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Mapping Loneliness in Australia

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Table of Contents

Tables and Figures	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Summary	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 The decline of relationships?	1
1.2 Feeling alone and living alone	2
2. Measuring relationships and community	5
2.1 Measuring loneliness and support: The Index of Social Support	5
2.2 Measuring formal and informal social engagement	6
3. How we live	8
4. Feeling alone, feeling connected	10
4.1 Lonely men	10
4.2 Talking over the back fence	19
4.3 Health and support	21
4.4 Dumped, broke or sacked	22
5. Social engagement and community participation	24
5.1 Around the water cooler: Paid work and social support	24
5.2 Caring for others	29
5.3 Participation in clubs and sports and loneliness	30
5.4 Informal social networks: Socialising with friends and relatives	33
References	40
Appendix	43

Tables and Figures

Figure 1	Proportions of men and women who live alone, by age range	3
Figure 2	Personal support and friendship by sex and age among people aged 15 to 75+	10
Figure 3	Agreement with the ten statements in the Index of Social Support among men and women aged 25 to 44	11
Figure 4	Personal support and friendship, by living situation and sex, among 25 to 44 year-olds	12
Figure 5	Personal support and friendship by household type, among 25 to 44 year-olds	13
Figure 6	Personal support and friendship by household type among 25 to 44 year-old men and women	14
Figure 7	Agreement with the statement, 'I often feel very lonely' by household type, men and women aged 25 to 44	17
Figure 8	Personal support among 25 to 44 year-old people living alone or as single parents who are either separated/divorced/widowed or never married	18
Figure 9	Personal support and friendship and neighbourhood sociability/assistance by household type among 25 to 44 year-olds	21
Figure 10	Personal support and friendship by employment status among 25 to 44 year-old men and women	24
Figure 11	Personal support and friendship, by employment status and living situation among 25 to 44 year-old men and women	26
Figure 12	Personal support and friendship, by household type, among 25 to 44 year-old men and women who are employed	28
Figure 13	Personal support and friendship, by household type, among 25 to 44 year-old men and women who are unemployed or not in the labour force	28
Figure 14	Personal support and friendship, by household type and membership of community groups, among 25 to 44 year-old men and women	32
Figure A1	Items on social and emotional loneliness in the HILDA questionnaire	43

Table 1	Household types among young adults aged 25 to 44 (%)	8
Table 2	Employment participation among young adults aged 25 to 44 (%), by living situation	9
Table 3	Agreement with the ten (positive) statements of personal support and friendship, by household type, among 25 to 44 year-old men and women (%)	16
Table 4	Perceptions of neighbourhood social interaction among 25 to 44 year-old men and women, by household type	20
Table 5	Active membership of sporting, hobby or community-based associations among 25 to 44 year-old men and women	31
Table 6	Cumulative frequency of socialising with friends and relatives, by household type, among 25 to 44 year-old men and women (%)	34
Table A1	Factor loadings for the rotated factors, items on social and emotional loneliness	44
Table A2	Agreement among 25 to 44 year-old men with the statement, 'I often feel very lonely,' by household type, on a 7-point scale	45
Table A3	Agreement among 25 to 44 year-old women with the statement, 'I often feel very lonely,' by household type, on a 7-point scale	45
Table A4	Contributions to care among individuals aged 25 to 44 from different household types	46
Table A5	Contributions to care among individuals aged 25 to 44 from different household types and with differing levels of participation in paid work	47

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Summary

This paper maps loneliness in Australia. Using national survey data, it outlines patterns of loneliness, support and friendship and assesses who is most at risk of emotional and social isolation and who is socially supported and connected. The paper focuses on young adults aged 25 to 44, a demographic that has been neglected in existing studies of loneliness despite the fact that solitary living has shown the most significant increase among such people.

Data for this study come from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, a national survey of Australian households. We assess loneliness and social support by constructing an index based on responses to ten survey questions regarding the personal support and friendship available to respondents. The Index of Social Support reflects people's experiences of social and emotional loneliness or connection.

Our analysis finds that there is a marked gender gap in the experience of loneliness, evident among adult men and women of all age groups. Men tend to be lonelier than women from early adulthood right through to old age. They are more likely to agree that 'I often feel very lonely'; 'People don't come to visit me as often as I'd like'; 'I don't have anyone I can confide in'; and 'I have no one to lean on in times of trouble'. And men are less likely than women to agree that 'I seem to have a lot of friends'; 'There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down'; 'When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone', and so on.

Whether we compare men and women in lone person households, or men and women in households shared with others, this gendered contrast in their perceptions of support remains. Men living either alone or with others experience less social support than women who live alone or with others, with the contrast particularly striking between those who live alone. It seems the type of household in which these individuals reside does make a difference, at least for men. Among people aged 25 to 44, men who live alone report much lower levels of support and friendship than men who live with others; but the same is not true for women. Women who live alone and those who live with others perceive very similar levels of support and friendship. In short, while men are generally lonelier than women, the difference is much greater in the case of men living alone.

Using the Index of Social Support to examine the different types of households, we find that single fathers with young children have the lowest levels of support and friendship amongst men and women in any household situation. In other words, single fathers with children are the loneliest people in the country. They are more likely than men in other living situations and women in general to agree that 'I often feel very lonely' or 'I often need help from other people but can't get it', and less likely to agree that 'I enjoy the time I spend with the people who are important to me' or 'There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down'. Similar levels of loneliness and isolation are experienced by men living by themselves and single fathers living with children aged 15 and over.

These men also report that neighbours only rarely help each other out or do things together. And men who live on their own or as single fathers have worse physical, emotional and mental health than men in other household situations. In other words,

these men's emotional and social isolation is complemented by unsociable neighbourhoods and poor health. Among women, single mothers with older children report the lowest levels of neighbourhood cooperation and interaction.

The data suggest that men rely on their wives or de facto partners for their emotional and social needs to a greater degree than women who draw on wider sources of support. Men in most couple households experience far higher levels of personal support than men who live alone, but this is not as true for women. While women in childless couple households also report high levels of support, women in couple households with young children report levels similar to those experienced by women who live by themselves. This finding suggests that a relationship with a spouse or intimate partner is a more important source of support for men than it is for women. In short, men need women more than women need men.

The HILDA survey includes a question asking respondents about the degree to which they 'often feel very lonely'. Using this single-item measure of 'emotional loneliness' rather than the summed Index of Social Support which measures 'social loneliness', men living by themselves are the most likely of all men to report that they 'often feel very lonely'. Next are lone fathers with children. About one-third of men living alone agree that they 'often feel very lonely', as do one-quarter of lone fathers with children. This compares with the 13 per cent of men in childless couple families who say they often feel very lonely. The pattern among women is similar. Single mothers with children report the highest levels of emotional loneliness, followed by women living alone. Close to one-third of single mothers with older children and over one-quarter of single mothers with younger children agree that they 'often feel very lonely'.

While a divorce or separation at some time in the past does not seem to have an association with lower levels of support, *recent* separation or divorce does. However, women who have separated in the last year indicate levels of support that are virtually identical to those of women who have not been through this. Thus social isolation experienced by men living alone does not appear to be a consequence of separation or divorce per se, except in the short-term. Men who live either alone or as single fathers suffer similarly low levels of support whether they have been separated or not.

Separation and divorce do have an indirect effect on social isolation among men. Men tend to have fewer close persons in their primary social networks than women, and are more likely than women to nominate their spouse or partner as the person to whom they feel closest. In couple households men are likely to rely both on the direct support of their partners and on the greater social networks maintained by those partners. But if they separate or divorce, men's levels of social support return to the low levels experienced by their single counterparts.

Our analysis confirms that social engagement in paid work, caring for others, and participation in clubs and sporting groups act as buffers against loneliness. Both men and women face a greater risk of social and emotional isolation if their financial situation has deteriorated or they have lost their jobs. Much more than women, men show a reliance on paid employment as an important source of their personal support and friendship and their levels of support and friendship rise as their participation in paid employment increases. Among women on the other hand, those in part-time employment and those working full-time for an average number of hours experience little difference in support, although the highest levels are to be found among female

employees with the longest work hours. For women living alone in particular, participation in employment is associated with greater levels of support and friendship, and it appears to provide such opportunities regardless of the number of hours worked.

Two forms of community involvement are consistently associated with higher levels of social support: voluntary or charity work, and active membership of sporting groups and community organisations. Carers who spend time looking after other people's children each week also describe higher levels of personal support and friendship.

As one might expect, both men and women who live alone socialise more frequently than those who live with others, and men and women in the same living situations experience similar levels of socialising overall. But getting together with friends and relatives does not appear to compensate for a sense of social isolation among lone men or lone fathers, given that men in these household situations encounter such low levels of access to personal support and friendship. The gender gap in support and friendship also reflects the differing quality of men's and women's social networks.

In an age where technological developments have meant it has never been easier to reach out and contact someone, many Australians feel lonely and isolated. They have no one to confide in or assist them, and they lack the friendships and social connections they desire. This research documents that there are significant differences among the Australian population in social support and that particular groups in our communities experience considerable levels of loneliness and social isolation.