LONELY-EU Policy Brief Series



What Europe's Social Connection Numbers Hide

Heterogeneity, Origins, and Implications for Policy

Written for ministries and public agencies that commission social connection surveys, and the national statistical offices that run them

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Executive Summary

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Governments across the EU fund responses to loneliness and social disconnection, and they need to know whether that spending works. That depends on survey tools that show which forms of connection people lack. A systematic review of 2,720 tools, drawn from 9,032 articles, shows where current tools help and where they fall short.

The tools were developed for a narrow slice of the population. A third were developed in the United States alone and 18.7% within the EU-27, mostly with adults aged 18 to 44 and rarely with adults over 65. Tools grouped under the same heading also ask about quite different things. Two tools in the same category share only a tenth to a fifth of their content, so two figures published under the same label can describe different experiences.

The tool is only one reason survey estimates differ. Surveys that ask the same question in the same year can still produce different prevalence rates and country rankings, because survey mode and sampling also shape the result.

Existing tools remain useful. They can track change within a survey series that keeps its questions and methods, and the Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale compares well across all 27 member states. The EU Social Isolation and Loneliness (SIL) Index, now in development, is designed to report the specific forms of connection that different parts of government can act on, comparably across member states. The brief closes with six recommendations: what to do with current surveys now, and how to build toward monitoring that can inform spending.

A Note on Terms

Social connection covers the relationships people have, what happens in them, and how they judge them. Loneliness is the feeling that registers a shortfall in relationships that matter to a person, and it is one part of social connection. What people need from their relationships differs between people and places: for one it is someone to rely on, for another feeling understood or being able to trust (Silan et al., 2026).

A tool is a questionnaire or set of survey questions; a survey is the data collection in which a tool is used. The population a tool was developed for is the one its authors wrote it for and first tested it with.

Why Measurement Matters for Policy

Most of what governments control acts on specific forms of connection. Transport decides whether people can reach others, housing shapes who they live near, and social services decide whether someone has a person to rely on. Funding for civil society, sport, and culture shapes whether people take part in community life.

A loneliness figure shows the scale of the problem, and such figures have helped put the issue on the policy agenda. On its own, a loneliness figure cannot show which of these forms is missing or which part of government could act. Monitoring that reports these forms separately, with tools developed for the people being monitored, is what will show whether spending works.

Policy attention has grown quickly. In 2025 the World Health Assembly adopted a resolution on fostering social connection for global health (World Health Assembly, 2025), following the report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection (World Health Organization, 2025). The OECD's 2025 report covers social connections as well as loneliness (OECD, 2025), and Eurostat's 2027 EU-SILC ad hoc subject on mental health and well-being includes questions on social support (European Commission, 2025). Many national strategies in Europe start from loneliness, the part of the field the public recognizes most readily.

The WHO Commission and the US Surgeon General's advisory organize the field into three components (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). Structure refers to how many relationships people have and how often they interact, function to what those relationships provide, such as support, and quality to how positive or strained they are (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). This brief uses that grouping as a common reference point and asks what current tools can support within it.

What Current Tools Can and Cannot Tell Us

Current tools support some uses well and are not yet precise enough for others. They can track change over time within a survey that keeps the same questions and methods, and the Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale compares well across all 27 member states (Paris et al., 2026). They are not yet precise enough to compare figures from different surveys, to estimate the costs of loneliness for budgeting, or to show which form of connection a program changed. Three findings explain why.

Who the Tools Were Developed For

This brief draws on a systematic review by Annecy Behavioral Science Lab and Ruhr-University Bochum (Mosalakanti et al., 2026). Of 9,032 screened articles, 1,859 developed a new tool, and 1,790 of those named at least one country of development. Development studies make the basic choices: which relationships to ask about, what counts as support, and whether isolation means living alone or having no one to confide in. A later translation or validation study can test whether a tool works in a new population, but it cannot add questions about experiences the original authors never considered.

Those choices were made in a small number of places. The United States accounts for 33.6% of development work and English-speaking countries for 56%, while 18.7% involves an EU-27 member state. Within Europe, the United Kingdom leads, followed by Spain and Germany, and most member states appear once or twice. European researchers have been active mainly in validating and adapting tools conceived elsewhere.

The people involved were narrow in the same way. Among tools with an assignable age band, 52% center on ages 26 to 44, 26.4% on ages 18 to 25, and 4.7% on adults aged 65 and over. Only 10.8% of tools mention an ethnic or racial group at all. These are the dimensions along which European populations are most diverse.

What the Tools Ask

The review coded the questions of all 2,720 tools into common content categories, so that any two tools can be compared on what they ask (Box 1). Tools grouped under the same component often ask about quite different things. Two tools classed as measuring function share on average 15.6% of their content. Within quality, the largest component, the figure is 9.4%, and structure, whose categories are the most concrete, reaches 20.1%.

The three components remain a useful way to organize the field, but a component label says little about what a given tool asks. People describe feeling connected in specific terms: being able to rely on someone, feeling understood, trust, reciprocity, safety. Which of these matters shifts from person to person and place to place (Silan et al., 2026), and a figure labeled “function” or “quality” can refer to any of them.

These findings bear most on research, meta-analysis, and program evaluation, which draw on the full range of tools. Official surveys mostly use a single direct question or a short established scale, each with its own validation record (Paris et al., 2026).

Box 1. How the Tools Were Compared

The review coded every question in the 2,720 tools into a common set of 73 content categories. Overlap between two tools is measured with the Jaccard index: the number of categories they share divided by the number of categories either one uses, from 0 (nothing shared) to 1 (identical). The overlap figures in the text are averages across every pair of tools within a component. For comparison, depression scales share around 36% of their content (Fried, 2017) and romantic relationship quality scales around 38% (CORE Lab, 2025), and both fields already regard their measures as highly varied. The coded content of all tools can be browsed in the LONELY-EU Item Explorer (Annecy Behavioral Science Lab, 2026).

Why Survey Estimates Differ

Estimates from different EU surveys in the same year can diverge by eight percentage points or more in some member states (Paris et al., 2026). The tool is one reason, and survey design is another. The EU Loneliness Survey and EU-SILC both measured loneliness in 2022 with the same question in nationally representative samples of all member states, yet produced very different prevalence rates and country rankings. The EU Loneliness Survey also found different prevalence across two data collections that used the same questions with different methods (Mauri et al., 2024).

Survey mode, sampling method, fieldwork timing, and where a question sits in the questionnaire all shape the result. A common tool is necessary for comparable figures, but it is not sufficient on its own.

National surveys add a further source of divergence. An OECD review of official surveys found that all OECD countries measure social connections, but that loneliness appears in fewer than half of national surveys and that few indicators for loneliness, social support, or frequency of socializing are shared between countries (Mahoney et al., 2024).

What the EU SIL Index Will Add

The EU SIL Index is being developed within LONELY-EU for EU-wide use from the outset. Its 3–10–10 structure lets surveys of different sizes use it. Three core items are short enough for EU-wide surveys such as EU-SILC, where questionnaire space is limited, and give comparable figures across member states. Ten extended-core items suit national monitoring, where a longer module is possible, and ten ancillary items can vary between population groups, so experiences specific to a group, such as older adults, can be captured. Because the core items are the same at every level, national results can be read against EU figures.

The extended versions report each form of connection as its own result. With them, a ministry could see whether a region's gap lies in contact, in having someone to rely on, or in feeling understood, and pass each finding to the department that can act on it. Programs could be evaluated on the form of connection they set out to change. A rural transport scheme that lets older adults see others every week may leave a general loneliness score unchanged while clearly increasing contact.

The divergence between national surveys is also an opportunity. Because many national surveys do not yet include loneliness, member states can adopt a common core before their approaches drift further apart, while keeping extended and national items for their own purposes. This can build on the OECD's work toward measurement recommendations (Mahoney et al., 2024).

The nearest opportunity for the core is Eurostat's 2027 EU-SILC ad hoc subject, whose variables include whether people have someone to discuss personal problems with (European Commission, 2025). Aligning the core items with these variables would let Index results be read against EU official statistics from the start.

Two conditions apply. Like any new tool, the Index needs independent validation across EU populations before it can carry policy weight. Asking the same items everywhere will also not remove differences due to survey mode and sampling, so the Index needs to be fielded with harmonized survey methods (Recommendation 3).

Policy Recommendations

The first two recommendations apply to current surveys now. The remaining four build toward monitoring that can inform spending.

1. Keep current series and report what they measure. A long series with the same question and method is the best available evidence of change over time. Publish alongside each figure the tool used, its psychometric properties, what it captures (for example contact frequency, support, or loneliness itself), and the survey mode and sample. Report figures from different tools or survey designs side by side, and keep them as separate numbers.

2. Add a comparable loneliness scale and a few items on contact and support. Where a multi-item loneliness measure is needed now, the Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale is the best-supported option for EU-wide comparison, although its scores relate more closely to emotional states than to social activities (Paris et al., 2026; see LONELY-EU Policy Brief No. 3). Pair it with a few items on how often people have contact and whether they have someone to rely on. EU-SILC 2027 already moves in this direction.

3. Harmonize survey design along with tools. When commissioning surveys, specify the mode, the sampling frame, and where the social connection items sit in the questionnaire, and align these with EU-SILC where possible. Where designs differ, publish the differences with the results. Beyond Eurostat, include modules in the ESS, EVS, and ISSP, and harmonize with WHO and OECD initiatives (see Policy Brief No. 3).

4. Complete and validate the EU SIL Index. Support independent validation of the Index across EU populations. Place the three core items in EU-wide surveys, starting with EU-SILC, and field the extended core in national monitoring with harmonized methods.

5. Develop new tools with underrepresented groups from the start. Fund development that includes older adults, ethnic and sexual minorities, migrants, and people in economic precarity at the design stage. In commissioned research and EU-funded projects, ask that reports state where and with whom a tool was developed and validated, what its psychometric properties are, and why it fits the population studied. The LONELY-EU Item Explorer (https://lonelinessineurope.eu/lonely-eu-item-explorer) shows what each published tool asks, as a starting point for this check. A translated tool needs its own validation in each new language and context.

6. Prepare the ground for costing and resource allocation. Pooled estimates linking loneliness and isolation to health outcomes have been valuable in raising the profile of the issue. Current measures are not yet precise enough to cost loneliness for budgeting or to allocate funds between programs. Two people with the same loneliness score can lack different things, and a program that addresses one may do little for the other. Once monitoring reports the specific forms of connection separately, societal costs can be estimated for each form and linked to the policies that address it.

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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.

Conflicts of Interest

Dr Hans Rocha IJzerman is the co-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 tools is relevant to Entrelacs' commercial activities. The framework presented here is based on an independent systematic review (Mosalakanti et al., 2026).

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