

Is Traffic Making Us Lonely?



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This month's *Atlantic* cover story, "[Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?](#)," has contributed to an ongoing national debate over whether Americans are more socially isolated than ever before, and whether our dependence on electronic communications is keeping us from forming meaningful social ties.

But a generation ago — long before the invention of social media — a man named [Donald Appleyard](#) was investigating how automotive traffic isolates us from one another and diminishes our human connections.

Appleyard published his compelling research in 1981 in a book called *Livable Streets*. Sadly, he died the next year — struck by a speeding car in Athens, Greece — and perhaps that is why he is not better known, even among urbanists. But his findings, which have recently been replicated in the United Kingdom, should be part of any discussion about the erosion of social ties in modern society.

Appleyard did his research in San Francisco in 1969, looking at three categories of streets: light traffic (2,000 vehicles per day), medium traffic (8,000 vehicles), and heavy traffic (16,000). What he found was that residents of lightly trafficked streets had two more neighborhood friends and twice as many acquaintances as those on the heavily trafficked streets.

Residents who were interviewed by Appleyard also talked about what they saw as

their home territory. On the heavily trafficked street, respondents indicated that their apartment, or perhaps their building, qualified as “home.” On the light-traffic streets, people often saw the whole block as home. They also included much more detail when asked to draw pictures of their streets.

The video below, produced by [Streetfilms](#) (part of the Streetsblog organization, where, full disclosure, I used to work), provides a great graphic visualization of Appleyard’s findings.

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In 2008, Joshua Hart, a researcher at the University of the West of England, set out to test Appleyard’s hypothesis in the U.K. city of Bristol ([PDF](#)). He encountered [parallel results to Appleyard’s](#). People on the heavily trafficked street felt besieged by cars; people on the quieter street felt much more of a sense of community. The comments from people on the medium street – which in this case had 8,420 cars per day – were particularly poignant:

An elderly couple who’d lived in their house for 48 years, said that MEDIUM street is “not very neighbourly or friendly because you’re on a main road.”

The oldest inhabitant interviewed on MEDIUM street, a 91 year old man who had been living in the same house for 81 years, when asked to describe his street, said “traffic is really the main thing- life has changed tremendously because of the car. Neighbours don’t see each other like they used to, because people get out of their front door, get in the car, and visa versa when they get home.” A single woman in her twenties described MEDIUM street as being “busy in terms of the traffic, quite impersonal- part of the busyness means that it doesn’t feel much like a community place.” One older woman even went as far as to say that “if you were to die here, nobody would know.”

One mother on MEDIUM street said that she actively discouraged her children from forming friendships across the street, in order to avoid crossing the busy road on a regular basis -- direct evidence that traffic flows can hinder the development of social networks.

Since Appleyard did his field work, the number of vehicles per 1,000 people in the United States has [risen from roughly 545 to 828](#). In the developing world, particularly China, India, and Brazil, the increase has been even more dramatic. As traffic increases around the world, will people be lonelier? The evidence certainly suggests that the answer is yes.

Perhaps we should be worrying about, and debating, the effects of traffic on our lives with the same urgency we reserve for Facebook.

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