

# TABLE FOR ONE

AMERICANS WILL  
NEED TO MAKE SPACE  
FOR THE SOARING  
NUMBER OF THOSE  
LIVING SOLO  
by Alyson Krueger  
/ GSAS '12



WHILE RECLINING IN AN ARMCHAIR IN HIS OFFICE AT NYU, SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR ERIC KLINENBERG FLASHES A WARM SMILE AND CASUALLY ASKS ME WHERE I LIVE (A STUDIO IN THE WEST VILLAGE), HOW I FEEL ABOUT LIVING ALONE (I LOVE IT), WHY I DECIDED NOT TO GET ROOMMATES (WHY PUT UP WITH ANYONE BUT MR. PERFECT?), AND WHETHER I FEEL STIGMATIZED FOR MY SINGLE LIFESTYLE (NOT YET, BUT I'M JUST 26). IT'S A FUN CONVERSATION, BUT THEN I REMEMBER I'M THE ONE WHO IS THERE TO INTERVIEW HIM.

It's understandable that Klinenberg can't help asking these kinds of questions. Although his latest book, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (Penguin Press), came out last winter, he's still in research mode. And after more than seven years of investigation, his work is the first comprehensive study to reveal that 32 million Americans now live on their own, including one half of all adults in Manhattan and Washington, D.C. The number is even greater

just the media that has taken an interest. In July, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a competition, called adAPT NYC, to develop buildings full of "micro-units" ranging from 275–300 square feet each—an idea that city officials say was inspired by *Going Solo*. And organizations like Google have asked Klinenberg to speak to their staff about how to accommodate, or capitalize on, an ever-growing number of single households.

in Europe and Japan, and it is rapidly growing in countries with developing economies, such as China, India, and Brazil. As Klinenberg says of the findings: "It's the equivalent of being an anthropologist and discovering some giant island out there with 277 million people. It's one of the [world's] biggest social changes of the last 50 years."

But perhaps most surprising—and contrary to the "lonely cat lady" stereotype—is that Klinenberg discovered singles are, in many cases, flourishing. They're more likely to befriend their neighbors, volunteer, exercise, take art classes, attend public events, and generally take advantage of their cities. Those on their own, he adds, may be better able to connect with others because they have time for relaxation and introspection—an idea he calls "restorative solitude." Yet, while living solo can be positive for individuals, it also poses unprecedented challenges for society. Most housing and public benefits are designed for nuclear families. And as singles age, they will need more help in the way of health care or other forms of aid; of course, the poor and disadvantaged who live alone are particularly vulnerable.

Since its release, Klinenberg's work has excited a stream of high-profile attention. Bill Maher welcomed the author to his *Real Time* show on HBO in April with the introduction: "It's been declared, and I agree, an important book. That's like the biggest thing that can happen to a professor." Both David Brooks in *The New York Times* and Nathan Heller in *The New Yorker* devoted long columns to the subject. And the author himself has written follow-up pieces for the *Times'* Sunday Book Review, *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Slate*. But it's not



# KLINENBERG'S INTEREST IN THOSE WHO LIVE ALONE WAS PIQUED AFTER COMPLETING HIS DISSERTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY. THE DISSERTATION BECAME HIS FIRST BOOK, ON THE DISASTROUS CHICAGO HEAT WAVE OF 1995, WHICH KILLED 750 PEOPLE IN FIVE DAYS. IN THAT TRAGEDY, SINGLETONS WITHOUT AID

from family and friends were the most likely to die. So when embarking on *Going Solo*, he expected to find sad and helpless loners, and intended to call the book *Alone in America*. But after 300 interviews in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, and Stockholm, and after extensively reviewing secondary literature from England, France, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Brazil, he discovered that most singles were, unexpectedly, empowered. In the book, we meet thirtysomethings who refuse—despite pressure from family and friends—to marry for the sake of marrying; recovering drug addicts who live alone so they won't fall in with bad crowds; divorcees who blossom in their new independence; and elders intent on maintaining their autonomy. As Heller remarked in *The New Yorker*, “Klinenberg’s research suggests that our usual perceptions about life alone [are] backward. Far from being a mark of social abandonment, the solo life tends to be a path for moving ahead, for taking control of one’s circumstance.”

It’s no wonder that after reading *Going Solo*, many singles who previously felt stigmatized started feeling better about their circum-

stances. Maher, a notorious singleton, raised his arms to Klinenberg on *Real Time*, saying, “I feel vindicated. All those years I thought I was the champion of the single people, they made it sound like I was getting boy sex in Bangkok.” At a book reading, a woman approached Klinenberg to tell him that she used to look around the subway thinking everyone was going home to someone else but her. “When I read the book,” she told him, “I realized that what was happening to me was totally normal.” Another woman who attended a conservative Christian church read the book and promptly wrote her pastor to say that he was ignoring singles by preaching solely about traditional family values.

For non-singles, the book also sheds light on the value of alternative experiences, according to Kate Bolick, author of an epic *Atlantic* cover story last November titled “All the Single Ladies,” which garnered more than 2,250 comments. “Even though these changes have been under way for the past 40 years, we still walk around presuming that there is one ‘normal’ and ‘ideal’ way to live—married, with kids,” Bolick says. “The more good writing there is that exposes and analyzes the way we *actually* live as opposed to how we think we *ought* to live is crucial.”

The notion also underscores the universal value and appeal of having time to oneself. When Klinenberg, who does not live alone, drops his two children off at school, he is often approached by parents who gush about their single years. His wife even calls *Going Solo* his “fantasy book” because it let him reminisce about his days as a bachelor. “When you spend your life running around the world talking about the virtues of living alone, you better come home with a very nice gift for your wife,” Klinenberg recommends, only half-joking.

But not everyone is so positive. There are some who believe Klinenberg’s research masks the fact that many singletons are sad, lonely, and insecure. Linda Waite, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, says the book “seems to suggest that all people living alone are happy as clams. And they probably are, because many of them are young and single and expecting to find a partner, perhaps marry, and live in a family. I didn’t see any evidence that people who live alone for their whole lives—or most of it—are happy.” She points to a study recently published in the *Population and Development Review*, which shows that in Norway, both men and women who never

**ERIC KLINENBERG (ABOVE RIGHT) DISCUSSED *GOING SOLO* ON *REAL TIME* WITH INFAMOUS SINGLETON BILL MAHER. ABOVE LEFT: A FLOOR MODEL OF A MICRO-UNIT APARTMENT PROPOSED IN MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG’S *adAPT* NYC COMPETITION, WHICH WAS INSPIRED BY THE BOOK.**

either short- or long-term single living—either by choice or circumstance—and Klinenberg argues that that must be considered as governments, communities, or individuals plan for the future. “Today our species has about 200,000 years of experience with collective living, and only about 50 or 60 years with our experiment in going solo on a massive scale,” he writes. “In this brief time, we’ve yet to develop any serious public responses to the challenges related to living alone.”

married had substantially higher mortality rates because they don’t have the “steadying effect” or “motivation for a better lifestyle” that a family offers.

Klinenberg acknowledges that most people *do* want to get married and enjoy some version of family life. But statistics show that, at some point, a substantial portion of Americans will experience



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# PERHAPS THE FOREMOST ISSUE FOR SINGLES IS THE LACK OF APPROPRIATE HOUSING. WHILE MOST COMMUNITIES OFFER

spaces for nuclear families, what singles need are compact residential units. Access to good public transit and proximity to shops, parks, restaurants, bars, and cafés are also important because singles, by definition, must seek out social opportunities. Klinenberg points to Sweden, where the government has constructed a series of “singles” buildings in which individuals have their own living space but share common areas, such as kitchens, gyms, libraries, and party rooms. In some towers, they have a rotation system where residents take turns cooking or cleaning for the group. If it sounds like camp or college for adults, that’s basically what it is. And the model works—all of the buildings are now wait-list only.

New York City is especially in need of this type of housing. There are currently some 1.8 million one-person or two-person households



in the city, but only one million studios and one-bedroom apartments, according to the mayor’s office. Klinenberg has been working with the New York City Department of City Planning to help tackle this discrepancy, which is becoming more urgent as the singles numbers continue to rise. One building that has already addressed the trend is MiMA, a luxury residence in Midtown Manhattan where almost 80 percent of the 814 rental apartments are studios or one-bedrooms. With amenities such as an in-house basketball court, restaurant, community lawn, screening room, tanning deck, bar, and dog spa, it’s no surprise that nearly 90 percent of the apartments were rented in the first six months. But the \$3,595 monthly rent for just a studio makes this

singles paradise well beyond the average person’s budget. There are a few more affordable options out there. Rosanne Haggerty, a PhD candidate in sociology at NYU and president of Community Solutions, a nonprofit organization with the mission to create practical homes for disadvantaged singles, has been working on this issue for almost two decades. In 1994, she helped to convert the dilapidated Times Square Hotel into a community-oriented, single-room-occupancy residence for the formerly homeless and others on limited incomes (aspiring artists, etc). The building, on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 43rd Street, offers a garden roof deck, art studio, medical clinic, and gym, as well as in-house counseling and career services. It was such a success—the project reduced homelessness by 87 percent in the hotel’s 20-block neighborhood in just two years—that she received funding to renovate more buildings and formed partnerships with organizations across the country to help them do the same. “People aren’t necessarily seeing being alone as bad,” Haggerty says, “but they do want the option of being with others. They want to be in an environment where they feel connected.”

Reimagining housing is just the start. There are numerous social, professional, and political inequalities still embedded in an American tradition that values—and rewards—those who are married, with children. *Going Solo* discusses the need for changes to the Family and Medical Leave Act, which states that one may only take time off work to care for relatives, putting singles who rely on close friends at a disadvantage. It also champions the Alternatives to Marriage Project, which fights for changes to adoption, health care, and income tax systems that all favor married couples.

LAST YEAR, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE CONDOLEEZZA RICE WAS REPEATEDLY QUESTIONED ABOUT HER SINGLE LIFESTYLE IN A TV INTERVIEW WITH PIERS MORGAN.

One of the most effective advocates for these issues is social psychologist Bella DePaulo, a visiting professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. When a politician or public figure attacks singledom as bad for society (which happens a lot, she says),

DePaulo is quick to write an op-ed in response or post a rebuke in her “Living Single” column in *Psychology Today*. In January 2011, she ridiculed Piers Morgan for an interview in which he repeatedly questioned Condoleezza Rice about why she’s not married, even asking whether she would rather be the first female president or married to a “hunky NFL player.” DePaulo wrote it could simply be that “Condoleezza Rice loves her single life. Maybe someday, in some interview, someone can pose *that* as a possibility.” DePaulo believes *Going Solo* has helped make this case. “What you cannot do, if you really do read the entire book,” she says, “is come away with anything but a deep and complex understanding of what it means to live alone.”

Klinenberg knows that his book has just started the conversation on how we live today and how we may live tomorrow. But it’s a conversation he believes we all need to be a part of. “The truth is that no one really knows how they will be living in three or five or 10 or 50 years,” he says. “The odds are that most Americans will spend some of their adult lives living alone, and not just in a fleeting stage. I think that is something we need to reckon with.” ■

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