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A photograph of three young adults against a light blue background. In the center is a woman with short, vibrant red hair, wearing a white t-shirt, with her arms crossed and a tattoo visible on her left forearm. To her left is a woman with dark hair and bangs, wearing a mustard yellow t-shirt, looking upwards and to the left while holding a white cup. To the right is a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a green sweater and a brown backpack, looking directly at the camera. Behind them is a large European Union flag. A thick, textured yellow brushstroke is at the bottom. A white text box is in the lower right.

A comparison of youth loneliness in Europe in 2024

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A comparison of youth loneliness in Europe in 2024

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Foreword

The issues of mental health and loneliness are becoming increasingly important for young people. In a study (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024) from February 2024, 41% of Germans aged 18–30 stated that mental health problems are a concern for them. This makes mental health one of the top five most relevant problems of this generation.

In the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Next Generation and Society – Sustainable. Digital. Engaged." project, we are strengthening the participation of young people and their social engagement for a sustainable future. Our frame of reference is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, we are focusing on the issues that are important to this target group.

This analysis of loneliness among young adults in the European Union follows two other studies in which we investigated this issue. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, people have become increasingly aware that loneliness is a serious problem, especially among young people. In our study "How lonely are young adults in 2024?" (Steinmayr et al. 2024), we used new data to show that loneliness remains at a persistently high level among the younger generation even after the end of the pandemic.

Up-to-date data, which this study extends to the EU-wide level, is the basis for informed political measures to combat chronic loneliness among young people. In Germany, the topic is increasingly making its way into the public discourse and onto the political agenda. Nevertheless, it is striking that even though loneliness is most pronounced among young people, many anti-loneliness approaches are not primarily aimed at this age group.

Together with the Liz Mohn Stiftung, we therefore expanded our focus to other countries in June 2024 in order to gain fresh insights and ideas for effective measures to combat loneliness. Some recommendations for action are summarized in the study "Young and lonely – International perspectives for a new field of political action" (Schwichtenberg et al. 2024).

We would like to counteract the worrying increase in mental health problems among the younger generation in Europe and worldwide. One prerequisite for this is to take the perspectives of young people seriously and to integrate them into the political process. For this reason, the Bertelsmann Stiftung supports the most recent declaration of the WHO Youth Council (2024). In it, numerous supporters call for the participation of young people, among other things. This also applies to the issue of loneliness.

This study demonstrates that rather than being specific to Germany, the problem of loneliness is affecting adolescents and young adults across the EU. This makes it all the more important to continue learning from each other and to tackle the issue of loneliness together.

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Executive Summary

Background and objective of the study

Loneliness has been an important and sometimes also a political issue for some time now – not only in Germany, but also in other European countries. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus was often on older adults, but more and more focus has been placed on young people in recent years. In this context, an important question is which young adults are particularly affected and whether the rates in Germany differ from those in other European Union (EU) countries. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate loneliness among young adults in 2024 and to shed light on this issue both in Germany and its EU neighbors.

Key findings

- In Germany, 51% of young adults (aged 18–35) say they are at least moderately lonely, of whom 12% say that they experience severe loneliness.
- Compared to young adults in other EU countries, young people in Germany are slightly less lonely. This mainly concerns emotional loneliness, whereas there are not any differences in social loneliness.
- Young adults (aged 18–35) are somewhat lonelier than older adults (aged 36–69) in Germany and across the EU.
- Young people with a low level of educational attainment are particularly affected by loneliness.

Recommended actions

- Regularly monitoring loneliness and life satisfaction can help in identifying risk groups and gauging how widespread and severe the problem is.
- Loneliness seems to be a persistent problem among young adults. However, most of the loneliness measures already in place are aimed at older adults (Nurminen et al. 2023). Thus, efforts should be made to establish more interventions to combat loneliness among young adults.
- Loneliness is an EU-wide phenomenon impacting all countries. International exchange and concrete international measures (e.g., an international database that can be used to document the effectiveness of various loneliness programs, especially among young people) could help all countries do something to combat this phenomenon.
- Measures fostering social and emotional skills are particularly suitable for reducing loneliness. They can also be used to prevent loneliness.

Introduction

Many young people in Germany are lonely (Schobin et al. 2024; Steinmayr et al. 2024). It is therefore to be welcomed that politicians and society are increasingly focusing on combating loneliness in this age group (Bundesregierung 2023). However, in the public discourse in Germany, loneliness among young people has so far been viewed almost exclusively through German eyes. At the same time, the EU Loneliness Survey conducted a few years ago showed that loneliness is also widespread in other EU countries – in some cases even more so than in Germany (Berlingieri et al. 2023). However, the EU Loneliness Survey was conducted in 2022, a period that was still clearly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore unclear how meaningful this survey's findings are today, several years after contact restrictions ended.

The aim of our study is therefore to determine current figures on loneliness among young people in Germany and the EU. The study is guided by three questions:

- How lonely are young people in Germany compared to older people?
- How lonely are young people in Germany compared to young people in other EU countries?
- Which groups are particularly affected by loneliness – and are these group differences comparable between Germany and the EU?

The study is based on the eupinions survey, for which 23,536 adults from all EU countries were interviewed between June 15, 2024, and July 1, 2024. For seven countries, the sample sizes were large enough to enable country-specific comparisons to be made: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

Loneliness

Loneliness is an unpleasant feeling that people experience when their actual social relationships do not match what they desire or need (Luhmann 2022). People who lack close, trusting relationships, such as those found in a partnership or close friendships, experience emotional loneliness. If their social network is inadequate or they have less contact with other people in everyday life than they would like to, they experience social loneliness.

Loneliness is something that almost all people experience at some point in their life, and it can affect people of all ages. But it is often temporary. For example, people can feel lonely after moving to a new city, separating from a partner or spouse, or other major life events. In these kinds of situations, loneliness can be useful because it motivates people to forge new contacts or to invest more into existing relationships (Cacioppo & Cacioppo 2018). However, if these efforts are unsuccessful, people can become chronically lonely and even mentally or physically ill as a result (Bücker 2022).

Thus, loneliness is particularly problematic when it is very severe. Following the EU Loneliness Survey (Berlingieri et al. 2023), we therefore distinguish between three groups:

- People who are “not lonely” are those who never or rarely feel lonely.
- People who are “moderately lonely” are those who feel lonely some of the time.
- People who are “severely lonely” are those who feel lonely most or all of the time.

Focusing on young people

A number of recently published studies confirm that loneliness has increased among young people in Germany. The German Loneliness Barometer (Schobin et al. 2024) analyzed data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) to identify trends between 2013 and 2021. The study shows that loneliness increased substantially in all age groups in Germany in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic – from 7.6 % in 2017 to 28.2 % in 2020. This increase was particularly sharp in the group of individuals aged 18–30 (from 8.6 % to 31.8 %). In 2021, the figures fell in all age groups – to 11.3 % across all age groups – but young people were still the most affected group in 2021, with a share of 14.1 %. In analyses of the German Family Demography Panel Study (FReDA) conducted in the winter of 2022/2023, younger people were also lonelier than older people (Diabaté et al. 2024).

Studies with current data suggest that loneliness has remained widespread even after the pandemic-related contact restrictions have ended. For example, a study conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia in the summer of 2023 estimated that around 17 % of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 20 were experiencing severe emotional and/or social loneliness (Luhmann et al. 2023). Data for 2024 is available from a representative sample of young people between the ages of 16 and 30, in which the prevalence of severe loneliness was estimated at 10 % (Steinmayr et al. 2024). If the moderately lonely are also included, one must conclude that almost half of all young people in Germany are at least somewhat lonely (Luhmann et al. 2023; Steinmayr et al. 2024).

Overall, these figures show that loneliness has increased among young people in Germany. However, the risk of being lonely is not the same for everyone, but depends on socio-demographic factors (e.g., gender, place of residence, or socioeconomic status). In this study, we therefore also look at differences in terms of gender, level of educational achievement, and the type of settlement structure (urban vs. rural). Previous studies have shown significant but mostly minor differences when looking at these factors. For example, women tend to experience loneliness more often than men (Schobin et al. 2024), but these differences are small and not present in all age groups (Luhmann et al. 2023; Steinmayr et al. 2024). Having

a high level of educational achievement – in terms of both oneself and one's parents – appears to be a factor protecting young people against loneliness (Diabaté et al. 2024; Luhmann et al. 2023; Steinmayr et al. 2024). With regard to settlement structure, some studies find a slight increase in loneliness among young people living in cities compared to those living in rural areas (Luhmann et al. 2023; Steinmayr et al. 2024). In the German population as a whole, however, the differences between urban and rural areas are mostly small and practically insignificant (Schobin et al. 2024).

Comparing loneliness across Europe

Loneliness is not an exclusively German phenomenon. On the contrary, it is even more widespread in many EU countries than it is in Germany. This was true both before (d'Hombres et al. 2018) and during the pandemic (Baarck et al. 2021; Berlingieri et al. 2023). For example, in the EU Loneliness Survey conducted in 2022, 52 % of the surveyed adults stated that they feel lonely at least sometimes, of which 12 % even said they feel severely lonely (Berlingieri et al. 2023). However, there were considerable differences among countries. For example, the proportion of severely lonely people in countries like Greece, Luxembourg, Bulgaria and Ireland was over 15 %, while Germany was more in the medium range.

However, because it was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU Loneliness Survey cannot provide answers on the prevalence of loneliness among young adults in Europe today. The aim of our study is therefore to determine current figures on loneliness among young people, to investigate how these figures differ when comparing Germany with the EU as a whole, and to use these figures to derive potential solutions to reduce loneliness in both Germany and Europe.

Methods

Sample

The data come from the eupinions survey, a recurring cross-sectional online survey of participants from all EU countries (www.eupinions.eu). The recruitment of survey participants and the survey itself are carried out by the market research institute Latana. Randomly selected individuals were made aware of the survey via various websites and apps and included in the sample using a quota-based inclusion procedure. Next, the data were weighed based on age, gender, educational attainment and settlement structure. In addition, the sample sizes were large enough in seven countries to allow for country-specific comparisons: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Along with standard questions, additional one-off questions are included in each wave to address current issues (e.g., on loneliness).

The data analyzed for our study was collected between June 15, 2024, and July 1, 2024. A total of 23,536 people from the EU were surveyed, including 2,848 people from Germany. Women were overrepresented in both the EU-wide sample (65 %) and the German sample (62 %). In the following section, we distinguish between young adults (aged 18–35) and older adults (aged 36–69). The proportion of young adults was similar in both the German (17 %) and EU (15 %) samples. While the majority of people in the EU-wide sample lived in a city (59 %), the German sample had an almost even split between respondents in cities (49 %) and rural areas (51 %).

In the EU-wide sample, 11 % stated that they have a doctorate or a master's degree. Another 24 % had a university degree. Most people (37 %) had a higher-level qualification (i.e., a secondary school degree qualifying them for university admission or matriculation [*Abitur*] or completed vocational training). Fewer people (21 %) had a lower-level qualification (i.e., a leaving certificate from a primary school, a general secondary school [*Hauptschule*] or an intermediate secondary school [*Realschule*]), while an even smaller share (7 %) did not have any formal education or training. In the German sample, 4 % had a doctorate or equivalent degree and around 19 % had a university degree. Here, too, the largest proportion (38 %) was made up of people with a higher-level qualification, while roughly a third (32 %) had a lower-level qualification. And, here as well, 7 % said that they did not have any formal education or training.

Measuring loneliness

Loneliness was measured using the same items that were also used in the EU Loneliness Survey and were therefore already available in different languages (Berlingieri et al. 2023): six items from de Jong Gierveld and van Tilburg's loneliness scale (2006), three of which relate to emotional loneliness ("I experience a general sense of emptiness," "I miss having people around," and "I often feel rejected") and three of which are related to social loneliness ("There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems," "There are many people I can trust completely," and "There are enough people that I feel close to"). There were three possible responses for each item: "yes," "more or less," and "no."

For the analysis, the answers representing moderate or severe loneliness were coded as 1, and the remaining answer as 0. These scores were then summed across all items. This meant that the individual loneliness scores could range between 0 (not lonely at all) and 6 (severely lonely).

Following previous studies, three categories were distinguished – with the same threshold values as in the EU Loneliness Survey: All persons who received the maximum score of 6 (i.e., who had selected response options on all items that expressed at least moderate loneliness) were classified as severely lonely. All persons who received a total score of 4 or 5 (i.e., who had selected response options on at least four items that expressed at least moderate loneliness) were classified as moderately lonely. All people with scores between 0 and 3 were classified as not lonely.

In addition to measuring general loneliness, the scale developed by de Jong Gierveld and van Tilburg can also be used to measure emotional and social loneliness separately. For this purpose, the scores were only summed for the items related to either emotional or social loneliness, meaning that the resulting scores could range between 0 and 3. No categories were formed for emotional and social loneliness; only mean scores were calculated and compared.

Results

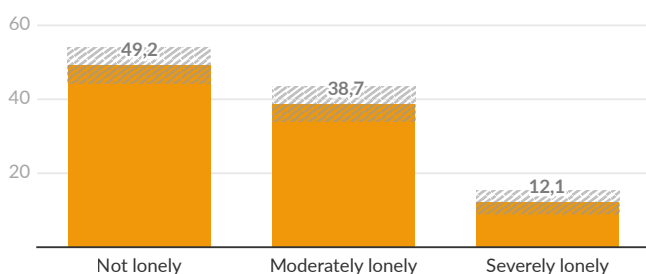
How lonely are young people in Germany compared to older people?

Overall, 41% of people in the German sample were at least moderately lonely (of whom 12% were severely lonely). Among young adults (aged 18–35), the propor-

tion of at least moderately lonely people (approximately 51%, of whom 12% were severely lonely; see Figure 1) was much higher than among older adults (aged 36–69, 37% at least moderately lonely, of whom 12% were severely lonely). As can be seen in Figure 2, this trend is also evident when comparing the mean values: Young people in Germany had significantly higher

Figure 1: Loneliness among young adults in Germany

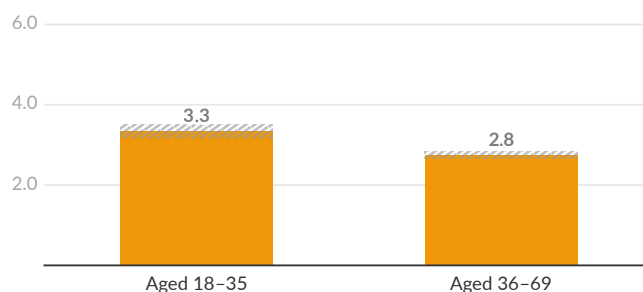
Share of general loneliness in % with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Perception of loneliness (scale from 0 to 6). 0 to 3: Not lonely, 4 to 5: Moderately lonely, 6: Severely lonely



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Figure 2: Loneliness in Germany by age

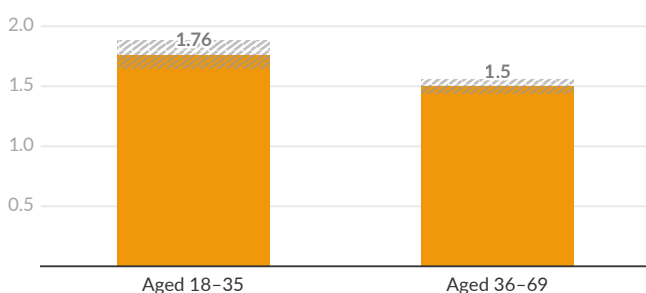
Mean values on a scale from 0 to 6 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the t-test: $t(2846) = -5.76$, $p < .001$



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Figure 3: Social loneliness in Germany by age

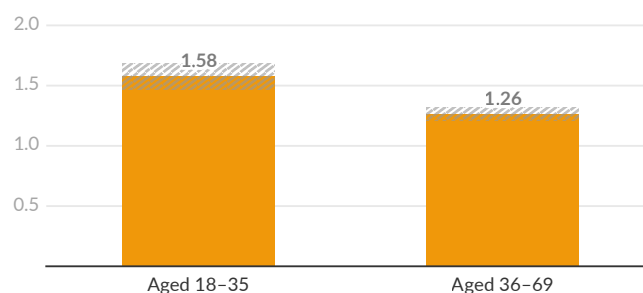
Mean values on a scale from 0 to 3 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the t-test: $t(2846) = -3.98$, $p < .001$



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Figure 4: Emotional loneliness in Germany by age

Mean values on a scale from 0 to 3 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the t-test: $t(2846) = -5.17$, $p < .001$



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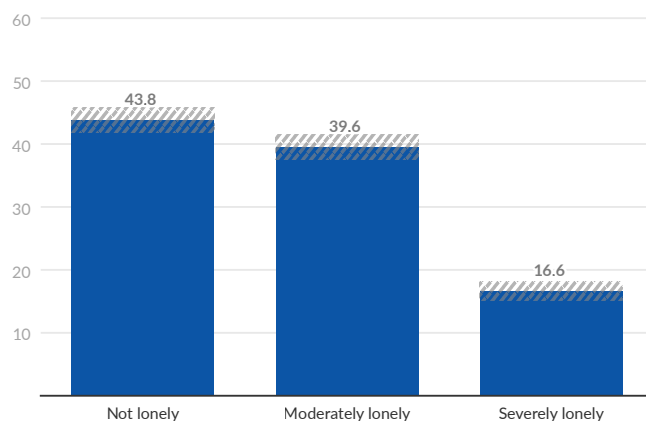
loneliness values overall (M [mean] = 3.34, SE [standard error] = 0.09) than the older comparison group (M = 2.76, SE = 0.05). This was also the case when social loneliness (see Figure 3; young: M = 1.76, SE = 0.06; older: M = 1.50, SE = 0.03) and emotional loneliness (see Figure 4; young: M = 1.58, SE = 0.06; older: M = 1.26, SE = 0.03) were considered separately. Thus, in this sample, loneliness appears to be a phenomenon that is currently being observed more frequently among younger adults than among older adults.

How lonely are young people in Germany compared to young people in other EU countries?

In the EU-wide sample, approximately 57% of the young adults surveyed (see Figure 5) stated that they are at least moderately lonely (of whom 17% were severely lonely). Thus, loneliness appears to be somewhat less widespread in Germany than in the EU as a whole. This is also reflected in a significantly lower mean value for loneliness among young adults in Germany (M = 3.34, SE = 0.09) compared to young adults across the EU (M = 3.61, SE = 0.04). In contrast, only 47% of older adults in the EU are classified as at least moderately lonely, of whom 17% were severely lonely (in the EU-wide sample, 50 %

Figure 5: Loneliness among young adults in the EU

Share of general loneliness in % with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Perception of loneliness (scale from 0 to 6). 0 to 3: Not lonely, 4 to 5: Moderately lonely, 6: Severely lonely



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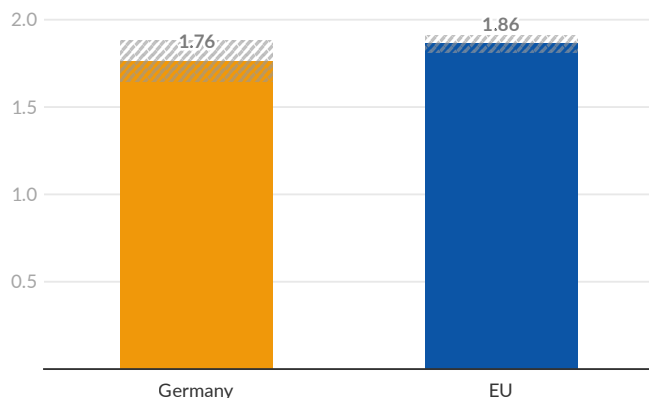
were at least moderately lonely and 17% severely lonely).

The difference in the values for general loneliness between young adults in Germany and those in the EU can primarily be attributed to differences in emotional loneliness (see Figure 6): The mean value of 1.58 (SE = 0.06) in the German sample was significantly lower than the mean value of the EU-wide sample (M = 1.75, SE = 0.02). In contrast, social loneliness in

Figure 6: Social and emotional loneliness among young adults (Germany – EU)

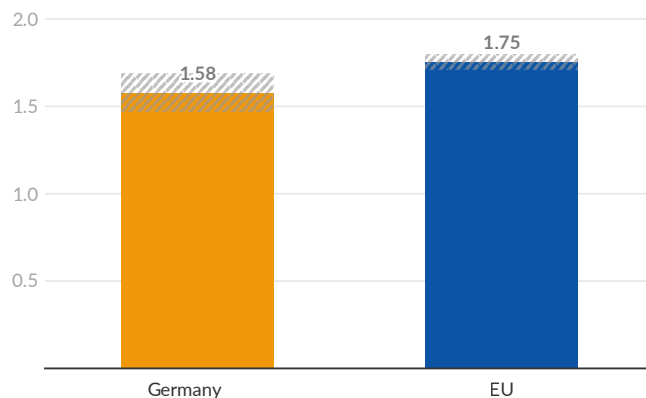
Social loneliness

Mean values on a scale from 0 to 3 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the t-test: $t(3952) = 1.54$, $p = .123$

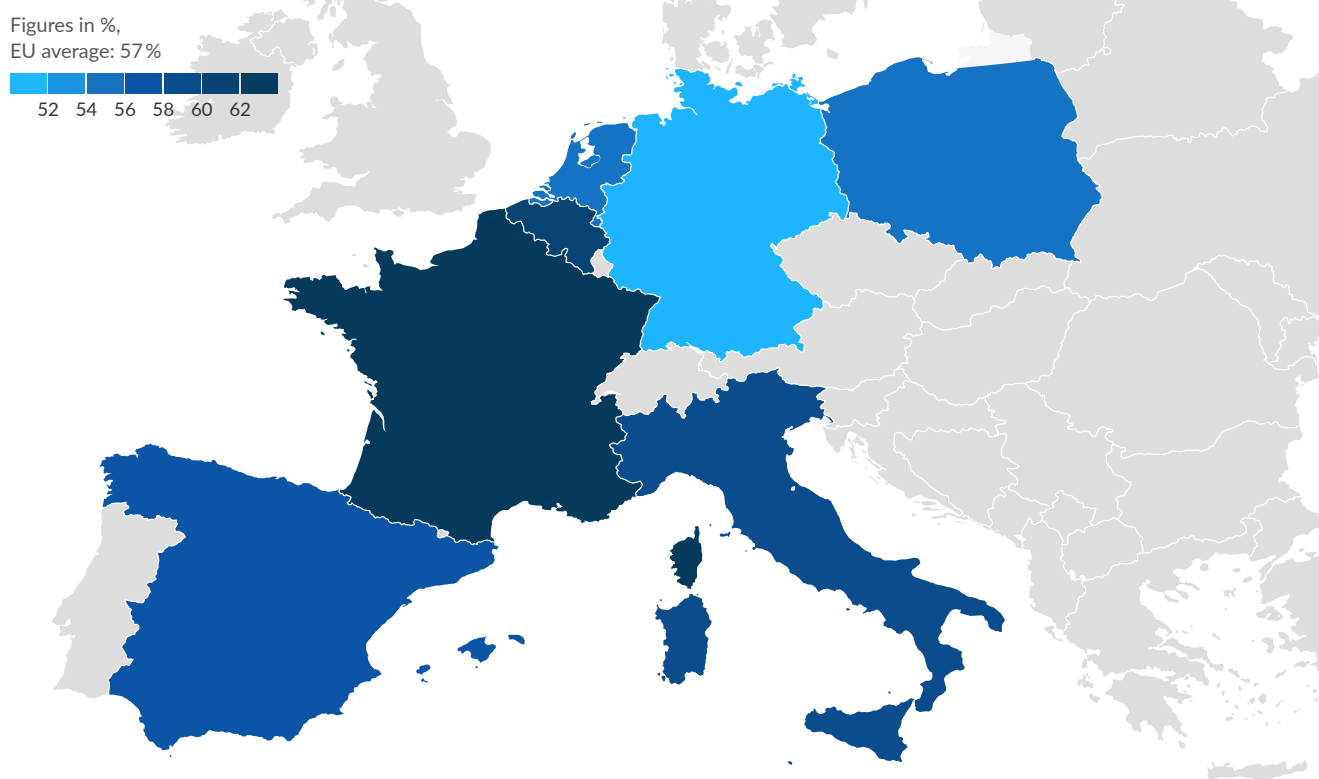


Emotional loneliness

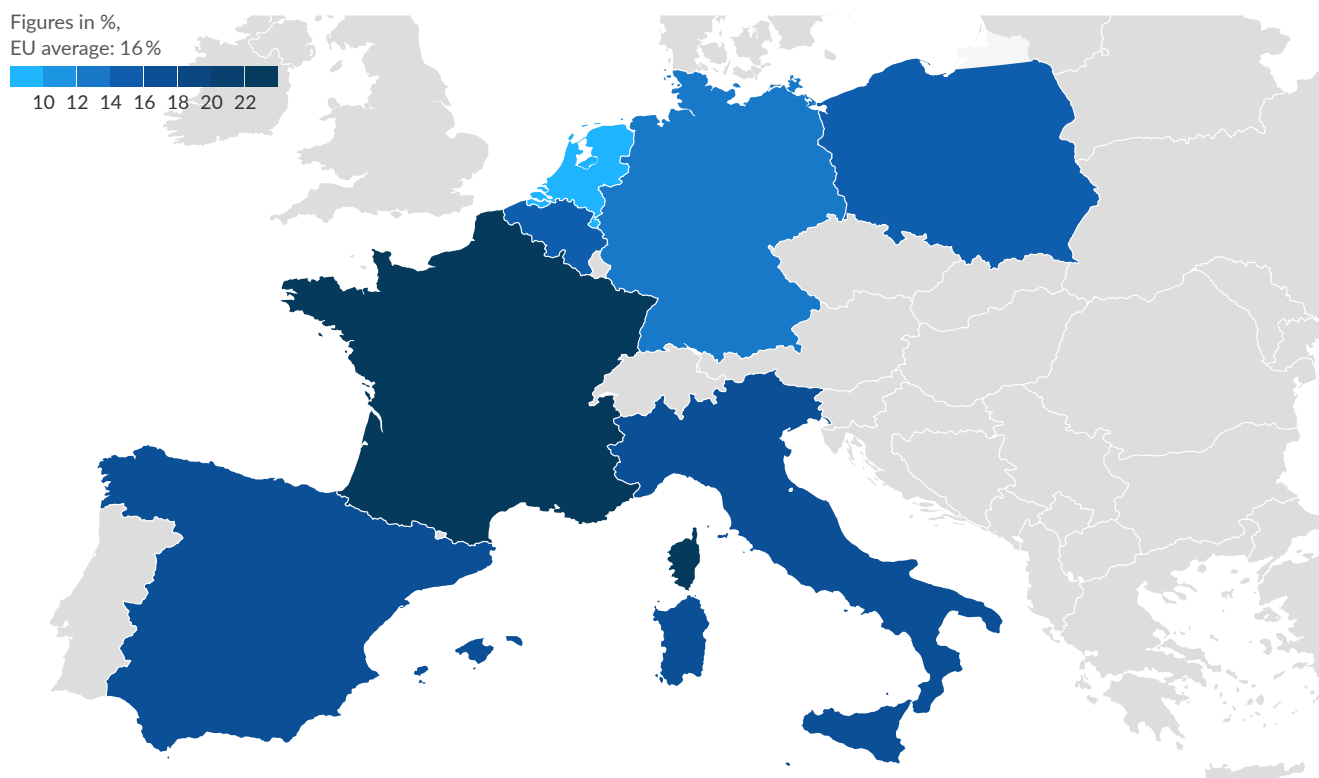
Mean values on a scale from 0 to 3 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the t-test: $t(3952) = 2.92$, $p < .01$



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Figure 7: **At least moderately lonely young adults – frequency by country**

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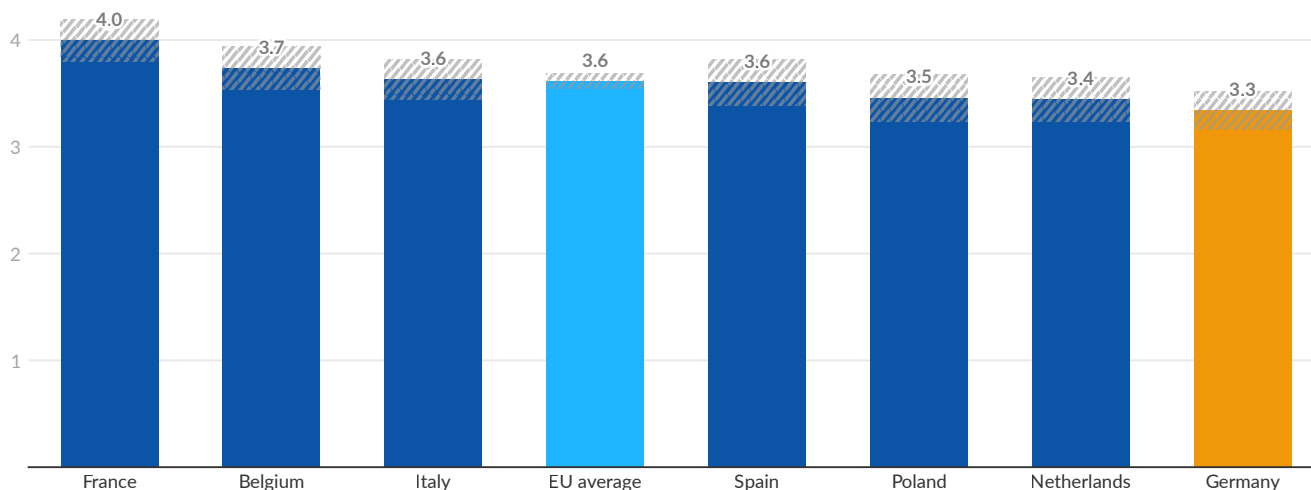
Figure 8: **Severely lonely young adults – frequency by country**

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Figure 9: Loneliness among young adults by country

Mean values on a scale from 0 to 6 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area).

Results of the Wald test: $F(6, 2586) = 4.98, p < .001$



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Germany, with a mean value of 1.76 ($SE = 0.06$), was not significantly different in statistical terms from the corresponding mean value for the EU as a whole ($M = 1.86, SE = 0.02$).

The seven countries for which specific comparisons were meaningful due to the sample sizes showed some substantial differences in terms of the prevalence of loneliness (see Figures 7 and 8). Young adults in France were affected particularly frequently: 63% were at least moderately lonely, of whom 23% were severely lonely.

Regarding the average level of loneliness, statistical analyses showed significant differences among the countries (see Figure 9). Pairwise comparisons among young adults showed that average loneliness was significantly lower in the German ($M = 3.34, SE = 0.09$), Dutch ($M = 3.44, SE = 0.11$) and Polish samples ($M = 3.46, SE = 0.11$) than in the French sample ($M = 3.99, SE = 0.10$).

Which groups are particularly affected by loneliness – and are these group differences comparable between Germany and the EU?

Gender and loneliness of young people in the EU

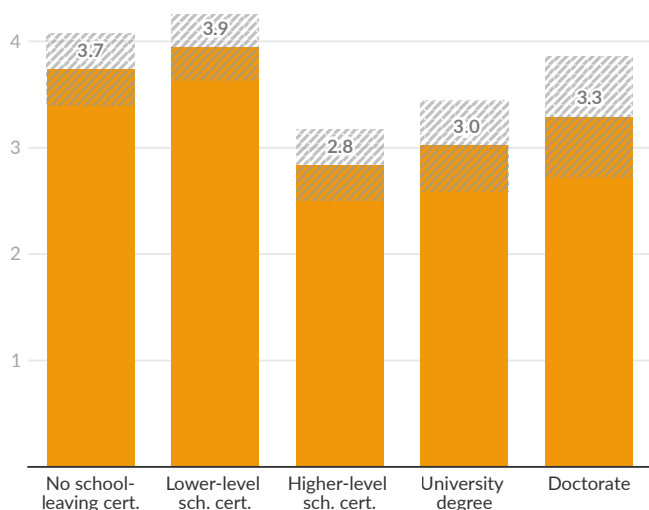
In the German sample, young men ($M = 3.35, SE = 0.14$) and young women ($M = 3.33, SE = 0.12$) were about equally lonely. There were also only very small differences in general loneliness by gender in the EU-wide sample. On average, young women were slightly lonelier ($M = 3.63; SE = 0.05$) than young men ($M = 3.60; SE = 0.05$), but these differences were not statistically significant.

Education and loneliness of young people in the EU

Regarding the correlation between the respective level of educational attainment and loneliness, Germany (see Figure 10) and the EU (see Figure 11) also showed very comparable results: Clear differences were evident in both Germany and the EU depending on the level

Figure 10: **Loneliness in Germany by level of educational attainment**

Mean values on a scale from 0 to 6 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the Wald test: $F(4, 472) = 7.32, p < .001$



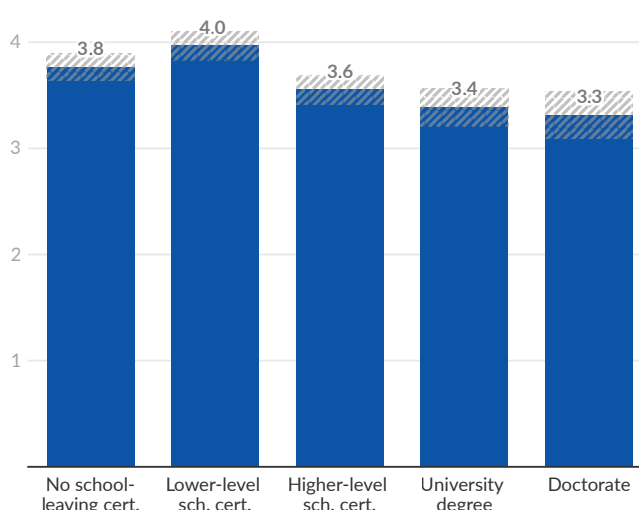
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of educational attainment. In Germany, the loneliness values of people without a school-leaving qualification ($M = 3.74, SE = 0.17$) and those with a lower-level school-leaving qualification ($M = 3.94, SE = 0.16$) were higher than the values of people with a higher-level school-leaving qualification ($M = 2.84, SE = 0.17$), a bachelor's degree ($M = 3.02, SE = 0.22$), or a master's degree or doctorate ($M = 3.29, SE = 0.29$). The differences between individuals without a school-leaving qualification and those with a higher-level school-leaving qualification were statistically significant – as were the differences between individuals with a lower-level school-leaving qualification, a higher-level school-leaving qualification, and a bachelor's degree from a university.

Among young people in the EU, both those without a school-leaving qualification ($M = 3.77, SE = 0.07$) and those with a lower-level school-leaving qualification ($M = 3.97, SE = 0.07$) also had higher loneliness values than people with an higher-level school-leaving qualification ($M = 3.55, SE = 0.07$), a bachelor's degree ($M = 3.39, SE = 0.09$), or a master's degree or doctorate ($M = 3.31, SE = 0.11$). With the exception of the difference between people with no school-leaving qualifications and those with a higher-level school-leaving quali-

Figure 11: **Loneliness in the EU by level of educational attainment**

Mean values on a scale from 0 to 6 with 95 % confidence interval (shaded area). Results of the Wald test: $F(4, 3472) = 10.58, p < .001$



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cation, the pairwise differences between people with at most a lower-level school-leaving qualification and those with at least a higher-level school-leaving qualification were significantly different.

Settlement structure and loneliness of young people in the EU

Neither in Germany nor in the EU as a whole did young people from rural areas and young people from cities differ significantly in terms of their average loneliness.

Summary and conclusions

This report provides an overview of how widespread loneliness is among young people in Germany and Europe.

Loneliness affects young adults in Germany and Europe

Loneliness is a widespread problem, not only in Germany but also in other EU countries. The study shows that every second young adult in Germany reports at least moderate loneliness (51%, of whom 12% report severe loneliness). Even though loneliness is still widespread among young adults in Germany, the figures for Germany are lower than for the rest of the EU.

However, young adults in Germany in 2024 are lonelier than middle-aged and older adults, as previous studies from 2020 and 2022 also show (Baarck et al. 2021; Berlingieri et al. 2023; Diabaté et al. 2024; Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). While older people were more likely to be affected by loneliness before the Covid-19 pandemic, this pattern reversed itself during the pandemic (Baarck et al. 2021). Since then, younger adults have continued to be the particularly affected age group (Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). A comparison of EU countries likewise shows that young adults are also lonelier than middle-aged and older adults.

In this report, we also distinguished social and emotional loneliness, with the former being slightly more common than the latter. In Germany, the average value for emotional loneliness reported by young adults was significantly below the EU average. The results of this study therefore differ from those of two other studies conducted in Germany with young adults up to the age of 30, in which emotional loneliness was more pronounced than social loneliness (Luhmann et al. 2023;

Steinmayr et al. 2024). Possible reasons for the differing results could be a slightly different survey methodology or the broader age range considered in this study (aged 18–35 instead of aged 16–30). More differentiated analyses were not possible due to the somewhat imprecise recording of age for this study (classification into groups aged 18–25 or aged 26–35).

As risk factors, we examined gender, level of educational attainment, and settlement structure. As in other studies, both in Germany and across the EU, a higher level of educational attainment was associated with lower levels of loneliness (summarized by Barjaková et al. 2023). The reasons for this correlation have not been conclusively established. While some studies show that people with a higher level of educational attainment are more likely to have less stress, a larger social network and higher-quality relationships – factors that tend to be associated with less loneliness (e.g., Hawkley et al. 2008) – other studies show that the correlation can be better explained by the higher income associated with higher educational attainment and the greater opportunities for social participation associated with having a higher income (e.g., Luhmann & Hawkley 2016).

There were no significant differences in the average levels of loneliness among young adults in Germany and the EU in terms of either gender or settlement structure. Other studies have also shown that if there are any gender differences, they are only found in certain age ranges that are narrower than those defined here (Luhmann et al. 2023; Maes et al. 2019; Steinmayr et al. 2024). Two other recent studies of young adults in Germany showed lower levels of loneliness among the rural population (Luhmann et al. 2023; Steinmayr et al. 2024), but other studies did not reach the same conclusion (Schobin et al. 2024). This means that it cannot be conclusively determined whether rural life, at least in Germany, is a protective factor against

loneliness. It is more likely that other aspects play a role in loneliness, such as the distance to the city at the center of the region, distances to parks and sports/leisure facilities, and perceived neighborhood quality (Buecker et al. 2021).

Increasing loneliness as a persistent problem

In the German sample, 41 % of respondents reported at least moderate loneliness (of whom 12 % reported severe loneliness). In the EU Loneliness Survey of 2022, 12–13 % of the surveyed Germans reported being severely lonely, according to the categorization chosen for this study (Berlingieri et al. 2023). This means that the frequency of severe loneliness in Germany has not changed since 2022. However, even if they have not yet reached the pre-pandemic level, the values are substantially lower compared to those seen in the pandemic period (Baarck et al. 2021). In the EU-wide sample, the proportion of moderately and severely lonely people was 50 % (of whom 17 % are severely lonely) – and is thereby also still notably higher in 2024 compared to the pre-pandemic level (Baarck et al. 2021; d’Hombres et al. 2018).

In the EU Loneliness Survey (Berlingieri et al. 2023), the values determined using the same survey instrument and categorization as used for this study were 52 % (of whom 12 % were severely lonely). This means that while the proportion of moderately lonely people in the EU fell slightly between 2022 and 2024, the proportion of severely lonely people increased across the EU. Thus, loneliness remains widespread in Germany and the EU and is still well above the pre-pandemic level in all EU countries.

General conclusion

The study shows that loneliness is an EU-wide phenomenon affecting all age groups – but especially younger adults and, in particular, those with a low level of educational attainment. Even if the reported frequencies for the German sample were lower compared to the EU-wide average, this does not represent an all-clear signal. Loneliness is still more common in Germany than it was before the pandemic – and it is mainly young adults who are more frequently affected by loneliness.

Combating loneliness requires an effort by society as a whole, in which all relevant players must work together. For starters, regular monitoring of loneliness and life satisfaction is crucial in order to identify risk groups and better gauge how widespread and severe the problem is. Politics plays an important role in this, as it can influence the framework conditions for such studies and provide support to measures aimed at helping lonely people. Even though policymakers in Germany and other countries (Schwichtenberg et al. 2024) have put the issue of loneliness on the agenda and have now identified adolescents and young adults as a target group for measures to combat loneliness, there is still a lack of specific programs both in Germany and in many other EU countries.

In addition, since most programs are still primarily aimed at older adults (Nurminen et al. 2023), more measures should be formulated to combat loneliness among young adults. Germany and other EU countries could learn from each other (see, e.g., the study “Young and lonely”; Schwichtenberg et al. 2024) – although it should be emphasized that country-specific strategies may need to be adapted to the unique context of each particular country. International exchange and concrete measures could also help, such as establishing

an international database on the effectiveness of programs aimed at combating loneliness. This could help countries to tackle their loneliness problems in a targeted manner.

In addition, some thought should be given to preventative measures, such as fostering social and emotional skills, which have been shown to be particularly effective at reducing loneliness (Beckers et al. 2022; Masi et al. 2011). Besides fostering social and emotional skills, interventions that focus on changing negative thoughts, perceptions and emotions through cognitive-behavioral techniques have proven to be particularly effective. These treatments aim to strengthen the sense of belonging, identify harmful automatic thoughts and perceptions, correct fears and misjudgments, and improve coping strategies and stress management (Cacioppo et al. 2015). However, it should be noted that these findings are primarily based on adult samples or, in the case of young adults, on studies focused on specific risk groups (Eccles & Qualter 2021). This also underscores the need for research into interventions for young adults.

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