



US Surgeon General: Loneliness is a public health crisis

A new report by the USA's leading public health advocate calls for widespread efforts to address social isolation. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.

For the Surgeon General's report see <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

The USA has an “epidemic of loneliness”, according to a new advisory from the Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy. “Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health”, Murthy warns. “It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death.” Its impact on mortality is equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, the report says. Approximately half of American adults experience loneliness, according to the report, making it more pervasive than other health threats such as obesity, diabetes, and smoking. During the past two decades, young people aged 15–24 years have experienced the most severe decline in social connection—spending 70% less in-person time with friends. The COVID-19 pandemic only made this trend worse, according to the report.

The report also describes the consequences of social isolation among certain groups. For example, isolated older adults are more likely to require hospitalisation and nursing home care, increasing Medicare spending by about US\$6.7 billion annually. Adolescents

who lack positive relationships with their peers and adults are more likely to have poor academic outcomes. The findings may not surprise mental health experts. “We have hundreds of studies that show the relationship between social connection and our physical health”, said Arthur Evans, Chief Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association. “But we’ve never had a Surgeon General use his platform to say how important social connections are to our health and wellbeing.”

The Surgeon General is a national public health advocate nominated by the President and approved by the US Senate. The role includes explaining how Americans can minimise illness and injuries and take steps to improve their health. The Surgeon General also supervises the 6000 members of the US Public Health Service. Past Surgeon General reports have addressed a range of issues, including smoking, maternal health, sexual health, suicide prevention, child abuse, indoor health risks, walkable communities, and opioid addiction.

Murthy proposes a national strategy to promote social connections and diminish loneliness. Recommendations are targeted to a dozen stakeholders, including health systems, government, employers, schools, families, and caregivers. Local governments are encouraged to make social infrastructure a priority in transportation, education, housing, and other public programmes to foster social connection. They also need to ensure access for all groups, especially those vulnerable communities that have experienced health-care inequities. In health care, providers should be trained to recognise the physical and mental health benefits of social connection. Insurers should reimburse

providers for addressing patients’ concern about social isolation. Educators and school administrators should offer programmes to help students develop social skills and peer relationships, with support from parents and school staff. Other recommendations are tailored for workplaces, community organisations, parents and caregivers, and technology companies.

Georges Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association, welcomed this holistic approach. “It is not simply a matter of people only getting the psychological and mental health supports that they need, because we tend to medicalise everything”, he said. “The solution to loneliness is to help people not be lonely...it’s all about creating a society where people don’t want to be shut in.”

Phyllis Vine, a historian whose recent book explores how activists propelled mental health reforms, said the report is “a remarkable contribution to the building blocks of community wellbeing” and a wake-up call to restore arts and sports in schools, and programmes for older adults, to secure “the relationships that sustain us”.

The report calls for more funding for collaborative research to implement and evaluate the recommendations, said Anthony Ong, a psychology professor at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, who reviewed a draft of the report. But he acknowledged that the advisory is not a binding policy document and does not mandate timelines or targets. “These recommendations should be seen as a starting point—rather than an endpoint—for addressing the epidemic of loneliness and isolation.”

Susan Jaffe



US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy