

International Conference on Loneliness in Barcelona

9–10 November 2022



Municipal strategy against loneliness 2020-2030

Writing and direction

Directorate of Services for Children, Youth and the Elderly
Department of Childhood, Youth, the Elderly and People with Disabilities

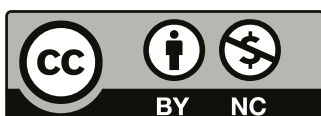
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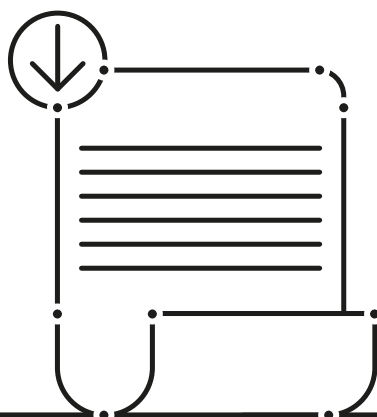


International Conference on Loneliness in Barcelona



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PRESENTATION



Joan Ramon Riera Alemany

Councillor for Childhood, Youth, the Elderly, and People with Disabilities

Unwanted solitude stifles the desire to socialise that we humans have by our very nature. Through either individualism or the increase in the number of life projects, Western cities - and Barcelona is no exception - tend to result in more lonely people, and exclude citizens from an optimal framework of social relationships; relationships that need to be built within an environment of trust that enables individuals to express themselves freely.

For some years now, we at the Barcelona City Council have been engaged in programmes to combat solitude - Radars and VinclesBCN are two clear examples. Bearing in mind this working framework, and given that unwanted solitude has come to feature on the public agenda, we concluded that it was essential to design a plan that would include a detailed study of solitude, an analysis that could provide a new approach to public policy with a view to assisting people throughout the whole of their lives and creating an action plan that includes both existing initiatives in the city and everything we believe has yet to be done.

The 2020-2030 Municipal Strategy to Combat Unwanted Solitude is a result of these reflections. The process of designing this strategy was complex, yet at the same time extraordinarily enriching. To avoid 'going it alone',





Barcelona City Council supported the creation of the CACS (Scientific Advisory Council against Unwanted Solitude), which is made up of prominent scholars in such diverse fields as philosophy, psychology and the health sciences. The council was extremely useful in helping us to understand and further explore the nature of the phenomenon of unwanted solitude. During the process of researching and designing the strategy, we noticed that there were cities around the world that were already implementing programmes to combat unwanted solitude, and that there were experts dedicated to researching the topic. So we decided to get everyone together, to share both the experiences and the conclusions of the different studies.

These documents that we are sharing are the result of the work, research and debates involved in the first international conference on solitude held in Barcelona on 9 and 10 November. The participants at this initial conference included scholars researching solitude, policy makers who either have designed or are designing policies aimed at addressing unwanted solitude, and members of non-governmental organisations, as well as individuals who wanted to present and share the programmes they are implementing to combat unwanted solitude.



OPENING LECTURE

Loneliness and unhappiness, some of the consequences of the crisis of trust in others



David Pastor Vico

Philosopher and populariser, specialist in communication ethics. Professor at the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico). Writer and regular contributor to the media

We must stop looking for meaning in life, because life has no meaning. It is better to dedicate time to filling life with meaning, to giving it meaning.

Aristotle speaks of happiness in a book of ethics that he dedicates to his son so that he learns to live well and this leads him to happiness. The first thing he says to his son is: "Don't trust anyone who doesn't have friends, it's impossible that they're happy. Only animals and gods are capable of living in solitude".

When Aristotle says that man is a political animal, he is not referring to the fact that he likes politics but to the fact that he needs others to live and be happy.

Unwanted loneliness is a consequence, not an end. Broadly speaking, it affects two large groups of people:

1. Older people, digital migrants, can face unwanted loneliness because they have chosen an atomised way of life. They have left their environment to earn a living, and they do the same for their children. They are detached from the more traditional life, but they have the ability to look back on a past in which they have been children who have played and shared.
2. Younger people can be lonely because of their predecessors, it has not been their chosen way of life. They do not have the capacity to compare with the childhood and youth shared with others that the previous generation lived through.

Trust between people, between neighbours, has been neglected because it has been taken for granted; philosophy has taken it for granted.

In 1945, the German political scientist Elizabeth Noelle developed the Interpersonal Trust Index, which is measured by the question: 'Is any kind of distrust in others a good thing? YES/NO'. From 1968 onwards, Josh Morgan began to work on this concept in the USA; this concept has not yet arrived in Latin culture.



High interpersonal trust has 4 consequences:

- 1. More interpersonal trust = a more democratic society.** In the end, democracy is closely related to trust. Trust is knowing that the other person or persons will do what they are expected to do. This also includes the responsibility of each person towards others. A high index of interpersonal trust implies a high index of personal responsibility. Individual responsibility does not exist, it is always a response to others.
- 2. More interpersonal trust = less corruption,** because there is more public participation and more control, and the citizens themselves act more responsibly.
- 3. More interpersonal trust = more country intelligence.** Intellectual knowledge on a national scale has begun to decline as interpersonal mistrust has increased. It is declining because a distrustful society has children who do not play, and if they do not play, they do not develop social skills. Mistrust leads to distrust of one's neighbours. Nowadays, neighbours don't know each other; in the past, when you went to other children's houses, you learnt other ways of living, and that was a way of cultivating critical thinking. Critical thinking creates a more intelligent society.
- 4. More interpersonal trust = more happiness.** It is very difficult to measure happiness, it is a complicated exercise. The UN has an index that establishes a clear correlation with interpersonal trust: more distrust = less happiness, and vice versa. For example: Mexico currently (November 2022) has 10% interpersonal trust; Spain, 27%, but among young people under 35, only 17%. Mexico ranks 47th in the world ranking of happiness; Spain, 26th. Trust figures in Spain are increasingly similar to those in Latin America. For the 5th consecutive year, in 2022 Finland is the happiest country in the world, with higher levels of democracy, less corruption and more advanced students.

A note on insecurity: insecurity causes loneliness, because it makes people stay at home, take their children home and abandon public spaces to give them over to insecurity.

ROUND TABLE: LONELINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

how can new technologies contribute to alleviating loneliness?

MODERATED BY:



Michael Donaldson

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WITH:

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It is important to think about the value of the use of technology. Everyone uses technology according to his or her needs in order to achieve his or her life goals. Therefore, the use of technology must have meaning and be linked to each person.

The aim of its use is not to remain in the digital sphere, it must be used for life beyond the screen. Technology must help us not to feel excluded and to gain autonomy.

During the pandemic, it was discovered that technology made it possible to replace some of the relationships we wanted to have. People lost their fear of socialising with each other through screens, but they were aware that this was just for a short while.

Digital technologies make the possibilities of relationships easier. We need to look at success stories, such as videoconferencing, for example, and that is the direction we need to head in.

According to Genís Roca, people with higher purchasing power will have people and services around them, while people with lower purchasing power will have technology at their disposal. Therefore, people who only have technology-based relationships are likely to be those with a lower level of income.

In addition to the use of technology by citizens, it is also important to think about how administrations can use technology to design services so that people do not feel alone.

On the other hand, it is important to prevent people who do not want to use technology from feeling lonely.



The data on loneliness in Barcelona do not show any correlation between "feeling lonely" and the use of technology. The surveys show that the people who feel most lonely are young people aged between 16 and 24, who make extensive use of technology, and older people aged 66 and over, who make little use of technology.

However, people who do not have access to technology may find it more difficult to meet some of their life needs, such as finding work. If you don't use technology, you are left on the sidelines.

Barcelona has a city challenge: it currently has a population of 365,000 elderly people, of whom 90,000 live alone and 100,000 need support for daily life. The number of elderly people who live in Barcelona and need care is increasing year by year. To help these people, Barcelona City Council is developing an **Intelligent Robot Assistant (ARI, from its acronyms in Catalan)**.

ARI is a robot that moves autonomously, recognises the user's face, has a visual assistant in Catalan and Spanish, and detects movement. It has the function of a companion and activator of daily tasks: it asks the user how he/she has slept, monitors medication, etc., and the user can also make requests. So far, a pilot test has been carried out with 14 users.

The behaviour of older people in relation to the ARI robot has also begun to be studied: some of them see it mainly as a leisure device and use it to play and have conversations with. Other users are more utility-minded and find that the robot does not have enough functions. It is necessary to evaluate what would be more useful.

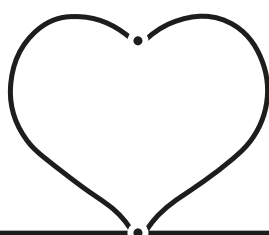
People are not replaceable, but more money is needed to cover services using only human resources. This is why we are moving towards hybrid contexts that combine technology and people.

As far as young people are concerned, technologies have been built taking into account the psychology of marketing, and it would be necessary to respond to technological addiction from a psychological point of view. People also need to be educated so that they make sound judgements about the content.



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Technology cannot replace people or human contact, but we must admit that it can help us to feel closer to each other, to communicate. The digital divide makes a difference; those who do not have this means of communication can feel very lonely.

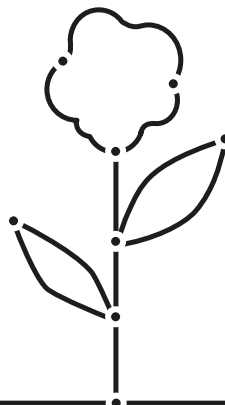
Often, however, despite all the tools at our disposal, it is also possible to feel loneliness, for example when a person calls a public service and is passed from one line to another without getting anywhere. Young and old alike despair in such cases. In this sense, many government services and websites have a usability problem, a technical problem, not a human problem.

An example is the artificial intelligence application "**Replika**": it creates an avatar, a companion. The app is advertised as "Come in and find that intimate space you're looking for, you will always have someone to listen to you". The avatar even writes that it is sad if the user has not logged in to the app for days. However, in order for the avatar to improve, money has to be spent, because the programmers of the virtual space have to be paid. Therefore, the business is based on addiction.

It is important not to confuse uses. Technology is made to help people, and for this reason it is necessary to rethink very carefully how it is made and how it is used. Real friendships cannot be provided by technology.

It is necessary to make use of the data available, of which there is a lot, because conclusions can be drawn and can help with decision making. There is the challenge of collecting data correctly in order to be able to analyse them well and compare them, and there is also the challenge of explaining well and in a simple way what artificial intelligence says.

The use of technology implies talking about ethics in its use. A critical understanding of how technology works is required, and it is important to be very clear that technology cannot replace personal relationships.



What are we talking about when we talk about Metaverse and immersive technology? It's a whole world, made up of three tools:

1. **Virtual reality:** a virtual world, without awareness of the physical world. Through the use of a headset, you can no longer see what is around you.
2. **Augmented reality:** unlike virtual reality, there is physical reality and a layer of information is added.
3. **Mixed reality:** the difference lies in the system's knowledge of the physical reality. In augmented reality there is no knowledge of what is in the physical reality, while in mixed reality the physical reality is analysed.

In Metaverse you can do things that you cannot do in real life. For example, a person with physical limitations can overcome them in virtual reality and have a different way of life. They can transcend limits or eliminate oppressions linked to their body, such as gender or ethnic discrimination, and free themselves from any social pressure.

An experience, even if it is virtual, is real, because it affects the person who lives it in a real way.

Technologies are not a substitute for personal relationships, but can serve as a complement to them. We should not blame them for social isolation and loneliness, although they have the most powerful and also the most pernicious characteristics. We simply need to take into account the ethical aspect. Therefore, the basic problem is often education.



Pierre Bourdin

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ROUND TABLE: LONELINESS AND LIFE CYCLES

How is loneliness experienced throughout one's life?

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Matilde Fernández

Ex-Minister of Social Affairs of the Spanish Government.
President of the State Observatory of Unwanted Loneliness.

Barcelona is the only city in Spain that has a strategy against loneliness. What stands out from the plan:

- a. A decision has been made to look at what has been done and what is useful, gathering what has been done and making new policies.
- b. It ensures that the policies that are put in place are maintained.
- c. It involves everyone, the whole city council, all the councillors, and cross-cutting measures are put in place.
- d. Control bodies and evaluation mechanisms have been created, and it is made clear that there are 25 objectives to be pursued.

We need to talk about several lonelinesses. We are learning ever more about different lonelinesses, but more needs to be known in order to find the tools required to implement useful policies.

Unwanted loneliness can be experienced and can be harmful at all ages and in any economic situation.

Young people have become an important factor in the analysis of loneliness. In this age bracket, the groups that suffer the most loneliness are homeless people, people with disabilities and young people. Minorities such as migrants and refugees should also be taken into account, although they may not appear on this list because there is no data on them.

There are some very objective factors regarding loneliness:

- a. **Relatives:** linked to the longevity of life ("empty nest" syndrome, life expectancy, loss of other relatives...). The network is shrinking.
- b. **Physical:** in people with disabilities, who have also increased their life expectancy. Also linked to other material aspects such as substandard housing or buildings without lifts.
- c. **Social:** change of neighbourhood and loss of the network of relationships, retirement with changes in income, etc.

We are experiencing a transformation from a welfare society to a caregiving society. We need to build a society that dignifies the work of carers, because caregiving is not just a family duty, but everyone's duty.

Society perceives loneliness as a major social problem, a problem that will continue to grow.

Since 1980, the definition of loneliness has been this: an unpleasant experience based on the difference between one's expectations in relation to one's social relationships and the reality of these relationships.

The emotional part is often forgotten, and loneliness has different emotions: sadness, feelings of vulnerability, anger, etc. To understand the experience of loneliness we need to go further, because there are different needs depending on the type of relationship. The loneliness of a person who seeks intimacy is different from that of a person who feels rejected.

We talk about emotional and social loneliness, but we do not talk about existential loneliness, especially in old age. There is a lack of focus on older people. People are needs and potential, they not only live but also exist, and this needs to be applied to the elderly. Therefore, in order to tackle loneliness, we need to review the old age model. Thinking that older people only need to survive can cause them existential loneliness. We need to create an old age model that takes into account the potential of older people.

Support is very important, but it does not mean that this is all that can be done. People need to be empowered to live as well as possible and to be able to overcome situations of loneliness. It is also necessary to create a community structure and to raise awareness.

Loneliness accompanies people throughout their lives. Sadness is not depression, and loneliness is not a pathology.



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Many comments are being made like "I don't have friends and I don't need them".

That is a mistake, because if you have never had friendships, you can't give an opinion on what it means to have friendships.

Some people defend solitude. A person may have decided that he or she needs solitude; normally they are people who do so after a very specific career (Kant, for example). These people send out a false message: yes to solitude, but a solitude that's been chosen and after a fulfilling life.

At the same time, defending solitude can be a justification, a defence of rationality and a discourse that should be avoided because it can confuse people who feel truly alone.



It is extremely important to identify the people who feel lonely and do not want to feel like that. Where are these people? How do we get to them? Barcelona City Council is reaching them with the **VinclesBCN** service.

Example Tarragona, to detect lonely people: some neighbours were concerned about the fact that the resident on the 4th floor, a wheelchair user, never left his home, even though he was seeking assistance. The identification network is very important.

The Red Cross has an observatory on loneliness, which has carried out a survey among the groups that the Red Cross Catalunya attends to. According to this survey, loneliness is very cross-cutting in terms of age. Only 22% of people define themselves as not alone; 8 out of 10 people express some degree of loneliness. The highest indicators are among young people, which indicates that loneliness has also reached young people. It can also be observed that, when economic income is lower, the feeling of loneliness increases. On the other hand, older people, especially women, tend to normalise loneliness. Technology does not solve unwanted loneliness, but it can help to connect and create links, together with community action.

We must avoid contributing to making people more dependent; what we need to do is to support them and make it easier for the community to reach out to them.



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In order to be able to answer the question "How is loneliness experienced throughout life?" it is necessary to take into account some factors:

- 1. It is essential to take the gender perspective into account**, because it allows us to incorporate productive and reproductive work into the analysis. It is not possible to be 100% available in these two areas of work. Focusing on work helps us to understand the different experience of loneliness between men and women.
- 2. Age and life cycle are not synonyms.** Depending on the life cycle, loneliness can be experienced in different ways. A person in their thirties who is still at home with their parents because they are studying does not experience it in the same way as a person in their thirties who has three children and is working.
- 3. It is necessary to combine a quantitative approach and a qualitative approach** when it comes to understanding loneliness. Purely quantitative data do not always explain everything.

An important qualitative fact to take into account is that young men suffer more from loneliness, but they express it less; they express it less in surveys because the stereotypical male role is not to express emotions, because it is understood that this means showing weakness.

Why do young men suffer more loneliness? One of the hypotheses is that the socialisation process is different because of gender; men carry the stigma of not expressing themselves. According to qualitative research conducted with NEET boys (young men who neither work nor study), they experience their day-to-day lives has empty time, because their expectations are culturally centred on the stereotype of "it's the man who provides for the family", and this leaves them with only two options: study or work.

In contrast, young girls had internalised the role of carers, and they took it on board. Although they were also NEET, they did not feel as much loneliness as young men.

In the case of adult women, the experience of loneliness has a lot to do with providing care. The invisibility of work in the home can be associated with the feeling of loneliness. Taking on invisible work makes them invisible and can reach extreme levels. Women who are immersed in the job market can also become isolated by precariousness. Also women who have raised children, when they find themselves with an empty nest, this can lead them to feelings of loneliness.

With regard to older men, in a productive logic in which the male gender responds to the stereotype of "the man is the provider", there are loneliness risk situations when there is no paid work due to unemployment or retirement if no alternative life plans have been made.

To the extent that loneliness, according to the life cycle, is related to the division of work on the basis of gender, there are many possibilities for designing successful policies and interventions.

ROUND TABLE: LONLINESS AND CITIES

what do cities need to be like in order to help increase connectedness?

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Xavier Matilla

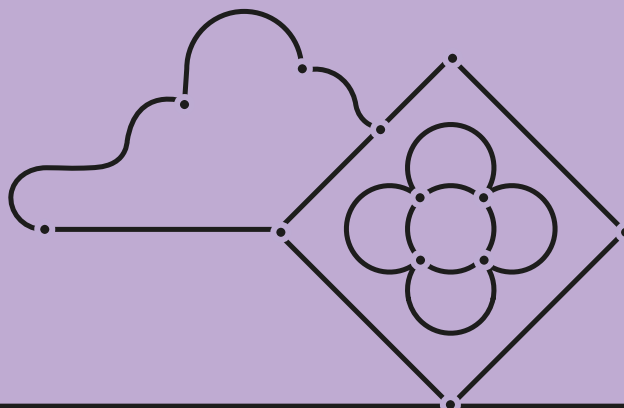
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Michelle Hoar

Founder of the 'Hey Neighbour! Collective' project in Vancouver. Aiming to increase social connectedness and neighbourliness.

The project "**Hey Neighbour Collective**" was a response to homelessness and loneliness in Canada. One cause of homelessness and isolation was housing. The architecture of the buildings can generate loneliness, and skyscrapers cause loneliness. Also the price of housing, buying is extremely expensive in Canada. For that reason, 83% of the population rent properties and there is a lot of competition to find rental offers.

The project aims to change the relationship between landowners and owners by incorporating the owners into the project, as well as other social and market actors. It works through various pilot programmes with building owner-partners and other community agents. Another objective of the programme is to ensure that each person has at least four reference people around them.

The project also works in research and learning with other projects, collaborating with some universities. It studies the impact of the programmes on residents and how to develop a sense of community in buildings that are not conducive to it.

Pilot programmes under way:

1. **CONCERT** is the name of an ownership group with 11 buildings. They dedicate one person full time to developing community and relationships, and also work with two or three residents so they can organise activities. The results have been very powerful and impressive: the residents are getting to know each other and there is a sense of community.
1. **CONNECT AND PREPARE** in Victoria, a seismically active area near Vancouver. It is a programme to prepare people for possible emergencies. It is made up of residents who come together voluntarily and also hold workshops, develop relationships and go beyond resilience in the face of emergencies.
1. **NORTH-WEST** In an area affected by the climate crisis, many elderly people died in a heat wave. Work is being done to prepare them to face emergencies while at the same time creating relationships.

Housing is essential. Many people have the feeling that the city doesn't want them, that they have no place to shelter. This programme is an attempt to change the relationship between owners and tenants. It is a paradigm shift that needs time.

The European Commission is conducting research on loneliness in EU countries, because, according to surveys carried out, in 2020, 25% of the European population felt lonely half of the time. A much higher figure than in 2016, when the percentage was 12%. The aim of the project is to provide data and knowledge for policy decisions. **It will be the first EU-wide compilation of data on loneliness.**

Loneliness has an impact on health, but also on confidence and social relationships.

In the interventions to combat loneliness that are carried out in different European countries, different aspects are worked on:

- a. Analysis of the effectiveness of the interventions.
- b. Production of a European map of the different interventions.
- c. Interviews with experts in interventions to alleviate loneliness.

What has been analysed so far?

- a. We have observed which interventions work, and the result is that different types of interventions can work. There is no one type that is superior to the others, and that is good news.
- b. It is important to carry out a variety of interventions to address the whole range of needs. It is also necessary to make specific interventions for young people, as, in general, few are made, although they are one of the groups that suffer the most loneliness.
- c. It is important to carry out a systematic and long-term evaluation of the interventions.
- d. Some tips for success have emerged from the interviews: there needs to be a connection with the people who use programmes and services to alleviate loneliness, so that they feel understood. It is necessary to apply inclusivity to avoid stigmatisation. It is also necessary to generate trust among the people involved.
- e. There are three key elements: creating a network, identifying the population in need of intervention and knowing how to communicate what is being done.

The city scale is the ideal scale to be able to carry out these interventions. Assessment is essential for monitoring, to know what works, where it works and what interest it has.



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Xavier Matilla

Head architect of Barcelona City Council and Professor of Urban Planning and Land Use Planning at the UPC (Polytechnic University of Catalonia)

Cities have been very focused on attracting tourism on a global scale, but the human scale has been forgotten. It is necessary to promote and transform the city in order to emphasise proximity between people.

It is important to understand that the whole city is a habitable space, not just housing. Conceive the city as a continuous series of spaces for habitability.

It is necessary to identify reference spaces that have been lost, in order to recover them as habitable spaces, such as, for example, squares.

Proposals that Barcelona City Council is working on:

- **HOUSING** Proximity begins with housing. Everyone must have the right to live in a decent home, including in terms of design and use. To live collectively is to live sharing activities, it does not mean living in isolation. There are projects in the city, such as La Borda, that facilitate this collective life.
- **COLLECTIVE COEXISTENCE** Recovery of spaces that have been used for collective coexistence in buildings: the roof tops. The City Council provides subsidies for green roofs, also as collective spaces. This has been a learning experience resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **FACILITIES** Facilities as spaces that help to create and strengthen relationships, also through their design. Barcelona has first-rate facilities, especially libraries. They need to be distributed evenly throughout the city's neighbourhoods. The García Márquez library (Sant Martí) has been designed as a space where people can socialise with one another, both in terms of its use and its structure.
- **SCHOOLS** Schools also form part of the urban strategy. The "Protegem les escoles" (Let's protect the schools) programme improves the school environment with low-cost actions that contribute to making schools places for collective life.
- **STREETS** Barcelona is a city with small and medium-sized parks. The City Council is working to transform the streets, managing traffic and mobility to recover the original value of the street as a space for mobility but also for coexistence. Superblocks are implementing a new mobility model that gives priority to public transport and bicycles, while reducing traffic. The power of tables and benches in the public space as elements that generate links is also important.
- **GAMES** Barcelona as a playable city. According to the Plan Horitzó 2030 (2030 Horizon Plan), the whole city must be a space that allows children to play spontaneously, at different levels and intensities.
- **ACCESSIBILITY** The city must be accessible to everyone. The new green areas guarantee universal accessibility, which has been worked on with the contributions of people with mobility difficulties.

The concept of the neoliberal city can be changed, and this can help to alleviate the feeling of loneliness, because the feeling of loneliness is also marked by the way cities are built.

There is also institutional loneliness, understood as the feeling of abandonment that people often have when they do not feel cared for by the institutions. This situation can lead to political disaffection.

Aspects to take into account:

- a. **Young people need to be reassured** because, according to a qualitative study carried out at the University of Seville, they do not feel they have enough of a sense of belonging, and are not given a sense of belonging by the authorities.
- b. The touristization of cities has created "**the paradox of the tourist**", according to which areas with a lot of tourists are very nice, but the residents who have lived there all their lives abandon them, are often pushed away, and the areas where they go to live, which are less touristy, are much less well cared for. Moreover, in the more touristy areas, the commercial fabric and community life tend to disappear.
- c. Often, elderly people who live in residential homes feel lonely, because they receive few visitors, when they go out on the street they do not find themselves in an area they like very much, etc. **Institutions should take action to make the areas where there are homes for elderly people friendlier.**



Juanma García

Director of the UPO-Creu Roja (Pablo de Olavide University-Red Cross) Chair in studies on unwanted loneliness, the only one of its kind in Europe





Bet Bàrbara

Coordinator of the Servei d'Atenció Comunitària de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona (Community Care Service of Barcelona City Council)

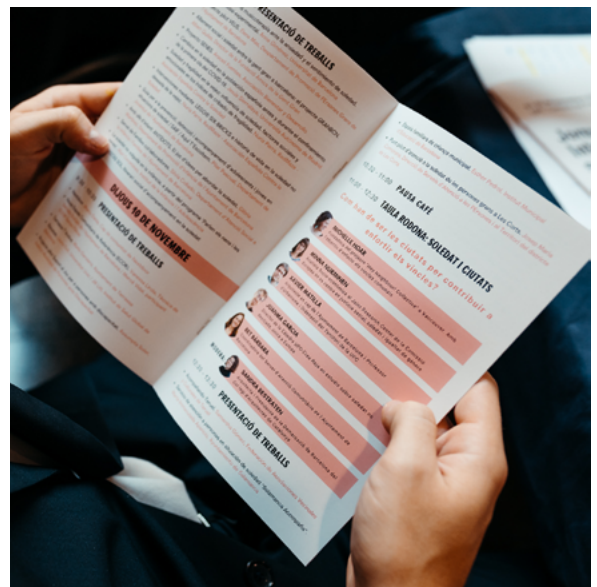
In the current context, we are moving towards a society with a lack of social cohesion. The most economically vulnerable people often have more relational poverty as well. **Without a relational network, isolation is greater.**

In order to tackle this situation, in addition to the intervention of social services, we need to move towards a much more community-based model of social care, with a more collective dimension. Up to now, public proposals have been built on a more individualised basis, but they are no longer useful.

Until now, we have been working from the logic of consumption: to hold a workshop, to get a book.... Now we need to start thinking that, as well as consuming, it is important to participate. We need to generate new, more collaborative methodologies and dynamics, especially in the face of complicated challenges such as loneliness.

Looking at the great diversity of facilities in the city of Barcelona, it is important to see whether they are useful for responding to unwanted loneliness. As well as changing the physical spaces to generate more proximity, the facilities also have to change the logic of how they function:

Spaces must be accessible and proactive. They cannot just wait for users to enter, but must also seek out people who might never enter. Accessibility must be inclusive, so that the facilities are proactive spaces for meeting and exchange.



ROUND TABLE: LONELINESS AND PUBLIC POLICIES

What can institutions do to alleviate loneliness?

MODERATED BY:



Sara Berbel

Barcelona City Council's
Municipal Manager.
Doctor in Social Psychology and Writer

WITH:

Tracey Crouch

British politician.
Ex-Minister for Loneliness in the UK

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Professor and researcher
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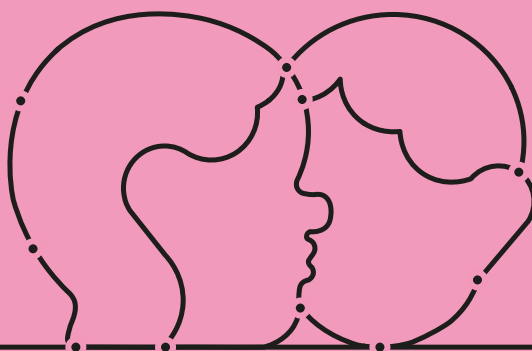
Councillor for children, young people,
older people and rapporteur
of the commitment 'Barcelona
against loneliness'

Colin Scicluna

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Dubravka Suica

Abbassia Hakem

Deputy Mayor for Social Inclusion
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Tracey Crouch

British politician.
Ex-Minister for Loneliness in the UK

Loneliness has a great impact on health, similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

According to statistics, **in the UK 45% of people say they feel lonely occasionally**; 6% say they feel lonely all the time; and young people aged between 16 and 24 feel lonelier than any other population group.

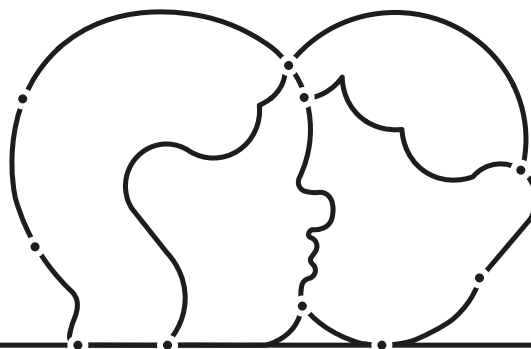
When the Commission on Loneliness was created in the United Kingdom, the media did not say anything against it. People from all over the world quoted the minister, there were many people interested in the issue of loneliness.

The Commission carried out an extensive analysis of the issue, covering the impact of local policies, public transport, technology and also the role of companies as employers and their responsibilities. This analysis therefore includes what the government can do, but also what many other actors can do.

A map was created of the important moments in life, from birth to death, which reflected many moments of unwanted loneliness. And solutions were sought according to the profile of each type of loneliness, because nothing there is not one solution that works for everyone. We also analysed how to reduce the stigma caused by loneliness, because it seemed extremely important.

An intervention was also carried out with medical professionals to help people who are lonely, which was called '**social prescribing**'. The doctors make prescriptions for patients to encourage them to join gardening and hiking groups and other activities. It worked very well until the pandemic hit.

In the end, it is all about people being connected, ensuring that activity groups have funding and recognition, especially for each person as an individual. It is good to be alone, but it is not good to suffer such severe loneliness that it even has an impact on physical and mental health.



Some notes on the **qualitative research carried out on elderly people and loneliness**, based on 100 in-depth interviews, with the aim of detecting and evaluating success factors in programmes to alleviate loneliness:

- a. Institutions must listen to people who are lonely. Loneliness is often measured only in figures, but it is also necessary to understand loneliness from a more qualitative point of view. This is achieved by going to see people where they live and listening to them.
- b. Loneliness increases when there are health problems and economic vulnerability.
- c. Many of the people who at some point have wanted to commit suicide have not done so because they were afraid of not carrying it out properly and of the possibility of being a burden to a close caregiver.
- d. Care no longer falls on the family, because dependent people do not want to "bother" their relatives. Faced with this, institutions must offer more policies, services and support programmes, because family solidarity is increasingly limited in Spain.
- e. In general, there is poor communication between citizens and authorities, because the latter are often late in responding. Nor is there good communication with the banking sector, because most procedures are carried out online and there are people who do not have access to the Internet or are digitally deprived. Health care has also been a source of complaint for those surveyed.
- f. Loneliness, despite being a social problem, is often perceived as a personal issue.



Juan López

Professor and researcher at the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Granada





Joan Ramon Riera Alemany

Councillor for children, young people, older people and rapporteur of the commitment 'Barcelona against loneliness'

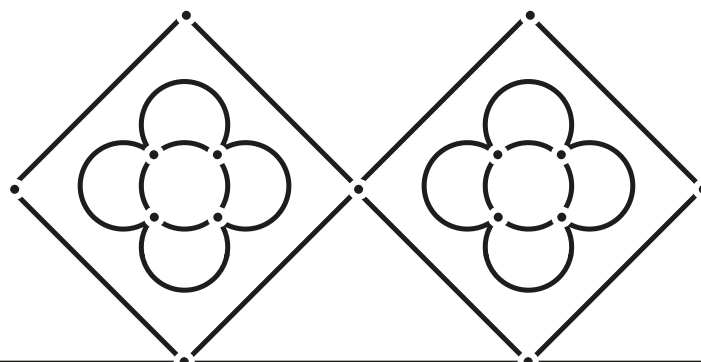
Addressing loneliness has become a new need and is creating a new way of doing politics.

Until now, policies were based on material conditions, and among all the values that have been deployed with neoliberalism, there is one that has triumphed: individualism. Politicians and representatives who believe in the polis must respond to this situation.

There is a new challenge that needs to be resolved: urban societies have a natural tendency to generate single people.

Barcelona City Council has drawn up a **municipal strategy against loneliness that responds to 4 main points:**

- 1. Raise awareness and generate knowledge about the issue of loneliness.** Without citizens, it is not possible to achieve this; there must be participation and community. As for the authorities, they need to design and implement the process.
- 2. Strengthen and deploy services to prevent and deal with loneliness,** from an intergenerational point of view.
- 3. Restructuring the city and its spaces.** Community work, with the collaboration of social entities, is now more necessary than ever, because it makes it possible to reach places and people that the City Council could not reach alone with its own social services.
- 4. Adapt the way institutions operate to the needs and problems arising from unwanted loneliness,** to introduce the loneliness perspective into all areas of the City Council.



At the European level, loneliness is still a new issue; it is not part of the competence treaties, it is not a competence of the European Union to think or reflect on issues such as loneliness.

However, from the last few years onwards, there has been more interest, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then awareness of unwanted loneliness has grown.

It is the job of politicians to take care of citizens; institutions cannot afford not to take into account loneliness and the effects it has on people.

The main action is carried out at the municipal level, and it is very significant, that is how it has to be done. We must intervene at a level as close to the citizens as possible.

Citizen involvement is essential as a consultative element.



Colin Scicluna

Head of the Office of the Vice-President of the European Commission
Dubravka Suica





Abbassia Hakem

Deputy Mayor for Social Inclusion and Solidarity of the City of Nantes

In France, loneliness is a phenomenon of incredible proportions: 16 million people say they feel lonely; 1 in 4 people live alone; only 1 in 3 people have a relationship network. **In the city of Nantes, 1 in 3 people live alone.**

20 years ago, the central government created an emergency plan to help two groups of people: the over 65s and people with disabilities. There was only one requirement in order to receive help and care: to register at the Town Hall.

After that national emergency plan, the guidelines of which were modified by the central government in 2021, the unwanted loneliness passed into municipal policy. It is not yet possible to evaluate the results from the point of view of the cities.

In Nantes, we are working to bring together different citizen groups and organisations, people working in politics and other agents interested in working to alleviate unwanted loneliness, with the aim of increasing awareness of this problem, encouraging everyone's involvement and making it well publicised.

Some actions that are carried out in Nantes are:

- a. **"O'menu" programme** for older people, which allows them to have fun whilst eating and making friends in a restaurant. The aim was to create a time for socialising. It is an invitation open to everyone and 28 restaurants in the city have been involved. In total, 500,000 meals have been shared in 2 years.
- b. **"Carta Blanca" programme**, to develop social skills through culture, sport and other socialising activities linked to leisure. It is also a free programme.



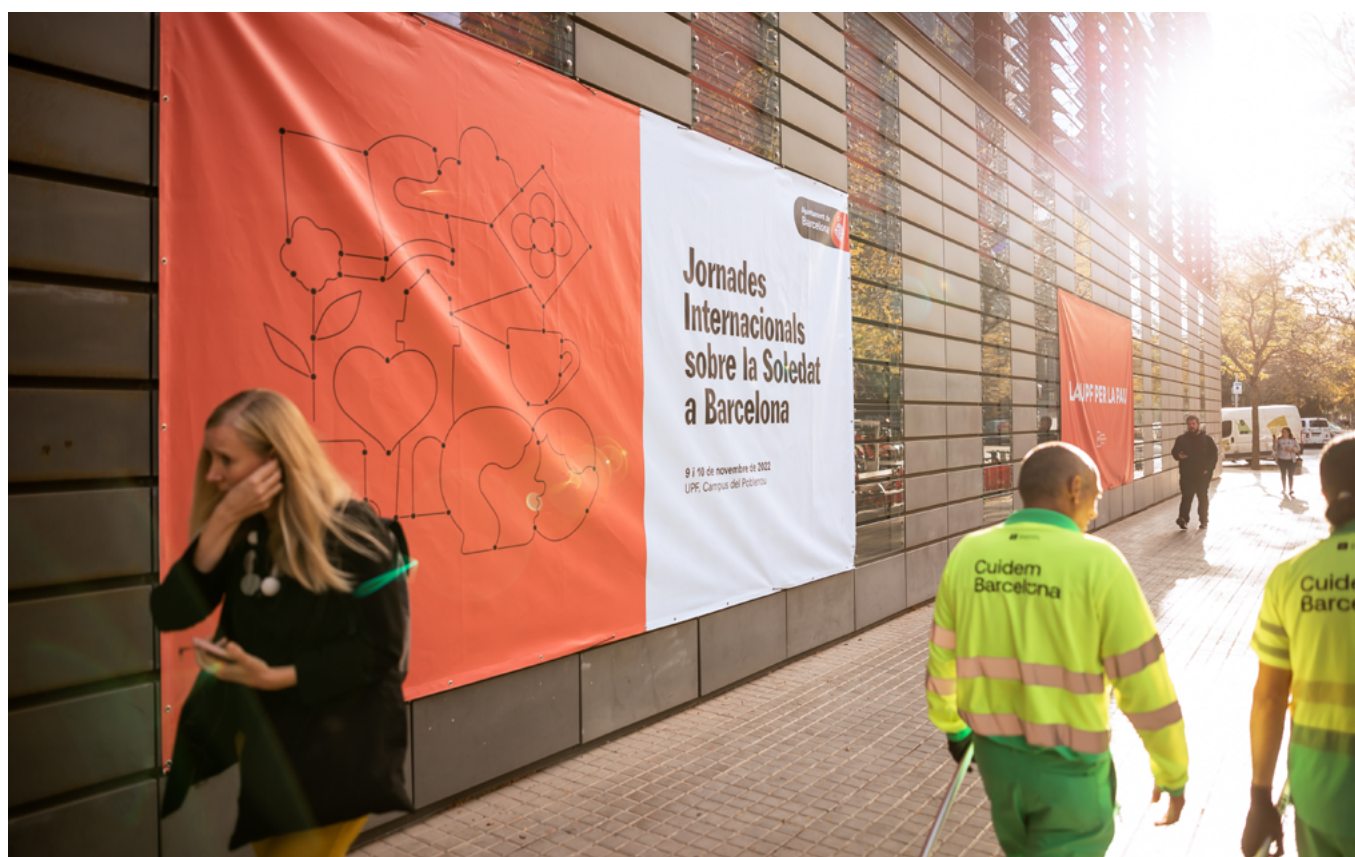
General conclusions



LONELINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

How can new technologies contribute to alleviating loneliness?

- 1. Technology can help people to be closer, to communicate, but it is important to think about how technology is used.** The aim of its use is not to remain in the digital sphere, it must be used for life beyond the screen. Technology must be used to help people.
- 2. The digital divide is important;** those who do not have these tools to communicate really feel very lonely. **It is also important to prevent people who voluntarily do not want to use technology from feeling lonely.**
- 3.** A robot cannot be confused with a person, but **technology (or a robot) can complement the services offered to citizens.** No robot will replace personalised services, but it will be able to complement them.
- 4.** It is necessary **to debate the ethics of technology and to build critical thinking in relation to it.** It is important to take care of the ethical aspect through debate and education.
- 5.** It is important to **research and knowledge about loneliness;** data helps to design effective public policies.



LONELINESS AND LIFE CYCLES

How is loneliness experienced throughout one's life?

- 6. Unwanted loneliness can exist and cause discomfort at any age and in any economic situation.** It is important to talk about several lonelinesses and try to understand them more and better so as to be able to use the tools required to implement appropriate policies.
- 7.** It is very important to identify people who feel lonely. How can these people be reached by the authorities? **The community can be very useful in identifying them and helping them.**
- 8.** According to surveys and data obtained, **elderly people, people with disabilities, young people, people without a home and carers are some of the groups that suffer most from loneliness.**
- 9.** In order to tackle unwanted loneliness, the model of care for the elderly needs to be revised. Thinking that it's enough for older people to simply survive can cause them existential loneliness. **It is necessary to promote a model of care that takes into account the potential of older people.**
- 10.** It is essential **to incorporate the gender perspective into the treatment of loneliness.** In this way, productive and reproductive work is introduced into the analysis. Focusing on work helps us to understand the different experience of loneliness between men and women. It is necessary to understand a model of society more focused on care as the evolution of the welfare society.



LONLINESS AND CITIES

What do cities need to be like in order to help increase connectedness?

11. The architecture of cities can provoke isolation and loneliness. For that reason, **cities need to be transformed so that they can promote proximity between people.**
12. **The whole city is a habitable space, not just housing.** All spaces can contribute to habitability and increasing connectedness.
13. It is important to carry out **a variety of interventions to address the whole range of needs.** It is also important to carry out specific interventions for young people, as, in general, these are few and far between, despite the fact that young people are one of the groups most affected by unwanted loneliness.
14. Interventions in loneliness must take into account several factors: **the connection with citizens, inclusivity to avoid stigmatisation and the capacity to generate trust** between all the agents involved.
15. **The facilities in the city are an opportunity to support people and generate interpersonal links.** To this end, they need to be adapted architecturally where necessary, and it is also important to rethink the model of citizen care and, above all, how people are received in community facilities.



LONELINESS AND PUBLIC POLICIES

What can institutions do to alleviate loneliness?

16. **Over the last few years, loneliness has begun to be put on the political agenda of European Union countries**, especially since the United Kingdom launched its first strategy and ministry against unwanted loneliness in 2018.
17. Government bodies must take care of people, listening to their needs and encouraging participation, in order to offer them adequate solutions to prevent and address unwanted loneliness. Social prescription is an effective tool. **Special attention should be paid to unwanted loneliness as a possible trigger for physical and mental health problems.**
18. Cities tend to exclude people because individualism has triumphed. It is necessary to build alternative, **emotionally-based policies that help to strengthen links and reconnect people.**
19. It is important to have **quantitative data** to measure loneliness, but it is also necessary to analyse and understand unwanted loneliness through **qualitative studies**. Equally, **public opinion needs to be made aware of loneliness as a social problem**, because it is often seen as a personal problem.
20. **The involvement of all political and social agents is essential.** Unwanted loneliness challenges governments, organisations, social agents and citizens. **Everyone can be part of the problem and part of the solution.**



Further information:

barcelona.cat/soledat

The Conference, in pictures:

- [9/11/2022](#)
- [10/11/2022](#)

Commitment

“Barcelona against loneliness”

Undesired loneliness has become a global problem which pervades society today and is linked to processes of modernity, urban development and greater individualism. Back in 2015, the European Commission warned that something like 30 million adults in Europe frequently experienced loneliness and urged an attempt to understand the different factors that may lead to people at different stages of life feeling lonely, in order to effectively work to relieve such feelings.

According to the 2022 Omnibus survey, in Barcelona 32.76% of young people aged between 16 and 24 stated they had, either on occasion or frequently, felt lonely. Specifically, 9% said they had had feelings of loneliness either frequently or very frequently, while 27.6% of young people aged between 25 and 34 said that either on occasion or frequently, they had felt lonely. On the other hand, 14.3% of older people aged 65 years or over, said they frequently or very frequently felt lonely while, for people aged between 55 and 65, the percentage was 16% and nearly 18% for people aged between 35 and 54.

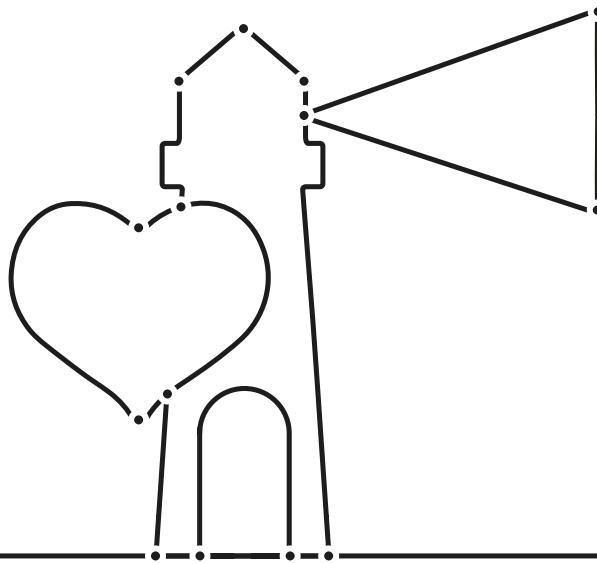
Most of us have felt or will feel lonely at some point in our lives and our ability to successfully tackle and overcome the feeling will depend on our environment and the social and support networks we have.

For many years Barcelona City Council has actively striven to reduce such feelings of undesired loneliness amongst its population but, given the evidence, which confirms the extent of the phenomenon, it feels it now to be a strategic priority for the administration of the city and stated as much in its 2020-2030 Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness.

To successfully tackle undesired loneliness it is not merely a question of offering care and support to people already suffering loneliness, we must also anticipate the situations and circumstances that can give rise to loneliness to prevent it occurring in the first place. We must also foster the development of quality social relationships and so help enhance the social cohesiveness of the city. This requires a commitment from all.

In order to involve all individuals, organizations and institutes, or public and private institutions in this quest to reduce undesired feelings of loneliness in the city, as the public administration of the city, Barcelona City Council has promoted and fostered its **“Barcelona Commitment Against Loneliness”**, as part of its 2020-2030 Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness so that each, within their pertinent area of competence, may engage in action, initiatives and best practices to help reduce undesired feelings of loneliness and foster social bonds in the following ways:

- Endeavour to create an awareness and knowledge of the phenomenon of undesired loneliness.
- Develop a suitable teaching environment and awareness at all stages of education.
- Engage in action and initiatives aimed at helping relieve feelings of undesired loneliness amongst those suffering them, or foster the creation of social bonds to help improve the social or community environment.
- Foster social bonds and socialization through the activities carried out by the organizations and areas in which they are involved, with particular emphasis on situations of undesired loneliness.
- Foster bonds and in-person, intergenerational relationships between people.
- Promote cooperation and volunteering amongst people at all stages of life as a tool for social transformation.



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