

The Hidden Costs of Social Media on Men's Mental Health:

Protecting Mental Well-Being in a Noisy World

Tedd Mitchell, MD

Professor of Medicine

President Emeritus, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

Chancellor Emeritus, Texas Tech System

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A man with grey hair and a beard is sitting on a dark couch in a dimly lit room. He is holding his right hand to his forehead, looking down with a distressed expression. The background is dark, with some blurred lights and a lamp visible on the right side.

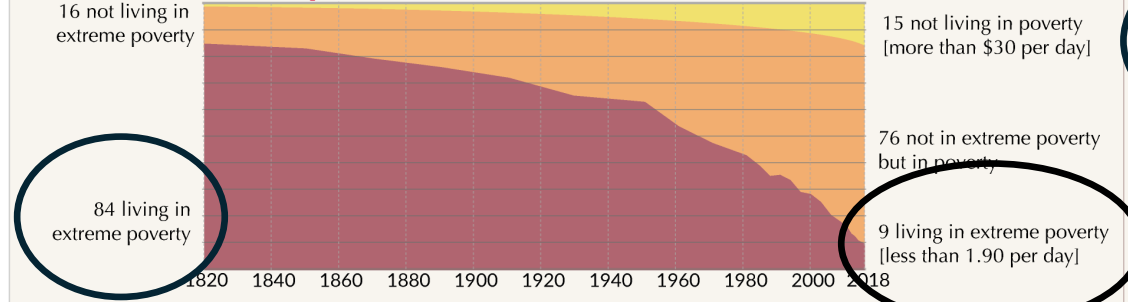
Men, Screens, and Sanity

How we protect our mental well-being in an increasingly noisy world

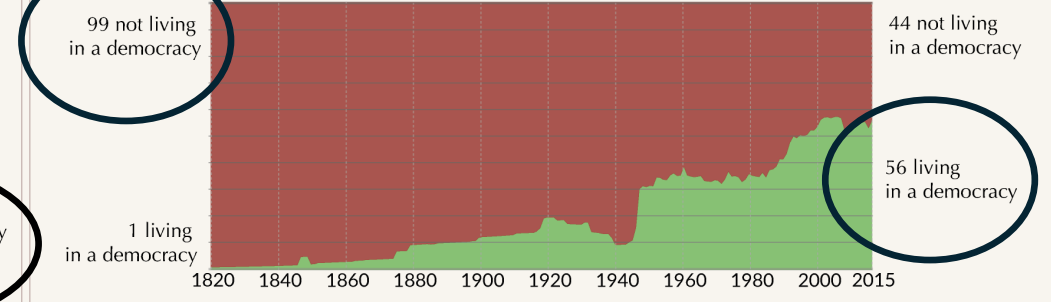
The World as 100 People over the last two centuries

Our World
in Data

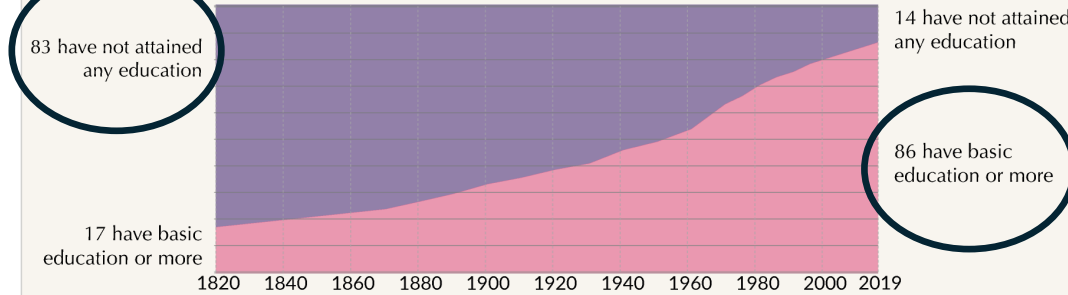
Poverty



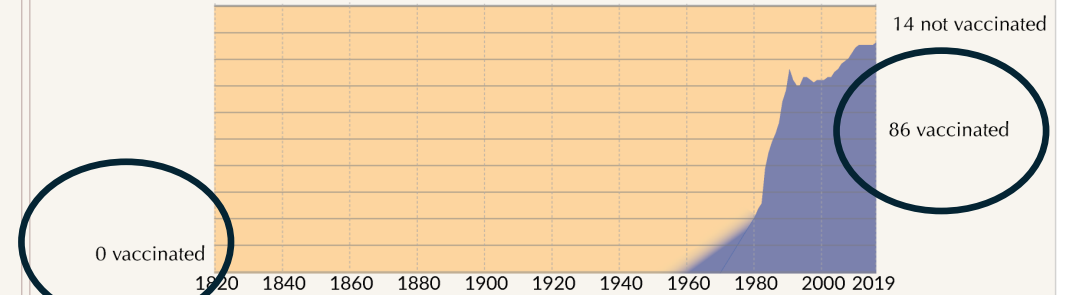
Democracy



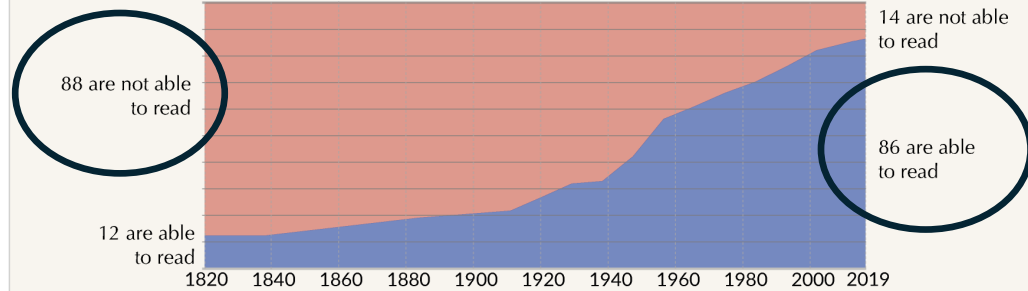
Basic Education



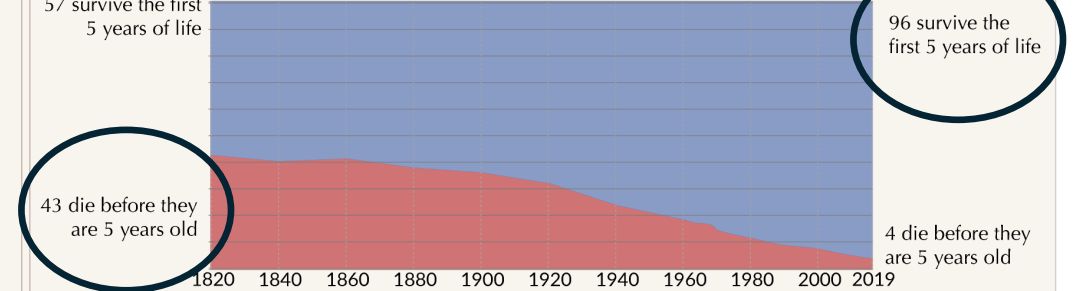
Vaccination against diphtheria, whooping cough, and tetanus



Literacy



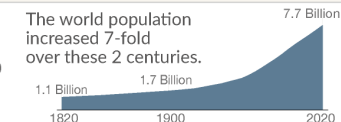
Child Mortality



Data sources:

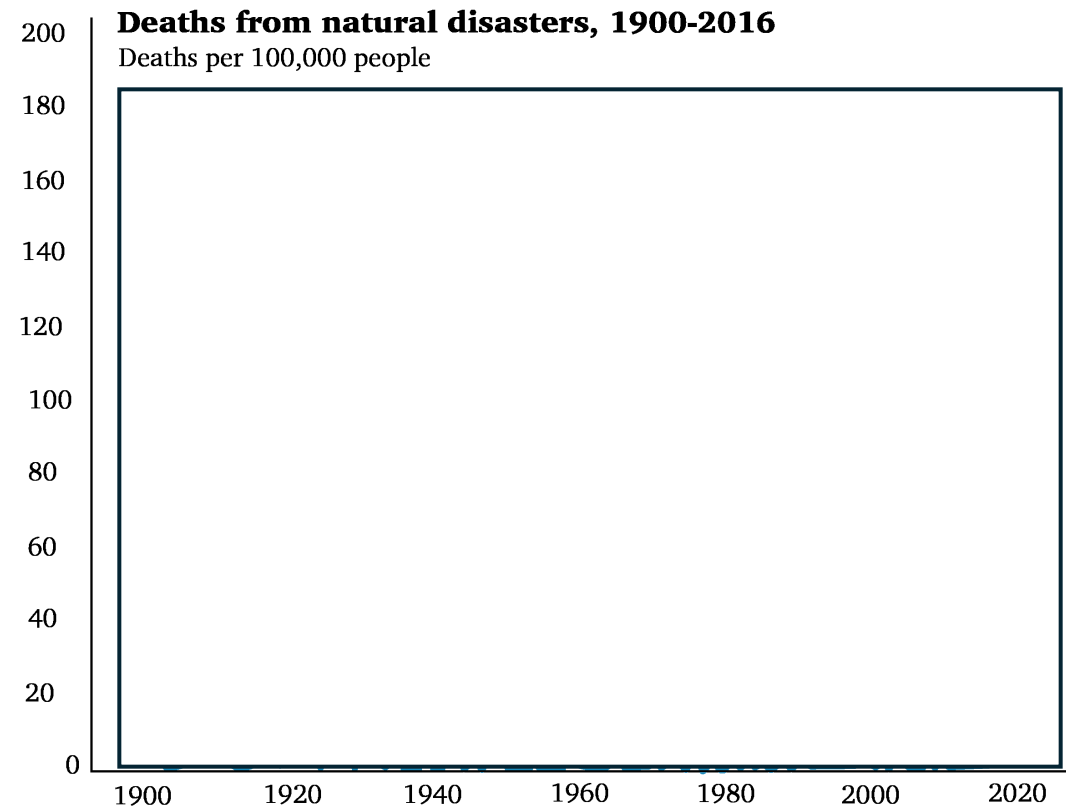
Poverty: World Bank from 1981; Bourguignon & Morrison (2002) for extreme poverty up to 1970.
[All measured in international-\$ to adjust for inflation and price differences between countries]
Education: OECD for the period 1820 to 1960. IIASA for the time thereafter.
Literacy: OECD for the period 1820 to 1990. UNESCO for 2004 and later.

Democracy: Polity IV index (own calculation of global population share)
Vaccination: WHO (Global data are available for 1980 to 2017 – the DPT3 vaccination was licenced in 1949)
[Vaccination refers to children (ages 12-23 months) in each year and not the entire population]
Child mortality: up to 1960 own calculations based on Gapminder; World Bank thereafter

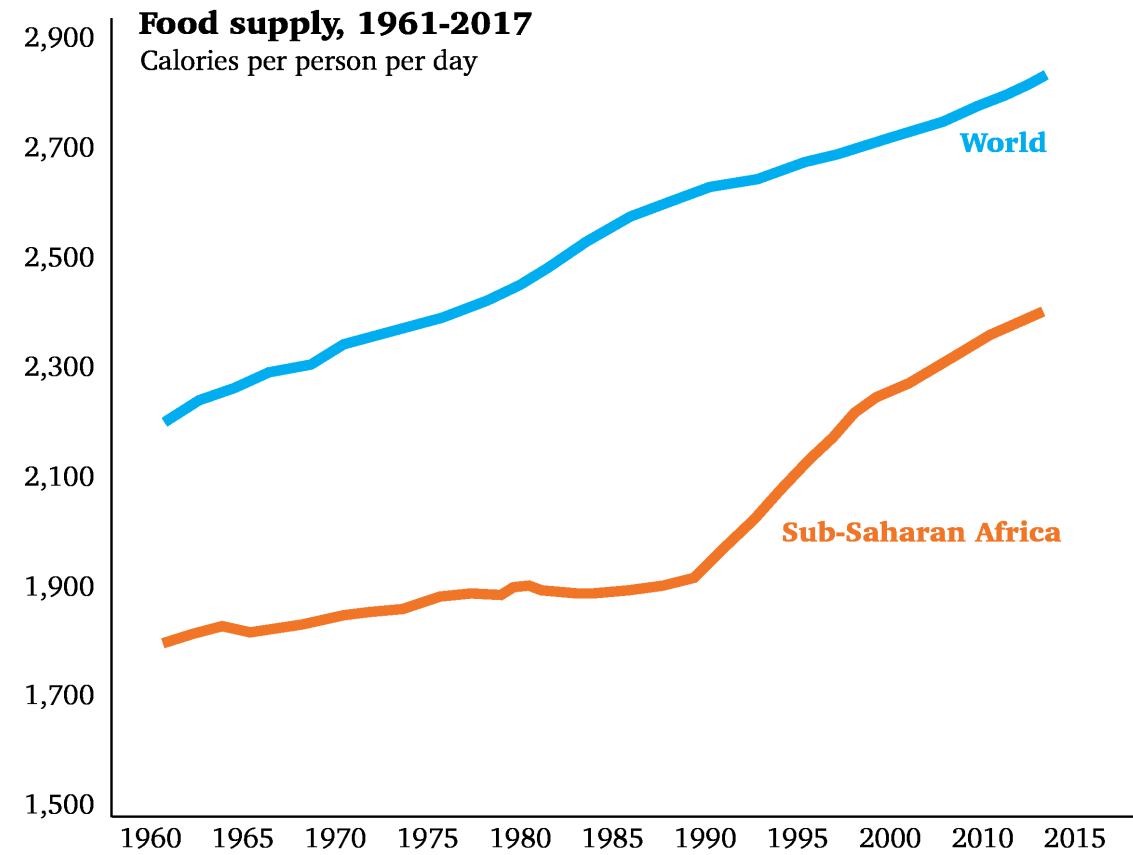


A visualization from [OurWorldInData.org](https://ourworldindata.org) – the online publication that presents the research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems.

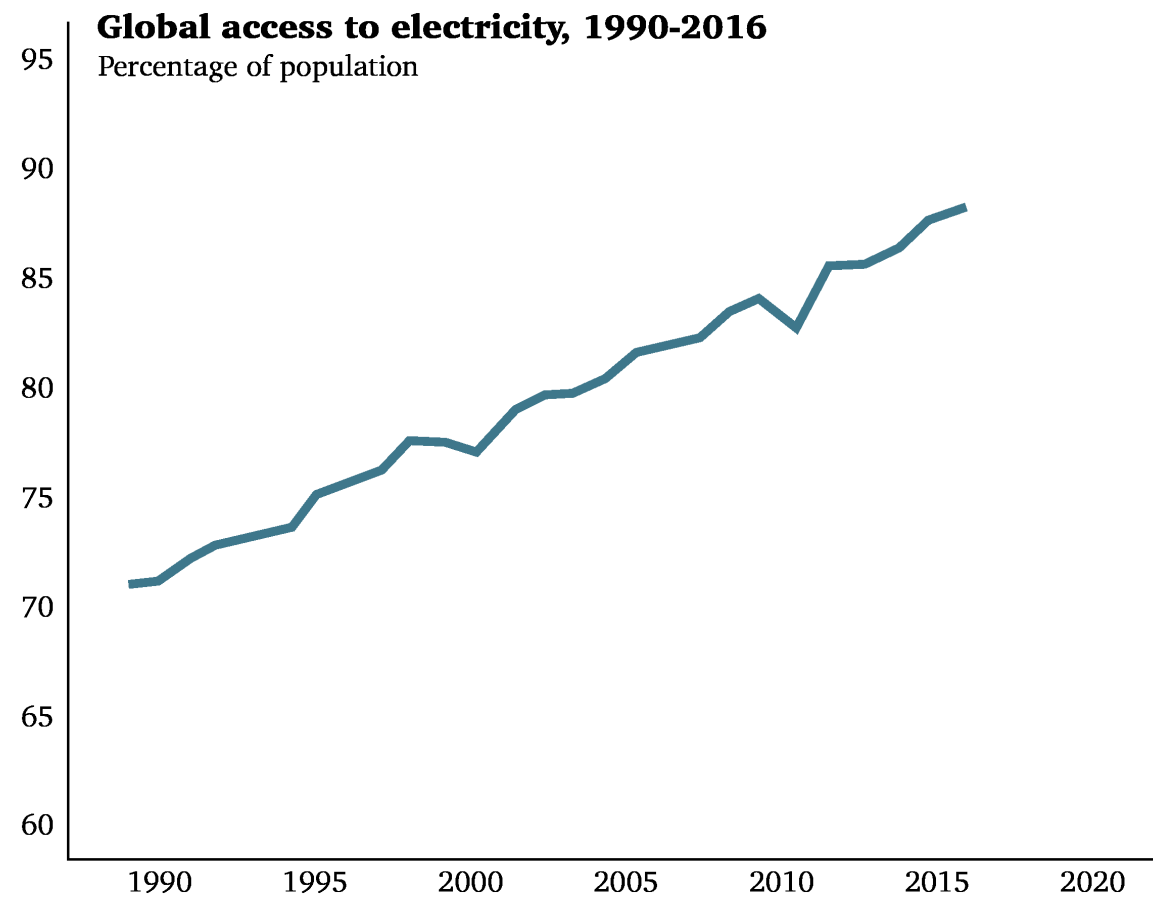
Licensed under CC-BY by the author Max Roser.



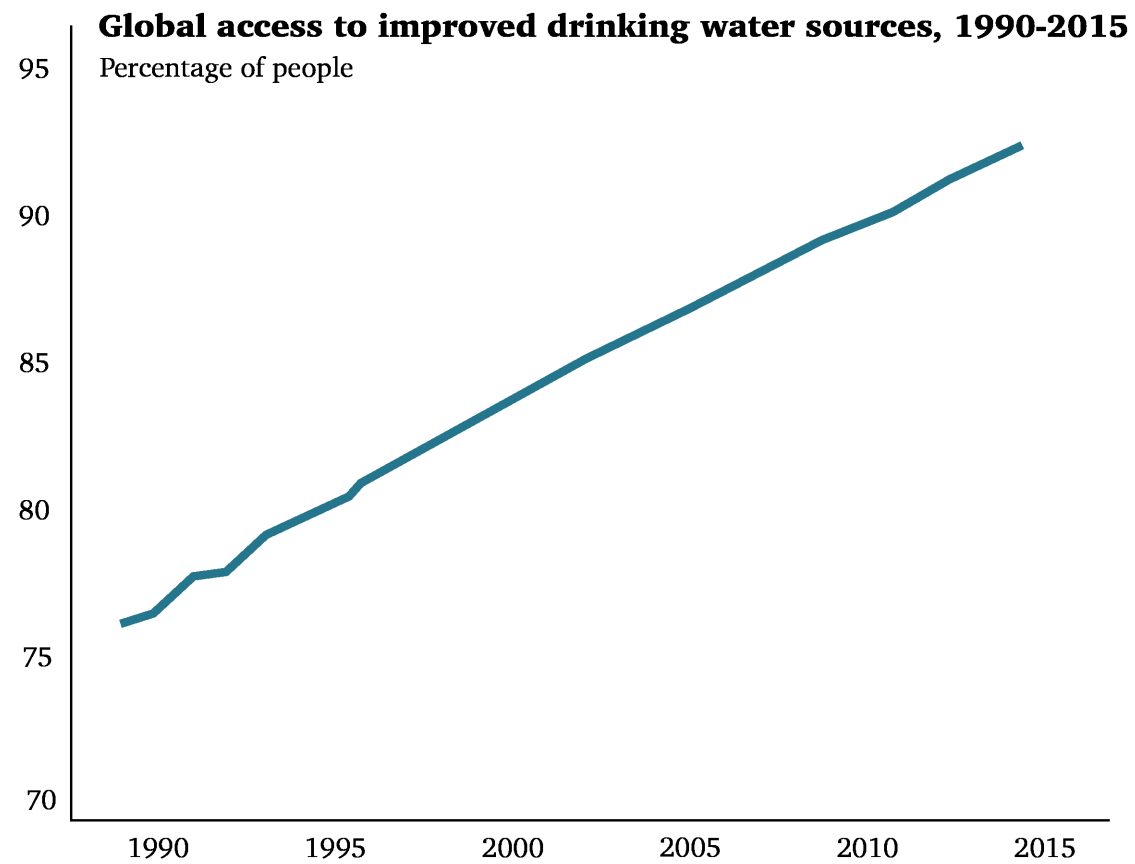
Sources: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Emergency Events Database website, 2019; and Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Poverty and Death: Disaster Mortality, 1996-2015," 2016, p. 112.



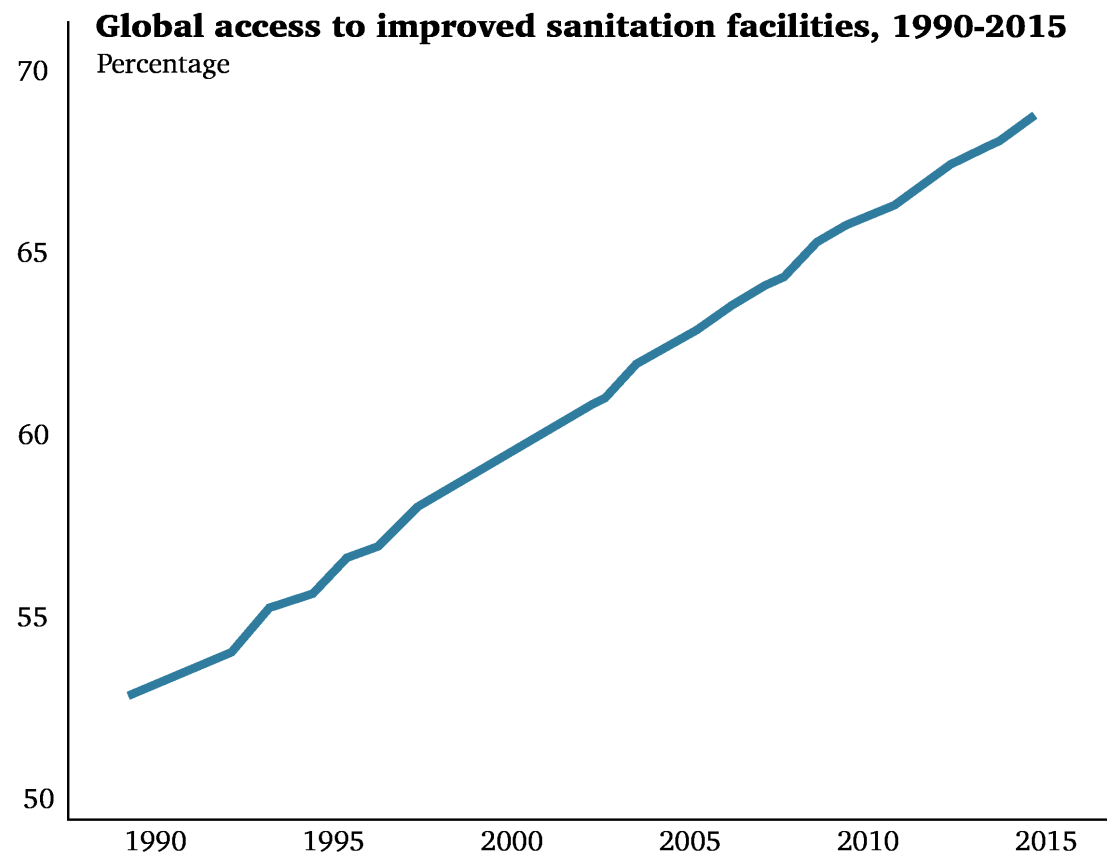
Source: FAOSTAT, Food Balance Sheets website, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, January 27, 2020.



Source: World Bank, "Access to Electricity" chart.



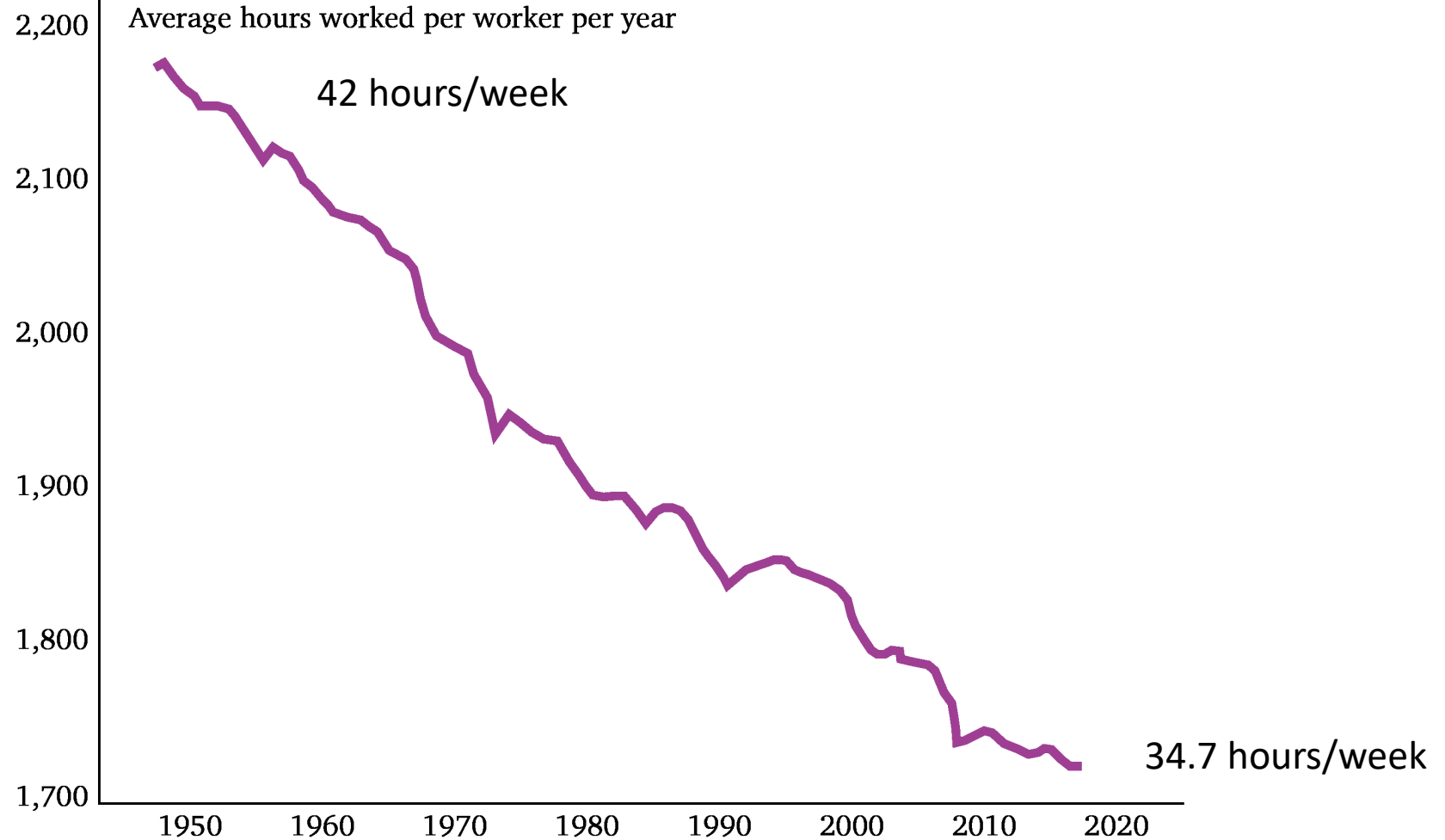
Source: United Nations Statistics Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Millennium Development Goals Indicators."



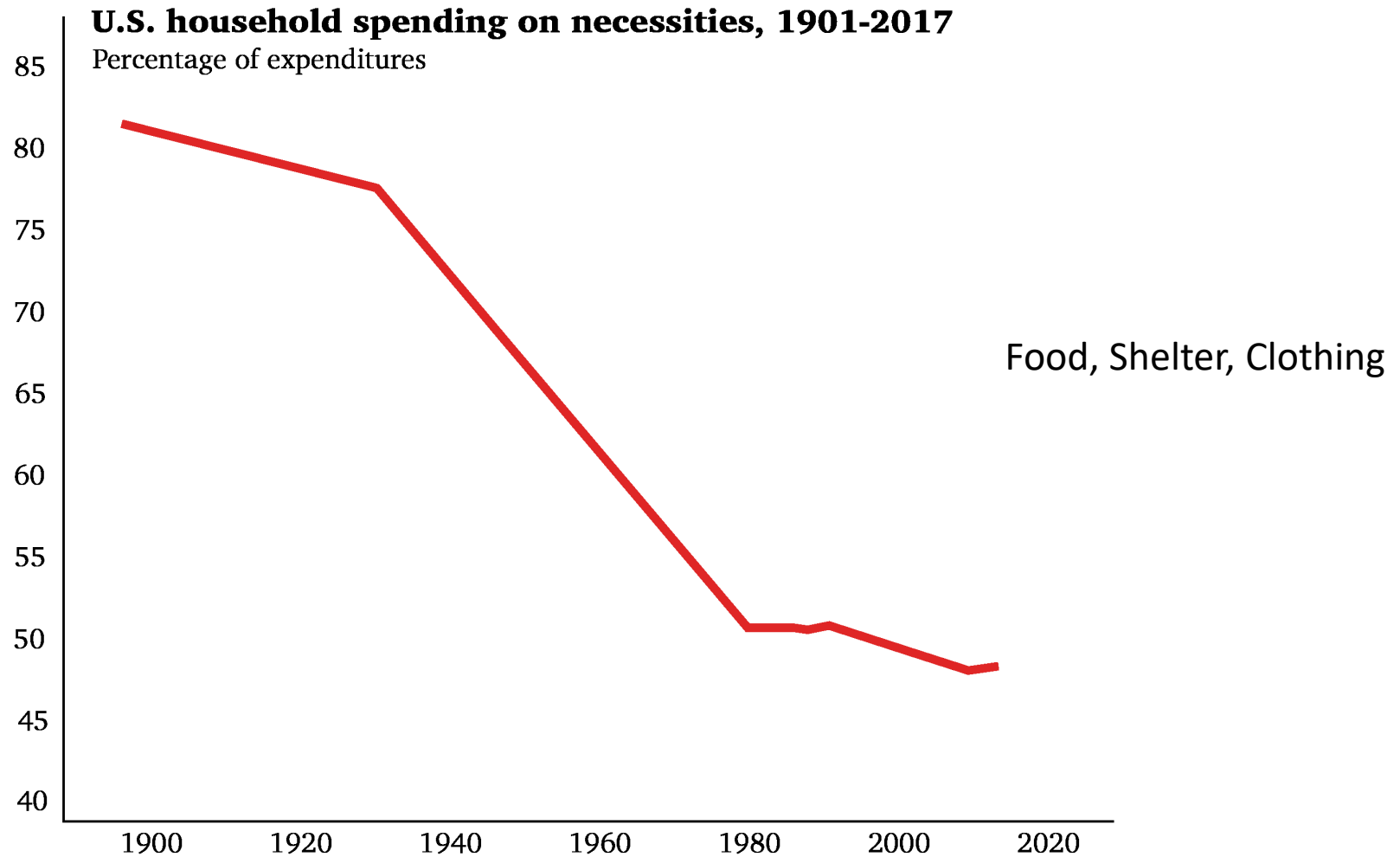
Source: United Nations, "Target 7.C: Halve, by 2015, the Proportion of People without Sustainable Access to Safe Drinking Water and Basic Sanitation," Millennium Development Goals.

Average hours worked in high -income countries, 1950-2018

Average hours worked per worker per year



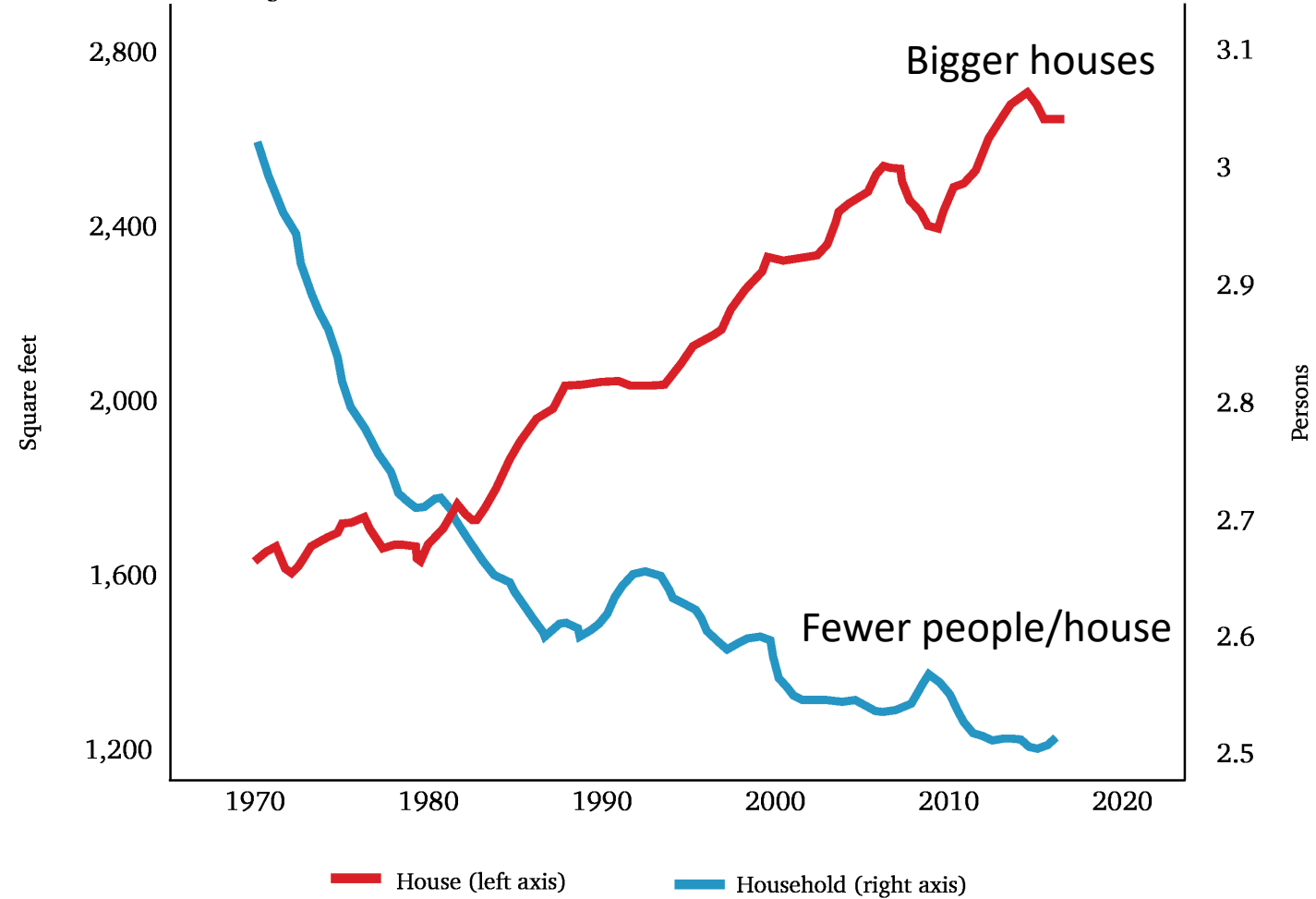
Source: Authors' calculation based on data from the Conference Board, Total Economy Database-Key Findings, April 2019.



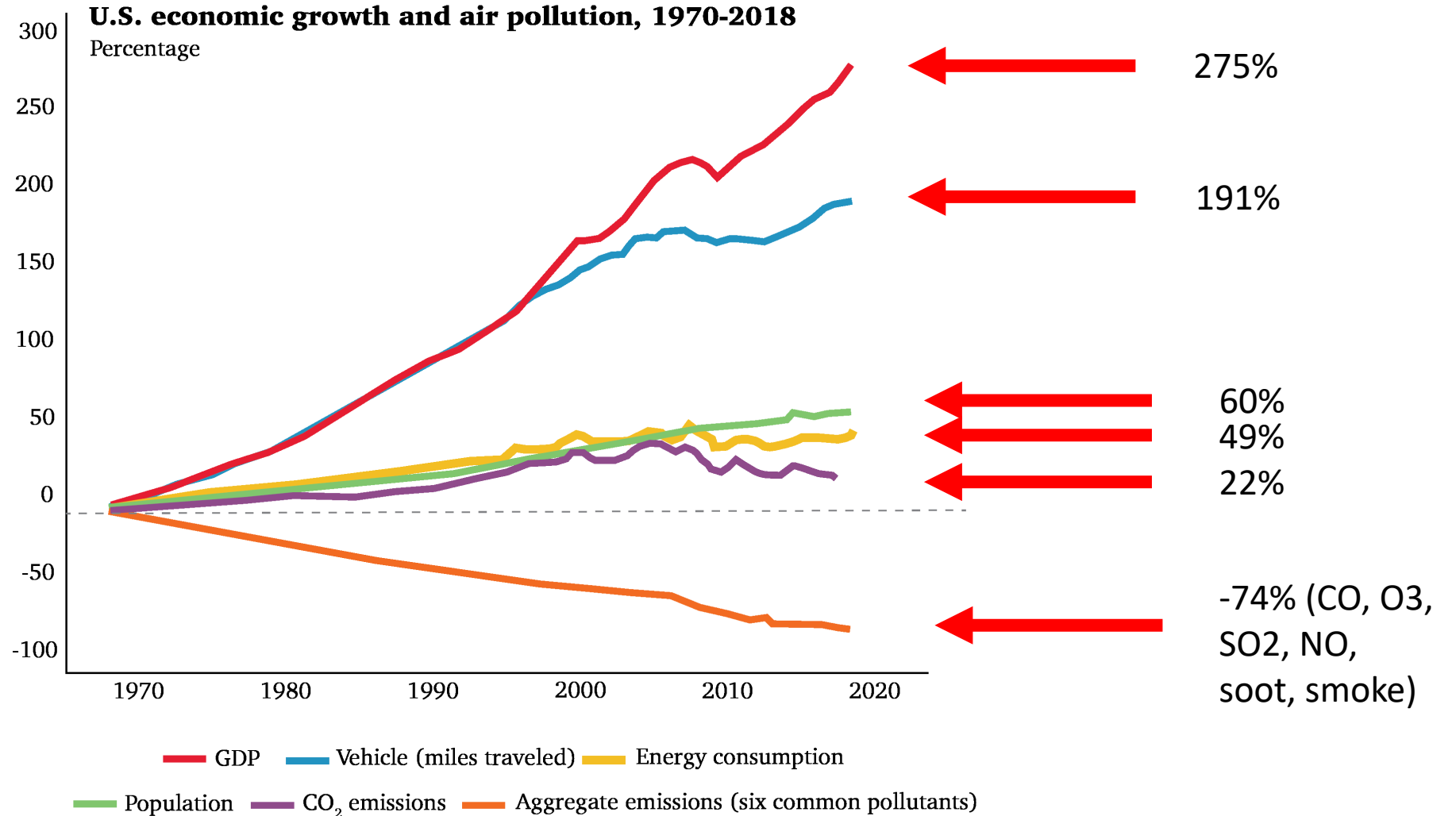
Sources: For 1901-2003 data, Elaine L. Chao and Kathleen P. Utgoff, "100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending; Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston," U.S. Department of Labor Report 991, August 3, 2006; and for 2016-2017 data, see U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Expenditures-2018," Economic News Release, September 10, 2019.

New single-family houses and households, 1973-2017

Average size



Source: Mark J. Perry, personal communication with author (Marian L. Tupy), July 2, 2018.



Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Our Nation's Air 2018* (website) "Comparison of Growth Areas and Emissions, 1970-2018."

Note: GDP=gross domestic product

A photograph of a server room. In the foreground, several server racks are visible, illuminated with a strong blue light. The background is out of focus, showing more server racks and a bokeh effect of yellow and white light spots. The text "American Free Enterprise System + Technology" is overlaid in yellow on the right side of the image.

American Free Enterprise System + Technology



74% of Americans feel country
is heading in the wrong
direction – Monmouth
University poll (May 2023)

71% NBC poll – “We have never
before seen this level of sustained
pessimism in the 30-year-plus
history of the poll” (January 2023)

Is our society on
the right track?

A TALE OF TWO EXPERIENCES

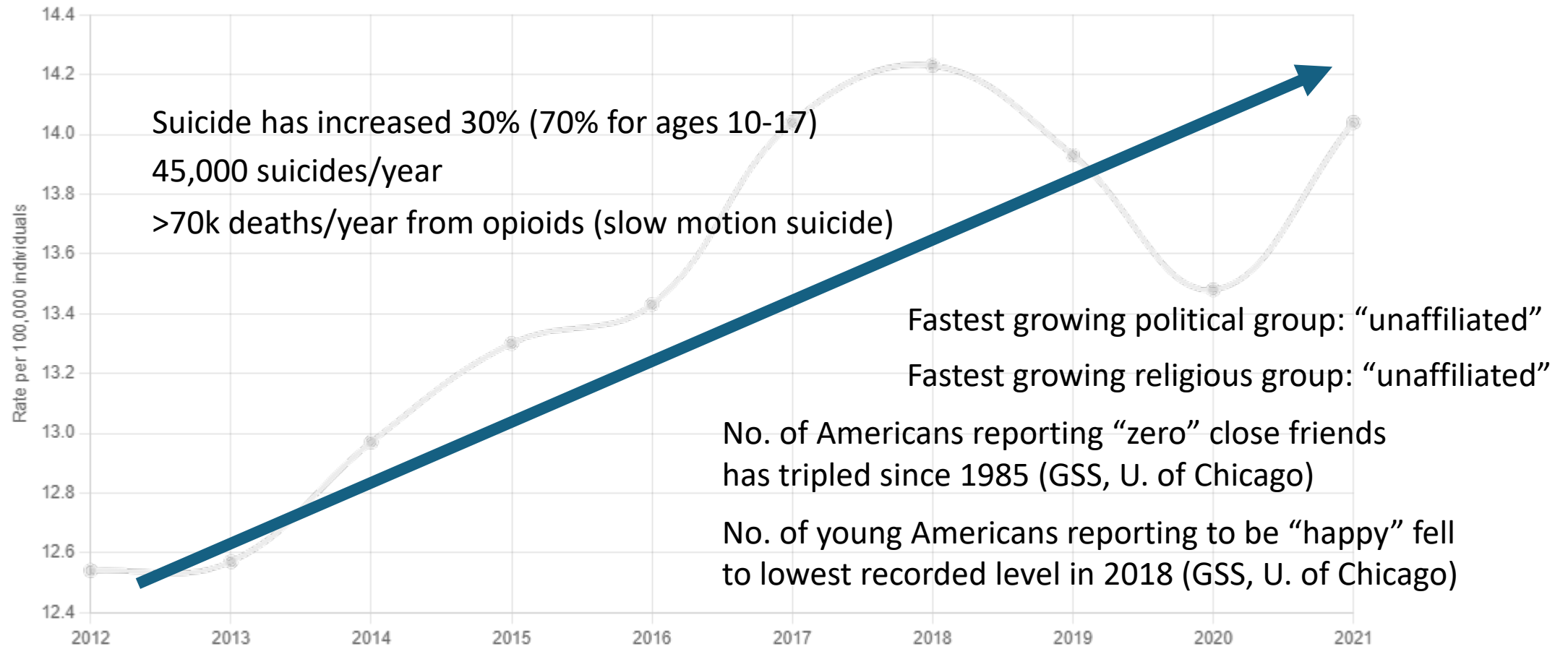
Reality

Perception

*The conditions of life have improved.
Our experience of life has not kept pace.*

How can life be getting better while it feels as though everything is getting worse?





Suicide Rates in the United States

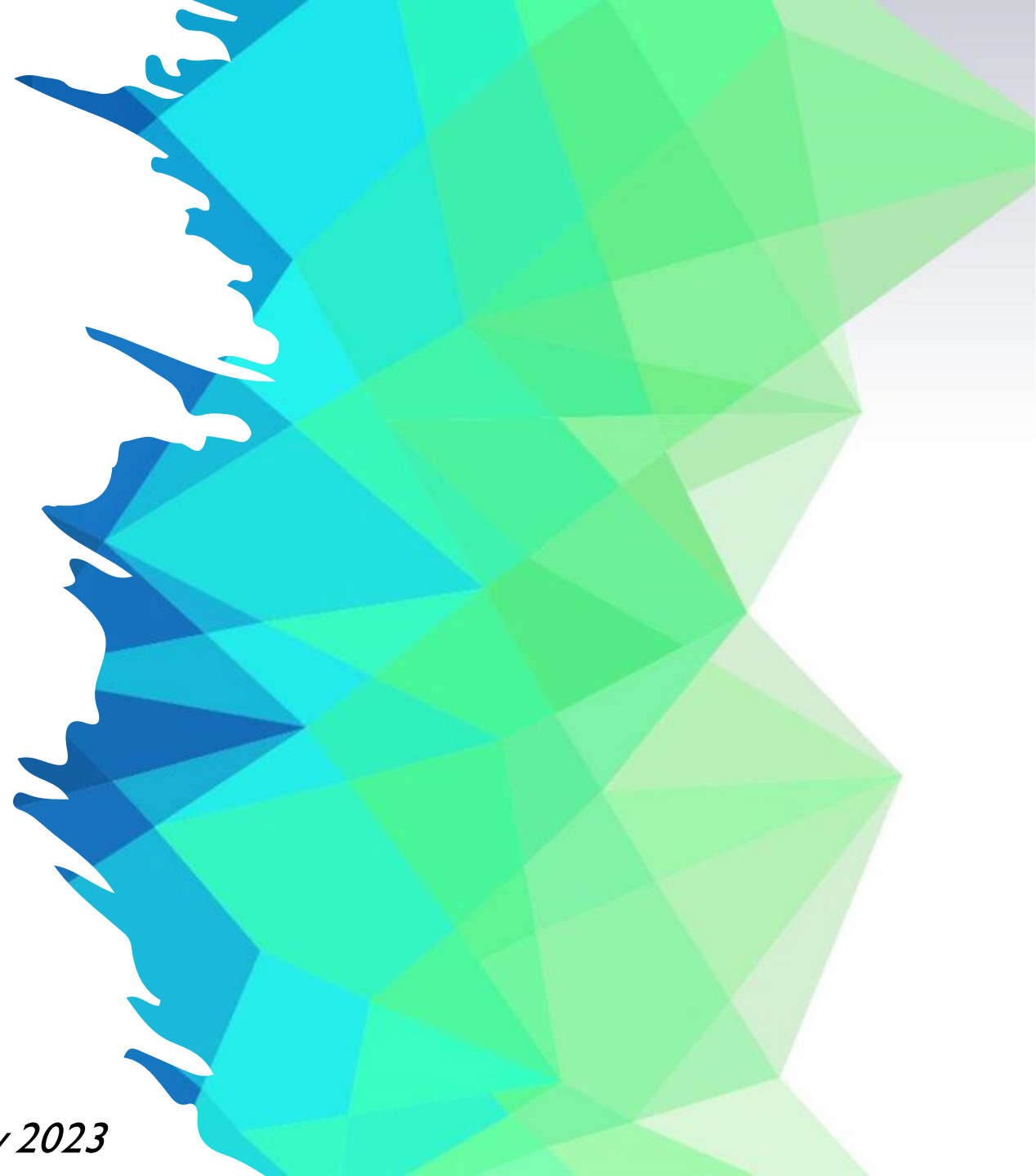
Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention





The Tik-Tok Challenge

- > 1 billion users (surpassing Google as most popular global website)
- Two-thirds of American teenagers use Tik-Tok



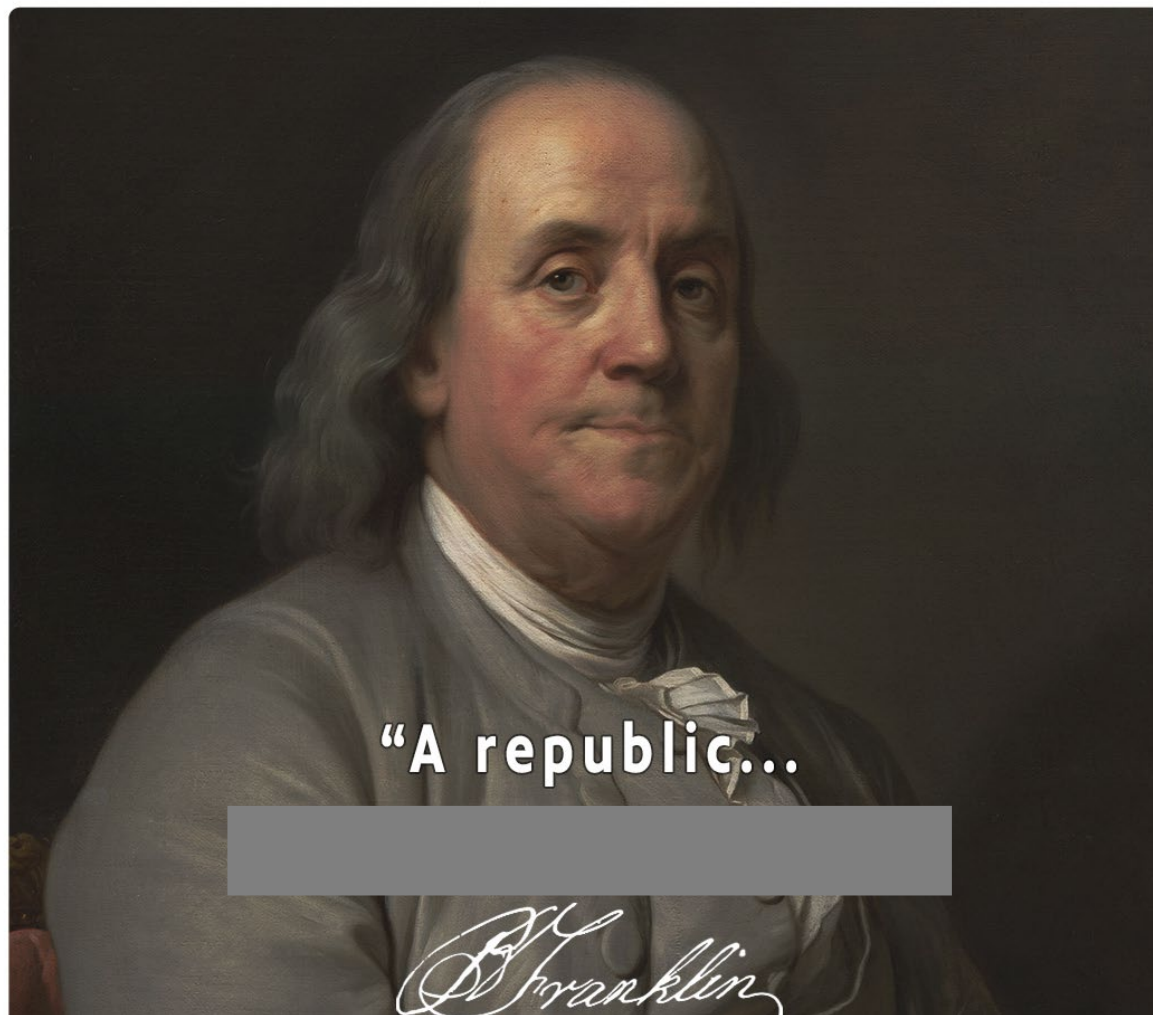
Source: Reboot – Elevating Critical Thinking; survey; May 2023

Influence of Social Media on America's youth

	Give up right to vote	Give up social media
Total	61%	38%
13-17	 64%	36%
18-24	 59%	40%

Source: Reboot – Elevating Critical Thinking; survey; May 2023

“What kind of government
have you given us?”



Dystopian Societies in Literature

1984 (1948)

What George Orwell feared:

- “Big Brother” (government) rules the people – an *externally* imposed oppression
- Books banned
- Government deprives us of information
- The truth is concealed from us
- We become a captive culture
- People controlled by torture
- That which society hates rules them
- **China**

***Brave New World* (1931)**

What Aldous Huxley feared:

- Technology destroys capacity to think – an *internally* imposed oppression
- No need to ban books – people lose interest
- So much information we become lazy/self-absorbed
- The truth is drowned in sea of irrelevance
- We become a trivial culture (Tik Tok)
- People controlled by pleasure
- That which society loves rules them
- **United States**

Cognitive Stunting

Despite more time in school; losses in:

Problem solving

Reading

Math

Memory

Attention span

Overall IQ



**Neuroscientist Dr Jared Cooney Horvath
(US Senate hearing – January 2026)**

***Gen Z'ers are first group in history to have
lower IQ than their parents***

COGNITIVE STUNTING

Heavy dependence on fast, fragmented digital experiences may leave important cognitive capacities underdeveloped.

The physical-fitness analogy

Capacities we fail to exercise may never develop as fully as they could.

COGNITIVE FITNESS REQUIRES REGULAR USE

01 Sustained attention

02 Working memory

03 Reading comprehension

04 Independent problem-solving

05 Critical thinking

06 Face-to-face social competence

The concern is displacement: screens replacing conversation, deep reading, focused effort, and independent thought.



Cognitive Stunting



Directly tied to rise of
“educational technology”

Reliance upon tablets and
computers as part of learning
process

Access to internet at home and
school

Greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ the time a
teenager is awake they are on a
screen

Findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



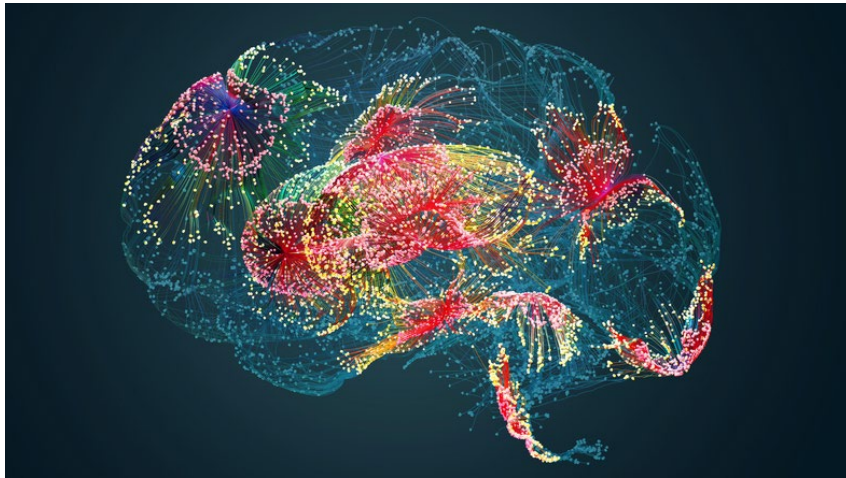
Students on computers 5 hours/day scored significantly lower than those who used no technology

When states rolled out one-to-one device programs, scores dropped quickly

Confidence became inversely proportional to intelligence

Schools now teach using video clips and platforms such as TikTok

Why the Cognitive Stunting?



Humans biologically programmed to learn from other humans (face-to-face)

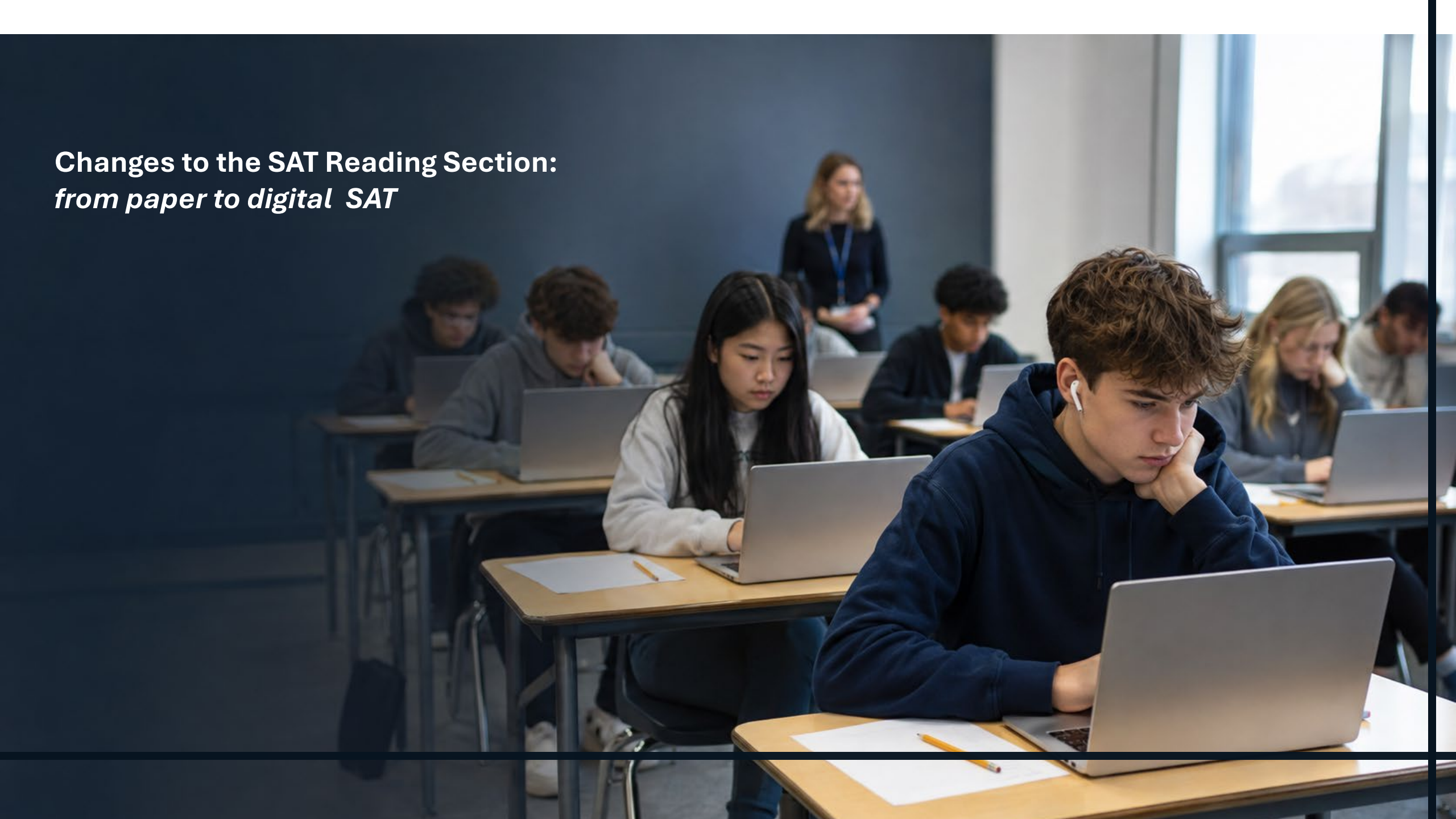
Brain needs **deep study**, not flipping through screens

Screens disrupt processes through which brain stores information and diminishes ability to focus

Problem not just in U.S. – research covered 80 countries

Source: The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 690,000 15 y/o students; 81 countries and economies; 2022.

Changes to the SAT Reading Section:
from paper to digital SAT



Overview of the Transition

- The SAT moved to a digital, adaptive format in March 2024.
- Reading passages are now much shorter than in the past.
- Each passage typically has only one associated question.

Passage Length: Old vs. New

- Old SAT: Long passages (~500–750+ words).
- New Digital SAT: Short passages (~25–150 words).
- Some passages are closer to a single long sentence or short paragraph.

Question Structure Changes

- Old SAT: Multiple inferential questions per passage.
- New SAT: One discrete question per short passage.

Key Differences at a Glance

- Passage Length: Long → Short
- Questions per Passage: Multiple → One
- Format: Paper → Digital

A photograph of a modern classroom where several students are seated at wooden desks, each with a laptop. They appear to be working or studying. In the background, a teacher or staff member is standing and observing. The room has large windows on the right side, letting in natural light. The overall atmosphere is focused and academic.

Changes to the SAT Reading Section:
from paper to digital SAT - 2024

Whom Was the Change Designed to Serve?

The College Board (the testers)

College Board Rationale

- Shorter passages allow ***greater flexibility in adaptive testing.***
- College Board states rigor is maintained despite format changes.
- Focus remains on core literacy skills.
- Neuroscientists disagree (new SAT tests for *skimming* skills, not *reading* skills)

Findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



Students on computers 5 hours/day scored significantly lower than those who used no technology

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When Confidence is High and IQ is Low



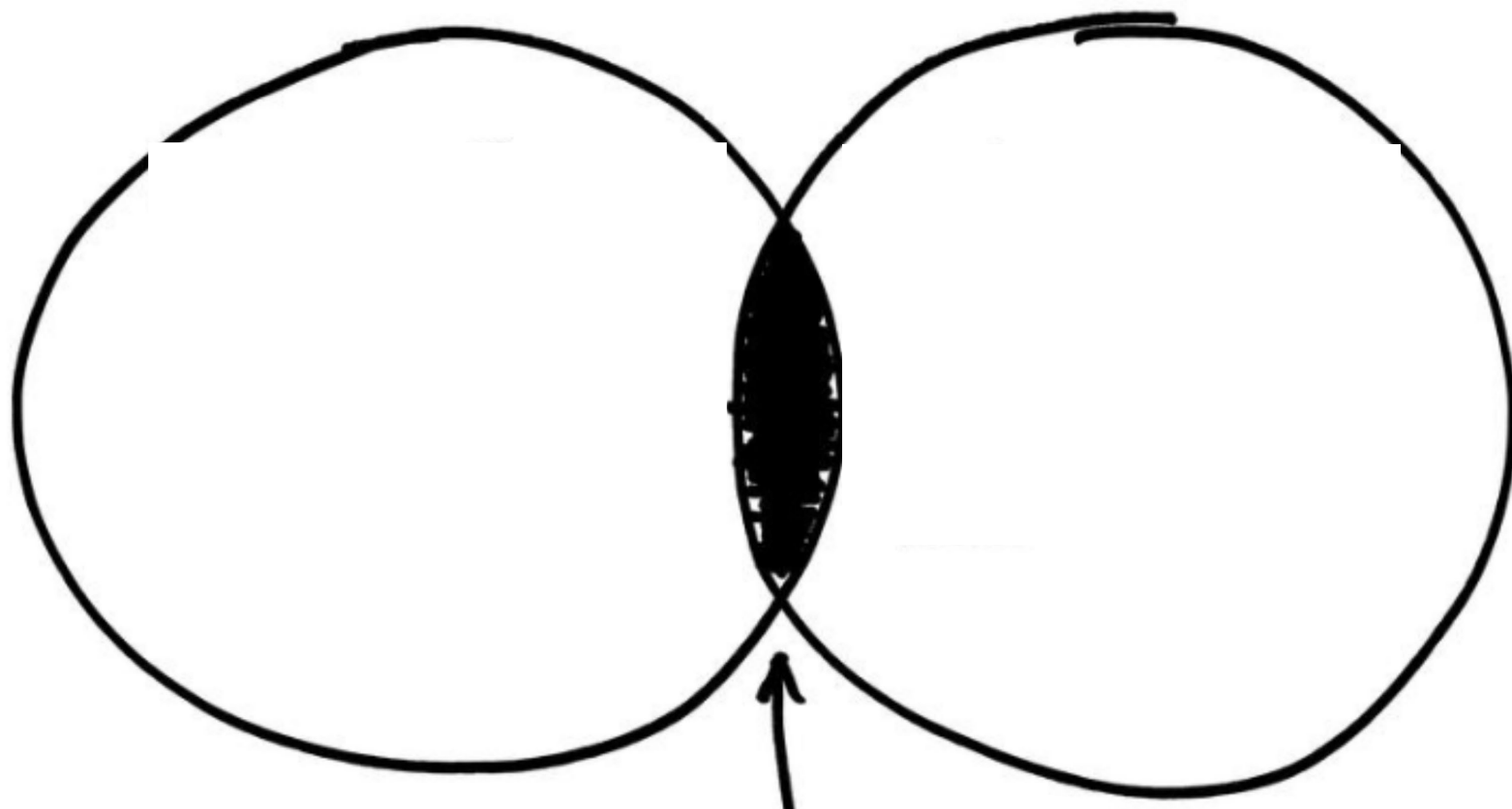
Senior Survey: Undergraduate Class of 2024

“Have you ever cheated in an academic context at Harvard?”

Yes – 47.2% (including 33% of those with a 4.0 GPA)

30% of respondents admitted to submitting work generated by AI

This is why it is important to understand the impact of technology...and why what we do with it matters.



Cognitive Stunting: How to Course Correct

More apps is not the answer

Not about poor implementation

Not about inadequate training of teachers

Technology itself is mismatched with how brains naturally work and learn

Recommend models like Scandinavia's EdTech bans





Sweden, Denmark Leading Push

Reverse classroom
digitalization

Reduce screen time in
classrooms

Ban smartphones in
classrooms

Return of books

Return of handwriting

Norway - 96% of primary
schools are mobile-free
zones

How men use technology and social media—those patterns differ according to:

- Age and generation
- Occupation and professional demands
- Marital and family status
- Career stage and retirement
- Preferred platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Venmo, gaming, and news



The Digital Landscape for Men – How We Use Screens

Professional identity through LinkedIn

News, politics, and cultural commentary

Sports and entertainment

Facebook and family connections

Gaming and online competition

THE SCALE OF DIGITAL GAMING

Hundreds of thousands of choices. Two-thirds of America.

304,000

Google Play
game listings

251,000

Apple App Store
game listings

550,000+

combined mobile game listings

Many titles appear in both stores; this is a listing count, not a count of unique games.

212.3 MILLION

Americans play video games weekly

UP 7.2 MILLION FROM 2025

67%
ages 5–90

Gaming and gambling are different behaviors. Both now occupy the same always-on device.



The Digital Landscape for Men – How We Use Screens

Professional identity through LinkedIn

News, politics, and cultural commentary

Sports and entertainment

Facebook and family connections

Gaming and online competition

Instructional videos and podcasts

Group texts and digital communities

Passive scrolling during periods of boredom, fatigue, or stress

The Genuine Benefits of Technology

Maintaining relationships across distance

Finding communities built around shared interests (TMA)

Accessing health and educational information (“Dr. Google”)

Supporting professional development (CME)

Providing entertainment and relaxation

Reducing isolation for some men

The Hidden Costs for Everyone

Attention: fragmentation, interruptions, reduced concentration, and the loss of sustained thought

Sleep: late-night use, stimulation, and the inability to disengage

Emotional regulation: increased irritability, reactivity, outrage, and anxiety

Self-perception: comparison with curated versions of other people's lives

Relationships: physical proximity without genuine presence

Loneliness: digital connection that does not always produce meaningful human connection (Claude, Grok, etc.)

Decision-making: information overload and decision fatigue

Productivity: frequent task-switching and the feeling of being busy without accomplishing what matters

Belief formation: repeated exposure to emotionally charged material that gradually shapes what we accept as true

Identity: allowing algorithms, peer groups, and online reactions to influence how men measure their worth

Why Men May Be Especially Vulnerable –

Men are reluctant to describe loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, or emotional distress directly.



INSTEAD, DISTRESS MAY PRESENT AS...

The warning signs may look ordinary until we see the pattern.

EMOTIONAL SIGNALS

Irritability

Anger

Reduced patience

BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS

Withdrawal

Excessive work

Compulsive checking

Gaming or scrolling

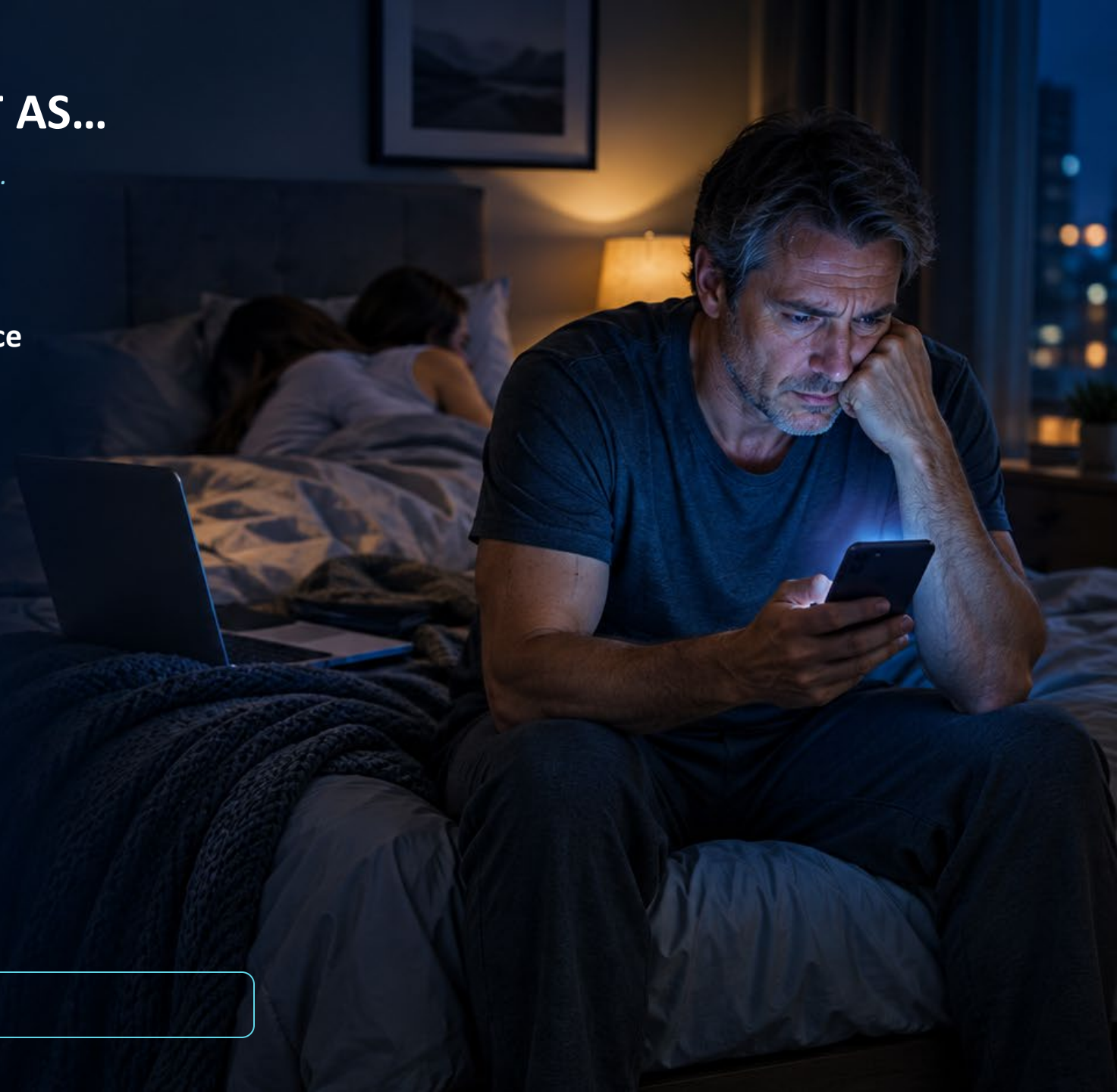
FUNCTIONAL & RELATIONAL COSTS

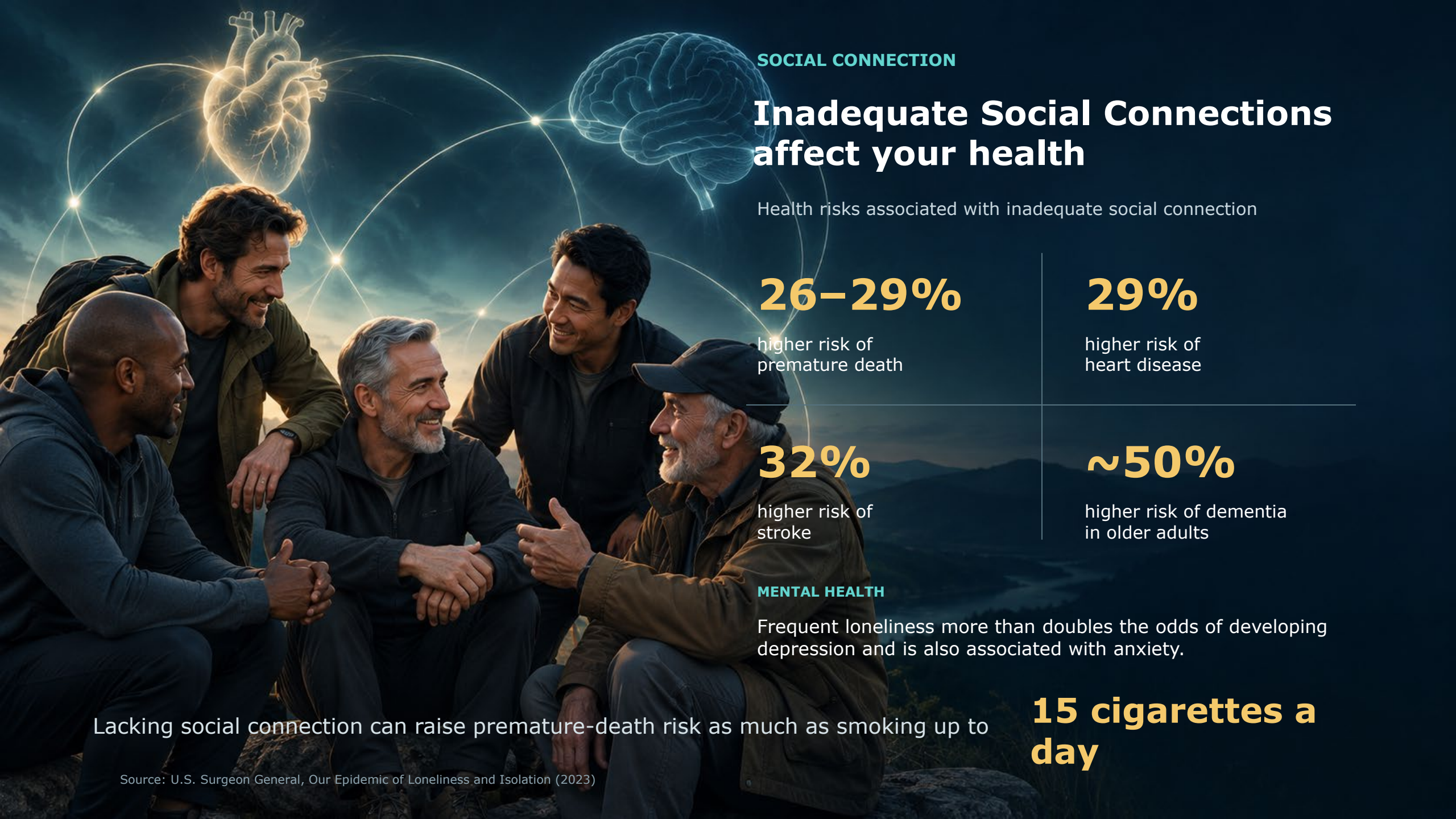
Sleep problems

Loss of concentration

Disconnection from spouses, children, and friends

Look for changes in pattern, function, and connection.





SOCIAL CONNECTION

Inadequate Social Connections affect your health

Health risks associated with inadequate social connection

26–29%

higher risk of
premature death

29%

higher risk of
heart disease

32%

higher risk of
stroke

~50%

higher risk of dementia
in older adults

MENTAL HEALTH

Frequent loneliness more than doubles the odds of developing depression and is also associated with anxiety.

Lacking social connection can raise premature-death risk as much as smoking up to

**15 cigarettes a
day**

Source: U.S. Surgeon General, Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (2023)

What digital platforms capitalize on:

Novelty

Reward anticipation

Emotional intensity

Social approval

Fear of missing out

Repetition



Practical Neuroscience Pearls



01 PROTECT YOUR ATTENTION

Make focus easier by reducing what competes for it.

1

Quiet the interruptions

Turn off unnecessary notifications.

2

Create protected space

Establish intentional screen-free periods.

3

Defend deep work

Protect time for concentrated work.

4

Bookend the day well

Avoid beginning and ending every day with a screen.



02 PROTECT YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Presence is one of the clearest ways we communicate value.

1 Remove the device

Keep phones away from meals and important conversations.

2 Choose richer contact

Replace digital contact with face-to-face conversation.

3 Offer undivided attention

Give family members the gift of your full attention.



03 PROTECT YOUR INNER LIFE

Pay attention to what technology is cultivating within you.

1

Notice the emotional residue

Identify content that repeatedly produces anger, fear, envy, or inadequacy.

2

Pause before amplifying

Evaluate information before sharing it or reacting to it.

3

Leave room for stillness

Permit periods of silence, reflection, exercise, and even boredom.

4

Use the values test

Ask whether technology supports or displaces the life you actually value.

