

SOCIAL HARMS (A PARTIAL LIST)

Putting the Individual Above the Collective

Over the past few decades, many industrialized countries—especially, perhaps, the United States—have seen a rise in “rugged individualism” and the belief that you can succeed exclusively on the merit of your own strengths and talents. Research shows the opposite is true: support from others is key to our success.¹

High Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of human relationships. It can lead to necessary change, and while it can get heated, healthy conflicts stay humane. High conflict is the type of extreme feud that becomes an us-versus-them, good-versus-evil mentality, making it inherently dehumanizing. High conflict can shift into healthy conflict when curiosity and considerate treatment are restored.²

Social Segregation

In recent years, there has been an increase in socially segregated communities, divided by wealth, race, and other demographics like politics. With the rise of planned communities and select sports, there are fewer opportunities for youth from different backgrounds to share the same communities, activities, or schools. This erodes social trust, intensifies social divisions, and makes it hard for “a village to raise a child” because, as social scientist Robert Putnam said, a village can’t raise a child they don’t know.³

Stigmas and Stereotypes

Social stigma is when something about you—often something you didn’t choose or can’t change—limits your full participation in a social group or larger society. Stigmas are seen as flaws because they differ from what is considered normal or desirable. When you’re discriminated against or excluded because of a personal characteristic, you’re being stigmatized (sometimes called stereotyping). When this discrimination is internalized and you form unhealthy beliefs about yourself, it can cause serious harm. The impacts of discrimination can even shorten your lifespan.⁴ Stigmas can change, depending on a community’s beliefs, attitudes, and the social context. For example, having a mental health condition is less stigmatized than it used to be.⁵

Social Predators

Social predators are those who exploit and manipulate others for their own gain, often with hopes of causing harm. They are like the hyenas of the human world. If you’ve ever watched *The Lion*

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¹Putnam, R. D. (2015). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon & Schuster.

²Freeland Fisher, J. (with Fisher, D.). (2018). *Who you know: Unlocking innovations that expand students’ networks*. Jossey-Bass.

³Putnam, R. D. (2015). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon & Schuster.

⁴Blackburn, E., & Epel, E. (2017). *The telomere effect: A revolutionary approach to living younger, healthier, longer*. Grand Central Publishing.

⁵Vecchio-Camargo, C. M., Rodríguez-A., S., & Aristizabal-Díazgranados, E. (2022). Social stigma: A systematic review of cognitive insights from behavioral economics (1940–2019). *International Journal of Psychological Research*, 15(1), 98–125. <https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.5434>

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King, you'll remember that these guys are bad on their own but worse as a pack. Sometimes, social predators target individuals to hurt them.

Shallow Social (Media) Connections

Social media is often a shallower form of human connection that prompts us to share a partial picture of our lives, frequently making it look better and easier than reality. Sometimes social media creates a loneliness rebound effect: we look at other people's posts, feel a jolt of connection, and long for the real thing.⁶ Social media use can distract us from the people we're with, sometimes with serious relationship consequences.⁷ One study showed that the more we use Facebook, the worse we feel.⁸ Early research on social media suggests it can broaden connections far and wide but reduce the depth of connection with people close by.⁹

Artificial Connections and Companions

The advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has brought human-machine relationships into a new stratosphere. AI chatbots and companions feel human, in large part because they are trained using human literature, history, and biases.¹⁰ This can trick us into thinking AI is a person capable of reciprocating emotions and care. Because AI is programmed to provide information we want to hear, it can make us less tolerant of humans and more interested in simulated—and more affirming—relationships.¹¹ The research on AI and human connection is still emerging. Julia Freeland Fisher, a leading thinker in this area, believes AI may cure loneliness short term but scale isolation long term.¹² My AI chatbot "Claude" said it best, "*While AI can provide information, assistance, and even a form of engagement that might temporarily ease feelings of isolation, we cannot provide true connection. The relationship is fundamentally one-sided. I don't have personal experiences, emotions, or the capacity for genuine reciprocity that defines meaningful human relationships.*"¹³

⁶Pinker, S. (2015). *The village effect: Why face-to-face contact matters* (2nd ed.). Atlantic Books.

⁷Cacioppo, S. (2023). *Wired for love: A neuroscientist's journey through romance, loss, and the essence of human connection*. Flatiron Books.

⁸Shakya, H. B., & Christakis, N. A. (2017, April 10). A new, more rigorous study confirms: The more you use Facebook, the worse you feel. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-new-more-rigorous-study-confirms-the-more-you-use-facebook-the-worse-you-feel>

⁹Pinker, S. (2015). *The village effect: Why face-to-face contact matters* (2nd ed.). Atlantic Books.

¹⁰Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Penguin Random House.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Freeland Fisher, Julia (Director of Education Research, Christensen Institute). Video interview by author. August 21, 2025.

¹³This quote is pulled from an exchange that I describe in Chapter 2, "Find Safe Harbors."