

THE LONELINESS OF THE SOCIALLY *connected*

Prof. Patrick Parkinson

Ours is perhaps the most socially connected generation in history. We live in an age when people can communicate almost instantaneously by email and text messages, talk with one another over video, and connect with a large number of others through social media.

We have the possibility of maintaining friendships not only in our locality, community groups and workplaces, but all over the world.

The endless possibilities for social connection, and the ease of maintaining relationships across distance, have many benefits. However, the paradox is that many Australians experience profound loneliness. A survey commissioned by Telstra of over 3000 people in September 2021 indicated that nearly one in four Australians say they don't have people they can regularly talk with or turn to, while 30% say they never, or rarely, feel close to people.

The lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic have no doubt exacerbated the problem, but they did not create it.

This fact sheet focuses upon young people under 25 in particular, for this is perhaps the most socially connected generation of all; but it is also the most lonely.

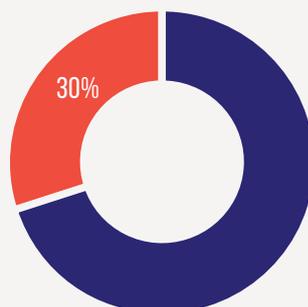
LONELINESS IN ADOLESCENCE

Prof. Jean Twenge and colleagues, in a large scale study of American teenagers over decades, found that there was a sharp drop in the proportion of teenagers who said that they got together regularly with friends, either at home or going out to parties, movies, shopping malls or dating. This decline was most marked from 2010 onwards. During the same period, internet and social media use had increased greatly.

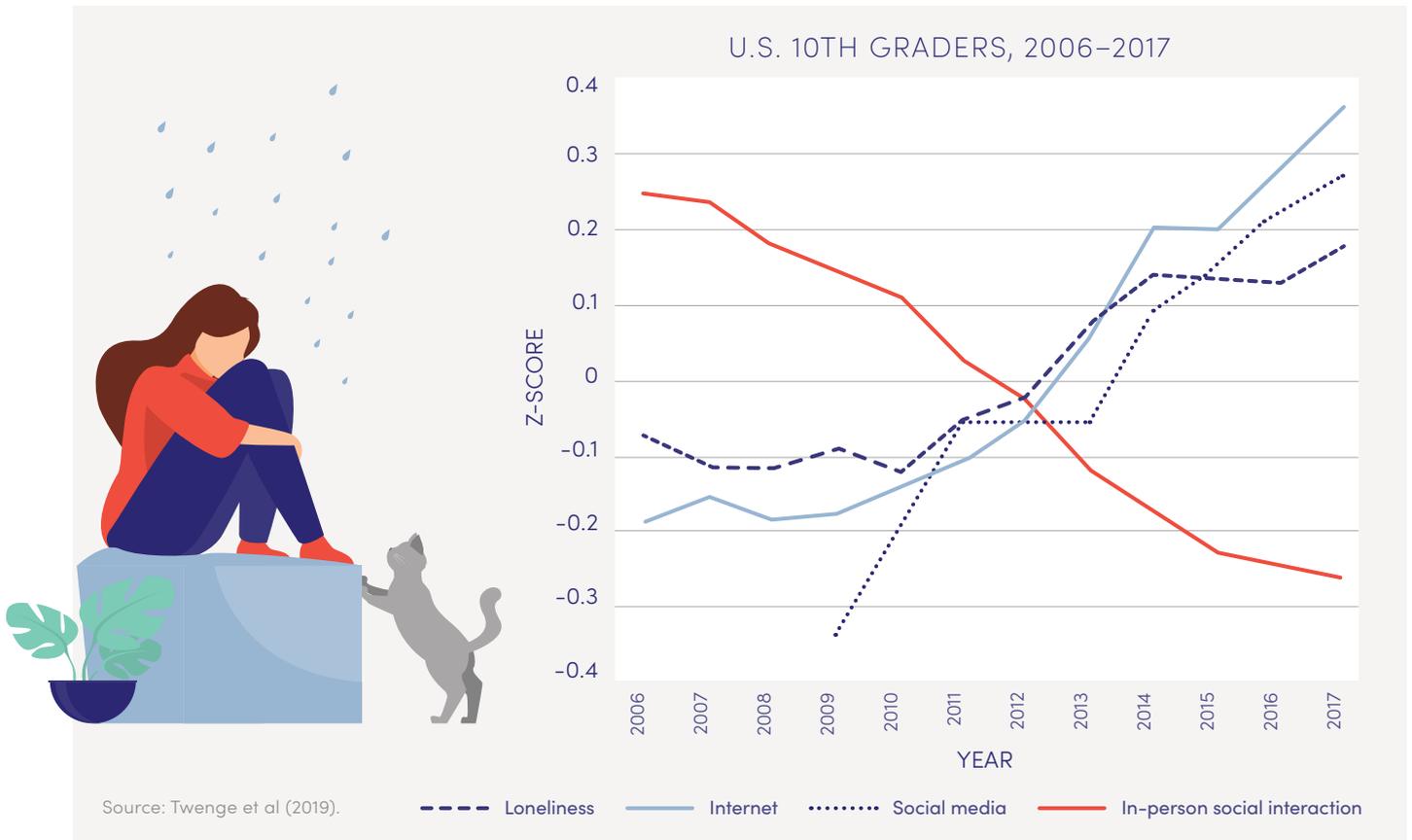
The decline in the proportion of teenagers who got together with friends corresponded with an increase in loneliness.



NEARLY ONE IN FOUR AUSTRALIANS SAY THEY DON'T HAVE PEOPLE THEY CAN REGULARLY TALK WITH OR TURN TO



30% SAY THEY CAN NEVER, OR RARELY, FEEL CLOSE TO PEOPLE



The researchers also found an increase in loneliness amongst year 12 students, with **50%** more 12th graders in 2017 than in 2012 tending to agree that they often felt lonely.

A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON

Data from a study of 37 countries in different parts of the world demonstrates that the increase in adolescent loneliness is a problem throughout the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The OECD organises an assessment of the academic performance of 15- and 16-year-olds, known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It includes measures of how lonely or connected students feel at school. Students are asked to provide a rating in response to six questions:

- "I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school,"
- "I make friends easily at school"

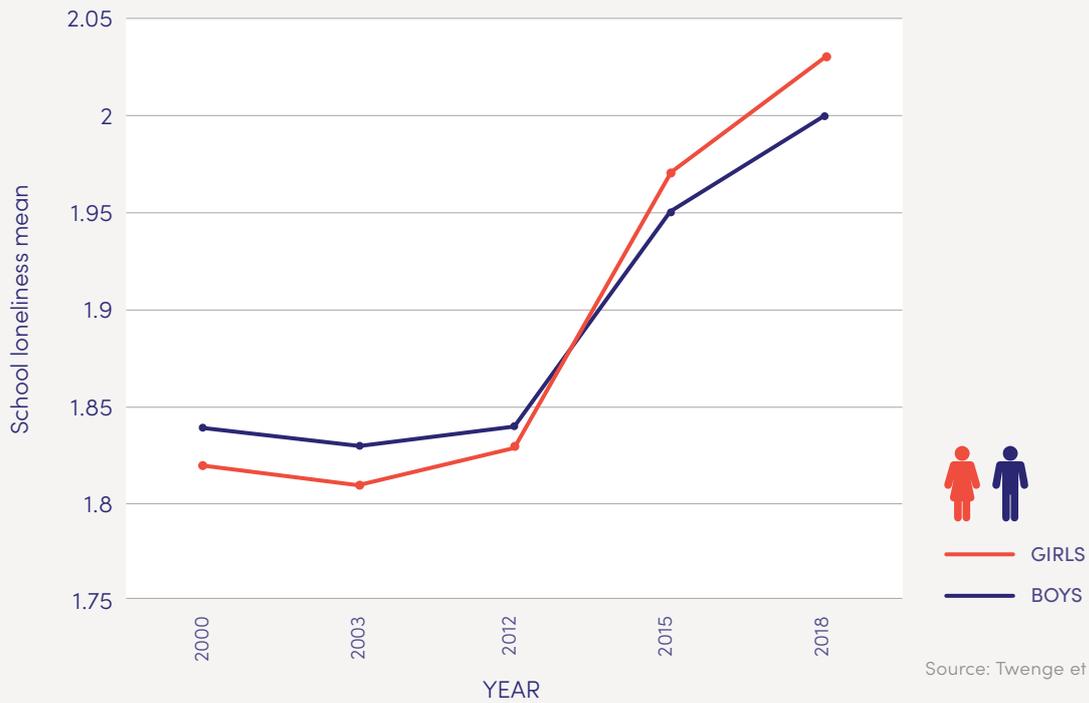
- "I feel like I belong at school"
- "I feel awkward and out of place in my school,"
- "Other students seem to like me" and
- "I feel lonely at school."

Students could answer on a four point scale: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree".

Jean Twenge, Jonathan Haidt and colleagues analysed the data across time. From the student responses to these questions, the researchers calculated a score from 1 to 4 with higher scores indicating more loneliness. In this sample of one million adolescents, loneliness at school increased between 2012 and 2018 in 36 out of 37 countries (the one exception being South Korea). The increase in loneliness was particularly high in girls.

LONELINESS AT SCHOOL INCREASED IN 36 OUT OF 37 COUNTRIES

INCREASES IN ADOLESCENT LONELINESS: 37 COUNTRIES 2000-2018



NEARLY TWICE AS MANY ADOLESCENTS REPORTED HIGH LEVELS OF LONELINESS IN 2018 COMPARED WITH 2012

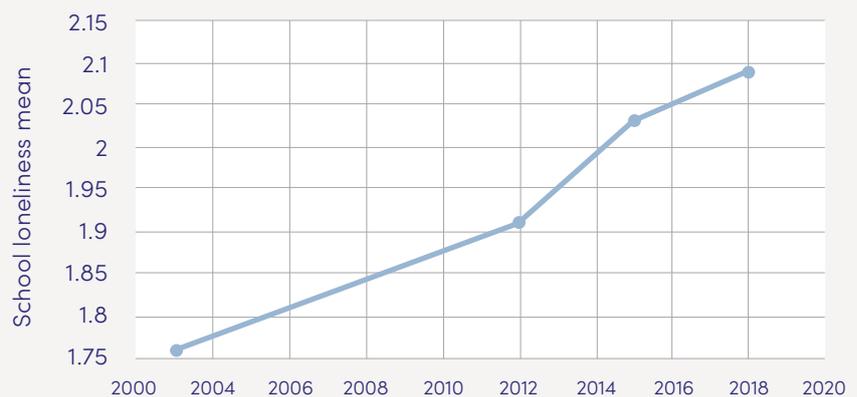
The sharp increase in loneliness between 2012 and 2018 coincides with the growth in ownership of smart phones and the popularity of social media apps. Paradoxically, social media can cause young people to feel isolated whether or not they have a lot of engagement with it. If they are not high social media users then they may feel cut off from communication with their peer group. Conversely, when they are on social media they may observe what their friends are

doing without them, and this may increase feelings of social isolation.

THE LONELINESS OF AUSTRALIAN ADOLESCENTS

Australia is no exception to these international trends. The Australian data indicates significant increases in loneliness at school over time. As was the case in the OECD as a whole, the rise in loneliness is particularly sharp from 2012 onwards.

ADOLESCENT LONELINESS: AUSTRALIA



There was also a substantial increase in Australia in students who were rated as having a high level of loneliness. In 2003, 10.42% of students reached that threshold. By 2018, the proportion had risen to 34.43%. Between 2012 and 2018 there was a 68% increase in students with a high level of loneliness.

THE LONELINESS OF YOUNG ADULTS

Australian research shows that loneliness may be an even greater problem for young adults. In a study in Victoria of nearly 1500 adolescents and young adults, Michelle Lim and colleagues reported that nearly 16% of 12-17 year olds and more than one in three (37.10%) young adults aged 18-25 indicated a problematic level of loneliness on a standardised measure. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of young adults reported that they felt alone either sometimes or often.

Young adult women, on average, had higher rates of loneliness than young adult men. The highest level of social anxiety was in the 18-20 age group.

Surveys conducted on behalf of Uniting Communities in South Australia during the course of 2020, found that the 18-24 age group was the loneliest age group of all. 38% of young men and 68% of young women reported feeling lonely some of the time, while 18% of young men and 24% of young women said they felt lonely often. The next most lonely group was those aged 50-54.

CAUSES OF LONELINESS IN A SOCIALLY CONNECTED AGE

Loneliness is a pervasive social problem with significant health impacts. It is a growing problem across all age groups. Why is it that we are so lonely when we are so well-connected in the digital age?

One answer is that social media has a displacement effect. While some people who are active on social media also have active social lives, for others, the time spent on computers displaces the time and incentive they have to meet in person. Close and meaningful friendships derive from shared experiences and not merely shared texts, photographs or videos.

Another answer lies in the decline of family formation. Rates of marriage have declined substantially over the last few decades, but informal cohabiting relationships have not proved to be nearly as durable an alternative. Loneliness may be a consequence either of being unable to find a long-term intimate partner, or experiencing a breakdown in a marriage or de facto relationship. The potential for loneliness in the young adult years is perhaps exacerbated by the trend for many people to postpone marriage and childrearing until they are into their early thirties.

The challenge is to think in new ways about how we can build community among the digitally connected but relationally isolated; those who say they have one close friend or less, those who say they have no-one to

2020

68%



OF YOUNG WOMEN
REPORTED FEELING LONELY
SOME OF THE TIME

38%



OF YOUNG MEN
REPORTED FEELING LONELY
SOME OF THE TIME

call upon for help; those who feel high levels of anxiety in social situations or who live in fear of how others will respond to their postings on social media. GPs and psychologists may be in the front line of responding to the problem of loneliness, but they cannot substitute for a caring community.

Loneliness may well prove to be the most serious pandemic of our time.

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SOURCES

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Publica
Strengthening family and community in a post-Christian society

