

Research Note on Social Connectedness and Isolation

An Analysis of Torontonians / Canadians with few close family or friends using data from the Toronto Social Capital Study 2022 and the Social Capital in Canada Study 2022

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For methodological information about these studies, see the final reports available at <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/toronto-social-capital-studies>.

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I combined responses to two survey questions about family and friends into a single, new variable.

The two questions I used were Q14 and Q16:

- Q14. How many relatives do you have who you feel close to (that is who you feel at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind, or call on for help)? This may include people you live with.
- Q16. How many close friends do you have (that is, people who are not your relatives but who you can feel at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind, or call on for help)?

The result of the combination of the responses to these two question are as follows:

Category	Description	Toronto survey		National survey	
		% (weighted)	n= (unweighted)	% (weighted)	n= (unweighted)
Few close family or friends	No close relatives and five or fewer close friends, <u>or</u> no close friends and five or fewer close relatives, <u>or</u> no close relatives and no close friends [1]	11.4	410	14.1	259
Some close family or friends	Between one and five close relatives <u>and</u> between one and five close friends	42.5	1,572	43.4	866
Many close family or friends	Between six and ten close relatives <u>or</u> between six and ten close friends (or both) [2]	28.9	1,180	25.3	526
Very many close family or friends	11 or more close relatives <u>or</u> 11 or more close friends (or both) [3]	14.7	654	13.2	269
Cannot say	Cannot say to at least one of the two questions	2.4	74	4.0	81
Total [4]		100.0	3,891	100.0	2,001

[1] The proportion with no close relatives and no close friends is very small (2.0% in the Toronto survey, and 2.9% in the national survey).

[2] This includes some respondents who have between six and ten close relatives but no close friends, and some who have between six and ten close friends but no close relatives; however those with these combinations represent a small proportion of this group (1.1% of the total sample in the Toronto survey, and 1.4% in the national survey).

[3] This includes some respondents who have between 11 or more close relatives but no close friends, and some who have 11 or more close friends but no close relatives; however those with these combinations represent a small proportion of this group (0.3% of the total sample in the Toronto survey, and 0.5% in the national survey).

[4] The total sample size for Toronto (3,891) is less than the complete sample for the survey (4,163) because not all respondents in the oversampled neighbourhoods were asked Q14 and Q16.

Observations:

- The results in the Toronto and national surveys are broadly similar, though Torontonians are somewhat less likely to have few close family or friends, and more likely to have many.
- The most common category is “some close family or friends” – with a little over two in five people belonging to this group.
- A little over one in ten have very few close family or friends, but this group is large enough to work with, in terms of further analysis.
- About two in five have many or very many close family or friends. This includes a little over one in ten who have very many close family or friends; again, this group is large enough to work with, in terms of further analysis.

Next, I looked at whether people with few close family or friends also have few other friends (Q19: Not counting your close friends or relatives, how many other friends do you have?).

Category	Toronto survey			National survey		
	No other friends (%)	Five or fewer other friends (including none) (%)	Six or more other friends (%)	No other friends (%)	Five or fewer other friends (including none) (%)	Six or more other friends (%)
Few close family or friends	45	78	21	48	85	11
Some close family or friends	13	53	43	18	63	33
Many close family or friends	6	31	67	9	38	57
Very many close family or friends	6	20	77	7	23	72

As expected, the results show that those with few close family or friends also have few other friends; in other words, people with a narrow circle of close family or friends do not generally compensate for this by having larger circles of other friends. In the Toronto survey for instance:

- 78% of those with few close family or friends also have five or fewer other friends.
- 77% of those with very many close family or friends also have six or more other friends.

Based on this, we can continue working with the new combined measure of social connection (Q14 + Q16) without being concerned that the social isolation we are looking at might be easily offset by larger circles of other friends.

To further check how meaningful the new combined measure is, I examined its relationship with Q39E: thinking about your life in general, how often would you say you have people you can depend on to help you when you really need it.

Category	Toronto survey: have people to depend on...			National survey: have people to depend on...		
	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)
Few close family or friends	30	32	34	34	30	35
Some close family or friends	55	32	12	61	28	10
Many close family or friends	69	23	7	66	26	8
Very many close family or friends	77	18	4	68	23	8

In the Toronto survey, only 30 percent of those with few family or friends always or often feel they have people they can depend on when they really need it, compared with 77 percent of those with very many close family or friends (results for the national survey are similar).

This confirms that the new variable is in fact capturing the experience of social connection (or social isolation).

Description of those who are more socially isolated

Who are the Torontonians / Canadians who are less connected to close family or friends?

Toronto survey					National survey						
Category	Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends	Category	Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends		
Gender	Men	12	42	29	15	Gender	Men	14	44	25	15
	Women	11	43	29	15		Women	14	44	26	12
Age	18-24	10	48	29	8	Age	18-34	12	37	28	17
	25-29	11	48	31	9		35-54	17	44	24	11
	30-39	11	44	28	14		55+	13	48	24	12
	40-54	12	46	26	14						
	55-64	14	40	29	16						
	65+	11	33	33	22						

Social isolation is not strongly related to either gender or age, with the exception that seniors are somewhat more likely to have very many close family or friends (in the Toronto survey).

Social isolation is more clearly related to income and employment. The proportion of Torontonians / Canadians with few close family or friends is higher among:

- those with low household incomes (compared to those with higher incomes);
- those who describe themselves as having a hard time because their income is not enough, (compared to those with more favourable descriptions of their income);
- those who are unemployed (compared to those who are employed full-time);
- those who have not completed a post-secondary education (compared to those with a college diploma or university degree).

The Toronto survey, with a larger sample, also suggests that those who are looking after their household (“stay-at-home”) and those who are on disability pension are also more likely than average to have few close family or friends.

Toronto survey						National survey					
Category		Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends	Category		Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends
Income (\$)	\$0 to \$29K	19	49	20	10	Income (\$)	\$0 to \$29K	18	48	20	11
	\$30K – \$59K	14	44	28	13		\$30K – \$59K	13	38	33	14
	\$60K-\$99K	8	43	32	14		\$60K-\$99K	10	43	29	15
	\$100K	6	39	36	19		\$100K	9	43	28	20
Income description	Good enough	7	39	34	18	Income description	Good enough	10	42	28	17
	Just enough	11	44	30	14		Just enough	14	44	28	11
	Not enough – stretched	16	47	24	12		Not enough – stretched	15	48	24	11
	Not enough – hard time	22	47	18	12		Not enough – hard time	25	47	13	10
Employment status	Working full-time	7	45	32	14	Employment status	Working full-time	12	42	29	15
	Unemployed (n=228)	20	43	25	7		Unemployed (n=122)	21	41	23	8
	Stay-at-home (n=128)	23	34	20	20		Stay-at-home (n=105)	14	47	20	13
	Student (n=178)	12	57	19	10						
	Retired	12	33	33	20		Retired	14	46	26	13
	Disability pension (n=144)	27	39	20	12						
Highest level of education	HS or less	16	42	25	14	Highest level of education	HS or less	19	43	21	14
	College	9	45	29	15		College	13	44	29	12
	University	8	42	33	15		University	10	46	27	14

Immigration status is not strongly associated with social isolation: the proportion with few close family or friends is similar among first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation plus Canadians (data not shown). The likelihood of having few close family or friends also does not vary significantly between racialized and non-racialized Torontonians / Canadians (data not shown). (The Toronto survey, with a larger sample, shows modest variations among identity groups; for instance, South Asian Torontonians are slightly more likely than average to have very many close family or friends.)

Toronto survey						National survey					
Category		Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends	Category		Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends
Physical health	Excellent or very good	7	42	31	18	Physical health	Excellent or very good	11	42	27	18
	Good	10	43	31	13		Good	13	45	26	12
	Fair or poor	20	43	23	12		Fair or poor	20	43	23	10
Mental health	Excellent or very good	7	39	33	19	Mental health	Excellent or very good	9	44	27	18
	Good	11	44	30	13		Good	14	44	27	10
	Fair or poor	19	47	22	10		Fair or poor	23	43	21	10
Disability	Yes – always or often limits	20	40	24	15	Disability	Yes – always or often limits	18	43	25	12
	Yes – occasionally limits	11	42	31	16		Yes – occasionally limits	11	42	29	16
	No	10	44	30	14		No	14	45	25	12
	Physical condition	15	40	27	17		Physical condition	16	44	26	12
	Mental health condition	18	44	25	12		Mental health condition (n=160)	10	46	24	19
	Mental health condition – always or often limits (n=167)	27	43	17	12						

Social isolation is also related to health and disability. The proportion of Torontonians / Canadians with few close family or friends is higher among:

- those who report fair or poor physical health (compared to those who report good, or very good or excellent physical health);
- those who report fair or poor mental health (compared to those who report good, or very good or excellent mental health);
- those who have a disability that always or often limits their daily activity (compared to those who are only occasionally limited or who have no disability).

The Toronto survey also suggests that those with a disability related to mental health are more likely than average to have few close family or friends, especially if this disability always or often limits their daily activity.

Social isolation and social capital

Finally, the surveys confirm that there is a strong connection between social connection / social isolation, on the one hand, and the measures of social capital and wellbeing, on the other hand. (This analysis excludes the social connection index because the number of close family and friends is a component of that index.)

Toronto survey					National survey				
Category	Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends	Category	Few close family or friends	Some close family or friends	Many close family or friends	Very many close family or friends
Social trust index mean score	3.43	4.37	5.07	5.48	Social trust index mean score	3.13	4.52	5.14	5.66
Civic engagement index mean score	3.63	4.31	4.90	5.17	Civic engagement index mean score	2.59	3.47	4.23	4.34
Wellbeing index mean score	4.91	6.30	6.82	7.32	Wellbeing index mean score	5.06	6.49	6.82	7.07
Life satisfaction mean score	5.13	6.45	6.92	7.40	Life satisfaction mean score	5.24	6.61	6.90	7.20

For instance, having more close family and friends is strongly associated with better wellbeing and higher life satisfaction. This may not be surprising, but it is important to document. It may be the case that some people are happier with fewer close contacts, but for most people, this is not the case. Social connection and social isolation matter because people with narrower social circles are, on the whole, less satisfied with their lives than those with wider social circles.

Having more close family and friends is also strongly associated with more civic engagement and higher levels of social trust. People who are more connected participate more in their community, and are more trusting of others in their community. As always, the survey cannot determine the direction of causality: having more friends may lead to more engagement and trust, or being more trusting and engaged may make it easier to form and sustain friendships. But either way, the point is that there is a relationship between individual wellbeing and community wellbeing. Individuals with wider social circles are more healthy and satisfied, but communities with fewer isolated individuals would likely benefit from higher levels of civic engagement and social trust.

Q39b: Are confident in your abilities, even when faced with challenges						
Category	Toronto survey			National survey		
	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)
Few close family or friends	45	35	18	40	34	24
Some close family or friends	57	32	10	60	31	8
Many close family or friends	67	26	6	64	28	7
Very many close family or friends	77	19	4	66	25	9
Q39c: Have something to look forward to in life						
Category	Toronto survey			National survey		
	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)
Few close family or friends	36	32	30	30	37	32
Some close family or friends	52	33	14	54	33	12
Many close family or friends	64	27	8	56	31	11
Very many close family or friends	69	24	6	63	26	9
Q39d: Are able to bounce back quickly after hard times						
Category	Toronto survey			National survey		
	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)
Few close family or friends	40	36	18	35	33	29
Some close family or friends	57	32	11	55	33	11
Many close family or friends	66	25	8	61	30	8
Very many close family or friends	71	24	4	68	22	9
Q39b: Have people you can depend on to help you when you really need it						
Category	Toronto survey			National survey		
	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)	Always or often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or never (%)
Few close family or friends	30	32	34	34	30	35
Some close family or friends	55	32	12	61	28	10
Many close family or friends	69	23	7	66	26	8
Very many close family or friends	77	18	4	68	23	8

Recap

- A little more than one in ten people in Toronto / Canada can be described as socially isolated (or less connected), in that they have relatively few close family or friends.
- Social isolation is more common among those who have low incomes, are unemployed, have poor physical health or mental health, or who have a disability.
- Social isolation matters to these individuals because it is associated with poorer wellbeing and lower life satisfaction.
- Social isolation matters to communities because it is associated with weaker civic engagement and social trust.

Comparison between Toronto 2018 and Toronto 2022

A comparison of the Toronto results between 2018 shows that:

- The proportion of Torontonians with few close family or friend increased from 8% to 11%.
- The proportion of Torontonians with few or some close family or friend increased from 41% to 54%.
- The proportion of Torontonians with many or very many close family or friend decreased from 55% to 44%.

Category	Description	Toronto survey 2018		Toronto survey 2022	
		% (weighted)	n= (unweighted)	% (weighted)	n= (unweighted)
Few close family or friends	No close relatives and five or fewer close friends, <u>or</u> no close friends and five or fewer close relatives, <u>or</u> no close relatives and no close friends [1]	7.7	197	11.4	410
Some close family or friends	Between one and five close relatives <u>and</u> between one and five close friends	33.7	1,003	42.5	1,572
Many close family or friends	Between six and ten close relatives <u>or</u> between six and ten close friends (or both) [2]	30.2	1,039	28.9	1,180
Very many close family or friends	11 or more close relatives <u>or</u> 11 or more close friends (or both) [3]	25.2	873	14.7	654
Cannot say	Cannot say to at least once of the two questions	3.2	95	2.4	74
Total [4]		100.0	3,207	100.0	3,891