

Increasing mental health problems among Britain's young people

Thomas Scripps
2 February 2013

Back in 2010, two years after the economic crash, academics from Roehampton University and the children's charity Elizabeth Finn Care published a report demonstrating the crippling effects of the recession in terms of mental wellbeing. It stated that incidents of depression had risen by between four- and fivefold and that those aged 18-30 were more likely to suffer than any other age group. Recent reports show that things have deteriorated.

A Youth Index study published last month by The Prince's Trust found that one in ten young people feel they cannot cope with day-to-day life. Nearly half of unemployed respondents said that their lack of a job had led to panic attacks, self-harm and self-loathing. This is compared to 27 percent of young people in work. The Prince's Trust chief executive, Martina Milburn, said, "A frightening number of unemployed young people feel unable to cope—and it is particularly tough for those who don't have a support network in place.

"We know at The Prince's Trust that it is often those from the most vulnerable backgrounds who end up furthest from the job market. Life can become a demoralising downward spiral—from a challenging childhood into life as a jobless adult," Milburn added.

Richard Parish, chief executive of the Royal Society of Public Health, said, "The Youth Index clearly shows a worrying discrepancy between young people who are in work and those who are not. These unemployed young people need support to re-gain their self-worth and, ultimately, get them back in the workplace."

Another survey this month of teachers carried out by YouGov showed that young children cannot help but be affected by increased stress at home. Some 78 percent of teachers believed that government cuts have had a negative effect on the mental health of their pupils or

their families.

Numerous studies have shown that the longer young people remain without a job, the more damaging is the impact on their mental health. With the number of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) now hovering around the 1 million mark, these figures become especially damning. Added to this, youth unemployment lasting longer than a year rocketed up by 250 percent between 2011 and 2012. In some areas, such as the north east, youth unemployment has seen a 400 percent increase since the beginning of the recession.

Even relatively affluent areas are not immune. Julie Duffy, chief officer at the What? centre in Stourbridge, revealed how it has seen a sharp rise in cases, with up to a quarter of its weekly workload now dealing with mental health issues. Duffy explained, "GPs are referring from right across the borough, including people who have been trying to commit suicide.

"With regards to mental health so many are suffering due to not being able to find work or family problems, it's an epidemic.... It is bleak for people who don't have the right skills—it's a big challenge for young people and more needs to be done."

The fact is that less, much less, is being done. Government support for young people has fallen 26 percent, and many local councils are targeting youth services for cuts.

For all those in education, there is the constant knowledge of £27,000 worth of debt waiting for them should they attend university. If they cannot, they must enter a jobs market in which even graduates are struggling to find stable employment, with one in five 16-24-year-olds out of work. Coupled with the promise of massive repayments, the continual educational reforms of Michael Gove—as well as the constant claims

made by the media that current qualifications are not rigorous enough—mean students are increasingly worried about the eligibility of their subjects and grades.

The Family Doctor Association (representing GPs in more than 1,000 surgeries across Britain) reported a rise in the number of teenagers seeking help for exam-related stress. According to Young Minds (a children’s mental health charity), the number of calls regarding anxiety centred on tests rose from 27 percent in 2009 to 40 percent in 2010. Those suffering will have come to realise the nature of education not as a means of personal development, but as a competitive system of ranking in which the stakes are higher than at any time in the past 50 years.

For the ever-increasing numbers of young people denied further education, the situation is perhaps more dire.

The incapability of capitalism to provide everyone with the basic right to a job is now manifesting itself as an assault on the mental wellbeing of a generation. These figures damn any popular media or political claims seeking to show welfare payments as an excuse for “shirkers”. The joblessness imposed on young people by the capitalist system leads not to an easy life, but an unfulfilling existence.

Despite this, government spending on mental health has fallen for the first time in 10 years. With 50,000 job losses in the National Health Service expected over the next 10 years, *Channel 4 News* revealed mental health services would be the hardest hit—losing a disproportionate number of staff and with a high proportion of those on the clinical side.

Of the many pieces of feedback the government ignored as it carried its fraudulent “listening” exercise when faced with widespread opposition to the privatisation of the NHS was a survey conducted by the mental health charity Rethink. It found that only 31 percent of GPs would feel confident commissioning mental health services—as they would be compelled to do under the government’s plans. When children in the poorest households are three times more likely to suffer from poor mental health than children in better-off households, the government’s lack of empathy is clear. Those suffering are none of their concern.

In a *Guardian* article, the principal of Queen Mary’s sixth form college in Basingstoke said, “Young people

are increasingly worried about whether or not they will be able to afford higher education; whether or not they will be able to find a job on leaving school or university; and whether or not they will be able to afford their own place to live”

He added, “In 30-odd years of teaching, I have never seen 16-18 year olds so politicised.”

Young people are indeed becoming aware that their problems have far wider roots than their own immediate circumstances, and this is opening them to a critique of capitalist society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact