

COTA
NEW SOUTH WALES
For older Australians



Connections
and Community
“a sense of belonging”

This publication is available on the COTA NSW website (below).

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Executive Summary

Our connection to community can provide a sense of belonging, feelings of trust and safety and foster social cohesion.

It is determined by a range of factors such as the physical environment, opportunities to participate socially and economically and the quality of our interactions with the people who live there. This sense of community and connection has important implications relating to broader issues of social capital and cohesiveness, but also the impact on an individual's risk of social isolation and the detrimental effects thereof.

As society ages, increasing numbers of us are living alone. The COTA NSW survey conducted in September/October 2020 indicated that approximately 36% of respondents lived alone. The adherence to social distancing requirements during the pandemic has exacerbated this isolation for many older people and the results of this were evident in the survey of some respondents' feelings of loneliness, anxiety or depression that were experienced.

Social isolation is an objective state that can be defined as "the absence of social interactions, contacts, and relationships with family, friends and neighbours".¹ However, this isolation is influenced by other factors such as access to appropriate and accessible transport, community infrastructure and design, and feelings of safety. This disconnection from others is associated with poorer health behaviours and outcomes and can contribute to an increased risk of loneliness or as a victim of elder abuse.

This research sought to explore the experience and attitudes of people aged 50 and older in New South Wales, with a particular focus on community participation and connectedness, age-friendly infrastructure, and perceptions of safety. More than 7,500 older people responded to the 2020 COTA NSW survey with a further 8 online focus groups conducted to explore the themes of the research in greater depth.

The main findings of the survey include:

- Sports and registered clubs are the most popular amongst respondents as social venues or for membership in an organised group.
- Volunteering continues to be popular with 60% of respondents undertaking some form.
- 2/3 of older people thought positively about their local community. Younger cohorts (50 – 59) were more likely to feel less connected than older groups. People living in rural areas felt most connected to others, although individuals living in regional centres did not.
- Older people receiving Job Seeker were least likely to feel connected to their local community, reporting less trust, less reliance on others and more likely to feel like an outsider.
- The prevalence of loneliness is highest amongst younger cohorts (50 – 59) of older people.
- The results indicated that generally older people felt safe in their neighbourhood (84%).
- Approximately 1 in 2 respondents asserting that they didn't have adequate access to well maintained, shaded footpaths in their locality.
- 46% of respondents rated the walkability of their area positively.

¹ Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Institute of Medicine (1992). *The Second Fifty Years: Promoting Health and Preventing Disability*. National Academies Press, Washington.

Recommendations

- 1** Commit to funding the *NSW Government - Reducing Social Isolation for Seniors Grant Program* that provides funding to community-based social support programs which target isolated and vulnerable older people experiencing social isolation and loneliness for the duration of the *NSW Seniors Strategy 2021 – 2031*. An amendment to the guidelines to allow for recurrent funding should be introduced, this would allow programs to develop and expand beyond pilot stage.
- 2** The evidence in this report demonstrating the inability of older people on Job Seeker to participate fully in their local community due to poverty and the consequent poor health and wellbeing outcomes strongly supports the call for the *Raise the Rate* campaign that is advocating for a significant increase in the payment for those seeking employment.
- 3** Provide ongoing education about the potential risks for older people online, including promotion of avenues for assistance and information in easy-to-read language. This should include printed information, and the availability of phonedlines and face-to-face training is vitally important for older people.
- 4** Commit to funding of the walking stream within the *Walking and Cycling Program* to 2031 to align to the *Seniors Strategy*.
- 5** Establish a state-wide database of the NSW walking and cycling network. This will enable state-wide assessment of current walkability, facilitate future network planning, DDA compliance reporting and maintenance prioritisation.
- 6** Commit to funding of the *Streets as Shared Spaces program* to 2031 to align to the *Seniors Strategy*.
- 7** Upon analysis of the trial on-demand bus and coach service, implement a network of this adaptable and responsive transport mode, with a focus on regional and rural NSW.

Methodology

A survey of people aged 50 and over in NSW was conducted by COTA NSW in September and October 2020 and received 7535 valid responses.

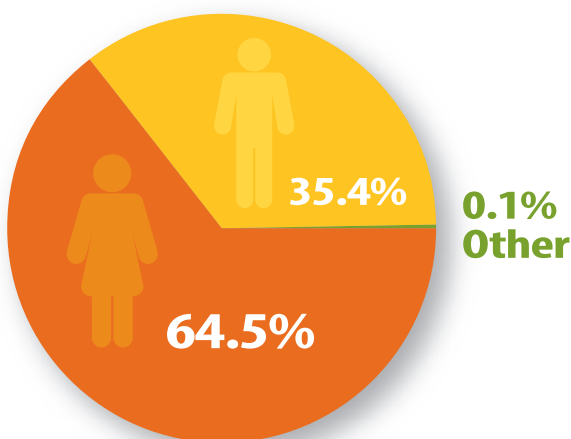
The survey was self-administered and available online and in hardcopy to COTA NSW members without e-mail or internet access. The survey was promoted through COTA NSW e-newsletter subscribers, COTA NSW members and COTA NSW Facebook and Twitter accounts. A link to the survey was inserted in the Seniors Card e-newsletter, and posted on various community organisation and local council websites in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

Data was weighted according to 2016 Census data of NSW's population for age-groups only. A under and over presentation of responses from certain age-groups necessitated the creation and application of a weighting/raking variable based on the census data for those age groups. Data software Stata was used to create the new weighting variable 'wgt1', using the 'survwgt' package. After weighting, the sample distribution aligns with NSW population data, making inference more meaningful. The resulting data set was analysed within the software package SPSS.

COTA NSW would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Hangyoung Lee, Lecturer in Sociology, Department of Sociology, Macquarie University with weighting of the data and Jenny Kishor, Macquarie University for analysis of the data. Acknowledgment also to Abiola Ogunleye, Patricia Kassas, Laura Firth, Alana Hutchings and Anna Dixon, Social Work students from the Australian College of Applied Psychology for their presentation and paper on Loneliness in Australia.

Survey sample

Gender



Age Group

50 - 54	18.7%
55 - 59	18.1%
60 - 64	16.2%
65 - 69	14.8%
70 - 74	11.3%
75 - 79	8.4%
80+	12.5%

Cultural Background

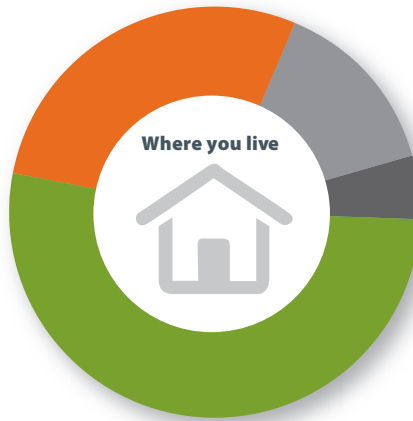
131 Respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

12.1% Respondents spoke a language other than English at home.

Where you live

28.2%
of respondents
live in regional
city/centre

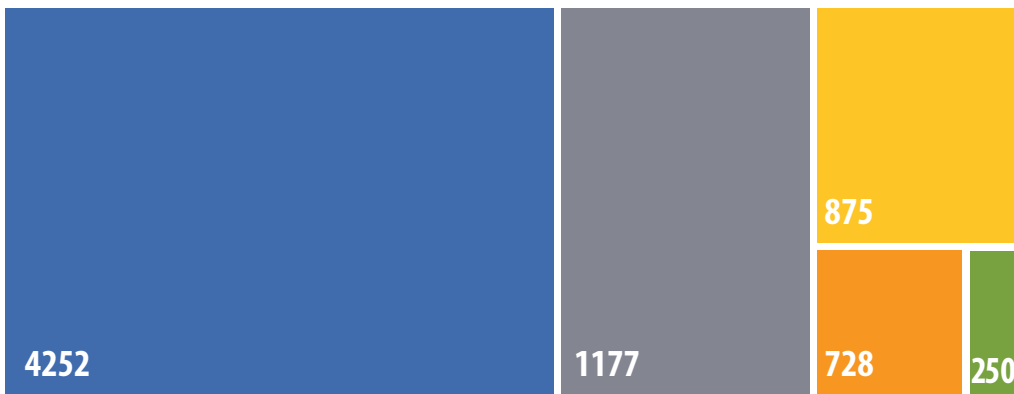
52.7%
of respondents
live in a
metropolitan
area (eg. Sydney
and surrounds)



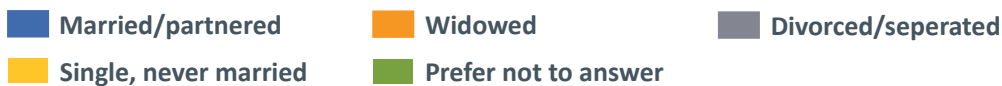
14.2%
of respondents
live in a rural town

4.9%
of respondents
live in a rural area
out of town or
remote area

Marital Status



*Multiple selections were permitted.



Current Work Status

I am retired	48.0%
I don't do paid work	3.1%
I am self-employed	5.5%
I work part-time	10.2%
I work full-time	18.8%
I am unemployed	6.2%
I work as a casual	3.7%
I am a volunteer	4.3%

24.9% Respondents provided care to someone with a disability or health condition.

20.9% Respondents identified as having a disability.

37.7% Respondents identified as having a chronic illness.

Limitations

As the survey was conducted predominantly online, to complete it all participants needed internet access and to be competent in its use. It is acknowledged that this requirement may skew responses across a range of variables. A small sample of respondents completed the survey on paper. The survey has been weighted by age, but not sex or other demographic markers.

Respondents to this survey were overwhelmingly Australian born and English speaking. The response rate to this survey of people from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds was 12.1% and not indicative of the cultural diversity in NSW.

After weighting, there was a significant difference in responses received by sex, with female responses constituting 65% of the weighted data, indicating that respondents in the 50 – 65 age group were predominately women. For these reasons, while the survey provides many insights into the attitudes and behaviour of the people who participated in the research project, the findings cannot be generalised to all older people living in New South Wales.

Consumer reference groups

To complement the quantitative research, 8 focus groups were conducted online in November and December of 2020.

These groups consisted of a maximum of 8 participants and included older people from across the state, from different age groups and gender. The groups focused on specific themes from the survey such as their experiences during COVID, volunteering or social connections and community.

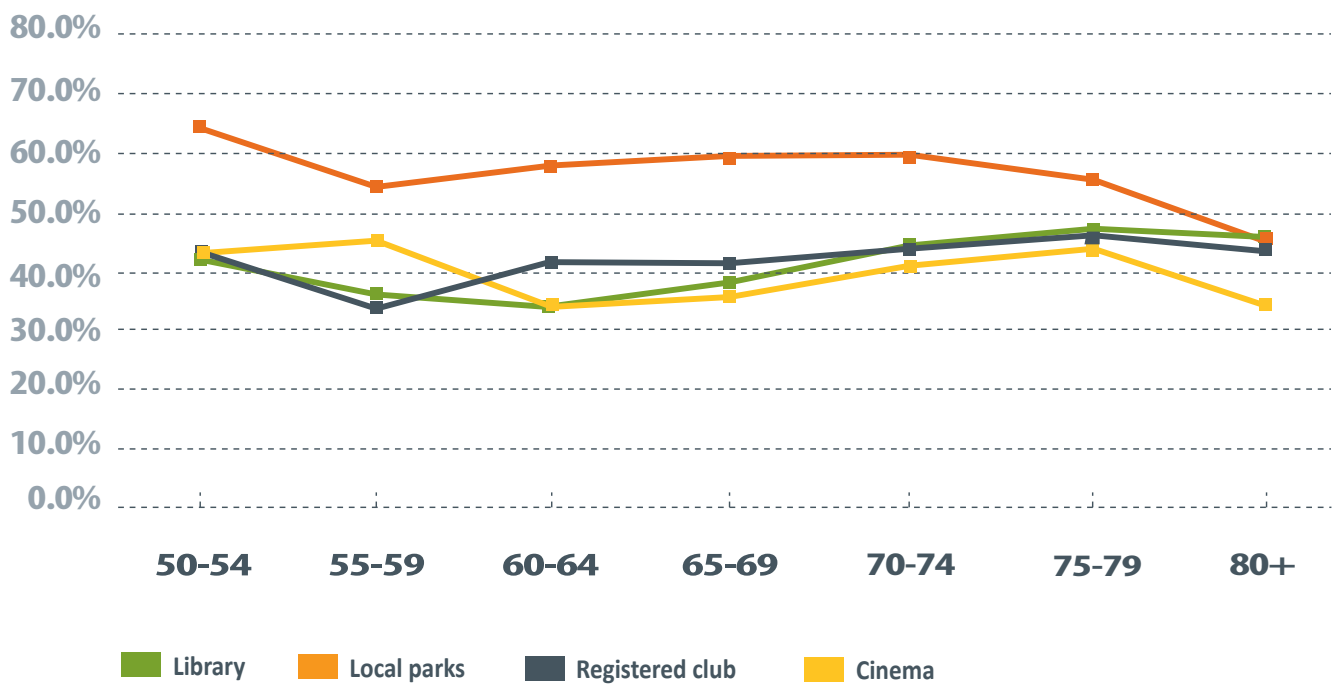
It is from these in-depth conversations that much of this report is informed, providing nuanced insights and personal stories on older people's thoughts and experiences on connecting and living during the pandemic.

Community facilities or businesses available locally

Access to a range of community facilities or businesses provides community members a greater choice in participating in activities that may be of interest to them. The data provides an insight into how our interaction within the community may change as we age or the limitation of where you live may have on an individual's involvement. The popularity of these venues is also of relevance to Local Government and businesses, with consideration needed on ensuring these spaces are inclusive of all ages and physical ability.

The data when analysed by age provides insights into changes in usage over time, with high park use amongst younger cohorts and increasing visits to libraries as people become older.

Use of common facilities or businesses by age



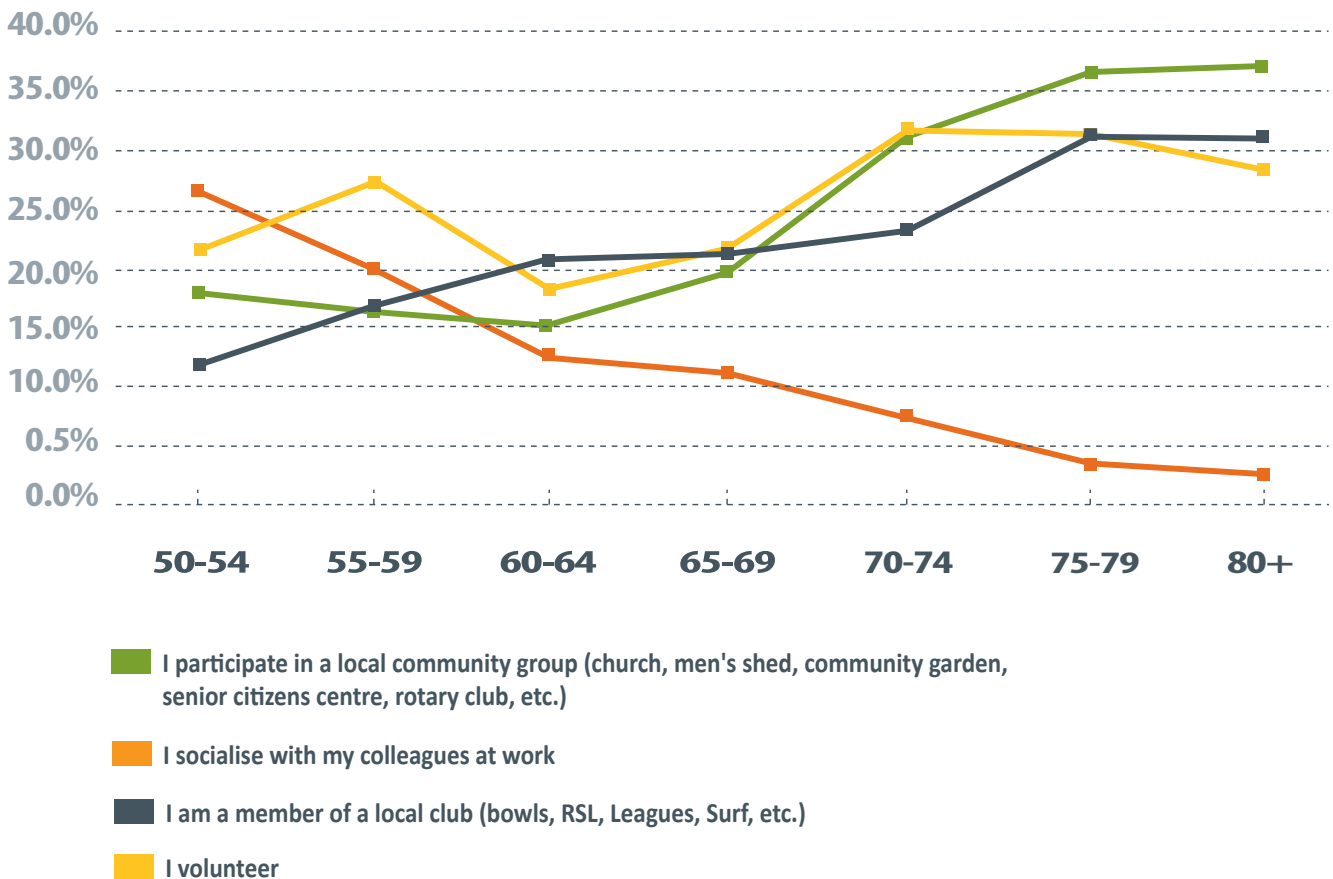
The local shopping centre or local shops were the most frequented location across all age groups and geographic locations. Given the differences in population and subsequent availability of entertainment venues there are moderate differences between metropolitan and regional centres compared to rural locations. Attendance at places of worship is also higher in these areas compared to the rest of the state, with 21% of Sydney and regional locations attending these venues compared to 14% for other areas in NSW. For rural towns, the role of registered clubs as a community recreation centre appears to be vital to residents there with 52% of people attending this business compared to 40% for the rest of the state.

Most popular social activities

Respondents were asked to select the main social activities that they usually enjoyed most often; they could select all that applied. Unsurprisingly, for a majority of people spending time with family (57%) and friends (61%) was most important to them. Volunteering was an important social avenue for 1 in 4 survey respondents, followed by participation in a local community group (23%) such as a place of worship, seniors’ clubs, Rotary Club etc.

The popularity of these different social activities was examined by age. There are clear trends in a number of activities, most notably the importance of socialising with work colleagues in the younger cohort, and the increases in volunteering, membership of local clubs and participation in community groups as people age and cease or transition from paid work.

Popularity of Social Activities by Age



Social Group Participation

A key indicator of measuring whether an individual is socially isolated is the presence of social connections. Whilst attendance at an informal or formal social group cannot be used conclusively to indicate whether an older person is socially isolated, it is indicative of a connection with other community members and subsequently a reduction in risks associated with social isolation.

One-third of respondents didn't belong to any clubs or organised social groups. The primary reason for non-involvement in these types of groups was due to work commitments followed closely by not wanting to be involved. For 10% of this group, a lack of confidence was cited as the reason for not attending a club or social group. A further 13% felt that their limited finances prevented them from participating. This limitation was particularly significant for older people receiving Job Seeker or a Disability Pension with 1 in 2 of this group citing finances as a reason that they don't participate in a club or social group.

The most popular social group selected by respondents was membership of a sporting club followed by faith groups. Craft and hobbies groups were popular, as was the University of the Third Age (U3A).

“When we moved to the area, I looked for things that my teenage son and myself could get involved with. We joined the local surf club, and it is really social. It was a good way of meeting new people and settling into the area.”

Male 67, focus group member.

Respondents were asked to nominate the most effective way to promote clubs or social groups in their local communities. Social media was the most popular

method for younger cohorts (50-59) and for all other age cohorts a dedicated website or other online source was elected as the preferred avenue to learn about local groups. It should be noted, that given that the survey was administered predominantly online, that it would exclude older people that are heavily reliant on other forms of information delivery. The local newspaper continues to be an important source of information with 16% of all respondents utilising this traditional media to read about activities in their local area. Concerningly, this resource is becoming scarce with many local newspapers closing in regional and suburban areas in the past 12-months.

“Our local paper used to be really good for that for finding out what was on. But of course, it's gone now. Yeah, that's how I found out about the men's shed that I've got my partner organised with. It was in the local paper”

Female 76, focus group member.

Further education, self-improvement, workshops

The pandemic resulted in many of us spending more time indoors during 2020 and limitations on our 'normal' social activities. The survey sought to gauge whether older people used this time to undertake further education, self-improvement classes or other workshops. The results indicated that 9% of respondents stated that they had participated in one of these endeavours in the previous 12 months.

Involvement in these curricular activities was most popular in the 50-59 age range with approximately 13.5% indicating that they had partaken.

Attendance at one of these pursuits was most popular amongst the self-employed (18.9%) followed by people that were unemployed (18.5%).

Volunteering

Volunteering continues to play an important part in the life of older Australians. It often provides them with a sense of purpose, social interaction, and an opportunity to give back to their local community.

The results of this survey indicated that approximately 60% of respondents undertook some form of volunteering, ranging in frequency of infrequent to daily.

“I've done many types from Meals on Wheels to Pink Lady in the hospital. It's just the joy of putting back into the community. And I think we owe it - everyone has to do something in their community.”

Female 73, focus group participant.

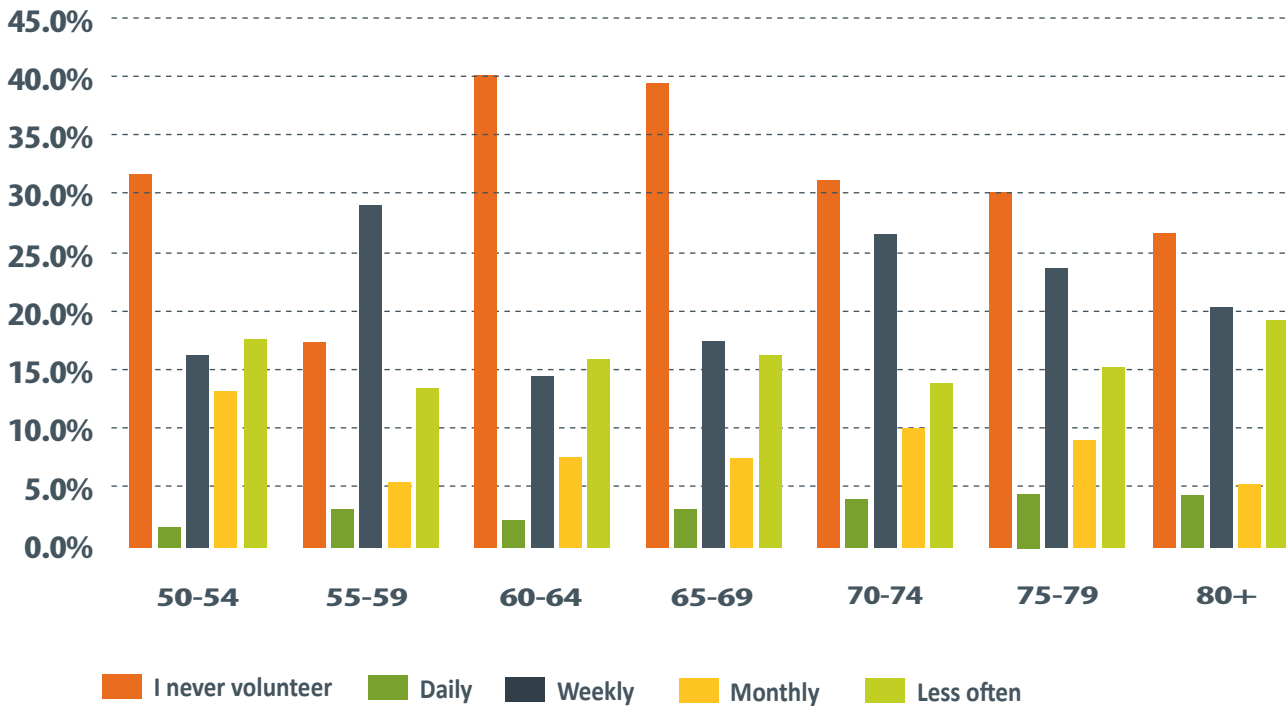
The COVID restrictions imposed in 2020 had a dramatic impact on opportunities to participate in volunteering for older people and consequently their ability to remain connected and supported by others.

FREQUENCY OF VOLUNTEERING	
I never volunteer	40%
Daily	4%
Weekly	25%
Monthly	11%
Less often	20%

When volunteering patterns are analysed by age the trend of increased participation in volunteering activities in people aged 70 and over is evident.

DONATION

Volunteering Frequency by Age



Analysis by geographic location indicated that older people living in regional or rural towns were more likely to volunteer on a regular basis compared to those living in metropolitan areas. When volunteering rates were examined by marital status, older people that were divorced or separated were considerably less likely to participate in volunteering than any other group. Low rates of volunteering were also apparent in those with very low household income. This may be due to a range of factors such as access to transport, financial limitations or feeling of social disconnection.

Community Connections

How socially included or excluded an older person feels living in a community can determine how supported they feel in participating in the social and economic life of that place. It also prevents them from realising their own potential and can contribute to their health and wellbeing status.

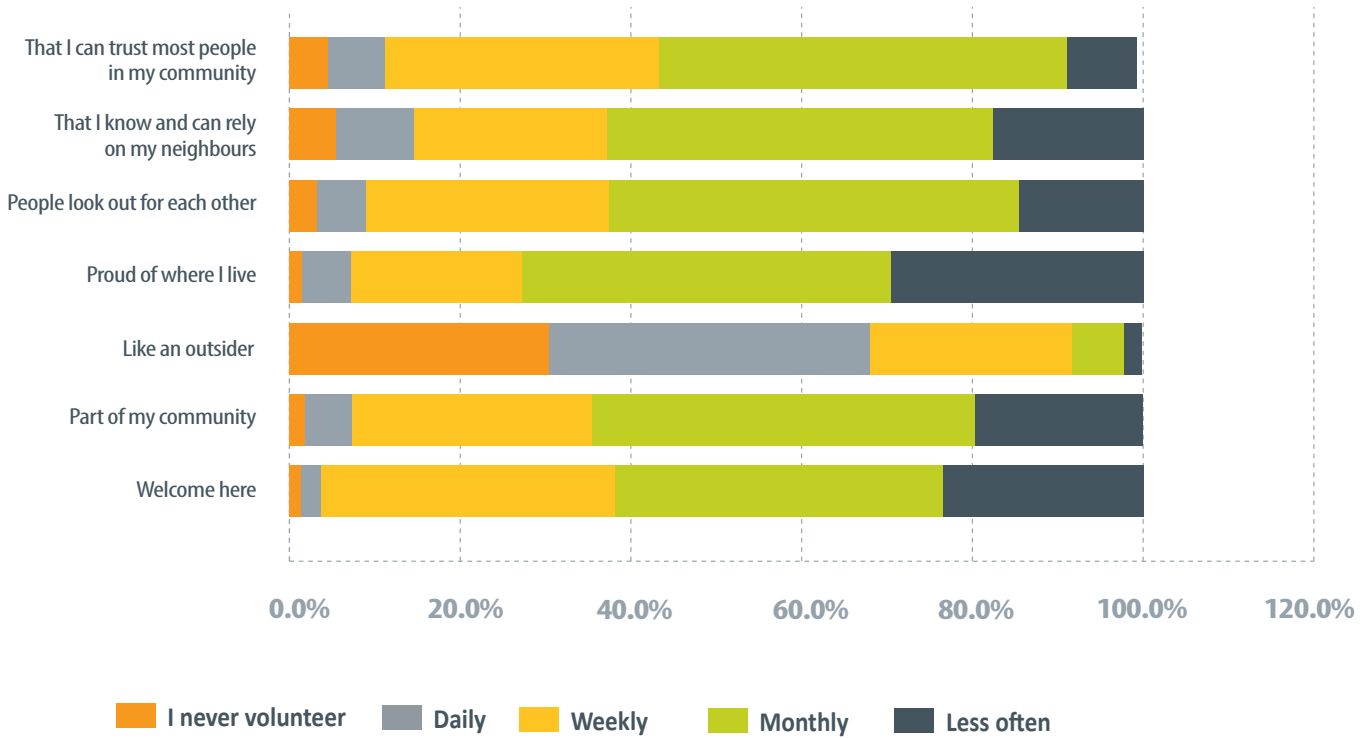
Survey respondents were provided with seven statements that measured their sense of belonging and liveability of their communities and were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with that assertion. These statements are based on a standard instrument found in a number of surveys measuring community social cohesion and inclusiveness.²

The results from this measure indicate that 2/3 of older people felt positively about living in their local community. However, an average of 27% of respondents were ambivalent.

² Schirmer, J., Mylek, M., Yabsley, B. (2015). *Wellbeing, community connections and resilience of dairy farmers*.

Centre for Research and Action in Public Health, Health Research Institute, University of Canberra & Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra.

Connection to Community



An analysis of individuals responses to these questions by length of time that they have lived in this area provided a clear insight into people’s feeling of connection to the community. On every criterion those older people living in a community for less than 12 months, were more likely to disagree with the above statements. The responses improved moderately when they lived in an area longer than 12 months. Unsurprisingly, older people felt most connected to their communities over all criteria when they had lived locally for longer than 10 years.

When analysed by age cohort, people aged 50 – 59 were more likely to feel less connected to their communities than people aged 75 and over. A comparison of these metrics was undertaken across geographic areas. Across a majority of the statements, older people living in rural towns or in remote areas were more likely on average to feel connected to their communities, feeling that they can rely on their neighbours and that people looked out for each other. However, they were more likely to disagree with the statement that they were proud of where they lived. For those living in regional centres there were more respondents that didn’t feel connected to their communities, however community connection was still high with 6 out of 10 people answering positively across the metrics. Older people living in metropolitan areas were the most likely to neither agree nor disagree with the statements, but amongst all locations were the proudest of where they lived.

Older people receiving JobSeeker or the Carers Pension felt most disconnected from their community compared to other income sources. JobSeeker recipients were more likely (20% - 30%) to feel negative about their connection to other people within their community. There was less trust, less reliance on others and more likely to feel like an outsider. Older people that were still in the workforce were the group most likely to rate highly in connection with their community.

Loneliness

Although loneliness is a subjective state and is defined by a perception of the quality of one's relationships, feelings of disconnection and social isolation can be contributory factors to feeling this way.³

A report by Ending Loneliness Together presented the findings of a national survey into loneliness.⁴

This research indicated loneliness was significantly higher in the 56 – 65 age group compared to those aged over 66. The results of the COTA NSW align with this finding. Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of how often they felt that they lacked companionship, left out or isolated. This was based on a standardised short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys developed by the University of Chicago.⁵

The frequency chosen was then allocated a value, with a score of 3-5 indicating that they were not lonely or rarely so, 6-7 as occasionally or moderately lonely and 8-9 as often lonely. The results of the survey indicated that approximately 1/2 of respondents felt lonely some of the time and 1 in 10 felt lonely often.

Least Lonely	>						Most Lonely
Loneliness Score	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
% of Respondents	17%	9%	11%	47%	6%	4%	5%

³ Australian Institution of Health and Welfare (2019). *Social isolation and loneliness*. AIHW. Retrieved from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

⁴ Ending Loneliness Together (2020). *Ending loneliness together in Australia – White Paper*. Retrieved from: <https://endingloneliness.com.au/resources/#research>

⁵ Hughes, M., Waite, L., Hawkely, L., & Cacioppo, J. (2004). *A short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys*. Research on Aging: University of Chicago.

It is important to note however, that the results of this scale may have been influenced by changes in behaviour and mental health due to both regulated and self-imposed restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Published in the 50+ Report *Connections in COVID – “Just keep on going & be kind to each other”*, questions relating to mental health indicated that a 1/5 of respondents self-identified as feeling lonely or isolated during the year.

This data was further analysed by age to identify differences – if any – across different age cohorts. The results challenged societal assumptions that people aged 75 and over were more likely to feel lonely compared to younger groups. The analysis found that people aged 50 – 59 were much more likely to identify that they had experienced those feelings during the year compared to people aged 70 and over.

“I’ve moved from Sydney to a tourist town – originally to look after my mother. Because I am still relatively young, I don’t fit in with the traditional clubs in the area. I’m not ready for bowls or golf. I feel isolated and lonely – it’s hard to find people with similar interests to me.”

Male participant, focus group.

Although the survey did not provide an opportunity to ascertain why they felt that way, a number of suppositions could be made. It is perhaps more likely that this younger cohort would have been impacted by changes to employment conditions or a fear of losing their job. This theory is supported by the results of the survey with 422 respondents indicating that they lost their jobs. The highest proportion of these was in the age groups 50 – 59 with approximately 10% of this age group stating that they had become unemployed. Challenges relating to housing costs was also more significant in this age group, potentially contributing to feelings of anxiousness or depression. This younger group may also have been more affected by social restrictions, with older groups having had time to adjust to retirement, smaller social circles, and financial responsibilities.

As with other wellbeing indicators relating to marital status, respondents who were either widowed or divorced were more likely to feel that they lacked companionship or felt isolated than other groups. Respondents on Job Seeker were also more likely to identify as feeling anxious or depressed and feelings of loneliness.



Community Safety

Questions were included within the survey to gauge older people's perceptions about safety in their community and if negative perceptions may impact their willingness to participate in the life of their neighbourhood, town or city.

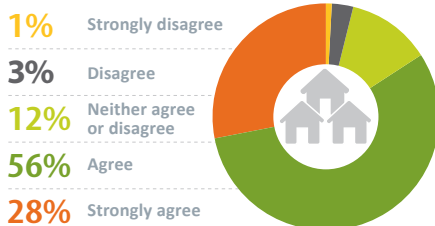
Respondents were asked to rate how safe they felt in their neighbourhood, going out at night or when they were home alone based on survey instrument developed by the University of Sydney.⁶

The results indicated that generally older people felt safe in their neighbourhood (84%), and when they were home alone (85%). They felt less safe when going out at night, with 64% agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement. This is an encouraging finding and demonstrates that older people's perceptions of safety align with the reality of crime in our state – with most criminal incidences declining (with the exception of sexual assault and domestic violence).⁷ It also suggests that fear of their personal safety is not a significant factor in their participation in their local community.

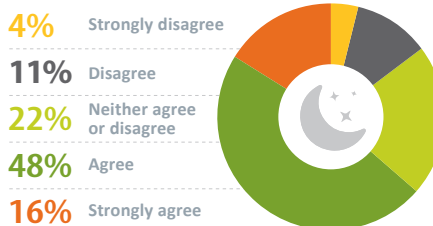


In my community, I feel safe:

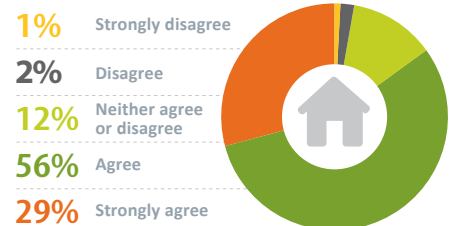
In my Neighbourhood:



Going out at night:



When I am home alone:



There were no significant differences when analysed by age, geographic location or by people who identified as having a disability.

⁶ Lee, M., Wickes, R., & Jackson, J. (2020). Social Cohesion and Pro-Social Responses to Perceptions of Crime. University of Sydney. Sourced from: <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/>

⁷ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. (December 2020) Trends in recorded criminal incidents for major offences over the 60 months to December 2020, NSW. Retrieved from: <https://boscar.nsw.gov.au>

Online Safety

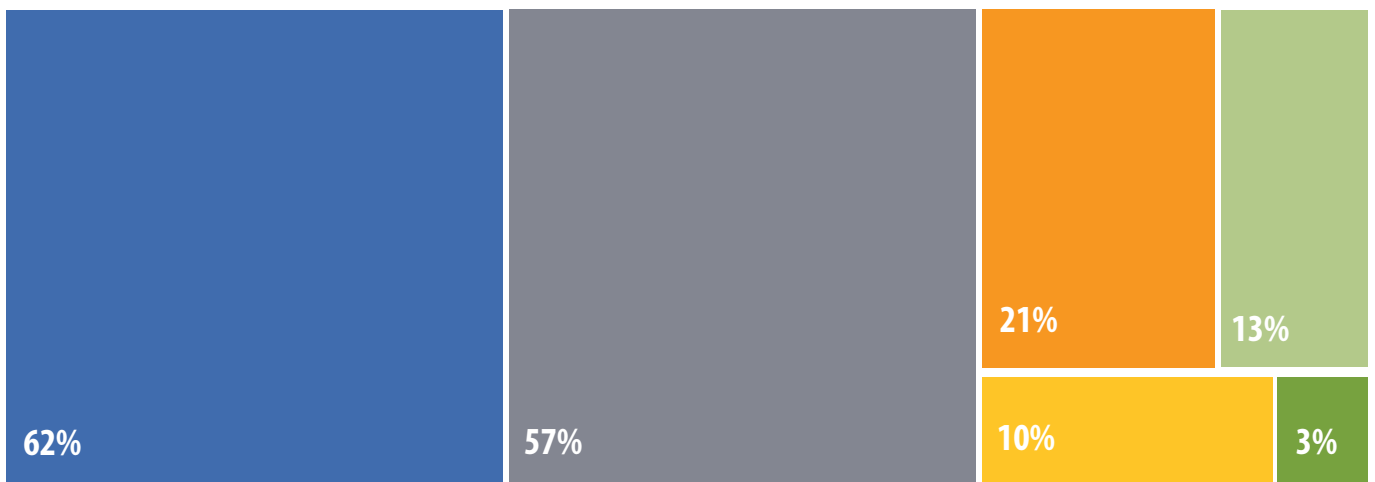
For many older people, their interactions online and within social media have become a ‘virtual’ community and for many has been critical in remaining socially connected with the outside world during restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. It is therefore imperative that this space is also safe, and risks are reduced or mitigated against.

The survey sought to gauge the proportion of older people that have experienced different types of negative experiences online. Respondents could select all that applied. A significant majority of survey participants had experienced spam or scam emails, with 13% experiencing dating romance scams. Only 1 in 10 reported that they had not experienced anything negative.

These results emphasise the need for ongoing education about the potential risks online, including identifying scam emails, how to protect their identity and where to go for assistance and information.



Have experienced the following...



- computer viruses
- scam emails
- dating/romance scams
- spam or junk emails
- identity theft
- I have not experienced

Age-friendly community spaces

People engage with their community in many ways. However, being able to physically move around within one's neighbourhood is fundamental to their ability to engage in it effectively.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) articulated the importance of the urban landscape and built environment within the Global Age Friendly Cities: A guide, emphasising the impact on mobility, independence, and quality of life.⁸

In circumstances where older people do not own their own vehicle or are unable to drive, access to accessible, reliable, and affordable alternative transport options are required. However, in regional and rural areas public or community transport options may be limited or non-existent. This physical isolation can inhibit people's ability to leave their homes and maintain social participation.

Older people stress the importance of being able to walk around their neighbourhood, as a means of access to shops and services, as a fitness and recreation activity, and for staying in touch with neighbours. However, the availability and quality of footpaths, adequate street lighting, shade and rest stops are important factors that can assist or inhibit safe and easy pedestrian access.

⁸ World Health Organisation (WHO). (2007). Global age friendly cities: A guide. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global_age_friendly_cities_Guide_English.pdf

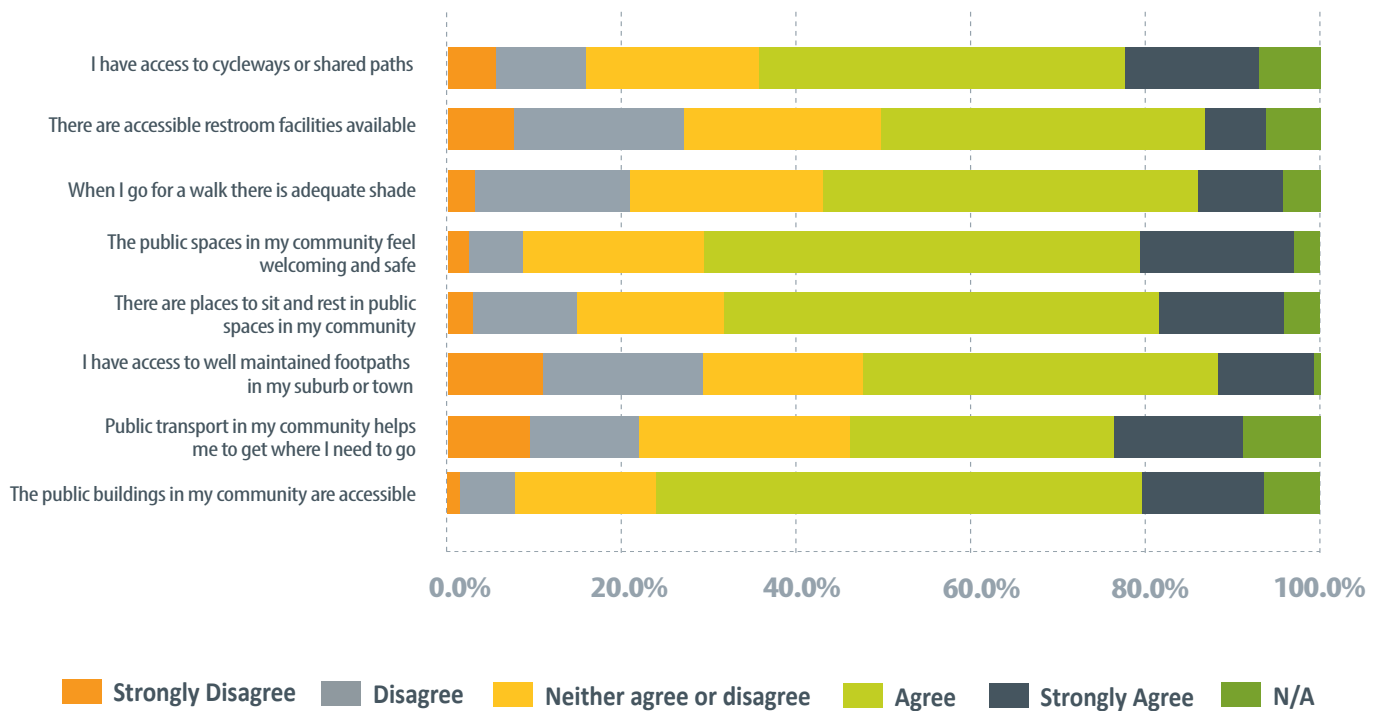
The survey explored older people’s assessment of their local public infrastructure, including paths, accessibility of buildings, availability of amenities and safety.

In general terms, the majority of respondents rated their local built environment positively; this positivity varies however on the type of infrastructure. Two-thirds of respondents felt that public buildings and open space were accessible, safe, and welcoming. This was consistent across age groups and for people with disability.

Assessment of footpath infrastructure was not as definitive with approximately 1 in 2 respondents asserting that they didn’t have adequate access to well maintained, shaded paths in their locality. Those living in metropolitan areas were more than twice as likely to rate footpath infrastructure positively than rural or remote respondents. Approximately one third of people with disability did not feel that paths were of a good standard where they lived.

Unsurprisingly, access to public transport and restroom facilities rated the least with discrepancies in availability depending on the respondent’s geographic location. Only 14% of older people living in a rural town had access to public transport, one third in regional centres and 52% in metropolitan areas.

Age-friendly infrastructure



Transport Commonly Used

Car use is the most popular form of transport for older people with two thirds of respondents citing this as the type of transport most commonly used.⁹

For those living in rural towns (82%) and rural and remote areas (100%), the car becomes a lifeline. This high reliance on car use, and very low access to community transport, public or private buses and other transport options becomes a concern for those older people who lose the ability to drive as they get older. The loss of a licence can have a detrimental effect on a person's health and has been associated with an increase in depressive symptoms.

Analysis of transport utilised by age is consistent across most transport types. However, as respondents move in the 80+ age cohort there is a decrease in car self-drive and corresponding increase in usage of community buses and taxis.

Car-Self drive	71%
Walk	45%
Train	30%
Car-Passenger	25%
Bus-Public/Private	25%
Taxi	9%
Ride a bike	7%
Powered chair or scooter	8%
Other	5%
Community Bus	3%

⁹ NRMA (2010). Discussion paper –
Transport and mobility needs of older Australians

Walkability of my local area

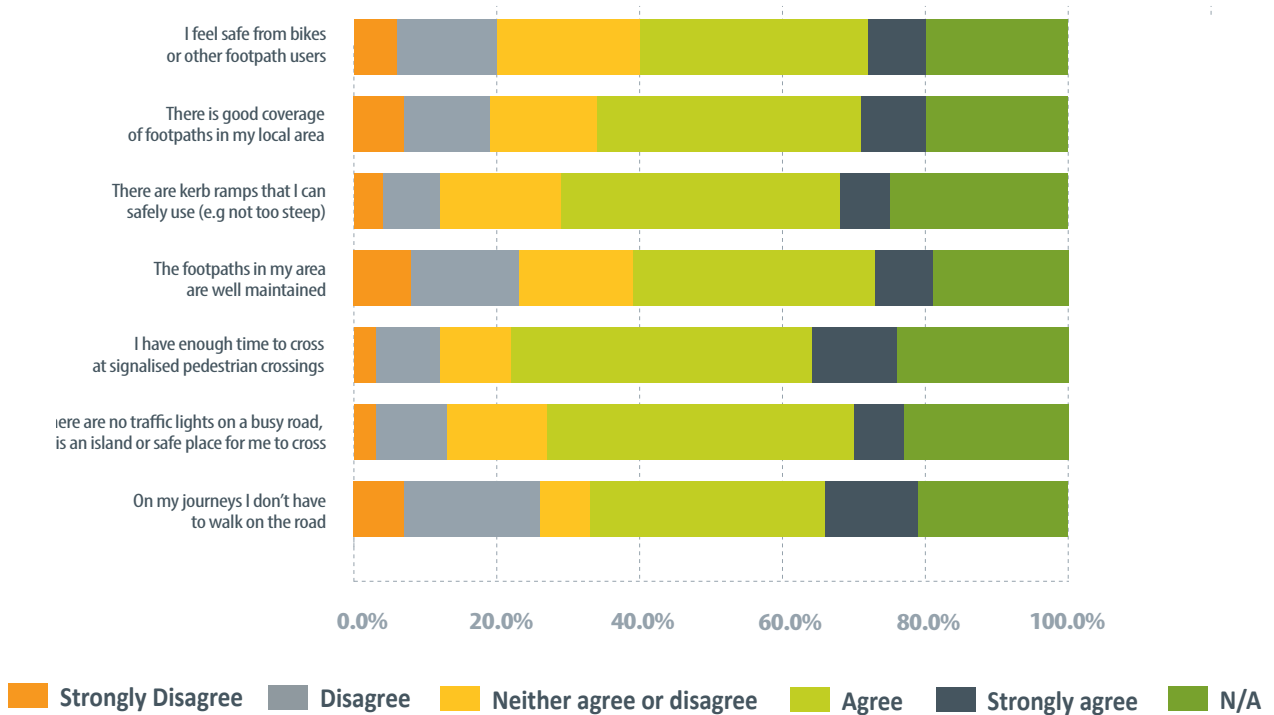
It is often underestimated how important access to well maintained and ample footpaths are to the wellbeing of older people.

It can facilitate both participation in their local community and physical activity. The importance of walkability is increasingly recognised by government and health care professionals, with Greater Sydney Commission for example, including walkable places as a key performance indicator for assessing the success of regional planning within Sydney.¹⁰

Walkability is a term that encompasses several measures, it includes factors such as footpath coverage, maintenance of paths, safety and accessibility.

The survey found that on average across all measures 46% of respondents rated the walkability of their area positively. The highest level of dissatisfaction was in the maintenance of the footpaths in their area and safety from bikes and other path users, with approximately 1 and 5 respondents selecting negative assessments within the survey. When analysed by age, those aged over 70 were more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of paths in their area compared to younger cohorts

Walkability of my local area



¹⁰ Greater Sydney Commission. Performance indicator: Walkable places. Retrieved from: <https://www.greater.sydney/performance-indicator-walkable-places>

“I know I’d go out more if we had better footpaths in our area.”

Survey respondent.



