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Observatorio Estatal de la Soledad No Deseada

Study on

Youth and Loneliness in Spain



Executive Summary

A study promoted by Fundación ONCE in collaboration with Fundación Ayuda en Acción



A study by



Observatorio Estatal de la Soledad No Deseada (SoledadES) (State Loneliness Observatory), 2023

www.soledades.es

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1

The need to study youth loneliness in Spain

The objective of this report is **to identify the incidence of loneliness among young people aged 16-29 years old in Spain, investigating the possible causes or correlations**. This is the **first study on this subject** carried out in our country to date.

Loneliness especially affects young people, as shown in international studies as well as in those previously carried out by the SoledadES Observatory, such as the ***Report on the social perception of loneliness***, or the study ***The cost of loneliness in Spain***.



The relationship between loneliness among young people and other key factors¹:

Social interaction

- Number of relationships with family members, friendships, coworkers and fellow students
- Quality of relationships

Attitudes towards social interaction

- Trust in others
- Life experiences
- Communicating feelings

Digital world

- Relationships with family members, friendships, coworkers and fellow students through digital means
- Use of social media

Education, employment and poverty

- Level of studies, early school leaving, educational success
- Unemployment
- Social inclusion

Habitat

- Municipality size
- Immediate household

State of health

- Physical health
- Mental health

Feelings of discrimination

- Disability
- Origin
- Sexual orientation

1. The complete study presents the detailed results of each of the areas



Sample and methodology

The study is based on a survey of **1,800 people between 16 and 29 years of age**, inclusive, using a telephone survey and random dialing of cell phones, with a margin of error of +2.3% ($p=q=0.5$). This survey obtained the prevalence of loneliness, which makes it possible to compare the results of young people who feel lonely with those who do not feel lonely. A multivariate analysis was also conducted to determine the significant risk factors for loneliness among young people.

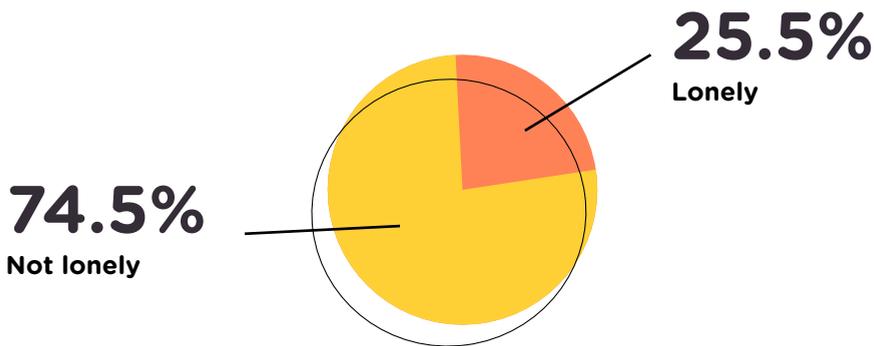
In addition, based on the results of the study, a discussion group was held with experts on loneliness, young people and/or vulnerable groups in order to propose solutions and recommendations for policies and programs.

2

Prevalence of loneliness among young people

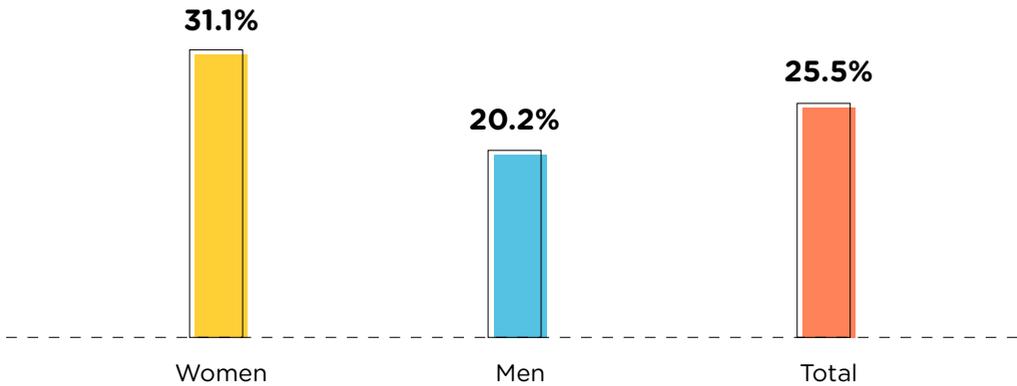
Loneliness affects one in four young people in Spain. The percentage of young people aged 16-29 who feel lonely is currently 25.5%.

Graph 1. Loneliness among young people in Spain, 2023



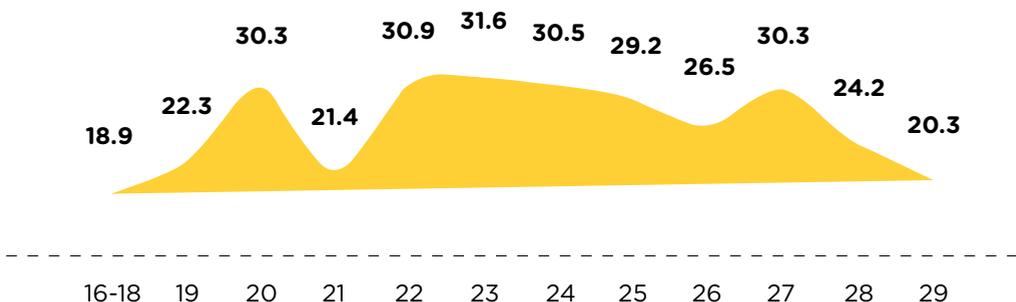
Loneliness among young people is very diverse, varying significantly according to young people's profiles. By sex, **loneliness is more frequent among young women** than men of the same age.

Graph 2. Prevalence of loneliness among young people (16-29) in Spain by sex, 2023



By age, **loneliness reaches its highest values in the middle age brackets, between 22 and 27 years of age.** In contrast, older young people, aged 28 to 29, and especially younger young people, aged 16 to 20, experience somewhat lower levels.

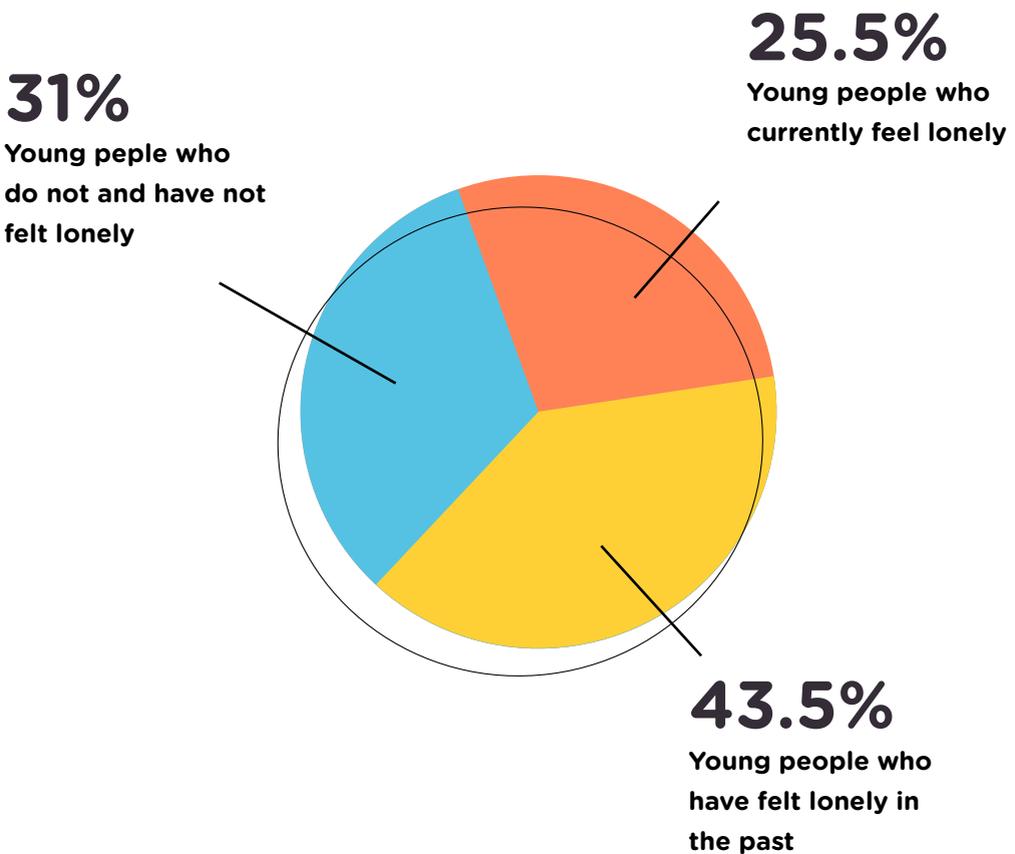
Graph 3. Prevalence of loneliness among young people (16-29) in Spain by age, 2023



Loneliness among young people in Spain is not a one-off or passing phenomenon, as **nearly half of the young people who currently feel lonely have been lonely for more than three years (45.7%)**.

In addition, 58.4% of the people who do not currently feel lonely have previously felt lonely at some point in their lives. Thus, **two out of every three young people, 69.0%, feel lonely or have felt lonely at some point in their lives**.

Graph 4. Current or past feeling of loneliness



Regarding the times when they feel most lonely, 30.5% of young people who feel lonely were especially lonely at night, 20.3% during the day, and 17.8% of people feel lonely all day long.

3

Loneliness and social interactions

The number of relationships is also a relevant factor to explain loneliness.

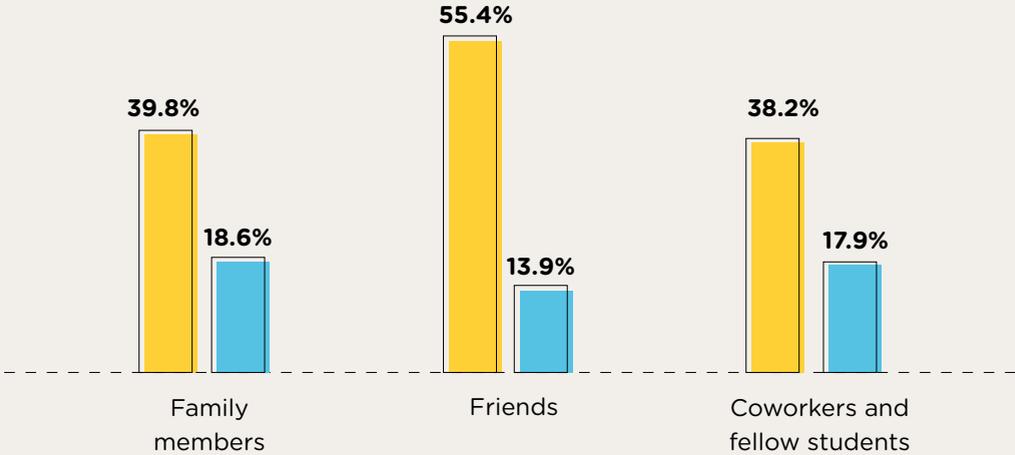
Friendships have the greatest impact on loneliness among young people, above family, coworkers, or fellow students.

The percentage of people dissatisfied with the number of friendships is much lower among those who do not feel lonely (13.9%) than among those who feel lonely (55.4%). However, this same data yields another observation: **almost half of the people who feel lonely are not unsatisfied with their number of friends** (44.6%).



Graph 5. Percentage of young people unsatisfied with the number of their relationships by type and the person's feeling of loneliness.

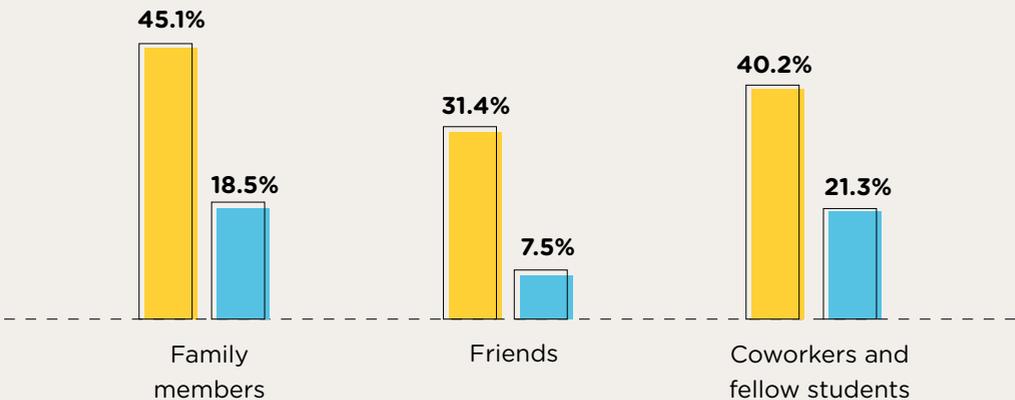
Lonely
Not lonely



The quality of relationships is also a relevant factor to explain loneliness among young people. The percentage of young people who are unsatisfied with their relationships is much higher among those who feel lonely in comparison with those who do not experience loneliness. This dissatisfaction is especially high regarding family relationships, followed by coworkers or fellow students and friendships.

Graph 6. Percentage of young people unsatisfied with the quality of their relationships by type and the person's feeling of loneliness.

Lonely
Not lonely



4

Loneliness, attitudes, and skills for social interactions

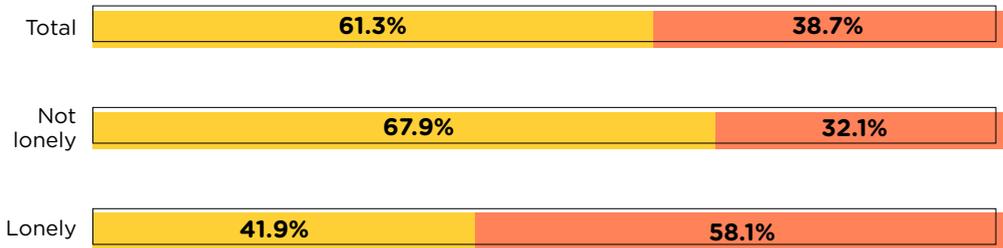


Social skills and attitudes toward social interactions play a key role in youth loneliness. People who do not feel lonely are much more **trusting** of others than those who feel lonely.

There is a strong relationship between bullying at school or in the workplace and loneliness among young people: the percentage of people who have been bullied at school or in the workplace at some time in their lives is almost twice as high among young people who feel lonely (58.1% have been bullied) than among those who do not feel lonely (32.1% have been bullied).

Graph 7. People who have been bullied at school or in the workplace at any time and their relationship with loneliness

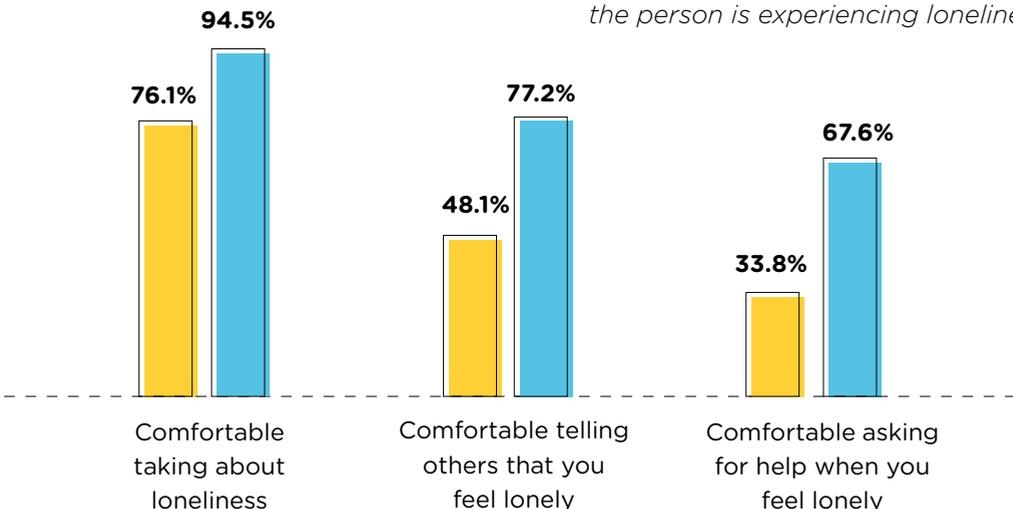
■ Has not been bullied
■ Has been bullied



According to young people, **knowing how to communicate to others what you feel or want has a very important impact on loneliness**. A relevant aspect of this communication deals precisely with feelings related to loneliness itself. It is easier to talk about other people’s loneliness than one’s own. Most people who feel lonely are confident talking about loneliness, as an abstract or general topic (76.1%), but the percentage of people who feel lonely talking about their own feelings of loneliness drops considerably to 48.1%. **In addition, only one in three people who feel lonely are comfortable asking for help when they do.**

■ Lonely
■ Not lonely

Graph 8. Differences in feelings when talking about loneliness and asking for help in dealing with loneliness, depending on whether or not the person is experiencing loneliness



5

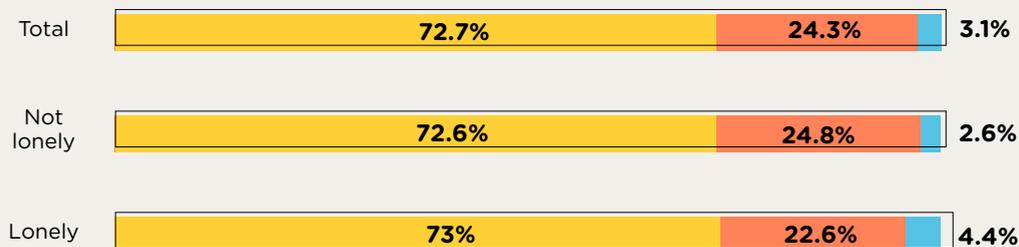
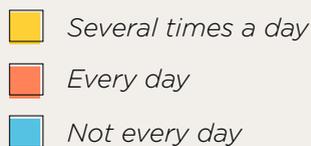
Loneliness and the digital world

Digitalization has had a major effect on the way society interacts with one other, with a particularly strong effect on young people.

One third of young people use social media for more than three hours a day. Most **young people consider that having too many online relationships** with other people is a factor that **considerably influences loneliness**, as well as being too often aware of social media. However, young people who **feel lonely use social media with a very similar frequency to those who do not feel lonely.**



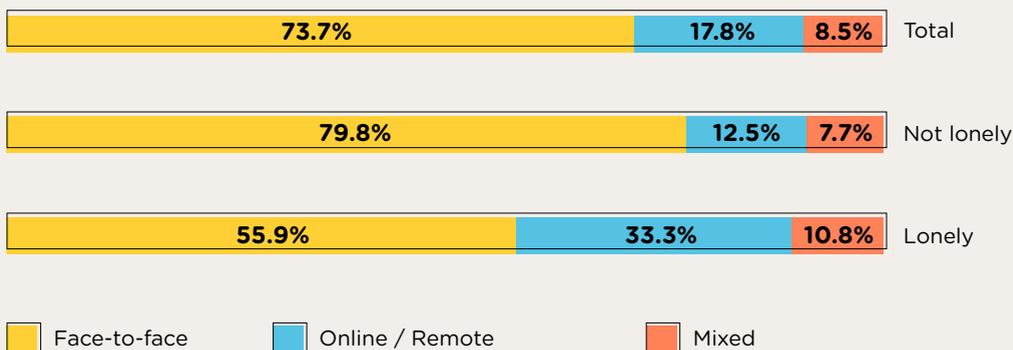
Graph 9. Frequency of use of social media and loneliness



Face-to-face social interactions are more frequent among young people who are not experiencing loneliness than among young people who are experiencing loneliness, especially friendships. The percentage of young people who interact mainly in person is higher among young people who do not feel lonely (79.8%), but barely exceeds half among young people who do feel lonely (55.9%).



Graph 10. Most frequent forms of relationship with friends and the person's feeling of loneliness.



6

Loneliness, education, employment, and Poverty

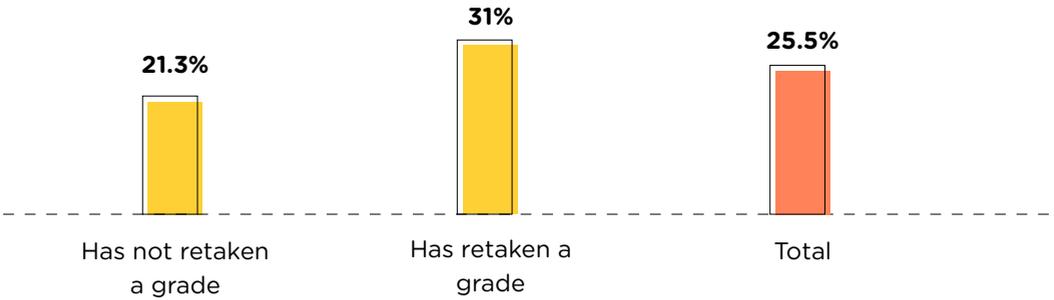


The survey shows a relationship between level of studies and loneliness: **college-educated young people experience the lowest levels of loneliness.**

Retaking a grade does show a relationship with loneliness:

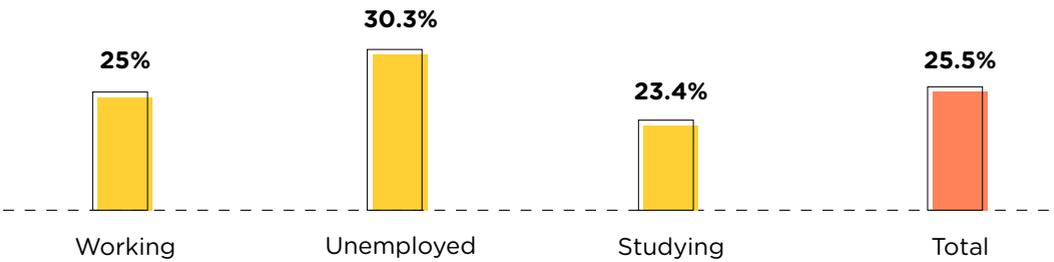
young people who have retaken a grade at some point show a 10-point higher prevalence of loneliness than those who have not (31.0% vs. 21.3%). A relationship with dropping out of school early and low academic achievement is also observed.

Graph 11. Prevalence of loneliness related to having retaken a grade.



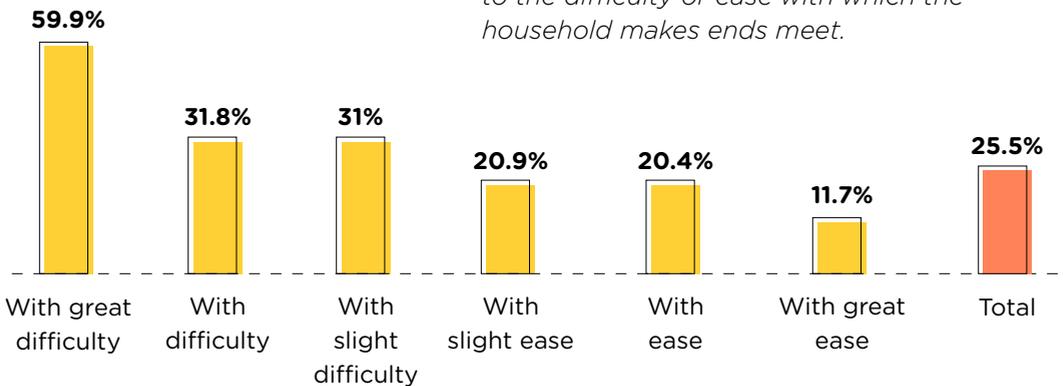
The relationship with activity also correlates with loneliness: **unemployed** people show a prevalence of loneliness 5 points higher than those who are studying or working.

Graph 12. Prevalence of loneliness by relationship to the activity.



This relationship is especially strong with **poverty**: the prevalence of loneliness among young people from households facing economic hardship is much higher than among young people from households that do not face economic hardship.

Graph 13. Prevalence of loneliness according to the difficulty or ease with which the household makes ends meet.



7

Loneliness and habitat

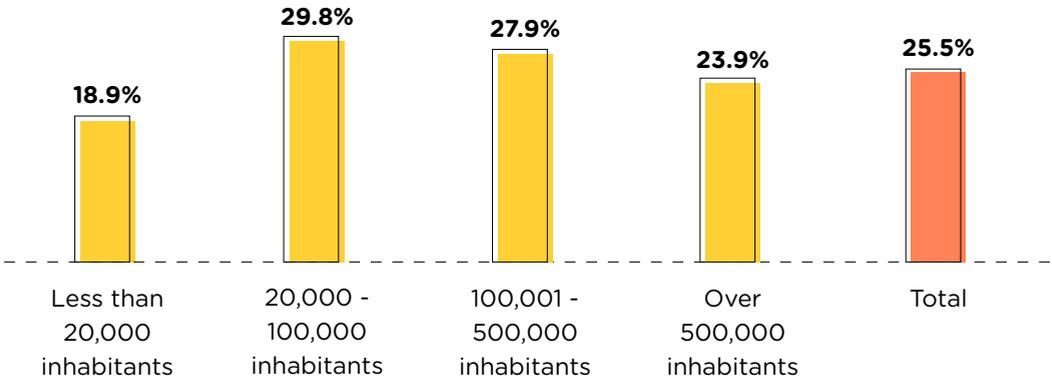
People in medium-sized municipalities experience higher levels of loneliness,

especially in towns between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, where loneliness reaches a prevalence of 29.8%, and in those with between 100,000 and 500,000, where it stands at 27.9%.

In contrast, the prevalence of loneliness is 18.9% in municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants and 23.9% in those with more than 500,000. In addition, the relationship between the size of the municipality and youth loneliness is statistically significant.



Graph 14. Prevalence of loneliness among young people by municipality size



Youth emancipation does not have a strong relationship to loneliness. The prevalence of loneliness among emancipated young people is very similar to those not emancipated (27.8% vs. 24%). In fact, young people living at home with their parents show a lower rate of loneliness than those living in a shared apartment, and these both show lower prevalence than those living in their own home.

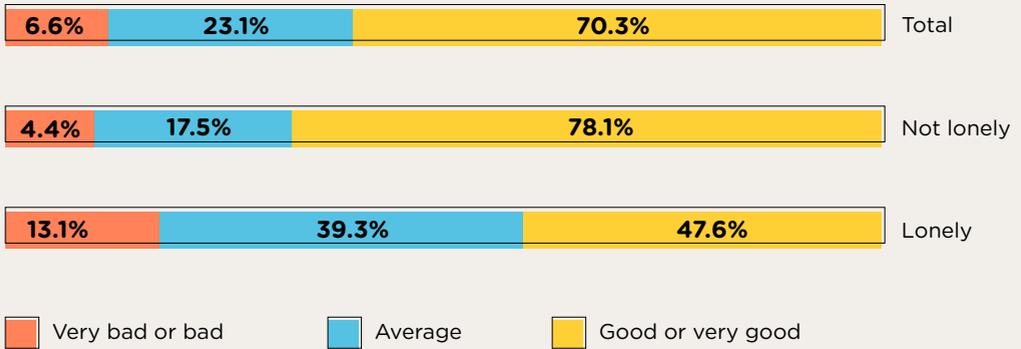
8

Loneliness and state of health



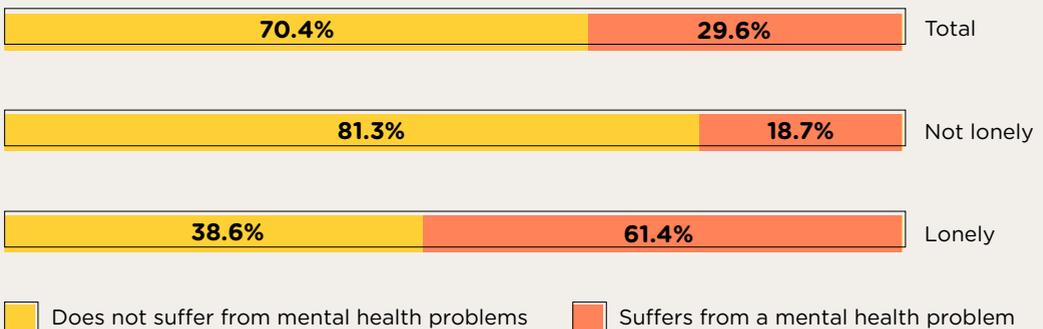
Young people who feel lonely show a much worse self-perceived state of health than those who do not feel lonely.

Graph 15. Self-perceived state of health among young people according to how lonely they feel

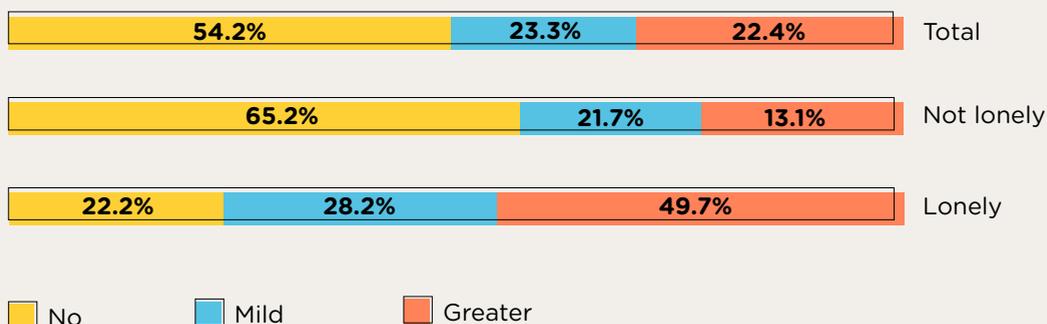


The data showing **the relationship between mental health problems and loneliness among young people is particularly significant**. The vast majority of people who feel lonely **suffer from anxiety or depression**. This occurs in 77.8% of cases, compared to 34.8% of those who do not feel lonely.

Graph 16. Mental health problems among young people according to how lonely they feel (medically diagnosed or perceived)

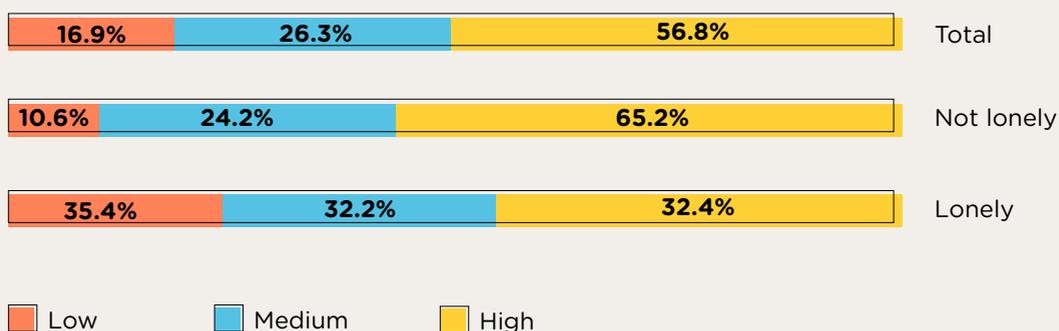


Graph 17. Anxiety or depression among young people according to how lonely they feel



In addition, young people who feel lonely have **lower levels of self-esteem** than those who do not feel lonely.

Graphic 18. Self-perceived state of health in young people according to how lonely they feel



Loneliness is also related to a higher prevalence of **self-harming thoughts and actions**, which are 2.5 to 3 times more frequent among youth who experience loneliness than among those who do not. Suicidal thoughts affect half of young people (50.5%) who feel lonely.

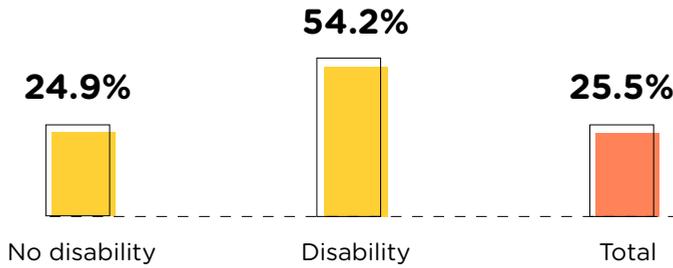
9

Soledad y sentimiento de discriminación

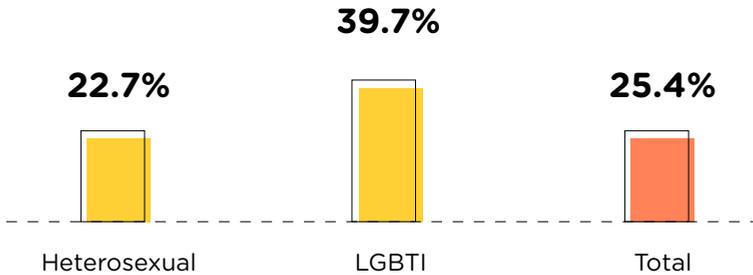
Disability, sexual orientation, or foreign origin have a much higher prevalence of loneliness in young people. These prevalences are especially high for disability and lower in the case of origin.



Graph 19. Prevalence of loneliness in young people (16-29 years) by disability

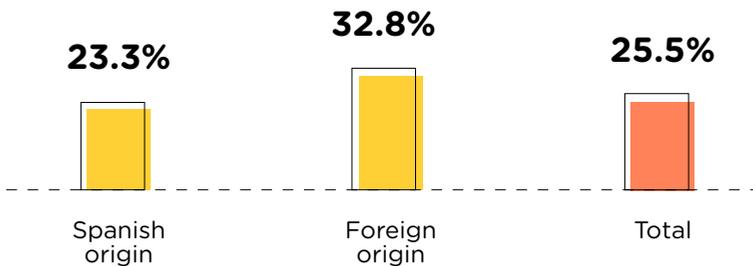


Graph 20. Prevalence of loneliness by sexual orientation



The prevalence of loneliness among young people who were born abroad or whose parents were born abroad is 41% higher than the prevalence among young people born in Spain and whose parents were also born in Spain.

Graph 21. Prevalence of loneliness by personal and family origin²



2. Foreign people are people who were born abroad or whose father or mother was born abroad

10

Explaining loneliness among young people

Loneliness among young people has multiple causes, that is, it is not possible to state that it is due to one or two specific causes, but rather that it is caused by a wide variety of aspects.

Beyond the differences in the prevalence of loneliness, **is it possible to know whether some factors are already more influential than others?** To answer this question, a multivariate statistical analysis was carried out to identify the most relevant factors explaining youth loneliness.



So, what can we learn from youth loneliness?

Stripping down hypotheses:

Loneliness is most prevalent in medium-sized municipalities. Despite the image of greater isolation associated with towns and large cities, the data indicate that young people living in **medium-sized municipalities** (between 50,000 and 500,000 inhabitants) have a higher level of loneliness, compared to rural young people or those living in large cities.

Social media is not an issue for loneliness. Even though one third of young people use social media for more than three hours a day and contrary to widespread opinion, their intensity and frequency of use do not have an effect on loneliness. On the other hand, **face-to-face relationships with friends do.**



Proving other hypotheses:

Friendships play a fundamental role

in explaining loneliness to a greater extent than family relationships or relationships with coworkers or fellow students.

Face-to-face contact is relevant for friendships

People who have relationships with mainly online friends are twice as likely to feel lonely. However, having primarily online or remote relationships with family members, coworkers or fellow students does not have a significant effect on loneliness.

Mental health is key

People with perceived or diagnosed mental health problems are 2.5 times more likely to feel lonely; people who perceive that they suffer from anxiety or depression are 89.2% more likely; people who acknowledge having low self-esteem are 83.2% more likely; and those who have had suicidal thoughts are 81.1% more likely

Attending psychological therapy protects against loneliness

People who have never been to therapy are 45.7% more likely to feel lonely than those who have.

Poor physical health also plays an important role

People who have a negative or fair perception of their state of health are 42.2% more likely to feel lonely.

Bullying at school or in the workplace is significant in explaining loneliness

People who have suffered bullying at school or in the workplace have a 37.2% higher risk of feeling lonely.

Poverty increases the risk of loneliness

Moderate poverty or having difficulty making ends meet increases the probability of feeling loneliness by 38.5%.

Foreign origin is key to explaining loneliness

People of foreign origin, including not only those who were born abroad, but also those whose parents were born abroad, are 72.5% more likely to feel lonely than those of Spanish origin.

Sexual discrimination causes loneliness

LGBTI people are 48.7% more likely to feel lonely than heterosexual people.

11

Recommendations to reduce youth loneliness

Three spheres of action

Prevent

through actions aimed at avoiding its emergence.

Detect

through actions aimed at identifying cases of youth loneliness, preferably at an early stage

Intervene

through actions aimed at reducing existing youth loneliness

Proposals

01

Favor emotional education and inclusiveness at all levels of education,

focusing on groups that have traditionally suffered discrimination, but also on people who, although they are not minorities, may suffer from discrimination or loneliness. To this end, it is very important to strengthen educational guidance as a preventive measure and for early detection of loneliness.

02

Protect mental health in adolescents and young people,

strengthening protection and early warning systems linked to mental health.

03

Encourage participation of young people,

promoting their participation in the design and implementation of loneliness policies or simplifying at the administrative level the access of youth organizations to resources.

04

Integrate, reinforce, and structure the institutional

ecosystem of public, private and social entities that already carry out a set of important actions to reduce loneliness among young people.

05

Promote social relations through healthy recreation,

creating spaces for young people's social interaction or reinforcing the financing of existing culture and leisure activities for young people.



06

Develop care services for young people aimed at reducing loneliness,

promoting information services for young people, creating facilitators of social interactions, or offering support services for life transitions.

07

Strengthen educational, employment and social inclusion policies,

as these have a significant effect on loneliness. This implies reinforcing the educational staff to improve ratios, the quality of education and thus educational equity and success levels or reinforcing and adapting active employment policies for young people.

08

Universities are a suitable environment for the promotion of the recommended actions

to reduce loneliness in different areas, from the prevention of mental health, the creation of more inclusive environments, the promotion of healthy leisure, and even bringing active employment policies into closer contact with young people.





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