

LONELY-EU Policy Brief Series
Research Update



LONELY-EU

The LONELY-EU Evidence Quality Rating System

A Framework for Reliable Loneliness Measurement in EU Policy

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Executive Summary

Not all loneliness measures are equally reliable. With billions in public health resources at stake, EU policymakers need transparent guidance on which measurement instruments produce trustworthy, comparable data across member states. The LONELY-EU traffic light rating system evaluates measures across three critical dimensions—cross-EU comparability, construct validity, and content coverage—enabling evidence-based instrument selection. Current assessment reveals that while several measures perform strongly on individual dimensions, none yet achieves green ratings across all three—a measurement gap the EU SIL Index is being designed to address while providing clear guidance on using available instruments appropriately. This framework ensures policymakers can distinguish between measures suitable for EU-wide monitoring and those requiring more cautious interpretation.

The Problem

Europe has lacked transparent quality standards for evaluating loneliness measurement instruments. While many reliable measures exist, policymakers face dozens of options—single-item questions, brief scales, comprehensive inventories—without clear guidance on which measures are best suited for specific policy purposes. In practice, this lack of measurement gold standard and the divergence in the choice of measures can provide drastically different results.

Prevalence estimates from different surveys in the same year (2022) differ by as much as 8 percentage points in some EU member states. In the United States, two reports published in 2025 showed loneliness prevalence estimates differing by 20 percentage points (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2025; Nivea Connect Report 2025). These represent fundamentally incomparable measurement approaches producing dramatically different pictures of the same concepts.

This measurement inconsistency creates serious risks:

- **Wasted resources:** Interventions evaluated using poor measures may appear effective when they're not (or vice versa)
- **Misleading comparisons:** Different measures can produce wildly divergent prevalence estimates for the same population
- **Invisible populations:** Measures that fail to capture diverse loneliness experiences can miss vulnerable groups
- **Untrackable progress:** Without reliable measurement, we cannot determine whether the crisis is improving or worsening

As Spain estimates loneliness costs €14B+ annually, Sweden designs national strategies, and the EU coordinates cross-border initiatives, measurement quality directly determines whether billion-euro investments achieve their goals.

Three Key Quality Dimensions

Every loneliness measure receives ratings on:

1. Cross-EU Comparability

Can we meaningfully compare scores across different EU countries?



- **GREEN:** Scalar invariance across all 27 countries
- **YELLOW:** Works in some countries/clusters but not universally
- **RED:** Cannot establish cross-country comparability

2. Construct Validity

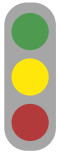
Does the measure actually assess loneliness (rather than depression, dissatisfaction, etc.)?



- **GREEN:** Validated in 20+ countries; strong correlation patterns
- **YELLOW:** Validated in 15-20 countries; moderate evidence
- **RED:** Fails validation in 8+ countries; weak evidence

3. Content Coverage

Does the measure capture the full spectrum of loneliness experiences?

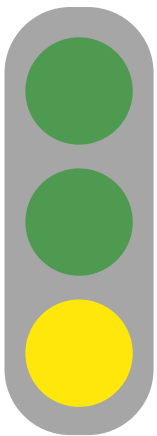


- **GREEN:** Assesses the breadth of social connection dimensions
- **YELLOW:** Focuses on one dimension; adequate but limited
- **RED:** Minimal coverage; oversimplified assessment

Many existing measures perform strongly on one or two dimensions. This system helps identify which measures are appropriate for specific policy contexts.

Example Assessments

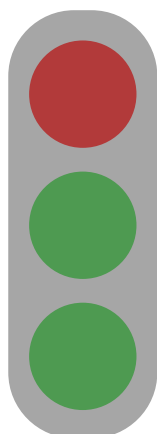
Example Assessment 1: Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale (T-ILS)



DIMENSION	RATING	WHAT THIS MEANS
1. Cross-EU Comparability	GREEN	Scalar invariance across all 27 countries
2. Construct Validity	GREEN	Validated in 21/27 countries (78%)
3. Content Coverage	YELLOW	Primarily captures emotional/affective distress; weaker associations with social network characteristics compared to DJGLS-6

Overall Assessment: Best available measure for EU-wide comparisons due to full scalar invariance, but captures emotional experience of loneliness more than structural social dimensions.

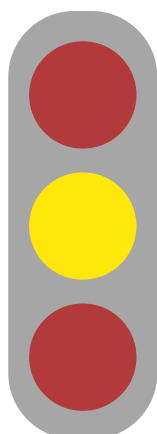
Example Assessment 2: Six-Item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS-6)



DIMENSION	RATING	WHAT THIS MEANS
1. Cross-EU Comparability	RED	Scalar invariance only in 5 countries (Cluster B); no configural invariance in 14 countries (Cluster A)
2. Construct Validity	GREEN	Validated in 25/27 countries (93%)
3. Content Coverage	GREEN	Captures affective distress, social support and relational characteristics; strongest associations with social network characteristics

Overall Assessment: Based on the current literature, sufficient content validity and breadth, but cannot be compared across all EU countries—only within specific clusters.

Example Assessment 3: Single-item loneliness measure



DIMENSION	RATING	WHAT THIS MEANS
1. Cross-EU Comparability	RED	Cannot establish measurement invariance with single items
2. Construct Validity	YELLOW	Validated in 19/27 countries (70%)
3. Content Coverage	RED	Captures only one dimension; cannot assess multidimensional loneliness

Overall Assessment: Not recommended for EU-wide monitoring; limited psychometric assessment possible; failed validity threshold in 8 countries.

Policy Recommendations

Immediate Actions

1. **Adopt the traffic light system** as standard protocol for all EU loneliness measurement initiatives
2. **Require evidence ratings** in grant applications and policy proposals using loneliness measures
3. **Check all three dimensions** before selecting measures for policy monitoring
4. **Prioritize cross-EU comparability** for initiatives requiring cross-national coordination
5. **Use multiple measures** where possible to capture different dimensions

Critical DON'Ts:

- Don't ignore yellow or red warnings when making EU-wide comparisons
- Don't assume all measures are equal—quality varies dramatically
- Don't use red-rated measures for policy decisions
- Don't mix incomparable measures and treat results as equivalent

For Strategic Planning

1. **Support development and validation** of the EU SIL Index. A measure being designed to address the identified measurement gap by aiming for strong performance across all three dimensions. Like all measures, it will require rigorous independent validation to confirm its psychometric properties.
2. **Update ratings regularly** as new validation evidence emerges
3. **Build capacity** among national statistical offices to apply quality standards

Why Evidence Quality Matters

Strong measurement enables:

- Confidence in research using validated, appropriate measures
- Accurate tracking of loneliness prevalence over time
- Evaluation of which interventions actually reduce loneliness
- Fair resource allocation to regions and populations most affected

- Learning from successful policies in other EU countries
- Confident cross-national comparisons and benchmarking

Frequently Asked Questions

Who determines the ratings?

Independent scientific validation studies using rigorous psychometric analysis across all 27 EU member states.

Can ratings change?

Yes—ratings are updated as new validation evidence emerges or societal changes affect measurement properties.

What if no measure has all green ratings?

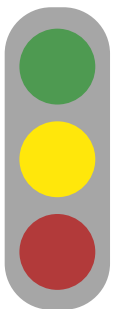
This indicates a measurement gap. The LONELY-EU project is developing the EU SIL Index to address this gap, though it will require the same rigorous validation process as existing measures. In the meantime, selecting measures appropriate to your specific policy context remains the best approach.

How do I know which countries have been validated for yellow-rated measures?

Detailed validation reports specify country coverage for each instrument. Contact the LONELY-EU team for specific guidance.

References

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*Ratings

- **GREEN:** Strong evidence
- **YELLOW:** Moderate evidence
- **RED:** Limited evidence

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.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

Dr Hans Rocha IJzerman is the founder and CEO, and Dr Miguel Silan is the Chief Scientific Officer, 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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