

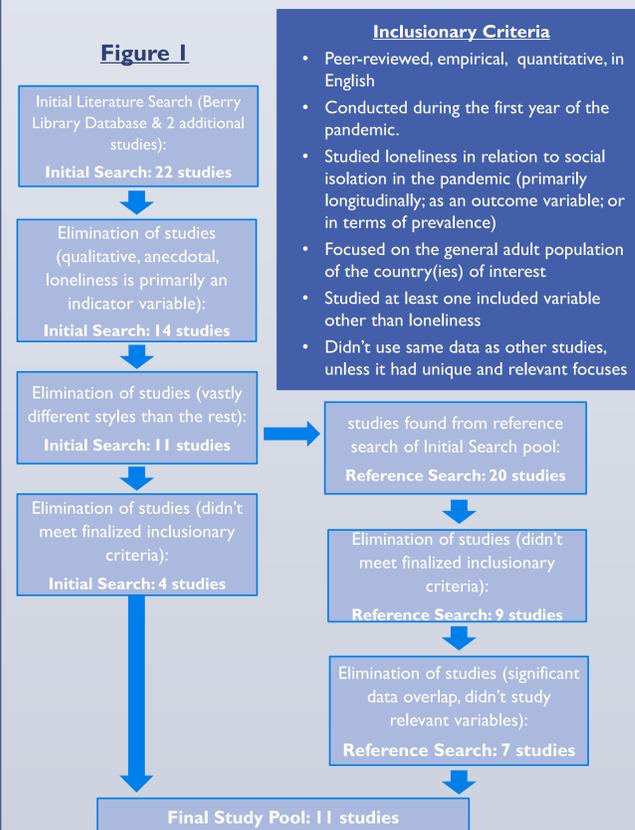
Abstract

- A literature review was conducted to study the effects of social isolation and other variables on loneliness in the COVID-19 pandemic
- A literature search was conducted of psychology databases for studies using search terms such as “loneliness”, “COVID-19”, “pandemic”, “lockdown”, “social isolation” and “coronavirus”
- Findings on loneliness and 8 other commonly researched variables from the first year of the pandemic – when the chosen studies were conducted - were synthesized
- Loneliness was prevalent during this time, but evidence indicates that social isolation may not have been the reason for this loneliness

Introduction

- Background Information**
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has been ongoing worldwide for nearly two and a half years³; there have been over 508,800,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 6,200,200 deaths worldwide¹³
 - Various restrictions have been implemented around the world, with social isolation mandates and quarantining especially common during the first year of the pandemic
- Research Objective**
 - Conduct a literature search and study the effects of social isolation and other variables on loneliness during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Benefits**
 - This research is intended to increase individuals’ understanding of the impacts of social isolation on loneliness. Additionally, it may inform mental health professionals so that they can better assist their clients who have been impacted by the pandemic.

Figure 1



Methods

- Article Selection**
 - The study selection process as well as inclusionary criteria are outlined in Figure 1
- Variable Selection**
 - Variables studied in relation to loneliness in the final study pool were compared
 - Different variables studying the same or extremely similar concepts were treated as one variable
 - Variables studied in 5 or more of the studies in the final pool were chosen for inclusion
 - Loneliness
 - Sex/Gender
 - Age
 - Level of Education
 - Income
 - Number of people in household
 - Employment status
 - Marital Status
 - Social Support

Findings

- Loneliness**
 - Two studies found loneliness to be widespread^{1,6}; two studies reported, respectively, prevalent or high loneliness in about a fifth¹⁰ and a quarter of participants⁴
 - One study found evidence of increased loneliness compared to pre-pandemic¹¹; another study found evidence of increasing loneliness⁸; three studies found evidence of general loneliness stability^{1,5,9}, two of which reported slight increases or decreases in certain subgroups^{1,5}
- Sex/Gender**
 - Six studies indicated that woman experienced greater loneliness^{1,2,6,7,10,11}; in another study, only older (60+) and younger (18-29) adult women were found to be predisposed to loneliness¹²; one study found no relationship between sex/gender and loneliness⁴
 - One study found that loneliness increased in older women near the implementation of isolation regulations⁵; two studies did not find evidence of a relationship between sex/gender and changing loneliness levels^{2,8}
- Age**
 - Nine studies indicated that loneliness was greater in younger adults^{1,2,4,6,7,9,10,11,12}; one additionally found older adults the least lonely¹², and another also found the age group just older than younger adults studied reported the second most lonely¹⁰
 - One study found evidence for increasing loneliness in older adults between pandemic onset and isolation measure implementation⁹; one study found evidence for an increase in risk for loneliness in older women near isolation measure implementation⁵; one study found evidence of an increase in likelihood of loneliness in younger adults compared to pre-pandemic²; one study found no evidence of a link between changing loneliness levels and age⁸
- Level of Education**
 - Two studies found evidence that lower education level was related to loneliness^{2,5}; four studies found no significant evidence for this relationship^{1,4,11,12}
 - Two studies found no evidence of changing loneliness levels based on education level^{2,5}

Findings (cont.)

- Income**
 - Three studies found evidence of an inverse relationship between income and loneliness^{1,2,10}, whereas two studies found no significant evidence of this relationship^{4,12}
 - One study found low-income individuals to have an increased predisposition to loneliness compared to pre-pandemic²
- Number of People in Household**
 - Six studies found evidence that living alone was associated with higher levels of loneliness^{1,2,7,8,9,12}; one study found that living with a significant other was related to lower loneliness⁶; one study found that living with more adults was protective against loneliness⁴; one study found no evidence of any relationship¹⁰
 - Two studies found no evidence of a relationship between household size and increasing or otherwise changing loneliness^{8,9}; one study indicated that those living alone during the pandemic were more predisposed to loneliness than those living alone before the pandemic²
- Employment Status**
 - Five studies found unemployment a risk for loneliness^{1,2,5,6,10}, one of these four noted students to be particularly susceptible¹, and a second noted remote working to be a loneliness risk factor; one study found evidence that pandemic-related unemployment was related to higher loneliness¹²; one study found insignificant evidence regarding employment status and loneliness⁴
 - One study's results didn't support a relationship between employment status and changing loneliness⁵; one study found students predisposed to loneliness when they weren't before²
- Marital Status**
 - Four studies found evidence that being in a relationship was protective against loneliness^{4,6,10,12}
 - One study found a small increase in loneliness in single adults close to isolation regulation implementation⁵
- Social Support**
 - Four studies found evidence of an inverse relationship between social support level and loneliness^{1,4,5,9}; one study found no significant support for a relationship between these variables⁷
 - One study found evidence for a relationship between lower support and increasing loneliness⁸; one found evidence that higher social support was protective against increasing loneliness⁹; one found evidence for a relationship between low pre-pandemic support and decreasing loneliness⁵

Conclusions

- Loneliness was shown to be widespread at a high level
 - Evidence indicates that women, younger adults, single adults, those with a lower income, those who live alone, those who are unemployed, and those who received less social support were more predisposed to loneliness and that there was no relationship between education level and loneliness levels
- Evidence does not indicate that loneliness levels changed in the context of the pandemic overall or in specific subgroups
 - Contrary to expectations and certain findings^{8,11}, loneliness doesn't seem to have increased in association with social isolation
- One possible explanation for the findings of this literature review is that loneliness is so prevalent that even the pandemic and related social isolation did not cause an increase in loneliness prevalence

Limitations and Suggestions

- Limitations**
 - This literature review only focused on certain types of studies, and excluded studies such as those that were qualitative, were anecdotal, studied loneliness as a predictor variable, or didn't study general adult populations
 - Some studies used subjective measures of loneliness to ascertain participants experiences with loneliness^{5,6,7,8,11,12}, and some of these measures were initially more qualitative in nature^{6,11,12}, which may have provided less valid results
 - Some studies were based on the same dataset as other studies, but reported largely separate findings^{1,2,7,8,11}; still, some overlap may have occurred
 - Generally, causal claims cannot be drawn from the findings nor conclusions of this study, as this type of research is not possible to conduct with the variables studied in the relevant context
 - Many potentially relevant variables, such as race/ethnicity, were not examined in enough studies to warrant inclusion in this literature review^{4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12} while others like sexuality and gender identity, were not studied at all^{1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12}
- Suggestions for Future Research**
 - Study variables in a more objective and quantifiable way
 - Pay more attention to certain underrepresented subgroups (the LGBTQIA+ community, members of diverse races/ethnicities)
 - Explore the impact of loneliness in the pandemic on other variables
 - Explore the lasting impacts of the pandemic situation on loneliness
 - Focus research on individuals shown to be at greater risk of loneliness in upcoming isolation-requiring situations

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