

Youth Action Submission to the Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales



Acknowledgement of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and understands that sovereignty was never ceded. Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people and we recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak body representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups. Our vision is for a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged and valued, and their rights are realised.

Principles that underpin our work:

- We give a particular focus to regional young people, First Nations young people, those doing it tough, those with disability, LGBTQIA+, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees.

- We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches and are informed by data and evidence.
- We are an ally to self-determination of First Nations communities and are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector to be a trusted partner and collaborator.

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into the Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people and the youth sector across New South Wales who we have heard from through our consultations.

In preparation for this submission, we heard from over 60 representatives from the youth sector about their views on the young people they work with experiences' of loneliness. In this consultation, the sector highlighted concerns they had for young people who had struggled with socialisation as a result of the COVID pandemic, the fact that many young people maintain relationships online, and the multitude of factors that can lead a young person to feel isolated and disconnected from the support they need.

Throughout our ongoing consultations in 2023 and 2024 we heard from young people about their views on mental health, social connectedness and access to support. We have drawn specifically from our consultations with young people on mental health and as well as our recent consultations on increasing social cohesion.

We are currently undertaking a poll to hear from a representative sample of 1000 young people about their experiences of loneliness and their recommendations to combat loneliness for themselves and their generation. We would welcome the opportunity to share the results of this poll with the committee when it is completed in the coming weeks.

The recommendations in this submission are drawn from the feedback from the sector and the experiences of young people themselves.

This submission responds to the following terms of reference:

- (b) the identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation
- (c) evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on people, including young people, the elderly, those living with a disability, those living in regional areas and the bereaved
- (g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation
- (i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community.

Key recommendations

1. At first instance, the Department of Communities and Justice in partnership with NSW Health, Local Councils, and non-government youth services invest in the establishment of 5 new youth hubs, with 2 new hubs in regional NSW and give further support to an additional 10 existing youth hubs, with 4 of those current hubs being in regional areas.
2. Triple funding for Targeted Early Intervention Programming (TEI) to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, youth development programs, disaster resilience and preparedness, and services aimed at increasing engagement, confidence and participation of young people.
3. Increase funding for specialist youth mental health support from acute and crisis services through to ongoing clinical support for mental health conditions so that services can meet demand. This should include a particular focus on access for socially excluded groups of young people (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people).
4. NSW Health and the Department of Communities and Justice coordinate to hear from young people about the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness. Facilitate the participation of young people in the design of any reforms emerging as a result of this inquiry.

Young people's experiences of loneliness

In our consultation with 60 representatives from the youth sector, we heard about the causes and impacts of loneliness on the young people that they support. The sector representatives emphasised the importance of connection for the young people they supported, the importance of young people being connected to support and services, as well as the prevalence of social media as a tool for young people to communicate with each other and maintain relationships.

Throughout our ongoing consultations on mental health, young people spoke to us about a lack of social connectedness in their lives which can leave them and their peers experiencing isolation and loneliness. Young people cited several different factors, such as the impacts of social media, a lack of access to support when needed, the ongoing impacts of the COVID pandemic and a lack of spaces where they can spend time together and develop friendships outside of school.

Impact of Social Media

Representatives from the youth sector highlighted the prevalence of young people maintaining relationships with each other online. They expressed concern that while social media is used by young people to connect with each other, it can also contribute to loneliness if young people are relating to each other less in person.

"There is an emerging trend of young people engaging with peers through using the sharing of Instagram Reels, TikTok's, meme's, etc. which is having an impact."

"Young people sit next to each other but engage and talk with other people online rather than with each other."

"Loneliness is an ongoing issue influenced by various factors, including relationships and the impact of social media. These platforms alter the nature of relationships and can have psychological effects, such as the differences between texting and being physically present with someone."

In 2023, researchers at the University of Sydney led research in partnership with Youth Action and released the report *Emerging Online Safety Issues: Co-creating social media education with young people* which brought together seven focus groups and an online survey of 1200 young people.

Amongst its findings, it found that young people broadly see social media as forming a major part of their lives and how they interact with their friends and peers. Many young people have spoken about the benefits of social media, such as the opportunity for connection, learning, finding community and keeping up with their social circles.

However, it also found that young people recollected feeling anxious about not being able to meet the standards and expectations of social media, and that there were numerous threats to safety facing young people online. These factors, alongside unwanted contact, cyberbullying and harassment can all contribute to young people feeling isolated or lonely.

Access to youth hubs

Representatives from the youth sector told us about how young people have shared with them that they do not have access to youth friendly spaces where they can safely spend time with each other.

"The feedback from my young people is that there isn't enough space for them to be, that's not just school or home. We've got a few services where we are that have drop-ins but they're not enough. They need to be able to go somewhere with a trusted adult around but just be."

In recent allied consultations on social cohesion, young people also spoke to us about the need for more youth friendly spaces where they can gather and spend time with peers outside of school and the home.

Many young people feel that there are few free and accessible options for them to engage with their peers outside of structured environments like school. The absence of these spaces can contribute to social isolation, especially for those who may not have strong connections within their immediate community or whose social lives are limited to online spaces.

Young people spoke about access to safe spaces as something that makes them feel included as part of their wider community.

"More places that young people of different communities feel more welcomed and connected to their community."

"Finding a space where you are welcome and not judged."

"Providing young people with a safe, supportive environment to support groups for various issues."

They stressed that these spaces needed to be purpose built and accommodating for all different types of young people, to ensure that everyone was truly included.

"Having places to go and hang out as young people because we realistically need access to spaces. As youth, especially as young people with mental health struggles, LGBTQIA+ young people and culturally diverse young people, we don't have spaces where we feel safe, welcomed and comfortable. Places [need to be accessible] for disabled young people as well."

"Having places to go and hang out as young people that are LGBTQIA+, disability friendly and accommodating of all cultures."

"Make accessibility the norm. All people matter no matter who they are and what is going on should be able to access the same services and places. Accessibility shouldn't be a question; it should be the norm."

Access to support

The youth sector also stressed the importance of young people having access to the support they need in response to challenges such as family violence, bullying, mental health and challenges maintaining engagement in education.

"I feel this is an ongoing issue attributed to other factors, like feeling isolated due to experiencing violence at home or bullying at school."

"Particularly for high school students post-Covid, there were a lot of issues going back into school environment due to a lack of social connectedness."

Young people in our ongoing consultations on mental health have long stressed their inability to access comprehensive, timely and appropriate mental health support. The impacts of this are particularly pronounced for young people who are isolated due to financial, geographic or systemic barriers. Young people from lower incomes, from regional areas or experiencing other forms of disadvantage can find it particularly difficult to access the appropriate support. Feelings of loneliness, disconnection and isolation are pronounced for these young people.

In our recent consultations on social cohesion, young people also spoke about access to support in the context of having more opportunities for young people to form networks with one another. This included access to peer support and facilitated spaces for young people to connect with each other to build friends and networks and support each other through challenges.

“Having an abundance of support groups which allows for a reduction in anxiety because you can seek help.”

“Being able to have access to a wide support network and services that fit your needs.”

“More places that young people of different communities feel more welcomed and connected to their community.”

The role of the youth sector, soft entry and relationship building

The Department of Communities and Justice and Youth Action commissioned Thrive International to research and write a report on the [Key tenets of programs that successfully engage young people](#) which identified the role of youth hubs in providing young people with soft entry to a broad range of youth programs and specialised supports was important to both the Youth Sector and young people themselves.

Isolated young people, young people in need of support and young people experiencing loneliness can benefit from engagement with youth services which provide a spectrum of programs and interventions including centre-based programs, casework, outreach and drop ins.

The report reinforced how important soft entry, or anchored service delivery was, as it provides young people a safe space, particularly for those young people who have had negative experience with adults and government agencies. The report reinforces the notion that relationship building is central to youth work and is one of the best ways to begin the journey to provide supports and services that are needed for a young person to thrive.

Youth services not only provide spaces for young people to connect with each other, but also provide an opportunity for young people to access the support they need and to build trusting relationships with youth workers.

Conclusion

Young people's experiences of loneliness and isolation are multifaceted. The young people we heard from highlighted the importance of access to support, responsible use of social media and the importance of safe and inclusive spaces such as youth hubs where they can engage with their peers and seek support when needed.