YOUTH ACCESS

Championing Youth Advice and Counselling

Equity scoping

Addressing inequity in service provision and experiences for young people facing marginalisation

February 2024

About Youth Access

Youth Access exists to ensure that every young person has access to the support they need, when and where they need it, to thrive on their journey into adulthood.

Alongside our member network of 128 youth advice and counselling services, we champion young people's right to access high-quality services providing a range of support, from mental health and wellbeing to housing and employment, all under one roof, in their local community.

Introduction

All young people deserve access to support that respects their rights and meets their needs. Yet, too often, the very systems created to support young people perpetuate inequality and reproduce systems of oppression. Put simply, many young people remain under-heard and under-served, facing barriers to services often not designed for or reflective of them.

We know that community-based, early support services like our members have a better reach to young people from some of the worst-served groups than statutory services. But much more must be done to dismantle institutional barriers and systemic discrimination, improve understanding and provision across our network, and spread good practice.

We carried out a review to identify and assess the structural and systemic barriers that may be preventing some marginalised young people from accessing resources, opportunities and outcomes equitably. We aimed to better understand which groups of young people remain under-served, the barriers these young people face in accessing support, and how YIACS (Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services) and other services can best meet their needs.

This overview report presents the common findings of needs, barriers and experiences found across 15 shared identities or experiences of young people examined as part of the review.[1] However, we know that addressing entrenched inequalities in service access and experience is complex and requires a sophisticated understanding of each specific group's needs, cultures and help-seeking behaviours. That is why in our five accompanying briefings, we set out specific recommendations from our in-depth exploration focusing on addressing inequity in service provision for the following young people:

- **Black young people and young people from racialised communities**
- **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people**
- **Refugee and asylum-seeking young people**
- **Trans and gender-diverse young people**
- **Deaf young people**

1 The review explored the needs, barriers and experiences of the following young people
- Black young people and young people from racialised communities
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people
- Refugee and asylum-seeking young people
- Trans and gender diverse young people
- Deaf young people
- LGBTQ+ young people
- Disabled young people
- Neurodiverse young people and young people with a learning disability
- Young women who have experienced violence, abuse or exploitation
- Children and young people in or on the edge of care
- Care leavers
- Young people in contact with the justice system
- Victims of child criminal exploitation
- Young carers
- Young parents

Background

Across multiple areas, there is evidence that statutory and mainstream services frequently fail young people as a whole. For example, although mental health needs and legal needs both peak in early adulthood, this is also the age at which people are least likely to access help.

Further, those young people with the greatest needs are often the least likely amongst their age group to access support or to find the help they are offered effective and relevant. Racism, misogyny, homophobia and other forms of discrimination are often layered upon inequalities relating to age, ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, disability, class or income to increase young people's disadvantage, vulnerability and marginalisation from services.

As well as being under-served by current service provision, there is some evidence that disadvantaged groups of young people are under-heard within youth services, with youth voice initiatives sometimes face an underrepresentation of marginalised young people (The Centre for Youth Impact, 2022).

Striving for equity is particularly relevant as services adapt to a new landscape following substantial economic, societal and service upheaval in recent years. A decade of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic and a cost of living crisis, accompanied by rapid developments in technology, have widened existing inequalities and reshaped service provision for young people.

The role of YIACS

Youth Access' members are well-placed to lead efforts to achieve equity in access to services for young people. The YIACS model contains some key features (such as being young person-centred, offering open access and self-referral, taking a holistic approach, addressing the social determinants of health, being available to a broad age range up to age 25) which provide a sound basis for facilitating access to support young people with diverse backgrounds and needs.

There is evidence that YIACS has better reach to young people from least-heard and worst-served backgrounds who may otherwise slip through the cracks of statutory settings.

This includes serving higher proportions of LGBTQ+ young people, Black and racially minoritised young people and young people with experience of the youth justice system than CAMHS or school-based provision, whilst delivering comparable clinical outcomes (Duncan 2018). However, we know there is more to be done to improve understanding and spread good practice to ensure that all young people can access support that meets their needs.

Addressing entrenched inequalities in service access and experience is complex, requiring a sophisticated understanding of the needs, cultures and help-seeking behaviours within each specific group as well as the reasons for the shortcomings within services. Often, the key barriers relate to young people's awareness of and trust in the support on offer. However, it is always services, not the people they intend to serve, that need to change to make themselves more accessible, acceptable and appropriate to people's needs.

As this review sets out, achieving equity involves ensuring that services are non-discriminatory, respectful and welcoming for all young people; promoting access across a range of under-served groups, whilst developing targeted responses for particular groups; understanding intersectionality and the impact of multiple forms of marginalisation; and treating each young person as an individual (Robards et al, 2019).

The review

The review examined a total of 15 groups of young people who have had experiences of systemic and structural marginalisation, including an in-depth exploration of the service needs, barriers and experiences of:

- **Black young people and young people from racialised communities**
- **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people**
- **Refugee and asylum-seeking young people**
- **Trans and gender-diverse young people**
- **Deaf young people**

Some of the criteria we used to make decisions about which groups we should focus on included:

- Whether being part of the group might form part of a young person's identity.
- Whether the group could be identified by services as a client group, as opposed to a service need or a condition.
- The group's fit with the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 (age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation).
- The size of the group and the perceived extent of its unmet needs and marginalisation from access to services.

Four methods were employed for this review – an extensive evidence review, workshops with 25 individuals from YIACS, eight semi-structured interviews with managers and practitioners in frontline organisations, and an online survey for YIACS, which had 18 responses.

This combined approach sought to generate insight and data to answer the following research questions:

- **Which groups of young people are currently under-served by agencies (including statutory, mainstream and VCS agencies) delivering services relating to key topics covered by YIACS, including: mental health and wellbeing; housing and homelessness; employment; money and debt; sexual health, orientation and gender identity; drugs and alcohol?**
- **What are the sizes and locations of these young people?**
- **What are the physical, psychological and cultural barriers that these young people face when trying to access services?**
- **What are these young people's experiences of services when they do manage to access support?**
- **To what extent are YIACS currently meeting the needs of these young people?**
- **What services or support would best respond to the needs and help-seeking behaviour of these young people?**

Our approach to the review was based on three core principles:

Equity

Recognising that different groups of young people need different resources and support enable to them to achieve equal outcomes.

Intersectionality

Recognising that all aspects of a young person's social identity can interact to influence their needs for services and support, and that belonging to multiple marginalised groups can make service navigation more complex.

Learning and sharing

Recognising that Youth Access' members hold a lot of the expertise around what works in meeting the needs of marginalised young people and wish to learn from each other.

It is acknowledged that some of the criteria used to determine which groups to focus on are subject to subjectivity or bias, and that applying them required an element of arbitrary decision-making rather than an entirely scientific process. It should also be noted that young people with shared identities are not heterogeneous; there are a range of different experiences as well as intersections with other protected characteristics.

The language and terminology relating to many of the groups examined can be contentious. This overview report and the accompanying briefings explore some of the terms in current usage, whilst recognising that terminology is in a constant state of flux; that umbrella terms are inherently unsatisfactory, as they fail to describe the complexities of communities; and that individuals may identify themselves in ways that vary from the terms used by agencies. Local services may need to conduct work to develop a shared lexicon that fosters respect and understanding.

Areas of need

Whilst each identified group has a distinct pattern of needs that must be understood in depth by any agency attempting to address their systemic and structural marginalisation, there are also some common experiences including:

Poverty, inequalityy and exclusion

A greater likelihood of experiencing social, cultural, and economic inequalities; and feeling excluded from mainstream services and/or society.

Discrimination

A greater likelihood of having experienced bullying, discrimination and/or hate crime.

Adverse life events

Common experiences of abuse, violence, exploitation and/or trauma.

Accelerated transitions

Where independence has often been thrust upon young people at an early age (e.g. see young parents, care leavers, refugees and asylum seekers).

Social isolation

A greater likelihood of living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood and/or in social housing; and experiencing communication difficulties and/or a lack of confidence.

Personal experiences

A greater likelihood of having experiences of mental health issues, homelessness, financial issues, legal problems, harmful substance use, and barriers to gaining employment.

Multiple disadvantage

Those young people with intersecting identities often experience greater marginalisation from services and worse outcomes. There is a particular need to focus on the intersections of race, gender identity, disability and neurodiversity.

Complex needs

Often requiring early intervention, coordinated support, and help navigating services and systems.

Barriers

Many marginalised young people are falling through the cracks of statutory support systems. Common barriers that affect many of the groups include:

- **Lack of trust in services**

often this is the overarching barrier

- **Language and communication barriers**

with a lack of interpreters affecting both young people who speak limited English and deaf young people.

- **Cultural barriers**

including stigma in communities regarding mental health, family expectations, and a lack of cultural awareness in services.

- **Discrimination**

including fear or expectation of encountering prejudice, racism, transphobia or other forms of discrimination.

- **Psychological barriers**

such as a lack of confidence in approaching services, concerns about confidentiality, or fear of the consequences of getting help.

- **Physical and travel barriers**

for example, due to disability, geographical remoteness, isolation in rural areas, cost, or danger.

- **Inadequacy of service provision**

including a shortage of specialist services, high thresholds for access, a lack of coordination between services and poor transition arrangements.

- **Previous experiences of services**

including feeling poorly understood by services and negative experiences of staff.

- **Lack of awareness**

including awareness of rights and entitlements, of services, and of how to access services.

- **Digital exclusion**

several groups, including young people with disabilities, young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and young refugees and asylum seekers, are disproportionately affected by a lack of access to devices or confidential spaces to use them, or a lack of digital skills.

- **Invisibility**

marginalised groups are often invisible within datasets, meaning their needs go 'under the radar'.

Steps to improving access and service quality

Whilst meeting the needs of each group requires a tailored approach, there are also some generic steps services could take to facilitate access for young people. These include:

- Identifying unmet needs systematically
- Conducting (peer) research
- Establishing a culture of inclusion
- Creating an inclusive, supportive environment
- Building a representative and culturally aware team
- Co-producing solutions and engaging young people in decision-making
- Building trust with communities and getting families on board
- Reaching into communities
- Developing partnerships with local community organisations
- Capacity-building communities
- Providing culturally competent support
- Offering flexible access routes and communication methods
- Providing access to interpreters
- Utilising trauma-informed approaches

- Addressing mental health stigma and increasing mental health awareness
- Developing young people's cultural confidence
- Taking additional time with marginalised young people
- Communicating the service's inclusiveness
- Improving data collection
- Evaluating what works

Key sources and further reading

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