

Challenges Facing Young People

Debate on 13 December 2018

Summary

This House of Lords Library Briefing has been prepared in advance of the debate due to take place on 13 December 2018 in the House of Lords on the motion moved by Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (Labour), “that this House takes note of the challenges facing young people”.

The briefing highlights some of the problems identified as affecting young people in the UK today. In so doing it provides statistical information on young people and sets out relevant government policy. It concludes with suggestions for further reading.

Young People in the UK

There are several different age ranges that can be used to define who constitutes young people. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines a youth as a person between the ages of 15 and 24 years.¹ In the UK, for the purposes of population statistics, there are two separate age cohorts which cover this group: 15- to 19-year-olds and 20- to 24-year-olds. For the purposes of this briefing, the term ‘young people’ will refer to anyone within the 15 to 24 age bracket, unless a different group is used by the source quoted.

The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid-year population estimates indicated that in 2017 there were 3.7 million 15- to 19-year-olds in the UK and 4.2 million 20- to 24-year-olds. Young people aged 15 to 24 made up 12 percent of the total UK population.² The proportion of people in England and Wales in this age range was also 12 percent.

Jobs and Unemployment

In 2016, Central YMCA published the results of a survey of people aged between 16 and 25 which asked respondents to identify the challenges “causing most harm” to young people.³ This survey found that a “lack of employment opportunities” scored highest in terms of importance. The unemployment rate for young people has been consistently higher than that for older age groups since 1992.⁴ The unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds was 11.1% in July to September 2018 compared to 3.8% of 25- to 34-year-olds and 2.8% of 35- to 49-year-olds.⁵ However, rates of youth unemployment are currently comparatively low. In July to September 2018, 476,000 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK were unemployed.⁶ This figure had fallen by 41,000 on the previous year and was close to the lowest level since comparable records began in 1992. Young people were also more likely to have unpredictable work patterns than their older peers, with 17% of people aged 18 to 25 having their working hours changed at short notice, compared to 5% of workers aged 36 to 65.⁷

In July to September 2018, 760,000 people aged 16 to 24 years were not in education, employment or training (NEET), 29,000 fewer than the previous year.⁸ Of this total figure, 37% were classified as unemployed while the remainder were classified as economically inactive. People who were NEET constituted 10.9% of all young people.

The Government has stated that it is committed to achieving full employment.⁹ In March 2017, a House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee report argued the fall in youth unemployment was the result in part of a “buoyant job market” as well as targeted Jobcentre Plus programmes intended to move young people more swiftly into work.¹⁰ However, while it concluded “good progress [had] been made on youth unemployment in recent years”, the committee raised concerns regarding the implementation of the Government’s new programme for the provision of employment support for young people seeking employment (referred to as the youth obligation). The Government announced that this programme would be implemented alongside universal credit from April 2017. The committee argued delays to the roll-out of universal credit would lead to a delay in implementing this scheme and recommended the two schemes be separated.¹¹ Responding to the committee’s report, the Government stated the youth obligation would remain linked to universal credit and its roll-out would not delay the implementation of the youth obligation scheme.¹² This decision was subsequently criticised, including by the former Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions Stephen Timms (Labour MP for East Ham) who has argued the youth obligation had not been implemented consistently across the country, leaving young people in some areas without adequate support to find work.¹³

Poverty and Homelessness

In 2015, the New Policy Institute found that 30% of people aged 14 to 24 were living in poverty, meaning their income after tax and housing costs was less than 60% of the median household income.¹⁴ This was the highest proportion for any age group, the institute argued. More recently, figures from the Department for Work and Pensions indicated households with children where the head of the family was aged between 16 to 24 were more likely to be living in poverty, with 54% earning below the threshold of 60% of median income, after housing costs.¹⁵ This compared to 21% of households of all ages with children earning below this threshold.

In 2018, the charity Homeless Link published the findings of a survey of organisations working with homeless people to which 109 homelessness service providers and 79 local authorities in England responded.¹⁶ The survey found 40% of local authorities had experienced an increase in youth homelessness. It also found 55% of responding homelessness services reported an increase in demand.

According to figures from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, young people in England make up only a minority of rough sleepers, with 8% of rough sleepers being between the ages of 18 and 25. This compares to 81% of rough sleepers who were over the age of 25 and 11% for whom ages were not known.¹⁷ In August 2018, the Government published its rough sleeping strategy, which included proposals for a social impact bond programme intended to support people aged 18 to 24 who were homeless or rough sleeping or at risk of becoming so.¹⁸ While the Government’s strategy has been welcomed by Crisis, the homelessness charity, it has also argued the Government needed to do more to tackle underlying issues such as shortages in social housing and cuts to welfare.¹⁹

Home Ownership

A further issue identified as affecting young people is a lack of affordable housing. In 2016, PricewaterhouseCoopers argued the so-called ‘generation rent’, which included people in the age range

20 to 39, would have to save for 19 years in order to buy their own home.²⁰ More recently, in April 2018, the Resolution Foundation stated that, while it remained an aspiration of many young people to own their own home, up to 16% of those born between 1981 and 2000 were likely to remain in private rental accommodation for their whole life.²¹

Over the last 20 years, the number of young people in the private rented sector has increased. Between 1996/97 and 2016/17, the number rose from 365,000 to 513,000.²² During the same period there was an increase across all age groups, except those aged over 75. As a result, the proportion of private renters aged 16 to 24 decreased from 18% to 11% over this period.²³ At the same time, the number of young people becoming first time buyers has decreased. For example, the Council of Mortgage Lenders reported that the *English Housing Survey* for 2015–16 showed that the proportion of first time buyers aged 16 to 24 had fallen from 21.3% in 1995/96 to 7.5% in 2015/16.²⁴

The Government has introduced policies intended to make it easier for first time buyers to enter the housing market. This included the 2017 autumn budget announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, of the removal of stamp duty for first time buyers on the first £300,000 of any purchase up to £500,000.²⁵ Further information on the housing market in the UK and Government policy on increasing the availability of affordable housing is provided in the House of Lords Library Briefing, [Affordable Housing](#) (22 October 2018).²⁶

Physical Health

Those aged 16 to 24 in England are the least likely age group to suffer from obesity and the most likely to meet the NHS guidelines for physical activity.²⁷ According to the 2016 Health Survey for England, 11% of 16- to 24-year-olds are obese.²⁸ However, there has been an overall increase in the prevalence of obesity over the last decade. The overall prevalence of obesity amongst all age groups has increased to 27% in 2015, up from 15% in 1993.²⁹ In 2015–16, there were 372 finished admission episodes for 16-to 24-year-olds where the primary diagnosis was obesity, compared to 184 in 2006–07.³⁰ During the last decade there has also been an increase in childhood obesity, with 22.5% of children in 2013–14 aged 4 to 5 and 33.5% of children aged 10 to 11 being overweight or obese.³¹

The focus of government policy has been the reduction of obesity in children. However, the Government's strategy, updated in January 2017, included measures affecting all consumers, not just children, such as reducing the level of sugar in consumer products.³² The House of Commons Health Committee has recommended the Government should go further, recommending for example it should enable local authorities to limit the number of unhealthy food outlets in their areas.³³

Mental Health

Young people in the UK are more likely to report mental health problems than other age groups: 70% of people in the UK aged 18 to 34 self-reported experience of such problems, compared to 68% of 35- to 54-year-olds and 58% of people aged over 55.³⁴ A young person's experiencing of mental health problems is also likely to have an impact on the rest of their lives. NHS England state that half of all mental health problems are established by the age of 14 and that 75% are established by the age of 24.³⁵ NHS England has indicated 14.3% of 11- to 16-year-olds and 16.9% of 17- to 19-year-olds have experienced a mental disorder.³⁶ Among both age groups, the most common type of disorder was emotional disorders.³⁷ Statistically emotional disorders were more likely to effect young women: 22.4% of girls aged 17 to 19 identified as having emotional disorders, compared to 7.9% of boys aged 17 to 19.

There is a gender gap in experiencing mental illness, the size of which varies between different age groups. The NHS England survey of mental health and wellbeing in England, *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*, found one adult in six had a common mental disorder.³⁸ For women, this proportion was about one in five while for men it was one in eight. This difference is larger amongst those aged 16 to 24.³⁹ One in four women in this age range reported having symptoms of a common mental disorder in the previous week. This compared to one in ten men in this age range.

In 2016, NHS England published its *Five Year Forward View for Mental Health*.⁴⁰ This included objectives intended to improve the mental health of children and young people, such as increasing the provision of mental health care to 70,000 more children and young people, with the provision of more government funding.⁴¹ In October 2018, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Mental Health published a report on the implementation of the five year plan.⁴² The APPG argued that since 2016, while some improvements had been made, there had been a deterioration of core mental health services due to a lack of resources and an increase in demand.⁴³ It also recommended that NHS England provide additional funding for children and young people's mental health services.⁴⁴ Responding to the APPG's report, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Nigel Adams, argued spending on mental health in the NHS had increased since the introduction of the plan.⁴⁵ However, he acknowledged there was "unmet need" in mental health service provision and that the Government was looking for ways to increase community mental health services to help prevent in-patient admissions.

In January 2017, the Government announced that it intended to publish a green paper on improving children's mental health. In May that year, in anticipation of that paper, the House of Commons Education and Health committees published a joint report entitled *Children and Young People's Mental Health—The Role of Education*.⁴⁶ The committees' recommendations included that the quality of mental health support in schools should form part of Ofsted inspection reports.⁴⁷ They also recommended support should be provided by the Government for continued professional development for teachers to better enable them to recognise early signs of mental illness.⁴⁸ In December 2017, the Government published its green paper on children and young people's mental health.⁴⁹ This included proposals to support the establishment of a designated senior lead for mental health in all schools and colleges; to provide funding for mental health support teams; and pilot a four week waiting time for access to specialist NHS children and young people's mental health services.⁵⁰ However, the House of Commons Education and Health committees subsequently criticised these proposals, arguing they did not go far enough in terms of meeting the needs of young people and they would "put significant pressure on the teaching workforce without guaranteeing sufficient resources".⁵¹

Suicide

Rates of suicide amongst young people are lower than the population as a whole. The rate for 15- to 19-year-olds is 5.6 deaths per 100,000 population.⁵² The rate for people age 20 to 24 is 8.7. This compares to the overall rate of 10.1 deaths per 100,000 for all people (those aged over 10). The rate was highest—15.6 deaths by suicide—amongst people aged 45 to 49.

In July 2017, researchers at the University of Manchester conducted a study of the common themes in the lives of children and young people who died by suicide in England and Wales.⁵³ While the study concluded that there was rarely a single reason why someone might commit suicide, they found the following common themes: amongst those under 20, these were academic pressures and bullying while for 20- to 24-year-olds workplace, housing and financial problems were common. This study also found instances of suicide-related internet use in 26% of deaths of those under 20, and in 13% of deaths of

those aged between 20- and 24-years-old. Two groups were identified as being prominent amongst people committing suicide in this age range: 9% of those under 20 had been looked-after children (ie children looked after by a local authority); and 6% of under 20s and 3% of 20- to 24-year-olds were reported to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) or uncertain of their sexuality.

Crime and Prisons

Young people are more likely to be a victim of crime. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the year ending March 2018, 20.2% of people aged 16 to 24 in England and Wales had been a victim of crime.⁵⁴ This compared to 14.4% for the adult population as a whole. Young men were more likely to be victims of crime: 22.4% of men aged 16 to 24, compared to 17.9% of women aged 16 to 24. The campaign organisation Crimestoppers has also reported that almost half of the members of the public who contact it are under 35.⁵⁵ Recently, the National Crime Agency identified so-called ‘county lines’—criminal networks supplying drugs from urban centres into smaller towns and rural areas—as often involving the exploitation of young or otherwise vulnerable people.⁵⁶ In November 2018, 65% of the forces reporting statistics on county lines found this activity was linked to the exploitation of children.⁵⁷

Young people are the age group most likely to take drugs illegally. In 2016/17, 19.2% of people aged 16 to 24 had taken an illicit drug in the last year. This compared to the overall figure of 8.5% for adults aged 16 to 59.⁵⁸ However, drug use amongst people aged 16 to 24 has reduced over the last decade, falling from 24.2% in the 2006/07 survey.

According to the Ministry of Justice, in June 2018, people aged 15 to 24 made up 17.5% of the prison population in England and Wales.⁵⁹ The proportion of the prison population under the age of 24 has reduced since June 2013, when the figure was 23.8%. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons has said, while the reduction in the proportion of younger prisoners is to be welcomed, those that remain include the “most vulnerable and troubled young adults”.⁶⁰

In November 2018, the Government published its *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy 2018*.⁶¹ Its objectives include developing “preventative methods and education to divert more young people from a life of serious and organised crime and reduce reoffending”.⁶² The Government has also announced the creation of a £200 million youth endowment fund, which it has stated would focus on young people at risk of crime and violence.⁶³ During a debate on organised crime and the safety of young people, the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, Ben Wallace, argued a successful strategy to tackle the exploitation of young people by gangs would need to include educating people about the dangers of exploitation, as well as address the means by which young people were exploited, including through social media.⁶⁴

Further Information

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