LONELINESS

A Data-Driven Report by CV Outreach

HOW LONELINESS IS KILLING AMERICA, AND HOW THE CHURCH IS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO ADDRESS THIS HEALTH EPIDEMIC

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WHY LONELINESS?

"It is not good that man should be alone"

If you start at the beginning of the Bible, you won’t go more than a few pages before coming to one of the most fundamental, human truths; it is not good for man to be alone. This phrase, spoken by God Himself during the Creation story is a seminal, often-overlooked aspect of the human condition. We were designed for relationships; ultimately a relationship with God Himself.

We chose to research the topic of loneliness for three reasons. Loneliness has far-reaching impact on our culture, it’s a rare opportunity for the church to directly impact a public health crisis, and it’s a call to go back to the basics of what living out our faith looks like.

Regardless of whether you are in the church world, the ministry world, or simply a passionate follower of Christ, we hope that the analysis and findings in the next few pages will give you an overview of the issue of loneliness in America. At the end of the report, we’ll provide a few suggestions for how we think individuals and churches can begin to reach the people in their midst who are struggling with loneliness.

Those final suggestions are rooted in the fundamental truth found in Genesis 2:18 that is echoed throughout scripture. God has called us out of loneliness and isolation into a life-giving relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

Our hope is that this report will help that message be effectively spread far and wide.
WHAT IS A DATA-DRIVEN REPORT?

The mission of CV Outreach is to connect people to the Church. This falls directly in line with the CV mission to reach people with the Gospel and encourage them to become true followers of Jesus.

In our desire to be good stewards of the opportunities that are available in our digital age, we believe that in order to reach people with the Gospel, it is imperative to leverage every chance we can to better understand them first.

Much has changed in our culture as we have entered the age of Big Data. Our daily lives are filled with novel digital experiences that are the result of Big Data being intelligently routed through algorithms and systems. There are endless opportunities to use this data to make intelligent decisions in every sector of life.

We believe that includes the area of evangelism and church outreach.

This is the first of many reports we hope to release that are data-driven. Much of this data is the result of the visionary partnership between churches from across the country and CV Outreach. In the past year, on behalf of our church partners, we have amassed actionable data from tens of millions of users from across America and beyond.

We believe that the analysis of user behaviors online can help any church better understand the needs and struggles of the people they are trying to reach, and cast vision for effective ways to do that.
There is a growing health epidemic in the United States.

It’s effecting up to 40% of the country.

The adverse health effects of this epidemic are on par with smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

It’s more damaging to your body than obesity.

It’s associated with a shorter lifespan, cardiovascular disease, dementia, anxiety and depression.

So, what is this health epidemic?

It’s loneliness.
A STARTLING REPORT

Recently, Dr. Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States, published a startling report on the issue of loneliness, categorizing it as not merely a feeling, but a physiological health epidemic in the United States.

Key to understanding the way that loneliness is affecting us, is shifting our perception of the issue from that of subjective feeling to that of transient human motivational state, like hunger, thirst or pain.
"During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."

- Dr. Vivek Murthy
"Loneliness complicates underlying illnesses that a person might be suffering from, making it harder for them to cope and heal."

It may be easy to associate the feeling of loneliness with a lack of romantic fulfillment, but loneliness is much broader than that. It’s a feeling that can effect people of all ages, from all socioeconomic backgrounds. It effects people in rural areas and people in urban environments. It effects married people as often as it does single people. It’s associated with grief, major life changes, and even life success.

Loneliness complicates underlying illnesses that a person might be suffering from, making it harder for them to cope and heal.

Also, loneliness is considered an epidemic, specifically because one person’s loneliness can impact another person’s loneliness.
"We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s."

- Dr. Vivek Murthy
LONELINESS BY THE NUMBERS

DATA

In this section, we will look at the rate of loneliness among different demographics and different geographic areas.

ANALYSIS

The analysis in this section comes from aggregate data collected on behalf of our church partners across 400+ church websites, as well as publicly available google and census data.
WHAT DEMOGRAPHICS ARE MOST AFFECTED BY LONELINESS?

As mentioned already, loneliness is an issue that doesn’t discriminate. People from all walks of life exhibit signs of loneliness.

Here is a demographic breakdown of the people our partner churches have interacted with who are struggling with loneliness.

*For this section, people are identified as “lonely” when they take the action of clicking on an ad that is targeted towards people suffering from loneliness and visit a landing page on one of our church partner’s websites that is designed to appeal to people struggling with loneliness.

Loneliness by Age

- **18-24**: 27%
- **25-34**: 23%
- **35-44**: 13%
- **45-54**: 14%
- **55-64**: 11%
- **65+**: 12%

Loneliness by Gender

- **Male**: 45%
- **Female**: 55%
Millennials constitute an estimated 21% of the total population in America, but make up 50% of the lonely population.
WHAT AREAS OF THE US ARE MOST AFFECTED BY LONELINESS?

For this analysis, our Google Adwords Team, which oversaw more than $20 million in Adwords spend last year, compiled a list of 100+ google search terms that are indicative of someone who is struggling with loneliness.

KEYWORD EXAMPLES

why do I feel so lonely struggling to connect I feel so alone

These search terms were then cross referenced month by month across different geographic areas with the appropriate population data. This resulted in a “loneliest area” designation based off of the total per capita lonely searches relative to the other results.
THE LONELIEST STATES IN AMERICA

These are, per capita, the loneliest states in America.

- *The top 16 states have a higher rate of loneliness than the national average*

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<td>50.</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
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These are, per capita, the 10 loneliest states with a population of at least 8 million

- *These states have 57% of the lonely population*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>POPULATION (MILLIONS)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Georgia</td>
<td>10.31</td>
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<td>2. New York</td>
<td>19.75</td>
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<td>3. New Jersey</td>
<td>8.95</td>
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<td>4. California</td>
<td>39.25</td>
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<td>5. Virginia</td>
<td>8.41</td>
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<td>6. Illinois</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<td>7. Michigan</td>
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<td>8. North Carolina</td>
<td>10.15</td>
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<td>9. Florida</td>
<td>20.61</td>
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<td>10. Texas</td>
<td>27.86</td>
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THE LONLIEST CITIES IN AMERICA

These are, per capita, the loneliest cities that have a population of at least 500k

• *Each of these cities has a higher than average rate of loneliness.*
• *The top 19 cities have double the average rate of loneliness.*
• *The top 3 cities have triple the average rate of loneliness in the country.*

1. Las Vegas
2. Washington, D.C.
3. Denver
4. Baltimore
5. Seattle
6. Tucson
7. Portland
8. Boston
9. Albuquerque
10. Detroit
11. Fresno
12. Nashville
13. San Francisco
14. Milwaukee
15. Louisville
16. Memphis
17. Oklahoma City
18. El Paso
19. Charlotte, NC
20. Austin
21. Indianapolis
22. Columbus, OH
23. Fort Worth
24. Dallas
25. Jacksonville, FL
26. San Jose
27. San Diego
28. Houston
29. Philadelphia
30. Chicago
31. San Antonio
32. Phoenix
33. Los Angeles
34. New York City
The rate of loneliness in Las Vegas, Washington, D.C., and Denver is 3x than the national average.
USER BEHAVIORS OF LONELY PEOPLE

BEHAVIOR

In this section, we will look at the online behaviors exhibited by people who are struggling with loneliness.

ANALYSIS

The analysis in this section comes from aggregate data collected on behalf of our church partners across 400+ church websites.
In order to fully understand the following data, it's important to know the CV Outreach Strategy that is responsible for the data.

Part of the CV Outreach strategy is to help our church partners turn their church website into an outreach tool.

This is done by equipping them with a growing number of topical landing pages. There are currently 22 different topical landing pages across every CV Outreach church partner website. A complete list of topics can be found at cvoutreach.com/current-content.

Each of our Ad Grant Partners has qualified and been onboarded to the Google Ad Grant, which awards 501c(3) organizations up to $10k/mo in in-kind advertising on the Google search network.

The people that are connecting with CV Outreach churches start their journey by googling a phrase that our Adwords team is targeting from each church’s Ad Grant account.

That person sees a text advertisement on google, and when the user clicks on the ad, they are routed to the topical landing page that is most closely associated with the phrase that was googled.

94% of the website visitors from the 10 million people that visited one of our partner church websites in 2017 had never been to that website. They are there mainly because they are being given an opportunity to find answers or get help with an issue or question that they are dealing with.

The landing pages consist of two main Calls to Action, the opportunity to watch a topical video that provides them with a Biblical view of the problem that they are dealing with, and an opportunity to directly email the church pastor from that landing page.

We refer to those emails as “responses”.

Let's dig into these responses.
ANALYZING RESPONSES

In order to gain a better understanding of the core issues surrounding loneliness, we analyzed the responses that were directly indicative of a lonely person.

To start, the following words (and common variants) were used in a search against all responses received from any of the 9000+ potential landing pages that are hosted on one of our 400+ church partner websites.

isolated
alone
lonesome
friendless
forsaken
abandoned

rejected
unloved
unwanted
outcast
lonely

The resulting messages where then fed into Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) which is a topic modeling approach that tries to discover the underlying themes or topics from a corpus of text.

The top 10 underlying words/topics were:

life
husband
time
feel
marriage
family
need
know
house
Pray

The summary of this analysis is that loneliness itself does not live in isolation. Those suffering from loneliness might be affected with this feeling based off of other core issues; things like marital struggles (husband, marriage), existential struggles (time, life, know) family struggles (family, husband), immediate financial concerns (need, pray) and general anxieties and worries (need, feel, pray).

Also, while it’s fairly obvious that the majority of people submitting “lonely” responses were connected through our “Loneliness” landing page, there are still a large number of people who submit responses through one of the other landing pages which deal with topics like marriage and divorce, the meaning of life, the problem of evil, and even seasonal pages for holidays like Christmas. This reinforces the idea that loneliness can sometimes exhibit itself not as a core issue, but as an underlying symptom of another, immediate issue.
Loneliness often surfaces, not as a core issue, but as an underlying symptom of another, immediate issue.
TOP GOOGLED TOPICS FOR LONELY PEOPLE

In order to take a step back and consider where the majority of lonely responses originated from, we analyzed the keywords that were googled by people who ended up submitting a response that was designated as “lonely”.

Based on our data, there were two trends in the top keywords that resulted in someone submitting a response labeled as "lonely". These were that the keyword was indicative of someone actively seeking spiritual guidance on how to deal with their problem or the keyword was indicative of someone seeking a direct, human connection.

Spiritual Guidance examples:

- Prayer request
- How to pray

Direct Connection examples:

- I need someone to talk to
- Feeling alone what to do

This is a fairly clear indication that regardless of a person's offline behavior, while online, their behavior shows that they are exhibiting clear calls for help.

This glimpse into the documented struggles and searches of an issue that is usually dealt with in private provides clear opportunities for us as Christians.
THE UNIQUE POSITION OF THE CHURCH

With measurable data like this, there is a clear opportunity to draw a line in the sand and work to see measurable improvements on an issue that previously might have been thought of as a subjective, private struggle.

We believe that the Corporate Church in America should be the clear leader in the battle against loneliness.

The fact that loneliness is now thought of as a transient human state reinforces Biblical Truths around the idea that God has called us into healthy relationships, ultimately into a relationship with Himself. It is the way we were created.

As communities of believers, as the family of God, with commandments to love our neighbor, and care for the vulnerable, the impetus is clear; a growing population of people suffering from loneliness is a direct affront to the efficacy of the Church.

With a few simple opportunities, we can reverse the tide of loneliness, and draw people into healthy communities that can lead to life-change through a relationship with Jesus Christ.
As a follower of Christ, you have a clear opportunity to be the Church for someone. As the Church, we will never be corporately what we aren’t individually. Impacting an aggregate trend like loneliness starts with individual efforts.

**Exhibit healthy online behaviors**
Recently, social media platforms like Facebook have come under fire for their apparent impact on our psychological well-being. There is clear evidence that passive engagement on our “feeds” can result in a downward spiral of real life problems, including loneliness. It’s important for believers to exhibit healthy online behaviors. If we are to use social media platforms for the Gospel, we need to maximize our time spent calling people into real engagement, and minimize the time we spend curating the best parts of our lives to showcase an inauthentic public persona.

Remember that many people who are lonely, may take the first step towards connection in an online environment. We need to be ready for them, and give them that opportunity.

**Strategically prioritize knowing your neighbors**
Here is a simple exercise. Draw a map of your home, and the homes that are immediately adjacent to yours. Write down the first and last names of everyone who lives in each of those homes. If you are drawing a blank on any of them, prioritize connecting with those people.

The feeling of being alone is a lie that is whispered in one’s ear, in the face of an increasingly connected world, and increasingly crowded living environments. It’s a lie that would have one believe, that even though they are surrounded, no one knows them, and know one cares.

It’s up to us to strategically and deliberately rebut those thoughts in our immediate area of impact.
Loneliness would have a person believe, that even though they are surrounded, no one knows them, and no one cares.

Individually, we can challenge those inner thoughts with simple acts of kindness and caring.
AS A CHURCH

The church is the most uniquely positioned entity in our country to directly impact the number of people suffering from loneliness. Churches consist of communities of believers who should be intrinsically motivated to engage their community and invite people out of loneliness, care for them when they are suffering, and pray for God to miraculously intervene.

Churches exist in unique cultural contexts across this country, and we believe that each one is capable of addressing this issue within their own context. However, to start with, here are a few ideas:

Speak Publicly
Your local church has the opportunity to speak publicly the truth found in the Gospel to people who are privately struggling.

Speaking Biblical truth into areas of private struggle can be done on Sunday from the pulpit, in a special call to connect, through church outreach events, or through home groups.

The call to action doesn't have to be complicated. It can simply be “We know, that based on the data we have, many of you may be privately struggling with loneliness.

God does not intend this for your life, and as a church we want to make sure you know that we are here to connect with you, and talk with you in confidence”.

It's an acknowledgement of the issue, and a call to connect with someone who cares. It's that simple.

This can also be done through church digital outlets, like the church website or social media accounts.
Connect With People Online
We believe that the CV Outreach strategy of connecting with people during their time of searching is an effective avenue towards meaningful connection. Besides the quantifiable data, we have an amazing amount of anecdotal examples of people who were connected to a church through the Ad Grant partnership.

While the CV Outreach Ad Grant Partnership is free, and we would welcome any kingdom-minded church who wants to partner with us, we also know that there are a variety of ways to connect with people who are searching for things online.

So, regardless of whether or not a church partners with us in something like that Ad Grant Partnership, we encourage all churches to actively prioritize online engagement as a starting point to meaningful connections.

"MORE THAN ANYTHING, THIS TYPE OF CONNECTION REQUIRES A DELIBERATE STRATEGY, AND A VISION TO CONNECT WITH PEOPLE REGARDLESS OF WHERE THEIR STARTING POINT IS."

The data is clear that, more than likely, in your church's immediate vicinity there are a growing number of people suffering from loneliness, and other felt needs issues. Many of these people might be reluctant to physically step foot inside a church, but more than willing to engage with someone online.

Your church has the opportunity to meet them where they are.
CONCLUSION

We hope this report has helped provide you with some insight on the issue of loneliness in our society. It’s a unique struggle and one that we believe may become even more pronounced in the coming years if the Church does not intervene.

More than anything, we hope that, for all believers, the marching orders are clear.

The only way to address this health epidemic is to be a country filled with churches that are effectively reaching people with the Gospel. It’s a rare opportunity to measurably impact a public health concern by simply living out our faith.

We are devoted to this cause and hope you are too.

If you would like to help us share this report, and raise awareness for this issue, you can find more resources at fightloneliness.org.
https://faculty.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Work_Loneliness_Performance_Study.pdf


http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316


https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-age/?dataView=1&currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D