

**Submission
No 142**

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission NSW Parliament Inquiry into Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in NSW- Men's Loneliness (Patulny)

Dear Standing Committee Members,

I welcome this opportunity to submit to the NSW Parliaments Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry on the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. I would like to use this opportunity to draw your attention to the unique challenges around disconnection and loneliness faced by Australian men. I will provide evidence below pertaining to all three of the requested components; Prevalence, Causes and Impacts. My data pertains to Australian male population, with transferable relevance to the male population of NSW.

Kind regards,
Professor Roger Patulny

Professor Roger Patulny - Bio

Roger Patulny is a Professor of Sociology at Hong Kong Baptist University. He has published over **100 academic publications**, including 3 books, 3 special editions, 53 peer-reviewed journal articles (75% in Q1/Q2 journals, 70% 1st or 2nd author), 21 book chapters/discussion papers, 7 refereed conference papers, 14 social policy reports, and 11 articles for *The Conversation*. These cover topics around loneliness, social connection and masculinity, the sociology of emotions, emotion management, social capital, unemployment and the future of work, volunteering, trust, and digital interaction. He has **2,754 citations** in Google Scholar, with an **h-index of 29** and **i10-index of 63**. His research has been reported in various news outlets including: *The Guardian*, *The Australian*, *ABC*, *SBS*, *BBC*, *The New Daily*, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, *News.com*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *Xinhua*, and on TV on Chanel 10's *The Project*. His 11 articles written for *The Conversation* have attracted over half a million (**533,000**) reads. Roger has been a CI on various Australian Research Council (ARC) and other competitive grants that have attracted over \$1.1 million in funding. These include the ARC Discovery 2009-11: 'Poor Women and Lonely Men: Examining Gendered Social Inclusion and Connection in Australia', the ARC Linkage 2015-17: 'Who You Know or Where You Go? The Role of Formal and Informal Networks in Finding Employment and Maintaining Wellbeing', and the ARC Discovery 2023-25 'How parents manage climate anxiety: coping and hoping for the whole family'. He has led several special editions, including 'Emotions in Social Life and Social Policy' (2012) for the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Sociology of Emotions (2 sections in 2015) for *Emotion Review*. He has also published recent edited collections on [Emotions in Late Modernity](#) (2019, Routledge) and [Dystopian Emotions: Emotional Landscapes and Dark Futures](#) (2021, Bristol University Press). Roger has served on the executive board of the Australian Sociological Association (TASA), leading the Public Sociology Portfolio (2020-22). He co-founded the TASA [Thematic Group on the Sociology of Emotions and Affect \(SEA\)](#). A detailed description of his research and teaching, and a full list of his publications, can be found at: <http://rpatulny.com>

Men's Loneliness and Social Disconnection in Australia

Summary

Loneliness and social disconnection are major issues affecting men in Australia, with 1 in 3 feeling socially isolated as of 2022. A range of recent indicators (Patluny 2024) showing men tend to have reduced emotional support and poorer quality, more instrumental social networks and relationships and friendships. Men's loneliness and social disconnection results from a range of intersectional factors (e.g. age, employment, partner status, health and disability, migrant background etc), but in nearly all cases, it is grounded in relationships shaped by hegemonic masculinity. At the extreme, lonely men risk being drawn into radicalised toxic-masculine 'manfluencers' communities as their only form of support. Men struggle with emotional expression and showing vulnerability due to societal expectations around being a strong and independent leader and provider, which impacts their ability to form supportive connections with others. Consequently, they over-rely on their female partners and nuclear families for intimate support, develop more distant, limited, and transactional relationships with other people – and other men, and risk great increases in loneliness and isolation. Loneliness is not only a likely health risk for men – impacting physical, mental health and suicide risks – but may also indirectly decrease tolerance and respect for women by driving men into toxic company. More research into these relationships and appropriate interventions is strongly called for.

Prevalence of Men's Loneliness and Social Disconnection

Loneliness and social disconnection are prevalent issues in Australia, particularly affecting men for many years (e.g., Flood 2005; Patulny 2012, 2013 & 2024; Relationships Australia 2018, 2022). As of 2022, one in three men reported feeling "socially lonely" and lacking close, supportive friendships (Relationships Australia 2022).

My recent analysis highlights the extent of social disconnection among men in Australia. This research, included in my upcoming book *Social Connections in Everyday Spaces* (edited by Milovan, Patulny, and Farmer, Bristol University Press), was summarized in a recent *The Conversation* article (Patulny 2024). The study draws on over fifty indicators of social connection and masculinity from the Australian Social Attitudes Survey, spanning the 2011-12, 2015-16, 2017-18, and 2022-23 waves.

The findings reveal that men continue to lack emotional support on various measures, which increases their risk of negative health outcomes and may contribute to the development of more harmful attitudes. A significantly greater proportion of men than women reported:

- receiving no support from their closest friend;
- receiving fun/practical advice over emotional support from close friends;
- having less contact with a close friend;
- not having anyone for emotional support;
- not feeling 'very close' to their closest friend;
- not feeling 'love' as their most commonly experienced emotion in the last week.

These findings are complemented up by others revealing that men are less likely to talk about problems, seek help from others, be chosen as someone's most important relationship, or be relied upon for social and emotional support in general (Relationships Australia 2022).

Causes of Men's Loneliness and Social Disconnection

Hegemonic masculinity

Understanding men's loneliness requires examining masculine roles. Although Australian men have great capacity for care and empathy (Patulny et al. 2017), traditional "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) promotes ideals of self-sufficiency, emotional restraint, and independence. This model discourages men from showing "vulnerable" emotions or engaging in physical expressions of affection, such as hugging, touching, or crying, and emphasizes the heteronormative expectation of men as providers and leaders (Franklin et al. 2019; Ratcliffe et al. 2023).

Men who conform to these beliefs often restrict their emotional range, with 'anger' their only allowable expression of upset (River and Flood 2021). This limitation hinders their ability to share vulnerable feelings essential for deep emotional connections. The prevalence of these views leads many men to maintain more distant, less intimate social ties. According to my findings (Patulny 2024), Australian men are more likely than women to:

- think it was ok to be transactional in their friendships, in cultivating 'use-value' friendships and strict repayment of favours;
- be kind to others out of a 'rational' sense that they are following their values, rather than because they empathise with others;
- seek practical support and engagement from more distant sources;
- give and receive kindness from strangers (rather than more familiar people);
- seek help with household jobs from more distant family or friends;
- seek practical support (money, advice) from private and commercial sources (rather than friends or family).

Men are therefore more likely to hold onto individualistic, hegemonic desires to remain emotionally distant and approach friendships in a more instrumental way, which can significantly contribute to their disconnection. Recent studies have directly linked hegemonic masculine attitudes to various related issues: suicide risk (Pirkis et al. 2017); limited emotional expression (River and Flood 2021); lower participation in caregiving roles (Hookway and Cruickshank 2024); and increased loneliness (Botha and Bower 2024). With nearly half of all men feeling pressured to adhere to hegemonic cultural norms (The Man Box and Flood 2024), this points to a troubling social issue that connects widespread male social disconnection with hegemonic masculinity.

Demographic intersections between male gender and loneliness

There are various demographic factors that intersect with male gender and can influence men's experiences of loneliness, with many of these intersections rooted in issues related to masculinity.

Age is a significant factor. Younger men are more likely to feel pressured to conform to hegemonic masculine norms (The Man Box and Flood 2024). They are also disproportionately represented in online communities promoting right-wing populist "victimhood" narratives and toxic-masculine "manfluencers" who foster radicalized attitudes toward women (Nilan et al. 2023; Roberts and Westcott 2024), potentially isolating men from more accepting viewpoints.

Middle-aged men face an increased risk of social isolation following experiences such as divorce, separation, or becoming single parents (Flood 2005, Patulny 2013). Older single men and widowers are among the most isolated individuals in Australia (Relationships Australia 2018), with factors like health problems, mobility limitations, living alone (Beach and Bamford 2015), or residing in aged care facilities (Neves et al 2019) further intensifying their loneliness.

Additionally, men's experiences of loneliness and isolation are influenced by factors such as low socio-economic status (Beach and Bamford 2015), long-term unemployment (Peterie et al 2019), student migration (Bilecen et al 2023), living in rural or regional areas (Bonell et al 2022), long-term disabilities (Botha and Bower 2022), and identifying with the LGBTQI community (Willis and Vickery 2022).

Excessive reliance on the nuclear family

The nuclear family, or the absence of it, plays a significant role in men's social connections and isolation. Family structures are evolving, with an increase in single-person households and a more individualistic culture (Hookway et al. 2019). Previous research indicates that single men and single fathers are more likely to experience loneliness compared to partnered men, who tend to be less isolated (Relationships Australia 2018).

At the same time, there is growing pressure on nuclear families and mothers to serve as the glue holding communities together (Franklin et al. 2019, Patulny 2024). Shifts in family-based gender roles are presenting new challenges for men's social connections. Many men face difficulties adjusting from being the primary breadwinner to sharing caregiving responsibilities, while also grappling with traditional, hegemonic, and sometimes toxic masculinity norms that discourage vulnerability.

My recent data (Patulny 2024) reveals that men revere the nuclear family institution, and the core supportive role of women and female partners. It shows that men were more likely than women to:

- believe that having children increased their social standing;
- believe that family was more important than friends;
- rely on family over friends for support;
- have mixed-gender friendships (in contrast to womens' predominately female friendships);
- see their (female) partner as their closest friend;
- emotionally support their (female) partner ahead of supporting others

The desire among men to be seen as a 'good nuclear family man' can both foster and hinder their social connections (Ratcliffe et al. 2023). While partnered men may experience less loneliness, this does not necessarily mean they receive or offer adequate emotional support

within their nuclear families. My recent research (Patulny 2024) indicates that men are less likely than women to:

- emotionally support others over their (female) partner
- plan or organise social and family activities;
- contact non-nuclear family members;
- emotionally support their friends, family or children ahead of their partners
- have their partner support them ahead of others (women were more likely to support their children first).

Many men therefore direct their emotional energy towards their nuclear families and partners, which can result in an over-reliance on their female partners for emotional support. This dynamic often leads to more distant, limited, and transactional relationships with others, including other men. This creates several challenges. If men continue to adhere to the traditional masculine ideal of being the primary provider and support for their (female) partner, while expecting her to emotionally support everyone else, they risk becoming isolated as their social networks and personal engagement with others diminishes. For instance, men who believe they should earn more than their partners tend to experience greater loneliness than other men (Botha and Bower 2024).

Inclusive, Caring and Hybrid Masculinities

Men's loneliness may be influenced by the rise of more 'inclusive' (Anderson and McCormack 2018) and 'caring' (Elliot 2018, Hookway and Cruickshank 2024) masculinities, as well as the growing visibility of diverse gender identities (e.g., trans men), which challenge the traditional association of 'men' with 'masculinity' as a fixed identity category (McCook 2022).

The 'inclusive' masculine attitudes seen in some younger men have enabled them to challenge and redefine the rules of masculinity, express emotions, and embrace close male friendships, or 'bromances' (Ridge and Broom 2023). Men can also bond emotionally through humor and shared activities that allow for casual communication (Patulny 2021), such as in Men's Sheds. These changes suggest that men have greater agency in forming varied connections, treating women with respect, and engaging in emotional sharing and care, all of which could help reduce loneliness.

However, if these inclusive and caring practices lead men to feel alienated or excluded from the dominant heteronormative masculine culture, their loneliness may actually increase (Ratcliffe 2023). Additionally, the blending or shifting between hegemonic and inclusive masculinities may disrupt masculine cohesion within certain communities (Bonnell 2022), potentially leading to a loss of social identity and, in turn, greater loneliness (Haslam 2022).

Men may navigate these complex spaces by adopting 'hybrid' forms of masculinity, mixing elements and styles from different backgrounds and contexts—such as expressing progressive values while still attempting to conform to traditional masculine ideals of rugged independence (Elliot 2018)

Impacts of Men's Loneliness and Social Disconnection, and Intervention Issues

Health

Loneliness and social isolation in men are likely to have a detrimental effect on their health outcomes. These include increased risk of early mortality (Holt-Lundstad et al. 2015), poor mental health (Lim 2018), and a higher risk of suicide, which aligns with the concerning statistic that men account for 75% of suicide deaths globally (River and Flood 2021). Therefore, addressing and reducing men's loneliness and isolation could significantly enhance their overall health.

Respectful treatment of women, minorities and other men

If research establishes that loneliness and isolation significantly influence men's adherence to hegemonic and even toxic masculine attitudes, addressing these issues could have a positive impact in these areas. Reducing loneliness may encourage men to be more emotionally open with one another, improve their caregiving behaviors, and foster more respectful attitudes and actions towards women.

However, and ironically, this reduction in loneliness may be difficult to achieve while men continues to place the responsibility for maintaining social and emotional connections on women and partners. This not only reinforces the heteronormative, family-centered social structures (primarily organized by female partners) as the most 'acceptable' form of socializing for men (Patulny 2024) – rendering other forms of socialising more 'illegitimate' – it can also potentially make men more socially and emotionally dependent on their female partners. And this dynamic can be particularly exclusionary for LGBTQI individuals, as well as single men and single fathers, who experience some of the highest rates of loneliness in Australia (Relationships Australia 2022).

Appropriate interventions?

It remains unclear which interventions are most effective in addressing men's loneliness. Although some studies suggest that individual therapeutic approaches can help, framing loneliness as an 'individualized pathology' (Jeste et al., 2020) may overlook the structural and cultural challenges men face, such as lacking intimate social networks (Patulny 2024) and facing norms that discourage vulnerability (Beach and Bamford 2015).

Previous research indicates that group-based interventions encouraging participation in activities are more likely to engage men and reduce their social isolation (Stewart et al. 2024). These include social and voluntary activities (Beach and Bamford 2015, Botha and Bower 2022), educational services (Stewart et al. 2024), and group activities aligned with men's interests (Beach and Bamford 2015). Men's Sheds are particularly good at fostering flexible, member-driven participation and facilitating male connections through 'shoulder-to-shoulder' rather than 'face-to-face' communication, which has been linked to improvements in health, social isolation, and wellbeing (Foettinger et al. 2022).

However, it is unclear whether such interventions encourage diverse and inclusive interactions. For instance, Men's Sheds typically cater to older, English-speaking participants with post-

secondary education and handyman skills (Foettinger et al. 2022), which may not appeal to younger men with different backgrounds, skills, and interests. Similarly, men's cultures of drinking (Ralph et al. 2024) and gambling (Coffey et al. 2023) may provide a sense of connection, but they can also lead to poor health, exclusion of non-drinkers and non-gamblers, and potentially harmful behaviors.

On the other hand, it is uncertain whether 'reflective' (or 'elaboration-based'; Stewart et al. 2024) interventions, designed to encourage men's behavior change, attract a wide range of men or foster genuine connections. Groups dominated by either hegemonic or inclusive-minded men may alienate other types of men (Bonnell et al. 2022), or pressure them into adopting a 'hybrid' form of masculinity—asserting progressive values while still maintaining stereotypical ideals of tough independence (Elliot 2018), ironically so that they can fit in.

Recommendations

Key applied research is needed in several areas:

- **How do demographic factors intersect with male gender to impact loneliness?** – we need to better understand the demographic and other factors that impact men's loneliness – what is the impact of age, socio-economic status, education, occupation, culture and migration, etc
- **What is the causality between hegemonic masculinity and loneliness?** - The causal direction between men's social disconnection and their hegemonic attitudes is unclear. Social disconnection might foster hegemonic (or toxic) attitudes towards women amongst men; or embracing hegemonic attitudes might isolate men and increase their health risks; or hegemonic attitudes and Social disconnection may reinforce each other in a bidirectional 'lonely-toxic' spiral. It is imperative to unravel these effects, in order to support men's health, develop their caring skills and cultures, and improve their attitudes towards women.
- **What are the impacts of more inclusive and caring masculinities?** - There is also a need to understand how men's loneliness is affected by more 'inclusive' (Anderson and McCormack 2018) and 'caring' (Elliot 2018, Hookway and Cruickshank 2024) forms of masculinity, and whether this gives men greater agency in their emotional interactions, whether it alienates them from other men (Bonnell 2022), or whether it encourages sustainable or unsustainable hybrid masculine forms and connections.

It is also important to trial, evaluate, upscale and employ widely successful intervention models. Educational initiatives and interventions may help men broaden their intimate networks beyond the nuclear family and connect with other men. Suggestions include:

- **Improved engagement and 'care cultures' amongst men** – We need to support cultural change and a better 'care culture' amongst men in their personal (Pointon et al 2020, Patulny 2024) and working relationships (Hookway and Cruickshank 2024) with others. The purpose here is to get more men caring for others (children, partners, each other), and engaging in more respectful and emotionally open relations with women, diverse groups and each other (Elliot 2019, Patulny 2024)

- **Better care-leave policies for men** – as part of this, we need to help men into caring roles through more family friendly employment and care-leave policies (Botha and Bower 2024), and care-based employment
- **Better male emotional skills and capital** – we need to engage a wider range of men in learning better skills in providing emotional expression and support for both women and men, for example through the Movember Men in Mind initiative (MMiM 2024);
- **Safe online spaces for men** – we should encourage the development of more online safe spaces for men (Ridge and Broom 2023) where they can form intimate and connective bonds while avoiding toxic online masculine spaces;
- **Group-based men’s activities** – we should develop initiatives that engage men through group-based activities that allow men to interact in incidental and authentic ways that do not force conversations and dialogues, for e.g. Men’s Tables (Pointon et al 2020);
- **More diverse interactions amongst men** - we should develop initiatives that encourage partnered, heterosexual men to broaden and diversify their intimate networks beyond the nuclear family, and be more inclusive of single men, single fathers, and LGBTQI persons.

Appropriate research and interventions into men’s loneliness and social disconnection accounting for the important links to hegemonic masculinity have many potential benefits. They may improve men’s health, encourage better attitudes, and improve their social and emotional skills for better participation in society. They may also potentially enhance social cohesion, gender equity, and reduce disrespectful behaviour and potentially even violence against women.

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