

# Why more Americans are living alone

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GWEN IFILL: Finally tonight, a look at a major demographic change in America, the sharp increase in people who live alone.

Ray Suarez has our conversation.

RAY SUAREZ: The numbers tell the story. In 1950, 22 percent of American adults were single. Four million  
5 lived alone. They accounted for 9 percent of all households.

Fast-forward to today, more than 50 percent of American adults are single — 31 million, about one out of every seven, live alone. They make up 28 percent of all households.

These so-called singletons are the focus of a new book by Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at New York University, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Going Alone*<sup>1</sup>.

10 Well, from all those numbers, it's obvious something's happening. What?

ERIC KLINENBERG, author: Well, my view is that this is the biggest social change of the last 50 or 60 years that we have failed to name or identify.

It's not just that so many Americans are unmarried, which is something we have talked about, but that people are living alone and for long stretches<sup>2</sup> of their lives.

15 RAY SUAREZ: But so many people get there in different ways.

ERIC KLINENBERG: That's right.

RAY SUAREZ: There are people just starting out, finishing college and living on their own, people who are perhaps just divorced and perhaps didn't intend to ever live alone, but find that they are, people who are widowed, and, of course, a group of people who are living alone and liking it.

20 With all these different roads to getting there, is there anything that we can say about this very diverse group of people?

ERIC KLINENBERG: Absolutely.

One thing we can say is that people who live alone are opting to do so. Now, they might not aspire<sup>3</sup> to be on their own, but they all have other choices available to them, really regardless of what age they are.

25 So, for instance, you can go to *Craigslist*<sup>4</sup> and find roommates. Most people have some family members they could live with, parents or children.

There are all sorts of institutional homes available to elderly people. A hundred years ago, even 60 years ago, that's how we would have lived. But, today, we don't. People are opting to go alone.

30 RAY SUAREZ: Is this something that only rich societies can aspire to? When you get up to that scale, one out of every four households just one person, I was thinking of a — perhaps a Manhattan apartment building

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<sup>1</sup> Den korrekte titel er: *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*

<sup>2</sup> perioder

<sup>3</sup> ønsker

<sup>4</sup> hjemmeside med annoncer for lejeboliger, jobs og kontaktannoncer

with 150 studio apartments<sup>5</sup> in it. That's 150 refrigerators, 150 microwave ovens, 150 televisions. This isn't something that every country can pull off.

ERIC KLINENBERG: That's right.

35 In fact, you see very little living alone in poor nations or in poor neighborhoods. On the other hand, there are some affluent societies where virtually no one lives alone, for instance, Saudi Arabia. One big difference in a place like Saudi Arabia is that women don't have the kind of independence they have in the United States or in other countries where there's high levels of living alone.

So there's a cultural side to this, as well as an economic one.

40 RAY SUAREZ: Has the United States adjusted? This may be something where the numbers and individual choice is way out ahead of supermarkets, the way we build the places where we live, the laws that we use to govern it. It may have outpaced the arrangements we make around this part of our life.

ERIC KLINENBERG: I think it has.

45 I think this is a transformation that we haven't fully come to terms with. We haven't had a language for coming to terms with it also. Right now, 28 percent of U.S. households are one-person households. But in cities, the numbers are far higher than that, Atlanta, Denver, Minneapolis, Seattle, San Francisco.

These are places where more than 40 percent of all households have just one person. And in Manhattan, where I live, and Washington, D.C., it's almost half of all households. Cities are largely not equipped for this kind of situation. And I think we have a lot of adjusting to do.

50 RAY SUAREZ: Or cities that are uniquely equipped for that situation by creating a way of life where it's possible to live alone without feeling isolated, lonely and so on.

ERIC KLINENBERG: Well, cities are better equipped than other places.

And you're right. It's the interdependence<sup>6</sup> of people who live in cities that makes their independence possible. So you can live alone in a city and not be alone, for all the reasons you mentioned.

55 At the same time, especially as our society ages and the boomer generation<sup>7</sup> begins to age alone, we will find that our housing is not quite up to the challenge of giving people what they want, which is a place of their own, if they can't have the right partner, but also connection to other people and to all kinds of care and support. We have a long ways to go there.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, as you mentioned, people turning 70 are going to break like a tidal wave on this society. And it doesn't seem like we have really thought that through very much, have we?

60 ERIC KLINENBERG: I think that's right. We haven't.

Now, I should say that people who live alone, whether they're 30 or 40 or 75, are actually more likely than people who are married to spend time with friends and with neighbors, to go out in the city and spend time and money in bars and restaurants and cafes. They're more likely to go to public events. They're even more likely to volunteer in civic organizations<sup>8</sup>.

65 So we shouldn't get carried away with the idea that living alone means being isolated. But there are a lot of older people who are at risk of growing isolated if they don't have the right kinds of housing. And at the moment, we just haven't invested in that, in the way that other nations have.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, in an earlier book, *Heat Wave*, you examined how it was that very living alone among a

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<sup>5</sup> *studio apartments*: etværelseslejligheder

<sup>6</sup> *gensidige afhængighed*

<sup>7</sup> *boomer generation*: generation født umiddelbart efter 2. Verdenskrig

<sup>8</sup> *civic organizations*: (her) foreninger

70 lot of low-income elderly that led to a terrible death toll<sup>9</sup> during a tragic heat wave in Chicago in the 1990s.  
So, could that be the downside of living by yourself?

ERIC KLINENBERG: It is the danger, if we don't find ways to adjust.

But the one thing I discovered in the course of writing this book is that the very vulnerable and isolated people do represent a small minority here, that, for the most part, people who live alone are engaged in the world in ways that we don't appreciate.

75 And I grew concerned actually that this kind of language we have for talking about our bowling alone and our disconnection, the way we have grown too individualistic as a society, has somehow misrecognized the ways in which we're actually connected with each other. So it's important to tell both sides of that story.

80 RAY SUAREZ: Well, implicit in a lot of the reporting you did for this book was this finding that we aren't totally sold on the idea yet, even though 28 percent of our households consist of one person.

ERIC KLINENBERG: That's right.

85 And let's be clear. This is not the case against marriage. I'm not trying to persuade anyone that they should live alone. But I am trying to come to terms with the fact that so many people are opting to live alone, when they have other options available to them. Again, they're not aspiring to it, but they're not going to settle with living with the wrong person in the way that they might have 50 years ago.

RAY SUAREZ: We'll continue this conversation online.

In the meantime, the book is *Going Solo*.  
Eric Klinenberg, good to talk to you.

ERIC KLINENBERG: Nice to be here. Thanks.

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<sup>9</sup> *death toll*: antal dødsofre