

# HEARING LOSS: THE SILENT BURDEN ON EUROPEAN ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

In the European Union (EU), 34 million adults live with a [hearing loss](#) of more than 35 decibels. At this degree, such hearing impairment has a detrimental effect on lives and society at large. Far from being seen as just an inconvenience, it is disabling.

When left untreated, it not only reduces a person's ability to communicate with others but also impacts speech and language development, educational outcomes, quality of life, employment, relationships, and cognition.

Although hearing technologies such as hearing aids, assistive listening devices, and cochlear implants, have revolutionised the lives of adults and children living with hearing loss, and are proven to be effective and cost-effective across different economic states, two thirds of adults living with hearing loss still [do not receive treatment](#) in the EU. The [average uptake](#) rate of hearing aids among children in Europe lay at around 36% in recent years.



Untreated hearing loss has a profound detrimental impact on the lives of European citizens. Although hearing technologies verifiably improve the situation and are cost-effective, two thirds of adults living with hearing loss do not receive treatment in the EU.

If untreated, the [yearly cost](#) of this disability in terms of lost productivity value and lost quality of life amounts to €185 billion in the EU, which is €17 billion more than the [total](#) EU budget in 2020.



- €149 billion productivity value is lost per year due to untreated hearing loss.
- €67 billion are spent per year due to reduced quality of life.
- €8,200 additional costs arise due to untreated hearing loss per person per year.



As the COVID-19 pandemic both put the EU budget under enormous strain and disproportionately affected vulnerable populations such as persons experiencing hearing loss, a policy response to this growing economic and public health challenge is more than needed.



More precisely, investing in effective ear and hearing care could be one of the most effective solutions to these issues, with a great return both on the individual and for society as a whole.

This paper will explore the true cost of hearing loss on Europe's economy and its impact on European citizens, as well as outline actions that policymakers can take to relieve this burden.

## UNTREATED HEARING LOSS NEGATIVELY IMPACTS THE EU'S PRODUCTIVITY



The unemployment rate of working-age adults with untreated hearing loss is significantly higher than that of people who use some form of hearing amplification and of normal hearing peers. Improving access to hearing aids and cochlear implants can help children enroll in mainstream educational settings with good chances to participate in the labour market in later life, greatly reducing the unemployment rates of people with hearing loss.

Working-age adults with untreated hearing loss face [higher unemployment](#) rates: nearly double that of those who use some form of hearing amplification, and twice that of normal hearing peers. Moreover, untreated hearing loss is shown to [lead to](#) significant underemployment, over-representation of hearing-impaired people in lower-paid and unskilled occupations, and increased levels of premature retirement, creating greater dependencies on state benefits.

However, studies have shown that improving access to hearing aids and cochlear implants can significantly reduce these rates, as such devices have been demonstrated to increase an

individual's employability and earning potential. A [study](#) observed an 11% increase in employment rates following cochlear implantation. A quarter of people in employment at the time of their cochlear implant surgery also noted an improvement in their employment status, with 31% welcoming an average annual income increase of more than €8,300.

## YOUNG HEARING-IMPAIRED HAVE DIFFICULTIES INTEGRATING INTO THE EU LABOUR MARKET

Whilst untreated hearing loss has a tremendous impact on the EU's labour market, it is key to remember that where barriers to hearing care and education exist for young hearing-impaired people, it impedes their speech and language development, ultimately limiting their entry and contribution to the EU's economy. For Government's additional costs arise not only in the provision of specialist educational requirements for children with additional needs of untreated hearing loss – [averaging €7,500](#) per child in Austria's kindergartens – but also indirectly amid their undermined chances to fully participate in the labour market in later life.

Research demonstrated that children who receive [early intervention](#) through cochlear implantation are shown to develop successful listening, language, reading, participation and engagement skills resulting in attendance at mainstream schools and educational [attainments](#) in-line with normal hearing peers; the longer-term impact of this being a levelling of opportunities to become productive citizens within the EU's labour market.



The impact of hearing loss on individuals extends beyond economics, diminishing quality of life and increasing the dependency on others. People with good access to treatment options demonstrated less interactions with healthcare services, yielding benefits both for the individual and the economy:

**Increased access to integrated hearing care can deliver a return of \$16 for each \$1 invested.**

## HEARING LOSS ALSO INDUCES HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE BURDENS

For individuals living with untreated hearing loss, the impact extends beyond economics. In fact, untreated hearing loss is the [number one](#) cause of years lost to disability among the elderly in Western Europe, and **the number one modifiable risk factor of dementia**.

Universally, it is associated with an increased hospitalisation, diminished quality of life and growing risks of [co-morbidities](#), such as:

- Cognitive decline including [dementia](#) (further research [here](#))
- Mental ill-health including depression and anxiety
- Falls
- Fatigue
- Social isolation and loneliness

The [Hearing Health Forum EU](#) reports that those living with hearing loss are [33%](#) more likely to be depending on others than those without the condition. Yet for people with good access to treatment options there is a [proven reduction](#) in the number of interactions with primary and secondary healthcare, as well as social services, representing both direct and indirect cost savings.

“ The prevalence of hearing impairment among the EU population will increase 1.5-fold throughout the next decades. Now is the time to act to offer hearing care and treatments for all citizens experiencing hearing loss.

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Considering wider economic factors, the net cost saving to society for paediatric cochlear implantation is over \$53,000 (€43,500) per child over a lifetime.



### AN URGENT SOLUTION IS NEEDED: INVESTMENT

A solution is urgently needed as the prevalence of hearing impairment among the EU population will increase 1.5-fold throughout the next decades, largely due to an ageing population. It is commonly known that Europe is the [oldest continent](#) worldwide, with the highest proportion of seniors. Already [half](#) of the general government expenditure in the EU is being spent on ageing, and this proportion is expected to grow: ageing is

the most common contributing factor to hearing loss, meaning that costs to society are not likely to decrease unless this problem is tackled.

Many reports have recognised the financial and societal gains that can be achieved through investment in cost effective interventions for people living with hearing loss: according to the World Health Organization (WHO), increased access to integrated hearing care can deliver a [deliver a return](#) of \$16 for each \$1 invested. The same could be done in the European Union, especially since the cost effectiveness of hearing interventions including hearing aids or cochlear implants for severe to profound hearing loss in children and adults is well [documented](#) across different economic states.

## HOW CAN EU POLICYMAKERS HELP REDUCE THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COST OF HEARING LOSS?

The new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, adopted by the European Commission in March 2021, has the potential to considerably improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities. Coupled with the WHO World Report on Hearing's target indicators, it is clear that now is the time to act to offer hearing care and treatments for all citizens experiencing hearing loss: by investing in their future, their quality of life will be improved, as well as their productivity at work and overall contribution to the EU's economy.



Only 35% of Europeans living with hearing loss use hearing aids, and 4.2% of those who could benefit from cochlear implants use them. The new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 has the potential to considerably improve the quality of life of persons with hearing loss, but policymakers must go beyond to ensure decisive action.

Today, we are not doing enough: only 35% of Europeans living with hearing loss use hearing aids. For those who could benefit from cochlear implants, it is [estimated](#) that the penetration rate is just 4.2%. Investing at micro-level is therefore key for macro-level improvements.

Since 2017 the WHO urged policymakers to take a number of actions in its [resolution](#) on 'Prevention of deafness and hearing loss', which offers a great foundation for our own suggestions of what national and European policymakers can do to place hearing loss among national priorities and shape an action plan:

- **Raise awareness of the importance of hearing health**, the impact of hearing loss and the benefits of hearing loss treatment among the public and healthcare professionals.
- **Promote the need for robust national hearing health strategies** including diagnosis, rehabilitation, service and maintenance.
- **Introduce a national Newborn Hearing Screening Programme and Over 55 Hearing Screening Programme.**
- **Acknowledge access to professional hearing care as a right.**
- **Promote access to effective treatments** including hearing aids, bone conduction devices, and cochlear implants.
- **Explore and invest in effective methods of prevention and rehabilitation** for hearing loss.
- **Share best practices** among EU Member States.

To discuss hearing loss policy development in your country and global best practice, please contact the Hearing Health Forum EU team via [contact@hearinghealth.eu](mailto:contact@hearinghealth.eu).

Visit the website for more information about hearing loss at [www.hearinghealth.eu](http://www.hearinghealth.eu).

With thanks to our partners: EURO-CIU, HEARRING, and MED-EL.