

Addressing Youth Inequalities Through Poverty Reduction Nationally and Locally



The York Policy Engine



Challenges Facing Young People Today

Young people are facing a range of new challenges linked to rising youth inequalities in health, education, employment and housing. Transitions to young adulthood have been jeopardised by a range of factors such as austerity, covid-19, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. This has meant that young people's life chances and opportunities have lessened, whilst the policy responses have left many young people without sufficient support and assistance.

Poor outcomes in later life are often rooted in childhood adversities, with evidence showing that childhood poverty is one of the strongest predictors in reproducing disadvantages. Since 2010 child poverty has risen. There are now 900,000 more children in child poverty than in 2010/11, and 4.5 million children in poverty overall. Growing up in poverty not only affects children's wellbeing and opportunities during childhood but opportunities for young people throughout their lives. Young people face entrenched inequalities in education, mental healthcare and the labour market. More recently, concerns have been raised around rising rates of young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) and the long term 'scarring' effects of being NEET, including poor job quality, lower lifetime earnings and greater risks of poor mental health.

An ambitious strategy is needed to reverse course and ensure that all children and young people are sufficiently supported throughout their journeys to adulthood – alongside a comprehensive strategy that eliminates child poverty and that builds on the proud record of poverty reduction in the last Labour government.

At the University of York, we have a longstanding tradition of groundbreaking research into poverty, inequality and social justice. Our newly established Born in Bradford Centre for Social Change is accelerating and amplifying the impact of our research into the spatial concentration of health, social, and economic inequalities generated through the longstanding partnership between Born in Bradford and the University of York. This report showcases some projects that will enhance understandings of the everyday inequalities facing young people.

Recommendations for policy change

1. We need substantive investments in youth services, holistically targeting young people who face the greatest adversities.
2. Increased mental health support provision that is driven by better evidence and understanding of the drivers of poor mental health.
3. As young people's lives become more complex, youth policy needs to address many interconnected issues with long-term, comprehensive, joined-up approaches.
4. Interventions need to be place-sensitive, including increased awareness of the role of community responses in mitigating the risks of poor outcomes.

Recommendations for evidence making

1. A stronger emphasis on the development of the child and youth strategy, meaningfully including those with lived experience of life on a low income.
2. More research is needed to understand the impact of place and belonging for youth inequality.
3. A deeper exploration into the contemporary drivers and impacts of child and youth inequalities in the context of the UK.

Key facts and figures

4.5m

children living in poverty.

987,000

young people aged 16–24 not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (ONS, 2025) (1 in 8 young people). The NEET rate has remained around 12% (or higher) for decades.

600,000

young people who are long-term NEET (approximately 8% of all young people in the UK) out of work or learning for more than 12 months, and 300,000 for more than two years.

15%

young people aged 16–24 not in education, employment or training in the North East of England



50%

mental health conditions often start in adolescence, with **half** established by age 14 years. One in six children aged 6–16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021.

9%

compared to 9% in South West England.



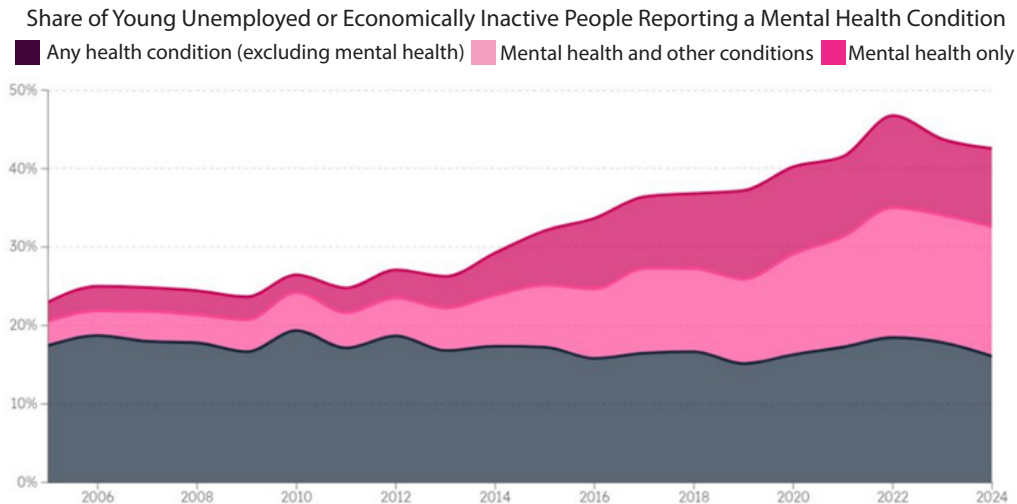
There is substantial evidence on the long term ‘scarring’ effects of being NEET, including **greater risks of poor mental health**, especially for those who are long-term NEET.

Increasing rates of mental health problems among young people reflect broader concerns about young people’s well-being. In 2023, **20%** of children aged 8 to 16 had a probable mental disorder, and in 2023, **23%** of 17–19-year-olds in 2023 (Newlove-Delgado T, 2023).

Mental health conditions have a large economic cost and impact on public services. National lifetime loss of earnings for children in England who experienced anxiety problems at age 14 and failed to achieve at least five GCSEs amounts to more than **£850 million**.

Young People and Inequality

Recent data points to 987,000 young people aged 16–24 estimated to be NEET (neither in Education, Employment, or Training) (ONS, 2025). Analysis from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that 600,000 young people will be long-term NEET (remain out of work or learning for more than 12 months), and a further 300,000 are out of work or learning for more than 2 years (Casey, 2025). Growth in the number of young people who are unemployed or economically inactive reporting poor health indicates a growing area of concern.



Source: Labour Force Survey + Annual figures are averages across quarters. Data includes up to Q3 2024. Note: The Labour Forces Survey (LFS) definition of mental health problems includes depression, bad nerves or anxiety, mental illness or suffering from phobias, panics and other nervous disorders.

Source: JRF (Casey, 2025)

Research continues to emphasise how social inequality shapes life outcomes and how many of these impacts are not equally felt. Statistics continue to show that where young people come from matters, and that spatial characteristics such as educational provision and local labour markets have a significant impact on how their lives turn out. Young people are also much more likely to be NEET if from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds, are 'looked after', have a disability, have SENs, or are a young carer (Wenham, 2015).

There is also evidence of a strong association between adversity and future labour market participation (Elsenberg, et al., 2025a). Exiting education earlier in life often explains the link between adversity and benefit take-up (Bennetson, et al., 2025), whilst experiences of childhood adversity are also associated with risks of belonging to high-intensity user groups across various public service systems including health, welfare and criminal justice later in life (Elsenburg, et al., 2025b).

Place and Spatial Approaches to Understanding Youth Inequality

Where children and young people live greatly affects the opportunities available to them. Research shows a **Child of the North has a 27% chance of living in poverty compared to 20% in the rest of England**, that they attend school less, are more likely to be living with obesity and have a 58% chance of living in local authorities with above levels of low-income families (Pickett, 2021) (Pickett, Taylor-Robinson et al, 2021). Significant studies such as Born in Bradford are enhancing understandings of child and youth-based inequality by exploring the complex interplay between place, opportunity and children and young people's circumstances – especially how opportunity is shaped across the life-course.

"There's nothing here for young people. We've got a water park but it's expensive ...We've got one cinema which is like run down, and obviously they're trying to build a new one, which is gonna be so expensive we can't afford it anyway. And it's just, they build like apartments and stuff, and they could be building like other things for us."

(Participant, 25, in a Youth Inequalities in Coastal Deprivation Project, University of York, Wenham, 2020)

The importance of place and belonging – including how children and young people see their own circumstances and communities – enhances policy responses to child and youth inequality as localised inequalities can be fully understood and properly addressed. Wenham (2020) shows the extent that ‘place’ enhances our understanding of children and young people that are situated geographically and economically on the periphery.

Future Research: Born in Bradford Centre for Social Change

The Born in Bradford Centre for Social Change at the University of York (BiB CSC) is a collaborative initiative between the world leading research programme Born in Bradford (BiB), the Healthy Livelihoods team within Health Sciences at York and The York Policy Engine (TYPE). BiB CSC is leveraging evidence, innovative policy engagement, and community-driven approaches to address societal challenges. It will drive meaningful social change by bridging research and policy through sustained collaborative efforts. The focus is on accelerating and amplifying the health, social, and economic research and impact generated through the longstanding partnership between Born in Bradford and the University of York.

The Centre is exploring these topics through new projects that are exploring youth and inequality to underpin appropriate policy responses, including:

Youth, Benefits, and Mental Health

Dr Aniela Wenham is investigating how welfare policy affects the mental health of under-25s. Comparing different localities, she is exploring the links between welfare conditionality, sanctions, and insecure employment, aiming to inform youth-responsive welfare and employment policy.

Pathways to Adulthood: Supporting 16–18-Year-Olds in Bradford

Using data from the Born in Bradford Age of Wonder project, **Dr Adam Formby** is examining youth transitions in a context where high numbers of young people are in poverty and not in education, training or employment (NEET). Co-produced with young people and service providers, this research will develop actionable insights for improving education, employment, and wellbeing outcomes.

MORE INFORMATION

Scan the QR code for more information and for downloadable links to studies featured in this report.

To contact The York Policy Engine email: type@york.ac.uk

