association]() says schools should put a greater emphasis on social skills training.

> ## Those planning their financial future upon retiring also need to prepare for the social aspects of their retirement.

The group also says community planners should ensure large public spaces include shared spaces for gatherings and interactions, and doctors should check for a patient's social connectedness when conducting medical screenings. Also, those planning their financial future upon retiring also need to prepare for the social aspects of their retirement.

For those feeling socially isolated, Bhargave, the Atlanta psychiatrist, said that instead of taking the "How do I fit in?" approach to gain a group of friends, maybe try focusing about 80 percent on the "one or two people who might be good friends for you," to be socially successful.

By "putting those energies" on identifying those connections, the people you do engage with can be held to a more meaningful standard friendship, says Bhargave, who expands more on the concept in his latest book, "A Moment of Insight." "Put 80 percent on who those people might be, and put in the work to foster the friendships," he suggested. "And then you can choose if you want to expand and have more friends."

In his book, Sen. Sasse says Americans don't have the "community thickness" like we used to. He thinks we want to be a part of something bigger — and to do so, we need to connect in more meaningful ways.

"What we need are new habits of mind and heart. We need new practices of neighborliness," the senator said. "We need to get our hands dirty replenishing the soil that nourishes rooted, purposeful lives."
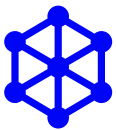
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# Why we need a change in climate

**by Marvin Brown**

*Editors note: this op-ed by Marvin T. Brown points out with searing clarity that injustices contribute to social isolation, disempower us, and keep us from tackling our most pressing challenges like climate change. We need a new climate of justice and new civic identities to right wrongs, come together, and move forward.*

**The recent uproar over white celebrities who were arrested for paying to get their kids into Ivy League colleges focused on the gap between our rhetoric around equal opportunity and the reality of the role money plays in college admissions.**

The managing director of a company caught in the scandal brushed the activities off as par for the course. "Is that unfair? That the privileged can pay?" asked Brian Taylor. "Yes. But that's how the world works." What he's pointing to is the fact that this is just one aspect of the climate of injustice we live in every day.

From early on in the U.S., our national climate — in other words, the social atmosphere we all live and breathe — has been linked to our faith in American prosperity. It turns out this climate has two serious shortcomings. It's a climate that ignores the earth's limited carrying capacity and suffers amnesia about what African-American architect, regional planner, and activist Carl Anthony called "the hidden narrative of race" in his 2017 memoir.

> **From early on in the U.S., our national climate — in other words, the social atmosphere we all live and breathe — has been linked to our faith in American prosperity.**

When one considers our whole story, from the European domination of Africa and the Americas to the present, the pervading climate is one of injustice. For some people of privilege, it may not feel like that, but that's exactly what a climate of injustice looks like — those who do not suffer from injustices can just ignore it.

Working within a climate of injustice, it's much harder to protect the future for our children and grandchildren. A climate of injustice keeps us separated from one another. It prevents us from joining together to develop workable solutions to our problems. It leads to civic disengagement and disconnection from our communities. It allows us to remain prisoners of our

own biases. It prevents us from repairing the injuries caused by white supremacy and racism.

We need to change from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice.

In a climate of justice, people expect broken relationships to be fixed, the vulnerable to be protected, and everyone to get a fair share. These are expectations of fairness, reciprocity, reparations, and negotiations. People give their opponents the benefit of the doubt. They ensure everyone is included. People who are lonely and alienated find opportunities to reconnect. Those who have been wronged are taken seriously and the wrongs addressed. The earth itself is shared and protected.

## We need to change from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice.

Instead of allowing a climate of injustice keep us separated from one another, a climate of justice would encourage us to join together to figure out a shared future for all of us. So how can we make the change from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice?

Here is my suggestion: We gather together as civilians. Why civilians? You probably know civilians as non-combatants. The civilians of Aleppo, at the Rio Grande River, at Wounded Knee are more than that.

During the riots in Ferguson, Missouri, a black teenager said that the police approached black men first as suspects, secondly as civilians. I think he knew what civilians are. They are vulnerable, cannot protect themselves, and depend on officials like the police to protect them, not shoot them. Civilians also have the capacity to organize to press for the recognition of their rights, at least in some places.

Some of us, of course, do not see ourselves as fitting this description. We may do well enough financially that we feel we can simply take care of ourselves and leave the rest of society out of it. The problem is that this difference in wealth, in privilege, in arrogance, maintains the climate of injustice in which we all live today.

We are all contemporaries. We share the earth. We share the city — though sharing the space doesn't mean we share the city's wealth, or its land. The wildly uneven distribution of those resources fragments our communities rather than brings them together.

Sometimes we rely on sports to do that. Nothing like a winning sports team to bring us together. If the 49ers would just get back on track. Or if the Raiders would stay in Oakland. We may look to other outside forces, like philanthropists, to help revive and reconnect our communities.

## Civilians do not just have needs. They have rights. They have rights that governments, from the local to the international level, have an obligation to honor. Civilians remind us that we are a nation of laws.

However, these actors cannot change the climate, because the climate is not a private affair, but a public responsibility. Civilians do not just have needs. They have rights. They have rights that governments, from the local to the international level, have an obligation to honor. Civilians remind us that we are a nation of laws.

As a privileged white male, I don't usually feel the vulnerability of many other civilians. My first experience was years ago when I took a brief course in nonviolent action before a small group of us left Nebraska to join in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery.

We were asked to lie down, curl up, and remain there so if we were beaten, we would not be harmed. I felt vulnerable, unable to protect myself, and reliant on law enforcement to protect me. I don't think all white men have to have similar experiences, but I think many of us have to be open to listening to and carefully responding to those who know the truth about living in a climate of injustice. Gatherings of civilians, I believe, could move us toward a climate of justice, where we could repair broken relationships, restore the earth as our habitat, and enjoy each other's company.
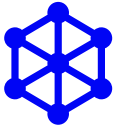
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# Can we build non-sexist and non-racist cities?

**by Monée Fields-White**

## Can we redesign American cities to foster connection and a sense of community instead of prioritizing isolated, atomic family units?

That's an especially urgent question as demographics shift. Single-individual households now make up 28 percent of all households, a dramatic increase since 1965, when they were 15 percent. At the same time, loneliness is on the rise.

It's also a question that was asked almost 40 years ago when urban historian Dolores Hayden wrote "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?" an essay that resonated through social science and urban

design communities and has experienced a resurgence of interest in recent years. In introducing the concept of the non-sexist city, she exposed how architectural design, capitalism and urban planning over centuries had isolated women physically, socially and economically.

"'A woman's place is in the home' has been one of the most important principles of architectural design and urban planning in the United States for the last century," she wrote in her essay. Since then, other academics have taken her critique farther, pointing to how urban design has also divided minorities and kept other communities disconnected. These concerns are more pressing for disadvantaged communities today. African Americans, for example, are [more likely](#) than any other ethnic group to live alone, putting people in those households more at risk for loneliness and feeling socially isolated.

Hayden "brought critical awareness to the design of cities and a new lens with which to see the built environment as an extension of western societies' systems of oppression," says Drea Howenstein, a professor of art education and architectural design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. That oppression in the built environment is not impossible to counteract, some experts say, but it requires civic engagement and in some cases a revolution.

## Material feminists led the way

In her book "The Grand Domestic Revolution," Hayden introduced her readers to the material feminists — whose leaders included Melusina Fay Peirce, Mary Livermore and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. For six decades, between the end of the Civil War and start of the Great Depression, these feminists redefined the idea of what home meant for them and their families by pushing back against the domestic servitude that they deemed isolated women. They championed for architects and urban planners to reconsider

the impact of their developments on family life. They even pro-
posed what "the ideal, feminist" city would look like, creating new
neighborhood designs and building developments that had shared
day care centers, public kitchens and community dining clubs.

## Material feminists dared to imagine women's economic independence from men and to plan for the complete environmental and technological changes such independence implied. – Dolores Hayden

Take Melusina Fay Peirce. She organized women to fight for paid
housework, and in her campaign, she developed the ideas behind
"cooperative housekeeping," in which women would create coop-
erative associations that would charge their husbands retail prices
for their services — ranging from cooking to sewing. She even
envisioned a broader plan for cooperative residential neighbor-
hoods that had kitchenless houses and a centralized headquarters
for cooperative housekeeping. "Material feminists dared to imag-
ine women's economic independence from men and to plan for the
complete environmental and technological changes such indepen-
dence implied," wrote Hayden.

Hayden's work came at a time when women were entering the
workforce in droves. In her essay on the non-sexist city, she her-
self envisioned an urban and suburban plan that centered on
supporting the activities of employed women and their families.
"It is essential to recognize such needs in order to begin both the
rehabilitation of the existing housing stock and the construction of
new housing," Hayden wrote.

## Could a non-sexist city also be a non-racist city?

Hayden has spurred community activists, educators and researchers to focus on creating urban spaces that foster community and equity for all. But that's still a challenge, especially for communities of color that have had to navigate redlining policies that barred them from accessing mortgage lending, racially restrictive covenants preventing them from purchasing homes in white communities, and other legacies of segregation.

"When we go back in time, the 1950s and prior, this is when we threw freeways through neighborhoods," says Dan Pitera, executive director of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture. "Redlining and other racist policies were in place to create the situation we have now," he added. "And we live in a capitalistic society — and equity doesn't exist in capitalism."

> **Unlike Europe — including Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands — the U.S. has been slow to move toward alternative housing options like co-housing.**

Unlike Europe — including Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands — the U.S. has been slow to move toward alternative housing options like co-housing, a concept that allows a collective sharing of services like common kitchens, dining rooms, laundry services and day care.

In the U.S., "we have barely cracked the surface," says Lori Brown, professor of architecture at Syracuse University. Brown, who's also

co-founder of [ArchiteXX](#) — a nonprofit focused on gender equity in architecture, notes that there are a few examples of communities adopting co-housing.

"But we need to fund more of that, and it will require a different kind of socializing on how we think about domestic space," she says. "Unless you're living in a community supportive of your demographics, it's so easy to become physically isolated and lonely in life."

## Co-housing and other community alternatives

Brown notes that living in isolation can weigh on a person's mental health and overall wellbeing, whereas co-housing can forge common bonds. Residents in Denmark's first co-housing community, built in 1972, described Saettedammen, where 71 people live, as an ["extended family."](#)

Hayden proposed a plan to create small participatory groups known as Homemakers Organizations for a More Egalitarian Society (HOMES). They involved tearing down fences between backyards and creating shared space as well as systems of shared work like meal preparation, day care, gardening. Hayden also imagined the groups using shared appliances, tools, cars, and an approach to shared work that eliminated sex stereotypes and treated men's and women's labor equally.

One of the first steps Hayes envisioned for those groups was organizing to persuade cities to allow them to modify zoning laws so they could open up their backyards. Such change requires civic engagement, says Pitera: "Civic engagement is set of systems that are put in place that will remain way beyond the project."

The DCDC has worked to build civic engagement since its inception in 1994, including in its partnership with the Detroit-based nonprofit Young Nation on The Alley Project (TAP). TAP is a community-driven project that has transformed a southwest Detroit neighborhood alley into a graffiti art center.

DCDC worked with Young Nation, the youth and the residents in the neighborhood to turn the alley into a walking gallery with the garages serving as the canvases. Two vacant lots were transformed into art displays with space for families to gather and play. A main garage was redesigned into an art studio for the youth to explore their creativity in other art mediums.

## Experts say it's critical to have an inclusive urban and housing design framework that brings people together.

"Our partnership with Young Nation is example of a civic engagement system that we have plugged into — and it continues to grow," Pitera says. "That's the difference between civic engagement and civic participation; civic engagement can't be turned on and off."

Experts say it's critical to have an inclusive urban and housing design framework that brings people together. It won't be easy to build, but a non-sexist and non-racist city would foster equality and an accountability to one's neighbors while creating an environment with shared resources, diverse perspectives, and public spaces built for sustainability.
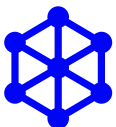
# II. How people are coming together to solve social isolation

*Photographer: Mike Erskine Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# 9 ways to reduce loneliness in your community

**by Courtney Pankrat**

**Community solutions to the loneliness epidemic have been top of mind at Shareable. In fact, we've dedicated a good bit of our reporting to it this year.**

Shareable's executive director, Neal Gorenflo, outlined the problem as did Marvin Brown in his article, "Why we need a change in climate", and Monée Fields-White shared her perspective in, "Can we build non-sexist and non-racist cities?"

After outlining the challenge, we proposed that community involvement is an accessible, effective solution to loneliness. Then, we

offered examples of how communities are coming together all over the world. For example, Japan is connecting youth and seniors and the UK government has created a minister for loneliness. In addition, Libraries of Things bring people together, On the Table hosts shared meals, and the Participatory City Foundation helps people create neighborhood projects.

At this point, you might be wondering where to start to lessen loneliness where you live. The nine articles below offer good starting ideas from hosting a stranger dinner to creating engaging public spaces. While some ideas can be done today, others require a bit more planning. Take a look and let us know what other suggestions you have for building community:

## 1. How to reinvent the potluck

"Hosting a potluck is a great way to start a neighborhood sharing group. Why a potluck? The potluck is an iconic community gathering experience that symbolically reinforces the idea of sharing, as each guest brings food to share with the group. And anyway, potlucks are fun!"

## 2. How to host a stranger dinner

"With a little forethought, having a stranger dinner can be a great way to meet some new people, gain some different perspectives, and get people to bring delicious food to your house for free."

## 3. How to start a housing co-op

"Co-ops save money by cutting out landlords' profits, sharing common spaces, lowering operating costs, and receiving public subsidies for affordable housing. Studies show that co-ops provide other benefits, like greater social cohesion and support, reduced crime, increased civic engagement & sustainability, better quality and maintenance of housing, and resident stability."

## 4. [How to integrate a gift circle into any community](#)

"The Gift Circle, as founded by Alpha Lo and spread by Charles Eisenstein, is a group facilitation format that holds great possibility as a way to match resources with needs, create community and inspire gratitude and generosity. The goals of a Gift Circle are simply to provide a warm, free, and welcoming space for community to gather and share Gifts and Needs, most often while literally sitting in a circle."

## 5. [How to create engaging public spaces](#)

"The idea behind creating a public space is not just to build a nice-looking addition to a town, but to create a space that people actually use. A plaza with no one in it is just an empty space. Creating a space that successfully engages people is an artform and a science that relies on the input of the community, the testing of ideas, sharp observation and detailed planning."

## 6. [How to plant a habitat garden at the local level](#)

Jeremy Adam Smith and his "Bees and Butterflies" group "went to the city and asked if [they] could plant a community garden in a strip of dirt available on our neighborhood playground, Noe Courts. To [their] surprise, the city said yes." This article explains how they created the garden.

## 7. [How to start a neighborhood work group](#)

"Once a month during the warm season, my partner Luan and I report for duty at one of six different neighborhood homes to help build a fence, paint a house, terrace a garden, put in a mosaic path, or what have you—with some eating and chatting thrown in."

## 8. <u>How to build a better neighborhood</u>

"Even if we haven't actually experienced it, most of us have nostalgia for that perfect neighborhood, the one where people know each other, help each other, and hang out together. So what is the one ingredient necessary to create a community vibe on the streets where we actually live? Face-time."

## 9. <u>How to start a social street</u>

"There are countless ways strong communities help people lead better lives. In the age of 'connected loneliness,' having neighbors to borrow that proverbial cup of sugar from is not only a way to share resources more effectively, but a great way to see the neighbourhood itself transformed into a powerful resource in its own right."
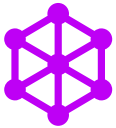
*Photographer: Evelyn Semenyuk Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# How the simple act of sharing a meal is creating community change

**by Monée Fields-White**

**Launched in 2014, On the Table has brought together tens of thousands of citizens nationwide to discuss ways to strengthen their communities.**

Five years ago, thousands of Chicago residents huddled in small groups around tables in restaurant dining rooms, conference rooms, community centers, school auditoriums and churches to break bread and openly discuss the critical issues in their city that mattered to them.

The candid, and often lively, conversations offered the more than 11,000 residents — ranging from small business owners and non-

profit organization leaders to local school teachers — a chance to move beyond the surface into questions about how they can make their city a better place to live. Approaches ranged from improving the educational system to getting fellow neighbors more engaged with one another — and the meetings have resulted in real change.

"We created a space where everyone can be heard," says Daniel Ash, chief marketing officer at the Trust, the nation's second-largest community foundation and creator of this initiative, known as On the Table.

Borne out of a desire to celebrate the foundation's roots of community building, the initiative started as a way to gear the foundation up for its centennial year in 2015. Then the concept took off, with the number of participants doubling each year up to a peak of 100,000 in 2017. All told, 211,500 people have taken part. The Trust partnered with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to expand its reach, creating the On the Table National Learning Network, a digital platform designed to allow other community foundations, civic organizations and nonprofits to replicate the program.

Since its inception, "the response has been overwhelming, and for those who know On the Table in Chicago, it has become a tradition," Ash says.

So far, 30 community foundations have replicated the initiative in other cities. Those meetings have developed sustainable and remarkable differences for communities. In Gary, Indiana, youths created their own YouTube channel to focus on what they liked about their community. In Lexington, Kentucky, the dialogue led city planners to revise their growth and development plan to take citizen suggestions into account.

Among the community foundations hosting their own version of On the Table, 10 received funding through the Knight Foundation in 2017. The foundation invested $1.15 million in total to expand the programs in areas like Lake County, Indiana, Lexington, Kentucky and Long Beach, California.

"On the Table has helped us to pull those residents who have been disengaged back into the social fabric of their community," says Erica Fizer, director of communications and marketing at the Legacy Foundation in Lake County, Indiana — located just east of Chicago. "It has empowered people to take that first step and say, 'we can come up with solutions for our own community and we don't have to wait for others to guide us.'"

## We can come up with solutions for our own community and we don't have to wait for others to guide us.

The Legacy Foundation hosted 133 conversations in 2017 — with about 1,300 participants — across all 25 communities in the county. Fizer says the foundation let the hosts decide how they wanted to facilitate those conversations, and through that approach, key issues rose to the top including education, youth development and the state of the county's economy.

In 2018, the foundation followed up by hosting On the Table conversations that allowed residents to delve further into those issues and develop solutions — many of which the foundation funded through community action awards. That included a new community-based YouTube show, called "What's Good, Gary?", produced by local middle school students who wanted to shine a light on the positive aspects of their community.

"The students felt like there was a lot of negative news about their community, and this broadcast allowed them to change that narrative," Fizer says.

Based on surveys of more than 12,000 residents from across the 10 cities, the Knight Foundation's 2017 national report, released last year, showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 percent) spoke with someone new. Also more than half of the participants (58 percent) says they have a somewhat-to-much better understanding of how they can help to address issues facing their communities. What's more, 75 percent says they took part in a conversation that produced specific solutions to issues facing their communities. The national report was prepared by the the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement.

Also while the conversations varied, the report showed that six themes emerged as prominent topics. That included equity and social inclusion, economic issues and poverty, education and youth development, public safety and the judicial system, transportation, housing and homelessness.

The state of housing and homelessness rose to the top for the 3,000 Long Beach residents who participated in the Long Beach Community Foundation's event, held in September 2017 in partnership with grassroots group We Love Long Beach. Together, they renamed their event to "Around the Table." Most of all, the residents wanted to know what they could do, but didn't know where to turn. The following year, the foundation responded by hosting a three-day event that allowed residents to meet with nonprofit organizations and city officials who work directly with the homeless population and housing in the city, which has bolstered not only awareness around the issues but also community involvement, says Marcelle Epley, the foundation president and CEO.

"We found this to be a golden opportunity to take advantage of the momentum," says Epley. "The massive awareness campaign that we orchestrated helped to create more understanding and more compassion." The city's Multi-Service Center, which provides an array of services including outreach and referrals to shelters and social service programs, has seen an uptick in donations, she notes.

Based on suggestions from the 2018 "Around the Table," the community foundation also awarded more than $17,000 in grants to organizations and initiatives focused on mitigating homelessness and the housing crisis. Urban Community Outreach Inc., which helps the homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless, was among the recipients. That funding will support placing more than 240 families in permanent housing.

## Big ideas and solutions can spring from having these small conversations, says Lisa Adkins.

"The overwhelming theme here is that people want to help," says Epley. "We offered them a way to do so."

Big ideas and solutions can spring from having these small conversations, says Lisa Adkins, president and CEO of the Blue Grass Community Foundation, which has hosted an On The Table event in each of the last two years. The foundation is gearing up for their third consecutive event on March 27.

In 2017, more than 11,000 people joined the discussion, and as part of their event, the city of Lexington, Ky. embedded their city planners in conversations. That information was used to help inform the city's 2025 Comprehensive Plan — an outline for future devel-

opment and growth in the city while preserving existing neighbor-
hoods, downtown and rural areas.

"Having the conversations can bring new people together, bridge
differences and produce new relationships," says Adkins. "There's
real power in that."
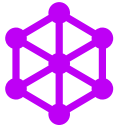
*Photographer: Cowomen Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# Q&A: Steve King on loneliness, the social side of coworking and the future of work

**by Cat Johnson**

**Freelancing, telecommuting, and job hopping are on the rise, and with these big shifts in work arrangements we're seeing an increase in loneliness. Could coworking be part of the cure?**

As research begins to show that shared workspaces can play a role in building social connections and reducing isolation, corporations are increasingly coming around to the view that coworking is a mental wellness issue, says Steve King, a partner at small-business research consultancy Emergent Research.

His 2017 Harvard Business Review article "Coworking Is Not About Workspace — It's About Feeling Less Lonely" highlighted the importance of social ties in coworking spaces and noted that the top three words used by members to describe coworking were community, fun and social. "By creating community and reducing isolation and loneliness," he wrote, "coworking benefits both organizations and workers due to greater levels of work engagement, productivity, and worker happiness."

Coworking spaces reduce social isolation and loneliness, according to a survey by Emergent Research and the Global Coworking Unconference Conference (GCUC), with 87% of respondents reporting that they meet other members for social reasons. Another 83% report being less lonely and 89% report being happier since joining a coworking space.

A rising number of companies in the coworking industry are responding to this demand by building social events into their business plans, King told Shareable. And wellness concerns have prompted more corporations to cover the cost of coworking spaces for remote employees, he said.

We spoke with King about the emergence of workplace wellness as a hot topic for remote workers in the corporate world and beyond, and the challenges around measuring wellness, loneliness and health in coworking.

**Cat Johnson: How has the idea of community building as a value proposition for coworking spaces changed in the last year or so?**

**Steve King:** Coworking now has so many different segments that I think it is a value proposition for some segments — but for other segments, less so. With large corporations moving into cowork-

ing and coworking-like things, and leasing whole floors or large chunks of space, loneliness and the social side is just not an issue that's coming up with them yet.

For individuals, particularly independent workers of various kinds — freelancers, independent consultants and that crowd — the social side is incredibly important.

**Some space operators open big, fabulous spaces and then wonder how to go about the social side of coworking. They find that it's harder than just putting someone at the front desk.**

It doesn't generally happen on its own [unless] you happen to have some members who take it on and do it. You really need to design community in if you want your space to be community-oriented and social. You have to think about it programmatically and have plans to get people interacting. And that can be hard to do.

I'm intrigued by the number of spaces now that either already were social spaces and have added coworking — a lot of city clubs and other types of clubs are trying to do this — and spaces that are designed from the beginning with a social side. For example, Soho House and Neuehouse and places like that have said from the beginning that they're social spaces.

You have a whole range now. Even places like The Wing, and niche spaces, are driving more toward the social side and realizing that's an important piece. Certainly, it's come a long way in terms of recognizing the broader social side as part of community than what I think it originally was. Back in the beginning of coworking, we all talked about community and we had that — we had some social activities — but it really wasn't as developed as it is today. In many segments and types of coworking spaces, it's social first, which is

different. Before, it was always a place to work first. That's a pretty big shift.

**Is the social aspect a significant driver of industry growth?**

We're kind of in our third phase of coworking. The first phase was when it was all independent workers; then startups found it and loved it. Now this is a third phase where corporates are increasingly getting [that] it is for their telecommuters and remote workers.

You have to split how corporations view this into two sides. We're seeing a much more lenient policy with corporations saying they'll pay for coworking for their remote workers than we did just a couple of years ago. If you asked them if they're doing this because their people are lonely, I don't know that they'd say yes to that. They'd say they need to be in a social environment and that they're hearing remote workers are not happy at home for a number of reasons.

The complaints about working from home have always been, number one, loneliness, and number two, productivity. Corporations are realizing that, if they want their remote workers to be productive and happy, they need to let them cowork — so that's related to loneliness.

For independent workers, absolutely. A lot more of them are realizing that working from home is a lonely thing to do. So, if your space is going after that segment and focusing on the individual and the independent worker and the micro-businesses of one to three employees, the social side is very important.

**How do you distinguish between the social aspect of coworking, loneliness and workplace wellness?**

Wellness is hard to measure, as is being more healthy. But one of the things that is true, from a qualitative standpoint, is that if people feel they're healthier, and believe they're healthier, there's a really strong correlation with them actually being healthier, because attitude is so much of this.

We consistently ask people about, not just loneliness, but about their health, and whether they feel they're more healthy. The numbers are actually quite strong around health. Not as strong as they are around reduced loneliness, but they are quite strong.

We've talked about this before, but you have the combination of social isolation — simply not being around other people isn't a good thing for us from a mental health standpoint — then you actually have loneliness, which is the perception that you're alone, even though you may be surrounded by people. So without a doubt, coworking is better for people's mental health than not being in a coworking space.

**What other coworking trends are you seeing?**

Longer term, wellness is such a big deal within the corporate setting. I continue to believe that we're not long from the day when the companies that use telecommuters are going to encourage people to go into a coworking space. This will be because a combination of the HR [human resources] people and the legal people will recognize that, if they don't encourage it, they're leaving themselves open to damaging their employees — maybe even legally liable.

But, even if not legally liable, the HR people will say that working from home has been proven to have a bunch of negative sides to it. (It has positive sides too.) So, if they tell employees they have to work from home, or if a remote employee tells them that working from home isn't working for them, more and more companies understand that it's just not that much to pick up a couple hundred dollars a month to let them get out of the house.

I think that will be increasingly common, and that will be driven by the broader wellness trend that's sweeping corporate America, and understanding that working from home is bad for the mental health of a lot of people. Going forward, that will be a big driver.

The second thing is that the independent workers — because there's been so much noise about coworking — are now getting it. They'll continue to go into coworking more and more.

Addressing loneliness is an interesting value proposition for coworking, but it's one of several. I wouldn't base my business plan on curing loneliness if I was a coworking owner, but having it part of the quiver is a good idea.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*
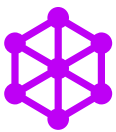
*Photographer: Hillary Ungson Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# Why creating community-led project spaces can ease social isolation

**by Dan Hancox**

**Pantry is an excellent middle-English word for a very 21st century idea: a peer-to-peer community food collective creating larder-filling products and changing lives in one of London's poorest boroughs.**

Here's how the program started: enthusiastic amateur cooks in Barking and Dagenham were given expert advice on refining their favorite home recipes into sellable products, perfecting batch-cooking, developing packaging design and sourcing ingredients. Finally, tastings were arranged, and the products were tested in market stalls.

"They're such a great team," says Nat Defriend from the [Partici-patory City Foundation](#), which provides funding and support for the program. "There's a woman who does amazing things with brownies, and a women tempering her own chocolate. We've got a cake-maker. We've got a guy who makes incredible chutney. We've got a woman who makes jollof rice, and another who makes unusual and delicious things that are kind of like pesto, but not pesto."

"They're delicious, really credible food products — which until recently they were knocking up in their own kitchens," he added. "And what's really important is they've begun to operate as a collective: They've been batch-cooking together, and are taking on catering commissions together. All we did was to remove obstacles and barriers in their path, and take on the financial risk."

## Launched in late 2017, Participatory City's 'Every One, Every Day' project in the Barking and Dagenham borough is awe-inspiring in its ambition.

Launched in late 2017, Participatory City's ['Every One, Every Day'](#) project in the Barking and Dagenham borough is awe-inspiring in its ambition, and almost certainly the largest of its kind in the world: a borough-wide, five-year, £7.2m project which aims to involve 25,000 residents and create more than 250 neighbour-hood-led projects. [Pantry](#) is one of its early success stories.

Barking and Dagenham is absolutely the right place for such a radical intervention. Still rebuilding its reputation, and its social cohesion, after the far-right British National Party won a horrifying 12 (out of 51) council seats in 2006, it has some of the [worst rates](#)

in the British capital for infant mortality, educational qualifications, evictions, low pay and unemployment.

The borough's population is both growing and turning over at a remarkable rate, with a rapidly growing number of residents for whom English is a second language, and a strikingly young population: 27% of the population of roughly 210,000 are under 16 (compared to 19% nationally). And Barking and Dagenham, where 21,000 residents are pensioners, is not immune from the nationwide crisis of loneliness and social isolation, which afflicts one in seven Britons.

## A research-led approach to community change

Participatory City had previously tried out its approach in Lambeth in south London, on a smaller scale, in a £300,000 project, based out of one "shop" site (there are five across Barking and Dagenham). "The main thing we learned from that," says Defriend, "is that in order for it to be potentially system-changing, or life-changing for large numbers of residents, we had to operate at scale."

It's an approach with a strikingly long gestation period. Every One, Every Day emerged from seven years of research into peer-to-peer models, whereby residents of neighbourhoods designed projects and activities together to help make them happier, greener places to live. The aim was to create a new model, distinct from the ways people usually seek to make changes in their communities, whether through formal local democracy, charities, local enterprise, or campaigning and protests.

Participatory City's key innovation was right in its name — putting participation at the center, above any other objectives of its projects. Getting people working together, or even just alongside one another, sets the stage for collaboration and connection, and can

play a huge role in combating social isolation by getting people more engaged with others in their communities. Once people have come together to work on projects, Participatory City provides a supportive ecosystem that it's found offers projects the best odds for building successful community engagement.

"Our founder Tessy [Britton] noticed that the key difference with participation as a model was that it was mutually beneficial, and much more inclusive. She then began to ask herself, well, why isn't there infrastructure for these sorts of projects, in the same way that there is for all those other models?" It was the need for this "missing piece of the jigsaw," Defriend says, which led organizers to create the Participatory City platform.

The problem of existing participatory community projects without such infrastructure and resources to support them, is that they tend to be led and sustained by people who are highly confident, highly resilient, highly skilled, and have plenty of time and energy in their lives to devote to them — and even one of those criteria excludes a lot of people. So the Participatory City Foundation set out to broaden participation beyond those already brimming with social (and sometimes financial) capital.

The idea of this new platform is to "clear away the burden" on local people associated with delivering these types of activities. No requirements for formal business plans were imposed on local entrepreneurs interested in joining the project. "Our goal has been to systematically remove obstacles in the path of people wanting to get things done in their community," Defriend tells Shareable — and in doing so, to significantly increase both the numbers and diversity of types of people getting involved, and to give residents the tools to help themselves and each other bring ideas to fruition.

## The importance of building in flexibility

To celebrate Every One, Every Day's first anniversary, the organization opened its largest site so far in the borough, "The Warehouse," and hosted a potlatch dinner attended by 180 residents, who arrived with armfuls of home-cooked food. "It was absolute buzzing," Defriend says. The next day, around 300 people turned up at The Warehouse's first open day, attending workshops around everything from beekeeping to robot-making, from dance classes to recycled craft activities and "make and mend" sessions.

One year on, Participatory City are keeping operations flexible, while substantially expanding their scope, and trying to bring new residents through the doors all the time. "All the research says that it is the participation itself which is impactful — and that's what we're finding," says Defriend. "The intention is that it doesn't get sort of calcified, and keeps evolving. As resident confidence increases, the theory is the residents will take on much more of the responsibility for spreading the word, with the platform providing the basics — the health and safety and so on — so the same infrastructure can extend much further into communities."

**All the research says that it is the participation itself which is impactful — and that's what we're finding, says Nat Defriend.**

Guardian writer George Monbiot reported on the project in January, and said he kept hearing the same comment from participants: "I hated this place and wanted to move out. But now I want to stay."

Defriend is keen to emphasise that each of the growing legion of Every One, Every Day projects are genuine peer-to-peer collabo-

rations. "It's not one resident donating their time to another who needs it — which would be the charity model — and it's not a commercial transaction, for profit," he says. "It's a genuinely mutual endeavor, shared between the residents. And that's why it works."
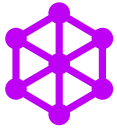
# III. How organizations are coming together to solve social isolation

*Whitney Coe and her 5 yr old daughter, Susannah, in Pocket Park in Athens. Photographer: Lauren Trew Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

# How Citizen University is building an army of civic leaders

**by Jen Boynton**

**It was a brisk fall morning in Athens, Tenn. when Whitney Kimball Coe delivered the town's first "civic sermon." Almost 70 people showed up at a dilapidated downtown park to hear Coe and other speakers expound on their passion for the community at the town's inaugural Civic Saturday last year.**

The event follows the model of a church service, but substitutes civic texts for the religious. Instead of an opening prayer, the pledge of allegiance. Instead of a hymn, a poem from an American

author. Instead of a bible passage, the Declaration of Independence. The goal is to reconnect citizens to the power and responsibility of civic engagement.

"Civic Saturday lasts about 45 minutes," Kimball Coe says. "That's all you need on a Saturday. By 11am, you might have already seen your neighbors at the Y[MCA] or the library, and you'll see them later in the day at a 5-K [run] or another community event. This is the time when we focus on our civic engagement."

Civic Saturday is the brainchild of Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University, a non-profit working to build a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship across the country. The group sees civic engagement as a key to rebuilding democracy and community. "Strong democracy depends on strong citizens. We all have the power to make change happen in civic life and we all have the responsibility to try," explains Kayla DeMonte, a managing director at Citizen University.

## Strong democracy depends on strong citizens. We all have the power to make change happen in civic life and we all have the responsibility to try. – Kayla DeMonte

Citizen University expanded its offerings in 2017 with the creation of Youth Collaboratory, a year-long program for high-schoolers ages 15 and 16. The goal: Help students understand how to harness their own civic character and use it to benefit their communities.

Civic character, DeMonte explains, is "how you act when everybody is watching." It's helping an elderly neighbor cross the street, picking up trash, and leaving a note if you dent someone's car.

The students meet remotely three times throughout the year and
conduct individual civic projects in their communities. The current
cohort includes students from all across the country — Brooklyn to
San Jose, California, with many large and small towns in between.

Civic Saturdays started in Seattle, and have expanded to cities all
around the country thanks to its parent nonprofit's Civic Seminary, a
training program for civic leaders. Kimball Coe participated in Civic
Seminary because she was drawn to the deep thought and pedagogy
that Citizen University puts into its programming and practice. And
she sees Civic Saturdays as a perfect fit for her small town of 13,000.



*Mother & daughter, Frances and Haley McMahan. Haley read civic scripture by Mary McLeod Bethune "What does democracy mean to me?" Photographer Emma Trew Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

## Building small-town civic participation

Athens already has an active civic presence with vibrant town
council meetings, five-kilometer runs and community theatre. It's
a member of Main Street America, a group that revitalizes older
and historic commercial districts to build strong neighborhoods

and thriving economies. In order to keep the grants and technical support that come with the Main Street designation, Athens needs to demonstrate that community events — such as Civic Saturdays — are regularly happening in the city.

Civic Saturdays give residents a common language and practice for community engagement, proponents say. They even have the potential to reduce loneliness and isolation. "People just feel more connected," DeMonte says. "They feel like they know their neighbors in their communities. They can recognize their own power in civic life to be able to go out and act for the good."

Kimball Coe is one of a cohort of residents working to building a more active citizenry in Athens. "We weren't always on this trajectory," she says. A decade ago, the town was in economic decline. But turnaround takes just one person with a desire to make a change.



*Little girls waving flags Photographer Emma Trew Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

"Every community with a zip code has an institution that is capable of supporting a practice of participation," she says. "The arc of change, growth and transformation is long." Civic Saturdays and the other Citizen University programs give community members the tools to build engagement and solve their own problems.

Remember that dilapidated park? Kimball Coe was able to secure a $20,000 community grant to revitalize it, and Civic Saturdays were one of the key park events she mentioned in her grant application. Ultimately, DeMonte explains, "our focus is really on supporting civic life by helping people understand their own agency and power."

# Can an app cure loneliness and isolation?

**by Karla Ballard Williams**

**Spring is in the air and hope for new beginnings abound — but not for everyone. Researchers have found for decades that the <u>number of suicides peak in the spring</u>. Some theories suggest that the emotional hibernation of winter becomes distressing levels of depression in the spring, specifically around relationships.**

It doesn't help that many people suffer from a lack of close relationships. In May 2018, Cigna's U.S. Loneliness Index found that loneliness has become an epidemic. Nearly half of 20,000 Americans surveyed said that they are "sometimes or always feeling alone or left out."

More than three-quarters of participants in a separate study led by Dr. Dilip Jeste, the director of UC San Diego's Center for Healthy Aging, reported "moderate to high levels of loneliness." Jeste describes loneliness as "the discrepancy between the social relationships you want and the social relationships you have."

Jeste's team also discovered an inverse relationship between wisdom and loneliness. They measured people across "six components of wisdom" — namely: "general knowledge of life; emotion management; empathy, compassion, altruism and a sense of fairness; insight; acceptance of divergent values; and decisiveness — the ability to make quick, effective decisions when necessary." People scoring high in wisdom were less lonely.

*Screenshot from yingme.co Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

Some of these "components of wisdom" can be developed or honed by one potential cure for loneliness: Time Banking. Today, mere acquaintances, perfect strangers, neighbors, friends, and family members are using Time Banking in over 38 countries to meet their needs and find a sense of connection and belonging.

Time Banking has helped communities in distress rebuild after earthquakes, cities bounce back from the economic and spirit-crushing devastation of the Great Recession, and individuals overcome personal crises. In big cities like Los Angeles and Philadelphia, people are Time Banking as part of a daily practice of digital detox.

## What is Time Banking?

Basically, a group of individuals form a network, called a Time Bank. Members support and help one another within a framework that is bound by a set of agreements. First, each member agrees to offer and provide their skills, talents and experience to others. In return, members can seek helpful skills from other members Time credits, usually measured in hour-long increments of time,

are traded as an alternative currency to traditional money in all Time Banking exchanges. Each member can bank the hours they earn by helping others, and also trade hours in their account as payment to anyone for their help. Unlike barter, which is one-to-one, Time Banking leverages the skills of everyone in the network and can be one-to-many.

## Time Banking has helped communities in distress rebuild after earthquakes, cities bounce back from the economic and spirit-crushing devastation of the Great Recession, and individuals overcome personal crises.

## How can Time Banking cultivate wisdom and combat loneliness and isolation?

Time Banking encompasses and embodies the six components of wisdom.

**Life knowledge:** It shines the light on the talent equally distributed across the population. It unlocks the value in each human that is hidden by traditional measures of economic wealth.

**Empathy/compassion:** Its practice requires an openness to being vulnerable and asking for help (versus allowing anger, resentment or shame get the best of you). It's always amazing how many people show up for someone who is vulnerable and asks for help.

**Altruism and fairness:** Members pay acts of kindness forward, by doing something for someone else, and "give back" to others by offering their skills and talents.

**Divergent values acceptance:** Time Banking also exposes its members to people from all walks of life, creating a sense of appreciation and respect for people across their differences.

**Decisiveness:** Finally, Time Banking is efficient. You make a request and accept the help when presented, to get things done that need doing.

We're working toward broad adoption of the concept behind Time Banking and for purposes of scaling we often refer to it as skill-sharing on-demand. Apps (like YING, which I co-founded) can work to make Time Banking easy to understand and do within any group you're a part of. Our vision is to see the concept of group skill-sharing, adopted in neighborhoods, corporations, and universities across the globe.

## We strongly believe embedding the concept of skill-sharing in our culture will raise the level of social capital desperately needding to be increased in our communities to deter isolation and loneliness

## What's next for Time Banking?

I believe the concept of Time Banking will also help democratize how we view and build social capital — a measure of the strength of our interpersonal relationships. We strongly believe embedding the concept of skill-sharing in our culture will raise the level of social capital desperately needing to be increased in our communities to deter isolation and loneliness. Perhaps it can help us build a world where the time invested in your social capital account will be as important as what's in your bank account.

## What you can do today?

Like my mentor, Edgar Cahn, "the father of Time Banking," my team and I have dedicated our lives to bringing connection to communities locally and globally. Join us in this important work! Download the YING Bank app at the App Store or Google Play (Tip: use the referral code "SHARNG" for fast approval). Go to yingme.co to learn more about us and our upcoming events. We hope to see you in our growing community of people living out of the spirit of human interconnection.

*Karla Ballard Williams is a member of Shareable's advisory board.*

*Image provided by Institute for a Resource-Based Economy (IRBE), Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

# How Libraries of Things build resilience, fight climate change, and bring communities together

**by Tom Llewellyn**

**I grew up in Canyon, a small village in the redwoods not far from Oakland, California. Unlike most residential communities in the United States, we managed our own infrastructure, including roads, water, and an internet mesh network.**

I learned firsthand how communal infrastructure brings people together, creates a culture of reciprocity, and reduces waste. Much of my work before and since joining Shareable has been directly influenced by this experience.

It wasn't until I moved to Asheville, North Carolina in 2013 that I got excited about Libraries of Things (LoT) and tool libraries specifically. A tool library is just like a regular library, but instead of checking out books, you can check out tools for gardening, plumbing, carpentry, or other projects at low or, in some cases, no cost at all. There are now LoTs all over the world. People are sharing pretty much anything you can imagine. They're a great example of what we at Shareable refer to as the real sharing economy, by which we mean sharing based on principles and platforms that are equitable, not exploitative.

LoTs have become a lot more popular in the past decade, helped by new, affordable LoT software platforms like myTurn and evangelists like Gene Homicki (co-founder and CEO at myTurn). My-Turn has been a sponsor of Shareable for many years, but I first got to know Gene when I co-founded the Asheville Tool Library (ATL) in 2013, almost a year before I started working for Shareable. Like many other LoTs, the ATL benefited from Gene's support during our startup phase, and while I'm no longer living in Asheville or working at the ATL, they're still using myTurn today.

We caught up with Gene to learn about the current state of the LoT nation, which includes more than 400 such libraries around the world. Gene shared what he's learned over the last decade, what myTurn's treasure trove of data tells us about who is sharing what, and for what purposes, and what's next for the thing-lending movement.

**Tom Llewellyn: Can you talk a little bit about the history and evolution of Libraries of Things?**

**Gene Homicki:** The Library of Things movement started with tool libraries. What is believed to be the first tool library has been in operation since 1943 at the Grosse Point, Michigan Public Li-

brary. There were at least a couple dozen tool libraries in the 1970s, but many closed down due to a combination of difficulty operating manually (without technology solutions), the rise of consumer culture, "retail therapy," and the availability of cheap products often made overseas in places without the same environmental or labor require-ments have here in the United States. The need for community and the joy of working with durable, high-quality tools and products didn't completely go away, but seemed to be forgotten for a while.



*Image by Montgomery County, MD via Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)*

By the mid-2000s, only a few of the original tool libraries were still in operation, but they would help inspire a new movement of Libraries of Things, which today is expanding around the world. In 2008-2009, two things combined to inspire this movement. First, the global finan-cial crisis put millions of people out of work, [so] they could not afford to maintain their homes or start new businesses. Second, the rise of cloud-based software development and other consumer technologies that were coming down in cost [made creating LoTs more feasible].

With so many people under- or unemployed during the financial crisis, a shift to affordable access over having to buy everything yourself started to make sense to more and more people. What's been amazing is that even with the economy being much stronger for many people, the growth and excitement around Libraries of Things is still accelerating.

We're seeing an increasing number of nonprofits, entrepreneurs, and more recently public libraries getting started with Libraries of Things on myTurn. We now have almost 400 publicly accessible tool, kitchen, kids/baby, audiovisual and electronics, musical instruments, and general Libraries of Things on our platform — with even more schools, government agencies, and enterprises using our platform internally. We have the lowest tech of items on our platform including baby carriers/ slings and 60-year-old hand tools, to the highest tech like drones, robots, and VR headsets.

**Speaking of myTurn, tell us what you do and how and why you got started.**

MyTurn is a mission-driven enterprise that uses "radical reuse" and sharing to increase affordable access to products — while reducing consumption and waste from those very same resources.

Specifically, we offer a cloud-based platform to help organizations track, rent, and share tools, equipment, or any durable resource. In cities and communities, our platform is being used to create subscription-based access to products. Educational institutions are using our platform to manage bike lending and equipment sharing both on campus and between campuses. Enterprises use the myTurn platform to increase utilization of equipment internally while turning excess capacity into revenue.

Durable and repairable products managed with myTurn are typically used one thousand to ten thousand percent (10 to 100 times more) compared to individual ownership. Reusing and sharing products, rather than purchasing them new, can reduce GHG emissions by up to 99% according to a recent report from the U.N. Resource Panel.

In 2009-2010, looking for practical ways to use my background in tech to help solve both the economic crisis and our serious environmental and climate challenges, I co-founded the West Seattle Tool Library. Having the inventory easily viewable online was a key driver of the rapid growth of the tool library, as it allowed community members to see and get excited about the hundreds and eventually thousands of tools they could borrow.

Our initial plan was to help get many of the items gathering dust in people's garages, closets, and attics into productive use. However, two interesting things happened along the way. First, rather than just helping people reuse resources, we found that tool libraries and Libraries of Things are also great at building community. Second, while many people and families have a ton of stuff in storage… businesses, universities, and cities have even more underutilized equipment locked away in storerooms, yards, and even warehouses.

With the amazing positive impact we saw, we took the next step to scale both impact and the business by incorporating myTurn.com as a legal for-profit, mission-driven public benefit corporation (pbc, or legal B-corporation) in 2013. Incorporating as a pbc has allowed us to scale while ensuring our environmental and social missions remain a part of our corporate DNA.

**We've seen a lot of online "stuff sharing" platforms come and go. LoTs are a great example of how replication (rather than scale) can improve the resilience of a service. What other differences have allowed LoTs to be so successful?**

Just about every time we introduce someone to the idea of a Library of Things, their first response is: "That makes so much sense, why don't I have one locally?"



*DeDeelkelder Library of Things in Utrect, Netherlands. Credit: Sanne van Vliet), Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

There are a few main reasons why Libraries of Things work so well and make sense. First, they provide a safe and reliable place to pick up and drop off items. There is no need to arrange two exchanges with someone you probably don't know. Second, most accept donations of products, which increases the sense of ownership by participants and simultaneously bring supply and demand online at the same time. And most importantly, they provide place-based services that create more vibrant communities.

Most people are familiar with libraries and also with rental shops, so Libraries of Things have the advantage of being both innovative yet familiar at the same time.

**Shareable is just wrapping up an [extended series on the global loneliness epidemic](). How are these new libraries contributing to solutions?**

One of the great things about Libraries of Things and tool libraries is that they bring people together. We've seen them be a great intergenerational gathering point where typically older people with woodworking, metalworking, and repair skills can share those skills with younger generations. This has been made evident in the popularity of [repair cafés]() and [events at tool libraries]().

Repair cafés and fixer events bring people together to fix items. In Seattle, we'd see the same people coming back, building relationships, and working on other projects like community gardens together. Many people describe the other people they work with, volunteer with, and meet at Libraries of Things as "family," and I know that is true for many of the people I started the West Seattle Tool Library with.

**The growing numbers of LoTs clearly shows there's a demand for these services, but what are the actual numbers?**

For Libraries of Things, there are over a quarter million items available, and our current pace is approaching a million loans per year. We're starting to bring on networks of organizations starting Libraries of Things, as well as public library systems, so the number of items and transactions is rapidly accelerating.

The frequency of use of items varies greatly based on the type and durability of the item, membership size, and the location of the library. We have items that have been used more than 300 times by more than 200 different people. Since some of our oldest customers run tool libraries, many of the products that have seen the most reuse on our platform so far have been power tools; however, we now see other types of higher quality items starting to catch up. Some examples of "radical reuse" from Libraries of Things on our platform include a DeWalt table saw that has been loaned out 321 times to 211 different people, a Hitachi compound miter saw, that has been loaned 252 times to 167 people, and tents and camping sleeping pads that spent over 250 days in use in the last year.

There are also multiple items that have been on loan 350+ days per year at the NE Seattle Tool Library.  When I first saw those stats, I guessed they were items that they had been checked out for months at a time, but in most cases, the items had an average loan length of under 7 days, meaning they were being loaned out almost every week of the year.

According to soon-to-be-published research, most people borrow items from Libraries of Things at least six to ten times per year, with the most prolific users borrowing 50 or more items. The number and variety of items available, how convenient the hours and locations are, and the demographics of an area all play a role in utilization.

**One of the lesser known aspects of tool libraries, and this is something that attracted our group in Asheville, is the support they can offer to first time entrepreneurs. What are some success stories from your customer base?**

Increases in entrepreneurship, economic development, and social innovation are happening both through the use of products avail-

able from tool libraries and Libraries of Things, and also in creating new circular- and sharing-economy businesses.

From the start, in Seattle, one of our members who lost her job during the financial crisis was able to use tools from the tool library to help her start an urban farm, which she was then able to expand into a multi-acre farm outside of Seattle. The Station North Tool Library ran a pilot program called the "Surface Project" that worked with individuals with high barriers to employment to help them learn marketable skills. They provided the tools and training to help these individuals create value-added products from re-claimed local materials.

While many Libraries of Things are nonprofit, we're working with a dozen teams in multiple countries to build out new business models that offer products like kids' toys, clothing, and even art, on a membership or subscription basis rather than purchasing them new. Interestingly, a number of tool libraries that started in the 1970s also started to help act as urban revitalization and job creation programs. What is old is new again.

**With climate-fueled disasters on the rise around the world, what role can tool libraries play in aiding community-led disaster response efforts?**

Tool libraries can play a huge role in climate resilience and helping communities bounce forward after a disaster, but to be most ef-fective they need to be in place before disasters like super-storms, floods, wildfires, or earthquakes.

The tools, skills, and community that support a tool library can all be essential ingredients for rapid response and rebuilding. As we've seen after recent disasters, it can take weeks — or even

months — for effective outside assistance to arrive, so the better-equipped communities are to help themselves, the better they will do after a disaster. Even if a tool library itself is damaged in a disaster, a redundant and reliable platform like myTurn can help locate the tools that were checked out at the time of the disaster or items from other nearby tool libraries, so they can be put back into service quickly.



*SHARE A Library of Things in Frome, UK. Credit: Upstream Podcas*

Even before a disaster happens, tool libraries can play a number of roles in disaster preparation. Some of the most popular tools at the Phinney Tool Library like concrete drills, palm nailers, air compressors, reciprocating saws are often borrowed to be used for earthquake retrofits, and the Oakland Tool Library even has earthquake retrofit kits. The social cohesion that tool libraries fosters also helps build community resilience.

One final important, and often overlooked, benefit of tool librar-
ies, Libraries of Things, and other product sharing services is the
large role they can play in reducing GHGs and climate risk in the
first place. According to recent research by groups in Europe and
the C40 Cities, consumer product consumption is the sector of
the economy that has one of the, if not the, biggest environmental
impact when taking into account resource extraction, manufac-
turing, and global supply chains, transportation, storage, use, and
eventual disposal of products.

Beyond reducing the "embodied" energy in products through
reuse, some organizations are using tool libraries to further ad-
vance energy efficiency. For example, the Smart Buildings Cen-
ter, SDG&E, and CUNY Building Performance Lab all run energy
efficiency tool libraries that help homeowners, professionals, and
construction companies retrofit existing buildings to reduce their
energy use. Using shared tools to reduce energy consumption is a
win-win for people, economics, and the planet.

**How can people start a library of things in their own community?**

People and communities can, of course, contact us directly here at
myTurn.com. We've directly helped over 100 programs get started.
We also connect people to other resources, such as those on the
Sharable.net website or to other groups in their region — we sup-
port libraries in more than 15 countries — that can provide practi-
cal advice to help them get going in their locality. MyTurn aims to
develop online training resources with our partners to help even
more Libraries of Things get going.

We have a page that links to a number of these and other resourc-
es to help people get started. Resources linked from that site will
also help provide ideas on overcoming some of the challenges of

getting started like finding a space, obtaining startup funds, and finding a supportive community to help guide you through the startup process.

**What's coming next? What role are LoTs going to play in urban society in 5 years?**

We see the movement accelerating over the next 5 to 10 years. We're going to see new, more convenient, ways to get products from Libraries of Things. This will include self-service kiosks, as well as, pickup and delivery options. For example, we're currently working with the Edinburgh Tool Library and i-PuK on a pilot program called EasySharing that will allow people in underserved areas of Edinburgh to reserve items online and pick them up locally in their neighborhood.

Libraries of Things are both starting to expand to multiple locations, and also connecting with other similar or complementary organizations to form local and regional networks. For example, our partner SmartUse.global in Norway is building out a props sharing network for theater arts related organizations in the Oslo region.

Want to borrow camping gear or a stand up paddle board? Your employer might provide a Library of Things as a new perk in the future. While we only know of a handful, organizations are starting to see the advantages of reducing consumption and the increased health benefits of making it easier for their employees to be active by providing them with shared sporting goods.

While high rents are forcing people into smaller spaces, amenities are on the rise. We see more buildings, developments, and whole neighborhoods being designed around sharing and including Libraries of Things right from the start. Here at myTurn, we're working to ensure

that anywhere you live, work, or travel, you'll be able to access the products you want and need rather than having to purchase them new.

**Any last nuggets of advice?**

Don't reinvent the wheel when you can partner. Part of why we released the myTurn platform was to remove one of the biggest barriers to starting and managing a Library of Things. We continue to work with new customers to modify and improve the system, such as [adding] the ability to translate myTurn into new languages. Recently, we opened up advanced APIs to support electronic locks and self-service Kiosks with partners like The Thingery and London Library of Things. And we're excited to be working on GIS, cross-organizational search functions, and expanding our network further across Europe with SmartUse.global.

Along the same vein, if you're looking to create a community resource, we recommend people first attempt to partner with an existing organization. Public libraries — originators of the "real" sharing economy — are increasingly offering Libraries of Things. For example, the Sacramento Public Library, among others, are offering full Libraries of Things and many more are [offering] at least smaller special collections. If a public library is reluctant to offer additional items, please feel free to put them in contact with us and we can connect them with other public libraries that lend everything from tools to telescopes.

*myTurn is a partner and in kind sponsor of Shareable. This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. Still have unanswered questions? Leave a comment below and we'll do our best to point you in the right direction.*

*Image provided by Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

# How 186 seniors building an exhibit on social isolation also built a community

**by Casey O'Brien**

**A California museum's new exhibit dedicated to exploring loneliness among senior citizens serves as an example of how to combat the very problem it highlights. By recruiting local seniors to design the exhibit, the museum fostered conversations and prompted participants to forge bonds that helped reduce the very social isolation they were working to illustrate.**

The exhibit, which opened in April, grew out of a push by the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History to raise awareness of the

American epidemic of loneliness. More than one in five adults in the U.S. report feeling lonely, isolated, or lacking in companionship. This isolation can have an adverse impact on people's physical health, especially among elderly people, who are often the hardest hit by social isolation. Lonely adults over 60 have been shown to have a 45% higher risk of death compared to more socially connected peers, and a 59% higher risk of mental and physical decline.

In Santa Cruz County, the problem has become extreme: 36% of surveyed elders in the area reported feeling lonely regularly. With these kinds of numbers in mind, museum leaders decided the best curators would be the experts on the problem: seniors themselves. They put out a call for interested community members and ended up with a committee of nearly 200 local seniors. Along with local nonprofits, volunteers and museum staff, the seniors designed a comprehensive, interactive exhibit called We're Still Here, which will be on display at the museum until January of 2020.



*Image provided by Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Usage rights: CC BY 2.0*

It turned out that the process of designing the exhibit helped reduce social isolation. For the senior curators and their collaborators, the opportunity to work together to tell real stories of loneliness led to deep connections. "At one of the early [committee] meetings, these women were sitting together, and it came up that they were all recently widowed," said Ashley Holmes, the museum's marketing manager. "They became really close, because it was helpful for them to talk to others going through the same thing. One of them actually even did artwork for the exhibit about her experience."

The exhibit includes artwork and photos by local artists and seniors, interactive activities, and even a dance portion, which all deal with different facets of social isolation among the elderly. Seniors are at a high risk for social isolation because they have usually stopped working and, in the West especially, regularly live alone. Seniors may be less mobile than other members of a community and are often on fixed incomes that don't allow them to do "fun" activities like going to a restaurant or a movie.

One of the most compelling features in the display is an action wall with cards featuring 45 things people can do to address the problem. Action items range from donating an iPod to translating written materials for monolingual elders. "This can be a really difficult topic," said Holmes. "It's a heavy thing. The committee didn't want people to walk away feeling depressed and disempowered, so they included a way for them to engage."

Although it opened just over a month ago, the exhibit has already brought enthusiastic feedback from Santa Cruz community members. "Overall, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. People have seemed so touched," said Holmes. "It is a really powerful exhibit, even if it is emotionally difficult."

Five local artists collaborated with the seniors to create artwork for the exhibit, including Wes Modes, an audio artist who recorded the seniors' stories for visitors to hear at the museum. "Working with these engaged and active seniors has been eye-opening," said Modes. "I felt like I'd met friends from whom I had a lot to learn."

The Museum plans to host a variety of events related to the exhibit held over the next several months, and information, blog posts and updates on the website for those who can't make it in person to visit.

*Photographer: Priscilla Du Preez Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# 10 innovative projects from around the world that reduce loneliness

**by Shareable**

**Our April 10th event at SFSU, [Community Solutions to the Loneliness Epidemic](), coincides with the one year publishing anniversary of our latest book, "Sharing Cities: Activating the Urban Commons." The book, which you can download for free [here](), includes numerous case studies of projects from around the world that help people share in everyday life.**

Sharing is a great remedy for social isolation, naturally. The case studies from "Sharing Cities" show how people are coming togeth-

er while meeting other vital needs. Below are our favorite loneliness reducing case studies with the author of each included.

## 1. Nippon Active Life Club: Time Banking for Affordable Elderly Care

In a country like Japan, where people over the age of 65 make up more than a quarter of the population, a pressing question is how the elderly can be provided with quality care without it becoming a major strain on the rest of the tax-paying population. Since the 1970s, time banking approaches have been developed there to address this problem. In Japanese, these practices are collectively called "fureai kippu." People who help the elderly earn time credits, which they can redeem themselves when they grow old, or gift to older family members living in other cities. Such credits can be supplemented with cash payments. Those who commit their time are generally not professional caregivers. Therefore, most of the care work includes basic services such as cleaning, yard work, and general companionship. Some of the time banks are run by local governments or quasi-governmental organizations. The largest number of them belong to a nonprofit network called Nippon Active Life Club. The club operates a time bank supported by member dues, and members pay for care work in both time credits and cash. As of early 2016, it had nearly 18,000 members and 124 offices across the country. Learn more at Sawayaka Welfare Foundation (Japanese). — Ryan T. Conway

## 2. [Humanitas: Senior Care Meets Student Dorm in Shared Intergenerational Living](#)



*Photographer: Lisa Goldapple / Atlas of the Future Source: http://atlasofthefuture.org/project/humanitas/ Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Humanitas Retirement Village, a long-term care facility in the city Deventer in the Netherlands, offers free accommodation to students in exchange for 30 hours of their time per month to help the older residents. Currently, six students are residents in the village. This arrangement provides a mutual benefit: rent-free accommodation for students and a younger demographic to help support the care of, and foster interactions with, older residents.

As part of their volunteer agreement, students teach residents various skills — such as using email and social media — and provide companionship. While these exchanges are important, it is living in such proximity that helps relationships and connections develop, eases loneliness, and makes a positive contribution to the mental health of the seniors. — [Sharon Ede](#)

## 3. Embassy Network: New Collaborative Housing Model for Purpose-driven Young Professionals

Young urban professionals frequently face high housing costs, social isolation, and career-building challenges. Embassy Network, one of the pioneers of the global coliving movement, addresses all three in a new shared-housing model. Properties in the network house from five to 20 people each. They include converted mansions, retreat centers, and small hotels. Residents share food expenses, regular communal meals, commons space, cars, and most importantly, career support. They are typically social entrepreneurs, freelancers, and young professionals seeking to make a positive impact through their work. Embassy Network creates an encouraging environment for personal and career development through peer support, regular public events, short-term visitors who share knowledge, and access to all nine Embassy Network properties located in North America, Central America, and Europe. Find a coliving community here. — Neal Gorenflo

## 4. CoAbode: Matching Compatible Single Mothers for Cohousing

Many single mothers work tirelessly to ensure they have good, affordable housing, while they hold down a job and take care of their children on their own. With around 40 percent of single parents in the U.S. employed in low-wage jobs, single mothers experience high rates of poverty even as they work long hours. Sharing the financial and practical responsibilities of housing, rather than struggling alone, can help make life easier. CoAbode is a service that matches compatible single mothers for shared housing, as well as services and support to make parenting less challenging. Cohousing can result in the mothers sharing their food and child care; it reduces financial costs, frees up time, and enables mutual support.

Membership is free, and with 120,000 members registered, there are CoAbode members in many U.S. cities including Brooklyn, San Diego, and Washington DC. — Sharon Ede

## 5. Seva Cafe: A Pay-it-Forward Experiment in Peer-to-Peer Generosity



*Photographer: Tharanath Gajendra.Source: Sent by photographer. Usage rights: licensed under CC BY 4.0*

Seva Cafe launched in 2006 in Ahmedabad, India, as an experiment in peer-to-peer generosity and the family model of sharing food. The whole organization is run on a daily basis by seven to eight volunteers who make and serve meals to guests. Based on the model of gift economy, the meals are served as an unconditional gift, with no price. Guests may choose to pay or volunteer with the organization, but they aren't required to do either. The bill at Seva cafe reads "0/-" with only this footnote, "Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. To keep the chain of gifts alive, we invite you to pay it forward for those who dine after you." The entire financial process and operation is completely transpar-

ent and run by the energy of giving. Seva Cafe is also famously known as "Karma Kitchen" in many countries. It is part of a larger trend of pay-it-forward restaurants. — Khushboo Balwani

## 6. Restaurant Day ('Ravintolapäivä'): Fostering Cross-cultural Gatherings Through Shared Meals

In big cities, people of many different cultures live in close proximity. However, there often aren't enough chances for them to intermingle and experience the diverse traditions within their city. In an effort to bring people together and foster cross cultural interaction, local organizers in Helsinki, Finland, created "Ravintolapäivä," or Restaurant Day. Initiated in 2011, it began as a food carnival where anyone with a passion for food was encouraged to run a "restaurant" in their private home or in public spaces for a single day. Even though the pop-up restaurants charge money for the meals, the emphasis is not on profit, but rather on community teamwork and cultural exchange. During the event, Helsinki is transformed by hundreds of these informal restaurants serving a wide range of cuisines in this city-wide street festival. The event is put on through distributed organization — individual volunteer restaurateurs are responsible for finding a location, managing the menu and invitations, and setting the meal prices. Now, Restaurant Day has become a global movement, with over 27,000 pop-up restaurants having served over 3 million community members across 75 countries. — Khushboo Balwani

## 7. Kitchen Share: A Sustainable Community Resource for Home Cooks

Kitchen appliances can be superfluous uses of money and cupboard space, especially for city residents with tight budgets and small homes. Yet interest in healthy eating is growing. More people are trying out unusual food preparation techniques, which can require

unique appliances. Kitchen Share, launched in 2012, is a kitchen tool-lending library for home cooks in Portland, Oregon. It enables community members to borrow a wide variety of kitchen appliances such as dehydrators, mixers, and juicers. Members can check out over 400 items online using affordable lending library software from myTurn. With two locations in Portland, Kitchen Share helps residents save money, learn new skills from neighbors, and reduce their environmental footprint. As a nonprofit community resource for home cooks, Kitchen Share only asks for a one-time donation upon joining, providing affordable access to otherwise expensive and bulky items while building a more resource-efficient city. Learn about starting a lending library with this toolkit. — Marion Weymes

## 8. Enspiral: A Network of Social Entrepreneurs Generating Shared Value for Mutual Benefit



Photographer:Silvia Zuur. Source:Enspiral. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Enspiral, a decentralized entrepreneurial collective based in Wellington, New Zealand, began in 2010 with a goal of creating com-

munities of workers who are deeply committed to social issues. Sometimes described as an "open-value network," Enspiral is a global coalition of enterprises that enables people to allocate their time and skills to social-impact projects by offering spaces and platforms that promote collaboration. The hub of the network is the Enspiral Foundation Limited, which holds common assets and facilitates interactions between members and related companies. Enspiral is an ongoing experiment in distributed leadership that includes more than 300 people and 22 different ventures in multiple countries. More than half the people involved in Enspiral are based in Wellington, with the rest dispersed across Australia, North America, Asia, and Europe.

While effective, Enspiral is not a simple cut-and-paste model that can easily be replicated. It is a shared set of tools and practices that demonstrates the potential for organically growing organizations from the bottom-up through an aligned sense of purpose. Enspiral includes a focus on activities that are hyperlocal in order to leverage situated strengths, a collaborative emphasis on sharing stories of best practices so that communities can learn together, and a platform for building open source tools that can be used and adapted by others. Perhaps most importantly, Enspiral demonstrates the way in which values-aligned organizations can build and share resources in the context of social solidarity, and with a "reciprocity-first" ethos. — Darren Sharp

## 9. Chisinau Civic Center: Vacant Lot Reclaimed as a Public Park for Community Gatherings

A neglected plot of triangular land once lay in the city of Chisinau in Moldova. Cars regularly drove over it. Some used it to dump their garbage and construction rubble. Now, the site is a lively public space, known as the Chisinau Civic Center. The transforma-

tion was initiated by the local nongovernmental organization the Oberliht Association, and was created together with local officials as well as artists, architects, scientists, students, and community members. In the very beginning, they held a public picnic at the park as a way to invite nearby residents to get involved in the park's restoration. The organizers then built a wooden platform in the center of the park with support of the nearby residents. This eventually led to the Civic Center becoming a play area for children, as well as a place for community gatherings, film screenings, games, exhibits, and performances. — Cat Johnson

## 10. The Repair Café Foundation Builds Community By Fixing Things



*Photographer:Ilvy Njiokiktjien. Source: Wikimedia Commons.http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0 Usage rights: CC BY-SA 3.0*

In 2009, Martine Postma organized the very first Repair Café in Amsterdam, Netherlands, to do something good for the environment and build social contacts within local communities. The Repair Café connected people who were skilled in fixing things with

community members who needed items to be fixed once a month at a convenient neighborhood location. The repair experts shared their knowledge with the community members, who learned that repair is possible, and often not that difficult, with a little bit of community support. People got to experience firsthand the value of repairing things instead of buying new stuff to replace them. — Darren Sharp

*These case studies and policy pieces were adapted from our latest book, "Sharing Cities: Activating the Urban Commons." Download your free pdf copy today.*

# IV. How governments are coming together to solve social isolation

# Q&A: How civic governance innovation can increase engagement

**by Jen Boynton**

**As Americans have become more disconnected from their communities, loneliness and social isolation have climbed. Research shows loneliness is linked to early mortality. <u>Given that one in 11 Americans over 50 lives without a spouse, partner or child</u>, this kind of social disconnection is a serious public health concern.**

One way to reconnect people is to get them directly involved in civic projects that encourage discussion, debate, and collaboration — everything from civic technology to open government and community re-

newal projects. These kinds of innovations "present an opportunity for democratic deepening that strengthens communities and rebuilds civic muscles," says Hollie Russon Gilman, a Political Reform program fellow at New America, a Washington, D.C.-based non-partisan think tank. One such intervention Gilman has studied is participatory budgeting, a process by which community members decide how to spend part of a real public budget. "It gives people real power over real money," the [Participatory Budgeting Project explains](). The budgeting process can increase rates of engagement because it prompts community participation and collaboration between people and governments. While reducing loneliness isn't its stated purpose, it is a great side effect.
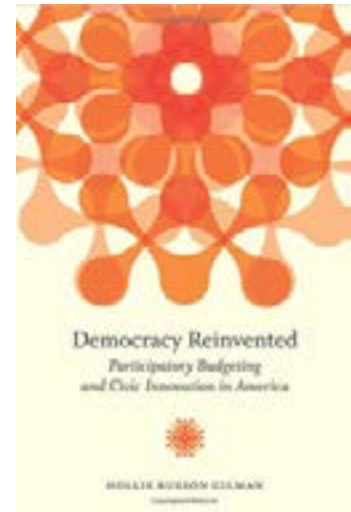
*Image credit: JSTOR*

To learn more, Shareable spoke with Gilman, a professor at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs and a fellow at Georgetown's Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation. Her first book, Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation and America takes an in-depth look at this innovative approach to governance.

**Jen Boynton: Let's talk about the current state of civic participation. Are we in a good place in our society?**

**Hollie Russon Gilman:** When you look on the national scale, we know that people feel disillusioned with government. They feel like it doesn't work for them. [But] there's a lot of bottom-up energy and a lot of people in their communities working together every day to solve problems. There's a lot of energy and excitement also in city halls around the country. The big question is, can we capitalize on that and can it really empower people in a structural way?

**It's interesting that you see the disillusionment as an opportunity because this series looks at the challenges of loneliness and social isolation in society.**

It is the optimistic way of looking at it, but the loneliness question is a big challenge too. It's a real thing that we have to grapple with as a society. We have to think about the ways in which technology really atomizes individuals. It connects people but also makes them more isolated. And then questions around digital equity, access, digital design, digital literacy, only then get exacerbated. So it's kind of one branch of the question.

The second branch is how do you engage people in a meaningful way, so they're doing things that are not just lip service, and then that can create civic rewards and strengthen social capital in a way that has positive benefits for people who feel isolated and lonely because they're making these new connections with their communities, their neighbors, their elected officials.

**People think of governments as a service provider that doesn't necessarily respond to local feedback very quickly. You look at it a little differently in your book.**

The book is about the rise in participatory budgeting. The movement started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, and then it moved all across the globe, from Africa to Europe to the Middle East. It came to the United States in 2009. It's a process where people in their communities work together, often with government officials, to come up with viable budget proposals that are then turned back to the community for a broader vote. And then those proposals are actually enacted into policy by public officials.

So the book looks at what this class of innovations could mean in the United States and how to think about other local-level innovations that are occurring, and how to tap into that energy.

**Can you share some examples?**

Boston [had] the first youth group in participatory budgeting, putting a million dollars aside for people aged 12 to 25. Seattle did a youth version of participatory budgeting. When you go and you talk to the kids that are at the meetings, they come for the pizza, but then they stay because they realize that they're really given decision-making. It's really powerful.

**They actually execute a project that they care about for their community.**

People are looking to them in a new way. Sometimes they talk about things that maybe aren't the same as the adults in the room would prioritize. At one event, youth violence was a key topic. That was not something I would have thought would be a priority, but in this community that was the issue that people felt they were really affected by.

**What is it about participatory budgeting that allowed that information about citizen priorities to flow where it might not have otherwise flowed?**

Process really matters. This is one of the things that we don't often think about when we engage people, but if you talk to any organizer, the people who work on campaigns, they all understand this intuitively. Participatory budgeting really is a process that works to lead people from a to b to c, so that they're informed but they're also empowered. They're not just randomly telling people, okay here's an apple, now make an apple pie. You're walking people through a process that begins with people identifying needs in their communities. There's a set of parameters. Here's what's in and here's what's out.

Community members work in tandem with public officials who are also volunteering their time, to show people how to actually create budget proposals that are viable and teach people how much things cost, how things get done. Then those projects which are vetted and are realistic and viable are put back to the community for wider vote. What's really exciting about participatory budgeting is that typically disenfranchised communities are empowered to vote. Non-citizens, recently incarcerated people, younger people.

**What is the key to success with a project like this?**

Where it's been most successful, there's been a strong grassroots organizing partner. In New York City, Community Voices Heard has been the grassroots lead. That group traditionally organizes low income women of color, many of whom are in public housing. There's been a real push for equitable and more inclusive participation in participatory budgeting than traditional voting. That's another really exciting opportunity to say, let's reduce the barrier to entry. In New York, they even have online voting [for these budgeting proposals]. Voting is open for many days, unlike our regular voting process.

In Brazil and other places the vote has been this really fun thing: a carnival atmosphere. We can be more creative with how we think about voting and democracy.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

*Photographer: Joshua Davis Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# Why countries worldwide are watching how the UK's newest Minister is handling the loneliness crisis

**by Dan Hancox**

The announcement, in January 2018, that Britain would have the world's first ever 'minister for loneliness' was greeted with consternation. It even sounded like a joke to <u>some</u> American observers. Member of Parliament Tracey Crouch, already the Minister for Sport and Civil Society, had her brief widened to incorporate loneliness.

The move was meant to build on work begun by the late Labour MP Jo Cox, who was murdered in 2016, and in whose name a major loneliness commission was established.

The statistics driving the creation of this unique role are grim, and impossible to ignore. A 2016 report by the Co-op and British Red Cross found that more than nine million Brits say they are often or always lonely (about one in seven). About 3.6 million people aged 65 and over say that the television is their main form of company — and around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or a relative in more than a month. Yet the problem spans all age groups, not just older Britons, and impacts other existing mental and physical health problems — and even the economy. It is regularly referred to as a crisis.

## A 2016 report by the Co-op and British Red Cross found that more than nine million Brits say they are often or always lonely (about one in seven).

It's not just a British-specific problem, of course, and the announcement of Crouch's role immediately attracted global interest from her fellow politicians. She was soon contacted by representatives from Norway, Denmark, Canada, UEA, Sweden, Japan and Iceland. "I cannot think of a region in the world that didn't follow this up," she said last July.

Belgian psychotherapist and author Esther Perel summed up the crisis of the digital age's 'shallow ties' on a 2017 podcast, reflecting on a Wall Street Journal article that cited loneliness as the U.S.'s

primary public health problem, above even obesity: "You've got a thousand virtual friends, but no-one who can feed your cat if you go away." A May 2018 survey of 20,000 American adults found 43% felt they were isolated from others — and that adults aged 18-22, "Generation Z," were the loneliest of all.

## Who's most affected? The most vulnerable

While the establishment of the U.K.'s minister for loneliness has been broadly welcomed across the political spectrum, there is some understandable scepticism about the limits of what they might be able to achieve. "Being up against powerful vested interests, [Crouch] is going to need all the friends she can muster," wrote Stewart Dakers in The Guardian.

**In Britain, half of disabled people say they are lonely on any given day. Eight out of ten caregivers say they have felt lonely. And 38% of people with dementia said they had lost friends since their diagnosis.**

As Neal Gorenflo argued in the introductory piece to this series, loneliness is not just a major public health issue for individuals, but an indictment of an unwell society — of "social fabric in danger of fraying beyond repair." It is a condition that most acutely affects those who are already vulnerable: In Britain, half of disabled people say they are lonely on any given day. Eight out of ten caregivers say they have felt lonely. And 38% of people with dementia said they had lost friends since their diagnosis.

Refugees and asylum seekers, arriving in a new country without established social networks, and facing a disproportionate number of mental health challenges, as well as overcoming the mountain of bureaucratic, cultural and language barriers, are likewise prone to further isolation when they need support the most. The much-maligned refugee dispersal policies of some EU nations — like those in the U.K. — which deliberately remove refugees from hubs of expatriate support (purportedly to support integration) make this worse.

Loneliness isn't a problem that emerges from nowhere, or from within. Indeed, Crouch, the first loneliness minister, resigned in anger in November over her government's slowness in enforcing restrictions on life-ruining gambling machines: exactly the kind of thing that often leads to unmanageable debt, depression and isolation. Her replacement, Mims Davies, is fairly untested, though speaks often of the 'moral duty' we have to include older members of our families in our lives. She has suggested taking grandparents on family holidays. She has also expressed interest in technological solutions, citing apps like Mush, which brings together new mothers.

Nothing is being ruled in or out by the ministry — from the idea that loneliness might be increasingly 'built in' to communities through the architecture of gated communities, to the closure of unprofitable rural bus routes and pubs leaving individuals isolated, to falling birth rates in more affluent societies meaning multi-generational households are increasingly rare, and more people are living alone.

## Next up: More research, and a multitude of interventions

The way forward seems to be firstly, to carry out more research, in an attempt to understand the nuances of a complex problem,

and secondly, since the causes are so manifold and the sufferers so diverse, to support as wide a spread of schemes and policy solutions as possible. These range from intergenerational community meet-ups, to activity-driven projects like Age U.K.'s Men In Sheds scheme, to asking doctors/GPs to refer patients experiencing loneliness to community activities and voluntary groups.

> ## It's a bitter irony which brings to mind a dry Twitter joke about people who call themselves 'socially liberal but fiscally conservative:' "The problems are bad; but their causes — their causes are very good."

There is something conflicting about seeing Britain's Conservative government congratulated for setting up what is certainly a much-needed role: They do so after eight years of brutal austerity, which has caused misery for our most vulnerable people. Their slashing of local authority budgets has seen a root-and-branch selling off of the public sector institutions which are vital meeting places: libraries, community centres, Sure Start children's centres and even public gyms and swimming pools. It's a bitter irony which brings to mind a dry Twitter joke about people who call themselves 'socially liberal but fiscally conservative:' "The problems are bad; but their causes — their causes are very good."

It fits a wider pattern in western neoliberal economies: Governments cut back or sell off the vital organs of the state, rolling back the mid-20th century social democratic norms which boosted living standards, while extolling the virtues of the charitable and voluntary sector which must fill in the gap left by these cuts. It's

something we've seen in Britain before, with former Prime Minister David Cameron's extensive rhetoric about "the big society" — a return to localist, community-oriented values which it is tempting to welcome on its own terms, but which is meant to replace a butchered welfare state.

The challenge for progressives should be to understand and support the important role that interpersonal, voluntarist, philanthropic, or community-based groups, networks and initiatives can play in alleviating loneliness, while not letting the macro-economic and political decision-makers off the hook for further isolating and immiserating society's most vulnerable.

*Photographer: Swan Leroi Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# How Seoul is confronting its deadly isolation epidemic with sharing

**by Ann Babe**

**Seoul has made a name for itself as one of world's premier sharing cities, with an [official metropolitan ordinance](#) to promote sharing, a dedicated sharing and innovation bureau, a scheme for classifying enterprises as certified sharing entities, and a range of resource shar-ing programs. At the same time, it's a capital of abject social solitude.**

In Seoul and in South Korea at large, a plummeting birth rate, gru-eling education and work culture, inadequate welfare services, and

widening socioeconomic divides have come together to create an epidemic of loneliness. And everyone from the young to the very elderly have been impacted.

The South Korean government is working to combat social isolation by mobilizing communities and enacting projects that share cars, bikes, toys, tools, books, clothes, food, homes, workspaces, skills, and more. Since 2012, Seoul has followed a "master plan" to bring corporations, organizations, and individuals together to participate. But has all this sharing actually yielded long-lasting and meaningful social connections?

## The number of single-person household deaths in Seoul reached 366 in 2017, up from 285 in 2013. A majority of these involved men between age 45 and 65. Nationwide, people older than 70 were the most affected demographic.

In March 2018, recognizing the rise in so-called "lonely deaths," or godoksa, when people die alone without anyone noticing for some time, the Seoul Metropolitan Government announced a new scheme of neighborly visits and emergency subsidies. That program identified particularly vulnerable households in Seoul, where more than half of all homes are made up of only one or two members.

The number of single-person household deaths in Seoul reached 366 in 2017, up from 285 in 2013. A majority of these involved men between age 45 and 65. Nationwide, people older than 70 were the most affected demographic.

Today, South Korea can officially be classified as an "aged society." The country's birth rate — just 0.98, an all-time low according to 2019 statistics — is the lowest among OECD nations, and its population is the fastest-aging in the developed world. This has led to what President Moon Jae-in has declared a "national crisis," with large swaths of society in danger of falling through the holes of a deficient social safety net.

About half of South Koreans above age 65 live in poverty, according to a 2016 report by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, and of those, almost one in two live alone. The number of elderly living by themselves is up nearly 20 percent since 2006.

**About half of South Koreans above age 65 live in poverty, according to a 2016 report by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, and of those, almost one in two live alone. The number of elderly living by themselves is up nearly 20 percent since 2006.**

## Using skill sharing and food sharing to build connections

Beyond regular community check-ins, other programs have emerged to foster interaction and engagement among the elderly.

One is the food-sharing service run by the Yongsan Citizens' Alliance. Once per week, volunteers — including students, companies, and local unions — get together to cook and deliver meals to senior citizens in their neighborhoods, and chat with them.

"Hopefully, those who are participating in sharing activities will want to partake more and more [because] they feel a sense of togetherness," alliance secretary general Jeong Eun-ju told Shareable.

Another social venture, SHAREUS, focuses on skill-sharing. It harnesses the rich, diverse knowledge of the elderly and empowers them to teach classes in everything from arts and crafts to finance and lifestyle.

"I was a run-of-the-mill office worker for about 16 years. I found it a shame that the seniors around me had accumulated decades of experience but were not able to put that knowledge to practical use," founder Lee Byung-hoon told Shareable. "We dream of uniting the vast know-how of the older generation with the younger generation who have just begun finding their way in life … by joining together the past and the present."

Since SHAREUS started in 2017, more than 3,500 people have participated in about 1,000 classes.

## How "alone tribe" culture affects young people

Initiatives like these aim to address the social isolation faced by senior citizens, but also by young people, through activities that bridge generational gaps. In a lonely society that's spawned such tech-fueled phenomena as mukbang — an eating broadcast whereby solitary diners can watch others consume copious amounts of food — broke and burned-out youth may be equally at risk of feelings of seclusion and sadness. The thinking is, why not help the two groups help each other?

"The problem of social isolation in Seoul stems from having limited opportunities to meet a variety of people [and] it's exacerbated by generational differences," says Lee. "Through even just a bit of natural interaction offline, society might recover from this state of severed generations."

Today, fewer young people are getting married in South Korea than ever before, with only 264,500 unions recorded in 2017. Within the honjok, or "alone tribe," culture, people are increasingly living on their own, turning to virtual technology, not real-life people, for their entertainment, and even shopping on consumer websites entirely dedicated to solitary-lifestyle items. South Korea also records one of the highest suicide rates in the industrialized world.

For the lonely, then, programs that facilitate community engagement could be a key part of fostering happiness. These include shared workspaces like Commons Ground, part of the Commons Foundation; coworking and startup incubator space D.Camp; and others. Creating ways to involve citizens in governance can also build connections and community.

**Seoul's Innovation Bureau, the first governance system of its kind in Asia, involves citizens in identifying problems, brainstorming solutions, and making important budget and policy decisions through an online portal and in-person workshops.**

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solutions, and making important budget and policy decisions through an online portal and in-person workshops.

In aggregate, the goal is to create a culture of sharing across the city and the country. But while progress in South Korea has been steady — with many program organizers saying they've witnessed their sharing services leading to long-lasting, meaningful connections between generations — its also been relatively slow considering the alarming pace of the epidemic at hand. And when it comes to social isolation, a proven health crisis, there's no time to spare.

*Photographer: JuniperPhoton Source: Unsplash. Usage rights: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

# How sharing can bring Japan's elderly and youth together

**by Louise George Kittaka**

**Until recently, 83 year-old-old Michiko Takada, a widow living in the city of Beppu in southern Japan, led an active life. The retiree volunteered as a "citizen teacher" for home economics classes at local middle schools.**

All this changed when the former dietitian injured her leg last summer and decided to surrender her driver's license, a move the government has promoted to curb a rise in accidents among elderly drivers.

"I didn't want to risk causing an accident, but I'm really regretting giving up my license now," says Takada. "There's only one bus every hour into town from my area, and no shops nearby, so it's a hassle to go anywhere. I now realize how easily a person could become a shut-in."

Takada has middle-aged children: a son and daughter living in Osaka and Tokyo. A generation ago, one of them would have been very likely to move back to care for their aging mother, but like many of her peers, Takada doesn't wish to be a burden on her children or their spouses.

## In 2040, projections show that around 40 million people, or one in three citizens, will be 65 or over, and 10 million of these will be 85 or older.

Along with changes in familial expectations, the Japanese are living longer, marrying later and having fewer children. In 2040, projections show that around 40 million people, or one in three citizens, will be 65 or over, and 10 million of these will be 85 or older. Even when people are on good terms with their neighbors, most Japanese tend to be reluctant to get involved in the affairs of others.

## Stopping isolation before it can take root

All these factors are contributing to an increasing risk of isolation for the elderly, with major social and economic ramifications for Japan. In 2015, 6.25 million Japanese aged 65 or over were living alone. In recent years multiple media reports have noted the increase in kodokushi ("lonely deaths"), where bodies go undis-

covered for weeks or even months. Boredom and loneliness is also thought to be a major reason behind why the crime rate among seniors has quadrupled over the past few decades, with many of the offences being petty shoplifting. In 2017, a Japanese government report noted that half of those arrested for shoplifting said they lived alone.

Moreover, these demographic trends will place a huge financial burden on Japan, as the balance shifts between GDP-generating workers and the elderly. Surveys indicate that within 50 years, Japan will have just one worker for each retiree, down from 12 half a century ago.

In 2000, the Japanese government introduced a comprehensive system known in English as Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI), which citizens start paying into when they turn 40. From the age of 65 (or earlier if necessary), seniors become eligible for various subsidies and services, based on assessments by welfare workers. Even so, the national system cannot keep up with the needs of this rapidly-aging society, and municipalities and nonprofits, known in Japan as NPOs, are stepping in to fill in the gaps.

Dr. Yoshinori Fujiwara leads the Research Team for Social Participation and Community Health at the Tokyo Institute of Gerontology. "Once someone becomes isolated, it is extremely difficult for them to recover," he says. "Efforts to combat isolation from specialized regional support agencies are important, as are efforts at the citizen level."

## Getting the generations together

According to Fujiwara, research indicates that intergenerational exchange can help the elderly to build interpersonal relations and develop greater social capital within their communities, with the

"win-win" result of bridging the generation gap. One successful example is the NPO REPRINTS Network, initiated in selected areas in Tokyo, Kanagawa Prefecture and Shiga Prefecture, whereby senior volunteers visit kindergartens and elementary schools to read to the children.

Iris Wang of Japan's Sharing Economy Association echoes this sentiment. "The concept of 'sharing' can shorten the distance between people, especially the elderly and the younger generation. For example, there are more and more co-living places in Japan, where people live together to share resources and become a new type of family to each other."

## Seniors with a spare room open their homes to university students, with the two generations coming together several times a week to share a meal.

Another concrete example is the "Under One Roof Project," facilitated by NPO Matching Hongo in Tokyo's Bunkyo Ward. Seniors with a spare room open their homes to university students, with the two generations coming together several times a week to share a meal.

The idea of connecting seniors to younger volunteers who can help them with life tasks has been around at least since the 1970s, when the nationwide Fureai Kippu model was developed. This system of time banking is built around the idea of earning cash or time credits for helping the elderly. The credits can be saved for one's own silver years in the future, or used for family members

in need of care. The largest number of these timebanks belong to Nippon Active Life Club, an non-profit which had over 17,000 members and 119 offices across the country as of 2017.

## Addressing gender differences in isolation patterns

Research has shown that elderly Japanese men are more likely to become victims of social isolation than women. A recent survey by Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research found that, over a two-week period, 15% of elderly males living alone had held either only one conversation with someone, or none at all, as opposed to 5% of their female counterparts.

Junko Edahiro is President of the Institute for Studies in Happiness, Economy and Society (ISHES), a thinktank that explores better systems and indicators. In a country notorious for long work hours, Edahiro notes that Japanese men's social relationships are predominantly built around their jobs. "One solution could be for firms to provide rehabilitation for men who are approaching retirement, preparing them to return to society," she suggests.

What about those who are already living in a state of isolation? Adachi Ward in Tokyo has taken an integrated approach to combating social isolation among the elderly, with local officials, welfare workers, community groups and volunteers joining forces. Launched in 2013, the Zero Isolation Project identifies elderly residents deemed to be at risk of social isolation.

If they request it, such individuals can then receive support, such as regular visits from volunteers through Adachi's Kizuna ("ties that bind") Relief Cooperative. Makoto Nishijima of the Adachi Ward Office says that, to date, some 3,895 households have been linked up with volunteer visits and nursing care services through the Zero Isolation Project.

Okinawans have a less formal alternative that helps many elderly stay connected and supported by the community. Children are assigned to be part of Moais, small, intimate friend groups that provide fun and aid throughout life. Some argue Moais are the main reason Okinawans live so long that they're labeled a "blue zone," or longevity hotspot. As demographics shift, Japan may want to draw on traditional models like moais for inspiration in its quest to avert isolation and loneliness among its aging population.

As one woman who at 77 was the youngest member of her Moai told the Blue Zones organization, "if you get sick or a spouse dies or if you run out of money, we know someone will step in and help. It's much easier to go through life knowing there is a safety net."

**COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS TO THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC**

# V. Event recap: Exploring community solutions to the loneliness epidemic

by Courtney Pankrat

# On Wednesday April 10, 2019 over 120 people gathered at San Francisco State University (SFSU) to discuss today's loneliness epidemic and how community action can help reduce it.

Shareable's executive director, Neal Gorenflo, kicked off the evening by explaining why this is a critically important topic. "We wanted to tackle loneliness because it's now an epidemic in the U.S. and in other developed countries like the U.K., Japan, South Korea," Gorenflo said in his opening remarks. "Today, the average American has only one confidant," he continued. "That's down from three in 1985."



*Participants mingle with the help of People Poker, a social game developed by Shareable and design firm The Public Society. Photographer: Ellie Llewellyn Usage rights: CC BY-SA 4.0*

For the last month, Shareable has been publishing a series on so-cial isolation. We've outlined the problem, not only in America but also in South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Japan; we've explored possible solutions such as those offered by Citizen University, or the Ying app; we've also offered different points of view on how we can ease the problem of social isolation with op-ed pieces by Monée Fields-White and Marvin Brown.



*Winners of People Poker showing off their prizes, copies of Douglas Rushkoff's "Team Human." Photographer: Ellie Llewellyn Usage rights: CC BY-SA 4.0*

This is an issue that needs to be addressed. "Loneliness doesn't just create a collection of sick individuals," Gorenflo said. "It also creates a sick society. It weakens our social fabric." The goal of this event was to catalyze action. "Tonight is about what each of us can do to solve [loneliness] in our communities," said Gorenflo.

Gorenflo's short introduction was followed by a panel discussion moderated by event co-host Kenn Burrows of SFSU's Holistic Health Institute. Burrows kicked off the panel by stating that gov-

ernments and corporations are not solving critical social problems like loneliness. He followed this by asking each panelists what brought them to the topic.



*Participants play an interactive game during Mazin Mahboug's breakout session. Photographer: Ellie Llewellyn Usage rights: CC BY-SA 4.0*

The panel featured Terry Collins, freelance journalist and author of the lead feature story in our series; Carla Perissinotto, M.D., associate professor, Geriatrics Division, University of California San Francisco; Vivian Chavez, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., associate professor, Department of Health Education, SFSU; Marie Applegate, experience designer, Creative Compassion Initiative and Asian Art Museum; and Mazin Mahgoub, founder & executive director, Holistic Underground.

Perissinotto has been researching social isolation and loneliness among older adults. She explores how seniors stay independent and what drives themt nursing homes. "Once you start doing clinical work," she said, "the things that are described as social problems, leave the realm of physicians. And that was deeply troubling to me. So I dove into some research."

*Scott Levkoff of The Mystic Midway ran a session of "Our Secret City," a collaborative storytelling game designed to bring people together through the mythic-heroic aspects of everyday life. Photographer: Ellie Llewellyn Usage rights: CC BY-SA 4.0*

Chavez spoke about community-based research and it's advantages over theory. Her research  examines the root causes of a sick society. "This global phenomenon of loneliness and social isolation completely makes sense in a fast-food nation," she said. "We have created a belief system that people are disposable. Literally, you can delete and swipe and change and shift and move and live in this technological world without really exchanging anything related to the heart."

"Technology is [like] a knife," Mahgoub added. "You can use it to cut an avocado or a finger, it's all about how you use it. What are the underlying values of our culture that are driving us?" he asked. "And how can we base our cultures on values that make belonging and maybe even a sense of purpose right at the center of our culture?"

The panelists discussed how you know you belong, what loneliness looks like, and how understanding our values is critical to how we fit into society. Please watch the full introduction and panel.



*Mazin Mahboug (right) of the Holistic Underground and bandmates played throughout the evening. Photographer: Ellie Llewellyn Usage rights: CC BY-SA 4.0*

After the panel, participants broke into small groups to discuss various facets of the topic in more detail. Chavez lead a group on  the sound of loneliness, Adam Poswolsky hosted a session on Friendship in the Digital Age, and Katrina Zavalney explored reducing social isolation through chance encounters and neighborhood engagement, to name a few.

At the end of the evening, the entire group gathered one last time for a wrap up. Gorenflo invited participants to share what they learned in the breakout sessions. He also asked participants if they were considering actions to reduce loneliness in their lives and communities. Some people mentioned projects they wanted to start such as an "Everybody Wednesday" potluck and open mic

event, a soup and story night, and a revival of Messy. Shareable plans to stay in touch with participants to see what actions they take as the main purpose of Shareable's 2019 event series is to catalyze action.

# SHAREABLE

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Shareable is an award-winning nonprofit media outlet, action network, and consultancy. Our mission is to empower communities to share for a more resilient, equitable, and joyful world. We inspire social change by publishing solutions-based journalism, running campaigns, and helping our consulting clients achieve their goals through sharing.

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www.shareable.net/sharing-cities

### How To: Share, Save Money & Have Fun (2016)

A collection of insightful guides on sharing housing, transportation, food, education, music and more. This book shows you how to lead a more enjoyable life, with your family and in your community, while saving money.

www.shareable.net/how-to-share-save-money-have-fun

### Policies for Shareable Cities (2013)

The guide curates scores of innovative, high-impact policies that US city governments have put in place to help citizens share resources, co-produce, and create their own jobs. It focuses on sharing policy innovations in food, housing, transportation, and jobs – key pocket-book issues of citizens and priorities of urban leaders everywhere. The guide is meant to help cities develop more resilient, innovative, and democratic economies.

www.shareable.net/new-report-policies-for-shareable-cities

### Shareable Futures (2010)

In this collection of short stories and speculative essays, literary futurists imagine a world to come where technology has changed the rules of ownership and access, and people are able to share transportation, living spaces, lives, dreams, everything and anything. These are futures in which we are surviving and even thriving, largely by learning to share our stuff.

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