

Study finds middle-aged Americans are lonelier than European counterparts

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Middle-aged adults in the U.S. tend to report significantly higher levels of loneliness than their European counterparts, possibly due in part to weaker family ties and greater income inequality, according to research

published in the journal *American Psychologist*.

"Loneliness is gaining attention globally as a public health issue because elevated loneliness increases one's risk for depression, compromised immunity, [chronic illness](#) and mortality," said lead author Frank Infurna, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Arizona State University.

"Our research illustrates that people feel lonelier in some countries than in others during middle age. It also sheds light on reasons this may be occurring and how governments can address it with better policies."

Considering the increased public health focus in the United States (as evidenced by the surgeon general's 2023 advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation) and abroad (countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan have appointed ministers to address the problem), the researchers explored how loneliness has historically changed over time and how it differs across countries.

Infurna and his colleagues examined data from ongoing, nationally representative longitudinal surveys from the United States and 13 European countries, with more than 53,000 participants from three different generations (the Silent Generation, baby boomers and Generation X). Data were collected from 2002 to 2020 and only included responses given when participants were between the ages of 45 and 65.

"We focused on middle-aged adults because they form the backbone of society and [empirical evidence](#) demonstrates that U.S. midlife health is lagging other industrialized nations," said Infurna. "Middle-aged adults carry much of society's load by constituting most of the workforce, while simultaneously supporting the needs of younger and older generations in the family."

Compared with European counterparts, adults in the U.S. reported significantly higher levels of loneliness. This "loneliness gap" widened with younger generations (late baby boomers and Generation X) reporting greater loneliness than older ones (early baby boomers and the Silent Generation).

While the U.S. showed consistent historical increases in midlife loneliness during the period data were collected, some European nations displayed more varied patterns. For instance, England and Mediterranean Europe demonstrated similar increases in loneliness for later-born participants (late baby boomers and Generation X). Continental and Nordic Europe demonstrated stable or even slightly declining levels across generations.

The study identified differences in [cultural norms](#), socioeconomic influences and social safety nets between the U.S. and other European countries as potential explanations for the loneliness gap between the U.S. and Europe. Cultural norms in the U.S. are often characterized by individualism, increased social media use, declining [social connections](#) and increasing political polarization.

The pressure faced by U.S. middle-aged adults is also further compounded by a higher residential mobility, weaker family ties, increasing job insecurity and income inequality. Additionally, social safety nets in the U.S. tend to be less comprehensive compared with some European nations regarding family leave, unemployment protection and childcare support.

"The cross-national differences observed in midlife loneliness should alert researchers and policymakers to better understand potential root causes that can foster loneliness and policy levers that can change or reverse such trends," said Infurna.

The study also found that loneliness is generally on the rise compared with previous generations across both the U.S. and Europe, with Europe's numbers only slightly behind those of the United States.

The researchers said that loneliness as a public health issue requires policy interventions tailored to national contexts and generational shifts, including promoting family and work benefits, and reducing income inequality.

Loneliness as a global public health issue has called attention to the importance of advancing social connections, according to Infurna. The study defends the promotion of social safety nets, through generous family and work policies, which may lessen midlife loneliness by reducing [financial pressures](#) and work-family conflict, in addition to strengthening job security and workplace flexibility. Infurna said such practices would also address health and gender inequities.

"The U.S. [surgeon general](#) advisory report coupled with nations appointing ministers of loneliness have shined a [bright light](#) on loneliness being a global public health issue," he said. "As opposed to being considered an epidemic—an outbreak that spreads rapidly and affects many individuals—our findings paint a picture akin to [loneliness](#) being endemic, regularly occurring within an area or community."

More information: Loneliness in Midlife: Historical Increases and Elevated Levels in the United States Compared With Europe, *American Psychologist* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0001322](https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001322)

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