Tackling Loneliness Fact Sheet

Government defines loneliness as a "subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want."[1]

While everyone feels lonely from time to time, feeling always or often lonely can have seriously negative effects on people's health, wellbeing and much more.

This fact sheet provides some key sources and statistics on the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in England.

Prevalence of Loneliness

- According to the most recent data from the 2019/20 Community Life Survey, 6% of adults aged 16+ in England report feeling lonely often or always. This is the same as in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

- The survey asks four questions about loneliness, which reflects that people might define loneliness in different ways, and that there is a stigma associated with admitting you are lonely. While 6% of adults reported feeling lonely often or always, 11% reported that they lack companionship often or always. More information about the loneliness measures used by ONS is available here.

- The Community Life Survey findings show that some groups are more likely to report feeling lonely often or always:
    - 16-25 year olds are the age group most likely to report feeling lonely often or always.
    - People with a limiting long-term illness or disability
    - People who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual
    - People who live in the most deprived parts of the country
    - People who are unemployed

- 2018 ONS analysis of The Children's Society Household Survey found that children in relative poverty have almost twice the odds of reporting feeling lonely. Previous ONS analysis also found that 27.5% of children who received free school meals said they were "often" lonely, compared with 5.5% of those who did not. (Source: ONS, 2018: Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness)

Impacts of loneliness

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[1] Perlman, D. & Peplau, L. A. (1981) Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness. In R. Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

Health and wellbeing

- Loneliness is not a mental health problem in itself. Despite overlaps they are distinct, though having mental health difficulties may lead to loneliness, while loneliness can help cause mental health difficulties. (Source: [Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020: The Psychology of Loneliness](#))

- Feeling lonely often has been linked by a US study to early deaths– on a par with well-established risk factors for mortality, such as smoking or obesity. (Source: [Campaign to End Loneliness, Risk to Health](#))

- Studies suggest there is a 50% increase in likelihood of survival for participants with stronger social relationships. (Source: [Holt-Lundstad, J, 2010: Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analystic review](#))

- Older people who report being always or often lonely are more likely to suffer depression, more likely to develop dementia, more likely to be physically inactive, which may lead to an increased likelihood of diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease. (Source: [Social Finance UK, 2015: Investing to Tackle Loneliness, A Discussion Paper](#))

- Young adults who report loneliness are more likely to experience mental health problems, to engage in physical health risk behaviours, and to use more negative strategies to cope with stress, such as withdrawing and obsessing about problems. They also have lower overall life satisfaction and report more compulsive use of digital technology, such as social media. (Source: [Matthews, T. et al, 2019, Lonely young adults in modern Britain: findings from an epidemiological cohort study](#)).

Costs of loneliness

- Loneliness could be costing UK employers up to £2.5 billion a year[2], including through costs of associated sickness absence, reduction in productivity, and increase in staff turnover. (Source: [The Co-op and New Economics Foundation, 2019: The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers](#)).

- A 2018 survey from Totaljobs found that a quarter of respondents reported quitting their jobs because of loneliness in the workplace. (Source: [Totaljobs, 2018: Loneliness causing UK workers to quit their jobs](#))

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[2] These numbers must be treated with caution as the cost analysis is based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions would need to be tested further in order to ensure the figures are robust.

- The [Simetrica Loneliness Monetisation Report](#), estimated that the impact on the wellbeing of reducing the loneliness of a chronically lonely individual equates to at least £9,537 per year.

What works

- There is no one-size-fit-all approach to alleviating loneliness and tailored approaches are more likely to reduce loneliness.

- More details on what works to tackle loneliness can be found in the [2018 Review of Tackling Loneliness](#), conducted by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

- The Campaign to End Loneliness has emphasised the importance of [psychological approaches to alleviating loneliness](#), citing research that found that the most effective. They have published an updated version of their '[Promising Approaches](#)' document to provide guidance on effective action on loneliness in later life.