

to poor health and well-being outcomes. We aim to explore these challenges from the perspective of NEET youngsters and link workers who support them in co-creating individual action plans for their social and economic integration.

**Methods:** Data were collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 15 young people in NEET situations, aged 18-34, and 7 link workers from several social organisations in rural and urban areas in Portugal. The young participants were selected based on their age, educational level, mental health needs, and urban/rural regions. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews.

**Results:** The results showed a convergence between the perspectives of young people and link workers on the factors that influence social isolation and loneliness, including social and emotional skill deficits, excessive use of social media platforms, and mental health problems. Young people reported to being heavily involved in social media platforms, which often did not translate into meaningful relationships in real life. Youngsters also highlighted the lack of local support and community resources in rural areas. Link workers identified specific challenges young migrants face in community integration, including language barriers (for the youth with a migrant origin) and lack of familiarity with local resources.

**Conclusions:** This study highlights social media platforms, mental health and social and emotional skill deficits as main factors contributing to the social isolation and loneliness of young people in a NEET situation. This emphasizes the importance of integrated proximity-based interventions that incorporate community resource mapping and local support networks, including mental health support services, and promote multi-sector collaboration.

**Key messages:**

- Social media platforms, mental health needs, and social and emotional skill deficits drive social isolation in NEET youth, stressing integrated, community-focused interventions.
- Proximity-based strategies with community mapping and mental health support enhance NEET youths' social integration, urging cross-sector collaboration.

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**Loneliness and Social Isolation: qualitative study among youth in vulnerable situations**

Maria João Marques

MJ Marques<sup>1,2</sup>, R Alves<sup>1</sup>, J Pires<sup>1</sup>, M Bertotti<sup>3</sup>, E Torri<sup>4</sup>, C Dantas<sup>5</sup>, S Dias<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>NOVA National School of Public Health, Public Health Research Centre, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>2</sup>CHRC, REAL, NOVA University Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>3</sup>Institute for Connected Communities, University of East London, London, UK

<sup>4</sup>Azienda Provinciale per i Servizi Sanitari, Trento, Italy

<sup>5</sup>SHINE 2Europe, Coimbra, Portugal

Contact: maria.joao.mrqs@gmail.com

**Background:** Loneliness and social isolation are increasing among young people, particularly those in vulnerable NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) situations, potentially leading