

# THE LONELIEST GENERATION?

Georgina Kiss-Kozma<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, more than 14 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 were estimated to have experienced mental health problems, and the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the mental health of young people across Europe. The OECD report *Health at a Glance: Europe* found that half of young people in Europe said they had not received adequate help to deal with their mental health problems. UNICEF reports that suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people in Europe after road traffic accidents. According to an EU survey from 2022, there are more loners among young people than among the older generation. The mental health of young people is becoming a bigger issue every year. This is not surprising, as a fifth of young people in Hungary are considered lonely. However, in addition to loneliness and lack of companionship, young people also struggle with the frustration of insecurity. The issue of young people's loneliness has become even more central to public discourse in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as a result of these two trends, the place and role of young people in society is taking an increasingly prominent place in the discursive space. One of the central questions of this study is to what extent the loneliness and mental health of young people in Hungary are in line with international trends.

**Keywords:** Hungarian youth, mental health, loneliness, social support

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## Introduction

Are we really heading for the greatest discontinuity in the history of Western societies, and are we at a crossroads of mutually reinforcing social changes - be it the effects of technological innovation, globalisation or the polycrisis - that will present societies with new challenges that require us to fundamentally reshape everything we have thought about the functioning of society and its basic rules? From redefining the institution of the family, the way knowledge is acquired, the boundaries of life stages, to redefining the rules of world power, economics and geopolitics, to our faith in the future? Most countries in the European Union and many regions in western industrialised countries are facing demographic challenges - some would even call it a catastrophe. Education, the media and politics are struggling with the phenomenon of 'fake news', and life expectancy has increased so much thanks to the heyday of welfare states that the boundaries between life stages are becoming increasingly blurred. At the same time, a growing body of international research shows that the youth phase of life is in crisis. The World Happiness Report 2024, commissioned by the United Nations and now in its twelfth edition, has broken down its findings by demographic cohort, making it possible to compare the happiness levels of people in different age groups.

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And this is no coincidence: The report begins with the fact that we used to think - as in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* - that people become more dissatisfied and unhappy over time, but the results of happiness research show a more nuanced and dynamic picture. We find that people born after 1980 are less happy, even on a global level.

An additional burden for the youth stage of life is the fact that, if we look back over the past years and decades, we can see signs of crisis in almost all areas of life: Westerners have experienced economic, demographic and migration crises, they have had to live through a pandemic despite believing that medical science was already advanced enough to avoid it, and they have had to face the frightening prospect of war despite trusting that the political system in their part of the world was already advanced enough to resolve conflicts through diplomacy. According to linguists, language reflects the spirit of the times and is also capable of capturing it. In line with this statement, we can characterise the current trend of major social and technological change as a perma-crisis. A perma-crisis can be defined as a long-lasting, protracted period of instability and uncertainty. To continue the linguistic approach, the Youth Research Institute conducted a 'word of the year' survey among Hungarian youth at the beginning of 2024. In the survey, a representative sample of 1,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 29 were asked to choose the phrase from a list that best describes the year 2023. The results show that young people in Hungary see the past year primarily described by the words "inflation", "war" and "poison". When choosing the word of the year, it should also be noted that we tend to choose words whose frequency of use has increased. We can therefore assume that the frequency of use of these terms in everyday language has increased.

One area that is of the greatest importance for society and young people in the permanent or polycrisis is the 'crisis of communities', which can lead societies to loneliness in the long term. We are therefore living in a transitional period in which more and more of the grey swans are turning out to be black swans.

## The changing and protracted youth stage of life

Youth has always been a time of constant and significant change. Young people have the greatest potential for change, react most quickly to social, economic and political changes and can adapt to new situations more quickly than their elders. The social environment has a considerable influence on the youngest age group, which is why the youth stage of life is constantly changing. The long period of prosperity in Western culture has meant that young people have been living better than their parents' generation for decades: the average life expectancy at birth has risen steadily thanks to the continuous development of medicine, and fortunate constellations in the social, economic and political spheres have enabled young people to stay in school longer and thus raise the level of basic education in society. This has also meant that important life events - such as attaining the highest level of education, entering the labour market, leaving home, getting married and starting a family - are being experienced later and later in life, meaning that the adolescent stage of life is not only subject to constant change, but is also being stretched out further and further. Whereas it used to be confined to the teens and twenties, the most important life events are now experienced less and less by the under-thirties. Recognising this fact, the

Youth Research Institute defined the youth life stage more broadly in its empirical research in early 2023, looking at 15- to 39-year-olds instead of the 15- to 29-year-old age group commonly used in national youth research practise (Kiss-Kozma and Székely 2023).

The crises of the last two decades can also be recognised in the self-reflection of the younger generations. Since 2008, data from the large-scale youth survey, which was launched in 2000 and has been repeated every four years since then, has been analysed in order to paint a picture of the problems faced by young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in Hungary. Over the last decade, the impact and priority of the problems perceived by young people have changed, as the problem maps from 2008 and 2012 show a very different picture of young people's lives in Hungary. On the way to the present, concrete problems were increasingly replaced by more ethereal, post-material problems: Hopelessness and uncertainty about the future have risen from third place in 2008 to first place in 2020 (in 2008 this was a pressing problem for only a tenth of the young people surveyed, but in 2020 it is perceived by almost a quarter of them as a priority for their generation). Similarly, aimlessness has climbed from fifth to third place within a decade. The results from 2020 also show another change worth highlighting: lack of friendships and communities was articulated as a new problem for the younger generation and immediately rose to the top, to fourth place. There is only one dimension where there were no significant shifts, namely that of material security, which is obviously related to the fact that this is the stage in young people's lives when they start to become independent, and in this process the issue of material goods plays a key role (independence from the family of origin, building one's own existence, starting a family are all life events for which material resources are a necessary, but not the only prerequisite). According to the results of the Youth Research Institute 2023 survey, young people continue to see uncertainty and an unpredictable future as the most important problems facing their generation. In the first part of the problem map, with the exception of financial worries, problems of a psychosocial nature are usually mentioned, such as the aforementioned uncertainty, an unpredictable future, lack of goals or lack of friends and communities (Kiss-Kozma and Székely 2023). International studies have also shown that frustration due to uncertainty about the future is increasing and has recently been higher among younger people (World Economic Forum 2023). Uncertain circumstances draw attention to the importance of maintaining mental health and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

## International overview

The mental health of young people is not a challenge specific to Hungary, as international surveys have shown a steadily worsening trend in recent years: in 2019, it was estimated that more than 14 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in the European Union had mental health problems, and the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the mental health of young people across Europe. The OECD report *Health at a Glance 2022: Europe* found that 23% of the adult population in Europe reported not receiving adequate mental health care in 2022, while half of young people

<sup>2</sup> Every year from 2023, the Youth Research Institute publishes the Youth Report, which includes all the topics, issues and events that have been significant for youth in the year under review. In the 2023 report, both the top five issues for 2023 and the expectations for 2024 included the topic of mental health of young people (Youth Report 2023).

(49%) reported the same. A UNICEF report has highlighted that suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in Europe after road traffic accidents, highlighting the serious consequences of poor mental health, and an EU survey in 2022 (Casabianca & Nurminen 2022) found that there are more loners among young people than among the older generation. In response to these surveys on young people's mental health, work is already underway in the Council and EU Member States have begun to develop their views on how to prevent mental health problems among young people. At the Council meeting of 27 November 2023, 27 Member States adopted Council conclusions on the mental health of young people, proposing measures such as improving their living and working conditions, promoting young people's access to mental health services, promoting research on the mental health of young people, combating stigmatisation, sharing best practises between EU Member States and promoting a safer and healthier digital space, including measures against hate, violence and abuse in the media and social media.

The aforementioned happiness index of the World Happiness Report, published for the 12th time in 2024 by the United Nations, shows how satisfied people in 143 countries around the world are with their lives, listing the results by age group for the first time. This provides some general insights into the differences in happiness levels between people in different age groups. For example, it was found that people born after 1980 have lower levels of happiness worldwide. However, it is important to note that there are large regional differences. In North America, for example, happiness levels among young people (aged 15–24) have fallen significantly since 2006–2010, meaning that they are now unhappier than their older peers. The subjective happiness level of young people has also fallen in Western Europe, while it has risen in Central and Eastern Europe, meaning that young people are now equally happy on both sides of Europe. In Hungary, people are less satisfied compared to the previous year, which is mainly due to the dissatisfaction of the older age group, which ranks 36th in the happiness index for those under 30, but only 70th for those over 60. Despite the decline, the subjective happiness level of the population in the years 2021–2023 has risen the most compared to the period 2006–2010, ranking 15th in terms of the increase in recent decades. However, Hungary lags behind the other countries in the region: in the ranking of countries in terms of life satisfaction, Romania is in 32nd place, Serbia in 37th place and Slovakia in 45th place, while Hungary is only in 56th place (Helliwell et al. 2024). Similar trends can be seen in the results of the Hungarostudy, which has been published regularly since 1988 and provides a comprehensive picture of the physical and mental health of the Hungarian population. According to the 2013 survey, the general satisfaction indicator and the happiness indicator have deteriorated since 2006, while both indicators in 2021 are above the 2006 level. In other words, the population's satisfaction and happiness are slowly but steadily increasing. Here, too, comparisons by age group show that satisfaction and happiness decrease significantly with age (Székely et al. 2022). The mental health of young people is becoming an increasingly important issue from year to year (Székely and Kiss-Kozma 2024), which is confirmed by both international and national trends (Kiss-Kozma and Székely 2023). However, in addition to loneliness and lack of community, young people also struggle with frustration resulting from a sense of insecurity (Székely 2023).

## Trapped by stereotypes – or lonely digital natives in the light of data

In literature, the youth of today is labelled with a series of terms that immanently imply two causally related characteristics: They are lonely and technologically wired. They are also referred to as digital natives (Prensky 2001), Generation Z, postmillennials, Facebook generation, net generation, iGeneration, zappers, instant online generation, dotcom kids (Pál and Törőcsik 2013) and homo zappiens (Veen and Vrakking 2006), which usually refers to those born between 1995 and 2009 (Pál and Törőcsik 2013; Juhász 2017). Their communication differs significantly from that of previous generations, as it is mostly done via digital means (Tari 2011) and they maintain social contacts in real and virtual space simultaneously (McCrindle and Wolfinger 2010). As a result, it is generally assumed that they are alienated from their personal relationships. However, a number of studies refute this (McCrindle and Wolfinger 2010; Selwyn 2008) and suggest that, like previous generations, they value face-to-face contact with friends and acquaintances. This is confirmed by previous large samples of youth research and by the findings of the Youth Research Institute.

### The Hungarian context

In our study, we analyse the extent to which young Hungarians feel lonely using the dataset of the Hungarian youth sociological research project, the Hungarian large- sample youth survey. As part of the research project, 8,000 young Hungarians between the ages of 15 and 29 were surveyed in 2020. The Hungarian large-sample youth survey started in 2000 and was repeated every four years thereafter. The target group of the survey was young people living in Hungary. We also use the results of the surveys conducted by the Youth Research Institute 2023. In the Youth Research Institute 2023 survey, the focus of the analysis of these factors was on the topic of social relationships. The survey was conducted by the Youth Research Institute between December 2022 and January 2023 among Hungarian citizens aged 15 to 39 in a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people using a face-to-face interview (TAPI).

### Results

In the intergenerational problem map of Hungarian youth, uncertainty, unpredictability and the lack of communities can draw our attention to the question of whether the resilience of young people in Hungary has changed, or at least whether it can be assumed that changes and crises in the world are not only perceived by them, but can also affect their psychological resilience. The results of the latest survey in the large-scale youth survey series, which was conducted in autumn 2020, shed light on young people's perception of safety and the role of communities in their lives. In the questionnaire, they were asked to answer the question of how safe they feel overall. The answers were given on a scale of one to five, with one being "not at all" and five being "completely". The results show that 15- to 29-year-olds in Hungary feel safest at home (4.4), in their own community (4.23) and in their immediate neighbourhood (4.22), while they feel least safe in countries outside the European Union (3.59) and on the internet (3.68). In other words, the closer they are physically to their family and their immediate personal relationships, the safer

they feel. In the questionnaire, the young people were also asked how afraid they were of certain events. Here too, respondents were asked to rate their opinion on a scale of one to five, with one being not afraid at all and five being very afraid. Young people in Hungary tended not to be afraid of another world war (2.76), but this changed in 2022 when fear of the coronavirus epidemic was replaced by concern about inflation and, above all, Russia's war in Ukraine. These were the topics that most concerned the young people between the ages of 18 and 21 surveyed by the Youth Research Institute, even before discussions about holiday plans or plans for (further) education and employment. Almost six tenths of them were not even talking about the coronavirus epidemic at this point. This suggests that young people are sensitive to the events around them. This is also supported by the findings that the coronavirus epidemic in autumn 2020 affected the lives of young people in several ways: primarily the time they spent online (23) and their financial situation (19). While the latter clearly had a negative impact (90%), their relationship with their family (66%) and their connection to spirituality, religion and God (59%) were positively affected. The results for 2020 also show the importance of family and friendships in other areas: on the trust scale, young people in Hungary trusted their family the most, followed by their friends.

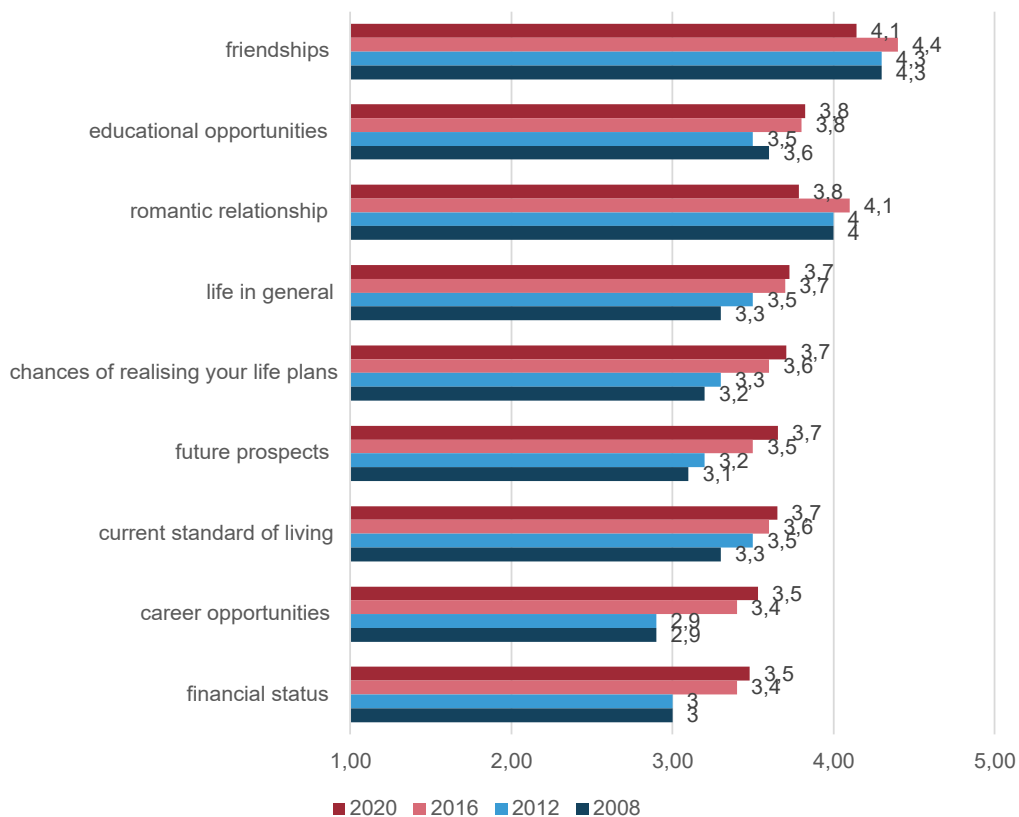
This is emphasised by the fact that they prefer to spend their free time with their family and friends, even if the screen is still the dominant leisure activity. The growing importance of their relationships with family and friends is also reflected in the results, which show that while young people are generally satisfied with almost all aspects of their lives, their satisfaction with their friends and partners was at its lowest in 2020, i.e. in the period between 2008 and 2020 (Fig. 1). The role of personal relationships, i.e. family and friends, is therefore still important in the lives of young people in Hungary, and the coronavirus epidemic has also shown, albeit mainly indirectly<sup>3</sup>, that in times of crisis, personal relationships become more important in the lives of young people.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), "health is defined as "well-being in body, mind, spirit and society" (Constitution of the World Health Organisation). Our quality of life encompasses physical, mental and social well-being. The complexity of mental health is reflected in the fact that the definition also includes self-acceptance, the ability to successfully cope with difficult situations, the ability to trust and the ability to maintain meaningful human relationships.

The greatest difference in social support was found with regard to the level of education. A quarter (26%) of respondents with primary education never or rarely felt they had much in common with people around them, compared to only 18% of respondents with high levels of education, i.e. those with tertiary education. A quarter of respondents with a low level of education (24%) never or rarely feel that they belong to a circle of friends, while only a fifth (20%) of respondents with the highest level of education can be considered to have no circle of friends. While 23% of respondents with primary education never or rarely feel that they have someone in their lives with whom they can talk about their problems, only 12% of respondents with higher education find it difficult to establish this kind of close connection.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the coronavirus epidemic had the effect of increasing young people's interest in politics by increasing their exposure to public and political issues within the family and in their communication with friends. Young people also became more interested overall, entering into a denser communication space, which resulted in an increase in the average political communication even among young people belonging to the less politically involved group, which basically rejects politics (Hajdú et al., 2022; Szabó és Oross, 2021).

## Figure 1. Satisfaction



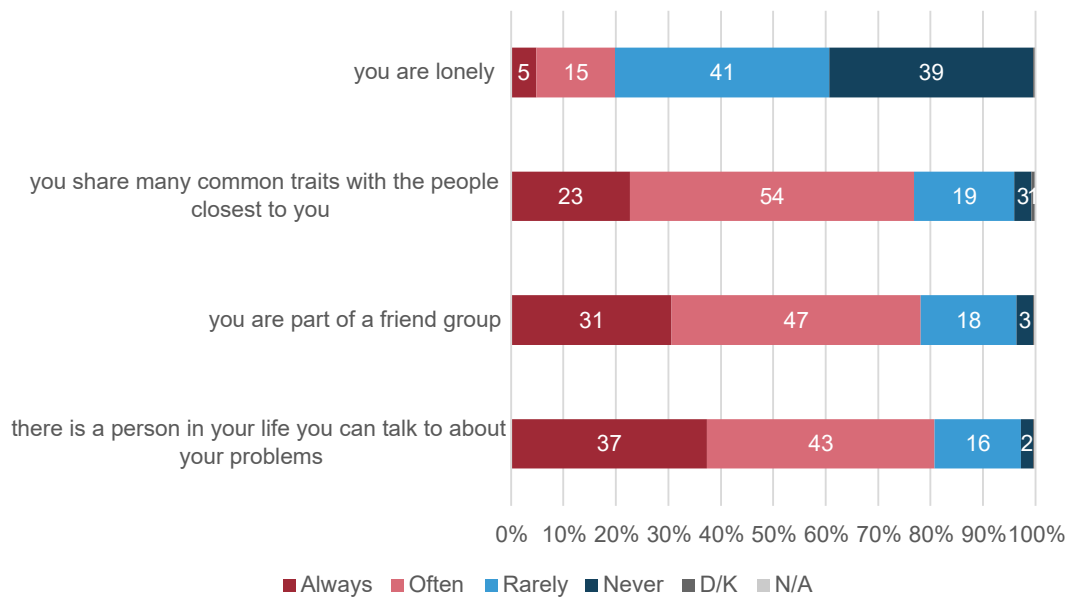
Source: Hungarian Youth Research 2020. (How satisfied are you with the following? Please answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you are not satisfied at all and 5 means you are completely satisfied.) N2008, N2012, N2016, N2020=8000; scale averages

There are no major differences between the sexes in this respect, except for one point: while just over a sixth of females (17%) feel that they never or rarely have someone to talk to about their problems, more than a fifth of males (20%) said that they never or rarely talk to anyone about their problems. And looking at the age differences confirms the finding that social relationships are most important in adolescence, which has already been confirmed by previous studies. 15 to 19-year-olds were above average in all aspects of the survey: 84% feel (often or always) that they have someone in their lives to talk to about their problems (average: 80%), 88% are part of a group of friends (average: 78%), 80% find common ground with people in their immediate environment (average: 77%) and 82 per cent never or rarely feel lonely (average: 80%).

The greatest differences in social support were found with regard to the level of education. A quarter (26%) of respondents with a primary school education never or rarely felt they had much in common with those around them, compared to 18% of respondents with a high level of education, i.e. those with a university education. A quarter of respondents with a low level of education (24%) never or rarely feel that they belong to a circle of friends, while only a fifth (20%) of respondents with the highest level of education can assume that they do not have a circle of friends. While 23% of respondents with a primary school education never or rarely feel that they have someone in their life with whom they can talk about their problems, only 12% of respondents with a higher level of education find it difficult to establish such a close connection. There are no major differences between the sexes in this respect, with the exception of one point: while just over a sixth of women (17%) feel they never or rarely have someone to talk to

about their problems, more than a fifth of men (20%) said they never or rarely talk to anyone about their problems. A look at the age differences confirms the finding that social relationships are most important in adolescence, which has already been confirmed in previous studies. 15 to 19-year-olds were above average in all aspects of the survey: 84% feel (often or always) that they have someone in their lives to talk to about their problems (average: 80%), 88 per cent are part of a group of friends (average: 78%), 80% find common ground with people in their immediate environment (average: 77%) and 82% never or rarely feel lonely (average: 80%).

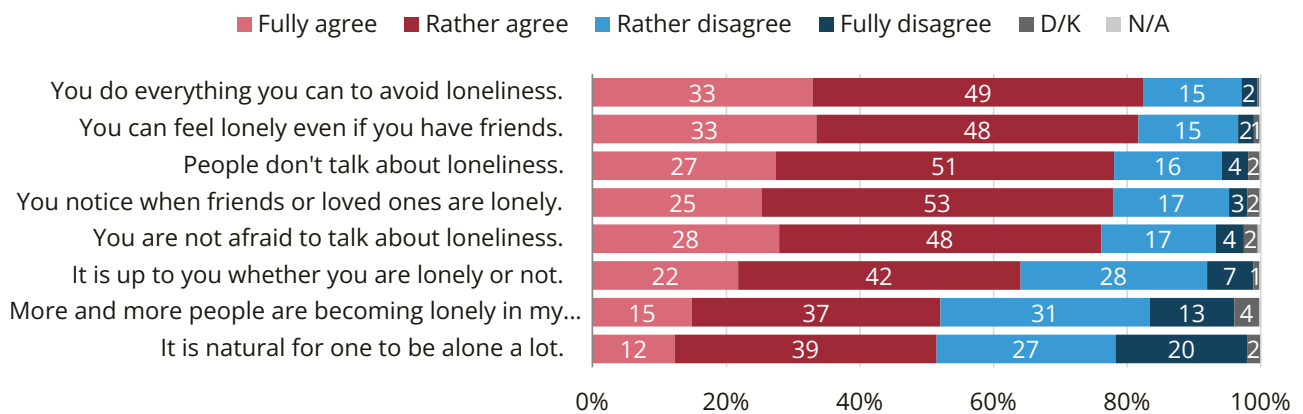
**Figure 2. Perception of social relationships**



Source: Hungarian Youth Research Institute, 2023 (How often do you feel that ...?) N2023=1000; averages

To summarise, eight out of ten young people aged between 15 and 39 in Hungary stated that they rarely or never feel lonely. However, it should be noted that 15% of young people often feel lonely, while five per cent always feel lonely. This is important because a number of studies have confirmed that people who feel lonely frequently or for long periods of time are more at risk than those who are "only" occasionally dissatisfied with their relationships with others. And loneliness that becomes chronic has psychological, physical and, in some cases, medical consequences. In other words, a fifth of teenagers and young adults are at risk and vulnerable to persistent or frequent feelings of loneliness. Research has also addressed the issue of societal perceptions of loneliness, as there is often a negative cultural image of loneliness in society, which can lead to social taboos. However, some progress has been made in recent years, mainly thanks to the ongoing discourse on young people's psychological and mental health. However, the fear of stigmatisation can still lead to feelings of loneliness being hidden. This is reflected in the findings and proposed measures adopted by the 23 EU Member States on 23 November 2023 in the call to combat stigma. In terms of society's perception of loneliness, one thought-provoking finding is that while three quarters of respondents (76%) said they were not afraid to talk about loneliness, the same proportion (78%) also completely or somewhat agreed with the statement that people do not talk about loneliness. Two possible conclusions can be drawn from this, which need to be investigated

### Figure 3. Agreeing with statements

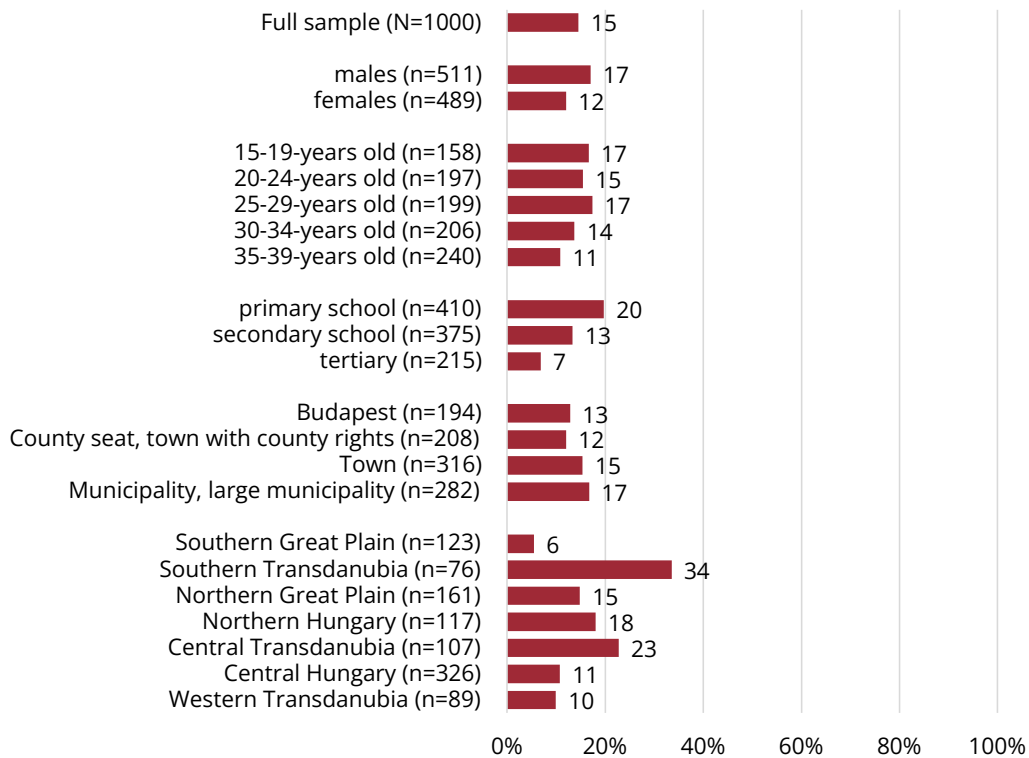


Source: Hungarian Youth Research Institute, 2023 (Please tell us whether you rather agree or rather disagree with the following statements.) N2023=1000; averages

in the future: On the one hand, society's openness to this topic may have become more dynamic in the younger age group, i.e. young people may find it more natural to talk about certain mental health difficulties and challenges. On the other hand, the result can also be explained by the fact that people do not like to think of themselves as tabooing certain topics of social importance. It can also be concluded from the responses that young Hungarians generally pay attention to the state of their environment: Every second respondent (52%) believes that more and more people around them are lonely, and 78% said that they recognise when their friends or relatives are lonely. When asked whether society or the individual is responsible for this, they favoured the latter: almost two thirds (64%) believe that it is up to the individual whether they are lonely or not. The majority of young people (82%) fully or somewhat agreed that someone can be lonely even if they have friends, but opinions were more divided when it came to how natural it is for someone to be alone a lot (51% said it was natural, 47% said it was unnatural) (Fig. 3).

If young people do not have the right tools to prevent the feeling of loneliness from persisting in their lives, it can become a pathological condition. One of the most important coping strategies is social support, which is a protective factor for health and can prevent pathological psychophysical consequences. The survey data shows that the vast majority of young people surveyed (82%) take measures to avoid feeling lonely. Most are with their families (31%) or turn to their peers (26%). Social support is followed in order of frequency by active coping strategies such as playing sport (20%) and going on outings and walks (20%). However, digital technologies are also used alongside traditional coping strategies: Almost a fifth of 15 to 39-year-olds in Hungary resort to digital tools to overcome loneliness, with 19% consuming audiovisual content (TV, videos, music), the same proportion using computers, mobile phones and social media, and 17% contacting a friend via social media. The importance of the different relationships also varies with age: the younger someone is, the more important their friendships are, while as they get older they turn to family members to overcome loneliness. A passive attitude towards loneliness is more characteristic of men, those with primary education, those living in a village or large municipality and young people in southern and central Transdanubia, who are less likely to do anything about their feelings of loneliness (Fig. 4).

**Figure 4. Does nothing when feeling lonely**

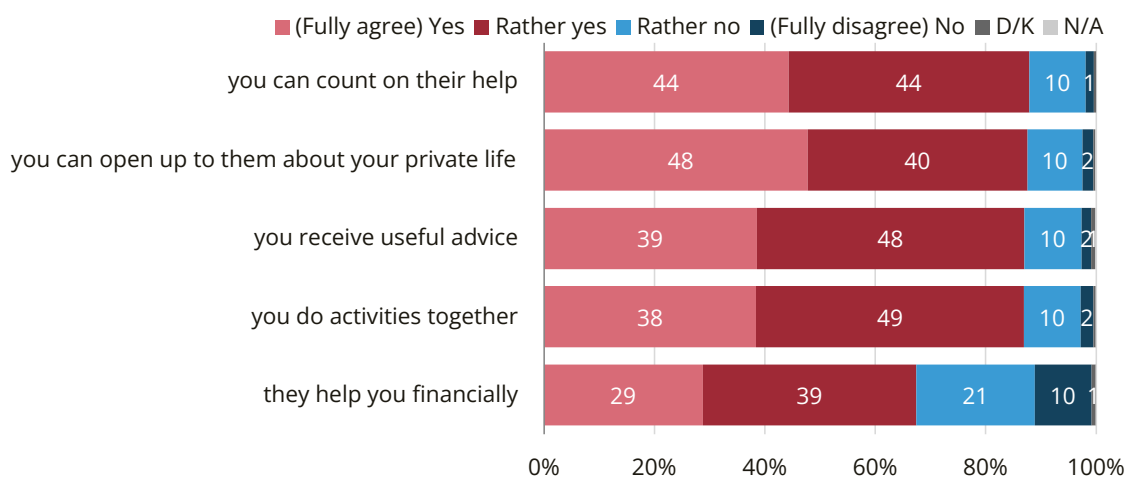


Source: Hungarian Youth Research Institute, 2023 (What do you do when you are feeling lonely? Nothing.) N2023=1000; averages

The prominent role of social support is also reflected in another dimension: one in two young people feel that they can rely on both family and friends (51%), one third (32%) rely more on family and one sixth (15%) rely more on friends.

The quality of relationships is influenced by many factors, but 9 out of 10 young people feel close to someone when they can count on their help, when they can open up to them, when they receive useful advice and, last but not least, when they can spend quality time with them, i.e. when they do activities together. Financial support is the least important aspect: only seven tenths of respondents feel close to a person if they receive financial support from them (Fig. 5).

**Figure 5. Do you feel close to someone when...**



Source: Youth Research Institute, 2023 (Do you feel close to someone when... ?) N2023=1000; averages

Young people in Hungary have on average four people around them with whom they can organise activities, nearly three people they can hug, who can give them emotional support when they need it, who can give them useful advice or help them with their tasks. They could also name an average of two people who would help them financially if they were in need.

## Conclusion

Eight out of ten Hungarians aged between 15 and 39 said they rarely or never felt lonely. At the same time, 15% of young people say they often feel lonely and a further 5% say they constantly lack company. These findings are significant in that several surveys have confirmed that people who feel lonely frequently or for long periods of time are at greater risk of being vulnerable than those who are only occasionally dissatisfied with their relationships with others.

Chronic loneliness has psychological, physical and, in some cases, medical consequences. In other words, a fifth of teenagers and young adults are at risk, vulnerable and exposed to persistent or frequent feelings of loneliness.

The use of generational labelling is not only prevalent in youth sociology, but also in public discourse through media coverage. The theory is that members of this generation have become alienated from real relationships, work and nature as a result of accelerated technological change. During the coronavirus pandemic, the issue of loneliness among young people has increasingly taken centre stage in public discourse.

Social support is one of the most important coping mechanisms. A sense of belonging or belonging to a community is particularly important for maintaining young people's physical and mental health. It is no coincidence that social support is on the third level of Maslow's pyramid of needs. Almost eight out of ten young Hungarians aged between 15 and 39 stated that they are a member of a group of friends with whom they identify emotionally and share many common characteristics. The overwhelming majority (80%) are therefore able to talk to someone about their problems, and all this provides them with a background that ensures they rarely or never experience loneliness.

Both international and national data show that the youth stage of life is changing and lengthening. The effects of globalisation, the emergence and spread of digital culture and the poly- or perma-crisis are drawing attention to the mental health and mental resilience of young people. The crises of recent years and societal trends such as ageism have had both a direct and indirect impact on young people's lives. The Youth Report published by the Youth Research Institute has also highlighted young people's mental health as one of the most important issues in the youth sector in 2023 and 2024. It is expected to remain an important issue in the coming years.

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