
5. LONELINESS IN THE CITY OF BARCELONA: DATA AND PREVALENCE

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the European Commission warned that around 30 million adults in Europe often feel lonely and highlighted the need to understand the different factors in loneliness at every life stage. As a response, Barcelona City Council began its research through various surveys and databases to identify different indicators of loneliness in the city (Barcelona City Council, 2021).

This document deals with the data on loneliness in the city of Barcelona. Rather than a full diagnosis, it is a collection of different sources and indicators that give us an idea of the prevalence of loneliness in the city. The data, mainly drawn from the 2020–2030 Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness⁵ and other secondary sources, provide an initial analysis of the scale of the problem, the characteristics of the main social groups that experience loneliness and the associated causes.

5. https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxiu-documents/barcelona_loneliness_strategy_2020_2030.pdf

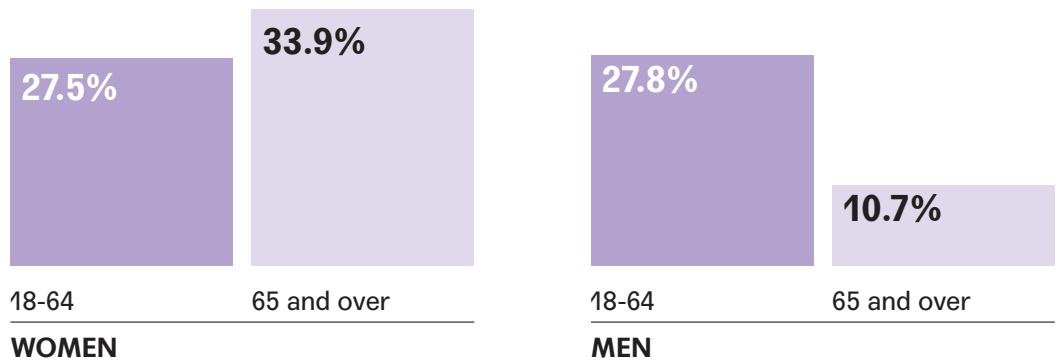


LIVING ALONE IN BARCELONA

As we have seen in previous sections, living alone does not necessarily bring with it a feeling of loneliness. In other words, living alone only implies a situation of objective solitude, and only in the sphere of housing. However, it can be associated with a higher risk of feeling lonely, as living alone is a risk factor in itself (see: Loneliness risk factors).

Populational dynamics in recent years in the city of Barcelona are leading more and more people to live alone. In 2020, almost one in three households in the city contained one person; specifically, 31% of homes were single-person households (Barcelona City Council, 2021). In 2004, the number of single-person households was 181,546. This figure has risen to 203,781 in 2021.

GRAPH 1
Profile of single-person households



Source:
Original, based on data from the city of Barcelona register of residents.
Barcelona City Council, 2021

The profile of the people living alone in the city is far from homogeneous, however, and more and more of them are older. As the graph demonstrates, women aged 65 and over are most likely to live alone, making up around 34% of single-person households. This percentage is three times that of the men over 65 living alone.

In the specific case of older people, this could be down to a series of factors, such as improved quality of life and health (with a direct impact on life expectancy and financial independence) and the value assigned to autonomy and personal independence (Sancho et al. 2020). Therefore, living alone is often a chosen situation in many ways. However, in other cases, living alone is an situation that emerges uninvited as the result of a process of losses, such as widowhood, children leaving home and the death of families or members of one's closest social network. It can therefore imply an increased risk of both loneliness and social isolation (Sala Mozos, 2020).

Populational dynamics in recent years in the city of Barcelona are leading more and more people to live alone.

In 2020, 31% of households contained just one person.

LONELINESS IN BARCELONA: INDIRECT INDICATORS

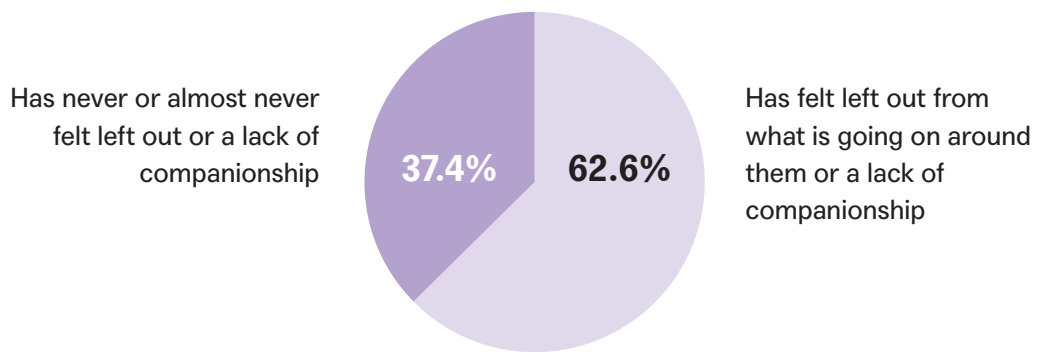
Loneliness is a construct that is difficult to identify; therefore, measuring it is not easy. In order to look at its prevalence in the city, various related indicators are often used. Various studies warn of the enormous variability in the results produced by analyses of loneliness according to the indicators used. This is why it is important to use indicators that are validated and common in the analysis of different sociodemographic profiles. Below is a series of data relating to indirect indicators of loneliness in the city of Barcelona, with which we can carry out an analysis – with certain limitations – regarding different age groups (Barcelona City Council, 2020).

- **Children:** according to the survey *Parlen els nens i nenes: el benestar subjectiu de la infància a Barcelona (2016-2017)*, 13.2% of children aged between 10 and 12 say that they do not entirely agree that someone in their family cares about them. Meanwhile, 22% of them think that, if they have a problem, their family will not help them. Finally, 26.5% indicate that they do not have enough friends (Barcelona City Council, 2021).
- **Teenagers (13–19 years):** according to the survey *Factors de risc en estudiants de secundària 2016 (FRESC)*, 7% of participants said that they had felt lonely on a regular basis in the six months prior to the survey. Out of those surveyed, 6% indicated that they had no good friends, while 12.3% said they had felt excluded or rejected by their peers in the previous year (Barcelona City Council, 2021). According to the same survey carried out in 2021, girls feel lonely more frequently than boys, and loneliness is more prevalent among pupils of schools in neighbourhoods of lower socioeconomic statuses. Specifically, 17.4% of girls and 9.6% of boys in less advantaged neighbourhoods feel lonely, compared to 15.1% of girls and 8.4% of boys in more privileged neighbourhoods.
- **Older people:** according to the latest edition of the *Barcelona Health Survey (2016)*, 25% of people aged 65 or over felt that they had lacked companionship in the previous 12 months, while 15.1% had felt left out from what was going on around them at some point. The data associated with this indicator also display differences according to whether the participants live alone or with others and along gender lines: women in this age group feel more excluded than men, whether they live alone or with others (Barcelona City Council, 2020). However, the feeling of lacking companionship often is four times as prevalent among women who live alone than among women who live with others (14.7% and 3.7%, respectively). Meanwhile, among men, the percentage is multiplied by nine (1.9% and 17.8%, respectively). It is worth noting here that men aged 65 or over who live alone perceive a lack of companionship more than women in the same situation (MSAL, 2021).

- **People with disabilities:** according to data gathered by the *Survey of People in a Situation of Functional Dependence (EPSD) in Barcelona (2018)*, 25% of people in a situation of functional dependence (mostly over the age of 55) live alone, and 11% have little social support (Barcelona City Council, 2020). In addition, as can be seen in the graph below, almost two thirds (62.6%) of them had felt left out or lacked companionship in the twelve months before the survey was conducted (Barcelona City Council, 2021).

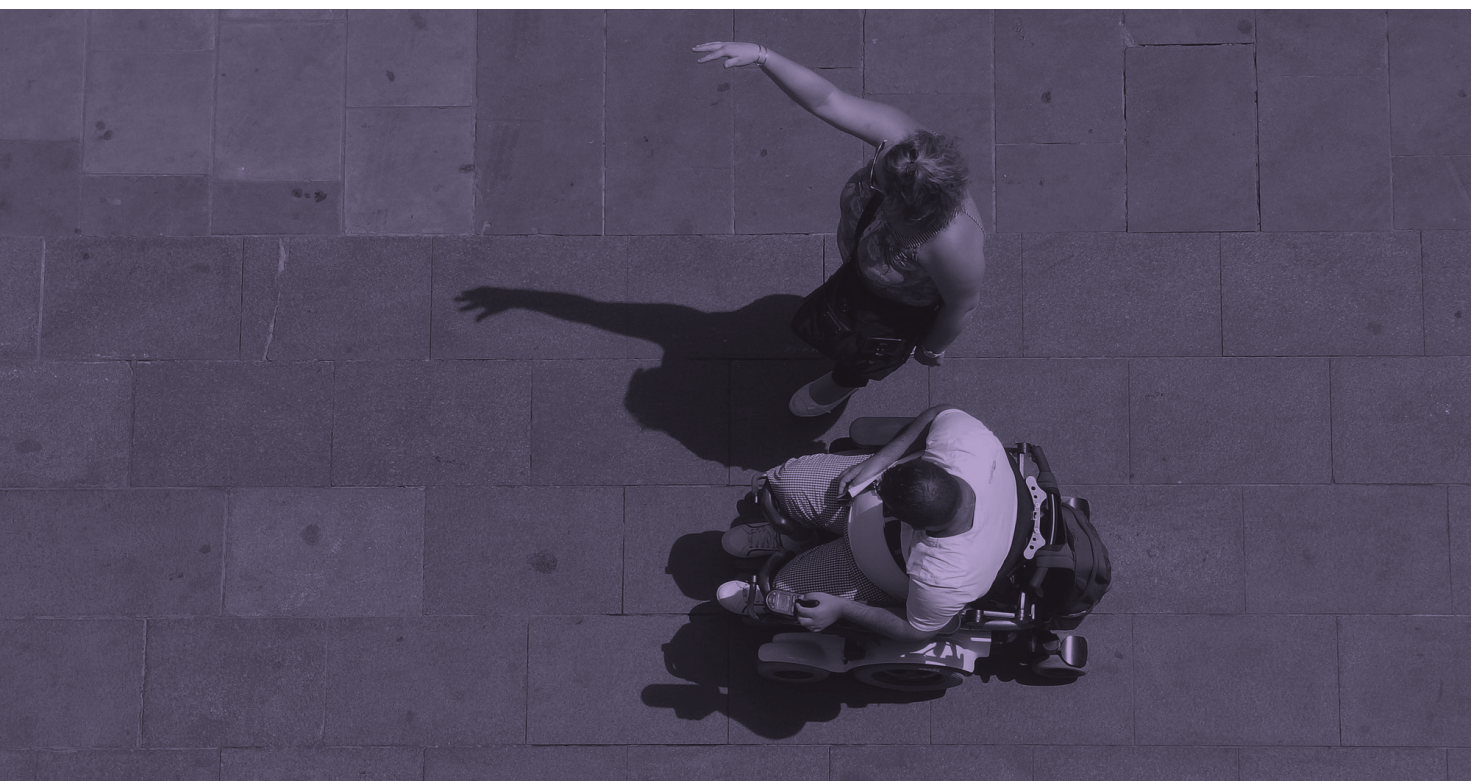
GRAPH 2

Percentage of people with disabilities aged 55 and over who experienced a lack of companionship or exclusion in the 12 months before the survey was conducted (2018).



Source: Survey of People in a Situation of Functional Dependence (EPSD) in Barcelona, 2018

It is important to note that, though it is difficult to appreciate the intensity of this lack of companionship and of the feeling of exclusion felt by people in a situation of dependence with these indicators, this percentage is considerably higher than that produced by the data on older people from the Barcelona Health Survey. In fact, according to the ESPD, 5% of people in a situation of functional dependence aged 55 or over are in a state of severe loneliness (Barcelona City Council, 2020).



LONELINESS IN BARCELONA: ÒMNIBUS SURVEY 2022

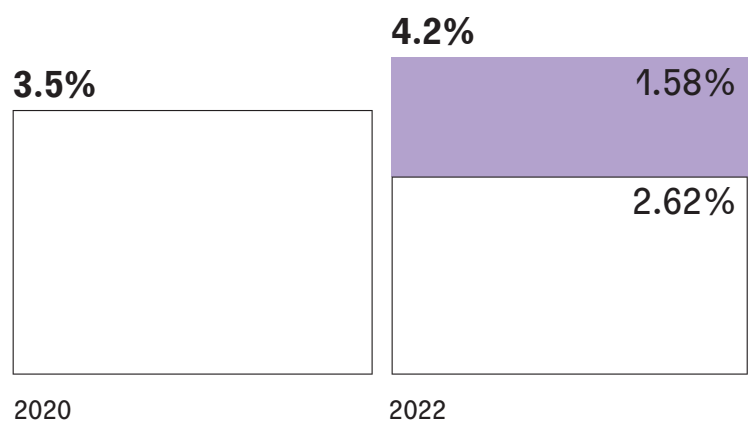


The Òmnibus municipal survey in the city of Barcelona is conducted among people aged 16 and over with a stratified random sampling procedure, and the assignment is proportional to population according to the municipal register of residents. It is based on a direct question: *How often do you feel lonely?*

According to this indicator – in other words, according to the data gathered through the question ‘*How often do you feel lonely?*’ – 4.2% of the surveyed population feels lonely often or very often.

As the graph shows, this figure has increased by 0.7 points on 2020, when 3.5% of the surveyed population indicated that they felt lonely. (Barcelona City Council, 2022).

GRAPH 3
People who feel lonely often or very often
Òmnibus 2020–2022
(%)



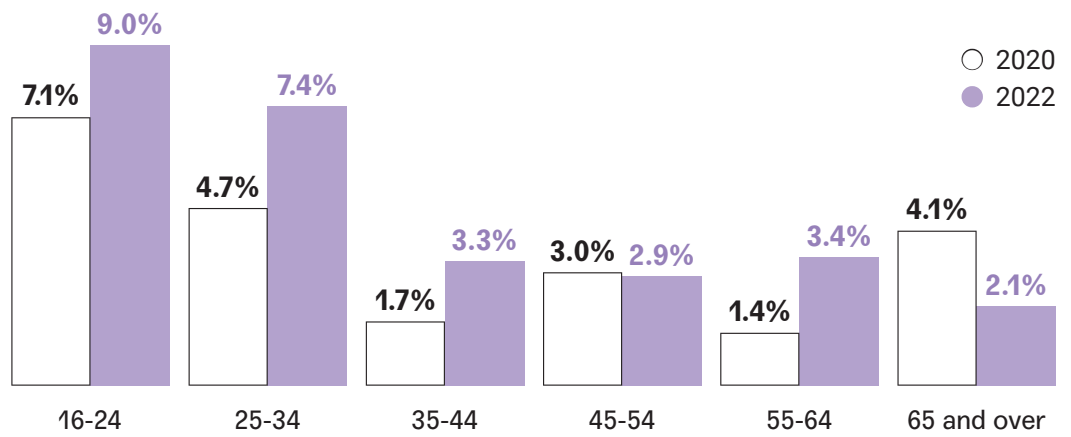
Source:
Òmnibus Survey, June 2022.
Barcelona City Council, 2022

○ ● Very often

In terms of age, we can see in the graph below that the group that express feelings of loneliness the most are young people aged between 16 and 24, with an increase of almost 2 points on 2020. The percentage of this group that state that they live with loneliness is 9%. Behind them are people aged 24–34, 7.4% of whom say that they feel lonely. Among the population aged between 35 and 64, feelings of loneliness are experienced by around 3%. Finally, 2.1% of older people – aged 65 or over – feel lonely this regularly.

In the last two years, loneliness has become more prevalent in practically all life cycles, especially among young people, but also in the age 55–64 age group. Meanwhile, it has decreased in prevalence among the population aged over 65.

GRAPH 4
Percentage of people who feel lonely according to age group



Source:
 Omnibus Survey, June 2022.
 Barcelona City Council, 2022

However, identifying and recognising loneliness can be a difficult task. For this reason, in the 2020 survey, three indirect questions were asked in order to help to recognise the feeling in situations where a direct question would not facilitate detection of loneliness:⁶

- *How often do you feel left out?*
- *How often do you feel isolated from others?*
- *How often do you feel that you lack companionship?*

There are three possible answers: hardly ever, some of the time or often. The scale is used to construct a dichotomous indicator – loneliness or no loneliness – which corresponds to the result of the sum of the 3 indicators, which can range from 3 (if the answer is hardly ever to all questions) to 9 (if the answer to all questions is often). Values of 6 or above indicate a case of loneliness (Barcelona City Council, 2021).

If we analyse these indicators in more detail, we see that 4.7% of the surveyed population felt that they often lacked companionship, 3.3% often felt left out and 2.1% often felt isolated. Meanwhile, 15.4% of participants stated that they feel lonely some of the time, 14.5% felt that they lacked companionship some of the time, 10.4% felt left out some of the time and, finally, 9.6% expressed that they felt isolated from others some of the time (Barcelona City Council, 2020).

6. These three questions correspond to the short-form version of the UCLA scale used in the Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness, which will be explained at the end of the module in the 'Test for measuring loneliness' section.

RELATIONAL LONELINESS IN BARCELONA

The Neighbourhood Relationships and Coexistence Survey in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (ECAMB by its initials in Catalan) from 2020 incorporates a specific relational loneliness indicator, which is different from the loneliness indicator in the UCLA scale. The relational loneliness index in this survey is based on three questions (Barcelona City Council, 2021):

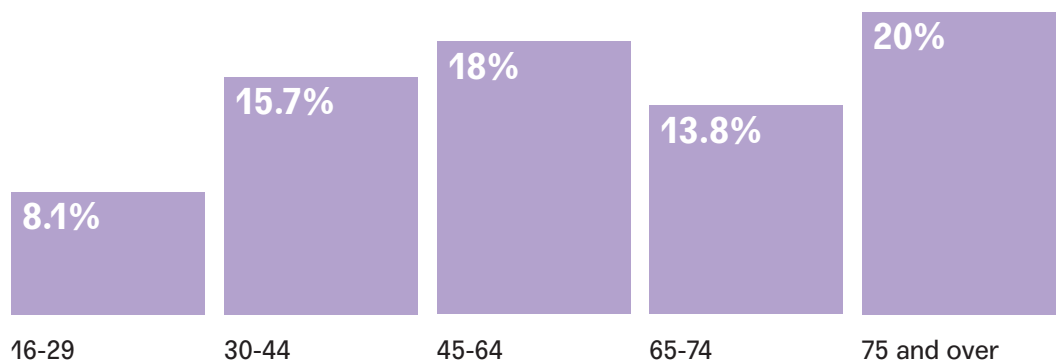
- *Do you usually have someone to talk to about personal issues in your day-to-day life?*
- *Can you rely on your friends or family when you need them?*
- *Do you want to talk to or see your family, friends or neighbours?*

A negative response to one or more of the questions indicates a case of relational loneliness or isolation. To conduct the ECAMB in 2020, 5,437 people aged 16 and over from the 36 municipalities in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area were interviewed, 4,043 of whom lived in the city of Barcelona. Of the population of Barcelona, 10.8% do not usually talk to or see their family, friends or neighbours; 5.5% have no one to talk to about personal issues day to day, and 3.2% cannot rely on friends or family when they need them. According to these results, relational loneliness affects 15.4% of those interviewed. There are no significant differences between men and women. However, there is evidence of a higher impact of relational loneliness on people born abroad: relational loneliness affects 12.3% of people born in the city of Barcelona and 21.6% of those born in another country (Barcelona City Council, 2021).

In terms of age, unlike the UCLA loneliness scale – which measures the subjective feeling of loneliness and shows that young people experience it the most – these results show that relational loneliness is most common among older people, as illustrated in the graph below (Barcelona City Council, 2021).

GRAPH 5
Relational loneliness index according to age range

Source:
Neighbourhood Relationships and Coexistence Survey in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, (ECAMB, 2020).
Barcelona Institute of Regional and Metropolitan Studies (IERMB)

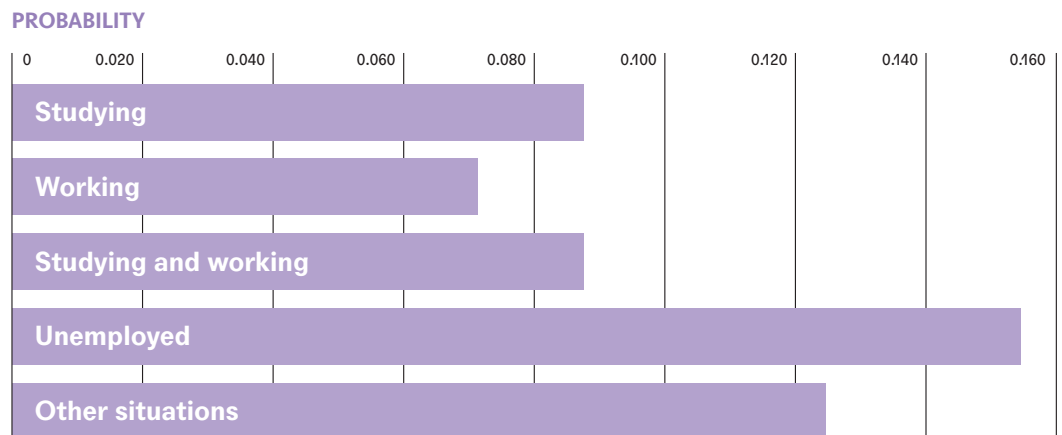


LONELINESS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BARCELONA

From a life cycle perspective, loneliness is directly linked to transitions and changes. In the case of young people, two crucial factors can have an impact on loneliness. In order to take a closer look at data on loneliness among young people, we can use the *Barcelona Young People's Survey 2020 (EJOB2020, by its initials in Catalan)*. The research done so far compares various moments of transition with feelings of loneliness (Marí-Klose; Escapa, 2021):

1. **Leaving the family home.** The loneliness index is higher among young people who still live in the family home than among those who have left. Therefore, not yet being independent in terms of housing is a factor that can influence feelings of loneliness.
2. **Transition into the world of work.** Young people who are working or studying are less likely to feel lonely than young people who are unemployed. The likelihood of feeling lonely doubles when the person is not working or studying.

GRAPH 6
Probability that the young person feels lonely based on their employment status



Source:
Barcelona Young People's
Survey 2020.
Barcelona City Council, 2021

3. **Income.** Young people without their own income are twice as likely to feel lonely as young people with their own income.
4. **Partner.** Intimate relationships during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood play a key role in improving self-esteem and creating identity. Having a partner is a protective factor against loneliness. Even in cases of occasional affective and sexual relationships, people still feel lonely. The stability factor is important to consider.

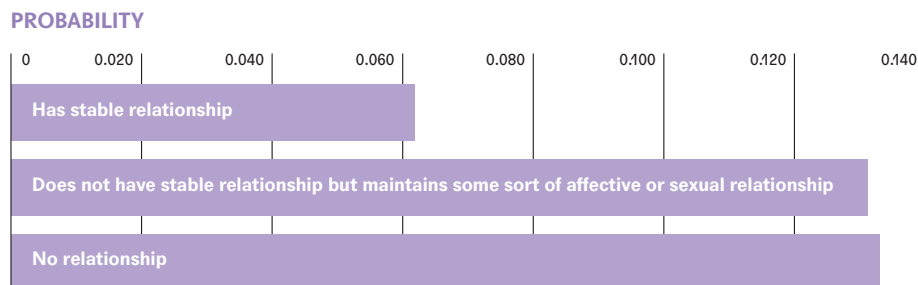
Loneliness among young people is linked to experiences of frustration and uncertainty in the transition to adulthood.

In older people, meanwhile, loneliness is more closely connected to a lack of social relationships of trust.



GRAPH 7
Probability that the young person feels lonely based on their relationship status

Source:
 2020 Barcelona Socio-demographic Survey.
 Barcelona City Council, 2021



KEY IDEAS AND SUMMARY

There are more and more single-person households in the city of Barcelona. In 2020, 31% of households contained just one person. The number of single-person households has increased from 181,546 in 2004 to 202,440 in 2021.

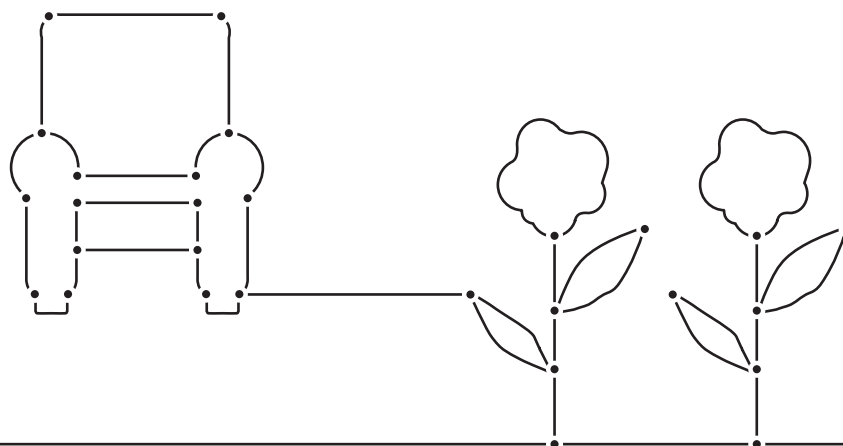
Loneliness is a construct that is difficult to identify; therefore, measuring it is not easy. In order to look at its prevalence in the city, various related indicators can be used, but with limitations.

For the same reason, the prevalence of loneliness sometimes increases when indirect questions are asked. According to the direct indicator, 3.5% of the population of Barcelona feels lonely often or very often. However, this figure rises to 7.3% when the sum of the indicators obtained through indirect questions is analysed.

According to the first wave of the Òmnibus municipal survey in 2022, young people are the group who feel lonely sometimes or often most frequently (32.6%). Specifically, 9% said that they feel lonely often or very often.

According to data from the Neighbourhood Relationships and Co-existence Survey in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (ECAMB by its initials in Catalan) of 2020, relational loneliness is most common among older people, experienced by 20%.

Loneliness among young people is linked to experiences of frustration and uncertainty in the transition to adulthood. In older people, meanwhile, loneliness is more closely connected to a lack of social relationships of trust (Barcelona City Council, 2021).



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