SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN QUEENSLAND

SUBMISSION TO: Community Support & Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Email: cssc@parliament.qld.gov.au

FROM: Mr Stephen Andrew, MP

POSITION: State Member for Mirani – Queensland Parliament

ADDRESS: Mirani Electorate Office
Colonial Corner
PO Box 56
SARINA QLD 4737

CONTACT PHONE: 07 4806 0700

CONTACT EMAIL: mirani@parliament.qld.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland.

I am the Queensland State Member for Mirani,

From the beginning, it was clear that lockdowns and harsh social restrictions were going to have enormous collateral consequences, things that are sometimes hard to see but are nevertheless real.

At the outset, much was still unknown about the virus and so I accepted the experts argument that the benefits of their unprecedented and harsh polices outweighed the consequences.

I no longer do.

The impacts we are seeing on those living alone or with no family in Queensland or with poor social networks are devastating. I have seen many studies linking these people's experience of forced isolation and social restrictions to significant cognitive decline, loss of self-esteem, personal validation and happiness and feelings of extreme loneliness and despair.

Human beings are social creatures. They crave to be around others face to face and to have daily interactions at work and socially. Confining them to their homes, depriving them of those social contacts at work, the pub or local church, and telling them not to hug or kiss their friends and families is doing untold psychological damage and harm and simply has to stop.

Social interactions with others means mental stimulation, and the more frequent our social interactions are, the better our cognitive functions and sense of self-worth will be.

How are young people supposed to meet partners, make new friends, develop a career path or build a life?

A submission by the University of Sydney to the government last year, said the mental health bill for Australia due to lockdowns and social restrictions could be as high as $114 billion in lost productivity over the next five years.

Stacey Harris, a GP in a clinic in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Camberwell, wrote a letter to the government which was co-signed by many other suburban GPs, claiming that many doctors were now treating up to 20 cases a day of people seeking mental health care.

"I have never in my 15 years of general practice seen such devastation with patients' mental health," Dr Harris said.

"I see approximately 180-200 patients per week and it is disturbing what effect the lockdown is causing. I am doing 15-20 mental health care consultations daily, in comparison to 3-5 this time last year.''

I have heard the same thing time and again from doctors here in Queensland.

Australian Psychological Society CEO, Zena Burgess said the scale and impact of the COVID-19 restrictions had been "far beyond what anyone expected".

"The mental health impacts will be the long-lasting, tragic legacy of this pandemic, and could go on for months and even years".

A lead researcher for the Brain and Mind Centre's new Mental Wealth Initiative told the National Press Club recently that updated modelling by researchers had revealed:

- the prevalence of psychological distress across Australia would peak at around 45% by April 2022

- the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training is projected to peak at 38% in major cities and 42% in regional areas

- youth mental health-related emergency department presentations are projected to increase by 26%, self-harm hospitalisations by 28% and suicide deaths by 30% over the next five years.

In Queensland, the Mental Health Commissioner told a Parliamentary Committee in February 2021, that "the restrictions imposed and the pandemic itself have had significant effects on the mental health and wellbeing of Queenslanders."

"The pandemic has affected every Queenslander in some way. Many people have faced a range of challenges including increased levels of anxiety and stress, including financial stress, business and job losses, pressures of home schooling, adjusting to work from home, hours of online meetings, quarantine and self-isolation and also separation due to border closures. People who were already experiencing vulnerabilities and stresses are now at greater risk of developing more serious mental health problems".

The Queensland Mental Health Commissioner reported that between March and August 2020, the Queensland Ambulance Service reported a 20 per cent increase in triple 0 mental health related incidents.

Self-harm and suicidal presentations to emergency departments increased by 11 per cent.

The Commissioner said young people were facing many challenges—for example, home schooling, remote learning, social isolation, the loss of rites of passage such as birthday parties, schoolies and graduation ceremonies, and general uncertainty about their future.

Kids Helpline reported a national increase of 24 per cent in demand for counselling services alone while public mental health services saw an almost 21 per cent increase in referrals of 12- to 18-year-olds in the July to September quarter.

People with mental illness, including those in involuntary treatment, faced service delivery disruptions such as moves to telehealth and loss of personal contact with restrictions on visitors and support services.

These imposts were causing increases in anxiety, depression and loneliness as well as noncompliance with treatment plans.

Others, including those living in residential aged care, prisons and detention centres, have faced similar challenges and hardships.

The Commissioner also spoke about how the pandemic had affected Queenslanders' use of alcohol and other drugs.

There were, he said, "indications of changing patterns of alcohol use and changes to the availability and use of some drugs as well as issues with access to treatment and support services.

The Queensland Health funded alcohol and other drugs information service reported a 54 per cent increase in weekly calls during March to June last year.

In the drive to achieve its "eradication" policy, governments and officials have ignored the serious mental and physical illnesses that their policies have caused.

In October, the World Health Organization's Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge said governments should stop enforcing lockdowns, unless as a "last resort," because the impact on other areas of health and mental well-being is more damaging.

WHO's special envoy on COVID-19, Dr David Nabarro, said in an interview that world leaders should stop imposing lockdowns as a reflex reaction because they are making "poor people an awful lot poorer."

Many mental health professionals across the world are reporting high demand and record caseloads, including more young clients who need help coping with the unprecedented feelings of fear, uncertainty, disruption to routine, physical and social isolation, increased time indoors and parental stress.

Many community leaders and parents are expressing concern that all the emergency lockdowns and other measures are having enormously damaging and long-term repercussions on the mental health and happiness of our young.

Many children they warn have started exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a syndrome typically associated with events such as wars, natural disasters, or physical or sexual abuse.

PTSD symptoms include increased negative thoughts and feelings, problems sleeping or concentrating, and "feeling more on guard or unsafe." Trauma experts are suggesting that the mental health toll of the pandemic may be "far greater than previous mass traumas," even exceeding the psychological impact of "large-scale traumas of war or natural disaster events."

Government and experts are ready to admit that the current signs of mental suffering and distress within the Queensland population is a serious problem, but few seem willing to discuss the most obvious cause of it or the most obvious solution, which is to call an end to all the cruel and coercive government lockdowns, harsh measures and general fear-mongering that are destroying the mental health of ALL Queenslanders.

Here in Queensland we are seeing NO studies done on the issue and the only statistics I could find were those given by the Mental Health Commissioner in February and even they were from 2020 and so largely out of date.

That's the problem. No-one in Queensland seems to be counting the social cost of these lockdowns on real, everyday people.

There's lots of talk about 'vulnerable' and 'at risk' groups, but let me tell you, every single person in Queensland is today 'vulnerable' and 'at risk' and no one is listening to them or paying attention to the massive social and psychological damage that is being done to them.

All over Queensland I am hearing reports of increased rates of suicide, acts of self-harm, acute anxiety, depression and social disconnection, with symptoms that seem to be worsening in 2021, not getting better.

In regional areas, although spared the worst of Queensland's lockdowns, many harsh emergency measures like the mask mandates, social distancing rules and the feeling of being under constant surveillance and official suspicion, have induced feelings of social dislocation, alienation, division, loss of trust in our governments and institutions, and widespread feelings of powerlessness, confusions and extreme loneliness.

The worst impacts are being borne by our young people, who no longer see any point to anything they were brought up to believe in or strive for.

Many have completed degrees that are now worthless, or lost jobs which they worked hard for and had planned their career path around.

Those that have found jobs to replace the ones they lost, have found them mainly in low paid, unfulfilling, 'nowhere' type jobs, in retail or the service sector.

Many have been forced to give up their leases on flats or rental houses and return home to live with their parents.

Their social lives, even when not under lockdown, are cruelly restrictive and there are widespread reports that few young people today are forming relationships or making new friendships – it has been this way for 18 months with absolutely no end in sight.

Being young is supposed to be a time of joy, hope and new beginnings. It is an absolutely crucial time for determining the rest of your life, whether in terms of career, marriage, friendship, happiness and self-esteem. That many are saying this has all been ruined for them is nothing short of a tragedy and a crime.

There is a complete lack of hope, motivation or joy in any of the young people I meet and speak with today, whether in urban or regional areas of Queensland.

It has all been taken away from them and I can no longer say 'the benefits outweigh the costs', because they clearly don't - not anymore.

Today's generation of young people are in danger of becoming a 'lost' generation and that simply must NOT be allowed to happen.

Today's under 30s deserve the same chance to be happy and enjoy all the social interactions and personal freedoms, free of fear, that our generation and our parents' generation did.

It is just not good enough to keep saying that it is "Covid" doing this.

It is not.

It is Government and bureaucrats doing it and they need to end it now.

Stephen Andrew
State Member for Mirani