# Community approaches to loneliness

## A European perspective

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BACKGROUND

# An EU pilot project on loneliness

Requested by the European Parliament

Carried out by the Joint Research Centre with DG EMPL, the Commission department for employment and social affairs

Aim: understand loneliness in the EU and what can be done about it

### 1 Synthesise the evidence

Literature reviews

### 2 Collect new data

2022 EU Loneliness Survey and policy briefs

### 3 Share good practice

Mapping of interventions and expert interviews

### 4 Disseminate and network

Web platform and events

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THE STARTING POINT

# Loneliness is widespread, and not evenly spread

**13%**

of people in the EU feel lonely most or all of the time

**36%**

feel lonely at least some of the time

**Higher risk among**

Young people · Poorer individuals· Unemployed · Minority groups

*Source: 2022 EU Loneliness Survey (EU-LS), JRC. More than 25,000 respondents in all 27 Member States.*

# What the research evidence tells us

### Promising, but uncertain

Reviews report positive effects, yet the certainty of the evidence is low

### Mostly individual and relational

Most studied programmes work with individuals or small groups. Community-level evidence is thin

### Narrow focus

Most studies target one age group, typically older adults, and often research-led programmes

**Two practical questions**

- What interventions exist in practice across the EU?
- And what makes them effective?

*Sources: JRC umbrella review of systematic reviews; Casabianca and Nurminen (2024), in Loneliness in Europe, Springer*

# Who runs them, who they reach, what they do

## Who runs them

NGOs
36%

Local governments
18%

Joint initiatives
13%

## Who they target

Older adults
53%

Young people
8%

## What they do

Connecting people
41%

Group and social activities
26%

**MAPPING OF LONELINESS INTERVENTIONS IN THE EU**

https://link.europa.eu/JjPNtx

*Note: Non-exhaustive mapping. | Source: Nurminen, Thoma-Otremba and Casabianca (2023), JRC134255*

COMMUNITY EXAMPLES

# Three European cities, three approaches

### Barcelona, Spain

**Citywide strategy 2020–2030**

- Build on existing knowledge and initiatives
- Long-term policy, but flexible
- Collaborative approach across all municipal departments

### Pau, France

**Anti-loneliness plan**

- Multiple actions, from prevention to mitigation
- Co-produced with citizens and associations
- Collaboration across public services

### Verona, Italy

**S.T.E.P.S.**

- Analysis of loneliness at local level
- Unused spaces reused as meeting places
- Citizens' participation through public consultations

*Sources: Barcelona City Council (2021); City of Pau (2022); Urban Innovative Actions*

COMMUNITY EXAMPLES

# What the three examples share

### Coordinate across sectors

All municipal areas in Barcelona, associations and city services in Pau, cooperatives in Verona

### Start from what exists

Mapping existing services, building on neighbourhood structures, associations and local spaces

### Involve residents

District sessions in Barcelona, citizen workshops in Pau, public consultations in Verona

### Measure and learn

A scientific council in Barcelona, an assessment of the plan in Pau, a household survey in Verona

**NOTE:** These are patterns across three cases, not proof of impact.

Source: author's synthesis of the three examples

# We asked practitioners what makes interventions effective

**28**
experts who design or run interventions

**12**
EU countries

**22**
interventions and broader initiatives

## How

- Online interviews
- Thematic analysis of the transcripts
- Mostly NGO practitioners

## Limits

- Mostly individual and relationship programmes; few community strategies
- Experts' views, not impact evaluations
- Only 3 experts from Central-East EU

*Source: JRC expert interview study (2022), article under peer review*

WHAT WORKS

# Four themes of effective interventions

**Context**

**Implementation**

**Participant**

### 1 Create connection

Sense of belonging and trust

### 2 Be inclusive

Low threshold, accessible, and a careful approach to stigma

### 3 Support facilitators

Trained staff and volunteers with an empowering approach

### 4 Choose the format

Group or individual, tailored, and long-term

*Source: JRC expert interview study (2022): four themes, nine sub-themes, three levels*

# Create connection and be inclusive

## Create connection

- Belonging: participants feel heard, accepted and cared for
- Trust: a safe place to share, as loneliness is linked to stigma and lower trust

> *"What was most effective was creating a sense of belonging in the group."*
>
> Expert, young people, Spain

## Be inclusive

- Easy to join and to stay: free, no sign-up
- Stigma: experts were divided between avoiding the word "lonely" and talking about it openly
- Awareness campaigns can support both

> *"It's all free. We never have entries [...] because loneliness belongs also to poorness."*
>
> Expert, older adults, Germany

Source: JRC expert interview study (2022), article under peer review

# Skilled facilitators and a long-term format

## Facilitators

- Trained, and able to see loneliness within wider situations such as health and livelihood
- Empowering: they support people's agency and active participation

> *"It's absolutely necessary to do a previous training of the facilitators."*
>
> Expert, older adults, Spain

## Format

- Bringing people together is not enough: build meaningful relationships
- Tailored to each person's situation and interests
- Long-term and coordinated with community services

> *"'Can you do it in 6 months?' That's the first question […] Can it be shorter?"*
>
> Expert, all age groups, the Netherlands

*Source: JRC expert interview study (2022), article under peer review*

IMPLICATIONS

# What this means for community-level action

1. Fund long-term interventions, not only short projects
2. Raise public awareness to reduce the stigma of loneliness
3. Coordinate services and actors in the community
4. Evaluate rigorously, so that successful programmes can continue

**Still missing**

More community-level evidence, and more offer for young people

*Source: JRC expert interview study (2022); JRC mapping of interventions (2023)*

LEARNING FROM OTHER PLACES

# Tailor interventions to the local context

We cannot simply copy an intervention from one place to another. Good practice travels as an idea, and has to be adapted to the place where it will run.

### Institutions

Who is responsible, and what already exists? City, region, health and social services, NGOs, cooperatives

### Culture

How is loneliness understood and talked about? Stigma, family and community norms

### Community

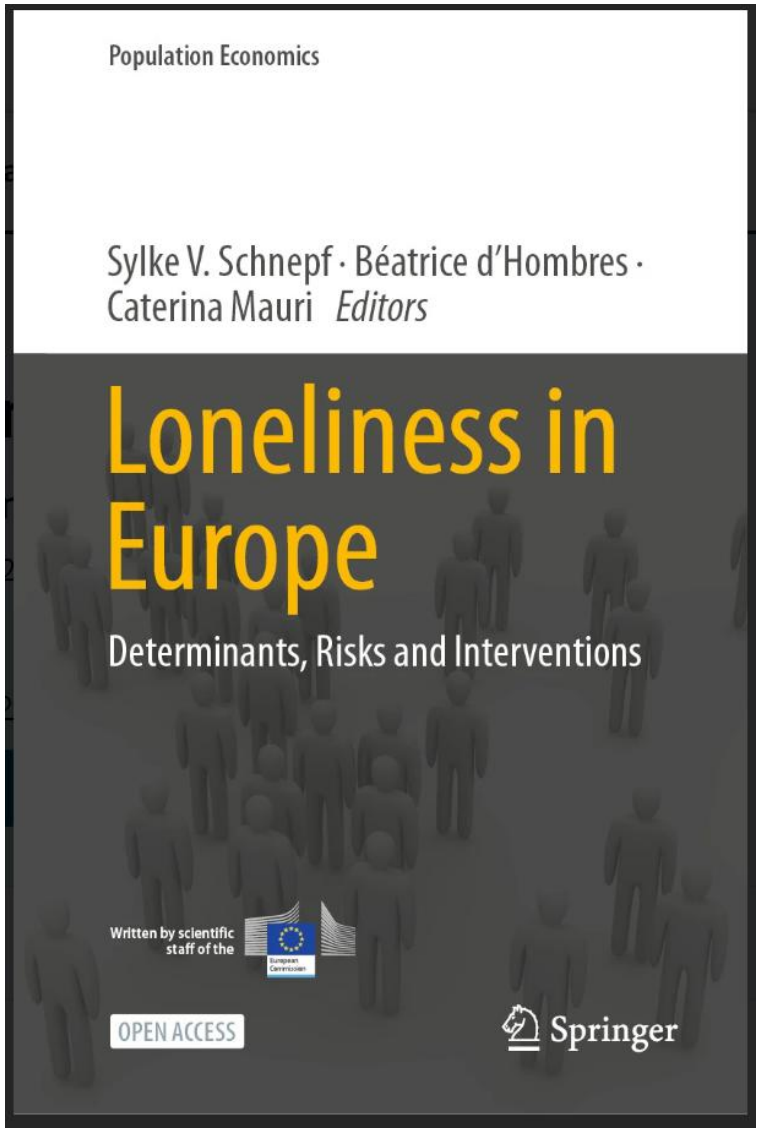
Who lives here, and what do they need? Age, income, background, existing groups and spaces

> *"Due to the diversity of loneliness that exists, it is necessary to address it in a pluralistic way."*
>
> Expert, all age groups, Spain

*Source: JRC expert interview study (2022); 2022 EU Loneliness Survey (EU-LS)*

# Want to learn more?

- **Book** (2025): Loneliness in Europe. Determinants, Risks and Interventions
- Loneliness Project Page
- Follow-up: LONELY-EU



# Thank you



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