



UNICEF YOUTH ADVICE

THE BES ISLANDS

2026

This is an extract from the UNICEF Youth Advice 2026, written by young people aged 10 and up. In this report you can read what worries us most right now: young people on Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba (the BES islands). UNICEF Netherlands and Ipsos I&O surveyed more than a hundred young people on the BES islands to find out their worries. On the islands, the top three issues identified are **mental health problems among young people, bullying** and **dangers from other countries**. There are also concerns about animal suffering and alcohol and drug use among minors. Children and young people on the BES islands do not feel heard enough by those in charge and have little trust in politics.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

The results of the survey show that we do not always feel heard. We rate the efforts of the Public Body (the local island government) 5.4 out of 10 for listening to children and young people. The Dutch government gets a 5.0. Almost half of us have little or very little trust in the Public Body. Trust is highest among young people on Bonaire, while distrust is greatest on Saba. We feel that our opinion is asked for, since we often fill in surveys, but too little changes afterwards. Many decisions about our future are made without us. We get the sense that adults are seen as more important than children and young people.

When it comes to problems in society, we worry most about mental health problems among young people, bullying and dangers from other countries. On Bonaire, dangers from other countries are rated first; on Sint Eustatius, bullying; and on Saba, mental health problems among young people.

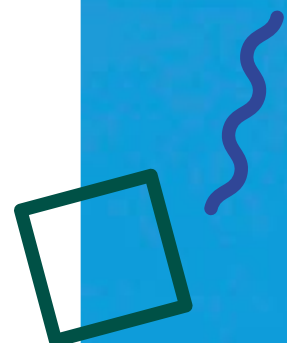
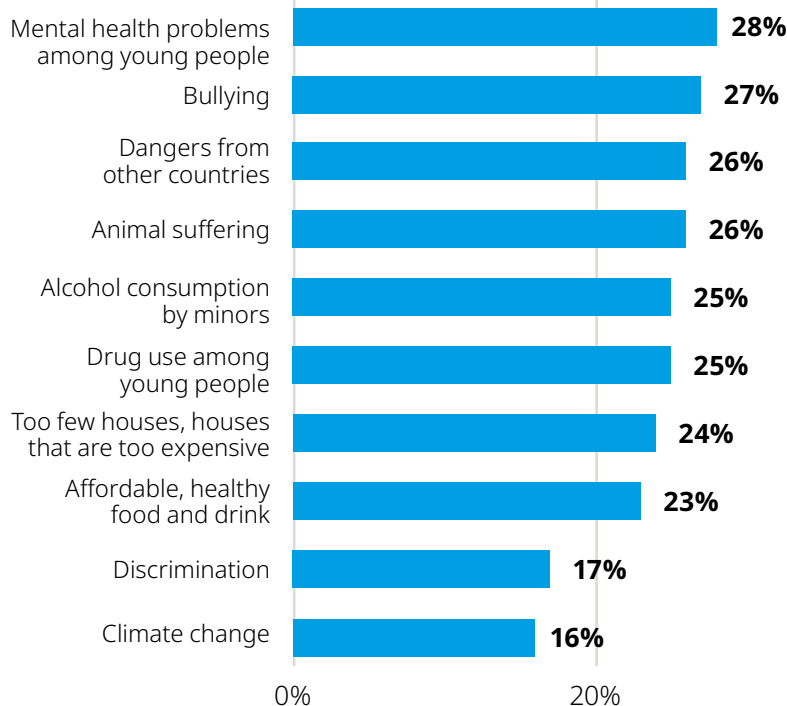
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“Therapists could come from outside the island, because I know most people do not feel comfortable talking to people from Saba; people they see every day.”

Girl, 15 years old

TOP 10 PROBLEMS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE

ON THE BES ISLANDS FIND IMPORTANT



Mental health problems among young people are our biggest concern; 28 percent of young people name this as an important problem. Around us we see people our age struggle with stress, low moods, loneliness and depression because of problems at home, at school, in relationships, through bullying or worries about the future. There are too few psychologists and therapists, so help is often not available. We also notice that mental health is still a taboo. Parents and teachers rarely talk about it, which makes it hard for us to learn to express our feelings. On the smaller islands there are also worries about privacy, so we sometimes do not dare to ask for help because everyone would find out.



"I would have schools warn that bullies face serious consequences for any form of bullying of other students."

Boy, 10 years old

Bullying is named as a serious concern by 27 percent of young people, which puts it in second place. Children in primary school mention it most. On Sint Eustatius, bullying is even named as the biggest concern. We see that bullying happens a lot and can seriously harm our self-confidence, wellbeing and mental health. Several of us say that discrimination plays a part in bullying. More should be done to prevent it. Often, people only step in once problems have got out of hand. Bullies could be

“Put more customs officers out on the water, so they check the boats more and lower the risk of bad things happening on Bonaire.”

Boy, 11 years old

dealt with more firmly. Right now we often lack clear rules for reporting and tackling bullying at school. We also think teachers could get more training to spot bullying better. Sometimes they are not aware enough of bullying, or they misread it because they come from another country and are used to a different culture.

Dangers from other countries are raised as an important concern by 26 percent of young people. Mostly young people on Bonaire and Saba, and to a lesser extent on Sint Eustatius, are worried, but in a slightly different way than young people in the Netherlands. We are mainly afraid of how the situation in other countries, such as Venezuela, indirectly affects our safety on the islands. In particular we mention weapons smuggling, drug crime, and how hard it is for small islands to protect themselves properly. We notice that illegal weapons and drugs come onto the islands fairly easily by sea. There have already been several incidents involving firearms at school and in nightlife. We are also worried about hackers from abroad who threaten our digital safety. And we worry that diseases from other countries could reach our islands. We need to take these dangers seriously and protect ourselves better.

SOLUTIONS:

THREE PIECES OF ADVICE

Advice 1: Mental health problems among young people

Make mental health support easier to access and create safe places where young people can talk about their feelings.

Advice 2: Bullying

Tackle bullying more firmly, with clear rules, accessible places to report it and more attention at school.

Advice 3: Dangers from other countries

Take safety risks on the islands seriously and invest in better checks, prevention and information for young people.



MEMO BUIJS FROM THE NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL

For the National Youth Strategy (nationalejeugdstrategie.nl), the National Youth Council (NJR) and UNICEF The Netherlands spoke with young people from Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba in 2025 about what they need for their future. Their message was clear: give us the same opportunities and greater influence on decisions that affect our lives.

Their input has been incorporated into the draft National Youth Strategy, alongside contributions from young people across the rest of the Netherlands, as well as experts and public servants. The concerns UNICEF sees now regarding mental health, bullying and safety only make the National Youth Strategy more urgent. We must not only address existing problems, but also invest in a generation with a future where young people are resilient, confident about what lies ahead, and experience equal opportunities.

The urgency is apparent, but the government has not yet succeeded in putting the National Youth Strategy into practice. We will continue to work hard to make this happen and call on politicians in both the Netherlands and the Caribbean Netherlands to ensure that it becomes a reality! So that we invest in young people and ensure that every young person in the Kingdom of the Netherlands has the same rights, opportunities and influence. And, as always: do not only talk about young people, talk with young people. Also in the Caribbean Netherlands.

KATHELIJNE VAN DEN BOOGERT VAN MENTAL HEALTH CARIBBEAN

"The worries these young people name are ones we recognise in our daily work in the Caribbean Netherlands. The demand for our mental health care has been rising among children and young people for years, especially since the coronavirus pandemic. By now, 24 percent of our clients are under 18. The growing population and the rising demand for care have led to waiting lists. Among young people we mainly see psychosocial problems, where mental health complaints and the social environment affect each other. This can involve stress, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, bullying or problems at home and at school. These problems can affect how a young person feels, behaves and takes part at school or in society.

Bullying comes up regularly during treatment. Young people tell us that bullying often happens at moments with little supervision, such as after school while waiting to be picked up. The stories of young people in this report show that more care providers are needed. It is also important to invest in prevention: spotting problems early, tackling poverty and making help easy

to reach. When problems are recognised and discussed sooner, young people can get support faster. In many cases this can prevent the need for heavier care later on."

UNICEF NETHERLANDS ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to protection, health and an environment in which it can develop as fully as possible. A safe environment includes not only physical safety, but also emotional, social and psychological safety at home, at school, online and in society. This applies to all children, without exception, therefore also to children living on the BES islands.

The Dutch government is responsible for safeguarding children's rights and for creating the appropriate legal and policy conditions. The Public Body on the islands is responsible for carrying this out locally and for creating a safe living environment for children.

UNICEF Netherlands works to improve children's rights on the islands. This is direly needed, because not all children on the BES islands grow up in an environment that is safe, healthy and supportive enough. We take the insights from this report into the Child Friendly City programme that we run on the islands together with the Public Body. Children and young people have the right to be heard and to influence decisions made on the islands (article 12).

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH:

On behalf of UNICEF Netherlands, Ipsos I&O carried out research among young people aged 10 to 17. For the first time, young people on Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba took part as well. In total, 113 young people on the BES islands filled in a detailed questionnaire about topics in society that matter to them, their worries about these topics and possible solutions.

Ipsos I&O also organised a focus group with young people from the BES islands to look more closely at the most important themes. See the full report, which also includes the advice of young people in the European Netherlands, at unicef.nl/jongerenadvies.

