All by myself

Exploring the change in time spent alone over the last decade

12 August 2026

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Time spent alone has risen up the public and political agenda, reflected in debates about the 'relationship recession', social media use and more working from home. But these underlying societal shifts have not affected time spent alone across all age groups equally.

Most strikingly, young men (aged 18-29) now spend more than two-fifths of their waking hours alone, up by two hours a day since 2014-15. In contrast, women aged 60 and over and men aged over 70 spend around one to one-and-a-half fewer hours alone than a decade earlier. These changes have closed the gap in time spent alone between younger and older people: in 2014-15, time alone rose steadily with age, but that clear upwards gradient has now gone.

For younger age groups, surging screen use almost certainly matters. But there is another important driver: the rise of solo working, which has nearly tripled. Working from home accounts for two-thirds of the rise in working time spent alone among those of working age. Meanwhile, older people are spending the time gained back over the decade doing leisure with others. This matters because people often have more control over their leisure time than over their work.

Even without factoring in a likely bigger rise in solo screen time (due to underreporting), recorded time alone is still up substantially for young people. Younger people not only spend more time alone but are lonelier. They are also making weaker income progress than previous generations, which may be part of why they are less able to offset time spent working alone with more sociable leisure time. These findings matter for the nature and satisfaction of work, and have important implications for policy, particularly health, job quality and 'worker power'. If we are serious about well-being for the youngest generation and those that come after, then work deserves attention as well as people's screens.

Time spent alone is a growing public and political concern

In recent years, there has been growing public and political focus on how much time people are spending alone. Behind the headlines lie real societal shifts. Fewer young people are coupling up, meaning they are more likely to live and spend time alone by default; an explosion in smartphone and social media use has changed how, and how frequently, people interact with each other; and the rise in working from home, itself a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, has removed a major source of face-to-face interaction for some workers.

These shifts have not been felt equally across the age spectrum. Smartphone and social media use, for example, is concentrated among younger age groups, and young adults are also increasingly likely to be single. However, some changes have affected everyone: for example, the decline in 'third spaces' has removed opportunities for social interaction across age groups. So, in this spotlight, we explore how patterns of time alone have shifted for different age groups, and what this could mean for people's well-being.[2]

Young adults, especially young men, are spending more time alone than a decade ago

Figure 1 shows the number of non-sleeping hours spent alone per day (henceforth referred to as 'time alone') for men and women of different ages in 2014-15 and 2023 (the latest available UK time use diary data). The most striking change is among 18-29-year-olds: young men now spend more than two-fifths of their waking hours alone (roughly six and a half hours), up by two hours since 2014-15. Over the same period, time alone rose by one-and-a-half hours among young women (to roughly five hours a day in total). As noted above, this likely reflects changing living arrangements, the rise of leisure at home and, for some, more working from home.

At the other end of the age spectrum, women aged over 60 and men over 70 now spend around one to one-and-a-half fewer hours alone than they did almost a decade earlier. In 2014-15, time spent alone rose steadily with age; that clear upwards gradient has now gone. One possible explanation is the long-term rise in life expectancy: more couples now survive into old age together. Moreover, there has been a rise in multigenerational households and in living with parents. Life in retirement has changed too as retirees have more time for leisure, and more of it involves digital connectivity, home-based leisure and community participation such as volunteering.

Figure 1 **Young men have seen the largest rise in time spent alone since 2014-15**
Number of hours of non-sleep time per day spent alone among men (left side) and women (right side), by age group: UK

Source: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

Given that 18-29-year-olds and people aged 60 and over show the biggest (and most divergent) changes in time spent alone, Figure 2 looks at these groups in more detail. It breaks the changes down by personal and household characteristics, specifically: quartile of household income, number of people in the household, and the respondent's self-reported health status.[3]

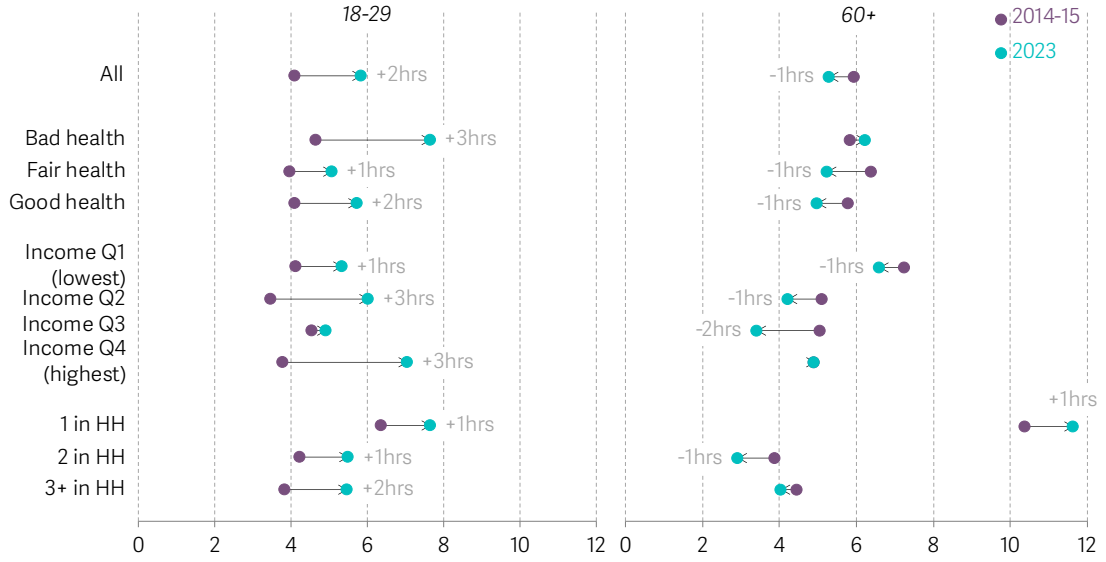
One important group is those living alone, who were the group most likely to spend time alone in 2014-15. In both age groups, they now spend around one additional hour alone each day. Given rising singlehood among young people, how much of the rise in time alone is simply a matter of more young people living alone?[4] The answer is not much. Changes in household size explain only 10 per cent of the increase in total time alone for 18-29-year-olds. Meanwhile, shifts away from single person households account for just under a third of the fall in time spent alone among the over 60s. So, living arrangements are only part of the story and a range of factors shapes time spent alone.

Time spent alone has risen across the board for every group of young people shown in Figure 2. Perhaps most concerning is that 18-29-year-olds in bad (self-reported) health spent nearly three more hours alone in 2023 than in 2014-15. This could reflect, in part, the increase in limiting ill health, greater anxiety about living standards, such as the availability of jobs, and more time spent online. Alone time for the richest young adults (those in the highest quartile of the all-age household income distribution) has risen by a similar magnitude, up by three hours. This likely reflects working from home, which tends to be concentrated in higher-paid roles as they more often involve tasks that can be done remotely, such as information processing, communication and coordination. In contrast, time spent alone has

fallen in almost all groups of those aged 60 and over, except those in bad health and those who live alone.

Figure 2 **Young people in poor health and on the highest incomes have seen the biggest rises in time alone**

Number of hours of non-sleep time per day spent alone by personal characteristics among 18-29-year-olds (left side) and 60 and above (right side): UK



Notes: Q1 = lowest household net income (post taxes and deductions) quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile.
Source: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

Screen time is the usual suspect, and it is strongly age-skewed

What, then, explains this recent surge in time spent alone among younger age groups? Screen time is one obvious candidate. Unfortunately, the time use diaries used for our analysis likely underestimates true screen time among survey participants.[5] This could be because, unlike other activities, screen time is now a habitual and semi-automatic part of our lives and is often done alongside other activities that are likely recorded as the 'primary activity' in the time use diaries (for example, think about how you use your phone while eating or commuting). It might also be that some people do not want to admit how much time they spend on their phones. Whatever the reasons, other data suggests that UK adults spent four and a half hours a day online in 2025 (mainly on smartphones). Among 18-24-year-olds it was more than six hours a day, roughly three hours more than the estimate for 18-29-year-olds from the 2023 Time Use Survey.

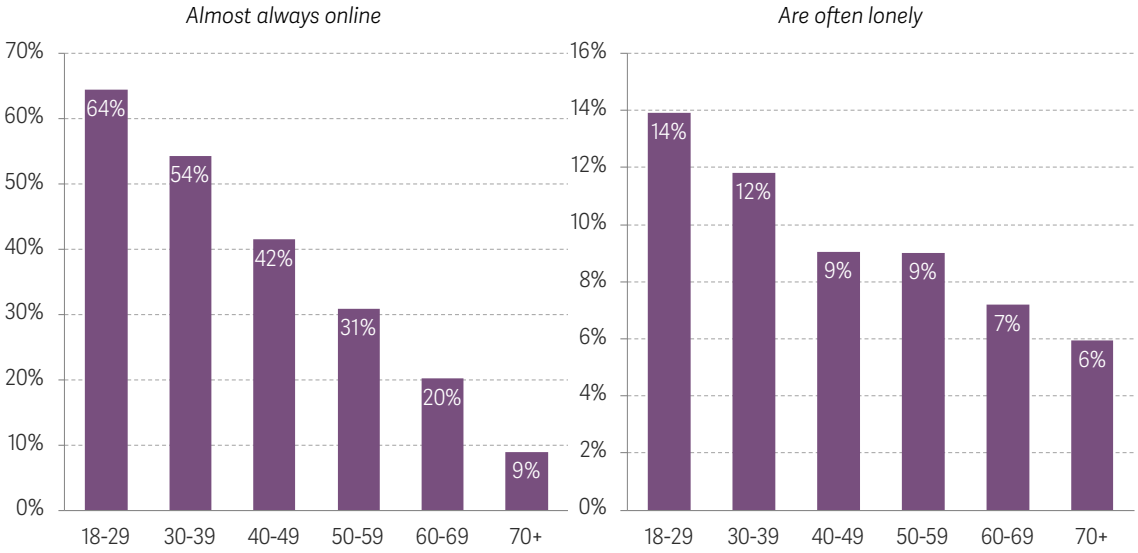
Our analysis of Understanding Society data shows a clear age gradient in both online activity and loneliness. Figure 3 illustrates that 18-29-year-olds are three times more likely than 60-69-year-olds to report being almost always online, and twice as likely to report feeling often lonely (14 per cent compared to just 7 per cent).[6] Of course, time alone is not the same as feeling alone (or loneliness) but arguably feeling alone is more likely to have negative consequences for health and well-being. That said, 'loneliness' is self-reported, so the pattern

in Figure 3 could reflect young adults being more fluent in discussing and recognising mental health.

A regression analysis shows that 18-29-year-olds who are almost always online are four percentage points more likely to be lonely (16 per cent) than those who are not (12 per cent). After accounting for a broader range of characteristics (sex, household type, net household income decile after housing costs and occupational social class), the gap narrows slightly: 18-29-year-olds who are almost always online are three percentage points more likely to be lonely (12 per cent) than those who are not (nine per cent).

Figure 3 **Young people are almost always online *and* most likely to be lonely**

Proportion who are almost always online (left side) and are often lonely (right side), by age group: UK

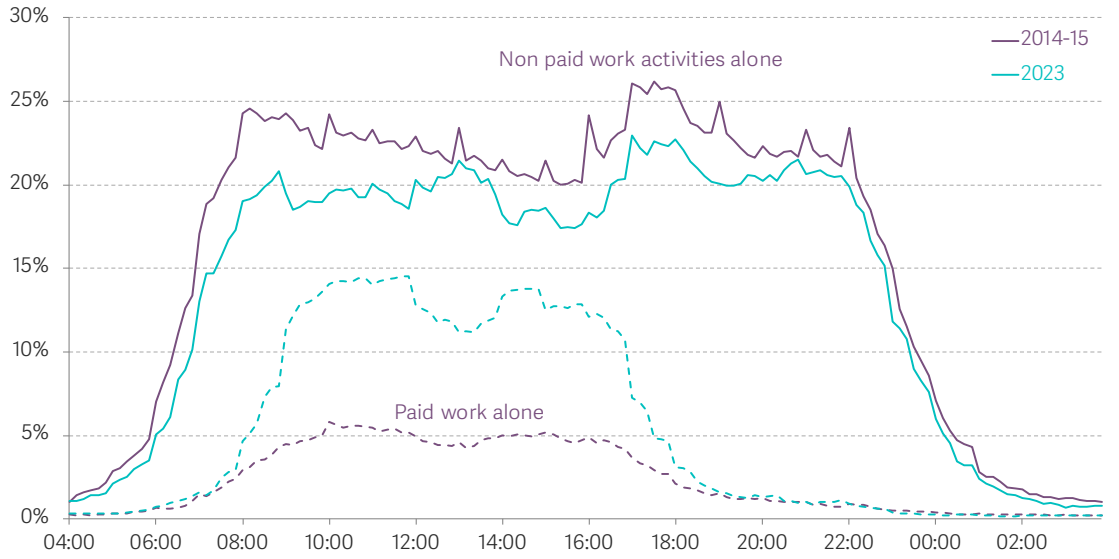


Notes: Understanding Society only asks highly specific questions about the frequency of online activity between Waves 12 to 15. Loneliness is asked between Waves 9 to 15. The chart displays an average from all the waves combined.
Source: ISER, Understanding Society.

But it is more solo working, rather than screen time, that has driven the rise in reported time alone

Despite likely under-reporting of screen time, time alone for young people is still up. So, something else is driving this increase in alone time and the diary data points to a sharp rise in solo working. Figure 4 shows the proportion of 18-69-year-olds doing paid work and non-paid work activities alone, by time of day, in 2014-15 and 2023. The average share of people doing non-paid work activities alone (including activities such as travel, studying, hobbies and screen time but excluding sleep) fell from 16 to 14 per cent (across the whole day). Most strikingly, throughout the standard working day (9am to 5pm), the average share of people who were doing paid work alone increased from around 5 per cent to between 12 and 15 per cent – a near-tripling.

Figure 4 **More people are solo working throughout the 'standard' working day**
Proportion of 18-69-year-olds doing paid work and non-paid work activities alone, by time of day: UK

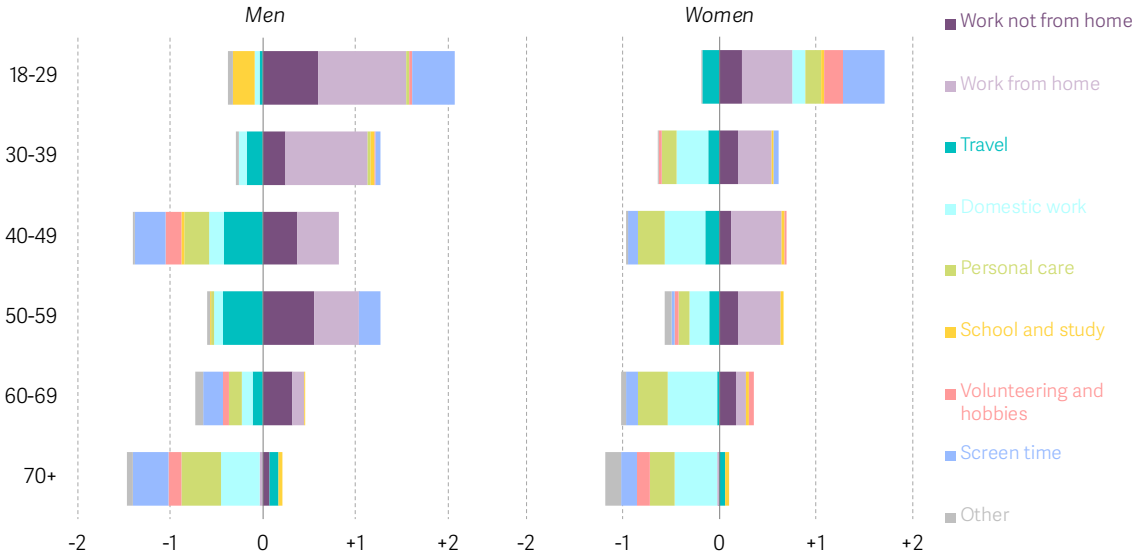


Notes: Non-paid work activities do not include time sleeping or resting. The denominator includes all people who do not have missing diary data.
Source: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

Figure 5 breaks down the changes behind Figure 4, showing how hours spent alone per day shifted across activities between 2014-15 and 2023.[7] As Figure 4 showed, paid work is the biggest driver of rising time alone among working-age people. The biggest change among men is for 18-29-year-olds, who spent around one-and-a-half hours more working alone per day. Among women, it was those in their 40s (as well as those aged 18-29) who experienced the largest rise, around three-quarters of an hour a day. Working from home accounts for roughly half to four-fifths of the rise in solo paid work across working-age groups – and two-thirds across all working age adults.

Figure 5 **Paid work is driving the rise in time alone**

Change in the number of hours of non-sleep time per day spent alone doing various activities among men (left side) and women (right side) between 2014-15 and 2023, by age group: UK



Notes: Categories are based on primary activity only.
Source: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

What sort of workers are doing more paid work alone? The diary data does not consistently ask about job sectors, but it does allow us to look at changes by occupational social class and household income. Among young men aged 18-29, the change is concentrated in managerial and routine occupations, as well as the second and fourth (richest) income quartiles. However, this does not hold true for other age groups or for women: increases among older working-age men and women aged 18-29 were more concentrated in intermediate occupations.

Figure 5 suggests that older adults have 'offset' those extra hours working alone more successfully than younger adults, by cutting the time they spend alone on non-work activities. They experienced a larger fall in time spent on solitary domestic work and personal care, travelling alone (which may reflect less time spent commuting) and doing leisure or using screens alone.

The activity changes in Figure 5 can reflect a change in how much time people spend on these activities overall, as well as a change in whether they do them alone or with others. For example, the total hours spent per day on personal care and domestic work, typically solitary activities, have gone down across the board. On the other hand, total time spent using screens increased across age groups. Younger people now spend more than half their time on screens alone (just over 50 per cent for 18-29-year-olds in 2023, which represents an increase of around 10 percentage points since 2014-15). However, older people are increasingly doing it sociably (for example, for adults aged 60-69 their share of solitary screen time fell by 10 percentage points, leaving them spending less than a third of their time on screens alone). That might mean watching TV more with others rather than scrolling alone

on a smartphone. Overall, the over 60s are spending around an hour more on leisure with others in 2023 than in 2014-15. For men over 70 this is nearly one-and-a-half more hours. In comparison, sociable leisure time for 18-29-year-old men and women increased by only a quarter of an hour.

We should care that young people are spending more time alone

It is likely good news that older generations are not only richer than they used to be, but are also less likely to be spending time alone. But it may be less positive for young people, who in addition to experiencing weaker income progress than previous generations, are more likely to be alone, and lonely. And these two effects might be linked if finances play into the reasons why younger people have felt less able to offset their time alone with more sociable leisure activities. Income and wealth measures often dominate the framing of intergenerational (in)equality, but how people spend their time is another part of the picture.

However, we should be careful not to assume that increased time alone is always a bad thing. As discussed above, it does not always translate into loneliness, instead it can be restorative, help people recharge socially and reflect independence. Choices over where and when we work can be valuable for flexibility and productivity, but individuals often have less control over their working conditions than employers and the Government do. This is especially important for the sizeable group of young employees who desire more face-to-face contact to support their social development and reduce isolation. Hence, these findings have important implications for policy, particularly health, job quality and 'worker power'. One tangible measure could include discussions within companies on synchronising when employees work from home to improve face-to-face contact.

If we are serious about combatting loneliness, improving well-being and life satisfaction, then how people work deserves to be in the debate just as much as people's screen time.

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[1] The author thanks colleagues Mike Brewer, Ruth Curtice, Sophie Hale, Charlie McCurdy, Aish Moothan and Hannah Slaughter for comments on and contributions to the analysis and report. This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the ESRC Connecting Generations research programme. The research programme brings together experts from the Centre for Population Change at the Universities of Southampton, St Andrews, and Stirling, with the University of Oxford Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science, and the Resolution Foundation Intergenerational Centre. The author would like to thank Becki Dey and Teresa McGowan from the ESRC Connecting Generations research programme for their input and comments on the draft. Any errors, however, remain the author's own.

[2] The RF analysis in this spotlight draws from the following sources:

1. United Kingdom Time Use Survey (series page here): J Gershuny and O Sullivan (2017). United Kingdom Time Use Survey, 2014-2015. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8128, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8128-1.

J Gershuny, O Sullivan and J Lamote de Grignon Perez (2025). Centre for Time Use Research UK Time Use Survey, March 2023. [data collection]. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9336, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9336-2.

2. Understanding Society (series page here): University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2026). Understanding Society: Waves 1-15, 2009-2024 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009. [data collection]. 21st Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-22.

[3] Splits were also conducted for degree level and a variety of employment variables but there was little variation between the categories and within age groups.

[4] The definition of singlehood changes between 2014-15 and 2023 so they are not directly comparable. We use household size instead as a proxy (HH stands for 'household' and relates to household size).

[5] In 2014-15, men and women reported spending, on average, around three hours on screens. By 2023, the largest increase was around half an hour among 60-69-year-olds. 18-29-year-olds reported they only increased their screen time by quarter of an hour.

[6] The question asked on loneliness in Understanding Society reads “How often do you feel lonely?” which includes the categories “hardly ever or never”, “some of the time” and “often”. The question asked on online activity reads “How often do you use the internet for your personal use?” and includes multiple categories from “almost all of the time”, “several times a day”, “once or twice a day” and then categories on weekly, monthly and no usage.

[7] Childcare and adult care is not included because these activities are, by definition, not solitary. For more information on care across multiple generations, please see this paper: A Vlachantoni, M Evandrou, J Falkingham & M Gomez-Leon, Caught in the middle in mid-life: provision of care across multiple generations, Ageing & Society, 40(7), July 2020.