

LONELY-EU Policy Brief Series
Research Update



LONELY-EU

**Europe's Loneliness
Measurement Challenge: Building
Evidence-Based Infrastructure**

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Executive Summary

Loneliness costs EU member states billions annually in healthcare and lost productivity, yet comprehensive psychometric evaluation across all 27 EU countries (N=25,646) reveals current measurement instruments vary dramatically in quality¹. The Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale (T-ILS) is the only measure achieving cross-national comparability, but primarily captures emotional distress rather than social connection deficits—raising concerns about whether it adequately represents how loneliness manifests across Europe's diverse populations. Europe urgently needs investment in completing the EU SIL Index (under development, expected 2026-2027) to achieve both comparability and comprehensive content coverage, alongside systematic measurement infrastructure including annual data collection, quality assurance protocols, and Eurostat integration. Without this evolution, the EU risks basing billion-euro policy decisions on inadequate measures that cannot effectively track whether interventions address the actual drivers of loneliness.

The Problem

Loneliness is associated with a 26% increased risk of early death and costs €14B+/year in Spain alone (1.17% of GDP)². Despite growing policy attention—with the UK³ and Japan⁴ appointing loneliness ministers, the US Surgeon General declaring a public health crisis⁵, and WHO launching a Commission on Social Connection⁶—the EU faces a critical challenge: widely-used instruments either don't produce comparable scores across member states or don't adequately capture the diverse ways loneliness manifests across European populations.

Without reliable measurement infrastructure, we cannot determine whether interventions reduce loneliness, which approaches work best, or whether the crisis is worsening or improving. Prevalence estimates from different surveys in the same year (2022) differ by as much as 8 percentage points in some member states¹ and, as recent as 2025, as much as twenty percentage points across two reports for the United States^{7,8}. In addition, an elderly widow in rural Greece experiences loneliness differently from a young professional in Amsterdam or a refugee in Berlin, yet current instruments—developed primarily in the US and the Netherlands—may not

capture these variations. Europe lacks coordinated data collection, standardized, yet contextually sensitive protocols, and systematic monitoring infrastructure.

The Evidence

Recent validation studies across all EU member states reveal a troubling paradox: the measure with the best cross-national comparability has limited content validity, while measures with better content coverage cannot be compared across all countries:

- **The Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale (T-ILS)** is the only measure showing the statistical properties that enable meaningful cross-national comparisons. However, it correlates strongly with emotional states (depression, happiness) but shows weak associations with social network characteristics (social activities, contact frequency, relationships) in many countries. This suggests the T-ILS primarily captures affective distress rather than the structural social dimensions that interventions often target. It can tell us how many people feel lonely but may not capture whether they lack social relationships or face structural barriers to connection. Interventions expanding social networks may show weak effects on T-ILS scores even when successful—not because they failed, but because the measure captures emotional states rather than social circumstances.
- **The Six-Item De Jong Gierveld Scale (DJGLS-6)** shows the opposite pattern: strongest construct validity across 25 of 27 countries and particularly strong correlations with social support, relationship quality, and social networks—suggesting it captures the full spectrum of loneliness. However, it achieves scalar invariance in only 5 countries and cannot be reliably compared across all 27 EU member states.
- **The currently used single-item measure** cannot establish measurement invariance, fails validity thresholds in 8 countries, and cannot capture multidimensional loneliness. We do not recommend this single-item measure.

Beyond measurement quality issues, Europe lacks systematic infrastructure to use even validated measures effectively: no annual coordinated data collection, no standardized quality protocols, no central coordination. We cannot track whether the crisis is improving, evaluate intervention effectiveness, or fulfill WHO commitments.

The Solution

Immediate Actions (2025-2026)

1. **Standardize current practice:** Adopt the T-ILS as primary measure for EU-wide monitoring given its unique cross-national comparability, while clearly communicating it primarily captures emotional distress. Issue guidance on supplementing T-ILS with qualitative methods where deeper understanding is needed and interpreting results in context of its limitations.
2. **Advocate for integration into established survey infrastructure:** Actively lobby for inclusion of validated loneliness measures (beginning with T-ILS, transitioning to EU SIL Index upon validation) in major European and global survey programs including the European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and other infrastructural surveys. This would provide longitudinal comparability, reduce implementation costs, and enable harmonization with existing social indicators.
3. **Begin infrastructure planning:** Coordinate with Eurostat and member state statistical offices now to design annual monitoring systems capable of evolving as better measures become available. Develop quality assurance protocols, prepare integration pathways, engage with WHO/OECD on harmonization, and plan for diverse population monitoring. These coordination actions require policy directive rather than immediate funding.

Medium-Term Implementation (2026-2027)

Upon EU SIL Index validation completion, implement:

- **Annual coordinated data collection** with core modules ensuring comparability plus ancillary modules for context-specific experiences
- **Integration into established survey infrastructure** including European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), and International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to leverage existing infrastructure and enable longitudinal tracking
- **Eurostat integration** leveraging existing survey infrastructure while enabling disaggregated analysis
- **Technical support systems** providing training, quality assurance, and capacity building
- **Harmonization framework** ensuring alignment with WHO/OECD initiatives while preserving European specificity, with cultural validation in all 24 EU languages

Investment scale should be comparable to other EU-wide statistical infrastructure for employment, health, and education monitoring.

Why This Matters

Quality, culturally-informed measurement infrastructure enables targeted policy evaluation (understanding what works for whom), prevents resource waste (ensuring billions address actual drivers), respects diversity (acknowledging loneliness manifests differently across populations), supports equity (capturing marginalized experiences), enables EU coordination while respecting context, and positions the EU to lead global efforts.

We can use the T-ILS today, but risk basing billion-euro decisions on a measure that inadequately represents how loneliness manifests across Europe's diverse populations. We're developing a solution—the EU SIL Index—but completing this work and building implementation infrastructure requires policy commitment and investment now. The question isn't whether to invest—it's whether Europe will have the nuanced data needed for evidence-based decisions that effectively address loneliness across all communities.

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About LONELY-EU

LONELY-EU is a Horizon Europe project that aims to improve understanding, monitoring and policymaking on social isolation and loneliness across Europe. The project combines research, policy development and networking to support evidence-based action at all governance levels.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

Dr Hans Rocha IJzerman is the founder and CEO of Entrelacs, a company developing AI-powered personalized loneliness assessment. The identification of measurement gaps in current instruments is relevant to Entrelacs' commercial activities. The measurement quality framework presented here is based on independent psychometric research (Paris et al., 2025).

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