



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness - Queensland

Submission prepared by:

NAPCAN

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Background

As the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, NAPCAN, is interested in the effects of loneliness on:

- Children themselves
- Parents and carers (and how this impacts their mental health and capacity to provide nurturing environments)
- Community connection (and the way that communities support and connect).

Child abuse and neglect is a complex issue with a range of known risk and protective factors.

Risk factors of relevance to this inquiry include:

- Social social isolation
- Mental health challenges

Source:

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/risk-and-protective-factors-child-abuse-and-neglect>

The following submission highlights key issues that NAPCAN would like to see considered under the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

Loneliness is an added burden for families, particularly single parent families

Evidence base: In 2018 Relationships Australia released *Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness*, a report exploring the findings from 16 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia Survey.

Findings included:

Generally:

- Most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives
- Just under 1.5 million people are reporting that they've been lonely for a decade or more
- One in six Australians is experiencing emotional loneliness at one point in time
- One in 10 lacks social support
- Overall levels (lack of social support and subjective feelings of loneliness) of loneliness for men are higher than women for all 16 waves of available data, although the reverse is true when examining the proportion of people reporting just emotional loneliness

Specific to families:

- Single fathers experience particularly high rates of loneliness
- Single parents experience higher levels of social isolation (38% for men, 18% for women) than single adults without children, or couples with or without children.

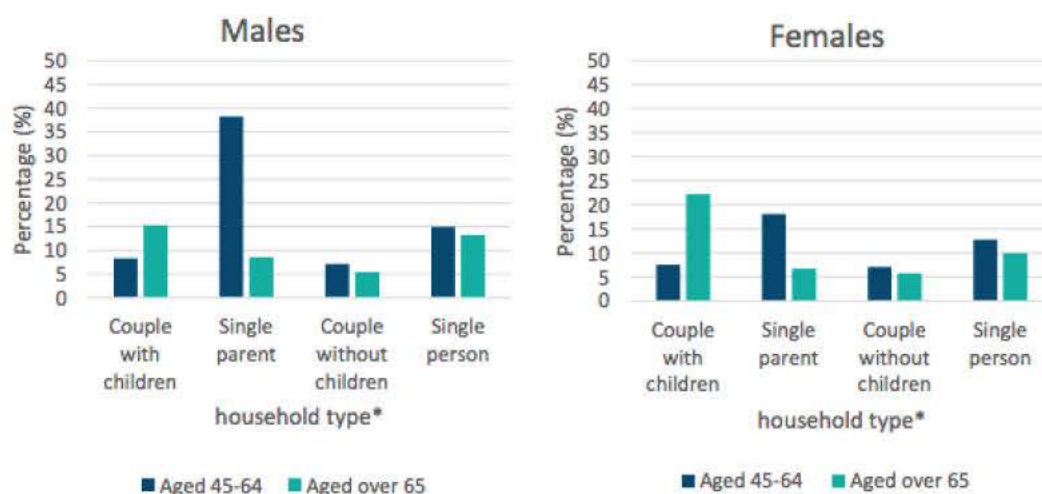
The following images from the report show the burden on families, particularly single parent families in terms of:

- Figure 12 - Social Support
- Figure 13 - Emotional Loneliness

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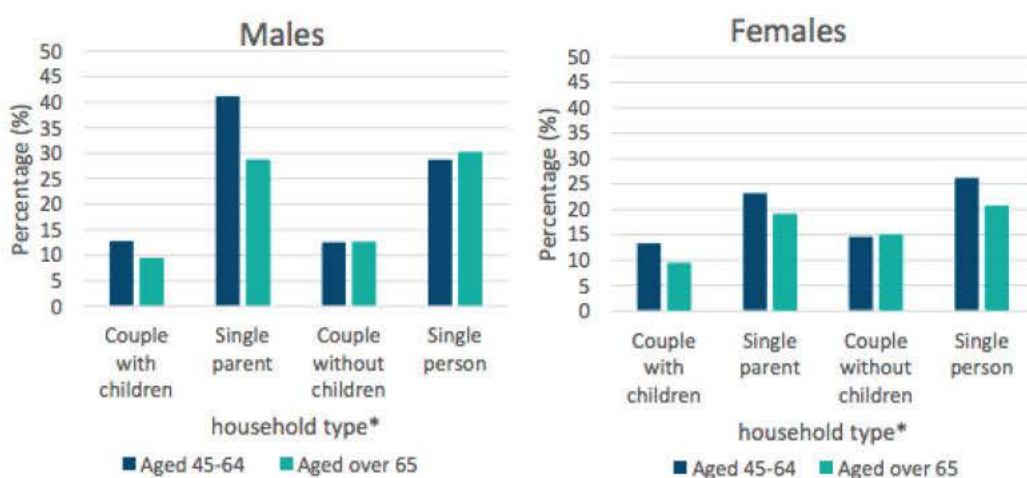
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Figure 12. Lack of Social Support, 2016, age cohort, household type and gender, per cent



*'other' households were excluded due to small sample size

Figure 13. Emotional loneliness, 2016, age cohort by household type and gender, per cent



*'other' households were excluded due to small sample size

For full report see:

<https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/is-australia-experiencing-an-epidemic-of-loneliness>

Children and adolescents experience loneliness

Evidence base: According to the *Ending Loneliness Together Report* (November 2020):

“While loneliness is often depicted as a problem for older adults, it is increasingly clear that this is only part of the picture. Children, adolescents, and young people are particularly vulnerable to feeling lonely. For example, recent UK research indicates that 11.3% of children age 10-15 years reported that they were “often” lonely, and that this was more common among younger children aged 10 to 12 years (14.0%) than among those aged 13 to 15 years (8.6%). Minimal data is available for school-aged children in Australia. However, in the Young Australian Loneliness Report, young people aged 18 to 25 years reported significantly more loneliness than adolescents aged 12 to 17 years.

Loneliness in children and adolescents plays out in poorer mental and physical health outcomes, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use. Such effects are expected to increase as physical distancing and home-schooling continues in response to curbing COVID-19 infection rates. There is also a growing recognition that loneliness in children can have a negative impact on students’ attendance and engagement at school, academic attainment, and overall school experience.

Based on this growing evidence, there is increasing value in teaching preventative measures within school, vocational, and higher education institutions. In these programs, educators can help implement evidence-based strategies to tackle loneliness in vulnerable young people. Learning about the consequences of loneliness, how to cope when it occurs and the skills to reconnect with others may have a positive, lifelong impact for future generations.

Efforts are now underway to develop an evidence-based teaching curriculum to achieve these goals. Integrating teaching about the value of social connections and relationships will benefit young people in Australia but will also require an ongoing systematic investigation. A holistic approach that can address the educators’ own social wellbeing, and equipping services that support children, young people, and families (e.g., maternal and child health, playgroups, youth groups) is more likely to be effective as the young person is embedded within a complex social network.

Policy Implication - Guidance on loneliness and belonging must be integrated into a national school curriculum. An effective evidence-based approach to loneliness in children, adolescents, and young people should be embedded within school curriculum and uniformly adopted within the education sector.”

For full report see:

https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia_Nov20.pdf

Responses to loneliness need to be collaborative

NAPCAN supports the five key calls to action of the *Ending Loneliness Together Report*.

- *“Unite and work towards a common goal - Ending Loneliness Together can bring together all stakeholders including people with a lived experience, advocates of vulnerable groups, all levels of government (Local, State, and Federal), academia, and not-for-profit to corporate sectors to unify their understanding and approach to addressing loneliness. We can work together to develop a National Loneliness Strategy that is relevant, feasible, and impactful across all sectors.*
- *Deliver an evidence-based community awareness campaign - We need to increase awareness of loneliness as an issue in our community. In this work, the community empower people experiencing loneliness to reach out and connect with others in a dignified and non-stigmatising way. Additionally, awareness campaigns should also empower others to help those more vulnerable. Specific messaging around building social connection can be nuanced across different cohorts of people and it is crucial to work with advocates and a variety of end-users and stakeholders.*
- *Accelerate the translation of evidence-based practice & policy - Scientific evidence and knowledge are not always readily available to civil society and other stakeholders. Consequently, many are reliant on anecdotal evidence and may be uncertain about what works, what holds potential, what does not work or may even cause harm. A strategic approach is therefore required to facilitate the translation of the latest evidence to ensure the maximum benefit across all sectors. A database of this latest evidence and how it can be applied within our current systems and practices should be developed in collaboration across academia, government, and service providers.*
- *Equip service providers - For more targeted responses, we should equip current health, social, community, aged care and education service providers on how to identify, monitor, redirect, or intervene with respect to individuals at risk of distressing or enduring loneliness. We can do so via direct training of practitioners and workers who see individuals who are lonely and further support them through delivering sector-specific resources.*
- *Develop a national community database - A national database of all community programs and services tackling loneliness should be developed. We can map programs by areas, with specific attention to program type (e.g., from low to high intensity), target cohorts (e.g. older people) and level of evidence (e.g., evaluated or not).”*

For full report see:

https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia_Nov20.pdf

Social connection is a protective factor for families

Evidence base: Thriving in Adversity: A positive deviance study of safe communities for children, published by the Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW, 2014), sought to understand the factors that contribute to positive child outcomes in communities where positive outcomes may be unexpected.

The findings revealed that the factors that promote safe families and communities include:

- social resources, knowledge and skills for parents, including informal support from family and friends;
- experience with and knowing about children before becoming a parent;
- strong, positive relationships between parents/caregivers;
- the capacity to ask for assistance, and access to formal support services;
- high levels of community engagement and connectedness, including through playgroups and sporting events;
- strong, positive connections with other families; and
- social, recreational, and cultural resources, that allow parents to expand their social networks.

For full report see:

https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2015/thriving_in_adversity.pdf

Children's views must be included in efforts to build social connection

Evidence base: What do children in Australia value about their communities? And what changes in their communities would children like to see? These questions were addressed in Communities matter: Children's views on community in Australia (ANU, 2014) which presented research findings from a joint project of the Australian National University and University of Western Sydney, in partnership with The Benevolent Society and NAPCAN.

The study found:

- Most children thought that people and caring, supportive relationships are the most important parts of community.
- While children reported many positive experiences of community, the majority also said they had been treated rudely or with hostility by the adults in their community.
- Many children felt disconnected from the adults in their community, including their parents.
- Children who spent more time with their parents felt more positive about their community.
- Most children said they did not feel listened to within their community.

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- Children in disadvantaged areas were more likely to experience negative elements of their community, such as witnessing public drunkenness.
- Many children did not feel safe in their community, especially those from disadvantaged areas.
- Fear of unfamiliar people, car-related aggression, and the effects of alcohol on adults' behaviour made children feel vulnerable.
- Being from better-off families protected children from the negative elements of community.
- Children in more affluent areas were more likely to feel safe, to know their neighbours and to be on friendly terms with adults.
- Children's views are different. Adult perceptions of a community may not reflect those of the children in a community.

For full report see:

<https://www.napcan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Children-Communities-and-Social-Capital-Report-FINAL-Colour-March-2014.pdf>

Initiatives to address social isolation for families

In addition to highlighting the above points, NAPCAN would like to acknowledge initiatives that should be considered as part of a strategy to address loneliness and social isolation for families and children:

- Neighbourhood Centres
- Playgroups (including targeted groups for parents at risk of social isolation e.g. single parents and fathers)
- Sporting & Recreation Clubs (with particular consideration of ensuring affordability and accessibility for all members of the community)
- Affordable and accessible early childhood education
- Connection of schools to community (e.g. Talking Families schools project <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/queensland-schools-become-talking-families-schools>)
- Stable social housing to reduce forced relocations for families (e.g.
- Eradication of poverty to alleviate barriers to social inclusion
- Engagement in community campaigns such as Neighbour Day, Child Protection Week, Children's Week
- Urban design that takes into consideration e.g. green spaces and open public spaces, traffic exposure, residential density and the climate) affect young children's development (<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2021/06/18/creating-environments-support-young-childrens-development> and Kids in Community Study https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Kids_in_Communities_Study/)



How we 'frame' issues around children and parenting is important

NAPCAN follows the evidence around the effective framing of social issues. The words and phrases we use can have a big impact on how well we can engage the community in addressing social issues and avoid stigma. Research of relevance to this topic and how it impacts on parents and children, includes:

- <https://www.parentingrc.org.au/publications/talking-about-the-science-of-parenting/>
- <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/projects/HPER/core-story/>