

Submission  
No 101

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

**Organisation:** The Sax Institute  
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Submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee  
on the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in  
New South Wales

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To the Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC

**Submission to the Legislative Assembly Committee on the Prevalence, causes and impacts of  
loneliness in New South Wales**

Thank you for inviting submissions to this inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

This inquiry represents a critical opportunity to create a healthier, more cohesive, and resilient society and identify how resources may be better utilised to support those most at risk of loneliness. This submission highlights how the Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study, Australia's largest ongoing study of healthy aging, is an invaluable resource uniquely positioned to inform the committee on the scope, causes, and impacts of loneliness across New South Wales.

We note the Terms of Reference require that the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW and have considered them in our response.

## **The Sax Institute and the 45 and Up Study**

The Sax Institute is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with a mission to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians by driving the use of evidence in policies and programs. Through a wide range of services that generate new research and summarise existing evidence, we connect evidence with those who use it to solve real-world health and social challenges.

Our extensive network of over 80 member organisations, including universities, research institutions, and public health entities, allows us to bring together diverse expertise to address Australia's pressing health needs.

Central to the Sax Institute's contributions is the 45 and Up Study, a large-scale longitudinal research study involving over 250,000 participants across New South Wales. Since 2005, the study has collected robust data on physical, mental, and social health indicators, enabling detailed, longitudinal insights into health trajectories and the social factors that influence wellbeing.

We would welcome the opportunity to present more detailed findings to the Inquiry and look forward to assisting in any way we can.

## Recent insights into loneliness

Comprehensive data on loneliness, including its causes and impacts within the community, has traditionally been limited. Recognising this gap, the Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study expanded its scope in recent years to examine loneliness, surveying over 70,000 participants on this topic since 2020.

This addition provides a robust foundation for understanding loneliness across diverse populations in New South Wales, enabling the identification of high-risk groups and the analysis of trends and associated health impacts over time.

The insights from the 45 and Up Study offer a unique and detailed understanding of loneliness in New South Wales, highlighting its prevalence, associated risk factors, and population groups disproportionately affected. The most recent surveys reveal that 83% of participants have experienced loneliness at some point, with 9% reporting severe loneliness. This data underscores loneliness as a significant and widespread experience, warranting focused intervention and support.

Our recent surveys from 2020 to 2023 show that, on average, 73% of participants have experienced loneliness, and that 9% experienced intense loneliness.

The surveys also shed light on specific groups of the population that experience intense loneliness. For example, on average across the four years of surveys in 2020 to 2023:

- Participants needing help with a disability had a significantly higher proportion experiencing intense loneliness (21%) than those who did not need help with disability (9%)
- Participants who reported being heavy or binge drinkers also had a higher proportion experiencing intense loneliness (13%) than those who were light or social drinkers (8%) and, interestingly, those who reported being ex-drinkers or non-drinkers also had a higher rate of intense loneliness (11%).
- Participants living in the Northern Sydney Local Health District reported the lowest rate of intense loneliness (7%) while those living in the Central Coast and Far West Local Health Districts reported the highest rates at (11%)

Other groups reporting higher-than-average periods of intense loneliness across the five surveys were those aged less than 70, people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and people identifying as LGBTIQ+.

## Leveraging the 45 and Up Study to inform targeted policy on loneliness

The 45 and Up Study offers a valuable resource for the Committee's work on loneliness in New South Wales. As a longitudinal, linked study, it provides insights into factors that may predispose individuals to or protect them from loneliness, with data that extends beyond surveys to include medical care records, prescription histories, mental health indicators, and other essential factors for a comprehensive understanding of loneliness and its impacts.

With nearly 20 years of data collection and linkages to extensive datasets on medical care, prescription medications, and cancer registries, the study can help answer complex questions about loneliness such as:

- Which factors may predict or protect against loneliness in later life
- How loneliness and age interact over time
- Connections between physical health, mental health, and loneliness
- Impacts of loneliness on mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and distress.

This extensive dataset supports policymaking by identifying key predictors of loneliness, tracking health outcomes, and assessing the effectiveness of interventions over time. Leveraging these data assets provides evidence-based insights and strategies specific to New South Wales demographic landscape, supporting a focused approach to reducing loneliness.

The Sax Institute is available to support the Inquiry and would be pleased to provide additional information on risk factors for loneliness and its impact.

Dr Martin McNamara

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