

The new normal: living alone

Anonymous . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]10 Nov 2010: A.15.

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ABSTRACT

[...] despite a chapter that expands his examination of dying alone in the city, Klinenberg's new work, based on a study of hundreds of one-person households in several cities and forthcoming as a book next year, takes a much more positive view of living alone.

FULL TEXT

DISTINGUISHED SOCIOLOGIST Eric Klinenberg was in town recently to talk about what he calls "the extraordinary rise of living alone." He spoke at Boston College, where his audience was composed largely of students, many of them living with roommates during a period of transition between their own room in their family's home and the place they aspire to get for themselves when they start making money. There were also some senior citizens there. One of them, finding herself in an elevator with the speaker, said to Klinenberg in a quavering voice, "I live alone, and I came because I'm hoping to pick up some tips."

In his talk, Klinenberg explained that after many thousands of years of doing it almost exclusively the other way, human beings have embarked in the last century on their first serious experiment in widespread solo living.

The stats are arresting. In this country, approximately 31 million people live alone, and one-person households make up 28 percent of the total, tying with childless couples as the most common residential type - "more common," Klinenberg pointed out, "than the nuclear family, the multigenerational family, and the roommate or group home."

Those who live alone are mostly middle-age, with young adults the fastest-growing segment, and there are more women than men. No longer a transitional stage, living alone is one of the most stable household arrangements. And while one-person households were once scattered in low-density rural settings, they're now concentrated in cities. "In Manhattan," he said, "more than half of all residences are one-person dwellings."

You'd think that the United States, with its cult of individualism, would be the world leader in living alone, but it's not. Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, among others, come in ahead of us. That's because they're advanced welfare states that combine their own emphasis on the individual with extensive social safety nets.

In the absence of such safety nets, terrible things can happen, especially to those who grow old in isolation. Klinenberg, who is not yet 40, won a reputation as a leading figure in his field with his much-discussed first book, "Heat Wave: The Social Autopsy of a Disaster in Chicago," which analyzed the deaths of over 700 people in Chicago during a weeklong period in July of 1995. Most of them were senior citizens who died at home and alone. Klinenberg showed how they were victims not just of the weather but of a social order that left them without the support of family, community, or government.

But despite a chapter that expands his examination of dying alone in the city, Klinenberg's new work, based on a study of hundreds of one-person households in several cities and forthcoming as a book next year, takes a much more positive view of living alone. He treats it as an important rite of passage, our emergent standard measure of full adulthood, one for which our society begins preparing us from infancy onward - by making it normal to teach babies to sleep alone and for middle-class children to have their own rooms, and by making it convenient for young adults to carry on full and rewarding lives while living alone.

Klinenberg is impatient with standard readings of contemporary life as grimly fragmented - stock portraits of a nation of isolated types reduced to, in Robert Putnam's evocative but imprecise phrase, "bowling alone."

"One reason so many people live alone today is that they can do it while being extremely social," Klinenberg told me in an email. "You needn't live a traditional lifestyle to have a community. In fact, people who live alone are more likely to socialize with friends and neighbors than are married people."

Big changes in the structure of everyday life have converged to enable us to live alone: the greater freedom and economic power of women, the communications revolution, longer life spans. Klinenberg sees living alone as a choice, not a form of exile, and it's a choice we value because it's infused with principles that are important to us: individual freedom, personal control, self-realization.

And we're ever more impatient with the alternative. "One thing that almost everybody we talked to made clear," Klinenberg said, "is that there's nothing lonelier than being in a bad marriage."

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DETAILS

Subject:	Households; Single persons; Social conditions &trends -- United States--US
Location:	United States--US
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A.15
Publication year:	2010
Publication date:	Nov 10, 2010
Section:	Opinion
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.

Country of publication: United States, Boston, Mass.

Publication subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 07431791

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: Commentary

ProQuest document ID: 763110306

Document URL: <https://proxy.bc.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F763110306%3Faccountid%3D9673>

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Last updated: 2017-11-17

Database: Boston Globe

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