

Title: Economic implications of the asocial society: a scoping review of loneliness among young adults across the life course

About the project:

Loneliness — the subjective experience of social isolation — is a pervasive social issue, negatively impacting individuals across the life course. Loneliness and its consequences have largely been studied in older populations. Yet, recent data indicate that loneliness is on the rise among young adults globally, including Canada. The economic consequences of loneliness among young adults are increasingly being recognized. In this scoping review, we asked what the existing research tells us about the economic impacts and dimensions of loneliness among young adults (15-35 years) in Canada and internationally.

This review assessed and synthesized the available evidence on the economic impacts of loneliness and interventions targeted to reduce loneliness in young adults, highlighting gaps and areas for future research. A systematic search was conducted for quantitative and qualitative evidence in peer-reviewed journals and grey literature published in English or French, between January 2012 and June 2022. The search was limited to literature that included direct and indirect effects of loneliness on economic outcome measures, as well as evidence on interventions designed to reduce loneliness among young people in Canada and other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Below are the main findings from 23 studies that met the inclusion criteria for our review.

Key findings:

Few studies have examined the economic impact of loneliness among young adults aged 15-35 years.

- **Research assessing the economic implications of loneliness is at an infancy stage.** Despite the economic implications of loneliness being increasingly recognized across research fields, there is a dearth of empirical research assessing it among young populations. This scoping review identified six studies measuring the impacts of loneliness on economic outcomes among young adults.
- **There is a lack of Canadian literature on economic impacts of loneliness in young adults.** There are significant research gaps on the economic implications of loneliness in Canada. This review identified no Canadian study that assessed the impacts of loneliness on economic outcomes among young adults. Thus, there is an urgent need to collect Canadian data to investigate the effects of loneliness and its impact on economic outcomes — both among young adults and the general population. The few studies that assessed the impact of loneliness on economic outcomes among young adults were done in Norway (2 studies), the United Kingdom (3 studies), and the United States (1 study).

- **Loneliness is associated with economic outcomes in young adults.** From the six studies included in this review, loneliness was found to be directly associated with fewer employment opportunities, lower income, a higher rate of university attrition and lower academic achievement. The indirect consequences of loneliness include increased use of community/university services, general practitioner visits and hospitalizations.
- **Interventions to tackle loneliness in young adults fall into four categories.** This scoping review identified 17 studies focused on interventions reducing loneliness among young adults. Over half of the intervention studies (n=11/17, 65%) used in-person delivery methods, while about third (n=5, 29%) used online/digital technology methods, and one intervention study (6%) used a mixed-approach. Overall, Interventions can be categorized as follows:
 1. Psychology based (e.g., changing maladaptive social cognition messaging, cognitive therapy, cognitive-behavior skills, mindfulness, mindfulness messaging, positive psychology, positive psychology, mindfulness-based self-compassion, and cognitive behavioural skill-building exercises).
 2. Skills development (e.g., coping behaviors, and education and enrichment of relational skills).
 3. Social support (e.g., social identification, psychosocial school program, social participation, group work)
 4. Stress management (e.g., social-emotional skills, vitality intervention).

Policy implications:

- **Support policy with scientific evidence:** There is a need for more evidence on loneliness and its economic consequences among young Canadians to evaluate and inform future interventions. Steps towards achieving this goal may include:
 - Harnessing the power of existing data to see the big picture and develop new surveys using standardized tools to measure loneliness and economic outcome indicators and monitor the prevalence, trends and patterns across regions in Canada.
 - New research is needed to investigate the mechanisms through which loneliness affects direct and indirect economic outcomes within Canada.
 - The design and implementation of a Canadian longitudinal study can address our gap in knowledge on the effects of loneliness across the life course and economic consequences linked to loneliness among young Canadians. Government bodies can play a role by funding research/intervention programs. Supporting further research on loneliness will help inform best practices and policies on how to manage the increase of loneliness exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Develop programs that encourage prosocial behaviour.** Effective interventions to address loneliness among young people require a holistic approach and multilevel partnerships, involving all levels of governments, organizations, communities and education sectors.
- **Appoint a high commissioner of loneliness to coordinate actions.**

Further information:

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