



Submission : Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland.

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During periods of isolation (COVID-19 enforced isolation, and also social isolation), the mental wellbeing of residents of the remote Indigenous community of Pormpuraaw is greatly affected and inevitably leads to the increased use of alcohol and drugs as a means to counteract the negative mental and physical wellbeing of isolation. To counteract this, an increase in social emotional wellbeing programs is needed to provide activities to generate community interaction (within social distancing requirements and COVID-19 action plans). This effectively distracts participants from turning to alcohol and drugs, and will also serve to reconnect individuals into useful and healthy networks and relationships.

Additionally, dedicated counselling provides much needed support for those suffering from social isolation, and also loneliness.

It is essential to increase counselling capacity, in addition to increasing social emotional wellbeing programs and services to assist those in the community who are suffering from social isolation, or loneliness, or both. Pormpur Paanthu Aboriginal Corporation is a trust organisation at the forefront of program and service delivery in Pormpuraaw.

Loneliness and social isolation can play a devastating role in the wellbeing of individuals. It is important to note, that social isolation and loneliness are not the same, and they can sometimes occur in unison, or an individual may exhibit only one of the conditions.

27.6% of Australians felt lonely for two days every week¹, while 15% felt loneliness at any given time². It's important to acknowledge that these figures were measured prior to COVID-19, and it would be assumed, that these figures have increased due to the continued lockdown cycles of state borders and local government areas, and the overall feelings of detachment that many people feel in relation to their friendship networks and families.

¹ Australian Psychological Society, 2018

² Friends for Good Survey, 1,000 participants, 2020.

Remote locations, such as the Indigenous community of Pormpuraaw, introduces additional layers over and above rural or metropolitan locations, that contribute to a greater intensity and broadness of loneliness and social isolation within remote Indigenous communities.

These additional factors specific to remote Indigenous communities, include;

- Domestic and family violence that may cause one or more people from a household to 'go into hiding' or seek emergency accommodation.
- Low levels of basic education leading to a feeling of few alternative choices to implement personal change into the lives of an individual.
- Poverty leads to a feeling of entrapment and of limited choices.
- Homelessness.
- Unemployment.
- Feeling of a lack of purpose in a community.
- Literacy and numeracy difficulties – leading to an inability to fully understand services and programs available.
- Poor internet and digital connectivity in remote locations.
- Poor health, and the requirement to sometimes remain close to dialysis or other regular medical procedures – which may be far away from an individual's home community, family and support network.
- Abuse of alcohol and other drugs can lead to social isolation for individuals who no longer wish to 'drink grog and do drugs', but who have no support network of friends and family around them to help them rise above the status quo of abuse, loneliness, isolation and despair.

Although the above factors are present in every community, town and city, the extreme isolation of remote communities amplifies each of the above factors greatly, leading to anxiety caused by the reality of far fewer alternative choices of assistance, when compared to regional and metropolitan sufferers. Additional pathways and choices need to be created and communicated to these individuals in remote Indigenous communities.

Pormpur Paanthu Aboriginal Corporation (PPAC) provides many services that set out to address the issues of loneliness and social isolation, within the greater context of domestic and family violence, basic education, digital and connectivity literacy, health and wellbeing, and in the provision of men's and women's programs in support of creating networks and choices for individuals to potentially assist with loneliness and social isolation. Further PPAC programs including child care and after-school-care, provide parents with the ability to participate in programs whilst their child/ren are cared for. This goes a long way in assisting social isolation and loneliness.

PPAC is continually stretched in terms of resourcing, in providing additional services, assistance and programs where specific needs have been identified. It's essential to note that PPAC have the historic, cultural and organisational ability to provide holistic, additional services and programs, or to up-scale current services and programs, to directly or indirectly address loneliness and social isolation issues in Pormpuraaw, however, limited funding does not permit this to occur.

Pormpuraaw has an unemployment rate of 18%³, which in itself reinforces many of the factors of loneliness and social isolation applicable to remote Indigenous communities. This has a knock-on effect from generation to generation, and at some point, a breaker switch of programs and services needs to be implemented to break the cycles.

Loneliness and social isolation in remote Indigenous communities cannot be resolved in isolation, or through targeting single elements. Loneliness and social isolation are the result of a holistic collection of negative factors (as per above) that mesh together (in different ways for different people) causing differing influences that ultimately pushes people into loneliness and social isolation.

PPAC offers assistance to women who require emergency shelter in Pormpuraaw. This much needed facility provides a last line of defence for women subjected to emergency homelessness through domestic and family violence, or the abuse of alcohol and other drugs in the family environment. In these cases, the women requiring shelter are suffering extreme versions of social isolation through having to flee their home environment and network, in search of safety, and ultimately a connection to normality through reconnection.

The effects of digital exclusion leads to great levels of social isolation and loneliness. Not being able to reach family members on popular digital devices, or not having connectivity to the internet, means many people in remote Indigenous communities remain out of touch with friends and family who are located within the same community, or located in other communities across the state and country. This was further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns made face to face contact unreliable or dangerous, and those without digital connectivity, relied on telephone calls to stay in touch, or on the radio or television to keep them company. In remote Indigenous communities where digital connectivity is likely to be poor, and where choices for television and radio are limited (and online streaming is not possible due to poor internet access), the social isolation and loneliness is further compounded.

COVID-19 had a number of effects on social isolation and loneliness in Pormpuraaw. Many community residents chose to remain at home and not attend community events, or to simply minimise their time in the community. Others chose to retreat to their traditional lands away from the Pormpuraaw community. As such, the community became dispersed with communication of events, COVID updates, announcements, and services / programs continuation becoming difficult to maintain without the need to change parameters or extend program completion deadlines. There was a real fear within the community regarding COVID-19, and as such, the retraction away from the community brought very real conditions of loneliness and social isolation.

COVID-19 also raised other issues of trust in terms of the quality and truth of information that was being dispersed throughout the community. This relates to the virus itself, and information surrounding it, and also through information regarding vaccines. For those who were socially isolated, this caused great confusion and anxiety as they did not have a social network to discuss the information or to 'fact check' amongst each other.

³ Census 2016

Social isolation can occur across all age groups and genders in Pormpuraaw. This can escalate if a person identifies as LGBTIQ. It can also escalate with age, with loneliness becoming prevalent amongst older residents.


Pormpuraaw and PPAC work hard to provide community events, and also programs targeting specific demographics who fit into the social isolation and loneliness catchment. Although the programs do not specifically target social isolation and loneliness, the by-products of some of the programs, is for reconnection by socially isolated and lonely people with the community as a whole.

Programs and services that specifically target the lonely and socially isolated people in the community would be welcomed by PPAC. This would allow for those who have 'fallen through the cracks' and become isolated, to be encouraged back into the community mainstream, and to develop meaningful network and support connections. PPAC has the infrastructure in place, and it is a trusted organisation in the community from a cultural perspective.

Funding and a program that is co-designed with the community is required to greatly alleviate the dual issue of loneliness and social isolation in the community of Pormpuraaw.

Recommendations

1. Utilise existing organisations that currently have a network and framework in place to implement programs and services focused on loneliness and social isolation within the Indigenous community of Pormpuraaw.
2. Utilise a co-design framework with the community and elders to develop a culturally sensitive Pormpuraaw-specific program of services and activities to address social isolation and loneliness.
3. Pormpur Paanthu Aboriginal Corporation is best suited, and has the historic and cultural track record to implement any programs that addresses loneliness and social isolation in the Indigenous remote community of Pormpuraaw.



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