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IS LONELINESS RISING IN YOUNG ADULTS?

THE ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC MARGINALISATION

INTRODUCTION

What is loneliness?

- A feeling that our need for connection is unmet

Persistent loneliness is linked to depression, anxiety, and early mortality

Why focus on ages 16–24?

- One of the loneliest age groups globally
- Period of major transitions: leaving school, starting work or university, moving out
- Social networks change and sensitivity to exclusion increases

Why does socio-economic marginalisation (SEM) matter?

- Being worse off than others in your local community can heighten loneliness risk
- Linked to bullying, social exclusion, and family stress

Aim:

Track changes in loneliness across late adolescence and test whether these patterns differ for young people experiencing high vs low socio-economic marginalisation

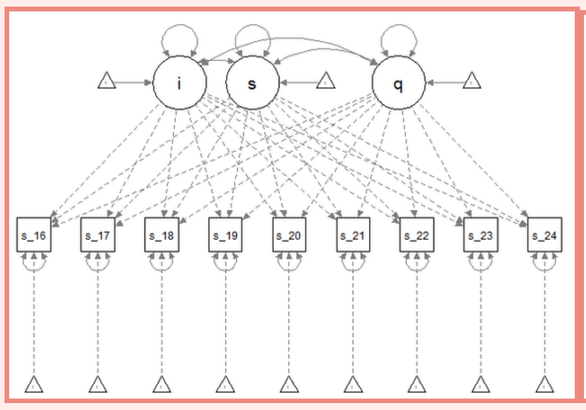
METHODS

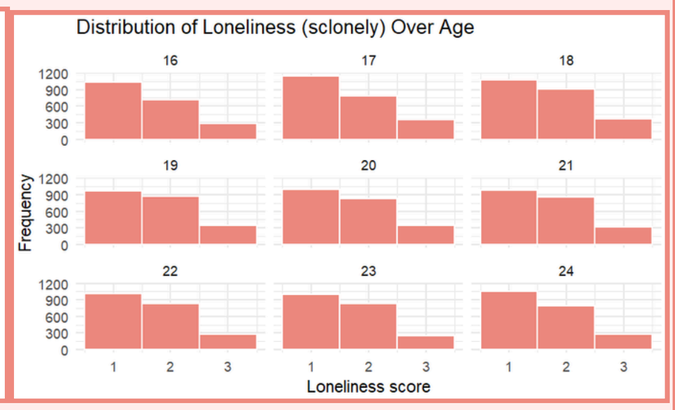
Data Source

- UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), waves 9-14 (Understanding Society, 2023)
- N=19,526
- Ages: 16-24

Measures

- Loneliness: UCLA 3-item Loneliness Scale





Statistical Analysis

- R Programming- lavaan
- Data wrangling: tidyverse, ggpubr, ggplot2, foreign, naniar, mice, ggmice, UpSetR, quest, semPlot, haven

We fit a **linear**, **quadratic** and **basis** latent growth model to determine the shape of loneliness trajectories. Quadratic slopes and basis slopes allow us to examine non-linear change: the quadratic slope would show either a U or inverted U shape, and the basis slope allows us to freely estimate non-linear change over time

Next Step:

- **Multi-Group LGM:**

Groups: High vs. Low socio-economic marginalisation.
Compared intercepts and slopes across groups.

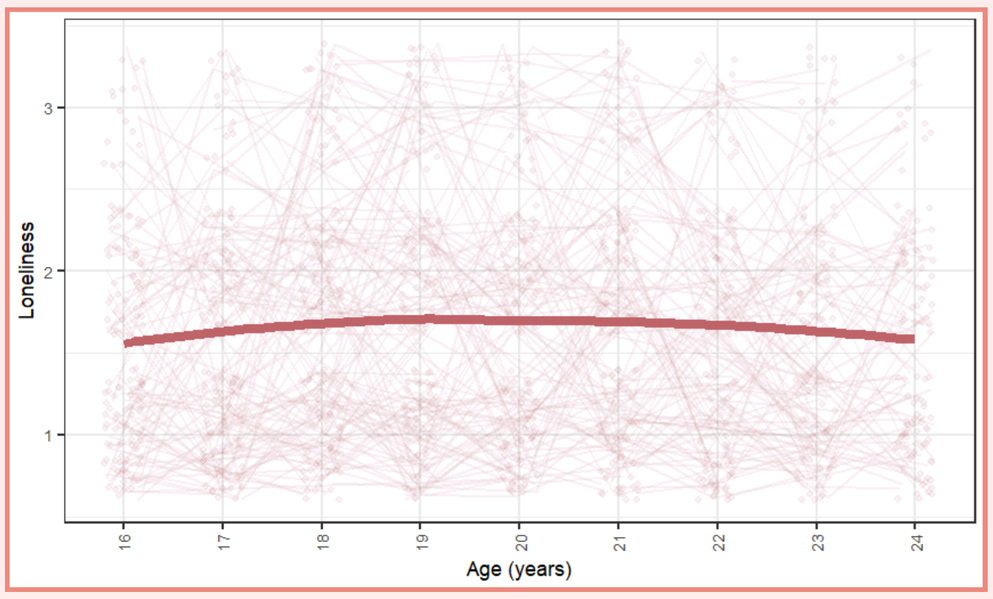
REFERENCES:
Shovestul et al. (2020). PLoS ONE, 15(2): e0229087.
Understanding Society (UKHLS), Waves 9–14 (University of Essex, ISER, 2023).

RESULTS

The model with the linear and quadratic slope parameters showed excellent fit to the data. The evidence suggests loneliness increased up to around age 19 to 20 years old, and evidence for deceleration in this increase and a decrease for some in later years

- CFI: 0.989, (⩾ .90 acceptable, ⩾ .95 good)
- RMSEA: 0.011, (⩽ .08 acceptable, ⩽ .05 good)
- SRMR: 0.047, (⩽ .08 good)

Growth Factor	Estimate	Interpretation
Intercept (i)	1.622	Baseline loneliness at age 16
Linear slope (s)	0.036	Loneliness increases slightly with age
Quadratic slope (q)	-0.004	Increase slows/curves downward



Significant variance found in the intercept and linear slope → substantial individual differences in baseline loneliness and rate of increase.
However, quadratic variance was not significant → deceleration of loneliness around age 19–20 was similar across participants.

DISCUSSION

Main Findings

- Loneliness ↑ slightly, but the rise slowed and stabilised in late adolescence.
- Large individual differences in baseline levels and changes over time.
- SEM may be linked to different loneliness trajectories

Interpretation

- Peak coincides with major life transitions (e.g., leaving school, uni/work).
- Supports prior cross-sectional work (Shovestul et al., 2020: peak at 19).
- SEM may increase vulnerability

Future Directions and Implications

- Test mechanisms (bullying, family conflict, social connection).
- Identify protective factors (peer/family support, community engagement).
- Inform targeted interventions prior to age 19