

**Submission
No 145**

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

Organisation: Womn-Kind
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Submission to the Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impact of Loneliness

**WOMN-KIND
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About Womn-Kind

Womn-Kind is a leading youth mental health organisation on a mission to close the gap in effective wellbeing education and support for adolescent girls and gender-diverse young people. We have supported over 25,000 young people and more than 5,000 young people engage with our services every day, with more than 60% of those living in regional, rural or remote communities.

Womn-Kind delivers evidence-based, low-intensity and largely preventative services that ensure young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills, tools and resources they need to optimise their wellbeing, feel a sense of belonging, reach their potential and create strong and sustainable foundations for health, leadership, happiness, safety, belonging and prosperity.

Womn-Kind services are delivered by young people aged 22-29 who are qualified in Mental Health First Aid and have lived experience with a mental illness. This is essential to our success and the rapport we have built with the target group. Our tried, tested and trusted services have also been co-designed with the community, a network of allied health professionals, educators and the Womn-Kind National Youth Advisory Panel.

Our hybrid model of holistic wellbeing support involves in-person and online offerings. In-person services include Womn-Kind Wellbeing Workshops, community events, partnerships and sessions for parents, carers and educators of young people. Womn-Kind supports young people online via our first-of-its-kind social wellness app; the Womn-Kind App, webinars and Dear Sister: A Womn-Kind Podcast. The combination of in-person and online services aims to eliminate barriers young people may have when needing or wanting to access relevant and credible wellbeing support. We are proud that over 5,000 young people engage with Womn-Kind services every single day.

At Womn-Kind we're revolutionising the way young people give and receive support by providing them with an interactive, engaging and largely-preventative online and in-person experience designed to optimise wellbeing outcomes, regardless of the presence or absence of a mental illness. In an approach that focuses on prevention and early-intervention, Womn-Kind continues to evolve its services in response to the ever-changing needs and challenges of young people (paired with best practice).

Introduction

Loneliness among youth is an emerging and critical issue, with profound psychological, emotional and social implications. For young people in regional, rural and remote areas, loneliness often exacerbates the challenges they face, particularly in relation to mental health. Living in more geographically isolated communities means young people have limited access to social support networks and mental health resources. The sense of physical distance from peers, combined with fewer opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities or social gatherings can create an overwhelming feeling of isolation and loneliness.

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Studies consistently show that social isolation can increase the risk of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation, while also hindering academic success, employment opportunities, leadership and professional development. Our submission will focus on the experiences of girls and gender-diverse young people aged 10-25, particularly those living in regional, rural and remote communities.

How we gather information

The voices and lived experiences of young people is at the heart of our organisation and woven into everything that we do. We co-design our services with young people and a network of allied health professionals to ensure that our services and products continue to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs and challenges of youth.

Our submission will share quantitative and qualitative insights from our most recent quarterly survey, which captures the voices of over 400 young people (>60% living in regional, rural or remote communities). The submission will also include the perspectives of Womn-Kind National Youth Advisors and our shared recommendations for practical, sustainable, innovative, low-intensity and evidence-based solutions to help combat the loneliness and social isolation.

The Womn-Kind National Youth Advisory Panel is made up of a group of young people (aged 15-25) who meet weekly to discuss the direction of the organisation, local issues within their community and ways to better represent and support the diversity of the Womn-Kind community. Members of the Advisory Panel also attend meetings with stakeholders and influence decision making within Womn-Kind. Current panel members have lived experience ranging from young people who are:

- LGBTQIA+
- Living in a regional, rural or remote area
- Aboriginal
- Living with a disability
- Young mums
- Sexual assault survivors

The holistic approach to health care that we are taking at Womn-Kind involves including parents, carers, educators and community leaders. We regularly hold seminars and workshops for them to learn about tools, resources and supports, which they can implement to best support the young people in their lives.



Womn-Kind is committed to continuing our work in supporting the wellbeing, belonging and leadership of young people, particularly those living in regional, rural and remote communities. We urge the Committee to consider the unique challenges faced by these youth and to engage with young people when committing to recommendations (whether it be directly or through organisations like Womn-Kind).

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What we know about the experiences of young people today

Below are extracts from 2024 Womn-Kind data collected from 412 girls and gender-diverse young people aged 10-25.

Demographics

- 10-13: 4%
- 14-16: 36%
- 17-19: 45%
- 20-25: 15%
- Metropolitan: 33%
- Rural/regional town: 64%
- Remote location: 3%

83%

Said they felt lonely always or often.

81%

Said that at least once a week, they feel like they are not good enough.

84%

Said that most people around them don't know how they're really feeling.

82%

Said they were worried about the mental health of at least one friend.

87%

Said they would live their life differently if they knew no one would judge.

41%

Said that they cry everyday or most days and nobody knows about it.

78%

Said they don't believe their school is doing enough to prevent and manage mental illness.

91%

Said they don't believe the Government is doing enough to prevent and manage mental illness.

90%

Said that in the last month, they felt tired or exhausted either every day or every other day.

42%

Said they don't feel like they belong at school either everyday or every other day.

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The widespread impact of loneliness

Loneliness is not simply an emotional experience; it has tangible, long-term effects on mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. In regional, rural and remote communities, these impacts are often compounded by additional factors such as:

Limited social and recreational opportunities: There are fewer opportunities for young people in these areas to engage with their peers and participate in extracurricular activities that build a sense of belonging.

Geographical and infrastructural barriers: The physical distance between individuals, lack of public transport, and limited local services exacerbate the feelings of isolation experienced by young people.

Cultural stigma: In smaller communities, the stigma surrounding mental health challenges can discourage young people from seeking help, perpetuating loneliness and potentially leading to more serious mental health struggles.

Recommendations

Based on our experience and insights from youth (especially those in regional, rural and remote communities), we make the following recommendations for addressing loneliness and social isolation among youth:

Increase access to digital resources: Expanding access to mental health services through digital platforms will help young people access the support they need, regardless of their geographic location.

Commission community engagement programs delivered by grassroots organisations: Establishing safer spaces where young people can meet, engage in activities and connect with peers will reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. These programs need to be inclusive of all backgrounds, co-designed with young people and tailored to the unique needs and challenges of youth.

Strengthen mental health education and awareness: Promoting mental health literacy in schools and communities, alongside programs to reduce stigma, will encourage young people to seek help early and engage in open conversations about their mental health.

Support youth-led initiatives: Investing in youth leadership and wellbeing programs that allow young people to take charge of and influence initiatives in their communities, which will foster connection, empowerment and resilience.

Provide age-specific training and resources for regional, rural and remote communities: Equipping local leaders, teachers, educators and community support workers with free Mental Health First Aid training will help them recognise the signs of loneliness and mental distress earlier and direct young people to appropriate supports and resources to prevent the need for crisis intervention.



Increase access peer-to-peer supports delivered by young people who have relevant lived experience: Young people appreciate having the opportunity to connect with people who they feel they can relate to or who have walked in similar shoes. Commissioning services which facilitate this safely and effectively will assist young people in feeling confident to reach out to relevant services and stay engaged with support.

Conclusion

Having supported and learnt from over 25,000 young people since 2020, I continue to witness first-hand how profound and concerning the toll of loneliness is on our current and future leaders. The issue of loneliness among young people living in regional, rural and remote communities is an urgent and multifaceted challenge.

Young people are desperate for a stronger sense of belonging and meaningful social connection, which can be achieved through safe, low-intensity online resources such as platforms like the Womn-Kind App, which is a first-of-its-kind social wellness app. This is particularly fitting for young people living in regional, rural and remote communities who are otherwise isolated from peers.

For many young people, isolation is not just a social concern, but a significant barrier to mental health, personal development, professional success and overall wellbeing. Womn-Kind is uniquely positioned to address this issue by providing tailored, age-specific, accessible and largely preventative support through our digital platform and outreach programs.

We understand that young people in these areas face unique challenges - whether due to distance, limited resources, or stigma - because we have relevant lived experience, and we are committed to creating a safe, inclusive space where they can connect, be heard and find the support they need.

Through our innovative approach, which combines digital health, peer-to-peer support, localised community engagement and lived experience, Womn-Kind can play a pivotal role in reducing the impact of loneliness in these under-served areas. By amplifying the voices of young women and gender-diverse young people, we can not only combat isolation but empower them to build resilience, form meaningful connects and access the support services they need and deserve.

We urge the Government to invest in initiatives like Womn-Kind, that are designed to bridge the gap, provide tangible solutions, and support the mental and emotional wellbeing of young people in regional, rural and remote communities. I hope to meet with the Committee alongside Womn-Kind National Youth Advisors to further discuss the opportunities for Government to work with local organisations to create innovative, long-lasting and sustainable change.

Kind regards,
Ruby

Womn-Kind Founder and CEO