



With rights in mind

Summary of a research report¹ reviewing evidence on the relationship between social welfare problems, mental health and youth

This briefing is for providers, planners and researchers with an interest in: youth advice and counselling; community-based mental health services; CAMHS mental health services for young adults; Integrated Youth Support Services; the Community Legal Service; services for young adults in transition; social exclusion.

1 Summary of key findings

- Both mental health problems and social welfare problems are common among young people.
- Young people with mental health problems are more likely to report social welfare problems, and vice versa.
- Social welfare problems impact adversely on young people's mental health.
- The provision of social welfare advice may have a significant beneficial impact on young people's mental health.
- The evidence points to the potential benefits to be gained from integrating advice services with mental health services for young people.

Social welfare advice = advice to individuals on their rights in relation to everyday problems concerning housing, homelessness, welfare benefits, money/debt and employment.

2 Why is this an important issue?

Significantly, this is the first time the relationship between mental health, social welfare problems and youth has been the subject of a research study. It is highly relevant to a number of linked policy agendas:

Health Given the estimated £77 billion annual cost of mental ill-health in England alone,² there is cross-Government concern to identify cost-effective interventions for young people and young adults. The need to improve the transition arrangements between CAMHS and adult mental health services through the development of new, evidence-based models and approaches is recognised in the Government's New Horizons strategy.³

Community Legal Service The Ministry of Justice is keen to better focus legal aid spending on vulnerable client groups in order to reduce the cost of unresolved social welfare problems, which has been estimated at over £3.5 billion a year.⁴ Legal services targeted at young people or at people with emotional and mental ill-health, let alone specifically at young people with mental health problems, remain scarce.

Integrated Youth Support Services As local authorities undertake major re-organisations of services for young people, they are seeking evidence of interventions that can tackle the social exclusion and health problems experienced by young people with complex needs and facilitate safe transitions to adulthood.

The recession & future public spending Young people are bearing the brunt of the 2008–09 recession. Youth unemployment continues to rise, with increasingly clear indications that this will lead to a sharp rise in both social welfare problems and mental health problems in the medium to long term.⁵ However, whilst demand for services is rising, there is likely to be increasingly intense pressure on public spending.

3 Introduction

There is increasing evidence of clear links between poverty, social deprivation and mental health problems and that inequalities in income and poverty are strongly associated with mental ill health.⁶ However, little research has focussed on the links between social welfare problems, mental health and youth.

This briefing provides a summary of the key findings from *With rights in mind*, a research report reviewing evidence relevant to the question: ‘does advice about social welfare problems have a positive impact on young people’s mental health?’

Scope The research focussed on young people aged 13 to 25. A reasonably broad interpretation of mental health was adopted, encompassing stress, worry and loss of confidence as well as more severe mental illness. The categories of social welfare problems analysed were: employment, housing, homelessness, money/debt, and welfare benefits.

4 Methodology

The research consisted of a literature review of the evidence, drawing primarily on large scale, nationally representative surveys. Much of the evidence comes from analysis of the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey (the CSJS), conducted specifically for this project by the Legal Services Research Centre, covering the period January 2006 to September 2008, during which 841 young people aged 18–24 took part.⁷

5 Key findings

Mental health problems are common among young people

- At any one time, around one in six 16–24 year olds and one in eight 11–16 year olds meet thresholds for clinical diagnoses of problems such as anxiety and depression.
- When problems such as post traumatic stress, attempted suicide, eating disorders, and alcohol and drug dependence are added in, the proportion affected rises amongst 16-24 year olds to almost a third.
- Evidence from the CSJS suggests that young people who are NEET are more likely to experience mental health problems than those who are in education, employment or training.
- Mental health problems are also far more common amongst young people who are in care, in custody or homeless.

Social welfare problems are also common among young people

- Around one in five 18-24 year olds report one or more social welfare problems over a three year period.

- Disadvantaged young people, e.g. those who are NEET, appear more likely to report social welfare problems, particularly concerning welfare benefits and homelessness.

See *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence*, Kenrick, J., Youth Access, 2009, for further detail on the prevalence, pattern and cause of young people’s social welfare problems.

Young people with mental health problems are more likely to report social welfare problems

- Among 18–24 year olds, social welfare problems are reported much more often by those who experience mental health problems (44%), than by those who do not (16%).
- Those who report both mental health problems *and* a long-standing illness or disability are even more likely to report social welfare problems (56%).
- Young people with mental health problems are particularly prone to housing and homelessness problems:
 - 15% reported homelessness problems, compared to only 1% of those reporting neither mental health problems nor a long-standing illness/disability;
 - 35% reported other types of housing problems. This rose to approximately 50% among those who reported a long-standing illness/disability in addition to mental health problems.

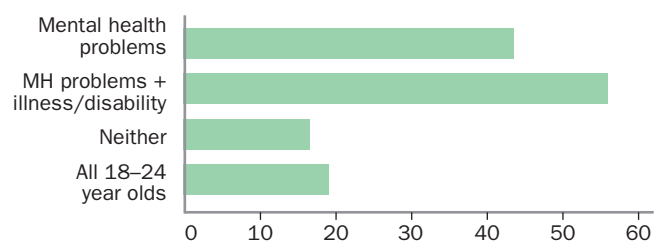


Fig. 1 Young people’s social welfare problems by mental health status (source: LSRC, 2009)

Young people with social welfare problems are more likely to report mental health problems

- Those young people reporting social welfare problems are more likely to report mental health problems (31% did so), compared with those not reporting social welfare problems (9%).
- Those young people reporting social welfare problems were also more than twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their life.
- The link with mental health problems is stronger among young people reporting social welfare problems than among those reporting civil justice problems more widely.
- A link with homelessness problems stands out: 62% of those who reported homelessness also reported mental health problems.
- A number of other studies have established links between youth homelessness and mental health problems, and between debt and mental health problems.

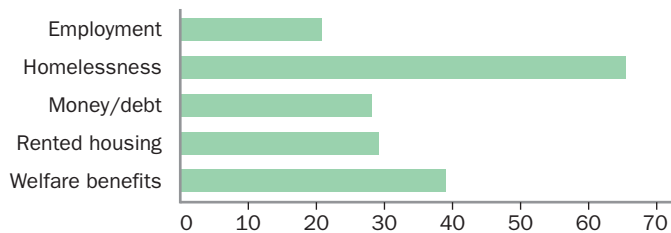


Fig. 2 Percentage of 18–24 year olds reporting social welfare problems who also reported mental health problems (source: LSRC, 2009)

Social welfare problems impact adversely on young people's mental health

- 18–24 year olds frequently report that their civil law problems (including social welfare problems) lead to stress related illness (22%), loss of confidence (9%) and worry 'all or most of the time' (36%).
- Those who report mental health problems appear more likely to report such adverse impacts (41% stress related illness, 13% loss of confidence, 46% worry), particularly when combined with long-standing illness/disability (59%, 17% and 63% respectively).
- Young people who are NEET also appear more likely to report such adverse impacts than other young people (34%, 13% and 45% respectively, compared to 18%, 7% and 32% for those in education, employment or training).
- (Amongst the general population) homelessness problems are most frequently reported as leading to stress related illness or worry, whilst employment problems are most closely associated with loss of confidence.
- There is also considerable evidence indicating that debt problems often have adverse effects on mental health.
- Of those young people who report stress related illness as a consequence of their civil law problems, 35% said they visited a GP, hospital or other health care worker as a result.

Social welfare advice appears to have a significant beneficial impact on mental health

- Statistically robust evidence of social welfare advice leading to improvements in mental health remains limited, largely due to methodological difficulties in researching this subject.
- Research efforts to date have focussed primarily on the impact of welfare benefits and debt advice provided to the general population. These findings point to advice potentially being instrumental to improvements in mental health. For example:
 - Recipients of welfare benefits advice delivered via outreach in GP services who had gained increased income were found to have average improvements in mental health at 12 months that were significantly greater than those who had not.⁸
 - Longitudinal research with debt advice clients identified substantial positive changes in self-reported mental and general health at 6 and 12 months.⁹

- Various small scale qualitative studies suggest potential for measurable gains in other areas, such as employment advice, housing advice and holistic advice for young people.
- Initial analysis of results from testing of Youth Access' Youth Advice Outcomes Toolkit indicates substantial self-reported improvements in young people's levels of stress and confidence after receiving social welfare advice. A full evaluation will be published in 2010. Contact james@youthaccess.org.uk for further details.

6 Conclusions and discussion

There appear to be **strong associations between mental health problems, social welfare problems and youth**, regardless from which direction the relationship is viewed. Of particular significance is the clear evidence that social welfare problems can lead to and/or exacerbate mental health problems. It is also clear that social welfare problems and mental health problems have a tendency to co-occur. However, the precise extent to which mental health problems may cause social welfare problems, and vice versa, is hard to determine. Causation is frequently bi-directional and many of the links between the reporting of both types of problems do not in themselves establish causation one way or the other.

Notwithstanding this, it seems clear that **social welfare advice has a potentially significant role to play in improving mental health**, and thus in reducing the social and economic costs associated with mental ill-health. Although the evidence base for the impact of social welfare advice is currently fairly limited, what evidence there is points to it potentially being instrumental to improvements in mental health.

It should also be noted that the evidence points strongly to the **importance of early intervention**. Longitudinal studies involving private household surveys have found that mental health problems often persist or recur over time. For many young people, mental health problems in childhood or adolescence mark the early stages of difficulties that continue well into adult life. There is also emerging evidence that getting advice may have a greater beneficial impact on young people than on the general population.¹⁰

7 Some implications for future policy and research

Implications for policy

- Given current pressures on public expenditure, the research provides potentially crucial evidence to inform Government efforts to better target spending in the areas of legal aid, mental health and youth services.

- The evidence points to the potential of a more joined-up, holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to service provision for disadvantaged young people at risk of social exclusion, in which age-appropriate advice services and mental health services are better integrated and, where possible, co-located.
- With both mental health problems and social welfare problems being more common amongst those young people who are NEET, joining up advice and mental health services for young people could provide an effective preventative response to the long-term impact of rising youth unemployment.
- Youth information, advice and counselling services, which offer an ‘under one roof’ approach to the delivery of services to 13–25 year olds, have been recognised as of critical importance to the young people’s mental health sector because they address not only young people’s mental health problems, but also other social and practical difficulties.¹¹
- *New Horizons: A shared vision for mental health* offers a springboard for stronger cross-departmental policies and strategies to tackle mental health and social welfare problems amongst 16–25 year olds. A truly co-ordinated response will require the Department of Health to work together with the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Ministry of Justice, the Legal Services Commission and Communities and Local Government.
- At the local authority level, there need to be joint approaches to the planning, funding and commissioning of services across the youth, mental health and advice sectors.

Implications for future research

- The current evidence base for the impact of social welfare advice on the mental health of young people is limited. Further research appears warranted, particularly regarding the potential impact of advice relating to housing and homelessness problems.
- Research into the combined impact on young people of social welfare advice, counselling and related support services, when delivered alongside each other in integrated service models, would be of value.
- Identifying and measuring impacts of social welfare advice can require considerable resources in terms

of time and skills, and rigorous studies will be beyond most advice providers without substantial additional resources.

- Specific challenges relevant to researching the impact of advice on young people’s mental health also include taking account of young people’s preferred methods of accessing advice and establishing that tools used are age-appropriate.

Next steps

Youth Access will use the findings of this research, together with the findings and recommendations from our new *Making Tracks Project* – which aims to improve services for young adults with complex needs by developing better partnership working between GPs, Primary Care Trusts and Young People’s Information, Advice and Counselling Services – to inform national and local policies and commissioning practices.

If you are interested in this work, please contact Amandeep Hothi (Amandeep@youthaccess.org.uk)

- 1 *With rights in mind: Is there a role for social welfare law advice in improving young people’s mental health? A review of evidence*, Sefton, M., Youth Access, 2009.
- 2 *The economic and social costs of mental illness*, Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2003.
- 3 *New horizons: A shared vision for mental health*, Department of Health, December 2009.
- 4 According to calculations made by Government economists, referred to in *Getting earlier, better advice to vulnerable people*, Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2006.
- 5 *The impact of the recession on young people – and on their needs for advice and counselling services*, Youth Access, 2009.
- 6 See, e.g., *Mental health, resilience and inequalities*, Friedli, L., Mental Health Foundation and World Health Organisation, 2009.
- 7 Full findings from this analysis are contained in *Young people advice and mental health: a data digest*, Legal Services Research Centre, 2009.
- 8 ‘What is the impact on individual health of services in general practice settings which offer welfare benefits advice?’ Abbott, S. et al, 2006, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, Vol 14, 1–8.
- 9 *Twelve months later: does advice help? The impact of debt advice – advice agency clients study*, Williams, K. and Sansom, A., Ministry of Justice, 2007.
- 10 *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence*, Kenrick, J., Youth Access, 2009.
- 11 *Heads up: Mental health of children and young people: a guide for donors and charities*, Joy, I., van Poortvliet, M. and Yeowart, C., New Philanthropy Capital, 2008.

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.

Youth Access is a charity recommended (in November 2008) by New Philanthropy Capital.

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