

UK: Nearly half a million young people not in receipt of minimal state support

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Youth are bearing the brunt of the Conservative government's austerity measures, with thousands affected by unemployment, homelessness and poverty. Their plight is made worse by brutal cuts to welfare benefits and social programmes.

There are currently around 794,000 16-to-24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEETs). This is approximately 11 percent of all youth in the country. The real figure is likely higher due to the cautious assumptions behind government statistics. New research reveals that large numbers of these lack even the minimal state support they are entitled to.

The London Youth charity published a report, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Young Londoners Unemployed Yet Unsupported."

It defines as "hidden" the 480,000 youth across Britain in the 18-to-25 age bracket that are NEET and not accessing statutory support such as welfare benefits and Job Centre Plus services. It details some of the causes and effects of this form of social exclusion, highlighting the broader social conditions facing youth today with case studies. The research was based on data collected via their social programmes, surveys, and official statistics.

London Youth originated in a coalition of youth charities in the 1880s from the "ragged school" movement that provided education and support to destitute children across the country. This was established in 1844, the year Frederick Engels wrote his seminal *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, by which time the organisation ran over 20 free schools.

There are a range of social and economic factors that are pushing youth "off the radar," the report finds. Many struggle to access Job Centre services due to lack of proper documentation or other bureaucratic hurdles.

Others lack a bank account, internet access or sufficient literacy. Others are carers for older relatives.

The political and media establishment has waged a systematic campaign of demonization of welfare recipients and young people, particularly the most oppressed layers. London Youth notes that many deliberately avoid the welfare system due to stigmatisation that has fostered a misconception that accessing statutory state support is a sign that one has "given up" on life.

Many are repelled by onerous job-seeking requirements that would "take control of their lives," forcing them to engage in fruitless, unpaid work programmes. The research found:

"They were discouraged from signing on after hearing stories from others who had been sanctioned [received cuts to their welfare payments], or experienced delays to receiving their payments, and the financial hardship this caused. Young people described the process as 'jumping through hoops for nothing.' Taking all of this into consideration, many young people decided that they would 'rather not bother.'"

Young people mistrust Job Centres, which are "not seen as a genuine source of support that would help young people find a job" because they are "unhelpful" or they "fear being treated badly" due to the threat of arbitrary sanctions and other punitive measures.

"Hidden" youth are more likely to possess GCSE qualifications and have completed further education than their counterparts who do participate in the welfare system. This exposes the lie that all unemployed youth are voluntary "drop-outs." Young workers face a lack of decent opportunities.

The welfare state has been eviscerated over the last decades. The role of Job Centres is often toxic, with staff under pressure to reject legitimate benefit claims

and force claimants into dead-end, low-paid jobs.

The transition from education to the labour market is a minefield. The report describes the long-term effect of poor careers advice and disruptive changes in the job market for which youth are unprepared. Many experience multiple set-backs before finding a permanent job, often poorly paid or demeaning.

The study discusses how social environment determines much of the response to these socio-economic pressures. A struggling young person may decide not to persevere through official channels and instead turn to friends or family members, while others enter the growing “off the books” economy of cash-in-hand work.

These problems can cause a vicious cycle of knock-backs, with the study noting long-term effects including increased risk of unemployment and poverty.

For those youth that do receive state support, its already paltry value is being systematically reduced. Most “hidden” youth live with their parents and are less likely to be living independently than those claiming state support. However, housing benefit for young people only covers the cost of a single room in a shared house and the Income Support rate is also lower.

The Conservatives eliminated Housing Benefit for 18-to-21-year-olds in 2014 but were forced into a U-turn due to popular hostility to this vindictive policy. However, the benefit has been merged into the new Universal Credit system, aimed at cutting welfare spending and making benefits harder to claim. This and other austerity measures are exacerbating youth homelessness.

Precarious working conditions are becoming the norm, with zero-hours contracts in the “gig economy” and other measures impacting on millions. Over one-third of employees in this sector are young people.

Many don’t sign on as unemployed, whether when in-work (when many are eligible for in-work benefits) or even during periods of unemployment. Youth who are working a few hours a week are effectively hidden from the unemployment statistics and don’t receive the support they need.

The lack of a reliable income is pushing large numbers of young workers into debt. A 2017 study by Populus Data Solutions found that 48 percent of 18-to-30-year-olds have to regularly borrow money, skip meals or work overtime to make ends meet.

Around one-quarter are in permanent debt. These financial pressures and the lack of a stable future are fostering hopelessness and impacting mental health.

The charities involved in this research do not provide any solutions for the root cause of this social crisis. Their proposals ignore the structural unemployment that is inherent to capitalism. Their calls for increased funding to youth charities to help youth into the labour market are simply an attempt to “grease the wheels of supply and demand,” as one charity activist admitted on social media.

The government shrugged off the issue of hundreds of thousands of young people going without even minimal welfare support. In response to the London Youth report, an official spokesperson refused to discuss the findings, instead claiming that youth unemployment is falling.

Youth face a punitive system as the ruling class creates a “hostile environment” in the same spirit as that targeting immigrants at the centre of the Windrush scandal. The wholesale waste of talent and energy is an indictment of an obsolete social order.



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