

Social isolation, loneliness and single parents in Scotland

September 2018

**Do single parents experience loneliness and social isolation?
Are some single parents more at risk than others?
Are single parents more at risk than other groups?**

Why this matters

There is growing recognition that social isolation and loneliness are problems in Scotland. In January 2018, the Scottish Government consulted on [A Connected Scotland](#), its strategy to tackle these problems in Scotland. There is no explicit reference to single parents in this strategy, although many aspects of life that are associated with single parents are acknowledged, for example, becoming a parent for the first time, poverty, and significant life transitions. As Scotland begins to think about its priorities in this area, it is important to be better informed about single parents' experiences.

What do we already know?

According to the Scottish Government in *A Connected Scotland*, social isolation refers to the quality and quantity of the social relationships a person has at individual, group, community and societal levels. Loneliness is a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between an individual's felt and ideal levels of social relationships.

In terms of what we know causes loneliness, [A review of the literature on isolation and loneliness](#) conducted by the British Red Cross highlighted that social determinants such as low income, poverty, unsecure employment, mental health issues and lack of social contact are key factors. With regards to whom we know experiences loneliness, [A review of prevalence and trends in relation to social-isolation and loneliness in Scotland](#) by NHS Scotland revealed that those at risk tend to be in older age groups (>55), with women being more likely to report feeling lonely than men. However, research conducted by [the CO-OP](#) in collaboration [the British Red Cross](#) found that younger mums are also experiencing loneliness and isolation. While the same literature indicates that stigmatised groups and people who have experienced divorce or living without a partner are more likely to experience loneliness, research on the extent to which single parents are affected is limited. One of the key findings of research conducted by [NHS Scotland](#) was that single parents were more likely to suffer from mental health issues and experience the same social determinants that cause loneliness. Given that single parents are situated within all the potential groups who are at risk of feeling lonely, there is a need to develop a better understanding of their specific experiences.

Our research

This is the first of seven research briefings arising from the Single Parent Community Connections project. With the support of the European Union and the Scottish Government, this [Social Innovation Fund](#) project has two aims. First, it aims to better understand isolation and loneliness among single parents in Scotland. Second, it aims to use this knowledge to design and deliver practical service delivery options to tackle these problems.

An online survey was designed by the [Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit](#) and approved by One Parent Families Scotland. Almost 900 single parents completed the survey in the Spring of 2018. The survey was introduced as aiming to find out more about the nature of the challenges that single parents face in Scotland and to explore what could be done to address them. The numbers that are reported in this briefing have been quality assured, including weighting some results to ensure that they are representative of single parents in Scotland, as a whole. Twelve in-depth interviews were also undertaken across Scotland to explore the key issues in greater depth. The anonymity of participating parents is protected in this briefing. More details about the research can be provided on request.

Findings - What's the big picture?

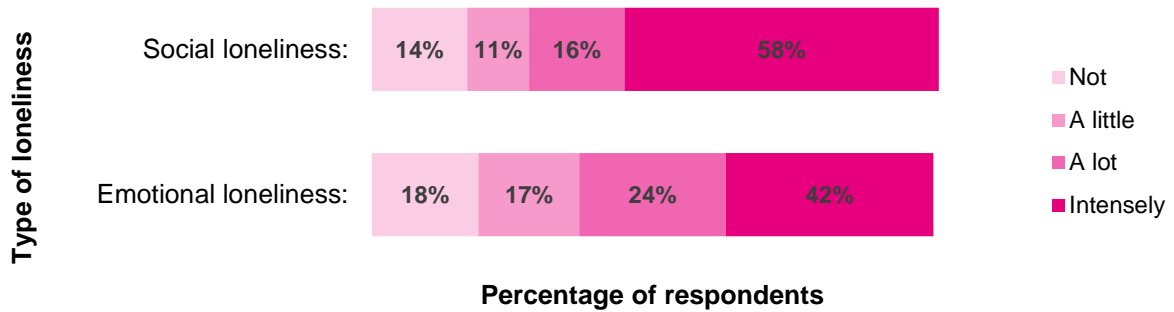
Loneliness is part of single parenthood for the majority of single parents in Scotland, with one in three reporting frequent loneliness and one in two reporting that it was something that they experienced 'some of the time'.

- None or almost none of the time: 16%
- Some of the time: 50%
- Most of the time: 22%
- All or almost all of the time: 13%

Isolation is associated with loneliness. [The Campaign to End Loneliness](#) recommends the de Jong Gierveld scale as one of the most effective ways to capture isolation. This involves asking six questions, which can be added up to give a measure of social isolation, a measure of emotional isolation and an overall measure of loneliness. It is considered to be academically rigorous. We used this to better understand isolation among single parents in Scotland.

The findings reinforce what was suggested by the single scale question described above. More than half of single parents are found to be *intensely social lonely* (scoring the maximum score on this scale) and two in every five single parents are found to be *intensely emotionally lonely* (scoring the maximum score). Together, more than one third of single parents in Scotland (35%) are also found to be *most lonely*, score the maximum six points when both scales are brought together for an overall measure of loneliness.

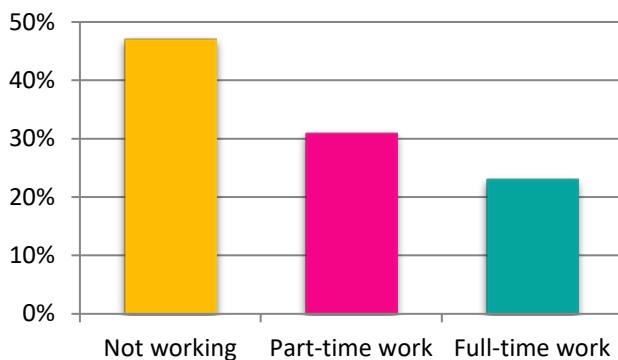
"I'm quite lucky that I work I guess...we all have a good laugh at break times...My work is like my social life."



Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

Whether or not single parents work is closely associated with how often they consider themselves to be lonely. More work seems to mean less loneliness. A recurrent theme throughout the interviews was that lack of employment contributed to loneliness through loss of routine. Those who were in employment felt that it combatted loneliness to some extent by providing a social network:

Experiencing loneliness 'most of the time' by work status



Interestingly, there is also a sense that older single parents are much less likely to experience loneliness, with the proportion who report never being lonely rising from 15% of those in their 30s, through 22% of those in their 40s, to 27% of those in their 50s.

Independently of work status, it is also found that loneliness varies according to whether single parents currently have a partner (as might be expected, those without are lonelier) and also whether there is disability in the family (disability is associated with loneliness).

<i>In a relationship</i>	Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	All of the time
Yes	25%	63%	10%	3%
No	13%	46%	25%	16%

<i>Disability in the household</i>	Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	All of the time
Both adult and child	7%	40%	28%	24%
Only adult	15%	36%	25%	23%
Only child	19%	50%	24%	7%
Neither adult or child	17%	57%	19%	7%

Findings - Are single parents different?

Single parents in Scotland express much more loneliness than the general population. The statistics are quite stark in their difference. [Christina Victor and Keming Yang](#) used the UK data from the European Social Survey to estimate the prevalence of loneliness among adults, publishing their findings in 2012. They identified some social characteristics that were associated with higher levels of loneliness, many of which were common to single parents. For example, loneliness was more likely to be encountered by those from smaller households, those who were hampered in their daily activities, those who did not have someone to discuss personal or intimate matters, and those outwith a married/partnered relationship. Nevertheless, on the whole, loneliness was reported to be a minority experience in the UK, with only 6% reporting being lonely all or most of the time, 21% being lonely some of the time and 73% reporting never being lonely. These UK-wide results contrast sharply with the experiences of single parents in Scotland that were reported in this briefing. Almost six times as many single parents in Scotland reported being lonely most or all of the time (35%), with not experiencing loneliness being a minority experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that single parents in Scotland are indeed experiencing social isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, the extent to which loneliness is experienced varies between single parents, with some groups at much more risk of being lonely than others. In particular those with disability in the household face challenges in terms of combating loneliness, particularly when it is the single parent who is disabled. As expected, single parents were more likely to be lonely if they did not have a partner when compared to those who were in a relationship underpinning the importance of social contact with others, which was previously highlighted in research. Some unexpected findings were uncovered with regards to employment status. On the one hand, the research reinforces the findings of NHS Scotland and the British Red Cross that unemployment can trigger loneliness suggesting that single parents who are not working may be at more risk than others. However, whereas the general research points to loneliness being more prevalent in over 55s, our findings revealed that it was younger single parents who were most at risk.

Referencing this paper

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