Friendship: The Most Overlooked Public Health Asset

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Abstract

Friends confer powerful benefits to physical and mental health, happiness, longevity, economic mobility, work productivity, civic participation, and community resilience. In the face of twin crises—the loneliness epidemic and the friendship recession—friendships are more important to understand and facilitate than ever. Yet friendship is undervalued in public discourse and invisible in public policy. Drawing from research across and beyond social psychology, this paper describes the profound consequences of the current state of social affairs—and the ways friendship can not only combat those but also boost flourishing on individual and societal levels. The paper then outlines a set of grounded policy recommendations aimed at making friendship easier to form, maintain, and prioritize across the lifespan. These include coordinating a national response to social disconnection, integrating friendship skills into school curricula, embedding friendship into eldercare infrastructure, and—provocatively—prioritizing friendship alongside already-subsidized romantic and familial relationships. A closing offers caveats: effective policy can, at best, create the conditions for friendship to flourish; it cannot mandate affection. By treating friendships as determinants of physical, mental, social, and public health—as essential as sustenance, exercise, and sleep—policymakers can take real strides toward a healthier, more connected, and more resilient society.

Keywords: friendship; close relationships; social connection; loneliness; public health; well-being

280-character social media post: Friendship isn't a luxury—it's a powerful public-health asset. It's as much a determinant of health and longevity as exercise or nutrition. It boosts happiness, school retention, economic mobility, civic participation. Yet policy overlooks it. A new paper argues it's time to take friendship seriously in public policy.

The U.S. is experiencing a friendship recession and a loneliness epidemic. Every other American is lonely. These friendship losses are shortening people's lives, fueling radicalization, and undermining civic engagement—as well as costing the U.S. billions a year in excess healthcare spending, U.S. companies hundreds of billions in absenteeism and turnover, and older Americans billions in vulnerability to fraud.

Friendship fuels opportunity and resilience—but remains invisible in policy. From boosting school retention to improving economic mobility and buffering communities during crises, friendships combat loneliness and its consequences while also enriching people's lives in nearly every measurable way.

Institutions treat friendship as secondary. Healthcare systems, eldercare, workplaces, education, and public policy routinely prioritize families and romantic partners while overlooking the importance of friendships for health, longevity, happiness, productivity, and economic outcomes. Friends have no mandated rights to visit one another in the hospital, to

assume responsibility for one another's children—and even tax laws benefit romantic couples but ignore friends.

Friendship can't be mandated, but it can be supported. Taking friendship seriously means creating and altering policies—in healthcare, in eldercare, in schools, in communities—to make it easier for people to connect, stay connected, and thrive. Doing so will meaningfully improve individual well-being and public health.

Friendship: The Most Overlooked Public Health Asset

Imagine wanting better physical and mental health, a longer life, greater happiness, and economic mobility. Imagine being a U.S. policymaker who wants to reduce national healthcare costs, improve performance and persistence in schools, curtail absenteeism and burnout at work, curb violent extremism, amplify civic engagement, and strengthen the resilience of local communities. Could any intervention realistically advance all these goals? Likely yes: friendship.

But social connections are eroding. The former U.S. Surgeon General has described loneliness as reaching epidemic proportions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2023). This paper first describes the extent and consequences—at the individual and societal levels—of these crises. Then it outlines ways that friendship can not only buffer from these adverse outcomes but is also uniquely poised to boost human flourishing before offering policy implications that follow from taking friendship seriously.

The Friendship Recession, The Loneliness Epidemic, and Their Costs

Social connection is as fundamental a need as food and water (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Kenrick et al., 2010). Yet connections—and their benefits—seem harder than ever to realize (Peng & Roth, 2021; Surkalim et al., 2022).

Humans are living through twin crises, including a *friendship recession*—a decline in the number and adequacy of friendships (Cox, 2021b). In the United States, the share of adults reporting *zero* close friends has quadrupled since 1990—from 3% to 12% (Cox, 2021a). This recession feeds directly into the *loneliness epidemic*.

Today, nearly every other American reports feeling lonely, defined as distressing feelings of isolation or unmet needs for social connection (HHS, 2023). Americans' most common unmet need was connection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022a). Similar numbers appear worldwide (e.g., Fuller-Rowell et al., 2025), leading the World Health Organization to establish a *Commission on Social Connection* in 2023. Although older adults experience the highest rates of objective *social isolation*—one in four—young people report unprecedented levels of loneliness, reflecting their subjective feelings of unmet needs for connection (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2020).

Loneliness is more widespread than smoking (12.5% of U.S. adults) or obesity (41.9%) (CDC, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

The Costs of Loneliness

At the individual level, isolation and loneliness are implicated in a slew of health problems (House et al., 1988): hypertension, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, dementia, depression, anxiety (Albasheer et al., 2024; Cacioppo et al., 2002; Fratiglioni et al., 2000; Hawkley et al.,

2010; Kent et al., 2015; Mesas et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Lacking social support carries the same mortality risk as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Disconnection also undermines people's ability to flourish academically, professionally, and economically (e.g., via poorer performance at school and work, vulnerability to fraud) (Bryan et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2020).

And do not forget the human costs: loneliness feels terrible. Lonely people may go weeks without anyone asking how they are; they may have no one to share good news with (Weissbourd et al., 2021).

Loneliness also brings economic and social burdens at the societal level. Via links to poorer health, loneliness costs the U.S. $7 billion per year in excess healthcare spending on older adults (Flowers et al., 2017). Via its links to lowered immune functioning and burnout, loneliness costs U.S. employers $154 billion (Bowers et al., 2022). The erosion of connection depresses innovation and slows economic growth (Haldane, 2024); it weakens communities' ability to respond to disasters (e.g., floods, fires), resulting in higher public expenditures (Zhao et al., 2025), is linked to violence, incarceration, and recidivism (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Tung et al., 2019), and undermines civic participation (Langenkamp, 2025). Loneliness reduces resilience to misinformation, increasing susceptibility to extremist views and radicalization (Langenkamp, 2025; Office for National Statistics, 2025), potentially accelerating shifts toward authoritarianism (Opozda-Suder et al., 2025; Peterson et al., 2025).

Friendship: A Brief Introduction and Myriad Benefits

Friends not only buffer against loneliness and its effects; they make life better in nearly every measurable way.

Friendships are communal bonds marked by mutual affection and a sense of closeness (Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Fehr, 1996). Friendships exist across cultures, although anecdotal evidence from researchers around the world suggests that what Americans call a friend often falls short of the interpersonal commitment required for a Frenchman, Israeli, or Pole.

Even within a culture, friendships exist on a continuum. People speak of *best friends*, *close friends*, *friends*, and so on (Dunbar, 2018). Some data suggest that people have one or two closest partners—which might include a romantic partner, parent, or best friend—but perhaps benefit most from five close friends (Dunbar, 2025).

Like people, friendships have their own lifespans (Fehr, 2000): beginnings, middles, and perhaps ends (Aknin & Sandstrom, 2024; Hall, 2019; Hays, 1985; Vieth et al., 2022). Each stage of friendship presents challenges that people must meet to realize friendship and its benefits. At minimum, then, people must *find*, *make*, and *keep* friends.

None of these are trivial tasks. Children may navigate them unconsciously, but as adults, failure to meet them increasingly occupies public discourse. For example, to *find* friends, people must encounter others—often repeatedly (Festinger et al., 1950)—and experience mutual attraction.

People are drawn to some prospective friends and reject others (Krems et al., 2023; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Notably, people tend to befriend similar others (McPherson et al., 2007)—including others who are similar even on genetic (Christakis & Fowler, 2014) and neural levels (Parkinson et al., 2018). Shen and colleagues (2025) recorded participants' neural responses to movie clips before participants met one another. Participants whose brains responded similarly were more likely to become and remain friends. Participants were unaware that their brains behaved similarly; rather, they likely experienced mutual attraction to those who seemed to *see the world similarly*.

But no one can befriend everyone (Giurge et al., 2020), and some friends are more attractive than others (Krems & Conroy-Beam, 2020). This introduces an underdiscussed dimension of friendship: *friendship competition* (Krems et al., 2024). Although loath to admit it, people compete to make friends and to become relatively closer to friends than those friends are to others. People must also work to keep friends (Krems et al., 2021; Oswald et al., 2004). And, as in all close relationships, there are conflicts. Compared to the extensive literature on romantic conflict, little work examines why adult friends fight or what predicts reconciliation.

Friendship Benefits

Researchers have long known how important people *say* friends are. Only recently, however, has science begun to grasp how profoundly friendships shape outcomes.

Happiness, wellbeing, life satisfaction. People with stronger relationships—including friendships—are happier (Diener & Seligman, 2002). In a 2023 Pew survey, more adults deemed friends extremely or very important (64%) elements in living a fulfilling life—a greater percentage than those emphasizing marriage (23%) or children (26%) (Parker & Minkin, 2023). For older adults, contact with friends outperforms contact with adult children or family in predicting wellbeing (e.g., Chopik, 2017).

Improved physical and mental health, longevity. Having friends predicts better physical health, mental health, and even longevity (Dunbar, 2025). Friends can boost breast cancer survival rates (Chou et al., 2012; Waxler-Morrison et al., 1991). In one elderly Southern European population, having a close friend (i.e., a confidant) was associated with a 25% reduction in mortality risk, even as supportive family ties were not (Rodriguez-Laso et al., 2007). Friends in adolescence and young adulthood predict health and wellbeing up to 50 years later (Ajrouch et al., 2023; Chopik, 2024; Cundiff & Matthews, 2018). In fact, friendship is so impactful for reducing all-cause mortality that Oxford psychologist Robin Dunbar (2018) proclaimed having friends the next best thing for one's health after quitting smoking.

Throughout both evolutionary and recent history, friends have also been literal lifesavers. Friends provide access to food when one cannot hunt, protection when injured, and other life-preserving support. In fact, converging evidence from ethnographic studies of small-scale societies (e.g., Hruschka, 2010; Sugiyama, 2004), analyses of historical disasters (e.g., Grayson, 1990), and logs of modern severe-weather events (e.g., Neal et al., 1988) show the same pattern: friends increase people's odds of surviving the worst.

Achievement and prosperity. Students' friendships can predict their academic engagement (Chen, Bian, et al., 2023), improve academic performance, and boost both persistence and retention (Alotaibi et al., 2023; Wodika et al., 2025). Friendships that bridge lines of class or socioeconomic status (SES) are the single strongest predictor of upward economic mobility. For low-SES children in the U.S., growing up with higher-SES friends is associated with adult incomes roughly 20% higher than those of peers without such friendships (Chetty et al., 2022).

Civic engagement and democracy. Friendships—including those with people who do not always agree with us—can boost trust, civic engagement, public health, and the health of democracy. Social connectedness fosters interpersonal trust, which underpins civic behavior—like voting (Langenkamp, 2025). When friendships are strong and widespread, this social infrastructure supports democratic functioning through informal monitoring, social norms, and mutual trust. When they fray, that infrastructure weakens—*with some scholars now viewing the absence of friendship as a growing threat to democracy* (e.g., Bogatyreva et al., 2024).

Combatting loneliness. Friendships might be most beneficial insofar as they protect individuals and societies against the effects of loneliness (Chopik, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2022). Friends decrease isolation and increase feelings of support (Dunbar, 2018). Each new friend reduces the odds of chronic loneliness by ~15% (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Cox, 2021a). As the Director of the Survey Center on American Life observed, "As an antidote to loneliness, nothing is more effective—not church membership, marriage, or parenthood—than a generous collection of friends" (Cox, 2023).

The Policy Implications of Friendship Science

The potentially profound benefits of friendship suggest policy implications for taking the science of friendship seriously.

Treat Friendship as a Public Health Asset

Friendship is biological infrastructure—as much a determinant for health as sleep, diet, and exercise. Yet friendship is not integrated in healthcare.

Healthcare professionals must treat friendship as a determinant of health.

First, they must be trained to understand the benefits of friendship. Second, providers need tools and incentives to assess friendship as part of routine care. Just as physicians ask patients about depression or measure weight, they should inquire about social support. Like many adverse health conditions, prevention and early intervention may be easier and more cost-effective than treatment.

Third, create a coordinating body to lead the national response to the loneliness epidemic (see also Holt-Lunstad et al., 2025). Responsibilities would include (1) surveillance and metrics. The office should support the development, testing, and implementation of validated social health metrics, including them in national health surveys. Making "connection" a measurable outcome—analogous to obesity or housing stability—opens pathways for targeted intervention. (2) Support preliminary funding mechanisms for testing, evaluating, and scaling interventions that promote lasting, high-quality friendships. (3) Issue guidance to support the adoption of

friendship-forward policies. (4) Because friendship intersects with health, education, transportation, housing, labor, and urban planning, this office must be empowered to coordinate across agencies—for example, ensuring that transportation and housing initiatives consider their impact on social cohesion.

(5) The office should lead campaigns to elevate awareness of friendship's benefits, framing friendship as a core health behavior. (6) The office must play a role in shaping technology policy. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, and artificial intelligence (AI) companions, sometimes called chatbots, increasingly shape how people interact with their worlds. Scholars, technology professionals, and policymakers are still in the early stages of understanding of how chatbots will affect friendship and its benefits (Smith et al., 2025). For example, California's new Senate Bill 243 (2025) would require operators to track addictive engagement patterns and report on connections between chatbot use and suicidal ideation. Data like these could feed into a regularly updated *AI Companionship Impact Report*, guiding regulatory standards.

Friendship Must Be Core To Eldercare Strategy

The U.S. population is aging. As of 2024, there are more than 60 million Americans over the age of 65, and this demographic is projected to surpass 80 million by 2050 (Mather & Scommegna, 2024).

Friendship in later life is perhaps the best predictor of older adults' health and wellbeing. Eldercare systems and policies must begin treating friendship as critical. For example, the architecture of eldercare facilities should invite repeated, consistent interactions. Where these facilities are built also matters. Facilities must be placed near transit and built with sufficient parking, so older adults can reach support networks and those networks can reach them. For those with limited mobility, investments in digital infrastructure are essential: high-speed internet, user-friendly devices, and reliable video conferencing. Just as Medicare's Nursing Home Compare includes ratings for staffing and cleanliness, it could also include ratings for resident social connectedness. That kind of transparency incentivizes facilities to treat connection as core to their mission and can empower families to prioritize it when making decisions.

Measuring and tracking elder social connectedness—and related outcomes—is also essential. Regularly collected connection metrics—folded into Medicaid services—could identify where interventions are needed and track their effectiveness over time.

Add Friendship to the Curriculum

Children are taught reading, writing, and arithmetic—and, more recently, practical competencies (e.g., cooking, financial literacy). Few school systems include instruction in friendship. In fact, there exist more college courses on Taylor Swift than adult friendship.

Although friendship skills can feel innate, they also involve teachable competencies (Cook, 1977)—such as perspective-taking and empathy, conflict resolution and forgiveness.

Schools should incorporate friendship literacy into early education, helping children learn and practice these skills. Colleges, workplaces, and community organizations (e.g., libraries, YMCAs) can offer adult-level programming, including practice in initiating conversations with strangers and reconnecting with old friends (see Aknin & Sandstrom, 2024). In-person offerings

might do double duty, by additionally providing a setting for those interested in improving their social connectivity to meet one another.

Stop Treating Friendships as Second-class

Friendship has a good pitch: friends make you happier, healthier, and help you live longer. Yet governments, workplaces, and universities treat friendships as second-class relationships.

These institutions often support and even subsidize romance. Marriage is recognized through tax and other legal benefits, health insurance coverage, family leave, housing policies, and social rituals. In academia, the "two-body problem" means universities routinely offer spousal hiring accommodations—yet no equivalent exists for close friends or chosen family. Federal family-leave laws guarantee time to care for a sick spouse or grieve their loss, but not for a friend. In hospitals, partners have automatic visitation rights; friends often must rely on staff goodwill. Even public health agencies devote billions to supporting marriage and family life.

Integrating friendship into policy could build a less lonely, more thriving society. For one, U.S. federal family and medical leave law covers only spouses, children, and parents—not friends. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) could be amended to allow workers to take paid or unpaid leave to care for a designated friend, grieve their death, or support them in a crisis. Some Scandinavian companies offer "social health days" that encourage workers to invest time in their networks. This might be particularly valuable in large countries like the U.S., where friends from home or college often live far enough away that friends need to plan, buy flights, and take time off to see each other. Other reforms could extend tax and housing benefits to friends. France's *Pacte Civil de Solidarité (PACS)* lets adults formalize non-marital partnerships for tax and inheritance purposes—though technically intended for civil unions. A similar "Registered Friendship" model in the U.S. could allow adults to share housing, insurance, adoption, and inheritance rights without needing to marry.

Make Friendship a Research Priority

Hunger for friendship guidance is great. Hundreds of articles in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Washington Post* offer advice on how to make friends, deepen friendships, break up with friends, and so on. But without empirical evidence to lean on, such advice is the epistemic equivalent of your doctor prescribing their own favorite meals to help you lose weight—merely anecdotal.

But what else are journalists to do when that evidence is missing? Today, scholars remain astonishingly underinformed about how friendship works. A preliminary analysis of ~27,000 peer-reviewed articles from top psychology journals finds that fewer than 4% of papers focus on friendship (versus >30% on romance) (Hong et al., in prep). A scientific community focusing so exclusively on romantic relationships will be unable to solve a problem the size of the loneliness epidemic.

Policymakers must support research that answers basic and translational questions about friendship. (HHS, 2023; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2025), arguing for national investment in the science of friendship. Identify gaps in knowledge and redress them, fostering evidence-based

decision-making about which friendship-forward policies work, as well as how, where, and when they should best be implemented.

Beyond government, the private sector is already entering this space—Match Group and Bumble have rolled out friendship-matching platforms, and start-ups focused on curated group outings or "friendship accelerators" are proliferating. These companies have resources and user data; scientists have theory and empirical methods. Even with clear risks (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2025), there is enormous potential for partnership.

Caveats

First, not all friendships are good (Krems et al., under review). This has long been recognized; Aristotle, the Buddha, and others taxonomized the "bad friends" people regularly encounter. Such relationships can undermine the positive outcomes outlined above (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2007). Policy must therefore focus on helping individuals cultivate several high-quality friendships.

A second caveat is that the form and function of friendship vary by sex, age, culture, and life stage. The best-studied example is sex differences in friendship patterns: men tend to form looser, activity-based groups, while women often prioritize emotionally intimate dyads. These structural and functional distinctions shape what people seek, how they sustain friendships, and the support they exchange (e.g., Ayers et al., 2023, 2024; Benenson, 2014; Williams et al., 2022). Interventions should reflect this variation—for example, men may benefit most from recurring, low-pressure group activities, whereas women may benefit from spaces that encourage disclosure and emotional connection.

Friendship differs, too, by education, mobility, and parental status (e.g., Kalmijn, 2012). While interventions cannot be tuned to every subgroup, policies that ignore this diversity risk being less effective—or even missing those most in need of connection.

Conclusion

Friendships are neither luxuries nor consolation prizes. The evidence is clear: friendships are central to health and flourishing. Friendship can help create healthy minds and bodies. Friendships can be key ingredients in creating productive, functioning, resilient individuals and societies. Friendship might also be the best weapon to fight the ongoing loneliness epidemic. Taking friendship seriously can create friendship-conducive conditions with wide-ranging, powerful effects.

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