

Preventing Loneliness in Young Adults in the Context of a Pandemic

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Notice

This document was drafted in the context of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Produced in a short period of time, it is based on knowledge from previous projects conducted by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), as well as on a non-exhaustive and summary review of the scientific literature. This document presents observations that may need to be revised based on the evolution of scientific knowledge related to the current pandemic. The INSPQ has therefore set up a scientific monitoring project for COVID-19 in order to rapidly modify this document, if necessary.

Key messages

- ▶ Young adults have been proportionally more likely than their elders to experience loneliness since the beginning of the pandemic.
- ▶ This situation may affect the well-being and health of this segment of the population.
- ▶ Students and young adults from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may be particularly affected.

To prevent and mitigate loneliness in young adults, it is important to adopt an ecological approach integrating various individual and collective interventions while meeting young adults in their settings of daily life. The priority is to:

- ▶ Broadcast messages that are favourable to social cohesion and sensitive to the diversity of young adults' experiences, especially:
 - ▶ promote the strengths and support the positive experiences that they put in place to deal with the impacts of the pandemic;
 - ▶ share messages based on compassion, assistance, solidarity, friendly conversation, and mutual support;
 - ▶ share information about available psychosocial support services and resources and make them accessible by relying on the possibilities offered by digital technologies (e.g., crisis lines);
 - ▶ avoid associating loneliness with a defect or reducing it to a problem to be overcome, in order to prevent the stigmatization of those youths more inclined to loneliness;

- ▶ strengthen actions that are conducive to social support, mutual aid, and the resilience of young adults in post-secondary institutions, especially:
 - ▶ reduce psychosocial and financial impacts of the pandemic by responding to their basic needs (e.g., financial assistance, food security, housing);
 - ▶ ensure the continuity of services in psychosocial support, taking into account emerging needs related to the pandemic;
 - ▶ implement peer-support programs and support mutual-aid initiatives that invite students to be kind to each other;
- ▶ strengthen actions that support future and new parents, especially:
 - ▶ Use perinatal interventions to ask questions about their psychological well-being and about their social support network and inform them about resources available in their area;
 - ▶ promote exchanges with other future and new parents by using the diverse methods available in the context of a pandemic;
- ▶ strengthen the actions for physical and built environments that are favourable to social interactions, when the epidemiological situation and public health measures allow for them, especially:
 - ▶ increase safe access to parks and green spaces;
 - ▶ support the use of public transportation and the practice of walking and biking through the installation of safe infrastructure;
- ▶ document and study the phenomenon of loneliness in young adults including:
 - ▶ conduct surveys and research to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the loneliness of young adults and the factors contributing to its emergence;
 - ▶ monitor the feeling of loneliness in different groups and document its long-term effects, especially on students;
 - ▶ study the role of social media and, more broadly, digital technologies as a tool in disaster response, and their effects on mental health and well-being, including feelings of loneliness.

Context

Since the start of the pandemic, measures put in place to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus have led to several upheavals that have affected young adults (1–3). The closing of educational institutions, online learning, massive layoffs in sectors employing mostly young workers (3), the reduction of access to certain places of socialization usually frequented by young adults, the change in the offer of formal parenting support for young parents (4), and a reduction in access to mobility are factors that have generated, in many cases, uncertainty, stress, distress, anxiety, isolation, and a feeling of loneliness in young adults (5, 6).

Several surveys conducted before the pandemic mainly in Europe and Australia already show that loneliness was present and widespread among young adults (7–9). Since the beginning of the pandemic, young adults have been proportionally more likely than their elders to experience loneliness (10–15). Among them, students and young adults from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may be the most affected (13, 16).

Several studies examining loneliness before the pandemic have shown that it can be associated with physical health problems and decreased well-being and satisfaction with life (7, 17–20). A long-term increase of risk of death of 50% in people with few social interactions and meaningful relationships was scientifically supported (18, 21).

Young adults suffering from loneliness have a greater propensity to adopt behaviours that are detrimental to their health and are less inclined to adopt effective adaptation strategies to cope with difficult situations (7).

It would not be the simple absence of social contacts (isolation) that would have a negative impact on health, but rather the discrepancy between perceived and desired social relations which causes loneliness (18–21). In this document, loneliness and isolation refer to two distinct but closely related concepts.

Loneliness and social isolation, two distinct but related concepts

- ▶ Loneliness refers to the subjective negative experience resulting from the perception of a marked gap between the quantity and quality of the relationships that a person has compared to those he or she would like to have (4, 20, 22, 23).
- ▶ Social isolation refers to situations in which contact is rare (in number, duration, frequency) and of low quality (in terms of exercising social roles or mutual exchanges) (22, 23).

Someone may thus have little contact and be socially isolated, but not suffer from loneliness, while another may have a lot of social contact and not be socially isolated, but suffer from loneliness (22, 23).

Loneliness is often characterized by insufficient social relationships, and a lack of social support is an important predictor of loneliness (20, 24). Although distinct, these two concepts are interrelated because social isolation is recognized as a factor that influences loneliness.

In the context of the pandemic, researchers have raised the importance of focusing on loneliness as a mechanism that may affect rates of depression or anxiety (5, 6). Several studies, mainly surveys carried out in various Western countries, have shown the link between loneliness and symptoms of psychological distress (24–28), depression, or anxiety (15, 29–31), in the context of COVID-19.

On the basis of these findings, it is relevant to suggest courses of action to prevent loneliness and reduce its consequences in young adults.

Objectives and methodology

This document aims to:

- ▶ describe how the pandemic has exacerbated risk factors for loneliness among young adults;
- ▶ propose courses of action aimed at preventing and reducing the loneliness of young adults in the context of a pandemic.

Note that the concept of *young adults* refers to a period marked by the transition from adolescence to adulthood and characterized by many choices and changes (32). The works identified in this document refer to varying age groups, ranging from approximately 16 to 30 years old.

To meet the objectives, an overview of the scientific and grey literature was carried out based on COVID-19 information monitoring conducted by the INSPQ. A complementary survey of various databases, including Google Scholar and certain government sites or recognized organizations, was also carried out. The level of scientific support for the strategies identified was established by examining the number and type of publications available, as well as the consistency of their results. The quality of each publication was not taken into account in this process. Details are presented in Annex 1.

Key findings

Risk factors for loneliness are exacerbated in the context of a pandemic

Many individual factors (e.g., living alone, having a low income, being unemployed, belonging to a sexual or gender minority, being a visible or ethnic minority, having physical and mental health problems or physical limitations, going through a transition, having deficient social support networks, being a caregiver) and environmental factors (e.g., type of housing, place of residence, neighbourhood, social norms) are recognized as increasing the probability of being socially isolated, which in many cases can lead to a feeling of loneliness (8, 18, 33, 34), especially when there are several factors present at the same time. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several of these factors are exacerbated, especially for young adults (3, 35).

The pandemic has caused economic upheaval. Massive layoffs of young adults (3) in the hardest-hit sectors have created uncertainty and a more precarious financial situation in this age group. This results in higher risks of social isolation and loneliness (11, 13, 35).

Protective measures against COVID-19, such as physical distancing and the closure of places where young people meet, as well as the fear of using public transportation, have led to a loss of mobility and decreased opportunities for social connections among young adults, two factors that may increase loneliness (11, 13).

The closure of educational institutions has brought about several changes that can impact many students' sense of loneliness as well as their mental health and well-being (11). Indeed, the modification of study routines, the greater use of solo work and need to be self-disciplined, relocation and a return to the family for some, reduced contact with classmates and friends, and decreased opportunities for engagement in student life and associated social networks (16, 29, 30, 36) are all factors that, in many cases, have generated uncertainty, stress, isolation, as well as a feeling of loneliness among young students (5, 6).

For some, these new challenges are added to those already present in their lives, and may possibly further accentuate their feeling of loneliness (36–38). For example, students with sexual and gender diversity may experience additional difficulties when returning home if the family setting is hostile to them (39). Also, young adults from socio-economically disadvantaged families may have to face the difficulties of their families to meet basic needs (e.g., problems with food security, inability to provide sufficient private space and access to the technology necessary to follow their distance-learning courses, or difficulty in maintaining contact with their social network or in receiving remote health care in complete confidentiality) (30).

Likewise, pandemic-related travel restrictions particularly affect international students who find it more difficult to return to their country. Several of them found themselves socially isolated with the obligation to relocate when residences closed. Studies attest to the feeling of loneliness experienced by this population (40).

The lack of support for parents can also exacerbate young parents' feelings of loneliness in the face of the many challenges that lie ahead (4). In Québec and elsewhere, the offer of formal parenting support has been suspended, cancelled, or its operations have been greatly modified. In this regard, once services are reopened or organized differently, support may come too late for young parents since waiting lists for these services can be long (41, 42). Furthermore, many future or new parents are deprived of the informal support given by grandparents, either because the latter may be considered to be at risk, or because of travel restrictions between countries and regions (42), or even by their limited access to new technologies which prevents them from providing remote support.

Courses of action to prevent loneliness among young adults in the context of a pandemic

To support young adults in dealing with loneliness in the context of a pandemic, an ecological approach with both individual and collective interventions in the different settings of daily life (neighbourhood, campus and post-secondary institutions, places of residence, green spaces) of young adults is required (28, 33). The literature consulted highlights the importance of the participation of young adults and community groups and partners from the education and health sectors in the implementation of these interventions (18, 28, 33).

Research highlights the importance of social support and quality social interactions as protective factors for health, and this is especially true for young adults who are going through, and adapting to, multiple transitions (8, 33). Social support networks provide a sense of recognition, love, and appreciation, and provide emotional and practical resources for good physical and mental health (43). Being able to rely on others when one really needs them is a recognized resilience factor and protects against loneliness (18, 19, 34).

The improvement of young adults' overall living conditions through inclusive public policies (e.g., education, transportation, housing, technologies and communication, income, physical and mental health care, and services) and a service offering that meet their basic needs can help reduce risk factors associated with loneliness. On the other hand, social inequalities in health are more acutely revealed in crisis situations and must be taken into account when implementing interventions to support young adults in situations of greater vulnerability (33, 35).

The courses of action presented in the following sections aim to prevent and alleviate loneliness in young adults. These have been divided into five broad categories:

- ▶ Actions for socio-cultural environments favourable to social cohesion and the social participation of young adults in their settings of daily life;
- ▶ Actions that are conducive to social support, mutual aid, and the resilience of young adults in post-secondary institutions;
- ▶ Actions that support future and new parents;
- ▶ Actions for physical and built environments that are favourable to social interactions when the epidemiological situation and public health measures allow for them;
- ▶ Actions to better document and study the phenomenon of loneliness in young adults.

STRENGTHEN ACTIONS FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS FAVOURABLE TO SOCIAL COHESION AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THEIR SETTINGS OF DAILY LIFE

The socio-cultural environment is a relevant anchor point for concerted actions aimed at preventing loneliness and social isolation among young adults. The development of action strategies adapted to all young people confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic is based on taking into account various parameters of the socio-cultural environment. The meaning given to loneliness and isolation, the relationships between groups, and the values and lifestyles of young adults are among the parameters to be considered (44).

The action strategies identified take these parameters into account and are oriented towards: 1) the dissemination of messages favourable to social cohesion and the diversity of experiences; 2) the creation of concrete opportunities for participation in the response to the COVID-19 crisis, and 3) the use of digital technologies.

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
<p>Disseminate messages favourable to social cohesion and sensitive to the diversity of experiences (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Appeal to positive human values such as reciprocity, responsibility, and social solidarity (45–47). Seeing that others share certain values with oneself is likely to foster a sense of interdependence that can be crucial to maintaining a sense of community and hope for the future. ▶ Emphasize the goodwill of young people and avoid blame (47, 48). A recent survey from Québec indicates that young adults adhere a little less to recommended public health measures (49). According to the same poll, 71% of older adults perceive that young people “break lockdown rules and contribute to the spread of COVID-19,” suggesting that they are partly to blame. However, blaming this group without recognizing its diversity and the challenges it faces risks weakening intergenerational cohesion (50). For this reason, it is relevant to correct this kind of perception and recognize young adults’ desire for positive contributions. This attitude can help sustain solidarity and compassion towards them (46, 51). ▶ Recognize the strengths of young adults. Without minimizing the negative psychosocial impacts of COVID-19, it is important to mention the positive experiences of certain young adults in the context of the pandemic and the methods they put in place to deal with its psychosocial impacts (52, 53). For example, some report having more time to think about their future, to measure the importance of certain relationships, and to strengthen certain friendships. Similarly, the strategies put forward to reduce the psychosocial impacts reported by some young adults could be shared (16) (e.g., social media, disseminating information in organizations close to young people). Finally, it is important to recognize and highlight the fact that, in addition to being a target of intervention, young adults can also be agents of change (16). ▶ Spread messages that reinforce compassion and mutual aid. As with the majority of people, many young people face disruptions and anxieties that can be hard to share in family, social, and academic circles (47). To help turn these challenges into constructive experiences, messages can be directed to encourage friendly exchanges and mutual support (54).
Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Avoid associating loneliness with a defect or reducing it to a problem to be tackled. The promotion of social ties should not be done through normative pressure that depreciates the diversity of experiences. Some young people prefer solitary activities to those involving social interaction (55, 56). Idealizing social ties would therefore risk stigmatizing young people who are more prone to loneliness, for example by identifying them as more passive or less attractive (57). In this regard, researchers argue that during adolescence and early adulthood, being able to spend time alone is essential for certain developmental milestones such as the acquisition of autonomy and the formation of identity (55). ▶ Aim for the human quality of relationships and not just the multiplication of social contacts. Indeed, studies conducted with adults of all ages suggest that enjoying warm human relationships characterized by trust and closeness can alleviate the distressing feelings that can be associated with time spent alone. (58).

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
<p>Create concrete opportunities to participate in the response to the COVID-19 crisis (46, 47, 59, 60) (strong level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Establish committees of young adults who will work, for example, on drafting a framework for reducing the risks associated with the confinement of this population (61). By providing participants with support and unifying resources, especially work methods that encourage them to consult their peers, this kind of strategy can reach many young people beyond those who take part in the committees themselves. ▶ Provide hands-on, interactive training that empowers young adults to engage in short-term COVID-19 response support activities (e.g., peer support for young people showing signs of distress, support for testing sites) (61, 62). ▶ Conduct online public consultations to support the design of relevant awareness messages, knowing that in the context of the crisis, recognizing and sharing losses and difficulties constitutes a strength that can rally collective efforts towards recovery (63, 64).
<p>Capitalize on the possibilities offered by digital technologies (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ensure that all young people have access to the internet and, if possible, provide it free of charge to financially disadvantaged families (51, 65, 66). ▶ Invite young people to exercise a certain vigilance, knowing that online interactions are not devoid of the risks of potentially negative collateral effects (e.g., physical inactivity, social tensions, sleep disorders, increased stress) (66, 67). ▶ Disseminate and make accessible to young adults the services and resources available in the context of a pandemic by focusing on the possibilities offered by digital technologies (crisis and psychological help lines, suicide prevention centre, 811, etc.).

STRENGTHEN ACTIONS THAT ARE CONDUCIVE TO SOCIAL SUPPORT, MUTUAL AID, AND THE RESILIENCE OF YOUNG ADULTS IN POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The measures put in place to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus have led to the closure of post-secondary institutions and a reorganization of the services they offer: transition to online education, modification of student life services (health, financial aid, employment support, etc.), cancellation of social and sporting activities, temporary closure of student residences, suspension of jobs on campus, and disruption of integration activities for new students. Actions can be put forward by educational institutions to support students, promote their well-being, and reduce the feeling of loneliness observed.

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
<p>Maintain access to on-campus support that meets the diverse needs of students (level of scientific support: strong)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ensuring the basic needs of students. To reduce the psychosocial and financial impacts of the pandemic on post-secondary students, in addition to government policies, the establishment of supportive measures by campuses is essential (financial assistance, food security, accommodation) to support students (39, 68). ▶ Ensure the continuity of psychosocial support services. These services should be considered an essential investment for young people’s well-being and success, even in the context of budget cuts resulting from COVID-19 (36, 38). Additionally, when assessing student needs, one should enquire about emerging needs: feelings of loneliness (11, 12); difficulties meeting basic needs (30), or victimization and stigmatization (69). ▶ Consider more vulnerable groups in services offered on campus. Student-support services must be established recognizing that the most marginalized students are particularly impacted by COVID-19 and are often those who use services the least. Particular attention should be paid to students with sexual and gender diversity (39), those experiencing financial difficulties (30), as well as international students (70). Everything must be done to reach them. For example, faculty members, who know the students well, could be allies in reaching these young people (30, 36).
<p>Foster peer-to-peer support (level of scientific support: moderate)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Establish recognized programs based on peer support. Awareness programs about the essential principles of psychosocial care (e.g., psychological first aid) allow trained people to be better equipped to take care of each other and to relay to support services (70, 71). These programs are already known to reduce feelings of loneliness and improve mental health in young victims of bullying or victimization (31) and could be applied remotely in a post-secondary context (62, 72, 73). ▶ Support mutual aid initiatives in the school setting that invite young people to be kind to one another: initiatives to promote mutual aid and social contacts that respect COVID-19 mitigation measures should be encouraged (70), particularly those undertaken by the students themselves (16, 36, 74).
<p>Foster student resilience on campus (level of scientific support: moderate)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Suggest self-care techniques. It is important to encourage and support students and staff in identifying ways to take care of themselves and try to approach life calmly and positively: focus on the present moment, plan pleasant activities, set challenges for oneself, participate in physical activity, be involved in campus initiatives, and maintain a routine (6,16). Such self-care techniques may reduce feelings of loneliness, isolation, and anxiety, as well as promote well-being for all (11, 70, 75). ▶ Encourage limited use of media that discusses COVID-19. Reduced social media use among post-secondary students is associated with a decrease in feelings of loneliness and symptoms of depression (76). In the context of COVID-19, the frequency of consuming upsetting information about the virus could be associated with increased anxiety (38). As a result, institutions of higher learning can help students to reduce their intake of sensationalized and upsetting news by becoming a trusted source of information that provides frequent, consistent, clear, and compassionate communication to students and the rest of the campus community (36).

STRENGTHEN ACTIONS THAT SUPPORT FUTURE AND NEW PARENTS

For many, the beginning of adult life also corresponds to the experience of parenthood. In normal times, and for all parents, formal support (prenatal meetings, pregnancy follow-up serves to prepare new parents for the reality that awaits them and allows them to forge links with other families. These activities can contribute to breaking the social isolation that some experience, especially those who have a limited or less available social network. Informal support also facilitates the adjustment to parenthood and can have a beneficial influence on the quality of the parent-child bond, as well as on their health and well-being.

Courses of action identified in May 2020¹ (4) and aimed at all parents transitioning to parenthood in the context of COVID-19 remain relevant for young adults experiencing parenthood (41, 77, 78).

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
Promote and support the use of formal and informal support networks for young parents (limited level of scientific support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make use of perinatal interventions to inform new parents about the sources of support available in their community and encourage them to use these resources. ▶ Promote exchanges with other future and new parents by using diverse means available in the context of a pandemic. ▶ Remind parents that it is possible, even remotely, to benefit from the emotional and informational support of their loved ones.
Use pre- and postnatal checkups to ensure that young parents' basic needs are met and that health services are accessible, particularly for mental health (limited level of scientific support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Systematically ask questions about their psychological well-being and social support network. ▶ Inform about the services and resources available during a pandemic. ▶ Ensure that their basic needs are met. ▶ Include mental health professionals on the follow-up team or refer young parents to professional mental health resources as needed.

STRENGTHEN THE ACTIONS FOR PHYSICAL AND BUILT ENVIRONMENTS THAT ARE FAVOURABLE TO SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WHEN THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL SITUATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES ALLOW FOR THEM

The results of several studies show that the characteristics and layout of built environments allow for the presence and development of spaces favouring social interactions (79).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a challenge arises, as social interactions are limited by the public health guidelines put in place. The risk of being infected with the virus when outdoors, although considered lower than in indoors, is still possible (80). Accordingly, national and international bodies generally recommend maintaining physical distancing in outdoor public places and, when this is not possible, wearing a face covering (80, 81). Remember, however, that in no case should wearing a face covering replace physical-distancing measures. Thus, when these preventive measures are respected (80), and when the epidemiological situation and public health measures allow it, parks and urban green spaces represent privileged environments for the practice of physical activities and opportunities for social interaction (82–85). For many people, active participation in their local, cultural, and natural environments while still respecting public health measures could greatly help to reduce feelings of loneliness (86–91).

¹ Comité en prévention et promotion — thématique santé mentale (dir.) (2020). *Transition à la parentalité en situation d'adversité: le cas de la COVID-19*. (French version only)

Similarly, in the context of a pandemic and physical distancing, access to public transportation (buses, subway, taxis, paratransit, etc.) may be limited, thus reducing the mobility of young adults without any other means of transportation (28). This is why measures aimed at physical access to means conducive to mobility at the desired time contribute to increasing social participation or breaking isolation, two factors that influence the feeling of loneliness. Since the start of the pandemic, several outbreaks of COVID-19 have been associated with various means of transportation around the world, including buses (92, 93), trains (94, 95), and subways (96, 97). Indeed, public transportation has certain risk factors that can contribute to episodes of transmission of COVID-19 (e.g., presence of many passengers, limited interior space, difficulty in respecting physical distancing, poorly ventilated spaces, long journeys, or surfaces frequently touched by several users). Several government organizations therefore insist on the importance of applying preventive measures to the various means of transportation (air, sea, rail, road) in order to reduce the risk of transmission (98–101). As such, young people must be reassured about the low risk of contagion represented by the use of public transit when recommended control measures are respected. Similarly, it is necessary to ensure the availability of safe and well-maintained infrastructure in both summer and winter to highlight active transportation as the preferred mode of travel.

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
<p>Promote interventions aimed at increasing safe accessibility to parks and green spaces (76 102–105) (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make parks and green spaces accessible to the population, particularly during the pandemic, since they represent one of the few places offering the possibility of indulging in various activities, which contribute significantly to people’s health and well-being. (76 102–104). ▶ Promote the use of parks and green spaces by improving their geographical accessibility, aesthetics, and cleanliness, and by designing safe facilities (105). ▶ Improve users’ sense of security in these areas, especially through lighting and the presence of security guards, in addition to the surveillance naturally carried out by other users when there is an increased use of these spaces (105).
<p>Support the use of public transportation and the adoption of appropriate health behaviours by all user groups (28 101 106–110) (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Support, through financial measures, public and adapted transit infrastructure and its accessibility to young adults. ▶ Ensure a good frequency of passage and a sufficient number of vehicles and stops to facilitate physical distancing throughout the network and pay particular attention to very busy areas (106–108). ▶ Make face coverings or masks available at points of sale in stations or distribute them free of charge, like hand sanitizers (111). Making the adoption of a behaviour less costly is one way to ensure greater adherence (63).
<p>Promote the practice of walking and cycling through the development of safe facilities (102 112–118) (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Install facilities aimed at reducing the speed and volumes of motorized vehicles as well as points of conflict on the road network (102, 112–115). ▶ Develop streets to make more room for pedestrians and cyclists (91).

STRENGTHEN ACTIONS AIMED AT BETTER DOCUMENTING AND STUDYING THE PHENOMENON OF LONELINESS IN YOUNG ADULTS

The research and literature consulted highlights the relevance of carrying out surveys and research to better document the phenomenon of loneliness in young adults and to identify the most effective and promising preventive actions.

Action strategies	Methods proposed in the context of COVID-19
<p>Better document the phenomenon of loneliness in young adults and identify the most effective and promising preventive actions (moderate level of scientific support)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Conduct surveys and research to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the loneliness of young adults and the factors contributing to its emergence (7). ▶ Monitor the feeling of loneliness in different groups (13) and document its long-term effects (31), especially on students (119). ▶ Ensure surveys include questions on loneliness, isolation, mental health and well-being, negative experiences (trauma), and social support for post-secondary students, and young adults more broadly (70). ▶ Study the role of social media and, more broadly, digital technologies as a tool in disaster response, and their effects on mental health and well-being, including feelings of loneliness (70). ▶ Give priority to supporting participatory research activities on the short, medium, and long-term effects of the pandemic. Conducted from approaches where young people can express themselves freely, such studies can create opportunities for involvement in a knowledge-building project sensitive to their reality and improve the collective response to possible similar crises in the future (120, 121). ▶ Continuously analyze the impact of public policies and assistance programs on the well-being of young adults and on their opportunities for social participation and ensure that the actions planned are as equitable as possible, paying particular attention to young people in vulnerable situations (33).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 health crisis has transformed the daily lives and living conditions of young adults, putting them at particular risk of finding themselves in a situation of social isolation or loneliness. Although young adults are not a homogeneous group, the impacts of this crisis on their health and well-being are concerning, especially since the effects of the current pandemic could increase in the coming months and persist beyond the current crisis.

In Québec and around the world, the pandemic has inspired the emergence of unifying actions and solidarity, but it has also revealed the fault lines that are weakening the social safety net necessary for the most vulnerable individuals and groups, including young adults (122). By taking inspiration from the action strategies and methods put forward in this publication, public health organizations can develop interventions that contribute to preventing and alleviating loneliness in young adults. When deployed in addition to other measures at the national, regional, or municipal level, these strategies have the potential to act positively in the short and long term.

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Annex 1

Literature search

Remember that this work was carried out in a short period of time, from November 16 to December 3, 2020. It is based on knowledge resulting from a quick search of the literature and a summary and non-exhaustive analysis of the scientific literature, from the perspective of the loneliness of young adults in the context of COVID-19. Additionally, given the available literature related to the current health crisis, expert opinions and preprints have been included.

The following information sources were consulted:

- ▶ Scientific monitoring on COVID-19 containing articles from the scientific and grey literature related to psychosocial factors. This has been produced daily by the INSPQ since March 24, 2020 (databases consulted and keywords used available upon request). Articles dealing specifically with the loneliness of young adults in the context of COVID-19 were selected. Those addressing loneliness in the general population in the context of COVID-19, but comparing young adults to other age groups, were also included.
- ▶ A targeted search of scientific and grey literature using keywords such as: young adults, social isolation, loneliness, COVID-19. The identification of documents was carried out through certain search engines such as Google Scholar and reference sites (e.g., World Health Organization, government or institutional sites).
- ▶ Where necessary, additional literature, including relevant social science and public health literature on loneliness and social isolation, was consulted.
- ▶ Certain previous publications produced by the INSPQ were consulted.

Scientific support

The level of scientific support was assessed according to the following criteria:

- ▶ Types of documentary sources:
 - ▶ Type 1: meta-analysis, systematic review, review of reviews, or guidelines when based on a review of the evidence;
 - ▶ Type 2: recommendations and reference frameworks by experts from recognized public health organizations (CDC, WHO, UN, etc.), literature reviews (not systematic), or research articles on interventions to remedy the problem of interest;
 - ▶ Type 3: research articles on the determinants of the problem of interest, foreign experiences, data from the community, opinion/editorial/perspectives in a scientific journal;
- ▶ Number of documentary sources relating to a measure;
- ▶ Concordance of the results between these documentary sources.

Note that published and preprint documentary sources are included.

Level of scientific support	Types of documentary sources	Number of documentary sources	Concordance of results
Strong	Type 1	1	Yes, within the review paper
Moderate	Type 2	3 to 5 or more	Yes, through the various documents
Moderate	Type 3	5 to 7 or more	Yes, through the various documents
Limited	Type 2	3 to 5 or more	No concordance between data sources
Not included	Type 3	Fewer than three articles	No concordance between data sources

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