



## ARTS & CULTURE

# Are America's Communities Disappearing?

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“Won’t you be my neighbor?” is a famous song from *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, a popular children’s television show.

The show, broadcast for 31 years ending in 2001, sought to teach American children the importance of kindness and understanding towards others. The idea was that strong communities need strong relationships between the people in them.

But fewer and fewer Americans seem to know their neighbors and that may be **eroding** America’s communities.

Marc Dunkelman wrote a book called “The Vanishing Neighbor.” In it, he examined how American communities have changed over time.

Dunkelman said most Americans have three levels of relationships: The inner circle includes family and close friends. The middle circle is more **casual** relationships. People in this circle include neighbors and people in community groups. The outer circle includes people who live far away but share a common interest. Today, people in outer circles are easily found through social media and other forms of technology.

In his book, Dunkelman argued that people spend most of their time and attention on the inner and outer circles. But, he said the middle-circle is necessary to strengthening local communities. Relationships with neighbors are important for debate, hearing different ideas and finding compromise.

Brad Birzer is a professor of history at Hillsdale College in Michigan. He said Americans are now more connected with national communities than with local communities.

“We used to think of the community good as a local thing, and now we tend to think of it as the whole country,” he said.

Americans used to have more middle-circle relationships. Face-to-face interaction was unavoidable without cell phones or the internet. People also felt more of an **obligation** to join community organizations.

Dunkelman argues that modern life has made middle-circle relationships less important. He said globalization, education and more women in the workforce have resulted in fewer middle-circle interactions. He said the weakening of communities has led to political **divisions** in America.

Americans now have less interaction with others who hold different political opinions. Less interaction with people who voted for the opposite party means “you begin to really be **alienated** from people who voted for the other side,” Dunkelman said.

There are some good results from this change in personal interaction, however. It has become harder for hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan to organize at the local level. Doctors and health experts all over the world have been able to collaborate to deal with the coronavirus health crisis.

However, Americans may be losing what it means to be a good neighbor, as Fred Rogers of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” taught.

Today, society’s problems like homelessness or poverty are not seen as local problems to solve, but national problems.

Doing good for a neighbor is healthy “not just for our neighbor, but for ourselves as well,” Dunkelman said. Learning how to be a good citizen can be lost, he said, “when we **defer** the problem to somebody else.”

I’m Caty Weaver.

*Dora Mekouar reported this story for Voice of America. Dan Novak adapted it for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter Jr. was the editor.*

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# Words in This Story

**erode**- *v.* to gradually destroy

**casual**- *adj.* not formal; having some interest but not a lot ; not serious

**unavoidable**- *n.* not able to be prevented or avoided

**obligation**- *n.* something that you must do because of a law, rule, promise, etc

**division**- *n.* a situation in which different groups, countries, etc., have different opinions, beliefs, or ways of life that separate them from each other

**alienate**- *v.* - to cause (someone) to feel that she or he no longer belongs in a particular group, society, etc.

**defer** -*v.* to permit someone else to decide or choose something

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