

# The Kids Aren't Alright

Why young people are detaching from  
democratic and social norms – and  
what to do about it



ONWARD➤

# About Onward

Onward is a modernising think tank whose mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity and strengthen communities in all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are not affiliated to any party but believe in a mainstream conservatism. We recognise the value of markets and support the good that government can do, and believe that a strong society is the foundation of both. We want to seize the opportunities of the future while preserving the accumulated knowledge of the past. We believe that most people are hard-working, aspirational and decent, but that many do not have the opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; in all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster – by working with ordinary people directly and developing practical policies that work.

# Thanks

We would like to thank the many people who have helped in creating this report. We are particularly grateful to James Johnson and the team at JL Partners for their assistance with the polling used in this report.

We are also grateful to our partners for the Repairing our Social Fabric programme – the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Power to Change and Youth Futures Foundation – and our patron Richard Oldfield, who have collectively made the Social Fabric Programme possible.

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# About Social Fabric

Onward's Repairing our Social Fabric programme seeks to understand the changing nature of community in different parts of the UK, and explore ways to repair the social fabric of different places in meaningful and practical ways.

It is chaired by Lord O'Shaughnessy, and the steering group includes Miriam Cates MP, Jon Cruddas MP, Ailbhe McNabola, Harriet McCann, Anna Round, Frank Soodeen, Alex Smith, Richard Clark, Chris Wood, Richard Oldfield, and Cassie Robinson.

We are grateful for the past support of Vidhya Alakeson, who stepped down from the steering group upon her appointment as Director of External Relations for the Leader of the Opposition.

# Endorsements

## Rt. Hon. the Lord Hague of Richmond

“This report highlights a concerning disconnection from democratic norms among young people. If we are to stave off authoritarianism in the future, ministers must take action to help the next generation find genuine connection in their lives, by developing civic service opportunities and robust regulation of social media.”

## Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP

“Both democracy and capitalism are like Tinkerbell’s light, if you stop believing in them they die. The lack of support for democracy amongst young people is both concerning and unsurprising. Order something on Amazon it arrives in hours. Solving a problem with legislation take years. We have to modernise both the mandate and its management. Part of this is about connecting people and empowering them. This report is right to point to the links between social connectivity and political opportunity”.

## Tom Tugendhat MP

"Narrowing social connections and increasing loneliness affect rich and poor across our country. For individuals it's painful and for society it's costly. We know that service to our country, and connecting people from across communities can form friendships and help people. The recommendation from Onward to build a national civic body could lay the foundation for future generations to tackle these issues and is very welcome."

### Rt. Hon. Matt Hancock MP

“Putin's illegal war in Ukraine has shown the devastating consequences of allowing authoritarianism to rise. The worrying data in this report shows we need to re-convince the next generation that democracy is the best way to promote freedom, prosperity and security. The steps proposed by Onward are a welcome first step towards making this important case.”

### Rt. Hon. Damian Green MP

“If we allow a whole generation to become disillusioned with what democracy has to offer, we are playing with fire. It is an urgent challenge to all democratic Governments that the system offers hope to young people, so that if they work hard they can expect the rewards that their parents and grandparents enjoyed. This report's recommendations show that there are solutions that would reconcile young people with the necessary compromises of democracy, and I hope the Government treats them very seriously.”

### Rt Hon. the Baroness Davidson of Lundin Links

“We should never be complacent about the freedoms we have and the representation we enjoy. The case for democracy needs to be made and remade for every passing generation and this work by Onward is invaluable in showing us why. Crucially, it doesn't just diagnose the problems – social isolation, changing technology, polarisation of social media – but puts forward potential solutions, too. Anyone who cares about how our country is run – and how it can be improved – should read this.”

### The Lord O'Shaughnessy

“We should all be concerned that younger people's attachment to democratic norms seems to be falling away. What's even more worrying is the root cause of that detachment – the lack of connections that young people feel to each other and wider society. This isn't a problem we can just wish away. As this report argues, it needs active attempts by families, communities, councils and central government to create new connections and a sense of belonging among young people.”





# Contents

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Summary of the argument	<b>1</b>
Symptoms: The atomisation of youth	<b>7</b>
Diagnosis: Drivers of detachment	<b>31</b>
Solutions: Repairing the ties that bind	<b>69</b>
Conclusion	<b>82</b>
Appendix 1: Statistical drivers of authoritarianism	<b>84</b>
Appendix 2: Technical annex	<b>92</b>
Endnotes	<b>97</b>

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# Summary of the argument





Youth is supposed to be a time for optimism and exuberance. We are conditioned to think of young people as carefree, socially connected and democratically liberal. And historically, at least, it was true. Surveys from the middle of the last century show younger people were considerably happier and more socially trusting than older people.<sup>1</sup> But something has changed.

Young people today are unhappier, less socially trusting, and more detached from society than young people historically or older people today. They have fewer friends and lower quality friendships. They are less likely to volunteer or contribute to their neighbourhood. They are more likely to suffer emotional problems at school and stress at work. And their narrowing social networks are undermining economic mobility. All of these are self-reinforcing, with narrower networks driving greater loneliness and lower social trust.

This is not just about rising loneliness among young people. It is also driving a generational slide away from social and democratic norms towards atomisation and authoritarianism. Nearly half of millennials believe that army rule would be a good way to run the country, for example, triple the level a decade ago. The atomisation of youth will have profound implications if left unchecked.

But what is driving this crisis - and what can be done about it? Onward's *Age of Alienation* report last year exposed these trends and how they have changed over time. We found some correlation between rising levels of university enrolment and declining homeownership and falling rates of neighbourliness, but could not examine more proximate causes of declining social trust, friendship quality and democratic values. That is the task of this paper, drawing on a major survey of 8,000 people by J.L. Partners and new analysis of official surveys. We find four convincing explanations:

- 1. Narrow social networks.** Young people's social networks are becoming socially less diverse, and their identities more polarised, over time. A third (33%) of 18-34-year-olds say they would not be able to marry someone who supports a political party they dislike, and a quarter (26%) would not consider being friends with them, compared to 20% and 11% respectively for over 55-year-olds.
- 2. Overprotective parenting.** The average age at which children are being allowed out to play on their own has risen from 9 to 11 years old within the last generation, with implications for children's social development. Children not allowed to play unsupervised are more likely to report

emotional problems in childhood and loneliness in young adulthood and the 20% rise in peer-related problems in 10-15-year-olds since 2011 is strongly correlated with isolated play.

3. **The treadmill of modern work.** Work-related stress, depression and anxiety has risen ten times faster among 18-34-year-olds than among over-35-year-olds since 2006. Meanwhile the proportion of 18-34-year-olds saying they feel “used up” at the end of the working day has increased by 44% since 1992, compared to 32% among older groups. Put simply, the changing nature of work appears to be changing the nature of society.
4. **“Always online” culture.** Over a third of 18-34-year-olds (36%) say they have more friends online than in real life, and these young adults are twice as likely to report loneliness and think army rule would be a good way to run the country as those who have more friends in real life than online. Meanwhile, 28% of young people spend over 4 hours a day on social media and 30% spend the same amount of time playing video games. When they do meet friends in real life, young people are twice as likely to stay in watching television than go to the pub or out playing sports.

These influences appear to be contributing to a destructive form of disconnection among younger generations that is undermining support for democracy and storing up social problems for the future. Since before the pandemic, for example, the share of 18-34-year-olds with just one or no close friends has doubled.

But this downward spiral of social and democratic retreat among younger generations is not inevitable. While the pandemic exacerbated many of the trends above, it also saw some markers of atomisation begin to retreat. Social trust, for example, has flourished, with 18-34-year-olds now more likely to say other people can be trusted than at any point since the British Social Attitudes survey started asking the five-option question in 1998. The same is true of neighbourliness, with young people considerably more likely to stop to say hello to neighbours, borrow items from them and to say they belong to their neighbourhood than before the pandemic. This “pandemic bounce” contradicts the idea that social atomisation is outside our control.

We put forward four recommendations to revive social connection and strengthen democracy. We recommend:

First, a national civic service scheme to strengthen democratic norms and encourage social mixing. Building on successful models such as AmeriCorps in the USA and Service Civique in France, the scheme would sign up young people for national civic missions, such as teaching disadvantaged children or environmental action. Its £400 million cost would be funded using revenue from the Digital Services Tax, which should become an effective tax on the social externalities of problem use of social media.

Second, the development of a national network of independent play clubs to support children's emotional and social development, in settings that parents find reassuring. This means giving parents the right to use school facilities and other civic assets, such as village halls and leisure centres, and waiving the need for DBS checks when parents themselves are supervising their children. This would build on evidence from pioneering schemes such as Let Grow Play in the USA and Roam in Birmingham.

Third, the extension of the right to request time off for civic duties, to allow anyone to receive time off to volunteer to support public services. This would mean amending the Employment Rights Act 1996, which already protects time off for jury duty, for example, to allow workers to request time off work to volunteer for St John's Ambulance, military cadets, or as a Special Constable. While not limited to any age group, the aim should be to normalise civic participation among young people as it was among previous generations.

Fourth, the Government should introduce age and identity checks on social media, while urging platforms to bring in limits on excessive use. This emphatically does not mean curbing freedom of speech or undermining online anonymity. But it should mean proving your age and identity when opening an account by default, as well as encouraging platforms to introduce opt-out time limits, similar to pension auto-enrolment on excessive usage of social media. This would allow young people to gain the very real benefits of social media for connection and belonging, while protecting them from the harms of problematic use.

The kids aren't alright and the implications for society are considerable. Just months ago in France nearly half of 25-34-year-olds voted for Marine Le Pen to be President. The UK's political context is very different to that of France, but young people's growing flirtation with authoritarianism is strikingly similar. We should act before it is too late.

## Summary of recommendations

Problem	Solution
<p>Young people’s social networks are becoming narrower over time and political values are becoming a bigger part of their identity and friendship circles - with implications for both economic mobility and political voting patterns.</p> <p>Narrower friendship circles means that younger generations appear to be less tolerant of others’ views, and increasingly open to flirting with more authoritarian forms of government.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Establish a national civic service scheme to strengthen democratic norms and encourage social mixing.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This should build on the good work of existing mass civic membership organisations and be built around broad national missions along similar lines to AmeriCorps Vista in the United States.</li><li>• The substantial cost for the scheme should be hypothecated through the Digital Services Tax, which already raises around £400 million from digital companies.</li></ul></li></ol>
<p>Parents spend well over twice as much time caring for children today as they did in the 1970s, and the average age at which children are allowed to go out alone has risen steadily with each generation, to 11 years old today.</p> <p>This kind of “overprotective parenting” risks over-cultivating children’s leisure time, meaning children spend less time socialising independently of adults. This restricts their ability to develop social skills and emotional resilience, resulting in worse relationships and mental health in later life.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>2. Encourage a national network of “independent play” clubs, supervised by parents or volunteers. This would include:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Giving parents the right to use civic spaces and schools for activities.</li><li>• Mitigating the costs of play clubs through support for DBS checks.</li><li>• Legislating to limit potential liability costs for public authorities who offer premises.</li></ul></li></ol>

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Young people work more intensively than previous generations, leaving them with higher rates of work-related stress and exhaustion after work. Despite young people relying more on work for friendship than in the past, their time to make friends at work has fallen steeply.

The “work treadmill” means that young people spend increasing amounts of leisure time alone recovering rather than engaging in their community and cultivating social networks that can generate long-term happiness and health.

3. Extend existing employment flexibilities to allow anyone to receive time off to volunteer to support public services or civic activity. This would mean:

- Amending the Employment Rights Act 1996, which protects time off for jury duty, to allow workers to request time off to volunteer for civic organisations.
- Eligible organisations should include the St John’s Ambulance, military cadets, and the Special Constabulary.

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The use of social media for validation and as a proxy for genuine real-life relationships is fuelling mental illness, political polarisation, and extremism among the young.

4. Introduce mandatory age, identity and usage checks on major social media websites to curb misuse without undermining the inherent value of online connection. This would entail:

- Age verification checks on users to prevent underage use.
  - Identity verification checks of users themselves or, for under-18s, a parent or guardian to improve user accountability. Introduce opt-out social media limits as default.
  - Encourage platforms to introduce default time limits on social media use, with opt-outs for unlimited use.
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# Symptoms

The atomisation of youth





This chapter describes the interlinked symptoms of young people’s atomisation today, which manifests itself in growing social isolation, declining economic opportunity and mental health, and an increasing openness to authoritarianism. It does so with reference to existing literature and data but mostly draws upon a major 8,004 GB sample poll conducted by J.L. Partners for Onward in May 2022.

It builds upon Onward’s study, *Age of Alienation*, which last year exposed how these issues were growing in severity across the Western world and have been worsening for some time. But it is clear that they have been exacerbated by the last two years of the pandemic.

The next chapter examines the root causes of this atomisation, in particular examining the role of narrow social networks, overprotective parenting, the treadmill of modern work, and an “always online” culture.

## **1. Young people were already socially isolated, but the pandemic has left them lonelier than ever**

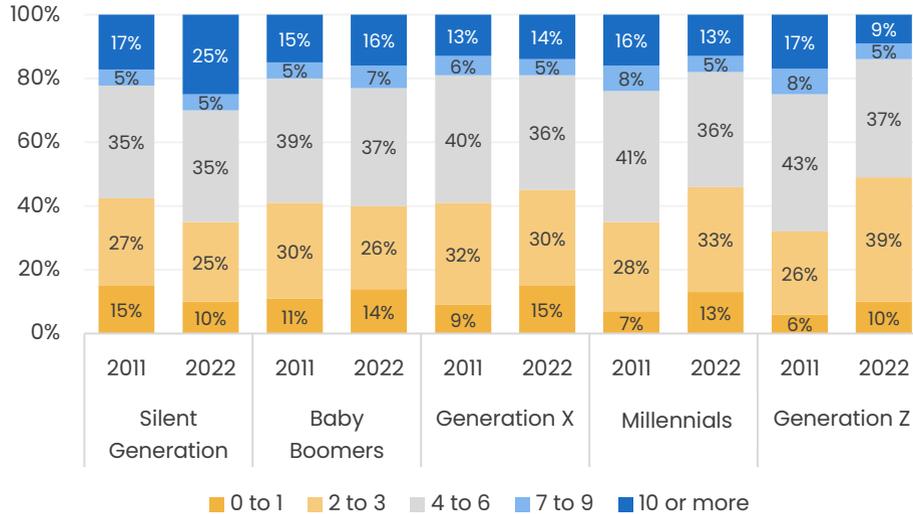
Young people have been at greater risk of loneliness than older people since before the pandemic. In 2016-17, the Office for National Statistics estimated that around 5% of all adults felt lonely “often or always”, but this was strongly correlated with age. 16-24-year-olds were twice as likely as the UK average to feel persistently lonely (9.8%) and over-65s were nearly half as likely (2.9%).<sup>2</sup>

In 2021, the ONS found that loneliness had risen considerably to 7.2% of the UK population as a whole, while 16-24-year-olds were now four times as likely to be often or always lonely than over-75-year-olds.<sup>3</sup> Today, we find that younger generations remain much worse off: 18% of 18-34-year-olds report being lonely “often or always” versus 5% among over-65s.<sup>4</sup>

This is partly due to a fall in young people’s *quantity* of friendships. The share of 18-34-year-olds reporting just one or no close friends remained broadly stable between 2011-12 and 2017-18, at around 6%. But during coronavirus young people’s friendships dipped far more than for older generations, with 21% of 18-34-year-olds saying they only had one or no close friends.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Number of close friends by generation, 2011-12 and 2022 compared**

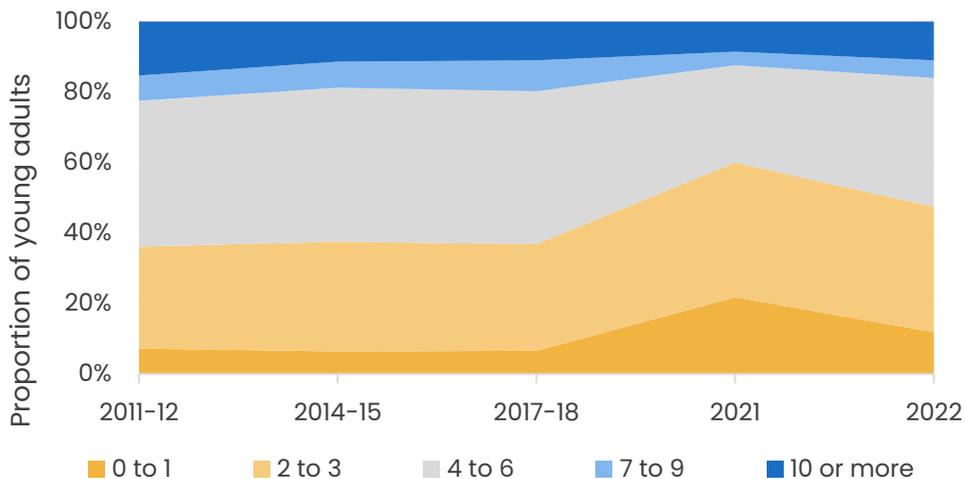
Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society, JLP 2022



While this has partly recovered since, as shown in Figure 2 below, the number of 18-34-year-olds with one or no close friends remains at twice pre-pandemic levels (12%). Just under half (47%) of 18-34s today report having three or fewer friends, nearly a third higher than in 2011-12 (36%) and considerably more than over-65-year-olds (37%) today.

**Figure 2: Number of close friends among young adults (18-34-year-olds), 2011-12 to 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society, Hanbury/Stack, JLP 2022



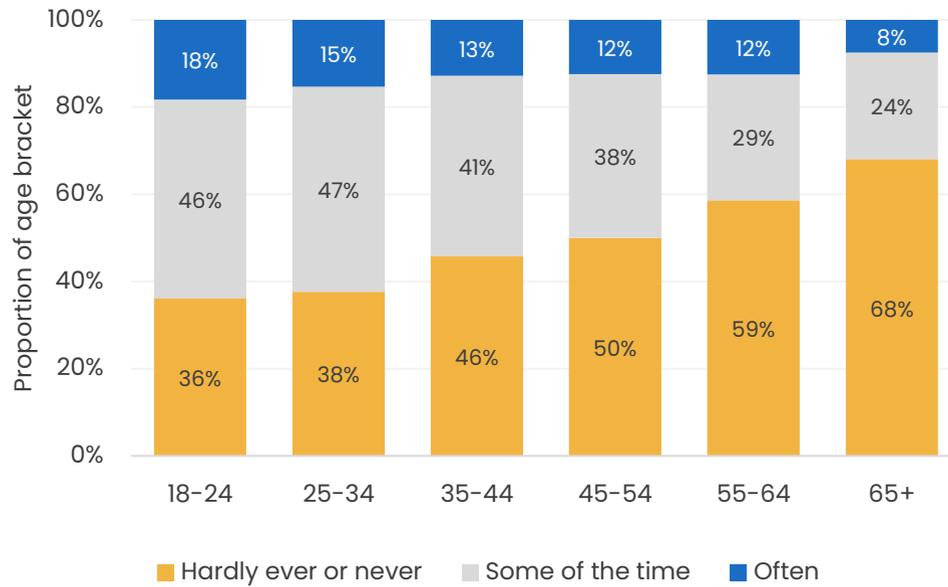
But the *quality* of young people’s friendships appears to have decreased too. The proportion of 18-34-year-olds who say their friends can be relied upon “a lot” fell from 45% in 2010-11 to 41% in 2022, a fall of nearly a tenth. Meanwhile, the share saying they can open up to their friends “a lot” or “somewhat” has fallen by five per cent to 77% since 2019-20. And while the number of young people who say their friends understand them “a lot” has risen since 2010-11, from 34% to 37%, the share saying their friends only understand them “a little” or “not at all” has risen too, from 18% to 21%.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, generational friendship patterns have gone into reverse. The share of Gen Z with few (one or no) close friends rose from 6% to 10% between 2011 and 2022, while the share of the Silent Generation (the interwar generation born between the mid-1920s and mid-1940s) saying the same fell from 15% to 10%. Nearly half of Gen Z (49%) and Millennials (46%) report having three or fewer close friends, considerably less than the Silent Generation (35%) and Baby Boomers (40%). The share of Baby Boomers and Silent Generation with many (seven or more) close friends rose between 2011-12 and 2022, but nearly halved among Gen Z (from 25% to 14%) over the same period.

The same crossover has happened to friendship quality. In 2010-11, the youngest generation, the Millennials (42%), were the most likely to report the highest quality of friends<sup>7</sup> while older Baby Boomers (35%) and the Silent Generation (36%) were the least likely. Again in 2013-14, the youngest cohort, Generation Z, reported the highest quality of friends (48%). Today the inverse is true: only 38% of Millennials and Gen Z report high quality friendships compared to 41% for Baby Boomers and 44% among the Silent Generation.<sup>8</sup>

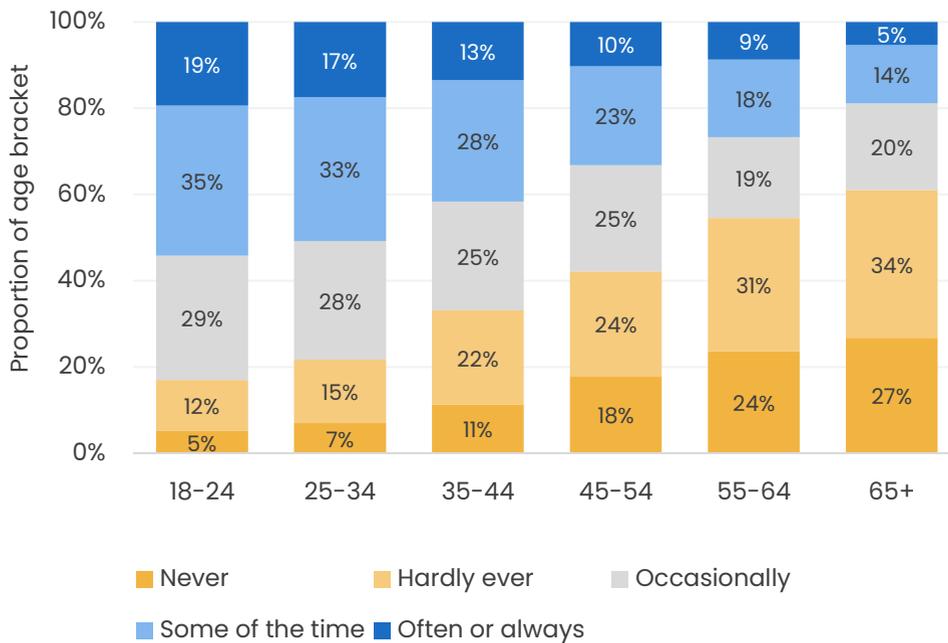
**Figure 3: How often adults feel isolated from others, by age bracket, 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



**Figure 4: How often adults feel lonely, by age bracket, 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



## 2. Weaker social networks are contributing to lower economic opportunity for some young people

Social and economic mobility depend on networks. Declining quality and quantity of social connections therefore undermines young people's opportunities to progress, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who lack the professional networks available to better educated or wealthier peers.

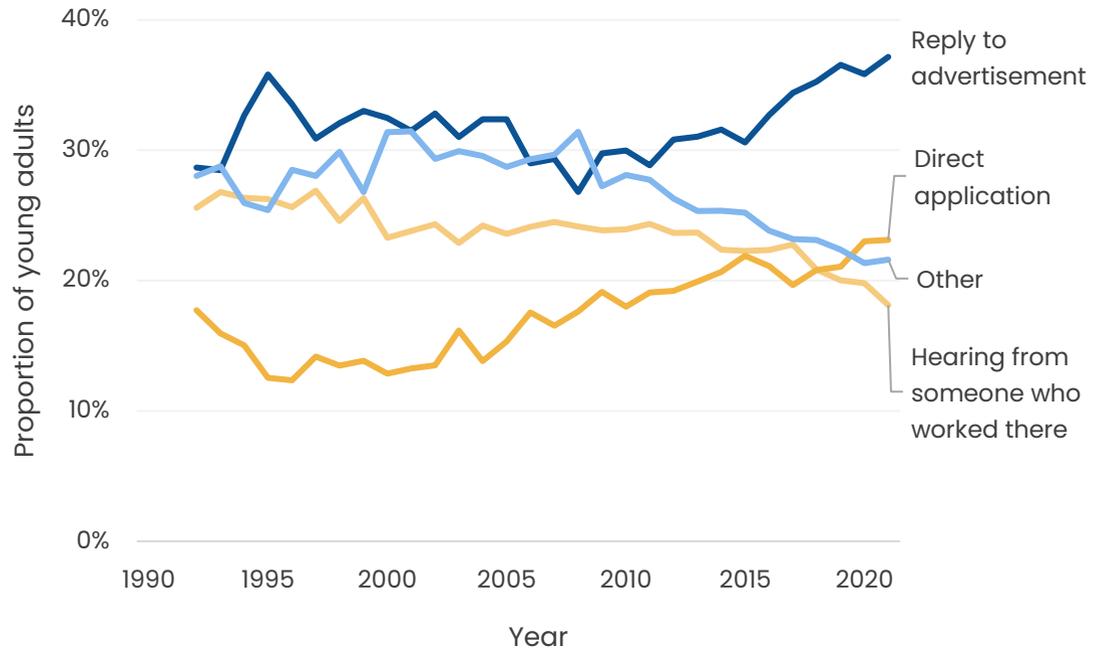
This has been strikingly demonstrated by new research from Raj Chetty et al in a landmark study published in *Nature*.<sup>9</sup> Analysing data from 21 billion friendships from Facebook to understand the relationship between social capital and economic mobility, the authors find that the extent to which a child socialises with other children of high socio-economic status - which they term "economic connectedness" - is strongly correlated with social mobility. Indeed, the authors estimate that children with poor parents growing up in neighbourhoods where 70% of their friends are from affluent homes go on to earn 20% more as adults than if they had grown up in an area where their friends were poor.

We find evidence to suggest that young people in the UK are likely to experience a similar relationship between social capital and economic mobility.

Data from the Labour Force Survey suggests that around one-in-five young people (18% in 2021) found their new job by hearing from someone who worked there.<sup>10</sup> This proportion has fallen over recent years, from 26% in 1992, as advertisements and direct applications have become more important ways of finding work. In theory these trends should be a good thing for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but in practice the professionalisation of job markets and the expansion of higher education appears to be making it harder for some young people to take advantage of more egalitarian hiring processes.

**Figure 5: How young people found their jobs (18–34-year-olds), 1992 to 2021**

Source: Onward analysis of Labour Force Survey



Note: Permanent full-time jobs only.

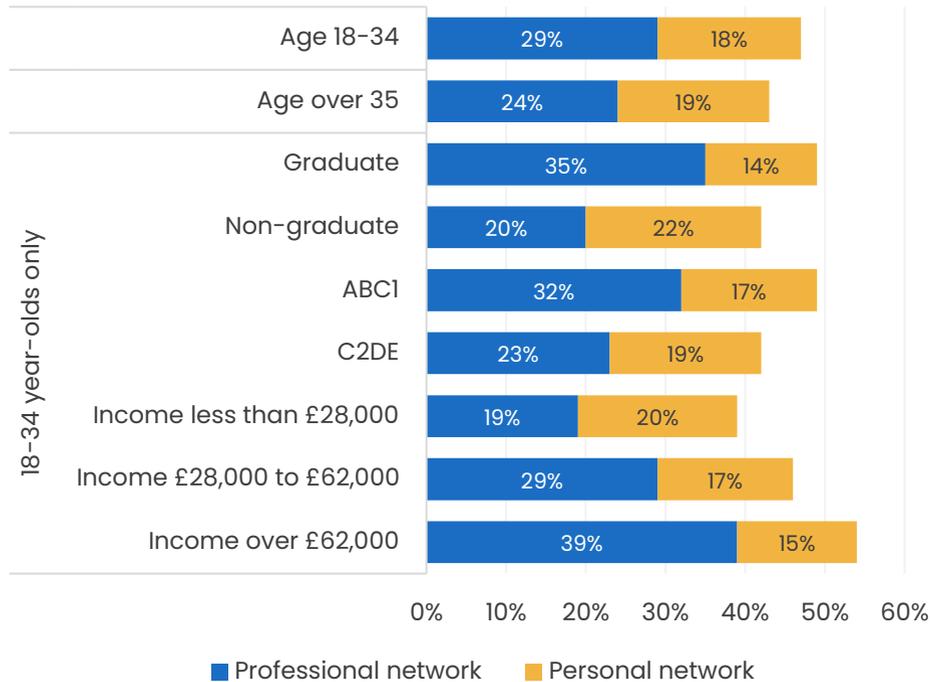
This is because, as the Youth Futures Foundation have noted, “in order to find employment, disadvantaged or marginalised groups generally tend to rely on personal contacts and their informal network.”<sup>11</sup> Young non-graduates are less likely to find work through professional networks than graduates of the same age (14% to 34%) and more reliant on personal networks (22% to 20%). The same disparities in use of professional networks exist for 18–34-year-olds from lower (C2DE) and higher (ABC1) social grades (23% to 32%) and from lower and higher income households (19% to 39%).

The relationship between social networks and employability is striking. Looking at Understanding Society data reveals that among unemployed 18–34-year-olds, those with four or more close friends are 15 percentage points more likely to be employed five years later than those with three or fewer close friends (49% to 34%). Similarly, 18–34-year-olds with four or more close friends in employment are less than half as likely to be unemployed five years later than those with three or fewer (1.5% to 3.5%).<sup>12</sup> Among young people dissatisfied with

their work, those with the highest quality friendships are more likely than those with lower quality friends to move into work they find satisfactory within five years (76% to 68%).<sup>13</sup> And young people with the highest quality friendships are twice as likely as those with the worst quality friendships to say they had clear career goals (66% to 32%).<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 6: Proportion of adults finding work through social networks, by age and demographic, 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



43% of 18–34-year-olds say they “have strong links with people who have experience in the kind of jobs I want to do”. But this is significantly higher among those with a degree (55%), from a higher (ABC1) social grade (49%), or from a higher household income (65%). In contrast, non-graduates (35%), those from lower (C2DE) social grades (37%), and those with low household incomes (34%) are all less likely to report strong career networks.<sup>15</sup>

Young non-graduates are twice as likely as graduates to report having no clear career goals (18% to 8%), while those from low income homes are three times as likely to lack clear career goals as those from high income homes (18% to 6%).<sup>16</sup>

The long-term impact of this is likely to be considerable: one American study has found that girls and boys that report uncertain occupation aspirations as early as age 16 have “significantly lower wages 10 years later than youth with professional aspirations”, even controlling for ability, school effort, race and socio-economic background.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Shrinking social networks are feeding through into a health crisis among young people**

Alongside the economic consequences of social isolation, there is growing evidence to suggest that young people are suffering serious health implications from their smaller and narrower social networks.

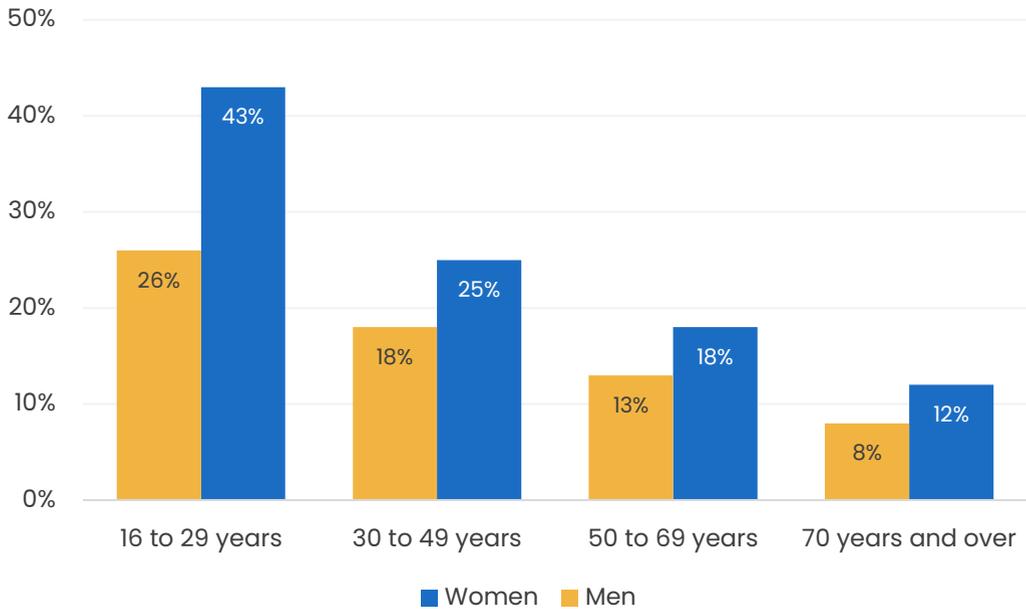
Between 2010 and 2018, the share of 16–24-year-olds reporting symptoms of depression or anxiety rose by 40%, from 18% to 25%. This rise was concentrated among young women, whose rates of depression or anxiety rose from 21.7% in 2009–10 to 31.3% in 2017–18, a 44% increase over the period.<sup>18</sup> While this may reflect rising rates of reporting and the declining influence of stigma - and therefore be a good thing - it nevertheless suggests a severe level of need among younger generations.

As coronavirus spread and lockdowns were implemented, rates of depression worsened across the entire population, but young people were by far the worst affected. Overall, the number of 16–29-year-olds reporting depressive symptoms rose to 34% in January to March 2021. This included 4 in 10 (43%) women aged 16 to 29 years experiencing depressive symptoms, compared with 26% of men of the same age.<sup>19</sup>

Rising rates of mental illness are reflected in a steep rise in referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), which have more than doubled in the last six years as shown in Figure 8 below. Over the last eight years, the prevalence of emotional problems in eight-year-olds has risen by 34%, and by 24% in 10- to 15-year-olds.<sup>20</sup>

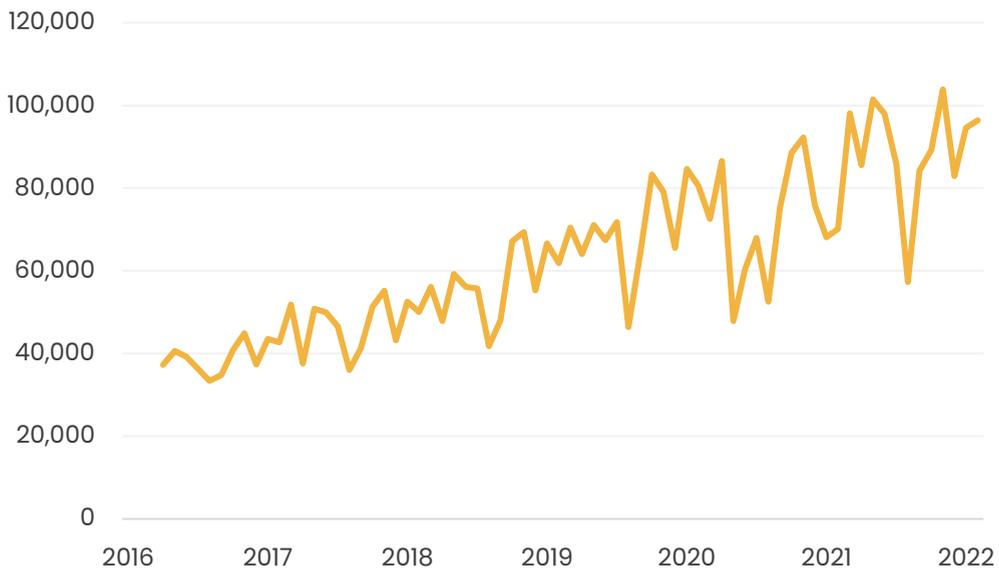
**Figure 7: Proportion of people with some form of depression, by age bracket and sex, January– March 2021**

Source: Onward analysis of ONS<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 8: Number of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Referrals, April 2016 to February 2022**

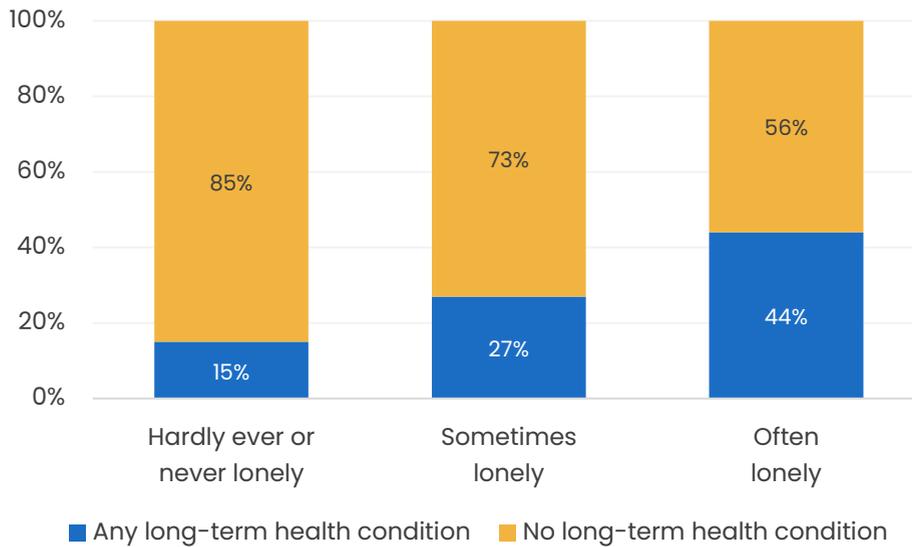
Source: Onward analysis of NHS Digital, Mental health services monthly statistics



Evidence suggests that declining health is strongly related to the decline in social networks outlined above. Young people who report being “never” or “hardly ever” lonely also report far better long-term health, with 85% not experiencing any long-term health conditions compared to 56% among those that are often lonely.<sup>22</sup> Young people with no close friends are more likely to be frequently lonely than those with friends: 27% of those with no friends are often lonely compared to just 12% among young people with two or more close friends. Young people reporting the highest quality friendships are considerably more likely to report “hardly ever” or “never” experiencing loneliness (56%) than those with the worst quality friendships (38%).<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 9: Long-term poor health by experience of loneliness among young adults (18-34-year-olds)**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11.



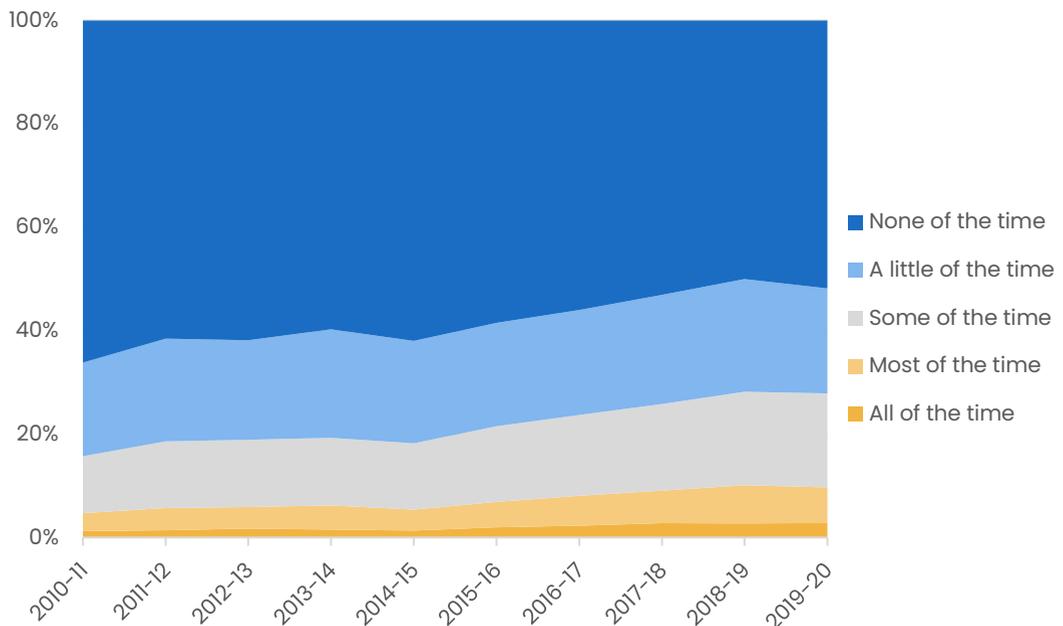
This self-reported data is strongly supported by empirical evidence: academic studies suggest that lonely individuals have a higher risk - and lower survival rates - of diabetes, obesity, dementia, anxiety, heart disease, and heart attacks.<sup>24</sup> Loneliness has been found to be as risky for health outcomes as smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>25</sup> and some studies have shown that membership of a group can reduce the risk of depression relapse by 24%, while membership of three groups can cut the risk by up to 63%.<sup>26</sup>

There are two reasons for this link between loneliness and ill health. First, loneliness directly impacts the body's hormone levels. Those that experience chronic loneliness have been found to have more 'wear and tear' on their regulatory systems than non-lonely people.<sup>27</sup> This puts them at greater risk of illnesses such as hypertension and coronary heart disease.<sup>28</sup> Elevated levels of stress hormones are likely to blame for this, given constant stress releases hormones that damage organs and our regulatory mechanisms. Second, loneliness can indirectly encourage lifestyle choices that generally lead to poorer health outcomes.<sup>29</sup> For example, loneliness is directly associated with smoking: 25% of lonely young people smoke compared to 14% of young people who were hardly ever or never lonely.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between health problems and connection is also circular. Since 2010-11, the share of young people who say their mental or physical health never prevents them from socialising has fallen from 66% to 52%.

**Figure 10: Proportion of young people whose mental and physical health affects their social life, 2010-11 to 2019-20 (18-34-year-olds)**

Source: Onward Analysis of Waves 2 to 11 of Understanding Society data.



#### 4. Young people's detachment from democratic values appears to be dangerously accelerating

There is growing evidence to suggest that younger generations are increasingly ill-disposed to democracy, and more open to authoritarianism than previous generations were at their age.<sup>31</sup> In our latest survey, we find that post-pandemic young people's support for authoritarian forms of government has now grown to a worrying degree.

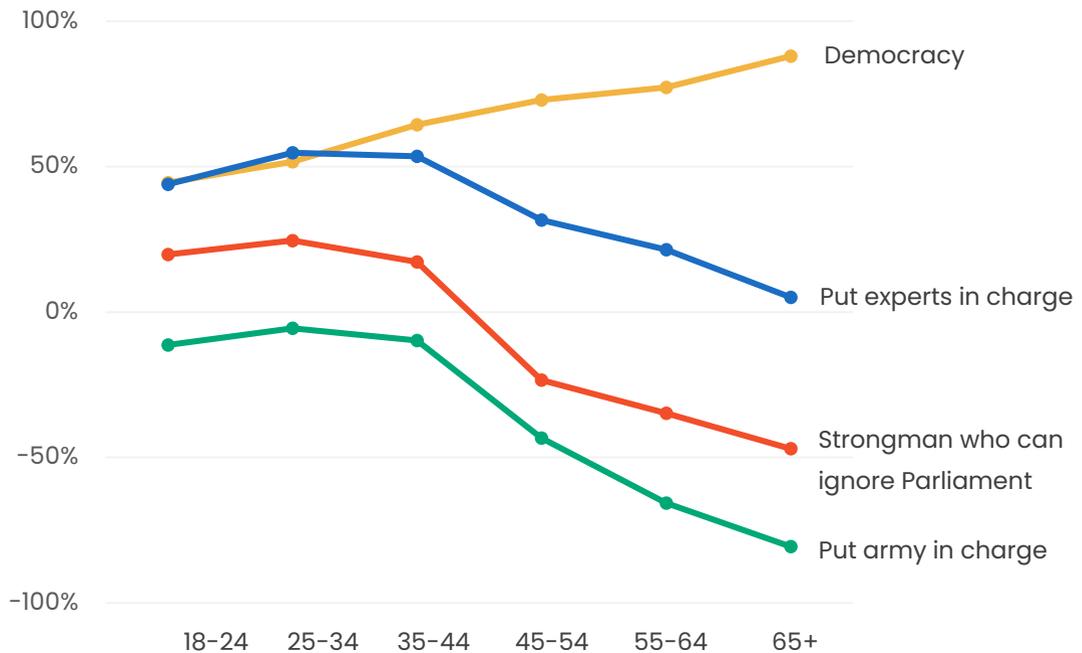
61% of 18-34s agree that "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections would be a good way of governing this country" while 46% agree that "having the army rule would be a good way of governing this country". This compares to 29% and 13% for over-55s respectively. Meanwhile a quarter (26%) of 18-34s think democracy is a bad way of governing this country, three times higher than the share for over-55s (8%). 75% of 18-34s think having experts, not government, make decisions, would be a good way to run the country, compared to 56% for over-55s.

In net terms this means that young people are more likely to support strongman leaders (+23%) than not, and only marginally more likely to oppose military rule (-8%) than not.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, over-55s are overwhelmingly against military rule (-74%) and strongman leaders (-42%). However it appears that at least some of this translates into support for technocracy.

These results are extreme but they should no longer be surprising. Since 1999, support for military rule among 18-24-year-olds has risen fivefold (from 7% to 44%), while support for a strongman leader has more than doubled (from 25% to 60%). There have been similarly large increases in 25-34-year-olds' support for army rule (10% to 47%) and a strong leader (33% to 62%). This explosion of anti-democratic sentiment has been considerably stronger among younger voters than older voters, as shown below.

**Figure 11: Net support for different forms of governance by age**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



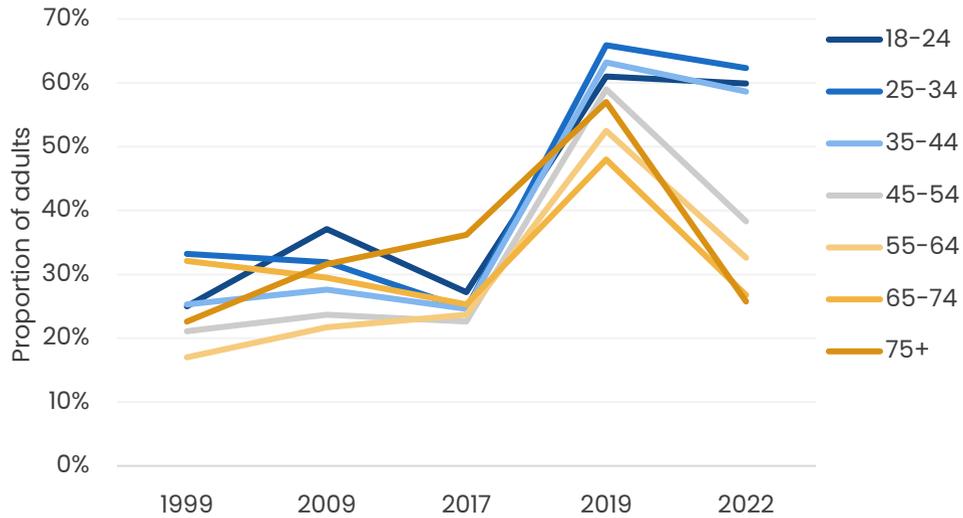
Note: Respondents were asked whether each form of government was a “very good”, “fairly good”, “fairly bad”, or “very bad” way of running the country. The net figures here show the proportion of people who replied “good” minus those who said “bad”.

This data confounds traditional assumptions that young people are the most liberal of all age groups, but they are supported by recent trends across the West. In the recent French Presidential election, for example, 49% of those aged 25-34 and 39% of those aged 18-24 voted for Marine Le Pen to be President.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, a recent study by the Centre for the Future of Democracy has shown that young people’s satisfaction with democracy is declining across Anglosphere democracies, Western Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>34</sup>

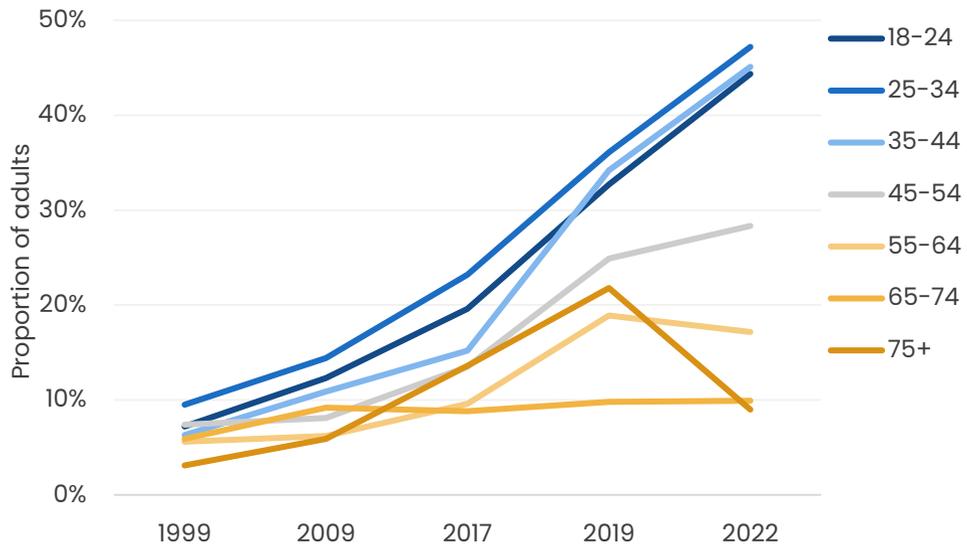
**Figure 12: Agreement that “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections” is a good way to run this country, by age group, 1999–2022**

Source: Onward analysis of European Values Survey, Hanbury/Stack, and JLP 2022



**Figure 13: Agreement that “putting the army in charge” is a good way to run this country, by age group, 1999–2022**

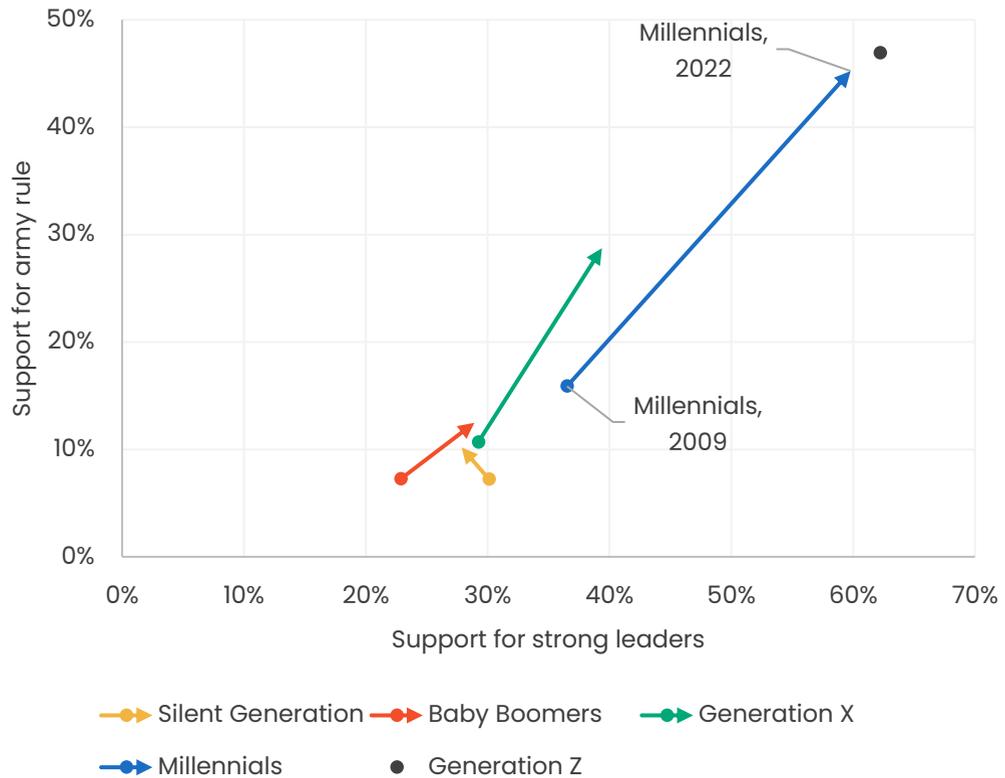
Source: Onward analysis of European Values Survey, Hanbury/Stack, and JLP 2022



The data suggests that this is a “cohort effect”, with these anti-democratic views particular to this generation of young people, rather than the impact of age. Looking by generation in Figure 14 below, we can see that support among the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers for army rule and a strongman leader remain broadly equivalent today to where they were in 2009. By contrast, Millennials’ support for army rule has nearly tripled since 2009 (16% to 45%). And both Generation X and the Millennials have been eclipsed by the emergence of Generation Z, 47% of whom support the idea of army rule, while 62% support strongman leaders.

**Figure 14: Support for strong leaders and army rule by generation, 2009–2022**

Source: Onward analysis of European Values Study 2009 and JLP 2022



So what is driving these rising rates of authoritarianism? Both correlative analysis set out in this section and more detailed regression analysis published in Appendix 1 point to a range of factors:

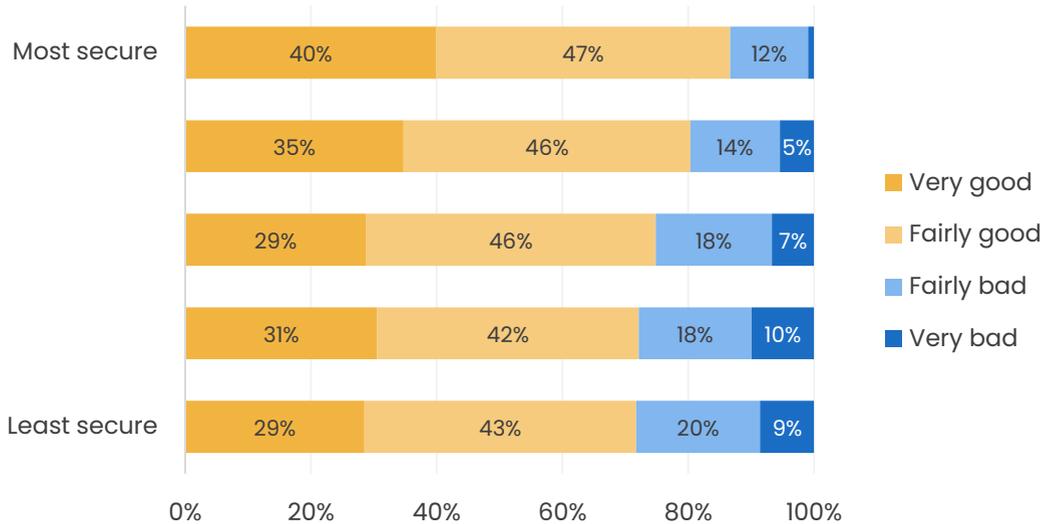
First, support for authoritarian forms of governance is linked to socio-economic circumstances. 18-34-year-old graduates are much more likely than young non-graduates to support democracy (81% to 67%) and technocratic government (80% to 70%). And they express broadly similar views on strong leaders and army rule. University students, however, are significantly less likely than the average young person to support army rule or strongman leadership.<sup>35</sup>

Just 29% of university students support army rule, compared to 46% of young people generally, and only 45% support the idea of a strongman leader, compared to 61% for all young people. Meanwhile, young unemployed people are much more likely to say democracy is a bad system than those in full-time work (32% to 21%) and young ABC1s are more likely than young C2DEs to support democracy (80% to 67%) and marginally less likely to support army rule (45% to 48%).<sup>36</sup> The youth unemployment finding is particularly concerning, given the Bank of England's latest baseline projection suggests that the unemployment rate will increase from 3.7% to 6.3% over the next three years.<sup>37</sup>

This relationship between democratic support and socio-economic security holds across the adult population.<sup>38</sup> 40% of the most socio-economically secure quintile of young adults think that democracy is a very good system and a further 47% think it is fairly good, compared to 29% and 43% for the least secure quintile respectively. This means that the least secure fifth of voters are over twice as likely to say that democracy is a fairly bad or very bad system for governing the country as the most secure fifth (28% to 13%).

**Figure 15: Support for democracy by socio-economic security among young adults (18–34-year-olds)**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



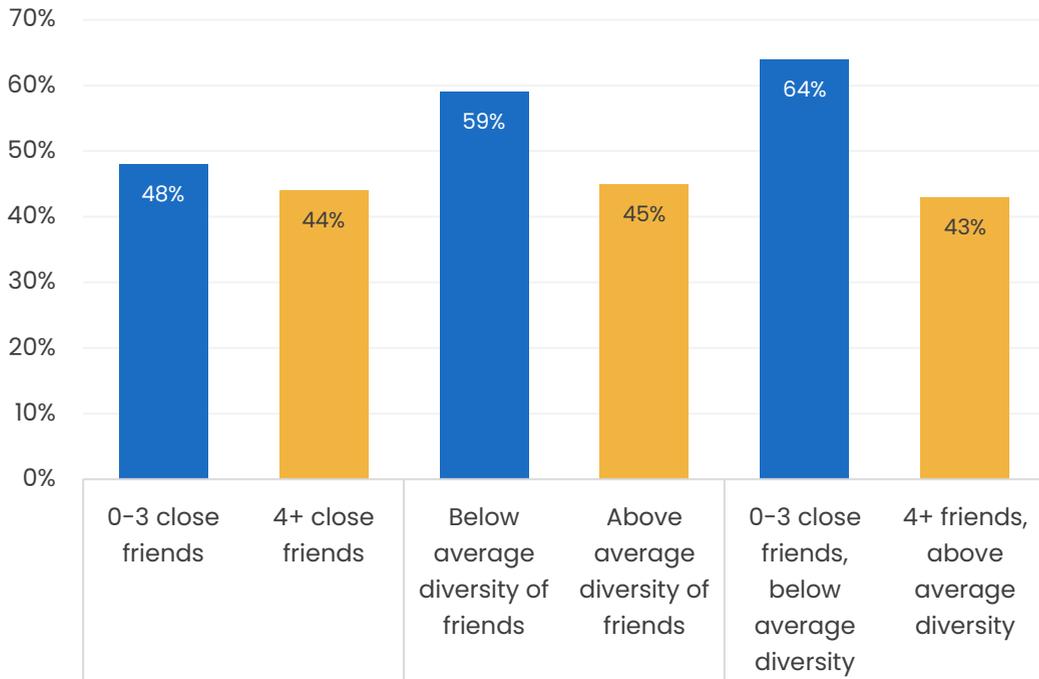
Note: This is a combined metric with five components: whether someone is in a stable tenure (homeowner or social renter), is married, has lived at their address for more than 5 years, is retired or employed (but not on a temporary or zero-hours basis), and has above-average household income.

Second, there appears to be a link between social connection and growing autocratic support among young people. Young people with four or more close friends are less likely than those with three or fewer to support a strong leader (58% to 66%) or army rule (44% to 48%). Similarly, those reporting diverse friendship circles are less likely than those with highly similar friendship circles to support army rule (45% to 59%) or a technocracy (72% to 81%).<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, these effects appear to be mutually reinforcing: those with four or more friends and a diverse friendship circle are even less likely to support army rule (43%), while those with both three or fewer friends and homogeneous friendship circles are much more likely to back army rule (64%). Finally, those reporting higher quality friendships<sup>40</sup> are also more likely to say democracy is a good form of governance than those with lower quality friendships (80% to 69%).<sup>41</sup> Our regression analysis in Appendix 1 finds that both friendship quality and diversity are statistically significant explainers of rates of support for authoritarianism and democracy, but friendship quantity has a limited impact after accounting for other factors.

**Figure 16: Support for military rule, by number and diversity of friends, among young adults (18–34-year-olds)**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022.

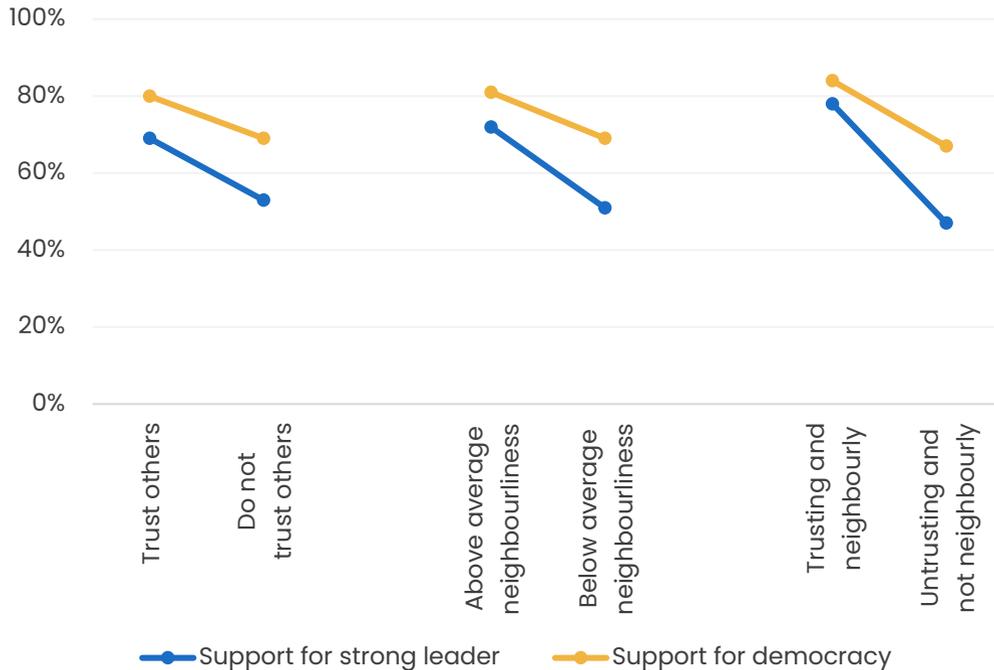


Counter-intuitively, however, while young people who generally trust others are more likely to support democracy than those who don't (80% to 69%), they are also more considerably likely to support a strongman leader (69% to 53%). Similarly, those reporting high levels of neighbourliness are more likely than those who don't to support democracy (81% to 69%), but also strongman leaders (72% to 51%) and technocratic rule (80% to 71%).<sup>42</sup> Again, wider regression analysis in Appendix 1 shows these factors to be significant after other factors are accounted for.

This mirrors a broader trend where young people who say that democracy is a good way to run the country are more likely to support army rule (50% to 33%), strong leaders (62% to 58%), and technocracy (81% to 57%) than those who are less enthusiastic about democracy.

**Figure 17: Impact of trust and neighbourliness on support for types of governance among young adults (18–34-year-olds).**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022.



Finally, support for autocratic governance also appears to be linked to political sympathies. Socially conservative young people are much more likely than young liberals to voice support for a strongman leader (73% to 53%) or military rule (59% to 36%). And young people who believe the country has moved closer to their cultural and economic values in recent years are twice as likely to back army rule or a strong leader (63% and 82%), than those who believe the country has moved further away from them (27% and 36%).<sup>43</sup> Social values are statistically one of the strongest predictors of autocracy.

## 5. But the pandemic appears to have revived young people’s sense of social trust and neighbourliness

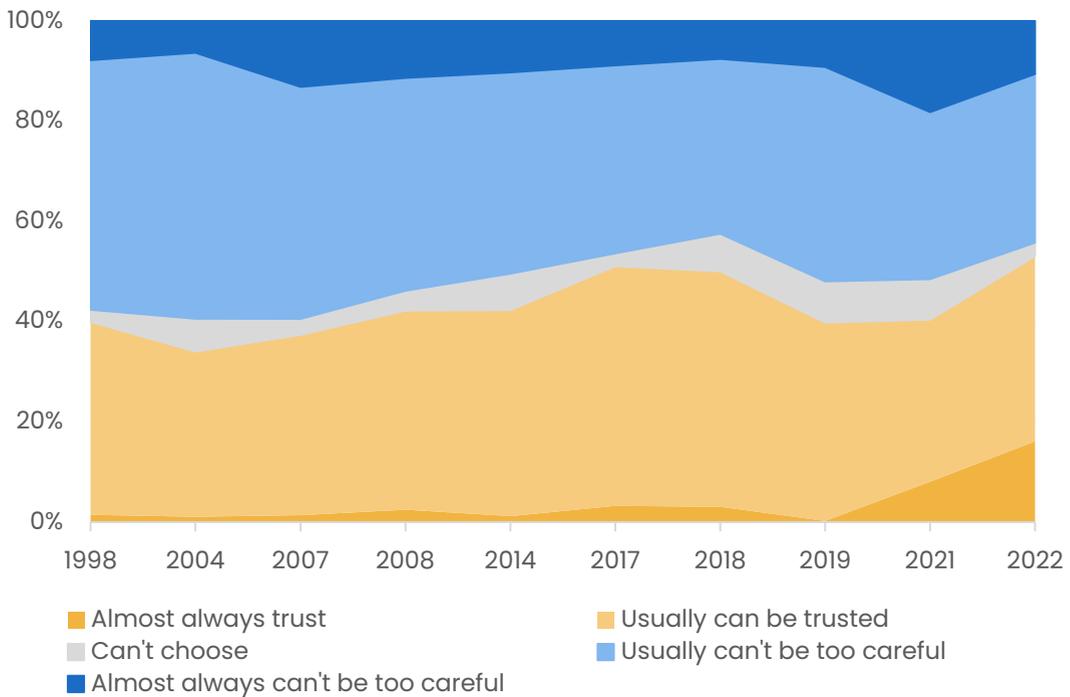
Social trust has been in decline among younger generations for much of the post-war period. As Onward reported in *Age of Alienation*, on a simple binary question, the share of 18–34-year-olds reporting that other people can generally be trusted nearly halved between 1959 and 2021.<sup>44</sup> 18–24-year-olds

were also more likely to distrust their neighbours than trust them, and three times more likely to distrust their neighbours than people over the age of 65 years old.

However, this decline in young people’s social trust appears to be in retreat. In our latest survey, conducted in May 2022, we find that 18–34-year-olds are now more likely to say other people can be trusted than at any point since the British Social Attitudes survey started asking the five-option question in 1998. 53% of under-35s agree that people can usually or almost always be trusted, including 16% who say that people can “almost always” be trusted. This “pandemic bounce” in social trust is reflected across all age groups, with trust rising to 56% overall, equivalent to the previous 2017 peak.

**Figure 18: Social trust among young adults (18–34-year-olds), 1998–2022**

*Onward analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey, Hanbury/Stack 2021, and JLP 2022.*



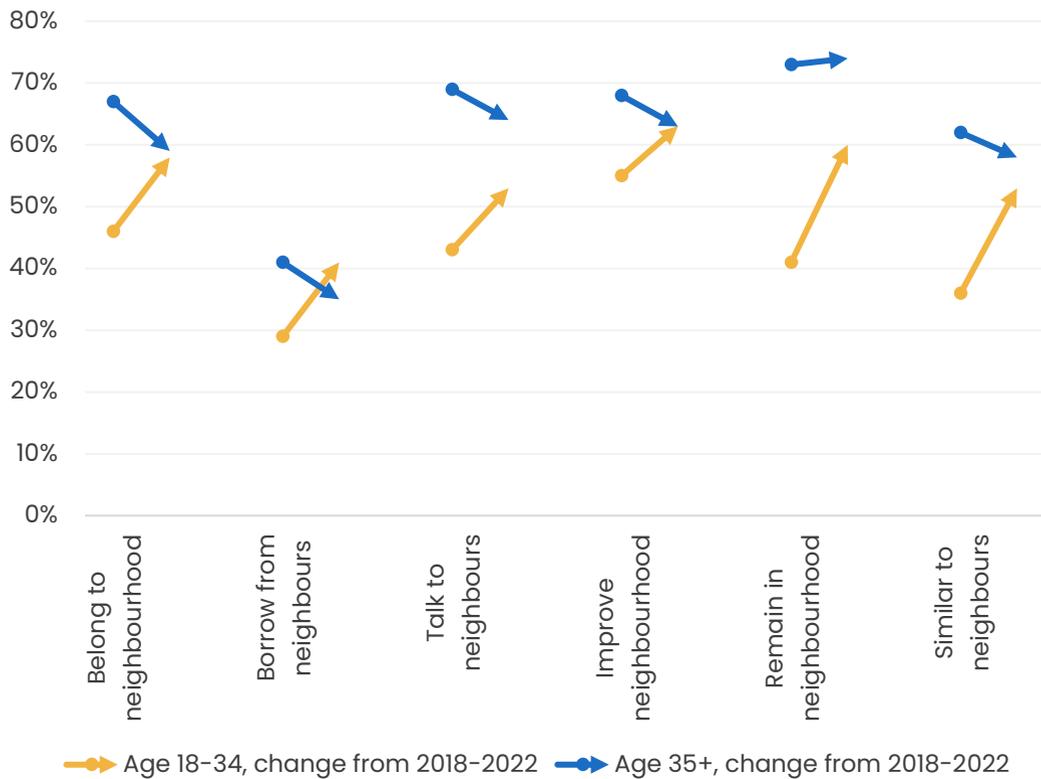
A similar effect can be observed around neighbourliness. In the two decades before the pandemic, neighbourliness among 18–34-year-olds was in long-term decline. For example, the proportion of 18–24-year-olds that regularly stopped and talked to their neighbours fell from 54% in 1998 to 36% in 2017.<sup>45</sup> But

between 2017-18 and 2022, there has been a recovery in youthful belonging, with a higher proportion of young adults saying they regularly stop and talk to their neighbours (43% to 53%), are willing to work to improve their neighbourhood (55% to 63%), and would borrow things from their neighbours (29% to 41%).

There have also been significant increases in the proportion of 18-34-year-olds reporting they plan to remain in their neighbourhood for a number of years (41% to 60%), they think of themselves as similar to their neighbours (36% to 53%), and that they belong to their neighbourhood (46% to 58%). This contrasts with over-35s, as shown in Figure 19 below, for whom many of the metrics of neighbourliness appear to have declined since 2017-18.

**Figure 19: Indicators of neighbourliness by age, 2017-18 and 2022 compared**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 9 and JLP 2022

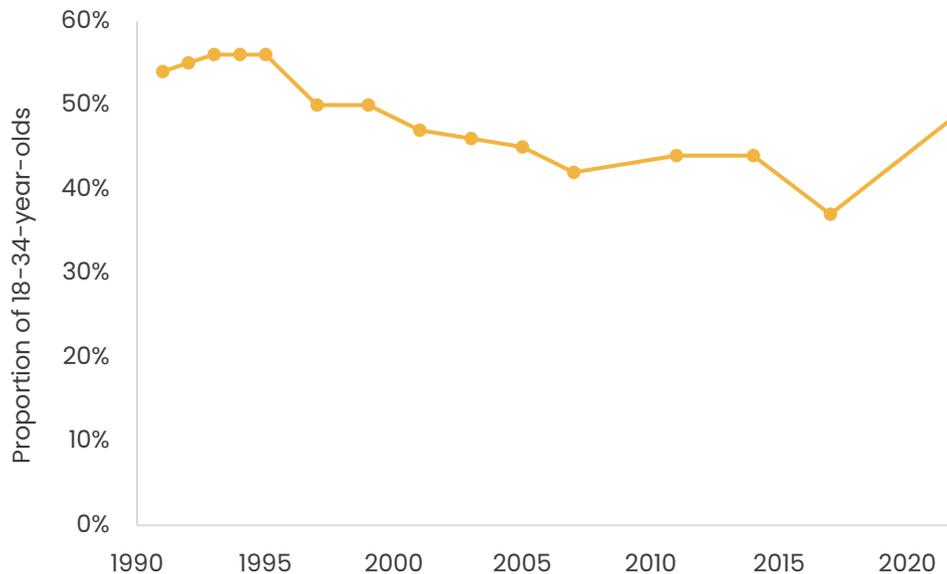


Rates of group membership among the young also appear to have reversed. Data from Understanding Society and the British Household Panel Survey suggest that group membership among 18–34-year-olds fell by around one-third between 1991 and 2017, from 54% to 37%. However, new polling for 2022 shows that group membership for 18–34-year-olds has risen to 49%, the highest rate since 1999.

Interestingly, social trust seems to have risen fastest in the oldest and youngest age groups, with the Silent Generation, Millennials, and Gen Z reporting the largest increases (16%, 4% and 2%). By contrast, generations in between have seen distrust rebound post-pandemic: social trust within Generation X respondents fell 7%. By contrast, neighbourliness has only increased among Generation Z (17%) and Millennials (15%), while falling back among Generation X (-5%), Baby Boomers (-4%), and the Silent Generation (-1%).<sup>46</sup>

**Figure 20: Rates of group membership among young adults (18–34-year-olds), 1991 to 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of British Household Panel Survey, Understanding Society, and JLP 2022



## Conclusion

This chapter has set out the *symptoms* of an incipient social crisis among young people. Younger generations are becoming more socially atomised from one another, with weaker and fewer close friendships and rising levels of isolation and loneliness. This, in turn, appears to be feeding through to a series of worrying social outcomes, including a mental and physical health crisis, declining economic opportunity and a growing detachment from democracy. These symptoms have all been exacerbated by the experience of the pandemic. While there are some causes of optimism, in the way neighbourliness and social trust has bounced back in the last year, there is still much to be concerned about.

But while we know the contours of the problem, we know much less about what is causing it. The next chapter will explore the *causes* of this atomisation, testing the different hypotheses that have been put forward by academics and policymakers - including the narrowing of social networks; overprotective parenting; the treadmill of modern work; and an “always online” culture. The final chapter sets out recommendations that try to treat the causes of atomisation rather than simply alleviate the symptoms.

# Diagnosis

Drivers of detachment





It is clear that the kids aren't alright. There is now a broad consensus that young people are experiencing a cultural and health crisis as set out in the previous chapter. But there is much less agreement about what is causing it. This chapter attempts to test the various hypotheses for youth atomisation, using our large sample survey to explore the statistical relationship between different factors.

There are four broad explanations that have been put forward by prominent academics and policymakers. These are:

1. **Narrow social networks.** Increased polarisation by both political identity and social background, has resulted in young people spending less time with people unlike themselves.
2. **Overprotective parenting.** Declining childhood independence is preventing children from building the social skills and emotional resilience they need as young adults.
3. **The treadmill of modern work.** Rising intensity of work has contributed to rising burnout and declining levels of socialisation and leisure.
4. **“Always online” culture.** Changing technology use, particularly related to social media and new forms of online communication, has replaced physical connection with a weaker substitute.

### **1. Are young people's social networks becoming less diverse, and their identities more polarised?**

One factor often blamed for social and political atomisation is rising polarisation, with people spending less time with people from different backgrounds or values to their own.

Proponents of this hypothesis include Bill Bishop, whose book *The Big Sort* showed how people with particular ideologies were geographically clustering in the United States, and Charles Murray, whose book *Coming Apart* documented the decline of common culture in the USA and its impact on white working-class communities.

But much of the literature on polarisation is centred on the United States and is not specific to young people. We should ask: to what extent are young people in the UK becoming more polarised? And how far does this go towards explaining rising support for authoritarianism among young people?

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of polarisation. The first is *issue* polarisation, which describes divisions formed around policy positions on which people have strong views.

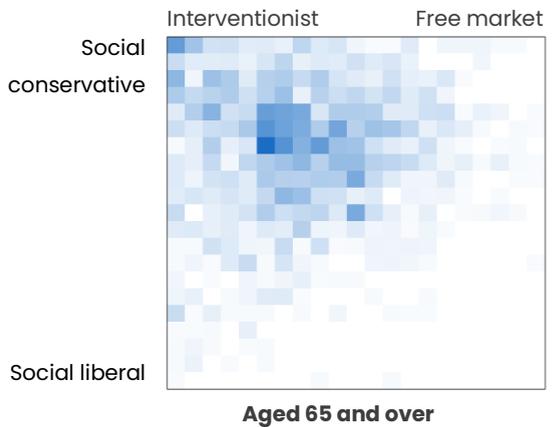
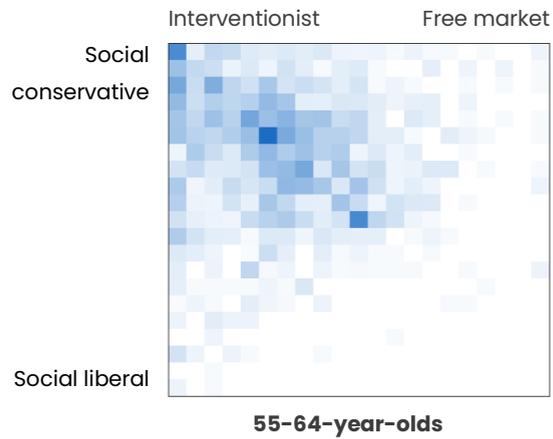
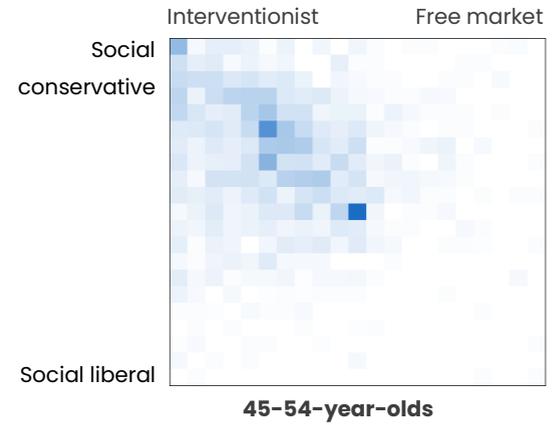
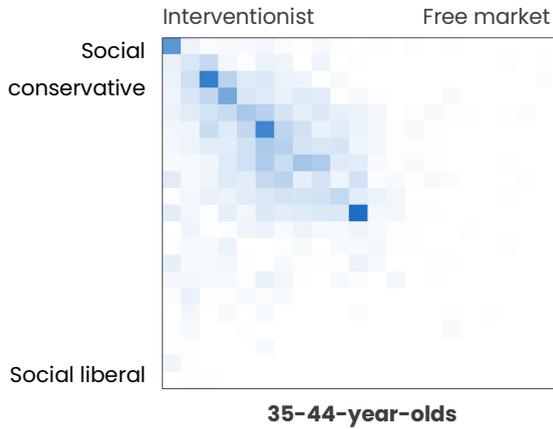
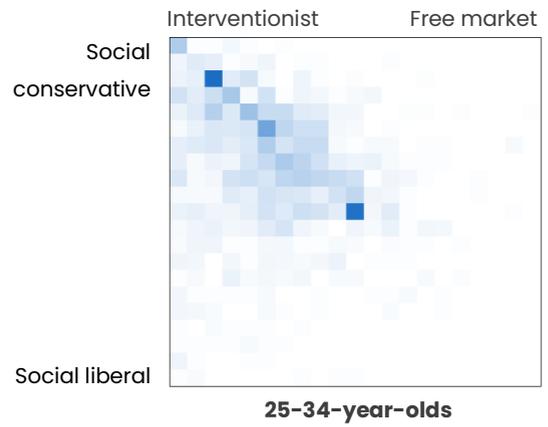
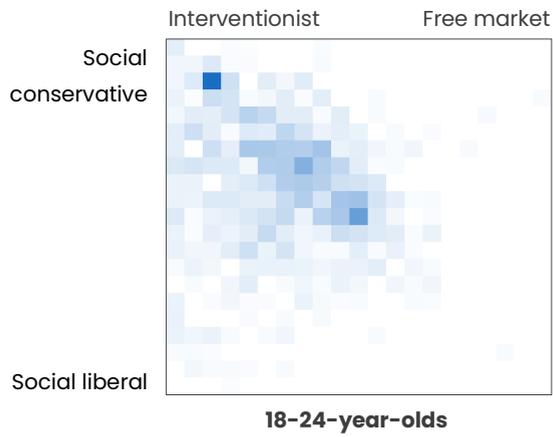
Using the same five-question set to create left-right and libertarian-authoritarian axes as the British Social Attitudes Survey, we find that British voters are broadly aligned on both economic and social issues, favouring (on the whole) a greater degree of economic interventionism and social conservatism than is often assumed. For example, all party voter groups, including those who plan to vote Conservative (+6%) are net supportive of the idea that the government should “redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off”, while all party voter groups, including those planning to vote Green (+11%) are net supportive of the statement “For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence”.<sup>47</sup>

However, when looking by age, we can see that there is strong variation between different age cohorts. Figure 21 below shows the density of values within each age cohort in the UK today, across both social (liberal to conservative) and economic (left to right) dimensions. The darker the colour, the more voters in that age group share that values combination. As you can see, younger voters are considerably more clustered around a set of distinct values, and tend to be more liberal socially and left-leaning economically.

Older voters, by contrast, are much more varied in their values, with both a broader spread and less density around certain values combinations. This suggests that if the culture war exists anywhere, it is among voters over the age of 55 years old, or between some of those voters and younger, more values-consistent groups.

### Figure 21: Density of social and economic values by age cohort

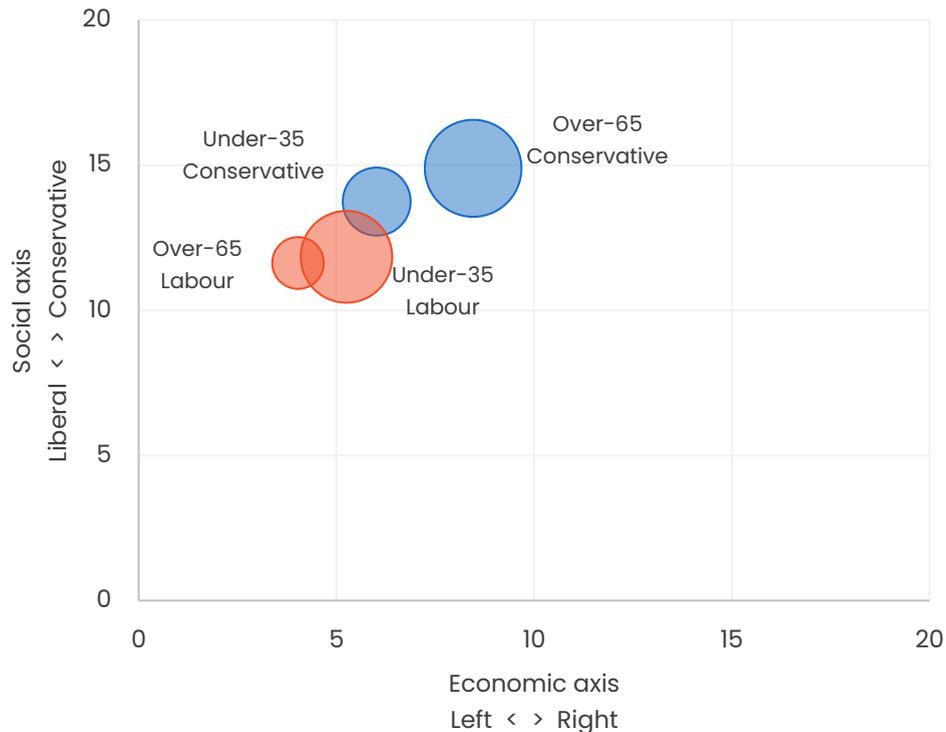
Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



This pattern also bears out within political parties. When broken down by both party and age group, where older is over 65 years old and younger is under 35 years old, we can see that younger voters coalesce while older voters are much more dispersed in their values set. Older Conservatives are to the Right of younger Conservatives and older Labour voters to the Left of younger Labour supporters.

**Figure 22: Social and economic values by age group and vote intention**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



Note: On the social axis, higher values indicate greater social conservatism. On the economic axis, higher values indicate stronger preference for right-wing, free-market values. The bubbles represent the relative size of each group.

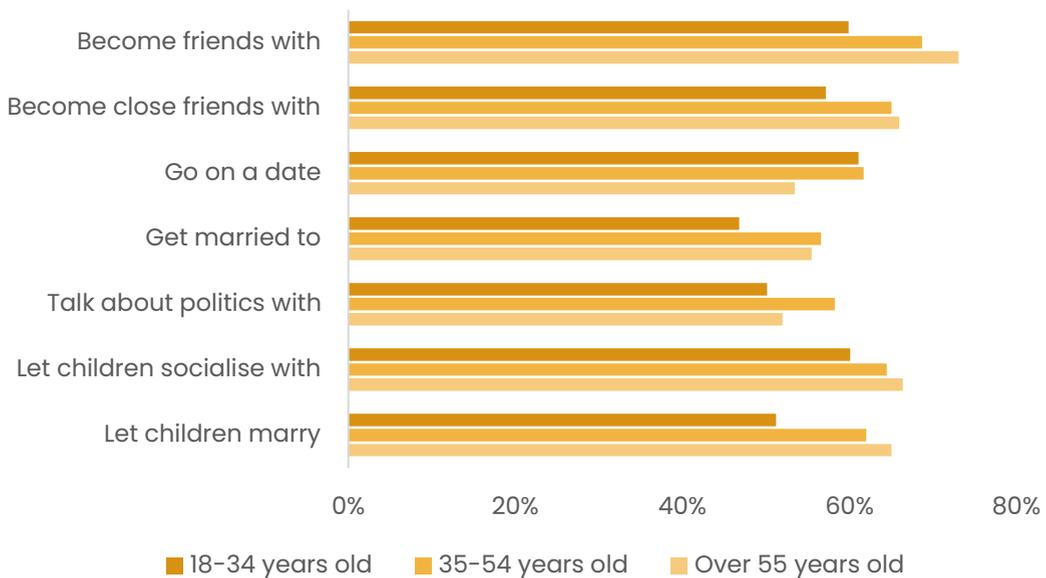
This relative lack of issue polarisation is reinforced by other analysis. Polling by YouGov has previously found that many self-described left-leaning people support right-of-centre policies, including tighter controls on immigration (50%) and many right-leaning people supporting left-of-centre policies, such as railway nationalisation (47%).<sup>48</sup> And experts such as James Kanagasooriam have suggested the general public lacks ideological consistency, supporting an often counterintuitive mix of left and right-wing views.<sup>49</sup> Traditional political frames,

far from being more deeply embedded in a self-reinforcing culture war, may be becoming less relevant for understanding the UK electorate. Indeed, a recent King’s College London report concluded that “association of specific issue positions with the political spectrum appears to be fairly weak in the UK, relative to trends in the US.”<sup>50</sup>

The second type of polarisation is *affective* polarisation, whereby people dislike or distrust those with other political viewpoints. This appears to be much greater among younger voters than older age groups. As shown in Figure 23 below, 18–34-year-olds are less likely than older age groups to say they would be friendly with people from other parties across a range of different situations.

**Figure 23: Proportion willing to consider ‘X’ with someone who voted for the opposite party, by age bracket**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



Over-55s are much more likely than 18-34s to say they would be happy for their children to marry someone from a different party. 65% of over-55s would be happy for a child to marry someone politically opposed to them, versus 12% who would not (net +53%). This compares to 51% and 29% respectively among 18-34s, giving net agreement of just +23%. Young people are also more than twice as likely as over-55s to say they would not consider even being friends with someone from a different party (26% to 11%), with a stark divide in net support for this between the two age groups (+34% to +62%). The only

exceptions are dating, where young people are marginally less likely than over-55s to say they would not consider dating someone who supports the party they oppose (22% to 21%) and talking about politics (29% to 27%).

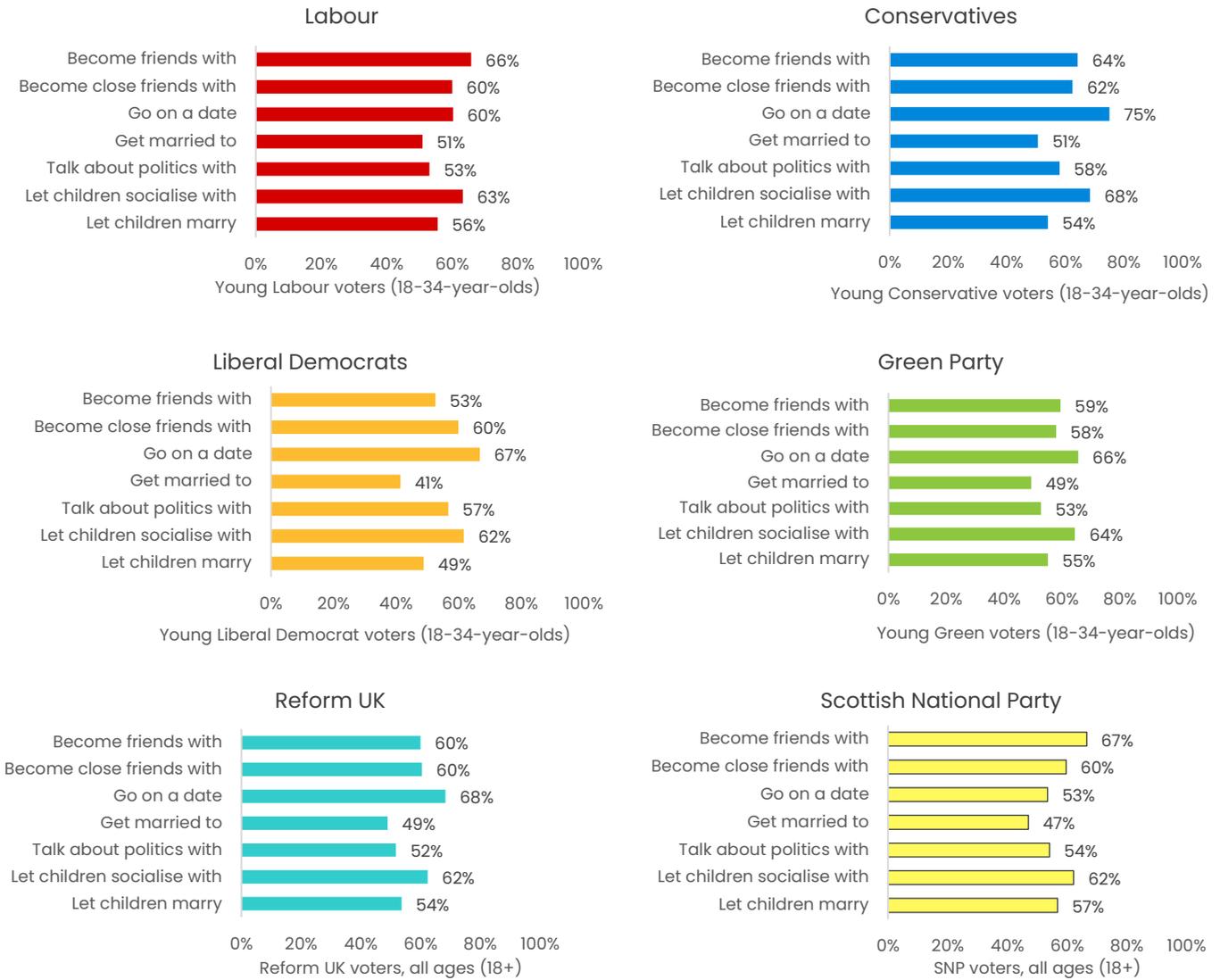
And young people's political views and identity are becoming increasingly intertwined. The proportion of 16-21-year-olds who say their political beliefs is "very" or "fairly" important to their sense of who they are has increased from 27% to 43% between 2011-12 and 2018-19.<sup>51</sup> And there is evidence of a decline in shared identities: the proportion of 16-24-year-olds who feel they very strongly or fairly strongly belong to Britain has fallen from 86% in 2013-14 to 79% in 2020/21.<sup>52</sup>

But *affective* polarisation is as much a function of party preference as of age. Voters for left-of-centre parties typically express much lower levels of willingness to engage voters from other parties than from centre-right voters. For example, 75% of young Conservative voters would consider dating a Labour voter, while 15% would not (net +60%). This compares to just 60% among Labour voters who would date a Conservative and 25% who would not (net+35%). While the sample sizes are too small to look at the views of young SNP and Reform UK voters, comparing their supporters of all ages to those of the other parties suggests supporters of these two parties are the most intolerant. Just 47% of all SNP voters and 49% of all Reform UK voters would consider marrying someone who supported a party they opposed, compared to 60% of Conservative voters.

The extent to which progressives are particularly prone to this kind of political-social intolerance is reinforced by YouGov analysis. According to their work, the proportion of 18-24 year old Labour voters who say they would be upset if they had a child who married a Conservative voter has tripled in three years, from 17% in 2016 to 51% in 2019, and the number of young Labour voters who would not consider dating a Conservative (42%) is nearly twice as high as young Conservatives the other way around (22%).<sup>53</sup> This is not confined to party politics. Recent polling commissioned by King's College London shows that 29% of Remainers say it's hard to be friends with people who voted Leave. Meanwhile, 55% of those backing the Black Lives Matter movement and 47% who say trans rights haven't gone far enough say it would be difficult to be friends with people who don't share their views on these issues.<sup>54</sup>

**Figure 24: How likely would you be to consider the following in relation to someone who voted for the opposite party to you? By vote intention.**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022<sup>55</sup>



We also find evidence that rising *affective* polarisation is linked to declining support for democracy. If we create a composite score for political animosity based on the seven questions outlined above, most people are tolerant of other people with opposing politics.<sup>56</sup> After excluding “don’t knows”, 54% of 18-34-year-olds and 71% of over-35s would consistently connect with people with whom they disagree politically. But those that do report animosity towards their political opponents are much more likely to support anti-democratic forms of government: 71% of young people who express some degree of animosity believe a strong leader would be a good form of government, compared to 53% who report no political animosity, while 59% of young people expressing animosity towards their opponents back army rule, compared to 40% expressing no such animosity.<sup>57</sup>

There are a number of theories for why *affective* polarisation may be rising. The academics Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff both argue that the decline of common enemies and challenges, like the Soviet Union during the Cold War, have contributed to political polarisation. Likewise, they argue that current “college students have lived through extraordinary times” and that this has contributed to a “extraordinary passion for social justice”, but one which can have a polarising influence on their perspectives.<sup>58</sup> They also point to increasing bitter hostility in Congress since the 1990s, trickling down to the voters. These factors appear plausible in the UK, given 18-34-year-olds’ exposure to the worst consequences of the 2008 financial crash, the pandemic, and today’s cost of living crisis. A recent study by King’s College London for example noted that “Voters to some extent take cues from party platforms and leaders, so polarisation among political leaders and activists can spread to the electorate”.<sup>59</sup>

Second, there is the “Big Sort” theory, first coined by Bill Bishop in the United States and supported in the UK by Jon Yates.<sup>60</sup> Bishop argues that political divides in the United States are being driven by residential self-segregation, this theory suggests that people are increasingly only interacting with people similar to themselves.<sup>61</sup> Proponents of the theory suggest that this is making it harder to build consensus and empathy across political divides.

There is some evidence to support a “Big Sort” in the UK. Research by Danny Dorling shows that the UK became more geographically polarised in the twenty years between the 1981 and 2001 census.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, a recent London School of Economics study found evidence for geographical polarisation by

income and work performed, in both low income communities such as Oldham and Margate, as well as more affluent places like Oxford and Tunbridge Wells.<sup>63</sup>

More recent data from Understanding Society shows that young people's friendship circles have become more homogenous. The proportion of 18-34-year-olds reporting that all their friends are a similar age to them rose 30% between 2011-12 and 2017-18 (30% to 39%). There has also been an increase, albeit smaller, in the proportion of young people reporting that all their friends have a similar level of education to them (31% to 33%).<sup>64</sup> Our survey shows that young people's friendship groups tend to be more politically homogeneous than older people's: 49% of 18-34-year-olds say more than half of their friends have similar political beliefs to them, compared to 37% of those aged 35 and over.<sup>65</sup>

Third, some experts point towards the increasing role of social media in young people's lives, a theory explored in the final section of this chapter. But our analysis points towards a fourth potential driver: the increasing inability to disagree agreeably.

Young people who talk about politics with friends who disagree with them are much more likely to back a strong leader or army rule than those who only talk to friends that agree with them. For example, those who say all of the friends that they talk politics with support the party they oppose are three times more likely to support army rule than those who only say none of the friends they talk politics with support that party (73% to 22%). Regression analysis in Appendix 1 shows that the political values of friends that young people talk politics with are one of the most significant drivers of support for army rule and a strong leader.

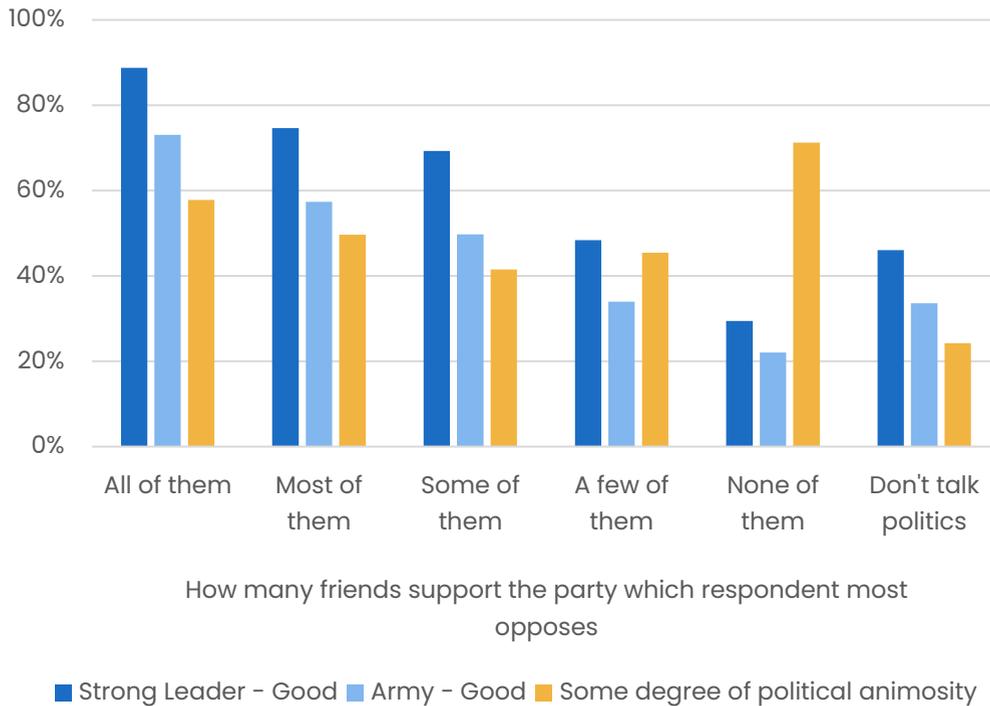
The gap in support for a strong leader is similarly wide (89% to 29%). But young people who talk politics with friends who disagree with them are also much more likely to report no political animosity:

- Young people who only talk politics with friends that agree with them report the highest levels of political animosity (71%).
- Those who only talk politics with friends who disagree with them also report fairly high levels of animosity (58%).
- Those who report that only "some" of their friends disagree with them report low levels of animosity (41%), reinforcing the idea that pluralism in political discourse breeds moderation and support for democracy.

- Finally, those who don't talk politics with friends at all report the lowest levels of animosity (24%), but this may just be a reflection of the fact that people who are not politically engaged do not have strong views about politics.

**Figure 25: Levels of animosity and authoritarianism, by the number of friends that support an opposing political party, under-35s only**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



Happily, some have argued that *affective* polarisation can be fairly quickly reversed if people with different views talk to each other in a constructive way. In *The Lonely Century*, Noreena Hertz points to the *Deutschland Spricht* or “Germany Talks” scheme, run by *Die Zeit* newspaper as a ‘political Tinder’, matching people with divergent political views through an algorithm and encouraging them to meet up. Afterwards, participants considered people with different views to be less malicious, less incompetent and less poorly informed than before.<sup>66</sup>

## 2. Is overprotective parenting undermining young people's independence and social capabilities?

In October 2021, the *Financial Times* columnist Sarah O'Connor posted a Resolution Foundation graph on Twitter showing that both male and female parents spent well over twice as much time caring for children in 2014-15 as they did in 1974, posing the question: "who on earth was looking after the kids in the 70s?!"<sup>67</sup>

The question, and the online discussion it provoked, was instructive. Many of her followers simply responded that they looked after themselves, including at landfill sites, in national parks and on the street. It is precisely this shift - away from unsupervised and independent play to more parental oversight and management of children - that many believe to be responsible for some of the atomisation experienced by young people across the West.

Most prominently, Haidt and Lukianoff have argued that the rise of "paranoid parenting" is undermining children's social skills. They argue that parents have become drawn to "safetyism" which they describe as "overestimating danger, fetishizing safety, and not accepting any risk".<sup>68</sup> As Lenore Skenazy, who set up the "Free-Range Kids" movement, has argued, increasingly "any risk is seen as too much risk" for parents, and "these parents don't seem to realise ... the greatest risk of all just might be trying to raise a child who never encounters any risks".<sup>69</sup>

Family expert Steven Horwitz argued that reduced time for children to play independently of adult interference deprives children of opportunities to build the social skills and emotional resilience they need to meet the challenges of adulthood. Horwitz even goes so far to argue that the decline of free play and rise of supervision "pose a threat to liberal societies", because over-supervision could be "flipping our default setting from 'figure out how to solve this conflict on your own' to 'invoke force and/or third parties whenever conflict arises'".<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, Harvard academic Michael Sandel has argued that over-parenting stems from rising credentialism and associated increases in school work. As he puts it, seeking to avoid the "fear of falling ... parents have become intensely involved with their children's lives - managing their time, monitoring their grades, directing their activities, curating their college qualifications".<sup>71</sup> Another

academic, Annette Lareau, refers to this as the “concerted cultivation” style of parenting.<sup>72</sup>

Implicit in each of these arguments is a belief that the kind of unsupervised play that Sarah O'Connor revealed in the 1970s was more conducive to strong social norms. Haidt and Lukianoff, for example, suggest that unsupervised play can help create empathy, because when playing in this way “anyone can quit at any time and disrupt the activity, so children must pay close attention to the needs and concerns of others”.<sup>73</sup> And there is some evidence to suggest a long-term decline in empathy, at least in the United States: a 2010 meta-analysis found that levels of empathetic concern and perspective-taking among American college students have declined since 1979, and particularly sharply after the millennium.<sup>74</sup>

But what evidence is there to suggest these trends are taking place in the UK, and how strongly can we link them to declining connection and rising atomisation among young adults?

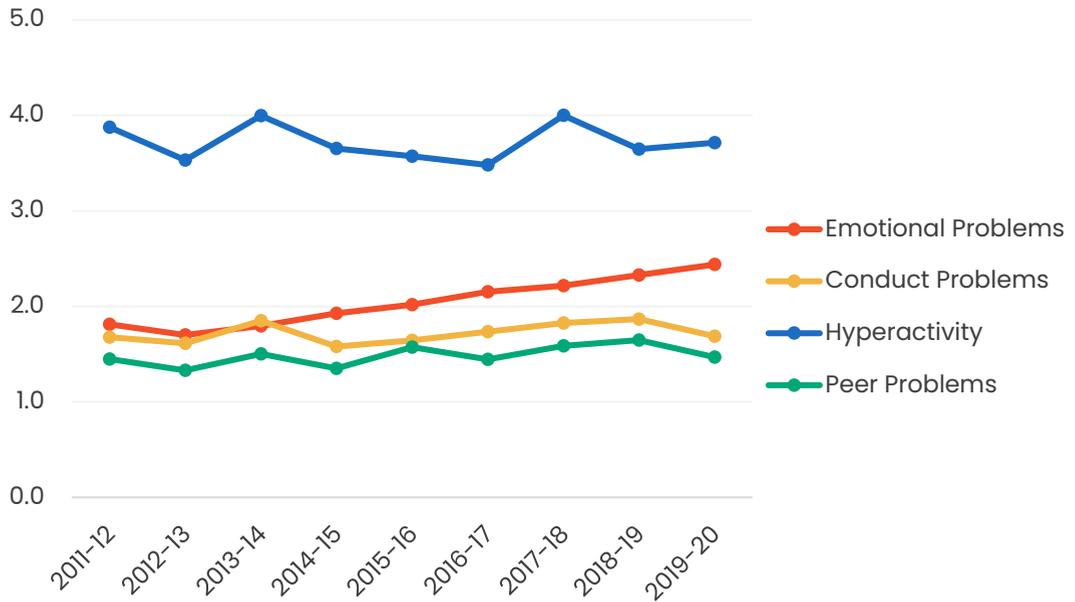
First, it is clear that levels of worry, unhappiness, nervousness, fearfulness, and solitary behaviour are all on the rise in children in the UK, in a similar way to the United States. According to the responses to the 20-question Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which collects information from parents for children aged 5 and 8, and children themselves for those aged 10 to 15, emotional problems have risen sharply among children in the last decade. The average score for “emotional problems” among 8-year-olds has risen by 34% since 2011 and by 24% among those aged 10 to 15. Over the same period, the average score for “peer problems” in 10- to 15-year-olds also increased by 20%.<sup>75</sup>

The increases in these composite scores are being driven by increases in the prevalence of five specific problems. For children aged 10 to 15, average scores for four of the five problems that make up the “emotional problems” scale have increased significantly: worrying (12%), unhappiness and tearfulness (10%), having lots of fears (10%), and nervousness in new situations (9%). By contrast, only one of the five problems that make up the “peer problems” scale has increased: agreement with the statement: “I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep to myself” (12%).<sup>76</sup>

Emotional problems in childhood often carry over into young adulthood. Looking at longitudinal Understanding Society data, we find that early teens who report childhood worries, unhappiness, fears, and solitary behaviour at age 14 or 15 are much more likely to report loneliness at ages 18 to 23 than those who had not. Those who reported as children that it was “not true” they were often nervous were twice as likely as those that said this was “certainly true” to report being “hardly ever or never” lonely in young adulthood (60% to 28%). There were also significant gaps in reporting low or no loneliness as young adults between those who did not and did report unhappiness (50% to 26%), worries (53% to 30%), solitary behaviour (49% to 31%), and fears (48% to 36%) as children.<sup>77</sup>

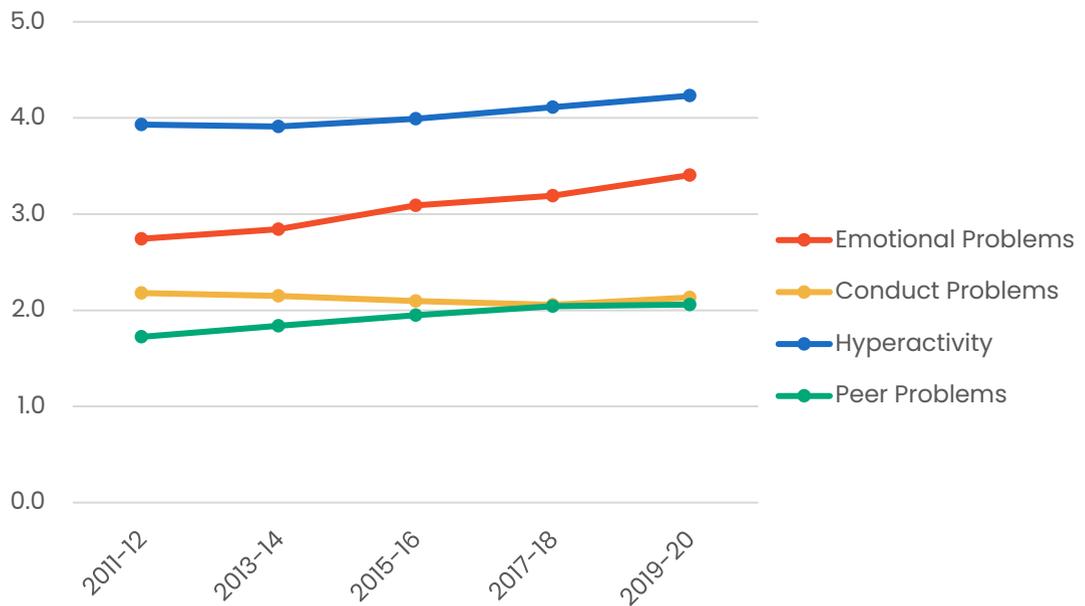
**Figure 26: Average scores from Child Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, at age 8, 2011 to 2020**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Waves 3 to 11



**Figure 27: Average scores from Child Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, at age 10-15, 2011 to 2020**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Waves 3 to 11



Rising childhood emotional problems may also be linked to increasing numbers of young people staying at home due to anxiety. The share of young adults who don't go out socially due to anxiety and a lack of confidence increased fivefold between 2011-12 and 2017-18 (from 6% to 32%). Early teens who report they “certainly” had many fears are twice as likely by age 16-22 to report not going out socially when compared with those who did not report any fears (18% to 9%). And of those who do not go out socially, those who reported fears as teens were significantly more likely to point to anxiety and a lack of confidence as the reason for why they did not go out (45% to 27%).<sup>78</sup>

Second, there is evidence to suggest independence in childhood is declining in the UK. Analysis shows that children are having less unstructured time in both school and at home. A 2019 study by the UCL has shown that since 1995 breaktimes have been reduced by an average of 45 minutes per week for KS1 students (aged 5-7) and 65 minutes per week for KS3 and KS4 students (aged 11-16). These changes result from cutting out afternoon breaks and shortening the lunch break. The same study also found there has been a marked decrease in the proportions of students who meet offline with peers outside of school, with children going to their friends' houses and taking part in offline activities with friends after school less often.<sup>79</sup>

Third, evidence points to a link between declining childhood independence and emotional and peer problems in children. A new study by child psychologist Professor Helen Dodd found evidence to support the hypothesis that when children play in an adventurous way, such as climbing trees or riding their bikes fast downhill, the fear they experience increases their ability to cope with anxiety.<sup>80</sup> Her research concluded that hours playing adventurously and hours playing outside both had small but statistically significant impacts on emotional and peer problems in children, as measured by the SDQ scale. Playing adventurously reduced the combined score of emotional and peer problems in children by an average of 13%, while playing outside reduced this score by 15%. The impact was even higher for children from low-income households, which Dodd suggests could be due to higher income children getting “exposure to adventure via more structured activities” such as “scouts, martial arts or adventure camps” which children from lower income families may have less opportunities to attend.<sup>81</sup>

Other studies have found evidence to suggest declining childhood independence is a result of “paranoid parenting” and over-cultivated

childhoods. One recent study found that the age at which children are allowed out alone has increased from age 9 a generation ago to around age 11 today.<sup>82</sup> The UCL study on children's social behaviour found that the most common reasons schools gave as to why they had to reduce break times were to create more time for covering the school curriculum and to reduce bullying that can occur during breaks.<sup>83</sup> While schools seeking to shield their pupils from bullying is clearly a laudable aim, depriving children of the chance to engage with each other and build social skills and resilience is clearly the wrong way to go about it.

These findings are supported by data from the Millennium Cohort Study, which reveals that 11-year-olds who spend lots of time unsupervised outside of home with their friends are less likely to report fears (28% to 33%) and nervousness in new situations (39% to 41%).<sup>84</sup>

This supports the idea that outdoor play helps protect against emotional problems in children. Aside from general reasons such as age and maturity, the most commonly cited reasons that parents of 11-year-olds do not allow them out unsupervised are a lack of friends nearby (13%), danger from adults (13%), and danger from traffic (12%). Each of these is ahead of the child not wanting to go out (10%).

Similarly, according to the British Social Attitudes survey, 63% of parents agree with the statement that it is less safe for children today to play outside than it was 10 years ago.<sup>85</sup>

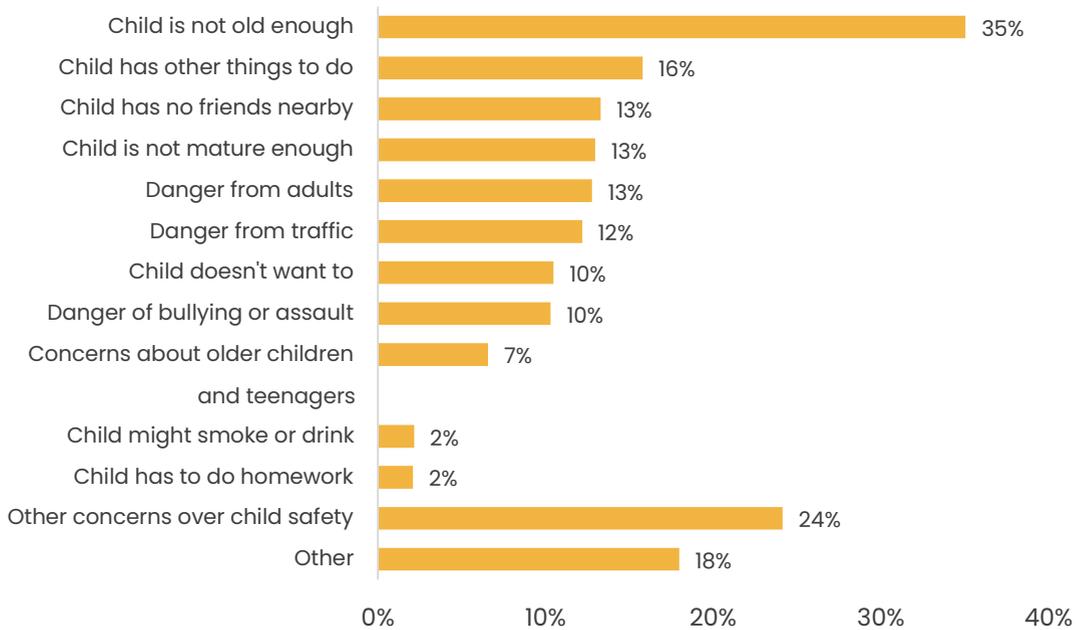
Notably, parents reporting that most people can be trusted are over twice as likely to disagree with the idea that the streets have become less safe for children as distrustful parents (37% to 15%).<sup>86</sup> This is also supported by the findings of focus groups convened to inform this report. Most young parents who attended said they wanted their children to spend more time outdoors in the fresh air with friends, learning social skills and getting healthier. But they did not feel able to break away from the perceived dangers their children face in the modern world.

It is likely that there is a cyclical effect at play: distrustful parents believe their children are at risk from "stranger danger", therefore curtail their opportunities for free play, contributing to their children developing worse social problems.

As an adult, the child then interacts less with others and therefore becomes less trustful themselves.

**Figure 28: Parental reasons given for why their child (aged 11) is not allowed to play outside, unsupervised with friends**

Source: Millennium Cohort Study Wave 5 (2012)



**3. Is the treadmill of modern work killing young people's social networks?**

Another culprit often put forward for growing mental illness and loneliness among young people is work. There are two broad interpretations as to why work is contributing to worse outcomes for young people. First, that work is becoming more stressful; second, that work is becoming less social - with a consensus that young people disproportionately suffer from both trends.

The writer Julia Hobsbawm, for example, argues that since 2008, "greater job and financial insecurity and the pressure to sustain ever higher levels of growth all contributed to levels of work-related stress rocketing".<sup>87</sup> Hobsbawm also states that well-being at work is linked to "control over your time, timelines and schedules".<sup>88</sup> Noreena Hertz has argued that "many aspects of modern-day

work, intended to make us more productive and efficient ... make us feel less connected and more isolated” - pointing to evidence that hotdesking and open plan offices are making people lonelier at work, and that many people report never or rarely eating lunch with their colleagues. <sup>89</sup>

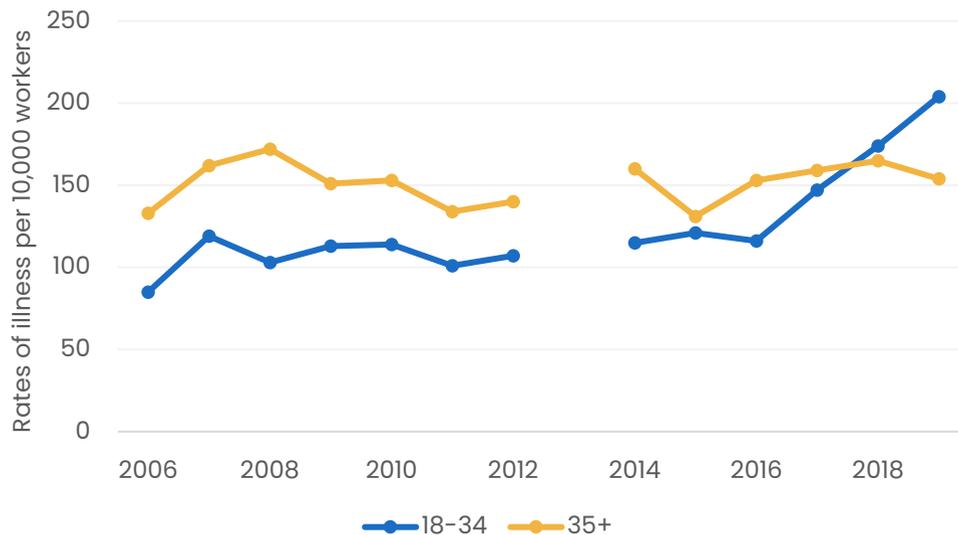
So, to what extent is it true that work is becoming more stressful and lonelier for younger people? And if so, what is driving these trends?

We find strong evidence that work has become more stressful, more arduous, and less autonomous for young people than in the past.

The proportion of 18–34-year-olds who report that work has made them ill with stress, depression or anxiety has increased rapidly since 2016, according to Labour Force Survey data. In 2016, the rate of work-related stress among young employed or self-employed people was 116 per 10,000, significantly below the rate of 153 per 10,000 for those aged 35 and over. In the following three years, rates among young workers rose to 204 per 10,000, a 76% rise. By contrast, the figure for over-35s remains broadly the same level as 2016, at 154 per 10,000. As a result, younger people now consistently report higher rates of work-related stress than older workers.

**Figure 29: Work-related stress, depression and anxiety per 10,000 workers, by age, 2006 to 2019**

Source: Onward analysis of Labour Force Survey 2006-2019

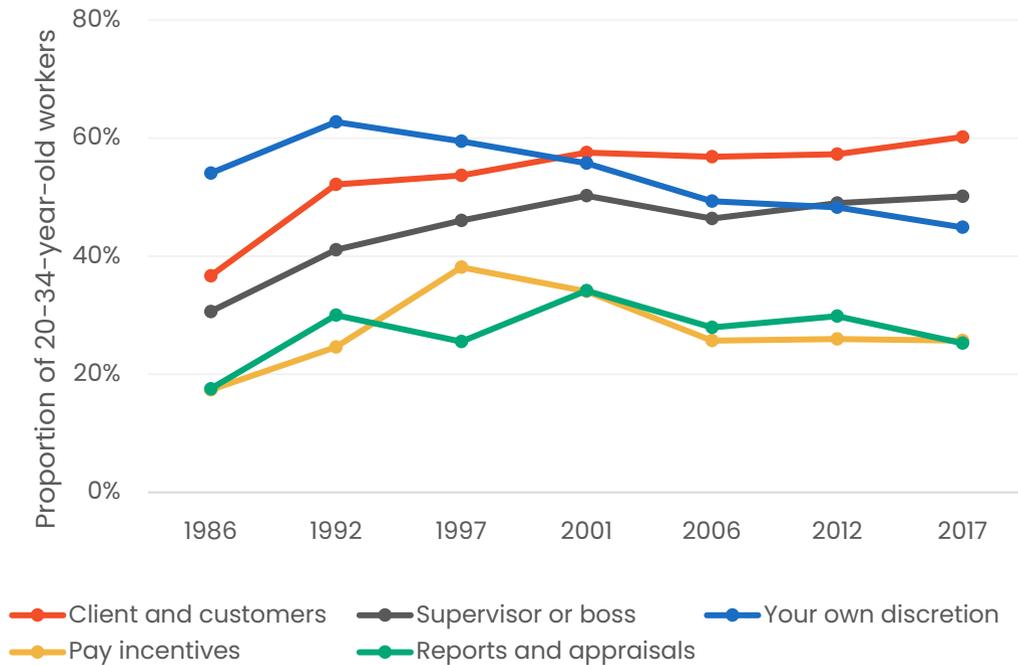


Note: This question was not asked in 2013. Only employees and self-employed respondents are shown.

The share of young people strongly agreeing that their job requires them to work hard has increased from 32% in 1992 to 45% in 2017, according to the Skills and Employment Survey, while the share stating that their work requires them to work at very high speed more than half the time has more than doubled, from 24% to 52% over the same period.<sup>90</sup> This is part of a wider trend affecting workers of all ages, with comparable increases among over-35s in reported hard work (31% to 47%) and high speed working (22% to 41%). Meanwhile, the share of young people who find work stressful “often” or “always” rose from 33% in 1989 to 38% in 2015, according to the British Social Attitudes survey, with a similar increase among over-35s (28% to 37%).<sup>91</sup>

**Figure 30: Factors in how hard young people work (20-34-year-olds), 1986 to 2017**

Source: Onward analysis of Skills and Employment Survey



The share of young people saying they have a great deal of influence over how hard they work has dropped from 69% in 1992 to 46% in 2017 while those saying their own discretion is important in determining how hard they work has dropped from 54% in 1986 to 45% in 2017. Meanwhile, the share who say that how they work is determined by their supervisors and bosses (31% in 1986 to 50% in 2017) or clients and customers (37% in 1986 to 60% in 2017) have risen

steeply.<sup>92</sup> Again, there are comparable trends among over 35s.<sup>93</sup> Understanding Society similarly finds that the proportion of young people reporting high levels of autonomy at work have decreased over the last decade.<sup>94</sup>

One explanation may be the use of technology at work. One recent study suggests that 32% of work intensification for adults of all ages since 2001 can be explained by the use of computers. The same analysis found that increasing team working, short and repetitive tasks, learning new things, and self-employment rates also had significant, but smaller, impacts.<sup>95</sup>

Meanwhile, a report by the Resolution Foundation has found that around one-fifth of the increase in work exhaustion since the 1990s can be explained by changes in the prevalence of certain occupations. Specifically, they point to the shift towards professional and managerial occupations, and away from manual work.<sup>96</sup> This suggests something specific about the nature of modern work, but more research is needed to fully understand the root causes of this trend.

The effect of rising work intensity on young people's connections is mixed. It is clear that in past decades, young people came to increasingly find friendships through work. The British Social Attitudes survey, for example, shows that the proportion of 18–34-year-olds with at least one close friend at work increased from 38% in 1986 to 62% in 2001. But a lack of data since then on this question makes it hard to assess whether this trend has continued. Meanwhile, different data suggests that the changing demands of work are now damaging young people's social connections.

For example, Time Use Survey data shows that workers' opportunity for socialising at work is reducing: between 2000 and 2015, the proportion of young people in full-time work skipping their lunch break increased from 40% to 47%, while the proportion of those taking their lunch break on their own rose from 13% to 17% over the same period.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the proportion of young people reporting they feel used up by the end of the working day much, most, or all of the time has increased from 22% in 1992 to 31% in 2017. This is a much larger increase than among over-35s (21% to 27%).<sup>98</sup>

In our survey, we find that almost half of young people (46%) say they would use any extra time they had to spend time by themselves.<sup>99</sup> This corresponds to qualitative research conducted for this report, where young people expressed a desire for more “me time” and “time to reset and focus on yourself” and

previous focus groups for Onward which found young people saying they were “too knackered to go to the pub”.

#### 4. Is technology making young people lonely and authoritarian?

The most frequently cited culprit for declining connection and associated problems is the changing use and nature of technology. This narrative broadly fits into four categories:

- 1. Socialising online is damaging the quality of young people’s relationships.** Noreena Hertz, for example, claims that socialising in person is qualitatively better than online communications and that trends towards socialising online risk damaging our social skills.<sup>100</sup> She writes: “as the calculator has destroyed our collective ability to do mental arithmetic, so too does the digital communication revolution risk leaving us ill equipped to effectively communicate in person.”<sup>101</sup>
- 2. Social media is fuelling mental illness among young people.** Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge argue that the advent of social media is the only plausible explanation for falling mental well-being, given the self-reported relationship among sufferers, the timing of rising prevalence with the first generation of social media users, and the mixed evidence base about the impact of social media.<sup>102</sup> Some studies suggest that social media users often compare themselves with others’ appearance, ability, popularity, and social skills.<sup>103</sup> But claims about the negative impacts of social media are heavily contested by other studies.<sup>104</sup>
- 3. Technology use, particularly online streaming, has reduced community engagement.** Robert Putnam has argued that watching television is “the single most consistent predictor” of disengagement from community life.<sup>105</sup> Jon Yates has argued that “TV was the killer competition for the industrial age’s voluntary common life”, pointing towards the “Notel” natural experiment of the 1980s which found associational life plummet when television arrived in a town.<sup>106, 107</sup>

- 4. Social media is damaging democracy by fuelling political polarisation and extremism.** Haidt has also argued that social media has eroded each of the “three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories.”<sup>108</sup> Political strategists such as Lynton Crosby have similarly blamed social media, labelling these platforms as “an echo chamber for anger”.<sup>109</sup> And social media has been linked to online “incel” culture, misogyny and trolling, and political extremism.<sup>110</sup>

Our survey provides up to date estimates of technology use among different age cohorts in society. We find considerable variation by age and economic status:

- Nearly three in ten (28%) 18-34s spend four or more hours on a typical day interacting with friends on social media websites. This is 7 times the share for over-55s (4%). Among 18-24s, nearly 4 in 10 (37%) spend this much time online, rising to 40% among students between the ages of 18-34 years old. One in seven (15%) 18-24-year-olds are extreme social media users, spending more than seven hours a day on social media, compared to just 1% for those over the age of 55 years old. Again, this is highest among university students, with less variation by employment or marital status.<sup>111</sup>
- Three in ten (30%) 18-34-year-olds also say they spend four or more hours on a typical working day playing video games, rising to 34% among 18-24s. This is twice the share for 35-54s (16%) and six times the level for over 55s (5%). This is marginally higher among married (32%) than single (28%) 18-34s and highest among unemployed 18-34s, 45% of whom spend more than 4 hours playing video games.<sup>112</sup>
- There is much less variation in television usage. 48% of 18-34s watch 4+ hours of TV on a typical working day, compared to 51% among 35-54s and 63% for over 55s. There is no significant variation between young people in different forms of employment or marital status. This is also true at more extreme levels of TV viewing: while young people are overall much less likely to watch seven or more hours of TV (20%) than over 55s (35%), unemployed, student and single 18-34s are only marginally more likely to do so (27%, 25%, and 22% respectively).<sup>113</sup>

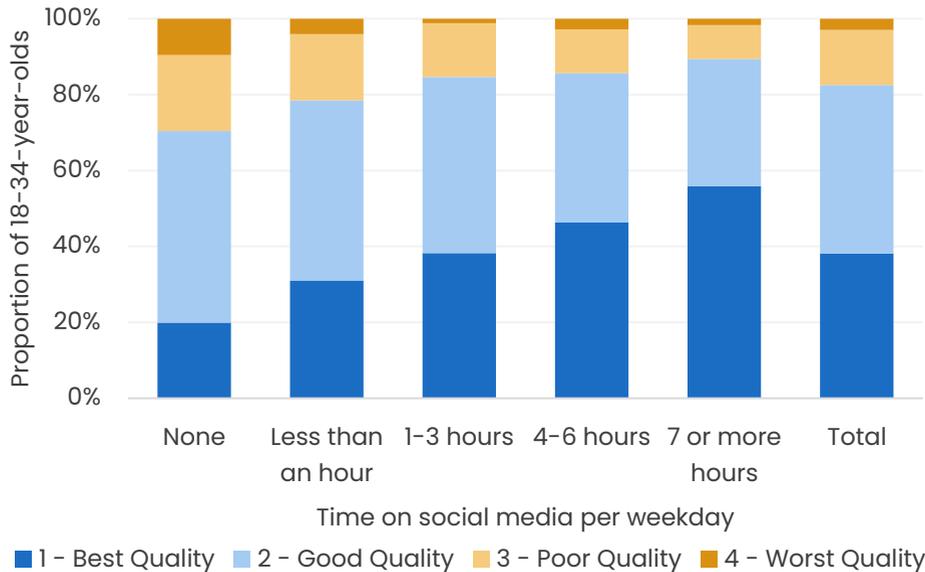
Due to the large sample nature of our survey, we are able to test each of the hypotheses listed above by looking at the correlation between technology use and different forms of democratic disengagement and social atomisation.

#### 4.1. Evidence suggesting that socialising online impacts on the quality of relationships is weak

It is not clear that socialising online, in and of itself, has a material effect on the quality of friendships among young people. In fact, young people spending more time socialising online tend to report better quantity and quality of friends. For example, of those spending four or more hours a day on social media, 65% report above average quality of friends and 57% report four or more close friends, far higher than the figures for those spending less than an hour on social media a day (43% and 45% respectively). Separate data for social media use per month shows a similar trend, with higher use associated with higher quality of friends. There is an exception: Understanding Society data shows that those who never use social media are the most likely to report the best quality friendships (49%), although this does not hold for Onward’s 2022 survey.

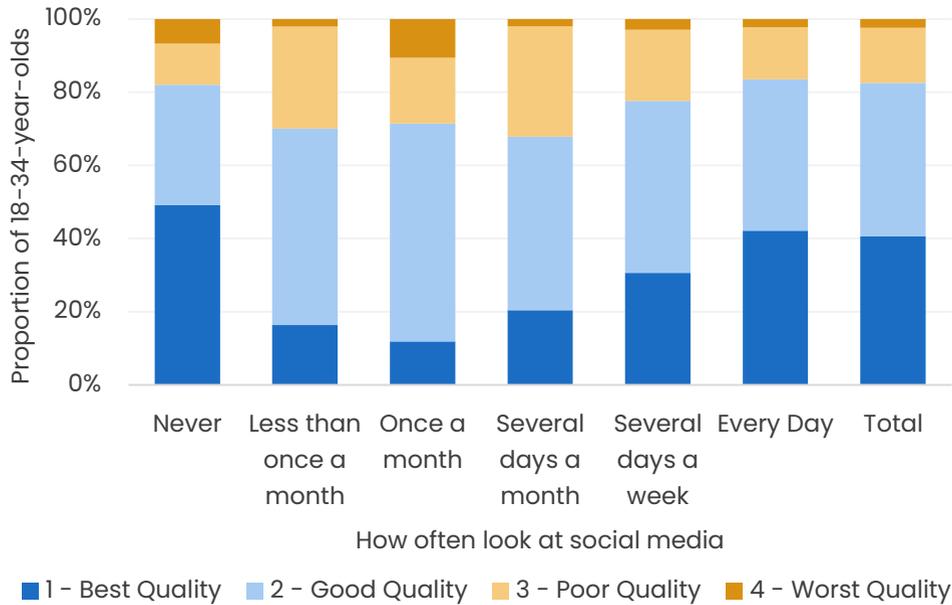
**Figure 31: Friend quality versus young adult’s time on social media per weekday (18-34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



**Figure 32: Friend quality versus young adult’s time on social media per month (18–34-year-olds), 2019–20**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11.



The relationship between friend quality and time on social media could be a result of these platforms being used to maintain existing strong friendships with friends living far away, a point raised by a number of young people in focus groups organised to inform this report. However, the data suggests the proportion of one’s friends living in the local area has very little association with time spent on social media by young people. In fact, those stating that half or more of their friends live in a different area are marginally more likely to spend less than an hour on social media, than those reporting over half of them living locally (35% to 32%).<sup>114</sup>

However, young people who “very often” spend time at the pub with friends or playing sports are more likely than those who “very often” watch television with their friends to report the highest quality of friends (56% and 48% to 43%) and are slightly more likely to report having seven or more close friends (21% and 20% to 16%).<sup>115</sup>

## 4.2. We do find evidence of a relationship between social media use and self-reported mental health

The link between social media use and mental illness is complex and highly contested. Academics such as Jean Twenge have used PISA data on loneliness to argue that there is strong correlation between social media use, and screen time more generally, and mental wellbeing.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile other academics, such as Amy Orban, argue that, while such a link may exist, observational time-use studies show no clear correlation between social media and depression.<sup>117</sup> Other studies have found evidence that the “biological, psychological, and social changes” that children go through in adolescence can create “developmental windows of sensitivity to social media”, at which stage kids are most vulnerable to the worst impacts of these platforms.<sup>118</sup>

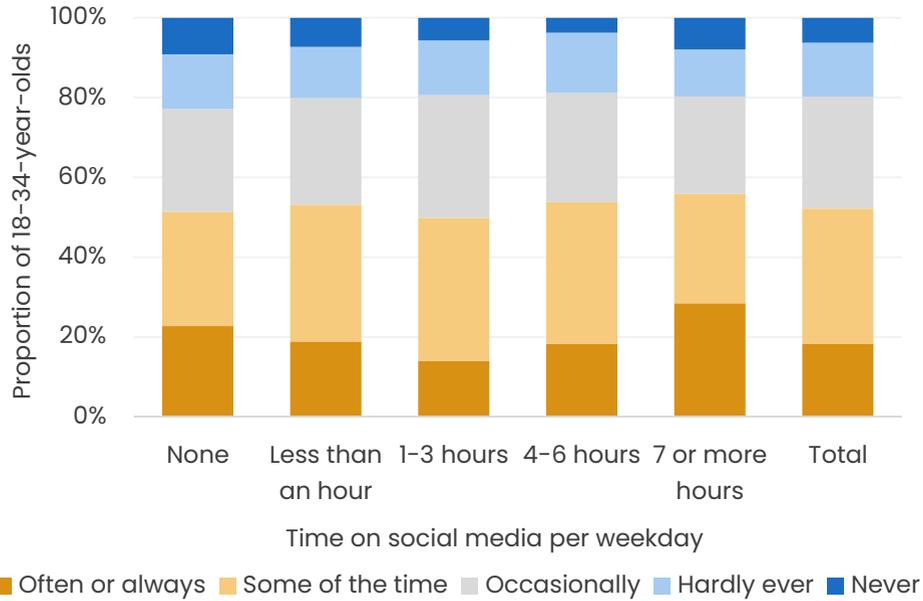
Our data is self-reported for 18-34-year-olds and therefore not equivalent to these academic studies. But it does offer a useful perspective. We ask two questions. First, is there a correlation between *time* spent on social media and mental health? Second, is there a correlation between the *way* in which social media is used and mental health?

There is some evidence of a relationship between time spent on social media and mental health among young adults, but it is not a linear one. Young people who spend the most (seven or more) hours on social media a day are considerably more likely than the average 18-34 year old to say they are “often or always” lonely (28% to 18%). But those who report no time on social media a day are also more lonely than average (23%). Moderate social media users (1-3 hours per day) are least likely to be often or always lonely (14%).

There is a clearer relationship between social media use and emotional and peer problems in children. Returning to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire for 10-15-year-olds, those spending lots of time on social media disproportionately struggled with emotional problems. For example, children of this age who spend four or more hours per weekday on social media are more likely than those who spend no time on social media to report “certainly” worrying a lot (40% to 24%), being nervous in new situations (36% to 24%), having many fears (17% to 9%), and being unhappy (12% to 4%). Rates for solitary behaviour were broadly comparable regardless of social media use.

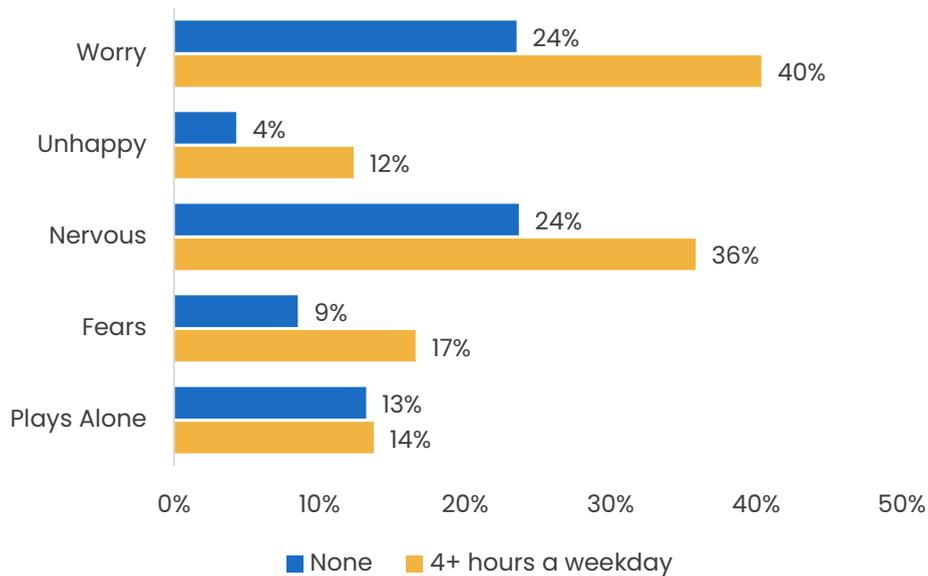
**Figure 33: Loneliness among young adults by hours of social media per day (18-34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



**Figure 34: Children reporting emotional and social issues, by social media use (10-15-year-olds), 2019-20**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11 <sup>119</sup>

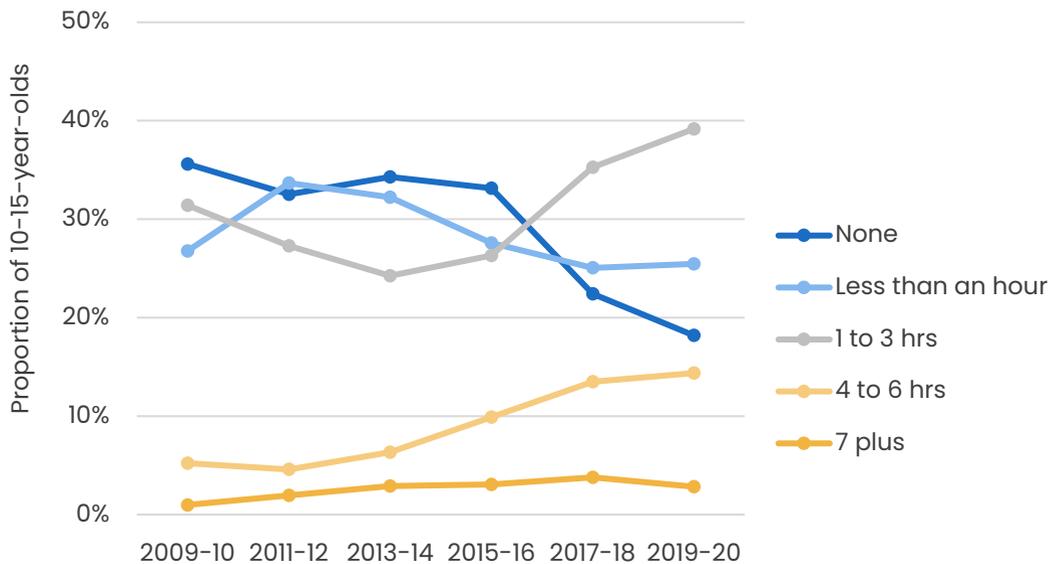


Social media use is just one of several factors that predicts whether a child struggles with emotional problems, but it is one of the only such factors to have significantly changed in recent years. Our regression analysis identifies a number of statistically significant factors that predict the five problem behaviours that are getting worse among children. These factors include happiness with schoolwork, happiness with their friends, the extent to which they feel supported by their parents, whether they are physically or verbally bullied, and how often they play sport.

But only three of these factors have changed significantly in the last decade: the share of children “completely” happy with friends, which declined from 60% in 2009-10 to 49% in 2019-20; the share of children playing sport five or more days a week, which fell from 48% to 33% over the same period; and the amount of social media use among 10-15-year-olds, with the share using social media less than one hour a weekday or not at all has fallen from 62% to 44% while the share spending more than four hours a day on social media has almost tripled (6% to 17%).<sup>120</sup>

**Figure 35: Proportion of children by time spent on social media per weekday (10-15-year-olds), 2009-2020**

Source: Onward analysis of Understanding Society Waves 1 to 11



The decline in sporting activity in children is also concerning because sport is a particularly strong predictor of better emotional resilience and social activity in children. Children who play sport less than once a week are twice as likely as those who play more than 5 days a week to report certainly spending most of their time alone (18% to 8%) and having many fears (23% to 11%). They are also significantly more likely to report being nervous in new situations (40% to 25%).<sup>121</sup>

The rising level of time spent on social media is correlated with declining sporting activity. Children who play sport less than once a week are nearly three times more likely to spend four or more hours on social media a day (34%) as those who play sport or exercise daily (13%). And 22% of children who never use social media play sport or exercise daily, around twice the rate of those who spend more than four hours on social media a day (12%).<sup>122</sup>

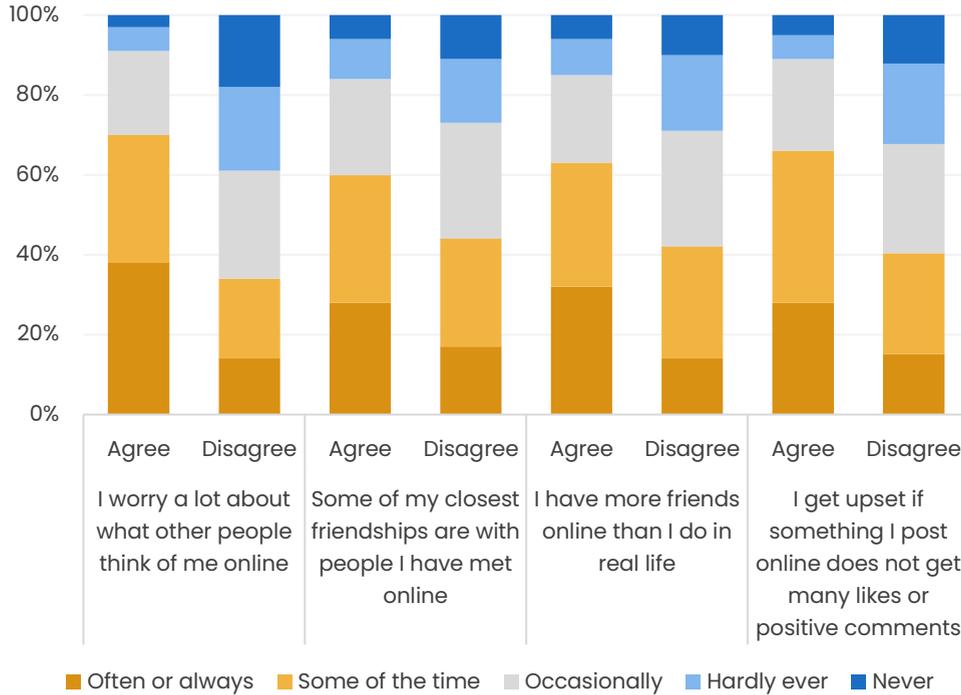
We also find evidence for a relationship between the way in which social media is used and mental wellbeing. We find that 18–34-year-olds seeking validation through social media are more likely to be lonely, lending credence to the theory that these platforms lead to negative social comparison. Those strongly agreeing with the statement that “I worry a lot about what other people think of me online” are more than twice as likely as those strongly disagreeing to report being lonely “often or always” (38% to 14%) and six times less likely to report “never” being lonely (3% to 18%). Those who strongly agree they “get upset if something I post online does not get many likes” are almost twice as likely as those strongly disagreeing to report being lonely often or always (28% to 15%).

Similarly, young people who strongly agree with the statement “I have more friends online than I do in real life” are twice as likely as those strongly disagreeing to report “often or always” being lonely (32% to 14%). There is a smaller gap in the highest levels of loneliness between young people strongly agreeing with the statement “some of my closest friendships are with people I have met online” and those strongly disagreeing (28% to 17%).

The proportion of young people agreeing with these statements is high. 46% of them agree with the statement on worrying about what people think about them online, while 35% report getting upset if they don’t get enough likes and comments. Over a third (38%) of 18–34-year-olds report some of their closest friendships have been with people online and say that they have more friends online than in real life (36%).<sup>123</sup>

**Figure 36: Loneliness compared with “strong” agreement and disagreement with statements on problem uses of social media among young adults (18–34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022.<sup>124</sup>



### 4.3. Excessive television use is associated with reduced community engagement, but time on social media is not

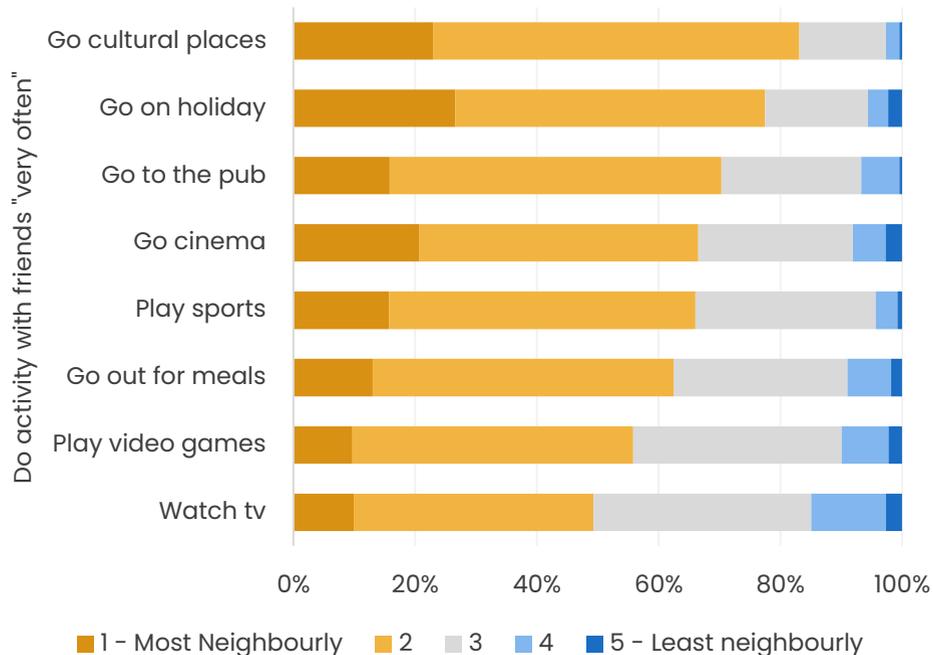
Our survey shows the clear link between technology use and engagement with one’s local community, but a large amount of variation depending on the type of technology involved. For example, young people who spend seven or more hours watching television are half as likely to volunteer than those who spend less than an hour a weekday watching TV (24% to 52%). Lengthy television use is also associated with reduced neighbourliness. Young people watching television more than seven hours a day are almost twice as likely as those who spend less than an hour a day watching TV to report the lowest neighbourly scores (21% to 12%) and are significantly less likely to report the highest neighbourly scores (36% to 47%).<sup>125</sup>

However, this is inverted for social media use and video gaming: 23% of young people who never game and 41% of those who never use social media volunteer, compared to 38% who spend seven or more hours gaming a day and 45% who spend more than seven hours a day on social media.<sup>126</sup> More time on social media tends to be associated with higher neighbourliness, while there is no clear relationship between time gaming and neighbourliness.

Likewise, socialising within the community is associated with higher levels of connection to one’s neighbourhood and the people within it. Those who “very often” visit cultural places with friends are much more likely to report high neighbourliness as those who “very often” stay in and watch TV with friends (83% to 49%). But young people are four times as likely to say they “very often” watch tv with friends, compared to those visiting cultural attractions (41% to 10%).

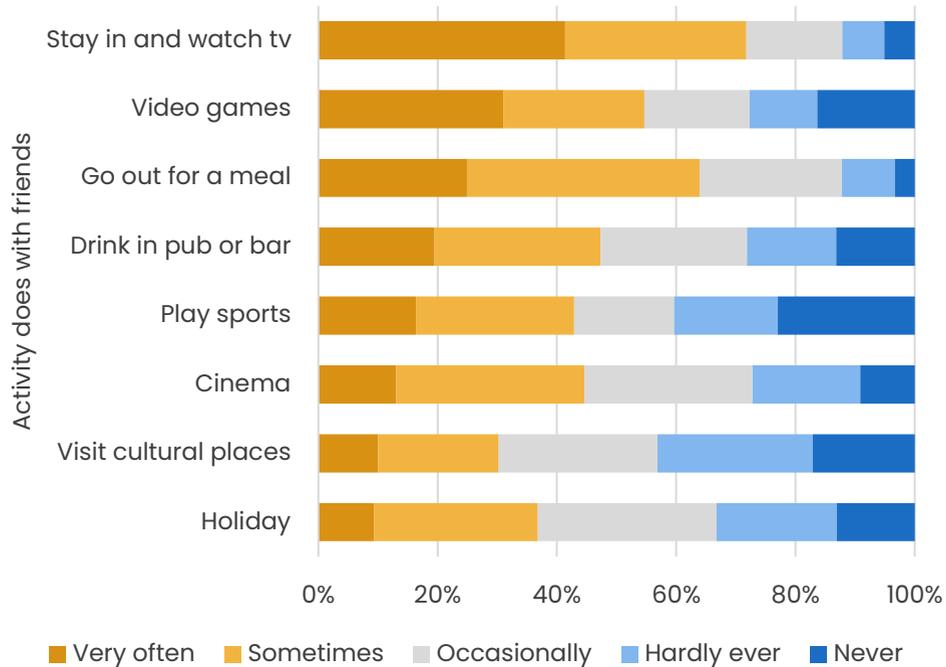
**Figure 37: Neighbourliness scores for young adults by activities they report doing “very often” with friends (18-34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022.



**Figure 38: Frequency of doing social activity with friends among young adults (18–34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



#### 4.4. Greater internet use is associated with political polarisation and declining democratic support

Finally, our survey allows us to examine the relationship between social media and anti-democratic views, and the relationship between social media and political values.

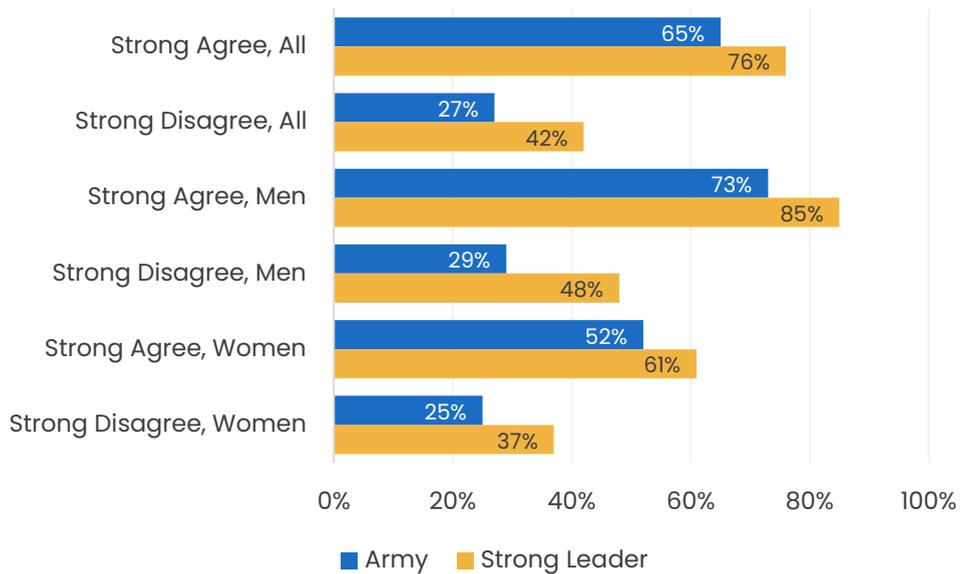
We find correlations between a number of factors. Again, it is largely the way in which social media is used rather than the time spent on these platforms that predicts problems. Young people who have more friends online than in real life are much more authoritarian in their views. Those strongly agreeing that “I have more friends online than I do in real life” are twice as likely to back army rule as those strongly disagreeing (65% to 27%) and much more likely to back a strong leader (76% to 42%). Interestingly, these gaps are driven by gender: 18–34-year-old men who have more friends online than in real life are more likely to back army rule than young women who say the same (73% to 52%) and young

men with more friends online than in real life are significantly more likely to back a strong leader than young women who also strongly agree with the statement (85% men to 61% women).

We observe similar effects for time spent on social media per day. Young men who spend seven or more hours on social media a day are much more likely to support army rule than those who spend no time on social media (61% to 49%). By comparison, the gap is much smaller for young women: 41% of those spending over seven hours a day on social media support army rule, compared to 35% who spend no time on social media. However, this effect does not hold for support for a strong leader.<sup>127</sup> This is borne out in statistical regressions, as at Appendix 1, which show that problem behaviours on social media drive are far better predictors of authoritarianism than time spent on these platforms generally.

**Figure 39: Support for autocratic governance among young adults by agreement with the statement “I have more friends online than I do in real life” and by gender (18–34-year-olds)**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022.



An unexpected finding from the new polling is that young women who game a lot are much more likely to back anti-democratic forms of government. Young women who spend more than four hours a day gaming are much more likely than those who spend no time gaming to back a strong leader (65% to 42%). They are also more likely to back army rule (46% to 29%). But there is no comparable gap for young men.<sup>128</sup>

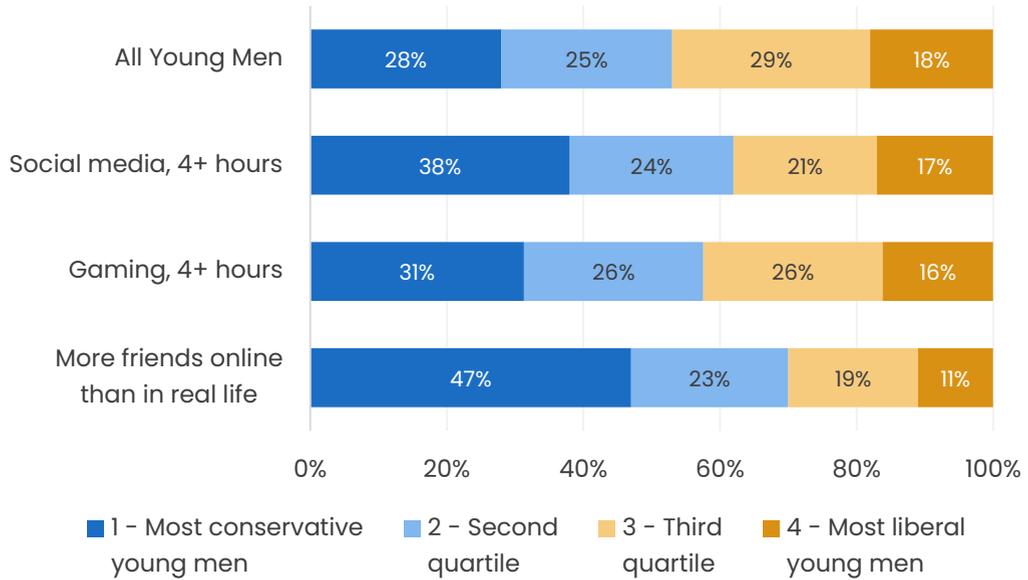
Further, the data suggests that young people who use technology are more likely to have strong socially conservative views. To do this, we divided the responses to a range of questions about social issues into four similarly-sized quartiles and compared this with technology-use.<sup>129</sup> Young men who have more friends online than in real life are much more likely to be in the quartile for the most conservative views (47% to 28% for all young men). Similarly, those who spend more than four hours a day on social media are also more likely to report the most conservative views (38%). There appears to be no relationship with how long young men spend gaming, just as with democratic values.

There is a similar, but weaker relationship between technology use and young women's social views. Young women who have more friends online than in real life are much more likely to report the strongest conservative views among young women (38% to 28% average), but by a smaller margin than is the case for men. By contrast, gaming again seems to have an impact: those gaming more than four hours a day are more likely to report strong socially conservative views (36%).

These findings suggest that excessive internet use can make young people more open to extreme views, particularly young men. There has been considerable focus on this group given the rise of the involuntary celibacy (incel) movement and the prominence of online commentators who argue that young men are being emasculated, such as Jordan Peterson.<sup>130</sup>

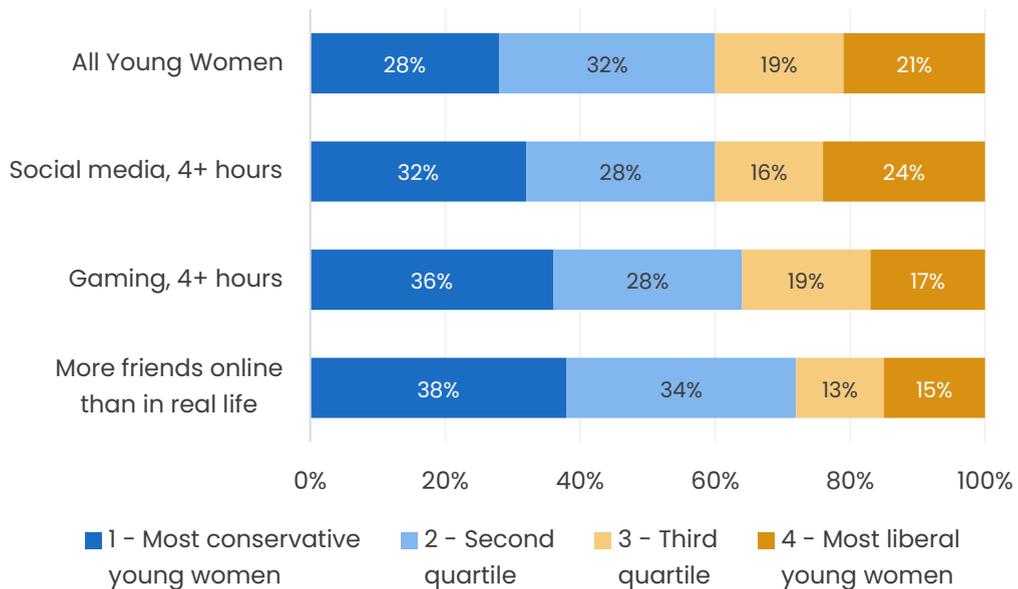
**Figure 40: Social value quartiles for young men, by online activity (18-34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022<sup>131</sup>



**Figure 41: Social value quartiles for young women, by online activity (18-34-year-olds), 2022**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022<sup>132</sup>

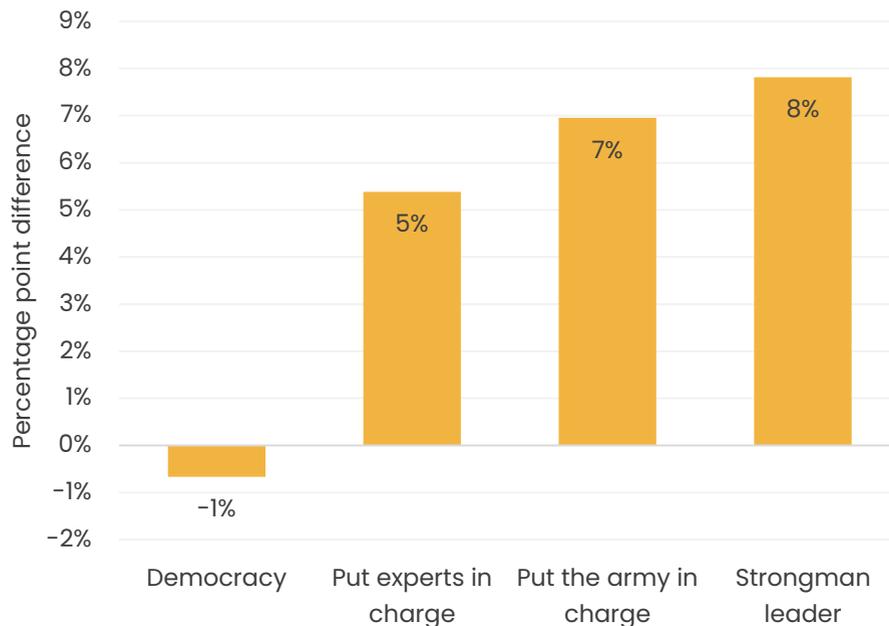


We can test the role of the internet in radicalising young men using our survey, by comparing (1) under-35-year-old men who have fewer than 4 friends and play video games more than an hour a day and (2) all other young men. We find that the former are more socially conservative and less socially liberal: 19% are on the socially conservative fringe (a combined score of 1-3), compared to 12% for all other young men. And only 6% are on the socially liberal fringe (a combined score of 14-20), compared to 11% for all other young men. But the two groups do not differ in their economic values.

When asked about different forms of government, we find that they have similar views about democracy as a system. But they are more favourable towards authoritarian forms of government. They are 5 percentage points more likely to say the expert rule is good or very good, 7 points more likely to say that army rule is good or very good, and 8 points more likely to say that strongman leaders who do not have to worry about Parliament are good or very good.

**Figure 42: Proportion saying 'X' is a good form of government, percentage point difference between lonely gamers and all other young men**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to interrogate the different hypothesis for youth atomisation and democratic detachment set out earlier in this paper. We find broad evidence that a confluence of different factors appears to be bearing down on young people's social and democratic foundations.

First, there is evidence for *affective* polarisation, driven by political partisanship and narrow social circles. Second, family life does appear to be becoming less social and more structured, undermining the development of key social skills later in life and compounding a wider shift away from community or social activity among younger generations. Third, work has become more stressful, more arduous and less autonomous for young people, even as young people rely more on work to forge connections than in the past, leaving them more socially isolated. Fourth, while there is a lack of evidence that socialising online impacts the quality of relationships, reliance on technology for making friends and securing social validation appears to be strongly correlated with social and democratic detachment.

Each of these four trends also relates in some form or another to the issue of “status”, suggesting that searching for self-esteem or validation could be a common factor contributing to these root causes. This is supported by analysis from other experts across these fields. On polarisation, Haidt and Lukianoff reason that recent increases are partly linked to a trend away from a “equality of opportunity” to a “equality of outcome” approach to social justice.<sup>133</sup> Many people fear being sidelined under an “outcome” approach to equality, whether in the job market or government priorities, again raising concerns about status. On childhood, Michael Sandel notes that the “concerted cultivation” style which deprives children of their independence, is driven by a parental “fear of falling”: a concern their child could slip further down the socio-economic ladder.<sup>134</sup> On work, Jon Cruddas MP argues in *The Dignity of Labour*, “Work is important beyond providing us with material subsistence. It can both contribute to and undermine our overall sense of worth; our human well-being.”<sup>135</sup> The shift from manual work to professional occupations could be linked to this desire for a higher sense of worth. Finally, on technology, Noreena Hertz highlights the link between social media and status, noting that “the new social currency of retweets, likes and shares mean that each time we post and our posts are ignored we risk feeling not only rejected or valueless, but also ashamed, because we experience our rejection in public.”<sup>136</sup>

These four key root causes suggest that multiple, bold reforms will be needed to tackle rising youth alienation and foster the kind of social and democratic norms which in previous generations we may have taken for granted. However, the pandemic bounce in social trust highlighted in the last chapter gives some cause for hope that these four issues can be tackled, and offer a foundation to build reforms that leverage a re-emerging civic mindset.

The next chapter sets out a number of proposals for instilling a greater sense of pluralism, democracy and social engagement among younger generations.

# Solutions

Repairing the ties that bind





So, there are four root causes of the atomisation among young people: narrow social networks; overprotective parenting; the treadmill of modern work; and an “always online” culture. This has led to three worrying trends: reduced economic opportunity; poorer mental and physical health; and a decline in democratic values.

Solutions will need to tackle these root causes, in a way that harnesses community capacity and doesn't lead to an overbearing or interfering state. As previous interventions in civil society have shown, the role of the state must be to enable, not deliver, these benefits. We propose four such solutions to tackle each of these four root causes.

### **Recommendation 1: Establish a national civic service scheme to strengthen democratic norms and encourage social mixing**

It is clear from the research in this report that democratic norms are under threat, particularly among younger generations. 18-34-year-olds are increasingly likely to express support for autocratic forms of government and are more likely than older people to express animosity towards those who don't share their political views. We know that these problem behaviours are associated with alienation from society - whether through heavy social media use, reliance on online friends over real-life ones, or unemployment. By contrast, positive democratic norms are stronger among those who report greater quantity and quality of friends, and who talk politics with both friends who share their political views and friends who do not.

Encouraging civic service is one of the best ways to help young people build stronger friendships and connect with people different to themselves. Data from the Community Life Survey shows that over 90% of 16-34-year-olds who volunteered with a group or organisation reported mixing with people from a different background to themselves. The most common form of mixing was with people from a different age group (80%), but a majority also reported mixing with those from different social or educational backgrounds (67%) and with those from a different ethnic or religious background (66%).<sup>137</sup> Given age, education, class, and ethnicity are some of the strongest predictors of voting intention, this demonstrates the role that civic service can play in helping people with different political beliefs to mix.

Young people need new ambitious civic service schemes, to help them connect with others from different backgrounds, across age, education, class and political lines. In previous reports, Onward has called on ministers to “create a vibrant ‘market’ of opportunities, primarily in local and community organisations, with light touch accreditation and evaluation, aggregated through a national portal or signposting” while avoiding the creation of a single body for civic service.<sup>138</sup> This means offering support for efforts to create new national civic service schemes, such as the “Year of Service” scheme currently being piloted by the NCS. The scheme seeks to give 18-24-year-olds paid work placements in organisations seeking to build social infrastructure in local communities.<sup>139</sup>

There are a range of examples of similar schemes across the Western world from which the UK can learn, including Service Civique scheme in France or Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr in Germany. But the best international example of a national civic service scheme is AmeriCorps - an independent agency of the United States Government that offers a range of programmes to help communities across America address social and environment issues. The main programmes open to young Americans are set out in the table on the next page.

AmeriCorps schemes provide three main benefits for their alumni.

First, the scheme has a significant positive impact on civic engagement and democratic norms. Alumni are more likely to engage in community service activities after the scheme ends than before, particularly in the areas of keeping their community safe and clean and donating money or goods to charity. Furthermore, alumni are significantly more likely to participate in democracy: 91% are registered to vote, with 94% of these registered voters casting their ballot in the 2016 Presidential Election, compared to 58% of eligible voters nationally. Alumni are also more likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood: 81% of alumni agree they are aware of the important needs in their communities, compared to 49% pre-AmeriCorps.<sup>140</sup> And research into voting patterns among alumni of the separate Teach For America scheme has reported similar findings.<sup>141</sup>

Second, AmeriCorps supports social mixing. 93% of alumni agree they have confidence interacting with people from different cultures and backgrounds, up from 72% before joining the scheme. The impact on social mixing appears to be strongest for the NCCC programme, with 87% of alumni from this programme

agreeing that they learned more about the ‘real world’ or ‘rest of the world’, significantly more than 76% of VISTA alumni.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, AmeriCorps supports employability. The NCCC scheme specifically seeks to increase members’ employment skills and leadership abilities, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>143</sup> And AmeriCorps more broadly runs an Employers of National Service network, listing over 600 employers who value the skills gained through AmeriCorps on their website with links to their job opportunities.<sup>144</sup> As a result, more than half of alumni (51%) state that their time in AmeriCorps opened up a career path they might not have considered, while 42% of the alumni employed six months on said that their employment resulted from a connection made during their AmeriCorps service.<sup>145</sup> This helps alumni of the scheme to find work, addressing another predictive factor for weak democratic norms: unemployment.

**Table 1: Summary of AmeriCorp schemes open to young Americans**

Source: AmeriCorps website; AmeriCorps 2022 Congressional Budget Justification<sup>146</sup>

AmeriCorps Programme	Participants	Cost per participant
<p><b>State and National</b></p> <p>Organisations identify their community need, then design and implement a program to recruit, train and manage individuals to help meet these needs. Example programmes include tutoring children in reading, supporting after-school activities, and neighbourhood watches.</p>	<p>Open to Americans aged 17 and over. Around 52,000 participants per year.</p>	<p>Budgeted at \$501m in 2022, equivalent to £8,000 per participant.</p>
<p><b>Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).</b></p> <p>Anti-poverty programme founded in 1965 designed to build capacity for not-for-profits and public agencies and help them lift communities out of poverty. Participants dedicate a year of full-time service to anti-poverty organisations.</p> <p>VISTA participants are provided with a modest living allowance, along with training, health care support, and support for childcare and relocation costs. Members also select two end-of-service benefits: a cash stipend or a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award which can be used to pay for education expenses, such as student loan repayment or tuition payments.</p>	<p>Open to Americans aged 18 and over. Around 8,000 participants per year.</p>	<p>Budgeted at \$104m in 2022, or £10,700 per participant.</p>
<p><b>National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC).</b></p> <p>Team-based residential service for young Americans. Members are assigned to one of four regional campuses and then placed into teams ranging between 8-12 members. The teams complete a variety of service projects, which are generally 3 to 13 weeks in duration, and respond to local communities' needs throughout the United States. Full-time for 12 months.</p>	<p>Open to 18-26-year-olds. Around 2,080 participants per year.</p>	<p>Budgeted at \$38m in 2022, at £15,000 per participant.</p>
<p><b>Total across the three programmes:</b></p>	<p>Around 62,000 participants per year.</p>	<p>Budgeted at \$643m in 2022, £8,591 per participant.</p>

The UK should follow this lead and establish its own national scheme to support young people to contribute to civic society. This would offer young people a quick way to connect with others, particularly those different to themselves, and do so in a way that demands relatively little emotional labour, which is crucial given how mentally stressed young people are today. Furthermore, such a scheme would help boost employability and stave off youth unemployment, an issue all the more vital given the Bank of England's projections for a recession and increased unemployment over the next three years.<sup>147</sup>

The UK already has the National Citizen Service which offers residential courses to young people. This should be incorporated into a broader national civic service that includes greater focus on ongoing volunteering, as pioneered by AmeriCorps VISTA. To set up such a scheme, ministers should bring together existing mass civic membership organisations, from the Scouts to the National Trust, to work together on the scheme's creation. We know that State-led approaches to strengthening civic society seldom succeed, so ministers should rely on the expertise of the charitable sector rather than civil servants.

Through this model, the Government would be responsible for providing funding for the scheme and setting broad parameters for what the new civic service would seek to achieve. This could include broad national missions for young people to work on, from tree planting and natural conservation to boosting child literacy. A recent study by the University of Bath found that 45% of 16-25-year-olds across ten countries, including in UK, reported that worries about climate change affected their daily lives, while 57% said they felt "powerless" over climate change.<sup>148</sup> This, coupled with the wealth of evidence that being outside in nature boosts mental well-being, suggests that a series of environmental missions through a new national civic service scheme would have additional benefits for young people's mental health.

Ministers would also set out expectations for participant outcomes. These should include experience and confidence in mixing with those from different backgrounds and with different political beliefs; a passion for civic participation; a sense of belonging to one's community and the United Kingdom; emotional resilience and social skills; and greater career confidence and employability prospects.

The expert panel would be responsible for using the funding required to design and operate a scheme to achieve these objectives. This would include

identifying local charities, public services and other organisations with which young people could be posted to as part of their service. Opportunities for National Civic Service participants to support these organisations could also be signposted via a national volunteering portal, as recommended in our previous report.<sup>149</sup>

The Government could also learn from AmeriCorp's example and bring together a network of employers that recognise the civic value and experience gained from a posting through the new National Civic Service scheme. As proposed in "Age of Alienation", these employers could potentially offer guaranteed interviews or accelerated access to prestigious career schemes such as the Civil Service Fast Stream or Teach First, as a way to incentivise participation and enhance the prestige of the new service.<sup>150</sup>

Given the contribution of problematic social media use to declining democratic norms, ministers should ringfence Digital Service Tax receipts to invest in this fund, and take similar steps if and when the OECD's global framework for international corporation taxation comes into effect. The DST raised £380 million for the Treasury in the 2021-22 financial year.<sup>151</sup> This funding, if hypothecated, could be used to support civic service.

If the costs of the scheme broadly mirrored those of Americorps, the UK could offer civic service to nearly 45,000 young people a year using this revenue stream. This represents a relatively small proportion - around 1.5% - of the 3 million 18-21-year-olds in the UK each year but would generate a significant benefit.<sup>152</sup>

## **Recommendation 2. Encourage a national network of "independent play" clubs, supervised by parents or volunteers**

Research shows that playing outdoors, independently of parents, can help reduce the likelihood of developing emotional problems. But the trend towards overprotective parenting means that children today are not allowed to play unsupervised outside until two years later than the previous generation. Parents are afraid to let their children outside of the home unsupervised for different reasons, ranging from fears about road safety to "stranger danger". To ensure that children can enjoy the benefits of independent play while parents can have the confidence that their kids are safe, a network of supervised "independent play" clubs should be established in every part of the country.

In the United States, Let Grow Play Clubs allow children to play independently, putting them in control of developing games and negotiating peer interactions without adult interference. These clubs also have a small number of parents on hand to keep an eye on the children, without getting involved unless there is an emergency, and are typically held on school grounds before or after the academic day begins. One review of Let Grow Play Clubs found that they help children of different ages mix and successfully lead to older children becoming responsible role models to the younger children.<sup>153</sup> In the UK, charities like Roam in Birmingham are taking a similar approach, with volunteers providing the supervision and children playing in parks, and recording the same benefits.<sup>154</sup>

But they are the exception rather than the rule. The Government should take steps to support the creation of a network of similar clubs in the UK. This should not mean the Government taking on direct responsibility. A key part of the Let Grow Play model is the fact it is staffed by parent volunteers, in a similar way to other extracurricular initiatives like reading groups and walk to school programmes.<sup>155</sup> However, ministers could take steps to support such a network.

First, existing civic assets, such as school sports halls, nurseries, parks, council-owned leisure centres and village halls, should be made available for independent play.<sup>156</sup> At the moment, many of these assets lie vacant and unused outside core times, such as at the end of the school day and some are subject to restrictive PFI contracts. This is a colossal waste. The Government should allow councils to designate certain buildings for community use, which would be able to be booked outside core hours and on weekends by the community, at no extra cost to the user.

Second, the Government should mitigate the costs of providing such clubs. This might include allowing parents to waive the requirement for a DBS check when parents are themselves providing supervision, and offering low cost first aid training and insurance for community use. Ministers should also consider amending the Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 to remove liability for any risks associated with these Play Clubs from the locations where they are held.<sup>157</sup> By taking these actions, the Government would ensure that children are able to get the benefits of independent play without parents having to worry about their kids being at risk of road traffic or strangers. The creation of such clubs

could also help foster connection between parent volunteers, and boost social trust in the parents whose children attend these clubs.

### **Recommendation 3. Extend existing employment flexibilities to allow anyone to receive time off to volunteer to support public services or civic activity**

With growing intensity at work leaving younger people exhausted, many are choosing to spend the free time they have recovering and unwinding, rather than engaging in social activities. Onward polling found that 46% of young people said if they had any extra time, one of the ways they would use it would be to take some time for themselves.<sup>158</sup> And even when young people do meet up with their friends, they are most likely to report doing low-energy activities like staying in and watching television, which is associated with having fewer and worse quality friends. As a result, leisure time is no longer being used to build or strengthen connection with others or one's place.

So, what can be done to reverse this trend, and encourage more people to connect outside education and work settings once again? One option would be to encourage greater volunteering, which Onward research shows is consistently associated with higher quantity and quality of friendship, as well as higher levels of neighbourliness.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, Community Life Survey data shows that over one-quarter of 18-34-year-olds who volunteered in the last year were motivated by a desire to make new friends (27%).<sup>160</sup>

Many young people don't feel able to volunteer because of the changing demands from work. As one young man told focus groups organised by Onward to explore this issue, they often feel "too knackered to go to the pub let alone volunteer". In fact, just 14% of 18-34-year-olds said that if they had more time they would use it to volunteer, less than a third of the rate for using extra time for themselves.<sup>161</sup>

Extending rights to request volunteering leave from work would be one way to resolve this impasse. It would make it easier for young people to volunteer and connect with new people without sacrificing the leisure time they need to recover from an exhausting day at the office. Depending on the role, a small amount of volunteering leave could also give workers a chance to reset and reduce burnout in the workplace.

Employees are already entitled to request “reasonable time” off work for specific civic duties, such as attending meetings as a local councillor or a school governor. Under this right, employers can refuse these requests if they believe the time proposed to be unreasonable, the employee has already had a significant amount of time off for similar duties, or if the time off will adversely impact the business. They also do not have to pay their workers for the time off.<sup>162</sup>

Extending this right to encompass a number of other civic roles would be straightforward. The rights are underpinned by Section 50 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which allows for new purposes and organisations to be added by secondary legislation.<sup>163</sup> For example, Theresa May’s Government amended this legislation in 2018 to include a further 300 people performing civic duties in the justice system, including independent prison monitors in Scotland.<sup>164</sup>

We recommend that the Government further extends this right to volunteering to a series of other civic roles, which are no less important but which are not currently eligible for guaranteed time off work. This should include volunteering for St John’s Ambulance, NHS reservists, military cadets and the Special Constabulary. There has already been cross-party interest in reforms to the right to time off for public duties: Conservative MP Stuart Anderson has called for the right to be extended to include charity trustees and Shadow Civil Society Minister Rachael Maskell MP has called for more opportunities for businesses to allow employees to volunteer with civil society organisations.<sup>165, 166</sup>

This should clearly be subject to safeguards. The right of employers to refuse such requests would need to be maintained. And to prevent a disproportionate impact on businesses, leave for volunteering would need to be for specifically designated roles with certain organisations, such as above. But the case for increasing the ability for young people to engage more in civic society through time off work is strong.

The impact on the workforce would be relatively limited. Clearly any extension to this right to request time off work, even a small extension with a narrowly defined set of organisations and roles, would result in lost working days. The Government does not collect data on working hours spent on public duties under this right.<sup>167</sup>

However, the Mayor of London recently published figures on this for bodies linked to the Greater London Authority. These showed that 3,136 hours were spent on public duties in 2019 by the 26,000 Transport for London employees, equivalent to 15 working days per 1,000 workers.<sup>168</sup> If we apply that ratio to the 21.8 million full-time employees working in total 6.3 billion working days a year, that would suggest that this right at present results in just 327,000 days lost per year, equivalent to 0.005% of all working days.<sup>169</sup>

The impact may be limited further by the small number of eligible workers. For example, pre-pandemic data shows that St John's Ambulance catered to around 9,000 health volunteers, while the number of Special Constables in 2020 was just 9,600.<sup>170</sup> But even if the proposed narrow extension to the right unexpectedly doubled uptake of the scheme, only 0.01% of working days would be lost to public duties, a relatively small impact with potentially considerable upside benefits for social trust and connection.

#### **Recommendation 4: Introduce mandatory age and identity checks on social media and encourage platforms to introduce opt-out usage limits**

The debate about technology use is hopelessly simplistic. As we have shown in the previous chapter, rising use of social media in and of itself is not necessarily problematic: young people who use social media in moderation are in fact least likely to report persistent isolation. Social media offers many benefits, such as staying connected to friends far away, and is generally associated with higher levels of quantity and quality of friendship. And use of television is much more correlated with declining rates of volunteering and neighbourliness among young people.

However, how social media is used, and problematic use by some groups of users, does warrant attention, particularly in relation to rising authoritarianism in young men and rising mental illness in young people generally. Action is therefore required to address the problems associated with unhealthy use of social media, while preserving the benefits of social media for the average person.

There is a broad debate about whose responsibility it is to regulate such behaviour. Some liberals - and many technology companies themselves - will say that if people are making their own choices then it is a matter for them and

no one else, especially government. But our data suggests that there is a clear negative externality from this behaviour: in the form of declining mental wellbeing and rising authoritarianism. This strengthens the case for action.

We propose three specific changes which, we believe, will considerably reduce the harms of excessive technology use without undermining the clear benefits that such technologies provide.

First, the Government should introduce mandatory age checks on all social media applications and sites. In the past, this was technologically difficult. This is no longer the case. As providers such as Yoti have proven, techniques such as optical character recognition - which matches data from an ID document to a selfie photograph - or facial age estimation offer robust ways to check the age of a user. This technology has been used by the BBC in investigations of child pornography,<sup>171</sup> and is increasingly used by platforms such as Meta, Instagram and OnlyFans.<sup>172</sup> These checks would only be mandatory for platforms who generate a significant amount of revenue, with the threshold set as the same level as that of the Digital Services Tax: platforms that generate more than £500 million worldwide and more than £25 million from UK users.

Second, and relatedly, the Government should introduce identity verification for social media sites. This could be achieved by allowing social media sites to verify the identity of a user against either a government identity database, such as the Passport or DVLA database, or through a credit card check. Where the user is under the age of 18, a parent or guardian could verify their identity on behalf of the user. This would allow social media organisations to hold users accountable for their online posts, and to reduce the number of aggressive bots that undermine constructive use of social media.

Third, the Government should encourage platforms to introduce time limits on users' social media use by default, which users can opt out of if they wish. This would "nudge" users away from excessive use, in a similar way to the introduction of auto-enrolment of pensions, which switched the default for savers from opt-in to opt-out for workplace pensions, and which is credited with driving up savings rates. For social media, such a policy would require platforms to automatically pause users' accounts after they had spent a certain amount of time on social media each day (say 4 hours) unless they had explicitly opted to remove usage restrictions. Many social media platforms, including Instagram, already have tools to limit excessive use among children.<sup>173</sup> Such a

policy would merely extend these tools to a wider age range and make them the default rather than the exception.

# Conclusion





This report reveals the extent of young people’s generational slide away from social and democratic norms and towards atomisation and authoritarianism. Narrow social networks, overprotective parenting, the treadmill of modern work, and today’s “always online” culture are contributing to a destructive form of disconnection. Policymakers must take urgent action to address each of these root causes and buttress the steadily eroding foundations that underpin our democratic society.

A failure to grasp this challenge will condemn our children and our children’s children to atomised lives and leave them as the first generation in decades to live worse lives than their parents. But the “pandemic bounce” in social trust and neighbourliness suggests that this downward spiral is not inevitable. If we are willing to engage in these difficult issues and focus on helping younger people build lives of genuine connection, we can deliver a better future for them. One in which young people are healthier and happier, have equal access to opportunities, and faith in the democratic process.

# Appendix 1

Statistical drivers of authoritarianism





## Detailed analysis of the impact of different factors on democratic support

This section explores in detail which factors are the most important in explaining levels of authoritarianism. To do this, we added different variables – shown below – into a simple model that predicts support for different forms of government based on demographic characteristics.

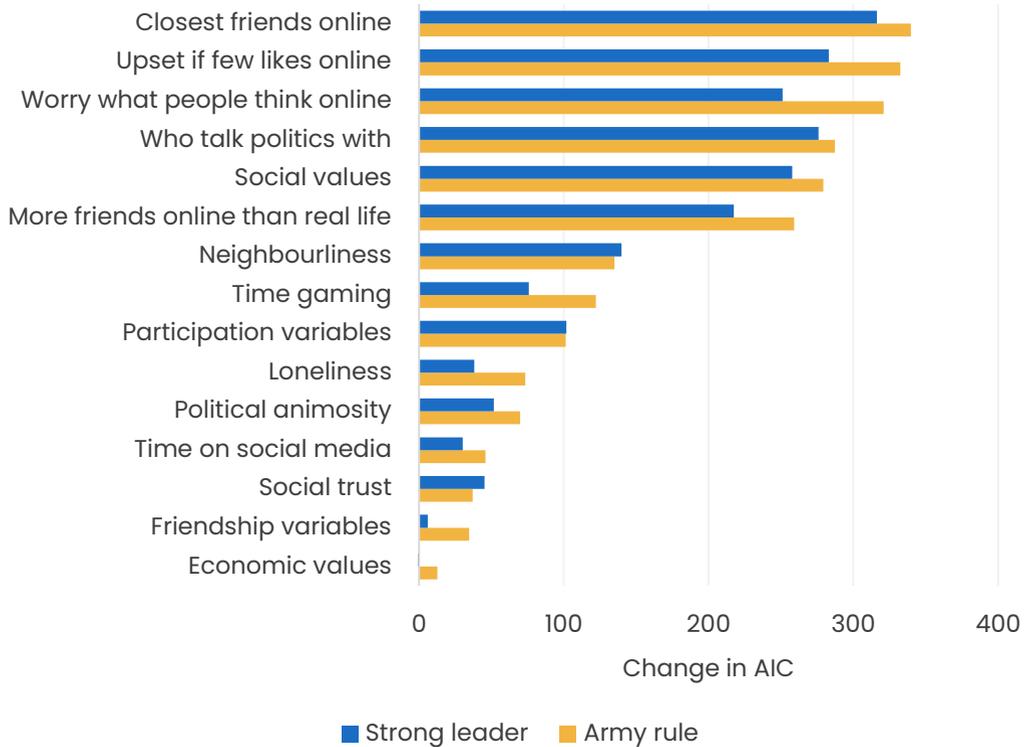
We use the Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) to compare this simple demographic model to another “full” model that includes, for example, social trust. In this example, the change in AIC estimates the relative amount of information lost by removing social trust from the full model. The more information that we lose by removing social trust, the greater the contribution that social trust was making to the model. Figure 43 below shows the relative contribution that each factor makes to the model.

Consider those who say “having the army rule” or “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” are good ways to run the country. The factors that make the greatest contribution are social values, talking politics with friends, and reporting problematic online behaviour. Specifically:

- For example, when considering people talking about politics with their friends, people who say that all of their friends support the opposing political party to them are more authoritarian than those who say that none of their friends disagree with them.
- Those who have generally more conservative social views are more supportive of authoritarian rule than those who hold more liberal social views.
- And authoritarian is higher for those who agree that: “Some of my closest friendships are with people I have met online”, “I get upset if something I post online does not get many likes or positive comments”, “I worry a lot about what other people think of me online”, and “I have more friends online than I do in real life.”

**Figure 43: Change in AIC when different factors are excluded from the model – support for a strong leader and army rule**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



Note: The simple demographic model includes the following: sex, age, household income, highest level of education, housing tenure, marital status, and ethnicity. “Participation variables” refer to volunteering and group membership, while “Friendship variables” refer to quality and similarity of friendships.

Neighbourliness (being more neighbourly), gaming (spending more time playing video games), and participation (being a volunteer and a member of local groups) also predict greater authoritarianism. But these relationships are statistically weaker.

Notably, one of the weakest relationships is for social media time. This demonstrates that while time spent on social media does matter, absolute time spent is less important than how that time is used, or who it is used with. This suggests that problematic use of social media is much more important than simply spending considerable amounts of time on social media.

Figure 44 below illustrates the strength of the relationship between feeling insecure online and supporting authoritarianism. Controlling for demographics, people who strongly agree that they get upset if something they post online does not get many likes or positive comments have an 81% likelihood of thinking that strong leaders who don't have to bother with Parliament would be a good way to run the country. Those who strongly disagree with that statement have only a 41% chance of supporting strong leaders.

**Figure 44: Predicted probability of supporting strongman leaders, by agreement with the statement: “I get upset if something I post online does not get many likes or positive comments”**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022

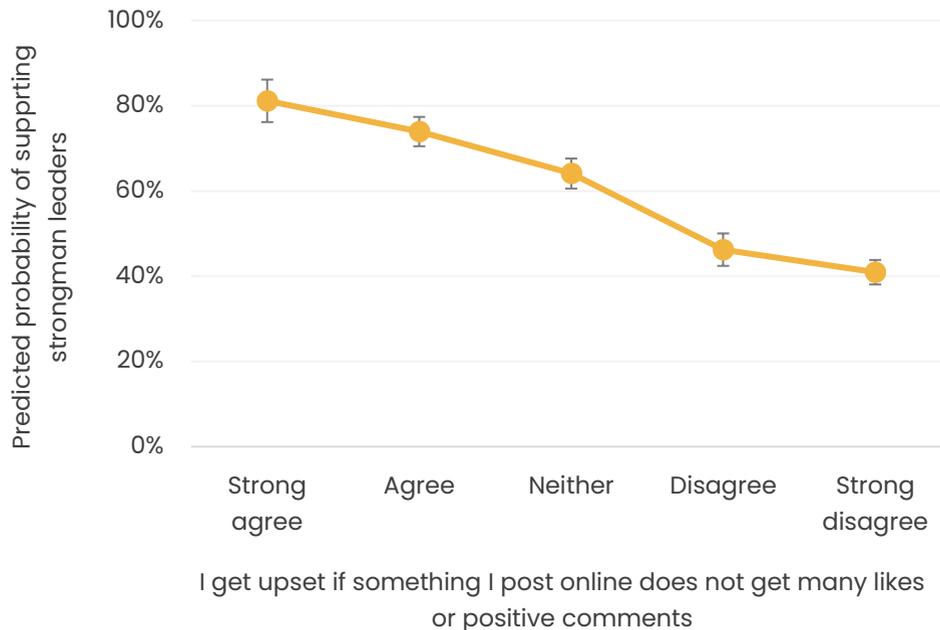
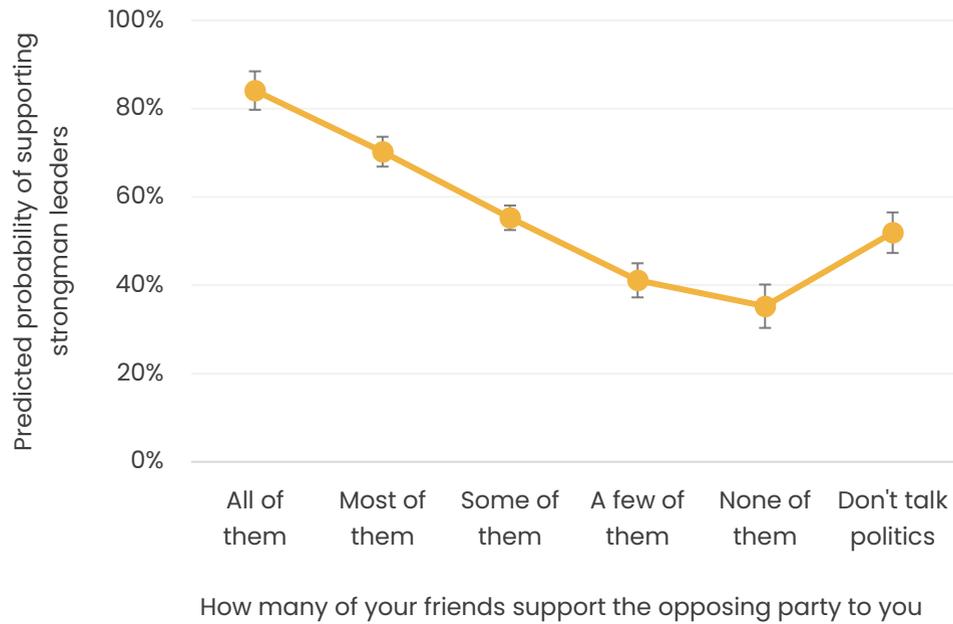


Figure 45 shows the effect of talking politics with people who disagree with you on support for strongman leaders, controlling for demographic factors like sex, age, and education. Those who say that all of their friends have opposing views are the most supportive of authoritarianism.

**Figure 45: Predicted probability of supporting strongman leaders, by the number of friends who oppose the respondent's political views**

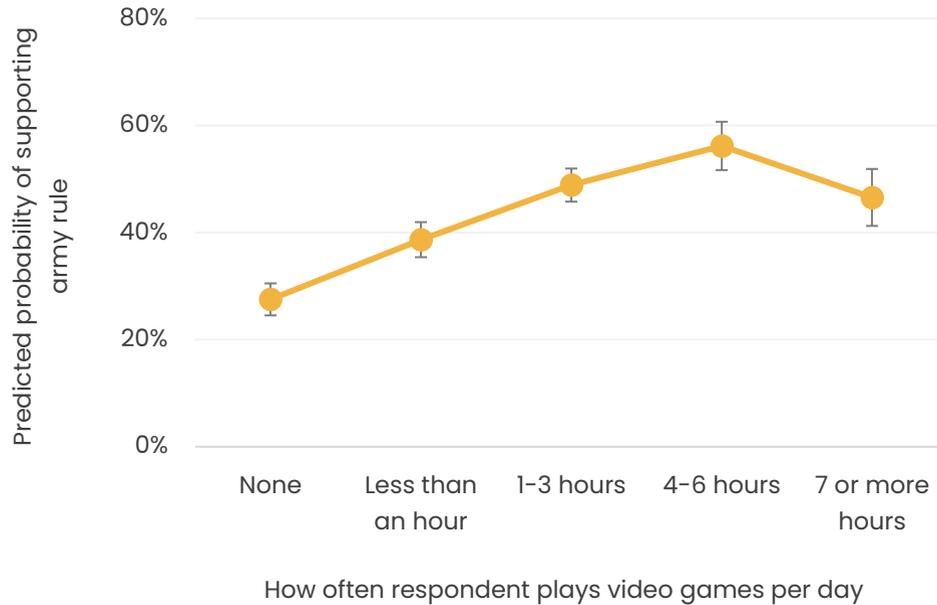
Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



The most prolific gamers are 19 percentage points more likely to support army rule than those who never play video games. Controlling for demographic factors like age, gender and education, the likelihood of supporting army rule is 28% for non-gamers. This figure rises to 47% for those who game for more than seven hours a day.

**Figure 46: Predicted probability of supporting army rule, by how often the respondent plays video games on an average day**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022

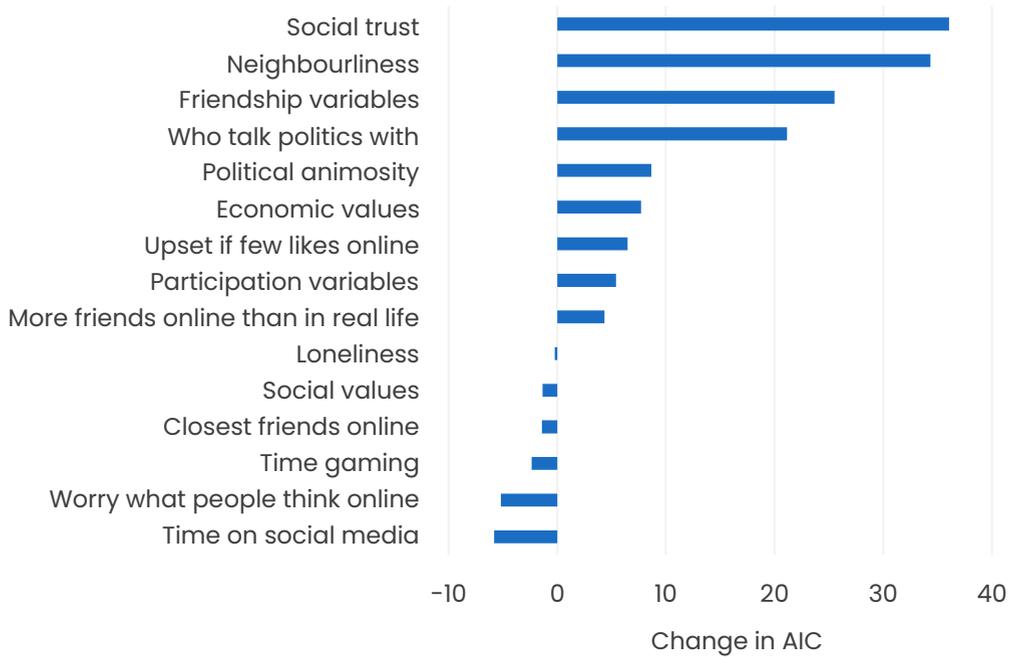


But support for democracy does not follow the same pattern. The factors that best explain attitudes to democracy are not the same as army rule or strongmen.

Trust, neighbourliness, and friendships make the greatest contribution to the model for support for democracy. Social values and gaming (which strongly predict support for, or opposition to, authoritarian government) do not make a significant improvement to the model on democratic support; talking politics only makes the fourth-greatest contribution to the model. This suggests that other factors, especially more traditional social fabric related issues such as neighbourliness and associational life, are more important predictive factors for support for democracy.

**Figure 47: Change in AIC when different factors are excluded from the model – support for democracy**

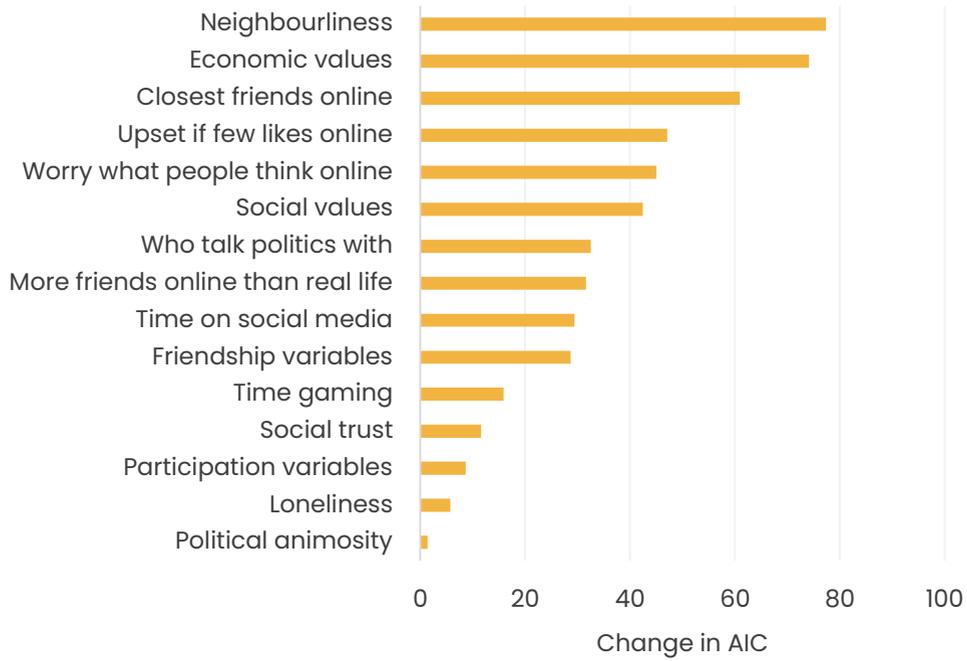
Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



Controlling for demographic factors, support for government run by experts - a technocracy - is mostly a function of high neighbourliness, economic interventionism, and problematic behaviour online. Figure 48 below shows the relative contribution that each factor makes to the model.

**Figure 48: Change in AIC when different factors are excluded from the model – support for expert rule**

Source: Onward analysis of JLP 2022



# Appendix 2

Technical annex





## Note on polling methodology

The polling used to underpin this report was conducted by J.L. Partners between 5<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> May 2022. This involved surveying over 8,004 adults aged 18 and over from every region and nation of the United Kingdom. This included 2,350 young adults aged between 18 and 34, on which our analysis of younger people rests.

When deciding which issues to poll on, we focused on those which secondary analysis suggested was linked to social connection, such as loneliness, job opportunities, and technology use. Where possible we have directly replicated questions from existing surveys such as Understanding Society, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and the European Values Survey, allowing for time series comparisons.

All results are quota-ed and weighted to be nationally representative, using inter-locking age and gender, region, socio-economic grade, and 2019 vote (including non-voters). J.L. Partners is a member of the British Polling Council.

## Note on analysis methodology

For a few measures, we have created variables using responses to a set of questions. These include:

- **Friendship quality score.** Based on three questions from Understanding Society - whether the respondent feels their friends understand them; that these friends can be relied upon; and that they can open up to their friends. The responses are coded in descending quality of friendship from “A lot” (1); “Somewhat” (2); “A little” (3); and “Not at all” (4). To construct our scale, we averaged responses to each of these questions. We then rounded these scores to give a simple 1-4 scale.
- **Socio-economic security score.** This is a combined metric with five components. Each person gets a score (1-5) depending on whether they are in a stable tenure (owner or social renter), have lived at their address for more than 5 years, are retired or employed (but not on a temporary or zero-hours basis), are married, and have above-average household income.

- **Similar friendships score.** Based on seven questions asking the proportion of their friends are similar to themselves. The responses are coded in descending order of similarity “All” (1); “More than half” (2); “About half” (3); and “Less than half” (4). To construct our scale, we averaged responses to each of these questions. We then rounded these scores to give a simple 1-4 scale. Of the seven questions listed below, the first four are taken from Understanding Society, while the next three are based upon these:
  - “What proportion of your friends are of the same ethnic group as you?”
  - “What proportion of your friends have a similar level of education as you?”
  - “What proportion of your friends have similar incomes to you?”
  - “What proportion of your friends live in your local area?”
  - “What proportion of your friends are from a similar class background to you?”
  - “What proportion of your friends have similar political beliefs to you?”
  - “What proportion of your friends have similar religious beliefs to you?”
  
- **Neighbourliness score.** Based on six questions from Understanding Society - the extent to which the respondent agrees with a set of statements. The responses are coded on the five-point Likert scale for agreement: “Strong Agree” (1); “Agree” (2); “Neither agree nor disagree” (3); “Disagree” (4); “Strongly Disagree” (5). To construct our scale, we averaged responses to each of these questions. We then rounded these scores to give a simple 1-5 scale of descending neighbourliness. The six statements are:
  - “I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood”;
  - “I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours”;
  - “I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood”;
  - “I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood”;
  - “I plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years”;

- “I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood”.
- **Economic values score.** Based on responses to five questions on economic issues, taken from the British Social Attitudes survey. The responses are coded on the five-point Likert scale for agreement: “Strong Agree” (1); “Agree” (2); “Neither agree nor disagree” (3); “Disagree” (4); “Strongly Disagree” (5). To construct our scale, we summed responses to each of these questions and minused five to give a 0-20 scale. Low scores show support for economic interventionism, high scores for free market values. The five statements are:
  - “Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off”
  - “Big business takes advantage of ordinary people”
  - “Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth”
  - “There is one law for the rich and one for the poor”
  - “Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance”
- **Social values score.** Based on responses to five questions on social issues, taken from the British Social Attitudes survey. The responses are coded on the five-point Likert scale for agreement: “Strong Agree” (1); “Agree” (2); “Neither agree nor disagree” (3); “Disagree” (4); “Strongly Disagree” (5). To construct our scale, we summed responses to each of these questions and minused five to give a 0-20 scale. Low scores show support for social conservatism, high scores for social liberalism. The five statements are:
  - “Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values”
  - “Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards”
  - “For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence”
  - “People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences”
  - “Schools should teach children to obey authority”

- **Political animosity score.** Based upon responses to seven questions on whether the respondent would consider engaging with someone who supported the political party they most opposed. Due to the majority of respondents suggesting they would consider all seven forms of engagement, rather than construct a scale, we grouped the responses into two simple categories - those expressing “no animosity” (“would consider” all seven forms of engagement”) and “some animosity” (those answering “would not consider” for one or more of the forms of engagement). These seven forms of engagement were:
  - “Dating, if you were single”
  - “Becoming friends with”
  - “Becoming close friends with”
  - “Getting married to, if you were single”
  - “Having your kids socialise with”
  - “Having your kids marry”
  - “Bringing up politics in conversation with them”

When using responses to the polling and existing survey data, unless stated otherwise, we have excluded “don’t knows” in order to focus our analysis on the responses for which we have clear data.

For our generation analysis we used the following years of birth to define each generation, using the same dates as our previous *Age of Alienation* report:

- **Silent Generation** (1925 to 1945)
- **Baby Boomers** (1946 to 1964)
- **Generation X** (1965 to 1979)
- **Millennials** (1980 to 1994)
- **Generation Z** (1995 to 2012)

# Endnotes



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- <sup>1</sup> R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> “Loneliness - What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?”, ONS, 10 April 2018.
- <sup>3</sup> “Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic”, ONS, 7 April 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> Onward analysis of J.L. Partners poll of 8,004 people between 5th – 25th May 2022. For more information, please see the technical annex.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Blagden, W. Tanner, and F. Krasniqi, “Age of Alienation”, *Onward*, 8 July 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society and JLP 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Respondents with “Highest quality friendships” are those scoring average score of 1 under friendship quality brackets indicator - see the technical annex for how this is derived.
- <sup>8</sup> Onward Understanding Society and JLP 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> R. Chetty et al, “Social Capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility”, NBER, July 2022.
- <sup>10</sup> Onward analysis of Labour Force Survey.
- <sup>11</sup> “Recruiting young people facing disadvantage: an evidence review”, *Youth Futures Foundation*, March 2022.
- <sup>12</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society, Waves 6 and 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society, Waves 5 and 10. Respondents with “Highest quality friendships” are those scoring average score of 1 under friendship quality brackets indicator, while those with “lower” quality friendships respondents are those scoring 2 to 4 under the same indicator. See the technical annex for how this is derived.
- <sup>14</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022. Respondents with “Highest quality friendships” are those scoring average score of 1 under friendship quality brackets indicator, while those with “worst” quality friendships respondents are those scoring 4 under the same indicator. See the technical annex for how this is derived.
- <sup>15</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>16</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Staff et. al., “Uncertainty in early occupational aspirations: role explorations or aimlessness?”, *Social Forces*, 2010; Dr Anthony Mann, “It’s who you meet: why employer contacts at school make a difference to the employment prospects of young adults”, *Education and Employers*, 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> “Young people’s well-being measures”, ONS, 2 Oct 2020.
- <sup>19</sup> “Coronavirus and depression in adults, Great Britain: January to March 2021”, ONS, 5 May 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.
- <sup>21</sup> “Coronavirus and depression in adults, Great Britain: January to March 2021”, ONS, 5 May 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11. Respondents with “Highest quality friendships” are those scoring average score of 1 under friendship quality brackets indicator, while those with “worst” quality

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friendships respondents are those scoring 4 under the same indicator. See the technical annex for how this is derived.

<sup>24</sup> A. Sundström et. al., “Loneliness Increases the Risk of All-Cause Dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease”, *The Journals of Gerontology*, 2020; L. Hawkey et. al., “Loneliness predicts increased blood pressure: 5-year cross-lagged analyses in middle-aged and older adults”, *Psychology and Aging*, 2010; T. Petitte et. al., “A Systematic Review of Loneliness and Common Chronic Physical Conditions in Adults”, *The Open Psychology Journal*, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> J. Holt-Lunstad, “The Potential Public Health Relevance of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Prevalence, Epidemiology, and Risk Factors”, *Public Policy & Aging Report*, 2017; J. Holt-Lunstad et. al., “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review”, *PLOS Medicine*, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> T. Cruwys et. al., “Social group memberships protect against future depression, alleviate depression symptoms and prevent depression relapse”, *Social science & medicine*, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> J. Cacioppo et. al., “The Anatomy of Loneliness”, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Y. Momtaz et. al., “Loneliness as a Risk Factor for Hypertension in Later Life”, *Journal of Aging and Health*, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> J. House et. al., “Social relationships and health”, *Science*, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11.

<sup>31</sup> W. Tanner and Lord O’Shaughnessy, “The Politics of Belonging”, *Onward*, 3 Oct 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Here and throughout net agreement is the proportion of people who agreed/supported minus the proportion who disagreed/did not support.

<sup>33</sup> “Second tour: profil des abstentionnistes et sociologie des électorats”, *Ipsos*, 24 April 2022.

<sup>34</sup> R. Foa et. al., “Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?”, *University of Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy*, 19 Oct 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.

<sup>37</sup> “Monetary Policy Report - August 2022”, *Bank of England*, 4 Aug 2022

<sup>38</sup> “Least secure” respondents are defined as those with socio-economic security score of 1, while “most secure” scored 5. See the technical annex for how this is derived.

<sup>39</sup> Respondents with “diverse friendship circles” are those scoring below the median average score for similar friendships, while “highly similar” friendships are those scoring above this average. See the technical annex for how this is derived.

<sup>40</sup> Respondents with “higher quality friendships” are those scoring below the median average score for friendship quality, while “low quality” friendships are those scoring above this average. See the technical annex for how this is derived.

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- <sup>41</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>42</sup> Respondents with “high levels of neighbourliness” are those scoring above the median average score for neighbourly behaviour, while those with “low neighbourliness” are those scoring below this average. See the technical annex for how this is derived.
- <sup>43</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>44</sup> J. Blagden, W. Tanner, and F. Krasniqi, “Age of Alienation”, *Onward*, 8 July 2021.
- <sup>45</sup> J. Blagden, W. Tanner, and F. Krasniqi, “Age of Alienation”, *Onward*, 8 July 2021.
- <sup>46</sup> Onward analysis of British Social Attitudes 2018, Understanding Society Wave 9, and JLP 2022
- <sup>47</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>48</sup> M. Smith, “Left-wing vs right-wing: it’s complicated”, *YouGov*, 14 Aug 2019.
- <sup>49</sup> J. Kanagasooriam, “There’s nothing woolly minded about centrism”, *The Times*, 9 Jun 2021.
- <sup>50</sup> B. Duffy et al., “Divided Britain? Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK”, *King’s College London*, 2019.
- <sup>51</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society
- <sup>52</sup> “Community Life Survey 2020/21”, Table B5, DCMS, 29 Jul 2021.
- <sup>53</sup> “Does marrying someone with different politics matter to parents”, *YouGov*, 27 Aug 2019.
- <sup>54</sup> “Liberals have most difficulty getting along with opponents on ‘culture war’ issues”, *Ipsos*, 11 Jun 2021.
- <sup>55</sup> Not adjusted for “Don’t knows”
- <sup>56</sup> See technical annex for further details.
- <sup>57</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>58</sup> G. Lukianoff and J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018.
- <sup>59</sup> B. Duffy et al., “Divided Britain? Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK”, *King’s College London*, 2019.
- <sup>60</sup> J. Yates, *Fractured*, 2021.
- <sup>61</sup> B. Bishop, *The Big Sort*, 2008.
- <sup>62</sup> D. Dorling and P. Rees, “A nation still dividing: the British census and social polarisation 1971 - 2001”, *Environment and Planning*, 2003.
- <sup>63</sup> I. Koch et al., “Social Polarisation at the Local Level: A Four-Town Comparative Study on the Challenges of Politicising Inequality in Britain”, *Sociology*, 2020.
- <sup>64</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.
- <sup>65</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>66</sup> Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century*, 2020
- <sup>67</sup> S. O’Connor, Twitter, 1 Oct 2021; G. Bangham and M. Gustafsson, “The time of your life”, *Resolution Foundation*, 2020.
- <sup>68</sup> G. Lukianoff and J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018.
- <sup>69</sup> L. Skenazy, *Free-Range Kids*, 2021.

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- <sup>70</sup> S. Horwitz, “Cooperation over Coercion: The Importance of Unsupervised Childhood Play for Democracy and Liberalism”, *Cosmos and Taxis*, 2015.
- <sup>71</sup> M. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 2020.
- <sup>72</sup> G. Lukianoff and J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018.
- <sup>73</sup> G. Lukianoff and J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018.
- <sup>74</sup> S. Konrath, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2010.
- <sup>75</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.
- <sup>76</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.
- <sup>77</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society. Data on these five problems for 14 and 15-year-olds in Waves 3, 5, and 7 were merged into Wave 11 adult data to compare against adult conditions. The children in question were aged between 18 and 23 at the time. For each problem, we compared “not true” and “certainly true”, with the exception of the unhappiness variable, where we summed “certainly true” and “somewhat true” due to a small sample size.
- <sup>78</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Waves 3, 5, 7 and 9. Childhood nerves and fear data for 14-15-year-olds in Waves 3, 5, and 7 were merged into Wave 9 adult data. This was compared against socialising data for the individuals, aged 16 to 22 in Wave 9.
- <sup>79</sup> E. Baines and P. Blatchford, “School break and lunch times and young people’s social lives: A follow-up national study”, *UCL Institute of Education*, 2019.
- <sup>80</sup> H. Dodd and K. Lester, “Adventurous Play as a Mechanism for Reducing Risk for Childhood Anxiety: A Conceptual Model”, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2021.
- <sup>81</sup> H. Dodd et al., “Child’s Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health”, *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 2022.
- <sup>82</sup> H. Dodd et al., “Children’s Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children’s Play Survey”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2021.
- <sup>83</sup> E. Baines and P. Blatchford, “School break and lunch times and young people’s social lives: A follow-up national study”, *UCL Institute of Education*, 2019.
- <sup>84</sup> Onward analysis of Millennium Cohort Survey Wave 5.
- <sup>85</sup> Onward analysis of British Social Attitudes 2010.
- <sup>86</sup> Onward analysis of British Social Attitudes 2010.
- <sup>87</sup> Julia Hobsbawm, *The Nowhere Office*, 2022.
- <sup>88</sup> Julia Hobsbawm, *The Nowhere Office*, 2022.
- <sup>89</sup> Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century*, 2020.
- <sup>90</sup> Onward analysis of Skills and Employment Survey.
- <sup>91</sup> Onward analysis of British Social Attitudes surveys
- <sup>92</sup> Onward analysis of Skills and Employment Survey.
- <sup>93</sup> The proportion of over-35s stating they have influence over how hard they work decreased over the time period (73% to 50%), as did the proportion stating that their own discretion is important when considering how hard they work (56% to 53%). The proportion of over-35s reporting bosses and clients

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were important when it came to how hard they worked also increased (20% to 39%; 31% to 60% respectively).

<sup>94</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.

<sup>95</sup> F. Green et al., “Working Still Harder”, *ILR Review*, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> K. Shah and D. Tomlinson, “Work Experiences”, *Resolution Foundation*, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Onward analysis of United Kingdom Time Use Survey, 2000-01 and 2014-2015.

<sup>98</sup> Onward analysis of Skills and Employment Survey.

<sup>99</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century*, 2020

<sup>101</sup> Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century*, 2020

<sup>102</sup> J. Haidt, “The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls”, *The Atlantic*, 21 Nov 2021.

<sup>103</sup> B. Dobb and M. Foster, “Loneliness and Facebook use: the role of social comparison and rumination”, *Heliyon*, 2021; B. Feinstein et al., “Negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms: Rumination as a mechanism”, *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2013.

<sup>104</sup> C. Odgers and M. Jensen, “Adolescent mental health in the digital age: facts, fears, and future directions”, *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 2020.

<sup>105</sup> R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000.

<sup>106</sup> J. Yates, *Fractured*, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> T. MacBeth, *The Impact of television: a natural experiment in three communities*, 1986.

<sup>108</sup> J. Haidt, “Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid”, *The Atlantic*, 11 Apr 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Sir Lynton Crosby, “Polling on polarisation: which way are we headed?”, 30 May 2018.

<sup>110</sup> “Plymouth shooting: Relatives call for ‘more action on incel culture’”, *BBC*, 17 May 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022

<sup>112</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022

<sup>113</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022

<sup>114</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022. “Highest quality friends” refers to a score of 1 on the friendship quality scale. See the technical annex for how this is derived.

<sup>116</sup> J. Twenge, “Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness”, *Journal of Adolescence*, 2021.

<sup>117</sup> A. Orben and A. Przybylski, “Screens, Teens, and Psychological Well-Being: Evidence From Three Time-Use-Diary Studies”, *Psychological Science*, 2019.

<sup>118</sup> A. Orben et al., “Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media”, *Nature Communications*, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Note, “None” includes children who say they do not have a social media account.

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- <sup>120</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society.
- <sup>121</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11
- <sup>122</sup> Onward analysis of Understanding Society Wave 11
- <sup>123</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>124</sup> Two of these statements were selected from the “Children’s Wellbeing in a Digital World – Index Report 2022”, designed by Revealing Reality.
- <sup>125</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022. Throughout this section “low neighbourliness” refers to the bottom two scores on the scale for neighbourly behaviour (4 and 5), while “high neighbourliness” refers to the top two scores (1 and 2). See the technical annex for details on how this is derived.
- <sup>126</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>127</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>128</sup> Onward analysis of JLP 2022.
- <sup>129</sup> See the technical annex for details on these social issue questions. The quartiles range from 1, “the most socially conservative men” and “the most socially conservative women”, to 4, the most socially liberal.
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- <sup>131</sup> Quartiles are of social values for young men, not young people generally. More friends in real life than online defined here as “Strong Agree” or “Agree” with the aforementioned statement on this subject.
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- <sup>159</sup> *Onward analysis of JLP 2022*. Those who volunteered in the last year almost half as likely as those who did not to report one or no close friends (8% to 14%), more likely to report highest quality friendships (42% to 34%), and over twice as likely to report the highest levels of neighbourly behaviour (10% to 4%). “Highest quality” defined as scores 1 on both friendship quality scale neighbourly behaviour scale. See technical annex for further details.
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