

# LCSA responses to Questions on Notice

Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

6 March 2025

## Question 4

**Please expand on the concepts of community building and community deterioration as they relate to loneliness.**

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‘Until we address the root causes, social prescribing and similar ameliorative interventions run the risk of becoming the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, driven by well-meaning but beleaguered volunteers while at the same time being advertised as a radical innovation: the fence at the cliff face’ ... ‘We must come to the realisation that we do not have a safety problem, nor a social care problem, nor a youth problem, nor even a health problem; what we have is a village problem’.

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*(Russell 2024)*

Academic research consistently supports the idea that community deterioration—through urbanisation, economic inequality, loss of social infrastructure, and digital alienation—contributes to increased loneliness. Addressing this issue requires policy interventions that invest in social infrastructure, strengthen neighbourhood cohesion, and create opportunities for inclusive social participation.

Community building and community deterioration are deeply intertwined with the experience of loneliness. The strength of social bonds, the availability of communal spaces, and the presence of inclusive, engaged networks all influence whether individuals feel connected or isolated.

### **Community building and the reduction of loneliness**

Community building refers to the intentional process of strengthening relationships and creating a sense of belonging within a group or geographic area. Communities can create protective factors against loneliness by actively fostering social inclusion, recognising social isolation as a public health issue, and investing in communal resources. This occurs through:

- **Social networks and relationships:** Strong social networks, whether through friendships, families, or neighbourhood groups, provide emotional and practical support and counteract loneliness.
- **Inclusive public spaces:** Parks, libraries, and community centres create opportunities for spontaneous and structured social interactions, ensuring that individuals have accessible places to connect.

- **Shared activities and events:** Collective experiences, such as festivals, volunteer programs, and local initiatives, give people reasons to engage with one another, fostering a sense of belonging.
- **Technology and virtual communities:** Online groups and digital platforms can complement in-person relationships, offering people a way to connect despite physical distance or mobility challenges.

### Community deterioration and the rise of loneliness

Community deterioration occurs when social ties weaken, institutions erode, or neighbourhoods become less hospitable to social interaction. This can happen due to various factors:

- **Urbanisation and transience:** Rapid urban development often leads to the displacement of long-standing communities, reducing the stability of social networks. Similarly, frequent moves for work or study can prevent individuals from forming deep and lasting connections.
- **Economic inequality and social exclusion:** Economic disparities can lead to the fragmentation of communities, as those with fewer resources may be unable to participate in social activities or may live in areas with weaker social infrastructure.
- **Loss of public and third spaces:** When communal places like libraries, parks, and local businesses close, opportunities for casual social interaction diminish, exacerbating social isolation.
- **Digital alienation:** While technology can facilitate connection, excessive reliance on digital interactions - especially when replacing in-person relationships—can lead to feelings of detachment and loneliness.
- **Cultural shifts and individualism:** Societal trends toward individualism and self-reliance may reduce the emphasis on collective wellbeing, making it harder for people to seek or offer social support.

When communities deteriorate, loneliness often follows, increasing the risks of mental and physical health problems. Addressing loneliness requires proactive efforts to rebuild social trust, invest in communal spaces, and prioritise inclusive policies that strengthen social bonds.

Russell notes that, ‘the Greater Rochester Health Foundation funds groups to recruit community builders to work in their neighbourhoods to reweave the social fabric of their communities and increase collective efficacy at the block level’.