



Survey Center  
on American Life

# Disconnected

The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life

**Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler**



A Project of the American Enterprise Institute

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# Executive Summary

At one time, American social and civic life was characterized by robust networks of social connections and activities. But in the years following the pandemic, which curtailed social opportunities and community activities, there are few signs of recovery. The American Social Capital Survey reveals that American civic life continues on a downward slide, with dwindling social ties and fewer Americans reporting membership in social and civic organizations. Two key institutions—labor unions and religious organizations—have experienced a dramatic decline in membership. This has coincided with a rapid contraction of Americans’ social networks: Americans have fewer close friendships and fewer people to rely on for social support, whether it’s a ride to work, care, or financial help.

The report also reveals a growing class divide in Americans’ social activities, support, and membership. Thirty years ago, Americans with college degrees had as

many close friends as those with less formal education, but the social circumstances of both groups have changed dramatically. Today, college-educated Americans have far more close friends than those with no college experience have. Among Americans with a high school education or less, 24 percent report having no close friends. There are notable racial disparities, as well. Black Americans without college degrees have some of the worst social and civic outcomes of any group.

Americans without a college education are also more likely to live in civic deserts—places with limited access to public and private gathering spaces like parks, coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, and community centers. As formal social, civic, and religious organizations struggle for members, informal gathering places have become more important, perhaps contributing to the class divide in social and civic life.

# Disconnected

## The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life

**Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler**

American social and civic life was once defined by diverse clubs, groups, and organizations. However, it has declined by every conceivable measure since the mid-20th century.<sup>1</sup> Today's Americans have fewer civic opportunities—that is, places, institutions, groups, programs, and activities in which they can experience community life.<sup>2</sup> Americans participate in organized activities less often and join fewer community groups than they once did.<sup>3</sup>

Relatedly, Americans have smaller social networks and fewer friends, and they spend less time with their friends, neighbors, and family members.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs has led Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to declare the United States is facing an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation.”<sup>5</sup>

But America's civic decline has not affected all groups equally. Americans with college degrees often reside in communities with abundant civic opportunities and thriving civic cultures. They participate in associational life at high rates and have robust social and friendship networks.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the relational lives of Americans without college degrees have contracted dramatically—compared to Americans with these degrees today and without them in the past.<sup>7</sup> Two institutions that were formerly crucial sources of civic connectedness for less educated Americans, unions and churches, are now more likely to serve college graduates.

Other civic opportunities are becoming stratified along educational lines. Americans with a high school education or less are more likely to live in civic deserts, lacking commercial places (e.g., coffee shops) and public places (e.g., community centers, parks, and libraries) that are hubs of community connection.<sup>8</sup> Partly as a result, these Americans are less likely to participate in associational life and more likely to be socially isolated. As Timothy P. Carney writes in *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse*, associational life has apparently become “a high-end good” that most people can't access.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the importance of community and relationships to human flourishing, there are substantial gaps in our understanding of how race and class constrain opportunities for community connection.<sup>10</sup> This report aims to build on previous social capital research by documenting the racial and class divisions in social capital creation, including in civic opportunity, participation, membership, friendship, and social support. Our research is based on a large national survey of more than 6,500 American adults. We conducted follow-up qualitative interviews with 20 survey respondents to contextualize and extend the survey's findings.

This survey's findings meaningfully contribute to the research on Americans' changing communal and relational lives. The educational gap has persisted—and

**Figure 1. College-Educated Americans Spend More Time in Public Spaces**

*Percentage of Americans who visit the following public spaces*

● At Least a Few Times per Month    ● A Few Times per Year    ● Seldom    ● Never

#### **A Local Public Library**

High School or Less



Bachelor's Degree or Higher



#### **A Local Park, Playground, or Garden**

High School or Less



Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

even expanded—since we published our previous survey research, and it is *the* dividing line across nearly every domain of social capital we measure. We find substantial disparities by educational attainment and race: For instance, black Americans without college degrees are significantly more disconnected than every other group in American life. For Americans without degrees—particularly black Americans—the civic opportunities, responsibilities, and relationships that imbue life with meaning seem increasingly out of reach.

### **Visiting Public Places: Parks, Gardens, Libraries, and Community Spaces**

Public libraries and parks are two of the most important parts of the country's social infrastructure. Although Americans are free to use any of the country's thousands of public parks and libraries, their use of these taxpayer-funded spaces is stratified by education: College graduates take advantage of them far more than everyone else. (See Figure 1.)

**Public Parks.** The public spaces that most Americans report having access to are parks, dog parks, and community gardens. Fifty percent of Americans report they can go to these places to be around their neighbors. Still, many Americans do not spend much time at parks: Nearly half (49 percent) of the public report they have “never” or “seldom” visited one in the past 12 months. More than one in five (21 percent) Americans report visiting parks “a few times a year.” Only 15 percent of Americans report visiting parks once a week or more often.

There is a stark educational divide in Americans' use of public parks. Nearly four in 10 (37 percent) college-educated Americans visited a park or community garden at least once a month in the past year. In contrast, less than one in four (23 percent) Americans without any college education report spending time at a park or community garden in the past month. More than one-third (34 percent) of Americans with a high school education or less say they never visited a park in the previous 12 months, compared to 16 percent of Americans with a college degree.

**Libraries.** Public libraries—often celebrated for their capacity to nurture civic life and bolster community participation—are not as widely used as parks. Sixty-three percent of Americans report “never” or “seldom” visiting a library in the past 12 months, and 18 percent say they visit only “a few times a year.” Just 17 percent of Americans report visiting a library at least once or twice a month.

Much like in Americans’ use of parks, there is a substantial educational divide in their use of public libraries. Close to half (45 percent) of college graduates but only about one-quarter (27 percent) of Americans with a high school degree or less report having visited a library at least a few times in the past 12 months. Slightly more than half (53 percent) of Americans with a four-year degree report “seldom” or “never” visiting a library, compared to 72 percent of those without any college experience. Notably, nearly half (46 percent) of Americans with a high school education or less report never having visited a library in the past 12 months.

Among college graduates, women demonstrate a greater propensity for visiting public libraries, perhaps reflecting their greater interest in reading.<sup>11</sup> More than half (52 percent) of college-educated women report they visited a library at least a few times in the past 12 months. Roughly four in 10 (41 percent) college-educated men report having done so.

The educational divide in library use is even wider among parents. College-educated parents, especially mothers, are far more likely than other Americans to take advantage of their public library. Among Americans with college degrees, 63 percent of mothers (and 51 percent of fathers) report they went to the library at least a few times in the past 12 months. In contrast, only 35 percent of mothers with a high school education or less visited the public library that often. Even fewer fathers with a high school education or less (25 percent) went to a public library at least a few times in the past 12 months.

**Commercial and Public Gathering Places.** When they are not at home or work, Americans spend time at various public and commercial “third places.” These include parks, public gardens, restaurants, bars, libraries, and community centers. However, not all Americans report that these places are hubs for community interaction. This may be due to a myriad of factors, including geographic challenges (e.g., few gathering places in the community), cultural issues (e.g., perceptions of non-belonging), and financial concerns (e.g., the expense of going out).<sup>12</sup>

Of the various commercial spaces in the US, restaurants and diners are mentioned most often by Americans as places where they can congregate with neighbors and other community members. Less than half of Americans report that people in their community can gather in restaurants or diners (46 percent), coffee shops or cafés (41 percent), gyms or fitness centers (37 percent), and local markets or corner stores (35 percent). Relatively few Americans report they can spend time with their neighbors in bookstores or other retail spaces (20 percent) and barbershops or hair salons (22 percent).

The extent to which different public spaces actually serve the public varies considerably. At least some of the discrepancy in Americans’ use of public infrastructure may come down to access. Americans with college degrees are significantly more likely than those with less formal education to say they live in a neighborhood with a variety of public spaces. Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) college-educated Americans report they can congregate with friends or neighbors at a neighborhood park or garden, compared to 41 percent of Americans with a high school education or less. Similarly, college-educated Americans are significantly more likely than those without a degree to say libraries or community centers serve as gathering spots for people in their neighborhood (43 percent vs. 29 percent). (See Figure 2.)

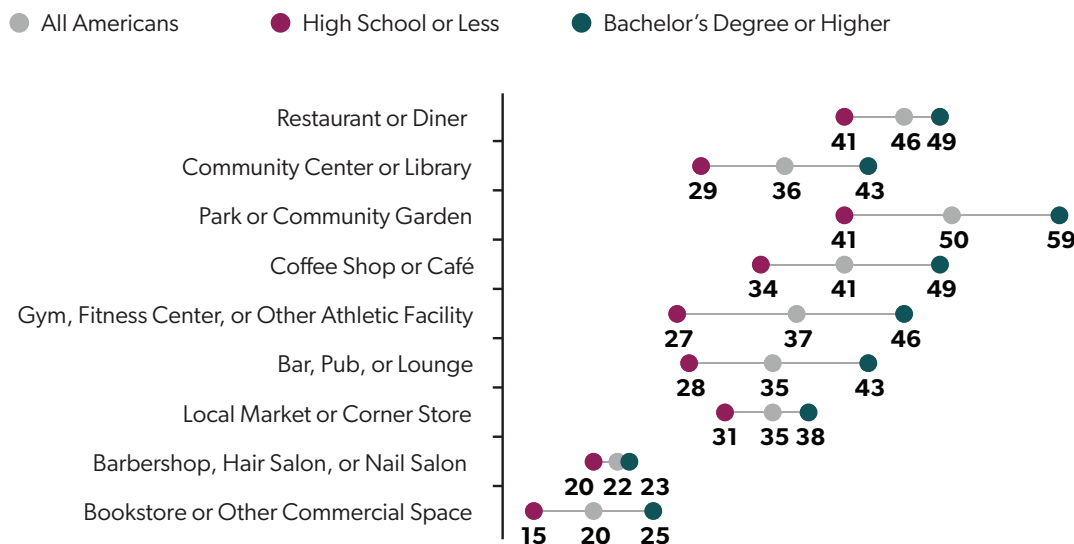
Likewise, commercial spaces that serve as gathering places for *everyone* in the community are the exception, not the rule. For instance, college graduates are more likely than those with a high school degree or less to identify gyms or fitness centers (46 percent vs. 27 percent), coffee shops (49 percent vs. 34 percent), and bars (43 percent vs. 28 percent) as places where they can encounter people in their community. Restaurants and diners stand out as commercial spaces that a significant portion of both college graduates and those without degrees (49 percent and 41 percent, respectively) cite as neighborhood gathering spots, perhaps reflecting these spaces’ diversity and ubiquity in the American landscape.

Regarding which places Americans say are important gathering places in their community, there are no significant differences across race and ethnicity. However, black Americans are the most likely racial group to cite barbershops and hair salons as places where they can gather with neighbors and community members (29 percent).

**Civic Access.** To understand how public and commercial spaces serve as local community gathering spots, we developed an additive index, the Civic Infrastructure Scale,

**Figure 2. College Graduates Report Having More Community Spaces to Gather with Neighbors**

*Percentage of Americans who report various places they can go to be around neighbors or talk to people in their neighborhood*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

measuring 10 types of commercial and public spaces that could be hubs of community activity. The result produced a composite measure with 10 values (zero to 10) that we recoded to create four discrete categories representing how many types of spaces Americans could use to gather with their neighbors: No access, minimal access, moderate access, and extensive access.

More than one in five (21 percent) Americans live in communities with no access to these 10 types of commercial and public spaces. These Americans report having nowhere to meet or talk to their neighbors—no neighborhood hangs, public places, or commercial spaces. Thirty-six percent of Americans have minimal access, meaning they have at least one type of place to gather with neighbors but no more than three. More than one in four (26 percent) Americans have moderate access to public and commercial places (four to six types of places) to spend time with people in their community, and 18 percent have extensive access to these spaces (i.e., access to seven or more types).

Consistent with previous research on the geography of neighborhood amenities, there are considerable divisions in civic access across categories of educational attainment. Americans with a high school education

or less are twice as likely as those with a college degree to have no access to a civic space (28 percent vs. 14 percent). More than half (51 percent) of college graduates have moderate or maximal access to commercial and public spaces, compared to only 35 percent of Americans without a college education.

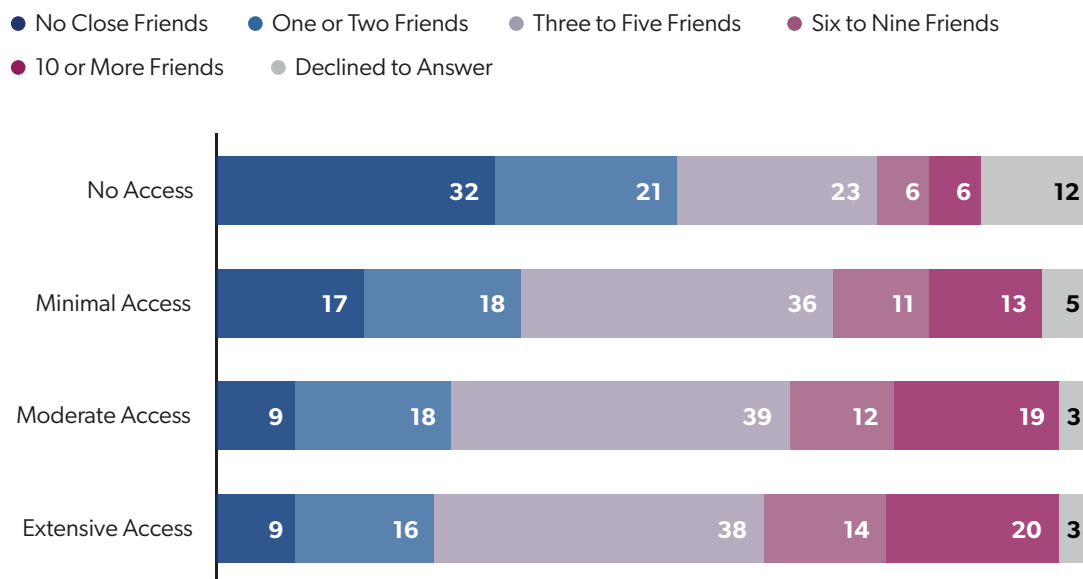
The density of civic infrastructure and the robustness of American friendship networks correspond remarkably closely. Americans with less access to civic infrastructure—such as parks, coffee shops, and libraries—have many fewer friends and report greater difficulty making social connections. Americans with no access to public or commercial places are more than three times more likely than those with the most access to report having no close friends (32 percent vs. 9 percent). (See Figure 3.)

Many interviewees could not identify any place they could go to be around their neighbors. Faith, a 27-year-old college graduate, said,

I feel like you would have to go really out of your way to meet people, you know. Generally speaking, nobody's just hanging outside, you know. I have seen people, like, on occasion, you know, going in as I'm coming out or something like that.

**Figure 3. Americans with More Places to Gather Have More Close Friends**

*Percentage of Americans with different levels of civic access who report having the following numbers of close friends*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

### Neighborhood Interactions

The social experience of neighborhoods is not simply confined to designated public and commercial places that serve residents. Neighborhoods are also experienced in the streets, on the sidewalks, in chance encounters among neighbors, and at the local gatherings and events that neighbors organize.<sup>13</sup> However, the frequency of neighborhood interactions and the time Americans spend out and about in their neighborhoods vary widely. As America's neighborhoods have become more segregated along class lines—and remained highly segregated along racial lines—the public experience there has followed the same patterns.

**Walking the Neighborhood.** For most Americans, walking around their neighborhood is a common experience. Overall, 55 percent of Americans report taking neighborhood walks once or more per month, including 39 percent who report taking them at least once per week. Thirteen percent of Americans say they walk around their neighborhood a few times a year, while approximately three in 10 (31 percent) “seldom” or “never” take walks.

Except in rural areas, the type of community where Americans live does not seem to greatly affect how often they stroll around their neighborhood. More than six in 10 (63 percent) Americans who live in a dense city center report walking around their neighborhood at least once or twice a month. Nearly as many Americans (58 percent) who live in spacious suburbs—with single-family homes and large yards—report taking a walk that often. Americans who live in rural communities walk far less frequently: Only 33 percent say they walk around their neighborhood at least once or twice a month.

Americans with a college degree are far more likely to report walking around their neighborhood at least once or twice a month than are those with a high school education or less (69 percent vs. 42 percent). Relatedly, Americans without a college degree are more than twice as likely as college graduates to report “seldom” or “never” taking walks in their neighborhood (43 percent vs. 18 percent).

Neighborhood walking has a racial gap that cuts across educational background but is especially pronounced among those with a college education. White Americans with college degrees walk around their neighborhoods significantly more than any other group. Nearly

three-quarters of white college graduates (73 percent) take neighborhood walks at least once per month—including 56 percent who take them once or more per week—while only 47 percent of black Americans with college degrees report taking neighborhood walks once or more per month. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of black Americans with college degrees report “seldom” or “never” taking walks, compared to just 15 percent of college-educated whites.

**Conversations with Neighbors.** Americans still have conversations with people in their community they do not know well, but not frequently. Less than half (47 percent) of Americans report speaking with a neighbor they do not know well at least a few times per year. Only about one-quarter (26 percent) report having these conversations once or more per month. In contrast, half (50 percent) of Americans report “seldom” or “never” talking to someone in their community they don’t know well.

Not surprisingly, Americans who take more regular walks around their neighborhood are more likely to strike up conversations with neighbors, even with those they do not know well. Among Americans who regularly (at least a couple times a week) walk their neighborhood, 44 percent say they talk with neighbors they do not know well at least once or twice a month. In contrast, Americans who stroll less often—only a few times a year—are far less likely to engage in this activity. Only 19 percent of these Americans say they talk with people in their neighborhood whom they do not know well at least once or twice a month.

White Americans with college degrees are the most likely to have these conversations. More than six in 10 (61 percent) white college grads report conversing with neighbors they do not know well at least a few times per year—including 34 percent who do so once or more per month—while 38 percent “seldom” or “never” have these conversations. Hispanic and black Americans are far less likely to converse with strangers, a pattern that holds at every level of educational attainment. Among those with college degrees, more than half (53 percent) of Hispanics and half of blacks “seldom” or “never” converse with community members they don’t know well. Among those without college degrees, 66 percent of Hispanics and 58 percent of blacks report “seldom” or “never” having these conversations.

### Do Neighborhood Interactions Increase Trust?

Neighborhood interactions and social trust are strongly linked. Americans who walk around their neighborhood

more than once a week are much more likely than those who seldom or never do to say they can generally trust people (39 percent vs. 21 percent). Note that this connection is far stronger among those who at least occasionally engage their neighbors in conversation, which suggests these social interactions are a crucial component of trust. Americans who are predisposed to trust others might also feel more comfortable walking around their neighborhoods and engaging with people they do not know well. Notably, the relationship between neighborhood walks and social trust is stronger among Americans without a college education.

In the interviews, we heard firsthand about how a lack of social trust might inhibit social interactions among neighbors. One interviewee, Sarah, a 37-year-old from Pennsylvania, said past negative encounters with neighbors had made her wary of extending herself.

I’m kind of introverted, so I don’t really like talking to people very often and introducing myself. I kind of just tend to stick to myself, especially since I had a lot of issues with neighbors in the past. Moving here, I just kind of don’t bother.

### Unattached: America’s Continuing Civic Slide

If America was a nation of joiners when Alexis de Tocqueville toured America in the 1830s, it is certainly not today. Most Americans are not joining groups. Despite the decline in religious membership over the past three decades, Americans are still more likely to be members of religious organizations (33 percent) than of any other group.

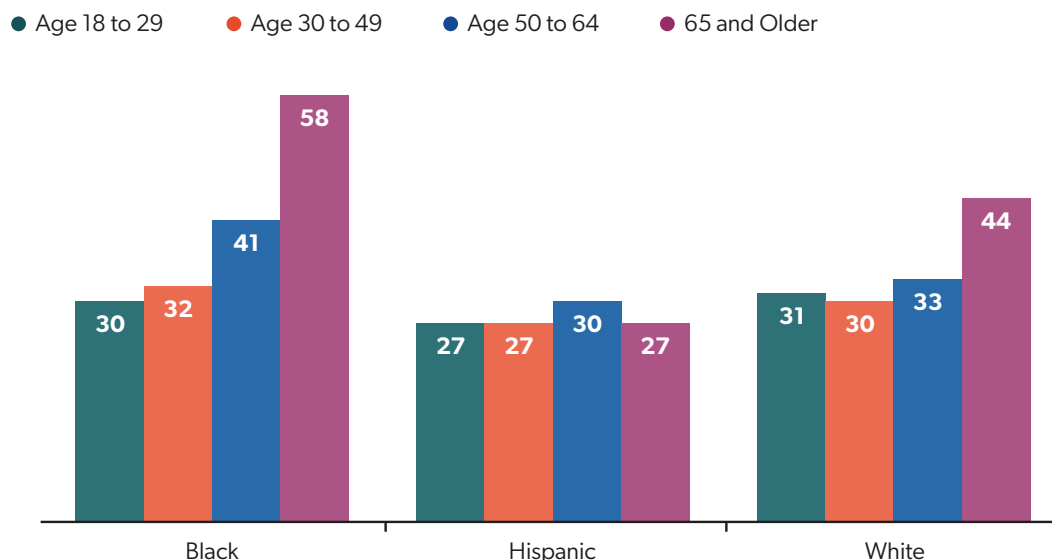
Beyond religion, Americans join little. Fewer than one in 10 (7 percent) Americans today are members of labor unions. Fewer than two in 10 Americans belong to each of the following community groups: hobby or activity groups (17 percent), neighborhood associations (15 percent), and sports leagues or workout groups (only 10 percent). Just 16 percent of Americans belong to parent groups or youth organizations.

The drop in organizational membership has not affected all Americans evenly. Americans with college degrees continue to join at relatively high rates. Americans without degrees, in contrast, are increasingly unattached.

**Churches and Places of Worship.** Religious organizations are the only group that more than 10 percent of Americans with high school degrees or less education

**Figure 4. The Black Generational Gap in Religious Membership**

*Percentage of Americans who identify as members of a church or religious organization*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

join (27 percent). Indeed, Americans with a high school degree or less are at least three times more likely to belong to a religious group than to join any other type of group. Yet their college-educated peers are significantly more likely to be members of religious congregations (39 percent).

There are pronounced educational gaps in religious membership among and within racial groups. Black Americans join religious organizations at higher rates than all other racial groups. However, black Americans have the largest educational divide in religious membership: Nearly half (47 percent) of black Americans with college degrees belong to religious groups, compared to just 30 percent of blacks with high school degrees or less. Hispanics, in contrast, have the lowest religious membership rates of any racial or ethnic group. Just 31 percent of Hispanics with college degrees identify with religious groups, while only 24 percent of Hispanics with high school degrees or less are members.

Young adults are considerably less likely than seniors to belong to a church or religious organization. Only 28 percent of young adults are members of these organizations, compared to 43 percent of seniors. Notably, the generational gap in religious membership varies

widely among different racial and ethnic groups. White Americans mirror the public overall. About one in three (31 percent) white young adults are members of a church or place of worship, significantly fewer than white seniors (44 percent).

Across generations, Hispanics report consistently low rates of religious membership. Identical shares of Hispanic young people (27 percent) and seniors (27 percent) report they belong to a church or religious organization. The same generational divide among black Americans is evident in religious affiliation over the past couple of decades.<sup>14</sup> While 58 percent of black seniors report being a member of a church or religious organization, only 30 percent of young blacks say the same. (See Figure 4.)

**The Changing Demographics of Union Membership.** Despite rising public support for labor unions in recent years, union membership remains at a historic low.<sup>15</sup> Only 7 percent of Americans report they belong to a union.

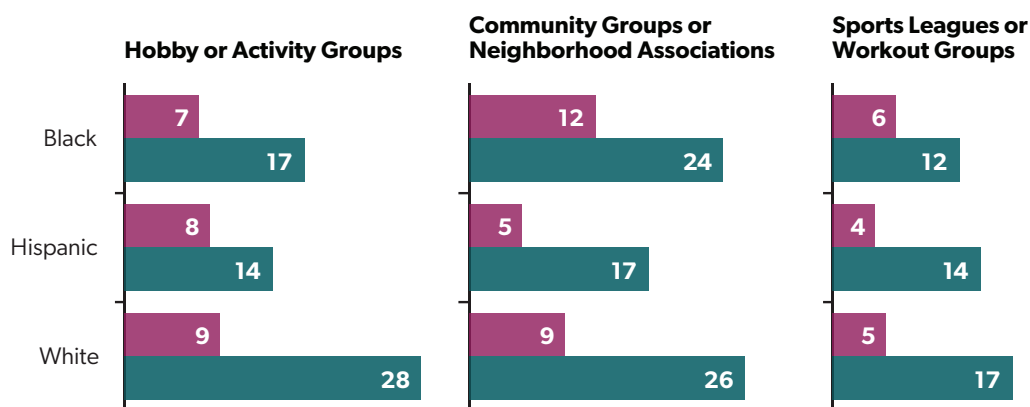
Union membership was once concentrated among workers in professions like construction, mining, and manufacturing that typically include men without college

**Figure 5. Pronounced Educational Gaps in Community Group Membership**

*Percentage of Americans who are currently members of . . .*

● High School or Less

● Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

degrees. Today, the gender gap in union membership has disappeared, and the educational divide has flipped. Union membership is now most common among those with advanced degrees, particularly women. Americans with *postgraduate* degrees are nearly twice as likely as those without any college education to belong to a union (11 percent vs. 6 percent). Among women with advanced degrees, 16 percent report they are union members, more than twice the share of men with a high school education or less who are members (7 percent).

### **The Educational Gap in Community Membership.**

The starkest educational divide in membership is in non-religious community groups. Americans with college degrees join these groups approximately three times as much as their peers with high school degrees or less. In particular, college-educated Americans are more likely than those with less education to be members of hobby or activity groups (25 percent vs. 9 percent), community groups or neighborhood associations (24 percent vs. 9 percent), and sports leagues or workout groups (16 percent vs. 5 percent). (See Figure 5.)

The educational divide varies somewhat across racial and ethnic groups. White college graduates are far more likely than Hispanic and black graduates to be members of hobby or activity groups, but the racial divide in membership is significantly smaller in sports leagues and

community groups. Hispanics at all levels of educational attainment consistently have the lowest rates of membership in community groups. Though blacks at all educational levels have relatively low rates of group membership overall, they have notably high rates of membership in neighborhood associations.

Parents with college degrees, particularly those with postgraduate degrees too, are the most likely to be involved in parent groups and youth organizations. Parents with college degrees join these groups at nearly four times the rate of parents with high school degrees or less (23 percent vs. 6 percent), while those with advanced degrees are nearly five times more likely to join (27 percent). These findings are consistent with decades of research on parental involvement: The more education Americans have, the more likely they are to invest time in their children's activities.<sup>16</sup>

Mothers with college degrees join parent groups and youth organizations at staggeringly higher rates. About one in three (32 percent) college-educated mothers report being members of a youth organization or parent group, compared to 15 percent of fathers and only 6 percent of parents with high school degrees or less. College-educated mothers are also much more likely to interact with neighbors at schools or playgrounds than are college-educated fathers (68 percent vs. 50 percent).

## Civic Participation: Attending Local Meetings and Events, Volunteering, and Hosting

Scholars have documented a broad-based decline of American civic and community life that extends beyond membership.<sup>17</sup> Today, regular attendance at local events and participation in community activities have become exceptions rather than norms. Overall, relatively few Americans report participating in local meetings, attending community events, or volunteering regularly. Fewer than half (44 percent) of Americans say they attend a social event in their community, such as a high school football or basketball game, even a few times a year. Even fewer Americans say they volunteer (28 percent) or attend a meeting (33 percent) in their community at least a few times a year.

Even if Americans have a civic spirit, a lack of resources can limit their ability to volunteer. Paul, an unemployed 47-year-old from Texas, desires to more actively participate in community life but faces transportation barriers. Of volunteering, he said, “I wanna do more. I am still trying for Social Security, ‘cause I’ve tried to work . . . and I can’t physically [or] mentally do it anymore.” He continued,

Once I get an income, like, and I get a vehicle, like, I’m gonna go, like, volunteer somewhere—just to do something for other people, you know. Just wanna volunteer ‘cause I like to, but I can’t because of limited funds and transportation.

In communities with numerous college-educated Americans, especially with young children, America’s civic state is much more robust. Americans with four-year college degrees participate in local meetings, attend social events in their communities, and volunteer much more often. These educational advantages persist across racial and ethnic groups, among men and women, and regardless of community type.

Americans with four-year degrees are far more likely to volunteer in their communities than are those with less formal education. Thirty-nine percent of college graduates report they volunteer at least a few times a year, compared to 19 percent of those with a high school education or less. College-educated Americans are also more likely to attend local events or community meetings: 43 percent attend at least a few times a year, nearly twice the share of those with a high school education or less (23 percent). The gap in attending community social events is even wider. More than half (55 percent) of Americans with college degrees say

they attend a community social event at least a few times a year, compared to just 33 percent of Americans without college degrees.

Not only do Americans with college degrees participate in civic life more than Americans without degrees; many Americans with less formal education do not appear to participate at all. Nearly eight in 10 (79 percent) Americans without college degrees report that they seldom or never volunteer in their community. Three-quarters (75 percent) of these Americans seldom or never attend local events or community meetings. And nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of them seldom or never attend social events.

**Hosting Neighbors, Friends, and Family.** Most Americans still invite friends, family, or neighbors to their homes. Overall, two-thirds (66 percent) of Americans host friends, family, or neighbors at least a few times per year—including 37 percent who have guests at least once or twice a month. One-third (33 percent) of Americans seldom or never host people at their homes.

The educational divide in hosting friends, family, and neighbors is somewhat modest. Among college graduates, 42 percent report having people over to their home at least once or twice a month, compared to 33 percent of those with a high school degree or less. (See Figure 6.)

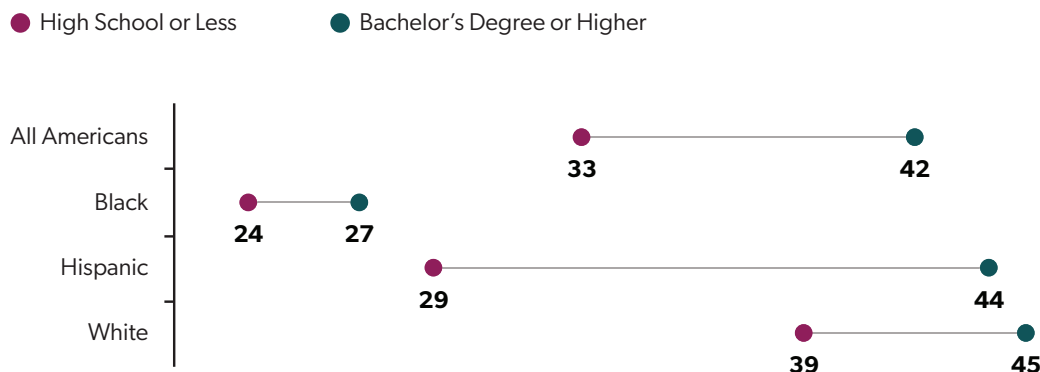
However, there are profound racial divisions in how frequently Americans host friends, family, and neighbors. Hispanics and whites with college degrees report having neighbors and friends over to their homes most frequently. More than four in 10 whites (45 percent) and Hispanics (44 percent) with college degrees host friends, family, or neighbors at least once or twice a month. In contrast, only 27 percent of blacks with four-year degrees report hosting once or more per month. Black Americans with a high school education or less are the least likely to have guests in their homes: Only 24 percent say they do this at least one or twice a month.

**Civic Superheroes: College-Educated Parents.** One group stands out for its relatively high levels of civic effort and community care: college-educated parents. Fully half (50 percent) of college-educated mothers and more than four in 10 (42 percent) college-educated fathers report volunteering in their community at least a few times a year. Nearly three in 10 (27 percent) college-educated mothers volunteer at least once or twice a month.

More than two-thirds of mothers and fathers with college degrees report they attend community social events at least a few times a year. Close to half (48 percent) of

**Figure 6. College-Educated Americans Host Friends and Neighbors More Often**

*Percentage of Americans who host friends, neighbors, and family at their home once or more per month*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).  
Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

college-educated mothers and a slightly smaller share (43 percent) of college-educated fathers participate in community meetings at least a few times a year. The educational gap in hosting neighbors, family, and friends is somewhat smaller but still significant. Half of college-educated mothers (50 percent) and fathers (48 percent) report entertaining guests at their home at least once or twice a month. (See Figure 7.)

Note that several factors may explain college-educated parents' high rates of civic involvement compared to parents without four-year degrees, including more free time, greater financial resources, and one parent not working, to name a few.

### American Friendships After the Pandemic

American friendship has contracted in recent years. In 2021, we found that American friendship circles were significantly smaller than a generation earlier. Three years later, with pandemic social restrictions behind us, we find that the size of American social networks has not recovered.

Today, 17 percent of Americans report having no close friends—a category that excludes close relatives. This is only a modest increase from 2021, when 12 percent of Americans reported they had no close friends.<sup>18</sup> Eighteen percent of Americans have one or two close friends. About one-third (34 percent) of Americans have three to

five close friends, and one-quarter (25 percent) have six or more.

The pandemic cast a long shadow on Americans' social lives. We spoke to Cheryl, a 54-year-old college graduate who moved to Florida at the start of the pandemic to care for her elderly mother. "Yeah, I would say the pandemic is probably why I don't know many people here or interact with many people here," she said.

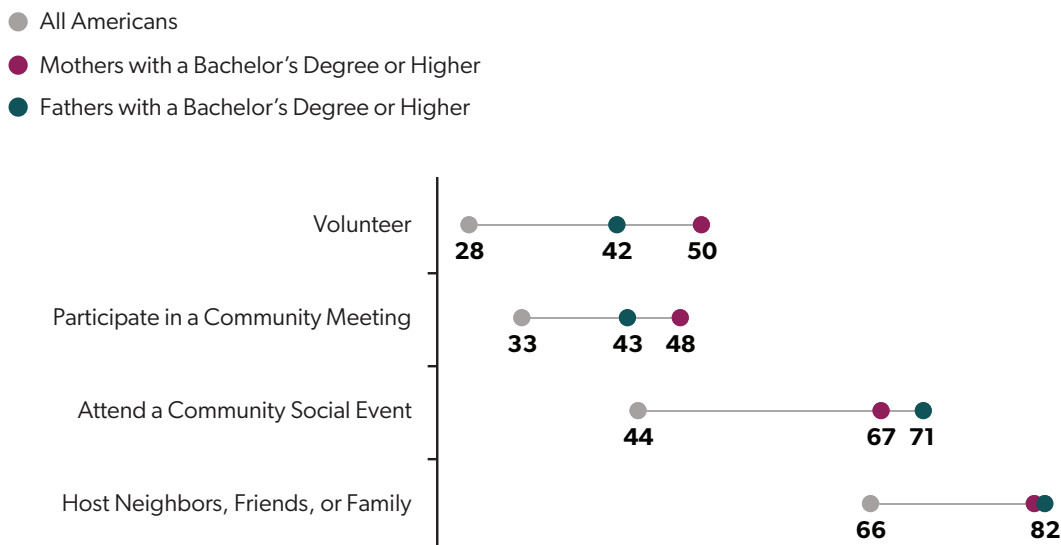
I'm still afraid to get too close to people. You know, if I caught COVID, it wouldn't be pretty, I don't think. And also, I have my mother, who's 86 years old; I definitely wouldn't want to give it to her. So I guess the pandemic is still affecting the way I interact with people.

The survey reveals a massive educational disparity in Americans' number of close friends. Roughly one in four (24 percent) Americans with a high school education or less report having no close friends, compared to only 10 percent of college graduates. College graduates are twice as likely as those without any college education to have at least six close friends (33 percent vs. 17 percent).

The educational gap in the size of American friendship circles is a relatively recent phenomenon. Roughly three decades ago, Americans with more formal education did not have larger social circles. In 1990, nearly half (49 percent) of Americans with a high school degree or less reported having at least six close friends—a slightly

**Figure 7. College-Educated Parents Are Civic Superheroes**

*Percentage of Americans engaging in civic activities at least a few times a year*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

greater share than those with a college degree—while only 3 percent reported having no close friends.<sup>19</sup> (See Figure 8.)

The educational divide in friendship is much more pronounced among black Americans. More than one in three (35 percent) black Americans with a high school education or less report having no close friends. Fewer Hispanics and white Americans without a high school education lack any close friends (25 percent and 19 percent, respectively). Similar shares of white (8 percent), Hispanic (7 percent), and black (11 percent) college graduates report they do not have a single close friend. (See Figure 9.)

Not only do Americans have fewer close friends than they once did; many of these friends do not live close by. One in four (25 percent) Americans report that most or all of their close friends live in their neighborhood or relatively nearby. Fifteen percent of Americans report that some of their close friends live nearby, while more than four in 10 (44 percent) say few or none of their close friends are within a short distance.

Multiple interviewees said their financial situation hurt their ability to socialize, a problem more acute among those without college degrees. Brandon, a 38-year-old living in Nevada, said that while he was satisfied with

the quality of his friendships, he could rely on few people for help if he faced a personal challenge. Two of his closest friends lived far away, in Canada and Connecticut, and maintaining friendships and making new friends had been difficult. “Relationships and friendships come and go,” he said.

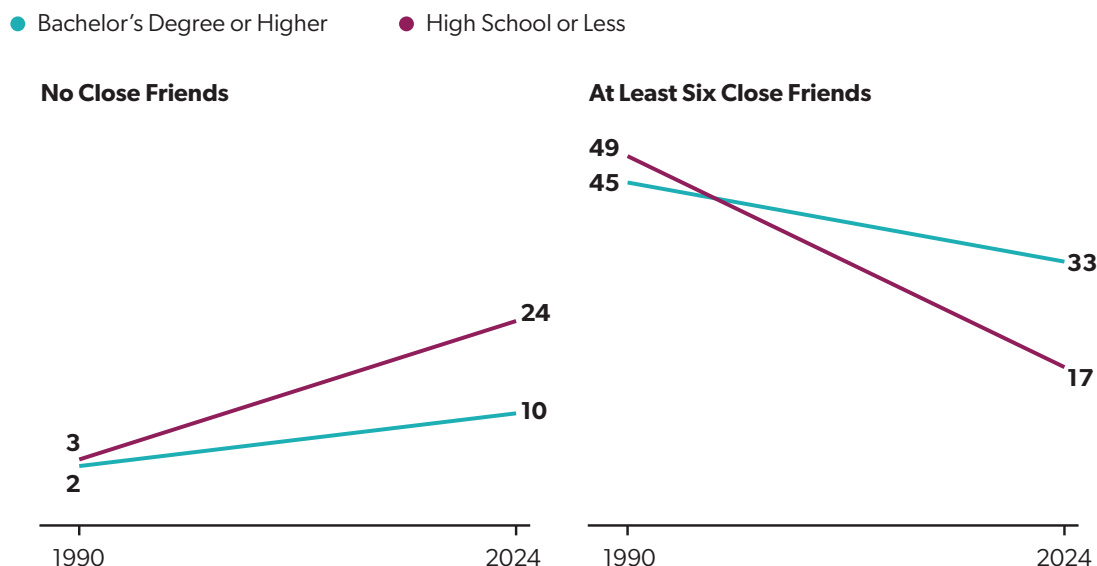
I found that most of the people who [were] coming to movie nights and stuff back in the day when I did them were only showing up for the free food and stuff like that. I also used to go to concerts with a lot of people. It turned out that I’d be buying the dinner, and then once my money went away, so did the people. So I suffered a lot of friendships back then because of that.

### On Whom Do Americans Rely, and for What?

Despite America’s weakening social ties, most Americans report having numerous people who can offer them social support. Roughly two-thirds of Americans say at least a couple people could give them a ride (66 percent), offer emotional support (66 percent), or help them move (65 percent). Six in 10 Americans say at least a few people would be willing to take them to a doctor’s appointment (61 percent) or offer them a place to stay for a few days (60 percent).

**Figure 8. The Growing Class Divide in American Friendship**

*Percentage of Americans who report having the following numbers of close friends*

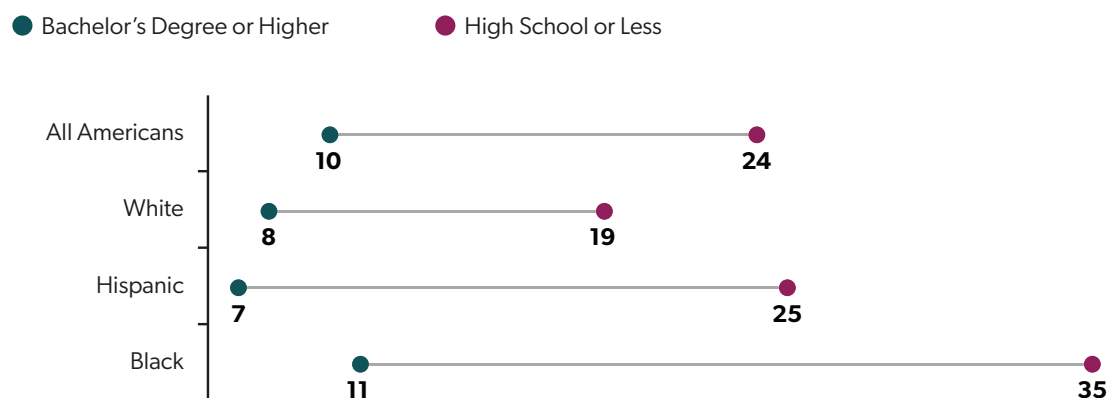


Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597). The Gallup survey was conducted over the telephone.

Source: Gallup, Gallup News Service Poll: January 1990, Wave 2, Cornell University, Roper Center, 1990, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/study/31088676>; and American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

**Figure 9. The Educational Divide in Friendship Is Most Pronounced Among Black Americans**

*Percentage of Americans who say they have no close friends*

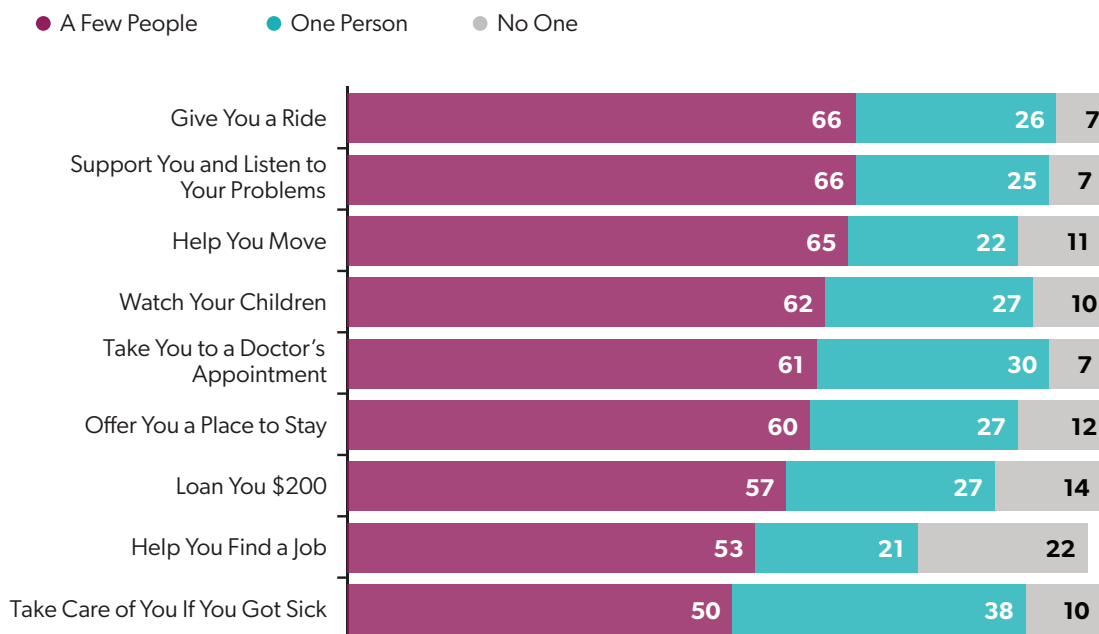


Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

**Figure 10. Most Americans Can Rely on at Least a Few People for Support**

*Percentage of Americans who report knowing multiple people who would . . .*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

Sixty-two percent of parents say they know at least a couple people who could watch their kids for a short time in an emergency. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say they could turn to a few people if they needed to borrow \$200. Only about half of Americans say they could turn to at least a couple people to help them find a new job (53 percent) or take care of them if they got sick (50 percent). (See Figure 10.)

We asked Andrew, a 37-year-old from Washington, whether he has people in his life he could rely on for support. He answered, “I guess if it was a money situation or something like that, then yes, there’s probably people I could turn to. If it was, like, an emotional deal, there’s not very many people I would turn to.”

**The Class Divide in Personal Support.** The robustness of Americans’ social support systems differs dramatically across the class divide. Overall, Americans with a college degree can rely on many more people to help them out in various ways. Seventy percent of college graduates report they know at least a couple people who would and could offer them a place to stay if needed.

Less than half (49 percent) of Americans without any college education report the same.

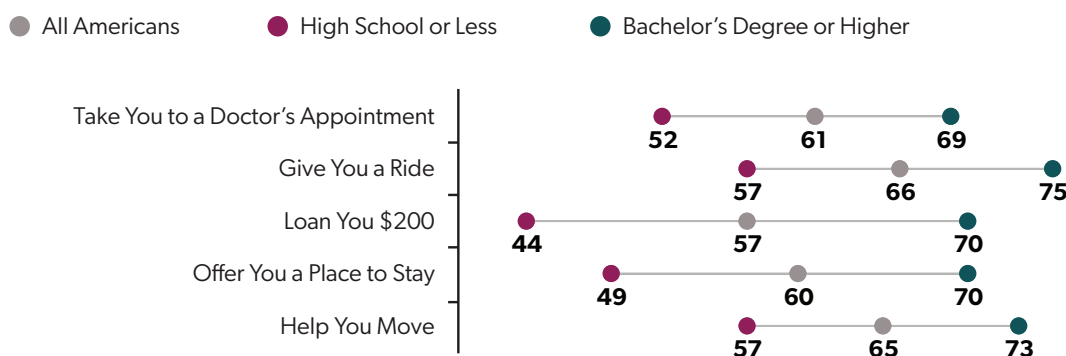
Even the basic act of getting a ride is more difficult for those without a degree. Three-quarters (75 percent) of college graduates report they could call on multiple people to give them a lift somewhere. Far fewer (57 percent) Americans without college degrees say the same.

There is a massive educational divide in Americans’ ability to borrow money from a friend. While 70 percent of college graduates say at least a couple people would loan them \$200, only 44 percent of those without a college degree say the same. More than one in five (21 percent) Americans with a high school education or less say there is no one from whom they could borrow this amount of money. (See Figure 11.)

The educational divide is also evident in the degree of emotional support available to Americans. Three-quarters of college-educated Americans say multiple people in their life would be willing to listen to their problems and support them. In contrast, 57 percent of Americans without a college degree report they could rely on numerous people for personal support.

**Figure 11. College Graduates Report Having More People They Can Rely on for Support**

*Percentage of Americans who report knowing multiple people who would be willing and able to . . .*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

There are crucial racial disparities in Americans' ability to rely on others for personal, financial, and logistical support. In general, white Americans have many more people they can rely on for help than black and Hispanic Americans have, regardless of their educational background. But these differences are especially stark among those without any college education.

White Americans with a high school education or less have stronger social support systems than black and Hispanic Americans with the same educational background have. A majority (55 percent) of white Americans without college degrees say multiple people would offer them a place to stay if they needed it, but only about four in 10 black (41 percent) and Hispanic (44 percent) Americans without college degrees say the same. Indeed, more than one in five (22 percent) black Americans without college degrees say no one could provide them with shelter if they needed it.

More than six in 10 (63 percent) white noncollege-educated Americans say they could count on at least a couple people to give them a ride if they needed one, while only about half of black (48 percent) and Hispanic (51 percent) Americans without college degrees say the same.

Black Americans are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to borrowing money from people in their social circle. More than half (51 percent) of white and roughly four in 10 (41 percent) Hispanic Americans without college degrees say multiple people could lend them \$200 if needed. Only 30 percent of black Americans with a high school education or less report that multiple people would or could loan them this amount.

**The Marriage Gap.** Older single men appear to have far weaker social support systems than older single women, married men, and married women have. Only 41 percent of single men age 30 or older say at least a couple people could take care of them if they got sick. In contrast, 57 percent of married women age 30 or older report they could count on multiple people to care for them if they got sick. Older single men are also far less likely than older married women to report that multiple people would support them and listen to their problems (57 percent vs. 72 percent).

### **The Social Benefits of Religious Membership.**

Americans who belong to a church or place of worship generally have more people they can count on for help and support than the religiously unaffiliated have. However, the religious membership gap in Americans' social support networks is largest among those with less formal education. Among Americans without a college education, members of a place of worship are much more likely than nonmembers to have multiple people who can take them to a doctor's appointment (63 percent vs. 49 percent), give them a lift (67 percent vs. 55 percent), loan them \$200 (53 percent vs. 42 percent), offer them a place to stay (59 percent vs. 46 percent), or help them move (68 percent vs. 54 percent).

Among Americans with a four-year college degree, those who belong to a church or place of worship do not have the same advantages over nonmembers. For instance, among Americans who are members of a church or place of worship, those with a college degree are not much more likely than those without one to have

multiple people who would offer them a place to stay if needed (74 percent vs. 68 percent).

Americans who are members of a religious congregation have more extensive friendship networks. Nearly half (48 percent) of Americans who belong to a place of worship report they have at least five close friends. In contrast, 35 percent of Americans without a religious community have this many close friendships. Compared to members of religious congregations, nonmembers are twice as likely to report having no close friends (20 percent vs. 10 percent).

The educational divide in friendship is significantly diminished among Americans who belong to a place of worship. More than one in four (27 percent) Americans with a high school degree or less who do not belong to a church or place of worship have no close friends. Meanwhile, 11 percent of college graduates who are not attached to a church or place of worship say they have no close friends. The educational gap is half this large among church members: Those with a high school degree or less are only somewhat more likely than those with a college degree to report having no close friendships (15 percent vs. 7 percent).

One interviewee, Robert, a 43-year-old high school graduate from Nebraska, reported having a large circle of friends and strong ties to his religious community.

Well, my parents attended [church] there when I was young, and I just kind of grew up there. I have a lot of friends, and actually, my employer is a church member. There are a lot of older people that, you know, I look up to and respect, and then there are people I grew up with that I'm good friends with and I work with. I'd say it's a pretty satisfying life that I live.

Although fewer Americans report belonging to a neighborhood church or place of worship today than did so in the past, religious membership is still closely tied to neighborhood friendships. Half (50 percent) of Americans who belong to a place of worship say at least some of their close friends live in their neighborhood or close by. In contrast, only about one-third (36 percent) of Americans who do not belong to a place of worship say at least some of their close friends live nearby.

### Parents, Spouses, and Partners: The People Who Support Us

By far, the first person most Americans turn to when facing a personal problem is a romantic partner or spouse.

Nearly half (49 percent) of Americans say they would first turn to their partner or spouse in this situation.

The next most common person Americans report they would contact when facing a personal challenge is a parent. According to 14 percent of Americans, their parents are the people they would first go to with a problem. Twelve percent of Americans say they would first turn to another family member, such as a sibling, while 11 percent say they would first turn to a close friend if they needed help. Only 4 percent of Americans report there is no one they could rely on for personal support.

Young adults (age 18 to 29) are most likely to rely on their parents: 42 percent say they would call first on their parents to help them handle a personal problem. But there are crucial racial and gender divisions among young people on this point. Young men are significantly more likely than young women to rely on their parents for personal support. Nearly half (46 percent) of young men, compared to 37 percent of young women, say they would go first to their parents with a personal problem.

Young women are significantly more likely than young men to rely on a partner or spouse for help with a personal problem (33 percent vs. 22 percent). Notably, young men are almost twice as likely as young women to say there is no one they could rely on for support (7 percent vs. 4 percent).

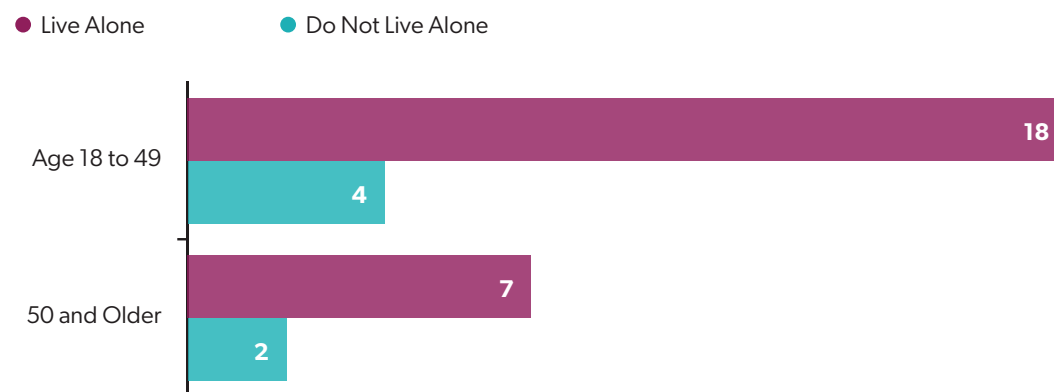
Young men's close reliance on their parents for personal support is partly because of their living situation. Young men are significantly more likely than young women to live at home with their parents, which may build trust and strengthen their bonds. Fifty-six percent of young men report living at home with their parents, compared to less than half (44 percent) of young women.

**Living Alone and Going Solo.** Importantly, living alone may limit Americans' social support. In general, Americans who live by themselves are more likely to say there is no one they could come to with a personal problem, but the gap is especially notable among younger Americans. Nearly one in five (18 percent) Americans under age 50 who live alone say no one could support them if they had a problem. In contrast, only 4 percent of Americans under 50 who do not live alone say the same. Among Americans age 50 or older, the divide is much smaller. (See Figure 12.)

**Growing Support from Fathers.** More Americans today are growing up in single-parent households. But despite this shift in family structure, younger Americans are not any less likely to report that they could turn to both

**Figure 12. Younger Americans Who Live Alone Have Fewer People Who Support Them**

*Percentage of Americans who say there is no one they could turn to if they had a personal problem*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).

Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

parents when experiencing a personal problem during their formative years. Forty percent of young adults say they could turn to their mother or father for help with a personal problem. This pattern is not significantly different among seniors. About one in three (35 percent) Americans age 65 or older say they could count on their mother and their father to help them navigate a personal challenge.

In two-parent households, the extent to which children rely on both parents for support when facing personal problems has changed remarkably. A majority (57 percent) of young adults report that when they experienced a personal struggle growing up, they could turn to either parent for help. Older Americans raised in two-parent households are far less likely to say they could come to either parent with a problem. Only about four in 10 (41 percent) seniors raised in two-parent homes say they could rely on both their father and mother for support during their childhood. (See Figure 13.)

Part of the explanation for this shift is that fathers in two-parent households are taking a more active role as caregivers. They are more involved in their children's lives and provide more emotional support than they once did. Americans raised in two-parent households today are more likely to be supported by their father than they were in the past.

Among young adults raised in two-parent households, 60 percent say they could come to their father with a personal problem. Less than half (45 percent) of seniors raised in two-parent households say the same. So even though fewer American children today grow up

with present fathers, those who do are more connected to them.

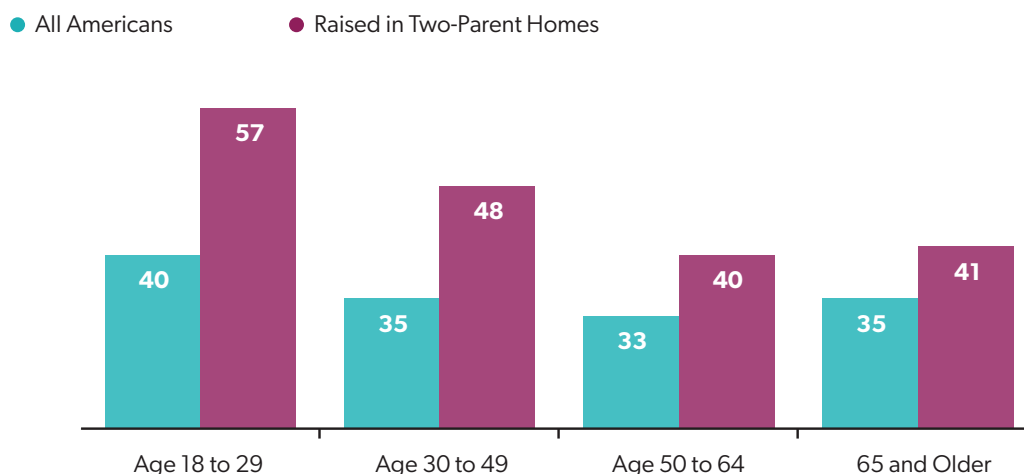
Although fathers in two-parent households are becoming more crucial support figures for their children, there is a persistent gender gap, with young men more likely than young women to report they could turn to their father for help with a personal problem. About two-thirds (66 percent) of young men report that when they had a childhood problem, they could come to their father for help. Significantly fewer young women (54 percent) say they could turn to their father for support during their formative years.

Overall, men and women are about equally likely to say they could come to their mother with a problem during childhood. Notably, young men are somewhat more likely than young women to say they could do so (82 percent vs. 75 percent).

Greater parental support is associated with better social outcomes later in life. Americans who report they could turn to either parent for support are more likely to have robust social connections. Those who grew up in two-parent households with both parents' support are more likely to have established close friendships in adulthood than those who could turn to only one parent or who could rely on neither parent. Half (50 percent) of Americans who could lean on either parent for personal support growing up say they have at least five close friends. Significantly smaller shares of Americans who could turn to only one or neither parent for help with a personal problem report having at least five close friends today (40 percent and 37 percent, respectively).

**Figure 13. More Americans Raised in Two-Parent Households Can Count on Support from Both Parents**

*Percentage of Americans who say they could turn to their mother and father when facing a personal problem growing up*



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 6,597).  
Source: American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

## Conclusion

The class divide in American social capital has grown over the past few decades. Americans with fewer years of formal education participate less often in community life, are less civically active, have fewer close friends, and have less social support than those with four-year college degrees.

In the recent past, three institutions—marriage, religious organizations, and labor unions—provided crucial ballast that enabled Americans without degrees to develop robust social ties and extensive systems of personal support despite facing more acute financial challenges. Today, Americans without a college education are less likely to be married, join a labor union, and participate regularly at a church or place of worship. Past research has shown that while membership in all three institutions has declined overall, it has declined much more steeply among Americans with lower levels of educational attainment.

What's more, research has found that Americans with college degrees tend to live in communities with richer commercial and public amenities and to have the resources to use them, giving them more social

and civic alternatives. Increasingly, the ability to cultivate strong social support is a privilege reserved for the college educated, rather than an ordinary and inevitable part of American life.

## About the Authors

**Daniel A. Cox** is the director of the Survey Center on American Life and a senior fellow in polling and public opinion at the American Enterprise Institute. Under his leadership, the center conducts public opinion and survey research on topics such as religious change and measurement, social capital, and youth politics.

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12. To assess the range of public and commercial places that offer opportunities for community connection, we asked the following question: "Today, what kind of places, if any, could you go to be around your neighbors or talk to people in your neighborhood?" Accessibility means more than proximity. Local residents might not gather in a particular venue for numerous reasons besides its location. A lack of safety or security could be an important reason public places do not serve as community gathering spots. Even if a park is nearby, if people generally view it as unsafe, it may not serve as a neighborhood gathering spot.
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