

Embargoed Release

Lifts at 5am 7 October 2026

Every \$1 invested in youth work creates \$12.69 in social value, new report finds

For the first time, new research puts a dollar value on the social impact of youth work estimating it generates \$1.72 billion in social value for young people, whānau and communities across Aotearoa over 12 months.

Young people in Aotearoa are navigating a tougher road to adulthood, with a cost-of-living crisis, uncertainty about work and the future, and challenges around mental health and wellbeing. But part of the solution may be closer to home than we think.

It could be happening at the youth centre, marae or church down the road. It's youth work, and new research released this week at an event hosted by Her Excellency Rt Hon Dame Cindy Kiro, GNZM, KSO, the Governor-General at Government House in Wellington reveals the significant value it creates for young people and their communities.

The *Te Pūrongo Whakaweawe o te Mahi Taiohi - Telling the Story of Youth Work through Social Return on Investment* by Hands for Impact for Ara Taiohi found that youth work is delivering significant social value for young people, their whānau and communities across Aotearoa. For every \$1 invested, youth work creates \$12.69 in social value.

Youth work is the intentional practice of building relationships with rangatahi that supports their wellbeing and development.

"Most New Zealanders will have a picture of youth workers playing games or taking young people on camps," says Jane Zintl MNZM, Chief Executive of Ara Taiohi. "This research shows the real value being created in those moments which can change lives and outcomes positively forever."

The independent analysis investigated the changes young people experience as a result of youth work. Technical expert Georgia Richards from Hands for Impact explains the approach behind the research. "We compare what's invested with the estimated value of the changes experienced by taiohi (youth). We then translate those changes into dollar terms, so we can show how much social value youth work helps create."

It found 12 material outcomes, including stronger relationships and belonging, decreased risk of suicidal harm, expanded education and employment pathways, and greater ability to shape their own lives.

“Belonging, friendships, education, mental health, identity, confidence, agency... these are fundamentally important,” says Zintl. “They are the foundations that help young people navigate adversity and become capable, connected, thriving adults”.

This evidence shows youth work creating significant value in society. However, investment in the people and organisations delivering it has not always matched the value being created.

The findings come as Government funding specifically allocated to youth development is budgeted at \$16.6 million in 2026/27, including \$13.7 million for the delivery of youth development services.¹ Youth work is also funded through other portfolios, reflecting its contribution across areas such as health, education, and justice. Even so, dedicated youth development funding remains limited.

Recent workforce research found that the majority of youth workers are paid below New Zealand’s median wage, while funding and resource limitations are among the sector’s biggest pressures.²

“Too often, youth work is seen as a bonus, rather than essential,” says Zintl. “But at a time when young people are facing multiple and increasingly complex challenges, we need to invest in what we know works. That means not only investing in crisis-response, but also in youth work.”

Ara Taiohi is calling for greater and more sustained investment in youth work, from Government and other funders, to give youth workers the time and resource to build the trusted relationships that make this impact possible.

The report will be released at 10 am 7 October Government House, Wellington.

ENDS

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¹ Source: [New Zealand Government, The Estimates of Appropriations 2026/27 – Social Services and Community Sector, Vote Social Development, “Partnering for Youth Development \(M77\) \(A25\)”, p. 327](#)

² Source: https://www.arataiohi.org.nz/_files/ugd/b1aa02_de99879f72214fbbb6fcad36d9f536df.pdf

Background:

About Ara Taiohi

Ara Taiohi is the national peak body for youth work in Aotearoa. We are a Te Tiriti-based, membership organisation which resources, connects and advocates for the youth development sector. <https://www.arataiohi.org.nz/>

Hands for Impact

Hands for Impact is a social impact organisation that works with charities to maximise their social impact. They are on a mission to improve access to social impact measurement for non-profit organisation in Aotearoa by offering a cost-effective, collaborative and sector-wide approach. <https://www.handsforimpact.com/>

About *Te Pūrongo Whakaweawe o te Mahi Taiohi - Telling the Story of Youth Work through Social Return on Investment – the Youth Work Impact Report*

The *Te Pūrongo Whakaweawe o te Mahi Taiohi - Telling the Story of Youth Work through Social Return on Investment - Youth Work Impact Report* was developed by Hands for Impact and commissioned by Ara Taiohi to better understand, measure and demonstrate the social value created through youth work in Aotearoa.

Young people experience real and meaningful outcomes as a result of youth work, but these outcomes can be challenging to capture and communicate in a way funders and decision-makers recognise.

The *Youth Work Impact Report* uses a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach to measure the impact youth work has in young people's lives. As part of the research, young people identified changes they had experienced in their own life as a result of youth work. These outcomes were then given a credible monetary value using financial proxies, to represent the value of that change to stakeholders. This results in a ratio to show how much social value is created for every \$1 invested.

This report has undergone an external Social Return on Investment assessment process and received a statement of assessment from Think Impact.

What is youth work?

Youth work is the intentional practice of building relationships with young people that supports their development and wellbeing. It takes place in a wide range of settings and can include everything from sport, recreation and spiritual activities to mentoring, advocacy, and group time.

Material outcomes identified in the research

The research found 12 material outcomes that young people experience as a result of youth work. These are:

- Stronger network of positive relationships (Whanaungatanga)
- Positive community contribution
- Stronger sense of belonging (Tūrangawaewae)
- Increased will to live and reduced risk of suicidal harm
- Increased personal stability
- Stronger sense of self
- Stronger connection to cultural identity
- Improved wairua / spiritual wellbeing
- Improved ability to meet everyday needs
- Expanded education and employment pathways
- Strengthened ability to shape own life path (Whai Wāhitanga)
- Improved physical wellbeing

Social Return on Investment Ratio

For every \$1 invested, youth work generates \$12.69 in social value.

Total value of outcomes

\$1.72 billion is the social value that 54 youth organisations are projected to create for taiohi after engaging with youth work over a 12-month period.

Key findings emerging from the research

The report uncovered seven thematic findings from across the research. These are:

1. Youth work creates substantial social value for young people
2. Trusted relationships are at the heart of how youth work creates value
3. Youth work creates value early, and sustained engagement is associated with a broader range of outcomes
4. Youth work's ability to be flexible and responsive is central to how it creates value
5. A significant part of youth work's value is preventative
6. The \$1.7 billion social value in the report represents only part of youth work's contribution
7. Young people are turning to youth work to navigate increasingly complex realities