

# LONELINESS AS A NOVEL PUBLIC PROBLEM - OUTLINES TO CREATE AN “ANTI-LONELINESS” POLICY

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider loneliness as a public (policy) problem and to review current “anti-loneliness” policies in Europe and the world, in order to offer guidelines for anti-loneliness policy in a particular area. The approach to this issue is based on methods characteristic for the public policy science. Firstly, the paper explains what qualifies some situation to be perceived as a public problem. It has been shown that loneliness throughout Europe and the world is a serious public problem and that various measures (policies) are taken against it. The paper presents current knowledge and experience on loneliness as a public problem. The final part of the paper analyzes the common elements of anti-loneliness and anti-isolation policies (worldwide) and offers guidelines for the development of anti-loneliness policy in areas where such policies have yet to be adopted.

**Key words:** public problem, loneliness, social isolation, anti-loneliness policy, EU, USA

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to look at loneliness as a public (policy) problem and review current “anti-loneliness” policies in Europe and the world, with the goal to offer guidelines for anti-loneliness policy in some concrete territory (city, region, state).

Loneliness, which intensified during the COVID-19 virus pandemic, is becoming an increasingly common problem for modern man. There is no doubt that this is a sociological and psychological phenomenon, but it can also be seen as a public (policy) problem. This is indicated by the objective characteristics of this problem that qualify it as public, but also the practice of countries that

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are already conducting policies against loneliness (there are even countries that appointed minister for loneliness).

The methodology of the work is based on the approach which is characteristic for public policy studies. Considering the subject and the goal of this paper as well as the methodology of public policy studies, the structure of the article was determined.

In the next segment, the phenomenon of loneliness is examined in more detail and it is checked whether it meets the conditions to be marked as public problem. In this regard, questions are raised such as: is there available data, the ability to measure and possibility to establish clear consequences for society? Since the answers to these questions are mostly positive, it is concluded that this issue (loneliness) is fully qualified as public which implies the need and possibility to take measures (public policy) against it.

The following chapters further elaborate on the mentioned aspects, i.e. available data and research on the problem of loneliness, current knowledge and practices of anti-loneliness policies in Europe and the world. Based on the review of these fields, common characteristics were extracted and a general framework (or let's say guideline) for creating "anti-loneliness" policy was offered.

## 2 WHAT IS A PUBLIC (POLICY) PROBLEM?

In the public policies studies, the central place is taken by the public policy analysis, which implies its parsing into constituent elements, in order to gain a more complete insight into the overall subject of observation. These elements are usually identified as: problem to be solved, policy proposal making, legalization (adoption), implementation and measurement of policy effects (Patton, Sawicki, Clark, 2016; Dunn, 2018; Dye, 2017).

So, the first phase of public policy analysis is the identification of a public problem. Here the question arises, what qualifies a situation to be marked as a public problem. In other words, what is the difference between private (individual) and social problem?

Problematic situations are those that some social groups or society as a whole classify as unfavorable and undesirable. Whether a situation will be marked as a public problem and the government called to do something about it, depends on the interpretation of the situation, the value system of society as well as the preferences of social groups and the interests of many actors in the public sector (media, parties, government, interest groups...) (Dye, 2017, p. 26). Namely, societies face phenomena and situations that are not desirable on a daily basis (illness, poverty, fanaticism, etc.). However, they become a subject

of public policy only after it is stated that something needs and can be done to eliminate / mitigate them. This SHOULD indicate the value aspect and the interpretive dimension of the problem, while it CAN indicates objective tools and resources to take action (legal, financial, organizational, etc.).

After noticing the problem, the phase of its structuring or detailed research follows (data collecting, literature review, comparative practice studying, contacting the stakeholders and experts...). The aim of these activities is to set a formal definition of the public problem (which will be usable in the next stages of drafting public policy proposals). In public policy textbooks, this phase is marked as crucial because it determines the entire public policy cycle (Dunn, 2018, p. 69).

Considering the topic of this paper, another important issue is the difference between a private and a public problem. If an individual is an alcoholic or is lonely and socially isolated, it is primarily his/her private problem, because the consequences are borne by her/himself and (possibly) a yet several people (such as family members, close friends, etc.). However, if there is a large number of people in one population who face this problem and the consequences begin to affect the whole society (even those that are not directly related to this problem). In that case the private problem becomes public and the government is called upon to take action. The question now is, what is the moment when private problems become public? The key criteria for classifying problems are their magnitude and intensity, which leads to their classification into relative (affects only certain groups) and absolute (affects all citizens) (Patton, Sawicki, Clark, 2016, pp. 141-143).

### 3 WHAT IS LONELINESS, IS IT A PUBLIC PROBLEM?

The answer to the question posed in the subtitle above can be reached in two ways. The first way is to determine whether loneliness meets the general conditions (explained in the previous part of the article) to mark and define it as a public problem. The second way is to look at already realized studies and, more importantly, already existing policy practices. Namely, some countries and local authorities are already conducting anti-loneliness policy (even more, some of them appointed minister for loneliness). It means de facto that loneliness is recognized as a public problem in many countries.

A large number of papers and books on loneliness and social isolation have been published, dealing with numerous aspects and with very different approaches to this phenomena. As it is impossible to cover all these aspects in the work of this scope, the focus will be only on:

- clarifying the exact meaning of loneliness and social isolation;
- data and analyzes that indicate a “pandemic” of these phenomena and

- harmful consequences for the whole society (therefore also for those who do not directly face this problem).

When talking about this topic, three terms are often mentioned that indicate similar but still different phenomena, and they are: loneliness, social isolation and solitude.

When it comes to loneliness, two basic characteristics stand out in the literature: subjectivity and negativity. Subjectivity means that someone feels lonely regardless of objective and external circumstances. Someone can be very active in the business field, know a lot of people or be active on social networks but still feel lonely. Loneliness in this context is perceived as insufficient intensity or simply incomplete relationship with other people. Another important characteristic of this phenomenon is its negativity. So, loneliness is problem by itself. (Valtorta, Hanratty, 2016).

Another phenomenon is social isolation, which, unlike loneliness, indicates objectively little contact with other people. This phenomenon often occurs in the elderly, and is significantly increased, generally in all age groups due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation is generally perceived as a negative phenomenon, but it should be noted that someone who is socially isolated does not necessarily feel lonely. Notwithstanding this remark, there is an obvious correlation between social isolation and loneliness (Age UK, 2018). In short, social isolation has a predominantly negative connotation, but not exclusively negative as it is the case with loneliness (National Institute on Aging, 2021).

Finally, solitude has a neutral or even positive connotation. This term also indicates a situation in which someone is alone, but primarily by their choice or will. In this regard, someone can feel pleasant feelings just because he is alone.

It is important to point out that loneliness and social isolation have very harmful consequences on people's mental and physical health, which in turn causes serious consequences for the public budget (greater pressure on the health system), economy and the quality of democracy and governance in one society. Therefore, these phenomena are important „public health issues that deserve attention and need to be addressed with effective intervention strategies.“ (European Commission, 2021, p. 6).

#### **4 MAGNITUDE AND MEASUREMENT OF LONELINESS**

Recent evidence based research on this topic point to a increasing of problem of loneliness around the world. One of the most important

researchers of this phenomenon in the USA, John T. Cacioppo together with his wife Stephanie Cacioppo, claims that in industrialized about a third of the population faces loneliness and that every twelfth person is seriously affected by this problem (health problems and higher probability of premature death) (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, 2018). The finding that young people in the United States are increasingly facing the problem of loneliness is also worrying (Bruce and others, 2018, pp. 1127-1128). An online survey conducted in the USA in 2018 (before the COVID-19 pandemic), on a sample of over 20,000 young adults, found that almost half of them (46%) feel sometimes or always lonely (Cigna, 2018, p. 3).

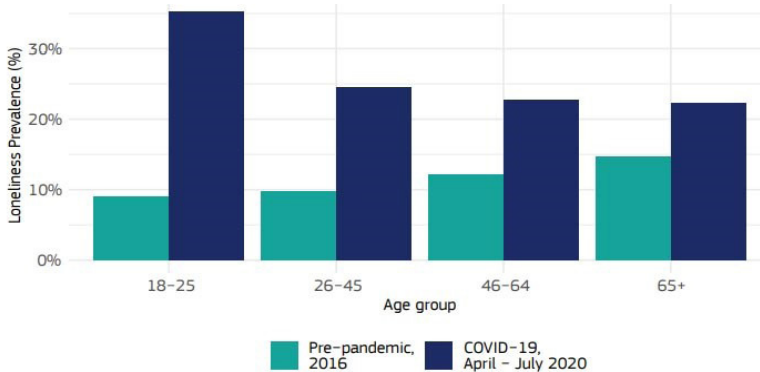
Research in Europe also points to a “pandemic” of loneliness. The policy report, entitled *Loneliness - an unequally shared burden in Europe* done for the European Commission in 2018, states that more than 75 million adult Europeans meet friends or family members at most once a month and 30 million Europeans often feel lonely. In addition, according to this report, loneliness is significantly more common in Eastern and Southern European countries (compared to Western and Northern). It was also found that loneliness is most often associated with poor health, unfavorable economic conditions and living alone. An important note (similar to the USA) is that the problem of loneliness affects all age groups, and that although older people often live in social isolation (they do not have many social contacts) they do not feel lonely more often (compared to younger ones) (European Commission, 2018).

However, having in mind the topic of this article, it can be said that one of the most comprehensive research conducted by the European Commission (namely the Joint Research Center) in 2021, is *Loneliness in the EU - Insights from surveys and online media data* (European Commission, 2021). It is a series of studies on loneliness and social isolation with the aim of creating evidence-based scientific and technical support for possible “anti-loneliness” public policy at the European level. This research is rich in numerous data and new findings. For example, it has been observed that although the largest number of single-member households is in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (over 40% on average), they are less likely to feel lonely. In contrast, people feel much more lonely in Eastern and Southern European countries, which is explained by differences in cultural patterns (collectivist and individualistic culture) (European Commission, 2021, p. 15). It also confirms the view that loneliness is not just a problem of the elderly but of all ages, or more precisely, it occurs most often in the oldest of the elderly and young adults. When it comes to gender, no correlation has been established, i.e. both sexes are at equal risk of loneliness. Also, no systematic differences between rural and urban areas (European Commission, 2021, p. 14).

The corona virus pandemic has drastically increased the problem of

loneliness, to a level where society and government should be alerted and take action on it. Namely, in the period before the pandemic, according to research from 2016, about 12% of EU citizens felt lonely. In the first months of the pandemic, this percentage more than doubled (rising to 25%). However, it is especially worrying that the pandemic had the greatest impact on the loneliness of young people (18-25 years old), which increased four times with the beginning of the pandemic.

Graph 1 Loneliness by age group<sup>2</sup>

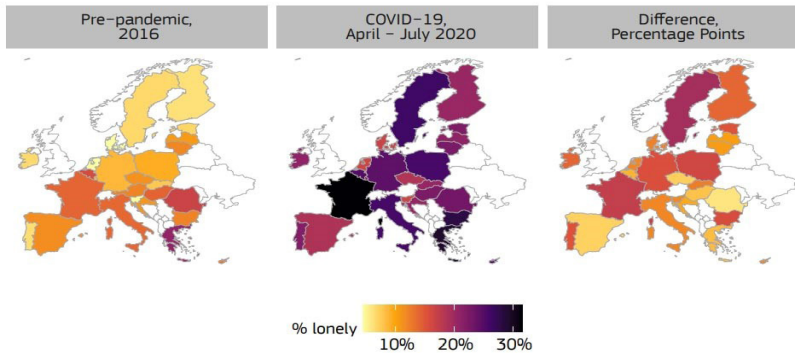


Source: EC, Loneliness in the EU Insights from surveys and online media data, p. 21.

Here we need to clarify what exactly it means to be lonely and how these results came from. These results were obtained through a survey by asking the respondent a question and offering possible answers. The question is: “tell me how much of the time during the last two weeks you felt lonely?” Possible answers are: ‘all of the time’, ‘most of the time’, ‘more than half of the time’, ‘less than half of the time’, ‘some of the time’ and at ‘no time’. Based on this, an indicator of loneliness was created, so that predominantly (prevalent) lonely people are treated who answered all of the time, most of the time or more than half of the time. Using this index, the results for European countries are shown in the figure below:

<sup>2</sup> The histogram displays, by age group and time period, the share of individuals who felt lonely more than half of the time over the two weeks preceding the interview.

Figure 1 Loneliness in the EU



Source: EC, Loneliness in the EU Insights from surveys and online media data, p. 31.

## 5 HEALTH, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF LONELINESS PROBLEMS

When it comes to the consequences of the problem of loneliness, the mentioned studies mostly talk about the negative health consequences for the health of the nation (quite expected). There is no doubt that the lower the overall health of the citizens of a country, the higher the costs of the public budget. Namely, it was noticed that elderly people who are lonely have a higher rate of admission to hospitals, a longer period of hospitalization, which in turn leads to more intensive work of doctors and thus to increased pressure on the health system and budget. There are many negative consequences for lonely young people as well. They have poorer employment opportunities and are at greater risk of facing financial problems (European Commission, 2021, p. 13).

Therefore, the consequences of the problem of loneliness are not only health but also economic. This has been an increasingly common topic in the professional public lately. One of the articles based on the view that loneliness is not only a health but also an economic problem is the article from 2021. Economic Aspects of Loneliness in Australia (Kung, et al, 2021). According to some estimates, in the UK, the costs of employers resulting from the negative consequences of employee loneliness problems (more frequent absences from work, lower productivity, etc.) amount to around £ 2.5 billion a year (Jeffrey, et al, 2017). A good review of the literature related to the issue of economic costs of loneliness is the work from 2019 entitled The economic costs of loneliness: a review of the cost of illness and economic evaluation studies (Mihalopoulos, et al, 2019). It should be noted that these costs were quite high in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they have increased significantly today. Although there are no comprehensive and complete studies on the economic costs of loneliness, there is certainly a belief that they are very high. It

remains for each country or region to conduct its own detailed research in order to determine the economic costs of this problem (more detailed: Social Impact Bonds, 2015)

However, loneliness and isolation have another extremely important and dangerous dimension of consequences, which are political consequences. Namely, loneliness and isolation spoil the quality of governance and democracy, and if they are present for a long time and to a large extent, they can destroy the democratic order. This topic is covered in the works of important political writers. Hannah Arendt in her famous work *Origins of Totalitarianism* writes that isolated and lonely people (but not alone!) are the basis of totalitarianism (Arendt, 1998, p. 483). Apart from these fundamental and long-term consequences that Hannah Arendt writes about, the political consequences can also be very concrete. For example, the American NGO *Renewing Democracy for All* in text *Is Loneliness a Threat to America?*, talks about how social isolation and loneliness affect political attitudes and argues that isolated and lonely people are much more likely to vote for radical (often undemocratic) political options (*Renew Democracy Initiative*, 2020).

In addition, when it comes to conducting public policies and modern models of governance, it can be said that loneliness and isolation are a serious problem. Modern deliberative democracy implies numerous principles and concepts such as participatory decision-making, co-production (joint creation of public service packages in a community), inclusiveness, etc. (it is enough to look at the model of good governance). All this implies that among the citizens of a community there is a sense of belonging and connection (identification for the community, ie city, region, state) and a sufficient degree of mutual trust and respect (social capital). This means that the society or community is networked, which is necessary for the successful creation and implementation of public policies. However, in order for these relations to occur, it is necessary that there is intensive communication between various actors in society and the promotion of desirable value patterns (openness, democracy, freedom, civil rights, rule of law ...). However, the enemy of all this is the growing “epidemic” of loneliness, which can seriously jeopardize the quality of public administration and make the work of public managers more difficult.

So, let’s conclude, if a significant number of people in a particular area face loneliness, the negative consequences are:

1. health problems (which increases the pressure on health system and increases budget costs);
2. economic costs that the economy and employers suffer due to more frequent absences from work, reduced productivity, more frequent layoffs and job search, reduced working skills and lower chances for quality work, but also the risk of poverty (social cases again come at the



expense of the budget) and

3. political consequences (difficult management of the community due to lack of relations of connection and trust – lack of cohesion) and endangering the foundations of democracy).

## 6 WHAT THE AUTHORITIES ARE DOING ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF LONELINESS

After explaining the consequences of the problem of loneliness, it remains to be seen what has been done so far and what instruments are available to the authorities in the combat against this problem.

Among the countries that have gone the furthest in this issue, the UK stands out, which appointed the Minister for Loneliness in 2018. This decision was made after a report from 2017, according to which as many as 9 out of 67 million people often feel lonely (Birnstengel, 2020). In 2018, the British government also adopted a strategy called: A connected society a strategy for tackling loneliness - laying the foundations for change (HM Government, 2018). The “anti-loneliness” policy measures prescribed by this strategy are based on 3 main dimensions: 1. encouraging public debate and free discussion on loneliness at the national level, 2. building data (evidence base) on loneliness and 3. changes in policy making (increasing sensitivity to the problem of loneliness) (UK Government, 2018, p. 67). So, judging by this document, an anti-loneliness policy is not a special policy, but its principles are incorporated into other policies (ie when creating public policies, one takes into account whether and how they affect connecting people).

The Local Connections Fund (in England) also plays an important role in this policy, providing an annual grant of several million pounds for projects of charities and various local groups working to reduce loneliness and build community connections (Community Fund, 2021). Also, the commitment to anti-loneliness policy is manifested in the way of spending budgets (especially local ones) for building places for socializing, such as cafes, gardens and places for going out with various content (entertainment, cultural, etc.) (UK Government, 2021).

Japan also raised this policy to the level of a ministry, forming a Ministry of Loneliness headed by Tetsushi Sakamoto. Japan opted for this measure after a drastic increase in suicides during the corona pandemic. According to Sakamoto, the first task of the Ministry was to identify who is lonely and at risk of being isolated from society, and then to create appropriate measures and (public) policy (DW, 2021). In late December 2021, the Japanese government adopted a program of measures to help people facing loneliness. This program

includes constantly open connections - consultations available to lonely people (by phone or through social media) while promoting different approaches in helping lonely and isolated people to reconnect (to feel connected to members of the local community). However, as this is a new policy, it is still in the formative phase and relies on few foreign experiences.

Across Germany, the topic of loneliness is common in the media and the question arises as to whether local initiatives to combat loneliness need to be linked at the national level by creating a national comprehensive anti-loneliness strategy (Neueste Nachrichten, 2022). Illustrative and worrying data are, for example, that in Berlin, where 3.5 million people live, half of the households are single, and every year at least 300 people die in Berlin without anyone noticing (Euronews, 2019).

A similar situation (as in Germany) is in Switzerland, where there is still no national consistent anti-loneliness policy, but the public often talks about the idea of forming a ministry for loneliness (following the British experience) (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2018).

Even in the individualistic cultures of the Scandinavian countries, the problem of loneliness is becoming more and more pronounced. According to a study from Sweden from 2019 (before the pandemic), 59% of Swedes feel alone often or sometimes, and one-third of them think it's a problem. The same study found that 24% of Swedes would like to have more friends while one in 10 say they don't have a single close friend (World Economic Forum, 2020). In Sweden, the problem of loneliness is being addressed through a housing policy that aims to connect the older and younger generations (people of different ages). For example, apartments with shared kitchens and space for recreation are being built, which should contribute to the socialization of tenants.

In the USA, where numerous researches have been done and there is an awareness of the problems that are a consequence of loneliness, the "anti-loneliness" policy is still in the formative phase. In August 2021, a bill was submitted for adoption, which should allocate \$ 250 million for the purpose of solving the problem of social isolation and loneliness among the elderly. This money should be provided by the Secretary of Health and Human Services to regional agencies responsible for the care of the elderly as well as other local organizations that will create, implement and evaluate programs that promote connectivity for the received grant (money). However, according to experts, this proposal is only one step in the right direction, but that this policy (and available money) must be extended to younger people as a target group and that it is necessary to create a comprehensive national strategy (Health Affairs Forefront, 2021).

Probably the most important organization in the United States that advocates and promotes public policies in this field is the Coalition to End

Social Isolation & Loneliness. This organization advocates 4 short-term goals and activities that should be undertaken immediately in the United States to address the consequences of COVID-19 (in terms of isolation) and five long-term goals - priorities that Congress should adopt to address loneliness and isolation:

1. increase public awareness;
2. enhance social services and supports;
3. advance health services and supports;
4. leverage innovative solutions that foster connection and social integration and
5. advance federal research to continue to develop the evidence base necessary to design effective programs and policies) (Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness, 2021).

In addition to the mentioned Coalition, an important actor in creating and promoting “anti-loneliness” policy is the Foundation for Social Connection, which is very close to the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection. It is a global initiative and cooperation in the field of solving the problem of loneliness and isolation. Three key areas of cooperation within this initiative (ie global networks) are: awareness, collaboration and national framework to end loneliness and promote connection (GILC, 2022).

## **7 HOW TO CREATE AN ANTI-LONELINESS POLICY IN A SPECIFIC TERRITORY**

Finally, a situation arises in which the public and / or the government of a particular country or region may ask whether there is a problem of loneliness in their area and whether something can and should be done about it. Following the logic of public policy analysis as well as the information presented so far and the results of research on the problem of loneliness, a set of steps is imposed that should be followed in creating “anti-lonely” public policy. In short, these steps are: 1. consideration of the scope and intensity of the problem, and the consequences it produces, 2. consideration of available options, 3. selection of optimal options for implementation and 4. mechanism for monitoring the EFFECT of anti-loneliness policy.

### **7.1 Problem identification and framing**

Given that the paper has already explained that loneliness under certain conditions becomes a public problem with numerous negative consequences for the health, economy and democracy of a community, the first step that the government

should take is to clearly establish whether it exists in its territory and to what extent. In other words, it is necessary to measure the presence of the problem of loneliness in a certain territory. It can be seen from the presented text that this measurement is performed on the basis of surveys and questionnaires that simply ask citizens whether and how often they felt lonely in the past period.

It is recommended that this be realized using the methodology applied in the research and report Loneliness in the EU Insights from surveys and online media data. This means that citizens would be asked the question: how much of the time during the last two weeks did they feel lonely?, and the possible answers are: 1. all of the time, 2. most of the time, 3. more than half of the time, 4. less than half of the time, 5. some of the time and at 6. no time. Here it is important to point out that those people who gave the answer 1, 2 or 3 (ie those who are always lonely, most of the time and more than half the time) are considered lonely. The age structure is also very important in this issue, and in the mentioned report it is structured in the following way: young (18-25 years), middle age (26-45), slightly older (46-65 years) and old (over 65 years). In addition, for a more complete picture, socio-demographic and territorial characteristics should be considered, ie the gender of the respondents, economic situations, places where they live (urban / rural) and health status.

The next step is to determine the extent of the problem. It is debatable here what percentage of loneliness is the signal for red alert. However, the answer to this question can be reached indirectly. Namely, the problem of loneliness has been discussed for years before the COVID pandemic. In European countries, judging by the mentioned countries, about 10% of people were lonely and this was already considered a problematic situation. In addition, before the pandemic, young people were the least lonely (below 10%) and the most the oldest (over 65) with a percentage of about 15%. After the pandemic, there is a drastic increase, especially among the young, where loneliness is around 35%, while among the oldest, the growth is the lowest (from 15 to about 22-3%). The average loneliness in European countries is about 25% of the population, which can be described as an extremely pronounced problem (every fourth adult feels lonely ?!).

Therefore, there is no universal criterion, but it could be said that with 10% of lonely people, there is a problem and its consequences are not negligible, and with 25% of lonely people the problem is extremely pronounced and it is necessary to react urgently.

This phase of identifying and researching the problem should include determining the consequences arising from the problem of loneliness (health, economic, political) as well as all costs to society.

## **7.2 Consider available options / instruments and select optimal ones**

Considering the current practice in the fight against loneliness and social

isolation, the following groups of instruments can be identified in principle:

- instruments aimed at raising awareness of the existence of the problem of loneliness and its negative consequences;
- instruments of direct support to the lonely people through (public) health and social services;
- financial - grants to local groups and organizations that implement projects with the aim of connecting people and creating a sense of community and
- those aimed at building a “knowledge infrastructure” on the problem of loneliness and social isolation (support for research and evidence creating).

What specifically will be undertaken depends on the results of the research of the problem. Above all stay the age structure and other characteristics of the groups that feel most lonely, as well as the available resources of government / community.

However, as this is a new problem and new policies, comparative experiences and cooperation with foreign actors are very important. In this sense, a good guide can be a document of the Global Initiative for Loneliness and Connection, entitled Position Statements on Addressing Social Isolation, Loneliness, and the Power of Human Connection (GILC, 2022).

### 7.3. Measuring the effect

Finally, the public policy cycle ends with the measurement of the results achieved. The good news about this is that the loneliness index is numerically expressed and after some time new research can be conducted to monitor whether the loneliness problem has been alleviated or is still present. On specific authorities and the community is to set a standard when a particular problem will be considered solved or reduced to an acceptable level. It should be borne in mind here that there would always be a certain number of people who feel lonely, just as there is always a certain number (% of the population) of smokers, alcoholics or the unemployed.

## 8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper points out the newer problem of loneliness, ie whether, why and under what conditions loneliness is a societal problem. Based on the standards of public policy studies and the prevalence of loneliness in real life and the serious consequences that this problem has on the whole society, it is clear that this is a public and serious problem, against which appropriate

measures are already being taken around the world.

The paper explains what loneliness is, how to measure it, what consequences it produces and how to combat against this problem. In order to explain these segments, we relied on research and findings done around the world (mostly in Europe and the USA). In other words, these are large fields and general observations.

What remains for concrete countries and regions is to conduct research in their area, establish a measure of the presence of loneliness problems and decide whether and what to do about it. It is within this framework that this paper may have its greatest contribution because it is a kind of guide for researchers and policy makers on how to approach this problem and create an effective anti-loneliness policy.

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