

ARTSSCI 4MN1: Patterns of Social Connection in the City

Winter 2021

Dates

Sunday March 7, 10am - 1pm (EST)
Monday March 8, 10:30am - 1:30pm (EST)
Sunday March 14, 10am - 1pm (EST)
Monday March 15, 10:30am - 1:30pm (EST)

Course Description

Loneliness has been described as one of the biggest public health issues of our time. Although the urban environment is densely populated, social isolation is pervasive. Furthermore, cities have long been characterized by economic and racial segregation, reinforced by urban planning frameworks and policies. This course will explore the concept of “connection” in the urban environment through the lens of city planning, public health, and sociology. It will also examine foundational questions and thinkers around loneliness as part of the human condition.

In this course, you will learn about patterns of polarization through a variety of historical and contemporary case studies, as well as efforts to foster more connected communities. Through seminar-style discussions and reflective exercises, you will be challenged to relate course themes to your own experiences.

Course Outline

Module 1: Introduction

In the introduction to this course, we will explore two different but related understandings of connection in the urban environment. The first touches on an individual’s relationships with others and the loneliness that is often experienced in their absence. The second refers more broadly to the social connectedness of a city on the basis of factors such as age, income, and race. We will also briefly look at the ways in which connection is researched, from measuring social capital to mapping spatial inequalities. The pandemic has further disrupted interpersonal interaction and we expect that the implications of COVID-19 for cities will come up in discussion. There will also be opportunities to consider comparisons between urban, suburban, and rural environments.

Module 2: Socio-Spatial Segregation

The first part of this module will focus on the segregation of North American cities by income, race, and ethnicity. Topics of discussion will include the history of white flight to the suburbs, the harmful effects of evictions on community cohesion, and the evolution of ethnic enclaves. We will also examine how urban planning has exacerbated (and tried to rectify) socioeconomic divisions through case studies such as the Pruitt-Igoe social housing project in St. Louis, Missouri and Toronto’s Regent Park neighbourhood.

The second part of this module will explore how wealth disparities in the Global South often manifest in the physical divisions between the urban core and informal settlements on the

periphery. We will look at efforts to foster connectivity in cities such as Medellín, where the municipal government has committed to a strategy referred to as “social urbanism.”

Module 3: Social Infrastructure

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg defines social infrastructure as “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” and argues that its collapse is a key cause of isolation and polarization in public life. This module will explore examples of social infrastructure, including libraries and parks, as well as “third places” such as coffee shops, coworking spaces, and places of worship.

We will also examine the impact of social infrastructure on a community’s capacity to deal with shocks and stresses. In particular, we will look at the role of neighbourhood spaces and organizations in responding to climate events like heat waves as well as mutual aid systems for coping with economic struggles.

Discussions of social infrastructure will be contextualized within the growing movement towards a “social and solidarity economy” built on principles of self-reliance, care and community-building.

Module 4: Loneliness - An Existential, Psychological, or Public Health Concern?

A number of recent studies have shown that loneliness and social isolation are correlated with increased risk of mortality and other health conditions like heart disease, obesity and cognitive decline. This module will begin by exploring the demographics of loneliness and its associated health risks. We will look at proposed solutions ranging from government interventions like the United Kingdom’s loneliness strategy to grassroots initiatives such as senior cohousing and men’s sheds.

But should loneliness be treated like other public health threats? The second half of this module will explore loneliness as an element of the human condition in the modern world by examining how it has been framed by key thinkers and artists, such as Hannah Arendt and Edward Hopper. We will look at the term’s historical roots and discuss the value of solitude in a fast-paced world.

Assignments

Mapping: Find a map (or make your own!) that is indicative of a particular spatial inequality (e.g. income by neighbourhood, the location of social infrastructure). Be prepared to present any patterns you observe to the rest of the class.

Personal Essay: For this assignment, you will be asked to write a short essay that relates a personal experience of connection (or lack thereof) in the city to course material and your own research on the phenomenon.

Participation: Active participation in class discussions is expected and encouraged.