

# Ending Loneliness

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

loneliness, people, pandemic, question, community, andrew, connection, australia, holly, migrants, support, new zealand, lonely, social, important, experiences, exacerbated, group, access, building

## SPEAKERS

Andrew Giles MP, Holly Walker, Ebony Bennett

### **Ebony Bennett** 00:02

G'day everyone. I'm Ebony Bennett. I'm Deputy Director at the Australian Institute and welcome to Australia Institute TV. Thanks for joining us for today's webinar. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which I live in work. This is nanowall country, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. Just a few tips before we begin to help things run smoothly. If you hover over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a q&a function where you can ask questions of our panellists. And you should also be able to upvote questions from other people. Please keep things civil in the chat, or we'll have to beat you out. We don't normally do that. But we will if we have to. And finally, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded and will be posted on our website and emailed to you all, after the discussion. We're just having some technical difficulties with Andrew Giles at the moment. So I'm just texting to let him know how he can get in.

### **Andrew Giles MP** 01:00

I'm here now, Ebony. Sorry.

### **Ebony Bennett** 01:03

Great, excellent.

### **Andrew Giles MP** 01:04

I'm very sorry. We had the wrong link in my calendar. And yeah, I'm very sorry.

### **Ebony Bennett** 01:11

All right, just glad that we've got you.

01:15

So today, we're discussing loneliness. I want to thank you all for joining us, we had upwards of 750 people RSVP today. So obviously, a topic that people are really keen to hear about. And we've all probably experienced loneliness at one point or another. But loneliness, of course, isn't the same as

just being alone. And so what is it? Well, that's sometimes hard to answer as well, circumstances which might make one person feel lonely, or perfectly fine for the next person. So at its heart, I guess loneliness is the disconnect that we feel between the kind of relationships and the connectedness that we want to have with other people, and the how we perceive the that connectedness that we're currently experiencing. So there's a gap there between what we desire and what we perceived, that we currently have access to. So the Australia Institute has released a few papers on loneliness over the years, including mapping loneliness in Australia, and all the lonely people, you can find those on our website. And amongst other things that found that for example, couples with children are more likely to be lonely than couples without and that the number of people feeling lonely in Australia is increasing. And loneliness can of course have negative impacts on health well being life expectancy. So it has some pretty clear policy implications to for things like health and social inclusion. So to discuss this issue, I am joined by two fabulous guests today. Andrew Giles is the Shadow Minister for cities and urban infrastructure, the Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs, the Shadow Minister assisting for Immigration and Citizenship, and of course, the Federal member for scallan. And today he's joining us because he's also the co chair of the parliamentary friends of ending loneliness, along with Dr. Fiona Martin, who sends her apologies today. And Holly Walker is the deputy director of the Helen Clark foundation and a Ws PE fellow. And she's the author of new research from the Helen Clark foundation that we'll be discussing today about loneliness. Great, Holly and Andrew, thanks so much for joining us. Glad to be with you. Having us. Andrew, could you please kick us off by telling us a little bit about the parliamentary friends of ending loneliness and why you think loneliness is such a big policy issue.

**Andrew Giles MP 03:37**

Look, thank Thanks very much, if any and Hi, good morning or good afternoon depending on where everyone is on this certain. Can I start by acknowledging that I'm participating on Rhodri land and pay my respects to elder's past, present and emerging and all First Nations people present on this call? Can I also thank the Australia Institute and the Helen Clark foundation for bringing together this incredibly important and also, I would say, timely conversation. Because one of the key lessons to me about the pandemic, perhaps as a Melburnian, particularly through four months of fairly hard lockdown has been the reflection, it's put on the importance of social connection to all of us in our lives.

04:28

I've been asked to speak briefly so I'll try and make that brief so we can open up the conversation. But I also feel I should talk a little bit about the parliamentary friendship group as as ebony has touched upon, and perhaps one or two very broad reflections to help shape the conversation. Before we get into Holly's really excellent slides which I've had the privilege of saying in advance.

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The reason to put in place a parliamentary friendship group, which is really just a bipartisan group of

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Members of Parliament and senators to highlight a particular issue was my concern that while loneliness is something that's often talked about, it is talked about as something that is inherently personal, and its consequences have not been well understood, have not well been understood by individual citizens, but particularly by policymakers and by anyone concerned about public policy. And I

guess what this parliamentary friendship group is designed to do is to build a bridge between the amazing work that's been done by academics and civil society organisations, and policymaking to recognise both that loneliness is something that affects a very large number of Australians and New Zealanders, and is something that can be affected in a positive and a negative sense by governmental policy settings. And what we are keen to do in the first instance is to raise the awareness of loneliness as a challenge for society to respond to, and then to destigmatise loneliness to build a greater sense in the Australian community in our case, so that we'd like to reach over the ditch if that ambitions okay by you, Holly

06:14

to to encourage all of us to talk more about our experiences of loneliness, which is obviously as ebony said out, a very subjective experience, you know, being alone and being lonely are clearly not the same thing. To build a stronger evidence base on the one hand, about how loneliness affects us and how in particular, it affects different cohorts within our population. And these are things that we just don't know enough about how loneliness might particularly impact on newly arrived migrants and people seeking asylum on First Nations people on people in different physical settings, denser urban environments versus more remote rural environments, so that we can then begin to address the subject matter of today's event, ending loneliness. But firstly, we've got to define the problem more effectively. I guess that the last couple of observations that I wanted to make before

07:12

moving on to Holly and in the conversation with it's that it's clear to me that in Australia, and the data is very similar in New Zealand, we were experiencing a crisis in loneliness. Before we even heard of COVID-19. It's even clearer that the experience of the last year has really accelerated that crisis, demanding a response on the part of government and I'm pleased as well as being part of a bipartisan friendship group that the platform labour will take to the next election, recognises that crisis, and recognises the responsibility of national government to address it. And I guess the last two points that I wanted to leave you with with this, it seems also clear to me that decisions of government particularly austerity can exacerbate loneliness, both its incidence and its consequences. We need to make that clear in in this conversation about ending loneliness. What is less clear, is the scope of the interventions that can effectively address loneliness. And the the, the conversation that I think is really important, is to explore that and all the dimensions Now think about that in terms of the day jobs that Anthony Albanese has given me, because it seems clear that the urban form shapes our relationships, and so shapes loneliness, and also as the Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs, it seems to me that settlement policies, the way in which government engages with citizens, these are also critical questions that we need to better understand if we are to come together and in line minutes. So hopefully, there are some provocations for our conversation there. evany. I really look forward to carrying it on today.

**Ebony Bennett** 09:00

Thank you so much, Andrew. And Holly, I will come to you next because you've got some pretty recent research out about loneliness, but you kind of jumped onto it pretty quick as part of the pandemic, knowing that it was going to be a big policy issue. I think he's still on mute there, but can you just tell us Yeah, why you kind of spotted that as a potential problem and what your research has shown?

**Holly Walker 09:27**

Yes, sure. [Speaks in te reo Māori] So that's just to say, my ancestors come from England and Scotland. I grew up on the ancestral lands of people so I acknowledge them as the traditional owners into the traditional owners of all the lands where people are joining us from today. And yes, to answer your question, it was a combination of I think

09:58

luck in

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Timing really. So we had identified loneliness as being an issue we might potentially look into for our research programme in 2020, even before the pandemic hit, and particularly actually, from those equations about urban form, and how can we design our cities in our towns to facilitate social connection. And then obviously COVID arrived and made it suddenly a very urgent issue for us. So we were able to establish both a bit of a pre pandemic baseline and I would agree with what Andrew has said about that showing that it was quite an urgent, urgent public health and policy challenge even before COVID. And then certainly has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

**Ebony Bennett 10:40**

And so exacerbated by the pandemic did you want to take us through those couple of slides just showing those top level results so we can get a bit of an idea of the scope of the of the issue.

**Holly Walker 11:00**

Okay, so hopefully, everyone can see my slides there. And so today, I'll just quickly take, I'm going to rush through it really quickly. So I'm sure we have time to tease out some of the details in our conversation. But I'm going to draw on these two reports, and which we co published with our partners at W SP New Zealand. So as I mentioned, they looked at the pre pandemic levels of loneliness and New Zealand and then at the impact of COVID-19, and how things change throughout 2020. And I will caveat by saying these are New Zealand's statistics only batch from the Australian sources which I have looked at, I do think they're telling a broadly similar picture. And so we are fortunate enough that our government can collect official wellbeing statistics, which include the question, how often have you felt lonely in the previous four weeks, and the options are most or all of the time, some of the time, a little of the time, or none of the time and at the moment, these are being collected quarterly. So we've got a really good source of information about this from official statistics here. And at the population level, we can see that there certainly was a noticeable if apparently small increase in loneliness during 2020. But we'll unpack that more in a minute. So on the left, we've got our pre pandemic baseline from 2018. And then the other three bars are the last three quarters of 2020. So the June the June quarter data was gathered really during our main lockdown period here in New Zealand. And then the September data was a few months afterwards. And so as you can see, there were slight increases in both of those quarters. And interestingly enough, loneliness actually increased more later on in the year after the main lockdown period was over. And so with, it's an interesting finding, we think probably what's going on there is that, during the lockdown itself, many people were making a very conscious

effort to check in on each other. I'll be in non physical ways, but to you know, have lots of phone contacts, checking on neighbours, bringing shopping, things like that.

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And afterwards, when life went back to quote unquote, normal for most people, some people who were already quite vulnerable to loneliness may have been left feeling quite bereft and even more disconnected as a result of that kind of extra support dropping away.

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But you know, you can see here, if we look at population level, it looks like a relatively benign picture, actually, with things starting to fall back to quote unquote, normal by the end of the year. But when we drill down further, it's really clear that those population level figures are masking some much more severe experiences of loneliness for some people. And so, for example, people who are unemployed, you know, we can see there that work provides actually more than just income, it's providing a really important social network for people and a really important sense of identity and purpose. And so loss of employment can really trigger significant feelings of loneliness. And of course, employment also does provide income, and then it's not shown on this slide. But there's a very strong correlation to between income and loneliness. So then, the lower your income, the more likely you are to report feeling lonely, you know, family structure, as you mentioned, in your introduction, Ebony makes a big difference. Here, we found sole parents were the most likely and kind of family category to report feeling lonely, and it could well be related to you know, whether we're providing adequate support for so parents, financially and in socially, migrant status makes a really big difference. Andrew, you mentioned this to you know, this could be because new migrants, you know, are new to the country, they're yet to really form those local social support networks. And then of course, the pandemic with the closure of borders will have exacerbated that with many people separated from family. If ethnic differences too interesting that Maori are our indigenous population here in New Zealand, were among those groups more likely to report feeling lonely, you're likely to be related to the history of colonisation, you know, intergenerational impacts of policies to break up

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Collective ways of living, things like that. And also interesting to see Asian people reporting higher levels of loneliness, again, in the pandemic context, unfortunately, likely to be related to some of that widespread anti Asian discrimination that's unfortunately been occurring alongside the pandemic. And in our report, we had a big focus to and disabled people, because as you can see the 11.3% reporting feeling lonely most all of the time, which is huge, and about four times more likely than non disabled people to report feeling that way.

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So, you know, lots of ways in which disabled people are marginalised, leading to, I think, challenges with maintaining and forming social connection. And finally, the last one, I'll mention young people. So I think in a lot of the popular discourse about loneliness, we often talk about it as an issue for older people. Yeah. But actually, in the New Zealand data, at least, in terms of age, young people, aged 18 to 24, are by far the most likely group to report feeling lonely. And it tends to decrease with age, although it does take up a little bit, again, at the very oldest, you know, 75 plus. But young young people are

significantly impacted by loneliness. And we don't think talk enough about that. And so then, just finally, which hopefully will inform us on that conversation, we, we looked at the evidence of who's feeling most lonely, and then

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came up with six planks of an effective public policy response response to loneliness. And these were to make sure that people have enough money to close the digital divide, to help communities do the magic, because that's where a lot of that social connection really does happen. And to create friendly streets and neighbourhoods speaking, again, Andrew to the importance of urban form, I think, and to prioritise to understand who is already lonely and prioritise targeted interventions to those people, and to invest in frontline mental health services. So we made a number of more detailed recommendations in our report, and each of these headings which we might be able to get into a conversation. So sorry, that's a really quick read or stop tour through some of the findings, but hopefully useful for people.

**Ebony Bennett** 17:08

Yeah, no, thank you so much for sharing that, Holly. And I think now probably, it will be good to kind of touch on some of those policy responses or other ways that we can kind of ameliorate this loneliness epidemic that we're seeing. So Andrew, have you come across through any of your shadow portfolios, for example, way public policy ways to kind of combat some of these feelings of loneliness?

**Andrew Giles MP** 17:35

Yeah, look, I think we start off and Holly touched on this as well. And I'm really pleased to see in the sort of Response Framework, he laid out that last slide, the focus on the urban form, because how we how we build communities, basically shapes how people are able to obtain or be prevented for obtaining social connection. And that's something that I think was really brought home to all of us who experienced lockdown. But I think if we talk about urban policy, purely through a lens of productivity, we're missing out on that. And I think what we need to do is to have is one of our pillars of city shaping, to focus on livability. And that livability, seen through the lens of how human connections can be facilitated, whether that's in the construction of

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apartment buildings and ensuring that there are common areas, or whether it's thinking about some of the estates that certainly are built, were built in the 1980s, around my electorate office, where people do drive in and drive out of their driveways, and don't have any incidental contact with the people around them. Said building walkable communities is a big part of this as well.

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And sorry, without I'm probably going on a bit, but I think the slides have touched on the experience. So multicultural communities. And I think understanding how everyone feels a sense of belonging and connection to the national community is something that's that's really important. And again, we've seen through the pandemic, whether it's been through at one end of the spectrum, the rise of racism and populist forms of nativism or at the other, an inability of government health messaging to connect to people and identify the strengths that exist within communities. That seems to me to be a really critical question, you know, loneliness conversation, to treat people as they are to look to identifying existing

strengths within population cohorts and utilise them because this is not a one size fits all. Problem. Yeah, and it's, you know, the

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The pandemic is, I guess, impacted our daily lives in so many different ways. And I think we kind of touched on that idea that at the beginning, when we're having those initial lockdowns and things, people made a really big effort to reach out, particularly for people who live alone, and things like that made real efforts to forge those connections, and then yeah, as things kind of return to normal, a lot of those things can drop off. But here in Australia, we've obviously seen too, I was just listening to a young woman on the radio national this morning talking about being cut off from support from her mother who's overseas and can't get back. And she's had, you know, issues with postnatal depression and her mother had previously been able to travel to be with her, and obviously can't at the moment, and I guess there must be a huge number of new migrants and other migrant communities who are really cut off from a lot of that extended family, even if you're trying to make that effort to connect, sometimes the the option isn't actually there. And yeah, just reflecting for myself, you know, just changes the equation. In a pandemic, you know, I live alone, I never very rarely feel lonely. But it felt quite different when you know, those options to reach out there anymore. Holly, I'm just wondering if you could talk in a little bit more detail about some of those solutions that you've proposed and how they might help those specific groups that we were talking about? who seems to be more impacted young people, I'm thinking they're people with disabilities and perhaps migrant communities?

**Holly Walker** 21:36

Absolutely. Yeah. So

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I think so one of the so one of the platforms that I mentioned was about closing the digital divide, I think it's very easy for us to kind of assume that everybody has got access to the internet, in this day and age and, and many people do have access to devices. Now, you know, smartphone ownership is extremely high. But actually access to an affordable internet connection is much lower than that. And we still have in New Zealand, some 200,000 households without an internet connection. So during the pandemic, that suddenly became an extremely pressing social concern, because those digital ways of communicating became our ways of keeping in touch with each other. And things that young people often do, which is go to public spaces, like McDonald's, for example, to access free Wi Fi, we're not available to them during during the lockdown. Now, that's easy, of course, a little bit as we've moved out of lockdown conditions, but I think it's it brought into relief, quite a significant equity challenge that we have, certainly here in New Zealand, and I imagine it's, it's similar in Australia as well. And for young people in particular, you know, I think

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safe and healthy ways of digital communication are vital, too. So

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social media clearly is a really powerful tool for connection when used in that way. But it can also be a significant contributor to young people's feelings of isolation and disconnection too. And so one of the

recommendations we make alongside things like rolling out affordable internet connections and all social housing.

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You know, the actually the provision of high quality digital citizenship education for young people so that a tool that is a powerful tool for connection can be one that is utilised for good rather than exacerbating those feelings of isolation and disconnection.

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Yeah, and in terms of new migrants, I just wanted to add as well, we this is not included in our report, which came out in April batch, I just had access last week to the most recent quarterly wellbeing data, which is telling a similar story overall to what I outlined at the start. But new migrants are one group that have reported an even greater increase in feelings of loneliness just in this last quarter alone. So I think exactly these situations like you were outlining family separation across international borders is, the longer that's in place, the deeper those hurts are going to be felt, I think.

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And, yeah, in terms of solutions to that, I think it's really important that communities are supported to identify their own goals. So it's one thing to sort of roll out the spoke loneliness, interventions, and they can be very effective, but also in general, I think we need to be supporting diverse communities. And that could be, you know, ethnic and migrant communities, but also disability communities, youth community groups, you know, to identify some common goals that they want to work on together and that they can access funding and support to do that. And as a sort of, happy byproduct of that a great deal of social connection can occur. But it's often Yeah, it's important for groups to be involved in their own formation of what those collective challenges that they want to work on together.

**Ebony Bennett** 24:53

Yeah. Andrew, I want to come down to unemployed people. Because I imagine

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You know, the results for loneliness would be very similar in Australia.

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And we've just been through a recession. Obviously, a lot of people are returning to work, but there was a lot of people who were very quickly out of a job.

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And we did say plant like government support in place, but in terms of the Coronavirus supplement at that time, but a lot of that support has now dropped away. What impact do you think that's going to be having in the long term?

**Andrew Giles MP** 25:34

enormous is that is the short answer evany. There was some interesting research from the University of Melbourne that was released, I think, a fortnight ago, which really made it clear that the, I guess, the

class dimension of loneliness, we know that loneliness affects all population groups, but its impact on the lowest quintile by earnings is very significantly greater than on everyone else. And I guess when you also think, and I think was touched upon earlier, there are there are two, there are two bits on the unemployed bit. One is obviously the lack of income. And Australian people in receipt of unemployment benefits had a period of time where

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those benefits were adequate to live a decent life. And now that has come to an end. And we're seeing that play out in all dimensions of how people live their lives. But particularly it constrains people's capacity to engage with the community and the world around them. And I guess that's the other bit of work is that it's not just a means through which we derive income, it's a means through which we define ourselves in terms of our identity, and for most of us where much of our social connection is located. So understanding that better through the loneliness name is something that I think is, is really important. And one of the thoughts that's been occurring to me through this conversation is perhaps the relationship between some of these class dimensions of loneliness and the age impact. If we recognise that obviously, young people today face a very different by the market, they face a very hard to access housing market in both of our countries. They're on the receiving end of wealth inequality. That's, that's quite staggering. And I wonder of all the questions that we've been asking ourselves in, in why young people appear to be lonelier than all other cohorts other than the oldest? I wonder if if these economic questions have a big part of the explanation or the explanatory

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factors that underpin that as well.

**Ebony Bennett** 27:48

Yeah, it's a good point to make, because the Australia Institute has done a bunch of research around what used to be called New Start and is now job seeker. And, as Andrew mentioned, it's, it was briefly for a period enough to live on, but now I think it's about 30%, below the poverty line. So it really puts people into dire straits. And you can imagine, as people return to work and start, you know, going out again, because we don't have a lot of COVID in war man, virtually in the community, people would be cut off from that, if they're, you know, under the poverty line, he can't go out for a B can't catch up with friends for a coffee, even all of those things would be beyond them. So you can see how that would have an incredibly direct impact on people's lives and loneliness. Certainly. But also, I think that's a really good point, Andrew, about the types of labour market that young people are entering into now. Certainly in Australia, I'm not sure about New Zealand, Holly,

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you know, it's much more casualized workforce, much less permanent, full time work, you know, with paid holidays, and all those types of things. So, yeah, it's, it's a very different labour market to many years ago. Did you want to just want to comment on the situation in your country before? I think we'll have questions from the audience very shortly.

**Holly Walker** 29:15

Sure. Yes, I would echo that. I think we're, we're in a very similar situation. And just the other group I was going to mention where there's a strong intersection with unemployment as disabled people. So in the in our most recent report, we looked at specifically the disability employment rate, which I don't unfortunately have immediately in front of me, but you know, it's something like three times higher than that for the general population. And so we know already that disability is a major risk factor for all kinds of social well being factors including loneliness, and then add to that the impact of disability and you see a really intersecting impact there, which needs addressing

**Ebony Bennett** 29:56

excellent Well, we might head over to do

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questions from the audience. Now I can see we've got nearly 20 questions here. So just a reminder that you can type them into the queue and a. So the first one that I've got here is from Terence Hall. He says, How can we effectively deal with loneliness in a multicultural society, in a nation with a high proportion of its first and sec, with a high proportion of first and second generation migrants? He says that our schools and universities seem to be failing in the promotion of multilingualism. And the international long lockdown as a strong barrier against family reunions, I might come to you first on that one, Andrew.

**Andrew Giles MP** 30:37

It's a pretty big question. But But I guess the my headline response would be,

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it's Australia has often been described as a multi cultural society with mono cultural institutions. And I think, until we line up the diversity of our society with diversity within those institutions, these problems are going to persist. And I think that the two short points that I would make, is to say that one of the things that we learned in public health through the pandemic was, we get great outcomes when we harnessed the strengths within communities. And I think the same goes for addressing loneliness within

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multicultural communities. The other thing is, I guess, to recognise that in Australia, and forgive me, Holly, aware of the equivalent New Zealand's statistics, we're a country where half of us were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. So I think we've got to understand not just the economic dimensions of closed borders, but the human dimension that goes with them, and recognise that as part of our policy framework, and I think that's why there has been such attention on the issue of the nearly 40,000 stranded Australians who have been trying to get home during the pandemic. But I probably should leave that there open it, because otherwise, I think I chew up the entirety of trying to respond to the question.

**Ebony Bennett** 32:13

Yeah. Holly, did you have any reflections on that?

**Holly Walker** 32:17

I think just the only quick one that jumped to mind is the important role that our schools are going to have to play in,

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in the future, you know, like, if our children are attending schools with a diverse community that that reflects the community that they're going to grow up and a lot of the work, I've kind of fostering,

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you know, cross cultural understanding happens there. And so I'm thinking, for example, about issues of kind of what we call white flight or, you know, concentration of schools, of particular communities and different schools and how important it is that

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the public school systems in both of our countries are reflective of the types of countries that our children are going to be growing up. And it's a little thought in response to that.

**Ebony Bennett** 33:06

Yeah. The next question is from Anthony Warren, who asks, How can we best support our mature age members of the community to address loneliness, and that during the COVID pandemic, probably likely to be affected with loneliness due to being a high risk group, we're crying require

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requiring greater considerations about risk and also probably challenges we'd some of that access and comfort with technology that we're talking about. Andrew, I'll come back to you again. We've also just had a royal commission in which we've seen, you know, some awful experiences of abuse and neglect. And there were some quite shocking statistics that came out about that, particularly for people in residential aged care who perhaps have no one to even visit them.

**Andrew Giles MP** 33:58

Yeah, look, I think of all the things that are difficult, frankly, to comprehend, the institutional neglect of older Australians in residential aged care settings is something that

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I guess perhaps like one, yes, it was, it was shocking before the pandemic and when we saw what happened to many residents of aged care facilities, including in just down the road from where I'm sitting, as the pandemic swept through these things,

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an urgent moral challenge. And the challenge can end dealing with the material circumstances of people in aged care facilities, even though that obviously is fundamental to ensure that people have access to qualified carers and for those carriers to have time to care that they have access to food that is appropriate and nourishing, which too often hasn't been the case that we have a regulatory regime.

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And that is fit for purpose, which has been shown.

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cruelly not been the case. But the other statistic, which is, which is quite staggering is the number of people in residential aged care who aren't visited.

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And that raises a pretty profound question about how we are as citizens and as a society as well as for the role of government as a regulator of ensuring dignity for people in aged care. So while we need to urgently focus on those material questions, for people at perhaps the most vulnerable stage of their life, I think we need to also have another conversation about ensuring that

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ensuring that both being alone and the issue of loneliness of older Australians in care settings needs to be addressed and considered. And I do know that there have been some interesting models that are being explored by some of the better providers and there's even on either the ABC or the SBS. a TV show exploring the intergenerational opportunities of melding preschool children, and people in aged care facilities, which I know a number of providers are looking at as well. And it's ideas like that, that I think need to be part of our conversation as we think about how we can ensure that people can age with dignity, and not feel alone all the time.

**Ebony Bennett** 36:31

Yeah. Holly, did you want to add anything to that?

**Holly Walker** 36:34

I would support everything that Andrew said, I think the only small comment I'd make is

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the I noticed this pop up in the q&a at some point, too, that for many older people, I think grief at the loss of a partner is often a significant contributor to loneliness, as well.

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So just a three.

**Ebony Bennett** 36:55

Yeah, and I'll just add, before I move to the next question, I know the Australia Institute has done a bunch of research around homeshare as another option for older people wanting to stay in their homes longer. And it's a scheme.

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Our research director rod will get me in trouble if I describe this wrong, but where a young person can have access to kind of cheaper accommodation by staying with an older person in return for you know, help with, you know, going to the shops and providing some companionship, and all those other

benefits that come with, you know, sharing a living space with someone. So there are a lot of different models out there to pursue.

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The next question I've got, well, actually, it's more of a statement q&a style. I'll take that as a comment. Marjorie Krause says that loneliness is not about with a technological solution. Let's not mistake broadband connections. For a social one. I think that is an important point. But, Holly equally, you were talking about the fact that when so much of our communication does happen over there, it is a real consideration. But in terms of communities and fostering those connections within communities, did you maybe want to talk about some of the results of your research on that front?

**Holly Walker** 38:14

Sure, yeah. I mean, I take that point for sure. I think, as with any technology, and, you know, it's, it's dangerous, I think, to fall into the trap of thinking that a new technology is the solution. You know, technology is only

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it's what we make of it, you know, and so it can, and I think we did see during the pandemic, and we'll probably continue to see in the future. It's an important social connectivity, it's about how we use it. And

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one thing I will mention in terms of different communities, and it relates to what we were just saying before, around different models of housing and so on, I mentioned in my opening comments, you know, we've seen that Maori as our indigenous population have been more likely not, not on the extreme, but somewhat more likely to report feelings of loneliness, and relating that to the historical legacy of policies designed to break out collective ways of living, you know, and so I think we can look to our indigenous communities to four models of different types of housing and community building, which would include, you know, elders living with younger

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community members, for example, we, you know, from a

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parkour settler culture here in New Zealand, you know, we tend to be very,

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you know, insular in our households and have just the nuclear family and our elders living elsewhere. But there are other cultural models we can draw on. And in our research with them, and the ethnic group least likely to report feeling lonely with Pacific Island populations. And

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in that community, it's very common to co locate with multiple generations of the same family. So I wonder if that is contributing to low incidences of

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Loneliness amongst that community that comes with its own risks and challenges in terms of the quality of that housing and the health impacts of it, and which we see in other kinds of health statistics. But certainly from a perspective of community connection and intergenerational connection models of intergenerational living, I think we can we learn a lot from looking at different cultural contexts.

**Ebony Bennett** 40:22

Yeah, so the next question is from Heather de Cruz. She says the description of the range of reasons and explanations for loneliness suggests there isn't a definition. Instead, it seems to be a range of issues that might require various practical support and the rest. But she wonders, is it a concern that many practical problems are perhaps being defined as mental health issues? And does it widen the net of what we're like? Are we describing it as a mental health issue? When it is an issue of loneliness? Are they one and the same thing? Andrew, I'm not sure if you've got any thoughts on that?

**Andrew Giles MP** 40:59

Well, I'm very conscious that I'm a politician and a lawyer and have no professional qualifications to this, but I mean, there's obviously a relationship between loneliness and mental ill health, but treating them as the same thing, I don't think is appropriate. I know that

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I'll start again, I think it's reasonably well understood that loneliness is an absence of desired social connection. And how that affects us obviously, is different, depending on who we are, and what we desire in our social connections. That can and often does, sadly, lead to other mental health issues. But you know, the Venn diagram isn't completely covered in, I think, if we just keep that focus on understanding that as human beings we are by and large social creatures, and part of living a good life is defined by the quality of our relationship with other human beings. If that's part of our understanding of what makes a good society, I think that's the basis upon which we can engage with loneliness as a public health issue, which is not to pretend that that there can be a one size fits all approach delivered from central government, either in Wellington or Canberra. But I think it sets a frame for a series of interventions, that that can work together rather than be solid.

**Holly Walker** 42:40

Yeah, I would just maybe I agree with it. And

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I think the way to think about it is, is that loneliness gives us is a significant risk factor for both actually mental health challenges and physiological health conditions.

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And, you know, when I looked into the kind of evolutionary purpose of loneliness, you know, we You're right, Andrew, we're wired for social connection, it's actually very fundamental human need. And that's because, you know, as we have evolved as a species, it would be life threatening to be separated from the group, because we rely on each other for food, for shelter for warmth, for community. And so we are wired to respond if we perceive ourselves to be isolated with, you know that with that physiological

fight flight freeze response. And so loneliness in some, in some regards, is, is actually a physiological response to a perceived disconnection. And that's fine. If we only experience it for a short period of time, it's a normal part of the human experience it, it's a trigger for us to reconnect with the people around us. But if though, if it becomes chronic, and if we are living in that state for months, or even years at a time, then it has significant impacts on our health because it disrupts our sleep, it disrupts our hormones, you know, it can lead to increased risk of things like heart disease, dementia, high blood pressure, and depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions. So

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it's not in itself, a health condition or mental health condition, but it's certainly an exacerbating risk factor, especially if it's experienced for a long period of time.

**Ebony Bennett** 44:18

Hmm. Android might take you back somewhere closer to your home ground, so to speak. I've got a question here from Kevin Hayes, who says, The rise of neoliberalism, outsourcing and technocratic elements, results in things like high rise buildings and high density,

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living, adversely impacting on people. Great to see some refocus on the well being and social responsibility and hopefully the environmental elements that can rebalance loneliness. And could you talk a little bit more about that about our built environment and the way that we've designed our cities and

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how we can change those?

**Andrew Giles MP** 44:58

Yeah, look, I think it's a really good

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Right question, and there's a lot in it. I certainly think that neoliberalism is exacerbating the incidence and probably the severity of funniness. I'd quibble a little bit about the density comment, I think density of itself. I think density can be done well, and facilitate

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access to social connection as well as to manage

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it. But also, if we go back to the initial premise, though, I do take the point that

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a pure economic rationalist approach to building construction can deliver soulless environments that don't facilitate connection. And I guess that's the, the pressure point here. I think what we need to do is to recognise particularly in a country like Australia, and New Zealand to come in, but Australia is if you

cut out the city states, the most urbanised nation in the world, we have a an urban economy and an even more urban community. And understanding how people live in cities is fundamental to securing a good life for the vast majority of Australians. And for most of us, a big chunk of that is about how we connect to others. And the relationship between where we live, where we work, how easy it is, for the to, to connect,

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covers every other aspect of our life, our ability to engage in extracurricular activities, to play sport, to enable our children to go to sport, to spend time with their neighbours and friends to feel part of a community. So, you know, again, I should probably stop at this point, or I'll run on, but I think the the premise of your question is absolutely fundamental, to ending loneliness in Australia, and indeed, in New Zealand.

**Ebony Bennett** 46:53

Yeah, and during the pandemic, we really sore, you know, people in small apartment buildings, perhaps without access to places to exercise outdoors and things like that, that perhaps our cities haven't been designed, as best they could, compared to other examples where people still live, you know, in overseas communities in very high density living areas that have perhaps more access to parks and green space, very close to weather. Yeah.

**Holly Walker** 47:23

A really quick comment, just a, an example of that. in Wellington, where I live, there are a number of office blocks in the central city, which have been converted into student accommodation for the main University here in recent years. But they've been converted in such a way that you can imagine these were office blocks with cubicle office desks, they've really been converted into cubicle accommodation. And so an architect with our partners at W SP, actually, and a student of hers had done some research into how student accommodation can be redesigned to foster social connection because loneliness is so prevalent amongst young, younger age group and looked at redesigning, you know, student accommodation. So there is, for example, a communal space on every floor, so that there is a communal, larger communal area at the bottom of the building where people can gather those opportunities and more green space and outdoor space as well. So there's opportunities for incidental interaction, there may not seem like deep connections, but they add up over time. So the ability to bump into someone make a cup of tea and then sit down and drink it together, is actually very significant and adds up if we design our buildings like that. Yeah.

**Ebony Bennett** 48:35

The next question is from BEC Davey and I might give this one to you. First, Holly, she says that you mentioned that employment plays an important role in social interaction. I'm wondering what suggestions you have for employers who are looking to choose to support hybrid or working from home situations and improving social connection?

**Holly Walker** 48:55

It's that's a really interesting one, isn't it? Because I think we've all learned during the pandemic bitch, actually, it's much easier to work flexibly and work from home and perhaps not spend as much time in

the office and, and that can be really good for people's work life balance, and it can be really good for the family responsibilities and, and for the productivity sometimes too. But still, that contact with other people that happens in the workplace and those types of incidental contact that I was just talking about to as significant. So getting the mix right between and having people coming together for that, that incidental sharing of ideas and social connection that can happen when you're in the same workplace, whilst also supporting people to work remotely, which has, you know, big benefits as well from an emissions aspect of too. So there's lots of reasons to support that. I think it's a mix. I think it's doing a mixture of both. One interesting finding too was that for a lot of disabled people, the they who were supported for the first time to work from home do during a pandemic. Seemed like

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Hey, this is really removing the barriers to my employment like we've been asking for this for so long. And actually, it turns out we can do it. So I think I think the the challenge really is to take the good parts of it that we've all had to very quickly adapt and learn how to do and keep those whilst making sure that the temptation to just kind of shrink back and stay in our homes, work from home whenever we can. We do have to think push back a little bit against it and make sure we still have opportunities for social connection as well. Yeah, I'm talking to just about the type of work where you can work from home and and there's lots of types of work that require course in person content, which will definitely see those considerations.

**Andrew Giles MP** 50:39

Yeah, if I can jump in if we if we do focus on the roughly half the workforce who can work from home, at least some of the time, I think that there are probably a couple of points that I'd like agreeing with everything Holly said. The first is, I think the reason people in big knowledge industries clustered together in the centre of cities, the same reason applies for people being together in workplaces to understand how the business operates to form close working, and non working relationships with colleagues. All these things going to apply equally today as they did two years ago. So I think we are looking very much at the majority of work in these workplaces being conducted,

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you know, in a work setting, but that still means there are some good opportunities for dispersed work, and indeed, for communities to form in the suburbs where people live, and are now doing some of their work. And I think that's exciting, that the caveat that I think we need to talk more about is the concern, which has been expressed a lot more in Europe than I think in either of our countries is concerned about the re gendering of work, both evidence suggesting that unpaid household work has been overwhelmingly shifting more to being performed by by women in households can conform, composed of both women and men. And the suggestion that flexible working arrangements will overwhelmingly be taken up by women denying those women some of those intangible benefits of being president in the workplace. So I think these are a couple of questions that we need to turn our attention to, not not perhaps or a loneliness lens, but they're really important in this conversation.

**Ebony Bennett** 52:35

Yeah, we've only got five minutes to go. But there's two questions I wanted to get to. So I'm just going to combine them even though they're not the same. So F Parker says, I really see the loneliness of

grief mentioned publicly. And I'm referring to the personal loss of a significant person as well as the isolation caused by the lack of understanding about grief and pressures to get over grief can often result in people pulling away or putting on a Happy Mask. And the other question that I wanted to get to was other international comparisons that you might be able to talk to Andrew or Holly, we've focused a lot on Western well resourced, liberal societies, how does that compare cross culturally, to other places in the world that might have a different system? Perhaps religious divides or sectarian divides? Is there any other comment that we could make on other international experiences? So grief? and other international experiences might come to you first, Holly?

**Holly Walker 53:37**

Sure. Well, yes, I think as I mentioned before, I think is really important to acknowledge grief as a particular source of loneliness. I think I've seen sort of three times mentioned in the literature, which is kind of social loneliness, those lack of social connections from our network, existential which is about a loss of identity and purpose, often connected with unemployment, and in the grief and the loss of a significant other, whether that's a bereavement or an ending of a relationship. And even things like when you first leave home, you're living on your own for the first time. It's a major contributor.

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Or the question about what we do about that and how we manage how people respond to grief is probably a bigger one than we can answer right now. But I I totally understand that comment about people not knowing how to respond appropriately.

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Yeah, something we all need to work on, I think is learning to get comfortable with just being there and just being with people through these challenging experiences and international comparisons. What jumped to mind was actually from the UK in terms of good example of

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it urban design that D prioritises cars and traffic in his head have great impact on

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prioritising social connection and community building but maybe it's not quite

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What the questioner had in mind, but that's from Waltham Forest, a borough of London in the UK, which has been experimenting with low traffic neighbourhoods for several years, which is a subject of my other area of research and have found huge. So that's had a great impact on road safety and emissions and all the things you might expect it to, but also great impact on people's reported feeling of connection and belonging in their community. So perhaps not exactly the kind of example that your Christian had in mind, but that was what came into my mind.

**Ebony Bennett 55:30**

Thank you, Andrew, last reflections from you. Well, look, I'm really glad Holly went first because I wasn't quite sure what I was going to say.

**Andrew Giles MP 55:39**

But But I think, on the point about grief, I think the one thing we do understand is that it is all these major life changes are now recognised as triggers for, for loneliness, specifically on grief, I think it's one of those things that all of us at a human level struggle with responding to. And and I guess the only thought I had that might be helpful in the loneliness context is this imperative, I think, to D stigmatise loneliness to pull loneliness, away from being regarded as something that is deeply personal as something that belongs in the public realm because of all the consequences we've been talking about. And then that might be a way also of unlocking our capacity as awkward friends or relatives in, in trying to support the real needs of someone who's going through a bereavement or other stage of grief on the competitors. I guess, for me, there's there's two points that emerge, one, I think, debate in a policy sense in Australia and probably in New Zealand, to us a bit underdeveloped compared to some of the other jurisdictions. That's not withstanding the fact that we've got some amazing researchers doing work in this space and some amazing civil society organisations, but we haven't joined it up in a in a public political conversation, at least in Australia.

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I think we should be looking at how both loneliness manifests itself in different cultural contexts, and seeing what learnings we can bring to bear. But my big, I think it is a big bad, I think we have got to make sure that our understanding of loneliness in Australia is located in that Australian context as as a settler society, where we've got to really pay close attention to what it means for First Nations people, as well as the unique nature of our migration programme, and indeed, our physical settlement patterns, if we're going to find correct and enduring public policy solutions.

**Ebony Bennett 57:57**

Well, I'm afraid we're gonna have to wrap it up there. Thank you so much, Andrew Giles, and Holly Walker, for joining us today. Thanks, everyone. For your great questions. I'm really sorry, we can't get to all of them. But before you go, next week, we have three webinars three. So on Tuesday, we'll be doing pole position with Catherine Murphy of The Guardian, Pete Lewis from essential media, and our very own Richard Dennis, where we'll unpack the latest Guardian essential poll. That's at 1pm. On Tuesday, on Wednesday, we're going international way with a conversation about the Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. That will be with Sharon borrow from the International Trade Union Confederation. Dr. Helen Durham from the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Dr. Marion Hanson from the International campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. And on Friday at 1pm. We'll be talking to the Human Rights Commissioner Ed Santo, about the red lines, we might need to sit around artificial intelligence, as well as things like facial recognition technology. So that's Australian intelligence. Can Australia chart a different course on AI? That's Friday at 1pm. So that's not one, not two but three webinars next week. You can find all the details at our website, Australia institute.org.au. Don't forget to head on over to the Helen Clark foundation to find all Holly's research. I think we put some links up in the chat. And don't forget to visit Andrew John's website for all the latest on his work on cities on loneliness and a bunch of other things because he's got several shadow portfolios. Thanks so much for joining us today. Everyone. Make sure that you've checked out our podcast, follow the money. We've got our latest budget wrap, where we unpack the federal budget there. And thanks very

much. Look after yourselves out there and take care. We'll hope to see you next week. Thanks, everyone. Thank you.