

Lonely with smartphones and few children

In her book, *The Lonely Century*,¹ written during Covid, Noreena Hertz discusses the other major health pandemic affecting much of the world – loneliness. She notes that this is not just a mental health crisis, but is actually making us ill. Loneliness is “worse for our health than not exercising, as **harmful** [*able to cause damage*] as being alcoholic, and twice as harmful as being obese. Statistically, loneliness is equivalent to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day”.

For Hertz, loneliness is not only “feeling **bereft** of [*to be deprived of, to lack*] love, company and intimacy. Nor is it just about feeling ignored, unseen or **uncared for** [*not looked after*] by those with whom we interact on a regular basis: our partner, family, friends and neighbours. It’s also about feeling unsupported and uncared for by our fellow citizens, our employers, our community, our government”.

Referring to Hannah Arendt, Hertz argues that loneliness is linked to “the politics of intolerance”. Hertz quotes Arendt who wrote that “the experience of **not belonging** [*feeling excluded, not fitting in*] to the world at all [is..] the essence of totalitarian government, preparation of its executioners and victims”.

Hertz identifies the “**harsh** [*unpleasant, cruel*] form of capitalism [that] took hold [in the 1980s]: neoliberalism, an ideology with an **overriding** [*to have top priority*] emphasis on freedom – ‘free’ choice, ‘free’ markets, ‘freedom’ from government or trade union interference” as a key driver of loneliness. “We [have been] reduced to *homo economicus*, rational humans consumed only by our own self-interest”.

A result is that “solo living is [now] most common in big cities such as New York City, [where] in Manhattan, over half of residents live on their own [as they do] in cities like Tokyo, Paris and Oslo”.

Hertz points also to the use of screens and smartphones in distancing us from others: “every moment in which we are on our phones, **scrolling** [*to move a screen up or down*], watching videos, reading tweets, commenting on pictures, we are not present with those around us, depriving ourselves of the multiple daily social interactions that make us feel part of a wider society – those small moments of feeling seen and **validated** [*recognised, confirmed*] that, ..., really do matter”. “The distracting nature of smartphones significantly **erodes** [*wears down, weakens*] [our ability to feel empathy] which helps us understand and connect with each other [...] because they fragment our attention, creating a **splintered** [*broken into small pieces*] self”.

For Alice Evans, a sociologist at King’s College London, smartphones are also central to why people are living alone and having less children across the planet, except in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are fewer smartphones.² She argues that in the last 15 years, fertility has fallen nearly everywhere, from Scandinavia with its strong government support for **parenting** [*to bring up children*] to more traditional societies like Egypt, Türkiye and Tamil Nadu.

For Evans, a key factor is that adults are increasingly living alone: in the United States, over half of people aged between 18 and 34 are neither cohabiting nor married, they are single, and the same is true for much of Latin America, East Asia, China and South Korea. Again all these countries have “cultural **idiosyncrasies**” [*specificities, particular characteristics*] which should not be ignored. But, “the big shock that’s occurred everywhere all at once is we’ve seen vast improvements in personal online entertainment... whether it’s watching on Netflix, sports bets – online gambling has become absolutely massive across Brazil and Latin America more broadly”. We are all becoming not just single, but “retreating into this digital solitude”. Technology makes it “nicer and easier to stay at home”. “The tech is outcompeting personal interactions”, people are living alone and societies are having less children.

Are the following sentences “true” or “false”?

- 1/ Loneliness is as bad for health as moderate smoking. True/False
- 2/ Loneliness is about not knowing enough people. True/False
- 3/ Neoliberalism has made us freer and less lonely. True/False
- 4/ Many people in big cities live alone. True/False
- 5/ Screens and smartphones use up our time a lot, reducing our contact with others. True/False
- 6/ The permanent distraction of screens has no impact on our self and personality. True/False
- 7/ Having children is declining in countries with different levels of public services and traditions. True/False
- 8/ Online entertainment is making us more solitary. True/False

Answers: 1 true; 2 false; 3 false; 4 true; 5 true; 6 false; 7 true; 8 true.

¹ Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World that’s Pulling Apart*, Sceptre, 2020. ([See this video too.](#))

² New York Times, “[How the iPhone Drove Men and Women Apart](#)”, *Interesting Times Podcast* by Ross Douthat, interviewing Dr Alice Evans, sociologist at King's College London, May 29, 2025