

1 November 2024

Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council
Parliament House, Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

To the Standing Committee on Social Issues,

RE: Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We are the national peak body for suicide prevention, with over 350 members representing more than 140,000 workers, staff, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service provider organisations both large and small, as well as practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

Suicide Prevention Australia is concerned about the impacts of loneliness on the risk of suicide in NSW. Although suicide is a complex human behaviour with many risk factors, research demonstrates clear linkages between experiences of loneliness and suicide.^{1,2,3} Suicide Prevention Australia runs a quarterly survey measuring community distress, this Community Tracker data consistently indicates that experiencing social isolation and loneliness is a significant cause of elevated distress in the Australian community.⁴ In addition, Suicide Prevention Australia's 2024 State of the Nation survey identified social isolation and loneliness as one of the top-rated risks to suicide rates over the next 12 months.⁵

Loneliness is a significant issue in NSW with nearly one half of resident's reporting experiencing loneliness.⁶ While loneliness impacts people of all ages, it is a key concern for particular cohorts such as young people, men and older adults. A study undertaken in Australia has identified that nearly 60% of young Australians are worried about loneliness, with 80% of those reporting that loneliness is impacting their mental health and wellbeing.⁷ Research on men's health found that men who lacked close friends or relatives were two times more likely to experience suicidal

¹ McClelland, H., Evans, J. J., Nowland, R., Ferguson, E., & O'Connor, R. C. (2020). Loneliness as a predictor of suicidal ideation and behaviour: a systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies. *Journal of affective disorders*, 274, 880–896. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.05.004>

² Gvion, Y., & Levi-Belz, Y. (2018). Serious Suicide Attempts: Systematic Review of Psychological Risk Factors. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 56. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2018.00056>

³ Gomboc, V., Krohne, N., Lavrič, M. et al. (2022) Emotional and Social Loneliness as Predictors of Suicidal Ideation in Different Age Groups. *Community Ment Health J* 58, 311–320 (2022).

⁴ Suicide Prevention Australia. (2024). The suicide prevention Australia community tracker: September 2024. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SEP24-The-Suicide-Prevention-Australia-Community-Tracker-3.pdf>

⁵ Suicide Prevention Australia. (2024). State of the nation report: August 2024. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SPA-State-of-the-Nation-Report-AUG24-Web.pdf>

⁶ NSW Mental Health Commission. (2023). Loneliness in focus report. <https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Loneliness%20in%20Focus%20Report.pdf>

⁷ ReachOut. (2022). Craving Connection: The Impact of Loneliness on Young People. Retrieved from ReachOut Report



ideation in the past 12 months.⁸ In addition, international research has shown that loneliness can be a risk factor for suicide in older adults.^{9,10}

For further background on the international and Australian evidence which shows the relationship between social isolation, loneliness and suicide, we refer the Committee to pages 25-27 of a paper on the socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide. The paper is attached to the submission and can be downloaded here:

[Socio-economic and Environmental Determinants of Suicide Background Paper](#)

Given the well-established link between loneliness and suicide we would like to provide input relating to the following terms of reference for this inquiry:

- (i) Steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community
- (j) Steps that community, technology/social media companies, organisations, and individuals can take to reduce impact of loneliness on individuals and the community.

NSW Government action to address loneliness

An important activity the NSW Government can undertake is funding evidence-based “first aid” suicide prevention training for key members of the community who commonly encounter people at risk of suicide, such as those experiencing loneliness and isolation. It is a critical moment when a person discloses their distress or suicidal thoughts for the first time, so it is vital to build suicide prevention skills and knowledge throughout the community.

For suicide prevention to be effective, key people in the community should be actively engaged. This can include clinicians, frontline service workers and teachers, along with members of the broader community who often provide informal support, such as pharmacists or barbers. With appropriate evidence-based suicide prevention training, these connectors within communities can provide vital assistance to help reduce their risk of suicide. One mechanism for enhancing community skills is Suicide Prevention Australia’s Learnlinc Platform. This learning platform connects participants with multiple different training providers plus free online resources, allowing users to choose the training that best suits their needs from a range of evidence-based options. Further support such as subsidising training programs could significantly improve the ability of communities to connect and address the risk of suicide.

Recommendation: Make a range of evidence-based “first aid” suicide prevention training more available to key members of the community who commonly encounter people at risk by funding free training accessed through a readily accessible online learning platform.

Whilst there is research and data available that demonstrates the impact of loneliness on suicide risk, research is needed to better identify effective strategies and services to address loneliness and prevent suicide. The Commonwealth Government funds suicide prevention research at a national level through the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund (Research Fund). Suicide Prevention Australia manages the Research Fund on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. Yet, as of 30 June 2025, the Commonwealth Department of Health's funding for this crucial initiative will

⁸ Ten to Men: Australian Longitudinal Study on Male Health. (2023). Research findings: <https://tentomen.org.au/research-findings>

⁹ De Leo, D. (2022). Late-life suicide in an aging world. *Nature Aging* 2, 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43587-021-00160-1>

¹⁰ Niu, L., Jia, C., Ma, Z., Wang, G., Sun, B., Zhang, D., & Zhou, L. (2020). Loneliness, hopelessness and suicide in later life: a case control psychological autopsy study in rural China. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, 29, e119. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796020000335>

conclude. An additional \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund will enable Suicide Prevention Australia to deliver an enhanced research program over four years. This should include allocating a portion of this funding for research that identifies effective strategies and services to reduce loneliness and prevent suicide.

Recommendation: Lobby the Commonwealth Government to invest \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund. Part of this funding should be used to identify effective strategies and services to reduce loneliness and prevent suicide.

Community-based actions to address social isolation and loneliness

Community-based programs and interventions should be co-designed with priority populations such as young people, be appropriately targeted to age demographics given protective factors can differ among age groups. Lived experience expertise should be included in all levels of community-based programs (i.e. design, delivery, and evaluation).

Alternative and innovative approaches to addressing loneliness are emerging overseas, including 'social prescribing', which involves the process of healthcare providers referring people in the community to existing community-based non-clinical supports.¹¹ These supports may include social support services, volunteering opportunities, arts activities, community gardens, and community groups.

Recommendation: Create targeted innovative community-based strategies to engage youth, men, older people, and other at-risk demographics in social connections.

Summary of recommendations

1. Make a range of evidence-based "first aid" suicide prevention training more available to key members of the community who commonly encounter people at risk by funding free training accessed through a readily accessible online learning platform.
2. Lobby the Commonwealth Government to invest \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund. Part of this funding should be used to identify effective strategies and services to address loneliness and prevent suicide.
3. Create targeted innovative community-based strategies to engage youth, men, older people, and other at-risk demographics in social connections.

We urge the Committee to ensure that the critical issue of preventing suicide is included in considerations on addressing loneliness. If the Committee requires any further information please contact Steph Trainor, stephaniet@suicidepreventionaust.org

Yours sincerely,



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¹¹ Torjesen, I. (2016). Social prescribing could help alleviate pressure on GPs, *BMJ*, 352