



Research Report

Reasons for Loneliness Among Young People in Australia

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Introduction

Most 18–24 year-olds are not lonely; however, for those who are the rate of loneliness is on the increase. Given this trend the UK, Japan, US, Sweden and Denmark are among the countries that have put loneliness on the national agenda and are seeking to develop public policy responses.

A key factor in understanding loneliness in young adults has to do with disengagement. This is not a problem unique to young people; but disengagement does make young people particularly susceptible to loneliness. The most significant factors driving disengagement are: screen time and digital life; foregoing possibilities for engagement in

community; little opportunity for forming connections in employment and study; changes in home life; and, of course, the impact of the COVID pandemic. One Australian study observed that within the 12–25 year-old age bracket, 18–21 year-olds were perceived as having the lowest quality of life, with females suffering the most.²⁶ Being a young adult is a peak time for loneliness;¹ but loneliness is not so much about being a certain age as about the combination of factors you are exposed to as a young adult.²

Defining Loneliness

In their foundational sourcebook from 1982, Perlman and Peplau define loneliness as relating to a deficit in desired social relations.³ Other reports have spoken of loneliness as “a feeling of distress people experience when their social relations are not the way they would like.”⁴ In his book, which looked at the experiences of social and emotional loneliness, Weiss was the first to describe loneliness as multidimensional.⁵ It can involve emotional loneliness, which is the lack of attachment to a significant person; or social loneliness, which is the lack of a larger support network.⁶ Loneliness may be short term or chronic. Though there are links between high levels of loneliness and social isolation,⁷ they are different.^{4,6} Loneliness is a multidimensional situation that extends beyond subjective and temporary feelings at particular points in time.

There can be suspicion regarding the reporting of loneliness and the subjectivity of such a measure; however, a number of the studies used here come up with a measure of loneliness that is able to rule out subjective and temporary experiences. Most studies into loneliness use extensive questioning and the UCLA scale, which has been tested and refined over decades of research. This measure is able to distinguish those who have a deeper and more sustained identification with being lonely from those who, infrequently, experience being alone. At least one source is able to show that children can understand the difference between being alone and loneliness.⁸ A small number of studies use a different measure or attempt to create a new measure.⁹ Though a study of Poles found that those who volunteer for psychological studies often do have a higher prevalence of

personality pathologies,¹⁰ it is still possible to sketch a picture of what is driving the so-called loneliness epidemic in the lives of young Australians.

Screen and Digital Life

Many young people have become reliant on a platform that was never made to be, and cannot be, a substitute for live, personal and physical relationships. For those who use it predominantly as a main avenue for 'socialising' there are links to poorer relational and mental health outcomes. Some studies show that screen time and social media are a cause of poor mental health outcomes and loneliness in young people.¹¹ Trying to socialise on screen platforms is void of many aspects that contribute to strong and healthy human relationships, such as body language and physical touch.

Screen time in the form of internet use, social media and smartphones all have traits that can be seen to aggravate loneliness in young adults. Males show more susceptibility to the negative impacts of general internet use and gaming, whereas females are more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media. With the increase and prevalence of screen time, there is less physical connection, which is a major factor in increased levels of loneliness as it can unintentionally foster disengagement. While some of these factors may contribute to loneliness, in some cases, digital connection can also alleviate some of the impacts of loneliness in the lives of young adults.

General Screen Time

A lot of life can now be lived on the screen, and the regular integration of internet usage into everyday life is often taken for granted. In Australia, only one-third of children have the recommended screen time of less than 2 hours a day. Most have a lot more.¹² A study conducted with 10 year-olds shows an increase in screen time with age.¹³ By the time people get to young adulthood the amount of screen time can equate to a full-time job.¹¹

Activities that have often involved the presence of other people—relationships, shopping, organising travel and entertainment—can now be conducted in physical isolation. Added

to this is the ever-increasing opportunity to upskill through online means—again, in isolation from others. 75% of young Australians have undertaken some form of informal online training. Most have undertaken this form of isolated learning through work software, social media or an online learning platform.¹⁴ Not only is learning done with the screen, but there is a shift in preference towards screen-based forms of communication. In Australia, a large portion of people are more comfortable texting than with a phonecall;¹⁵ and 50% of young people find it easier to connect online than in person.¹⁴ As one academic surmises: more screen time, less happy.¹¹ Given screen time means the opportunity cost of engaging with a person, it is more than realistic to consider it a major factor in contributing to the loneliness of young Australians.

Internet Use and Gaming

The increased level of comfort and prevalence of screen time in young Australians' lives has led to some concerns for their wellbeing. There is shown to be a link between loneliness and social internet use for all ages¹⁶ with one academic claiming internet time as the strongest predictor of anxiety for teens worldwide.¹⁷ One study indicated that for men, internet time use, ie. chat-rooms and browsing, was associated with lower levels of social development. Prolific internet time led to less mature identities and higher social anxiety.¹⁸ With the advent of virtual experience, men are retreating from the tangibles of everyday life such as employment, education and relationships.¹⁹ A small-scale study in Israel on university-age students indicated a moderate and positive link between internet use and social anxiety.²⁰ Higher social anxiety and the decision to withdraw are both forms of disengagement which can work to cultivate feelings of loneliness.

Gaming can also have effects that kindle loneliness in young adults. Problematic online gaming is a maladaptive coping strategy and has links to other psychological disorders such as depression and loneliness, in addition to being associated with social anxiety.²¹ Notably, the factors of problematic online gaming and social anxiety may somewhat mutually reinforce each other. On the other hand, not all people who regularly and intensively game are negatively impacted. Time spent on the internet and gaming is not

the leading issue, it is that such periods of screen time can lead to a number of avenues for human disengagement—and it is this that plays on loneliness in the lives of young adults.

Some claim internet use can be neutral or even positive,²² with one study demonstrating digital intervention as having the potential to reduce social anxiety in males.²³ Another study from Taiwan, showed that for some people social anxiety was lower in internet interactions compared to face-to-face interactions.²⁴ The impacts of internet use can come down to intentionality. A report that looks at the benefits of gaming, especially for boys and men, shows gaming provides a space for distraction, connection and belonging with others.²⁵

Social Media

71% of Gen Z prefer social media as a platform of connection.¹⁵ This preference is ironic given the link social media has to contributing to loneliness. Young people seem only too aware of some of the negative implications of social media, with a number reporting it as a major contributor to mental health problems.²⁶ 70% of young adults say it is between somewhat and completely responsible for mental health issues.²⁷ A number of young people also admit their own social media addiction.²⁸

Not only are young people aware of the dangers of social media for mental health, but there is plenty in the scholarly field to support these concerns. One writer, on the topic of adolescents, blames social media for disrupting the wellbeing of adolescents²⁹ and points to strong links between social media usage amount and conditions such as depression.³⁰ Another study found a causal link to better wellbeing and a reduction in social media use after studying participants for a period of three weeks.³¹ This same study showed a decrease in the fear of missing out and anxiety. This was thought to be due to a greater level of self-awareness, which was stimulated by decreased social media use. Another study of 18–22 year-olds demonstrated higher levels of anxiety in those who had higher levels of social media use.³² The virtual approval seeking and the famine of physical

human interaction combine to make it a contributing factor to loneliness in young Australians, especially for females who spend more time on social media.³⁰ Even with all the above, about the negative impacts of social media, it is not *always* a hindrance to relationships.

Like with internet use, social media is not to blame for all the poor outcomes and impacts of loneliness on young adults. Even if it constantly exposes adolescents to potentially negative outcomes there are some positives to be gained from its use.³³ A US study on a broad range of adults challenged the view that more social media accounts are linked to worse mental health. Instead, this paper argues, that it is those who already have low levels of wellbeing or happiness who seek out more accounts.³⁴ Correlation here does not imply causation. One all-ages study reported that those who say they are lonely are not more likely than their peers to report using social media.³⁵ Another study demonstrated the use of Facebook as a helpful extension of current friendships.³⁶ There are instances where forms of social media can work to create a platform for personal engagement with others. Facebook can be positive for civic engagement,¹⁴ as it can foster a felt sense of belonging to a particular community. The blame does not solely lie on social media. It is part of one's lifecycle to be lonely at this age.³⁷ The type of usage seems to be an important factor as to whether social media contributes to poor outcomes or not.

Smart Phones

The rise in loneliness among adolescents in the US since 2012 correlates to the increase in smartphone usage in this cohort,³⁸ according to US psychologist Jean Twenge. On a worldwide scale, Twenge attributes the increase in loneliness between 2012 and 2018 to intensified use of the smartphone and the internet. Though the smartphone has been found to be a useful device, the point of becoming overly dependent on the device becomes a point of becoming overly-detached from others. One paper from British Columbia demonstrated, through a range of studies, the variety of negative impacts a smartphone can have. In terms of parent-child relations—fracturing attention; for university-age students—detrimental to social interactions with strangers and lowering a

person's mood in waiting situations; using a phone for directions—does provide better convenience, yet at a cost to social exchanges.³⁹ As many young people spend a lot of time on these devices they are not necessarily managing the downsides of human withdrawal that come with the level of reliance on a smartphone. In addition, the use of smart phones has been demonstrated to alter a user's concept of time and space, impacting levels of present social attachment.⁴⁰ It is not the device itself that is to blame; it is its inherent usefulness that can so easily foster personal disengagement.⁴¹

Young Adults' Environment

Another factor contributing to loneliness in young adults in Australia is the combination of environmental and life changes at this particular age. Their environment is one that tends towards individualism and fewer social connections; alongside this is the isolation that can be experienced in the lives of those with physical and mental health diagnoses. By examining some of these changes young people are subject to at this time of their lives it will be seen how these factors are contributing to loneliness.

Life Stage

Though loneliness and social isolation are different, the two impact each other, especially at key junctions in life. Loneliness is still linked to social isolation²⁸ and social isolation risk.¹ Changes to life structures can increase social isolation.¹ Moving from adolescence to young adulthood is a stage where friends are not as readily accessible as they once were. One moves from structured school classes with many peers five days a week to a situation where seeing peers may be quite infrequent. A study has shown that not all people adapt well to coming out of the school environment and this sudden drop in social interaction.¹**Error! Bookmark not defined.** As access to and depth of relationships with those around us matter, it is important to preserve regular relationships into adulthood. One study sees the solution to assisting this transition to adulthood as the strengthening of social institutions.⁴²

Individualistic Culture

The decline in social groups is a factor linked to higher levels of reported loneliness in young adults. The noted decline in civic engagement in the US⁴³ is not unique. Onward UK, in one study, discusses the declining social fabric and dismantling of community.⁴⁴ They say the reason for a feeling of alienation in young people is due to the collapse in community and though young people might be socially conscious, they are less socially attached than previous generations.⁴⁴ There is a huge disconnect among young people from church and religion in a formal way.¹¹ As people progress from childhood to adolescence church attendance decreases markedly,⁴⁵ with the decline being more noticeable in recent decades. Another report, regarding sports participation, augments the case for participation in social groups to counteract loneliness. Participation in social groups "enhance a sense of community and assist people in developing social relationships and a sense of belonging."⁴⁶ Young people lay the blame on the difficulty of getting involved in communal activities. 87% of young people in Australia perceive barriers to entry for organised activities they would like to be involved in.¹⁴ Some of these barriers are that such activities are considered as being time-consuming, expensive and difficult to access. Regardless of the validity of these perceived barriers, a withdrawal or absence of regular social interaction puts one in more of a position of being vulnerable to loneliness.

Being social is shown to promote the feeling of belonging, and function as an antidote to loneliness. A sense of belonging has been shown to be beneficial to wellbeing.¹⁴ Having a better or stronger attachment style to others was linked to a lower level of loneliness for students in Turkey.⁴⁷ In his studies of western culture, Humphrey makes two points which are quite relevant to this paper: embracing western individualistic values has negative implications for well-being;⁴⁸ and the western individualistic culture harms young people's mental health.⁴⁹ If young Australians focus more on themselves and are not as social, it is no surprise that a reasonable portion report they are lonely. Finnish studies link loneliness to a lack of meaningful relationships.^{50,51} These findings do not

impact all groups equally. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders often have lower rates for those who perceive poor or very poor mental health outcomes in themselves.¹⁴ This is likely due to their more communal culture. It is true that young people are spending less time going out to do activities with others,¹¹ and as they do so, a reduced sense of belonging becomes apparent.

Physical and Mental Diagnosis

Having a physical or mental diagnosis has been seen to increase the chance of loneliness.⁴⁴ Almost 30% of those with a disability experience loneliness.⁵⁴ Conditions such as depression make one more likely to experience loneliness.²⁸ Before making a link between loneliness and its relation to physical and mental disability it is helpful to get an idea of how many young Australians are impacted. 4% of children were diagnosed with a severe disability in 2009¹² and 9% of children were diagnosed with mental health issues, including behavioural and anxiety-related disorders.¹² In terms of more specific diagnoses, almost 3% of 10–14 year-olds had an autism diagnosis in 2015—roughly the same percent of young adults today.⁵² Alongside all of this there has been an increase in psychological distress in 15–19 year-olds since 2012, especially among females.⁵³ Though the numbers may seem small, these are still people who make up a portion of young Australians who are lonely.

When young adults are in this situation there is much reliance on government support and unstable work, both of which can aggravate loneliness. “In 2020, 20% of young people aged 16 to 24 received income support payments. Of these...10% received disability-related payments.”¹⁴ Most 16–24 year-old disability support pension recipients were for intellectual or learning disabilities, followed by psychological or psychiatric disorders.⁵⁴ Lower incomes correlate to higher levels of loneliness.⁶⁵ In 2015, for those aged 16 and over with autism, the main source of income was the disability support pension.⁵² Gig work can be unstable and the situation of unstable work can foster a sense of loneliness. Still, a large portion of those with disabilities are turning to this form of income. “84% of young people with long-term illnesses and 85% of those with a physical disability earned

income from gig work in the previous month, compared with 56% of those without a disability.¹⁴ Having any form of disability can impact one's ability to become part of a community and feel a sense of belonging. Having a low or unstable income, which seems to be the situation for a number of these young Australians, can further perpetuate loneliness.

Relationships, Work and Study

Friends, work and place of education are commonly ranked as important places for young people to feel a sense of belonging.¹⁴ This section will be looking at the impacts of intimate relationships, work and study on loneliness, and seeing that being in close relationships with others and having structured and consistent work and study environments can help to abate loneliness in young adults.

Intimate Relationships

Loneliness is higher for those not in a romantic relationship.⁴⁷ Those who are single, or not in a committed relationship, are more likely to feel lonely than those who are married.⁵⁵ With the fall in marriage rates, and the number of young adults living with a partner, around half of young Australians now identify as being single.⁵⁶ The fall in marriage rates also relates to a delay in long-term relationships for this age group. Strong family relationships can alleviate some of the feelings of loneliness, but not completely.⁵⁵ Given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to be in a relationship¹⁴ they are a group who are less likely to feel the loneliness that is apparent in the lives of many young Australians.

In this digital age, access to sex and other acts of physical intimacy is a choice overload. This kind of choice overload can lead to people delaying the decision to settle with a person long-term or not making a decision at all. Online forums and chats, live online erotic displays and dating applications provide a plethora of options to fulfil temporary desires without a permanent relationship. Dating applications can promote aspects of intimate relationships through increases in sexual activity, partners and experimentation⁵⁷

but this does not translate to more young people entering into long-term committed relationships. This is not the only dilemma presented by the range of dating applications. Swipe-based applications can promote higher levels of depression, anxiety and distress.⁵⁸ Some studies back the benefits of online dating applications with one study indicating that applications like Tinder can be a beneficial addition to intimate relationships with no negative impact on loneliness.⁵⁹ In addition to the person-to-person content, with the rise of screen time and internet use, pornography is a lot more accessible and this has implications for loneliness. In one study, it was shown that the use of pornography is associated with worse mental health outcomes.⁶⁰ Worse mental health outcomes, as seen above, can lead to higher levels of loneliness. In the case of intimate relationships, when the many options presented hinder the formation of an established and consistent connection with another person, loneliness can become an issue.

Work and Study

Young people are more likely to be in casual or part-time roles with less job security. This can lead to loneliness through reduced or minimal contact with others. Over the past decade, the underemployment rate in the 20–24 age group has increased.⁶¹ This reflects the capacity for young people to be at a workplace with a more secure income and around other people, but not necessarily be able to achieve that goal. One corrective measure young people have employed is increasing their involvement in gig work. “56% of young Australians reported earning income from gig work in the past year.”¹⁴ The uncertainties that gig work introduces^{62,63} can contribute to loneliness. Though it provides a source of income, it is less likely that people will make long-term connections or develop a sense of belonging given the inconstancy or low hours associated with such roles. Higher anxiety and instability are associated with gig economy work;⁶⁴ and this can have negative implications for mental health. Gig work can mean a lower and more unstable income. It has been reported that poorly met financial needs are associated with higher levels of loneliness;²⁸ and there is a negative correlation between loneliness and income.⁶⁵ Less stability in the type of work young Australians undertake can lead to higher levels of

loneliness due to the lack of regular and consistent work communities to belong to, in addition to the mental stresses of low or insecure income.

Study arrangements and alternative sources of income also have an impact to the lives of young Australians and their loneliness. Many forms of education today can be conducted without the need to interact with others—with only one in five post-secondary students exclusively face-to-face in 2022 (much of this can be contributed to the COVID pandemic).¹⁴ The ability to form a sense of physical community comes from regularly attending campus and interacting with other students face-to-face. To account for the isolation off-campus students may feel, one Australian university started a program for off-campus students. The result was a greater reported sense of belonging.⁶⁶ Learning in isolation, which is becoming increasingly common, removes the sense of belonging to a community. Around 12% of 18-24 year-olds were neither in work or study in the 2021 census.¹⁴ This too represents a noticeable segment who are at high risk of disengagement due to lower levels of regulated person-to-person contact. In addition to the loneliness that can come from the chosen mode of study, working less while studying, or neither undertaking work nor study, often means having a lower than average income. "In 2020, 20% of young people aged 16 to 24 received income support payments. Of these, 51% received unemployment payments, 31% received student payments."¹⁴ This is a sizeable segment who are susceptible to the impacts of low income on loneliness. The style of study and low income can be compounding factors in their contribution to loneliness.

Home Life

The decision to stay at home can be complex,⁶⁷ with financial considerations being one of the major factors in leaving home at a later age.⁶⁸ 49% of young Australians live in their family home,¹⁴ with implications for young adult loneliness. Being with family is a great way to feel a sense of belonging.¹⁴ One study found that more parental involvement in 18–24 year-olds lives is mutually beneficial,⁶⁹ and this can be significantly fostered when one is living with family. It is good that both mothers and fathers are spending more time with their children than in 1965 across a range of countries, and more educated parents

are spending more time caring for their children.⁷⁰ Living at home provides the opportunity to have regular contact with other people which can alleviate feelings of loneliness; however, this would still depend on family relations and how these relationships impact other aspects of young adults' lives.

When family structure changes, young adults can become more susceptible to the risk of loneliness. One study from Turkey found adolescents with divorced parents had higher levels of loneliness,⁷¹ and a study from the Netherlands found that, among other factors, parental divorce had a significant association with loneliness in 12–18 year-olds.⁷² The absence of parents is linked to a greater level of loneliness in 13–18 year-olds.⁷³ In addition, there are secondary effects of the family structure on loneliness. Family and peer relationships in earlier years have the most effect on romantic relationships in later years.⁷⁴ As seen above, romantic relationships have strong implications for whether someone is lonely or not. Being at home can provide the space to have a sense of belonging with one's own family, but when this structure changes drastically, the positive effects of living at home can be overshadowed.

The COVID Pandemic

Loneliness is worse since the COVID pandemic.⁷⁵ The Telstra report noted that during this period over 25% of people experienced loneliness for the first time.¹⁵ The impacts of the COVID pandemic on loneliness in the lives of young Australians were an exacerbation of what had already been happening—a trend of less physical connection to others. There were rapid changes in work arrangements. Young people suffered most from job losses in the pandemic⁷⁶ as they were often employed in the industries that suffered the largest declines, such as food, retail and travel.⁷⁷ More broadly, a high portion of young people were involved in casual employment which was seen to suffer heavy staff cuts. It was seen above that less stable work and lower incomes have been seen to lead to higher levels of loneliness in young people, and this was the situation for many young people in the case of the pandemic. Study arrangements also shifted. Physical attendance at universities dropped. 20 years-olds who attended campus went from 97% down to 37% between

2019 and 2021¹⁴—a massive reduction in face-to-face interaction. Combined with all of this there was a great push towards more screen time in the day-to-day. Time in front of screens skyrocketed with the speedy uptake of meetings and social events via Zoom, Teams and other digital platforms. Face-to-face time with others also dropped rapidly with the introduction of numerous government restrictions. Moreover, there were reports of heightened psychological distress⁵³ as part of the pandemic, which, as seen above, can increase susceptibility to loneliness. What happened during the COVID pandemic was an amplification of factors that were already instigating loneliness in the lives of young Australians.

Conclusion

The following report is not an exhaustive summary of why young people in Australia are lonely. Rather, it points to the main factors that have been uncovered in the perusal of a vast number of studies from around the world and from a variety of academic disciplines. The increase in loneliness among young adults in Australia is not *because* of their age, but because of the combination of factors in their lives that make them more susceptible to loneliness than other age groups. The overarching factor in why a young person may be lonely relates to whether they feel like they have a sense of belonging to any particular type of community.

Screens, social media and electronic devices are often blamed for this loneliness epidemic. Loneliness is linked, but not always caused, by these factors and the impacts are seen to differ depending on a person's situation and usage intent. Screen time can result in people physically disassociating from others; using the internet habitually can feed into a sense of escapism and disconnection; being infatuated with social media can leave relationships shallow; and repeatedly defaulting to a smartphone for assistance can foster personal disengagement. Though a person uses all or a majority of the above, it does not guarantee that they will be at increased risk of loneliness. In the case of young Australians, the lack of preparation for using this machinery carefully has made them more susceptible to the negative effects of constant use and reliance.

The environment that young Australians exist in also contributes to loneliness. The inherent life changes at this age and stage of life can make it more difficult to be part of a community of belonging and stay in it. Being part of a social group is on the decline as is belonging to physical communities. In addition, hindrance to social relations can happen through having a physical or mental disability, the diagnoses of which are on the rise. Relationships, study and work are also influential. Those in intimate relationships or with strong family connections are less likely to be lonely, and the portion of young people in this situation is on the decline. Tertiary structures have changed to be less communal. The type of work young people are engaged in can be more inconsistent and present an isolating financial strain. In each of these ways, young people are experiencing less opportunity for consistent personal interaction and attachment to others. Home life also matters. Staying at home can be beneficial for experiencing belonging, yet fractures in family structure, even at an early stage in a child's life, are seen to impact emotional stability in later years. The relationships in one's life and the regular physical presence of others have a big impact on feeling a sense of belonging.

In a number of ways the COVID pandemic augmented the factors discussed above, which contributed to increased levels of loneliness in young Australians. To return to the title of this report; a combination of circumstances is driving the increase in loneliness in young adults. These factors are not unique to this age group; it is in this age group that we are seeing the strongest culmination of these factors.

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