

Isolation, Loneliness, and COVID-19: Pandemic leads to sharp increase in mental health challenges, social woes

Percentage of older Canadians using video calling apps has nearly doubled since last year

October 14, 2020 – As COVID-19 cases [surge](#) and public health officials [plead](#) with Canadians to stay home and minimize their contact with others whenever possible, a new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute sheds light on the monumental shift in social behaviours in Canada this year and the corresponding effects it has had.

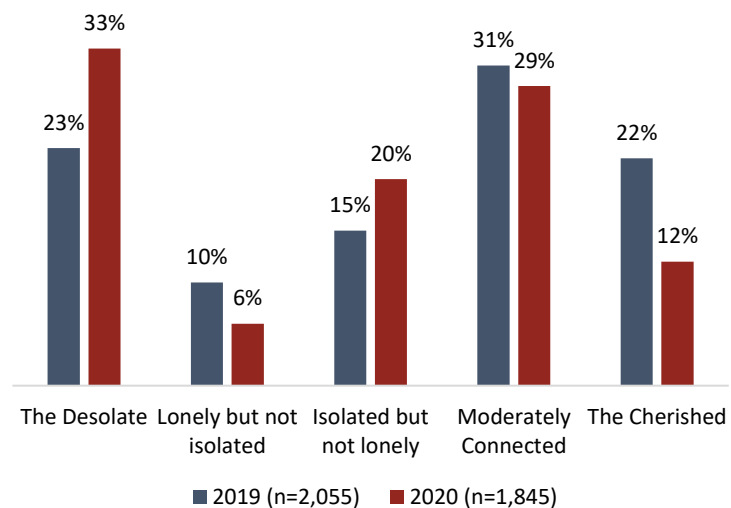
The unprecedented drop in community activity, from volunteering, to attending live concerts, to visiting local community centres and hubs, has taken its toll on Canadians. The percentage of those saying they have a good social life has dropped from more than half in 2019 (55%) to just one-in-three (33%) this year.

This study, as with its predecessor in May of last year, sorts Canadians along two key dimensions: *social isolation* (or the number and frequency of interpersonal connections a person has) and *loneliness* (or their relative satisfaction with the quality of those connections), to recreate our Index on Loneliness and Social Isolation (ISLI).

This year, the percentage of Canadians who can be categorized as The Desolate, those who suffer from both loneliness and social isolation, has increased from 23 per cent of the population to 33 per cent. Further, the percentage suffering from neither has dropped by nearly half, from 22 per cent to 12 per cent.

As Canadians have become more isolated, many are voicing concerns about their mental health. Last year, two-thirds (67%) said their mental health was good or very good; this year just 53 per cent say the same. One-in-five (19%) now share that their mental health is either poor or very poor, with three-in-ten young women (30%) reporting this.

Isolation and loneliness index - 2019 vs. 2020



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from September 25 - 28, 2020 among a representative randomized sample of 1,845 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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More Key Findings:

- Canadians relationships with their family members have remained a source of comfort and largely positive. Half of married respondents (51%) say their relationship with their spouse is still very good, down from 57 per cent last year.
- The number of residents over 54 years of age who say they would rather see more of people has nearly doubled, from 18 per cent last year to 33 per cent. On the other end of the spectrum, those in the 35 to 54 age group are most likely to say they wish they had more alone time (34%).
- While some older Canadians are having a very difficult time with isolation and loneliness, they are also most likely to be within the Cherished and Moderately Connected groupings – those enduring the pandemic best. Two-in-five young men and women are among the Desolate and are experiencing considerable isolation and loneliness.
- Many are using technology to stay connected and this is nowhere truer than with those 55 years of age and older. Among this group, usage of video calling apps has increased from 36 per cent to 55 per cent.
- That said, Canadians using Zoom, FaceTime and other video calling apps are less enthusiastic about the experience this year than last. Just 47 per cent say it makes them feel more connected to friends and family, while 47 per cent say it's simply better than nothing. Last year, 71 per cent chose the former, suggesting the increase in usage is reducing the quality of overall connection.

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part One: Pandemic's impact on community activity

The COVID-19 outbreak forced Canadians into their homes and away from their communities, and consistently threatens to do so again as the country navigates rising and falling cases of the virus. While **finances** have been the key challenge for many families as they try to keep food on the table and businesses afloat, there are myriad social connections that have been lost for the bulk of 2020. Birthday parties and celebrations over Zoom have become commonplace, and large events like Canada Day festivities and Thanksgiving have become smaller. This study represents the second analysis of social isolation and loneliness in Canada, the first was in May 2019. This allows for a fascinating comparison to understand the scope of changes Canadians are facing this year compared to last.

Quality of relationships

As the initial lockdown transitioned into public health guidance to stay home and limit gatherings, Canadians have seen a lot of their immediate household members. The good news is that for most, despite the extra time at home, those relationships are enduring.

Half of those with a spouse say they feel their relationship continues to be very good (51%). This is down slightly from 2019 (57%) but has largely been compensated by those saying their relationship is just good. Immediate family relationships are also largely unchanged. The vast majority of Canadians are getting by with their closest relatives without much tribulation.

That said, Canadians relationships with their closest friends are subject to the most strain. Here there has been a nine-point drop in the number saying they have very good relationships with their close friends, and one-quarter (24%) say their overall situation is only fair or worse:

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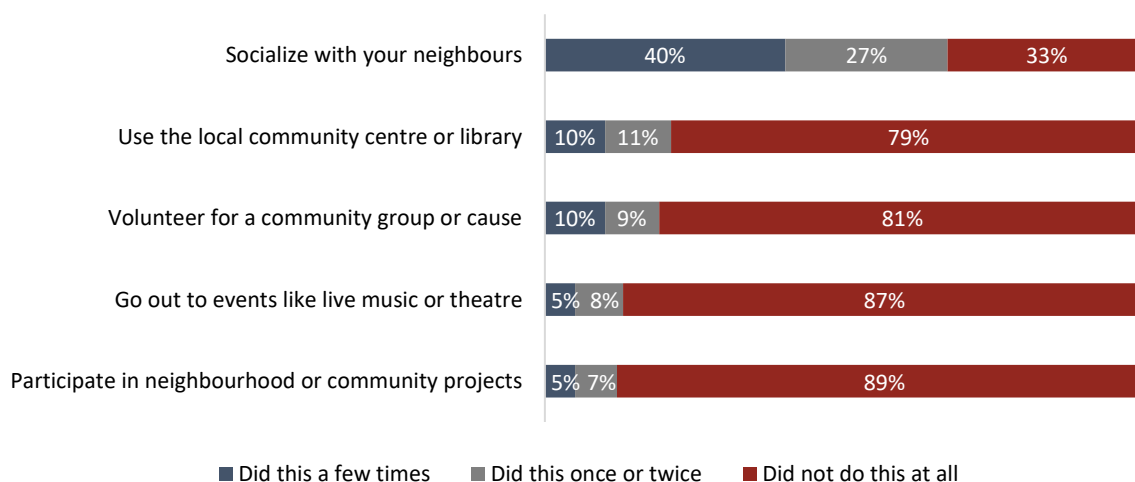
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How is your relationship with each of the following?						
		Very good	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Very poor
Your Spouse	2019	57%	32%	7%	2%	1%
	2020	51%	36%	9%	3%	0%
Your Immediate Family	2019	42%	42%	12%	3%	1%
	2020	38%	44%	13%	4%	2%
Your Close Friends	2019	38%	45%	14%	3%	1%
	2020	29%	47%	18%	5%	1%

Neighbourhood and community engagement

At the community level, nearly all activities outside of socializing with neighbours have evaporated. Nine-in-ten Canadians say they did not attend a live event like a concert or play this summer, while the same number say they had no involvement in neighbourhood or community projects during that period:

This summer, which of the following activities did you participate in?



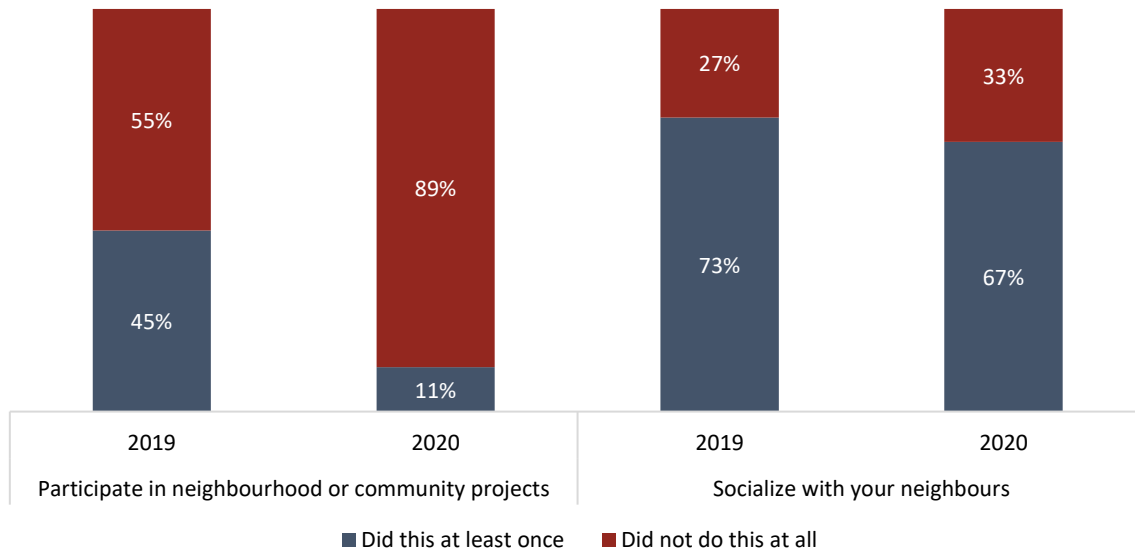
The activity that has fallen off the least is socializing with neighbours. Evidently two-thirds of Canadians (67%) took advantage of this proximity to enjoy a neighbour's company this summer, similar to the

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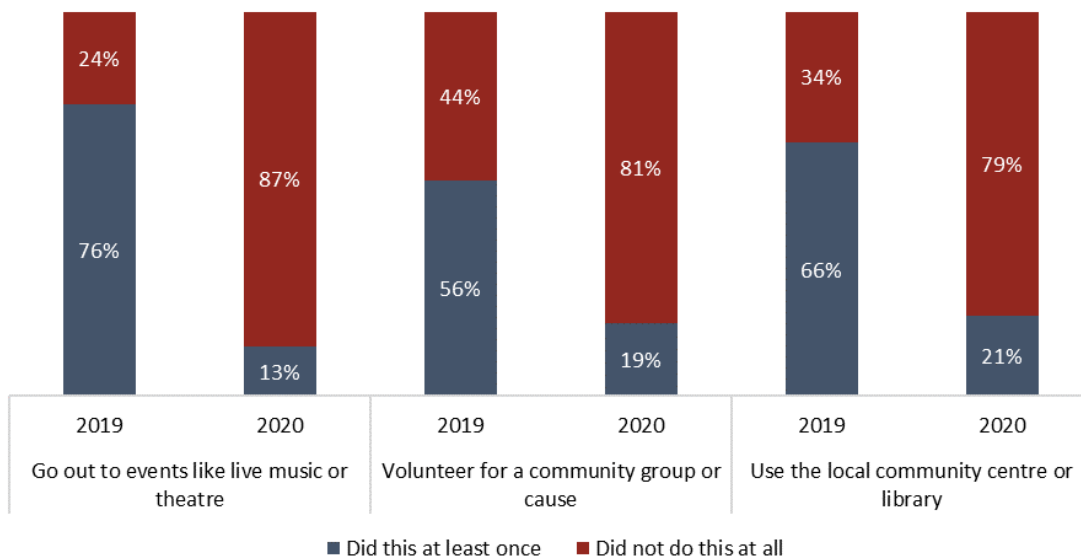
number that did so in 2019 (73%). When it comes to broader community projects however, participation dropped from a typical level of 45 per cent to just 11 per cent:

How often Canadians did each of the following, last year versus this summer



Even more stark is the drop in participation for enriching events that people all over the country enjoy within their communities. Last spring 76 per cent of Canadians said they were people who normally go out to events like live music or theatre; this summer just 13 per cent did so. More than half of Canadians had also said they volunteer for community clubs or groups and use the local community centre; just one-in-five did so this summer.

How often Canadians did each of the following, last year versus this summer

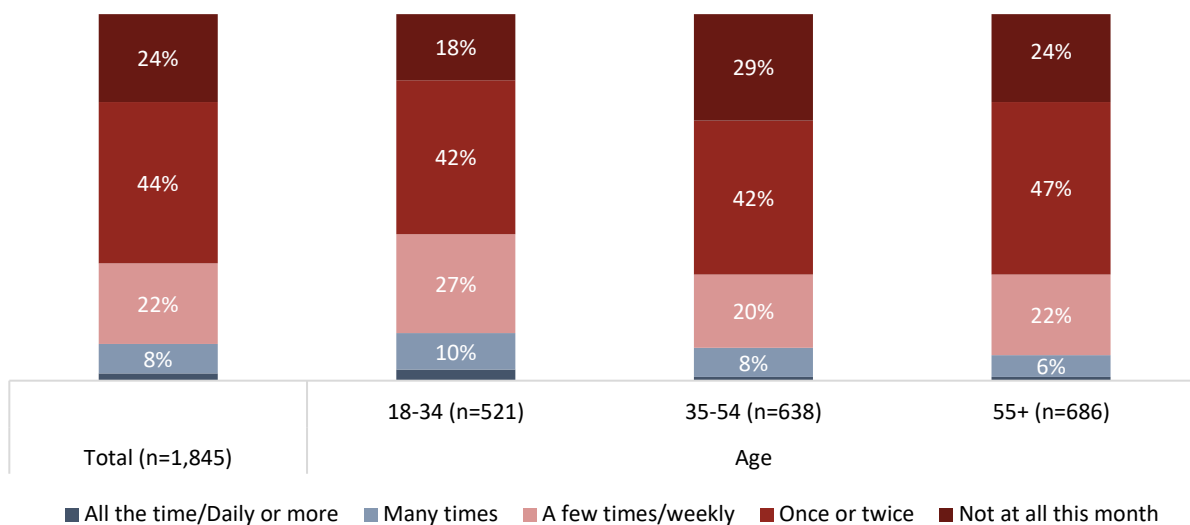


Social interactions

Canadians' interactions with nearly every social group in their lives have diminished during the pandemic. Even over the summer months, when many were taking advantage of outdoor spaces, beaches, and patios to expand their social circle beyond the household level, most made an effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by avoiding personal contact with others.

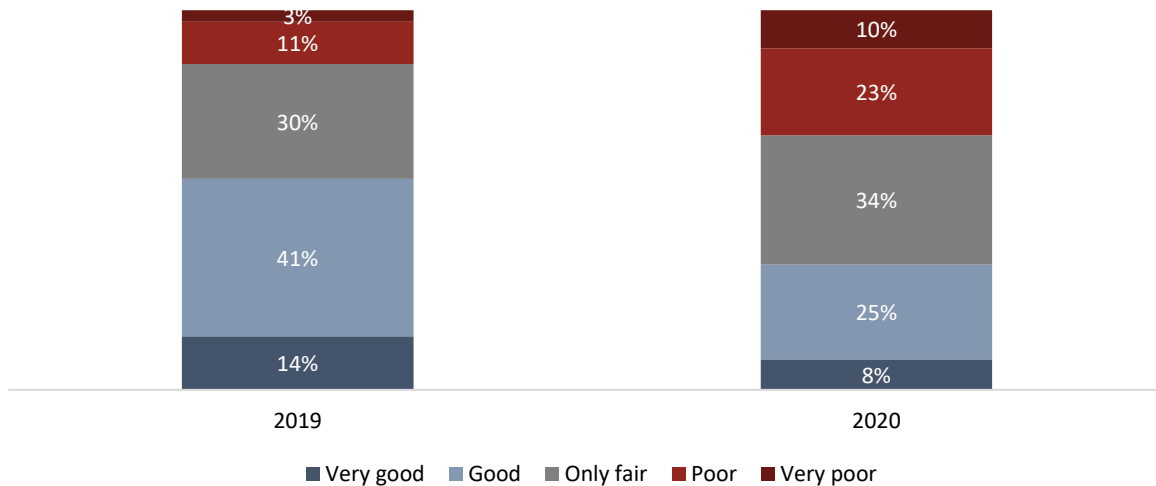
Consider that over the past month (asked September 25-28) seven-in-ten Canadians (68%) say they did not see friends beyond one or two visits. Those between the ages of 18 and 34 are most likely to have seen friends weekly or more (40%):

Over the past month, how often have you been socially interacting with friends?



While family relationships remain strong, there is a clear contrast between now and 2019 when Canadians assess their social lives. The percentage who say this aspect of life is good or very good dropped from 55 per cent to just 33 per cent:

**How would you describe each of the following aspects of your life these days?
'Your Social Life'**

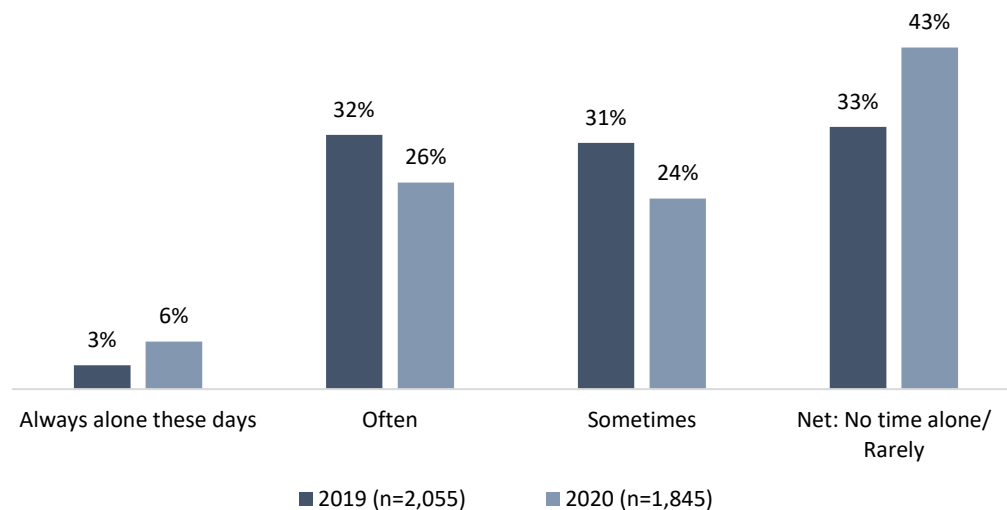


Part Two: Relationships and health

Too much time alone?

There are multiple ways that the pandemic can affect a person's time alone. For some, who may have already been alone often, this has been exacerbated. For others, who have been confined to fewer spaces, time alone has been hard to find. These new data suggest that the number of Canadians saying they are rarely or never alone has increased most, though it is also worth noting that the proportion of Canadians saying they are always alone, though relatively small, has doubled:

These days, how much time are you alone?



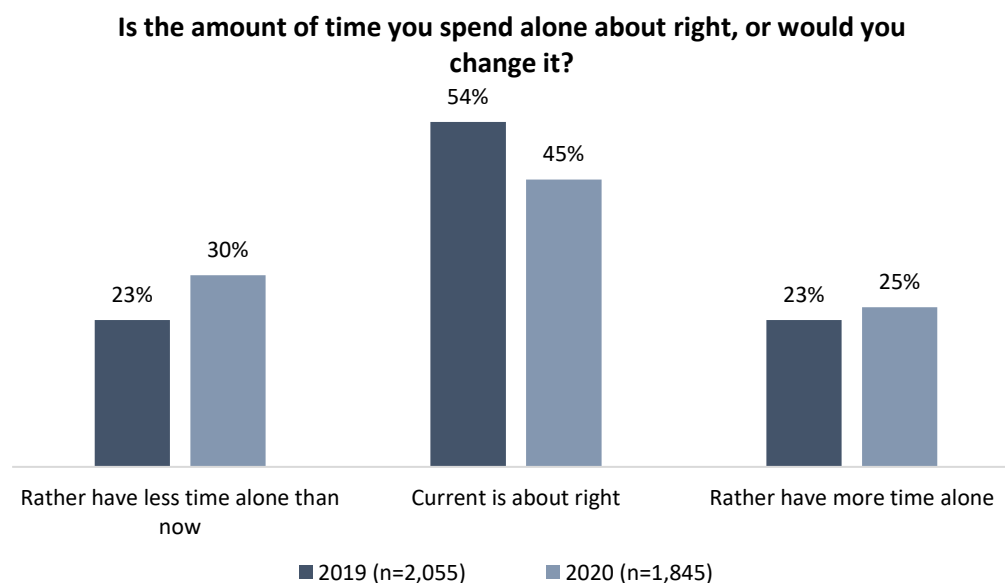
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Examining this by age, one can see that it is older Canadians who are still most likely to be alone always or often, but all age groups are much more likely to have *less* alone time than they did before:

These days, how much time are you alone?						
	Age groups – 2019 vs. 2020					
	18 – 34		35 – 54		55+	
	2019 (n=581)	2020 (n=521)	2019 (n=710)	2020 (n=638)	2019 (n=764)	2020 (n=686)
Often/Always	32%	31%	34%	30%	39%	36%
Sometimes	32%	23%	31%	25%	31%	25%
No time alone/ Rarely	36%	46%	35%	45%	30%	39%

What is perhaps more important here is measuring how much a person *would like* to be alone. Those who are alone, while a smaller group this year than last, appear to have a more acute sense of that loneliness. Three-in-ten Canadians this year say they would rather be alone less, compared to 23 per cent last year:

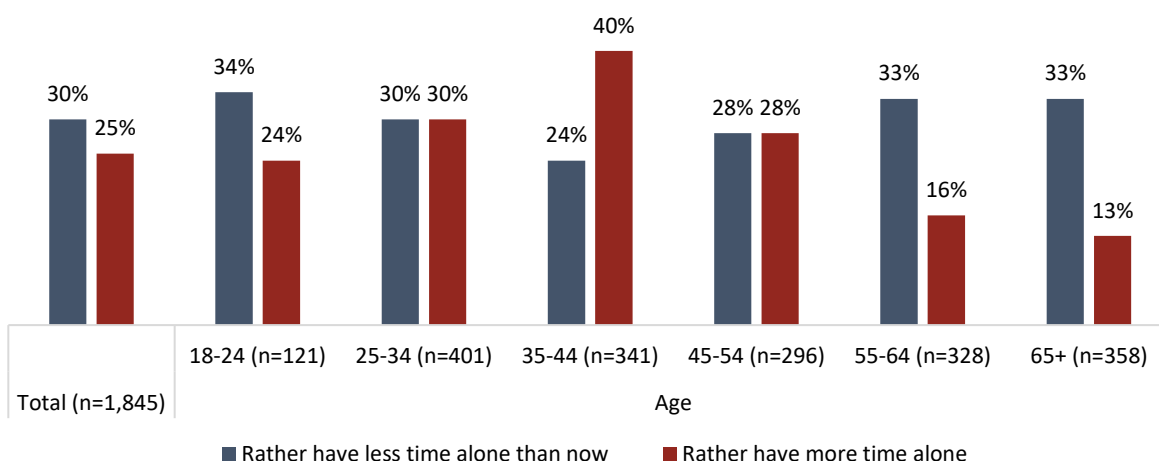


Troublingly, the number of residents over 54 years of age who say they would rather see more of people has nearly doubled, from 18 per cent last year to 33 per cent. On the other end of the spectrum, those in the 35 to 54 age group are most likely to say they would appreciate some more alone time:

Is the amount of time you spend alone about right, or would you change it?						
	Age groups – 2019 vs. 2020					
	18 – 34		35 – 54		55+	
	2019 (n=581)	2020 (n=521)	2019 (n=710)	2020 (n=638)	2019 (n=764)	2020 (n=686)
Rather have less time alone than now	28%	31%	23%	26%	18%	33%
Rather have more time alone	30%	29%	28%	34%	13%	14%
Current is about right	42%	40%	49%	40%	68%	53%

Looking at this with smaller age demographics it is evident that 35 to 44-year-olds are most likely to say they could use some more time alone, while at least one-quarter of all age groups say they would like less time alone:

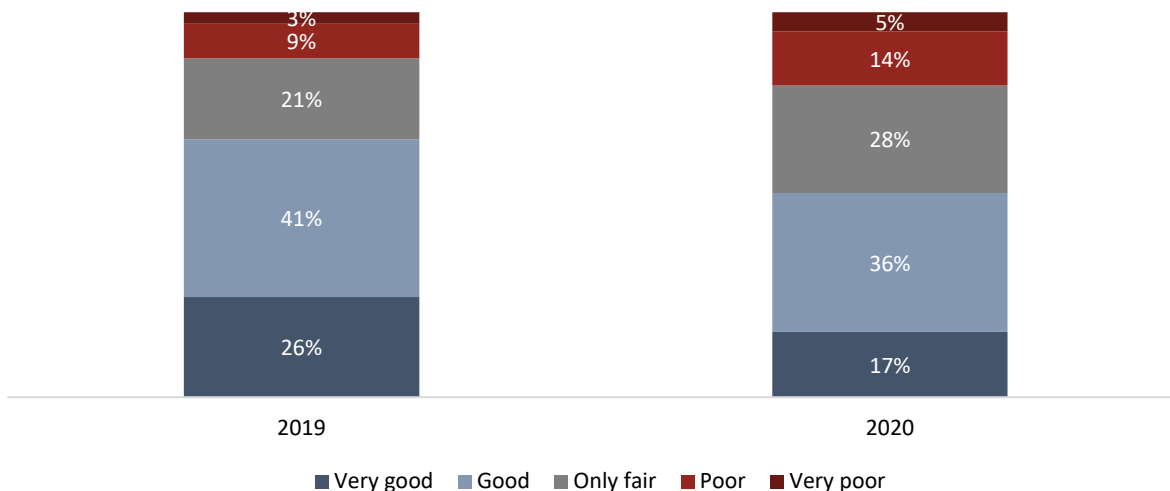
And, as far as you're concerned, is the amount of time you spend alone about right, or would you change it?



Mental health challenges

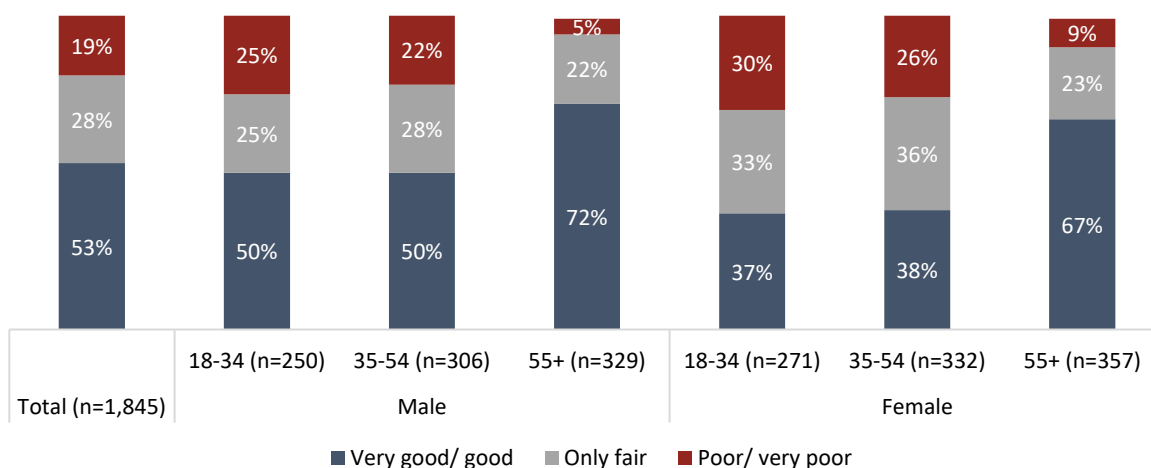
These unprecedented shifts in social behaviour are manifesting themselves in different ways. One of these appears to be an overall increase in mental health concerns within the public. In 2019 one-third of Canadians said their mental health was either only fair, poor or very poor. Now, that number has increased to nearly half (47%).

How would you describe each of the following aspects of your life these days?
'Your Mental Health'



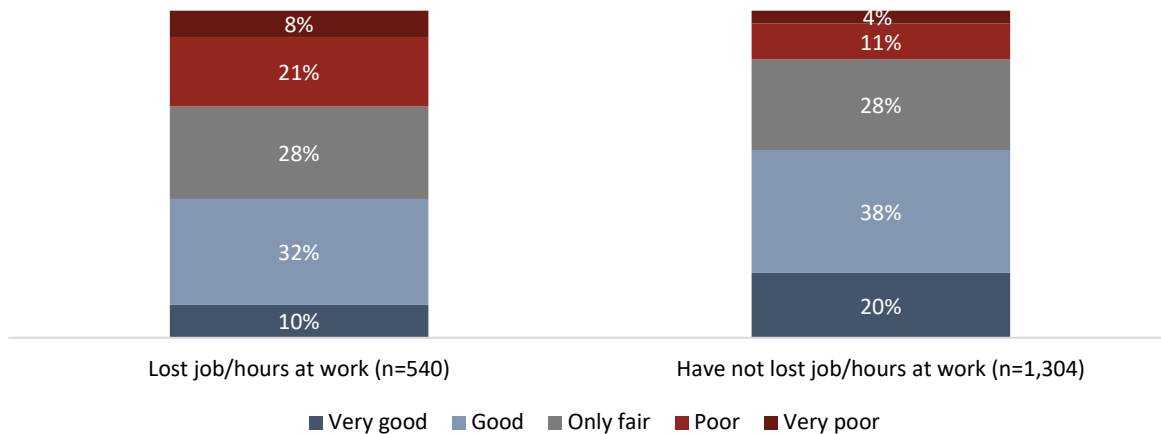
Older Canadians are by far the most likely to say that their mental health is holding up. Conversely, only two-in-five women under the age of 55 say their mental health is good or very good:

How would you describe each of the following aspects of your life these days?
'Your Mental Health'



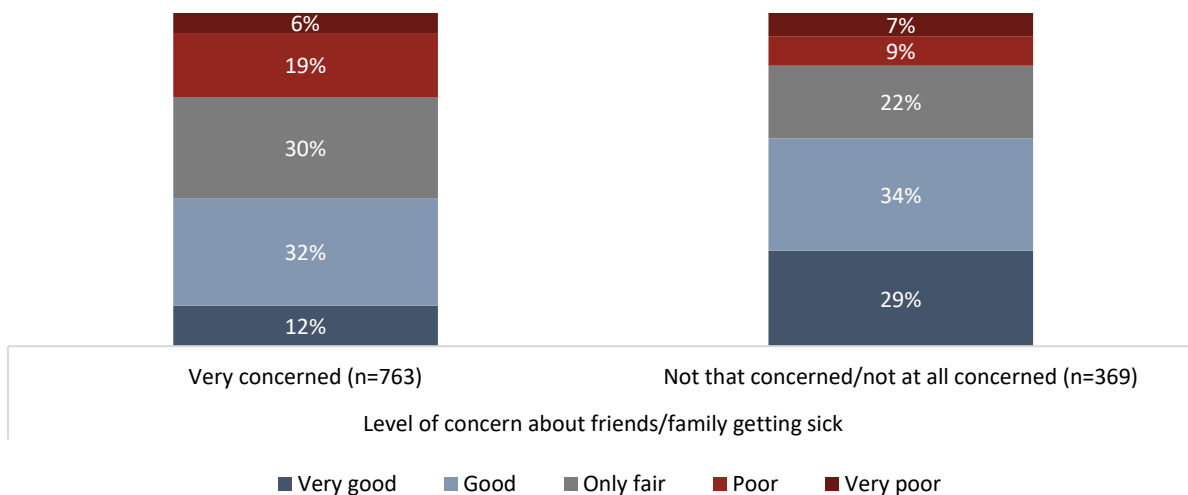
Also notable is the role that job loss plays in one's self-assessment on this question. Those who lost work throughout the pandemic are twice as likely as those who have not to say that their mental health is poor:

How would you describe each of the following aspects of your life these days?
'Your Mental Health'



Concern about others becoming sick with COVID-19 is illuminative. While three-in-ten of those who are not concerned about friend or family illness (29%) say their mental health is very good, just 12 per cent who are very concerned say the same. More than half of those who worry a great deal about their close social circle (55%) say their mental health is only fair or worse, as seen in the graph below:

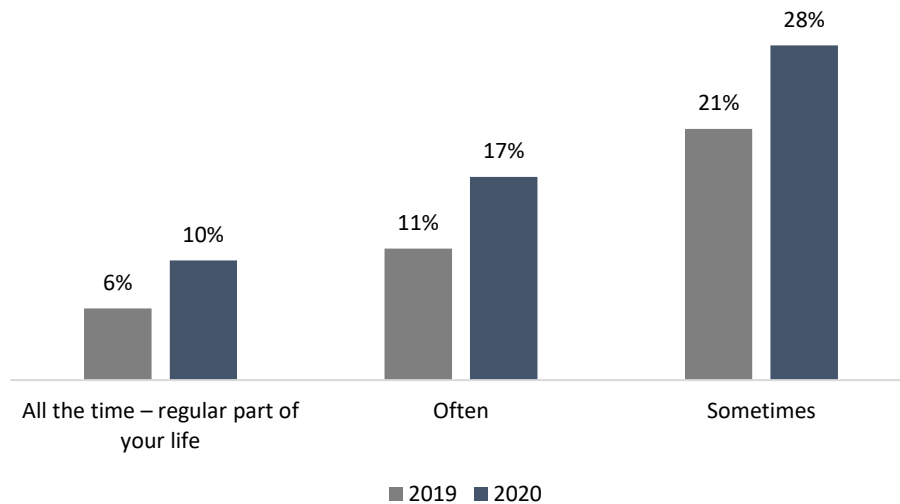
How would you describe each of the following aspects of your life these days?
'Your Mental Health'



Leaning on Technology

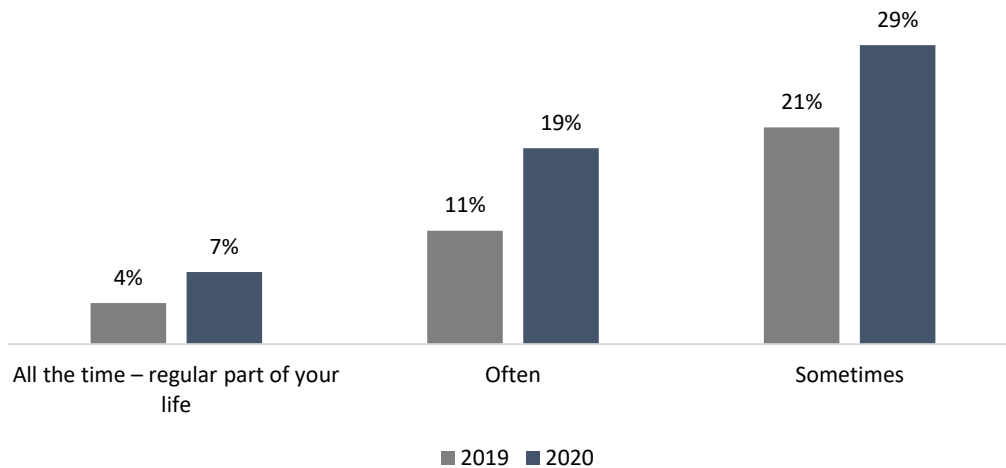
Last year's research documented a correlation with using technology to stay in touch and overall connection. This year we find the use of video calling apps like Zoom and FaceTime increasing significantly.

Use of video calling apps - 2019 vs. 2020



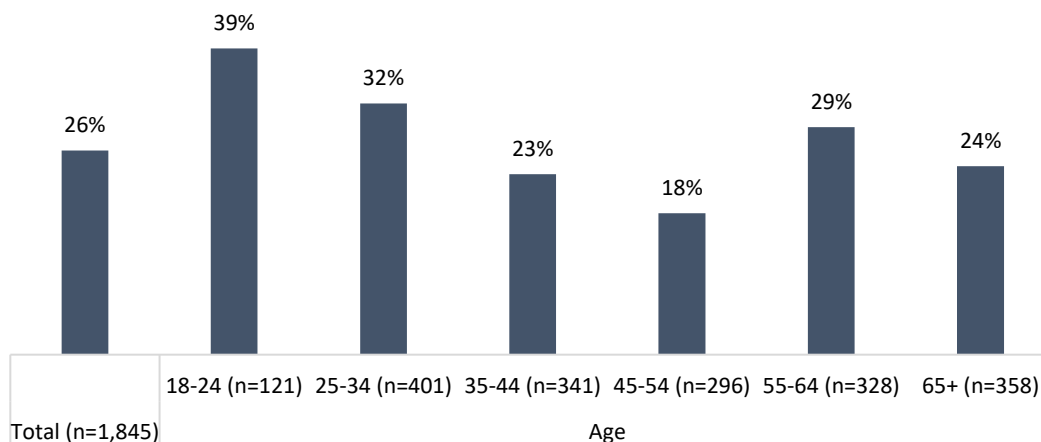
Perhaps most notably is the increase for those 55 years of age and older. Adoption of video calling technology has jumped dramatically from 36 per cent to 55 per cent.

Use of video calling apps - 55+ only



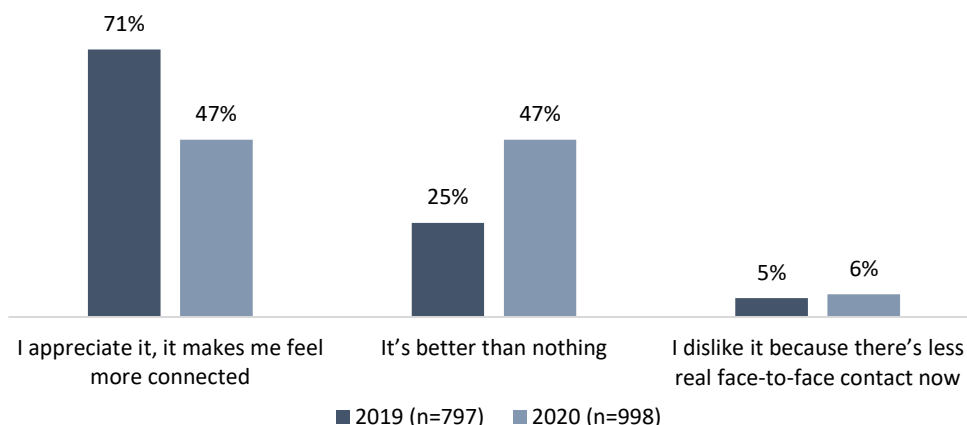
Young people are the most likely to be using video calling services. That said, usage is not a linear relationship with age. Canadians 55 years of age and over are more likely to be using video calling than those between the ages of 35 and 54:

Use video calling apps like FaceTime and Zoom all the time or often



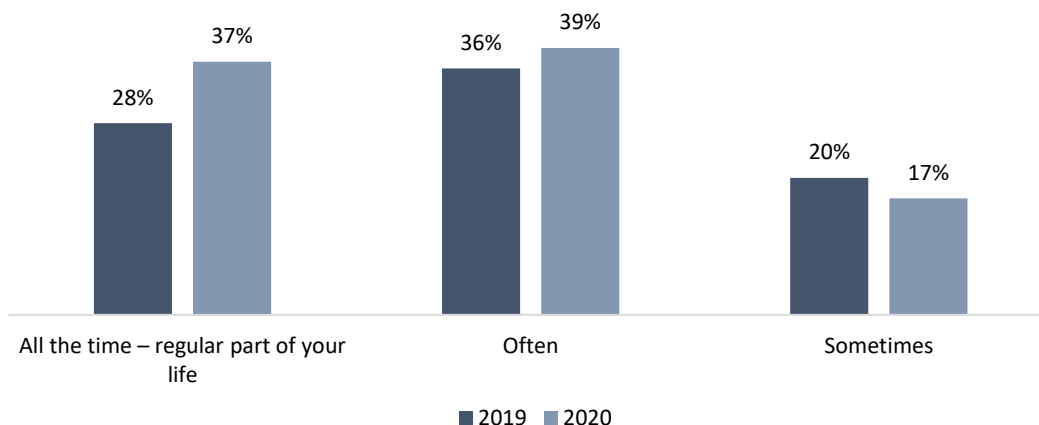
Unfortunately, while video calling is appreciated, the percentage of those saying it is making them feel truly connected has plummeted as usage has increased. Canadians who use these services are now equally likely to say that it makes them feel connected (47%) or it's just better than nothing (47%):

**Feelings about keeping in touch with video calling - 2019 vs. 2020
(Among those who use it)**



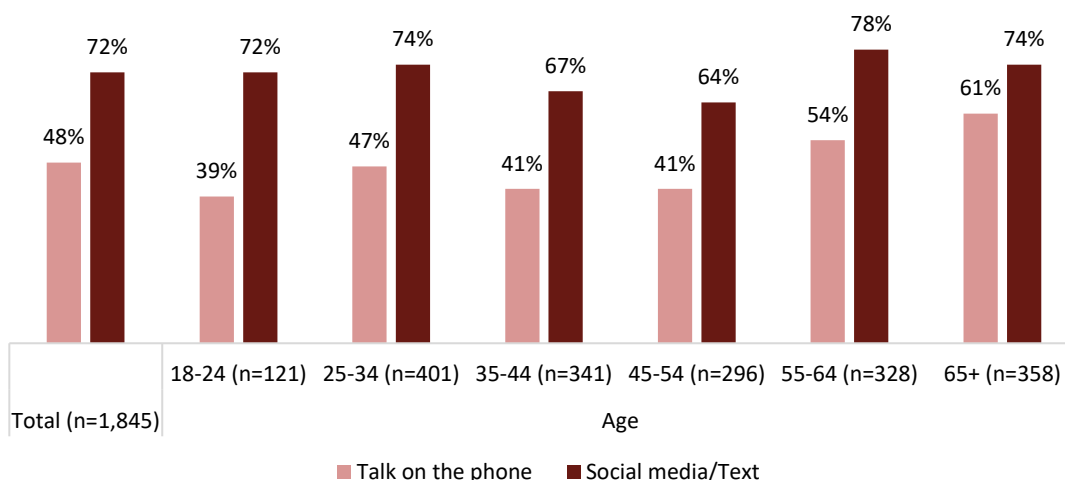
Cellphone and landline usage have not changed during the pandemic (see detailed tables), but it is worth noting another generational shift when it comes to social media, texting, and email as a form of communication with friends and family. While the overall numbers are similar between 2019 and 2020, the proportion of older Canadians (55+) utilizing these newer technologies has increased. The group who say they use this type of medium always or often has grown by 12 percentage points:

Use of social media, texting, and email with friends or family - 55+ only



The increase in usage among older Canadians puts them on par with younger Canadians in using social media and texting. This group, those 55 years of age and older, are also far more reliant on picking up the phone and calling their friends or family:

Using each of the following technologies to stay in touch often/always



Part Three: Comparing Social Isolation and Loneliness to 2019

As was done in 2019, this study sorts Canadians along two key dimensions: social isolation (or the number and frequency of interpersonal connections a person has) and loneliness (or their relative satisfaction with the quality of those connections).

Though these concepts are of course related, there are important distinctions. Isolation involves objective situations or behaviour, such as how time a person spends with friends. Loneliness is a subjective,

unwanted feeling of lacking companionship. For example, a person cannot be *isolated* in a crowded room, but a person could *feel lonely* in that same room.

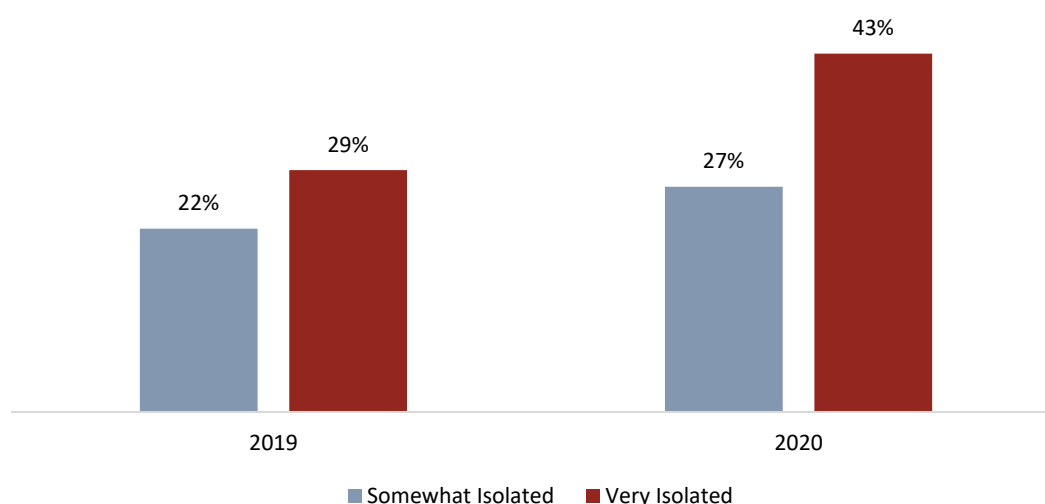
Looking at how measures of isolation and loneliness have changed from 2019 to 2020 further highlights the pandemic's impact.

Social isolation

It is perhaps unsurprising that Canadians are more isolated this year than they were in 2019. Isolation has indeed been one of the themes of the year as public health officials have asked Canadians to minimize contact with others and isolate when they feel unwell or may have contacted someone with COVID-19.

The proportion who are somewhat isolated has risen by five percentage points, and even more starkly, the proportion of those who are very isolated has risen by 14 points. These rises are explained by the absence of common activities and behaviours discussed in part one of this report:

Isolation, May 2019 vs September 2020



Notably, despite the media coverage focused heavily on young people being the cause of recent COVID-19 spread, a significant portion of 18- to 34-year-olds are experiencing extreme isolation. Nearly half in that group and those in the age cohort above them are very isolated, suggesting that though some people may be failing to exercise caution, considerable portions of all Canadians are doing their best:

Social Isolation Index						
	Age groups – 2019 vs. 2020					
	18 – 34		35 – 54		55+	
	2019 (n=581)	2020 (n=521)	2019 (n=710)	2020 (n=638)	2019 (n=764)	2020 (n=686)
Very Isolated	27%	47%	31%	47%	29%	36%
Somewhat Isolated	23%	26%	21%	26%	22%	29%

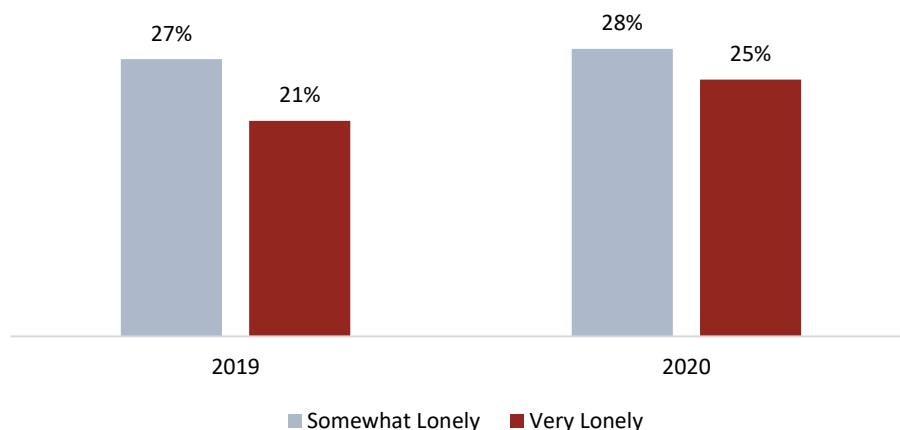
Those earning household incomes of less than \$50 thousand are also more likely to be experiencing isolation than wealthier Canadians. That said, the proportion of isolated individuals has increased across all income levels:

Social Isolation Index						
	Yearly household income – 2019 vs. 2020					
	Less than \$50K		\$50K - <\$100K		\$100K or more	
	2019 (n=661)	2020 (n=446)	2019 (n=630)	2020 (n=576)	2019 (n=514)	2020 (n=602)
Very Isolated	38%	49%	26%	41%	21%	41%
Somewhat Isolated	21%	27%	23%	28%	24%	25%

Loneliness

Loneliness has, interestingly, not increased as dramatically. The percentage of Canadians who can be categorized in this way has risen by five points, but increased time with immediate family and consistent socializing with neighbours appears to have curtailed a significant increase on this measure. Note that this index is derived from questions about a person's feelings about relationships and the quality of time spent with others. Nonetheless, while the increase has been smaller than noted for isolation, 53 per cent of the population is still lonely by these measures, up five points from last year.

Loneliness, May 2019 vs September 2020



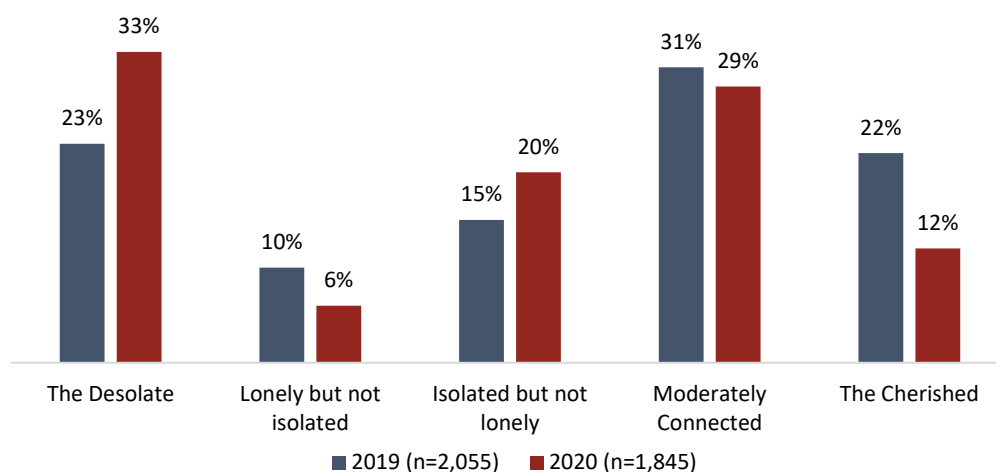
Young people are more likely to feel lonely than their older peers. One-in-three between the ages of 18 and 34 (34%) are in this most lonely cohort compared to 18 per cent of those 55 years of age and older:

Loneliness Index						
	Age groups – 2019 vs. 2020					
	18 – 34		35 – 54		55+	
	2019 (n=581)	2020 (n=521)	2019 (n=710)	2020 (n=638)	2019 (n=764)	2020 (n=686)
Very Lonely	29%	34%	20%	26%	15%	18%
Somewhat Lonely	31%	29%	28%	27%	22%	29%

Part Four: The Index on Loneliness and Social Isolation

In order to understand how these two phenomena intersect, Angus Reid Institute researchers recreated the Index on Loneliness and Social Isolations (ILSI) to compare proportions from last year. The proportion of those worst off, the Desolate has increased dramatically. This group suffers from both loneliness and isolation. There has also been a corresponding decrease in the Cherished, those who are neither lonely nor isolated:

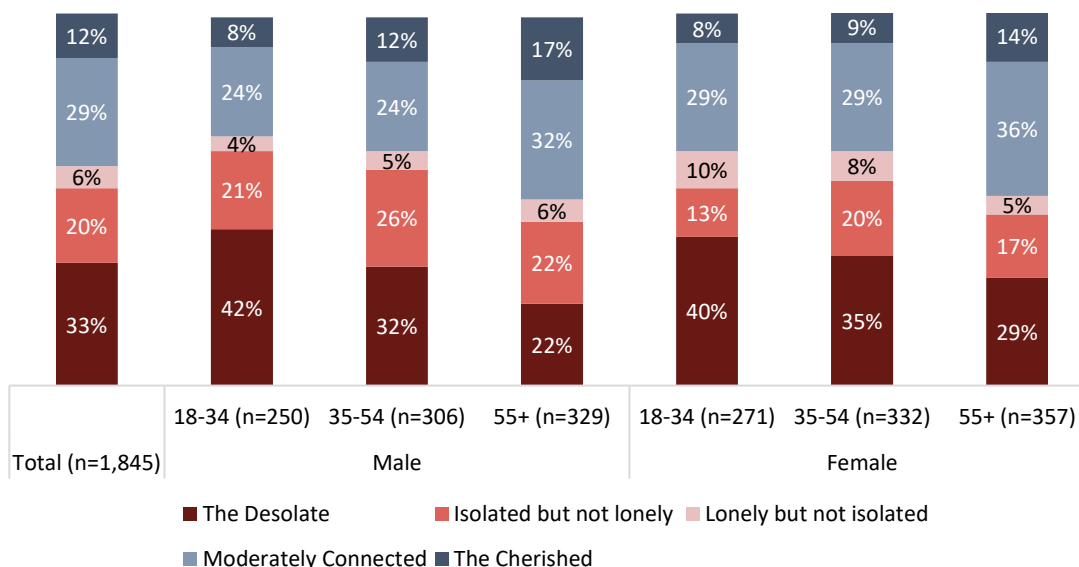
Isolation and loneliness index - 2019 vs. 2020



Age and Gender factors

There are a number of demographic correlations within the ILSI. Notably, while some older Canadians are having a very difficult time with isolation and loneliness, they are also most likely to be within the Cherished and Moderately Connected groupings – those enduring the pandemic best. Two-in-five young men and women are among the Desolate and are experiencing considerable isolation and loneliness:

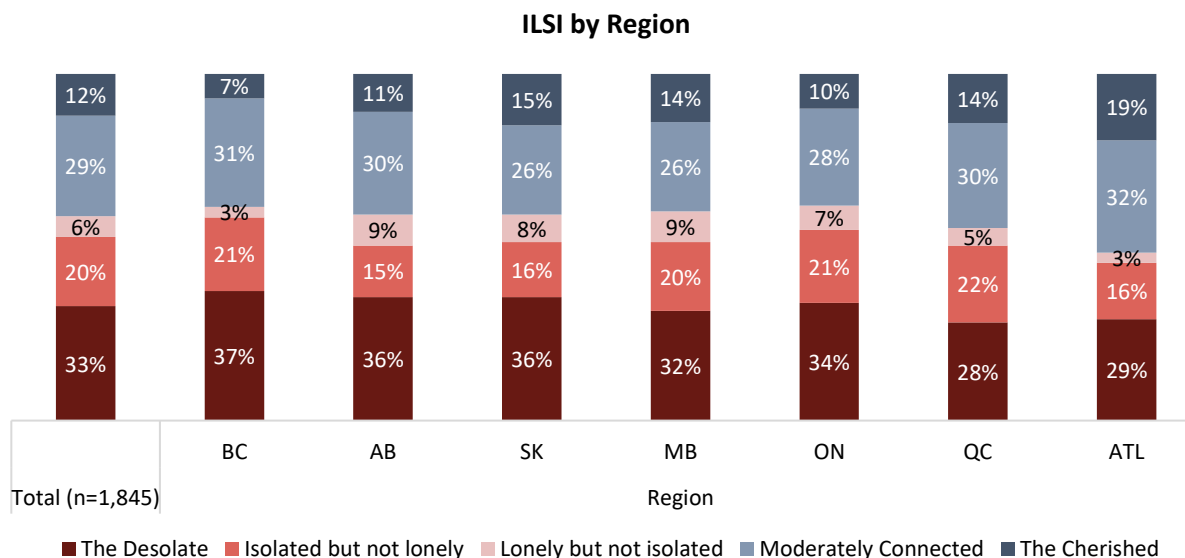
ILSI by Age and Gender



Regional findings

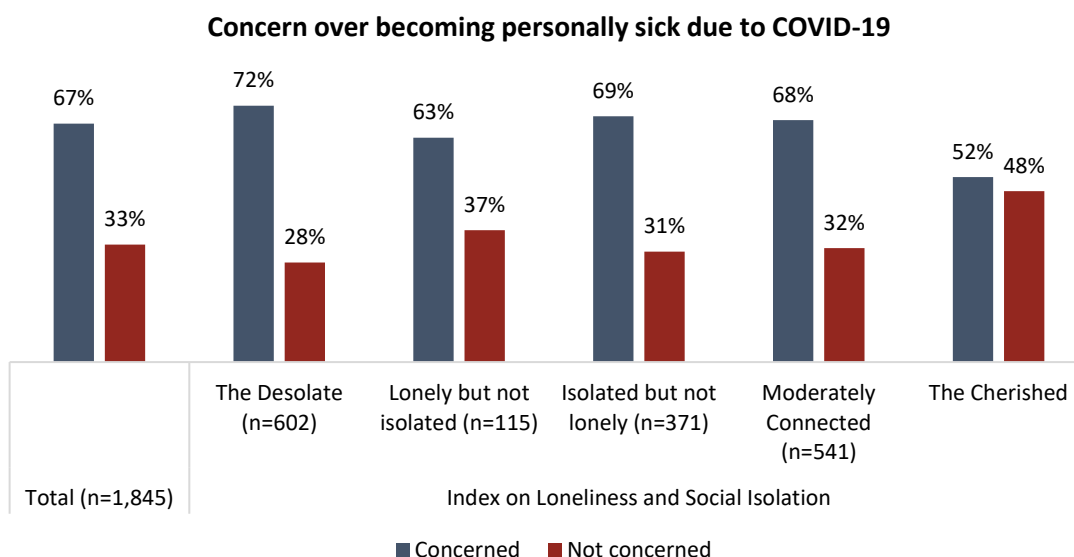
Atlantic Canadians have been in an expanded bubble for months, with travel allowed between the four provinces. Residents in this region of country appear to be faring well comparatively when it comes to

social isolation and loneliness. Half (51%) are in the two most favourable groups, compared to 38 per cent in B.C. and Ontario:



COVID concern

A person's anxiety about becoming sick with COVID-19 has an interesting correlation to the ILSI as well. Those who are most isolated and lonely are most concerned about becoming sick, while for the Cherished, concern drops to just 52 per cent. Those who are maintaining connection throughout the pandemic are evidently less worried about their own risk:



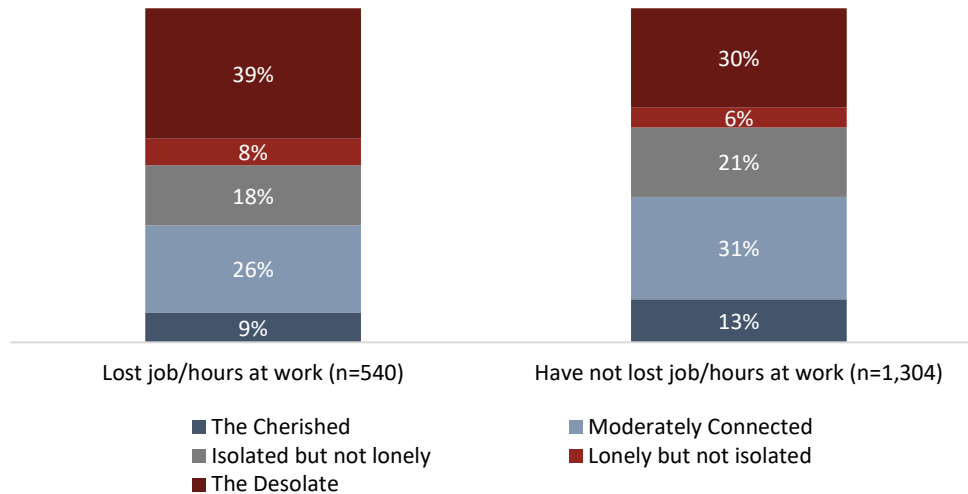
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Job loss plays a role

Losing a job or hours at work is also correlated with the ILSI. Two-in-five respondents who have lost work are in The Desolate group (39%), compared to three-in-ten (30%) among those who have not. Similarly, those who lost work are less likely to be in the Moderately Connected or The Cherished group.

ILSI among those who lost work vs. those who did not



Of course, correlation does not mean causation. There may be other factors that make someone both more likely to be part of The Desolate *and* more likely to have lost work. That said, there has been research supporting the idea of a [link between unemployment and poor mental health](#), which has spurred interest in finding ways to [help people cope](#).

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by Social Isolation, Loneliness and ILSI, [click here](#).

For detailed results by Job Loss and COVID-19 Concern, [click here](#).

For detailed results by finer age groups, [click here](#).

For 2019 detailed results, [click here](#).