

'An epidemic of loneliness': How the COVID-19 pandemic changed life for older adults

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Years after the U.S. began to slowly emerge from mandatory COVID-19 lockdowns, more than half of older adults still spend more time at home

and less time socializing in public spaces than they did pre-pandemic, according to new University of Colorado Boulder research.

Participants cited fear of infection and "more uncomfortable and hostile" social dynamics as key reasons for their retreat from civic life.

"The pandemic is not over for a lot of folks. Some people feel left behind," said Jessica Finlay, an assistant professor of geography whose findings are revealed in a series of new papers.

The study comes amid what the U.S. Surgeon General recently called an "epidemic of loneliness" in which older adults—especially those who are immune compromised or have disabilities—are particularly vulnerable.

"We found that the pandemic fundamentally altered neighborhoods, communities and everyday routines among aging Americans and these changes have long-term consequences for their physical, mental, social and [cognitive health](#)," said Finlay.

'I just can't go back'

As a health geographer and environmental gerontologist, Finlay studies how social and built environments impact health as we age.

In March 2020 as restaurants, gyms, [grocery stores](#) and other gathering places shuttered amid shelter-in-place orders, she immediately wondered what the lasting impacts would be. Shortly thereafter, she launched the COVID-19 Coping Study with University of Michigan epidemiologist Lindsay Kobayashi. They began their research with a baseline and monthly survey. Since then, nearly 7,000 people over age 55 from all 50 states have participated.

The researchers check in annually, asking open-ended questions about

how neighborhoods and relationships have changed, how people spend their time, opinions and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their physical and mental health.

"We've been in the field for some incredibly pivotal moments," said Finlay, noting that surveys went out shortly after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020 and again after the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Collectively, the results paint a troubling picture in which a substantial portion of the older population remains isolated even after others have moved on.

In [one paper](#) published in February in the journal *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 60% of respondents said they spend more time in their home while 75% said they dine out less. Some 62% said they visit cultural and arts venues less, and more than half said they attend church or the gym less than before the pandemic.

The most recent survey, taken in spring 2023, showed similar trends, with more than half of respondents still reporting that their socialization and entertainment routines were different than they were pre-pandemic.

In [another paper](#) titled "I just can't go back," published in *SSM—Qualitative Research in Health*, 80% of respondents reported that there are some places they are reluctant to visit in person anymore.

"The thought of going inside a gym with lots of people breathing heavily and sweating is not something I can see myself ever doing again," said one 72-year-old male.

Those who said they still go to public places like grocery stores reported that they ducked in and out quickly and skipped casual chitchat.

"It's been tough," said one 68-year-old female. "You don't stop and talk to people anymore."

Many respondents reported that they were afraid of getting infected with a virus or infecting young or immune-compromised loved ones, and said they felt "irresponsible" for being around a lot of people.

Some reported getting dirty looks or rude comments when wearing masks or asking others to keep their distance—interpersonal exchanges that reinforced their inclination to stay home.

Revitalizing human connection

The news is not all bad, stresses Finlay.

At least 10% of older adults report exercising outdoors more frequently since the pandemic. And a small but vocal minority said that their worlds had actually opened up, as more meetings, concerts and classes became available online.

Still, Finlay worries that the loss of spontaneous interactions in what sociologists call "third places" could have serious health consequences.

[Previous research](#) shows that a lack of social connection can increase risk of premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and exacerbate mental illness and dementia.

"For some [older adults](#) who live alone, that brief, unplanned exchange with the butcher or the cashier may be the only friendly smile they see in the day, and they have lost that," Finlay said.

Societal health is also at risk.

"It is increasingly rare for Americans with differing sociopolitical perspectives to collectively hang out and respectfully converse," she writes.

Finlay hopes that her work can encourage policymakers to create spaces more amenable to people of all ages who are now more cautious about getting sick—things like outdoor dining spaces, ventilated concert halls or masked or hybrid events.

She also hopes that people will give those still wearing masks or keeping distance some grace.

"It is a privilege to be able to 'just get over' the pandemic and many people, for a multitude of reasons, just don't have that privilege. The world looks different to them now," she said.

"How can we make it easier for them to re-engage?"

More information: Jessica Finlay et al, Altered place engagement since COVID-19: A multi-method study of community participation and health among older americans, *Wellbeing, Space and Society* (2024).

[DOI: 10.1016/j.wss.2024.100184](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2024.100184)

Jessica Finlay et al, "I just can't go back": Challenging Places for Older Americans since the COVID-19 Pandemic Onset, *SSM—Qualitative Research in Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmqr.2023.100381](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2023.100381)

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