

Submission  
No 63

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

**Organisation:** CORE Community Services

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# Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

## Submission prepared by:

CORE Community Services

CORE Community Services (CCS), located in Southwest Sydney, has been operating for 47 years and is a vital resource focused on enhancing the well-being of residents. It addresses social isolation through various programs and activities that promote community connection and support. CCS runs three neighbourhood centres within the area that serve as hubs for engagement and assistance. These centres offer programs such as social groups, recreational activities and educational workshops for all ages, all aimed at fostering relationships among residents and reducing isolation. Despite their valuable services, the Neighbourhood Community Centres (NCC) face challenges including limited funding, increasing demand for services, and the need to adapt to diverse community needs. The emphasis on local community response helps the NCC tailor our initiatives effectively, ensuring they remain relevant and impactful combatting social isolation.

Loneliness and social isolation are distinct concepts, although they often overlap, and this is emphasized in Weiss's work on loneliness. Weiss, 1975 outlines how loneliness can stem from both lack of social connection (social isolation) and the absence of deep emotional bonds (emotional isolation). Weiss connects his work on loneliness to John Bowlby attachment theory by emphasising the significance of emotional bonds in determining an individual's emotional well-being. Weiss argues that it's not merely the quantity of social interactions that matter, but rather the quality and depth relationships. This aligns with Bowlby's insights which suggest that early attachments shapes how individuals form relationships later in life. Weiss work on loneliness can be linked to the concept of community response by emphasising the collective role that social networks and community support play in fostering emotional wellbeing. Just as Bowlby attachment theory highlights the importance of secure relationships for individuals' mental health, community response creates environments where individuals can build meaningful connections, such as NCC settings enhancing feeling of belonging and reducing isolation, and this is echoed in community dynamics where supportive relationships can buffer against loneliness. (Weiss, Weiss, 1975)

CCS NCC offers services to all vulnerable groups including Children, Youth, CALD, Seniors, Aged & Disability etc. each encountering unique challenges related to loneliness and social isolation.

CCS has not collated specific data on loneliness and Social Isolation, but we do capture these aspects through the narratives and experiences shared by our clients.

**Example 1:** CCS NCC provides Food relief programs that are accessed by all vulnerable groups. CORE has seen an increase in demand for food relief particularly among single-person household many of whom have pet companion. This demographic face unique challenges navigating cost of

living, and the expense of their pet adds on financial burden making it more difficult to afford nutritious food for both themselves and their animal companion.

- Client X: A woman in her early 30's was referred by a partner organisation to receive food relief support. During conversation it was identified that she has 10 cats that fill a void and offer solace in times of hardship – the client has no connection to her family, friends and struggles with mental health. Living alone she expressed that her cats are a source of her comfort and companionship. This bond highlights the principles of attachment theory which shows how meaningful relationships are essential for our emotional wellbeing. The client's situation sheds light on a broader issue that many individuals regardless of age are navigating life alone leading to isolation. **"I LOVE my Cats, I can't live without them, they are my friends"**

**Example 2:** One of our Neighbourhood Centres is in a dominant high density social housing blocks where residents often struggle mental health, substance abuse, crime and violence.

- Client X: After sharing a considerable amount of time in prison, one client returned home to find his living space vandalised and damaged. Residing in a high-density social housing block and area populated predominately by other single men, many of them who struggle with issues related to drug and alcohol abuse, this client felt isolated and disconnected. Client X expressed to the support worker that they have no family or friends to rely on and harbours deep mistrust towards government agencies. The client also shared frustration about securing employment and their inability to move to a safer and more stable environment to start a new life due to financial constraints and. **"I feel very lonely living here in this place" "I don't have any friends or family to turn to"**
  - The clients experience exemplifies the profound effects of loneliness and social isolation. Without a supportive network of family, friends they would face greater challenges in navigating the transition back into society. Their feelings of distrust towards government agencies further alienate them leaving them without valuable and adequate resources or connections. The combination of these factors not only hinder ability to find work but also exacerbates their sense of isolation, making it more difficult to rebuild life and break free from challenges associated with recidivism. This client's story is reflective of many individuals who seek our support, with numerous cases resulting in recidivism and a return to prison.

A successful initiative "Reinvent yourself Women Support Group" implemented through Domestic Violence program specifically for women was able to reduce loneliness and social isolation. This program provided a safe space for women to seek support and forge new connections with each other. Many participants reported feelings of loneliness and a lack of support, as they often found themselves without family or friends to rely on. 90% of attendees were newly arrived migrant and refugee women often settling in Australia under the spouse visa. In addition to acculturation stress, compounding factors such as language barrier, navigation in a new country, employment, financial constraints added extra layer of complexity in these women lives.

Over the course of two years, the program fostered strong relationships among the women leading to establishment of trust within the group. This bond has encouraged them to extend their support beyond the confines of the program itself; for example, **one mother shared that she is unable to**

**pick up her children from school, she feels comfortable reaching out to another mother in the group for help. The informal network of friendship became instrumental in their day to day lives.**

Finding: Many participants reported increased feelings of connection and trust within the group. Participants have become more confident reaching out for help, demonstrating a shift from isolation to community reliance. Feedback from the group indicated that many women continue to form friendships beyond the program, suggesting a positive long-term impact.

### Art Class

Children today often experience loneliness exacerbated by the overuse of social media and devices lacking face to face relationships and warmth of friendship. Therefore, NCC at CCS art classes were organised targeting young children aged between the age of 5 to 12. The main objective of the project was to involve children in a safe, nurturing space that allowed the mental and artistic stimulation and provide holding space for organic friendship to develop and evolve.

#### **A positive story -**

- A parent recently noticed her young son was spending too much time online gaming which made them feel isolated. To address this, the parent enrolled her son in art class.
- The parent expressed joy when her child participated in the art program, meeting children of the same age. The young child and parent forged new connections, friendships and experience of genuine fun. **Client X "I'm so happy my son gets to come here talk and paint and make friends, at home he is always glued to the game"**

Our neighbourhood centres play a vital role in combating loneliness and isolation by fostering a sense of community and belonging among residents. By offering a diverse range of programs, including educational workshops, volunteering opportunities, excursion, exercise program, celebrating events such as Mental health week and Men's Day etc, these centres provide individuals the numerous avenues to connect with others and build meaningful relationships. In addition, our neighbourhood centres serve as essential hubs for existing and emerging ethnic communities, providing a welcoming space for cultural exchange and social interaction. In addition, the NCC provide dedicated spaces for seniors to meet, facilitating friendships and support networks that are crucial for their mental health and emotional wellbeing. CCS NCC partner and collaborate with diverse array of stakeholders including school, businesses, educational institutes such as TAFE and Universities, government and non-government organisations, local politicians and ethnic communities. This collaborative approach is essential in addressing pressing issues such as mental health, social engagement, community events and more. Our collaborated efforts help identify community trends, themes and challenges that need to be addressed and supported.

Investing in our CORE NCC would significantly enhance community support systems, especially when it comes to addressing mental health and social isolation. Loneliness and Social isolation are serious issues faced by many seniors that access our CCS NCC, seniors who often live alone and feel disconnected from the community around them. As a vulnerable group, seniors heavily rely on social groups to foster connections and alleviate feelings of isolation. Their longstanding relationship with NCC makes it the most appropriate and trusted space for their weekly congregation. However, due to lack of any funding in NCC, it limits organisation's capacity to fully address their needs as it restricts the scope of service or the parameter that we need to be within (KPI) whilst accessing other funded programs. Most of the time, CCS subsidises the incurring program cost such as booking community

hall and facilities as well as provision of Public Liability Insurance for various senior groups to meet on a weekly basis.

With increased and adequate funding and infrastructure we could expand our services to better support seniors and break loneliness and social isolation in the community. One community group member shared **“the only time I am happy is when I come to the group and see my friends, when I’m home I see no-one, I wait all week for today”**

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Currently NCC operated at CSS are limited to minimal office space, lacking dedicated rooms for casework or onsite group activities. This restriction not only reduces the range of services we offer but restricts our ability to create an inviting environment for social connection.

If the investment from the state could also go towards enhancing the physical structure of NCC, it would most definitely expand our capacity to support vulnerable communities and combat loneliness and social isolation on a deeper level. Both physical infrastructure and internal team capacity is critical for CCS NCC. The invested funds would expand our internal team’s capacity to address the diverse needs however it cannot be achieved without improving the physical spaces. A well-resourced team requires adequate facilities to collaborate, conduct training and engage with

community effectively. By investing in both physical and internal infrastructure simultaneously (Tailored to each unique NCC service) LCSA funding can create a robust framework for service delivery to maximise the full potential of our neighbourhood centre.

CCS would also want the appropriate investment towards FREE counselling services and a broader range of programs that are comprehensive & tailored unique to the individual and community. Currently, we only provide short-term intervention, leaving many individuals without the necessary support. The importance of these counselling and psychological services it would allow us not only to address the immediate concerns faced by clients, such as isolation and loneliness, but to explore and understand the underlying issues that contribute to these feeling in a safe space clients access. Attachment theory suggests that early relationships shape our ability to form connections with others throughout life. Individuals who experience insecure attachment or trauma may struggle with trust and feel isolated as adults.

In addition, as living expenses increase, many individuals and families find it difficult to afford activities such as sport and counselling etc. By offering these fundamental additional services at no cost, we will be ensuring equitable access to mental health and overall wellbeing. The stress related to financial strain can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Investing in affordable counselling not only addresses immediate mental health needs but also contributes to a more resilient community.

The most important step the NSW Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community is to provide a universal core funding model to NCCs in NSW.

To reduce loneliness in the community, the most important step is to provide funding for NCC to customise their services based on their needs. The current environment that NCC is operating, in an absolute lack of core funding, it would not be able to provide sustainable support to the community. Hence, in the absence of NCC's active role in community development and engagement space, the social issue such as social isolation, loneliness and disengagement will continue to exacerbate.

Reliance on other short-term funding tends to lack sustainability. The limited funding can tend to lead to abrupt halts in essential services leaving communities vulnerable and underserved.

As local governments and organisation face budget cuts due to economic pressure, community centres also struggle to provide programs that foster social connections making it essential for new funding to fill these gaps. With tailored funding and improved infrastructure, it will be instrumental in creating inclusive environments that facilitate enhance social engagement especially during challenging economic times. By addressing the barriers presented by financial constraints and prioritising accessibility, communities can cultivate meaningful connections that lesson loneliness and enhance overall wellbeing.

To create enduring change, it is crucial to invest and establish sustainable funding mechanisms that ensure adequate resources are available for initiatives aimed at enhancing accessibility and engagement to tackle loneliness and break social isolation.

Strategies to combat loneliness and social isolation in neighbourhood centres are essential for fostering connections and promoting mental health wellbeing. By addressing the specific needs of individuals, NCC create inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and ensure everyone feels valued. Encouraging participation in community events helps build vibrant atmosphere, while safe spaces allow individuals to engage without fear or judgement. Ultimately these initiatives strengthen social networks, enhancing community resilience and creating supportive environment where residents can rely on in times of need.

## References

Weiss, R. S., Weiss, R. (1975). *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*. United Kingdom: Penguin Random House LLC.