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

Organisation: Multicultural Community Council NSW

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MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES COUNCIL OF NEW SOUTH WALES INCORPORATED.

MCC NSW INC - I401100
For a Multicultural New South Wales
All correspondence for Chair -

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

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The Multicultural Communities Council of NSW, endorsed by MCC Australia, submits this document to the *NSW Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.*

MCCNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *NSW Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.* As an advocacy organisation promoting multiculturalism in Australia, we believe it is crucial to highlight the unique challenges and experiences of loneliness faced by Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Our submission focuses on the unique challenges faced by people from CALD backgrounds and offers recommendations to address these issues. The representatives of MCCNSW are available to provide further input and assistance in this important Inquiry.

In our submission, we draw attention to the issue of loneliness amongst CALD people living in multicultural Australia, addressing the following Terms of Reference:

> (b) identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation
>
> (c) evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia
>
> (e) key pathways from transient to chronic loneliness amongst CALD communities
>
> (g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation
>
> (i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness amongst Australia's CALD communities

<u>**Response to Terms of Reference**</u>

b) The identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations globally, with nearly half of all Australians either born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Data from the 2021 Census (ABS, 2021) reveals:

- 3 in 10 (28%) people living in Australia were born overseas, with Australia's population including people born in nearly every country of the world.
- around 1 in 4 (23%) Australians speak a language other than English at home
- more than 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes
- 3% of Australia's population indicated that they did not speak English well, or at all.

This multicultural fabric presents both opportunities and challenges in addressing issues such as loneliness and social isolation amongst people from CALD backgrounds in Australia. People from CALD backgrounds often face greater challenges when dealing with the health and welfare system. Within Australia's multicultural landscape, the following groups are identified as being at highest risk of loneliness and social isolation:

1. *Older Adults:* Older adults from CALD backgrounds often face significant loneliness, especially if they have limited English proficiency and are separated from their extended families. Higher risks of social isolation have been identified among older migrants, particularly in regional and rural areas of Australia, where cultural diversity may be less pronounced (AIHW, 2022).

2. *Refugees and Asylum Seekers*: Individuals who have experienced trauma, displacement, and the challenges of resettlement are at a higher risk of loneliness. The stress of adapting to a new culture and the loss of social networks contribute to their vulnerability (AIHW, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024).

3. *Recent Migrants*: New migrants, particularly those who arrive without established social networks, can experience high levels of loneliness. The initial period of adjustment can be isolating as they navigate a new environment and culture (Georgeou et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2024).

4. *CALD women*, especially those who work in the home or have caregiving responsibilities, may experience isolation due to limited social interactions outside the home. Cultural norms and responsibilities can further limit social engagement.

5. *Youth and International Students*: Young people and international students from CALD backgrounds may struggle with loneliness due to cultural differences, academic pressures, and being away from their families.

6. *People with Low English Proficiency*: Language barriers can significantly hinder social integration and access to services, leading to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Georgeou et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2024).

7. *Temporary visa holders with limited social networks:* Temporary migrants are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness due to visa restrictions and uncertainty (Pfitzner, et al., 2023).

Addressing the specific needs of these groups through targeted interventions and support services is essential to mitigate loneliness and improve their overall well-being. Loneliness is shaped by language, culture, and migration, with variations within and across migrant groups and generations (Tran et al., 2022). Heterogeneity within and across CALD communities needs to be recognised in interventions to attenuate loneliness.

The following domains are strongly associated with risk of loneliness amongst CALD people in Australia:

Culture and Social Isolation / Social exclusion

- Loss of traditional support networks post-migration emerges as a primary driver of loneliness (Song et al., 2024)
- Research indicates CALD women experience heightened risk of poor wellbeing during pregnancy and early parenthood (Bonakdar et al., 2023)
- Discrimination toward people from CALD communities leads to social withdrawal and reduces community trust (Ferdinand et al., 2015).
- Displacement effects can become more pronounced in later life, with reduced opportunities for meaningful social roles and participation, impacting social engagement, sense of

belonging, identity, and connection to place for older CALD migrants (Wilmoth, 2004; Liu et al., 2019

- CALD people increasingly seek social interactions with others from similar backgrounds as they age (Tran et al., 2022). This preference is linked to older adults reverting to their first language later in life (Franklin et al., 2023; Thomas, 2003).

Access to Support Services

- Limited access to culturally sensitive healthcare services in Australian medical and aged care systems contributes to isolation among CALD communities in later life
- CALD individuals generally have lower rates of access to general and mental health services (Khatri et al., 2022; Multicultural Mental Health Australia, 2019).
- Cultural stigma and language barriers serve as primary obstacles to seeking help amongst people from CALD backgrounds (Khatri et al., 2022; Multicultural Mental Health Australia, 2019)
- Digital literacy gaps compound service access issues, particularly among older CALD community members (Cunningham et al., 2023)
- Ethnic organisations provide cultural continuity and help to facilitate broader social integration for migrants in Australia (Franklin et al., 2023)
- Ethnic and multicultural organisations provide significant navigational support for older people from CALD backgrounds (Franklin et al., 2023)

Intergenerational Aspects

- CALD youth often report feeling "caught between cultures," which can lead to unique forms of loneliness. For instance, a report by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights highlights that Muslim youth frequently experience this cultural tension. They navigate the expectations of their heritage culture while trying to fit into the broader Australian society, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. (Hammond et al., 2023)
- Grandparent separation due to migration policies creates significant emotional burden (Hamilton et al., 2022).
- Language barriers between generations within CALD families can contribute to emotional isolation (Georgeou et al., 2023)
- Changing family structures can impact wellbeing of older migrants, and intergenerational tensions can contribute to isolation (Georgeou et al., 2023)

Systemic and Policy Factors

- Visa insecurity contributes to ongoing isolation among temporary migrants.
- Financial stress and job insecurity among temporary and newly arrived migrants in Australian labour markets can lead to financial insecurity and social withdrawal. Un/underemployment increases loneliness risk, whereas employment facilitates social integration (Wilson et al., 2023).
- Economic disparities within Australia's multicultural society creates barriers to social participation and community engagement.
- Organisations' abilities to create programs that effectively reflect factors promoting wellbeing for CALD populations have been impacted by funding cuts (Pruitt et al., 2017; Ziersch et al., 2020).

Regional settlement issues

- CALD communities in regional areas face compounded isolation: physical distance from cultural communities combines with limited transport infrastructure

- Regional migration programs, while aiming to address population distribution, may place migrants in areas with limited cultural support networks putting people at risk of social isolation (Kelly et al., 2023).

c) evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia

Loneliness within Australia's CALD communities, represents a significant but often overlooked public health concern. The research outlined above indicates that CALD individuals face unique challenges that can intensify experiences of loneliness, including language barriers, cultural isolation, and difficulties accessing culturally appropriate support services. These factors, combined with the disruption of traditional social networks through migration, can create a complex web of psychological and physiological impacts that require targeted intervention strategies. Despite this knowledge and the emphasis on improving the wellbeing of CALD populations in Australia, programs attending to the wellbeing of this population are scare (Kara & Khawaja, 2024).

(e) key pathways from transient to chronic loneliness in migrant communities

The issues outlined above highlight specific areas requiring intervention within Australia's multicultural context to stem transient loneliness developing into chronic loneliness among CALD people in Australia. The interconnected nature of these factors suggests that interventions in the Australian context must be multi-faceted, addressing both immediate social needs and underlying systemic issues that contribute to the transformation of transient into chronic loneliness among migrant communities.

g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation

- All levels of government must collaborate to complement funding and service provision for people from diverse backgrounds.
- Migrant support and multicultural organisations are increasingly providing services through federal funding (e.g., NDIS, My Aged Care), however, federal funding risks local and state governments withdrawing or reducing support for these not-for-profit organisations.
- Government and non-government organisations need to ensure two-way integration and multiculturalism across the life course.
- Ethno-specific and multicultural not-for-profit organisations are responsive and adaptive to the diverse contexts and circumstances of migrants and CALD people, facilitating cross-cultural/multicultural and mixed immigrant/non-immigrant activities, fostering mutual social integration and inter-ethnic appreciation. These organisations provide spaces for people to learn about and explore each other's cultures, supporting multiculturalism and social cohesion.
- These organisations play a crucial social role, helping to reduce loneliness and isolation among people from diverse backgrounds.

i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness amongst Australia's CALD communities

1. **Enhance Language Support Services**
   - Increase funding for English language classes and multilingual support services to help migrants and CALD individuals overcome language barriers.
   - Support community-based language programs that offer informal and culturally relevant language learning opportunities.

2. **Culturally Participatory and Responsive Service Design**
   - Develop statewide standards for culturally appropriate interventions to mitigate loneliness
   - Support community centres that serve as hubs for social interaction, cultural exchange, and support services.
   - Encourage volunteer programs that connect CALD individuals with local communities, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support.
   - Implement bi-cultural worker programs
   - Develop and fund language and culturally specific mental health first aid training, expand multilingual telehealth services and culturally appropriate counselling services
   - Fund digital literacy programs specifically designed for CALD seniors
   - Establish intergenerational programs that maintain cultural and family connections

3. **Promote Integration and Multiculturalism**
   - Develop and expand cultural orientation programs that help new migrants understand and adapt to Australian society while preserving their cultural identity.
   - Fund and promote cultural events and festivals that celebrate diversity and encourage social interaction among different cultural groups.
   - Launch public awareness campaigns to combat discrimination and promote social cohesion.
   - Provide support services for individuals who experience discrimination and vilification, including counselling and legal assistance.
   - Strengthen programs that support CALD individuals in gaining meaningful employment, including skills recognition, mentorship, and workplace integration initiatives.
   - Increase access to affordable housing for migrants and CALD individuals to alleviate economic pressures that contribute to social isolation.

Research Priorities

- Identify and address barriers that CALD individuals face in accessing services aimed at reducing loneliness; Investigate the effectiveness of culturally tailored mental health services in reducing loneliness among CALD individuals.

- Conduct longitudinal studies on CALD loneliness patterns in NSW and effectiveness of mainstream and culturally sensitive interventions

- Examine impacts of migration policies on family separation and loneliness, including examining the role of family dynamics and social networks in either alleviating or contributing to loneliness in CALD populations.

By implementing these steps, the NSW Government can help reduce loneliness and its impacts among Australia's CALD population, promoting a more inclusive and connected society.

Conclusion

The experience of loneliness among CALD individuals in Australia is complex and multifaceted, influenced by a range of social, cultural, economic and systemic factors. Addressing the risk of

loneliness requires a comprehensive approach that recognises the diversity within CALD communities and the intersecting challenges they face.

We urge the Inquiry to consider these recommendations and to actively involve CALD community representatives in the development and implementation of strategies to combat loneliness. By doing so, we can work towards a more inclusive and connected society that values the contributions and wellbeing of all its members, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background.

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