

youthunited



Being Connected

Improving mental health and wellbeing by tackling the experiences of youth loneliness.

Executive Summary

The Youth United Foundation Network

The Youth United Foundation (YUF) was established in 2009 by HRH The Prince of Wales in order to provide every young person, nationwide, with the opportunity to join a uniformed youth organisation, regardless of their ethnic or economic background.

It brings together leading uniformed youth organisations in the UK. Collectively the Foundation's Network works directly with over 1.5 million young people, with waiting lists exceeding 180,000 children and young people. The Network members are:



The purpose of this report

This report aims to enhance understanding of the relationship between uniformed youth organisations and loneliness, mental health and wellbeing.

It is based on a review of existing research on mental health, wellbeing and loneliness, for both young people and adult volunteers. It also includes an analysis of current practices within uniformed youth organisations, in relation to addressing the mental health, wellbeing and loneliness of young participants and adult volunteers.

Accompanying this report is youth-led research produced by members of the Youth United Foundation Youth Panel, which examines direct experiences of loneliness within uniformed youth organisations.

Defining Youth Loneliness

Loneliness is 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have and those that we want.'

Loneliness has been described as the ‘social equivalent of physical pain’.

Experiences of loneliness is a normal part of human development. The feelings and responses we have to feeling lonely change over time and as we mature. However for some young people loneliness can be an ever-intensifying state, where they feel increasingly isolated, distant and outside of relationships with their peers, families and communities they live in.

Young people are amongst the most lonely group in our society. By the age of 18, almost a third of young people experience feelings of loneliness some of the time.

Loneliness is different from social isolation. Young people can feel incredibly lonely even when we think they are socially connected, or very sociable. It is possible for a young person to feel lonely even when they are surrounded by people they call ‘friends’. This ‘in-group loneliness’ arises where someone’s own life experiences, values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings are not recognised, or do not resonate, with their peers or adults around them.

Youth loneliness is common

By the age of 18 years, 23–31% of people report experiencing feelings of loneliness some of the time, with 5–7% reporting feeling them often. Even children as young as 5 years old have expressed an appreciation for, and sense of, what it is to be lonely, though loneliness peaks at 10–12 years old.



2 in 3 young people believe that youth loneliness is a problem for people their age



1 in 5 young people believe that loneliness is taken seriously as a social issue

It can be hard to talk about loneliness

Talking about our experiences of loneliness can feel really difficult, because we fear rejection, that we might not be understood, or that we will be judged for the ways we think or behave. Peer interactions focus on a sense of belonging and commonality, so feeling lonely is stigmatised amongst young people.

Young people often associate being lonely as something to be ashamed of, something that is their fault, and something that they fear will get worse if they were to tell others. So, whilst many young people may be aware of their loneliness, it is not something they readily voice or discuss.



1 in 10 young people feel confident about talking about loneliness.



8 in 10 young people say that the fear of people's reactions stops them talking about loneliness

When young people feel lonely they may develop an inability to feel pleasure from social activities and may withdraw from connecting with others. This forms a cycle of loneliness. This cycle can be exacerbated for children and young people who have also experienced adversity, trauma or relational difficulties in their lives. The cycle of loneliness, once initiated, can strengthen and intensify feelings of loneliness, and result in isolating the young person even more. When we are caught in a cycle of loneliness it becomes even harder to reach out for connection and talk about the experiences we are going through.

Factors influencing the experience of loneliness

Our experience of loneliness can be affected by:

- ▶ Our identity
- ▶ The societies and cultures we live in
- ▶ Life events, stages or experiences
- ▶ The ways we relate and are treated by our friends and family
- ▶ Our own personal thoughts, emotions and feelings

Loneliness in childhood and youth is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon varying in intensity, causes and circumstances. Risk factors for experiencing loneliness include:

- ▶ **Social belonging:** those who do not feel that they belong in their neighbourhood, who never talk to their neighbours or where they feel they have been activity rejected by their community or peer group.
- ▶ **Life circumstances:** those who grow up in environments, or have experiences, that are emotionally distressing and create the foundations for mental ill health and poor wellbeing in young adulthood.
- ▶ **Peer relationships:** those who experience in-group loneliness, which can be heightened by whether or not a young person is accepted by their peer group for who they are, and the way they act and/or think.

Children living in relative poverty are almost twice as likely to feel lonely as other children.

- ▶ **Familial factors:** those who live in families with lower levels of cohesion, attachment, attunement, and hope.
- ▶ **Economic factors:** those who live in community and familial poverty, scarcity and precarity, which can have a detrimental effect on opportunities to make connections and avoid loneliness feelings.
- ▶ **Personal characteristics:** those who feel lonely as a result of their actual or perceived differences to those around them; including their sexuality, ethnicity, gender and disability status. These are factors can lead to both bullying and victimisation, though paradoxically can also building a sense of belonging.

The impact of loneliness on the lives of young people

Studies have clearly shown that experiencing loneliness in childhood and adolescence can have an enduring impact on young people's social, economic, physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood. It can increase the risk of:

- ▶ mental health problems and emotional distress.
- ▶ poorer physical health and living with physical health conditions.
- ▶ dying younger than would otherwise be expected.

Loneliness can be a cause, symptom and contributing factor to mental health problems and vice versa.

The role of Uniformed Youth Organisations

Evidence shows that uniformed group activities can give young people the resources and skills they need to feel connected and valued. For example, uniformed group programmes in schools have been shown to have positive wellbeing outcomes, including a rise in levels of children's and young people's empathy, resilience, collaboration and career aspirations. More widely, youth participation enhances character-formation, and increases self-esteem.

Uniformed youth organisations can have a positive impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

As well as benefits during childhood and adolescence, participation in uniformed youth organisations may have a protective effect on participants. Analysis from an ongoing cohort study of people born in the UK in a single week in 1958 found that, even when controlling for early life factors, those who were members of the Scouts/Guides have better mental health in later life than their non-attending peers. These positive effects appeared particularly strong for children growing up in low social position households, ameliorating inequalities in later life probability of mental health based on childhood socioeconomic position.

There are also benefits for the mental health and wellbeing of many thousands of adult volunteers who support uniformed youth organisations, with studies showing volunteering

can provide important social connectivity and social capital benefits. Other evidence suggests that volunteering may be more strongly associated with enhanced mental wellbeing, and that this grows with age.

Young researchers findings

Young Researchers from the Youth United Foundation Youth Panel explored two themes.

1. Adult Volunteers' response to supporting young people experiencing loneliness:
 - ▶ Adult volunteers have a mixed understanding of mental health and loneliness
 - ▶ They are keen to listen and want to help children and young people get the support they need, especially if they are struggling with feeling lonely or their mental health.
 - ▶ Some volunteers are more happy to talk about these issues with older teenagers, but will also talk with young people, especially if they have had training.
 - ▶ Even if they think they might struggle to talk about these issues, adult volunteers often have other volunteers they could speak with or get help from.
 - ▶ Many would like specific training in mental health and loneliness.
2. The impact of rank on mental health, loneliness and wellbeing:
 - ▶ Young people seem to join uniformed youth organisations for lots of different reasons not just to get a rank
 - ▶ Rank was important to many young people and helped them gain a sense of respect and to try new things.
 - ▶ Rank positions opens lots of opportunities and that is really valuable.
 - ▶ Sometimes the process of promotion is not always seen as fair and open to everyone.
 - ▶ Sometimes going up a rank can separate people from friends, but this could be both good and challenging for them.
 - ▶ Sometimes people misuse their rank and we need to make sure this was not common or gets out of hand.

Addressing loneliness in youth organisations

Based on this review and research, we propose a set of characteristics that youth organisations activities could adopt in order to address experiences of youth loneliness, and the two-way relationships with mental health and wellbeing.

These characteristics are not exhaustive, nor aimed to be mutually reinforcing and overlapping. Rather, they are the likely hallmarks of a youth organisation which is loneliness-informed, and promotes positive mental health and wellbeing.

1. Take a developmental approach
2. Promote peer-acceptance
3. Build a sense of belonging
4. Provide supportive relationships and inclusive spaces
5. Are mental health and wellbeing-informed
6. Enable managed risk-taking with safety and care

7. Adopt an adversity-informed response to behaviour that challenges
8. Actively avoid activities, cultures and behaviours that are more likely to perpetuate cycles of loneliness and mental distress
9. Tackle the causes of loneliness and social isolation

How Uniformed Youth Organisations can address loneliness

At their best, Uniformed youth Organisation activities, and the relationships they facilitate, can play a positive role in responding to loneliness, enhancing mental health and promoting wellbeing amongst young people and adult volunteers.

Key priorities for going forward should include:

1. Placing children's, young people's and adult's mental health in clear parity with physical health. They should proactively seek to strengthen action which builds positive mental health and supports wellbeing.
2. Emphasising the building of stronger foundations, which benefit all, ensuring that current good practice is shared and enhanced. There should be a shared aim for a consistent high-quality wellbeing informed approach as the norm for all participants and volunteers.
3. Increasing collaboration between uniformed youth organisations, especially in terms of building awareness of mental health issues and training for volunteers in core skills to build supportive and attuned relationships with participants.
4. Investing in new and improved methods to better capture and report what is being achieved and what elements of the ways uniformed youth organisations are working are especially impactful on the wellbeing and wider development of young people and adult volunteers.

