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Young and lonely

International perspectives
for a new field of political action

Imprint

© Bertelsmann Stiftung and Liz Mohn Stiftung, Gütersloh
June 2024

Publisher

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Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

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Recommended Citation

Schwichtenberg, Leonie, Karenina Schröder and Michael Seberich (2024). Young and lonely: International perspectives for a new field of political action. Edited by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Liz Mohn Stiftung. Gütersloh.

Layout

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Editing

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Photo Credits

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Printing

Gieselmann Druck und Medienhaus

Paper

Circleoffset, 100% recycled paper, certified by Blauer Engel and FSC Recycled

DOI 10.11586/2025004

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FOREWORD TO “YOUNG AND LONELY”

Loneliness is a fundamental experience that most people encounter at some point in their lives. But for many years, loneliness was a niche topic in research, politics and the public sphere and, if at all, was mainly discussed with regard to very old people.

This has changed since the Covid-19 pandemic, as it is now clear that loneliness is a widespread phenomenon affecting people of all ages. Data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) show that, on average, all age groups became lonelier during the pandemic. This increase was particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults. While very old people (aged 80 and over) were the most affected by loneliness before the pandemic, this unwelcome top position was taken over by the youngest age group surveyed during the pandemic. Moreover, a study that my team and I conducted on behalf of the State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia shows that a significant proportion of young people are still lonely in 2023. According to our estimates, more than half of 16- to 20-year-olds feel at least moderately lonely, and around 17% of respondents in this age group reported feeling very lonely.

These figures suggest that the problem will not just resolve itself. If one additionally considers that lonely young people often become lonely adults and that loneliness can have serious health and societal consequences, it becomes clear that there is a considerable – and urgent – need for action.

Preventing and combating loneliness is a challenge for society as a whole that can only be overcome if all the relevant players come together to formulate and implement solutions. Policymakers have a special role in these efforts. Although loneliness is initially an individual problem that has multiple causes and can take different forms from person to person, the risk of experiencing loneliness also depends on external conditions, which policymakers can influence. In addition, policymakers can lend their support to programs aimed at helping lonely people.

In Germany, policymakers have accepted this challenge. Loneliness is now on the agenda across all political parties and at all levels – from municipalities and Germany’s federal states to the country’s federal parliament and government. I was allowed to participate as an internal expert in an enquiry commission on loneliness set up by the parliament of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia before the pandemic. In its widely read final report, the commission proposed 65 concrete measures. In December 2023, Germany’s federal government unveiled a comprehensive strategy to combat loneliness. Unlike a few years ago, adolescents and young adults are now explicitly mentioned in all these documents as a target group for measures to combat loneliness. Nevertheless, measures aimed specifically at young people are still rare. For this reason, we urgently need (ideally) evidence-based services that focus on young people as a group that is currently particularly affected by loneliness.

At the same time, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, as strategies to combat loneliness are also currently being devised in other countries, and in some countries, the issue has been on the political agenda for much longer than in Germany. So it is worth taking a look outside the proverbial box. This paper, initiated by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Liz Mohn Foundation and written by Wider Sense GmbH, aims to provide food for thought and to make a valuable contribution to these efforts. In the study presented here, Wider Sense has systematically examined and compared strategies and services to combat loneliness in various countries both in and outside Europe. The findings demonstrate that we can learn a lot from other countries. But they also show that the magic formula for defeating loneliness has not yet been found, because in most of the surveyed countries, the formulation and implementation of specific strategies is still very much in its infancy – just as it is here in Germany. The report also makes it clear that potential solutions from other countries should not be adopted blindly. Rather, it is important to select approaches that have been proven to be effective and to transfer them to the German context in such a way that our legal, social and cultural particularities are taken into account. This paper lays the foundation for doing just that.

The next step will be to implement the recommendations contained in this report. To do so, all relevant players must be involved and brought together. These players include sports clubs and similar groups bringing together people with similar hobbies and interests, non-governmental organizations, researchers, policy-makers, the media, foundations – and, most importantly, those who are the focus of this report: young people.

*Prof. Maike Luhmann
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a societal challenge, loneliness is becoming bigger and bigger. Studies show that young people (aged 16 to 30), in particular, are lonelier than the members of other age groups. Loneliness has only been a field of policy intervention for a few years, and the focus was initially on reducing loneliness among older people.

This paper examines what policy approaches exist on the international level to reduce loneliness among younger people. To this end, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Liz Mohn Stiftung commissioned Wider Sense GmbH to conduct research and interviews with experts in the field in Canada, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea and the UK.

In all the countries surveyed, young people are the loneliest segment of the population. Civil society actors are particularly active in efforts to combat loneliness. National governments are also beginning to recognize youth loneliness as a societal problem and to devise appropriate policy measures. Most of the surveyed countries are in the process of formulating or implementing a policy strategy against loneliness. Measures to help young people have their own place in these countries, but they are pronounced to greater and lesser degrees.

The UK, in particular, was an early adopter of a political strategy with elaborate measures to combat loneliness among young people. But worthwhile approaches, best-practice projects and requests to

politicians can also be found in other countries. Based on our findings, the following recommendations for action can be made for formulating and implementing an effective policy to reduce youth loneliness:

TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. **Knowledge base:** Gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of loneliness among young people
2. **Participation:** Actively involve young people and other relevant actors
3. **Awareness-raising:** Find digital and analog ways to reach young people
4. **Leadership:** Give the issue political weight and a face
5. **Integration:** Design cross-sectoral measures
6. **Responsibility:** Clarify goals and responsibilities
7. **Get started:** Get the ball rolling with pilot projects
8. **Prevention:** Prevent loneliness before it arises
9. **Quality:** Test what really works against youth loneliness
10. **Continuity:** Structurally anchor measures

This paper shows that addressing loneliness among young people is a new – but also urgent – field for political action.

INTRODUCTION

Young people (aged 16 to 30) were the loneliest age group in Germany during the coronavirus pandemic (Entringer 2022). But young people were already lonelier than other population groups even before Covid-19 (ibid.). Following the publication of the latest data, the long-term consequences of loneliness for younger people are also moving into the political spotlight (Neu, Küpper & Luhmann 2023).

The Netherlands and the UK were the first countries to launch national strategies to combat loneliness already before the pandemic, followed by Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Germany. Nevertheless, political efforts to date have mainly focused on reducing loneliness among older people. What policies are in place that are explicitly dedicated to preventing and reducing loneliness among young people?

The efforts of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Liz Mohn Stiftung to answer this question have resulted in the commissioning and creation of this paper. It takes a look around the globe and presents policy measures from six countries, with the focus being on identifying which lessons can be learned for successfully formulating and implementing a policy to combat loneliness among young people. First, the current status of the new policy field of loneliness is briefly explained. Second, the situations in Finland, the UK, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands and South Korea are analyzed. And, lastly, recommendations for action are formulated for policies to reduce loneliness among young people.

Loneliness is the subjective feeling of a discrepancy between the desired and actual number and quality of social relationships (Luhmann 2022; Peplau & Perlman 1982). This can – but does not necessarily have to – go hand in hand with an objective lack of social contact (i. e., social isolation). Periods of loneliness are part of human life and do not automatically point to the existence of a problem. It only becomes critical when the feeling of loneliness becomes chronic and no longer goes away. Those who suffer from loneliness – and especially chronic loneliness – also feel a profound sense of shame and are socially stigmatized, which makes it even harder for them to look and ask for help.

The experience of loneliness is complex and subjective and can be sub-divided according to individual and societal causes. On an individual level, people who are impaired by health problems, have a below-average income and are not in gainful employment are particularly susceptible to loneliness (Deutscher Bundestag 2021). Young people with only one or no parents, with negative life events or with experiences of discrimination are also lonely particularly often (Luhmann et al. 2023). At a societal level, various trends (e. g., individualization, changing values, the pluralization of lifestyles, and the associated increase in single-person households) are contributing to people's isolation. In addition, institutions that foster social cohesion have been weakened as a result of budget consolidation (Wendt 2023). These include, for example, welfare-state institutions that offer social services.

The consequences of loneliness are profound – for both individuals and societies. Loneliness increases the risk of mental illnesses (e. g., depression and anxiety disorders) and, due to lack of exercise and poor eating habits, it also increases the risk of physical illnesses (Luhmann et al. 2023). In addition, loneliness leads to reduced social participation and an increased tendency to embrace political extremism and to believe in political conspiracy narratives (Neu et al. 2023).

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the proportion of lonely young adults was above the average for the population as a whole (Entringer 2022). At the height of the pandemic, loneliness among young adults in Germany increased to such an extent that they were the most severely affected population group (ibid.; Entringer & Kröger 2021). Figures from North Rhine-Westphalia suggest that this level has not fundamentally decreased in the post-pandemic period (Luhmann et al. 2023).

What scope for action, tasks and roles do policymakers have when it comes to responding to the highly subjective and individual feeling of loneliness among young people? Following initial research, an iterative process was used to draw up a list of potential countries and then a selection was made based on three criteria: the level of development of the policy, the diversity of the countries, and the thematic fit. The countries selected were Canada, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea and the UK. After selecting the countries, suitable interview partners were identified, additional research was conducted, and interview guidelines were drafted based on this research. The interviews were then conducted and systematically analyzed. Most of the interviewees come from civil society and academia, which makes them critical observers as well as participants in the political process.

COMBATING LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AS A NEW FIELD OF POLITICAL ACTION

The reduction of loneliness among young people as a field of political action is a very recent development. The UK attracted international attention in 2018 with the appointment of a “Minister for Loneliness” (in this case the person who was officially the Minister for Sport and Civil Society at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport was put in charge of the strategy to combat loneliness) and the simultaneous presentation of a political strategy to reduce loneliness. However, the Netherlands was actually the first country in which policymakers addressed the issue of loneliness, as it already introduced an action plan to reduce loneliness in 2014. The Covid-19 pandemic – and the politically enforced social isolation that accompanied it – focused increased attention on loneliness as a societal problem and put it on the political agenda in many regions and countries. Following the example of the UK, Japan also introduced a national strategy to combat loneliness in 2021, as did Australia and New Zealand. At the end of 2023, Germany’s Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth also presented a national strategy. A recent review of the literature on international loneliness policies concluded that, to date, 14 countries have published official government documents on the topic (Goldman et al. 2024).

While older people were the focus of measures in the initial development of the policy field, younger people are increasingly becoming the focus of policymakers.

How can young people’s individual experience of loneliness be countered from a policy perspective? At present, there is still no classification framework for policy interventions to reduce loneliness that is specifically tailored to young people. However, a distinction can be made for all age groups between interventions at various points in the experience of loneliness. Similar to other health policy strategies, this involves prevention, early intervention and treatment. Preventive measures begin before feelings of loneliness arise. They foster social cohesion and the formation of communities while also enabling people to forge meaningful social ties. Early intervention is initiated at the first signs of loneliness by offering information, support and assistance, which can be sought out by those affected by loneliness. In this case, it is important to have close links to places where people typically spend time. In the case of chronically lonely people, treatment measures are based on therapeutic approaches.

Various actors – at an individual, municipal and societal levels – are responsible for carrying out the interventions. The role of the national government lies in prioritizing mental health policy; awareness

and anti-stigmatization campaigns; research funding and evaluation; and other influencing factors: education, locations and spaces for socialization, housing, employment, local public transport, welfare and the design of social spaces.

In summary, preventing and reducing loneliness is a field of political action that is in the early stages of development and is only just starting to include young people as a relevant target group. In what follows, we will explain how policymakers in Finland, the UK, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands and South Korea are responding to the growing incidence of loneliness among young people in their countries.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

FINLAND

FACTS & FIGURES

According to the latest surveys, young people in Finland are affected by loneliness twice as often as the rest of the population. Roughly half of 15- to 24-year-olds feel lonely at least a few times a month, as compared to 25% of members of the other age groups (Finnish Red Cross 2023).

POLICY STRATEGY

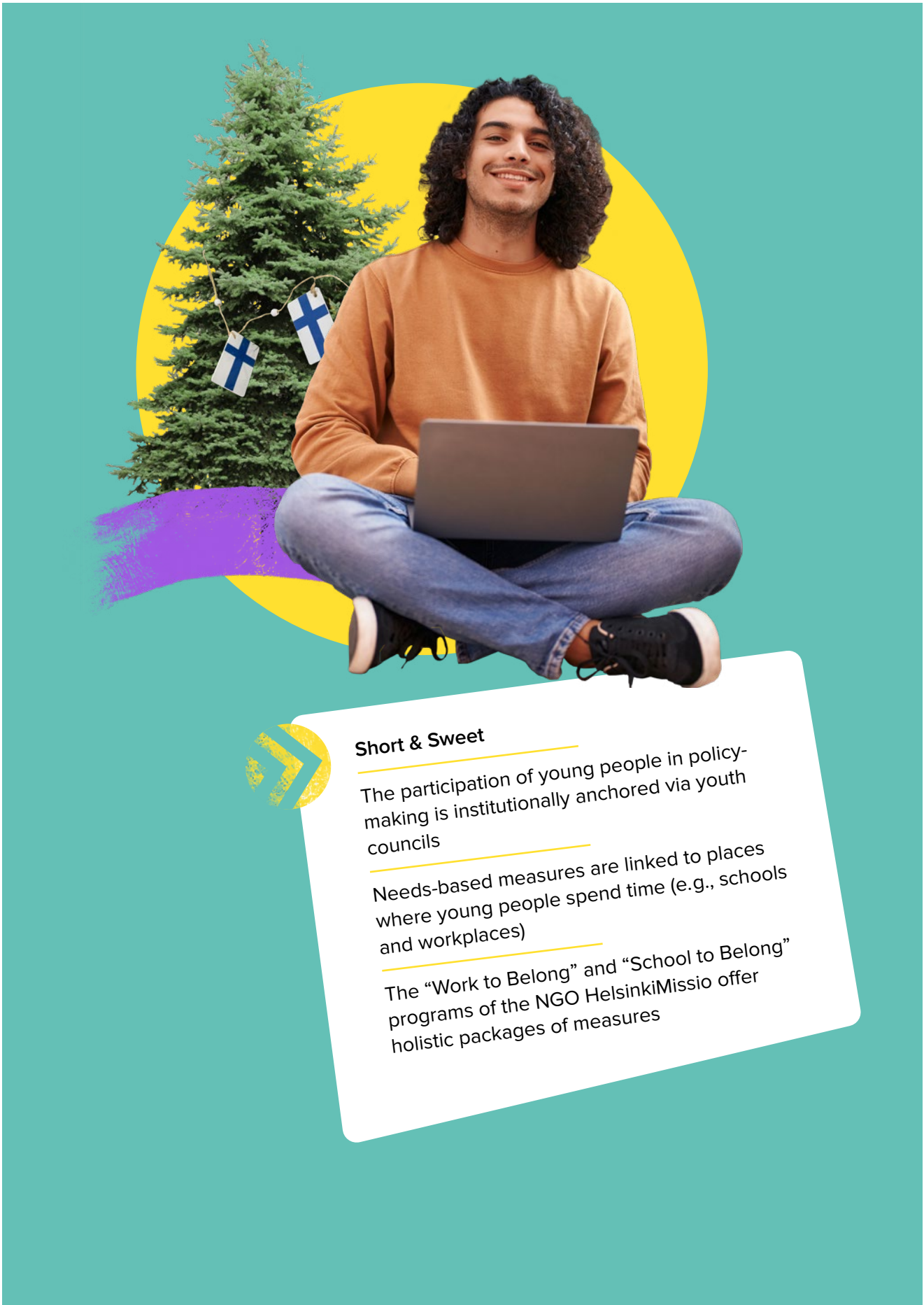
Although it has not yet published a policy strategy to combat loneliness, the Finnish government is currently in the process of formulating one. According to current assessments by observers of the process, the strategy will be cross-sectoral in addition to focusing on social policy measures. What's more, all age groups are to be included, with children and young people forming a distinct focus. When it comes to approaches to combat loneliness among young people, what sets Finland's political system apart is the fact that it has institutionalized youth councils. These ensure that young people are represented and given a say in political decision-making processes at the local and national levels. Youth councils are enshrined in law and stand out as a distinctive feature of the Finnish system (European Commission 2023). Youth organizations, the youth research community and other relevant interest groups are consulted for legislative projects that affect young people. Some of these groups are also allowed to speak in Finland's parliament as part of committee debates.

ACTORS

Those who have been active in efforts to combat loneliness among young people in Finland have so far mainly been civil society actors. NGOs and welfare organizations (e. g., the Finnish Red Cross and the NGO HelsinkiMissio) have long recognized loneliness as a social problem and are working (a) to create an empirical data basis; (b) to devise, implement and evaluate measures; and (c) to network the various organizations in the field. To date, the government has provided support in the background while playing less of a role in terms of shaping and coordinating efforts. There have also not been any national awareness campaigns so far. However, the government's role will change with the unveiling and implementation of the strategy to combat loneliness.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

HelsinkiMissio is the oldest charity organization in Finland dedicated to promoting the welfare of disadvantaged people and is also committed to the needs of lonely individuals. It is financed by project-based state funding and donations. Its loneliness-related work includes (online and offline) counseling sessions tailored to various target groups – young people, adults, families and seniors – with elements of cognitive behavioral therapy as well as follow-up support provided by volunteers. The organization also provides informational material (e. g., a self-help guide available in both Finnish and Swedish). Another focus is



Short & Sweet

The participation of young people in policy-making is institutionally anchored via youth councils

Needs-based measures are linked to places where young people spend time (e.g., schools and workplaces)

The “Work to Belong” and “School to Belong” programs of the NGO HelsinkiMissio offer holistic packages of measures

on systemic programs that address loneliness in schools (“School to Belong”) and in the workplace (“Work to Belong”). All projects are regularly evaluated.

“School to Belong”¹ is a long-term program that informs participating schools about loneliness in addition to supporting them in their efforts to identify lonely students and make the reduction of loneliness a common endeavor for the whole school. This includes a loneliness survey, the publication of the results, and the subsequent development of a school strategy to combat loneliness. Based on the results of the surveys, students with high loneliness scores are provided with information. The participating schools are provided with scientifically sound tools to facilitate early intervention. These include training social skills, reflecting on and changing attitudes, and working to realign distorted thought patterns that contribute to loneliness. Participating schools receive a certificate. “School to Belong” emphasizes that the entire school community – including teachers and non-lonely students – is responsible for social cohesion. The long-term goal is for all Finnish schools and educational institutions to participate in the program. In the 2023/24 school year, 84 of the 3,343 schools in Finland (Statista 2024) participated in the program (HelsinkiMissio 2024a).

“Work to Belong” is aimed at companies in the same way that “School to Belong” is geared toward schools. Companies that are committed to reducing or preventing loneliness among their employees can apply for a program. Following a staff survey, targets are defined and appropriate measures implemented. At the end of the program, the company receives a certificate, which is reviewed annually and designed to help foster an organizational culture in which no one feels lonely (HelsinkiMissio 2024b).

HelsinkiMissio’s programs are based on scientific findings indicating that the most effective way to combat loneliness is to specifically realign distorted thought patterns. Loneliness is often correlated with a negative self-attitude and negative self-talk (Teneva & Lemay Jr. 2020). The HelsinkiMissio surveys in schools show that loneliness is still perceived as a major stigma by young people, even though other mental illnesses

(e.g., depression and anxiety disorders) have already been destigmatized. At the same time, the survey results show a great need to be able to talk about experiences of loneliness. “In our surveys as part of our ‘School to Belong’ program, we are seeing that young people feel more shame about talking about loneliness than about other mental health issues,” says Maria Lähteenmäki, who heads the loneliness work at HelsinkiMissio. “At the same time, they are grateful to finally be able to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings.” Those affected are highly motivated to change their situation, but they feel that there is nothing they can do about it.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

To date, the issue has been too dependent on the personal commitment of individual parliamentarians. This has prompted civil society groups in Finland to call on policymakers to institutionalize the political strategy currently under development to ensure that it remains in place over the long term and transcends changes in government. This can be achieved, for example, by establishing permanent positions and regular monitoring with clear indicators. In addition, the issue of loneliness should be made a political priority in order to really tackle it and incorporate all policy fields. Before implementing any new policy, one should ask whether it will contribute to the social inclusion and well-being of each individual. A regulatory impact assessment with clear, measurable indicators would be an example of implementation in this case.

Overall, Finland’s “School to Belong” and “Work to Belong” programs can be used to learn how a program can be designed with evidence-based early interventions. What’s important is implementation on a broad scale, which is still being pursued in Finland. In addition, a look to the north shows how youth participation can work with the help of institutionalized youth councils.

¹ The program is realized in cooperation with the Finnish National Agency for Education, the University of Turku’s Department of Teacher Education, and regional administrative authorities.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

THE UNITED KINGDOM

FACTS & FIGURES

In the UK, young people aged 16 to 34 are also the most likely to report feelings of loneliness (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2023). While around 6% of all respondents state that they often or always feel lonely, this figure rises to 10% in the younger age group.

POLICY STRATEGY

Alongside the Netherlands, the UK was one of the first countries to launch a national strategy to combat loneliness. This cross-sector strategy was unveiled in 2018. The simultaneous appointment of a “Minister for Loneliness” (officially the Minister for Sport and Civil Society of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, who was put in charge of the loneliness strategy) attracted attention worldwide. The main aims of the strategy are to improve the evidence base, to embed loneliness-reduction across policy areas, and to stimulate a national debate through awareness campaigns and anti-stigma efforts.

ACTORS

In the UK, the state is already playing a major role in efforts to combat loneliness by embedding a national strategy within a department (as ministries are called in the UK). However, the political strategy was preceded by the civil society initiatives of the Jo Cox

Commission on Loneliness and the Campaign to End Loneliness, which have been drawing attention to the problem since 2011 and 2016, respectively. One important civil society actor in terms of youth loneliness is the non-profit organization UK Youth,² which founded the Belong Collective in partnership with Youth Focus North East. This serves as a network that aims to bring practitioners together to exchange knowledge, challenges, good practices and new ideas on combating youth loneliness.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

Although measures specifically geared toward young people are not explicitly embedded in the UK government’s 2018 loneliness strategy, there are references to young people through measures to be implemented by the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. These include, for example, the compulsory introduction of the subjects “relationship education” at the primary school level and “relationship and sex education” at the secondary school level, which also provide information about loneliness. In addition, schools and universities have been encouraged to set up mental health support teams and reduce the waiting time for specialist mental health services to four weeks. The aim is to ensure that young people in need of assistance can be identified and supported more easily and quickly.³ What’s more,

² Funded by the Co-op Foundation and the Astra Foundation, UK Youth aims to have a positive impact on the lives of young people.

³ An overview of the measures can be found in the British Loneliness strategy (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2018: 58).



Short & Sweet

Creating visibility of loneliness through personal networking and functional localization (appointment of a “Minister for Loneliness”)

Awareness-boosting using campaigns with influencers targeted at young people

Cross-sectoral measures

Loneliness strategy defines a package of measures that also affects ministries responsible for overlapping matters

Needs-oriented programs to convey knowledge and reduce loneliness in the school and extracurricular contexts

Regular monitoring report on the progress of the loneliness strategy

initiatives have been set up, such as “studentspace” (<https://studentspace.org.uk/>), a website that offers informational material and advice on mental health issues for students and is funded with the equivalent of € 4.2 million. Each year, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport reports on the status of the measures in a monitoring report.

However, young people’s experiences of loneliness are politically addressed not only by the loneliness strategy, but also by embedding them in the wider political youth agenda. A variety of government funds and strategies support measures to improve the mental health of young people as well as the work of the youth sector itself. One example is the National Youth Guarantee, which provided the equivalent of € 650 million for needs-based extracurricular activities to ensure that all 11- to 18-year-olds have access to activities outside their families and educational institutions. Another example is the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund, which aims to reduce loneliness by fostering volunteering. Furthermore, at the beginning of 2024, the government launched a social media campaign aimed at young people. With the help of well-known influencers, the campaign aims to disseminate information and motivate young people to keep an eye out for loneliness in their surroundings and to invest in social relationships (Department for Culture, Media & Sport 2024).

in ministries with more power and influence (e.g. the Department of Health and Social Care) would give the issue more relevance and importance.

In summary, the UK is a pioneer in the fight against youth loneliness. Noteworthy examples of its efforts include its ministerial anchoring of the issue with simultaneous cross-sectoral cooperation with other ministries, the interlinking of loneliness and youth policy, having programs in both school and extracurricular contexts, organizing awareness campaigns and evaluating measures in an ongoing fashion.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

The policy wishes expressed by the non-profit organization UK Youth relate to (a) getting young people more involved in the formulation of anti-loneliness measures, (b) providing more and free funding for youth work aimed at combating loneliness, and (c) formulating a cross-sector strategy to tackle youth loneliness that includes the youth sector as a relevant stakeholder. “We don’t necessarily need a new political strategy to combat loneliness among young people, but what we do need is to strengthen the youth sector already in place,” said Kate Roberts, a policy manager at UK Youth, in an interview. Furthermore, the organization points out the importance of institutionally anchoring the issue in a way that will make it independent of the activities of individual political actors. In addition, as the connection to ministries is not insignificant, having the issue be institutionally anchored

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

JAPAN

FACTS & FIGURES

In Japan, a study commissioned by the government in 2022 showed that people between the ages of 20 and 30 feel the loneliest (Stickley & Ueda 2022; The Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation, Cabinet Secretariat 2024). Public attention was drawn to the problem by the high suicide rate. While the overall suicide rate in Japan has fallen in recent decades, it has risen among children and adolescents. In fact, suicide is now the leading cause of death among teenagers in the country (Matsumoto et al. 2024).

POLICY STRATEGY

In response to the alarming rate of youth suicides, the Japanese government introduced a strategy to combat loneliness in 2021 and appointed a Minister for Loneliness and Isolation. Since then, this minister has been in charge of coordinating and monitoring measures to combat loneliness and isolation. The aim is to create a policy framework that promotes action against loneliness at the national and regional levels in addition to clarifying the responsibilities of national and regional governments.

ACTORS

By launching Japan's national loneliness strategy, which is being implemented in the regional municipalities, both the national government and the regional governments are now playing a role in efforts to combat loneliness. The political strategy to reduce loneliness was preceded by years of civil society efforts. Inspired by the UK, NGOs in Japan have been leading efforts to lobby for the establishment of a political framework for measures to combat loneliness since 2020. One of these actors is "Anata no Ibasho" ("A Place to Be"), a digital counseling space for young people.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

The government measures have mainly been based on: formulating a priority plan; providing consistent and continuous financial support to the organizations already active in the field (with the equivalent of approx. €38 million per year); expanding cooperation between public, private and non-governmental organizations (in the form of dialogue formats, collaborative websites and regional versions of the loneliness strategy); educating the population and organizations more about loneliness; raising awareness about loneliness (through websites and national campaigns); and expanding the knowledge base by conducting national surveys (Act on Promotion of Policy for Loneliness and Isolation 2023).



Short & Sweet

Shift responsibility to the local level while also providing it with the necessary funding/resources

Strengthen cooperation between public, private and non-governmental organizations

Appoint a minister to assume the political lead and set the agenda

Identify gaps in care for young people and put in place services tailored to their needs

Offer a 24-hour online crisis chat service – because young people don't use telephone helplines

To implement this policy framework, a national steering group will be established and regional governments will be encouraged to form local working groups to address loneliness. All parties involved will be obliged to maintain confidentiality. Since services delivered at the local level can have the strongest preventative impact, local communities will bear primary responsibility for these efforts. These services can include community spaces and educational campaigns (ibid.).

In Japan, there is great degree of shame associated with suffering from mental health issues. At the same time, children and young people have few adult caregivers outside of their schools and families. And since they often do not want to burden relatives with their worries and problems, they do not speak with them openly about them. Given these circumstances, combating the stigma associated with suffering from mental health issues and loneliness is particularly important in Japan. The strategy introduced to combat loneliness, which includes an annual awareness week, provides a good basis for such efforts. The digital information platforms provide information and refer people to other services. By making it the responsibility of regional communities to form working groups and formulate their own strategies, the fight against loneliness is anchored exactly where the problem needs to be addressed.

“Anata no Ibasho” is one of the NGOs that has advocated the introduction of a national strategy and is now supported by state funds. Founded in 2020, it is a digital counseling center where young people can seek assistance and advice by phone or chat around the clock. The NGO is dedicated to combating loneliness among young people. Around 1,000 volunteer counselors, who work from any location, seek to provide initial crisis support and refer young people to other programs and social services. There is enormous demand for the chat option offered by “Anata no Ibasho,” as it closes a supply gap. Since members of the young generation in Japan are reluctant to discuss such issues on the phone, conventional telephone-based support services have presented a major obstacle. But the NGO’s chat option allows young people to avoid this obstacle by getting in touch online.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

In Japan, there is room for improvement in terms of representing young people and their interests. Only a small proportion of the available budget is spent on measures to reduce loneliness among young people, and research funding mainly goes to studies on older people. In order to adequately address the feelings of loneliness of the young generation in Japan, youth organizations must be strengthened and their political articulation of their interests supported.

Four lessons can be learned from the Japanese example: (a) make local governments responsible, as they play a key role in implementing measures to combat loneliness; (b) establish political leadership by appointing a responsible minister; (c) expand cooperation between the government and actors active in the field; and (d) identify and then close gaps in services for young people when it comes to the range of related offerings.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

CANADA

FACTS & FIGURES

Canada has also not been spared the phenomenon of young people showing increased feelings of loneliness. For example, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, a UNICEF study found that 27% of children in Canada felt lonely, sad or hopeless (UNICEF Canada 2019). Figures from a study conducted in 2021 show that younger people (aged 15 to 24) are particularly affected by loneliness compared to the population as a whole (The Daily 2021).

POLICY STRATEGY

Although quantitative surveys give clear indications that loneliness appears to be a growing problem in society as a whole and among young people in particular, the Canadian government has not yet formulated a national loneliness strategy or implemented any concrete measures. Instead, it has mainly focused on promoting mental health. When it comes to loneliness as a sub-field of mental health, there are relatively few specific intervention measures in place.

ACTORS

Canada's federal government began addressing mental health at a relatively early stage, and it established the Mental Health Commission of Canada in 2007, which it

tasked with conducting research on mental health. In addition, there is also a focus on mental health among civil society actors. Among the relevant organizations in this field is the Graham Boeckh Foundation, which aims to improve the healthcare system's ability to foster mental health.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

One example of a concrete policy measure related to combating loneliness is the establishment of the Quality of Life Framework in 2021. It uses various indicators to measure life satisfaction in order to be able to make political decisions on this basis. The "loneliness" indicator was also incorporated into the framework (Statistics Canada 2024). Furthermore, in 2021, the Canadian government allocated the equivalent of roughly €68 million to fund projects that focus on the mental health of people who have been particularly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic (Public Health Agency of Canada 2023). In 2023, the equivalent of almost €2.8 million of this sum was invested in the "Social Prescribing for Better Mental Health across Ontario" project. Using non-medical services, this project aims to bring people in the community together to support the social determinants of health; practical examples from Ontario include cooking, art and gardening groups (Best Health 2024). This project is one of the few direct measures that can be cited, as it explicitly addresses the harmful effects of loneliness on health.



Short & Sweet

Viewing loneliness as part of a wider mental health issue that needs to be addressed in its entirety rather than just in parts

Low-threshold access to comprehensive services integrated into a single system

“Integrated Youth Services” as a point of contact: mental health, education, drugs, employment, housing | one-stop shop as part of the mental health program

Understanding and promoting community activities as social determinants of mental health (“social prescribing”)

When it comes to overcoming loneliness, one measure that stands above the general issue of mental health is “peer support.”⁴ In its Mental Health Strategy published in 2012, the Mental Health Commission of Canada identified peer support as an important mental health service and formulated guidelines for training and real-world practice the following year (Mental Health Commission of Canada 2012).

One initiative that is jointly funded by the state and the Graham Boeckh Foundation in addition to being particularly aimed at the younger population group (12- to 25-year-olds) is called “Integrated Youth Services.” The initiative includes various projects in several Canadian provinces that serve as a point of contact for young people who are concerned about their mental health (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2023). At the same time, support is also offered in a wide range of areas, such as drug use, basic medical care, education and employment. The bundling of multiple services in one place is designed to keep the threshold to access as low as possible. The challenge in Canada – with its extremely low population density and how this makes it difficult to reach young people in rural areas – is overcome by making the Integrated Youth Services accessible online.

In summary, the Canadian government shows a strong overall commitment to promoting mental health. However, there are hardly any projects specifically focused on loneliness despite the fact that loneliness was already a societal problem before – and was further exacerbated by – the Covid-19 pandemic. One example of a project to combat loneliness is “social prescribing,” which involves having doctors prescribe social activities to their patients. However, this offering is not specifically aimed at younger segments of the population, even though they suffer greatly from feelings of loneliness. The Integrated Youth Services initiative, in particular, is a positive example of how to promote mental health among young people and support them in their efforts to cope with a range of related issues.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

As the Integrated Youth Services are not available in every Canadian province and territory, the interviewees are advocating for their expansion; talks are reportedly already underway in the background. The interviewees would also like policymakers to expand cooperation between the various players active on the national level – as is already the case on the regional level in Alberta with the Converge platform (<https://www.convergence.mentalhealth.org/about-us#our-board>). What’s more, interviewees noted that even though a lot of money is being invested to treat mental illnesses, there is a lack of funding for preventative measures.

One thing to learn from the approach in Canada is the concept of Integrated Youth Services, which creates low-threshold access to cross-sectoral services for young people at a centralized point of contact (i. e., one-stop shop). On the other hand, prescribing participation in community activities (“social prescribing”) can serve as a “treatment measure” in cases of loneliness.

⁴ The term refers to the relationship between two or more people who have similar life experiences in common and exchange information in a supportive manner.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

THE NETHERLANDS

FACTS & FIGURES

A 2021 study conducted by Statistics Netherlands found that the cohort of young adults aged 15 to 25 is the loneliest group in the country's population – even ahead of those over 75 years old (CBS 2022). The study also makes a distinction between emotional and social loneliness: While the former is based on close relationships, the latter has to do with social contacts. The study clearly shows that young adults also feel the loneliest in emotional terms.

POLICY STRATEGY

In 2014, the Netherlands became the first country to launch a national program to combat loneliness. In cooperation with local communities, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport drafted a “reinforced action plan against loneliness.” Building on this, the government program “Een tegen Eenzaamheid” (“One against loneliness”) was launched in 2018 with a budget of €26 million. As part of the Pact for Elderly Care, the program was primarily focused on reducing loneliness among people over 75. The pact called for a partnership to be formed between civil society organizations, companies and government agencies to identify early signs of loneliness and make them a topic of public discussion. The follow-up program for the 2022 – 2025 period has expanded the target group to include the entire population. In addition to the €26 million, the govern-

ment has committed itself to providing an additional €10 million per year for measures to combat loneliness (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport 2022).

ACTORS

Although the government and local communities took action early on to combat loneliness, the fact that younger people are particularly affected by the problem is not yet explicitly reflected in the action program, which was originally designed to help reduce loneliness among the elderly. A pioneer in the field of loneliness and young people has been the NGO “Join Us,” which was founded in 2016 with the aim of improving the personal and social health of young people (aged 12 to 30) using an evidence-based approach to prevent chronic loneliness.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

The Dutch government's current action plan is based on three pillars: (a) forming a national anti-loneliness coalition to raise awareness of the issue and identify early signs of loneliness (e.g., through neighborhood teams, campaigns and helplines); (b) bolstering existing social initiatives (e.g., through annual networking meetings, project funding and the establishment of new initiatives); and (c) requiring all municipalities to design and implement a local loneliness strategy. Since 2015, responsibility for the issue has primarily been borne by municipalities. The ministry provides a toolkit to assist them in these efforts. Since 2022, some



Short & Sweet

Meeting places are not enough – targeted therapeutic approaches are needed

Boost visibility with a “national awareness week”

Strengthen cooperation among the various actors involved in a strategy

Make local governments responsible for designing and implementing a loneliness strategy and provide them with support from the national government

The NGO “Join Us” invests heavily in the accompanying evaluation and ongoing improvement of its measures, and it calls for this to be made the basis for receiving state funding

of the funds from the action program have also been allocated to municipalities (World Health Organization 2022).

Another important project is the NGO “Join Us,” which empowers young people to form their own social network and realize that they are not alone when it comes to experiencing feelings of loneliness. Participants are invited to two-week meetings in groups of individuals of similar ages, which are facilitated by trained social workers or volunteers. In the meetings, they are asked to grapple with their own personal challenges. The aim is to have positive experiences with peers, develop social skills and learn how to deal constructively with their own negative thoughts. The program is being implemented in 77 municipalities (20% of all municipalities) and has been integrated into their local anti-loneliness strategy. “Join Us” is financed by companies and, to a lesser extent, by state funds. It is promoted by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport as a best practice example. The method has been evaluated and found to be effective; two evaluation studies have confirmed that it has positive impacts (Netherlands Jeugdinstituut 2021).

important initial measure to identify and prevent loneliness as well as to raise awareness about it; and (b) putting responsibility in the hands of local administrations to design and implement strategies to combat loneliness – while ensuring that they receive support from the national government for these efforts. What’s more, it is important to establish meeting places for lonely young people so that they can (re-)build a social network while also ensuring that all these programs are accompanied by therapeutic support.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

“Join Us” shows that providing places to come together does not suffice to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

Instead, young people need to be empowered to form social ties with their peers. This requires peer-to-peer approaches with professionally trained support and an evidence-based understanding of causes and effects.

Regarding this matter, Jolanda van Gerwe, the director of “Join Us,” emphasizes: “Having places to connect is not enough on its own, as lonely young people need to be coached and their social cognition trained.” What’s more, the social impact of funded projects needs to be evaluated on an ongoing basis. And municipalities should include young people as an affected group in their political strategy to combat loneliness. To do so, they must be provided not only with guidelines, but also with financial support.

The findings from the Dutch example demonstrate two crucial aspects of an effective anti-loneliness approach: (a) fostering cooperation between civil society organizations, companies and government agencies as an

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

SOUTH KOREA

FACTS & FIGURES

In 2023, the latest figures from the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA) caused a stir, as its survey showed that 5% of all 19- to 34-year-olds in South Korea (around 540,000 people) were living in extreme social isolation (Lee et al. 2023). More specifically, this means that those affected only have minimal human contact – or none at all – on a regular basis, hardly ever leave their own room, and are often not employed. This alarming figure served as a wake-up call to politicians and the public. At the same time, on their own initiative, young people living in seclusion were using social media to publicize and report on what their lives were like.

POLICY STRATEGY

The empirical data – combined with the fact that this social media content went viral – prompted political actors to take action. The focus in this case is not explicitly on the issue of loneliness, but on the problem of social isolation more broadly. A nationwide pilot program has been developed that consists of identifying isolated young people, supporting them in their efforts to resocialize, developing preventive measures and integrating them into administrative structures. The program is scheduled to be launched in July 2024 and run until the end of 2025.

ACTORS

The scientific findings have played a key role in drawing attention to the issue of loneliness, which in turn has prompted the government to take action. The pilot program has been initiated by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, although the Ministry of Employment and Labor is also involved. Some municipalities (e.g., Seoul and Gwangju) had already launched programs in the past to tackle the social problem of extreme isolation.

PROJECTS & MEASURES

The South Korean government's package of measures will initially be implemented in four districts. A system for the early detection of signs of isolation is to be developed in order to identify severely isolated young people.⁵ Youth centers based on the “one-stop shop” model⁶ will be set up and staffed to assist with resocialization. A single standard for measuring social ties will be formulated and applied. Depending on their classification, those affected will be placed in different rehabilitation programs. These programs

5 This will include: setting up a website with tools for self-diagnosis; establishing telephone helplines; putting outreach teams in places that are often frequented by young adults who feel lonely and isolated (e.g., galleries); and creating a regional cooperation network involving municipal authorities, police departments, fire departments, social services and local residents. In addition, guidelines for communicating with the target group will be formulated.

6 One-stop shops are points of contact that bundle various services in a single location, such as counseling on health, youth welfare, education and housing.



Short & Sweet

Interventions and measures must be evaluated on an ongoing basis

Start with pilot measures, which can then be further developed and scaled up

The first measure should be to identify lonely and socially isolated individuals

Those affected should be classified according to the severity of their loneliness and offered measures tailored to their needs

Draw attention to the magnitude of the problem by creating a robust data basis

Such data has enabled South Korea to recognize that its highly competitive labor market is an important structural cause of increasing levels of loneliness

will include: initial psychological counseling; shared housing projects to re-establish a normal, everyday social life; communication training for affected families; mentoring programs in which those affected meet with other, non-isolated young people; and peer-to-peer programs in which those affected will be together with each other. The preventive measures are aimed at strengthening everyday safety nets at school, during job searches and in professional life. The program distinguishes between four places where the measures must be implemented: schools, venues for extracurricular leisure activities, workplaces and cultural venues. In the first years of the pilot phase, the program will focus on identifying and resocializing socially isolated individuals. It is to be evaluated on an ongoing basis and eventually institutionalized nationwide. The equivalent of €1 million has been allocated to the pilot phase.

The case of South Korea shows how important research is when it comes to drawing attention to problems and encouraging stakeholders to take action. As a first step, it is crucial to identify those affected, assess the extent of their loneliness, and then assign them to programs that match their specific needs. Based on the results of these pilot measures, it will be possible to further develop and fine-tune the strategy. Using them in all spheres of public life represents a holistic approach that promises to have a major impact.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES WANT FROM POLICYMAKERS

There are many reasons why young people are extremely withdrawn from society. In South Korean society, there are many prejudices against the so-called “hikikomori” (an adopted Japanese term), as people associate them with criminality or mental illnesses. Severely withdrawn individuals consequently feel much shame, which makes the inhibition threshold for seeking help high. The causes can also be found in the conditions of the South Korean labor market. For example, it is extremely competitive and there are only a few jobs for many highly qualified young people. On top of that, the range of available jobs is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and working conditions vary greatly depending on the size of the company. The combination of great shame and difficulties in finding a suitable job leads to role conflicts and can result in extreme withdrawal from social life. The pilot program will eventually also be about dovetailing with labor market policy measures, although it has only concentrated on direct interventions to date. It will be exciting to see what unfolds over the next few years and what findings emerge from the evaluations of the measures.

TEN TIPS FROM REAL-WORLD PRACTICE:

RECOMMENDED APPROACHES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The country examples presented in this study show that efforts to formulate policy measures to combat loneliness among young people are still in their infancy. To date, only a few countries have implemented measures specifically designed to prevent and reduce youth loneliness. The UK, Japan and the Netherlands have their own strategies for reducing loneliness – and the most advanced approaches can be found in the British strategy. Both the UK and Japan have also given the issue of loneliness a face by appointing ministers responsible for addressing it. The UK's strategy contains the strongest measures explicitly geared toward young people. Canada is an example of how the issue can be addressed by embedding it in a broader mental health strategy. South Korea's program demonstrates how a specific pilot project can get the ball rolling. And Finland's civil society projects show how interventions can focus on the places where young people spend time.

The following recommendations for designing the basic parameters for and content of a good policy to prevent and reduce youth loneliness can be derived from the country examples.

1. KNOWLEDGE BASE: GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHENOMENON OF LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE



In order to formulate targeted measures, one needs to have a more precise definition of youth loneliness. To achieve this, it is first necessary to clearly distinguish loneliness from other concepts (e.g., mental health) and to clarify the relationships between these phenomena. In addition, one needs: (a) empirical data on the context-specific causes and forms of loneliness among young people and their evolution over time; (b) information on the structural causes as well as effective prevention and intervention strategies; and (c) an awareness and understanding of the actors and measures already in place. Each country needs to build up its own related database, as the causes and forms of loneliness can vary depending on the culture, with the result that interventions can have different impacts. Without sound knowledge – especially about the structural causes of loneliness among young people – future policies could be less effective.

South Korea, for example, has identified its highly competitive labor market as an important structural cause of increasing loneliness. Finland, the Netherlands and the UK collect specific data on loneliness among young people. Previously, their data-collec-

tion efforts had only been focused on older population groups or no differentiation was made between age groups.

2. PARTICIPATION: ACTIVELY INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE AND OTHER RELEVANT ACTORS



It is particularly important to involve the target group itself. Good policies should ensure that structures and measures to combat loneliness are only designed with the participation of young people, those affected and knowledgeable civil society actors. This is the only way they will meet the actual needs of the target groups and gain their acceptance. There are already many initiatives that include actors from civil society as well as the business, research/academic and administrative spheres. Their expertise and wishes for policymakers should be solicited.

The youth councils in Finland show how an institutionalized form of having young people actively involved in designing policies for young people can work. The national action plan of the Netherlands focuses on strengthening and networking actors in the field.

3. ATTENTIVENESS: FIND DIGITAL AND ANALOG WAYS TO REACH YOUNG PEOPLE



Feelings of shame and stigmatization are a big part of the experience of loneliness. While young people are discussing mental health issues more and more openly, there are often still inhibitions when it comes to loneliness. Building on the knowledge base, a good policy should therefore include specific measures aimed at raising awareness of the issue of loneliness among young people. These must be designed in such a way that they reach young people in their own environment while making the topic “discussable” and addressable for society as a whole. This can be achieved, for example, by means of awareness campaigns aimed specifically at young

people. It is also important to ensure that the campaigns are accompanied by low-threshold and target group-oriented services, which those affected can turn to.

This year (2024), the UK has launched a major national awareness campaign targeting young people with the assistance of influencers. The UK and the Netherlands also have annual national awareness weeks. In addition, websites that provide informational material and points of contact for young people (like ones found in Japan) are essential for educating people about and destigmatizing loneliness.

4. LEADERSHIP: GIVE THE ISSUE POLITICAL WEIGHT AND A FACE



A politically influential individual is needed to place young people’s loneliness on the political agenda and transform it from an individual into a societal and public issue. To help the issue make a breakthrough, strong, personal leadership is needed in the political sphere. In this way, loneliness shifts from being a matter of hidden personal shame to a publicly visible topic.

Examples of this can be found in the UK and Japan. As part of their strategy, both countries have appointed “loneliness ministers.” In particular, the appointment of the British “Minister for Loneliness” Tracey Crouch in 2018 gave the issue global visibility and established a position with personal responsibility for overseeing related efforts.

5. INTEGRATION: DESIGN CROSS-SECTORAL MEASURES



Loneliness is often viewed as a personal problem – but there are actually many structural causes (e.g., a precarious economic situation or lack of opportunities for participation). When formulating a policy to combat loneliness, one needs to have the attitude that this is a problem for society as a whole and that it can only be solved together. A good policy to combat loneliness should try to break down silos and take into account the interplay

of various policy areas. Loneliness has aspects that are relevant to multiple areas of life, such as education, health, social systems, the labor market, media and culture.

The UK's loneliness strategy defines a package of measures that also requires ministries responsible for overlapping matters (e.g., the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport) to take action. One exemplary measure taken by the Department for Education is the compulsory introduction of the subject “relationship education.” Canada does not have an explicit strategy against loneliness – partly because the issue is viewed as being under the overall umbrella of “mental health,” which needs to be addressed in a holistic manner. The Integrated Youth Services include services in the fields of mental health, education, drug prevention, employment and housing. These kinds of “one-stop stops” can anchor loneliness as an integral part of mental health programs.

6. RESPONSIBILITY: CLARIFY GOALS AND RESPONSIBILITIES



Building on a clear understanding of how loneliness-reduction efforts can be sustained, a good policy should make strong and clear public commitments. Naming ambitious goals and creating effective structures underlines the importance of and strengthens accountability for the approach. Municipalities and civil society organizations – as the most important actors when it comes to formulating context-specific strategies and then effectively implementing them at the local level – should be guaranteed a special role as well as financial support.

In the Netherlands and Japan, municipalities are responsible for designing local strategies to reduce loneliness. To do so, they receive support from the national government in the form of guidelines and financial resources. The UK's strategy sets out a clear, public goal to effectively reduce loneliness and promises to deliver a regular monitoring report on the progress made in efforts to address this issue.

7. GET STARTED: GET THE BALL ROLLING WITH PILOT PROJECTS



Although loneliness is very multifaceted and affects a wide range of parts of society (e.g., education, the labor market, discrimination, the healthcare system and social media), decision-makers should not be overwhelmed by the issue's complexity. Instead, pilot measures can be used to take the initial steps and generate lessons learned. The important thing is to get active, to learn and to improve.

This can be seen in South Korea, where policy measures are focused on identifying and supporting severely isolated young people. The pilot program will initially be implemented in four districts and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

8. PREVENTION: PREVENT LONELINESS BEFORE IT ARISES



Preventive measures often receive little attention when political actions are prioritized, as they rarely lead directly and quickly to demonstrable results. Nevertheless, measures aimed at preventing loneliness from arising at a young age are essential. The key here is to strengthen the infrastructure that is already in place: Places for socializing, volunteering or engaging in leisure activities must be provided with funding and support in order to foster a sense of community. In this case, the measures will not fall directly under the umbrella of “loneliness,” but they will address its underlying causes.

The “Integrated Youth Services” projects in Canada offer a wide range of low-threshold services for a broad spectrum of problems – from housing and mental health to education and work. These “one-stop shop” models can be seen as good examples of accessible youth services that focus on both prevention and intervention.

9. QUALITY: TEST WHAT REALLY WORKS AGAINST YOUTH LONELINESS



Not everything that is offered to or desired by target groups is effective. Policies should therefore set clear requirements for the evidence-based effectiveness of measures. To this end, principles and indicators for good evaluations can be stipulated in the policy itself. Research to date has shown that a minimum number of interactions does not suffice to effectively alleviate loneliness (Besse et al. 2022; Masi et al. 2011). Instead, deeply ingrained negative thought patterns (e. g., such as ones that lead people to think “I’m alone because nobody likes me”) need to be addressed in a targeted manner.

In South Korea, the specific offerings and measures are being tested and evaluated in four districts during the pilot phase. In the Netherlands, the NGO “Join Us” invests heavily in the accompanying evaluation and ongoing improvement of its measures, and it calls for this to be made the basis for receiving state funding.

10. CONTINUITY: STRUCTURALLY ANCHOR MEASURES



Although personal leadership is needed to draw initial attention to the issue, loneliness must be institutionally anchored during the subsequent phases of the process. This is the only way the process can survive changes of government and personnel as well as continue to be administered. Although the political landscape may change, the problem will persist. To succeed, a process to combat loneliness requires long-term regulatory and financial anchoring so that it is not jeopardized by political changes. This can be ensured by guaranteeing stable funding and fixed budgets that transcend legislative periods.

In the Netherlands, municipalities are obliged to formulate an anti-loneliness strategy and to collectively dedicate a total of € 36 million in national funds to these efforts. In the UK, a “Ministry of Loneliness” has been established to provide a clear structure and strategy with clear building blocks to draw on.

Many young people around the world are afflicted by feelings of loneliness. Political action to address this problem, which affects society as a whole, is needed now. This paper provides food for thought by presenting insights and suggestions gathered from across the world. As the fight against loneliness is still a relatively new field of political action and one that has traditionally only focused on older people, policy measures specifically aimed at helping young people are still in their infancy in all the countries surveyed. The most active player to date has been civil society, which formulates, implements and tests interventions that are appropriate for young people. These 10 recommendations for action, which have been derived from the country examples, show where and how efforts to design effective policies can be started.

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THE EXPERTS

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