



The Men's Table

ACT Government Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

May 21st 2024

Michael Collins - Regional Director - michael.collins@themenstable.org;

With Chris De Cean and Jon Toth (members of Tables in Canberra)

Phone: 1800 636 782

ABN: 80 636 420 301

85/515 Kent St, SYDNEY NSW 2000

Spoken Statement (3mins)

My name is Michael Collins and I work as the Regional Host for the Men's Table. We are a grassroots, for purpose organisation formed in 2019 and active in the ACT since 2021. I appear today with two of the over 100 ACT men who are Table Members. I welcome their willingness to build capacity in themselves; other men at Tables and their communities by being courageous and vulnerable in sharing their real stories and feelings, as they model the values of a Men's Table. I will ask them to introduce themselves briefly.

████████████████████ "Chris De Cean - I am a founding member of MT185- the Inner North Table since November 2023. I am called to share my story of isolation and loneliness as a First Responder coming to grips with not being permitted to return to health service work at the age of 53 due to a workplace related PTSD diagnosis 3 years ago. I want to share my journey to inform inquiry how clinical and non clinical supports can coexist and are essential for a man like me and for other men living with PTSD."

████████████████████ "Jonathon Toth - a founding member of the MT88 Belconnen Table formed in November 2022. I was drawn to share my story today ... because.....

The Men's Table Problem Statement

39% of men currently entering Men's Table say they're wanting connection and friendship. This is evidence of what we see as a 'mateship crisis' in Australia and poses significant risks to men's mental, social, and emotional well-being, with a quarter of Australian men having nobody to confide in about their worries and fears.

There are a lack of safe places in society for men to share their experiences, seek support, and build and maintain meaningful social connections, which is exacerbated by a lack of positive male role models. As a result, many men are 'going it alone'.

Conforming to traditional masculine norms – not showing emotion, avoiding vulnerability, being reluctant to seek care when going through hard times or crisis, and being overly self-reliant – discourages men from seeking help and sharing their stories with others, and can lead to social disconnection, social isolation and loneliness, increased risky coping behaviours, and other mental health challenges.

The Men's Table Purpose

Men's Tables are intimate and safe places for diverse men to have quality and intentional **conversations** about their lives and wellbeing. Regular and committed Tables allow men to feel safe to express their emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of judgement, leading to meaningful long-term reciprocal **connections** that form a **community** of mutual support. We create Healthy Men, Healthy Masculinities and Healthy Communities by activating, building and caring for Men's Tables.

[Our appendix has further data and a specific recommendation to the Government in its inquiry which we are happy to explore with you..](#)

APPENDIX

- [The Method and Model of Care](#)
- [4 years of data: What are men seeking at a Table?](#)
- [ACT Experience](#)
- [Filling the Gap in Government Services](#)
- [Recommendation/ request of Government](#)
- [Benefits to Men and Communities](#)
- [Supporting Research and Impact Evaluation \(5 pages\)](#)

The Method and Model of Care

The Men's Table is a community building, men's mental health and suicide prevention initiative. At each Men's Table, a group of 10 - 12 local men meet once a month over a cheap meal in a private room or venue, to talk, listen and share their highs and lows and how they're really feeling. The Men's Tables are established upon a simple structure and are sustained through the commitment of each man to show up each month.

- This [Model of Care](#) has been proven to demonstrate positive outcomes and impacts including men's mental health and suicide prevention, resilient community building and social connection, healthy masculinities and improved help seeking for men.
- The Men's Table currently facilitates 200 monthly Tables (2300 men) nationally in all States and territories including ACT since 2022.

ACT Experience

Our Target segment of the Population is the 130,000 men over 18 years old in ACT including healthy men and men who are struggling with challenges. As a peer to peer and non clinical organisation, we are a low cost and easy entry for most men.

The Men's Table appreciates the partnership with Snow Foundation that commenced July 2021.

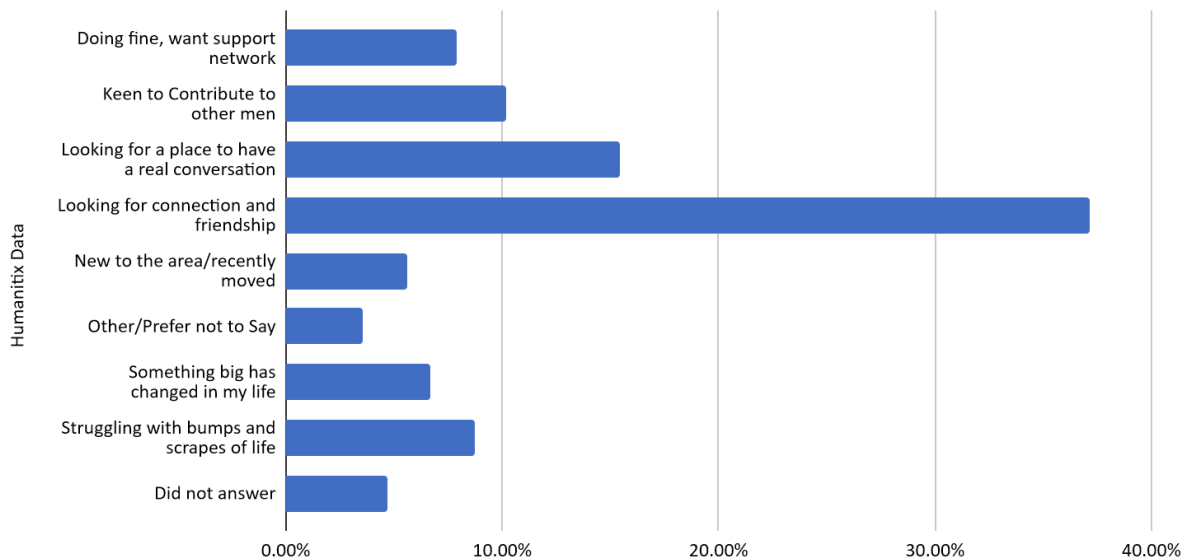
10 Men's Tables have been formed and a 2 year funding program commitment supports Canberra Regional expansion going forward

- 2 Tables in Gungahlin
- 2 Tables in Belconnen
- 1 Table in Erindale
- 1 Table in Queanbeyan
- 1 Table Weston
- 1 Molonglo Valley
- 1 Table Inner North
- 1 Table Inner South

- The collaboration with Snow, HAC and Communities at Work along with other community organisations and politicians has enabled us to have high quality of invitation to men in the ACT
- Our Messaging is not using traditional “health and wellbeing” program language which can stigmatise and send the wrong message around help seeking for men in our experience
- Men of all ages and cultural backgrounds in and around Canberra are experiencing significant challenges relating to social isolation and mental health challenges, that stem from widespread adoption of traditional, stoic masculine norms.

What are men seeking at a Table..[NATIONAL DATA on 3180 men in the last 4 years]

Socially isolated men: 39% of men currently entering Men’s Table say they’re wanting connection and friendship.



[See section below on Evaluation and Research and impact measurement]

Filling the gaps in Government Services

[\(*see section below on Research and Impact Evaluation including Duplication and Collaboration\)](#)

- There are no equivalent Government based services offering the same or similar kinds of services. The grassroots Men’s Table and other community originated movements and activities offer a unique, evidenced based, low cost preventative model for loneliness and isolation.
- This is a community led, grass roots initiative that empowers men in the community to support themselves and support other local men, and this peer to peer model is not easily replicated by the Government.

Our Request/ Recommendation to Government

Request clear Government Support to:

1. **Endorse community led, innovative and preventative measures** to address Men's wellbeing, positive role modeling; and mental health (including suicide) in the most impacted and at risk population groups - suicide is largest cause of death for men from 15 to 50 years old.
2. **Prioritise codesigned and community-led wellbeing and capacity building** and acknowledge volunteer contribution of time and money invested by participating.
3. **Fund and integrate evaluation** of community organisations to be funded through social impact on community as measured by ACT Community Wellbeing metrics (<https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing>), which include **causal links** as well as outcome of ...
 - a. Sense of Social Connection and cohesion
 - b. Loneliness and Isolation
 - c. Mental Health and Physical Health (mind- body connection in Health outcomes)
 - d. Identity and Belonging - with a focus on diverse and young men who are seeking healthy masculine spaces
 - e. Resilience to Adversity , Uncertainty and Life Transition Events and Social Determinants
 - f. Family Violence and Harmony
4. We request the **ACT government embrace a multidisciplinary and cross departmental** policy response to understand and address the unique qualities of men (and boys). Evidence suggests men don't engage with or relate to compliance-led workplace or clinical government and health programs - and would rather seek agency from a community based approach, or at least see it as a complement to other support.

Benefits received and reported /evidenced

The evidenced based benefits to men, their families and the wider communities in which they live and work are outlined below. ([see annual Survey responses and evaluation](#))

- **The Table is a safe inclusive place**

Critical to The Men's Table model is that a Table creates a safe place for men to share their deepest feelings. 81% of men rated the safety of their Table 8/10 and above.

 - **How men feel** : Men were asked for 3 words to describe how they feel about being at a Table and 645 words were offered. The most common feelings men have about being at a Table are:
 - Supported
 - Connected
 - Safe
 - Included

- **Mental Health benefits**

Respondents were asked if they had experienced mental health issues or been concerned about their mental health in the last 12 months, with a follow up question, if they had had times when they felt like life isn't worth living in the last 12 months.

- Just over half (52%) indicated that they'd had concerns with their mental health in the last 12 months.
- Worryingly, 18.75% indicated in 2021 that they had had times when they felt life wasn't worth living in the last 12 months. This will be reduced to 11.96% in 2022.

- **Help seeking**

There were highly significant changes in the data when comparing approaches by men at Tables to dealing with issues when stuck or troubled, before and after their experience of being at a Table.

- There was an average of 3 times reduction across four behaviours or tendencies that can be deemed 'less helpful' approaches to help seeking.
- Similarly and conversely, there were 2 - 3 times increases in adoption of more useful help-seeking behaviours

- **Relationship ripples beyond The Table**

The evidence is clear that there are impacts beyond the boundaries of the Table; there are benefits that flow onto family, friends and community. The survey asked; *'Does being part of a Table positively impact other relationships in your life?'*

- 81% answered Yes to this question.
 - When asked 'Who?' the responses were
 - Spouse, Partner (69%),
 - Family (63%)
 - Other men (58%)

Qualitative comments regarding Ripple Effects

- Partner/ Spouse
 - "My relationship with my wife has improved."
 - "Better husband and friend now because of this. Less judgemental."
- Family
 - "...improved communications at home."
 - "...my loved ones are noticing my mood and reactions have quietened."
- Work, friends, other men
 - "Being open in everyday life enables you to... really be a better friend."
 - "The Men's Table has definitely helped my professional life a lot"

Supporting Research and Impact Evaluation

The [Men's Table Model of Care document](#) provides research evidence underlying the issues for men (pp 18 - 24). These include Mental Health and Suicide Risk, Social disconnection, loneliness and lack of meaningful friendships, and masculine norms that restrict men from sharing feelings, seeking help and building community.

- The sense of being isolated, not from superficial contact with others, but from deeper and more supportive relationships, has been identified as a 'primary source of psychological suffering' for men (Vasquez, et al, 2014).
- Being socially connected is associated with improved mental health (Dias, et al, 2018)
- Men choose what to reveal about themselves, particularly in relation to stressful life events, as a way of being seen to conform to masculine norms and protecting themselves and their status in groups (Schwab, et al 2015).
- Difficulties with self-disclosure have been identified as a common barrier to help-seeking for mental health and relationship issues (Heath & Brenner, 2017).
- People who are lonely or socially isolated are less likely to self-disclose than people who are in close relationships (Sheldon, 2013)
- Enabling men to meet others in a non-competitive and non-judgemental environment in which at least some of the men are role-modelling meaningful self-disclosure enables men to overcome some of the barriers to forming close male to male relationships.

The secondary research information above has been substantiated by primary research with Canberra based men themselves and the existing communities we have begun working with.

Intake Data and the Experiences of Men in the System

Upon registering for an Entree - men disclose the reason for their interest in attending a Men's Table and we have shared the [data above in graphical form](#).

At each Entree, when men first come to find out about The Men's Table, we begin with a round of sharing about why they have come. After establishing an agreement about confidentiality, we ask them 'what is happening in your life that had this resonate with you when you heard about it'. The warm data shared has consistently highlighted these needs for men.

- "After my divorce, I found myself alone again."
- "I moved here recently and have found it hard to make friends"
- "I'm lonely. I've got mates, but we just talk about footy and shit"

Our annual Table Survey then asks men about the impacts of the Table, as well as questions about the social determinants affecting their wellbeing and community connectedness.

When working with local communities in Canberra in partnership with local councils, existing agencies and health networks, we listen and learn about specific local needs and challenges. For example, in bushfire affected communities, we know that whilst there are common patterns of communities in crisis, there are many variances in the ways different communities grieve and heal through recovery. See [Communities through Adversity Report](#)

Other primary research included semi-structured focus group discussions with existing Table members during regular Table Care meetings either with a co-hosting team or the whole Table once a year.

We've also recently undertaken a Women's Survey. 92 women responded and 23 of those were then interviewed. This data will soon be released in [The Men's Table Ripple Effect report](#). We

have found women are very strong supporters of The Men's Table and confirm the need they see for the men in their lives.

Men's Table supports addressing systemic disadvantage in the ACT and/or nearby regions.

- The following evidenced based impacts are expected:
 - 1) Preventative men's mental health and wellbeing
 - 2) Improved relationships
 - 3) New versions of masculinity
 - 4) Improved help seeking of men
 - 5) Resilient communities

UNIQUE Experience of Men

Whilst the needs outlined above are widespread and are affecting significant numbers of men across Canberra, there are very limited opportunities for men to engage in programs they see as relevant and accessible to them.

We support community mental health and wellbeing - as Tables are directly improving health outcomes. As is well known, the Health System recognises the challenges of providing services to men with regards to uptake and commitment:

- The average number of Mental Health sessions of a 10 session Mental Health Care plan taken up by men is 1.
- Men find services difficult to engage with and often feel under-resourced and under-served in programs for men.
- We see help seeking behaviour improve in Men at Tables... which allows an increase in the level of awareness and outreach toward support and clinical services

The impacts generated by the Men's Table are at depth, with the model delivering sustainable and ongoing benefits to the participants, as well as growing indirect benefits as time goes on. The indirect benefits outlined in the question above including to women and families, when correlated to time spent by a man at a Table, show increased depth.

The progression from a man participating at a Table for his own benefit, through to his participation in wider community, including becoming an advocate and supporter of other men, is well documented in '[From Couch to Community](#)'. Thus, the program also leads to wider ripples of community participation and outreach to more men in the Canberra community and enhancing community connectedness.

Social inclusion opportunities: The Men's Table represents a safe and trusted space to convene and connect with authenticity and consistency. This "inside out" **capacity building model is enhancing community cohesion, family harmony and inclusiveness through enduring and intentional commitment space**. This leads to

- participants better understanding diversity and normalising sharing between all variety of men,
- without the need for "fixing", judging or advising as a means of being of service..
- But rather listening and witnessing another person
- AND at the right time, Men are self directed in opting into health education and awareness programs - such as our Suicide First Aid Scholarships and Conflict

Resolution training or engaging other professional clinical support

Expected Outcomes and How Impact is Measured

- MT believes deeply in measuring the impact we are having for Men at Tables and in their communities.[numerous [Research and Evaluation reports to share](#)]
- *We would like to collaborate with ACT Government Wellbeing Framework and other stakeholders to develop a deeper and stronger evidence base that links cause and effect wrt to community and individual wellbeing .. especially in the male sector of the population, to ensure targeted outcomes for all population segments and Wellbeing Impact Metrics*
- As outlined in [The Men's Table Model of Care 2020 report](#), the evidenced based outcomes of our model for men include:
 1. Psychological safety; being heard, courage and competence in sharing feelings, cathartic release, normalising difficult emotions
 2. Mutual self disclosure; valuing the give and take of sharing and listening of feelings
 3. Social connectedness; a sense of belonging, friendship, feeling connected
 4. Community belonging; commitment to others, ours not mine, serving the whole
 5. Help-seeking; more useful behaviours and attitudes to reaching out when feeling stuck or troubled, or in crisis

The Men's Table model is now proven with 4 years of evaluation evidence, [4 evaluation reports](#), 200 Tables launched & ≥ 2,300 men. Evidenced based **positive outcomes and impacts** include;

- men's mental health and suicide prevention;
 - **19%** of men at Tables who said they *felt 'Life wasn't worth living'* are now supported at Tables
 - **86% of men** at Tables say it's a safe place to share feelings and vulnerability
- positive relationship ripple effects to men's partners, families and communities;
 - **81%** of men at Tables say there's a ***ripple effect to other relationships***
- improved men's help seeking;
 - Men from Tables report a ***3 fold decrease in less useful ways of seeking help*** and a ***2 - 3 fold increase in more useful ways of help-seeking***

EVALUATION PROCESS:

The Men's Table has an evaluation process in place to measure fidelity of our model, as well as project outcomes and impacts. Working with our academic partners (Monash University), we refine the evaluation process each year to include evaluation of emerging patterns and outcomes that we previously had not identified.

The evaluation process includes;

- A once anonymous online survey administered at each Table in April. Response rates are historically ≥ 40%
- The purpose is to encourage individual reflection on the impacts and function of the Table and collect data comparable to the baseline survey data gathered across prior years Annual Surveys.
- Data is analysed by Table location to identify impacts and efficacy of Tables across regions, across years, and social determinants affecting men's lives.

- A report is then written and published and made available for download from our website, and distributed through networks, as well as distributed to key partners
- A once a year Table Care conversation, facilitated by a regional volunteer Host to reflect on the Table's healthy functioning is conducted. This visit draws upon the data from each Table, as well as bringing to the Table a man skilled and experienced in the functioning of The Men's Table and with facilitation and group process capability. The result is further insights for the Table that are specific to this groups dynamic and functioning and helps men identify actions they wish to take to strengthen their healthy functioning for a sustainable and enduring Table.
- Another layer of evaluation is ongoing and monthly, with each Table completing a Monthly Table Health Check online form after their Table. This helps them reflect on the evolution and healthy functioning of their Table and provide feedback to the Kitchen (Head office) as well as ask for support or resources as required.

Duplication vs uniqueness and customised to Male Population group

- Our focus on establishing strong and healthy foundations with newly forming Tables based on a simple, accessible but structured Table process ensures they are safe spaces and have enduring benefits to members over the long term.
- There are some distinct elements of our Model that are not replicated as an integrated set of Model elements in other programs
- Peer to peer - There are many preventative men's mental health initiatives. Our peer-to-peer program is based on the idea that getting men together provides an accessible, relatable environment for open sharing that is locally led by men in community
- Explicit invitation to share feelings and emotions - Some men's programs are focussed on a shared activity with the intention of open sharing of feelings occurring by chance, rather than by design. The Men's Table provides an explicit invitation to share feelings and is a key differentiator at a Men's Table.
- A safe place - Evidence indicates that the quality and safety of the group culture varies significantly across men's group initiatives, and only in some cases do men feel safe to be vulnerable and share openly.
- Peer led - Professionally led peer group initiatives have greater controls on the quality and safety but are perceived as less accessible by many men, particularly for men who are reticent help-seekers.
- Enduring membership - Many programs have a beginning and end point, meaning that men do not have ongoing access to the benefits of these services. The invitation to enduring membership encourages the practice of commitment, and trust strengthens over time.
- Reciprocity - The Table is an invitation for a man to serve himself, but also be present and able to serve other men through his listening and care.

Collaboration - How to engage with respect and trust?

- The Men's Table prioritises Sector Collaboration with like minded organisations in community development (grassroots); Philanthropy; Health and Wellbeing services and in complementary men's program delivery (like OzHelp); and with national peak Men's Health Sector bodies ...Our philosophy in each community is to honour what is

strong and only enter when we are invited or introduced by a connected and trusted partner.

- The Men's Table model is based upon sound community building and collaborative principles and approaches, including ABCD (Asset Based Community Development), and strategic partnering principles.
 - From the time we first begin engaging with new communities, we respect and acknowledge the current strengths and networks in place. We engage in on-the-ground relationship building through 'one at a time' conversations and introductions.
 - This can include with local community leaders, local agencies, council programs, health support networks, suicide collaboratives, existing men's health and wellbeing programs and networks, local clubs, local businesses and business networks, government funded health services and NGO community building programs.
 - Our approach is to foster trust and an approach to partnering whereby we are 'invited' to contribute to local community building efforts. This ensures that as we begin outreach, we have an active group of advocates and supporters, and also mitigates any risk that we may be duplicating a service already provided, or in some other way inadvertently impeding current activities and networks.