

# Post-Covid Youth Work and Mental Wellbeing of Young People Across Scotland and England

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## Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the debate about the current and future support needs of young people (aged 11-25) across Scotland and England who are experiencing mental distress in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, it focuses on the profession that works specifically with this age range – youth work - and youth work practice across Scotland and England, and then examines the challenges and opportunities for the profession. It concludes that youth work, and youth workers, are well placed to provide much needed initial mental health support to young people, but that the profession urgently needs the UK and Scottish Governments to financially (re)invest in its infrastructure to deliver this provision.

**Key words:** youth work, mental health, Covid-19, pandemic, austerity

## Introduction

Youth work across Britain has been subjected to pernicious cuts since the UK Coalition Government's (2010-2015) adoption of austerity in 2010 as an economic strategy to pay off debts associated with the 2007/8 financial crisis. The Coalition Government planned to save £83 billion by 2013/14 through cuts to welfare; various government departments, and a reduction in spending on public services (Bailey, Bramley & Hastings, 2015). This resulted in an overall reduction of youth work provision across all four nations, including the closure of youth clubs and centres, wide scale redundancies of youth workers, and increased reliance on short-term funding (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019). Cuts to local authority spending since 2010 have led to one-third to one-half of local authority youth workers being made redundant (Bailey,

Bramley & Hastings, 2015), with UNISON (2019) estimating that 3660 youth work jobs were lost between 2012-2016. Local government cuts also slashed available funding to the voluntary and community sector which had been increasingly providing youth provision on behalf of the state since the introduction of the New Labour 'Compact' in 1998 (Alcock, 2010). While no official statistics presently exist to quantify the youth sector workforce in Britain, a 2018 report shows that the voluntary and community sector now provides the majority of youth work services, and that for every full-time, paid youth worker there are now two volunteers doing youth work roles (UK Youth, 2018). From 2010-2018, Davies (2019) advocates that youth work has experienced around £387 million in cuts, and that over 600 local authority-run youth centres nationwide have closed.

These trends have impacted the strategic direction of youth work across Britain. Central government funding to national youth organisations to provide leadership for the sector has been significantly curtailed or, in the case of England, withdrawn completely (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019). Local authorities have also slashed the number of senior officer posts '... that previously provided leadership for the local youth sector' (ibid, p.19). Scotland has fared better with the Government spending approximately £9.5 million on youth work each year (Scottish Government, 2020). It has also retained some sector leadership through national bodies such as the Community Learning and Development Standards Council for Scotland (CLDSCS) and YouthLink Scotland which the Scottish Government financially supports. Nevertheless, in 2016 UNISON surveyed youth workers in Scotland and 83% of the remaining workforce reported sustained cuts in funding since 2011, leading to an increased reliance on volunteers to deliver youth services (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019).

Young people's mental health has long been a UK policy concern. It emerged as a central issue in a 2019 Labour Party briefing on Youth Services which emphasised young people's '...chronic levels of mental ill-health and loneliness' (Labour Party, 2019, p.10). Pre-pandemic, it was estimated that only one third of young people in England experiencing mental health issues were able to access the support and treatment they needed (Bristow *et al.*, 2018). Of these, it was those from low-income families who were experiencing the most acute levels of mental distress, compared to

their peers from high income households. Particularly vulnerable were young people across the UK categorised as NEET ('not in education, employment or training') where research demonstrated that their lack of employment opportunities contributed to their deteriorating mental health (Goldman-Mellor *et al*, 2016). Evidence shows that these trends intensified during the pandemic (Pearcey *et al.*, 2021). Helplines such as ChildLine, NSPCC and Samaritans reported an increased volume of calls from children and young people across the UK, citing increased anxiety, sleeping problems, panic attacks, self-harming, and suicidal ideation (Cowie & Myers, 2020). Restrictions and lockdowns were cited as key factors, and re-adjustment has been difficult for many school and college pupils due to anxiety around classroom socialisation and (re)infection (Youth Access, 2021).

The pandemic has already been described as a 'perfect storm' for mental health, and '... this description is certainly fitting for the mental health of young people' (Danese & Smith, 2020, p.169). Semhi & Slaughter (2021) found that 41% of young people who did not identify as having mental health issues before the pandemic were, by April 2020, showing symptoms. This mirrors previous international research demonstrating that pandemics '... have an extremely negative impact on mental health, with children and young people being especially at risk due to their limited understanding of the event' (Cowie & Myers, 2020, p. 64). Further research found that '... the longer the quarantine, the poorer mental health, in particular, the greater reporting of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD)' (*ibid*). The conclusion was that these mental health conditions were likely to continue at length after quarantine ended.

Young people in Britain were also the hardest hit in relation to economic security during the Covid-19 pandemic. By January 2021, approximately one-in-five 18–24-year-olds who were in employment before the pandemic were no longer working (Semhi & Slaughter, 2021). It can be surmised that this is a continuation of a longer-term trend since the 2007/8 financial crisis, where young people have disproportionately experienced economic insecurity through a rise in fewer (and precarious) employment opportunities, adversely impacting on their mental health and their ability to make stable life transitions (Semhi & Slaughter, 2021; Antonucci, 2018; Gardiner, 2014). Youth unemployment in Britain peaked at 24% in 2011 and it took five years before

rates fell back to pre-crisis levels (Sehmi & Slaughter, 2021). During this time, young people in Britain reported experiencing worsening mental health which they linked to poor employment opportunities and lack of confidence in achieving stable, and successful, labour market transitions (Cowie & Myers, 2020; France, 2016). This suggests that young people will be harshly affected, both economically and in mental health terms, by the pandemic in the short to medium term.

Adolescence is a life stage where peer support and companionship are especially important. In terms of social and emotional development, friendships are regarded as a protective factor for mental health (Graber *et al.*, 2016). The pandemic lockdowns restricted young people to spending time with family members or others who lived in their household, and interactions with peers and extended family were limited to online platforms, including social media. They were physically unable to access external infrastructures that would normally bolster their mental wellbeing and provide much needed support. Unsurprisingly, young people experienced a lack of intimacy and closeness during lockdown which symptomatically manifested as loneliness and isolation (Danese & Smith, 2020). Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) also reported these symptoms as prevalent in young people, and their waiting lists for services post-lockdowns were over five times longer than before (*ibid*; UK Youth, 2020). Such findings resonate with Orbach's (2020) analysis that British society, and principally its young people, were experiencing a 'collective trauma' due to the pandemic.

Youth work is an external infrastructure which bolsters the mental health and wellbeing of young people and provides much needed support. It also offers young people the space to meet with friends, to socialise and just 'hang out' which is a crucial part of their development. Youth work fosters holistic development and facilitates nascent capabilities to exercise agency in their lives and reach their full potential (Centre for Youth Impact, 2019). It allows young people '... to safely explore risky impulses, form new relationships and take on new challenges' (NYA, 2020, p.5). Youth work, typically, involves youth workers and young people interacting at a face-to-face level across a wide variety of settings including youth clubs, schools, and the outdoors. Unsurprisingly, provision stalled during the lockdowns and restrictions, and only a

small percentage of youth organisations were able to transfer their services online. The Centre for Youth Impact (2019) stipulates that this was due to a longstanding lack of investment in digital infrastructure, and training (beyond social media) for youth workers.

Youth work is essentially a relational practice (Ranahan, 2018). In a review outlining a National Curriculum for England, the National Youth Agency (NYA) emphasised that ‘... the heart of good youth work is relationships and relational practice’ (NYA, 2020, p.6). As such, it espouses the basic principles, in counselling terms, of a ‘person-centred’ approach - namely: the ability to be genuine, to accept others in the moment, and congruence in ‘being’ with others. When compared with the principles of person-centred counselling practice, there is a striking alignment; where positive and genuine regard, non-judgemental attitudes, warmth, and building rapport are all essentially part of youth work's values and principles. The informal nature of youth work delivery means that relationships are built on a non-threatening basis – although never non-challenging. A Norwegian study, (Eriksen & Seland, 2021), explored the potential for youth clubs to act as a means of fostering ‘well-being’ in young people and concluded that these clubs functioned as ‘safe spaces’ offering a ‘moratorium’ from the hectic pressures of online and offline activity, and the opportunity to ‘be’ in themselves, whilst simultaneously exploring new opportunities and connections with peers and youth work professionals. In addition, the research demonstrated that youth club spaces not only contributed to positive well-being and self-efficacy, but were also a space for learning, growth, and empowerment (ibid).

Youth work also has a rich history of fostering resilience in young people, using Rutter’s (2012) definition of resilience as an ‘interactive concept’. The theory is that children and young people from ‘troubled families’ benefit enormously from positive and self-affirming relationships within their environment, usually from outside the immediate family (ibid). Youth workers have fulfilled this role of ‘positive mentor’ since the inception of the profession. This was formally acknowledged in the New Labour Government’s ‘Aiming High for Young People’ plan in 2007 (Ni Charraighe, 2019) and, notwithstanding valid criticisms of the concept of resilience (Diprose, 2014, Joseph, 2013), it has since been a constant theme in policy related to youth provision.

In aligning resilience with youth work, the focus is on recognising the positive contribution of youth work to the lived experience of young people and the communities within which it takes place. Positive interactions between young people and youth workers are the fundamental rationale for the interaction *per se* - unlike other professionals that work with young people such as teachers or social workers.

Despite being a practice based on relational and emotional well-being, youth work is often overlooked in policy and service provision reforms that aim to address young people's mental health. The 'in vogue policy vehicle of the moment' (Gibson, 2021, p.16) are early intervention programmes to ameliorate Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and build resilience in children in early-to-mid childhood (Davidson & Carlin, 2019; Gibson, 2021). ACEs are defined as 'stressful events occurring in childhood that can result in excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain, and consequently diminished health and wellbeing across the lifecourse and generations' (Davidson & Carlin, 2019, p.481). Children and young people growing up in poverty are statistically more likely to have experienced ACEs. Research shows that such children and young people benefit greatly from early intervention of services; especially mental health support (van Duin *et al*, 2019). However, not all socially marginalised children and young people are able to access, or benefit from, interventions that target children in early-to-mid childhood (Davidson & Carlin, 2019). Evidence shows that half of all mental health issues manifest by the age of 14, and an additional quarter by age 24 (Burstow *et al.*, 2018). Youth work already undertakes targeted work with socially marginalised young people aged 11-25 most at risk of experiencing mental distress. Still, the compromised state of its infrastructure means it is unable to fully meet this upsurge in demand from young people for mental health support.

Emerging from the pandemic, the demand for youth provision across Scotland and England far outstrips supply. A UK Youth (2020) survey found that the majority of youth organisations now work with fewer young people than before the pandemic because they simply do not have the resources to meet the demand. 83% of the youth organisations surveyed reported that their income had decreased even further since the onset of the pandemic, which forced these organisations to further reduce their services,

workers, and opening hours. This dearth of financial and human resources also significantly impacted the ability of most youth organisations surveyed to move to digital delivery, outdoor activities, and detached youth work during the pandemic to meet increasing demand (ibid).

Youth work is clearly well placed to provide much needed initial mental health support to young people, and youth workers already have many of the necessary skills needed to meet current demand. Pre-pandemic, it was estimated that £1.77 billion would be required ‘... to treat all the young people who need help with their mental health’ (Bristow *et al.*, 2018, 4). With the evidence presented in this article, this £1.77 billion figure is now undoubtedly higher. The authors advocate that youth work is both a cost- and outcome-effective way to meet this demand. But, with the impaired infrastructure of youth work across Scotland and England, this raises concerns about the future of the profession itself. Despite lobbying by the National Youth Agency and the Institute for Youth Work, funding packages for youth work (the Youth Investment Fund) announced by the DCMS in England prior to the pandemic, in late 2019, were ‘shelved’ in 2021 (Muirhead, 2021). In 2020, the Scottish Government introduced a £3 million Youth Work Education Recovery Fund to help young people (re)engage with learning during the pandemic (Scottish Government, 2020). But many youth organisations did not have the required digital infrastructure and/or youth workers to meet the criteria (UK Youth, 2020).

This article calls for the UK and Scottish Governments to recognise how well-placed youth work, and youth workers, provide much needed initial mental health support to young people across Scotland and England, and to sufficiently (re)invest in its infrastructure to deliver this provision. As research presented in this article demonstrates, the effects of the pandemic on young people’s mental health are likely to continue at length. There is a real opportunity here to combat this trend by galvanising on the skills, values, and experience that youth work brings.

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