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Do humanitarian entrants in Australia experience loneliness?

In September 2018 Relationships Australia released its research paper: [Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness?: Findings from 16 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia \(HILDA\) Survey](#) (Study). SCoA welcomes this important report and thanks Relationships Australia for their efforts to increase understanding of loneliness as a matter of growing concern in Australian society.

The Study examines loneliness prevalence rates at the national level in association with ageing, remoteness, employment, income, income support, relationships, household types, marital status and health, for both males and females accordingly. Respectively, the Study gives us an insight into some crucial reasons why people experience different levels of loneliness. “This research adds to the substantial Australian and International research evidence to confirm that poverty, unemployment and poor relationships are associated with loneliness and lonely people are likely to make greater use of health care system.”¹

The HILDA Survey, from which the Study draws considerable data, follows the lives of Australian residents in their households from 2001 onwards. Given that the HILDA Survey does not specifically focus on the circumstances of new arrivals to Australia – migrants and refugees, the findings of the Study do not provide us with information on how severely and persistently this group of the Australian population experience feelings of loneliness. SCoA considers that humanitarian migrants at the beginnings of their settlement journeys in Australia, are with no doubt extremely vulnerable to the risks of being socially isolated and excluded and may struggle to truly feel belonging in Australian society, which is fundamental for successful settlement.

Even though a range of settlement services are delivered to newly arrived humanitarian entrants to help them achieve the best settlement outcomes as soon as possible, it is perceived that they struggle to overcome many barriers, such as language barriers, lack of job opportunities, housing, financial problems, worrying about family and friends overseas, being homesick and, for some, overcoming considerable trauma experienced prior to arrival in Australia.

Considering these circumstances, it is possible to draw inferences from the findings of the Study about the likelihood of an even higher prevalence of loneliness among new Australians from a refugee

¹ Relationships Australia, 2018, Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness?: Findings from 16 waves of the household income and labour dynamics of Australian Survey, p.13

background, compared to the general Australian population. As an example, the Study on Loneliness found for both males and females, that employment was consistently associated with lower rates of loneliness and receipt of income support was consistently associated with higher rates of loneliness. In addition, individuals gaining higher income felt less lonely than those gaining lower income.

It is well reported that the challenge of finding employment, and securing independence from income support payments, is one of the most persistent and endemic hurdles faced by new Australians from a refugee background. As a result it can be concluded that this vulnerable cohort is more likely to suffer loneliness as a result of these issues, among others.

Loneliness has undesirable negative impacts on mental and physical health of individuals and for new Australians has considerable impact on their long-term settlement prospects. Therefore SCoA believes further examination on the prevalence of loneliness for specific groups of migrants, especially humanitarian entrants is crucial. Such examination would support the settlement sector with an important evidence base for planning and providing appropriate and efficient settlement services that can specifically target loneliness and help new arrivals to overcome it.

The Department of Social Services' 2017 Report on the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) Survey analyses the first three waves (2013 – 2016) of the settlement journeys of a group of humanitarian migrants in Australia.² This Report examines some experiences of humanitarian entrants that could be associated with experiencing loneliness, such as levels of community support, community engagement and interaction with the Australian community, as well as refugees' life satisfaction over time and their feelings of being accepted in Australia. However, these findings can't be directly compared with the findings of Relationships Australia's recent Study which associates loneliness with other individual characteristics. It is also important to point out that participants of the HILDA Survey were asked very specific personal questions regarding loneliness and levels of social support (among 10 questions was e.g. 'I often feel very lonely'). This reveals the difficulty in making any direct comparison between the two studies regarding loneliness.

Notwithstanding the absence of any direct correlation, the 2017 BNLA Report provides comparison on some of the findings of other longitudinal surveys including HILDA (regarding financial stress, other types of stress, life satisfaction, etc.). In doing so, it emphasises the need for harmonising more of the available data with other studies in the future. SCoA considers that there is a great potential in addressing this need in order to best understand the settlement experiences of humanitarian migrants in Australia.

SCoA believes that the BNLA Survey is of great importance for the settlement sector and should continue into the future. SCoA suggests that future iterations of BNLA should include appropriate questions to be asked individually in order to examine loneliness prevalence rates among humanitarian migrants in Australia. The answers would enable harmonisation of the collected data with the data from the HILDA Survey, as well as shedding further light into specific situation of new Australians as they complete their settlement journeys. Subsequent findings would facilitate the delivery of efficient settlement services in order to prevent or overcome the undesirable impacts of loneliness.

² Department of Social Services, 2017, Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants.