

CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

*Perceptions of the World, Digital
Behaviour, and Social Impact Among
Young New Zealanders*



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– Commissioned by Outward Bound, Ideally surveyed 553 New Zealanders, comprising 330 young adults^(18–24) and 223 parents of teenagers, between 9-19 December 2025. Findings were processed through Ideally's robust analytical methodology, a rigorous testing framework designed to benchmark behavioural trends.

(1) Executive Summary

Each of the last 60+ years at its Anakiwa school in the Marlborough Sounds, Outward Bound has welcomed the youth of the day through its doors, shepherding them through their personal journey in the programme. Over that time, many of the issues young people are confronting have stayed constant. Core concerns like anxiety, direction, and social alienation were just as prevalent in 1962 as they were in 2010.

However, over the past decade, young people have been presenting with issues unprecedented in the organisation's history. Young people are arriving at Anakiwa more distressed, anxious, overwhelmed, living lives punctuated by constant online connection, exposure, and comparison.

We wanted to understand this phenomenon and set out to take the pulse of our young people, their parents, and the most current research on the state of play. The results from Outward Bound's 'Crisis of Confidence' report are clear. Young New Zealanders are growing up in a world that, to too many of our young people, feels hopeless.

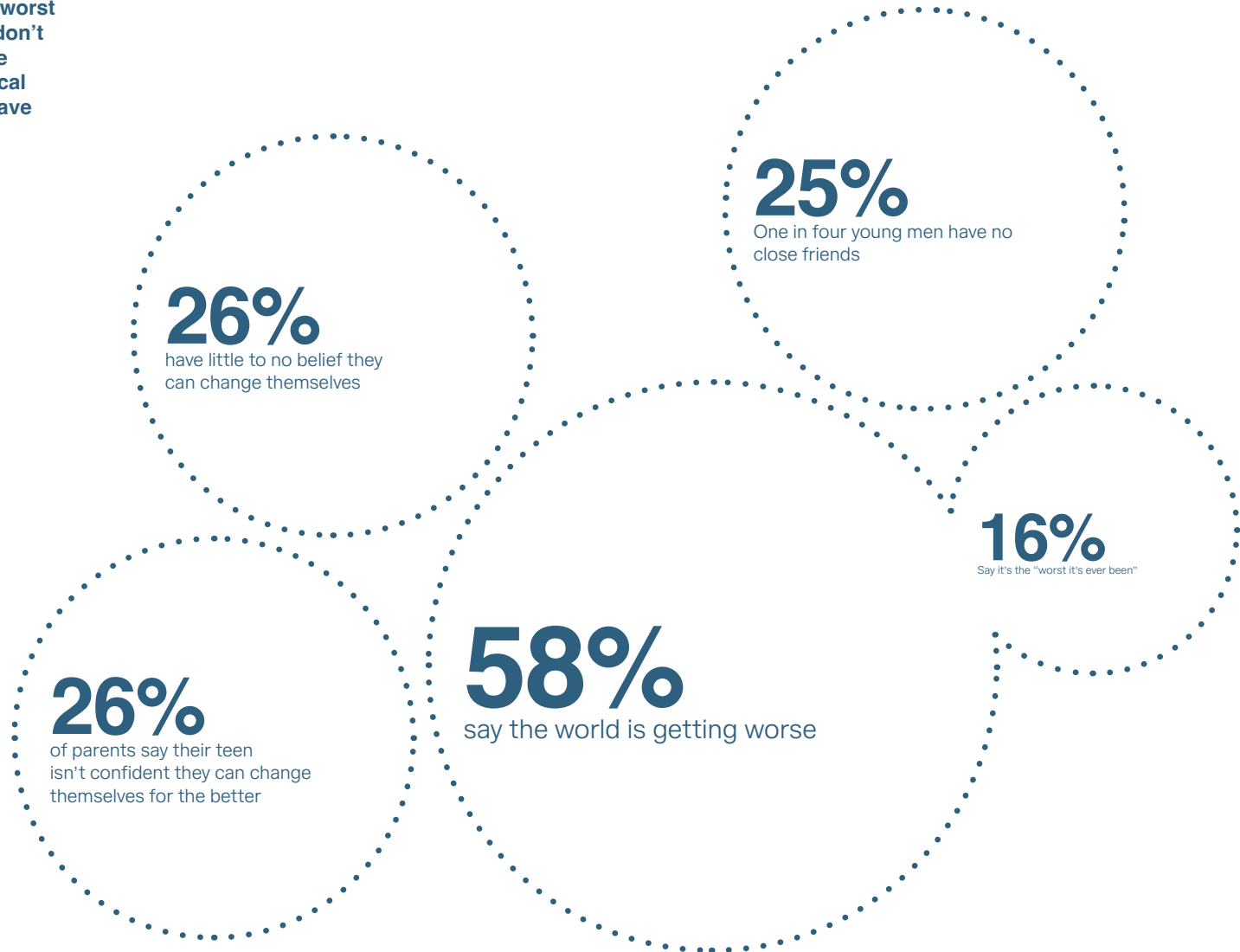


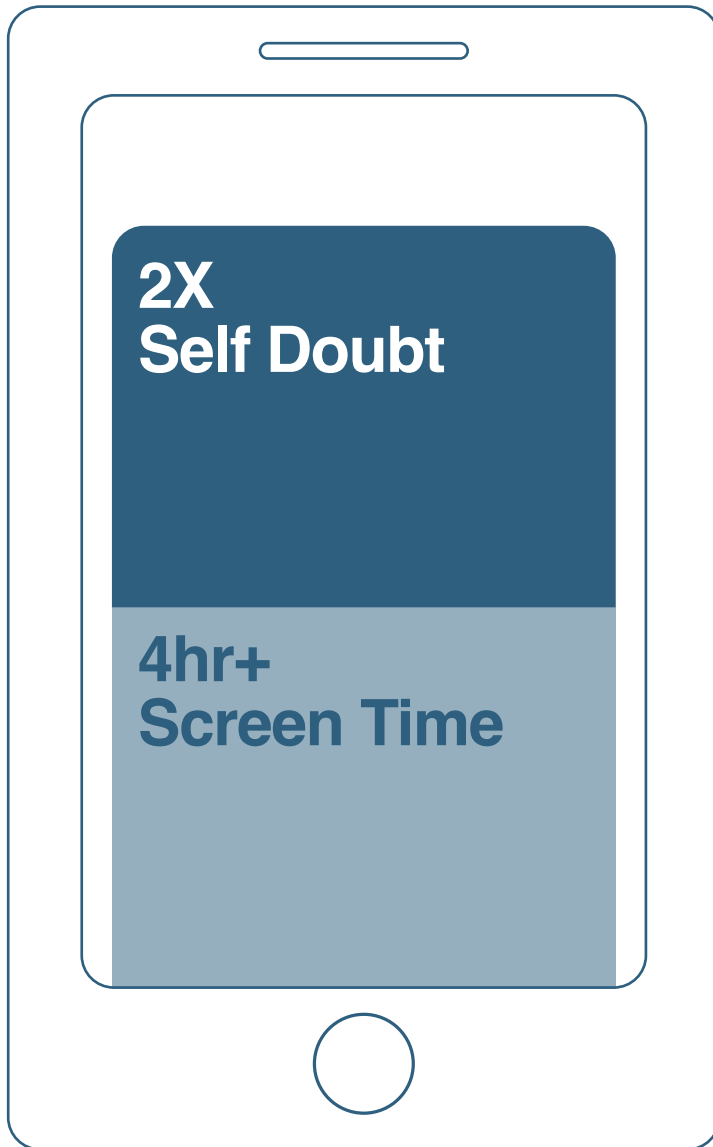


“The results of the ‘Crisis of Confidence’ report are indeed distressing. How can MPs, educational organisations, or parents compete with content designed to prey on the vulnerabilities of our young people? Our only answer can be to instill them with the self confidence that they can indeed inspire change; in themselves and the world around them. That there’s strength in community and importantly, there’s always more in them.” – **Outward Bound CEO, Malindi Maclean**

(2) How Rangatahi See the World

The majority of young people think the world is getting worse - some say it's "the worst it's ever been". One quarter of Kiwi youth don't believe they can change themselves for the better. Vast majority of rangatahi say political and cultural opinions in their peer group have grown more extreme.





Young New Zealanders who spend more than 4 hours online are twice as likely to report little to no confidence in their ability to change themselves for the better

15% of those who spend <4hrs online report having a small amount or no ability to change themselves for the better, compared to 30% of those who spend >4hrs

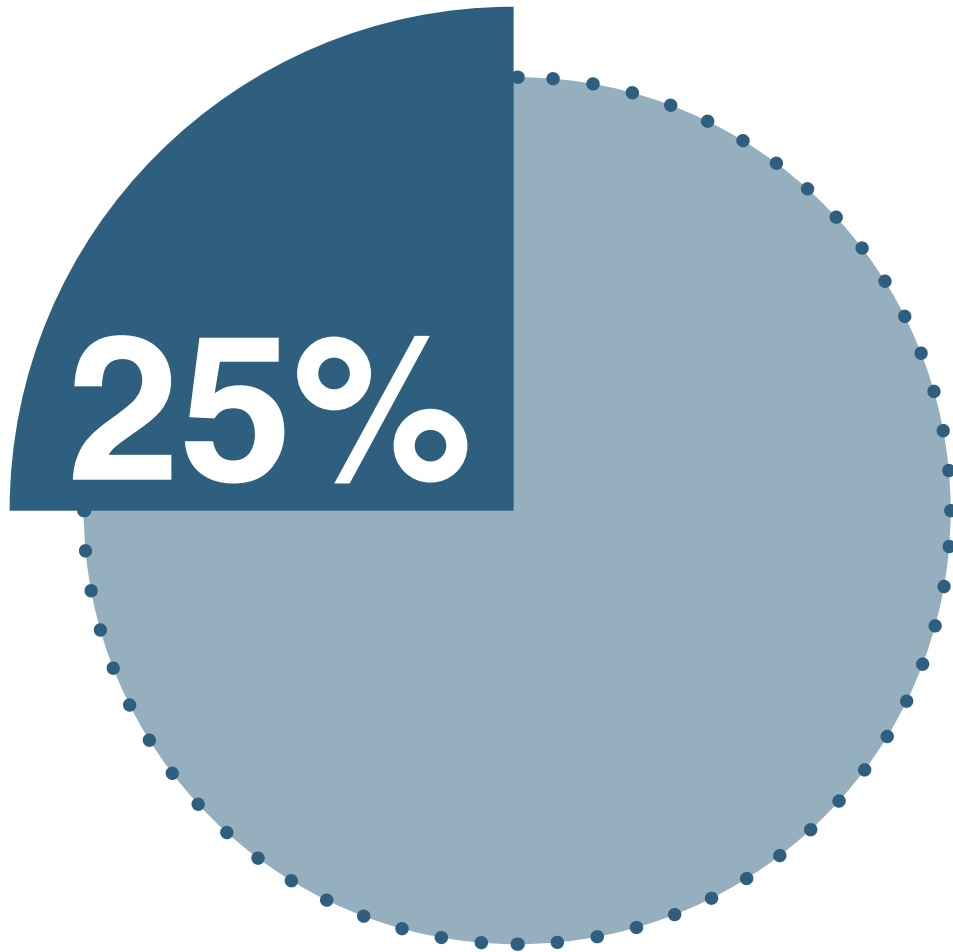
– We are witnessing a generation that is digitally saturated but socially fractured,
where the very tools promised to connect them are instead driving polarisation and a profound loss of personal power.

(3) Friendship Recession

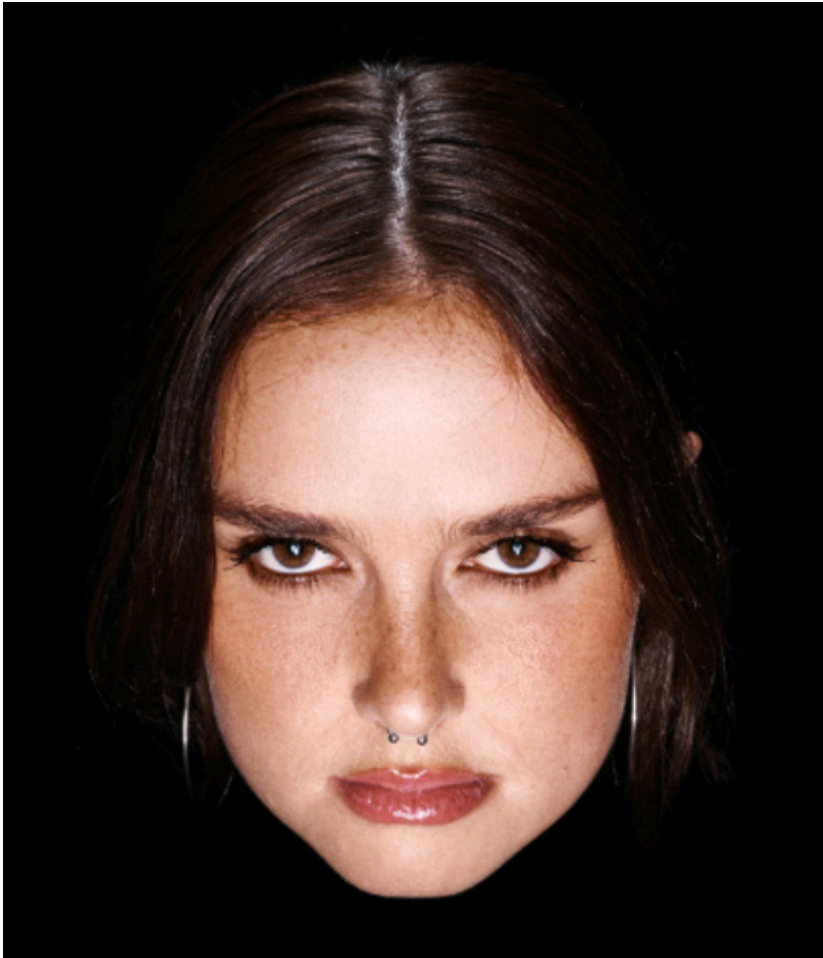
The report identifies a profound lack of social connection disproportionately affecting New Zealand men. While female distress appears to manifest outward as global pessimism, male distress is defined by acute isolation.

The data reveals that one in four young men (25%) report having zero close friends - specifically defined as someone they feel comfortable crying in front of. This is nearly triple the rate of their female peers (10%).





**One quarter of young
Kiwi men don't have
any close friends**
– someone they could
cry in front of



“We’re a generation handed a dying planet and being told young there’s nothing we can do to save it. Well unless a few billionaires (soon to be trillionaires) do something about it. It breeds a kind of generational pessimism and hopelessness that’s hard to shake”

– Jennifer

(4) Results in Short

A substantial majority of young New Zealanders believe the world would be better if social media had never existed. For many, this isn't just abstract dissatisfaction — one in four say they often regret the time they spend online, suggesting growing awareness of the personal cost of constant connectivity.

44%

of women feel that the world is declining

31%

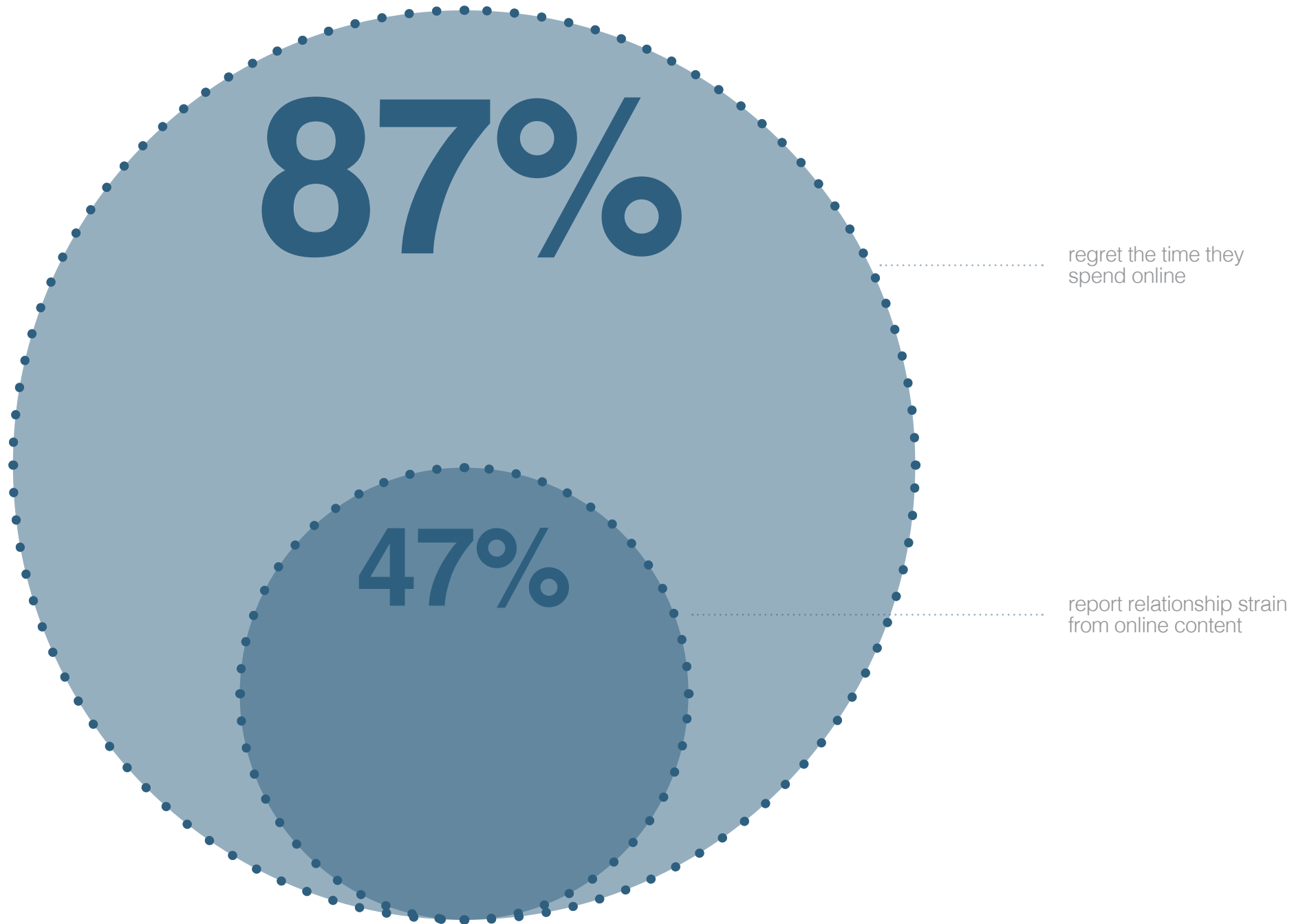
of men feel that the world is declining

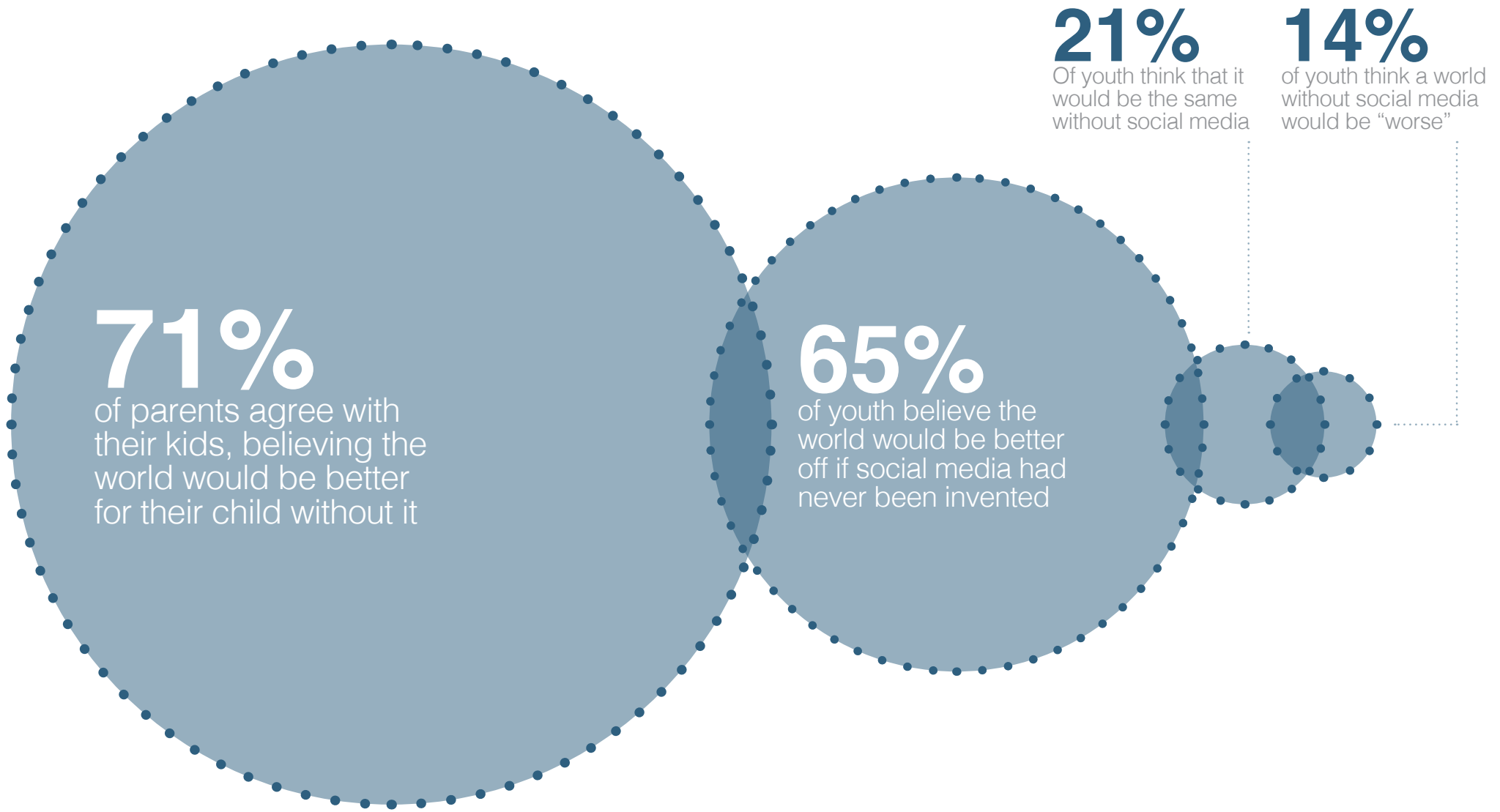
21%

of men say that the world is the "best it's ever been"

3%

of women say that the world is the "best it's ever been"





(5)
Fractiousness,
Extremity, and Social
Fragmentation

71%

Vast majority say opinions in their peer group have grown more extreme

54%

Of Parents report that disagreements over online content has impacted their teen's relationships

47%

Almost half of young people say disagreements over the content they consume online have negatively affected their peer groups

This perception is consistent across genders and age groups, indicating a broadly shared sense among youth in New Zealand.

– Contrary to the narrative that youth are addicted to social media because they love it, the data suggests they view it as a net negative for society, it's a burden they inherited rather than a tool they cherish. Where the very tools promised to connect them are instead driving polarisation and a profound loss of personal power.

(6) The Parental Blindspot

19%

of fathers say they are extremely aware of their child's online content exposure

35%

of mothers say they are extremely aware of their child's online content exposure

28%

Almost a third of parents admit they are "unsure" how often their child is exposed to fringe content

71%
of young people
reporting they encounter
fringe content it at
least sometimes

59%
of parents believe their
teen is exposed to fringe
online content

71%
of parents say their teen
has not exhibited signs of
“doomerism” or despair

57%
of youth see the world
as declining



“Everything is content... I’ve never felt more dead inside because every f* up leaves me at risk of turning into a joke. Surely there’s more to it all than being constantly clocked by screens. I deserve to live unseen and unstreamed”**

– Oliver

(7) Analysis

New Zealand's rangatahi are navigating a profound crisis of outlook and connection. The data reveals a generation deeply pessimistic about their external world and increasingly powerless over their internal one.

A majority of young people (57%) believe the world is on a downward trajectory or the worst it's ever been, with females significantly more likely to hold this pessimistic view (61%) compared to males (46%).

This external hopelessness is mirrored by an internal crisis of agency. Over one quarter of Kiwi youth believe they cannot change themselves for the better. This sense of helplessness is strongly correlated with digital consumption: those spending more than four hours daily online are twice as likely to lack confidence in their ability to improve their lives.

This digital habitat is not a happy one; 87% regret the time they spend online, and a substantial majority believe the world would be better if social media had never been invented.

The cost of this digital immersion is social fragmentation. While youth are more connected, the fabric of friendship is fraying, particularly for young men - one in four report having no close friends they can be vulnerable with.

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This isolation is compounded by polarization; 71% of youth report that peer opinions have grown more extreme, and nearly half (47%) say their personal relationships have suffered due to disagreements over online content.



(8) Where To From Here?

Understanding the problem is a necessary step toward addressing it. This research doesn't unearth isolated trends. Together, they point to a generation that is connected yet lonely, informed yet paralysed, constantly stimulated yet increasingly unsure of its own capacity to act meaningfully in the world.

This is not just a mental health crisis. It is a crisis of agency.

Young New Zealanders are not disengaged because they do not care, but because they have begun to doubt that their efforts can meaningfully change their lives or the world around them.

The many links connecting this brand of nihilism with an increasingly online life make for an intimidating challenge to fix. Thankfully, a key part of the solution is already well established.

For decades, experiential and outdoor education providers such as Outward Bound have demonstrated that when young people are placed in environments that require responsibility, collaboration, and perseverance, there are measurable improvements in self-confidence, connection with others, and belief in personal capability.

Young people and their parents are in consensus around the negative impacts of social media, and more needs to be done at a household, school, and national level to create separation between young people and their devices.

Beyond formal interventions, rebuilding belief does not require reinventing youth support, but recommitting to approaches that ground young people in real-world connection and consequences.

At a moment when pessimism about the future is growing, restoring young people's confidence in themselves may be one of the most important investments New Zealand can make.



OUTWARD BOUND
NEW ZEALAND