

Locked down, looking out

How young people embraced co-operative values to tackle the challenges of lockdown.

March 2021



Foundation



Introduction

Words by Nick Crofts, Co-op Foundation Chief Executive

It's more than four years since we launched 'Belong' - our UK-wide programme of grant giving and support to help young people tackle loneliness. Inspired by Co-op research* that found young people were lonely more often than any other age group, over this time we have:

- Awarded more than £6.5m in grants to community organisations UK-wide.
- Helped to develop networks and resources with [UK Youth](#) and the [National Youth Partnership](#) to strengthen local youth services
- Launched a national campaign to tackle the stigma of youth loneliness.



We're proud of the impact of our work so far and passionate in the belief that **co-operation** has been at the heart of everything we've achieved. Whether it's through the solidarity and caring that drives our [Lonely Not Alone](#) campaign or our commitment to democracy that [gives young people a say](#) in our youth funding decisions, co-operative values are built into everything we do.

And today, as we mark just over 12 months since the UK first went into coronavirus lockdown, our **Locked down, looking out** research shows this spirit of co-operation is also key to many of the positive actions young people are taking to respond to the challenges of the past year.

Our survey shows that, since March 2020, young people have built stronger relationships with family and friends; they've reached out to others in greater numbers; and they've found ways to overcome the isolation and boredom that has so negatively affected us all.

And what's more, they've done this at a time when they've also lost physical access to schools, colleges and youth institutions; at a time when levels of loneliness have risen for 10 to 25-year-olds UK-wide**; and when 61% of 18 to 24-year-olds have said they believe their own future will be worse because of the pandemic***.

Thank you to all the young people who took part in our survey for showing us the way towards a more compassionate, community-focused and co-operative future. Thank you, also, to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for funding this research. I hope charities, policy-makers and funders alike will use young people as their inspiration to build a more co-operative world of real equality post-pandemic. One in which we can **all** belong.

Methodology

Unless otherwise stated, statistics used in this report refer to the Co-op Foundation/Opinium Lonely Not Alone survey February 2021. 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 8 and 16 February 2021.

For our survey, we used the national loneliness measure recommended by the Office for National Statistics. Visit the [ONS website](#) for more information.

* [Trapped in a Bubble](#), Co-op and British Red Cross 2016.

** [In This Together](#), Co-op Foundation 2020.

*** [Mental Health in the Pandemic \(wave 9\)](#), Mental Health Foundation, 2020.

Key findings

Loneliness continues to be a problem for young people, and the pandemic has made it worse



73%

of young people are lonely at least occasionally, and more than half say the issue is worse now than at the start of the first lockdown

Just
26%

of young people think society treats youth loneliness seriously

Only
36%

of young people feel confident talking about loneliness

Young people have built a sense of community despite lockdown



65%

of young people feel closer to their family now than they did in March last year

45%

of young people say they've made friends through online hobbies over the past year

65%

of young people say they are now more likely to reach out to friends who they think may need help

Self-help and caring for others



89%

of young people who've felt lonely have taken an action that has helped to combat their feelings of loneliness

82%

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

46%

of young people say lockdown has made them think more about others in their local community, and they've taken action to help

73%

of young people are lonely at least occasionally

65%

of young people say they are more likely to reach out to friends who they think may need help than they did this time last year



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Tackling the challenges of lockdown

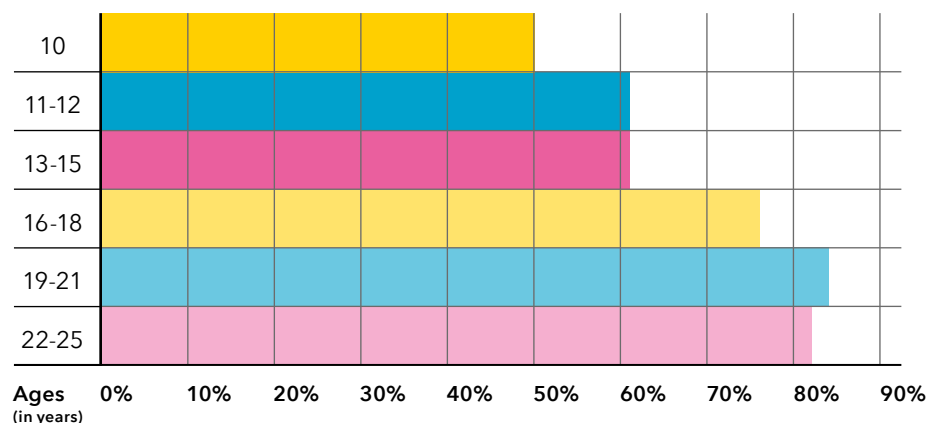
Building community and co-operation

We spoke to 2,000 young people for this report and **73%** said they felt lonely at least occasionally. Worryingly, more than half (**53%**) said they felt more lonely now than at the start of the first national lockdown in March 2020 with the problem worse for older age groups (**57%** of 16 to 25-year-olds) and those no longer in school/education and working. In fact, three-fifths of those young people (**59%**) told us they feel more lonely now than a year ago.

Despite this, young people have also shown amazing fortitude to build a stronger sense of community, co-operation and caring, where this has been possible through lockdown. Almost two thirds of young people (**65%**) say they are more likely to reach out to friends who they think may need help compared to at the start of the pandemic, while the same number are closer to their friends and family than they were a year ago. In addition, **46%** say lockdown has made them think more about others in their local community, and they've taken action to help. **46%** also said they've tried to make their social media more positive by sharing more positive images and posts.

However, there is also a cautionary note as almost half of the young people we spoke to (**48%**) said they felt less confident in social situations in physical settings than a year ago. This rises among older age groups (**53%** for 16 to 25-year-olds) and those who are lonely most often (**66%** of young people who are often/always lonely). This suggests young people may need time and additional support to a return to life of more 'normal' physical interactions as we leave lockdown.

How many young people feel lonely at least occasionally



Proactive approaches to helping others

More young people are taking action

We've been measuring how young people support peers who feel lonely over the past two years and we're encouraged to see positive trends beginning to appear. Our latest stats show a huge **92%** of young people would be comfortable helping others while **82%** have taken at least one action. When looking specifically at actions taken, this is a **6%** increase on our [August research](#) and highlights young people's greater sense of co-operation and caring after a year of lockdowns.

The specific actions young people say they are comfortable taking is interesting, as the majority are focused on close connection building with individuals. Almost four-fifths of young people (**79%**) said they would be comfortable supporting a friend who told them they felt lonely while **74%** would include someone in their friendship group who seemed lonely. Examining the actions taken, **38%** of young people say they have supported a friend who told them they felt lonely while more than two-fifths (**41%**) have been friendly with someone outside of their friendship group who they

thought may be lonely. Actions that fewer young people feel comfortable with are those with reduced agency. Just over a half of young people (**54%**) said they would feel comfortable getting involved in their community to help other young people who might be lonely, while only **13%** have done so. This may also reflect a disconnect in knowing where to get involved in such opportunities.

Personal connections are also important for young people tackling their own feelings of loneliness. In fact, the most helpful actions to beat loneliness all focus on interactions with others. **91%** of young people who spent more time with family said this action helped to beat loneliness, while **88%** of those who spent more time with friends reported a positive difference. Conversely, just **50%** of those who waited for the feeling to pass and **63%** of those who spent more time online reported positive improvements.

Young people who have more experience of loneliness are significantly more likely to have helped others, compared to those who have hardly ever or never been lonely. For instance, more than two-fifths (**43%**) of young people who feel lonely often/always have been friendly with someone outside their friendship group who they think may be lonely compared to just **28%** of those who've never been lonely. This suggests experience of loneliness leads to greater empathy and then to actions that make a difference.

92%

of young people would feel comfortable helping other young people who feel lonely

38%

of young people have supported a friend who told them they felt lonely



Stigma remains a problem

Despite a willingness to help others who feel lonely, young people still lack confidence talking about the issue. We first saw this in our 2018* research that found young people were four times more likely to feel comfortable reaching out to a friend who seemed lonely, than admit to feeling lonely themselves.

In fact, only about a third of the young people we spoke to in February 2021 (**36%**) said they felt confident talking about loneliness and those who experience loneliness the most frequently are the least likely to feel confident talking about it. Those who were lonely most often were also the most likely to assume very negative emotions towards the feeling. In fact, almost two-fifths (**39%**) of young people who were lonely often/always said loneliness was something to be embarrassed by compared to just **10%** of those who were hardly ever or never lonely.

Interestingly, despite this feeling of 'embarrassment', the young people who were lonely more often were the most likely to agree that loneliness was a normal emotion for their age group. More than half (**55%**) of young people who are lonely often/always agreed with this statement, compared to **40%** of those who are hardly ever or never lonely and **52%** of the full youth population. This suggests negative emotions about loneliness, such as embarrassment or shame, come from a fear of other people or society's reactions rather than an intrinsic belief that loneliness is 'wrong'.

Positively, we are seeing upwards overall trends on young people's views on the 'normality' of loneliness. In August 2020, just **48%** of all young people agreed loneliness was a normal emotion.

Throughout our survey, young people from rural areas have communicated more negative attitudes towards loneliness. In fact, although they were slightly less likely to feel lonely than their peers in cities or suburban areas, they were also less likely to tell someone they felt lonely (**58%** of young people from rural backgrounds compared to **70%** of those in cities) and significantly less likely to agree loneliness was a normal emotion for people their age (**45%** compared to **57%**).

36% of young people feel confident talking about loneliness

What does loneliness mean to young people?

Upset
Isolated
Anxious
Boring
Sad
Depressing
Unhappy
Empty
Lost
Alone

Most common answers to the question: What words would you associate with, or use to describe, 'loneliness'?

*[All Our Emotions Are Important](#), Co-op Foundation 2018

Lonely Not Alone

Embracing co-operative values

Our **Locked down, looking out** report provides a unique insight into young people's experiences of loneliness, and their actions to help themselves and others. It also highlights changing attitudes inspired - or perhaps forced upon them - by lockdown.

Their sense of community and caring is something we at the Co-op Foundation embed across our work through our co-operative values. It's what we believe stands us out from other funders and it's seen in all its glory in our national [Lonely Not Alone](#) campaign.

We launched Lonely Not Alone in 2019 to help young people feel more confident talking about loneliness and taking actions to support themselves and others. Young people have been empowered to co-design this campaign from the start and their commitment to the values of solidarity and caring for others, coupled with the relationships and sense of community they've built, have benefitted them as well as their peers. Read below how Lonely Not Alone helped 2019 co-designer, Dani.

"Lonely Not Alone built my confidence up massively - especially the workshops. Feeling really vulnerable - but ok in that vulnerability - has been positive. Being surrounded by people who understand how I felt was so good for me. It's also nice creating work that has a real purpose and that will make a positive contribution to other people."



Our **Locked down, looking out** report will now help to guide our 2021 campaign. We know that young people feel more lonely than they did a year ago and that some also feel anxious about going back to 'normal' life. But we've also uncovered a window into what young people say helps them and what they're already doing to build a positive future, such as growing connections, reaching out to others and simple acts of kindness.

We believe in the power of young people to make life better for themselves and others and, as a funder driven by co-operative values, we want to create an environment for that to happen. We estimate that there are **1.8 million** young people in the UK who would be comfortable taking action to help peers who feel lonely and who just need encouragement and support to do so. By building empathy around loneliness and by focusing on the positive impact that community, co-operation and caring can have, we hope Lonely Not Alone 2021 will be the impetus they need to step forward like so many of their peers.

lonely NOT ALONE

57 young people collaborated to make the 2020 Lonely Not Alone campaign as authentic, honest and open as possible

1.8m young people would be comfortable helping other young people who feel lonely, but are yet to do so



**Lonely Not Alone is a Co-op Foundation campaign.
Thank you to our partners for your continuing support:**

