Age of Alienation

The collapse in community and belonging among young people, and how we should respond

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ONWARD

About Onward

Onward is a campaigning thinktank whose mission is to develop new ideas for the next generation of centre right thinkers and leaders. We exist to make Britain fairer, more prosperous and more united, by generating a new wave of modernising ideas and a fresh kind of politics that reaches out to new groups of people. We believe in a mainstream conservatism – one that recognises the value of markets and supports the good that government can do, is unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, and assiduous in supporting the hardworking, aspirational and those left behind.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; and for all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster. We will achieve this by developing practical policies that work. Our team has worked both at a high level in government and for successful thinktanks. We know how to produce big ideas that resonate with policymakers, the media and the public. We will engage ordinary people across the country and work with them to make our ideas a reality.

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Summary of the argument

The physical manifestations of Britain's fraying social fabric are visible for all to see. The abandoned high street, shuttered library or converted pub have become potent symbols of a deeper malaise: civic institutions lost in the throes of socio-economic changes which have brought prosperity to some places but withdrawn it from others. Politicians of both left and right now compete in a long overdue arms race to restore a sense of belonging and pride of place to areas where it has been lost.

The faces of community decline are much harder to identify. Social fabric is as much about culture as it is about the institutions and assets around which they gather. But people's declining adherence to social norms and engagement in associational life is much less immediate than a crumbling building. Even when we know that social fabric is in decline, the demographics driving these trends are often obscured.

This report explores *who* is driving community decline and exposes a startling insight - that the fraying of Britain's social fabric may be in large part a generational problem. Younger generations appear to be suffering from what can only be described as a collapse in community, and this crisis of belonging is getting worse over time. Combining analysis of longitudinal surveys with our own polling, we find that:

- Young people appear to be around half as likely to say they think other people are trustworthy as they were sixty years ago, with 56% of young people saying that other people could be generally trusted in 1959 compared to 30% today. This represents nearly double the rate of decline of older groups, and there is evidence to suggest that this may be particularly impacted by the pandemic.

- 18-24 year-olds are more likely to distrust their neighbours (48%) than trust them (35%), and three times more likely to distrust their neighbours than people over the age of 65 years old (15%). Young people are also half as likely to speak to neighbours, and a third less likely to borrow or exchange favours from them, as they were in 1998.

- Most worryingly of all, younger generations' interpersonal social networks appear to be narrowing. Around one in five 18-34 year-olds say that they have one or fewer close friends, three times the level in 2011/12, and older generations now typically have far more close friends than younger groups in an inversion of historical trends. This is far worse than in recent years, suggesting the pandemic may be contributing to an "epidemic of loneliness" among young people.

These figures expose what we might call a “paradox of virtue”. On the one hand, young people are ostensibly the most socially *conscious* generations in recent history, with more progressive views on social issues, such as inequality and the environment, than both older generations and previous generations of young people. But on the other hand, they are easily the least socially *attached* to interpersonal networks or to their neighbourhood, and on most measures of social capital the gap between younger and older generations is widening, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

This suggests an enormous opportunity if we can transform the social intentions of younger generations into meaningful social action. Qualitative research for this paper reveals that young people are not detached from their communities out of choice, but through lack of opportunity, security and time. If policymakers can create meaningful routes for young people to engage, and the space and freedom to do it, we may emerge from the pandemic to a great civic revival of the kind witnessed at the beginning of the last century.

This is reinforced by the fact young people are no less rooted in principle or more mobile in practice. 18-34 year-olds are the only age cohorts more likely to say they “plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years'' than in 1998, and are equally likely to think of themselves as similar to people in their neighbourhood as previously. Moreover, those aged 35 or under were twice as likely as older groups to look in on an elderly or vulnerable neighbour at least once or twice a fortnight during the pandemic. Other factors are driving alienation among younger generations.

We can hypothesise what these might be. The most obvious factor is the growing influence of the internet, which is both creating new spaces for young people to come together and polarising some of their social interactions. Younger people are more likely than older people to say that the internet is good for socialising, meeting new people or understanding what other people think. But on average 18-34 year-olds are more likely to disagree with statements like “some of my closest friendships are with people I have met online” and “socialising online is as good as socialising in person”. This suggests that the internet has not yet replaced the value of in-person networks. Our qualitative research suggests that younger generations simply feel they do not have the time to socialise or contribute to community.

This may be linked to other cultural factors. Young people are less likely to live in secure housing, more likely to form a family later, and more likely to go to university and live in cities than they were twenty years ago. We find that - while housing tenure and urbanity are linked to lower neighbourhood cohesion overall - most of this effect disappears when controlling for age. The two factors that appear most significant, when controlling for age, are education and social

participation: at all ages, those with limited qualifications or those who participate in group activities have higher neighbourhood cohesion scores than those who do not. But age as an independent variable is by far the most important factor in predicting social attachment, and when viewed generationally it becomes clear that it has become countercultural to contribute to one's neighbourhood for Millennials and Generation Z in particular. If not quite citizens of anywhere, they are not citizens of somewhere either.

Despite the spirit of reciprocity engendered by the pandemic, on several measures the "social fabric gap" between generations appears to have worsened in the last year. For example, the gap in generalised social trust between under-35s and over-35s was 5 percentage points when the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey measured it in 2018; it is now 9 percentage points. Trust in neighbours and family all declined at a much faster rate among younger generations than older generations since 2018. This suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated the existing trend of lower community engagement among young people.

This generational decline is not just troubling for young people but for society as a whole. Not only are the social and economic benefits of social capital and rootedness well proven, but a growing body of research shows that young people today suffer from issues closely related to weak social capital. For example, Onward's *Politics of Belonging* report exposed rising authoritarianism among 18-35 year-olds in the UK.

The challenge for policymakers is considerable: to develop a set of interventions that can reverse a profound cultural shift and instil civic behaviours among an entire generation of young people. This will require policies which involve every single young person and which have the capacity to effect genuine behavioural change among them.

We recommend six big ideas to end the age of alienation:

1. The introduction of National Civic Service, built around a voluntary expectation that every young person undertakes 10 days of voluntary activity each year between the ages of 18-35 years old, or fulfils a single paid year of service or civic sabbatical during these years.

2. This should be encouraged with a system of Civic Rewards, which could either be redeemed against student loan costs or be against other training courses, awarded to young people who undertake 10 days of civic activity each year - in the community or volunteering for a charity or emergency service cadet force.

3. The establishment of a **Civic Challenge Fund** to identify, incubate and scale mass-participation civic associations for young people, building on the historical success of organisations like the scouts, women's institute and rotary clubs.

4. The introduction of a **Social Spaces Act** to democratise use of underutilised assets in the community. This would automatically open up public sector buildings, like town halls and sports pitches, for community use and allow the temporary reclamation of empty high street shops for business hubs and enterprise clubs for young people.

5. Make every higher education institution a **Civic University**, to force institutions to take a greater role in their community and to encourage students to engage more locally, backed up by the Office for Students and the removal of student loan subsidies if they don't comply.

6. Build half a million new **Homes for Young People** - reduced rent houses for working people under the age of 40 years old - to allow them to save up for a deposit and get on the housing ladder. This would be paid for by transferring local authority stock into housing association control and capturing more of the value from development.

7. Roll out a new model of **Family Hubs**, to foster social fabric among younger parents and among communities with fraying social fabric. These would draw on the successes of Sure Start and the pioneering Family Hubs model, and aim to co-locate family services and charities within a single location to strengthen the most important institution: the family.

These policies, if enacted, would deliver a much-needed jolt of participation and contribution to younger generations who have increasingly lost touch with each other and their communities. They are radical in some ways. But a radical response is necessary if we are to rebuild a sense of belonging and community among entire generations. It would also be a fitting response to a pandemic during which young people have sacrificed their social lives and economic prospects for the greater good.

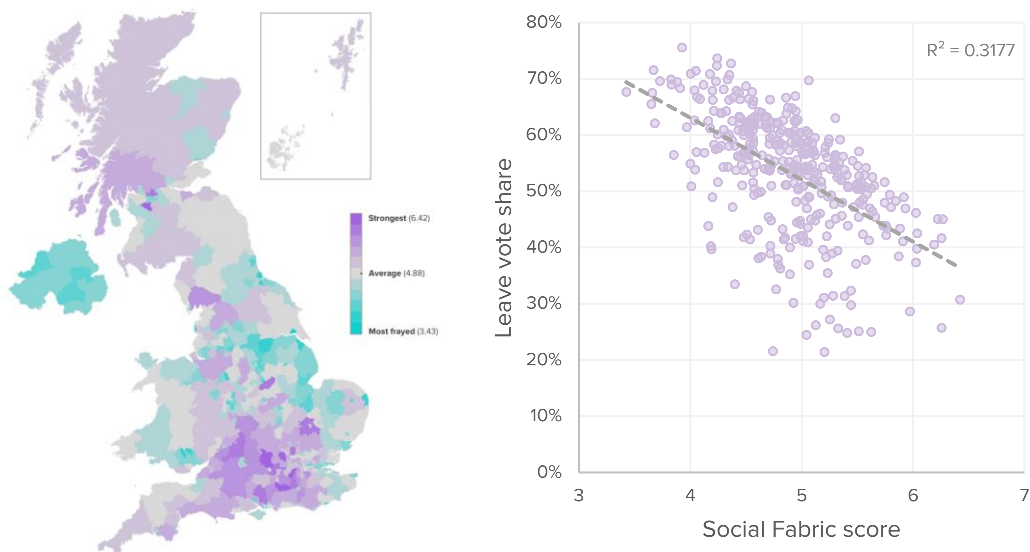
Things fall apart

The alienation of youth

Long before the pandemic, the social fabric of community in the UK was in a state of disrepair. The assets and institutions which sustained association and belonging in the past are fewer and weaker, and the norms that characterise thriving a civic society, such as volunteering and group membership, have become less commonplace or routine.

As Onward's Social Fabric Index demonstrates, the types of places most held back by a fraying social fabric are those that are most challenged economically and most volatile politically. This has since been reinforced by work by other organisations including Demos, the Legatum Institute and Cambridge University's Bennett Institute.[1] The implication of successive pieces of analysis is clear: we will not level up the country or address the political demands of recent years unless we pay close attention to the institutions and networks that bind us together in our place.

Figure 1: Social Fabric Index (LHS) and Leave vote vs Social Fabric (RHS)
Source: Onward (2020), *The State of our Social Fabric*



But while we now understand the *what* and the *where*, we have so far done little to understand the *who*.

This report starts to explore this challenge, looking in depth at the factor that appears to be most central to the story of wider community decline - a growing generational divide in social attachment. In doing so, we expose a paradox. Younger generations are in many ways the most socially committed of any group: their values tend to be more progressive, their activism is more visible, and they

often display deep awareness of social problems at home and abroad. We see this around issues of climate change and economic inequality specifically, but an age curve exists across almost every political issue.[2]

Yet, as we will show, this is not driving rising levels of social attachment or contribution. In many ways, we find quite the opposite: a generational collapse in social trust and attachment, exacerbated by the pandemic, which has profound implications for society as a whole. Our task with this paper is to understand the different ways social attachment varies between generations, why these gaps are emerging, and what, if anything, can be done about it.

1. Social trust appears to be in decline among younger generations, especially since the pandemic

Social trust is vital for human progress. In 1972, Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow spoke of social trust as a “lubricant” of society, “enabling you to produce more goods or create more value for services”[3] by reducing the costs of exchange and helping societies to develop norms that support pro-sociality, cooperation, innovation and good governance. Elinor Ostrom and Douglass North won subsequent Nobel Prizes for related work on the importance of trust to social and economic functioning. Research shows that countries with higher levels of trust tend to have higher levels of income, greater life satisfaction and longer life expectancy.[4] There is emerging evidence that societies with higher trust have fared better during the pandemic.[5]

Over the last fifty years, social scientists have asked variations of what is known as the generalised trust question (GTQ) to measure the level of social trust within a society. This question, first developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1956,[6] asks respondents: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”.[7] The question is designed to measure trust in a way that is moralistic rather than strategic, in that it tests respondents' trust in other members of society (bridging capital) rather than members of their in-group (bonding capital).[8]

There are other ways of measuring trust, including experimental trust games like the public goods game, but the GTQ is one of the most consistently applied methods over long periods.[9] The generalised trust question was included in UK questionnaires for the 1959 Civic Culture Study and in successive waves of European Values Survey between 1981 and 2017. This gives us a longitudinal data series for social trust in the UK. In 1959, 56% of people in the UK believed that most people could be trusted. By 1981, this had declined to 44%, before falling again to 40% in the latest European Values Survey data in 2017.[10] The British Social Attitudes survey, using a different five-point scale, has suggested a more stable pattern, with social trust remaining stable at around 45-47% since 1998.

However, more interesting than the headline change in social trust is the age curve that sits beneath it. In his classic 1999 study, *Social Capital in Britain,* the sociologist Peter Hall found that while the UK had not (at that point) suffered the same loss of social capital that Robert Putnam had earlier identified in the United States, there was evidence that social trust was beginning to diverge between generations. Looking at rates of generalised trust since 1959, Professor Hall remarked:

> *"... perhaps most striking are the differentials among age cohorts when 1959 is compared with 1990. In 1959, those under the age of 40 were substantially more trusting (61 per cent expressed trust) than those over 40 (52 per cent). By 1990, we find just the reverse: although 47 per cent of those over the age of 40 express trust in others, only 40 per cent of those under the age of 40 do so, and this proportion declines steadily with each younger age cohort to reach only 32 per cent of those between 18 and 20 years of age in 1990... one cannot discount the possibility that growing up in a lower-trust period will leave its mark on the younger generations."*

This observation now appears astute. The generational reversal of trust in strangers that Hall identified in 1999 was not an anomaly but appears to be the continuation of a trend. In the 1950s, there was no difference between levels of interpersonal social trust among the younger and older generations: under-30s and over-30s were equally likely to believe that most other people can be trusted and under-40s were considerably more likely to generally trust others than those over the age of 40.

In the subsequent decades, however, a clear generational divide has emerged. Among under-35s, trust in other people declined steadily from 1981, with a five-point gap between under-35s and over-35s in 2017, the last recorded year of the European Values Survey. In 1998, all respondents recorded particularly low levels of social trust but the survey has since recovered to its pre-existing trend. Our poll, conducted in March 2021 by Stack Data Strategy (n = 1,007, weighted on demographics and voting history), suggests that this inter-generational gap has since increased substantially to 10 percentage points, with just 30% of under-35s saying that most people can be trusted. This is responsible for the fall in average social trust to 34% in our poll, and suggests that on this measure social trust among younger age groups has nearly halved since 1959 while trust among older groups has fallen by a quarter at most.

Table 1: Proportion who generally trust other people, using a binary question
Source: Civic Culture Study; European Values Survey; Onward/Stack

	1959	1981	1990	1998	2010	2017	2021
All people	56%	44%	44%	30%	40%	40%	34%
Under-35s	56%	40%	38%	27%	39%	37%	30%
Over-35s	56%	46%	46%	32%	41%	42%	40%
Intergenerational trust gap	0%	7%	8%	5%	1%	5%	10%

Note: Data for 1959 is only available as under/over 30 years old

As mentioned earlier, the BSA has asked a similar question since 1998 in a different way: using a five-point scale from "people can almost always be trusted" or "people can usually be trusted" to "you usually can't be too careful in dealing with people" or "you almost always can't be too careful in dealing with people" and "can't choose".[11]

This data tells a slightly different story, suggesting that over a shorter timescale - between 1998 and 2018 - young people's social trust appears to have risen, from 40% of under-35s thinking most people are trustworthy in 1998 to a high of 51% in 2017, and a *closing* of the intergenerational gap in trust between those two dates as a result. However, using the same question formulation as the BSA, we find that a significant gap has re-emerged since 2018, potentially as a result of the pandemic.

On this measure, 40% of people under the age of 35 say that most people can usually or almost always be trusted, down 10 percentage points since 2018. This means that under-35s are now 9 percentage points less likely to trust other people than those aged 35 or more on the BSA measure.

While previous BSA research had given hope that social trust was rising among younger generations, this suggests that the effect of the pandemic has been to set back social trust among younger generations and re-establish the gap between younger and older cohorts. We will look in detail at different types of trust below, and find further evidence to support this hypothesis.

Figure 2: Social trust by age group, based on the BSA five-point scale
Source: Stack (2021); Onward analysis

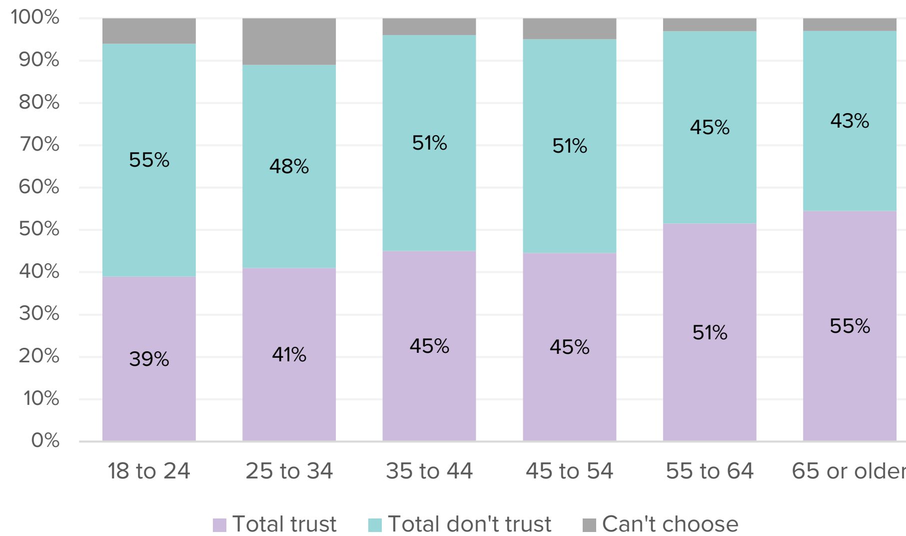


Table 2: Proportion who generally trust other people, using a five-point scale
Source: British Social Attitudes survey[12]; Onward/Stack (2021)

		1998	2004	2007	2008	2014	2017	2018	2021
All people	Almost always trust	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	5%
	Usually can be trusted	45%	45%	43%	43%	46%	51%	51%	42%
	Usually can't be too careful	45%	46%	42%	42%	41%	34%	34%	33%
	Almost always can't be too careful	6%	5%	10%	10%	7%	9%	6%	15%
	Can't choose	2%	3%	2%	2%	5%	3%	6%	5%
Under 35	Almost always trust	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	3%	3%	8%
	Usually can be trusted	39%	33%	36%	40%	41%	48%	47%	32%
	Usually can't be too careful	50%	53%	46%	42%	40%	38%	35%	33%
	Almost always can't be too careful	8%	6%	13%	11%	10%	9%	8%	18%
	Can't choose	2%	7%	3%	4%	7%	3%	8%	8%
Over 35	Almost always trust	3%	1%	4%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%
	Usually can be trusted	48%	49%	45%	45%	48%	53%	52%	46%
	Usually can't be too careful	43%	43%	41%	42%	41%	32%	34%	33%
	Almost always can't be too careful	5%	5%	8%	9%	6%	9%	6%	14%
	Can't choose	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	5%	4%
Intergenerational trust gap		**11%**	**16%**	**12%**	**5%**	**8%**	**5%**	**5%**	**9%**

Looking at this data using smaller age brackets, the intergenerational differences become particularly stark. In our question mirroring the BSA five-point scale, fewer than two in five (39%) 18-24 year-olds agree that people can always or usually be trusted, compared to over half (55%) who agree that you usually or always need to be careful of other people. Among over-65s these patterns are reversed: well over half (55%) of over-65s think that most people can be trusted, while 43% agree that you need to be careful. In net terms, over-65s are 12 points more likely to be trusting while under-25s are 15 points more likely to be wary of others.[13]

The age gradient of trust is reinforced when looking at trust towards specific groups. When asked about different groups in society, we find that younger generations also display much lower levels of trust than older generations, across family, neighbours, acquaintances and strangers. For example:

- 94% of those over the age of 65 say they trust their family somewhat or completely, compared to 3% who distrust their family. This compares to only 79% of those aged 18-24 who said they trusted their family, with one in ten (10%) of 18-24s saying that they trust their family not very much or not at all. Just over half (54%) of people under the age of 35 years old say that they trust their family "completely", compared to 80% among those over the age of 65 years old.

- Just over two thirds (69%) of 18-24s trust "people they know personally", compared to 97% of those over the age of 65 years old. The share of people who have complete trust in those they know personally is half the level (25%) among those under the age of 45 as it is over the age of that 75 years old (50%). Among 18-24s, 1 in 5 people (19%) say they do not trust people they know personally, compared to 1 in 100 (1%) among those aged 65 or older.

- The age gap is greatest when considering neighbourhood level trust. More than three times as many young people as older people distrust their neighbours, and young people are now more likely to distrust the people they live next to than trust them. Just 35% of 18-24 year-olds say they trust people in their neighbourhood, compared to 48% who say they do not trust their neighbours. This compares to 79% and 15% respectively for those over the age of 65 years old. One in seven (15%) over-75s trust their neighbours completely, compared to just one in fifty (2%) 18-24 year-olds.

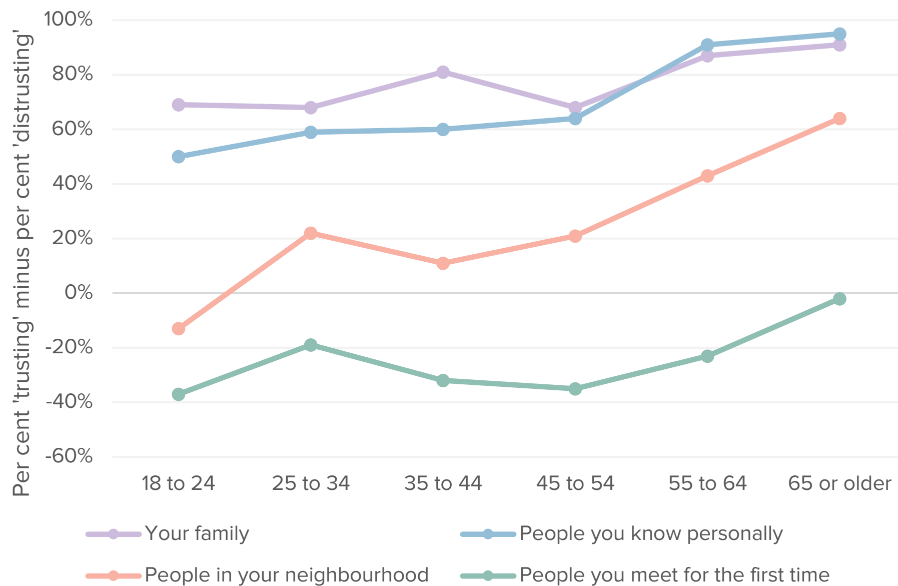
- This is also true for impersonal groups. When asked whether they trust people who they meet for the first time, all generations except over-75s express net distrust rather than trust. However, 18-24s are about half as trusting (22%) as over-75s (45%). This is despite younger groups being more likely to say they trust strangers completely (4%), whereas no over-

75s do so. The chart below, detailing net levels of trust towards different groups in society, shows the extent to which social trust is now strongly correlated with age.

Looking at historical surveys, it also becomes clear that these generational divides are widening over time. In 2005, 87% of 16-29 year-olds said they trusted their family "completely"; by 2017, this figure had fallen to 80.5%. Meanwhile, the share of over-50s who trusted their family completely remained unchanged at 86%. Over the same period, the share of under-30s who trust people in their neighbourhood completely has halved from 9.6% to 4.9%, while the level of over-50s who trust their neighbours completely has barely changed, falling marginally from 29.7% to 27.7% in 2017. The net result is that while older generations were three times more likely to completely trust their neighbours in 2005, they are now six times more likely to do so. Our survey data suggests that this divide has further widened since the pandemic.[14]

Figure 3: Net social trust in different social groups

Source: Stack (2021), Onward analysis



The contrast between young people's greater distrust of neighbours and their simultaneous expectation of staying longer within their neighbourhood is striking and alarming. Why would young people expect to stay within their neighbourhoods if they increasingly distrust their neighbours, and would their levels of social trust increase if they lived elsewhere? One possible explanation is the fact that younger generations are far more likely to be living with their parents than previous generations. One 2020 study by Loughborough University found

that nearly two-thirds of childless single adults aged 20-34 in the UK have either never left or have moved back into the family home. This means that 3.5 million single young adults in the UK are estimated to live with their parents, an increase of a third over the past decade.[15] This is likely to be as a result of a range of factors, including more precarious employment, insecure housing and delayed family formation.

Younger generations are considerably less trusting than older generations and becoming more so over time. If it continues, the potential consequences of this trend are likely to be profound. To take just one example, recent research examining 190 regions in 21 European countries between 2002 and 2016, including in the UK, found that higher levels of bridging social capital - where trust and networks form across social divides between different types of people - has a significant and positive impact on regional growth. This kind of bridging capital is more important for growth in regions with deficiencies in human capital endowment.[16] These are exactly the kind of places the Government is trying to level up - and where Onward has previously found weaker social fabric than elsewhere.

2. Social networks are becoming smaller with each generation

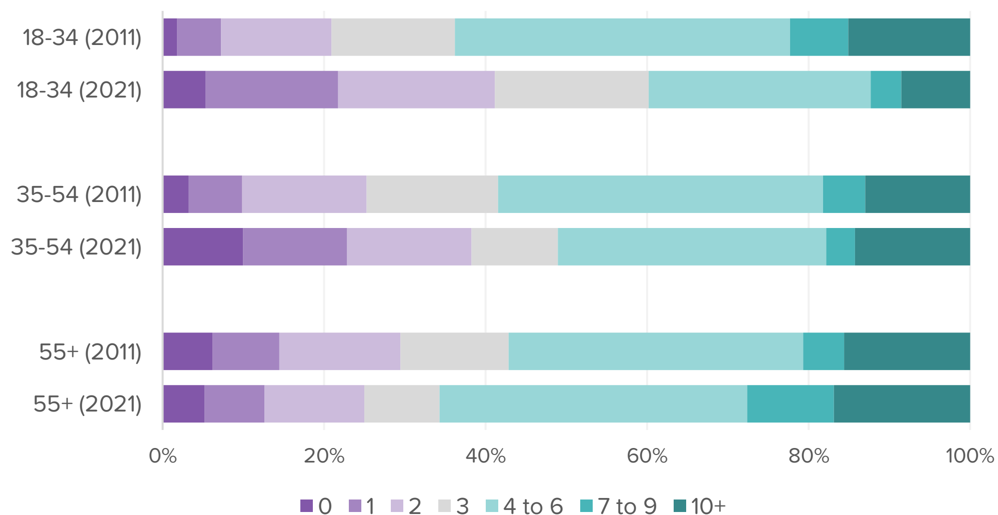
Another way to measure the strength of social capital across different generations is to measure the size of people's social networks. *Understanding Society* has been asking people how many close friends they have in surveys since the early 2010s, through the headline social capital indicators. The most recent ONS release, carried out pre-pandemic in February 2020, found that "people are more likely to say they have at least one close friend than they were in 2011", with 97% of people saying they have at least one close friend in 2017-18 compared with 96% in 2011-12.[17]

Data drawn from *Understanding Society*, suggests that in 2011/12, 3.9% of people said they had no close friends whatsoever, a figure which fell to 2.5% in 2017/18. Over the same period, the number of people who had between 2 and 6 friends has risen from 68.6% to 70.4%, and the share of people who have seven or more friends rose from 20.8% to 21.5%. The ONS' central conclusion is that social capital related to interpersonal social networks is "increasing".

These figures are not routinely broken down for age, obscuring a rapidly changing generational picture. Looking more deeply at the *Understanding Society* data, and comparing to Onward's own survey, we can see that the number of close friendships one has appears to be becoming increasingly associated with age. We find that:

- In 2021, one in five (21%) of 18-34 year-olds report having one or fewer close friends, compared to 19% for the entire population and 11% for over-55s. This represents a reversal since 2011/12, when 7% of 18-34s had one or fewer close friends, compared to 11% for the entire population and 17% of over-55s. This suggests that, whereas young people were half as likely to have limited close social networks as older groups a decade ago, they are now twice as.
- Just 40% of 18-34 year-olds say they have four or more close friends. This is down from two thirds (64%) in 2011/12. This compares to a rise in the number of over-55s having four or more close friends, from 57% in 2011/12 to 66% in 2021.
- Older generations are now considerably more likely to have very large close social networks than younger generations. In our survey, we found that over-65s today are nearly three times as likely (41%) to say they have six or more close friends than under-25s (14%) and twice as likely (16%) to say they have ten or more close friends as under-25s (9%). This compares to 2011-12, when over-65s were only marginally more likely than under-25s to have 6 or more close friends (35% to 33%) and more than 10 close friends (16% to 15%).

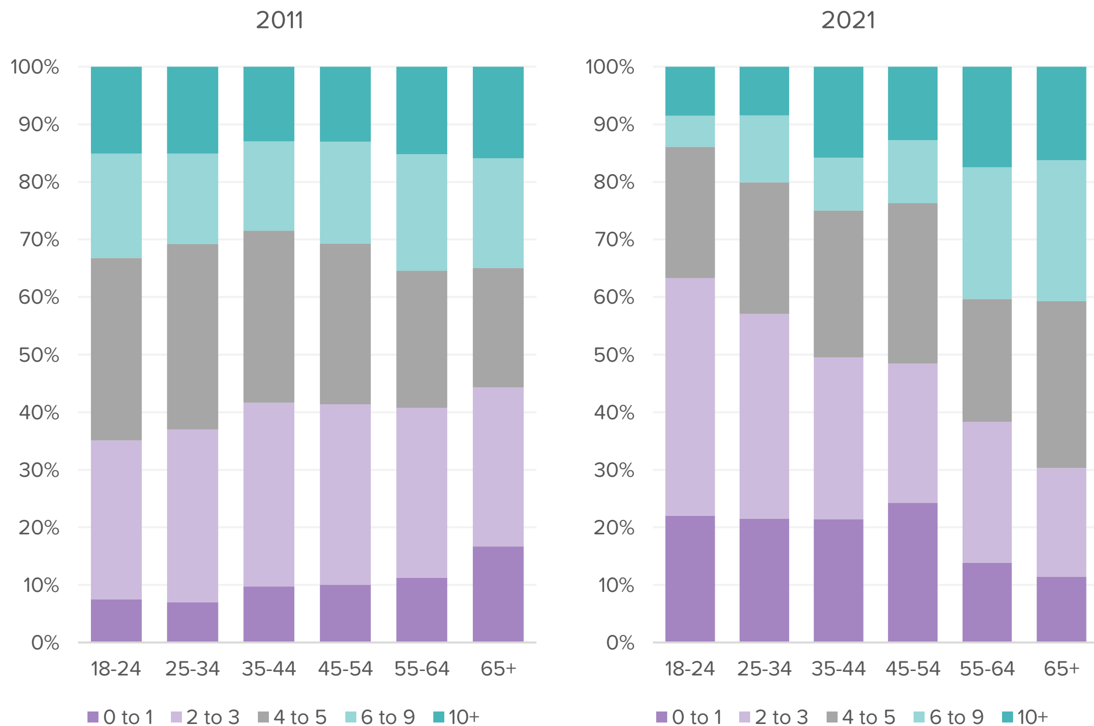
Figure 4.1: How many close friends would you say you have? By age, 2011 vs 2021
Source: Understanding Society[18] and Onward/Stack (2021)



The implication is that despite the detrimental effects of mortality on social networks and greater connection through technology and mobility for young people, older generations' social networks have expanded in the last decade, while younger generations' have markedly reduced.

Figure 4.2: How many close friends would you say you have? By age, 2011 vs 2021

Source: Understanding Society[19] and Onward/Stack (2021)



This is such a stark finding that we re-tested this question in a separate survey two weeks later. We found extremely similar results: 19% of 18-24s reported one or fewer friends and 57% reported three or fewer, compared to 9% and 33% respectively for over-65s. Meanwhile, just 15% of 18-24s have more than 6 close friends, versus 44% of over-65s. These findings are reinforced by other research. Between 2014 and 2016, YouGov conducted a regular survey related to social relationships for the charity Relate. When asked to rate their friendships, 90% of those aged 65 or over reported having good or very good friendships, compared to 80% of those aged 16-35 years old.[20]

These patterns correspond closely to data related to loneliness and social isolation. Looking at data from the *Community Life Survey*, we can see that 16-24 year-olds (9.8%) are three times as likely to say they feel lonely “often or always” as people aged 65 or over (3%) while 25-34 year-olds are twice as likely as those aged 65 or over. This age curve holds for people who describe being lonely “some of the time”, with a quarter of people aged 16-24 saying they are lonely some of the time, compared to just 11% of those aged 65-74 and 17% for those aged 75 or over. By contrast, more than a quarter of over 65s say they “never” feel lonely, more than twice the rate as among 16-24 year-olds.[21]

Table 3: How often do you feel lonely? By age

Source: Community Life Survey, 2017-18

	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Often/always	9.8	6.1	4.9	4.5	5.4	2.9	3.0
Some of the time	23.0	18.2	12.5	15.0	16.2	11.4	17.0
Occasionally	26.8	27.4	24.0	23.0	23.4	21.7	22.7
Hardly ever	28.9	29.9	34.6	34.8	30.9	31.7	29.6
Never	11.5	18.4	24.0	22.6	24.2	32.4	27.7

As with other indicators of social attachment, this generational gap appears to have worsened over the last year of the pandemic - as our survey would suggest.

In the latest COVID-19 module of the *Opinions and Lifestyle Survey*, the share of 16-29 year-olds who say they are lonely some or all of the time has risen to 38%, around five percentage points higher than in 2018. Meanwhile the number of older people who say they are persistently lonely appears to have remained relatively stable: 18% of those aged 70 or above say they are lonely some or all of the time, although 23% of those aged 50-69 say the same. The number of over 50s who say they are often or always lonely has barely risen, with just 5% of 50-69s and 4% of over-70s saying they are lonely often or always.

This is also replicated when considered through a geographic lens. As the ONS recently noted, places with a lower median age generally experienced higher rates of loneliness during the pandemic, with effects particularly pronounced outside London. Looking at those who specifically said that their wellbeing had been affected in the last seven days by the pandemic, researchers found that 18-24 year-olds were about four times more likely to have experienced “lockdown loneliness” than those over the age of 75 years old.[22]

3. Neighbourliness is becoming an old person's game

We see a similar generational pattern with respect to measures of social attachment, such as belonging to one's neighbourhood, willingness to engage in neighbourly behaviour or to contribute to the wellbeing of the neighbourhood. While young people have always been more mobile, less rooted and more individualistic in their approach to life, the generational differences are nevertheless stark. We found:

- Young people are nearly half as likely to speak to their neighbours as they were twenty years ago - and less than half as likely as older generations to do so today. According to *Understanding Society*, more than half (54%) of 18-24 year-olds said they would regularly stop to talk to their neighbours in 1998, compared to four fifths (84%) of those aged 65 or over. This figure fell steadily over the last twenty years, to 36% in the last survey before the pandemic, in 2017.

- The share of young people who regularly stop to speak to neighbours has fallen even further to fewer than three in ten (29%) today. Those over the age of 65 have seen their willingness to stop and talk to neighbours decline much more slowly, with seven in ten (69%) still regularly stopping to speak to their neighbours in 2021 and just 10% saying they would not,

  even after a year of shielding and social distancing. The same proportion, 29%, agree that if they needed advice about something they could go to someone in their neighbourhood, down from over half in 1998. People aged 65 and over remain twice as likely to be able to ask neighbours for advice.

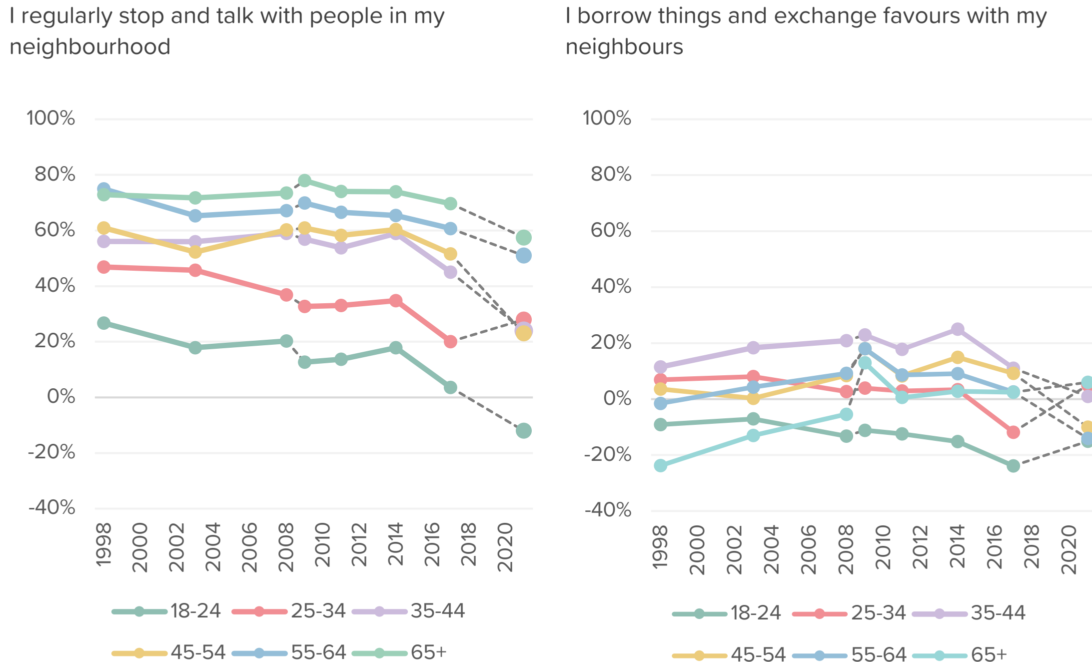
- Younger generations used to be more likely to borrow and exchange favours with neighbours than older generations, now they are less likely to do so. 18-24s are twice as likely to disagree (49%) as they are to agree (26%) that “I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours”, down from 38% who agreed in 1998. This is the opposite trend to that among older generations who have gone from net unwillingness (-24%) to exchange neighbourly favours, to more net willingness (+3% in 2017). Interestingly, 25-34 year-olds appear to be more willing to exchange favours in 2021 than they were before the pandemic: 42% say they do so, compared to 32% in 2017.

- Older generations are also twice as likely to say they would be willing to improve their neighbourhoods than younger generations, whose willingness has fallen substantially since 1998. Today, fewer than half (44%) of 18-24s agree with the statement “I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood”,

compared to a UK average of 57% and 61% among over-65s. Young people's willingness to contribute to their place is far lower than it was in 1998, when 65% of 18-24s said they would work with neighbours to improve their neighbourhood, roughly equal to the 72% rate among over-65s. Much of this fall has come in the last few years: as recently as 2014, 60% of young people would be willing to contribute to their neighbourhood.

Figure 5: Net agreement with different statements about neighbourhood, by age group

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

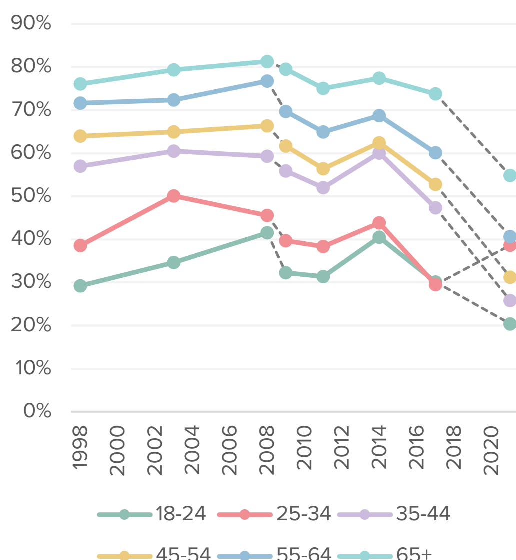


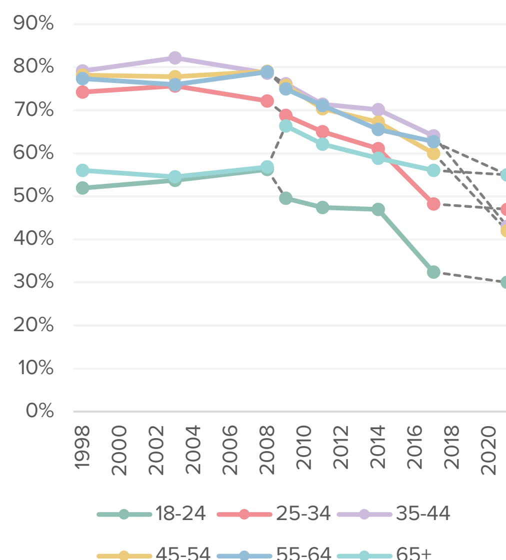
Younger people are much less likely to say they belong in their neighbourhood, even though they expect to stay there. Fewer than half (46%) of 18-24s agree they belong in their neighbourhood, compared to three fifths (60%) of over-65s. Far more (26%) 18-24s say they do not belong to their neighbourhood than among over-65s (6%). Among over-75s, only 1% of people say they do not belong. Interestingly 25-34 year-olds are more likely to say they belong, and are nearly twice as likely to strongly agree that they belong in their neighbourhood, than those aged 35-54.

However, falling belonging among young people is part of a society-wide trend. Between 1998 and 2017, all age groups became considerably less likely to say they belong to their neighbourhood. For example, the share of over-65s who said they belonged to their neighbourhood fell from 84% to 78%, similar to the six percentage point fall as among 18-24s, whose belonging fell from 51% to 45%. The largest falls were among 45-54 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds, who saw belonging decline by 12 and 14 percentage points respectively. In our survey, we found that this broad decline has continued but with particular falls among 35-44 year-olds and over-65s, who have seen self-reported belonging fall by 15% and 18% in the last four years.

Figure 6: Net agreement with different statements about neighbourhood, by age group

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis





This data begs important questions about what is driving the decline in social attachment among younger generations and whether it can be reversed. History is replete with evidence about the value of associational life to democratic politics, social cohesion and economic prosperity. Alexis de Tocqueville described associational life as the "mother science" of democratic societies and Edmund Burke revered the little platoons of community, church and family that orient people toward virtue. More recently, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett have written convincingly about how the era of American prosperity between 1920 and 1960 was driven by rising levels of social commitment.

As we have previously written, there is now compelling data to show that the ties that bind together communities at a local level are fragmenting in the United Kingdom as they have done in the United States, and that associational life and social relationships are becoming fewer in number and more fragile in their foundations. This fraying of the social fabric, as we term it, is correlated to the political volatility of recent years - including Brexit and the collapse of the Red Wall - and to the growing demand for a different kind of politics focused on belonging and security.

4. But young people are no less rooted or local in their attitudes

The data described above paints a worrying picture of declining levels of interpersonal trust, weakening social attachment and rising levels of alienation among younger people. This has profound implications for how society operates and the social fabric of different places. Yet some would argue that these trends are unsurprising, given the social and political milieu in which younger generations were born. Today's young people are the beneficiaries of widening higher education, global mobility, and many individual rights and entitlements. Is it any wonder that they are less attached to their neighbours and their place?

On one level, this argument makes sense. Young people are indeed considerably more progressive than older generations. As Onward has previously illustrated, they tend to be more accepting of bigger government, more exacting of business and more demanding on issues of economic equality and social and environmental justice.[23] And this has not changed as a result of the pandemic. Despite the devastating effects of coronavirus on young people's economic prospects, for example, just 28% of 18-24 year-olds today agree that "Government should focus on growing the economy rather than strengthening society", versus 72% who think that the Government should focus on strengthening society, substantially more than for other age groups.

However, it is wrong to presume that support for progressive causes equates to a greater desire for flexibility or declining levels of rootedness. When asked to choose between the statements "I would rather live in a society that focuses on giving people more freedom" or "I would rather live in a society that focuses on giving people more security", younger people are not substantially more likely to choose freedom over security than older voters. Among 18-24s, 31% choose freedom and 69% choose security, compared to 24% and 76% respectively among over-65s. This suggests that younger voters - far from being footloose and fancy free - are motivated as much by security and belonging as they are by freedom and mobility. This desire for roots is replicated elsewhere:

- 18-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds are the only two age groups more likely to say they "plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years" than they were in 1998. Older generations are much less likely to say they want to stay within their neighbourhood: the share of 45-54 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who say they plan to stay in their neighbourhood for a number of years has fallen by 15 and 16 percentage points respectively since 1998.

- Younger people are no less likely to think of themselves as similar to people in their neighbourhood today than they were two decades ago, and the gap with older generations is closing rapidly. In 1998, one in three

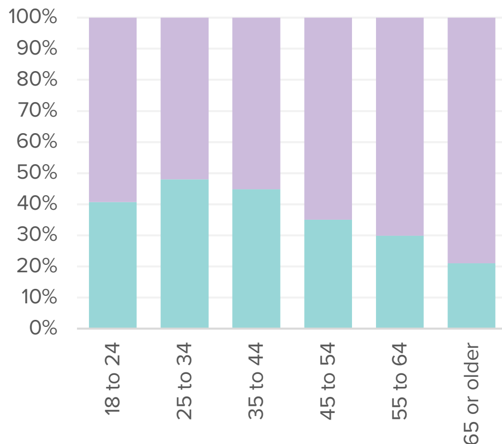
(33%) 18-24 year-olds and nearly half (46%) of 25-34 year-olds agreed with the statement "I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood", compared to 81% for those aged 65 or over. Today, 18-24 year-olds are only marginally less likely to think of themselves as similar (31%) and 25-34s are more likely to do so (50%) than they were two decades ago, but among over-65s the figure has fallen 15 percentage points to 64%.

- Despite being less willing to contribute to neighbourhood improvement, younger people are more likely to support vulnerable people in their neighbourhood. Excluding those who don't know, 37% of 18-24s and 47% of 25-34 year-olds say that they have looked in on an elderly or vulnerable neighbour at least once or twice a fortnight in the last 12 months, around double the proportion for older age groups. This is likely to be highly related to the reduced ability of older people to support neighbours during the pandemic given shielding rules and the risks of the pandemic. However, this is replicated at all levels of neighbourly support: younger generations are more likely to have supported vulnerable neighbours on a daily or weekly basis, and much less likely to say they did not support vulnerable neighbours at all.

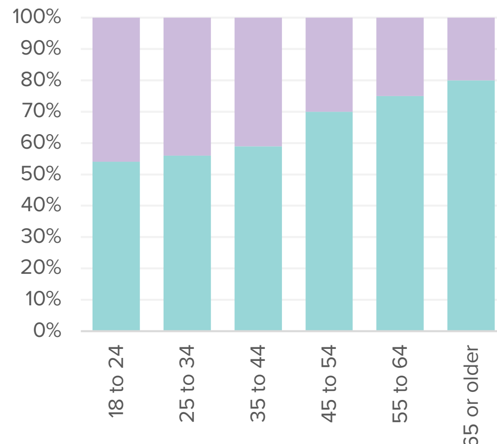
Figure 7: Neighbourly support and views of community decline by age, excluding don't knows

Source: Onward/Stack 2021

How often in the last 12 months have you looked in on an elderly or vulnerable neighbour who has no friends or family nearby?



To what extent do you believe that community has declined over your lifetime?



This is reinforced by other data about the effect of the pandemic on young people's intentions towards civic society. According to recent polling for the National Lottery Community Fund, 41% of those aged 18-34 exhibit net agreement that they "now plan to get more involved" in their community. This is the highest change of any age group and more than half (58%) of 18-34 year-olds say that the impact of coronavirus changed the amount that they plan to be involved in their community next year, compared to 22% of those aged 65 and over. Moreover, over half of young people aged 18-34 and older people aged over 65 have felt that there has been a strong sense of community spirit during the pandemic.

If younger people's declining social attachment to their place is not due to rising social mobility, reduced rootedness or less desire to be involved in their communities, the implication is that young people are being held back from civic activity. This points to other factors that may be influencing the social attachment of younger generations and undermining their ability to contribute to their communities, which we will explore in the next chapter. If this is right, then there is a considerable opportunity for policymakers to activate young people's latent civic purpose - and rebuild community for younger generations.

5. The link to wider social trends among younger generations

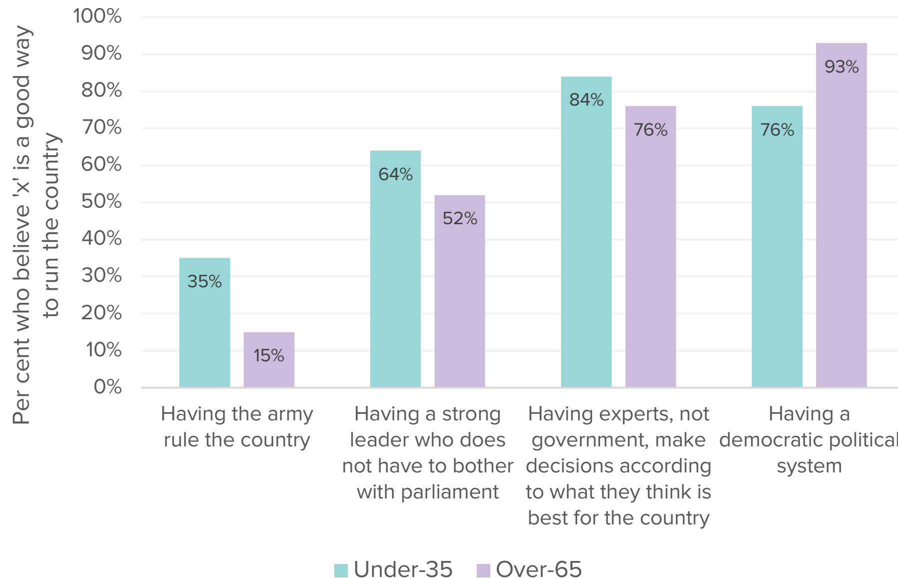
The evidence that younger people appear to have lower levels of social trust and neighbourliness than older generations set out above may be linked to a number of wider trends, including rising levels of authoritarianism, that have recently become visible among younger generations.

The work of Francis Fukuyama and Robert Putnam, as well as Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke historically, has posited a strong link between social norms and associational behaviours and the health of a political democracy. Is it possible that declining neighbourliness is driving changing political values among younger voters?

In 2019, Onward's report *Politics of Belonging* explored the extent to which younger voters are rejecting liberal democratic ideals and discovered a growing tendency of younger voters to believe that more authoritarian types of rule were good ways to run a country. More than a third (35%) of under-35 year-olds supported the idea of having the army run the country, around three times the level recorded by the *European Values Survey* in 1999 and more than twice the level (15%) of over-65s. A further 64% of under-35s supported having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament and just 76% of under-35s thought that a democratic political system was a good way to run a country.[24]

Figure 8: Support for liberal democracy by age

Source: Onward (2019), *The Politics of Belonging*



These findings correspond closely to wider studies of changing values around the world, including Yascha Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy*, and the *World Values Survey*, all of which suggest a growing trend towards authoritarianism among younger generations of voters. This is no longer theoretical: in France's upcoming presidential election, Marine Le Pen's National Rally is around 19 points ahead of any other party among 25-34 year-olds, with 37% of the vote.[25]

Like the development of democratic values, the ability to engage in critical thinking and deal with challenging situations is inherently social and influenced by the nature and quality of our social networks and civic associational lives. If younger generations are spending less time with neighbours, participating less in groups, and have fewer friends, is this influencing their views about freedom, democracy and authoritarianism? What does this mean for open debate and understanding of different views?

These examples are not conclusive and we do not have any evidence of a causal connection, but we do think it is likely that declining attachment to the values of democracy among younger generations is likely to be linked to the decline in younger people's social and participatory networks - and warrants further exploration. The next chapter looks in detail about what may be driving this collapse in community among young people - before we turn to what we might do about it in the final chapter.

Drivers of disconnection

What is driving these trends?

It is clear from the data presented in the last chapter that the last few decades have witnessed a marked decline in measures of social trust and attachment among younger groups, which is not replicated to the same degree among older age groups. This collapse of belonging does not appear to be a result of a falling *desire* to belong among younger generations, suggesting that other factors outside their control may be at play. The important question, then, is: why? Why have younger people become less willing to speak to or borrow from their neighbours? Why are they less trusting of other people, and less willing to work with them to improve their neighbourhood?

1. Cohort or life cycle effect?

We have so far analysed social attachment as a function of age. But to understand whether these differences are a result of lifecycle effects – i.e. the stage of life that young people are at – or cohort effects – i.e. that these characteristics are intrinsic to different cohorts - we need to look at the data by generational cohort.

The data described below, which uses the *Understanding Society* measure of neighbourhood cohesion to explore generational difference, reveals some evidence of a cohort effect, with today's younger generations appearing structurally lower on measures of community cohesion and group membership than generations before them. The implications of this are significant - implying that as these younger generations get older, participation and social norms will be lower than among previous generations at a similar age. This will over time lead to a society with lower levels of social attachment overall.

- Levels of neighbourhood cohesion appear to be declining with each successive generation. Using Understanding Society data, we find that the generation with the highest neighbourhood cohesion score is the Silent Generation (born 1925 - 1945) with a score of 3.78, followed by Baby Boomers (born 1946 - 1964) with a score of 3.62. Generation X (born 1965 - 1979) have a neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.51 while Millennials (born 1980 - 1994) have a neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.16, and Generation Z (also called iGen, born 1995-2012) have a score of just 3.03.

- Looking at the graphs, it appears that a cohort effect may have emerged among Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z, where these generations have structurally lower levels of neighbourhood cohesion. This pattern is not apparent among previous generations, where the lifecycle effect of rising cohesion with age is clearly visible. We should not necessarily over-interpret this, given the presence of only two overlapping data points, but

it should give cause for concern that newer generations will continue to have lower levels of participation and neighbourliness as they age than generations before them.

- Additionally, it is clear that a cohort effect is much clearer for membership rates than for neighbourhood cohesion, where the effect is more marginal. Since 1991, all generations excluding Generation X have seen group membership decline. This decline has been most profound among the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers, where membership has declined from 61% to 51% and 62% to 51% respectively. Among Generation X, membership of group organisations has actually risen from 48% to 50% over the same period. As a result, in the latest data, just over 3 in 10 of Millennials and Generation Z are members of an organisation, compared to over half of the Silent Generation, Boomers and Generation Z.

- Looking at the cohort effect, we can see that younger generations appear to be becoming structurally less likely to be a member of a group. At age 45, three fifths (62%) of Baby Boomers were members of a group, but among Generation X (when they reached the same age) this figure was just over half (53%). Meanwhile, nearly half (48%) of Generation X were members of a group at age 25 years old, but at the same age fewer than two in five (37%) Millennials were group members. At age 21, 39% of Millennials were group members, but among Generation Z this had fallen to 37%. It appears that group membership is becoming less important with each successive generation.

- The same pattern is visible with group participation. Among the Silent Generation, 53% of people say they regularly participate in a group, up 5 percentage points since 1991. Over the same period, Baby Boomers and Generation X have seen group participation remain stable at around 49% and 45% respectively. However, among Millennials, group participation has fallen ten percentage points from nearly half (47%) to less than two-fifths (37%) since 1997. And in the last three years alone, group participation among Generation Z has fallen by 10 percentage points from 46% to 36%.

- This suggests that younger generations are becoming less likely to participate than older generations at similar points in their lives. For example, at the age of 25 years old around a third of Millennials (35%) said they regularly participate in a group. This compares to half (50%) among Generation X at the same age. Meanwhile at the age of 21, just 36% of Generation Z say they regularly participate in group activities, compared to 40% of Millennials. This reinforces the impression that the social norms and behaviours that characterised previous generations are less rehearsed in newer cohorts.

- The exception to the rule is volunteering, where the clear age curve we identify elsewhere becomes a U-shaped curve. Looking at generational data, we find that 23% of 20-year-old Generation Z respondents said that they volunteered in the last twelve months, compared to 19% of Millennials at the same age. However older generations still do more volunteering than subsequent generations do at the same age. For example, 24% of the Silent Generation volunteered at the age of 70, compared to 20% of Baby Boomers, while Baby Boomers (21%) are three percentage points more likely to volunteer at age 50 than Generation X (18%).
- As a result, at age 20, 23% of members of Generation Z say they have volunteered in the last 12 months, compared to 19% among Millennials. Meanwhile at age 34, 18% of Millennials say they have volunteered in the last year, compared to 13% among Generation X at the same age. This suggests recent national declines in volunteering have been driven by those now in middle age.

Figure 9: Neighbourhood cohesion, by generation
Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

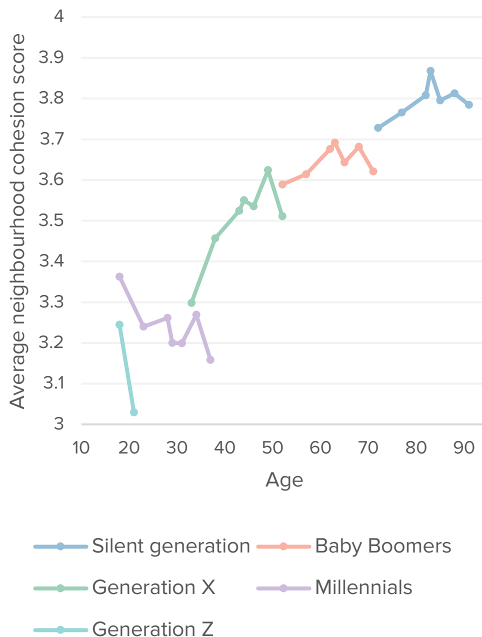


Figure 10: Neighbourhood cohesion, by generation, relative to UK average
Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

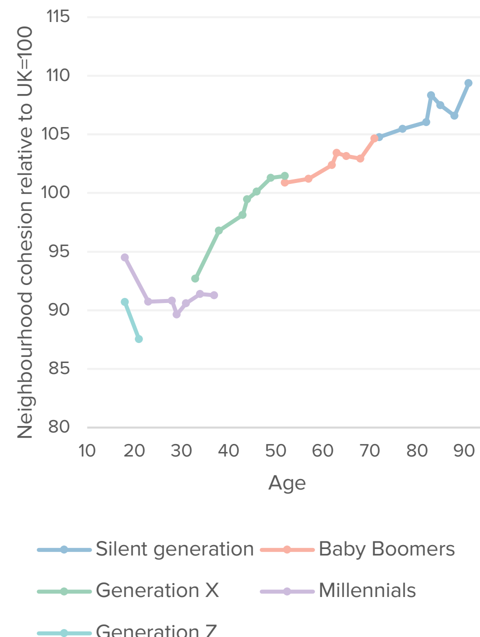


Figure 11: Group membership rate by generation

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

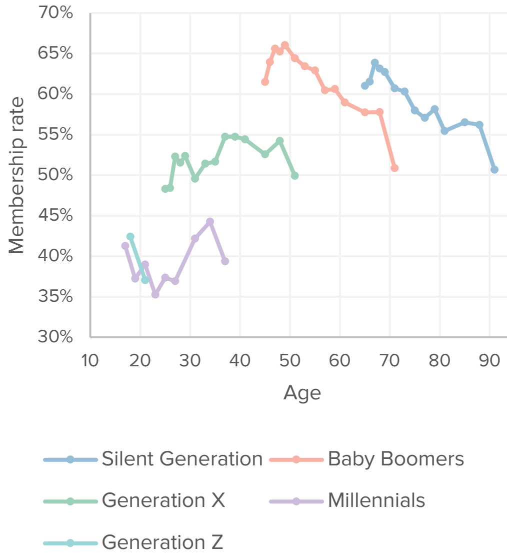


Figure 12: Group participation rate by generation

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

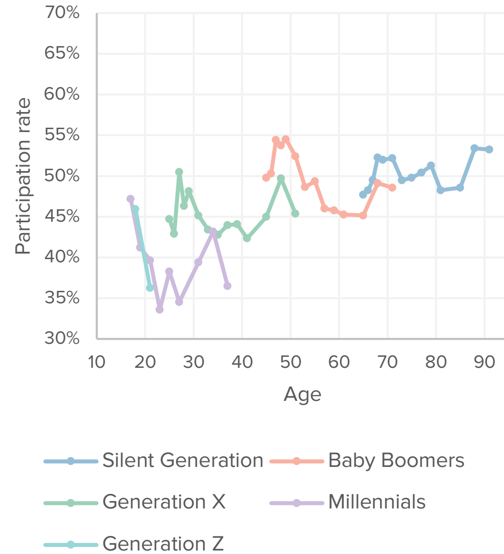


Figure 13: Volunteering rates by generation

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis

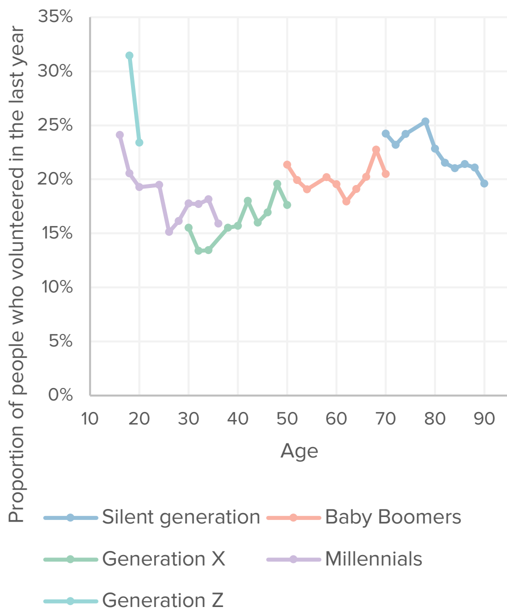
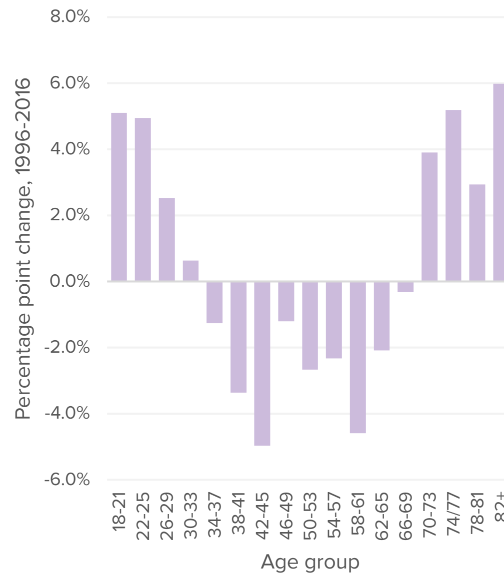


Figure 14: Change in volunteering rate by age group, 1996-2016

Source: Understanding Society; Onward analysis



2. The internet: A new form of community or a poor substitute for belonging?

A well-rehearsed explanation for the generational decline of community is the rise of the internet. Since the mid-1990s, digital connectivity has transformed all of our lives and introduced fundamentally new ways of connecting with others. In the last year of the pandemic, the benefits of this technological revolution have been abundantly clear. The primary reason that businesses were able to keep running, families able to stay in touch, and neighbourhoods and public were able to coordinate support for the most vulnerable is that they could make use of digital tools that did not exist just a few years ago.

But there are also those who argue that digital connectivity has changed our relationships with each other and our places. The social psychologist Jean Twenge, for example, has written extensively about the differences between Generation Z, which she called iGen, because of the fundamentally new ways of connecting introduced by the onset of social media.

Her premise is that young people born in 1995 came of age around 2007, the same year the iPhone was released and a year after Facebook changed its membership requirements from college students to thirteen year-olds. As a result, she argues, iGen display fundamentally different behaviours than previous generations: they learn to drive, get jobs, drink alcohol and have sex later in life than previous generations, and are more tolerant, less happy and less prepared for life as a result.[26]

Could the technological changes of the last few decades be responsible for the shifts outlined above? And if so, is it necessarily negative - could it not be that younger people are simply finding social connection in other ways, online? The evidence we have suggests that while it is certainly true that younger people use digital tools more frequently than older generations, the internet is not a replacement for more traditional modes of social capital. We find that:

- Younger people are unsurprisingly much more likely to agree with the statement “the internet is a good way to meet people with the same interests and values”. 51% of under-35s agree and just 9% disagree, compared to 15% who agree and 47% who disagree among those over 65 years old.[27] They are also much less likely to disagree. Similarly, 45% of under-35s think that the internet and social media helps people like them somewhat or a great deal to “meet new people I have things in common with”, versus 10% who say it does not help much or at all. Among over-65s, 60% say the internet does not help versus just 10% who say it helps somewhat or a great deal.

- Younger generations are also more likely to agree that "people can make more difference coming together to improve society online than they can working together in their local communities" than older generations. 38% of under-35s agree that people can make more difference online compared to 15% who disagree. Among over-65s, just 9% of people think that people can make more of a social difference online, compared to 53% who disagree. Meanwhile, 57% of under-35s think that the internet and social media helps them show their support for different causes, versus 9% who disagree. Among over-65s, more people disagree (33%) than agree (26%).

- More than half (51%) of under-35s agree that social media and the internet helps people to understand what other people think about important issues, compared to just 20% among over-65s. Meanwhile, 42% of under-35s say that the internet and social media helps them find out trustworthy information, compared to 17% who say that it does not. This compares to 19% of over-65s who think the internet and social media helps them source trustworthy information and 41% who say it does not.

However, while younger generations appear to find greater use in the internet and social media, the data we have suggests that they do not derive stronger social connection from it than from more traditional relationships. For example:

- While 60% of under-35s say that the internet and social media helps people like them to connect with people they know in real life (twice the proportion among over-65s) they are still more likely than not to disagree with the statement "some of my closest friendships are with people I have met online". Even after a year of the pandemic, 33% of under-35s disagree compared to 29% who agree.

- Similarly, 35% of under-35s disagree with the statement that "socialising online is just as good as socialising in-person", compared to 29% who agree. Among over-65s, just 5% think that socialising online is as good as socialising in person and 4% say that some of their closest friendships were forged online. This is particularly pronounced among iGen, who are nearly twice as likely to disagree (35%) that socialising online is as good as socialising in person as they are to agree (20%).

- One age cohort - 25-34 year-olds - displays a clear preference for internet-based sociality. 25-34 year-olds are the only generation more likely than not to agree with the statements: "I have more friends online than I do in real life" (42% agree, 25% disagree); "before the pandemic, I spent more time with friends online than I did in person" (41% agree, 28% disagree); and "socialising online is better than socialising in-person" (39%

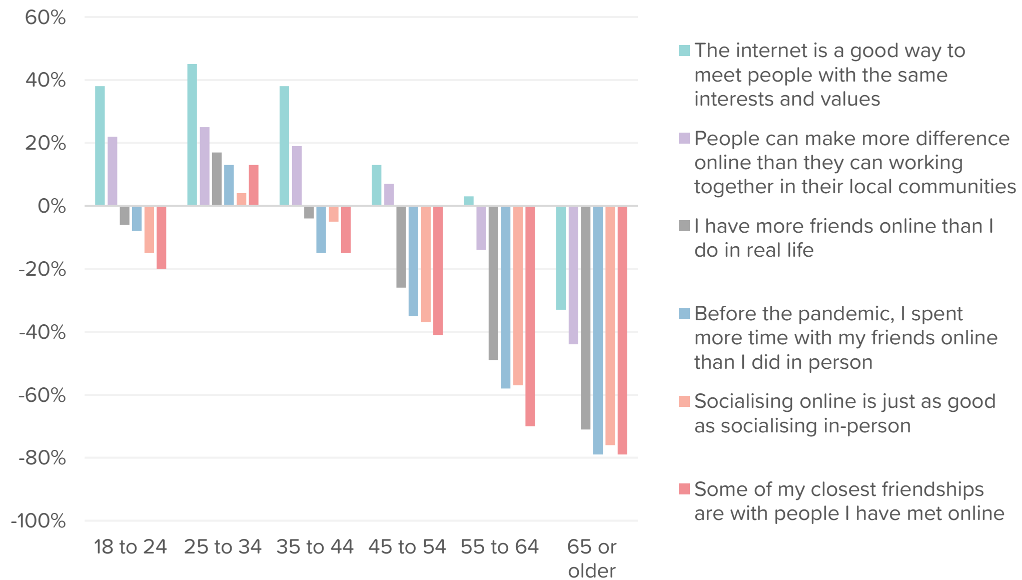
agree, 35% disagree). Every other generation is considerably more likely to disagree than agree with these statements.

- This suggests that this cohort, which broadly overlaps with the Millennial generation, identifies more strongly with online connection than physical connection. Interestingly, this is not iGen, the age group that Jean Twenge identifies, but its immediate predecessor, born in the 1980s and early 1990s. This 25-34 age group displays different habits in other ways: as Onward exposed in *The Politics of Belonging*, 25-34s are also more likely than other generations to agree that putting the army in charge (36%) and having a strong leader (66%) are good ways to run a country, suggesting rising authoritarianism.[28]

Figure 15: How much do you think social media and the internet helps people like you to... Net

Source: Onward/Stack 2021

Figure 16: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement… Net
Source: Onward/Stack 2021



There is a similar age curve when respondents are asked about the extent to which online groups are fulfilling some of the functions that physical groups may previously have played. Despite the survey being held during the initial lockdown, we find that:

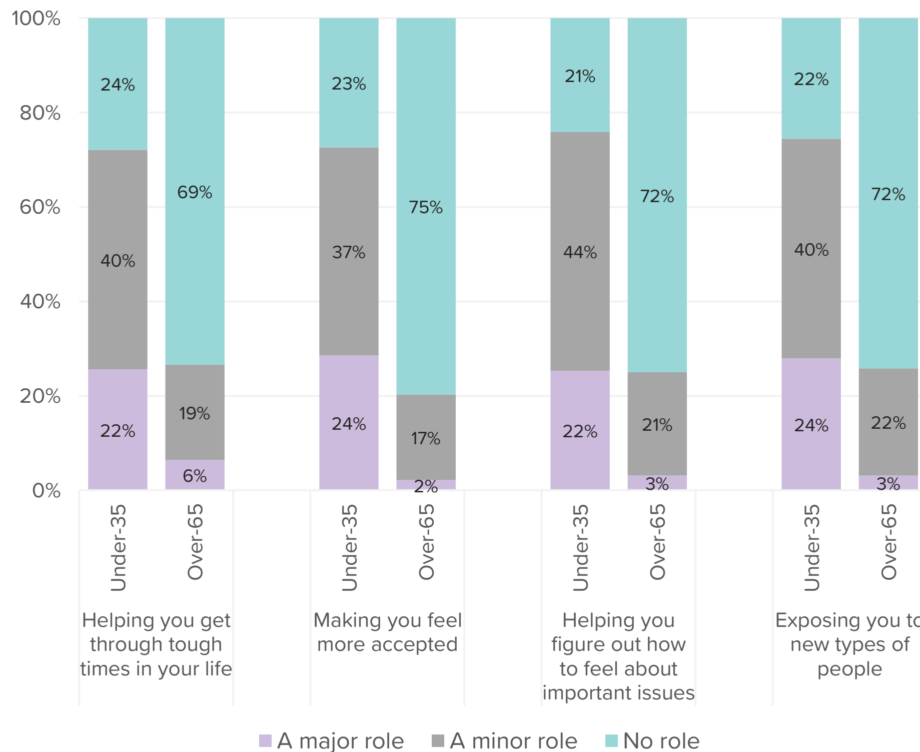
- Young people are notably unlikely to say that online groups have played a major role in key aspects of their lives. For example, only a fifth (22%) of under-35s say that online groups have had a major role in "helping them get through tough times", meaning that more (24%) say they have had no role at all. A fifth (22%) of under-35s say that online groups have helped them "figure out how to feel about important issues" and a quarter (24%) say they have had a major role in helping make them "feel more accepted". This compares to 21% and 23% respectively who say they have had no role, suggesting that online groups are only marginally seen to be effective at fulfilling these functions. Only 24% of over under-35s say that online groups have had a major role in exposing them to new types of people, versus 22% who say they have had no role.

- However, as shown below, a large share of under-35s do believe that online groups have played at least a minor role in these scenarios, and reliance on online groups is far higher than among people over-65 years old, where at least two thirds of respondents said that online groups had

played no role at all in any of these four scenarios we asked about. For instance, just 6% of over-65s say that online groups have had a major role in helping them get through tough times and just 3% say they have had a major role in helping them to figure out important issues. This suggests that younger generations, especially 25-34 year-olds, are more likely to gain value from online groups, even if the benefits are not particularly well-established.

Figure 17: Thinking about online groups where you spend time, how much of a role, if any, have they had in…

Source: Onward/Stack (2021)



3. Social and economic factors

Another factor that is often seen as characteristic of younger generations is social and economic insecurity. Young people today are more likely to be in insecure work, less likely to own their own home or live in secure social housing, more likely to form a household or marry later, more likely to live in a city, and, since the growth of university, to be more mobile in their working and studying patterns than previous generations. To what extent do these factors affect community and rootedness? Is the generational collapse in social trust and attachment we identified earlier as much a function of economics as of culture?

Looking again at *Understanding Society's* neighbourhood cohesion score - which combines questions on neighbourhood trust, willingness to work with others to improve the neighbourhood, talking with and borrowing from neighbours and other factors to create a composite score between 1 and 5 - we find strong evidence to suggest that social and economic factors are at play in the decline of pro-social norms among younger generations.

Tenure

- Housing tenure is strongly linked to neighbourhood cohesion. Across all generations, those who privately rent have a lower neighbourhood cohesion score compared to other tenure options. The average neighbourhood cohesion score for those who are homeowners is 3.60. This is compared to lower average scores of 3.47 and 3.41 for those living in social housing and privately rented accommodation respectively. This suggests that higher levels of private renting, a lack of social housing, and delayed homeownership among younger age cohorts may be undermining community and belonging.

- Looking by generation, we find that all generations record the lowest levels of neighbourhood cohesion among private renters. Neighbourhood cohesion among homeowners is 7 percentage points higher among Baby Boomers and 9 points higher among Generation X compared to members of those generations who rent their home. Millennials in privately rented accommodation have the lowest neighbourhood cohesion scores of any group. Today, Millennials in privately rented accommodation have a neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.05, compared to 3.14 for social housing and 3.22 for those who own their home.

Education

- Neighbourhood cohesion is negatively correlated with education level. Those with degrees have a lower sense of neighbourhood cohesion than any other skill level. In 2017, the average neighbourhood cohesion score for those with degrees was 3.44. This compares to 3.35 for those with A-Levels, 3.44 for those with GCSEs and 3.63 for those with no qualifications.

- But when examined by generation, it is clear that this is a recent phenomenon, suggesting it is not a feature of higher education but a function of age. Among members of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Generation X, there is no real difference between the neighbourhood cohesion of graduates and that of those with lower qualifications in any of the years of the survey. In fact, degree holders often have higher neighbourhood cohesion scores than those with lower qualifications.

- However, among Millennials, graduates record substantially lower neighbourhood cohesion scores than both previous generations who gained a degree and those of the same generation with lower-level qualifications. In the most recent year of the survey 2017, Millennial graduates had a neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.09, compared with 3.14 for those with A Levels, 3.26 for those with GCSEs and 3.33 for those with no qualifications. In the same year, there is no education-related variation among Silent Generation and Baby Boomers and Generation X graduates have higher average scores than non-graduates.

Figure 18: Neighbourhood cohesion scores by generation, education and tenure
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis

Urbanity

- One possible factor behind the variation in social attachment between generations is the fact that younger people are significantly more likely to live in urban areas, notably cities, which tend to have weaker social fabric. This may mean that younger generations are simply more likely to be socially detached as a result of their environment.

- Looking at the data, we find that urbanity does on the surface appear to be negatively correlated to neighbourhood cohesion. Non-urban areas have an average neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.63, compared to

3.42 in urban areas. However, when broken down by different categories - core city, other city, large town, medium town, small town, village or smaller - this gap closes, suggesting that urbanity is not a major factor.

- The effect of urbanity is also fairly consistent across different age groups except young people. There is no difference between the neighbourhood cohesion score of 18-24s who live in urban or rural areas. This suggests that age, rather than urbanity, is the driver of lower neighbourhood cohesion.

Ethnicity

- Another factor that may make a difference to overall cohesion scores is the greater diversity of younger generations compared to older generations. While there will not be updated data until the results of the 2021 census, the ONS believes that the fastest growing demographic groups in the UK are from ethnic minorities. Examining the data, we find that there is no discernible difference in the neighbourhood cohesion scores of white and black and ethnic minority respondents. However, there is an age effect that interacts with ethnicity.

- The age curve in neighbourhood cohesion is steeper among white respondents than BAME respondents. Specifically, among 18-24 year-olds, BAME individuals score 10% higher on neighbourliness than white individuals. This BAME-white gap is 5% among 25-34s. But older (over-65) BAME individuals have an average score 3% lower than white people of the same age. In an ideal world we would consider these groups independently of one another given known differences between different ethnicities. However, the size of the sample means that this is not possible.

- We can also look at the diversity of the wider local authority. Overall, people living in more diverse areas tend to report lower levels of neighbourliness; the correlation is weak, but negative. As diversity increases, neighbourhood cohesion among white people decreases, but increases among BAME people (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Neighbourhood cohesion score, by age and ethnicity
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis

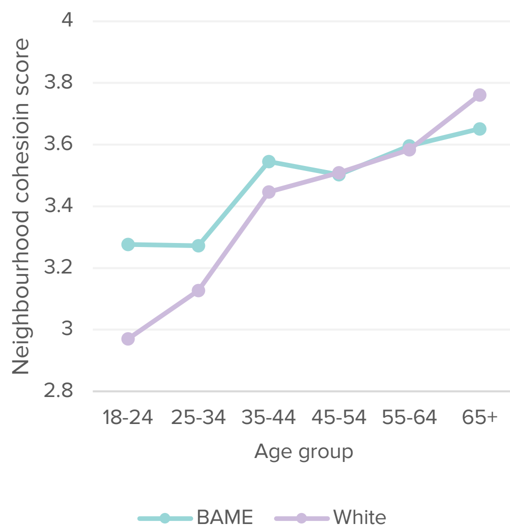
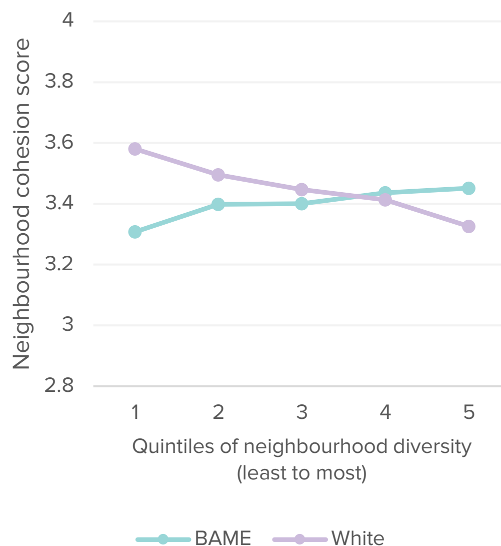


Figure 20: Neighbourhood cohesion score, by ethnicity and local authority ethnic diversity
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis



Gender

- Men and women differ slightly on self-reported neighbourliness. One-in-three women (31%) score between 4 and 5 on the neighbourhood cohesion scale, whereas only a quarter (25%) of men have the same high score. Men are marginally more likely to report lower levels of neighbourliness. Average neighbourliness among men is 3% lower than women, a gap that has remained unchanged since 1998.

- The gap between men and women is larger for those with dependent children than those without. Among men living with dependent children, 25% score above 4 for neighbourliness. This is exactly the same as among men without children. But the share of women with strong neighbourhood cohesion scores rises from 28% for those without children to 33% for those with children. In other words, the gap increases from 3 percentage points to 8 points. This suggests that parenthood has a particularly beneficial effect for women, but less so for men.

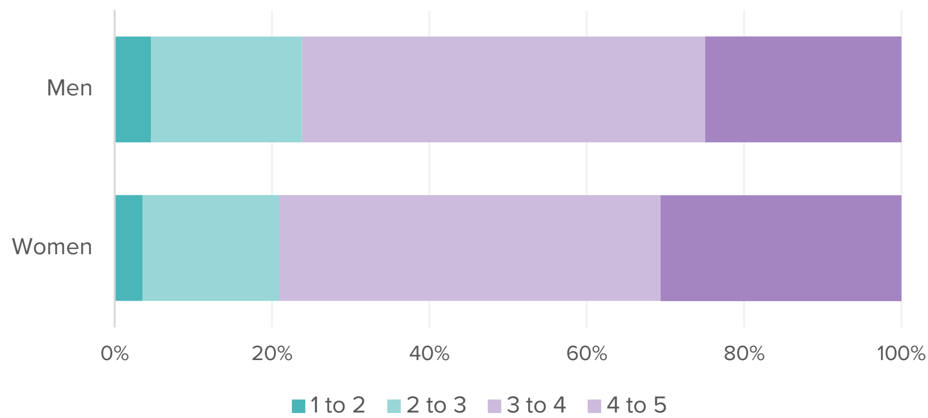
- If we look at those men and women with lower neighbourliness scores, the share of men scoring less than 3 on the scale falls from 25% among those without children to 20% for those with children. Among women, the figures are 23% for those without children, falling to 17% among those with

children. While the gender difference is not as stark, the slightly larger fall among women (26% vs. 20% for men) reinforces the gender differences for strong neighbourhood cohesion.

- This is notable given the division of caring responsibilities between men and women. On the one hand, higher rates of child and family care are likely to place women in the community and create opportunities to get to know neighbours and engage in local groups. On the other, women may be less likely to have significant free time as a result of these activities. As Onward argued in *The Politics of Belonging*, there is a strong case for policymakers to consider ways to better balance family and caring responsibilities within families to give both men and women more opportunities to enjoy the benefits of community.

Figure 21: Neighbourhood cohesion scores by gender

Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis



- However, in our recent polling, we find that men are more neighbourly than women. On average, men are more likely to say that they regularly chat, borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours and plan to remain resident in the area for a number of years.

- We also find that men are slightly more likely to say that people in their neighbourhood can be trusted (55% agree, compared to 51% of women). Men are more likely to trust people in their neighbourhood (63% compared to 58% of women) and people you meet for the first time (33% compared to 28%). But women are more likely to say they trust their family (90% agree, compared to 84% of men).

Social class

- The greatest sense of belonging and neighbourliness is among small employers and the self-employed. They are underrepresented in the bottom quartile of neighbourliness and overrepresented in the top quartile. In fact, this is the only occupational group among whom high scores are more common than low scores.

- 24% of small employers and self-employed have a score below 3 (which would place them in the bottom 25%), compared to 36% of people in both intermediate and semi-routine occupations. In an almost complete reversal, 31% of small employers and self-employed have a score above 4 (which would place them in the top 25%), compared to just 22% of people in the intermediate and semi-routine occupations.

- Beyond this disparity, the neighbourhood cohesion scores among other occupation groups do not differ significantly. Exactly 25% of people in higher occupations and routine occupations report high neighbourliness, although people in routine occupations are slightly more likely to report low scores (35% compared to 30% among higher occupations).

Figure 22: Neighbourhood cohesion scores by socio-economic status
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis

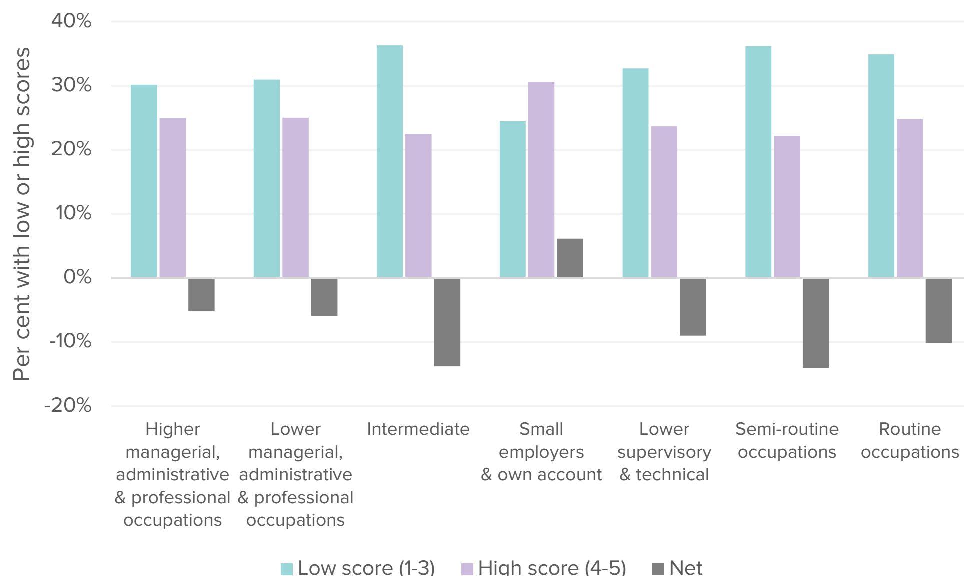


Table 4: Neighbourhood cohesion scores by socio-economic status
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis

	Low score (1-3)	High score (4-5)	Net (High minus Low)	Mean score
Higher managerial, administrative & professional occupations	30%	25%	-5.2%	3.42
Lower managerial, administrative & professional occupations	31%	25%	-5.9%	3.41
Intermediate	36%	22%	-13.8%	3.34
Small employers & own account	24%	31%	6.1%	3.56
Lower supervisory & technical	33%	24%	-9.0%	3.40
Semi-routine occupations	36%	22%	-14.0%	3.33
Routine occupations	35%	25%	-10.1%	3.40

As with so many variables, when we drill down into the details, we find that age is doing most of the statistical heavy lifting. The differences between occupation groups within age groups is smaller than the other way round, as Table X shows below. Under-35s are more likely to have low neighbourliness regardless of occupation. 55-64 year-olds report higher neighbourhood cohesion across all occupational classes.

Table 5: Net neighbourliness (high score minus low score) by age and socio-economic class
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Higher managerial, administrative & professional occupations	-59%	-38%	1%	5%	5%	9%
Lower managerial, administrative & professional occupations	-48%	-31%	5%	6%	2%	18%
Intermediate	-53%	-30%	-2%	1%	0.4%	19%
Small employers & own account	-29%	-18%	-2%	3%	22%	25%
Lower supervisory & technical	-43%	-18%	-4%	2%	11%	-4%
Semi-routine occupations	-38%	-27%	-5%	-6%	7%	17%
Routine occupations	-36%	-18%	-12%	-2%	7%	36%

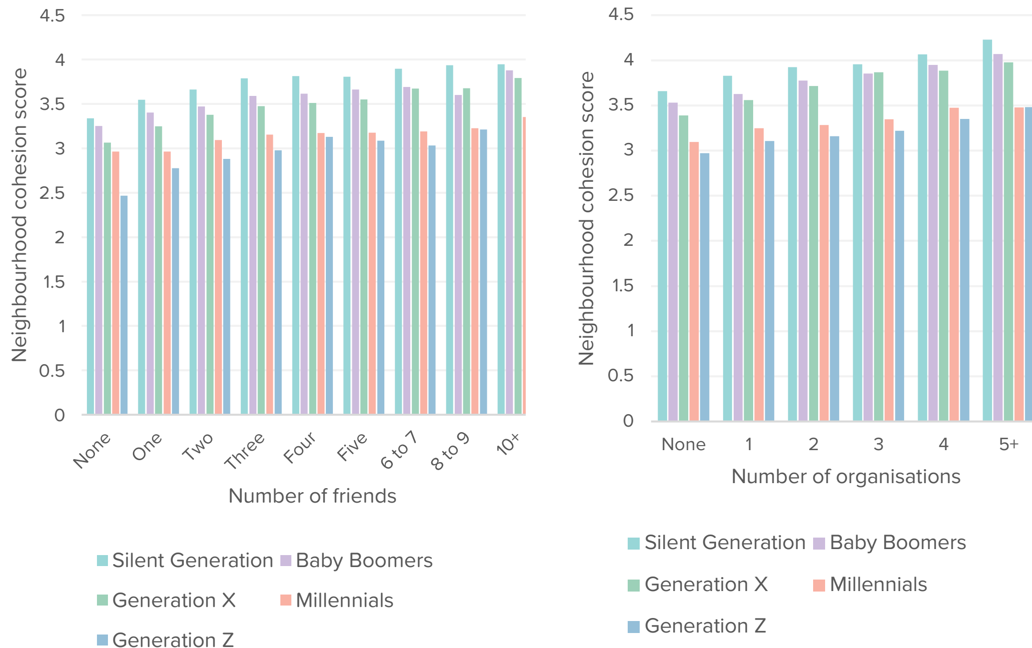
Social and participatory networks

- As discussed earlier, younger generations increasingly report smaller interpersonal networks than older generations. This has a direct correlation to neighbourhood cohesion. People that have more than 10 close friends have an average neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.72. This is substantially higher than the 3.15 average score recorded for those with no close friends and the 3.23 recorded for those with only one close friend.

- As we can see below, this does not appear to be purely an age effect. In every generation, people demonstrate higher levels of neighbourhood cohesion if they have more close friends. More pro-social people contribute more to their neighbourhoods. However, this effect does appear to be becoming considerably sharper over time. For example, members of the Silent Generation with no friends at all are more neighbourly than members of Generation Z with more than ten friends and Baby Boomers with one close friend have a higher average neighbourhood cohesion score than Millennials with ten or more close friends.

- Neighbourliness is also connected to regular group participation and group membership. Across all generations, neighbourhood cohesion is highest amongst those who regularly participate in five or more groups. Millennials and Generation Z report the highest neighbourhood cohesion when they regularly attend five or more organisations, with neighbourhood cohesion rising with each organisation they join. This is also true of religious participation. Among Millennials, those that attend service once a week have a neighbourhood cohesion score of 3.42 compared to 3.12 among those who do not attend.

Figure 23: Neighbourhood cohesion score by generation, number of close friends (LHS) and number of groups an individual participates in (RHS)
Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis



One further linked issue is use of technology. To what extent do people's responses around digital connectivity relate to their neighbourhood cohesion? Looking at different factors, we find that how someone responds to the question "the internet is a good way to meet people with the same interests and values" has no relationship at all to neighbourhood cohesion at a population and only a weak relationship among young people. Similarly, how someone responds to the question "I have more friends online than I do in real life" has a small but statistically significant correlation (R^2 = 0.22) to neighbourhood cohesion for 18-24s and 25-34 year-olds, but not for over-65s or at a population level. This provides some indirect evidence that while use of the internet is related to neighbourhood cohesion, the effect is weak and likely to be small compared to other factors.

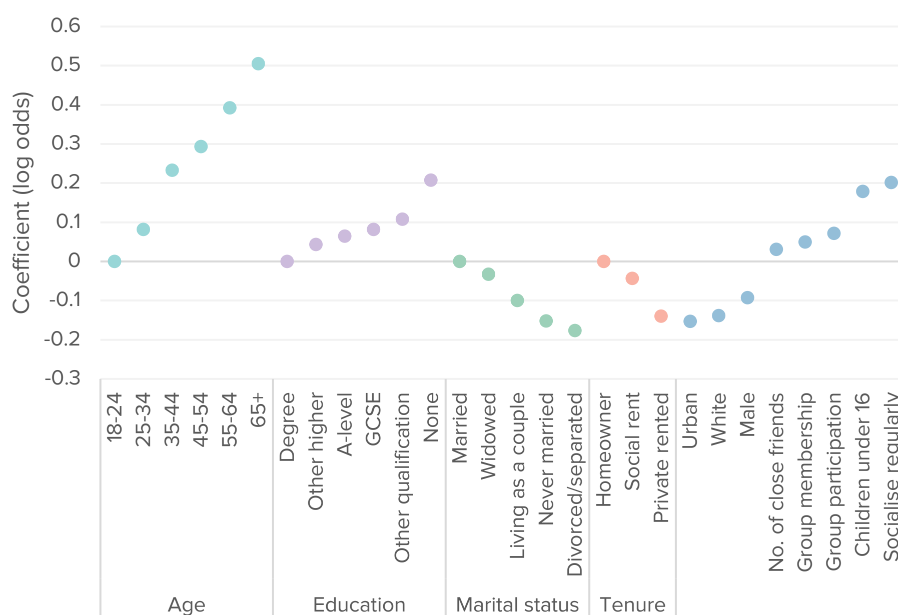
It can be difficult analysing this data to understand which factors drive generational differences in community more so than others. Running a logistic regression analysis of the data demonstrates which factors are statistically significant and which ones are less important. As shown by Figure 24 below, there are a few factors that – controlling for other characteristics – appear to be more important than others in driving levels of neighbourhood cohesion.

The single biggest predictor of neighbourhood cohesion is age itself. This reinforces our central finding in this paper: that the collapse of community is generational. The older you are the more likely you are to engage with your neighbourhood.

However, other factors are also at play. The next most predictive factors are education and levels of social activity. The lower one's education qualification and the more one socialises, the stronger neighbourhood cohesion is likely to be. Tenure, marital status, and whether a person has young children are also fairly important factors.

Figure 24: Logistic regression analysis of the statistical drivers of neighbourhood cohesion

Source: Understanding Society, Onward analysis



This suggests that the fraying of our social fabric is in large part a generational problem. If policymakers and local leaders want to reverse declining levels of neighbourliness and repair the social fabric of communities, they need to primarily focus on young people, prioritising policies that will expand their social networks and encourage group membership - both of which are in freefall among newer generations.

As we emerge from the pandemic, with youth unemployment steeply rising, this must be an urgent priority for ministers. The next chapter explores ways in which policymakers could achieve this - building on the outpouring of civic engagement during the pandemic.

Qualitative research

How do young people feel about community?

This chapter summarises two participatory workshops we conducted with young people aged 18-34 years old in Barnsley and Wokingham to understand how young people relate to community and the reasons for their lower levels of association, participation and civic engagement. The quotes provided below are representative of the discussions unless otherwise stated.

1. Young people perceive community as inherently local

- When asked what they think when they hear the word community, young people spoke of a "bunch of people living in the same area" and the idea of "living near each other." There was a strong sense that community was within the immediate vicinity of their homes. Most young people spoke of how community was "more the road" that they lived on and the geography of community was always spoken of as "smaller" rather than larger communities like the centre of town. For example, a participant spoke of how they live in flats and saw that as a "micro-community, such as the building" in itself. One said: "We all live under the same roof... often if there is an issue it affects us all so it is good we can come together." Another said that "if you are from Barnsley, you are from a community. We are known to be friendly and sociable."

- Community was also perceived as about people "working together," "groups of people helping each other out" and "supporting each other." Participants identified communities they were part of, including a local amateur sports club or an allotment club. They spoke of how this was a community because they saw "the same people" and had a "shared idea".

2. We found sharply different views of social trust in the two towns

- Social trust varied considerably between Barnsley and Wokingham. In Barnsley, young people started from the position of trust, with people having to give them "a reason to not trust them" to change their view. There was agreement that you needed to "trust neighbours as you need to rely on them" and the nature of the town bred close social relationships. Participants emphasised that trust existed because "businesses have been in the family for ages, you are connected in some way. There is always a relation of some kind" and "everybody knows everyone; uncles, dads, cousins, grandparents. You feel at home."

- In contrast, respondents in Wokingham tended to be "wary" and "sceptical of neighbours and people being too friendly." In Wokingham, one participant spoke of how in their block of flats, which has a young demographic and "high tenant turnover," many of the occupants "actively

avoided contact or interaction". Both groups of young people unprompted used London as an example of an unfriendly community where interaction was "forbidden" or did not exist. The divide in local trust and interaction was best described by two definitions of their local community: in Wokingham, community was described as "friendly strangers"; in Barnsley community was defined as "relational networks".

3. Young people appear to associate community with affluence and age

- In both locations, we found that young people repeatedly associated community with older and richer residents. In Wokingham, young people spoke of trusting people "because they are old, have a nice car, garden, respectable jobs". Others also spoke of "age and money" being the two important factors of a good and safe community. The fact that Wokingham was seen as an "old town" where participants or their family were raised helped bolster this sense of security and many respondents had either moved back to the area that they grew up in or moved to be closer to their family and friends. As one participant said: "affluence has a bubble of trust".

- Young people in Barnsley also associated a safe and good community with older people. Many spoke of having older people for neighbours and living with their grandparents, noting "it is a nice area with older people." Others commented on what this meant for social interactions. For example, neighbourliness was seen through acts of "giving cards to new neighbours," "inviting them to a back garden BBQ" or "going to a working man's pub with your grandad." These neighbourly acts were all closely associated with older generations.

4. Lack of time seems to be a crucial barrier to community participation by young people

- When asked what was holding them back from volunteering or participating in their community, many respondents said they lacked the time. People said they were "too busy" or "too knackered to go to the pub let alone volunteer." There was universal recognition that "modern life is not plannable" so they were hesitant to "make commitments and not work out." One respondent summed up the sentiment with: "being young you have no time, but when you get older you do." Another said: "if I am not earning money or being with kids then I would be doing something else... when the children are not around, maybe it will be something that I pick up" and the desire to "come home to get away from life."

- Interestingly, respondents said that if volunteering was “more flexible” and “reflected life” they would be more inclined to participate. Others spoke of “not looking to litter pick” but “if a social or creative opportunity” arose, they would have time to volunteer to “have an impact and a sense of purpose.” There were other barriers that were highlighted too. For example, both groups spoke of not knowing “where I would go to volunteer or how to find it” and “not seeing volunteering opportunities.” The sense that they have to “seek out opportunities” did not appeal to them, amongst other demands in their life. This suggests that young people do not lack motivation to their community, rather they lack the time, information and opportunities to contribute.

Recommendations

This section sets out seven recommendations for addressing the problems outlined in earlier chapters: namely a growing intergenerational trust gap and the detachment of young people from their communities, not out of desire but as a result of limited time, information and opportunity about how to contribute to their social fabric. Our ideas will not be without controversy but the wholesale collapse in community and social attachment among entire generations and the fraying of the social fabric in many parts of the UK demand bold answers.

These recommendations are also designed in part to respond to the challenge posed by the last year. Coronavirus has confined us to our homes, restricted people from coming together, and prevented communities from restoring reserves of social capital. All of these changes have disproportionately affected younger generations and it is incumbent on policymakers to act now, as we emerge from the pandemic, to heal the social scarring left behind. Together we hope this plan would start to rebuild society after this catastrophic year, and bring different generations together again.

1. Introduce national civic service to re-instil a culture of participation and association in young people

In line with the experiences of other countries, the UK has not operated any form of national service for many decades. National service succeeded wartime conscription through the 1948 National Service Act, which compulsorily required men between the ages of 17 and 21 years old to serve in the armed forces for 18 months and then remain on the reserve list for four years, during which they could be recalled for up to 20 days at a time. The last national servicemen (they were all men) left their posts in 1963.

However, while few countries have reintroduced compulsory military service, there has in recent years been a revival in the idea of national civic or community service across the democratic world. National service has been endorsed as a way to restore liberal democracy and values of community by public figures including: the former Cabinet Minister Rory Stewart,[29] Prince Harry,[30] the former Labour Shadow Cabinet Minister Chuka Umunna[31] and most recently *Bloomberg's* John Micklethwait and *The Economist's* Adrian Wooldridge,[32] and Senators Chris Coons and Roger Wickers led a bipartisan effort in 2020 to significantly expand AmeriCorps.[33] These calls build on numerous successful models of civic service - as opposed to military service - in other Western democratic countries, including:

- France. In 2017, President Macron announced the introduction of national service for all 15-17 year-olds to promote a sense of civic duty and national unity among French youth. Service National Universel (SNU) includes a mandatory two week placement for every 16 year old that focuses on civic culture, digital skills, first aid, and emergency response, with participants

also required to wear navy uniforms and sing the Marseillaise, as well as a longer voluntary placement in which young people work in a local charity or emergency service department.[34]

- **Italy.** For several years, Italy has operated a voluntary universal civil service for both native and foreign-born 18-28 years-olds. Participants dedicate a period of service, typically a year, to various social and cultural initiatives, including: civil protection; heritage and urban regeneration; cultural promotion; agriculture or international development. Participants receive training, a monthly stipend of €439, with an additional daily allowance for service abroad, and are awarded a certificate of community service.[35]

- **Austria**. Austria, like neighbouring Switzerland, has continued to operate mandatory military service since the Cold War. However, since 1975, conscientious objectors have been able to opt for nine months of "zivildienst", or compulsory paid community service, instead of serving for six months in the Austrian armed forces. Around 40% of Austrian men choose this option. This consists of nine months of civic service in organisations ranging from hospitals, elderly care, emergency services, and development projects abroad. Every year about 15,000 "Zivildiener" are employed at approximately 1,700 organisations.

- **Israel**. Since the 1949 National Security Law, Israel has conscripted 18 year-olds into military service in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) or, for those exempt on the basis of their faith, into civic service. Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion referred to the Israel Defense Forces as a "melting pot of the diasporas gathering in Israel, a school of civil education and a cradle of a renewed nation". Civic service is administered by seven approved non-profit organisations which coordinate postings in public bodies, Israel's Red Cross, special needs education and community welfare organizations, for around 9,000 volunteers each year, who receive a grant of $1,500 grant for each 12 months of service. Around 30% go on to serve a second year.

We recommend that the Government introduce national civic service in the UK. This should go considerably further than the current offering of the National Citizen Service, which offers 15-17 year-olds a limited period of communal activities. However, it would not mean the return to national military service for teenagers and we do not propose that the Government initially make such a scheme compulsory. But ministers should consider introducing a nationwide scheme to engage younger generations in long-term service to their communities and wider society.

This should take the form of a cultural expectation that every person between the ages of 18 and 35 years old should undertake 10 days of unpaid civic service through an established charity, community group or emergency service cadet force every year or, alternatively, complete a paid "year of service" through a new Year to Serve scheme (as recommended in Onward's previous *Policies of Belonging* report). The Government would accredit organisations to offer these civic service posts, in exactly the same way as the Royal Voluntary Service and St John's Ambulance have offered people the ability to volunteer to support the NHS or vaccination programme during the pandemic. National organisations that might offer large numbers of posts include: the National Trust, the Woodland Trust, the Royal Parks, the Princes Trust, the police, emergency services or military cadets, as well as the Royal Voluntary Service and St John's Ambulance.

However, learning the lessons from the establishment of the National Citizen Service and the attrition of the national volunteering initiatives during the pandemic, ministers should actively avoid creating a single national body for civic service. Instead, the Government should aim 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. This is how similar initiatives in other countries, such as AmeriCorps in the US, work effectively.

To create both an incentive and the time for civic service, this should be backed by a legal obligation for schools, universities and employers to give 18-35 year-olds up to 10 days off a year to undertake civic service. At the same time, young people who do take part could receive a number of attractive benefits, including: reduced tuition fees for students and graduates, vouchers towards training for apprentices and workers, or even a cash award (see recommendation two). The Government should also consider ways to enhance the prestige of civic service so that it becomes a signal for career advancement, for example by working with leading recruiters to offer guaranteed interviews or accelerated access to prestigious public service early career schemes, such as the Civil Service Fast Stream, Teach First, Police Now, Frontline and Think Ahead.

2. Develop a system of civic rewards to incentivise community participation

As part of a wider introduction of national civic service, the Government should consider introducing a system of incentives to encourage younger generations to engage in voluntary action and community contribution in their local community. There have been various proposals put forward to encourage a system of rewards for social action, including time banking and volunteer passports.[36] Many of these proposals have merit but they are not specific to younger age groups and they have historically proved technologically difficult to implement. They also can have little direct link to activity in the person's local community.

An alternative method would be to introduce a system of rebates, by which young people would be rewarded when they have completed a certain amount of civic service in their community. This might take a number of forms, for example as a credit that can be redeemed against either their student loan debt (if they are a student or graduate) or against the cost of another eligible training course, such as a digital skills course or vocational training (if they are not not). Alternatively, given many young people (including those perhaps most likely to be in need of the incentive) do not go to university and do not want to do extra training, it could be a reduction in national insurance contributions or simply a cash reward. This would follow several international examples:

- In the United States, volunteers who contribute 1700 hours of community service to AmeriCorps over a 12 month period are awarded the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, worth $6,095 redeemable against college tuition fees.[37] Similarly volunteers in VistaCorps, a poverty alleviation programme, and the Peace Corps, the international volunteering scheme established by J.F. Kennedy, are eligible for a 15% forgiveness on low interest Perkins student loans for the first two years of service and a further 20% for the following two years, potentially allowing a young person to reduce the cost of their tuition by 70% over a four year period.[38]

- A similar scheme exists in Germany, where volunteering is regarded as part-time employment and is eligible for a tax allowance of up to €720 per year exempt from tax and national insurance contributions. There are no definitions of what constitutes volunteering, other than it must be completed with an association or a non-profit organisation, with churches, youth hostels and nursing and retirement homes frequently providing placements for young people to volunteer.[39]

These schemes provide a direct incentive for volunteering that is highly targeted at young people and avoids some of the complexities associated with other civic reward schemes. For example, by offering a rebate against student loan costs or debt, the US scheme is redeemed through existing loan repayment structures rather than establishing a new reward route. Similarly, the German scheme operates through federal tax systems, reducing complexity. Both are also paid in arrears after the volunteering has taken place, therefore reducing deadweight cost.

We recommend that the Government introduce a similar scheme that makes 18-35 year-olds who have conducted 10 or more volunteering days each year eligible for a civic reward, which can be redeemed against either student loan debt, the costs of an alternative education course, such as digital skills or vocational training, or a national insurance rebate.

This would create a highly targeted and scalable incentive for young people to contribute to civic or community activity, and do so without introducing a wholly new system of rewards or complicated new bureaucracy. Moreover, because around four in five student loans are expected never to be fully repaid due to graduates never earning enough, the upfront costs to the taxpayer of those rewards would be limited - effectively bringing forward the point at which a portion of eligible students' debt would be forgiven.

3. Rebuild civic participation after the pandemic

The growth of civic membership and participation at the beginning of the last century was driven not only by a wave of new social norms, usefully described in Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's latest book as "the upswing", but also by a number of new national civic networks that harnessed people's energies and provided an outlet for them to associate and contribute.

This wave of association, which began around the turn of the twentieth century in the UK, included national organisations which typically operated with a federated structure of local chapters, including the Scouts (established 1908); Rotary Clubs (established 1905 in Chicago); the National Trust (established 1895); the Women's Institute (established 1915); the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (established 1926); as well as all manner of friendly and civic societies, church groups and political associations.

These organisations, most of which were entirely voluntary for most of their existence and rely on the time and beneficence of members, have been responsible for the proliferation of pro-social norms and civic participation for much of the last hundred years. Some organisations, such as the Primrose League - which was both a political and social movement - had at their peak as many as 2 million members, equivalent to around one in every 25 people in the UK as a whole.

It is striking to which this pattern of civic association and participation has dissipated in recent decades. Many of the most popular civic associations today are those that were established more than a hundred years ago. The last few decades have been mostly absent of concerted attempts to create large-scale civic movements, with notable exceptions in ParkRun, community organising and food banks. Whereas it was countercultural *not to* take part in a civic association as recently as the 1950s, it is now countercultural to do so, especially among younger generations.

While the models of civic association popular in the past may not be appropriate today, there should nevertheless be a consensus that the *principle* of civic association remains strongly applicable in the modern world. A wide range of eminent social scientific work has shown the value of associational life to both

political democracy and economic prosperity in recent settings. This is particularly the case for bridging social capital, which connects heterogeneous groups and in doing so transmits trust, reduces the costs of exchange and aligns information asymmetries and which has been shown to increase creativity,[40] innovation,[41] regional growth,[42] and democratic norms.[43]

We recommend that Ministers set an ambition to develop a new wave of civic association after the pandemic, specifically led by and for younger generations. In doing so, we recognise that the State cannot *create* such movements itself and in some ways is antithetical to this kind of activity. But we do believe that the government can play a vital role in facilitating the development of civic networks by giving permission, seeding valuable funding and offering policy support for new civic associations to emerge.

One way to achieve this would be to create a Civic Challenge Fund to identify, incubate and scale a number of mass-participation civic networks that can re-engage new generations in associational life. This should be run independently of government, with its work driven by young people themselves and funded in perpetuity through an endowment rather than through ongoing funding. This might operate in a similar way to the Royal Society of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, which started life in the 17th Century as a series of prizes aimed at fixing social and economic problems, or the more recent Grand Challenges set out in the 2017 Industrial Strategy.

Under such a model, the Government would provide the funding and policy support to help nascent ideas to flourish, and would set parameters for each of the missions. These might include: new approaches to intergenerational mixing, building on the transformative impact of organisations like the Cares Family; fostering entrepreneurship, learning from the Tenner Challenge pioneered by Lord Young; or tackling obesity, to find the successor to ParkRun. In each mission, the specific objective should be to seed, test and grow a civic association that can reach and engage a million people in active participation every year.

This might lead to the incubation of a new national association of after-school sports clubs, a network of enterprise clubs for aspiring business leaders, a federation of community orchestras and choirs, or guerrilla gardening clubs across major UK cities. Ministers should not prescribe how to support associational life, and it will be vital for these plans to be developed not only with young people in mind but with young people involved. The Government would play a role in giving the permission and support to help scalable interventions to grow to national prominence and a sustainable funding base.

The point should be explicitly to channel young people's clear desire to contribute to social change, evident in multiple surveys and their visible activism, into practical action within their local community. This is an extraordinary opportunity that is seemingly being lost, because the social norms, participatory networks and institutions do not exist to catalyse that activity.

4. Create the space for civic society to thrive

In *The State of our Social Fabric,* Onward set out the decline of the civic realm in recent years. As we wrote then, communities are roughly half as likely (47%) to have a local post office than they were nearly two decades ago and three quarters (76%) as likely to have a local pub. This means that there are now only 7 pubs for every 10,000 adults, compared to 11 pubs per 10,000 adults a decade ago in 2010. Similarly, the number of libraries has diminished by 28% since 2005. The net effect of this change, exacerbated by declining membership of churches and trade unions, is that many of the spaces in which civic society used to flourish are simply no longer available for communities to use.

As the UK recovers from the pandemic, the Government should seek to reverse this decline and create the space for civic associations to flourish. We recommend that Ministers consult on a Social Spaces Bill, to democratise use of underutilised assets in the community owned by both the public sector and private owners. There are a range of assets that might be considered, including: empty high street shops; vacant local authority owned buildings and land; job centres and local authority assets when they are not in use; parks and green spaces. According to figures from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in 2020 there were over 25,000 vacant council owned homes and over 100,000 empty council-owned garages.[44]

These assets should be put to better use in the community, to boost available space and support associational life for young people. There are a number of ways legislation could support this.

1. Legislation could include statutory requirements for local authorities, schools and universities to make sports pitches or other communal green spaces available to civic groups during evenings and weekends - and other times when they are not in use such as school or university holidays - for community sports. Similar provisions might be made for meeting places, which could be made available for music, dance, theatre, group meetings or other activities. This might mean that village and town halls, university lecture theatres and job centre offices, often in the centre of towns, become important community anchors over time, rather than the preserve of those who use them day to day.

2. Legislation could introduce an automatic permission for long-term vacant or unused assets to be converted to specific types for community use. According to the Local Data Company, the percentage of units in Great Britain that had been vacant for more than three years increased by 0.5% in 2020.[45] 4.2% of those persistent vacancies found on the high street had been vacant for more than three years, compared to 1.9% in Retail Parks and 5.0% in Shopping Centres.[46] This could work in a similar way to permitted development rights in the planning system: if a high street property is left vacant for more than two years, any community group could be able to apply for a temporary licence to make better use of it. If that use is to turn it into a shared workspace, community shop or meeting place, or an enterprise hub, local authorities or the landlord should not be able to refuse, unless in exceptional circumstances.

3. Local bodies could be placed under an obligation to advertise publicly owned spaces for community use better. At present, many community assets are technically available for community use but information about them is often scarce, community groups are not aware or access is bureaucratic, all of which means they go underused. Legislation could clarify the responsibilities of local bodies to advertise public assets locally to ensure better use, and to publish data on their usage to measure local success in opening them up.

This would make better use of underutilised assets, drive better value for money for taxpayers, and forge a culture of closer partnerships between public sector organisations and local civic organisations, such that associational life can flourish more easily in future and generate stronger social connections among younger generations. They would also encourage new uses of high streets and town centres after several years of declining fortunes and footfall, particularly among young people.

5. Make every university a civic university

There are few more important civic institutions than universities. At their best, universities not only inculcate new generations and play a vital role in their communities, fostering knowledge and cultural exchange, sponsoring civic engagement and volunteering and diffusing innovation and entrepreneurship.

In 1900, Joseph Chamberlain famously founded the University of Birmingham as the first civic university, with a new curriculum, a culture embedded in its community, and a commitment to recruit students of all classes, women and men. The idea transformed the university model, for the better. But as universities

become more commercial and international and compete within a global export market they have arguably neglected their responsibilities closer to home - to the communities in which they sit. In 2019, the UPP Foundation revived the idea of a civic university with the publication of *Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places*.[47]

As the foreword to the UPP Foundation report puts it: "Under the pressure to grow student numbers and become global players, universities have lost some of the tangible connection to their places... but if we are – once again – recognising that universities are supported by the taxpayer as well as the student, then it is more reasonable to expect some of these funds to go towards the wider public benefit. There is an opportunity to rearticulate the university's role."

To their credit, more than 60 universities, including some of Britain's leading institutions have since signed the Civic University pledge and joined the network, which is now hosted at Sheffield Hallam University.[48] The progress made on the Civic University Network should be commended. It demonstrates that with the right leadership and focus it is possible for universities to re-assume a larger role in their communities. But it remains entirely voluntary, and therefore unenforceable and ignored by many institutions.

Universities in England are now better funded than they have been for a generation. The value of outstanding loans at the end of March 2020 was £140 billion, a figure that is expected to grow to £540 billion by the middle of this century.[49] Up to 83% of graduates are expected to never fully pay back their loans due to low earning rates after graduation, representing an enormous government subsidy to universities.[50] In this context, it is reasonable for politicians to expect universities to play a much greater role in fostering prosperity and community locally. Many already do this but many do not. And the evidence in this report, that graduates in particular suffer from much lower levels of neighbourhood cohesion than non-graduates, gives the lie to the idea that all universities are fulfilling their civic role.

More must be done. We recommend that the Government announces its intention that every university should become a Civic University, as set out by the Civic University Network, meaning that universities should take steps to understand their local community, to respond to its needs and to play an anchor role within local civic society and the economy.

The Government should not need to legislate to force universities to do this - and ultimately universities are civic organisations much of whose value lies in their independence from the State. But ministers should ask the Office for Students to transparently review universities' activities regularly within the existing regulatory framework and be willing to curtail universities' ability to access subsidised student loans if they do not take steps to assume a stronger civic role.

6. Introduce Homes for Young People to increase security of tenure among younger generations

Housing tenure is not one of the most significant drivers of weak social attachment among younger generations, but it is nevertheless important. We know from our work in *The State of our Social Fabric* that there is a strong relationship between housing tenure and social fabric generally. Delayed homeownership, and more people stuck in insecure private rentals for longer or forever, prevents young people from putting down roots and having a personal interest in a neighbourhood - both of which are linked to the development of social norms and participation.

A combination of smaller stock of social housing, a rising population, much higher rental costs and house prices, and changes to social housing allocations after 1977 have all contributed to fewer people, especially young people, having fewer opportunities to access secure housing. Over 11 million people currently live in privately rented accommodation in England, with 46% of private renters under the age of 35 years old in 2017.[51] It is critical that the Government provides more security, including reversing declining rates of youth homeownership to allow more young people the opportunity to buy their own home. One way to do this would be to invest in more social housing which could provide homes at rents linked to local incomes to help young people save as well as a route into home ownership through the right to buy. Another way, which Onward has proposed previously, would be to create a new class of cheaper rented housing exclusively for younger people in work to help them get off the treadmill of renting and onto the housing ladder.

We recommend building half a million Homes for Younger People (HYP), funded by capturing more of the gain from development and by transferring the remaining local authority housing stock to housing associations. HYP Reduced Rent Homes would offer working tenants under the age of 40 the opportunity to get on the property ladder by discounting their rent by 10-20% below market rates for up to ten years. This would allow them to build up towards ownership or shared ownership.

The ten-year tenancy for HYP tenants would give these young people long-term security while they are renting. After this period, tenants would have the option to either buy a share or full ownership of the home, move or pay the full market rent value. If tenants chose to move out, the home should be offered to another young person, couple or family, or if purchased the revenues would be recycled to replace the stock. Over time, the stock of HYP homes would steadily grow.

It is important that these allocations remain separate to the local authority allocations system. This can either be handled centrally by local authorities or by housing associations and other providers themselves. To build 500,000 HYP Reduced Rent homes over the next 10 years would mean building 50,000 a year. According to 2018 figures, if we assume a similar unit cost to the current Affordable Homes Programme of £20,000 (public subsidy leveraged by housing associations and local authorities), this would cost £1 billion a year.[52]

There are a number of ways in which this can be funded. First, the government could capture more of the gains from development by adding to capital budgets. Second, it could redirect existing capital budgets, for example from shared ownership to this new type of housing. Third, local authorities can voluntarily release capital rich housing stock. This can be done as an innovative venture partnership between stock owning local authorities and housing associations. This is not a new idea. Over the last 30 years, we have seen many local authorities make such transfers, and they could do more. The transfers can help remove the constraint of government borrowing, competing claims for investment from other government departments and provide a revenue grant to undertake an options appraisal followed by financing work to support such a transfer. The overall cost would be minimal compared to the long-term benefit of moving future borrowing of the local authority homes outside of the public sector.

Currently, a large number of associations already build and let homes for market rents in order to cross subsidise their social purposes. HYP homes would sit in between social rent tenancies and market rent tenancies, creating a middle tier of security for younger people and allow them to put down roots within their neighbourhood and community.

7. Roll out a new model of family hubs in areas with particular weak social fabric

Onward's previous work on the *State of our Social Fabric* found that many of the places with the weakest social fabric are also characterised by less resilient families and early years support. This is one reason why, when we speak about the importance of institutions, this includes the family, and why we have previously recommended allowing parents to flexibly transfer their tax allowances between themselves in a way that best suits their and their children's needs.

But it is also clear that some families need active support in their local community and that doing so can help them to better participate in their community and build social capital with neighbours. One way to do this, especially for younger parents, would be to roll out a new model of Family Hub across different parts of the country, building on the experiences of what worked (and what didn't) with

previous models, including the Sure Start programme. While the 2010 evaluation of Sure Start proved inconclusive,[53] it focused largely on the economic outcomes from the programme and other studies have shown a number of important benefits that are particularly lacking in less connected places:

- The National Evaluation of Sure Start found that when comparing five year-old children living in Sure Start Local Partnership (SSLP) areas and non-SSLP areas, children in SSLP had better physical health and a lower BMI than children in non-SSLP areas. Mothers in SSLP areas also reported a greater life satisfaction, provided a less chaotic home environment and more stimulating home learning environment.[54] There was also a great decrease in workless household status (from 9 months to 5 years of age).[55] On the whole, analysis from the evaluation showed that 'the higher the pre-school childcare quality, the higher the child's attainment in language development as measured by the BAS 'Naming Vocabulary' scale.'[56]

- Wider literature has also supported the value of family hubs. They have shown the effects of high quality pre-school education, which has been found repeatedly to be associated with improved cognitive and social development.[57] For example, early childhood interventions were derived from crime reduction in adolescence and adulthood. Poverty, living in a disadvantaged area and harsh parenting are all factors associated with higher rates of offending in later life.'[58]

- An IFS report in 2019 found that Sure Start benefits children living in disadvantaged areas most. For example, the 'poorest 30% of areas saw the probability of any hospitalisation fall by 11% at age 10 and 19% at age 11, those in more affluent neighbourhoods saw smaller benefits, and those in the richest 30% of neighbourhoods saw practically no impact at all.'[59] They argued that it was because of the services that Sure State offers and that children in disadvantaged areas were more likely to attend a centre.

Since 2005-6, they have been under the control of local authorities and run as children's centres. Today, there are 2302 Sure Start children's centres and 699 linked sites open.[60] They are maintained and funded by local authorities, which means the decision to open or close centres is made locally. If a local authority decides to close a Sure Start children's centre, statutory guidance is clear that they must demonstrate that local children and families will not be adversely affected. On average, Sure Starts cost £4,860 (including capital costs) per eligible child living in the area at 2009-10 prices over the four years that children and their families were eligible to receive services.[61]

We recommend that Ministers consider funding a new wave of Family Hubs, building on the legacy of Sure Start and the success of the Family Hubs network pioneered by Lord Farmer. These would be centres dedicated to strengthening families and providing them with support to prevent breakdown and intervene early in the case of problems. They should be located specifically in places with weak social fabric but no existing Sure Start or Family Hub, and could be piloted at first to refine the model. While models vary, the best examples of Family Hubs bring together different services and charities together in a single location, which helps to break down silos between different services and charities, and root support in the community.

Conclusion

This report exposes an uncomfortable truth: that the fraying of Britain's social fabric is in large part a generational problem. Younger generations are considerably less likely to exhibit the social norms and participatory behaviours that characterise a thriving civic society, and appear to be becoming even less so with each successive generation. If civic society is the mother science that sustains political democracy and economic prosperity, as de Tocqueville claimed and decades of social science empirically shows, then this generational collapse in community has profound implications for our society.

We may be already starting to see the results of this shift in rising authoritarianism among younger generations and the growing age gap in voting patterns at elections - all of which suggest the dilution of social norms governing social reciprocity, moderate debate and respect for common institutions. If the trends we have set out in the report continue, these trends may get worse before they get better, and the social fabric of communities may become even more threadbare.

We must therefore act - to deliver a much-needed jolt of participation and contribution to younger generations who have increasingly lost touch with each other and their communities. The big ideas we set out in the previous chapter are not the only ways to do this but they are a start. A radical response is necessary if we are to rebuild a sense of belonging and community, especially in the wake of a pandemic during which young people have sacrificed much of their lives for the greater good.

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A commitment to transparency

Onward is committed to transparency and will publish the names of individuals and organisations who give us more than £5,000 of support each year. This is published on our website twice a year.

About the authors

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Will Tanner advised the Prime Minister Theresa May between 2013 and 2017, as a Special Adviser in the Home Office and as Deputy Head of Policy in 10 Downing Street. He has also previously worked for the leading communications firm, Portland, and for the independent thinktank, Reform.

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