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Letter to the Editor

Who is lonely in lockdown? This cross-cohort analysis suggests students may be at risk



Loneliness is widely considered to be one of the key public health concerns when it comes to the lasting effects of lockdown measures that we have seen globally. This article by Bu et al.¹ vitally addresses the identification of most at-risk populations, enabling targeted policy and action. Although perhaps unsurprising, the results will allow concerted efforts to focus with just-cause and importantly highlight that even within at-risk groups, there is clear evidence that the coronavirus pandemic has had compounding outcomes.

However, I do believe that it is important to draw further attention to one anomaly that they describe, being a student. The authors' overall conclusion is that groups previously identified as high risk are the very same that should be targeted with specific interventions affecting loneliness. The risk with this is that the importance of the one anomaly they have identified is overshadowed and down-played, potentially with long-lasting consequences.

The data does not aim to demonstrate prevalence, but being a student was clearly shown to confer much greater risk of loneliness during the pandemic. The authors here have proposed that this may simply be a manifestation of longer term trends in the student population; as the key outlier to otherwise expected results, this warrants far greater attention. The comparator data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study wave 9 is dated from January 2017 to January 2019. Even if one decided to fully assume that this specific change is a sign of longer term trends, that is a very marked change in such a short time frame. If the pandemic is then taken into account, it may be purported that this population, in relative terms, has been most affected by lockdown measures. This should then warrant much more targeted research and interventions so as to mitigate for irreversible long-term detriment.

Relevant to this, I most agree with the authors' second recommendation for further studies, 'track the trajectories of loneliness

across lockdown'.¹ Furthermore, it should be recommended that these studies are continued postlockdown to analyse whether easing itself sees any reversal of loneliness. Not only relevant to this subset of the population, observational studies demonstrating longer term trends through the easing of lockdown and into the 'new normal' are vital. These studies could further highlight population groups with continually escalating risk or even groups that demonstrate self-propagated improvement. Separately, further investigation as to the specifics of student loneliness and its causes (longer term vs pandemic-induced) are strongly indicated.

Overall, I support this work by Bu et al. and simply wish to draw more focus to a specific finding of their work which was perhaps not given the attention necessary to further scientific discussion in a timely way. Apt recognition of the marked increase in loneliness in the student population, relative to all other population subsets, has the potential to mitigate huge downstream negative effects.

References

1. Bu F, Steptoe A, Fancourt D. Who is lonely in lockdown? Cross-cohort analyses of predictors of loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Publ Health* 2020; **186**:31–4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.06.036>.

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