



Economic Dimension of the Solitude in Consideration of COVID-19 Pandemic- Sociability, Alone Living and Economic Growth

INTRODUCTION:

- The COVID-19 pandemic “has highlighted a massive challenge in the form of loneliness. Social distancing has become the norm, the biting feeling of loneliness has been an unwelcome companion to far too many Europeans. [...] This is not a new phenomenon, yet it is now revealed as never before and has significant social, economic and health implications that deserve our attention” (Suica 2020).
- In the literature, loneliness has a strong subjective nature; it is the perception of a discrepancy between a person’s desired and actual network of relationships. This cognitive discrepancy is lived as a deep negative experience. Loneliness is thus not only about having too few social contacts per se, but also about the perception that these relationships are not satisfying enough. In other words, loneliness does not mean being alone, but feeling alone. In this respect, loneliness is different from social isolation, which has an objective connotation, defined by an absence of relationships with other people and/or very small number of meaningful ties.
- Solitude describes the act of being alone voluntarily, which once again involves the objective condition of being away from others, but also the possibility of pleasant and positive feelings about this situation (Andersson 1998; Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Thisted 2010; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Hoff and Buchholz 1996; de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006; Rokach 2015; D. W. Russell et al. 2013). Much attention has been paid to the relationship between loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is not automatically connected to objective social isolation. Socially isolated people are not necessarily lonely, and lonely people are not necessarily socially isolated.
- Broadly speaking, scholars have been investigating loneliness from two main vantage points. One focuses on the individual-level characteristics that predispose people to become and remain lonely (e.g. personality traits and social skills, emotional map, as well as background features, such as gender, health conditions). The other moves from the major structural socio-economic and demographic changes occurring in a society to consider whether they fuel individual loneliness and if mechanisms of societal patterning are at play. The field has always been characterised by mutual cross-fertilisation between the two approaches, but a distinctive attribute of the scientific work on loneliness of the past decade has been a more systematic effort to integrate contextual and individual determinants “under an overarching cognitive theory, connecting social and economic inequality to the cognitive processes of persons’ perceptions of societal fairness and trust” (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006, 493; Buecker et al. 2021).
- Research shows that living alone might be associated with loneliness, an individual-level risk factor. However, per se, it does not represent a meaningful indicator that the individuals in question feel lonely. In sum, so far, there is no substantial evidence that loneliness is on the rise (Beutel et al. 2017; Dykstra 2009; Mund et al. 2020; Suanet and van Tilburg 2019, d’Hombres et al. 2021). In addition, scholars warn that the field “has yet to produce a convincing model that sets out the mechanisms by which loneliness in a society might increase (or decrease)” (Morrison and Smith 2018, 19). Longitudinal studies that monitor the same people over time, which are required to detect proper trends, are sparse.
- The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented economic contraction in 2020, with EU real GDP falling by 6.1%, more than during the global financial crisis. The EU response to the crisis was fast, forceful, and well-coordinated at all levels.
- It is encouraging to see that those countries hit comparatively hard during the financial crisis and took time to recover are now able to absorb the current shock much faster and return to a pre-pandemic growth path. No doubt the help provided by policy, both in the form of quantitative easing by the European Central Bank, as well as the various programmes including the Recovery and Resilience Fund, are significant contributing factors.
- A significant additional risk to both inflation and the growth outlook has to do with energy prices and the accompanying possible higher inflation, with secondary effects in the form of higher costs and wages. Currently, energy prices account for about 50% of the euro area inflation rate. If higher prices were to persist longer, these second-round effects will begin to sustain pressures on inflation

THE AIM OF THE RESEARCH:

- The assessment of the economic dimension of the solitude in consideration of COVID-19 pandemic and sociability, alone living, economic growth.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS:

- How does the diversification of the economic dimension of the solitude in consideration of COVID-19 pandemic in terms of sociability, alone living, economic growth look?;
- Which of the researched aspects of the economic dimension of the solitude in consideration of COVID-19 pandemic in terms of sociability, alone living, economic growth has the lowest, middle, the highest level?

Territorial scope of the research: European Union

Time scope of the research:

- 2010; 2016; 2020;

Methodics of the research:

- comparative analysis,
- statistical analysis,
- dynamics analysis,
- documentation analysis.



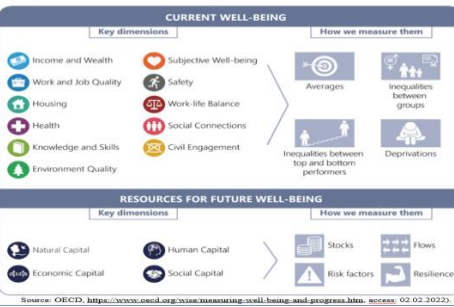
RESULTS:

Figure 1. The alone and lonely matrix.



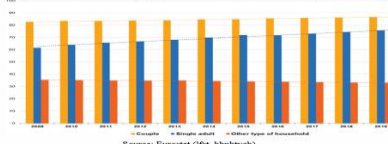
Source: Klimbert, E. (2012). Going solo: The extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone. New York: Penguin.

Figure 2. The OECD Well-Being Framework.



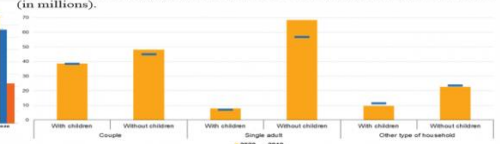
Source: OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/press/measuring-well-being-and-progress.htm>, accessed: 02.02.2022.

Fig. 3. Households by type in the EU, 2010-2020 (in millions).



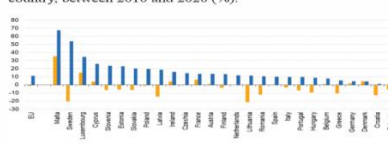
Source: Eurostat (dlt_hhshch2)

Fig. 4. Households by type and presence of children in the EU, 2010 and 2020 (in millions).



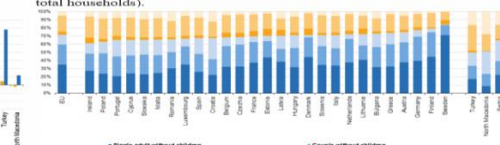
Source: Eurostat (dlt_hhshch2)

Fig. 5. Growth rates of households with and without children by country, between 2010 and 2020 (%).



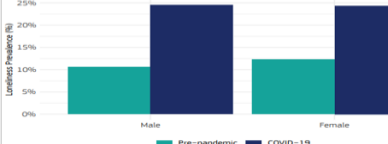
Source: Eurostat (dlt_hhshch2)

Fig. 6. Households by type, presence of children and country, 2020 (% of total households).



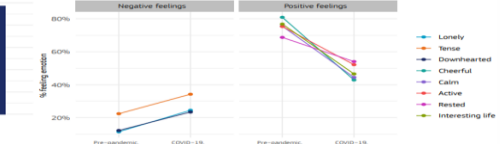
Source: Eurostat (dlt_hhshch2)

Fig. 7. Loneliness by gender.



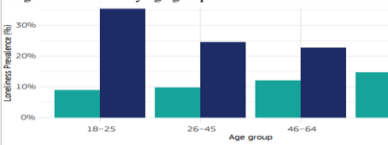
Source: Eurofound, 2016 EQLS and 2020 LWC surveys

Fig. 8. Mental well-being before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.



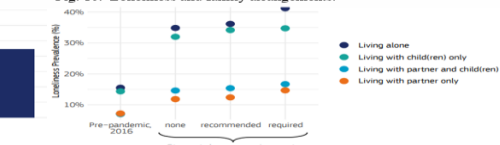
Source: Eurofound, 2016 EQLS and 2020 LWC surveys

Fig. 9. Loneliness by age group.



Source: Eurofound, 2016 EQLS and 2020 LWC surveys. 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 waves preceding the survey.

Fig. 10. Loneliness and family arrangements.



Source: Eurofound, 2016 EQLS and 2020 LWC surveys, Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker database.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

- Loneliness and social isolation are increasingly recognised as critical public health issues that deserve attention and need to be addressed with effective intervention strategies. Ample scientific evidence points to the detrimental effects of loneliness and social isolation on physical and mental health, as well as on social cohesion. The COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the mobility restrictions and social distancing measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus, has made the need to tackle loneliness and social isolation even more pressing.
- Loneliness or social isolation is predominantly associated with health-related issues. Geographically speaking, media coverage in association with health comes primarily from Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany and Sweden. Unsurprisingly, negativity is the predominant sentiment for the whole period analysed, except for a short period before the end of 2021, where positive reporting is equal to negative. Scientific evidence can contribute to design effective interventions, by enhancing the understanding of the problem and its effects, as well as by assessing of which interventions work in tackling loneliness and social isolation.
- The EU economy is rebounding from the pandemic recession faster than expected. As vaccination campaigns progressed and restrictions started to be lifted, growth resumed throughout the spring and continued unabated through summer, spurred by the reopening of the economy. The EU economy regained the pre-pandemic output level in the third quarter of 2021 and moved from recovery into expansion.
- The EU economy is projected to keep expanding over the forecast horizon, achieving a growth rate of 5%, 4.3% and 2.5% in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively. This outlook depends on the evolution of the pandemic and the pace at which supply adjusts to the rapid turnaround in demand following the reopening of the economy.
- The forecast projects employment in the EU to grow at a rate of 0.8% this year, 1% in 2022 and 0.6% in 2023. Employment is expected to surpass its pre-crisis level next year and move into expansion in 2023. Unemployment in the EU is forecast to decrease from 7.1% this year to 6.7% and 6.5% in 2022 and 2023, respectively. In the euro area, it is projected at 7.9%, 7.5% and 7.3% over the three years.

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Author of the research poster:
MSc Michał Mrozek
University of Szczecin
Faculty of Economics, Finance and
Management
Institute of Economics and Finance
Department of Economics
e-mail: 2188@stud.usz.edu.pl

