

# Types of social support networks of elderly people during the COVID-19 pandemic



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# Background

The sources of informal social support are crucial for well-being in an aging society.

**Slovenia, as many other countries, is facing the aging of population.**

The share of those older than 65 was 18% in 2018 while this percentage could rise up to 29% in 2060.

**The aging of the population requires specific services and help for elderly people.**

These can be provided by institutional services or/and by informal sources of (social) support.

**Previous studies have shown that there is a share of elderly people having a serious lack of informal social support (e.g., Hlebec 2004).**

# Goal

Studying social support networks among elderly people.

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## RESEARCH QUESTION

**What types of social support networks of elderly people can be identified during the coronavirus pandemic in Slovenia?**

**Knowledge of the types of social support networks can provide a guide for practitioners in designing appropriate interventions and combinations of care services (Wenger 1994).**

**Wenger (1994) identified five types of social support networks of the elderly population.**

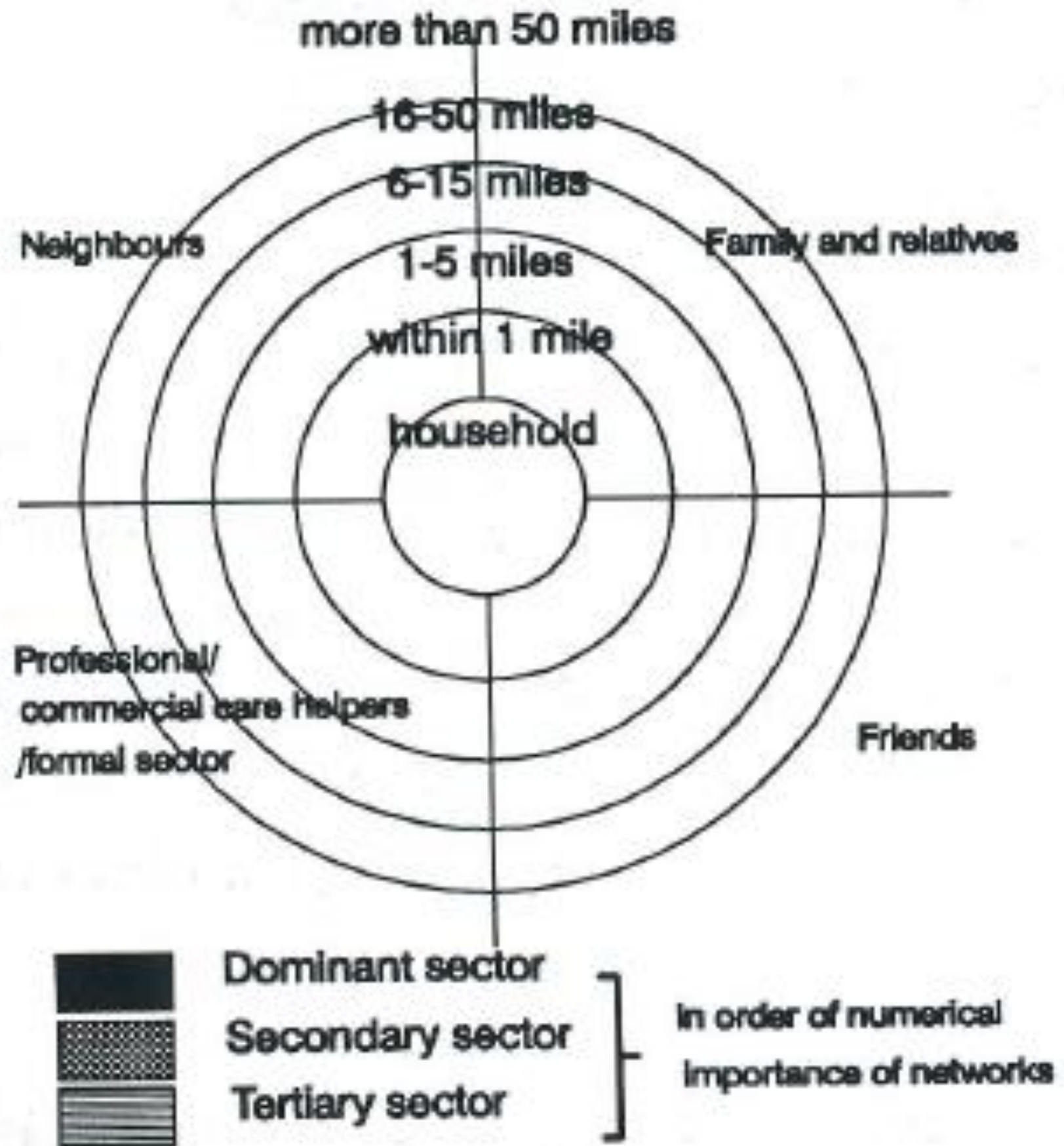
Fact

## SUPPORT NETWORKS OF OLDER PEOPLE: A Guide for Practitioners

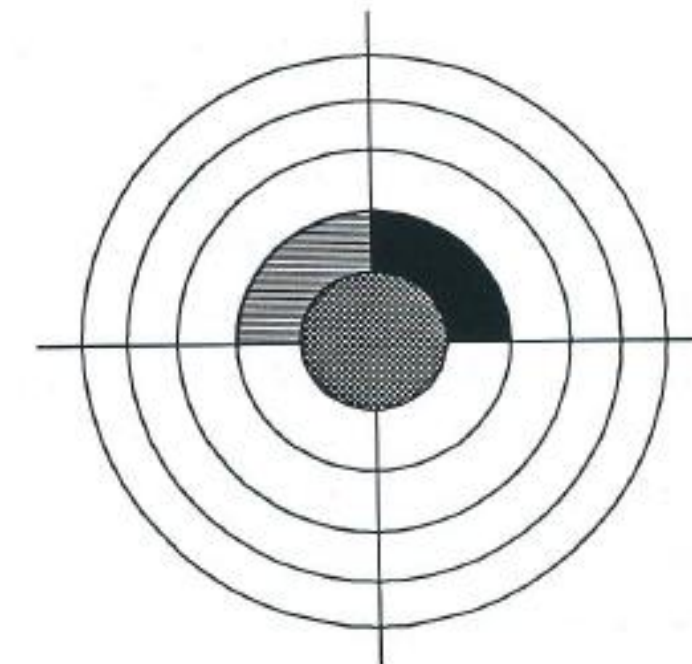
G. Clare Wenger

Centre for Social Policy Research & Development  
University of Wales, Bangor

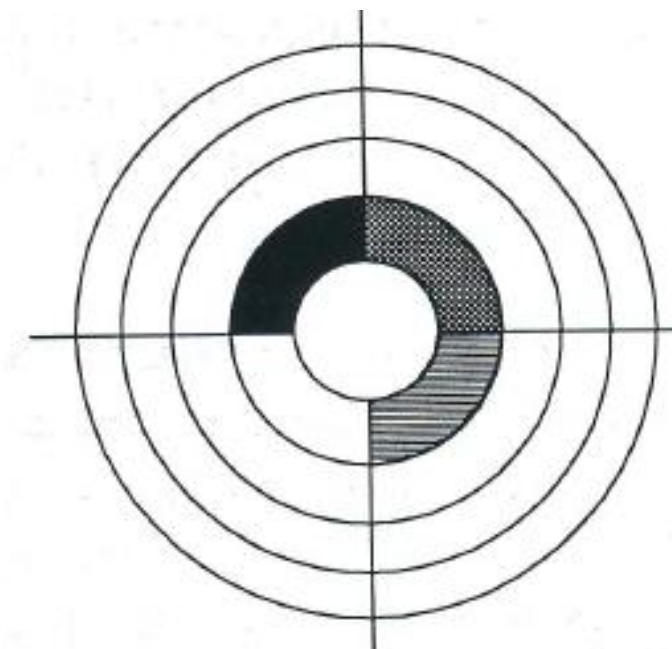
## KEY TO FIGURES



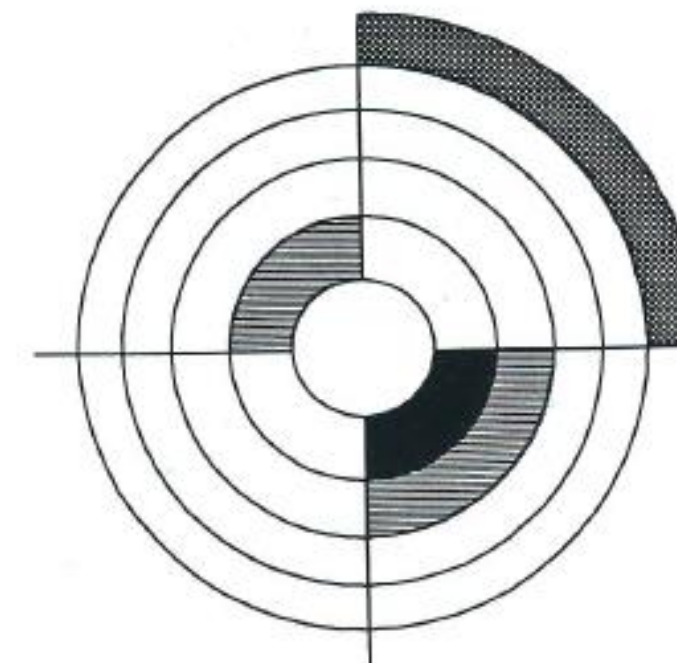
## FAMILY DEPENDENT NETWORK TYPES



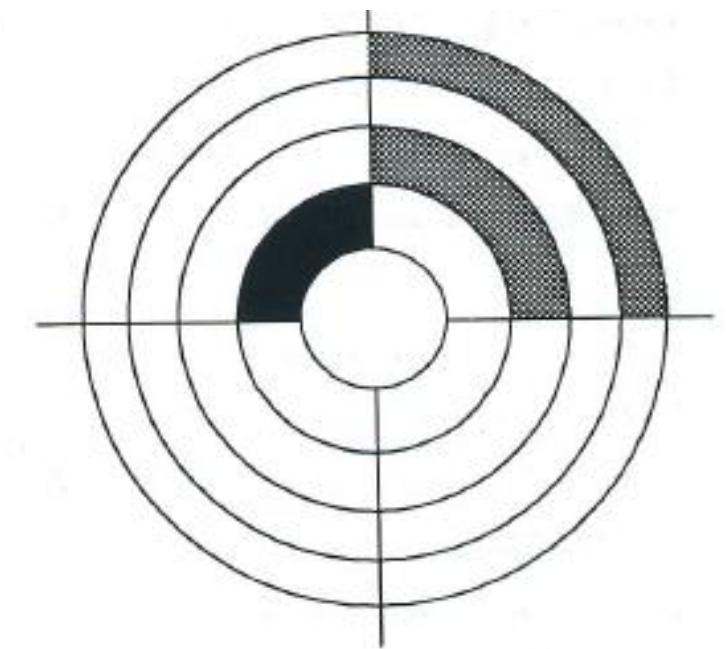
**LOCALLY INTEGRATED NETWORK TYPES**



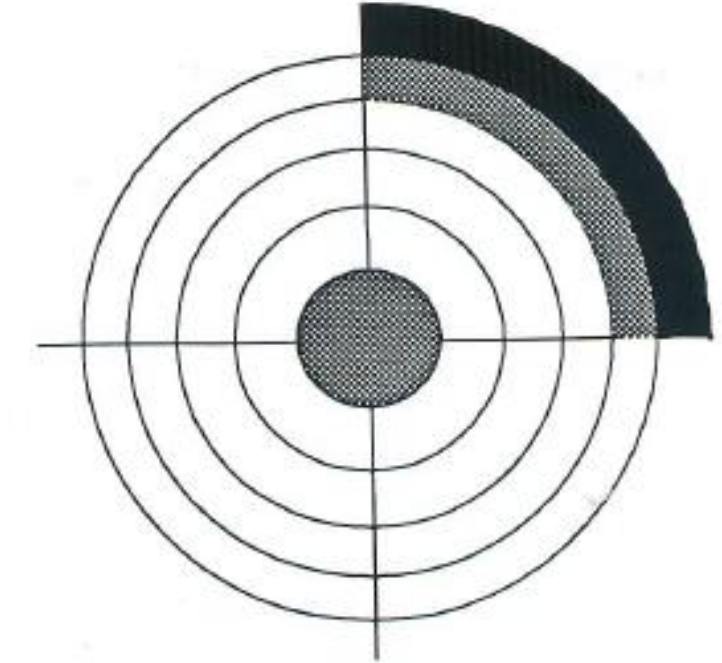
**WIDER COMMUNITY FOCUSED NETWORK TYPES**



**LOCAL SELF-CONTAINED NETWORK TYPES**

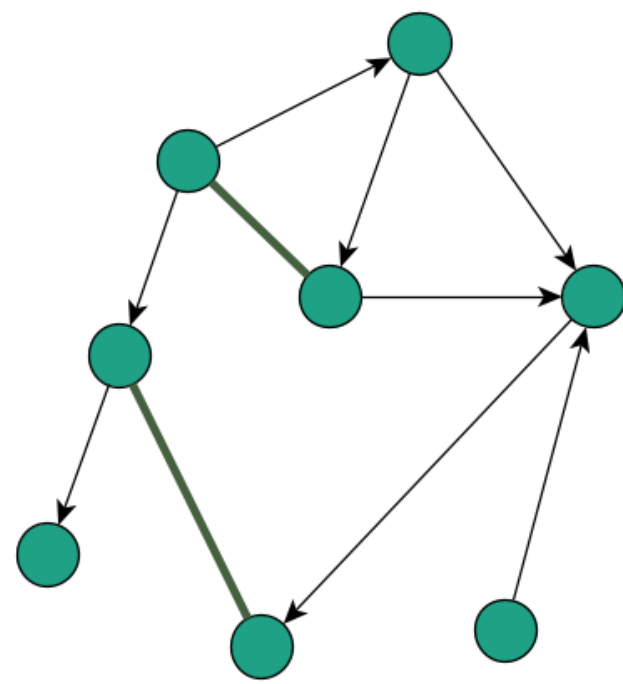


**PRIVATE RESTRICTED NETWORK TYPES**

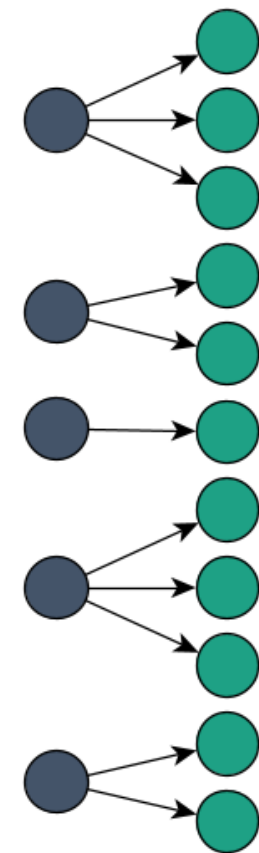


# Methodology

Social support was measured by egocentric networks.



**WHOLE  
NETWORK**



**EGOCENTRIC  
NETWORK**

- ✓ The construct of social support has four dimensions (e.g., Vaux 1988, Hlebec & Kogovšek 2004, Kogovšek & Ferligoj 2005): emotional support, instrumental support, socializing and material support.
- ✓ The types of social support were considered, for which we assumed that are especially relevant during the coronavirus pandemic.

# 1

## **INFORMAL SOCIALIZING**

Who are the people you have been socializing with during the time of social isolation? Either face to face, by phone, or via computer, tablet ...

# 2

## **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**

To whom do you usually talk to these days about personal things that are important to you?

# 3

## **INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT**

In the coronavirus crisis, it is advisable not to leave the apartment, e.g., to go shopping or to the pharmacy. To whom do you turn for this type of help?

# About coronavirus pandemic in Slovenia



THE FIRST CASE



THE OFFICIAL **START** OF  
PANDEMIC IN SLOVENIA



THE OFFICIAL **END** OF  
PANDEMIC IN SLOVENIA

**During the pandemic, people in Slovenia were not allowed to leave their municipalities (there are 212 municipalities in Slovenia).**

**Elderly people (65+) had to shop before 10 AM.**

# Data

The data were collected during the pandemic period.

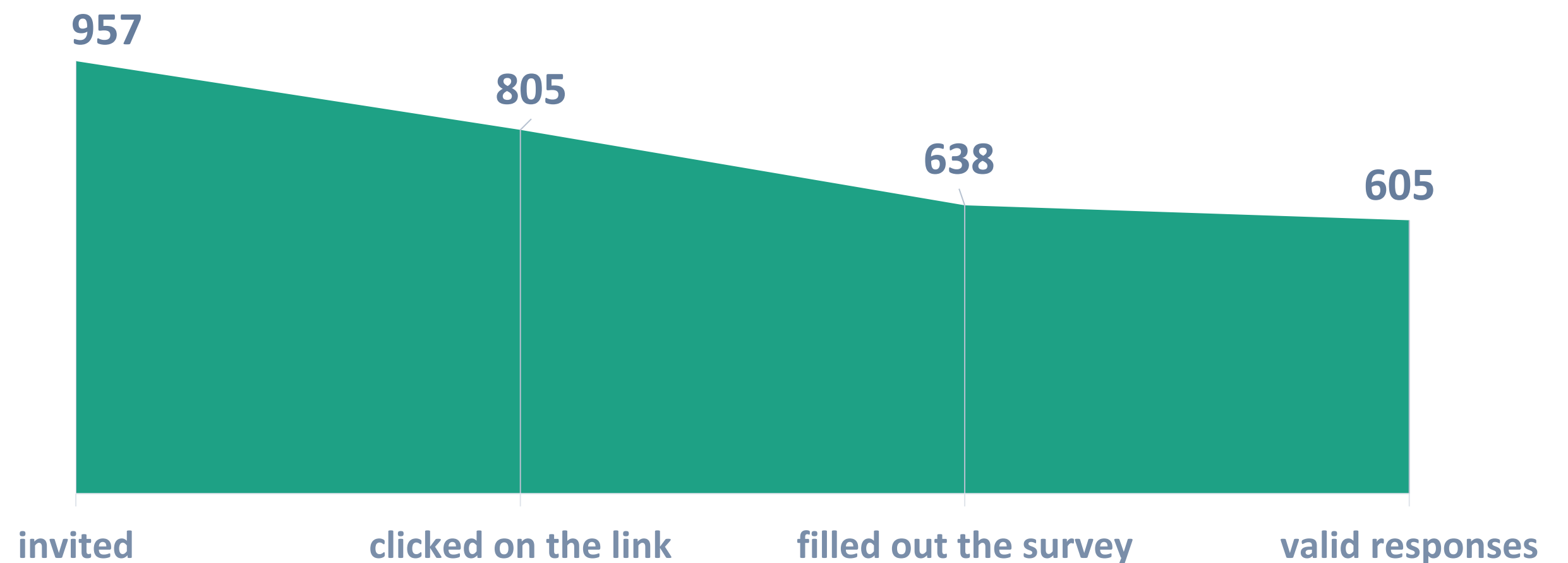
**Probability sample of elderly people who are capable and wiling to participate at Web survey.**

**It is estimated that 38 % of all elderly people (65+) in Slovenia use the Internet.**



Web Survey  
April 25 – May 4  
2020

(VALICON - Marketing consulting company)



# Basic statistics of egos

The total number of egos is 605.

48 %

MALES

70

AVERAGE AGE  
(max = 85; sd = 3.8)

71 %

MARRIED

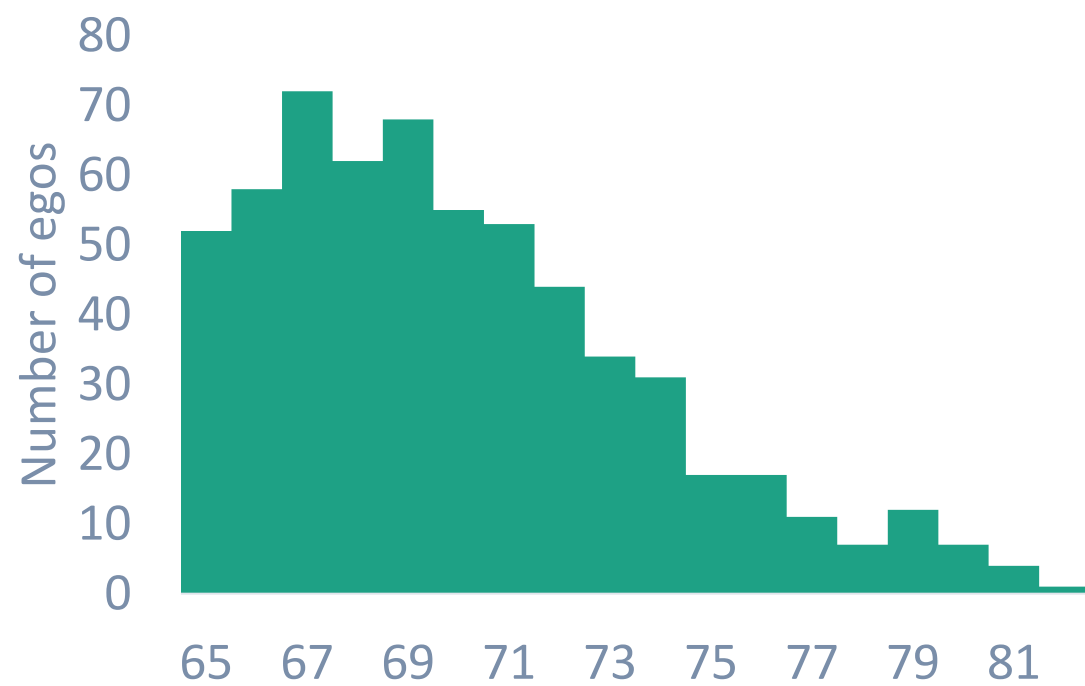
97 %

RETIRED

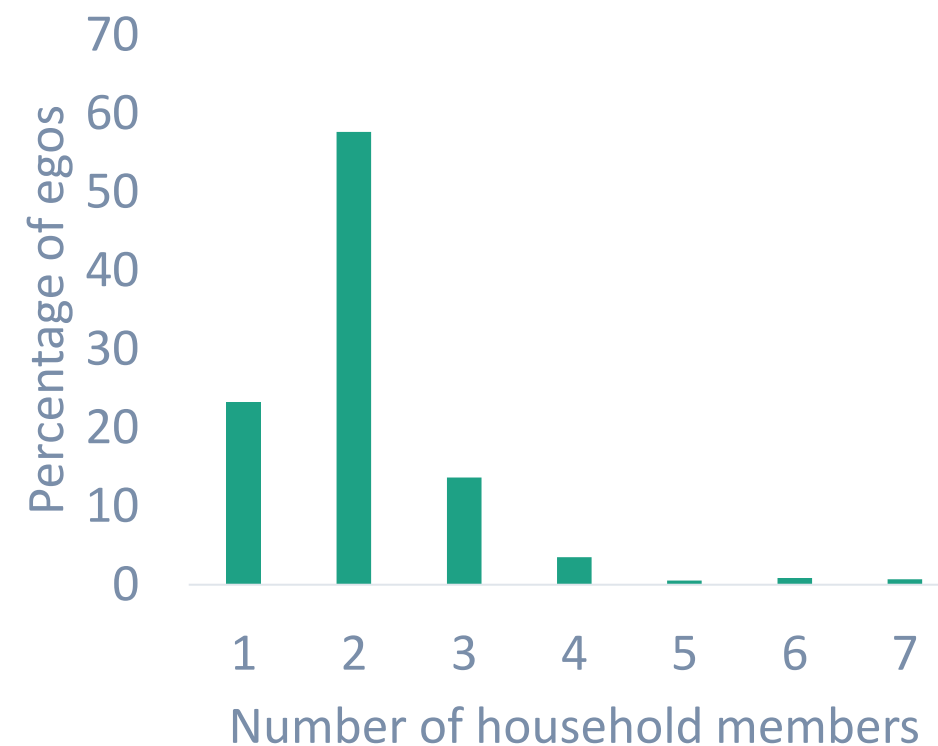
62 %

URBAN ENVIRONMENT

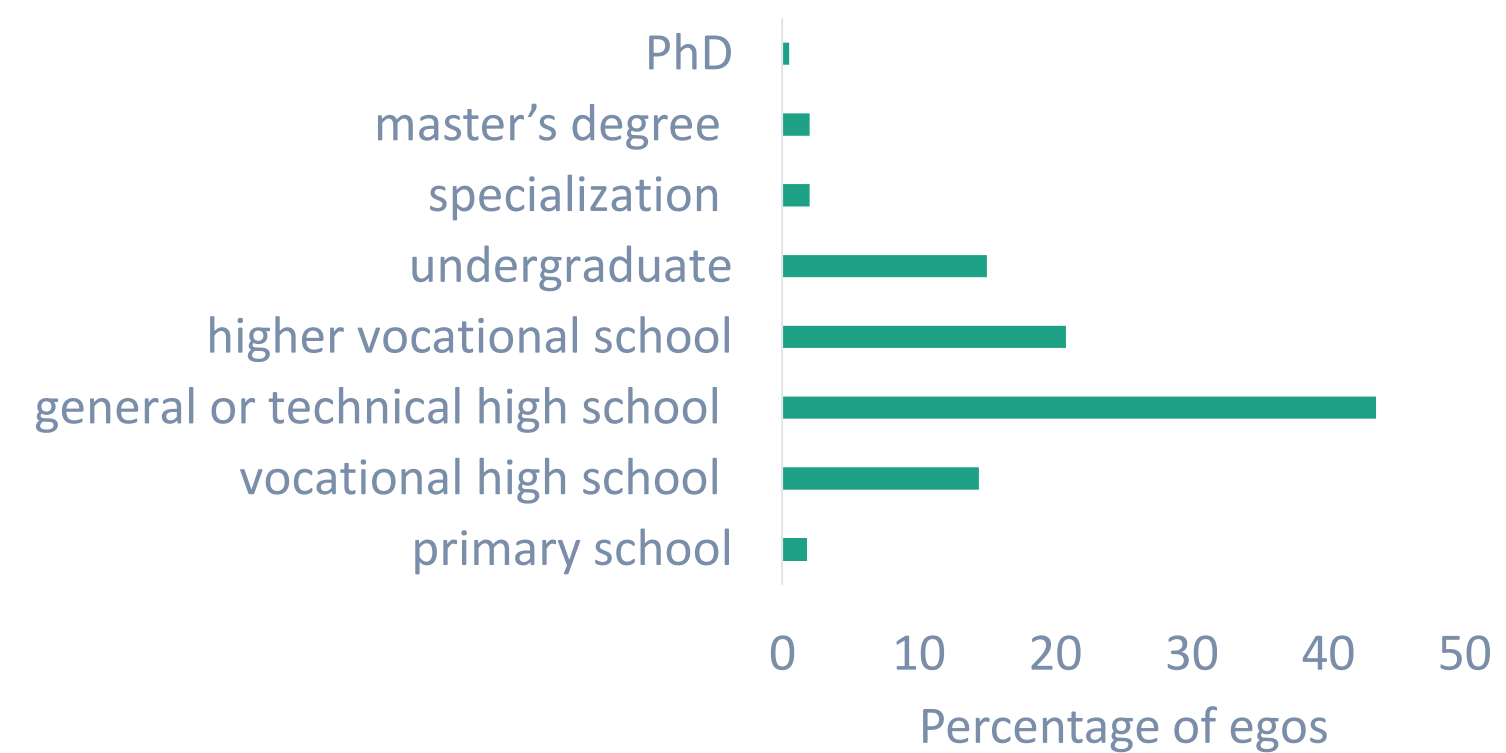
AGE



HOUSEHOLD SIZE



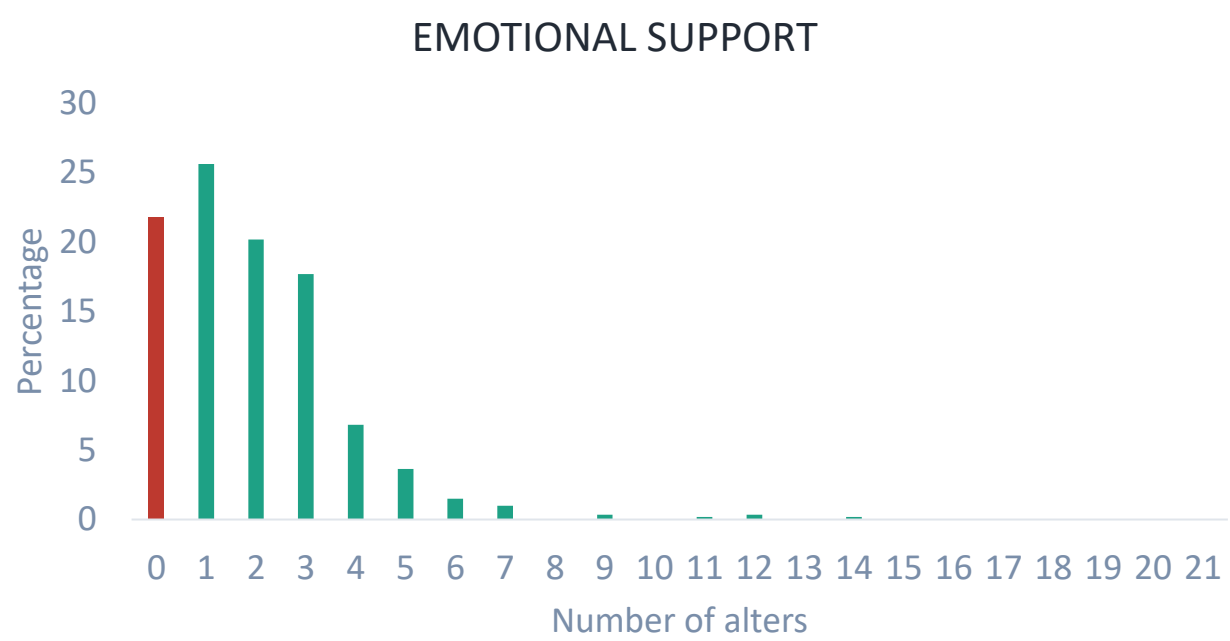
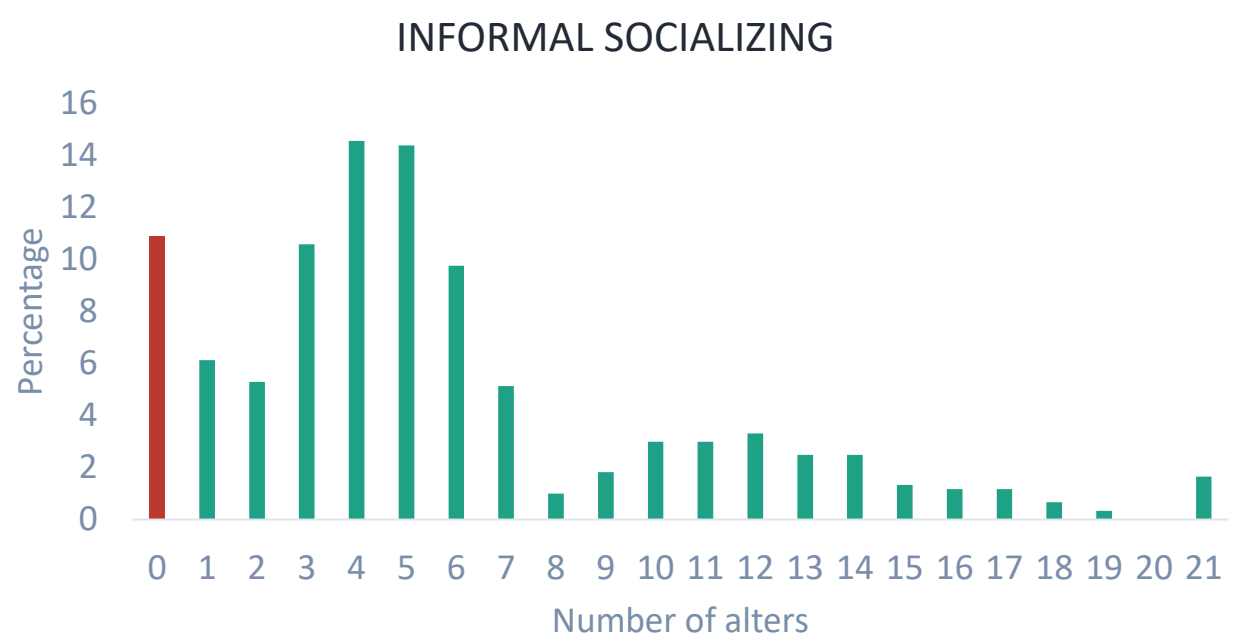
LEVEL OF EDUCATION





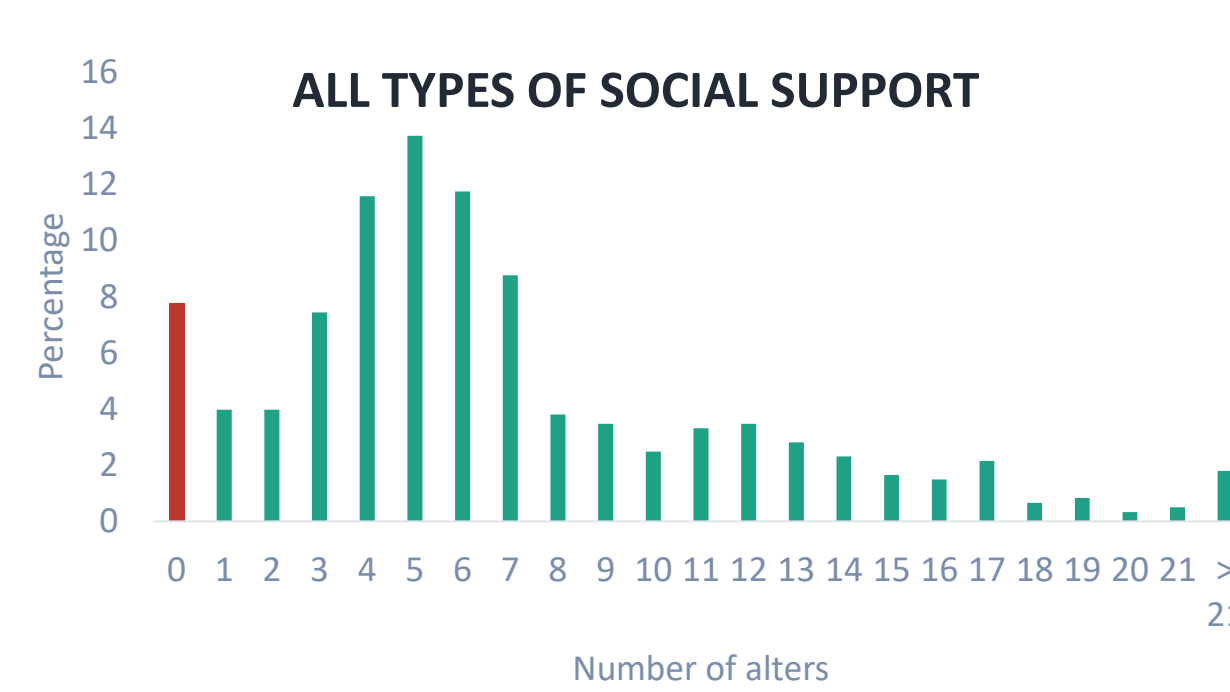
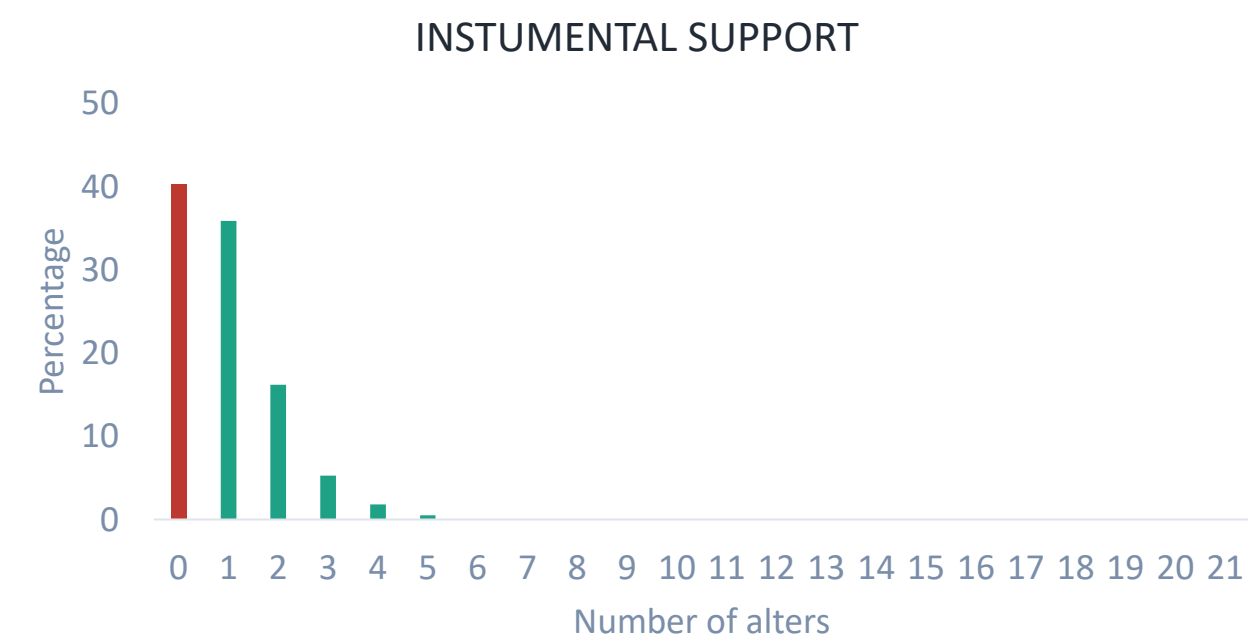
# Basic statistics of ego networks

The total number of alters is 4,163, average 6.9 alters.



47 (7.8%)  
EGOS WITHOUT ANY SOURCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

24 (4.0%)  
EGOS WITH ONLY ONE PERSON PROVIDING SOCIAL SUPPORT



5  
EGOS ARE GETTING FORMAL SOCIAL SUPPORT

# Clustering of egocentric networks

To obtain the typology of the ego networks, the clustering of symbolic data approach (Kejžar et al. 2020) was used.

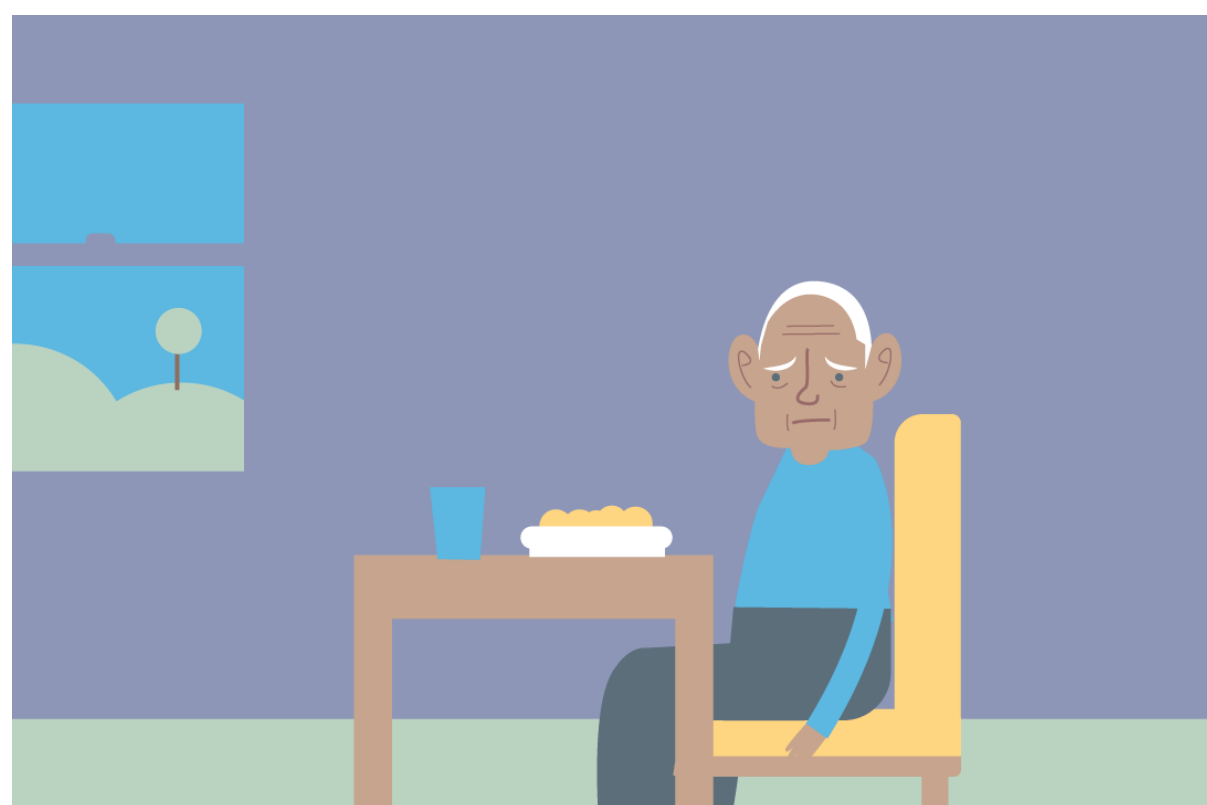
**The symbolic data for each ego (unit) are the probability distributions of measured characteristics of his/her ego network.**

- ✓ Distribution of the number of alters by **type of social support**.
- ✓ Distribution of the **geographical distances** from an ego to his/her alters' residences.
- ✓ Distribution of the **types of relationship** of an ego to the alters.
  - ✓ Distribution of the **frequency of contacts** with alters.
  - ✓ The **number** of alters.

# A note prior to the clustering

Two specific clusters were extracted manually.

**Before applying the clustering procedure, we manually extracted two clusters of respondents for which we assumed that might be more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.**



## **EGOS WITHOUT SOCIAL SUPPORT**

They are vulnerable because they have no one for help.

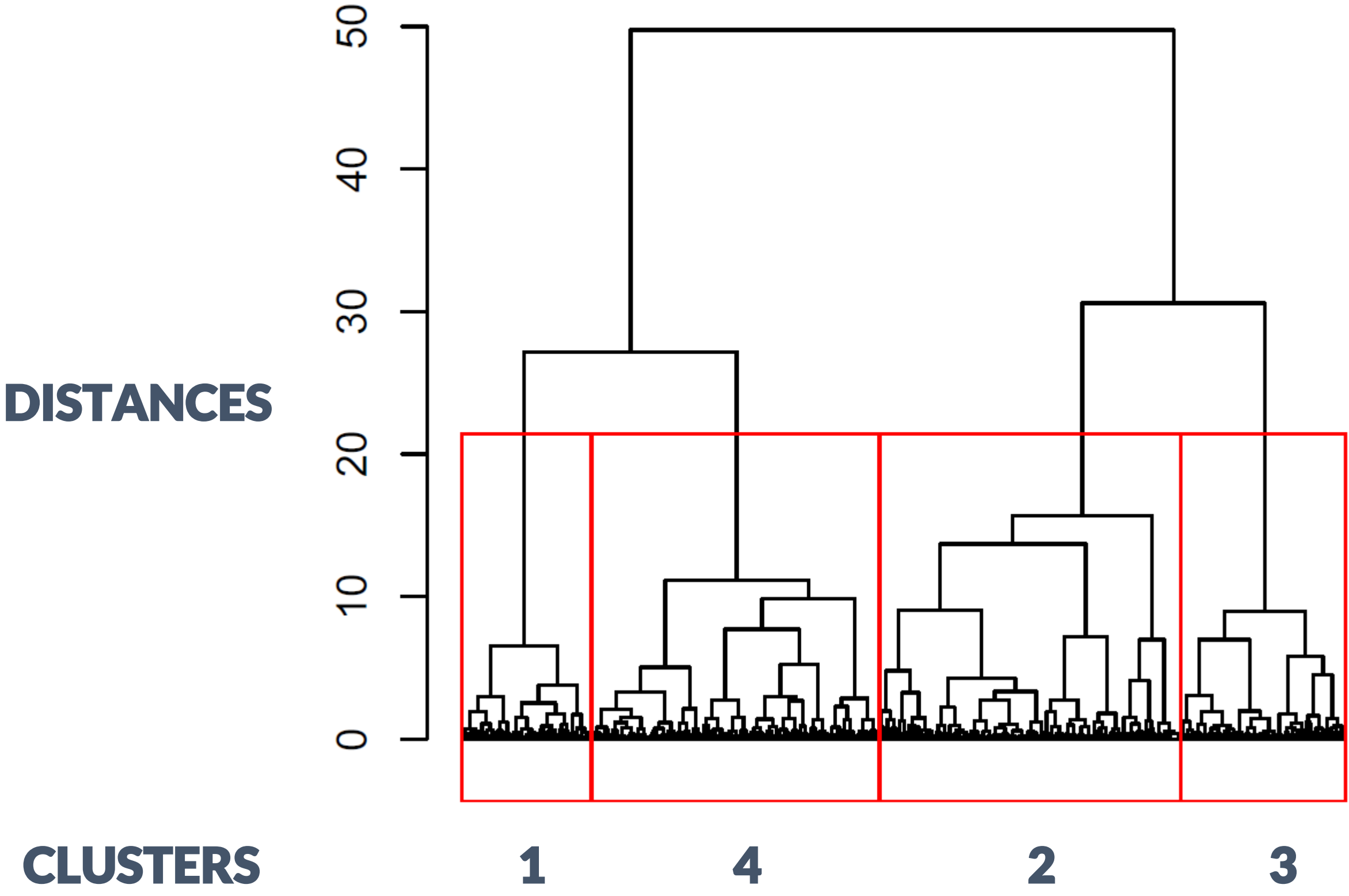


## **EGOS WITH ALL DISTANT ALTERS**

They are vulnerable because they have no support for the daily needs.

# Hierarchical clustering of ego networks

Dendrogram



# Clustering into 4+2 clusters

The averages of the number of alters by clusters are given in the table bellow.

CLUSTER	0	1	2	3	4	5	ALL
N	47	78	181	99	173	27	605
Total no. of alters	0	10.0	5.5	6.1	9.5	4.3	6.9
Informal socializing	0	9.3	3.8	5.7	8.3	3.1	5.8
Emotional support	0	2.0	2.0	3.5	1.9	1.4	2.0
Instrumental support	0	0.9	1.2	1.3	0.8	0.6	0.9
Type of relationship							
Partner	0	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.5
Child	0	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.4
Other relatives	0	3.4	2.0	1.9	2.5	1.1	1.5
Friend	0	2.5	0.7	1.5	2.7	1.0	1.6
Neighbor	0	0.6	0.3	0.3	1.1	0.0	0.5
Other	0	1.0	0.4	0.4	1.4	0.6	0.7

CLUSTER	0	1	2	3	4	5	ALL
Number of roles							
One role	0	8.2	2.2	2.7	8.3	3.6	5.3
Several roles	0	1.9	1.3	3.5	1.3	0.7	1.6
Physical distance							
Same household	0	1.0	1.4	0.7	0.8	0.0	0.9
Same municipality	0	1.9	2.6	2.4	5.5	0.0	3.0
Another municipality or abroad	0	7.1	1.5	3.0	3.3	4.3	3.0
Frequency of contacts							
Several times per day	0	0.9	1.8	0.8	0.8	0.2	1.0
Once per day	0	1.6	1.7	1.5	1.7	1.0	1.5
Several times per week	0	2.4	1.3	2.2	2.6	1.6	1.8
Once per week	0	3.1	0.6	1.0	2.6	0.9	1.5
Less often	0	2.0	0.2	0.7	1.8	0.6	1.0



## A note

- Cluster 0: a cluster of egos without any alter.
- Cluster 5: a cluster of egos with all distant alters.

# Clustering into 4+2 clusters

Descriptive statistics of egos by clusters.

CLUSTER	0	1	2	3	4	5	ALL
<b>Mean age</b>	69.6	69.5	69.7	70.1	70.6	70.3	70.0
<b>Percentage of men</b>	61.7	47.4	51.9	35.4	48.0	48.1	48.1
<b>Percentage of egos in a relationship</b>	60.0	82.9	76.4	66.0	68.6	52.0	71.0
<b>Percentage of egos living in urban areas</b>	63.8	46.2	58.6	62.6	72.8	48.1	61.7
<b>Percentage of egos living alone</b>	38.3	10.3	16.8	30.6	24.3	44.4	23.6
<b>Educational level</b>							
primary school	0.0	1.4	3.6	0.0	1.8	0.0	1.81
vocational high school	22.7	18.6	10.8	15.7	13.5	14.3	14.4
general or technical high school	47.7	38.6	44.3	44.9	43.6	38.1	43.5
higher vocational school	13.6	27.1	21.0	18.0	20.2	28.6	20.8
undergraduate	13.6	10.0	15.0	16.9	16.6	14.3	15.0
specialization	2.3	2.9	3.0	2.2	0.6	0.0	2.0
master's degree	0.0	1.4	0.6	2.2	3.7	4.8	2.0
PhD	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5

## ! A note

- Cluster 0: a cluster of egos without any alter.
- Cluster 5: a cluster of egos with all distant alters.

## No social support

CLUSTER 0

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### A SMALL CLUSTER OF EGOS

These elderly people did not provide any source of social support.

**MEN, SINGLE, LIVING ALONE,  
MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION**

## Distant alters

CLUSTER 5

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### THE SMALLEST CLUSTER OF EGOS A VERY LOW NUMBER OF ALTERS

These elderly people have all alters in other municipalities.

**SINGLE, URBAN ENVIRONMENT,  
LOW LEVEL EDUCATION**

## Locally integrated support network

CLUSTER 4

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**AMONG THE LARGEST CLUSTER OF EGOS  
AMONG THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF ALTERS**

Very social. Support mostly comes from their friends, neighbors, and family members. Most of the alters live in the same municipality.

**URBAN AREA**

## Wider community-focused support network

CLUSTER 1

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**SMALL CLUSTER OF EGOS  
THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF ALTERS**

Support is given by family members, neighbors, and friends. The social supporters come from the same household but also from other municipalities.

**RURAL, MARRIED, MORE EDUCATED**



## Private restricted support network

CLUSTER 2

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**THE LARGEST CLUSTER SIZE OF EGOS  
LOW NUMBER OF ALTERS**

Especially low socializing social support, which is mostly provided by their partners or family members and less their neighbors and friends.

**MEN, LOW LEVEL OF EDUCATION**

## Less private restricted support network

CLUSTER 3

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**SLIGHTLY SMALLER CLUSTER SIZE OF EGOS  
SLIGHTLY LOWER NUMBER OF ALTERS**

Above average emotional and instrumental support, mostly provided from partner, other family members or friends. The same alters are providing different types of support.

**WOMEN, URBAN AREA**

# Discussion

**Some elderly people might be vulnerable due to the lack of informal social support.**

Almost 60 % of respondents have satisfying social support.

Very vulnerable respondents are those without any social support (8 %), those from the cluster of private restricted social support network (30 %), who depend only on their partners and those with all distant alters (5 %).

**The obtained typology is consistent with the one proposed by Wenger (1994).**


We found 3 out of 5 types of social support networks proposed by Wenger:

- ✓ Locally integrated support network type;
- ✓ Wider community focused support network type;
- ✓ Private restricted support network type.

Only Family dependent network type and Local self-contained network type were not found in our study. Instead, we found the Less private restricted support network type.

# What can we do?

1. **Proactively organizing social support** for those who have limited informal social support. Here, the role of non-governmental organizations as well as social workers is essential.
2. Investing in programs and preventive activities to **teach different coping approaches and approaches to minimize maladaptive responses**, such as panic and paranoia also during a pandemic.
3. **Minimizing stigma, discrimination and ageism** by the general public, including the media.

- 
4. Investing in educational programs for increasing the older population's **digital literacy**.

# Limitations

During the pandemic, **only the Web survey was possible**. Therefore, about 40% of the elderly population is covered, who are capable and willing to participate at Web survey. This is probably the reason, why we did not find the Family dependent network type which consists of those older than 80.

Also when using other data collection modes, quite a percentage of elderly people is not covered, e.g., people with serious illnesses.

**Similar social support study was done 20 years ago in Slovenia** (n = 690).

In 2000, the number of egos without any source with social support was 4 (0.58 %), in 2020 there were 47 (7.8 %).

Hlebec (2004) obtained the typology (with different clustering approach) and only one cluster was in line with Wegner's typology.

The results of the two studies are not entirely comparable because of at least the following factors:

1. The possible social changes in 20-years between two studies.
2. Different data collection modes: telephone mode (2000), Web mode (2020).
3. The corona virus pandemic circumstances.

# References

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# COSTNET Video



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e22gKPjjHz8&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e22gKPjjHz8&feature=emb_logo)