

Mental Health Needs of Young People in the UK from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds Who Are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

Introduction

This poster looks at UK young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). It explores how socioeconomic disadvantage combines with NEET status and affects the mental health of young people in this community. Some interventions and ideas to improve wellbeing and future prospects are discussed whilst areas for future improvement are highlighted.



11.1%

Percentage of young people aged 16-24 in the UK who are NEET (Office for National Statistics, 2020)

Who Are NEETs?

NEETs do not belong exclusively to one demographic, gender, ethnicity, geographic region or cultural group (Boshoff et al., 2019; Department for Education, 2018; EuroStat, 2020). However, a significant proportion are from a disadvantaged or low socioeconomic background (Impetus, 2019). Whilst NEETs can be found amongst all working age groups, the term is predominantly applied to young people aged 16-24 as they make up the largest proportion of NEETs (Oliver et al., 2014). Since the 2008 recession, youth unemployment and disengagement has been on the rise (Mawn et al., 2017). Consequently, for at least the last decade, NEET young people have been a big issue in society and have been a hot topic in social policy. Over recent years, due to national and local efforts the numbers have been slowly decreasing (Impetus, 2020).

765,000

Number of young people aged 16-24 in the UK who are NEET (Office for National Statistics, 2020)

Socioeconomic disadvantage is typically characterised by fewer job and life opportunities (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). In their 2016 study, Goldman-Mellor et al found that coming from a deprived family and financial background as well as from a poor community had a significant negative impact on young people. They also found that NEETs were more likely to come from these kinds of disadvantaged backgrounds.

Evidence suggests that being NEET and coming from a low socioeconomic background can bring restrictions and impairments in terms of position in society (Mawn et al., 2017). NEETs are often considered to be lazy, unskilled and likely to give up easily which makes employers hesitant to hire them. Many from underprivileged areas are less likely to access higher education, leaving them with low or no qualifications (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). This lack of education and experience along with preconceived prejudicial ideas due to background can make it very hard for NEETs and those at risk of becoming NEET to progress in life. In effect they are doubly disadvantaged (Impetus, 2019).

Understandably these factors have a lasting effect on an individual's life in every respect including future opportunities, financial stability and independence, economic growth, career progression and satisfaction, quality of life, social and community engagement as well as self-esteem and mental health (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016).

Double Disadvantage

Mental Health and Being NEET

Not keeping up with social norms and seeming to be behind in life stages has a big impact on an individual's wellbeing and psychological state (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). This is why NEET status is just as much a mental health issue as it is a social and economic one (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that NEETs are disproportionately affected by mental health struggles. They are more prone to psychological disorders such as depression, substance abuse and even suicidal behaviour (Iyer et al., 2018; Mawn et al., 2017). In their 2016 study, Goldman-Mellor et al found that NEETs had higher rates of all psychiatric and substance disorders than their non-NEET peers. Oliver et al suggests two reasons for this. Firstly a lack of structure can make one more vulnerable to mental illness. Secondly it often leads to increased exposure to other disenfranchised people or people also struggling with mental health issues.

NEET status often disconnects people from society, culture and community, and this lack of social and community participation has a negative effect on mental health (Oliver et al., 2014). Disengagement often leads to loneliness and isolation which can be a breeding ground for mental health struggles. Therefore it seems NEET status and mental health challenges seem to have a reciprocal impact on each other (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016).

Studies have also shown that a large proportion of NEETs experience mental health problems earlier in life. Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time in a person's mental health development, and mental illnesses can frequently originate during this stage of life. One study found that nearly 60% of NEET youths had already experienced one or more mental health problems in childhood/adolescence compared to 35% of non-NEETs (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016).

To further compound the problem, NEETs can also experience social prejudice and are often negatively viewed in society (Iyer et al., 2018). Combined with coming from a low socioeconomic background and dealing with one or more mental health challenges, as is the case for many NEETs, the obstacles to overcome can to many seem insurmountable. For this reason, although many NEETs are keen to reengage with work or learning, many feel hopeless about their future prospects (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). This has a critical negative impact on their self-esteem and mental health.



Getting Unstuck

There is surprisingly little empirical evidence for the effectiveness of interventions supporting NEETs and their mental health (Oliver et al., 2014). However, one thing that does appear to be true is that being NEET is "sticky" (Impetus, 2019) and once someone gets stuck it can be very hard to get unstuck. In 2019, youth engagement charity, Impetus, reported that 75% of those NEET for 3 months have actually been NEET for 12 months.

In a review commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation, the Institute for Employment Studies found some key points which can be incorporated into interventions to improve success (Impetus, 2020).

- Early identification of those at risk
- Effectively engaging those in need through the use of music, sports, arts and financial provision
- Personalised support and understanding of the individual's unique needs
- Establishing trust through relationship with a consistent advisor
- Building skills, experience and resilience whilst also working to address obstacles to reengagement

Confidence-building activities have also been shown to be beneficial (Mawn et al., 2017). Given the significant role that self-esteem plays in the engagement or disengagement of young people and their perception of their future success, it is important to take an individual approach as much as possible. What works with one individual may not work with another, and the same is true of the communities in which they find themselves. Mawn et al also found that the most disadvantaged are the ones who benefit the least from the interventions available or who find them hardest to engage with. This effectively makes this group even more marginalized. It is clear then that there is a gap between those most needing support & those actually seeking and benefitting from it (Iyer et al, 2018).

What Does the Future Look Like?

There is a lack of both qualitative and quantitative evidence into what causes people to become NEET, and even more so in how to effectively help people to move from NEET to EET (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016; Impetus, 2020). This is an important area for future research. However, data analysing interventions can be particularly difficult as they are often delivered by charities and rely on volunteers, they don't always follow set delivery methods, charities are subject to funding limitations and engagement from service users is not always consistent (Mawn et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2014). Studies need to evaluate what works, who it works for, what parts of certain interventions do and don't work, and the effectiveness of interventions on physical and mental health (Mawn et al., 2017). The current limited understanding means that although numbers may be slowly decreasing, it is not at a fast enough rate, and each year more young people are at risk of either becoming NEET and their mental health suffering or experiencing mental health challenges that lead to becoming NEET.

To create effective interventions there needs to be greater involvement from psychologists and behaviour change specialists into how best to help NEETs reengage rather than having the majority of decisions made by those whose interests are more financial and political and who have limited understanding of human behaviour (Mawn et al., 2017). One of the most effective preventors for adolescents at risk of becoming NEET is to treat their mental health struggles early. This will benefit them & society in many ways in the long-term (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). It's important that the interventions we use don't only tackle the symptoms (being NEET), but also the cause – whether that be socioeconomic disadvantage, mental health problems or other debilitating issues (Mawn et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is an important but challenging life stage. Many young people are unable to make the transition smoothly leading to a significant number of young adults in the UK being not in employment, education or training. A large proportion of these come from a low socioeconomic background which further impacts their ability to find work or engage in education or training. These factors have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of NEETs putting them at even further disadvantage and risk. Adding to the problem is a lack of understanding and evidence about how best to support these young people to reengage with work or education and also how to deal with their mental health challenges. Whilst further research is necessary to help those already in this position, it is also important that intervention take place early enough to prevent young people from becoming NEET in the first place and to help them to deal with the mental health challenges that come with disadvantage before they become damaging so that we can turn the tide for young people in this and future generations.



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