INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Parliament of New South Wales
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Submission to the Upper House Committee Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in NSW

Dear Committee Members,

My name is **Sky Camarce**, and I am pleased to submit my thoughts on the growing issue of loneliness and social isolation. I am a recent high school graduate with a deep passion for youth advocacy, particularly in the context of supporting young Australians as they transition from dependency to adulthood. Having personally experienced the challenges of this critical life stage, I am committed to raising awareness about the issues of social isolation and loneliness that many young people face after completing their HSC. My advocacy work has been shaped by my own experiences and the desire to ensure that future generations are better equipped with the support and resources they need during this transitional phase.

The post-HSC transition represents a pivotal life change for young Australians. The movement from the familiar routine of high school to the uncertainty of adulthood often leaves many feeling disconnected from their peers and the broader community. This phase can exacerbate loneliness, as young adults grapple with the loss of their school social networks, the pressures of future planning, and the struggle to find their place in a new and independent world.

Key Issues

1. Disconnection from School Networks

Many young Australians face a sudden break from the social networks they built during their school years. After completing their HSC, students often disperse in different directions—some attending university, others joining the workforce, and others taking gap years. This disruption can create feelings of isolation, especially for those who find themselves on different life paths from their friends. Without structured support to maintain or rebuild social connections, many young adults are left feeling adrift during this pivotal stage.

In addition to the loss of peer connections, the transition removes young people from regular, supportive interactions with teachers and school staff who previously provided guidance and mentorship. For those who may lack stable family support, the absence of these positive adult influences can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and contribute to emotional insecurity. Given that social isolation has significant psychological effects, this lack of supportive connections can deepen young people's sense of vulnerability during the transition to adulthood.

Prevalence, Causes, and Impacts of Loneliness In NSW

Research from the Australian Psychological Society (APS) shows that 40% of young Australians report experiencing significant social isolation during this life stage. The Australian Institute of Family Studies further indicates that young people without established networks are at a heightened risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This underscores the critical need for interventions that help maintain these networks and provide opportunities for new social connections.

2. **Increased Pressure to Succeed**

Along with disconnection, there is increased pressure for young adults to quickly decide their future path. Whether it is enrolling in higher education, entering the workforce, or taking on other responsibilities, this pressure can lead to anxiety and, in turn, a greater sense of loneliness. Many young Australians are left feeling overwhelmed by the societal expectation to "succeed" without adequate support or guidance.

3. **Mental and Physical Health Impacts**

The mental health implications of social isolation during the transition from school to adulthood are well-documented. This period, marked by the loss of structured support systems and the pressure to succeed, leaves many young people vulnerable to heightened levels of anxiety and depression. **Loneliness** amplifies these mental health challenges, as young adults often struggle to form new social connections outside of the familiar environment of high school.

For many, the isolation felt during this transition can lead to long-term emotional consequences. Studies indicate that **prolonged loneliness** is strongly associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. These mental health issues can have a snowball effect, making it more difficult for young people to engage in social activities, seek out new opportunities, or ask for help when needed. This can trap them in a cycle of loneliness, further exacerbating their emotional well-being.

Furthermore, the physical health impacts of loneliness cannot be ignored. **Social isolation** has been linked to higher levels of stress hormones, which can weaken the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to illness. Young adults who feel disconnected are also more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as neglecting physical activity, poor dietary habits, and, in some cases, substance misuse. These behaviours can contribute to long-term health issues, including cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and chronic fatigue.

A study from **ReachOut Australia** highlights that young people who experience loneliness during the transition to adulthood face an increased risk of developing emotional and physical health problems that may persist into later life. This includes heightened stress levels, sleep disturbances, and difficulty managing everyday responsibilities, which can further deepen feelings of isolation and anxiety. The cumulative effects of loneliness at this critical stage can lead to a range of negative outcomes, such as poor academic performance or difficulties maintaining steady employment, creating additional stressors that harm both mental and physical health.

The link between **mental and physical health** is clear: when one is neglected, the other often suffers. Young adults who experience anxiety or depression due to loneliness may also be more likely to neglect their physical well-being, leading to a vicious cycle of declining health. This cycle can become even more challenging to break as time goes on, underscoring the need for early interventions.

Given the substantial risks associated with loneliness during this life stage, it is crucial to provide young people with the support and resources they need to navigate this transition successfully. By expanding access to mental

health services and creating opportunities for social connection, we can help mitigate the harmful impacts of loneliness and improve both the mental and physical well-being of young Australians.

4. Financial Costs of Loneliness

The economic impact of loneliness is often overlooked but carries significant implications for both the NSW budget and the broader state economy. Loneliness, especially when it becomes chronic, can lead to increased healthcare costs, decreased workforce productivity, and higher demand on social services.

a) **Healthcare Costs**: Prolonged loneliness is linked to various mental and physical health issues, including depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and weakened immunity. These health issues require medical intervention, leading to higher healthcare expenditures for the state. According to studies by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, individuals experiencing chronic loneliness are more likely to visit general practitioners, emergency departments, and mental health professionals, putting strain on public healthcare resources. **Targeted early interventions to reduce loneliness could lead to significant cost savings in healthcare by preventing these long-term health complications.**

b) **Lost Productivity**: Young people experiencing social isolation often struggle with focus, motivation, and self-esteem, which can affect their academic and career performance. This is particularly concerning for recent high school graduates who are in their formative working years. When young adults face career instability or underemployment due to unresolved mental health issues linked to loneliness, it results in lost productivity and reduces their contributions to the state economy. **Investing in preventive measures, such as mental health support programs and youth mentorship initiatives, can help ensure that young people are prepared to engage fully in the workforce, ultimately boosting productivity.**

c) **Increased Demand on Social Services**: Chronic loneliness can lead individuals to require additional social support services, including counselling, housing assistance, and welfare support. For young people who struggle with social isolation during the transition from school to adulthood, there may be an increased reliance on government-funded support services. By addressing loneliness proactively through structured support programs, community engagement initiatives, and mental health resources, the NSW Government could potentially reduce the long-term financial burden on social services.

d) **Impacts on Community Stability**: Social isolation among young people also affects the broader community by diminishing community engagement and cohesion. When individuals feel disconnected, they are less likely to participate in community events or volunteer work, which can weaken local support networks. This detachment can create a ripple effect, where communities lose potential leaders, role models, and contributors, impacting both economic vitality and social stability. **Programs that foster youth engagement in community activities could help strengthen local networks, reducing long-term economic costs associated with social fragmentation.**

e) **Future Economic Costs**: Failing to address loneliness and social isolation in young people can have compounding economic costs. As socially isolated individuals age, they are more likely to face chronic health issues and prolonged periods of unemployment, resulting in increased demand for healthcare and welfare benefits. Addressing loneliness early in life can help build a resilient, healthier population that contributes positively to the economy over the long term.

Evidence and Research

Prevalence, Causes, and Impacts of Loneliness In NSW

The post-HSC transition is a vulnerable period for many young Australians. Research from Mission Australia's Youth Survey (2021) indicates that nearly 35% of respondents felt unprepared for life after high school, with the lack of social support being a key concern. Additionally, a 2022 report from the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that youth experiencing isolation during this life stage are at an increased risk of developing chronic mental health conditions. This aligns with findings from the ReachOut Australia study, which highlights that young people face a greater risk of both physical and mental health problems when isolated from peers.

Data on youth social isolation highlights gaps in current support systems. Improved data capture through routine surveys and school exit interviews would provide valuable insights into the causes and prevalence of loneliness among young people. By consistently measuring loneliness at key transition points, policymakers could better assess the long-term effects of isolation and the success of existing interventions. These findings suggest that providing targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs and mental health resources, could help mitigate the effects of social isolation among youth transitioning to adulthood.

Recommendations

1. **Post-HSC Support Programs:**
   The NSW Government should implement structured, elective post-HSC transition programs across all high schools. These programs should be available for at least six months after the HSC, offering workshops and resources on career counselling, financial literacy, time management, and mental health resilience. Local TAFEs and community organisations should collaborate with schools to run these programs, ensuring accessibility in both urban and rural areas. Additionally, schools should track engagement with these programs and provide individual follow-ups for students showing signs of disengagement or difficulty adjusting to life post-HSC.

2. **Youth Mentorship Initiatives:**
   A formal mentorship initiative should be established at the state level to support young adults post-HSC. This initiative could be run through existing community centres or online platforms. Each young person transitioning from high school should have access to a mentor—either a professional in their desired field or a young adult who has successfully navigated the post-HSC transition. The program should include quarterly check-ins between mentors and mentees, offering guidance on decision-making around education, employment, and social challenges. Additionally, a database of volunteer mentors should be created and maintained by local councils or the Department of Education.

3. **Expanded Access to Mental Health Services:**
   The NSW Government should mandate that schools partner with local health districts to provide free or subsidised counselling services specifically tailored to youth transitioning out of school. These services should include telehealth options, particularly for students in remote areas, and be promoted actively through schools' digital platforms, social media, and community centres. Furthermore, the mental health support program should include peer-led support groups where young adults can share their experiences and challenges in a safe, moderated environment. These groups should meet bi-weekly, offering continuous support for those feeling isolated after school.

4. **Public Awareness Campaigns on Youth Loneliness:**
   a) A state-funded public awareness campaign should be launched to reduce the stigma associated with loneliness and promote available support services. This campaign should involve collaborations with youth-focused organisations like Headspace, ReachOut Australia, and beyondblue to provide legitimacy and a wide reach. By developing engaging multimedia

content—such as short videos, social media posts, and radio ads—the campaign could effectively target youth platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Including interactive content, such as online forums or live Q&A sessions, could also encourage more young people to engage directly with mental health professionals and peer support groups.

b) The campaign should also prioritise culturally diverse representation to ensure it resonates with young people from all backgrounds, including those who might feel disconnected due to cultural or language barriers. In addition, the campaign should spotlight specific resources, including local youth groups, mental health hotlines, and mentorship programs, ensuring information is accessible to young people regardless of their location. Regularly updating the content and collecting user feedback could help keep the campaign relevant and responsive to young people's changing needs.

5. **Incentivize Employers to Hire Recent Graduates:**
The government should introduce tax incentives for businesses that hire recent HSC graduates, providing them with on-the-job training, mentorship, and career development support. By offering businesses financial incentives, this program would help reduce the pressure on young adults to immediately enrol in higher education, giving them more time to explore career paths while maintaining financial independence. Additionally, the program could include government-funded apprenticeships or internships tailored to those who need more hands-on learning experiences before committing to higher education or long-term employment.

6. **Create Youth Transition Centers in High-Density Areas:**
Establish dedicated youth transition centres in metropolitan and regional hubs where recent graduates can receive comprehensive support. These centres would offer a range of services such as career counselling, mental health support, financial planning, and legal advice on issues like housing and employment contracts. Centres would be staffed by youth specialists and offer drop-in services, as well as scheduled workshops. The centres should also host social events to help young adults build new friendships and professional networks post-HSC.

Conclusion

The transition from high school to adulthood is a crucial period for young Australians, one that requires more attention and support. By introducing targeted interventions, such as post-HSC programs, mentorship initiatives, and expanded mental health services, the NSW Government can help mitigate the feelings of loneliness and isolation that many young people experience during this life stage.

Thank you for considering my submission. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations further with the Committee

Yours Faithfully,

Sky Camarce
Youth Advocate