

Loneliness among emerging adults increased slightly

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Emerging adults today feel lonelier than in the past—and not just since the coronavirus pandemic. This is indicated by an evaluation of studies on the loneliness of emerging adults between 1976 and 2019, conducted by a research team from Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB) and Friedrich Schiller University Jena. "This kind of increase is a warning signal, as

loneliness seems to be an emerging problem in emerging adulthood," says Dr. Susanne Bücken from the Department of Psychological Methodology at the RUB Faculty of Psychology. The research team nevertheless describes the often-used term "loneliness epidemic" as overdramatising, since the effect size of the increase is relatively small. The study was published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* from December 2021.

Loneliness has many possible causes

It appears to be a growing societal concern that [loneliness](#) has increased among emerging and [young adults](#) in particular, which experts classify as 18- to 29-year-olds. Indeed, the life experiences of young people have changed massively since the late 1970s. Among the societal changes that have caused this are the increasing volatility of social relationships, [greater opportunities](#) for mobility, a shift in marriage and starting a family to later stages of life, and changes in communication due to technological innovations.

The research team conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis and a systematic literature review to find out whether the average loneliness of emerging adults has actually changed over time. In the process, the authors used [statistical methods](#) to summarize the available individual empirical studies that recorded loneliness among emerging adults using the UCLA Loneliness Scale in the period from 1976 to 2019. This scale, named after the University of California, is one of the most common measurement instruments for loneliness in adults and has been used since 1976. Overall, the meta-analysis comprises a very extensive database with 345 studies and 124,855 emerging adults.

The meta-analysis was pre-registered. This means that the methodological approach for the literature search and [data analysis](#) was published in advance by the researchers. In addition, the data from the

[meta-analysis](#) were made available to the scientific community for further use. This approach facilitates transparency in research.

Slight increase is nevertheless a warning signal

Across all studies, the researchers found that loneliness among emerging adults increased slightly from 1976 to 2019. This increase equates to about 0.56 standard deviations on the UCLA Loneliness Scale over the 43-year study period. "This means that emerging adults feel lonelier today than they did in the past—but the increase is relatively small," concludes Susanne Buecker. "Nevertheless, emerging adults should not be overlooked when designing prevention and intervention measures against loneliness, as loneliness has serious negative consequences in all age groups and is clearly not unique to old age."

More information: Susanne Buecker et al, Is loneliness in emerging adults increasing over time? A preregistered cross-temporal meta-analysis and systematic review., *Psychological Bulletin* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000332](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000332)

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