TOP BLOKES
FOUNDATION

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

INQUIRY INTO THE PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NSW

Prepared by Top Blokes Foundation

1 November 2024



TOP BLOKES
FOUNDATION

WE BELIEVE...

When young males are healthy, engaged and well, they influence others around them to do well too. When young males thrive, their communities become safer, stronger and healthier.

Young males want to be invested in. They rise to the opportunities to become the best versions of themselves. They deserve the opportunity to harness their potential and become top blokes.

The future for young males is exciting. Our society is becoming more inclusive, attentive and caring to help young males grow into their full selves.

In a future where young men will be able to express their mental health experiences and they will be received with acceptance, respect, dignity and understanding.

Mentoring young men has a long lasting effect, inspiring them to mentor others in the future. It helps young males turn their past struggles into future strengths.

Peer groups are powerful and when mobilised for good, can create and shape culture to build a positive future.

Top Blokes provides the necessary skills, knowledge and language to connect young men with their families, building stronger relationships to ensure they have the necessary support in the future.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Top Blokes Foundation (Top Blokes) is a youth mental health charity supporting young males aged 10-24 years old. Top Blokes welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW, with a focus on the experiences of young males.

Our submission is informed by our experience working with young males in schools and communities since 2006, the lived experience of our Youth Ambassador Council members (10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs and provide advice on Top Blokes strategy and operations).

To develop this submission, we ran **a focus group with Youth Ambassador Council members**. The results of this focus group, as they relate to the terms of reference for this inquiry, can be summarised as follows:

- Young males are at a heightened risk of social isolation and loneliness. Many do not have 'organic' opportunities for meaningful social connection at school and need facilitated access to these opportunities.
- Starting secondary school and Years 7 to Year 9 are key transition points for young males that can adversely impact their sense of connection and belonging.
- Positive male role models are critical to reducing social isolation and loneliness among young males. When a role model demonstrates openness and transparency, young males feel less alone and can build up the trust and rapport needed to open up to someone.
- Young males have a complicated relationship with social media. They acknowledge that social media can impact them negatively, but also recognise that social media supports their sense of belonging and connection.

OUR SUBMISSION MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Invest in programs that work with students at risk of exclusion by enhancing behavioural management strategies and equipping educators, school leaders, and mental health professionals with best-practice approaches for engaging students diagnosed with neurodiversity, including ADD and ADHD.
2. The NSW Government invest in a 'Supervisor of Boys' position within the Teacher's Employment Award to improve the mental wellbeing of male students to promote school engagement and avoid school exclusion.
3. Programs aimed at improving the social connection of young males include a focus on supporting young males to explore their sense of identity outside of dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.

4. Invest in initiatives that promote sustained engagement in social activities for young male students transitioning through Years 7 to 9, such as clubs and community sports, with a focus on fostering continuous participation, enhancing social cohesion, and supporting the holistic development of young males.
5. Invest in greater access to mental health services for young males in schools.
6. Programs aimed at reducing the social isolation and loneliness of young males include a focus on the link with violent extremism (particularly helping young males recognise and critically analyse extremist content online) to prevent the health and safety costs of violent extremism to young males and the wider community.
7. Engage young males to contribute to local and national strategies aimed at reducing extremism.
8. Invest in long-term programs that encourage mental health discussions among young males and that give them the opportunity to bond through sharing personal experiences.
9. Investment in initiatives (e.g. campaigns and programs) that provide young males with positive male role models that talk openly about mental health.
10. Advocate to the Federal Government to consider better regulation of social media for young people, as opposed to a ban, to ensure young people continue to derive the benefits of social media on their sense of connection and belonging.

We hope that sharing these insights and recommendations gives the Committee a deeper insight into the experiences and thoughts of the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW among young males and possible ways forward.

We welcome any opportunity to speak to the Committee about our submission.

Regards



Melissa Abu-Gazaleh
Founder and Managing Director

ABOUT TOP BLOKES FOUNDATION

Top Blokes provides safe and supportive spaces for young males to meaningfully connect, explore their identities outside of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity, develop critical thinking skills and build their knowledge and resilience.

Currently we support 2,500 young males across New South Wales, through programs delivered in 65 schools.

Top Blokes programs are informed by frameworks for promoting positive and healthy masculinities, improving mental health and harm minimisation. Programs are delivered by qualified Youth Workers in New South Wales and Queensland.

Top Blokes' mission is to challenge and nurture males to be their best selves.

Top Blokes' vision is that more young males lead healthy and safe lives.

Top Blokes has three programs that we deliver in schools and with community partners such as workplaces and community organisations:

- 10-13 program: run in primary schools over one school term
- 14-17 program: run in high schools over two school terms
- 18-24 program: run with community partners over 10-20 weeks

Graduates from these programs can become members of our Grad Club, which offers them ongoing support and opportunities for personal and leadership development as well as to stay connected with like-minded males.

Top Blokes has a Youth Ambassador Council, comprised of 10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs. The Youth Ambassador Council provides lived experience advice and guidance on Top Blokes programming, operations and strategies, as well as engaging in policy and advocacy activities.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF POPULATIONS MOST AT RISK OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Young males in NSW are a key group at risk of loneliness and social isolation.

Data on social isolation and loneliness shows that 25% of young males aged 15-24 years reported experiencing social isolation (AIHW 2024). This is the highest rate of any age group and gender. Seventeen per cent of young males aged 15-24 years reported experiencing loneliness, a result that is broadly comparable to other age groups and genders.

To better understand this statistic, we asked Youth Ambassador Council members to reflect on why some young males participating in Top Blokes programs may feel lonely and/or socially isolated. They discussed how young males have limited opportunities for authentic connection based on shared interests and values.

NEED TO LOOK BEYOND THE CLASSROOM TO FOSTER CONNECTION AND BELONGING FOR YOUNG MALES

Some Youth Ambassador Council members noted that the school environment does not foster connection and belonging for young males:

> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: **…in schools, you are conditioned to make friends just via proximity. You're just around these people all the time. But there isn't necessarily an organic authentic connection there. So you might think your friends are like your friends because you've seen them every day since primary school and you hang out with these people a lot. But if you don't actually have good brotherhood and strong relationships with these people, you're still-**
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 2: **You're not going to talk to them after school.**
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: **But you still just feel empty. You can be sitting there with your friends and just feel like you're completely alone.**
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 2: **An outcast.**
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: **Yeah.**

Teacher-student dynamics were also identified as contributing to the social isolation of young males in school settings. Some Youth Ambassador Council members reported observations of male students with a diagnosis such as ADHD or ADD having difficulty forming positive relationships with teachers which can lead to a propensity to disengage from education.

In a review of research on troublesome classroom behaviour, Beaman, Wheldall and Kemp (2007) found that teachers consistently identify male students as being more troublesome than female students and that this can relate to the difference between the way boys and girls present symptoms of disruptive behaviour.

YOUNG MALES DISPROPORTIONATELY SUSPENDED FROM SCHOOL, PLACING THEM AT HIGHER RISK OF 'DEEP EXCLUSION'

At its worst, disruptive behaviour can result in school exclusion. Levitas et al. (2007: 9) argue that school exclusion can contribute to 'deep exclusion', where young people are excluded across more than one domain of disadvantage, with severe and negative consequences for their quality of life, wellbeing and future outcomes and opportunities. This may further impact their sense of self and make excluded students more vulnerable to experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

Data on 2023 suspensions from the NSW Department of Education (2024) shows a clear divide in

the experiences of young males and young females that reflect the findings of this research and the experiences of some Youth Ambassador Council members. Under the new student behaviour policy implemented in 2023, a student in NSW can be given a suspension if their behaviour:

- Causes harm to any person; or
- Creates an unacceptable risk to the health and safety, learning or the wellbeing of any person.

In 2023, there was a clear gender disparity across experiences of school suspension (Department of Education 2024):

- 85% of primary school students receiving a suspension for causing harm to a person were male.
- 67.3% of secondary school students receiving a suspension for causing harm to a person were male.
- 83.4% of primary school students receiving a suspension for creating an unacceptable risk to health and safety, learning or wellbeing of any person were male.
- 67% of secondary school students receiving a suspension for creating an unacceptable risk to health and safety, learning or wellbeing of any person were male.

Hemphill, Broderick and Heerde (2017) argue that there is a clear relationship between school suspension and behaviours that risk the health and wellbeing of young people and which are connected to risk factors associated with social isolation and loneliness, including:

- Alienation from school
- Association with antisocial peers
- Increased alcohol and tobacco use
- Increased likelihood of dropping out of school
- Involvement in illegal behaviour

They conclude that while school exclusion may provide schools with a short-term solution to managing student behaviour, the long-term costs to the community may be very high (Hemphill, Broderick and Heerde 2017: 10-11).

School exclusion disproportionately impacts young males, but even within this group, some young males are impacted more than others. In a review of international research on school exclusion, Sullivan et al. (2020) found that school exclusions disproportionately impact vulnerable and marginalised groups of students, putting them at further risk of exclusion.

This is supported by a study of suspension in Queensland state schools from 2016-2020. Graham et al. (2023) found that the risk of suspension increased as intersectionality increased: students at greatest risk and overrepresentation were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability and living in out of home care. The study identified disability as the most predominant underlying factor in school suspensions.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in programs that work with students at risk of exclusion by enhancing behavioural management strategies and equipping educators, school leaders, and mental health professionals with best-practice approaches for engaging students diagnosed with neurodiversity, including ADD and ADHD.

YOUNG MALES SENSE A DISPARITY BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS

Young males can sense this disparity between male and female students in school settings, and this may heighten their sense of exclusion and isolation:

> **"I feel like there should be more programs like [Top Blokes] out, especially for the males and stuff because I feel like in school they actually work. [Schools] do a lot more excursions, they do a lot more activities, workshops for the girls...so I feel like there should be more programs like that."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

To combat the growing rate of male student disengagement and high misbehaviour rates, in 2014 one high school in the Illawarra, NSW, piloted a new position 'Supervisor of Boys' (referred to as Boys Mentor with the students) to sit alongside and work collaboratively with the NSW Department of Education funded role, Supervisor of Girls.

The pilot found improvements in male student behaviour and engagement in education, including:

- 57% decrease in non-attendance
- 43% decrease in negative entries

- 57% decrease in detention rates
- 60% reduction in suspensions

These results correspond with an evaluation of Top Bloke's high school program conducted by EY in 2019. The evaluation found that the Top Blokes high school program helped increase attendance at school and reduced the rate of detention and suspension among the majority of schools participating in the study. The study found that this saved participating schools an average of $33,000 in avoided time spent dealing with behavioural incidents while participants were in the program and an additional $20,000 in avoided costs post-program.

To support male students to thrive at school, we encourage the NSW Government to fund a new position of 'Supervisor of Boys', a dedicated teacher resource, to improve the mental wellbeing of male students, support ongoing engagement in education and encourage pro-social behaviour. The proposed investment will be modelled on the Supervisor of Girls role.

RECOMMENDATION

The NSW Government invest in a 'Supervisor of Boys' position within the Teacher's Employment Award to improve the mental wellbeing of male students to promote school engagement and avoid school exclusion.

KEY LIFE TRANSITION POINTS WHERE YOUNG MALES ARE ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

The Top Blokes 10-13 program is offered to young males in primary schools and includes a focus on the transition from primary school to secondary school. Evidence and practice wisdom identify this transition as a key period for young people (Thomas 2020, Sanci, Webb and Hocking 2018). This was also recognised by the Youth Ambassador Council members:

> **"...the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, and especially when you're going from primary school to high school, that's like one of the times a lot of people feel really lonely because they're going into a new environment or going into a new group of friends. And I know for myself that was the same thing, getting my head around such a big school and making that transition is a time that I felt really, like, lonely."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Youth Ambassador Council members also identified the period between Year 7 and Year 9 as critical in terms of friendships and socialising. While some of this is developmental, we have also seen young males end their affiliation with community sports or other activities during this period, which may impact their sense of social connection, identity and self-worth and reduce the number of positive role models in their lives outside of the home environment.

Leaving high school is another critical transition point for young people (Sanci, Webb and Hocking 2018).

> **"[The] transition from Year 12 to going out in the real world and working, that's where I feel like a lot of kids start to feel a lot more lonelier and feel like they've got no support because they're an adult and they have to try and fend for themselves...it's harder to make friends because... it's a different environment than what your comfort zone and what you're used to."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

In our experience, young males who have left school can experience relationship breakdowns, friendship losses and challenging economic circumstances, all of which can leave them struggling and in need of help. For those young males who enter post-school education, the shift towards online learning can present an additional challenge to their sense of belonging and connection.

SOCIALLY DOMINANT FORMS AND PATTERNS OF MASCULINITY IMPACT ON YOUNG MALES' EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

While young females also experience the challenges outlined above, the transition period from adolescence to adulthood is a particularly vulnerable time for young males. Drummond et al. (2022: 756) argue that young males often have minimal guidance through this phase and may struggle to access safe spaces where they can attain emotional support. While there is not a single cause for this, socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity have emerged as an important lens through which to understand the experience of young males in Australia.

The internalisation of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity (such as emotional stoicism and toughness) can impact on the development of psychological, social and physical resources males require to cope with life's challenges (Coleman, Feigleman and Rosen 2020). Adherence to these norms is associated with negative consequences for male mental and physical health, which we consider in the next section of our submission, and is also linked to community issues including men's violence against women and gender inequality more broadly.

Male-specific therapies and services can address the individual and community impacts of

socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity on male mental health and wellbeing (Pirkis et al. 2016: 7).

Supporting young males to explore their sense of identity outside of dominant forms and patterns of masculinity is a key outcome of all Top Blokes programs. Part of this is preparing young males for major life transitions and, in the case of our 18-24 program, supporting them through these transitions. We explore this later in our submission when identifying existing initiatives to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation.

When exploring their sense of identity outside of dominant forms and patterns of masculinity, young males in Top Blokes programs are supported to understand and articulate their true identities and values. Living 'authentically' and having a strong sense of self was cited by Youth Ambassador Council members as key to protecting young males from loneliness and social isolation:

> **A lot of those people who are most lonely are people who have a lack of strong identity...As young men, a lot of the time it's quite a struggle to find really who you are that's like... authentic. I think if you don't know who you are and you're not living authentically, you will always be lonely."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

Programs aimed at improving the social connection of young males include a focus on supporting young males to explore their sense of identity outside of dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in initiatives that promote sustained engagement in social activities for young male students transitioning through Years 7 to 9, such as clubs and community sports, with a focus on fostering continuous participation, enhancing social cohesion, and supporting the holistic development of young males.

EVIDENCE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF LONELINESS ON PEOPLE AND EVIDENCE LINKING SOCIAL CONNECTION TO PHYSICAL HEALTH

For some young males, social isolation and loneliness can lead them to engage in antisocial behaviour that can impact their physical and mental health:

> ..[young males might] go through a different route to try not to be as lonely. I feel like that's where they tend to lead into crime and start stealing, hurt, harming people, stuff like that. That's why I feel like they do that so they sort want to feel respected and wanted by other people."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> 'I feel once you enter that lonely stage, you feel like there's no one there to help you. You can't do anything but get worse from... That's when you start getting into drugs and drinking...Me personally, I went through that. I felt like this, I turned to drugs, alcohol. And you think it makes you cooler and a better person, but it just makes you look like a douche.'
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Weak social connections can heighten the isolation young males feel when struggling with their mental health:

> It matters, when you need someone and no one's there. And the big stigma with guys is you can't talk about your mental health. It's weak."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS, SOCIALLY DOMINANT FORMS AND PATTERNS OF MASCULINITY AND ADVERSE HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG MALES

Coleman, Feigleman and Rosen (2020) note that these norms also impact the resilience and adaptability of males, with rigid coping strategies leaving males unable to adapt to major life changes.

Research indicates that socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity can impact the help-seeking behaviours and health choices of males:

- Low engagement with mental health service use among males who are distressed (King et al. 2020; Milner et al. 2019: 2).
- Low engagement of males in health promotion (Milner et al. 2019: 6)
- Increased health risk behaviours, including dangerous behaviour while intoxicated and alcohol use as a coping strategy (The Men's Project and Flood 2024: 9; Pirkis et al. 2016: 4; King et al. 2020).

Pirkis et al. (2016: 15) explored whether socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity heighten the risk of suicidal ideation and found that one particular element, self-reliance, is related to poorer mental health, higher levels of suicidal ideation and lower use of mental health services. King et al. (2020) also found that greater conformity to self-reliance norms and violent norms was associated with suicidal ideation in young Australian males. Milner et al. (2019: 6) also identified masculine norms as incompatible with health literacy[1].

Sadly, social isolation and loneliness can lead to suicidal ideation and suicide. While acknowledging that there is no simple or single explanation for suicide, the NSW Strategic Framework for Suicide Prevention 2022-2027 (2020: 9) identifies common factors that are known and recognised as contributing to a person's suicidal distress, including social isolation and loneliness.

While young males are less likely to report a mental disorder than young females and have lower rates of self harm (AIHW 2023a) and mental-health related emergency department presentations (AIHW 2023b), young males have a higher rate of death by suicide (Hill et al. 2021). In a retrospective analysis of coronial data from 2006-2015, Hill et al. (2021: 133) found that 73.5% of young people aged 10-24 years who died by suicide were young men.

Teerhag et al. (2020: 13) found that lifetime suicidal ideation among males was high, with 1 in 5 young males and 1 in 4 adult men reporting they had thought about hurting or killing themselves at some point in their life.

1 A person is health literate if they have the personal, cognitive and social skills that enable them to access, understand, and use information in ways that help them promote and maintain good health (Nutbeam 2000: 263; Milner et al. 2019).

Hill et al. (2021: 133, 138) found that the majority of young people who died by suicide in Australia in 2006-2015 were not receiving treatment for mental health problems, despite 57% having diagnosed or possible mental health disorders. They argue that this indicates a role for prevention strategies that target the mental health and psychosocial stressors impacting young people (Hill et al. 2021: 133, 138). This should include efforts to strengthen the social connection of young males and their health literacy as protective factors against social isolation and loneliness.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in greater access to mental health services for young males in schools.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL ISOLATION AND RADICALISATION TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Radicalisation results from emotional and cognitive processes. Developing a sense of belonging and identifying with a group is an important developmental milestone for young people (Sanci, Webb and Hocking 2018). Social isolation and loneliness may contribute to a young person's radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism (Lowe 2020). This has health and safety impacts at the individual and community levels.

To counteract the vulnerability of young males to violent extremism, the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (2021) and Lowe (2020) recommend policies and programs that:

- Recognise the strengths and interests of young people.
- Encouraging young people to engage in positive social and community activities.
- Link young people to appropriate mentors and other role models.
- Maintain young people's connection to families and friends.

Top Blokes receives funding from the NSW Premier's Department under the Strengthening Social Cohesion Community Grants aimed at improving social cohesion and preventing violent extremism.

This funding recognises the role that programs such as Top Blokes play in safeguarding young males against radicalisation by developing their resilience, sense of purpose, identity, empathy and compassion. Our program addresses extremism by targeting known risk factors for radicalisation including social isolation, mental health, feelings of disempowerment from negative portrayal in media and community and lack of life aspirations and purpose.

A key outcome for Top Blokes programs is that young males respond to diversity and different

perspectives with respect. This supports the development of social connections and protects against radicalisation:

> **"I also feel like the lesson [about stereotypes] and racism actually plays a big role in [helping participants connect] as well because as we were talking about before how people are quiet, people split off, they're segregated from everyone else. And I feel like it's something big at school though how you push the quiet kids away."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Program content alone is not enough: each Top Blokes program is delivered by qualified youth workers, at least one of which is male. This provides young men with a positive male role model and opens up opportunities for meaningful connection with a trusted adult.

RECOMMENDATION

Programs aimed at reducing the social isolation and loneliness of young males include a focus on the link with violent extremism (particularly helping young males recognise and critically analyse extremist content online) to prevent the health and safety costs of violent extremism to young males and the wider community.

RECOMMENDATION

Engage young males to contribute to local and national strategies aimed at reducing extremism.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF EXISTING INITIATIVES BY GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS TO MITIGATE AND REDUCE LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Top Blokes programs give young males the opportunity to meaningfully connect with each other in safe and supportive environments. Top Blokes programs include age- and stage- appropriate modules relevant to young males such as mental health, racism and stereotyping, respectful relationships and online behaviours. The program focuses on supporting young males to explore their identity independent of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity in an effort to support their mental health and wellbeing, including boosting their social connection and sense of belonging.

OFFERING YOUNG MALES OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL CONNECTION

When asked what connected the young males through the program, Youth Ambassador Council members reported sharing struggles they were experiencing as bonding moments:

> "[Seeing] that we all struggle and we don't talk about it."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "..you hear different people saying different things and you realise, "Oh, I'm also struggling as well." So you slowly start to connect to people through struggles and that. And I feel like people that you connect through with struggles and that as well, you have the strongest friendships."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "...it's the common knowledge that you're all put into that program for a reason that could be similar, could be not, but you've been chosen I guess. And that other people that you know or that you don't know are also facing the same sort of issues that you are and it just connects [you]."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Program content was also identified by Youth Ambassador Council members as key to helping participants meaningfully connect:

> **Strangely, it's also having a common enemy. That's a weird way to put it, but doing the mental health workshop and you see that statistic [about male suicide rates]. And everyone's just looking around at each other like, "That's so messed up." You have your little quarrels amongst each other or just your lack of friendship or you weren't friends before, that just becomes a materialism, because the conversations...get so raw."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

PROLONGED CONTACT TO BUILD RAPPORT AND TRUST

Multiple points of contact and sessions of longer duration can help sustain outcomes. While there is no conclusive evidence on the most impactful duration or dosage for programs working with young males, 16 or more hours of program time across multiple points has been identified as a good starting point (Elliot et al. 2022: 44; Flood, Hewson-Munro and Keddie 2024: 11-12; Australian Institute of Criminology 2020: 7).

The Top Blokes 14-17 program, run over two school terms, and 18-24 program, run over 10-20 weeks, meet every week at the same time. Participants are supported by the same youth workers for a total of 16 hours.

In our experience, this prolonged contact helps Top Blokes participants build meaningful connections with each other, as trust and rapport take time to build. Reflecting on their own experience in school-based Top Blokes programs, Youth Ambassador Council members describe the program as offering them a chance to elevate their relationships with students they previously had very little, and sometimes negative, interactions with:

> **I had a lot of trouble with a group of guys all through from seventh to ninth, and we started the Top Blokes halfway through grade nine. And so I'm sitting there in that room in this program with four or five dudes who, I hate using the word bully, I just hate it, but picked on me a lot, made my life hell. Beat me up a couple of times actually...And by a couple of weeks in, one of them comes up to me, tears in his eyes. He's like, 'Bro, I'm sorry for how we've kind of treated you,' whatever, and he's one of my best friends till this day...with the other guys I was just able to like, 'Yo, we're cool.' We've got a common goal here. And through some of those conversations you get a bit of vulnerability, people open up and you see another side of people."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in long-term programs that encourage mental health discussions among young males and that give them the opportunity to bond through sharing personal experiences.

POSITIVE MALE ROLE MODELS ARE CRITICAL TO REDUCING LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG YOUNG MALES

An important component of Top Blokes programs is providing young males with a positive male role model. This can be a Top Blokes Youth Worker or, in the 14-17 program, a person supporting the young male for the duration of the program. A supporter can be a parent, guardian, teacher, uncle or other person in the young male's life.

Some young males in our program do not have a strong male or parental figure in their lives. This was identified by Youth Ambassador Council members as a contributor to young males' experiences of social isolation and loneliness, which can then lead to antisocial behaviours:

> "[For] a lot of young men nowadays, there's so many stigmas around growing up and they feel like this pressure or need to conform to what's set out for them. And because you don't really have a parenthood figure that dictates everything for you and how to fit in and how to look the best or act the best way, you might not always have those figures of guidance. And that's why young people, they turn to other methods, like other methods and most of these methods involve some form of loneliness."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "it was really tough there because I never had really a strong male role model to guide me...it was just tough going through those times, feeling like I was alone and having no support from a male when I needed it most and that. So that's where I also feel like it becomes a struggle with younger generations not having a proper figure in their life, not having a good role model or even not having... Not feeling like you've got support from adults as well. That's where I think it becomes a tough one."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

When asked about what would work to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation, Youth Ambassador Council members also emphasised the importance of role models talking openly about their experiences and broadening this to mental health in general.

> People [are] actually talking about it. You've got famous UFC fighters, boxers, wrestlers, footy players actually talking about the problem with men's mental health."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> Nicho Hynes for example, that's a big example. He was trying to advocate for men's mental health and for stuff to do with drug use...And then he kept talking about it and trying to push for it because it's a big thing for him...and there's other people like Harry Garside, Alex Volkanovski, there's a lot of famous people that have gone out and spoken about it. And another example, Paddy Kennedy as well. So there's a lot of big names that have spoken about it and it's becoming a lot more known now and more spoken about...And people are starting to feel open to talk about it because they can see their idol talking about their mental health and their struggles, and they feel like they can finally talk about it now."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

Investment in initiatives (e.g. campaigns and programs) that provide young males with positive male role models who talk openly about mental health.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG MALES IS COMPLEX AND UNDER-RESEARCHED

We note that the impact of social media on social isolation and loneliness is a complex and under-researched topic (AIHW 2024). Youth Ambassador Council members were asked if social media helps them feel more or less socially isolated and lonely, and their feedback reflects the current state of evidence on this topic.

Social media was recognised as an essential, though problematic, element of maintaining social

connection and reducing or mitigating loneliness:

> When you see kids who don't have social media, they aren't really, I guess, as talked to."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> I feel like I'm happier and more socially connected [when I am off social media] because I'm not worried about some [dumb] thing. But I guess it depends...everyone's on Snap and Instagram all the time, I do feel out of the loop in a way."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Some members would not use social media for meaningful connection because of the possibility that their content will be used against them:

> Your social media footprint stays there forever, and especially when you're opening up and letting other people around you also know what you're feeling like because you can also get out of... Say you're in a period of depression, people can always take a screenshot and use that against you even when you grow up later."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: ....when it comes to social media, it is more deconstructive than it is constructive...there's always a douchebag online...Sometimes we'll post something and then they'll be like try to get you to dig further into that.
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 2: And try to antagonise.
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: To the point where they try to indirectly get you to kill yourself, try to.
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 2: Yeah. They antagonise. They just pick at you little by little and try and make you just feel worse about yourself.
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 3: Yeah, because there's always someone out there that really wants to just mess with you.
>
> YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 4: I reckon that comes from like de-personalisation.

Young males participating in Top Blokes programs are often aware of the falsity of social media content but are influenced by it nonetheless. This impacts their sense of self-worth and ability to meaningfully connect with others. This can contribute to them experiencing loneliness and isolation:

> **"But what's so interesting, bro, not only it's social media de-personalising like that, it's all perfectly and deliberately curated projection. Say, like an Instagram profile...Everyone's optimising shit to present a certain image. So it's not real, it's not authentic... You see the plus of people that they want to show you."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Social media also encourages 'low touch connections' where people appear to be more connected than ever, but these connections are not sustained or meaningful.

> **"Where the whole loneliness thing ties in, people start substituting real-life relationships with parasocial ones. If the only way you talk to your friends is messaging them, it's just not the same. People see social media and like, "Oh, I can talk to my friends. I don't ever have to leave my house." That's where the loneliness, the depression...mental health comes from."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> **"[People] become more anti-social, locked up in their room. They don't want to go out, they don't want to do anything. They're just so fixated [on social media]."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

Advocate to the Federal Government to consider better regulation of social media for young people, as opposed to a ban, to ensure young people continue to derive the benefits of social media on their sense of connection and belonging.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL ISOLATION, LONELINESS AND PORNOGRAPHY USE

The Youth Ambassador Council also raised the impact of pornography use on young males as a consideration for this inquiry. They discussed the impact of pornography use on young males' sense of identity, shame (leading to social isolation) and adverse mental health outcomes. We refer the Committee to the Top Blokes submission to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health, also being run by this Committee, for additional insights and recommendations on this topic.

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