

Culture Report 2021

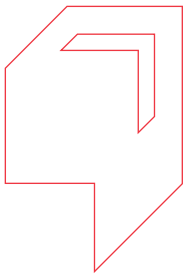
When Cracks become Crevices: Loneliness

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SCOTT MOORE |
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I can remember my first time back on the TTC subway after six years away from the city. There was a strange warmth to the familiarity of crowding into a jammed train en route downtown. No, I'm not talking about the mass of body heat, but a sense of human connection. Sixteen years later, I now look at that experience through the lens of so many of the youth we serve. Surrounded by people in a metropolis of six million people and yet feeling totally alone. More connections at the tip of a finger in all of human history and yet less genuine relationships than ever before. Loneliness — the focus of this year's Culture Report — is as subversive as it is pervasive for today's youth. It was a critical issue long before COVID and the past 14 months have only exacerbated its reality and prevalence. Join us as we grapple with and bring hope to one of the most widespread cultural realities facing our young people. 📌



ABOUT US

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Listening as an Antidote to Loneliness



BY PAUL ROBERTSON |
YOUTH CULTURE
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Sick Kids Toronto reported in February 2021 that about 70% of youth ages 6 to 18 experienced one or more of the following: Depression, anxiety, irritability, a lower attention span, or obsessions and compulsions. For children between the ages of two and five, approximately 66% reported having at least one of the symptoms. Not included in the list, but a contributing factor to all of them, is loneliness.

We have underestimated the importance of real person conversations. People need constant



BY MARIANNE DEEKS |
OUTREACH WORKER

communication with others to keep their minds organized and their lives grounded and stable.

In their loneliness, young people have turned to technology to fill the emptiness. Technology promises us meaning and hope when all seems lost. It gives us answers to our deepest questions and promises meaningful relationships through online connections. Sadly, all this screen activity has only added to feelings of isolation. God never intended us to live without community and conversations. We are more than algorithms and

patterns. Our dignity and worth are directly tied to God.

What can we do as parents and caring adults? What is becoming more and more apparent is the significance of truly listening to our teens. As adults invested in the lives of young people, we can often assume kids don't want anything to do with us. However — here's the good news! — for the most part, that is actually not true. Youth are longing to have parents and adults listen to them without feeling like they are being lectured or that we have a point to make because we



are older and wiser. We would encourage you to ask open-ended questions, without putting your opinion into every discussion for fear of not teaching a life lesson. Simply listen. Our youth long to be seen and valued and sometimes it is as simple as letting our kids know that by letting them talk. 📌

The Simple Act of Spending Time



BY KAREN BAST | LIGHT PATROL OUTREACH WORKER



Since the pandemic began we witnessed social services almost disappear for a few months and then return with a vengeance to aid the homeless community with so much food and supplies that one encampment asked people to please STOP! While we praise God for his provision, Light Patrol has often asked, "What can WE do with our limited capacity?" The answer isn't far off. We've been given insight into God's heart through His word. In Matthew 25:34-40 we see what care for people looks like. It can mean giving food, drink and clothing, but even more costly, it means giving of

our time and selves. *You invited me in...you looked after me...you came to visit me.* This is something that we have been told by our friends is in much shorter supply: *"Thank you for continuing to meet with me. Light Patrol is the only support that will see me face to face."* *"Thank you for sitting with us. A lot of people give us food and move on - like there's a rush to get all their stuff handed out."*

Homeless youth who try to make positive changes in their lives encounter a unique type of loneliness. For many, the community they found on the street cares more deeply than any they've ever been a part of. To step away from that and into the unknown with hope for the future demonstrates immense resilience and strength. However, youth can easily end up back on the streets when facing the inevitable disappointments of life if they



A new and healthy community can surround these youth so they know they're not alone.

lose hope. A new and healthy community can surround these youth so they know they're not alone. In our experience, many are open to friendship - even with those outside their peer group. What an opportunity for the Church, who is called and already beautifully set up to welcome the marginalized. A lot of organizations are out there doing good work so we don't need to have all the answers. But we can be friends who invite them into our lives, who look after them and who come to visit. 🍀

A Vehicle towards Community: Employment



BY MARK DEAN | DIRECTOR OF THE SHOP

All of us feel lonely at times. Isolation and loneliness has become an acute and untenable issue for many vulnerable youth, especially those experiencing unemployment.

In the beginning, God looked at Adam and said "It is not good for the man to be alone." The Gospels and all of Scripture confirm for us that we are created to live in community. When good happens, sharing our joy with others helps to validate and confirm our value. It cements the victory within us by confirming our sense of worth. Isolation bars us from celebrating those milestones. Offering employment is an excellent way to address this issue at the root cause. Simply being in a workplace puts us within reach of others with whom we can process life's experiences.

But it's not always that simple. 18 year-old Emmy* attends an alternate school and has a neurological disorder preventing her from driving. Emmy lives in a suburban area that is not well serviced by public transit, and if she needs to leave the property for any reason, including employment, she is dependent on others to drive her. Emmy's situation is not unfamiliar to staff at The Shop.

At Youth Unlimited, we have two programs that hire youth seeking employment training. In both programs, we have developed carefully designed approaches to transportation. In some cases, staff or volunteers take youth directly to their jobs, which provides an opportunity for transformative conversation. Although this

approach is most effective in terms of life impact, it's also resource heavy and unsustainable. Providing bus passes, sharing the cost of taxi rides, and resourcing options with youth furnish longer-lasting solutions and options for youth.

For those of us fortunate enough to have the resources (whether a privately owned vehicle, or the finances to provide a public transit pass), consider how you can help those in isolation get themselves to a place of employment. This will help them break the cycle of unemployment, giving them access to community and breaking the vice-like hold of loneliness. It can truly open the door to lifelong transformation! 🍀



* Names and some details changed to protect the privacy of the individual.

Longing for Connection



BY DAVE BURRIDGE |
OUTREACH WORKER

The state of loneliness has increased for all of us during the past 15 months, as we face stay-at-home orders, curfews, and varying stages of grief. Now, imagine living in a confined space with a group of 20 people you don't know and having no clarity about what the next year, few years or rest of your life will look like. As you might imagine, incarcerated youth and young men are no strangers to loneliness.

Being imprisoned is one of the worst feelings one can experience—losing the ability to connect, support, comfort or celebrate with the ones we love; being unable to speak



BY REV. KYLE CARTER |
PRISON CHAPLAIN
(YU PARTNER)

privately about your anxiety about the future, the health of an aging parent or grandparent that raised you, or speak openly about the birth of your first child. In a male institution, these are some of the realities. But men still need to connect.

Before COVID 1 (Dave) had the opportunity to visit many institutions in the GTA on a regular basis, to develop 1:1 and group relationships. Before every visit, I would pray before I entered the building for the Holy Spirit to provide opportunities to connect and share the gospel. It's hard to set up consistent programming in a jail. Jails are very transient, as individuals move around quickly as they wait for their court dates. But we would set up small group meetings where a handful of us would catch up, share



HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

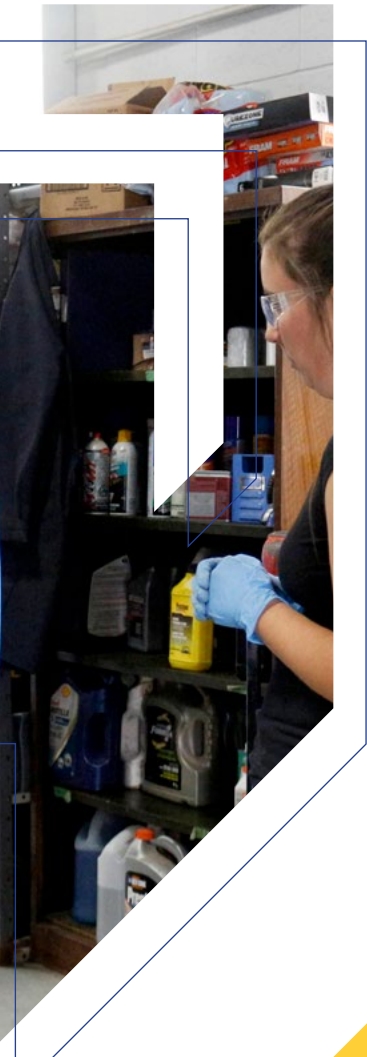


Skills are important but we know these young men could benefit even more from relationships.

a bible verse or story and then take turns praying for each other. For many reasons these groups would fall apart as inmates came and went, but another group would form and we would do the same thing with each other.

For many, a release date may bring relief to loneliness and hope for community. But the support for young people re-entering society after being incarcerated is minimal and lacking, forcing many to go back to their old ways and end up right back in an institution. So what can be done?

In our humble opinions, it starts on the inside: Providing opportunities for young men to develop skills that will help them to successfully re-enter society. Skills like financial literacy, anger management, and job development. Skills are important but we know these young men could benefit even more from relationships. Most importantly, lasting relationships on the outside: Having faith communities committed to these young men so they have a healthy community to join upon release, one that will embrace them and encourage them to flourish. 🗨️



The Pandemic's Epidemic



BY CARL NASH | MINISTRY DIRECTOR

Loneliness. Even the word feels heavy to write. In a 2017 Harvard Business Review article, Dr. Vivek Murthy (former Surgeon General of the United States) declared that loneliness reduces lifespan expectancy as much as smoking 15 cigarettes per day (even more than obesity). In addition, despite an increase of loneliness amongst the elderly, youth ages 16-24 routinely report being the loneliest generation. Recently, the news has confirmed what our staff have recognized, namely that in the previous 6 months, many of our

youth are experiencing isolation and loneliness as the pandemic continues.

At Youth Unlimited, one of the ways in which we recognize God uses our ministries to bring about transformation in our youth is through healthy relationships, including a sense of community and belonging. Not surprisingly, COVID has made this very challenging as many programs and interactions have been reduced to virtual encounters. Like the rest of us, many youth are experiencing Zoom

fatigue and tend to be less inclined to engage relationally over digital platforms. Still, we are holding out hope that we can continue to help youth overcome loneliness and find community through meaningful relationships with our staff and volunteers, and by helping mobilize church communities to embrace and integrate community youth.

In the meantime, I am so thankful and proud of many of our staff who are finding creative ways to be present in the lives of the youth during COVID. Sam and Scott are turning to online youth social media platforms to meet youth wherever they are at. Rob and Paul are frequently reaching out to youth via phone and text to pray for them and be a constant presence. Bonnie is teaching her youth how to build online community and Lee is being

a 'mom' to her girls in times of need. Andrew wishes he could do more, but is surprising families with pizza and a quick hello to let them know they are not forgotten. In the big picture of things, these may seem like small examples of engagement, but over time, God appears to be using them in a beautiful way to help reduce loneliness in the lives of our young friends. 🍕



Volunteer Story: Enterprising Youth



MARY HAN AND NIKHIL CELLY | SEEDS OF HOPE VOLUNTEERS

Last December, I (Mary) received a newsletter from Seeds of Hope and was touched by the fact that seniors were volunteering at their programs. I reached out to Betty about an opportunity to help by teaching an entrepreneurship program. It turns out they were looking for new and fresh ideas to offer their youth. After several meetings of brainstorming, prayer, and discernment with the team and mentors, the Enterprising Youth Program was born.

For a long time, we have wanted to work with youth in the Jane-Finch area to provide an avenue to expand their horizons and sow seeds of faith, hope, and love in God. We were eager to see young people grow in confidence and be inspired about their future. Knowing that many of the youth were feeling very isolated during prolonged lockdowns, we hoped to create something that built healthy relationships between the youth and also with mentors. Being university professors, we thought we

could do so by creating a program that teaches youth the foundations of entrepreneurship and how to develop a business plan for a new business they might want to launch. We are delighted that we had the opportunity to partner with the Seeds of Hope team, and are grateful for their support and help especially Ben Osei, Betty Bailey and all the mentors.

Enterprising Youth provided a venue for youth to come together with other youth and mentors and learn about entrepreneurship. They developed meaningful connections and a sense of purpose through their business plan development. They also learned about not giving up, persevering, working in

teams, financial literacy, and, most importantly, having and developing faith in God.

There is so much that we can do at any stage in life, whether in our youth, adulthood, married life or senior years. God has gifted each of us and we simply need to open our hearts to help, pray and reach out. Even a simple act of being interested in just one young person and talking to them can go a long way in making a positive impact and difference not only in their lives but also in ours. We can all make a difference one conversation at a time. 🍕

Make an Impact.

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