

Submission to the Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impact of Loneliness

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)

November 2024

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
About the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)	3
Introduction	4
COVID-19.....	5
Cost of Living.....	5
Mental Health	6
Social Media.....	7
Bullying.....	8
Children and Young People in care	8
Conclusion.....	9

About the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, wellbeing and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*, my functions include:

- (a) to advocate for and promote the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people.,
- (b) to promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity.
- (c) to conduct special inquiries under Part 5 into issues affecting children and young people.
- (d) to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, reports, policies, practices, procedures and services affecting children and young people.
- (e) to conduct, promote and monitor research into issues affecting children and young people.
- (f) to promote the provision of information and advice to assist children and young people.
- (g) to prepare, in consultation with the Minister, a 3-year strategic plan for children and young people in the State.
- (h) such other functions as are conferred or imposed on the Advocate by or under this or any other Act.

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/>.

Introduction

The Advocate draws on the voices, experiences and aspirations of children and young people across NSW through face-to-face consultations and through mixed methods surveys, utilising the expertise of SEC Newgate Australia Pty Ltd. Annually, the Advocate conducts a survey during Youth Week which asks children and young people a variety of questions related to their wellbeing and their life as a young person in NSW.

Social connections, the need to be with friends both in the physical and the digital world, connection to culture and family and belonging are consistently raised as integral to their positive development and wellbeing. However, children and young people also emphasise the significant issues they experience in developing and maintaining these connections.

It is important to acknowledge that there are certain cohorts of children and young people who experience social exclusion and/or isolation at higher rates than their peers including those in rural and regional NSW, LGBTQIA+, Aboriginal children and young people, young people living with disability, young people in the care system and those involved in the youth justice system.

In the 2023 Strategic Plan for Children and Young People Tracking report, whilst the majority of children and young people who participated in the survey reported feeling positive about their future, a significant number of respondents reported feeling worried and concerned about their future. In the 2023 Strategic Plan for Children and Young People Tracking report, when asked what matters to young people, 'fear stress or uncertainty for the future' was reported as one of the top 10 issues for the first time since we began polling that question. Some groups are noticeably less hopeful when compared to 2022, including those who have had contact with the justice system, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young Neurodiverse children.

We acknowledge that social isolation and loneliness are discrete constructs.¹ However, for the purpose of this submission, and drawing on our experience with speaking directly to children and young people, the terms belonging, connection, social exclusion, social isolation, connectedness, and loneliness have been used interchangeably.

The voices of children and young people are central to this submission. We have focused on presenting their direct experiences of social isolation and loneliness, which we have collected through face-to-face consultations, Youth Week and Strategic Plan polling, roundtables, and events. Young people have shared their experiences across a wide range of topic areas including COVID-19², cost-of-living³, mental health⁴, social media⁵, bullying⁶ and young people in care⁷.

A key role of the Advocate and the Office is to elevate the voices and experiences of children and young people from across New South Wales on issues that matter to them. For this reason, while

¹ Lawn, S. & Kaine, C. (2022) *Understanding Loneliness and Mental Health*, Lived Experience Australia Ltd: Oaklands Park, South Australia, Australia.

² ACYP (2021) *COVID-19 Sentiment Tracking Research reports – Wave 1-4*; ACYP (2021) *Back to School: Student insights after lockdown interim report*.

³ ACYP (2023) ['It should be easier to just exist': How children and young people are impacted by and responding to the rising cost of living in NSW](#).

⁴ ACYP (2023) [The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People: Tracking Report 01](#); ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#).

⁵ ACYP (2024) *Social Media Summit – Youth Workshop Survey Summary* October 2024; ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#).

⁶ ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#); ACYP (2022) *Anti-bullying roundtable report*.

⁷ ACYP (2024) [Moving cage to cage: Final Report of the Special Inquiry into Children and Young People in Alternative Care Arrangements](#); ACYP (2021) [The Voices of Children and Young People in Out of Home Care Report](#).

their experiences may not fit specifically into the terms of reference, we believe their voices are an important addition to this inquiry.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound negative effects on the wellbeing of children and young people. In polling captured by ACYP throughout 2020-2021, the overall life sentiment of children and young people was low, with young people consistently reporting feeling negative emotions. In the August 2021 tracking report⁸, the majority of respondents reported feeling tired (55%) bored (51%) stressed (52%) anxious (46%) and lonely (36%). By way of contrast, only 40% reported feeling happy.

Children and young people felt concerned about the impact COVID-19 was having on their social life (70%) and on their mental health (66%).⁹ The stay-at-home orders left children and young people feeling socially isolated (63%) and less engaged in physical activities (54%). While both young men and woman were affected, young females reported higher levels of psychological distress.

Towards the end of 2021, the return to school brought an immediate increase to life sentiment for some children and young people. For others however reengaging with society did not alleviate feelings of anxiety (44%), stress (51%) and loneliness (26%), and the overall levels of psychological distress showed only a slight improvement from earlier in the year.¹⁰ While children and young people were feeling stressed, anxious and bored about not being able to socialise and see their friends, they also had concerns relating to 'interacting with other students after being isolated for so long'¹¹ with 26% finding socialising with classmates difficult after being in lockdown.¹²

Cost of Living

In our 2023 Youth Week Polling¹³, the cost of living was reported to be the biggest concern for young people in NSW. The majority of young people are either very or quite concerned (57%) about the cost of living today, and around a third (34%) reported they were currently having difficulty making ends meet. Young people are feeling the financial burden in relation to both the immediate management of everyday expenses and impacts on their future planning and decisions.

More than anything else, young people reported feeling anxious (33%) and stressed (32%) about their financial situation, and only a little over half aged 18+ (54%) reported feeling in control of their finances. While feeling stressed or concerned about your finances may not directly correlate to feeling lonely, we do know that the spending habits of children and young people have changed with (84%) reporting they spend less on social activities and going out with friends. While the COVID-19

⁸ ACYP (2021) *COVID-19 Sentiment Tracking Research report, Wave 1-15 August 2021*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ with respondents reporting they felt 'so depressed that nothing could cheer them up' all of the time (4%) most of the time (10%) some of the time (16%) and a little of the time (21%). ACYP (2020) *COVID-19 Sentiment Tracking Research Wave 4*.

¹¹ ACYP (2021) *Back to School: Student insights after lockdown interim report*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ ACYP (2023) [The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People: Tracking Report 01](#).

pandemic caused severe constraints on young people's capacity to socialise, they are now facing a new barrier to building and maintaining strong social connections.¹⁴

Young people also reported undertaking a range of activities to generate additional income and boost their ability to meet the high cost of living. More than a quarter (27%) reported taking on additional hours or an additional job –something which will put further pressure on their already diminished ability to socialise –while 21% have started a side hustle.¹⁵

In the Youth Week 2022 polling, we heard that children and young people were very interested in participating in activities outside of school and home activities. While over 50% reported playing sport or being involved in the creative arts, many respondents also felt that they would like to be more involved in sporting and social activities but could not due to the associated costs and insufficient time. When asked about the reasons why they did not partake in existing activities, 'I don't have time' was the number one reason. 'It is too expensive' and 'I don't have transport to get there' were other common answers.¹⁶

Another young person reported, *"I think there could be more recreational facilities that are more open for the public. Currently if I want to hang out with my friends, I have to worry about having enough spare pocket money to go to for example, the cinema eating out."*¹⁷

It is important that children and young people not only have access to, but sufficient time to participate in social activities of their choosing with other like-minded young people, as it is a protective factor against poor mental health and loneliness. In addition to being active, having a sense of belonging and a purpose in life, all contribute to positive mental health. One young person reported, *"I think they [children and young people] feel the need to belong to a group or identify as something, rather than just travelling their own path. Peer pressure and social media pressures us big"*.¹⁸ When asked what is important to fostering a sense of belonging, hanging out with friends and spending time with family were the most common responses, followed by music, sport and hobbies.

Mental Health

Mental health and wellbeing are consistently raised by children and young people as important factors in their lives.

In Strategic Plan Tracking surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022, mental health was cited as the number one issue facing children and young people across NSW, with around one in three mentioning this unprompted.¹⁹ In 2023, mental health was cited as the second highest issue of concern just falling behind cost of living. Analysis also indicated that mental health had the single greatest impact on how children and young people felt about life overall.²⁰ The overall number of young people reporting that mental health is a concern, has fallen since last year. While any decline is positive, this change may reflect the preoccupation associated with the cost-of-living pressures,

¹⁴ ACYP (2023) ['It should be easier to just exist': How children and young people are impacted by and responding to the rising cost of living in NSW](#).

¹⁵ ACYP (2023) Youth Week Polling Report 2023.

¹⁶ ACYP (2022) Youth Week Polling Report 2022.

¹⁷ ACYP (2023) [The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People: Tracking Report 01](#), p12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ ACYP (2023) ACYP (2023) [The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People: Tracking Report 01](#), p14; ACYP (2022) 2022 Strategic Plan Tracking Survey; ACYP (2021) 2021 Strategic Plan Baseline Survey.

²⁰ ACYP (2021) 2021 Strategic Plan Baseline Survey.

rather than an actual improvement in mental health and wellbeing. Particular cohorts of young people including LGBTQIA+, young people living with disability and those with financial difficulties report greater mental health challenges.²¹

Whilst children and young people's self-reported ratings for mental health improved marginally between 2021 and 2022, approximately one in five rated their mental health as poor in both years, and mental health ratings continue to receive the lowest score across all the key measures of the Strategic Plan.²²

Accessing support is a key concern for young people when they are asked about mental health issues. Children and young people frequently report that there are significant barriers for them to access support. In the 2023 Strategic Plan Tracking report fewer young people reported seeking mental health support in the last 12 months.

Children and young people report that psychologists are expensive, and waitlists are long, one young person responded, *"I feel that we can feel pretty lonely and hopeless, and do not know where to reach out or seek for help"*.²³

Social Media

Children and young people who engage in online activities have mixed and varied experiences. While there are numerous benefits for children and young people including, but not limited to, access to mental, physical and sexual health information, access to support services, platforms to connect with friends and family, and educational support. However, there can be negative impacts as well. In recent polling ACYP undertook relating to social media, 46% of children and young people reported that social media has both a positive and negative impact of young people lives, with 10% believing that social media had a negative or very negative impact.²⁴ In the recent NSW Social Media Summit, 47% of young people reported that social media has a negative or very negative impact on their mental health.²⁵ One young person commented, *"in my experience social media has often led to feelings of loneliness and isolation when I see other people hanging out without me or doing things that I want to do"*.

Feelings of loneliness can make people more vulnerable to worrying about their relationships and can increase anxious thoughts and feelings about others judging them in a negative way. One young person reported *"Lack of connection to community, self-esteem issues from seeing only the best of people's lives from the internet"*.²⁶

While social media may not be the primary cause of loneliness, it does have the ability to impact the feelings of loneliness and isolation in children and young people. In consultations with young people who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, the Advocate heard how social media a place where young people in the LGBTQIA+ community often experience discrimination in both their media feeds as well as personal, targeted attacks.

²¹ ACYP (2022) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#).

²² ACYP (2023) [The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People - Tracking Report 01](#), p7.

²³ ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#), p12.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ ACYP (2024) *Social Media Summit – Youth Workshop Survey Summary* October 2024.

²⁶ ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#), p12.

One young person reported, *“As a trans person, online and on social media, I constantly even if it’s not being directed to me, see a constant flow of transphobic stuff and that has in general, a pretty big negative impact on young trans people’s mental health. And I have had things like cyberbullying and harassment targeted towards me and my online friends directly, through things like infiltrating those safe spaces and things like that and I definitely think that it’s a big issue.”*

However, children and young people also talk about social media being a place where they can find connection, community and information about issues that are important to them. In the report *“The Voices of LGBTQIA+ young people in NSW”*²⁷, when ACYP asked where they sought information about sexual consent and respectful relationships, the quantitative study found that LGBTQIA+ young people were more likely than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers to rely on social media, their own experiences, TV shows and movies, search engines, online forums and support groups.

While it is encouraging to see the current momentum within and across Government departments and broader community, it is important the issue remains a top priority until such time that online spaces have the protective mechanisms, in place to ensure all children and young people are always safe when they are accessing online spaces.

Bullying

Bullying is another area of concern for children and young people in NSW. In the 2023 Strategic Plan Tracking report, it was the 6th most important issue.²⁸ In 2023, 36% of children and young people had experienced bullying in the past 12 months. While this is a slight decrease from the 2022 figures (39%), it is still a significant number with more than one in three children and young people impacted.

The experience of bullying is much more prevalent among certain cohorts – such as neurodiverse children and young people, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and young people, those with a disability, those with a mental illness, younger aged children, and young people living in regional areas. Over 50% of children and young people in those groups reported experiencing bullying.²⁹ In a roundtable held in 2022 with the Department of Education, young people reported that bullying made them feel *“worthless, excluded”* and *isolated*.³⁰

Children and Young People in care

Children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) are a particularly vulnerable group and often have a range of complex and co-existing needs and challenges, regularly relating to experiences of trauma and distress. This can result in increased physical, mental and social health needs, which are unfortunately often coupled with limited access to resources.

²⁷ ACYP (2022) [The Voices of LGBTQIA+ young people in NSW](#).

²⁸ ACYP (2024) [The NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young people Tracking Report 02](#).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ ACYP (2022) *Anti-bullying roundtable report*.

The Advocate heard from children and young people in the OOHC system that being disconnected from friends and missing out on opportunities to socialise while in care had a negative impact on their mental health. Maintaining relationships is important to children and young people in care and without these connections, children are vulnerable to experiencing isolation and loneliness.

A significant theme that emerged in consultations with children and young people in alternative care arrangements (ACA's), was the experience of isolation, including disconnection from family, friends, community, and culture. Being in an ACA can further impact or cause poor mental health in children and young people – resulting in increased anxiety, uncertainty of the future, no sense of belonging and re-traumatisation.³¹ As one young person likened his experience to being an animal, “[T]hey just move me around like a doggy in the pound pretty much, moving cage to cage.”³² Even children and young people in residential care or more stable placements reported having limited freedoms to socialise and be with friends. In consultations with children and young people in OOHC, one young person reported, “We weren’t really allowed to socialise outside of school, so we weren’t actually allowed to meet up with friends.”³³

Moving between placements and care regulations are barriers for young people trying to maintain and cultivate their social connections. When asked what children and young people would like to have done if they were not in care, one young person responded “I guess, like being able to socialise more. Have like a better social health. I always struggle to try and talk to people. And I guess, without the system and without my circumstances, I would’ve been able to do that better.”³⁴

Social connections are integral to the health and wellbeing of children and young people and perhaps even more important to children and young people who are living without a supportive and loving family environment. It is important that relationships and connections are prioritised when decisions are being made about the welfare of children and young people in the OOHC system.

Conclusion

Responding to the issue of loneliness requires a coordinated, community-wide approach which aims to improve the overall health and wellbeing of all people, including children and young people. Children and young people need more support to navigate what is happening within their communities and around the world. Societal pressures inadvertently placed on children and young people are leaving them feeling a myriad of negative emotions, including loneliness. Early intervention and prevention strategies that emphasise and nurture the positive social connections of children and young people should be prioritised. When children and young people do become socially isolated and require mental health support, it is important that they have access to the appropriate services and support systems they need, at the time they need them.

³¹ Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care (2023) [Submission to the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People: Special Inquiry: Children and Young People in Alternative Care Arrangements \(ACAs\)](#).

³² ACYP (2024) [Moving cage to cage: Final Report of the Special Inquiry into Children and Young People in Alternative Care Arrangements](#).

³³ ACYP (2021) [The Voices of Children and Young People in Out of Home Care Report](#).

³⁴ *Ibid.*