

Reducing loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people: a participatory evidence synthesis

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Plain English summary

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Feeling lonely or lacking social ties can be bad for people's health; various responses have been tried. This project aimed to produce new understanding about how loneliness among ethnic minority and migrant groups can be tackled. These populations have, so far, not received much research attention, to our knowledge.

We undertook desk-based work, searching for relevant research papers and reports, and summarising their findings. We also worked closely with community workers and interested members of the public through groups called consultation panels. Two groups met in Sheffield and one in Leicester; each met three times over the course of the project. We used interactive sessions to allow consultation panel members to look carefully at what the research papers were showing. They added to this information with insights from their own broad experience.

We found that the way we think about loneliness needs to be broadened when the focus is on migrant and ethnic minority people. We need to pay attention to the experience of negative social ties and interactions, and to low self-worth. Both can increase the risk of loneliness, as well as a lack of positive social ties.

We identified eight different types of intervention that can potentially reduce loneliness. Three were common: befriending (a one-to-one supportive relationship), shared-identity social support groups (similar people coming together to support each other and engage in meaningful activities) and intercultural encounters (people interacting across ethnic or cultural difference).

Evidence on whether or not these initiatives work in practice was limited. UK studies were particularly sparse. However, there was quite a lot of consistent evidence to suggest that shared-identity social support groups can be effective. Some befriending and some intercultural encounters also appeared to be effective.

We found little information on the costs of interventions.

Research evidence and consultation panel workshops indicated that a wide range of factors can increase the risk of loneliness. Racism, both in terms of interpersonal abuse and organisational processes that discriminate, is a widespread problem. The wider hostile policy and media environment also contribute to feelings of loneliness, and of not belonging, among ethnic minority and migrant groups.

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