
Online and Disconnected: COVID-19's Shift of Social Capital Online

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social capital project

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KEY POINTS

- Social capital—the strength of relationships between people, families, and communities—has been declining over the past 50 years, well before the start of the pandemic.
- The pandemic introduced further disruptions to civil society by moving 90 percent of students into virtual classrooms and causing over 60 percent of all work hours to be done remotely. This disruption was temporary in the case of remote school and likely permanent in the case of remote work.
- Data do not yet exist to fully examine the pandemic’s effect of shifting many other activities online, but early evidence indicates that more of our social lives are permanently moving online.
- Relative to pre-pandemic levels, we find that children are more likely to spend at least 4 hours per day online and less likely to participate in clubs or other in-person activities, that social activities in the workplace remain suppressed, and that religious institutions more frequently use digital technology to conduct their services.
- Understanding the impact of these trends on social capital is essential as the Internet becomes a more prominent mediator of our social lives.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic increased Americans' reliance on the Internet in ways that are still not fully understood. For many, the Internet became the primary means by which they worked, learned, and socialized. The pandemic's effect on work and school is widely studied but comparatively little is known about how the shift to online life affected the relationships and communities that make up Americans' social capital and whether or not this shift is permanent.

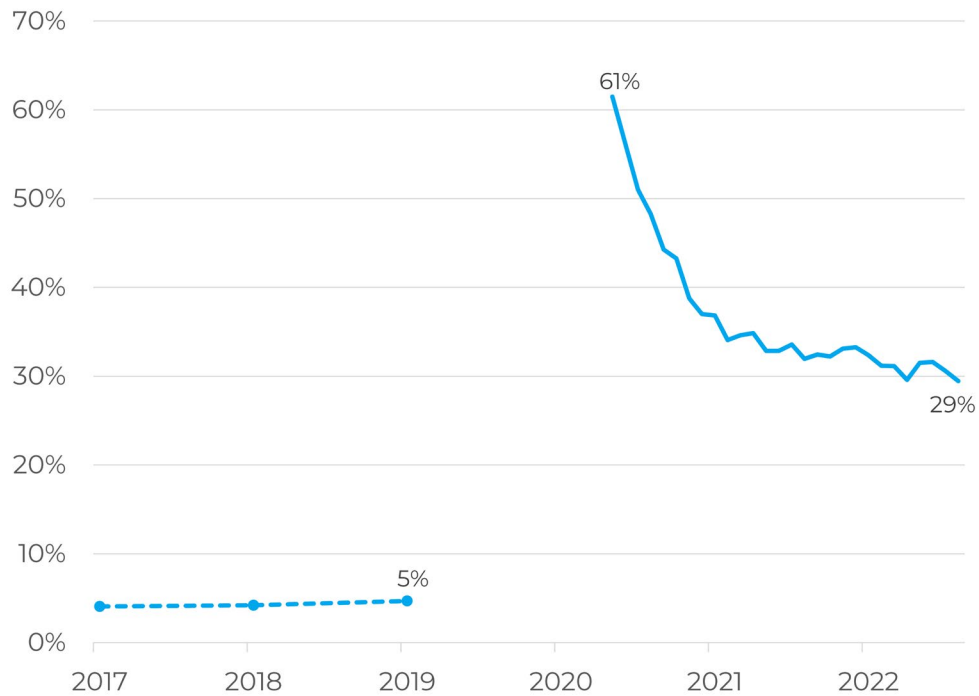
Before the pandemic, the Internet already had a complicated, albeit incompletely understood, effect on social capital. On one hand, it removes physical barriers, allowing people and communities to connect and support each other in new and less burdensome ways. On the other hand, the Internet can replace valuable in-person interactions, leading to greater isolation and disconnection from family, community, and work. Increased reliance on the Internet during the pandemic likely magnified both the positive and negative effects of the Internet on social capital. The pandemic thus presents an opportunity to better understand how individuals and institutions adapt when their social lives are moved online.

This report documents the extent to which parts of civil society shifted online during the pandemic, and the extent to which they have since returned to the pre-pandemic norm. It then discusses the potential costs and benefits of these changes and how they may impact social capital. Ultimately, we find that religious and work events are being conducted in-person less frequently, children are spending more of their leisure time online, and that much of civil society has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of "in-personness."

THE PANDEMIC'S EFFECT ON WORK AND SCHOOL

We begin by documenting the widely understood movement of work and school online since the start of the pandemic, in order to provide a baseline with which to compare trends in other areas of civil society.

Figure 1: Percent of Total Work Days Spent Working from Home in the U.S., 2017-2022



Source: Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "Why Working From Home Will Stick," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 28731, 2021.

Figure 1 displays the percent of total hours worked from home in the United States since 2017. Before the start of the pandemic, working from home was relatively rare and had remained fairly constant over the last 50 years.¹ However, at the start of the pandemic, days spent working remotely jumped from 5 percent to 61 percent. Despite falling from the early-pandemic peak, 29 percent of work days are still done from home as of August 2022 (compared to the 5 percent pre-pandemic baseline).²

Similar to the pandemic's immediate effect on remote work, 92 percent³ of students moved away from in-person classrooms due to pandemic restrictions as of May 2020. Unlike remote work however,

¹ Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "Why Working From Home Will Stick," *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 28731*, 2021, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28731>.

² Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "Why Working From Home Will Stick."

³ U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, Week 1, April 23- May 5, May 20, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp1.html>.

practically all schools returned to in-person learning by Fall 2021.⁴ In the case of school, the pandemic acted as a temporary shock to a relatively stable institution. This temporary shock led to severe learning loss, even though the institution itself has not permanently changed. For work arrangements on the other hand, the pandemic shock led to a more lasting re-balancing of online and in-person interaction. Understanding how the pandemic changed other types of personal relationships and civil society is essential to understanding the impact that the shift online had on social capital.

Toward this goal, the following sections begin by reviewing the academic research on the effects of the Internet on the strength of social capital. Then we investigate (i) how the pandemic has shifted religious services, social activity in the workplace, and children's leisure time online, (ii) the extent to which the changes are persistent, and (iii) how these changes may affect the strength of social capital. While data on a comprehensive set of social activities post-pandemic are not available, these areas help to illuminate the shift online that has taken place post-pandemic. We find that all three areas moved online to some extent during the pandemic and that many of these changes appear to be permanent. Over two years since the start of the pandemic, we observe enduring changes in how religious institutions operate, an increased number of remote conferences and meetings in the workplace, and children spending a greater amount of their leisure time online. Future research is needed to determine the gravity of these changes and their positive and negative impacts on the strength of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE INTERNET

To understand the implications of moving more social activities online, it is helpful to review the existing literature on the importance of social capital and what we know about the effects of the Internet. In 2017, the Joint Economic Committee Republicans launched the Social Capital Project, a multi-year research effort to explore the state of associational life in America. The Social Capital Project's first report, *What We Do Together*, describes how associational life has declined in the United

⁴ Lauren Camera, "Nearly 100% of Students Back to School Full Time and In Person," U.S. News & World Report, December 15, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-12-15/nearly-100-of-students-back-to-school-full-time-and-in-person>.

States over the past 50 years.⁵ Americans are marrying less frequently and having fewer kids, families are spending less time together, fewer people are going to church, people have fewer close friends, more American men are disconnected from work, and people are less engaged politically than they were 50 years ago. The causes of this decline are not well established but the sustained decline in social capital over the past 50 years is clear.

Social capital—the web of relationships between people, families, and communities—is associated with better health, greater perceived happiness, and stronger interpersonal relationships.⁶ Before the advent of the Internet, our relationships were formed and maintained through primarily in-person institutions; our homes, jobs, schools, and churches served as the places where communities were built and relationships maintained. The value of participating and interacting in in-person institutions is well documented, however, the benefits and costs of participating in online equivalents is less clear.⁷

In one sense, the Internet is just the latest in a series of new technologies that have changed how individuals interact. The printing press revolutionized the mass dissemination of written text, replacing word of mouth—often at group gatherings—as the main way of communicating information and shared history.⁸ The telephone allows people to stay in touch with friends and family over long distances, albeit at the cost of reducing the time people spend together face-to-face.⁹ Similarly, adoption of the television is strongly associated with decreased civic engagement as people spend more time watching television and less time engaged with friends and family.¹⁰ Although it is hard to prove conclusively the causal effect of television, or any other technological change, on declining social capital, Robert Putnam

⁵ “What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America,” U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee Republicans, May 15, 2017, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2017/5/what-we-do-together-the-state-of-associational-life-in-america>.

⁶ “What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America,” U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee Republicans, May 15, 2017, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2017/5/what-we-do-together-the-state-of-associational-life-in-america>.

⁷ “What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America,” 7-10.

⁸ “Printing Press, Digital Age, and Social Movements,” Center for Mobile Communication Studies, Boston University, November 16, 2017, <https://sites.bu.edu/cmcs/2017/11/16/printing-press-digital-age-and-social-movements/>.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, October 2020), 168.

¹⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

concludes in *Bowling Alone* that there seems to be an important and powerful connection between television and social capital.¹¹ Like the technologies before it, the effect of the Internet on social capital is difficult to disentangle from pre-existing trends, but the task remains important.

Existing Literature on the Internet and Social Capital

The academic literature on how the Internet shapes social capital is new and still developing, but early evidence suggests the new technology comes with some costs to social capital. A study comparing the introduction of high-speed Internet networks in parts of the U.K. to longitudinal survey data about individual social behaviors, found that the introduction of high-speed Internet resulted in declines in civic and political engagement.¹² Illustrating how online activity can replace in-person engagement, a randomized experiment had users deactivate Facebook for a month.¹³ The participants randomly selected to deactivate Facebook, subsequently reported reducing their overall online activities and increasing time spent doing offline activities, such as socializing and watching television.

In addition to these studies showing a causal effect of Internet use on declines in social capital, there are also studies that show how Internet use may be associated with changes in well-being. A large cross-sectional survey of Canadians found that after controlling for factors such as income and demographics, the size of online networks is not associated with measures of subjective well-being.¹⁴ On the other hand, the same researchers found that the size of in-person friend networks is positively correlated with subjective well-being. Doubling the number of one's in-person friends is associated with the same increase in well-being as a 50 percent increase in income. Taken together, these results suggest that Internet use may replace valuable, welfare-enhancing in-person interactions.

¹¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 246.

¹² Garcia et al., "Broadband Internet and Social Capital," *Journal of Public Economics* 206, (February 2022): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272721002140?dgcid=coauthor>.

¹³ Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow, "The Welfare Effects of Social Media," *American Economic Review*, 110 (3): 629-76, 2020, <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/facebook.pdf>.

¹⁴ John F. Helliwell and Halifang Huang, "Comparing the Happiness Effects of Real and On-Line Friends," *PLoS ONE* 8(9): e72754. (September 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0072754>.

However, not all research finds that the Internet necessarily reduces social capital. A small survey of college students finds that active Facebook use is effective at helping students build stronger ties with people outside their immediate friends and family, a phenomenon called bridging social capital.¹⁵ A similar study looking at social media users over the age of 65, finds that active participation in social media has a positive effect on their social relationships.¹⁶ Active participation and interaction with people in the participants' friend groups increased both bridging social capital and bonding social capital, or the connectedness of people already in close social groups together. The quantity of personal messages sent had a positive association with bonding social capital while the number of public posts had a positive association with bridging social capital. On the other hand, the frequency and duration of social media use had no impact on social capital, implying that there may be diminishing returns to extended social media use.

The academic literature suggests that increased reliance on the Internet for social activities following the start of the pandemic has the potential to either replace in-person interaction and thus weaken social capital or support in-person interaction and thus strengthen social capital. The following sections of this paper document the extent of the pandemic shift online in three areas— religious services, professional social connections, and children's leisure time—and discusses the potential impacts on the strength of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

As businesses, governments, and community organizations were required to suspend in-person gatherings in Spring 2020, they adopted new technologies in order to maintain participation and engagement. In many faith communities, what started as temporary online religious services have now become a permanent option. These virtual services may be able to reach a wider audience, but evidence suggests that

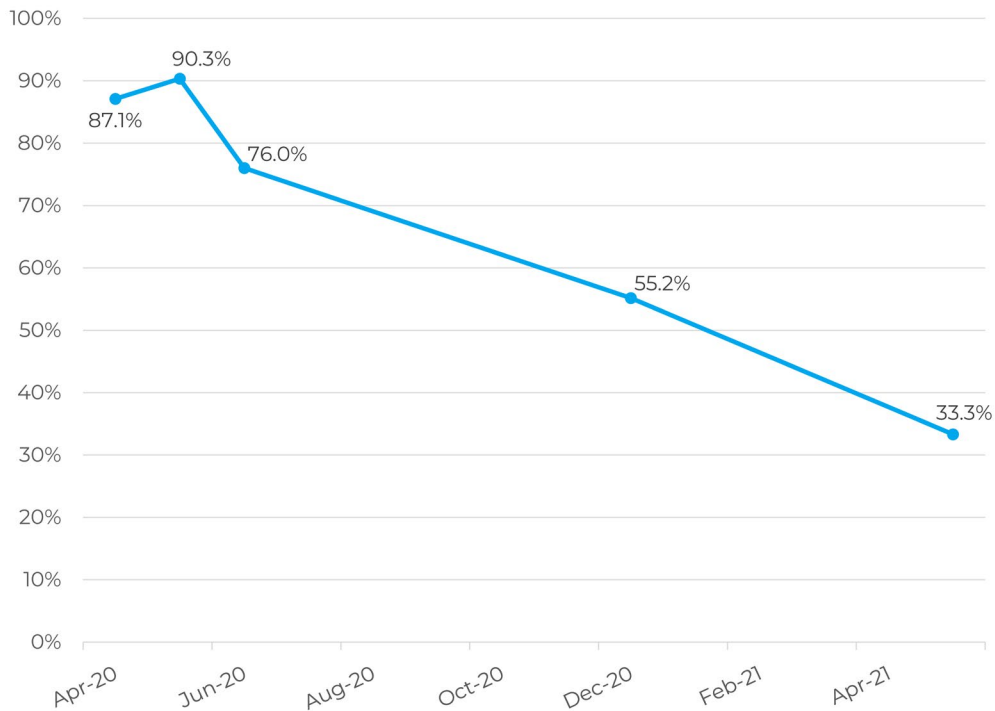
¹⁵ N.B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12: 1143-1168, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x>.

¹⁶ Nicole O'Brien, Yufei Yuan, and Norman Archer, "The Impact of Social Network Sites on Social Capital for Older Adults," *Gerontechnology* (2021), <https://journal.gerontechnology.org/archives/c0fd28cffc29454a91249006cef7a7c4.pdf>.

they may also result in declines in the benefits that come from in-person religious communities.

Before the pandemic,¹⁷ online worship services were unheard of but by May 2020 over 90 percent of those who attended a religious service within the past week did so remotely.¹⁸ Figure 2 shows that remote religious service attendance has declined since its peak in May 2020, and as of May 2021 (the most recent date this survey question was asked) 33 percent attended remotely.¹⁹

Figure 2: Remote Religious Service Attendance as Percent of Total Attendance, United States, 2020-2021



Source: Megan Brenan, "In-Person Religious Service Attendance Is Rebounding."

According to a March 2022 survey, 47 percent of places of worship are still operating with changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as by offering virtual services. This is a decline of just 8 percentage points since July 2020, when 55 percent reported that they were open

¹⁷ Aaron Earls, "Online Services Expanded Reach of Churches During Pandemic," Lifeway Research, October 14, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/14/online-services-expanded-reach-of-churches-during-pandemic/>.

¹⁸ Megan Brenan, "In-Person Religious Service Attendance Is Rebounding," Gallup, June 2, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/350462/person-religious-service-attendance-rebounding.aspx>.

¹⁹ Megan Brenan, "In-Person Religious Service Attendance Is Rebounding."

but with changes to how they operate.²⁰ Such a small decrease in almost 2 years indicates that the changes in worship services due to the COVID-19 pandemic are persistent and potentially permanent.

The movement of religious services online is likely to weaken social capital derived from the institution. The strong social capital of religious communities comes from deliberate and repeated interaction between members, often bridging across different socioeconomic or other backgrounds.²¹ Churches and other religious institutions can connect members to a community and provide individuals with spiritual and philanthropic fulfillment. To this end, members are more likely to volunteer or participate in social outings and reap the benefits of the community when they feel connected with other members.²² Moving religious services online can undermine the key social interactions that make religious communities so beneficial for their members.

Fewer in-person interactions may reduce the perceived value of religious participation, and as a result, reduce attendance. For example, in May 2020, 34 percent of practicing Christians reported that they attended a digital church service from a church other than their own.²³ So called “church-hopping” allows religious communities to recruit new members and reach wider audiences, with members attending services online reporting greater satisfaction with the flexibility that virtual services provide. However, these benefits come at the risk of losing in-person engagement. Religious services have a strong community component that is generated through repeated in-person interaction. Without a vibrant community, the value of the religious service may decline for some individuals, which would be reflected in lower attendance and decreased engagement over time.

²⁰ Justin Nortey, “More Houses of Worship are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance Is Unchanged Since Fall,” Pew Research Center, March 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>.

²¹ Chetty et al. “Social Capital I: Measurement and Associations With Economic Mobility.” *Nature* 608, 108–121 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04996-4>.

²² Darin Freeburg, “Trust and Tithing: The Relationships Between Religious Social Capital and Church Financial Giving,” *Journal Of Contemporary Ministry*, 2, 39-55, (2016), https://works.bepress.com/darin_freeburg/10/download/.

²³ “One in Three Practicing Christians Has Stopped Attending Church During COVID-19,” *Barna*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>.

At the same time there were declines in church attendance and engagement, church leaders also reported declines in financial giving.²⁴ In 2020, 42 percent of congregations reported that charitable giving declined from the previous year.²⁵ Historically, recessions have had little impact on religious service attendance²⁶ and a small negative impact²⁷ on religious charitable giving. However, the 2020 recession was abnormal; overall charitable giving increased 3.8 percent in 2020,²⁸ while religious giving decreased by 0.2 percent.²⁹ This implies that there may have been other factors influencing charitable giving beyond the economic burden of the pandemic such as reduced engagement from online services.

Ultimately, the movement online of religious services is a potentially concerning development. On one hand, religious organizations have reported that virtual services may have dampened COVID-induced declines in attendance by bringing back former members and reaching new ones. On the other hand, the expanded online membership may be changing the quality of the in-person community and detracting from the key social capital function of religious services.³⁰ More time and data are necessary to fully assess the impact of the pandemic on religious communities, but faith leaders may benefit from prioritizing the maintenance or revival of their in-person communities. The following section outlines how businesses face similar challenges maintaining collaboration and social capital among coworkers and peers after the pandemic shifted their day-to-day operations online.

²⁴ Wendy Wang, "The Decline in Church Attendance in COVID America," Institute for Family Studies, January 20, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america>.

²⁵ "COVID-19 Congregational Study," *Lake Institute on Faith & Giving*, September 2020, <https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/institutes/lake-institute/covid-study.html>.

²⁶ "Is a Bad Economy Good for Church Attendance?" Pew Research Center, March 12, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/03/12/is-a-bad-economy-good-for-church-attendance/>.

²⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Charitable Donations Rebound; Volunteering Still Down," Gallup, January 11, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388574/charitable-donations-rebound-volunteering-down.aspx>.

²⁸ "Giving USA 2021: In a year of unprecedented events and challenges, charitable giving reached a record \$471.44 billion in 2020," *Lilly Family School of Philanthropy*, June 15, 2021, <https://philanthropynetwork.org/news/giving-usa-2021-year-unprecedented-events-and-challenges-charitable-giving-reached-record-47144>.

²⁹ Note: 3.8% and 0.2% figures are adjusted for inflation.

³⁰ G. Jeffrey Macdonald, "No Pew? No Problem. Online Church Is Revitalizing Congregations," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2021/0209/No-pew-No-problem.-Online-church-is-revitalizing-congregations>.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE WORKPLACE

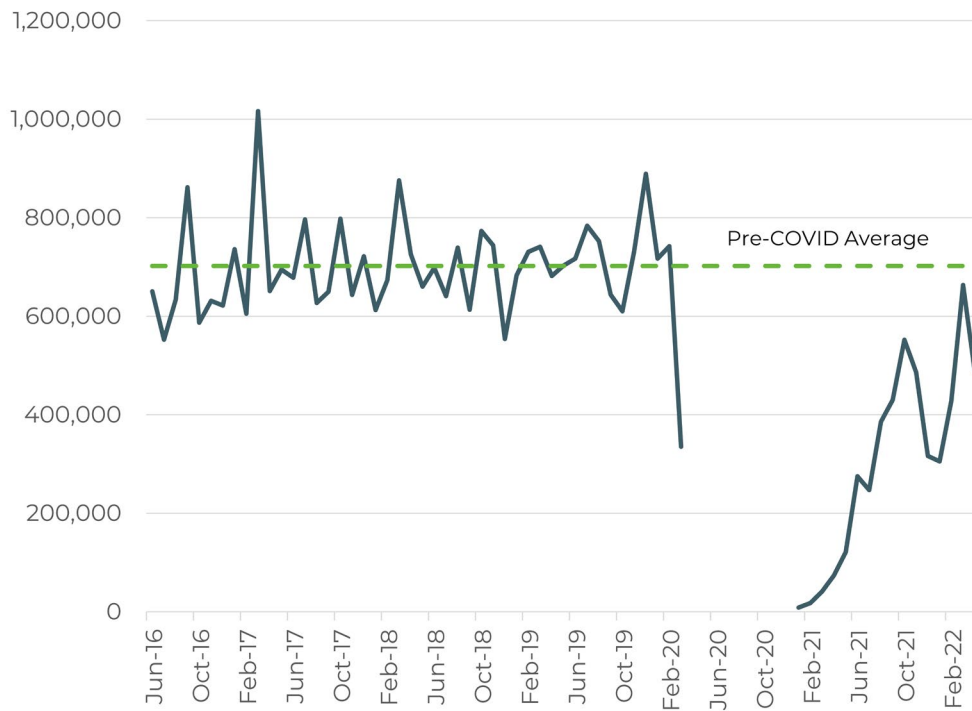
The effect of the pandemic-induced shift to remote work on the social capital employees gain from the workplace remains under studied. If the shift online means fewer social connections are made and maintained, it could have widespread societal costs beyond lost productivity. Work provides people not only with income but also rich social networks that contribute to meaningful relationships and connect people with others across communities and peer groups.³¹ Many of the specific activities within the workplace that build this type of social connection shifted online during the pandemic and have not yet returned in their pre-pandemic form. This section will present data on in-person conferences and other activities that help shed light on how the pandemic shift online impacted social capital generated in the workplace.

Convention Center Attendance

In Spring 2020, nearly all work-related activities, such as meetings, conferences, and team building exercises were moved online. We can observe this trend in convention center attendance, where businesses and academic institutions typically hold the types of events that encourage relationship building among peers. Figure 3 shows seasonally adjusted monthly attendance data for the Las Vegas Convention Center from June 2016 to April 2022.

³¹ Christina King, Scott Winship, and Adam N. Michel, "Reconnecting Americans to the Benefits of Work," U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee Republicans, October 2021, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/5ac0a254-ff00-4a18-baf0-bdfedb9bb154/connections-to-work.pdf.

Figure 3: Las Vegas Convention Center Attendance, Seasonally Adjusted, 2016-2022



Note: Dashed green line represents average seasonally adjusted monthly attendance (702,000) pre-COVID (June 2016-February 2020). Seasonally adjusted data were generated by creating dummy variables for each month. Each dummy variable coefficient represents the average increase in the number of Las Vegas Convention Center attendees relative to January. Each individual month's seasonally adjusted attendance was then calculated using these coefficients. Source: "LVCVA Tourism Tracker," Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, April 2022, <https://www.lvcva.com/research/>.

While attendance has rebounded significantly since the start of 2021, there were still only 486,000 attendees in April 2022, a 29 percent decline relative to the 681,000 attendees in April 2019. Although we do not have systematic data for other event spaces throughout the country, reports indicate they have seen similar trends and a slow return of in-person conferences.³²

³² Dee-Ann Durbin, "Crushed by Pandemic, Conventions Mount a Cautious Return," AP News, September 9, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-technology-business-health-travel-7818e93db6d0ef66111c8e5a278e>.

If the post-pandemic trend continues, fewer in-person conferences do not necessarily mean damage to workplace social connections. Not every pre-pandemic conference was tailored for building social capital and many discontinued conferences may have been inefficient at meeting other goals, such as disseminating information. Virtual conferences may be just as effective at communicating new knowledge. Certain virtual conferences may even be more effective at achieving their intended goals compared to in-person meetings since they can include a larger and more geographically diverse audience. Even if there have been more benefits than costs due to the decline in in-person attendance, the decline may have gone further than is optimal. More time and research are necessary to determine whether or not this shift has ultimately had a positive or negative impact on social capital.

Social Connections in the Workplace

In addition to the conference data, anecdotal evidence from business leaders and data from Microsoft also explain how the shift online may have impacted social capital.

Business leaders have noticed the impact virtual work has had on workplace social capital and expressed concerns that virtual work may adversely impact social connections between coworkers.³³ In March 2022, Goldman Sachs required employees to return to the office 5 days per week, writing that remote work is not ideal for their “collaborative apprenticeship culture.”³⁴ Fewer spontaneous interactions between coworkers and peers may mean fewer employees will end up collaborating to create new ideas. Echoing similar concerns, other industry leading companies, such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft, have implemented policies that require employees to be in the office at least 3 days per week, despite opposition from employees.³⁵ The widespread implementation of return to in-person work policies and the steady

³³ Nancy Baym, Jonathan Larson, and Ronnie Martin, “What a Year of WFH Has Done to Our Relationships at Work,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 22, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-year-of-wfh-has-done-to-our-relationships-at-work>.

³⁴ Morgan Smith, “Goldman Sachs Wants Workers Back in Office 5 Days a Week—‘a Stampede’ of Other Companies Could Follow, Experts Say,” CNBC, March 14, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/14/goldman-sachs-wants-workers-in-office-5-days-a-week-and-other-companies-could-follow.html>.

³⁵ Henry O’Loughlin, “Every Fortune 100’s Return to Office Policy (OCT UPDATE),” Build Remote, October 2022, <https://buildremote.co/companies/return-to-office/>.

return of many conferences signals that employers fear virtual work is not an ideal replacement for in-person equivalents.

This fear of adverse consequences from remote work is supported by data from Outlook emails and Microsoft Teams meetings.³⁶ The data suggest that the shift of activities online shrunk networks among coworkers and peers. Interactions, such as emails or Teams messages, among people who were already in close networks with frequent interactions, increased, while interactions among people who did not work as closely decreased throughout the pandemic. The shift online enhanced peoples' relationships with those they already frequently interacted with while their networks outside of those groups significantly weakened due to less communication. Weaker bridging social capital from the shift online means that social networks will be smaller and less likely to reach new employees.

More data are needed to unravel the full extent to which conferences and social work activities have moved online. Las Vegas Convention center attendance and data from Microsoft Outlook and Teams suggest that some social work activities have permanently moved online and that the shift is likely undermining workplace social capital. Fewer workplace connections means reduced societal innovation and that people are less likely to make new friends, find social support, or be introduced to a new community.

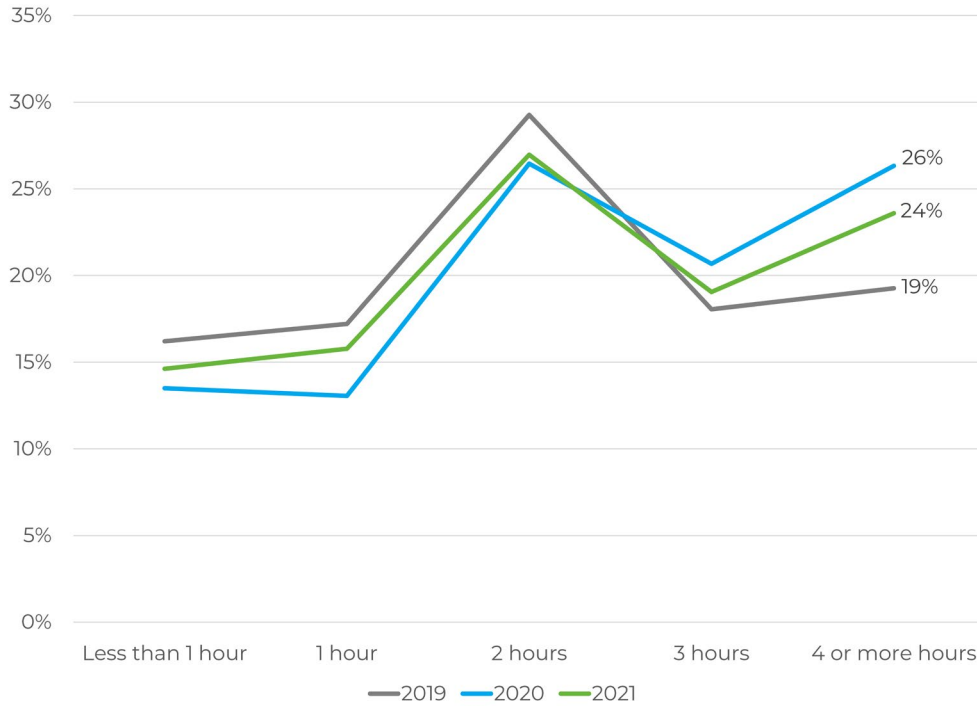
THE INTERNET'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The pandemic also thrust the Internet and related technologies more directly into the lives of children and their families. The isolation caused by the pandemic and the rise of remote schooling required a more prominent role for the Internet in order for children to remain engaged in their pre-pandemic social activities. Increased Internet use due to remote schooling is well documented, but the pandemic may have also permanently increased children's time online as a leisure activity, crowding out in-person activities.

³⁶ Ben Wiseman, "The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work—Are We Ready?" Microsoft, March 22, 2021, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>.

Figure 4 presents data from the National Survey of Children’s Health, which asks parents about how much leisure time their child under 18 spends in front of a television, computer, cellphone, or other electronic device watching programs, playing games, accessing the Internet, or using social media.³⁷

Figure 4: Children’s Leisure Time Spent with TV, Cellphone, or Computer, 2019-2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, National Survey of Children’s Health.

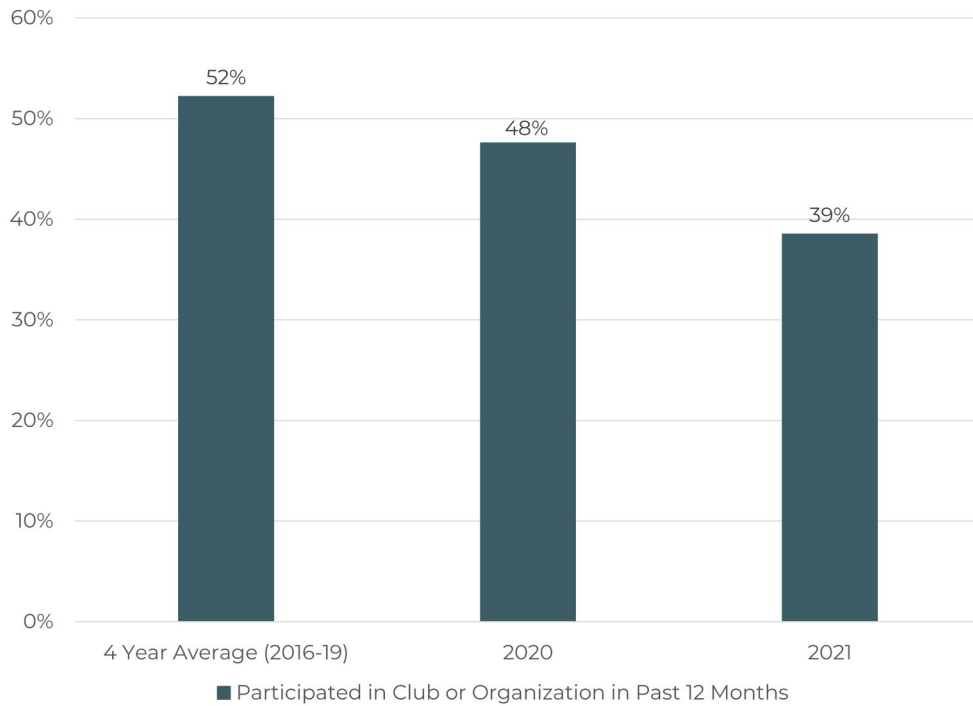
In 2019, 19 percent of parents reported that their child spent more than 4 hours of leisure time per day with television, cellphones, or computers, before rising to 26 percent in 2020 and reverting slightly to 24 percent in 2021. Thus, although tech use among children for leisure has declined following the initial shock from the pandemic, it may not return to pre-pandemic levels over the long run.

The National Survey of Children’s Health also measures club and activity attendance. As shown in Figure 5, between 2016 and 2019 an average of 52 percent of children participated in a club or other organization over the past 12 months. Participation fell to 48 percent in 2020 and even further to 39 percent in 2021. Taken together, Figure 4

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, National Survey of Children’s Health, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch/data/datasets.html>.

and Figure 5 suggest that online leisure activities are replacing in-person participation in organizations among children. While some of the decline in participation is likely due to a general decrease in in-person social activities being offered due to the pandemic, the continued drop in 2021 raises concerns that this trend could be persistent.

Figure 5: Share of Children Participating in a Club or other Organization in the Past 12 Months, 2016-2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, National Survey of Children's Health.

More time and data are necessary to draw stronger conclusions, but there is initial evidence that children are spending more time online and less time at in-person activities that are more likely to generate social capital in the form of new relationships and greater community participation.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how people work, learn, socialize, and worship. Cornerstones of civil society—charities, political organizations, and social clubs—all faced difficulties operating as in-person activities were restricted. In the aftermath of the pandemic, we observe lasting changes to civil society. Children now spend more time

online and less time in clubs or other activities; social activities in the workplace are more frequently conducted online; and religious services continue to actively rely on digital technology. These are just a few of the trends for which we have available data, but other important areas of social life such as dating and civic participation may have also seen permanent changes since the pandemic began. As the Internet continues to be a prominent mediator of our social lives, it is more necessary than ever to continue to study and understand the impact that it has on our social capital.

Alex Schunk
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