



YOUNG PEOPLE, NO PROBLEM.

Bridging the gap between
myths, reality, and genuine
support for young people.

About 'Young People, No Problem'

This booklet came about because of conversations with youth workers who were frustrated that the good work they saw every day in their communities was going unacknowledged.

Instead, news stories about young people seemed to focus on negative & sensational headlines that aligned with common misconceptions and which painted youth as a problem to be solved - rather than as real young people with their own aspirations and potential.

How was this affecting volunteering in the sector? How does this impact funding? How do young people themselves feel when they see these stories?

With the results of our recent Sector Insights Study on Youth Mentoring in Aotearoa in-hand, we decided to connect with people to explore practical ways for them to get involved in supporting youth, dispelling some common myths along the way.

We hope you enjoy this material and we encourage you to reach out to us to discuss it, connect, volunteer or otherwise learn more about youth mentoring in **your** community and how you can get involved.

The material in this PDF was first delivered as a webinar on 28th May, 2026.

What is the NZ Youth Mentoring Network?



The **NZ Youth Mentoring Network** is a charitable trust that serves as the national hub for New Zealand's youth mentoring sector. Led by a group of volunteer trustees we deliver training and we support youth mentoring providers by facilitating connections, advocacy, professional development, and research.

We are guided by the principle that providing young people with intentional and structured support can help them to establish a sense of identity, develop positive aspirations for their future, and flourish.

Sometimes we skip over explaining what a mentor is because we get in the habit of thinking everybody knows what mentoring is, but it is helpful if we're specific.

Youth Mentoring is generally defined as a supportive relationship between a young person and an older and more experienced adult, but within this there is a lot of variation. We take an inclusive view of youth mentoring in Aotearoa recognising that, on top of academic definitions from overseas, we have several cultural models of mentoring that are unique to us.

What the various models of mentoring have in common is a focus on the growth and well-being of the young person while recognising their voice and intrinsic strengths.

We have a problem

In the news, on social media, or when you're talking to *that* relative at a party, you'll hear a phrase that begins "Young people nowadays..." followed by a really negative comment. Maybe you've even been the one to say it!

Collectively we spend a lot of time wondering how we're going to fix this problem with young people. Maybe it's crime that we're worried about, the ramraids and violence that we see on TV. Maybe it's the fact young people are always on their phones. Maybe it's just the attitude young people have and the fact they don't respect their elders like they used to.

All of these ideas have one thing in common. They create a chasm between young people and the rest of the adult world. Youth mentoring, in contrast, is about building a bridge between generations. Because of the wide reach of Youth Mentoring, this bridge is often cross-cultural, positively connecting people who would otherwise remain strangers.

That's why this talk was called "Young people, no problem" because we'd like to invite people to cross this bridge and connect with each other more, regardless of age, culture, or background, and to maybe stop thinking that young people are the problem that needs to be solved.

This talk was advertised with the hook that it would do some myth-busting, so let's get under way.



Myth #1:

Youth Crime is on the rise

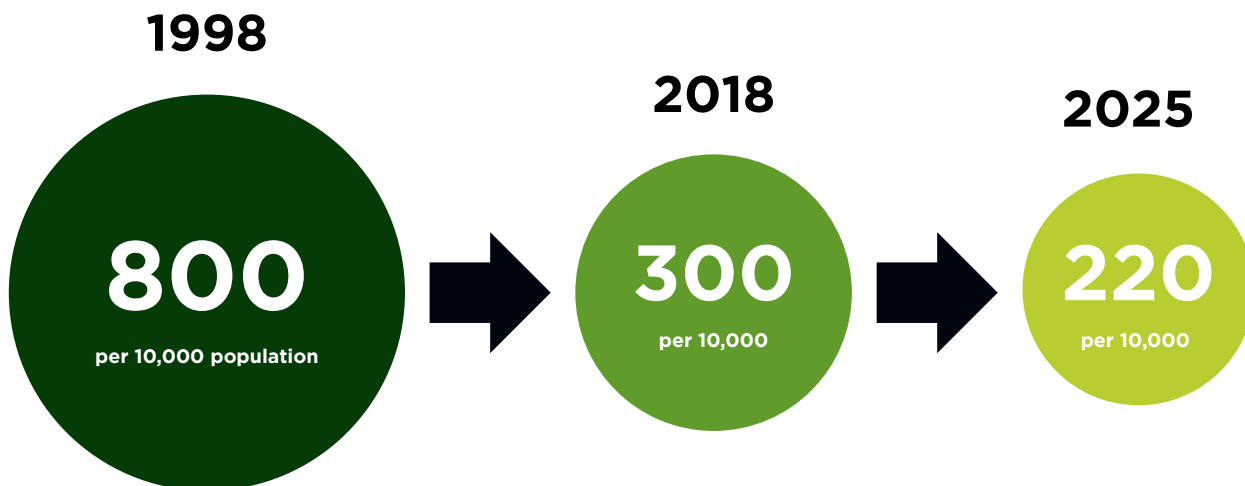
This is a confronting issue and a big one to tackle first but we think it underscores some important ideas in the way we think about young people's behaviour.

We know that this topic can trigger strong feelings and we acknowledge that youth crime is a serious topic. It causes real harm. The fact that youth crime exists is not, in itself, a myth.

So what is the reality?

Reality:

Youth offending has been dropping for 30 years¹



Ministry of Justice records show that youth offending has been steadily dropping for over 30 years.

This is very good news. In our communities and for a wide range of reasons, we have slowly but surely been reducing youth crime for decades! There's a long way to go of course, but the statistics show us that putting in the effort makes a difference.

If we look at some of these numbers for a moment, we can see that the number of offences committed by young people is now only about a quarter of what it was in the late 1990s. Despite some ups and downs over the past few years, 2025 had the lowest level in 30 years.

Based on what we see in the news or online some people are going to find these figures hard to believe, but this reduction in crime rates is a consistent and very easily measurable trend - so why is this reality so out of step with our perceptions, and why does it matter?

Why this matters

People across our communities work hard to provide positive youth development every single day. Some young people are extremely challenging and not every engagement is successful, but research shows that mentoring programmes are overwhelmingly successful at turning around young lives.

Here's why this myth matters:

- Hard headlines make for hard attitudes, deepening social division,
- They also obscure success & progress in our community,
- Funding then gets diverted from support to punishment, and...
- This process creates the same negative cycles that we're trying to avoid.

Our own research shows us that the majority of people working with youth as mentors are volunteers, and every single one of them is passionate about helping our rangatahi.

We're going to show you some stories from young people to back this up in a moment, but first take a moment to think about your own perceptions of youth crime and whether any of this rings true.



Myth #2:

Social media drives social isolation

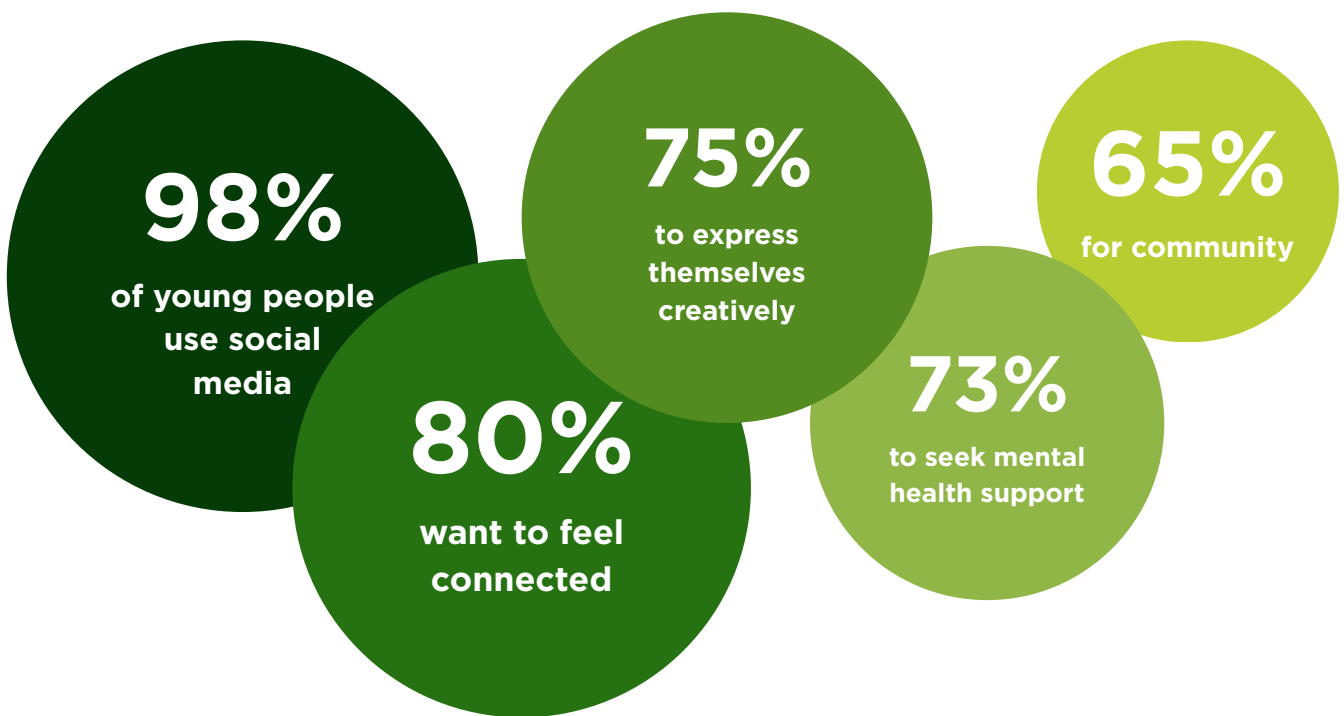
This is another big issue that has received a huge amount of media coverage, and one which concerns many parents.

Much like our comments about youth crime, we understand this issue can trigger some powerful feelings and we want to acknowledge the significant impact, and harm, that social media can cause our young people (and indeed, people of any age). We are not about to give social media a free pass.

What we wish to emphasise, instead, is that the harms caused by social media are by-and-large not young people's fault - they did not create the platforms or design the algorithms we all love to hate. Their reasons for using social media provide some interesting food for thought.

Reality:

Social media supports a real need for connection²



In Australia and the US there have been extensive surveys exploring social media use among teens.

What we know from those surveys is that 98% of young people use social media regularly. That means it is pretty much universal. These same surveys show young people consistently quoting a core reason to use platforms like Instagram: it makes them feel more connected to their peers and to their community.

For many vulnerable young people this might mean a community of choice – particularly for LGBTQ+ youth, for migrants, for cultural and religious groups, or for those who feel isolated by plain-old geography.

In short, we know that young people crave connection and community and Social media is one way – though maybe not always the best way – that they're seeking it.

The question for us is not whether young people are addicted to their phones, but rather how do we take some responsibility to foster genuine connection with them, in a way that provides support and does not erode their agency or access to communities they identify with.

Why this matters

Looking at why young people use these platforms it seems there is a lot of opportunity for us to help connect them to community, culture, and better support. Youth mentoring is an established and proven approach to providing this.

In our workshops and training events we are fond of using the phrase: ***The problem is the problem, the person is not the problem.***

In this case we might say the platforms are the problem, the young people are not the problem.

Here's why this myth matters:

- Criticism of young people for using social media ignores their agency and need for connection
- This can create more barriers to genuine, offline engagement
- It focuses on the negative, without providing other avenues to meet these needs
- By contrast a strengths-based approach, building on the positive, can create new opportunities in real life.



Myth #3:

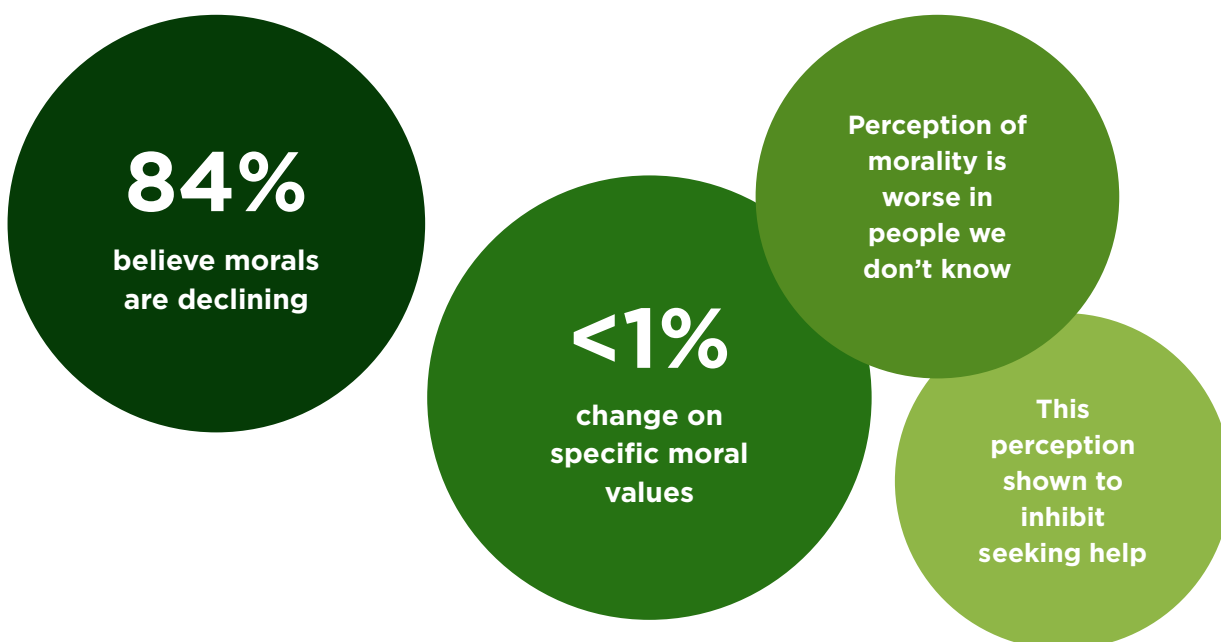
Young people are losing their values

This is a persistent myth that is as old as time. The punks you can see in the image above are all in their sixties now and probably complaining about young people to their relatives on Facebook. That photo was taken in 1981.

Most people understand and acknowledge this myth on some level but it remains persistent. You do not have to scratch too deeply in any online comments section to see a widespread belief that young people are more reckless than before and that they lack the respect for their elders that they used to have.

Reality:

'Moral Decline' is an enduring illusion³



In the modern era we've been surveying people about 'moral decline' since the 1960s, and a meta-study revealed some interesting trends.

We complain about young people's values in every generation, in the same way, but when we examine specific things such as honesty and kindness most people surveyed see things as the same now in their peer group as they were when they were young. For some values, such as equality and diversity, people recognise these have improved.

Across generations our belief in moral decline is constant regardless of any actual change of behaviour that we can point to, showing that an 'erosion of values' is an illusion - and it doesn't matter if you grew up in Asia, the US, the Pacific, or in Europe - more than 12 million people surveyed around the world over 70 years have said the same thing.

The flipside of this is that we perceive morality as much worse among people we don't know. The more of a gap there is between ourselves and others, the worse we perceive their moral behaviour. We even think it is less likely they would help us if we needed it. The solution to our feelings of moral decline is to bridge that gap - whether it is between cultural groups or generations.



"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words... When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient of restraint".

Hesiod, 8th century BC (maybe)

Why this matters

Viewing young people today as worse than they used to be impedes involvement and connection or leads to dramatic over-corrections and punitive treatment. It makes that 'empathy gap' wider than ever.

While morals probably aren't eroding, we can all agree that we live in a complex and challenging time, and the mental well being of young people is under strain.

That is something on which the evidence is very clear, and it is of real concern. In an uncertain world, getting past our misunderstandings and bridging the gap between generations is more important than ever.

And there's a hidden benefit in all of this. Being a mentor does not only re-connect a young person, it reconnects the adult too, building social cohesion that benefits us all.

One thing is certain: our fear of difference is not a myth. It is a human constant that demands significant effort to overcome.

Youth Mentoring Sector Insights 2025



Last year the Youth Mentoring Network did a first-of-its-kind study in partnership with ImpactLab looking at the entire youth mentoring sector. The report explored data from 184 community organisations across NZ and almost 300,000 interactions with young people and their families over a 12 month period. Also drawing on separate, in-depth studies of a dozen mentoring services, it explores both the widespread use and the impact of mentoring in Aotearoa.

Understanding youth mentoring in NZ

We wanted to know how many people were out there providing youth mentoring in our communities. Well, as it turns out, a great many people. The organisations in our study had a combined annual revenue of half a billion dollars, although that's just part of the story. Because of the reliance of most mentoring charities on volunteers, if we had to pay for those services it would cost us many times that.

There were gaps in the data, but we were able to get a fascinating glimpse at the sheer scale of mentoring being provided and, by extension, the enormous impact this was having.

At this point it's worth us providing another definition: coaching is not, by itself, mentoring. Neither is teaching. Both of these have some aspects of mentoring to them, but when we discuss youth mentoring we are talking about structured mentoring programmes delivered by trained people.

[Download the report](#)

Measuring impact

The study is full of charts, numbers, and definitions which we encourage you to explore, but to give you the short version, we can see that mentoring has an impact on youth mental health, school attainment, a reduced risk of violence, addiction, and offending, and improved future income.

The story told by these charts is one of clear, positive changes across the community delivered by a wide range of organisations, the vast majority of which are small, local community groups that are very much in need of capability support, training, and resources.

Mentoring is not just for 'bad' kids (whatever that means), but for young people in a range of situations. Our study outlines programmes for academic support, general well-being, some for young people caught in the justice system, and some for young people in sport.

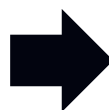
We know from previous research that training mentors means the delivery of support to young people is greatly improved - and that is a core service that we need your help to provide.

One measure of mentoring impact is captured by the **Social Return on Investment (SROI)**, an example which you can see below. We feel that this captures only a part of the picture and that many of the benefits of mentoring are intangible and hard to measure - but SROI does provide somewhere to start.

Total investment

The combined total investment of the programmes in this sample was:

\$11,822,679



Total social value

The combined total social value of the programmes in this sample was:

\$27,159,600

Mentoring stories

Mentoring isn't complicated, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

While mentoring sometimes looks like just kicking a ball around or having some fun, it also takes long term commitment and care. Some stories from taiohi can be really confronting, and it is important that mentors have the support and training to handle that. When done right, the mentoring relationship will change the trajectory of a young person's life.

From our survey we know that mentoring is most often used to support the general well-being of young people, but it also has an important role to play in youth that find themselves in the justice system. The next couple of stories highlight this.

A thank-you to our providers

Within our network are many wonderful mentoring providers. Two of those have shared stories with us to help us show the way mentoring changes lives: MacStrong and Upside Youth Mentoring. We're very grateful for their ongoing support and we encourage you to watch the videos to learn more about their work.

We also want to acknowledge the courage, honesty, and generosity of the young people featured in these stories.



Jono's story



- At age 9, he was really struggling and experiencing violence.
- His school referred him to Upside Youth Mentoring, who matched him with Michael.
- They met once a week, kicking a ball, eating ice-cream, and talking.
- They met together for 3 years

- Jono is now 18
- He passed all his exams and became the go-to for advice among his peers
- He's at university studying to be a counsellor
- Having a mentor changed Jono's life trajectory. and he's now helping others.



[Watch video](#)

Xavier's story



- Started mentoring with Delane when he was 16.
- He was stealing cars, using drugs, and living in a boys' home
- Mentoring was part of wraparound care
- Delane didn't treat him like a problem that needed fixing, he met him where he was at.
- Delane treated Xavier like a young man with potential

- Two and a half years of mentoring included fishing, diving, and practical skills like building decks.
- He learned self-control, a work ethic, and how to better communicate.
- Most of all, he developed a sense of belonging
- Four years later, Xavier is now a qualified drain layer, a father, and a committed partner.



[Watch video](#)



No problem, sign me up!

We hope that this exploration of mentoring has provided a spark for reflection and has got you thinking about getting involved in supporting youth in your community.

You don't need to be some extraordinary over-achiever with gold medals and a doctorate in being awesome to make a difference in someone's life (although it's OK if that's who you are.)

Everyday people with compassion and the ability to commit are all that is required. Many mentoring organisations provide their own training, and if they don't have that capacity there's some good news: we provide regular training workshops too - in fact we're known for it.

If you can't volunteer, and fair enough, life is full-on, you may want to consider giving money. While as Kiwis we don't like to talk about money these services need cash to operate and they get very little government funding. If you think *that* isn't right, then we encourage you to write to or meet with your MP.

Taking action

- Visit our list of mentoring providers at youthmentoring.org.nz/mentoring-providers/ to find a provider in your area.
- Consider making a donation or contact them to see if they need volunteers.
- Join our [Friends of Youth Mentoring](#) group to support nationwide training, collaboration, and to stay in the loop about future events.

Friends of Youth Mentoring

Our Friends of Youth Mentoring group has the sole purpose of bringing like-minds together to grow awareness of youth mentoring and support our work. We believe that intentional mentoring in Aotearoa is essential to help taiohi navigate a complex world.

By joining you'll be helping support training, connections, and collaboration around NZ, benefiting thousands of young people. **We are particularly seeking corporate support.**

Joining is easy.

Simply click on the logo or link below to visit our website and sign up. Membership of this group is free for individuals (although you can make a voluntary donation). For business & corporates there is a sliding membership fee based on the size of your organisation.

You'll then be able to proudly display our 'Friends of Youth Mentoring' badge on your website and other materials and you'll know that you're making a positive difference in young people's lives.

[Join today.](#)



Acknowledgements

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Thanks to Jenny Horst, Chief Executive at [Upside Youth Mentoring](#), and Jono Bucheler, General Manager at [MacStrong](#) for their continued and generous support.

References

1. **Polglase, L., & Lambie, I. (2024). A sharp decline in youth crime: reviewing trends in New Zealand's youth offending rates between 1998 and 2019.** Current Issues in Criminal Justice, 36(1), 42-62. See also [Ministry of Justice NZ statistics](#).
2. 'What Young Australia Thinks': **Young people's social media use** Mission Australia: **Social Media and Young People in Australia**
3. **Mastroianni, A.M., Gilbert, D.T. The illusion of moral decline.** Nature 618, 782-789 (2023).