

Loneliness among the UK Population

How is loneliness measured across the countries of the UK?

Summary: There are differences in the official measures of loneliness, and the presentation of these figures, across the countries of the United Kingdom. This will be a reflection of the differing priorities and focus, yet the learning and sharing of what works between these places raises the importance of differences not simply reflecting what and how loneliness is measured and presented. This is where the inclusion of other surveys, that are not to be the source of official figures, can provide additional information which can improve our understanding of this issue and tackling it.

Disclaimer: The contents of this paper are not based on a comprehensive review of questions used across the geography of the UK to measure the prevalence of loneliness. Any omissions and errors are the author's only.

Introduction

Over the last decade the issue of loneliness has risen globally in both the public consciousness and as a public policy issue to be tackled. The UK has put itself among the countries attempting to tackle this issue through policies, provisions and services that aim to enable and support people in maintaining and (re)establishing positively meaningful connections and relationships.

The UK government published a ‘loneliness’ strategy for Englandⁱ in October 2018. The Scottish Government published a ‘loneliness’ strategy for Scotlandⁱⁱ in December 2018. The Welsh Government published a discussion document for consultation in October 2018, which led to the publication of a ‘loneliness’ strategy for Wales in February 2020.

In each of these strategies, the importance of measuring loneliness both in the general population and when evaluating policies and programmes to tackle this issue has been highlighted. The importance of measuring loneliness has also been recognised within Northern Ireland, which although did not have a sitting Northern Ireland Assembly between January 2017 and January 2020, has had institutions that have attempted to measure the prevalence of loneliness among the population.

This paper presents the results of a short review of how each of the countries of the UK are measuring ‘loneliness’ and what the chosen metrics for each country mean for our understanding of loneliness among the UK population. The table in the Annex summarises the questions being asked in the surveys included in this review.

Measuring Loneliness in England

The 'loneliness' strategy for England indicates that the single direct loneliness question - 'How often do you feel lonely?' – will be used to determine the prevalence of loneliness in England.

This is based on the recommendation from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), who after reviewing the existing 'loneliness' measures they useⁱⁱⁱ, "*recommend four questions to capture different aspects of loneliness....the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) three-item loneliness scale and...a direct question about how often the respondent feels lonely*" with the view that "*where it is not possible to use all four questions...we would recommend at a minimum the use of a direct question on loneliness*"^{iv}.

Box 1: Official Loneliness Measure - England

UCLA three-item loneliness scale:

- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

Response categories: 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'

Responses to each question can be scored to provide a single loneliness score.

There is a slightly modified version of this scale for children aged 10 to 15.

Single direct loneliness question:

- How often do you feel lonely?

Response categories: 'Often or always', 'Some of the time', 'Occasionally', 'Hardly ever' or 'Never'

The ONS recommended single direct loneliness question has been sourced from the Community Life Survey. The Community Life Survey is a nationally representative household self-completion survey of adults aged 16 and over in England. It is commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS). Households invited to participate in the survey are asked to complete the survey online; non-respondents are sent two reminder letters with some being sent a paper questionnaire alongside the second reminder letter. Paper questionnaires, which are a reduced version of the full online survey, are also available on request for those who are unable to take part online.

The single direct loneliness question will also, in future, be included in the Active Lives Survey (Sports England), Families Continuous Attitude Survey (Ministry of Defence), Taking Part Survey (DCMS), English Household Survey (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government), Health Survey for England (NHS Digital) and the National Travel Survey (Department for Transport).

The English Housing Survey, Health Survey for England, National Travel Survey and the Taking Part Survey have all been awarded National Statistics Status by the Office for Statistics Regulation (which is the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority).

Measuring Loneliness in Scotland

The 'loneliness' strategy for Scotland indicates that Scotland's National Performance Framework includes a new national indicator on loneliness which will be measured through the single 'indirect' loneliness question - 'How much of the time during the last week have you felt lonely?' – which will be used to determine the prevalence of loneliness in Scotland.

Box 2: Official Loneliness Measure - Scotland

Single 'indirect' loneliness question:

- How much of the time during the last week have you felt lonely?

Response categories: 'None or almost none of the time', 'Some of the time', 'Most, almost all, or all of the time'

This question has been included in the Scottish Household Survey since 2018. The Scottish Household Survey is a nationally representative household survey of adults aged 16 and over in Scotland. It is commissioned by the Scottish Government. Households invited to participate in the survey are interviewed face-to-face at home using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI).

The Scottish Household Survey has been awarded National Statistics Status by the Office for Statistics Regulation (which is the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority).

Measuring Loneliness in Wales

The 'loneliness' strategy for Wales indicates that the De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale will be used to determine the prevalence of loneliness in Wales.

Box 3: Official Loneliness Measure - Wales

De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale:

Please indicate for each of the following statements, the extent to which they apply to your situation, the way you feel now.

- I experience a general sense of emptiness
- I miss having people around
- I often feel rejected
- There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems
- There are many people I can trust completely
- There are enough people I feel close to

Response categories: for statements 1 to 3 Yes [1], More or Less [1] or No [0] and
for statements 4 to 6 Yes [0], More or Less [1] or No [1]

Responses to each of the six statements are added to give a core between 0 and 6; with a score of 0 being defined as not lonely, 1 to 3 as sometimes lonely and 4 to 6 as lonely

This question has been included in the National Survey for Wales since 2016-17. The National Survey for Wales a nationally representative household survey of adults aged 16 and over in Wales. It is commissioned by the Welsh Government. Households invited to participate in the survey are interviewed face-to-face at home using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) with the questions on loneliness being part of the module that is self-completed using Computer Aided Self-Interviewing (CASI)^v.

The National Survey for Wales has been awarded National Statistics Status by the Office for Statistics Regulation (which is the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority).

Measuring Loneliness in Northern Ireland

There is currently no 'loneliness' strategy for Northern Ireland and no official measure for the prevalence of loneliness in Northern Ireland. On the recommendation of the Government Statistical Society harmonisation team, the single direct loneliness question and the UCLA three-item loneliness scale have however been included in surveys of the Northern Ireland population.

Box 4: Loneliness Measure – Northern Ireland

Single direct loneliness question:

- How often do you feel lonely?

Response categories: 'Often or always', 'Some of the time', 'Occasionally', 'Hardly ever' or 'Never'

UCLA three-item loneliness scale:

- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

Response categories: 'Hardly ever or never', 'Some of the time' or 'Often'

Responses to each question can be scored to provide a single loneliness score.

There is a slightly modified version of this scale for children aged 10 to 15.

The single direct loneliness measure has been included in the Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey, which is a nationally representative household survey of adults aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland, since 2017-18. It is commissioned by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Households invited to participate in the survey are interviewed face-to-face at home using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) with showcards used to provide response options to the question on loneliness.

The UCLA three-item loneliness scale has been included in the Health Survey for Northern Ireland, which is a nationally representative household survey of adults aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland, since 2017-18. It is commissioned by the Department for Health (Northern Ireland). Households invited to participate in the survey are interviewed face-to-face at home using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) with the questions on loneliness being part of the module that is self-completed using Computer Aided Self-Interviewing (CASI) ^{vi}.

Commentary on Presentation of Official Loneliness Prevalence Figures

There are differences in the types of loneliness being measured across the countries of the UK. The loneliness strategies published, whilst being very similar, also have subtle differences and it is understandable why this may lead to difference measures of loneliness being used across the countries of the UK. The measure of loneliness used by the Scottish Government is about recent feelings of loneliness, whereas the measure used by the UK Government for England and the Northern Ireland Institutes is about the frequency at which loneliness is experienced. The measure of loneliness used by the Welsh Government, although about the frequency at which loneliness is experienced, may be conceptually distinct from those used in England and Northern Ireland, given the differences in questions being asked.

There are differences in how the figures of the prevalence of loneliness are presented by the different countries of the UK. The findings from the surveys asking about feelings of loneliness are published in each of the countries of the UK, and thereby it is possible to develop a good understanding of what the findings indicate. However, in the headline presentations (and possibly as outcome indicators in performance frameworks) the presentation of the findings may provide a particular view. The Scottish Government describe people as 'lonely' if they respond "some of the time" or "most, almost all, or all of the time" to the question asked in the Scottish Household Survey. The Welsh Government describe people as 'lonely' if they respond "more or less" or "yes (statements 1 to 3) or no (statements 4 to 6)" to at least four out of the six statements asked in the National Survey of Wales. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency describe people as 'more lonely' if they respond "occasionally" or "some of the time" or "often/always" to the question asked in the Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey. In addition to the differing description of people who are lonely, the presentation of the prevalence of loneliness by characteristics also sometimes categorises the characteristics (e.g. age-bands) differently.

Loneliness Prevalence Figures - Filling the Gap

Loneliness is a subjective feeling and therefore there is no singular way to measure it. Therefore the use of different measures and presentation of findings can be a reflection of differing priorities and focus. Nonetheless, the learning and sharing of what works between the four countries of the UK raises the importance of differences in success not simply reflecting what and how loneliness is measured and presented. This is where the inclusion of other surveys asking about loneliness can add value to an understanding of this issue.

Understanding Society is the UK Household Longitudinal Study, based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. It is a representative sample of the UK as a whole. It includes a single direct question on loneliness and the UCLA three-item loneliness scale. The UK-wide geography coverage of the survey provides the opportunity to present information on the prevalence of loneliness across each of the countries of the UK using the same measures of loneliness.

The use of a survey such as Understanding Society also involves the use of the same mode of administration across the four countries of the UK. The official surveys being used to measure the prevalence of loneliness vary between being an online survey to a face-to-face survey using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing, within which sometimes sensitive questions (such as on loneliness) are self-completed on a computer.

The Office of National Statistics cognitive testing of loneliness questions found that *“respondents may be more likely to answer openly in self-completion formats”* which lends value to the use of a self-completion component in surveys. Some groups of people are unable to or unwilling to participate in online surveys or self-complete questions on the computer and this is where surveys such as the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) with a face-to-face interview and a paper-based self-completion module can add value, specifically because it includes the same loneliness questions as in Understanding Society. ELSA is focussed on people aged 50 and over in England yet can provide a useful

comparison for results of the same 'groups' of people from Understanding Society. The sister surveys to ELSA in the UK, Healthy Ageing in Scotland (HAGIS) and the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study of Ageing (NICOLA), can possibly play a similar role.

Triangulating information from different surveys that have a broadly similar conceptual measure of loneliness is likely to improve understanding of the prevalence of loneliness across each of the countries of the UK^{vii}.

Annex: Loneliness Measures in National Current Surveys

Survey Name	Which areas of the UK does the survey cover?	What is the age range of respondents to the survey?	How is the loneliness question asked?	Is the Loneliness Question Self-Completed?	What is the Loneliness Question in the survey?	Has the survey been assigned National Statistics Status?	Comment
Community Life Survey	England	16 & over	Online	Yes - online	Direct question ¹	No	Included every year since 2012-13
Scottish Household Survey	Scotland	16 & over	Face-to-Face	No	Direct question ²	Yes	Included every 2 years since 2018

National Survey for Wales	Wales	16 & over	Face-to-Face	Yes - computer	Six-item De Jong Gierveld Scale ³	Yes	Included every year since 2016-17
Student Health and Well-being Survey	Wales	11 to 18	Online	Yes - online	Direct question ⁴	No	Unknown
Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey	Northern Ireland	16 & over	Face-to-Face	No	Direct question ¹	No	Included every year since 2017-18

Health Survey for Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland	16 & over	Face-to-Face	Yes - computer	UCLA three-item loneliness scale ⁵	No	Included every year since 2017-18
English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing (ELSA)	England	50 & over	Face-to-Face	Yes - paper survey	Direct question ⁶ UCLA three-item loneliness scale ⁵	N/A	Included every Wave since 2006-07 (Wave 3)
Healthy Ageing In Scotland (HAGIS)	Scotland	50 & over	Face-to-Face	Yes - paper survey	Six-item De Jong Gierveld Scale ³ UCLA six-item loneliness scale ⁷	N/A	Included every Wave since 2016-17 (Pilot Study)

Northern Ireland Cohort for the Longitudinal Study of Ageing (NICOLA)	Northern Ireland	50 & over	Face-to-Face	Expected to be paper survey	Unknown	N/A	Expectation is for inclusion in every Wave from 2014-15 (Wave 1)
Understanding Society	UK	16 & over	Online & Face-to-Face	Yes - online & computer	Direct question ⁶ UCLA three-item loneliness scale ⁵	N/A	Included every Wave since 2017-19 (Wave 9)

¹ How often do you feel lonely? [Often or always] [Some of the time] [Occasionally] [Hardly ever] [Never]

² How much of the time during the last week have you felt lonely?
[None, or almost none of the time] [Some of the time] [Most, almost all, or all the time]

³ Please indicate for each of the following statements, the extent to which they apply to your situation, the way you feel now.

1. I experience a general sense of emptiness
 2. I miss having people around
 3. I often feel rejected
 4. There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems
 5. There are many people I can trust completely
 6. There are enough people I feel close to
- [Yes] [More or Less] [No]

⁴ During the most recent summer holidays, how often did you feel lonely?
[None of the time] [Rarely] [Some of the time] [Often] [All of the time]

⁵ How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
How often do you feel left out?
How often do you feel isolated from others?
[Hardly ever or never] [Some of the time] [Often]

⁶ How often do you feel lonely? [Often or always] [Some of the time] [Hardly ever]

⁷ How often do you feel you lack companionship?
How often do you feel left out?
How often do you feel isolated from others?
How often do you feel in tune with the people around you?
How often do you feel lonely?
How often do you feel sad, low or depressed?
[Often or always] [Some of the time] [Often]

Endnotes

ⁱ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. (October 2018) *A connected society A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness> (Accessed 12th February 2020)

ⁱⁱ The Scottish Government. (December 2018) *A Connected Scotland - Our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections* Available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/> (Accessed 12th February 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of National Statistics. (December 2018) 'Chapter 2: Mapping the loneliness measurement landscape'. In *National Measurement of Loneliness: 2018*. Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/compendium/nationalmeasurementofloneliness/2018> (Accessed 12th February 2020)

^{iv} Office of National Statistics. (December 2018) 'Chapter 5: Recommended national indicators of loneliness'. In *National Measurement of Loneliness: 2018*. Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/compendium/nationalmeasurementofloneliness/2018/recommendednationalindicatorsof Loneliness> (Accessed 12th February 2020)

^v Computer assisted self-interviewing (CASI) is a technique for survey data collection in which the respondent uses a computer to complete the survey questionnaire without an interviewer administering it to the respondent. It requires the respondent to be able to read well (enough).

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^{vii} This is akin to taking the averages of different perspectives as a way of aggregating diverse information while filtering out the errors.