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

Organisation: UTS Centre for Social Justice

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Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW

UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion submission

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, upon whose ancestral lands this research and submission was undertaken. We pay respect to Elders past and present, acknowledging them as traditional knowledge holders and recognising their continuing connection to land, waters, country, and community.

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Who we are

The Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion (CSJI) operates out of the University for Technology Sydney (UTS), with a mission to create positive social change both within and beyond our campus. The Centre is a gateway for community organisations, not-for-profits, social purpose businesses and individuals to engage with the university's resources and expertise to maximise social impact. Our work is driven by the belief that universities exist for public good and should use their resources and expertise to contribute to a socially just society.

As a Centre, we are responsible for many of UTS's social impact initiatives and programs, and we strive to create meaningful, equitable and impactful partnerships with our local community, working together to create positive social change.

Our Mission

Our interest in this topic comes from research conducted with community members in our local precinct in Sydney, NSW. In 2023, the CSJI worked with the local communities around UTS, that is, Glebe, Haymarket, Ultimo and Pyrmont, on a place-based research project which aimed to explore how inclusive and accessible spaces connect people and create a sense of belonging.

As part of this project, we facilitated appreciative inquiry interviews with 104 community members in 2022 and 100 in 2023. This consultation and engagement uncovered a number of key enablers and barriers, many of which were linked to social isolation or loneliness. To identify how local communities could address this underlying issue, the research team conducted a literature review to understand what initiatives had been successful in other communities. Our review was focused on local neighbourhoods and communities across Australia and internationally and aimed to look at what practical solutions had been successful in reducing social isolation and loneliness for community members in a variety of different contexts.

The findings of the literature review were then shared back to local communities and UTS supported a range of community-led initiatives including community garden projects and establishing a local newsletter. In sharing our findings as part of this inquiry, we hope to help the NSW Government by providing practical solutions and a blueprint for how governments and communities can work together to address this pervasive issue.

Recommendations

1. The NSW Government identify loneliness as a key issue affecting individual and community wellbeing, and prioritise initiatives to reduce and mitigate its impacts.

2. The NSW Government work collaboratively with community organisations, non-for-profits and community members to trial and fund the development of community-led initiatives aimed at reducing and preventing loneliness.

3. The NSW Government focus on specific interventions aimed at reducing loneliness for marginalised groups in NSW, making sure these interventions are adaptative and responsive to the diverse needs of these equity groups.

4. The NSW Government commit to increased data collection on loneliness in NSW and to studies looking at long-term effects of interventions.

Introduction

The Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

Loneliness is a growing issue across the world, and it has significant impacts on individual and community wellbeing. Unfortunately, it is also a very difficult and complex problem to solve; there is no 'one size fits all' solution and there is a dearth of evidence on effective interventions. However, there are many common themes between initiatives which have been successful or contributed to reducing individual and community loneliness. Western societies tend to skew towards interventions which are aimed towards changing individual behaviours, but community and group activities can have a better impact. People's connection to place, their local areas and their physical environments can play a role in reducing loneliness and social isolation (Stephens, Phillips, & Castle, 2022).

In this submission we provide a number of case studies from around the world where different kinds of approaches were successful in reducing loneliness and social isolation. A common theme in these approaches is that they were community led (i.e. 'bottom up'), adaptable and sensitive to the needs of the people they were for.

We would encourage the NSW Government to invest in community-led solutions, working with local communities and co-designing interventions which could foster group connections and shared neighbourhood identities which could reduce the impact of loneliness across NSW.

What do successful initiatives look like?

Individual interventions have limitations

The research in our literature review largely showed that individual-level initiatives are not as successful as community-level initiatives. Different types of individual interventions, such as 1-1 weekly volunteer outings, home visits or phone call check-ins were generally found to be ineffective in reducing loneliness. These initiatives are often short in duration and don't necessarily increase social interaction in a meaningful and sustainable way (Ferran et al, 2021).

Community interventions can be more effective

In contrast to individual interventions, community-level interventions create conditions for multiple connections, effecting a whole group of people and enhancing neighbourhood and community trust, overall. This is what tends to make community interventions more effective than individual interventions. Community activities, such as support groups, physical activity groups or communal neighbourhood activities, increase contact with neighbours or other people in the community, often seeing a reduction in loneliness (Ferran et al, 2021).

Many of the case studies we have included in this submission are communal activities, as loneliness and by extension social isolation are essentially community level problems that need community-level solutions. For example, one study looked at how mothers' groups and playgrounds build social support and community in local neighbourhoods (Strange et al, 2014). When connections in these local groups formed, people generally felt more connected to their local community and less isolated postpartum. Further, when working with older adults, approaches which promote ongoing volunteering and community building tend to be more successful because older adults want to feel a sense of purpose and meaning in what they do, rather than being passive 'receivers' of help (Yang & Moorman, 2021). Intergenerational programs can be successful here, providing opportunities for friendship and purpose between older adults and children, but these need to be

tailored to older adults who may have mobility issues (Kenning, et al., 2021). Building sustainable relationships, regardless of the setting, can take time, which is why interventions based off group activities over a longer duration create more favourable conditions for reducing loneliness.

Community interventions need to be strengths-based and co-designed with community

Communal interventions need to be co-designed in order to work well though (Cotterell, Buffel, & Phillipson, 2018). Adopting a participatory and a strengths-based approach to program design, goes beyond consultation and seeks to deepen collaboration between service providers and funding bodies, treating community members as equal collaborators. Focusing on community strengths (not deficits) when designing interventions for loneliness and focusing on building community members capabilities to run their own community projects or initiatives can help improve the success of projects (Mann, et al., 2017) and also lead to increase social networks which in turn also reduces loneliness.

It's important for these activities to also be culturally competent. Successful community interventions should enable underrepresented groups to also experience a sense of belonging and inclusion in group activities, as these groups may have struggled in the wider community where they might otherwise have difficulties due to language or cultural barriers.

What stops people from participating in initiatives designed to reduce loneliness?

While community-level interventions play an important role in reducing loneliness and isolation, there are key barriers which prevent participation. In our own interviews with community members, a number of barriers to participation and community engagement were identified. These include the cost of activities, the location of activities (having available community spaces) and how accessible these spaces are (that is, do community members have access to any needed transport) (see also Hand, 2022).

For example, a number of interviewees spoke about the cost of using shared community facilities and how this can often inhibit participation. Community members felt that by reducing, or removing fees, we could encourage participation and

engagement within the community.

"Charging fees for booking ping-pong or badminton tables contradicts the community's purpose, which is to serve the public. I propose abolishing these charges to promote accessibility and encourage broader participation in community activities" - Community Member

"You need community spaces, and events that are low cost, the cost of living is high and you don't want that to be a barrier" - Community Member

Community members also discussed the importance of accessible community spaces. It was clear that community and neighbourhood centres act as very important anchors in local neighbourhoods, especially for marginalised groups and those at risk of social isolation.

"The Ultimo Community Centre provides me with a sense of belonging and I feel less lonely more at home" - Community Member

These spaces often provide an informal touch point for anyone in the community seeking support, whether it be a referral for a formal service, information about what's going on in the local community or just someone to have a conversation with.

It is also important to consider how physical environments can increase further isolation and loneliness, for example a lack of ability to walk around (such as from a lack of pedestrian crossings or unsafe footpaths) means people with limited mobility cannot move around their neighbourhood (Cotterell, Buffel, & Phillipson, 2018). Even something as simple as being able to safely walk your dog can foster a sense of connection and community:

"We didn't know anyone so we were very lonely when we first moved here. [But] there was a connection there, to be able to walk our dogs and talk to people, go to cafes. The connection was for safety, for health, for friendship." – Community member

Designing and maintaining physical environments that enable people to safely move around their neighbourhood can foster informal connections that can help prevent loneliness and isolation.

The needs of marginalised groups such as older adults, people with learning difficulties, people living with disability, LGBTIQA+ communities and racialised community must also be considered so these groups are not excluded from whole of community & place-based approaches (Wilkinson, Lang, & Yarker, 2023). Language barriers were often spoken about by our community members as a challenge that

made it hard for some groups of people to engage in their local community:

"Sometimes language is a barrier so I can imagine how difficult it is for elderlies. People say if you live in the country, you should learn the language. However what people overlooked is that the elderlies might have tried hard to learn the language but it is too difficult for them. They might feel especially lonely and excluded." - Community Member

Migrant communities may face cultural or linguistic barriers when accessing neighbourhood programs or interventions, or they may struggle to find someone they share an identity or experience with. To address this, one community intervention in the UK focused specifically on older adults from African Francophone, Lusophone and Lingalaphone backgrounds (Wilkinson, Lang, & Yarker, 2023). The program focused on arts and crafts, and enabled people to feel connected, included and involve these older people in age-friendly activities in the local area. This kind of planning and consideration can help mitigate the kind of barriers that stop people from participating in initiatives designed to reduce loneliness.

What specific approaches have worked to reduce loneliness?

The following case studies feature a variety of different methods and approaches used to address loneliness in communities.

- **Neighbourhood Houses:** The Neighbourhood Houses model is a series of sites for community-based adult learning. While they have feminist origins, they could also be an initiative for communities to use as a place to develop and extend social connections. These places could serve as a way to learn different things for older adults such as language and horticulture. Neighbourhood Houses created active social spaces, creating ways for people to learn and get community connection. Examples of this included encouraging people to bring food from their cultures and encouraging deeper conversations. Overall, people who came to these Neighbourhood Houses because they were isolated found these sites provided them with a space to have these social connections in their local communities (Harrison, Ollis, & Ryan, 2020).

- **Community Gardens:** One study focused on the impact of a garden project that was catered towards helping refugees in the community find greater social connections. The project involved 3 days a week of gardening activities, a weekly community kitchen, food enterprises, creative projects group, micro-enterprises, a weekly market, and a monthly community market. This project was found to provide the refugees with better social connections and support, and helped to create a sense of community, through meaningful activities like eating meals and working with plants together. It was felt though that if the project had been run by the participants themselves and not the refugee agencies, it might have been more tailored to their needs – speaking to the important of co-design in creating lasting impact (Hsueh, et al., 2022).

- **Neighbour Day**: was run by a non-for-profit organisation called Relationships Australia. The event involved people across Australia to connect with their neighbours on a particular day, and support was given by Relationships Australia in how to host certain events. The specific kind of events/activities that were held included social gatherings in homes or communal spaces (such as driveways), leaving cards in letterboxes, checking in on older neighbours, community meetings or community social media pages. The idea of this intervention was to have both large and small-scale events that would promote connection, belonging and a whole-of-community event to promote people feeling a sense of identity within their neighbourhoods. Their evaluation of the event found the day led to increased engagement with neighbourhoods, a reduction of loneliness and isolation and increased sense of social cohesion. Events like the Neighbour Day campaign are an example of how community and neighbourhood specific focused events can help strengthen local's sense of connectedness and community, and thus reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

- **Community Choir**: In Kingston, Melbourne, a group of Chinese Australians have a weekly choir. Older people from diverse backgrounds often need support because they may have cultural or language barriers, but feeling part of these inclusive groups can support and enrich friendships and decrease isolation. The group consists of people who have had no formal training, and they rehearse once a week for 90 minutes. The group has a repertoire of

songs which they decide all together which to focus on. This context helps create a sense of belonging as weekly rehearsal becomes a social gathering in which relationships can be formed. This was a key aspect of why people joined (to overcome loneliness) as it enabled people who had similar migrant experiences to connect. The group has helped people feel less isolated and is a place of inclusion for people who find English skills a barrier to social inclusion (Li & Southcott, 2012).

- **Social Hubs**: A Finnish model which operate on a neighbourhood level, providing free service co-ordination, counselling, group activities and meeting places. Some of the things on offer include chair exercising, handicrafts, games, cafeterias, free newspapers and computers. These hubs are a valuable local resource and important gathering points for older adults of the neighbourhood, helping to foster community buildings among different types of residents. These hubs also provide older adults with the support to live independent lives without being socially excluded. Overall, the connections people formed in this hub fostered an overall sense of wellbeing and social inclusion (Rantala, Valkama, Latikka, & Jolanki, 2024).

- **GezelschApp:** was used to encourage social connection between older adults in the local community. The app used various tools in order to encourage older adults to visit local activities and make new friends. It gave users access to news, activities, information and tips, and an ability to message other friends/people on the platform. Friends could be added on the app, and invitations sent for different activities. This study and intervention found that after a sustained period of use, there was a meaningful increase in quality of life, as the users made new friends, though the long-term impact of this on loneliness is hard to gauge (Jansen-Kosterink, Bergsma, Francissen, & Naafs, 2020).

- **Seniors Satellite**: In the UK, a program called 'Seniors' Satellite' was implemented for older adults to bring them more social and physical programs, in order to improve wellness and reduce social isolation. The aims of the program were to connect people who may be at risk of social isolation, build a local community and reduce transport barriers. The participants saw social contact as important, especially those who did not have children or a partner.

The interventions findings show this program enabled people to make and strengthen their social networks, feel connected to their neighbourhoods and give people a chance to both 'just be' with others or make deeper friendships. This shows this importance of a diverse outcomes to reduce social isolation – the ability to have both casual acquaintances and the ability to make longer lasting connections. The program was low resource intensive, was successful in attracting older adults and in reducing their social isolation and loneliness. It could be used or run by local councils, community centres, or other community organisations (Hand, 2022).

We would encourage the NSW Government to look further into trialing or adopting some of these ideas or interventions, working with local organisations, community members in a co-led approach, and looking further into more research and long-term studies into the effectiveness and impact on loneliness in the community.

What other steps can be taken to reduce loneliness?

Our research has shown that community-led, adaptable interventions have had the most success in reducing social isolation and loneliness. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, with most successful interventions having a specific target audience, or a specific activity or outcome to encourage connection. Local communities have a unique role to play in facilitating neighbourhood connections, and their strengths can help foster group connections rather than individual approaches which leave more room for failure.

The NSW Government should work with non-for profits, local community organisations and specific community groups or members to build capacity to improve existing programs and design new fit-for-purpose programs aimed at reducing isolation and loneliness. It is also worth noting the lack of studies and data, especially at a state level, that explore the prevalence and impact of loneliness. This is even more apparent when looking at specific groups of people in our communities, First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, people living with disability, and LGBTQIA+ communities. More research and data is needed to understand the diverse needs and desires of these groups. NSW Government should prioritise strengths-based research projects that aim to build the evidence base in this space.

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