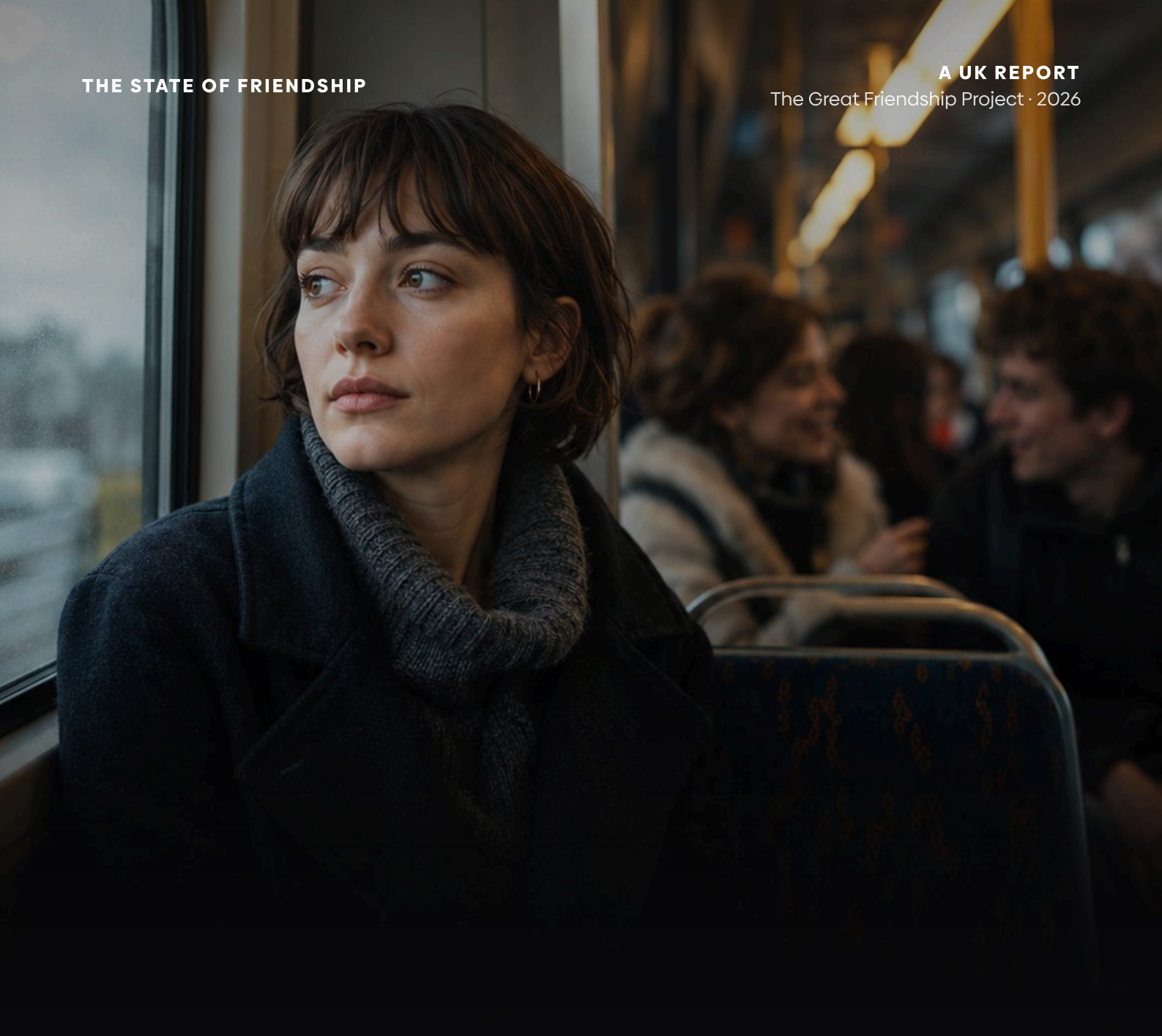




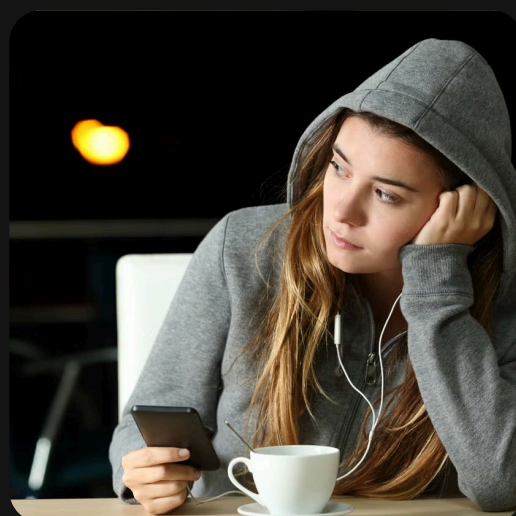
YOUTH LONELINESS & THE FRIENDSHIP RECESSION

The State of Friendship.

Why the youngest people in Britain are also its loneliest. Friendship is retreating from daily life, from work, and from the places it used to be made. This report sets out what is happening and what must change.

CONTENTS

- 01** **The loneliest generation**
- 02** **The friendship recession**
- 03** **Where friendship is failing**
- 04** **Connection without closeness**
- 05** **The rise of the AI companion**
- 06** **Men and friendship**
- 07** **Out of work, out of touch**
- 08** **Work no longer works as a friendship factory**
- 09** **Why friendship matters**
- 10** **The cost of disconnection**
- 11** **Voices from #TheLonelyMillion**
- 12** **What friendship actually needs**
- 13** **What must change**



The State of Friendship draws together the best available evidence on loneliness, social connection and friendship among young people. Its foundation is UK data: the ONS, DCMS-commissioned research, the Campaign to End Loneliness, the BACP, the Marmalade Trust and The Great Friendship Project's own #TheLonelyMillion findings. Every figure is labelled UK or US at the point of use. All figures are quoted from named public sources, listed in full at the back.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Friendship is in recession - and the young are paying most.

Four shifts define the state of friendship in 2026.

First, the age profile of loneliness has inverted. **16-to-29-year-olds are roughly twice as likely to feel chronically lonely as the over-70s**, and two-thirds now feel lonely at least once a week.

Second, time itself is draining out of friendship. US time-use data shows **daily time with friends has more than halved in twenty years**.

Third, the places that used to make friendship are producing less of it: youth clubs, affordable nights out, and above all the workplace.

Fourth, the substitutes are arriving faster than the fixes. **One in four young UK adults now finds it easier to talk to an AI than to a person.**

Young adults are being priced out, designed out and crowded out of the places where friendship is made. And because friendship protects mental health, physical health, education and employment, this is not just a private sadness but a public problem. The recommendations at the end of this report are addressed to the people who can begin to fix it.

67%

of UK 18-29-year-olds feel lonely at least once a week.²⁰

31%

of 16-29s feel lonely always, often or some of the time, against 16% of over-70s.¹

-57%

daily time with friends over twenty years: from 60 minutes a day to 26 (US time-use data).⁸

1 in 4

young UK adults say talking to an AI chatbot feels easier than talking to a real person.²⁰

70%

of 16-24s say loneliness negatively affects their mental health.³⁵

1 in 10

Britons say they have no close friends at all.⁵



01 The loneliest generation

For decades, loneliness was framed as a condition of old age. The first official statistics upended that assumption: when the ONS began measuring loneliness in 2016-17, **the loneliest age group in the country was not the retired but the young.**

That finding has been repeated in official releases since, and in the BBC Loneliness Experiment, the largest survey of its kind. What looked like an anomaly is now the most consistent pattern in the national data.

The pandemic raised the water level, and it has not gone back down: millions of people in Great Britain now live with chronic loneliness, well above the pre-2020 share. As the chart below shows, the burden falls heaviest at the start of adult life and lightens with age, the precise inverse of the stereotype.

The numbers also hide the texture of the experience. This is not the loneliness of empty rooms. Most lonely young adults are surrounded by people, at university, at work and online, yet **nearly half say home is where the feeling bites hardest.**²⁰ It is a loneliness of thin connection rather than absent company: plenty of contact, too little closeness.

It is also deepening by the year. Young adults report feeling lonelier than they did twelve months ago, and most believe their generation carries more of it than any before.²⁰

FIG. 1 - CHRONIC LONELINESS BY AGE:
LONELY OFTEN OR ALWAYS



Campaign to End Loneliness analysis of ONS OPN data.³
Bar widths proportional.

74% sometimes feel lonely even when surrounded by others.²⁰

Who is hit hardest - and who stays silent.

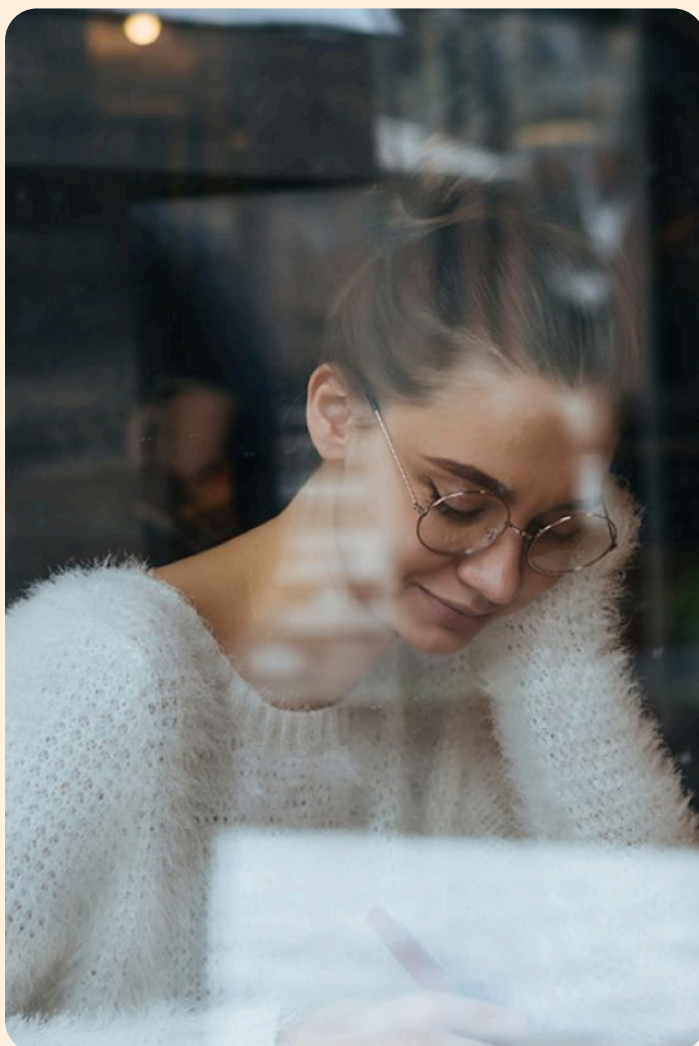
Within the headline figures, some groups fare worse still. Young women report markedly higher loneliness than young men: **49% of 18-24-year-old women feel lonely some or all of the time**, against 29% of the general population.

Loneliness is consistently higher among young people on low incomes, renters and LGBTQ+ young people, and nearly one in five 18-29s feel unsafe or unwelcome in public spaces.

Students are a particular concern: **70% of students living in UK university halls feel lonely or isolated**, and 44% find it hard to make friends where they live.³³

The barriers are practical as well as emotional. 36% of 16-34s say a lack of confidence stops them making new friends, and 21% simply do not know how or where to make them.³⁴

There is a deep reluctance to name it. Young adults will more readily admit to anxiety than to loneliness. Government research finds that 18-24s are at the highest risk of all, yet the least likely to do anything about it, so whatever the surveys capture, the real picture is almost certainly worse.



49%

of women aged 18-24 feel lonely some or all of the time - vs 29% of the general population.⁵

70%

of students living in UK university halls feel lonely or isolated.³³

45%

would rather admit to feeling anxious than to feeling lonely.²⁰

02 The friendship recession

Loneliness statistics tell us how people feel. Time-use data tells us what they actually do, and it describes a quiet collapse in the practice of friendship. The richest evidence comes from the American Time Use Survey, the world's most detailed time-diary study.

Two decades ago, people spent an average of 60 minutes a day with friends. **By 2023 that had fallen to 26 minutes.** The decline hit every age group, but it was steepest for teenagers, who now spend about a third of the time socialising with friends that teenagers did twenty years ago. The decline predates the pandemic: friend time was already falling sharply through the 2010s, and time spent alone rose over the same period.

The circle is shrinking as well as the hours. Since 1990, the share of US adults reporting no close friends has **quadrupled to 12%**, and UK polling echoes it, with one in ten Britons reporting no close friends at all. And the retreat starts young: among 11-to-18-year-olds in England, 48% now spend most of their free time in their bedroom, and 16% spend most of it alone.²⁹

The vacated hours have not disappeared. They have been reallocated. The same time-diary data shows the fall in socialising mirrored by a rise in solo screen leisure: streaming, scrolling and gaming alone now absorb the evenings that once belonged to friends. And because staying in is cheaper than going out, every economic pressure on young adults pushes in the same direction.



-57%

daily time spent with friends, 2003-2023 (US) - from an hour a day to 26 minutes.⁸

The stakes are long-term: in a 30-year longitudinal study, how much people socialised in their twenties predicted the quality of their relationships and their psychological wellbeing at midlife.¹⁰ A generation averaging under half an hour a day is running a deficit it may feel for decades.

FIG. 2 - MINUTES/DAY WITH FRIENDS, ALL ADULTS (US)



American Time Use Survey.⁸

FIG. 3 - DAILY SOCIALISING, AGES 15-24 (US)



The steepest decline of any age group.⁹

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling - it harms both individual and societal health."

Dr Vivek Murthy - US Surgeon General, advisory on loneliness and isolation, 2023¹⁹

03 Where friendship is failing

The paradox that the most digitally connected generation in history is also the loneliest dissolves once you look at how young adult life has changed. Five structural forces are working together, and each one removes a place or a habit where friendship used to be made. Young people feel the result as exclusion: 28% of Generation Z say they do not feel connected to a community, and among those experiencing loneliness, 49% identify a lack of social opportunities as the principal reason.³²

1

Priced out of a social life. 68% of 18-30s have cut back on going out because of the economic climate; 61% go out less than a year ago. When money is tight, the first spending to go is the kind that maintains friendships.¹³

2

The disappearing third space. Youth clubs, community venues and affordable social spaces have declined sharply; nightclubs and pubs are closing. The result: 37% of young people say they do not have opportunities to meet new people and make friends.²⁹

3

Connection without contact. Digital communication increasingly substitutes for, rather than supplements, in-person relationships, and the plans that anchor friendship are easier than ever to call off.

4

A decade of transitions. Ages 16-29 are a conveyor belt of upheaval: leaving school, starting university, first jobs, new cities. Each move resets a social network and forces friendship to be rebuilt from scratch.

5

Stigma at the wrong age. Loneliness carries a particular shame when you are young and "supposed" to be thriving, so the highest-risk group is also the least likely to seek help.¹⁵



87%

of 18-30s believe young people have fewer opportunities to connect, build confidence and be creative than previous generations, and more than half blame a lack of safe community spaces.³⁰

04 Connection without closeness

Young adults communicate with friends more than any generation before them, through group chats that never sleep, voice notes, streaks and passive awareness of a hundred lives. What has thinned out is not contact but closeness: the sustained, private, mutual disclosure that turns contact into friendship.

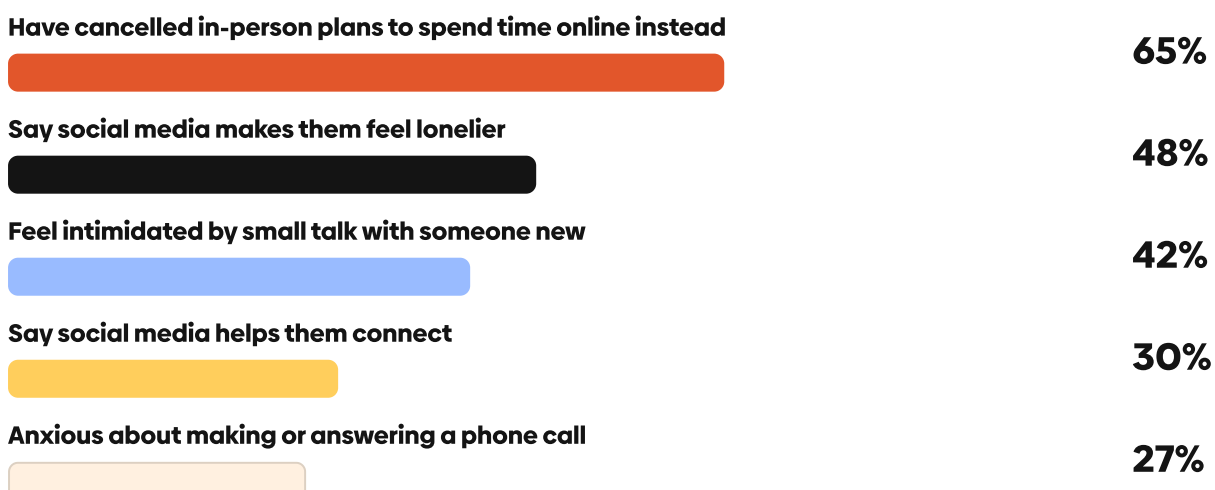
The UK evidence suggests the trade is not working. **Almost half of 18-29s say social media makes them feel lonelier**, against 30% who feel it helps them connect, and one in three young women put their loneliness down to comparing themselves with others online. Meanwhile the effortful channels are atrophying: many now find small talk intimidating and a phone call quietly stressful, and even entertainment isolates by design, as

algorithmic feeds replace the shared viewing that once gave friends something in common to talk about.

Gaming shows both sides of the ledger. As physical third spaces close, much of young social life has migrated into games: US research finds 72% of teen gamers regularly play multiplayer, mostly with friends known offline and online, and four in ten Britons name gaming as their preferred way to socialise.¹⁷

For many, and especially for young men, gaming communities are a genuine lifeline. But frequent gaming correlates with loneliness when it replaces in-person contact rather than adding to it.¹⁶ The distinction that matters is not screen versus no screen. It is whether time online converts into relationships that exist anywhere else.

FIG. 4 - DIGITAL LIFE AND DISCONNECTION, UK 18-29S



Marmalade Trust / Loneliness Awareness Week survey, 2026.²⁰

05 The rise of the AI companion

The newest force reshaping young friendship did not exist five years ago, and it is no longer only an American story. In the UK, **one in four 18-29-year-olds say talking to an AI chatbot feels easier than talking to a real person.**²⁰

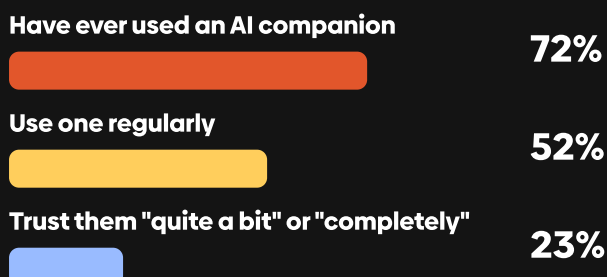
46% of 16-24s have used AI instead of speaking to a real person about their mental health, including 31% who used it instead of talking to a friend.³⁵ Among 11-to-18-year-olds, 39% have turned to AI for advice, support or company, yet only 6% trust an AI more than a real person.²⁹

The US data shows where this is heading. Common Sense Media's nationally representative survey found that **72% of American teenagers had used an AI companion**, and 52% were regular users. A third of US teen users have chosen to discuss important or serious matters with an AI companion instead of a real person; nearly a quarter trust them "quite a bit" or "completely". Common Sense Media concluded the products are unsuitable for under-18s.

There is one hopeful number: **80% of US teen users still spend more time with real friends than with chatbots**, and say those friendships matter more. That is the window, and it is closing. Right now AI is mostly a supplement to human connection, but the design of these products pulls the other way: they are built to be endlessly available, agreeable and attentive, exactly what makes them easy to lean on when a real friendship feels like hard work.

The distinction that matters is between supplement and substitute. Used alongside real relationships, AI companions appear largely benign; used in their place, during the years when the skills of friendship are still forming, the risks are much less understood.

FIG. 5 - TEENAGERS AND AI COMPANIONS, 2025 (US, 13-17)



Common Sense Media / NORC, n=1,060 US teens, 2025.¹¹
Pew finds ~two-thirds of US teens use AI chatbots.¹²

"AI companions are emerging at a time when kids and teens have never felt more alone."

James P. Steyer - Founder & CEO, Common Sense Media¹¹

1 in 4

young UK adults find talking to an AI easier than talking to a real person.²⁰





06 Men and friendship

On the headline measures, young women report more loneliness than young men. But a large research literature suggests men's numbers hide as much as they show. Analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found men were less likely than women to say they were lonely even when scoring identically on indirect loneliness scales. Men under-report the word, not the experience. New DCMS-commissioned research on boys and young men in England reaches the same conclusion: because of stigma, loneliness in this group is likely underestimated, even though around half experience it at least occasionally.

The structure of male friendship differs in well-documented ways. Men's friendships are more often built "shoulder to shoulder", around shared activity and in groups, where women's are more often sustained "face to face", through one-to-one conversation and disclosure. Men communicate with friends less between meetings, disclose less when they do, and rely more heavily on a romantic partner as their primary or only confidant, which makes their support networks brittle when relationships end.

The stakes are severe. **Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 in the UK, and men account for around three-quarters of all suicides.**²⁸ Disconnected young men are also more likely to lean on alcohol and drugs to cope, and are prime targets for online communities that monetise isolation, offering belonging first and radicalisation second.

The friendship deficit is measurable: loneliness is three times higher among young men with few or no friends, and chronic loneliness affects 21% of young men who see friends less than once a week.²¹ The same research identifies what protects: friendship and family support, and taking part in clubs, societies or community groups.

FIG. 6 - US MEN REPORTING NO CLOSE FRIENDS AT ALL



Survey Center on American Life, 2021.²²

1 in 3

young men (16-25) with mental distress reported chronic loneliness, against 6% without.²¹

Clubs protect

Young men in clubs, societies or community groups were less likely to report feeling lonely.²¹

07 Out of work, out of touch

Close to one million young people in the UK, roughly one in eight 16-to-24-year-olds, are not in education, employment or training.

For a young adult, a job or a course is not just income and prospects. It is the main daily source of structure, contact and belonging. Losing it, or never getting it, removes all three at once.

The loneliness data reflects that. ONS analysis consistently finds unemployed adults report higher loneliness than those in work, and youth-focused research such as the King's Trust Youth Index finds young people outside education

and work report markedly lower wellbeing, confidence and social connection than their peers. 18% of young adults say loneliness has affected their studies, and 16% believe it has hindered their career prospects.²⁰

The two problems feed each other. Isolation erodes the confidence, networks and everyday social practice that finding work depends on; unemployment then deepens the isolation. Most job opportunities travel through networks, the classic finding on "weak ties", so the young person with no connections is disadvantaged twice.²⁵



~1 in 8

16-24-year-olds in the UK are not in education, employment or training.²³

16%

of 18-29s believe loneliness has hindered their career prospects.²⁰

A two-way street

Unemployment deepens isolation; isolation erodes the networks that finding work depends on.

08 Work no longer works as a friendship factory

For most of the twentieth century, the workplace was where adult friendship was made: repeated, unforced contact with the same people, a shared task, and the slack time around it, the commute, the lunch, the after-work drink.

That machinery has been quietly dismantled. Hybrid and remote working have stripped out informal encounters, colleagues are spread across schedules and locations, and a growing share of young people work gig, freelance or insecure jobs with no stable colleagues at all.

The people entering this thinner workplace are precisely those who need it most. Older workers brought established networks into remote work;

younger workers arrive with none, and must build first professional relationships over video calls. One in five UK workers now feels lonely during a typical working day. Among workers aged 16-24 the figure rises to 38% who feel lonely or isolated because of their working circumstances, against 24% of workers overall.³¹ A third of 18-34-year-olds say loneliness at work has taken a toll on their mental health.²⁷

The business cost is measurable. Loneliness shows up as overworking, reluctance to ask for help, withdrawal from colleagues, higher absenteeism, lost focus and a drop in the quality of work. Young people have noticed what they are missing: **45% of Generation Z workers are considering jobs that provide greater social interaction.**³¹

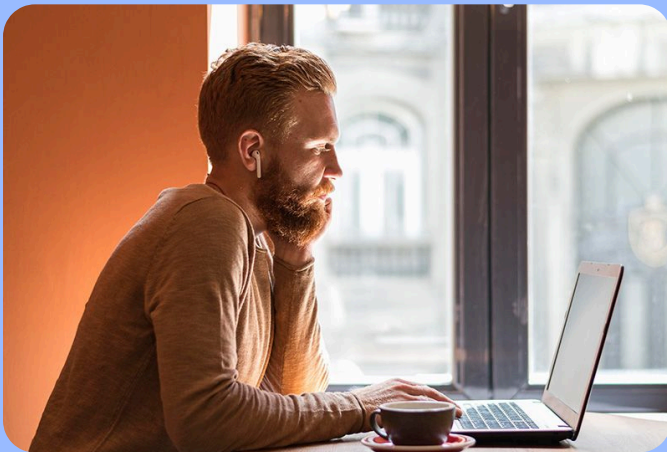
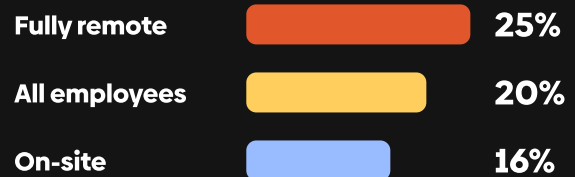


FIG. 7 - DAILY LONELINESS BY WORK LOCATION



Gallup, State of the Global Workplace, 2024.²⁴

59%

of young workers wouldn't feel confident telling a colleague they were struggling with loneliness.²⁷

48%

say loneliness makes them less likely to want to progress in their careers.³⁶

62%

say loneliness at work makes them lose confidence in themselves.³⁶

09 Why friendship matters

The case for friendship is not sentimental. It is one of the most consistent findings in social science. Large-scale evidence reviews find people with strong social relationships have a **roughly 50% higher likelihood of survival** over a given period than those without,¹⁸ and the Harvard Study of Adult Development, running since 1938, concludes that the quality of people's relationships is the strongest predictor of health and happiness in later life.²⁵



Mental health & resilience

Confiding relationships protect against depression and anxiety and buffer stressful life events; recovery from adversity is faster with social support.

Physical health & ageing

Connection is associated with lower risks of cardiovascular disease, dementia and premature mortality, and these habits compound over a lifetime.^{18,25}

Life satisfaction

Satisfaction with personal relationships is among the strongest correlates of overall life satisfaction in ONS wellbeing data.

Education

Belonging predicts attendance, engagement and attainment; 18% of young UK adults say loneliness has affected their studies.²⁰

Employment & opportunity

Most opportunities travel through networks, the "strength of weak ties", so friendship is economic infrastructure too.²⁵

Crisis prevention

Close friends are usually the first to notice when something is wrong, and the most likely to nudge a young person into support before a problem becomes a crisis.

Friendship is preventative health infrastructure, an educational input and an economic asset. It should be funded, measured and designed like one.

10 The cost of disconnection

If friendship delivers all of the above, its absence exacts the mirror-image price. Large-scale evidence reviews have associated weak social relationships with a significantly increased risk of premature mortality, an effect sometimes compared in scale with established health risks such as smoking.¹⁸

The relationship with mental health is bidirectional and strong: loneliness predicts depression, and depression deepens loneliness. Among young people the link is starkest of all: **one in four 16-29s reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms**, against 8% of the over-70s. Counsellors see the same damage first-hand: BACP practitioners report loneliness presenting as anxiety, low confidence and disrupted sleep long before young clients name it as loneliness.⁴

The costs compound over a lifetime, in GP visits, mental health care, lost productivity and early exits from education and work. And because socialising in your twenties predicts friendship quality at midlife, today's deficit is tomorrow's isolation, and young people themselves see it coming.

At national scale the sums are substantial. In the UK, loneliness is estimated to cost employers around **£2.5 billion a year**, of which £1.62 billion is staff turnover alone.²⁶ In the United States, the annual cost of loneliness and isolation to the economy has been put at **\$406 billion** once healthcare, lost productivity and turnover are counted together.³⁸

FIG. 8 - MODERATE-TO-SEVERE DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS, BY AGE

16-29-year-olds



Over-70s



ONS Opinions & Lifestyle Survey, April 2025.¹¹⁴ Bar widths proportional.

72%

of 16-25s say loneliness harms their mental health and wellbeing.⁴

3×

depressive symptoms are roughly three times as common among 16-29s as among over-70s.¹⁴

58%

of 18-29s worry loneliness will be even worse for Generation Alpha.²⁰

11 Voices from #TheLonelyMillion

As part of our #TheLonelyMillion campaign, we invited young adults to complete a self-assessment exploring their experiences of friendship, belonging and loneliness. The findings reveal that loneliness is rarely just about being alone: it is a layered experience shaped by difficulty making friends, feeling part of a community, forming emotionally close relationships, and having people to turn to when support is needed.

The pattern is consistent and stark. A clear majority struggle at every layer, from first contact to deep connection to reaching out for help. Increasing social contact alone will not fix it; young adults need relationships in which they feel noticed, accepted and able to be themselves.



FINDING FRIENDSHIP IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

79%

often or always struggle to make new friends, as the chances to form them shrink once education ends.

A CRISIS OF BELONGING

79%

often or always feel they lack a community, group or social circle to belong to.

KNOWN, BUT NOT DEEPLY KNOWN

78%

feel nobody really knows the “real” them.

STRUGGLING TO REACH OUT

71%

feel unable to reach out to anyone when they need support.

In their own words

We asked young adults to finish one sentence: **"Loneliness is..."** Their answers say more than any statistic, and they describe the same layered experience: lost community, missing closeness, and a quiet ache that a crowded room does nothing to lift.

"...coming home after a tough day at work, and having no-one there to ask how your day was."

"...when your community disappears overnight, when you leave university and everyone moves home."

"...going to the market to buy something, not because you need it but just to have a reason to talk to someone."

"...moving away from everyone you love for the first time, sitting in a new flat missing the comfort of familiar faces."

"...a quiet, persistent presence that follows you even into a crowded room."

"...a hollowness within you that feels like there's nobody interested in your inner life."

"...endless empty days, waking up with a whole weekend ahead and no idea how to fill it."

"...feeling like you're not part of anything, like the world is happening without you."

"...struggling to find your place after education, feeling left behind and invisible as you look for jobs."

12 What friendship actually needs

Decades of research on how friendships form point to a short list of conditions, the same ones sociologists identified in the 1950s and that every successful club, team and congregation has stumbled into since: proximity (the same people, physically together), repetition (unplanned, regular contact over time), and a setting that lets guards drop. **Friendship is built by showing up repeatedly in the same place, not by single introductions.**

That is what "social infrastructure" means in practice: not campaigns or apps, but the physical settings that make repeated, low-stakes contact automatic, such as clubs, classes, teams, choirs, volunteering and affordable venues.

Shared activity matters especially. It gives an evening a script, removes the pressure of "networking", and, as the evidence on men's friendship shows, it is how a large share of the population prefers to connect.

Young people name the same things. The most popular answer on what would rebuild connection was **more free and welcoming spaces to meet face-to-face (37%)**, ahead of better access to mental health support (33%) and stricter social media rules (22%).²⁰ The appetite is there: 49% say time together in person is what makes them feel most connected,²⁹ and 92% of the few who attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives.²⁹



Proximity

The same people, physically together, in a place that is easy and affordable to reach.

Repetition

Regular, expected contact. Weekly rhythms beat one-off events, every time.

Shared activity

Something to do together, so connection forms sideways, without pressure or performance.

13 What must change

Youth loneliness is a structural problem, and it needs structural answers. We make five calls to action, the five pillars of a national response, each with the institutions that must lead it.

PILLAR 1 · NATIONAL GOVERNMENT & THE NHS

Recognise social health as a core pillar of health. Hardwire loneliness prevention into the key health agendas, including the 10-Year Health Plan, mental-health strategy and social prescribing, with young adults, the loneliest age group, named as a priority cohort rather than an afterthought.

PILLAR 2 · LOCAL AUTHORITIES & PLANNERS

Foster connected communities. Appoint local loneliness champions, and embed social-connection principles into the design and planning of all new housing, public spaces and transport, investing in promising interventions and protecting the community spaces where young adults can meet.

PILLAR 3 · GOVERNMENT & EMPLOYERS

Drive productivity by tackling workplace loneliness. Incorporate loneliness support into national employment agendas and workplace frameworks, with onboarding designed for young and remote starters and social time treated as legitimate work, and measure it with the same seriousness as absence and retention.

PILLAR 4 · GOVERNMENT, REGULATORS & TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

Future-proof young people's social health. Proactively address digital harms, with age-appropriate design standards and safeguards for AI companions, and ensure emerging technologies and AI are harnessed to strengthen human connection rather than substitute for it.

PILLAR 5 · GOVERNMENT, FUNDERS & MEDIA

Destigmatise loneliness. Fund coordinated national awareness campaigns and education programmes with a unified narrative and a shared language, led by young adults' lived experience, so the age group at highest risk of loneliness is no longer the one least able to say so and seek help.

The friendship recession is reversible. Loneliness at 22 is not a life sentence. It is a design flaw in how we have built young adult life, and design flaws can be fixed.



About The Great Friendship Project

The Great Friendship Project is an award-winning, youth-led organisation tackling loneliness and strengthening social connection among young adults. We combine welcoming, affordable community activities with national awareness campaigns, pioneering research, policy advocacy and cross-sector partnerships to change how friendship is supported and how loneliness is understood.

Since 2021, we have delivered more than 700 activities and built a community of over 60,000 young adults. Our work has been featured by the BBC, The Independent, the Evening Standard and media outlets worldwide, and recognised by One Young World as one of the world's leading youth-led organisations tackling loneliness. Grounded in lived experience and strengthened by academic research, we believe friendship should be treated not as a luxury, but as essential public health infrastructure.

This report is part of that mission: to put the national evidence on youth loneliness in one place, and to make the case to funders, policymakers, employers and communities for treating friendship as something we build on purpose, together.

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29. OnSide / YouGov, Generation Isolation, 2025 (n=5,035, ages 11-18, England): 34% report high or very high loneliness; 37% lack opportunities to meet new people; 48% spend most free time in their bedroom (16% alone); 76% mostly on screens; 39% have turned to AI for advice, support or company (6% trust AI more than a person); 49% have had a negative online friendship experience; 12% attend a youth centre, of whom 92% say it made a positive difference. onside.org.uk
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33. Opinium for PFP Students, 2025 (UK students): 70% of students living in university halls feel lonely or isolated; 44% find it difficult to make friends in their accommodation. pfpcapital.com
34. Ipsos / JOE Media, 2025: 36% of 16-34s say a lack of confidence prevents them from making new friends; 21% do not know how or where to make them. ipsos.com
35. BACP / YouGov, 2026: 70% of 16-24s say loneliness negatively affects their mental health; 46% have used AI instead of speaking to a real person about their mental health, including 31% instead of talking to a friend. bACP.co.uk
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38. US analyses of the economic burden of loneliness and social isolation: the annual cost to the US economy has been estimated at \$406 billion, combining healthcare spending, lost productivity and staff turnover.

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