



Brisbane Youth Service Inc

Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Authorised by:

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Introduction

Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians and Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation

Brisbane Youth Service Incorporated (BYS) wishes to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and the many different Nations across Brisbane and Australia. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

BYS expresses our commitment as a service to Reconciliation and ensuring our service delivery approach and workforce continue to redress past injustices within our scope of influence.

BYS recognises the disproportionate experience of social injustices affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and Australia's history of genocide, dispossession, assimilation, and Stolen Generations.

1. About Brisbane Youth Service Inc

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) is a medium sized community based not-for-profit organisation and registered Charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC). The service specialises in responding to disadvantaged young people who are at risk of or experiencing social disadvantage and exclusion. We are dedicated to ensuring a socially just society that promotes and celebrates the diverse voices and experiences of young people. BYS is led by an experienced skills-based Board, who guide organisational sustainability and accountability.

Vision, Purpose, Commitment and Values

BYS is committed to fulfilling the organisational vision of **“new futures for young people.”** Established in 1977, BYS operates as a highly respected Youth Specialist Homelessness Service, providing wrap-around, integrated supports to vulnerable young people and young families in Brisbane, Queensland. Our purpose is, **“to enable young people and families to navigate life challenges and thrive in the community.”**

BYS is a registered Tier Three provider under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) and accredited under the Human Services Quality Framework (HSQF).

Sector Leadership and Partnerships

BYS has a strong emphasis on defining theories of change and collecting data to inform the delivery of quality services and grow the sector knowledge base. This data informs our systems advocacy and sector leadership and drives effective, evidence-based responses to young people who are experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

BYS partners with crucial housing and support services, as well as corporate partners and philanthropists, identifying service gaps and innovating to meet the growing needs of disadvantaged young people. BYS engages in sector leadership through our active membership in peak bodies, participation in advisory, reference groups, and practice forums.

BYS Service Delivery Response

BYS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland as these are substantial issues affecting vulnerable young people in the community. BYS recognises the intersectionality of social isolation and the experience of youth homelessness on the young people accessing services.

In relation to the presenting issues for young people in the service:

- 60% rated their family support as poor or very poor
- 43% said that lack of support was a crisis/serious concern in their lives
- 71% came from homes where there was family violence
- 54% had a diagnosed mental illness when they came to BYS, with 29% identifying suicide risks and 24% indicating that they had self-harming behaviours
- 25% stated that they had a current substance abuse issue

(BYS Annual report 2019-2020)

Service Data Snapshot 2019-20

In the 2019-2020 year:

- Geographically, young people came to BYS from 241 different suburbs ranging from the Gold Coast to the Sunshine Coast, with just 9% identifying that they were living in the inner Brisbane city/Fortitude Valley areas.
- 15% of young people were **culturally and linguistically diverse**, with 45 different countries of birth and 68 languages other than English spoken. 10% identified as migrant refugees.
- 31% identified as **Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander**.
- 36% identified as **sexuality-diverse** and 6% as **gender-diverse** (identifying as a gender other than male or female).
- 19% of young people had an **identified disability** at the time that they engaged with the service. More young people are also assessed as having a disability eligible for NDIS support during support.

- 49% were unemployed and 15% were enrolled but **disengaged from education** due to life circumstances. 23% had **no source of income** when they were assessed at BYS.
- 54% of young people attending BYS services had a **diagnosed mental illness** at the time that they engaged with support.
- 19% have a **serious physical health condition** identified at the time of assessment, however many young people are not aware of their own health needs when in crisis and experiencing homelessness risks and health concerns during support at BYS. BYS operates a bulk-billed medical clinic including the services of a triage nurse.
- 22% of the young people we support are themselves **young parents**.

Further information about Brisbane Youth Service can be accessed at <https://www.bys.org>

BYS Integrated Continuum of Care Model

BYS's integrated continuum of care model includes:

- intake and intervention services, including comprehensive assessment and brief intervention
- a range of accommodation options such as: 3 x 24/7 congregate living, and 26 units of transitional accommodation
- tenancy sustainment program
- health services, including mental health, alcohol and other drugs support, and primary health medical clinic
- specialist young women and young families programs
- holistic crisis and case management for young people and their families
- transition support of young people to employment, education and training pathways
- specialist domestic and family violence support services, through an embedded Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) worker position provided by Brisbane Domestic Violence Service (BDVS)
- brokerage and emergency relief for the purchase of essential goods and services

Service Responses to Social Isolation and Loneliness

BYS is committed to responding to the issue of social isolation across all aspects of service delivery, informed by person-centred practices that assist young people to make choices, whilst balancing rights, risks, and responsibilities.

2. Social Isolation and Loneliness

The statistics around social isolation and loneliness in Australia and Queensland continue to be alarming, with the impacts experienced by the most vulnerable groups within society, and across the life span.

In an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019)¹ report, which sought to provide a comprehensive review of the issue, it was found that 1 in 10 people aged 15 and over said that they lacked the necessary social support, with one in four experiencing loneliness and one in two reporting feeling lonely for at least one day of the week. Primary factors that impacted on the experience of loneliness included isolated living arrangements such as living alone, disconnection from communities of support, unemployment, and high use of social media.

Focusing on the issue of young people, the report highlighted that the level of loneliness is highly problematic, with one in four young people aged 12-25 reported feeling lonely within the last week. This was found to have a significant link to the risk of young people developing mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (AIHW 2019).

This submission focuses on young people's experience of social isolation and loneliness, with provision of recommendations to support a comprehensive approach to address contributing factors affecting young people.

Key Issues:

Many young people who access BYS's service have complex trauma histories, and ongoing psycho-social stressors. Young people's access to social capital may be severely restricted, as access to positive primary caregivers, family and friends is often significantly limited. From an early age young people are often forced to rely on formal systems for support, or forge relationships with peers that may not be pro-social in nature.

Homelessness

Social isolation and loneliness are inextricably linked to the experience of homelessness for young people, significantly impacting on overall health and wellbeing, and their ability to build relationships that are positive, mutually beneficial and supportive. The breakdown of meaningful social relationships places young people experiencing homelessness at a greater risk of issues such as exposure to violence, substance use, mental health issues and further trauma.

Social isolation and loneliness can be significant for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including young people who are couch surfing and needing to move frequently. Connection to community, friends and family is impacted for young people who are forced out of their homes due to family breakdown or family violence

¹ AIHW (2019) Social isolation and loneliness, Accessed 18/8/2021 at [Social isolation and loneliness - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-conditions/social-isolation-and-loneliness).

and who are needing to find safe housing in a different location, often far away from existing networks and supports. This includes young people who access crisis or transitional housing where vacancies are limited, and young people who have no choice but to take whatever options are available despite the ramifications for schooling, friends, family and community supports.

Disconnection from family due to family breakdown or conflict is a major driver of social isolation and loneliness for young people. Many young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness have a parent or caregiver with a mental illness or substance abuse issue that can result in the young person needing to rely on themselves to have their needs met, or to seek out alternative supports to have their physical and psychosocial needs met. Often, it is their friends or peers who become the primary support and provider of housing (couch surfing) and connection in the absence of a capable and willing parent.

Social housing models in Queensland do not always meet the needs of young people. Crisis and transitional housing programs are based on communal living models offering 24 hour supervision, limited privacy and independence for young people (shared facilities with own bedroom) and therefore young people are keen to move on from this housing, but not necessarily solo living and without some mobile support. The public and social housing options for young people are either high density boarding house accommodation with the adult population (presenting high risks of violence and exposure to substance use), or single occupancy tenancies. Many tenancies break down due to young people feeling unsafe or vulnerable in boarding house accommodation with adults, or extreme loneliness and isolation living alone.

Most community youth programs in Brisbane focus on crisis intervention and delivery of acute support to young people experiencing homelessness and housing crisis. There is a lack of youth hubs that provide shared spaces for young people to come together in meaningful ways. These types of models reduce the risk of police interventions for public space related offences and redirects young people who may otherwise engage in anti-social or illegal activities, to engage in positive, pro-social and safe relationships.

Education, employment and training

Engagement in education and employment is a protective factor for young people, enabling access to friendships and mentors. There needs to be significant investment in early intervention and prevention programs within educational institutions to keep young people engaged and motivated at school. For young people who are unable to attend mainstream schooling due to learning difficulties or expulsion from school, there needs to be a range of educational programs offering alternative delivery of Queensland curriculum conducive to the challenges of young people experiencing homelessness and complex trauma. Collaborative models of service delivery that support facilitated outreach and access to supports and services in the community for young people who attend alternative schooling pathways is a priority.

Young people who enter Specialist Homelessness Services residential programs can form positive social connections with other young people experiencing similar challenges. Young people who are rough sleeping or couch surfing, often are surrounded by others who provide them with a sense of safety and connection.

Offering healthy and meaningful activities for young people and increasing opportunities for safety is key to reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence is also a significant issue for women and children accessing BYS's Young Women and Young Families team, as well as other programs. Most of the young people do not have strong relationships with immediate family, describing them as strained, unhealthy, and non-supportive. Most of the young people BYS engage in case management or in a therapeutic capacity have experienced trauma histories, often whilst in the care of parents and families. With a lack of pro-social supports, young people can become easily isolated from important networks and are particularly vulnerable to falling into intimate partner relationships that are characterised by domestic violence and coercive control. A common tactic of control is the alienation of victims/survivors from friends and families, professional supports, and positive engagement with the broader community. Additionally, most of the young people accessing the Young Women and Young Families team are unemployed and lack access to formal education pathways. These factors increase the dependence on the perpetrator for all their emotional and support needs.

Health and wellbeing

Social isolation and loneliness have a significant impact on overall health and wellbeing for young people. Adolescence marks a developmental phase of navigating complex tasks and transitions that are supported through social engagements across different contexts. Key milestones include the development of self-worth and life skills, as well as connection and relationships with others. The lack of access to social opportunities by young people who may be experiencing issues such as homelessness, mental illness, domestic and family violence and poverty, can lead to interrupted development and social isolation. This can also lead to ongoing ramifications into adulthood for young people for physical and emotional wellbeing, feeding into continuous cycles of isolation and loneliness and poor life outcomes.

There is a significant lack of youth-specific health services that are free, accessible, and which support psycho-social group connection and life skills development from a trauma recovery perspective. There are also a significant lack of youth specific spaces and programs designed with and for young people.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has especially increased the levels of isolation of young people, particularly in the context of government regulations involving lock downs and restrictions. Young people have reported to workers that they feel less safe in their communities, which is yet another barrier to a sense of social inclusion and participation. During the pandemic, BYS has seen an increased number of occasions of support and average number of occasions of support per young people increased significantly.

COVID-19 has raised significant issues for young people, particularly for already vulnerable youth populations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, CALD, LGBTIQ+, and young people who present with physical, intellectual and psychosocial

disabilities. Issues include but are not limited to: higher levels of isolation and decreased opportunities for positive social connection and physical self-care (i.e. exercise, outdoor connection), resulting in increased risks including mental health and substance use concerns. COVID-19 has also exacerbated already reduced access of young people to vital services and supports. Privacy difficulties and safety concerns for vulnerable young people have at times increased with homebased service delivery such as telehealth, where the home environment is not safe or adequate. Additionally, young people are presenting to the service with a lack of access to digital IT infrastructure/IT platforms/adequate data plans. BYS has seen increases in domestic and family violence, mental health issues, suicide ideation and substance use, and high levels of non-school attendance for vulnerable young people. COVID-19 has reduced the availability of protective factors for young people presenting with high and complex needs.

COVID-19 has further exacerbated social isolation and loneliness for many young people who have been required to stay at their residential transitional housing during lockdowns. This has meant that young people have had limited or no connection with family and friends and have been unable to engage in meaningful social activities. The pandemic has been particularly difficult for young people who often seek out social opportunities in groups, and often in public spaces. Some young people have been exited or chosen to leave their transitional housing because they have been unable to follow the rules of lockdown, instead opting to spend times with their family and friends, often risking fines. Many young people have chosen to be with family or friends, even if that means that they become homeless again, pointing to the significance of social connection for young people.

Protective factors and benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness

A systems approach highlights a complex interplay of protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness for young people. These factors include:

- secure attachment to family and primary caregivers, at least one or several close friends, participation in extracurricular activities, and engagement in education, training or employment pathways
- emotional support outside the family, such as in sporting clubs, community groups or religious institutions
- access to health and mental health, and drug and alcohol support, information and resources

The benefits of reducing social isolation and loneliness for young people include the following:

- Addressing social isolation during younger years is not just important for young people's psychological wellbeing but is also vital for meeting key

developmental milestones such as cognitive, emotional and social capabilities

- Ensuring young people feel safe and have the skills to connect with others and participate in the community has significant impact on their help-seeking behaviors and how they engage proactively with a broad range of services
- Addressing social isolation and loneliness reduces the cost to the overall system through rectifying the underlying causes and drivers

3. Recommendations

- (1) BYS commends the State Government's commitment to, "consolidate and expand effort towards homelessness prevention and early intervention, supportive housing and improving pathways out of homelessness" (Department of Housing and Public Works Partnering for Impact 2018), as a component of the Queensland Housing Strategy 2017-2027. To meet the growing demand, targeted housing supply strategies are required to meet the complex needs of disadvantaged young people, and their diverse developmental needs. These strategies should provide access to affordable, accessible and appropriate housing solutions along the continuum of private rentals, community and social housing. Additionally, affordable housing must be provided for the duration of the young person's needs and be adequately resourced/subsidised to support the high number of young people who present with little or no income. Strategies should also address how disadvantaged young people will be supported into the future to enter the home ownership market to ensure ongoing housing and economic security. Housing models in Queensland must be age appropriate, fit-for-purpose, safe and conducive to positive social connection.
- (2) Address underlying drivers of disadvantage and social determinants of health and wellbeing for young people: such as increasing the supply of affordable, accessible and appropriate housing; challenging cultural values and norms that support patterns of behavior that are violent, controlling and non-supportive, increase opportunities for meaningful employment, education and training that meets the needs and challenges of issues facing vulnerable young people and which can support pathways out of poverty.
- (3) In responding to domestic and family violence, BYS would like to recommend further funding for services that work specifically with marginalised and traumatised young people:
 - Both for responding to and educating young victims/survivors, namely the provision of psycho-educational individual and groupwork.
 - The provision of youth specific refuges and other youth-appropriate emergency accommodation in major city locations.
 - Further funding for specialist domestic violence services (embedded roles) within youth services.

- Funding for specialist perpetrator interventions which are tailored for young men as opposed to adult men's behaviour change models.
 - Review of current models of support to ensure that the needs of young people engaging with the domestic and family violence support system are adequately met.
- (4) Reduce barriers to accessing appropriate mental health care, such as mental health care plans and availability of skilled workers reducing wait-times for young people to access important physical and mental health treatment, and specialist support such as domestic and family violence counselling. This may include enhanced funding for clinical and therapeutic models of care within specialist youth services where young people can access integrated responses that address their holistic needs. Additionally, further funding is required for health services that have outreach capacity, and which focus on health promotion, early intervention and prevention. Investing in collaborative models of care enable co-ordinated approaches to meet the needs of vulnerable young people, so that they can access the services and supports that they need to reduce social isolation and loneliness.
- (5) Reduce siloed funding responses to enhance co-ordination between government and social service delivery systems to ensure that Queensland builds on existing investments that will enhance social capital, with targeted interventions specifically designed for young people.
- (6) Continue investment in youth specific services that provide integrated supports within communities. Funding of programs from an early intervention/prevention approach supporting vulnerable young Queenslanders, are cost effective measures providing a sustainable platform for reduction of social isolation and loneliness. Building on the current funding of alternative schooling and training pathways for disadvantaged young people is a step forward in addressing underlying drivers of poverty and enabling engaged participation. A variety of free or low-cost activities for young people that provide opportunities to meet new friends, experience a range of healthy activities, develop skills and build self-esteem and confidence are also required.

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