

Lack of public appreciation contributes to loneliness in farming, study shows

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A lack of public appreciation for farmers, and an understanding of the work they do and the pressures they're under contributes to feelings of loneliness, according to a new study. The paper, "It's a lonely old world":

Developing a multidimensional understanding of loneliness in farming," is published in the journal *Sociologia Ruralis*.

Researchers from the University of Exeter's Centre for Rural Policy Research and national charity The Farming Community Network (FCN) carried out in-depth interviews with 22 [farmers](#)/members of farming families and six farm support practitioners in England, conducted either by telephone or video-call between March and July 2021.

Many farmers who were interviewed as part of the study felt undervalued, identifying a feeling of disconnection between farmers and wider [society](#), and a lack of understanding from the general public about what is involved in farming and its unique pressures.

Loneliness was found in the study to be linked to [mental health problems](#) such as depression and anxiety.

Some of the farmers interviewed had been subjected to abusive behavior, including being sworn at during the course of their working day.

One farming man, aged 40-49, said, "In the local village the demographic has completely changed in the past 20 years. And you get sly comments or something from a footpath walker or you quite often get... someone flicking you the Vs on the road, or beeping their horn because you're in the tractor going from A to B. So you get the sense that the [local community](#) isn't really your best friend. You feel a bit of an alien on your own doorstep."

One farm support practitioner talked about how she had supported farmers in one area where an increase in the [local population](#)—following a large housing development—had led to farmers feeling more isolated because of complaints they received about aspects such as noise from

cows and tractors.

The study also found that farmers are keen to highlight the vital role they play in producing food, and the positive actions they are taking to care for and improve the environment, but feel these are often overlooked in media stories about agriculture and environmental issues such as climate change.

Dr. Rebecca Wheeler, Senior Research Fellow from the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter, said, "Cultural loneliness refers to feelings that arise from a sense of difference with others in the wider community—including feelings of being an outsider or being misunderstood by other cultural groups.

"It's concerning to see that this type of loneliness repeatedly emerged in participants' stories, with many farmers describing or alluding to a strong sense of disconnection with the wider public, and of feeling undervalued and misunderstood by Government and society."

Professor Matt Loble, Co-Director of the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter, said, "The issue of the sense of disconnection between farming and non-farming people has come up repeatedly in our research over a number of years. We now know that the loneliness and isolation that can stem from this impacts the mental health of farming people. Farming people are key workers and we should all have a stake in helping improve their health and well-being."

The researchers recommend that there is a need to strengthen connections between farming and non-farming communities in order to avoid farmers feeling [isolated](#) from society.

This could include:

- enhancing opportunities for [community engagement](#) with agriculture
- improving public dialogue in relation to food and farming
- promoting local food networks that facilitate more direct relationships between producers and consumers
- a more positive and empathetic approach from the government and regulators when it comes to shaping and enforcing policy and legislative requirements, particularly since associated paperwork and inspections have long been identified as key sources of stress for farmers

Dr. Jude McCann, CEO of The Farming Community Network, said, "All of us rely on farmers three times a day. Sadly, many people particularly in urban environments have very little exposure to farming, and as a result often a limited understanding of the challenges involved and the hard work and long hours that are required to ensure food is produced for the country and to a high standard.

"We hope that the findings of this study will help to encourage people to appreciate their local farmers more and to be more aware of what is involved in farming—helping to bridge the gap between farmer and non-farmer, and rural and urban environments."

More information: Rebecca Wheeler et al, "It's a lonely old world": Developing a multidimensional understanding of loneliness in farming, *Sociologia Ruralis* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/soru.12399](https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12399)

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