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

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

The prevalence of loneliness

Loneliness affects more than 50% of NSW residents, with significant links to poor mental and physical health and poor social capital. Loneliness can also be a factor affecting productivity in the workplace, which is an issue for business.

Recent research by the Mental Health Commission of NSW[1] and by the private Ending Loneliness Together initiative[2] highlights the prevalence of loneliness in the community. Table 1 sets out the results of these surveys in terms of the frequency of reported loneliness. It shows that while the proportion of chronic loneliness is relatively small among the respondents to these surveys so is the proportion of people who reported they were never lonely. More than 50% of respondents said they were lonely occasionally or were lonely some of the time.

Table 1 Prevalence of Loneliness

Frequency	Mental Health Commission	ELT
Occasionally	28%	26%
Some of the time	26%	25%
Never	13%	11%
Often/always	13%	15%

The findings of these surveys are also supported the Melbourne Institute's HILDA Survey (*The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey) [3]* which presents 21 years of the survey that included questions about loneliness in Australia. The survey is conducted every three years.[4]

It reported that females are more likely to feel lonely than males across all age groups.

Loneliness has grown more prevalent among those aged 15-24, while it has declined amongst those 65 and over, which contradicts the common understanding that the elderly are the loneliest. This was also supported by the results of the NSW Mental Health Commission Survey (p.26)

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[1] Mental Health Commission of NSW, 2023, *The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters in NSW: Insights from the 2022 'Community Wellbeing during COVID-19' survey results*, https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/sites/default/files/2023-06/2022%20Survey%20Results%20-%20Insights%20Report.pdf

[2] Ending Loneliness Together, 2023, *State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023*, https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf

[3] Wilkins, R, Esperanza Vera-Toscano and Ferdi Botha (2024) *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 21*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/4841909/HILDA_Statistical_Report_2023.pdf

[4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023, *Australia's Welfare 2023: Data Insights*, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/summary

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But females 25 to 44 and males 25 to 55 are lonelier than the younger age group. Another study found that loneliness is particularly prevalent among young women.[5]

Loneliness tends to be higher amongst those with higher educational attainment. The HILDA study also says that:

> Loneliness is greatest among unemployed individuals and lowest among employed people. Higher levels of income tend to be associated with lower loneliness scores, especially among males (p.171)

Those in poor general health or with a disability are more likely to be lonely (other studies suggest that loneliness is a factor that correlates with, if not contributes to, poor general health).

Despite the forced lockdowns in response to COVID, the HILDA study found no significant associations between the lockdowns and loneliness (p.174).

Partnered people report lower loneliness scores than unpartnered.

First nations people across both males and females report the highest loneliness scores, compared to non-First Nation people.

Loneliness is lowest among those who have frequent association with family and friends. Being a member of a club or association is not significantly related to loneliness for either males or females. Research has also shown that although schools can be a place to form connections and friendships, they can also be places where loneliness can become problematic. A 2021 study by the OECD reported that a survey of 15-year-olds in 2018 across its member countries found that 15% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt lonely at school. Also, that the percentage experiencing loneliness had increased from 8% to 15% between 2003 and 2018.[6]

The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre has developed survey tool that helped them develop a Social Connectedness Index[7] consisting of four measures:

- Social Interaction
- Social Support
- Interpersonal Trust
- Socio-Economic advantage

The Index was developed in 2010. The Centre reports that between 2010 and 2018 the index of social connectedness declined by 10%.

The strong conclusion from these studies is that loneliness in the community is prevalent in but that the predictors of loneliness depend on factors such as age, socioeconomic status and health.

Social Connectedness and social capital

Humans are social beings who exist in human networks of social connectedness that create social capital. Connections with other people can be strong or weak, both of which connections can contribute to an individual's health and sense of wellbeing.

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[5] Duncan et.al. , 2021, *Stronger Together: Loneliness and Social Connectedness in Australia*, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 139532_BCEC-Stronger-Together-report_WEB.pdf

[6] OECD, 2021, *All the Lonely People: Education and Loneliness*, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/all-the-lonely-people_23ac0e25-en.html

[7] Duncan et.al.

Social capital derives from an individual's relationships with family, friends, colleagues and community, as well as from the quality of those relationships. We can have strong family relationships, but if those relationships are dysfunctional then they can contribute to a sense of isolation and loneliness. The family relationship might be dysfunctional because it is abusive and leads to domestic violence or because a family member is in ill health because of a mental or physical disability. In the latter situation where a partner becomes the primary carer the risk is that they will feel lonely without support.

While it is obvious that close friends, and family can be important to the growth of social capital it has also been demonstrated that casual acquaintances can equally be important to an individual's sense of social connectedness. As American sociologist, Mark Granovetter has said:

> Your weak ties connect you to networks that are outside of your own circle. They give you information and ideas that you otherwise would not have gotten.[8]

These weak ties connect you to your neighbours and your community as well as assisting with finding employment and doing well in your job. Participation in clubs and community activities is one important way that individuals can develop weak ties, as can volunteering. People with companion animals that need to be exercised on a regular basis also tend to develop weak ties.

There is also evidence that the neighbourhood environment can contribute to a sense of social connectedness. A study by Ma et al found that:

> Overall, our model results support the hypothesis that a walkable neighbourhood environment helps to reduce transport disadvantage and increase social inclusion. In particular, a neighbourhood with higher density is associated with more engagement in political and civic activities, better access to social help, and more participation in social activities. Further, increased accessibility to amenities and services and more infrastructures for walking are both associated with less transport disadvantage. A neighbourhood with an aesthetically pleasing environment is associated with more engagement in political and civic activities, and more participation in social activities generally. [9](p44)

This suggests attention to social capital and connectedness should be a factor in considering housing and transport development plans.

What Next?
Awareness
Given the prevalence of loneliness in the community, it is not a subject that has had much public discussion, which is why this inquiry is so important to the development of future policies. Loneliness is a public health issue which more people should be aware of, which suggests that, as with other public health issues the awareness of the issues surrounding loneliness needs to be raised in the community. The starting of Loneliness Awareness Week in 2023 is a good first step[10]. But

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[8] 50 years on, Mark Granovetter's 'The Strength of Weak Ties' is stronger than ever, *Sanford Report*, 24 July, 2023, The strength of weak ties | Stanford Report

[9] Ma L, Kent JL and Mulley C ,2018, 'Transport disadvantage, social exclusion, and subjective well-being: the role of the neighbourhood environment – evidence from Sydney, Australia', *The Journal of Transport and Land Use, 11*(1):31–47

[10] https://lonelinessawarenessweek.com.au/about-2024/

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messages about loneliness and connection should also be considered for other public health campaigns.

Research

We note that The Ending Loneliness Together organisation, BCEC and the Groundswell Foundation[11] all advocate for more research to be done into the causes and predictors of loneliness. For example, given the prevalence of loneliness in the young, the BCEC recommends more research into the factors affecting social support networks in the transition to adulthood. (p.136)
It will also be important as action on loneliness and social connection is rolled out to continue to monitor changes in the community.

Government Action

There are already government and non-government organisations devoted to measuring and acting on loneliness, social connection and mental health. But there is an opportunity for government to provide leadership and funding for a national strategy.
As an example of what it is possible for governments to do it is worth looking to what the UK Government has achieved in a whole of government approach to tackling loneliness and social connection. Starting in 2018 with a Minister for Loneliness the objectives of the program were:

- Reducing the stigma of loneliness by building a national conversation
- Driving a lasting shift so that loneliness is considered in policy making and delivery by government and organisations across the country
- Playing a part in the development of the evidence base on loneliness[12]

This whole of government approach, has delivered funding for volunteering programs, for research, for awareness campaigns and programs that promote social connection.[13]

Companion Animals

There is evidence that companion animals can help to ameliorate loneliness through companionship and putting structure into an individual's day through care for the companion.[14] Animals that require exercise also bring people into contact with other people on a regular basis. According to the RSPCA

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[11] The Groundswell Foundation, 2022, Connections Matter: A Report on the Impacts of Loneliness in Australia, https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connectionsmatter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia

[12] Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year, Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year - GOV.UK

[13] Ibid

[14] Kretzler et.al., 2022, "Pet ownership, loneliness, and social isolation: a systematic review", *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology (2022) 57:1935–1957*, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s00127-022-02332-9.pdf
"The importance of animals: Tackling loneliness one pet at a time", https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-importance-of-animals-tackling-loneliness-one-pet-at-a-time/#:~:text=Staying%20home%20with%20a%20cat,depression%2C%20anxiety%2C%20and%20loneliness

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almost 70% of Australian households own a pet, most of them dogs.[15] Reform to strata legislation has made it easier for people to own pets in apartment buildings. Consideration also needs to be given to making it easier for pets to be taken onto public transport. For example, dogs are allowed on all forms of public transport in Paris, contributing to its reputation as a pet friendly city.

Conclusion

The research referred to in this submission demonstrates that loneliness and lack of social connection have been problems for some time, but it appears it has become a larger problem. Thus, the purpose of this inquiry is to see how this can be addressed.

Loneliness is not only an issue for individual and public health, but also an issue for social cohesion and trust in our community and its institutions. People who feel lonely and disconnected, who are deficient in social capital are less likely to trust in civil society.

While there is certainly an element of individual action required to tackle feelings of loneliness and disconnection, there is also a role for government and organisations to provide services and support for that action.

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[15] [How many pets are there in Australia? – RSPCA Knowledgebase](#)