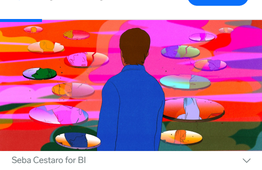
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DISCOURSE | ECONOMY

America is facing a 'fringe friend' crisis

Juliana Kaplan
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Nikol Moses felt the itch to head somewhere new.

The pandemic made her a little stir-crazy, so two years ago, she decided to take the plunge and move from her native Melbourne to Brisbane — a two-hour flight down Australia's west coast. Self-described as both social and talkative, the now-22-year-old figured it'd be relatively easy to make new friends.

"Plot twist: I didn't. I spent probably nine months in Brisbane completely alone," Moses told me.

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In a last-ditch attempt to make a connection, Moses went to the place where socializing for Gen Z lives these days: TikTok. After she uploaded a video about having no friends, hundreds of people messaged her to say that they were in the same boat. Moses decided to make the best of the support and started hosting events oriented toward cultivating those friend groups she craved. In the eight months since she kicked them off, Moses estimates that about 1,500 people have attended her IRL "Friends on Purpose" events.

"My favorite ones are where the people just all click," she said. "It's almost like I brought together a group of people who would've been friends in the previous lifetime."

Moses' struggle to establish a friend group is far from unique today. In a July survey by the Pew Research Center of Americans under the age of 30, less than one-third of respondents reported having five or more close friends. In total, 8% of Americans said that they had no close friends. That's a stark contrast from a 2003 Gallup survey, in which just 2% of Americans said they had no close friends — and 18- to 29-year-olds reported having a mean of 8.9 friends, which was higher than in other age cohorts.

Even though Gen Zers are in the prime time to forge lasting relationships, they're finding it extremely difficult to make friends. It's not as if young people don't want connection — the popularity of Moses' events and the amounts of money Gen Zers are willing to spend on social activities are proof that people still want to cultivate social circles.

So why are so many floundering?

One of the biggest reasons for our shrinking social circles is the loss of fringe friends — casual friends that you enjoy seeing occasionally. These are the people you see only at parties but are always happy to chat with. The people who you see at the local watering hole every so often, and maybe challenge to a game of darts. The people who ended up in your orbit by proximity — the ones who rode the subway to work with you at the same time every day or waited next to you for their morning coffee.

Have you seen any of those people in recent years? If you're like me, the answer is probably not. I caught a glimpse of one of my fringe friends months ago on the streets of Brooklyn and realized how long it had been since I saw them. When I went to reach out to interview them for this story, I realized I didn't even have their number; we chatted a bit on Instagram, and, like the arc of many of these friendships, our conversation ended up fizzling out.

These relationships might seem trivial or inconsequential, but experts and research indicate that fringe friends are vital. These loose connections are the people who might introduce you to a hobby, invite you to a book club, or even end up becoming your spouse. But now these fringe friend groups are disappearing, and we're all worse off for it.

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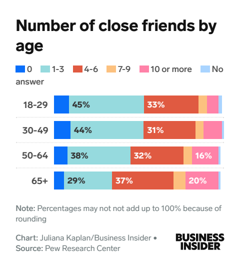
What we lose without fringe friends

There are few things more important in people's lives than their friendships. In fact, in a 2023 survey by the Pew Research Center, many Americans said that close friendships were more necessary for a complete life than other traditional forms of relationships.

"Close friendships make for a more-fulfilling life in people's minds than necessarily being married or having children," Juliana Horowitz, an associate director of research at Pew, told me.

But even with that knowledge, Americans are struggling to keep up with these connections. In a 1990 Gallup survey, 3% of Americans said that they had no close friends. By contrast, the American Survey Center's 2021 American Perspectives Survey found that number had risen to 12%. One-third of Americans in 1990 said they had 10 or more close friends, while just 13% said the same in 2021. And while there's the old refrain about quality over quantity, Americans become more satisfied with the number of friends they have as that number increases.



Daniel Cox, the director of the Survey Center on American Life at the American Enterprise Institute, told me the "notion that you can have one or two close friends, and that's enough to get you through things, is just not borne out by the data." He added: "We find that even for close friends, the more you have, the better you do on a variety of measures, whether it's loneliness, whether it's physical health, life satisfaction — all these things are higher when you hit four or five or six friends."

While maintaining a sizable, emotionally connected group is important, the more run-of-the-mill social interactions are equally critical, Cox said.

"In some ways, these weak social ties are even more important than our intimate friendships and relationships that we have because they connect us to a wider world," Cox said. People tend to engage in what's called "homophily," Cox said, which is when you cluster — romantically or platonically — with people like you, whether that's racially, religiously, or politically. More-distant relationships are so important because they're often the people who don't share those same kinds of characteristics and attributes, Cox added.

"They're able to share with us experiences that are very different or provide us with information we may not otherwise have access to," Cox said.

Talking to Cox, I started to think about my local bodega buddy. During the darkest days of the pandemic, I'd go — double-masked — to the bodega a few blocks away once a week. I was a remote worker; he was a student sent online who worked nights at the store. Having someone who knew me and was ready to chat as he fired up my regular order brought much-needed lightness during a dark time. We even established our own barter system: I'd bring him whatever pandemic baking I'd made that week, and in return, he'd let me pick out a snack. That's not a relationship I could've cultivated while ordering delivery from my house.

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>
> - Daniel Cox, director of the Survey Center on American Life

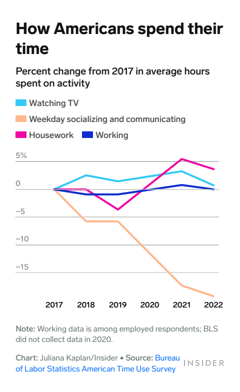
Losing fringe acquaintances means losing people who push you out of your comfort zone or who might shape you in unexpected ways. They can be critical for you in finding a new job, a new way of thinking, or even a romantic partner. We also lose something beyond a prospective friend or partner when distant ties disappear, as Cox told me: We also become less connected to our neighborhoods, communities, and other societal institutions. That's bad news for an increasingly lonely society.

Shriveling social circles

While the pandemic created an acute fringe-friend crisis, the loss of these outlying social systems has been brewing for decades. According to the experts I talked to, there are two big reasons for the shift: We've shrunk the physical spaces in which we interact with people, and we've shrunk the emotional space to trust the people with whom we do interact.

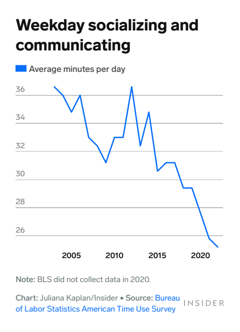
It's no secret that Americans, and younger people especially, are spending less time with other humans. The amount of time spent alone has increased by over 5% from 2003 to 2019, research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia found. And, come the pandemic in 2020, people were spending a little over half their free time alone.

"It felt physically and psychologically dangerous to be in spaces with other people," Danielle Bayard Jackson, a friendship coach and educator, told me. It's been hard for many people to get comfortable returning to spaces, especially as the risk of illness lingers.



But the pandemic wasn't the start of this hangout crisis. For years, third spaces — places that aren't your home or office but a casual, free hangout spot — have been dwindling. The casual places to hang out with people, such as libraries, parks, or coffee shops, are disappearing. Instead, everything has to be paid for and intentional. The lack of places to interact with people from different walks of life even has young people yearning for less time working remotely and more time in the once dreaded office.

"The places that you'd normally meet fringe friends, which would eventually develop into a proper friend, they don't exist anymore," Moses said.



At the same time that casual hangout spaces are falling by the wayside, Cox said, membership in institutions that might provide social frameworks and structures — places including unions, religious communities, or the school PTA — has also declined.

"A lot of these relationships were forged through joint membership in these organizations," Cox said. "As fewer of us are doing that, and particularly fewer men are doing that, we're limiting the opportunity to develop strong, enduring friendships, which are absolutely critical."

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Even the online spaces where people once found new friends or organized their social lives have started to lose what little connective power they had. Long gone are the days that you might log on to Facebook, see some personal updates, and then peruse event invitations from people you were tenuously connected to. Social media has become decentralized, with public feeds bogged down by impersonal, professional content — real socializing happens in group DMs or messaging apps where people chat with a tight circle of preexisting friends.

Evan Paul Cudworth, a party coach, a role that he said he always took on socially but made into a job in 2021 to help people craft healthier social lives, told me that one of his most powerful friend experiences came after he moved to New York in his early 20s and started going to nightclubs. After he saw the same handful of people out and about, they decided to create a Facebook group to coordinate and sell tickets to each other for various events. The group slowly morphed into something more.

"Eventually, we started all going to the same shows together, and then we created a logo and people got tattoos of the logo," he said. "We were all these fringe people, but a couple hundred of us would all see each other out at these same events." It was "so cool" to see this community of all different types of people grow, Cudworth said, but nowadays, he isn't sure it could be replicated: "I don't feel a lot of that now."

As the physical and cyberspaces where we interact have become harder to find, so too has Americans' emotional willingness to open themselves up to new people and experiences. In a Pew Research Center report from 2019, 64% of adults said they believed that Americans' trust in each other had been shrinking. In 2020, 46% of respondents to a Pew survey in the wake of the pandemic said, "Most people can't be trusted." Younger Americans, in particular, were much less trusting than their older counterparts; just 34% of Americans ages 18 to 29 said that most people could be trusted.

"People don't introduce themselves to their neighbors. Trust allows vulnerability, and you need vulnerability to create friendships," Anna Goldfarb, the author of the upcoming book "Modern Friendship" and the writer of a Substack newsletter on friendship, told me.

Too many of us are no longer exchanging a few words with the person in the elevator, cracking a few jokes with the coworker at an after-office happy hour, or asking the guy at the bodega how his week's been going. Part of that might be rooted in the fact that

younger people aren't able to put down roots in the same way as their older peers, jumping from rental to rental or job to job, and can buy only homes far away from their urban hubs. What's the point in saying hi if you're going to change bodegas or coworking spaces in a matter of months?

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Like other Gen Zers chasing cheap rent, I ended up moving away from my bodega buddy. On the occasions I've been back, I've missed him — maybe my schedule has become misaligned or he's back at school full time, or he's moved on to another bodega. Whatever the reason, I don't think I'll see him again. That's another fringe acquaintance gone, vanished into the ether by the socioeconomic realities that weigh on our connections.

Even when we do make plans or an attempt to cement the ties that bind us, Cudworth told me that the "radical individualism" stoked by the pandemic had made it more acceptable to cancel plans and just sit alone. While taking care of one's mental health is good — as Cudworth said, "I get it; people deserve their peace" — we are ultimately "a society that relies on a culture of integrity and showing up and doing the thing that maybe you don't want to do, but you're going to love that you did it by showing up," he said.

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Glimmers of hope for Gen Z

The decline in fringe friends has also created a generational divide when it comes to who's doing well socially.

"Older Americans are more likely than younger Americans to have a lot of close friends," Pew's Horowitz told me.

But even as they have fewer close friends, younger Americans rely on those relationships. The American Perspectives Survey found younger Americans were more likely to lean on a friend when dealing with personal problems but were also more likely to say that they'd lost touch with most or a few of their friends in the 12 months before the survey.

According to Jackson, the friendship coach and educator, Gen Z is also the generation most actively trying to buck this trend. She said that she'd been hearing more of a desire for friend groups from people in their mid-20s. People are pointing to social-media trends where groups show off silly conversations in their group chats, or inside-joke archetypes in their friend groups, and saying that's what they want.

There's no real solution to the loss of fringe friends. They might not exist in the way they did before the pandemic ever again. It doesn't help that, as Goldfarb said, it's never been harder to form lasting friendships. But there are glimmers of hope — Moses' sold-out events, for one, and an increased desire for third places to hang out in for free and for as long as you want.

"It might be cynical and sad, but I do think that we're just going to see people get maybe just more online, more lonelier," Moses said. "But at the same time, if you want to make new friends, I think there's going to be — and I've seen it — there's just going to be heaps and heaps of new initiatives to make new friends. It's just a matter of if you actually want to go."

Juliana Kaplan is a senior labor and inequality reporter on Insider's economy team.

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