

Media release

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Social media not the panacea for loneliness: new study

The risk of loneliness increases for those in the community raising children, either as a single parent or as part of a couple, a new study from The Australia Institute has found.

All the lonely people: Loneliness in Australia 2001-2009 reveals that three in ten Australians experienced loneliness in that period and that the number of people moving in and out of loneliness is increasing.

The Institute's Director of Research and report author David Baker said more Australians are experiencing loneliness now than in the early 2000s.

"Our study found that loneliness is higher amongst men (36%) than women (29%). Surprisingly couples with children were lonelier than couples without children. The lifestyle change that occurs for many new parents appears to loosen the connections they have with their pre-existing social networks," said Mr Baker.

"Although household type was found to be a key determinant of loneliness, there was no real difference between the levels of loneliness recorded in urban, regional or rural areas. Those earning higher incomes were no more or less lonely."

The study also examined the role of social media, namely Facebook, in the lives of those who identified as lonely. Lonely users reported having fewer Facebook 'friends' and were less likely to count them as real friends. However, they were more likely to say Facebook helps them connect with family and existing friends.

"This contrasts with non-lonely users who use Facebook as a means to further expand their existing network of social support by finding new online 'friends'," said Mr Baker.

"Given the rapid increase in the use of social media and the government's policy focus on 'social inclusion', there is a risk that social networking sites may be over promoted, especially to younger people.

"We have already seen the Department of Human Services, which oversees access to social, health and other government payments, enthusiastically embrace social media by creating a digital media section. While it is certainly a positive step that the government is moving with the times, it does need to recognise that online social connection may in fact mask real social disconnection," said Mr Baker.

The Institute's paper also highlights risk factors for experiencing loneliness and discusses the policy implications of this for the Federal Government. The paper can be downloaded from www.tai.org.au, under 'Publications'.

For media enquiries, please contact:

Serena Rogers 0421 759 262