

Loneliness in Older Persons throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic in Switzerland

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Background

Loneliness is associated with adverse health outcomes in older people such as mortality, cardiovascular diseases, depression and dementia (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Lambert Van As, et al., 2021; Lara et al., 2019; Valtorta et al., 2016). Before the COVID-19 pandemic about 4.7% of persons aged 65 years and older felt often or very often lonely and another 26.7% felt sometimes lonely in Switzerland (Hämmig, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic older persons' mobility and social contacts have been restricted to a large extent. Several studies showed that the COVID-19 pandemic and restriction measures taken to contain it led to more feelings of loneliness in older persons during the first weeks and month of the pandemic compared to before the outbreak (e.g. Kotwal et al., 2021; Macdonald & Hülür, 2021; Seifert & Hassler, 2020). However, none of these studies had follow-ups of more than 15 weeks. Therefore, we investigated older persons' feelings of loneliness over 15 months (between March 2020 and June 2021) to describe its development throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and in changing situations, e.g. with regards to restrictions.

Methods

The COVID-19 Social Monitor is a longitudinal online panel survey of the Swiss population. Participants were randomly selected and actively recruited from an existing panel pool (LINK Institute, Zurich, Switzerland). Participants were surveyed every 2-5 weeks since March 30th 2020 and data collection is still ongoing. For the present analyses data from March 30th 2020 to June 17th 2021 was used.

We used two different measures of loneliness: the 3-item UCLA loneliness scale (Hughes, 2004) and a direct question on feelings of loneliness (i.e. How often do you currently feel lonely?) as used in the Swiss Health Survey.

Results

304 persons between 65 and 79 years participated between March and November 2020 and 506 between December 2020 and June 2021. Response rates were between 73% and 91% in the former and between 78% and 92% in the latter time period.

Preliminary descriptive analyses show that the percentage of older persons that felt lonely during the lockdown periods in spring (between March 16th and May 4th) and fall/winter (between October 29th and May 31st) was higher than the percentage of older persons having such feeling between or after lockdown periods. This can be seen in both measures used: the 3-item UCLA loneliness scale (Figure 1) as well as the direct measure of loneliness (Figure 2). The examined population mostly felt a lack of companionship throughout lockdowns (data not shown). Further analyses are planned to tackle time trends, significance of these differences in time and differences in subgroups.

Conclusion

Our descriptive analyses show that in the spring and fall/winter lockdown more older people in Switzerland seem to have felt lonely than in time periods between and after these lockdowns. Compared to data from the Swiss Health Survey 2012 that found 4.7% of persons aged 65 years and older feeling often or very often lonely (Hämmig, 2019), the prevalence seems to have been higher during lockdown periods but not throughout summer 2020. This suggests, that feelings of loneliness increased during the pandemic, but the increase was limited to phases with severe restrictions regarding mobility and social contacts.

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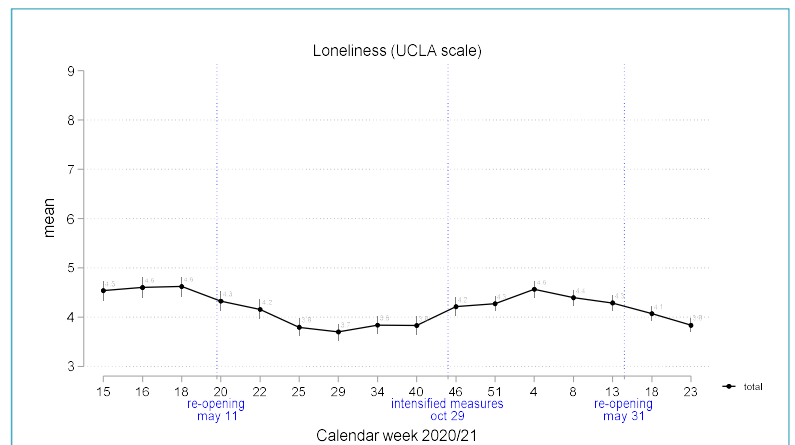


Figure 1: 3-item UCLA loneliness scale in persons 65 – 79 years throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland.

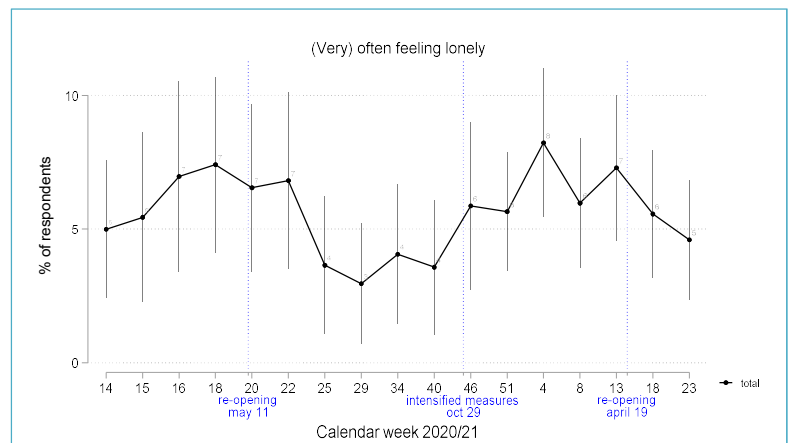


Figure 2: direct question on loneliness in persons 65 – 79 years throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland.