



C/2025/2006

30.4.2025

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee
Addressing loneliness: cementing measures for demographic cohesion
(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/2006)

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Plenary Assembly decision	11.7.2024
Legal basis	Rule 52(2) of the Rules of Procedure
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	4.2.2025
Adopted at plenary session	26.2.2025
Plenary session No	594
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	203/00/03

1. Conclusions and recommendations ⁽¹⁾

1.1. This opinion aims to promote public policies to combat loneliness, moving forward at both EU and Member State levels and including all stakeholders concerned.

1.2. Loneliness is widespread throughout the European Union and the world, impacting European economies and people's quality of life. It affects physical and mental health, health systems, productivity and social health. This creates significant challenges for European democracies and economies, which need to face this widespread phenomenon that has far-reaching consequences, but first they need to tackle the root causes of loneliness.

1.3. Loneliness is influenced by a number of social factors.

1.3.1. It affects the most vulnerable groups (in particular those suffering from poverty or exclusion) to a greater extent. Measures to promote inclusion and social cohesion are therefore needed.

1.3.2. The ageing of the population and the demographic changes – including in family and work structures – that the EU is currently facing contribute to the increasing rates of loneliness. It is therefore necessary to promote an intergenerational approach, review welfare policies, focus on a more inclusive society model for older people and adopt voluntary, flexible retirement ages.

1.3.3. Loneliness causes mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and is even linked to suicide. To prevent loneliness, especially during childhood and adolescence, it is essential that measures be adopted at European and national levels to address mental health and emotional well-being.

1.3.4. The increasing reliance on digital technologies can deepen feelings of isolation in those who lack skills in or access to digital technologies. In addition, excessive internet and social media use can lead to an increase in loneliness, especially in young people.

⁽¹⁾ The list of references can be found on the dedicated opinion webpage.

1.4. A European strategy addressing loneliness could incorporate the following strategic guidelines.

- Guideline 1 – Consolidate knowledge on loneliness.
- Guideline 2 – Analyse and assess measures.
- Guideline 3 – Incorporate an intersectional approach to measures.
- Guideline 4 – Address root causes through a preventive approach.
- Guideline 5 – Raise awareness and eliminate stigma.
- Guideline 6 – Alleviate the pressure on health systems.
- Guideline 7 – Mobilise financial support.

1.5. It also calls for financial resources to be mobilised to combat loneliness and promote social connections. To this end, the EESC calls for a European Guarantee for Older People, bringing together support from different European funding frameworks from the next multiannual financial framework, in particular from the new European Social Fund+, to implement these actions.

1.6. The EESC highlights the fundamental role that civil society organisations play in the fight against loneliness, and recognises that the social partners (businesses and trade unions) can also contribute in this regard. Most of the current initiatives against loneliness at European level come from NGOs and civil society organisations, and very few of them target children, youth and those suffering the most discrimination or at risk of exclusion. This highlights the need for greater commitment by Member States to developing programmes and diversifying actions through an intersectional approach, given that the cost of inaction surpasses that of implementing concrete policies.

1.7. Strategies should address loneliness at all stages of life, from childhood to old age, focusing on key life transition periods. In order for a strategy to be effective, it needs high-level leadership and to involve all stakeholders concerned, such as public administrations (in particular local authorities), organised civil society, social partners, the social economy and the media.

1.8. The EESC calls for specific measures against loneliness to be developed at EU level as part of the European strategy for older persons (EESC opinion on a European Strategy for Older Persons) and the future European strategy for intergenerational equity (EESC Opinion on Promoting European intergenerational solidarity), including national plans developed by the Member States that align with the European strategy. In this vein, the EESC calls for commitment from the new European Commission to developing this strategy during its 2025-2029 term of office.

1.9. The EESC highlights the importance of consolidating knowledge on loneliness by further exploring its effects and associated costs, the impact that the built environment and its social facilities has on loneliness, and the impact that loneliness has on societies in order to understand how it affects social cohesion, social polarisation and social health.

1.10. The EESC believes that impact assessments on existing policies, plans and programmes should be further promoted. The EESC also calls on the European Commission to include the impact on loneliness in the impact assessments of related public policies and regulations.

1.11. The EESC emphasises the need to prioritise a preventive approach at all stages of life, in all related areas (health, education, leisure, employment, etc.), paying particular attention to the built environment and its social facilities.

1.12. The EESC points to the importance of raising public awareness of loneliness and eliminating the associated social stigma.

1.13. The EESC calls on the European Commission to coordinate policies and initiatives on loneliness drafted by national, regional and local authorities and by civil society organisations, promoting public-private partnerships.

1.14. The EESC calls on the European Commission to continue the pilot project on loneliness, launched at the request of the European Parliament in 2022. This should include updating data, carrying out awareness-raising campaigns and establishing a European network for monitoring loneliness. The EESC also calls for the loneliness dimension to be included in the future Youth Check initiative, which will serve to ensure that young people's perspectives are integrated into policymaking.

1.15. The EESC encourages the European Committee of the Regions to become involved in the proposed strategy, given the role that local administrations play in developing programmes that bring people together and promote a sense of community.

2. Background

2.1. Recent academic studies and civil society organisations have highlighted the severity of loneliness in Europe and across the globe. According to the Joint Research Centre's (JRC) 2022 EU Loneliness Survey, 13 % of the European population suffer from loneliness.

2.2. Demographic changes – including in family and work structures – that the EU is currently facing contribute to the increasing rates of loneliness in the Member States. People are living longer, making it essential to ensure quality of life over these years.

2.3. Loneliness has far-reaching implications for people's physical and mental health and vice versa, and hinders the full economic and social participation of many Europeans. This creates significant challenges for European democracies and economies, as it affects social and economic participation and places a substantial economic burden on local and national budgets – in particular on health systems. Loneliness is not just an individual problem but a collective problem as well.

2.4. It particularly affects specific segments of the population that are most vulnerable, such as young people, older people, women, the LGTBI community and those with disabilities, and especially those with fewer economic and educational resources. Furthermore, loneliness reduces participation in community life, eroding local solidarity and inciting social isolation.

3. What challenges and opportunities does loneliness present? Analysing the root causes as well as the consequences

3.1. Demographic change and an ageing population: the EU has a significant ageing population that is more susceptible to loneliness due to the loss of family, friends, mobility and independence, or due to problems related to urbanisation and progressively diminishing resources, populations and services in rural areas. In this context, the intergenerational approach of EU policies, the revision of welfare policies, the commitment to a model of society that is more inclusive for older people, and voluntary, flexible retirement ages are things that need to be further developed, without prejudice to the competences of the Member States.

3.2. Changes in household structures: living alone is a loneliness risk factor. The number of single-person households in Europe is gradually increasing due to demographic changes, geographic mobility and changes in family structures.

3.3. Mental health and emotional well-being: loneliness can lead to a number of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and even suicide. The younger generations are those that most suffer from loneliness. Furthermore, various studies show that adverse experiences during childhood have an impact on loneliness during adulthood. Care must be taken to prevent this by addressing the mental health and emotional well-being of children.

3.4. Physical health: studies have shown that loneliness can also affect physical health, leading to conditions such as heart disease, strokes and even premature death. The impact of loneliness on mortality is similar to that of smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day. Older people experiencing high levels of loneliness have a higher risk of cognitive impairment.

3.5. Economic impact: loneliness can lead to increased medical costs and can overburden social security systems. It also generates costs to the productive fabric due to productivity losses and premature deaths. One study carried out in Spain estimated that the annual cost of addressing loneliness was the equivalent of 1,17 % of GDP, between health costs (0,51 % of GDP) and costs related to productivity losses (0,67 % of GDP).

3.6. Social cohesion: high levels of loneliness can lead to social isolation and reduced involvement in community life, which can undermine social cohesion and solidarity, and have negative effects on social health. It also erodes social trust and reduces participation in politics. Creating social connections and combating loneliness promotes the development of more cohesive societies.

3.7. Social vulnerability and discrimination: loneliness is more prevalent among populations with lower incomes and lower levels of education. Those living in poverty are exposed to increased feelings of loneliness, in part because poverty limits social participation and could lead to social exclusion. In addition, loneliness is also more prevalent among those who suffer the most discrimination, such as people with disabilities, migrants and older people. The impact of poverty on loneliness is particularly pronounced in areas that lack 'third places' – free or affordable spaces that foment informal social interaction outside the work or school environment.

3.8. The COVID-19 pandemic: the pandemic exacerbated loneliness, especially among young people, due to social distancing measures and lockdowns. It is therefore crucial to address this issue as part of the post-pandemic recovery.

3.9. Current working arrangements: continuous and irregular working hours, solo work, temporary employment, night shifts and fatigue-inducing work can leave workers with fewer personal resources (time and energy) to participate in social activities and family life. This could directly contribute to the loneliness experienced not only by the workers themselves, but also by the children, older people and other dependants in their lives. Despite the opportunities that remote and hybrid work bring, the physical isolation from work colleagues and the mutual interference of work and domestic responsibilities can pose challenges for social interaction.

3.10. Reduced transport services: the limited access to public transport, for example in rural and remote areas (where connections are scarce or not financed because they are not profitable), particularly affects those who do not drive, such as older people or those in economic difficulty. This increases the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

3.11. The digital divide: increasing reliance on digital technologies can deepen feelings of isolation in those who lack skills in or access to digital technologies. In addition, intensive and passive internet and social media use can lead to increased loneliness, especially in young people. Numerous studies suggest that the intensive and passive use of social media is also linked with increased loneliness among young people, while the same has not been found with the use of instant messaging tools or active use of social media. Loneliness also increases where there is a lack of face-to-face contacts. This shows the need to increase education on digital media and networks.

4. General overview

4.1. Given the scale of the problem and the fact that it has so far only been addressed from a public health perspective (in particular through the European Commission communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health), loneliness needs to be addressed proactively as part of the Committee's commitment to the future European strategy for older persons.

4.2. Member States are developing various types of measures against loneliness. More than 53 % of these are targeted towards the older populations, with only 8,4 % targeted towards young people and 4,3 % towards people with disabilities and those at risk of exclusion. Actions aimed at these groups should therefore be expanded and diversified. For example, older people with pets feel less alone than older people without pets.

4.3. Most initiatives come from NGOs, with only 3,7 % coming from national governments. This highlights the need to increase the Member States' commitment to developing programmes against loneliness.

4.4. Specific measures against loneliness that are aligned with the European Pillar of Social Rights need to be developed at EU level, including a European strategy against loneliness. At national level, Member States should draw up national plans that are in line with this strategy and supported by specific resources. Municipalities, as the administrations closest to citizens, have a key role to play in implementing these measures. These strategies and plans need to address loneliness across all stages of life, have high-level leadership and involve all the stakeholders concerned, such as organised civil society, social partners, the social economy and the media. The creation of anti-loneliness laws, where appropriate, could also be explored (much like in Japan, where public-private partnerships have proved instrumental), although these regulations should include concrete programmes with resources.

4.5. This strategy needs to incorporate calls from the EESC opinion on a *European strategy for older persons* for a new EU strategy that addresses the risks and opportunities that demographic change presents. The opinion calls for specific actions to address discrimination and loneliness in older people, especially those most vulnerable, and at the same time supports 'the European Commission's recommendations to combat loneliness, ensuring that, in the context of the current demographic changes, mental health, social and long-term care services are accessible, affordable, integrated, community-based and easy to use'.

4.6. The new European strategy could incorporate the following strategic guidelines.

4.6.1. Guideline 1 – Consolidate knowledge on loneliness: advancing studies on the prevalence, risk factors, effects and costs of loneliness in all Member States, including carrying out longitudinal studies. It is also necessary to establish a loneliness scale and to use standard tools that allow regular monitoring. There is also a need to further enhance the impact of the built environment and its social facilities (such as benches to sit on, areas to play games, cafeterias, libraries, etc.) on loneliness and social connections, and to further study the impact of loneliness on societies to understand how it affects social cohesion, social polarisation and social health.

4.6.2. Guideline 2 – Analyse and assess measures: assessing the current policies, plans and programmes against loneliness in the EU Member States to determine their impact and scalability in the EU. Assessment is also essential for carrying out innovative actions that have an impact. In addition, the impact on loneliness should be taken into account in the impact assessments of related public policies and regulations, such as urban planning, transport and education policies.

4.6.3. Guideline 3 – Incorporate an intersectional approach to measures: the various target groups require specific and long-term approaches. Particular attention should be paid to older women, people with disabilities, migrants and young people, and to the complex overlaps between these groups, for example older migrants. Loneliness is not simply a problem for individuals, but a social problem influenced by social exclusion and other structural factors.

4.6.4. Guideline 4 – Address root causes through a preventive approach: prevention is fundamental for taking action before loneliness presents or becomes chronic. Prevention and intervention strategies are key to combating loneliness among children and young people. Special attention should be paid to the built environment and its social facilities. Smart, green and inclusive urban planning models under the Cities for All initiative should also be incorporated (promoting mobility and interpersonal relationships), as should the WHO recommendations on urban design.

4.6.5. Guideline 5 – Raise awareness and eliminate stigma: promoting mutual support and solidarity, including intergenerational solidarity. It is therefore important to empower people, change narratives and speak positively.

4.6.6. Guideline 6 – Alleviate the pressure on health systems: specific resources need to be allocated, and the health systems and their workforce adequately prepared to find and address the root causes and effects of loneliness.

4.6.7. Guideline 7 – Mobilise financial support: a future European guarantee for older people should bring together support from various European funding frameworks under the next multiannual financial framework to carry out these actions.

5. Implementation of recommendations: cooperation with EU institutions, Member States and civil society organisations

5.1. The EESC calls on the Commission to:

- coordinate policies and initiatives on loneliness drafted by national, regional and local authorities and by civil society organisations as part of the new strategy for older persons and the future European strategy for intergenerational equity;
- adopt measures at EU level to address mental health and emotional well-being in children and adolescents;
- continue the pilot project on loneliness, updating data, carrying out awareness-raising campaigns and establishing a European observation network.

5.2. Social partners (businesses and trade unions), together with civil society organisations, play a fundamental role in the fight against loneliness. The EESC would like to work closely with the organisations concerned when implementing the recommendations made in this opinion.

5.3. The EESC encourages the European Committee of the Regions to become involved in the proposed strategy, given the role that local administrations play in developing programmes that bring people together and promote a sense of community.

Brussels, 26 February 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE
