

The ties that bind and break: a natural experiment on the role of (in)stability in local and transnational social ties for loneliness among refugees

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Abstract

Research on social isolation and loneliness has largely overlooked refugees, who are among the loneliest in society. This study employs the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural experiment to examine how stable and situational social isolation contribute to loneliness. Drawing on two-wave panel data from 647 Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, fielded before and during the pandemic, we explore the stability of social ties across geographical and ethnic dimensions and how fluctuations lead to varying degrees of loneliness. While transnational ties served as a social safety net against loneliness during situational social isolation, our findings underscore their limited effectiveness compared to the more transient but protective local ties. Refugees who lacked local ties or experienced a disruption in local inter-ethnic ties were particularly vulnerable to heightened loneliness, emphasizing the importance of maintaining geographically close ties.

Keywords: refugees; inter-ethnic contact; co-ethnic contact; transnational contact; loneliness; latent transition analysis.

1. Introduction

An extensive body of research has shown that loneliness can seriously harm people's well-being, physical health, and even life expectancy (Hawkey and Capitanio 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017). These major adverse consequences have prompted researchers to investigate the factors that lead to loneliness (Haslam et al. 2024). One key factor is social isolation, which refers to having few or limited social ties with other people. Loneliness, by contrast, refers to the distress people feel when they perceive a gap between the social ties they want and the ones they actually have (Perlman and Peplau 1982; Holt-Lunstad 2021). Hence, social isolation

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and loneliness are related but distinct concepts and should not be used interchangeably: A person can feel lonely even if they are surrounded by others, while someone else may have very few social ties but not feel lonely at all (Dykstra and Fokkema 2007).

Although many studies have explored how social isolation and loneliness are connected in the general population, we still know relatively little about how these experiences unfold in marginalized groups (Bilecen and Vacca 2021; Luhmann et al. 2023). Among these marginalized groups, recent evidence has shown that Syrian refugees who crossed into Europe during the summer of 2015 reported significantly higher levels of loneliness compared to voluntary migrants or people without a migration background (Entringer et al. 2021; Spiritus-Beerden et al. 2021; Löbel et al. 2022). Besides these few examples, however, research on loneliness among refugees is still limited, and existing studies on social isolation and loneliness in the general population do not fully capture key features of refugees' social worlds.

First, refugees often maintain social ties that span multiple geographic contexts. These include transnational ties—connections with people in their country of origin or elsewhere in the world—as well as local ties within their new country of settlement (Basch et al. 1994; Vertovec 2009; Bilecen and Lubbers 2021). For some refugees, transnational ties can help reduce feelings of loneliness. For others, these long-distance connections may actually make loneliness worse, especially if they do not have supportive relationships in their immediate surroundings (Horn and Fokkema 2020, 2025; Rüdel and Joly 2024). Hence, with the growing role of digital technologies, maintaining transnational ties has become easier in terms of frequency and immediacy of contact. However, while digital platforms allow for the sharing of everyday experiences regardless of geographical distance, this does not necessarily mean being emotionally close or fully involved in each other's daily lives (Tedeschi et al. 2022). This ambivalence of digital transnationalism complicates how transnational ties shape refugees' experiences of loneliness—such ties may offer connection and comfort but may also highlight emotional distance and deepen feelings of disconnection.

Second, refugees often experience specific challenges and major disruptions that make it difficult to build or maintain social ties (Echterhoff et al. 2020). Research on social networks highlights that critical life events—such as childbirth, relocation, or employment changes—can disrupt or reshape social networks and increase the risk of social isolation (Wrzus et al. 2013; Caarls et al. 2021). Refugees face all these challenges, but they also deal with additional burdens linked to forced migration, such as changes in legal status, housing instability, or long and uncertain family reunification processes. These factors can further destabilize the continuity of their social networks over time, weakening existing ties and making it harder to form new ones (Schapendonk 2015; Wissink and Mazzucato 2018).

For these reasons, it is essential to understand both the diversity of social ties that refugees have and how stable these ties remain over time in terms of regularity of contact in order to fully address loneliness in this population. In this article, we examine how diverse refugees' transnational and local social ties are, and whether changes in these ties are associated with feelings of loneliness. Tracking the impact of critical events on social ties is usually difficult because these events are often personal and unpredictable. However, this research leverages a unique situation: the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic acted as a natural experiment that exogenously induced social isolation by dramatically altering people's social worlds (Politi et al. 2021; Mouw et al. 2025). This context provides a unique opportunity to examine how refugees experienced both stable and situational forms of social isolation, and how their social ties across different places and ethnic groups changed during this time. To investigate this, we used two waves of panel data collected among 647 recently arrived Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, both before the pandemic (2019) and during it (2020/2021). This allows us to track how social ties and feelings of loneliness evolved over time. We conclude the article with targeted policy recommendations tailored for service providers working in refugee reception and integration.

2. Theory

2.1. Refugees' geographically dispersed social ties

In the broader literature on loneliness, having more and higher-quality social ties is generally considered a protective factor, while having fewer and lower-quality social ties is considered a risk factor (Holt-Lunstad 2018). However, as we have argued, this general rule does not fully capture key specificities of refugees' social worlds. To address this limitation, we bring together two main research streams.

First, we draw from the literature on transnationalism, which emphasizes the geographical dispersion of social ties, highlighting how refugees often maintain social ties that span across countries and ethnic communities (Williams 2006; Lubbers et al. 2021). Transnational ties include family members, friends, and acquaintances who remained in the country of origin or have migrated elsewhere (Vertovec 2009; Tedeschi et al. 2022). These ties are increasingly recognized as valuable sources of shared experiences and mutual support (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019).

Second, we build on the literature on integration, which focuses on how refugees form new social ties in the receiving country (Vacca et al. 2018). According to Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 2000), the ability of migrants to build new social ties after resettlement helps migrants mobilize essential resources to overcome adversity (Portes 1998). This research distinguishes between bridging social capital—ties with members of the ethnic majority group—and bonding social capital—ties with others who share a similar ethnic background and migration experience (Putnam 2000). Both types of local ties are crucial for helping refugees integrate (Williams 2006; Ager and Strang 2008). They help overcome language barriers (Van Tubergen and Kalmijn 2008; Morrice et al. 2021), increase self-efficacy (Tip et al. 2020), improve well-being (Tip et al. 2019; Marinucci and Riva 2021), enhance economic and housing opportunities (Kanas et al. 2012; Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Martén et al. 2019; Battisti et al. 2022), and foster a sense of belonging (Repke and Benet-Martínez 2018; Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019).

2.2. (In)stability of social ties and their relationship with loneliness

While the benefits of transnational and local social ties for refugee integration are well-documented, their role in shaping feelings of loneliness remains underexplored in quantitative research (Nguyen et al. 2024). Still, some noteworthy exceptions offer insights. For example, Horn and Fokkema (2025) found that older refugees in Germany felt lonelier when they lacked family ties in the receiving society and had limited contact with ethnic majority members. Similarly, Rüdel and Joly (2024) reported that having few local social ties increased loneliness among Syrian refugees in Germany. However, these studies did not examine the compositions of refugees' social ties across both geographic and ethnic dimensions or how these combinations relate to loneliness. Taking a more integrated approach, Djundeva and Ellwardt (2020) studied Polish migrants in the Netherlands and found that those with small, close-knit networks were more likely to feel lonely than those with larger, more diverse networks that included both local and transnational ties. However, this study focused on voluntary migrants, so it remains unclear whether the same patterns apply to refugees. Additionally, the study did not track how changes in social ties may influence loneliness over time.

Most quantitative research on loneliness among (forced) migrants relies on cross-sectional designs, which offer only a static perspective on social ties. In contrast, qualitative studies suggest that the loss of social ties over time is especially painful for refugees. Refugees often miss their close or extended family abroad, who would typically provide emotional support or help with family responsibilities (Wissink and Mazzucato 2018; Nguyen et al. 2024). For refugees, losing social ties is often linked to the specific challenges of forced migration, such as legal uncertainty, relocations due to asylum or housing policies, or long delays in family reunification (Echterhoff et al. 2020; see also Politi et al. 2023 for additional challenges due to the COVID-19 outbreak). These disruptions make it difficult to maintain existing social ties or build new ones (Wissink and Mazzucato 2018). It is therefore essential to understand how refugees' social ties change over time to better explain their relationship with loneliness.

2.3. The current research

In this article, we examine whether refugees' social ties—across both geographical and ethnic dimensions—remain stable or change over time. Although social ties naturally change—through varying frequencies of interaction, the formation of new ties, or the loss of existing ones—such changes tend to be gradual, unpredictable, and, hence, difficult for scholars to observe in real time (Lubbers et al. 2021). In contrast, critical life events can trigger more abrupt and observable changes in social ties. To capture such changes, we leverage the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural experiment, which exogenously induced social isolation and offers a unique opportunity to study how these social ties changed and how this affected loneliness.

Using two-wave panel data from 647 Syrian migrants resettled in the Netherlands, we take an exploratory methodological approach using latent transition analysis (LTA) to generate novel insights about how different compositions (i.e. along geographical and ethnic dimensions) of social ties and their changes across time relate to loneliness among refugees. Herewith, we study how critical events impact social ties within immediate communities and across borders and jointly shape refugees' feelings of loneliness. We identify three underlying research goals: First, we explore the most common combinations of transnational and local co-ethnic and inter-ethnic ties among our respondents. Second, we investigate to what extent, and how, these combinations of social ties shifted against the backdrop of exogenously induced situational social isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, we examine to what extent the (in)stability of social ties is related to feelings of loneliness.

3. Method

3.1 Data and procedure

We employed three-wave panel survey data collected among recently arrived refugees living in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, aimed at investigating a wider range of structural and socio-cultural integration indicators and experiences with integration policies. We selected the second and third waves of the panel survey, as these waves were fielded shortly prior to and during the pandemic.¹ The fieldwork for T1 (originally the second wave) was conducted between June and October 2019, and for T2 (originally the third wave) in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic between September 2020 and February 2021.

Using the Municipal Personal Records Database, we recruited respondents who received asylum status in 2016 and had been living in Rotterdam since. The survey was administered in Syrian-Arabic, English, or Dutch and was set up as a sequential mixed-mode design to improve the representativeness of the panel: Respondents were initially requested by letter to participate online (i.e. computer-assisted web interviewing, CAWI), but upon nonresponse, were approached face-to-face by a surveyor of the same ethnic background as the respondent (i.e. computer-assisted personal interviewing, CAPI). At T1, respondents approximately equally often participated in the CAWI and CAPI fieldwork modes (i.e. CAWI = 51% and CAPI = 49%). At T2, however, participation more often occurred via the CAWI mode (CAWI = 64% and CAPI = 36%), which was a deliberate adjustment aimed at minimizing health risks for surveyors by reducing the need for door-to-door visits. This approach was supported by additional measures, including an extra reminder and a tablet raffle as incentives. All respondents received a gift voucher of 15 euros to thank them for their participation.

For the final sample, we selected respondents who participated in both waves, which was necessary to study temporal changes in social ties. Additionally, we selected respondents from Syria, as they were the largest recent group of refugees in the dataset, as well as in the Netherlands during the timespan of this research. This resulted in a final sample of 647 respondents. There was a roughly equal share of male and female respondents (53%), with a mean age of 37 years old ($SD=12$) and an average stay in the Netherlands of around 4 years ($SD=0.53$).

¹ Wave I was less conducive to addressing our research question, as the fieldwork was conducted shortly after respondents resettled in the Netherlands, leaving them with limited opportunities to cultivate local social ties.

Education levels varied, with 13% holding a higher education degree, 30% a higher secondary or vocational education degree, 15% a lower secondary education degree, 19% completed primary education, and 22% had no (completed) education.

3.2 Measures

The dependent variable *loneliness* was measured with the following item: ‘The following questions are about how you have felt over the past 4 weeks. How often did you feel lonely?’ (1 = *all the time—every day*, 6 = *never*). The variable was recoded so that a higher score indicates more frequent feelings of loneliness. The independent variables were measured as follows. First, *transnational ties* were assessed by transnational contact frequency: ‘How often are you in contact with family who do not live in the Netherlands?’ and ‘How often are you in contact with friends and acquaintances who do not live in the Netherlands?’ followed by the clarification: ‘This involves meetings, telephone and written contacts, but also contacts by e-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.’ All response scales ranged from 1 (*every day*) to 5 (*never*), and were recoded so that a higher score indicated more frequent contact. Next, the items about local ties were introduced as only concerning the respondents’ social contacts in the Netherlands. *Local ties* were assessed by inter-ethnic contact frequency: ‘How often are you in contact with Dutch friends or acquaintances?’ and ‘How often are you in contact with Dutch neighbours or Dutch people in your neighbourhood?’ as well as co-ethnic contact frequency: ‘How often are you in contact with Syrian friends or acquaintances who live in the Netherlands?’ and ‘How often are you in contact with Syrian neighbours or Syrian people in your neighbourhood?’

3.3 Plan of analysis

Our statistical analyses were structured along three steps. In the first step, we applied latent profile analysis (LPA) to uncover distinct patterns or profiles of transnational and local inter-ethnic and co-ethnic social ties. Hence, we applied LPA on the six items measuring inter-ethnic, co-ethnic, and transnational ties—separately for the second and the third wave—to decide about the optimal number of profiles to be retained (Zyberaj et al. 2022; Nylund-Gibson et al. 2023). We estimated models ranging from 1 to 6 profiles. Our decision to stop further extracting profiles was based on their sample sizes becoming increasingly smaller and less distinctive. To increase the likelihood of obtaining global maxima solution (Nylund-Gibson et al. 2023), we used 5,000 random starts and 500 final stage optimizations. In the second step, we employed LTA to explore whether and how refugees move between different profiles of social ties across time. We applied LTA with the number of profiles corresponding to the solution retained in the previous step. Once again, we used 5,000 random starts and 500 final stage optimizations. We also tested for the measurement invariance of the latent profile solutions across time points by comparing the latent profile model, whereby means were allowed to vary across time, to a model whereby means were constrained to be the same across time. This step was performed to ensure that potentially important differences in profiles across time are not ignored. Subsequently, we defined qualitatively distinct profiles and estimated transition probabilities. In the third step of the analysis, we discerned whether specific changes in compositions of social ties were associated with differences in levels of loneliness. We applied LTA with loneliness as a distal outcome. In this step, the mean level of loneliness for each of the possible transition patterns was estimated and subsequently compared using Wald’s test.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptives

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the (in)dependent variables. Respondents reported having monthly to weekly contact with transnational friends and family, as well as with co-ethnic friends and neighbors, while inter-ethnic contact was less frequent, ranging from a few times per year to monthly contact. Over time, there seems to be a small but consistent

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of main variables.

	Mean (SD)	
	T1: pre-pandemic	T2: mid-pandemic
Transnational contact with family	3.87 (1.13)	3.87 (1.14)
Transnational contact with friends	3.43 (1.22)	3.20 (1.27)
Co-ethnic contact with neighbors	2.95 (1.28)	2.71 (1.26)
Co-ethnic contact with friends	3.20 (1.23)	2.99 (1.19)
Inter-ethnic contact with friends	2.71 (1.28)	2.57 (1.25)
Inter-ethnic contact with neighbors	2.41 (1.31)	2.23 (1.59)
Loneliness	2.53 (1.59)	2.54 (1.60)

N = 647.

downward turn for contact frequency. Except for transnational contact with family, all contact frequency decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Loneliness, on the other hand, remained stable. On average, respondents reported feeling lonely rarely to sometimes both prior to and during the pandemic.

4.2 Latent transition analysis

Prior to conducting LTA, we conducted wave-specific LPA to ensure that the models with the same number of profiles should be retained in both waves. We found that models with four profiles were optimal in both waves (for more details, see [Table A.1 in Supplementary Materials](#)). In the next step, we ran an LTA test for measurement invariance across time. The latent profile solution with four profiles with profile means constrained to remain the same across time (measurement-invariant model) was compared to a solution in which profile means were allowed to vary across time (measurement-variant model). The Bayesian information criterion (BIC) of the measurement-invariant model (BIC = 23,607.980) was lower than the BIC of the measurement-variant model (BIC = 23,716.986), indicating that the means of the four-profile solution do not substantially differ across time and that we can proceed with the assumption that the same profile structure describes contact accurately for both time points.

Description of the profiles. [Figure 1](#) shows the mean contact frequency for the four profiles and the corresponding percentages per wave. The first profile consisted of respondents who, on average, reported having frequent inter-ethnic, co-ethnic, and transnational contact (*High contact overall*, 30% in T1 and 25% in T2). The second profile consists of respondents who have frequent transnational and co-ethnic contact but less inter-ethnic contact (*High transnational and co-ethnic contact*, 33% in T1 and 29% in T2). The third profile consists of respondents who, on average, have frequent transnational contact but less co-ethnic and inter-ethnic contact (*High transnational contact*, 24% in T1 and 35% in T2). The fourth profile consists of respondents who have frequent transnational and inter-ethnic contact but less co-ethnic contact (*High transnational and inter-ethnic contact*, 13% in T1 and 11% in T2).

Latent transition patterns. [Table 2](#) shows the proportions of all 16 possible transition patterns over time. The majority of our sample (54%) remained in the same contact profile across time: 17% remained in the *High contact overall* profile, 16% in the *High transnational and co-ethnic contact* and *High transnational contact* profiles each, and 5% in the *High transnational and inter-ethnic contact* profile. Among those who changed the profile over time, the three most observed patterns are: (a) transition from the *High transnational and co-ethnic contact* into the *High transnational contact* profile (9%); (b) transition from the *High contact overall* into the *High transnational and co-ethnic contact* profile (9%); and (c) transition from the *High transnational and inter-ethnic contact* into the *High transnational contact* profile (6%). Hence, most frequent transitions going from pre-pandemic to mid-pandemic indicated a loss of refugees' social ties: Whereas in the first case the transition

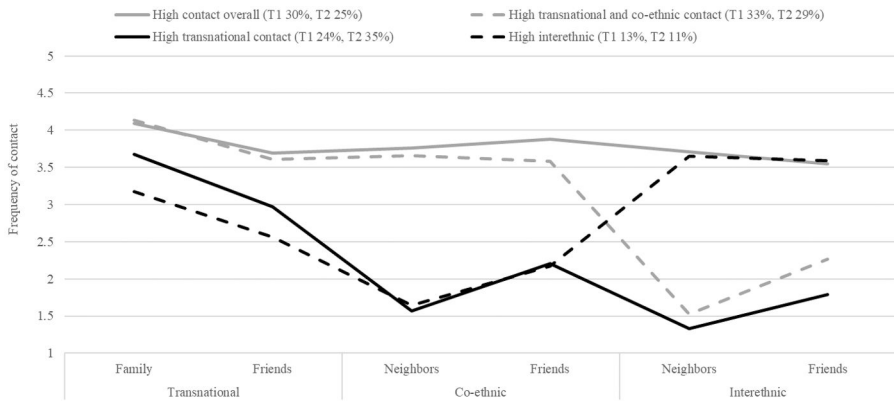


Figure 1. Latent profiles' mean level of transnational, co-ethnic, and inter-ethnic contact and profiles' shares per wave. $N = 647$.

Table 2. Proportions of latent transition patterns.

T1: pre-pandemic	T2: mid-pandemic			
	High transnational contact	High transnational and co-ethnic contact	High transnational and inter-ethnic contact	High contact overall
High transnational contact	0.16	0.03	0.02	0.02
High transnational and co-ethnic contact	0.09	0.16	0.03	0.05
High transnational and inter-ethnic contact	0.06	0.01	0.05	0.02
High contact overall	0.04	0.09	0.02	0.17

$N = 647$. Most frequent transitions are in bold.

entailed loss of co-ethnic contact, in the latter two cases, the transition entailed loss of inter-ethnic contact.

4.3 Latent transition patterns and loneliness

Last, we tested whether the most common transitions were significantly related to experienced loneliness. Table 3 presents the average level of loneliness for the six most frequent patterns of transition. We focused on the six most frequent patterns, as they have sufficient sample size for meaningful comparisons ($N \geq 39$; see Tables A.2 and A.3 in Supplementary Materials for a complete overview).

Results showed that respondents who maintained high levels of all three types of contact over time (*High contact overall* profile, row 6 in Table 3) were less likely to feel lonely than respondents who maintained high transnational (row 2) or high transnational and co-ethnic (row 4) contact over time. They were also less likely to feel lonely than respondents who displayed patterns that entailed loss of inter-ethnic contact over time (rows 1 and 3). Furthermore, respondents who maintained high transnational contact over time (row 2) were more likely to be lonely than respondents who, in addition to transnational contact, had co-ethnic contact prior to the pandemic (row 5) or stable co-ethnic contact during the pandemic (row 4).

Overall, our findings indicated that respondents who maintained diverse social ties (i.e. all types of contact) felt less lonely during the pandemic as compared to those who maintained only (local and transnational) co-ethnic ties. However, about half of our sample lost at least some

Table 3. Mean level of loneliness for most frequent patterns of transition.

	Profile in T1: pre-pandemic	Profile in T2: mid-pandemic	Mean loneliness	Comparison to other patterns
1	High transnational and inter-ethnic contact	High transnational contact	3.14	>6
2	High transnational contact	High transnational contact	3.04	>4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ , 6
3	High contact overall	High transnational and co-ethnic contact	2.63	>6
4	High transnational and co-ethnic contact	High transnational and co-ethnic contact	2.57	>6
5	High transnational and co-ethnic contact	High transnational contact	2.43	
6	High contact overall	High contact overall	2.05	

N = 647. The symbol + means that the comparison is only marginally significant. In all the other cases, the difference is significant at the $P < 0.05$ level at least.

part of their social ties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local inter-ethnic ties were most often lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing ties with ethnic majority members to be more difficult to maintain as compared to co-ethnic ties. Maintaining local inter-ethnic ties proved important for mitigating loneliness, as respondents who lost these ties during the pandemic and replaced them with transnational ties reported the highest levels of loneliness.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Despite a substantial body of research exploring the relationship between social isolation and loneliness in the general population, we still know little about how this relationship plays out among marginalized groups (Luhmann et al. 2023), especially refugees, who are among the loneliest people in society (Entringer et al. 2021; Spiritus-Beerden et al. 2021; Löbel et al. 2022). This paper helps fill this gap by exploring the composition of refugees' social ties across geographical and ethnic dimensions. We do so during the COVID-19 pandemic, a natural experiment that allows us to examine how stable and situational social isolation relate to loneliness.

We argue that both the diversity and stability of social ties are critical for understanding the relationship between social isolation and loneliness among refugees. First, refugees' social worlds often span both local and transnational networks and include connections with people from similar as well as different ethnic backgrounds. The complex interplay between geographic and ethnic compositions can lead to varying degrees of loneliness. Our findings show that refugees who maintained local ties—especially when combined with transnational ties—felt less lonely. In contrast, those who relied mainly on transnational ties experienced the highest levels of loneliness. This supports previous research highlighting the importance of local ties in mitigating loneliness after resettlement (Rüdel and Joly 2024; Horn and Fokkema 2025).

Second, forced migration exposes refugees to additional critical events that disrupt social networks and can lead to tie instability (Wissink and Mazzucato 2018). In our study, nearly half of the respondents experienced changes in their social ties during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a significant loss of local ties, especially ties with ethnic majority members. Refugees transitioning from local inter-ethnic ties to mainly transnational ties reported the highest levels of loneliness. These findings suggest that while transnational ties can offer some protection against social isolation, they are less effective than the more fragile but protective local ties. Refugees lacking local ties or experiencing a disruption in local inter-ethnic ties were especially vulnerable to increased loneliness.

We wish to highlight four main directions for future research on the relationship between social ties and loneliness among (forced) migrants. First, although we provided a detailed analysis of different types of social ties based on their geographic location and ethnic composition, our

measure focused solely on the frequency of contact with these ties. To obtain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between social ties and loneliness, future studies should explore additional dimensions of social ties as well as how these factors change over time and relate to loneliness. Social network techniques would be particularly well-suited to disentangle these different functions of social ties and deepen our understanding of the complex social worlds inhabited by refugees (Roblain et al. 2025). Promising directions for future research include examining shifts between digital and in-person modes of contact; expanding the scope of different relational types of social ties, from close connections such as co-residing or nearby family members to looser ties like colleagues (Tedeschi et al. 2022); and investigating qualitative aspects of social relationships—such as relationship quality, tie strength, social support, emotional closeness, and reciprocity—that likely play a crucial role in shaping the emotional benefits of social connections (Agneessens et al. 2006; Gottlieb and Bergen 2010).

Second, our study used a single item to assess loneliness. However, loneliness is widely recognized as a complex, multidimensional experience that requires more fine-grained measures (e.g. Russell 1996). Future research should explore how different types of social ties relate to specific dimensions of loneliness. For example, intimate loneliness refers to the absence of close, emotionally supportive relationships, while collective loneliness is linked to the lack of connection to broader social groups or valued social identities within distant or larger communities (Dunbar 2014; Cacioppo et al. 2015).

Third, longer follow-up studies are needed to examine whether the loss of social ties prevailed after the COVID-19 pandemic or if, and for whom, these social ties were recovered. Refugees may be particularly motivated to invest in re-establishing lost ties, in this case, local ties with ethnic majority members that play a vital role in their inclusion in the society of settlement (Schapendonk 2015). Such a 'bounce back effect' would demonstrate the social resilience of refugees in the face of critical events.

Fourth, while the current study focused on migrants who had received refugee status, future studies could usefully explore how differences in legal statuses matter for their feelings of loneliness. In particular, undocumented migrants may experience much higher levels of loneliness compared to those who hold permanent residency permit or have been naturalized (Politi and Roblain 2021). Citizenship and the equal rights and protections it provides are considered essential for immigrant inclusion (Ager and Strang 2008), while forms of legal exclusion may contribute to migrants' feelings of loneliness by fostering a sense of instability and detachment from society.

Taken together, our findings are important for both research and practice, as they offer valuable insights into the relationship between stable and situational social isolation and loneliness as refugees resettle in society. Refugees' feelings of loneliness are not exclusively tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, as even before the onset of the pandemic, 'refugees felt as lonely as most people feel in the middle of a lockdown' (Entringer et al. 2021: 106). The forced migration experience is inherently marked by extended periods of social isolation. Accordingly, refugees often find themselves in unfamiliar territories, on the move, or sheltered in reception centers awaiting asylum proceedings in isolation from the broader society and physically severed from familiar social ties. Bureaucratic procedures that prolong these periods of isolation further hinder the formation of local ties, negatively impacting psychological well-being (Van der Linden et al. 2023). The current research thereby provides a useful starting point for better understanding when, how, and for whom stable and situational social isolation is associated with loneliness, which is paramount in developing comprehensive support mechanisms for individuals navigating the complex landscape of forced migration. Otherwise, persistent feelings of loneliness among the most socially isolated refugees may cause resignation from the society of settlement (Marinucci and Riva 2021), consequently hindering their well-being and capacity to actively participate in society (Strang and Quinn 2021).

Policies and programs that promote the development and consolidation of social ties between refugees and majority group members should be prioritized. Initiatives such as buddy programs can play a vital role in reducing social isolation and loneliness by fostering an exchange of

emotional support through active listening and meaningful interpersonal exchange, as previous research among local volunteers and refugees from Middle-Eastern and Eastern-African countries enrolled in buddy projects in Belgium during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown (Vescan et al. 2023). While current programs such as buddy systems are encouraging, we also recommend focusing on strengthening community resilience by promoting and supporting local co-ethnic ties, which can serve as important buffers against social isolation and loneliness, especially when access to majority group networks is limited.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Journal of Refugee Studies* online.

Conflict of interest. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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