IDEAS

Why Americans Stopped Throwing Dinner Parties

The share of adults who say they regularly have friends over has declined dramatically since 1975.

By Derek Thompson



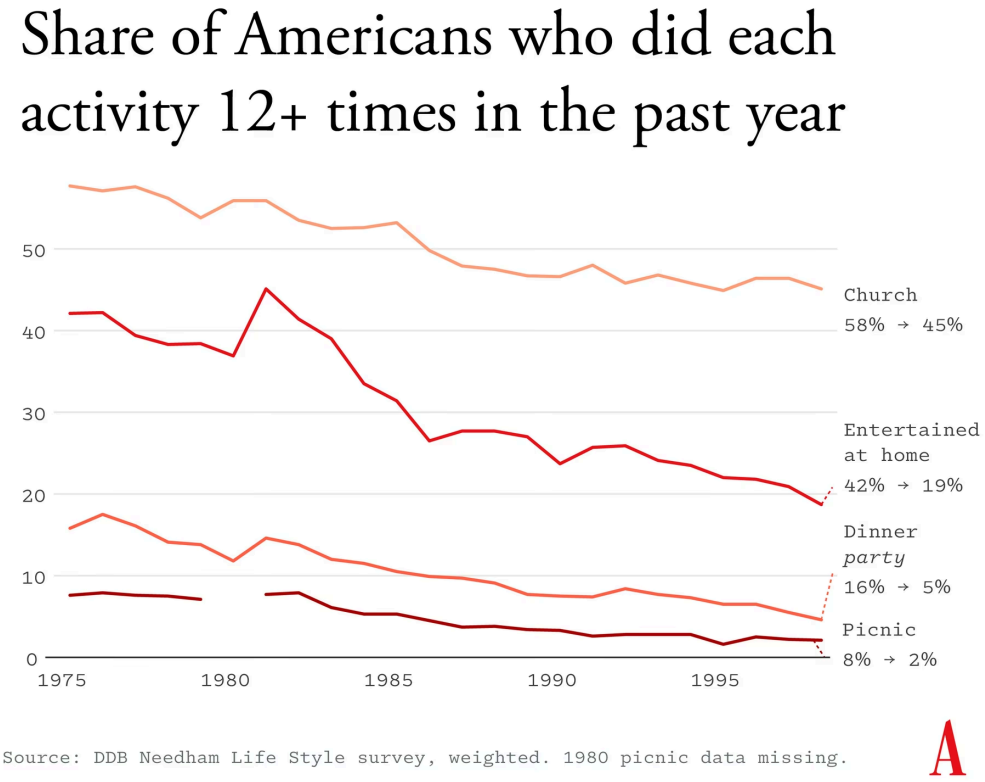
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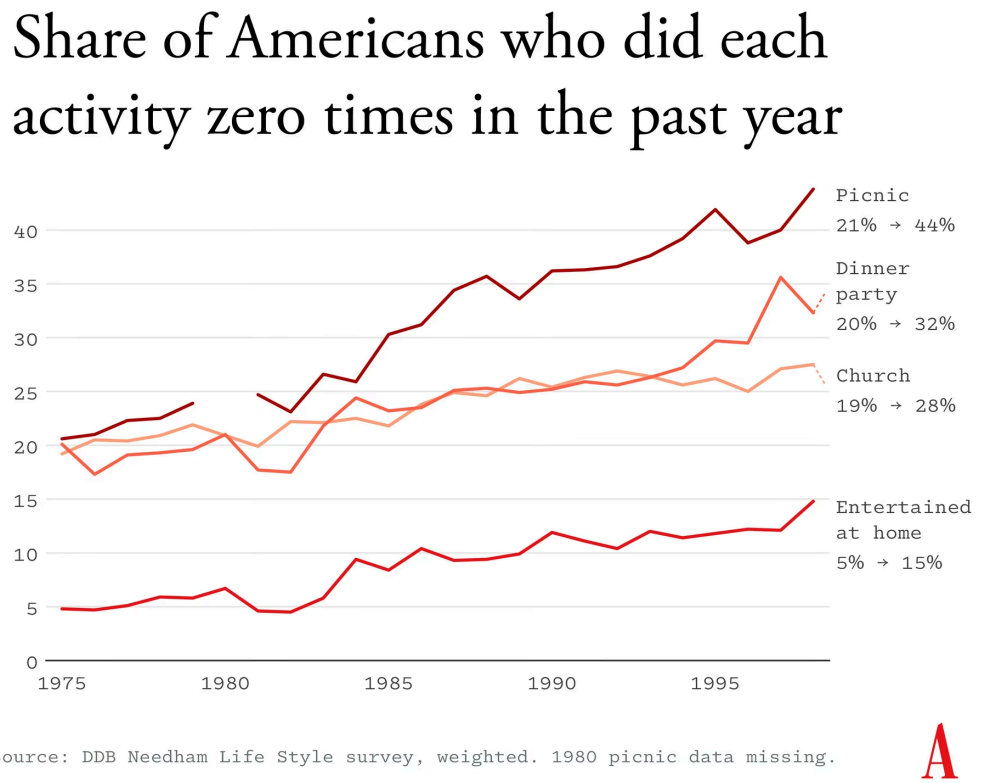
OCTOBER 1, 2026 SHARE AS GIFT DISCUSS 505 SAVE

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Mid-century Americans knew how to throw a party, for better or worse. In some of the most famous titles of the 1950s and 1960s—*Couples*, by John Updike; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, by Edward Albee; *Revolutionary Road*, by Richard Yates—the drama (and martini-soaked melodrama) took place in middle-class living rooms. The stories were fictional, but the setting was realistic. Until 1975, half of Americans said they entertained guests at their home every month.

Then something changed. Americans stopped throwing parties. Even more fundamental, they stopped visiting one another. From 1975 to 1998, the share of Americans who gave or attended a monthly dinner party declined by half. The share of Americans saying they never entertained people at home tripled. Although cultural critics often bemoan the decline of organized religion, the dip in church attendance was downright modest compared with the collapse in hosting, according to data gathered by the DDB Needham Life Style Surveys.





In his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam wrote that if these trends continued, the ancient practice of visiting with friends "might entirely disappear from American

life in less than a generation." Check your calendars. One generation and change later, Putnam's prediction needs an update.

So what's the state of hosting in the 21st century? To get an apples-to-apples answer to that question, the polling group Data for Progress replicated the DDB Needham Life Style Surveys cited by Putnam. Unfortunately, the upshot is about as brutal as you'd imagine.

In the past 30 years, Americans have seen double-digit declines in practically every measure of socializing. They are less likely to play cards; attend a sporting event; go to the bar; volunteer; work on a community project.

Read: Americans need to party more

When it comes to hosting people at home, the declines are particularly stark. Since 1995, the share of Americans who say they've hosted guests or attended a dinner party has declined by about 20 percent, from 88 to 67 percent—and that's in addition to the declines that Putnam noted a quarter century ago.

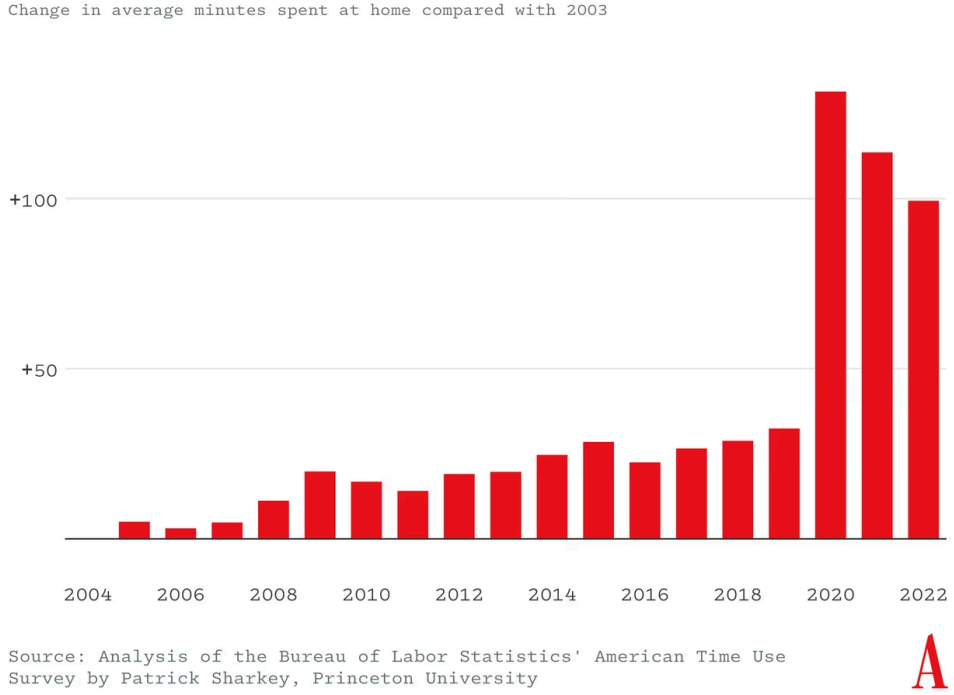
Combining the two surveys, we get this astonishing fact: The share of Americans who say they host friends or family at their home at least monthly has fallen from 42 percent in 1975 to 12 percent in 2026—a 70 percent collapse in a half century.

To figure out what's going on, let's first reject a few stories that don't entirely fit the data.

Perhaps, an optimist might think, Americans are hosting fewer dinner parties because they've simply moved all of their hangouts to restaurants and bars. Nice idea, but almost certainly wrong. As Putnam wrote in his book, "the practice of entertaining friends has not simply moved outside the home, but seems to be vanishing entirely." Overall face-to-face socializing has declined significantly in the past few decades, and the restaurant industry has actually noted a sharp increase in people eating alone.

Another plausible theory is that Americans have replaced dinner parties with other forms of healthy socialization. Americans do engage in some activities much more frequently than in 1975, such as going to concerts, traveling, and exercising. All very good.

But the evidence suggests that, despite the increase in running clubs, the surge in exercise time seems to be mostly solo. A lot of people are going to the gym with a podcast to keep them company or rolling out a yoga mat in the basement. Most important, it is impossible to assert that Americans are getting out of the house to socialize in new ways when time spent at home has certifiably exploded since the 2010s.



In short, the great disinvitation is real, and we can't wish or explain it away by arguing that Americans are just finding new ways to be with friends. Here are four explanations:

First is that people are more harried, especially those in dual-earner households. In the 1970 book *The Harried Leisure Class*, the Swedish economist Staffan Burenstam Linder wrote that as a society gets richer, leisure time takes on the frantic quality of work, because each hour of downtime practically shouts, *Excuse me! You could be making money right now!* We multitask and pack various activities into short periods. Firing up a Netflix show at 9 p.m. that you can half ignore while you answer email is a perfect activity for people who need their leisure time to feel like half-productive box-checking. Taking several hours to coordinate with other busy people to set up a lengthy dinner party is a tougher sell.

That's a sociological explanation, but the decline of hosting is also about macroeconomic trends. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam acknowledged that women have historically been the keepers of the family social calendar, planning the birthday parties and neighborhood potlucks. For any number of reasons, women seem to do better than men at making and keeping adult friendships and making plans with other families. But in the 1950s and 1960s, tens of millions of women traded their unpaid household-management jobs for salaried jobs, and the family social calendar frayed, as men failed to pick up the slack.

Moving from macro to micro: My wife and I love to host parties. But these get-togethers are a lot of work: conception, communication, coordination, shopping. *Are your kids coming, or are you getting a babysitter? Does your eldest kid eat eggplant? No? We'll make pasta. Oh, that's right, your wife's gluten allergy …* These multiskilled logistical adventures are almost indistinguishable from the sort of logistical problem-solving that characterizes a good deal of white-collar work. But when both parents are already inundated with literal white-collar work, it's hard to add the job of unpaid party planner.

The trouble with going all in on this explanation—beyond the fact that it embraces a version of learned helplessness for men—is that leisure time has increased overall since the 1950s. Theoretically, married couples should have even more time to have people over for food and drink. Other facts must be squeezing out socializing.

Another possibility is that intensive parenting leaves less time for hosting. Americans used to have many kids whom they cared for sparsely; now they have fewer children to whom they devote every minute of their life.

The numbers here are unreal. The sociologists Liana C. Sayer, Suzanne M. Bianchi, and John P. Robinson wrote in 2004 that from 1975 to 1998, mothers increased the amount of time they spent with their kids by about 200 minutes a week. In the 21st century, mothering time has continued to rise. For married fathers, parenting time increased by even more.

Thus evenings that adults once spent hosting adults are now spent holding, bathing, driving, tutoring, playing with, and talking to their children.

A third explanation is that friendship networks are shrinking, especially for poor people who aren't married. If you're going to throw a dinner party, you probably need a few things first. Say, a dinner table. Chairs. Food and drink. And also: friends. It is rare to host a dinner party for people you've never met. But the average number of close friendships is declining with each generation, and the decline is steepest for Americans without a college degree. So it's not just that married people have fewer dinner parties; poor people, who are less likely to be married, have fewer friends, period.

According to Data for Progress, the two groups most likely to say they never entertained people in their home in the previous year were political independents (44 percent) and people without a college diploma (39 percent). The latter isn't surprising, given all of the evidence that socializing is declining most rapidly among poorer Americans with less education. Hosting friends, like so much socializing, is in danger of becoming a luxury good.

The political wrinkle is more intriguing to me. I sometimes hear from people who tie everything back to politics that political polarization might lead to social

fragmentation. But I wonder if the opposite is just as plausible. Maybe people who are less embedded in strong social networks are less likely to attach themselves to groups of all kinds, including political parties. In this way, America's long-term detachment from groups and institutions is leading to a kind of pox-on-all-parties mentality that cashes out in an increase in independents.

From the February 2025 issue: The anti-social century

A final possibility is that it's too much fun to be home alone. The rise of aloneness is arguably the product of mostly positive trends. In the 20th century, perhaps, many housewives planned dinner parties out of a feeling of crushing isolation. Americans felt suffocating social pressure to attend social events with neighbors and fellow congregants whom they hated. Now we are free to be exactly who and where we want to be.

For many, this freedom has taken the shape of a living-room couch. The average time that Americans spent at home increased by almost two hours a day from 2003 to 2022. Cocooned within personalized entertainment fortresses, more Americans have shrunk the great buffet of all possible leisure activities to the small plate of screened media. Something deep in the human psyche seems to want to turn off our self-talk and silence our nattering internal monologues by turning up the volume of other characters' voices.

THE DEATH OF THE HOST is the story of lonely unmarried people and harried married dual-earner households, anxious parents spending more time with their children and less time with friends, and the typical home becoming such a riot of diverting comfort that people no longer have to invite human beings to interrupt their boredom.

For 200 years, people have worried that machines would make human labor unnecessary. This false assumption is commonly known as the "lump of labor" fallacy. (The finiteness of the labor market is the fallacy here, because people keep finding new problems to turn into jobs.) But machines in the past half century have accomplished something stranger. They have made other people less necessary to our leisure. Every generation has acquired better ways to entertain itself without leaving the house. The result is a peculiar triumph of modern abundance: We have built a world in which being alone has never been easier, more comfortable, or more fun. And then we wonder why everybody stopped coming over.

Leisure, as an activity to be enjoyed with other people, turns out to be more finite than work. The lump-of-labor fallacy was wrong, because technology keeps failing to replace jobs. But the "lump of leisure" theory might be right on the money. Social leisure turns out to be the real lump—something finite and easily displaced by technology. Our technology keeps getting better. Our social lives keep getting smaller.

Is this what we want? It depends on what *want* means. Everybody might prefer, in the abstract, a world of dinner parties, neighborhood friendships, and spontaneous gatherings. But on any given Wednesday at 7:45 p.m., looking at a screen is easier than hosting a party. This is not so much an individual failure as a coordination failure. Modernity has shifted leisure from activities that require coordination with other people toward activities that can be consumed without the permission or participation of others. Compared with TikTok, a dinner party is a terrible leisure technology. It requires matching schedules, cleaning the house, buying food, accommodating children and allergies, tolerating awkwardness, and taking the risk that the evening is mediocre. By contrast, what does television ask of us? Nothing. TikTok? Even less. We keep creating opportunities for downtime that eliminate the need for other people to be present. Not all progress is progress.

This article was adapted from a post on Derek Thompson's Substack.

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