

MOST OF OUR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS ARE ALREADY DIGITAL - SO WILL PHYSICAL ISOLATION CHANGE ANYTHING?

By Rebecca Cassells, Alan Duncan, Daniel Kiely and Astghik Mavisakalyan

Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that there are new rules around how we should interact with each other. There are strict limitations to the number of people with whom we can interact with at one time, and requirements relating to physical distancing. Handshaking and physical greetings should be avoided altogether. Physical distancing and hygiene are the order of the day. **But physical isolation shouldn't mean we stop socialising altogether and now more than ever we need to make use of the tools around us - particularly digital communications - to adapt to this new way of life.**

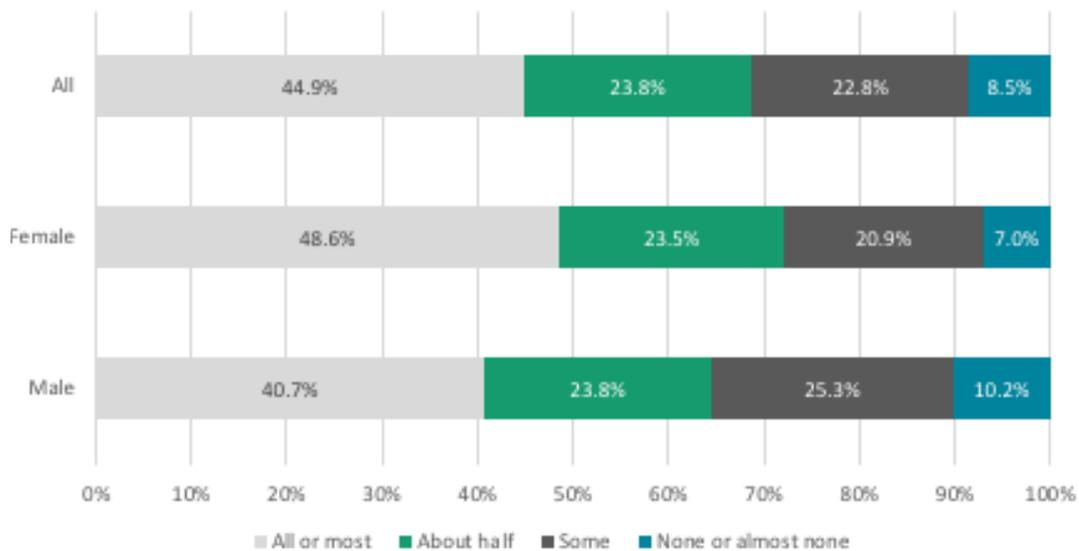
In some cases, this may be easier said than done.

A lot of us already socialise digitally, but there are differences by gender and age

As it turns out, many Australians won't have to change much to adapt to this new way of online socialising. Data from the 2017 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes show that for about 45% of Australians, all or most of their communication with family members and close friends is through text messages, mobile phones, or other communication devices that use the internet (Figure 1).

Women are more likely than men to have most of their contact with family and friends through digital means – nearly 49% compared to 41%. A higher proportion of men report that none or almost none of their contact with family and close friends is through digital means (10.2%).

Figure 1: How much contact with family members and close friends is through text messages, mobile phones, or other communication devices that use the internet, by gender, 2017



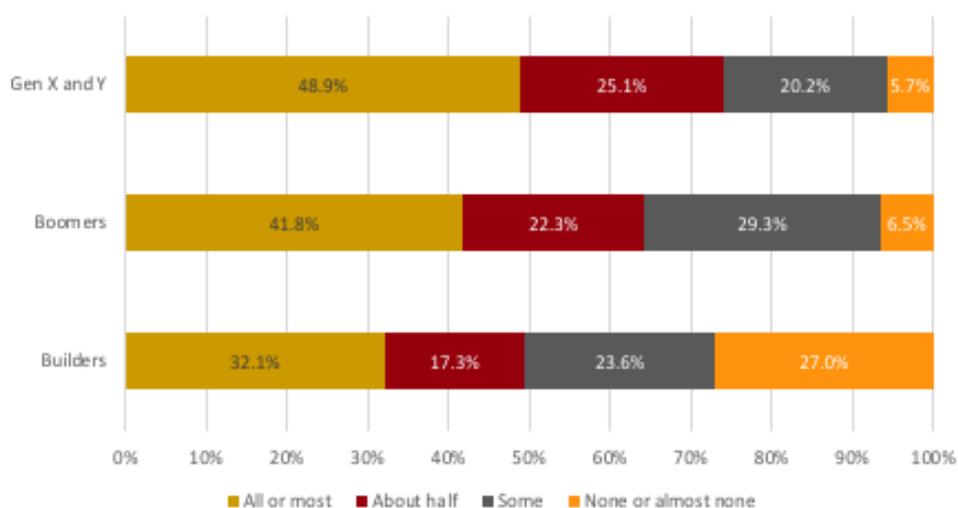
Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2017

Physical isolation is likely to impose additional challenges for older people, not only in their ability to access goods and services, but also in being able maintain social connections with family and friends.

Among the builders, our oldest cohort aged 70+, nearly a third say that none or almost none of their contact with family members and close friends is through text messaging or mobile phones (Figure 2).

In contrast, only about 6% of members of generations X and Y interact with people close to them entirely or mostly in a non-digital way.

Figure 2: How much contact with family members and close friends is through text messages, mobile phones, or other communication devices that use the internet, by generation, 2017



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2017

Can everyone afford a move to a largely digital mode of social connectedness?

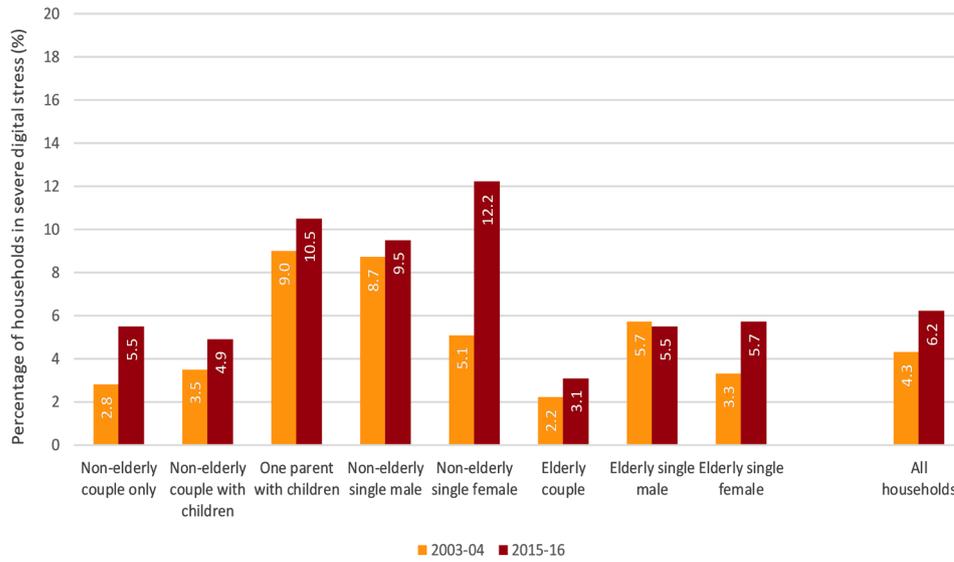
Clearly, digital technologies and internet connectivity will play a far greater role in our lives in these new times of the COVID-19 pandemic. But digital affordability is a real and significant issue for many families who are at a risk of full social disconnectedness. So, which families face particular challenges in meeting the costs of mobile communications and digital technologies? Looking at the share of households spending more than 10% of their budget (after housing costs) on digital services and in the poorest 40% of the income distribution - a situation of digital stress - we see that the incidence of digital stress is most pronounced among single parents (at around 10.5%) and non-elderly single women (12.2%) (Figure 3). Almost one in ten single men commit more than 10% of their budget to digital spending, while digital stress has risen over time for couples and elderly single women.

Some Australians may simply not be able to afford accessing the internet at all. The gap in internet access rates between those on the lowest and second lowest quintiles and those in the higher three quintiles is particularly evident (Figure 4).

For WA, for example, 74% of those on the lowest income quintile access the internet. This is over 25 percentage points lower than that of the highest quintile in WA, who report 99% access.

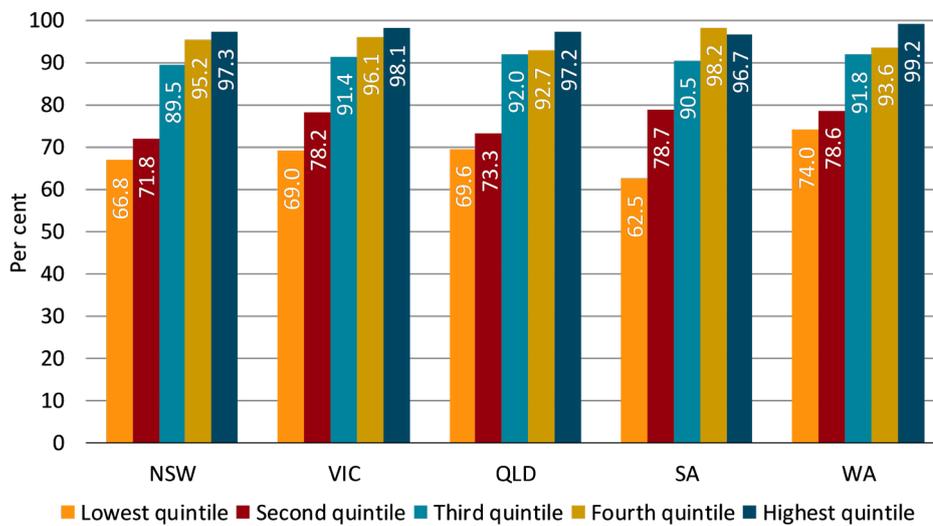
Access to internet varies vastly by location too with many households across Australia having no internet access at all ([click here for link to map of share of dwellings with internet access](#)). Fewer households in remote and very remote areas across Australia have access to the internet than those located in urban areas. Nationally, in terms of dwellings with access to the internet, the lowest performing LGA is Belyuen in Northern Territory with only 12% of dwellings having access to the internet. Maralinga Tjartuja in South Australia is another jurisdiction with very low access to the internet at under 17% of all dwellings. Other localities where internet access was under 40% include: Cherbourg (35%) and Woorabinda (36%) in Qld and the Central Desert (37%). For WA, the region with the lowest percentage of dwellings with internet access is Upper Gascoyne (43%). In contrast, most metropolitan areas have over 80% of dwellings with internet access. However, many of these urban LGA's have thousands of households without internet access.

Figure 3: Prevalence of digital stress, by family type, 2003-04 and 2015-16



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' estimates based on ABS Household Expenditure Survey, 2003-04 and 2015-16, and Cat. No 6401.0.

Figure 4: Internet access by income and by state, 2016-17



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from ABS cat no 8146.0, unpublished data.

Implications for accessing services

With the economic impact of COVID-19 deepening, we have seen many Australians queue outside Centrelink offices while the Centrelink website had crashed due to the high volume of people seeking online access – a situation that clearly poses risks of elevated stress to those who are struggling, and who may not be able to get to a Centrelink office.

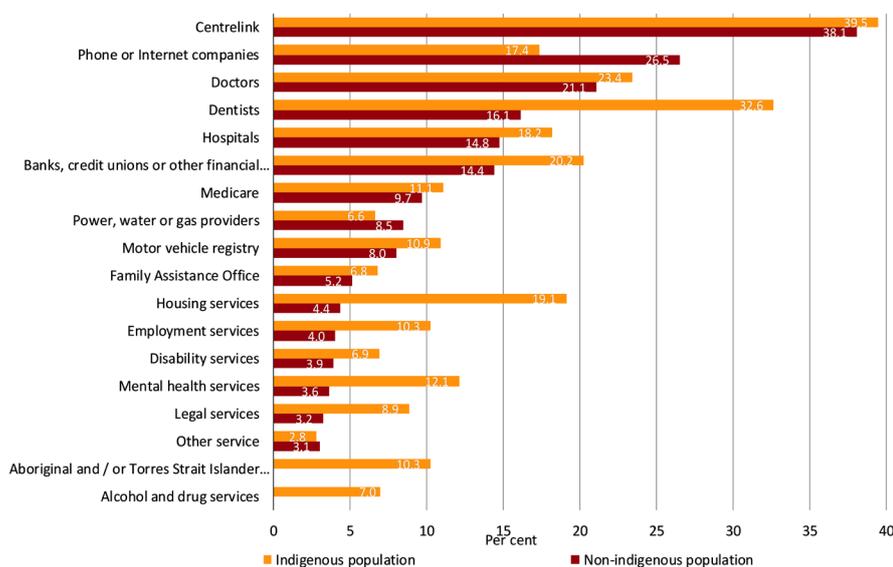
Our analysis suggests that Indigenous people are particularly at risk in this context.

Many of us already had problems accessing services before the current crisis - 24% of Indigenous persons reported having a problem accessing services (through physical, online and other means), a figure that is in line with non-Indigenous people. And in fact, for all groups the service people had most difficulty accessing is Centrelink (Figure 5).

With the exception of phone or internet services and power, water or gas providers, Indigenous people reported higher difficulty in accessing services across all other services. Particularly striking is the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people reporting difficulty in accessing services related to medical needs (hospitals, doctors and dentists), housing, mental health and legal matters.

In response to people queuing outside Centrelink offices, there has been strong encouragement to access these services online. However, for many in remote areas, areas with high levels of disadvantage, and areas with high Indigenous populations, internet access is very low.

Figure 5: Services people have problems accessing by Indigenous status, Australia, 2014-15

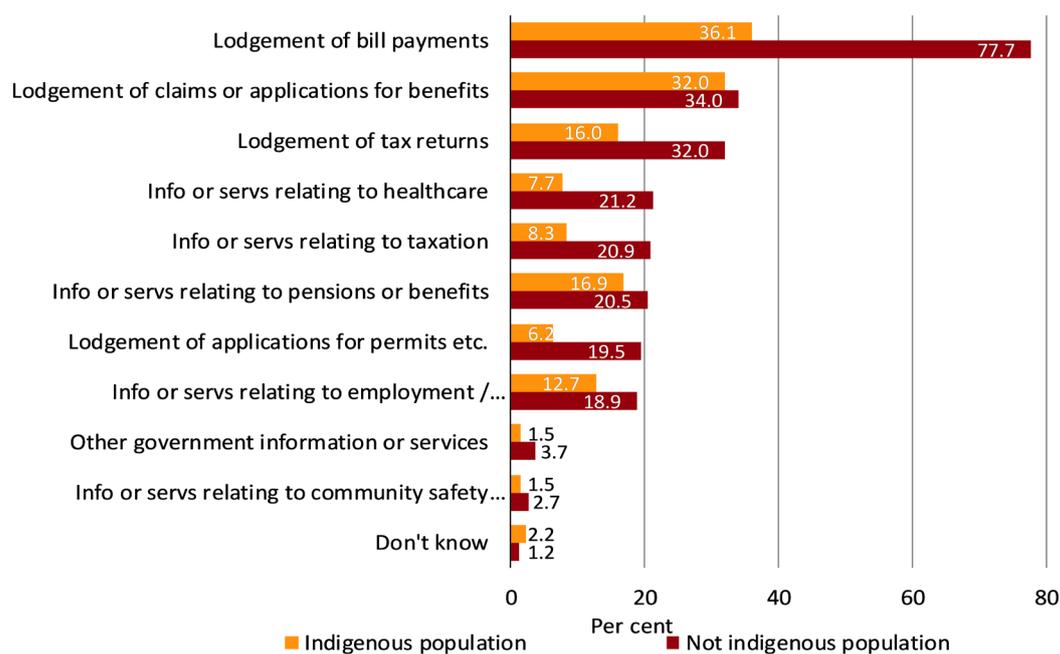


Note: Sample are those already experiencing a difficulty with a service.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from ABS cat no 4159.0, 2014 and 4720.0.55.002, 2014-15.

Figure 6 looks specifically at the type of government services accessed online by Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. For the non-Indigenous community, almost 78% of people lodge bill payments online. This compares to only 36% of Indigenous people – a difference of 42 percentage points. There is also a clear divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in how information about government services is obtained.

This includes accessing information or services about healthcare (13 ppt gap) and employment (6 ppt gap). Keeping in mind that in many cases there is a non-existence of services available to many Indigenous people, particularly those living in remote communities, it is essential to ensure that they can obtain information and can access essential services as required.

Figure 6: Government services accessed online, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons Australia, 2014

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from ABS cat no 4159.0, 2014 and 4720.0.55.002, 2014-15.

Digital communication may increase feelings of isolation and being left out

In many ways, we are already living in a physically isolated society. For many, physical isolation is already a normal aspect of their daily lives. In our current situation, this may well save lives. On the other hand, physical distancing may permanently engrain a way of life that has started eroding our sense of community and social wellbeing.

Even before the pandemic, a significant proportion of Australians have been facing feelings of isolation and a sense of being left out on a frequent basis (Figure 7). Only around 45% of Australians reported never experiencing such feelings in the preceding four weeks when surveyed in 2017. Will the inevitable increase in digital modes of socializing exacerbate these feelings in our society? Quite possibly.

Around 41% of those whose contact with family members and close friends is entirely or mostly digital say they never felt left out in the preceding 4 weeks (Figure 8).

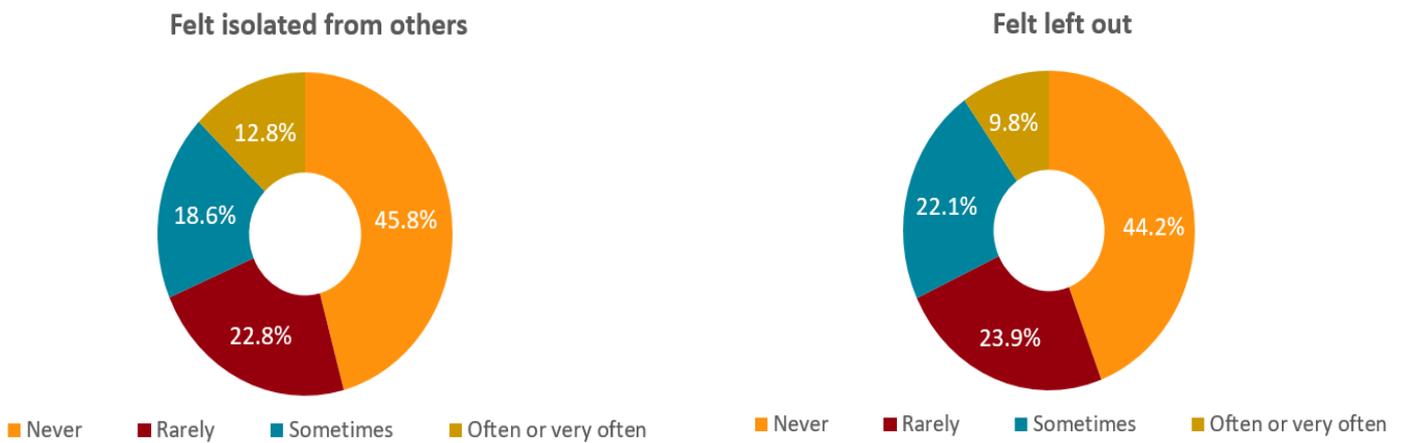
In comparison, 53.5% of those who say that none or almost none of their close personal contacts are digital report never feeling left out – a difference of over 12 percentage points.

Measures of physical distancing currently in place are unavoidable. But we need to think about how to mitigate the potential negative side effects on social and emotional wellbeing. Perhaps the manner of our online interactions will change in frequency and regularity.

Now is the time to be picking up the phone to your family and friends and making more of an effort to regularly connect and check-in.

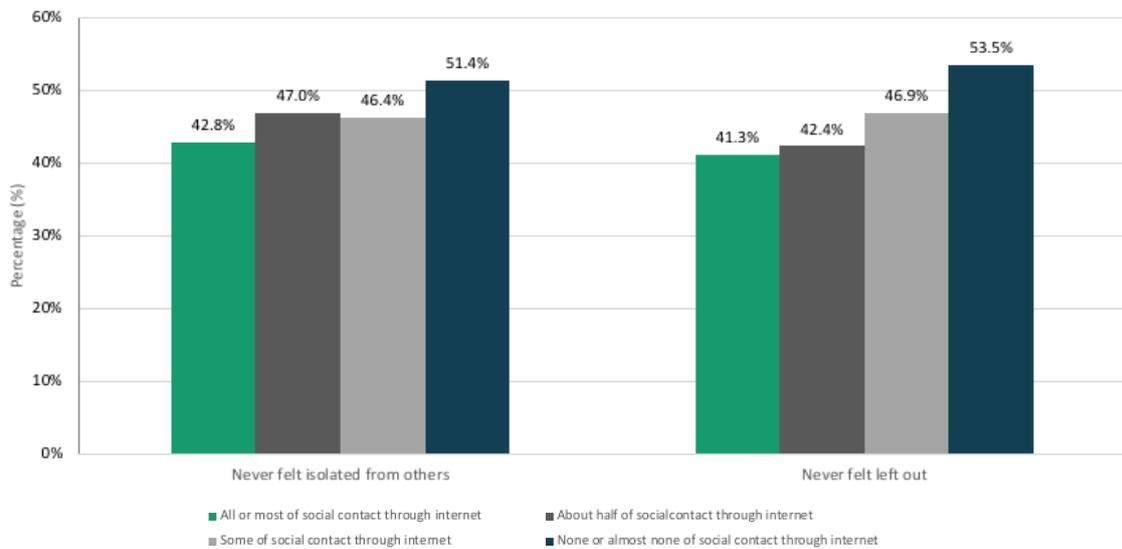
We also need to make sure that those who are unable to connect through digital means either through access, ability or affordability issues are looked after. And once these times of physical distancing are over, we will need to make an effort to physically reconnect.

Figure 7: Frequency of feelings of being isolated from others and being left out in the preceding 4 weeks, 2017



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2017

Figure 8: Share of individuals who never felt isolated from others and who never felt left out in the preceding 4 weeks, by the frequency of internet-based communication media used for contacts with family and close friends,



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Authors' calculations from Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2017