

Americans' circle of confidantes is down to two

November 2 2011, By Susan Lang

Although the average Facebook user may have some 130 "friends," in reality, Americans have, on average, slightly more than two confidantes, down from three 25 years ago, but the size of this social network has stabilized since 2004, finds a new Cornell study.

Although this shrinking social network "makes us potentially more vulnerable," said Matthew Brashears, assistant professor of sociology, the good news is that "we're not as socially isolated as scholars had feared."

Brashears' study is published online and in press in the journal Social Networks.

The findings confirm Brashears' 2006 findings from a paper with Miller McPherson and Lynn Smith-Lovin of Duke University, which reported that between 1985 and 2004, the average size of the group with whom we discuss important matters had shrunk by about one-third (from about three people to two).

"We also reported that the level of [social isolation](#) -- the percentage of the population that reports not discussing important matters with anyone at all -- in the U.S. had increased dramatically to roughly 25 percent from about 8 percent," said Brashears.

These findings were challenged by prominent [sociologists](#) who claimed that the results were the result of survey errors.

In the new study, Brashears used new data from a nationally representative experiment. He found that "modern discussion networks have decreased in size, which is consistent with other researchers' findings, but that social isolation has not become more prevalent," said Brashears.

The level of social isolation, he said, is so variable from survey to survey that it is not possible at this point to make generalizations about its true level, although it is possible to measure the overall size of our discussion networks.

Provided by Cornell University

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