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NWMO**

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NEWS

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Social Connection Emerging as Critical Quality of Life Issue in Northwest Missouri

ST. JOSEPH, Mo., December 16, 2025 — Northwest Missouri residents are facing a growing challenge that affects health, economic success, and overall well-being: declining social connection and sense of belonging. As part of an ongoing focus on the seven core aspects of community quality of life, Maximize NWMO has reviewed the most current data related to social connection, loneliness, and civic engagement. The findings point to the importance of strengthening everyday relationships across the region's 18 counties.

Social connection includes the relationships and interactions that help people feel supported, valued, and engaged in their communities. Recent research shows increasing levels of isolation, fewer close friendships, and declining participation in civic and volunteer organizations nationwide. These trends raise particular concern in rural areas, where geographic distance, transportation barriers, and the loss or absence of traditional gathering places—such as churches, libraries, community buildings, and restaurants—can limit opportunities to connect.

Data reviewed highlights several key patterns:

- Rising loneliness nationwide, with unique barriers in rural communities
- Declining participation in civic, faith-based, and volunteer organizations
- Increased physical and mental health risks linked to prolonged isolation
- Stronger workplace success tied to higher levels of belonging
- Greater resilience and local pride in communities with stronger social ties

"Strong communities don't happen by accident," said Kristie Arthur, Workforce Development Director at the St. Joseph Chamber of Commerce. "They are built through meaningful interactions between neighbors, families, local organizations, and employers."

Northwest Missouri has many strengths to build upon. The region's violent crime rate is significantly lower than state and national averages, and it has a higher rate of social associations per capita than Missouri overall. However, that number has steadily declined in recent years while state and national rates have remained more stable. The 6.2% drop in population numbers over the past 14 years is partially responsible, but not the whole story.

"We've been losing population for over a century, yet we have outstanding social and civic groups," said Christel Gollnick, Director of Maximize NWMO. "Looking beyond the number of groups to the

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quality of member experience and outcomes helps explain why engagement is challenging. Declining participation affects other quality of life measures—from health risks and academic performance to stress and unemployment.”

Lower social connection is also linked to reduced civic participation. While some counties exceed 70% voter turnout, others see less than half of eligible voters participating. Across the region, voter participation averages 61.3%, nearly three percent below the state average.

Community leaders emphasize that rebuilding connection does not require large programs. “Attending a local event, checking on a neighbor, or inviting someone new to participate can make a real difference,” said Jackie Spainhower, Community Development Specialist with MU Extension.

Steve Wenger, Maximize NWMO Navigation Team member, added, “If we want the region to remain thriving, we must understand why people choose to live, learn, work, play, and stay here—especially younger generations.”

Social connection is one of seven core quality of life aspects guiding Maximize NWMO’s work. A full data analysis and resources are posted at [maximizenwmo.org/our-quality-of-life](https://www.maximizenwmo.org/our-quality-of-life).

Maximize NWMO serves the region by providing administrative, communications, data access, and coaching support on systems-thinking and community wealth building for individuals, communities and the region. The initiative’s Navigation Team supports leaders and communities who want to *dream big, decide wisely, and maximize our region’s potential by growing together*. Maximize NWMO is the regional vitality initiative of The Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri, primarily serving the 18 counties of Andrew, Atchison, Buchanan, Caldwell, Clinton, Daviess, Dekalb, Gentry, Grundy, Harrison, Holt, Linn, Livingston, Mercer, Nodaway, Putnam, Sullivan, and Worth. It has been made possible over the last decade through partnerships with Communities of Resilience & Excellence (formerly Communities of Excellence 2026), Patterson Family Foundation, the United States Department of Agriculture – Rural Development (USDA-RD), University of Missouri Extension, Missouri Department of Economic Development, and several other donors. www.maximizenwmo.org and together@maximizenwmo.org.

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