

# One Small Step

Let's create a kinder society  
for young people to thrive

September 2021



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Foundation



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

One of the most quoted comments about loneliness comes from the late Jo Cox MP who said “loneliness doesn’t discriminate”. It’s one of the most powerful and honest descriptors of an issue that can affect anyone, at anytime, in any place.

For the past five years, the Co-op Foundation has been doing its bit to tackle the issue among one demographic, by empowering young people to overcome loneliness in their age group.

Our work has ranged from funding theatre groups and community cookery classes to helping to build networks that support youth workers to co-operate and collaborate. It’s also encouraged us to launch a multi-year, national (and growing) campaign called [Lonely Not Alone](#) that focuses on tackling the stigma many young people feel about loneliness.



**And we’re proud of all we’ve achieved. To date, our direct funding has helped:**

- 6,065 young people to have more trusting relationships
- 10,341 young people to have improved confidence
- 4,379 young people to feel valued by their community
- 8,585 young people to gain skills

Today’s One Small Step report shows that despite our impact, and that of our partners, there is much more we can all do within society to help young people overcome loneliness and improve their wellbeing.

Our research shows that young people most affected by loneliness are those who are in older age groups, who have ever received free school meals and who have moved away from structures like schools where peer support is more readily available.

It also suggests that loneliness has a real impact on young people’s mental wellbeing and that the stigma that surrounds it touches all age groups and demographics, but is particularly severe on those who are the most lonely.

But it is also clear about the small steps we can all take in society to empower young people to make positive changes. Young people have told us that they need society to be kinder; to be more supportive, and to be more open to discussions about loneliness. By doing this, they’ll be in a much better position to take actions that make a difference to themselves, their friends and their communities.

I hope our research is useful to funders, youth organisations and government. We look forward to working with you all to build a kinder and more honest future where young people are connected and empowered to overcome loneliness.

## Methodology

Unless otherwise stated, statistics used in this report refer to the Co-op Foundation/Opinium Lonely Not Alone survey August 2021. Fieldwork was completed by Opinium. Opinium surveyed a sample of 2,001 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 16 and 23 August 2021. For our survey, we used the national loneliness measure recommended by the Office for National Statistics. Visit the ONS website for more information.

## The impact of loneliness



**70%**

of lonely young people say that feeling lonely negatively impacts on their mental wellbeing

**82%**

of young people who are lonely often or always say feeling lonely makes them feel more worried or anxious

**61%**

of lonely young people say feeling lonely makes them want to help others who feel lonely, too

## Loneliness is still hard to talk about



**24%**

of young people think that if you're lonely, it's your own fault

Just  
**47%**

of young people would feel comfortable asking for help if they felt lonely

**77%**

of young people who are lonely often or always say feeling lonely makes them speak up less

## Being proactive helps



**89%**

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

**84%**

of young people who've felt lonely said it helped when they talked about how they were feeling with someone they trusted

**56%**

of young people would be comfortable taking action to help raise awareness of youth loneliness

## A widespread issue

There are an estimated **12.6 million** 10 to 25-year-olds living in the UK today. According to our latest survey, **71%** of them are lonely at least occasionally while **15%** - almost **1.9 million** - are chronically lonely (lonely often or always). This is a rise of almost **400,000** from August 2020.

We've found the figure of chronically lonely young people increases as young people get older with **18%** of 16 to 25-year-olds feeling lonely often or always compared to just **9%** of 10 to 15-year-olds. Those living in more urban environments are also more affected. They're almost twice as likely (**19%**) to say they are lonely often or always, compared to young people in villages or hamlets (**11%**).

The reasons for loneliness are complex but our findings suggest a lack of structured environments like schools could have an impact. **21%** of young people not in school or working are lonely often or always compared to **13%** of those in school. In addition, young people who have ever received free school meals while in education are twice as likely to say they are currently lonely often or always than those who did not (**20%** compared to **10%**), suggesting a link also exists between loneliness and income.

## A wellbeing issue

We asked young people how loneliness affected them and found a number of negative consequences on wellbeing and anxiety.

**70%** of all lonely young people said feeling lonely negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing, while **71%** said it made them more worried or anxious about things. In addition, **61%** said feeling lonely made them less likely to speak up.

However, young people who feel lonely also display positive reactions to their experiences. Three fifths of lonely young people (**61%**) said feeling lonely made them think more about other people's feelings which rises to three quarters (**74%**) of those who are lonely often or always. In addition, **61%** said feeling lonely made them want to help others who may be lonely, too.

## An issue for the loneliest

Our research shows that the impact of loneliness is worse for those who were lonely the most often. More than eight out of 10 young people (**85%**) who feel lonely often or always said loneliness negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing, while **70%** said it made them less able to do schoolwork well / work well. In addition, two thirds of young people (**67%**) who are lonely often or always say feeling lonely makes them less likely to want to help out in their local community compared to **50%** of all lonely young people.

**1.9m** young people are lonely often or always in the UK

**85%** of young people who feel lonely often or always say loneliness negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing



## Young people thinking they're to blame

Of the 2,001 10 to 25-year-olds we spoke to for this survey, just **37%** said they feel confident talking about loneliness. However, this stat is heavily weighted towards younger age groups with **45%** of 10 to 15-year-olds agreeing this was the case compared to **32%** for 16 to 25-year-olds. This is interesting when you consider older age groups are more likely to say loneliness is a 'normal emotion' for their age group. **55%** of 16 to 25-year-olds believe this to be the case compared to **50%** of 10 to 15-year-olds. This suggests that it's young people's pre-conceptions of how others will react rather than their own views on the issue that stops them talking about loneliness.

This self-stigmatisation is backed up when we look at the results of those who are lonely the most often. **49%** of chronically lonely young people say it's your own fault if you feel lonely - three times more than the **14%** of young people who are hardly ever or never lonely. This suggests that the more often a young person feels lonely, the more negatively they project that feeling on to themselves. Gender also has an impact. A quarter (**25%**) of boys and young men say loneliness is something to be embarrassed by compared to **17%** of girls and young women. More than a quarter of boys and young men (**27%**) also say if you feel lonely, it's your own fault, compared to **20%** of girls and young women.

Just  
**37%** of young people say they feel confident talking about loneliness

**25%** of boys and young men say loneliness is something to be embarrassed by

## Working nine to five

Young people in work struggle to talk about loneliness and ask for help, according to our research. Just **28%** of young people currently working say they feel confident talking about loneliness compared to two fifths (**40%**) of young people in school. In addition, **42%** of young people in work would be comfortable asking for help compared to almost half (**49%**) of young people in school. This suggests more needs to be done to support young people in working environments to open up about the issue.

## Free school meals

We also note large differences in feelings of embarrassment or shame around loneliness among young people who have ever received free school meals. As well as being twice as likely to be chronically lonely, **28%** said loneliness was something to be embarrassed by compared to **17%** of young people who've never received free school meals.



## Taking actions makes a difference

Although a high number of young people experience loneliness at least occasionally, they are taking lots of actions to help themselves. Our research shows that many of these actions have a positive impact and the challenge is for young people to find the solutions that work for them.

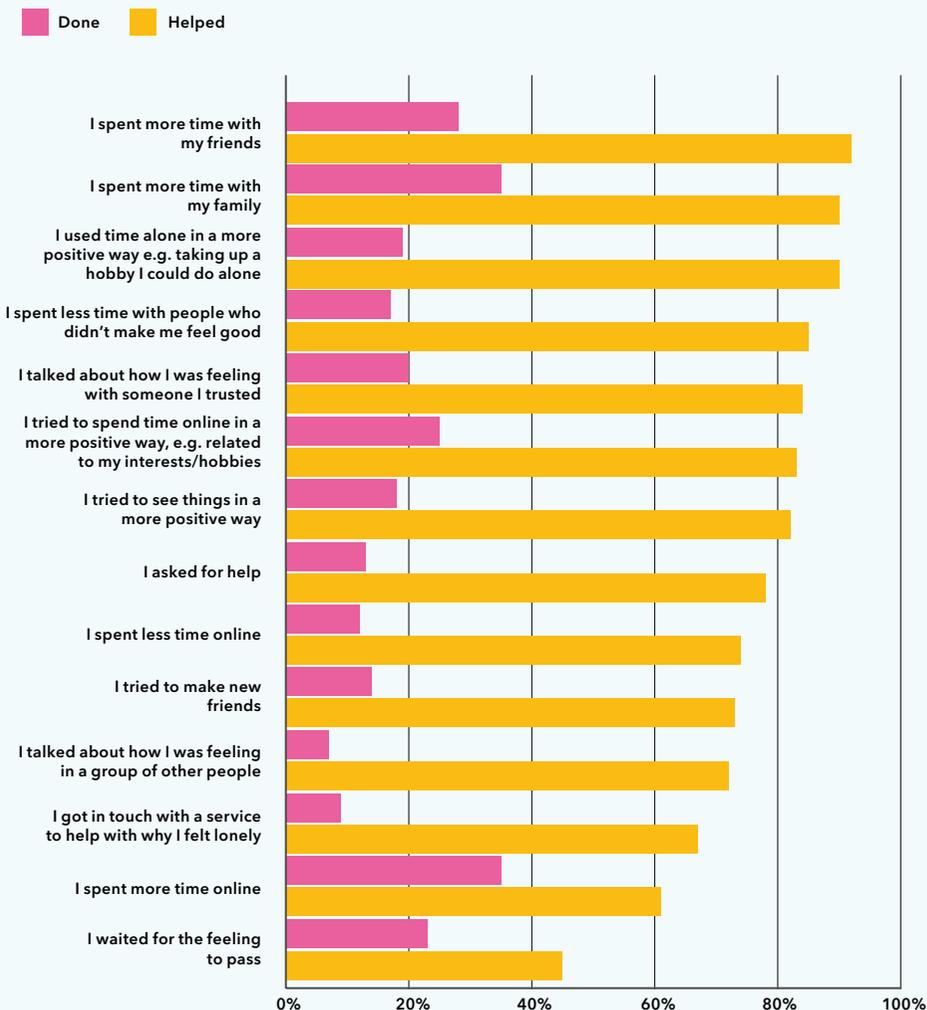
Looking across all ages of young people, **89%** of those who've felt lonely have taken an action that's helped to combat the issue. Most interesting are which actions are most popular and which have the most impact. Two of the most popular options young people take are seemingly really helpful. Spending more time with family is an action taken by **35%** of all lonely young people that **90%** found helpful. In addition, **28%** of lonely young people have spent more time with friends when they felt lonely and **92%** found this helpful.

Other popular but more passive options are much less helpful. This includes spending more time online - which is one of the most popular responses to loneliness but second least helpful - and waiting for the feeling to pass, the fifth most popular response but least helpful, overall. This suggests that proactive actions that give young people a chance to connect with others are most helpful.



When looking at the number of actions young people take to tackle loneliness, there is an interesting rise when you look across different age groups. **56%** of 16 to 25-year-olds have taken three or more actions when they've felt lonely compared to just **45%** of 10 to 15-year-olds. This is contrasted by the impact of these actions across different ages. Just **66%** of 16 to 25-year-olds said trying to make new friends helped to tackle loneliness compared to **86%** of 10 to 15-year-olds. Similarly, **68%** of 16 to 25-year-olds said talking in a group helped compared to **81%** of 10 to 15-year-olds. More research is needed to understand why this may be.

## Actions to tackle loneliness



## Helping young people tackle loneliness

Despite the many difficulties young people face, our research shows they are making real efforts to improve life for themselves. They also remain co-operative and community minded with **79%** having done something to help other lonely young people and even more saying they would be comfortable taking an action. This desire to help others is particularly strong for young people who are lonely at least occasionally. **85%** of this group having taken an action, like supporting a friend who might be lonely, compared to a relatively low **64%** of those who are hardly ever or never lonely.

But while we should celebrate this activity, young people have been clear about what small steps we could all take to help them do even more. When we asked, "What do you think is the most important thing society can do to help young people who have been experiencing feelings of loneliness, as we come out of the pandemic?", a key theme they brought up was to build a kinder and more supportive society where young people could talk about issues like loneliness and where they wouldn't feel fear asking for help. They also said they wanted society to create more awareness about youth loneliness and, in a nod to the long-term impacts of Covid, encourage young people to socialise outside more.

### Lonely Not Alone 2021

Year three of our Lonely Not Alone campaign to tackle the stigma of youth loneliness will launch in late 2021. This year's experience will look to build empathy around youth loneliness so young people who know less about the issue can understand why it's important to help their friends and peers. Read more and get involved at [www.lonelynotalone.org](http://www.lonelynotalone.org)

lonely  
**NOT**  
**ALONE**

As Co-op's charity, led by our co-operative values of solidarity and caring for others, we feel well placed to help deliver on this and to empower young people to take the lead. Our Lonely Not Alone campaign is one small step but our experience tells us we achieve more when we work together. That's why we look forward to continuing to work with other funders and government to support young people to tackle loneliness, break down stigma and improve wellbeing.



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

