



## UK Social Inclusion Research Summary

### Is Preston A Place to Belong?

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The UK case of youth citizen social science (Y-CSS) was one of 10 cases in a multiple case study commissioned by the European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme to address a pressing challenge for Europe: How to increase social inclusion for young people. YouCount, a three-year project took place in nine countries - Norway, Hungary, Lithuania, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and the UK – and set out to examine young people’s perspectives and experiences of social inclusion (defined as participation, belonging and citizenship). In Preston, a team of UCLan researchers and students, and a group of young citizen scientists (YCS) used qualitative and participatory methods to explore young people’s experiences and perspectives of belonging and social inclusion in Preston. While care should be taken in generalising the findings, our narrative literature review clarified that many of the critical issues and the barriers to belonging for young people in Preston reflected those experienced by other young people elsewhere.

## Main Findings

- Young people’s understanding of, and the meanings they attached to the terms ‘belonging’ or ‘community belonging’, were fluid and multi-faceted.
- Even though young people related to ‘belonging’ as connection to place, fundamentally for them belonging concerned the level and extent of relationships with others. Sense of belonging was fostered through ‘bonds’, ‘connections’, ‘support systems’ and ‘good relationships’ with others.
- Critical issues that impact on whether young people feel they belong were: being heard and having an influence; stereotyping by older people that excludes them; feeling safe and secure; a lack of access to youth friendly spaces; and having affordable facilities and opportunities.
- Many young people consider that Preston does not provide sufficient employment or leisure opportunities for them, thus they often feel unsupported and unsatisfied with what is available.
- However, it was also commented that there was ‘more to do in Preston than first appears – you have to dig deep’.
- Overwhelmingly, young people were negative about the physical environment of Preston. They highlighted that those with restricted mobility and wheelchair users tend to be most adversely affected when areas become rundown.
- Young people viewed public transport in Preston as expensive and as limiting them from joining activities. For instance, they wanted more opportunities in the places where they live rather than city centre based.
- The disconnect several young people felt because of being stereotyped by ‘older’ generations in Preston resulted in them not feeling part of the wider community as well as feeling disempowered.
- Gender inequality was perceived by young people to be embedded in society, and it was acknowledged as affecting opportunities for young people’s development and safety.
- The findings suggest that young people in Preston lack formal opportunities to be heard, with limited opportunities that allow their voices to surface in policy and decision-making that concerns young people.



# Introduction

The UK case of Y-CSS has explored ‘social inclusion’ by focusing on young people’s experiences of, and views of community belonging and connectedness in Preston. As a post-industrial city in the North-West of England, UK, Preston faces several socio-economic challenges and has a population that is both ethnically and faith-diverse. The city of Preston boasts high levels of community engagement in the framework of the pioneering ‘Preston Model’ of new socio-economic development and a proactive approach to community wealth building based on increasing community connections (Manley & Whyman, 2021). The case study has explored the shaping of young people’s identities (including gender identity), and their sense of belonging and connectedness in this context. In summary, the main aims of the local study were to:

- Identify what helps young people feel that they belong and are connected to Preston.
- Identify what gets in the way of young people feeling that they belong and are connected to Preston.
- Identify factors (or drivers) that better promote a supportive climate for youth-driven solutions.

To achieve these aims the research used different methods of data collection, active youth participation and stakeholder dialogue through **Living Labs**. At four Living Labs held at UCLan we aimed to create opportunities for young person-focused dialogue by facilitating contact, communication, and collaboration between young people (YCS and other young people), a wide range of stakeholders (Local Government, Community, Third Sector, NGOs, Police, Education etc.) and UCLan researchers.

## Meaning of ‘belonging’ and social inclusion

The findings indicate that the network of relationships in young people’s lives has the most impact on whether or not they feel like they belong, painting a multi-faceted picture. Feeling like one belongs comes from having relationships with people through numerous channels. A sense of belonging is cultivated by belonging to families, interest organisations, and groups of people who share your beliefs and values.

“Belonging” was characterised in terms of connections, relationships, and common interests with the absence of these making it difficult to feel a part of the community. Young people provided examples of different forms of ‘community’ that they belong to, including communities of place, association and interest (e.g. Army Cadets and running clubs), wider communities of interest groups (e.g. football, sports,

music), belonging to faith communities, and family bonds. Previous literature has shown that connection and activity, particularly sports, are crucial to community belonging (Riley, 2019).

Yet, belonging to multiple organisations, did not always mean that young people felt that they belonged to Preston. Nor was being part of different communities necessarily synonymous with a sense of community belonging, which to some seemed more elusive and idealised. Bonding with others and a feeling of togetherness and unity often characterised the way young people described “what it feels like to belong”.

## Critical Issues

The main issues identified as barriers to social inclusion and belonging were:

**Lack of being heard and having influence:** young people felt that involvement is ‘particularly low’ and that young people ‘are not involved in decision making as much as they should be’. Involving young people from deprived communities in both local and national decision-making is crucial (Hochlaf et al., 2019).

**Stereotyping of young people:** the YCS team concluded that intergenerational interactions were crucial to community cohesion and youth belonging. Their perception was that ‘older people’ often make judgements about them simply on account of their age, and that they are unfairly stereotyped. This can lead to, for instance, young people finding ways to ‘prove everybody wrong’ and avoiding places or asking for help when they need it (Vincent & Thomson, 2013).

**Feeling safe and secure** in different places and areas in Preston was an issue for young people. They described situations where they felt anxious, tried to avoid specific places and how some areas in Preston gained negative reputations due to anti-social behaviours, incidents of criminality or drinking culture (around pubs and clubs in the city centre). Feelings of anxiety and danger in a place can result in place-avoidance and a sense of exclusion (Thomas et al., 2018).

**The physical places or the lack of youth-friendly places** were seen as negative attributes of Preston. Young people suggested that Preston “could be made more attractive” and cleaner. Under these circumstances, young people are prone to leave and the majority do not “envisage themselves living in Preston long term”. UNICEF has identified that the closure of many youth centres since 2010 has deprived young people of safe and secure spaces to connect (UNICEF, n.d.).

**Economics and affordability** of doing activities/leisure represent barriers for young people. Within the category of financial constraints, the cost of transport was seen as significant, as it limits young people and becomes a key critical issue for belonging. The Health Foundation recognised the importance of addressing transport issues, specifically fair bus fares for young people to open up opportunities for participation (Collings et al., 2022).



# Opportunities for Social Inclusion and Drivers

YCS expressed mixed views regarding opportunities and what is available for young people in Preston, such as leisure activities or employment which were considered barriers to inclusion and belonging. When young people cannot find activities and opportunities for themselves in their local area, it can be challenging to experience a meaningful connection to a place. Another issue was represented by the limited activities in communities, which meant that *“most things happen in the city centre”*. Consequently, youth who undergo financial difficulties and cannot access these are excluded from such opportunities.

Nevertheless, other young people were quite enthusiastic about the outdoor areas available to them in Preston, but as mentioned, young people have diverse experiences in these locations, both good and negative, which make them feel secure or dangerous whether they are natural beauty spots or not. Regarding what was available some suggested that cinemas, skate parks, parks, and community groups were emphasised by young people as sources of paid and free leisure opportunities. Thus, there was, possibly *‘more to do in Preston than first appears – you have to dig deep’* (YCS).

Young people identified the following drivers for social inclusion:

**Trust** was perceived as the main enabler for feeling a sense of belonging within a community. This could be trusted to keep a secret, to be available for support when needed or safety.

**A shared focus** was valued by young people, as it helped in fostering connections with others. This might be a shared objective, passion, or set of principles, like religion or music.

**Spaces to connect** were considered important as they provided platforms for shared experiences (e.g. institutions, schools, religious spaces, clubs, online communities).

**Pride** represents another driver to inclusion, linked with belonging, emotional well-being and being comfortable with the place you live in.

## Recommendations for Increasing Social Inclusion

Young people suggested several key means and policies that would increase young people’s inclusion and sense of belonging in Preston. These included to:

- Develop more opportunities for young people including work experience and jobs
- Increase ways for young people to have an influence
- Support education and participation as enablers for inclusion (and belonging)
- Enforce practice and solutions focused on youth-friendly spaces

- Ensure that policy and solutions are focused on access, care and safety for young people

- Foster better collaboration, trust and consistency between young people and agencies.

## Gender Dimension

Discussions with the YCS highlighted perceived gender imbalances in society that impact their lives and the lives of other young people, regarding opportunities, expectations and safety. To reduce inequality and ensure all voices are represented and heard, the young people suggested equalising opportunities across genders through the following:

- To implement inclusive educational practices that promote gender equality in education
- To promote positive role models for girls and boys
- To encourage more open dialogue and awareness of gender issues
- To address biases in hiring and promotions
- To reduce societal pressure and stereotypes

These proposals reflected the young people’s collective understanding and emphasised the importance of comprehensive approaches to foster gender equality and create equal opportunities.

## Implications and Lessons

Although researching a topic that is difficult to define, we were able to look at social inclusion from the perspectives of young people - and with young people as researchers – providing unique and valuable contributions. In the UK case, YCSs played a crucial role in strengthening the understanding of belonging and social inclusion as experienced by young people.

Several lessons were learned from the perspective of applying Y-CSS to enhance young people’s sense of belonging:

- Young people have a great deal to offer in social science research to promote social inclusion. This includes insightful ideas and peer networks.
- Flexible recruitment strategies are needed to attract a diverse range of young people to CSS research.
- Developing positive and empowering relationships with young people can be effective in ensuring continual engagement but this takes time, skills and resources.
- Young people have many demands on their time, and professional researchers must make allowances for this.

Despite the challenges in working with YCSs, such as recruitment and retention in the project team, and the availability of YCSs to meet regularly, the benefits were clear. Among the main benefits reflected upon together with stakeholders and YCSs were:

- Challenging assumptions and understanding different perspectives.
- Providing inclusive spaces for dialogue and discussion.
- Networking opportunities for YCS and stakeholders.

- Four Living Labs between November 2022 and June 2023 involving 30+ stakeholders.

The YCS supported the data collection process through co-designing collection tools, co-researching and adding their input into data analysis and the identification of key themes.

## Research Design and Methods

The overall research design of YouCount was a multiple case study of Y-CSS using multiple sources of information (Yin, 2013). The data collection process was continuous and flexible consisting of several interrelated and partly overlapping elements that aimed to build a richer understanding of belonging from different young people's perspectives, and how new means and policymaking can increase young people's social inclusion, specifically their belonging and connectedness. In the UK, as in the other nine cases, data collection was in a stepped way, starting by seeking the views of the YCS, expanding to involve wider samples of young people in the community, and lastly, incorporating the views of other stakeholders through the Living Labs (Ridley et al, 2022).

### Our key research questions were:

1. What are young people's own views on what the critical issues are for social inclusion?
2. What is young people's experience with opportunities for social inclusion in their daily lives?
3. What new means and policies for social inclusion are needed?

### The following research methods were used:

- Narrative literature review
- Seven Focus groups / participatory workshops.
- Five stakeholder interviews conducted by YCS.
- SPLOT method (Tolstad et al, 2017) with the YCS and a wider group of young people, drawing important relationships and creating dialogue.
- YCS designed questionnaire survey completed by 50 young people.
- The 'Degrees of agreement' participatory method used in two workshops with two groups of YCS.
- Visual methods including photovoice with YCS.
- Quantitative and qualitative data collected through an app - YouCount App

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More information about the project and published reports can be viewed at <https://www.youcountproject.eu/resources>. If you have any further queries about YouCount or would like further detail of the research findings contact Professor Julie Ridley at [jridley1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:jridley1@uclan.ac.uk)

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