Research briefing
October 2022

Exploring young people's perspectives on mental health support in areas of high deprivation: the importance of community support

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About the research

Improving young people's mental health and wellbeing is a global public health priority. However, despite continued commitment within the UK policy agenda to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people, the incidence of mental health issues continues to rise. This has been further compounded by the outbreak of COVID-19 which has disproportionately affected young people in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Young people face many barriers in accessing mental health support such as long waiting times and high thresholds that have to be reached before support is available.

In light of these issues, it is vital to explore young people's perspectives on mental health support in order to develop policies that better meet their needs. We conducted 18 focus groups with 42 young people aged 13-21 in three geographical areas with high levels of deprivation in England, UK. Recruited through six local youth organisations, each group of young people took part in three interlinked focus groups designed to explore their perceptions of what impacts their health in their local area, and their understandings of health inequalities through participatory methods.

As well as showing an awareness of the factors within their local areas that influence their mental health, such as poverty, the findings demonstrate the pressing need for increased investment in services focused on prevention (such as youth groups) in areas of high deprivation.

Policy implications

- Public service cuts have disproportionately affected young people in the poorest areas, resulting in increasing inequalities in the distribution of services.

- Young people in our study highlight the impact of poverty on their everyday lives and on service provision in their local areas. This shows they are aware of, and directly experience, the impact of austerity policies.

- Our findings show there is a clear need for investment in services (such as youth services) that support mental health through prevention, as well as the need for ring fenced funding for Child and Young People's Mental Health services.

- However, given the challenges many young people in our study faced in accessing mental health support, increasing investment without improving existing provision may not be enough. In the context of cuts to service provision and public health budgets, services need to be affordable, accessible and tailored to young people's needs.

- Through exploring young people's perspectives in areas of high deprivation this study provides important insights into how mental services can be better designed to meet the needs of young people.

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Key findings

- The factors affecting young people's mental health are interrelated and complex.

- Young people were aware of how their mental health was influenced by their socioeconomic position, linking poverty to food insecurity and stress.

- Young people perceived challenges to accessing mental health support, such as long waiting times and high thresholds for support, and were acutely aware of how funding cuts and gaps in provision impacted their everyday lives.

- Although some young people felt school was a good place to receive mental health support, several felt that staff lacked time, training and expertise, particularly for more complex mental health problems.

- In the context of deficits in mental health provision, young people consistently foregrounded the importance of youth groups for supporting their mental health.

- Youth groups provided safe, accessible and informal mental health support.

- In light of systems pressures and inequalities in the distribution of services, our study calls for further investment in community support (such as youth groups) in areas of high deprivation.

"[name of youth organisation], it's a place where we all feel safe, a place where other young people have a place where we can speak freely and be ourselves.'" (Young person)

"I think that the people who aren't at risk then only get help when they deteriorate...it's like there's a standard for how bad mental health has to be for you to get help" (Young person)

About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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Further information

The findings of this study have been published: http://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.14078

Further information on the wider project which this research is based on can be found at: https://nihrsphr.link/FairerHealth

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