



What are the factors associated with loneliness?

Analysis from the August 2011 ONS Opinions Survey, Well-Being Module

Key Points

Although one in twenty respondents reported being highly lonely, 53% of respondents do not report being lonely at all. Being lonely is associated with lower well-being. Factors associated with loneliness are: poor health, no access to a car, being younger, not being a parent and small household sizes.

Introduction

Loneliness was assessed in the Opinion Survey collected by the Office of National Statistics in August 2011. The question asked to assess loneliness was "Overall, how lonely did you feel yesterday?", which differed from the question used in July 2011, which was "How lonely do you feel in your daily life?". A small proportion of respondents reported being highly lonely (4.7%), however, the majority of respondents (53.1%) reported that they were not lonely at all. This means that it may be more suitable to investigate the determinants of whether people report being lonely at all, rather than investigate what makes people lonelier.

Loneliness and Wellbeing

If respondents indicated that they were lonely they indicated that they were likely to report significantly lower life satisfaction; that they felt that the things they did in their life was significantly less worthwhile; they were likely to report that they were less happy on the day prior to the one on which they were surveyed and that they were significantly more anxious. The factors associated with loneliness were investigated using a logistic regression model. The variables entered are shown in Box 1 (an asterisk indicates an interaction).

Box 1. Variables entered into the model

- Age
- Education Level
- Local Government Area
- Gender
- BME Status
- Whether respondent had access to a car
- Whether respondent was in good health
- Income
- Defacto Relationship Status
- Household Size
- Employment Status
- Whether respondent was a parent
- Household size and age*
- Age and whether the respondent was in good health*
- Whether respondent had access to a car and whether they were in good health*
- Age and defacto relationship status*

Results

The size of the sample for these analyses was 950. The model was shown to fit the data well, based on the Hosmer-Lemeshow test and explained 15.9% of the variance. After controlling for other determinants of wellbeing we found that the following variables were associated with loneliness: respondents' self-rated health, age, respondents' household size, not having access to a car and whether or not the respondent was a parent, which was associated with less loneliness. Respondents' age was also found to be an important factor, with older people being less lonely. Significant interactions between health and age, and health and having access to a car were also found.

Health, age and mobility

People who rated themselves as having worse health reported being more lonely. This can be seen in Figure 1. Amongst people who were disabled those who considered themselves limited by their illness were significantly more lonely, than those who did not. Not having access to a car lead to people feeling significantly more lonely. This was found to be greater amongst those with ill health, although amongst people with fair to very good health, not having access to a car was still associated with being lonely. There was a significant interaction between age and health, with the effect of health on loneliness being greater for people under the age of 65. When health and household size were considered, older people tended to be report being less lonely than younger people.

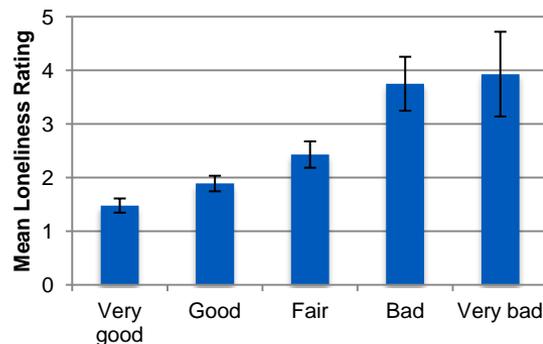


Figure 1. The association between self-reported health and loneliness

Household size and parenthood

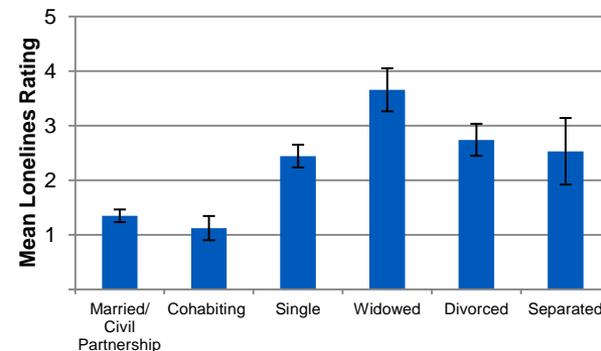


Figure 2. The association between defacto relationship status and loneliness

There was a significant association between household size and loneliness with people in larger households being less likely to be lonely. Being a parent was also found to be significantly associated with being lonely, with parents being significantly less lonely than people who were not parents. Relationship status was not found to be significant once household size was considered, but on its own it is significant. Interestingly there is no significant differences in the loneliness of married people and unmarried cohabiting couples. This can be seen in Figure 2.

Considerations

The majority of people stated that they were not lonely at all, so the analyses could only establish the factors that are associated with respondents reporting any loneliness at all, rather than the factors leading to increased loneliness. As with any analysis of observational data, causality is difficult to establish and hence careful interpretation is required.

Conclusions

Most people do not report being lonely, but there is an important number of people who do report being lonely and this is associated with reduced wellbeing. People who report being lonely are more likely to report having worse health and living alone. These analyses could be used to inform policy related to health and social care.