



The advice needs of young people

Summary of a report¹ setting out research evidence on young people's needs for advice on social welfare issues

This briefing is for providers, planners and researchers with an interest in: Integrated Youth Support Services; the Community Legal Service; services for young adults in transition.

1 Key findings

- 1** The social and physiological nature of the adolescent transition leaves young people particularly vulnerable to experiencing rights-related problems and less able to resolve their problems without support.
- 2** Although young adults experience similar numbers of problems to the general population, the pattern of their problems differs markedly and is disproportionately focused in the core areas of work traditionally dealt with by the not-for-profit advice sector.
- 3** Young people's social welfare legal problems tend to cluster with inter-related practical, emotional and personal issues requiring an integrated response from services.
- 4** Disadvantaged young people, such as NEETs, are considerably more likely to experience serious problems, notably homelessness.
- 5** Social welfare problems have a disproportionate adverse impact on disadvantaged young people. However, the evidence suggests that getting advice may have a greater beneficial impact on young people than on older adults.

2 Why is this an important issue?

Each year

- 16–24-year-olds will experience at least 2.3 million rights-related problems requiring advice.²
- More than a quarter of these problems will be experienced by young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs).
- As many as 200,000 problems will result in young people trying, but failing, to obtain advice, often because there is no service able to help them.
- In all, considerably fewer than half of all young people with serious social welfare problems will actually manage to obtain advice.
- At least 1 million young people are left to cope with their problems unassisted.

The cost of the country's collective failure to provide this vulnerable group with the rights-based advice services it needs is likely, based on existing research,³ to amount to at least several hundred million pounds a year.

Recent indications are that the effects of the current UK recession are leading to a sharp rise in demand for advice from disadvantaged young people on debt, welfare benefits, homelessness and employment.

In this context, it is vital that service planners and providers gain a better understanding of young people's needs for advice.

3 Introduction

This briefing provides an overview of the key findings from a research report setting out evidence of young people's needs for advice on social welfare issues, such as housing, homelessness, welfare benefits, debt, employment rights, education rights, social services and discrimination.

The report provides a comprehensive source of evidence on the subject for practitioners, policy makers and funders to turn to as they attempt to understand and tackle unmet need. It is of particular relevance to the development of Integrated Youth Support Services and Community Legal Services.

The full report is complemented by *Young People's Access to Advice – The Evidence*, a further report by Youth Access which provides evidence on methods of and barriers to addressing needs.

4 Methodology

The report's findings are based primarily on desk research, drawing extensively on data from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey (CSJS), which is a major, and increasingly influential, national private household survey of adults aged 18 and over focusing on people's experiences of everyday problems. In addition, the findings draw on the results of focus groups with young people and consultations with youth advice practitioners.

5 Root causes of advice need

At the root of young people's social welfare problems, and their advice-seeking behaviour, are four key phenomena:

- **The changing nature of adolescent transition** Paths to adulthood have become more complex in recent years. The achievement of full social and financial independence is more protracted. Most young people, supported by parents, friends and school, manage the adolescent transition successfully. But for some young people the process is fraught with difficulties and they develop problems. At particular risk are those young people who experience 'accelerated' or 'fast track' transitions, where independence and responsibility are thrust upon them at an early age, for example through becoming a young parent, an early school leaver or a young carer.

- **The unique thinking and behaviour of young people** Recent research in the field of cognitive behaviour and adolescent brain development reinforces the importance of considering young adults' thinking and behaviour as distinct, and has demonstrated that the brain's centre of reasoning and problem-solving is among the last to mature – even into the twenties, young people may think, react and process emotions very differently from older adults. In addition, negative attitudes displayed by adults towards young people in wider society can result in some young people lacking trust in mainstream advice services that do not cater specifically for their needs.
- **The social exclusion of young people** The statistical evidence supports the view that young people are disproportionately and increasingly prone to a range of social welfare problems – e.g. homelessness, unemployment, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, mental health issues – that both increase the risk of an unsuccessful adolescent transition and frequently give rise to a need for advice. Without effective intervention, social exclusion in youth can continue long into adulthood and be passed down to the next generation.
- **Problem 'triggers'** Young people's social welfare problems are often the result of changes in life circumstances or key life events. The most common triggers are leaving home or care, leaving education, getting or losing a job, being the victim or perpetrator of crime and arriving in the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker. Many of young people's social welfare problems result directly from the actions, or inaction, of a local or central government department, often in relation to benefits or housing. Without early intervention, young people can develop serious, multiple problems.

6 Problems experienced by young people

- **Problem incidence** Analysis of data from the CSJS indicates that approximately one-third of 18–24-year-olds had experienced at least one civil justice problem in the previous three and a half years – a broadly similar level of problem incidence to that of the population as a whole. However, it is likely that CSJS data significantly under-estimates the relative prevalence of young people's problems.
- **Subject areas** The pattern of young people's problems differs markedly from that of other age groups. Young

The Youth Population

There are seven million young people aged 16–24 in the UK, representing 11% of the total population.

Homelessness

Young people aged 16–24 account for two-fifths of all people accepted as homeless by local authorities and for a third of all homelessness problems requiring advice.

Unemployment

The unemployment rate amongst under-25-year-olds is well over double that for the general working population. The young claimant count has increased by 80% over the last year as a result of the recession.

people are much more likely to experience problems relating to rented housing, homelessness, employment, discrimination and problems with the police.

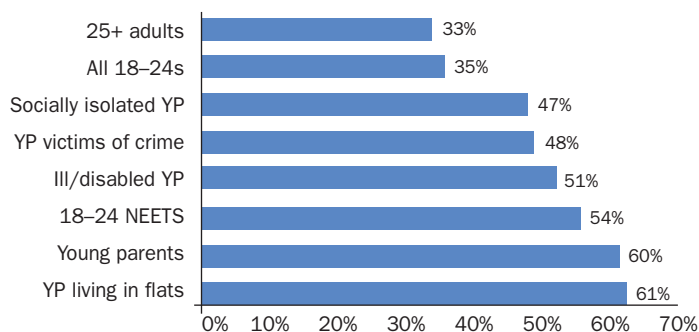
- **Relevance to the not-for-profit advice sector** Analysis of data from the CSJS suggests that young people increasingly account for a disproportionate number of all people with problems in the key subject areas of social welfare law that fall within the remit of the Community Legal Service and that are traditionally the core areas of work for the not-for-profit advice sector.
- **Age differences** Advice needs change significantly as young people get older. Hence, whilst under-16-year-olds often present to advice services with social services and education issues, housing and welfare benefit problems are more prevalent amongst 16–24-year-olds.
- **Multiple problems** Young people, particularly the 22–24 age group and disadvantaged young people, are prone to multiple problems. As people experience multiple problems, they are increasingly likely to experience problems, such as homelessness, that play a direct role in social exclusion.
- **Interrelated needs** Reflecting the complexity of the adolescent transition, young people’s social welfare problems rarely develop in isolation from inter-connected practical, emotional and personal issues – concerning, for example, relationship breakdown, stress, depression, abuse, drugs and alcohol or education – pointing to a need for legal advice to be closely integrated with other services that young people use.

7 The experience of disadvantaged young adults

Disadvantaged young adults experience a disproportionate number of all the problems experienced by young people (see Figure 1).

- In the 2004 CSJS, **NEETs** accounted for more than a quarter of all young adults who reported problems, for almost two-fifths of all the problems reported by young adults and for approaching half of those seeking advice.
- Remarkably, **homelessness and rented housing** were the most common problems experienced by NEETs, ahead of consumer problems (which are many times more prevalent than homelessness problems amongst the general population).
- The report examines in greater detail the advice needs

Figure 1 **Problem incidence amongst disadvantaged young people** (Source: 2004 CSJS)



of a number of **specific groups** of young people, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young refugees, young parents, disabled young people and young offenders.

8 Severity and impact of problems

- Young people appear to experience relatively **severe problems**, evidenced by the type of problems they experience, their greater reliance on face to face services and the disproportionate impact that problems have on them.
- Disadvantaged young adults are significantly more likely than the population as a whole to **worry** about their problems and to report (as a result of their problems) stress-related illness; violence (aimed at them); loss of home; loss of confidence; physical ill-health.
- Young people fare worse than average when they have a problem due to their **inherent vulnerability** and their relatively little experience of ‘the system’ compared to older groups.
- In addition, young people are **less likely to obtain advice** than older age groups, rendering it less likely that their problems will be resolved and the impact of their problems ameliorated.

9 Services required

- 16–19-year-olds with housing, homelessness and welfare benefits problems generate the greatest **demand** for support from youth advice services, with debt, employment, education and social services being other important areas.
- Service approaches that fail to appreciate the distinct behaviour and needs of the adolescent are clearly less

Poverty

2 million 16–24-year-olds live below the poverty line. There is a correlation between areas with concentrations of young people and areas of deprivation.

Employment

Three out of ten young workers cannot expect an accurate payslip; one in four have experienced bullying at work.

Immigration

Nearly half of all applicants for asylum in the UK are aged under 25. Only 2% of unaccompanied asylum seekers aged 17 and under are granted asylum.

Money

Four out of five young people have been in debt by the age of 21 – delays and complexities in the benefits system are one of the major causes.

likely to succeed. The evidence points strongly to the importance of the availability of advice services **targeted** solely at young people.

- No single intervention can hope to deal comprehensively with the full range of issues on which young people need help. Rights-based advice is best delivered to young people as part of a package of **integrated interventions** that may include:
 - **public legal education** – to raise young people’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities; to build their life skills and resilience; and to help young people avoid problems and cope with them when they do arise;
 - generalist **information, advice and guidance**;
 - **targeted support** from a range of services, e.g. counselling, sexual health, drug and alcohol and housing support services.

10 The difference made by advice

- Previous research for Youth Access has highlighted the positive contribution that advice can make to achieving all five of the **Every Child Matters outcomes**.
- New CSJS data indicates that 18–24-year-olds are twice as likely to **meet their objectives** where they do manage to obtain advice in comparison to when they handle their problems alone. By contrast, older adults meet their objectives only slightly more often where they obtain advice.
- This evidence reflects the fact that, because of young people’s **inherent vulnerability** as a result of their age, they are more likely to need advice than people with greater experience when they have a comparable problem.

- 1 *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence*, Kenrick, J., Youth Access, 2009. Copies of the full report can be ordered from Youth Access or downloaded at www.youthaccess.org.uk/publications.
- 2 These figures have been calculated by Youth Access using data from the 2006–08 Civil and Social Justice Survey. The calculations have been checked by the Legal Services Research Centre and are deemed to under-estimate the extent of young people’s unmet needs for advice. For further details of the calculations, see Appendix 1 of the full report.
- 3 Ministry of Justice economists have used CSJS data to estimate that over a three-and-a-half-year research period, unresolved law-related problems cost individuals and the public purse at least £1.3 billion.

About Youth Access

Youth Access is the national membership organisation for a network of 200 youth information, advice and counselling services.

Through its members, Youth Access is one of the largest providers of youth advice and counselling services in the UK, dealing with over one million enquiries a year on issues as diverse as sexual health, mental health, relationships, homelessness, benefits and debt.

Youth Access provides the training, resources, research, campaigning and other infrastructure support to ensure high quality services exist to meet young people’s diverse needs.

Youth Access has published a number of reports on advice, covering: young people’s needs; advice-seeking behaviour and access; effective models of delivery; the impact of advice. All our reports are available to download from our website.

11 Some implications of the research

- The evidence indicates that young people’s needs for social welfare advice may be more significant than previously acknowledged by legal advice and youth service planners and providers. The unequal impact of the recession is likely to bring young people’s unmet advice needs to the fore.
- The evidence also suggests that getting good advice may have a disproportionately beneficial impact on young people, pointing to a need for further research into the potential economic benefits of targeting legal advice services at young people.
- Community Legal Service planners may wish to ensure adequate provision of targeted advice services for young adults in transition from children’s to adult services.
- Children’s Trusts and local authority Integrated Youth Support Services may wish to review their local strategies for Information Advice and Guidance and Targeted Youth Support to ensure they make adequate provision for young people’s rights-based, as well as careers advice needs.
- There is a need for a joined-up cross-departmental national strategy to improve young people’s access to advice on their rights involving, as a minimum, the Department for Children Schools and Families and the Legal Services Commission.

Copies of the full report, *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence* by James Kenrick, are available from Youth Access or can be downloaded at: www.youthaccess.org.uk/publications

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