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

Organisation: Orygen

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ORYGEN SUBMISSION

Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the *Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales (NSW)*. Orygen's submission will address the impact of these issues for young people, with particular focus on mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pay respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

Orygen receives funding from the Australian Government as the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health which includes the provision of policy advice. This submission does not necessarily reflect this advice.

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A. THE EXTENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN NSW

Conversations about loneliness have often centred around the experiences of older people, but young people report significantly higher rates of loneliness in Australia. The prevalence of loneliness in young people has risen steadily over the past fifteen years.(1)

In 2023, Mission Australia's Youth Survey found more than one in five young people (aged 15–19 years) living in NSW reported feeling lonely most or all of the time in the past four weeks.(2) This aligns with similar data published by Ending Loneliness Together.(3) Nearly a third of Youth Survey respondents living in NSW also said they found it hard fit in and socialise with everyone else – gender diverse young people (one in two) and young women and girls (one in three) reported this experience at a higher rate than young men and boys (one in five).(2)

B. POPULATIONS MOST AT RISK OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

RISK FACTORS AND CORRELATES

Every young person manages a personal combination of demographic, health and socio-environmental factors that can contribute to their vulnerability for experiencing problematic loneliness. The likelihood of problematic loneliness may increase when multiple challenges converge, or during times of significant stress or transition.

Social isolation and social exclusion

Young people from vulnerable or marginalised population groups have higher rates of loneliness, social isolation, and social exclusion. These factors can reduce their opportunity meaningfully participate in social, community and institutional settings.(4-7)

Belonging and bullying

A sense of belonging is a protective factor for mental health and against loneliness.(8-12) Social interaction with peers is linked to the developmentally important processes of identity-formation and autonomy.(13, 14) Adverse social experiences during childhood and adolescence can lead to diminished self-worth and a less defined sense of identity.(15)

Bullying is a common social problem associated with decreased sense of belonging, and increased marginalisation and loneliness.(10, 11, 16) In 2023, more than one in three children and young people living in NSW reported experiencing bullying at school, online, in the community, or at work within the past 12 months.

Effective policy interventions should promote inclusive cultures, build positive peer relationships and address bullying behaviours through a strengths-based approach that reduces social isolations and improve social relationships skills.(9, 17)

RECOMMENDATION 1
Build socially inclusive school cultures.
Foster inclusive school environments that encourage positive peer relationships, reduce marginalisation or bullying, and promote help-seeking. Support school leaders to collaborate with students to develop and test social inclusion structures that promote diversity, empathy, and provide evidence-based advice to those needing additional support for loneliness.

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adulthood, spanning the late teens to early twenties, entails significant life transitions in addition to ongoing developmental changes. These transitions can heighten feelings of loneliness and risk of social isolation.(6, 10, 18) While transient loneliness is a normative response motivates social engagement, it is also associated with poorer wellbeing and has wider implications for mental health challenges such as social anxiety, depression, psychological distress and emotion regulation

difficulties, and suicidality.(3, 4, 19, 20) Emerging adults experience higher rates of social anxiety than other age groups. One in two young people (18–25 years), and one in three adolescents (12–17 years) meet the criteria for possible problematic social anxiety. Young adult women reported higher rates of loneliness despite similar rates of social isolation risk across genders.(6)

RESEARCH GAPS RELATING TO SECTIONS A AND B

While several national and state-based studies have measured general population prevalence of loneliness across NSW in recent years, gaps remain in our understanding of who is most vulnerable and how loneliness impacts people over time.(2, 3, 14, 20, 21) Young people's loneliness is currently being measured using tools designed for adult respondents. Because young people may experience loneliness differently to adults, there is a need for a psychometrically validated tool to ensure the way we measure the prevalence of loneliness for this cohort is developmentally appropriate.(22) Expanding the NSW Population Health Survey and the Tell Them From Me student survey to include questions about loneliness would enable policymakers to better understand if and when this experience rises and falls across the life course, and how it impacts other wellbeing outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Utilise the *NSW Population Health Survey* and the *Tell Them From Me* student survey to measure and analyse young people's loneliness and social isolation.

The NSW Government should expand these surveys to include questions about young people's experiences of loneliness and social isolation to develop a clearer picture of how intersecting social determinants – for example gender, ethnicity, geographic area – impact wellbeing outcomes.

C. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF LONELINESS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Loneliness is "a force for downward mobility" (10), and can have serious consequences for mental and physical health.(3) Targeted interventions to alleviate loneliness and strengthen social connections can mitigate the impacts for young people. Designing effective interventions requires a better understanding of who is most vulnerable to loneliness, how it affects other long-term life outcomes, and whether periods of transient loneliness can predict chronic loneliness.

MENTAL HEALTH

Loneliness is significantly related to a range of mental health symptoms and diagnoses, including social anxiety, depression, emotional distress and regulation challenges, and suicidality. Studies show loneliness and lack of social support impacts young people's psychological wellbeing.(19) These impacts are persistent with the risk and severity of anxiety and depression continuing even after someone's experience of loneliness subsides.(23)

Psychological distress

Young people aged 15–25 years who feel lonely and isolated experience high or very high levels of psychological distress at nearly triple the rate of their peers who do not feel lonely.(19)

Social anxiety

Loneliness is both a cause and consequence of social anxiety.(3, 6, 23) Young Australians experiencing moderate and severe loneliness are over four times more likely to have social anxiety.(3)

Depression

Loneliness can precede depression, with even moderate loneliness significantly increasing the risk of depressive symptoms, even after controlling for sociodemographic factors.(3, 24) Individuals experiencing loneliness are close to five times more likely to have depression.(3)

Suicidality and self-harm

Loneliness is a strong predictor of suicidality and self-harm.(4, 10) A UK study found those experiencing severe loneliness were 17 times more likely have attempted suicide in the previous year.(25)

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Loneliness is linked to numerous physical health outcomes that can continue throughout all life stages.(3, 4, 26, 27) For young people, loneliness is associated with poor sleep quality; higher rates of somatic symptoms (for example, headaches and migraines, back pain and stomach aches), asthma, increased inflammation, and early signs of cardiovascular issues.(10, 20, 28, 29)

Young people who experience loneliness may also engage in risky behaviours – such as smoking, problematic substance use, overeating, and unsafe sexual practices – often as a means of coping or fitting in with peers. These behaviours carry long-term health risks, underscoring the need for interventions to improve overall wellbeing.(10, 20)

E. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSIENT LONELINESS INTO TO CHRONIC LONELINESS

Research on episodic or transient loneliness is limited. Collecting longitudinal data is likely to be a useful way of gaining insight into how and when transient or episodic periods of loneliness become more chronic, and who is most at risk. Qualitative studies on the causes and effects of young people's loneliness will be central to recognising loneliness, and ensuring young people can access the skills, strategies, and support they need to prevent transient loneliness from becoming chronic.(14, 20)

RECOMMENDATION 3
Develop a longitudinal research program to track experiences of loneliness across the lifespan.
Mixed methods research is required to understand if and how episodes of transient loneliness impact long-term wellbeing outcomes or predict chronic loneliness. The NSW Government should commission ongoing research to track frequency and duration of experiences of loneliness and social isolation, as well as wellbeing outcomes, across the lifespan.

F. FINANCIAL COSTS OF LONELINESS TO NSW

Loneliness can have significant, ongoing social and economic effects on both individuals and society. Beyond the added healthcare costs tied to the issues outlined in section C, loneliness is also associated poorer education and employment outcomes, which further impact social and economic prosperity. For instance, a young person who feels lonely during secondary school is more likely to experience health challenges that limit their work capacity, affecting their personal earning capacity, as well as wider productivity and economic stability.(3, 4, 27) Additionally, individuals experiencing financial hardship are nearly seven times more likely to face persistent loneliness, placing economically disadvantaged young people at higher risk.(30)

Education and employment

Young people experiencing loneliness are less likely to be engaged in education, employment, or training.(10) This can reduce their confidence in employment potential, and loneliness in adolescence has been shown to predict unemployment later in life.(28)

Social cohesion

While loneliness can affect anyone, certain socially isolated or marginalised groups experience it more acutely, impacting not only individual wellbeing but also broader social cohesion.(4, 8, 10)

I. STEPS THE NSW STATE GOVERNMENT CAN TAKE TO REDUCE THE IMPACTS OF LONELINESS

Management of loneliness and promotion of social connection involves multiple departments and complex funding pathways across each level of government. State and local governments can play an indispensable role in leading the implementation and regular evaluation of evidence-based social connection activities within their communities.

A SOLUTION IN SOCIAL CONNECTION

Modern economic, cultural and technological shifts have encouraged more individualised lifestyles, reducing the frequency of face-to-face interactions. The increase in single-person households, the blurring of work and personal time, and rapid digitalisation have affected young people's opportunities for social connection significantly.(31) As traditional social structures evolve, targeted policy efforts will be essential to creating new ways to foster community and connection.

Social connection is a powerful protective factor for mental health and wellbeing, countering loneliness by building a sense of belonging, "interpersonal trust", and optimism – key elements that contribute to broader community resilience.(32, 33) The NSW Government should collaborate with young people to develop activities, programs and spaces that enhance social connection within local communities.

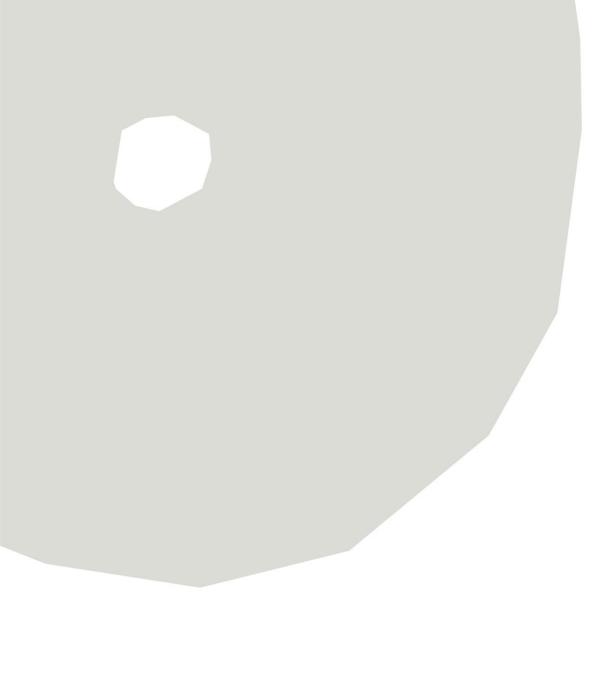| RECOMMENDATION 4 |
|---|
| **Expand community-based social connection opportunities.** |
| Community programs offer young people opportunities to build social connections outside formal systems. The NSW Government should increase funding for free or low-cost community-based activities, initiatives and spaces that aim to strengthen social connection between young people and their local communities. |
| Trial creative initiatives to engage young people in local extra-curricular activities that foster social connection (for example, discounted group activities). Involve local young people in the selection and evaluation of initiatives to inform the scaling-up of successful programs. |

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