

Compendium

# Recommended national indicators of loneliness

Overview of our recommendations for national measures of loneliness.

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## Notice

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The Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004)" used across various ONS webpages, has been incorrectly referred to as "UCLA 3-item Loneliness Scale". While the scale was derived from the longer UCLA Loneliness Scale, it is not officially named as such, as reported in the original journal: A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys - Mary Elizabeth Hughes, Linda J. Waite, Louise C. Hawkey, John T. Cacioppo, 2004.

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# 1 . Recommended measures for adults and children

Based on our review of [existing measures](#) and the results of our [cognitive testing](#) and [survey testing programme](#), we recommend four questions to capture different aspects of loneliness. The first three questions are from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) three-item loneliness scale and the last is a direct question about how often the respondent feels lonely, currently used on the [Community Life Survey](#). The questions recommended for use with adults aged 16 years and over are detailed in this section.

## Proposed indicators of loneliness for adults aged 16 years and over

### Three-item version of UCLA scale

The three-item version of the UCLA scale asks indirectly about loneliness using the following questions:

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

Response categories: "Hardly ever or never", "Some of the time" or "Often".

Responses to each question can be scored to provide a single loneliness score.

### Direct measure

A single-item measure currently used on the Community Life Survey, which asks people directly about their experience of loneliness:

"How often do you feel lonely?"

Response categories: "Often or always", "Some of the time", "Occasionally", "Hardly ever" or "Never".

For clarity, we are not recommending that the direct measure of loneliness be combined with the UCLA scale into a composite score, but rather that the indirect (UCLA) measure and direct (single-item) measure should ideally be used together as a loneliness question module. The two approaches to measurement provide a more holistic picture of loneliness (as shown by findings from the [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing](#)).

Where it is not possible to use all four questions, as survey space is a major constraint, we would recommend at a minimum the use of a direct question on loneliness: "How often do you feel lonely?". This will provide an estimate of the prevalence of loneliness based on respondents' own perspectives and will give the greatest comparability with other surveys.

An adapted version of the measures is recommended for use with children and young people aged 10 to 15 years. The wording for the children's measure was changed to a more "plain English" version, reflecting concerns that the words "companionship" and "isolation" are difficult for children to read and may be interpreted in a range of different ways. We revised the questions and tested them cognitively (to understand children's ease of use and interpretations) and on a survey conducted among children by [The Children's Society](#). The findings showed that the revised questions were appropriate for use with children.

## Proposed indicators of loneliness for children aged 10 to 15 years

### Modified version of UCLA scale

For children (aged 10 to 15 years), we suggest a slightly modified version of the UCLA scale using the following questions:

- How often do you feel you have no one to talk to?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel alone?

Response categories: "Hardly ever or never", "Some of the time" or "Often".

## Direct measure

The Direct measure currently used on the Community Life Survey, which asks children directly about their experience of loneliness:

"How often do you feel lonely?"

Response categories: "Often or always", "Some of the time", "Occasionally", "Hardly ever" or "Never".

To accompany the loneliness recommendations, we have also developed a [guidance report](#) for incorporating the measures in relevant surveys and interpreting the results.

## 2 . Harmonisation of national indicators of loneliness

Harmonisation is about ensuring consistency in the use of definitions, survey questions, administrative data and in the presentation of outputs across the Government Statistical Service (GSS). Harmonisation is important in maximising the usefulness of data collected and statistics produced. Ensuring comparability across the GSS is important as it maximises the power of data and analyses without compromising quality.

The Interim Harmonised Principle for loneliness has been agreed by the cross-government National Statistics Harmonisation Group (NSHG) and approved by the National Statistics Harmonisation Steering Group (NSH SG). From today (5 December 2018), the loneliness indicators outlined in this section will form part of a new GSS Interim Harmonised Principle for loneliness that can be accessed through the [GSS web pages](#).

We will encourage the roll-out of the Interim Harmonised Principles for loneliness across the GSS and more widely, and suggest taking stock and making any refinements necessary within two years, after survey data have been analysed, before proposing the final GSS Harmonised Principle. The GSS Harmonisation Team will monitor implementation of the loneliness principle to ensure harmonisation is adhered to.

We would welcome your feedback on how well the loneliness indicators work and any improvements you would suggest, before submitting them for final approval as GSS Harmonised Principles in 2020. Please get in touch with us by contacting:

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