Upper Clutha Youth Survey

Path Wānaka

HELPING CAREGIVERS NAVIGATE WILDHOOD

July 2026

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Member agencies: NZ Police, Community Networks/ LINK, Te Kura o Tititea | Mt Aspiring College, Kahu Youth Trust, Queenstown Lakes District Council, ADL, Students Against Dangerous Driving, Te Whatu Ora Southern, WellSouth and Te Hau Toka

Background and approach

Since 2016 Path Wānaka | Ara ki Wānaka [1] has been researching and tracking the attitudes towards, and engagement with, harmful substances and the activities of youth living in the Upper Clutha.

Surveys have previously been conducted in 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2023.

The 2026 survey is a follow-up from those surveys and aims to understand current substance use and other behaviour (both online and offline) and provide the Upper Clutha community and Path Wānaka with information to support strategic activities for the next five years.

The 2026 study was an online survey, conducted in Term 2. The survey was written by Tasman Research and Path Wānaka, with input from key stakeholders and based heavily on the 2023 survey.

It was sent out to approximately 1330 students at Mt Aspiring College and there was a total of 477 responses. [2]



[1] Path Wānaka - formerly known as the Wānaka Alcohol Group

[2] 380 participants completed the survey in full.

Unfortunately, the 2023 study was not well-balanced, neither in terms of age nor gender, so where appropriate a "faux" 2026 result has been created to provide some meaningful comparison.

> *For example, alcohol use is correlated with age. Without this, the extra people 14 years and younger in the 2026 sample would make it look like alcohol consumption had fallen – when it hasn't – purely due to the age difference in the sample.*

The statistical tests have been conducted using the Normal approximation to the Binomial distribution, with an estimated finite population correction factor of 0.8 for the 2026 study and 0.9 for the 2023 study. (The closer we get to a census, the more the margin-of-error falls).



In the comments, "significant" means at the 95% level, and "weakly significant" at the 90% level. No corrections for multiple tests such as named after statisticians Tukey or Bonferroni[3] have been used.

[3] The more comparisons researchers make, the greater the chance of finding differences purely by coincidence. These statistical methods help reduce that risk, but they were not applied in this analysis.

Member agencies: NZ Police, Community Networks/ LINK, Te Kura o Tititea | Mt Aspiring College, Kahu Youth Trust, Queenstown Lakes District Council, ADL, Students Against Dangerous Driving, Te Whatu Ora Southern, WellSouth and Te Hau Toka

Results

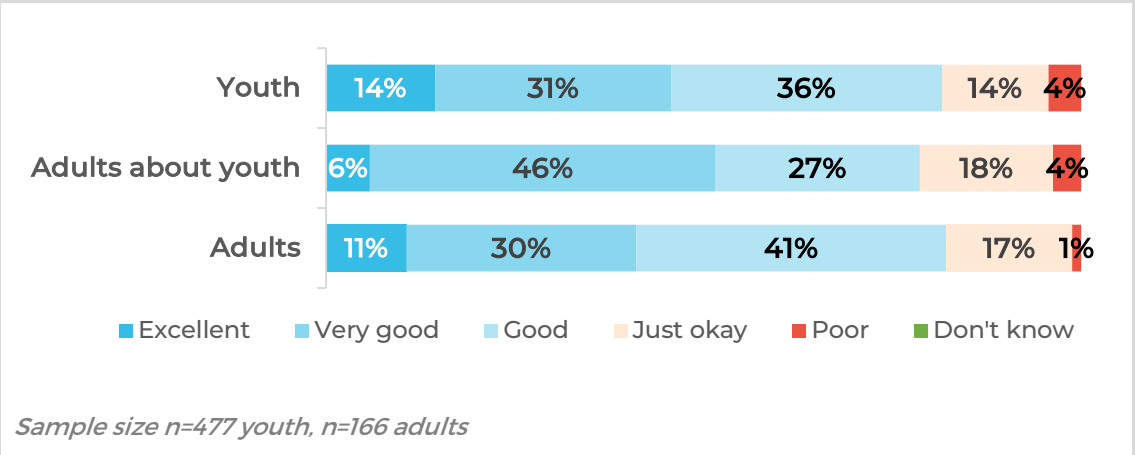
The present

What it's like *'at the moment'*

Most youth (82%) say that things are going good or better *'at the moment'*, with 46% [4] very good or better.

This is similar to adults (parents and caregivers) as well as what they say about their children, suggesting that adults feel the same as their children (overall) and have a good idea as to how their children feel.

(Note that for privacy reasons, the surveys weren't "matched" so we don't know what individual family dynamics are.)



Sample size n=477 youth, n=166 adults

Those **more or less likely** to say they are *very* good or better include:

	46%	**Total sample**
↑	56%	Other Europeans
↑	53%	Males
↓	40%	15 years and older
↓	31%	Gender non-binary (n=13)
↓	28%	South-East Asians

[4] The apparent difference with the graph is due to rounding.

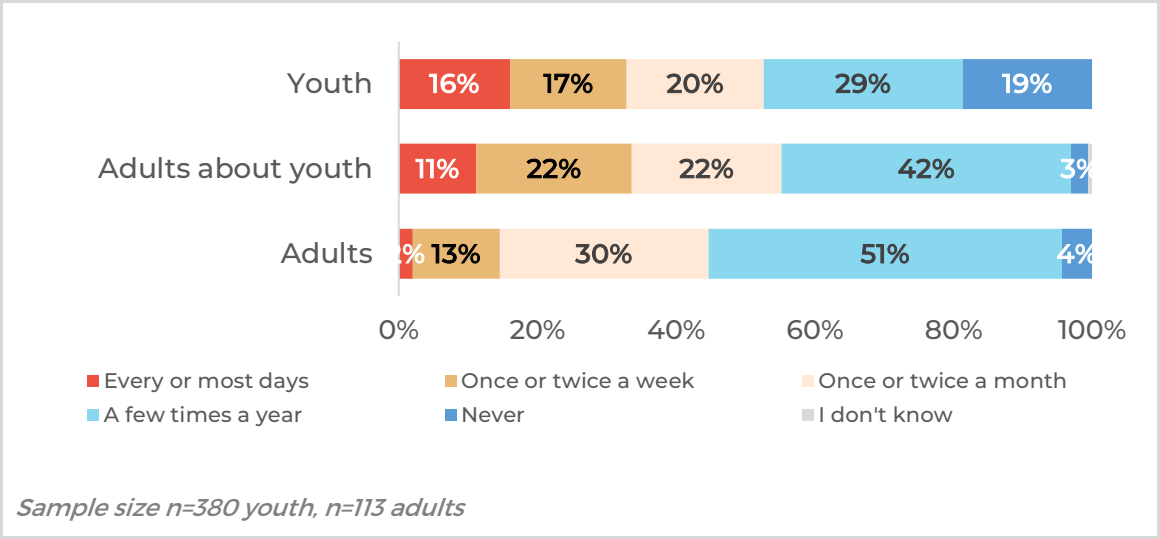
Feeling sad

However, about one-sixth of youth feel "really sad or unhappy" most or every day (16%). A third experience that at least once a week (33%).

Almost half of youth say "never" or only a few times a year. This represents a vast difference in the mental health of youth; some are sad almost every day and some say they never are.

We can see a significant difference between adults and youth (the top and bottom bars), but again adults seem to have a reasonable understanding of how often their child feels sad. (The middle bar.)

The question was prefaced by saying that *"sometimes life can be really difficult and make us feel sad or unhappy, through no fault of our own"*.



Sample size n=380 youth, n=113 adults

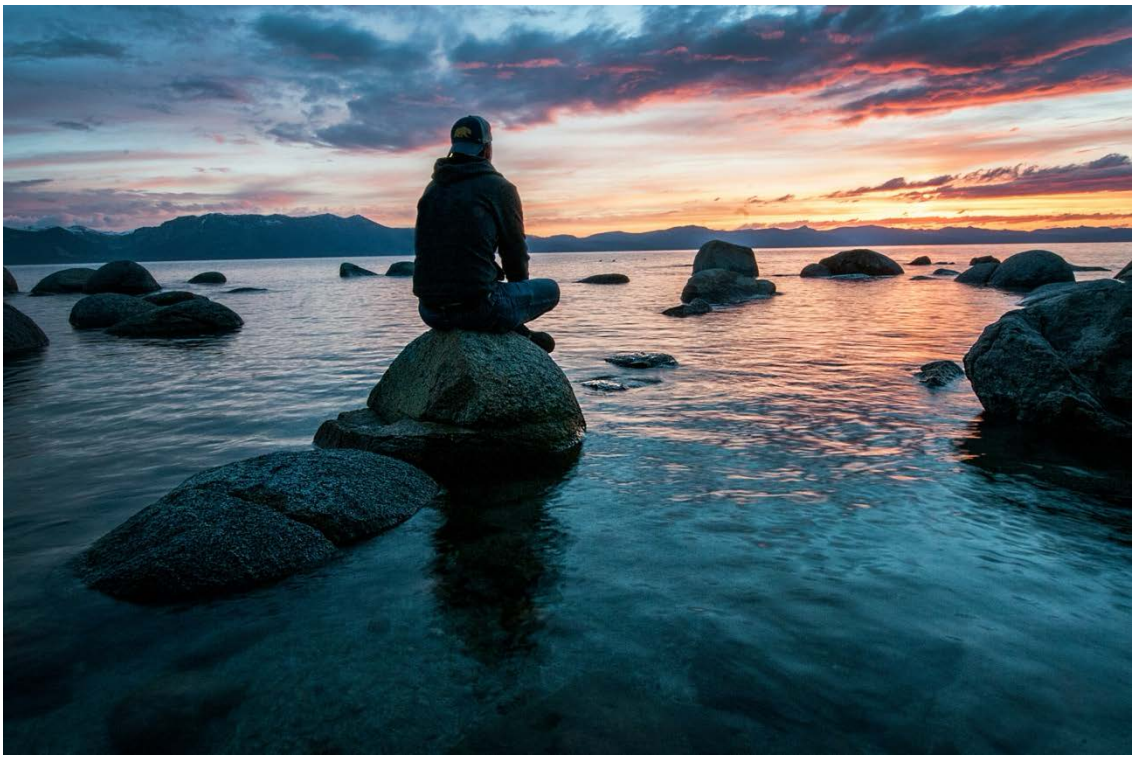
Those **more likely** to feel 'really sad' on a weekly basis include:

	33%	**Total sample**
↑	56%	Gender non-binary (n=13)
↑	54%	South-East Asians
↑	44%	15 years and older
↑	42%	Other Europeans
↑	40%	Females (males 23%)
↓	29%	NZ European or Pākehā

Member agencies: NZ Police, Community Networks/ LINK, Te Kura o Tititea | Mt Aspiring College, Kahu Youth Trust, Queenstown Lakes District Council, ADL, Students Against Dangerous Driving, Te Whatu Ora Southern, WellSouth and Te Hau Toka

Note that some say they feel sad often, and yet say that their life is very good or better.

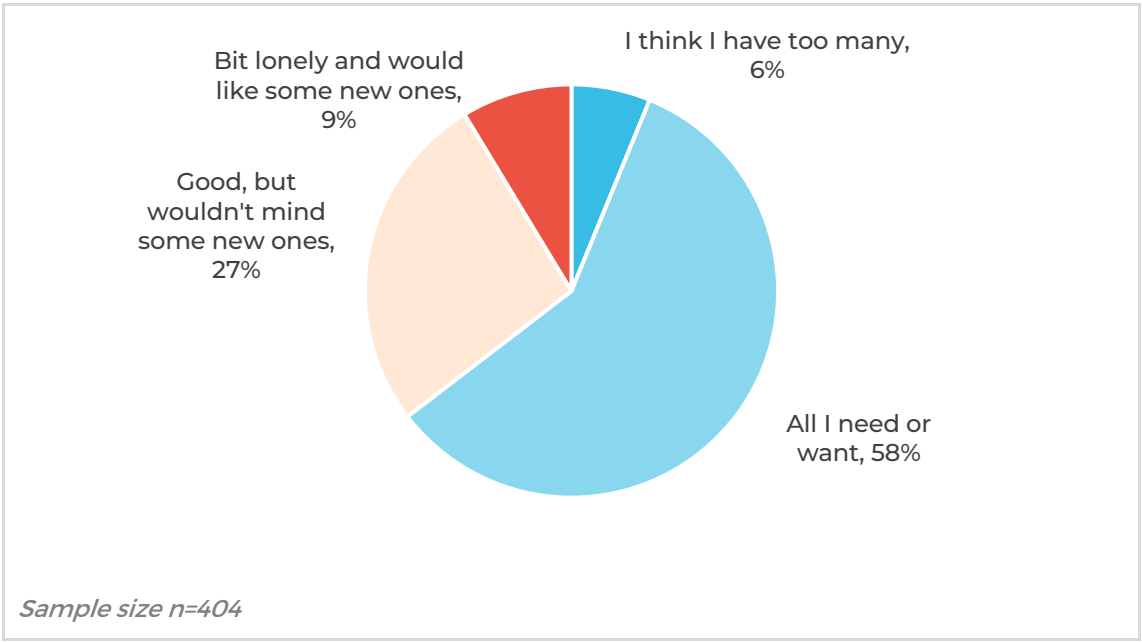
To study this further, a category of people with chronic or acute mental health issues was created. This was people who said that their life was "just okay" or "poor" *at the moment,* or who said they felt 'really sad' or 'unhappy every day or most days'. This was over 100 people. The term used for this group is "*people with mental health challenges*".



Friends

Most youth seem to be satisfied with the friends that have.

Over half say they have all they want or need (58%) and another quarter say they're good, even if they wouldn't mind some new ones.



Sample size n=404

Those **more or less likely** to say they would like some more friends include:

	36%	**Total sample**
↑	57%	South-East Asians
↑	55%	People with mental health challenges
↑	43%	Females (males 27%)
↑	41%	15 years and older
↓	33%	NZ European or Pākehā

What's good about being a young person today [5]

Young people highlighted friendships, freedom, opportunities and access to information as some of the best aspects of growing up today. Many value the support of family, the freedom to explore their interests, and opportunities through school, sport and community activities.

Technology was seen as a positive tool for learning, connecting with others around the world and having a voice. Several also appreciated having fewer financial responsibilities and the freedom to enjoy life without the pressures of adulthood.

Overall, the comments reflect a positive appreciation of youth as a time for connection, discovery, learning and opportunity.

"It's easy to connect with people around the world." - Male, 16, South-East Asian

"Having no bills and having good parents." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"To enjoy life and not really worry about a lot of stuff." - Female, 16, Other European

"Friends, not having to pay bills, not having to worry about money." - Female, 14, Pākehā

"Accessibility to information, Accessibility to help." - Male, 17, South Asian

"Gaming and sports." - Male, 17, Pākehā

"You can learn anything anywhere usually for free." - Male, 17, Pākehā

"Lots of opportunities." - Female, 13, Pākehā

"I feel like being a young person today feels very balanced. The best things are friendships and having more freedom." - Male, 13, South-East Asian

"Having friends, signing up for things." - Female, 12 or younger, Pākehā

"There are lots of options especially in Wānaka. However, I do think that It's limiting depending on where you are. I think that we have a far bigger platform to speak as well." - Female, 17, Pākehā

"School provides opportunities." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"Heaps of information on anything. A lot of freedom for future careers." - Male, 17, Pākehā

[5] These are a selection of comments.

What's bad about being a young person today [6]

Young people highlighted pressure, uncertainty about the future, bullying, discrimination and the challenges of growing up in a digital world as some of the most difficult aspects facing youth today.

Many expressed concerns about academic expectations, future careers, financial security and wider global issues, including the economy, conflict and the environment. Social pressures, judgement from others, bullying and the expectation to be perfect were also recurring themes. Technology and social media were viewed as potential sources of negativity and harmful content, while vaping and drug use added to concerns.

Several young people also expressed frustration at not being taken seriously or understood by adults, highlighting a desire for greater acceptance, respect and understanding.

Overall, the comments reflect the emotional, social and future-focused pressures young people face, alongside a strong desire to be heard, accepted and supported.

"The economy is in the shit, mass wars around the world, corruption is lingering behind most politicians, lack of care for the earth, lack of care for the youth, lack of care for the people. There is a chance I will never be able to afford a house, plus much more." - Male, 16, Other European

"We're so emotional, and we make things a big deal even though It's not." - Female, 16, South-East Asian

"Everything." - Female, 15, Māori

"Adults don't always take you seriously." - Female, 14, Other European

"Lots of bad stuff leaks into the "moderated" online spaces." - Male, 17, Other European

"Discrimination, bullying etc, pressure of being perfect." - Male, 16, Pākehā, Other European

"Vaping, drugs, schoolwork, drama." - Female, 16, Māori, Other European

"Judgemental people especially the older generations." - Male, 16, South-East Asian, Pākehā

"Probably my phone." - Male, 16, Pākehā
"Getting into university and thinking about all that stuff." - Male, 16, South-East Asian

"People vaping etc, bullying, name calling, saying that people are gay or lesbian or making fun of where they're from." - Female, 12 or younger, Pākehā

"Online is scary - sometimes people are unkind." - Male, 18 or older, Pākehā

"Thinking about your future, it's like a pressure." - Female, 18 or older, South-East Asian

[6] These are a selection of comments.

Feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance [7]

Young people highlighted friendships, family, supportive relationships and shared activities as central to feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance. Many described feeling connected through sport, outdoor adventures, school, faith and community activities, where they can share experiences, build friendships and feel part of something meaningful. Simple gestures of kindness, being welcomed, included and listened to were also highly valued.

Feeling safe, understood and accepted without judgement emerged as particularly important. While many young people described strong support from family, friends and trusted adults, while some shared experiences of feeling less accepted at school or within their families. Overall, the comments reinforce that belonging is built through genuine relationships, inclusion and opportunities to connect. Young people want to feel valued, heard and accepted for who they are.

"When me and my friends laugh together." - Female, 15, South-East Asian

"Friends, family, sport and work." - Female, 16, Pākehā

"I'm a Christian. So is my family. My family love me and make me feel accepted but so does knowing Jesus. I know I am loved by God." - Female, 17, Other European

"I felt belong when everyone smiles at me back when I smile [at] them, also when they ask 'how are you' I felt accepted when they can get along with me, or they want to hang out." - Female, 16, South-East Asian"

"We need more drama and musicals for students It's an amazing community and way to make connection." - Female, 16, Other European

"My friends make me feel accepted, but I don't [by the school] Itself, but my teachers also make a safe environment that makes me feel as if they want me there. My family doesn't really feel too accepting, only my sister and my friends. That's kinda it." - Female, 16, Māori, Pākehā

"Family and friends, sports and activities." - Male, 14, Pākehā

"Really friendly and welcoming people like friends that I can talk to, and they won't judge or tell anyone else." - Female, 13, Māori, Other European

"I love my friends and my rugby and netball. I don't live with my mum and dad, but they love and support me still every day." - Female, 17, Pākehā

"When with friends' family and when I swim go climbing camping ski and that stuff." - Male, 13, Pākehā"They care.

They actually listen and give advice. I am extremely lucky to have a mum that listens and a dad that listen and a safe community I know some people don't have that opportunity." - Female, 12 or younger, Other European

[7] These are a selection of comments.

Proud achievements [8]

Young people highlighted academic success, sporting accomplishments, creative pursuits, personal growth and overcoming challenges as achievements they felt proud of.

Many recognised the importance of family, whānau, friends, faith, mentors and community organisations in supporting their success. Others expressed pride in their own determination, resilience and ability to overcome personal struggles, including anxiety, mental health challenges and difficult life experiences.

Importantly, achievement was not always measured by awards or recognition. For some, simply getting through difficult times, staying at school or continuing to pursue their interests represented significant personal success.

Some comments also revealed feelings of self-doubt, pressure to achieve and a lack of recognition or support, highlighting the importance of acknowledging individual progress and celebrating different forms of achievement.

Overall, the comments reinforce that achievement means different things to different young people. Feeling supported, recognised and valued for their efforts, not just their results, plays an important role in building confidence, resilience and self-worth.

"Good results and Dad." – Male, 16, Pākehā, Other European

"…not feeling fulfilled or proud, and worrying about not getting recognition.." – Male, 17, Pākehā

"Probably improving on my anxiety is one of the best things I've done, and I helped myself to get there. Social media was also an outlet, and my friends were a little bit of help, but I mostly pushed myself to change…" – Female, 16, Māori, Pākehā

"Yes, I am but I always find I put too much pressure on myself to push too far" - Male, 16, Pākehā

"My family achieving to give me a passion for the outdoors and teaching me valuable life skills. encouraging me in my pursuit of white water kayaking I am most proud of my performance competing and my connection to the environment and obligation to protect it..." - Female, 17, Māori, Pākehā

"Staying in school and getting through the hard times I went through a couple years ago, my friends and family were always there." - Female, 15, Pākehā

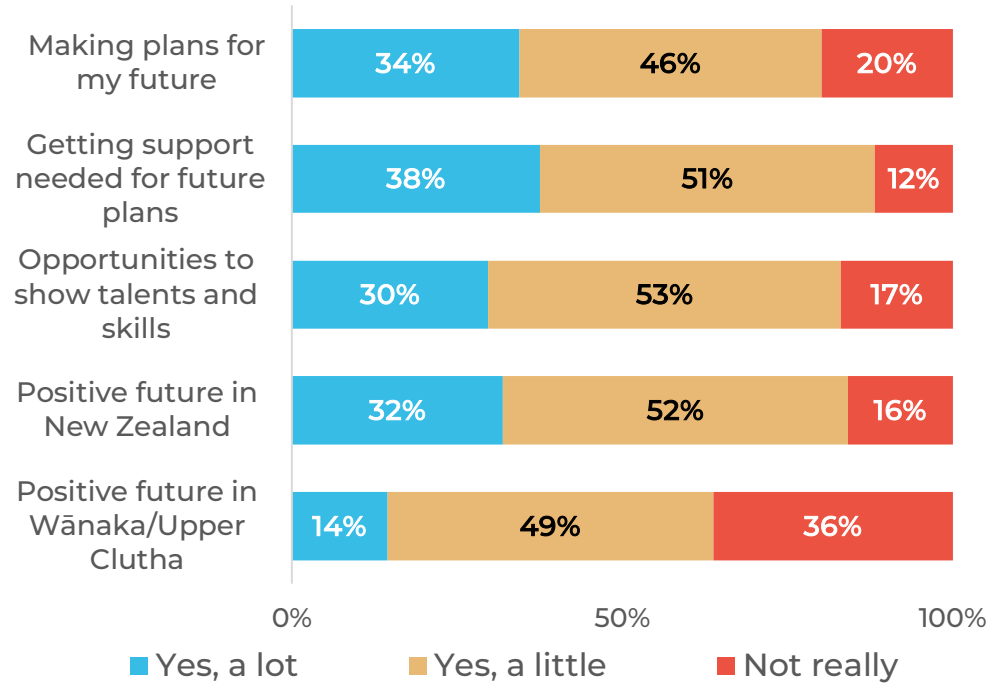
[8] These are a selection of comments.

The future

Most young people make plans for 'the future', at least a little (80%) And most (88%) feel they get at least some support for them.

Most young people also see a positive future for them in New Zealand (84%), at least a little. However fewer (64%) see a positive future for them in Wānaka | Upper Clutha.

Although most say they get an opportunity to show their talents and skills (83% at least a little), only 30% said a lot, with the remaining 17% saying they don't really get any. This represents a chance to improve self-image and self-worth and is something to further consider.

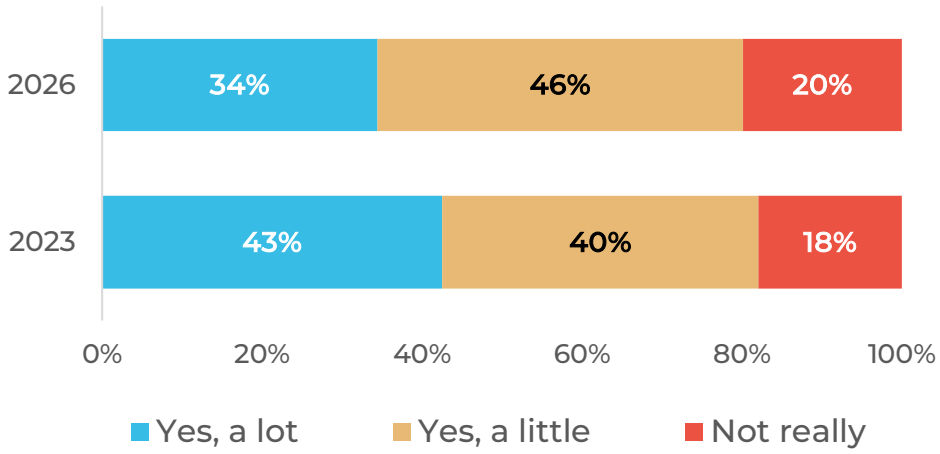


Sample size varies slightly by question, but at least n=430

Further analysis of each individual question (including comparison with the 2023 study and subgroup analysis) follows.

Making plans for my future

Most youth (80%) say they do at least "a little" planning or thinking about their 'plans for the future'.



Sample size n=453 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

If the age variation between the two studies is factored in, the differences between 2023 and 2026 become insignificant.

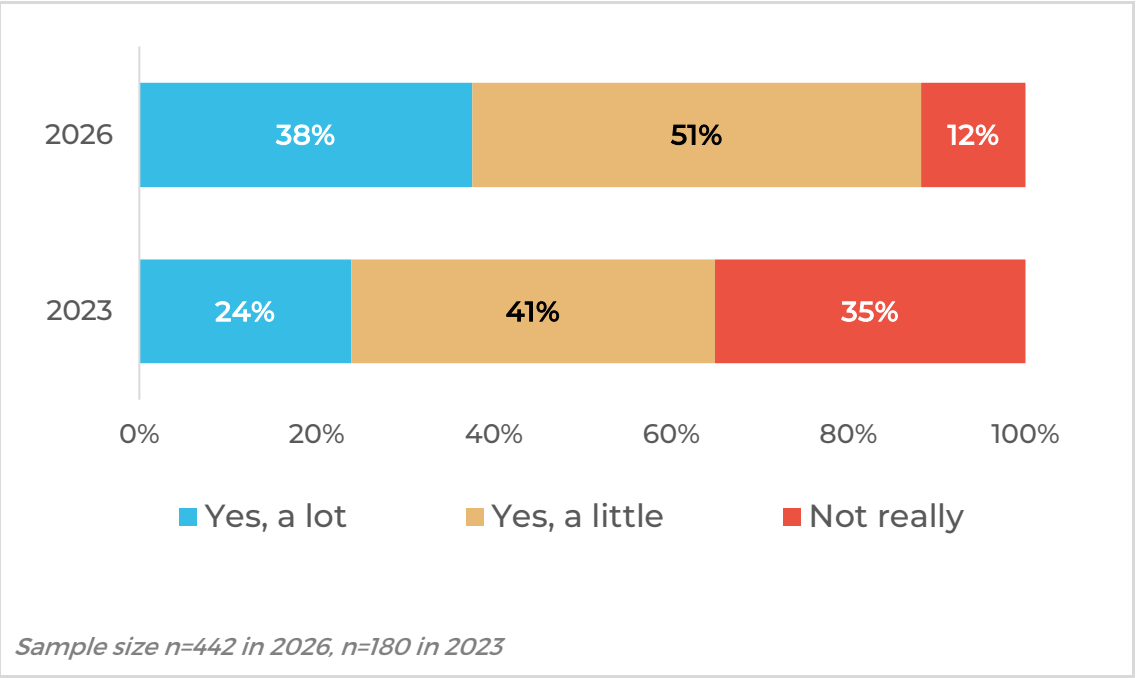
Those **more or likely** to say they think about or make 'plans for their future' include:

	80%	**Total sample**
↑	86%	15 years and older
↑	84%	Females (males 77%)
↓	58%	Gender non-binary (n=13)

Getting the support needed to achieve 'future plans'

It's positive that almost all (88%) making 'plans for the future' say they get at least a little of the support they need.

This appears to be an increase from 2023, even allowing for the difference in ages between the two samples.



Sample size n=442 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Note that the question was asked in the negative in 2023.

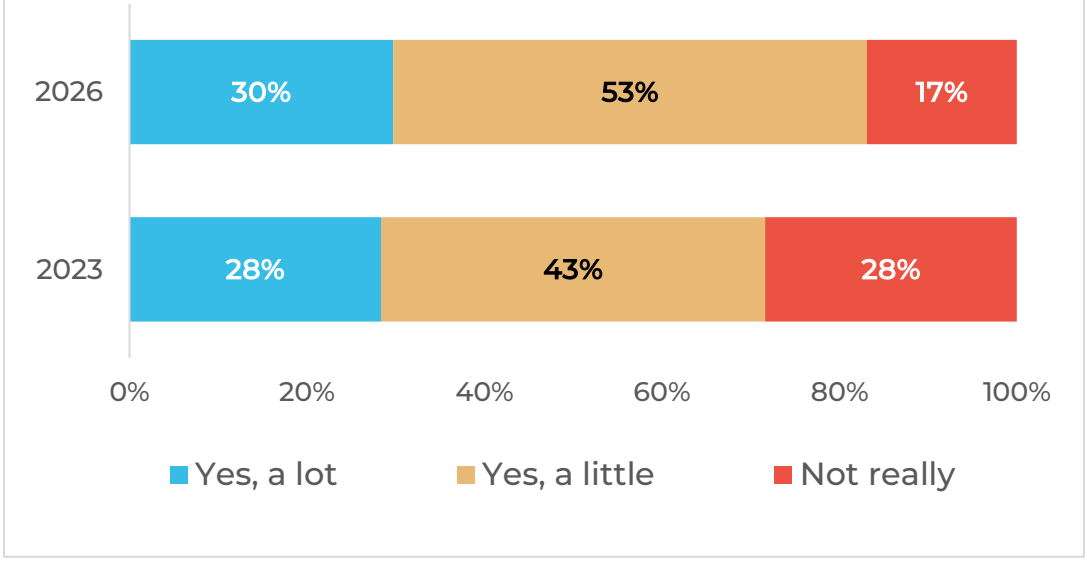
Those **less likely** to say they are getting the support needed to achieve their future plans include:

	88%	**Total sample** [9]
↓	78%	People with mental health challenges
↓	33%	Gender non-binary (n=12)

[9] The difference between here and the graph is due to rounding.

Opportunities to show talents and skills

Most youth (83%) say they get at least a few opportunities to show their talents and skills.



Sample size n=444 in 2026 and n=180 in 2023

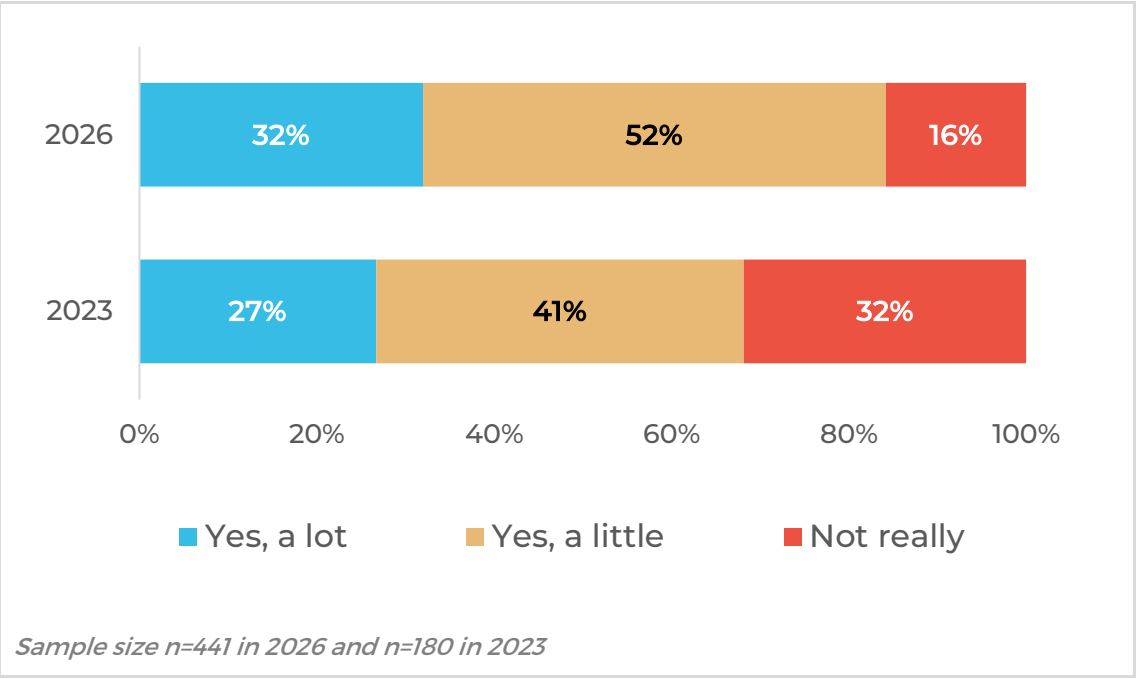
Verbatim comments about pride and achievements, show that an opportunity to show their skills and talents is highly valued.

Those **more or less likely** to say they have opportunities to show talents and skills include:

	83%	**Total sample**
↑	87%	NZ European or Pākehā
↓	79%	15 years and older
↓	72%	South-East Asians
↓	67%	People with mental health challenges
↓	50%	Gender non-binary (n=12)

A positive future in New Zealand

Most youth (84%) see a positive future for themselves in New Zealand. This appears to be up slightly from 2023.



Sample size n=441 in 2026 and n=180 in 2023

Those **more or less likely** to say they see a positive future in New Zealand include:

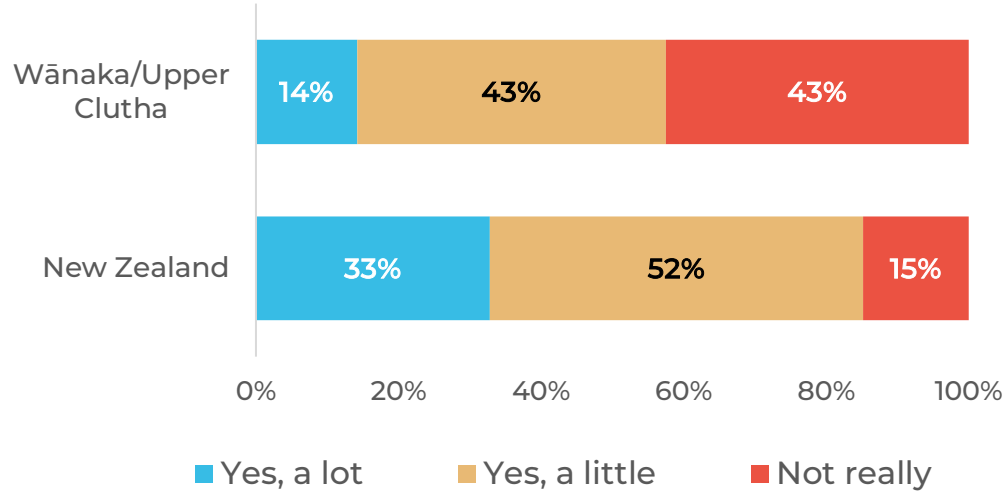
	84%	**Total sample**
↑	88%	Males (females 82%)
↑	88%	NZ European or Pākeha
↓	77%	People with mental health challenges
↓	58%	Gender non-binary (n=12)



A positive future in Wānaka/Upper Clutha [10]

Almost two-thirds of youth (64%) see a positive future for themselves in Wānaka/Upper Clutha.

However, this is a lot lower than the 84% that see a positive future for them in New Zealand. This difference suggests a group of youth who will stay in New Zealand, just not in Wānaka/Upper Clutha.



Sample size n=436

Those **less likely** to say they see a positive future in Wānaka/ Upper Clutha include:

	64%	**Total sample**
↑	66%	NZ European or Pākehā
↓	58%	Females (males 72%)
↓	56%	Other Europeans
↓	55%	15 years and older
↓	51%	People with mental health challenges
↓	48%	Māori
↓	27%	Gender non-binary (n=11)

[10] This question was not asked in the 2023 survey.

Changes to better support young people [11]

Overall comments reinforce a clear message: Young people want to feel valued, listened to and supported for who they are, with access to trusted adults, meaningful connections and opportunities to thrive.



Many called for greater kindness, empathy and understanding from adults, teachers, health professionals and peers. They expressed a desire for more meaningful conversations, trusted role models and safe spaces where they could openly discuss their challenges without fear of criticism or dismissal.

Mental health support emerged as an important theme, with youth calling for greater awareness of mental health challenges, eating disorders and the impact of stigma. Concerns were also raised about social media, vaping, smoking and the pressures of academic achievement.

Importantly, young people wanted their individual strengths, efforts and aspirations to be recognised, rather than feeling judged solely on academic results or expectations.

"Be kind, no matter how old you are, we are the same, you don't overrule." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"Maybe boost their confidence, and don't make them stop what they want to do if It's right. Don't judge them for who they are. Also teach them to appreciate little things." - Female, 16, South-East Asian

"Treat us like human beings." - Female, 17, Pākehā

"Help online - help at school." - Male, 18 or older, Pākehā

"More information about eating disorders…" - Female, 17, Pākehā

"Less social media, vapes and cigarettes." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"Find role models who are fit for the role." - Male, 17, South-East Asian

"Less stigma around having poor mental health, and doctors taking young people more seriously." - Female, 17, Pākehā

[11] These are a selection of comments.

"I think what needs to be changed is how sometimes adults act, screaming, yelling at kids is not always the solution." - Male, 13, South-East Asian"

"People having deeper conversations with each other rather than always joking or being on a phone." - Female, 14, Other European

"Well, I guess it would be nice if there were more people who understood to talk to. It would also be perfect if you didn't get judged by the kids around you when you cry." - Female, 12 or younger, Pākehā

"Taking in consideration that just if someone isn't at the top of their class and getting excellences every day, that they are 'actually' good enough. You just have to give them a chance, all a person can do is try their best and be given a chance." - Female, 16, Māori, Pākehā

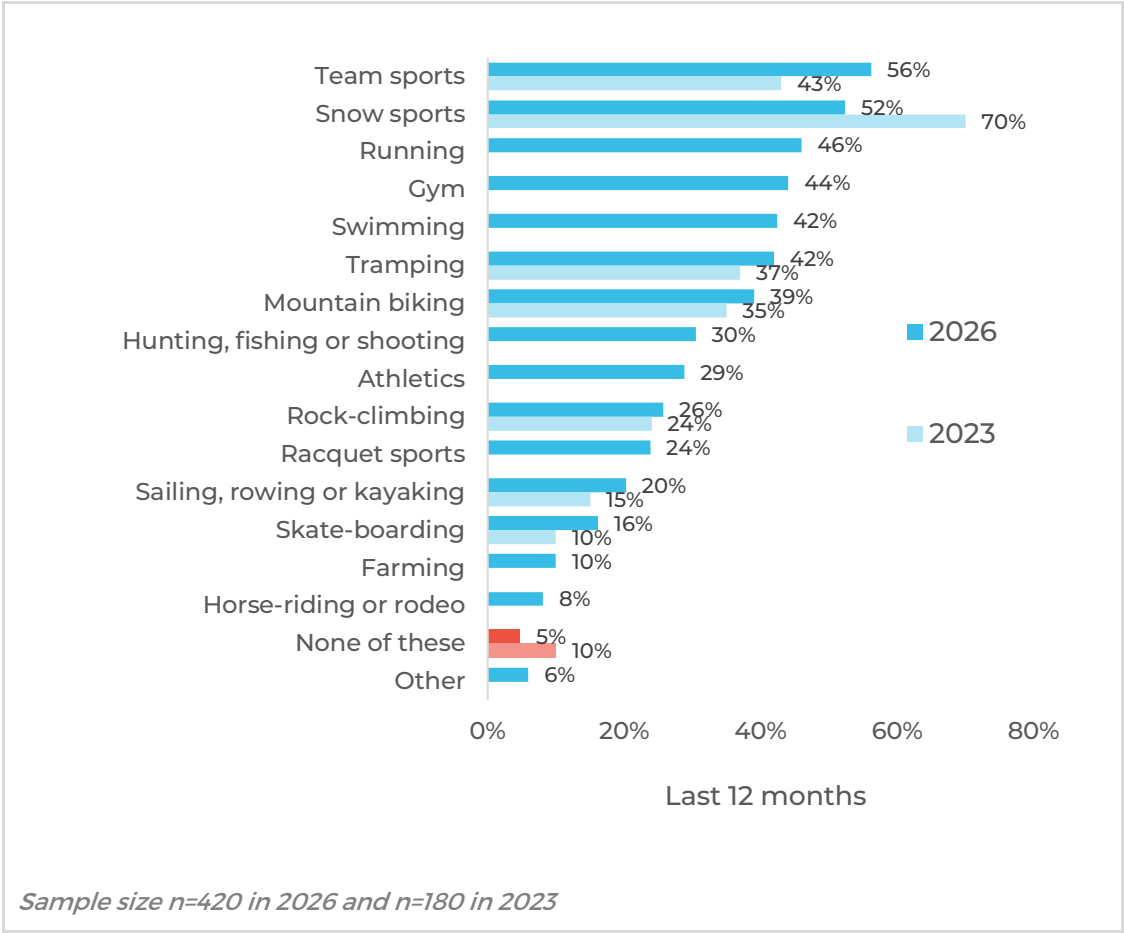


Participation

Outdoor activities

Youth participate in a wide range of outdoor activities, with almost all taking part in something in the last year (95%).

The average (mean) outdoor activities taken part in the last year is at least five. (People in two sport teams are only counted once, for example.)



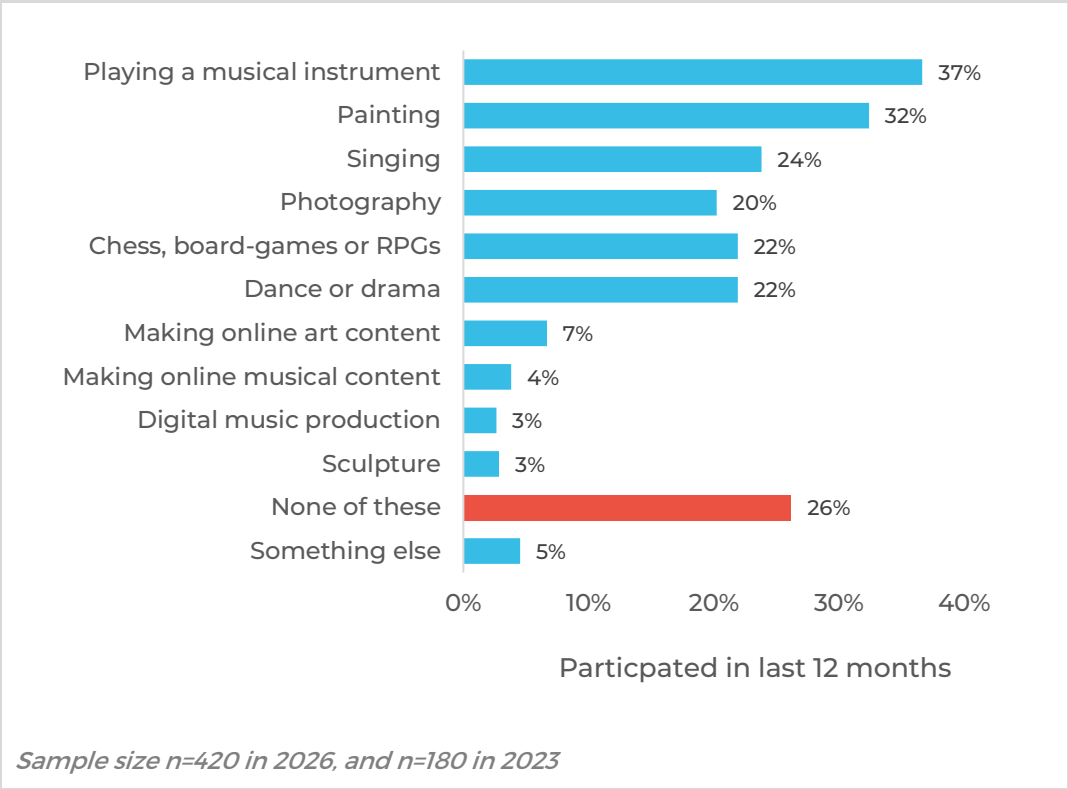
Sample size n=420 in 2026 and n=180 in 2023

"Other" included golf, motorsports and martial arts.

Arts, music and indoor activities

Fewer have taken part in indoor activities compared to outdoor one, but participation rates are still three-quarters in the last year.

The average (mean) indoor activities taken part in the last year is just under two.

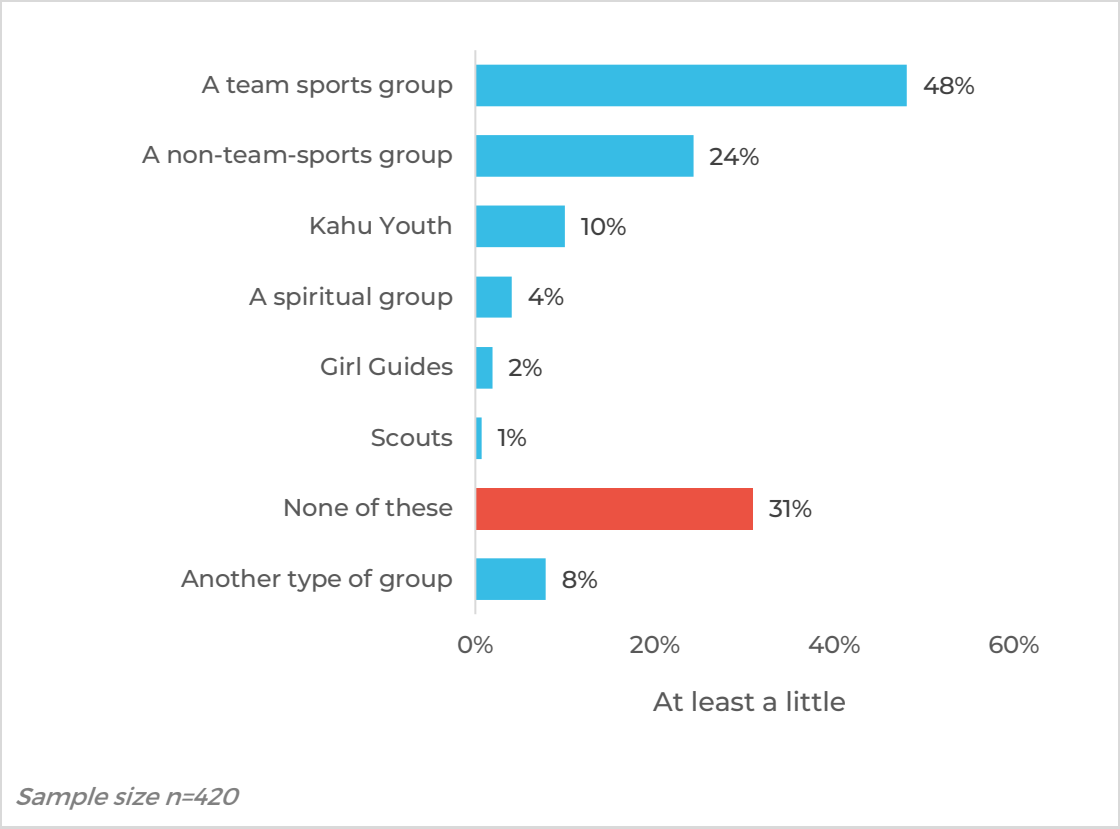


Sample size n=420 in 2026, and n=180 in 2023



Groups

Half of the youth in the region belong to a team sports groups (football, basketball etc) with a quarter belonging to a non-team sports group. (There is quite a lot of overlap as about a third don't belong to any group.)

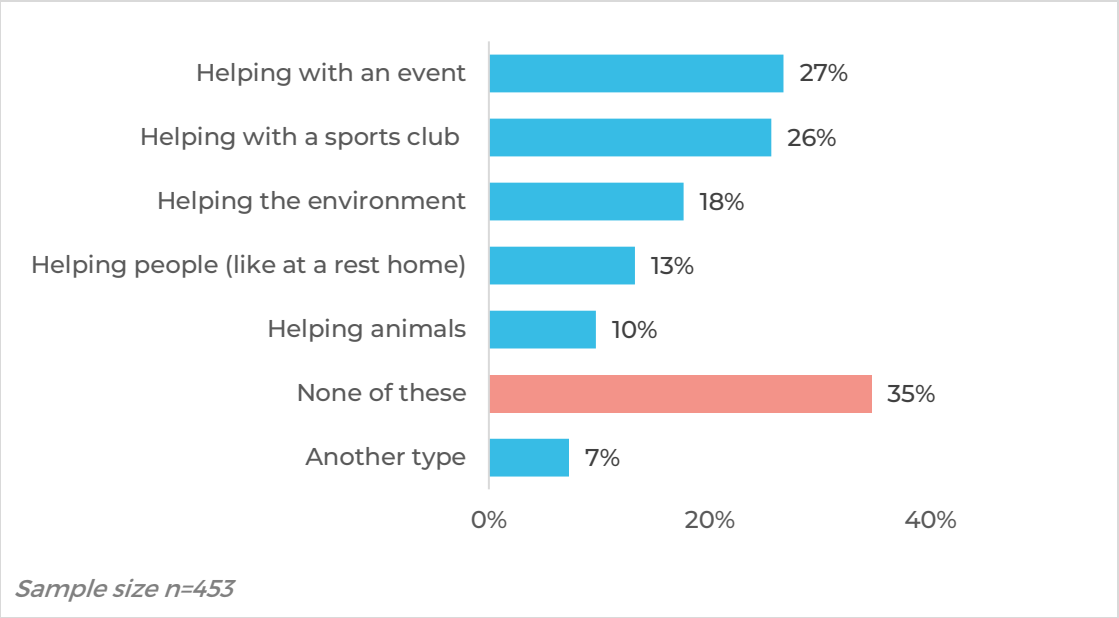


Sample size n=420

Other types of groups include arts/dance groups and air cadets.

Volunteering

Almost two-thirds of youth in the region volunteer at something, with a few volunteering at two or more different things.



Sample size n=453



Online

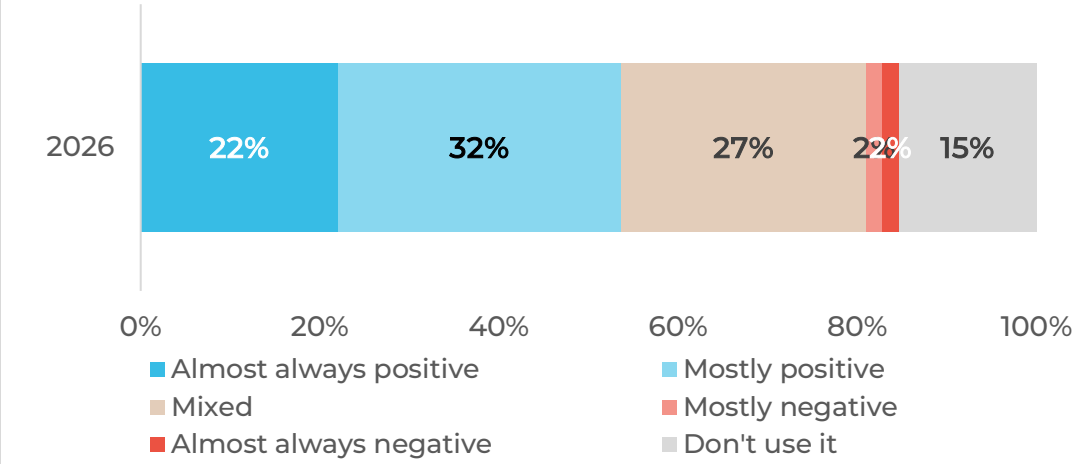
Social media

Most youth use social media, and most find it mostly positive.

However almost one-third (31%) find it negative to some degree.



Net overall positive[12] (once you exclude those don't use it) is 63%.



Sample size n=390

Those **more or less likely** to find it net overall positive include:

	63%	**Total sample**
↑	66%	NZ European or Pākehā
↓	60%	Females (males 70%)
↓	52%	Māori
↓	41%	People with mental health challenges
↓	33%	Gender non-binary (n=10)

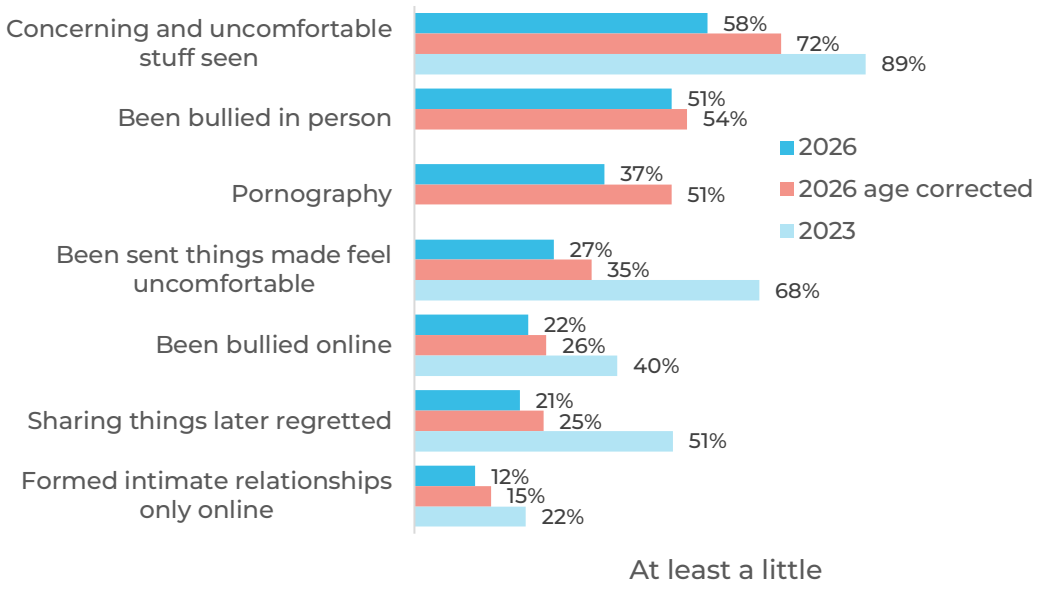
[12] The term "net positive" means that, overall, the benefits outweigh the negative effects.

Overall behaviour and experiences

Online harm has reduced in three years.

It must be noted that the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. However, even allowing for this age effect there still appears to be a significant decrease.

Youth 'Seen concerning and uncomfortable stuff', for example, was 58% in 2026. If the study is restricted to the same age/gender distribution as 2023, it changes to 72%. This is still a significant drop.



Sample size n=390 in 2026 (varies slightly) and n=180 in 2023

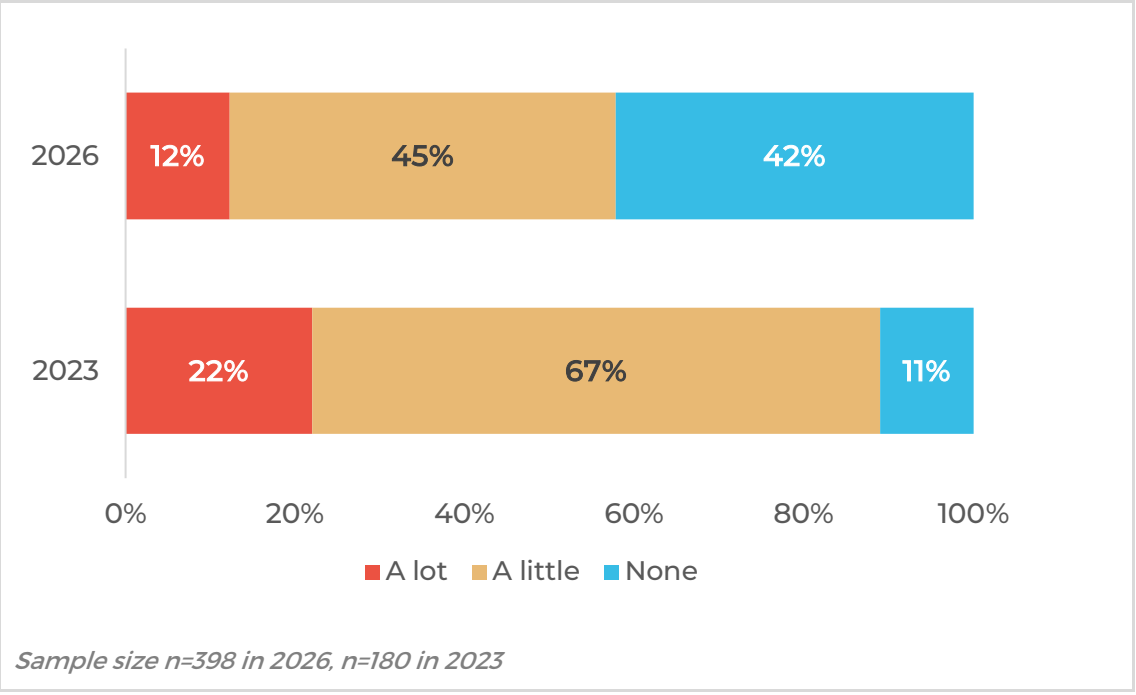
Note: In-person bullying and viewing pornography was not measured in 2023.

Further analysis of these issues follows.

Concerning and uncomfortable stuff [13]

Most youth have seen at least a little concerning or uncomfortable stuff online (58%).

This is a decrease since 2023, even if the age-distribution of the two studies is considered. (The 58% becomes 72%).



Sample size n=398 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Youth were left to define "concerning and uncomfortable" for themselves; what is comfortable for one person may not be for another.

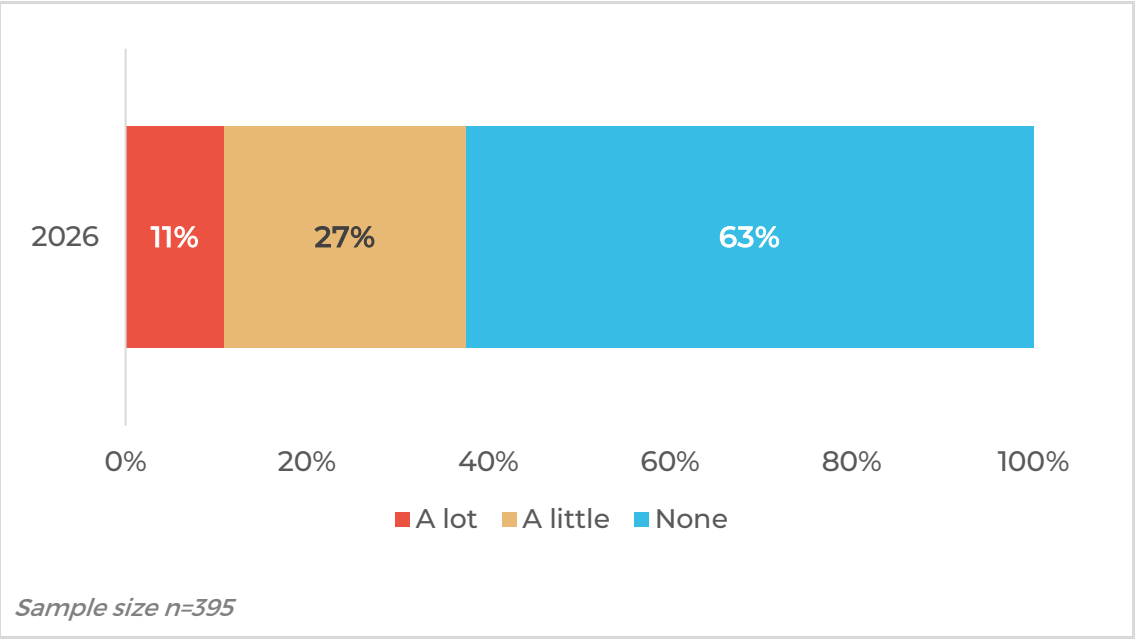
Those **more likely** to say they had seen at least 'a little' concerning or uncomfortable material online include:

	58%	**Total sample**
↑	90%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	77%	15 years and older
↑	74%	People with mental health challenges
↑	68%	Māori
↑	61%	Females (Males 53%)

[13] "In some cases, the individual results on a graph may differ from the sum of two or more categories. This is due to rounding. For, example for *"seen some uncomfortable stuff online"* "a lot" was 12.31% and "a little" was 45.48%, which shows on the graph as 12 and 45. But together add to 57.79% which is 58 - not 57 as the graph seems to indicate."

Pornography [14]

Over a third of youth (37%) have seen online pornography.



Sample size n=395

Those **more likely** to say they had seen at least a little online pornography include:

	37%	**Total sample** [15]
↑	70%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	55%	People with mental health challenges
↑	54%	15 years and older
↑	49%	Māori
↑	44%	Males (females 30%)

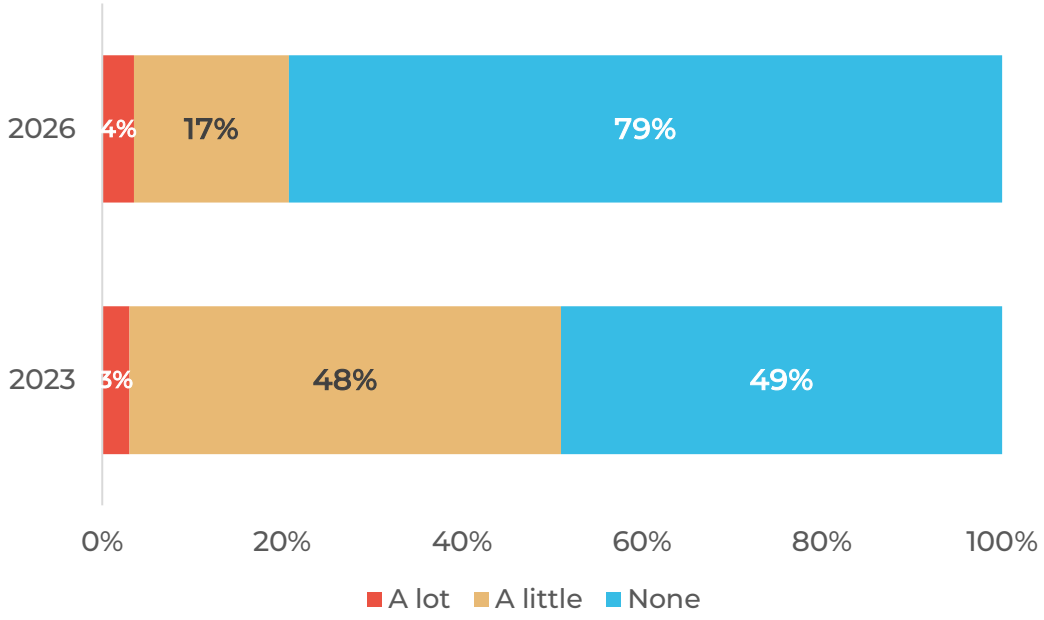
[14] This was not measured in 2023.

[15] The difference between here and the graph is rounding.

Sharing images or information later regretted

Almost one-quarter of youth have shared images or information that they later regretted (21%).

This is a decrease since 2023, even if the age-distribution of the two studies is considered. (The 21% becomes 25%).



Sample size n=395 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Those **more likely** to have shared images or information that they later regretted include:

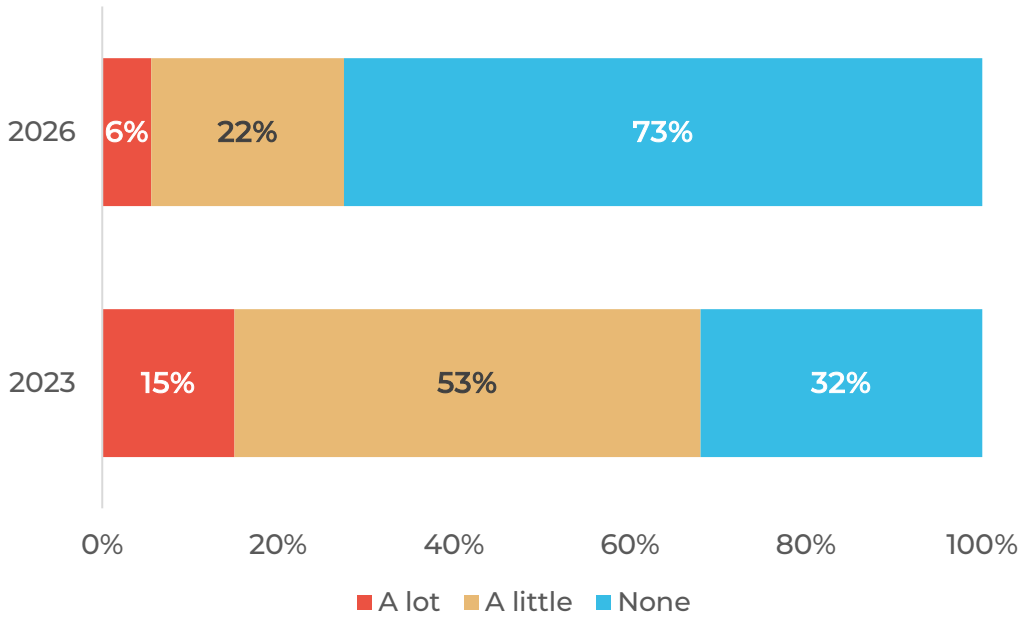
	21%	**Total sample**
↑	50%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	35%	People with mental health challenges
↑	32%	Māori
↑	27%	15 years and older

Sent uncomfortable stuff

About a quarter of youth (28%) have been '*sent*' "uncomfortable or worrying stuff". (The previous question measured if they'd seen any.)

Youth were left to define "uncomfortable or worrying stuff" for themselves; what is comfortable for one person may not be for another.

The issue has become better since 2023, with a lot more saying "none". (If the age-distribution of the two studies is factored in, the 73% falls to 65%, but that is still a drop.)



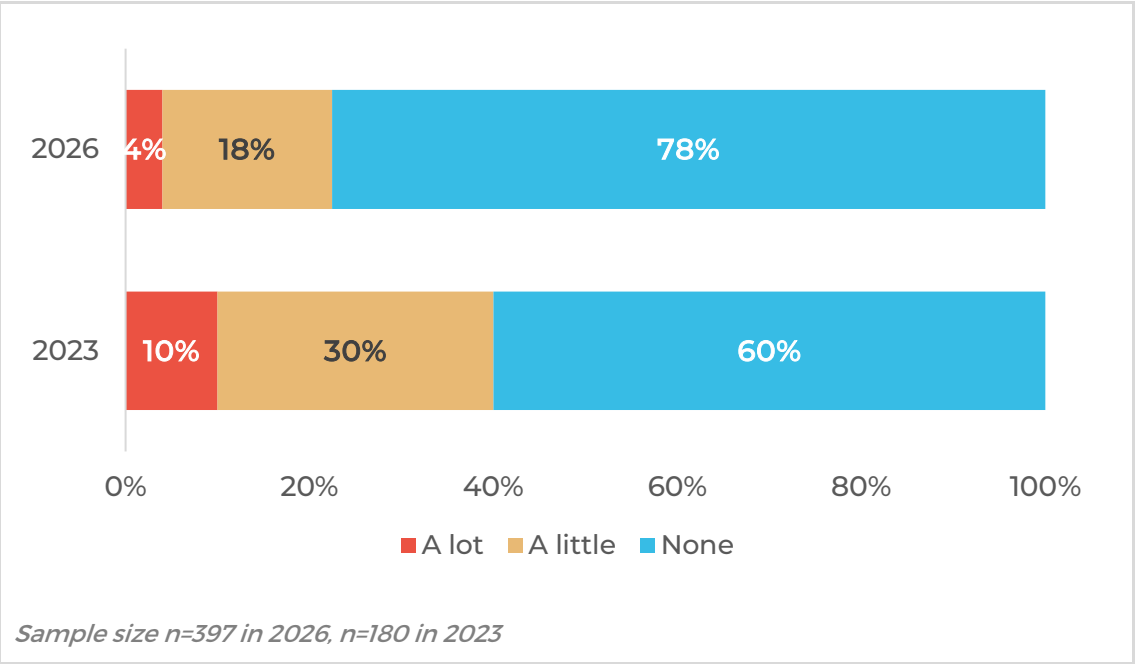
Sample size n=393 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Those **more likely** to say they have been sent uncomfortable items include:

	28%	**Total sample**
↑	48%	People with mental health challenges
↑	41%	Māori
↑	41%	15 years and older
↑	40%	Gender non-binary (n=10)

Bullied online [16]

Just under a quarter of youth (22%) report being bullied online, at least a little.



Sample size n=397 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

The definition of bullying was left to the respondent.

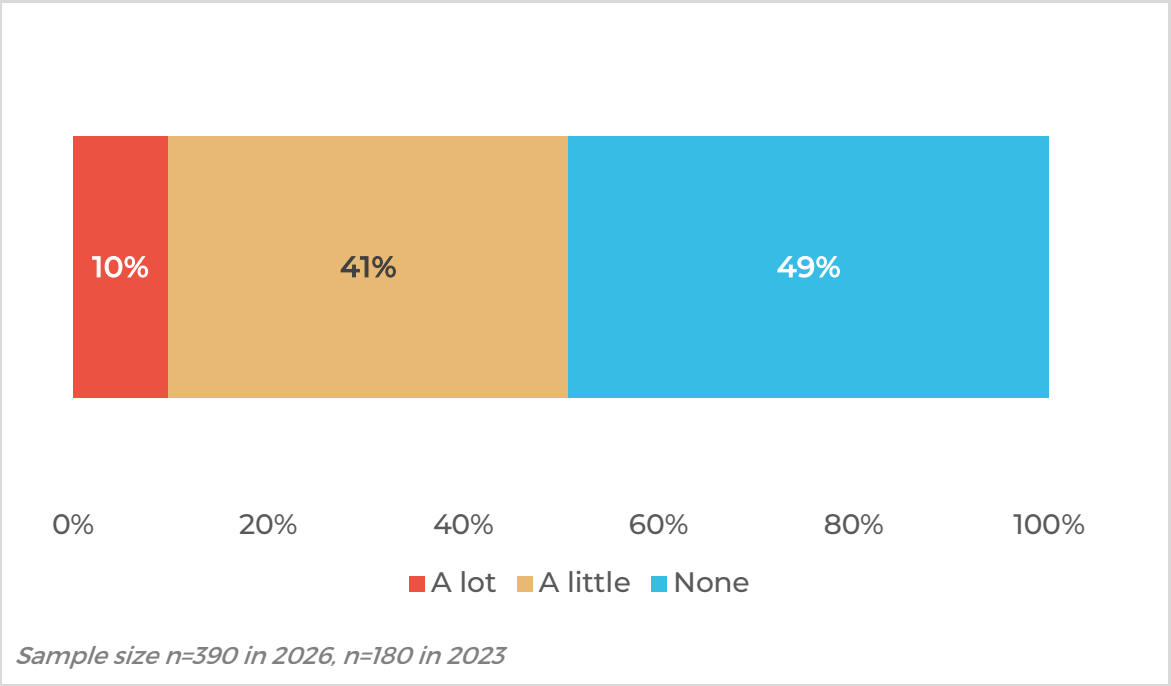
Those **more likely** to say they have been bullied online include:

	22%	**Total sample**
↑	80%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	47%	People with mental health challenges
↑	30%	Māori (only weakly significant)
↑	29%	15 years and older
↑	28%	Other European (only weakly significant)

[16] The 2023 question about online bullying was split into two parts: one about someone local and one about someone not local. The 2026 survey only asked about online bullying in general for two reasons; people may not know whether someone is local or not, and it enabled the addition of the "in person" question. The 2023 results have been estimated from the combination of the two 2023 questions.

Bullied in person [17]

With half of youth reporting being bullied in person, this is much higher than being bullied online.



Sample size n=390 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

The definition of bullying was left to the respondent.

Those **more likely** to say they have been bullied in person include:

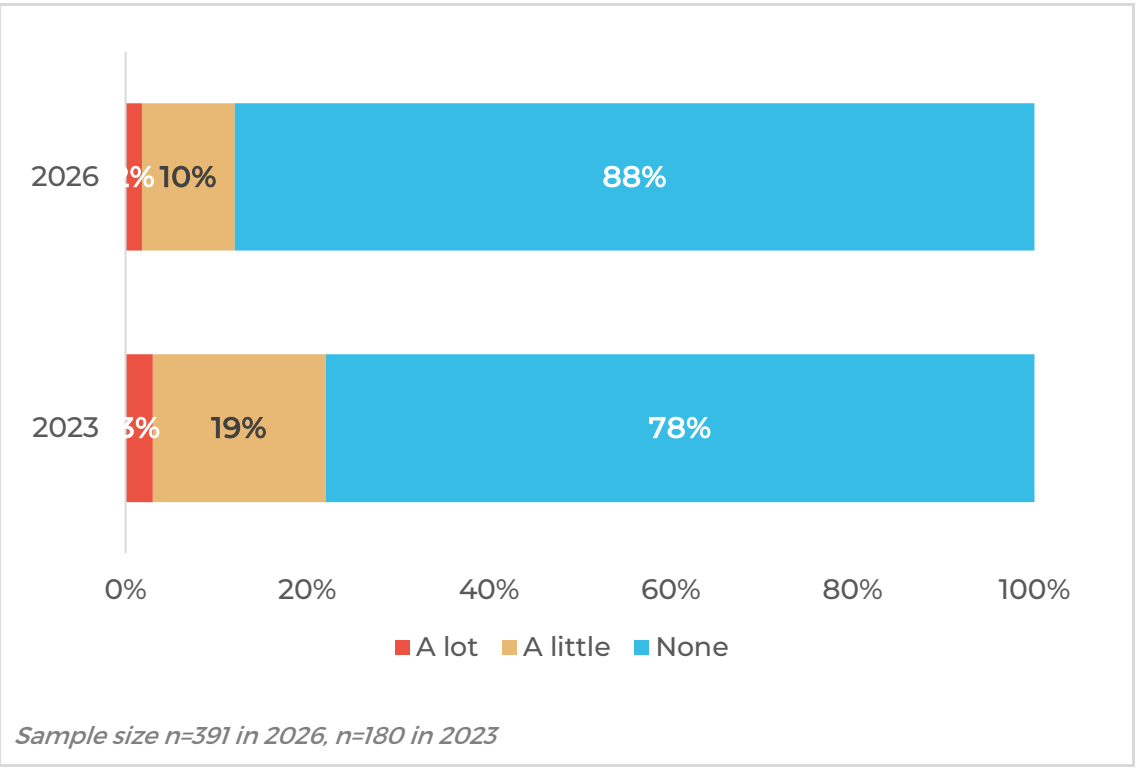
	51%	**Total sample**
↑	90%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	78%	People with mental health challenges
↑	56%	15 years and older

[17] Although the survey was predominantly about online behaviour, it was felt that having a comparison with in-person bullying would be useful.

Online intimate relationships

About one-eighth (12%) of youth report having an online relationship with someone they have '*only*' met online (as opposed to in-real-life.)

This looks to have decreased in the last few years. Even if the unbalanced age sample in 2023 is accounted for, it's still only 15%.



Sample size n=391 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Those **more or less likely** to say they have an intimate relationship with someone they have *only* met online include:

	12%	**Total sample**
↑	40%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	26%	People with mental health challenges
↑	23%	South-East Asians
↑	16%	Other European (weakly significant)
↑	15%	15 years and older
↑	14%	Females (males 8%)
↓	8%	NZ European or Pākehā

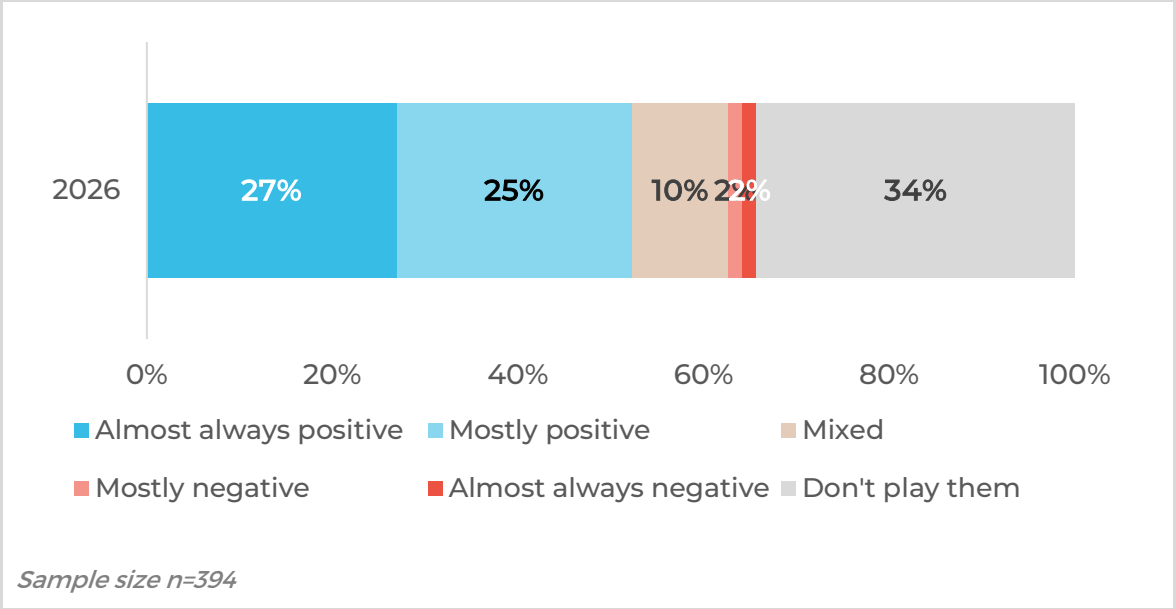
Online gaming

Effect

Most play online games (about two-third) and most of those find it mostly or almost always positive. In fact, online gaming appears to be more positive than social media in general.

If the non-players are removed (34%), the net positive effect is a very high 80%.

By comparison, social media is only 63% net positive.



Sample size n=394

Those **more likely** to say online gaming it is net positive include: [18]

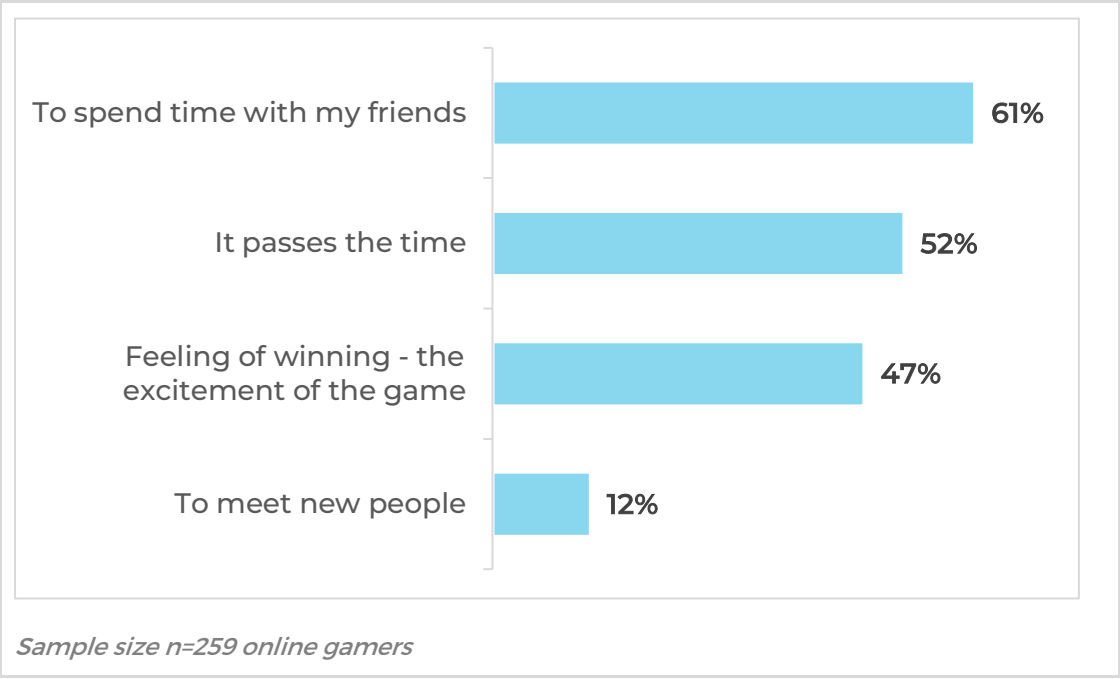
	80%	**Total sample**
↑	84%	Males (females 74%)
↑	83%	15 years and older
↓	72%	People with mental health challenges
↓	67%	Gender non-binary (n=10)

[18] The term "net positive" means that, overall, the benefits outweigh the negative effects

Note the online gaming is skewed heavily towards males. Only 15% of males have never played them (so 85% have) compared to [19]about half of females (52% have never played them.)

This indicates about two-thirds of online gamers are male.

Reasons for Gaming



Sample size n=259 online gamers

Online gambling

Almost no youth (3%) do online gambling for money.

In some cases, the individual results on a graph may differ from the sum of two or more categories. This is due to rounding

[19] In some cases, the individual results on a graph may differ from the sum of two or more categories. This is due to rounding

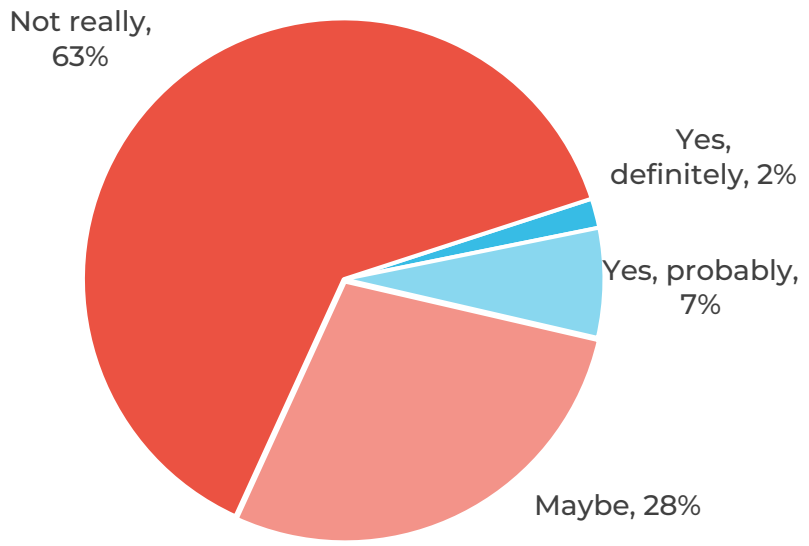
Keeping safe online

Interest in learning more

There is little-to-no interest in learning or training to improve online safety.

This means most youth are staying safe online, or rather that they ***think*** they are. The levels of exposure to uncomfortable stuff, being sent things they didn't want and bullying, for example, may bely this.

If we use the rule-of-thumb of "half the definitely, a quarter the probably" then we can estimate the uptake of any training at only 3%.



Sample size n=383

Echoed in the comments [20]

This lack of interest in training is echoed in their answers to *"does anything make you feel unsafe online"*.

"Can't name anything." - Female, 14, Pākehā

"No." - Female, 17, Pākehā

"Games trying to restrict talking to people different ages, sometimes our friends aren't our age, so they need to stop trying to ban talking to other age groups." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"Group chats filled with people." - Female, 16, Other European

"No." - Female, 15, Pākehā

"No." - Male, 16, Pākehā

"Nope." - Female, 16, South-East Asian

"Racist, and just borderline crazy things have become so often, that nobody even cares about it anymore and treats it like banter." - Male, 13, South-East Asian, Pākehā

"No." - Female, 17, Pākehā

"No." - Male, 16, Other

"Scammers." - Another gender, 17, Māori

"Nope." - Female, 15, South-East Asian

"Scams or randoms following me." - Female, 17, Other European

"That my account got hacked." - Female, 16, South-East Asian

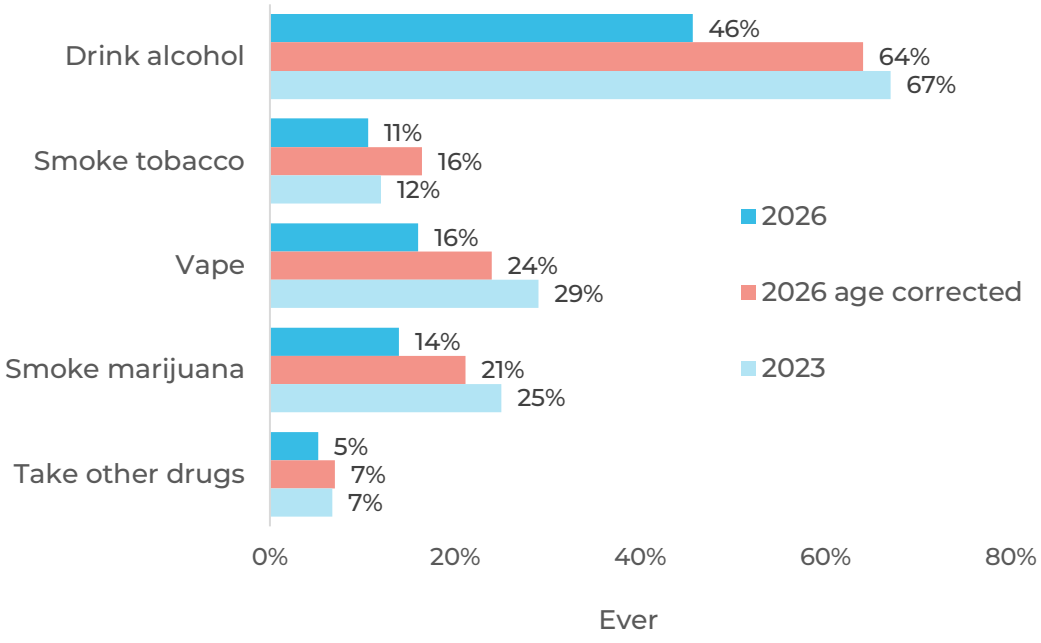
[20] These are a selection of comments.

Substances

Overall frequency

While at first glance it may appear that online harm has reduced in three years, the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. Once this age-effect is removed, there is little difference.

As expected, substance use is highly correlated with age.



Sample size varies slightly by question, but at least n=380 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

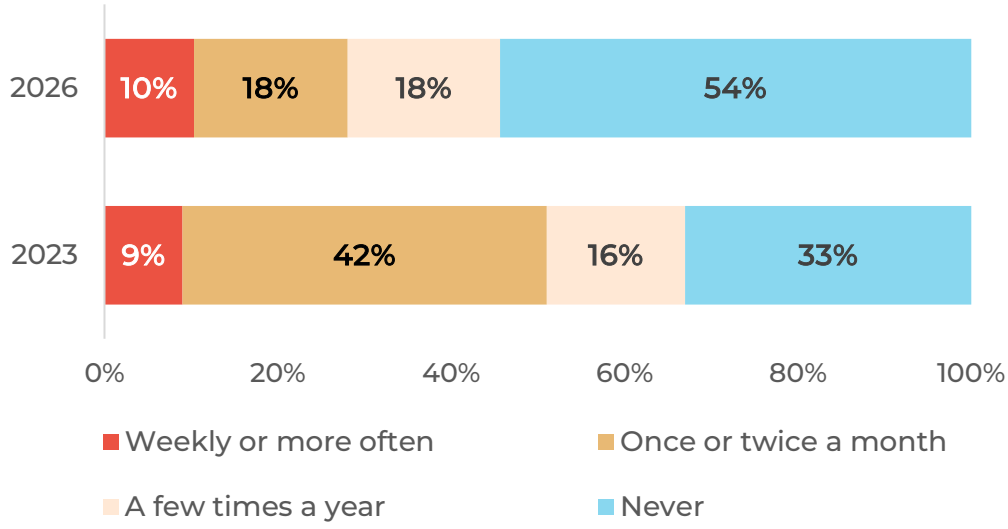
Further detailed analysis follows.

Alcohol

Frequency

About 10% of youth drink at least weekly, with over one-quarter (28%) at least once-a-month.

Note that the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. Once this age-effect is removed, there is little difference.



Sample size n=388 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

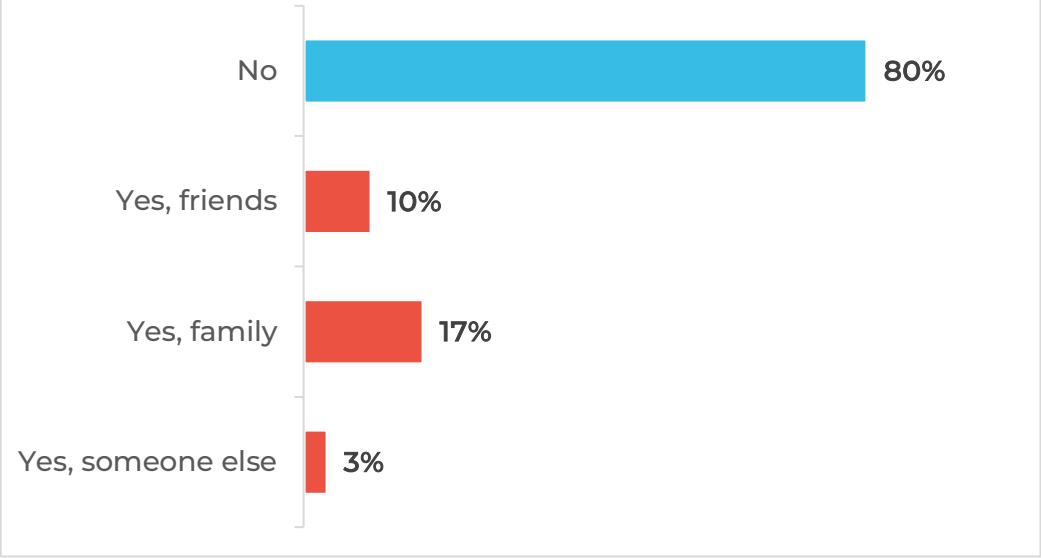
Those **more likely** to say they drink alcohol at least monthly include:

	28%	**Total sample**
↑	50%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	48%	15 years and older
↑	44%	People with mental health challenges
↑	36%	Māori (only very weakly significant)
↑	31%	NZ European or Pākehā

Concerns raised

Very few youths (20%) who drink alcohol have had their drinking raised as a concern by anyone.

For most who have, it was family and/or friends.

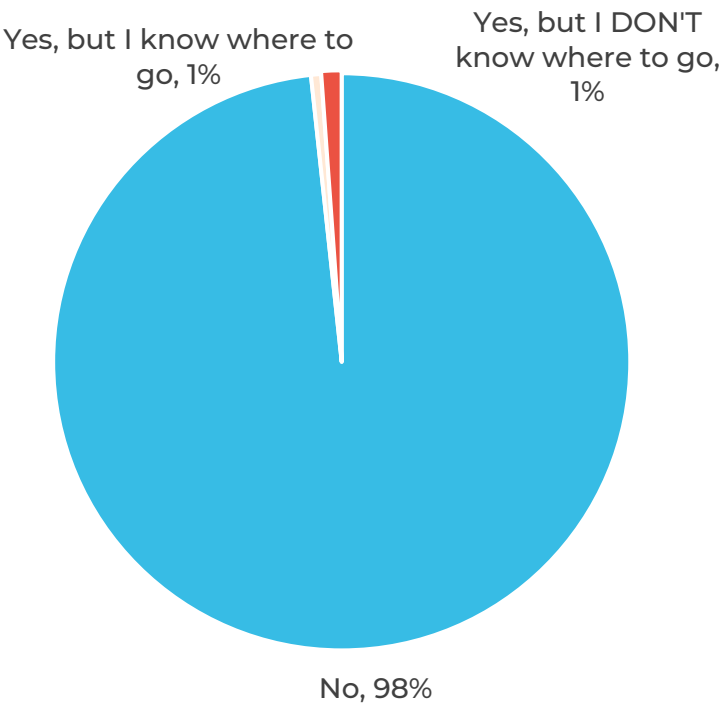


Sample size n=177 drinkers of alcohol

Need help

Almost no drinker of alcohol thinks they need help with their drinking.

This could either be that they don't need help, they do need help but don't realise it, or that they need help but deny it.

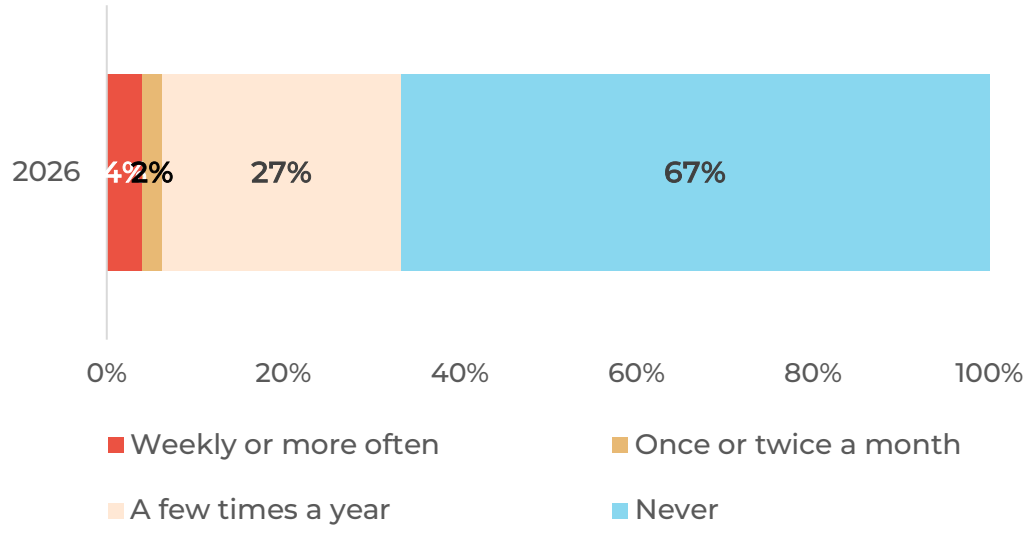


Sample size n=176 drinkers of alcohol

Trouble

Although almost none say they need help with their drinking, 6% say they get into trouble at least once-a-month, and about a third (33%) at least a few times a year.

This may suggest some level of denial on the part of the drinkers.



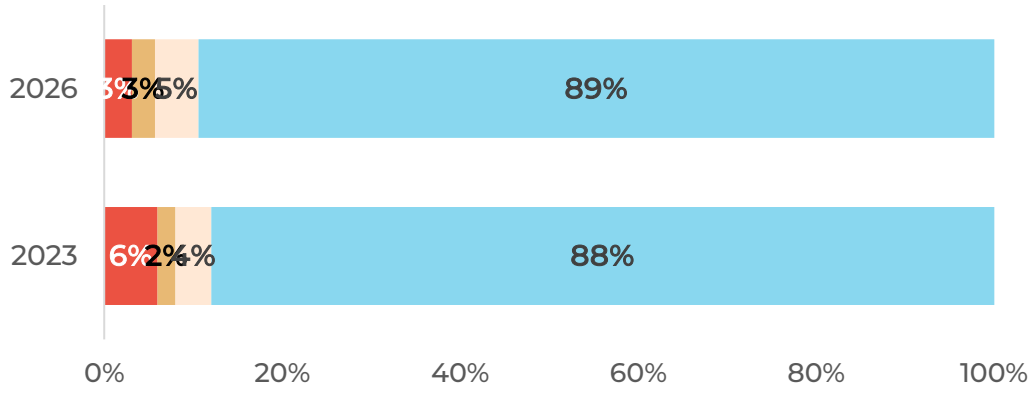
Sample size n=174 alcohol drinkers in 2026

Cigarettes

Frequency

Most youth have never smoked tobacco, but half of those who have (11%) smoke at least weekly (6%).

Note that the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. Once this age-effect is removed, smoking tobacco may have increase slightly. (The 11% becomes 16%.)



Sample size n=387 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

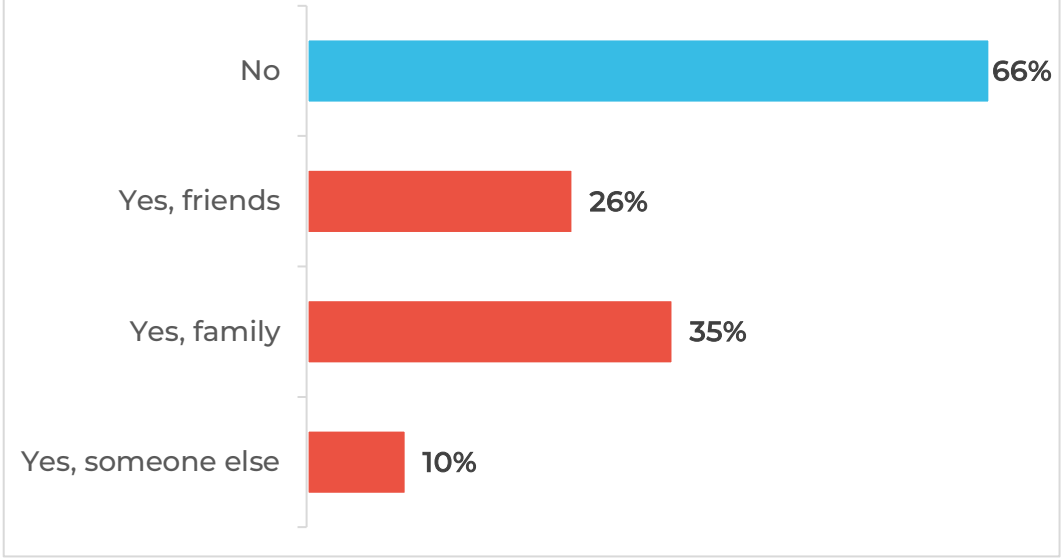
Those **more likely** to have ever smoked tobacco cigarettes include:

	11%	**Total sample**
↑	30%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	22%	People with mental health challenges
↑	19%	15 years and older
↑	13%	Males (females 8%)

Concerns raised about smoking or vaping

More concern appears to have been raised about youth smoking or vaping, and this may be because it is more obvious.

Either that, or alcohol is more socially acceptable.

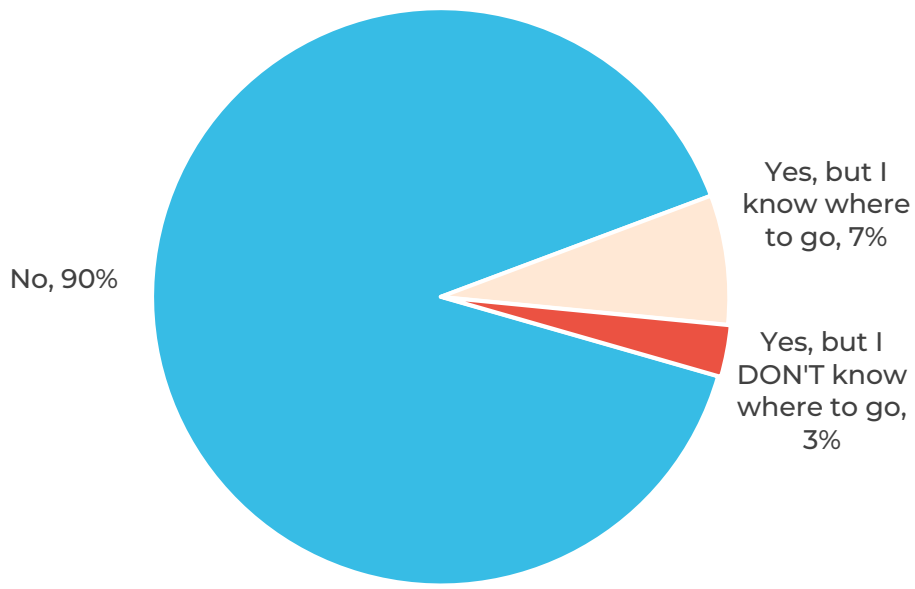


Sample size n=62 smokers or vapers

Need help about smoking or vaping

Similar to the alcohol drinkers, smokers and vapers do not consider that they need any help.

Most of those that do, say they know where to go.



Sample size n=70 in 2026

Member agencies: NZ Police, Community Networks/ LINK, Te Kura o Tititea | Mt Aspiring College, Kahu Youth Trust, Queenstown Lakes District Council, ADL, Students Against Dangerous Driving, Te Whatu Ora Southern, WellSouth and Te Hau Toka

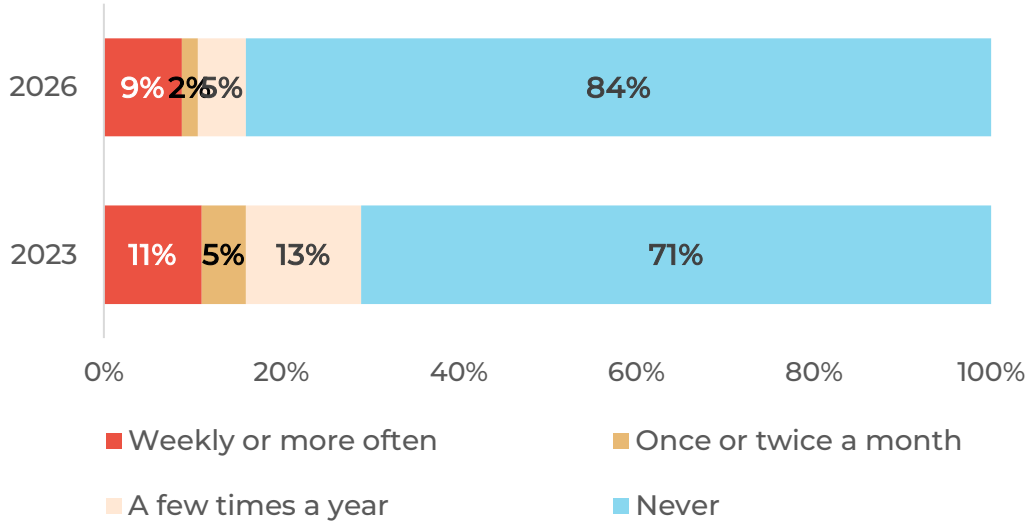
Vaping

Frequency

Most youth have never vaped, but over half of those who have (9% out of 16%) vape on a regular basis (at least weekly.)

Vaping is also more popular that smoking tobacco.

Note that the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. Once this age-effect is removed, the 16% becomes 24%, although this is still a decrease since 2023.



Sample size n=70 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Those **more likely** to have ever vaped include:

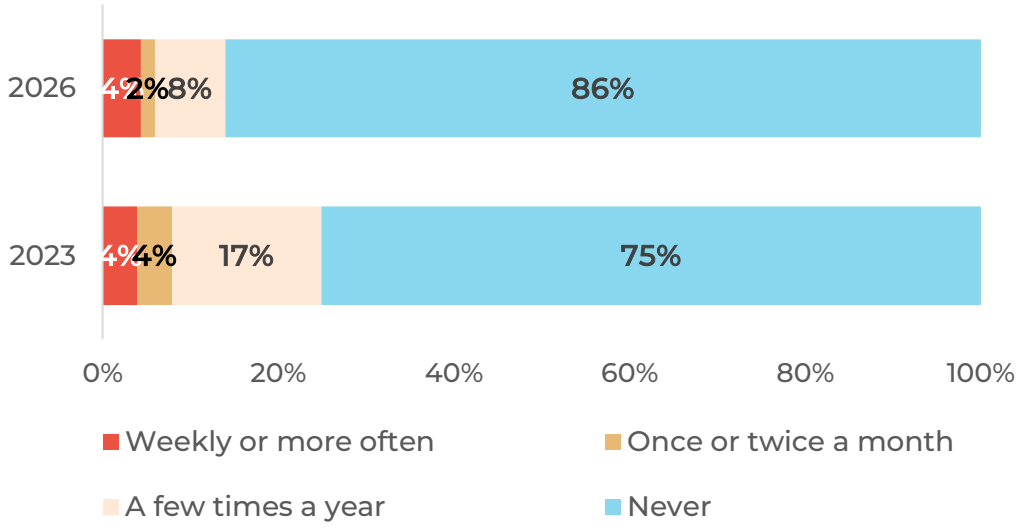
	16%	**Total sample**
↑	32%	People with mental health challenges
↑	30%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	25%	15 years and older
↑	22%	Māori (weakly significant)

Marijuana

Frequency

Most youth have never smoked marijuana, but it remains more popular than cigarettes.

Note that the 2023 study was predominantly made up of those 15 years and older. Once this age-effect is removed, there is little difference, albeit possibly a small drop. (The 14% "ever" goes up to 21%, but that is still a decrease on the 25% in 2023.)



Sample size n=387 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Those **more likely** to have ever smoked marijuana include:

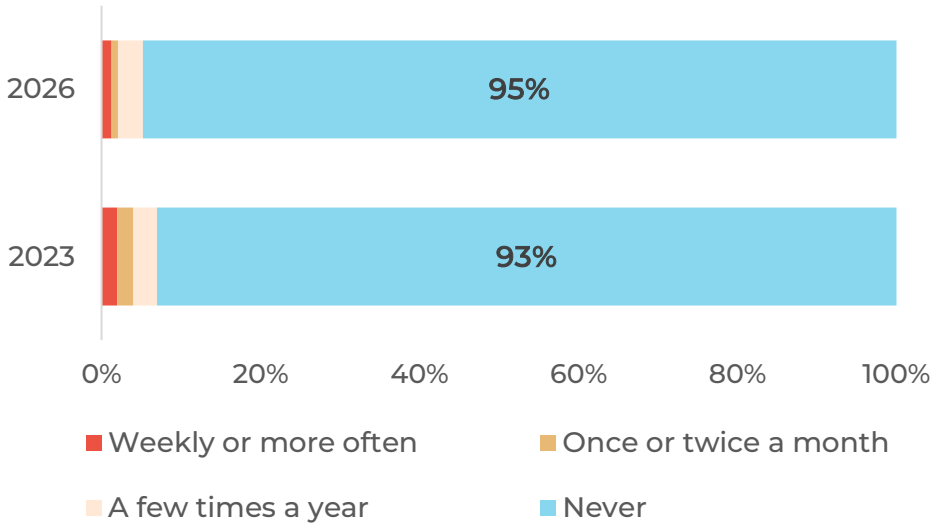
	14%	**Total sample**
↑	30%	Gender non-binary (n=10)
↑	27%	People with mental health challenges
↑	23%	15 years and older
↑	19%	Māori (weakly significant)
↑	17%	Males (females 10%)

Other drugs

Frequency

Almost no youth take other drugs. Examples were listed as MDMA (ecstasy), ketamine or meth (P).

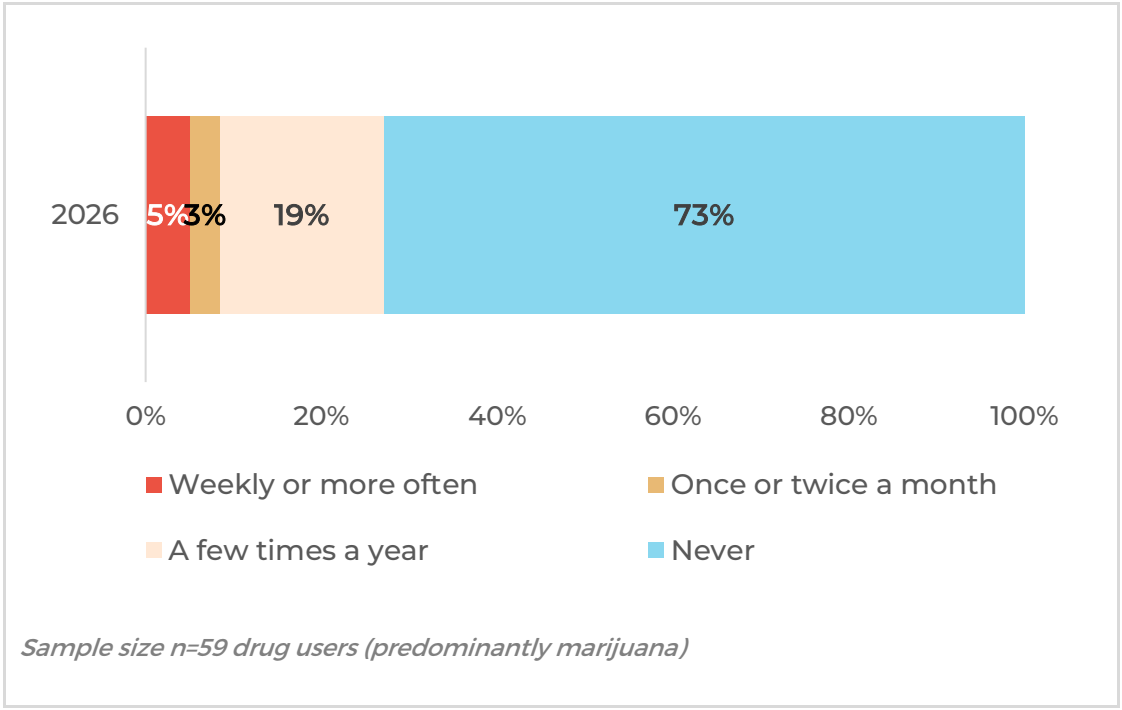
Even with the small numbers, there may be some bravado in the responses.



Sample size n=386 in 2026, n=180 in 2023

Trouble from drugs [21]

Most drug users say they are not getting into trouble with their drug use.

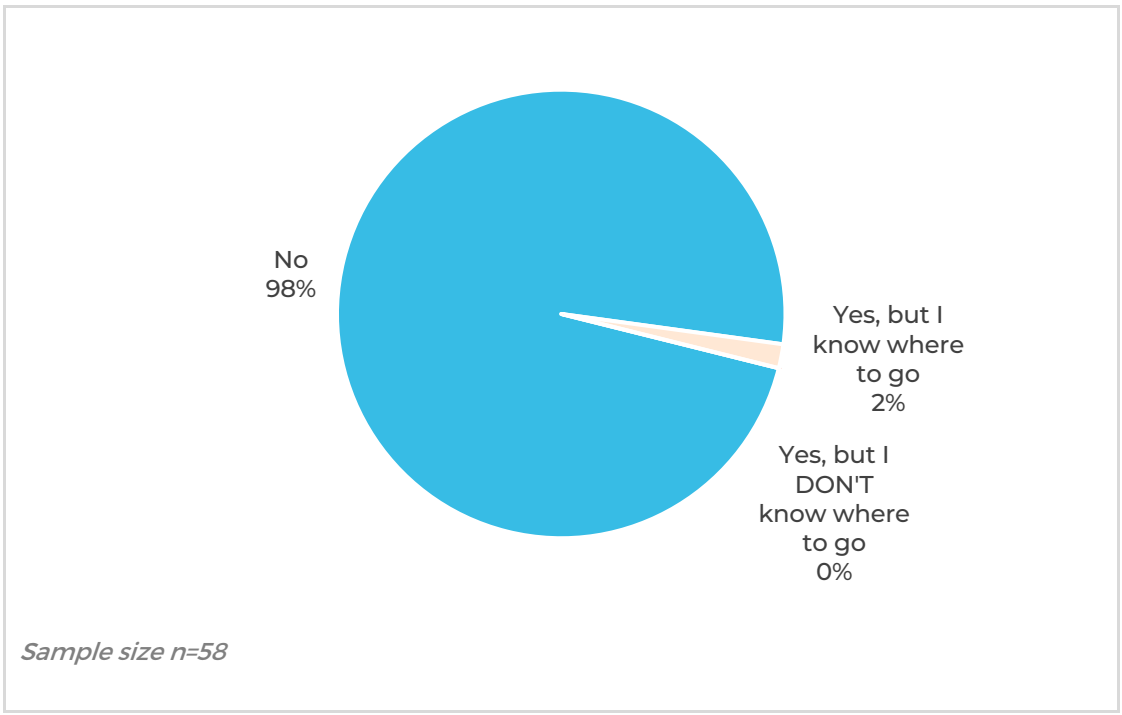


Sample size n=59 drug users (predominantly marijuana)

[21] This includes marijuana, as well as other drugs such MDMA (ecstasy), ketamine and meth (P)

Need help [22]

Like alcohol, almost no drug users say they need help with their use.



Sample size n=58

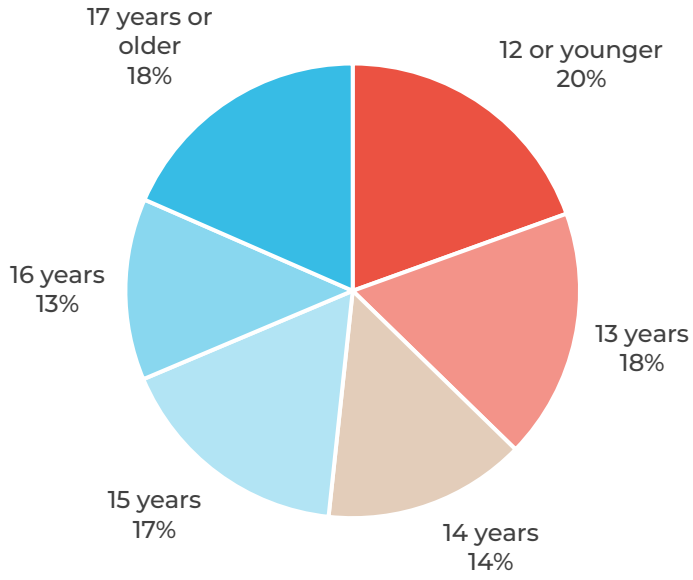
[22] This includes marijuana, as well as other drugs such MDMA (ecstasy), ketamine and meth (P)

Appendix

Sample

Age

The sample was well-balanced in terms of age, from those 12 and under to 17 and over. (There were only a few 11-year-olds and 18-year-olds.)



Sample size n=472

Unfortunately, the 2023 survey was not well-balanced in terms of age. It had 52% aged 16 or over (this study 31%), so the 2026 study is not directly comparable to that.

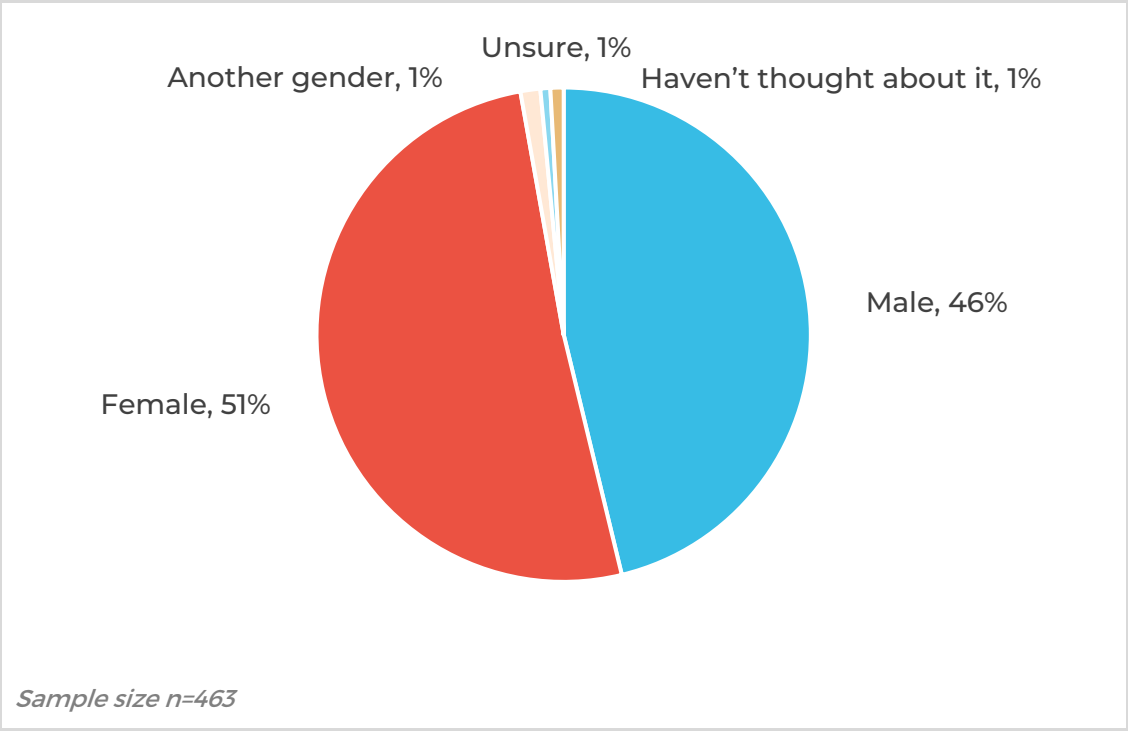
The main issue is that some of the behaviour and attitudes are strongly correlated to age. This can skew the overall results, but responses have corrected the comparisons as best, where it was relevant.

It was decided not to weight the data, as the 2023 wasn't weighted, we had no access to it and would have made comparisons even more difficult.

Gender

The 2026 sample was well-balanced in terms of gender.

Females are more likely to complete surveys, and the non-binary responses are not incompatible with Statistics New Zealand results.



Sample size n=463

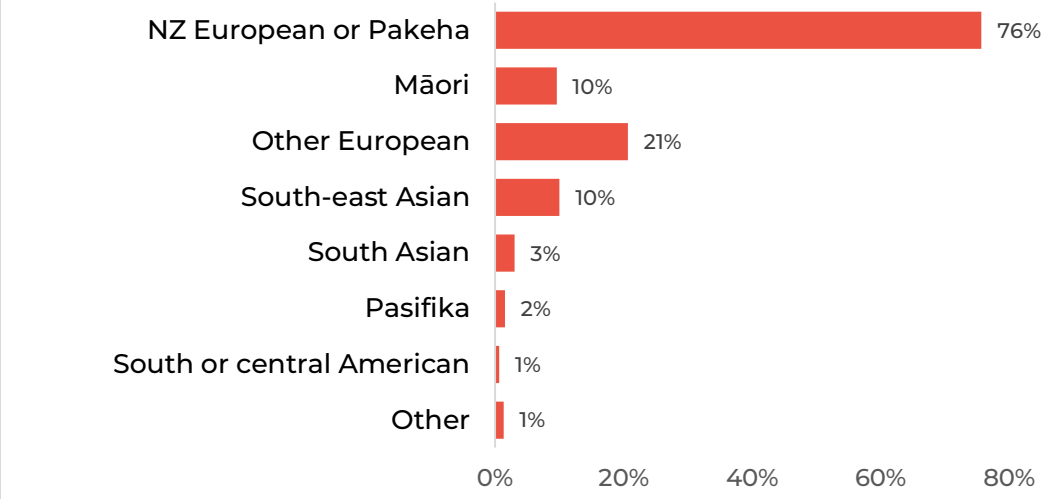
The 2023 survey had 57% female responses, 39% male and 4% another answer. The 2026 survey is closer to the target population.

As with age, it was decided not to weight the data, as the 2023 wasn't weighted, and would have made comparisons more difficult.

Ethnicity [23]

Note that as someone may be more than one ethnicity, the graph adds to more than 100%.

See the footnote below about the way Statistics New Zealand classifies ethnicity.



Sample size n=470

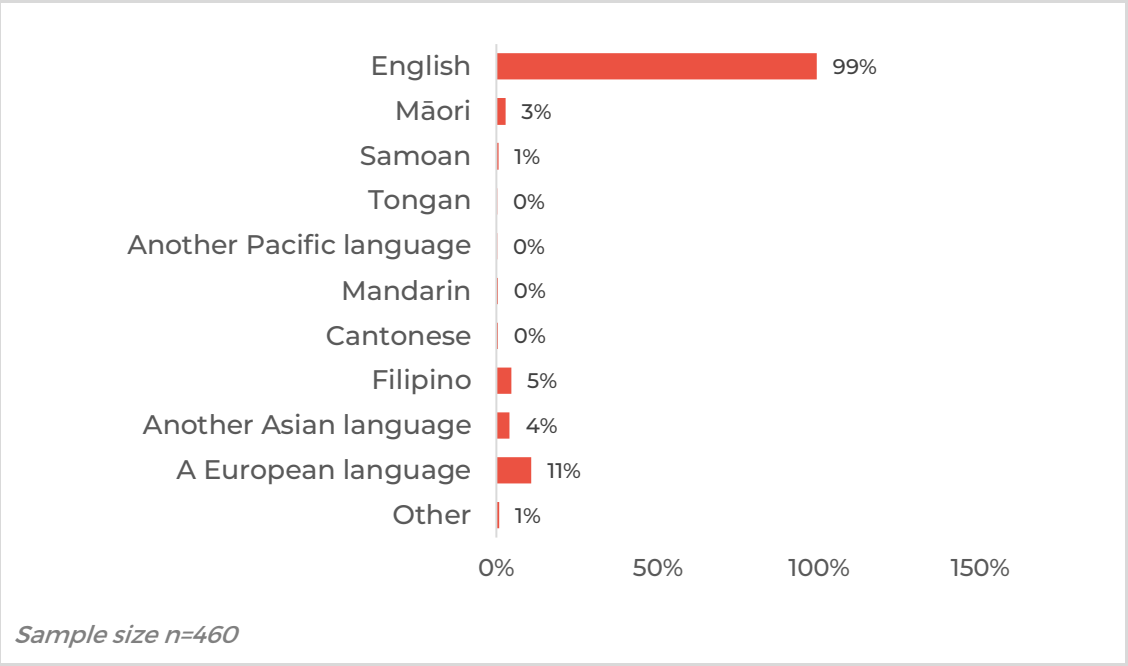
The 2026 survey matches well with the 2023 study in terms of ethnicity.

"Other" included African and South African.

For sub-group analysis, only Pākehā Māori, "other" Europeans (British, Europeans, North Americans etc) and south-east Asians had sufficient sample size.

[23] Note that Statistics New Zealand uses a mutually exclusive hierarchical classification for ethnicity. This says if someone is of Māori descent, they are classified as Māori – and nothing else. Then Pasifika, then Asian, then Indian, then "other" and finally someone is only classified as NZ European/Pākehā if they are *nothing else*. This study allowed people to identify as multiple ethnicities.

Languages spoken (at a conversational level)



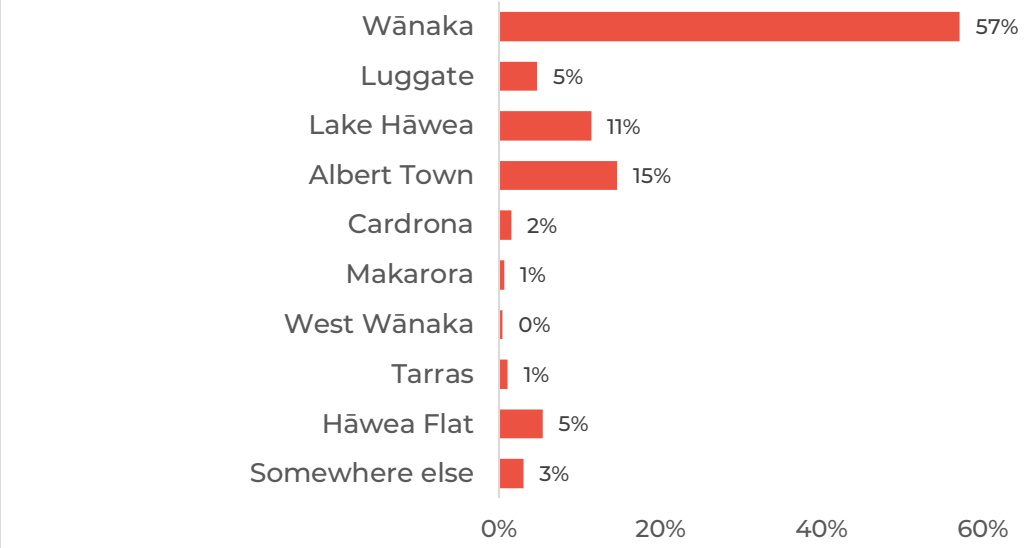
Sample size n=460

Other languages spoken included Shona[24] and Afrikaans.

There were a few people who did not select English, but selected other languages, hence the 99% figure for English.

[24] Shona (native name: chi Shona) is a major Bantu language spoken primarily in Zimbabwe and parts of Mozambique, Zambia, and Botswana

Location

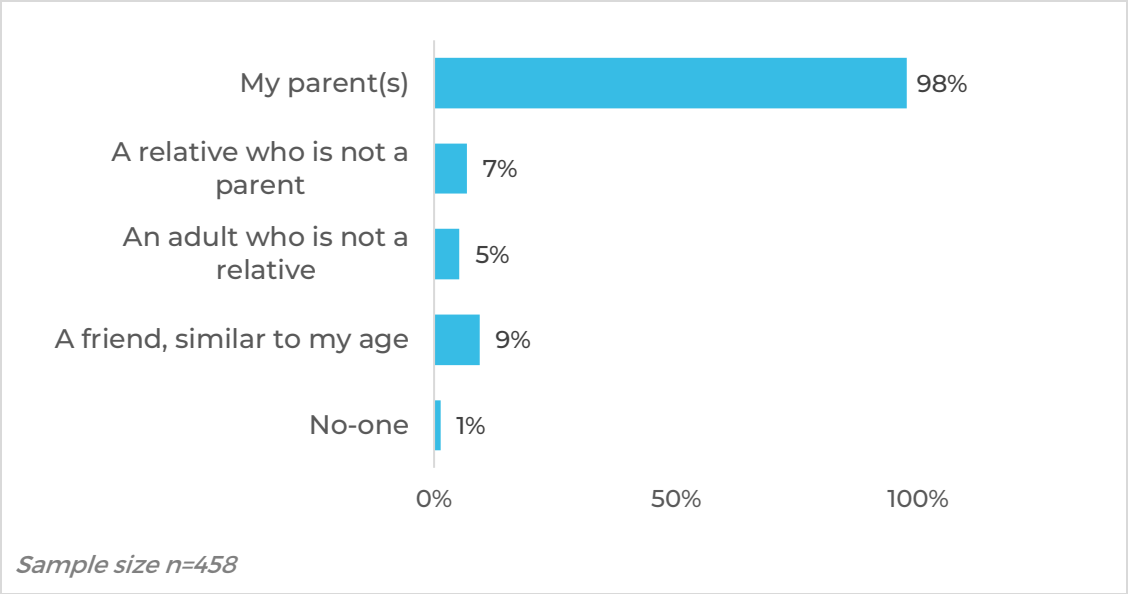


Sample size n=464

Other locations included Queensberry, Northlake and those with split living arrangements.

Caregiver

Almost everyone has their parent(s) as a caregiver, with about a fifth having joint arrangements.

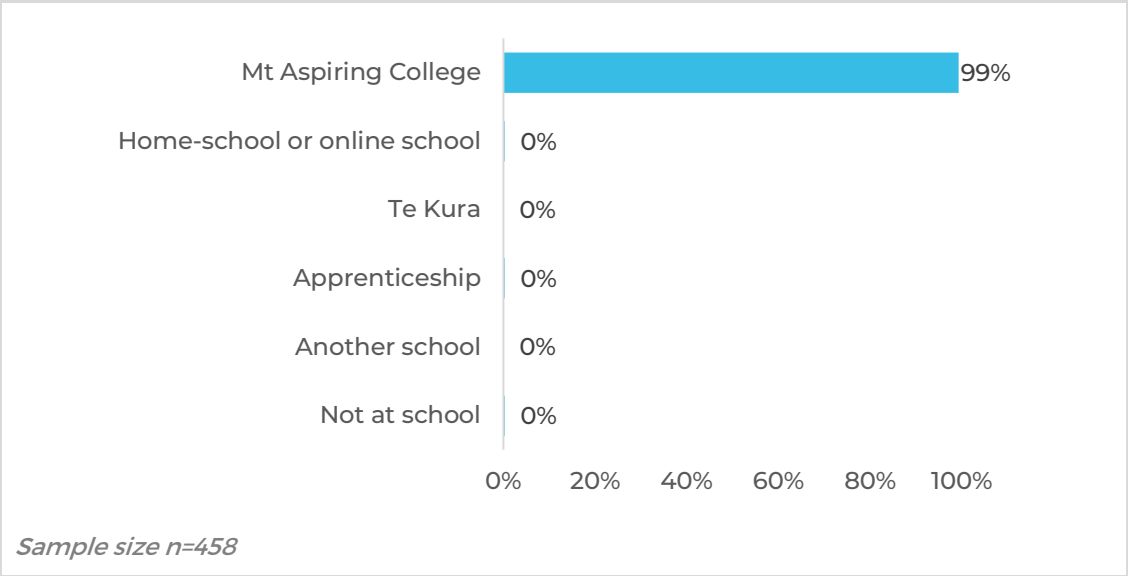


Sample size n=458



Member agencies: NZ Police, Community Networks/ LINK, Te Kura o Tititea | Mt Aspiring College, Kahu Youth Trust, Queenstown Lakes District Council, ADL, Students Against Dangerous Driving, Te Whatu Ora Southern, WellSouth and Te Hau Toka

Schooling

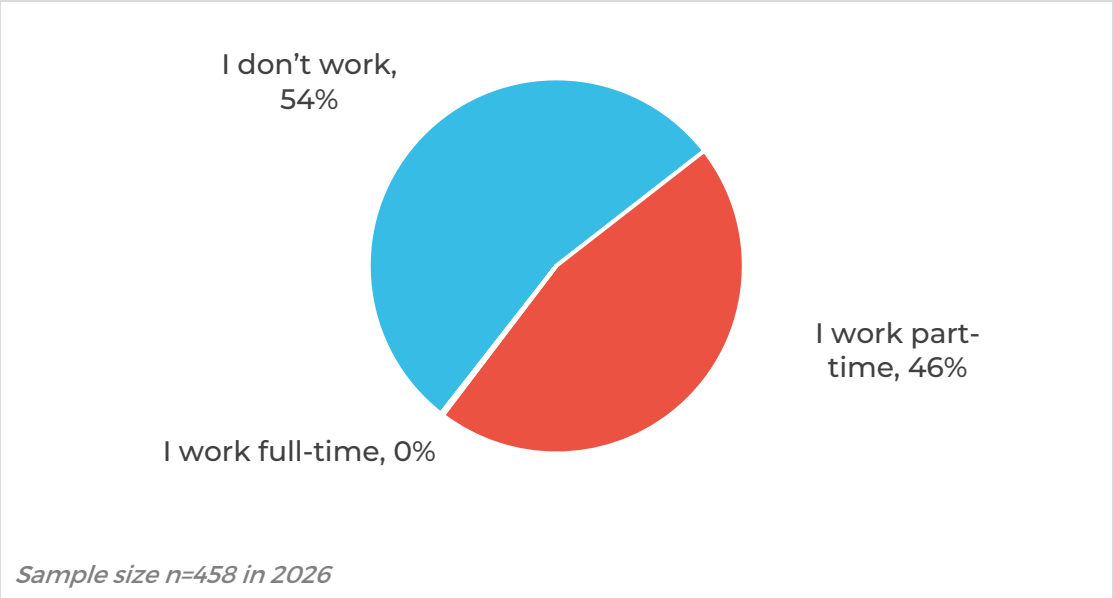


Sample size n=458

There was one person each with home, or online-school, in an apprenticeship or not at school, hence the graph only showing 99% due to rounding.

Working

Half of youth (at school) are in part-time work.



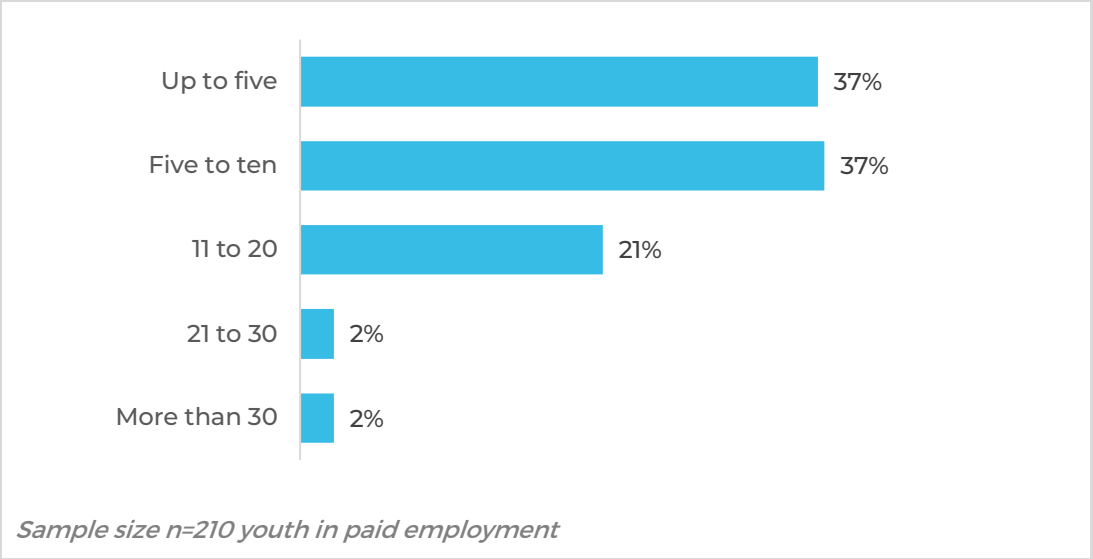
Sample size n=458 in 2026

Those **more likely** to be in work include:

	46%	**Total sample**
↑	68%	15 years and older

Hours

Uses the mid-points of each category, we can construct a mean for the hours worked per week: 8.3.



Sample size n=210 youth in paid employment

Suggestions for Path Wānaka and their Member agencies:

Based on participant comments, Path Wānaka could consider the following priorities:

1. **Strengthen youth voice and participation:** Create opportunities for rangatahi to share their experiences, influence community initiatives and be actively involved in shaping programmes that affect them.
2. **Build parent and whānau capability:** Continue parenting workshops, coaching and educational events that encourage positive communication, empathy, active listening and respectful relationships between adults and young people.
3. **Improve mental health awareness and support:** Continue Mental Health First Aid training and collaborate with schools, health professionals and community agencies in the wider Upper Clutha | Central Lakes region to improve awareness, reduce stigma and strengthen pathways to support, including around eating disorders.
4. **Promote positive role models and meaningful connections:** Support mentoring opportunities and community activities that connect rangatahi with trusted adults and peers who encourage confidence, belonging and personal growth.

5. **Address digital and substance-related harm:** Continue evidence-based education and prevention initiatives addressing social media pressures, vaping, smoking and other potentially harmful behaviours.
6. **Celebrate diverse strengths and achievements:** Encourage schools, whānau and community organisations to recognise young people's individual talents, resilience, effort and personal progress beyond academic achievement.

Key takeaway for Path Wānaka: *The strongest message from these comments is not simply that young people need more support, but that they want adults to listen, understand and take them seriously. This provides a valuable direction for Path's future programmes - strengthening relationships, building confidence and ensuring rangatahi have a genuine voice in their community.*

He mihi maioha ki ngā rangatahi katoa i whakapau kaha ki te whakakī i tēnei puka uiui | A cherished acknowledgement to all the young people who put in the effort to fill out this survey.

The 2026 Youth Survey questions included some very heavy topics. If you or someone you know would like to talk about any of these issues, some contacts are listed below. If you have an emergency, and you or someone else is at immediate risk, please call 111 – and ask for Police. If someone is hurt, then ask for the Ambulance.

Lifeline – 0800 543 354
Youth-line – 0800 376 633 or free text 234
Rainbow Youth: https://ry.org.nz/online-support
Need to talk? Text 1737 support from trained counsellor
thelowdown.co.nz – or emailteam@thelowdown.co.nz or free text 5626

