

Loneliness among the adult population in Ireland and associations with mental health^{1, 2}

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INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of international research has established a strong link between loneliness and a lack of social connectedness and a range of adverse outcomes including poorer wellbeing, mental and physical health, increased healthcare utilisation and associated economic costs. The confluence of this growing evidence base, and the acute experience of loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred greater policy attention, with loneliness now widely recognised as a critical public health issue. Irish research into loneliness has mainly concentrated on specific groups, such as older people and, to a lesser degree, adolescents. This has resulted in a notable lack of understanding regarding loneliness within the broader adult population. Consequently, this paper addresses the following research questions:

1. Who experiences loneliness in Ireland today?
2. Does loneliness affect mental health and quality of life?

DATA AND METHODS

This research draws upon data from two waves (2021 and 2023) of *Healthy Ireland*, a nationally representative telephone survey of the Irish population aged 15 and over. Regression analysis was employed to investigate potential predictors of loneliness. These include demographic factors (gender, age group, country of birth, region of residence), socio-economic characteristics (marital status, responsibility for children under 18, educational attainment, employment status), health and disability status, participation in social groups, whether respondents report having few people to rely on, and the presence of a mental health problem.

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Mohan, G. (2025) 'Who is lonely in the EU's loneliest nation? A post-pandemic examination of loneliness among the adult population in Ireland, and associations with mental health. *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry of Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/112175>

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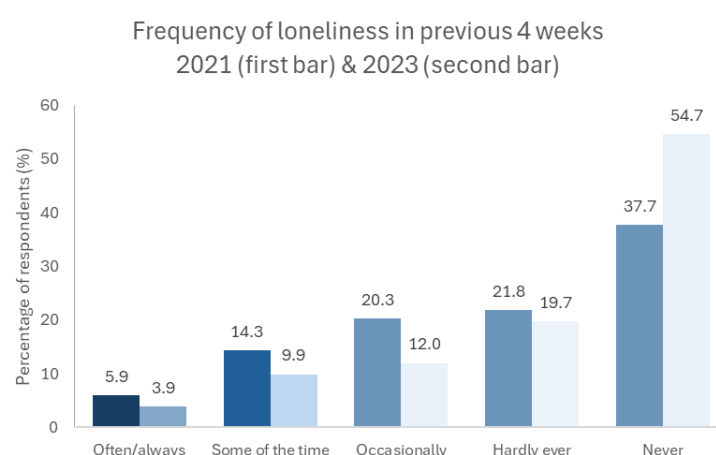
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The modelling also examines the association between experiences of loneliness and the likelihood of having a mental health problem, as well as an individual's perception of their quality of life.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows that frequent loneliness (often or always) saw a decrease from 5.9% in 2021 to 3.9% in 2023, while the proportion experiencing loneliness at least some of the time also fell, from 20.2% to 13.5%. The elevated levels of loneliness observed in 2021 were likely a consequence of the COVID-19 government-mandated lockdown restrictions that were in effect. As these restrictions were lifted and daily life gradually returned to a normal state, loneliness levels declined by 2023.

FIGURE 1: PREVALENCE OF EXPERIENCING LONELINESS



In the combined 2021 and 2023 sample, around 13.7% showed indicators of a probable mental health problem, while the majority (80.1%) of respondents reported a good quality of life. Concerning social connectedness, 31.4% stated they belonged to a club or group, and 26.0% indicated having few close confidants.

Results from statistical modelling

The modelling analysis highlighted a strong association between having few people to rely on, probable mental health issues, and acute loneliness (feeling lonely often or always). Marriage, compared to being single, was linked to a lower likelihood of experiencing loneliness, whereas unemployment and homemaking were associated with a higher likelihood. Older age groups (50-64 and 65+) were less likely to report loneliness than younger respondents (15-29). Moreover, individuals frequently experiencing loneliness had a 35.6 percentage point higher probability of having mental health problems compared to those less frequently lonely. Loneliness was negatively associated with reported quality of life, with frequent loneliness showing a stronger negative correlation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and associated factors of loneliness, mental health, and quality of life within the Irish population. The findings underscore the intricate relationship between these

elements, highlighting the critical role of social connections and support networks in individual wellbeing. While the observed decrease in frequent loneliness from 2021 to 2023 offers a positive trend, the continued experience of loneliness by a significant portion of the population necessitates ongoing attention. The strong links identified between loneliness, mental health issues, and reduced quality of life emphasise the importance of targeted interventions and policy initiatives focused on strengthening social connectedness and promoting mental wellbeing throughout life.