

YMCA

A DIFFERENT WORLD

The challenges
facing young people



The public narrative surrounding young people still tells a negative story of high unemployment, crime, drug and alcohol use, poor educational attainment and teenage pregnancy.

However, if you look across a range of factors, it quickly becomes apparent that many of the challenges that faced large proportions of young people in previous generation are diminishing and a new set of challenges are coming to the fore.

They are less likely to drink and smoke than any other group. In addition to drinking and smoking less, young people are also doing fewer drugs. Rather than the often threatening image painted of young people by the media and politicians, the reality is young people are committing fewer and fewer crimes.

As well as making healthier life decisions, this generation of young people are staying in education longer and have more academic qualifications to their name than any generation that came before them, and record numbers of young people are now in employment.

Young people are also waiting longer to get married and start a family. Teenage pregnancies are at the lowest since records began.

As all this highlights, on the face of it we now have a generation of increasingly clean living, qualified, and driven young people who are largely taking positive decisions about their future.

While progress has been made on a number of these traditional issues facing young people, YMCA has seen a range of challenges emerging.

Key challenges facing young people

Transitioning from education to employment

The academic success young people are achieving is coming at a cost. In research conducted by YMCA, we found 44% of young people report concerns with study and exam pressures.¹ Added to this, young people now face the added burden of tuition fees in excess of £9,000 a year to gain a degree.

Despite being the most academically qualified generation ever and facing all this pressure to succeed academically, employers consistently report that young people are unprepared and unequipped to enter the workplace when they leave full-time education – lacking a broad range of softer skills.

The British Chambers of Commerce's Workforce Survey found that 88% of employers believed school leavers were unprepared for the world of work, and 54% believed graduates were unprepared for the workplace.²

When young people do find work, they are paid less than previous generations, and increasingly find themselves in insecure jobs. One in three of those on zero-hour contracts and in the gig economy are young people.³

To address some of these issues, YMCA believes action needs to be taken to:

- Equip more young people with employability and life skills
- Ensure more young people are able to access meaningful work experience
- Provide more young people with professional careers information, advice and guidance



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Experiencing mental health difficulties

The pressures this generation of young people face also extend to their mental health.

Currently in England, an estimated 1.25 million children and young people have a diagnosed mental health difficulty. This is equivalent to one in eight young people.⁴

The effects of living with a mental health difficulty are both profound and pervasive, as it infiltrates many areas of a young person's life, affecting their confidence, performance at school and their prospects of finding work.

Without help and support, this can even lead to individuals taking their own lives. One in four young people who experience mental health difficulties have self-harmed or attempted suicide.⁵ Suicide is the biggest killer of young people.⁶

But despite the considerable numbers of young people affected and increased public awareness and recognition, YMCA's research found three quarters of children and young people still believe that there is a stigma associated with experiencing mental health difficulties.⁷

This stigma exacerbates the negative effects of living with mental health difficulties, and most significantly, it prevents them from speaking out and seeking help, meaning many children and young people suffer in silence with their mental health difficulties.

However, addressing stigma alone is not enough. It is critical that young people know where to go and appropriate services are available when they do speak out and look to seek help, something which currently isn't the case.

By their own admission, the NHS is only currently supporting a quarter of those in need and is struggling to deal with the ever increasing demand, with many thousands of young people in need being turned away each year.⁸

To address some of these issues, YMCA believes action needs to be taken to:

- Support mental health anti-stigma campaigns, like YMCA's #IAMWHOLE campaign, targeted specifically at young people
- Require all young people to be educated on mental health as part of the national curriculum
- Increase preventative and community mental health services targeted at young people

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YMCA's IAMWHOLE campaign aims to tackle mental health stigma



Suffering body image anxieties

Young people are also facing increasing pressures related to their appearance. Body image worries start young and can have damaging effects on people's health and wellbeing.

While a focus on the importance of appearance in society is by no means a new phenomenon, many young people today are struggling to escape the constant barrage of messages they receive about how they look and how they should behave.

YMCA's own research also found that more than half of young people (52%) regularly worry about the way they look, and more than a third (36%) agreed that they would do whatever it takes to look good.⁹

To address some of these issues, YMCA believes action needs to be taken to:

- Encourage schools to adopt a whole-school approach to promoting body confidence
- Prioritise healthy living and general wellbeing over just appearance and weight in the healthcare sector and those in the diet, health and fitness industries
- Encourage businesses, publishers, editors and advertisers to act responsibly by positively promoting different body shapes and sizes, people with and without disabilities, and all ages, genders, and ethnicities

Experiencing isolation and loneliness

The different social landscape young people face is also demonstrated by them spending more than a day a week on the internet.

Apps are increasingly replacing the need to leave the house or even their bedroom. They can shop for clothes, food, books and music, they can chat with their friends, they can date, they can study, they can play games, they can bank, they watch the latest TV and films.

This is resulting in them missing out on other activities, including going out, sleeping, spending time with their friends and family offline. While the connections that young people make online can be critical, this doesn't appear to be a sufficient substitute, with 11% of children and 10% of young people saying that they often feel lonely.¹⁰

But the cuts to youth services mean that spaces young people have to meet up have largely disappeared. In just seven years, Local Authorities have cut their expenditure on youth services in England and Wales by £781m, which is equivalent to a reduction of nearly two-thirds (64%) since 2010/11.¹¹

To address some of these issues, YMCA believes action needs to be taken to:

- Reclassify youth services as a statutory service
- Protect youth service funding within the Local Authority finance settlement
- Require Local Authorities to set out their annual expenditure and delivery of youth services in their respective areas

1. YMCA England & Wales, What Matters Most, March 2016
2. British Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Survey, July 2014
3. ONS, People in employment on zero hour contracts, August 2018
4. NHS Digital, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, November 2018
5. NHS Digital, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, November 2018
6. Samaritans, Suicide statistics report, September 2018
7. YMCA England & Wales, More Than Words, October 2017
8. National Audit Office, Mental health services: preparations for improving access, 2016
9. YMCA England & Wales, Somebody Like Me, January 2017
10. ONS, Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness, December 2018
11. YMCA England & Wales, Cut Loose, December 2018

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Contact details

If you require further information about the challenges facing young people, please email: policy@ymca.org.uk

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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION