

A Supplement to the Surgeon General's Advisory "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation"

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Executive Summary

The US Surgeon General (SG) Vivek Murthy recently published a public health advisory, which describes “[our epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#),” details the public health burden posed by these trends, and highlights some strategies for ameliorating it (Murthy, 2023). SG Murthy’s report offers a thorough symptomology of the current crisis, and proposes six “pillars” to structure public-health responses to it, each of which is reasonable and important in its own right. As helpful as these are, there are arguably additional key causes of loneliness and social isolation that merit further attention, such as economic conditions for the working class; moreover, some of the epidemic’s most damaging aspects, such as the decline of marriage and religious participation, likewise merit further analysis. The report’s six pillars could thus also be supplemented with several other urgently needed approaches as well. Our aim in this Supplement is to call attention to some of what is underemphasized in the SG’s report, in the hope of building on his important Advisory to develop a yet more comprehensive account of the drivers of the decline of belonging in contemporary America, and of a path back toward a richly connected society. The Supplement begins by emphasizing drivers of loneliness and isolation in America which arguably merit greater consideration:

- i. Economic stagnation for less-educated workers, driven by changing industrial and trade policy, de-unionization, and education policy, among others.
- ii. The decline of free play and independence among American children.
- iii. The growing isolation of America’s elderly as households shrink.
- iv. Drivers of decline in religious participation: the rise of the “Nones,” and increased secular competition owing in part to the repeal of Sunday-closing laws.
- v. Drivers of declining marriage rates include shifts in economic structures, incentives in federal welfare policy, and important technological developments.

The Supplement further emphasizes the corporate dimensions of social connection, and thus proposes augmenting and expanding the Advisory’s threefold typology of “structure, function, and quality,” to a fourfold typology of “engagement, support, connection, and emergent good.” This section also emphasizes that not all social connections or communities equally promote individual and societal flourishing; we can canvass the strong empirical evidence that marriage and religious participation in particular are among the most important forms of social connection – in terms of their effects on mental and physical health – for most people. Finally, the Supplement concludes by proposing a range of additional policy solutions for ameliorating loneliness and isolation, each of them related to the drivers of decline considered above:

- i. Boosting median wages through reforms to industrial, trade, and labor policy aimed at strengthening worker bargaining power.
- ii. Promoting children’s free play and independence, following, for example, the leadership of Lenore Skenazy and LetGrow.org.
- iii. Reducing the isolation of the elderly by encouraging multi-generational households.
- iv. Ending marriage penalties in welfare programs, and supporting marriage through the federal “Healthy Marriages and Responsible Fatherhood Program,” including by promoting early counseling interventions for at-risk marriages.
- v. Promoting religious participation, when appropriate, through social prescribing, as well by experiments in reviving Sunday-closing laws, which might also provide greater leisure time available for other forms of social connection.

I. Introduction¹

The US Surgeon General (SG) Vivek Murthy recently published a public health advisory, which describes “[our epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#),” details the public health burden posed by these trends, and highlights some strategies for ameliorating it (Murthy, 2023). As the nation’s “doctor-in-chief,” the SG has a unique ability to galvanize public and academic discussion of challenges to public health, and so this is a seminal development, one which bears comparison with SG Luther Terry’s 1964 advisory regarding the dangers of tobacco and nicotine consumption, which marked a [turning point](#) in the nation’s use of cigarettes. In fifty years, perhaps we will look back on this latest advisory as a similarly signal call to action against the growing crisis of loneliness and social isolation, an epidemic with manifold causes and dire effects on our flourishing.

SG Murthy’s report offers a thorough symptomology of the current crisis, and proposes six “pillars” to structure public-health responses to it, each of which is reasonable and important in its own right. These pillars include (1) strengthening social infrastructure in local communities; (2) enacting pro-connection public policies; (3) mobilizing the health sector; (4) reforming digital environments; (5) deepening our knowledge; and (6) building a culture of connection. We think all of SG Murthy’s proposals are worth pursuing and could go a long way toward addressing the crisis of loneliness and social isolation. Nonetheless, we also think that the report does not fully address some of the epidemic’s key causes, such as economic conditions for the working class, and also does not adequately address some of its most damaging aspects, such as the decline of marriage and religious participation. We thus think that SG Murthy’s six pillars should be supplemented with several other urgently needed approaches. Our aim in this Supplement is to call attention to some of what is perhaps underemphasized in the SG’s report, in the hope of building on his extraordinary work to develop a yet more comprehensive account of the drivers of the decline of belonging in contemporary America, and of a path back toward a richly connected society.

II. American Anomie: The Landscape of Loneliness and Isolation Today

SG Murthy begins by emphasizing that contemporary America is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of loneliness (the subjective side of social disaffiliation) and social isolation (its objective side). The data are disconcerting: surveys indicate that about half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness. From 2003 to 2020, the average American’s self-reported time spent with friends and in “social engagement with others” decreased by two-thirds and one-third, respectively, while time spent in social isolation increased by 17%. Related trends are equally discouraging: marriage- and birth-rates are near all-time lows, religious affiliation is down from 70% in 1999 to 47% in 2020, and volunteering and other forms of civic participation are in long-term decline as well (Murthy, 2023: 13-16).

These trends are concentrated among the very old, who are especially isolated, and the screen-attached young, who have become our loneliest demographic. Murthy stresses – following the

¹ Thanks are due to Ying Chen, Christina Hinton, Ronald M. Ivey, and Sam Pressler for helpful comments on and suggestions for earlier drafts of this paper.

work of Julianne Holt-Lunstad, who served as a key scientific advisor in the report’s drafting – that social disconnection predicts increases in unhappiness, depression, anxiety, and even mortality (Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Czajkowski, Arteaga, & Burg, 2022; Hong et al., 2023). Further, it is a key driver of suicide (Shaw et al., 2021; Troya et al., 2019; Rico-Uribe, 2018), which is rising at alarming rates, along with other “[deaths of despair](#),” caused by alcohol poisoning and drug overdose (Murthy, 2023: 24-30).

III. Supplement (I): Drivers of Decline

The Advisory gives important discussion to some of the drivers of contemporary social disaffiliation. However, certain key causes of the crisis are arguably not given adequate attention, including economic stagnation, the decline of play, the increase in elderly Americans living alone, and a range of forces disrupting family formation and decreasing religious participation. SG Murthy notes the significant effects of declining family formation and religious participation on loneliness and social isolation, but only comments, “The reasons people choose to remain single or unmarried, have smaller families, and live alone over time are complex and encompass many factors.” This true, but it does not shed much light on the concrete drivers of family breakdown today.

This is in contrast, for example, with SG Murthy’s insightful treatment of the role of digital technology, especially social media platforms, in crowding out flesh-and-blood relationships and replacing them with less fulfilling and at times even pathological forms of interaction. There is now strong evidence that the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media in the last fifteen or so years has been a major driver of loneliness – as well as of anxiety, depression, and suicidality – among young people, and especially adolescent girls, with strong dose-response effects evident both for the intensity of daily use and for the age of adoption (Murthy, 2023; cf. also Twenge, 2023: 281-296; Twenge et al., 2022). SG Murthy is thus amply justified in his call for tighter restrictions on adolescents’ access to these technologies and platforms, and there are promising signs of bipartisan efforts to implement such reforms both at the state and federal levels. Other key drivers of the epidemic of loneliness and isolation however are not discussed in such great detail. Thus, in a similar spirit, we would like to offer further discussion of five other potential causes of loneliness and social isolation in the United States.

A. Additional Drivers (i): Economic Stagnation and Social Disintegration

One important driver of social disintegration is arguably the economic conditions faced by the middle and working classes. Only once across the report’s 82 pages are economic factors invoked as a potential cause of social (dis)connection, rather than as one of its outcomes, in Murthy’s observation that social infrastructure – i.e., the “physical assets,” “programs,” and “transportation networks” that influence the formation of social connection in a community – is influenced by “broader social policies, cultural norms, the technology environment, the political environment, and macroeconomic factors.”

There is good reason to think that economic factors are critical drivers of many aspects of social disaffiliation (Wilson, 1987; Putnam, 2015; Eberstadt, 2016). Fostering strong families, rich friendships, and deep participation in communal life (religious, civic or otherwise) requires at

least four economic foundations: adequate time for leisure and social life, financial stability, low levels of financial stress, and the dignity of socially-valued work. In a recent study of belonging in the U.S., lower socio-economic status was the greatest predictor of alienation from one's community over any of demographic factor (Argo & Sheikh, 2023). So too, Case & Deaton argue that “the loss of good jobs for less educated Americans” has triggered a cascade of social pathologies, amounting to “the slowly unfolding loss of a way of life,” which in turn explains the rising epidemic of deaths of despair (2020: 146).

In recent decades, each of these four foundational elements has been eroded for the bottom half of Americans by declining real median wages, which have proven unable to keep up with the rapidly rising costs of housing, healthcare, and other critical needs (Cass, 2023), which, among other factors, have fostered soaring growth in personal debt. Declining wages only tell part of the story, however, since these are typically found in the growing sector of low-skilled, “dead-end” jobs with unpredictable schedules and tenuous contracts (Rodgers, 2023; Lind, 2023). Growth in this sector in turn is potentially due to lower investment in technical and vocational education at the expense of college and university education (Cass, 2022).

At top of the income ladder, by contrast, asset values and salaries have grown exponentially, and tax liabilities have declined significantly for top earners. For decades, monetary policy and tax policy have largely benefited the top of the economy (Ivey & Shirk, 2021). Moreover, church and civic clubs use to be a pathway for the bridging connections between classes and helped draw people out of precarity. As wealth concentration increased, however, these pathways have increasingly been privatized, with, e.g., municipal youth sports teams losing ground to expensive private clubs (Jennings & Pressler, 2023). This loss of solidarity has created a vicious cycle of social breakdown and distrust across classes.

Lind (2023), published just a day before the Surgeon General’s report on loneliness, offers a helpful synthesis of some of these trends. As Lind argues, and as we elaborate in the remainder of this section, over the past fifty years, a combination of corporate labor arbitrage, union-busting, and credential-inflation has depressed the average American’s real earnings. These diminished economic prospects in turn depressed marriage- and birth-rates and hollowed out the mass-membership civic institutions which once pervaded American life, so leaving us profoundly vulnerable to loneliness, isolation, and *anomie*.

There is a growing body of evidence, as in the work of Raj Chetty and his team at Opportunity Insights, that rising economic inequality – both owing to rising income and wealth among top earners and stagnating wages within lower earnings brackets – diminishes social mobility and erodes social solidarity (e.g., Chetty et al., 2022; Chetty et al., 2018; Chetty & Hendren, 2018). For his part, Lind traces a slow, national transition from a high- to a low-median-wage economy (2023: 17), crystallized in two statistics: while as late as “1985, a typical male American worker could pay for the housing, healthcare, education, and transportation of a family of four on thirty weeks of salary,” by 2018, “it took fifty-three weeks to do so” – a significant challenge, given that there are only fifty-two weeks in a year (Lind 2023: 83).

Lind relies here on calculations by *American Compass*’s Oren Cass, whose “cost of thriving index” (COTI) “measures the number of weeks a typical worker would need to work in a given year to earn enough income to cover the major costs for a family of four in the American middle class in

that year,” including the four categories Lind outlined above, plus the recent addition of food as a separate category (2023: 1). (*American Compass*’s most recent update reflects further erosion of the middle class, with the COTI for the median male American worker having risen from 53 weeks of income in 2018 to 62.1 weeks in 2022 (Cass, 2023: 1).)

The COTI is intended to be a more realistic measure of the changes over time in Americans’ purchasing power than the inflation-adjusted statistics which are commonly cited in this connection. As Cass notes,

Measures of inflation try to detect the change in cost for the exact same set of things. That’s enormously important data if you are trying to assess the broader economy’s behavior. But it tells you little about the cost of living as experienced by someone trying to support a family, who cannot simply continue to buy the same things, and who would not remain in the middle class if he did. When inflation-adjusted figures report that a 2022 earner could afford roughly what a 1985 earner could, that assumes the 2022 earner still plans to drive a 1985 car, live in a 1985 house, watch a 1985 television, and receive 1985 medical care. That’s not possible, nor is it what being “middle class” in 2022 means. Consider instead the costs of a 2022 car, a 2022 house, a 2022 television, and 2022 medical care—the things a 2022 middle-class family should be able to afford—and the picture looks quite different (2023: 2-3).

Cass’s analysis focuses on median *male* wages, but wage stagnation affects everyone, women as well as men. Although 16% of married women now serve as their family’s primary breadwinner (Fry et al., 2023), 50% of American mothers with children under 18 (and 29% of American fathers) say they would prefer staying home with the kids full-time, compared to 45% of such women (and 71% of men) expressing a preference for working outside the home (Brenan, 2019; cf. the discussion in Greco, 2023). Today, as Richard Reeves observes, the mothers most likely to reduce their working hours to spend more time at home with children are those “with the highest-earning husbands,” suggesting significant economic constraints on families’ ability to choose to keep one parent at home (2022: 46). Moreover, many communities have fallen into a “two-income trap,” as assortative mating among the highly-educated produces dual-income couples who bid up the cost of big-ticket items such as houses, cars, and university tuition, and so increasingly price single-earner households out of those markets (Warren & Warren-Tyagi, 2004). Many more Americans would like to have a single-income family than can afford to do so given current median wages.

This change was wrought in part by declining worker bargaining power, driven by the erosion of unionization; the growth of wage-suppressing measures, such as “[salary bands](#)” or “no-poach agreements” (Lind 2023: 23-33); and the growing prevalence of markets characterized by monopoly, oligopoly, or monopsony (Wilmers, 2018; Tepper, 2018; Azard, Marinescu, & Steinbaum, 2017). It also owed much to the outsourcing of production to low-wage settings following the trade liberalization effected by the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) and China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (2001) (Lind 2023: 34-44; cf. Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2021; Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2016). The net loss of around [7.5-million US manufacturing jobs](#) since 1980 has undermined many Americans’ chances of finding a prosperous and fulfilling vocation.

These trends have given rise in turn to a vicious cycle of credential inflation, in which workers seek to improve their economic prospects by investing ever-more time and money in licenses and degrees in order to enter occupations which formerly had fewer (or no) formal educational requirements for entry or promotion (Lind 2023: 83-95). Credential inflation itself, however, has been exacerbated by America's shift in recent decades toward an increasingly myopic focus on college enrollment as the sole acceptable outcome of primary and secondary education (Cass 2022: 1-3). Whereas OECD member states enroll an average of [42% of their "upper secondary school" students in technical or vocational training](#), America has "no distinct vocational path at upper secondary level," having instead opted over the last fifty years, as Cass [notes](#), for a de facto "college-for-all" system, which sidelines most students' needs and desires for an overwhelming focus on the mere 18% of Americans who ultimately obtain a job which required their bachelor's or higher degree (2022: 10).

The stagnation of median wages and the credentials arms-race it sparked exacerbates trends toward social disaffiliation, not least by "lead[ing] many Americans to delay, and sometimes forgo, marriage, family formation, and childbearing" (Lind 2023: 95). Declining real wages mean that less-educated men become less "marriageable," increasingly struggling to attract and keep spouses (cf. Doar, Streeter, & Wilcox, 2018: 97-98; Reeves & Pulliam, 2020; Wilson, 1987), while rising educational attainment has meant that the well-off marry and have children later, if at all, since two lucrative and rewarding careers substantially increase a couple's opportunity cost of procreation.

Fewer well-paying, unionized jobs also mean less socializing in union halls and less free time to apportion among coaching Little League or attending religious services. Low-wage jobs subject to "just-in-time" scheduling make it harder to maintain a regular social calendar, never mind obtain adequate childcare. Fewer marriages and children mean less religious participation – in one study the [strongest predictor of increased religious service attendance](#) in adulthood is having a child enter kindergarten (Schleifer & Chaves, 2017) – which in turn means [less volunteering](#) (Kim & Dew, 2019).

As the economic historian Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) has suggested, modern economists seem to be historically exceptional in imagining commerce as potentially disembedded from all social relationships, communal goals, and religious or philosophical frameworks. Only given such an assumption can the notion of shareholder supremacy – that the *only* responsibility of a business is to maximize profits – seem vaguely sane or sustainable, whether or not it is (Ciepley, 2017). The rise of a disembedded, shareholder economy has created an environment in which one can run a socially destructive business – pushing addictive, life-wrecking opioids into impoverished areas, charging 400% interest on payday loans to the poor, tweaking apps for ever greater addictiveness via the stimulation of negative emotion – and be considered a "successful" businessperson. Those who fall prey to these offerings may rightly intuit that they inhabit a society that does not care about them, wherein powerful actors are not only allowed, but even encouraged to exploit them.

B. Additional Drivers (ii): The Decline of Children's Independence and the Mental Health Crisis

In addition to economic factors, two other factors that arguably need greater attention are the decline of unsupervised play and the changing living situation of the elderly – which are key drivers of loneliness and isolation among younger and older Americans, respectively. Not

coincidentally, these are the two demographics which, as the Advisory stresses, are most severely burdened by the crisis of loneliness and isolation.

On the first point, there is growing evidence that the sharp decline since the 1970's of children's unstructured play and other independent activities is an important contributor to the mental health crisis among young people (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018: 163-94; Gray, 2013). Recent decades have seen sharp declines across the developed world, but especially in the United States, in "children's freedom to engage in activities that involve some degree of risk and personal responsibility away from adults" (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023: 1). ("Children" here means anyone under age 18, though of course prudence dictates that the degree of freedom accorded a child will increase gradually as she ages, and will vary according to her capacities and surroundings.) "Free play," in which kids play with one another without adult direction, is increasingly crowded out by school – the average school year increased by five weeks from 1950-2010, even as time spent in recess declined – and adult supervised extra-curricular activities (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023: 2).

Increasingly anxious parenting has also played a role, arguably driven in part by a transition to family structures with fewer children in whom parents invest more intensively and for longer, in what Twenge (2023) calls the "slow-life strategy." "In England," for instance, "license to walk home alone from school" – often in the company of other kids from the neighborhood – "dropped from 86% in 1971 to 35% in 1990 and 25% in 2010, and license to use public buses alone dropped from 48% in 1971 to 15% in 1990 to 12% in 2010" (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023: 2). And finally, flesh-and-blood socializing of all kinds is on the decline among adolescents; according to the Monitoring the Future study, in 2020, high school seniors "went out with friends" 1.9 times per week, down from 2.9 times per week in 1976 (Twenge, 2023: 292).

Some aspects of this transition do not necessarily reflect an absolute decline in social connection (its "structure" in the SG's sense) but primarily one in its "function" and "quality" in the life of children. (See p. 11 below for further discussion.) Interacting with other kids in class or at soccer practice is no substitute for the boundary-testing, confidence-building excitement of climbing trees or cycling around the neighborhood surrounded by friends and with no adults in sight. Free play matters both for the subjective joy it brings kids, who consistently depict it as contributing to their happiness, and for the opportunities it affords to develop skills in conflict resolution, healthy risk-tolerance, and a strong internal locus of control (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023: 3-5). It is small surprise that kids who are increasingly deprived of opportunities for fun and independence – even if their care is lovingly oriented towards safety – would become more depressed and anxious. There are, no doubt, many causes of the mental health crisis among youth, several of which SG Murthy discusses, including the use of social media (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021; Murthy, 2023), but the decline of free play and independence should arguably be added to the list as contributing factors, both to declines in mental health and to declines in social connection.

C. Additional Drivers (iii): Shrinking Households & the Isolation of the Elderly

A third additional factor in the rise of loneliness and isolation specifically concerns older Americans, who – as the Advisory indicates – are our most socially isolated demographic (19), with those 65 and older spending 1405 more hours per year in social isolation than 25-34 year-

olds (Kannan & Veazie, 2023: 5-6). This is due in large part to the fact that 27% of Americans 65 and older live alone, compared to 4% of Americans aged 18-24, and 8.5% of those aged 25-44 (Wu, 2017), and compared with only 11% of the elderly in the Asia-Pacific region, or 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ausubel, 2020). (The oft-cited figure that 29% of American households now consist of a single person (cf. Murthy 2023: 15) can easily obscure the fact that only about 13% of the total American population actually lives alone (Wu, 2017), since a three-person household has triple the population of a one-person household. The proportion of the elderly living alone is thus much higher than the national average.)

Changes in household composition represent one of the longest-running trends influencing loneliness and isolation today; while in 1850, about 68% of white Americans over 65 lived with their adult children, that figure had fallen to about 28% by 1950, and had reached a low of 13% in 1990, before rebounding slightly by 2000 (Ruggles, 2007). In 2020 (and calculated using a slightly different methodology), only 6% of all Americans over 60 lived in “extended family households,” including three or more generations (e.g., grandparents, parents, and minor children), compared to 50% of the elderly in the Asia-Pacific region and Sub-Saharan Africa (Ausubel, 2020). (Another 15% of older Americans live with one adult son or daughter.)

This trend toward smaller households consisting of only one or two generations has many causes, some of them arguably desirable, such as increased income – and dramatically increased social provision from Social Security and later Medicare – allowing elderly Americans to support themselves in their own homes for longer, or increased longevity rendering the elderly more independent until later in life. In some respects, however, elderly isolation flows from broader societal and cultural shifts: increasing geographic and economic mobility over the twentieth century meant that ever-fewer children took over the family farm, while the spread of a culture of “expressive individualism” (or the rise of the “buffered self”) has made Americans of all ages less willing to embrace unchosen obligations, whose paradigm is the parent-child bond (Bellah et al., 2007 [1985]; Taylor, 2007; Snead, 2020; Henrich, 2020: 21-27 *et passim*). Whatever goods flow from these changes – and it would be foolish to deny that they are many – they negatively affect the elderly in certain ways, as well as other vulnerable groups. There is also a loss of something special for the flourishing of younger generations: the multi-generational wisdom, traditions, and stories that help create a sense of belonging, emotional stability and resilience for our children (Drury, Hutchinson, & Abrams, 2016; Silverstein & Marenco, 2001).

D. Additional Drivers (iv): The Decline of Religious Community

As noted above, the Advisory comments on the decline in religious affiliation and religious service attendance, which for centuries provided had served as a pillar of social connection and community. Religious affiliation is down from 70% in 1999 to 47% in 2020 (Murthy et al., 2023), while religious service attendance, after decades of hovering around 40%, has dramatically fallen from 43% in 1999 to 30% in 2020 (Gallup, 2023). About 40 million Americans have stopped regularly attending religious services at some point in their lives, most of them in the past 25 years (Davis, Graham, & Burge, 2023: xxii).

The causes of these trends are manifold, and are worth exploring in greater detail. One important factor is the overall decline in religious conviction, with 29% of Americans in 2021 reporting no religious affiliation, up from only 16% as recently as 2007 (Smith, 2021). The

intellectual changes underlying this transformation range from the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution and the “mechanistic” metaphysics by which it was frequently interpreted (cf. Israel, 2015; Gillespie, 2008; Taylor, 2007), to such recent factors as the Cold War’s end making it “more culturally acceptable to be both American and non-Christian,” widely-publicized clergy abuse scandals undermining the credibility of religious institutions, or the rise of the “Religious Right” in America driving political liberals and centrists away from Christianity altogether (Davis, Graham, & Burge, 2023: 6). The significance of and interrelations among these potential causes are the subject of ongoing debate by intellectual historians and social scientists; as such, they largely lie beyond the scope of this Supplement. Whatever the causes, however, every decade, more and more Americans join Matthew Arnold on *Dover Beach*, watching as the “Sea of Faith’s” “long, melancholy, withdrawing roar” exposes “the naked shingles of the world.”

Nonetheless, many of those who have desisted from religious participation in recent decades still describe themselves as committed religious believers. For instance, while 30% of respondents in the Gallup poll cited above reported attending services at least almost every week, 46% said that religion was “very important to them,” and 46% also reported being a “member of a church or synagogue” (Gallup 2023). One of the most striking findings reported in Davis, Graham, & Burge (2023) is that 51% of “casually dechurched” evangelicals – who gradually drifted away from church attendance, rather than leaving because of some significant trauma – reported being either “somewhat” or “very willing” to resume service attendance, with many noting that they don’t attend services because no friends or family members have invited them (28). “For hundreds of thousands of dechurched evangelical Christians, all they need [to resume attendance] is a personal invitation to a decent church community” (Davis, Graham, & Burge, 2023: 28).

This gap between belief and action, however, is also likely caused in part by the concrete incentives that inform people’s “choice architecture” in relation to religious participation (Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2013). For instance, there is some evidence that the repeal of once ubiquitous “blue laws” enforcing the closure of businesses on Sunday has depressed religious service attendance, since they “increase the opportunity cost of religious attendance by offering alternatives for work, leisure, and consumption” (Gruber & Hungerman, 2006). (A related factor which is particularly pressing for many families today is the “growth of [children’s] extracurricular activities and sports demanding Sunday morning attendance” (Davis, Graham, & Burge, 2023: 163).) Comparing ten states which repealed their Sunday-closing laws over the period 1973-1998 to six states which had repealed them prior to 1973, Gruber & Hungerman concluded that “repealing the blue laws reduced attendance by 0.21 index points, or about 5 percent of the sample mean,” with an even stronger “15 percent decline in the prevalence of [weekly service attendance],” even after controlling for relevant variables such as age and education (2006: 15-16).

E. Additional Drivers (v): The Decline of Marriage

The Advisory also notes the sharp declines in rates of marriage, which have dropped from 64 per 1000 American women in 1960 to 14.9 per 1000 in 2021 (Vital Statistics of the United States 1960; Washington & Anderson, 2023). Here too, the causes are diverse, and merit closer scrutiny. Of course, not all of these causes are necessarily appropriate targets for policy measures and interventions, but it is important to at least better understand how the various changes came

about. It is moreover the case that marriage itself has important effects on social support and social connection (Marks and Lambert, 1998; Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Chen et al., 2023), with marriage also still being a desired goal for a large portion of Americans. Understanding the trends in the decline of marriage rates is thus important.

One factor in declining marriage rates is the set of “marriage penalties” in federal and state means-tested welfare programs, most of which were instituted during or after the Johnson administration’s “War on Poverty” beginning in 1965. These penalties, which result from the loss of benefits subsequent to marriage, can “reach tens of thousands of dollars [per year] when the full set of benefits lost across all programs is calculated” (Paris & Hall, 2023: 2). As such, they serve as a significant disincentive to marriage for the very people who might most benefit from the support it provides (Micheltore, 2018; Gennetian & Miller, 2004).

Another factor in the lower rates of marriage likely concerns the economic conditions in which marriage occurs, including the decline in men’s median earnings, as discussed above. This has simultaneously been accompanied also by a rise in women’s economic prospects, with 40% of women now earning more than the average man, up from just 13% in 1979 (Reeves 2022: 41), offering women greater prospects for economic independence. This, in and of itself, is arguably desirable. However, taken together, these trends will often render men relatively less attractive as potential mates, resulting in declining marriage rates (Carbone & Cahn, 2014; Autor & Wasserman, 2013; Cherlin, 2010).

Even before these changes in economic life and social policy took effect, however, marriage in America was already being reshaped by the advent of orally-administered, hormonal contraceptive pills, first approved for sale by the FDA in 1960, just before marriage rates began their precipitous decline. Controversial though this issue is, we should not neglect the ways in which the “markets” for sex and marriage have been transformed by this then novel technology, which removed a strong impetus for marriage by allowing men and women to reliably break the connection between sexual activity and fertility for the first time in our species’ history (cf. Bachiochi, 2021: 283-304; Perry 2022: 6-7 *et passim*; Regnerus, 2017).

IV. Supplement (II): The Corporate Dimension of Social Connection

The Advisory (again following Holt Lunstad) identifies three key constituents of social connection, namely structure, function, and quality. “Structure” refers to “number and variety of one’s relationships and frequency of interactions”. “Function” broadly refers to “the degree to which relationships serve various needs;” and “quality” to “the positive and negative aspects of relationships and interactions” (Holt Lunstad, 2022; Murthy, 2023: 10-11). Perhaps somewhat more expansively one might more broadly conceive of “function” or perhaps more aptly “support” to be the instrumental goods offered to the individual by his or her relationships and communities, and “quality” or “connection” to be the intrinsic goods offered by one’s relationships and communities.

A. A Richer Model of Social Connection

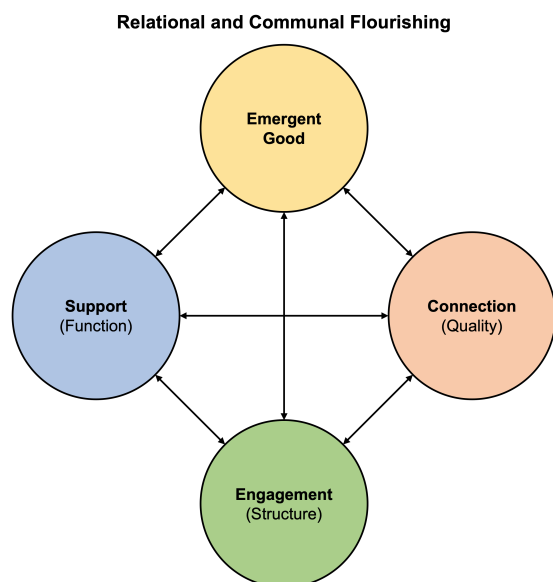
These dimensions of social connection are important. However, we believe these should also be further supplemented. The aforementioned domains arguably employ a primarily individualistic frame, whereas social relations call, if anything does, for a systems-level frame. Consider the following goods which both inform and emerge from diverse types of healthy social connection, but which arguably cannot be captured by the threefold scheme above:

1. Lewis (1960), with reference to his own best friends, wrote of the way in which true friendship grows by being shared: “Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald’s reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him ‘to myself’ now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves” (2017 [1960]: 66). In short, there are spillover effects of the goodness of one friendship into others; if we assess the goodness only of A’s friendship with B and C, and of B’s with A and C, and so on, then we miss the ways in which each friendship can grow by its mutual entanglement with the others. Conversely, researchers have found that loneliness is, perhaps counterintuitively, contagious: the more lonely people you interact with, the more likely you are to become lonely (Cacioppo et al., 2009).
2. The existence, health, and stability of a particular marriage likewise have implications for many others besides the spouses who are parties to it. In the first instance, at least in healthy marriages, their children benefit from a stable and loving home environment, and from getting to grow up in the same house as both of their parents. (We return to the empirical basis for these claims below.) But so too, those who persevere in marriage despite its inevitable challenges and trials strengthen the marriages of others in their social networks (including their children), since a key risk factor for divorce is the number of one’s friends or family who are divorced (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). Here again, the full social significance even of a dyadic relationship such as marriage cannot be assessed solely in dyadic terms, but must account for the ways in which that relationship influences the wider social and moral ecology within which it is embedded.
3. Sports teams, churches, clubs, and other civic associations offer important intrinsic and instrumental goods to their members, but it would be highly reductive to think that their social significance could be reduced to the sum total of those individual goods. First, each individual’s participation sets an example for others in his or her social network, who thus might be marginally more likely to see, e.g., volunteering or religious service attendance as a live option for themselves. As Daniel Cox (2023) notes, “The shrinking of our friend groups is not an individual tragedy, but a collective one,” since “friendship predicts community involvement and civic participation. Sixty percent of Americans with at least six close friends say they have attended a local event or community meeting at least a few times in the past 12 months compared to only 33 percent of those with no close friends.” Those joining a religious community, club, or civic organization can create a self-reinforcing feedback loop promoting further social connection, just as those leaving communities contribute to vicious cycles of self-reinforcing communal decline. The same process might plausibly be thought to occur at the level of the organization itself: the existence of a rich ecosystem of civic associations encourages the formation of further associations, whereas the collapse of one association imperils the survival of others.

4. The examples above illustrate ways in which various forms of social connection – friendship, marriage, or “mediating institutions” such as religious communities or clubs – can furnish important instrumental goods to non-members, including the good of positive inducements to healthy connections for themselves. To these we should also add the many important forms of charitable provision or social support which civic associations or religious communities offer to non-members. However, flourishing relationships or communities can also offer important intrinsic goods to non-members within their orbit. For instance, winning the World Series is good for the Boston Red Sox, but it is also good – a source of happiness and local pride – for those Bostonians, however lukewarm they are in baseball fandom, who are glad to see the “home team” win. So too, even a non-Catholic can take pleasure in the beauty of the neo-Gothic Catholic church past which he or she walks on the way to work, and can enjoy the polyphonic strains of music which drift into the office from choir practice down the street. Here again, to limit our consideration of a community’s social value to the goods it offers its individual members would radically underestimate its genuine contributions to the wider community, both in terms of its instrumental and intrinsic goods.

The foregoing examples illustrate the need for expanding the SG’s threefold typology of belonging to include what we might call a relationship’s or community’s “emergent” or “common goods,” which arise – without being separable – from the individual goods it furnishes for its members (Donati, 2023; cf. Fig. 1 below). We might define such an “emergent good” as the perception and actuality of having relationships and communities that are good in ways that extend beyond their contribution to the wellbeing of any particular individual. When one friendship by its very existence enhances another, or when one marriage tacitly strengthens another, or when the existence of one club calls forth the founding of another, we see the emergent good of social connection at work. As the examples above illustrate, this emergent good can be intrinsic as well as instrumental – the Bostonian can take pleasure in a Red Sox victory quite independently of any additional benefits he or she might garner from those institutions. Future assessment of social connection ought to take account of this emergent dimension of relational and communal flourishing.

Figure 1: A Fourfold Schema of Relational and Communal Flourishing



B. Some Connections Matter More than Others

These points also relate to what might be seen as an indifference in the Advisory regarding the types of social connection which Americans enjoy. For instance, in a section on declining rates of marriage and birth, the SG does not call for efforts to reverse either trend, but instead proposes that we “cultivate ways to foster sufficient social connection outside of chosen traditional means and structures.” The Advisory also downplays the role of marriage in comparison with the research literature on which it draws. For instance, its Figure 1, which visually depicts the threefold typology of social connection discussed above, is adapted from one developed by Holt-Lunstad (2018), which includes references to “marital status” and “marital quality.” These references were broadened in the Advisory to “marital/partnership status” and to “relationship satisfaction” (Murthy, 2023: 11). The overall implication would seem to be that it matters little whether people are bound to one another through vows of marriage or baptism, or instead through co-habitation and cooking classes.

However, the empirical literature suggests otherwise. Rich and meaningful connections are possible in many settings, to be sure, but the evidence suggests that marriage and religious community on average more strongly promote various of dimensions of human flourishing than other forms of belonging. This is of course consistent with there being many people whose lives are made worse overall by religious community or marriage, and many who flourish without participation in either institution (cf. Kislev, 2020).

The data are particularly striking with regard to religious community. Regarding religious participation and public health, the best recent summary of the evidence is found in Balboni et al. (2022), which offers a systematic review of the empirical literature on religion and spirituality in relation to serious illness, including an assessment of the evidence by a Delphi panel of eight subject-matter experts. The review’s key consensus statements noted, e.g., that “a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies indicated that service attendance was associated with reduction in all-cause mortality (hazard ratio, 0.73; 95% CI, 0.63–0.84),” that “77% of studies evaluating religious service attendance found a statistically significant, beneficial association with measures

of depression,” and that “a majority of studies found a beneficial and significant association between spirituality and several measures of substance use, including use, recovery, and initiation” (190).

Those who attend religious services at least weekly are about 34% less likely to binge-drink than those who never attend (Chen et al., 2020), while adolescents who attend services regularly have a 33% lower risk of illegal drug use and a 40% lower risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection compared to never-attenders (Chen & VanderWeele, 2018). Regular attenders are also about 50% less likely to divorce (Li et al., 2018), 27% less likely to become depressed (Li et al., 2016a), and five times less likely to commit suicide than non-attenders (VanderWeele et al., 2016). And, over a sixteen-year period, regular service attendees were 33% less likely to die for any reason than non-attenders (Chen, Kim, & VanderWeele, 2020). In studies of cardiovascular disease (Chang et al., 2017), all-cause mortality (Li et al., 2016b), and suicide (VanderWeele et al., 2016), religious service attendance was a stronger protective predictor of beneficial outcomes than any other social variable in these studies, including number of close friends, participation in other groups, marital status, or even the composite of all of these other assessments.

Moreover, there is a great deal of evidence that religious belief and practice generally biases people toward pro-social or more broadly moral behaviors. In one study, for instance, the incidence of reported domestic violence was found to be about 60.7% higher among men who did not attend church, compared to men who attended religious services once a week or more (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). So too, charitable giving (to secular as well as religious causes) is about 3.5x higher among regular service attenders than among those who never attend, (Putnam & Campbell, 2010: 461; Haidt, 2012 308-311; Brooks, 2007).

In experimental settings, religious believers (particularly those, such as Christians, Jews, or Muslims, who believe in an all-knowing and all-powerful God and in a final judgment) consistently show higher levels of trustworthiness, generosity, and cooperation than unbelievers, especially but not only when cooperating with co-religionists (Tan & Vogel, 2008; Ruffle & Sosis, 2006; Haidt, 2012: 308-309). And these findings are complemented by observational evidence that, as Henrich notes, “across countries, the belief in a contingent afterlife,” i.e., in a final judgment by God or reincarnation in accord with the law of karma, “is associated with greater economic productivity and less crime... The higher the percentage of people who believe in a contingent afterlife (hell and heaven) in a country, the lower the murder rate. By contrast, the greater the percentage of people of who believe only in heaven, the *higher* the murder rate” (2020: 146-47).

The empirical evidence for the importance of marriage is likewise robust. Meta-analyses and other studies have indicated notable effects of marital status on lower mortality risk (Manzoli et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2023). A recent study by Chen et al. (2023) examined the long-term effects of the decision to marry on about twelve thousand female nurses, and found that, even after controlling for race, income, age, a range of important health behaviors, and the risk of adverse outcomes from marriage itself, including divorce, marriage was associated with greater life satisfaction, greater mental and physical health, and even a 35 percent reduction in all-cause mortality. And a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of the effects of marital status on health found substantial protective effects for both sexes, but stronger reductions in all-cause mortality for men than for women (Wang et al., 2020; cf. also Schoenborn, 2004). The effects of

marriage on men in particular likely have much to do with the fact that marriage (and especially lifelong monogamy, which, unlike polygamy, takes men “off the sexual market” entirely) and fatherhood act as a “testosterone suppression system,” reducing their levels of the hormone that makes men so disproportionately amorous, violent, and risk-prone (Henrich 2020: 268).

The significance of marriage is further underscored by the fact that, as Henrich notes, despite important variation in its form across cultures, “marriage represents the keystone institution for most (not all) societies, and may be the most primeval of human institutions” (2020: 72). The core problem underlying the institution is that when men and women have sex, children frequently result, a fact which men can ignore much more easily than can women. Marriage (and especially lifelong monogamy) creates strong social norms in favor of men’s to assuming responsibility for their children and for supporting those children’s mothers – in a sense, for making their sex lives more like the female norm, closely tied to commitment and children. The institution equally benefits husbands as well, in the first instance by offering them (as in Henrich’s helpful if somewhat crass summary) “preferred sexual access and stronger guarantees that [his mates’] kids are in fact his kids” (2020: 72). However significant those material considerations might be, however, they are surely not the most important part of the story: at its best, marriage offers men and women alike a unique combination of intimacy, mutual commitment, and deep investment in the lives of others, which makes it not only an adaptive institution for slow-maturing, pair-bonding primates like us (cf. Henrich 2015: 146-50), but also a frequent source of daily joy and lifelong meaning for its participants.

Marriage is also a critical institution in the lives of children, who have been systematically disadvantaged by its erosion in recent decades. Contrary to all expectations, even with birth control, the sexual revolution witnessed a sharp rise in the rate of out-of-wedlock births (from 5 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 2022), despite the fact that 87 percent of women still say they would prefer to be married before having children (Stone, 2023). This sea-change occurred in part because, even as the Pill prevented many pregnancies, its widespread adoption made casual sex so much more common that its typical failure rate of 10.8% over 24 months produced a large increase in unplanned pregnancies (Polis et al., 2016; for discussion, cf. Perry, 2022: 165-66). (Also important, as Reeves observes, was the collapse during and after the 1960’s in the cultural norms around “shotgun weddings” for unmarried parents-to-be (2022: 55).)

Increased rates of divorce have likewise altered the proportion of children living with both parents (Wilcox, 2009; Perry, 2022). While research suggests negative effects on average of divorce on the health and well-being of spouses (Aseltine and Kessler, 1993; Marks and Lambert, 1998; Shor et al., 2012; VanderWeele, 2017; Chen et al., 2023), there are perhaps even more notable negative effects on children (Amato, 1991; 2010; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Maier and Lachman, 2000; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; d’Onofrio et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2009). Single, widowed, and divorced parents and their children of course can, and should, be strongly supported, like all others, and can be enabled to flourish, especially with strong support. Moreover, the impact of single-parent households on child wellbeing outcomes will be mediated by many factors besides family structure, likely including maternal education (Mensch et al., 2019), warmth (Chen, Kubzansky, & VanderWeele, 2019), and attachment style (Mónaco et al., 2019), as well as the family’s financial resources and wider social support.

Nonetheless, these various trends are concerning from the standpoint of children’s welfare. Children of unmarried parents see their fathers – who play a distinct role in their nurture and education at every developmental stage (Reeves 2022: 207-208) – much less than do children of married parents: “within 6 years of their parents separating,” Reeves notes, “one in three children never see their father, and a similar proportion see him once a month or less” (2022: 61). Moreover, children growing up in single-parent households are about 5 times more likely to live in poverty than those in married households (cf. “Families with related children”). By age 28, 24% of black men and 18% of white men who grew up in a single-parent home have been incarcerated, compared to 14% and 8% (respectively) of those who grew up in a house with both biological parents (Wilcox, 2021).

Children of unmarried parents are also at an elevated risk of neglect or abuse, not least because they frequently live with an adult to whom they are not related, such as their mother’s boyfriend or a stepfather. As Vanderminden et al. (2019) note, “Families with two biological parents had lower rates [of child neglect] (4.29% in the past year) than other household configurations (range from 7.95% to 14.10%; $p < .05$).” This greater propensity for stepparents and other non-relatives to abuse children is sometimes called the “Cinderella effect,” after the fairytale character who was abused by her stepmother. “Fatal baby batterings, in particular, have been found to exhibit Cinderella effects on the order of 100-fold or more in many studies in several countries, including Britain” (Daly, 2022; cf. also Finkelhor et al., 1990). The result of these changes in family structure is thus not only fewer marriages, but many fewer children growing up in nurturing or even safe households.

In short, the genius of marriage is the way it at least partly harmonizes the needs and desires of men, women, and children alike. We thus have ample reason to want norms which encourage men and women to live together while they raise their children – or suffer the absence of hoped-for children – and institutions to render that arrangement durable and socially valued.

V. Supplement (III): Neglected Responses to the Loneliness Epidemic

Along with the additional causes and dimensions, we also would like to put forward some corresponding additional potential responses to the crisis. Each of the six “pillars” which Murthy advocates as a response to loneliness and isolation is good in itself. Again, these were to (1) strengthen social infrastructure in local communities; (2) enact pro-connection public policies; (3) mobilize the health sector; (4) reform digital environments; (5) deepen our knowledge; and (6) build a culture of connection.

The combination of these six approaches will certainly help address numerous aspects of social isolation and loneliness. However, given the critical role played by economic factors, the decline of free play in childhood, the alienation of the elderly from their families, and the declines in marriage and religious life, we believe it will be difficult to adequately address the crisis without sustained efforts to raise median wages, revive a culture of independent in-person play, reduce the isolation of the elderly, and re-invigorate American families and religious communities.

A. Additional Responses (i): Boosting Median Wages

How we might best boost the average worker’s earnings, and more broadly reorient the economy toward genuine human flourishing, are of course enormous topics, and well beyond the scope of this Supplement. Good work is being done in this area by critics of economic liberalism emerging from the Right and Left alike, including *American Compass*’s recent comprehensive “handbook” on “[Rebuilding American Capitalism](#)” (Cass et al., 2023) and Lind’s (2023) detailed policy proposals for strengthening worker bargaining power and ultimately increasing wages, including via the revival of private-sector unions and the end of corporate labor arbitrage.

One relatively neglected approach which is worth highlighting here, however, is that of promoting worker ownership, which gives workers a sense of shared purpose and destiny, along with a share of monetary upside. With notable exceptions, including farmers’ cooperatives such as [Organic Valley](#), worker-ownership is relatively rare among U.S. firms, but there are good international models which we could emulate. In the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna (centered on Bologna), for instance, “two out of three citizens are members of a cooperative,” and “per capita income is 30% higher than the national average and 27.6% higher than the EU average” (Restakis, 2010: 73-86; cf. also Médaille, 2014: 201-202, 227-28). Another important model for worker-ownership even of large firms is found in Spain’s Mondragón Corporation, which has over 80,000 employees (Médaille, 2014: 122-24, 224-26). Happily, U.S. lawmakers are increasingly interested in worker ownership; in May 2023, a bipartisan and bicameral group of legislators introduced [The Employee Equity Investment Act in Congress](#), which “would return a greater share of American profits to American workers, by supporting the sale of businesses to their employees.”

B. Additional Responses (ii): Get Kids Out of the House – and Grandparents back into It

On the issue of improving the mental health of children via the revival of free play and genuine independence, the organization “[Let Grow](#),” led by Lenore Skenazy, has led the way both in developing networks of schools and parents committed to fostering independent children, as well as in legislative advocacy at the state level. One key initiative is the passage by individual states of “Reasonable Childhood Independence” legislation – now law, following the advocacy of Let Grow, in four states – which [clarifies](#) that child protection laws do not prevent parents from “giving children independence as long as they are reasonable and prudent.” To be effective, however, such legislation likely needs to be paired with sustained campaigns to persuade anxious parents that, attention-grabbing headlines notwithstanding, children are in fact much less likely to be abducted or assaulted today than they were decades ago, when independent play was more common (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018: 163-81).

If the adolescent mental health crisis commends getting kids *out* of the house, the isolation of the elderly invites getting them back *into* it – if the elderly are more than twice as likely as the rest of us to live alone, then one natural response would be to increase the share of multi-generational households, among other initiatives to increase social connection in this cohort (cf. Sandu, Zólyomi, & Leichensring, 2021: 6-9). However, this is a particularly challenging policy objective, since it seems to be so heavily influenced by shared values, notably the West’s unusual commitment to individual autonomy, a conviction doubtless shared by many older adults as well as by their children. The doors in this case are principally locked on the inside; the many daily sacrifices and loss of agency which older parents and their adult children must accept in living together, or even near one another, can be significant.

One potentially easy fix, however, would be to change to zoning laws, many of which prohibit the construction of so-called in-law apartments. The pandemic helped to accelerate the demand for such changes, which are [proceeding in many localities](#). Nonetheless, while these and related policy tweaks might help at the margins, they are unlikely to turn the tide of elderly isolation in the absence of a reconsideration within American culture of the relative trade-offs concerning belonging and freedom.

C. Additional Responses (iii): Reviving Marriage and Religious Community

There are also difficult questions concerning how we might go about reversing the long-term declines of religious participation and marriage. Admittedly, as with the challenge of boosting median wages, these are wracking problems, and no obvious solution to them has yet been found. Nonetheless, there are some good prospects which merit further study and exploration on a pilot basis, perhaps allowing individual States to serve as “laborator[ies], and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country” (Brandeis 1932).

With regard to the promotion of marriage, we might start by eliminating the “marriage penalties” in federal and state means-tested welfare programs discussed above (p. 7). Greater efforts could also be made to support existing marriages as well. Two broad policy initiatives might plausibly help in this regard: first, we could institute a national policy of paid family leave for new parents (Olafson & Steingrimsdottir, 2020); the United States is the [only country in the OECD which has no such policy](#), and this lack leaves many married couples with newborn children struggling to piece together childcare even as they juggle sleepless nights and ongoing work commitments (Petts, Carleton, & Knoester, 2020). And second, and relatedly, we could increase means-tested cash transfers to parents of young children to help them find the right childcare solutions for their family, whether by sending children to daycare or preschool, or by allowing one parent to spend more time at home (Cass & King, 2021).

Addressing marital problems before they become so severe that divorce seems like the only option could also help sustain marriages. We might, for instance, better fund the federal Healthy Marriages and Responsible Fatherhood program, which supports interventions aimed at promoting marital health and engaged fatherhood, many of which have proven effective under rigorous assessment (Hawkins, 2019). At present, it receives an annual \$150 million appropriation, which is only about one tenth of one percent of the \$102 billion annual budget of the Department of Education. Dissemination of evidence-based online marriage support program could also potentially allow for broad outreach (Doss et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017). Churches and other religious organization likewise also offer marriage support services.

How and in what ways might social engagement within religious institutions be reasonably promoted? Some important closely related efforts, such as social prescribing, are already implicitly covered in the SG’s “pillar” of “mobilizing the health sector” to address loneliness and social isolation (Murthy, 2023: 50). Although approaches of “social prescribing,” discussed by Murthy, could be employed with respect of religious communities as well, a universal “prescription” is not advisable here. People make religious commitments on the grounds of values, systems of meaning, truth claims, evidence, relationships, experiences, etc. However, for those who do already positively identify with a religious tradition, communal participation could

potentially be encouraged in an ethical and responsible manner, and participation in other forms of community life could likewise be encouraged for those who are not religious (VanderWeele et al., 2022).

Of course, the federal and state governments already indirectly subsidize religious life through their extension of tax-exempt status to religious communities. Nonetheless, governments could begin to do more to promote religious participation through public messaging about the effects on flourishing of religious participation (in an appropriately inclusive sense) might well encourage many of the nearly 50% of Americans who identify with a religious tradition but don't actively participate in it to consider returning to their faith communities.

Finally, and more controversially, if the repeal of Sunday-closing laws has depressed religious service attendance, cities or counties could explore reviving them. This idea is not as radical as it might at first appear: such laws were not only once common throughout the United States, but also remain common in parts of the developed world, including Germany (“Gezetz über den Ladenschluß”) and France (Reuters, 2015). Moreover, they have the added benefit of serving as pro-worker measures to ensure that everyone, including wage-laborers, has a regular day of rest not only for worship, but also for time with family and friends.

Even apart from the political and cultural headwinds facing any effort to revive Sunday-closing laws, such reforms would doubtless have to be reimaged for a society in which many consumption and leisure activities have migrated online and into the home, from movie theaters to streaming services or from malls to Amazon. Nonetheless, even partial and local efforts – which were upheld as constitutional in the Supreme Court’s *McGowan vs. Maryland* (1961) – could bear fruit, and could build momentum toward more coordinated state or federal action targeting border-crossing, Web-based technologies.

Finally, and perhaps most challengingly, we need to find ways to better convey, in a generous and inclusive spirit, that institutions such as marriage and religious community still profoundly matter for human flourishing, and in fact are more important than comparable (or rival) institutions and practices. The belief all relationships or communities are created equal is a prime example of a “luxury belief,” namely “ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes” (Henderson, 2022). The well-educated and well-off are the most likely of all Americans to have stable marriages and to enjoy the social, moral, and spiritual support of a religious community (Case & Deaton, 2020: 165-84), but the key institutions they dominate – the academy, prestige media, the entertainment industry – are on the whole either indifferent or actively hostile to marriage and religion. Nonetheless, the evils fostered by the collapse of marriage and religious communities arguably weigh most heavily, not on the most advantaged Americans, but on poor and less-educated men, women, and children. We need more married and religious professors, pundits, and producers who are willing to publicly endorse what they practice in private.

VI. Conclusion

Our aim in this document on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation is intended merely to supplement the already powerful analysis and set of recommendations found in the SG’s Advisory. Several of the topics that are well-covered in the Advisory, such as the epidemic’s scale

or public health costs, we have not touched upon here. Rather, we hope to have shown that since the scope of the crisis is so wide, its resolution will require yet more thoroughgoing and potentially costly efforts – though often ultimately healing and humanizing ones – to supplement those that the Advisory so helpfully suggests.

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