Social Isolation and Loneliness

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Were you surprised how frequently social isolation and loneliness appeared as a concern in the Stocktake?

At a national level we weren't surprised to see how often social isolation and loneliness were identified. We knew that social isolation was an issue everywhere in Australia and the results support anecdotal evidence that loneliness increased with the impact of COVID-19.

Were there areas where this was a particular issue, or not an issue?

There was a correlation between respondents who were in lockdown and identifying social isolation and loneliness. It was most commonly identified in Victoria which had experienced the longest lockdowns and where almost a quarter of all respondents identified.

COVID-19 was by no means the only factor. A number of electorates that were not in lockdown or which were in lockdown for only part of the survey period also identified social isolation and loneliness. Other forms of disadvantage such as financial hardship or discrimination, and other vulnerabilities to disadvantage such as being older can lead to or exacerbate loneliness and social isolation.

What are the biggest drivers of loneliness and social isolation as issues?

Loneliness and social isolation are two different but interrelated phenomena. Loneliness relates to the quality of our interactions rather than how many people we know or how often we relate to them. Social isolation is more about the quantity of interactions and how connected we are with other people.

There's no single driver of either but many of the injustices identified in the Stocktake contribute to social isolation. Barriers to social connection can include financial and logistical issues a person experiences that prevent them reaching out and they can include community level pressures such as discrimination or stigma on the basis of a person's identity, mental ill health, or experiences.

One key driver of loneliness is the stigma that continues to be associated with admitting to feeling lonely. As humans we have a natural drive to connect and interact with others, but our society continues to perpetuate myths about it being unusual to feel lonely and it being easy to make friends.

Ending Loneliness Together has produced a range of resources and research with the goal of ending the stigma around loneliness and helping people understand loneliness. More information can be found at Ending loneliness together

How do you see COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns impacting the numbers reporting to feel isolated and/or lonely?

Both loneliness and social isolation were major issues in Australia before COVID-19 but the necessary steps to protect people during the pandemic have certainly increased both. The experience of the pandemic has also shone a light on the issues of loneliness and social isolation. I am hopeful that we can use the current conversation, and widespread acknowledgement of loneliness and social isolation, to break down the stigma.

The common perception of a lonely person is someone living alone without family or friends. What is the truth?

The perception that loneliness only affects people living alone is a myth that needs to be addressed. Many people who live alone do not feel lonely and many people who live with others do. Different studies return different results about who is most likely to be lonely, but it appears that all of us feel lonely at some times with young adults and older people more likely to experience the most negative effects of loneliness. Ending Loneliness Together has produced a number of resources addressing this myth such as Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia_Nov20.pdf (endingloneliness.com.au)

In certain countries, governments are allocating specialist ministers to tackle the issue of loneliness. What are we doing to address the issue in Australia?

In Australia there have been efforts to address loneliness and community groups in Australia are very active in providing social connection. What we don't have is a national strategy or national policy focus on addressing loneliness. Addressing loneliness will reap benefits for individual wellbeing, build a more cohesive community and help alleviate pressure on the health system.

What does The Salvation Army offer to someone presenting as lonely?

The Salvation Army is active in every state and territory in Australia. We run a wide range of activities and there are many opportunities to get involved as a volunteer or as a participant. We welcome everyone without judgement or discrimination. To find out what is going on in your community you can go to https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/get-involved/your-local-salvos/