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Research that matters.

All the lonely people

Loneliness in Australia, 2001-2009

David Baker

Acknowledgments

All the lonely people

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Summary

Loneliness is the disconnect felt between desired interpersonal relationships and those that one perceives they currently have. While the subjective nature of this experience makes measuring loneliness difficult, understanding loneliness is important for the development of a range of social policies. The availability of longitudinal Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey data now makes it possible to track loneliness in Australia over the past decade.

This paper studies the long-term pattern of loneliness and identifies demographic characteristics and risk indicators associated with this experience and finds the incidence of loneliness in Australia is growing. The use of online social networking sites and how this may influence the experience and prevalence of loneliness is also explored.

Between 2001 and 2009 three out of ten Australians experienced loneliness. More tellingly, the proportion of people transitioning into, and out of, loneliness increased over this period, with 13 per cent experiencing repeat episodes of loneliness. An episode of loneliness was most likely to last for less than a year, however, for those whose experience extended beyond a year, it was more likely to last for three or more years. The proportion of Australians experiencing loneliness in any given year was fairly consistent at around one in ten people (9 per cent).

The effect that social networking sites may have on the experience of loneliness is a new field of study. This paper finds that the relationship between online socialising and feeling lonely is not straightforward. Amongst Australians surveyed by the Institute about their use of *Facebook*, people experiencing loneliness reported having fewer online "friends" and were also less likely to consider online friends as real friends. At the same time, however, users of social networking sites who are lonely were more likely to report increased communication with family and friends. This finding suggests that some people experiencing loneliness may be endeavouring to access social support through online social networking sites. It also shows that users of social networking sites who are not experiencing loneliness are using online networks to further expand what is already a solid foundation of social support.

People living in lone person and lone parent households were on average almost twice as likely to experience loneliness as people living in couple households. The risk of experiencing loneliness was greater for adults living with children. Couples with children were lonelier than couples without children. Although household type was found to be a key determinant of loneliness, there was no real difference between the levels of loneliness recorded in urban, regional or rural areas of a state.

Men and women experience loneliness at different times in their lives. In the period studied, more men (36 per cent) recorded episodes of loneliness compared with women (29 per cent). The intensity of loneliness increases for men up to the age of 60 years before reducing again. In contrast, the level of loneliness that women experience is greater in their younger years and decreases in later life. Amongst younger people (aged 25-44), men were four times as likely to live alone and were more than twice as likely to be lonely.

The presence of children influences men and women differently. Women are more likely to be lonely if they are living in a couple household with children, but in couple households without children proportionally more men are lonely.

Young women on low incomes are most likely to experience loneliness. Low income earners accounted for two thirds (65 per cent) of people who became more dissatisfied with their financial situation in the same year as they became lonely. It is not surprising, then, that an increased dissatisfaction with one's financial situation is a risk factor for experiencing loneliness. People feeling disconnected from their community and experiencing loneliness are less likely to volunteer, and they are also more likely to feel dissatisfied with the neighbourhood in which they live.

The issue of loneliness has implications for the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda. It is hard to imagine that people who are experiencing loneliness feel a part of the community in which they live. The trend towards relying on families to provide community services where those support networks may not already provide some form of support also seems at odds with the government's agenda and could potentially have serious social consequences. The new findings about loneliness and social networking sites pose some interesting questions about the benefits and shortcomings of utilising such sites to increase access to social support, especially amongst younger people. When developing social policy, the government needs to be aware of the ongoing propensity for Australians to experience loneliness.

1.   Introduction

All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?

"Eleanor Rigby", The Beatles.

Besides the recent popularity of social inclusion policies, few government policies tackle the social phenomena of loneliness or take this social issue into account when developing wider public policy. This paper, *All the lonely people: Loneliness in Australia, 2001-2009* finds the incidence of loneliness in Australia is growing. The increasing rate of loneliness in Australia has personal and social consequences that policy makers need to be aware of and must consider when making policy decisions in a range of areas, such as social inclusion, health and community services and the use of online social networking sites, including the utilisation of such sites by government departments.

The way people experience loneliness is subjective, making it hard to measure. What one person might experience as loneliness may not feel that way to another. The range of people's experiences of loneliness is reflected in the definition of loneliness as 'the aversive state experienced when a discrepancy exists between the interpersonal relationships one wishes to have, and those that one perceives they currently have'.[1] Despite this diversity, understanding loneliness is important for the development of a range of social policies.

To measure loneliness, this research uses an Index of Social Support based on responses to ten questions about social support and friendship asked in the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. Respondents were asked to rank their access to forms of social support such as: feeling lonely; receiving visitors; getting help when needed; friends and confidants and knowing people who can cheer them up. These factors attempt to measure ongoing levels of social support. Where people registered a negative Index score they were interpreted as having experienced an episode of loneliness, over an extended period of time rather than occasional feelings of loneliness.

Recent Australian research into loneliness includes an earlier Australia Institute paper by Michael Flood, *Mapping Loneliness in Australia*, and *Loneliness in Australia*, published by the University of Tasmania. There is some overlap in the findings from these two papers as well as some differentiation, in part due to the theoretical basis informing them and the data sets used.

The original Australia Institute paper, published in 2005 started from the perspective that social relationships were declining as social networks fragmented.

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[1]   Heinrich, L M & Gullone, E (2006), 'The clinical significance of loneliness: A literature review', p.698.

To test this theory, Flood developed the Index of Social Support. In general, Flood found that men are 'consistently lonelier than women' at all ages and that living alone was 'the most important risk factor'. Also at risk of loneliness were lone parents. While men and women were found to have similar frequencies of social contact, it emerged that women have more supportive social networks.

Adrian Franklin and Bruce Tranter from the University of Tasmania released their research findings three years later. Notably, Franklin and Tranter chose to conduct a survey that asked specific questions about loneliness. Their findings in some cases confirm Flood's earlier results, and in other cases counter them. Franklin and Tranter found that loneliness increased in Australia between 2001 and 2007,[2] but also acknowledged that there was a lack of 'baseline comparative data' for analysing the changing experience of loneliness in Australia. The availability of longitudinal HILDA data now provides the opportunity to make concrete observations about the trend in loneliness in Australia over the last decade.

Longitudinal data from the HILDA survey that was not available to Flood can now be used to examine patterns of loneliness over time, for example, how long episodes of loneliness last and the influence of life events on this experience. This paper studies the long-term pattern of loneliness, and includes an examination of how the increasing use of online social networking sites may be influencing the experience and prevalence of loneliness. This contemporary mode of socialising was not examined by either Flood or Franklin and Tranter.

To study the part being played by social networking sites, The Australia Institute conducted a survey that employed the HILDA questions about "people's perceptions of the personal support and friendship available to them" that have been used to measure loneliness alongside questions about the use of online social networking sites. This new research is reported in Section 4 of this paper. The first three sections of the paper consider the context of loneliness in Australia (Section 1); undertake a demographic analysis to determine who is lonely (Section 2); and examine which factors might act as risk indicators of loneliness (Section 3).

1.1 Understanding loneliness

Social inclusion and the theory of social capital was popularised by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*. The book documented the diminishing nature of community and social relationships, typified by low community involvement through organisations such as clubs and churches, and spending less time with others. The pessimistic interpretation of this decline or change is that society is becoming more individualistic, with people leading increasingly self-interested

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[2]   Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.10.

lives. In Australia Lindsay Tanner picked up the shift in his book *Crowded Lives*. Tanner argued that increasing self-interest is overriding relational commitment and social obligation.[3] Flood undertook his research to examine this reduced social connection, a perspective which has prompted governments in Australia and overseas to develop social inclusion policies.

Franklin and Tranter contend that rather than a decline in social relationships, we are seeing a change in the way we relate to each other. This interpretation is based on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, who views social connections as becoming increasingly "liquid", that is, more flexible and constantly changing, with people logging in and out as needed. This optimistic view of what appear to be increasingly individual lives interprets the breakdown of old forms of social connection not as evidence of greater isolation or disconnection, but of a transition to a new form of relating that includes many temporary connections.

1.2 Measuring loneliness

In order to measure loneliness in Australia this paper largely replicates the research method used by Flood. The main exception to the approach taken by Flood was the decision to categorise respondents to the HILDA survey as lonely only if they registered a negative response to every question making up the Index of Social Support. For further detail see Appendix A.

Advantages of using Flood's Index of Social Support include:

- allowing comparison with Flood's original research findings,
- the availability of longitudinal data offers further insights into how the experience of loneliness in Australia may have changed over time, and
- questions about a range of circumstances that may influence loneliness are also asked in the HILDA survey.

An emerging field of study relevant to the experience of loneliness is the effect, both positive and negative that the use of social networking sites may be having. Participation rates in these sites are rapidly increasing,[4] making it an important area of study. However, it remains unclear how participation influences the risk of experiencing loneliness amongst users of social networking sites.

Research published by Relationships Australia reported a link between the use of communication technology and feeling lonely, with the frequency of feeling lonely increasing as the range of technologies being used increased. In particular, people

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[3]   Tanner, L (2003), *Crowded Lives*, pp.21-25.
[4]   ABS (2011), pp.29-30.

who reported that they 'frequently felt lonely were more likely to use *Facebook* to communicate with friends, family and potential partners'.[5]

The HILDA survey does not include any questions about the use of online relating, a limitation of the survey's longitudinal format. The recent study of loneliness from the University of Tasmania was limited to a brief examination of email use, with further analysis of the role of the internet to be undertaken in the future. The rise and rise of social networking sites, and its potential influence on the experience of loneliness, demands that we examine this new phenomenon. For this paper, The Australia Institute conducted an online poll (n=1,384) to look at the relationship between the increasing use of social networking sites and people's experiences of loneliness.

1.3   Are Australians getting lonelier?

Is loneliness a growing social problem in Australia, or is it limited to a sub-section of the population? By studying the experiences of loneliness amongst the same group of people[6] it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of loneliness and the factors that increase the likelihood someone may experience it. In addition to the incidence of loneliness in any given year, the proportion of people transitioning into, and out of loneliness points to a changing pattern in the experience of loneliness in Australia. Although fewer Australians were lonely in 2009 compared with 2001, the trend over this time has been fairly consistent at nine per cent. Figure 1 shows the change in the proportion of the survey population classified as lonely during this period alongside the proportion of people becoming lonely and others moving out of loneliness.

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[5]   Relationships Australia (2011), p.21.

[6]   The HILDA sample analysed (n=5,313) was restricted to respondents who had participated in every survey between 2001 and 2009.

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Figure 1   Proportion of Australians experiencing loneliness 2001-2009 (%)
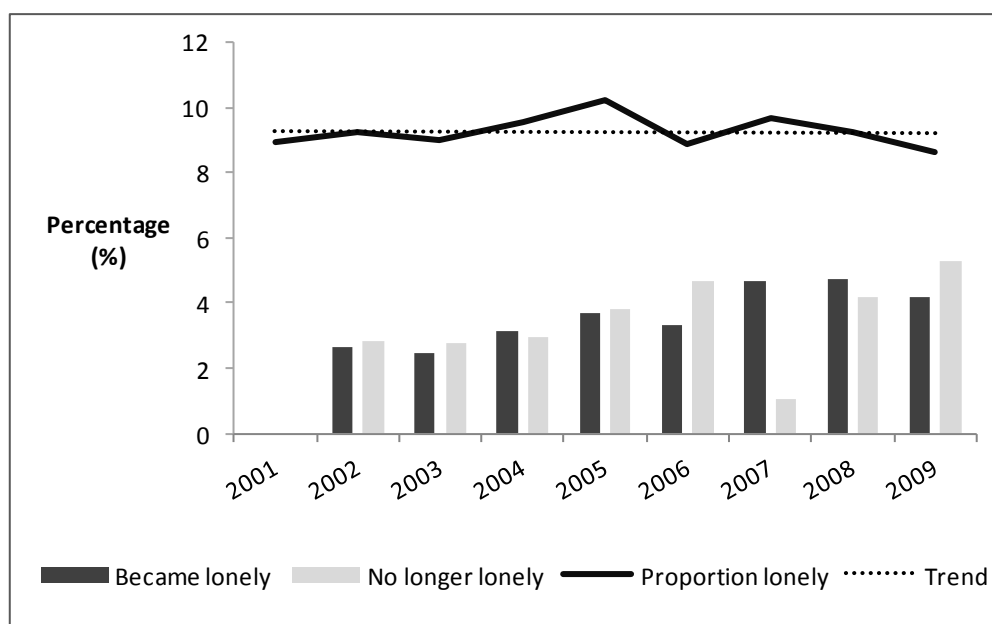
Figure 1 shows that the proportion of people making a transition in or out of loneliness increased in 2004 and 2005, along with an increase in the proportion of people experiencing loneliness. Following an aberration in 2007, the rate of movement in and out of loneliness again increased in the last two years of the survey period. Interestingly, despite a decline in the proportion of the population experiencing loneliness in 2009, the increasing transition rate means that more and more people were experiencing loneliness by the end of the decade.

The proportion of people recording a negative Index of Social Support score was higher in the Institute survey than in the HILDA survey.[7] Whereas the average proportion of HILDA respondents experiencing loneliness was nine per cent, twice as many respondents to the Institute survey recorded a negative score (17 per cent). Seven out of ten respondents to The Australia Institute survey reported having used *Facebook*; this figure increased slightly amongst those people experiencing loneliness (73 per cent).

The finding that on average nine per cent of Australians experienced loneliness between 2001 and 2009 is only a third of the loneliness rate for Australia reported previously. A study of loneliness in central Queensland found that a high proportion of the population were lonely (36 per cent).[8] Similarly Franklin and Tranter found that one in three Australians are lonely, this is despite their

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[7]   The Institute survey used the same ten questions asked in the HILDA survey to enable comparison between the two surveys.

[8]   Lauder, W et al (2004), p.91.

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expectation that their method of asking specific questions about loneliness risked underreporting due to the potential effect of stigmatisation associated with loneliness. They also recognised, however, that there was 'no way of knowing how to judge the seriousness' of individual experiences of loneliness.

In an attempt to solve this problem, analysis of the HILDA data for this paper restricted the definition of loneliness to negative scores on the Index of Social Support; that is, a survey respondent had to have reported a negative response for each of the ten questions used to calculate an Index score to be classified as lonely. This approach to determining loneliness may have contributed to the finding of a lower incidence of loneliness.

Although the incidence of loneliness reported here is lower than was found elsewhere, the increasing proportion of people experiencing loneliness, illustrated by the higher rates of people moving into and out of loneliness points to a growing social issue. This issue is further compounded by the recurrence of loneliness episodes. Thirteen per cent of HILDA respondents recorded more than one episode of loneliness. Table 1 summarises the incidence of long-term and recurrent loneliness.

Table 1   Number of years recorded as lonely

	Sample (n)	Proportion of sample
Never lonely	3,606	68%
Lonely for one year	770	14%
Lonely for two years	310	6%
Lonely for three or more years	627	12%
Total	5,313	100%

Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009.

Although the likelihood is that an episode of loneliness will most likely be for only a year, if the experience extends beyond a year it is more likely to extend to three or more years of loneliness. Table 1 shows that amongst the three out of ten people experiencing loneliness between 2001 and 2009, more than half of those people were lonely for more than one year.

1.4 Previous research

Who is lonely?

In 2005, Flood found that certain people are more likely to experience loneliness than others. People recording lower levels of social support included men; lone parents with a younger child; and people living alone.

Franklin and Tranter also found that men who are recently separated are at risk of loneliness, but so too are young singles; in fact 'loneliness seems to be quite acute throughout the life course'.[9] They concluded that age and marital status have a greater influence on the depth of loneliness than its duration. Lauder et al found that living with someone was found to 'lower odds of being lonely'.[10] Similarly, a study from the relationship support services organisation Relationships Australia found that being in a relationship can reduce the risk of loneliness:[11]

> *Those who had never married were significantly more likely to frequently feel lonely compared with married people, who were most likely to never feel lonely.*

The makeup of the household an individual lives in appears to be a solid risk indicator of the likelihood that he or she may experience loneliness.

The ABS predicts that within 20 years the number of people living alone is expected to increase from around two million people (in 2009) up to 3.1 million.[12] The increasing trend toward people living alone was a factor that led to Flood's study of loneliness. He found that adults living on their own, both with children and without, are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness, although he stressed that living alone does not necessarily correlate with being lonely. Franklin and Tranter also cited increases in the numbers of people living alone as contributing to increased levels of loneliness.

Although people living alone are at risk of experiencing loneliness, research suggests that young families are also at risk. Franklin and Tranter argue that this susceptibility may be due to:[13]

> *…severe problems among those in early stages of the marital/partnership and family cycle and may be exacerbated by high mortgage and dual-career stresses.*

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[9]   Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.18.

[10]   Lauder, W et al (2004), p.92.

[11]   Relationships Australia (2011), Issues and concerns for Australian relationships today: Relationships Indicators Survey 2011, p.20.

[12]   ABS (2011), Australian Social Trends.

[13]   Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.18.

Existing research is not clear on the reason why. Flood suggested that the presence of children resulted in 'various forms of social engagement',[14] whereas earlier Australian research found that having children (under 18) actually affected a small increase in loneliness.[15] The influence of being part of a couple in minimising the risk against loneliness differs for men and women. According to Flood, women reported a similar level of support and friendship whether they lived alone or with a partner. Whereas, for men (more so than women) marriage is an 'insulator' against loneliness.[16] Interestingly, age was found to be a common factor in the experience of loneliness.

Adults in their mid-20s to mid-40s were the focus of the two key reports into loneliness in Australia. Flood focused on this age range in part because of the 'fast-growing' trend toward living alone amongst adults this age. Franklin and Tranter found that 'loneliness peaks' in this age range. Relationships Australia were more specific, identifying people aged 25-34 as the most likely to feel lonely, while 40-49 year olds were most likely to never feel lonely.[17]

In general, younger adults, men and those living alone appear to be at greater risk of being lonely. Loneliness is not, however, the exclusive domain of these demographic groups and the factors affecting this experience is going to overlap with other groups.

Where are the lonely people?

Previous research has not widely reported on the effect of location on the experience of loneliness. Analysis for this paper found that there were only slight differences in the experience of loneliness based on where people lived. The lowest incidence of loneliness was recorded in Victoria (30 per cent), while the highest (35 per cent) was recorded in South Australia and Tasmania.[18] The variance in results, however, may account for almost half this difference. Notably, there were negligible differences between the levels of loneliness recorded in urban, regional or rural areas of a state. This finding confirms an earlier finding that geographical isolation is not a predictor of loneliness.[19]

Why are people lonely?

The reasons why people may be lonely are many and varied and this raises the level of complexity the issue of loneliness presents for policy makers. A general

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[14]   Flood, M (2005), p.13.

[15]   Lauder, W et al (2004), p.93.

[16]   Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.11.

[17]   Relationships Australia (2011), p.21.

[18]   Data for the Northern Territory was excluded due to the small sample size (n=36).

[19]   Lauder, W et al (2004), p.93.

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assessment makes the link between loneliness and dissatisfaction with life.[20] The relevance of people's satisfaction with life to experiences of loneliness have been identified previously.

> *Loneliness may be part of a wider social phenomenon evident in contemporary society. Industrialized countries appear to be experiencing, what could almost be described as an epidemic of dissatisfaction with lifestyles. Life dissatisfaction seems to be a composite health and well-being indicator comprising of feelings of loneliness, disinterest in life, unhappiness, and a general unease of living.[21]*

Dissatisfaction with life can be triggered by any one of these factors, or a combination of multiple situations and events. For example Flood found that a person's vulnerability to loneliness increases when their:[22]

> *…financial situation has deteriorated or they have lost their jobs, while men in particular are vulnerable if they have recently separated or divorced.*

The Australian Social Inclusion Board identified wider community participation and social interaction in setting out its principles of social inclusion.[23] Broadening one's social and community participation may generate an increased sense of life satisfaction. Flood found that people who spent at least some time each week volunteering reported higher levels of personal support and friendship than people who did not volunteer.[24]

Relating online

The growing use of social networking sites used to relate with others online is an important new area in the study of social support and loneliness. Being a relatively new phenomenon existing research is still divided on the role and affect on loneliness such sites pose.

For example, it has been argued that there is a 'positive relationship between measures of *Facebook* use and perceptions of social capital'.[25] Another study suggests that when it comes to using social networking sites it is the volume of information shared, rather than the type of information that is determining social

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[20] Schumaker, J F et al (1993), 'Loneliness and Life Satisfaction in Japan and Australia', p.69.

[21] Lauder, W et al (2004), 'A community survey of loneliness', p.89.

[22] Flood, M (2005), Mapping loneliness in Australia, p.23.

[23] Australian Social Inclusion Board (2009), *A compendium of social inclusion indicators,* p.51.

[24] Flood, M (2005), pp.29-30.

[25] Vitak, J, et al (2011), 'The Ties That Bond: Re-Examining the Relationship between Facebook Use and Bonding Social Capital', p.1.

connection.[26] Others have concluded that social networking participation reflects and sustains offline social connections – that is, connections in the real world.[27]

Of particular relevance to this paper; Franklin, co-author of the University of Tasmania paper on loneliness in Australia, expands on the relationship between loneliness and internet use in an article published in 2009. In this article he cites a 'specific and sophisticated study' from the United States, in which the authors were surprised to find that 'socializing online is associated with an increased level of loneliness'.[28]

An article co-authored by *Facebook* employees reported that the greater the number of *Facebook* "friends" one has, the greater the potential for social support.[29] Whereas, contrary research has concluded that numbers of *Facebook* "friends" has been found to translate little into actual social connection because 'users only interact with a small core of their friend network, even as their overall network size grows'.[30] On way of measuring the value of such online "friends" is to measure the strength of the ties connecting users. Caroline Haythornthwaite defines strong ties as those with friends and family, compared with the weaker ties shared with acquaintances. Stronger ties are also likely to exist between "friends" who move in the same or similar social circles. Haythornthwaite concludes that social networking ties are as real as ties in other, offline social contexts.[31]

The mixed findings regarding the role of social networking and its impact on loneliness makes it an important aspect of this paper. The findings that follow in the next two sections will add to this developing understanding of how new technologies are shaping how we relate and the strength of social support people are accessing.

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[26] Köbler, F, et al (2010), 'Social Connectedness on Facebook – An Explorative Study on Status Message Usage'.

[27] Papacharissi, Z & Mendelson, A (2011), 'Toward a New(er) Sociability: Uses, Gratifications, and Social Capital on Facebook', p.19.

[28] Franklin, A (2009). *On loneliness*, p.349.

[29] Burke, M, et al (2010), 'Social Network Activity and Social Well-Being', p.1.
    "Friend" is a generic term used for all other *Facebook* users linked to an individual's *Facebook* account.

[30] Burke, M, et al (2010), p.1.

[31] Haythornthwaite, C (2005), 'Social Networks and Internet Connectivity Effects', p.128.

2.   Who is lonely?

One in three Australians experienced an episode of loneliness between 2001 and 2009. Forty per cent of these people experienced more than one episode. Who are these Australians? Are some groups more prone to loneliness than others? In this section demographic attributes (household type, sex, age and income) are examined to begin to understand who, in Australia is lonely.

2.1   Household type

There is an evident link between the type of household one lives in and the chance that they may experience loneliness. Figure 2 shows the link between (i) cohabiting with another adult; and (ii) the presence of children on the incidence of loneliness.

Figure 2   Household type for people who were lonely 2001 - 2009 (%)
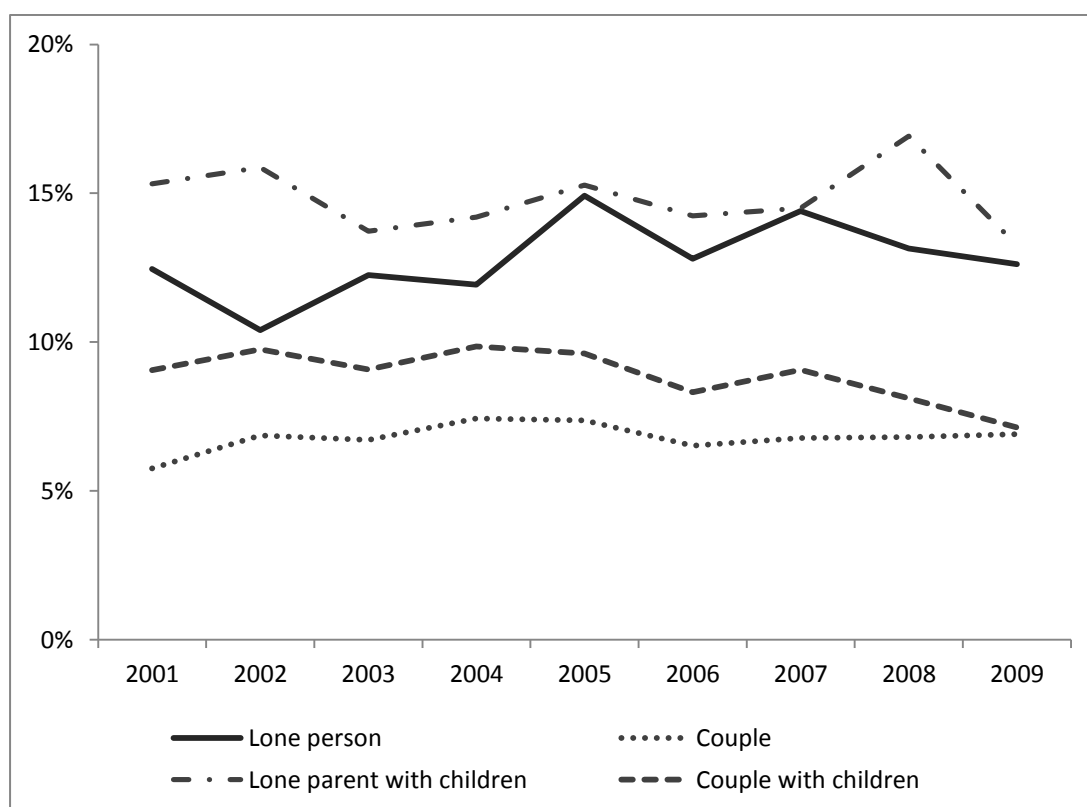
Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009.

Figure 2 shows that people living alone or in lone parent households are more likely to be lonely than people living with a partner. The presence of children also appears to increase the risk of loneliness. It seems that contrary to the conclusion drawn by Flood, friendships established between children at school and sporting clubs do not necessarily translate into socially supportive friendships for parents.

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A lower but more consistent level of loneliness is evident amongst people living in couple households. This suggests that the day-to-day support partners offer each other provides a foundation of social support. From 2001 to 2009 the average proportion of people living in couple households who were lonely was eight per cent. In contrast, people living in lone person and lone parent households were on average almost twice as likely to be lonely, but the trend was more variable.

A different breakdown of lonely people by household type was present in the online survey sample. Couples with children were the most likely to be lonely followed closely by couple households and people living alone. People living in other types of household represented a far greater number of respondents (n=44) in the online survey than in the HILDA sample. Table 2 lists the proportion of lonely respondents by household type and whether they were *Facebook* users.

Table 2   Proportion of survey sample identified as lonely (%)

Household type	All respondents	*Facebook* users
Lone person	23 %	21 %
Couple only	24 %	22 %
Couple, with children	28 %	27 %
Lone parent	7 %	9 %
Other	18 %	21 %
Total	100 %	100 %

Source: The Australia Institute survey.

Unlike the HILDA sample, there is little noteworthy effect of household type on an individual's risk of experiencing loneliness within the online survey sample except for the low incidence amongst lone parents. Although this discrepancy is notable, the size of the HILDA study and the magnitude of differences, household type remains a key determinant of loneliness in the study of this larger sample. We will now consider other demographic variables: sex, age and income.

2.2   Differences by sex and age

Men are more likely to be lonely than women. Amongst HILDA respondents 36 per cent of men recorded episodes of loneliness between 2001 and 2009 compared with 29 per cent of women. Slightly more men (54 per cent) than women registered as lonely in the sample surveyed by The Australia Institute. Interestingly, the proportion of men and women within the HILDA survey who agreed with the statement 'I often feel very lonely' reveals a contrary finding.

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Slightly more women (18 per cent) than men (16 per cent) reported feeling lonely in response to a direct question about loneliness. Although the difference is small, it represents a reversal of the overall picture of loneliness. Further, the lower proportions recorded in response to a direct question about loneliness supports the link between social stigma and admitting to loneliness.[32]

The experience of loneliness between men and women also differs depending on a person's age.[33] For men, the intensity of loneliness increases up to the age of 60 years before reducing again. In contrast, the level of loneliness experienced by women is greater in their younger years and decreases in later life. It is amongst young adults that the greatest difference between women and men is evident in opposite patterns of loneliness. The degree to which people feel socially isolated or lonely is higher amongst young women than it is amongst young men, but more men experience loneliness overall.

The marked difference in the experience of loneliness amongst young adults suggests that forming and maintaining a relationship, having children and increased financial stress may be affecting women and men differently and, therefore, contributing to different intensities of loneliness. Younger people were more likely to report being lonely in the sample of Australians surveyed by The Australia Institute. The age of lonely respondents showed a bias towards younger adults that largely reflected the age breakdown of the survey sample. Figure 3 compares the ages of the survey sample and of the lonely sub-set.

Figure 3   Age of survey respondents and lonely sub-set (%)
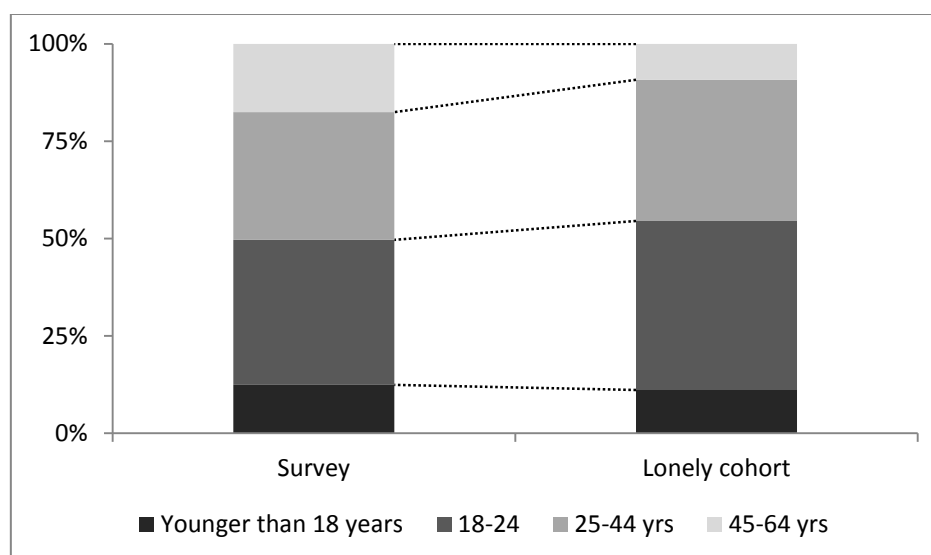
Source: The Australia Institute Survey 2010 (n=1,383) and lonely cohort (n=252).

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32   Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.3.

33   Age is survey participants' age in 2009; the average score is calculated over the previous nine years. For example, the score plotted for a 30 -year -old is the average Index of Social Support score since they were 21.

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Respondents aged between 45 and 64 years were half as likely to be lonely as those in the younger age groups. Respondents aged 18 to 24 years were more likely to be lonely and the percentage of 25 to 44 year olds who were lonely was more likely to record a higher level of loneliness. Respondents aged 25 to 44 years were the highest users of social networking sites (28 per cent) after young people aged 18-24. There was no noticeable difference in the number of men and women using social media.

The following re-examination of the role of household type amongst young adults provides further insight into loneliness amongst this age group.

Loneliness amongst 25-44 year olds

The greatest disparity in the experience of loneliness (see Table 3) amongst adults aged 25-44 years is that between men living alone (39 per cent) and women living alone (12 per cent). The fact that four times as many young men (aged 25-44) are living alone is interesting; the fact that they are more than twice as likely to be lonely is important. In all other household types the difference between men and women is less than ten per cent. Although the number of women living in lone parent households out numbers men by three to one, the rate of loneliness is about equal. This analysis confirms earlier findings that men living on their own are at the greatest risk of loneliness.

The presence of children affects the experience of loneliness amongst young men and women living in couple households in two ways. Firstly, women are more likely to be lonely if they are living in a couple household with children, but in couple households without children proportionally more men are lonely. Secondly, by and large the rate of loneliness amongst young adults is highest amongst those living in couple households with children. This finding is similar to that found in the online survey.

Not surprisingly, the lifestyle change that occurs for many new parents appears to loosen the connections they have with their pre-existing social networks. This is evident in the overall rate of loneliness amongst couples without children (13 to 16 per cent) compared to couple households with children (52 to 62 per cent). These latter figures are considerably higher than the rate of loneliness amongst all adults living in couple households with children (see Figure 2). Interestingly, young adults in lone parent households report lower levels of loneliness than parents in couple households. This may be due to the more realistic expectations that lone parents have, or reflect a greater investment in developing social support networks. In couple families, adults may be more dependent on their partners for immediate social support, while together experiencing a shared social disconnection.

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Table 3 Young adults experiencing loneliness by household type (%)

| Household type | Women (aged 25-44) | | Men (aged 25-44) | |
	Number (n)	Proportion of all women (%)	Number (n)	Proportion of all men (%)
Lone person	50	12 %	210	39 %
Couple only	70	13 %	92	16 %
Couple, with children	439	62 %	511	52 %
Lone parent	149	47 %	54	48 %
Total	724	35 %	893	39 %

Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009.
Note: 'Other' household types not listed due to insignificant sample size (n=16) but included in total.

There is little difference in the experience of loneliness amongst women living alone or in couple only households, whereas men are much more likely to be lonely if they are living on their own. The figures in Table 3 suggest that young men living with a partner are least likely to be lonely, until they begin having children. The disproportionate degree of loneliness amongst the large number of disconnected young men living alone and among new parents with young children is an important social policy issue.

2.3   Income levels and loneliness

Income has previously been found to influence the likelihood of experiencing loneliness. Analysis undertaken for this paper divided reported taxable income for women and men into three intervals: low, middle and high. In assessing how income relates to the likelihood of experiencing loneliness, we must note at the outset that as a rule women earn less than men.

Men aged 25 to 44 years earning high incomes are more likely to be lonely. Older men, aged 45 to 64 years with high and middle incomes are less likely to be lonely; men on a low income make up the majority of lonely men in this age range. Figure 4 shows the relationship between age and income level for men.

Figure 4   Relative income of men registering as lonely, average 2001-09 (%)
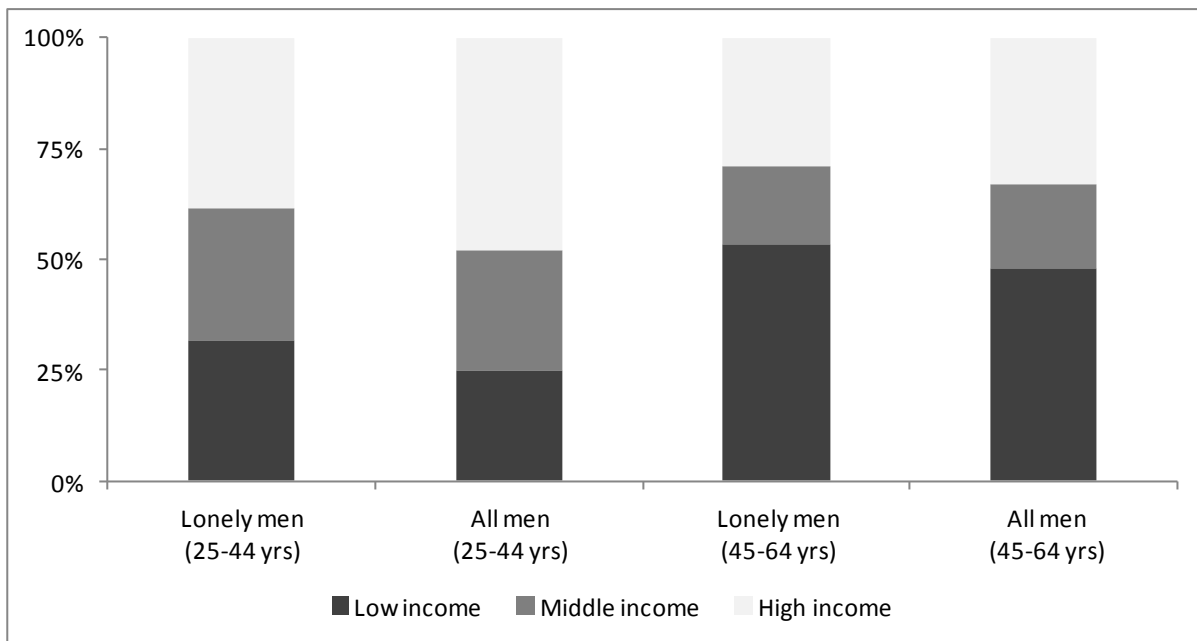
Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009.

Turning to women, Figure 5 shows that young women (25-44 years of age) on low incomes are disproportionately more likely to be lonely. There is a slight increase in the proportion of middle and high income earners experiencing loneliness amongst older women (aged 45-64 years), a finding which more closely reflects the income distribution amongst all women in the HILDA sample.

Figure 5   Relative income of women registering as lonely, average 2001-09 (%)

Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009.

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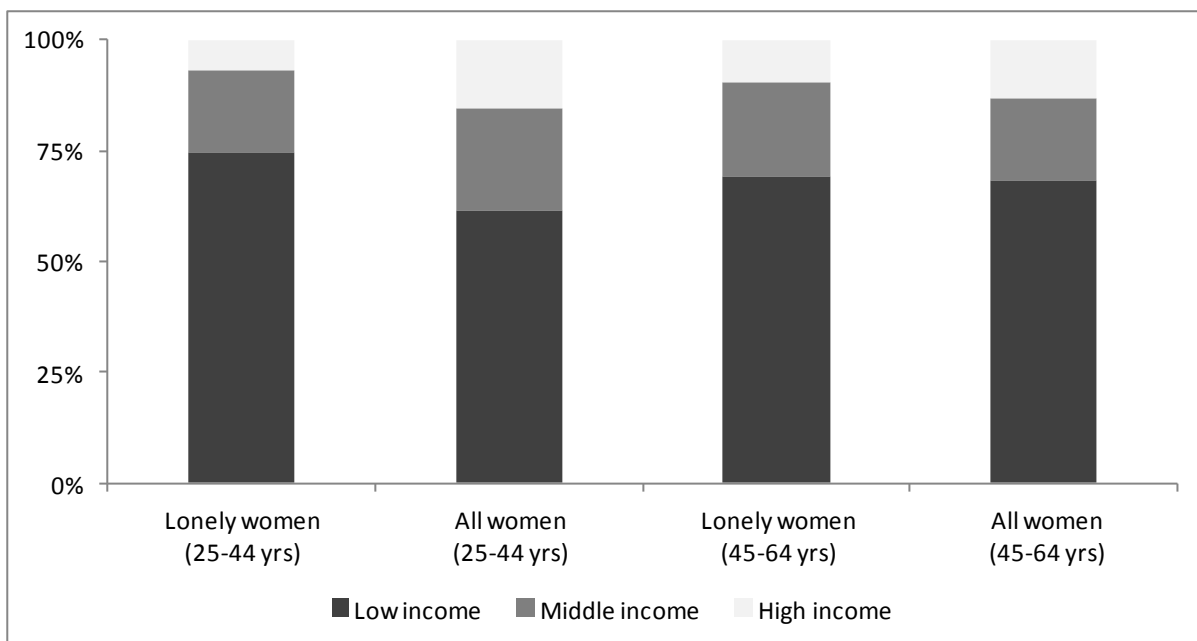
People earning an income in the low range are over represented amongst those experiencing loneliness. The difference in income levels of men and women who are lonely can be explained by the lower earning capacity of women. These findings broadly support Franklin's and Tranter's conclusion that:[34]

> *Higher levels of income appear to be linked to lower levels, frequency and duration of loneliness.*

The role of income as a risk factor for loneliness is further explored in the next section, which considers people's satisfaction with their financial situation, as well as the level of community feeling reported by people who are lonely.

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[34] Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), p.16.

3.   Indicators of risk

In general adults living on their own are more likely to be lonely and the presence of children can also increase the risk of loneliness. In an attempt to understand why people may be lonely we will now evaluate the level of risk associated with different life experiences.

Analysis found a correlation between dissatisfaction with one's financial situation and feeling less a part of the local community and the experience of loneliness. People transitioning into loneliness were more likely to report either lower satisfaction with their finances or less community participation and in 13 per cent of cases people recorded decreases in both factors. Where people reported less community feeling, a decrease in time spent volunteering and lower satisfaction with one's neighbourhood were also found. The following sections examine these indicators in more detail.

There was no independently significant correlation between a transition into loneliness and other factors identified by Flood, including working longer hours, lower job satisfaction, and spending less time volunteering or socialising (see Appendix B).

3.1   Dissatisfaction with one's financial situation

Increased dissatisfaction with one's financial situation is a risk factor for experiencing loneliness. Flood identified this association, concluding that 'men and women face a greater risk of social and emotional isolation if their financial situation has deteriorated'.[35] On average, between 2001 and 2009 just over a third of HILDA survey respondents (36 per cent) transitioning into loneliness reported a drop in satisfaction with their financial situation.

People earning a low income (in the bottom third of income earners) accounted for two thirds (65 per cent) of people who became more dissatisfied with their financial situation in the same year they became lonely. Couple families with children were also more likely to report lower satisfaction with finances and to being lonely. Figure 6 presents a breakdown by household type.

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[35]   Flood, M (2005), p.23.

Figure 6   Proportion of people who became lonely and reported increased dissatisfaction with their financial situation by household type (%)
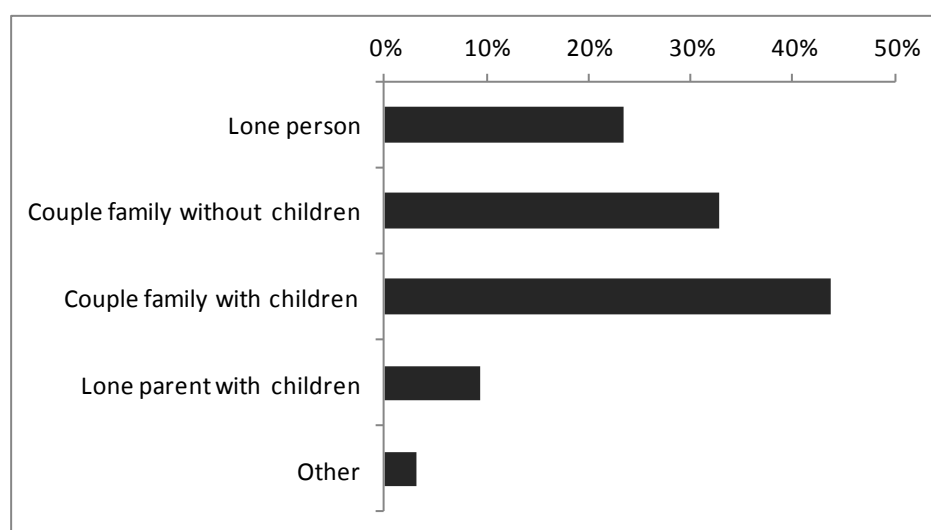
Source: HILDA Survey 2001-2009; (n=1,879).

Figure 6 shows that people living in couple households accounted for three quarters of those people who reported increased dissatisfaction with their financial situation when they became lonely. Interestingly, such a link was evident in only nine per cent of lone parent households.

The strength of the relationship between loneliness and dissatisfaction with one's financial situation is similar to that between feeling an increased disconnection from the community and becoming lonely considered below.

3.2   Disconnection from the community

Loneliness is epitomised by lower levels of community connection. Not surprisingly then, disconnection from the community was one of two statistically significant factors associated with a shift to loneliness. The association was slightly greater amongst lone person and lone parent households, an inverse finding to that described in Section 3.1, where fewer of these household types registered a link between financial dissatisfaction and loneliness.

Where community disconnection and loneliness were linked, the significance of other factors that had not been independently significant increased. People who reported feeling less a part of the community also reported volunteering less and feeling lower satisfaction with the neighbourhood in which they lived. This finding indicates that disconnection from community and wider social participation can be an indicator of loneliness.

The evidence reported here indicates that people experiencing loneliness who report feeling disconnected from their community are also less likely to volunteer

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and/or feel dissatisfied with the neighbourhood in which they live. They are also likely to perceive themselves as struggling financially, as evident in increased dissatisfaction with their financial situation. For a smaller proportion of people moving into loneliness both financial dissatisfaction and community disconnection are contributing factors.

3.3   Social connections and loneliness

Although financial dissatisfaction and community disconnection were found to be linked with transitions into loneliness no independent link was found between loneliness and factors consistently identified in social inclusion policies, such as: volunteering, socialising and participation in sporting and community organisations. This finding is noteworthy, not only in determining the risk factors behind loneliness, but also for the challenge it presents to policy makers charged with implementing the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda.

The Social Inclusion Board has previously reported high levels of community participation and sociability amongst Australians.[36] This finding may explain the lack of correlation between those two factors and transitions into loneliness, despite their listing as indicators of social inclusion. It is important to note, however, that the Social Inclusion Board and the HILDA study used differing measures of community involvement.

Whereas the Social Inclusion Board study defined community participation as 'participating in a community event in the last six months',[37] for this paper, the measure used was membership of a community organisation. The latter is a more stringent test of community participation and may be a further reason why no strong link was found between community participation and loneliness. The way researchers measure factors influencing both loneliness and social inclusion will clearly influence the importance that we can attribute to them.

3.4   Is social media connecting people?

Social networking sites, the most popular of which is currently *Facebook* provide users with an online means of communicating with groups of people as well as individuals. On *Facebook* these people are known as "friends" and users invite other users to be their "friend" and accept (or reject) the same invitations. Users of *Facebook* who did not record a negative score reported having more *Facebook* "friends" than respondents categorised as lonely. Table 4 shows the number of "friends" reported by survey respondents.

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[36]   Australian Social Inclusion Board (2009), p.51.
[37]   Australian Social Inclusion Board (2009), p.51.

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Table 4   **Number of "friends" amongst respondents using *Facebook* (%)**

Facebook users	1-20	20-100	100+	Total
Lonely respondents	24 %	44 %	32 %	100 %
Other respondents	20 %	37 %	43 %	100 %

Source: The Australia Institute survey (n=1383).

Table 4 shows that people experiencing loneliness also report having fewer online "friends". The number of "friends" someone has, therefore, can act as a risk indicator for the potential likelihood a person may experience loneliness. It is unclear, however, whether a greater number of "friends" translates into lower levels of loneliness if these online connections consist of weaker social ties with acquaintances. Therefore, it is not necessarily the number of friends but the quality or strength of the social tie that is important.

The Australia Institute tested the thesis that it is not the number of "friends" but the quality of friendships by asking survey respondents: What percentage of your *Facebook* friends would you regard as real friends (including family members)? The results from this question are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7   **Percentage of *Facebook* "friends" considered to be real friends (%)**
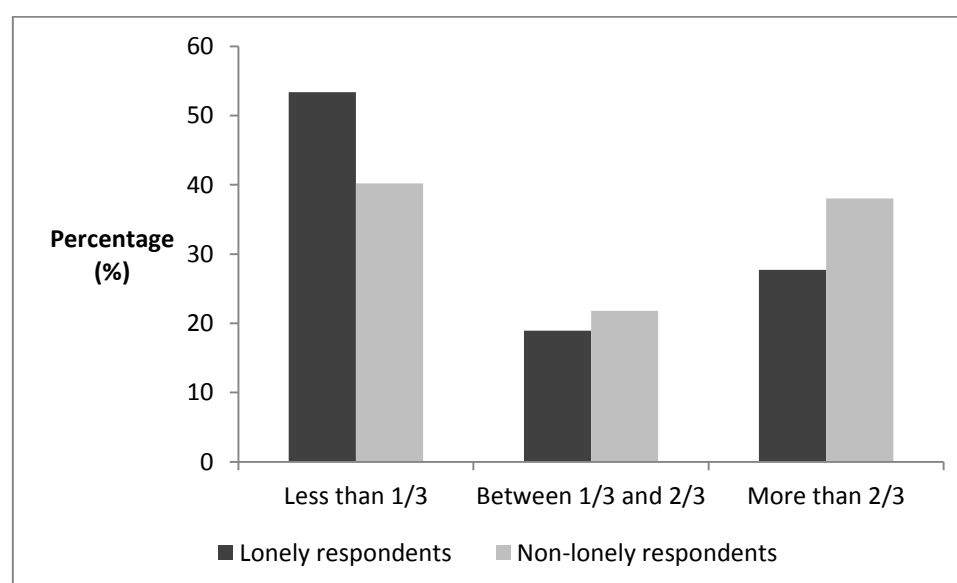
Source: The Australia Institute survey (Lonely respondents using *Facebook*; n=184).

Figure 7 shows that people registering as lonely are less likely to consider online "friends" as real friends. This important finding tells us that social networking sites provide a lower quality of social connection for people experiencing loneliness. The quality of social connections, rather than the quantity (i.e. the number of

Facebook "friends"), has previously been identified as the critical factor in determining loneliness.[38] What is not clear is whether this apparent disconnection between the number of "friends" and loneliness is the result of a false sense of online community or the experience of loneliness.

The proportion of survey respondents reporting that contact with friends and family increased when they started using social networking sites gives some insight into how social networking may be influencing the level of social connection. Interestingly, the proportion of people using social networking sites who reported that contact with family and friends had increased since they began using this new form of communicating was higher amongst the lonely sub-set (35 per cent) than amongst other users (28 per cent). The reported increase in contact with family and friends amongst users experiencing loneliness shows that some users who are lonely may be proactively using social networking sites to address their loneliness. It also shows that users of social networking sites who are not experiencing loneliness are more likely to be using online networks to further expand what is already likely to be a sound foundation of social support.

Although research has shown that the number of "friends" a person has online is not related to people's level of social connection, new research reported in this paper finds that there is a link between the likelihood of experiencing loneliness and the number of "friends" a person has online. In turn, the quality of social networking connections is reportedly higher amongst users not experiencing loneliness. Users of social networking sites that have fewer "friends" with which they share weaker ties are at further risk of loneliness. Despite being connected to others through social networking sites, these users are not satisfied with the quality of their online social connections.

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[38] Mellor, D, et al (2008), 'Need for belonging, relationship satisfaction, loneliness and life satisfaction'.

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4. Key findings and policy implications

Analysis of longitudinal data from the HILDA survey finds that the proportion of respondents experiencing loneliness remained largely consistent between 2001 and 2009 at nine per cent. However, due to movement in and out of loneliness, approximately one third of Australians experienced loneliness during this time.

Adults living on their own, either in lone person households or as lone parents, were more likely to experience loneliness. A notable finding was that the risk of loneliness was twice as high for men living on their own as it was for women living on their own. The rate of loneliness amongst men increased toward middle age before decreasing again after retirement age. For women a similar pattern was evident in later life, but they were noticeably lonelier up to the age of 50.

The presence of children increases the risk of loneliness but affects men and women differently. Women are more likely to be lonely if they are living in a couple household with children, but in couple households without children proportionally more men are lonely.

Franklin and Tranter drew attention to the influence of income on whether an individual experiences loneliness. This paper finds that having a low income was a considerably greater risk indicator for loneliness for women than for men.

Beyond demographic analysis, the possibility of pre-empting the experience of loneliness arising from changes in life circumstances is limited. This is a potential hurdle for policy makers, particularly those working in the field of social inclusion.

Two factors indicate a risk of experiencing loneliness. Amongst people who became lonely there was evidence of increased dissatisfaction with their financial situation and disconnection from their community. The degree to which increased dissatisfaction with their financial situation influenced loneliness differed by household type, with the effect being greatest in couple households and more so those with children. In contrast, the effect of community disconnection on loneliness was more uniform. People who felt less connected with their community and experienced loneliness were also less likely to spend time volunteering and to feel more dissatisfied with the neighbourhood in which they lived.

Interestingly, many factors that have been linked with loneliness and social inclusion by other researchers did not show up as significant contributors to people's reported loneliness. These factors include health and well-being, employment stresses, less time spent with family and friends or participation in community organisations.

A factor not considered in earlier Australian loneliness research is the impact of social networking sites. Loneliness amongst users of these sites reflects the same

gender disparity identified in the HILDA survey in which men using social networking sites showed higher levels of loneliness. However, the difference between household types identified in the HILDA sample was fairly balanced in the online sample, with the exception of the low number of lone parent households who were lonely. Couples with children were the most likely to be lonely. There were higher levels of loneliness amongst younger users, who also make up the majority of people socialising online.

The strength of ties or connections that people obtain through social networking sites is an indicator of their propensity for loneliness despite an online social networking presence. Those people who are more likely to report a higher proportion of online "friends" to be real friends are less likely to be lonely.

4.1 Policy implications

There are a range of policy implications of loneliness in Australia. Immediately obvious are the ramifications for implementation of the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda. Less apparent is the potential effect of social exclusion through loneliness on the trend toward government reliance on families to provide community services. The new findings about loneliness and social networking sites may have consequences for policies concerning loneliness amongst younger people and more broadly their interactions with social media, as well as the increasing use of social media by government departments and agencies.

Social inclusion

The Federal Government's vision for social inclusion is of a society 'in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society'. The Social Inclusion Agenda aims to enable all Australians to learn, work, engage and have a voice. The third point, engagement, means 'connecting with people and using their local community's resources'.[39] Unfortunately, where lonely people are disconnected from their community (see Section 3.2), their opportunity to engage with others is diminished.

Assisting people who are experiencing loneliness due to disconnection from their community to connect with other people is a challenge for the implementation of social inclusion policies. Relevant social inclusion indicators identified by the government are volunteering, community participation and sociability.

The importance of volunteering is illustrated by the reduced rates of volunteering that this paper found amongst people experiencing loneliness and feeling disconnected from the community. When it found a peak in volunteering amongst 35 to 44 year olds, the Social Inclusion Board suggested a likely link between

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[39]   Australian Government (2011), *Social Inclusion* (website).

volunteering rates and the presence of children.[40] The higher rates of loneliness amongst people living on their own and new parents with young children point to a need for policy initiatives to increase rates of volunteering among these people.

Efforts to promote social inclusion through community engagement need to focus on eliciting greater involvement in the wider community (beyond people's friends, family and neighbours) through volunteering. Success in this area of social inclusion policy would be likely to reduce recorded levels of loneliness. The policy challenge is how to achieve greater levels of volunteering amongst those at greater risk of loneliness.

Improving participation in volunteering could be fostered by:

- targeting the avenues for volunteering,
- coordinating opportunities to volunteer, and
- increasing recognition of volunteers, particularly amongst demographics least likely to volunteer but with a heightened risk of loneliness.

Opportunities to volunteer in spheres of community life relevant for men living on their own (sport, gaming, dinner clubs, dancing classes or manual arts) and parents of young children (toy libraries; playgroups; adult reading, film and conversation groups; sport and fitness) are more likely to appeal to those people experiencing high rates of loneliness and reduced participation as volunteers.

Greater local recognition of the contribution volunteers make would help raise the profile of volunteering. Promoting examples of people from target demographics at risk of loneliness could help mitigate the risk. Volunteering could also be recognised as part of people's Work Experience Phase requirements with Centrelink. This form of recognition would also promote the validity of including volunteer work on a person's resume, and further raise the perceived value of volunteering amongst younger people at risk of social disconnection and loneliness. Such a link to training and employment aligns with other facets of the Social Inclusion Agenda.

Outsourcing services to the community

A primary focus of social inclusion work is on connecting people with services, yet at the same time the government is outsourcing many services to the community. For the nearly one in ten Australians who in any given year are lonely, the social network that they may need to call on to provide these services may be lean or altogether absent.

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[40]   Australian Social Inclusion Board (2009), p.49.

One such area is post-hospital care. For example, stroke survivors are heavily reliant on informal carers for assistance with daily activities.[41] Where informal care is not available, more likely amongst people living alone and those experiencing loneliness, people recovering from a stroke are likely to have to move into residential care. Evidence of the reliance upon informal carers is found in the *National Evaluation of the Transition Care Program: Final Evaluation Report*, which shows that people living alone are more likely to use residential-based transitional care services.[42] Where the availability of these services are limited people experiencing loneliness are at risk of lower levels of care. Conversely, patients dependent upon family and/or friends for more of their care are going to place greater stress on those support networks.

The absence of support networks has been identified nationally in frameworks for coordinating care for people with mental illness. People who suffer from mental illness 'rely extensively on multiple health and community services for assistance to maintain their lives within the community'.[43] People living with mental illness, those recovering from stroke recovery and also those requiring long-term health care more generally, are reliant on public health services. Where these services are in turn dependent on the community and personal support networks, people who do not have such networks to call on, are at risk of: receiving lower levels of care; being forced into residential care that may be inappropriate (such as young people being placed in nursing homes); or having to wait for care that may not be readily available.

Social networking

People's use of social networking sites provides risk indicators of loneliness, but this research shows that such use may in some cases increase social connection. Although having fewer online "friends" indicates a greater propensity for loneliness, the proportion of those online "friends" that users considered to be real friends points to the possibility that social networking sites may be alleviating experiences of loneliness for some people. Having said this, it does not automatically follow that new forms of social connection will replace more traditional forms of connection that appear to be breaking down.

The evidence suggests that people who use social networking sites, but are not having their needs for social support met in the offline world may experience a greater depth of loneliness. Given the rapid increase in use of social media and the impetus to find social inclusion solutions, there is a risk that social networking sites may be over promoted, especially to younger people. The Department of

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[41]   AIHW (2006), How we manage stroke in Australia, p.42.

[42]   Department of Health and Ageing (2008), National Evaluation of the Transition Care Program: Final Evaluation Report, p.36.

[43]   COAG (2006), *National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006-2011*, p.5.

Human Services (DHS) provides an example of the enthusiastic uptake of social media by government. In its 2010-11 annual report the DHS reported that:[44]

> *With the rapid growth and application of social media, the portfolio had developed a digital and social media roadmap of 36 projects and established a Digital Media Section.*

These projects included: an online community and online discussion forum to 'engage with customers', a specific online community for recipients of the Parenting Payment and a *Facebook* site. Although these websites represent a new means of promoting government agendas and initiatives, all levels of government need to recognise the risk that apparent online social connections may in fact be masking real social disconnection.

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[44] Department of Human Services (2011), *Annual Report 2010-11*, p.45.

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5.   Conclusion

Loneliness is a persistent social issue in Australia. Although fewer Australians reported being lonely in 2009 than in 2001, the trend over this time has been fairly consistent at nine per cent. Despite a marginal decline in the proportion of people experiencing loneliness, an increasing number of people have been transitioning into and out of loneliness. As a result approximately one in three Australians experienced loneliness over this period.

This research found evidence of a link between cohabiting with another adult and a lower incidence of loneliness. People living in lone person and lone parent households were on average almost twice as likely to experience loneliness. The presence of children also increased the risk of being lonely. There is also a gender based difference with men more likely to experience loneliness than are women. However, there are different patterns of loneliness for men and women throughout life with women more likely to be lonely in earlier adulthood and men more so in later life. There is also evidence of a correlation between low satisfaction with one's financial situation, feeling less a part of the local community and loneliness.

The impact social networking sites may have on the experience of loneliness is a new field of study. The more "friends" users of online social network sites have the less likely they are to report being lonely and users who reported experiencing loneliness were less likely to consider online friends as real friends.

Yet, there is some evidence that online socialising may provide a means of alleviating loneliness. More than one in three (35 per cent) lonely users reported increased contact with friends and family, indicating that for this group, use of social networking sites offers the potential for increased social support.

Examination of the experience of loneliness in Australia has a range of policy implications. These policy implications include:

- feeling less a part of the community, and of the related decrease in volunteering rates and how this relates to experiences of social exclusion,
- the potential limits on access to support with a policy trend towards government relying on families to provide community services, and
- the potential benefits and shortcomings of utilising social networking sites for increasing access to social support, especially amongst younger people.

When developing social policy, the government needs to be aware of the ongoing propensity for Australians to experience loneliness.

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Appendix A

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey asks questions about social support modelled on the approach applied to the UCLA Loneliness scale. The questions combine positive and negative framing (five of each). The UCLA scale, 'which is the most commonly used loneliness measure',[45] takes a similar approach to that used in HILDA, asking questions about being "in tune" with people; feeling close to people; how well people feel they are known; and having people to turn to.[46]

Methodology

This paper uses data from the HILDA survey and from an online survey of 1,384 Australians undertaken by The Australia Institute in June 2011. The second survey, complements and supplements data from the HILDA survey, replicating the ten questions and the seven point Leichhardt scale used to determine the Index of Social Support measurement, and asking new questions about the use of social networking sites. The survey sample was representative of the Australian population by gender, age and geographic distribution.

Franklin and Tranter were critical of the method employed by Flood (and replicated in this paper), which was based on the assumption that an absence of social support is an indicator of loneliness. Franklin and Tranter instead asked eight specific questions about the experience of loneliness, while recognising that this approach might result in underreporting due to the stigma of admitting to loneliness.[47]

The research approach used in this paper attempts to address the potential effect of stigmatisation by using questions about social support asked in the HILDA survey as proxies for loneliness which also includes a question about feeling lonely. Although the proxy between social support and loneliness may be limited by the lack of direct questions about loneliness it can nevertheless provide insights into the experience of loneliness, thus making an important contribution to the development of social policy.

Index of Social Support

The Index of Social Support replicates a methodology designed by Michael Flood in an earlier Institute paper, *Mapping Loneliness in Australia*. The following explanation is reproduced from that paper.

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[45] Heinrich, L M & Gullone, E (2006), p.700.

[46] Russell, D W (1996), 'UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, Validity, and Factor Structure', pp.21, 23.

[47] Franklin, A & Tranter, B (2008), *Loneliness in Australia*, p.3.

The key task of this paper, mapping patterns of loneliness, was achieved by using HILDA data to construct an index of personal support and friendship. The HILDA survey includes ten statements about people's perceptions of the personal support and friendship available to them. Respondents are asked to signal their agreement on whether each statement applies to them, on a seven-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. The ten comprise five statements suggesting that personal support and friendship is lacking and difficult to access, and five statements suggesting that such support and friendship is readily available and accessible. They are as follows;

1) People don't come to visit me as often as I'd like.
2) I often need help from other people but can't get it.
3) I seem to have a lot of friends.
4) I don't have anyone I can confide in.
5) I have no one to lean on in times of trouble.
6) There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down.
7) I often feel very lonely.
8) I enjoy the time I spend with the people who are important to me.
9) When something's on my mind, just talking with the people I know can make me feel better.
10) When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone.

The construction of an index of personal support and friendship involved three steps. First we recoded responses on the five negatively-phrased statements (numbers 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7) so that a higher score on the seven-point scale indicates the perception of a higher degree of support. Second, we recoded responses on the seven-step scale so that the 'most lonely' response scored -3 and the 'least lonely' response scored +3. Third, we summed all responses to the statements for each person. This means that, after summing responses to the ten statements, total scores on the Index of Social Support range potentially from -30 to +30. A score closer to -30 indicates that the person perceives that very little support or friendship is available to them: they often feel lonely, people do not visit, they cannot find people to help them out, they do not have people to confide in or lean on, and so on. A score closer to +30 indicates that the person perceives a high level of support or friendship. In other words, a high score on the Index of Social Support indicates lower loneliness, while a low score indicates higher loneliness.

A point of difference from the previous paper was the decision to measure an incidence of loneliness as a negative score. On average, nine per cent of respondents had a negative Index of Social Support score each year. Defining a maximum score for loneliness allowed movements in and out of loneliness (see Figure 1) to be tracked. This measurement of movement also permitted analysis

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of the link between a transition into loneliness and changes in life circumstance (see Section 3).

Online Survey Questions

In addition to the replication of the ten questions above, the following questions were asked.

Q.   Do you use *Facebook*?

- Yes, regularly
- Yes, sometimes
- Yes, rarely
- No, but I have in the past
- No, never used *Facebook*

Q.   In the past week, how long did you spend doing the following? Please enter the number of minutes. If you don't know enter '999'

- Talking on the phone with family or friends
- Emailing/texting with family or friends
- Using *Facebook*
- Talking with family or friends through skype/webcam

Q.   Do you use *Facebook* for any of the following…?

- For work/business
- To organise/keep track of my calendar
- To contact friends and family
- To update my 'status'
- To keep up with what my friends/family are doing
- To blog/share information with my network of friends/contacts
- To follow websites I am interested in
- To pass time/watch videos/etc.

Q.   Why don't you use *Facebook* more often?

Q.   You said you use *Facebook*. How many *Facebook* 'friends' do you have?

- 1-20
- 20-50
- 50-100
- 100-200
- 200-400
- 400-1000
- 1000+
- Not sure

Q.   What percentage of your *Facebook* friends would you regard as 'real friends' (including family members)?

- __%
- Not sure

Q.   Since you began using online social networks, which of the following has taken place?

- The contact I have with friends and family has increased or improved
- The contact I have with friends and family has declined or deteriorated
- The contact I have with friends and family has stayed the same
- Not sure/hard to say

Q.   In the past week, how many minutes did you spend emailing friends and family while at work? Please enter the number of minutes. If you don't know enter '999'

Q.   In the past week, how many minutes did you spend on social networking sites (e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter*) while at work? Please enter the number of minutes. If you don't know enter '999'

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Appendix B

Results

The following results present the strength of relationship of the analysis discussed in this paper.

Analysis of factors behind loneliness

Table B1 lists the correlation and statistical significance of various self-reported factors considered in relation to a transition into loneliness. Overall the correlation was at best low or absent; there were only statistically significant results in three instances. These results may have been different had a lower threshold been set for classifying loneliness on the Index of Social Support.

There was a notable exception in cases where there was a link between loneliness and lower community feeling. In these cases there was a statistically significant moderate correlation with less volunteering ($r = 0.413$) and less satisfaction with one's neighbourhood ($r = 0.373$).

Table B1   Relationship between life changes and a transition into loneliness

Change	Sample size (n=)	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Less satisfied with one's financial situation	684	0.114	<0.01
Feel less a part of one's local community	714	0.113	<0.01
Less satisfied with the neighbourhood one lives in	708	0.09	<0.05
Less satisfaction with one's health	664	0.095	
Health is a greater interference in social functioning	394	0.074	
Working longer hours	874	0.062	
Working non-preferred hours	924	0.056	
Less job satisfaction	382	0.034	>0.05
Lower self-assessment of one's health	308	0.029	
More time spent caring	43	0.012	
Less time spent volunteering	272	0.011	
Less time spent socialising with friends and family	455	0.008	

Source: HILDA survey cases that transitioned into loneliness between 2002 and 2009 (n=1,527).

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