Remember the media panic from the summer of 2006 about lonely and isolated Americans? The publication of a sociological study had unleashed a cascade of headlines such as:

- "Americans' circle of friends is shrinking, new study shows" (from Science Daily)
- "The lonely American just got a little bit lonelier" (from the New York Times)
- "Study: 25% of Americans have no one to confide in" (from USA Today)

In the study (by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears), a representative sample of Americans from 1985 and 2004 answered the question, "Looking back over the last six months - who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?"

The results seemed to show that Americans had become much more isolated over those two decades. In 2004, nearly 25% said they discussed important matters with no one, compared to 10% in 1985. The average number of people named in answer to that question dropped, too. In 1985, it was about 3 people; by 2004, it was just 2. That's a decrease of about one-third - by sociological standards, a huge change over a relatively short historical period.

Sociological skeptics spoke out, but garnered little media attention. Claude Fischer reported that within the same surveys, answers to other questions did not seem to paint a picture of increasingly isolated Americans. For example, when asked how often they spend a social evening with neighbors, relatives, or friends beyond the neighborhood, the answers changed hardly at all from 1985 to 2004. The same was true for answers to the question, "How many close friends would you say you have?" The number did not shrink over time.
Now, a new study also suggests that Americans are not becoming more socially isolated. In fact, as of 2007, we have more friends than we did in 2002. I'm not just talking about faux friends or Facebook "you're a friend if I say you are" friends. Here's the precise question a national sample of Americans answered in 2002 and 2007:

"How many friends outside of your household do you have that you see or speak to at least once a week?"

Authors Hua Wang and Barry Wellman found that in both 2002 and 2007, only 5% of American adults said that they had no friends they saw or spoke to at least once a week. (Remember that McPherson reported that nearly 25% of Americans were isolated in 2004.) The friendship study authors also computed the median number of friends, and found that it was either 5 or 6. In their words:

"The average number of friends contacted face-to-face and by phone was substantial early in the decade, and it continued to be substantial. The number of friendships did not decline. Rather, it increased on average between 2002 and 2007 and increased the most for heavy Internet users."

Media panics about social isolation are nothing new. To quote Wang and Wellman again:

"Putnam (2000) looked back nostalgically from the 1990s to the 1960s and argued that Americans were 'bowling alone' because television watching was keeping people from community involvement. Likewise, in the 1960s, Stein (1960) and Nisbet looked back to the 1930s and mourned the decline of social connectivity. Yet in the 1930s, Wirth (1938) looked to preurban America and worried about the loss of social connectivity in transitory urban life."

Undoubtedly, many Americans are lonely, and their distress should not be dismissed or trivialized. But nor should the number of lonely people be overstated.

[A more detailed overview of this media panic can be found in this post at my Living Single blog at Psychology Today. A discussion of various reactions to that post can be found here at my new personal blog, Bella DePaulo's blog. Also on that blog is a guest post by Claude Fischer, "Inventing Friendship."]

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