Solo living: One is no longer the loneliest number

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A faulty alarm brought police creeping slowly into Christine DiRocco's Lake Worth townhouse with guns drawn last year.

Surveilling the jumble of clothes, shoes and accessories spilling out of drawers and closets, the officers were certain her house had been ransacked.

"Oh, no," DiRocco said blithely during what she calls her "CSI moment." "It's just been a busy week. There were a lot of costume changes."

Remember when forty-something women living alone were pitied as hermits in sweater sets who spent their evenings petting cats and rereading Jane Austen novels?

These days, "smug marrieds," to borrow a term from the Bridget Jones lexicon, are likely envying their singleton counterparts.

One is no longer the loneliest number, as more people are living alone than at any other time in human history, writes sociologist Eric Klinenberg in his recent book Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone.

What's even more surprising is that soloists have richer, more varied social lives than their co-habiting friends, according to experts.

"I'm out at least five nights a week," said DiRocco, 46, the public relations director for the Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach who also co-chairs the Kravis Center's Young Friends group. She lives alone in a Lake Worth townhouse she rarely sees during the busy social season. "After work, I'm home just long enough to walk my dog and change my clothes. I tell my family I've taken living alone to an art form."

Lacking the domestic checks and balances of a partner, DiRocco straightens her townhouse only when she's good and ready, although she recently got a dog to force herself to stay home more.

Nationwide, 28 percent of American households are headed by a single person, compared with 9 percent in 1950, according to Census figures. Palm Beach County's percentage of single households is slightly higher than the national average, at 30 percent, while in heavily urban areas such as Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Manhattan, the figure is 40 to 50 percent.

The rise of "one-derland" stems directly from declining marriage rates, say social scientists. With only 51 percent of adult Americans married, single people are close to becoming a majority population.
(While a recent study stated that people living alone were 80 percent more likely to be depressed, the research was conducted in Finland, where from a Floridian's perspective, it's easy to imagine depression when you don't see the sun for months.)

Since 1980, the number of people living alone has doubled, which prompted Time magazine last month to call the trend "the biggest social change that we've neglected to identify, let alone examine."

Noted or not, living alone is becoming unremarkable at all stages of life.

"Up until my 30s, I had to explain to people why I was single. Now it's not even questioned," said Cathy Exley, 56, an associate pastor at Trinity West Church in Wellington, who "ran from the altar four times."

Living alone, she said, has allowed her the freedom to pursue mission work in more than 50 countries, from Fiji to several African nations. "My time is not divided between family, kids and work. I can give myself totally to my ministry," she said.

Absent the obligations of children and family, singles have more free time to visit restaurants, museums, go to concerts and socialize.

"Research shows they have as many friends as those who live with spouses and often they have more," said Greg Lukasik, a sociology instructor at Florida Atlantic University. "It can enhance your social life."

Nor does living alone mean being isolated, in the age of Twitter and texting.

"The notion of connectedness is undergoing a new definition due to social media. Young people feel fine with a lot of social life taking place in cyberspace," he said.

Gentry Benjamin, a single lawyer who lives in Greenacres, says she has "more of a social life because I'm not tied to anyone. Even though you live alone doesn't mean you have to be alone."

So satisfied is Benjamin with being "happily divorced" that she is writing a book titled Singlehood is not a Disease and Marriage is not the Cure.

"There is nothing wrong with being single, nothing wrong with coming home to your own house and having a full life. A lot of people are discovering the advantages of living by themselves," Benjamin said.

Aside from lording it over the remote and the entire bed, a big advantage to Benjamin is not having to get anyone's approval when making a major life change.

In January, she left her job as an assistant Palm Beach County attorney to begin an MBA program, which includes a 6-week Mideast trip this summer. She imagines what her ex-husband would have said on hearing the news.

"He would have been like, 'Baby, let me get this straight, you're going to quit your job and take a $5,000 trip to Dubai?""
"I get to do things like that when I'm single," said Benjamin, while acknowledging that DIY projects are one downside to living alone. She once knocked herself unconscious while trying to install shoe shelves.

Not since the baby boom following World War II has a generation enacted such wide-ranging social change, according to author Klinenberg.

With improved health and longevity, even those older than 65 are opting to live by themselves, provided they have the economic independence.

"Increasingly, the elderly are living alone and are perfectly happy by themselves," said Lukasik. "In fact, most prefer it, if they can" for as long as they can.

The biggest category of people living by themselves is 35- to-64-year-olds, which includes baby boomers who are charting yet more new demographic territory. The smallest but fastest-growing contingent is the 18 to 34 age group, which may have shrunk temporarily as jobless college graduates returned home during the recession.

Ultimately, opting to live alone may be an appropriate response to an increasingly crowded, incessantly interconnected world. As our gadgets constantly ping with greetings from friends and strangers, perhaps the privacy and personal space of being alone has become a longed-for luxury.

"Every once in a while I spend a whole weekend not answering the phone, brushing my teeth or even taking a shower," said Benjamin. "I'll even eat Fruit Loops for dinner."