

2025



A CALL FOR CONNECTION

LONELINESS
AWARENESS
WEEK AUS
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Understanding and Addressing
Youth Loneliness in Australia



MOMENTS MATTER

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ABOUT

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

Ending Loneliness Together was founded in 2016 by a collaboration of established leaders and experts in the field of loneliness, with a vision to create an Australia where everyone feels a sense of connection and belonging.

Now a national peak body underpinned by lived experience, research, community, government and health expertise, Ending Loneliness Together generates ground-breaking research and translates evidence into practical resources and solutions to effectively address social isolation and loneliness.

www.endingloneliness.com.au

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Ending Loneliness Together acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters, and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.



MESSAGE

FROM ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MICHELLE LIM

CEO and Scientific Chair

When we think about young people, we often envisage connection, possibility and hope. But more and more young Australians are telling us something different - that they're feeling alone, often and persistently.

This report lays bare a quiet public health crisis that too many young people are facing: loneliness.

For some, it's the pain of walking into a crowded room and still feeling invisible. For others, it's the late-night scroll through social media and feeling left out. Whatever shape it takes, loneliness is real and painful to young people.

More than two in five young Australians say they feel lonely. This statistic demands our attention. It signals that loneliness is not an unusual experience but a widespread issue deserving of urgent and compassionate action.

Loneliness doesn't persist by itself. It is shaped and fuelled by broader cultural, digital, economic, and social forces. From the pressures of online comparison to the fragmentation of home, school and community life, young people are often left without the structures of meaningful healthy support they need to thrive.

This report is not just a collection of statistics. It is also a reflection of real voices and real lives. Young people want to be seen, to belong and to connect. This report gives voice to young Australians who want to be heard, to belong, and to connect.

At Ending Loneliness Together, we are listening. We're committed to working alongside young people, health professionals, educators, and communities to create safe and inclusive spaces where healthy and meaningful social connection can thrive. Whether that is in schools, workplaces, local communities, or online, we all have a role to play.

Loneliness is not inevitable - This is something we can change with empathy, with intention, and with collective will and action.

Thank you to the young Australians who shared their experiences with us on this journey. Your experiences have paved a way forward towards change. To everyone reading this report, let this report be an inspiration to act and empower our young Australians.

Let's build a world where no young Australian feel like they are facing life alone.

**Associate Professor
Michelle H Lim**
CEO and Scientific Chair
Ending Loneliness Together



MESSAGE

FROM THE HON EMMA MCBRIDE

**Assistant Minister for Mental
Health and Suicide Prevention**

**Assistant Minister for Rural and
Regional Health**

Loneliness is more than a feeling - it's a significant public health concern. When young people experience loneliness, it can affect every part of their lives: their mental health, learning, relationships, and their sense of belonging and purpose.

We often see youth as a time of connection, energy, and opportunity. But for too many young Australians, especially in rural, regional, and remote communities, and it can also be a time marked by disconnection and isolation.

This report is a powerful reminder that loneliness while deeply personal, it is a signal that our systems, services, and communities need to do better in supporting young people's social and emotional wellbeing.

As Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, and Assistant Minister for Rural and Regional Health, I know that mental health is shaped by where we live, how connected we feel, and the support we can access. Youth loneliness, if left unaddressed, can deepen existing inequalities particularly for young people living in regional and remote areas, First Nations youth, LGBTIQ+ young people, and those experiencing discrimination or hardship.

That's why this issue matters. Because every young person deserves to feel connected, valued, and supported—no matter what challenges they face.

Because loneliness doesn't just affect individuals; it reverberates through families, communities, and the broader health system.

And because addressing loneliness now can prevent more serious challenges down the track, including the risk of suicide.

Responding to this challenge will take collective action from governments, schools, health and community services, and across the private and not-for-profit sectors. We must build policies and programs that bring people together and centre young people's voices in the process.

Young people are not just recipients of support, they are leaders, advocates, and change-makers in their own right.

Youth loneliness is real. It's urgent. And together, we can and must act to change it.

LONELINESS IN YOUNG AUSTRALIANS



Loneliness in young people has emerged as a growing public health concern.

Despite being the most digitally connected generation, many young people report feeling socially disconnected, highlighting a discrepancy between online relationships and real-life connections.

Young people are at a critical stage of social development, where forming peer relationships, building social identity, and gaining independence from their families are part and parcel of their growth.¹

Yet, in our previous State of the Nation report (2023), 38% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 reported experiencing loneliness.² Worryingly, in the follow up of this same cohort, an estimated 41% of young people also reported persistent loneliness.² This worrying trend is aligned with many other international data.³

Loneliness is known to lead to poorer physical and mental health issues and if unaddressed, can lead to poorer outcomes in social, educational and vocational areas.^{4,5}

While mental health in young people has been extensively studied, understanding loneliness in youth is far less investigated despite its strong links to poor outcomes. Further to this, if loneliness is neglected and unaddressed, it may lead to even poorer outcomes for both the individual and society.

The findings from this report indicate there are pressing needs for prevention, early intervention and the implementation of targeted effective solutions for young people. Understanding and taking action on loneliness in young people will also add to broader societal wellbeing by preventing long-term emotional, academic, and economic impacts.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH



There are two components to this research: quantitative data from the Household Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, and qualitative data from in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of young Australians.

Insights from the HILDA survey

The quantitative data from the HILDA survey provide a national snapshot of the distribution of loneliness in young Australians and the relationships between episodic and persistent loneliness and a range of other factors. Using data over two annual waves of the HILDA survey allowed us to identify young people who experienced no, episodic or persistent loneliness, and to examine the relationships between levels of loneliness and a range of demographic, health, social and economic characteristics.

The sample included in these analyses comprised 1085 members of the HILDA cohort who were ages 15-25 years old, who completed the surveys in both 2022 and 2023. While the HILDA cohort has national coverage, in order to improve representativeness, the data were weighted by age, gender and region to reflect the latest Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS) population profiles.

Loneliness was measured using psychometrically validated items included within the HILDA self-complete questionnaire.⁶ The experiences of loneliness in young people were categorised as follows:

- No loneliness where the young person did not meet loneliness criteria cut off;
- Episodic loneliness where the young person met loneliness criteria for either 2022 or 2023;

- Persistent loneliness where the young person met loneliness criteria for both 2022 and 2023.

The weighted prevalence of episodic and persistent loneliness was calculated and compared according to selected demographic factors, health status indicators, health behaviours, financial status characteristics, social relationships, levels of community participation, and life events.

In addition to comparing experiences of loneliness between these subgroups according to the variables noted above, the analysis also examined whether loneliness was related to higher levels of psychological distress (assessed by the validated Kessler 10 items⁷ in the HILDA survey).

The quantitative findings are presented as percentages and adjusted odds ratios (aORs). The latter were calculated using multiple logistic regression, which enabled assessment of whether differences observed were statistically significant after adjustment for the possibility that relationships were caused by underlying socio-demographic differences (i.e, age, sex, socioeconomic status). The aORs can be interpreted as the odds that levels of episodic and persistent loneliness are related to another variable; to facilitate understanding the term 'likelihood' is used in preference to 'odds'.

Insights from interviews with young people

Supplementing the quantitative findings from the HILDA surveys are insights from in-depth interviews with young people that explored their understandings and experiences of loneliness, barriers and facilitators to social connection, and beliefs about strategies to reduce loneliness. These qualitative interviews were undertaken by Wallis Social Research.

The interview sample comprised 16 young people aged 16-25 years. The sample was balanced by age and gender and included representation of young people from different states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia), locations (metropolitan, regional, rural) and social and cultural groups (LGBTIQ+, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse background). Participants were recruited by the Wallis team using an internal database of representatives of the general population who had previously expressed interest in being a part of research studies.

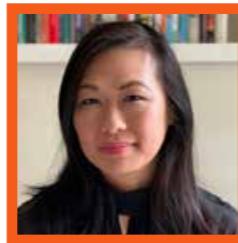
Informed consent was obtained, and the 45-minute interviews were conducted from March to May 2025 using videoconferencing methods. Participants were reimbursed for their time. The major findings from in-depth interviews were generated using structured thematic analysis, with salient quotes from participants selected to illustrate these.

The qualitative study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Approval 2024/HE001497).

RESEARCHERS

The study was developed and led by the following team:

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CEO AND SCIENTIFIC CHAIR

Ending Loneliness Together; Co-Vice Chair, International Scientific Board, Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection; Principal Research Fellow and Clinical Psychologist, Social Health and Wellbeing Group, Prevention Research Collaboration, Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney.

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PROFESSOR

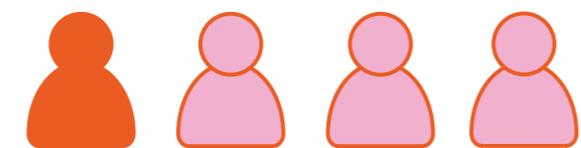
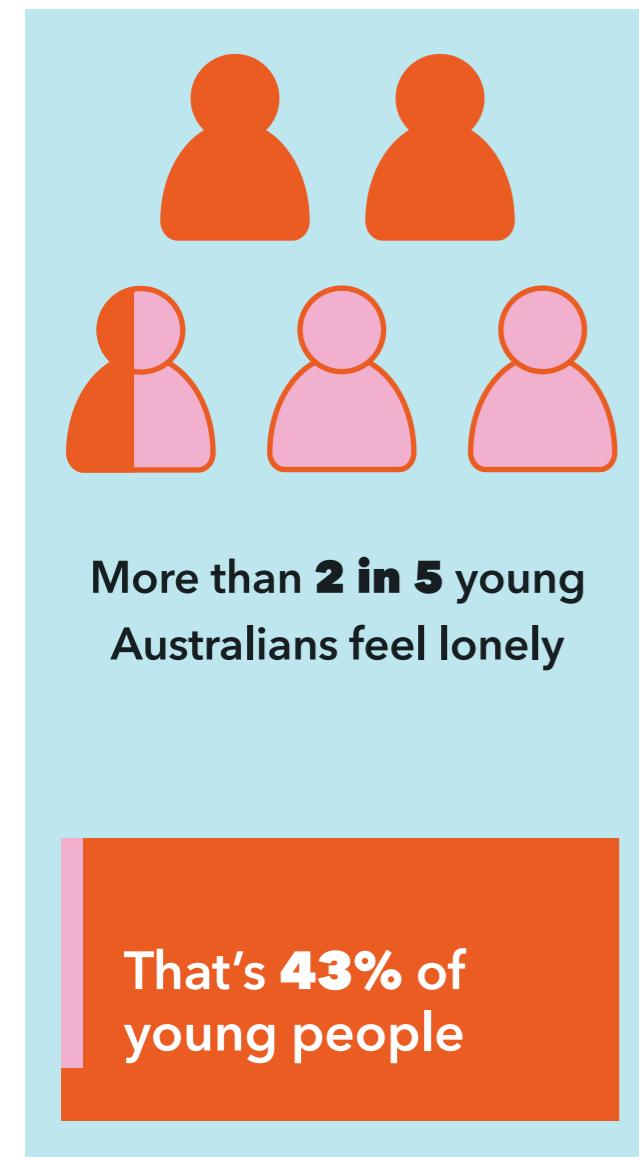
Psychology for Education, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester.

Wallis Social Research Team

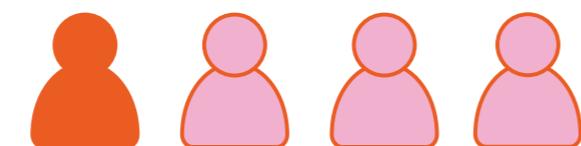


LONELINESS IN YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

SNAPSHOT KEY FINDINGS 2025



1 in 4 experience episodic loneliness



1 in 7 experience persistent loneliness lasting at least two years

Young people who are persistently lonely are **7x** more likely to experience psychological distress.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

18 - 25 YEAR OLDS

are more likely to be persistently lonely compared with 15-17 year olds

HEALTH STATUS

Young people experiencing poor mental health are 3x more likely to be persistently lonely

Young people experiencing poor physical health are 2x more likely to be persistently lonely

UNEMPLOYED YOUNG PEOPLE

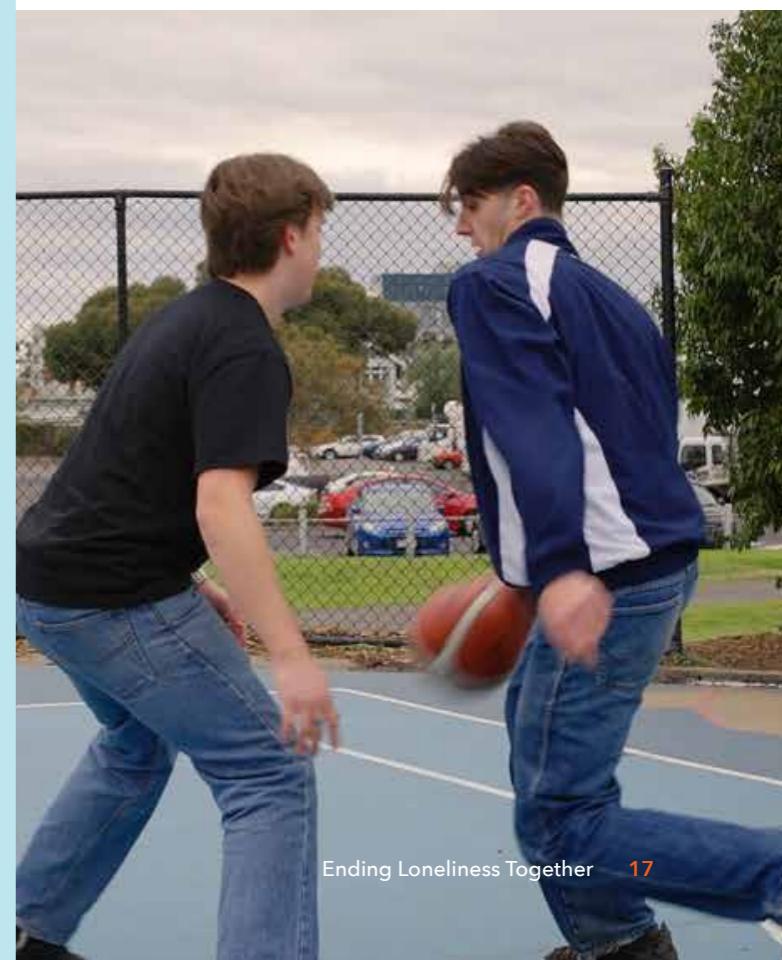
Unemployed young people and students not working experience higher levels of loneliness

FINANCIAL STRAIN

Financially insecure young people are 2x more likely to be persistently lonely

WHAT MAKES LONELINESS WORSE?

- Infrequent time with friends/family
- Low satisfaction with parent relationships
- Low community participation (sporting, hobby, or other community-based clubs)
- Low neighborhood trust and cohesion
- Smoking (daily use linked to episodic loneliness)
- Lack of physical activity
- Major life events (e.g. parenthood, grief, job loss)



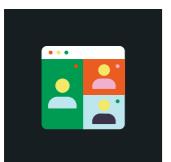
WHAT HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE CONNECT?



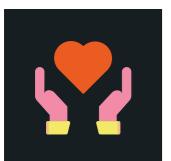
Accessible and inclusive community spaces



Free or low-cost connection opportunities



A mix of online and face-to-face connection



Support during life transitions

The solution isn't as simple as 'putting yourself out there' or placing the onus on young people. It's a collective effort where we can all take steps to create moments and build on those - across home, work, education and community settings.



Belonging matters - and so does being able to be yourself

"I experienced [loneliness] a lot when I was a teenager growing up being like I'm neurodivergent and queer and that's very different to like a lot of my peers. Even though I had a lot of people around I still felt like I couldn't really relate to a lot of people or connect with people on like a deep, genuine level."

IN THEIR WORDS

How young people explain loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness is emotional disconnection, not just physical isolation

"Sometimes I feel most lonely when I'm surrounded by people."

School cliques, life transitions, cost of living and online bullying can deepen the experience

"All the cafes will close at 2 and by the time everyone gets out of their jobs, you're having to go to a restaurant and [you're] spending 50 dollars. Like all the sort of basics are much more expensive."

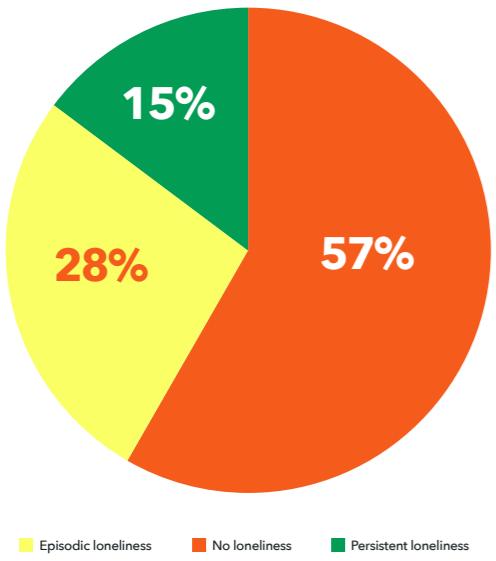
"I think because it's so easy to just directly message someone, a lot of maybe mean stuff or like bullying and stuff happens over the Internet."

"I dropped out of high school and I'm currently not going to TAFE. I would say that that's a bit challenging since I don't have a set place to go to and talk to people. Schools are a very social environment and not having that takes away a really big [part of your life]."

PREVALENCE & DEMOGRAPHICS

Prevalence

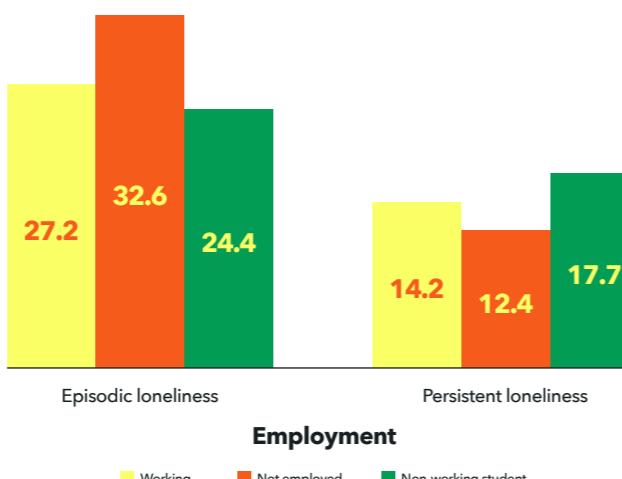
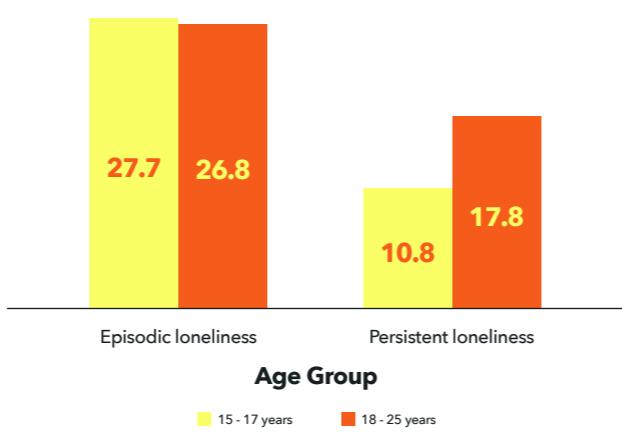
A total of 43% of young Australians report loneliness; 1 in 4 young Australians experience episodic loneliness; 1 in 7 young Australians experience persistent loneliness.



Over 2 in 5 (43%) young Australians report loneliness

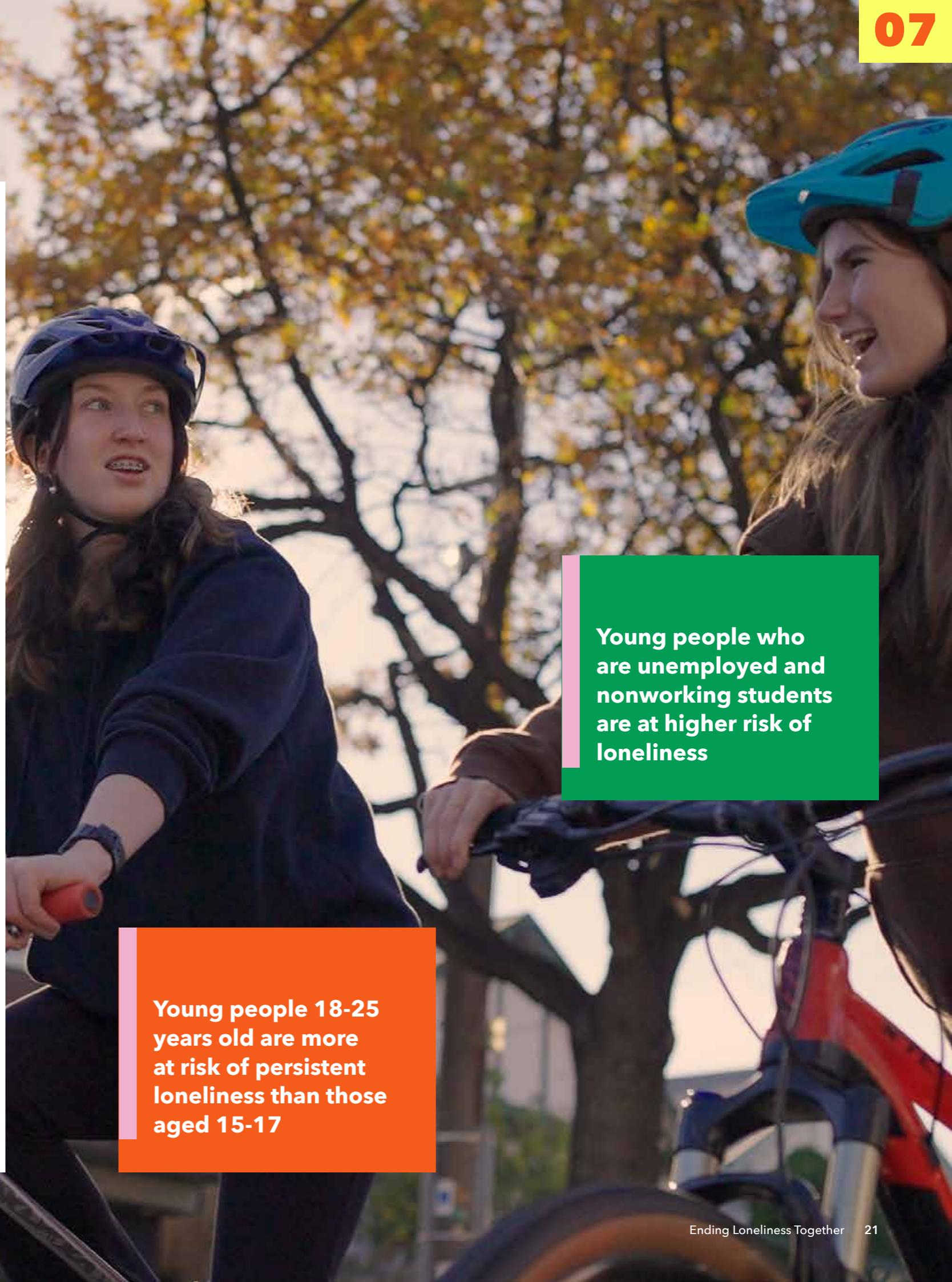
Demographic subgroups

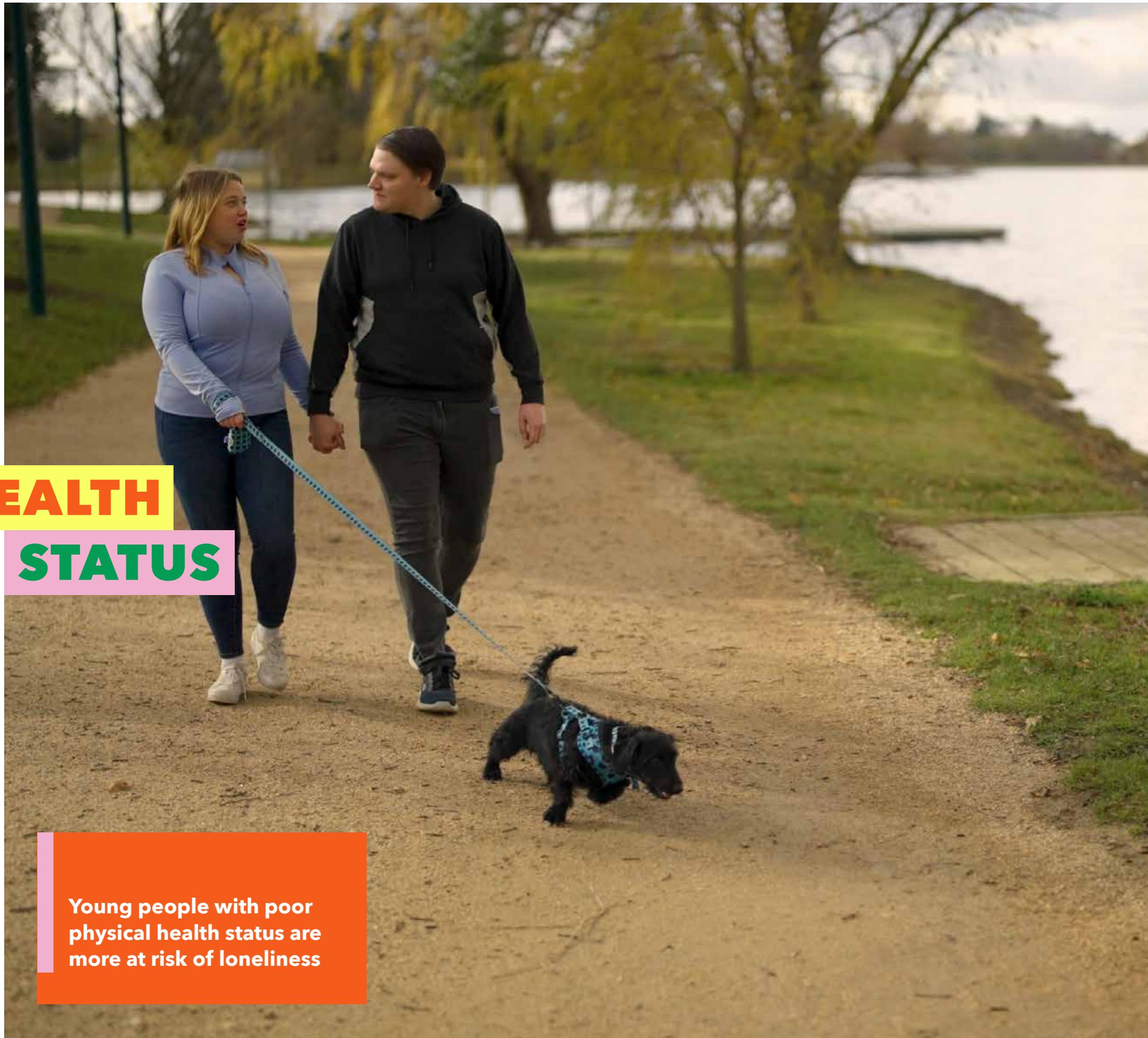
- We compared the distribution of loneliness subtypes by age, sex, living arrangement, employment, student status, and Social Economic Index For Areas (SEIFA). Only two factors yielded significant difference: age group and employment status.
- The prevalence of persistent loneliness was significantly higher in the 18-25 years age group (17.8%) than in those aged 15-17 years (10.8%).



Young people 18-25 years old are more at risk of persistent loneliness than those aged 15-17

Young people who are unemployed and nonworking students are at higher risk of loneliness

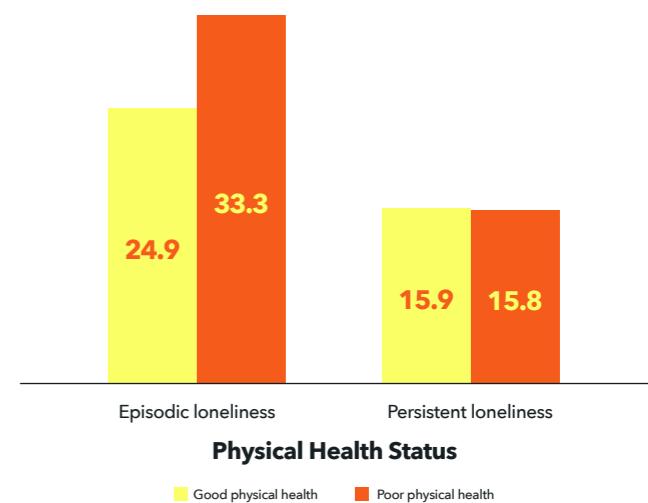




Physical Health Status

- There was a higher proportion of young people who have poor physical health* status who experienced episodic loneliness (33.3%) compared to those with good physical health status (24.9%).
- Adjusted analyses show that young people who have poor physical health status were nearly two times ($aOR=1.68$) more likely to experience episodic loneliness than those with good physical health status.
- While there appeared to be similar proportions of young people with poor and good physical health status who experienced persistent loneliness, adjusted analyses show that young people who had poor physical health status were nearly two times ($aOR=1.64$) more likely to experience persistent loneliness than those who had good physical health status.

* Physical health includes: physical functioning, role limitations due to physical health problems, bodily pain, and general health perceptions.

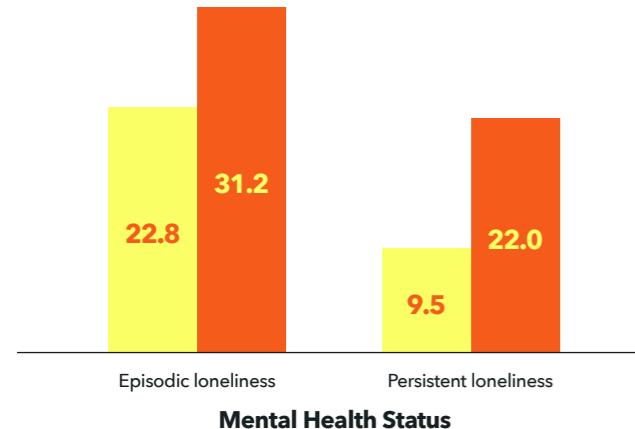


HEALTH STATUS

Mental Health Status

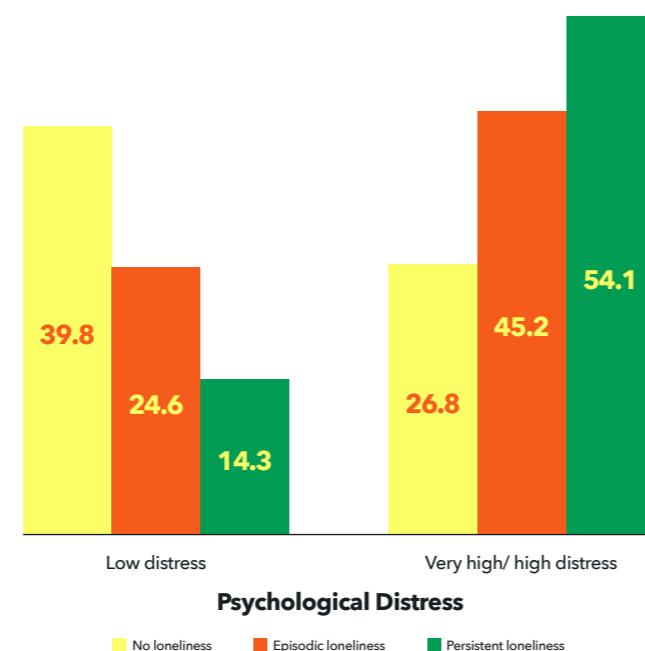
- A higher proportion of young people who have poor mental health* status experienced episodic loneliness (31.2%) or persistent loneliness (22.0%) than young people who have good mental health status (22.8% with episodic loneliness, and 9.5% persistent loneliness).
- Adjusted analyses show that young people who have poor mental health status were more than two times (aOR=2.14) more likely to experience episodic loneliness than those with good mental health, while young people who have poor mental health were nearly three times (aOR=2.84) more likely to experience persistent loneliness than those who have good mental health status.

* Mental health includes: social functioning, general mental health, vitality and role limitations due to emotional problems.

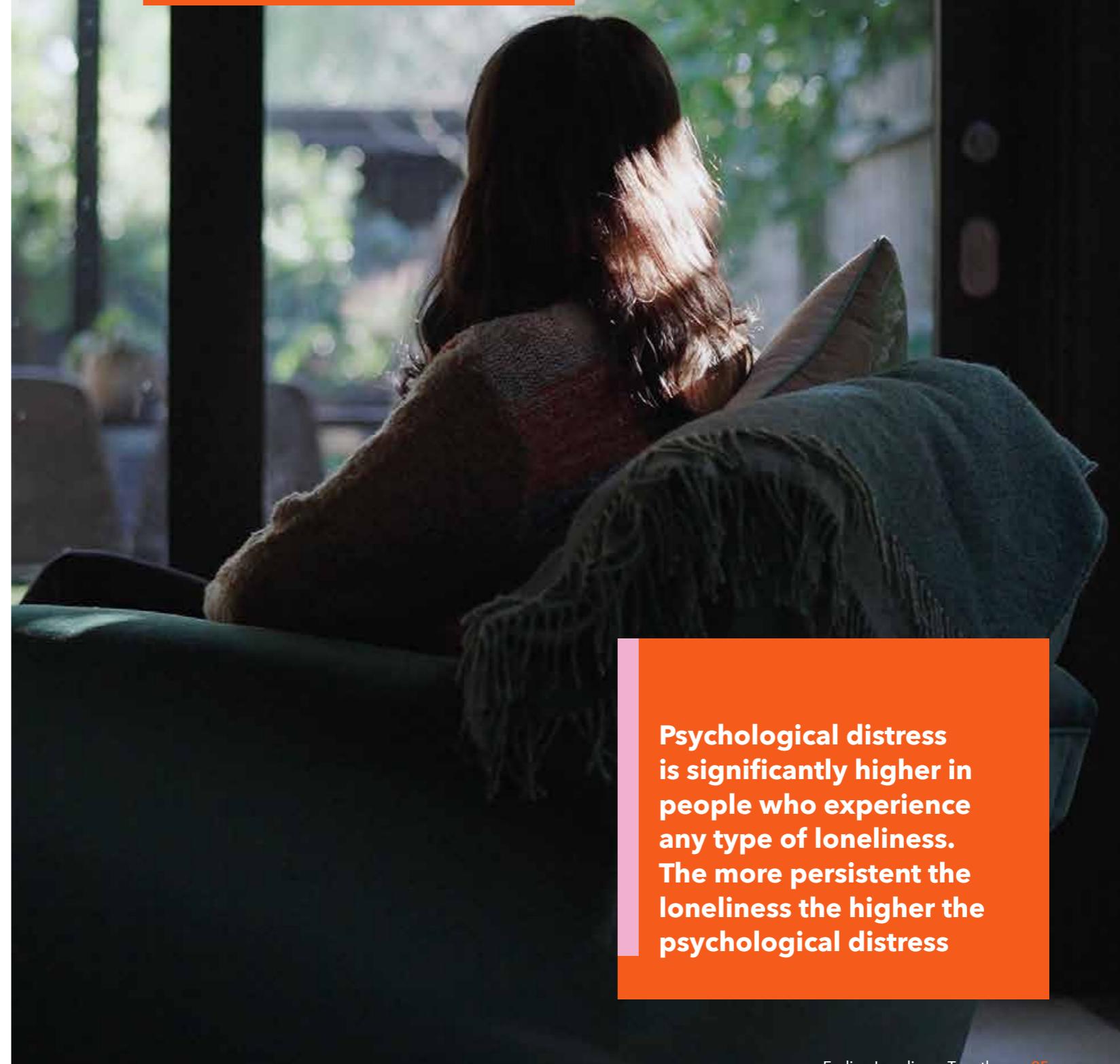


Risk of Psychological Distress

- We also examined whether young people had experienced episodic or persistent loneliness were more at risk of reporting psychological distress.
- The proportions of young people with very high/high levels of psychological distress were markedly higher in those who had experienced episodic (45.2%) or persistent loneliness (54.1%), whereas the proportion of young people with low psychological distress was highest in those who had not experienced loneliness (39.8%).
- Adjusted analyses show that young people who reported episodic loneliness were nearly 4 times (aOR=3.77) more likely to experience high/very high psychological distress compared to those with no loneliness. Meanwhile, young people who reported persistent loneliness were 7 times (aOR=7.10) more likely to experience high/very high psychological distress compared to those with no loneliness.



Young people with poor mental health status are more at risk of loneliness



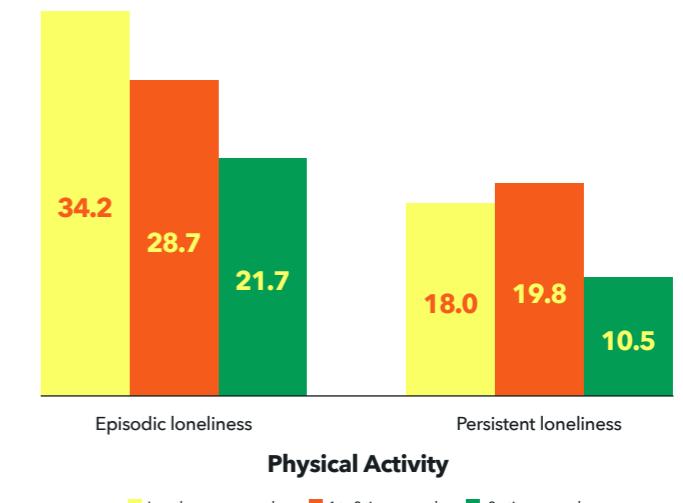
Psychological distress is significantly higher in people who experience any type of loneliness. The more persistent the loneliness the higher the psychological distress

LIFESTYLE & BEHAVIOURS



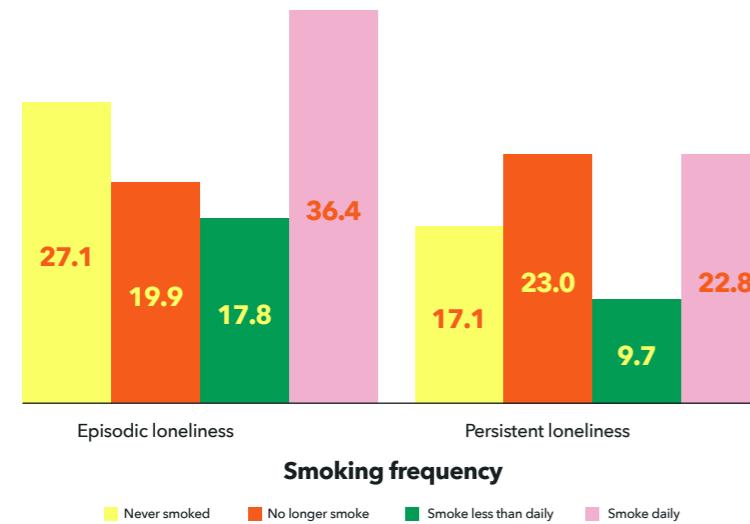
Physical Activity

- The proportion of young people with episodic loneliness was highest among those who exercised less than once a week (34.2%), while the proportion of young people with persistent loneliness were about the same among those who exercised one to three times a week (19.8%) or once a week (18.0%).
- Adjusted analyses show that young people who exercised less than once a week were nearly 2 times more likely to experience episodic loneliness ($aOR=1.74$) or persistent loneliness ($aOR=1.71$) than those who exercised more than three times a week.



Smoking (cigarettes and other tobacco products)

- The proportion of young people reporting episodic loneliness was highest in those who smoked daily (36.4%), while the proportion of young people with persistent loneliness was about the same between those who no longer smoked (23.0%) or who smoked daily (22.8%).
- Adjusted analyses show that young people who smoked daily were nearly two times (aOR=1.80) more likely to experience episodic loneliness, but not more likely to experience persistent loneliness, compared with those who never smoked.



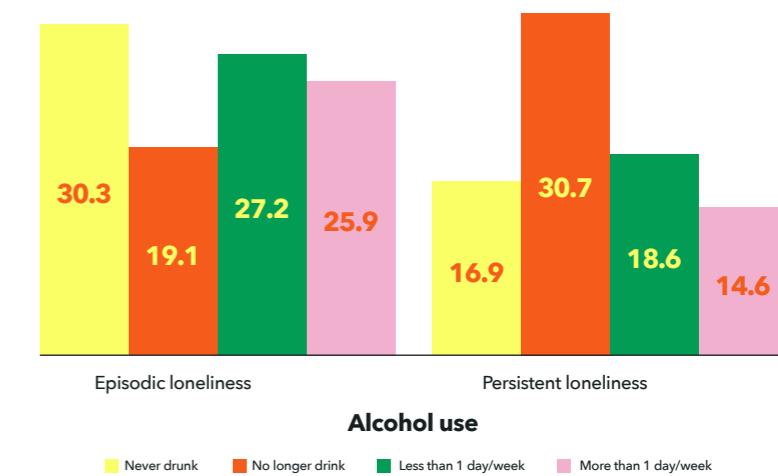
Those who smoke daily were more likely to report episodic loneliness

Note: We conducted this analysis only among young people who were 18 years old or older.

Frequency of alcohol use did not impact on loneliness

Alcohol Use

- The proportion of young people with episodic loneliness was highest in those who never drink (30.3%), followed by those who drink less than one day a week (27.2%). Meanwhile, the proportion of young people with persistent loneliness was highest in those who no longer drink (30.7%).
- Adjusted analyses indicated no differences in loneliness across alcohol use groups.

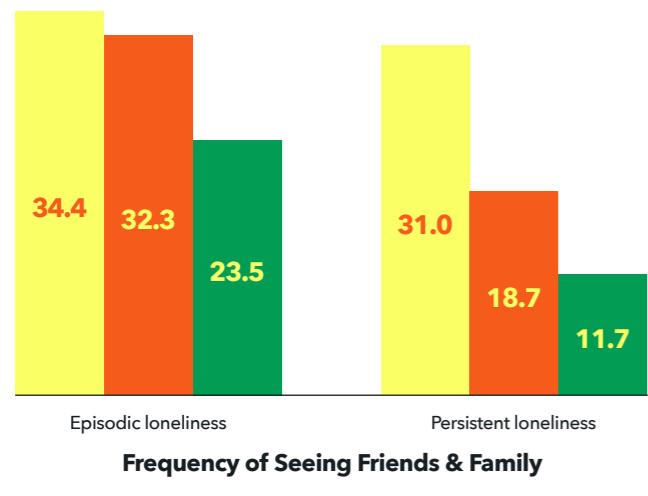


Note: We conducted this analysis only among young people who were 18 years old or older.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

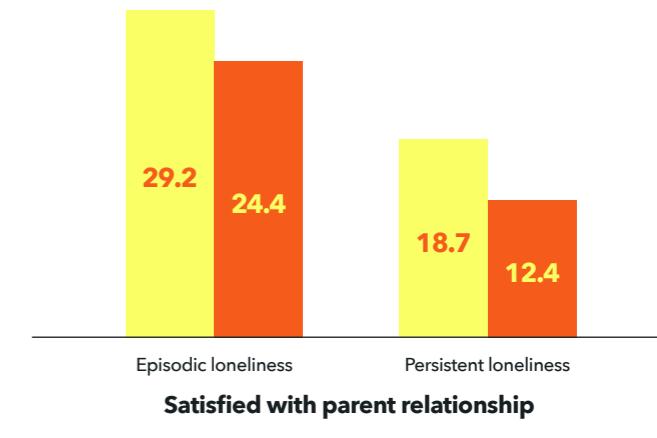
Frequency of Seeing Friends and Family

- The proportions of young people who reported episodic or persistent loneliness were highest in those who visited their friends or family less than once a month (34.4% and 31.0%, respectively).
- Adjusted analyses showed that compared with those who visited their family weekly, young people who saw their friends and family less than once a month were about 2.5 times (aOR 2.46) more likely to experience episodic and 3 times (aOR 3.01) more likely to experience persistent loneliness.



Parent Relationship Satisfaction

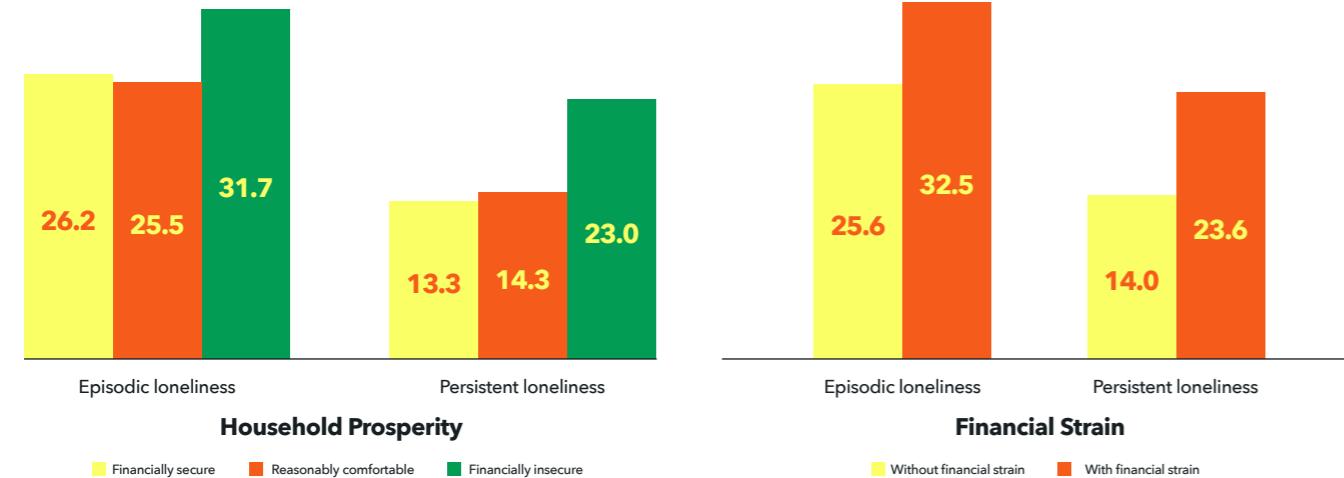
- The proportions of young people experiencing any type of loneliness was higher in those reporting low satisfaction with parental relationships (29.2% in episodic loneliness and 18.7% in persistent loneliness) than those reporting high satisfaction (24.4% and 12.4%, respectively).
- Adjusted analysis showed that young people with low satisfaction with their parental relationship were nearly 1.5 times (aOR=1.47) more likely to experience episodic loneliness and 2 times (aOR=2.08) more likely to experience persistent loneliness.



FINANCIAL STATUS

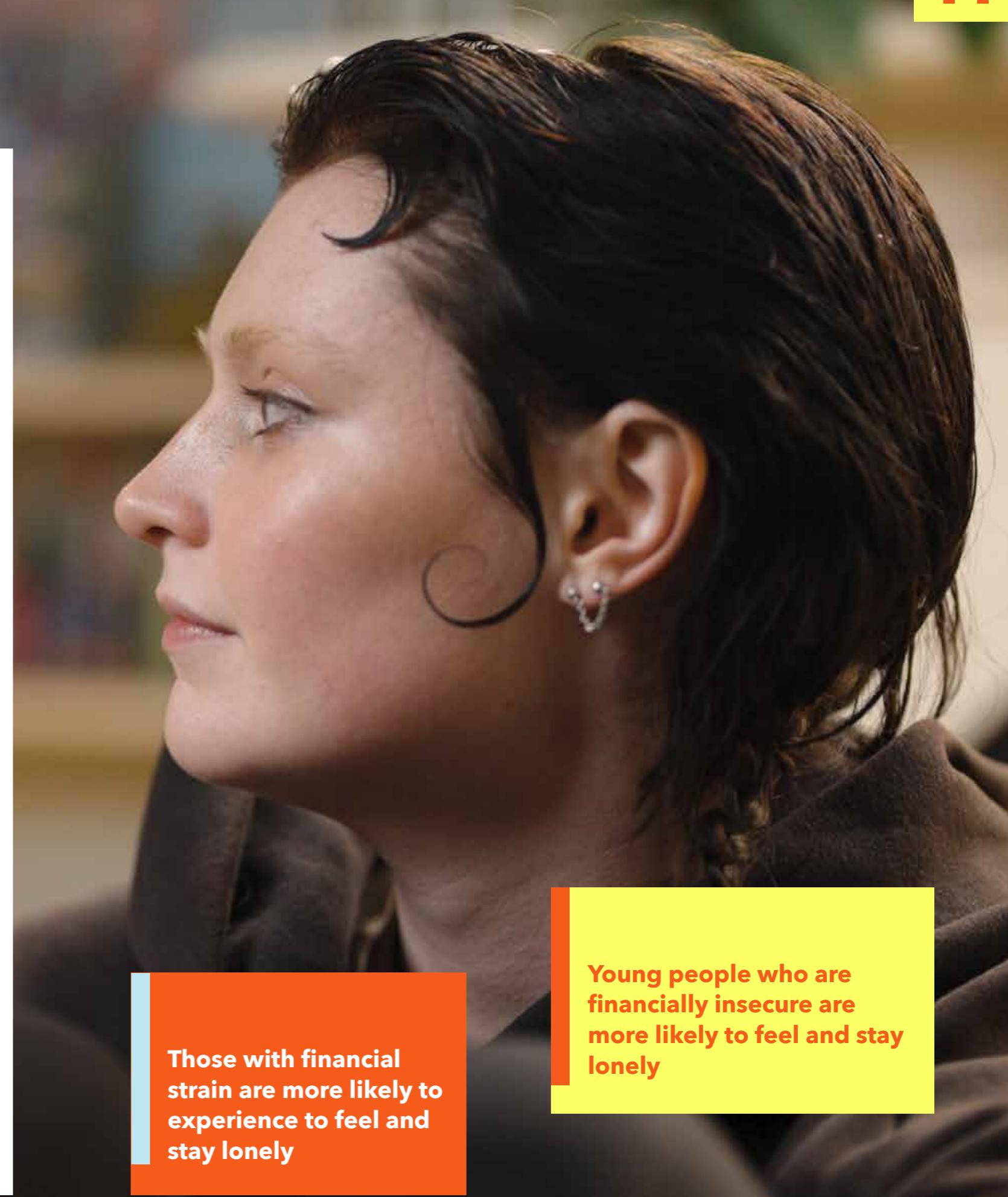
Household Prosperity

- The proportions of young people who experienced episodic or persistent loneliness were highest in those living in households reported as being financially insecure (31.7% and 23.0%, respectively).
- Adjusted analyses showed that young people who reported being financially insecure households were more than 1.5 times (aOR=1.65) more likely to experience episodic loneliness and nearly 2 times (aOR=1.88) more likely to experience persistent loneliness, compared to those who were in financially secure households.



Financial Strain

- Compared to young people without financial strain, young people experiencing financial stress had a higher prevalence of both episodic (32.5% vs 25.6%) and persistent loneliness (23.6% vs 14.0%).
- Adjusted analysis showed that young people with financial strain were about two times more likely to experience episodic loneliness (aOR 1.76) or persistent loneliness (aOR 2.1) compared to those without financial strain.

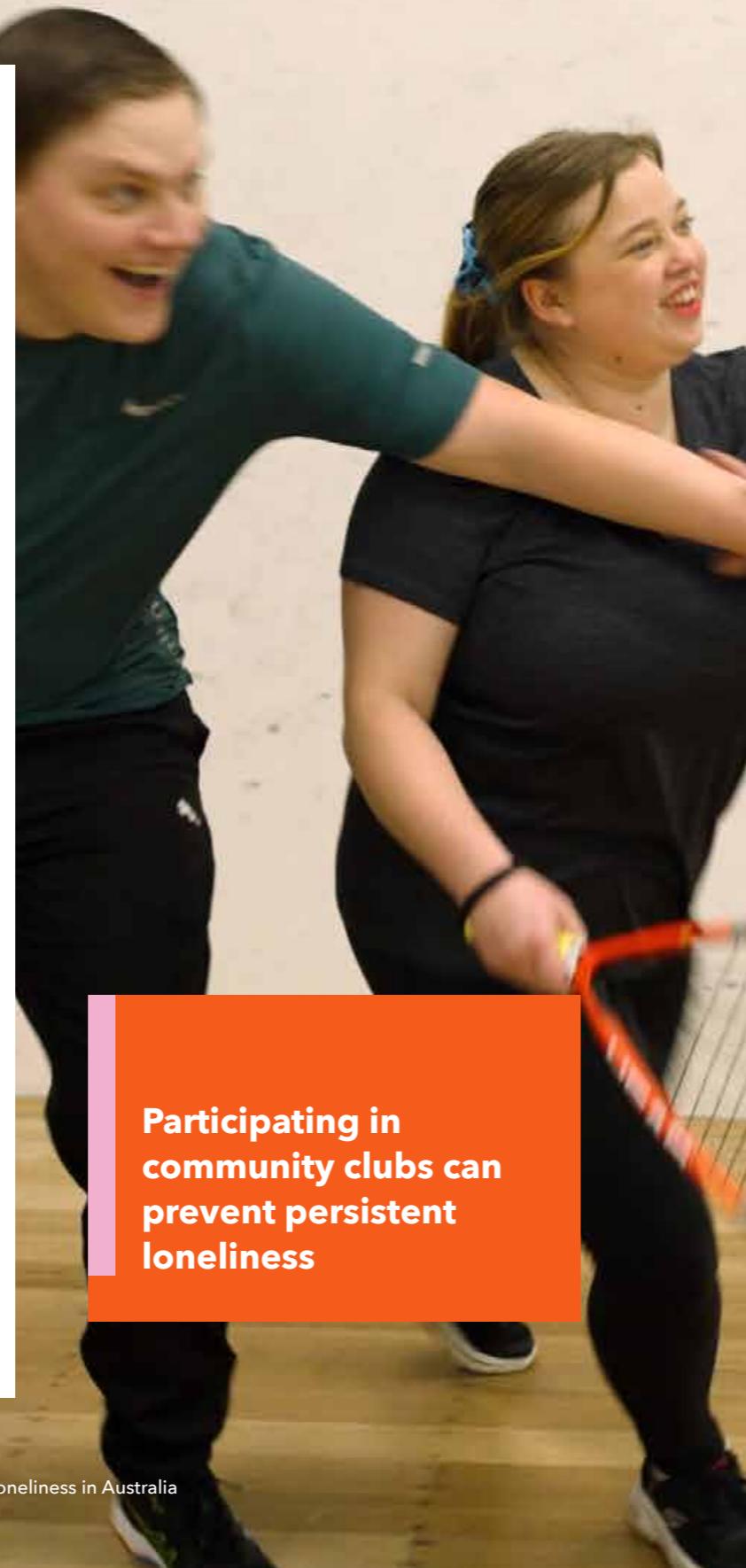
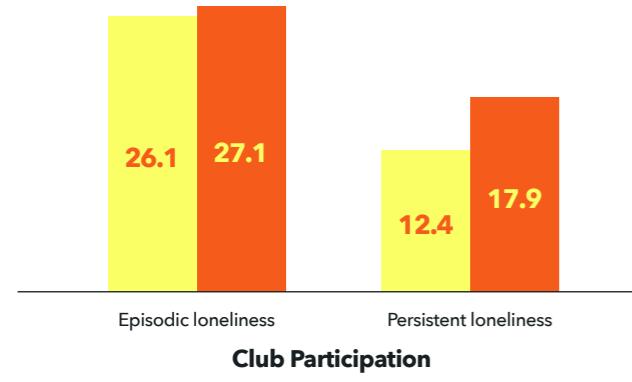


COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION & CONNECTIONS

Club Participation*

- The proportion of young people who experienced episodic loneliness was slightly higher among those who did not participate in any club-based activities (27.7% vs 26.1%, respectively), while the proportion who experienced persistent loneliness was more markedly higher among those who did not take part in clubs (17.9% vs 12.4%, respectively).
- Adjusted analyses showed that young people who did not participate in community clubs were about 1.5 times (aOR=1.45) more likely to experience persistent loneliness than those who participated.

*Club participation is defined as an active member of a sporting, hobby or community-based club or association.

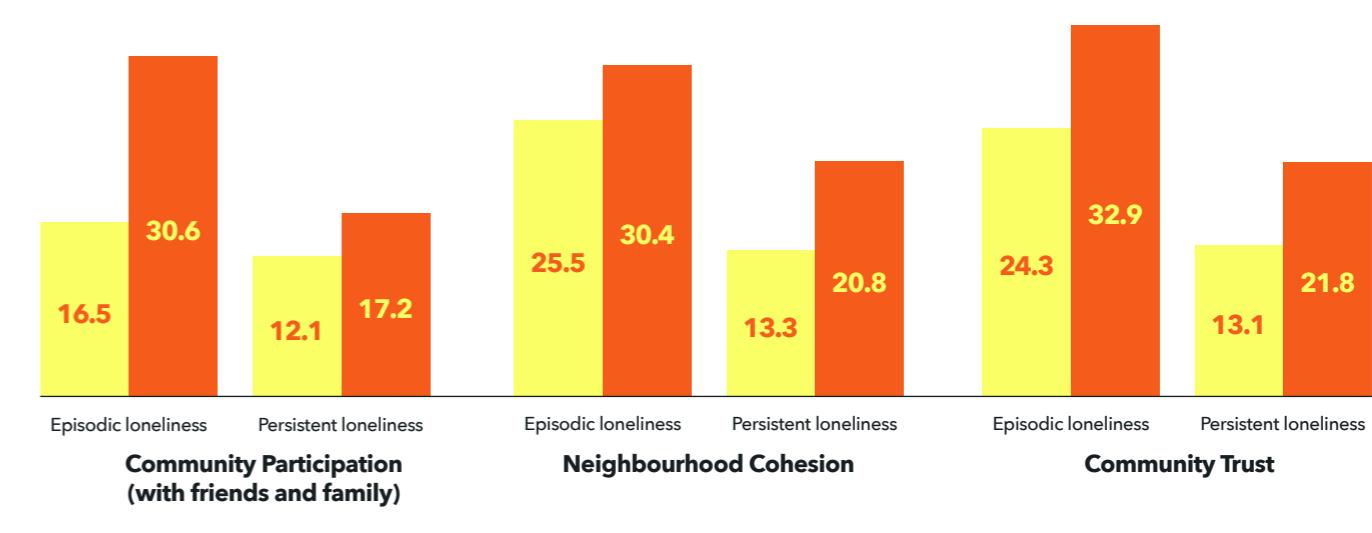


Participating in
community clubs can
prevent persistent
loneliness

Community Participation, Neighbourhood Cohesion and Community Trust

- The proportions of young people who experienced any type of loneliness were higher among those who reported low level of community participation (30.6% with episodic loneliness and 17.2% with persistent loneliness), low level of neighbourhood cohesion (30.4% and 20.8%, respectively), and low neighborhood trust (32.9% and 21.8%, respectively) compared to those who reported high level in each category.
- Adjusted analyses showed that young people who reported lower community participation or lower community trust were two times more likely to experience episodic loneliness (aOR=1.93 and 2.00, respectively) or persistent loneliness (aOR=1.81 and 2.47, respectively) compared to those with higher level of participation and trust in community.

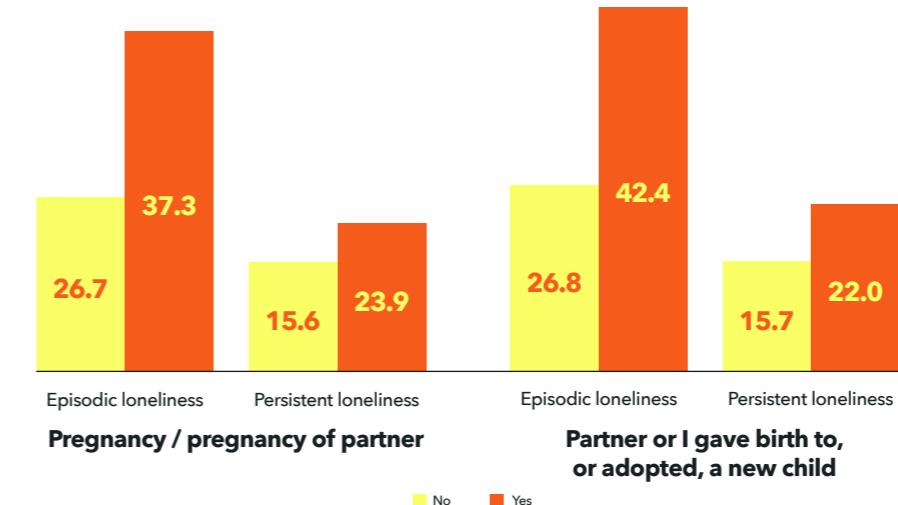
**Young people with lower
community participation,
cohesion and trust were
more likely to experience
loneliness**



EVENTS

Parenthood

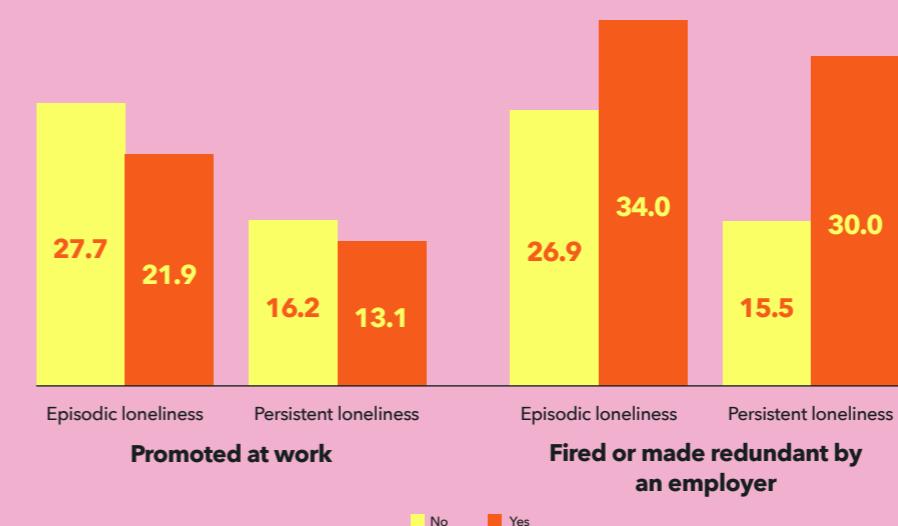
- The proportion of young people who experienced persistent loneliness was higher among those who entered parenthood (23.9% among those who were pregnant and 22.0% among those who had a new child) compared to those who did not become a parent (15.6% and 15.7%, respectively). The same was observed among young people who experienced episodic loneliness (37.3% among those who were pregnant versus 26.7%, and 42.4% among those who had a new child versus 26.8%).
- Adjusted analysis showed that young people who became pregnant were nearly 2 times (aOR=1.75) more likely to experience episodic loneliness and nearly 3 times (aOR=2.78) more likely to experience persistent loneliness. Meanwhile, those who became parents were 1.5 times (aOR=1.5) more likely to experience episodic loneliness, not persistent loneliness.



Being pregnant and a new parent were periods of heightened loneliness

Work-related Experiences

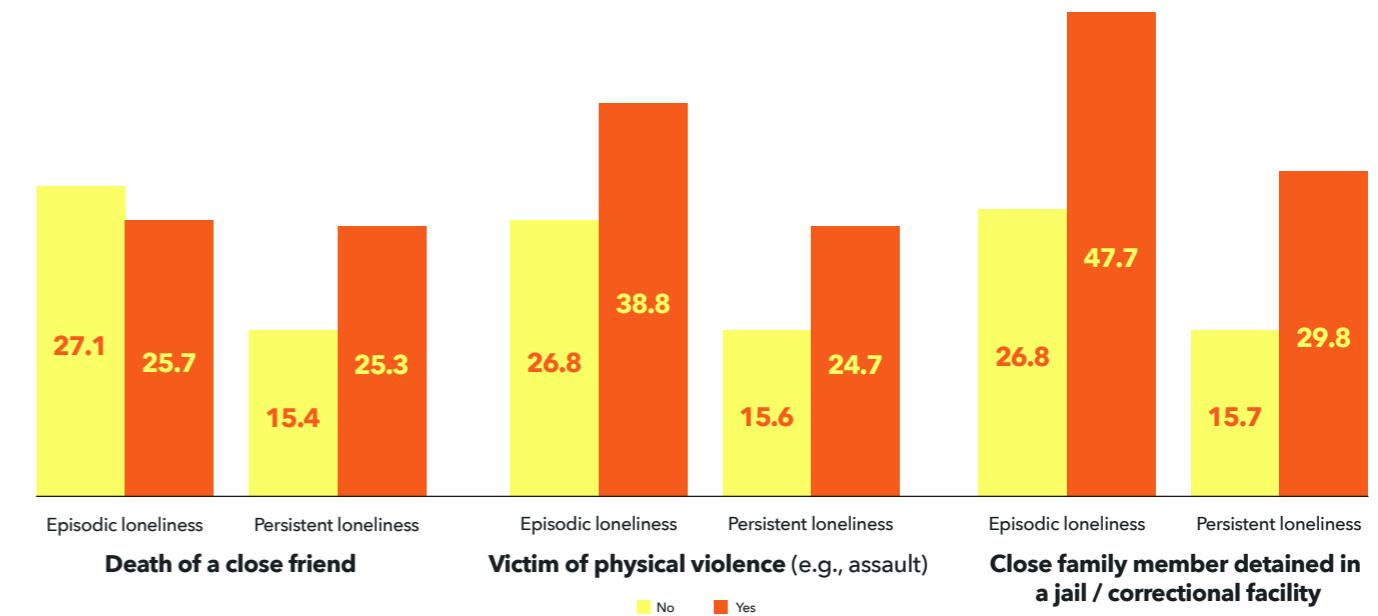
- The proportions of young people who experienced any type of loneliness were higher in those who did not report a promotion at work (27.7% experiencing episodic loneliness, 16.2% experiencing persistent loneliness), or who were fired or made redundant (34.0% with episodic loneliness and 30.0% with persistent loneliness), than in those who did get promotion (21.9% with episodic loneliness and 13.1% with persistent loneliness) or did not get fired (26.9% with episodic loneliness and 15.5% with persistent loneliness).



Loss and Trauma

- The proportion of young people who experienced persistent loneliness was higher in those who reported the death of a close friend (25.3%) than those who did not experience such a loss (15.4%).
- The proportions of young people who experienced both episodic and persistent loneliness were higher in those who reported being a victim of violence or who had a close family member detained in a correctional facility than in those who did not experience these life events.
- After adjusting for demographics, young people who lost a close friend were more than 1.5 times more likely to experience episodic loneliness (aOR=1.65) and nearly 2 times more likely to experience persistent loneliness (aOR=1.82).

Young people who experience the death of a close friend were more likely to experience loneliness



DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING

OF LONELINESS IN YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

The topics discussed with young people in in-depth interviews encompassed their understandings and experiences of loneliness, and their views on barriers and facilitators to social connection. We refer to young people as participants in the following result sections.

Understandings of Loneliness

Participants' views on loneliness were broadly consistent even in those from different backgrounds. Three themes emerged:

Young people can feel lonely in a group and being lonely is unwanted. Loneliness can be triggered by major life events which could come with less social support

Loneliness versus solitude

Participants generally drew a distinction between physical solitude (being alone) and emotional isolation (feeling lonely). Several participants identified that loneliness was not the same as being alone by choice (solitude). For example, one participant commented that she craved time on her own to 'recharge' after a busy social period - she understood that people who experienced loneliness may not have had the opportunity to exercise the choice to be alone.

"I like to spend time by myself sometimes. I know after a lot of social outings or gatherings, especially like school and stuff, you feel quite drained and it's kind of nice to just be by yourself and you know, go for a walk."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

Feeling lonely around others

Participants observed that people can feel lonely when surrounded by people when they lacked genuine connections with others in the group.

"Sometimes when I'm in a group setting like there might be a lot of people ... sometimes I still feel quite lonely. Like maybe I'm not being included in a conversation... or like I'm kind of on the outside of like the group."

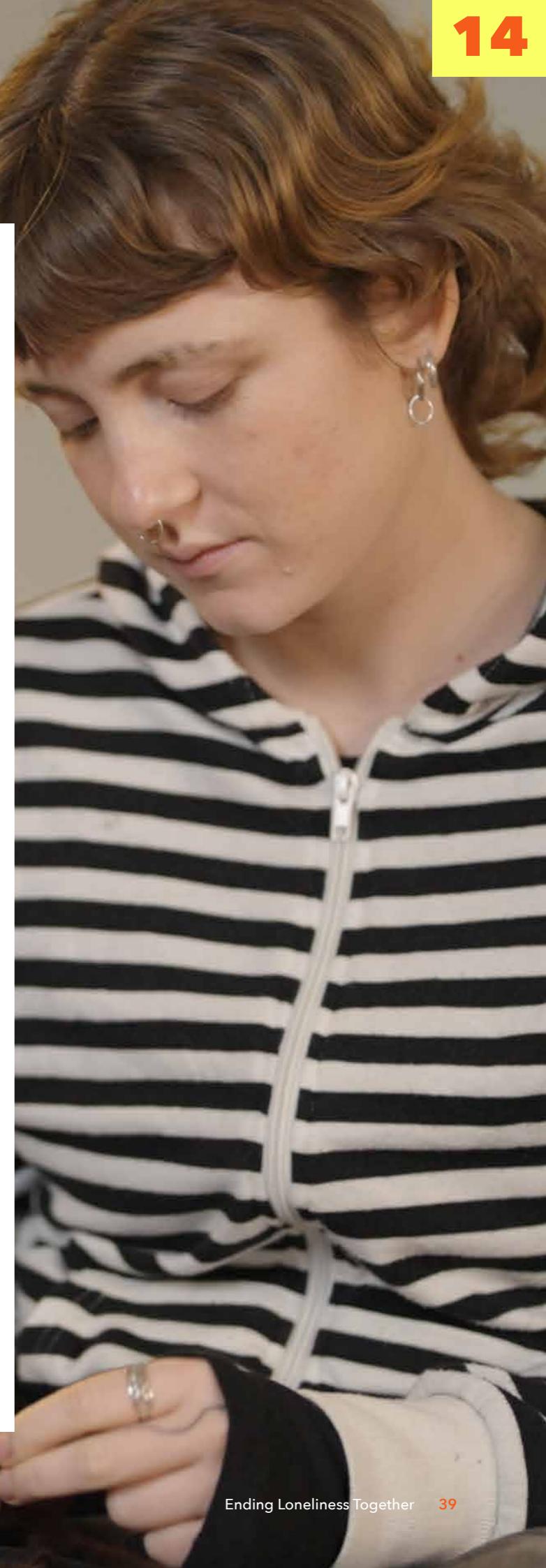
Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

Major life events

Several participants noted that loneliness can occur following major life changes, such as starting school or university, moving house and migration. These life changes often came with an absence or reduced supportive social network and feeling like they need to 'start over' with building connections.

"I dropped out of high school and I'm currently not going to TAFE. I would say that that's a bit challenging since I don't have a set place to go to and talk to people. Because schools are a very social environment and then just not having that, it takes away a really big like [part of your life]."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #06



Experiences of Loneliness

Almost all the young people we spoke to identified that they had experienced loneliness, and four themes emerged:

Being lonely in a group

Several noted they have often felt most lonely in large groups. Younger participants were most likely to report experiencing loneliness in school settings, which they attributed to cliques and social exclusion from their peers.

"I feel like everyone establishes a place in the social hierarchy in school... and it's hard to go up, and sometimes I feel sometimes like 'oh there they have a lot more... are like at a higher level, so I can't talk to them."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

Life transitions

Some participants also shared that the impact of COVID and the transition to online learning had contributed to loneliness.

"[During COVID] I was in getting locked down in Year 7. Like when you start to really establish friendships throughout high school and we pretty much skipped over the whole chapter... through lockdown."

Male, 16-18, Metro VIC, #02

"I came [to Australia] one month before [COVID] started. So, the most challenging aspect of any of this was online classes, because if you have online classes, there's no true connection there."

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, CALD #09

Being part of a diverse community

The perspectives of young people of diverse abilities and sexual identities revealed that experiencing a lack of belonging in their social environment contributed to loneliness.

"I experienced [loneliness] a lot when I was like a teenager growing up being like I'm neurodivergent and queer and that's very different to like a lot of my peers. Even though I had a lot of people around I still felt like I couldn't really relate to a lot of people or connect with people on like a deep, genuine level."

Female, 22-25, Regional VIC, LGBTIQ+ #12

Concealing loneliness

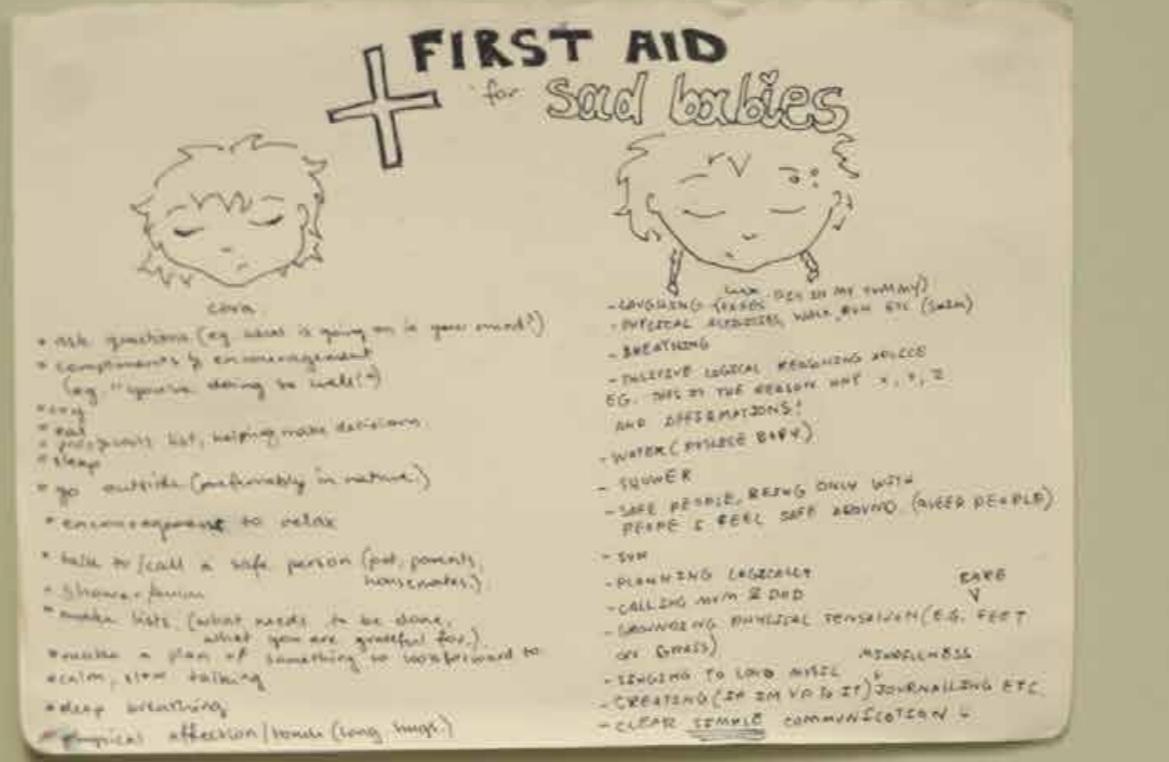
Several young people reported it can be hard to tell when people around them were experiencing loneliness. People experiencing loneliness felt social pressure to 'mask' and behave as though everything was okay.

"People kind of, I guess in my experience, express, or like show that they're lonely the most when they're alone. So even if they're feeling really lonely, if I'm there, they're not gonna... it's not gonna be as obvious."

Trans-male, 22-25, Metro VIC, LGBTIQ+ #04



Young people feel lonely in large groups including in group settings such as school. This generation of young people continue to report like they've missed out in the critical social developmental periods during COVID. Life transitions, belonging to a diverse community group and concealing loneliness all add to the experiences of loneliness.



Barriers to Social Connection

When young people speak about what prevents them from connecting with others, six themes emerged:

Lack of an inclusive community environment

A lack of inclusivity or welcoming attitudes in groups or spaces can make young people feel excluded. A lack of reciprocity in efforts to form connections can also compound feelings of loneliness. In more extreme circumstances, 'toxic' interactions can fuel bullying and exclusion.

"I find it pretty challenging. I don't really like speaking up with other people and... then [if I'm] trying to make conversation and it's not like, you know, not being welcomed in. That doesn't, you know, make you very happy."

Male, 16-18, Metro WA, CALD #03

Transitions such as starting a new school or university or a new job can also disrupt existing social connections

"When I was in Year 7, so just starting high school, I found it pretty difficult to make friends straight away. I had very few genuine connections with people. I think I had one very good friend for the whole of Year 7 and that was about it, before I kind of found my footing and started to find people that I liked. I think it was made harder."

Male, 18-21, Metro VIC, #07

Social hierarchies and cliques can limit opportunities for meaningful connections, especially in schools.

"Within school, [there are] cliques. I feel like everyone establishes like a place in like the social hierarchy in the school. I feel like once you get in that it's... it's not hard to come down, but it's hard to like, go up, and sometimes I feel like they [are at] a higher level, so I can't talk to them."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

Mental health and personal circumstances

Mental health challenges, such as anxiety, the pressures of balancing work and study, or financial struggles can make it difficult for young people to engage socially. The fear of judgment or exclusion may also prevent some young people from participating in these community spaces.

"I think a lot of people are worried about judgement from other people so They either, like, don't speak up when they're like they want to, and then they miss opportunities to get into conversations and stuff like that... they're just too anxious."

Female, 18-21, Metro VIC, #06

Negative social media contexts and use

While participants observed that social media platforms can facilitate connection by providing common topics for discussion, they also harbor toxic elements such as online bullying. The presence of "breakaway chats" in established groups can also lead to feelings of exclusion.

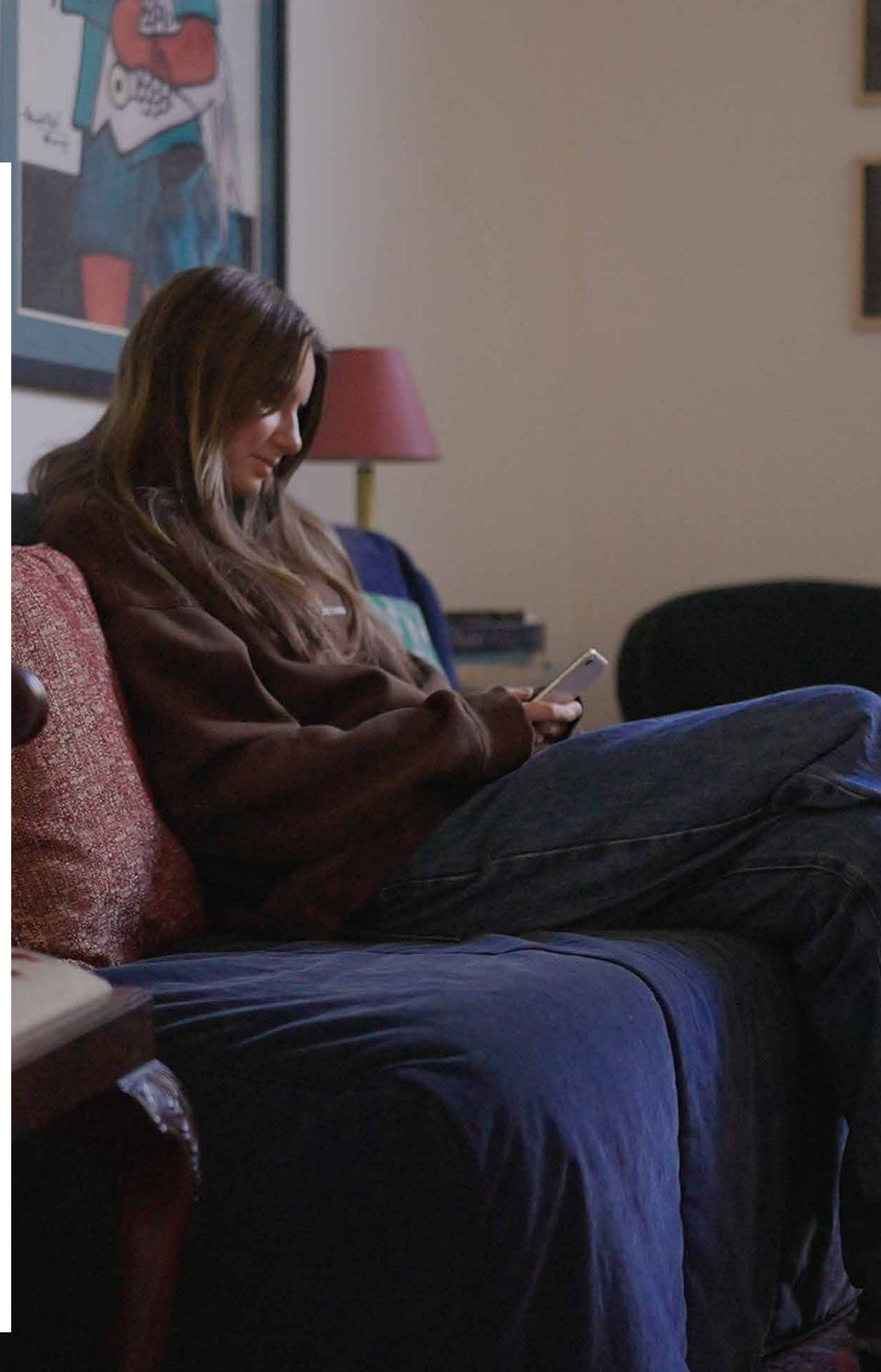
"I think because it's so easy to just directly message someone, a lot of maybe like mean stuff or like bullying and stuff happens over the Internet... I feel like happens often is like, let's tell you there's a big group chat and like everyone's texting on it or something. And then a lot of the time, people will break off into a smaller chat or something like that or they'll break off into one on one and be like, ohh, do you see what she said?... I feel like that's probably... easy to just like be mean I guess."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

One participant noted that while social media was an essential tool to stay connected with friends during the pandemic, the increased usage had now started to feel overwhelming and often resulted in stilted conversations.

"During COVID and stuff I remember, like, you know, [there'd be] lots of like late night text or chats calls. But like, I feel like, you know, over the past year or maybe a bit more, there's just so much on that it sort of gets overwhelming and then like I feel like I can't even respond to messages sometimes. I just leave it for a while... Also like it's hard to get online at the same time... So, like I don't like it when it'll be someone will text at 9 AM and then you'll get back to them at, like, 12."

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, #14



Some older participants admitted that they had used social media for external validation when they were younger but recognised now that it was detrimental to their mental health.

"Yeah, they would post pictures about themselves to get that extra validation or something like, OK, this this person's liking my post commented on my profile... I used to do that as a kid. when I was say 17, if I was not feeling in the best [mood], if I was feeling lonely, I'd probably do that as well. I don't do that anymore, but I used to do it."

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, CALD #09

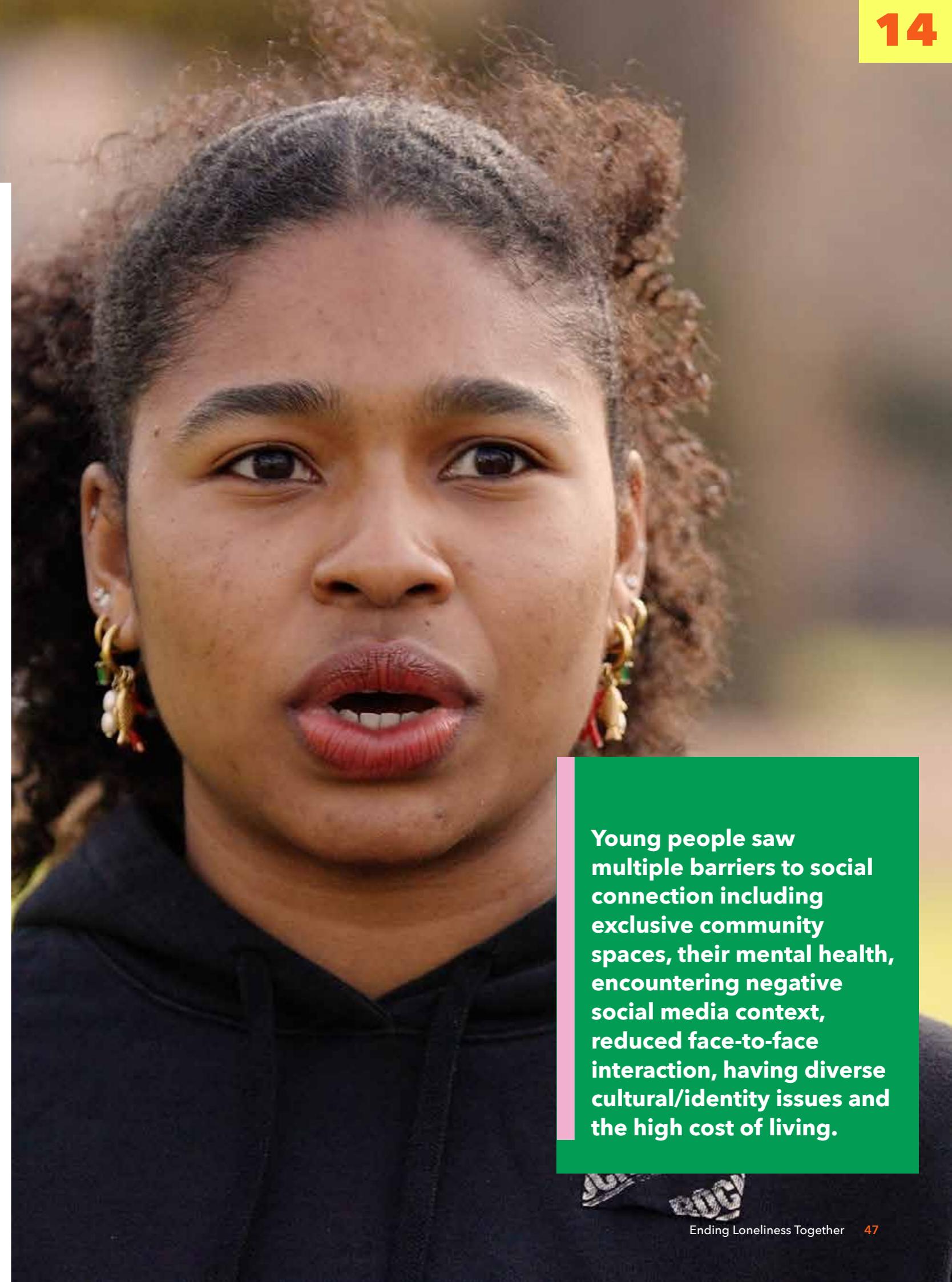
Physical and environmental factors

Several participants reported that pandemic's shift to online communication reduced the quality of face-to-face interactions and contributed to poorer mental health.

"... especially during COVID like you couldn't go and see your friends and yeah, we did have social media, but you really do need the in-person aspects I think cause... you don't really feel connected to them through the phone for that length of time."

Female, 18-21, Metro VIC, #05

Seasonal changes, such as reduced socialisation over the winter months and geographic factors, such as rural living, can also impede social interactions.



Cultural and identity issues

Participants from CALD backgrounds noted that language barriers and cultural expectations could pose challenges for individuals from similar backgrounds, leading to potential exclusion.

"It was the weirdest thing to me, because growing up, I used to always just feel like I'll just be friends with everyone. But [here in uni] I see mainly people like they used to have their own groups. For example, Koreans would have their own groups or Indians would have theirs... Then I realised this is because there is a cultural gap, and nobody really wants to take that initiative to explore another culture completely because they find comfort in the place they grew up in."

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, CALD #09

For LGBTIQ+ youth, fear of judgment based on identity could pose a significant barrier to forming social connections.

"I would say just being a teenager in general because there's a lot going on, like biologically, socially. At least in my experience, it made it harder to actively want to get to know people. I wanted to isolate myself and just figure out who I was first, which was a bit counterproductive."

Trans-male, 22-25, Rural NSW, CALD & LGBTIQ+ #10

High cost of living

A participant from the older cohort noted that maintaining social connections was becoming increasingly challenging due to the rising cost of living. As activities once considered affordable had become significantly more expensive, young people, many of whom have limited financial means, felt constrained in their options to build on social connections, further compounding feelings of isolation and loneliness.

"Like you'll often say, oh, you'll go on drive [with friends] or whatever... but that is so like incredibly expensive. Having to pay for your own car and like petrol and insurance and maintenance. Sometimes it's hard to... even like... sit down in peace and have a chat. All the cafes will close at 2 and by the time everyone gets out of their jobs, you're having to go to a restaurant and [you're] spending 50 dollars. Like all the sort of basics are much more expensive."

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, #14

Young people saw multiple barriers to social connection including exclusive community spaces, their mental health, encountering negative social media context, reduced face-to-face interaction, having diverse cultural/identity issues and the high cost of living.

Facilitators of Social Connection

When young people speak about what helps them to connect with others, five themes emerged:

Supportive relationships

Having an established social network of trusted and reliable friends and family members provided participants with assurances that they would be supported if they reached out for assistance.

"Being able to relate to other people like within your community and have kind of like a support network. And I guess people you can rely on and communicate with. Who you can empathise with. That sort of thing."

Female, 22-25, Regional VIC, LGBTIQ+ #12

Participants noted that having friends who actively initiate social interactions or who simply reach out for casual meetups, create opportunities to sustain existing relationships and foster an environment where young people feel valued and included.

"... people who enabled the social connection. I would say like in like a friendship, the friend that reaches out to the other person, who checks up on them."

Male, 16-18, Metro VIC, #02



"I think I feel most connected with my friends is when we've organised to do something. I think in school it's almost forced. You know, you have to like, there's some sort of social expectation to sit with your friends. [But] when you've organised to catch up with people, it's completely voluntary. And that voluntary aspect just... means something more."

Male, 18-21, Metro VIC, #07

Some participants acknowledged the importance of being part of multiple social groups, for example, at school or university, in the workplace, and in structured groups in the community.

"I go to this youth group on Friday night, I feel like it gives me new ways to socialise. It's always healthy to have multiple friend groups going around. Some of my work mates... are my friends."

Male, 16-18, Rural WA, #16

Shared interests and activities

Participants felt that having shared interests such as sports, hobbies or cultural connections can facilitate connections by creating common ground for interaction. Moreover, regularly scheduled activities within these groups ensure that social interactions are not left to chance but are instead built into participants' lives, creating more opportunities to form and grow social connections.



“... like if you have stuff in common or you’re finding common ground on a topic or something like that I feel like it’s always like a positive thing. Especially cause I’m in school... like if you talk to someone that you don’t usually talk to when you realise ohh like we actually have like a good connection or like a lot in common.”

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, #01

“I’m really involved in the [Name of theatre group]. So that’s a pretty big community that I’ve been in for quite some time. So that’s kind of where a lot of my social connection comes from is from like doing shows with people and going to rehearsals...you’re seeing the same people at least three times a week and for like multiple hours each time.”

Trans-male, 22-25, Metro VIC, LGBTIQ+ #04

Accessible community spaces

Participants felt that being in close proximity to friends or attending school or university together enhances opportunities for connection and strengthens social networks by providing regular opportunities for meaningful engagement.

While workplaces and sporting activities foster connections through shared goals and interests, community spaces that can host things like study groups can encourage spontaneous interactions that build camaraderie.

“I guess meeting people through the places I go to. I mean, you got the sporting clubs, you got university, you got work. I would say like through like the church as well. Like there’s also that kind of way. [They’re] very good for the social aspects.”

Male, 18-21, Metro VIC, #08

“After lectures, someone’s hungry, you go to eat together. We used to go to [Name of restaurant] after almost every lecture. Talk or discuss somethings so it gave us that extra opportunity to mingle amongst each other and take that next step towards building a good friendship.”

Male, 22-25, Metro NSW, CALD #09

A shared sense of cultural and personal identity

Participants noted that shared cultural traditions, values and languages often foster a sense of trust and understanding while making new social connections. These connections create a sense of belonging and ease in diverse social environments.

“...community events and all that... it allows a whole different like diverse community to come together. It’s just like shared connections and culture. We speak about the things we do that are way different. With my friends from school, you know, I normally talk about cars and like other stuff like football with them. But the people from [my community] I talk to them about more important things.”

Male, 18-21, Metro VIC, #08



Young people felt that they can build and maintain social connection if they have supportive relationships, shared interest and activities, safe community spaces and having healthy online connections.

Participants identifying as queer also emphasised the value of queer visibility and support networks that offer resources, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, for fostering social connections.

Making and maintaining healthy social connection online

Despite having some negative aspects, participants noted that digital platforms were also instrumental in bolstering connections and were particularly beneficial during significant transitions such as staying in touch with friends after moving to a new city or building new connections. Online communities were also a significant support for marginalised groups and offered safe spaces for connection and identity exploration.

"If you're in school or something like that and you don't really have any like many people within your community to look to, it's really nice being able to connect with people and make those friends online. So, I think that that is like continuously a really important thing for marginalised groups like that."

Female, 22-25, Regional VIC, LGBTIQ+ #12

"[Social media apps] help to maintain friendships because if I didn't have those, then there's no way of me interacting with [my friends]... Like usually when they send me TikToks or we send each other reels, it's like, you know, like, oh, they're still thinking about me or I'm still there [with them]."

Female, 16-18, Metro VIC, CALD #15

"Some of the best friends I've made have been friends I made through social media. [And] most of my friends are long distance. That's the only way I can talk with them and share what's going on in our lives. And that's how I met them as well."

Trans-male, 22-25, Rural NSW, CALD & LGBTIQ+ #10

Participants who reported having previous negative experiences involving social media also avoid it when they feel lonely.

"Everyone goes on [social media] like everyday like it's just in our lives now. I just say have a cleanse, do something that you know will make you feel better, like remove the followers that you don't like or you don't know."

Female, 18-21, Metro VIC, #05

A WAY FORWARD

Everyone can make a difference.

Loneliness is a feeling almost of us have experienced at some point. But, for many young Australians, feeling lonely is more than just an occasional feeling. It's a regular part of their everyday life. This report shows that loneliness isn't just about being alone. It's about feeling socially disconnected, unseen, or feeling like you do not belong even if there are people around you.

Young people shared how things like poor health, financial stress, moving schools or cities, or feeling different from those around them can make it harder to connect. They also spoke about the emotional weight of trying to fit in, the impact of social media, and the fear of being judged for who they are.

Young people also shared what helps. A friend who checks in. A parent they can rely on. A safe, welcoming environment. Community spaces where they can just be themselves.

We can create small moments of connection and build these to more meaningful social connection. Small moments can transform strangers into acquaintances, acquaintances into friends.

Everyone has a role to play

Young people: You are not alone in how you are feeling. Building small moments of connection all the way along can help you feel less lonely. You also have the power to support others who feel lonely. A simple kind message or action can change someone's day. Know that your voice matters in shaping how we respond to loneliness.

Parents and families: Be a safe landing place for young people. Keep the lines of communication open. Make quality time to connect and have meaningful conversations. Stay curious about what your young people are experiencing and let them invite you into their world.

Educators: Schools and universities are powerful places to build healthy social connection and offer inclusion. Foster environments where students feel safe, included, and encouraged to speak up. Prioritise social wellbeing alongside mental health and academic success and don't delay appropriate action if bullying is present.

Health services: Prioritise social wellbeing alongside physical and mental health needs. Train health practitioners on how to identify, screen, direct or redirect young people to the appropriate avenues. Learn to speak about loneliness in a non-stigmatising and empowering way.

Workplaces: Young people entering a new job may take longer to adjust socially, especially in large or older workforces. They often have higher social needs and thrive in environments where they can build peer-to-peer relationships. Mentors can also play an important role by offering stability, guidance, and reassurance during this transition.

Community: Create and maintain inclusive safe spaces that welcome young people, especially those from diverse backgrounds. Invest in evidence-based solutions and programs that bring young people together and support their belonging.

Policy makers: Elevate loneliness as a national priority in Australia. Recognise loneliness as a serious issue that affects health, education, employment, and social outcomes. Support evidence-based programs, fund inclusive spaces, and ensure young people are part of shaping the solutions. Ensure that all young Australians are given economic opportunities to live, learn, and be. Give young people a voice when decisions about them are being made.

By listening and acting together, we can build a more connected and kind society where no young person feels left behind.

APPENDIX

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Research Methodology

Loneliness measurement

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Kessler Psychological distress scale (K10)

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Ware, J. E., Gandek, B., & the IQOLA Project Group (1994). The SF-36® Health Survey: Development and use in mental health research and the IQOLA Project. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 23, 49-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207411.1994.11449283>

Smoking and alcohol frequency

Based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

Physical activity

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1995 National Health and Nutrition.

Financial prosperity

Based on International Social Science Survey Australia (IsssA) Survey 2000 (q. 5, p. 84)

Financial strain

Based on ABS 1999 Survey of Living Standards pilot (q. H6)

Relationship with family and friends

Based on Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Australian Living Standards Study (Part 4, q. 103)

Frequency of social interaction

Based on Tasmanian Healthy Communities Survey (HCS)

Neighborhood trust and characteristics

Based on the IsssA and the British Social Attitudes (BSA).

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Cut Off Scores on Psychometrically Validated Measures

Loneliness refers to people with median scoring higher than 4 on the loneliness scale validated by Manera et al (2022).

Good physical and mental health status is calculated using the Physical Component Score (PCS) and Mental Component Score (MCS) of the SF-36 scale with a cut off score of higher than 41.

K10 score (using Kessler Psychological Distress Scale) from 10-15 were categorized as "Low psychological distress", from 16-21 as "Moderate psychological distress", from 22-29 as "High", and from 30-50 as "Very high".

Glossary of Key Terms

Loneliness is a subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships.

Persistent loneliness, sometimes refer to as chronic loneliness, is loneliness that persists for a longer duration. In this report, persistent loneliness is defined as meeting criteria for loneliness in two consecutive years.

Episodic loneliness, sometimes refer to transient loneliness, is loneliness that occurs for a short duration. In this report, episodic loneliness is defined as meeting criteria for loneliness for one year either in 2022 or 2023.

Social Connection refers to a continuum of the size and diversity of one's social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive or negative qualities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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JOIN US

1 in 3 Australian adults are lonely. If you're anything like us, you think it's time for that to change.

There are many ways you can join us in the movement to address loneliness in Australia, including by becoming a member, or supporting us as a donor or an organisational partner.

To make an immediate impact, consider donating online. By making a charity donation, you are supporting Ending Loneliness Together to lead a national, coordinated response to tackling persistent loneliness effectively.

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www.endingloneliness.com.au



If you're looking for connection:

Search our National Directory to find groups, organisations and services that will help you, or someone you know, connect with others and build meaningful relationships.

endingloneliness.com.au/search

If you need someone to talk to, call:

Lifeline on **13 11 14**

Men's Line on **1300 789 978**

Kids Helpline on **1800 551 800**

Beyond Blue on **1300 22 46 36**

Suicide Call Back Service on **1300 659 467**



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