



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.

ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT. Orygen's submission will address the impact of these issues for young people, with particular focus on mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Loneliness is a subjective experience of unwelcome feelings that arise when there is a divergence between someone's desired and actual social relationships. It is a distressing emotional state that occurs when an individual perceives their social relationships to be inadequate in terms of quality, quantity, or both.(1-5) Loneliness can be transient or episodic (often occurring when an individual is managing significant life events or transitions), or it can be ongoing and chronic.(6, 7)

The term loneliness is often used interchangeably with social isolation. However, while these experiences do frequently co-occur, it is important to note they are not mutually exclusive. **Social isolation** refers to the objective and observable state of having few opportunities for social interaction. Although some people certainly experience loneliness as a result of their social isolation, others feel lonely even when they are in the company of others.(4, 5)

Finally, it is important to note that some people voluntarily choose periods of **solitude** and should not be assumed to have unmet social needs.(4, 5, 7)

THE PREVALENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN THE ACT COMMUNITY

Although loneliness has traditionally been associated with older people, it is in fact young people who now report the highest rates of loneliness in Australia. While the prevalence of loneliness in Australians over 65 years has declined steadily over the past two decades, the opposite has occurred for young people. The prevalence of loneliness in Australians aged 15–24 years has been rising progressively since 2008, with more significant increases since 2015.(8)

The ACT is the loneliest jurisdiction in Australia.(1) Mission Australia's most recent Youth Survey found more than one in five young people (aged 15–19 years) reported feeling lonely most or all of the time in the past four weeks. More than a quarter of ACT respondents also said they found it hard fit in and socialise with everyone else – young women and girls reported this experience at a higher rate than young men and boys.(9)

The *Living well in the ACT Region* survey and its accompanying *Wellbeing Data Dashboard* provide a strong platform for measuring the prevalence of loneliness across the lifespan of ACT residents aged 18 years and older. These tools also offer an opportunity to build a longitudinal picture when young people are most likely to experience loneliness and how long they tend to be impacted. This information is critical ensuring support can be targeted at those with greatest need.

Research conducted in Victoria found one in six adolescents (aged 12–17 years) and one in three young adults (aged 18–25 years) reported problematic levels of loneliness. The noticeable increase in loneliness in early adulthood is likely linked to the significant and multiple transitions that tend to occur during this life stage.(3) Expanding *Living well* to include this adolescent age group and analysing early adulthood data would enable policymakers to better understand (a) if loneliness also peaks for young people in the ACT during these life stages, and (b) how that impacts other wellbeing outcomes.

Orygen acknowledges the additional challenges of conducting research with minors. While *Living well* would ideally be expanded to involve ACT residents aged 12–17 years, expanding the research to include anyone over 16 years would provide a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of young people.

Comparing this data with other participant characteristics (for example, cultural background, gender identity, and disability status) would also provide a clearer picture of how loneliness is experienced by different population groups of young people. Collecting longitudinal data may also provide some insight into how or when transient or episodic periods of loneliness become more chronic, and who is most at risk.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Utilise the *Living well in the ACT region* survey to measure and analyse young people's loneliness and social isolation.

To maximise the utility and insights the *Living well in the ACT region* survey can provide for understanding the experience of loneliness by young people, the survey should include young people aged 16 years and over and report findings for an early adulthood age group (16–24 years).

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop a longitudinal research program through the *Living well in the ACT region* survey.

Building longitudinal data collection into the current *Living well* methodology to enable researchers to track frequency and duration of experiences of loneliness and social isolation, as well as wellbeing outcomes, across the lifespan.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The social isolation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns has generated increased public interest in the issue of loneliness. Research has improved community understanding of the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation but research into young people's experiences of these issues is limited.(7)

The period of adolescence and early adulthood involves a range of physical and emotional developmental changes, as well as significant life transitions. Young people grapple with identity formation, fluctuating relationships with peers – including intimate partners, and increasing independence from parents or guardians. At the same time, they leave established school-based social networks and the family home, and have to build new social connections in unfamiliar education and workplace environments.(3, 7)

While transient or episodic periods of loneliness during this period are not unexpected, further research is needed to understand their intensity – that is, *how it feels* to be lonely – and their long-term impacts on wellbeing outcomes.(7, 10) Qualitative investigation into the causes and effects of young people's loneliness will be central to (a) recognising when a young person is lonely, and (b) ensuring young people can access the skills, strategies and support structures they need to manage loneliness and build social connection.(7, 11)

LONELINESS FROM AN ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVE: CHILDLINE STUDY (UK)

Childline is a telephone and online counselling service based in the UK, similar to Australia's Kids Helpline. In order to address the evidence gap relating to young people's experience of loneliness, researchers analysed Childline conversation transcripts. The study revealed how some young people experience and manage loneliness. The methodology employed in this research could be reproduced in a local setting and presents an opportunity develop a similar analysis of young people living in the ACT.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Fund qualitative research into young people's experience of loneliness.

Support the development of qualitative research to capture the causes and effects of young people's loneliness, how they perceive and manage this issue, and how it impacts their wellbeing. Participants involved should reflect a cross-section of the ACT's population.

THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL COSTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Loneliness is recognised globally as a public health priority.(4, 5, 12) Loneliness and social isolation can have significant harmful health, social and economic consequences for individuals and the wider community.(1) Research shows loneliness increases the risk of premature death to the same or greater degree as other universally recognised determinants of health, for example: smoking, excessive drinking, obesity and pollution.(5, 6, 13, 14)

MENTAL HEALTH

Loneliness is a strong predictor of a range of mental health challenges including: depression, anxiety, emotional distress and regulation difficulties, and suicidality.(3, 5, 7, 15) For young people in particular, loneliness and social isolation have been found to have an ongoing mental health impact, increasing the risk and severity of anxiety and depression even after these issues have been alleviated.(14) This relationship is also bidirectional: social anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem are significant contributors to loneliness.(3, 7) Some young people living with mental ill-health manage their symptoms by withdrawing from their social networks, increasing their risk of experiencing

loneliness.(7) This inverse effect is especially pertinent to young people who have much higher rates of social anxiety than other age groups: one in two young adults (18–25 years), and one in three adolescents (12–17) meet the criteria for problematic social anxiety.(3) Given this association, it follows that early interventions that target a young person’s experience of loneliness may also serve as a protective factor against ongoing mental ill-health.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Develop a public awareness campaign to understand and respond in sign of loneliness.

The campaign should aim to support young people and adults to recognise signs of transient and chronic loneliness, and strategies for supporting themselves or others. To be relevant and acceptable for a youth audience, young people must be engaged in the development of campaign assets.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ACT GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION, IMPROVE SOCIAL CONNECTION, AND INTEGRATE IMPROVING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS INTO OTHER ARES OF POLICY MAKING

Modern economic, cultural and technological trends have cultivated individualised lifestyles and reduced physical interaction. Increasing numbers of single-person households, blurred boundaries between work time and personal time, and rapid digitisation have had a marked impact on young people’s social connection opportunities.(16) Social connection is a strong protective factor for mental health and wellbeing. It helps to build an individual’s sense of belonging, ‘interpersonal trust’, and optimism for the future – all of which contribute to wider community resilience.(17-21) Policy interventions are needed to provide additional opportunities for young people to rebuild social connections in their community.

A whole-of-government approach is required to ensure social connection outcomes are built into all policy decisions that impact the way people live, learn, work, and play. The ACT’s population geography is well suited to developing a strategy that strengthens social connection between young people and their local communities. During recent consultation relating to this topic, members of Orygen’s Youth Advisory Council emphasised the need for young people to be actively involved in the development of local social connection models. These young people preferred opportunities that prioritise social connection as their primary objective, rather than as a secondary addition to an existing activity.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Develop a whole-of-government social connection strategy to address loneliness and social isolation.

Implement an integrated strategy that improves social connection within the ACT community and enables young people to access the resources and support they need for healthy and fulfilling lives. Young people must be actively consulted in development and evaluation processes.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Identify and support community initiatives that strengthen social connection between young people and their local communities.

Consult with young people to (a) evaluate existing community programs to ensure they are fit for purpose, and (b) develop and support new social connection initiatives that address loneliness and social isolation, particularly those targeting at-risk groups.

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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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