



DistantButClose

2024-2027

Physically distant but socially close:
how to prevent (inequalities in) loneliness and
social isolation in times of crisis?
Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic

Table of

Content

01 Project summary

02 Objectives

03 Financing

04 Sources



Project Summary

DistantButClose studies the public health implications of loneliness and social isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic and explores how the pandemic has influenced these experiences across various sociodemographic groups. The project addresses these issues through a few key objectives (see page 4).

DistantButClose is a collaboration between the Departments of Sociology and of Public Health and Primary Care at Ghent University and the University of Antwerp, the Center of Research in Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Clinical research of the Free University of Brussels, and the Scientific Directorate of Epidemiology and Public Health of Sciensano. The project is funded by BELSPO as part of the POST-COVID research programme (see page 5).

The project aims to contribute to pandemic preparedness and tackle the pressing issue of loneliness and social isolation, both by sharing new scientific insights and by developing policy recommendations for structural interventions.



Objectives

Despite conflicting findings [4], a growing body of evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated loneliness and social isolation worldwide [5-7]. In Belgium, data from the COVID-19 health survey in March 2021 revealed that more than 60% of the population was dissatisfied with their social contacts and about 30% reported strong feelings of loneliness. This is concerning, as poor social wellbeing not only has negative health effects on individuals, but also may hinder efforts to end a health crisis. Our project aims to address the escalating public health concerns of loneliness and social isolation.

This project aims to innovatively address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social well-being, specifically focusing on both loneliness and social isolation.

DistantButClose seeks to contribute to existing knowledge by



Exploring the public health implications of loneliness and social isolation during health crises.



Studying persisting consequences of the pandemic, moving beyond the focus on short-term effects alone.



Investigating inequalities in the long-term effects of the pandemic across socio-demographic groups, with a special focus on older adults and adolescents.



Adopting a comparative approach to gain understanding of the meso- (neighbourhoods and schools) and macro-level (Belgian regions and European countries) factors that have shaped the long-term consequences of the pandemic, thus expanding beyond individual-level explanations.

Financing



BELSPO

This project is funded by BELSPO. The Belgian Science Policy is one of the main actors of scientific research in Belgium [8]. It brings together many prestigious research programs and manages ten federal scientific institutes.

More information on <https://www.belspo.be>

POST-COVID

The goal of this program, carried out by BELSPO in collaboration with the FPS Public Health, is to build scientific knowledge about the societal consequences of the COVID crisis in order to draw necessary lessons for the federal government [9]. This is also in preparation for a potential future pandemic.

More information on https://www.belspo.be/belspo/Post-Covid/index_nl.stm

Sources

1. Photo by [Toa Heftiba](#) on [Unsplash](#)
2. Photo by Anna Shvets: <https://www.pexels.com/nl-nl/foto/handen-aarde-vasthouden-milieu-4167544/>
3. Photo by Gabriela Palai: <https://www.pexels.com/nl-nl/foto/persoon-die-zich-op-bruin-houten-dok-bevindt-395196/>
4. Ernst, M., Niederer, D., Werner, A. M., Czaja, S. J., Mikton, C., Ong, A. D., Rosen, T., Brähler, E., & Beutel, M. E. (2022). Loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review with meta-analysis. *American Psychologist*, 77(5), 660–677.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001005>
5. Bierman, A., Upenieks, L., & Schieman, S. (2021). Socially Distant? Social Network Confidants, Loneliness, and Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Currents*, 8(4), 299-313.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965211011591>
6. Elmer, T., Mepham, K., & Stadtfeld, C. (2020). Students under lockdown: Comparisons of students' social networks and mental health before and during the COVID-19 crisis in Switzerland. *Plos one*, 15(7), e0236337.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236337>
7. Rogers, A. A., Ha, T., & Ockey, S. (2021). Adolescents' perceived socio-emotional impact of COVID-19 and implications for mental health: Results from a US-based mixed-methods study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), 43-52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.09.039>
8. Belgian Science Policy Office. (n.d.). About us.
https://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/about_intro_en.stm
9. Belgian Science Policy Office. (n.d.). Post-Covid.
https://www.belspo.be/belspo/Post-Covid/intro_nl.stm