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More people live alone in nation built for families

By Erica Pandey, Axios

The overall share of people living alone in the U.S. has been inching up, per the U.S. Census.

Why it matters: Living alone can be tough in a country built for families. And it can have consequences for mental and physical health — especially among older Americans.

What's happening: Several social and demographic trends are converging to increase isolation.

Over the last 50 years, the marriage rate in the U.S. has dropped by nearly 60%, and many people are also delaying marriage into their late 30s, early 40s or beyond. That means more people in their 20s and 30s are living alone.

Among adults 60 and older, kinlessness is on the rise, and that trend will likely continue for younger generations as more people opt not to start families.

Zoom out: Although more people are living alone, cities and towns are still primarily set up for families.

Housing is becoming more expensive in cities, where many younger single people might like to live to find community, CNN reports.

And housing in more suburban areas is usually parceled into homes built for a family of four.

The stakes: Living alone may have more dire consequences for older adults.

Research shows that older adults who are isolated face a greater risk of mortality — whether that's because no one is around to help in case of an accident or a fall, or because the loneliness can prompt depression, anxiety and even accelerate cognitive decline.

Reality check: Living alone and being lonely are not the same thing, says Eric Kim, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia.

Many people can live socially fulfilling, happy lives alone — and do so by choice.

Still, the rise of living solo is a social change that is likely to continue, especially among older adults — the population that faces the most risk while living alone.