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

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region and Relationships Australia (National Office) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Australian Capital Territory. This submission is a joint submission from Relationships Australia Canberra & Region and Relationships Australia (National Office).

Key Recommendations

1. Loneliness measures should be used to track loneliness, but interpretations should acknowledge the limitations they present in measuring communities most at-risk of loneliness.

2. Interventions should target communities, with a focus on minority communities, most at risk of loneliness, through services they already engage with, to ensure that loneliness does not become chronic or entrenched.

3. Support evidence and community-based loneliness interventions, such as Neighbours Every Day, that support people to create new connection in their community and improve all the relationships in their lives.

4. Recognise the unique impact the ACT's geography and development has on loneliness for residents, especially those experiencing poverty. Consider the implications public transportation and service location has on loneliness and explore impacts of emerging Artificial Intelligence technologies on loneliness.

5. Acknowledge the prevalence of poverty in the ACT. Consider the implications poverty has on loneliness, especially for 'well-hidden' poverty in the ACT. Prioritise universal access to services for people experiencing poverty, including 'loneliness adjacent' supports which facilitate social connection, address loneliness, and support people to overcome economic barriers to acquiring social capital.

6. Any efforts made to address loneliness in the ACT should complement gambling prevention strategies by ensuring the links between gambling and loneliness are well understood.

7. The ACT government should explore opportunities for investing in loneliness interventions and other services and supports which make social connection possible for everyone in the ACT. This should occur across policy areas, including healthcare, social supports, public space design, technology, and transport. Investments should prioritise inclusivity for our communities most at-risk of loneliness and most negatively affected by the ACT's current systems.

Contents

Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia provides a range of relationships services to Australians, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with healthy and respectful relationships. Relationships Australia has provided family relationships services for more than 75 years.

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region are a leading provider of relationship support services for adults, families, children and young people, workplaces and communities across Canberra and the New South Wales South Coast, Alpine, Southern Tablelands and Riverina regions. We are a member of the Relationships Australia federation.

Relationships Australia believes that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others. Our services include individual, family and couples counselling, children's services, services for victim-survivors and perpetrators of family violence, services to people experiencing harms related to gambling and use of alcohol and other drugs, dispute resolution, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people to receive the benefits of nurturing relationships and inclusive, welcoming and flourishing communities.

Relationships Australia's work in with loneliness and social isolation

Relationships Australia has a particular interest in social isolation and loneliness. We are invested in supporting respectful and sustainable relationships not only within families, but within and across communities. Relationships Australia is uniquely positioned to speak on social isolation and loneliness as we have clinical experience supporting clients who experience loneliness. We have also conducted pioneering research into who experiences loneliness (Mance 2018; Relationships Australia 2021) and are a founding member organisation in the Ending Loneliness Together network. We also manage a social connection campaign, Neighbours Every Day, since 2013, the primary purpose of which is to equip and empower individuals to build sustainable, respectful relationships with those around them. The campaign fosters connection and belonging, increasing individuals' mental well-being and reducing feelings of loneliness (Cruwys et. al. 2021). Across its lifetime, the campaign has been independently evaluated to demonstrate sustainable and equitable reductions in loneliness in those who participate (Cruwys et. al. 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Prevalence of loneliness in the ACT

What is loneliness

Loneliness is a universal human response. Most people, at some point in their life, will experience feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is primarily understood as an emotional response to discontented feelings about the quality or quantity of our connections (Heinrich & Gullone 2006).

Measuring loneliness

Loneliness is usually considered a psychological response to a personal experience, making it a uniquely individual phenomenon, and therefore difficult to predict and respond to. The ACT Wellbeing Framework is a good example of a population-based loneliness measure, that uses a representative sample of the ACT population to understand the fluctuations in loneliness across the Territory.

How well can we use loneliness measures to understand loneliness and its solutions?

Loneliness is measured using psychometrically robust scales, which can be used to compare a respondents', or groups, loneliness levels in real time, or over time. While these psychological measures can explore loneliness among groups of people, they can only measure individual distress, without addressing the social realities that make a group of people more, or less, lonely (unless these variables are specifically included in the research design). Loneliness scales were also developed and standardised in white, Anglo-American cultures, characterising some behaviours or responses through this lens.

As such, measures of the prevalence of loneliness in a community, such as the ACT, while useful, should be interpreted within the context of the social realities of the ACT and with reference to other ongoing concerns for certain communities. For example, data from the ACT Wellbeing Framework demonstrated a reduction in loneliness since it began measuring in 2019, however they note that carers, people from CALD backgrounds and LGBTIQIA+ groups did not experience this reduction (2020). Loneliness and social isolation is understood to be a complex concern in these communities (Hughes et al., 2021; Warr et al., 2020; Sharafized et al., 2023).

As such, small shifts in population-based levels of loneliness are not especially useful at supporting us to understand the impact of loneliness on specific communities and how best to develop interventions that target the appropriate communities. This is due to a variety of reasons.

Firstly, population-level experiences with loneliness are relatively stable. Excluding the COVID-19 lockdowns, where loneliness peaked with 1 in 2 people in Australia reporting feeling lonely, most people move in and out of loneliness throughout time, with approximately 1 in 5 Australians feeling lonely at any given time throughout the last 20 years (Lim 2020; Mance 2018; Newby et. al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2024). In fact, even very statistically significant studies such as the HILDA survey, found that there was no statistically significant relationship between loneliness and lockdowns (Wilkins et al., 2024). This is partly because loneliness measures are very ephemeral. Since most people, at some point in their life, will experience feelings of loneliness, and feelings can be triggered by a variety of factors, it is important to interpret any small changes to the data with this in mind. Without very robust sampling methods that can account for this movement, such as those found in the HILDA survey, it is difficult to conclusively suggest that the ACT is less lonely now than in 2019. More importantly, if the populations who face unique challenges with social isolation and loneliness have had little movement in their levels of loneliness, such as carers, people from CALD backgrounds and LGBTIQIA+ groups, those most in need of support remain lonely despite population-level reductions. Therefore, the focus should not be on the minimal improvements in the general population, but on the potentially worsening and entrenching experiences for minority communities.

Secondly, while research does suggest that the ACT has relatively low levels of loneliness when compared with other Australian states and territories, it has well-documented but notably hidden experiences of poverty and social isolation, which align closely with experiences of loneliness, and which population-level statistics can also obscure (Tanton, Miranti & Vidyattama 2017). There are many indicators that suggest that loneliness affects some groups of people more frequently and severely than others. It also intersects with specific identities and experiences which reflect other patterns of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion. As such, it is important to acknowledge that without analysis which attempts to uncover and document the experiences of these 'hidden' groups, any interventions that employ these statistics may not target the groups most at need.

Recommendation: Loneliness measures should be used to track loneliness, but interpretations should acknowledge the limitations they present in measuring communities most at-risk of loneliness.

Our definition of loneliness

In our clinical practice and our advocacy, we apply a social model of loneliness which recognises systemic and structural barriers that inhibit people from making fulfilling social connections and from participating as fully as they would wish in all facets of our community. Throughout this submission, we will refer to the social model of loneliness by discussing the inequitable impact entrenched loneliness has on specific communities within the ACT.

Chronic loneliness

Loneliness is usually considered concerning if it is severe or chronic. The British Red Cross' research found that chronic loneliness was characterised by people who felt their loneliness was a habitual behaviour, where it became their default outlook on life, and their self-worth was impacted (2016). Their study found that loneliness was most likely to become chronic when individuals began to self-identify as lonely people, affecting their self-worth and making them feel burdensome to others. This created barriers to re-connection, ongoing reductions in self-worth and in some cases, suicidality. While chronic loneliness was not necessarily time-dependent, as people spent more time feeling lonely, and their self-perceptions shifted, the likelihood increased. Further, they found that chronically lonely people were more difficult to engage with through service outreach, and less likely to reach out due to feelings of burdensomeness, making it very important to intercept before loneliness reaches these stages.

Relationships Australia's Relationship Indicators survey found further evidence of the complex and interconnected relationship loneliness has to other relational concerns (2022). We found that having one strong and reliable relationship that you can count on for emotional, social and physical support improves subjective wellbeing, reduces loneliness, and enhances mental health. Conversely, dissatisfaction with your important relationships was correlated with loneliness. People who faced multiple pressures in their important relationships were lonelier (for example: mental health concerns, money problems and communication problems). We also found that loneliness negatively affects relationship satisfaction and subjective wellbeing, people who were lonely had reduced relationship satisfaction and were less likely to agree that they were satisfied with life. Finally, people who reported

lasting impacts from a relationship breakdown and/or bereavement were 1.5 times lonelier than those who didn't have these experiences. These findings suggest both the importance of strong relationships, the impact of loneliness on relationships and the need for interventions which support people to overcome loneliness before it impacts are entrenched.

Recommendation: Interventions should target communities, with a focus on minority communities, most at risk of loneliness, through services they already engage with, to ensure that loneliness does not become chronic or entrenched.

Experiences of loneliness in the ACT

The following descriptions are based on consultation with Relationships Australia Canberra & Region, exploring issues which face clients based in the ACT at higher rates, and contribute to a sense of loneliness and social isolation.

Life transitions

Life transitions and loneliness are closely linked. These can include becoming parents, relationship breakdown and loss and grief, etc. The loss of familiarity and social networks, challenges to identity and increased stress and anxiety that accompany these transitions leads people to face these challenges without their usual supports and leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness. While residents of the ACT share many of these experiences with the rest of the nation, the transient nature of Canberra's communities means there are additional relocation stressors for those moving and those who stay.

The transition from school to university is often characterised by loneliness. This is compounded by moving out of home, and/or towns, cities or countries to attend university, as is the common experience for students in the ACT. Despite this, ANU data suggests that only 1 in 4 students attend an orientation activity, suggesting that a large proportion of students miss key activities, support and opportunities to engage (Walker 2021, p. 6). Other examples of transient communities in the ACT include Defence force families and people who move for jobs in the Federal government.

A key aspect of addressing loneliness is ensuring that people have a variety of relationships across different social networks. Relationships Australia has conducted multiple research studies that have confirmed this. Relationships Indicators found that having a strong relationship which you can rely on for social, emotional, and physical support is extremely important and led to improved wellbeing, better mental health, and reduced loneliness (2021). The study also demonstrated that compounding pressures in relationships, such as the pressure of moving or losing your larger friendship circle as they are relocated for work, can lead to distress or relationship break-down. Lastly, it found that people are unlikely to seek help when facing challenges in these relationships, with 46% preferring to manage on their own. This suggests that not only is it extremely important to have one, reliable relationship, but it is also important to look after this relationship as breakdowns can lead to compounding effects.

Relationships Australia's Neighbours Every Day research found that improving one's relationship to their community leads to improved perceptions of traditionally closer relationships, such as friends and family. Part of the challenge associated with transient communities is the lack of a broader social network, something which takes time to establish and is impacted by others leaving for new work or

study opportunities. The findings from these studies evidence the need for supports for people living in transient communities which support people to meet and create social networks, manage relationship pressures in their significant relationships and refer to professional support when necessary.

Recommendation: Support evidence and community-based loneliness interventions, such as Neighbours Every Day, that support people to create new connection in their community and improve all the relationships in their lives.

The geographic realities of a dispersed city

Several studies have explored the relationship between urban city design and social isolation, highlighting how characteristics of sprawling cities can contribute to loneliness. Neighbourhoods and cities with low population density and car dependency are associated with less social ties among residents, emphasising the importance of walkable cities (Leyden 2003). Canberra is understood to be one of Australia's least walkable cities, with only 1 in 5 trips made by ACT families on foot (Transport ACT 2022). More problematically, only 3.6% of trips in the ACT are taken by public transport. Those without access to a car are limited by the public transport options and the availability of services and supports on foot is very low.

Cities with lower density tend to have greater economic segregation and disparity between suburbs (Musterd & Ostendorf 2000). Compact, mixed-use developments promote social inclusion, produce greater access to amenities for lower income people and reduce loneliness. Alternatively, in other cities, areas with less economic diversity can be widespread and therefore governments can place appropriate services in the area. The ACT is particularly susceptible to pockets of poverty that go unseen (this will be discussed further in the section 'Poverty and Loneliness'), and therefore services do not necessarily congregate in areas of need, as these are scattered across the ACT. The combination of the ACT's low-density design and relative lack of public transportation isolates people, especially those on lower incomes who don't drive, and makes it very difficult for people to access the services they need. Rapid development of new ACT urban areas has resulted in delays in the establishment of community infrastructure. This has been particularly significant for people living in these regions who have to travel to access support services. Our practitioners report lack of public transportation and challenging parking situations as a key concern for clients accessing services. Clients are usually facing relationship breakdown, life transitions and other stressful relational events which predispose them to loneliness. Service data suggests that clients across Relationships Australia's services are experiencing loneliness at twice the rate of the average Australian (46% of clients are experiencing loneliness compared to 20% of the general population). Clients are also twice as likely to be facing financial challenges (52% of clients are experiencing financial struggles compared to 20% of the general population). Dispersed and financially segregated communities predisposes clients to loneliness, combining with stressful life events and a lack of public transportation, limiting access to services, and making clients particularly susceptible to chronic and entrenched loneliness.

One emerging 'solution' is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies for engaging with isolated and lonely people. RA staff have been involved (in advisory capacities) in the development of an app which includes voice engagement with AI, where users can receive referrals, tips and play games. They recognise that the pace of the loneliness epidemic is much faster than any government, especially

relatively small governments with fewer resources, can address through solely people-based responses. Concurrently, the pace at which AI technologies are beginning to 'address' these concerns is difficult for governments to match. For example, research has found that the use of AI technology is already able to diagnose depression more effectively than GPs and tell you which treatment is best (Levkovich & Elyoseph 2023).

While there is significant evidence that connects technology-use with loneliness, nuanced interpretations recognise that the impacts of technology on loneliness depend on the user and their specific circumstances (Saadati et. al., 2021; Allen et. al., 2014). For example, people who regularly engage in online games that involve playing with known people (who they met online) and frequent voice-based communication, experience less loneliness online than when in the 'real world' (Martončik & Lokša 2016). A recent Australian study actually found that people who feel socially supported by AI felt more supported by AI companions, and the more a participant used AI, the higher their feeling of social support from the AI was (Cowling et. al., 2024). This study found that AI is effective at improving people's wellbeing, yet it also found that as a person's connection to their AI grew, their feelings of support from family and friends diminished. Ultimately, it found that human connection cannot be completely replaced by AI, and for AI to be effective, it requires someone to create a connection with the technology that can impact their human relationships. This study highlights the tightrope we must walk when seeking to use these technologies to address loneliness, especially in populations who are geographically isolated or otherwise vulnerable.

Loneliness can be the both the cause and effect of problematic internet use (Kim et. al., 2009). As the use of AI technology increases, it is expected that lonely people will be drawn to solutions which involve the internet and AI. We believe it is very important that the ACT government uses this opportunity to contemplate the effect this rapidly expanding technology will have on loneliness interventions. Preliminary research demonstrates that the AI is best at addressing loneliness when it is accompanied by referrals to human-centric services, operated by voice-commands and involved linking users to other humans using the technology. We also urge the government to consider developing policies that ensure that any interventions harnessing AI to address loneliness in isolated communities are accompanied with human-centred responses, to ensure they do not further entrench the social isolation.

Recommendation: Recognise the unique impact the ACT's geography and development has on loneliness for residents, especially those experiencing poverty. Consider the implications public transportation and service location has on loneliness and explore impacts of emerging Artificial Intelligence technologies on loneliness.

Poverty and loneliness

Poverty is a relative concept used to describe the people in a society that cannot participate in the activities that most people take for granted. The national poverty line is established by calculating the median salary, and those who earn under half of this are considered to be living under the poverty line (e.g., if the median income is $2300, the poverty line sits at those earning less than $1150). However, this measure is not always useful for demonstrating levels of inequity in well-off regions.

Poverty is well hidden in the ACT. In this high-income, high-cost jurisdiction, broad national statistics tend to obscure the levels of poverty and as such, the ACT requires adjustments to truly measure poverty. This crude measure of poverty is often supported by other, more sophisticated measures, such as cost of living and members of the household. A 2017 study found classic measures of poverty were actually higher than the national average in the ACT when 'area-based' analysis was completed, rather than looking at the entire territory (Tanton, Miranti & Vidyattama 2017).[1] Despite this, a recent analysis of ACT 2023 budget papers found that the concept of poverty was not mentioned (Stanhope and Ahmed, 2023).

Our clinical experience demonstrates that poverty co-occurs with a range of experiences, circumstances, and positionalities, including longstanding health restrictions, intimate partner violence, abuse or neglect of older people, poor mental health, housing insecurity and instability, employment precarity, misuse of alcohol and other drugs, and harmful gambling. Causation is often multi-factorial and multi-directional and, once individuals, families and communities are caught by poverty, our social, economic, political and legal systems operate in concert not only to actively hinder escape, but also to exacerbate it.

Poverty, social isolation and loneliness are closely linked (Morris and Verdasco 2020). Poverty reduces people's access to resources for social activities, transportation and participation in community and social events. Housing instability and associated transience caused by poverty further impacts social networks and leads to stress and social isolation. Loneliness and poverty have been linked with greater health-risk behaviours, suggesting that experiencing loneliness is both the cause and product of health concerns (Algren et. al., 2020). Poverty intersects with other social determinants of health, such as race, gender, age, and disability, which can compound the experience of loneliness. Marginalised populations facing multiple forms of discrimination and oppression are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness due to systemic barriers and inequalities.

Many clients who visit Relationships Australia are experiencing poverty. Our clients and our staff face escalating hardship and precarity, severe rent and mortgage stress, and financial barriers to accessing other goods and services that are necessary to flourish. These include basic health care (including dental and mental health care and preventive health measures), physical, social and cultural activities, educational and employment opportunities, and good quality fresh food. Since the onset of the pandemic, many people have experienced these kinds of difficulties for the first time. But there are many others for whom the pandemic has merely exacerbated longstanding structural inequalities, barriers and scarcities. For them, the situation is exponentially worse. As the cost-of-living crisis worsens, addressing important, yet comparably immaterial concerns like social connection and feelings of loneliness, become more difficult to prioritise.

Australia has obligations to reduce poverty, defined by the Sustainable Development Goals (Australian Government 2024). Poverty is a cross-governmental issue that requires commitment from every level of government to address. It is important that the ACT government recognises the role it plays in

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[1] These measures include the proportion of persons living in low-income households, the proportion of sole parent families living on low incomes, the proportion of people paying higher than average proportions of income for rent and proportions of people with lower education levels.

acknowledging, identifying and addressing poverty in the ACT, especially by recognising its presence and exploring the implications poverty has on loneliness. Loneliness interventions should include funding services that support people experiencing entrenched and intergenerational poverty. Often, effective loneliness interventions can be 'loneliness adjacent'. They might include flexible and client-centric access to relationship support services, where flexibility is included in funding to support clients who are experiencing poverty to overcome barriers to service access that may not be considered in prescriptive grants. A good example of these services can be found in our submission about the benefits of the Counselling services that accompanied the Disability Royal Commission. This submission outline how clients with disability, who disproportionately experience poverty, a faced by a plethora of unique challenges to accessing services, that were able to be addressed by flexibility in the funding arrangements. When clients are hindered from accessing everyday services due to poverty-related barriers, such as a lack of public transport, interventions that already exist and are proven to address loneliness, are not able to be accessed by those who need them most.

Recommendation: Acknowledge the prevalence of poverty in the ACT. Consider the implications poverty has on loneliness, especially for 'well-hidden' poverty in the ACT. Prioritise universal access to services for people experiencing poverty, including 'loneliness adjacent' supports which facilitate social connection, address loneliness, and support people to overcome economic barriers to acquiring social capital.

Gambling in the ACT

Loneliness is both a cause and product of gambling-related harms. Community clubs are a part of Canberra's social fabric and provide a location for Canberrans to meet and socialise. The relative lack of gambling-free club venues in the ACT, pushes people towards venues which contain electronic gaming machines (EGMs). This results in ready access to gambling opportunities when attempting to socialise.

Our clients have reported challenges associated with returning to social life when attempting to address gambling harm, as there are fewer affordable social venues that don't contain EGMs than in other major cities in Australia. Pub-like venues, at affordable prices, without EGMs are less common in the ACT.

A 1999 Legislative Assembly for the ACT report on *The Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in the ACT (with particular reference to poker machines)* cited that 'the emphasis of the clubs has changed from the family club to a money making enterprise' and that 'there are many lonely people in Canberra who find solace in the welcoming nature of clubs but then are exposed to gambling problems' (1999, p.12). Since this time, the issues have not improved.

For example, a 2019 study of ACT residents' gambling habits found that 80% of adults in the ACT had been to a club which had gaming machines, with 20% of adults in the ACT playing an electronic gaming machine in the last 12 months (Paterson, Leslie & Taylor 2019). While this matches national statistics from a similar period (21% of Australians have used EGMs in 2017), the same report found that EGM players were over-represented among people for whom welfare payments formed their main source of income. People using EGMS also demonstrated higher than average spending on gambling, when

compared with other forms of gambling (Armstrong & Carroll 2017). This suggests that EGMs are particularly problematic gambling tools for targeting those seeking social interaction with lower incomes. In the ACT, these groups have fewer options for socialising in affordable venues without EGMs.

For example, a 2019 study of ACT resident's gambling habits found that 80% of adults in the ACT had been to a club which had gaming machines, with 20% of adults in the ACT playing an electronic gaming machine in the last 12 months (Paterson, Leslie & Taylor 2019). While this matches national statistics from a similar period (21% of Australians have used EGMs in 2017), the same report found that EGM participants were over-represented among people for whom welfare payments formed their main source of income. People who used EGMs also demonstrated higher than average spending on EGMs (Armstrong & Carroll 2017). This suggests that EGMs are particularly problematic gambling tools for targeting those seeking social interaction with lower incomes. In the ACT, these groups have fewer options for socialising in affordable venues without EGMs.

Gambling harm often exists at the intersection of a range of mental ill-health and related factors such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse (Monash University, 2011), and loneliness (Raylu & Oei, 2007). Our experience of providing gambling help services is that gambling, for some individuals, becomes a substantial barrier preventing them from initiating and nurturing connection with family, friends and the broader community. Those individuals can, without noticing, become increasingly isolated, losing the protective factors that social connection provides, and leaving them vulnerable to a range of harms to physical and mental.

One cohort that is particularly susceptible to the harmful effects of problem gambling is the international student community. International students have a variety of risk factors that make them especially susceptible to gambling harm and loneliness. They can face social isolation due to challenges creating social connections due to cultural differences, language barriers, and being away from family and friends. Gambling offers excitement and escapism,

It's essential for universities and support services to be funded to address the unique challenges faced by international students and provide culturally sensitive support. This may include offering programs and resources specifically tailored to the needs of international students, such as language support, cultural integration activities, and counselling services. International students need support to build communities and supportive social networks can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and reduce the likelihood of turning to gambling as a form of escapism. For example, Relationships Australia PEACE services provide free support services for all migrants and refugees (regardless of their visa type) which are meaningful, culturally appropriate services, including culturally-appropriate gambling support. These are funded by the Government of South Australia, SA Health, the Office of Problem Gambling, and the Office of Chief Psychiatrists.

Relationships Australia recognises the work done by the ACT government to address gambling harm through the strategy for gambling harm prevention. As this strategy ends in 2024, and a new strategy is developed, we recommend considering the impacts gambling has on loneliness, and its propensity to trap and entrench people in loneliness.

Recommendation: Any efforts made to address loneliness in the ACT should complement gambling prevention strategies by ensuring the links between gambling and loneliness are well understood.

Populations who experience loneliness

Relationships Australia serves many cohorts who are disproportionately more likely to experience systemic and structural barriers to participation in Australian social, cultural, political and economic life and, as a result, are at heightened risk of loneliness which both compounds, and is compounded by, socio-economic disadvantage and poor physical and mental health. These cohorts, membership of which includes a high degree of intersection, include:

- First Nations people
- people with disability
- people who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including people who have chosen to migrate and people who have sought refuge)
- people affected by complex grief and trauma, intersecting disadvantage and polyvictimisation
- people living with intergenerational trauma
- survivors of all forms of abuse, including institutional abuse
- non-offending parents of as secondary victims of child sexual abuse
- people experiencing mental ill-health
- people experiencing homelessness or housing precarity
- people who identify as members of the LGBTIQ+ communities, and
- younger and older people

The final section of this submission will detail three cohorts that Relationships Australia Canberra & Region has identified as particularly susceptible to loneliness among their clients.

Carers

Our Relationship Indicators data indicated that carers felt lonely at higher rates than the general population. 1 in 3 carers felt very lonely (35% of carers felt lonely compared to 20% of the general population) (2022). A complex web of time commitments and physically demanding work can cause social isolation, limited capacity beyond caring roles and work commitments, emotional burden, changes to relationships due to caring roles, loss of identity and a lack of respite all contribute to carers levels of loneliness. Additionally, there is an external devaluation of carers roles in Australia.

> "…a major and enduring flaw in Australian social security [is] its inability to recognise various productive activities people undertake – including unpaid care work, which is largely undertaken by women (Blaxland, 2010). People receiving social security payments are accused of being dependent on welfare, but actually, the economy and society are dependent on their unpaid labour, yet these same people are denied an economic floor upon which they can survive." (Klein et al., 2021, p 63).

Caring roles are disproportionately filled by women. The ABS has found that the most common reason women were unavailable start a job or work more hours within four weeks was 'Caring for children',

while for men it was 'Long-term sickness or disability' (ABS, 2020-2021). Disturbingly, despite recent advances in how women are treated in society, the value placed on caring roles has in real terms diminished (Evaluate 2022, p.6). However, our economic, social and political institutions now have the opportunity to build on experience and insights, about the true value of caring, which emerged from the pandemic (Klein et al., 2021).

The connection between loneliness and feelings of unappreciation are strong. It contributes to negative self-perceptions, a key driver of chronic loneliness (British Red Cross, 2016). Many of Relationships Australia's clients are carers in some capacity. In the ACT, we have a variety of services which support carers of all kinds to improve their relationships to themselves and others. These include services such as Young Carers Connect, which helps young carers to build a support network of others managing similar responsibilities. A key aspect of this service is its ability to alleviate loneliness by support young carers to connect on their successes and challenges and demonstrate appreciation for the important role they play, that is often minimised or ignored by the larger society.

Our society must re-frame how caring roles – paid and unpaid – are recognised and valued in our social, economic and political infrastructure. The government has an important role to play in this shift. While many responsibilities sit with the Federal government, including the need to pay Superannuation Guarantee Contribution on the Carer Payment, other shifts can be led more locally. The ACT government should consider how it can include carer-specific support groups and services that encourage connection and reduce loneliness, especially in community centres like Gunners Place, that already provide similar services. The ACT government should also play an active role in celebrating carers across the ACT and ensuring they are appropriately represented in reports, strategies and communications from the ACT government.

Older Australians experiencing elder abuse

The connection between loneliness and elder abuse is stark. In the national prevalence study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), they concluded that low social support and lack of social contact were associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing elder abuse (Qu et. al., 2021, p.3). Research has also shown that social isolation on the part of the victim, and a broad social network on the part of the perpetrator, are associated with lower help seeking (Burnes, Acierno, & Hernandez-Tajada, 2019; Vrantsidis et al., 2016).

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region provides senior relationships services for those navigating difficult conversations and important life decisions. Our counselling, mediation, case management and education services can support families to prevent or resolve family conflict, make decisions to protect the interests, rights and safety of the older person, reduce the risk of elder abuse including financial and emotional abuse while improving and (where possible) maintaining important relationships in the older persons life. In delivering these services, it has become evident (as demonstrated through the AIFS prevalence study) that complexity and high level of need is widespread, and that effective responses require a combination of case coordination, mediation and counselling to reduce the risk and impact of elder abuse. Further, our experience suggests that healthy ongoing relationships are as important for the older person's safety, well-being and recovery as the immediate response to the circumstances leading to their abuse. Accordingly, effective resolution of these matters requires a focus

on relationships, with a view to exploring and resetting relationship dynamics, and empowering individuals with the necessary skills to overcome conflictual dynamics post service and/or legal intervention.

The characteristics of elder abuse reflect other topics we have discussed throughout this submission. For example, economic precarity and elder abuse are closely linked, low socio-economic status is associated with a greater risk of abuse overall, and especially financial, sexual and psychological abuse (Qu et. al., 2021, p.2). Additionally, carers are often perpetrators of abuse.

Our Relationship Indicators analysis found that those who don't feel safe disagreeing with their most important relationship were lonelier.[2] They were both more likely to agree that they often felt lonely and demonstrated significantly higher levels of emotional or social loneliness. Emotional loneliness refers to the lack of a significant person with whom you have an attachment to, making this especially concerning, as our analysis also found that when people sought help for issues in their relationship (such as feeling unsafe), they were most likely to do so from family or friends (2022).

Social support for older people in response to social isolation and poor-quality relationships has been identified as a promising focus of intervention because, unlike some other risk factors (eg disability, cognitive impairment), there is greater potential to improve the negative effects of social isolation (Dean 2019). Additionally, there are ample reports from our practitioners demonstrating the links between the well-being of carers and the well-being of those for whom they care; providing more impetus to focus on the wellbeing of carers and those they care for. Interventions which support the entire community to make social connections and prevent loneliness have important implications for preventing elder abuse.

Victim/survivors of domestic and family violence

Like elder abuse, domestic and family violence is closely linked to social isolation and loneliness. Data taken from our DOORS universal screening tool, administered to all clients across certain Relationships Australia organisations, suggests that 46% of our clients reported feeling very lonely, 44% are experiencing money problems and 28% face illness/sickness/physical disability. This data also highlighted that hostile, anger and avoidant behaviour is common, with 1 in 4 clients reporting these behavioural characteristics towards their current and former partners. While anger, hostility and avoidant behaviour is only an indicator of domestic and family violence, 1 in 4 clients report experiencing behaviours that are considered evidence of domestic and family violence. Most notably, clients who experience loneliness, money concerns and illness/sickness/physical disability are more likely to answer yes to these questions. Additionally, the effect is additive – meaning that if a client experiences multiple challenges, the likelihood increases further.

Trans people

Another community we would like to bring attention to in this submission is a 'minority among a minority', trans people. Trans people face significant forms of isolation and stigma, both from society

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[2] Relationships Australia has sought to develop a national survey which explored the 'most important, meaningful' relationship people have in their lives. Respondents were asked to identify this person and respond to a variety of questions about them.

at large, as well as within LGBTQIA+ communities. Trans people have been cited as one of "most stigmatized groups in society" (Verbeek et. al., 2020).

Although the ACT is considered the gay and lesbian capital of Australia, this welcome does not necessarily extend to all in the LGBTQIA+ communities. While studies have shown that LGBTQIA+ communities experience increased social support among their community, trans people experience stigma within these communities and therefore face greater risks of social isolation and disconnection (Luhtanen, 2002). This leads to problematically high levels of loneliness among trans communities. One study found that 83% of trans people meet clinical levels of loneliness (Hajek et. al., 2023). This loneliness is associated with suicidality, with one Australian study identifying nearly half of transgender Australians have attempted suicide (Bretherton et. al., 2021). These rates are higher than data we have on any other group experiencing minority stress in Australia. The impacts of multiple minority identities cannot be underestimated.

Our practitioners report that social disconnection can exacerbate existing disconnection from an experience of authentic self, leading to maladaptive introversion and reinforcing loneliness. Trans people experience discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare and public spaces. Often family and friends do not understand transition processes and the relatively small trans community in the ACT makes it difficult to find appropriate in-person support. The impacts of these multiple forms of stigma can lead to internalisation of stigma and shame. Practitioners report that trans clients often turn to online forms of support due to a lack of support within the broader Canberra LGBTQIA+ communities. The need for trans-inclusive spaces, gender affirming healthcare and inclusive communities for trans people to share experiences and resources is paramount. An Australian study found that the most popular method for receiving health information was online, specifically Reddit, an online peer discussion board. Despite this, better training for doctors in trans health issues was considered the top priority for government funding. The ACT government must consider how it can support healthcare workers, and other essential services, to make the ACT a more inclusive place for everyone within the LGBTQIA+ communities.

Recommendation: The ACT government should prioritise carers, those who are already marginalised such as trans gender people, older people at risk of experiencing elder abuse, and people experiencing DFV in loneliness interventions and explore high-impact, low-cost services such as peer support networks for these groups. Policies, plans, agendas, and interventions in the DFV and elder abuse space should recognise the impact loneliness has on these communities.

Investing in loneliness

Investment in loneliness initiatives provides clear value for money. Economic modelling conducted by the National Mental Health Commission in 2019 demonstrated that for every $1 invested in programs that address loneliness in older people, the return on investment is between $2.14 to $2.87 respectively (2019).

A recent economic evaluation conducted by the University of Queensland and the Australian National University found that the Neighbours Every Day campaign reduces loneliness and increases quality of life for participants. The analysis measured cost effectiveness of the campaign, per quality adjusted life

years (QALYs). It identified that the campaign has an average incremental cost effectiveness ratio of $4,667 per QALY. Estimates by researchers project that the Government has previously spent up to $28,033 per QALY for health interventions that benefit quality of life. The cost of the Neighbours Every Day campaign therefore compares very favourably, making it a cost-effective option for improving the health and relationships of Australians. With adequate resourcing, we are confident that Neighbours Every Day could be scaled to reach a greater number of ACT residents, in all communities and at all stages of the life course.

Recommendation: The ACT government should explore opportunities for investing in loneliness interventions and other services and supports which make social connection possible for everyone in the ACT. This should occur across policy areas, including healthcare, social supports, public space design, technology, and transport. Investments should prioritise inclusivity for our communities most at-risk of loneliness and most negatively affected by the ACT's current systems.

Conclusion

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region and Relationships Australia (National Office) welcome this inquiry. Our experience in providing supports for people experiencing loneliness provides us with insight into the pervasive and entrenching nature of loneliness, especially for those experiencing forms of abuse, marginalisation, discrimination and poverty. We have provided context to more hidden forms of loneliness that exist in the ACT, and hope you will consider the opportunities to support interventions that reduce loneliness and social isolation in the ACT, and to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making.

Concluding remarks

Should you require any clarification of any aspect of this submission, or would like more information on the services that Relationships Australia provides, please contact either of the signatories to this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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