



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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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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## Health Research Institute (HRI) submission: Loneliness and social isolation in the ACT

The *Living well in the ACT region survey* conducted by researchers at HRI (Schirmer et al 2024) has measured incidence of loneliness amongst adults living in the ACT since 2019, with data collected at five points (In late 2019, early 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdown, at the end of 2020 between lockdowns, at the end of 2020, and in early 2023)<sup>1</sup>. The data show that the proportion of residents who often experience loneliness increased from 13.6% in late 2019, to 25.6% during the first lockdown in early 2020. It then declined to 9.8% in late 2020 (between lockdowns) while in 2021 it returned to 15.8% during and immediately after another lockdown. Post COVID-related lockdowns, it has declined slightly, to 8.8% in 2023 (data sheet attached).

The data show that some groups are consistently more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation than others. When looking at who is most likely to report they are often lonely – which indicates a level of loneliness likely to be associated with poorer health outcomes – some groups are significantly more likely to be lonely than the ACT average of 8.8% of people (as of early 2023). In particular, there are consistent differences by age group:

- The highest rates of loneliness are reported by those aged 18-29 (13.6% in 2023): During the time the survey has been conducted, the proportion of 18-29 year old reporting frequent loneliness has fluctuated between 14% and 24%, with the exception of the first COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020, during which 31.8% reported frequently being lonely.
- Those aged 30-49 (11.2% in 2023).

While the elderly are often identified as a high risk group for loneliness, and some of those in this age group are lonely, in general those age 65 and over in the ACT are at lower risk of loneliness and social isolation compared to younger age groups, with 5.6% reporting experiencing frequent loneliness as of early 2023, and this age group being less likely to report frequent loneliness compared to younger people in all five surveys conducted between 2019 and 2023.

Women are slightly more likely to experience frequent loneliness than men (15.2% compared to 11.9% in 2019, falling to 9.0% compared to 7.4% in 2023).

Other groups who consistently have higher rates of loneliness compared to the average across the ACT are people living with a disability that severely restricts day to day functioning (34.6% as of 2023), or moderately restricts functioning (16.9%), informal carers who have 15 hours a week or more of caring obligations (18.9%), and those identifying as LGBTIQ (18.7%). Those born overseas in non-English

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<sup>1</sup> Levels of loneliness are measured by asking survey respondents (i) How often do you feel you lack companionship, (ii) How often do you feel left out, and (iii) How often do you feel isolated from others. Response options were (i) Never, (ii) Hardly ever, (iii) Occasionally/sometimes, (iv) Often, or (v) All of the time. This is an internationally validated and widely used measure of loneliness (see Schirmer and Dale 2024 for further information).

speaking countries in most surveys were slightly less likely to report frequently feeling lonely compared to the average, but in the most recent survey in 2023, were slightly more likely to report feeling lonely (11.3%). The survey also found higher rates of loneliness amongst recent arrivals to the ACT, with 27.2% of those who have lived in the ACT for three years or less frequently lonely in 2019, and amongst single parents (26.6% in 2019).

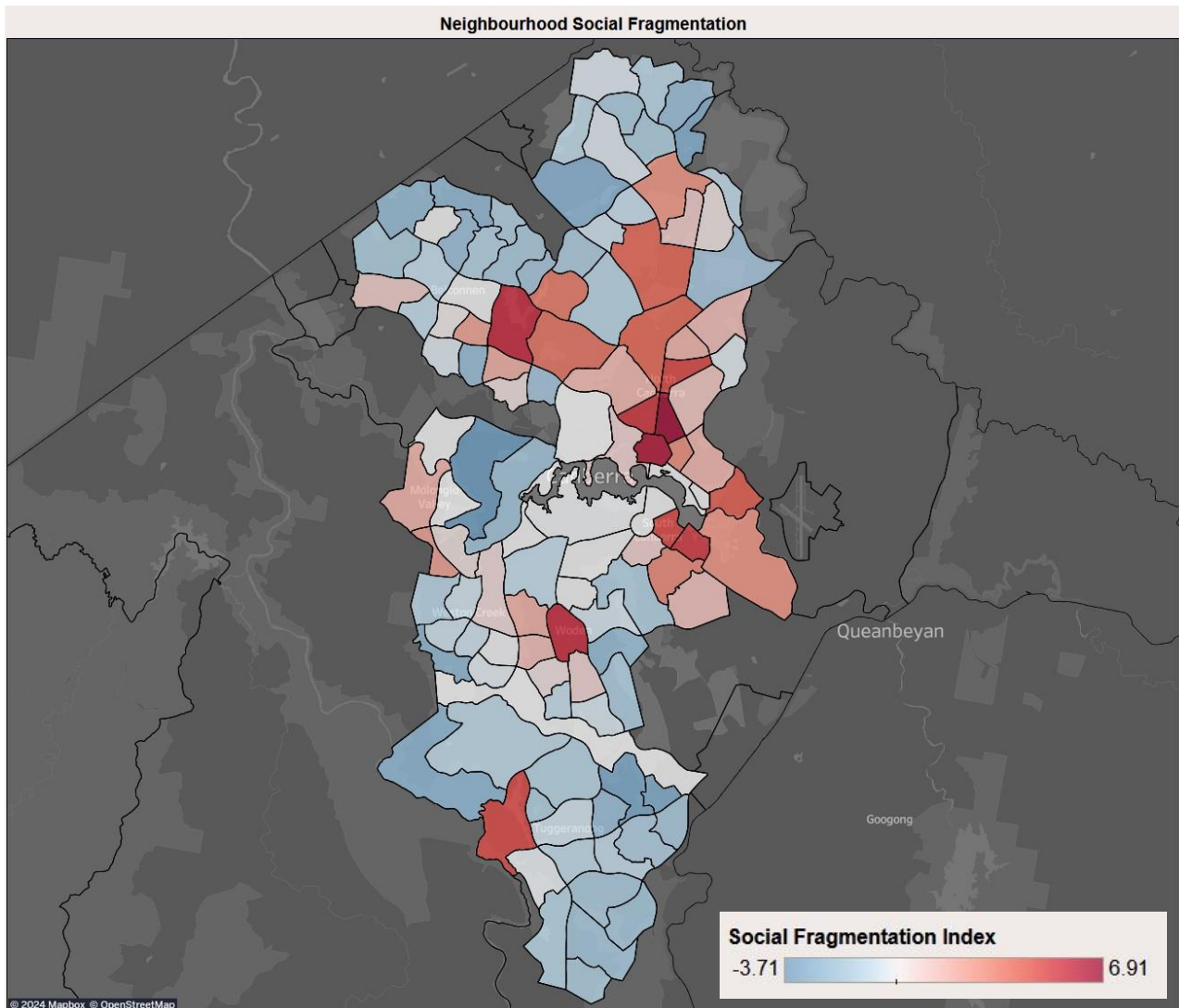
The type of residence a person lives in also appears to make a difference. While this will be partly due to co-occurrence of other risk factors for loneliness amongst those living in particular types of residence, residence type appears to be a contributing factor even after taking these co-occurring risk factors into account:

- Renters are more likely to be lonely than those who have a mortgage or own their home outright; this is largely associated with the younger average age of renters compared to the other groups
- Those living in units/apartments are more likely to frequently experience loneliness compared to those living in townhouses or separate dwellings: this effect is still there after controlling for age, and in part is associated with the higher proportion of people in units/apartments who live alone compared to other types of dwelling
- Those who live alone are more likely to experience frequent loneliness than those who live with others (18.9% in 2019)

There were slightly higher rates of loneliness amongst people living in Inner Belconnen and Inner South suburbs, as of 2019. These districts of the ACT have relatively higher proportions of units/apartments, and of renters and younger residents living in rented dwellings, compared to other districts. Lower rates of loneliness were found in Tuggeranong North, Weston Creek, and Woden Valley.

Overall, the survey suggests that addressing loneliness requires interventions that target those who have a disability or are informal carers, single parents, renters, those living in units/apartments, and those living alone. Those who have recently moved to the ACT are at high risk of loneliness, as are younger adults compared to older adults.

The **National Social Fragmentation Index** developed by researcher at HRI (Bagheri et al 2019) has been used to capture social fragmentation across neighborhoods in Australia and demonstrate how the index may be useful for understanding patterns in health outcomes by investigating the prevalence of common mental disorders across communities. In mapping social fragmentation across the ACT we find that there are particular suburb 'hot spots' where social fragmentation is very high (see map below). As part of our MRFF grant, we are currently undertaking community consultation with some of the communities in the Belconnen District with high social fragmentation, with the aim of developing a co-designed intervention using Link Workers to help address loneliness and social isolation in these sub-groups. We are happy to discuss in further detail any of the above.



Map of social fragmentation by suburb in the ACT 2021.

## References

Schirmer, J. and Dale, M. 2024. Living well in the ACT region – User Guide February 2024. University of Canberra, Canberra. DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.2.20756.07045](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.20756.07045)

Bagheri, N., Batterham, P.J., Salvador-Carulla, L. et al. Development of the Australian neighborhood social fragmentation index and its association with spatial variation in depression across communities. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 54, 1189–1198 (2019).