Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries

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Foreword

Since 2011, the OECD has assessed the state of multidimensional well-being for people, the planet and future generations through its flagship publication, *How's Life?* Drawing on the OECD Well-being Framework, the *How's Life?* series of reports document OECD country performance on key material, social, environmental, civic and relational well-being outcomes, highlighting inequalities between population groups, differences between countries and trends over time. The accompanying OECD *How's Life? Well-being Database* (http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu) is updated on a quarterly basis.

Social connections have always featured in these monitoring efforts, measured through a small set of internationally comparable indicators related to time spent in social interactions, perceived social support, and, since 2024, loneliness. This publication builds on the findings of the most recent *How's Life?* report, *How's Life? 2024 Well-being and Resilience in Times of Crisis*, and uses new high quality data sources to provide the most complete picture thus far of social connectedness across OECD countries.

The report was prepared by the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE), under the direction of Romina Boarini. The report was co-authored by Lara Fleischer and Jessica Mahoney, with editorial support from Carrie Exton. Jessica Mahoney led the statistical work for this volume. Gerard Eijsink authored an early draft of Chapter 5, and conducted statistical analysis on national microdata from Colombia, England, France, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands. Martine Zaïda, Anne-Lise Faron and Taylor Kelly provided support throughout on communication co-ordination and formatting.

The publication benefitted from the valuable comments of delegates from the Working Party on Well-being Statistics (WPWB), the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy (CSSP) and the Working Party on Social Policy (WPSP). We are also grateful for comments received from Hans Rocha IJzerman (Annency Behavioral Science Lab); Ilona Kish (Public Libraries 2030); David Lankes (University of Syracuse); Alana Officer and Christopher Mikton (World Health Organization); and Marissa Plouin and Alexandre Lloyd (Social Policy Division, Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, OECD).

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Reader's guide

This guide provides details on the data and surveys used in this report, guidance for interpreting figures and a discussion of how differences – between groups and over time – are assessed.

Country coverage

This report includes data from OECD Member states, alongside outcomes for accession candidate countries, when data are available. In all figures, countries are denoted by their ISO3 code (Table 1).

Table 1. ISO3 country codes used in this report

Country	ISO3 code	Country	ISO3 code
OECD Member countries			
Australia	AUS	Japan	JPN
Austria	AUT	Korea	KOR
Belgium	BEL	Latvia	LVA
Canada	CAN	Lithuania	LTU
Chile	CHL	Luxembourg	LUX
Colombia	COL	Mexico	MEX
Costa Rica	CRI	the Netherlands	NLD
Czechia	CZE	New Zealand	NZL
Denmark	DNK	Norway	NOR
Estonia	EST	Poland	POL
Finland	FIN	Portugal	PRT
France	FRA	Slovak Republic	SVK
Germany	DEU	Slovenia	SVN
Greece	GRC	Spain	ESP
Hungary	HUN	Sweden	SWE
Iceland	ISL	Switzerland	CHE
Ireland	IRL	Türkiye	TUR
Israel	ISR	United Kingdom	GBR
Italy	ITA	United States	USA
Accession candidate countries			
Argentina	ARG	Indonesia	IDN
Brazil	BRA	Peru	PER
Bulgaria	BGR	Romania	ROU
Croatia	HRV	Thailand	THA

In each figure, data labelled “OECD” are simple mean averages of the OECD countries included in the figure, unless otherwise indicated. Whenever data are available for fewer than all 38 OECD countries, the number of countries included is specified (e.g. OECD 33), and the countries included are listed in the figure note. “OECD EU” is used when the OECD average includes only countries in the European Union; “OECD EU-EFTA” is used when the OECD average includes only countries in either the European Union or the European Free Trade Association.

Data sources

This report collates data on social connections from high quality, large sample size surveys. The majority of these are multi-country, internationally comparable surveys, including official statistics – such as the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC) – as well as high quality private or academic exercises. The report also supplements these with national data from official surveys fielded by OECD Member state national statistical offices or government departments, to highlight how findings either complement – or diverge from – OECD average patterns. Detailed information on the surveys referenced in this report – including country coverage, sample size, notes on data quality, sampling methodology and survey mode – are included in the Chapter 2 Annex.

Note that estimates provided in this report are summary statistics – i.e., simple average outcomes for a given country or population group, without controlling for additional socio-demographic factors.

Population groups considered in inequality analyses

Chapter 3 disaggregates social connections outcomes by different population groups. The ways in which each population group are defined are described in detail in the Chapter 3 Annex, additional information is included in each figure note throughout the report as needed.

Population breakdowns are only reported if sample sizes are sufficiently large enough to do so, defined as having at least 100 observations per population group / country / year grouping. In most instances, only findings for the OECD average are shown, however because the OECD average is a simple average of each country average, individual countries must have sufficiently large samples so as not to distort the overall average. For this reason, the countries included in the OECD average may vary across both indicators and population groups considered and are listed in figure notes throughout the report.

Assessment of significant differences: Between population groups and trends over time

Chapter 3 includes information about significant differences in social connections outcomes between population groups, and Chapter 4 assesses significant changes in these outcomes over time (defined as the difference in average outcomes in a baseline year as compared to the most recent year for which data are available). In all instances, differences between means (group A vs group B, or year 1 vs year 2) are determined using a basic t-test of means; significance is assessed at the 5% level. Significance is only assessed for international, multi-country surveys for which microdata are available. Note that because many of the international surveys have very large sample sizes, we are powered to detect small effects – these differences may be very small in magnitude, meaning that though they are significant from a statistical perspective they may not seem large in absolute terms. This nuance is discussed in the text, where relevant.

Executive summary

The quantity and quality of people's social connections matter – for well-being and for reducing preventable social and economic costs

Beyond their intrinsic importance, social connections – the frequency and quality of interactions and relationships between people – play a critical role in advancing broader policy goals in areas such as health, financial well-being, employment, education and civic engagement. Spending little time interacting with others and feeling lonely are independently associated with premature mortality – up to 871 000 global deaths annually – and an increased risk of many physical and mental health conditions. Loneliness is also associated with poorer job performance, a higher likelihood of unemployment or leaving education early, and can shape voting behaviour. In contrast, frequent supportive social interactions are associated with better health outcomes, positive relationships with coworkers are related to greater job satisfaction and creativity, and support from parents, teachers and peers is linked to academic performance. Given their wide-reaching impact, social connections are foundational to societal health and well-being, and their absence incurs significant costs.

There is growing awareness of the role policy plays in promoting social connection, but effective monitoring and evaluation will require better evidence

While policy attention to loneliness and isolation preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, it has accelerated in its aftermath. The United Kingdom and Japan both established new Ministers for Loneliness; Germany, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain introduced national strategies to target loneliness; while others implemented local initiatives. In May 2025, the World Health Assembly approved a resolution identifying social connection as an essential issue for the global health agenda. At the international level, both the European Commission and the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Connection identified social isolation and loneliness as public health priorities.

Government engagement on the topic reflects an increasing awareness that, although the drivers of social connections are complex, they are also shaped by structural conditions and policy choices. Evidence on what works in promoting connection is growing, but in many ways the field is still in its infancy. Most existing interventions and evidence target disconnected or lonely individuals, but new approaches that focus on community-level solutions show promise. These include improving access to high quality social infrastructure: physical spaces that cultivate connection, including libraries, parks, community organisations or commercial establishments that encourage socialising. Other strategies prioritise establishing safe and enriching online spaces for building community, particularly for young people. Regardless of the intervention chosen, effective policy responses require an understanding of which communities are most vulnerable to social disconnection to tailor responses to specific risk profiles. Regular monitoring is also essential to assess whether outcomes are improving or deteriorating both at the population level and in direct response to interventions.

This is the first international report to provide a comprehensive comparative assessment of the state of social connections across OECD countries. Drawing from high quality, large sample size official data sources, it enables the comparison of both the quantity and quality of social connections across diverse population groups, and – importantly – tracks how these connections have developed over the medium- and short-term.

The majority of people in OECD countries interact regularly with friends and family and feel supported, but notable deprivations remain

Social connections are strong overall across OECD countries: over two-thirds of respondents interacted with friends or family at least daily over the past week and 90% have someone to count on in times of need. Nevertheless, 10% of people feel unsupported by others, 8% of respondents in 22 European OECD countries say they have no close friends and 6% of respondents in 23 OECD countries felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks. Moreover, strong outcomes in one area – such as frequent socialising – do not necessarily translate into high-quality relationships, highlighting the importance of incorporating both social connections quantity and quality in intervention and monitoring efforts.

The share of people who interact with others in person has been falling for over a decade, while self-reported feelings of connection have shown signs of decline only recently – possibly in relation to the pandemic

In 21 European OECD countries, daily face-to-face interactions with friends and family fell consistently between 2006, 2015 and 2022 while remote contact increased. In contrast, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2018 and 2022 people began to feel less supported and less satisfied with their relationships; similarly, fewer people “never” felt lonely. While small in magnitude, these consistent downward trends should be monitored further. Supplementary evidence from national data indicate that social connections outcomes have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels in some countries.

Men and young people have emerged as new at-risk groups

While men have traditionally reported lower rates of feeling lonely and better relationship quality than women, between 2018 and 2022 they experienced larger deteriorations in both. Despite younger people generally experiencing better social connections outcomes than older cohorts, those aged 16 to 24 saw the largest increase in feeling lonely over this period – with the pandemic possibly compounding a longer-term trend. Young people also reported rising relationship dissatisfaction and worsening social support, while meeting with friends in person less frequently. Many of these deteriorations are driven by younger men. The underlying drivers and potential consequences of these shifts for younger generations are likely complex: understanding and addressing them should be a priority.

Unemployment and low income often go hand in hand with poor social connection, as does older age and living alone

Compared to the general population, unemployed individuals and those in the lowest income quintile are around twice as likely to report feeling lonely. People living alone are 1.5 times more likely to be dissatisfied with personal relationships, while the elderly are most at risk for social isolation: 11% report never meeting friends in person in a typical year, more than double the rate for the general population. In the context of rising rates of single person households across many OECD countries and aging societies more generally, the social connections of these groups – and especially older people who live alone – warrant attention.

1. An overview of what social connections are, why they matter, and how and for whom they have changed in recent years

Social connections – how people interact with and relate to one another – have far-reaching effects on health, employment, education and civic engagement. A growing number of OECD governments are recognising their importance and prioritising policies to strengthen them. This report provides the first comprehensive overview of social connections levels, trends and inequalities across OECD countries using high-quality official data. It finds that (1) people are meeting in person less frequently than before, while subjective assessments of social connections have shown signs of deterioration only recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) men and young people – previously at lower risk – are increasingly vulnerable to poor outcomes; (3) deprivations in social connections often overlap with socio-economic disadvantage; and (4) while the drivers of social connections are complex, they include the provision of public goods and services, and take place in the broader context of digitalisation, making them amenable to policy action.

A fulfilling social life is an essential part of a healthy human life. Social connections – the time people spend with others, the support they give and receive, and the quality and diversity of their relationships – improve physical and mental health, enhance job satisfaction and cooperation, and strengthen the community bonds that bolster resilience. Conversely, prolonged social isolation, loneliness and disconnection can have serious health consequences, further straining overburdened healthcare systems, limit labour market participation and discourage civic participation. In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, which profoundly disrupted social life through distancing, confinement policies, and school and workplace closures, governments across OECD countries have increasingly recognised the importance of strengthening social ties. There is now growing consensus that public policy plays a key role in creating and sustaining the structures that promote or hinder connectedness. The evidence base on what works best to promote connectedness is growing fast, but is nevertheless still in early stages (WHO, 2025[1]; Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[2]; Lim, Eres and Vasan, 2020[3]; Dahlberg et al., 2022[4]). As this report highlights, promising approaches include mechanisms that target the socio-economic determinants of disconnection, initiatives that focus on the community as a whole rather than only on lonely individuals – such as improving access to social infrastructure (broadly accessible public spaces centred around socialising) – and efforts to ensure safe and enriching online interactions, especially for young people. Effective evaluations of these newly emerging national strategies and policy interventions require a robust understanding of who is most affected by social disconnection, and how different aspects of social connectedness are evolving.

Despite the growing public interest, social connections have traditionally been an area in which official statistics have been less developed and harmonised. Previous OECD work has scoped current measurement practice by national statistical offices in OECD countries to understand the extent to which social connections outcomes are currently captured in national surveys. The exercise revealed that almost all OECD countries are active in measuring social connections, however data collection practices are uneven and some important outcomes, such as loneliness, are only included in fewer than 40% of national surveys (Mahoney et al., 2024[5]).[1] As a part of broader well-being monitoring efforts, the OECD regularly publishes a flagship statistical report, *How's Life?*, to understand how the different outcomes encompassing the OECD Well-being Framework (Box 1.1) are evolving for society at large. Social connections have always been included as one of many well-being aspects considered, however thus far there have been no in-depth investigations into the topic.[2] Additionally, recent large-scale but thus far one-off international data collection efforts by intergovernmental, private and academic actors – including the 2022 Gallup World Poll's collaborative survey with Meta (covering all OECD countries) as well as its preceding pilot exercise in a smaller sub-set of countries called the *Global State of Social Connections*; the EU Joint Research Centre's 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* (covering all European OECD countries); and AXA's *Mind Health Survey* (covering twelve OECD countries) – have contributed to the availability of a broader range of data on social connections outcomes. Yet on their own, these initiatives do not provide the longitudinal insights needed to track social connections trends over time.

To provide the most complete picture of social connectedness across OECD countries to date, this special edition of the *How's Life?* series combines official data from national statistical offices with data from these newer cross-country surveys. This includes harmonised information from Eurostat's *European Survey on Income and Living Conditions* and evidence from official national datasets, highlighting synergies in findings across sources and at times diverging trends across regions (refer to the Reader's Guide and Annexes in Chapters 2 and 3 for details on all sources used). This combination of high-quality time series data and large sample sizes enables the analysis of changes over time – both overall and by population group – and helps to identify emerging at-risk groups. Going forward, it will be important to continue the current momentum in (inter)national efforts to improve and harmonise measurement practice, driven by efforts in academia and international policy such as those led by the OECD and the United Nations Friends of the Chair Group on Social and Demographic Statistics (UN-FOCG-SD).[3]

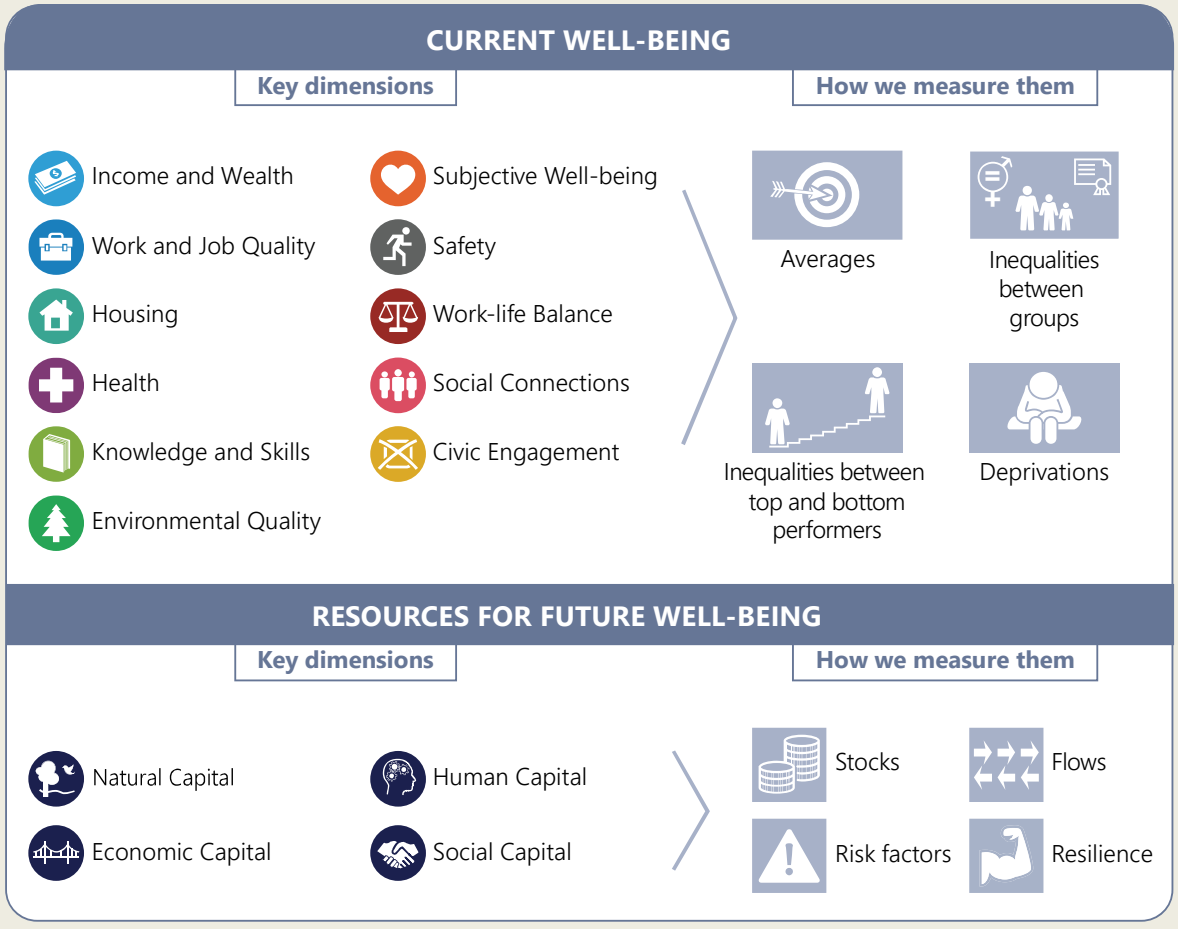
Box 1.1. What is multidimensional well-being?

As part of its efforts to monitor societal progress in a holistic and people-centred way, the OECD defines well-being as encompassing the material conditions, quality of life, relational, environmental and civic outcomes that shape people's lives now, and into the future (Figure 1.1).

Social connections are one, stand-alone dimension of the well-being framework that includes indicators referring to the quantity and quality of time people spend together, alongside the support they receive from others. Other dimensions of the framework capture aspects of aggregate communal and societal connections, in particular the social capital dimension, which refers to societal norms, shared values and institutional arrangements that encourage cooperation between groups.

At the national level, more than 70% of OECD countries have developed initiatives focused on monitoring multidimensional well-being; of these, some have begun integrating well-being principles such as multidimensionality, equity and inclusion, people-focused outcomes and long time horizons into policy. These policy efforts range from strategic goal-setting, to assessing trade-offs and synergies in appraisal and impact evaluation, and informing resource allocation (OECD, 2023[6]).

Figure 1.1. The OECD Well-being Framework



Source: OECD (2024[7]), *How's Life? 2024: Well-being and Resilience in Times of Crisis*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/90ba854a-en.

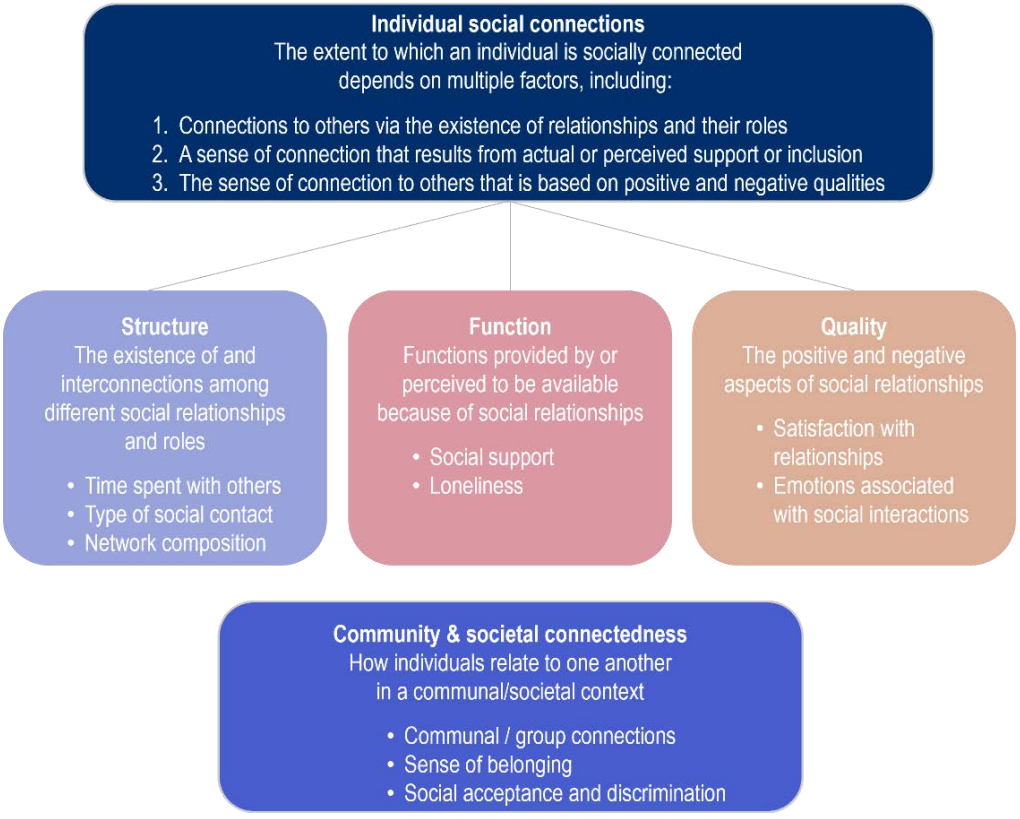
This chapter presents the key messages from this analysis. It begins with a working definition of the different aspects of social connectedness, encompassing structure, function and quality, making the case that ideally collecting and analysing information on several of these aspects is necessary for a complete picture. It then outlines why social connections matter for broader well-being and summarises the various strategies recently adopted across OECD countries and at the international level to foster them. The key findings of the report are that (1) longer-term trends show that people across OECD countries are meeting in person less often than in the past, while self-assessments of social connections quality slightly worsened between 2018 and 2022, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) men and young people – groups previously considered at lower risk – are increasingly vulnerable to poor social connectedness; (3) deprivations in social connections often overlap with socio-economic disadvantage; and (4) while the drivers of social connections are complex, they are partly influenced by government choices, either purposeful or unintended, that target the socio-economic determinants of well-being, how and where services are delivered, the make-up of the built environment and the nature of online spaces – all of which are amendable to policy intervention.

Readers seeking further detail will find it in the chapters that follow: Chapter 2 examines current social connections outcomes across OECD countries; Chapter 3 explores how these outcomes vary across socio-demographic groups and identifies who is most and least connected; Chapter 4 tracks both medium-term (10-15 years) and short-term (post-2018/19) trends, highlighting newly emerging at-risk populations. Chapter 5 closes with a discussion of two emerging areas of research: the role of social infrastructure for quantity and quality of social interactions, as well as that of digital technology and social media.

Defining social connections

Social connections encompass the various ways that people interact with and relate to one another. Figure 1.2 presents a conceptual framework – based on Holt-Lunstad, Robles and Sbarra (2017[8]) and widely adopted in both academic literature and policy design (see Mahoney et al., (2024[5]) for a longer discussion) – to clarify the key constituent parts of social connectedness outcomes. These include *structural* aspects, referring to the existence of social relationships, roles and interactions; *functional* outcomes, which capture the support – actual or perceived – provided through these relationships; *quality* measures, reflecting both positive and negative features of social relationships; and *communal and societal* connectedness, capturing an individual's sense of belonging and relationship to broader social groups.[4] This report focuses primarily on structural, functional and quality aspects of individual-level social connections, with key terms defined in Box 1.2. It distinguishes between *quantitative* outcomes – such as how people spend their time and with whom, largely reflecting structural aspects, and *qualitative* outcomes, like feelings of loneliness, perceived social support and relationship satisfaction, which reflect aspects of function and quality.

Figure 1.2. A conceptual framework of social connections



Note: Example indicators within each box are meant to illustrate measurement approaches, they do not constitute a comprehensive list of all approaches to measuring a given topic. Note also that there is heterogeneity within each category of social connections – that is, "structure", "function", "quality" and "communal and societal connectedness" are not necessarily capturing a single, distinct, latent construct. Refer to Mahoney et al. (2024[5]) for an extended discussion.
Source: Adapted from Holt-Lunstad, Robles and Sbara (2017[8]), "Advancing social connection as a public health priority in the United States", *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 72/6, pp. 517-530. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28880099/.

Box 1.2. Key terms and definitions

The following definitions are used throughout this report:

- **Social connections:** is an umbrella term that encompasses the many ways that people interact with and relate to one another. It includes both the quantity and quality of time spent with others, and how much support people feel they have.
- **Social network:** refers to how many people an individual interacts with, and who these people are.
- **Social isolation:** the frequency, duration and extent of interactions – i.e., objective conditions, such as spending little time with others, and/or having a small social network. Social isolation is distinct from experiencing loneliness: it is possible to spend time alone without feeling lonely, just as it is possible to feel lonely even when spending time with others.
- **Loneliness:** is a subjective experience that results from an individual's perception of being undesirably isolated, or from feeling that their needs are not being met in their relationships with

others. Loneliness is one qualitative aspect of relationships, distinct from measures of relationship quantity (e.g. social network size, or the amount of time spent with others).

- **Social support:** is the actual or perceived support – both material and non-material (i.e., social emotional) – provided by interpersonal relationships.

Source: Adapted from Mahoney et al. (2024[5]), refer to Box 1.1.

Evidence outlined in the next section shows how loneliness, isolation, and network diversity and quality all play a role in influencing health, employment, financial and community outcomes. Importantly, however, different facets of social connections capture different latent constructs (Huxhold, Suanet and Wetzel, 2022[9]; Perissinotto and Covinsky, 2014[10]; Danvers et al., 2023[11]), and each therefore influence well-being outcomes through different pathways (Holt-Lunstad and Smith, 2016[12]; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[13]). This underscores the need to collect data on social connections that span quantitative (structural), functional and qualitative outcomes, and on both positive outcomes and deprivations, to inform effective policy interventions (Holt-Lunstad, 2025[14]).

The dynamics of each outcome type differ, and individuals that perform well in some aspects of social connections do not necessarily have good outcomes in other areas. For example, correlational analysis of microdata from the EU *Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey shows only a weak relationship between the frequency of in-person or remote contact with friends and family, and outcomes like loneliness and dissatisfaction with personal relationships (Table 1.1).[5]

Table 1.1. The structure, function and quality of social connections are only weakly correlated at the individual level

	Get together with family in person on a daily basis	Get together with friends in person on a daily basis	Contact family remotely on a daily basis	Contact friends remotely on a daily basis	Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks
Get together with friends in person on a daily basis	0.23				
Contact family remotely on a daily basis	0.27	0.13			
Contact friends remotely on a daily basis	0.10	0.32	0.31		
Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	
Dissatisfied with personal relationships	-0.02	-0.02	-0.05	-0.04	0.24

Note: Table displays weighted listwise Pearson correlation coefficients between the structure, function and quality of social connections outcomes at the individual level, using microdata from 23 European OECD countries in 2022. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (Accessed in October 2024).

Why social connections matter for other policy goals

Efforts to quantify the societal costs of loneliness and isolation have grown in recent years, and various estimates for different national contexts range from USD 400 billion a year to the U.S. economy (Cigna, 2020[16]; CDC, 2023[17]), to 1.2% of annual GDP in Spain (Rodríguez, Castiñeira and Rodríguez-Míguez, 2023[18]), DKK 7 million annually in Denmark (AGE Platform Europe, 2023[19]; Hamilton, 2023[20]), GBP 2 billion per year for employers in the United Kingdom (New Economics Foundation, 2017[21]) and the combined economic, policy and health-related costs of social isolation in young Korean adults totals KRW 7 trillion, or KRW 21 million per person (Korea Youth Foundation, 2023[22]). A recent systematic literature review found that across fifteen studies – including evidence from six countries[6] – the estimated costs of loneliness and social isolation ranged from USD 2 billion to USD 25.2 billion per year (Engel et al., 2025[23]).

Relatedly, there is robust and increasing evidence linking social connections outcomes to a range of well-being outcomes. The most well-developed strand of literature focuses on the interlinkages between social connections and physical and mental health. Both feelings of loneliness as well as social isolation are associated with worse physical health outcomes, including increasing the risk – and worsening the symptoms – of dementia, cardiovascular and coronary heart disease, and stroke (Akhter-Khan et al., 2021[24]; Penninkilampi et al., 2018[25]; Valtorta et al., 2016[26]; Freak-Poli et al., 2021[27]; Holwerda et al., 2014[28]), as well as premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[13]; Alm, Låftman and Bohman, 2019[29]). Recent analysis from the World Health Organization estimates that loneliness may be responsible for 871 000 deaths annually, across the globe (WHO, 2025[1]). Loneliness and isolation are also negatively associated with mental health outcomes (Wang et al., 2018[30]; Cruwys et al., 2013[31]; Cacioppo et al., 2011[32]; Hansen et al., 2017[33]), while people with larger and more supportive social networks tend to be happier, are more likely to feel satisfied with their lives and have better overall health outcomes (Amati et al., 2018[34]; Tomini, Tomini and Groot, 2016[35]; van der Horst and Coffé, 2012[36]).

However social connections have implications beyond health – touching aspects of material conditions, the local environment, civic engagement and community resilience. Loneliness is associated with poorer performance and productivity at work, a higher risk of absenteeism, unemployment or dropping out of an educational programme (Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022[37]; Matthews et al., 2016[38]; Maher et al., 2013[39]; Bowers et al., 2022[40]). On the other hand, supportive workplace relationships are associated with increased job satisfaction and creativity (Patel and Plowman, 2022[41]; Lleras-Muney et al., 2020[42]), and positive support from parents, friends, classmates and teachers may lead to better academic outcomes (Saeed et al., 2023[43]; Holahan, Valentiner and Moos, 1995[44]; Rueger, Malecki and Demaray, 2010[45]; Dwyer and Cummings, 2001[46]). Furthermore, larger social networks are shown to have a positive association with financial and labour market outcomes, as individuals are able to tap into their networks for help finding jobs and obtaining higher paying employment opportunities, thereby enhancing upward economic mobility (Calvó-Armengol and Jackson, 2004[47]; Montgomery, 1991[48]; Lleras-Muney et al., 2020[42]; Chetty et al., 2022[49]; Chetty et al., 2022[50]; Harris et al., 2025[51]). Beyond socio-economic considerations, strong social ties within a local community – including close relationships with one's neighbours, community leaders or local service providers – are associated with crime reduction (Stuart and Taylor, 2021[52]) and a greater ability of the local area to respond to natural disasters (The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023[53]; Aldrich and Meyer, 2014[54]). Lastly, feelings of loneliness, isolation and lack of belonging shape patterns in civic engagement and voting behaviours (Neu et al., 2023[55]).

Rise in policy strategies addressing social connectedness

Many OECD countries have identified social connections as a policy priority, even preceding the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Kingdom introduced a Minister for Loneliness in 2018, and soon there-after launched a national strategy to improve social connections (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018[56]; Local Government Association, 2018[57]); that same year, the Netherlands introduced its 2018 Loneliness Programme (Ministry of Health Welfare and Sport, 2023[58]).

In the years following the pandemic, the introduction of policy initiatives has accelerated. In 2021, the Japanese government appointed its first Minister for Social Isolation and Loneliness, and followed this three years later with new legislation requiring local governments to treat loneliness and isolation as whole-of-society issues (Prime Minister of Japan Cabinet Office, 2021[59]; Asahi Shimbun, 2024[60]). In 2022, the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, adopted a *Strategy against Loneliness* which, in part, funds programmes to establish multi-generational homes, fund story-telling salons and community meeting places at the municipal level, and target outreach efforts at low-income elderly people most at risk for isolation (BMFSFJ, 2022[61]; BMFSFJ, 2022[62]). Also in 2021, the Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Healthcare and Consumer Protection debuted the *Platform against Loneliness in Austria*, a public-private-partnership co-funded by the European Union that provides a database of social infrastructure and group activities to enable residents to access needed support (Plattform Gegen Einsamkeit, 2021[63]). The following year, the Danish government introduced its National Partnership Against Loneliness – in collaboration with DaneAGE and the Red Cross – which was in part inspired by a 2021 survey that found loneliness cost society more than DKK 7 million per year (AGE Platform Europe, 2023[19]; Hamilton, 2023[20]).

More recently, in 2024 the city of Seoul announced the "Seoul without Loneliness" initiative to combat lonely deaths[7] and isolation (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024[64]); in 2025, the Korean national government announced "Responding to Social Isolation and Loneliness across the Life Course" as a key policy priority, integrating existing programmes to support isolated adolescents and young adults, lonely death prevention for middle-aged and older adults, and support for older adults living alone into a comprehensive multi-agency system. Meanwhile, a Finnish Parliamentary Working Group on Strengthening Inclusion and Reducing Loneliness introduced its national strategy and action plan to reduce loneliness and build community in 2024, a collaborative effort between the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the National Board of Education, the National Institute for Health and Welfare and various civic organisations (Kunta Liitto, 2024[65]). In June 2025 the Swedish Public Health Agency released a national strategy to combat loneliness (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2025[66]), the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour supported the introduction of an emotional support line for older adults to combat their isolation and feelings of loneliness (Caritas, 2025[67]),[8] and the Spanish Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 is currently developing a national strategy (EPE, 2022[68]). Other OECD countries – including Ireland, Norway, Slovenia and Türkiye – address social connections as a part of broader mental health or quality of life policies (WHO, 2025[1]; NIJZ, 2020[69]; BMYK, 2024[70]; Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet, 2025[71]), and many regional and local governments throughout the OECD have developed their own social connections initiatives.

International organisations are also active, particularly regarding awareness-raising and work to understand what is effective in promoting connectedness. For example, the European Commission has identified social isolation and loneliness as public health priorities (European Commission, 2022[72]), and the World Health Organization established a Global Commission on Social Connection to emphasise the key role of "social health" in driving health outcomes (WHO, 2023[73]) (Box 1.3). Both efforts include a measurement component: the European Commission supported the 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* referenced in this report, and the WHO has used a modelling approach to estimate loneliness globally across WHO Member states, including those that do not collect any data on social connections outcomes directly (WHO, 2025[1]). Most recently, in May 2025 delegates of the World Health Assembly approved a

resolution identifying social connections as a standalone global public health priority, and encouraging governments to introduce national strategies to combat isolation and loneliness, improve measurement tracking at the population level and increase public awareness (WHO, 2025[74]; Health Policy Watch, 2025[75]).

Box 1.3. The WHO Commission on Social Connection

In November 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a three-year Commission on Social Connection to raise awareness of social connection, isolation and loneliness as global public health issues. The Commission aims to (1) increase visibility of these issues, (2) reframe them as global concerns affecting all age groups and regions and (3) accelerate proven solutions. It is led by 11 high-profile members, including government ministers and civil society leaders, co-chaired by Dr. Vivek Murthy (former U.S. Surgeon General) and Ms. Chido Mpemba (African Union Youth Commissioner) (WHO, 2023[73]).

In June 2025, the Commission released its report, *From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies* (WHO, 2025[1]). It argues that social health, with social connection at its heart, is a critical but often overlooked pillar of overall health – just as important as physical and mental well-being. Today, social disconnection is widespread. Between 2014 and 2023, loneliness affected nearly 1 in 6 people globally, contributing to an estimated 871 000 deaths annually. The report highlights three key messages:

1. Social disconnection is widespread, across all regions and age groups.
2. Its impacts are severe, affecting mortality, health, well-being, education, the economy and society.
3. Solutions exist and should be scaled up urgently.

The report defines key terms (social connection, isolation, loneliness) and presents global evidence on the scale, drivers and impacts of the issue. It also outlines effective strategies to foster connection and reduce social isolation and loneliness and concludes with five priority areas for action: policy, research, interventions, measurement and data, and engagement. The Commission will support awareness raising, the development of a policy database, upcoming WHO guidelines on interventions to reduce social isolation and loneliness, and the creation of a Global Index on Social Connection.

Source: World Health Organization (2023[73]), *WHO Commission on Social Connection*. https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection.

Key insights of this report

Social connectedness is strong overall in OECD countries, but some experience lack of support, loneliness and dissatisfaction with relationships

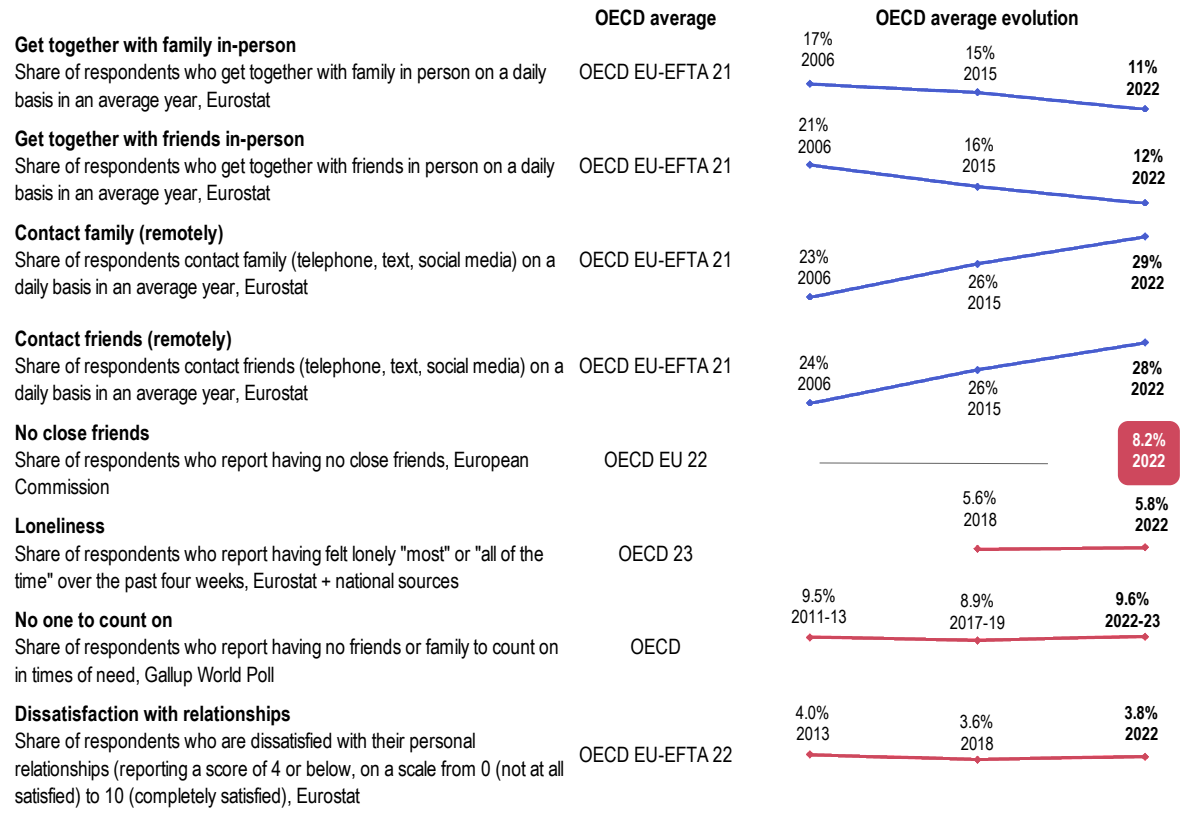
This report draws on a range of high-quality data sources to assess the state of social connections across OECD countries, and to examine trends over time (Figure 1.3). Across 21 European OECD countries with comparable data in 2022, 11% of respondents report getting together with family in person on a daily basis in a typical year, and a similar number (12%) report doing so with friends. Conversely, rates of contacting family and friends remotely on a daily basis – via phone, text or social media messaging – are almost three times higher, at 29% and 28%, respectively. With regard to the function and quality of relationships, in OECD countries with comparable data, the large majority of the population has someone to count on in times of need, did not feel lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks and is satisfied with personal relationships. However, on average, still 10% of people say they have no one to count on in times of need, 8% report having no close friends, 6% felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks and 4% are dissatisfied with personal relationships.

Longer-term trends show that social connections are changing across OECD countries as people meet in person less often than in the past

Rates of in-person interaction with friends and family have steadily declined since 2006 – the first year for which data are available – while remote contact has increased (Figure 1.3).[9] More research needs to be done on the actual *quality* of in-person vs. remote interactions to fully understand the implications of these new trends in socialising, especially as the impacts may be experienced differently by different population groups.

Fewer data points over time are available for outcomes such perceived social support and relationship satisfaction, however a comparison of rates between 2018 and 2022 show that average outcomes worsened slightly, but significantly (Figure 1.3). This decline takes place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning subjective assessments of relationships in 2022 may still reflect the lingering effects of social distancing, confinement policies and general uncertainty of the pandemic years. However, supplemental national data presented throughout this report and for which time series extend closer to the present day – and therefore allow for a more robust comparison of outcomes pre-, during and post-pandemic – suggest that some qualitative social connections outcomes have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, at least in some countries with available data.

Figure 1.3. At a glance: Social connections outcomes over time



Note: Pink lines indicate that the outcome is a deprivation, meaning higher values indicate worse outcomes. Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. OECD 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand (latest available year is 2023), Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland; OECD EU-EFTA 22 refers to the same, with the exception of New Zealand; OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to the same, excepting Switzerland. The OECD EU 22 average for "no close friends" refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (Accessed in October 2024); European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b; Gallup (n.d.[76]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx; Stats NZ (2024[77]), *Wellbeing Statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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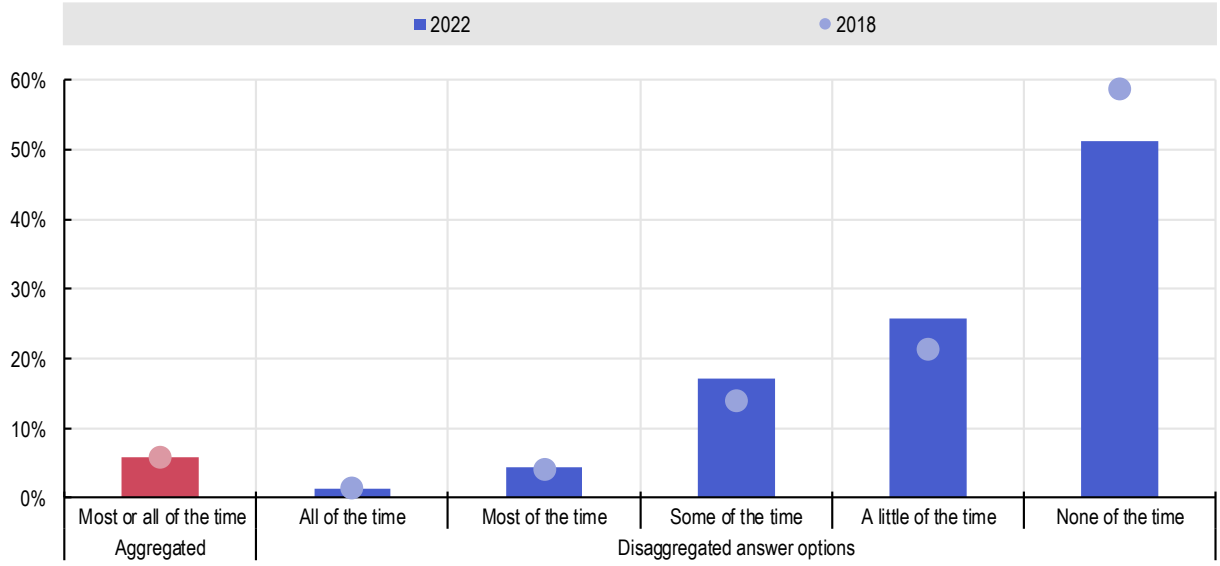
While average rates of feeling lonely most or all of the time remained relatively stable between 2018 and 2022 (Figure 1.3), a closer look at the data reveals that people are more frequently experiencing sporadic loneliness. In 2018, 59% of respondents in 22 European OECD countries said they "never" felt lonely over the past four weeks, but by 2022 this had fallen to 51% (Figure 1.4). Over the same period, the share of people who felt lonely "a little" or "some" of the time increased by 4 and 3 percentage points, respectively. These shifts in the broader distribution are not captured in typical aggregate measures of loneliness, which focus only on respondents who felt lonely "most' or "all" of the time.

Figure 1.4. Fewer people never feel lonely, indicating rising low-level loneliness

Share who felt lonely _____ over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Note: Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. OECD EU-EFTA 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland.
Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life" and 2018 ad hoc module on "Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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Men and young people are newly emerging risk groups for social disconnection

Both medium- and short-term trends presented in this report suggest that the groups experiencing the most consistent deteriorations in social connectedness are *not* those traditionally seen as most at-risk (Figure 1.5). For example, while women tend to report higher overall levels of feeling lonely than men (6.5% vs. 5.3% in 2022; see Chapter 3), data from 22 European OECD countries show that men experienced a 0.5 percentage point increase in feeling lonely between 2018 and 2022 (from 4.7% to 5.2%). While this might seem small, this increase was larger than that of both the overall population (+0.15 pp, from 5.7% to 5.8%) and women (from 6.44% to 6.41%, a change that was not statistically significant; see Chapter 4). Men also saw a greater rise in dissatisfaction with personal relationships over the same period (+0.4 pp, from 3.8% to 4.1%), compared to +0.2 pp for the total population (3.6% to 3.8%) and a non-significant +0.1 pp increase for women (3.5% to 3.6%) (see Chapter 4). These findings suggest that this potential emerging risk group might warrant greater attention in future monitoring and policy action.

The most striking finding in this report is the deterioration of outcomes for young people, across nearly all social connections indicators assessed. While young people still fare better in terms of overall levels of social connections in comparison to other population groups, these downward trends serve as early warning signs for policymakers. Between 2018 and 2022, those aged 16 to 24 experienced a 1 percentage point increase in feelings of loneliness (from 3.3% to 4.3%), the largest increase of any demographic group. They also saw the largest (albeit overall still small in magnitude) increases in dissatisfaction with relationships (+0.9 pp from 2018 to 2022, from 2.4% to 3.3%) and in reporting having no one to count on in times of need (+0.9 pp from 2011-16 to 2017-23, from 4.1% to 5.0%). While all deteriorations are small, they are consistent – across indicators, and data sources. Importantly, these declines extend beyond qualitative social connections outcomes. Young people also experienced the steepest drop in daily in-person interaction with friends, from 53% in 2006 to 44% in 2015, and 36% by 2022. Unlike all other age groups, they did not offset this decline through remote contact: daily communication with friends via text or social media among people aged 16 to 24 remained relatively stable in the medium-term – 64.5% in 2015 and 63.4% in 2022 (see Chapter 4) – in comparison to all other age groups, who saw increases in text and social media communication over this time.

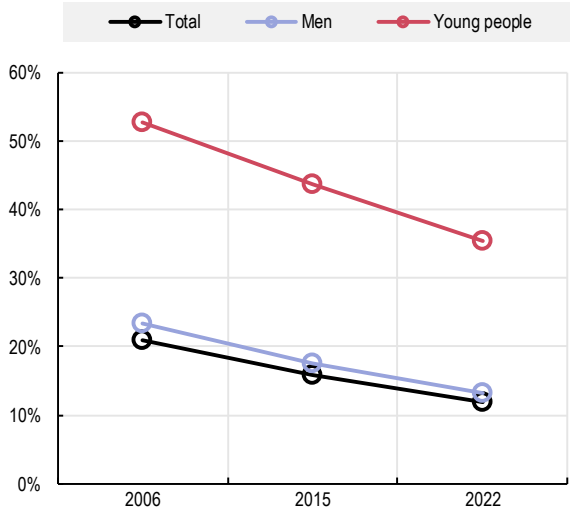
These results beg the question as to whether the confluence of age and gender may be at the root of new trends in social connection. Large sample sizes available for European OECD countries allow for disaggregation by both gender and age. Growing deprivations in social connections outcomes in the short-term among young people are indeed partly driven by changing outcomes for younger and middle-aged men: those aged 16 to 24 experienced the largest deteriorations, however those aged 25 to 49 also consistently experienced significant worsening of outcomes. For example, young men aged 16 to 24 experienced a 1.1 pp increase in feelings of loneliness between 2018 and 2022 (from 2.7% to 3.8%) – the largest of any age/gender group – while men aged 25 to 49 saw a 0.5 pp increase (from 3.8% to 4.3%): smaller in magnitude, but still significant (Figure 1.6, Panel A).

These results extend beyond loneliness: the youngest male age cohort experienced a significant increase in relationship dissatisfaction between 2018 and 2022 (from 2.3% to 3.6%), and men aged 24 to 49 also experienced an increase in relationship dissatisfaction during this time (0.5 pp deterioration, from 3.7% to 4.2%) (Figure 1.6, Panel C). In terms of the frequency of social interactions, both young men and women experienced the largest declines in daily in-person contact with friends between 2015 and 2022, of all age groups. Young women reported a 7.4 percentage point decline (from 41% to 34%), and young men a 9.0 pp fall (from 46% to 37%); however, across three of four age groups (excepting the 65+ age cohort), the decline for men was slightly larger than that of women (Figure 1.6, Panel D). These findings align with other OECD reporting on deteriorating outcomes for men and young people, in terms of non-material aspects of well-being such as life satisfaction, and feelings of worry and pain (OECD, 2024[7]). On the whole, this suggests worrying trends for younger men that necessitate further investigation to better understand the causes, and potential solutions.

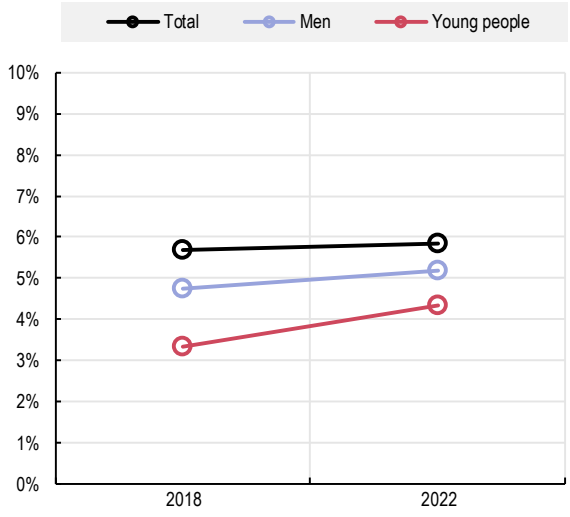
However, this is not to suggest that young women are not vulnerable to feelings of loneliness: women aged 16 to 24 continue to have higher overall rates of feeling lonely than young men (4.9% for young women vs. 3.8% for young men in 2022), and experienced larger declines in *never* feeling lonely between 2018 and 2022 (a 15 percentage point drop, from 59.5% to 44.4%, compared to a 12 pp decline for young men) (Figure 1.6, Panel B).

Figure 1.5. Population groups with historically better social connections outcomes – including men and especially young people – have seen recent deteriorations

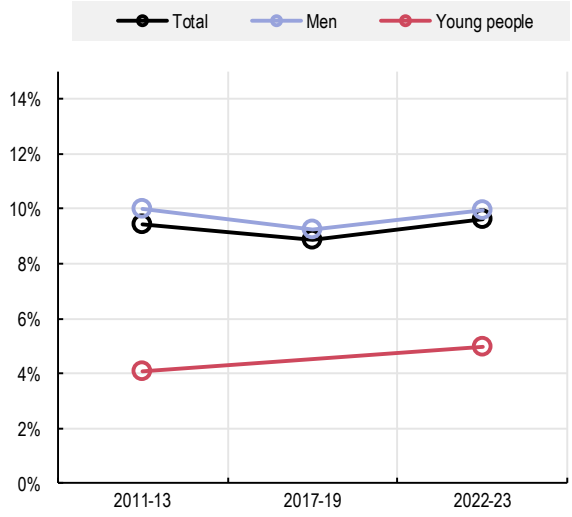
Panel A. Get together with friends in person at least daily in an average year, OECD EU-EFTA 21



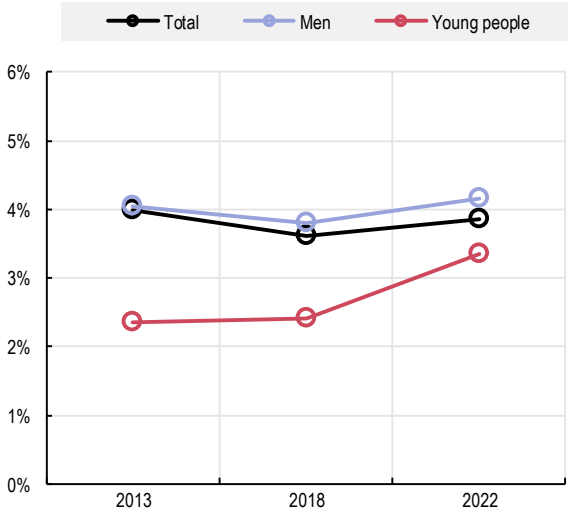
Panel B. Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22



Panel C. Have no one to count on in times of need, OECD



Panel D. Dissatisfied with personal relationships, OECD EU-EFTA 22



Note: "Young people" refers to those aged 16 to 24. Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. Panel A: OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain; Panels B and D: OECD EU-EFTA 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland. Panel C: Data refer to a pooled averages (2011-2013, 2017-2019 and 2022-2023), to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes. Pooled averages for young people refer to 2011-2016 and 2017-2023.

Source: Panels A, B and D: Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions; Panel C: Gallup (n.d.[76]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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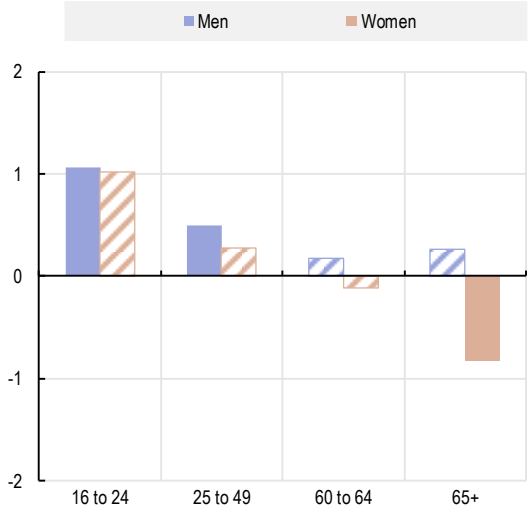
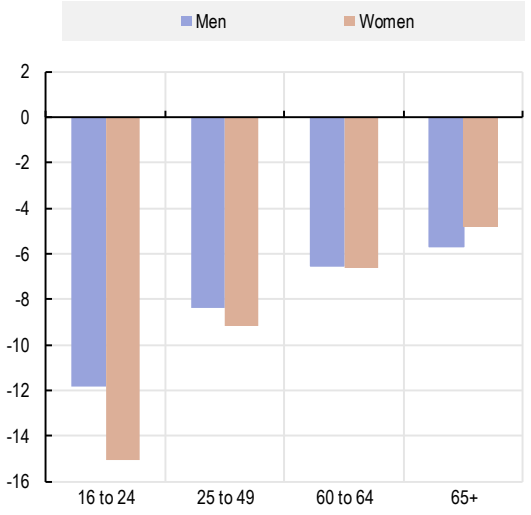
Figure 1.6. Many – though not all – of the recent worsening outcomes for young people are driven by younger men

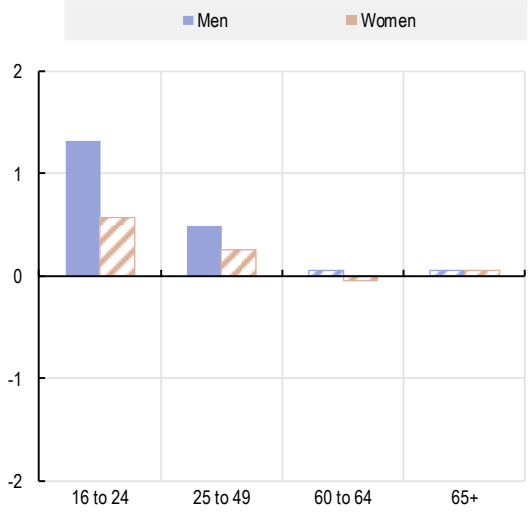
Panel A. Percentage point change 2018 to 2022, felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22



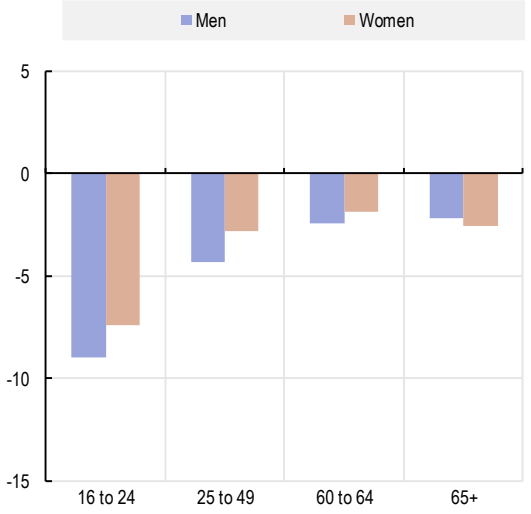
Panel B. Percentage point change 2018 to 2022, never felt lonely over the past four weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22



Panel C. Percentage point change 2018 to 2022, dissatisfied with personal relationships, OECD EU-EFTA 22



Panel D. Percentage point change 2015 to 2022, get together with friends in person on a daily basis, OECD EU-EFTA 21



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the percentage point change over time is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Panels A, B and C: OECD EU-EFTA 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland. Panels D: OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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Socio-economic disadvantage, old age and living alone often go hand-in-hand with deprivations in social connectedness

Different societal groups are significantly more likely to experience isolation and disconnection based on their behaviours and life circumstances (Figure 1.7). For example, the unemployed are more than twice as likely to have felt lonely over the past four weeks compared to the overall population (12% vs. 6%). Research suggests this relationship is bidirectional (Morrish and Medina-Lara, 2021[78]; Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[79]; Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022[37]; Üniversity et al., 2025[80]): losing one's job can lead to fewer social interactions, and a loss of a sense of meaning and/or community, all of which contribute to feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, loneliness can lead to worse mental health outcomes, including depression, which itself influences future employment outcomes (Box 1.4).

Box 1.4. Towards a better understanding of the drivers of (dis)connection

While controlling for common confounders and in some cases using longitudinal designs, much of the evidence on the drivers of social connections, loneliness and isolation is correlational or associative, meaning that researchers do not yet have a complete understanding of the causal pathways that underpin these relationships. As is described throughout this report, some relationships appear to be bidirectional, with causal mechanisms acting in both directions, simultaneously. One example is the interaction between loneliness and unemployment: becoming unemployed leads to less time socialising and a loss of community, both of which can contribute to loneliness, while conversely, loneliness is associated with worse mental health outcomes, which is then demonstrated to affect future employment opportunities.

Improved measurement practice is one way to aid researchers in better understanding the dynamics of these relationships, including the relative importance of different causal pathways and which are the most promising (and cost-effective) candidates for effective policy intervention. More longitudinal data collection of social connections outcomes, in particular, will provide a robust evidence base from which causal studies can be designed. Furthermore, high-quality measurement and monitoring of prospective policy interventions to promote connection and alleviate loneliness and isolation – for example, through rigorous impact evaluation methodologies including randomised control trials – can also assist in improving our understanding of how (dis)connection shapes well-being, and vice versa.

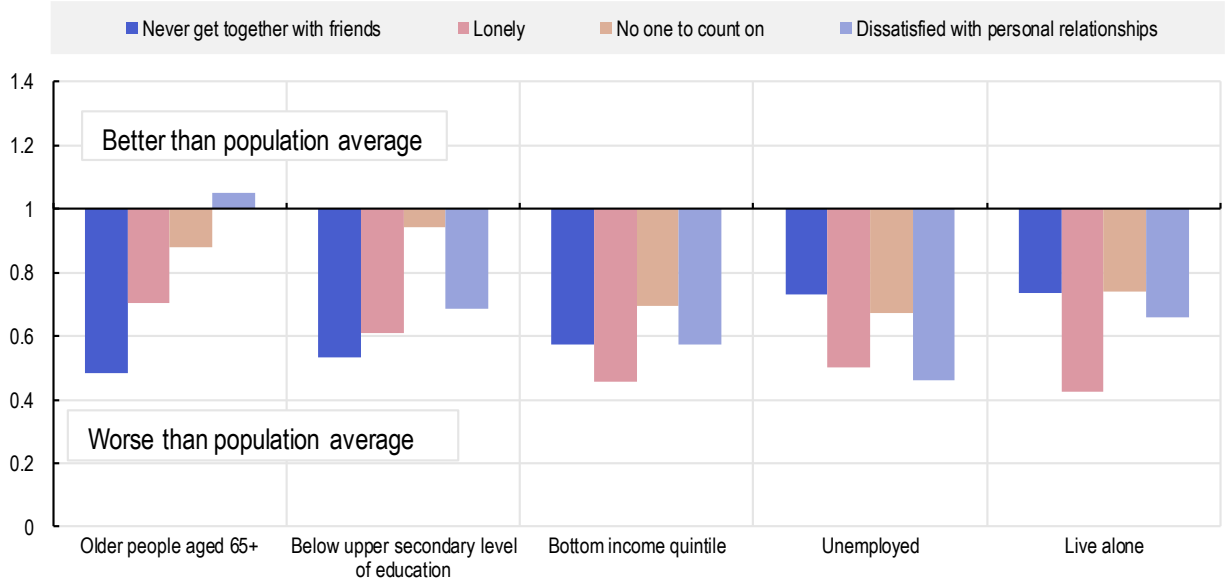
Similarly, people in the bottom income quintile are 2.2 times more likely to feel lonely (13% vs. 6%), 1.4 times more likely to report having no one to count on in times of need (14% vs. 10%) and 1.7 times more likely to feel dissatisfied with their personal relationships (7% vs. 4%), in comparison to the overall population. Existing research has found a negative association between income and poor social connections outcomes, but is less clear on the mechanisms behind this relationship – in part, perhaps, because financial status is often used as a control variable rather than as the direct focus of research itself (Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[79]). Some studies highlight the fact that those with lower incomes, or recent experiences of financial stress, have fewer resources to support social leisure activities (Klinenberg, 2016[81]; WHO, 2025[1]). Others note that poverty is related to poor health (Macdonald, Nixon and Deacon, 2018[82]), which itself influences social connections outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[13]); furthermore, married couples tend to have higher joint household incomes, and being in a relationship and/or living with others is also associated with better outcomes (Hawkley et al., 2008[83]).

Older adults and individuals living alone also face elevated risks. Among those aged 65 years and over, 11% report never meeting friends in person in an average year, more than double the rate for the overall

population (5%). This likely reflects a diminishing social circle and increasing mobility issues that come with age (Wrzus et al., 2013[84]; Sander, Schupp and Richter, 2017[85]). People who live alone are also 2.4 times more likely to feel lonely than the general population (14% vs. 6%). This may not necessarily be unexpected, but is concerning given the growing number of single-person households in many OECD countries, and the high share of older people who live alone. Data from Eurostat's Labour Force Survey finds that across all EU countries, the share of single adult, no children households had risen by 21% since 2013, the highest increase of any household type (Eurostat, 2024[86]). Furthermore, data from the OECD's Affordable Housing Database shows that the share of the population living alone in 30 OECD countries – including non-EU regions – has risen since 2010, with almost one third (31%) of the population aged 65 and over living alone, and just over 1 in 10 of those 15 to 29 doing so (see Chapter 3). OECD analysis suggests that the share of single-occupancy households is only likely to increase in the coming decades, due in part to rapid population ageing (OECD, 2024[87]).

Figure 1.7. Those with socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to experience worse social connections outcomes, as are the elderly and those who live alone

Ratio of social connections outcomes for different population groups compared to population outcomes, OECD average, 2022 or latest available year



Note: The figure depicts the ratio of the population group outcome compared to the total population average outcome, for each of four selected social connections outcomes. Latest available year refers to 2022 aside from "no one to count on" which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023 for education, income and live alone outcomes; and a pooled average of 2017-2023 for age and education outcomes. Pooled averages are used to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes. Outcomes better than the population average are greater than 1, and outcomes that are worse than the population average are below 1. A value of 1 indicates equal outcomes for the population group and the population average.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[15]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (Accessed in October 2024) and Gallup (n.d.[76]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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While the drivers of social connections are complex, they are partly structural and can be addressed by policy

Measures of outcomes on their own are insufficient to design well-tailored interventions that address loneliness and isolation, or to ensure that existing policies do not inadvertently cause harm to people's connections. To do so, it is essential to understand the drivers of loneliness, isolation and poor-quality relationships, as well as the upstream factors that support a thriving social life. The growing number of OECD government policy initiatives to address loneliness and isolation, described above, include many examples of multi-sectoral, community-level programmes and interventions: a reflection of the complex socio-economic, environmental and structural factors that shape (dis)connection.

The drivers of social connections are interrelated and often bidirectional in nature – that is, the factors that can influence loneliness, on which the majority of research thus far has focused, may themselves be simultaneously affected by loneliness (refer again to Box 1.4). For example, reduced connection to others is both a risk factor for the onset of poor mental health outcomes, as well as a of symptom mental ill-health (OECD, 2023[88]; Saeri et al., 2018[89]). Similarly, smaller social networks can worsen labour market outcomes (Lin, 1999[90]), while unemployment may lead to a diminished social network and feelings of exclusion (Kunze and Suppa, 2017[91]; Pohlan, 2019[92]). This complexity makes it difficult to identify the causal pathways that underpin these relationships, particularly in the absence of longitudinal data (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[2]). However, importantly, drivers are not solely determined by personality traits or genetics (Lim, Eres and Vasan, 2020[3]), but rather are also affected by policy choices – whether intentional or not – that inform an individual's socio-economic status, the discriminatory barriers they may or may not face, the make-up of their local environment, and their ability to access services and socially mix with others in their community who may or may not share similar characteristics.

Structural and socio-economic factors such as income and employment are highly correlated with social connections outcomes. As shown in Figure 1.7, people in socio-economically disadvantaged groups experience much higher levels of loneliness and social disconnection. Indeed, research shows that financial instability and lack of financial resources are associated with reduced opportunities for social participation and can contribute to compounded health issues (which themselves influence isolation and loneliness) (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[31]). Unemployment has also been shown to be associated with a reduction in the size of one's social network and heightened feelings of exclusion (Kunze and Suppa, 2017[91]; Pohlan, 2019[92]). At the societal level, some evidence also suggests that countries with higher levels of income inequality are more likely to have higher loneliness prevalence (Tapia-Muñoz et al., 2022[93]): in societies with more material inequality, the salience of one's relative deprivation is increased, which has psychological impacts (Marmot et al., 2010[94]; Marmot, 2020[95]). Furthermore, those experiencing poverty in more unequal societies are more vulnerable to lack of social integration and community support, having fewer comparative financial resources to participate in an active and fulfilling social life (Tapia-Muñoz et al., 2022[93]; WHO, 2014[96]). People with migrant backgrounds face elevated risks for loneliness, including second-generation migrants, who may experience a weaker sense of belonging due to cultural differences, language barriers, feelings of discrimination or the size of a local network relative to a transnational network (van Cluysen and van Craen, 2011[97]; Koelet and de Valk, 2016[98]; Eralba and Barbiano Di Belgiojoso, 2021[99]). Research into social connections outcomes for ethnic and racial minorities reveals similar experiences. For example, a study by the British Red Cross found that ethnic minority groups have higher levels of loneliness and social isolation, in part because of overlapping deprivations including poverty, worse health outcomes and language barriers (Kennedy, Field and Barker, 2019[100]). However, context matters: for example, in New Zealand, evidence from the 2021 General Social Survey showed that Māori and Pacific peoples reported higher levels of family support than the general population, potentially reflecting the prioritisation of collective well-being and shared responsibilities (Stats NZ, 2022[101]). These, and other examples, are discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

Beyond socio-demographics, an individual's housing situation, the built environment and access to services also influence social connections and belonging to a place (OECD, 2023[102]). A systematic review reveals that inadequate (public) transport is associated with loneliness and isolation, particularly – though not exclusively – for those living in remote and underserved areas (Williams et al., 2024[103]; OECD, 2023[102]). In these contexts, community transport services can play a vital role in reducing social isolation, for instance for older adults in rural areas (Hagan, 2020[104]). In more car-dependent countries, such as the United States, older adults may continue driving despite health risks, fearing that giving up driving will harm social connectedness. Evidence from Canada, Ireland and Japan confirms that driving cessation is indeed associated with reduced social participation, while access to alternative public transport can mitigate these effects (Williams et al., 2024[103]) (Matsuda et al., 2019[105]). In the Netherlands, frequent cycling is positively associated with social interaction, possibly due to increased chances of spontaneous encounters compared to driving (Weijs-Perrée et al., 2015[106]).

Much of the thus far limited evidence on which policies work best to improve social connections are focused on interventions tailored to the individual, however the built environment – and more specifically, physical spaces within the built environment where people are free to come and go and interact with one another informally – play a key role in shaping social connections. As such, interventions targeted at the community level are promising, and merit greater policy attention. Community spaces that encourage connection can include libraries, playgrounds and parks (public institutions); places of worship or civic associations (community organisations); or commercial establishments that encourage socialising, such as cafes, barbershops and bookstores. This so-called *social infrastructure*, also referred to as third places, plays an important role in facilitating interactions among different social groups, and encouraging the building of relationships (Oldenburg and Christensen, 2023[107]; Klinenberg, 2019[108]).

A better understanding of how policy can support the development of social infrastructure and increase its accessibility to a broader range of population groups (including via financial support), will be an important step in developing programmes to improve social connections at the community level. Some OECD countries are already active in this regard. For example, as a part of its *Strategy Against Loneliness*, the German government has established inter-generational homes and community meeting spaces in part to reach out to low-income elderly people at risk for isolation (BMFSFJ, 2022[61]; BMFSFJ, 2022[62]); in Aragon, Spain the local government has developed an initiative to target undesired loneliness among the elderly, especially those in more rural areas who may struggle to access services, by creating communal spaces to encourage connection while building necessarily skills (i.e., digital literacy) (OGP, 2024[109]); the Lithuanian government has developed a range of programmes designed to facilitate the social integration of the elderly, especially those who live in remote areas and lack digital skills, including a social prescribing initiative that connects seniors to free local cultural, wellness and (non-formal) education activities (Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2025[110]); and in Paris, the Mayor's Office has developed a list of recommended third places to encourage residents and visitors alike to frequent off-the-beaten track destinations that encourage interactions with others (Ville de Paris, 2023[111]). Sub-national and local initiatives – such as the *République des Hypervoisins* effort to build hyperlocal community belonging in the 14th arrondissement of Paris (helloasso, 2025[112]), and the borough of Camden's community activity guide to local community activities, events, social groups and resources to meet new people (The London Borough of Camden, 2025[113]) – also show promise. These types of programmes and interventions may be particularly important in the context of shifting demographics whereby more people live alone and rely on out-of-home interactions, or proactive social invitations to one's own home, to sustain an active social life. Metrics on social infrastructure availability and quality are not yet well developed, and a greater statistical focus on this topic could provide policymakers with key evidence to support needed programmes (see Chapter 5 for an extended discussion).

In light of worsening outcomes for young people, there is growing concern among policymakers, parents and teachers about the role of digital technologies, particularly social media, in shaping modern social connections (see Chapter 5 for an extended discussion). Additionally, declining trends in getting together

with friends and family in person, and rising trends in regular remote contact (see Chapter 4), necessitate a better understanding of the broader well-being impacts of moving socialising online.

The available evidence is thus far mixed: some research suggests that online interactions displace real-world socialising (Kraut et al., 1998[114]; Dienlin, Masur and Trepte, 2017[115]), to the detriment of broader well-being (Twenge, 2019[116]; Turkle, 2015[117]). Online communication differs in important ways from in-person conversation (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020[118]; OECD, 2024[119]), and particularly for younger people, some researchers posit that an over-reliance on the former may lead to poorer social skills, withdrawal and increasing isolation and loneliness (Haidt, 2024[120]). The online space also presents its own unique risks for social connectedness, including cyberbullying and algorithm-driven echo chambers (OECD, 2024[121]; OECD, 2025[122]; Kitchens, Johnson and Gray, 2020[123]). However, other strands of research highlight the benefits of digital technology: rather than displacing off-line engagement, digital platforms can help sustain relationships across distance and time, especially for marginalised groups such as LGBTI youth, who may lack offline support (Masur, 2021[124]; Dienlin, Masur and Trepte, 2017[115]; Valkenburg and Peter, 2007[125]; Cui, 2016[126]; Eickers, 2024[127]). The lack of academic consensus is partly due to limited longitudinal data. However, it also reflects that not all digital use is equal: the type and purpose of engagement matter (OECD, 2025[122]; Uhls et al., 2025[128]). Passive browsing or video watching is more strongly associated with negative outcomes, while active communication – chatting, commenting, sharing – can foster connection (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[2]; Uhls et al., 2025[128]; Frison and Eggermont, 2020[129]). This shows the need for better tailored, more nuanced measurement approaches to digital technology use and its impact on online and offline social connections.

While research into the causes of loneliness and isolation continues to evolve, policymakers, parents and educators are already taking action. Several countries have introduced legislation to restrict access to social media or smartphones, particularly in schools (see Chapter 5). More systematic evaluations of these initiatives should accompany their roll out to enable a better understanding of how they can be effectively designed, implemented and enforced. A key consideration of policy design is a discussion of which outcomes will be affected by each initiative: in addition to the existing focus on cognition, attention and learning outcomes, outcomes relating to the quantity and quality of social connections should also be included.

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Notes

[1] Furthermore, while one-third of official surveys in OECD countries with social connections indicators are fielded annually, two-thirds are fielded every 2-5 years or irregularly (Mahoney et al., 2024[5]).

[2] *How's Life?* reports include a small set of internationally comparable indicators related to time spent in social interactions, perceived social support and, since 2024, feeling lonely (OECD, 2024[7]).

[3] In addition to measurement work done at the OECD, there is a growing international community of practice dedicated to harmonising and standardising social connections data. Forthcoming work from a global group of scholars will investigate the statistical properties of different approaches to measuring

loneliness across all 27 EU countries; the analysis will focus on the suitability of different measures in terms of their factor structure, reliability and measurement invariance, among other aspects (Paris et al., 2024[135]). A parallel initiative will conduct qualitative research (in-depth interviews and focus groups) across multiple countries to better understand how social connections and loneliness differ across culture, language and region – in terms of how the terms are conceptualised, understood and valued (TWCF, 2025[137]).

This work aims to contribute to the measurement agenda by ensuring that indicators used are broadly applicable to different population groups, beyond the cultural context in which they were initially developed; in this way, cross-country comparisons can be more robust and valid. Previous OECD assessments of the cultural sensitivity of related topics, including subjective well-being and population mental health, have found cultural differences to play some role in explaining variations between countries and demographic groups, but not to the extent that the measures themselves are invalid; that is, they still provide meaningful information about prevalence, especially when longer time trends are available (OECD, 2013[130]; 2023[131]).

International organisations are also actively engaged in social connections measurement work. In addition to the WHO Commission on Social Connection's forthcoming work on a Global Index on Social Connection (see Box 1.3), the United Nations Friends of the Chair Group on Social and Demographic Statistics (UN-FOCG-SD), which the OECD is contributing to, is developing a multi-level Institutions and Relationships Measurement Framework that conceives of relationships as "building blocks" for social statistics. This approach, mirroring the system of macroeconomic statistics, outlines how social interactions comprehensively shape society as a whole, and comprises the extent, function, quality and impact of relationships across micro-, meso- and macro levels (e.g. people, families, communities, institutions) (UNSD, 2023[139]). Social connections outcomes, such as those presented in this report, are then only *one* (important) component of these relationship building blocks.

In a separate workstream, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has published an in-depth review of social cohesion measures in order to better understand the affective distance between different ideological groups (UNECE, 2025[138]). This work was supported by a pilot data collection exercise conducted by Statistics Canada, which included indicators covering respondents' feelings towards those with similar/different political views, views on racism and views on gender identity (MacIsaac and Schellenberg, 2025[134]).

[4] Social capital, which refers to the social norms, shared values and institutional arrangements that foster co-operation among population groups, is highly related to the concept of social connectedness, however is captured in a separate domain of the OECD Well-being Framework via indicators measuring trust, volunteering, government stakeholder engagement and corruption (Figure 1.1); it is therefore not the primary focus of this report.

[5] Weak correlations can also be an artifact of imprecise measurement of latent constructs. In this instance, the academic literature supports evidence distinguishing structural measures of isolation from concepts like loneliness (Huxhold, Suanet and Wetzel, 2022[9]; Perissinotto and Covinsky, 2014[10]; Danvers et al., 2023[11]).

[6] Countries covered by the studies included in the systematic review include Australia (n=4), Japan (n=1), the Netherlands (n=2), Spain (n=1), the United Kingdom (n=6) and the United States (n=1) (Engel et al., 2025[23]).

[7] "Lonely deaths" (고독사 / *godoksa* in Korean) refers to the death of an individual who is socially isolated from family or friends, from illness, suicide or other causes (Korea Ministry of Government Legislation, 2025[133]). Lonely deaths are in part affected by the growing number of single-occupancy households. While the elderly are affected, the most vulnerable groups may be men in their 50s or 60s who have not yet aged into social welfare programmes for the elderly, and are thus out of reach of social welfare systems designed to check in on them, their health and well-being (The Korea Herald, 2024[136]).

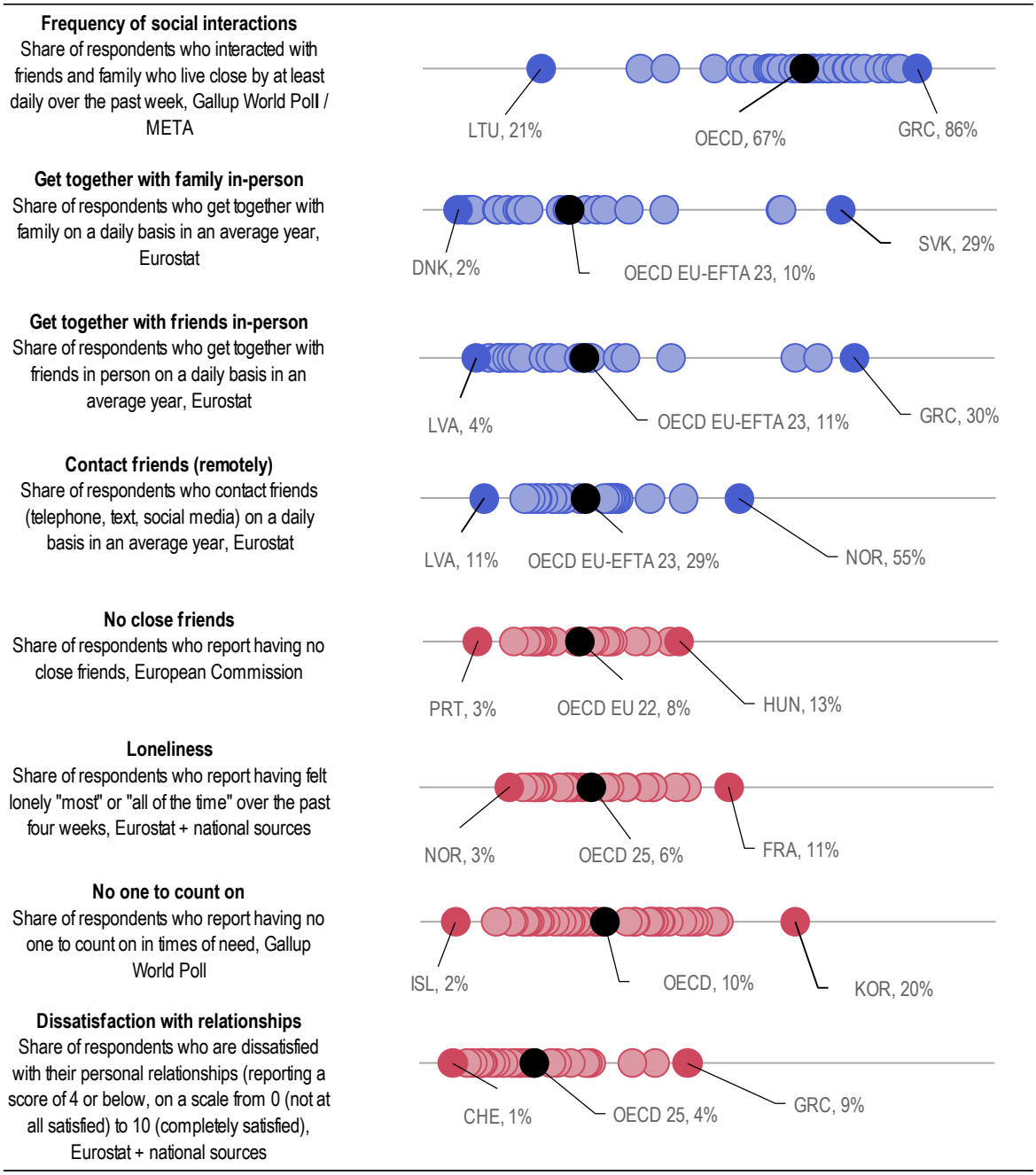
[8] This initiative joins a range of other Lithuanian government-sponsored programmes to support the emotional well-being and social connectedness of the elderly population, including a social prescribing programme (Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2025[110]) and an inclusive ageing policy (OECD, 2023[132]).

[9] These results could be, in part, a reflection of aging societies – this concern is partially addressed in later analysis in this report in which outcomes are disaggregated by age group (and age group by gender), to show that in-person socialising has declined most precipitously for young people. Future analysis could take an age-period-cohort modelling approach to test for cohort effects.

2. Social connections across OECD countries

Across OECD countries, most people report frequent social interactions and generally feel supported by their social network. However, a notable share of the population faces deprivations in social connectedness: on average, 10% feel unsupported, 8% report having no close friends and 6% experienced loneliness most or all of the time over the past four weeks. Different indicators provide different insights: strong outcomes in one area – such as frequent in-person interactions – do not necessarily translate into high-quality or supportive relationships, both across countries and for individuals.

Figure 2.1. Snapshot: Key social connections outcomes, 2022 or latest available year



Note: The snapshot depicts data for 2022, aside from "no one to count on" which refers to a pooled average from 2022-2023. Pink shading indicates that the outcome is a deprivation, meaning higher values indicate worse outcomes. For each indicator, the OECD country with the lowest and highest values is labelled, along with the OECD average.

Source: Gallup (2023[1]), *Global State of Social Connections*, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx; Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b; Gallup (n.d.[4]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx; Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2021[5]), *Encuesta de Bienestar Social*, Government of Chile, https://observatorio.ministeriodesarrollosocial.gob.cl/encuesta-bienestar-social-2023; Stats NZ (2024[6]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/; OECD (n.d.[7]), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu.

StatLink https://stat.link/a6nfic

This chapter provides an overview of the structure, function and quality of social connections outcomes across OECD countries. It covers how people spend their time; who they spend it with; the composition of their social networks; experiences of loneliness; access to and receipt of different forms of social support; and various measures of relationship quality.

Figure 2.1 highlights results for a key set of such outcomes collected around 2022. People across all OECD countries reported frequent social interactions: on average, 67% say they interacted with friends or family at least daily over the past week. In 23 European OECD countries with available data, these interactions occurred much more often remotely – 29% of respondents contacted friends daily via telephone, text or social media – than in-person, with only 11% meeting up with friends at least daily over a given year.

On average across OECD countries, 90% of respondents have someone to rely on in times of need, and just 4% of people (across 25 OECD countries with available data) are dissatisfied with their personal relationships. Nevertheless, notable deprivations persist: on average 10% of people report having no one to support them should they need it, across 22 European OECD countries 8% of people have no close friends, and across 25 OECD countries with comparable data, between 3% and 11% of the population reported feeling lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks.

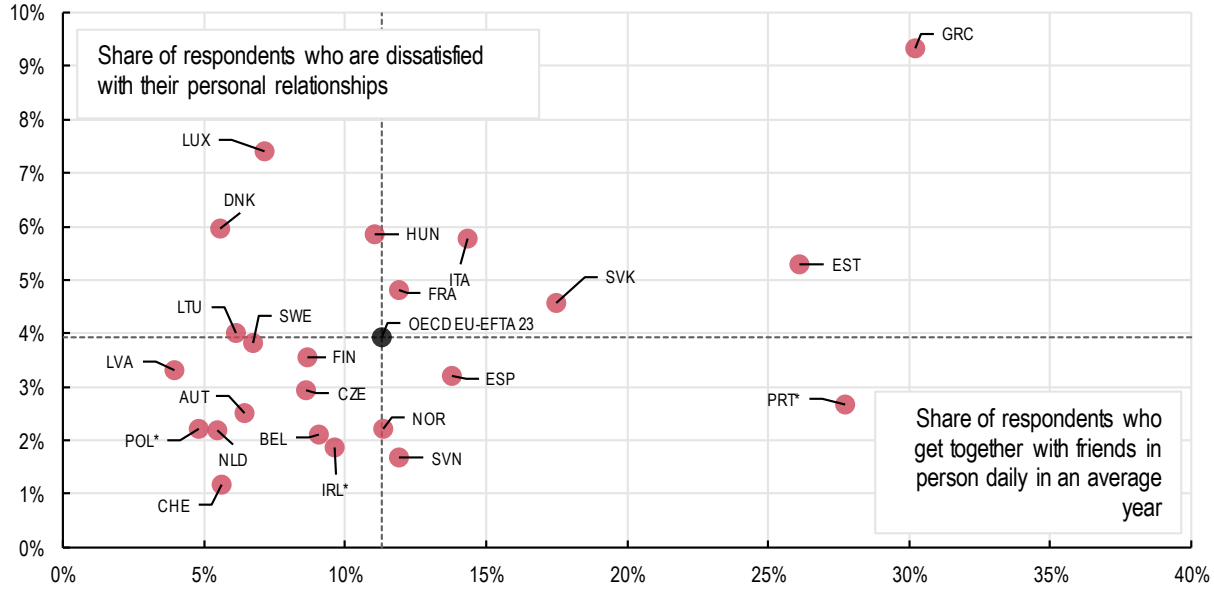
These findings are based on international surveys fielded between 2022 and 2023, and therefore may still reflect the tail-end effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its significant disruptions to (social) life. However, medium-term trend analysis (see Chapter 4) shows that the frequency of in-person social interactions have been declining since 2006, while remote social interactions have been rising, suggesting that the higher rates of remote interactions seen in this chapter are not pandemic-related anomalies but reflect longer-term shifts in social behaviour.[1]

A key insight is that strong performance in one area of social connection does not guarantee positive outcomes in others. For instance, there is no clear relationship between daily in-person socialising[2] and dissatisfaction with relationship quality – indeed, some countries with low rates of daily socialising also have relatively low rates of dissatisfaction with relationship quality, while others have high rates of both (Figure 2.2).

This pattern also holds at the individual level (Table 2.1.).[3] Frequency measures of social interactions (such as daily socialising or daily remote contact) are moderately correlated with one another, but show only weak correlations with perceptions of relationship quality (such as feeling lonely and dissatisfaction with relationships). This highlights the importance of measuring and analysing both quantitative and qualitative dimensions when assessing the state of social connections, as they provide distinct and complementary insights.

Figure 2.2. Strong performance in one area of social connections does not guarantee positive outcomes in others

Scatterplot of dissatisfaction with personal relationships and daily in-person interactions with friends, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: "Getting together" refers to spending time in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. Dissatisfaction with personal relationships is defined as reporting a score ≤ 4 on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). * indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for dissatisfaction with personal relationships. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

StatLink https://stat.link/otnz5a

Table 2.1. High-frequency social contact is only weakly correlated with feeling lonely and perceived relationship quality

	Get together with family on a daily basis	Get together with friends on a daily basis	Contact family (remotely) on a daily basis	Contact friends (remotely) on a daily basis	Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks
Get together with friends on a daily basis	0.23				
Contact family (remotely) on a daily basis	0.27	0.13			
Contact friends (remotely) on a daily basis	0.10	0.32	0.31		
Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	
Dissatisfied with personal relationships	-0.02	-0.02	-0.05	-0.04	0.24

Note: Table displays weighted listwise Pearson correlation coefficients between quantitative and qualitative social connections outcomes from 23 European OECD countries in 2022. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

How and with whom people spend their time

One way to understand social connections is to examine the basic patterns of people's social interactions – such as how much time people spend with others versus alone, how often they interact in person compared to digitally, and the size of their social networks. While these indicators are based on self-reported data from household surveys,[4] they are focused on the frequency and quantity of social interactions, making them quite different from indicators that address the perceived quality of people's social lives – such as how supported people feel or how satisfied they are with their social relationships. These latter dimensions are explored later on in this chapter.

Frequency of social interactions

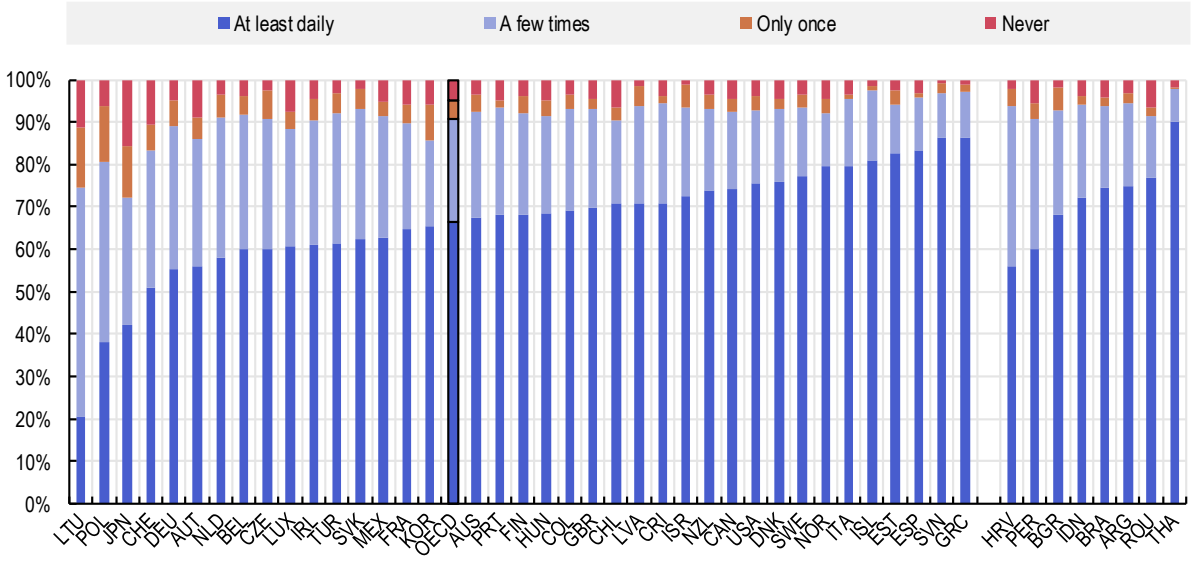
Frequent interactions with others provide important well-being benefits, including better physical and mental health (Holt-Lunstad and Smith, 2016[8]; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[9]; Hansen et al., 2017[10]; Amati et al., 2018[11]; van der Horst and Coffé, 2012[12]). They also help to strengthen social networks that offer access to labour market, educational and financial resources, in addition to emotional support (Lleras-Muney et al., 2020[13]; Chetty et al., 2022[14]). While social interactions take place in a variety of settings – including schools, the workplace and community spaces[5] – this section focuses specifically on interactions with family and friends, given their relevance to the entire population (i.e., not just the school-aged, or those in the labour market).

Evidence from all OECD countries shows that a large majority of people frequently interact with friends and family (Figure 2.3). In 2022, on average 95% of respondents say they had at least one interaction – either in person or remotely – with friends or family they live with or who live nearby, over the past week. Two-thirds (67%) reported such interactions on a daily basis. Still, 5% of respondents reported no contact

at all – neither in-person nor remote – with friends or family in the previous week, with this rate varying from as low as 1% to as high as 16% across countries. These findings highlight that although most people remain socially connected, a notable share of the population faces elevated risks of social isolation, and its associated negative impacts on well-being (see Chapter 3 for details on the groups most affected).

Figure 2.3. In all but three OECD countries, over half of the population reported some form of daily interaction with friends and family over the past week

Share of respondents who interacted (either in person or remotely) with friends or family who live nearby over the past 7 days, by frequency, OECD, 2022



Note: "At least daily" combines answers to "more than once per day" and "once per day". The question refers to friends and family who live with, or close to, the respondent. Separate questions (not shown here) refer to friends and family who live "far away", people from work and school, neighbours, strangers and members of shared interest groups. Further definitional details for "interaction" are not specified. Responses may not sum up to 100% due to refusals and "don't know" responses.
Source: Gallup (2023[1]), *Global State of Social Connections*, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx.

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Types of social interactions – in person vs. remote

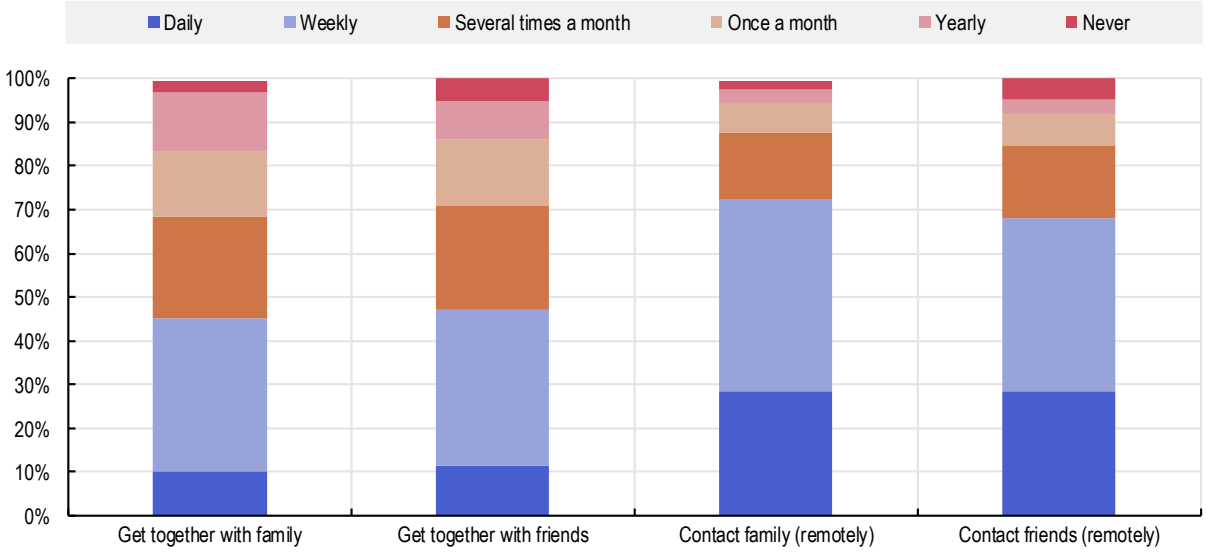
In recent decades, a larger share of respondents have reported declining in-person social interactions with friends and family and increasingly frequent digital interactions – via phone and video calls, text messages, emails and social media platforms. The broader implications of this shift for the quality and nature of social relationships are explored in greater detail in Chapter 5. However, existing cross-country data outlined in this chapter already offer valuable insights into current patterns of in-person versus remote social engagement.

2022 data from 23 European OECD countries show that people are more likely to stay in touch with family and friends remotely than in person. On average, 72% of respondents report contacting family members (not living in the same household) at least weekly, and 68% say the same for friends. In contrast, only 45% of people report getting together weekly with family, and 47% with friends (Figure 2.4). National data from non-European OECD countries reveal similar patterns (Box 2.1). The higher frequency of remote interactions likely reflects, at least in part, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which social distancing and confinement policies limited in-person contact and for some population groups, pushed many aspects of work, education and social life online. By 2022 – when these data were collected

– many behaviours had returned to pre-pandemic norms, but some lingering effects may remain. Regardless, these patterns are consistent with long-term trends in the increasing use of digital communication, at a time when face-to-face interaction is falling (see Chapter 4 on trends).

Figure 2.4. In 23 European OECD countries, nearly half of people meet friends or family weekly, while over two-thirds stay in touch remotely

Share of respondents who get together with or contact family or friends, by frequency in a given year, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: Data for respondents answering "no relatives" is not shown. Getting together with, or contacting, family refers to relatives who do not live in the same household as the respondent. "Getting together" refers to spending time in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. "Contact" refers to any form of contact, including telephone, text, letter, Internet (including social media). Engaging with content on social media (i.e., "liking" a post or photo) is not considered contact; contact should reflect a conversation (written or verbal). OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

StatLink https://stat.link/p6jqey

Box 2.1. National spotlight: Frequency of in-person vs. remote interactions in Japan and the United States

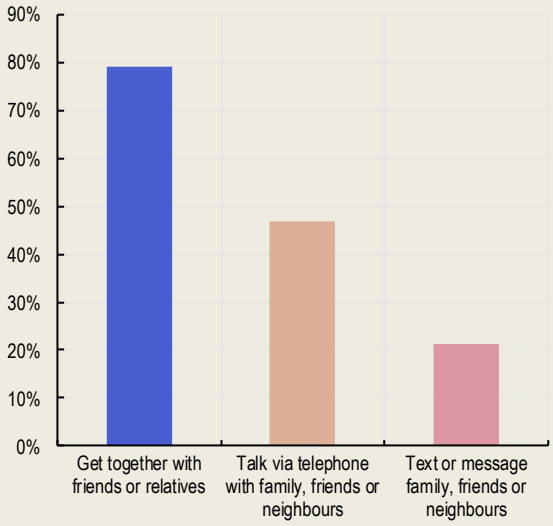
Official data from the United States and Japan also confirm that remote interactions are more common than in-person contact. In the United States, as of 2024, nearly 80% of respondents reported getting together with friends or family fewer than three times per week – one threshold used to identify potential social isolation used by the United States Census Bureau in reporting data from its *Household Pulse Survey* (CDC, 2024[15]). In contrast, far fewer reported limited remote interactions: 47% talked on the phone and 21% texted others fewer than three times per week (Figure 2.5, Panel A).

In Japan, 2023 data show that 44% of respondents reported having in-person conversations with friends or family at least weekly over the course of a year. Slightly more – 47% – communicated this frequently via social media, and around one-third did so via phone calls (Figure 2.5, Panel B). However, nearly

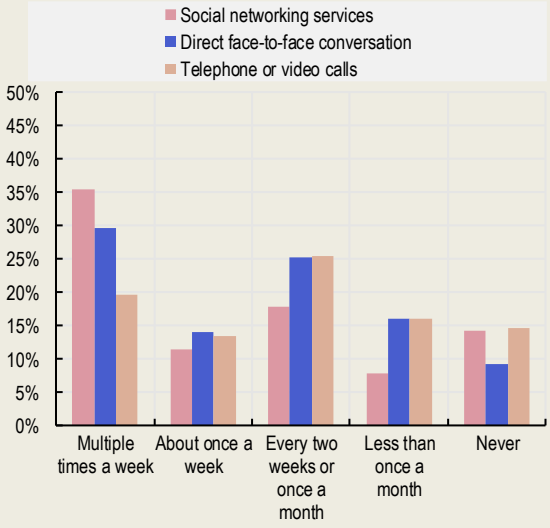
10% of respondents say they never interact in person – a much higher share than in European OECD countries (Figure 2.4). Additionally, around 15% of Japanese respondents reported never calling or using social media to communicate with others (Figure 2.5, Panel B).

Figure 2.5. In the United States and Japan, remote interactions are more frequent than in-person contact – but sizable shares report little or no social connection

Panel A. Share of adults who report they _____ fewer than three times in a typical week, United States, Jan-Sep 2024 average



Panel B. Share of respondents who have different types of interactions with family and friends, by frequency, Japan, 2023



Note: Panel A: Data shown are averages from nine rounds of data collection spanning January to September 2024. "Fewer than three times" combines outcomes for those who answered "Less than once a week" and "1 or 2 times a week". Panel B: The question refers to friends and family members who do not live in the same household as the respondent. "Multiple times a week" combines answers to "4-5 times a week or more" and "about 2-3 times a week"; "Every two weeks or once a month" combines answers to "about once every two weeks" and "about once a month". Refusals to answer are not shown.

Source: Panel A: US Census Bureau (2024[16]), *Household Pulse Survey*, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html; Panel B: e-Stat (2023[17]), 人々のつながりに関する基礎調査, Government of Japan, https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?page=1&toukei=00000004&metadata=1&data=1.

StatLink https://stat.link/j40gzf

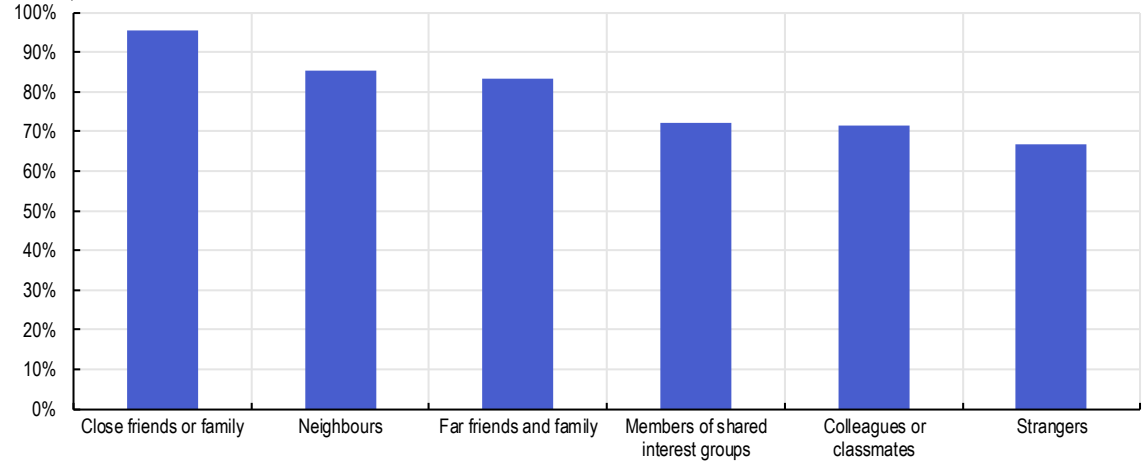
The types of people we socialise with

Social circles extend beyond friends and family to include colleagues, classmates, neighbours, community members and even strangers – all of whom play important roles in building social capital and supporting social mobility (see next section). The Gallup World Poll's *Global State of Social Connections* survey asked respondents whether they had interacted – either in person or remotely – with various types of people over the past week. Unsurprisingly, in nearly all OECD countries, the most common interactions were with nearby friends or family members, reported by 95% of respondents for the OECD average (Figure 2.6, Panel A; Figure 2.6, Panel B).

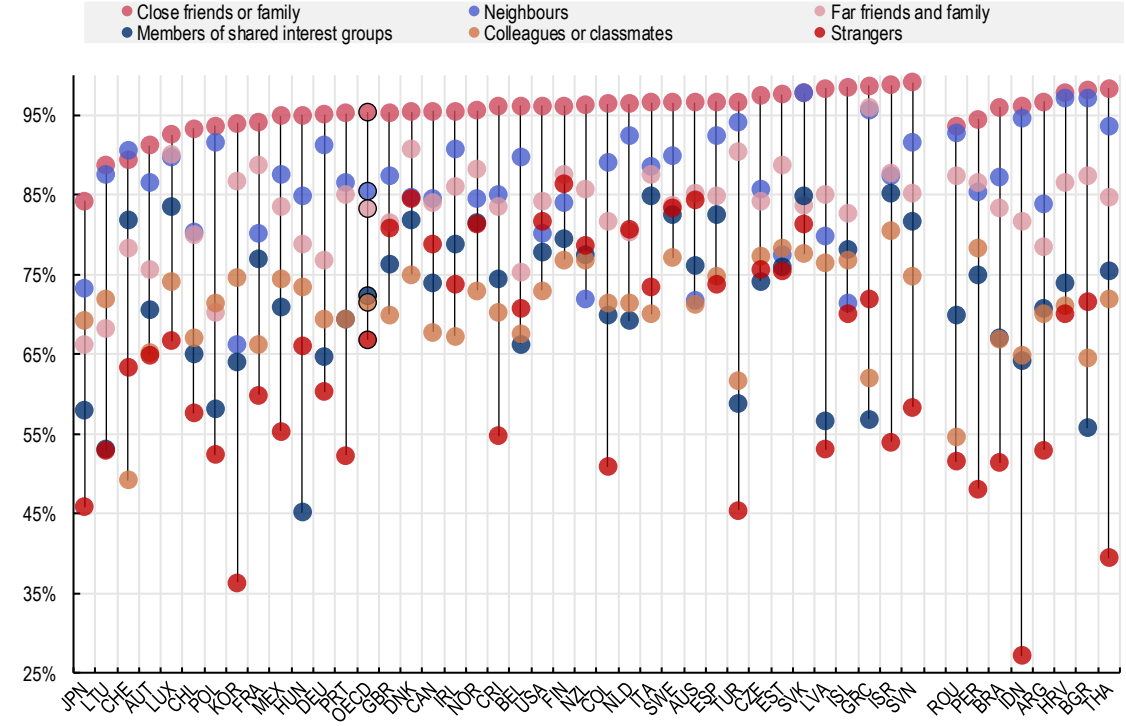
However, a majority of people across OECD countries also reported contact with a broader set of social ties: 85% interacted with neighbours, 83% with distant friends or family, 72% with members of shared-interest or belief groups, 71% with colleagues or classmates and 67% with strangers (Figure 2.6, Panel A). These patterns vary across countries: for example, the share of respondents interacting with strangers in the past week ranged from below 50% to over 80%; for colleagues and classmates, from under 65% to 80%; and for shared-interest groups, from 45% to 85% (Figure 2.6, Panel B).

Figure 2.6. Across OECD countries, people are most likely to interact with friends, family and neighbours either in person or remotely, and least likely to interact with strangers

Panel A. Share of respondents who interacted with different types of people at least once over the past 7 days, OECD, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who interacted with different types of people at least once over the past 7 days, OECD, 2022



Note: Panels A and B: "Close friends and family" refers to those who live close to the respondent, "far friends and family" refers to those who live far away. "Members of shared interest groups" refers to people who belong to groups the respondent is a part of based on shared interests or beliefs. Panel B: Displays the share of respondents who interacted with each group at least once over the past week, combining answers for "more than once per day", "once per day", "a few times" and "only once". Further definitional details for "interaction" are not specified.
Source: Gallup (2023[1]), *Global State of Social Connections*, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx.

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Size and composition of social networks

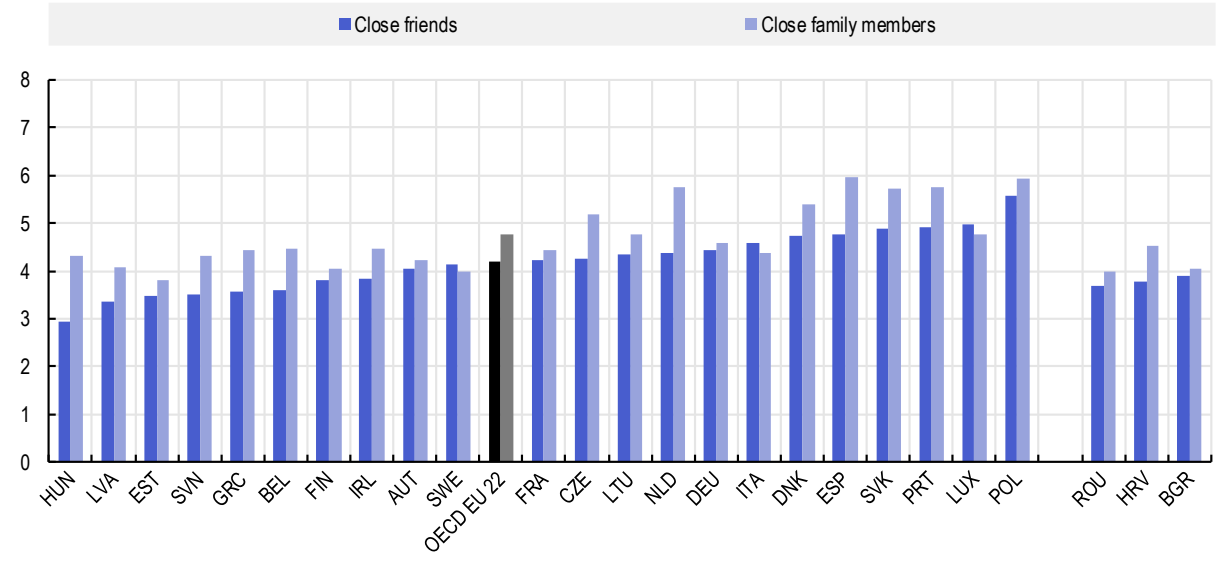
As discussed above, friends and family represent core components of most social networks, and positive relationships with both are key to realising the well-being benefits of social interaction.[6] Data from 22 European OECD countries in 2022 show that people report, on average, having five close family members and four close friends (Figure 2.7, Panel A). However, a non-negligible share of the population reports social network deprivations. On average, 8% of people report having *no* close friends, ranging from 3% to as high as 13% across countries (Figure 2.7, Panel B). The share reporting to have no close family members is lower, at 3%, on average. Comparable data collected by the Pew Research Center in the United States show similar patterns: in 2023, 8% of adults reported having no close friends (Goodard, 2023[18]).

Network size and diversity – particularly beyond the strong ties with immediate family and close friends – play a crucial role in building social capital and supporting social mobility. For example, supportive relationships with colleagues are associated with higher productivity and greater job satisfaction (Patel and Plowman, 2022[19]), interacting with individuals from different socio-economic groups can encourage social mobility (Chetty et al., 2022[14]; Chetty et al., 2022[20]; Harris et al., 2025[21]), interactions with strangers or distant acquaintances (so-called “weak ties”) have been shown to improve societal inclusion (Granovetter, 1983[22]), and a diversity of social contacts – including with those with differing views – may foster greater tolerance and civic participation (Mutz, 2002[23]; Ikeda and Richey, 2009[24]; Quintelier, Stolle and Harell, 2012[25]).

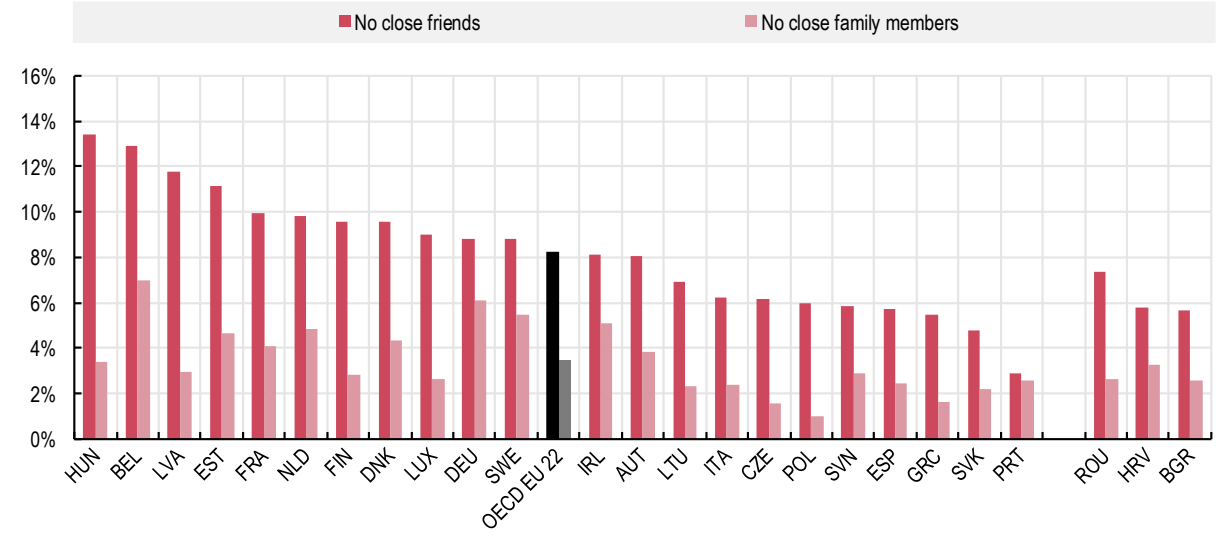
Internationally comparable survey data on network diversity is scarce, but recent evidence from three OECD countries sheds light on selected dimensions (Figure 2.8). In 2022, 13% of respondents in the United States, 14% in France and 21% in Mexico reported having no friends with different political views. In both France and Mexico, 21% of respondents reported having no friends from a different religious background; in the United States the rate was only 13%. Official statistics from England further illustrate similar trends, showing that many people’s social networks are composed primarily of individuals who share similar characteristics (Box 2.2).

Figure 2.7. On average in 22 European OECD countries, people report having between four and five close friends or family members, while 8% report having no close friends at all

Panel A. Number of close friends or family members, OECD EU 22, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who report having zero close friends or family members, OECD EU 22, 2022



Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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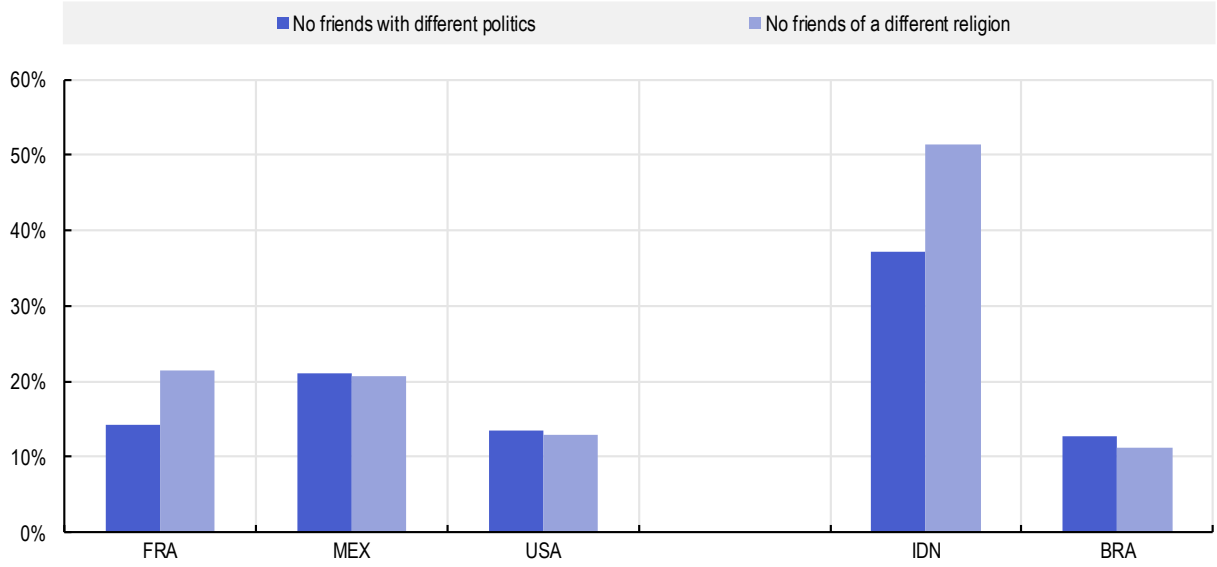
Figure 2.8. Across three OECD countries the share of respondents who have no friends with different political or religious beliefs ranges from 13% to 21%

Share of respondents who report having no friends with political or religious beliefs that differ from their own, 2022



Source: Data for Good at Meta (2022[26]), *Social Connections Survey*. https://data.humdata.org/dataset/social-connections-survey.

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In addition to data collected on household or time use surveys, some researchers have used alternative approaches to measuring network composition using digital trace data from social networking platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn to assess the size, structure and diversity of individuals' social networks, as well as patterns of engagement with different network members (Bazzaz Abkenar et al., 2021[27]; Bailey et al., 2018[28]; Davis et al., 2020[29]). For example, research using Facebook data has shown that United States counties with more geographically dispersed social networks – measured by the share of friends living more than 100 miles away – tend to also have better socio-economic outcomes and higher social mobility (Bailey et al., 2018[28]). In the United Kingdom, Facebook friendships reveal high levels of homophily by social class (i.e., a tendency to associate with others of a similar class), but cross-class connections are linked to greater upward mobility (Harris et al., 2025[21]). These approaches provide new avenues for data sourcing, but come with important ethical considerations surrounding data use, privacy and consent – requiring careful consideration by analysts prior to data collection and analysis.

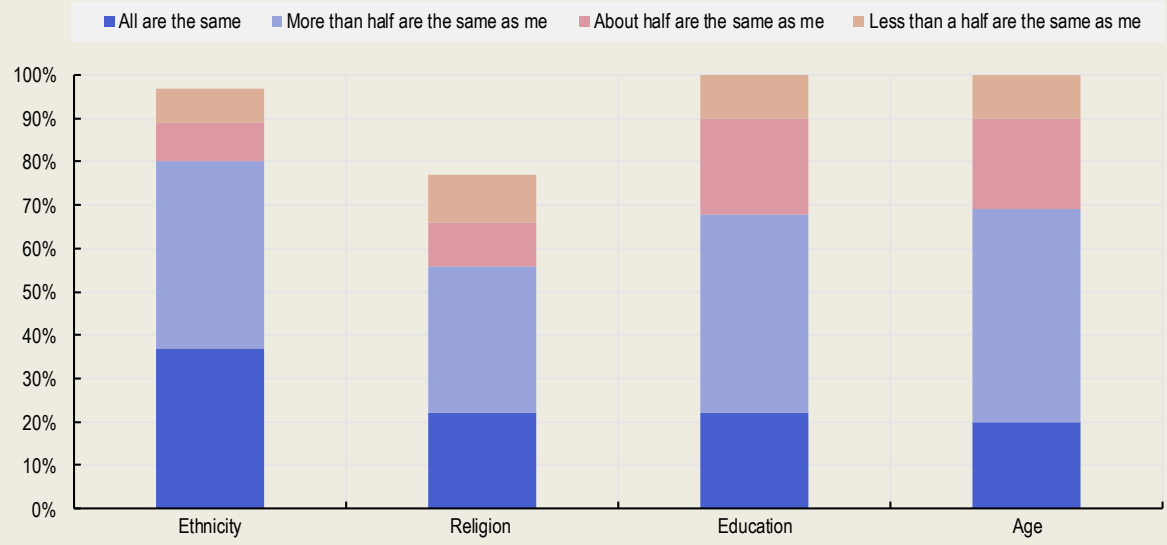
Direct mapping of social networks can be resource intensive, however understanding social networks can provide important information on social mixing and segregation. A different method of understanding network diversity, recently employed by Statistics Netherlands, leverages administrative data to estimate the size and diversity of social networks through indirect methods (Box 2.3).

Box 2.2. National spotlight: Social network composition in England

Data from the *Community Life Survey* in England provide insight into the composition of individuals' social networks by asking how similar or dissimilar their friends are across a range of socio-demographic characteristics (Figure 2.9). In 2021-2022, over half of respondents reported that more than half of their friend group shared the same age (69%), education level (68%), religious background (56%) and ethnicity (80%). Additionally, more than 1 in 5 respondents said that *all* of their friends shared their own characteristics in terms of age (20%), education (22%), religion (22%), and ethnicity (37%). In contrast, only around one in ten respondents reported high diversity in their social networks – that is, having *more than half* of their friends differ from them across these dimensions.

Figure 2.9. In England, over half of respondents report their friends share similar socio-demographic characteristics

Share of respondents who report friendships with those who are similar/dissimilar to them, England, 2021-2022



Note: Values do not sum to 100% due to missing responses, refusals and those who responded they do not have any friends. These indicators were fielded again in the 2023-24 *Community Life Survey* but the results have not yet been published by DCMS.
Source: DCMS (2023[30]), *Community Life Survey 2021/22: Identity and social networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-identity-and-social-networks.

StatLink https://stat.link/kxij4h

Box 2.3. Methodological insight: Using administrative data to estimate the potential size and diversity of social networks in the Netherlands

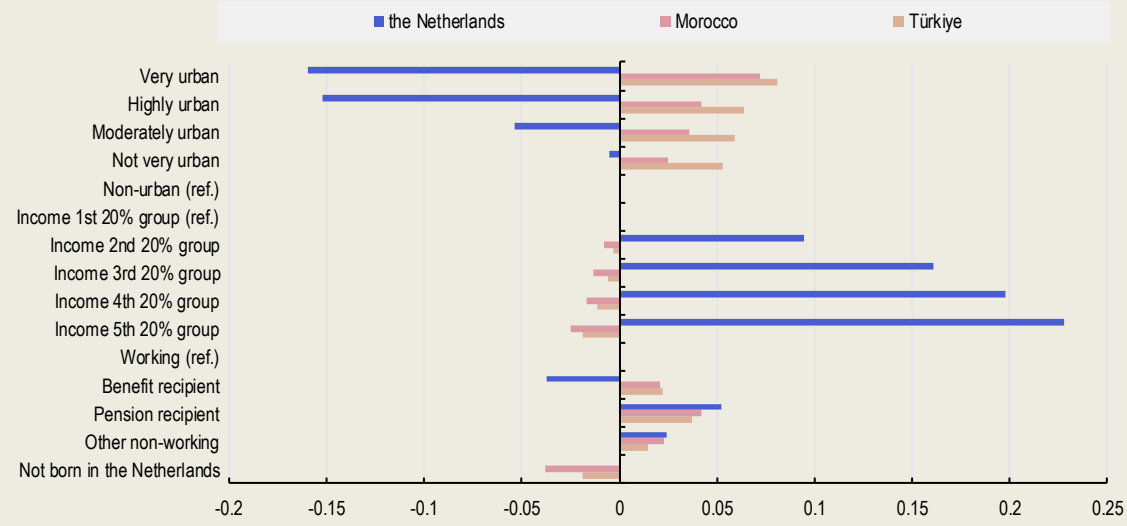
Information on social network composition – those with whom we live, study, work and socialise – provides detailed insight into societal segregation, including the socio-demographic profiles of who is most likely to (self-)segregate, and the types of places that may be more (or less) conducive to cross-group mixing. Getting detailed information on social network size and diversity can be difficult: either resource intensive, via official household surveys, or associated with complex data use considerations (and issues of non-representative samples), via social media data.

Statistics Netherlands (CBS) has recently employed a new method to indirectly measure social networks by using administrative data from tax, education and personal records of the entire registered population to identify potential neighbours, colleagues, family members, flatmates and classmates in an individual's network (CBS, 2023[31]). Importantly, the network compositions in this dataset are based on administrative relationships, and therefore do not necessarily represent actual connections.[1] Therefore, CBS refers to the resulting information as *a reservoir of potential contacts* rather than the actual network of individuals. However, this approach illustrates how administrative data can illustrate macro-level patterns in social networks across Dutch society as a whole.

Research using these data has illustrated the socio-economic dynamics of social segregation (i.e., living closely to and having contact mainly with people similar to oneself). For example, one study finds that the dynamics of segregation vary for those born in the Netherlands compared to those born abroad (CBS, 2024[32]). For those born in the Netherlands, segregation levels are highest in rural areas and decrease with urbanisation; segregation levels also rise with income. The opposite patterns are true for those born outside of the Netherlands: individuals born abroad who live in urban areas are more segregated than those born abroad who now live in rural areas in the Netherlands. Similarly, individuals born abroad who have lower levels of income are more segregated than those born abroad who have high earnings (Figure 2.10).

Figure 2.10. Segregation rises with urban density and income for those of Dutch origin; the opposite is true for those born outside the Netherlands

Linear regression coefficient, segregation score as dependent variable, by country of origin, 2009-2020



Note: Results of linear regression analysis. The dependent variable is a segregation score; positive coefficients mean an *increase* in the segregation score, negative coefficients mean a decrease in the segregation score. Outcomes are shown for those of Dutch, Moroccan and Turkish origin. Not pictured, but included in the full analysis by CBS, are results for those from Belgian, German, Polish, British, Chinese, Surinamese, Dutch Caribbean and Indonesian origin.
Source: CBS (2024[32]), *Herkomstsegregatie in Nederland: een netwerkanalyse*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2024/herkomstsegregatie-in-nederland-een-netwerkanalyse?onepage=true.

StatLink https://stat.link/7qjxw9

1. Neighbours were identified by selecting the 10 registered addresses closest to an individual. An additional 20 members of the neighbourhood were randomly selected from the larger pool of all registered individuals who live within 200 meters from the individual's address. Since it is not known to CBS with whom someone works directly in practice, those working for the same registered company as the individual were considered colleagues, limited to the 100 geographically closest colleagues by residence for larger employers. Family connections were defined as consisting of core family (biological or through adoption), stepfamily, registered partners, and the family of the registered partner; while people registered at the same address who are neither family nor a partner were considered flatmates. Lastly, for primary and secondary education, classmates were those attending or having attended the same year of education at the same school location. For tertiary education, registration to a specific degree at a university or other institution and the number of years registered for that degree were used (e.g., BSc economics at Utrecht University, registered since year X). For more detailed methodological considerations, see Van Der Laan et al., (2023[33]) and CBS (2023[31]).

How people perceive their social relationships

Beyond the frequency and structure of social connections, the *quality* of interactions and the *functional suppo*rt they provide are essential elements to consider. This section captures these aspects through a range of indicators, including feelings of loneliness; the need for, receipt of, and provision of social support; satisfaction with personal relationships; and the perceived quality of relationships with friends and partners.

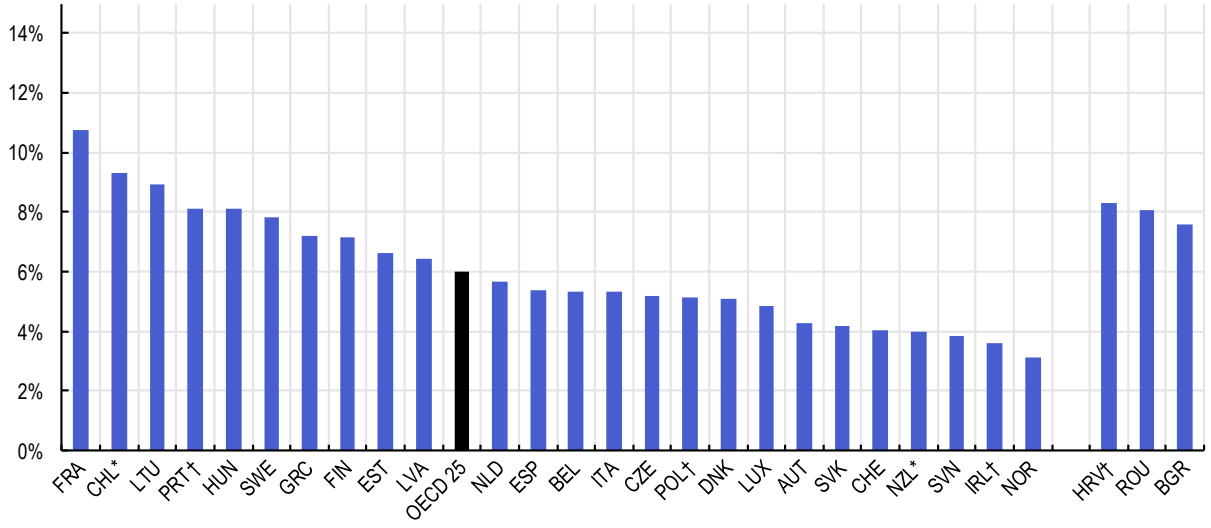
Loneliness

Loneliness is a subjective experience that arises when individuals feel undesirably alone or perceive that their interpersonal relationship needs are not being met. It is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including poorer physical and mental health (Holt-Lunstad and Smith, 2016[8]; Akhter-Khan et al., 2021[34]; Wang et al., 2018[35]), increased risk of premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[9]), and reduced academic and workplace performance (Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022[36]; Matthews et al., 2019[37]; Maher et al., 2013[38]).

In 2022, the share of people reporting that they felt lonely "most of the time" or "all of the time" over the past four weeks ranged from 3% to 11% across 25 OECD countries,[7] with an average of 6% (Figure 2.11).[8] For a number of OECD countries using a slightly different measure – asking how lonely respondents feel in general rather than within a specific timeframe – results are broadly comparable, with the average share of people saying they feel lonely "always" or "often" ranging from 5% to 14% (Box 2.4).

Figure 2.11. Across OECD countries, the share of people who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks ranges from 3% to 13%

Share of respondents who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, OECD 25, 2022-2023



Note: * indicates that data come from national sources, rather than EU-SILC survey. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for feeling lonely. All sources use the same indicator to measure feeling lonely. Data refer to 2022 except for Chile (2023) and New Zealand (2023). The figure reflects the share of respondents who felt lonely "most of the time" or "all of the time" over the past four weeks.

Source: Unless otherwise specified with an asterisk, data come from Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); CHL: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2021[5]), *Encuesta de Bienestar Social*, Government of Chile, https://observatorio.ministeriodesarrollosocial.gob.cl/encuesta-bienestar-social-2023; NZL: Stats NZ (2024[6]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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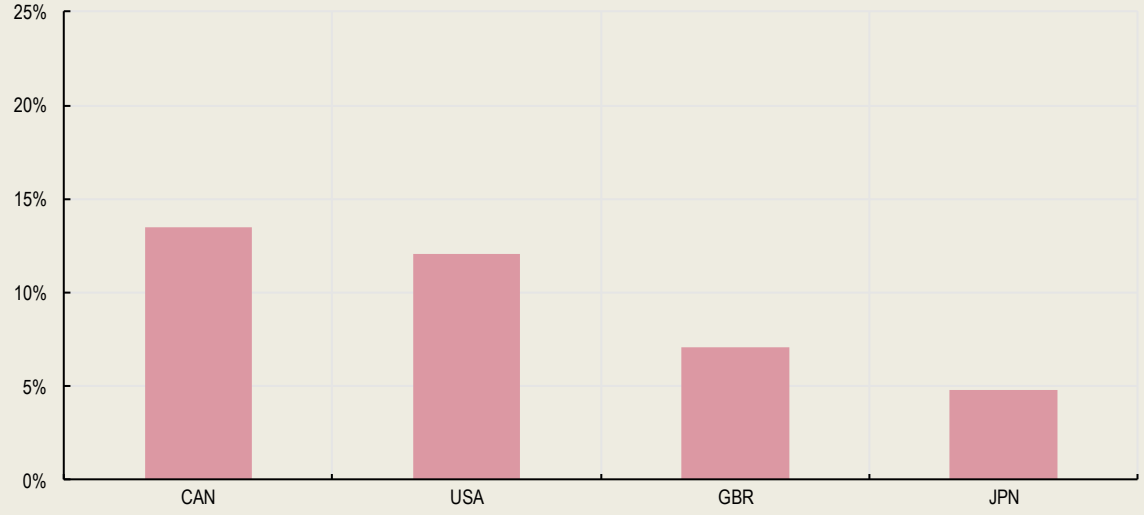
Box 2.4. National spotlight: Loneliness in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan

The most common approach to measuring loneliness in official data across OECD countries is a single-item question on whether individuals have felt lonely over the past 4 weeks (see Figure 2.11).

However, several countries use a slightly different measure, asking respondents how lonely they feel in *general* – a question included in nationally representative surveys in Canada, the United States, England and Japan. In 2023-2024, the share of people who reported feeling lonely "often" or "always" ranged from 5% in Japan to 7% in England, 12% in the United States and 14% in Canada (Figure 2.12).

Figure 2.12. The share of respondents in Canada, the United States, England and Japan who generally feel lonely ranges from 5% to 14%

Share of respondents who feel lonely, Canada, the United States, England and Japan, 2023-2024



Note: All questions ask respondents how lonely they feel in general, however the answer option phrasings vary slightly across surveys. Data for Canada are from 2024 and refer to combined "always or often" answer options; data for England are from 2023-2024 and refer to combined "often/always" answer options; data from Japan are from 2023 and refer to "often/always"; and data from the United States refer to "always" or "usually". Data for GBR refer to England, only. Data for the United States show the average outcomes from nine rounds of data collection from January to September 2024.

Source: DCMS (2024[39]), *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2; Statistics Canada (2025[40]) *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; US Census Bureau (2024[16]), *Household Pulse Survey*, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html; e-Stat (2023[17]), 人々のつながりに関する基礎調査, Government of Japan, https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?page=1&toukei=00000004&metadata=1&data=1.

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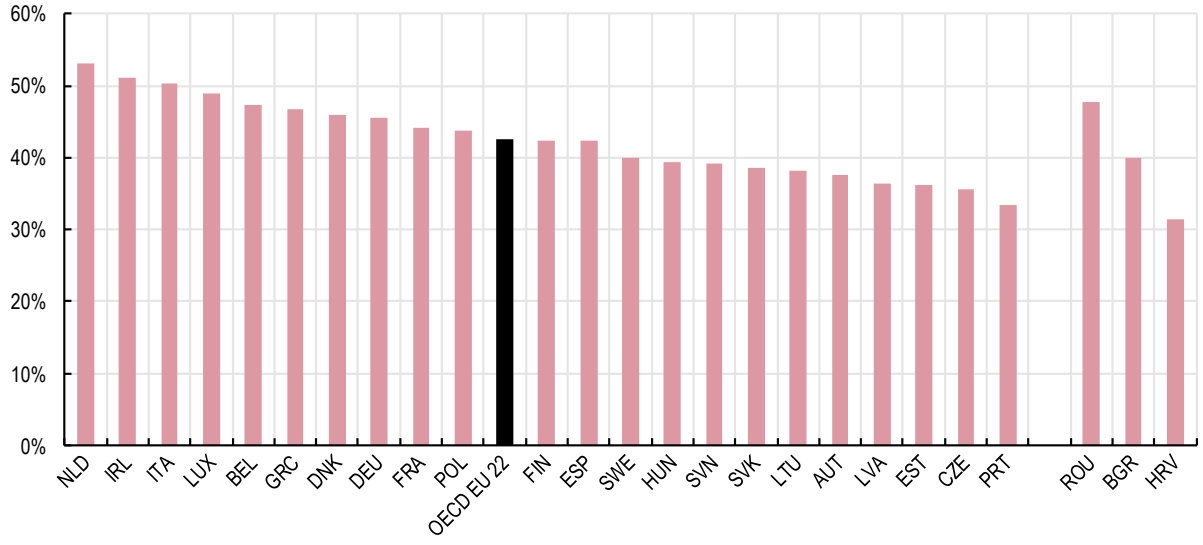
Loneliness is not a binary condition, and it can be further assessed by examining its *intensity* (Figure 2.13) and *duration* (Box 2.5). Data from 22 European OECD countries show that among those who reported experiencing some form of loneliness in the past four weeks, 43% described their loneliness as "very intense" (Figure 2.13).[9] However, high prevalence of loneliness does not necessarily correlate with high intensity: some countries with elevated overall rates may have relatively lower shares of people experiencing intense loneliness (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[41]).

Figure 2.13. In 22 European OECD countries, of those who feel lonely, the share of *intense* loneliness exceeds 40%

Share of respondents who report their loneliness over the past 4 weeks was "very intense", OECD EU 22, 2022



Note: "Very intense" loneliness is defined as a score ≥ 7 on a scale from 1 (not very intense) to 10 (very intense), asked to those who indicated they experienced some form of loneliness over the past 4 weeks (i.e., excluding those who responded "never").
Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey.* European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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Box 2.5. National spotlight: Persistence of loneliness in Japan

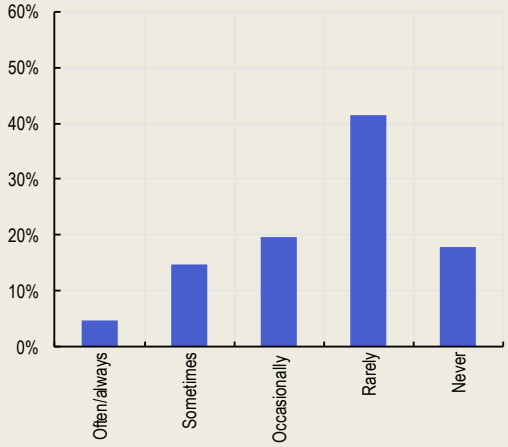
Research shows that chronic loneliness – persistent feelings of loneliness over time – has particularly harmful impacts on long-term health and mortality (Shiovitz-Ezra and Ayalon, 2010[42]; Newall, Chipperfield and Bailis, 2014[43]; Sheftel, Margolis and Verdery, 2024[44]).

Data from the Government of Japan capture not only the overall prevalence of loneliness (Figure 2.14, Panel A), but also its duration (Figure 2.14, Panel B). Among the 81% of Japanese respondents who report experiencing some degree of loneliness (i.e., any response other than "never"), nearly half say these feelings have persisted for more than five years – by far the most common response.

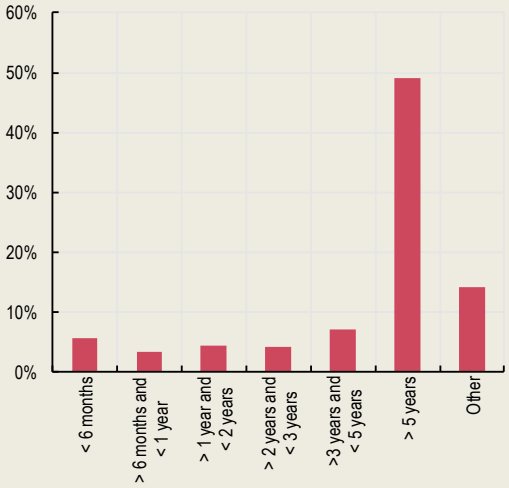
This finding highlights that for many, loneliness is not a fleeting experience but a long-term condition with potentially serious consequences.

Figure 2.14. 5% of Japanese respondents feel lonely often or always, but of those who feel any form of loneliness, almost half say the feeling has lasted more than 5 years

Panel A. The extent to which respondents feel lonely in general, JPN, 2023



Panel B. The duration that feelings of loneliness have lasted, JPN, 2023



Source: e-Stat (2023[17]), 人々のつながりに関する基礎調査, Government of Japan, https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?page=1&toukei=00000004&metadata=1&data=1.

StatLink https://stat.link/34epsa

As with all self-reported, perception-based indicators, cross-country differences in loneliness estimates may be influenced by various factors – including cultural response styles, social stigma surrounding loneliness, and differences in the socio-demographic composition of populations. Existing research shows how survey design, including the mode of data collection and potentially sampling strategy, can affect reported prevalence rates (Box 2.6).

Box 2.6. Methodological insight: Mode effects, sampling strategies and loneliness estimates

Survey mode can influence both how respondents interpret questions and how willing they are to disclose personal information. For example, interviewer-administered surveys (whether in person or by telephone) establish a different dynamic than self-administered formats; responses may also vary across in-person, telephone and web-based surveys. Research on mode effects in loneliness – the social connections outcome with the largest evidence base – can vary depending on the measurement approach used. For example, earlier research on the multi-item De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Scale found no clear mode effect when comparing in-person vs. telephone, or interviewer-led vs. self-administered surveys (Tilburg and Leeuw, 1991[45]). However, a recent systematic review covering multiple measurement approaches finds that respondents report higher levels of loneliness in face-to-face surveys (40% for face-to-face, on average across studies) and lower levels in telephone-based surveys (15% for telephone) (Stegen et al., 2024[46]). On-going measurement efforts will provide data users with more detailed information on the psychometric properties of different loneliness measures, including mode effects (Paris et al., 2024[47]). Existing OECD measurement guidance for other thematic

areas, such as subjective well-being, recommends that data producers always provide clear information on how data were collected, and to be consistent across survey rounds (OECD, 2025[48]).

Some recent reports suggest that sampling strategy may also affect loneliness estimates, in combination with – or perhaps in addition to – mode effects. The European Commission's 2022 *Loneliness in the EU* project was composed of two surveys: while the main survey was administered via a consumer panel (a non-probability sampling method) across all 27 EU countries, a shorter version using probability sampling was conducted in four countries. The results showed lower loneliness estimates in the probability-based survey compared to the non-probability one (for example, 8% vs. 15% loneliness rates in France, within the EU4 vs. EU27 samples, respectively). Notably, survey mode also differed: the EU27 version was entirely web-based, while the EU4 version included telephone interviews for respondents unable to complete the survey online. Future research efforts by the team will seek to disentangle mode from sampling effects, to better understand how each may affect prevalence rates (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[41]).

The loneliness estimates shown in this report (Figure 2.11) and included in the OECD Well-being Database primarily draw from Eurostat's *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC), a household survey conducted using probability sampling by national statistical offices (European Commission, 2003[49]) and following the common framework for European statistics relating to persons and households (Regulation (EU) 2019/1700) (Eurostat, 2022[50]). In 2022 – the year in which these estimates were collected – 44% of participating countries used computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), 25% used computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI), 21% used computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI), and 10% relied on paper-assisted personal interviews (PAPI). (Many countries using PAPI did so in combination with other collection methods; most all countries used mixed methods.) Full details on sampling and mode for all surveys referenced in this report, including national-level instruments, can be found in the Annex (Annex Table 2.A.1 and Annex Table 2.A.2).

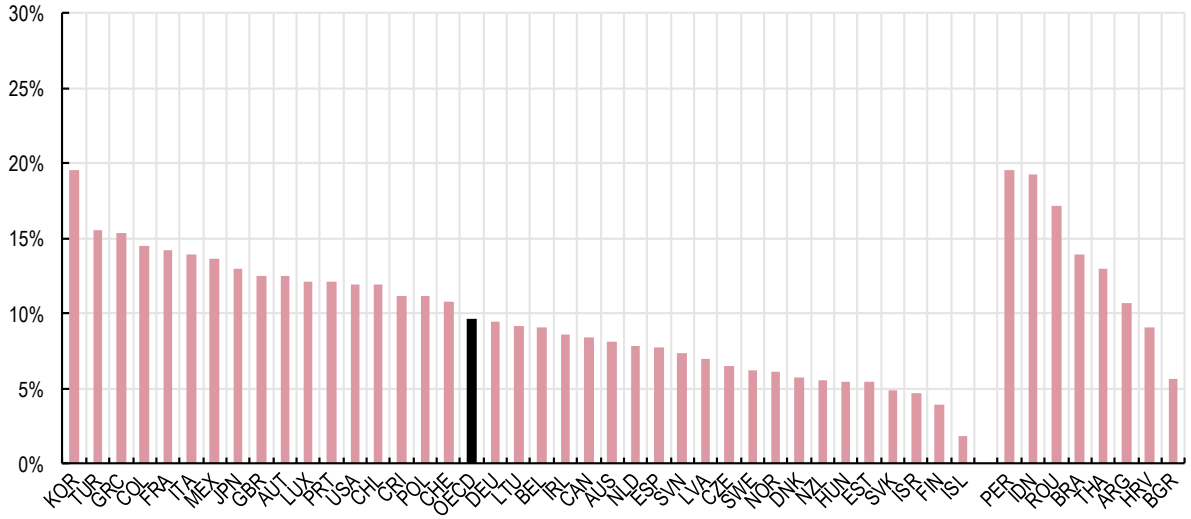
Support received by and given to others

Social support can take many forms. The literature typically distinguishes between instrumental support (tangible aid, including financial), informational support (resources to deal with a problem or issue) and emotional support (warmth and nurture) (Tay et al., 2013[51]; Wills, 1991[52]). Social support can provide resilience against poor physical and mental health outcomes (Freak-Poli et al., 2021[53]; Wang et al., 2018[35]; OECD, 2023[54]), and has been associated with better performance in school and the workplace (Patel and Plowman, 2022[19]; Saeed et al., 2023[55]; Holahan, Valentiner and Moos, 1995[56]).

Data from 2022-2023 across all OECD countries show that, on average, 90% of people report having friends or family they can rely on in times of need. However, a notable minority – 1 in 10 – say they have no one to count on, with this figure reaching up to 20% in some countries (Figure 2.15).

Figure 2.15. Lack of social support affects between 2% and 20% of people across OECD countries

Share of respondents who report having no friends or family to count on in times of need, OECD, 2022-2023



Source: Gallup (n.d.[4]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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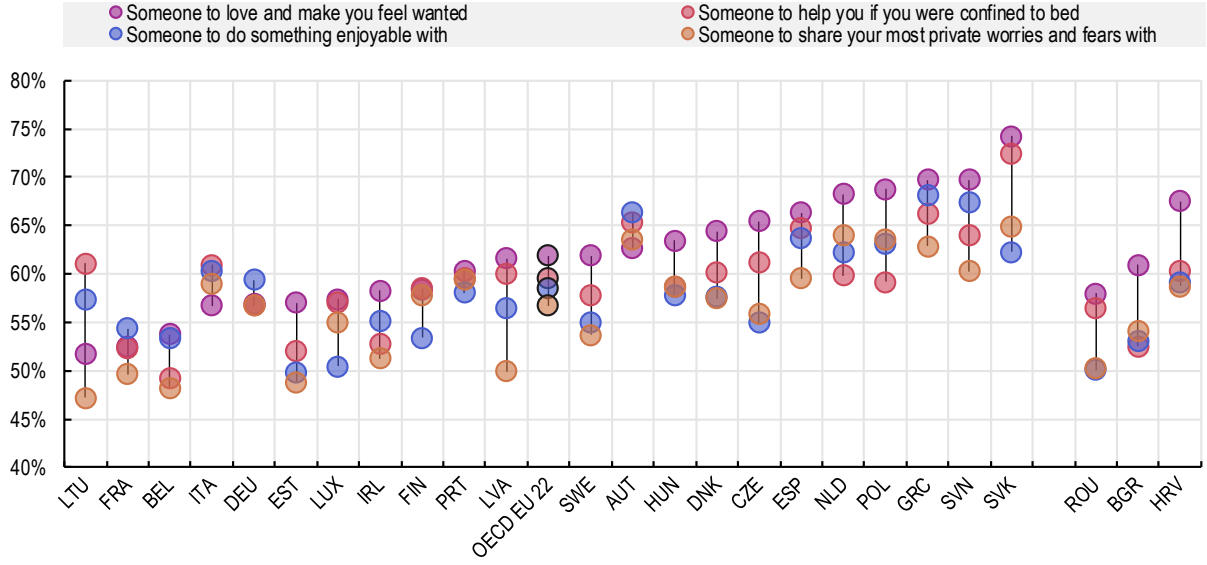
Data from 2022 across 22 European OECD countries show that, on average, 62% of people report "always" having someone who loves them and makes them feel wanted, 60% have someone to help if they are sick and confined to bed, 58% have someone to do enjoyable activities with, and 57% have someone to confide in about private fears or worries (Figure 2.16, Panel A). In most countries, emotional support in the form of feeling loved is the most commonly reported, while emotional support involving personal disclosure is the least prevalent.

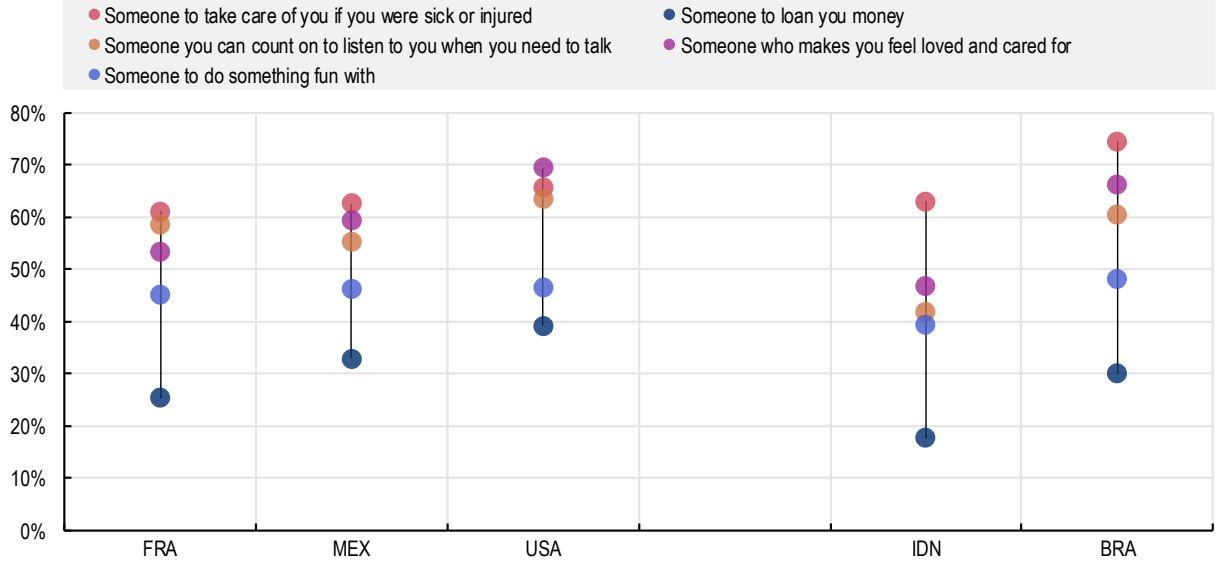
Additional 2022 data from Mexico, the United States and France highlight that instrumental financial support is typically less commonly available. Only 25% of respondents in France, 33% in Mexico and 39% in the United States reported "always" having someone to lend them money – compared to over 60% who had someone to help them if they were ill (Figure 2.16, Panel B).[10]

Figure 2.16. Prevalence of social support differs by type: Financial assistance is the least available form in all OECD countries with available data

Panel A. Share of respondents who have someone to provide each of the following types of support "all of the time" or "most of the time", OECD EU 22, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who "always" have someone to provide each of the following types of support, FRA, MEX and USA, 2022



Source: Panel A: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b. Panel B: Data for Good at Meta (2022[26]), *Social Connections Survey*. https://data.humdata.org/dataset/social-connections-survey.

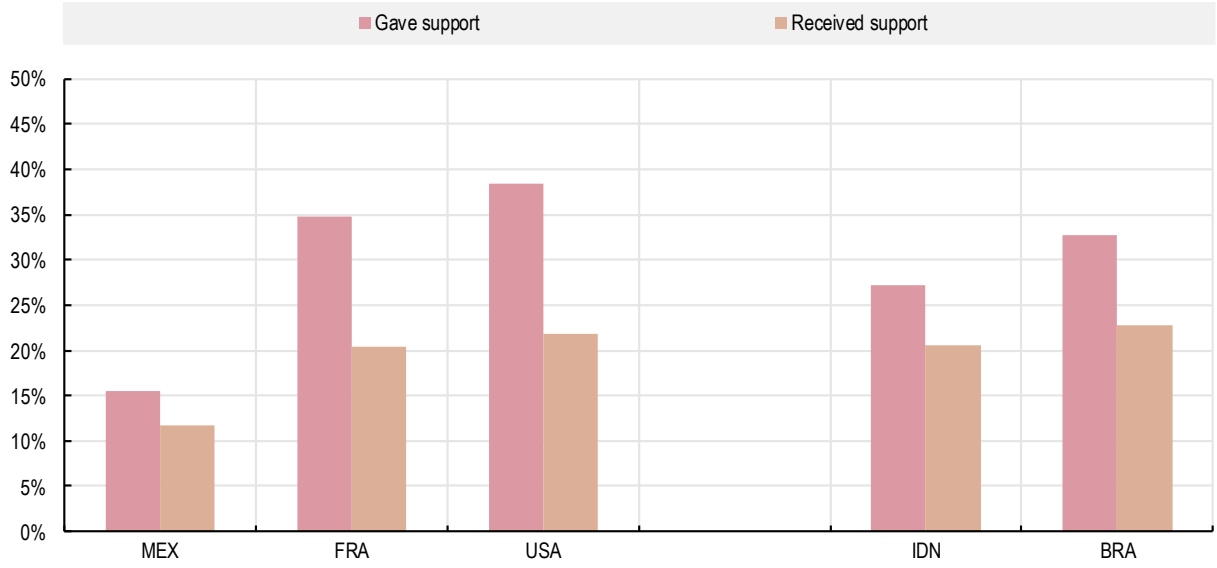
StatLink https://stat.link/6silv5

The data highlighted in the preceding paragraphs are based on survey questions that ask about the *theoretical* availability of different types of support – whether respondents *could* receive help if needed. However, when asked about *actual experiences* – whether they received support in the past 30 days, or provided support to others – evidence from Mexico, France and the United States shows that people are

far more likely to report giving support than receiving it (Figure 2.17). This could reflect a genuine mismatch between support given and support received. Alternatively, it may stem from response biases – such as a tendency to overreport prosocial behaviours (e.g., helping others), underreport personal need, a lack of awareness of when one is receiving support (i.e. taking support for granted, or a reflection of the fact that support received is ineffectual and therefore not noticed or counted) or discomfort in acknowledging vulnerability due to stigma.

Figure 2.17. More people report giving social support, than receiving it

Share of respondents who "often" gave someone support or help, or received it, over the past 30 days, 2022



Source: Data for Good at Meta (2022[26]), *Social Connections Survey*. https://data.humdata.org/dataset/social-connections-survey.

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Relationship satisfaction

The *quantity* of social relationships – such as the size of one's network or frequency of interactions – is only part of the equation: it is equally, if not more important, to understand the *quality* of these relationships. For example, while having a partner is one of the strongest predictors of reduced loneliness (Arpino et al., 2022[57]), the nature of that relationship matters greatly. Marital stress is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Hawkley, 2008[58]) and strained marital or family relationships – characterised by constant arguing, critical comments, or excessive demands – are associated with trauma and adverse health outcomes, especially harmful to children and young people (Thomas, Liu and Umberson, 2017[59]; Robles et al., 2014[60]; Alm, Låftman and Bohman, 2019[61]; Giletta et al., 2021[62]).

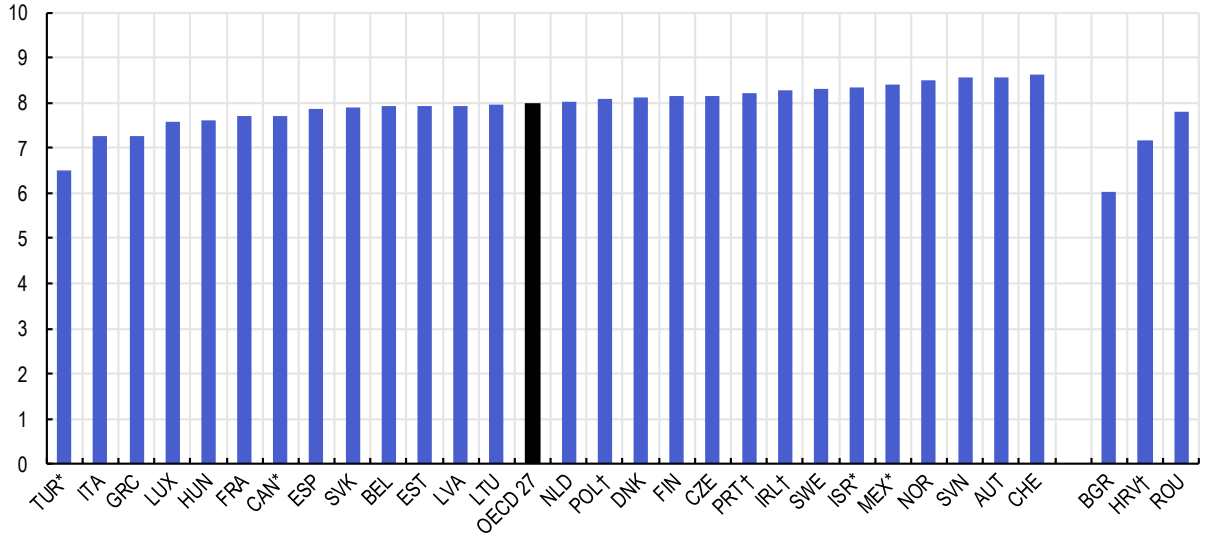
Satisfaction with relationships in general

In 2022, evidence from 27 OECD countries with comparable data show that respondents rate their satisfaction with personal relationships at an average of 8 on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) (Figure 2.18, Panel A, see also national data from Colombia and Mexico in Box 2.7). When looking at relationship dissatisfaction (defined as the share of respondents reporting below the scale midpoint of 5) – the data reveal that while countries with higher average satisfaction scores also tend to have lower shares of dissatisfied respondents, there is substantial cross-country variation (Figure 2.18,

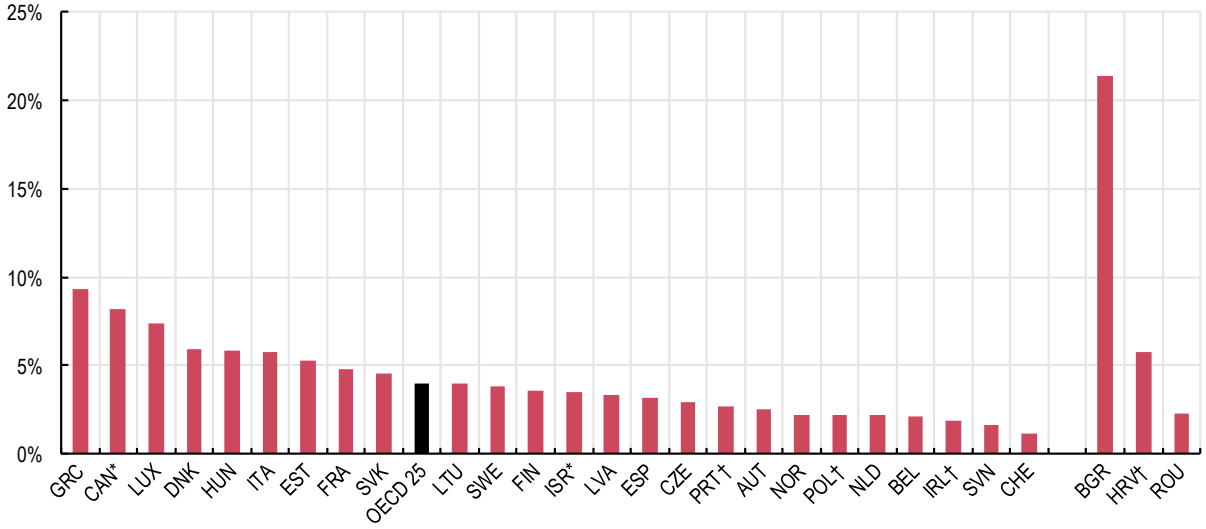
Panel B). Among 25 OECD countries with comparable data, on average 4% of respondents are dissatisfied with their personal relationships, with individual country scores ranging from 1% up to 9%.

Figure 2.18. Satisfaction with personal relationships in 27 countries ranges from 6.5 to 8.6 on a 0-10 scale; 4% of respondents across 25 OECD countries are dissatisfied with their relationships

Panel A. Share of respondents who are satisfied with their personal relationships, on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD 27, 2021-22



Panel B. Share of respondents who are dissatified with their personal relationships, OECD 25, 2021-22



Note: Panels A and B: * indicates that data come from national sources, rather than EU-SILC survey. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for relationship satisfaction. All sources use the same indicator to measure satisfaction with personal relationships. Panel B: Dissatisfaction with personal relationships is defined as reporting a score ≤ 4 on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied).
Source: Panels A and B: Unless otherwise specified with an asterisk, data come from Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024). Data for Canada, Israel, Mexico and Türkiye come from the OECD (n.d.[7]), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu.

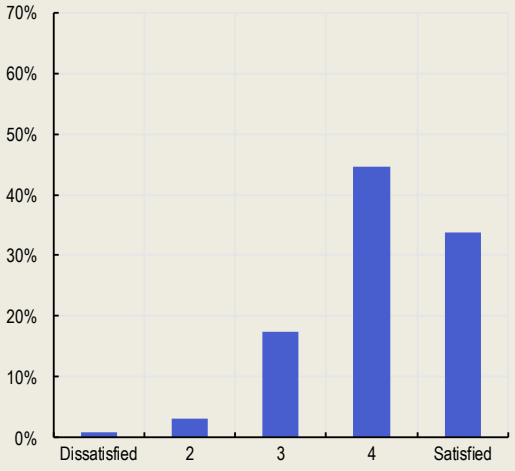
StatLink https://stat.link/t6ifs4

Box 2.7. National spotlight: Satisfaction with relationships in Mexico and Colombia

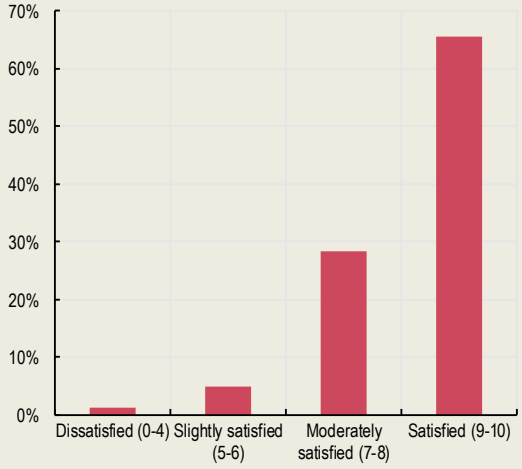
Average satisfaction with personal relationships is generally high in Colombia and Mexico. In Colombia, 78% of respondents rate their relationship satisfaction a 4 or 5 on a 1-5 scale, and only 1% report feeling dissatisfied (Figure 2.19, Panel A). In Mexico, 66% of respondents rate their satisfaction with personal relationships a 9 or a 10, on a 0 to 10 scale, with just 1% reporting dissatisfaction (defined as a score below 5) (Figure 2.19, Panel B).

Figure 2.19. More than one-third of Colombians, and two-thirds of Mexicans, are satisfied with their personal relationships

Panel A. Share of respondents who are satisfied with their personal relationships, Colombia, 2022



Panel B. Satisfaction with personal relationships on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), Mexico, 2022



Note: Panel A: Figure represents the average of monthly outcomes over the course of 2022. Panel B: Figure represents the average of quarterly values over the course of 2022.
Source: DANE (n.d.[63]), *Encuesta Pulso Social* (database), Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/encuesta-pulso-social. Panel B: INEGI (n.d.[64]), Bienestar subjetivo - BIARE Básico (database), Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), https://www.inegi.org.mx/investigacion/bienestar/basico/#documentation.

StatLink https://stat.link/8rf056

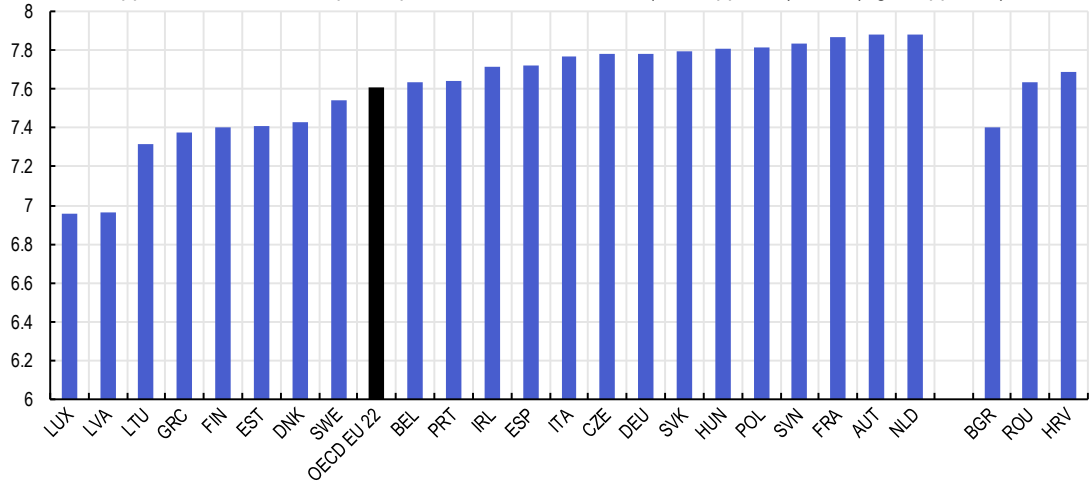
Relationship satisfaction with partners and friends

The 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* also explored satisfaction with romantic relationships, specifically. Across 22 European OECD countries, respondents rated their happiness with their partner at an average of 7.6 on a scale from 1 to 10 (Figure 2.20, Panel A).

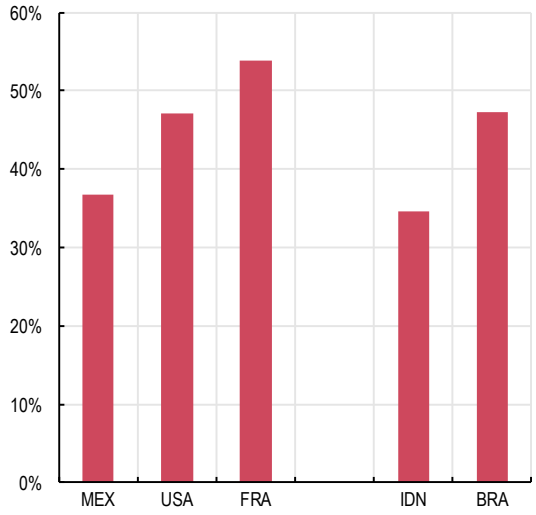
The 2022 pilot survey of the Gallup World Poll included a set of questions assessing the quality of friendships, focusing on the frequency of meaningful interactions and interpersonal conflict. In terms of positive engagement, 37% of respondents in Mexico, 47% in the United States and 54% in France reported "often" having meaningful interactions with friends (Figure 2.20, Panel B). This implies that in both Mexico and the United States, more than half of respondents do *not* frequently have meaningful interactions with friends – and in France, the figure is close to half. On the other hand, reported explicit conflict within friendships is relatively rare: only 4% of respondents in Mexico, and 3% in both the United States and France, say they often experience conflict with friends (Figure 2.20, Panel C).

Figure 2.20. Evidence across OECD countries sheds light on satisfaction with relationships to romantic partners, and the dynamics of friendships

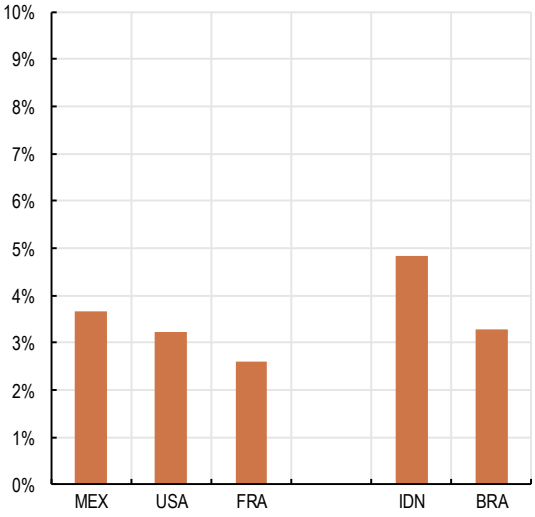
Panel A. Happiness with relationship with partner, on a scale from 1 (low happiness) to 10 (high happiness), OECD EU 22, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who "often" have meaningful interactions with friends, FRA, MEX, USA, 2022



Panel C. Share of respondents who "often" have conflict with friends, FRA, MEX, USA, 2022



Source: Panel A: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID, http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b. Panel B: Data for Good at Meta (2022[26]), *Social Connections Survey*, https://data.humdata.org/dataset/social-connections-survey.

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Annex 2.A. Technical annex

Data sources

Data in this report are pulled from various high-quality surveys. Annex Table 2.A.1 provides detailed information about the multi-country, internationally comparable data sources – including official statistics such as the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC) – while Annex Table 2.A.2 provides relevant information for official surveys fielded by OECD Member states.

Annex Table 2.A.1. International surveys referenced in this report

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions Survey (EU-SILC) Eurostat (n.d.[2])	Meet with friends or family at least monthly for a drink or a meal: 2009, 2013-2022 Get together with friends / family; Contact friends / family: 2006, 2015, 2022 Satisfaction with personal relationships: 2013, 2018, 2022 Feeling lonely†: 2018, 2022	**Member states:* AUT, BEL, CZE, DNK, EST, FIN, FRA, DEU, GRC, HUN, ISL, IRL, ITA, LVA, LTU, LUX, NLD, NOR, POL, PRT, SVK, SVN, ESP, SWE, CHE, TUR, GBR *Accession candidate countries:* BGR, HRV, ROU Data for DEU in 2022 are not included due to high non-response rates (DEU is therefore also not included in any time series analysis); data for SWE is not included in time series analysis due to a break in methodology between 2018 and 2022 making outcomes not comparable between the years. Additional information on data quality can be found on Eurostat's website.	Exact sample sizes vary, but range from around 2 900 to 50 000 respondents per country, per year	In line with EU regulation 2019/1700, the EU-SILC data collected are based on representative samples. These are drawn from sampling frames set up at the national level which allow persons or households to be selected at random, with a known probability of selection. The sampling frames aim to identify and cover the target population exhaustively, with the usual accepted coverage error. They are regularly updated. The sampling frames contain all the necessary information for the sample design, such as information needed for stratification purposes and for contacting the persons or households.	A combination of computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI), computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) and paper-assisted personal interviews (PAPI); rates of each vary by country and year

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
Gallup World Poll Gallup (2023[1])	Annual since 2005	*Member states:* AUS, AUT, BEL, CAN, CHL, COL, CRI, CZE, DNK, EST, FIN, FRA, DEU, GRC, HUN, ISL, IRL, ISR, ITA, JPN, KOR, LVA, LTU, LUX, MEX, NLD, NZL, NOR, POL, PRT, SVK, SVN, ESP SWE, CHE, TUR, GBR, USA *Accession candidate countries:* ARG, BRA, BGR, HRV, IDN, PER, ROU, THA	Around 1 000 respondents per country, per year Gallup World Poll data are pooled to 2- or 3-year averages in OECD analyses, to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes	Nationally representative probability sampling of the non-institutionalised, adult population Sampling design varies by geographic region (depending on the availability and granularity of existing population information – for example from pre-existing census data), and survey mode (in-person household sampling vs. telephone survey sampling)	A combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews. In general telephone surveys are used in North America, Western Europe and East Asia; face-to-face surveys are used in Central and Eastern Europe and much of Latin America and the former Soviet states.
Global State of Social Connections Gallup (2023[1])	2022	*Member states:* AUS, AUT, BEL, CAN, CHL, COL, CRI, CZE, DNK, EST, FIN, FRA, DEU, GRC, HUN, ISL, IRL, ISR, ITA, JPN, KOR, LVA, LTU, LUX, MEX, NLD, NZL, NOR, POL, PRT, SVK, SVN, ESP SWE, CHE, TUR, GBR, USA *Accession candidate countries:* ARG, BRA, BGR, HRV, IDN, PER, ROU, THA	Around 1 000 respondents per country	Same as annual Gallup World Poll (see above)	Same as annual Gallup World Poll (see above)
Social Connections Survey Data for Good at Meta (2022[26])**	2022	*Member states:* FRA, MEX, USA	2 000 respondents per country	Probability-based, nationally representative of the 15+ population living in a household	Telephone (France, United States) and face-to-face (Mexico)
EU Loneliness Survey European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3])	2022	*Member states:* AUT, BEL, CZE, DNK, EST, FIN, FRA, DEU, GRC, HUN, IRL, ITA, LVA, LTU, LUX, NLD, POL, PRT, SVK, SVN, ESP, SWE *Accession candidate countries:* BGR, HRV, ROU	Around 1 000 respondents per country (aside from Luxembourg, which has 500 respondents)	Online survey of respondents recruited from established consumer panels; quotas were used to ensure representativeness by age, gender, education level, geographic distribution and economic characteristics	Online self-administered survey

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
Mind Health Survey AXA (2023[65])	Annual since 2022	**Member states:* BEL, FRA, DEU, IRL, ITA, JPN, MEX, ESP, CHE, TUR, GBR, USA *Accession candidate countries:* THA	Around 2 000 respondents per country	Quota method sampling conducted via Ipsos. Quotas are used to ensure representativeness by gender, age, occupation and region	Online self-administered survey

Note: * Country participation varies across years; each figure depicting an OECD average using these data clarifies which countries are included in the average. ** This pilot survey, a collaboration between Meta and Gallup, informed the subsequent *Global State of Social Connections* survey by Meta and the Gallup World Poll in 2022. † Eurostat elected to not publish data on feeling lonely in 2022 due to non-response rates in nine countries (including non-OECD countries) exceeding 40%. In this report, whenever figures show country-level Eurostat data, a figure note indicates if non-response rates exceed 40% to clearly note this to the reader. Broader analysis on trends and sub-group analysis are conducted on OECD average outcomes (i.e., not at the country level) to ensure sample sizes are as robust as possible.

Annex Table 2.A.2. National surveys referenced in this report

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
Canadian Social Survey Statistics Canada (2025[40])	Annual, quarterly since 2021	Canada (non-institutionalised respondents aged 15+ living off-reserve)	20 000 respondents (one randomly selected per household)	Probabilistic two-stage stratified sampling	Self-response via electronic questionnaire with computer-assisted telephone interview follow-up in case of non-response
Social Pulse Survey Encuesta Pulso Social DANE (n.d.[63])	Monthly, between July 2020 and March 2023	Colombia (23 departmental capital cities and their metropolitan areas)	Varies across rounds, for an average of ~10-12 000 completed surveys per round	Sub-sample of the labour market household survey, Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (GEIH), which uses a probabilistic multi-stage stratified sampling design	Telephone interviews
Social Welfare Survey Encuesta de Bienestar Social Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2021[5])	2021, 2023	Chile	20 800 respondents (2021); 12 400 respondents (2023)	Probabilistic two-stage sampling design, based on a sub-sample of La Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional (Casen), a bi- or triennial household survey	Telephone interviews
Community Life Survey Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2023[30])	Annual since 2012/13, quarterly estimates available in 2023/24	England	Around 180 000 respondents in most recent round (to enable local area estimates); around 10 000 respondents in previous years	Stratified random sampling	Web time series from 2013-2014

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
The Statistics on Resources and Living Conditions Survey *L'enquête Statistiques sur les ressources et conditions de vie* Insee (2022[66])	Annual	France (beginning in 2022, extended to French overseas departments excluding Mayotte)	Around 25 000 to 38 000 respondents per year (higher sample sizes in recent years)	Nationally representative probability sampling of individuals living in private households	Face-to-face (aside from 2021, when all surveys were done via telephone)
The German socio-economic panel (SOEP) *Sozio-oekonomische Panel (SOEP)* Goebel et al. (2019[67])	Annual	Germany	Around 30 000 respondents in 22 000 households per year	Multistage stratified sampling	Mixed-mode approach: computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI), computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) and paper-assisted personal interviews (PAPI) and self-administered questionnaire (SAQ). In recent years CATI and CAPI are most common.
Basic Survey on People's Connections 人々のつながりに関する基礎調査 e-Stat, Government of Japan (2023[17])	Annual since 2021	Japan	Around 12 000 respondents aged 16+, randomly selected from the population-wide Basic Resident Ledger	Random sampling	Mixed method: respondents can choose to respond to the survey online, or fill out the survey and submit it by mail
Subjective Well-being – BIARE Basic survey *Bienestar subjetivo - BIARE Básico* INEGI (n.d.[64])	Quarterly since 2013; Annually beginning 2025	Mexico	Around 2 400 households per round; Beginning in 2025, 4 818 households per round	Probabilistic multi-stage stratified sampling. Prior to 2025, BIARE allowed for estimates of urban aggregates for the 32 largest cities. Beginning in 2025, the survey samples the 12+ population; sample size provides national coverage for both urban and rural areas	Personal interview on mobile device
Social cohesion and well-being *Sociale samenhang en welzijn* CBS (2023[68])	Annual	the Netherlands	Around 7 500 respondents per year	Weights are applied to ensure the sample is representative based on gender, age, origin, marital status, urbanisation, province, region, household size, income and survey month	Mixed-mode approach: respondents are asked via letter to respond online, computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI); non-responses are re-contacted by telephone (computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI)), and if no telephone number is available, the respondent is contacted in person by an enumerator (computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI))

Survey	Years	Country coverage	Sample size	Sampling methodology	Survey mode
General Social Survey Statistics New Zealand (2024[6])	Biennially (most recently in 2022/2023 – the GSS will not be fielded in 2025/26 but is planned for 2026/2027)	New Zealand	Around 12 000 respondents per round, achieved sample size of 7 800 respondents in 2023	Probabilistic three-stage sampling of 15+ usually resident population living in private dwellings	Face-to-face, computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI); in 2023 computer-assisted video interviews (CAVI) were introduced as an option
Household Pulse Survey US Census Bureau (2024[16])	High-frequency data collection (beginning every two weeks, moving to monthly) between April 2020 and September 2024	United States	Between 50 000 and 60 000 respondents per round	Multi-stage probabilistic sampling design, based on the Census Bureau's Master Address File of sampled housing units	Internet questionnaire; respondents are invited to complete the survey online via email or text message

Note: The specific modules and variables included in each survey may vary across years. "Sample size" typically refers to the total number of *completed* surveys, however reporting on sample sizes varies across national statistical offices and so in some cases may refer to the total number of respondents selected for inclusion in the survey (rather than completed surveys).

Additional statistical analysis

Coding answer options for frequency of social interactions (in-person vs. remote)

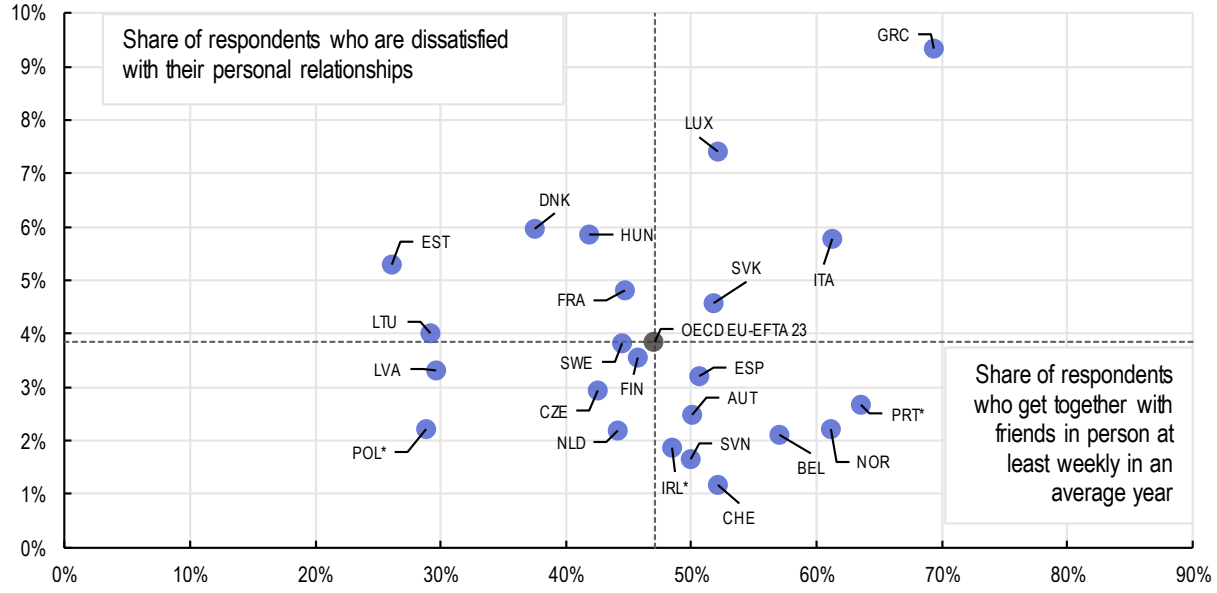
Throughout this report, data on in-person vs. remote social interactions come from the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC). Respondents are asked how frequently they (1) get together in person or (2) contact (via remote forms of interaction, such as messaging, email, video chat, etc.) both family members and friends in an average year. The answer options are as follows: daily, every week (not every day), several times a month (not every week), once a month, at least once a year (less than once a month) and never. The full range of answer options is shown in Figure 2.4, however when conducting correlation analysis (Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1), looking at inequalities by population group (Chapter 3) and trends over time, including trends for population groups (Chapter 4) outcomes are shown for respondents who select "daily". (In Chapters 3 and 4, outcomes for "daily" are contrasted with "never".)

Reporting outcomes in this way – showing the full set of answer options, but comparing "daily" and "never" when discussing outcomes for specific population groups – mirrors the approach Eurostat has taken in its statistical publications describing the same set of indicators (Eurostat, 2010[69]; 2017[70]; 2020[71]).

For readers who are concerned that "daily" is too narrow a frequency grouping, in this Annex we present results for "at least weekly" – combining answer options for "daily" and "every week (not every day)". As is shown in Annex Figure 2.A.1 and Annex Table 2.A.3 below, results are consistent regardless of the frequency grouping shown (compare to Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1, respectively).

Annex Figure 2.A.1. Strong performance in one area of social connections does not guarantee positive outcomes in others

Scatterplot of dissatisfaction with personal relationships and at least weekly in-person interactions with friends, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: "Getting together" refers to spending time in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. Dissatisfaction with personal relationships is defined as reporting a score ≤ 4 on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). * indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for dissatisfaction with personal relationships. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

Annex Table 2.A.3. High-frequency social contact is only weakly correlated with loneliness and perceived relationship quality

	Get together with family at least weekly	Get together with friends at least weekly	Contact family (remotely) at least weekly	Contact friends (remotely) at least weekly	Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks
Get together with friends at least weekly	0.26				
Contact family (remotely) at least weekly	0.35	0.18			
Contact friends (remotely) at least weekly	0.15	0.45	0.33		
Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks	-0.05	-0.07	-0.07	-0.08	
Dissatisfied with personal relationships	-0.07	-0.07	-0.10	-0.09	0.24

Note: Table displays weighted listwise Pearson correlation coefficients between quantitative and qualitative social connections outcomes from 23 European OECD countries in 2022. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[2]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

Additional correlational analysis

Annex Table 2.A.4 and Annex Table 2.A.5 serve as a robustness check to the correlation analysis presented in Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1, using data from the *Global State of Social Connections* survey and *EU Loneliness Survey*, respectively: in all three surveys considered, including the EU-SILC survey referenced in the main text, quantitative (structural) measures of the frequency of social interactions are only weakly correlated with self-assessments of social connections (loneliness, social support, relationship satisfaction).

Annex Table 2.A.4. Interactions with friends and family are weakly correlated with feeling lonely and supported

	Interact with friends / family who live close by daily over the past week	Interact with friends / family who live far away daily over the past week	Feel lonely
Interact with friends / family who live far away daily over the past week	0.17		
Feel lonely	-0.10	-0.02	
Feel supported	0.13	0.05	-0.16

Note: Further definitional details for "interaction" are not specified (i.e., whether in person or remote). Table displays weighted listwise Pearson correlation coefficients between quantitative and qualitative social connections outcomes from all 38 OECD countries in 2022.
Source: Gallup (2023[1]), *Global State of Social Connections*, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx.

Annex Table 2.A.5. Perceptions of loneliness and dissatisfaction with relationships are weakly correlated with seeing or contacting friends and family

	See family at least daily	See friends at least daily	Contact family at least daily	Contact friends at least daily	Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks
See friends at least daily	0.38				
Contact family at least daily	0.32	0.21			
Contact friends at least daily	0.21	0.38	0.41		
Felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks	-0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.01	
Dissatisfied with relationship	-0.03	-0.01	-0.04	-0.04	0.17

Note: "See" refers to meeting up face-to-face, either pre-arranged meetings or by chance encounters. "Contact" refers to remote interactions via phone, Internet or social media. Table displays weighted listwise Pearson correlation coefficients between quantitative and qualitative social connections outcomes from 22 European OECD countries in 2022.
Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[3]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

Notes

[1] Shorter time series are available for qualitative outcomes in social connections – such as feeling lonely and relationship dissatisfaction – making it more difficult to establish whether recent declines are pandemic-related, or began beforehand. However, supplemental evidence from national surveys shows that, for countries with more frequently collected data that extend closer to present day, loneliness and other qualitative outcomes declined over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not yet rebounded to pre-pandemic levels (see Chapter 4 for an extended discussion).

[2] Refer to the Annex for a discussion of how answer options are grouped for frequency of interacting in person vs. remotely, throughout this report. Analysis using an alternate grouping ("at least weekly" instead of "daily") is presented, to show that results are consistent regardless of grouping.

[3] Figure 2.2 and Table 2.1 use data from the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC). Additional analysis in the Annex shows that this pattern – weak correlation between quantitative outcomes in social connections (e.g. frequency of socialising) and functional or qualitative outcomes (e.g. feeling lonely, lack of perceived support or relationship dissatisfaction) holds across multiple data sources. See Annex Table 2.A.4 and Annex Table 2.A.5.

[4] Time use surveys can also provide useful data on structural aspects of social connections, such as the amount of time spent interacting with others. All data used in this chapter, however, come from household surveys.

[5] While school and the workplace are not the primary focal settings for outcomes presented in this chapter, recent surveys have collected data on the quantity and quality of social connections in these environments. For example, evidence from the 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* found that in 22 European OECD countries, 3% of people reported feeling isolated at work vs. 42% who never feel isolated at work, whereas 8% of students reported feeling isolated at school and 20% reported never feeling so. In general, respondents are more likely to feel supported by their peers (21% of workers always feel supported by colleagues, and

17% of students always feel supported by classmates) than their superiors (19% of workers are always supported by managers, and 15% of students report always having support from teachers) (European Commission and Joint Research Centre (JRC), 2024[3]). Additionally, data from the 2022 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that 16% of 15-year-olds reported feeling lonely at school, 17% felt like an outsider and 21% felt awkward or out of place. On average across OECD countries, sense of school belonging deteriorated slightly between 2018 and 2022, however individual country trajectories varied (OECD, 2023[75]).

[6] Close relationships with friends and family serve an important protective role, and provide resilience against poor health and socio-economic outcomes. However, poor quality relationships can actively cause harm. For example, evidence from a long-term study in Sweden tracking individuals from birth to age 65 shows that poor quality family relationships in childhood are associated with premature mortality, even when other common risk factors (including childhood poverty, parental mental illness, etc.) are controlled for (Alm, Låftman and Bohman, 2019[61]). Other evidence shows how parental expectations and pressure imposed on children to succeed academically can induce anxiety, depression, stress and burnout in young people (Ciciolla et al., 2017[78]; Rizwan, Talha and Qi, 2020[79]; Ma, Siu and Tse, 2018[80]; Luthar, Barkin and Crossman, 2013[74]).

[7] There are different approaches to measuring loneliness, including a single-item question asking respondents how lonely they feel (either in general, or in reference to a specific time period), as well as multi-item scales: the two most common are the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) 3-item scale and the De Jong-Gierveld (DJG) 6-item scale. The single-item question referenced in the main text of this chapter is the most commonly-used loneliness question on official surveys across OECD countries (Mahoney et al., 2024[76]), and asks respondents how lonely they felt over the past four weeks, with responses ranging from: all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, a little of the time and none of the time. The most common approach when scoring these answers is to define “lonely” respondents as those who answered either “all of the time” or “most of the time” (Schnepf, d’Hombres and Mauri, 2024[41]; Mahoney et al., 2024[76]).

[8] In 2025, the Mexican statistical office began collecting national data on feelings of loneliness over the past four weeks. In 2025, 8.3% of Mexicans reported feeling lonely most or all of the time (INEGI, 2025[77]). This data point is not included in Figure 2.11 because the year of data collection (2025) is too far removed from the other data included (2022-23).

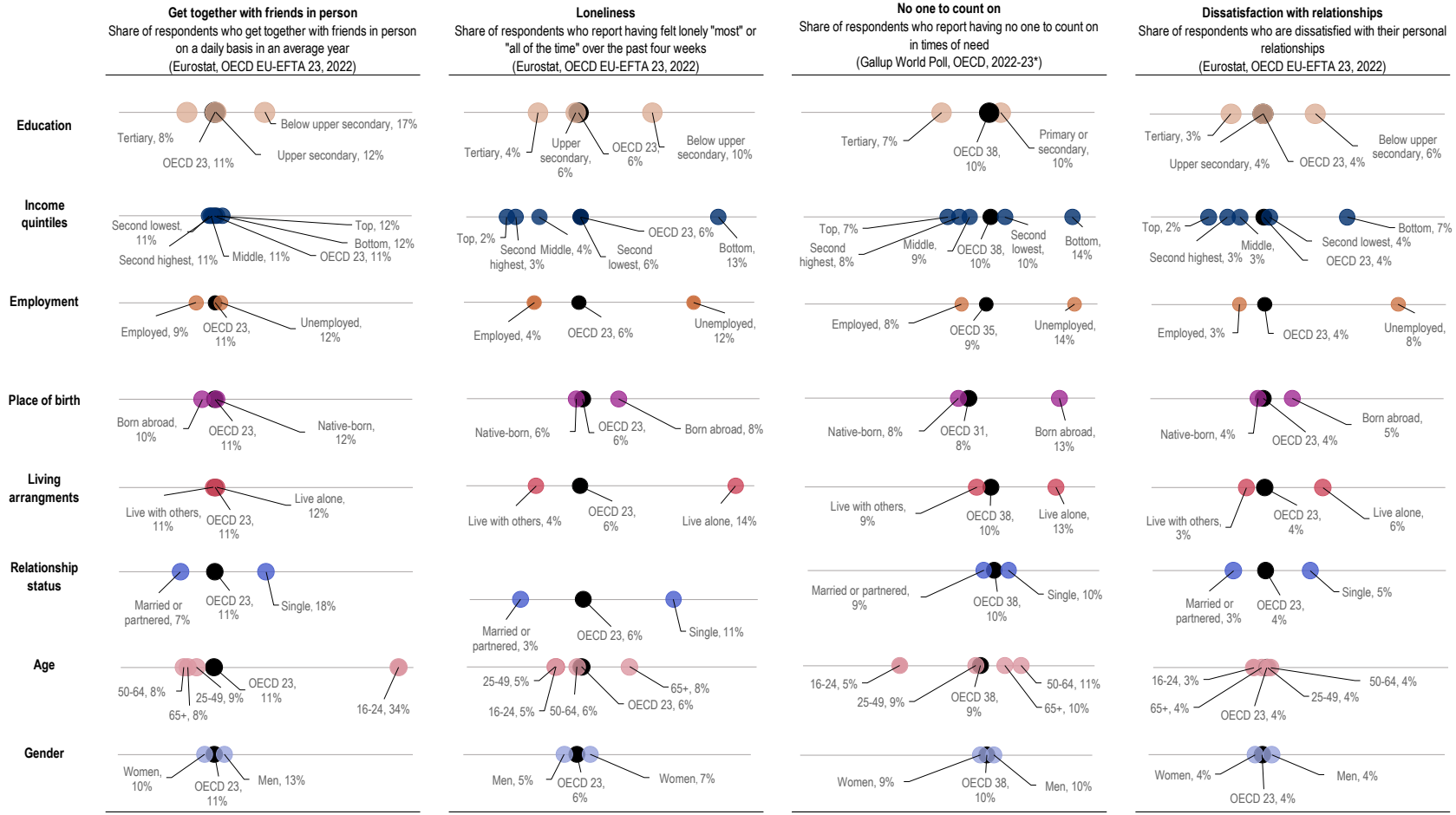
[9] Intense loneliness is defined as a score exceeding 6 on a scale from 1 (not very intense) to 10 (very intense).

[10] These data were collected in 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still greatly impacting many aspects of society in OECD countries, and the cost-of-living crisis led to financial insecurity (OECD, 2021[72]; 2024[73]). This may have influenced responses regarding the availability of certain types of social support: for example, the ability to obtain financial support from friends or family (pandemic job disruptions, inflation and cost-of-living all affecting household finances), or the availability of aid should one be sick and confined to bed (a likely recent *actual* occurrence for many respondents, given the high rates of COVID throughout 2020 and 2021).

3. Inequalities in social connections: Who is least connected?

Comparing social connections outcomes across socio-demographic groups reveals which portions of society are most at risk for isolation, loneliness and lack of connection. Those experiencing low income, unemployment and lower levels of education are much more likely to experience deprivations in social connections. Those belonging to minority groups, those who live alone and single people are also more likely to experience poor social connections outcomes. Young people consistently have better social connections outcomes than older age groups, however evidence of flipped age patterns from individual country surveys suggests that these age dynamics may be changing. Gender differences in social connections are generally smaller than those between other population groups.

Figure 3.1. A snapshot of inequalities in social connections outcomes across major socio-demographic groups



Note: * Gallup World Poll inequalities in lack of social support by age, employment and location of birth refer to pooled averages from 2017-2023.

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Different parts of the population have access to different social resources – goods, information, opportunities and affection provided through relationships and social networks (Webel et al., 2015[1]) – and their experiences of social connectedness vary. This chapter uses high quality data with large sample sizes to investigate inequalities in social connections for a broad range of population groups, including by socio-economic and labour market outcomes, belonging to a minority group, lifestyle characteristics including living arrangements and relationship status, age and gender (refer to Annex Table 3.A.1 for definitional details on each group). This exercise sheds light on who in society is most connected, and conversely, who is most at-risk for isolation and feeling lonely. This is not only important for understanding societal inequalities more broadly, but also for promoting social connections in the most efficient and targeted way (i.e. feelings of loneliness in youth vs. the elderly will likely best be addressed through different types of interventions). Actions to combat poor outcomes also need to consider, where possible, the ways in which risk compounds at the individual level: for example, someone who is both unemployed and living alone may be at especially heightened risk, compared to those experiencing only one of these two situations (Box 3.1).[1] In order to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes for each population group, this chapter focuses on results for the OECD average, rather than for individual countries; national spotlights, using official survey data from OECD countries, are included throughout to supplement and strengthen findings from cross-country surveys.

At a high-level, the analysis shows that across a range of social connections indicators, those most at risk for poor outcomes include those with lower levels of education, those in the bottom income quintile, the unemployed, those who live alone and single people (Figure 3.1). For example, rates of feeling lonely are highest for those who live alone (14%), those in the bottom income quintile (13%), the unemployed (12%), single people (11%) and those with lower than upper secondary levels of education (10%) – conversely, those in the top income quintile are the least lonely (2%), followed by those in a relationship (3%). Patterns for social support are similar, but also reveal new groups at risk: in addition to groups with socio-economic deprivations, those who were born abroad (i.e. migrant populations) and those who live alone have some of the highest rates of lacking social support, at 13% each. Socio-economic considerations are also important for dissatisfaction with personal relationships, with the unemployed (9%) and the bottom income quintile (7%) reporting the highest dissatisfaction rates. Young people aged 16-24 outperform older age cohorts – in particular those aged 65+ – in all aspects of connection: they have the most active social lives, with over one-third (34%) getting together with friends in person on a daily basis. They are also less lonely and have higher reported social support.

The data presented in this chapter were mostly collected in 2022 and 2023, and therefore results should be viewed in the context of the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. Confinement and social distancing policies were associated with poor social connections outcomes for all (OECD, 2021[2]), however those living alone and/or single were more affected during the most severe periods of social restrictions; similarly, cost of living pressures in recent years may have contributed to fewer financial resources that enable participation in social activities (OECD, 2021[2]; 2024[3]). However, trend data from Chapter 4 reveal that, while the pandemic undoubtedly shaped people's social connectedness in the short term, it remains the case that single people, those who live alone and those on low incomes have historically had worse outcomes – so the challenges they face are structural and persistent rather than being unique to recent circumstances. Furthermore, groups that experienced the largest declines in outcomes over the pandemic are those that have historically not been at such high levels of risk, such as young people.

Box 3.1. Methodological insight: Overlapping risks for poor social connections outcomes

Socio-demographic and contextual risk factors for loneliness, isolation and disconnection often overlap and intersect with one another. Analysing each risk factor individually overlooks the compounding effects and heightened vulnerabilities that can emerge for those who experience several risk factors simultaneously.

For example, studies suggest that elderly widowed men may be particularly susceptible to feelings of loneliness: not only grieving their spouse, but also becoming disconnected from the broader social network their spouse had maintained on the couple's behalf (Dykstra, 2009[4]). Experiences of discrimination, language barriers, exposure to poverty and living in less safe neighbourhoods can also directly influence the size of one's social circle, opportunities to socialise and feelings of inclusion – all of which may simultaneously affect people facing socio-economic deprivations, members of minority groups and recent migrant populations (Motmans et al., 2011[5]; Koelet and de Valk, 2016[6]; Kennedy, Field and Barker, 2019[7]; Taylor et al., 2024[8]).

Capturing data on these intersecting risk profiles can be difficult, even for national statistical offices. Nationally representative surveys are designed such that the sample is representative of major demographic considerations – sex, age, socio-economic status, among other factors – however once these attributes are combined, sample sizes are rarely sufficiently large to make reliable estimates of outcomes. One potential approach to address this is to tailor a survey specific to a population: for example, the Italian statistical agency developed a *Social Condition and Integration among Foreign Citizens* survey, designed to understand how the migrant population was integrating into broader society (Istat, 2012[9]). Beyond this, research has highlighted the methodological tools available to analysts interested in better exploring intersecting risk factors more generally – covering qualitative research design, multi-level modelling and mixed method approaches, among others (Yang, 2023[10]), with specific applications to the topic of loneliness, as well (Yang, 2023[11]).

Socio-economic and labour market outcomes

Individuals experiencing disadvantage in terms of income, education and occupation, have significantly worse outcomes than their more advantaged peers for several social connections outcomes: they feel lonelier, report fewer close friends, are more likely to lack social support and are more dissatisfied with relationships. Findings are more mixed in the case of daily socialising, reflecting the complex interacting dynamics of time poverty (which can affect both low-wage workers and high-income individuals, groups who both work long hours), enforced time off (in the case of the unemployed) as well as financial resource constraints that limit many social activities.

Education

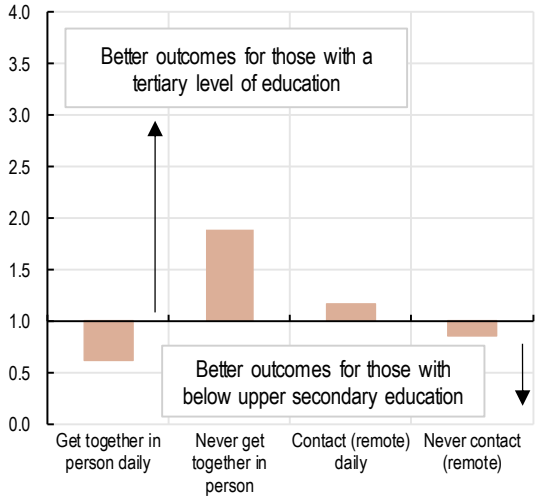
In general, higher education levels are associated with better social connections outcomes (Figure 3.1). To illustrate the overall size of these gaps, this section compares outcomes between those with below upper secondary levels of education with those who have completed a tertiary degree (or above),[2] however disaggregating by below upper secondary, at least upper secondary and tertiary levels of education typically reveals a gradient – with outcomes improving as education increases (see Figure 3.1).

Educational differences in quantitative social interactions present a mixed picture (Figure 3.2). When daily in-person socialising is considered,[3] those with below upper secondary levels of education have better outcomes: for example, across 23 OECD countries, 17% see friends daily (Figure 3.2, Panel B), compared

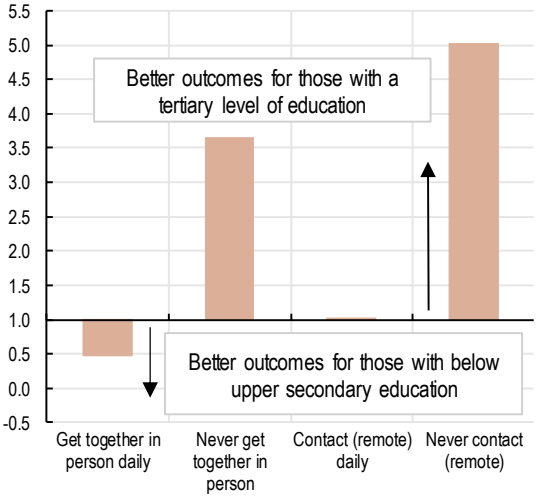
to 8% of those with a tertiary education. However, when looking at deprivations in social contact, those with a tertiary level of education are at lower risk: 3% of tertiary educated respondents report *never* getting together with friends in an average year, compared to 10% of those with below upper secondary. Patterns for getting together with family members are similar (Figure 3.2, Panel A). Therefore, those with below upper secondary levels of education are more likely to see friends and family *both* daily *and* never.

Figure 3.2. Those with lower levels of education are both more likely to interact with friends and family on a daily basis, *and* more likely to report never doing so

Panel A. Getting together or contacting family, ratio (distance from parity) between people with below upper secondary vs. tertiary education attainment, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Panel B. Getting together or contacting friends, ratio (distance from parity) between people with below upper secondary vs. tertiary education attainment, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: Ratio bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the (percentage point) difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for those with a tertiary level of education are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for those with upper secondary levels of education are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. Data for respondents answering "no relatives" is not shown. Getting together with family refers to relatives who do not live in the same household as the respondent. "Getting together" refers to spending time in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. "Contact" refers to any form of contact, including telephone, text, letter, Internet (including social media). Engaging with content on social media (i.e., "liking" a post or photo) is not considered contact; contact should reflect a conversation (written or verbal). OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

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This unevenness across different indicators suggests different potential constraints on spending time with others. Indeed, as is outlined in the following sections, these patterns are similar for other markers of socio-economic status, including income and employment outcomes, speaking to the often simultaneous and competing constraints of time and financial resources on socialising.

Those with lower levels of education are more likely to have lower paid jobs and may therefore have more limited financial resources to support certain types of social interactions (e.g., meeting at a bar or restaurant, hosting people at home, or traveling to meet distant friends and relatives); they may also be more likely to hold multiple jobs to make ends meet, resulting in limited time to socialise. For example, research finds that the unemployed spend less time socialising, with their additional enforced (as a result of not being in employment) time off spent on solitary, home-centred activities (Zuzanek and Hilbrecht,

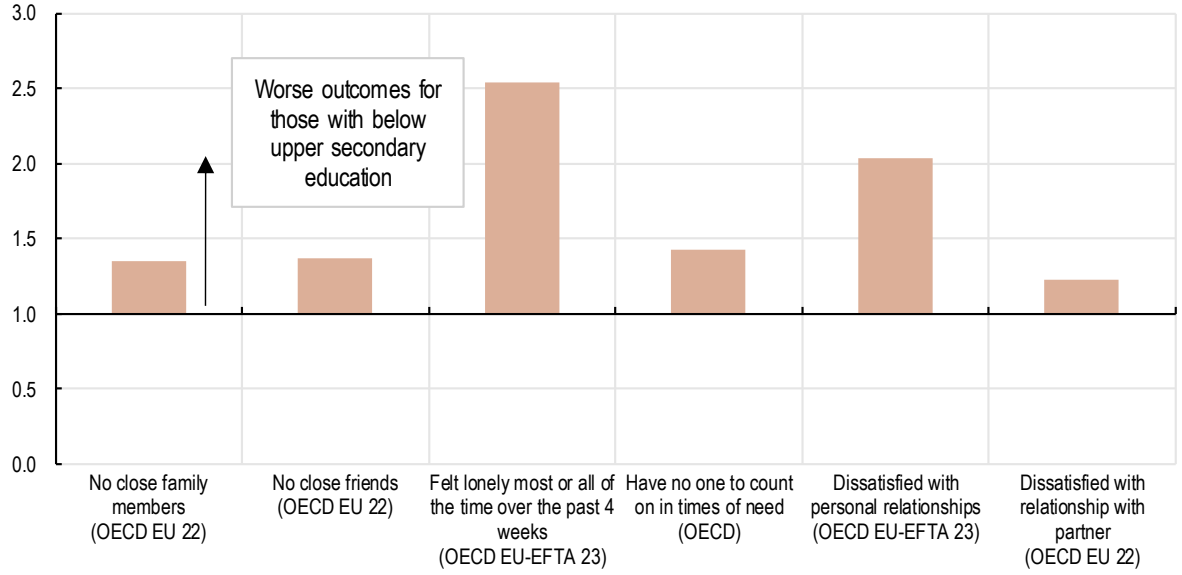
2019[13]; Lobo, 1996[14]). Multiple studies have also found that young people from low income families have fewer friends, and that economic resources play a role in adolescent socialising (Hjalmarsson and Mood, 2015[15]; Cavicchiolo et al., 2022[16]).

At the other end of the scale, those with higher levels of education are more likely to have higher paid jobs, which sometimes also imply longer working hours that can constrain their available time for socialising. As an illustration of these complex forces, research using data from the American Time Use Survey finds that having a lower level of education, experiencing food insecurity and living in poverty are all associated with spending *more* time socialising (Davis et al., 2023[17]), while analysis of time use data in Great Britain finds that workers in *both* high- and low-paid (i.e., shift work, working unsocial hours) occupations are both more likely to be time deprived (Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2012[18]).

When looking at the perceived quality of social connections, those with lower levels of education fare worse across the board (Figure 3.3). On average, people with less than upper secondary levels of education are 2.5 times more likely to report feeling lonely than those with a tertiary education (10% vs. 4%), they are also less likely to report having someone to count on in times of need (10% vs. 7%), to have close friends (9% of those with a primary education have no close friends vs. 7% of tertiary) or family members (4% vs. 3%), and are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their personal relationships (6% vs. 3%).

Figure 3.3. Those with below upper secondary levels of education feel lonelier, less satisfied with relationships and have less support

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between people with below upper secondary vs. tertiary education attainment, OECD 22-38, 2022/2022-2023



Note: All differences are significant. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD) which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023. OECD EU-EFTA 23 show differences between respondents with below upper secondary and tertiary levels of education; OECD EU 22 and OECD show differences between primary+secondary vs. tertiary respondents (due to insufficient sample sizes for primary only). OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD EU 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD EU 22 refers to European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey.* European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b; OECD refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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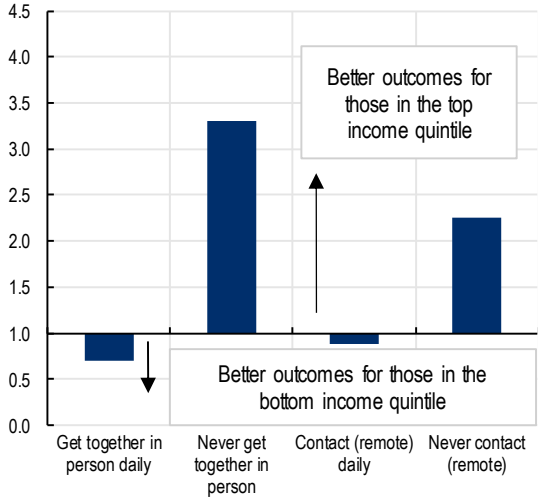
Income

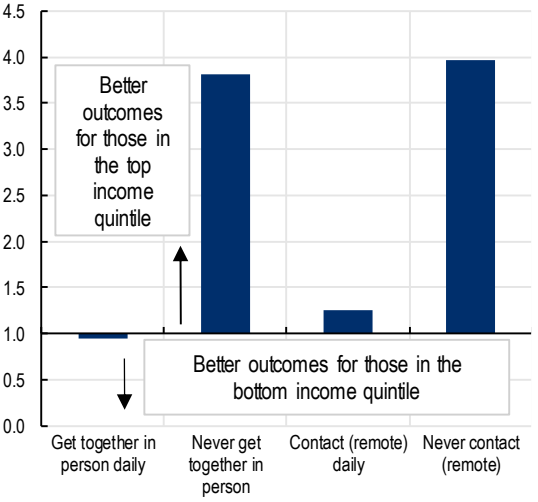
Frequency of social interactions by income show similar patterns to those by education. Across OECD countries, those in the bottom income quintile report slightly higher rates of getting together with friends (12.4%) (Figure 3.4, Panel B) and family (12.4%) (Figure 3.4, Panel A) in person on a daily basis in an average year, when compared to respondents in the top income quintile (11.7% for friends, 8.6% for family). However, at the same time, the bottom income quintile is also more likely to report *never* getting together with friends and family: 9% never see friends and 4% never see family, compared to only 2% and 1%, respectively, in the top income quintile. This again alludes to time and financial resource constraints, acting in different ways for those with high and low incomes, limiting or supporting their ability to socialise.[4] Discrepancies are particularly large between income quintiles for never socialising with friends.

Figure 3.4. Similar to patterns in education, those in the lowest income quintile are more likely to both *always* interact with friends and family, and to *never* do so

Panel A. Getting together or contacting family, ratio (distance from parity) between top vs. bottom income quintile, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Panel B. Getting together or contacting friends, ratio (distance from parity) between top vs. bottom income quintile, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: All differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for those in the top income quintile are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for those in the bottom income quintile are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

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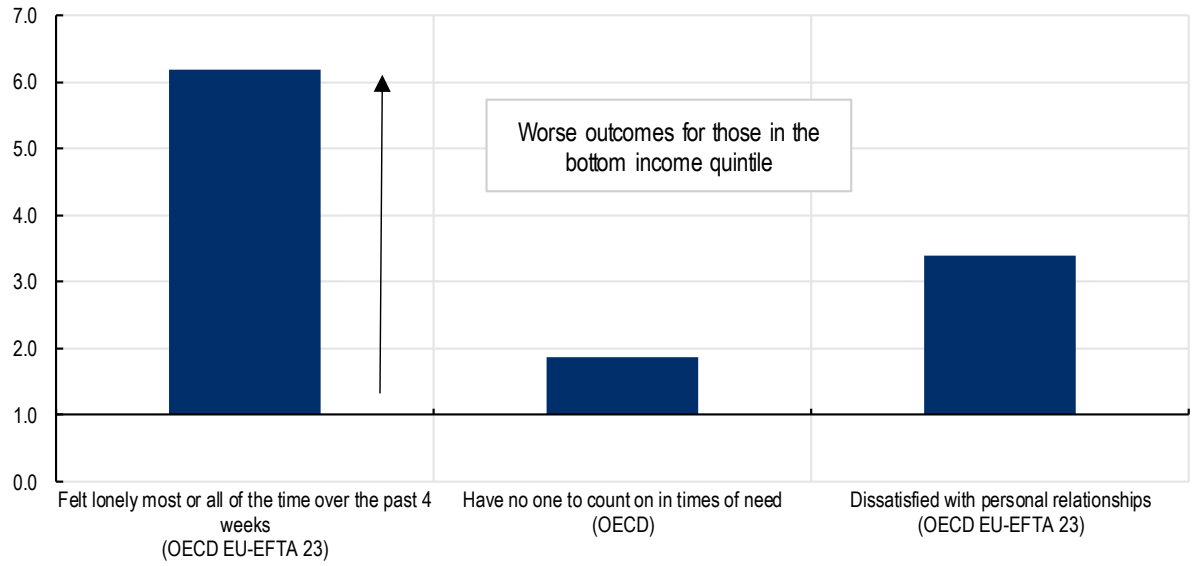
Gaps in function and quality measures of social connections between the top and bottom income quintiles are some of the largest disparities across any socio-demographic group (Figure 3.1). On average for the OECD countries with available data, respondents in the bottom income quintile are 6.2 times lonelier (13% vs. 2%), almost twice as likely to have no one to count on in times of need (14% vs. 7%) and 3.4 times more dissatisfied with their personal relationships (7% vs. 2%) (Figure 3.5). Indeed, research has consistently shown that poverty is correlated with feeling lonely, potentially caused by factors such as reduced social participation or compounding health issues (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]) (WHO, 2025[22]).[5] Those with lower incomes, or who recently experienced financial stress, have fewer resources to spend on social leisure activities (Klinenberg, 2016[23]; WHO, 2025[22]); relatedly, those who are married or in long-term partnerships tend to have higher joint household incomes, and being in a relationship or living with a partner is a protective factor against deprivations in social connections outcomes (Hawkley, 2008[24]) (see also the below section on lifestyle characteristics). Additionally, poverty is associated with a number of other physical and mental health issues (Macdonald, Nixon and Deacon, 2018[25]), which can themselves influence social connections outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015[26]).

Figure 3.5. Those in the bottom income quintile are lonelier, have less support and are less satisfied with their relationships, compared to those in the top income quintile

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity), top vs. bottom income quintile, OECD 23-38, 2022/2022-2023



Note: All differences are significant. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD) which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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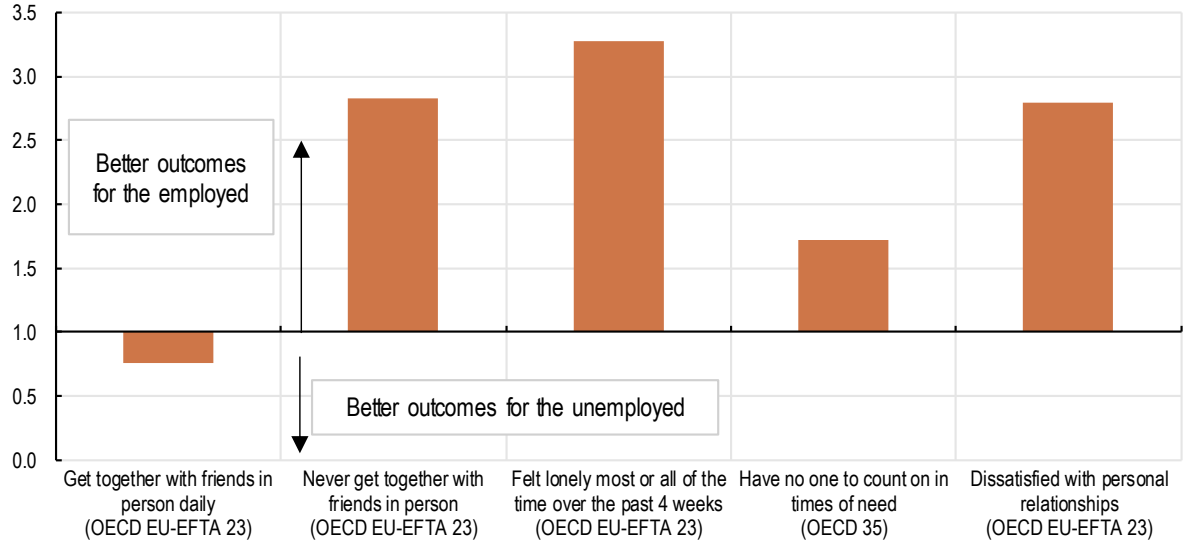
Employment

In considering social connections outcomes by labour market status, the unemployed have worse outcomes in almost all aspects of social connections (Figure 3.6). The one exception is getting together with friends on a daily basis in an average year: on average across 23 European OECD countries, 12% of unemployed respondents report doing so, compared to 9% of employed respondents. However, the unemployed also have higher rates of *never* getting together with friends (7%, compared to 3% of the employed). This could possibly reflect greater time constraints of the employed; however unemployment is also associated with a diminished social network and feelings of exclusion (Kunze and Suppa, 2017[27]; Pohlan, 2019[28]), and lower enjoyment of leisure activities (Krueger and Mueller, 2012).

Figure 3.6. The unemployed have worse outcomes than the employed, for almost all aspects of social connections

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between unemployed vs. employed, OECD 23-35, 2022/2017-2023



Note: All differences are significant. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD 35) which refers to a pooled average of 2017-2023. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for the employed are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for the unemployed are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD 35 refers to Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States.
Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD 35 refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

StatLink https://stat.link/w91uha

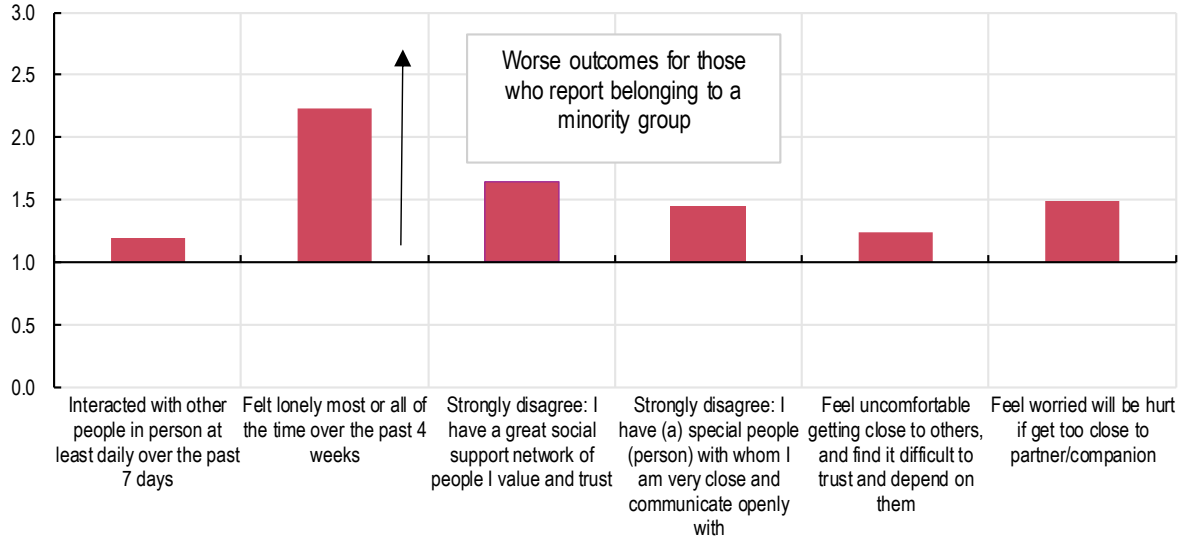
Disparities between the unemployed and employed are particularly stark for indicators of perceived relationship quality. Across OECD countries, the unemployed are 3 times more likely to feel lonely (12% vs. 4%), 1.7 times more likely to report having no one to count on (14% vs. 8%), and 2.8 times more likely to be dissatisfied with personal relationships (8% vs. 3%) (Figure 3.6). The mechanisms underpinning this may be bi-directional, and mediated by income and mental health (Morrish and Medina-Lara, 2021[29]; Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[30]; Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022[31]; Üniversity et al., 2025[32]). For example, unemployment can lead to a decrease in social interactions, less of a sense of community and/or belonging and a subsequent increase in feelings of loneliness (Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[30]). However, feelings of loneliness may also contribute to experiences of mental or physical ill-health, which can then potentially lead to unemployment or poorer future employment prospects (Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[30]; Üniversity et al., 2025[32]; Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022[31]).

Belonging to a minority group

"Belonging to a minority group" is a broad term that encompasses the experiences of very different – and in and of themselves heterogeneous – communities, based on ethnicity or skin colour, language, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, religion or belief, migrant status or political opinion. This section brings together internationally comparative information on social connectedness for different types of minority groups where possible. However, given that such statistics are not widely available, this analysis is supplemented with deep dives into experiences of specific communities from individual OECD countries.[6]

Figure 3.7. Respondents who identify as a member of a minority group report worse social connections outcomes, across the board

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between those who belong to a minority group vs. those who do not, OECD 12, 2023



Note: Belonging to a minority group can be based on, but is not limited to, one's ethnicity or skin colour, language, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, religion or belief, migrant status or political opinion. All differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for non-minorities are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for minorities are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. OECD 12 includes Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, United Kingdom and the United States.
Source: AXA (2023[33]), *Mind Health Report 2023*, AXA Global Healthcare, https://www.axaglobalhealthcare.com/en/wellbeing/emotional/mind-health-report/.

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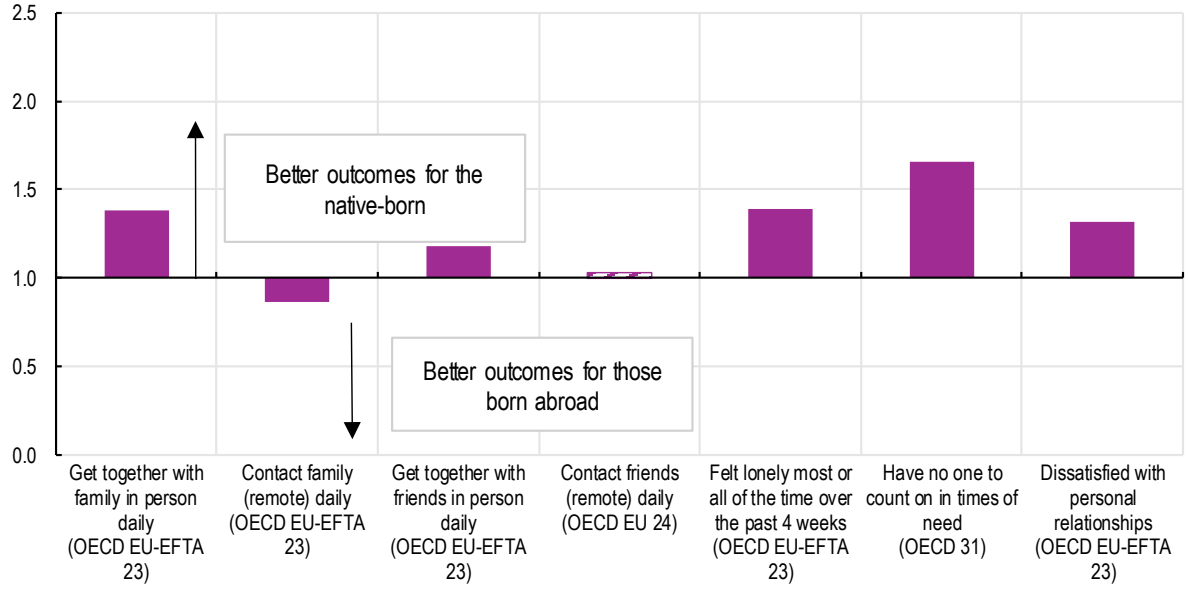
Data from 12 OECD countries show that belonging to a minority group of any sort is associated with worse outcomes in all aspects of social connections. On average, respondents who self-identify as a member of any minority group are 2.2 times more likely to have felt lonely over the past four weeks in comparison to non-minority respondents (29% vs. 13%), 1.5 times more likely to have an anxious attachment style, in that they feel worried they will get hurt if they get too close to a romantic partner (46% vs. 31%), and 1.2 times less likely to have interacted with other people in person over the past week (62% vs. 74%) (Figure 3.7). These high-level findings are in line with the majority of the evidence presented in this section, in that those belonging to different minority groups tend to have worse social connections outcomes than the general population; however, the frequency of socialising varies depending on the group considered.

Place of birth

Data from 23 European OECD countries show that a proxy for migrant status – namely, those who were not born in the country where the survey is being administered – is associated with higher rates of contacting family members on a daily basis in an average year (32%), in comparison to those who were born in the country (28%) (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Those born abroad have worse overall social connections outcomes than their native-born counterparts, but are more likely to stay in regular contact with family members

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between those born abroad vs. native-born, OECD 23-31, 2022/2017-2023



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the percentage point difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for the native-born are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for those born abroad are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD 31 refers to Australia, Austria, Canada, Chile, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD 31) which refers to a pooled average of 2017-2023.

Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD 31 refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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This likely reflects the close ties migrants retain to their home communities, and the increasing ubiquity of digital technology tools that facilitate communication across large physical distances (Navarrete and Huerta, 20006[34]; González and Castro, 2007[35]). Migrants are meanwhile *less* likely to report getting together with family members on a daily basis (8% vs. 11% for those not born in another country), perhaps unsurprising given that a higher share of their family members may be based abroad. These patterns are also reflected in national data from New Zealand (Box 3.2).

When looking at functional and quality aspects of social connection, those born abroad have consistently worse outcomes: on average, they are lonelier (8% vs. 6% for the native-born) and are more dissatisfied with personal relationships (5% vs. 3.7%). Disparities in outcomes between foreign and native-born respondents are largest for having someone to count on in times of need: those born abroad are 1.7 times more likely to report having no one (13% vs. 8%) (Figure 3.8). National data from Canada, Germany and New Zealand reveal similar dynamics (Box 3.2).

A possible mechanism for poorer social connections outcomes for those born abroad may be a weaker sense of belonging to their current place of living due to cultural differences, experiences and feelings of discrimination, or the size of their local network relative to their transnational network (Motmans et al., 2011[5]; Koelet and de Valk, 2016[6]). Analysis of a survey conducted by the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat), *Social Condition and Integration among Foreign Citizens*, shows that the migrant population in Italy face greater risk for feelings of loneliness and isolation due to discrimination, language barriers, worse health outcomes and higher likelihood of living in deprived neighbourhoods (Eralba and Barbiano Di Belgiojoso, 2021[36]). Similar findings have been found for migrant communities in the Netherlands (Ten Kate et al., 2020[37]), Luxembourg (Albert, 2021[38]) and Canada (De Jong Gierveld, Van der Pas and Keating, 2015[39]).

Box 3.2. National spotlight: Foreign vs. native-born social connections outcomes in Germany, Canada and New Zealand

Data from Germany, Canada and New Zealand highlight differences in feelings of loneliness between the foreign- and native-born populations (Figure 3.9).

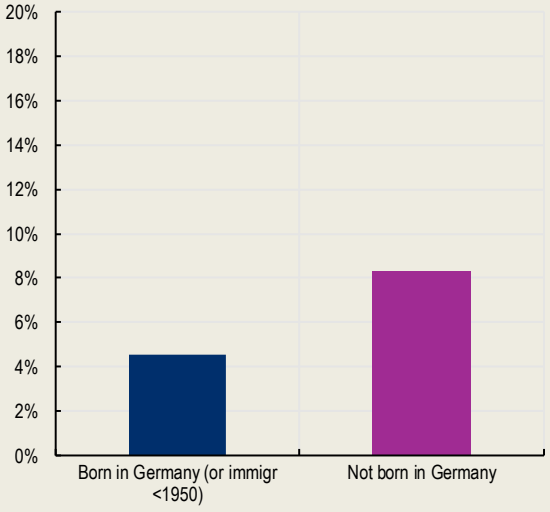
Data from Germany confirm that migrants (defined as those who were not born in Germany) are lonelier than non-migrants (Figure 3.9, Panel A).

In Canada, overall rates of loneliness between migrant and non-migrant respondents are comparable, however migrants are more likely to report feeling “somewhat” lonely, and less likely to report they “never” feel lonely (Figure 3.9, Panel B).

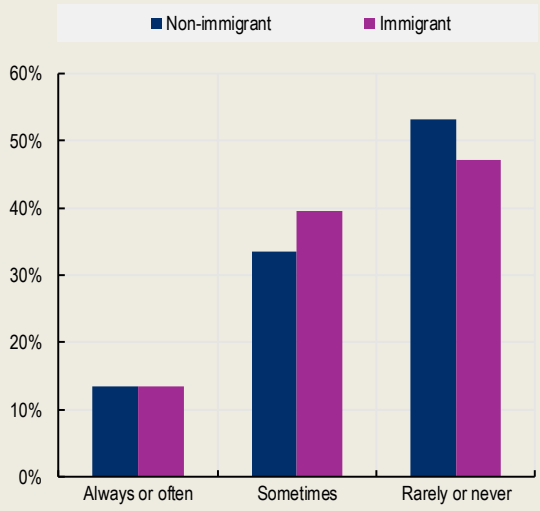
New Zealand provides data on a range of social connections outcomes for those born in the country, long-term migrants and recent migrants (Figure 3.9, Panel C). Recent migrants have the highest rate of engaging in remote interactions with family members, while native-born respondents have the highest rates of in-person family social interactions, similar to findings from European OECD countries (Figure 3.8). Compared to other groups, recent migrants to New Zealand also have the highest rates of loneliness, and lowest rates of access to social support.

Figure 3.9. Migrant populations in Germany, Canada and New Zealand are all lonelier than their native-born counterparts

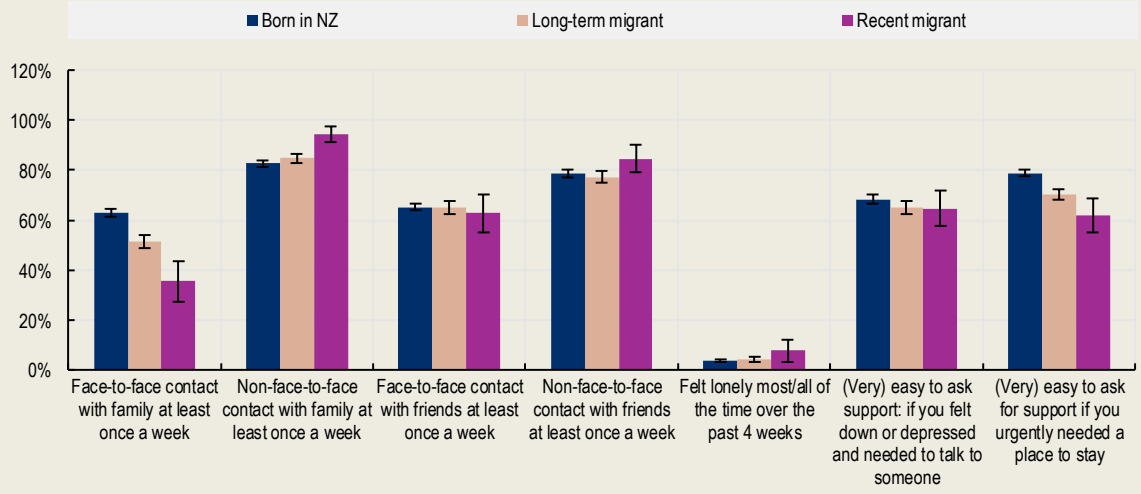
Panel A. Share of respondents who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, born in Germany vs. not, Germany, 2021



Panel B. Share of respondents who feel lonely _____ in general, migrant vs. non-migrant, Canada, 2024



Panel C. Social connections outcomes, by migration status, New Zealand, 2023



Note: OECD uses the terms "migrant" and "non-migrant", however individual countries use varying terms to differentiate between those born in the country and those born abroad. Figure labels use country-defined categories. Panel B: Data in figure reflect average of quarterly outcomes for 2024.

Source: Panel A: Goebel et al. (2019[40]), "The German socio-economic panel (SOEP)", *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik* 239(2) pp. 345-360, doi:10.1515/JBNST-2018-0022; Panel B: Statistics Canada (2025[41]) *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; Panel C: Stats NZ (2024[42]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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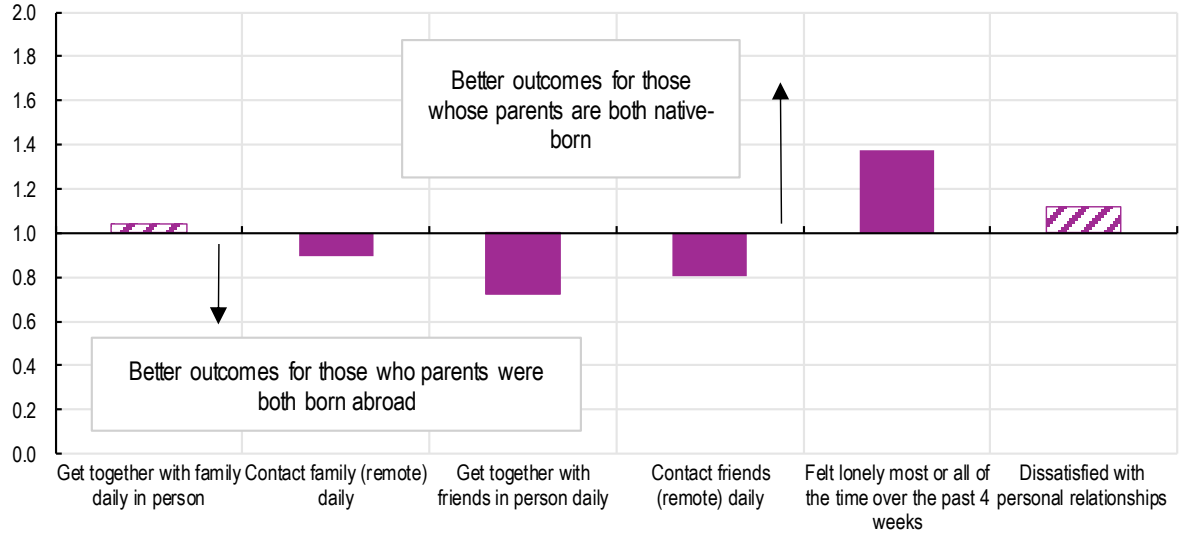
Location of parents' birth

These dynamics of belonging and socially connecting often extend over generations of migration to other countries. In 18 European OECD countries with data, second-generation migrants, identified as respondents who are born in their current country of residence but report that both of their parents were born abroad, are more likely to say they contact family members remotely on a daily basis in a given year (29% on average), compared to respondents with two native-born parents (26%); they are also more likely to be in daily contact with friends (Figure 3.10). Prevalence of feeling lonely for second-generation migrants, at an average of 7%, is comparable to the elevated rates found among first generation-migrants, a finding that has been replicated by other cross-European surveys (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]).

Figure 3.10. Second-generation migrants continue to report worse qualitative social connections outcomes than those with native-born parents, but are more likely to remotely contact friends and family

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between those whose parents were born abroad vs. those whose parents are both native-born, OECD EU-EFTA 18, 2022



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the percentage point difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for those whose parents are both native-born are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for those whose parents were both born abroad are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. Outcomes refer only to respondents who were born in the country in which the survey was administered (i.e. first-generation migrants are not included). OECD EU-EFTA 18 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

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Indigenous, racial and ethnic minority groups

Obtaining cross-country comparable data on outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities is difficult, due to different policies and protocols on collecting this information across OECD countries. Furthermore, individuals may identify with multiple racial or ethnic groups simultaneously, making comparisons across different racial and ethnic minority groups complicated. For countries that do collect and report on this information in national surveys, social connections outcomes for those belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups, or belonging to an Indigenous community, tend to be worse than outcomes for non-minority, non-Indigenous groups, and/or worse than outcomes for the population as a whole (Box 3.3).

Box 3.3. National spotlight: Social connections outcomes for minority groups in Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States

National surveys in Canada, England, the United States and New Zealand highlight differential outcomes across a range of social connections indicators for those who belong to Indigenous, racial and ethnic minority groups, and those who do not. In Canada, rates of loneliness are higher for members of visible minority groups[1] and those with an Indigenous identity (First Nations, Inuit, Métis): the latter are 1.4 times more likely to always or often feel lonely, in comparison to non-Indigenous respondents (Figure 3.11, Panel A).

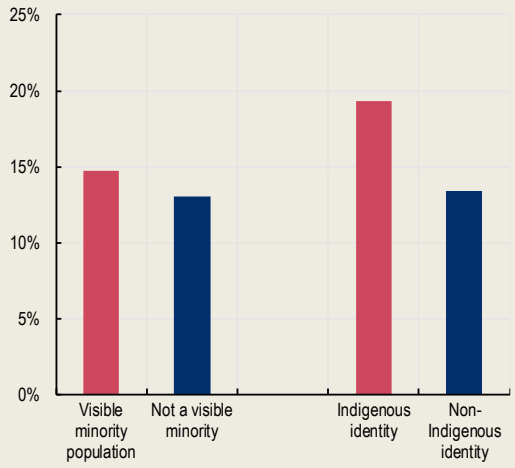
Data from England show that white respondents have the lowest deprivations in social support outcomes; they also have the lowest reported rates of loneliness, although these differences are smaller in magnitude (Figure 3.11, Panel B).

In the United States, mixed race respondents are most likely to always or often feel lonely (17%), followed by Black and Hispanic (14% for both), and white respondents (11%); Asian respondents report the lowest levels of loneliness (9%). In looking at social support, Hispanic respondents are 1.9 times more likely than white respondents to report rarely getting the social and emotional support they need, and Asian respondents are 1.7 times more likely (Figure 3.11, Panel C).

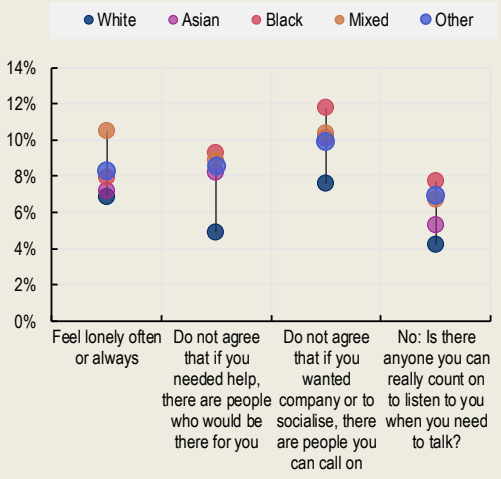
Data from New Zealand sheds light not only on qualitative social connections outcomes – such as loneliness – but also on time spent socialising (Figure 3.11, Panel D). Māori respondents have the highest rates of interacting with family members in person on at least a weekly basis (65%), followed by Pacific peoples (63%), European origin respondents (59%), with Asian respondents having the lowest rates (49%). In-person interactions with friends follow a slightly different pattern: European origin respondents have the highest rates of in-person socialising with friends on at least a weekly basis at 67%, 65% of Asian respondents, followed by 59% of Māori and Pacific peoples. In terms of loneliness, Māori respondents are 1.7 times as likely to report having felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks, compared to the total population, Pacific peoples are 1.4 times more likely and Asian respondents are 1.3 times more likely.

Figure 3.11. Members of ethnic minority groups tend to have worse qualitative social connections outcomes, across Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States

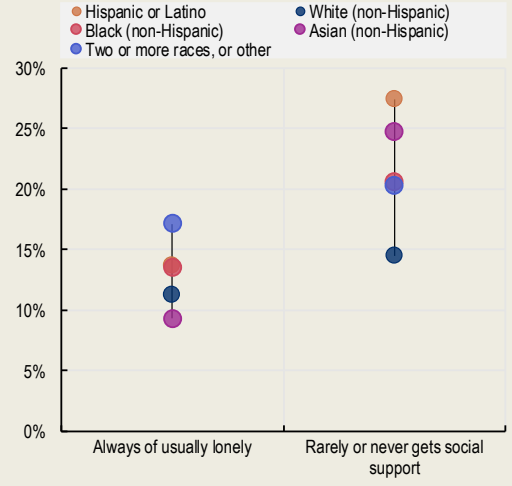
Panel A. Share of respondents who always or often feel lonely in general, by minority or Indigenous identity, Canada, 2024



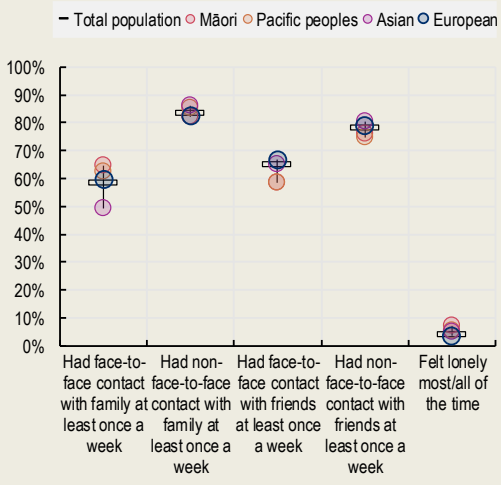
Panel B. Social connections outcomes, by ethnicity, England, 2023



Panel C. Social connections outcomes, by race and ethnicity, United States, 2024



Panel D. Social connections outcomes, by ethnicity, New Zealand, 2023



Note: Panel A: Data reflect the average of quarterly estimates from 2024. Per Statistics Canada, "Visible minority refers to whether a person is a visible minority or not, as defined by the Employment Equity Act. The Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour". The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese" (Statistics Canada, 2021[43]). Panel C: Data reflect the average of nine rounds of data collection from January to August 2024. Panel D: Absolute standard error bars are included in the figure StatLink.

Source: Panel A: Statistics Canada (2025[41]) *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; Panel B: DCMS (2024[44]) *Community Life Survey 2023/2024: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2; Panel C: U.S. Census Bureau (2024[45]), *Household Pulse Survey*, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html; Panel D: Stats NZ (2024[42]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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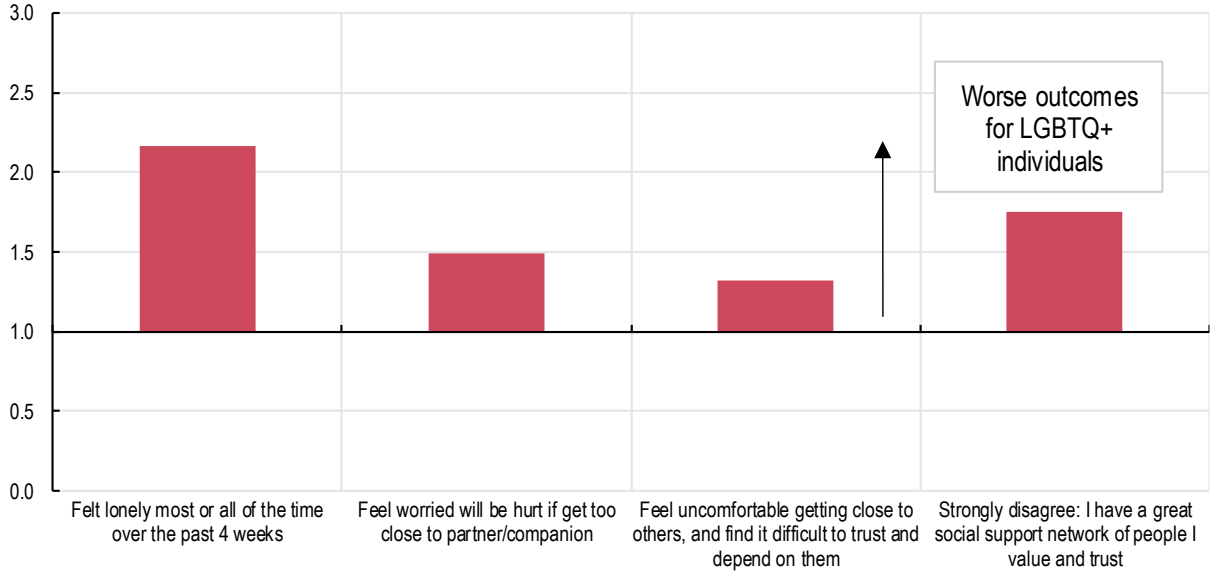
1. In Canada, the term "visible minority" is an official demographic category defined by the Canadian Employment Equity Act, and is used by Statistics Canada in their work. The Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour". The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese (OECD, 2021[2]).

Sexual orientation

When data are available, social connections outcomes for people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTI) tend to be worse than for cisgender, heterosexual respondents. Data from 11 OECD countries show that LGBTQ+ people are 2.2 times more likely to feel lonely (32% vs. 15% for non-LGBTQ+), 1.5x more likely to feel worried that they will get hurt if they get too close to their partner (50% vs. 33%), 1.3x more likely to feel uncomfortable getting close to / trusting / and depending on others (48% vs. 36%), and 1.8x more likely to strongly disagree that they have a good social support network (8% vs. 4%) (Figure 3.12). In national surveys where these data are collected, similar patterns are exhibited (Box 3.4).[7] LGBTI youth were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who were required to quarantine with family members who may not be supportive – and disconnected from wider friends and support networks (OECD, 2021[2]; Ruprecht et al., 2024[46]).

Figure 3.12. LGBTQ+ respondents are more likely to report feeling lonely, worried they will be hurt if they get too close to others, and to strongly disagree that they have great social support networks

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity), by sexual orientation, OECD 11, 2022



Note: All differences in outcomes between LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning) and non-LGBTQ+ respondents are significant. OECD 11 includes Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, United Kingdom and the United States.
Source: AXA (2023[33]), *Mind Health Report 2022*, AXA Global Healthcare, https://www.axaglobalhealthcare.com/en/wellbeing/emotional/mind-health-report/.

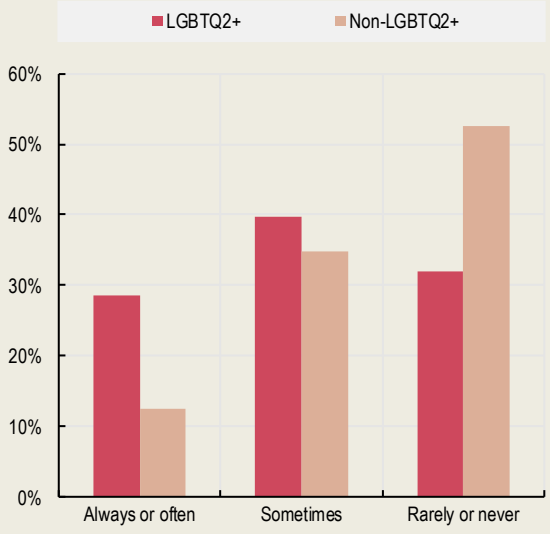
StatLink https://stat.link/k8e0ws

Box 3.4. National spotlight: LGBTI outcomes in Canada and England

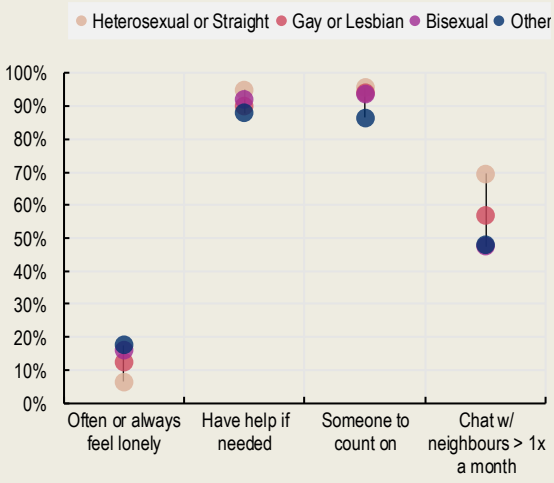
LGBTQ+ people in Canada are 2.3 times more likely to feel lonely always or often, in comparison to non-LGBTQ+ Canadians (Figure 3.13, Panel A). Data from England show that heterosexual or straight respondents are the least likely group to report feeling lonely often or always (7%), in comparison to gay or lesbian (12%), bisexual (16%), or other (17%) sexual orientation respondents. Similarly, straight respondents have the highest rate of reporting they chat with their neighbours more than once a month (Figure 3.13, Panel B).

Figure 3.13. LGBTI respondents have worse social connections outcomes than non-LGBTI individuals in Canada and England

Panel A. Share of respondents who _____ feel lonely, by sexual orientation, Canada, 2024



Panel B. Share of respondents with each social connections outcome, by sexual orientation, England, 2023-24



Note: Panel A: Data in figure reflect averages of quarterly outcomes throughout 2024. Per Statistics Canada, LGBTQ2+ "includes people who reported their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or a sexual orientation not elsewhere classified. It also includes persons whose reported sex assigned at birth does not correspond to their gender, including those whose gender is not exclusively man or woman (regardless of sexual orientation)." Panel B: "Have help if needed" is the share of respondents who agree with the statement, "'if I needed help, there are people who would be there for me", "someone to count on" is the share of respondents who state that, yes, "there is someone who you can really count on to listen to you when you need to talk".

Source: Panel A: Statistics Canada (2025[41]) *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; Panel B: DCMS (2024[44]) *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2.

StatLink https://stat.link/9hwq1i

Lifestyle characteristics

Lifestyle characteristics, including structural factors but also individual choices – such as whether one lives alone or with others, is single or in a relationship, or one's place of residence – can also influence how connected people are and feel. In general, single people and those who live alone have worse qualitative social connections outcomes than those in a relationship or who live with other people, with particularly striking gaps for feeling lonely. Available cross-country data do not pick up on significant differences in social connections outcomes between rural and urban living.

Living arrangements

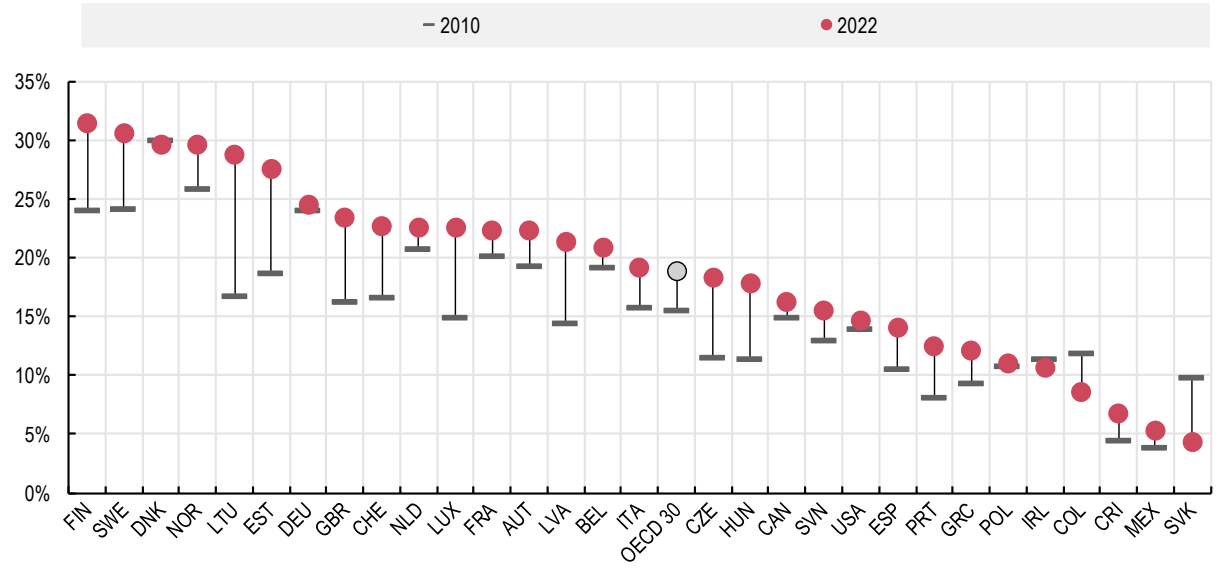
Across 30 OECD countries, almost one-fifth (19%) of the population lived in single-occupancy households in 2022, a slight increase from a decade prior (15%) (Figure 3.14, Panel A). Rates of living alone are highest in Nordic countries and the Baltic states, and lowest in Latin America, East and Southern Europe. Older people are most likely to live alone, with 31% of the 65+ population living alone in 2022; all age groups, however, experienced an increase in living alone between 2010 and 2022 (Figure 3.14, Panel B). Furthermore, OECD analysis suggests that the share of single-occupancy households is only likely to increase in the coming decades, due in part to rapid population ageing (OECD, 2024[47]).

Living alone can influence how frequently one socialises – on the one hand, living alone may induce people to more pro-actively plan social events with friends and family, and indeed data from the United States has found that people who live alone spend more time with both friends and neighbours (Klinenberg, 2013[48]). On the other hand, living on one's own may lead to more overall time spent alone – particularly during events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Fingerman et al., 2021[49]). Data from 23 European countries, collected in 2022, show this tension: those who live alone report higher levels of *never* interacting with friends and family, however their rates of daily in-person interactions are either not significantly different from those who live with others, or slightly higher (Figure 3.15). Differences in contacting friends and family show similar patterns (not pictured).[8]

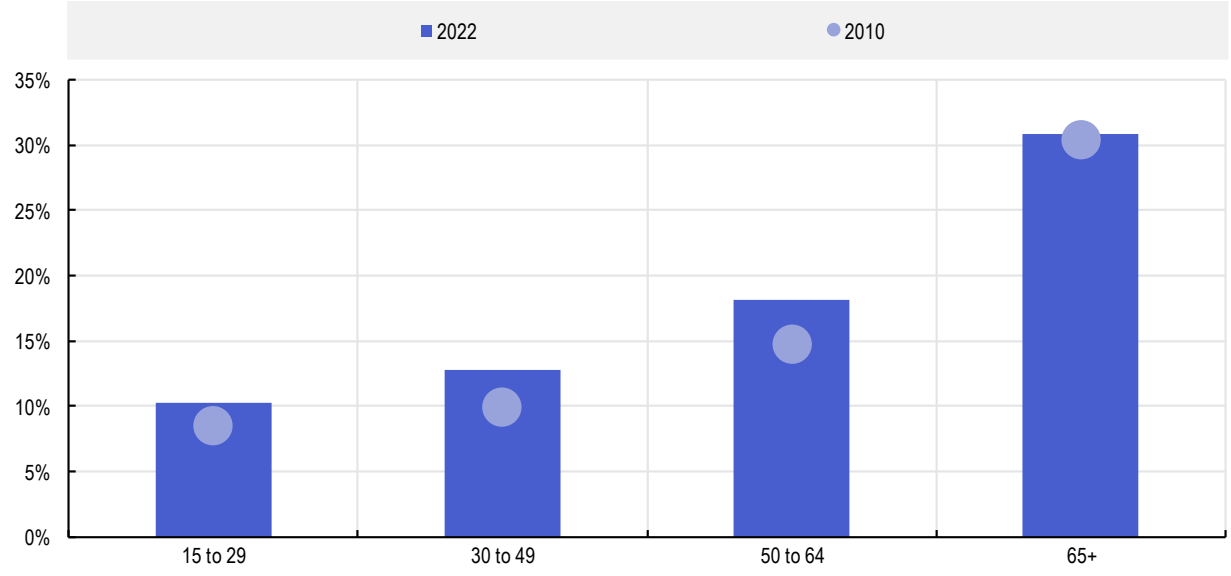
When considering a range of functional and qualitative social connections indicators, those who live alone have worse outcomes, and often by a large magnitude (Figure 3.15). While there is no significant difference between those who live alone and those who live with others in terms of having close friends, on average in 17 European countries those who live alone have fewer close relationships with family members. 11% report having no close family members, compared to only 2% of respondents who live with others.[9] People who live alone are also 3.9 times more likely than those who live with others to report having been lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks (14% vs. 4%), 1.5 times more likely to report having no one to count on in times of need (13% vs. 9%), and 1.8 times more likely to be dissatisfied with their personal relationships (6% vs. 3%). The links between living alone and experiencing feelings of loneliness are not straightforward, in that spending time alone or solitary living do not inherently imply an undesirable situation (Klinenberg, 2013[48]). However, living alone – as opposed to momentary experiences of solitude – may be particularly detrimental for older people (Pauly et al., 2016[50]; O'Súilleabháin, Gallagher and Steptoe, 2019[51]; Yeh and Lo, 2004[52]), those facing mobility challenges, and anyone, regardless of age, who has little access to social infrastructure that provides spaces and opportunities for socialising outside of the home (Klinenberg, 2016[53]) (see Chapter 5 for an extended discussion).

Figure 3.14. Across 30 OECD countries, close to 1 in 5 people live alone; older adults are more likely to live alone, but rates have been rising for all ages since 2010

Panel A. Percentage of population living in single person households, OECD 30, 2010 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage of population living in single person households, by age group, OECD 30, 2010 vs. 2022



Note: Panel A: OECD 30 includes all countries shown in the figure. Panel B: OECD 30 refers to all countries shown in Panel A.
Source: OECD (2024[54]), *OECD Affordable Housing Database - indicator HM1.4 Living arrangements by age groups*, https://oe.cd/ahd.

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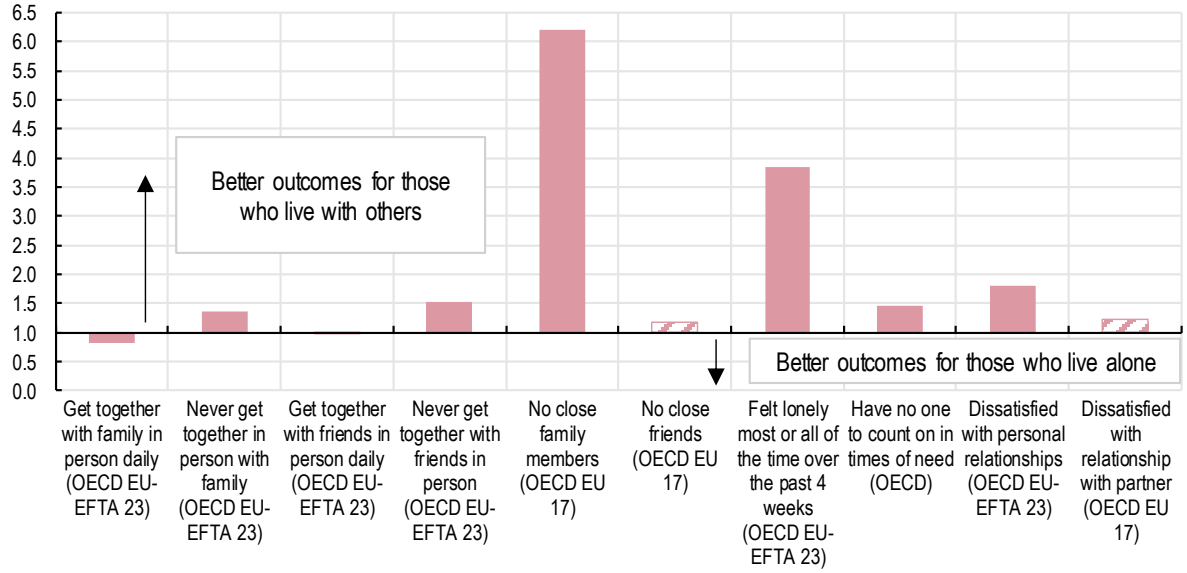
Figure 3.15. Those who live alone have worse social connections outcomes than those who live with others

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between those who live alone vs. those who live with others, OECD 17-38, 2022/2022-2023



Note: Ratio bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the (percentage point) difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for those who live with others are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for those who live alone are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD) which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD EU 17 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Sweden.

Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD EU 17 refers to European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b; OECD refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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Relationship status

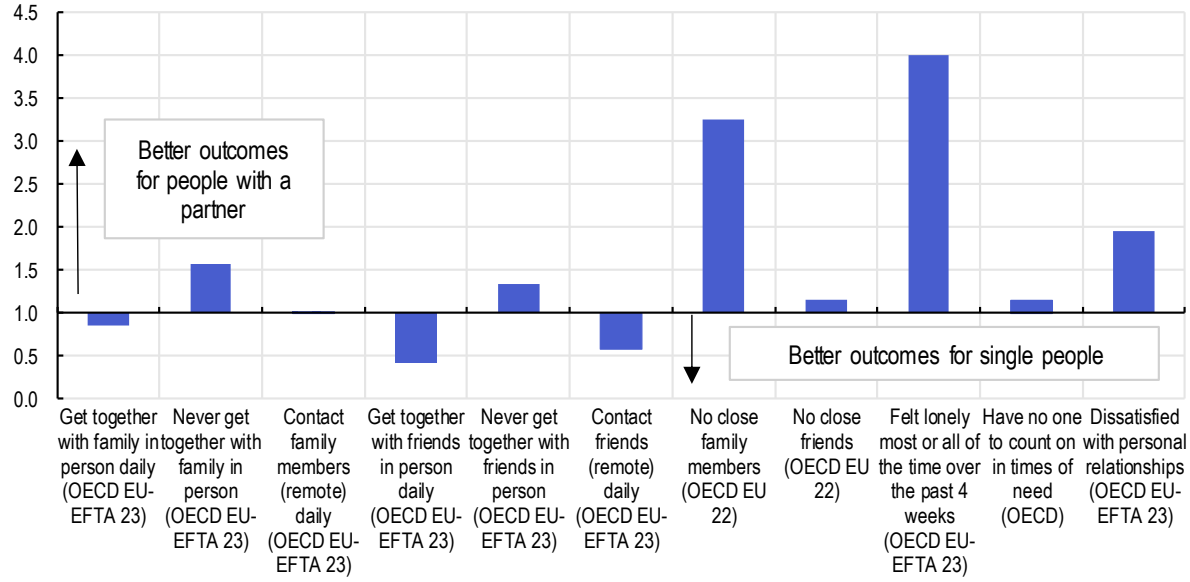
In comparison to people in a relationship, single people are more likely to frequently socialise with friends. In 2022, across 23 European OECD countries, 18% of single people reported they get together with friends on a daily basis in an average year, compared to 7% of people in a relationship; similarly, 38% of single people contact their friends daily, vs. 22% of those in a relationship (Figure 3.16).[10] Differences in socialising with family members are much smaller in magnitude. Single people, however, are four times more likely than people in a relationship to report feeling lonely (11% vs. 3%), slightly more likely to have no one to count on (10% vs. 9%), and twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their personal relationships (6% vs. 3%).

Having a partner, whether through marriage or cohabitation, is one of the strongest predictors of reduced loneliness (Arpino et al., 2022[55]). Among other things, having a partner increases the frequency of having in-person contact and, in most cases, social support. However, the quality of the relationship with said spouse or partner is crucial; having a spousal confidant is found to be negatively associated with loneliness,

while experiencing marital stress may be positively associated with loneliness (Hawkley, 2008[24]; Hawkley and Kocherginsky, 2017[56]). Indeed, data show that individuals in unsatisfactory relationships are more likely to be lonely than those not in a relationship (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]).[11]

Figure 3.16. Single people spend more time interacting with friends than people in a relationship, but single people are also more likely to feel lonely, lacking in support and dissatisfied with relationships

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between single vs. partnered, OECD 22-38, 2022/2022-2023



Note: Ratio bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the (percentage point) difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for those in a relationship are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for single people are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. All data refer to 2022, aside from data from the Gallup World Poll (OECD) which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD EU 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Source: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD EU 22 refers to European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey.* European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b; OECD refers to Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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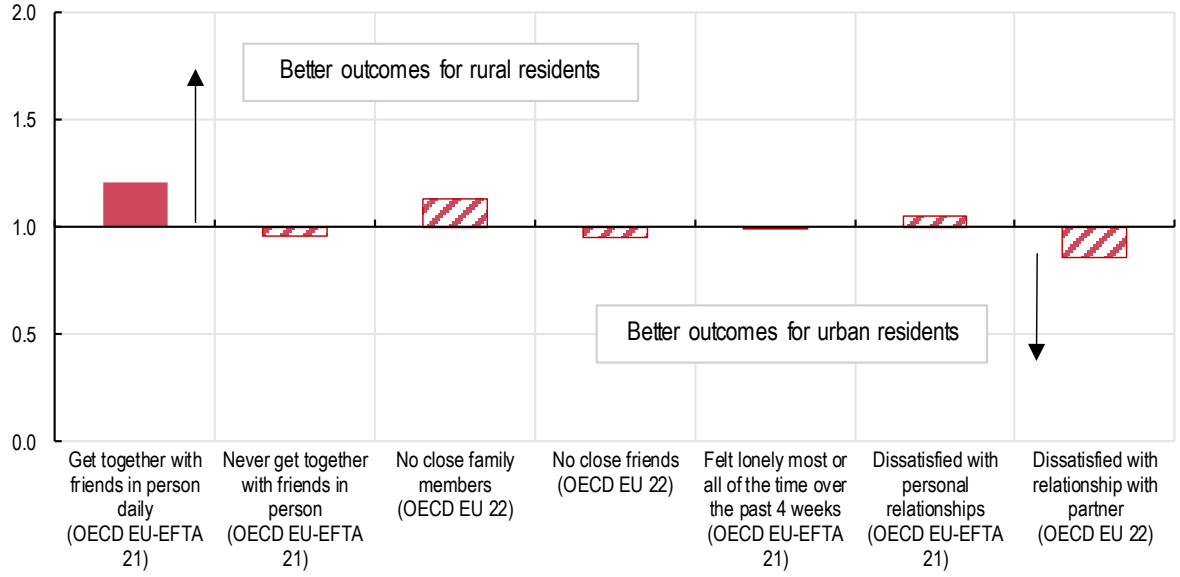
Place of residence – urban/rural

Existing data do not show significant differences in social connections outcomes for urban vs. rural residents across OECD countries, with the exception of a slightly higher likelihood for rural residents to frequently get together with friends in person (13% vs 11%) (Figure 3.17). This may in part be due to the insufficient granularity of "urban" and "rural" designations in the underlying datasets: because of small sample sizes, and/or inconsistent answer categorisations across different countries participating in the surveys used for this analysis, outcomes for residents in large urban areas are combined with those in smaller towns or suburbs.

Aside from somewhat limited granularity, however, research has found limited evidence for the impact of urban characteristics such as housing type, city size or area density on loneliness or isolation (Bower et al., 2023[57]). This may in part be explained by the fact that people who choose to live in different areas have different preferences for social contact. For example, a case study of suburban towns in the metro area of Warsaw shows that residents who move to these areas do so because they prefer the relative tranquillity of being outside of the city and closer to nature, and prefer to socialise with others either in the home or in private gardens (Kępkowicz and Mantey, 2016[58]). Other research has found a U-shaped curve for loneliness, in particular, with respondents in both the least (i.e., rural) and most (i.e., urban) densely populated areas having the highest rates of loneliness (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]).

Figure 3.17. Social connections outcomes do not significantly differ across urban vs. rural residents

Social connections outcomes, ratio (distance from parity) between rural vs. urban residents, OECD 21-22, 2022



Note: Ratio bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the (percentage point) difference between groups is not statistically significant. All other differences are significant. Ratios for positive outcomes and deprivations are standardised such that better outcomes for rural residents are always greater than 1, and better outcomes for urban residents are always below 1; 1 indicates outcomes between both groups are equivalent. OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. OECD EU 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. For OECD EU-EFTA 21, "rural" refers to rural areas, and "urban" refers to cities combined with towns and suburbs. For OECD EU 22, "rural" refers to a rural area or village, and "urban" refers to small or medium-sized towns as well as large town/city.

Source: OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); OECD EU 22 refers to European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey.* European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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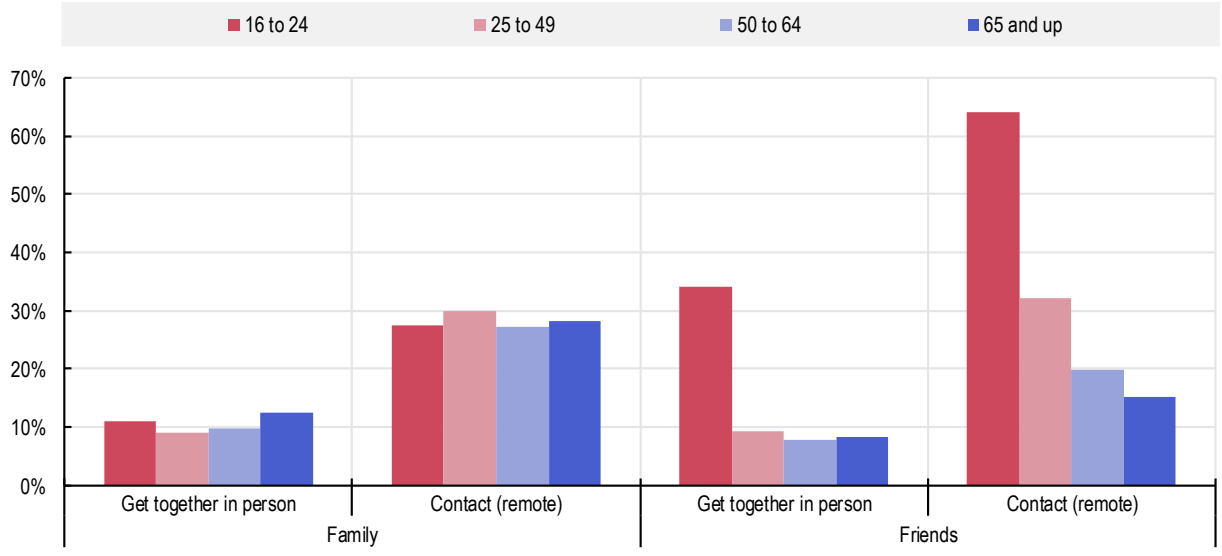
Age

Cross-country data from European OECD countries show that younger people tend to have better social connections outcomes than older age cohorts: they are more likely to interact with friends, they are more likely to report having someone to count on and they are less likely to report feeling lonely. However, data on age patterns from national surveys in several non-European OECD countries reveal that in Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States, young people are the loneliest age group (Box 3.5): this could reveal country-level differences in age-related social connections outcomes, or a reflection or worsening trends for young people that are further along in some countries than in others (see Chapter 4 on trends).

Age differences in social interactions are most apparent when looking at relationships with friends. While there is little variation in how often people of different ages interact with family members – either in person, or remotely – social interactions with friends present striking age patterns (Figure 3.18). 2022 data from 23 European OECD countries show that on average, young people aged 16 to 24 are four times more likely to get together with friends on a daily basis in a typical year, compared to older people aged 65 and up (34% vs. 8%); furthermore, young people are also four times more likely to contact their friends daily (64%, compared to 15% for those 65+). Evidence from many national data sources corroborates these findings: younger people spend the most amount of time with their friends, and older people spend the least (Goebel et al., 2019[40]; Insee, 2022[59]; ONS, 2024[60]; CBS, 2023[61]).

Figure 3.18. Compared to other age groups, young people have significantly higher rates of contacting friends and getting together with them in person

Share of respondents who _____ with friends or family on a daily basis in an average year, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

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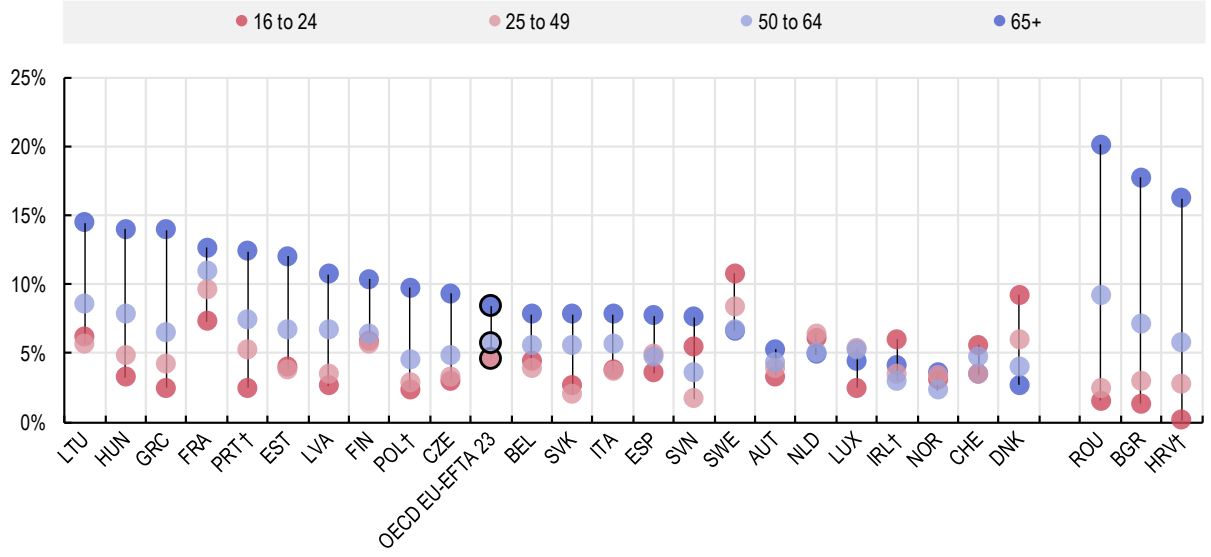
Longitudinal research has corroborated the finding that time spent with friends declines with age: during middle-age and adulthood, life events such as marriage, divorce and/or childbirth diminish peoples' time with friends, and in old age the decline is linked to deteriorating physical health and the death of others in one's social circle, including the death of a spouse (Augustsson et al., 2025[62]; Wrzus et al., 2013[63]; Pahl and Pevalin, 2005[64]; Sander, Schupp and Richter, 2017[65]). Time spent with family, however, is more or less stable as people age (Sander, Schupp and Richter, 2017[65]).

The same evidence from 23 European OECD countries shows that in 2022, older people were the loneliest age group, and that the prevalence of feeling lonely increases with age: 8.4% of those 65 years and up reported having felt lonely most or all of the time over the past week, on average (Figure 3.19). This average pattern is reversed in Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and Ireland, where the youngest age cohort reports the highest levels of feeling lonely. Indeed, this reflects age patterns seen in other international surveys, as well as national data sources (Box 3.5). On the one hand, this could be a reflection of different age patterns in different countries, cultural groups or regions – that is, in certain places younger people may be more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, this could reflect underlying structural changes that are making young people everywhere more at-risk to feeling lonely, with these trends already visible in some countries and not yet in others, though they may arise in future. On-going monitoring of trends, and longer time series, are needed to better understand these dynamics (see Chapter 4 for a longer discussion on trends in youth outcomes).

Figure 3.19. In almost all European OECD countries, older people are the loneliest age group

Share of respondents who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Note: OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for feeling lonely.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024).

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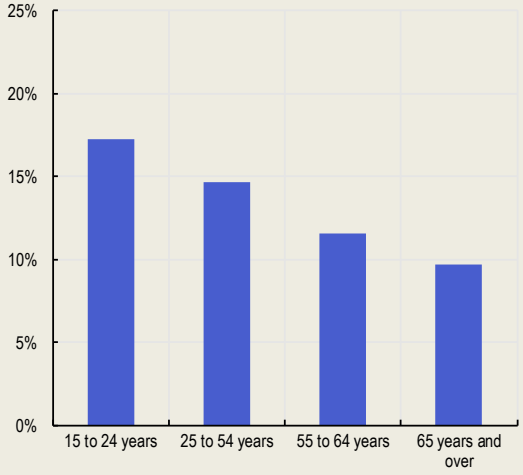
Box 3.5. National spotlight: Lonely young people in Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States

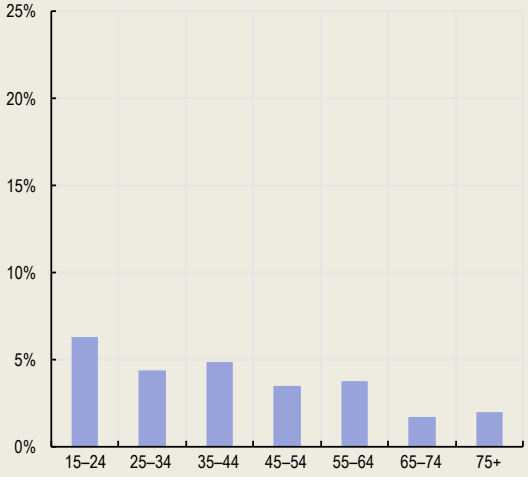
Data from national surveys in Canada, the United States, England and New Zealand all show visible age gradients in loneliness outcomes (Figure 3.20).

Figure 3.20. In Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States, young people are much lonelier than older people

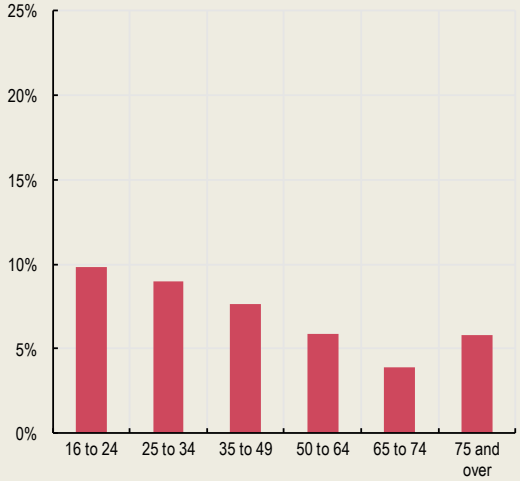
Panel A. Share of respondents who are always/often lonely, by age, Canada, 2024



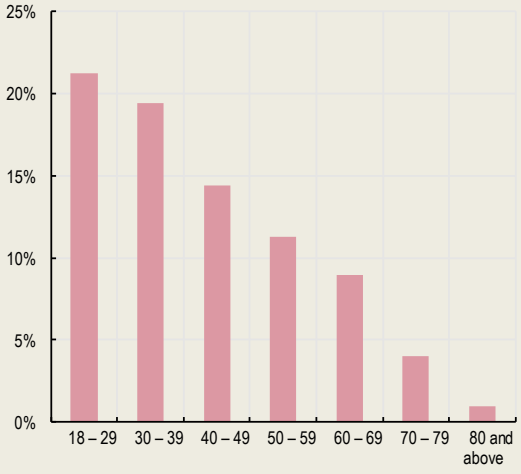
Panel B. Share of respondents who were lonely most/all of the time over the past 4 weeks, by age, New Zealand, 2023



Panel C. Share of respondents who are often/always lonely, by age, England, 2023-24



Panel D. Share of respondents who are often/always lonely, by age, United States, 2024



Note: Panel A: Data reflect the average of quarterly estimates from 2024; Panel D: Data reflect the average of nine rounds of data collection from January to August 2024.

Source: Panel A: Statistics Canada (2025[41]) *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; Panel B: Stats NZ (2024[42]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/; Panel C: DCMS (2024[44]) *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2; Panel D: U.S. Census Bureau (2024[45]), *Household Pulse Survey*, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html.

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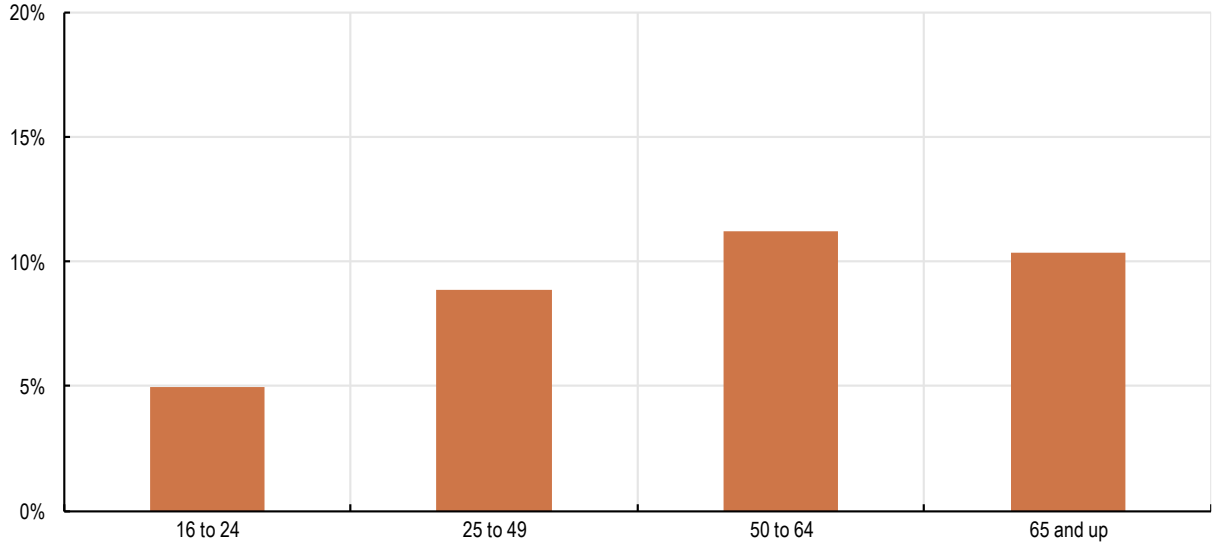
In all four countries, in recent years younger age groups have reported the highest levels of loneliness, with a general pattern of declining loneliness for each subsequent age cohort. (There are slight deviations from this pattern in England, where the 75+ age group is lonelier than the 65-74 group, and the difference between the 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 age groups are not statistically different from one another; in New Zealand age cohorts do not follow a linear descending pattern. In both instances, however, younger age groups are lonelier than older ones).

Differences in outcomes between the old and young are particularly striking in Canada and the United States. In 2024, young people aged 15 to 24 in Canada were almost twice likely as older people 65+ to feel lonely always or often (Figure 3.20, Panel A). Similarly, and in the same year, in the United States 18-to-29-year-olds were at least twice as likely to feel lonely compared to older groups, starting at age 50, with the age gap particularly striking vis-a-vis those aged 80+ (Figure 3.20, Panel D).

Pooled annual data from 2017-2023 for all OECD countries show that, on average, younger people are the age group most likely to report having social support, with only 5% saying they have no one to count on in times of need (Figure 3.21). Conversely, 11% of those aged 50 to 64, and 10% of older people aged 65 and up say they have no social support available. Once again, however, more recent data from the United States suggests that young people are the least likely to report having the social support they need, with the oldest age cohorts reporting the best outcomes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024[45]).

Figure 3.21. Young people are least likely to say they have no one to count on in times of need

Share of respondents who have no one to count on in times of need, by age, OECD, 2017-2023



Note: Data refer to a 2017-2023 pooled average, to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes.
Source: Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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Gender

Gender patterns in social connections outcomes are less clear than comparisons between other population groups, and vary by the outcome considered. Across OECD countries, women tend to be in contact with others at higher rates than men, and get together in person with *family members* more frequently than men do. However, women report seeing *friends* less frequently than men – and some data suggest women say they have fewer close friends. Compared to men, women also report very slightly higher rates of feeling lonely, and are more likely to be dissatisfied with their romantic relationships. Still, men are less likely to report having various types of social support. All of these differences are statistically significant, however the magnitudes are small in size compared to the other socio-economic and demographic differences in social connections outcomes discussed in the previous sections.

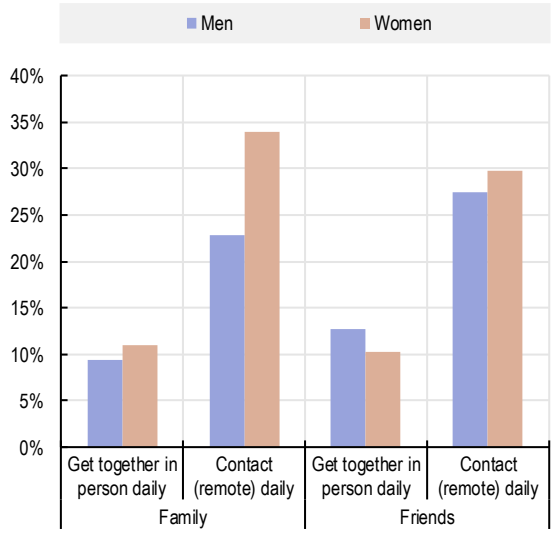
Women have closer relationships with family members, and interact with family more frequently than men do – both in person, and remotely. Data from European OECD countries reveal that in 2022, 11% of women got together with family members who do not live in the same household on at least a daily basis in an average year, compared to 9% of men; furthermore, 34% of women contacted family members daily, compared to 23% of men (Figure 3.22, Panel A). These findings align with other evidence from European OECD countries showing that women report having 4.9 close family members, compared to 4.6 for men (Figure 3.22, Panel B). The size of these gender differences is not large, but illustrates a consistent pattern of slightly stronger family bonds for women (and perhaps also family responsibilities – which may feed into the higher rates of feeling lonely among women discussed later on).

In recent years, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom, much has been made of a "male friendship crisis", or "male friendship recession" (Hirsch, 2022[66]; Pearson, 2022[67]; Wollaston, 2023[68]). Academic research in these countries has pointed to men having fewer close friends than in the past, with implications for their physical, mental and social well-being. Indeed, across all OECD countries, where trend data are available, social connections outcomes for men have been declining – especially in more recent years (from 2018/2019 to 2022) – and have deteriorated more than those for women (refer to OECD (2024[3]) as well as Chapter 4). Nevertheless, data from European OECD countries do not indicate that levels of social contact, or numbers of close friends, are lower for men than for women, a priori: for example, in 2022, 13% of men reported getting together with friends on a daily basis in an average year, similar or slightly higher than the share of women (10%) (Figure 3.22, Panel A).[12] And, on average in 22 European OECD countries, men report having 4.7 close friends compared to 3.7 close friends for women (Figure 3.22, Panel B).[13]

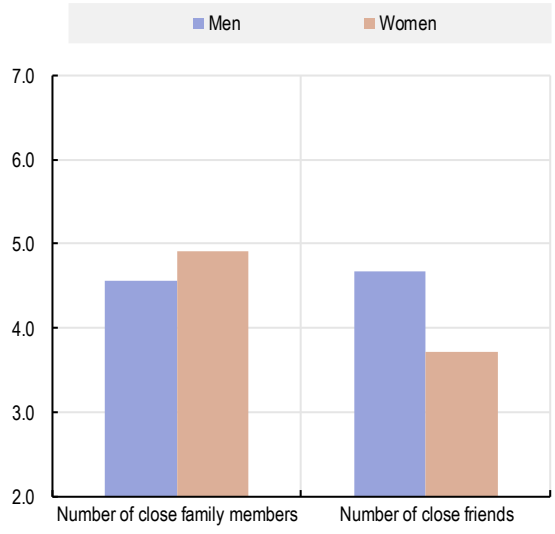
The small gender differences – in favour of men – with regard to spending time with friends may also at least in part reflect the larger responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks that fall on women, which could preclude their having time available to spend with friends, rather than family (OECD, 2021[69]; Craig and Mullan, 2013[70]; OECD, 2020[71]). Furthermore, these data were collected in 2022, when the effects of the pandemic were still being felt, especially for parents of school-aged children who were dealing with the impacts of remote schooling, the social and behavioural effects that had on young people, all while balancing their own work and family obligations – with women more likely to take on care duties than men (OECD, 2021[2]; 2021[72]).

Figure 3.22. Data from European OECD countries show that women have closer relationships with family, but men are more likely to see friends in person and report a higher number of close friends

Panel A. Frequency of getting together with friends or family in person, or contacting family, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2022



Panel B. Number of close family members and friends, OECD EU 22, 2022



Note: All differences in outcomes between men and women are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 23 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Panel B: OECD EU 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Source: Panel A: Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024). Panel B: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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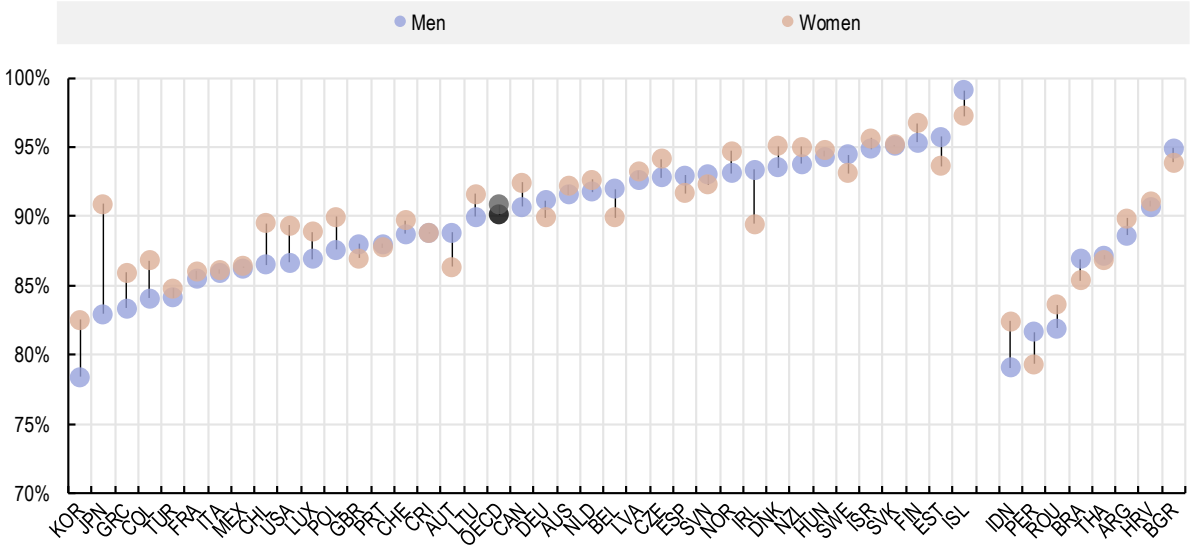
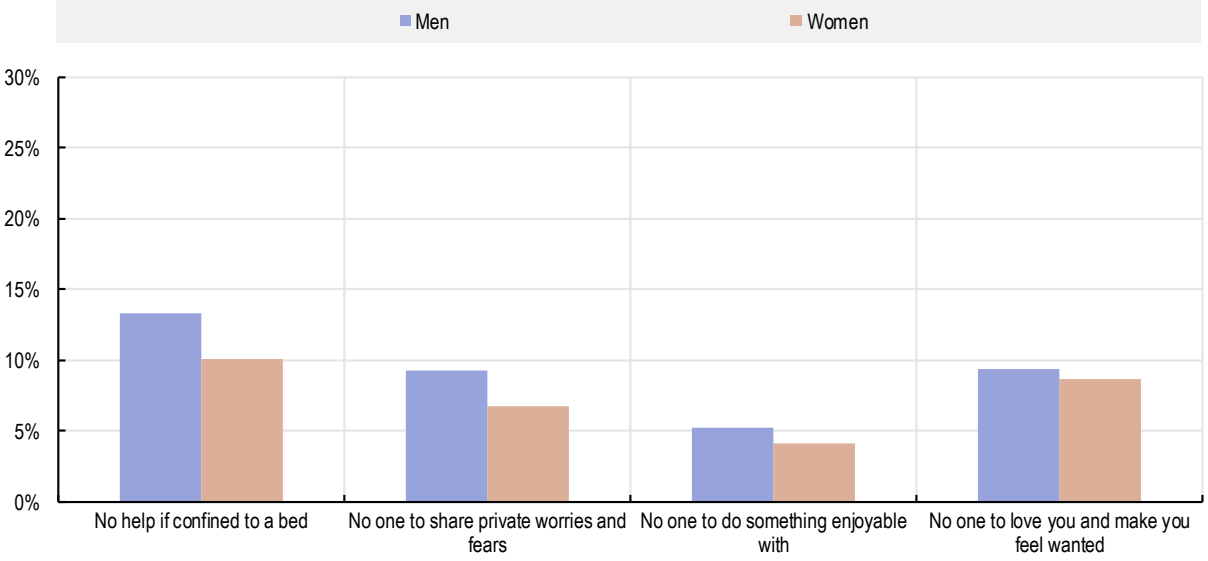
In addition, despite reporting more interaction with friends, and a higher number of close friends, men report lower levels of social support, suggesting their needs may not be (fully) met in these friendships. Across OECD countries in 2022-2023, women were on average slightly (but significantly) more likely to report having social support than men: 91% of women say they have friends or family to count on in times of need, compared to 90% of men (Figure 3.23, Panel A). Data from 22 European OECD countries further underscore the gender difference in social support (Figure 3.23, Panel B). On average, men are more likely than women to report having no one to provide three of four different types of social support: having no one to help if you were sick and confined to bed (13% of men report having no one, compared to 10% of women), no one with whom to share private worries and fears (9% men vs. 7% women) and no one to do something enjoyable with (5% men vs 4% women). This mismatch between feelings of loneliness and social support – with more women reporting feeling lonely, but more men lacking social and emotional support – has been echoed in research findings elsewhere (Goddard and Parker, 2025[73]).

Figure 3.23. Women are more likely to say they have friends or family to count on in times of need; in European OECD countries, men are more likely to report having no one to provide all types of social support

Panel A. Share of respondents who report they have friends or family to count on, by gender, OECD, 2022-23



Panel B. Social connections outcomes, by gender, OECD 22, 2022



Note: Panel A: Data refer to a 2022-2023 pooled average, to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes. Panel B: OECD EU 22 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Source: Panel A: Gallup (n.d.[20]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx. Panel B: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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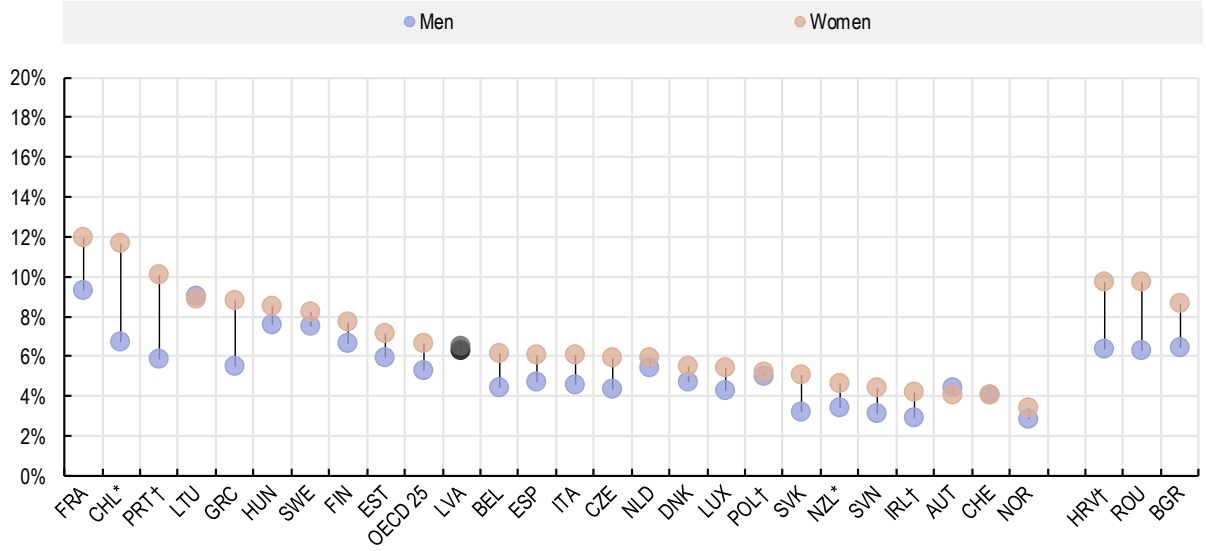
In survey data used in this report, women report very slightly higher levels of feeling lonely than men.[14] For example, in 25 OECD countries with comparable data from 2022-2023, on average 7% of women report having felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks, compared to 5% of men (Figure 3.24).

Figure 3.24. Women are slightly more likely to report feeling lonely in almost all OECD countries with comparable data

Share of respondents who felt lonely "all" or "most of the time" over the past 4 weeks, OECD 25, 2022/2023



Note: * indicates that data come from national sources, rather than the EU-SILC survey. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for feeling lonely. All sources use the same indicator to measure feeling lonely. Data are from 2022, aside from Chile and New Zealand which are from 2023.

Source: Unless otherwise specified with an asterisk, data come from Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024); CHL: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2021[74]), *Encuesta de Bienestar Social*, Government of Chile, https://observatorio.ministeriodesarrollosocial.gob.cl/encuesta-bienestar-social-2023; NZL: Stats NZ (2024[42]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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National data from the United States, England, Canada and Colombia also show small but consistently higher rates of loneliness for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024[45]; ONS, 2024[60]; Statistics Canada, 2025[41]; DANE, n.d.[75]). This may reflect genuine gender differences in outcomes for men vs. women, but could also be capturing response behaviours that vary by gender: for example, some research has shown that men have stronger perceptions of the stigma of loneliness than women, and are more reluctant to self-report loneliness, especially via direct questions (Langenkamp and Schobin, 2024[76]). Regardless, not all countries follow this pattern: data from Japan show that men report slightly higher levels of loneliness than women, and the problem of lonely and socially isolated young men is a significant policy issue (Box 3.6).

Box 3.6. National spotlight: Loneliness and social isolation for Japanese men

Social isolation among men in Japan has been a policy concern for years. *Hikikomori* are individuals who withdraw from society, isolating themselves in their rooms for months or years at a time, without attending school or work. *Hikikomori* spend their days watching television, gaming or online, spending little time speaking to others and thus lose contact with friends as time passes. Many are affected by mental ill-health, including anxiety and mental exhaustion.

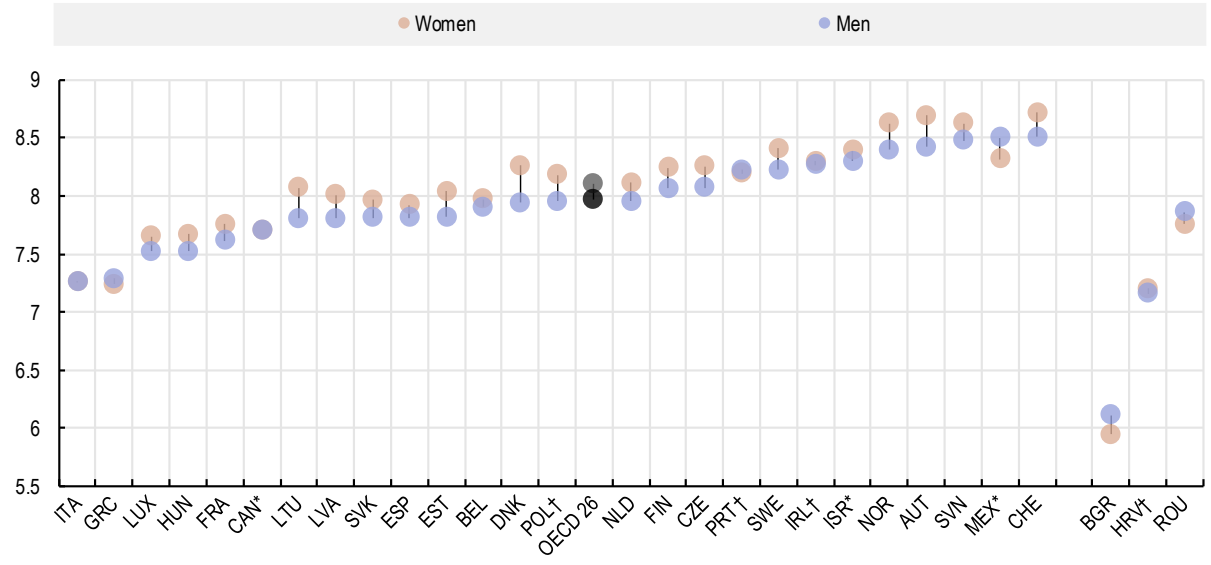
Data from 2022 estimate that 2% of the Japanese population are affected, with young and retired men over-represented. In response, in 2024 the Japanese government introduced a law recognising loneliness and isolation as national priorities. To reintegrate *hikikomori* into society, more specifically, the government has rolled out public awareness campaigns, created *hikikomori* support centres and established an online platform, the *hikikomori* voice station.

Source: OECD (2025[77]), "Supporting Japanese people affected by severe social isolation: A case study", OECD Publishing: Paris. https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2025/03/supporting-opportunities-insights-from-communities/supporting-japanese-people-affected-by-severe-social-isolation-a-case-study.html.

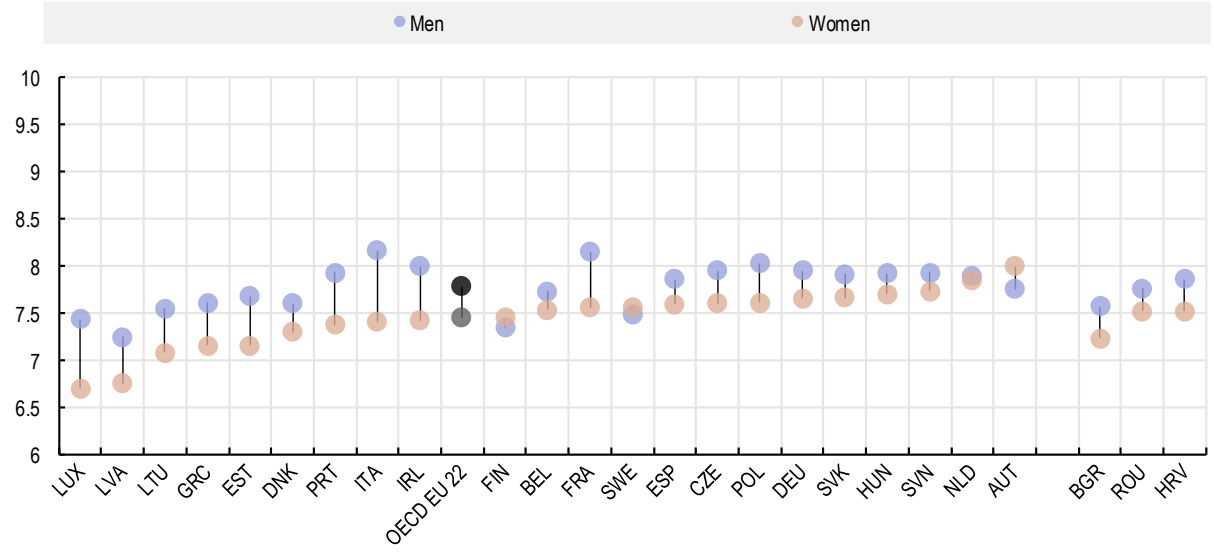
When it comes to evaluations of the quality of their relationships, women are slightly more likely than men to report feeling satisfied: on average, across 26 OECD countries with comparable data, women rate satisfaction with their relationships with family, friends, neighbours and other people they know an 8.1 on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), compared to 8.0 for men (Figure 3.25, Panel A). The difference, while small in size, is statistically significant. However, when focusing only on romantic partners, specifically, women report worse outcomes than men. Data from 22 European OECD countries show that women report their satisfaction with their partners a 7.5 on a 1-10 scale, compared to 7.8 for men (Figure 3.25, Panel B).

Figure 3.25. Women are more likely to feel satisfied with their personal relationships, but more likely to feel dissatisfied with romantic relationships, specifically

Panel A. Satisfaction with personal relationships, by gender, on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD 26, 2021-22



Panel B. Satisfaction with relationship with partner, by gender, on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD EU 22, 2022



Note: Panel A: * indicates that data come from national sources, rather than the EU-SILC survey. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for relationship satisfaction. All sources use the same indicator to measure satisfaction with personal relationships. Data refer to 2022, aside from Canada, Israel and Mexico, which are from 2021.

Source: Panel A: Unless otherwise specified with an asterisk, data come from Eurostat (n.d.[12]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions (accessed in October 2024). Data for Canada, Israel and Mexico come from the OECD (n.d.[78]), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu. Panel B: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024[19]), *EU Loneliness Survey*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b.

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Care work responsibility

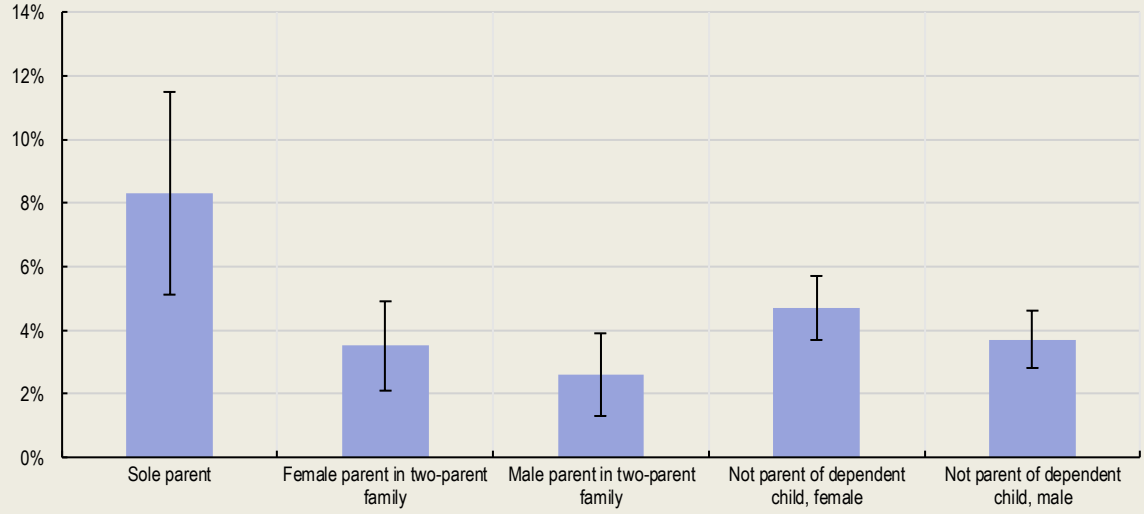
It is well documented that women generally take on a larger share of care responsibilities – spending more time on childcare and taking care of other dependents (including elderly, or ill, relatives), in addition to spending more time on household chores (OECD, 2021[69]; Craig and Mullan, 2013[70]; OECD, 2020[71]). Research has also consistently found that care work is associated with increased levels of loneliness and social isolation (Brimblecombe and Cartagena Farias, 2022[79]; Levine, 1999[80]; Sun, Finkelstein and Ouchida, 2019[81]; Nowland et al., 2021[82]; U.S. Surgeon General, 2025[83]). Data from New Zealand shed light on how the responsibility of childcare, disaggregating by types of parenting arrangements, can impact feelings of loneliness (Box 3.7).

Box 3.7. National spotlight: New Zealand data on the role of parenting in childcare and loneliness outcomes

Evidence from New Zealand highlights the complex dynamics of parenting and loneliness (Figure 3.26). On average, male and female parents are slightly less lonely than their non-parent counterparts: 3.5% of female parents are lonely compared to 4.7% of non-parent females, and 2.6% of male parents are lonely vs. 3.7% of male non-parents. However, parenting in a couple is an important mediating factor. Single parents are lonelier than all other groups, with 8.3% reporting they felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks.

Figure 3.26. Single parents are lonelier than both parents in a relationship, and non-parents

Share of respondents who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, by parent type, New Zealand, 2023



Note: Absolute standard error bars are shown: the true value for the given population will lie within +/- ASE of the estimate, based on a 95% confidence interval. This error arises due to a subset being taken from the population rather than using the whole population.
Source: Stats NZ (2024[42]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/.

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Annex 3.A. Technical annex

Annex Table 3.A.1 provides details on how each of the socio-demographic breakdowns presented in this chapter are defined by each source survey. Recall from the Reader's Guide that results are only reported if sample sizes are sufficiently large enough to do so, defined as having at least 100 observations per population group / country / year grouping.

Annex Table 3.A.1. Definitional details of population groups considered in inequality analysis

Population group	Definition used for EU-SILC Survey data	Definition used for Gallup World Poll data	Definition used for EU Loneliness Survey data	Definition used for AXA Mind Health Survey data
Education	Education categories correspond to ISCED levels 0-2 for "below upper secondary" level (i.e. less than primary, primary and lower secondary); 3-4 for "upper secondary" level (i.e. secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education); and 5-8 for "tertiary" level	"Primary", "secondary" and "tertiary" levels of education are pre-coded by Gallup. As per the Gallup codebook, primary education refers to having completed elementary education or less (up to eight years of basic education); secondary refers to having completed some secondary education and up to three years of tertiary education (9-15 years of education); and tertiary refers to having completed four years of education beyond "high school", or having received a four-year college degree Unless otherwise noted, Gallup World Poll inequalities use 3-year pooled averages to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes	"Primary" refers to less than primary, primary and lower secondary education; "secondary" refers to upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education; "tertiary" refers to tertiary education	NA
Income	Income quintiles are determined by dividing total annual household disposable income by 12, and dividing the resulting total into quintiles	Income quintiles are pre-cleaned by Gallup	NA	NA
Labour market	"Employed" refers to any form of employment (including self-employment). EU-SILC measures self-declared current 'main activity status'. Respondents can consider themselves being employed irrespective of their official labour market status, working time or kind of income from employment. They can also be looking for another job in parallel. Also, other categories can apply to them as long as they consider employment to be their main activity. Persons who would choose another main activity status can also be in	"Employed" refers to any form of employment (including self-employment and part-time employment) but does *not* include underemployment. Outcomes for those out of the workforce are not included Labour market inequalities use 7-year pooled averages to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes	NA	NA

Population group	Definition used for EU-SILC Survey data	Definition used for Gallup World Poll data	Definition used for EU Loneliness Survey data	Definition used for AXA Mind Health Survey data
	employment. For instance, many people who would regard themselves as full-time students or mainly fulfilling domestic tasks can have a job. In that case they can assign themselves to the corresponding category. Respondents helping in the family business, even if it is unpaid, can consider themselves as employed. Outcomes for retired and inactive respondents are not included in these comparisons			
Minority group	NA	NA	NA	Respondents are asked whether they consider themselves to be a part of a minority group, for any reason, including but not limited to one's ethnicity or skin colour, language, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, religion or belief, migrant status or political opinion. "Minority" refers to those who answer yes, and "non-minority" those who answer no.
Place of birth	The country of birth of an individual is defined as the country of usual residence (in its current boundaries) of the individual's mother at the time of delivery. Information on the country of birth is used to distinguish between native-born (born in the reporting country) and born abroad (born in a country other than the reporting country) residents.	"Born abroad" refers to respondents whose place of birth is different from the country where the interview is being conducted; "born domestically" refers to respondents who were born in the country of the survey. Place of birth inequalities use 7-year pooled averages to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes	NA	NA
Place of birth of parents	Outcomes are only included for respondents who were themselves born in the country of the survey (i.e., no first-generation migrants). The variables country of birth of the father/mother report on the country of birth of the person's father/mother, i.e., the country of usual residence (in its current borders, if the information is available) of the person's father/mother at the time of the delivery, or, failing this, the country (in its current borders, if the information is available) in which the birth of the person's	NA	NA	NA

Population group	Definition used for EU-SILC Survey data	Definition used for Gallup World Poll data	Definition used for EU Loneliness Survey data	Definition used for AXA Mind Health Survey data
	father/mother took place. This information determines whether the person's father/mother is native-born (born in the reporting country) or foreign-born (born in a country other than the reporting country). Outcomes are compared for respondents whose parents were both born abroad, and whose parents are both native-born; outcomes are not included for those who have a single parent born abroad.			
LGBTI	NA	NA	NA	Respondents who self-identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning) and those who do not
Living arrangement	"Live alone" refers to respondents who live in a single-person household; "live with others" refers to respondents in households with more than one person providing themselves with the essentials for living	"Live alone" refers to respondents who live in a single occupancy household; "live with others" refers to respondents in households with more than one person	"Live alone" refers to respondents who live in a single occupancy household; "live with others" refers to respondents in households with more than one person	NA
Relationship status	"In a relationship" refers to respondents who are married or in a consensual union (on either a legal, or non-legal basis); "single" refers to respondents who are separated, divorced, widowed or never married *and* are not in a consensual union	"In a relationship" refers to respondents who are married or have a domestic partner; "single" refers to those who are single / have never been married, are separated, divorced or widowed	"In a relationship" refers to respondents who are "married or cohabitating" or "in a relationship"; "single" refers to respondents who are single, separated or divorced or widowed	NA
Place or residence – urban/rural	"Urban" refers to cities, towns and suburbs, "rural" refers to rural areas	NA	"Urban" refers to a small or medium-sized town (50 000 people or less) or a large town/city (over 50 000 people); "rural" refers to a rural area or village	NA
Age	For the purposes of this publication, several age categories are created by grouping respondent self-reported age into the following groups: 16-24, 25-49, 50-64 and 65+	Age categories are created by grouping respondent self-reported age into the following groups: 16-24, 25-49, 50-64 and 65+ Age inequalities use 7-year pooled averages to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes	NA	NA
Gender	Respondent self-reported "male" vs. "female"	Respondent self-reported "male" vs. "female"	Respondents are asked "which of the following describes how you think of yourself?"	Refers to gender at birth, for which options are "male" or "female"

Notes

[1] Sample sizes in international household surveys often preclude investigating intersecting risk profiles – individuals who belong to two at-risk socio-demographic groups, such as being both unemployed and a first-generation migrant, or being elderly and living alone – especially when only a small share of the population is exposed to each risk. Nevertheless, large-scale national datasets often enable more granular assessments – see Box 3.1.

[2] Sample sizes are sufficiently large to analyse outcomes for those with below upper secondary levels of education for the EU-SILC survey (23% of respondents in 23 European OECD countries have achieved less than upper secondary education in 2022). However, outcomes from both the 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* and Gallup World Poll combine primary, lower and upper secondary educational attainment into a single group, given smaller sample sizes in these surveys.

[3] Refer to the Chapter 2 Annex for a discussion of answer groupings for the variables relating to the frequency of in-person vs. remote social interactions with friends and family in a given year. In this chapter, for each socio-demographic group, outcomes are shown for those answering both that they socialise with friends or family "daily" in a given year, as well as "never".

[4] Future analysis could disaggregate income quintiles (and/or employment status) by age group, to understand whether retirement is at least partly affecting these results. Sample sizes within individual countries do not allow for this level of granularity in this report.

[5] While the relationship between poverty, loneliness and social isolation is well documented, the (causal) mechanisms underpinning the relationship are less well understood, in part, perhaps, because financial outcomes are often used as control variables in research studies rather than the direct outcome measured (Barjaková, Garnero and d'Hombres, 2023[30]).

[6] Cross-country statistics on minority groups are not widely available, given that what is deemed a minority in one country may not be in another; in addition, some OECD countries have explicit policies against measuring certain socio-demographic characteristics such as race and ethnicity in official surveys (Balestra and Fleischer, 2018[85]). For these outcomes, findings from individual OECD countries that do capture this information are presented. The most commonly collected information in a cross-country comparable way is a proxy for migration status: whether the respondent was born in the current country of residence, or born abroad. Findings based on first- and second-generation migration status are included here for European OECD countries, with supplemental findings from two non-European countries with official data.

[7] In Norway, the annual *Quality of Life* survey allows for the disaggregation of well-being indicators by sexual orientation; findings for loneliness have not been analysed, but published analysis finds that non-heterosexuals in Norway report lower life satisfaction, have more negative emotions, and experience less meaning and engagement in comparison to heterosexuals, possibly due to socio-demographic factors including rates of cohabitation (Statistics Norway, 2023[90]).

[8] Data from other sources – also collected in 2022 but with smaller samples and using different questions to capture social interactions – show less nuanced patterns. The 2022 Gallup *State of Global Connections* survey finds that people across OECD countries who live alone are more likely than those who live with others to have not interacted with friends or family who live nearby over the past week (9% vs. 4%) (Data for Good at Meta, 2022[86]); similarly, the 2022 *EU Loneliness Survey* finds that people who live alone are

more likely to report never meeting family members in person (8% vs. 5%), or to speak with them over the phone (6% vs. 4%). However, similar to the findings in Figure 3.15, the *EU Loneliness Survey* shows that people who live alone are more likely to both *never* contact and get together with friends, as well as to report doing so *weekly* – that is, this survey also shows clustering at both extremes for different "types" of one-person households (European Commission and Joint Research Centre (JRC), 2024[19]).

[9] Survey data on household composition do not necessarily specify with *whom* the respondent lives – nuclear family, extended family, friends or roommates.

[10] These high rates of socialising with friends echo social connections outcomes for young people, described later in this chapter. This might also be partly driven by the fact that single people in the EU-SILC dataset are, on average, eight years younger than those in a relationship.

[11] Data from the Mexican statistical office's ENBIARE well-being survey supports this. In 2021, data show that among 71.5% of adults who report being in a relationship, 91.1% qualify their relationship as "good" (indicating their relationship fulfils at least one of the following quality criteria: admiration, mutual recognition and teamwork), however almost 1 in 10 (8.9%) report their relationship fulfils *none* of the criteria. There is a gender gap: women are less likely to be partnered (68.1% vs. 75.3% for men) as well as more likely to report a poor quality relationship (11.3% vs. 6.4%) (INEGI, 2021[87]).

[12] Data from New Zealand (not pictured) does not show any significant gender differences in rates of face-to-face contact with friends at least once a week.

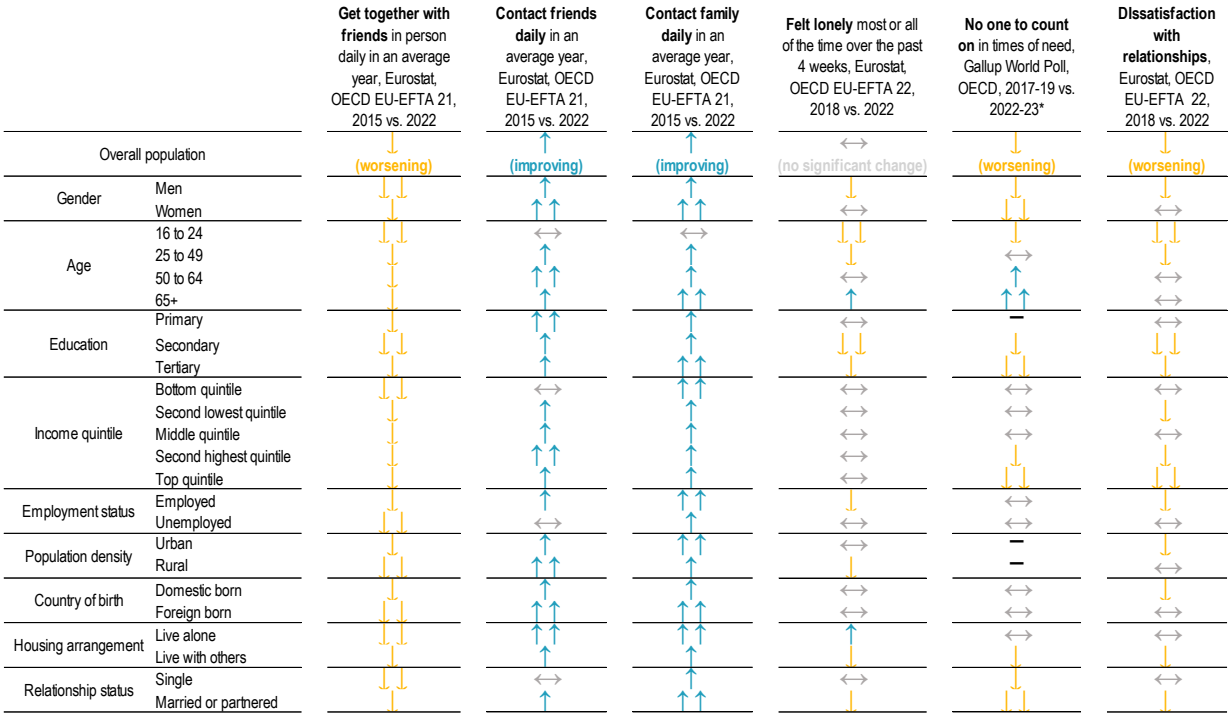
[13] The difference in the share of men vs. women who report having no close friends, or no close family members, is not statistically significant.

[14] Evidence from the academic literature finds inconclusive results in terms of loneliness and gender – and comparisons across studies suggest that the measurement tool used to measure loneliness may affect which gender is more likely to have a higher prevalence. Some studies using indirect measures of loneliness, such as the UCLA scale, have found men to be lonelier than women, while other studies that use a direct loneliness measure (such as the indicator shown in Figure 3.24) find either that women are lonelier, or find no significant differences (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]; Maes et al., 2019[89]; Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2014[88]; Yang and Victor, 2011[84]).

4. Trends in social connections: Are people becoming more or less connected?

Over the past 15 years, the share of people across OECD countries who meet others in person has steadily declined, while frequent contact with friends and family via phone or digital platforms has increased. A growing minority remains socially isolated – never meeting or contacting friends, and this growth has accelerated in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2018 and 2022, self-assessments of social connections, including social support, satisfaction with relationships and never feeling lonely have also worsened, though by a relatively small magnitude. Young people stand out as the most affected group, experiencing deteriorations across nearly all social connections outcomes, and in some cases, seeing no change even as other groups improved. Men also saw declines in most subjective social connections outcomes over the short term, albeit to a lesser extent than young people, while women experienced fewer significant changes.

Figure 4.1. Short-term trends in social connections outcomes



Note: *Years of comparison for Gallup World Poll data are 2017-2019 vs. 2022-2023 pooled averages, *except* for age, employment and country of birth outcomes, which are comparisons of 2010-2016 vs. 2017-2023 to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes. "Getting together" refers to spending time in person in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. "Contact" refers to any form of contact, including telephone, text, letter, Internet (including social media). Engaging with content on social media (i.e., "liking" a post or photo) is not considered contact; contact should reflect a conversation (written or verbal). Yellow downward arrows indicate a deteriorating outcome; blue upward arrows indicate an improving outcome; grey side arrows indicate no significant change; and a black dash indicates no data are available. Deprivations have been reverse coded such that a downward arrow always means worsening outcomes, and vice versa for blue. Double arrows indicate that a population group (e.g. bottom quintile income group) experienced a larger magnitude decline (or improvement) in comparison to other significant changes in that socio-demographic group (e.g. the bottom income quintile experienced the largest magnitude decline in outcomes compared to all other income quintile groups). Refer to the Reader's Guide for information on how significant changes are defined.

StatLink https://stat.link/qmexs0

This chapter maps trends in social connections outcomes across OECD countries and across population groups over time. Where possible, it distinguishes between medium-term changes (over the past 10-15 years) and short-term changes (over the past 5 years), the latter of which may reflect the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis on the ways people connect with one another.[1]

Between 2015 and 2022, the share of people across 21 European OECD countries who meet with friends *in person* on a daily basis declined across all population groups (Figure 4.1). At the same time, the share of people who *contact* both friends and family daily increased, likely supported by the growing use of digital technologies to maintain social ties at a distance (Figure 4.1). This is consistent with trends going back more than a decade, as outlined later in this chapter: since data collection began in 2006, in-person socialising has declined, while the frequency of contacting friends and family via remote means has increased. However, in more recent years, one population group stands out as an exception: young people aged 16 to 24. Between 2015 and 2022 they reported no significant change in daily contact with friends and family – the only age cohort to not see an increase (Figure 4.1).

Functional and qualitative aspects of social connections have worsened modestly (i.e. changes are statistically significant, but small in magnitude) in recent years across most population groups (Figure 4.1). Between 2018 and 2022, across OECD countries with available data, slightly more people had no one to count on and were dissatisfied with their relationships. Once again, young people experienced some of the largest declines; additionally, men were more negatively affected than women. Interestingly, people living with others reported a deterioration in some social connections outcomes, while those living alone saw, on average, either no change or improvements. This may reflect (temporary) circumstances of the pandemic, in which confinement, work-from-home and remote schooling policies strained family relationships.

The evolution of how and with whom people spend their time

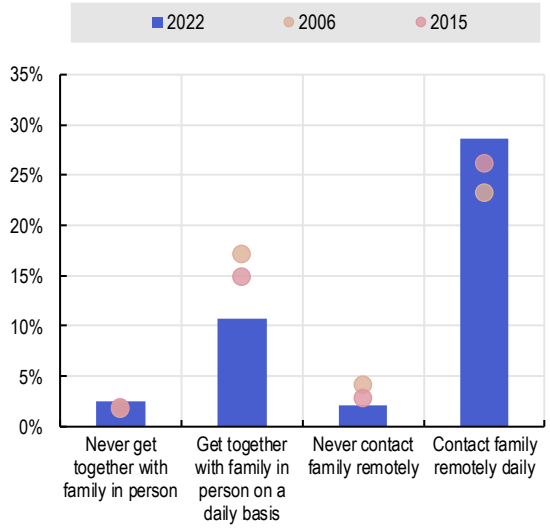
In-person interactions with friends and family have been steadily declining over the past 15 years, well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2006, 17% of respondents in 21 European OECD countries reported getting together daily with family members they did not live with, and 21% reported doing so with friends (Figure 4.2). By 2015, these shares had fallen to 15% for family and 16% for friends, and by 2022, had declined further to 11% and 12%, respectively.

This downward trend in face-to-face interactions is likely driven in part by the growing accessibility of remote communication – through phone and video calls, texting and SMS messaging, and social media. Indeed, the share of respondents who report contacting family on a daily basis[2] increased from 23% in 2006 to 26% in 2015, and reached 29% in 2022 (Figure 4.2, Panel A). A similar pattern is seen in contact with friends: on average, 24% of people contacted friends daily in 2006, 26% in 2015 and 28% in 2022 (Figure 4.2, Panel B).

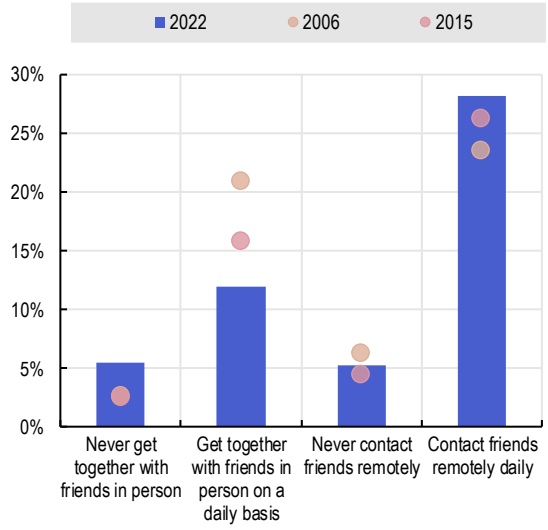
Conversely, patterns in social isolation followed a different trajectory – one that likely more directly reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across 21 European OECD countries, the share of people reporting *never* seeing friends or family remained relatively stable between 2006 and 2015, but then increased slightly – but significantly – between 2015 and 2022 (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2. Respondents in 21 European OECD countries see friends and family less often in person than they used to; many make up for this by contacting family and friends more

Panel A. Frequency of getting together with, or contacting, family, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2006, 2015 and 2022



Panel B. Frequency of getting together with, or contacting, friends, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2006, 2015 and 2022



Note: All changes between 2006 and 2022, and between 2015 and 2022, are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 21 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain. Data for respondents answering "no relatives" is not shown. Getting together with family refers to relatives who do not live in the same household as the respondent. "Getting together" refers to spending time in person in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. "Contact" refers to any form of contact, including telephone, text, letter, Internet (including social media). Engaging with content on social media (i.e., "liking" a post or photo) is not considered contact; contact should reflect a conversation (written or verbal).

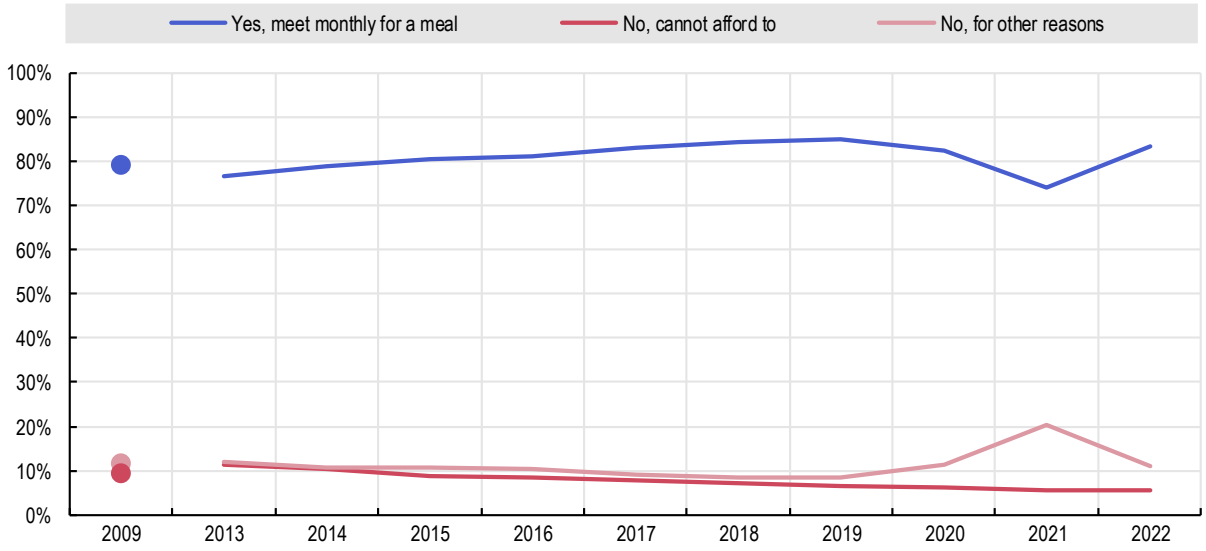
Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life, 2015 ad hoc module on "Social/cultural participation and material deprivation", and 2006 ad hoc module on "Social participation", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

StatLink https://stat.link/j7f9qu

Additional evidence from 22 European OECD countries highlights the impact of external shocks on the ability to socialise even more clearly (Figure 4.3): in 2009 (during the height of the financial crisis) 9% of respondents reported they were unable to share a meal with others at least monthly for financial reasons – a rate that has regularly declined in the years since, with only 5% of respondents in 2022 saying so. In 2021 there was a large spike of respondents saying they were unable to share a meal for "other reasons" (20%) – a reflection of social distancing and confinement policies during the pandemic. By 2022, rates had rebounded to pre-pandemic levels (11%). High-frequency data collection in Colombia throughout the pandemic shows similar patterns in disruptions to different types of social interactions, and subsequent recovery (Box 4.1).

Figure 4.3. The 2008-10 Financial Crisis and COVID-19 pandemic affected people's ability to get together with friends and family to enjoy a meal on a monthly basis

Share of respondents who do, or do not, meet with friends and family at least monthly to share a drink or a meal in an average year, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2009, 2013-2022



Note: OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland. Getting together for a drink or a meal can refer to a meal at home, or at a restaurant. Family refers to relatives who do not live in the same household as the respondent. Having a drink or meal for professional reasons is not counted.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.[1]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

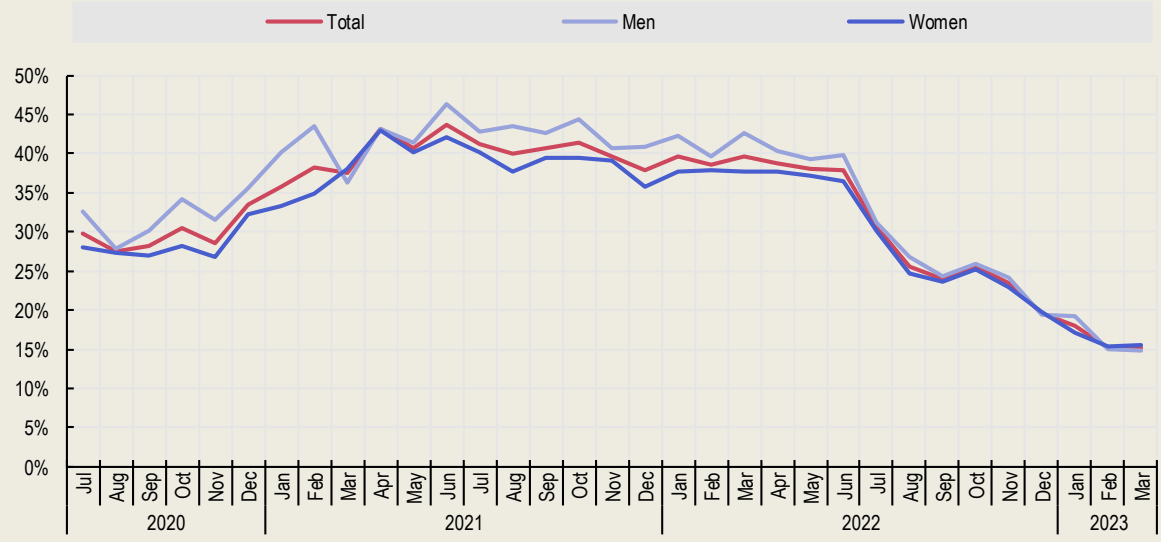
StatLink https://stat.link/u57tvc

Box 4.1. National spotlight: Trends in social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia

In 2020, the Colombian statistical agency, DANE, fielded a high-frequency household survey, the *Encuesta Pulso Social*, to understand how the population experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. The share of people "talking to friends and family over the past week in order to feel better" tracks the progression of the virus: rates of *not* having done so steadily rise over the course of 2021, plateau in 2022, before declining steeply throughout 2023 (Figure 4.4). During the height of the pandemic, men were less likely to speak with friends and family than were women, however this gap diminished over time and rates of talking to friends and family by gender were almost equal by the end of 2023.

Figure 4.4. In Colombia, the share of people not speaking with friends or family declined as the pandemic progressed; gender gaps have narrowed over time

Share of adults who did NOT speak with friends or family over the past 7 days to feel better, Colombia, July 2020-March 2023



Source: DANE (n.d.[2]), *Encuesta Pulso Social* (database), Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/encuesta-pulso-social.

StatLink https://stat.link/viygj7

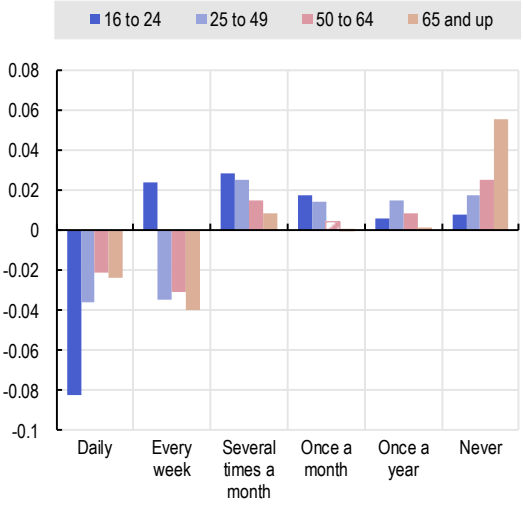
Social interaction trends vary markedly by age group, with different cohorts affected in distinct ways. For instance, in recent years older people (those aged 65 and up) across 21 European OECD countries saw the largest increase in social isolation, i.e. *never* getting together with friends, rising by 5.5 percentage points from 5.9% in 2015 to 11.4% in 2022 (Figure 4.5, Panel A). This may partly reflect lingering concerns about contracting COVID-19 from in-person encounters (a diminishing, but still present, concern by 2022), as this age group is most at-risk for severe complications from the virus (OECD, 2021[3]; OECD, 2023[4]; UN, 2020[5]).[3]

At the same time, there seems to be a troubling erosion of regular social connections among younger generations. Among 16- to 24-year-olds across 21 European OECD countries, the share getting together with friends daily declined by 8 percentage points between 2015 and 2022 – the steepest drop observed across all age groups (Figure 4.5, Panel A). These declines pre-date COVID-19 (in-person encounters

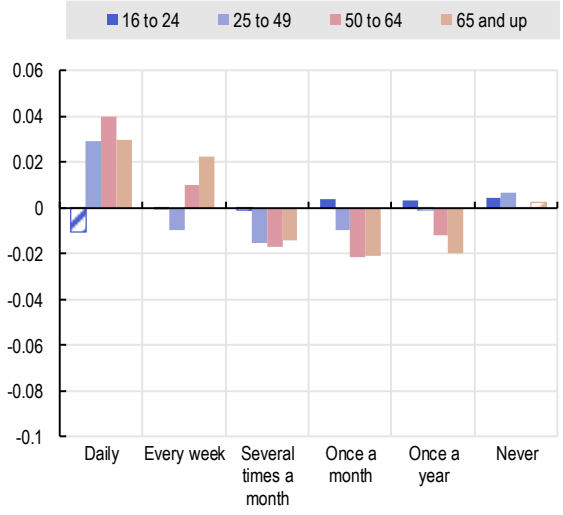
with friends among young people had already fallen from 53% in 2006 to 44% in 2015), but were accelerated by the pandemic and related school closures (OECD, 2021[3]; Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2021[6]). Importantly, this youngest age group was also the only one to *not* experience an increase in contacting friends daily, even through remote means, between 2015 and 2022 (-1 percentage point, but not a significant change – whereas all other age groups experienced a significant increase). Together with the 25-49 age group, they also drove the overall increase in the share of respondents who *never* contact friends (Figure 4.5, Panel B).

Figure 4.5. In recent years, social contact with friends has declined most sharply among young people, while older adults report increasing social isolation

Panel A. Percentage point change in frequency of getting together with friends in person, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2015 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage point change in frequency of contacting friends remotely, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2015 vs. 2022



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the change between 2015 and 2022 is not statistically significant. All other changes are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 21 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain.
Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life and 2015 ad hoc module on "Social/cultural participation and material deprivation", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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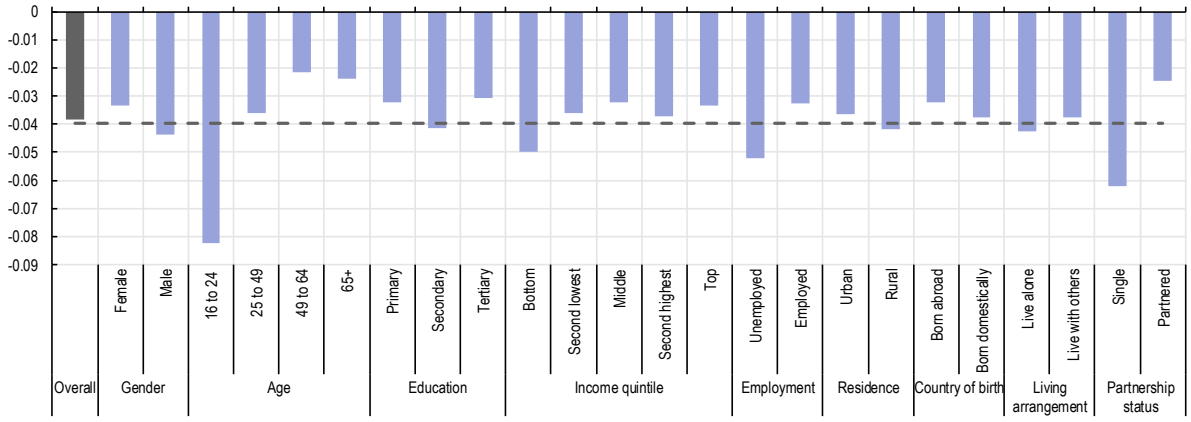
These concerns about young people's declining social contact become even more pronounced when considering a broader range of socio-demographic groups. Between 2015 and 2022, the decline in young people's rates of getting together with friends on a daily basis was not only higher compared to other age groups, but also compared to single people, the unemployed or those with low incomes: all traditionally at-risk groups for social isolation (see Chapter 3) (Figure 4.6, Panel A). Furthermore, young people – alongside the unemployed, those in the bottom income quintile and single people – were the only population groups to *not* experience an increase in contacting friends on a daily basis (Figure 4.6, Panel B).

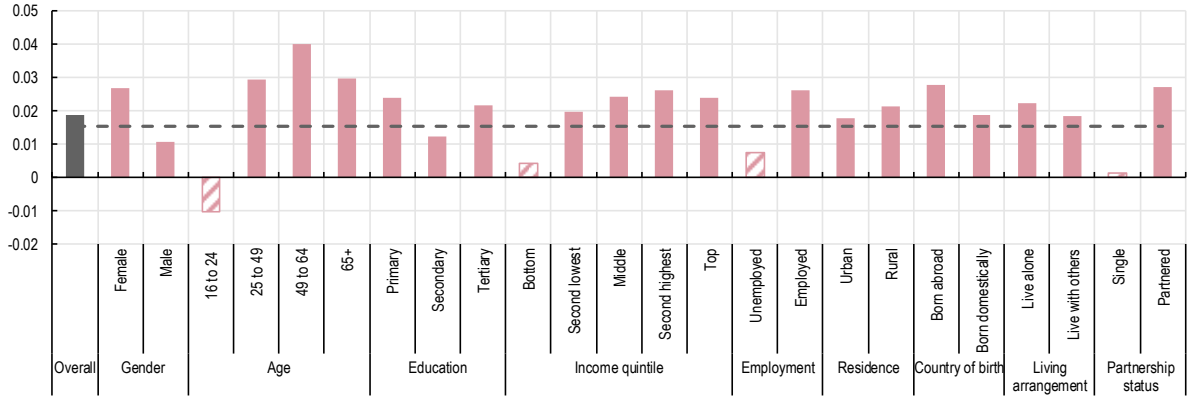
Regardless, trends across population groups may differ across specific national contexts (Box 4.2) and it remains unclear whether young people's rates of socialising with friends will return to pre-pandemic levels. Continued monitoring will be essential to assess the extent to which these declines reflect temporary pandemic-related disruptions or structural shifts in social behaviour.

Figure 4.6. Young people, low-income individuals, the unemployed and singles saw the largest declines in daily in-person contact with friends between 2015 and 2022; young people were the only age group to not significantly increase remote contact with friends

Panel A. Percentage point change in frequency of getting together with friends in person on a daily basis, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2015 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage point change in frequency of contacting friends remotely on a daily basis, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2015 vs. 2022



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the change is not statistically significant. All other changes are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 21 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain.

Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life and 2015 ad hoc module on "Social/cultural participation and material deprivation", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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Box 4.2. National spotlight: Trends in social interactions in England and the Netherlands

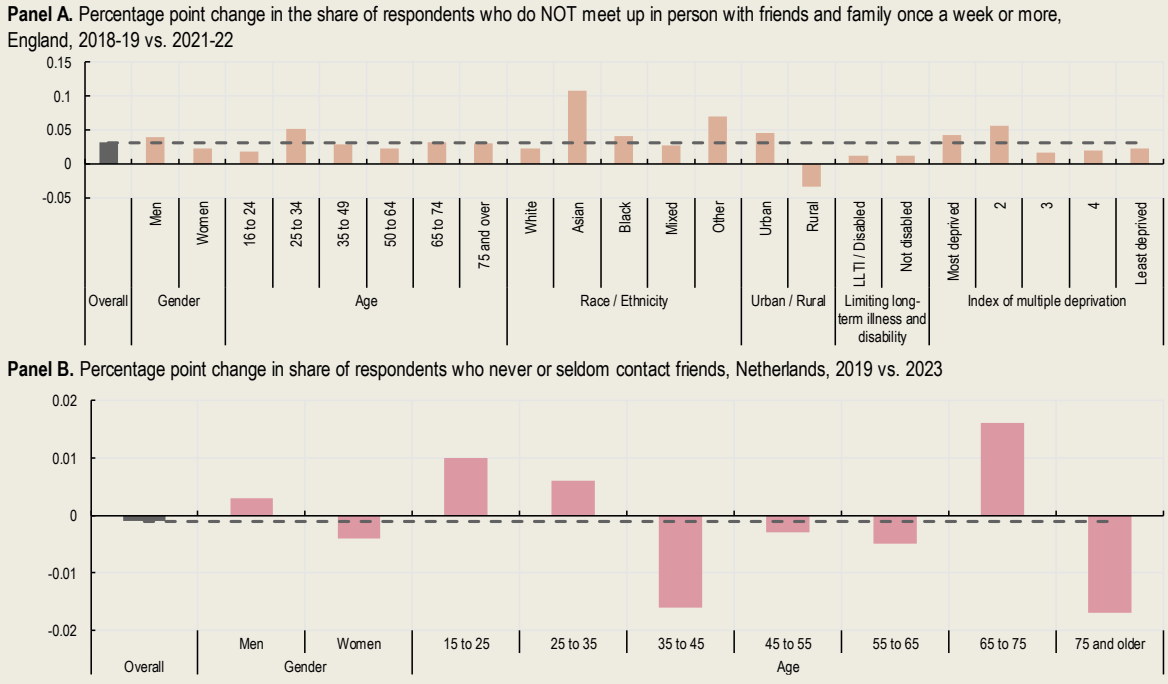
Pre- and post-pandemic data from England and the Netherlands reveal that patterns of social interaction deprivations can vary across countries and population groups. While some trends – such as gender differences – are broadly similar, others, particularly age-related patterns, diverge.

In both countries, men experienced slightly higher deteriorations than women. For example, in England, between 2018-2019 and 2021-2022, men saw a slightly larger increase than women in the share of those *not* meeting up with friends and family more than once a week (Figure 4.7, Panel A). In the

Netherlands, from 2019 to 2023, men experienced a slight rise in never or seldom contacting friends, whereas women saw a slight fall, suggesting an improvement in outcomes (Figure 4.7, Panel B).

However, age-related trends differ between the two countries. In the Netherlands, people aged 65-74 experienced the largest increase in social isolation (+1.6 percentage points in never or seldom contacting friends), while those aged 75 and over saw the greatest improvement (-1.7 percentage points). The youngest group (15-25) experienced the second largest increase in social isolation. In contrast, in England, the sharpest rise in not meeting up with friends and family at least once a week occurred among 25- to 34-year-olds, followed by older adults (65-74 and 75+), while the youngest age group (16-24) showed the smallest deterioration in outcomes.

Figure 4.7. Trends across age cohorts in social interaction deprivations vary slightly between England and the Netherlands



Note: Panel A: These indicators were fielded again in the 2023-2024 *Community Life Survey* but the results have not yet been published by DCMS.
Source: Panel A: DCMS (2023[7]), *Community Life Survey 2021/22: Identity and social networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-identity-and-social-networks.
Panel B: CBS (2025[8]), *Sociale samenhang en welzijn*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onze-diensten/methoden/onderzoeksomschrijvingen/korte-onderzoeksomschrijvingen/sociale-samenhang-en-welzijn.

StatLink https://stat.link/eu15ct

The dynamics of how people perceive their relationships

In the short term (i.e. over the past five years), how people perceive their social connectedness – such as never feeling lonely, lacking of social support and being dissatisfied with personal relationships – has declined by a small magnitude. However, all observed changes point to a deterioration. In every case, young people experienced the most pronounced short-term declines.

Medium-term trends (over the past 10-15 years) for self-perceived social connections outcomes are often harder to assess due to limited data availability. Where data do exist, outcomes were generally stable or slightly improving prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that recent declines may be linked to pandemic-related disruptions. Ongoing monitoring will be essential to determine whether these trends reverse or persist.

Loneliness

Across 22 European OECD countries where microdata enable significance testing, the average share of respondents who reported feeling lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks did not change significantly between 2018 and 2022 (from 5.7% in 2018 to 5.8% in 2022) (Figure 4.8, Panel A). However, at the country-level, significant increases in feeling lonely (i.e. deteriorations) were more common than improvements.[4] Medium-term trends for this indicator are not available, making it difficult to assess whether the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in previously stable patterns. However, other evidence points to marked upticks in feeling lonely during the pandemic (OECD, 2021[3]), and national data from Canada and England suggest elevated levels have persisted into 2023 and 2024 (Box 4.3).

In addition, the full distribution of responses – feeling lonely all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, a little of the time and none of the time over the past four weeks – reveals more pronounced changes than the headline loneliness figure (Figure 4.8, Panel B). The average share of people who *never* felt lonely fell visibly, from 59% in 2018 to 51% in 2022. Meanwhile, the share who felt lonely *a little of the time* rose by 4.4 percentage points, and those feeling lonely *some of the time* increased by 3.1 points. Although these shifts at the top of the distribution remain below the threshold of what constitutes a "lonely" individual,[5] they signal early signs of deterioration and may indicate a growing risk of worsening loneliness in the future.

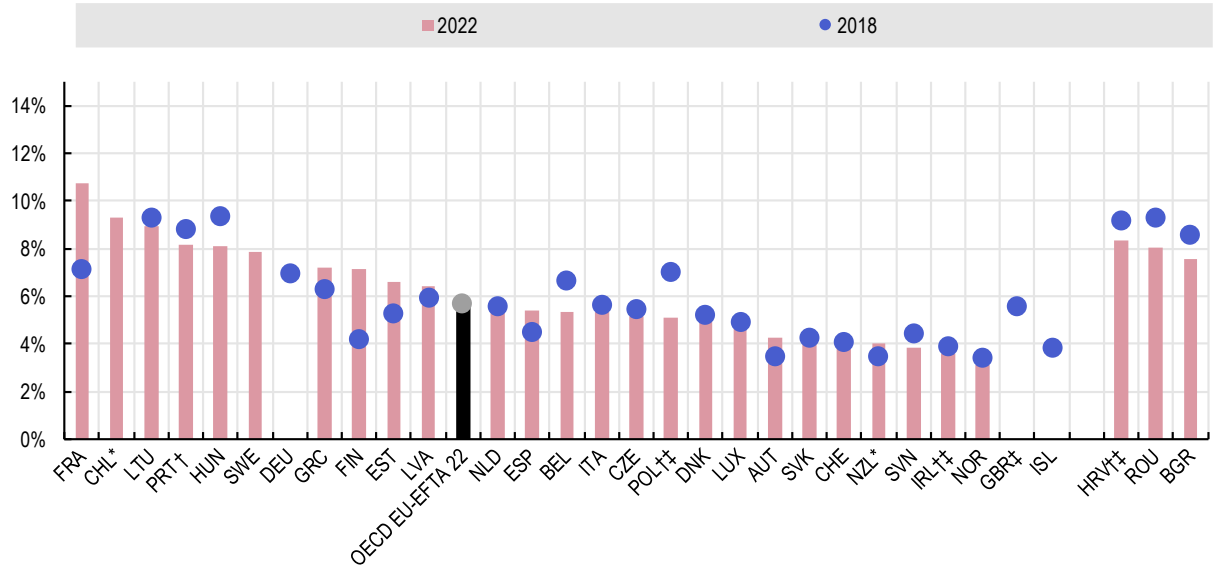
Among the population groups who experienced a rise in feeling lonely most or all of the time between 2018 and 2022, the youngest age group experienced the largest change: their reported loneliness rose by 1 percentage point, on average (Figure 4.10, Panel A). Moreover, young people experienced the largest decline in the share reporting *never* feeling lonely – down by 14 percentage points, compared to a 5-point decline among those aged 65 and over – and the largest relative increase in those feeling lonely *a little* or *some* of the time (Figure 4.10, Panel B). These findings suggest a broader shift toward more frequent, if less intense, feelings of loneliness among youth.

In contrast, the oldest age group, despite consistently reporting the highest overall levels of feeling lonely (see Chapter 3), saw a slight improvement, with rates falling by 0.5 percentage points between 2018 and 2022 (Figure 4.10, Panel A). Women experienced no significant change in feeling lonely, while the share of men who report feeling lonely most or all the time rose from 4.7% to 5.2% over the same period. Some of these patterns identified in European OECD countries – such as greater recent increases in feeling lonely among men – are echoed in national data from England, France and Japan, while age patterns are more mixed (Box 4.4).

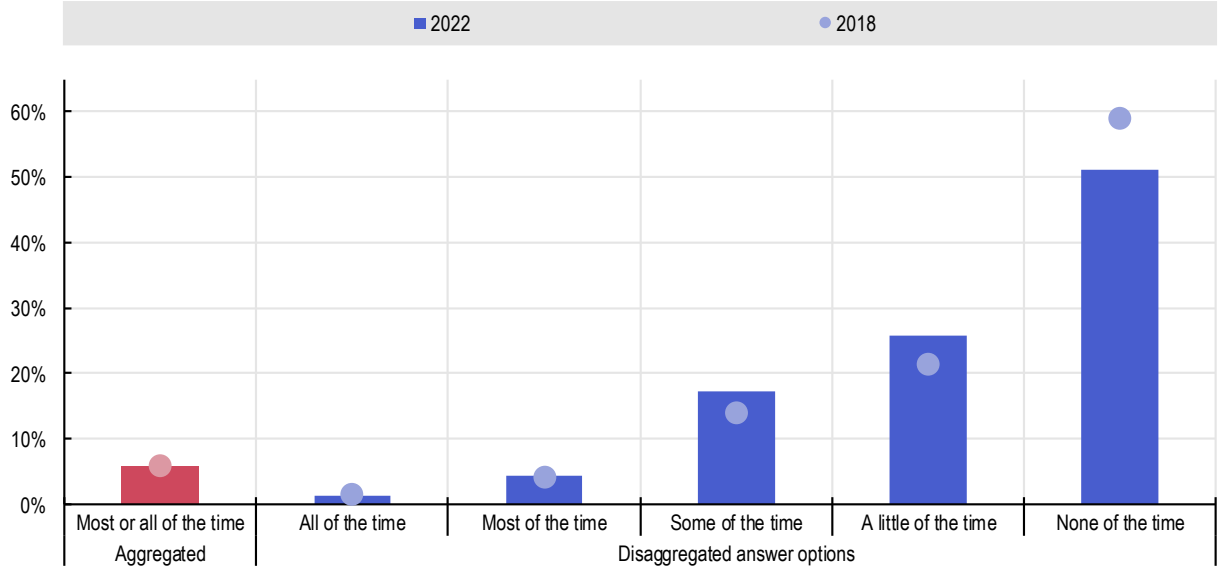
Interestingly, people who live alone experienced the greatest improvement in rates of feeling lonely, with estimates across European OECD countries falling by 1.3 percentage points between 2018 and 2022 (Figure 4.10, Panel A). However, they continue to report much higher absolute rates of feeling lonely than those living with others (14% vs. 3.6% in 2022, respectively, see Chapter 3). While this result may seem counter-intuitive, it may reflect higher levels of relationship conflict, stress and emotional strain for those who were confined with others during the COVID-19 pandemic (particularly when required to work from home, or supervise young children attending school on Zoom) (Schokkenbroek et al., 2021[9]).

Figure 4.8. Average levels of feeling lonely remained steady between 2018 and 2022, but the pronounced drop in people who *never* feel lonely may signal risks for social disconnection ahead

Panel A. Share who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Panel B. Share who felt lonely _____ over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Note: * indicates that data come from national sources, rather than EU-SILC survey. All sources use the same indicator to measure feeling lonely. † indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for feeling lonely in 2022; ‡ indicates item non-response rates exceeding 40% for feeling lonely in 2018. Panel B: Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland.

Source: Unless otherwise specified with an asterisk, data come from OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life" and 2018 ad hoc module on "Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions; CHL: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2021[10]), *Encuesta de Bienestar Social*, Government of Chile, https://observatorio.ministeriodesarrollosocial.gob.cl/encuesta-bienestar-social-2023; NZL: Stats NZ (2024[11]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/; Stats NZ (2019[12]), *Wellbeing statistics: 2018*, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2018/.

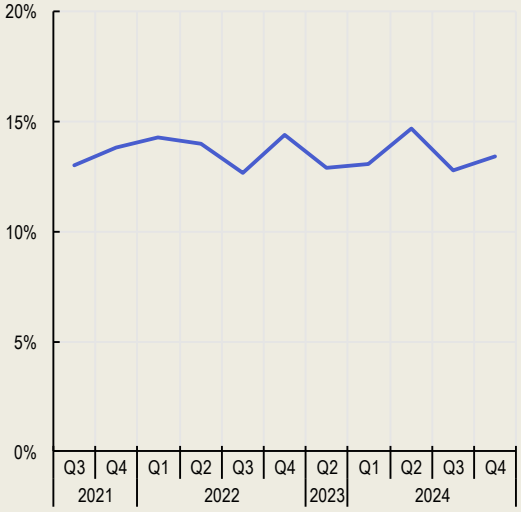
StatLink https://stat.link/zkrfax

Box 4.3. National spotlight: Pandemic-level loneliness in Canada and England sustained into 2023 and 2024

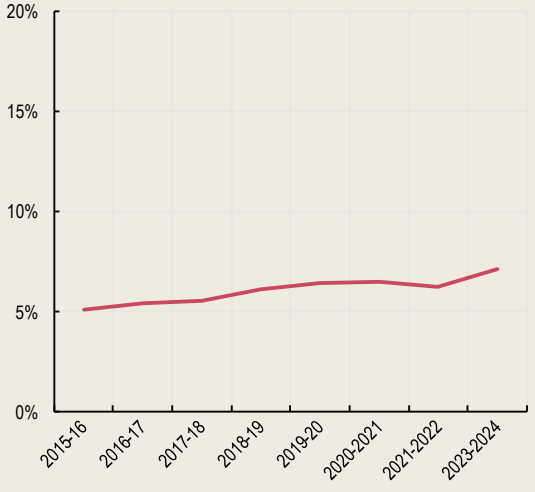
Official data from Canada and England provide regular monitoring of population-level loneliness in the years during and after the pandemic – extending up to 2024 (Figure 4.9). Data in both countries show that pandemic levels of loneliness have proved relatively enduring: despite the end of social distancing and other restrictions, average loneliness prevalence post-pandemic does not appear to be falling, but has either remained at more-or-less the same levels as during the pandemic, or even increased.

Figure 4.9. Loneliness in Canada and England has not recovered from pandemic levels

Panel A. Share of respondents who are always or often lonely in general, Canada, Q3 2021-Q4 2024



Panel B. Share of respondents who are always or often lonely in general, England, 2015-16 to 2023-24

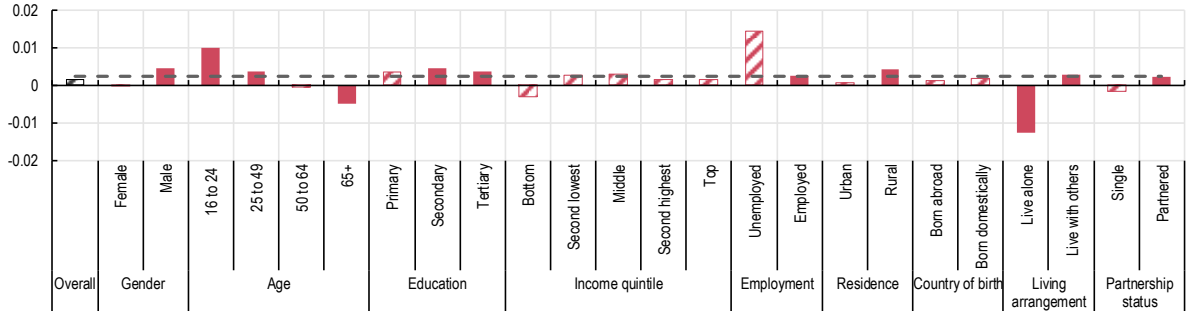


Source: Panel A: Statistics Canada (2025[13]), *Loneliness by gender and other selected sociodemographic characteristics* (database), https://open.canada.ca/data/dataset/277e3275-5b97-4b2b-bf59-59af72541bd7; Panel B: DCMS (2024[14]), *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2.

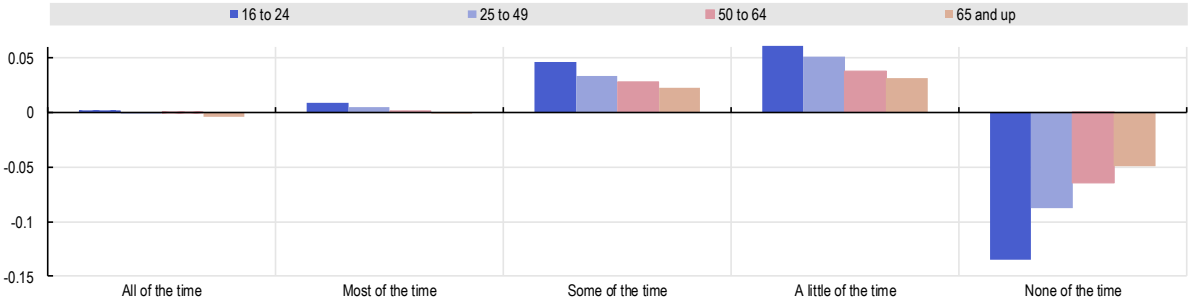
StatLink https://stat.link/v1uwo2

Figure 4.10. Young people have been most affected by increased feelings of loneliness in recent years; they have also experienced the largest declines in reporting "never" feeling lonely

Panel A. Percentage point change in feeling lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage point change in frequency of feeling lonely over the past 4 weeks, OECD EU- EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the change is not statistically significant. All other changes are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland.

Source: Panels A and B: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life"" and 2018 ad hoc module on "Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

StatLink https://stat.link/87zs50

Box 4.4. National spotlight: Loneliness trends across groups in England, France, Japan and Norway

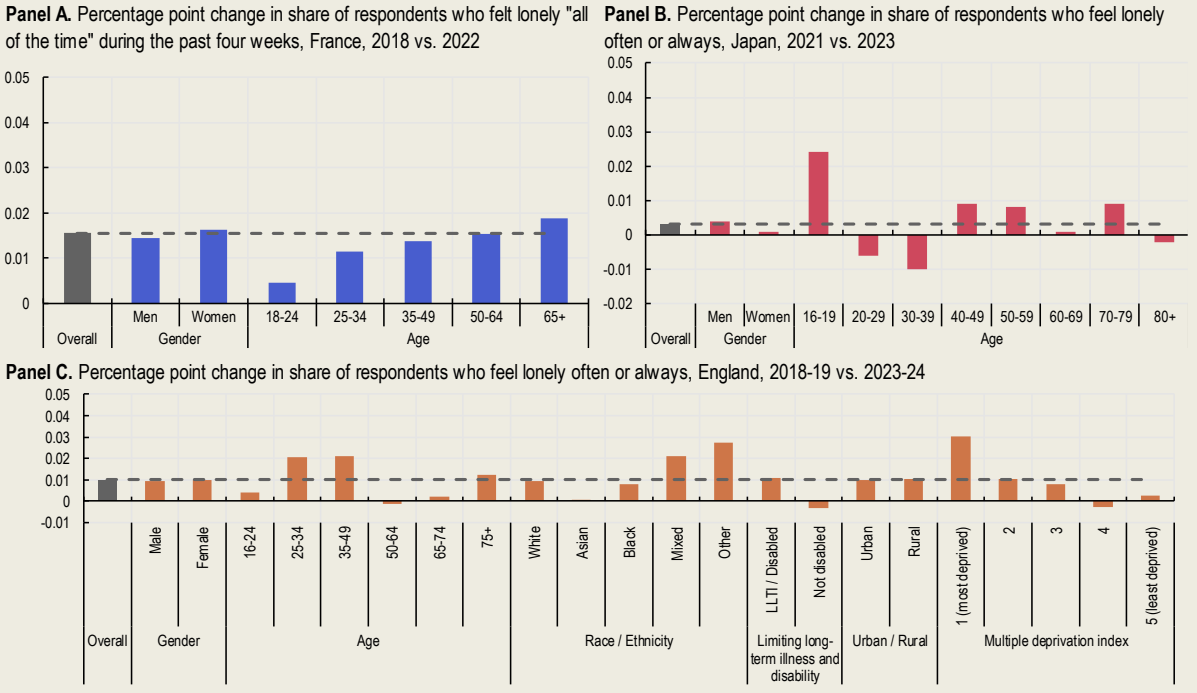
National data comparing pre- and late-pandemic trends in England, France and Japan reveal that overall loneliness has risen in all three countries – however the population groups driving this change vary according to national context, with age patterns in particular differing.

In France, the 65+ age cohort experienced the largest rise in reported loneliness between 2018 and 2022, while the 18- to 24-year-old group saw the smallest increase (Figure 4.11, Panel A). By contrast, in England, the largest increases occurred among middle-aged adults (those aged 25-34 and 30-49). However, much of the overall rise in loneliness was driven by higher rates among certain ethnic groups and those experiencing multiple socio-economic deprivations (Figure 4.11, Panel C). In Japan, the overall increase in loneliness between 2021 and 2023 was small, but young people aged 16-19 experienced a comparatively large rise (Figure 4.11, Panel B).

2025 data from Norway's *Quality of Life* survey (not pictured) suggests another trajectory for loneliness outcomes in young people. The youngest age cohort (aged 18 to 24) has the highest rates of loneliness, compared to other ages, and their rates of loneliness increased between 2020 and 2021. However,

between 2021 and 2025, young people experienced the largest *improvement* in loneliness outcomes. This suggests some degree of recovery, post-pandemic. Data in Figure 4.10 refer to changes between 2018 and 2022, therefore it remains to be seen how feelings of loneliness evolved for all population groups in other European OECD countries in the years following 2022. On-going monitoring can shed light on whether more OECD countries experienced the trajectory of Norwegian youth (tentative evidence for recovery to pre-pandemic rates of feeling lonely), or that of the United Kingdom, Canada or Japan (sustained, elevated rates of feeling lonely in the years following the pandemic, see Figure 4.9 and Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11. Age patterns can vary by country: loneliness has increased most for the youngest age cohort in Japan, the middle-age cohorts in England, and for older people in France



Source: Panel A: Insee (2022[15]), *L'enquête Statistiques sur les ressources et conditions de vie*, Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/4230346; Panel B: e-Stat (2023[16]), 人々のつながりに関する基礎調査 ,Government of Japan, https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?page=1&toukei=00000004&metadata=1&data=1; Panel C: DCMS (2024[14]), *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks*, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2.

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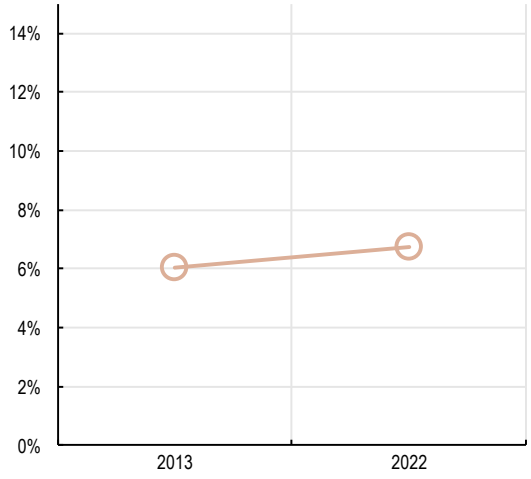
Social support

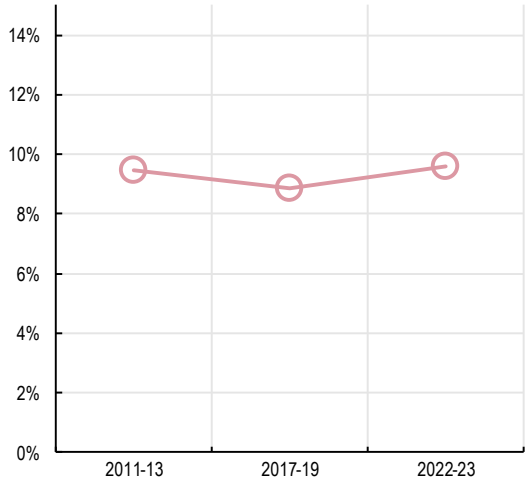
Multiple data sources indicate a slight but consistent erosion of perceived social support over the past 5-10 years. In 22 European OECD countries, 6.0% of respondents in 2013 said they would be unable to get help from friends or family if needed, a figure that rose to 6.7% by 2022 (Figure 4.12, Panel A). While small in magnitude, this trend is echoed in data from the Gallup World Poll covering all 38 OECD countries: between 2017-2019 and 2022-2023, the share of respondents reporting they did not have friends or family to count on rose from 8.9% to 9.6% (Figure 4.12, Panel B).

Figure 4.12. There are small but significant declines in social support across OECD countries over the past 5-10 years

Panel A. Share of respondents who could not get help from friends or family if they needed it, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2013 vs. 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who report they do not have friends or family to count on, OECD, 2011-13 vs. 2017-19 vs. 2022-23



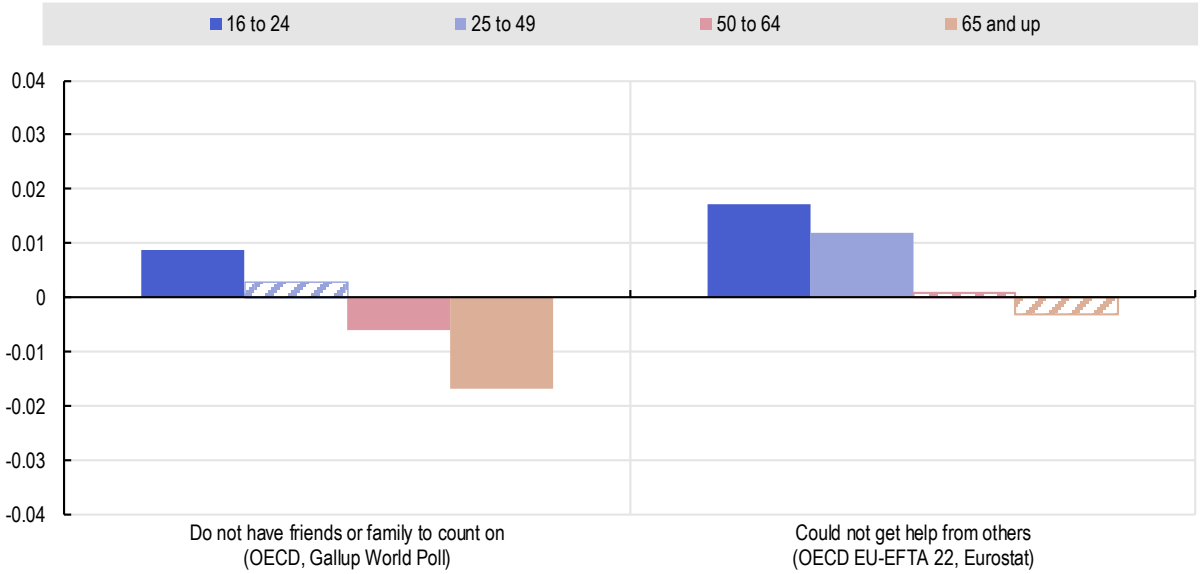
Note: Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. Panel A: OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland.
Source: Panel A: Eurostat (n.d.[11]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions; Panel B: Gallup (n.d.[17]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

StatLink https://stat.link/akiwxm

In both data sources, young people reported the most noticeable medium-term declines in social support, relative to other population groups. Across all 38 OECD countries, the share of 16- to 24-year-olds saying they have no one to count on increased by 0.9 percentage points between 2013-2017 and 2017-2023 (Figure 4.13). In contrast, the 65+ age group saw a 1.7 pp decrease (i.e. improvement in social support) over the same period. Similarly, in 22 European OECD countries, young people experienced a 1.7 percentage point increase in having no one to help them between 2013 and 2022, while the oldest age group saw no significant change (Figure 4.13). Although the time periods covered by the two surveys differ slightly due to data availability, both point to a consistent trend – declining levels of perceived support among youth, alongside stability or improvement among older adults – suggesting that broader structural shifts may be contributing to these patterns.

Figure 4.13. In the medium-term, social support has declined most for young people, while improving for older adults

Percentage point change in lack of social support, OECD (2010-2016 to 2017-2023) and OECD EU-EFTA 22 (2013 to 2022)



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the change is not statistically significant. All other changes are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland. Years of comparison for Gallup World Poll data are 2010-2016 vs. 2017-2023 pooled averages, to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes.
Source: Eurostat (n.d.[11]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life" and 2013 ad hoc module on "Wellbeing", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions; Gallup (n.d.[17]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

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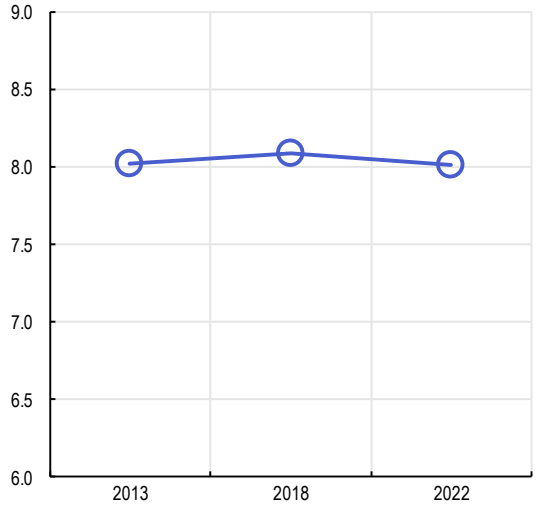
Satisfaction with relationships

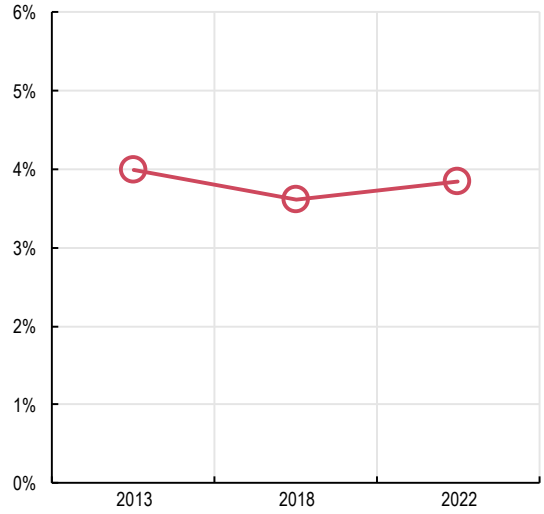
Satisfaction with personal relationships rose slightly between 2013 and 2018 – from an average score of 8.0 to 8.1 (on a scale from 0 to 10) – but declined again by 2022, returning to 2013 levels (Figure 4.14, Panel A). When focusing on *deprivations* – that is, the share of respondents who are dissatisfied with their relationships (reporting a score below 5) – similar dynamics are observed. Across 22 European OECD countries, 4% of respondents were dissatisfied with their relationships in 2013, falling to 3.6% in 2018 and rising again to 3.8% in 2022 (Figure 4.14, Panel B). These changes are very small in magnitude, but are statistically significant, and should be monitored further. National data from Mexico and Colombia indicate that relationship satisfaction has continued to decline into 2023-2024 (Box 4.5).

Figure 4.14. Slight movements in satisfaction with relationships warrant further monitoring

Panel A. Satisfaction with personal relationships, on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2013 vs. 2018 vs. 2022



Panel B. Dissatisfaction with personal relationships, defined as reporting a score below 5 on a 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) scale, OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2013 vs. 2018 vs. 2022



Note: Dissatisfaction with personal relationships is defined as reporting a score ≤ 4 on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Standard errors for point estimates are included in the StatLink file. OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland.

Source: Panels A and B: Eurostat (n.d.[1]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life"; 2018 ad hoc module on "Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties" and 2013 ad hoc module on "Wellbeing", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

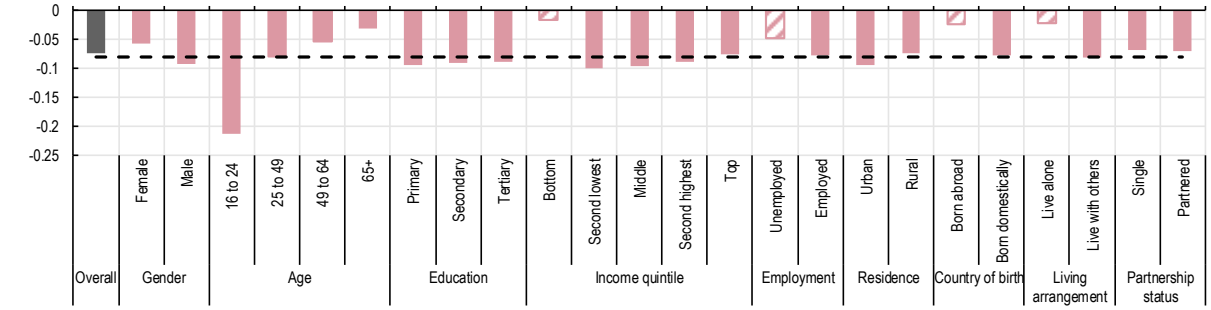
StatLink https://stat.link/a9vdor

Once again, young people were the group to experience the largest deteriorations in satisfaction with personal relationships. Between 2018 and 2022, they saw a 0.21 point drop in average relationship satisfaction (from 8.4 to 8.1), and a 1 percentage point increase in dissatisfaction (from 2.4% to 3.4% (Figure 4.15). National data from Germany show a similar pattern (Box 4.5).

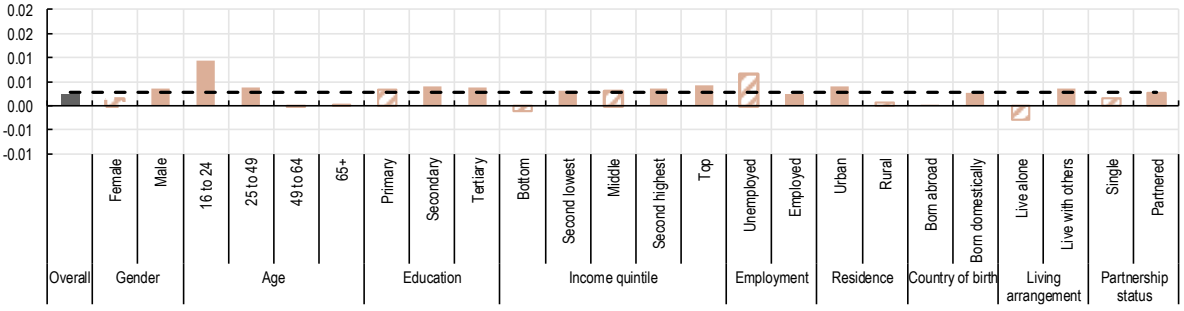
Additional evidence points to the impact of living arrangements during the pandemic. Those who live with others experienced a significant decline in relationship satisfaction – from 8.2 in 2018 to 8.1 in 2022 – alongside a small but significant increase in being dissatisfied with their relationships, from 2.9% to 3.3% (Figure 4.15, Panels A and B). In contrast, those living alone reported no significant change over this time. Men also experienced a small but statistically significant increase in relationship dissatisfaction, rising from 3.8% to 4.1%, while women's outcomes remained stable (Figure 4.15, Panel B).

Figure 4.15. Young people experienced the largest declines in average satisfaction with personal relationships, and the largest increases in dissatisfaction

Panel A. Point change in feeling satisfied with personal relationships, on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage point change in feeling dissatisfed with personal relationships, defined as the share who report a score below 5 on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), OECD EU-EFTA 22, 2018 vs. 2022



Note: Bars with striped pattern fill indicate that the change is not statistically significant. All other changes are significant. Dissatisfaction with personal relationships is defined as reporting a score ≤ 4 on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). OECD EU-EFTA 22 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland.

Source: Panels A and B: Eurostat (n.d.[1]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life" and 2018 ad hoc module on "Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties" https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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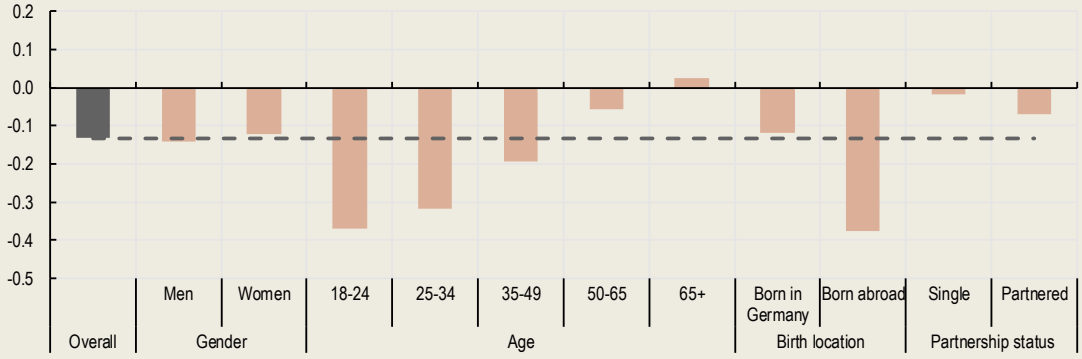
Box 4.5. National spotlight: Trends in satisfaction with personal relationships in Germany, Mexico and Colombia

Satisfaction with personal relationships and family has declined in Germany, Mexico and Colombia in recent years. In Germany, average satisfaction with family life fell slightly from 7.86 in 2019 to 7.73 in 2022. Those who were born abroad saw large and significant declines in satisfaction, followed by the youngest age group (those aged 18 to 24) (Figure 4.16, Panel A). Those in a relationship saw larger deteriorations than did single people during the same period.

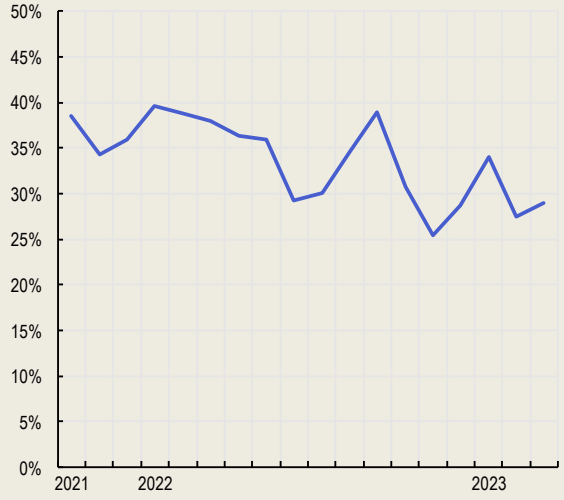
High frequency data from Mexico and Colombia track satisfaction with personal relationships into more recent years. In Colombia, the share of respondents who are satisfied has been volatile over time but has generally been on a downward trend between 2021 and 2023 (Figure 4.16, Panel B). In Mexico, data from 2019 to 2023 show that the share of respondents who are dissatisfied with personal relationships first rose during the pandemic and has continued to rise since then, reaching 6.5% in 2024 (Figure 4.16, Panel C).

Figure 4.16. Satisfaction with personal relationships has fallen in recent years in Colombia and Mexico; in Germany, younger people have seen the sharpest declines in satisfaction with family life

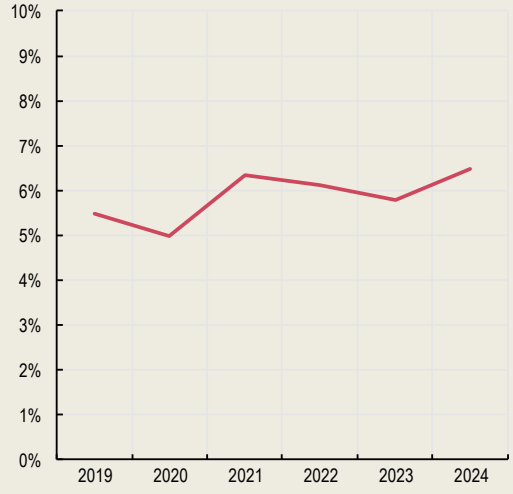
Panel A. Percentage point change in satisfaction with family life, Germany, 2019 vs. 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who are satisfied with their relationships, Colombia, Oct 2021-Mar 2023



Panel C. Share of respondents who are dissatisfied with their personal relationships, Mexico, Q1 2019 - Q4 2024



Note: Panel C: Quarterly data are averaged to produce a single value per year.

Source: Panel A: Goebel et al. (2019[18]), "The German socio-economic panel (SOEP)", *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik* 239(2) pp. 345-360, doi:10.1515/JBNST-2018-0022. Panel B: DANE (n.d.[2]), *Encuesta Pulso Social* (database), Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/encuesta-pulso-social; Panel C: INEGI (n.d.[19]), *Bienestar subjetivo - BIARE Básico* (database), Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, https://www.inegi.org.mx/investigacion/bienestar/basico/#documentation.

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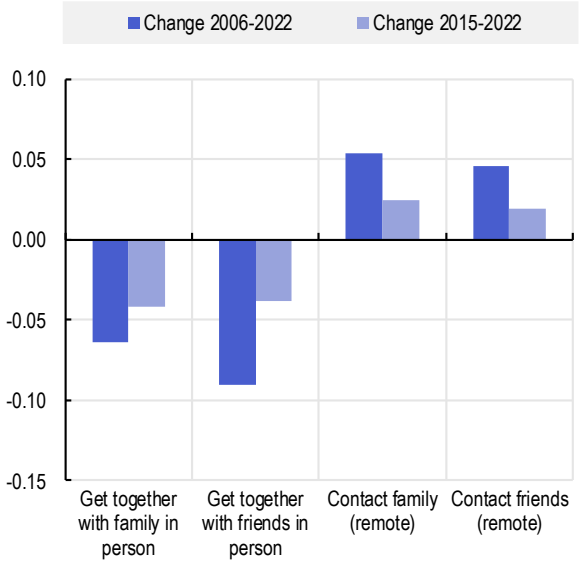
Annex 4.A. Technical annex

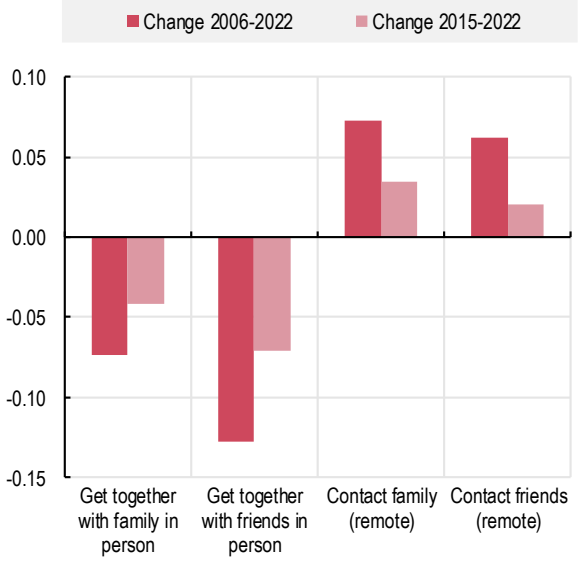
Data on in-person vs. remote social interactions come from the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* survey (EU-SILC). Respondents are asked how frequently they (1) get together in person or (2) contact (via remote forms of interaction) both family members and friends in an average year. The answer options are as follows: daily, every week (not every day), several times a month (not every week), once a month, at least once a year (less than once a month) and never. As in Chapter 2, for readers who are concerned that "daily" is too narrow a frequency grouping, in this Annex we present trend analysis comparing outcomes for "daily" and "at least weekly" – combining answer options for "daily" and "every week (not every day)" – to show that regardless of answer grouping, interacting in person with others has been declining in the medium- and short-term, while remote contact has been increasing.

Annex Figure 4.A.1. Regardless of measurement approach, in-person socialising has been declining and remote interactions have been increasing in both the medium- and short-term

Panel A. Percentage point change in respondents who socialise with friends or family on a *daily* basis, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2006 vs. 2022 and 2015 vs. 2022



Panel B. Percentage point change in respondents who socialise with friends or family at least *weekly*, OECD EU-EFTA 21, 2006 vs. 2022 and 2015 vs. 2022



Note: All changes are significant. OECD EU-EFTA 21 average includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain. Data for respondents answering "no relatives" is not shown. Getting together with family refers to relatives who do not live in the same household as the respondent. "Getting together" refers to spending time in person in any form, including talking or doing activities with one another; meeting by chance is not counted. "Contact" refers to any form of contact, including telephone, text, letter, Internet (including social media). Engaging with content on social media (i.e., "liking" a post or photo) is not considered contact; contact should reflect a conversation (written or verbal). Panel B: "At least weekly" combines answer options for "daily" and "every week (not every day)".

Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.[1]) *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database), 2022 six-yearly rolling module on "Quality of life, 2015 ad hoc module on "Social/cultural participation and material deprivation", and 2006 ad hoc module on "Social participation", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions.

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Notes

[1] Because there are few internationally harmonised datasets with longitudinal data, much of the evidence from this chapter pulls from Eurostat's *European Survey on Income and Living Conditions* and therefore describes outcomes for European OECD countries. Where possible, data from the Gallup World Poll – covering all OECD countries – is also considered, as are outcomes from individual national sources, to understand how widespread these trends are across a more diverse set of OECD countries.

[2] Refer to the Technical Annex for a discussion of answer groupings for the variables relating to the frequency of in-person vs. remote social interactions with friends and family in a given year, and for additional analysis using "at least weekly" instead of "daily" answer groupings.

[3] It seems indeed likely that COVID-related concerns drove this increase, as the share of older people who never see friends had fallen (slightly) between 2006 and 2015, from 7% to 6%.

[4] Countries that experienced a significant increase in the prevalence of feeling lonely between 2018 and 2022 include Austria, Estonia, France, Finland, Greece and Spain. Only three countries experienced a significant *decrease* in rates of feeling lonely during the same time period: Belgium, Hungary and Poland. All other country changes displayed in Figure 4.8 are not significant. Significance is not assessed for New Zealand, as microdata were not available to the authors.

[5] The single-item loneliness indicator shown in Figure 4.8 is the most commonly-fielded loneliness question in official surveys fielded by OECD country governments (Mahoney et al., 2024[20]). The most common approach to scoring this question – and that used by all OECD countries who field this question – is to define "lonely" respondents as those who answered either "all of the time" or "most of the time" (Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[21]; Mahoney et al., 2024[20]).

5. Social infrastructure and digitalisation as drivers of (dis)connection: Implications for measurement and policy

Social connections are shaped by socio-economic, environmental and structural factors, and policies to combat loneliness in OECD countries increasingly include multi-sector community-level interventions for broad-based results. This chapter highlights two contextual drivers of social (dis)connection that are particularly relevant for such policies, and outlines next steps to improve their measurement. First, social infrastructure (spaces that foster interaction) can enhance connection across groups and strengthen belonging. Aging populations and rising numbers of people living alone heighten the importance of such infrastructure. Second, much of the concern about deteriorating outcomes for young people has centred on the role of social media and digital technology. These tools present both benefits (ease of contact, building community) and risks (withdrawal from offline interactions, problematic Internet use) for social connection. However, open questions remain about the effects of moving in-person interactions online, as well as the most effective policy approaches to support positive online connections.

To effectively design policies aimed at reducing loneliness and isolation, and to ensure that existing policy actions do not inadvertently cause harm to people's connectedness, it is essential to identify and target the upstream factors that shape people's opportunities to connect with others. Both the extent and quality of a person's social connections can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including genetics and personality traits,[1] life events[2] and aspects of people's social, economic and environmental well-being, such as their income, work, leisure, health and housing.[3]

So far, the majority of the limited, but growing, evidence on interventions aimed at boosting social connectedness has focused on interventions targeted at (disconnected or lonely) individuals. These include strategies focused on self (e.g. self-guided social skills training) or inter-personal (e.g. social skills or psychoeducation led by healthcare professionals) delivery mechanisms, rather than community- or even population-based delivery mechanisms, targeting the structural causes of disconnection (Welch et al., 2023[1]; Holt-Lunstad, 2024[2]; WHO, 2025[3]). Despite the lack of evidence, there is growing awareness of the importance of community-level interventions. For example, many of the government action plans and strategies designed to combat loneliness and social isolation in OECD countries, introduced in Chapter 1, highlight the importance of community-level interventions and underscore the need for multi-sector collaboration – across levels and departments of government, and with non-government partners (civil society, research and the private sector) (HM Government, 2018[4]; Government of the Netherlands, 2023[5]; Asahi Shimbun, 2024[6]; BMFSFJ, 2022[7]; AGE Platform Europe, 2023[8]; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024[9]; Kunta Liitto, 2024[10]; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2025[11]).

This chapter contributes new evidence on social infrastructure and digitalisation as two contextual drivers of social (dis)connection that are increasingly relevant for policymakers, particularly when considering several of the at-risk groups identified in earlier chapters of this report: the elderly, those living alone and more recently, the young. Indeed, both social infrastructure and digitalisation have been highlighted as promising areas of social connection promotion by experts in the field (WHO, 2025[3]; Holt-Lunstad, 2024[2]; Schnepf, d'Hombres and Mauri, 2024[12]), and have been flagged as priorities in government strategies to address loneliness. For example,[4] as a part of its "Seoul without Loneliness" campaign, the municipal government of Seoul will introduce "Seoul Mind Convenience Stores", open spaces where city residents can come to share a meal and interact with others in their community (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024[9]). The United Kingdom's *Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* explicitly identifies examples of community infrastructure – green spaces and public parks, youth community hubs, conversation clubs hosted in job centres, etc. – that can facilitate connection (HM Government, 2018[4]). The Lithuanian government has developed a series of social welfare programmes to address loneliness and isolation among the elderly, including a social prescribing programme run through municipal health offices: seniors are referred by general practitioners or mental health practitioners to free group activities with others in their local area (Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2025[13]). In a related vein, the Austrian *Platform against Loneliness in Austria* provides residents of all ages with a database of social infrastructure and group activities that provide social support (Plattform Gegen Einsamkeit, 2021[14]). And lastly, both the British and Swedish strategies highlight the role that digital technologies can play in complementing in-person interactions and sustaining social connection across physical distance (HM Government, 2018[4]; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2025[11]), and the Finnish action plan outlines the need to better understand and address the potential adverse effects of digitalisation (Kunta Liitto, 2024[10]).

This chapter outlines what is known so far about how these phenomena are shaping whether and how people connect with one another, what open questions remain, and which data are needed to fill important evidence gaps. Forthcoming work from the OECD, the World Health Organization, the European Commission and the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection will focus on addressing some of these gaps, particularly around the effectiveness and feasibility of community strategies.

The role of the built environment and social spaces for meeting – so called social infrastructure – and how these shape in-person interactions will be particularly important given demographic trends. As outlined in

Chapters 3 and 4, more people of all age groups, but in particular the elderly, live alone; those who live alone may be more at risk of isolation and loneliness, and therefore particularly benefit from spaces that lower the barrier to socialising while providing needed services (Klinenberg, 2016[15]; Kawachi, Subramanian and Kim, 2008[16]; Aldrich and Kyota, 2017[17]). Even for those who do not live alone, growing housing unaffordability (OECD, 2025[18]) can inhibit people's ability to have a private space for hosting and socialising with others, and prevent them from living in neighbourhoods that are close to their friends or family, both of which contribute to loneliness and isolation (Bower et al., 2023[19]) – in this context, public social spaces are all the more important. In order to ensure equitable access to high quality social infrastructure, policymakers need better information on their supply (stock and funding) and demand (how often each are frequented, and how the spaces are used). Combining data from administrative sources and big data or web scraping with select indicators on household questionnaires could enable interested policymakers to better assess the state of social infrastructure in their local areas.

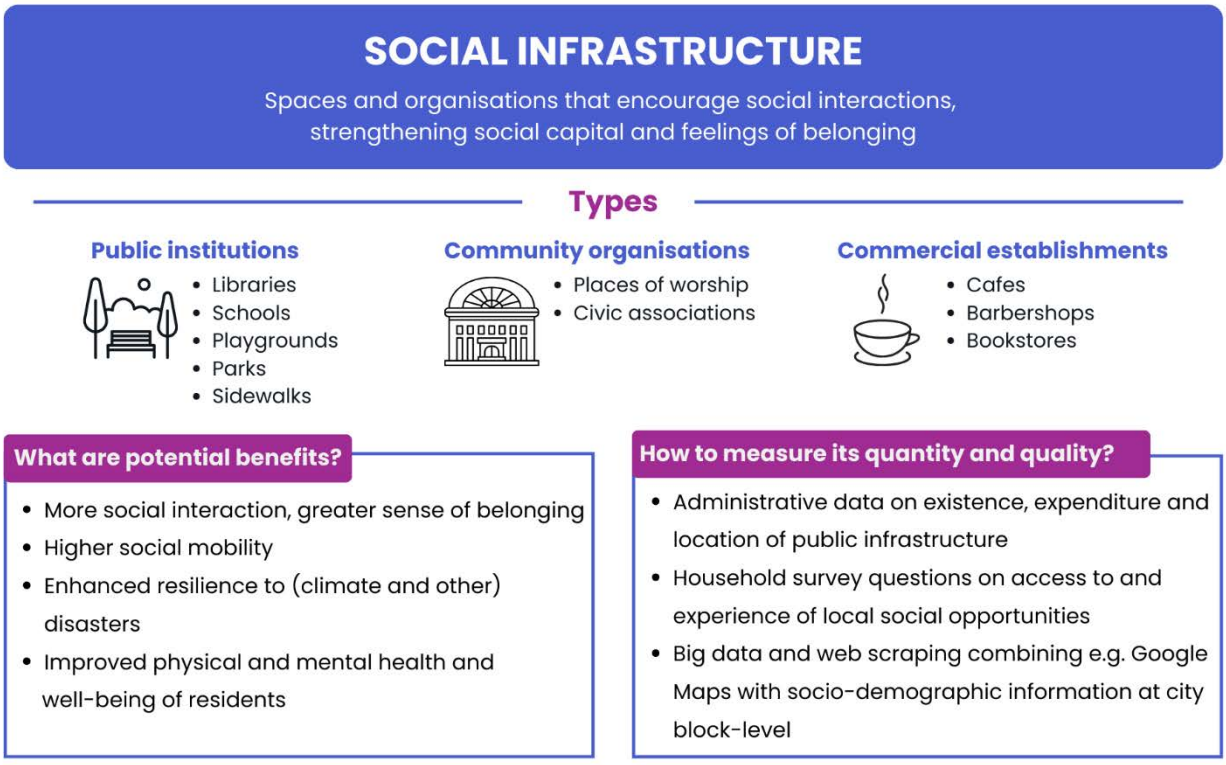
Worsening social connections outcomes for young people (and young men in particular) are not yet well understood. Debate has partly focused on the role of social media and digital tools. Much work has gone into the study of the broader well-being risks and benefits of the digital transformation,[5] however open questions related to how social connections *in particular* are affected remain: to help fill this evidence gap, emerging national strategies to regulate digital technology and social media use should expand the outcomes that are monitored to also include the quantity and quality of social interactions. While on-going academic research finds mixed results on the impact of digital technology on feelings of loneliness and disconnection, there is consensus that *how* digital tools are used, as well as the *types* of online behaviours, matter. Furthermore, understanding the impacts of moving socialising online is particularly important in the face of declining trends in getting together with friends and family in person, and rising trends in regular remote contact (see Chapter 4). Here, preliminary evidence suggests that the well-being benefits to online socialising pale in comparison to real-world interactions.

Building connection with social infrastructure

A substantial share of in-person interactions take place in public and semi-public places – whether running into a neighbour while walking the dog in the park, joining a friend for a drink or meal at a restaurant or bar, or meeting other parents at the playground or during school pick-up. The spaces that make up a neighbourhood shape day-to-day interactions, encourage socialising between different members of a community – often spanning social groups – as they go about their daily tasks and engage with service providers. All of this makes community-level interventions, as opposed to individual-level treatments, a promising avenue for policy.

Social infrastructure refers to the spaces and organisations that encourage social interactions and thereby strengthen social capital and feelings of belonging (Figure 5.1):[6] examples include public institutions (libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, sidewalks), community organisations (places of worship, civic associations) and commercial establishments (cafes, barbershops, bookstores) (Klinenberg, 2019[20]). The availability, accessibility and hospitability of these (semi-)public places all play an important role in forming, maintaining and expanding social relationships (Klinenberg, 2019[20]; Latham and Layton, 2019[21]; Enneking, Custers and Engbersen, 2025[22]), and in improving social mobility (OECD, 2025[23]).

Figure 5.1. Increasing access to quality social infrastructure can facilitate more frequent interactions across social groups, enhancing feelings of community belonging



A growing number of people in OECD countries now live alone (see Chapter 4): while living alone is not in and of itself a deprivation (Klinenberg, 2013[24]), it can be a risk factor for poor social connections outcomes (see Chapter 3). Elderly people who live on their own may be at particular risk for social isolation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020[25]; Victor et al., 2000[26]), making social infrastructure a particularly useful way for them to engage in the community (Klinenberg, 2016[15]; Aldrich and Kyota, 2017[17]). Indeed, some existing policy approaches are designed to provide older people with information on which services and public spaces are available to them in their local area (National Governors Association, 2025[27]; Vermont Agency of Human Services, 2025[28]). It is not just the elderly, however, who can benefit. Providing safe and accessible spaces for young people to congregate can provide them with well-being benefits, furthermore, the creation of inter-generational spaces can improve outcomes for multiple age groups simultaneously, making this an attractive avenue for policy (BMFSFJ, 2022[7]; OECD, 2025[29]).

The benefits of social infrastructure to social connections and broader well-being

Increasing access to social infrastructure has many benefits for well-being. To begin with, these places provide individuals with the opportunity to connect with others, and are particularly instrumental in strengthening "bridging" (connections to others from different groups, or socio-demographic backgrounds) and "linking" (connections to individuals or institutions who can provide access to resources – job opportunities, services, etc.) social ties, both of which strengthen social cohesion and social mobility (Putnam, 2000[30]; Woolcock, 2001[31]).[7] Libraries and daycares, in particular, have been shown to foster bridging social interactions between different groups of people who would otherwise not cross paths (Fraser et al., 2024[32]; Klinenberg, 2019[20]) (see Box 5.1 for a detailed discussion of public libraries). Social infrastructure encourages these cross-group interactions by lowering the barrier for engaging with

strangers. By way of illustration, a case study of Australian community gardens found that participating in the activities of the space – gardening, reading, drinking coffee – encouraged people to engage with one another more frequently, building relationships over time (Dolley, 2020[33]). Studies have shown that reducing obstacles to socialising by frequenting senior centres (Jing et al., 2024[34]), all-age community centres (Aldrich and Kyota, 2017[17]), restaurants and cafes (Rosenbaum, 2006[35]; Jing et al., 2024[34]) and local services such as shopping areas, banks and post offices (Alidoust, Bosman and Holden, 2019[36]) have been beneficial to the elderly, in particular.

Box 5.1. Public libraries: More than book lending

By serving as a publicly accessible meeting space, where services are provided to a wide variety of people free of charge, libraries can facilitate social interaction and help build networks (Corble and van Melik, 2021[37]), generate trust and increase social capital (Vårheim, 2014[38]) and nurture social inclusion (Peterson, 2023[39]). Libraries are "one of the few remaining community-wide spaces for all residents" (Lankes, 2016, p. 13[40]), providing "free access to the widest possible variety of cultural materials to all people of all ages, from all ethnicities and groups" (Klinenberg, 2019, p. 37[20]).

Libraries provide many services, beyond the provision of books. They supply a quiet place to study, digital (and AI) literacy support, cultural and social engagement activities, free Internet access (via access to Internet enabled computers, or a free wireless connection for visitors' personal devices), job application support, homework help for young people, parenting courses, book clubs and more (Klinenberg, 2019[20]; Lankes, 2016[40]). Services can be tailored to the specific community. Evidence from a multifunctional library in an impoverished area of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, shows how libraries can improve information literacy and strengthen community bonds by providing access to Internet services (Da Silva and Olinto, 2015[41]). Libraries in Australia provide English language lessons to newly arrived immigrants; some have even employed library-based social workers to serve the local community (Bourget, 2025[42]). In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Polish and Hungarian libraries have introduced a broad range of activities to support displaced Ukrainian refugees, including providing places of refuge, information access, mental health support, job search facilities and functioning as aid and resource collection points (Johnston et al., 2024[43]).

Despite their wide array of services, since the early 2000s, in several OECD countries with data, the number of libraries, membership rates and number of staff employed have all declined. For example, in the United Kingdom almost one-fifth of libraries closed between 2010 and 2019 (Bogue and Ouillon, 2023[44]), while in the Netherlands roughly one-quarter of libraries closed between 2014 and 2018, and adult membership declined by 12% during the same period (Corble and van Melik, 2021[37]). In the United States, public library visits decreased from 1.53 billion in-person visits in 2011 to 1.2 billion in 2019, despite the number of libraries remaining roughly stable, at around 9 000 (Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.[45]) (however, it should be noted that many libraries now offer digital services, meaning library users can still access e-books without making in-person visits).

More recently, however, concerns among policymakers about loneliness, polarisation and community building has led to renewed attention on libraries and their ability to foster social connections (Heck et al., 2024[46]). Across OECD countries, more governments are looking to expand libraries into multifunctional community centres with a range of services. For example, in 2014 the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) announced a policy to build 50 new libraries a year over the next five years (Korea.net, 2014[47]); by 2019, the number of publicly funded libraries had reached 1 134, up from 828 in 2012 (Korea.net, 2014[47]; Korea Bizwire, 2020[48]). Public libraries in Korea provide many services, including reading programmes for young children, cultural programmes and career training for young adults, and initiatives related to employment (job search, how to start a business) for adults.

The role of the library is expanding, as well: in 2024, the City of Seoul announced 122 libraries would have extended hours to serve as climate shelters during abnormal weather conditions (heat waves, cold snaps, heavy rain and flooding) (Seoul News, 2025[49]). In the Netherlands, a 2022 bill requires every municipality to offer a library facility to inhabitants, offering services for education and development, social gatherings and debates, and introducing people to arts and culture (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2022[50]). And in 2024, the Costa Rica Ministry of Culture and Youth introduced "Books, Reading, and Libraries Strategy" to encourage a love of reading in the population; among other activities, the initiative will create "Reading Points" in vulnerable communities, increasing their access to literature (Latina Republic, 2024[51]). Beyond the provision of a wider array of services, expanded access to libraries – for example, via opening hours that enable those with full-time employment to visit, or improving public transit systems so that those without private transport are still able to frequent libraries – can ensure libraries remain a vital social resource for communities.

While many OECD countries collect data on investment in, and use of public libraries, international comparisons remain difficult due to patchy data and different measurement approaches. One programme, the Public Libraries 2030 initiative, in collaboration with the International Federation of Library Associations, publishes factsheets with key statistics on public libraries in European countries (Public Libraries 2030, 2022[52]). It provides a useful resource for cross-country comparisons, however time series are limited. Improved data collection and harmonised measurement in this regard could improve understanding of the role libraries play in social life and civic engagement.

Use of social infrastructure can have knock-on benefits to other areas of well-being, in addition to improved social connection and cohesion. Aside from encouraging social interactions (Krellenberg, Welz and Reyes-Päcke, 2014[53]), frequenting public parks encourages physical activity and increases time spent in nature, both of which have physical and mental health benefits (OECD, 2023[54]). Frequenting social infrastructure establishments is associated with long-term health benefits (Klinenberg, 2019[20]; Fraser et al., 2022[55]), including longevity, mediated at least in part through social interactions (Rosenbaum, 2006[35]). Evidence from Japan finds that older people in local areas that had invested more in community centres for the elderly – flexible spaces that serve as a library, café or general meeting area for older people who otherwise have few social interactions – report having more friends, higher levels of efficacy (i.e. a belief they have the ability to change their environment) and a greater sense of belonging to their neighbourhood (Aldrich and Kyota, 2017[17]). Data collected in the years following the 2011 earthquake, and subsequent Fukushima nuclear accident, show that attendance at these same community centres was associated with higher perceived neighbourhood recovery from the disasters (Lee et al., 2022[56]).

Considering how inclusive a particular social infrastructure space is – rather than assuming it benefits all parts of society equally – should be an explicit priority in its design and accessibility. To begin with, different cultures – or different population groups within a country – may experience spaces differently, and have diverging views as to which places are socially welcoming. For example, in many Western societies, bars, cafés and pubs serve as common forms of social infrastructure (Jeffres et al., 2009[57]), while in other (sub-)cultures barbershops, public bathhouses, parks, plazas, libraries or community centres may be more fitting (Sugiyama et al., 2023[58]; Wexler and Oberlander, 2017[59]). Additionally, for some marginalised groups, including LGBTI youth, social infrastructure that may be considered "neutral" by others and therefore welcoming – such as libraries, and parks – may be anything but, with individuals feeling their behaviours are socially policed (Littman, 2022[60]). Socio-economic divisions can complicate the role of commercial social infrastructure. Coffee shops, for example, have historically served as meeting places for individuals across socio-economic strata or classes, where the primary activity is to converse over a beverage (Oldenburg and Christensen, 2023[61]). While indeed providing a sense of community to some, for others high-end coffee shops may represent gentrification and exclusion (Hyra, 2017[62]), leading to boycotts and anti-gentrification protests (Ferreira, Ferreira and Bos, 2021[63]). Considerations of who feels

included, or excluded, in (semi-)public places are necessary to ensure that the well-being benefits of social infrastructure are afforded to all (Middleton and Samanani, 2022[64]).

Existing evidence assessing the state of social infrastructure

Given different cultural and geographic designations for what constitutes social infrastructure, there are few harmonised measurement efforts. This can make it difficult to assess the current stock of social infrastructure, and whether accessibility and quality have been declining – or growing – over time, and for whom. Individual studies in specific environments, however, have shone light on inequality in access to social infrastructure, as well as changing patterns in funding, use and quality of these spaces.

Equality of access

Convenient access to social infrastructure is not always equitably distributed. Using a large geospatial dataset at the United States census tract level, one study finds that tracts with higher poverty rates and higher shares of Hispanic and Black populations have the least social infrastructure: inhabitants of these neighbourhoods have fewer resources to spend in commercial spaces, and less political capital to advocate for more communal areas (Rhubart et al., 2022[65]). Another study in the United Kingdom finds post-financial crisis austerity measures may have had a detrimental effect on the availability of social infrastructure in more financially deprived neighbourhoods (Hickman, 2013[66]). A Swedish study nuances these findings to show that patterns in which types of establishments people frequent may vary by neighbourhood type. Using geospatial data of users of the platforms Foursquare, Google Places and Twitter in Gothenburg, the authors show that individuals in neighbourhoods with lower income levels and more ethnic diversity are more likely to visit open public spaces (such as parking lots and basketball courts), while those in more affluent and ethnically homogenous areas are more likely to frequent commercial places (Adelfio et al., 2020[67]). Further research using geospatial data from census or social media data can help to expand the evidence base for inequalities in social infrastructure accessibility and affordability (see Fraser et al., (2022[55]) and Figure 5.2 for more information on this approach).

Trends in the supply (stock and funding) of social infrastructure

In terms of trends, notions of deteriorating (semi-)public spaces and lack of investment in social infrastructure have been around for some time. According to Oldenburg (1989[68]), in the United States, the decline of what he terms the “third place” (widely accessible and informal spaces – beyond home, school or the workplace – where people come together predominantly for conversation and social interaction without needing an invitation or requiring significant expense) began after the second World War, when old neighbourhoods made way for car-centred single-use neighbourhoods, with little possibility for informal social gatherings. In a similar vein, the writer and activist Jane Jacobs argued that the focus on car-centric urban planning hastened the decline of walkable neighbourhoods and sidewalk culture, leading to neighbourhood decay (Jacobs, 1989[69]).

More recent research has tried to show this empirically. Robert Putnam (2000[30]) showed the downward trend in participation in civic life in the United States (which has strong overlaps with aspects of social infrastructure and spending time in (semi-)public places) – less participation in community organisations, lower voter turnout, more time spent on solitary activities like watching television – in the years from 1950 to 2000. Using a United States business microdata set for 1990-2015, another study shows a decline in commercial social infrastructure (Finlay et al., 2019[70]), which can in part be explained by the effects of the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) and ensuing economic hardship. Comparable quantitative evidence of trends outside of the United States is limited, however, a study in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands found that post-GFC austerity measures led to a decline in the number of communal places (Corble and van Melik, 2021[37]). While also highlighting declining trends, this differs from the United States study in that in the United States commercial spaces declined with no effect on communal or public spaces (Finlay et al.,

2019[70]). Few internationally comparable studies yet exist to compare trends in the investment in, maintenance and development of, freely available public spaces.

Trends in the demand for social infrastructure, and the ways in which social spaces are used

Beyond understanding the supply of social infrastructure, understanding the dynamics of the public's demand for these spaces is also key. Rising inflation and the cost-of-living crisis in recent years have seen households dealing with rising food prices, and devoting a larger share of household income to food (Arend, Botev and Fraisse, 2024[71]; OECD, 2023[72]). This affects peoples' ability (and willingness) to frequent certain types of commercial social infrastructure. In a 2023 survey, more than half of Canadians reported they would eat out at restaurants less frequently given rising food costs (Wunsch, 2024[73]); a Boston Consulting Group consumer panel survey in Germany the year prior found that similar rates of Germans – 62% – reported eating out less often, and 68% reported using food delivery apps less frequently (Manager Magazin, 2022[74]). Credit and debit card transaction data from Barclays show that spending on restaurant meals in Britain fell 3% in February 2023 compared to the year prior (Barclays, 2023[75]). These changing behavioural patterns – in the face of squeezed household budgets and financial pressures – mean people are spending less time in commercial social infrastructure like cafes and restaurants, which could hurt the viability of these establishments in the long-term. However, these studies only speak to the demand for a particular type of social establishment, and cannot reveal whether cost-of-living pressures may have shifted use patterns to other types of (public) social infrastructure: that is, there is a difference between people spending more time alone, or in private spaces vs. spending less time at (more expensive) restaurants and more time having a (free) picnic in a public park.

Demand and use of (semi-)public spaces therefore varies over time depending on broader social conditions. Recent studies illustrate the usefulness of geo-located social media data to define and measure the frequency of visits to different places, tracking demand for social infrastructure in almost real-time. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, social interactions moved to open-air places such as parks and forests, but when the risks and fear of contagion faded, consumers moved back to inside spaces such as bars and cafés (Jay et al., 2022[76]; Our World in Data, 2022[77]; Uthpala and Meetiyagoda, 2022[78]). In the future, data on the geographic mobility of individuals – and which places they frequent – will help policymakers better understand demand for, and accessibility of, social infrastructure. However as of yet, the quality of longitudinal data needed to say something conclusive about trends is insufficient (Adelfio et al., 2020[67]; Borsellino, Charles-Edwards and Corcoran, 2021[79]).

The quality of social interactions taking place within a given space – i.e., how effective the place is at fulfilling the qualities that define social infrastructure – is also important. With the rise of digital technology, some scholars have argued that the tenor of social spaces has changed. With so many people in close proximity, but focusing solely on their phones, a café, train station or park "is no longer a communal space but a place of social collection: people come together but not to speak to each other" (Turkle, 2012, p. 155[80]). This can be difficult to measure. One innovative approach was used by a team of researchers in the United States to compare pedestrian behaviour in three metropolitan areas over a 30-year period. By analysing video recordings and CCTV footage of pedestrians, researchers found that walking speeds have increased by 15% and time spent lingering on public sidewalks has declined – this has led to an overall decrease in frequency of group encounters, and interactions in public spaces (Salazar-Miranda et al., 2024[81]).

Next steps for closing evidence gaps

Better measures of the stock and quality of social infrastructure would enable the creation of a "social infrastructure report card" (Klinenberg, 2019[20]): benchmarking communities and countries on the quantity and quality of their social infrastructure,[8] in a similar manner to the way physical infrastructure is assessed

in some places (McBride, Berman and Siripurapo, 2023[82]). More advances in the measurement of social infrastructure must be made before a standardised scorecard can be proposed. Yet despite known challenges to measurement, there are many new data collection initiatives underway that use a variety of methodologies to triangulate the stock of social infrastructure, including at the local level. Combining data from a variety of sources, including administrative and business records, social media and web scraping, and self-reported indicators on household surveys, can provide a clearer picture.

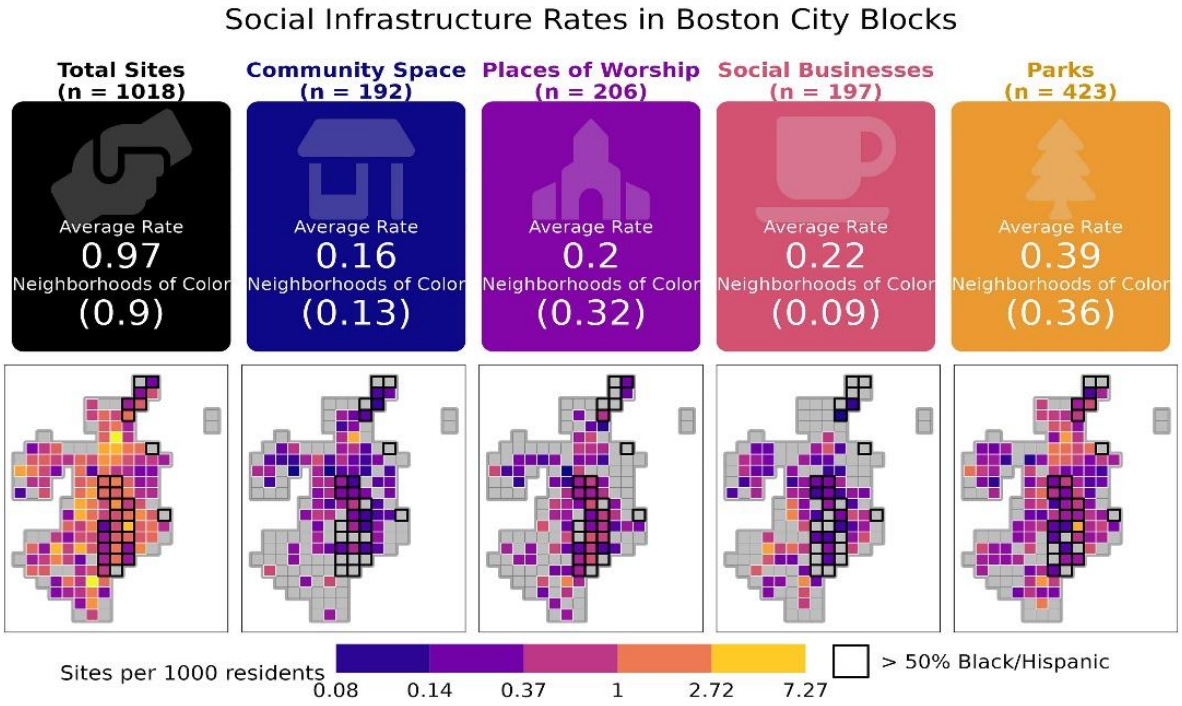
Administrative data

Administrative data on publicly funded public spaces – public libraries, museums, parks – and commercial establishments – restaurants, cafes, bars, salons – capture the existence, and location, of different types of public infrastructure. In European countries, Eurostat publishes harmonised data on cultural enterprises (Eurostat, 2024[83]); government expenditure on recreation, culture and religion (Eurostat, 2025[84]); and household expenditure on culture (Eurostat, 2023[85]). While not administrative data, the National Neighborhood Data Archive (NaNDA) in the United States provides a census-tract level database of different types of social infrastructure,[9] including eating and drinking places; religious, civic, and social organisations; parks; personal services; arts, entertainment, and recreation; and social service organizations (Rhubart et al., 2022[65]). Lastly, the OECD's *Built Environment through a Well-being Lens* report showcases harmonised data on the built environment and different types of physical infrastructure from national sources across OECD countries (OECD, 2023[86]).

Big data and web scraping

A team of researchers at Cornell and Northeastern University in the United States has developed a methodology combining information from Google Map API to build neighbourhood-level datasets of social infrastructure in cities in the United States. The algorithm classifies locations as community spaces (libraries, city facilities), social businesses (cafes, bookstores, salons), places of worship (churches, mosques, synagogues) and parks (green space, squares, sports fields, gardens). By validating with on-the-ground verification methods, the researchers deem the Google Map API to provide accurate measures with an acceptable margin of error (Fraser et al., 2022[55]); the methodology was first applied to Boston, but has since been applied to other cities in the United States (Fraser et al., 2024[32]).

Figure 5.2. Collating information from Google Map API data provides a local map of social infrastructure, highlighting inequalities in access at the neighbourhood-level



Note: "Neighborhoods of color" refer to areas where the local population is predominantly Black or Hispanic.
Source: Fraser, T. et al. (2022[55]), "Trust but verify: Validating new measures for mapping social infrastructure in cities", *Urban Climate*, Vol. 46, p. 101287, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.UCLIM.2022.101287.

Overlaying social infrastructure data with information on socio-demographic characteristics taken from the census provides detailed, neighbourhood-level mapping of inequalities in access to different types of social infrastructure and variations in density of social infrastructure (i.e., cold vs. hot spots) (Figure 5.2). Applications of this approach in the city of Boston highlight socio-demographic inequalities in the density of social infrastructure, both overall and by type. For example, city blocks that are predominantly inhabited by Black or Hispanic/Latino residents have less social infrastructure, and in particular fewer social commercial establishments (bookstores, cafes and coffee shops) compared to majority white neighbourhoods; conversely, predominantly Black neighbourhoods have a higher density of places of worship (Fraser et al., 2022[55]).

Self-report measures in household surveys

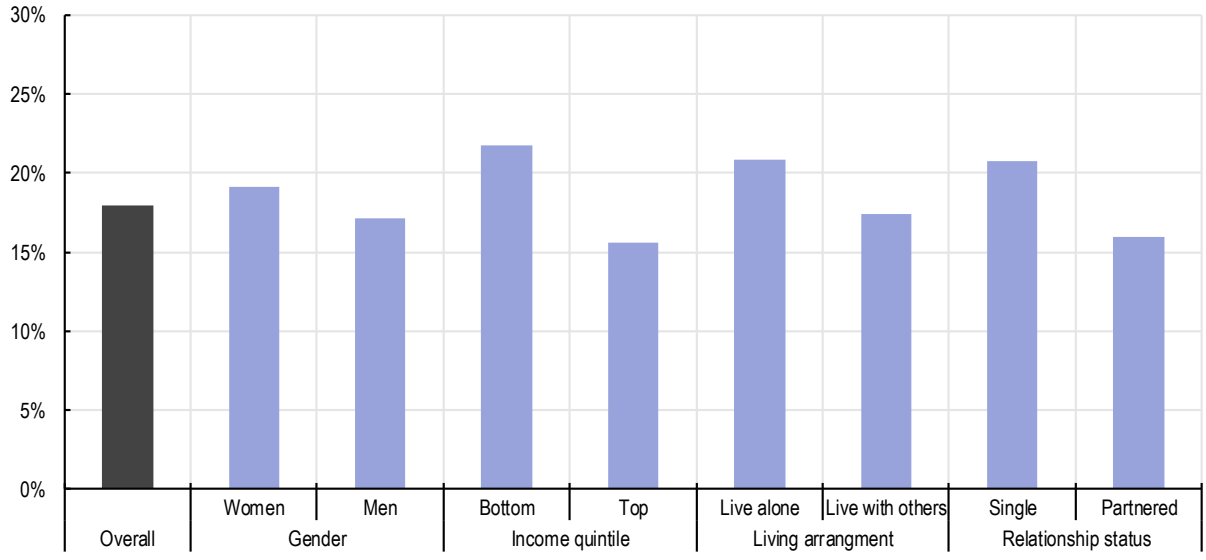
Another approach is to include direct questions to respondents on household surveys, asking whether they have access to, and/or frequent, the types of spaces that fit the definition of social infrastructure. This can be captured by asking about frequency of visits to a specific type of place (e.g., how often do you go to museums in a typical year?), with the list of places chosen depending on the cultural or local context. Another approach is to ask whether the respondent frequents a place defined by a series of characteristics. For example, an academic study in the United States conducted qualitative interviews with respondents to better understand local examples of social infrastructure. To guide the conversation, interviewees were asked: "What are the opportunities for communication in public places in your neighbourhood, for example, places where people might chat informally or where friends and neighbours might go for a conversation?" These could then be adapted to multi-item response questions (Jeffres et al., 2009[57]). As another

approach, Statistics Canada fields a series of questions asking respondents about their sense of belonging to their local community, to their province and to Canada as a whole.[10]

Although an imperfect metric for capturing specific aspects of the quality of social infrastructure, the Gallup World Poll includes a question asking people whether they are (dis)satisfied with opportunities to meet people and make friends in the area where they live. The results also highlight the comparative value of survey questions, vis-a-vis the non-survey data collection approaches outlined before, in capturing socio-economic inequalities. Indeed, as Figure 5.3 shows, those earning a lower income are consistently more dissatisfied with the social opportunities of their neighbourhoods. Those with lower levels of education, those who are single and/or live alone, and women are also more dissatisfied.

Figure 5.3. Women, those who live alone, single people and those earning lower incomes are less satisfied with local social opportunities

Share of respondents who are dissatisfied with opportunities to meet people and make friends in the area where they live, OECD, 2022-2023



Source: Gallup (n.d.[87]), *Gallup World Poll* (database), https://www.gallup.com/analytics/318875/global-research.aspx.

StatLink https://stat.link/1gvsb8

Digital communication technology, social media and social connections

One of the most important changes over the past decades in how we socialise – with friends and family as well as with strangers – is our increased use of digital technology, and in particular, our use of social media.[11] As was shown in Chapter 4, compared to 10-15 years ago there has been a decrease in the number of people who report regular in-person interactions with friends and family, however the share who report daily contact with friends and family through digital devices has been rising. These trends have been particularly pronounced in young people.

Digital communication refers to any interaction between people that makes use of digital tools or technologies, which can encompass digital devices (computers, smartphones), video games, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media, among others (Lee and Žarnic, 2024[88]). Interactions vary by digital tool, with different characteristics associated with texting, speaking over the phone or video calls. Additionally, within the broader category of social media, interactions can vary by platform: all enable users to connect

and engage with others, but some are geared towards a large audience (e.g., X (Twitter) or Instagram) whereas others target smaller, more specific groups with whom a user connects (such as with Whatsapp or Telegram) (Meier and Reinecke, 2021[89]).

Importantly, tools and platforms enable users to engage in different types of online interactions, all with different implications for social connections outcomes, although the dynamics of these relationships are still being unpacked by researchers. Much work – including at the OECD – has been devoted to the broader impacts of digital technologies on well-being, including for young people (OECD, 2025[90]); this section homes in on the effects of these technologies on social connections, specifically. While on-going academic research finds mixed results on the impact of digital technology on feelings of loneliness and disconnection, consensus is growing that *how* digital tools are used matters, and the *types* of online behaviours we engage in are more likely to induce better, or poorer outcomes. Another key question is to better understand the implications of shifting social interactions to online spaces, and away from in-person engagement. Preliminary evidence suggests that the well-being benefits to online socialising pale in comparison to real-world interactions, however on-going efforts to assess these differences more rigorously using time use data will provide higher quality evidence in future.

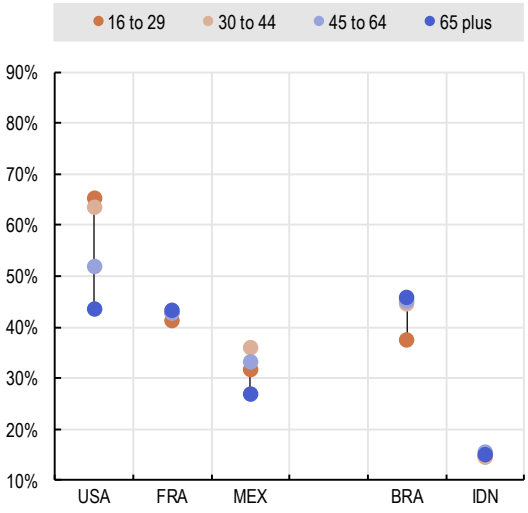
As researchers continue to unpack these relationships, aided by more granular and more frequently collected data, many parents, teachers and policymakers – concerned by what they perceive to be a growing crisis among young people, in particular – have begun taking action, introducing initiatives to ban or limit digital devices and social media access for children below a certain age, and/or in specific contexts (such as in school classrooms). It will be important to design rigorous evaluations of these new interventions, as the OECD plans to support countries in upcoming work, to understand which are most effective at promoting good outcomes, including for social connectedness.

Benefits and risks of digital technology and social media for social connections

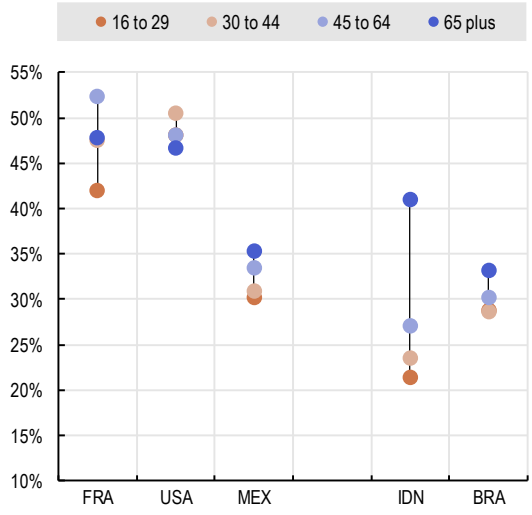
There have been growing concerns from policymakers and citizens alike as to the potential effects that the increased use of digital technology has on how we connect with one another. Data from three OECD countries and two accession states shows that between a quarter and half of respondents believe social media makes people feel less connected, and in all but one country 50-80% believe social media makes people feel lonelier (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. Perceptions that social media use negatively impacts social connections are widespread, and tend to rise with age

Panel A. Share of respondents who believe social media makes people feel more lonely, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who believe social media makes people feel less connected, 2022



Note: Share of respondents who believe that social media makes people "more lonely" and "less connected", as compared to less lonely and more connected.
Source: Data for Good at Meta (2022[91]), *Social Connections Survey*. https://data.humdata.org/dataset/social-connections-survey.

StatLink https://stat.link/kr7i1h

Belief in the detrimental effects of social media on social connections rises with age across all five countries, though the United States is an exception – here, the younger age groups are more likely to feel that social media makes people lonelier (although the majority of respondents in all age groups believe this to be true).[12] Separate data from the Pew Research Center show that 36% of teenagers in the United States think they use social media too often and 32% believe that social media has a negative effect on people their age. However, their feelings are complicated – only 9% believe social media has a negative effect on themselves, personally, and over half say it would be hard to give up social media (Vogels and Gelles-Watnick, 2023[92]).

However, the ongoing debate among researchers is more nuanced and not all agree that digital technology has *causal* negative impacts on social connections, mental health and broader well-being, and different theoretical and empirical arguments support both positive and negative impacts of digital tools. These are summarised in the following.

Quantity of social connections: Online vs. offline

On the one hand, *displacement theory* posits that connecting over the Internet can increase feelings of loneliness by reducing face-to-face interactions (Kraut et al., 1998[93]). According to this hypothesis, feelings of loneliness increase when physical interaction is replaced by social media use, and stronger offline social ties are replaced by weaker online encounters (OECD, 2019[94]; Dienlin, Masur and Trepte, 2017[95]).[13]

On the other hand, some aspects of digital technology and social media have been found to facilitate and increase the total number of social interactions. Digital tools offer a means of communication independent of time and place, and social media has made it easier than before to actively connect with people and stay in touch with friends and family across large physical distances (OECD, 2019[94]; Masur, 2021[96]). *Stimulation theory* hence argues that online communication can facilitate increased face-to-face

interactions (OECD, 2019[94]; Dienlin, Masur and Trepte, 2017[95]; Valkenburg and Peter, 2007[97]). Advocates of this theory argue that social media encourages communication with existing friends, for example by using social media to organise more in-person gatherings (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007[97]), and helps manage close relationships, particularly in cases where people live far from their family, friends and other social contacts (Cui, 2016[98]).

Quality of social connections: Online vs. offline

Beyond the quantity of social interactions, some evidence points to the fact that increasingly interacting online can lead to worse *quality* interactions both online and in the real world. Online interactions are characterised by anonymity, disembodiment and disinhibition, which can lead to behavioural differences in communication and interaction style (OECD, 2024[99]). Even when engaging in interactions with offline peers, the nature of online communication – e.g. fewer non-verbal cues – can lead to more miscommunication, and less of a sense of connection to the other person (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020[100]). Engaging in fewer face-to-face interactions may decrease the development of important psychological skills in young people, as real-world encounters require a different social skillset than that of online interactions:[14] this can lead to younger people feeling more sensitive and anxious engaging in real-world social interactions, causing them to further shy away from social engagement, leading to increased isolation and worse mental health (Haidt, 2024[101]). Others argue that digital technology harms social interactions and empathy – for all age groups, not just young people (Turkle, 2015[102]). One study of 8- to 12-year-old girls in North America, analysing the relationship between their social relationships and digital technology (social media, texting, video chats, etc.) use, found that face-to-face conversations were highly correlated with good social well-being, but online communication, video (YouTube, television, etc.) and media multitasking (an index that calculates how many forms a media each girl consumed simultaneously) were all associated with worse social outcomes (Pea et al., 2012[103]).[15]

In general, research into the effects of social media on mental health outcomes in young people show stronger effects for girls rather than boys (Liu et al., 2022[104]): girls are more affected by social comparisons, and more likely to feel dissatisfied with their own bodies and engage in disordered eating after seeing edited images of peers, celebrities and influencers online (OECD, 2025[90]; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2024[105]; Haidt, 2024[101]). In 2021-2022 across OECD countries, 12% of young girls self-reported engaging in problematic social media use, compared to 7% of boys (OECD, 2025[90]). Boys, however, are more likely to report problematic video game usage (Nagata et al., 2022[106]). Another risk factor on social media is cyberbullying, particularly for children and adolescents (OECD, 2025[90]; 2024[107]); however, evidence indicates substantial overlap in rates of victimhood/perpetration of cyberbullying and traditional bullying, which suggests that digital platforms themselves are not the root cause.[16]

Despite the above concerns, other research on the quality of social connections online vs. offline has come to opposite conclusions. A recent overview of the literature has highlighted how social media and technology can facilitate empathetic interactions in a variety of ways (James et al., 2025[108]). For example, one study of surgical patients in Canada found that those who texted with a partner or stranger and engaged in empathetic exchanges prior to the procedure required less pain relief medication than those who received standard post-operative care, or were provided with game-based distractions: this shows how social support via digital technology provides well-being benefits (Guillory et al., 2015[109]). Another study in the United States found that a text-message empathy-building intervention was successful in improving empathy and pro-social behaviours among participants (Konrath et al., 2015[110]). Multiple studies have shown the link between online (liking a post, sharing a story on social media) and offline (donating to a cause, volunteering) prosocial behaviours (James et al., 2025[108]), particularly for young people. A long-term study of empathy levels among college-aged youth in the United States found that rates declined between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath et al., 2023[111]), however began to rise again between 2009 and 2018 (Konrath, O'Brien and Hsing, 2011[112]); while the causes are unknown, the more recent

uptick dispels earlier theories that the decline was directly linked to growing digital technology and social media use.

More broadly, empirical studies find mixed results for establishing an association between online interactions and perceptions of social connections and/or mental health.[17] One potential confounding factor for most studies (which often rely on cross-sectional data) is that associations between loneliness and social media use do not infer causality. A positive correlation between the outcomes could be because people who are *already* lonely may be more likely to engage in certain types of behaviours online. Evidence from the literature supports this, showing that people who experience loneliness may be more prone to certain types of social media use (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo, 2018[113]). Lonelier individuals have a higher preference for communicating online, as they feel more in control of their interactions and are better able to be themselves than in face-to-face interactions (OECD, 2024[99]; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, 2003[114]).

Lastly, human to AI-chatbot engagement has now emerged as a new type of digital communication. While some use artificial intelligence to improve productivity or supplement work or education tasks, others have begun using chatbots to socialise, as confidantes and in some instances, as surrogate therapists (Moore et al., 2025[115]; Skjuve, Brandtzaeg and Følstad, 2024[116]). Some studies suggest that well developed AI-chatbots can provide therapeutic benefits to those in need, reducing loneliness, isolation and even suicidal ideation, in particular in contexts in which access to human therapists is constrained (De Freitas et al., 2024[117]; Maples et al., 2024[118]; Merrill, Mikkilineni and Dehnert, 2025[119]). However, human therapists remain sceptical (Prescott and Hanley, 2023[120]), and recent evidence suggests caution should be taken: a 2025 study from Stanford University found that when engaged as a pseudo-therapist, large language models (LLMs) expressed stigma towards users with certain types of mental health conditions (in particular harmful consumption of alcohol and schizophrenia), and provided clinically inappropriate responses (for example, encouraging delusional thinking, or failing to recognise suicidal ideation) (Moore et al., 2025[115]). Other studies highlight caution, even in instances in which users are less at risk for such extreme mental ill-health outcomes. A longitudinal randomised control trial found that while engaging with social AI-chatbots was associated with diminished loneliness, this was only the case when the chatbots were used infrequently; at high usage levels, users reported *more* loneliness, less socialisation with people and higher dependence on the chatbot (Fang et al., 2025[121]).

Types of online communities

Beyond the quantity and quality of social connections at the individual level, increased time spent in digital spaces also has implications for the types of broader social communities and cohesion that is being fostered.

On the one hand, digital platforms can create online echo chambers – spaces where individuals choose or are shown content aligned with their prior beliefs and political opinions – that may have detrimental impacts to social cohesion (Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016[122]). More recently, this conversation has expanded to include concern about personalised content through algorithms and machine learning techniques, known as filter bubbles (Kitchens, Johnson and Gray, 2020[123]). One overview of the mechanisms behind online radicalisation finds that it can be both a cause and a consequence of isolation: the former, as individuals may be attracted to online communities when they experience offline alienation or weakening real-world relationships, while the latter may happen as radicalised individuals increasingly withdraw themselves from society (Mølmen and Ravndal, 2023[124]). Additional evidence on the causal pathway between social media use and increased polarisation is inconclusive. A recent overview finds that most people access a diverse set of online media outlets, and that those who do not (and rely on only a small set of outlets) typically use sources that cater to a politically diverse audience (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022[125]). While news outlets may not be the only ‘chambers’ in which people engage with others online, it suggests that media polarisation may be less pronounced than popularly believed. In addition, research

using a longitudinal dataset of nearly 200 000 American adults' web browsing behaviour found that increased use of the platform Reddit is linked to increased diversity in information sources, and a tendency toward more moderate websites. The platform, however, matters: increased Facebook use was associated with a shift to more partisan websites (Kitchens, Johnson and Gray, 2020[123]).

On the other hand, digital spaces have been found to actively foster community connections. Social media networks can complement real-life social interactions by connecting people with shared beliefs or interests who may not otherwise be able to connect in the offline world. For example, some scholars argue that high use of social media platforms by teenagers reflects the fact that free time and geographic mobility of modern adolescents are more regulated – by their parents, as well as by proprietors of privately owned spaces like shopping malls – compared to teens in previous generations, meaning online platforms serve as the primary space for offline friends to interact outside school hours (Boyd, 2014[126]; Valentine, 2017[127]). The Internet as a meeting space may be particularly relevant for marginalised groups, for whom social media provides an opportunity to join a community and feel included, in a way that their physical environment may not always provide. For example, a qualitative study incorporating evidence from structured interviews finds that for LGBTQ+ people, social media helps to decrease feelings of loneliness and increase feelings of belonging (Eickers, 2024[128]). Similarly, members of racial and ethnic minority groups can use social media to gain a sense of belonging and support when support in the offline world is lacking (Miller et al., 2021[129]). In addition, individuals with niche interests can find likeminded peers online. A series of interviews with users of Reddit shows that finding a subgroup of likeminded individuals creates feelings of belonging (Hwang and Foote, 2021[130]).

Open questions for policy and research

The mixed conclusions on the link between social connectedness and digitalisation, and the fact that the majority of evidence so far is correlational, points to three main open questions for policy and research going forward:

(1) Which types of digital technology use matter most for social connections?

Evidence so far points to the fact that it is not just the *amount* or *frequency* of social media use that matters, but the *purpose* and *way in which* the platform is used. Thus, simply collecting data on overall smartphone or social media use does not capture all relevant information; it is important to further distinguish between how digital tools and social media platforms are used (Dienlin and Johannes, 2020[131]; Charmaraman et al., 2025[132]; Masur, 2021[96]).

For instance, one useful categorisation of activity type comes from Frison and Eggermont (2020[133]):

- *Active communication*: chatting via WhatsApp, videocalls via FaceTime, or sending photos through Snapchat
- *Active participation and creation*: posting, commenting, or liking on TikTok, Instagram or LinkedIn
- *Passive interactions*: browsing a feed, watching videos etc.

Each type of interaction may have a different relationship with loneliness, isolation and connection. For example, by manipulating research participants' social media use, one experimental study found that inducing users to actively post status updates on Facebook led to decreases in loneliness (Deters and Mehl, 2013[134]). On the other hand, passive interactions, such as scrolling or viewing posts, are associated with social comparison and higher levels of loneliness (Verduyn et al., 2015[135]). Recent research in Europe corroborates this, finding that intense passive use of social media is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Dhombres et al., 2024[136]).

(2) Does the shift from real world to digital interactions causally matter for quality of social connectedness?

This topic was studied by researchers in more detail during the COVID-19 pandemic, when confinement policies and enforced isolation meant that people were actively substituting in-person interactions with remote ones. Studies found that digital social interactions were protective of mental health, in particular during the most restrictive periods of lock-downs (Marinucci et al., 2022[137]), and were more associated with positive mental health outcomes than other forms of coping, such as physical activity or spending time outdoors (Stieger, Lewetz and Willinger, 2023[138]). While more frequent social interaction of any sort (in-person or remote) is protective of mental health, multiple studies find that in comparison to all forms of remote connection (video calls, texts or messaging apps, social media), more frequent *in-person* interactions have a greater association with positive affect and mental health outcome improvements (Liang et al., 2024[139]; Marinucci et al., 2022[137]; Stieger, Lewetz and Willinger, 2023[138]); one study of young people in the United Kingdom found that those who increased the frequency of their usage of social media during the pandemic experienced deteriorations in their mental health (Rouxel and Chandola, 2023[140]).

Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) sampling[18] to link digital communication and social media use to mood might provide a more robust answer – this can enable an understanding of how these behaviours can induce feelings of loneliness, isolation and connection alongside other affective states including those relating to poor mental health outcomes. EMA studies collect objective – rather than self-reported – data on how much time an individual spends on a social media platform, texting, etc., and combine this with regular self-reported assessments of mood (see (Garcia et al., 2014[141]) and (Blahošová et al., 2024[142]) for an explanation of the methodology).[19]

(3) How effective are efforts to limit young people's screen use, and problematic Internet use, in terms of promoting positive online interactions?

While academics debate the causal relationship between deprivations in social connections and use of digital technologies and social media, policymakers have taken steps or proposed policy initiatives to regulate, limit or ban social media or digital devices for children below certain ages and in specific contexts (Table 5.1), in an effort to safe-guard the learning potential of young people as well as improve their focus, attention, mental health and well-being (OECD, 2024[143]). Part of the impetus for this is the demand for acting in a precautionary manner to safeguard children (as a particularly vulnerable group) voiced by frontline actors who work with children: teachers, clinicians and particularly parents. Indeed, in many OECD countries, parents have organised to issue pledges and proposals to limit social media and smartphone use, such as the Wait until 8th movement in the United States (Wait until 8th, 2024[144]), *Smarter Start ab 14* in Germany (S14, 2024[145]), the OFF initiative in Spain (OFFM, 2024[146]) or the *Smartphonefri Barndom* in Denmark (Smartphonefri Barndom, 2024[147]).

As most of these initiatives are relatively recent, in most instances their impact has yet to be assessed[20] – and when evaluations of these policies have been done, the quantity and quality of youth social connections have not been a primary outcome of interest. More systematic evaluations on these initiatives should accompany their roll out to help peer learning on how these policies can most effectively be designed, implemented and enforced. A part of this process should be a discussion of which outcomes will be affected by each initiative – and therefore measured as a part of monitoring and evaluation efforts. Complementing the focus on cognition, attention and learning outcomes, these efforts should also include assessments of mental health, frequency of in-person vs. remote social interactions, feelings of inclusion and connection, and relationship quality.

Table 5.1. Selected policy initiatives relating to digital technology and social media use

Type of initiative	Country	Description
(Inter)national strategies on digital technology and/or social media	Canada	The Online Harms Act aims to create stronger online protections for children and safeguard Canadians from online hate and harmful content (Ministry of Justice, 2024[148]).
	European Union	The 2023 Digital Services Act is designed to provide better data protection and prevent illegal and harmful online activities by regulating social media platforms, among other online services providers (European Commission, 2023[149]).
	Ireland	The 2022 Online Safety and Media Regulation Act aims to protect children from harmful and age-inappropriate content online, overseen by a newly formed regulator of online safety, Coimisiún na Meán (The Irish Statute Book, 2022[150]).
	Japan	In 2020, Kagawa Prefecture introduced the country's first ordinance recommending screen time limits for minors under 18 of 60 minutes per day on school days and 90 minutes on non-school days (Kyodo News, 2020[151]).
	United Kingdom	The United Kingdom passed the Online Safety Act in 2023, providing a new set of laws to protect children and adults against harmful, age-inappropriate content and give more control over the types of content users want to see (UK Government, 2023[152]).
	United States	In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General called for a warning label on social media, analogous to cigarette-package warnings, to make parents and adolescents aware of the possible adverse effects of social media use (Barry and Kang, 2024[153]; HHS, 2023[154]).
Minimum age for technology use*	Australia	The Online Safety Amendment passed through Parliament in December 2024, setting a minimum age limit of 16-years-old for social media platforms. The Amendment mandates that social media platforms take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under the age of 16 from opening accounts on their platforms (Parliament of Australia, 2024[155]).
	European Union	At the 2025 EU Telecom Council, France, Greece, and Spain, joined by Denmark, Slovenia and Cyprus proposed a common minimum age for social media access enforced via mandatory age verification. A pilot "Digital Wallet" app, involving Spain, France, Greece, Denmark and Italy, is scheduled for a July 2025 rollout to confirm that social media users are over 18 without revealing their actual age (Villamor, 2025[156]).
	France	A 2024 expert report, commissioned by President Macron, highlights 29 recommendations for healthy smartphone and social media use for children, including recommendations like no smartphones before the age of 11, and no social media use before 15 (Commission on Screens and Children, 2024[157]). In 2025, a Parliamentary report reiterated the recommendation to ban children under the age of 15 from using social media, and introduced a recommendation to institute digital curfews for 15- to 18-year-olds (Assemblée Nationale, 2025[158]).
	Norway	A 2024 proposal to raise the minimum age for social media from 13 to 15 by amending the Personal Data Act and introducing new age-verification tools (e.g., BankID) remains under consultation, with mixed responses and concerns regarding privacy and technical feasibility (Opiah, 2024[159]).
	Sweden	Public health authorities issued guidelines in December 2024 on screen time for toddlers, children and teens – none for children under the age of 2, one hour per day for 2- to 5-year-olds, 2 hours for 6- to 12-year olds and a maximum of 3 hours per day for teens (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2024[160]).
	United States	A bi-partisan federal bill to limit social media access to adolescents above the age of 13 has been proposed, and is making its way through the legislature (US Congress, 2025[161]); in the interim, many states have issued their own legislation (The Florida Senate, 2024[162]; Utah.gov, 2024[163]; Maryland General Assembly, 2024[164]) although some of these have been challenged in court (Berman, 2024[165]).
Limiting or banning phones in schools	Belgium	The French-speaking government in Belgium will ban recreational use of digital devices in schools beginning at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year (Euronews, 2024[166]).
	Canada	Eight provinces have introduced restrictions on smartphone use in primary and secondary classrooms as of 2024 (Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2025[167]). School districts are required to set rules limiting phone use during instructional time, generally prohibiting personal devices except for educational, medical, or accessibility reasons (Government of British Columbia, 2024[168]).
	Finland	In December of 2024, the government of Finland announced its intentions to ban the use of smartphones in classrooms, with exceptions granted in the case of digital devices being used for learning purposes by instructors (Teivainen, 2024[169]).
	France	In 2018, France banned the use of mobile phones in schools for children, although individual schools are responsible for enforcement (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2018[170]).
	Greece	As of 2024, the Greek government requires students to keep mobile phones inside school bags during the school day (Euronews, 2024[166]).
	Hungary	In 2024, Hungary implemented a nationwide restriction on phones in schools (the legislation does not fully ban phones in schools, as teachers may authorise the use of digital devices for learning purposes)

Type of initiative	Country	Description
		(Euronews, 2024[166]).
	Italy	A 2024 piece of legislation extends an existing ban from 2007 on the use of smart devices in classrooms for non-academic purposes, by completing banning such devices in schools – even for learning purposes (Euronews, 2024[171]).
	Korea	In March 2026, a new law will come into effect banning the use of smart devices and mobile phone in schools during class hours (Lee and Wang, 2025[172]).
	Latvia	Younger students – up to grade 6 – are not allowed to use mobile devices at school as of May 2025, with the exception of engaging in learning activities (Euronews, 2024[166]).
	Luxembourg	Phones are no longer allowed in primary schools for students up to age 11; high schools allow phones, but require "physical distance" from devices during class time (Euronews, 2024[166]).
	the Netherlands	A 2024 bill bans the use of mobile phones in secondary schools for students. Individual schools are responsible for enforcement of the bill (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2023[173]).
	Norway	The Ministry of Education and Research has issued recommendations on phone restrictions in primary and secondary schools – regulating and limiting their use during school hours – rather than banning devices (Phone Locker, 2024[174]).
	Spain	Seven regional governments have introduced policies to restrict phone use in schools (Euronews, 2024[166]).

Note: * For a thorough review of the topic, refer to OECD (2025[175]), *Legal and policy landscape of age assurance online for child safety and well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris https://doi.org/10.1787/4a1878aa-en.

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Notes

[1] Certain personality traits have been found to be associated with feelings of loneliness and the propensity to socialise (MacAdams, 1992[205]; Norman, 1963[176]). Extraversion has the strongest negative association with loneliness (Buecker et al., 2020[195]; Abdellaoui et al., 2019[196]). Research using data from longitudinal studies of twins or bio-banks has sought to understand the genetic basis for loneliness and isolation. In general, higher-end estimates come from research using twin or family studies, which find that hereditability may account for up to 50% of individual variation in perceptions of isolation (see (Cacioppo et al., 2011[177]) and (Gao et al., 2016[178]) for an overview). Even assuming the higher end estimates, this still means that at least half of the variation in social connections outcomes stem from other sources – allowing a potentially large role for socio-economic, structural and environmental factors in determining how lonely, isolated or connected an individual is.

[2] Sudden life events, or transition phases, may also induce feelings of loneliness or social isolation. One reason life transitions can be a vulnerable time for social connections outcomes is because they disrupt existing social networks, and can lead to greater isolation (Evans et al., 2022[200]). This can be true for both young people leaving home for the first time (Lim, Eres and Vasan, 2020[204]), or for the elderly entering into long-term care facilities (Weldrick and Grenier, 2018[179]). Examples of these events – sometimes called triggers – include the loss of a loved one, divorce or separation, the onset of an illness, losing a job or moving away from home (Lim, Eres and Vasan, 2020[204]). The effects of a life transition on any given individual vary widely. Some trigger events are inherently negative (loss of a loved one) whereas others are not inherently positive or negative (moving from home). Additionally, life events may overlap with one another, happen suddenly without warning, or take place over an extended period of time (Lim, Eres and Vasan, 2020[204]). The ways in which people respond to and rebound from triggering life events stems in large part from the underlying risk and resilience factors unique to the individual, but can also be affected by policies that are designed to ease transitions (e.g. youth transitions to the labour force), or ensure the inclusion of socially isolated individuals (e.g. community centres, particularly important for elderly people living alone).

[3] Outcomes in various dimensions of the OECD Well-being Framework (Figure 1.1), such as income, education, jobs and job quality, health, work-life balance and housing, can all shape people's time, resources and opportunities to connect with others. A simple illustration of this is provided in Chapter 3, which highlighted how deprivations in socio-economic conditions – earning a low income, being unemployed, having lower levels of education – are all associated with worse outcomes in social connections.

[4] Various programmes run by Türkiye's Ministry of Family and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the areas of housing, community-based social assistance, youth participation, counselling and psychosocial support, culture and volunteering also focus on social cohesion and intergenerational connection, including through many initiatives that support families and children. The Ministry of Family and Social Affairs also provides parents with resources and services to support raising children in the digital age, including protecting children from digital risks, cyberbullying and – in coordination with the Information Technologies and Communication Authority and Department of Cybercrime – a social media working group.

[5] Previous work at the OECD has highlighted the well-being impacts of digital technology (OECD, 2019[94]; Lee and Žarnic, 2024[88]), the role of digital technology and social media in adolescent and child mental health and well-being (OECD, 2025[90]; 2018[210]) – which includes discussion of social connections outcomes, including social media use and cyberbullying – and the ways that digital devices are integrated into education systems (OECD, 2024[143]; 2024[208]; 2023[180]).

[6] Different definitions for social infrastructure exist, and not all stakeholders active in the field use the term synonymously (Latham and Layton, 2022[217]). There are two main definitional approaches: (1) the welfare state perspective and (2) the social cohesion approach (Renner, Plank and Getzner, 2024[211]). The welfare state perspective views social infrastructure as one form of broader infrastructure, encompassing the services, facilities and institutions that enable people to actively participate in society and ensure quality of life. This approach focuses on public service provision, and typically includes education, health, culture, recreation and social services (including public order and safety). Previous OECD statistical work in defining the distinct components of infrastructure (economic vs. social) has been centred in this approach (van de Ven, 2021[214]; Mudde, Dornel and D'ambrières, 2024[207]).

The social cohesion approach has gained traction in recent years, and centres on the physical spaces that foster social interactions and build social capital – especially connection across disparate social groups – rather than the provision of service itself (Klinenberg, 2019[20]; Latham and Layton, 2019[21]). For this reason, the second approach goes beyond publicly funded spaces to also include commercial spaces that have a strong social component: for example, cafes, bookstores, barbershops, etc. This definitional approach builds off the concept of third places: widely accessible and informal spaces – beyond home, school or the workplace – where people come together predominantly for conversation and social interaction without needing an invitation or requiring significant expense (Oldenburg, 1989[68]; Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982[181]). The social cohesion approach is also closely linked to social capital literature, investigating declining trends in civic participation and its implications for connection (Putnam, 2000[30]).

This chapter uses the social cohesion approach to define social infrastructure. Note that other recent policy approaches have taken a much broader definitional view of social infrastructure, marrying together the welfare state and social cohesion perspectives to create a definition of social infrastructure that includes all social policies, rights and services as well as all public resources – including technical infrastructure such as waste water, electricity and telecommunications – that enable people to fully engage in their civic, economic and social lives (WHO, 2025[3]). The narrower definition used in this chapter enables a finer distinction between social infrastructure – physical spaces that encourage interaction – and the *outcomes* it influences – social connection and social capital. Its narrower scope on physical space, as opposed to

spaces, policies, rights and services combined, also allows for more actionable recommendations in advancing the measurement agenda.

[7] The third categorisation, "bonding" social ties, refers to close relationships with individuals who are a part of the same existing network – close family and friends, members of a social club, etc. (Putnam, 2000[30]). These relationships are also important for well-being, and can be supported by social infrastructure, however are also cultivated in private spaces.

[8] There are a few existing initiatives to score social infrastructure that provide a suggestive range of inputs for what criteria might be needed to create and structure such a scorecard.

The Australian Urban Observatory Social Infrastructure Index ranges from a minimum score of 0 and maximum score of 16, and comprises four sub-domains (Australian Urban Observatory, 2025[199]): health infrastructure (access to residential aged care facilities, dentists, general practitioners, pharmacies, community health centres, and maternal child and family health centres), education infrastructure (access to childcare, public primary and secondary schools), community and sport infrastructure (access to community centres, public swimming pools and sports facilities) and cultural infrastructure (access to museums, art galleries, cinemas, libraries). The index focuses on communal, rather than commercial (or digital) spaces, and does not include public parks or green spaces.

The University of Texas at Dallas has developed a Social Infrastructure Index for 55 large metro areas in the United States and Canada, containing the following input measures: volunteer rate, poverty rate, community centres per capita, libraries per capita, education expenditures per child, police spending per officer, technology sector job growth, five-year population growth, quality of parks and open spaces (measured via total acreage, and expenditure per capita) (Gearey, Foster and Ahmed, n.d.[202]).

[9] The National Neighborhood Data Archive (NaNDA) collates data from the National Establishment Time Series Database which itself contains private for-profit, non-profit and government agency organisations. NaNDA then classifies each establishment according to North American Industry Classification system codes, resulting in a database of the following types of social infrastructure: eating and drinking places; religious, civic and social organisations; parks; personal services; arts, entertainment and recreation; social service organisations (Rhubart et al., 2022[182]).

[10] "How would you describe your sense of belonging to the following? a. To your local community b. To your town or city c. To your province d. To Canada" Very strong; somewhat strong; somewhat weak; very weak; no opinion (Statistics Canada, 2020[194]).

[11] In OECD countries, the number of adults who reported having used the Internet over the past three months increased from 54% in 2005 to 92% in 2023 (OECD, 2024[209]). Furthermore, the percentage of respondents in the EU who have used social networks in the last three months increased from 43% in 2014 to 59% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024[183]). These statistics are for the general population, but when narrowing in on young people, 2024 data from the United States show that almost half (46%) of young people aged 13 to 17 use the Internet "almost constantly", and 90% have access to a smartphone (Faverio and Sidoti, 2024[201]). Across all OECD countries, 15-year-olds use digital devices for non-academic purposes for 2.6 hours a day during the week, on average, and 3.9 hours per day on weekends (OECD, 2025[90]).

[12] The second youngest age cohort in the United States has the highest rate of agreeing that social media makes people feel less connected, however the difference in outcomes between age groups is less than for loneliness (Figure 5.4, Panel A).

[13] Findings from Chapter 4 show that in-person interactions have been declining over the past 10-15 years, while at the same time, remote connections have been rising. This is suggestive of some degree of displacement, however it is insufficient to make causal claims.

[14] This line of argument posits that real-world encounters use social cues, happen synchronously (i.e., people speak in turn, reacting to tone, facial cues and body language of the other) and are often one-to-one. Conversely, online interactions tend to be disembodied, asynchronous, characterised by one-to-many modes of communication and take place in short-lived communities with low barriers to entry and exit, which makes relationships more disposable (Haidt, 2024[101]).

[15] In addition, the simple presence of a digital device can impact not only the quantity but also the quality of real-world interactions (Turkle, 2015[102]): one experimental study found that the presence of a mobile phone negatively affected the quality of conversation and closeness between people in the same room, as a result of it being a distraction (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2013[184]); another finds similar results, with the presence (or absence) of a mobile device influencing perceived empathy levels of one's conversation partner (Misra et al., 2016[218]). An additional line of research focuses on "phubbing" – when a person focuses on their phone, ignoring others nearby – showing that it can diminish feelings of connection and enjoyment of social interactions (Barrick, Barasch and Tamir, 2022[185]; Capilla Garrido et al., 2021[186]). One study in China, focused on the effects of parental "phubbing" on young children, suggests it can influence social withdrawal in children and worsen parent-child relationship quality (Zhang and Wang, 2025[216]).

[16] Data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey shows that between 2017 and 2022, young people reported an increase of cyberbullying victimisation from 12% to 16%, with girls reporting higher rates than boys (conversely, boys report higher rates of engaging in cyberbullying, themselves) (OECD, 2025[90]). The impact of cyberbullying can be exacerbated by the widespread dissemination of harmful content targeting victims. Research highlights links between cyberbullying and various mental health issues, including psychological distress and depression (Giumetti and Kowalski, 2022[188]).

[17] A meta-analysis of 23 studies investigating the relationship between loneliness and social media use finds a small positive relationship between the two outcomes (Liu and Baumeister, 2016[187]). Another oft-cited study concludes that more frequent digital media use is associated with lower psychological well-being among adolescents, compared to adolescents who seldom use digital media (Twenge, 2019[213]): these findings may be due to a reduction in face-to-face interactions and physical activity, disruptions to sleep and the effects of social comparison.

Other scholars argue that the weight given to social media for changes in mental health and feelings of loneliness and isolation may be overstated: findings are either unclear, or show small effects. A 2019 study finds a negative association between digital technology use and psychological well-being in adolescents, however the authors argue that the effect is too small in magnitude to interpret as relevant in a policy context (Orben and Przybylski, 2019[189]). In a more recent paper, the same authors find no evidence that the deeper integration of social media into the daily lives of adolescents has increased the prevalence of depression or emotional problems (Vuorre, Orben and Przybylski, 2021[215]). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 196 studies investigating the relationship between social media use and loneliness, specifically, finds no significant relationship (Cheng et al., 2019[190]).

[18] Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) sampling involves real-time sampling of respondents' affective states and behaviours; for more information on the methodology refer to (OECD, 2013[193]) and (Kudrna et al., 2024[191]). Increasingly, these surveys are fielded digitally using apps.

[19] Applications of this approach have shown that day-to-day changes in digital communication and social media use did *not* affect adolescents' perceptions of social support (Blahošová et al., 2024[142]); other evidence shows that in-person or mixed in-person and remote interactions are associated with high levels of positive affect, compared to either not socialising or only remote interactions (Kroencke et al., 2022[203]). Another study found that following online interactions with friends and family (who the respondent knows in the real-world – i.e., not "online friends"), depressed adolescent respondents were more likely to report negative emotions than positive (Moukalled, Bickham and Rich, 2021[206]), and yet another study showed that adolescents susceptible to social influences were more likely to feel socially isolated after one hour of social media use (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022[198]). Indeed, another study of college-aged students finds that socialising via digital technology was associated with higher levels of loneliness, and lower well-being, in comparison to socialising in person – even when users described both types of interactions as meaningful (Roshanaei et al., 2024[212]). Continued applications of this method will help unpack these relationships in greater detail.

[20] A few studies of school bans have been conducted thus far (although social connections outcomes were not considered). For example, a study of 30 English secondary schools found that restrictive school policies on smartphone usage were not associated with better mental well-being among the student population, and while the policies limited social media use *during* school hours it had no effect on out-of-school usage (Goodyear et al., 2025[192]). This aligns with previous OECD work, which notes that classroom bans can minimise disruptions during the school day, but that these policies could have the unintended consequence of *increasing* smartphone and social media use at home (OECD, 2024[208]). Conversely, an assessment of Norway's guidelines by a researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Health finds that the policy has had mental health benefits for girls, as well as improving their education outcomes (Abrahamsson, 2024[197]).

Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries

Social connections – how people interact with and relate to one another – have far-reaching effects on health, employment, education and civic engagement. This report builds on findings from the OECD's flagship well-being publication, *How's Life?*, to provide an in-depth overview of social connectedness across OECD countries, expanding the evidence base on this emerging policy priority. Drawing from newly combined, large sample size official data sources, it compares the quantity and quality of social connections across population groups, and tracks how these outcomes have developed over time. Findings reveal that (1) people are meeting in person less frequently than in the past, while self-reported feelings of connection have only recently shown signs of worsening in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) men and young people – groups previously considered at lower risk – have seen some of the largest deteriorations; (3) deprivations in social connection often overlap with socio-economic disadvantage, living alone and older age; and (4) the drivers of social connections are complex and span socio-economic, environmental and structural factors. This report explores social infrastructure and digital technologies as two examples of drivers of (dis)connection that can be targeted by policy.

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