



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Miss Laura Nuttall MLA (Deputy Chair),  
Ms Nicole Lawder MLA (Member)

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

**Submission Number: 06**

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# Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

A submission regarding shunning by the  
Jehovah's Witnesses

Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion  
Chair Mr Michael Pettersson MLA,  
Deputy Chair Ms Laura Nuttall MLA,  
and Committee Member Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

via: LAcommunityECI@parliament.act.gov.au

**RE: Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT**

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in relation to the current inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT (the "Inquiry").

This submission advises the government on human rights concerns faced by former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Yours sincerely,

Lara Kaput

"Every Jehovah's Witness suffers from shunning  
- either you're being shunned, or you have to shun."<sup>1</sup>

Lara Kaput's realisation after meeting with Irish whistleblower, Mr Jason Wynne

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/how-the-jehovahs-witnesses-broke-my-family/tioi56yxw>>

## Table of Contents

Background .....	5
Introduction .....	5
a) The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community .....	6
Being a current or former Jehovah’s Witness is a driver of loneliness and social isolation in Australia..	6
b) Experiences of loneliness and social isolation among residents of the ACT, including but not limited to seniors, young people, people with a disability, parents, carers, LGBTIQ+ people, and recently arrived migrants and refugees .....	7
c) The personal and social costs associated with loneliness and social isolation in the ACT, including the impact of loneliness and social isolation on mental and physical health.....	8
d) Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community .....	10
The ACT and federal governments have a positive obligation to identify and reduce the risk of institutionally coerced adverse mental health. ....	10
e) Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making .....	11
Recommendations .....	13

## Background

I'm a survivor of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion, and I advocate for fellow exploited and vulnerable Jehovah's Witness victims and survivors. I'm also an Australian with Ukrainian, German and Polish ancestry.

Since 2016 I have provided up-to-date factual and unique information to local and international law enforcement agencies, government bodies, politicians, inquiries, royal commissions, law firms, and the media in relation to Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watch Tower Society. I have made written submissions to, or appeared before, the Inquiry into Australia's Human Rights Framework, the Inquiry into the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2023, the Submission to the Review of the Modern Slavery Act 2018 (NSW), the Joint Select Committee on Operation of the National Redress Scheme, the German Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the Productivity Commission's Review of Philanthropy, Inquiry into the extent and nature of Poverty in Australia, the Disability Royal Commission, the Joint Select Committee on Implementation of the National Redress Scheme, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, the NSW Inquiry into Modern Slavery Act 2018 and Associated Matters, and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

I also have a Bachelor of Chemistry, was a Personal Trainer and became a Management Consultant with a Procurement expertise<sup>2</sup>. I have a culturally diverse background, being the daughter of two immigrant parents who spoke no English when they arrived in Australia.

## Introduction

I was a second-generation, child-indoctrinated Jehovah's Witness. My family handed over their money, time and children to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). From birth we studied emotionally disturbing and graphic publications such as the Awake and Watchtower magazines. At age 8, I cleaned bricks and helped build roads for the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). On weekends, my we focused on selling religious literature from door-to-door. Three times a week we attended religious meetings, sometimes until late into the night. We weren't allowed to sustain non-Jehovah's witness friendships. My baptism at 17 was considered an ever-lasting contract<sup>3</sup> by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Women were not treated equally. I felt paralysed with fear, obligation and guilt. ██████████

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://au.linkedin.com/in/lara-kaput-39504755>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/submissions/65890/0023%20Ms%20Larissa%20Kaput.pdf>>

██████████ were sexually abused, including myself<sup>4</sup>. At the age of 19 I left<sup>5</sup> my former religion and was immediately shunned<sup>6,7</sup> by my family and friends, which has endured for over 30 years<sup>8</sup>. For a lived experience of my former Jehovah's Witness family's collective loss, please see the SBS Insight program, Family Estrangement<sup>9</sup>.

## a) The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community

Being a current or former Jehovah's Witness is a driver of loneliness and social isolation in Australia.

Jehovah's Witnesses are doctrinally required to be of the world, but "no part of the world"<sup>10</sup>. This dichotomy causes the community to be fearful of the government and the non-Jehovah's Witness community and isolates them from understanding parliamentary processes, from participating in democratic activities, and, for example, prevents children participating in after school sports.

The religious harm that contributes to the ACT's loneliness and social isolation most often results in subsequent adverse mental health. This was explored by detailing ten harms in a recent submission in relation to coercive control to the Inquiry into Australia's Human Rights Framework<sup>11</sup>.

**Recommendation 1:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government develops a training curriculum and material for primary schools to teach children about coercive control and human rights.

A major harm - shunning - and the prevalence of it amongst former or current Jehovah's Witnesses is virtually 100% of a population of approximately **3,694** either former or current Jehovah's Witnesses in the ACT (in 2023). Why is this? Because every Jehovah's Witness suffers

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4

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357669210\\_Jehovah's\\_witnesses\\_response\\_to\\_child\\_sexual\\_abuse\\_a\\_critique\\_of\\_organisational\\_behaviour\\_and\\_management\\_policies\\_1989-2020](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357669210_Jehovah's_witnesses_response_to_child_sexual_abuse_a_critique_of_organisational_behaviour_and_management_policies_1989-2020)>

<sup>5</sup> 'Losing my religion': *Managing identity in a post-Jehovah's Witness world* by Nicholas Samuel Hookway and Daphne Habibis

<sup>6</sup> Shunning can be the act of social rejection, or emotional distance. In a religious context, shunning is a formal decision by a denomination or a congregation to cease interaction with an individual or a group, and follows a particular set of rules. It differs from, but may be associated with, excommunication.

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<[https://www.academia.edu/34654607/A\\_LOVING\\_PROVISION\\_HOW\\_FORMER\\_JEHOVAHS\\_WITNESSES\\_EXPERIENCE\\_SHUNNING\\_PRACTICES](https://www.academia.edu/34654607/A_LOVING_PROVISION_HOW_FORMER_JEHOVAHS_WITNESSES_EXPERIENCE_SHUNNING_PRACTICES)>

<sup>8</sup> <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-020-01156-8>>

<sup>9</sup> <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR\\_frDWax5c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR_frDWax5c)>

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/wp20120301/No-Part-of-the-World/>>

<sup>11</sup> <<https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=5492dcb0-cb0b-4083-85d3-04020d1a60d8&subId=752063>>

from shunning - either you're being shunned, or you have to shun<sup>12,13</sup>. Shunning is a religious harm<sup>14</sup>. Shunning in the Jehovah's Witnesses generally occurs as a result of disfellowshipping or disassociation. Two examples of why individuals may be disfellowshipped or disassociated as those that either perpetuate child sexual abuse, or conversely, those who speak out against the institutionally-endorsed covering up of child sexual abuse<sup>15</sup>.

How was the affected population in the ACT estimated to be 3,694?

In 2023, there was one Jehovah's Witness for every 379 Australians<sup>16</sup>. As at June 2023, the population of the ACT was 466,8000<sup>17</sup>. The number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the ACT in 2023 was approximately 1,232. We know from Pew Research that about two thirds leave<sup>18</sup> so, it's likely that in our generation, 2,462 have already left. If we assume that, approximately 1,232 and 2,462 current and former Jehovah's Witnesses are alive, and remain living in the ACT, it makes the likely maximum number of current and former Jehovah's Witnesses in the ACT was ~3,694\*.

I am not aware of the prevalence of shunning in other fundamentalist or high control religions or cults, such as the Exclusive Brethren or Scientology.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government conduct research into religious harm factors, including the prevalence of each factor and an understanding of which religions are causing the greatest harm, and why.

\* Note: included are the maximum numbers, which may require verification.

b) Experiences of loneliness and social isolation among residents of the ACT, including but not limited to seniors, young people, people with a disability, parents, carers, LGBTIQ+ people, and recently arrived migrants and refugees

It should be noted, that the majority of my Jehovah's Witness induced loneliness and social isolation was initiated in Melbourne, but it continued when I lived in Queensland and then

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<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-13/jehovah-witnesses-child-abuse-four-corners-investigations/100444320>>

<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.jwfacts.com/watchtower/disfellowship-shunning.php>>

<sup>14</sup> Religious Harm: Distress and suffering of persons impacted by physical, psychological, emotional and social harms caused, or contributed to, by a person, entity or group seeking to advance a religious cause or belief or acting in connection with a religious activity.

<sup>15</sup> <<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Case%20Study%2029%20-%20Findings%20Report%20-%20Jehovahs%20Witnesses.pdf>>

<sup>16</sup> <<https://jwfacts.com/watchtower/statistics-australia-jehovahs-witnesses.php>>

<sup>17</sup> <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release>>

<sup>18</sup> <<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/04/26/a-closer-look-at-jehovahs-witnesses-living-in-the-u-s/>>



moved to Canberra. And, it all came ‘screaming back’ to me when my partner was diagnosed with a brain tumour soon after we moved to Canberra. We were trapped in the ACT and with me being a fulltime Carer with no support from my Jehovah’s Witness family or former friends<sup>19</sup>.

Including myself, now an ACT resident, [REDACTED] family members suffered from poor mental health<sup>20</sup>:

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

c) The personal and social costs associated with loneliness and social isolation in the ACT, including the impact of loneliness and social isolation on mental and physical health

“When some of us left the Jehovah’s Witnesses, not only did we have no support, but we also had little idea of how society worked. It’s hard to adjust when we are told that Satan controls the government, and all of society<sup>21</sup>, and literally “wants to devour you!”<sup>22</sup> – William LJ Bigmore

<sup>19</sup> <[https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/2378283/VAD-Submission-081-Lara-Kaput.pdf](https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2378283/VAD-Submission-081-Lara-Kaput.pdf)>

<sup>20</sup> <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9803876/>>

<sup>21</sup> <<https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-child-sexual-abuse-records-destroy-satan-video-20180709.html>>

<sup>22</sup> <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/ws20150515/watchful-satan-wants-to-devour/>>

As a result of many Jehovah's Witnesses cultural practices, I have suffered extensive institutionally-endorsed adverse mental health<sup>23</sup>, including:

- bullying - indirectly as a result of religious harm and directly as a result of non-religious corporate behaviour;
- career breakdown and poverty - indirectly as a result of religious harm;
- childhood domestic violence (physical, contributing to emotional abuse) - directly as a result of religious harm;
- depression - directly as a result of religious harm;
- generalised anxiety - directly as a result of religious harm;
- post-traumatic stress disorder - directly as a result of religious harm;
- relationship breakdowns - indirectly as a result of religious harm;
- reproductive coercion<sup>24, 25</sup> - directly as a result of religious harm; and
- vulvodynia - indirectly as a result of religious harm.

“I have seen hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses (sic) child survivors gathering in support groups. They articulate their pain and seek validation from their community. Most are too traumatised, uneducated, poor and socially isolated to effectively seek help. They use aliases so as not to be discovered and shunned by their family and friends. They're generally not allowed to vote nor take any interest in politics. So even former members simply don't understand the government process...”<sup>26</sup>

**Calculating the cost of mental health support for the estimated 3,694 of current and former Jehovah's Witnesses alone (at \$5,000 per person) is \$18,470,000.** Jehovah's Witness accountability may avoid this cost to taxpayers.

**Yet in addition to this, I estimate a loss of \$150,000 in lost earnings as a result of trying to obtain awareness, justice and reform.** Early governmental intervention may have alleviated this.

**Recommendation 3: That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government formally recognises religious harm and provide a funding stream to provide care for the most vulnerable and exploited religious harm sufferers.**

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<sup>23</sup>

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262733101\\_Salutary\\_pathogenic\\_and\\_pathoplastic\\_aspects\\_of\\_the\\_Jehovah%27s\\_Witness\\_culture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262733101_Salutary_pathogenic_and_pathoplastic_aspects_of_the_Jehovah%27s_Witness_culture)>

<sup>24</sup> Reproductive Coercion: Behaviour that deliberately prevents a person from making decisions about their reproductive health.

<sup>25</sup> *Hidden Forces: Shining a Light on Reproductive Coercion White Paper* by Marie Stopes

<sup>26</sup> <<https://saysorrycampaign.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/jsc-hansard-19-march-2020-witness-lara-kaput.pdf>>

**Recommendation 4:** Provision of respite houses and/or domestic shelters for cult-leavers, using a similar model to the AFP’s referral pathway to the Red Cross for modern slavery survivors.

d) Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community

The ACT and federal governments have a positive obligation to identify and reduce the risk of institutionally coerced adverse mental health.

In my lived experience, doctors such as General Practitioners, did not recognise my loneliness and social isolation when I was young, nor prioritise treatment<sup>27</sup> for my poor mental health.

My mental health issues were not picked up by:

- my childhood doctor, nor doctors, nurses or pharmacists I visited as an adult;
- any community leaders that I have come into contact with;
- any corporations that I’ve worked for;
- any Victorian public or private hospitals that I was a patient in;
- any police officer;
- any law court officer; nor
- any school teachers or university professors.

These people add up to well over one hundred people, representing 100+ missed opportunities to diagnose, refer and/or treat me earlier.

As a result, it took over ten years for my new general practitioner to recognise that I was suffering generalised anxiety and to recommend and provide a health care plan to complete ten psychological sessions. Identifying the risk to me earlier would have increased my productivity, reduced the cost of treatment and prevented my risk to co-morbidities.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government provide training for professionals (Family Law Court Magistrates, healthcare professionals, police and teachers) to recognise symptoms of religious harm and referrals pathways to professional therapists.

Although being in online social media support groups can alleviate the devastation of loneliness and the loss of social connection, it’s not a substitute for a formal pathway to recovery. Without

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<sup>27</sup> *‘The Aims and Challenges of Treating Jehovahs Witnesses’* by Friedson, M. L.

the critical skills and connection that they desperately need, survivors like me often stagnate and/or self-destruct. Mental Health awareness campaigns have done much to destigmatise mental health issues as an illness. But these campaigns haven't been tailored to support religious harm sufferers.

When I felt lonely and was socially isolated, what helped me most was when:

- my GP referred me to a psychologist,
- my psychologist treated me with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and relaxation therapy,
- my GP recommended reading self-help books,
- my GP recommended physiotherapy, including clinical pilates,
- my GP recommended outdoor exercise,
- I discovered the on-line former Jehovah's Witness community

I accepted and acted on all of these recommendations. Yet, rebuilding my life still took over a decade.

As religious harm issues are religion-specific, sufferers may not recognise treatment relates to them unless it is targeted at them. For example, a Jehovah's Witness suffering from religious harm may use cult-like, loaded language, such as "Elder", "Kingdom Hall" and "disfellowshipped". These words may be different for a Catholic, using the terms "Priest", "Church" and "ostracised" respectively. Likewise, for those of other former or current faith backgrounds.

**Recommendation 6: That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government develops a pathway for psychological professionals to recognise and understand cult-like language, and ensure these resources are trained to support people from different faith backgrounds, so they can relate to and benefit from therapy.**

e) Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making

The ACT government could promote secular organisations for those suffering loneliness and social isolation due to religious harm. Examples of such organisations are:

**a) Canberra Bushwalking Club**

The Canberra Bushwalking Club<sup>28</sup> was founded in 1961 and has over 400 members. They're a member club of Bushwalking NSW and walk in all sorts of places, not just Canberra!

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<sup>28</sup> <<https://canberrabushwalkingclub.org/>>

#### **b) Rationalist Society of Australia**

The Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA) is the oldest freethought group in Australia, promoting reason since 1906. Their members and supporters hold that:

- All significant beliefs and actions should be based on reason and evidence.
- The natural world is the only world there is.
- Answers to the key questions of human existence are to be found only in that natural world.<sup>29</sup>

#### **c) Social Health Australia**

Growing evidence suggests that the impacts of isolation, loneliness, transition, grief and loss are often best mitigated by meaningful human connection. At Social Health Australia, human connection is the basis for the kind of social emotional existential support they're helping make available in a wide range of settings, from the Australian Royal Navy to the local neighbourhood house. Their work draws inspiration from spiritual companionship, the time-honoured art of compassionate listening, reimagined as non theistic, and evolving as a new way of mediating meaning, holding hope and building resiliency in times of crisis. They are committed to ensuring that this support becomes increasingly accessible for anyone who may need it, regardless of age, culture, disability, gender identity, or belief system.<sup>30</sup>

#### **d) Secular Association of NSW:**

The Secular Association of NSW "...recognise that the right to freedom of religion or belief entails state neutrality in matters of religion. That is, the people should enjoy both freedom of religious belief and practice, and from imposed religious doctrine and practice".<sup>31</sup>

Effective advertising campaigns have been released for alcoholism, depression (Beyond Blue), domestic violence (White Ribbon), gambling and Suicide (RUOK?). None have specifically targeted religious harm.

**Recommendation 7:** Provide "Are You In A Cult?" multimedia advertising, with referrals to secular support.

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<sup>29</sup> <<https://rationalist.com.au/about/about-us/>>

<sup>30</sup> <<https://socialhealthaustralia.org/about-us/>>

<sup>31</sup> <<https://secular-nsw.com.au/about/>>

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government develops a training curriculum and material for primary schools to teach children about coercive control and human rights.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government conduct research into religious harm factors, including the prevalence of each factor and an understanding of which religions are causing the greatest harm, and why.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government formally recognises religious harm and provide a funding stream to provide care for the most vulnerable and exploited religious harm sufferers.

**Recommendation 4:** Provision of respite houses and/or domestic shelters for cult-leavers, using a similar model to the AFP's referral pathway to the Red Cross for modern slavery survivors.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government provide training for professionals (Family Law Court Magistrates, healthcare professionals, police and teachers) to recognise symptoms of religious harm and referrals pathways to professional therapists.

**Recommendation 6:** That the Committee recommends the Australian Capital Territory government develops a pathway for psychological professionals to recognise and understand cult-like language, and ensure these resources are trained to support people from different faith backgrounds, so they can relate to and benefit from therapy.

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