Measuring the Impact of Youth Centres on LONELINESS



Flinders University

Acknowledgements

Flinders University is located on the traditional lands and waters of Kaurna Peoples, and we pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their sovereignty and continued responsibility to care for country. We respect the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, languages and spirituality and their relationship with country.

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Lastly, we extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the youth centre staff and young people involved in this project. Your insights and support were fundamental to our research efforts.

About the Project

This report and toolkit serve as a guide to aid measuring the impact of youth centres on young people's experiences of loneliness. This report is designed to aid workers in gathering further in-depth information about their impact on loneliness in young people that attend their sites and includes practical qualitative and quantitative measures to support this.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents iii

Project Rationale 1

- Aims & guiding questions 6
- Methods 7

Findings 11

- Engaging in Activities with Likeminded People 13

Opportunities for connection 13

- Connection through low- pressure activities 15
- Activities available which may not usually be accessible for some young people 16

Accessibility of Youth Centres 19

- Affordability 19
- Awareness of events and activities 20
- Perceptions of Openness 23
- Getting there 24

Features of The Space 25

- Choice and flexibility within the space 26
- Material features of space 27
- Look and feel of a place 29

Authentic relationships & connection 31

- Staff are youth centred 32
- Less daunting and more intimate settings 33
- Welcoming and accepting spaces for diverse communities 34

Flinders Loneliness Scale and Return on Investment Rationale. 37

- What is the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale? 38
- Administering the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale 38
- Scoring and Interpretation of the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale 41
- Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale. 45
- Calculating the change in loneliness 47
- Calculating the Monetary Value of a Change in Loneliness 49
- Worked Examples of Calculating ROI 53
- Validation & Reliability 55

References 57

Helpful Organisations & Resources. 59

PROJECT RATIONALE

This project aimed to better understand young people's experience of loneliness in youth centres and how youth centres can influence these experiences.

Loneliness is an increasing concern for Australian young people. Research from 2025 identified that 43% of young people feel lonely, with 1 in 7 experiencing persistent loneliness lasting at least two years (Ending Loneliness Together, 2025).

Indeed, young adults are one of the loneliest age groups within South Australia (McHale et al., 2023).

Young people experiencing poor mental health, financial strain, or difficulty finding employment are placed at even further risk of feeling lonely (Lim et al., 2019). Loneliness has been linked to major emotional and health-related issues including psychological distress, depression and social anxiety (Wolters et al., 2023), poorer immune system and cardiovascular health (Granieri et al., 2026), and increased alcohol consumption (Vasan et al., 2023). The impact of experiencing loneliness on young people is a significant concern.

But what is loneliness?

Commonly, loneliness is defined by a subjective negative experience that results from inadequate meaningful connections (Prohaska et al, 2020). Historical understandings of loneliness have primarily been viewed through a bio-psychological lens which places an emphasis on the emotional impact of a perceived lack of social connection (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). However, conceptualising loneliness is this way can frame it as an individual issue, and understate the influence of environmental factors, such as space and place. Importantly, loneliness has been an experience long associated with the elderly community.

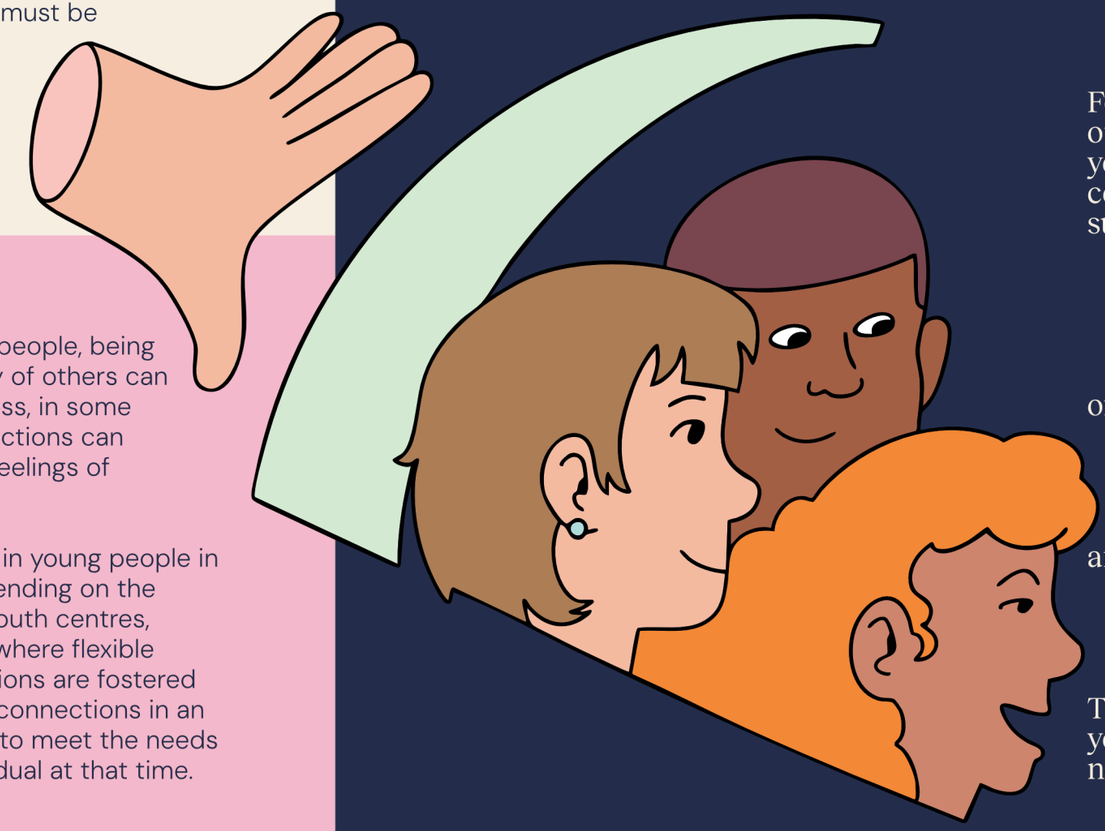
Research is now highlighting that rates of loneliness in young people is placing them within the most 'at risk' demographic.

Furthermore, recent research suggest that young people's experiences of loneliness may be unique and include the impact of desirable social connections (Lohmeyer & SA Youth Forum, 2025; Yang et al., 2022). The way in which young people experience loneliness is complex and must be investigated further.

Participants in this study described loneliness not just in terms of an absence of connection. Therefore, loneliness cannot simply be mitigated by being around people.

Although for some young people, being within the physical vicinity of others can reduce feelings of loneliness, in some contexts undesired connections can exacerbate isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness is experienced in young people in a wide range of ways depending on the needs of that individual. Youth centres, therefore, can be a place where flexible opportunities for connections are fostered through establishing safe connections in an organic way, that are able to meet the needs and capacity of the individual at that time.



I think the reason why that is, is because yes, you are with other people, however just because you are with other people doesn't mean that they're not excluding you subtly

IN SUBTLE WAYS THAT YOU CAN'T THINK OF.

For example, if you're hanging out with a group of friends and you're trying to add to a conversation and then all of a sudden

YOU JUST KEEP GETTING BRUSHED ASIDE

or

NO ONE REALLY LISTENS,

and

YOU JUST KEEP REPEATING YOURSELF.

That can isolate, that can make you feel more lonely than normal.

This project brings new insights and a new toolkit to measure the impact and return on investment of youth centres on loneliness in young people.

This project was a collaboration between Flinders University, the South Australian Youth Forum, the City of Onkaparinga and the Alexandrina Council. Building on previous collaborations, the South Australian Youth Forum acted as a youth-oversight group throughout the project, providing insights and direction in the project focus and methods. Members of the Forum participated as a peer-researchers during the data collection and supported the analysis of the qualitative data.

The City of Onkaparinga and Alexandrina Councils, partnered in the project to provide access to their youth centres and young people to participate in the project. Their staff supported the knowledge translation in the development of the report and toolkit.

This project was funded by the Local Government Association and Local Government Research and Development Scheme. It aimed to gain insight into how the space and place of youth centres shape young people's experience of loneliness and social connection.

This project gathered young people's descriptions of their experiences in youth centre spaces, as well as their social experience of loneliness within this place.

This report aims to highlight the findings of this project, while also providing tools to measure the impact of youth centres on the experiences of loneliness or social connections in young people.

Aims & guiding questions

Aims

- To *increase the capacity of local government youth services* to identify, measure and evaluate the impact of their work on young people's loneliness and sense of belonging.
- To *provide a set of principles and a new evaluation tool kit* to design and evaluate the impact of their work on youth loneliness
- To provide set of principles to *inform the design of youth programs and spaces*, and an evaluation tool kit to *test and measure the impact of local government youth initiatives* on youth loneliness.

Guiding questions

- How does the youth centre space and place *shape young people's experiences* of loneliness and social connection?
- How do young people describe *their experience of space and place* in youth centres?
- How do young people describe the *social experience of loneliness* in youth centres?

Methods

The data collection for the project was conducted across 4 sites within the City of Onkaparinga, and Alexandrina council within South Australia. Information about the project was delivered to site leaders before information sheets and consent forms were distributed amongst young people that attended the youth centres outlining project goals and ways to engage within the project.

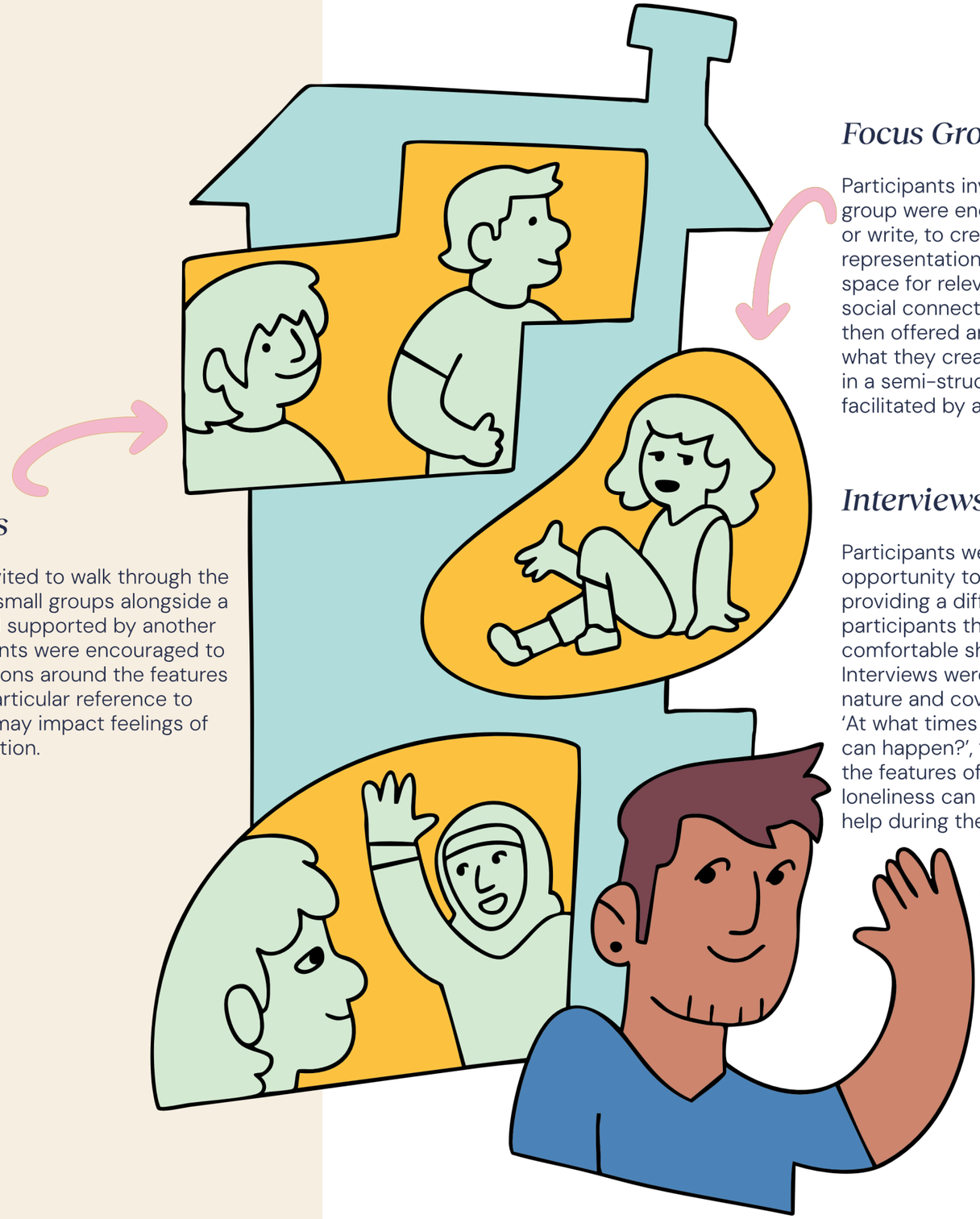
A total of 61 young people, aged 12 – 25, participated in qualitative data collection across the four sites. Participants were comprised of individuals with diverse gender identities and culturally diverse backgrounds, providing representation across multiple demographic groups.

All quotes within this report were collected from this project.

If young people chose to participate, they were remunerated for their time and participated in the following methods:

Walk-throughs

Participants were invited to walk through the youth centre site in small groups alongside a peer-researcher and supported by another researcher. Participants were encouraged to engage in conversations around the features of the space, with particular reference to how these features may impact feelings of loneliness or connection.



Focus Groups

Participants involved within the focus group were encouraged to draw, label, or write, to create a map or other visual representation of the centre, or another space for relevant their experience of social connection. Participants were then offered an opportunity to share what they created with the wider group in a semi-structured discussion facilitated by a researcher.

Interviews

Participants were also offered the opportunity to talk 1:1 with a researcher, providing a different opportunity for participants that might not have been comfortable sharing with a wider group. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and covered questions such as ‘At what times do you feel loneliness can happen?’, ‘Where are places and the features of that place where loneliness can happen?’, and ‘What can help during these times?’.

Scale & Return on Investment Calculation

Additional to these other data collection methods, this project developed a new scale (survey) to measure young people's experiences of loneliness. This scale was based on a review of existing loneliness scales and insights from previous qualitative work.

Young people and youth centre staff were consulted in the development of the questions (items) on the scale. The scale was tested (validated) with large online groups. This validation enabled the development of a return on investment (ROI) calculation.

> The development of this new scale and ROI calculation provides a means for youth centres to evidence the impact of their work in terms of *quantifiable financial* and *psychosocial* outcomes.

Details on the development of the scale and ROI are included in this report. Details on how to used the scale and calculate the ROI are also included in the Toolkit section of this document.

and I worked out wow,

> THERE'S ACTUALLY SO MANY THINGS YOU CAN BE PART OF IN THE COMMUNITY THAT i DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT,

and so many like-minded people, so for me it's about the relationships you make and not about the centres in general,

> THE CENTRES ARE JUST AN ACTIVE SPACE THAT MAKES IT ALL HAPPEN.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present key insights from the project into young people's experiences of loneliness in the participating youth centres.

These insights *provide a snapshot* of the *experiences* of participants in these particular centres; providing a *rich picture of the nature of youth centres* and how they *promote social connection.*

We hope our findings offer opportunities for youth centres to evidence the value of their space and initiatives for young people. We also hope they offer opportunities for critical reflection on what works and what is prioritised in youth centres. While qualitative research is always limited to the context in which it is undertaken, it is likely that other youth centres, young people and staff will resonate with these insights and find them a useful point of reflection.

The youth centres acted as a 'third space' (Oldenburg, 2010), where young people connect, interact, and engage with peers which overwhelmingly minimised their experience of loneliness.

Participants in this study attending youth centres highlighted that their perception of the youth centre was that it was a place that largely fosters feelings of connection. This perspective was echoed within the discussions with the South Australian Youth Forum (SAYF), where they reinforced that for young people, a physical space designated for young people for connection was important.

In an age of intense social media use social connection can at times feel *fragmented* or *disingenuous.* 'Third spaces' free from expectations such as the physical space offered by youth centres, offer an *invaluable role* in *promoting connection.*

In this section, we present key findings from the interviews, walk-throughs, and focus groups under four broad themes. Within each of these themes is a sub-theme for which we offer:

- *An insight from participants in for the form of a short quote*; then
- *Briefly unpack some of the meaning in the data*; before, finally,
- *Suggesting some considerations for youth centres moving forward.*

Following the presentation and discussion of the insights from the interviews, walk-throughs, and focus groups, we present the development of the new loneliness scale and return on investment calculations. This provides insight into the process and rationale for the design of these tools.

iT'S VERY RARE THAT i FEEL LONELY HERE,

and if I do,

it's usually an indication that there's something going on for me personally

than it is the space.

BUT THE SPACE ITSELF OVERALL PROMOTES CONNECTION.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION

I guess just HAVING PEOPLE THAT HAVE AN INTEREST IN ME AND MY WELLBEING AND MY INTERESTS... like people who have similar passions and interests and can collaborate, work together; I think THAT MAKES ME FEEL SAFE AND IT HELPS ME HELP OTHERS FEEL SAFE TOO.

Engaging in Activities with Likeminded People

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Young people discussed how engaging with like-minded people can be a great support for initial connection. As attendance is voluntary, when young people chose to engage in an activity or session at a youth centre, they are making a choice to be there.

Unlike environments such as schools where attendance is mandatory and connection is more shaped by circumstance; youth centres provide spaces that are inherently easier to navigate as attendees want to be there.

Furthermore, as youth centres provide programming around specific activities (art, gaming, DnD, making music, etc.), young people that attend will already know that others will have a similar interest, which can act as a social bridge and lead to more organic connections.

Youth centres can provide events and activities targeted to young people with a specific interest. Providing these opportunities not only creates interest in accessing the youth centre itself but also creates common ground for attendees to initiate connections with like-minded people.

What does this mean for youth centres?

It is important to have regular discussion and input from young people that are attending youth centres about their interests and what they are hoping to engage with while present within the space.

Youth centres can then work alongside the young people to create environments or enable opportunities for attendees to engage with peers that share similar interests.

It's like group wise at school, but

> JUST BECAUSE WE'RE ALL MAKING ART IT'S LIKE SUCH A GOOD WAY TO CONNECT,

to maybe

> BECOME A COMMUNITY,

which is nice.

It's like the programs that are offered here it's such a kind of

— not strange collection of people —

> BUT PEOPLE THAT WOULD NOT USUALLY KNOW EACH OTHER AT ALL,

which is nice.

Yeah so there's just a space for all,

> THERE'S MANY GROUPS IN HERE, ALL THE GROUPS YOU CAN FIND

some of your, like some,

> SOMETHING THAT YOU'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT

and then you'll be able to find at least one or two people that are new

> AND YOU'LL BE ABLE TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH THEM.
>
> NO ONE JUDGES YOU

because you all share the same activities and interests and the same group as you're in, when you do something that you like.

> HENCE WHY THERE'S A LOT MORE GROUP PHOTOS ON THE WALL.

Connection through low-pressure activities

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Participants highlighted how some situations to make conversation difficult. Building social connection can at times feel disingenuous or forced. Young people highlighted low pressure activities that are widely available within youth centres such as playing cards (see overleaf for an example), creating art, or engaging in craft creates environments where young people can connect with others in an organic way. This parallel participation enables social connection to happen gradually over time in a way that feels comfortable.

What does this mean for youth centres?

It is important to understand that social connection does not always look like conversation. Youth Centres can ensure that there are multiple activity options available that are easy to join or leave freely, that provide informal, low-stake opportunities for connection. These low-pressure activities (such as art, card games, craft, etc.,) can provide participants to connect in a way that feels comfortable for them to do at that time.

Activities available which may not usually be accessible for some young people

Youth centres are able to provide access to activities which may not usually be available to young people for a variety of reasons (financial, lack of awareness, lack of support, etc.,). Young people in this study discussed engaging in activities like creating music, going kayaking, or creating art, that would not have been as accessible for them without being facilitated at the youth centre. This in turn attracts other young people in from the wider community, some of which that may have been not having opportunities to engage with others. By providing these opportunities, the reach of impact of youth centres grows by drawing in more young people from the community to engage, which then increases opportunities of social connection.

I THINK IT'S HELPFUL IF YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING WITH YOUR HANDS,

or doing something where your mind is outside of just having to make conversation

BECAUSE A LOT OF PEOPLE FIND IT DIFFICULT TO NOT FIDGET OR NOT HAVE —

you're looking around and stuff trying to make conversation,

WHEREAS IF WE'RE COOKING OR WE'RE DOING SOME ART OR COLOURING OR JUST WHATEVER OR PLAYING SOME GAMES

— we play UNO a lot and stuff while we're here —

JUST BECAUSE IT'S SOMETHING CHILLED WE JUST TALK OVER,

that's always really good,

because then you can connect with people around you,

AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO THINK

"I'M TALKING TO SOMEONE I DON'T KNOW"

because it is a bit difficult to actually engage with conversation and be like

"OH WELL, HOW ARE YOU":

it's like you know,

WE FIND THAT A BIT DIFFICULT.



ACCESSIBILITY OF YOUTH CENTRES

Affordability

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Young people have limited financial resources and this can impact access to spaces to socialise within the community. While many spaces within the community require money to access, youth centres are an important option for young people to attend, socialise, and connect with others, without financial barriers. Participants of the project highlighted how having the opportunity to engage in activities without having to pay can be a primary reason as to why they would initially, and continue to, attend the youth centres.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Youth centres can accommodate the financial limitations that young people may face and

...poverty can definitely increase loneliness because if your friends are like,

> "HEY LET'S GO OUT TO EAT AT THIS PLACE IN THIS CITY."
>
> "HEY, LET'S GO CHECK OUT THIS EVENT OR THIS CONCERT"

or whatever, and you can't go because you don't have the money for it, because you have to pay bills or groceries or rent or whatever. That can really isolate you really quickly and I know that from experience...

And it's a point where I'm so embarrassed that I have to keep saying,

> "I'D LOVE TO BUT I'M FEELING SICK AT THE MOMENT"

just to lie, just as a way to make it seem less embarrassing to me to say, because

> I'D RATHER SAY, I CAN'T MAKE IT BECAUSE I'M SICK, THAN I CAN'T MAKE IT BECAUSE I'M BROKE.

provide opportunities that engage young people that are free or have minimal cost. Youth centres that provide low, or no cost, activities are removing barriers for young people to accesses an important space for building social connections.

Awareness of events and activities

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Participants discussed not knowing what activities or events were on offer for them in the youth centres prior to initially engagement. Participants discussed how they were aware of communication strategies such as social media posts, information pamphlets, and activity notice boards created by youth centres to increase awareness, but at the primary way appeared to be through word-of-mouth or other attendees.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Loneliness, or lack of social connection, may stem from not being aware of available options for creating social connections. Therefore, communicating what is available at youth centres and increasing community awareness is critically important. Social media posts, posters within public settings, and discussions with other community supports are some other ways that participants stated they heard about what was available.

However, word-of-mouth appeared to be the primary way that participants initially became aware of the Youth Centre, or perhaps was more likely to result in participants attending the centre. Exploration and discussions with young people about how to best share information with them and wider community will likely support strategies that work for young people.

Participant: ... being here and the collaborations I find that they're very helpful and that **HAVING A PLACE TO REDIRECT THAT LONELINESS** to really help. So redirecting that loneliness to a place of connection helped. But then it's just finding out where those connections, all those communities are so sometimes just information, **SOMETIMES YOU CAN BE LONELY AS A BYPRODUCT OF LACK OF INFORMATION OR KNOWLEDGE.**

Researcher: What do you mean by that?

Participant: What do I mean by that is that you could be depressed and want to do something but because you don't know that something's out here. So I could be at home being, I want to do music and have no idea that (the youth centre) does music. And that **I'M JUST DEPRESSED AND LONELY AS A BYPRODUCT OF WHAT I DON'T KNOW.**



Perceptions of Openness

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Participants discussed how the youth centres were perceived as being inviting and welcoming spaces to attend. They spoke of a 'vibe' that appears to be prevalent within youth centres, that make them a receptive space. Generally, this was attributed to the way in which they were engaged and whether that was with staff or other young people within the centre. Participants noted that they felt comfortable coming into this space and engage with others, even if they had not met them previously. This experience did not appear to be as prevalent within other spaces they regularly attend such as schools.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Youth centres can continue to promote this perception of their centres as open spaces by intentionally supporting staff and participant to build connection between young people and within spaces. Although staff within the spaces were highlighted as important in bridging initial contact, young people that regularly attend also play a valuable role in welcoming new young people. Regular attendees of youth centres could be encouraged to welcome new attendees, by creating a peer-support initiative within the centre.

Participant: I find people, the first time I come here, **PEOPLE GIVE THE VIBE OF, IT'S A WELCOMING, EVEN THOUGH YOU'RE A COMPLETE STRANGER**. And it feels nice to have that empathy it feels like when you feel connect, not everyone has empathy but or even sympathy, they have just that, I don't know...

Researcher: Yeah, it's like a welcoming vibe when you come here, you find that that was from the people here, the staff or—?

Participant: Yeah the staff definitely and some people here, not everyone's great with connecting, but some people **YOU CAN TELL THEY'RE TRYING DO THEIR BEST TO CONNECT** with others.

Getting there

Participants also highlighted that having close access to public transport was a strength for youth centres. Young people at the participating rural site specifically discussed the challenges of accessing the youth centre if you do not live in the town and how there is a heavy reliance on parents or carers being able to drop off and pick up young people. Youth centres and councils should consider accessibility of these spaces and provide information for how young people are best suited to access the youth centres.

Participant: I mean, **THE STAFF DEFINITELY HELPS**, being friendly and accepting of whatnot. **SAME WITH THE YOUTH, THEY TEND TO BE OPEN AND ACCEPTING TO WHATEVER**. I guess youth centres also tend to not just be like, you know, bland, white, boring, they actually - you get what I mean, you go in anywhere today and it's a clinical room.

Researcher: So that probably helps in just..

Participant: Yeah. Yeah, being welcoming and inviting kind of thing, **THEY FEEL LIKE INVITING SPACES**.

FEATURES OF THE SPACE

Participant: the thing with the youth centres is **YOU'RE NOT FORCED TO BE HERE**, so it's like everyone wants to be here, and that's why you get such, working well relationships

Participant: Yeah, and obviously like it's very, very good, the youth centres because there's so much, **"HEY CAN WE TURN THE LIGHTS OUT?", "YEAH, OF COURSE WE CAN"**, you know, like if you don't like this room go into another room, and it's like obviously **IT'S SO VERY ADAPTABLE TO EVERYONE'S NEEDS** and it's always like "hey, is there anything we can do?", it's like you're not required to do a certain program. But when you choose to do it there's so many other people choosing to do it.



Choice and flexibility within the space

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Choice and flexibility are foundational to the participants' experience within youth centre spaces. Attendance at youth centres is voluntary and services are shaped around meeting the needs of young people coming into that space. This means that young people are provided a space which promotes choice and agency, which differs from other setting young people frequent, such as institutionalised settings like school where choice is limited. Flexibility and choice within the youth centre spaces normalises engaging, disengaging, and moving around the space, which in turn allows the young person to meet their needs at that time.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Youth centres can actively promote flexibility and choice within their spaces, by continuing to create opportunities to exercise choice and agency. Providing multiple opportunities or activities where young people can disengage or engage with how they feel comfortable. A judgment-free way supports feelings of safety and comfortability, leading to feelings of connection.

Material features of space

As previously discussed, young people experience loneliness or social connection in a variety of ways. Therefore, having adaptable spaces allows youth centres to provide features that support individuals to meet their needs at that time. There does not appear to be a 'one size fits all' in terms of creating an ideal space for promoting connection. However, some common themes were highlighted by participants regarding the material features of youth centres that support social connection.

Noise

Participants voiced that at times they enjoyed being in the busier rooms where there was a lot of chatter or music playing as they felt more connected, even if they were not engaging in conversations. However, some young people also voiced that this can be overwhelming, particularly in spaces where they are first entering into the space such as lobbies or foyers. Designated quiet spaces, or 'break out rooms' appeared to be useful as not only places to regulate, but also to provide spaces for more intimate connection.

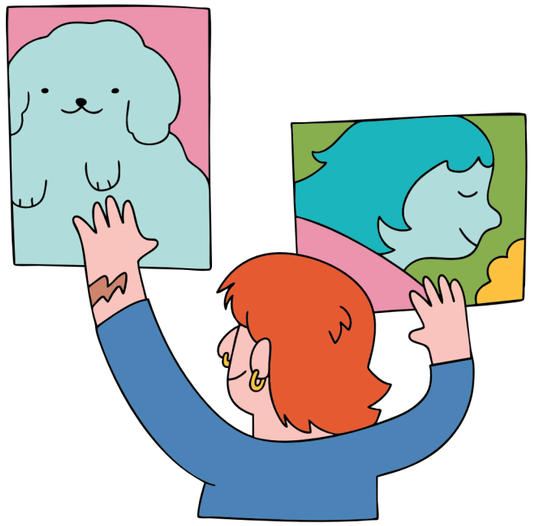


Size

The size of the space appeared to directly relate to how participants perceived these spaces, as well as how they viewed they should be used. Larger spaces created an environment where social connection could be encouraged in informal ways through group, or parallel participation. Participants also voiced that they enjoyed utilising these spaces even when not engaging with others. These spaces tended to be the 'busiest' and allowed them to feel a part of the group even when not directly engaging with others. Smaller spaces were useful as 'break-out' spaces for either quiet or more intimate engagement with peers, as well as providing a space for regulation when becoming overwhelmed. A large cohort of participants stated that they enjoyed the flexibility of the spaces, as they were able to move between, depending on their needs at the time.

Furniture

Comfortable furniture to 'chill-out' with, such as bean bags or couches, were important to young people and were a common feature in spaces where connection frequently occurred. Furthermore, having these as a feature of the space appeared to shift the perspective of how young people viewed the youth centres, into a more relaxed and welcoming space.



Artwork

Artwork played a valuable part in making the space feel less 'clinical' or institutional. The use of bright colours appeared to allow participants to differentiate between youth centres and other spaces they spend time in, creating a welcoming and inviting space. Participants particularly mentioned spaces that displaying artwork created by young people that attend that space created a sense of ownership and pride.

Lighting

Warm lighting was discussed by participants as having a calming effect. They described how spaces with lower-level lighting, such as using lamps were their favourite spaces, whereas spaces with bright cool lighting were not spaces they generally enjoyed spending time in as they felt more clinical.

I like how it's got the painted poles along here

because I feel like

> IT SHOWS A THEME — DO WE COME IN HERE AND DO WE GET INVOLVED KIND OF THING.

I know it probably sounds strange, but —

— I don't know —

> IT JUST MAKES IT MORE WELCOMING.

Look and feel of a place

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Features of the space, such as lighting, furniture and art can change how young people perceive that space. Using colourful art, comfortable furniture such as bean bags or couches, and having music playing in the background create an environment that feels more relaxed and 'cool'.

Examples of this could be seen in centres where they displayed art that was created by young people within that space, playing music that attendees are into at the time, or providing inviting and comfortable furniture such as bean bags and couches. Ultimately, the layout of the space should be strongly created through attendee voice to reflect what would be inviting for them.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Youth centres are encouraged to be responsive to what their young people are wanting within that space. As noted previously, choice and flexibility within the space is crucial and allowing young people to move freely between spaces that provide different features of space (lighting, noise, size, etc.,) to meet their needs at that time.

AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTION

Just that a lot of the adults here just make it,

I think I said this before, but

THEY MAKE IT FEEL LIKE A SECOND FAMILY.

Because it's like, when you get there, it's hard to explain, it's just like,

it might just be since I've been going here a while, it's like...

JUST TO EMPHASISE HOW IMPORTANT THE CONNECTION IS HERE,

because I've just, I've seen the adults talking to other kids' parents and services that really benefit other kids.

AND THEN JUST, I WANT TO EMPHASISE THAT CONNECTION

Staff are youth centred

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Participants described the importance of youth centre staff being young person centred, safe, welcoming, and genuinely care about the young people that attend the youth centres. Participants highlighted the contrast between the youth workers in the space, and other adults that may be in a more authoritative position such as teachers.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Greeting young people when entering, engaging in activities with them, supporting them with skills, and being friendly were all experiences participants associated with the youth workers within the space. Furthermore, engaging with staff within sites were stated by participants as being a primary protective factor or strategy used when feeling lonely or isolated, highlighting the important role the adults in this space hold.

[After a question about what helps during times of loneliness] -

Definitely the staff. Like that was the big —

LIKE SUPER OPEN BUT NOT OVERBEARING.

Like when I first started, I had like pretty bad anxiety,

SO THEY WERE JUST SUPER WELCOMING AND MAKING SURE EVERYONE WAS INVOLVED,

rather than, you know, the

— if you're a regular—

you get what I mean, like making sure that everyone gets an opportunity to - and there's a reason for them to be there,

RATHER THAN YOU'RE HERE, COOL, WHATEVER.

Intimate settings

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Youth centres as a space were perceived to be more intimate and less overwhelming than other spaces that young people attend such as schools. Particularly for young people that face challenges with neurodivergence and social anxiety, youth centres are able to provide a space that is more accessible through smaller numbers, leading to more opportunities for social connection. Youth centres are able to capitalise on this less overwhelming setting and provide young people that may usually struggle to socially connect with others, a space that feels comfortable and safe to do so, free from social expectations found within other settings such as schools.

I think everyone was just — especially in the team —

EVERYONE WAS REALLY FRIENDLY

and then just everyone would ask you a question or everyone would be how are you doing or whatever.

AND IT WASN'T LIKE A MASSIVE OVERWHELMING GROUP OF PEOPLE.

Just a smaller, little nice group of people.

Participant:Yes, because well you know all the people at school, but you don't anyone here... But also e**SPECIALLY WITH PEOPLE AT SCHOOL THERE'S A LOT OF STUFF LIKE TO DO WITH PRESSURE**, not, in a sense of work pressure or that kind of thing. But like lots of, **YOU FEEL A LOT OF ANXIETY WITH WANTING TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH SOMEBODY AT SCHOOL** because you know that since they go to the same place, **THERE ARE LOTS OF DIFFERENT CHAIN REACTIONS THAT CAN GO ON FROM TRYING TO BEFRIEND A CERTAIN PERSON**.

Welcoming and accepted diverse communities

How are youth centres shaping young people's experience of loneliness or social connection?

Consistently participants described youth centres as a welcoming and inviting space. Youth centres appeared to create a safe space for the LGBTQI+ community and neurodivergent young people (see example overleaf) to connect socially with others. Participants described youth centres as 'inclusive' and 'respectful'. As youth centres generally appeared to be a less overwhelming place to socialise comparatively to other spaces such as schools and sporting clubs, they play a pivotal role in creating a physical third space for these communities.

What does this mean for youth centres?

Youth centres provide an important space that supports building social connections for marginalised groups. Youth centres can continue to actively create safe spaces for these communities through neuro-affirming conversations, inclusive art or messaging throughout site, or providing activities or groups for targeted communities.

Researcher: So why do you think this, at the youth centre, you find that it doesn't have that sort of, that pressure?

Participant: Well it's a bit more just, I don't know how to say it, a bit more, not, not respectful but **A BIT MORE INCLUSIVE**

I recently got diagnosed with autism,

so I never understood why I found it hard with connection and stuff,

BUT WHEN I CAME TO A YOUTH CENTRE I IMMEDIATELY CLICKED,

like staff so friendly and understanding.

AND THERE IS SO MANY LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE THAT IT JUST DOESN'T MATTER,

it doesn't matter that you can find a connection with anyone really,

like different cultures, backgrounds, disabilities, autistic, neurodivergent, neurotypical,

it just doesn't matter who you are or where you come from,

IT'S JUST SUCH A COMFORTING SPACE AND I FEEL LIKE YOU CAN'T BE LONELY IN A SPACE LIKE THAT,

like yeah,

I'M ALL FOR THE WHATEVER THIS IS,

I'm like yes,

yes.



FLINDERS LONELINESS SCALE AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT RATIONALE.

What is the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale?

The Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale (FYLS) is a 21-item scale that we have designed to assess how young peoples' loneliness may change across different spaces, situations, and time points. It has been validated using data from two different large-scale online surveys, one with 850 participants from the United States of America, and one with 335 participants from across Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The scale is attached at the end of this document.

Administering the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale

For the best estimate of a change in loneliness over time, we recommend that the scale is administered at a ***minimum*** of ***two different points in time, no less than two weeks apart***, but preferably at ***the beginning and end of a program*** (more on Page 49). Once you have administered the scale (Page 45), you can use the scoring index (Page 46) to convert responses into a number, which allows you to find ***the total score***.

Total Score

For a ***general, overall estimate of loneliness***, it is recommended that this ***total score*** is used, which corresponds to both a severity level and written interpretation. To identify whether loneliness is being experienced by a young person in a problematic way that requires further intervention, the ***cutoff score*** of 50 may be used, with respect to this total score.

Subscales

For a more specific understanding of loneliness in order to facilitate intervention, we recommend that scores are calculated for each ***subscale***. Subscales can also be administered ***independently*** of the whole scale, if there's one area in particular with which the young person may be experiencing challenges that you would like to measure in isolation.

There are five subscales within the full scale that indicate the different facets of life in which young people may be experiencing loneliness the most.

- *Social Support*; which relates to social loneliness and isolation — where feeling misunderstood, unsupported, or uncomfortable within social connections leads to loneliness.

- *Yearning*; which taps into emotional loneliness and isolation, where loneliness is characterised by a general feeling of yearning for more connection or more satisfying connections with others.

- *Negative Treatment*; which measures an aspect of loneliness that appears to be both unique and fundamental to the experiences of young people, where social interactions can be characterised by hostility, unfair treatment, rejection, or exclusion.

- *Awareness of Social Judgment*; another aspect of loneliness that appears to be unique to young people. This subscale taps into stigmatisation, surveillance of one's social behaviour, and a general awareness of judgement from others in social situations.

- *Comfortable Spaces*; a new aspect of loneliness that is central to the experiences of young people. This subscale taps into the Danish and Norwegian idea of "Hygge", which is a mood that is derived from spaces that are cozy and comfortable to the senses.

With these more specific scores, each category corresponds to different ***recommendations for interventions*** or ***further actions*** that may be taken to target loneliness within that facet of life, which we will cover later in this toolkit.



Scoring and Interpretation of the Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale

Once you have a completed questionnaire with the young person, fill out the score sheet (Page 46) by circling or highlighting the number that corresponds to the box that the young person has ticked. Write the total score for each subscale in the space beneath each subscale, and write the overall scale score in the space the end of the page — calculating it by adding up all of the subscale scores.

Interpreting Total Scores

Total scores on the FYLS may range from 21–84, where scores closer to 21 indicate minimal loneliness, and scores closer to 84 indicate a high degree of loneliness. The following table outline guidance for what each range of scores means with respect to loneliness.

Score	*Severity Level*
21-45	Negligible or very low loneliness
46-49	Mild loneliness
50-52*	*Moderate loneliness
57+	Severe loneliness

* 50 is the cut-off score for the scale, indicating the point at which the loneliness being experienced by a young person is most likely problematic and requiring further intervention.

Interpreting Subscale Scores

Total scores on the FYLS range from 4–16 for social support, yearning, awareness of social judgment, and comfortable spaces; and from 5-20 for negative treatment. Higher scores indicate more difficulty in the subscale's domain , with lower scores indicating less difficulty. The following tables provide score interpretation guides for each subscale. Additionally, we map score ranges to recommended interventions; providing a starting point for youth workers and young people to improve their outcomes within each area.

Social Support Score (Items 1-4)	*Severity Level*	*Recommended Intervention*
4-7	Well supported	None needed immediately; monitor for changes.
8-10	Supported	
11-12	Slightly unsupported	Strengthen their social support within the centre; talk to them about their current circle; strengthen their communication skills; referral to a psychologist, counsellor, or therapist if feasible; monitor for any changes.
13+	Little to no social support	

Yearning Score (Items 5-8)	*Severity Level*	*Recommended Intervention*
4–7	Little to no yearning	None needed immediately; monitor for changes.
8–10	Some yearning	
11–12	Moderate yearning	Strengthen connections within the centre; seek local clubs, groups, events, or volunteer groups that may be of interest; organisations like Headspace for resources; referral to a psychologist, counsellor, or therapist if feasible; monitor for any changes.
13+	Significant yearning	

Negative Treatment (Items 9-12)	*Severity Level*	*Recommended Intervention*
5–7	Few negative interactions	None needed immediately; monitor for changes.
8–10	Some negative treatment	Strengthen connections within the centre. Monitor for changes.
11–13	Moderate negative treatment	Provide them with a safe space to talk about their experiences; organisations like Headspace for resources; bullying resources may be helpful; referral to a psychologist, counsellor, or therapist if feasible; monitor for any changes.
14–20	Significant hostility	

Awareness of Social Judgment (Items 13-16)	*Severity Level*	*Recommended Intervention*
4–6	Minimal awareness	None needed immediately; monitor for changes.
7–8	Some awareness	
9–11	Moderate awareness	Provide them with a safe space to talk about their experiences; referral to a psychologist, counsellor, or therapist if feasible; monitor for any changes.
12–16	Debilitating awareness	

Comfortable spaces (Items 17-20)	*Severity Level*	*Recommended Intervention*
4–6	Able to find comfort across spaces	None needed immediately; monitor for changes.
7–8	Mostly comfortable in spaces	
9–11	Some comfortable spaces	Discuss and explore their specific sensory needs; seek local clubs, groups, events, or volunteer groups that may be of interest; monitor for any changes.
12–16	Few to no comfortable spaces	

Flinders Youth Loneliness Scale.

When thinking about the past *TWO WEEKS*, tick the box that most applied to you.

	Did not apply to me at all	Applied to me some of the time	Applied to me a good part of the time	Applied to me most of the time
I had somebody to go to when I needed someone	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that I could relate to others	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt understood by others	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had people with whom I felt comfortable	☐	☐	☐	☐
I wanted more friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt lonely	☐	☐	☐	☐
I did not feel fulfilled by my current social connections	☐	☐	☐	☐
I wished I was more "in the loop" with others' lives	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had negative interactions with others	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt rejected or excluded by others	☐	☐	☐	☐
My feelings were overlooked in situations where they should have been considered	☐	☐	☐	☐
My voice was not listened to by others	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was treated unfairly by others online	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt bad about myself when thinking about certain interactions I had	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that I would be judged if I was seen on my own	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt watched by others in the places I accessed	☐	☐	☐	☐
When seeing people interact on social media, I felt bad about my own social life	☐	☐	☐	☐
I accessed places that catered well to my needs	☐	☐	☐	☐
I accessed places where I felt comfortable to be myself	☐	☐	☐	☐
I accessed places where I felt safe and respected	☐	☐	☐	☐
I accessed places that felt cozy and homely	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scoring sheet

	Did not apply to me at all	Applied to me some of the time	Applied to me a good part of the time	Applied to me most of the time
I had somebody to go to when I needed someone	4	3	2	1
I felt that I could relate to others	4	3	2	1
I felt understood by others	4	3	2	1
I had people with whom I felt comfortable	4	3	2	1
Total for Social Support		/16		
	1	2	3	4
I felt lonely	1	2	3	4
I did not feel fulfilled by my current social connections	1	2	3	4
I wished I was more "in the loop" with others' lives	1	2	3	4
Total for Yearning		/16		
I had negative interactions with others	1	2	3	4
I felt rejected or excluded by others	1	2	3	4
My feelings were overlooked in situations where they should have been considered	1	2	3	4
My voice was not listened to by others	1	2	3	4
I was treated unfairly by others online	1	2	3	4
Total for Negative Treatment		/20		
I felt bad about myself when thinking about certain interactions I had	1	2	3	4
I felt that I would be judged if I was seen on my own	1	2	3	4
I felt watched by others in the places I accessed	1	2	3	4
When seeing people interact on social media, I felt bad about my own social life	1	2	3	4
Total for Awareness of Social Judgement		/16		
I accessed places that catered well to my needs	1	2	3	4
I accessed places where I felt comfortable to be myself	1	2	3	4
I accessed places where I felt safe and respected	1	2	3	4
I accessed places that felt cozy and homely	1	2	3	4
Total for comfortable spaces		/16		
Total score for all subscales		/84		

Calculating the change in loneliness

To show a change in the level of loneliness across the course of a program, take an average (i.e., the sum of the total scores divided by the number of participants) of the total scores from participants at the beginning of the program, and an average of the total scores from participants at the end of the program, and compare the two. (Trotter & Rawlings Adams, 2017).



What if the group of young people changes from beginning to end?

While it is ideal to have identical participants at the pre- and post-program timepoints for a proper evaluation, you can still calculate the change in loneliness scores for pilot programs. However, you would need to provide a caveat about what that change in participants looked like from pre to post (e.g., numbers of people who did not continue with the program). Otherwise, if applicable, you can still calculate the average of the specific group who have stayed the same (e.g., if there are only five young people who have remained from the beginning of the program until the end).

Measuring individual change

To show individual change for young people who join the program for an extended period, measure their loneliness score when they first join the program, and then again at the end of the program, and compare these scores.

It is also useful to have additional insights that support the written interpretations from the scale. These insights may be obtained from having conversational interviews with young people, conducted either before or after administering the scale.

Calculating the Monetary Value of a Change in Loneliness

Based on an online survey we conducted through CloudResearch with 335 people from across Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Table 1), we found that 1 unit of movement on the FYLS is equivalent to -0.282 units of movement on the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) (significance of <.001). As a result, it is possible to calculate the financial impact of a change in the FYLS.

Table 1.

Frequency and proportion of participants who scored within each score range on the SWEMWBS

Category	*Overall SWEMWBS score*	*Number of respondents*	*% of total respondents*
1	7-14	16	4.8
2	15-16	26	7.8
3	17-18	36	10.7
4	19-20	55	16.4
5	21-22	56	16.7
6	23-24	45	13.4
7	25-26	38	11.3
8	27-28	42	12.5
9	29-30	9	2.7
10	31-32	7	2.1
11	33-34	3	0.9
12	35	2	0.6

Note. These data are based on a survey of 335 people from Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

The valuation of this change has been interpreted from the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT; Trotter & Rallings Adams, 2017) wellbeing valuation table. Table 2 shows the change in the SWEMWBS scale results that have been calculated to "represent the additional money, the average individual would need to improve their wellbeing, which is the same amount as the improvement in their SWEMWBS score" (p. 5). In other words, if someone completing the scale improved by a given amount due to your program, this calculation shows how much money they would have to otherwise be given to produce the same improvement in their wellbeing.

Table 2.

The raw scores on the FYLS and their equivalent SWEMWBS score and wellbeing valuation

Category	*Overall SWEMWBS score*	**Equivalent Score on FYLS*	*Cost (Pounds/£)*
1	11-14	83.97 – 73.33	0
2	15-16	69.79 – 66.24	9,639
3	17-18	62.70 – 59.15	12,255
4	19-20	55.60 – 52.06	17,561
5	21-22	48.51 – 44.96	21,049
6	23-24	41.42 – 37.87	22,944
7	25-26	34.33 – 30.78	24,225
8	27-28	27.23 – 23.69	24,877
9	29-30	20.14 – 16.60	25,480

Note. The wellbeing valuation has been interpreted from the HACT (Trotter & Rallings Adams, 2017) wellbeing valuation table, where an improvement SWEMWBS score reflects an improvement in wellbeing, that can be translated into a monetary increase.

*This assumes that one unit of movement on the FYLS scale equates to the SWEMWBS score minus 34.68 (unstandardised regression constant), divided by -0.282 (unstandardized regression Beta).

The formula may be written as $FYLS\ score = \frac{SWEMWBS\ score - 34.68}{-0.282}$

How to Calculate this Return

Based on the above mapping between the SWEMWBS and FYLS, youth centres can attribute a monetary value to a shift in loneliness among their participants. ***Table 3*** (right) outlines 9 categories on the SWEMWBS and their associated monetary value. For example, if survey results show a shift from Category 1 to Category 2, this reflects an improvement in wellbeing/reduction in loneliness that we could expect to reproduce by giving each person an additional $19,278.

Using the formula below, youth centres can calculate the total social impact of the program by taking away the cost of delivering the program from the value calculated through the shift in loneliness in their participants:

① ***Shift in categories*** (including "deadweight") –
② ***Total cost*** of running the program =
③ ***Net social impact***

For each program participant, we need to calculate the change in FYLS score by subtracting the "after" score from the "pre-program" score. We then subtract 27% from this difference to account for improvements in wellbeing that would have happened anyway without the program (the deadweight; Trotter & Rallings Adams, 2017)..

We provide two worked examples of calculating these changes on the following pages.

Table 3.

Interpretation of wellbeing valuation from SWEMWBS and FYLS scores.

Category	*Overall SWEMWBS score*	*Number of respondents*	*Cost (Pounds)**	*Cost (AUD)**
1	7-14	84 – 73	0	0
2	15-16	72 – 66	9,639	19,278
3	17-18	65 – 59	12,255	24,510
4	19-20	58 – 52	17,561	35,122
5	21-22	51 – 44	21,049	42,098
6	23-24	43 – 37	22,944	45,888
7	25-26	36 – 30	24,255	48,510
8	27-28	29 – 23	24,877	49,754
9	29-30	22 – 21	25,480	50,960

Note. Scores on the FYLS have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and score ranges have thus been interpreted for comparison between the FYLS and SWEMWBS scores. The wellbeing valuation has been interpreted from the HACT (Trotter & Rallings Adams, 2017) wellbeing valuation table.

*Comparable value (real buying power) adjusted for cost-of-living differences, where £1.00 ~ AUD$2. These are conservative values, subject to inflation. It is also important to note that the conversion is subject to change.

Worked Examples of Calculating ROI

As a reminder, our formula for calculating return is:

① *Shift in categories* (including "deadweight") –
② *Total cost* of running the program =
③ *Net social impact*

Worked Example One.

Adding Scores Participant-by-Participant

Participant	*FYLS "before" score*	*Model value*	*FYLS "after" score*	*Model value*
Participant A	68	$19,278	55	$35,122
Participant B	74	$0	47	$42,098

① *Per person social impact* = After score model value – Before score model value x (1 – deadweight)

Participant A: ($35,122 – $19,278) x (1 – 0.27) = *$11,566.12*
Participant B: ($42,098 – $0) x (1 – 0.27) = *$30,731.54*

② *Total social impact* = Participant A social impact + Participant B social impact

$11,566.12 + $30,731.54 = *$42,297.66*

③ *Net social impact* = Total social impact – Total costs.

$42,297.66 – ($16,000 for equipment, venue hire, and staff) = *$26,297.66*

So, your return on investment would be *$26,298*, meaning that your program has led to an increase in wellbeing for these 2 participants that would otherwise require an additional *$47,147.06* to effect.

Worked Example Two.

Average FYLS Scores across Participants

Participant	*FYLS "before" score*	*Model value*	*FYLS "after" score*	*Model value*
Average scores across 20 participants	67.8	$19,278	40.3	$45,888

① *Per person social impact* = After score model value – Before score model value x (1 – deadweight)

($45,888 – $19,278) x (1 – 0.27) = *$19,425.30*

② *Total social impact* = Participant A social impact + Participant B social impact

$19,425.30 x 20 = *$388,506*

③ *Net social impact* = Total social impact – Total costs.

1. $388,506 – 2 staff members ($100,000) for the First Quarter (i.e., a 10-week program) – equipment ($10,000) – venue hire ($5,000)
= *$273,506*

So, your return on investment would be *$273,506*, meaning that your program has led to an increase in wellbeing for these 20 participants that would otherwise require an additional *$273,506* to effect.

Validation & Reliability

Table 4.

Correlations between FYLS and Other Variables

Construct	*Measure*	*Pearson Correlation (r)*	*Significance*
Loneliness	University of California (UCLA) Loneliness Scale Version 3	.856 (38-item version)	P < .001
Wellbeing	Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (MHC-SF)	-.712 (38-item version)	P < .001

We found that there is a positive relationship between the FYLS and the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3, indicating good convergent validity. This means that the FYLS measures loneliness in a similar way to other loneliness scales.

In contrast, the FYLS and MHC-SF were negatively correlated, indicating good discriminant validity. This means that somebody who scores highly on a wellbeing measure should score low on the FYLS, as loneliness and wellbeing are distinctly different variables that are not measured in a similar way.



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HELPFUL ORGANISATIONS & RESOURCES.

Mental Health Supports for Young People

- Beyond Blue Online Forums: https://forums.beyondblue.org.au/
- Black Dog Institute: https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-services/schools/parents/enhancing-teen-wellbeing-building-positive-social-connections-for-youth/
- Headspace: https://headspace.org.au/
- Kids Helpline: https://kidshelpline.com.au/ or call 1800 650 890
- Lifeline: https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/support-toolkit/techniques-and-guides/building-social-connections

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