



INTRODUCTION:

# THE QUIET CRISIS NO ONE SEES.

Bridging the gap for New Zealand's  
"lost middle" youth. A research paper



# Bridging the gap for New Zealand's "lost middle" youth.

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Imagine a 14-year-old girl in Tauranga who has struggled with anxiety for years. She forces herself to school each day, stomach in knots, doing her best to appear "fine." At home, she withdraws to her room, feeling invisible. When she finally sought help, she was turned away three times. It took self-harm and a crisis for services to take notice. "I told them I was harming myself and that's when they cared. They only care when you're at risk, not anywhere before that," she says.

[Appendix 1](#)

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Her mum is exhausted and heartbroken: "I don't know where to go now. She's still stuck in her bedroom... I feel like no one cares" [Appendix 2](#)

Her story is not an isolated case. Across Aotearoa New Zealand, **thousands of young people are quietly falling through the cracks.** They aren't truant enough to sound alarms or top of the class enough to get special attention. They're doing okay, until suddenly they're not. This research paper shines a light on these youth - **the "lost middle"** - and the systemic failings that leave them unsupported. It weaves together personal stories, data, and community insights to show how we can do right by these rangatahi (young people). Most of all, it's a call to action that we **must not wait until they break** before we lend a hand.

*"I told them I was harming myself and that's when they cared. They only care when you're at risk, not anywhere before that"*



# Lived Experiences:

## Voices from the “Lost Middle”

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Talk to any teacher, parent, or youth worker, and they'll tell you about kids who are **slipping through the cracks in plain sight**. They're the quiet student in the back who stops turning in homework, or the friendly kid who suddenly quits the netball team. Because they're not causing trouble, their pain often goes unnoticed. Yet at the ground level, there are plenty of signs.

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- **“You have to be in crisis to get help.”** That's how one teen described her experience with the mental health system, after needing four referrals (and confessing to self-harm) just to be accepted for counselling [Appendix 3](#)

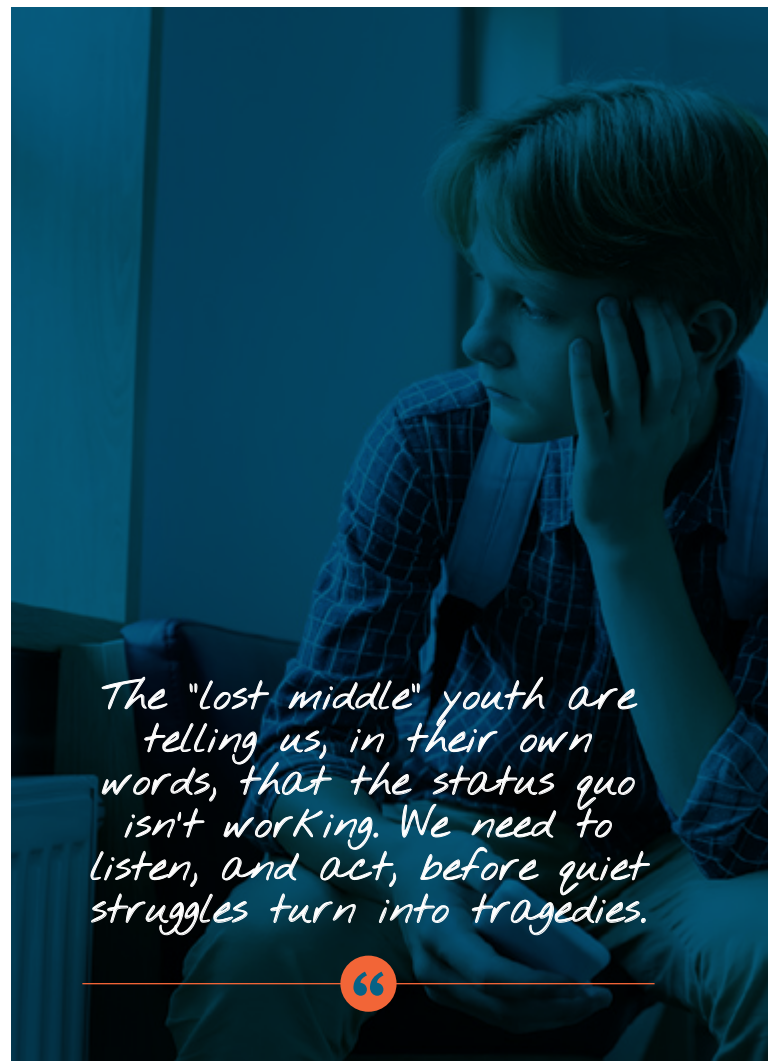
She felt the system was effectively telling her to “get worse so I can receive help.” No young person should be pushed to such desperation before someone listens.

- **“I feel like no one is listening.”** This heartbreaking sentiment [Appendix 4](#) is echoed by many rangatahi and their whānau. Parents describe **going “back and forth” begging for support** only to be given websites or waitlists. [Appendix 5](#)  
By the time help arrives (if it does), the young person may have spiralled from mild struggle to full-blown crisis.

- **Disappearing in the Classroom:** Youth workers in the community see early warning signs in schools. A student might start missing a day here and there, or sit alone at lunch. These aren't “bad kids,” often they're sensitive teens overwhelmed by stress or loneliness. “As an intermediate school, we are seeing large numbers of students grappling with issues that used to arise at 15 or 16,” one Bay of Plenty principal notes, citing anxiety, social withdrawal and low self-esteem in kids as young as 11 [Appendix 6](#)

The need for support is clearly filtering down to younger ages.

These voices and stories underline a painful truth that **the system is hardest to reach when you need it early**. The “lost middle” youth are telling us, in their own words, that the status quo isn't working. We need to listen, and act, before quiet struggles turn into tragedies.



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# By the Numbers: A Hidden Crisis in Plain Sight

Behind these personal stories is a larger picture of **worsening youth wellbeing**. The data reveals that what we're seeing anecdotally is part of a national trend:

- **SkYROCKETING Distress:** Nearly **1 in 4 young Kiwis** (23.6% of ages 15–24) experienced high or very high psychological distress in 2021/22 – **double** the rate from just two years earlier [Appendix 7](#)

Youth mental distress has effectively **skyrocketed** since the pandemic, yet countless teens are **denied support because they're "not sick enough"** to meet service thresholds

- **School Attendance Plummeting:** Regular school attendance has collapsed to historically low levels. In 2023, **fewer than half of students** attended school consistently (Regular attendance is defined as >90% attendance; in Term 3 2023 it was only 46% nationwide.) [Appendix 8](#)

This means tens of thousands of students are missing class at least once a fortnight or more, a glaring red flag. In many cases, disengagement from school is an early cry for help, not "bad behaviour."

- **Shut Out of Services:** Youth who do speak up about feeling anxious or depressed often hear, "Come back when things get worse." An RNZ investigation found teens being told they weren't "unwell enough" for specialist mental health care, essentially being turned away until they are in crisis. [Appendix 9](#), [Appendix 10](#)

This **"ambulance at the bottom of the cliff"** approach leaves moderate needs completely unmet.

- **Bay of Plenty's Alarming Snapshot:** The Bay of Plenty region highlights these issues. As of late 2024, **16.6% of Bay of Plenty youth (15–24) are NEET** – not in education, employment or training. [Appendix 11](#)

That's nearly **1 in 6 young people** disconnected from both school and work, one of the highest rates in New Zealand. The region also battles above-average social deprivation and youth mental health challenges, creating a perfect storm. Community leaders locally have been **calling for stronger youth support** and counselling in schools to address this wave of need. [Appendix 12](#)

- **The Cost of Doing Nothing:** The impacts aren't just personal, they're societal. It's estimated that mental illness costs New Zealand about **5% of our GDP each year** (around **\$12–\$20 billion** annually). [Appendix 13](#), [Appendix 14](#)

Much of this burden stems from issues that first emerge in adolescence. Every dollar we fail to invest in a struggling young person now is **paid many times over later**, in health care, in social services, even in prisons. The human cost of lost potential is incalculable.

**Together, these numbers tell a story** that we have a generation teetering on the edge. They are not officially "at-risk" by our current definitions, but they are undoubtedly in danger of poorer life outcomes. This "lost middle" of youth is large, growing, and urgent. It's time to define who they are and why our systems aren't built to catch them.

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# Defining the “Lost Middle”

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Who exactly are the youth we’re calling the “**lost middle**”? In policy terms, they’ve been dubbed the “**missing middle**” – those with needs too significant for a GP or teacher alone to handle, but not severe enough to qualify for specialist intervention. [Appendix 15](#)

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In plain terms, these are the kids in between:

- They are **13–24 years old**, trying to find their footing in a tumultuous world. They’re not the extreme cases that trigger urgent action, nor the high-fliers who attract accolades. They are the **quiet majority** of young people in the middle.
- They might come from working families that **earn just enough to miss out on support**, but not enough to easily afford private therapy or tutors. They often fall through eligibility gaps – for example, not meeting the very high threshold for mental health services, or not being “disadvantaged” enough for certain youth programmes.
- They **don’t tick the usual boxes** for assistance. They haven’t been expelled, they’re not homeless, they’re not in court – so the system assumes they’re fine. **But we can see they’re not fine.** They’re experiencing anxiety, depression, identity struggles, family stress, or just a profound sense of not belonging. It’s often invisible to outsiders.
- Mental health professionals have a term for this: “**the missing middle**” of mental health care. [Appendix 16](#)

These young people have **mild to moderate mental health needs** – serious enough to cause distress and impairment, but they “don’t meet the threshold to access specialist interventions” under our public system. [Appendix 17](#)

In other words, unless they become acutely ill or suicidal, they’re told to manage on their own.

- The same pattern exists in social services and education. A teen might be **chronically**

**anxious and barely eating**, but as long as they attend school occasionally and aren’t harming anyone, there’s no targeted programme for them. A 19-year-old might be unemployed and isolated, but not on a benefit and thus not tracked. These youth are **practically invisible in the data** and in service planning.

Crucially, being “lost” in the middle is often a **temporary status** – a turning point. With a timely hand, these rangatahi could bounce back, thrive, go on to lead full lives. Without it, many will **slide into the very outcomes** we fear, severe mental illness, unemployment, self-harm, substance abuse. Research shows roughly **75% of lifelong mental health conditions begin by the mid-20s** [Appendix 18](#)

These years are our chance to catch them. If we miss this window, **we risk a lifetime of fallout** for these young people and their whānau.



**75%**  
**of lifelong mental health  
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# Systemic Failures:

## Why Are They Falling Through the Cracks?

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Why are these young people not getting help? The short answer: **our systems are set up to react to crises, not prevent them.** Despite good intentions, multiple systemic failures are contributing to the plight of the “lost middle”:

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**1. A Mental Health System Geared to “Highest Needs” Only:** Public mental health services in New Zealand have long been structured to treat the most severe cases first. The Ministry of Health openly acknowledges that District Health Board (DHB) specialist services are funded for those with the “highest needs”, using clinical triage to prioritise level of risk. [Appendix 19](#)

In practice, this means a teenager must often **hit rock bottom before they qualify for help.** As one mother put it, “you only get in there if you are suicidal... you have to be in crisis” [Appendix 20](#)

. If a GP referral notes “moderate depression” or “anxiety but no suicide plan,” it may be **rejected for not meeting criteria** [Appendix 21](#)

. The young person is then sent home with perhaps a brochure or a suggestion to call a helpline. We wouldn’t tell a stage 1 cancer patient to “come back at stage 4,” but that is effectively what we say to youth in moderate mental distress. This **gap in care – the missing middle – was explicitly highlighted in He Ara Oranga (the national mental health inquiry)**, leading to new programmes like Access and Choice to provide some support for mild/moderate cases [Appendix 22](#)

. Still, coverage is spotty and many youths don’t know how to access these services. The system remains overwhelmingly an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.

**2. Schools Struggling to Respond to Disengagement:** Education is often the first arena where “lost middle” kids start to slip. Unfortunately, our schools are stretched thin and **attendance is treated more as a statistic**

**than a symptom.** The shocking fact is only 46% of students attended regularly in late 2023, [Appendix 23](#) yet responses have largely focused on truancy officers and attendance campaigns. What’s missing is a deeper inquiry into why so many are disengaging. Many students report feeling **unsafe, unheard or uninspired** at school. A sense of belonging can make or break a young person’s connection to education. When asked, youth say they want schools to notice mental health issues early and provide support – not punishment – for those who struggle to show up. Some principals are speaking out: in the Bay of Plenty, principals of primary and intermediate schools have urgently called for **more counsellors and mental health support in schools**, noting that even 11-year-olds are now grappling with anxiety and self-esteem issues that used to appear much later [Appendix 24](#), [Appendix 25](#)

ONLY  
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## Systemic Failures: Why Are They Falling Through the Cracks? CONTINUED...

Yet most primary and intermediate schools in NZ have **no funded counsellor or staff**. The result: early signs like frequent absences, declining grades, or withdrawn behaviour might get a phone call home at best. There is no systematic safety net in the education system to catch a kid who is quietly checking out. By the time a student drops out or fails NCEA, the opportunity for early intervention is long past.

**3. Siloed and Criteria-Driven Social Services:** For a young person to get help from social services (like youth mentoring programs, family services, or government support), they often have to fit a defined “at-risk” category – whether that’s being on a youth justice radar, in state care, or from a low-income decile area. **Those who don’t fit these boxes get overlooked.** For instance, a teen from a middle-class suburb who is battling hidden depression may not be considered “vulnerable” by funding criteria, so agencies might not prioritize outreach to them. The **White Paper for Vulnerable Children (2012)** noted this mismatch, warning that services often fail youth whose struggles span multiple areas but never quite reach crisis in any single one. In other words, a young person could be a bit mentally unwell, a bit academically behind, and a bit in conflict at home – and **still get no help** because none of those issues alone is “extreme” enough. This compartmentalized, threshold-based approach is a fundamental flaw. Real lives don’t operate in silos; a moderate problem in several life domains can be just as debilitating as a severe problem in one.

**4. Lack of Early Outreach and Youth Voice:** Systemically, we have under-invested in **preventative, youth-centred supports**. Services that do exist (like youth hubs, mentoring schemes, or community youth workers) are often **charity-run and patchy** in coverage. There is no universal screening for mental wellbeing in schools, no routine check-ins for 18-year-olds who finish school not in work, etc. Moreover, the voices of young people themselves have often been missing

in designing solutions. As the Auditor-General recently pointed out, government agencies need to **put “young people and whānau at the centre”** of support systems, and that means involving youth in designing services and policy [Appendix 26](#)

When youth are consulted, they consistently ask for things like: easier access to **counselling and support without huge wait times**, more adults who they trust and can talk to, help with transitions (into high school, into adulthood), and a sense of purpose through community or creative opportunities. Failing to incorporate these insights leads to programs that young people don’t engage with – perpetuating the cycle of disconnection.

In sum, the **system is failing these young people by default**. It is nobody’s intention – no teacher or doctor sets out to ignore a struggling teen. But the structures in place make it tragically easy to do so. As a result, we end up effectively saying to a generation: “Come back when you’re broken enough. Until then, good luck.” This is **not only counterproductive – it’s cruel**. It’s also entirely fixable. The next sections highlight how communities are stepping up to fill the gap, and how we must all rally to support early intervention over late-stage repair.

**Most primary and intermediate schools in NZ have no funded counsellor or staff.**

**The result:** early signs like frequent absences, declining grades, or withdrawn behaviour might get a phone call home at best.

# Regional Spotlight:

## Bay of Plenty – A Community at a Crossroads



While the “lost middle” issue is nation-wide, looking at the Bay of Plenty region provides a clear window into the problem – and the potential solutions. **Bay of Plenty (BOP)**, with cities like Tauranga and Rotorua and a large rural hinterland, has been called “a community at a crossroads” for youth wellbeing:

- **High Youth Disconnection:** BOP consistently reports one of the highest NEET rates in the country. As of the end of 2024, **16.6% of Bay of Plenty youth (15–24) were not in education, employment or training.**

[Appendix 27](#)

This is significantly above the national NEET rate (~12%). It translates to thousands of young people in the region essentially “parked up” at home, not building skills, not earning, and often feeling aimless. Some communities in the Eastern Bay (such as Kawerau, Opotiki) face intergenerational unemployment and limited local opportunities, fuelling this crisis.

- **Social Deprivation and Isolation:** Parts of the BOP (particularly rural and eastern areas) rank among the most deprived in New Zealand, with high poverty and limited access to services. Even in wealthier Tauranga, rapid growth and housing costs have created pockets of hardship. High deprivation correlates with increased mental health issues and lower access to help. A local youth worker describes many BOP young people as “geographically and socially isolated, the help isn’t nearby, and they don’t have the transport or networks to go find it.” Without strong outreach, these youth simply go unseen.
- **Stressed Schools, Scarce Support:** BOP schools have acutely felt the trends of non-attendance and mental distress. In 2023, regular attendance in some BOP high schools fell well under the already-low national average. Principals from Tauranga to Whakatāne have reported **growing numbers of students with anxiety, behavioural struggles, and absenteeism**, and they have lobbied for

more on-site mental health resources. As noted, intermediate principals in the Western Bay have publicly asked the Government to fund counsellors, saying current support is not nearly enough. [Appendix 28](#)

Youth organisations like **Youthline** have also seen spiking demand from the region, Youthline’s 2023 data showed depression and mental health challenges are the top issues for young people in BOP, and usage of their helpline in the Bay jumped sharply.

[Appendix 29](#)

# 16.6%

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It translates to thousands of young people in the region essentially “parked up” at home, not building skills, not earning, and often feeling aimless.



## Regional Spotlight: Bay of Plenty – A Community at a Crossroads CONTINUED...

- **Community Efforts Emerging:** Despite challenges, BOP is also a place of innovation and hope. Local iwi and hapū (Māori communities) are leading Kaupapa Māori youth programmes focusing on cultural connection and identity. NGOs are collaborating through networks like the Bay of Plenty Youth Development Alliance. Notably, Youth Voices Action (YVA) itself is based in Tauranga, BOP, working on the ground to identify solutions to catch those falling through gaps. Community leaders recognise that BOP's youth outcomes lag behind and have made calls for a “whole-of-community” response – schools, councils, businesses, and charities working in tandem to re-engage young people. There is a growing sense that “**it takes a village**” to support youth, especially in smaller or tight-knit BOP communities.

The Bay of Plenty's situation highlights why a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. The region needs resources **tailored to its youth** – whether that means mobile outreach to rural towns, partnerships with Māori health providers, or funding for grassroots groups connecting with disengaged young people. If solutions can be demonstrated in BOP, they can provide a roadmap for other regions facing similar challenges (Northland, parts of Waikato and Hawke's Bay, etc.). **The Bay is sounding an alarm** that if we don't invest early in our youth, we'll pay for it later a thousandfold. But if we do act, even a place with serious social hurdles can turn the tide for its rangatahi.



*Principals from Tauranga to Whakatāne have reported growing numbers of students with anxiety, behavioural struggles, and absenteeism, and they have lobbied for more on-site mental health resources.*



Why we wrote this:

## Speaking up for the “Lost Middle”

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We’ve put this research paper together because **we live and breathe this issue every day**. At Youth Voices Action (YVA), we’re based in the Bay of Plenty, working directly with young people who are stuck in the gap, not “bad enough” to get support, but clearly not thriving. And to be honest? We’re tired of watching good kids fall through cracks that shouldn’t even exist.

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Our organisation began as the Tauranga Youth Development Team (TYDT), but we saw too many young people being overlooked, stuck in limbo between the extremes of “at-risk” and “high-achieving.” The current youth funding landscape reflects this binary thinking too. **Most funding still targets those already in crisis or already on a leadership path.** That’s important work, but it leaves out the quiet majority.

So we made a bold shift. We became Youth Voices Action, **to serve the ones the system doesn’t**. The ones who are trying, but not thriving. The ones who aren’t waving red flags, but are slipping further into the shadows every day.

We’ve done what we can with a small team, tight budgets, and a whole lot of heart. We’ve created safe spaces, supported youth-led initiatives, launched peer mentoring, and made sure young people’s voices are heard where decisions are made. But **this work is underfunded**, not because it’s not working, but because it sits outside traditional funding boxes.


**The truth is, we’re struggling to grow and not because the need isn’t there, but because the system doesn’t see this need as urgent yet.**

This paper is our call to change that. We wrote it because we see **a huge opportunity**, not just for us, but for funders, government agencies, and communities to back a smarter, more sustainable approach to youth wellbeing.

We believe the best solutions will come from working with young people, not for them. And from bridging the gaps together, between community groups, schools, service providers and government.

To do that, we need backing. Not just belief in our kaupapa, but investment so we can keep doing what we’re doing, and do a whole lot more.

So if you’ve read this far and thought, “Yes, this is what’s missing,” we’re ready to talk.



*We believe the best solutions will come from working with young people, not for them. And from bridging the gaps together, between community groups, schools, service providers and government.*



# Conclusion:

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We have a generation of young New Zealanders who are **hurting in silence**, doing their best to cope alone in the messy middle. We, as a society, are essentially asking them to **prove they're "bad enough"** before we help. We can do better than that. We **must** do better than that.

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## Let's build something better for the "lost middle."

The evidence is clear and compelling. We've heard the voices of youth who feel invisible, seen the data on distress and disengagement, and highlighted a model of change through Youth Voices Action. Now it's time to translate this into action on a national scale. Here's what we're asking, in plain terms:

- **Funders and Philanthropists:** Prioritise **prevention over crisis**. Too often, funding goes to well-known causes or acute interventions after a tragedy has occurred. We urge you to invest in initiatives that support young people early, before they fall. This could mean backing organisations like Youth Voices Action to expand their reach, fund our new youth hub initiative, mentoring schemes, and school-based wellness programmes. Remember that investing in youth wellbeing yields exponential returns, financially and socially. It's been estimated that for every dollar spent on early youth intervention, several dollars are saved in future costs.

More importantly, you are saving lives from being derailed. We need courageous funders willing to say, "We'll back you now so you don't break later." Be a part of building the solutions, not just responding to the failures.

- **Government and Policymakers:** It's time for a **system reset** in how we support our rangatahi. We call on government ministers and agencies

to recognise the "lost middle" as an urgent priority, an unseen epidemic of unmet need. Concretely, this means **lowering the barriers to access support**: expand the Access and Choice programme and ensure every region has youth-appropriate primary mental health services (with no referral needed).

[Appendix 30](#)

Integrate mental health professionals in **all schools** (not just secondary), so issues are caught when they first emerge. Track disengagement not to punish, but to deploy help (for example, trigger a pastoral care response when a student's attendance drops). Allocate funding for community youth organisations that demonstrate they reach the unreached. And importantly, mandate that youth voice is at the table for all youth policy "nothing about us without us." The **Auditor-General's 2024 report** made nine recommendations for a more coordinated, youth-centered approach; those should be a blueprint moving forward. [Appendix 31](#)

New Zealand has made bold moves before (we were among the first with a Wellbeing Budget); we can innovate again to support the full spectrum of youth, not just the extremes.

*We need courageous funders willing to say, "We'll back you now so you don't break later."*



- **Communities and Every One of Us:** Government and money alone can't solve this. **Community attitude and awareness are key.** We ask parents, teachers, coaches, and employers to look beyond the obvious. Pay attention to the quiet kids, the ones who "seem fine." Create environments where young people know it's okay to not be okay, and where seeking help is seen as strength, not weakness. Support local youth groups and volunteer your time or skills if you can; sometimes one trusting adult relationship can change a teen's life. If you're an employer, consider mentoring a young person who's not in work; if you're a neighbour, reach out to that shy teen down the street. **Sharing stories** is powerful too, it breaks the stigma and isolation. Encourage young people and families to talk about these issues openly, so that being in the "lost middle" doesn't feel so lonely or shameful. When a community wraps around its youth with love and understanding, incredible change can happen.

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**No one entity can fix this alone, but together we can weave a safety net that catches every young person, not just those who fall the farthest. The "lost middle" don't have to be lost at all, if we choose to find them, to see them, and to walk alongside them.**

Youth Voices Action and organisations like it are already lighting the way. They are **ready when you are**. The question now is, will we answer this call? Will we continue to allow quiet suffering behind closed doors, or will we extend our hand before one more kid slips away?

Let's stop asking whether they're "bad enough" to deserve our help. **Let's start asking what they need to thrive.** Every young person matters, not just the ones who shout the loudest or stumble the hardest. The future of Aotearoa New Zealand depends on **all** its youth. The time to lift them up is **now**.

If this vision moves you, we invite you to act. Visit [www.youthvoicesaction.org.nz](http://www.youthvoicesaction.org.nz) to learn more about how you can stand alongside the next generation. Whether you choose to become a regular supporter, partner with us as an organisation committed to youth wellbeing, or simply share our mission, your involvement makes a real difference. Together, we can ensure every young person in Aotearoa feels seen, supported, and ready to lead. The future is calling. Let's answer it, together.

Help us continue raising voices of the lost middle.  
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