



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

Submission Number: 14

Date Authorised for Publication: 05 March 2024



Submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

23 February 2024

Children and Young People Commissioner

ACT Human Rights Commission

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Role of the Children and Young People Commissioner

The Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is one of eight independent statutory roles that together make up the ACT Human Rights Commission. These roles promote the human rights and welfare of all people living in the ACT and have legislative responsibility for protecting some of Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

The role of the CYPC is to:

- Promote the rights of children and young people,
- Consult and talk with children and young people and promote their participation in decision-making,
- Ensure stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people, and
- Provide advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.

Introduction

Over 2022 and 2023, the CYPC conducted three consultations with children and young people that are directly relevant to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation. In 2022, the CYPC consulted 2456 children and young people about racism in the ACT culminating in the 2023 [It Really Stabs Me](#) report. Also in 2022, the CYPC spoke to over 300 children and young people about their right to wellbeing, the results of which are presented in [Listening to Children and Accepting How They Feel](#). Then, in 2023, the CYPC consulted 755 children and young people about their right to play and recreation, which resulted in the [More Big Kid Swings](#) report.

Although we did not explicitly ask about social isolation and loneliness, all three consultation processes highlighted experiences that can lead to loneliness and social isolation for children and young people. They also outline practical and effective strategies to address isolation.

This submission is therefore premised on the words of children and young people who have directly engaged with the CYPC in our work over the past two years.

Input from children and young people

Despite young people being specifically listed as one of the Committee's target groups for the Inquiry and the fact that the Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS) identified them as being at particular risk of loneliness,¹ it is concerning that there appear to be limited avenues in this Inquiry to obtain direct input from children and young people. I acknowledge the Committee may be reaching out to children and young people in other ways, however I would like to emphasise that any endeavours to address loneliness and social isolation in the ACT need to acknowledge that this acutely affects children and young people and actively engage them in developing solutions.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This not only includes decisions relating directly to their individual circumstances, but also applies to developing policies, frameworks and legislation that affect children and young people as a cohort and as citizens.

¹ Strawa, Cat. [Understanding and defining loneliness and social isolation](#). Australian Institute for Family Studies, Dec 2022

Children and young people are the experts in their own lives and the only ones who truly understand their lived experiences – no one knows what it is like to be a child today better than children and young people themselves. Ensuring children and young people can share their knowledge and experiences with the Committee will enable the Inquiry and any resulting recommendations to be more relevant and effective. Hearing from children and young people themselves provides a different perspective to that of adults.

To this end, if you have not already done so, I encourage the Committee to establish appropriate and accessible mechanisms so those children and young people who directly experience loneliness and social isolation or are impacted by the loneliness and social isolation of their parents/carers can actively engage in the Inquiry and comment on the causes, impact, and solutions.

Experiences of loneliness and social isolation among young people

The terms loneliness and social isolation can be difficult to define, and the way they are used is often inconsistent.² For the purposes of this submission we are using the definitions put forward by the AIFS, which are summarised as follows:

Social isolation: A measurable lack of contact with social connections, usually when a person experiences a low number of social interactions.

Loneliness: A person's feelings that the number and quality of their social connections is less than they would like.

AIFS states in the same article that "*Supporting individuals to foster meaningful engagement has been shown to be effective at reducing feelings of loneliness.*"³

As CYPC, my submission focuses on what we have heard from children and young people about the ways they wish to be supported to foster friendship, community connection and family relationships, and on the barriers they have identified in doing so.

Factors that support wellbeing

During our 2022 right to wellbeing consultation, children and young people identified the following factors as crucial to their wellbeing and mental health:

- Feelings of connection to friends and family,
- Being able to play sport or online games,
- Access to clubs and community events, and
- Meeting up with friends in nature.

"I think that it would be better for children's wellbeing if we get to go outside more, and we aren't stuck in the classroom."

Children and young people use play and recreation to connect to their peers and to manage their mental health.

"Getting to socialise and push intrusive thoughts away and knowing people care for you."

² Strawa, Cat. [Understanding and defining loneliness and social Isolation](#). Australian Institute for Family Studies, Dec 2022

³ Ibid

This requires spaces and facilities in which children and young people can come together, both independently and with their families. A lack of these spaces, or an inability to access them, reduces opportunities for children and young people to connect and exacerbates their risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Access to play and recreation

The CYPC's 2023 right to play and recreation consultation identified clear links between social connections and recreation. During this consultation, barriers to accessing play and recreation spaces were explored. A lack of appropriate spaces, or barriers to accessing them, were identified as concerns for children and young people.

This sits alongside the strong messages from the CYPC's 2022 right to wellbeing consultation, which indicated that spaces, clubs, and nature play an important role in connecting children and young people to friends and family. Clearly these spaces need to be designed in ways that meet these needs. Sadly, however, 78 per cent of the 657 year 9-12 students we polled said there are not enough accessible play and recreation spaces in the ACT. The lack of spaces, and the barriers to accessing the existing spaces, mean children and young people are being limited in how they can connect with their friends and wider community.

Barriers included:

Not feeling safe due to lack of footpaths and streetlights, experiences of homophobia and racism in parks and playgrounds.

"Lighting is really poor across all streets in ACT. It is NOT safe for girls to walk anywhere, even from bus stops."

"Not easy to go on bikes to playgrounds because of car focus, no footpaths."

Lack of public transport connecting children and young people to parks and playgrounds to enable them to travel there independently and not have to rely on parents or guardians taking them.

"Unable to get to spaces."

Limited disability inclusive play and recreation spaces within local neighbourhoods that cater for a broad spectrum of ages, stages and diversity.

"More things for disabled people."

As part of the CYPC's 2023 right to play and recreation consultation, we reviewed how many parks were listed on the Park Finder website as accessible (which means they have either a ramp, wide enough gate or a flat entry with no grass) coupled with accessible play equipment and found only 10.

Not enough options for teens was a strong message from young people who felt the lack of options for their age group, coupled with hostility towards them from adults when they go to existing spaces, left them with very few options to safely connect with each other.

"Got yelled at by a mum for being in a park."

"Making spaces more diverse not just playgrounds. Young people like different things like fishing."

The role of inclusion

Inclusion was a key theme in the CYPC's 2022 right to wellbeing consultation. Children and young people we spoke to wanted people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those from multicultural backgrounds to feel included and have support to engage with peers and in their community equally to others.

"Everyone should be equal, no matter what culture or gender."

"The right to sport for disabled children, disadvantaged children, different genders."

"I need to know that I belong, even though I am different."

From very young ages, children we have spoken to are keenly aware that characteristics some children have result in them being isolated from community activities, sport, and recreation. They recognise this has detrimental impacts on wellbeing and mental health and through our 2023 right to play and recreation consultation, they identified ways to ensure our public spaces were more inclusive (we will discuss this further in a later section).

The impact of racism

The prevalence of racism in public spaces must be acknowledged by this Inquiry. In 2023, the CYPC released the *It Really Stabs Me* report on children and young people's experiences of racism. It is well established that racism has significant mental health impacts that can contribute to isolation and feelings of loneliness, and racism was identified by children and young people as directly leading to self-imposed isolation and loneliness.⁴

"To protect myself, I don't go to events where I think there will be lots of ignorant yahoos or drunk young men who think it funny among peers to call out names and make "funny" jokes in your earshot. I never feel safe in events like summernats (sic), football crowds. I've had people in line at Woolies (sic) hiss at me to speak English when I was with elderly parents and chatting with them in our native language. I have a broad Aussie accent but felt scared when these confrontational events happen. Everyone in line pretends it didn't happen, and shamefully so did I. It stays with you, diminishes confidences, makes you feel shame when none should have been felt."

One young woman we spoke to said she did not even feel safe moving around her own neighbourhood, saying that:

"Walking alone for me is scary."

And a number of children and young people said instances of racism are prevalent during club sport, with reflections such as:

"They scream chants at me at sport, at out-of-school soccer."

When common ways to connect with your peers and community, like events and organised sport, feel threatening due to racism it is understandable that some children and young people begin to isolate themselves from these environments. This puts them at high risk of loneliness, particularly when instances of racism were identified in every aspect of their daily lives. Addressing racism must remain a whole of government priority across all sectors.

⁴ ACT Children and Young People Commissioner, [It really stabs me: From resignation to resilience - Children and young people's experiences of racism in the ACT](#), Pg 38. 2023

Opportunities to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community

Children and young people have innovative and practical ideas to create more opportunities for social connection and ensure our communities feel safer when they are engaged in social activities. In addition to the suggestions below, we strongly recommend the Committee read the three CYPC reports hyperlinked earlier in this submission.

Provide a greater variety of play and recreation spaces

Many teenagers emphasised the lack of suitable spaces for them to come together to socialise. This was a commonly identified barrier for this age group in accessing play and recreation spaces, and therefore some forms of social connection. Many of them had great ideas for how to increase opportunities for themselves and their peers to connect:

Gaming rooms - One group of boys suggested that having spaces where they can physically come together and use the same gaming systems would mean they would be more likely to socially connect in person. They also explained that not having the same consoles and therefore not being able to play the same games means they are also more likely to connect with strangers online. Having gaming rooms would lessen this risk.

"Gaming room so you can do multiplayer games with your friends, not strangers online."

Greater investment in community centres and clubs - Community centres and clubs were seen as a possible option for socialising and recreation but some students we spoke to in suburbs that were further from the city noted that facilities were not as good in their neighbourhoods as they were in others.

"Not as nice facility here at the community centre compared to Woden which is nicer and feels safer."

"More clubs, like bird watching clubs."

Facilitate connection through the arts - Children and young people have diverse interests so options to address social isolation also need to be diverse. Some creative young people expressed the desire for dedicated areas to come together to explore their artistic talents without having to go to organised classes or clubs. One suggestion was to have spaces designated for young graffiti artists so interested children and young people could get together to explore this skill. Another was to have amphitheatres and stages at parks so children and young people can stage their own productions.

"Thinking of people who dream to be actors, dancers, something in a playground where they can practice, helping people have their dreams."

Free access to sports facilities and equipment - Sport plays a huge role in children and young people's social lives, but club membership can be prohibitively expensive. Many children and young people we spoke to suggested free access to a wide range of sporting equipment and facilities (not just football fields) would enable them to connect with peers and the wider community in healthier ways.

"More sports equipment for public use"

"More public spaces areas such as volleyball courts"

Improve feelings of safety around parks and recreation spaces

A major issue across all three consultations was safety. This was particularly true for children with a disability, those who identified as LGBTIQ+, girls and young women, and children and young people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Children and young people need to feel safe to go out into their communities and reported to us that they often do not.

Providing better lighting, footpaths and unisex bathrooms were all suggested as practical ways to increase safety, but tackling racism and homophobia are also necessary steps to ensure children and young people are not isolating themselves.

"To keep kids safe from mean people."

The important role of nature and pets

In both our 2022 right to wellbeing consultation and our 2023 right to play and recreation consultation, nature was identified as a key factor in facilitating connection and managing mental health. Children and young people want outdoor spaces that facilitate connections with each other and with nature.

Pets and animals were also identified as crucial to mental health. Many children and young people listed their pets as key factors in feeling happy and reducing loneliness. Significant emotional support was identified through relationships with animals.

You may remember from our submission to the [Committee's 2023 Future of School Infrastructure Inquiry](#) that there is growing evidence that animals in schools reduce anxiety, reduce aggression, and increase engagement and positive attitudes to the classroom. There is also evidence that animals in schools can increase attendance for some students who experience school refusal.

"I want there to be more social emotional dogs at school for people who need them."

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also notes evidence that there is "an association between pet ownership and lower experiences of social isolation, particularly for children."⁵

Practical support and funding for schools to implement 'animals in school' programs would support positive connection and increased attendance, thereby reducing the sense of isolation for some students at risk of loneliness.

Concluding comments

In a little over a year, I have heard from over 3500 children and young people through the consultations mentioned in this submission. I also hear from many more children and young people in the course of my everyday work, so I am well placed to draw links between what I have heard and the focus of your Inquiry. However, because we have not specifically asked children and young people about loneliness and isolation, our analysis is likely to only paint part of the picture.

Almost a third of the ACT population are children and young people aged under 25 years. Again, I strongly urge you to generate accessible ways to both inform children and young people about inquiries such as this and to facilitate their participation. Only then will you be able to formulate recommendations that will effectively reduce isolation and loneliness in the ACT for those who are some of the most vulnerable in our community.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Social Isolation and Loneliness](#), September 2023.