



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

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Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion

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About Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together (ELT) is the national Australian organisation working to raise awareness and reduce the negative effects of loneliness and social isolation in our community through evidence-based interventions and advocacy.

Inspired by the work of the UK Campaign to End Loneliness and the growing research evidence of the role of social connection in the prevention of poor health and wellbeing, Ending Loneliness Together draws together knowledge from national and international researchers, along with service delivery expertise from community groups, professional organisations, government agencies, and skilled volunteers, to effectively address loneliness in Australia.

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Introduction

Ending Loneliness Together welcomes this inquiry into loneliness and isolation in ACT.

Loneliness and social isolation are now recognised internationally as significant threats to public health, important community-based targets for prevention of mental and physical ill-health, and major contributors to health system costs.^{3,4} Indeed, the UK and Japan both having appointed Ministers to address loneliness and suicide prevention.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection (2024-2026) launched in late 2023 and will focus on addressing loneliness and social isolation, to promote social connection from a global perspective.¹ The Commission will focus on increasing global awareness and advocacy, fostering global partnerships and review the scientific evidence on solutions and policies from around the world.

By 2026, the Commission will deliver evidence-based and best practice/policy recommendations to all governments on how to effectively address loneliness and social isolation. ELT is part of this critical work and therefore be well-informed of the work of the Commission and will continue to work alongside other international agencies including the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection.

The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community

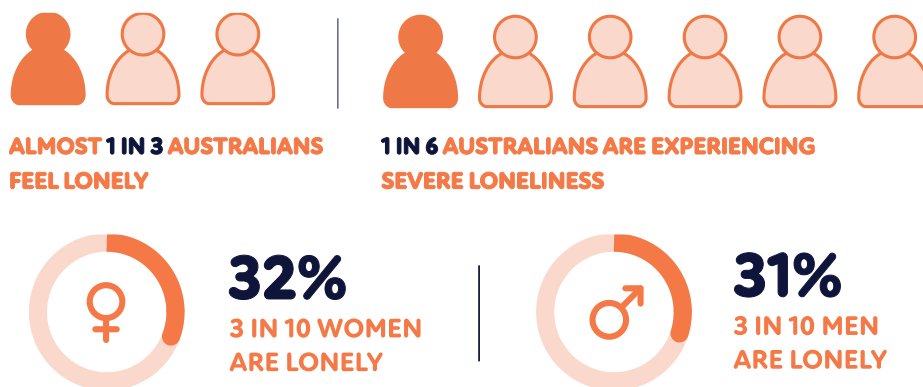
In reporting on prevalence, we need to define what we mean by loneliness and isolation as they are not the same thing and require different responses.

Loneliness is ‘a subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying social relationships’.² Loneliness is **different from social isolation** which involves having objectively fewer social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.² Measures of social isolation focus on the number and/or frequency of social contacts but are **not adequate for assessing loneliness**.³

Loneliness also differs from the general sense of well-being, introversion, (absence of) social support, depression, solitude, and social exclusion, and therefore cannot be accurately inferred from these constructs.⁴ Measuring loneliness therefore requires its own question.

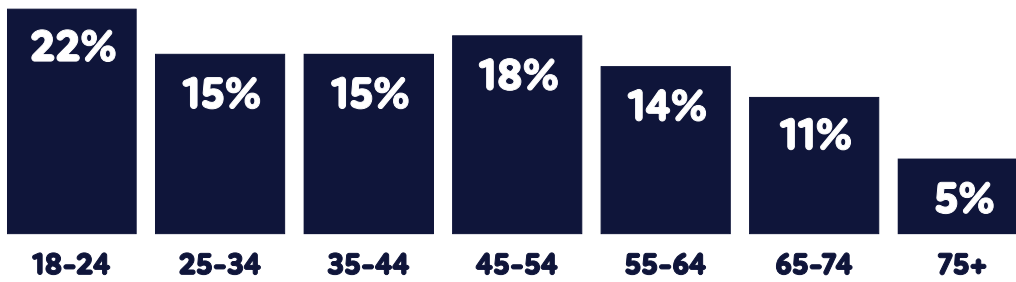
In 2023, ELT undertook Australia’s largest State of the Nation Report on Social Connection.⁵ The findings were launched during Australia’s first [Loneliness Awareness Week](#) in August 2023. The large scale nationally representative study of 4026 people explored the unique prevalence, perceptions, experiences and impacts of loneliness and social isolation in Australia.

A summary of the State of the Nation report indicates the severity of the problem in our communities.

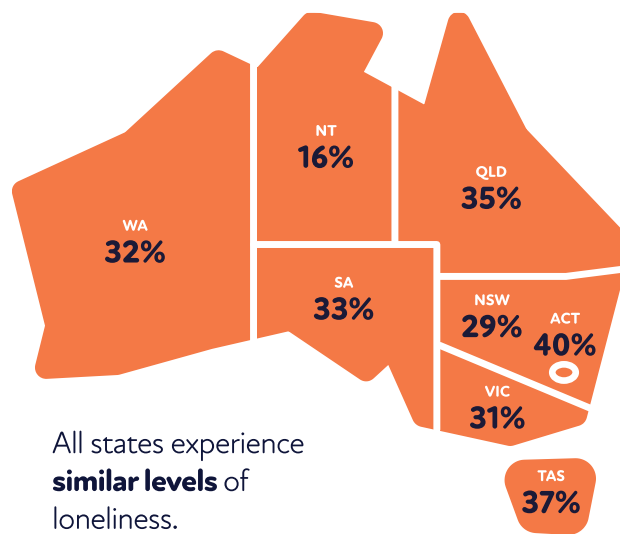


Loneliness is highly prevalent, and it does not discriminate. It negatively affects Australians across genders, ages, and states. While there were no significant differences across states for loneliness, ACT residents reported the highest prevalence with 40% meeting criteria for loneliness (i.e., defined as meeting a cut off score of more than 10 on the gold standard University of California Loneliness scale 4 items).

Percentage of Australians who often/always feel lonely (by age group):



Prevalence of loneliness by State/Territory



What do Australians think about loneliness?

Despite the high prevalence of loneliness, Australians hold many negative misconceptions about loneliness, poor knowledge of how to find help, felt ashamed when they feel lonely and were likely to conceal their loneliness. This means that Australians are not getting the help they need early to prevent poor health outcomes.

These data tell us that community awareness of the issue is lacking – specifically Australians understand that loneliness is an issue but they do not know how to help themselves or others, where to go, and are reluctant to seek help early.

How are Australians affected?

People who were lonely were 2 times more likely to also have chronic disease, 4.6 times more likely to report clinical levels of depression, 4.1 times more likely to report social anxiety, and 5.2 times more likely to report poor wellbeing.

Unfortunately, people who are lonely are also less engaged in physical activity, more likely to have social media addiction and less productivity at work (including more presenteeism, absenteeism and impairment).

What are the costs in Australia?

A 2021 report from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre ⁶ estimated the cost of loneliness at \$2.7 billion each year, an equivalent annual cost of \$1,565 for each person who becomes lonely.



In 2019, the National Mental Health Commission showed that for every \$1 invested in programs that address loneliness, the return on investment is between \$2.14 to \$2.87 respectively. ^{7,8}



What are the opportunities for the ACT Government?

We made four recommendations based on what is currently lacking.

- 1. Meaningful Social Connection Framework in ACT.** The ACT can focus on developing their state specific strategic framework that to support meaningful social connection. Specifically, we recommend adopting a multisectoral approach that can deliver a comprehensive framework to guide community, health, and corporate sectors to address loneliness and social isolation, and to promote social connection. Ending Loneliness Together is made up of a coalition of organisations in Australia and can coordinate multisectoral stakeholders via a variety of forums including clinical and community round tables. This work can be commissioned and executed swiftly in a cost-effective way. See the Ending Loneliness Together prebudget submission 2024-2025.
- 2. Implementing effective frontline responses to loneliness and social Isolation in the ACT.** The ACT can train first responders in programs including the Ending Loneliness Together Social Connection literacy program or Meaningful Social Connection at Work. These training programs were developed from evidence-based approaches and provide practical solutions on how to identify, help, or redirect. Given that children, adolescents and young people are also affected by loneliness, an evidence-based training program designed to educators, parents, and to the young person themselves is needed and can be swiftly developed by Ending Loneliness Together.
- 3. Improve community awareness of loneliness in the ACT.** The ACT can support Loneliness Awareness Week, an initiative that is shepherded by Ending Loneliness Together. Community forums held on the grassroots levels, within schools and organizations to increase awareness and improve the way we speak about loneliness can destigmatise the issue and promote help seeking behaviour.
- 4. Augment the Ending Loneliness Together Directory on ACT services catered to improve social connection in ACT residents.** This directory helps people who are lonely or people who want to help others who are lonely (including health practitioners, family, friends). The ACT government can augment this national directory to ensure that all ACT services are available on the directory.

Why should the ACT Government work with Ending Loneliness Together on addressing loneliness and social isolation?

Ending Loneliness Together is readily identified as the leading authority on loneliness, social isolation, and social connection in Australia, and an international leader working with global agencies including the World Health Organization. We have worked with and has given consultation to the Victorian State government, Department of Health, the Queensland Government, the South Australian Government, and the NSW Mental Health Commission on their initiatives focused on loneliness.

A coordinated response to strengthen social connection in our communities will alleviate the burden and cost to Australia and enhance economic participation, productivity, and growth. However, it requires a coordinated effort to bring Australians across sectors to work on the whole of systems problem. Ending Loneliness Together is well-placed assist the ACT Government and lead the way.

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