CityReport

Less in Common

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Summary

As Jane Jacobs observed decades ago, cities work best when they bring people of diverse backgrounds, with different ideas and perspectives, into close connection. These same sentiments were echoed more recently in Harvard economist Ed Glaeser's **Triumph of the City**, which cites mounds of statistical evidence for the role of cities in generating the wealth of new ideas that power economic and social progress. The civic commons, the places we share with the rest of society, are where interaction underpins opportunity and democracy.

While cities continue to fulfill this critical role, there is compelling evidence that the connective tissue that binds us together is coming apart. In particular, it appears that the level of social capital–the connections and norms of reciprocity that smooth interpersonal actions and support community–has declined in the United States over several decades.

In recent years, the amount of time we spend in the public realm has declined. While we have more leisure time, we spend more of it alone or isolated by technologies as diverse as the private automobile and personal headphones.

Many of the community resources that were nearly universally shared across the population have eroded or become fractured. We spend less time in public pools and more time in private gyms. We ride the bus or streetcar less and spend more time alone in our cars. High income people increasingly live in separate, wealthy neighborhoods, while people of modest means live in their own, less wealthy neighborhoods.

Our city governments, schools, and communities are more fragmented and less inclusive than in days gone by. In many cases–in leisure, entertainment, and schooling–we've enabled people to secede from the commons and get a different level and quality of service.

Our policy decisions have shaped our built environment and land use patterns, and resulted in voluntary and involuntary segregation, sorting the public realm so that we spend proportionately more time with people like us, whether it's people who look like us, live like us, or work or think just like we do.

Technology has been a mixed blessing. While better communications can facilitate networking, many technologies, such as television, headphones, and smartphones enable people to cocoon themselves in their own audio environments. Even in an age of "social" media, Americans have arguably become more disconnected from one another in many aspects of daily life.

This essay chronicles some indicators of the decline in function of the public realm in the United States over the past several decades–how we live, how we travel, how we spend our time, and what that says about the ways in which we relate. For purposes of this essay the public realm includes both public property (parks, public buildings, and civic settings), but also private property that by its intrinsic character is effectively open to all and offers opportunities for lingering (such as coffee shops, movie theatres, and shopping malls). And arguably the public realm is now virtual, as well as physical, as we increasingly use electronic technologies to connect with one another.

The trends outlined here are more than just a compendium of sociological trivia: A divided, disconnected and often balkanized populace is likely to make it more difficult to address and solve national problems, like poverty or climate change. We have less in common, both in the form of a shared base of knowledge and belief about the nature of the challenges we face, and also a weaker sense of mutual interests. Restoring the civic commons may be an essential step to making progress on a wide range of challenges.

1

The Decline in Social Capital

It has become common to speak of social capital as the shared experiences, webs of relationships, and norms of reciprocity that underpin the smooth functioning of society. In his seminal work Bowling Alone, Harvard's Robert Putnam argued that America has less social capital now than it had for most of the past century. There are a myriad of reasons for the decline. Putnam attributes 10 percent of the decline in social capital to lower density and suburban sprawl, and 25 percent to television (Putnam, 2000, page 283-84). Arguably, the decline in social capital is both a cause and an effect of the decline of the public realm: people exhibit less trust because they have fewer interactions; we have fewer interactions, so we have lower levels of trust and less willingness to invest in the public realm that supports it.
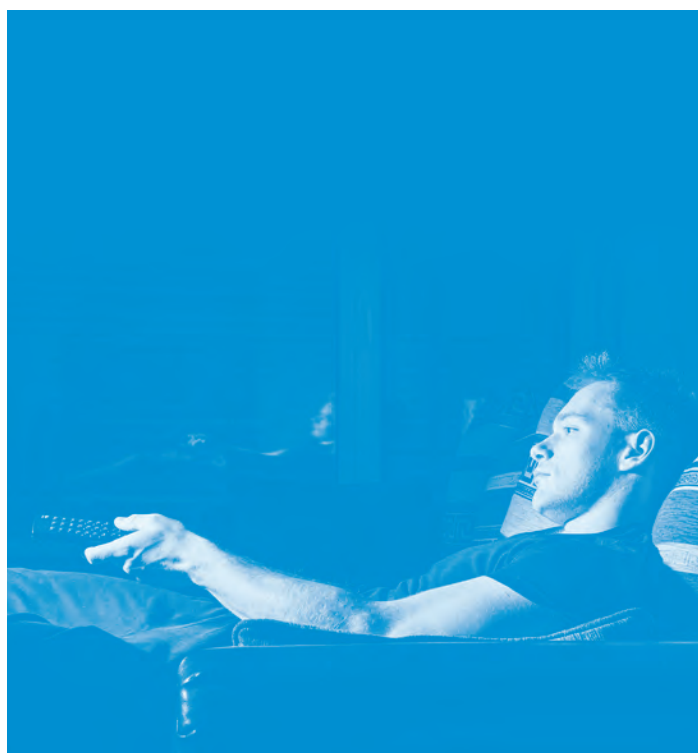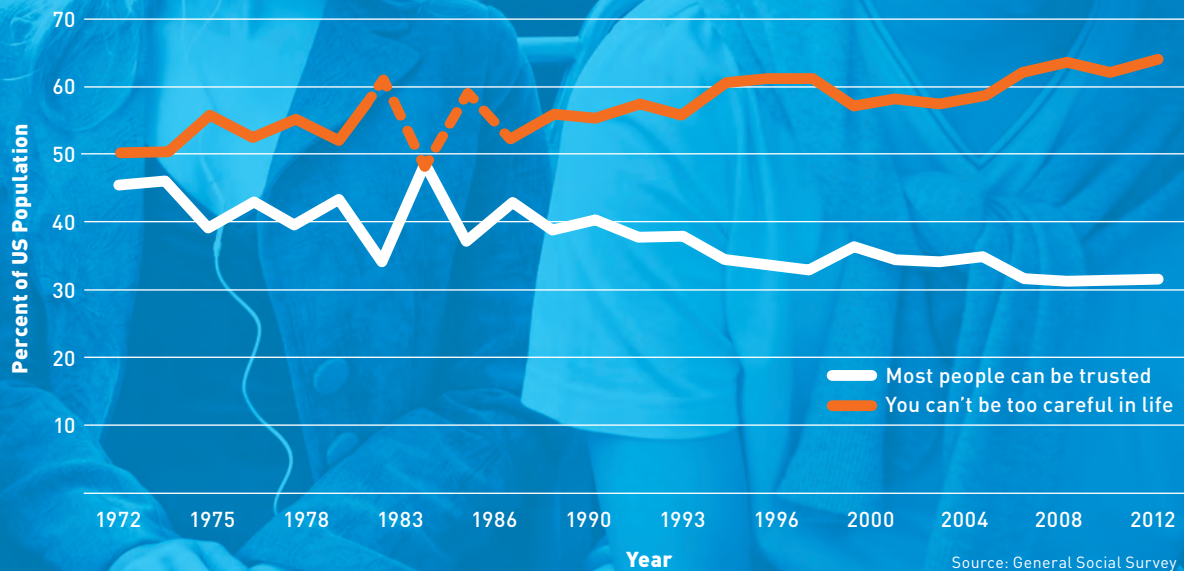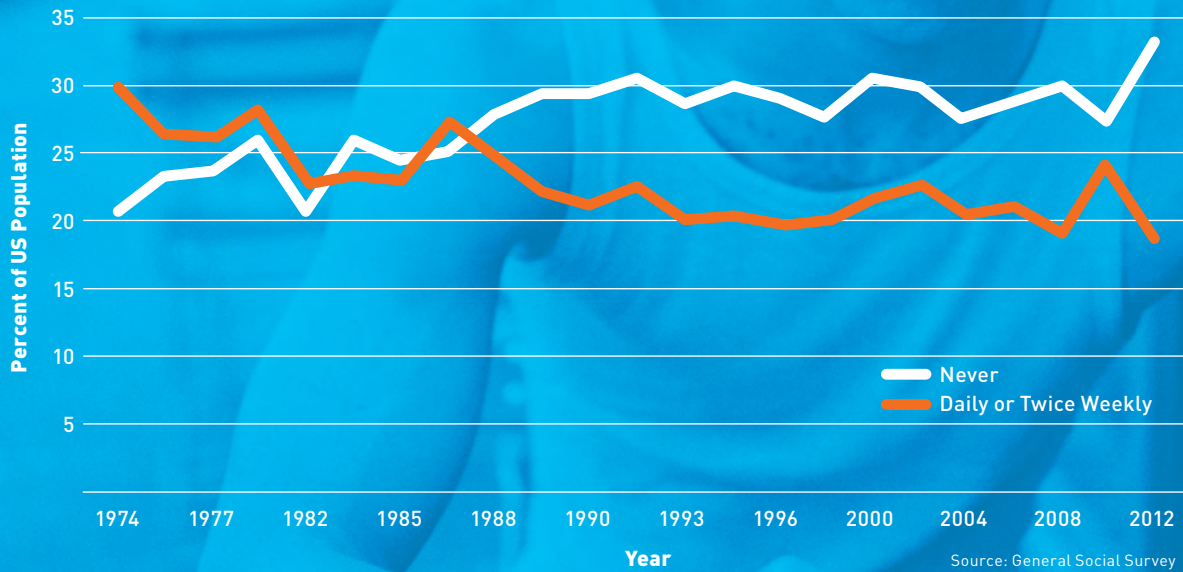
Declining Levels of Trust

A key marker of social capital that is regularly used in comparing nations and tracking trends over time is the generalized feeling of trust. One question on the General Social Survey has for decades asked, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in life?" Over time, Americans have expressed growing distrust. In the early 1970s, Americans were nearly equally divided on this choice, with only a small majority expressing distrust. Since then, with few exceptions, the trend in the share of the population expressing trust has been steadily downward. Today only slightly more than three in 10 say "most people can be trusted."

Figure 1: Levels of Trust Continue to Decline

Source: General Social Survey

Legend:
- Most people can be trusted
- You can't be too careful in life

Y-axis: Percent of US Population
X-axis: Year (1972, 1975, 1978, 1983, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012)

Figure 2: Spend time with Neighbors

Percent of US Population

	Never	Daily or Twice Weekly

Year

Source: General Social Survey

Americans now are less likely than four decades ago to socialize regularly with their neighbors. In the 1970s, nearly 30 percent of Americans reported spending time with their neighbors at least twice weekly; fewer than a quarter reported no interactions with neighbors. Over the past three decades, the number of interactions has trended downward. Today, nearly a third report no interactions with neighbors and only about 20 percent say they spend time regularly with neighbors.

Declining levels of trust and the measurable decrease in social capital are indicators that as a society, we're growing apart. How does this trend correlate with how we build and inhabit the public realm in our cities?

2

Separate, but Equal

Economic segregation

Economic segregation is the sorting of the population into separate neighborhoods by income. High-income and low-income Americans have become more geographically separated within metropolitan areas over the past three decades. Even though racial segregation has moderated, segregation by income has steadily increased. Between 1970 and 2009, the proportion of families living either in predominantly poor or predominantly affluent neighborhoods doubled from 15 percent to 33 percent. Those living in "middle income" neighborhoods declined from 65 percent to 42 percent of all families (Bischoff & Reardon, 2013).

Unlike the 1950s, when affluent and poor families frequently lived in the same neighborhoods, today the rich and poor live in separate neighborhoods, and the benefits of neighborhood affluence are concentrated on rich kids and the costs of neighborhood poverty are concentrated on poor kids.
(Putnam 2015).

The adverse consequences of increased economic segregation are especially significant for the poor. The poor in U.S. cities are increasingly concentrated in neighborhoods of high poverty. In 1970, about 26 percent of the poor living in the nation's 51 largest metropolitan areas lived in neighborhoods where the poverty rate exceeded 30 percent. By 2010, 42 percent of the poor lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates exceeding 30 percent (Cortright & Mahmoudi, 2014). Concentrated poverty tends to amplify all of the negative effects associated with poverty. It is associated with higher rates of crime, lower performing schools, and worse economic outcomes. Poor people living in mixed income neighborhoods generally have greater economic mobility than those living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

> **Affluent neighborhoods have denser networks of loose social ties–the kinds of connections to friends and associates who can help kids succeed in school, overcome life challenges, avoid crime and drugs and find jobs. Poor neighborhoods have fewer resources to buffer and offset these risks, and experience corrosively low levels of social trust.**
> (Putnam 2015).

The Big Sort

Much has been made of the polarization of America into red states and blue states. Other data suggest that the political and cultural division of American into like-minded geographies may be stronger and more pervasive (Bishop, 2008).

New data from the Pew Research Center indicate a growing political polarization of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2014). Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of consistent conservatives and about half (49 percent) of consistent liberals say most of their close friends share their political views. People on the right and left also are more likely to say it is important to them to live in a place where most people share their political views, though again, that desire is more widespread on the right (50 percent) than on the left (35 percent).

Most Americans, regardless of their ideological preferences, value communities in which they would live close to extended family and high-quality schools. But far more liberals than conservatives think it is important that a community have racial and ethnic diversity (76 percent versus 20 percent). At the same

time, conservatives are more likely than liberals to attach importance to living in a place where many people share their religious faith (57 percent versus 17 percent of liberals).

The combined effects of economic segregation, and sorting by ideology and social interests has been to lessen the extent to which we are likely to interact on a regular and familiar basis with people who have different experiences and perspectives than our own. This produces what Mark Dunkelberg calls a loss of "township," a recognition that we belong to communities with a wide range of beliefs and attitudes (Dunkelman, 2014). As a result, we tend to have less empathy for others, less tolerance for differences, and are more easily polarized on issues of the day.

Education

A system of common schools has long been viewed as a central institution for learning basic skills and also creating a shared set of social experiences. The typical American spends a dozen years in
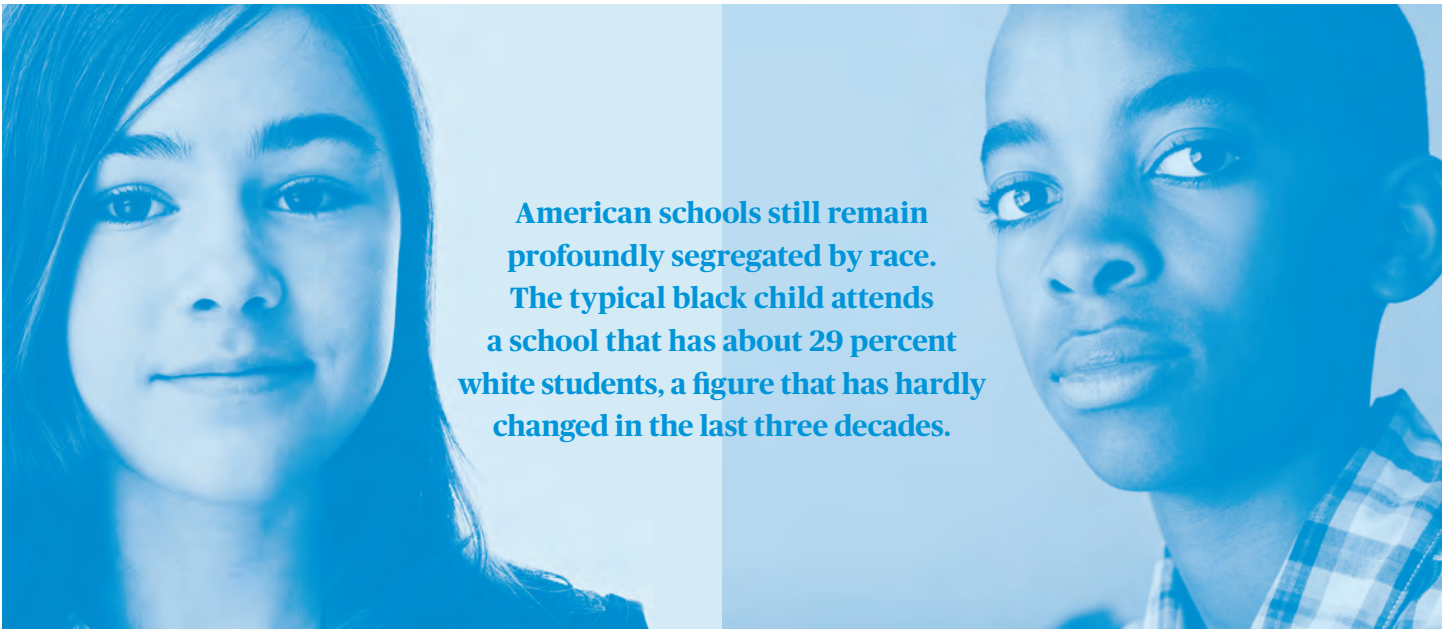
American schools still remain profoundly segregated by race. The typical black child attends a school that has about 29 percent white students, a figure that has hardly changed in the last three decades.

elementary and secondary schools, at a time of life that has a profound impact on social skills and attitudes. School segregation by race and income, reflecting the composition of neighborhoods where various forms of segregation persist, greatly limits the extent to which social mixing takes place in this environment. K-12 experiences vary widely based on the quality of schools and the composition of each school's student body. Our children's most formative years are spent in these schools. The combination of suburbanization and economic segregation, persistent racial segregation, and the advent of greater school choice has tended to expand the degree of variation in the K-12 experience.

Suburbanization has been propelled, in part, by the appeal of better-funded, higher quality schools in some suburbs. In effect, suburban schools offered families that could afford suburban housing the opportunity to "buy" better schooling for their children. The net effect of this suburbanization has been to further polarize schools by income, with low-income families increasingly concentrated in poorer school districts. The increase in economic segregation nationwide means that, even within school districts, schools that serve poorer neighborhoods have less funding and often have lower achievement rates.

American schools still remain profoundly segregated by race. The typical black child attends a school that has about 29 percent white students, a figure that has hardly changed in the last three decades. Black children are also disproportionately located in high-poverty neighborhoods with the poorest schools: 28 percent of black children live in high-poverty neighborhoods compared to just four percent of white children (Rothstein, 2013).

Beyond this property tax-fueled stratification of public schooling, private schools, magnet schools, and charter schools offer additional self-selected options for families willing and able to exit the public system's standard offerings. The number of children in the K-12 system attending their assigned public school has declined from 80 percent in 1993 to about 73 percent in 2007. Non-poor students are more likely than poor students to attend private school and to take advantage of choice within public schools (Grady & Bielick, 2010).

3

Spreading Out, Staying Out

Suburbanization

The civic realm is more fragmented now than in years past. Not too long ago, a majority of metro area residents were citizens of the central city–the biggest municipality in their metropolitan area. For example, in 1950, on average, about half of the residents of the largest 20 metro areas lived in the principal city in that metro. By 2000, only one in five did so. While it was common for a majority of residents to be governed by a single city administration, now, on average, 80 percent of a metro region's population lives outside its principal city.

This fragmentation means that residents, although nominally living in the same region, have less in common. They don't vote on the same issues or shop at the same grocery stores. The civic realm of shared amenities is carved up into many separate fiefdoms, each with its own interests, priorities for spending, and constituencies.

Gated Communities and Sprawl

Since 1970, a significant share of new single-family housing construction, particularly in the Sunbelt, has been in gated or access-controlled subdivisions. By 1997, it was estimated that there were more than 20,000 gated community developments of 3,000 or more residents (Blakely & Snyder, 1997).

Gated communities are designed to restrict access and carefully control who is allowed into a community to separate residents from outsiders. Gated communities tend to be designed for a particular income group–usually those with higher incomes–and are designed to exclude lower income persons except as invited and monitored guests or service workers.

Even outside of suburbs and gated communities, our living spaces are becoming increasingly private. More people now live alone, and average household sizes are falling–even as the average size of homes and apartments increase. In the aggregate, neighborhoods and houses have become less densely populated, with fewer chances for interaction and a lower likelihood of finding communality.

Over the past half century, our population has become more dispersed within large metropolitan areas. More than two-thirds of the nation's metropolitan residents live in suburbs, where the average density is 200 persons per square mile. All of the net increase

in population in metropolitan areas nationally between 1950 and 2000 was in suburbs. Meanwhile, population density in central cities declined by more than half, from 7,500 persons per square mile in 1950 to less than 3,000 persons per square mile in 2000 (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). On average, in our metro areas, we have fewer neighbors and live farther from them than we did five decades ago.

We also live farther apart within our dwellings. It is increasingly uncommon for household members to have to share bedrooms. In 1960, about 3.5 percent of U.S. households lived in a dwelling that had more bedrooms than occupants; today, 44 percent of households have at least one "extra bedroom" (defined as a dwelling with more bedrooms than occupants).

Security Guards

The presence of security guards in a place is arguably a good indicator of "negative social capital." Guards are needed because a place otherwise lacks the norms of reciprocity that are needed to assure good order and behavior. The dramatic increase in the number of security guards and the number of places (apartments, dormitories, public buildings) to which access is secured by guards is indicative of the diminishment in the number and kinds of places that we can freely visit and serendipitously associate with others.

The number of security guards in the United States has increased from about 600,000 in 1980 to more than 1,000,000 in 2000 (Strom et al., 2010). In the 1970s, there were about 40 percent more private security officers than public law enforcement agents; while by the late 1990s there were 200 percent more private security officers than public ones (Blackstone & Hakim, 2013). This was a steep increase from earlier years. According to the 1960 Census, which used a different occupational classification system than other data, only about 250,000 people were employed as "guards, watchmen and doormen" in 1960.

4

Transportation: Moving Apart

Cars and Commuting

With the growth of the private automobile–now the dominant form of transportation, measured by the time people spend traveling–we spend the bulk of our time isolated from others. The automobile has essentially replaced many forms of mass transportation. Intercity trains, streetcars, and buses that were previously common in city life have declined substantially from their historic highs. There are some signs that we have passed the period of "peak-driving"; vehicle miles traveled per person have declined over the past decade, and the younger generation is getting licenses later and driving less than previous generations of young adults (Davis & Baxandall, 2013).

Over the past several decades, the amount of time Americans spend commuting to and from work has increased, and at the same time, more commuters are getting to and from work by driving alone in private automobiles. Today, 85 percent of American commuters travel to work in private automobiles, up from 63 percent in 1960. The number who commute via transit has declined from 12 percent in 1960 to less than five percent today (Koohi, 2013). Carpooling has fallen by half since 1980. About 20 percent of Americans carpooled in 1980, while fewer than 10 percent do so today (Polzin & Chu, 2014).

The Decline of Transit

Only one in 20 Americans commutes to work regularly by transit, in part because so many people live in low-density areas difficult to serve by transit. Outside of a few very large cities with excellent transit systems (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and some others), transit use is the nearly exclusive province of those who can't afford automobiles or who are unable to drive (the young, elderly, and disabled). In the typical large U.S. metropolitan area, fewer than 10 percent of non-poor workers use transit to commute regularly to work (Cortright, 2012).

There is a sharp contrast between the public realm qualities of transit and solo car travel. On buses and trains, we sit or stand shoulder-to-shoulder with strangers; car travel isolates and separates us from direct contact with others. Studies of happiness show that time spent driving alone has a strong negative effect on self-reported well being (Stutzer & Frey, 2004). Commuting alone also reduces other forms of social interaction and civic engagement. Robert Putnam estimates that each additional 10 minutes spent commuting reduces civic participation by 10 percent (Putnam, 2000).

How We View Streets

The role of the public space of the street has changed as well. Prior to the advent of the automobile, the street was a shared, multi-use public space, not just for vehicles (horse-drawn, self-propelled, commercial, and private), but also for walking, cycling, playing, selling, and socializing. The legal environment of the street was changed to establish the dominance of automobiles over all other uses of the street. A new term–jay-walking–was coined and codified in the 1920s, effectively precluding free pedestrian use of streets. Cars and fast moving traffic were given precedence over other uses (Norton, 2007). Notably in some places–most famously in Times Square in New York–some street space is being reclaimed from the car for the pedestrian and for casual public use.

5

Recreation and Physical Activity

One of the chief ways we interact with others is through leisure and recreation. While many Americans have become more physically active in the past few decades, many forms of recreation that were traditionally situated primarily in public spaces like parks and recreation centers now take place in private venues. Two examples are for-profit gyms and swimming pools. In addition, a considerable amount of recreational activity now takes place in private homes. More Americans live in sprawling, single-family settings, rather than dense, multi-family neighborhoods where backyards can play a larger role substituting for public parks.

We lack direct systematic evidence on utilization trends in local public parks. One review of the literature on outdoor recreation concluded: "To a remarkable extent, the frequency, duration, and types of use of municipal and county parks are unknown" (Godbey, 2009). We do have circumstantial evidence to suggest that park use has declined. Obesity rates among adolescents and teenagers have more than doubled in the past two decades. There is a strong correlation between physical inactivity and obesity (Godbey, 2009). And there is also a correlation between proximity to local parks and likelihood of engaging in physical activity (Babey, Wolstein, Krumholz, Robertson, & Diamant, 2013).
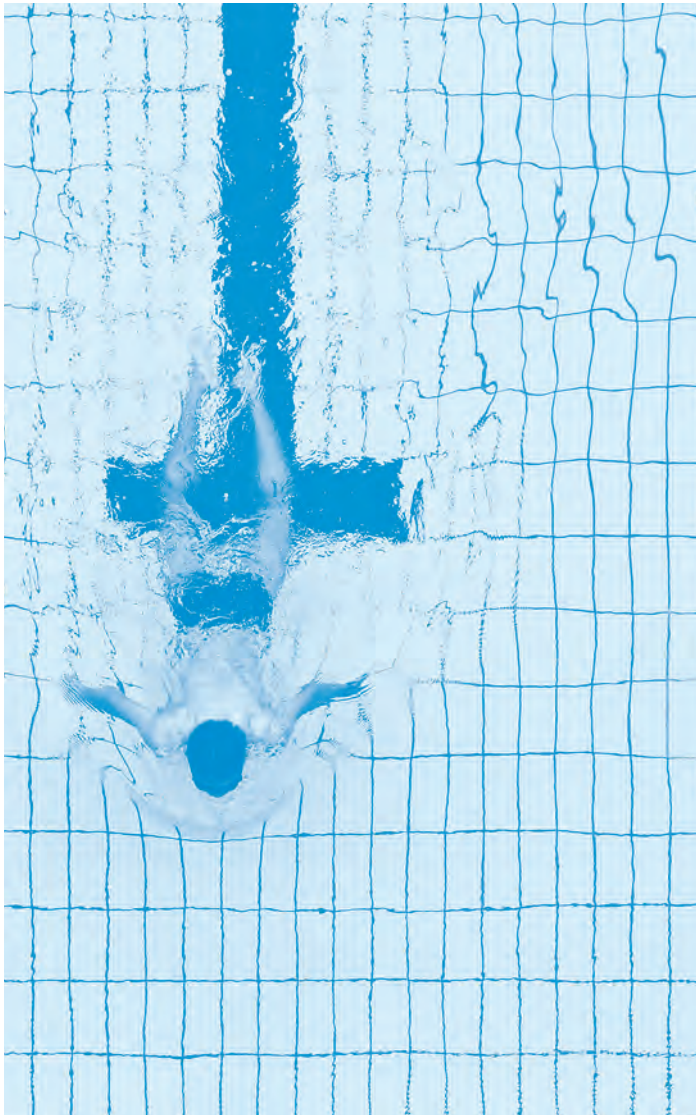
Public Swimming Pools

In the early part of the 20th Century, public swimming in community pools was a fast-growing form of recreation. The number of public pools increased six-fold between 1916 and 1929, to more than a 1,000 public pools, including more than 300 indoor pools. During the Great Depression, the federal government funded the construction of 750 more public pools and the reconstruction of hundreds of others (Wiltse, 2007). Pools were a venue for social mixing:

> From the 1920s to the 1950s, municipal pools served as centers of community life and arenas for public discourse. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people gathered at these public spaces where the contact was sustained and interactive. Neighbors played, chatted and flirted with one another, but they also fought with one another over who should and should not be allowed to swim and what sorts of activities and clothing were appropriate for these intimate public spaces. In short, community life was fostered, monitored and disputed at municipal pools. (Wiltse, 2007)

Prior to 1940, private swimming pools were almost exclusively the province of the extremely wealthy. In the post-war period this changed rapidly. The integration of public pools coupled with white flight and suburbanization undercut the support for public pools. At the same time, in new suburbs, the number of privately-owned pools exploded. In 1950 there were just 2,500 private, in-ground swimming pools–roughly the same numbers as municipal swimming pools built in the 20s and 30s. By 2009 there were about 5.2 million private swimming pools in the U.S. (Collins, 2011). An activity that could chiefly occur only in the public realm in the early part of the century had become a much more "private" activity later.

Gyms

A growing number of Americans belong to private gyms. Between 1981 and 2014, the number of Americans who were dues-paying members of private health clubs quadrupled from about 13 million to more than 50 million. During that same time, total U.S. population has increased by less than 40 percent.

Health club members tend to have much higher incomes than the average American, so there is likely to be less socioeconomic mixing in private clubs than in public settings like parks.

6

Books, Media and Television

Television

It is widely acknowledged that television has had a profound effect on the way Americans spend their time and socialize with one another. Television watching consumes something between three and four hours of the average American's day and is the single largest use of waking leisure time.

The social effects of television are mixed. For some households, the television is an electronic hearth where families watch programs together, commenting on program content and using the stories told to build a common bond. But a large share of Americans watch television alone, and for the most part, television viewing is a passive activity.

Over the past decade the amount of time Americans spend watching television has continued to increase. In 1965, the average American spent about 10 hours per week watching television, an amount that increased to about 15 hours per week in the 1970s and 1980s—an increase from about one and one-half hours per day to slightly more than two hours per day (Robinson & Godbey, 2010). In 2003, the average American spent about two hours and 34 minutes per day watching television; by 2013 this had increased to two hours and 46 minutes. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the typical American spends a majority of her leisure time watching television. Meanwhile, over the past decade the amount of time Americans report "socializing and communicating"

has fallen by about 10 percent from 47 minutes per day to about 42 minutes per day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004)(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

This increase in television viewing was driven entirely by an increase in viewing by the over-35 population; television viewing by the under-35 population is lower and declined slightly over the decade. While they spend less time watching television, younger Americans are spending more time connected to the growing panoply of electronic media (including music, handheld devices, video games, and the Internet). After adjusting for multi-tasking, the number of hours eight to 18 year olds spent with all forms of media increased by a full hour per day from six hours and 19 minutes in 1999 to seven hours and 38 minutes in 2009 (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Television sets and video have proliferated. More children have television sets of their own, or can watch video on personal, hand-held devices.

With the proliferation of channels, recorded media, and now the advent of online programming (Netflix, YouTube), the range of choices for "watching" has widened considerably. This means that the average American is spending more time consuming more varied electronic media in a more private setting.

Reading and Library Use

Predictably, the rise of television viewing and more recently, Internet use, has cut into time devoted to other activities, notably book reading. The national survey of public participation in the arts suggests, especially for younger adults, that the number of people reading books for pleasure has declined noticeably over the past two decades.

While reading is arguably part of the private realm, the ways in which we acquire reading material and the places in which acquisition occurs have historically interacted importantly with the public realm.

Table 1: Percentage of Americans 18 and Older Who Read a Book Other Than for Work or School in the Previous 12 Months, by Age, 1992-2008

	1992	2002	2008	Change
18–24	59.3	52.0	50.7	−8.6
25–34	64.4	58.9	54.1	−10.3
35–44	65.9	59.0	56.2	−9.7
45–54	63.9	60.7	54.2	−9.7
55–64	58.7	57.5	58.4	−0.3
65–74	55.0	53.8	54.5	−0.5
75 and Older	47.5	44.3	47.4	−0.1
All Ages 18+	60.9	56.6	54.3	−6.6

Source: National Endowment for the Arts, Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (1992, 2002, 2008). Estimates generated using the Cultural Policy and the Arts Data Archive's online data analysis system at http://www.cpanda.org/stage/studies/a00260.

Table 2: Levels of Public Library Use, per Capita, Fiscal Years 1995-2010*

	Circulated Items	Visits	Reference Transactions
1995	6.4	3.9	1.1
1996	6.5	4.0	1.1
1997	6.6	4.1	1.1
1998	6.6	4.2	1.1
1999	6.4	4.3	1.1
2000	6.4	4.3	1.1
2001	6.5	4.3	1.1
2002	6.8	4.5	1.1
2003	7.0	4.6	1.1
2004	7.1	4.7	1.1
2005	7.2	4.7	1.1
2006	7.3	4.8	1.0
2007	7.4	4.9	1.0
2008	7.7	5.1	1.0
2009	8.1	5.4	1.0
2010	8.3	5.3	1.0

Based on the total unduplicated population of libraries' legal service areas. Values presented are for the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Calculations were performed on all surveyed libraries, not only those meeting Institute of Museum and Library Services criteria for public libraries.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Public Libraries Survey (1995–2005); and Institute of Museum and Library Services, Public Libraries in the United States Survey (2006–2010).

Libraries and bookstores are important public spaces. However, the increasing adoption of electronic retailing and e-books is changing the way Americans get their reading material.

The use of public libraries has continued to increase steadily over the past two decades. Public library visits have grown from 3.9 visits per capita in 1995 to 5.3 visits per capita and circulation has grown from 6.4 to 8.3 items per capita. References transactions have declined slightly.
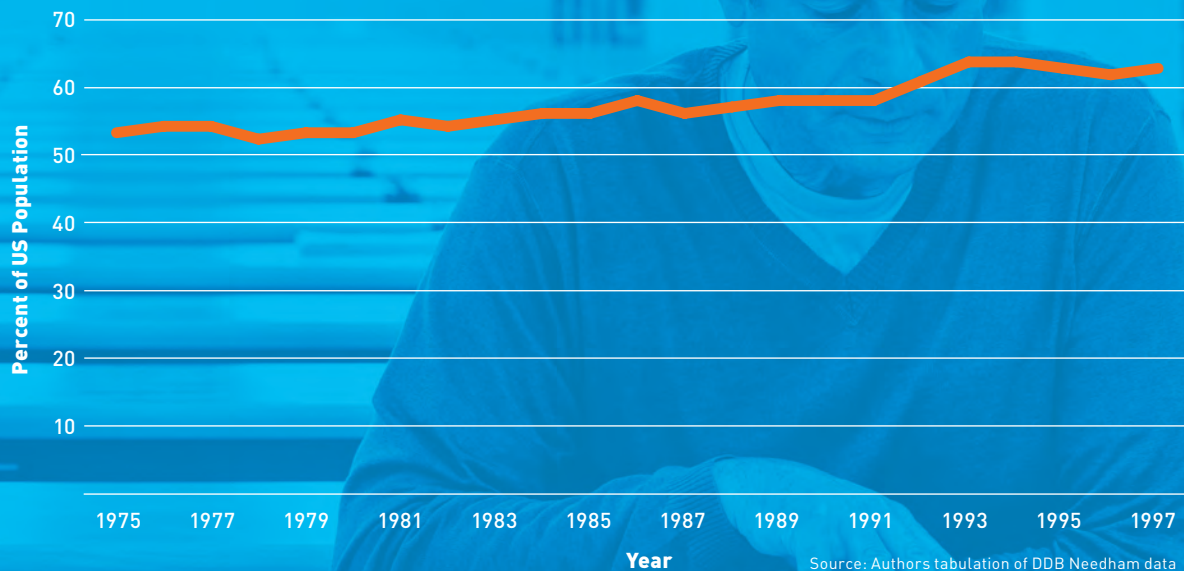
Despite fears that large-scale private bookstores would divert readers from the public realm to the private realm, one study–drawing on data collected in the 1990s, during the heyday of Borders and Barnes and Noble–showed no strong statistically significant relationships between the presence of big box bookstores and library patronage (Hemmeter, 2007). The same research did find, however, a complementarity between the number of small independent book stores and library patronage, suggesting that these outlets are complements, not substitutes for libraries, or that literate populations self-select for areas with high concentrations of both.

The DDB Needham survey asked a broad cross-section of Americans a battery of questions about their activities, lifestyle, and attitudes, and included one question about whether people had visited a library in the past year. Data are available annually from 1974 to 1998. The fraction of Americans reporting that they had visited libraries increased gradually over that 24 year period–from about 53 percent in 1975 to about 63 percent in 1998.

We have conflicting data on more recent levels of library use. In 2011, a Harris Interactive survey commissioned by the American Library Association reported that about 60 percent of Americans have library cards, and about 62 percent say they have visited a library in person in the past year (Harris Interactive, 2011). In contrast, according to the Pew Internet and the Public Life Survey, in-person visits to libraries are down slightly in 2013 from the year earlier, from 53 percent of the population to 48 percent of the population (Zickuhr, Rainie, Purcell, & Duggan, 2013). This has been counterbalanced by a slight increase in online use of library resources.

Higher-income families are slightly more likely to patronize libraries than lower-income families. While about 85 to 87 percent of those living in families with incomes over $50,000 report using the library,

Figure 3: Percentage of adults who visited a library in the past 12 months

Percent of US Population (y-axis: 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70)

Year (x-axis: 1975, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997)

Source: Authors tabulation of DDB Needham data
(DDB Worldwide, 2006).

about 77 to 80 percent of those living in lower-income families say they use the library (Zickuhr, et al). Even so, lower-income families are much more likely than upper-income families to say they greatly value libraries. Among those who use the library, families with incomes under $30,000 are more likely to say library services are "very important" than those with incomes over $75,000. Lower-income families are twice as likely to highly value Internet access and programs for adults, and three times as likely to value job search assistance and guidance on government programs as higher-income families (Zickuhr, et al).

The audio cocoon:
Headphones, iPods, and the fragmentation of media

The portable battery-operated transistor radio with a single earpiece was an innovative novelty in the 1960s, enabling school children to listen surreptitiously to World Series broadcasts during school hours. The advent of the Sony Walkman in the 1980s and the Apple iPod in the 1990s led to the widespread "personalization" of audio, especially music. Where previously it was highly unusual to see people in public listening with headphones, it has become increasingly common in a variety of environments: on buses and mass transit, in airplanes, in parks, in coffee shops, and in health clubs. Noise-canceling

headphones have become popular in open-office work environments and on commercial aircrafts. While personal entertainment and a cloistered sound environment can make otherwise tedious experiences more enjoyable (riding the bus) or make a work environment more productive (reducing distractions), wearing headphones or earbuds in publicly shared spaces clearly signals "do not disturb" and discourages casual conversation.

Personalized audio lets us each listen to the music or programming of our choice, but it also means that we are individually less likely to share the same content as those around us. While in the early days of radio, those few who had audio devices were listening to one of a few broadcast stations, today, most people are listening to digitally recorded content, or can access a nearly infinite variety of audio content via Internet

connections, so the likelihood that any two people are listening to the same content is very low. Beyond "tuning out" the world around us in public spaces, this lessening of shared media experience means that we are less likely to be able to discuss the media we consume with others. We simply don't consume the same programming.

Fragmentation of Media

Arguably, our shared stock of cultural and current events that reinforce our sense of connection and commonality is smaller. In the 1960s, most Americans got their television news from either Walter Cronkite or Huntley and Brinkley. In the late 1970s, the three major national broadcast networks accounted for about 90 percent of the television viewing of Americans (Webster, 2005). Other data suggest that the market share of the top-selling pop-music album is smaller today, relative to population, than in decades past. The proliferation of personal music players, cloud storage, and Internet radio stations enables more variety in music consumption, with a by-product being less widely "shared" musical memories.

In addition, a smaller and smaller share of the American population is reading daily newspapers. Since 1999, newspaper readership has fallen among all age groups. Less than a quarter of 25 to 34-year-olds read daily newspapers, down from more than 40 percent a decade ago. Readership among those 65 and older has declined from more than 70 percent to less than 60 percent (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012).

With our separate, personal audioscapes and an increasingly fragmented media world, it may be more difficult today to have shared, collective experiences that provide a common meaning (or narrative) and strengthen our sense of attachment to "place" and each other.

7

Counter Currents

While in many respects Americans have less in common, in other ways our lives are growing more similar and shared.

Third Places. We spend the bulk of our time in our homes and in places of work. According to Ray Oldenburg, Americans are seeking "third places"–where they can socialize aside from work and the home (Oldenburg, 1999). With the added allure of wireless Internet access, coffee shops have become important places to hang out, socialize, study, hold impromptu business meetings, and work away from the home or office. The number of coffee shops in the United States has nearly doubled in the past decade, from about 11,000 in 2003, to about 20,000 in 2012 (SBDC Network, 2012). And some long-established "third places" like libraries are seeing a resurgence of patronage.

Nationally Homogenous Customer Experiences. The consolidation of many industries–banks, department stores, airlines, cable companies– means that more Americans are served by the same company. Where once there was a proliferation of local department stores, today virtually all Americans can shop at a Macy's or a Walmart, which offers the same array of goods at all its locations. National chains–for fast food, clothing, footwear, office supplies, hardware, and home improvements–mean that Americans can have virtually the same retail experience regardless of where they live. The increased uniformity of these kinds of experiences gives us a common frame of reference.

The trials and tribulations of the "customer service" experience are now often widely shared. We all wade through the same seemingly endless menus of prompts that comprise "voicemail hell." We all express frustration dealing with call center staff that are working from pre-programmed scripts and often have weak language skills. There is the misery of the commons: standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles to register a car or get a driver's license remains a common and democratic experience for all Americans. In theory, the security screenings conducted by TSA should be a common shared experience, but even that has been segregated; frequent fliers get shorter lines, and a select few are excluded from the ritual of removing shoes, belts, and liquids.

Farmer's Markets. Farmer's markets provide opportunities for social interaction between producers and consumers, and become community gathering places in their own right. The number of Farmer's markets in the U.S. has quadrupled in the past two decades to more than 8,000 nationally (Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA), 2013).

Declining Racial Segregation. Overall, American neighborhoods have become demonstrably less segregated by race over the past half-century (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012). White Americans today are much more likely to have persons of color in their neighborhood than in decades past. (Public schools still have substantial segregation, especially by income).

Technology. Some technologies are highly common. Most Americans use one of two Smartphone operating systems (iOS or Android) and one of two computer operating systems (Mac OSX or Windows). Everyone accesses the Internet using the same underlying technology (the TCP/IP protocol and typically a web browser).

Sporting events. A few big sporting and cultural events still command very large audiences and stimulate social activity. A few events, like the Super Bowl, draw the simultaneous attention of a large fraction of the population. Some events command widespread engagement in particular communities. College and professional sports teams draw loyal fans for many kinds of participation–attending sporting events, tailgating before and after such events, holding viewing parties, or even collectively watching such events in taverns and bars. Sometimes cities and sports teams arrange large-venue public viewing opportunities for important "away" games, giving fans a chance to participate communally in watching the sport. For some sports, fans have organized their own formal groups to promote not just game attendance but outside social activity as well. High school and college sports frequently have "booster" groups that have a significant social component.

Social media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Meetup and other social media enable people to connect more easily and quickly–at least virtually–than was heretofore possible. There is some evidence to suggest that the advent of these social media have reduced the amount of time that people spend watching television (a generally passive, often individual activity)–and young adults do watch less television than older Americans. Some video viewing is social–for example, people share videos on YouTube or Facebook, using commenting features to jointly discuss content. Social media allows us to connect better to people who are far away (since it's easier to talk to them online) and local (through locational check-in tools, rating features, etc.). At the same time, too, social media facilitate connections among like-minded people, especially those who may be in disparate locations. Social media let us find people or things that reflect our interests; we can see if our Facebook friends like the same bands, restaurants, etc. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and blogs let us follow and jointly discuss or comment on the accounts of people, businesses, and organizations whose interests align with ours.

Gaming. Video games are a mixed bag when it comes to social interaction. Some games are a single player versus machine games, played on a personal computer or other device, often with headphones. But many games, especially game consoles, are frequently played by groups of two to four players in the same room, interacting socially as well as virtually. In between are online, multi-player games that offer at least a partly-social experience, which can be augmented by text or audio chat in addition to game play.

Dining Out. Americans are dining out more. Meals eaten away from home can be a social experience, especially when a group enjoys a meal in a full-service restaurant. But meals away from home are a mixed bag: some are solo-dining at fast-food restaurants, taking away food (like sandwiches), or making "drive-thru" purchases that are then consumed in an automobile. And dining at home has become less social; families are less likely to share meals than in earlier years, and people report that they are less likely to entertain friends in their homes (Putnam, 2000).

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