

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Handbook for Volunteer Involving
Organisations and volunteer mentors



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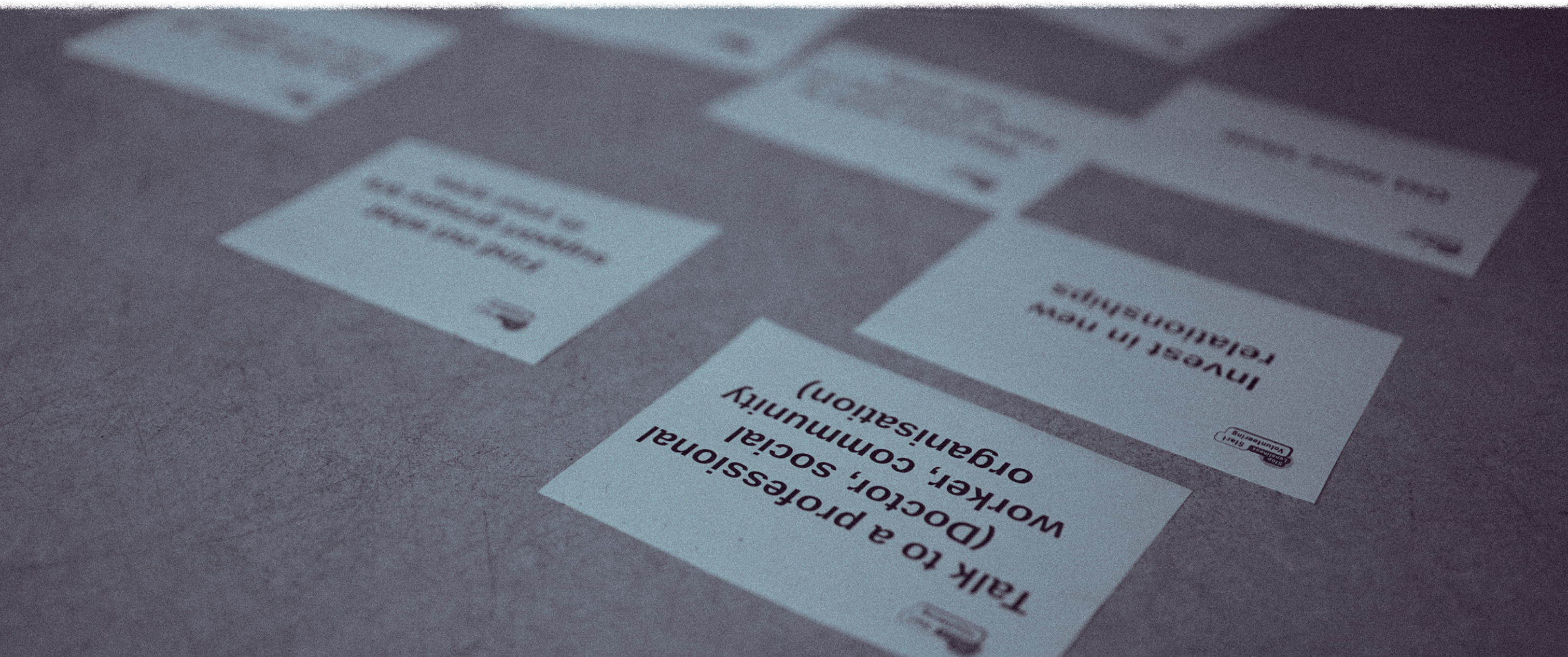


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1 — INTRODUCTION

1.1 — BACKGROUND

Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering! was developed in response to the growing distress caused by loneliness and isolation among young people across Europe. The main objective of the participating organisations Frivilligcenter & Selvhjaelp Danmark (Denmark), Volunteer Ireland (Ireland), DKolektiv (Croatia), European Playwork Association (Germany), Centre for European Volunteering (Belgium) and Slovene Philanthropy (Slovenia) is to raise awareness about the importance of volunteering as one of the potential ways to prevent and reduce social isolation and loneliness among young people.



1.2 PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

This handbook aims to support and empower Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) working with young volunteers to better understand and more effectively address the issues of loneliness, isolation and exclusion among young people. Young people today are increasingly facing social and psychological challenges that lead to feelings of isolation, which has a negative impact on their mental health and overall quality of life. Volunteering and quality volunteering programmes can act as key mechanisms to reduce these feelings and enable young people to reconnect with their communities and find meaning in their activities.

The handbook focuses on the importance of creating a supportive environment within volunteering organisations, where young volunteers not only contribute to society but also gain emotional support and social skills to help them overcome feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. The importance of establishing quality mentoring schemes to help young people through the process of becoming involved in volunteering programmes is also highlighted, especially for those facing additional challenges such as social isolation, lack of self-confidence or difficult living conditions. In addition, the handbook offers guidelines for creating inclusive volunteering programmes that give young people a space to express themselves, make new friends and develop a sense of belonging to a community.

The handbook aims to encourage organisations to develop volunteering programmes that not only address the needs of the community but also comprehensively support the development of young volunteers who may be in a vulnerable situation themselves. Thus, volunteering can become a tool for strengthening social bonds and reducing loneliness among young people, while also contributing to their personal growth and sense of self-worth and belonging.

1.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING LONELINESS AMONG YOUTH

There are several important reasons why Volunteer Involving Organisations should strive to understand and address loneliness among young (potential and active) volunteers and beneficiaries:

* Mental health:

Loneliness can have a significant impact on mental health, leading to problems such as depression, anxiety and reduced self-esteem. By taking a proactive approach to addressing loneliness, organisations can contribute to improving the overall wellbeing of young volunteers.

* Building resilience:

Equipping young volunteers with tools to cope with loneliness enables them to develop resilience and coping mechanisms that will benefit them throughout their lives.

* Community building:

Young volunteers often seek connections and a sense of belonging. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, organisations can create strong communities that nurture relationships between volunteers.

* Diversity and inclusion:

Understanding the different experiences of loneliness and isolation among young people allows organisations to adapt their approaches and become more inclusive, ensuring that all young people feel welcome.

* Skills development:

When young volunteers feel socially connected, they are much more likely to actively participate, share ideas

and engage in teamwork. This not only improves their general well-being, but also contributes to the development of different competencies. An important part of empowerment is also for young people to move from the role of the person in need to that of a co-creator in the community or a provider of assistance.

* Long-term volunteer involvement and participation:

Young volunteers who feel connected and supported are more likely to stay active in the organisation. If feelings of loneliness are properly addressed, the proportion of long-term active volunteers can increase.

* Increased impact:

When volunteers are properly supported, they can be more effective in their roles and therefore have a greater impact on their communities. Group cohesion is important for collaboration and creativity. The results of their work encourage volunteers to take on more active and challenging volunteering roles.

* Awareness raising and advocacy:

Addressing loneliness empowers organisations to raise awareness of mental health issues in their communities, which promotes a broader dialogue about loneliness and its effects on young people.

In summary: addressing loneliness among youth and young volunteers is essential to the improvement of their well-being, for fostering a supportive community and increasing the effectiveness of volunteering efforts. Above all, addressing loneliness fulfils the mission of voluntary and youth organisations, important links in building community networks.

2 — DEFINING LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

“ON SOMEONE’S SHOULDER YOU MUST LAY YOUR HAND, SO THAT IT GLUTS ITS HUNGER WITH NEARNESS, THERE MUST, MUST BE SOMEONE... IT IS LIKE BREAD, LIKE A DRINK OF WATER”

→ *Ivan Minatti*

2.1 — LONELINESS VERSUS SOCIAL ISOLATION

Loneliness is a multidimensional construct. Loneliness and social isolation often coexist and are therefore related concepts, but they are not synonymous. Someone may be socially isolated but not feel lonely, while another may feel lonely even though surrounded by people. The ability to be alone is a complex psychological phenomenon linked to emotional maturity. The need to exchange with the outside world is a basic human need, and it is essential for human beings that the outside world is not empty. The need for proximity is so strong that deprivation of proximity may hurt deeply or be seen as punishment.

Social isolation refers to an objective state of limited or no social contact or interaction with others. Social isolation can be the result of physical factors (e.g. independent living, lack of mobility), situational factors (e.g. quarantine, relocation) or personal choices (e.g. preference for solitude).

2.2 — TYPES OF LONELINESS

It is normal to experience loneliness. All of us feel lonely at some point. The feeling of loneliness becomes problematic if it lasts for a long time or when we cannot get rid of it.

Loneliness is a subjective emotional state that occurs when an individual perceives a gap between desired and actual social connections. It can relate to both the quantity and the quality of social relationships. It is a deeply personal experience that can result from a variety of factors, such as a lack of close relationships, social support or a sense of belonging or connectedness.

The multidimensional theory of loneliness defines **three types of loneliness**: social loneliness, emotional loneliness and existential loneliness.

Social loneliness is a feeling that stems from a lack of interpersonal relationships, often due to social isolation. It can be experienced when we do not feel connected to our family/friends or have no social network at all.

Risk factors for developing social isolation include:

- * unfrequent participation in communal social activities,
- * problems in interpersonal relationships (e.g. conflicts, mistrust, poor communication),
- * life changes (e.g. moving to another place),
- * disabilities,
- * stigmatisation or discrimination that may exclude us from society...

Social isolation is often accompanied by feelings of sadness, fear and low self-esteem resulting from lack of social activities.

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Emotional loneliness is a feeling that comes from a lack of quality social relationships. It differs from social loneliness in that does not concern physical isolation, but the feeling of not having a person with whom to share our feelings, thoughts, experiences, etc. It involves the feeling of lacking closeness and significant others who really know and understand us and are there for us when we need them.

Risk factors for developing emotional loneliness include:

- * loss of a loved one,
- * problems in interpersonal relationships (e.g. conflicts, mistrust, poor communication),
- * life changes (e.g. moving to another place, entering a new educational environment, splitting up with a partner),
- * lack of intimate connections ...

Emotional loneliness is often accompanied by feelings of isolation, emptiness, abandonment, inadequacy and being misunderstood, associated with a reduced range of emotional interactions.

Existential loneliness is a feeling that comes from a lack of quality social relationships. It differs from social loneliness in that does not concern physical isolation, but the feeling of not having a person with whom to share our feelings, thoughts, experiences, etc. It involves the feeling of lacking closeness and significant others who really know and understand us and are there for us when we need them.

A person experiencing existential loneliness may feel as if they cannot share their deepest thoughts, feelings and questions with others because of the intensely personal outlook on life. This can lead to the development of feelings of fear, anxiety and alienation from others.



3 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The experience of loneliness is shaped by several interacting factors that affect young people in different ways. Understanding the factors that contribute to young people's loneliness is key to finding solutions to their subjective feelings of loneliness.

3.1 WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TECHNOLOGY?

Social networks are an increasingly important part of most people's lives, including young people. Although young people are much more connected virtually, loneliness among them is on the rise. Numerous studies show that excessive use of social networks impacts negatively mood, leading to trouble sleeping or insomnia, poorer self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, lack of exercise, social isolation, digital addiction and correlation with depression, anxiety or personality disorders, while not necessarily comorbidity with other mental disorders. Online violence is also a major risk factor. In smartphone and internet addictions, similar to other addictions, the risk age limit is getting lower, reaching primary school children, and it usually stems from attempts to use phones and the internet to improve or self-regulate mood, which often leads to social withdrawal and loss of control over one's own life.

Volunteer Involving Organisations play an important protective role in young people's mental health, regarding social inclusion, solidarity and making friends. It is therefore particularly important that organisations do provide mentorship and support to the youth, a safe space for conversation, psychoeducation and joint exploration, and socialising with peers, which can help reduce feelings of loneliness. Volunteering is today, perhaps more than ever, a place of personal contact and gaining different experiences. Most importantly, when working with young people, volunteer mentors need to be aware that social networks are becoming an increasingly important part of their lives and that they contribute to the complexity of individual problems. Some may lack the

social skills or confidence needed to engage with others, which makes it difficult to make friends or even begin volunteering. Measures to combat loneliness should focus on helping young people to feel heard and understood. They should provide opportunities for self-expression without fear of judgment. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that social networks also create opportunities to form new friendships, which can reduce loneliness, as demonstrated in particular by the good practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, when young people actively communicated their problems and were not just passive recipients.

3.2 ACADEMIC PRESSURE

Research shows that school or academic pressure can contribute significantly to feelings of loneliness among young people. Pupils and students often feel overwhelmed by high expectations, leading to social isolation and withdrawal from social interactions. Excessive efforts in school work and participation in extracurricular activities can cause young people to run out of valuable time for socialising, which further increases feelings of loneliness. Poor grades are also a common contributor to poor mental health, isolation and feelings of loneliness.

3.3 FAMILY DYNAMICS

A large body of research shows that young people who have experienced a lack of parental care in childhood often develop difficulties with social interaction, which increases the risk of loneliness. Adolescents who come from conflicting families or who do not have a secure attachment relationship with their parents find it more difficult to relate to their peers and are more likely to experience dissatisfaction in their interpersonal relationships. Feelings of loneliness can also be caused by life transitions, such as moving to a new place for school, starting a new job or changes in personal relationships.

3.4 PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Peer relationships are extremely important for young people as they have a strong influence on their social, emotional and personal development. During adolescence, friends and peers become a key source of support, guidance and identity formation. These relationships help the youth cope with everyday challenges and also provide a place where young people develop their social skills, build self-confidence and explore their role in society. If these relationships are healthy and supportive, young people are more likely to develop emotional stability, a sense of self-worth and cooperative skills.

Peer interactions are also extremely important for the development of empathy, as they allow young people to learn about other people's perspectives, understand and respect different points of view, and strengthen their ability to cooperate and resolve conflicts. Peer relationships also provide a safe space for young people to try out and shape the behaviours that will be of key importance in their adult lives.

3.5 DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Various demographic (age, gender, race, ethnicity, migration) and socio-economic factors (environment/neighbourhood, education, employment, social status) can contribute to loneliness among young people. Adolescents from diverse backgrounds often face difficulties in finding a sense of belonging, especially in environments where they feel different from their peers. A supportive environment that includes understanding and acceptance of diversity is key to reducing feelings of loneliness. In addition, low socio-economic status is associated with greater loneliness. Findings show that low family income is associated with increased feelings of loneliness among adolescents. Insecure forms of employment and poor housing policies further contribute to young people's feelings of loneliness.

3.6 PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The way an individual experiences external and internal events depends on the filters that shape their personal experience. These filters are based on our biology, especially genetic predispositions, and on past experiences. Different individuals react differently to the same events depending on their psychological resilience - their ability to cope with difficulties and maintain mental equilibrium when faced with stressors. Resilience is the result of the intertwining of internal and external protective factors:

- * **Internal resources:** Young people's personality characteristics such as resilience, social intelligence, realistic self-confidence, good emotional regulation, positive coping strategies and the ability to build and maintain quality relationships
- * **External resources:** support from family and friends, protection provided by adults, a positive school environment and community cohesion

Not all young people have equal needs for social contact, some are more sociable than others because of their temperament. Temperament is a biologically determined way of responding to the external world and internal events that influence perception, behaviour, attitudes and socialisation. Through a combination of experiences, temperament can be shaped and influence mental health. It can act as a protective factor or as a risk factor for psychosocial problems and the development of mental disorders.

Neuroticism, characterised by frequent feelings of anxiety, anger, guilt and depression, is associated with higher levels of loneliness. Conversely, extraversion, which involves a greater openness to social contact, is associated with a lower sense of loneliness, while introvertedness, which leads to the internalisation of distress and sadness, is often associated with an increased risk of feelings of isolation and depression.

Mental health problems have a strong impact on feelings of loneliness in adolescents. Those experiencing mental health problems are often at greater risk of isolation and stigmatisation, which can exacerbate their feelings of loneliness.

If their mental health issues are not adequately addressed, these problems can deepen and become even more challenging later in adulthood.

3.7 — SOCIAL CONTEXT AND VALUES

Social factors are a major influence on people's mental health. They include the constant and rapid changes in lifestyles, the transformation of family structures, wars and environmental issues, and the ubiquitous use of smart technologies that affect all aspects of life. These social developments don't affect only young people, but also community sources of support such as social networks, social capital, community culture and a sense of solidarity. In a neoliberal, competitive society, where success is often measured through the prism of performance and social visibility, even the smallest obstacles to achievement can become a source of psychological problems. Pressure on individuals to meet these expectations can lead to feelings of failure if they fall short of societal standards.

The social and cultural context determines which behaviours or traits deviate from social norms and are therefore labelled as "disorders" or "deficits" requiring correction. In modern societies, especially in the richer parts of the world, socially determined risk factors for mental health abound, while protective factors such as strong social ties and solidarity are on the decline. Increased individualisation, a focus on personal success and fewer collective support systems make it harder to cope with pressures, which can lead to a rise in mental disorders. It is important to understand that mental health and well-being are deeply intertwined with the wider social and cultural circumstances of people's lives, which is why we need to consider the wider social context when addressing these issues.

All these factors, and indeed many others that contribute to loneliness among young people, are interlinked and can mutually reinforce one another. Understanding these factors is key to developing effective strategies and programmes that will enable young people to cope with loneliness encourage them to create social connections, and promote well-being. If volunteering organisations are aware of these challenges, they can contribute more effectively to reducing loneliness and fostering connectedness among young people.



THE IMPACT OF LONELINESS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Loneliness in young people poses serious risks to psycho-physical health, including depression and anxiety, social isolation, poorer school performance and relationship quality. In addition, feelings of loneliness are often stigmatised in society, further closing the cycle of loneliness. Raising awareness about loneliness as well as finding solutions to improve wellbeing is therefore crucial when working with young volunteers.

Loneliness affects young people's mental health in several ways:

1. Increasing the risk of developing anxiety disorders

Lonely young people often feel uncomfortable in social situations, which can lead to social anxiety. This can be exacerbated when they start to avoid socialising, creating a vicious circle of loneliness and social isolation.

Young people experiencing loneliness often find it harder to cope with stressful situations as they lack social support to help them process difficult events or feelings.

Many adolescents who feel lonely experience constant feelings of worry and anxiety.

2. Depression and negative emotions

Lonely young people often experience feelings of despair, hopelessness and inferiority. Over time, they lose interest in activities they used to enjoy and also any motivation to interact with others.

Due to lack of social contact young people can feel that they are not important to anyone, which encourages negative thoughts about themselves and their worth.

3. Lowering of self-esteem and self-confidence

Loneliness often affects young people's self-esteem. They feel less worthy or unable to form and maintain friendships. As a result, their self-esteem may falter and they may start to believe that they are not good enough to be accepted by others.

Lonely young people often overthink their reasoning and behaviour, leading to excessive self-criticism. This can limit them in making new contacts, as they fear rejection or uncomfortable situations.

4. Increased vulnerability to suicidal thoughts

Young people who experience loneliness for long periods are more vulnerable to developing suicidal thoughts, especially when feelings of loneliness are combined with depression, hopelessness and a sense of not being able to find a way out of their distress.

Prolonged loneliness can create a sense of being trapped in a situation where there is no hope of improvement, which increases the risk of suicidal behaviour.

5. Increased risk of addictions and risky behaviour

Lonely young people are more likely to develop harmful behaviours such as drug or alcohol use and digital media addiction, as they see this as a way to escape unpleasant feelings. Risky behaviour can be a way to alleviate feelings of loneliness, but in the long term, it impacts negatively on mental health.

Young people experiencing prolonged loneliness who have no other means of expressing their feelings may develop behaviours such as self-harm to release emotional pain.

6. Social isolation and difficulties forming relationships

Loneliness can lead to the weakening of social skills. This makes it harder for young people to establish contacts and build lasting relationships, leading to even greater isolation.

Young people who are lonely for a long time may develop a mistrust of others, which makes it difficult to form new friendships or establish contacts, for fear of rejection or disappointment.

7. Long-term impact on mental health in adulthood

People who experience loneliness in their youth are at greater risk of being lonely in adulthood. Chronic loneliness can become a deep-rooted pattern that affects their relationships, work and social life in later years.

Loneliness in youth is associated with an increased risk of developing mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders, depression and other disorders that may intensify in adulthood.

To prevent these long-term mental health consequences, it is crucial to recognise loneliness and take action early. It is important to create a supportive environment where young people feel heard, understood and valued. Involving young people in volunteering activities, quality mentoring and access to professional help such as psychologists or psychotherapists can significantly improve their mental state and reduce feelings of loneliness.

Signs of loneliness vary from person to person, but some of the most common are: feeling empty, isolated, lacking motivation and feeling disconnected from others. Identifying and recognising these signs is crucial to begin overcoming loneliness and obtaining timely support and help. Loneliness is not always obvious, as young people may hide it.

Here are some common signs that may indicate loneliness:

1. Changes in behaviour

Avoidance of social events: adolescents start to withdraw from friends, social events or activities they previously enjoyed.

Isolation: They spend a lot of time alone, either at home or at school, and avoid interactions with peers.

Over-reliance on technology: Some turn to social networking, games or the internet as a substitute for face-to-face contact.

2. Emotional signs

Lack of self-confidence: Young people who feel lonely are often less self-confident, and find it difficult to believe that other people value or like them.

Frequent sadness or irritability: Young people who feel lonely are often melancholic, anxious or more irritable for no apparent reason.

Feelings of inadequacy: There are feelings of not fitting in with peers, of being uninteresting or of having nothing to contribute to conversations or group activities.

3. Changes in physical health

Lack of energy or motivation: Loneliness can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. Adolescents may complain of tiredness or lack of willpower for daily activities.

Sleeping or eating disorders: Lonely young people may experience changes in sleeping patterns (e.g. too much or too little sleep) or eating disorders (overeating or loss of appetite).

Common physical symptoms: Young people may complain of headaches, abdominal pain or other physical symptoms that have no obvious medical cause.

4. Lack of contact with friends

Limited friendships or no close circle of friends: Lonely young people often lack strong or close friendship ties. They may also feel lonely in the company of others because they lack deeper connections.

Lack of conversation: If young people stop talking to peers or family members about their feelings, experiences or problems, this can be a sign of loneliness.

5. Problems at school or with hobbies

Drop in academic performance: Young people who feel lonely may lose interest in school or have problems concentrating, leading to a drop in academic performance.

Giving up hobbies and interests: Someone experiencing loneliness may lose interest in activities they used to enjoy and gradually stop engaging in hobbies.

6. Mood swings

Anxiety: Frequent feelings of anxiety, especially in social situations, can be associated with feelings of loneliness and social anxiety.

7. Expressing negative feelings

Young people may mention feeling lonely without saying so directly - e.g. statements such as "no one understands me" or "I have no one to talk to".

Low self-esteem: Lonely young people often express the belief that they are not good enough or that others do not value them (increased self-criticism).

8. Withdrawal from the family

Lack of interaction with family members: adolescents experiencing loneliness often withdraw from their families at home, spending a lot of time in their rooms and avoiding family activities.

HOW TO REACT WHEN YOU PERCEIVE THAT SOMEBODY IS LONELY?

If you recognise the above mentioned signs in young people, you should:

Make contact: either through face-to-face conversation or through informal meetings where young people feel safe and supported.

Listen without judging: Allow young people to talk about their feelings without fear of judgement.

Link them to sources of support: Help young people access professional resources such as counsellors, and therapists, or get them involved in youth programmes that focus on young people's mental health.

Early identification and intervention can make a significant contribution to improving the mental health and well-being of young people experiencing loneliness.

6 THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING ORGANISATIONS IN COMBATING LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Volunteering organisations play a key role in reducing loneliness among young people by creating a safe and supportive space for social networking, skills development and emotional support. By providing opportunities to engage in a range of activities, they enable young people to connect with their peers and community and gain a sense of belonging. Volunteering is not only a way for young people to help others, it is also an opportunity for activation, personal growth, confidence building and mental health improvement.

The following section outlines the key roles that voluntary organisations play in the fight against loneliness among young people.

6.1 CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Volunteering organisations are important in creating inclusive environments where young people from diverse backgrounds, with various interests and experiences can find a place for themselves. By promoting equality, diversity and participation, these organisations enable young people to connect with their peers and feel a sense of belonging.

Creating an inclusive environment means:

- * **Promoting equal opportunities for all:** Organisations strive to include young people from different social, ethnic, religious, cultural and economic backgrounds in their programmes.
- * **Opening safe spaces for expression:** Young people who feel isolated often find it difficult to express their feelings and experiences. Volunteering organisations wishing to contribute to young people's mental health should provide opportunities for open conversations and educational workshops where young people can share their thoughts without being judged.
- * **Reducing stigma:** Loneliness is often stigmatised, which can exacerbate social isolation. Inclusive environments reduce stigma by encouraging acceptance of diversity and openness in conversations about mental health.

6.2 PROMOTING POSITIVE LINKS WITHIN VOLUNTEER PAIRS

Fostering connections within volunteer pairs or among peers is among the most powerful tools available to volunteering organisations in the fight against loneliness among young people. They encourage young people to work together and learn from each other, creating opportunities for deeper relationships and supportive bonds.

Volunteering organisations can do this in a variety of ways:

- * **Creating friendship networks:** Volunteering organisations often create networks wherein young people can build long-term bonds with peers with similar values or interests. A volunteer who is starting needs a volunteer mentor to introduce them to the work, respond to the challenges they face in volunteering, monitor their motivation and help them develop their skills.
- * **Organising social activities:** Group games, cultural events, creative workshops and other leisure activities allow young people to interact with their peers in a relaxed and positive environment, which encourages the development of interpersonal connections.
- * **Group work projects:** When young people take part in volunteering projects such as humanitarian actions, ecological initiatives or helping vulnerable groups, they work together towards a common goal. This fosters a sense of cooperation and mutual support.

Mentoring is one of the most effective forms of support that Volunteer Involving Organisations can offer to young people facing loneliness. Mentors - older volunteers or more experienced peers, provide emotional support, guidance and help with social integration.

Mentoring programmes have several key benefits:

- * **Emotional support:** Young people can confide in a mentor who listens and offers unconditional support, which boosts their self-esteem and reduces feelings of isolation
- * **Developing social and communication skills:** Mentors can help young people improve their communication and networking skills, making it easier for them to build new friendships and social networks.

*** Promoting independence and responsibility:** With the help of a mentor, young people are better equipped to take responsibility for their own lives and make decisions about volunteering activities, which empowers them to face the challenges of loneliness.

Mentoring programmes are particularly effective because they provide positive role models who help young people understand how to integrate into the community and develop healthy relationships.

6.3 PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKING

Volunteering organisations can offer young volunteers the opportunity to become active players in supporting their peers facing exclusion or loneliness, who may never volunteer themselves. Volunteers can get involved in their lives in a variety of ways: by socialising, accompanying them to activities, helping them with school work, giving them advice or simply spending time with them. One of the key benefits of this approach is that peers are more connected to each other as they share similar interests, cultural references and ways of communicating. Because of this closeness, young people in need often prefer to receive help from peers rather than from adults or professionals.

A good volunteer can offer positive interpersonal experiences to young people in distress, motivating them, boosting their self-esteem and widening their social circle. This opens up new opportunities to develop interests and get involved in activities they may not have known before or dared try.

It is important that volunteers are properly trained, not only in techniques of assistance and support but also in how to deal with any problems they may encounter. It is also crucial that their work is regularly monitored to ensure a quality volunteering experience for both volunteers and beneficiaries. This improves the effectiveness of their work while ensuring that volunteering remains a positive and rewarding experience for all involved.

6.4 BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Volunteering organisations play an important role in building community support by enabling young people to become active members of their communities. By creating a space where young people can connect and collaborate, they help build a social network that supports inclusion and reduces isolation.

Organisations can build a supportive community through:

*** Strengthening group identity:** Young people who take part in volunteering activities become part of a wider community, giving them a sense of belonging and group spirit.

*** Involvement in local projects:** Volunteering organisations often implement projects that involve local people: landscaping, helping the elderly or taking part in events, which actively involve young people in the life of the community.

*** Building social connections:** Organisations link young people to the community through a range of activities that promote participation and strengthen connections between young people and other members of the community. When young people participate in community projects, they connect with peers and other community members, which reduces loneliness and increases the sense of connectedness and collective action. It is also important for volunteering organisations themselves to link up with schools, other organisations and public services, and to work with young volunteers to identify young people's needs.

Through inclusive programmes and initiatives, volunteering organisations help young people develop social skills, build relationships and reduce feelings of loneliness. By providing mentoring, a supportive community and creating opportunities for positive social contact, they play a key role in creating a more cohesive, supportive and inclusive society for young people.



VOLUNTEERING AS A METHOD OF EMPOWERMENT

Volunteering is extremely important as a method of empowering young beneficiaries, as it offers the opportunity for active involvement and personal growth. Through volunteering, young people, recipients of help, can gain a sense of responsibility, self-confidence and value, helping them to move from a passive role of receiving help to an active role of giving and contributing to the community.

When we offer young people the opportunity to volunteer, we put their individuality at the forefront, identifying their talents, interests and strengths. In this way, we encourage them to take the initiative and play an active role in tackling challenges, whether in their neighbourhood or society. This approach allows them to rediscover their abilities and develop them in a constructive environment where they feel safe and supported.

Mentoring plays a key role in this process. The mentor acts as a guide and support, helping young people to overcome obstacles, encouraging them and providing feedback. Volunteering itself is an invaluable source of experience, offering a space for young people to learn, try out new skills and develop empathy and solidarity.

On top of all this, volunteering also provides opportunities to have fun and create new social contacts. In such an environment, young people can develop a sense of belonging to a community, strengthen social skills and create new friendships. In this way, volunteering is not just a job, but also an opportunity to socialise, have fun and grow as a person, which further contributes to their empowerment. Involving young beneficiaries in volunteering activities thus strengthens their sense of self-worth and encourages them to become active citizens contributing to positive change in their communities.



WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMME TO MAKE IT SENSITIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S LONELINESS?

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMME

- * Reduce loneliness among young people.
- * Promote young people's integration into the community.
- * Mental health education and social skills development.
- * Provide safe spaces for socialising and talking.
- * Build a support network among peers.
- * Encourage young people to volunteer and actively participate in society.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

* Workshops and social gatherings

Weekly events such as informal socialisation, creative workshops, group games and sports activities provide a space for informal conversations where young people can share their experiences of feelings of loneliness and network with peers in similar situations.

Thematic workshops on stress management, mental health and communication.

* Peer mentoring programme

Setting up a peer mentoring scheme where volunteers (young people) act as mentors to their peers facing loneliness. The focus is on building a safe relationship and providing emotional support.

Mentor training: Volunteers will receive training to better understand loneliness and to acquire communication and counselling skills.

* Support groups

Organise support groups: bring young people together in small groups that meet regularly to share experiences of volunteering, discuss problems and support each other.

Occasionally work with professionals such as psychologists, social workers and psychotherapists to moderate the meetings.

* Volunteering projects for the common good

Young people should also be involved in group volunteering projects where they will actively participate in charitable activities while building social links (e.g. organising events, helping the elderly, etc.).

* Skills development

Provide opportunities for young people to develop new skills (e.g. teamwork) that will benefit them in the future.

* Empowerment

Every young person has strengths in different areas. Find them and encourage them to activate them through volunteering. Maybe they can take photographs, design, illustrate, and create music.

* Online support and community

Setting up an online platform or group (e.g. on social networks) where young people can share their thoughts, receive support and stay in touch after socialising in person or participating in live events.

Online discussions with experts on topics such as loneliness, mental health, and social relationships.

* Volunteer training

Volunteers should receive comprehensive training on the psychological aspects of loneliness, communication skills, conflict resolution and how to provide support to themselves and to other young people before the beginning of the programme.

Emphasis on developing empathy skills and understanding the needs of socially isolated young people.

* Partnerships and cooperation

Cooperation with schools, youth centres, NGOs and other organisations that work with young people to reach a wider range of young people and involve more stakeholders.

Professional cooperation with local counselling centres, psychologists and therapists to provide professional support to programme participants.

* Promoting the programme

Social media campaigns, focus on raising awareness of the issue of loneliness among young people, the positive impacts of volunteering and the importance of participating in volunteering activities.

Engaging with influencers and young ambassadors who can use their stories to reach out to their peers and encourage them to volunteer.

Think about what else could be included in a volunteering programme aimed at building supportive communities among young people and encouraging involvement in volunteering activities, which can effectively reduce feelings of loneliness and help develop lasting social bonds.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF MENTORING TO ADDRESS LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Mentoring support is a key element in engaging young volunteers facing loneliness. Mentors play a role as guides and confidants, helping young people to integrate socially and improve their mental well-being. In particular, it is important that mentors build on the development of compassion and active listening skills, encourage open communication, build trust and good relationships, positive self-image and self-confidence, and identify and develop talents and interests.

Here are some examples of how mentoring programmes can support young volunteers who feel isolated:

* Individual mentoring

Example: Personal support through regular conversations. The young volunteer is assigned to a mentor with whom they have regular weekly or monthly conversations or can contact at any time as needed.

The mentor and the volunteer meet in a relaxed environment (in person or via video calls) once a week or at least twice a month to discuss the challenges the volunteer is facing - both personally and in their volunteering work.

The mentor helps the volunteer to set personal and volunteering goals (e.g. to make more contacts with fellow volunteers, and improve social skills) and monitors progress.

The mentor provides a safe space for the volunteer to talk about their feelings, which reduces feelings of loneliness and builds self-confidence.

* Group mentoring

For example: young volunteers can join a volunteer support group where a mentor leads discussions and guides young people in sharing their experiences.

Volunteers meet in small groups with a mentor who leads workshops on social skills, self-esteem, stress and overcoming loneliness.

The mentor encourages interaction between the group members, which reduces loneliness and enables the volunteers to develop friendships.

Young people share the challenges they face and the mentor provides feedback and encourages them to find solutions within the group.

* Peer mentoring

Example: a younger volunteer receives support from a more experienced peer. The young person receives a mentor who is young as well but has more experience in volunteering. Such peer mentoring allows:

Connecting with peers: The young mentor helps the volunteer to overcome feelings of loneliness, as the age difference is minimal, so they can connect better on a personal level.

Sharing personal experience: The young mentor shares their experience of how they overcame loneliness or how volunteering helped them, which can encourage the lonely volunteer.

Encouraging active participation: The mentor invites the young volunteer to participate in different events and introduces them to other volunteers, thus facilitating social integration.

* Mentoring focused on specific social skills

Example: targeted mentoring to improve social and communication skills. A mentor is assigned to a single volunteer to focus on developing specific social skills such as communication, networking and group work. This includes:

Conducting workshops on communication skills: the mentor can guide the volunteer through exercises where they learn how to have effective conversations, ask questions and engage in conversations in different situations.

Encouraging social interactions: The mentor encourages the volunteer to participate in different social events or activities within the volunteering programme, where they will be able to gradually connect with others. **Monitoring of personal progress:** The mentor monitors the volunteer's involvement in group activities.

* Digital mentoring (e-mentoring)

Example: Online mentoring for young volunteers who are physically isolated. If a young volunteer is facing loneliness and cannot meet the mentor in person, the mentoring can be done online. This includes:

Regular video calls: once a week or once a month, the mentor connects with the volunteer via video calls and offers remote support.

Online mentor availability: The volunteer can send questions to the mentor or talk to the mentor when feeling lonely, e.g. via email, messaging apps or social networks.

Digital workshops and online events: The mentor organises online events or webinars where volunteers can connect with other young volunteers if they are unable to attend live meetings.

* Mentoring through involvement in activities

Example: active mentoring through joint projects. The mentor helps the young volunteers through joint projects where social skills and a sense of connectedness are developed, for example:

The mentor works with the volunteer on projects (e.g. organising events, helping the elderly, eco-projects), which allows the young volunteer to connect with others.

Encouraging teamwork: The mentor encourages the lonely volunteer to participate in a team where they can start to build relationships with peers.

Participation in informal activities: The mentor encourages the volunteer to take part in informal activities such as sporting events, cultural workshops or social gatherings that take place as part of the volunteering programme.

* Ideas for talking about loneliness

The different mentoring approaches mentioned above offer support to young volunteers in a way that helps them reduce loneliness, build self-confidence and integrate more effectively into their social network. A combination of emotional support, guidance and active community involvement can help make lasting positive changes in young people's lives.

Discussions with young people about loneliness and volunteering can be held in a relaxed and empathetic way so that young volunteers feel safe to share their experiences. Here are some examples of questions you can ask to encourage reflection on how young people experience loneliness and closeness and what impact volunteering can have:

Examples of questions that address loneliness:

- What does real closeness mean to you?
- How do you feel when you hear the word "loneliness"? Does it feel familiar?
- Do you ever feel that no one really understands or sees you? When?
- When do you feel most lonely? What do you usually do then?
- Where do you look for support when you feel lonely (friends, family, the internet)?
- Do you think your peers feel lonely too? How do you see this?

Examples of questions that address volunteering as a possible solution to reduce loneliness:

- Have you ever participated in volunteering activities? How was it?
- How do you think volunteering could help people who feel lonely?
- Does volunteering help make new friends? Why? Why not?
- Which types of volunteering activities appeal to you most? Why?
- How would you feel if you took part in a programme where you helped other young people who feel lonely?

Examples of questions that address young people's needs and aspirations for social connections:

- What would help you most not to feel lonely?
- How can volunteering organisations create a space where young people do not feel lonely?
- Would you feel more connected to others if you were working on a project where you had the support of a mentor or peers?
- What do you think is the "ideal place" for young people to come together and do something good for the community?

Examples of questions addressing the long-term impacts of volunteering:

- How do you think regular volunteering could help you in the long term? Could it reduce loneliness?
- Do you believe that volunteering could help you improve your social skills? Why?
- Have you ever thought about becoming a mentor to younger or less experienced volunteers? How would this affect you?
- What advice would you give to other young people who feel lonely in order to help them find their community?

Examples of questions addressing community impact:

- How important do you think it is for young people to feel supported by their community? What would you like to see from your community?
- How do you think the community could reduce loneliness among young people?
- What would be important to you if you were involved in a programme that builds a supportive community for young people?
- How could you contribute to making your peers feel less lonely?

These questions can open up a conversation in which young people share their experiences, reflect on how they feel and explore how volunteering can improve their lives and help them connect with others.

EXAMPLE OF AN EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR YOUTH ADDRESSING LONELINESS

By regularly monitoring the progress of volunteers and collecting feedback from them through surveys and individual conversations, we ensure that volunteer programmes tailored to young people and their needs are regularly being adapted and improved.

The evaluation questionnaire for measuring youth loneliness at the beginning and after a certain period of volunteering should include questions that focus on various aspects of social connectedness, emotional support, and the subjective feeling of loneliness. To ensure effective comparison, it is important to include the same questions at both stages. Sections III and IV of the questions should only be included after three to six months of volunteer work. We recommend simply adding the following questions to the questionnaires you already use for quality assessment.

Evaluation questionnaire for measuring youth loneliness in relation to volunteering

Date: _____
 Age: _____
 Gender: _____
 Duration of volunteer activity: _____ months

Instructions

The goal of this questionnaire is to determine whether and how volunteering affects feelings of loneliness and social connectedness among young people. The results of the questionnaire will help improve volunteer programmes and provide a better understanding of how to support young people in the process of social inclusion.



I. FEELINGS OF LONELINESS

Rate how often you have experienced the following feelings in the past weeks.

Use the following scale:

- 1 – Never
- 2 – Rarely
- 3 – Sometimes
- 4 – Often
- 5 – Very often

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel lonely. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. I feel like I have no one to talk to when I'm in distress. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I feel excluded from social activities. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I feel that my peers neglect me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I feel like the people around me don't understand me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. I often feel a sense of emptiness in my life. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I find it hard to find someone who supports me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

II. SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Please rate the following statements regarding your social connections and sense of belonging.

Use the following scale:

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 - Agree
- 5 - Strongly agree

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. I have friends who support me and whom I can rely on. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I easily make new friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I feel like I am part of a community. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I am able to socialize with peers who understand me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Rate how often you have experienced the following feelings in the past weeks.

Use the following scale:

- 1 – Never
- 2 – Rarely
- 3 – Sometimes
- 4 – Often
- 5 – Very often

12. When participating in social activities, I feel confident.
1 2 3 4 5
13. I have a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life.
1 2 3 4 5
14. Since participating in volunteering, I have a more positive view of myself.
1 2 3 4 5
15. I am more willing to engage in new activities.
1 2 3 4 5
16. I feel more included in society.
1 2 3 4 5
17. I feel a sense of belonging to the volunteer group.
1 2 3 4 5
18. My social relationships have improved since I started volunteering.
1 2 3 4 5
19. Volunteering has helped me improve my social skills.
1 2 3 4 5

IV. OPINION ON VOLUNTEERING

Please rate the following statements regarding your social connections and sense of belonging.

Use the following scale:

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 - Agree
- 5 - Strongly agree

20. Volunteering has helped me reduce feelings of loneliness.
1 2 3 4 5
21. Through volunteering, I've met new people who mean a lot to me.
1 2 3 4 5
22. Participating in volunteering has encouraged me to have better social relationships outside of volunteering.
1 2 3 4 5
23. Since I became a volunteer, I feel more connected to people.
1 2 3 4 5
24. Volunteering gives me a sense of being part of something bigger.
1 2 3 4 5

V. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

How would you describe your feelings of loneliness before starting volunteering?

What has volunteering brought you in terms of your social connections and feelings of loneliness?

Which aspects of volunteering would you highlight as the most beneficial for reducing loneliness?

Would you recommend volunteering as a way to reduce loneliness to other young people? Why?



As part of the project "Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering," we carried out the following activities:

- 1) We researched existing practices in partner organisations' countries and other European countries in the field of youth volunteering and the fight against loneliness, isolation, and social exclusion of young people. The findings were presented in the document **Research and Analysis of Challenges and Responses of Volunteer Organisations**.
- 2) We identified good practices in combating loneliness through volunteering in all the partner organisations' countries and other European countries, recognised the potential of innovative practices for encouragement and transfer to other environments, conducted interviews with inspiring volunteers, users, and representatives of organisations (mentors), and recorded and filmed personal testimonies of young volunteers and beneficiaries. The selected examples were presented in the **Collection of Good Practices**, accompanied by a video featuring personal experience.
- 3) We identified and explored current challenges and needs in the field of combating loneliness and youth volunteering. Using the World Café method, we worked together with different stakeholders (young people, mentors, youth leaders, decision-makers, etc.) to explore the future development of youth involvement in volunteering activities and to establish a dialogue between different stakeholders. Our findings were presented in the online campaign Voice of the Youth.
- 4) We delved into the role of Volunteer Centres and networks in combating youth loneliness and explored and developed opportunities for further action in favour of young volunteers and other young people, especially those with fewer opportunities. The guidelines were presented in the document **Guidelines for Volunteer Centers and Networks**.
- 5) Based on all the aforementioned activities, we conducted an advocacy campaign and prepared the document: **European Frameworks for Combating Loneliness, Isolation, and Exclusion of Young People through Volunteering – Policy Recommendations**, which we will share with deci-

sion-makers and other key stakeholders at the local, national, regional, and EU levels.

Additionally, we organized six partner meetings in all participating countries and four multiplier events, where we presented the results in an interactive and connecting manner and established new connections and dialogues among organizations working in this field. Concurrently, all partner organizations will also work on disseminating and promoting the project's results through publications on websites, and social media, and informing within their regular activities (during trainings and workshops, events, conferences, congresses, and through mailing lists).

10.1

RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE TO TACKLE LONELINESS, ISOLATION, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF YOUTH

This research analysis presents the starting point of the project Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering where the main goal is to raise awareness about volunteering as a possible means of preventing and alleviating social isolation of the youth and as a source of empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers.

This research was designed to explore:

- To what extent do existing EU and national policies and practices in partner countries grasp the process of volunteering, support it and see it as a possible solution in the fight against loneliness, isolation, and exclusion of young people.
- The role of volunteers and Civil Society Organisations.
- The role of volunteer centres, youth organisations, and other volunteering organisations and communities in Europe.
- To seek out relevant statistics to measure the level of loneliness, and isolation among young people.

In order to approach the topic comprehensively, desk research in all partner countries, and the 5 additional countries of Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and Bulgaria, has been combined with the questionnaire for civil society organisations working with or involving youths as volunteers. 231 organisations from Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Slovenia and

Croatia responded to the questionnaire.

The purpose of this research is to help develop and establish quality volunteer programmes that are geared towards combating the isolation of young people.

The desk research conducted states that there is no common law on volunteering at the EU level. EU institutions have however stressed the importance of making volunteering more inclusive through relevant policy papers and European programmes.

Despite the existing EU policy framework on volunteering and social inclusion, the practice in Member states varies:

- ✔ While some countries have adopted specific legal frameworks for volunteering including Italy, Spain, Slovenia and Croatia who have a law on volunteering others, such as France and Portugal, have volunteering and its terms defined in other laws. The remaining countries, Ireland, Denmark and Germany (although they do have law on federal level), lean on long traditions of volunteering and active citizen participation and function well without a law on volunteering or any legal regulation on volunteering. Bulgaria has had a draft law on volunteering since 2006.
- ✔ Denmark, Ireland and Slovenia have national strategies/programmes aimed at the development of volunteering. This suggests that volunteering needs to be supported and recognised on a national level by relevant institutions.
- ✔ In most of the partner countries, with the exception of Croatia, there is no specific governmental body responsible for volunteering. Volunteering has been present in different areas within policies and represented in different ministries and state offices. 73 Issues of loneliness and isolation have been creating problems for young people in the past few years. These have been magnified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the on-going social, political and economic crisis.
- ✔ Research conducted by the Commission's Joint Research Centre shows that loneliness has spiked across the EU in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, 12% of EU citizens felt lonely more than half the time.⁵⁷ This figure more than doubled to 25% in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁸ The increase in feelings of loneliness was felt evenly, geographically speaking, across the European Union, with all member states having loneliness levels of between 22% - 26%.
- ✔ Despite the various research conducted in all countries and at the EU level, none of the countries involved in the project has yet a specific national strategy or plan to combat loneliness. The topics of loneliness, isolation and social exclusion are represented in some other plans and programmes, mostly those combating social exclusion or dealing with mental health issues.

✔ Denmark has a recommendation from 2021 to adopt a national strategy to combat loneliness. In Spain also there are local initiatives and recommendations to adopt local strategies for combating loneliness. In all partner countries, there are good examples of best practices in civil society organisations when it comes to providing support to young people feeling lonely, isolated and thus, socially excluded.

✔ In most partner countries there is no specific focus on young people who may feel lonely and isolated. The existing practice shows that we still lack volunteer programmes that strategically and deliberately involve lonely young people as volunteers.

As a result of the research, the following conclusions of CSO challenges and responses to tackle loneliness, isolation and social exclusion of youth demonstrated that:

- ✔ Over 43% of organisations state that they implement volunteer programmes to support youths facing loneliness and isolation. Almost 15% of organisations state that they are considering developing such volunteer programmes or activities. Over 42% of organisations do not implement such programmes. This demonstrates that there is still a lot of space left to raise awareness on the importance of supporting these groups.
- ✔ Over 56% of organisations recognise the value and power of examples of good practice and exchange of information with other volunteer managers, organisations or networks.
- ✔ Over 49% of those questioned stated that they lack knowledge and competences about finding and recruiting young people affected by loneliness and isolation.
- ✔ Over 48% of organisations stated that they lack knowledge and competences about adapting or implementing new activities for youth affected by loneliness and isolation.
- ✔ Over 45% of organisations recognised the need for support from local, regional or national government in the area in which their organisation operates.
- ✔ Enabling the environment was observed through five elements; the legal framework, public policies, social atmosphere, existing good practices and the culture of volunteering. The results across the partner countries differ. Those countries that have some kind of public policy in practice such as Slovenia, Germany and Ireland, stated that the legal frameworks or public policies are, on average, good as are the social atmospheres. The existing good practice and culture of volunteering were better rated, on average, in all partner countries, which refers to the greater role of civil society and its interventions in combating loneliness, isolation and social exclusion.
- ✔ Over 41% of the organisations already involved youth affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers. 40% of the organisations did not know or were not aware if their volunteers were people affected by loneliness and inclusion.

- ✓ 60% to 70% of the organisations recognize the positive effects of volunteering on; mental health or overall personal well-being, expanding the social network of volunteers, building self-esteem and self-confidence and helping to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- ✓ Main obstacles in involving youths affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers were cited as; insufficient human and financial resources - over 51%; insufficient organisational capacity - over 41%; insufficient knowledge and competences to work with youth affected by loneliness and isolation - over 29%.
- ✓ Organisations with a specific focus on loneliness, isolation mental health issues etc. (over 68%), national/local volunteer centres or networks (over 52%) and youth organisations (over 49%), are recognised as relevant stakeholders in providing support to volunteer involving organisations.
- ✓ The role of civil society in combating loneliness and isolation amongst youths has been widely recognised by all organisations involved in this research. More than half recognise the role of civil society in areas such as awareness raising, providing direct support and engagement of youth and cooperation with other sectors. Also cited was the provision of knowledge and advocating for an enabling environment that supports volunteer programmes that involve youths affected by loneliness and isolation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In an increasingly individualised society, loneliness and isolation among young people has become a growing problem, which the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated. Loneliness and isolation can lead to social exclusion and severe distress in young people. To help combat this, civil society plays an extremely important role.

The success of civil society interventions and programmes depends partly on the kind of volunteering activities offered to support youths affected by loneliness and isolation and depends also on those that may be suitable for involvement and active engagement. As well as this, success is dependent on the support and conditions that governments, volunteer development agencies and volunteer-involving organisations can provide.

Even though there is some awareness being raised on the issue of loneliness and isolation, as yet, there are no specifi-

cally developed ways to encourage and support youths affected by loneliness, isolation and social isolation to volunteer. Likewise, the support is not in place to help motivate and support civil society organisations to create such programmes.

The findings of this research indicate that there is significant evidence in favour of volunteer programmes that not only support youths affected by loneliness, isolation and social exclusion but also involve them as volunteers.

ADVOCATING FOR MORE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT TO COMBAT LONELINESS, ISOLATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The research results have demonstrated that there is a lack of local, national and European recommendations, plans or programmes tackling the problem of loneliness and isolation that has been raised in the past few years.

European statistics prove that there is an increase in feelings of loneliness and isolation and that youths are becoming more and more affected. Even though there are existing practices of civil society in the area, there are no sufficient policies, mechanisms and measures that support the development of programmes geared towards combating loneliness and isolation that either support or actively involve youths in volunteering. Such measures will create a more enabling environment and thus contribute to the improvement of quality civil society interventions and existing practices.

NETWORKING AND PARTNERSHIP ON LOCAL/NATIONAL/EUROPEAN LEVEL

One of the main research results states that there is a need for more exchanges of good practice to support organisations and stimulate cooperation between civil society organisations in the development of programmes combating loneliness and isolation. We need to go beyond local and national efforts and promote transnational dialogue and knowledge exchange to create more European-wide practices and improved infrastructure for sustainable volunteering opportunities for youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Volunteering and quality volunteering programmes can play

a key role in supporting young people who face loneliness or poor living conditions. This is achieved by involving them in the community as volunteers and thus reducing the feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Civil society organisations dealing with loneliness and isolation, youth organisations, national volunteer development agencies, and volunteer centres have been recognised as relevant stakeholders for providing support. Therefore, they should be supported to invest more in the motivation, education and mentorship of volunteer involving organisations so that they have a greater understanding of, and capacity to deliver, volunteer programmes that support and involve youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS

The social changes that the COVID-19 crisis created, should not be underestimated. We need to build better connected societies and break down the barriers that make some young people feel excluded, isolated, and lonely. To recognise loneliness and isolation as a source of distress in young people is not enough. Combating loneliness and isolation should be high on the list of priorities on the social agenda. Sufficient resources must be allocated for awareness raising campaigns that use narratives that challenge stereotypes, address the consequences on personal well-being and also reach and motivate young people to use volunteering as a tool for combating loneliness, isolation and thus social exclusion.

As a part of the SLSV project, we compiled case studies of best practices in Volunteering Youth Engagement from 10 different European Countries. The following case studies show projects and organisations from all SLSV partner countries, that provide support to young people feeling lonely, isolated and thus socially excluded. However, when it comes to involving these youth through volunteering, we can say that in most of the countries, there is not a specific focus on how to engage youths feeling lonely and isolated in volunteering. Most of the best practices come from individual projects implemented by non-profit organisations with a general focus on loneliness, with the inclusion of excluded youth. The existing practice shows that we still lack volunteer programmes that strategically and deliberately involve lonely young people as volunteers.

DENMARK

Denmark has a long tradition of national strategies and policies that support voluntary activities and the social inclusion of disadvantaged people in civil society through volunteering in non-profit organisations.

The latest recommendations, for a new civil society strategy, were developed by a working group in 2021 which consisted of; the Voluntary Council, Voluntary Centres & Self-Help Denmark (FriSe), the Civil Society's Industry Association, the Danish Disabled Organisations and the Council for the Socially Vulnerable. The creation of the new recommendations and the working group was decided by the government and a broad majority of parties. The recommendations focused, among other things, on how to ensure more sustainable funding of civil society's social work, how to ensure greater inclusion of citizens in vulnerable positions in voluntary work, and how to combat loneliness through increased co-operation and a national strategy.

In 2021, a recommendation for a national strategy to combat loneliness was also developed. Red Cross and the Elderly Cause, together with 88 other organisations, prepared an inspirational presentation for a national loneliness strategy, which was sent to the government and parliament. The presentation contained recommendations to reduce loneliness in



five areas; home and housing, school and education, leisure and communities, working life and employment, and health and care.

The result of the two documents / recommendations is that a broad political majority in November 2021 decided on a new civil society strategy for 2022-2025. Here, among other things, it was decided that Denmark should have the first national loneliness strategy. Therefore, a national partnership, led by the Red Cross and the Elderly Cause was formed to:

- Gather scientific and practical knowledge about loneliness from Danish and foreign initiatives, as well as action plans and strategies including knowledge about effective tools and initiatives that prevent and remedy loneliness.
- Initiate a national conversation about loneliness.
- Prepare a proposal for a national strategy against loneliness that sets a the common direction for combating loneliness nationally and across sectors.
- Prepare a proposal for an action plan that points to concrete solutions.

Based on the recommendations for a new civil society strategy, the political the majority also decided to set aside a pool of DKK 23.5 million to support Voluntary Centres & Self-Help Denmark, along with The National Board of Social Affairs and five local partners to test a new model designed to increase the participation of people in a vulnerable position, including people with disabilities, in social communities through volunteering in a bid to reduce loneliness. The first two local projects run by two volunteer centres are starting in December 2022 and both projects are targeting vulnerable and lonely people from 16-32 years old.



“When I came down here for the first time I got the impression that it was actually what I needed at the time. To have a place where you could go once or twice a week just to talk without any prejudice and without having any labels put on you. You could just come here and help build a community. (...) Before this I was quite lonely myself. I was mostly at home, with few friends, Then I started down here and its only gotten better since. Now I can easily go out and I have friends all over and have no problem with public speaking anymore.”

→ *Daniel, Volunteer - Head of Youth Network*

IRELAND

Loneliness Taskforce

In 2021 a Loneliness Taskforce was created in Ireland combining a large number of organisations working together to address loneliness in Ireland. Whilst it was initiated by a charity focused on older people, youth organisations in Ireland such as Jigsaw and community organisations such as Muintir Na Tire are also involved. As such the Loneliness Taskforce is a coalition of organisations and individuals who work to address loneliness. The purpose of the Taskforce is to increase awareness of loneliness and to continually advocate for policy change to address loneliness at the local and national levels.

Youthreach Programme

The Youthreach programme provides two years of integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. In these types of programmes, volunteering is used and encouraged as a path to develop the young person's ongoing personal development.

There are almost 6,000 places available nationwide under the Youthreach umbrella and learners in the Youthreach programme are entitled to receive training allowances.

Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of the programme content. There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills of literacy/numeracy, communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and volunteering.

SpunOut

Established in 2005, SpunOut helps to create an Ireland where young people aged between 16 and 25 are empowered with the information they need to live active, happy, and healthy lives.

They aim to educate and inform young people about the importance of holistic wellbeing and how good health can be maintained, both physically and mentally.

They believe young people should have easy access to relevant, reliable, and non-judgemental information and provide a dynamic, responsive website full of up-to-date, factual information, free of any shame or bias. SpunOut is led by a reader community and young volunteers. A group of 130 young people from around the country forms the spunout Youth Action Panels which provide leadership to the organisation.

Hundreds of young people volunteer their time to the work of the organisation through writing articles, proofreading content, making videos and giving feedback. As a part of their services, they support young people who may be experiencing loneliness and advocate on the benefits of volunteering for young people as a form of social inclusion.

Jigsaw

Jigsaw's mission is to make sure that every young person's mental health is valued and supported. They understand that mental health can affect every aspect of a young person's life and believe every young person must have the support that's right for them, whatever they are going through.

Jigsaw Youth Advocates are volunteers who support the organisation's goal of achieving better mental health outcomes for young people. Youth advocates create understanding,

and raise awareness of and promote youth mental health within their community. They are also a key element of the youth voice and engagement approach within Jigsaw in the battle against loneliness and isolation in young people.

How and why did you get involved as a volunteer with Jigsaw?

- **When I first started volunteering, I had just completed the peer education program so that programme is a Transition Year program and still runs to this day in Jigsaw. A group of schools in the hub service will come together and they will learn a presentation and then they will bring it back into the schools, so the Transition Year students will (...) so it is a way to explain what Jigsaw is in a youth friendly way by your peers. So it is not a teacher or a guidance counsellor or someone coming in to talk about mental health, and you don't want to hear about it, it's your friends or your school peers coming in to explain it.**••

→ **Niamh, Volunteer
Jigsaw Mental Health Youth Service**

GERMANY

Yoldaş'- Tandem

In this project, a volunteer adult and a child from a Turkish-speaking family come together as companions who meet regularly, discover Hamburg, play, talk and open new perspectives for each other.

During the long period of lockdown, volunteers provided orientation and helped with homeschooling. This prevents children from deprived areas from isolation and loneliness and supports them in integration activities.

You:sful

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and lockdown, many schools and initiatives closed. Several schools however decided to continue albeit with limitations but were convinced of the need for their commitment to young people at that time. Through this new project campaigns emerged such as a to make senior citizens aware of the rapidly developing assistance services in their neighbourhood, an exchange of letters with isolated residents of senior citizens' homes and other environmental and digital engagement projects.

BürgerStiftung Hamburg

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, BürgerStiftung Hamburg, one of the biggest local organisations with more than 400 volunteers, initiated a row of successful projects dedicated to initiatives that were already active in their district. The focus was on cultural, educational, and physical activity projects for children and young people from difficult socioeconomic conditions, affected by the pandemic crises. The purpose was to strengthen civil society and the sense of togetherness of young people in their local area. These projects range from promoting reading and mentoring to the involvement of school classes that develop their own community projects. In addition to this operational project work, BürgerStiftung Hamburg supported local initiatives that were already successfully active in local neighbourhoods where the focus was on cultural, educational and exercise projects for children and young people from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. With the community fund "Hamburger Spielräume" (Hamburg Play Spaces), selective and one-off activities that create balance and free space in COVID-19 were able to be created.

MITmachers

This project helps and accompanies people into voluntary

<https://mitmacher.org/en/mitmachen>

work. Many refugees or migrants would like to do something, they are looking for orientation and participation. So we don't need to encourage them, but we do need to show them ways. The people come to us who want to volunteer - and we look for a project that fits. This strengthens them because they can feel part of society. It's about respect and appreciation. We have a database of about 300 places that we can contact. The volunteer position is then limited to three months. After that, many volunteers receive training in the area that interests and in many cases they have gained a very important experience in their voluntary work.

“I don't think it is enough just to be with people to not feel lonely. I think you also have to have quality time with people.”

➔ *Marius, Volunteer - Die Falken Hamburg*

SLOVENIA

Creatively against COVID-19

The project 'Creatively against COVID-19' was formed by a non-governmental organisation in response to the increase in mental distress among young people, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. They aimed to implement a project where they can offer young people a safe space to talk, to offer informative content about mental health and to raise awareness of how to deal with difficulties. It also provided information on where to turn to if they need help, and through workshops, develop and discover topics that young people see as a challenge and can focus on together with a therapist on solving problems and sharing experiences. Another part of the project is dedicated to creative practice, where young people can creatively express their feelings.

Phone companionship and Intergenerational Cooperation

Non-governmental organisations are connecting volunteer high school students with elderly people via phone calls to help decrease feelings of loneliness, isolation, and exclusion. In some organisations, this practice has evolved into visitations and spending quality time together.

“Parents or other people in the child’s environment are often not their first choice or someone they would want to talk to. This might be due to some sort of lack of understanding, poor relationships, or, as I said, feeling that they do not care.”

→ *Neža, Tom Telefon Organisation*

“Well, as far as this volunteering is concerned, I think I got a lot of benefits here in terms of communication, in terms of access to children, talking with children, and working with children in general. Before, it was so strange for me to approach someone I didn’t know who was much younger than me, what to talk to him about, how to talk to him! But I learned all that here and now everything goes naturally and it’s much easier for me when it comes to talking with adults and employees. (...) I realise how good these things are when someone tells you what you did well and gives advice and in general that certain feeling, of satisfaction, and sense of usefulness. I am not at home, I am not on my cell phone, but I come here, I do something specific, I help the group, but at the same time it helps me too.”

→ *Zlatana, Volunteer
Centre for Missing and Exploited Children*

CROATIA

Association How are you?

Many people in Croatia, either because of the pandemic or because of the earthquake, have felt lonely, anxious and depressed in the last 2 years. Therefore, psychology students from the Faculty of Philosophy wanted to raise awareness with the project of psycho walks in the metropolis. The project runs with the cooperation of tourist guides and activities include walks around the city with local stories which help with motivating the participants to develop psychological resistance, optimism, openness and acceptance. By meeting new people, loneliness can be reduced which many people experience.

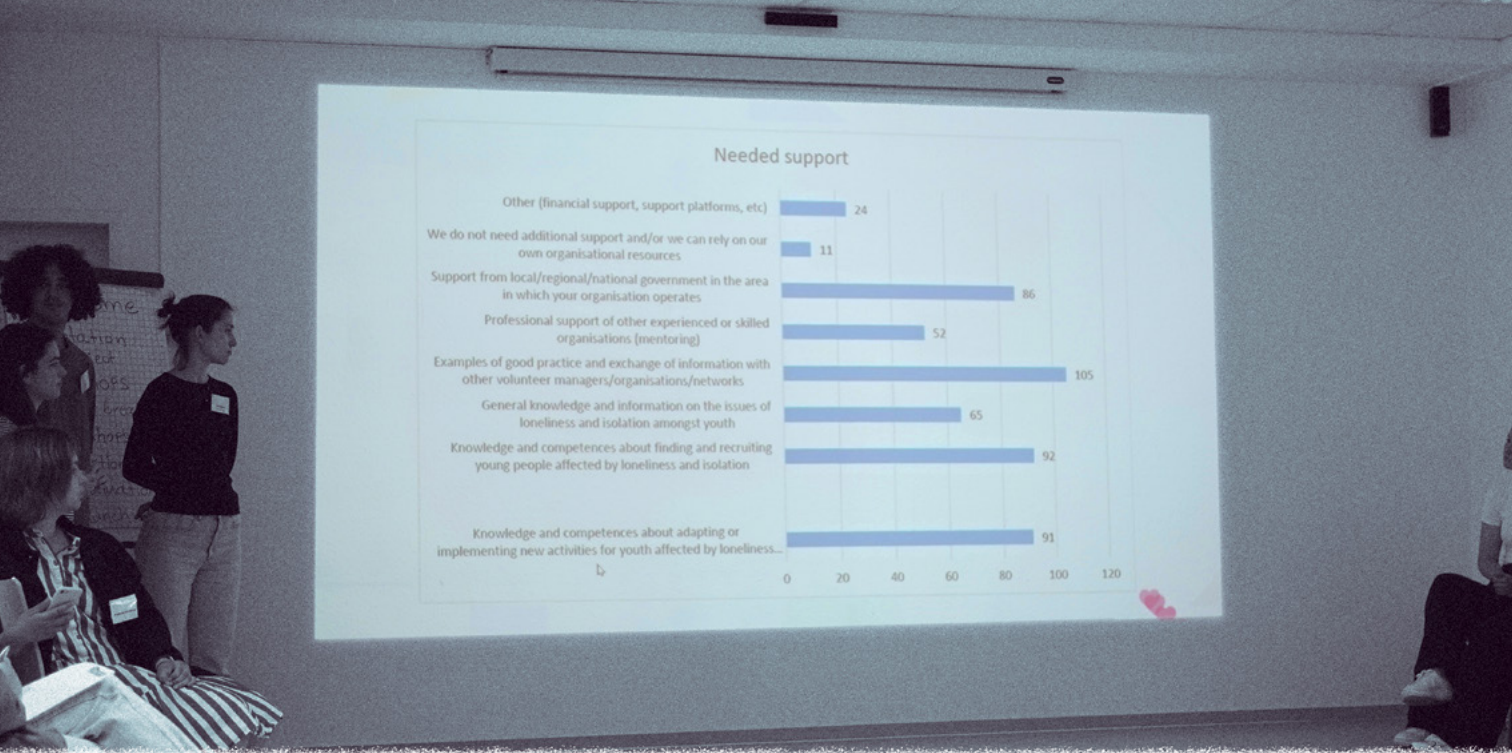
As well as this, the association also organises other activities such as individual and group counselling provides individual support and organises workshops on different topics, etc.

Helpline for youth during the pandemic

The Central State Office for Demography and Youth and the Croatian Psychological Chamber launched telephone lines for psychological counselling of young people and support during the pandemic. At this time, young people faced frustration due to the limitation of social contact and not being able to go out. They also experienced feelings of loneliness, they were concerned about the end of the school year and graduation experienced an excessive degree of criticism from adults concerning the responsibility of young people and also were afraid of infection for their family members. The helpline was initiated in all the 20 Croatian counties and the City of Zagreb.

It is also worth mentioning that various festivals (such as Mentalist) and public discussions on the topic of loneliness as well as dialogues, symposiums and conferences can now be found, especially during the last two years.





CONCLUSION ON BEST PRACTICES

When it comes to the type of interventions, programmes/activities or actions that are implemented in partner countries, can be summarised as follows:

- Support groups (peer-to-peer or with the professionals), Social Media groups
- Awareness raising through public dialogues, presentations, forums, seminars, social events, etc.
- Creative work (arts, crafts, knitting, etc.)
- Social activities (walks, visits, board games, card games, going to the cinema, museums, eating together and shared dining, etc.)
- Practical and individual support
- Workshops and education geared towards personal empowerment (improvement of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image)
- Social cafes, social centres and social gatherings
- Youth centres and youth networks (meeting places and platforms where young people meet civil society organisations to start volunteering)
- Big brother, big sister friendship programmes, Befriending programmes
- Music groups and music events
- Outdoor sports activities (soccer, hill walking, swimming, residential weekend aways, etc.)

Looking at the results and information gathered from the SLSV partner countries there were three things that really stood out in terms of good practice when it comes to managing volunteer programmes for young people at risk or suffering from loneliness.

Peer to Peer support

One of the most important things we can do to help young people is to listen to them and learn from them in terms of their needs and wants. Giving young people agency and control of their own projects and involving them in as many stages of the decision making process brings incredible benefits in terms of selfworth and accomplishments. Allowing young people to lead projects aimed at young people can assure inclusion and volunteering culture that would be hard to replicate otherwise. Asking a young person how they would like to be involved, when they would like to volunteer, what they would like to be doing, what do they need in order to volunteer – should be the start to make your volunteer programme more accessible and inclusive.

Facilitating Spaces

Young people need a space where they can meet. But what came out of our conversations with organisations about good practice was that there is not enough just to provide a space where young people can meet, but more importantly to facilitate activities that create purpose, fulfilment and connection between participants. Especially thinking about the young lonely volunteer who might not be confident enough to show up at an event to chat with everyone. Hav-

“And even when we make these smaller groups within the Network, it is still inclusive. I am part of the monthly cooking, but it’s not just that group deciding what to eat. We speak to everyone beforehand. It’s the same when we do excursions. And then everyone has an opportunity to be heard and included. I think it is amazing that even though some people are in charge, everyone gets a say.”

→ *Cille, Service user - The Youth Network*

ing an activity that one can engage in but also allows for a little alone time if needed, like cooking dinner together, can be a haven for a person who is uncomfortable fully participating all the time. Volunteering can be incredibly valuable here as it facilitates practical tasks, purpose and teamwork.

Education and awareness raising

There is a big piece that needs to be done to educate our young people and the community on the risk of Loneliness and social isolation. A lot of the SLSV partner countries have highlighted the need for governmental policies and campaigns on this subject, with Denmark being the only country that currently has a National Strategy combating the issue. An even bigger piece is to circulate and draw attention to the solutions and ways out of loneliness. As Civic Organisations we can have a real effect on the people and volunteers we engage with through our programmes. Including special attention and resources on loneliness could help create a ripple effect in our communities resulting in a more open and constructive dialogue on the topic.



“I don't think you should underestimate the combination of putting no obligations on the youths, but still pointing out that we have a lot of opportunities and that we would love them to come and help, so they feel like they are making a difference. That is my personal experience from watching our young people who at the beginning, thought 'I can't do anything', that are now volunteer scouts or volunteer in other ways. Because they have been allowed to take small steps and learn more about themselves. So yes, it should be a free space, but also with a gentle push once in a while either from other volunteers or from some of us who administer the Network. So, I think it is important that we also guide it to become more than just a club and make sure we also go out and do things together.”

→ *Noemi, Head of Billund Volunteer Centre*

Is it easier to talk about loneliness here, than with others around you?

“I would say so because it is an open topic here. Every time you come here, there is always someone who asks how you are doing. So we always invite people to talk about it. You don't have to initiate yourself. It can be pretty difficult to start a conversation like that when you are down.”

→ *Daniel, Volunteer Head of Youth Network*

10.3 THE “VOICE OF YOUTH” WEB CAMPAIGN



We launched a web campaign through the e.p.a. Instagram account in collaboration with our 5 partner organisations. Together, we published posts, photos, and videos across all our partners' accounts to inform young people about volunteering opportunities and, simultaneously, raise awareness about loneliness and mental health challenges that youth, especially post-COVID-19, are increasingly facing.

Link to the project:
<https://www.instagram.com/start.volunteering/>

All our posts emerged from our World Café sessions held across all six partner countries. These sessions offered a platform for open dialogue and exchange, allowing young people and volunteers to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The content of our posts included real quotes and stories from these participants, capturing the authentic voices and lived experiences of young people within our network. Through this approach, we aimed to convey the realities they face, using their own words to highlight the importance of addressing issues such as loneliness, mental



health, and the positive impact of volunteering on personal growth and community building.

By incorporating direct quotes and personal reflections, we sought to create content that resonates deeply, fostering a sense of connection and solidarity among young people who may be facing similar challenges. Each post, crafted from these genuine exchanges, served not only to inform but also to encourage others to engage in meaningful dialogue and consider the supportive role that volunteering can play in their lives.



Our goal with our web campaign extended beyond simply raising awareness; we also aimed to create a safer space where young people and volunteers could feel comfortable discussing loneliness and to actively promote volunteering as a means of fostering community and connection.

Through this campaign, we reached 6,542 people via our Instagram accounts, with even broader outreach through other platforms.



10.4 BUILDING BRIDGES TO VOLUNTEER COMMUNITIES

Many feel lonely or outside the communities of society and do not feel valuable or valued by others. The causes are many and complicated, but they often struggle with different social challenges or with problems such as health, a disability, mental illness, and a squeezed economy.

A common barrier can be bad experiences with other people or communities, lack of trust in others or that the community will welcome them, fear of being rejected or that their prerequisites for participating are not considered. This can lead them to avoid social contact, and they can find it difficult to reach out to the community and establish relationships.

However, studies show that the problem is not the desire to participate in society's communities, but that conditions and barriers make it difficult and that they do not receive sufficient support to participate.

With this guide, we therefore want many more people to have the opportunity to participate in self-chosen and meaningful activities and contribute as active citizens and thereby increasing their social network, well-being, and quality of life. We want to promote inclusive communities and more sustainable bridges between communities and those people who, due to loneliness and visible or invisible barriers, do not participate in activities or volunteer.

The guide introduces different elements of a bridging model aimed at volunteer centres and organisations that want to build bridges between people and communities or want to involve people in vulnerable positions in their community.



What is bridging?

Bridging is about supporting people's path to becoming part of a community where they feel welcome, valuable and have positive relationships with others. It is especially about reducing the barriers that prevent them from participating in a community.

It is also about building bridges between communities. For example, it can be between municipal initiatives and communities in civil society or across civil society. Because the individual may need a community after completing a course in a municipal offer or need something else or more than what the individual voluntary community can offer.

Therefore it is very important to create greater coherence and collaboration across organisations.

Support crossing the bridge

Moving towards a community or just the thought of it is for some associated with bad experiences, mistrust, insecurity and fear. Fear of whether you are welcome, the others' perception of you, whether you fit in or whether you can live up to your own and others' expectations.

This underlines the importance of systematic bridge-building, where it becomes easier and safer to cross the bridge and where individual wishes, needs and prerequisites are considered throughout. Building bridges does not just happen by itself, it requires a special focus, resources and skills.

Different forms of participation

In bridging, it is important to distinguish between different dimensions of participation or different needs to participate in a community. It has an impact on how the individual is best supported and which community is relevant.

Participation is often divided into three categories:

- Receive support and help in connection with various problems and challenges, e.g. from various counselling, drop-in centres, patient associations or visiting services.
- Participation in an activity, e.g. in various sports activities, creative activities, activities in nature, game cafés or other leisure activities.
- Volunteer, e.g. in sports clubs, cultural associations or in various social associations and communities.

For some, one form of participation may be a prerequisite for another, for some it's important to be able to switch between different forms of participation.

Another way of looking at participation is based on different underlying needs:

- **Social participation:** You miss someone to be with or to do something with, e.g. someone to drink coffee with, go for walks with, go to the cinema with or someone to share your interests and passions with. This is not necessarily about the quality of one's relationships, but more about the opportunity to be with others.
- **Emotional participation:** You miss someone to share your innermost thoughts, feelings and experiences with and miss close relationships where you feel seen, heard and understood. This is mostly about the quality of one's Relationship.
- **Existential participation:** You miss being able to contribute to your surroundings, to be something for others, to feel valuable or to feel that it does matter if I'm here.

Social deprivation can be alleviated by participating in activities with others, while emotional deprivation places demand on the quality of relationships in the community. Here it's about presence and cohesion with the others, because the need is more than "superficial" relationships or to participate in activities. Existential participation is about the feeling of contributing to and being a valuable part of the community, e.g. as a volunteer or through the feeling of a mutually valuable togetherness.



The bridging model

The bridge-building model is based on four elements that promote the path to and into a community. In a bridging process, there may be a difference in the need for the individual elements. Together, they represent a systematic model that considers individual wishes, needs and prerequisites, as well as some of the obstacles that are important to reduce.

- 1. Knowledge:** A comprehensive and accessible overview of a wide range of voluntary communities and activities, so it is easier to find an activity or community that matches the individual's wishes, needs and resources.
- 2. Companionship:** Clarifying and motivating conversation(s) to support the individual's desire and courage to participate in a community, support to find a relevant community and support on the way to a community.
- 3. Hosting:** A good and safe welcome to ensure that new participants feel welcome and can more easily be part of the community, regardless of whether they are looking for help and support, are going to participate in an activity or are volunteering.
- 4. Inclusion:** The individual's attachment to and opportunity to be part of the community on their own terms in a mutually valuable interaction with the others. Different roles in bridge-building



Different roles in bridge-building

There are different roles in bridge-building that are important to ensure a unified and successful bridge-building.

- 1. Mediator:** Person(s) who collect and create an overview of associations and communities.
- 2. Referrers:** People with contact to the target group, who can refer or guide on to the volunteer center or directly to a community. It can be relatives, municipal employees, health professionals, doctors, associations, etc.
- 3. Guides:** Person(s) who have clarifying conversation(s) with participants to support motivation to participate, match with a relevant community and follow up.
- 4. Companion:** Person(s) who accompany the participant to the community, if necessary.
- 5. Advisor:** Person(s) who can guide associations and communities about hosting and inclusion.
- 6. Hosts:** Person(s) in associations who are responsible for welcoming new participants and ensuring that they feel like a valuable part of the community.
- 7. Community participants:** Existing participants in the community who pay special attention to create an inclusive community.

Some of the roles may be one and the same person, but it is important to relate to the different functions and how or whether they can be filled by different actors in order to create an overall bridge-building model that considers different needs and barriers.

The guide elaborates the four core elements to support many more people to become an active and valuable part of a community to increase their well-being and mental health or to reduce loneliness.



EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS FOR COMBATING LONELINESS, ISOLATION, AND EXCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

Young adults have been the most severely hit by social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of people aged 18-25 who reported feeling lonely almost quadrupled in the first half of 2020.¹ As a recognition of the sacrifices and resilience that young people have made during the pandemic and an opportunity to engage and support youth at the EU level, the European Commission declared 2022 the European Year of Youth² (EYY). One of the key priorities of the EYY was to support young people's personal, social and professional development, including attention to mental health, in line with the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027. Mental health and wellbeing is one of the 11 goals of the Strategy aimed at promoting an evidence based approach and reducing the stigma related to mental health issues. This area has direct interlinkages with the need to identify and mitigate the effects of youth loneliness emphasising the urgency and importance to prevent long-term consequences. The 2022 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy also confirmed that health and wellbeing are among the top priorities for young people themselves.³

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre is doing research on the topic of loneliness and social isolation in the EU youth, highlighting its relevance among European Institutions. However little has been done in terms of policies to tackle loneliness in youth and developing related programmes.

The Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ Project findings indicate that there is significant evidence in favour of volunteering programmes as an effective means to alleviate the feeling of loneliness and exclusion in young people. Based on the research done, project partners recognised the need to develop specific recommendations for policymakers, emphasising the importance of creating and supporting volunteering programmes that foster the social inclusion of youths. Additionally, these recommendations are intended to guide the organisations involved in the volunteering programmes, helping them to implement effective strategies that address the social needs of young people through volunteering initiatives.

1 Joint Research Centre, Loneliness in the EU. Insights from surveys and online media data, 2021, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC125873>

2 European Year of Youth 2022 website, https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth_en#:~:text=20%2022%20was%20the%20European%20Year,voice%20%and%20%20it%20was%20heard!

3 European Commission, Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth: Young Europeans are increasingly engaged, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_2774_22

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICIANS

1. PROMOTING VOLUNTEERING AS A MEANS TO TACKLE LONELINESS IN YOUTH

Volunteering is not only an outstanding source of preventing and alleviating social isolation of young people but also a way to provide empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers. At the European and national levels, there is still a significant gap in policies that directly address the issue of loneliness among youth. To address this, **policy-makers should develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation in youth**, both enabling and encouraging a deeper understanding of the value and benefits of volunteering and quality volunteering programmes as a means in supporting young people who face loneliness or poor living conditions.⁴

Even if loneliness and social isolation are increasingly becoming recognised as public issues that need to be addressed with effective policy interventions, there is still social stigma around the topic in several European Countries. Loneliness and social isolation are not only harmful to mental and physical health but can have significant consequences for social cohesion and community trust at the societal level.⁵ Interventions for youth are crucial to prevent the experience of loneliness from becoming chronic and therefore shaping the future of today's youth. **Tailored outreach strategies should be developed** taking into account cultural differences, varying levels of loneliness, and preferences for volunteer activities among participants. Addressing youth isolation and loneliness requires a multifaceted approach, where volunteering is recognised as a vital tool. By promoting the value of volunteering, and harmonising loneliness interventions while respecting national contexts, policy-makers can more effectively combat the challenges of social isolation and enhance social cohesion among young people in Europe.

2. BUILDING MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Loneliness interventions are often targeted at older adults. Yet, it is clear that **tailored interventions are also needed for young people**. Ensuring that monitoring and evaluation systems are embedded into volunteering programmes tackling isolation in youth would help develop an evidence base

4 Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ Project, Good Practice Compendium, https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_e50e0fd46fcf4cb19db185afa29de3d2.pdf

5 Joint Research Centre – European Commission, Policy considerations for loneliness interventions, 2023, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC133369>

for such policies. The evidence can then be used to improve strategies and interventions and therefore enable an even bigger impact among those that need support. Local communities have a crucial role to play in monitoring and evaluating the programmes as well as researchers and practitioners from organisations working in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion. Collaboration and exchange between these actors are fundamental to designing, implementing and monitoring programmes to reduce loneliness among youth. Policy-makers should facilitate interventions built on holistic approaches that include actions and collaboration across fields and sectors to be more effective.

3. RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION

More European-wide efforts should be made to build evidence and provide more and better data on youth facing isolation and exclusion in Europe. Policy-makers should **empower statistics agencies, research institutes, experts and expert organisations to identify, quantify and record any organisations involved in dealing with loneliness** and isolation among youth and the positive impact of volunteering in their life path. The use of evaluation findings is crucial to identify areas for improvement and develop future policies related to volunteering as a means to combat loneliness and isolation in young people. A specific Eurobarometer on youth and loneliness could be an interesting path to explore taking as a model the 2022 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy.

4. AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Recognising loneliness and isolation as a source of distress in young people is not enough. Combating loneliness and isolation should be high on the list of priorities on the social and political agenda. **Policy-makers should launch awareness campaigns** that can be integrated in schools and universities as well as in non-formal education providers programmes, aimed to reach and motivate young people to use volunteering as a tool for combating loneliness, isolation and thus social exclusion. These could include narratives that challenge stereotypes, dissolve the stigma surrounding loneliness and address consequences on personal wellbeing. The campaigns should not only target individuals but also volunteer-involving organisations, employers, formal & non-formal education institutions and organisations as well as society at large, encouraging these actors to undertake initiatives designed to face loneliness in youth.

5. COOPERATION AMONG STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to cooperation at the European level, cooperation on a national and local level is also crucial to put in place suitable and appropriate arrangements to implement volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth. **The stakeholders involved in the volunteering programmes should be engaged in a regular structured dialogue** with policy-makers on all matters related to volunteering as a means to combat loneliness and isolation in youth. Through this structured dialogue, the various actors involved will ensure that combating loneliness in youth through volunteering remains relevant. From this, the demand is to regularly review and update the aforementioned volunteering programmes in response to emerging trends, best practices, and feedback from stakeholders and youth. **Policy-makers should enhance this community building among all multiple stakeholders** involved in the implementation and development of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness through European-wide events mobilising and engaging bottom-up volunteer-involving organisations and youths.

6. STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Policy-makers should enable and support civil society organisations, youth organisations, national volunteer development agencies, and volunteering centres dealing with loneliness and isolation as they are key stakeholders in providing support. Civil society not only provides various social interventions in the communities but also has the potential to raise awareness and create space for youth engagement and volunteering as one of the main tools in preventing and fighting against rising issues of youth loneliness and isolation. **Policy-makers should invest more in the motivation, education and mentorship of volunteer-involving organisations** so that they have a greater understanding of, and capacity to deliver, volunteer programmes that support and involve young people affected by loneliness and isolation.

7. DEVELOPING TOOLS: THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PROGRAMME (ESC) & CLIVE PROJECT

At the European level, the most current EU policy related to volunteering is the European Solidarity Corps Programme. The increase in its budget⁶ gave more visibility and importance to volunteering in the EU member states. Yet, it didn't reach its potential in the perception of volunteering as

⁶ European Commission, European Solidarity Corps – Performance, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

an effective means to tackle loneliness for the individual and an element of social cohesion for the society. The introduction of new selection criteria for organisations to host volunteers under the quality label of the programme is a good step ahead towards the improvement of the ESC programme and is meant to increase the quality and the sustainability of the projects proposed in the ESC platform. **Policy-makers should strengthen the ESC programme highlighting its unique identity** as the only EU programme focussed on embedding solidarity in a thriving European democracy.⁷ Moreover, policy-makers should push to increase the number of projects dealing with mental health and social isolation in youth.

The **Centre for European Volunteering** coordinated in 2023 the implementation of the “**Combating Loneliness and Isolation with Volunteers in Europe (CLIVE)**” project in Belgium, Italy, Malta, Poland and Portugal.⁸ The project involved 66 young volunteers from Europe and aimed to combat the increasing loneliness that had emerged as a result of Covid-19 lockdowns and to tackle the negative effects that prolonged isolation has had on social cohesion and people’s mental health. The project goal was to reverse this trend among groups who have been most affected by lockdown loneliness. In the short term the beneficiary groups of the CLIVE project: young people; elderly people; and people with disabilities, were able to feel relieved from the loneliness and isolation they were feeling. In the mid-term, the beneficiaries improved their mental health as well as increased social inclusion in their home communities. Thanks to the project activities, they shared and developed new connections with others, leading to improvements in their emotional health as positive stimuli and developed positive social relationships. As a result, they are more capable of combating their feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The volunteers who participated in the CLIVE project experienced a unique high-quality opportunity where they exchanged ideas, knowledge and reflection during 16 days with other young people opening their vision towards personal and professional development in a multicultural atmosphere. The volunteers went back to their home countries with higher ambition and confidence to start to search for different opportunities such as volunteering and training to meet new people, empower their capacities, progress and generate an impact in the community, getting close to realising their full potential.

Policy-makers should **support the creation of environments** within educational institutions, community centres, and online platforms **where young people can easily access**

information about volunteering opportunities and receive support in joining these programmes. This could include mentorship programmes, peer support networks, and tailored outreach efforts to engage isolated youths.

8. PUBLIC FUNDING

The lack of public funding for initiatives for youth facing loneliness and isolation can act as a barrier. Policy-makers should allocate public funding for the development of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth and for the research and implementation of monitoring and evaluating systems. **European, national and/or local public authorities should offer financial incentives or grants to the organisations involved in tackling loneliness** and cover associated costs. European funding can also help in investing in transnational projects to share good practices among EU member states.

8.1 BUDGETS SHOULD BE MADE AVAILABLE TO PILOT LARGE SCALE QUALITY VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMMES TACKLING LONELINESS IN YOUTH

Policy-makers should enhance the upscaling and sustainability of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth through larger pilots and experimentations across multiple EU member states. This is an essential step towards collecting knowledge related to best practices and evidence-based practice for the implementation of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness. This is crucial in order to further improve future programmes and better inform future policy decisions. Furthermore, these piloting schemes will increase awareness of volunteering programmes, generating a conversation within the public sphere about the benefits of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness and further opening the door to successful future programmes.

9. RECOGNISE AND AWARD BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING QUALITY VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMMES TACKLING LONELINESS IN YOUTH

To support volunteering programmes tackling loneliness, **it is important to recognise the effort of the organisations involved and the impact of that effort**. It is also proper to motivate others by awarding the good practices of implementing those programmes. Additional public funds should be allocated to award civil society organisations dealing with the topic of isolation in youth to ensure its sustainability and legacy as a driver for further take up.

7 Centre for European Volunteering, Volunteering: The keys to unlocking the potential, 2024

8 Centre for European Volunteering Website, CLIVE webpage, https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/clive_jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC133369

ATTACHMENTS



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Policy-makers need to address the issue of combating isolation among young people and support volunteering programmes aimed at alleviating the problem. However, organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion also play a crucial role in the successful implementation and development of these programmes.

1. ADVOCACY FOR BETTER POLICIES AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should organise awareness campaigns on the topic of youth isolation in schools and in non-formal education centres**, through social media and organising community events. Moreover, organisations **should advocate for the development and implementation of better policies** emphasising the role of volunteering as a means to combat loneliness in youth. Organisations should also demand an increase in funding for volunteering programmes related to loneliness in young people.

2. CAPACITY BUILDING

Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should enable and encourage their staff and volunteers to attend training and capacity building activities** on how to organise volunteering programmes and to guide young volunteers in these programmes.

Digital technology can be used to ease access to and increase the potential outreach for volunteering projects tackling loneliness and isolation. Indeed it is crucial that not only policy makers are aware of this but also any organisations involved in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion. They must be conscious of the use of these tools and equipped with the right knowledge and resources to engage with them effectively.⁹

⁹ Centre for European Volunteering, Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 #BEV, 2030 2021, https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_0e028c421bd14adcbd69bdbe744a0313.pdf

3. FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Collaboration and knowledge exchange is essential for the improvement of future volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth. **Organisations** active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should be open to dialogue and collaborate with each other**. They should join existing networks focused on the topic to keep up to date with research, policies and programmes. Hosting and participating in workshops, webinars, and conferences on combating loneliness and isolation in youth through volunteering can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences among stakeholders and experts.

4. IMPLEMENTING MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should implement monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of volunteering programmes** tackling loneliness and isolation in youth. These insights are useful for the improvement of future programmes and as a base for the development of requested policies for policy-makers. Collaboration and exchange between these actors and policy-makers is fundamental to design, implement and monitor programmes to reduce loneliness among youth, ensuring at the same time that the monitoring and evaluation systems are compatible with broader data-gathering frameworks.



WHO WAS PART OF THE SLSV PROJECT?

SLOVĚNTROPIJA
FILANTROPIJA

Slovene Philanthropy is an independent, nongovernmental, non-political, non-profit, humanitarian organisation working in the public interest since 1992. Its programmes are aimed at improving the quality of life in the community and advocating for vulnerable groups in society. Slovene Philanthropy's central activity is the promotion of volunteering, training and advocacy for various stakeholders.

Website: www.filantropija.org



Volunteer Ireland
Obair Dheonach Éireann

Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for 29 local Volunteer Centres in Ireland. Their work includes also supporting national volunteer involving organisations by offering bespoke training, consultancy and an extensive range of online guides and resources on engaging volunteers as well as supporting large scale corporate volunteering projects.

Website: www.volunteer.ie



FRIVILLIGCENTRE & SELVHJÆLP
DANMARK

FriSe is the national umbrella organisation for 69 local volunteer centres and 10 self-help organisations across all of Denmark. FriSe works to support, develop and promote volunteering and to improve the framework and conditions for volunteer organisations, in addition to run a number of projects and initiatives which aim to make it easier to become and be a volunteer and easier to be a voluntary association.

Website: www.frise.dk



DKolektiv is a social development organisation built on the 15 years' experience of the Volunteer Centre Osijek in the fields of development of volunteering, civil society and democratic culture. The organisation's mission is to inspire and support democratic culture, the development of civil society and volunteerism, the creation of equal opportunities and active participation of citizens. DKolektiv cooperates with civil society organisations and initiatives, citizens, public institutions, public and private institutions, media, the economy as well as European and international organisations.

Website: www.dkolektiv.hr/public/hr



The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), previously the European Volunteer Centre was established in 1992. It is a European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion and support of volunteers and volunteering in Europe at the European, national or regional level. Their aim to be the leading voice in values-based volunteering debate in Europe, to influence and share current trends and challenges, develop and provide policy advice and expertise for European policymakers.

Website: www.europeanvolunteercentre.org



e.p.a. is an independent, International Youth NGO based in Hamburg. e.p.a. has been active within a network of partners in 40 countries over 4 continents, involved in Youth Exchanges, Training Courses, Seminars and Voluntary Service. e.p.a. works especially with young people with fewer opportunities (labelled 'Neets', young migrants and refugees) from disadvantaged communities by creating access to non-formal learning and supporting European youth projects.

Website: www.go-epa.org



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