

# Loneliness by Numbers: A South Australian Snapshot

December 2024



# What is loneliness?

There is no one universal experience of loneliness and, consequently, there is not one universal definition of loneliness. For the purposes of this report, we refer to **Ending Loneliness Together's** definition of Loneliness:

Loneliness is a distressing feeling we get when we feel disconnected from other people, and desire more (or more satisfying) social relationships.

Experiencing loneliness often relies on the meaningfulness or quality of interactions, rather than just the quantity of interactions, connections or friendships. Chronic loneliness is

defined as a long-term and regular experience of loneliness as opposed to episodic loneliness, which can be the temporary, occasional feeling of loneliness. While feeling episodic loneliness is quite natural, it can become problematic when experienced consistently for a longer period.

Research shows that chronic loneliness can lead to significant physical and mental health consequences. **Studies** have compared chronic loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and can have the same health impacts as obesity. Chronic loneliness can lead to an **increased risk** of coronary heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.

## Why are people lonely?

**Evidence** currently indicates that the causes of loneliness are complex and usually not a result of one signal factor or event but often the **combination** of personal as well as community and country-wide factors. The common misconception is that loneliness is a result of a personal deficit or failure on the part of the individual when in fact it is often a result of factors outside our control. There are a range of **factors and circumstances** that contribute to loneliness, **these include:**

### Individual

Factors can range from changed habits, sense of self, health (including physical and mental health), income (financial instability makes it hard to rationalise spending money on social and non-urgent purchases), major life event/changes (such as moving home, becoming a parent, family breakdowns), energy, lack of confidence (usually due to a life event), as well as emotions/perceptions.

### Connections

Friends, acquaintances, family, colleagues, community wide connections (e.g. neighbours). Often about the quality rather than the quantity of these connections.

### Community

Factors include fewer social activities to attend (opportunities for connection), disappearance /lack of social spaces (community centres, areas for people to congregate, infrastructure) difficulty accessing support services, inadequate transport infrastructure, neighbourhood safety and not feeling a part of the community.

### Society

Social and cultural norms (such as the perceived inappropriateness of talking with strangers), our increasingly individualistic society, work/life balance (e.g. shift work, long hours/overtime), stigma of loneliness (including the notion that experiencing loneliness isn't a large enough issue), communities becoming more 'closed off,' insular communities, the rise of the digital age, political landscape, financial hardships (including 'benefits culture' harmful narratives about whether someone is 'deserving of support' leads to worry of judgement).

# SA population



## Loneliness

### Young adults

**87%**

of people (aged 18-24) report experiencing loneliness sometimes or often.

**86%**

of people (aged 25-29) report experiencing loneliness sometimes or often.

### Other

**20%**

of people aged 35-39 report experiencing loneliness 'often' which is the highest since tracking began.

### Middle years

**29%**

of people (aged 45-49) report experiencing loneliness 'often' which is the highest since we began tracking in 2020.

**23%**

of people (aged 55-59) report experiencing loneliness 'often' and 28 per cent 'often' lack companionship.

### Income

Amongst a cost-of-living crisis it is concerning that there are higher rates of loneliness for those with a lower income. **22 percent of people with an income less than \$40,000 'often' feel lonely compared to 8 percent of people with an income over \$80,000.**

**26 per cent of people with an income less than \$40,000 felt isolated 'often' compared to 9 percent of people with an income over \$80,000.**

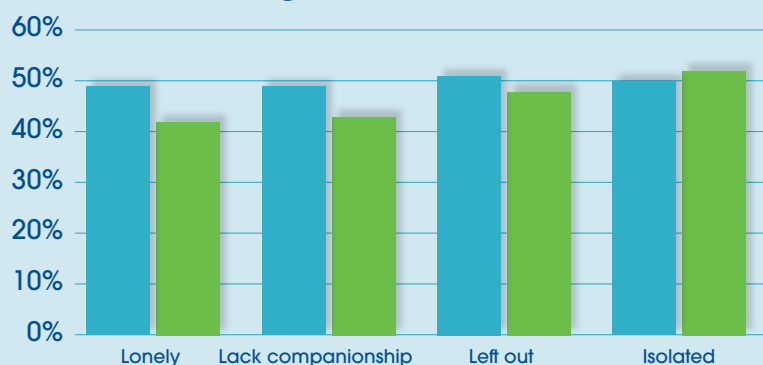
### Regional vs metro

**54% vs 62%**

More loneliness is experienced in metropolitan (62%) areas then in regional (54%) areas. Although regional areas reported slightly higher experiences of feeling isolated from others.

■ Metro ■ Regional

### Metro vs Regional often + sometimes



# Case Study

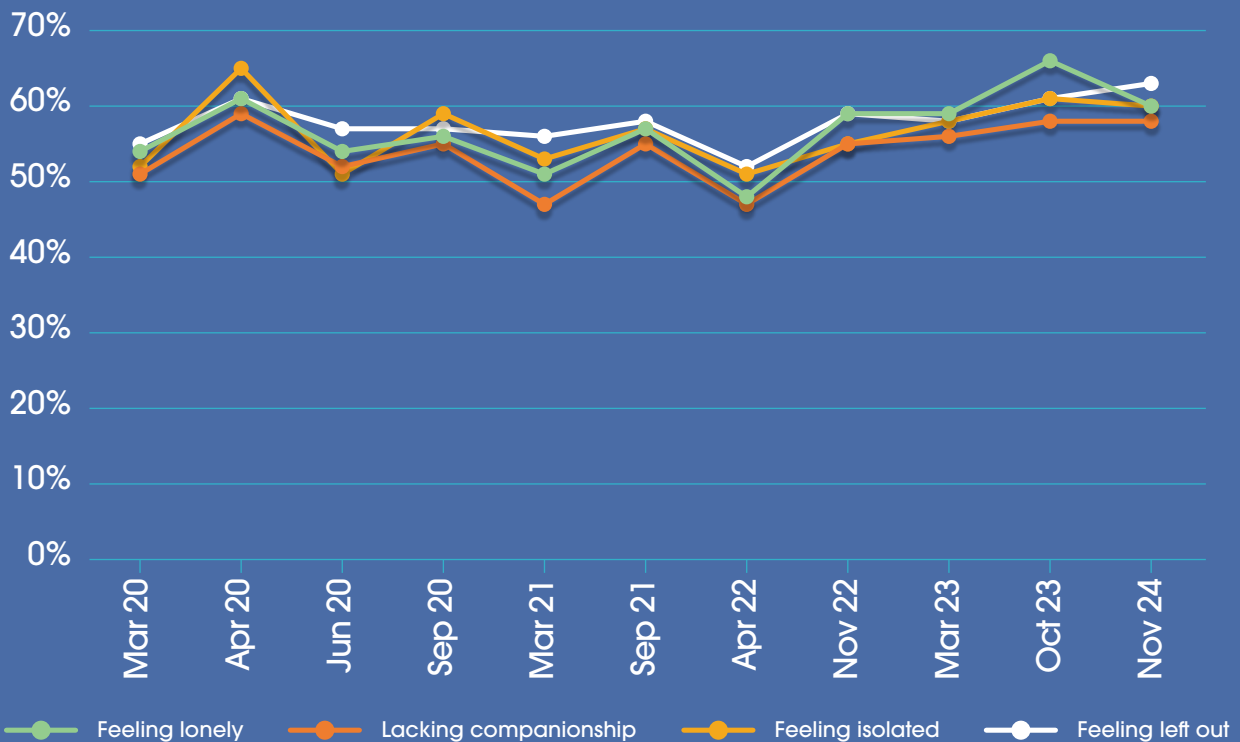


In our Community Connections Program (CCP), we walk alongside participants between the ages of 18 and 64. A significant part of our work is to support people experiencing loneliness and social isolation to engage into meaningful activities.

'Jenny (aged in her 40s),' who was referred by another Uniting Communities service achieved great outcomes from CCP. Jenny was experiencing loneliness and social isolation. Jenny was also struggling financially and felt a lack of self-confidence and self-worth, and this was affecting her mental health. A CCP worker contacted Jenny and arranged to meet out in the community on a regularly basis and work towards achieving Jenny's goals. These goals include 'to connect into meaningful employment and/or study' and 'to increase social, health and fitness, opportunities.' Because of the guidance she received from the CCP, Jenny is now attending a new yoga program at her local community centre with a friend she has reconnected with since joining the program. After engaging with CCP Jenny was also able to obtain meaningful employment and was feeling more confident and positive about herself."

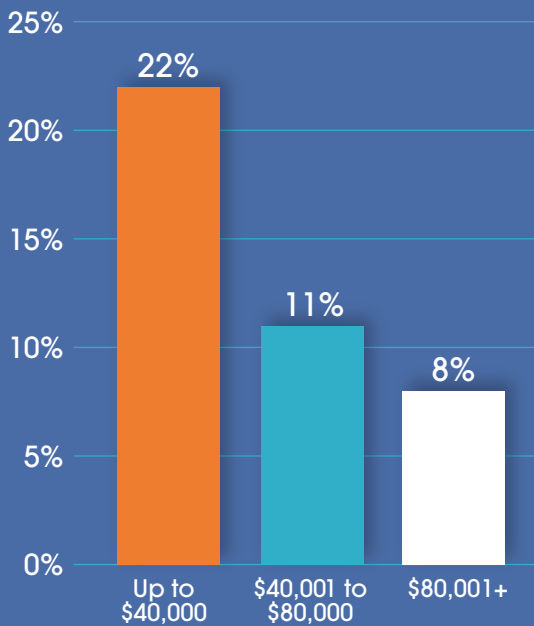
The Uniting Communities Loneliness by Numbers Snapshot asked South Australians to report their experiences of loneliness, lack of companionship, feelings of being left-out or isolated.

## SA population reports (sometimes + often)

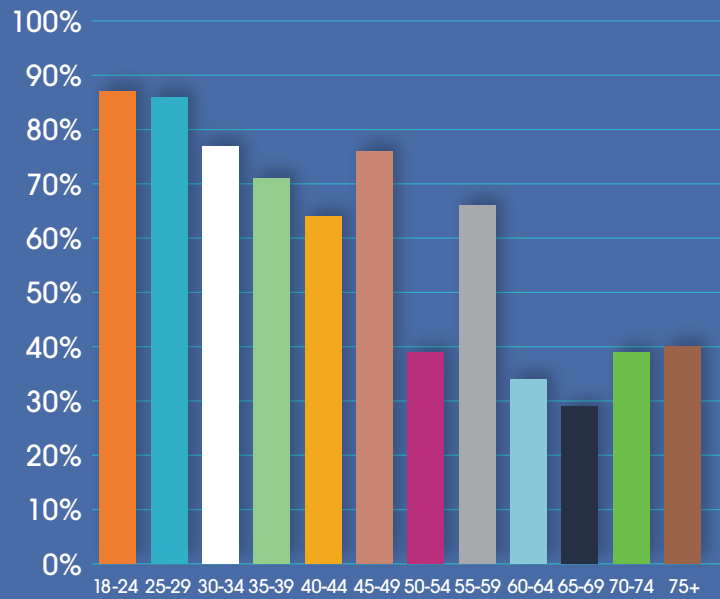




## Lonely 'often' by income



## Reports of loneliness by age (sometimes + often)



## What can we do:

Tackling this issue requires a whole-of-community approach.

1. Create a culture that actively seeks connection. We can all play a part in reducing loneliness by actively connecting with others, whether it's talking with a neighbour or reaching out to someone we haven't spoken to in a while.
2. Improve education on the importance of **social health**. Having strong friendships contributes positively to our physical and mental well-being. It is important to focus on the quality over the quantity of relationships.
3. Spread awareness of loneliness. We need to encourage people to have meaningful conversations about loneliness to reduce the stigma associated with it. When so many of us experience loneliness it's time to drop the stigma.
4. Support communities to identify place-based activities and services that will assist people to build and maintain social connections. It is imperative that once these initiatives have been identified that they are continuously and appropriately resourced.
5. Improve access to public transport. Public transport can be infrequent, inaccessible, expensive or non-existent in many areas across South Australia. Those that do not have access to a car are forced to rely on public transport infrastructure. This adds an additional barrier to attending place-based activities and visiting people in community, particularly in rural, regional and remote areas.
6. Improve infrastructure by having the places and spaces for people to connect. Good community infrastructure can support community connection by providing a variety of spaces for people to come together. Including open spaces like parks as well as leisure and other facilities is essential. Local community activities and social groups rely on infrastructure to ensure their programs successfully address loneliness.
7. Consider loneliness and social connection during urban planning. Particularly whether developments and communities are being designed to encourage or discourage connection and inclusion that creates a sense of community. Communities are increasingly segregated particularly as new developments push more people further away from the city, and subsequently, further from services, support and opportunities for social connection.



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