

# A Friend in Need

Young people are showing they care more than ever

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Foundation



## Words by Nick Crofts, Co-op Foundation Chief Executive

The **Co-op Foundation** has a long and proud history of tackling youth loneliness.

It began in 2016 with early pilot funding for local community groups connecting and empowering young people.

It progressed into national multi-million-pound partnerships with government and #iwill, before moving into collaboration with other funders to strengthen the youth sector through co-operative networks and training. Finally, it raised national awareness via the truly brilliant youth-led campaign, [Lonely Not Alone](#).

It's been a six-year journey of learning, impact and inspiration.

But as I reflect today on the findings from our **'A Friend in Need'** report, one thing stands out more than anything else - the power of young people, themselves, to make a difference.

Over the next few pages, you'll get an insight into how 10 to 25-year-olds from all over the UK are making lives better for their peers. How they're helping others more than ever before. And how they're focusing on their friends even when they are lonely themselves.

And as a source of true inspiration, they're doing this against overwhelming odds.

The world we live in today is very different to 2016. The coronavirus pandemic has left scars on individuals and society. More than half of all young people say they feel like they've been pushed to the back of the queue for jobs\*. And the cost of living crisis is creating anxiety and stress across all sections of society.

The mere fact young people still follow the co-operative values of solidarity and caring for others is nothing short of a miracle. I thank them for everything they do, and I applaud them for their tireless approach to self-help and self-responsibility.

It is now time for funders and the rest of civil society to re-examine what we can do to enhance the support we offer. Despite the positive findings in this report, we also found evidence of increasing levels of loneliness, reduced action from young people to help themselves and rising levels of stigma.

Now is the time to do something new, and something radical. We need to put young people in charge, and we need to find ways to empower them and others to build fairer communities where we have the best chance to beat loneliness and stigma.

We've begun this journey at the Co-op Foundation by partnering with young people to imagine a more positive vision for the future, which we'll endeavour to build as part of our new 2022-27 strategy. We hope other funders and charities will join us in turning this into a reality.

**Let's build the communities of the future together.**



**Methodology:** Unless otherwise stated, statistics used in this report refer to the Co-op Foundation/Opinium Lonely Not Alone survey, August 2022. Fieldwork was completed by Opinium. Opinium surveyed a sample of 2,000 10 to 25-year-olds, representative of each age group (10 years, 11-12, 13-15, 16-18, 19-21, 22-25) living in the UK. Fieldwork was conducted between 29 July and 5 August 2022. For our survey, we used the national loneliness measure recommended by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). When we say 'chronically lonely', this means young people who answer 'often/always' to the question 'How often do you feel lonely?'. Visit the [ONS website](#) for more information.

\*[Covid - the shadow on a young generation, Co-op 2021](#)

## A growing concern



16 to 25-year-olds are

**3x**

more likely to feel chronically lonely than 10 to 15-year-olds

**70%**

of students are lonely at least occasionally

**55%**

of lonely young people say not having the money to take part in activities has a negative impact on how lonely they feel

## Small acts help others



**83%**

of young people have taken an action to help other young people they think may be lonely

**52%**

of young people who've felt lonely said a friend reaching out to them makes them feel better

**59%**

of lonely young people say loneliness makes them more likely to want to help others

## Impacts on society



**48%**

of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them less likely to want to progress in work

**62%**

of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them lose confidence in themselves

The more often a young person feels lonely, the

**less likely**

they are to say they'd volunteer in their community



# Levels of loneliness

We spoke to 2,000 young people from all over the UK for our 'A Friend in Need' research and found that loneliness remains an issue for the vast majority.

In fact, only **5%** of young people said they never felt lonely, compared to **10%** who agreed with this statement in August 2021.

Of those who feel lonely, **12%** are chronically lonely, a slight reduction from August 2021. This is potentially due to less instances of self-isolation and community closures due to Covid.

It's interesting to look in detail at the groups of young people who are lonely the most often in 2022.

As in previous years, older age groups are more likely to be chronically lonely. Just **5%** of 10 to 15-year-olds are lonely often/always compared to **16%** of 16 to 25-year-olds. This aligns with previous research that suggests issues like transition, moving away from home and changing relationships impact on how often a young person feels lonely.

Loneliness is also more prevalent among young people with less digital access. Four-fifths of young people who don't have WiFi at home and run out of data at least occasionally are lonely at least occasionally. This suggests digital connections help to reduce some instances of loneliness.

We also see similarly high levels of loneliness among students, with **70%** saying they're lonely at least occasionally.

## Causes of loneliness

According to our research, the causes of loneliness are varied. They also suggest the cost of living crisis may cause levels and intensity of loneliness to rise in the future.

More than half of lonely young people we spoke to (**55%**) said not having the money to attend or take part in activities was already having a negative impact on how lonely they feel. This may be made worse for those with active social media accounts as **56%** of young people say seeing friends having fun on social media has a negative impact.

## Stigma in rural areas

Levels of loneliness differ depending on where young people live, and so does their perception of the issue.

Although levels of loneliness are overall lower among young people in rural areas (**68%** of 10 to 25-year-olds are lonely at least occasionally, compared to **78%** of those in cities or towns), this group is significantly less likely to believe youth loneliness is treated seriously. In fact, less than a fifth of rural young people (**19%**) believe youth loneliness is treated seriously by society compared to **32%** of those in urban areas. This suggests support for lonely young people is more prevalent or more visible in cities or towns. Rural young people are also less likely to believe loneliness is a normal emotion and less likely to say they feel confident talking about loneliness than those who live in cities or towns.

95%

of young people say they feel lonely

55%

of young people say not having the money to take part in activities has a negative impact on how lonely they feel

## Young people are helping others

Our first ever research into youth loneliness ([All Our Emotions are Important, 2018](#)) found that young people were four times as likely to feel comfortable reaching out to a friend who seemed lonely than admitting they often felt lonely themselves. And this trend of helping others continues to this day, despite the difficult environment of lockdowns and school closures that young people have had to endure over the past few years.

According to 'A Friend in Need', 83% of 10 to 25-year-olds have taken an action to help other young people who may feel lonely. This has risen

# 83%

of young people have taken an action to help other young people who may feel lonely

from 76% just two years ago, a positive trend during a time of real uncertainty for young people.

The most popular actions young people take include being friendly with someone outside of their friendship group who they think may be lonely (44%) and including someone in their friendship group who seemed lonely (43%). Two-fifths of young people have also offered support to a

friend who seemed lonely (40%). Read more about how acts of kindness help others on [page 7](#).

## Rising levels of stigma

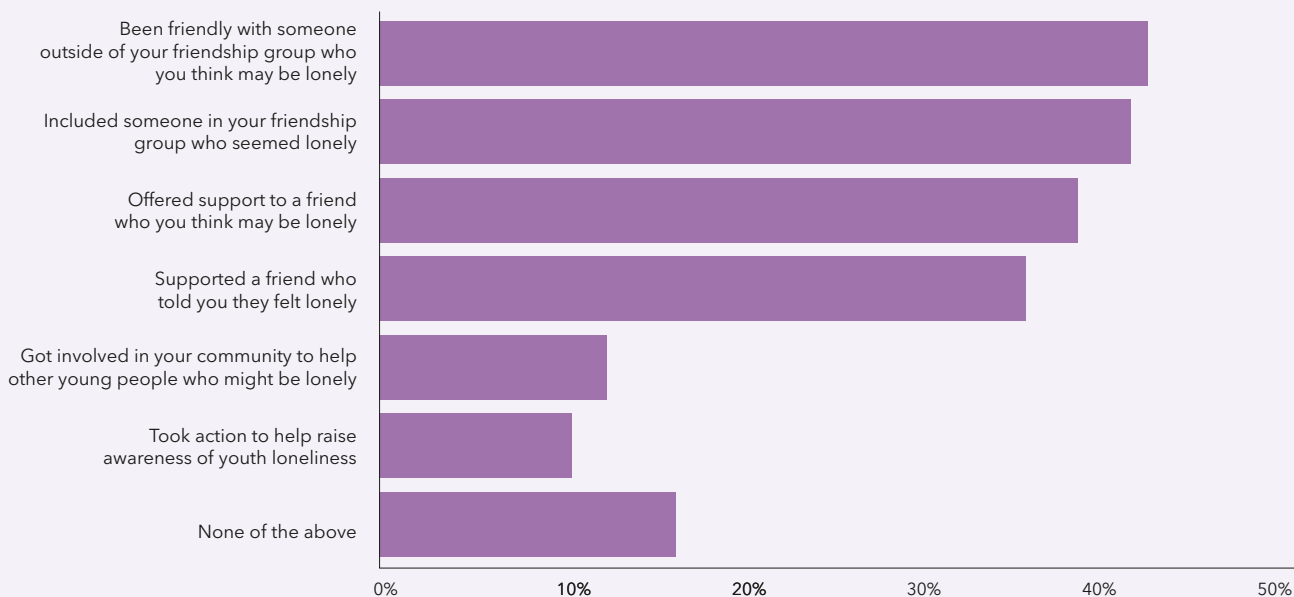
Worryingly, the percentage of lonely young people taking actions that help themselves has fallen slightly recently. In November 2021, 95% of lonely young people said they had taken an action that helped when they felt lonely. In our latest research, this has fallen to 89%. In addition, fewer young people say they feel comfortable telling someone they feel lonely. In our latest survey, just 42% of 10 to 25-year-olds say they have done this, compared to 49% in November 2021.

This drop matches other negative trends we see in how young people currently perceive loneliness.

In November 2021, 40% of young people said they felt confident talking about loneliness. This has fallen to 35% in our most recent data. Similarly, only 24% of young people say they think society treats youth loneliness seriously, compared to 30% just nine months ago.

This may suggest that despite youth loneliness continuing to be an ongoing issue, young people feel it is becoming less prioritised in society. This may have knock-on effects for how they deal with their own emotions in the future.

Actions young people have taken to help others



## 60%

of chronically lonely young people say loneliness makes them less likely to volunteer in their community

## 82%

of lonely young people who live with friends say loneliness makes them lose confidence in themselves

Our [One Small Step research](#) (August 2021) found that loneliness negatively impacted on the mental wellbeing of 70% of lonely young people. Understanding this was important because it highlighted the impact loneliness can have on individuals and wider society.

We've looked into this in more depth for 'A Friend in Need' and found further evidence of the negative consequences of feeling lonely for young people:

- 62% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them lose confidence in themselves.
- 61% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them worry more about social situations.
- 62% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them shy or nervous about giving their opinion.

This impact is worse the more often a young person feels lonely. For instance, 76% of young people who are lonely often or always say loneliness makes them worry more about social situations compared to 41% of young people who are hardly ever lonely.

This shows a cumulative impact of loneliness on young people's mental wellbeing and the importance of early interventions and support from others.

We also found wider societal impacts of youth loneliness:

- 48% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them less likely to want to progress in work.
- 41% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them less likely to volunteer in their local community.

- 51% of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them less likely to talk about their emotions with others.

Again, those who feel lonely the most often are more likely to feel this way. In fact, three-fifths (60%) of young people who are chronically lonely say loneliness makes them less likely to volunteer in their community compared to just a quarter (26%) of young people who are hardly ever lonely. This may be the result of rising feelings of stigma for young people who feel more regularly lonely or the cumulative negative impact of loneliness on confidence and mental wellbeing.



## Lonely in a crowd

Young people who live with friends are more likely to say loneliness impacts on them than those who live alone, according to our most recent data.

82% of lonely young people who live with friends say loneliness makes them lose confidence in themselves, compared to 51% of those who live alone. In addition, 68% of lonely young people who live with friends say loneliness makes them less likely to want to progress at work, compared to 51% of lonely young people who live alone.

## Small acts of kindness towards and from lonely young people are effective ways of tackling loneliness.

More than half of all the lonely young people (**52%**) we spoke to said friends reaching out to them made them feel better when they were lonely, while a fifth (**20%**) said young people talking or campaigning about loneliness also had a positive impact.

The second most positive action a lonely young person can take when they feel lonely is helping friends, themselves. **46%** of lonely young people agreed with this statement and it was particularly positive for younger age groups, with **50%** of 10 to 15-year-olds saying this was helpful to combat their own feelings of loneliness.

Interestingly, young people with less digital access said helping others was more beneficial for tackling loneliness than friends reaching out to them. **47%** of lonely young people who don't have WiFi at home and regularly run out of data said helping friends made them feel better when they were lonely, while just **36%** said friends reaching out to them had a positive impact.

It was helpful for young people, when they felt lonely, to recognise that they're not alone. **35%** of lonely young people agreed with this statement, and it appears particularly helpful for those who identify as female, with **39%** of this group saying it helped them.



## Lonely Not Alone 2022

Lonely Not Alone is our campaign to tackle the stigma of youth loneliness. We co-design it every year with young people to make it as authentic and engaging as possible for their peers.

So far, **3.1m** young people have seen our work and **97%** have taken an action as a result!

Our 2022 campaign will build on the digital universe we created last year. This gave lonely young people a safe space to share the one small step they'd taken to tackle loneliness. It also helped them to share tips with other young people so they could be inspired and find new ways to feel better. Thank you to all the brave young people who got involved and helped others.

We'll relaunch our website on 5 October this year and support even more young people to share their stories, particularly students and those from rural backgrounds, who we know have difficult and different experiences of loneliness. For the first time ever, we'll also encourage young people to post messages of support online to their friends and peers. Small acts of kindness can have a real impact on young people's feelings, and help them to contribute more positively to society.

Read more at [lonelynotalone.org](https://lonelynotalone.org).

**Lonely Not Alone is a Co-op Foundation  
campaign created in partnership with young  
people and specialist co-design agency Effervescent.**

