

Prolonged loneliness in New Zealand before, during, and after lockdown

**Based on the Stats NZ General Social Survey 2018,
Victoria University Life under Lockdown Survey 2020,
and Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey 2020**



Loneliness New Zealand

August 2020



1 August 2020

Tēna koutou katoa,

Prolonged loneliness in New Zealand

The unprecedented global events triggered by COVID-19 have produced poor health, economic, and social effects across New Zealand and the world. These effects have negatively impacted on loneliness, with lockdowns and border closures leading to less physical and meaningful connections. Furthermore, unemployment, potential business failures, and reduced incomes have increased the risk of feeling lonely.

Loneliness is a primary signal, like thirst or hunger, which encourages us to meaningfully connect with others. We benefit from occasional, shorter spells of loneliness (driving us to find companionship) in the same way as short-term, occasional pangs of feeling thirsty or hungry (driving us to find replenishing liquids and nourishing food). However, just as being thirsty or hungry most or all of the time is bad for our health, so feeling lonely most or all of the time is too – potentially leading to harmful physical and/or mental health issues. In this report, we focus on New Zealanders with prolonged loneliness. Survey respondents are considered to have prolonged loneliness if they self-reported that they felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks or month (as opposed to having felt lonely none of the time, a little of the time, or some of the time).

In preparing this report, we have utilised three surveys: the Stats NZ General Social Survey 2018, the Victoria University Life under Lockdown Survey 2020, and our Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey 2020 (presented in this report). The Post-Lockdown Survey 2020 uses the same preamble and loneliness question as the General Social Survey, and replicates many of the demographic breakdowns. The Life under Lockdown Survey asked a similar loneliness question, with some different demographic breakdowns. While there can be risks comparing different surveys, the changes in the incidences of prolonged loneliness across surveys is so large that any spurious statistical effects of comparing the surveys is unlikely to change the overall findings in this report.

Regarding the Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey, we are grateful to Horizon Research for constructing demographic measures that mirror the Stats NZ General Social Survey, administering the survey, weighting the survey results, and providing us access to their analysis tools. We thank you for your generous support.

Ngā mihi nui



Dr Spencer Scoular
Trustee, Loneliness NZ

“Conquering Loneliness in New Zealand”

Context

Social connection (not feeling lonely) is one of the three primary drivers of wellbeing in New Zealand, after health (excellent or very good general health) and income (more than enough or enough money to meet every day needs).¹ In this context, those with prolonged loneliness are likely to have lower wellbeing.

This report has been prepared to highlight demographic groups that are particularly suffering from prolonged loneliness before, during, and post-lockdown. With an awareness of those in need, Government and NGOs can then better target support to relieve the distress that experiencing prolonged loneliness brings, particularly heightened by the global pandemic.

Author

The author of this report is a Trustee of the Loneliness New Zealand Charitable Trust ('Loneliness NZ'):

Dr Spencer Scoular is one of the leading strategy, performance improvement, and problem solving specialists in New Zealand. He works collaboratively with clients, co-developing the strategic, operational, and organisational recommendations. He has been a consultant of McKinsey & Company, the COO of a technology company, a founding partner of Partners in Performance (UK), an Executive Director of Ernst & Young, an Associate Director of SBC Warburg, a senior executive of Fonterra (reporting to the CFO), a software entrepreneur, a cornerstone shareholder in a back-office finance company, and an independent consultant. He holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge and has prepared a number of submissions with Government around the issues of wellbeing and loneliness.

¹ Loneliness NZ (2020)

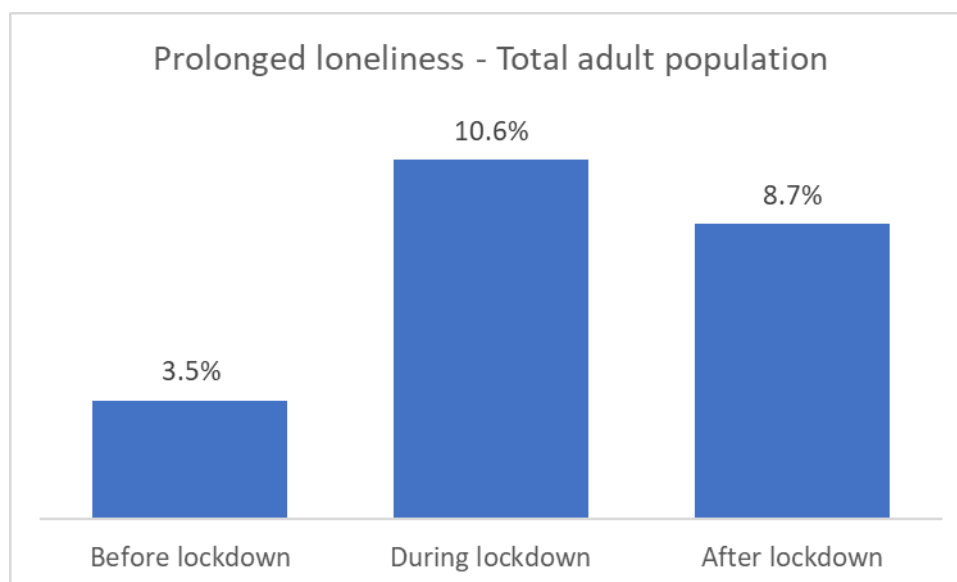
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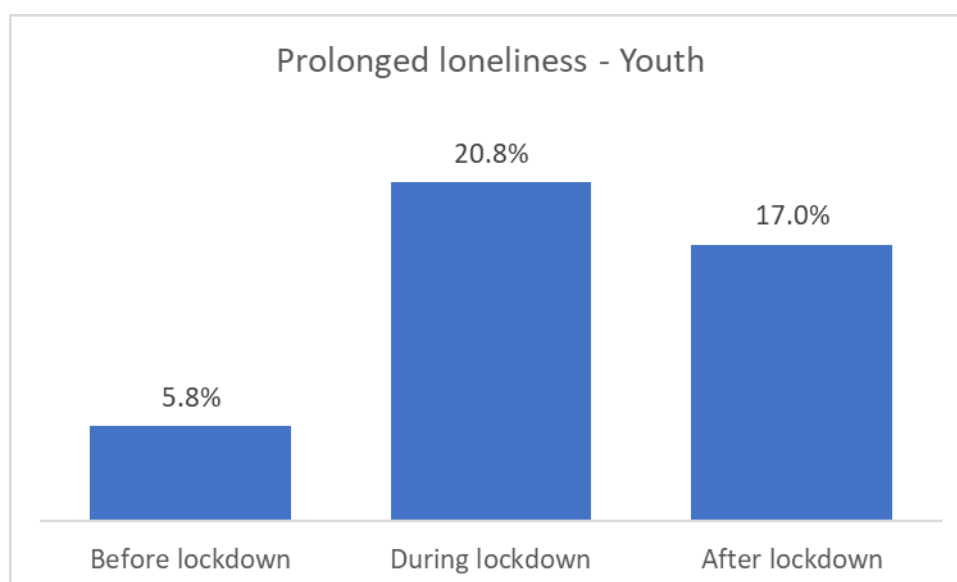
1. Key findings

The key findings of the report are:

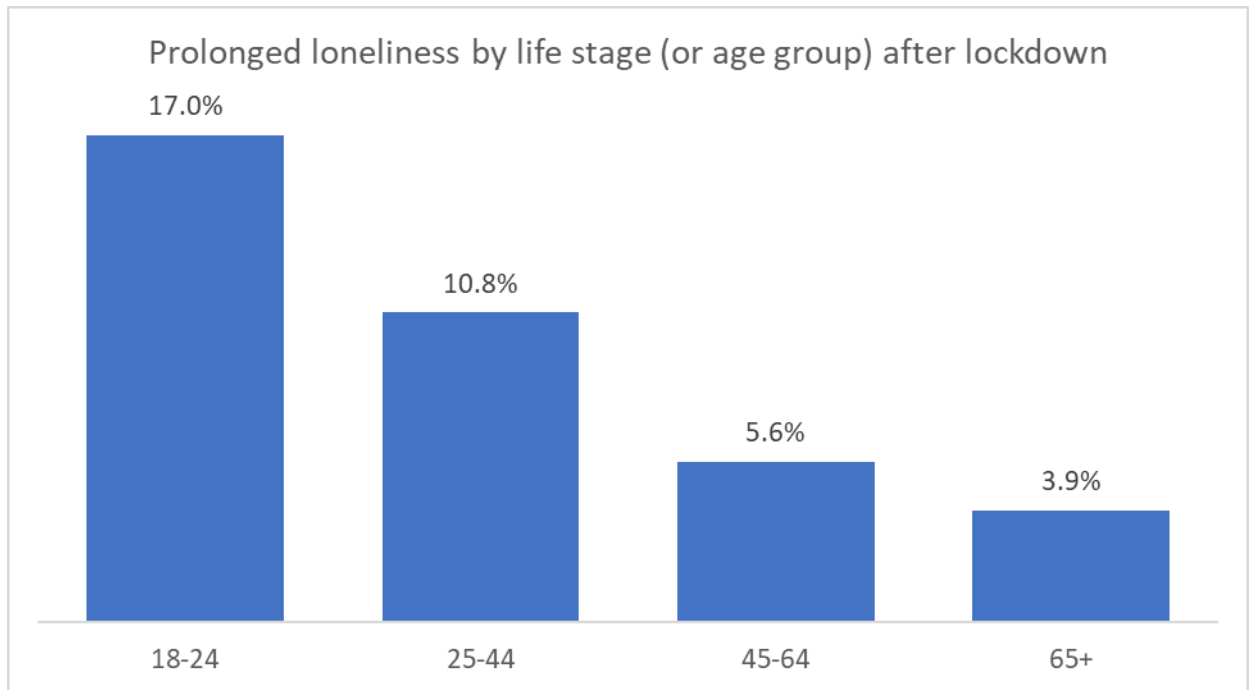
- For the adult population aged 15+ (General Social Survey) or 18+ (other surveys), the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased from 3.5% of the population before lockdown to about 10.6% during lockdown, before slightly falling to 8.7% post-lockdown.



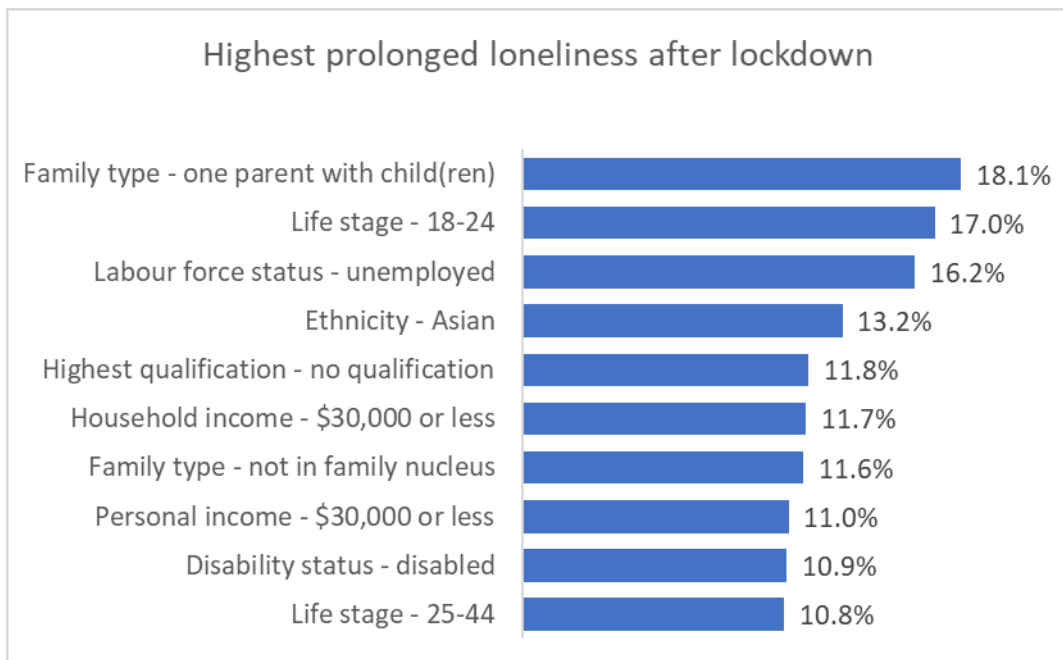
- Of particular concern, for youth aged 15-24 (General Social Survey) or aged 18-24 (other surveys), the incidence of prolonged loneliness was much higher increasing from 5.8% of youth before lockdown to about 20.8% during lockdown, before slightly falling to a still very high 17.0% post-lockdown.



To give context, the incidence after lockdown of prolonged loneliness in youth aged 18-24 (17%) is 4.4x the incidence of prolonged loneliness of seniors aged 65+ (3.9%) – a demographic that has historically been perceived to be lonely.



In addition to youth, solo parents, the unemployed and many other demographics are struggling with high incidences of prolonged loneliness after lockdown.



2. Introduction

In this report we present the first findings of our Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey 2020. A stand-alone survey can only provide information for a point in time. A single loneliness survey cannot provide answers to the question of whether prolonged loneliness is increasing or decreasing over time: especially before, during, and after lockdown.

In order to also answer this question, we designed the Post-Lockdown Survey to mirror the loneliness question in the Stats NZ General Social Survey 2018. This has enabled us to compare the results of the Post-Lockdown Survey with a 2018 baseline prior to COVID-19. Furthermore, the Victoria University Life under Lockdown Survey had a similar loneliness question that has enabled us to get a gauge of how prolonged loneliness has tracked before, during, and after lockdown.

Stats NZ General Social Survey 2018²

The Stats NZ General Social Survey is a biannual survey of the well-being of New Zealanders aged 15 years and over. The survey provides a view of how well-being outcomes are distributed across different demographics within the New Zealand population. The survey is administered by Stats NZ with the 2018 survey undertaken between April 2018 and March 2019 via about 8,000 face-to-face individual interviews in households.

The General Social Survey 2018 included the preamble and loneliness question:

People who have contact with family and friends can still feel lonely sometimes, while those who have little contact may not feel lonely at all.

In the last four weeks, how much of the time have you felt lonely?

- A. None of the time*
- B. A little of the time*
- C. Some of the time*
- D. Most of the time*
- E. All of the time*

Respondents who answered D or E are considered, in this report, to have prolonged loneliness over the four weeks prior to answering the survey.

Victoria University Life under Lockdown Survey 2020³

The Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families and Children and the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies conducted a economic and social wellbeing survey in week 3 of Alert Level 4 lockdown (between 15 April and 18 April 2020). The survey was administered by Colmar Brunton using an existing sampling frame of adults (18 years and older) living in New Zealand. There were 2,002 respondents in the final survey, with sample weights applied to derive nationally-representative estimates.

² Stats NZ (2019)

³ Prickett et al. (2020)

The purpose of the survey was wider than solely prolonged loneliness. Nevertheless, they reported results for those who “experienced feelings of loneliness in the past month” most or all the time. Their demographic breakdown was primarily focused on prolonged loneliness associated with job loss, income loss, and economic loss. Nevertheless, some of their demographics matched the Stats NZ General Social Survey (and Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey) demographics, which enabled us to use them, with care, in a time series comparison.

Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey 2020

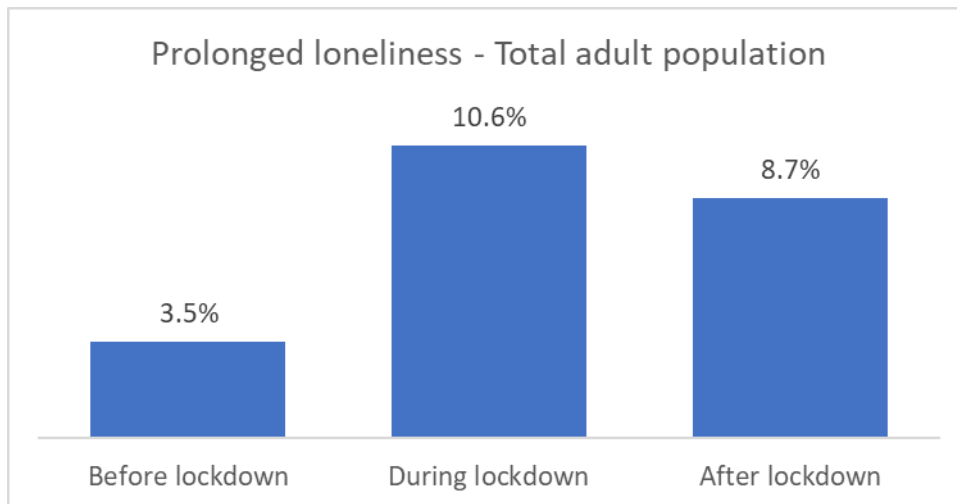
The Loneliness NZ Post-Lockdown Survey is a loneliness survey conducted in week 5 of Alert Level 1 (between 14 July and 19 July 2020). The survey was administered by Horizon Research using adults (18 years and older) living in New Zealand. There were 1,764 respondents in the final survey, with sample weights applied to derive nationally representative estimates (see Appendix A).

The survey replicated the preamble and loneliness question from the General Social Survey 2018, and replicated many of the demographic categories. The purpose of the survey, however, was wider than simply reporting prolonged loneliness by demographic; with more detailed questions seeking to understand some of the drivers that underlie prolonged loneliness. This report focuses on the reporting of prolonged loneliness by demographic; one or more follow-on reports will statistically consider some of the drivers that underlie prolonged loneliness.

3. Comparison of prolonged loneliness before, during, and after lockdown

Total adult population

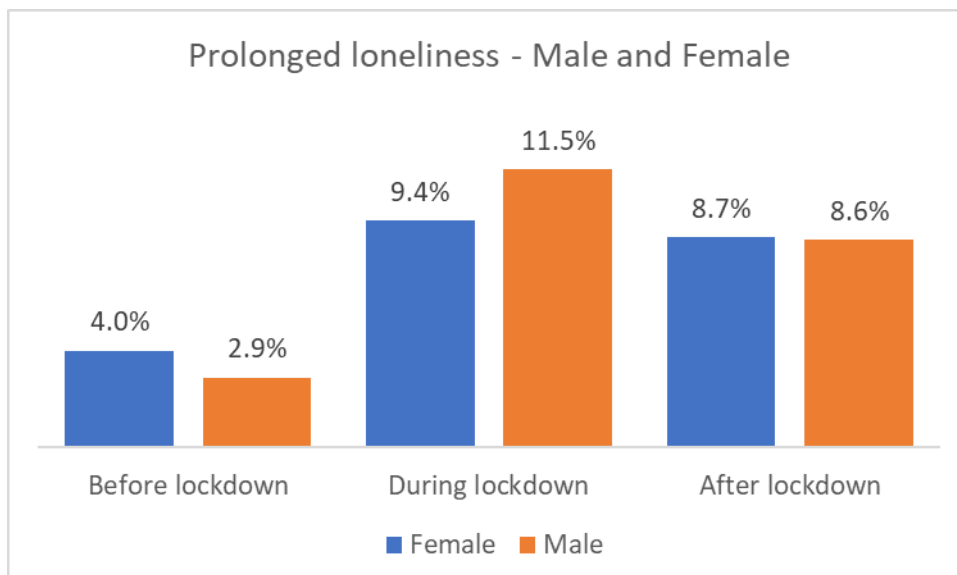
For the adult population aged 15+ (General Social Survey) or 18+(other surveys), the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased from 3.5% of the population before lockdown to about 10.6% during lockdown, before slightly falling to 8.7% post-lockdown.



That is, the incidence of prolonged loneliness of the adult population increased 3x during lockdown; and now, after lockdown, sits at 2.5x the before lockdown baseline.

Male and female demographic

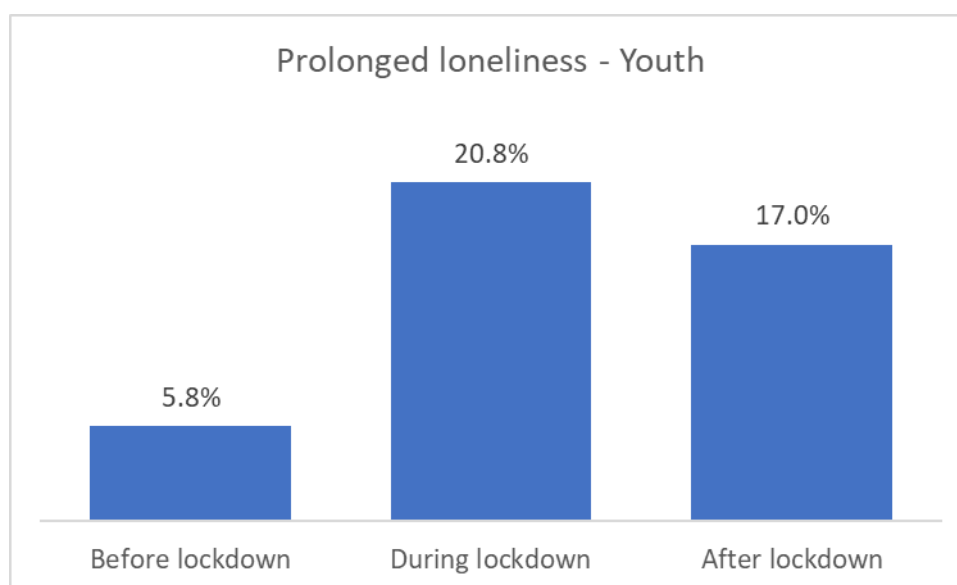
Before lockdown the incidence of prolonged loneliness was higher in females than males; whereas during lockdown this was reversed; and after lockdown the incidence was the same for both genders.



That is, for males, the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased about 4x during lockdown; and now, after lockdown, sits at 3x the before lockdown baseline. On the other hand, for females, the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased about 2.4x during lockdown; and now, after lockdown, sits at 2.2x the before lockdown baseline.

Youth demographic

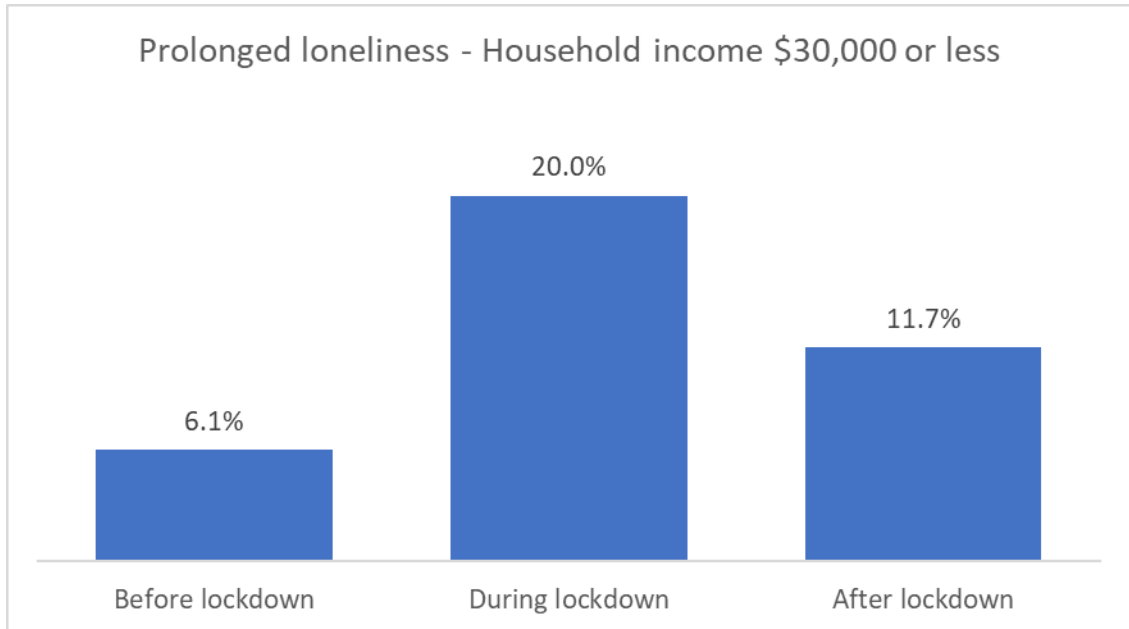
Prolonged loneliness is prevalent in youth. For youth aged 15-24 years (General Social Survey) or aged 18-24 years (other surveys), the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased from 5.8% of youth before lockdown to about 20.8% during lockdown, before slightly falling to 17.0% post-lockdown.



That is, the incidence of prolonged loneliness of youth increased about 3.6x during lockdown; and now, after lockdown, sits at almost 3x the before lockdown baseline. Put another way, before lockdown 1 in 17 youth experienced prolonged loneliness, whereas during lockdown this increased to 1 in 5 youth and post-lockdown 1 in 6 youth. These figures highlight the loneliness challenges that youth face during the pandemic.

Low household income demographic

Prolonged loneliness is prevalent in low income households. For household incomes \$30,000 or less, the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased from 6.1% of the population before lockdown to about 20.0% during lockdown, before falling to 11.7% post-lockdown.



That is, for individuals in households with annual income of \$30,000 or less, the incidence of prolonged loneliness increased about 3.3x during lockdown; and now, after lockdown, sits at 1.9x the before lockdown baseline.

4. Demographics of prolonged loneliness before and after lockdown

Demographic groups

The General Social Survey 2018 has a wide range of demographic groups. For this report we have examined ten of these demographic groups, namely:

- Disability status
- Ethnicity
- Family type
- Highest qualification
- Household income
- Labour force status
- Life stage
- Personal income
- Sex (male/female)
- Total population

We were not able to reliably include the General Social Survey demographics for regions, urban rural breakdown, housing tenure, migrant status, and other sexual identities.

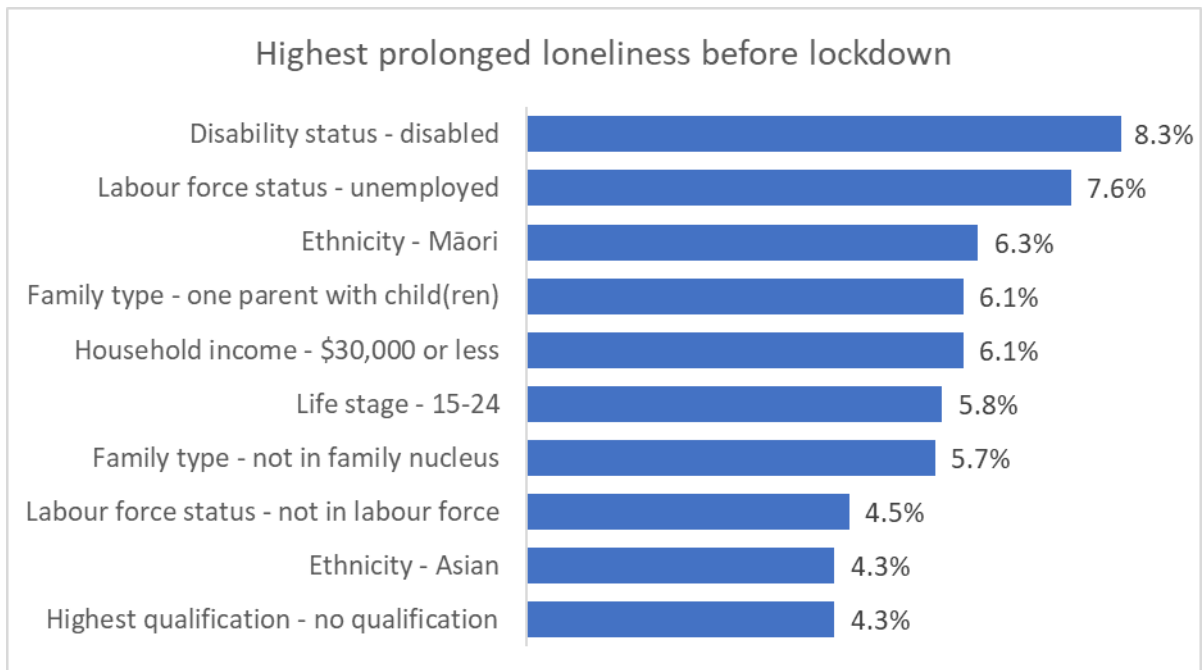
Thirty two specific demographics are examined in our analysis.

Highest incidences of prolonged loneliness

Based on the examined demographic groups, the demographics with the highest incidences of prolonged loneliness before lockdown were:

- disabled
- unemployed
- Māori
- solo parents
- low income households
- youth (aged 15-24)
- not in family nucleus.

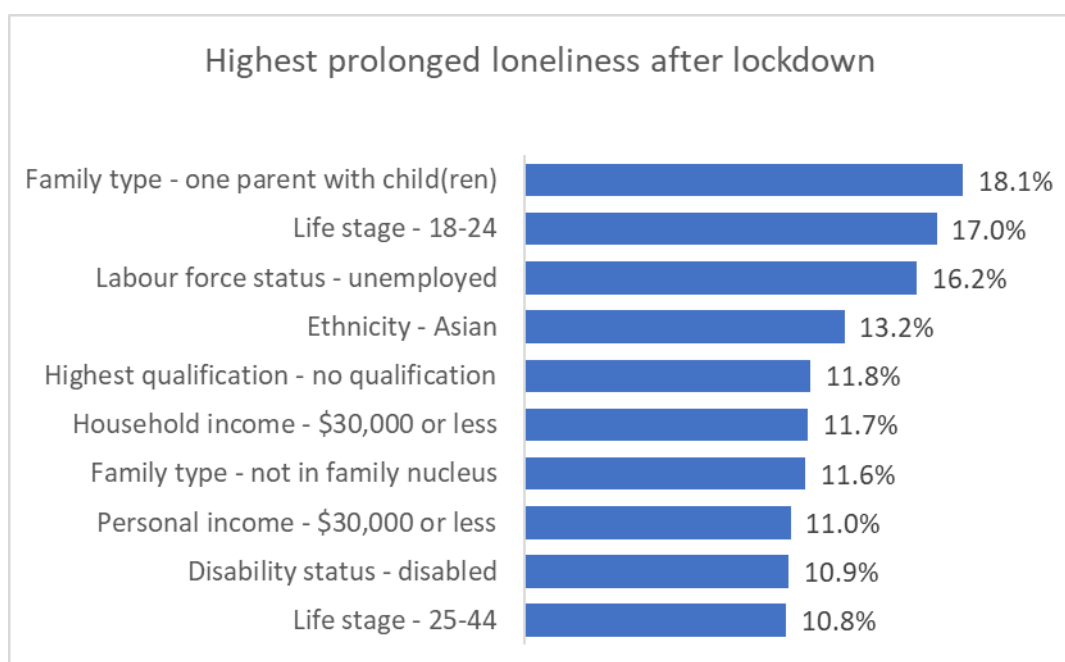
Compared to the total adult population average before lockdown (3.5%), these demographics had between 1.6x and 2.4x the incidences of prolonged loneliness.



Based on the Post-Lockdown Survey, the highest incidences of prolonged loneliness after lockdown are:

- solo parents
- youth (aged 18-24)
- unemployed.

Compared to the total adult population average after lockdown (8.7%), these demographics had between 1.9x and 2.1x the incidences of prolonged loneliness.



Notably, the incidence of prolonged loneliness in the top 15 demographics after lockdown is higher than the incidence of prolonged loneliness for any of the demographics before lockdown. This highlights the impact of COVID-19 on prolonged loneliness in New Zealand today.

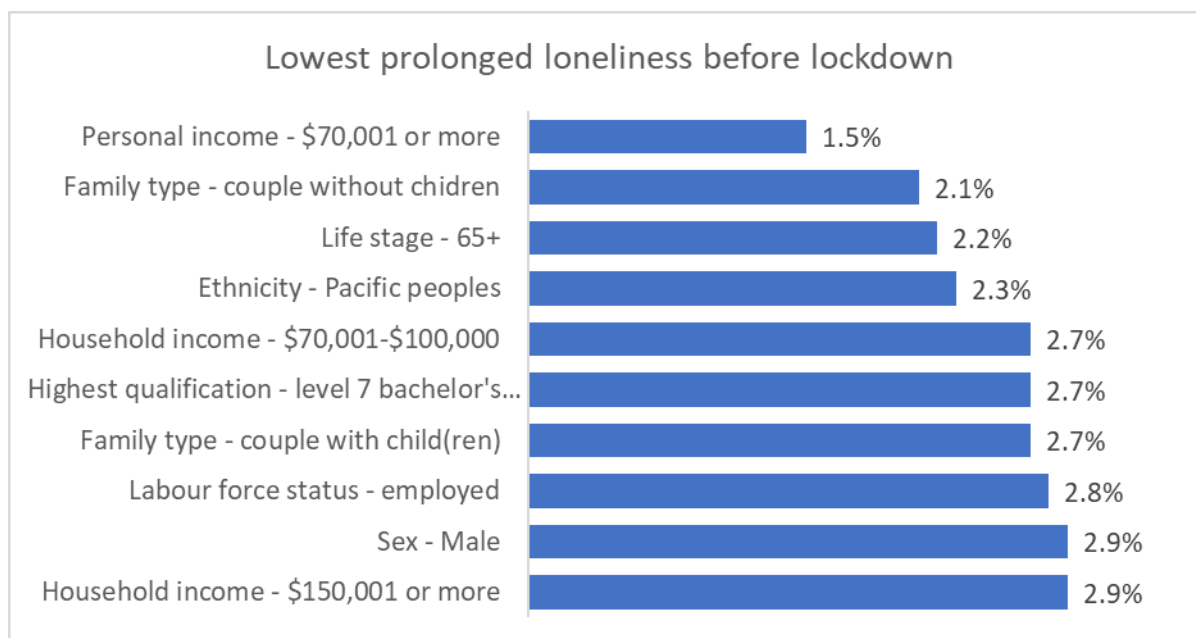
Lowest incidences of prolonged loneliness

Looking at those demographics where people experience the lowest incidences of prolonged loneliness helps sharpen our understanding of the types of characteristics of people who enjoy stronger meaningful connections.

Based on the examined demographic groups, the demographics with the lowest incidences of prolonged loneliness before lockdown were:

- personal income \$70,000 or more
- couples without children
- seniors (aged 65+).

Compared to the total adult population average before lockdown (3.5%), these demographics had between 0.4x and 0.6x the incidences of prolonged loneliness.

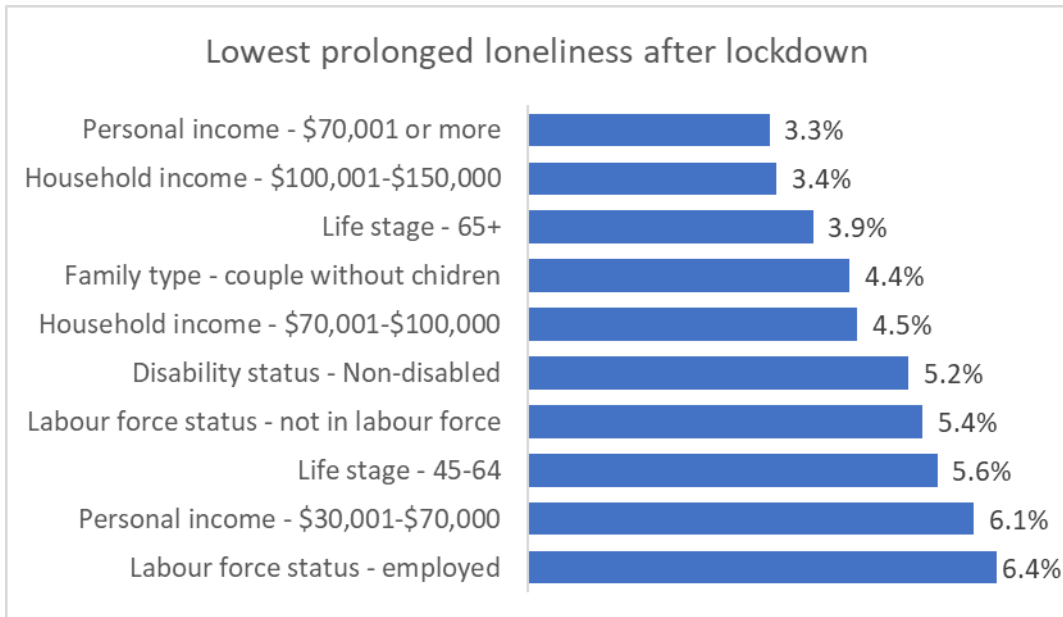


Based on the Post-Lockdown Survey, the lowest incidences of prolonged loneliness after lockdown are:

- personal income \$70,000 or more
- household income \$100,001 to \$150,000
- seniors (aged 65+)

- couples without children.

Compared to the total adult population average after lockdown (8.7%), these demographics had between 0.4x and 0.5x the incidences of prolonged loneliness.

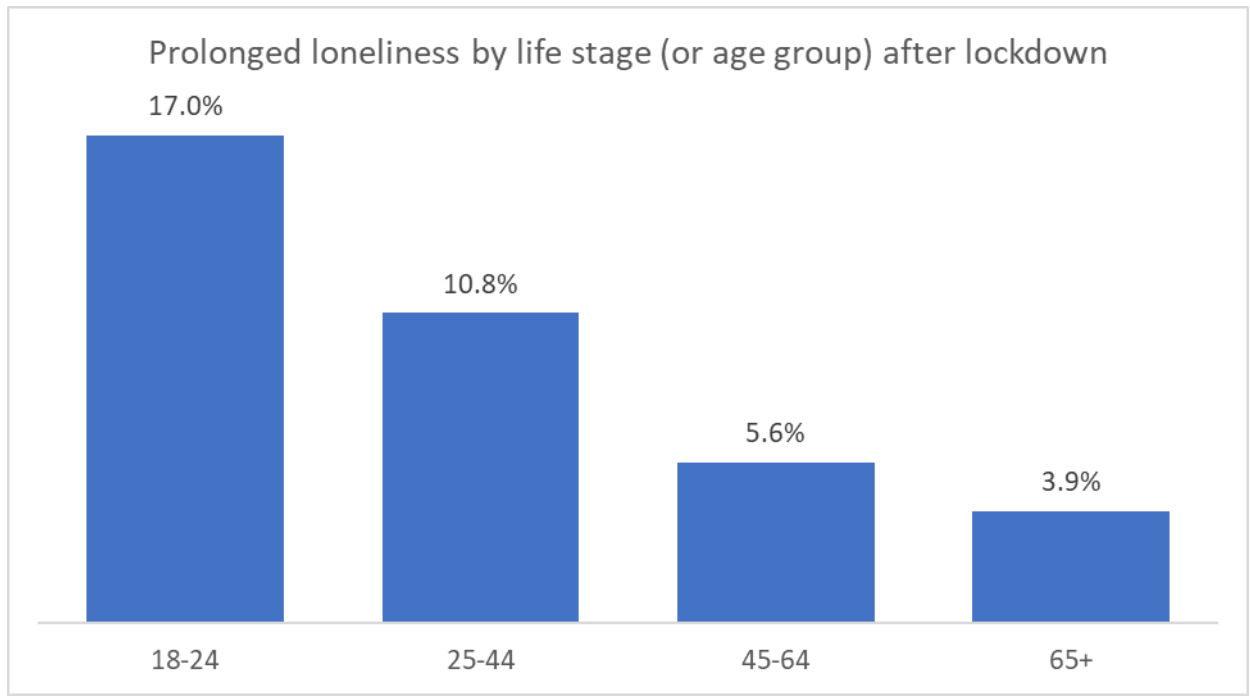


While the level of prolonged loneliness has increased across the board, the profile of those demographic groups with low prolonged loneliness before and after lockdown has not changed substantially.

5. Prolonged loneliness after-lockdown across demographic groups

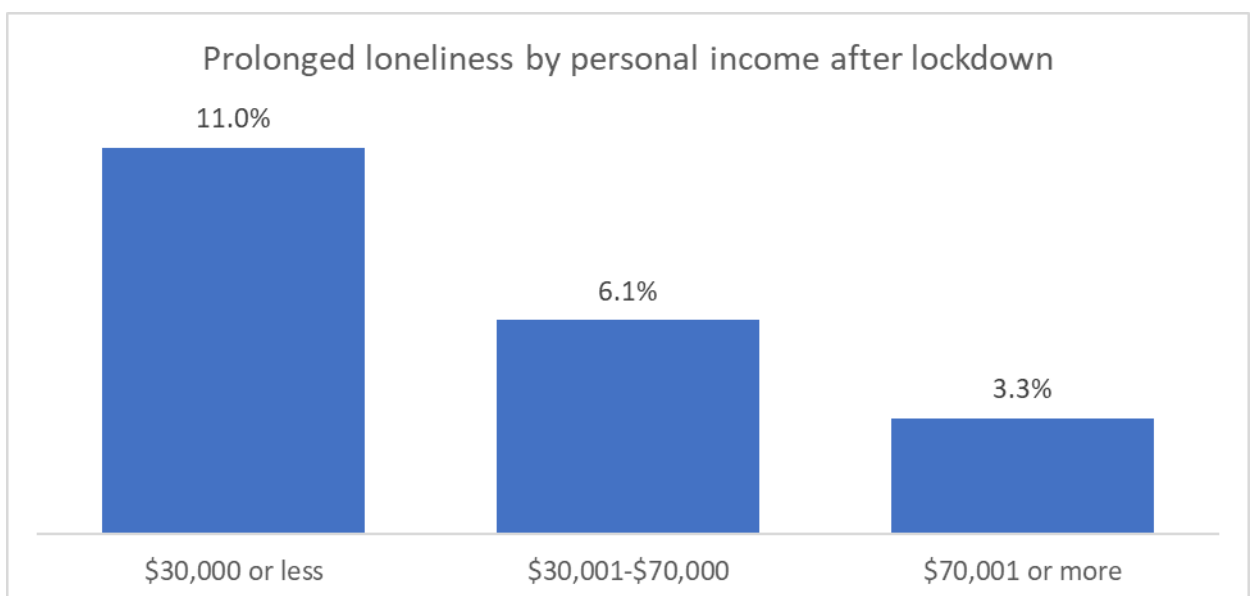
Life stage

The incidence of prolonged loneliness decreases by life stage (or age group) from youth aged 18-24 (17.0%) to seniors aged 65+ (3.9%).



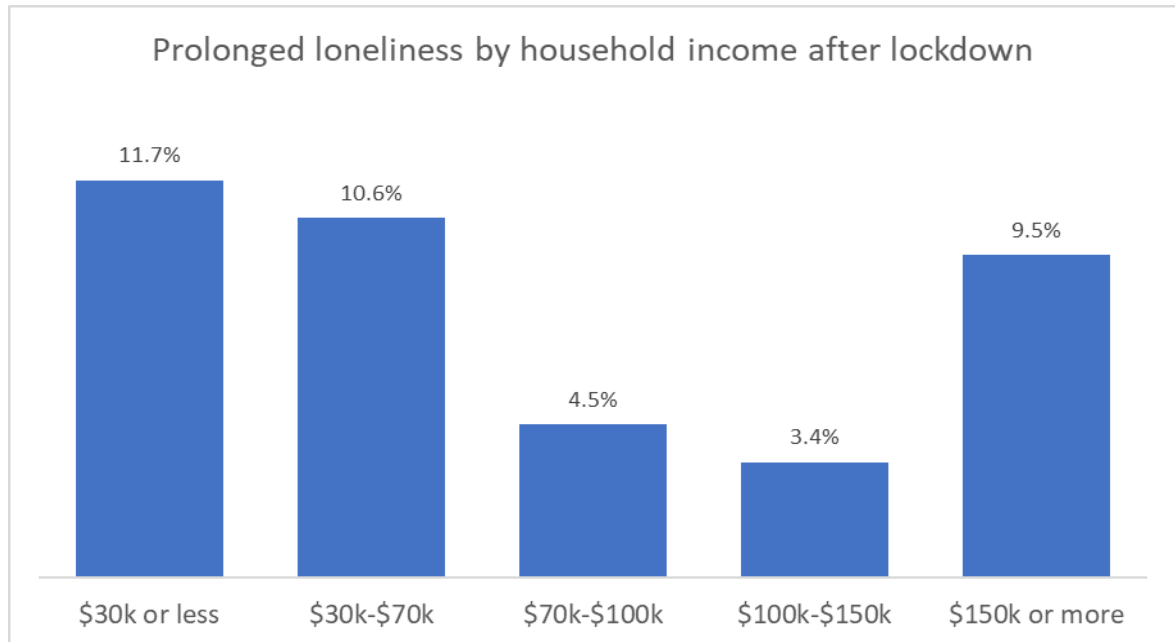
Personal income

The incidence of prolonged loneliness decreases with personal income from personal income of \$30,000 or less (11.0%) to personal income of \$70,001 or more (3.3%).



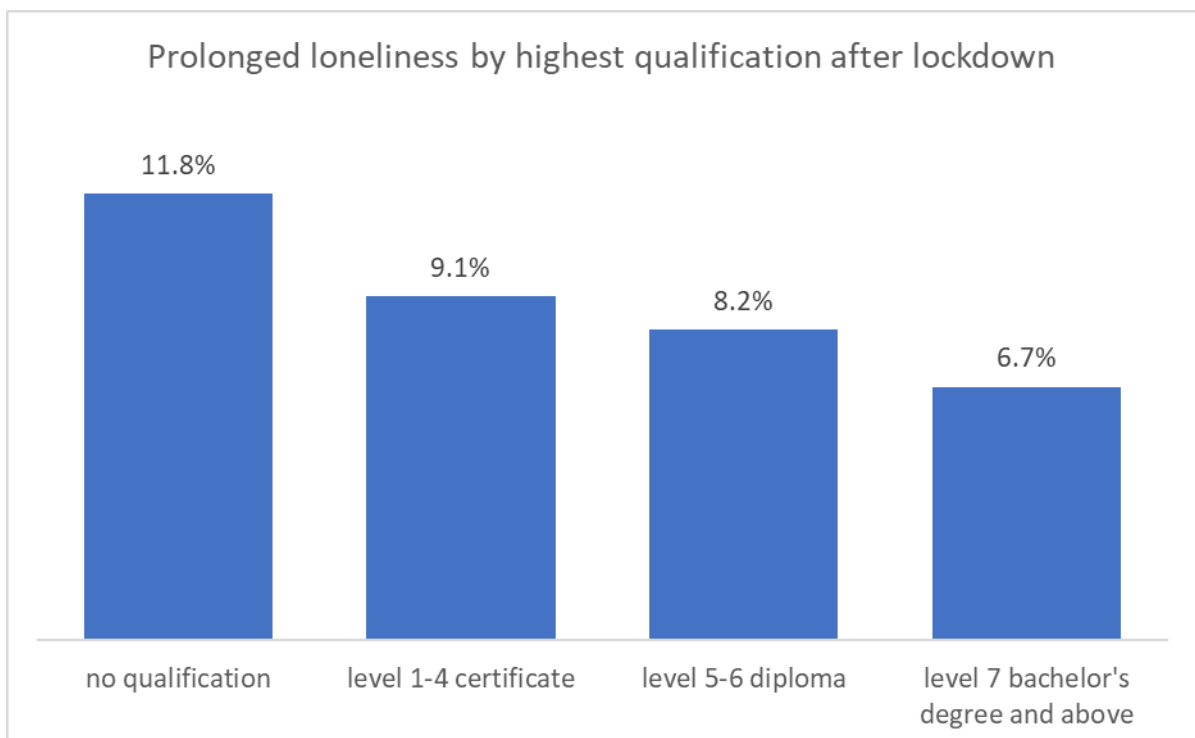
Household income

With respect to household income, the incidence of prolonged loneliness falls with increased income until above \$150,000 when it sharply rises again.



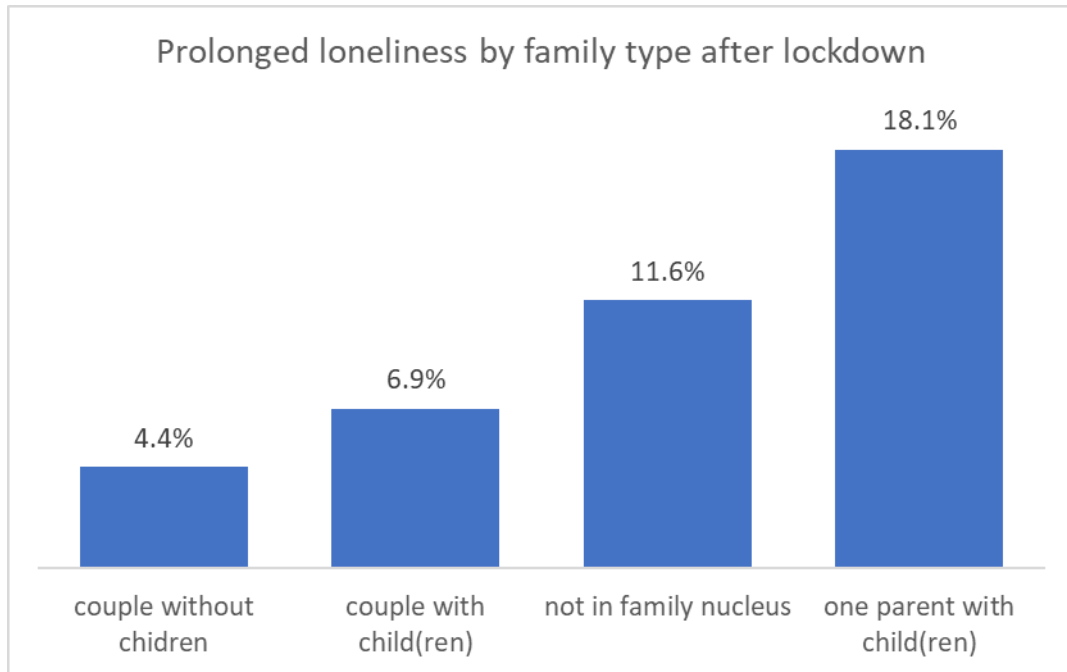
Highest qualification

The incidence of prolonged loneliness decreases with highest qualification from no qualification (11.8%) to level 7 bachelor's degree and above (6.7%).



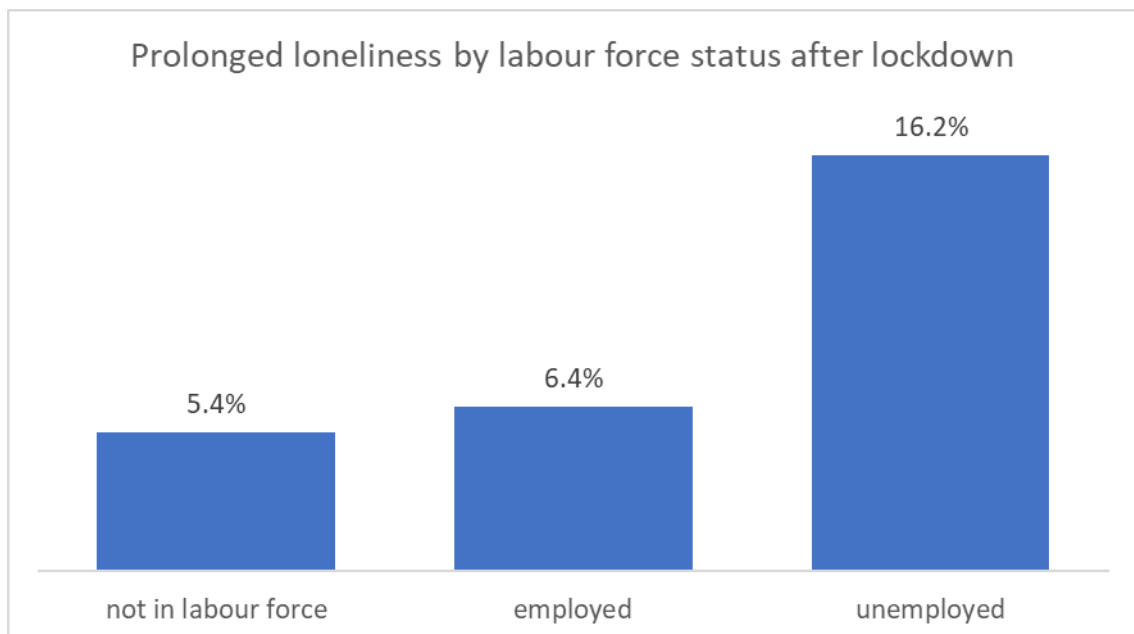
Family type

Family type has a large impact on prolonged loneliness, ranging from a low incidence of prolonged loneliness for couples without children (4.4%) to a high incidence of prolonged loneliness for solo parents (18.1%).



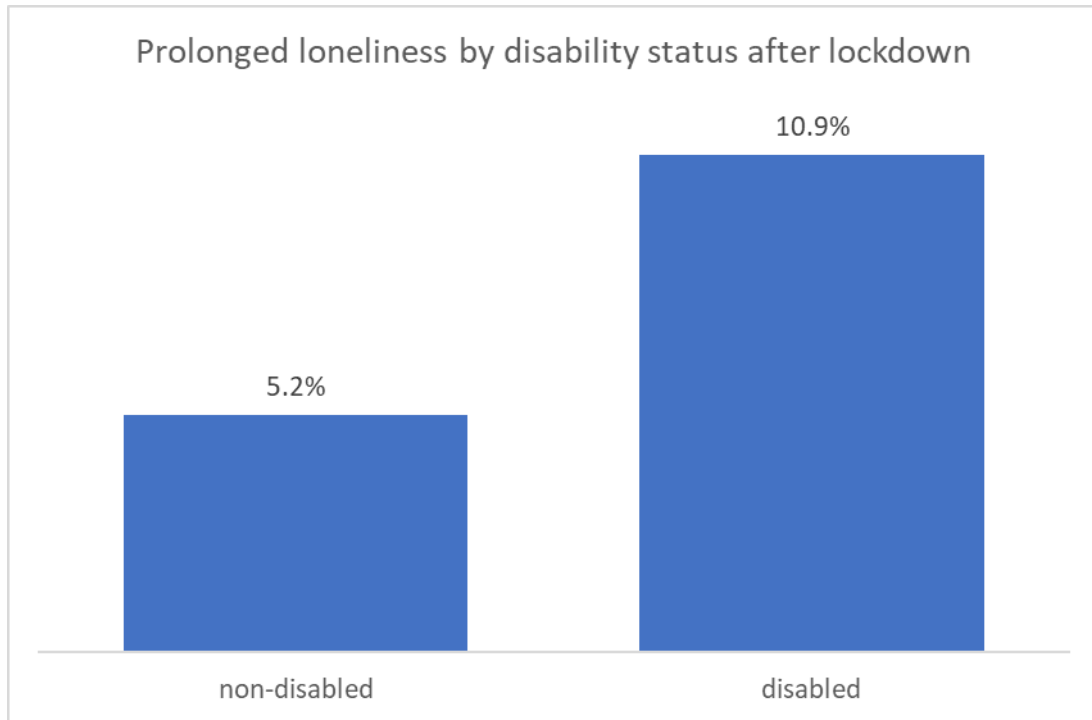
Labour force status

Being unemployed has a significant negative impact on the incidence of prolonged loneliness.



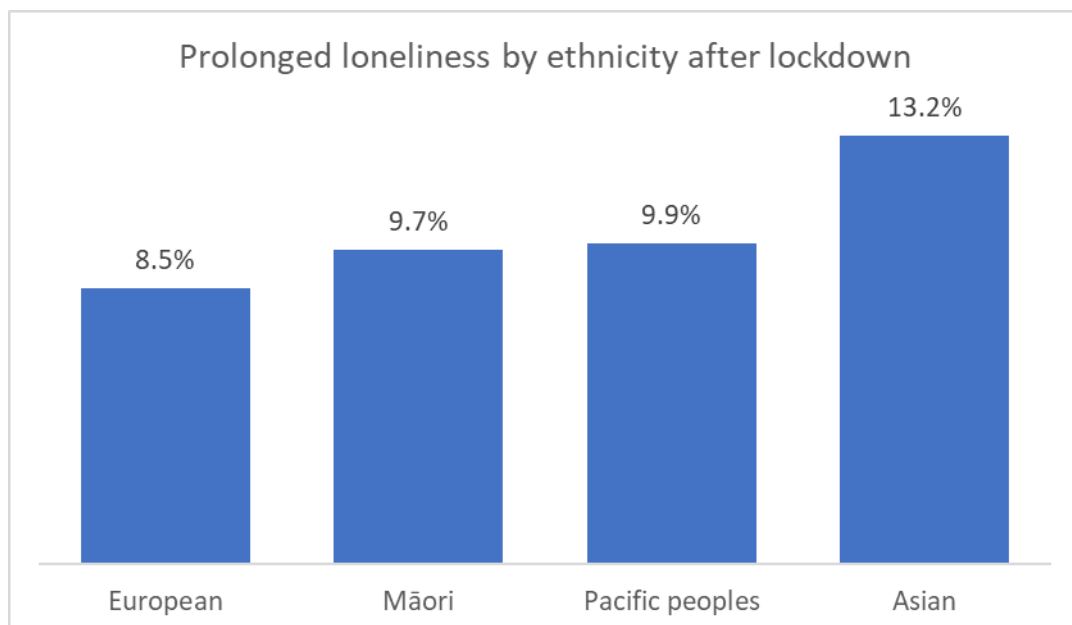
Disability status

Being disabled has a significant negative impact on the incidence of prolonged loneliness.



Ethnicity

Asian peoples are, in general, experiencing higher incidences of prolonged loneliness. Our more detailed filters are showing that this loneliness is concentrated in the Indian community.



Appendix A: Post-Lockdown Survey weighting

Horizon Research applied sample weights to derive nationally representative estimates across six demographic groups:

- Age group
- Employment
- Highest education
- Personal income
- Region (Local Government Area)
- Sex

Age group	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
18 to 34 years	23.1%	30.6%	30.6%
35 to 54 years	31.2%	33.9%	33.8%
55 years or older	45.7%	35.5%	35.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Employment	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
Not in paid employment	32.2%	34.9%	35.3%
In paid employment	67.8%	65.1%	64.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Highest education	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
Other and not specified	4.7%	6.5%	6.5%
More than sixth form but not a degree (level 4-6)	30.9%	20.2%	20.2%
Degree of some sort	41.3%	23.4%	23.2%
Sixth form or lower (level 3 or lower)	23.1%	49.9%	50.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Personal income	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
Up to \$20,000	19.8%	38.7%	39%
\$20,001 to \$30,000	12.4%	13.9%	14.0%
\$\$30,001 to \$50,000	17.9%	21.2%	21%
\$50,001 or more	37.5%	16.2%	16%
Not stated or don't know	12.4%	10.0%	10%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100%

Region	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
Upper North Island (Taupo North)	18.6%	20.0%	20.0%
Lower North Island (south of Taupo)	29.9%	22.8%	22.8%
South Island	22.8%	24.0%	24.0%
Auckland	28.7%	33.3%	33.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100%

Sex	Actual % of respondents	% of respondents after weighting	Percent of NZ population
Male	50.1%	48.6%	48.8%
Female	49.6%	50.8%%	51.2%
Total	99.6%	99.4%	100.0%

References

Loneliness NZ (2020), "[Loneliness is associated with poor wellbeing.](#)"

Prickett, Kate C., Michael Fletcher, Simon Chapple, Nguyen Doan, and Conal Smith (2020), "[Life in lockdown: The economic and social effect of lockdown during Alert Level 4 in New Zealand](#)", Working Paper 20/03, Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Stats NZ (2019), "[Wellbeing statistics: 2018.](#)"