

Lonely voices

Submission to the inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Community Support and Services Committee of
Queensland Parliament

*Results from polling on loneliness and isolation
across Australia.*

Submission

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Introduction

The Australia Institute welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Queensland Parliament's Community Support and Services Committee inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland.

The Australia Institute has conducted polling on loneliness and social isolation that may be useful for the committee, particularly with regards to the first term of reference:

The nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to: (a) identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course; and (b) the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue.¹

The Australia Institute surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Australians in May 2021 about their social and emotional states since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these questions were first asked in 2011 and again in April 2020.

Comparison of polling results across the ten years from 2011 is only available for national results.

For the 2020 and 2021 polling, The Australia Institute is able to provide state-level data. The polling conducted by The Australia Institute is nationally representative by state, with a total sample size of around 200 respondents from Queensland in both the 2021 and 2020 polling.

By providing these polling results, The Australia Institute hopes to assist the committee in its investigation into loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, and provide insights into the changing state of social wellbeing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Australia Institute can provide detailed results from the polling on request, and would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the committee.

¹ Queensland Parliament (2021) *Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland*, <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/CSSC/inquiries/current-inquiries/socialisolation>

Polling Results

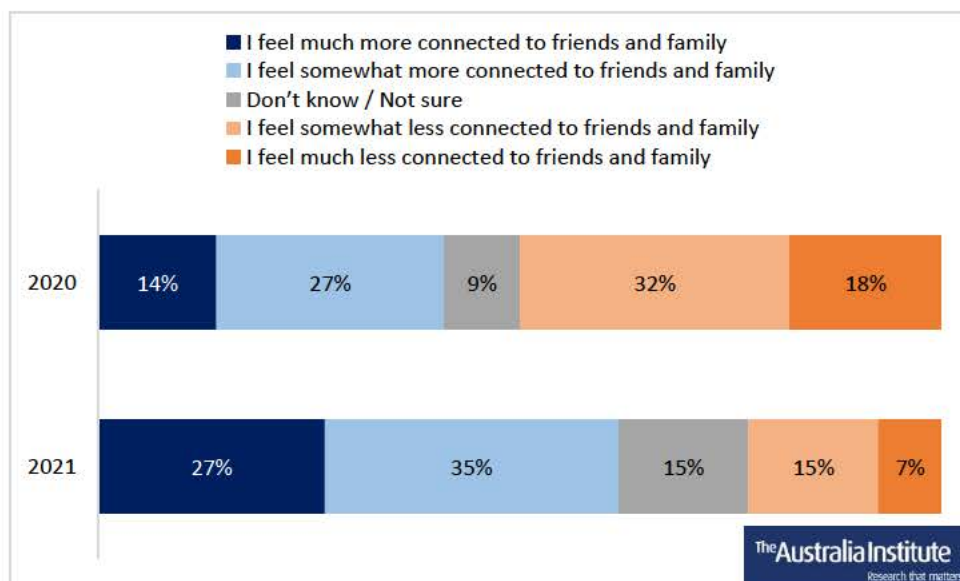
QUEENSLAND RESULTS

Queenslanders were asked similar questions in both 2020 and 2021. In 2020, they were asked how connected to friends and family they felt compared to before the nation-wide lockdowns experienced when the question was asked. In 2021, Queenslanders were asked how connected they now felt, compared to during the period of lockdowns in 2020.

Connectedness has improved since 2020, with one in four (27%) Queenslanders feeling much more connected to friends and family, and one in three (35%) feeling somewhat more connected – a total of 62% of Queenslanders feeling more connected to friends and family. One in four (23%) Queenslanders felt less connected to friends and family, of which 7% felt much less connected.

The Queensland results were not significantly different to the Australia-wide results from the same poll.

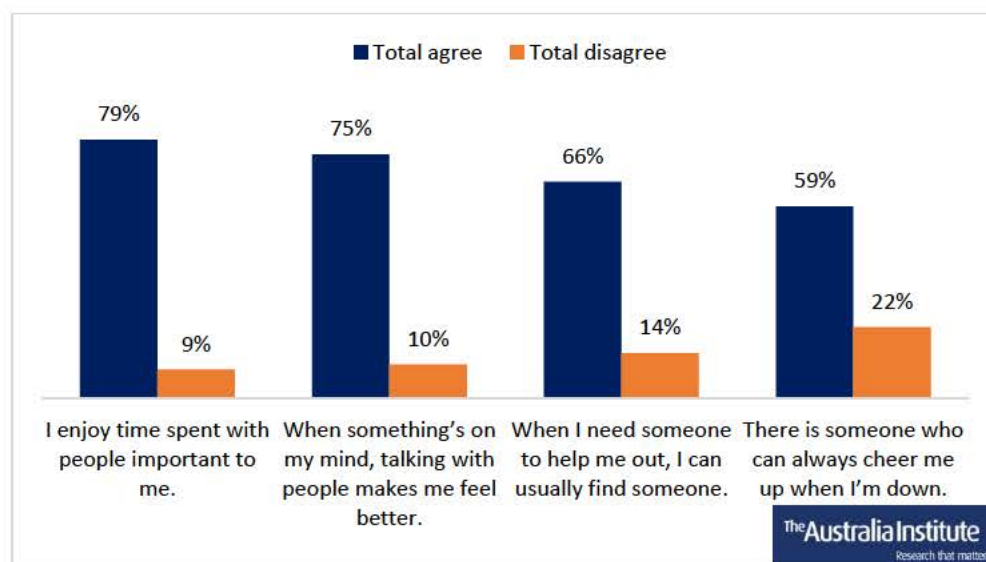
Figure 1: Perceptions of connection in 2021 compared to 2020, Queensland



When asked in 2021 whether they agreed with several statements on social and emotional wellbeing:

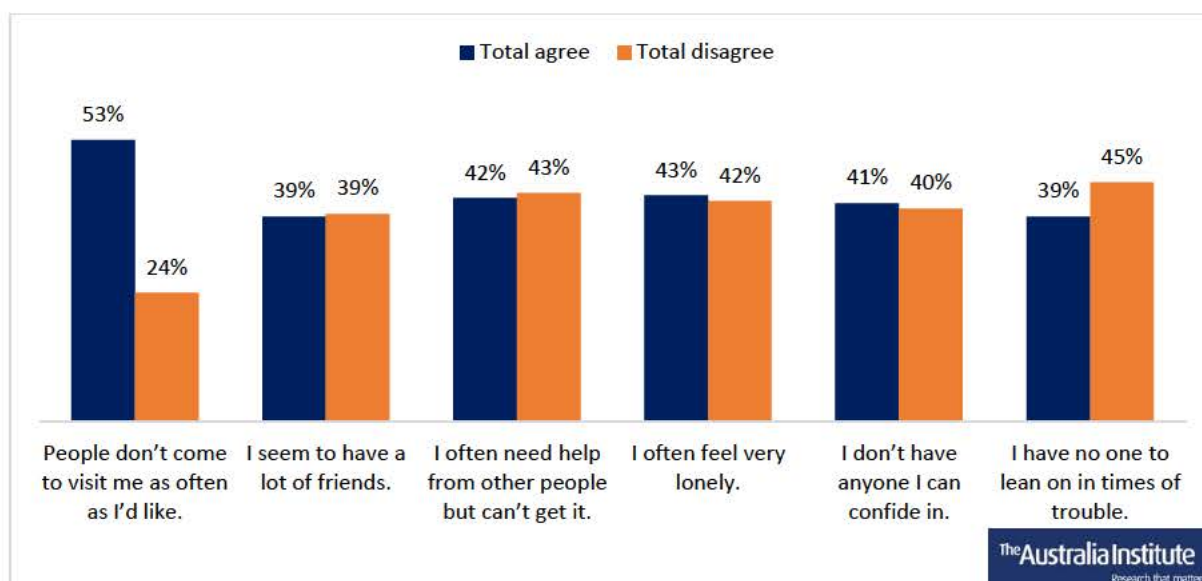
- Four in five (79%) Queenslanders agreed that they enjoyed spending time with people important to them.
- Three in four (75%) Queenslanders agreed that talking with people makes them feel better if something is on their mind.
- Two in three (66%) Queenslanders agreed that they can usually find someone when they need help.
- 59% of Queenslanders agreed that there is always someone who can cheer them up when they are down.

Figure 2: Responses to selected statements, 2021, Queensland



While these results are generally positive, several statements also attracted a response that showed lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing:

- Half of all Queenslanders (53%) agreed that they are not visited as often as they would like to be.
- Queenslanders were split evenly on whether they have a lot of friends or not (both 39%).
- 42% of Queenslanders often needed help from other people but could not get it, while 43% disagreed.
- 43% of Queenslanders often felt very lonely.
- 41% of Queenslanders do not have anyone they can confide in.
- Two in five (39%) Queenslanders agreed that they have no-one to lean on in time of trouble.

Figure 3: Responses to selected statements, 2021, Queensland

NATIONAL RESULTS

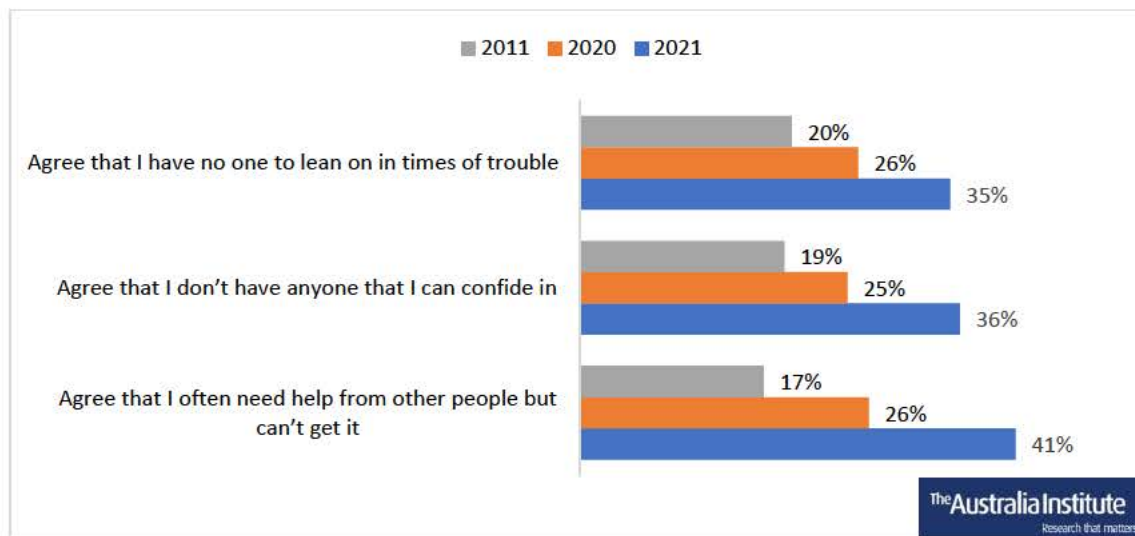
The Australia Institute also polled a nationally representative sample of people in April 2020, in the context of the initial lockdowns that occurred after COVID-19 first reached Australia. The Australia Institute has also previously conducted a survey in 2011 using the same questions, reported in *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Australia, 2001–2009*, a paper which found that one in ten Australians experience loneliness every year.²

In order to gauge how responses have shifted over time, the same questions asked in 2011 and 2020 were also asked in the recent May 2021 survey.

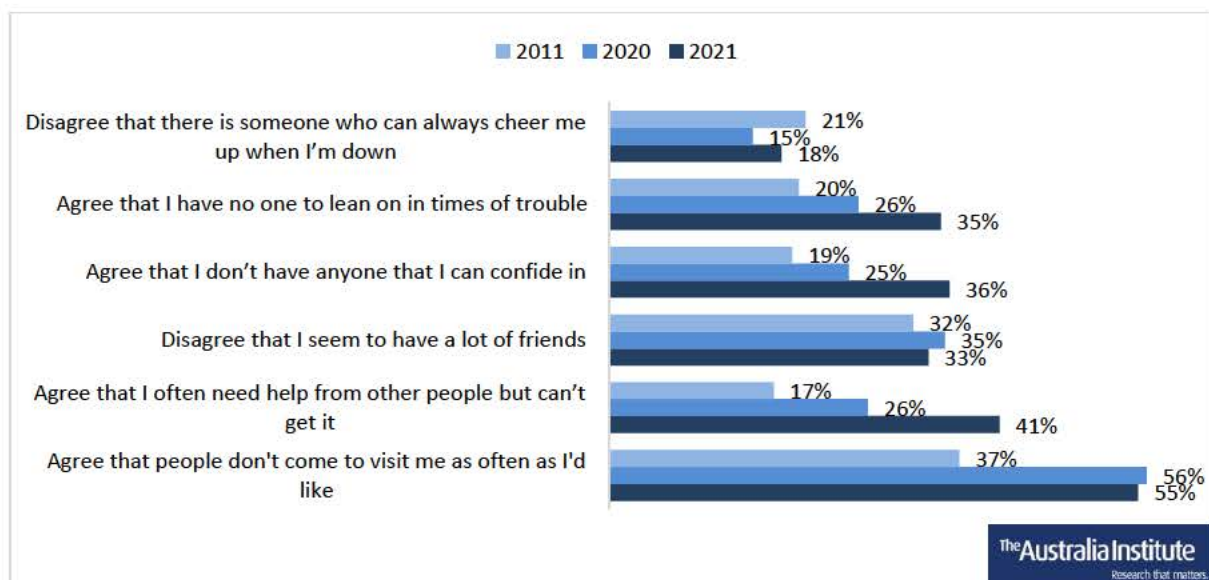
Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with several statements concerning their social and emotional wellbeing. Results show a concerning rise in Australians' inability to access emotional support:

- One in three Australians (35%) agree that they have no one to lean on in times of trouble, up from one in four (26%) in 2020 and one in five (20%) in 2011.
- One in three Australians (36%) agree that they do not have anyone to confide in, up from one in four (25%) in 2020 and one in five (19%) in 2011.
- 41% of Australians agree that they often need help from other people but cannot get it, up from 26% in 2020 and 17% in 2011.

² Baker (2012) *All the lonely people: Loneliness in Australia 2001-2009*,
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/all-the-lonely-people-loneliness-in-australia-2001-2009/>

Figure 4: Agreement with selected statements in 2011, 2020 and 2021, Australia-wide

To visualise how respondents' opinions changed over time in a uniform fashion, the 'negative' response to each statement is graphed in Figure 5. Negative refers to a response to a statement that suggests the respondent is experiencing mental ill health. For example, the 'negative' response to 'I seem to have a lot of friends' is to disagree, but for 'I have no one to lean on in time of trouble', the 'negative' response is to agree.

Figure 5: 'Negative' responses to selected statements, Australia-wide

By visualising the 'negative' responses to each statement as a trend line from 2011 to 2020 to 2021, it becomes clear that while some responses have remained relatively steady since the beginning of the pandemic, 'negative' responses to several statements have risen.

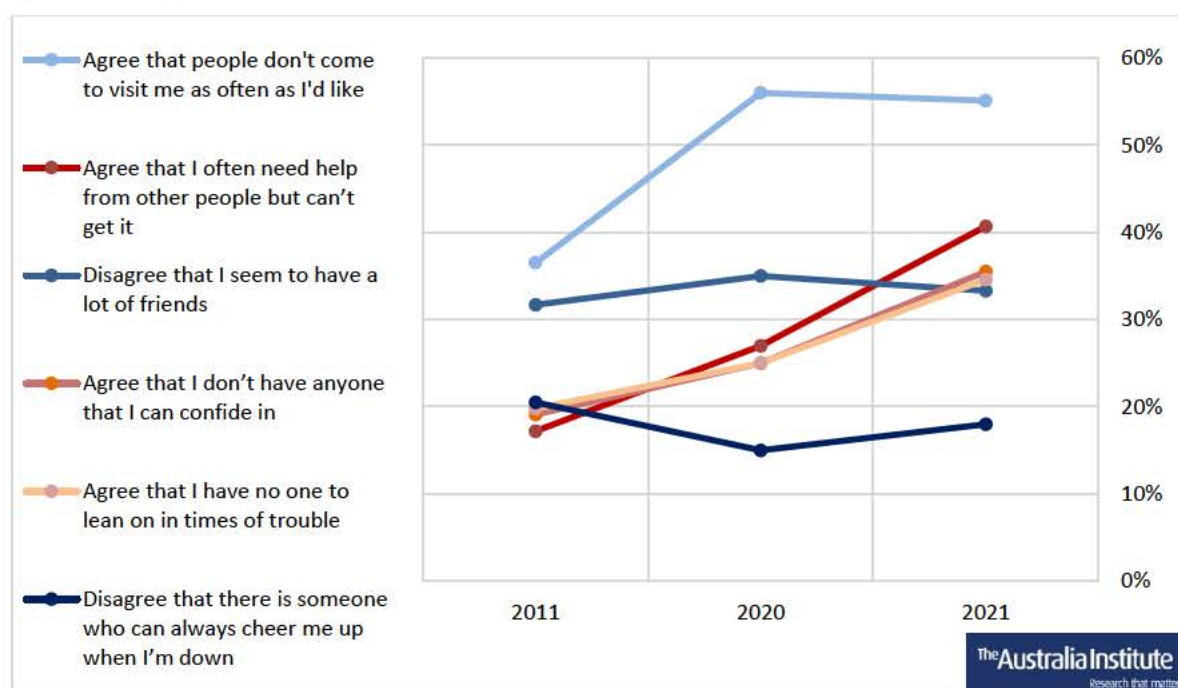
As shown in Figure 6, the following statements have seen a significant rise in negative responses:

- “Agree that I often need help from other people but can’t get it” surged from 17% in 2011 to 26% in 2020 and up to 41% in 2021.
- “Agree that I don’t have anyone that I can confide in” rose from 19% in 2011 to 25% in 2020, continuing to 36% in 2021.
- “Agree that I have no one to lean on in times of trouble” increased from 20% in 2011 to 26% in 2020, up to 35% in 2021.

It is worth noting that responses to the following statements have remained relatively stable, with the exception of perceptions of visits, which is stable from 2020:

- “Agree that people don’t come to visit me as often as I’d like” saw a slight decrease from 56% in 2020 to 55% in 2020, after having surged from 37% in 2011.
- “Disagree that I seem to have a lot of friends” rose slightly from 32% in 2011 to 35% in 2020 before decreasing slightly to 33% in 2021.
- “Disagree that there is someone who can always cheer me up when I’m down” saw a result of 21% in 2011, falling to 15% in 2020 before rising to 18% in 2021.

Figure 6: ‘Negative’ responses to selected statements on emotional and social wellbeing (trend lines)



Statements that concern the number of friends that someone has, the number of visits one receives, or having someone that can cheer you up have all remained relatively stable from 2020-2021. However, negative responses to issues of needing emotional support have trended up significantly since 2020.

While more research is no doubt needed, this could suggest that while Australians are remaining in contact with each other, close connections and the ability to receive emotional support are on the decline.

CONCLUSION

The results from Australia Institute polling show limited differences between Queenslanders and Australians more broadly when it comes to responses to social and mental wellbeing questions.

These results give a glimpse of how Queenslanders are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this submission is not to provide policy options, but to equip the committee with insights into Queenslanders' social and emotional wellbeing. The Australia Institute is available should the committee have further questions about our research.