



# Understanding and tackling loneliness inequalities

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Local Authorities and Connected Communities, 9 June 2025

Org: The Tackling Loneliness Hub, Neighbourly Lab, Helayna Jenkins

# Loneliness Inequalities

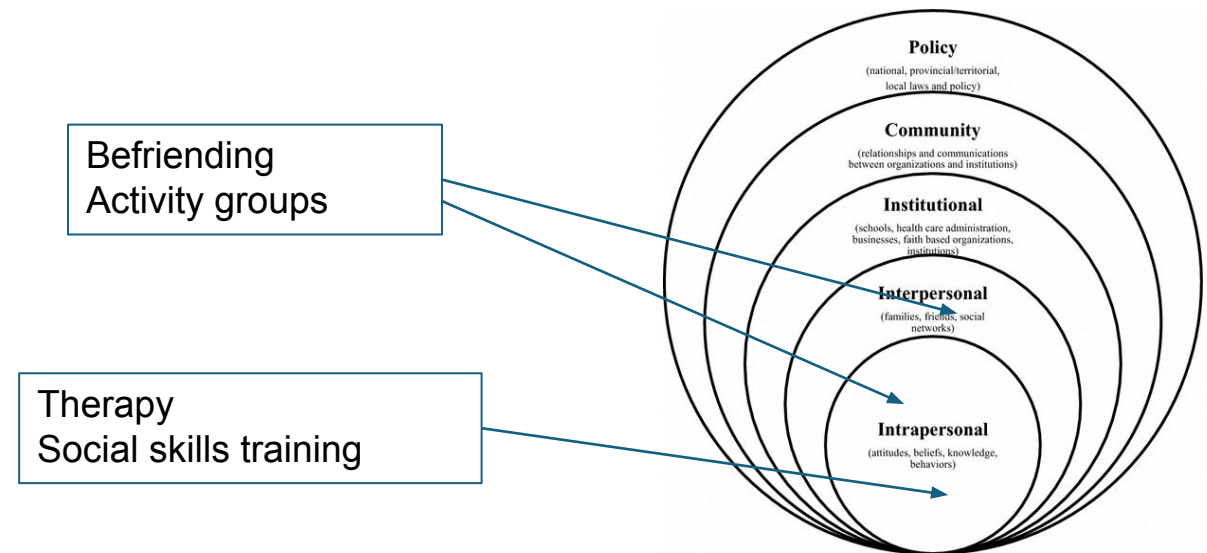
- Loneliness does discriminate!
- It is socially patterned: Most prevalent in minoritised and devalued social groups
  - Migrants
  - Racial and ethnic minorities
  - Gender minorities
  - Sexual minorities
  - Mental health status
  - Disability and chronic illness
  - Poverty and unemployment

□ Contributes to accentuate and perpetuate social inequalities



# Interventions are limited

- Poor effectiveness--especially to reduce inequalities
  - Short lasting effects
  - Many root causes not addressed
  - Causes addressed are not as important as those that are not
  - Interventions not always developed with specific population needs in mind
- Need to understand and address community deficits



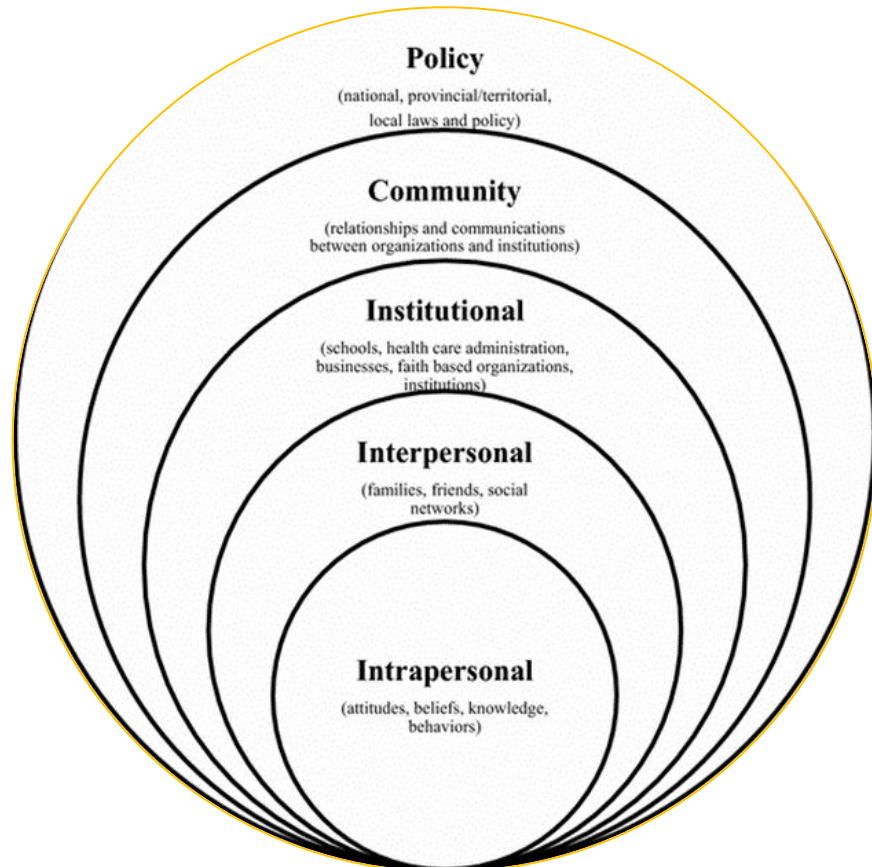
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# Tackling loneliness for everyone

- Understand how these disparities emerge (mechanisms)
  - And the role of modifiable contextual, structural factors (that are not always visible to individuals)
- Work with diverse community representatives to identify needs, assets, and solutions (beyond well-intended assumptions)



# Mechanisms



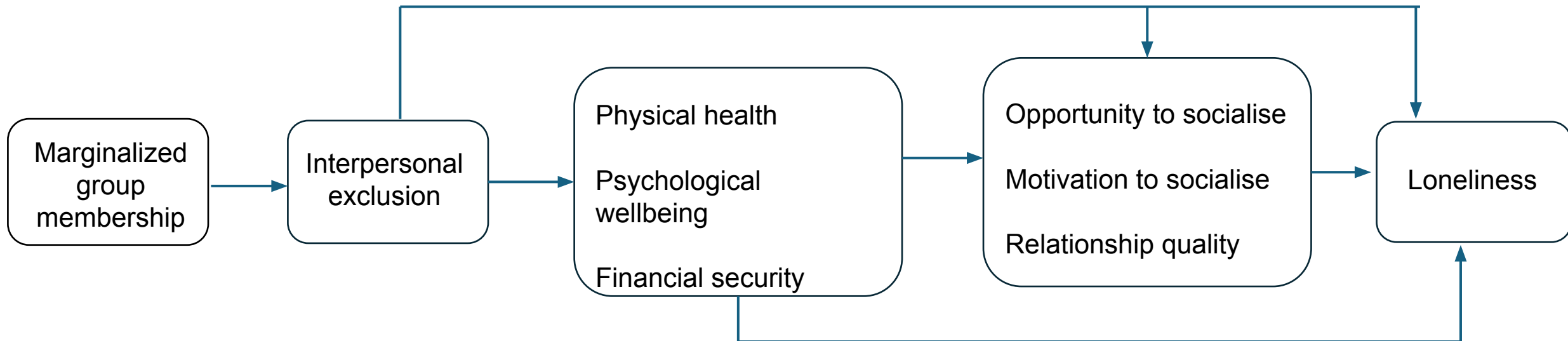
- Potential for exclusion at all levels

“If a plant were wilting we wouldn’t diagnose it with ‘wilting-plant syndrome’—we would change its conditions” (Sanah Ahsan, Guardian, 2022)

# Intra/interperson al



- It takes a village to make someone lonely
- Distal/root and proximal causes



# Structural

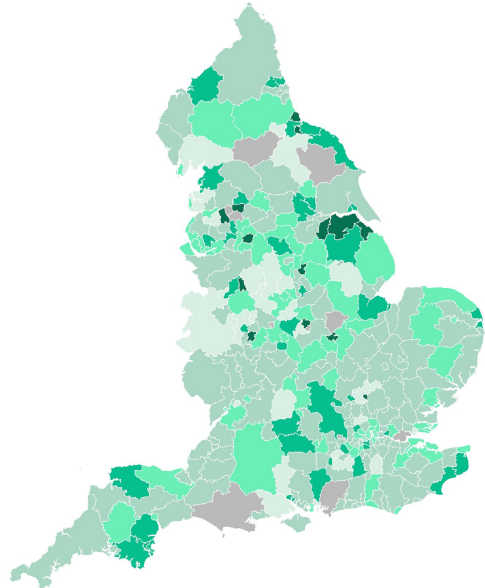
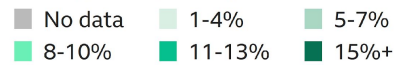


- Community deprivation
- Physical environments
- Social environments
- Social infrastructures
- Policy

# Community deprivation

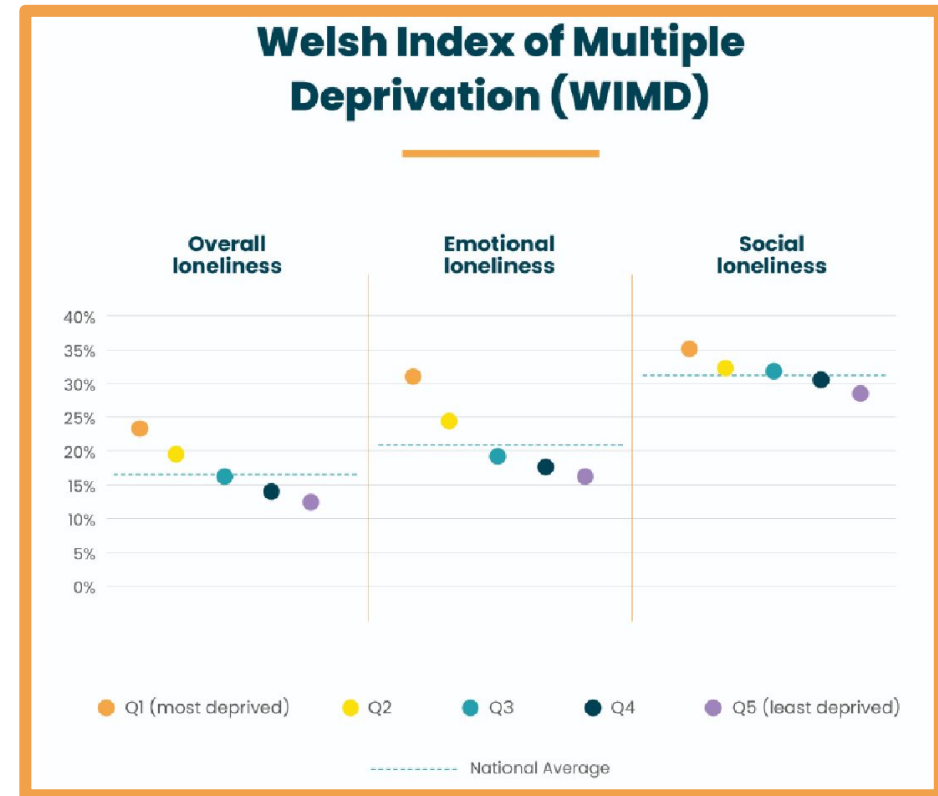
## Loneliness rates by local authority

Percentage of people surveyed reporting “often or always” feeling lonely in England



Note: Data gathered 14 Oct 2020 to 22 Feb 2021

Source: ONS



Welsh Centre for Public Policy, Wales, 2021

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# Community deprivation

Effects via:

- Devaluation and disaffection—we do not matter
- Poorer population health, wellbeing, and financial resources
- Lack of community resources and infrastructures



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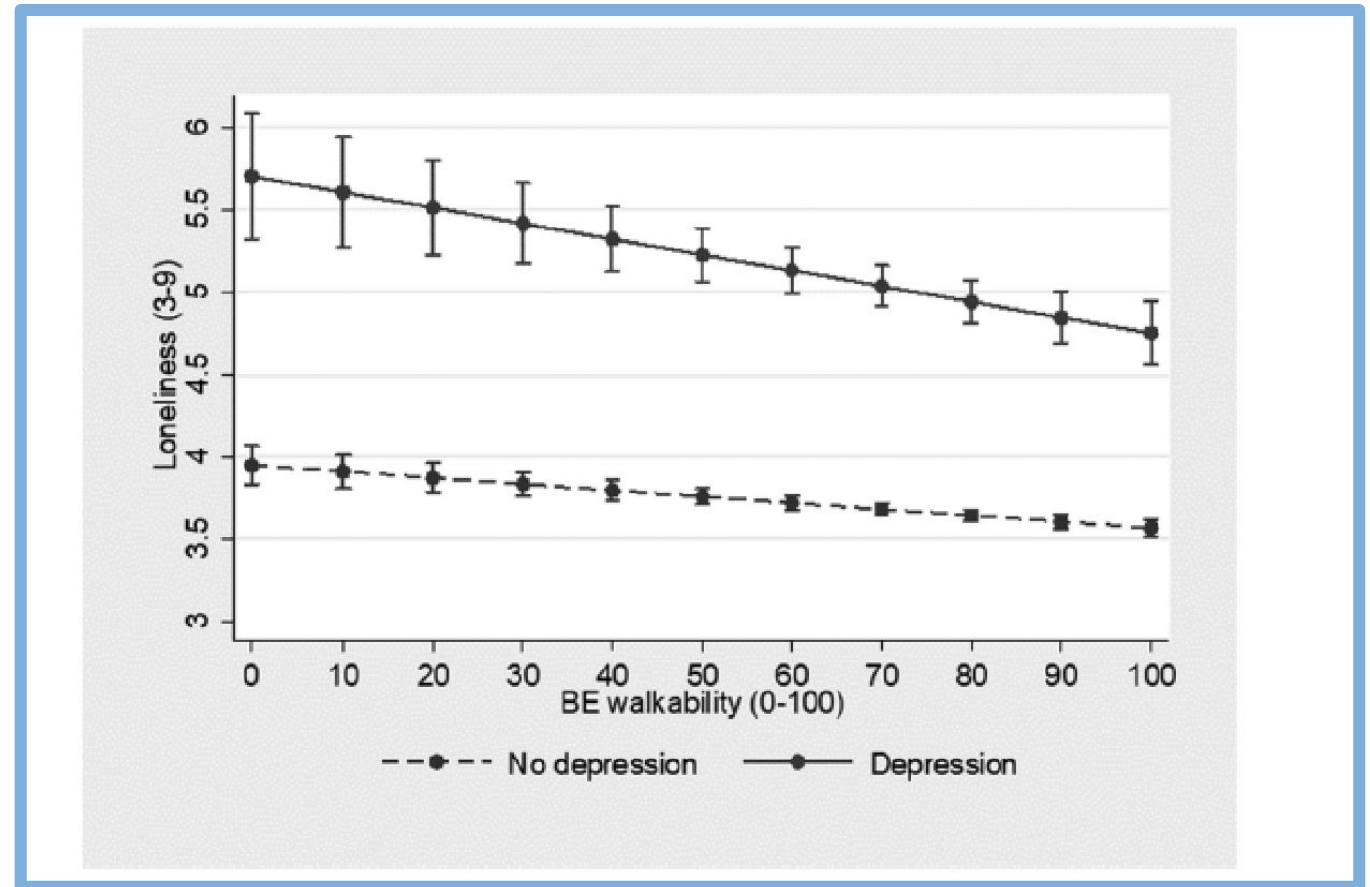
# Physical environments

- Affordable, accessible, and safe places to meet (parks, pools, benches, etc).
- Third spaces—libraries, shops, cafes—with inviting social areas.
- Restorative spaces.
- Transportation



# Physical environments

- Well maintained and accessible pavements/routes:
- Walkability decreased loneliness especially for people with depression.



Domenech-Abella et al.  
(2020):  
Finland, Poland, Spain

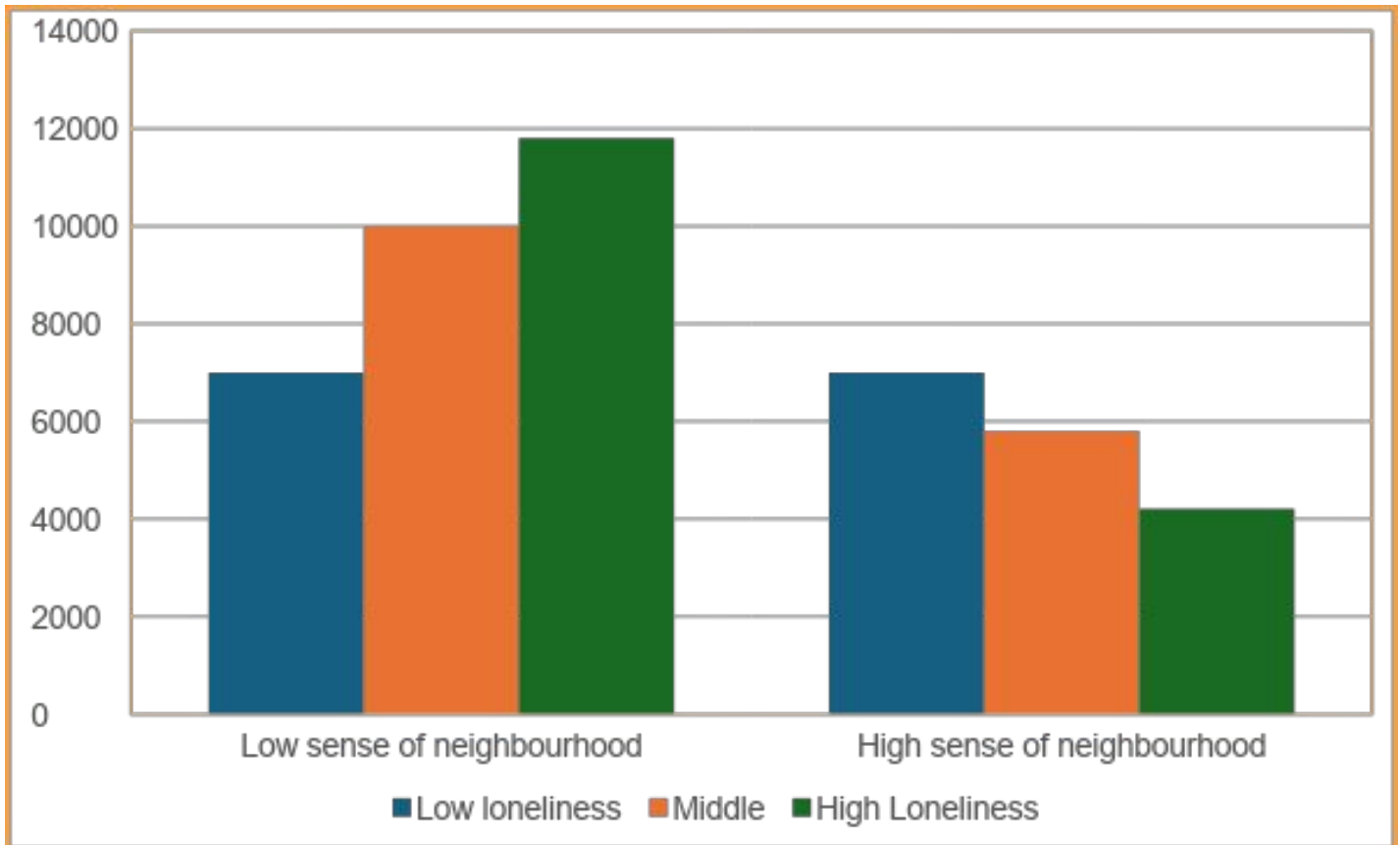
# Social environments

- Safety: Low **crime**, high perceived justice
- Strong and inclusive public **services** that make people feel listened and cared for
- **People and organizations** that play a fundamental role identifying and meeting the social needs of a community
- Diversity and **representation**
- Low community prejudice, **inclusivity**
- Inclusive **sense of community** that represents all



# Social environments: Sense of community

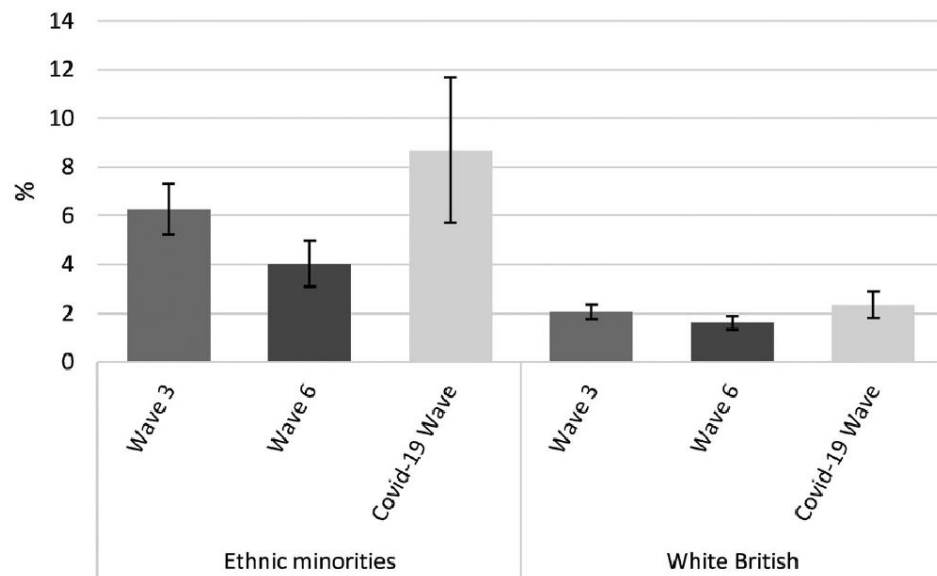
- More people reported feeling lonely when their sense of neighbourhood was weak



BBC Loneliness Experiment: Worldwide sample



# Social environments: Prejudice



**Figure 5.** Percentage of Ethnic Minority and White British respondents stating that racial insults and attacks are very/ fairly common in their local area at Wave 3, Wave 6 and Covid-19 Wave. Weighted results with 95% CI. (Data: Understanding Society, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research 2020)

- Neighbourhoods not the same for everyone: Individuals differ in the extent to which they feel included in the same neighbourhood
- Racial insults and attacks in the local area...

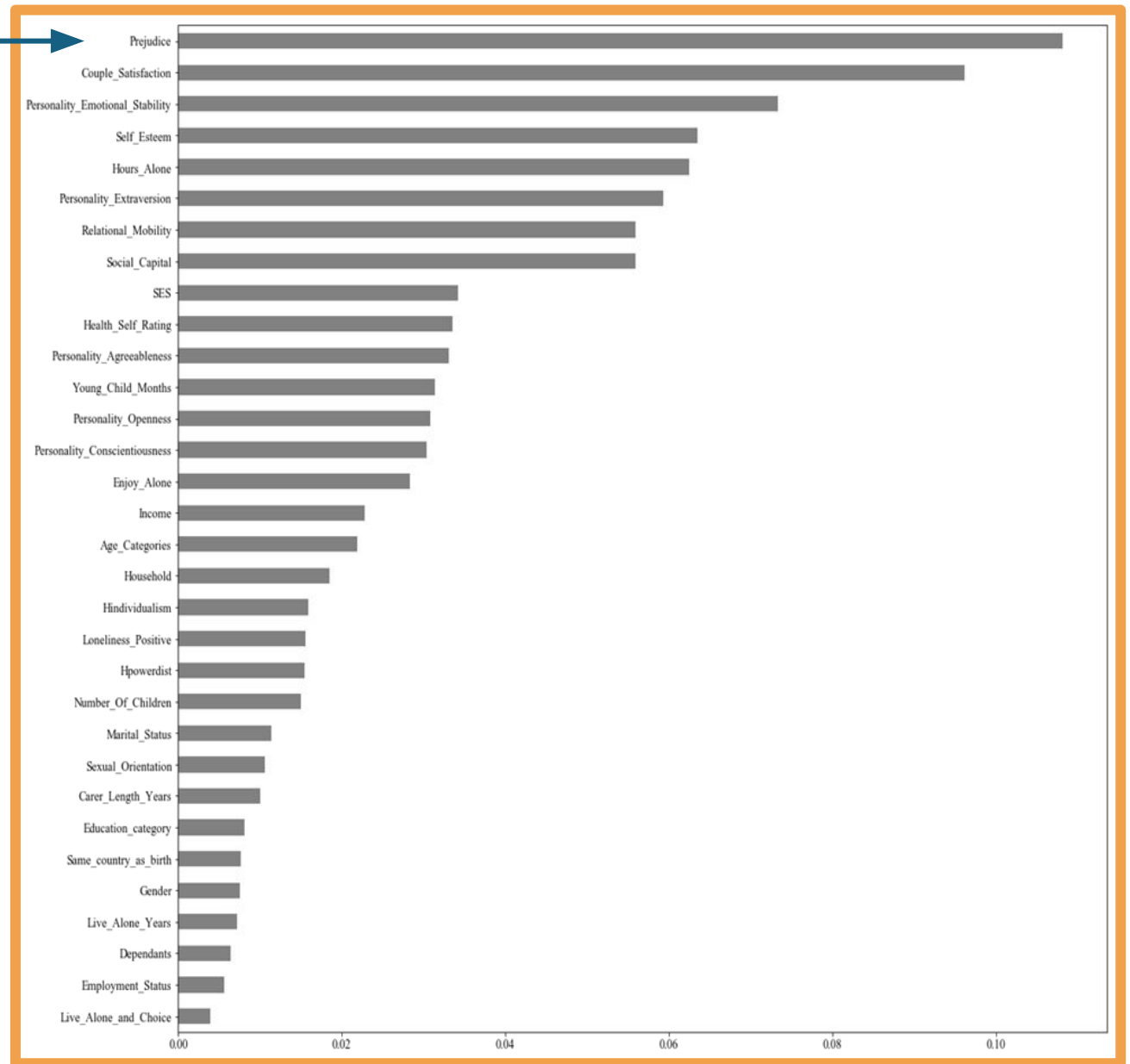
Borowska & Laurence, 2020:  
UK

# Social environments

- Daily experiences with interpersonal stigma emerged as the most important of 32 predictors of loneliness frequency in a worldwide sample of over 40,000 participants.



BBC Loneliness Experiment: Worldwide sample.



# Policy



- Inclusive and non-discriminatory policies
  - That are carefully developed and implemented to increase engagement and avoid backlash
- “Social in all policies approach”\*
  - Understand how seemingly unrelated policies affect (dis)connection
  - Routinely monitor unintended effects on (dis)connection

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# Take away messages

- Tackling loneliness and disconnection for everyone requires structural change—not merely individual change or the proliferation of clubs and activities
- Local authorities and organizations can do better by
  - Taken social health seriously and recognising it as a property of communities
  - Understanding how their policies and services might unwittingly be disconnecting their communities
  - Listening to marginalised populations about their social needs and solutions
  - Supporting and connecting to the work of the voluntary sector



# The politics of loneliness

“The hypocrisy of governments that talk about loneliness while systematically destroying key sources of social connectedness is breathtaking”

Taylor, 2020

“To combat loneliness we must be fiercely invested in combating colonialism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, interphobia, ableism, sanism and all other forms of oppression that cultivate the ideal conditions for loneliness to flourish”

Magnet & Orr, 2022

Thank you

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