

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

**Organisation:** Ending Loneliness Together

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# Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness in New South Wales

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## About Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together was founded in 2016 by a collaboration of established leaders and experts in the field of loneliness, with a vision to create an Australia where everyone feels a sense of connection and belonging. Now a national organisation underpinned by lived experience, research, community, government and health expertise, Ending Loneliness Together generates research and translates evidence into practical resources and solutions to effectively address social isolation and loneliness.

[www.endingloneliness.com.au](http://www.endingloneliness.com.au)

Registered with Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission (ACNC)

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## Introduction

Ending Loneliness Together welcomes this parliamentary inquiry into loneliness and isolation in NSW.

Loneliness and social isolation are now recognised internationally as significant threats to public health, important community-based targets for prevention of mental and physical ill-health, and major contributors to health system costs.<sup>3,4</sup> Indeed, the UK and Japan both having appointed Ministers to address loneliness and suicide prevention.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection (2024-2026) launched in late 2023 and will focus on addressing loneliness and social isolation, to promote social connection from a global perspective.<sup>1</sup> The Commission will focus on increasing global awareness and advocacy, fostering global partnerships and review the scientific evidence on solutions and policies from around the world.

In 2025, the Commission will make policy recommendations to all governments on how to effectively address loneliness and social isolation. Associate Professor Michelle Lim, CEO and Scientific Chair of Ending Loneliness Together, provides advice to the World Health Organization Commission to Social Connection secretariat.

Ending Loneliness Together is well-informed of the work of the Commission and will continue to work alongside other international agencies including the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection.

## The prevalence of loneliness in the NSW community

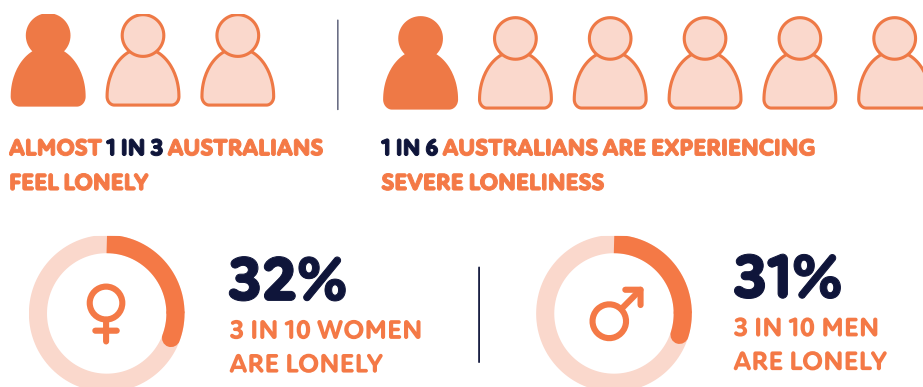
In reporting on prevalence, we need to define what we mean by loneliness and isolation as they are not the same thing and require different responses.

**Loneliness** is ‘a subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying social relationships’.<sup>2</sup> Loneliness is **different from social isolation** which involves having objectively fewer social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.<sup>2</sup> Measures of social isolation focus on the number and/or frequency of social contact but are **not adequate for assessing loneliness**.<sup>3</sup>

Loneliness also differs from the general sense of well-being, introversion, (absence of) social support, depression, solitude, and social exclusion, and therefore cannot be accurately inferred from these constructs.<sup>4</sup> Measuring loneliness therefore requires its own question.

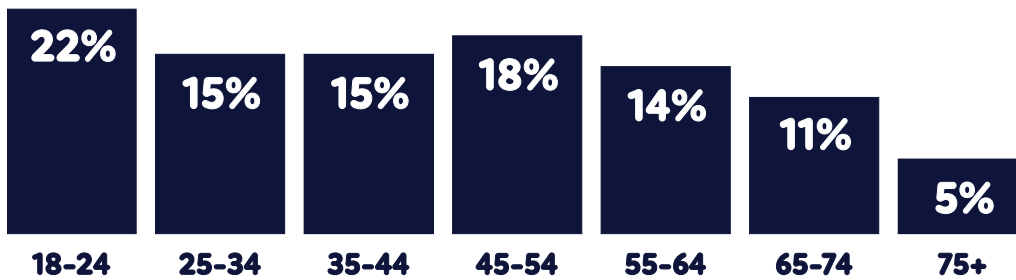
In 2023, ELT together with the Prevention Research Collaboration Unit, Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney, undertook Australia’s largest [State of the Nation Report](#) on Social Connection.<sup>5</sup> The findings were launched during Australia’s first [Loneliness Awareness Week](#) in August 2023. The large scale nationally representative study of 4026 people explored the unique prevalence, perceptions, experiences and impact of loneliness and social isolation in Australia.

### A summary of the State of the Nation report indicates the severity of the problem in our communities.



Loneliness is highly prevalent, and it does not discriminate. It negatively affects Australians across genders, ages, and states. While there were no significant differences across states for loneliness, NSW residents reported the highest prevalence with 29% meeting criteria for loneliness (i.e., defined as meeting a cut off score of more than 10 on the gold standard University of California Loneliness scale 4 items).

### Percentage of Australians who often/always feel lonely (by age group):



### Prevalence of Loneliness by State/Territory



An estimated 29% of people living in NSW report loneliness at any given time

### What do Australians think about loneliness?

Despite the high prevalence of loneliness, Australians hold many negative misconceptions about loneliness, poor knowledge of how to find help, felt ashamed when they feel lonely and were likely to conceal their loneliness. This means that Australians are not getting the help they need early to prevent poor health outcomes.

These data tell us that community awareness of the issue is lacking – specifically Australians understand that loneliness is an issue, but they do not know how to help themselves or others, where to go, and are reluctant to seek help early.

### How are Australians affected by loneliness?

People who were lonely were 2 times more likely to also have chronic disease, 4.6 times more likely to report clinical levels of depression, 4.1 times more likely to report social anxiety, and 5.2 times more likely to report poor wellbeing.

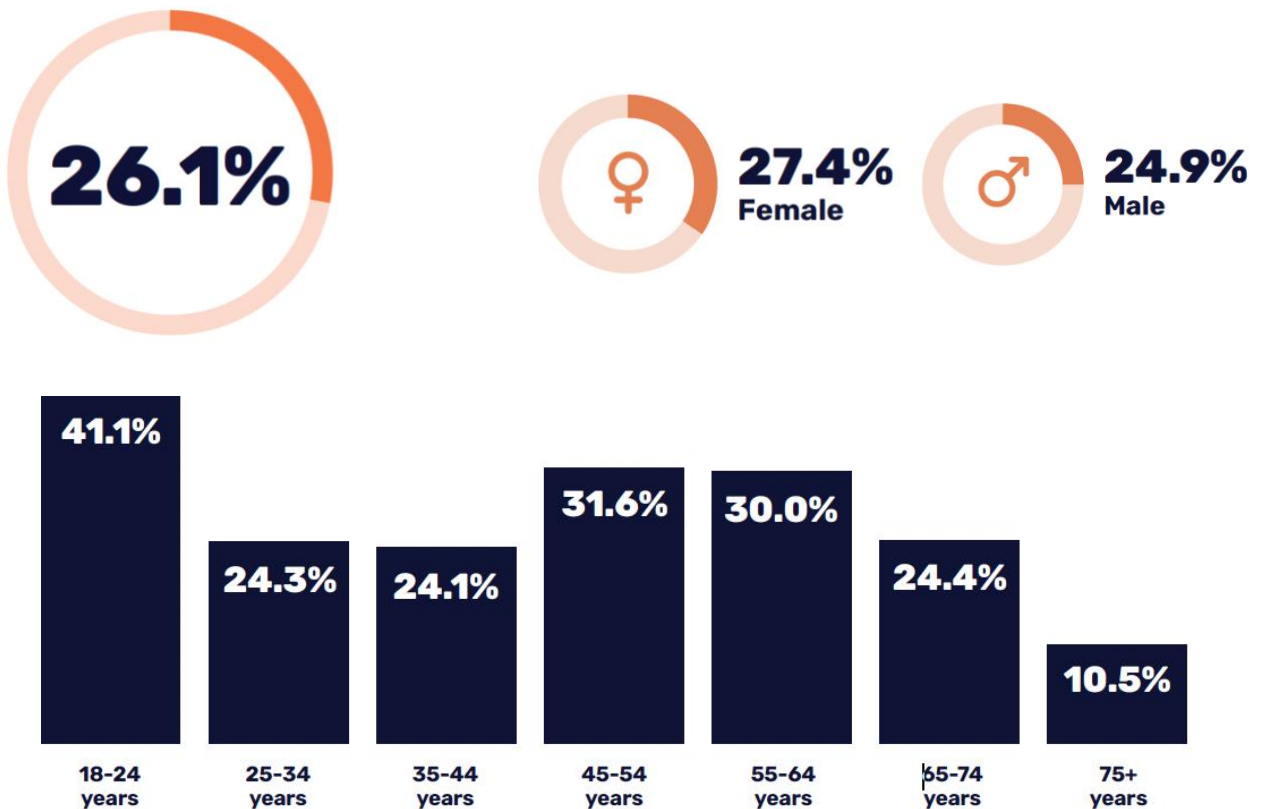
Unfortunately, people who are lonely are also less engaged in physical activity, more likely to have social media addiction and less productivity at work (including more presenteeism, absenteeism and impairment).

## Why we feel lonely? Report 2024

In 2024, ELT conducted a follow up study titled [Why we feel lonely?](#) from the State of the Nation Report on Social Connection.<sup>5</sup> This study followed up the 4026 participants over a period of 16 weeks. Persistent loneliness is defined as people who met criteria to be classified as lonely at least across two consecutive points (i.e., a minimum of 8 weeks and up to 16 weeks). This report highlights how many Australians report persistent loneliness and who is at risk of persistent loneliness.

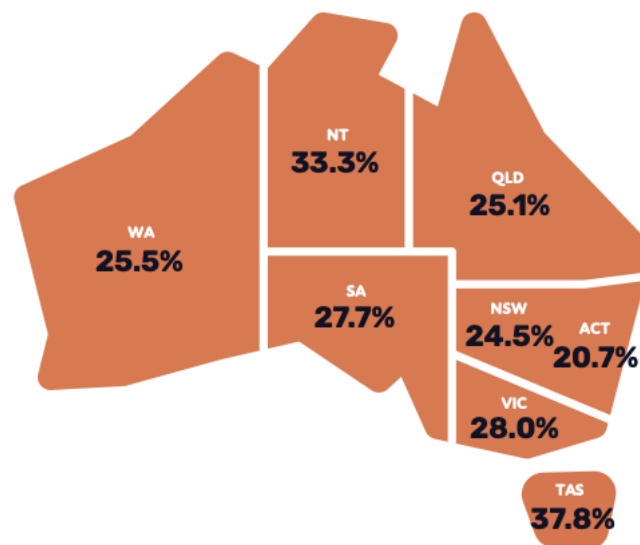
### Prevalence of Persistent Loneliness

#### All people





## Prevalence of Persistent Loneliness by State/Territory



### Almost 25% of people living in NSW report persistent loneliness

#### Who is affected by persistent loneliness?

Particular communities were identified to report persistent loneliness.

1. **Young people** aged 18-24 are 2.4 times more likely compared to people aged 35-44 years old.
2. People who are **single** are 2.7 times more likely to report persistent loneliness compared to people who are in a relationship or married.
3. People who are **separated or divorced** are 2.1 times more likely to report persistent loneliness compared to people who are in a relationship or married.
4. Those with **chronic health condition** are 1.5 times more likely to report persistent loneliness compared to people without a chronic health condition.
5. Those with **mental health conditions** are 2.9 times more likely to report persistent loneliness compared to people without a mental health condition.
6. Communities from a **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Background** are 1.5 times more likely to report persistent loneliness compared to people who do not have a CALD background.
7. Those who **report financial hardship** (almost 7 times) compared with those who do not report financial hardship.

## What are the costs in Australia?

A 2021 report from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre <sup>6</sup> estimated the cost of loneliness at \$2.7 billion each year, an equivalent annual cost of \$1,565 for each person who becomes lonely.



In 2019, the National Mental Health Commission showed that for every \$1 invested in programs that address loneliness, the return on investment is between \$2.14 to \$2.87 respectively. <sup>7,8</sup>



## What are the opportunities for the NSW Government?

We made five recommendations based on what is currently lacking.

### 1. Commission the development of an evidence based statewide strategy to promote social connection and address loneliness and social isolation

We call on the NSW Government to adopt a 5–10-year, statewide strategy for addressing social isolation and loneliness. This is consistent with the recommendations of the Report of the Queensland’s Parliament Community Support and Services Committee on its Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland (Recommendation 14); the ACT’s Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT (Recommendation 4); and

Ending Loneliness Together's forthcoming recommendation (in its pre-budget submission) to develop a National Strategy for addressing social isolation and loneliness.

As noted by the ACT and QLD inquiry reports, loneliness and social isolation are complex issues that cannot be solved in isolation by a single sector or discipline; a strategy is a critical foundation for mobilising not only different government agencies, but also the social sector, private sector and individual community members.

We submit that a state-level strategy should:

- Establish a state-level target for reducing loneliness and social isolation in NSW. *For example, Denmark's recent National Partnership Against Loneliness establishes a quantitative 2040 target*
- Seek commitments from individual government agencies and departments to incorporate strategies for reducing social isolation. *For example, the ACT Inquiry highlighted research on the connection between public transport and social connection, which warrant transport-specific actions (and the UK Government's Strategy articulates a set of actions that a range of critical departments would take expressly to address social isolation)*
- Shepherd efforts from across sectors toward the most effective interventions with the strongest evidence base (informed by national-level frameworks and evaluation), and communities who are most affected in NSW. *For example, ELT has conducted robust national-level research into prevalence, which could be further broken down by jurisdiction*
- Identify mechanisms for supporting place-based, local approaches, including support for local governments to engage participants in co-design of appropriate services. *For example, the UK Strategy and QLD Inquiry explicitly call out support for place-based responses*
- Establish state-level governance and accountability mechanisms for driving progress against these targets and commitments from all sectors. *For example, the UK Government has reported annually since 2019 on progress against its strategy*

This strategy would serve as a vital complement to a national strategy, addressing state-level levers that ultimately only the NSW Government can exercise (in the same way that other major social and public health issues in Australia have generated both state-level and national strategies, such as the NSW Government Housing 2041 Strategy and the forthcoming National Housing and Homelessness Plan).

The NSW Government might also consider establishing a Ministerial portfolio for social connection, to help coordinate the delivery of the state-level strategy, provide a platform for federal lobbying, raise public awareness (as the ACT Government calls for in Recommendation 1, 'to establish a Minister for Loneliness and Social Isolation', and following the examples of the UK and Japan in establishing dedicated Ministerial positions)].

**2. Develop, implement and evaluate a Social Connection Competency framework.**

We recommend adopting a multisectoral approach that can deliver a comprehensive framework to guide community, health, and corporate sectors to address loneliness and social isolation, and to promote social connection. We also recommend a framework that is evidence-based, can be implemented within policy and evaluated. Ending Loneliness Together is made up of a coalition of organisations in Australia and can quickly coordinate multisectoral stakeholders via a variety of forums including clinical and community round tables. Similar to other governments (e.g., Denmark and the USA), work can be commissioned and coordinated with NSW government stakeholders. Synergising with experts doing the work will mean that this can be executed swiftly and in a cost-effective way. See the Ending Loneliness Together prebudget submission 2024-2025.

**3. Implement evidence based training program for frontline practitioners in NSW.**

NSW can train first responders in programs already developed and led by the Ending Loneliness Together. For example, the Social Connection literacy program or Meaningful Social Connection at Work. These training programs were developed from evidence-based approaches and provide practical solutions on how to identify, help, or redirect. Given that children, adolescents and young people are also affected by loneliness, an evidence-based training program designed to educators, parents, and to the young person themselves is needed and can be swiftly developed by Ending Loneliness Together.

**4. Improve community awareness of loneliness in the NSW.** The NSW government, similar to Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria can support the annual Loneliness Awareness Week, an initiative that is shepherded by Ending Loneliness Together. This campaign has wide reach and in 2024 yielded 288 million media impressions in just 3 weeks. Community forums held on the grassroots levels, within schools and organizations to increase awareness and improve the way we speak about loneliness can destigmatise the issue and promote help seeking behaviour.

**5. Augment the Ending Loneliness Together Directory on NSW services catered to improve social connection in NSW residents.** This curated directory helps people who are lonely or people who want to help others who are lonely (including health practitioners, family, friends). The NSW government can augment this national directory to ensure that all NSW services that address loneliness and social isolation are available on the directory.

## **Why should the NSW Government work with Ending Loneliness Together on addressing loneliness and social isolation?**

Ending Loneliness Together is already identified as the leading authority on loneliness, social isolation, and social connection in Australia, and an international leader working with global agencies including the World Health Organization and the Global initiative on Loneliness and Connection.

Our CEO, Associate Professor Lim has also provided advice on this issue to other international Governments include South Korea, Japan, USA, and Sweden.

We have worked with and has given consultation to the Victorian State government, Department of Health, the Queensland Government, the South Australian Government, and the NSW Mental Health Commission on their initiatives focused on loneliness.

We also already have an active Lived Experience Advisory Panel and a community of practice that brings grassroots organisations working on this issue together.

Given the level of expertise and current activities, it will be cost effective for the NSW to execute any recommendations that will come out of the inquiry.

A coordinated evidence-based response to strengthen social connection in our communities will alleviate the burden and cost to Australia and enhance economic participation, productivity, and growth. However, it requires a coordinated effort to bring Australians across sectors to work on the whole of systems problem.

Ending Loneliness Together is well-placed to assist the NSW Government and lead the way.

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