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Who cares? Exploring economic inactivity among young women in the NEET group across England

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores what it means to be defined as NEET and economically inactive (EI). It draws on research conducted in England in 2016 and 2017 to examine the lives of young women who carry this label. While the term 'NEET' has been extended in recent years to cover a much wider age cohort of young people across the UK (and internationally), this has failed to be accompanied by an expansion in understanding about the wider group of young people it now embraces. The division within the NEET group between young people who are defined as economically active (EA), i.e. unemployed, and economically inactive (EI) triggers significant differences in the type of welfare entitlement and associated levels of support received. The paper explores why there are many young women who become NEET and EI and remain so for long periods of time. It presents evidence which highlights that young women often find themselves isolated and disconnected, despite their abilities and aspirations. The existing evidence would suggest the wider categorisation of NEET status and, crucially, associated policy interventions are failing to meet the needs of many young people, both those classified as NEET EA and those classified as NEET EI.

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Introduction

Recent trends in the official statistics point to declining youth unemployment rates in the UK. This has enabled some policymakers to suggest that young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training), and particularly the young unemployed, no longer constitute a significant 'problem'. The reality is that less than half of young people (aged 16–24) who are defined as NEET are classified as economically active (EA) or 'unemployed', with the remainder being defined as economically inactive (EI). Those in the EI group do not appear in the unemployment statistics because they are not actively seeking work and are assigned different types of welfare support and intervention within the UK.

Little is known or understood about what it is like to be NEET and EI (Tamesberger and Bacher 2014). Scant attention has been paid to understanding the underlying causes of NEET EI status and, crucially, its impact on large numbers of young people's lives. Broadly, among young women, the attributed cause of most of their EI status is their caring responsibilities, whilst among young men it is due to health conditions, which are dominated by mental health problems. As far as young women are concerned, recent research which is presented in this paper sheds light on important factors which impinge on their everyday lives and on the barriers they face in coping with their circumstances, while many seek to improve their life chances. It draws on the qualitative evidence from a two-year study of NEET and EI young women in England to highlight how EI status

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effectively 'hides' young people from the policy spotlight, while at the same time exacerbating their social and economic exclusion. The paper also provides some key messages for policy makers about the need to develop targeted policy interventions to address the needs of this often forgotten group of young people.

UK and international context

Before considering the evidence from the study, it is necessary to unpick how NEET is defined, what is meant by EI, and the relationship of young people who are NEET and EI to the welfare system in the UK.

The adoption of the term 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training), which emerged in the 1990s to capture the number of 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK who were denied unemployment status following legislative changes, is well-recorded in the literature (Istance, Rees, and Williamson 1994; SEU 1999; Furlong 2007; Thompson 2011). Since then, it has been applied internationally to refer to a much wider cohort, typically 16–24-year olds (and in some countries up to the age of 35 years), with varying age definitions existing between specific countries (House of Lords 2014). Coupled with a broader age spectrum, the NEET group now incorporates the conventionally unemployed who are actively seeking work, i.e. the economically active (EA) NEET group, as well as those who are economically inactive (EI), primarily because they have caring and/or domestic responsibilities or are unable to participate in EET (education, employment or training) due to long-term ill health, sickness or disability. As a result, young people who are classified as 'unemployed' and EA co-exist in NEET status with young people who are defined as EI.

This extension of the 'NEET' category, in terms of both its widespread use internationally and the inclusion of a much wider age spectrum, has led to a growing concern about its currency as an appropriate term. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has argued that while, worldwide, there are recognised standard definitions for unemployment or employment, there is no such international standard definition for the NEET group. Its own definition makes a distinction between the EA and the EI groups by whether or not an individual is actively seeking work (ILO 2013).

It is apparent from official statistics that there are gender differences in terms of representation in both the economically active (EA) and the EI groups within the UK. Overall, nearly 800,000 (11.1% of young people in the UK aged 16–24) are NEET (Office for National Statistics 2018). Of the NEET group as a whole, just over 40% (41.6%) were classed as EA, of whom 60% were young men. In contrast, there are many more young people in the NEET EI group. In October-December 2017, there were 212,000 young men and 251,000 young women who were NEET and EI. While of those who were EI, the majority (54%) were young women, the picture has changed over the last two years, with an increasing proportion of young men who are NEET falling into this category. For example, in 2015, 19% of males who were NEET had EI status. By 2017, there had been a ten-percentage point increase to 29% of males being categorised as NEET and EI (Office for National Statistics 2015, 2017). Another key feature of NEET EI status is that young people have a much greater propensity to remain in this category for considerable periods of time and to be long-term welfare dependent, in comparison to their counterparts who are classified as unemployed.

NEET as an international phenomenon

Economic inactivity within the NEET group is not peculiar to the UK, as it remains a 'hidden' problem in many countries across the EU and internationally. Thus, young women are disproportionately more likely to be NEET in all OECD countries, with the exceptions of Luxembourg and Spain, where young men are more likely than young women to be NEET. Also, young women have a greater likelihood to be NEET and EI, whilst men are more likely to be unemployed within the NEET group (OECD 2014; Lee et al. 2012). Female NEET inactivity is overwhelmingly linked to 'caring' responsibilities, whether this be child or elder care and/or other domestic/family responsibilities and, in some countries, to cultural expectations. As an extreme case, 40% of young girls in

Turkey are NEET (as against 18% of boys), out of which 93% are EI, possibly with family care responsibilities (Bardak, Maseda, and Rosso 2015). NEET rates and NEET EI rates increase among young women as they get older and assume childcare responsibilities. For example, among 25 to 29 years old women, the NEET rate stands at 26% across all OECD countries, which is 11% higher than the male NEET rate. Within the overall NEET rate, the share of NEET EI among young women is three times higher than that for young men (OECD 2016).

Assaad and Levison contend that inadequate global labour market demand for young people invariably leads to young women being more likely to be found doing non-labour force work and less likely to report themselves as actively seeking work. This results in many young women not being included in the unemployment rate, especially when the 'seeking work' criteria are applied. However, exceptions to this trend do exist. For example, in Latin American, Middle Eastern and North African countries, female unemployment rates are substantially higher than those of males, which is attributed to significant numbers of educated women seeking work in public sector employment. In these localities, high female EI rates co-exist with high female unemployment rates and serve to perpetuate young women assuming responsibility for non-labour force work, such as housework and child care responsibilities (Assaad and Levison 2013).

In the international literature, few papers focus specifically on the economic outcomes of NEET status due to the complex and changing nature of the group and the lack of suitable longitudinal data. The evidence suggests that periods of economic inactivity in early life leave a scaring effect on the individual's education and employment prospects that persists over time (Samoilenko and Carter 2015; Eurostat 2015). For example, a study from Sweden showed that individuals who were economically inactive when they were 20–24 years old in 1993–94 had a significantly elevated risk of being economically inactive when followed up seven years later. Also, in comparison with individuals in other unstable labour market positions, there was a significant excess risk of a marginalised outcome among the inactive groups (Franzén and Kassman 2005).

While high female economically inactive groups are a common feature among most NEET populations worldwide, there is a dearth of national and international evidence about effective interventions to reverse this trend, or, in fact, to accurately quantify or qualify their composition or existence. Some commentators highlight that the NEET EI group is essentially an under-researched 'black box', which is categorised in terms of what young people are not doing, as opposed to understanding the likelihood of young people within the overall group or subgroups (re) engaging with education, employment or training (Tamesberger and Bacher 2014).

Theoretical perspective

Providing a theoretical explanation for the causes and consequences of NEET EI status may be linked to traditional arguments put forward to explain the vulnerable position of young people in the labour market and reasons for their economic and social exclusion. Fluctuations in the demand for youth labour have been explained by pointing to the state of the economy, with employers reducing their demand for youth labour during recession and increasing it during an upturn. On the basis of research carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, two contrasting schools of thought attempted to explain why young people are more vulnerable than other groups to a lessening in demand for their labour: the structural hypothesis (Ashton and Maguire 1983; Roberts, Dench, and Richardson 1986, Roberts 2009); and the labour queue hypothesis (Main and Raffe 1983; Main 1985; Raffe 1986). Structural arguments assert that labour market changes over the last decades are irreversible and, regardless of economic conditions, many of the jobs which were traditionally occupied by young people have been lost (Roberts 1995). In contrast, labour queue theory argues that young workers are particularly vulnerable to any changes in the levels of unemployment and employment because of their precarious position in the 'labour queue', due to their limited skills and labour market experience. Proponents of this hypothesis maintain that these changes are not permanent and could be reversed by policies aimed at stimulating economic activity (Raffe 1986).

In the United States, Reskin and Roos' discussion of labour queues incorporated sex segregation as a key element, with women being disadvantaged in terms of job quality and wages (Reskin and Roos 1990).

More recently, the emergence of cross-country comparisons of education-work transitions has seen the development of the concept of transition systems, whose theoretical underpinnings are attributed to: theories of societal analysis; labour-market segmentation theory; theories of social stratification and social mobility; and network and signaling theories (Raffe 2008, 2014). Here, Raffe contends that 'the institutional and structural factors which shape transitions are broader than education and training; they include the organisation of labour markets as well as contextual features such as social welfare systems and family structures' (277–278). The inclusion of 'social welfare systems and family structure' is of particular significance for this paper.

From an educational perspective, Brown (2015), in her study of children in poverty who had multiple transitions within their schooling, identified a number of common and interlocking 'binds' which framed their lives and acted as barriers to their school and community inclusion. These include: material deprivation; cultural inequalities and symbolic value; friendship networks which act as mechanisms for inclusion and exclusion; and irregular transitions which occur outside of normal admission and exit points (Brown 2015,15). As the next section highlights, some of these binds appear to resonate in the lives of young women who are defined as NEET and economically inactive.

In contrast, proponents of underclass theory have put forward alternative arguments to explain economic and social exclusion. Prominent among these is Charles Murray, who argued that a generous welfare support system has encouraged economic inactivity among young women, given the access to welfare support and social housing afforded to single parenthood (Murray 1994, 29). This view, which attributed membership of an 'underclass' to being the result of the behaviour of its constituents, was challenged by numerous commentators, who favoured a 'structural' interpretation of causation (Field 1996).

In a review of underclass theory and studies of youth transitions in the 1990s, MacDonald (1997, 195) highlighted that, contrary to Murray's position, most young people (and adults) who are defined as being part of a 'so called' underclass wanted to work. The challenges they faced were associated with navigating opportunity structures which were negatively defined through the lack of available quality jobs, which emanated from the consequences of economic restructuring in local labour markets.

Overview of study

This paper draws on the qualitative evidence and a literature review from a two-year study,[1] which was completed in December 2017 and examined EI rates among the NEET group and why they disproportionately impact on the lives of young women (Maguire and Mckay 2016, 2017). The stated aims of the project were to:

- understand the reasons why so many young women are NEET and EI;
- enable young women to tell their own stories about their experiences of being NEET and EI; and
- find new ways of supporting NEET and EI young women.

The first year of the study comprised: a literature review; in-depth interviews with ten key informants, including policymakers and academics; analysis of data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS); and case studies in five areas in England. The selected localities for the case studies were Norwich, Kent, Hull, Birmingham and Oldham. In each area, semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with local stakeholders involved in devising and delivering employment interventions. These stakeholders typically represented local authorities, Jobcentre

Plus (JCP), Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), education and training providers, and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. In total, there were thirty-eight respondents. Additionally, in Birmingham and Hull, individual interviews and a focus group were conducted with ten young women who were NEET and EI.

A major component of the second year of the study involved in-depth interviews with 57 young women aged 16–25. These were conducted between March and June 2017 across nine localities in England (Manchester, Newcastle, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Leicester, Walsall, Bournemouth, Derby and Loughborough). All interviewees had experience of being EI, although, at the point of interview, some of their circumstances had changed. The interviews, which were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, were structured by the use of a discussion guide, with the aim of encouraging open conversation. Information about young women's history of education, employment and training and their daily lives were collected with the help of exercises such as drawing timelines or filling in a 'clock' of their day. In addition, ten young women completed seven-day diaries via WhatsApp, email and text message. Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the sample, in terms of their housing arrangements, ethnicity, caring responsibilities and disability and health issues.

Researchers arranged the interviews through contacts in local youth and employment support organisations, national and local charities and housing associations. This implies that interviewees had already received some support, such as parenting classes, basic skills education or involvement in youth projects. It follows that the research team, with a few exceptions, did not reach those young women who were NEET EI and who remain unsupported.

Experiences of education, training and employment

In terms of their experience of education, training and employment, the overwhelming majority of young women interviewed in both Year 1 and Year 2 had completed Year 11, obtained qualifications (GCSEs) and had some experience of post-16 learning. The Year 2 sample included some Year

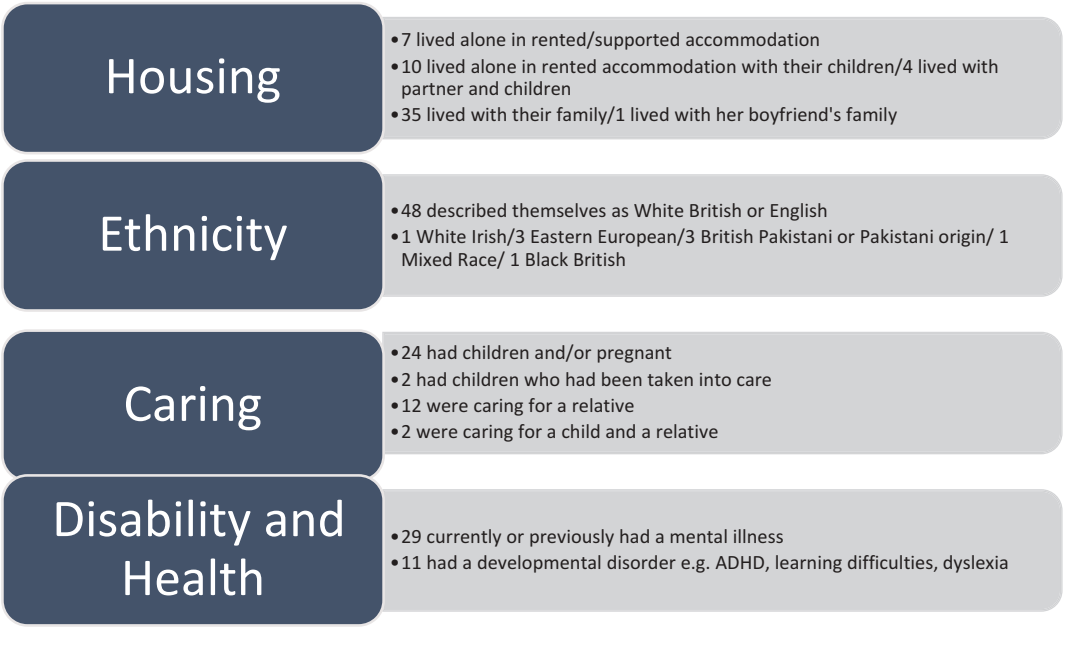

Figure 1. Profile of Year 2 sample.

11 high achievers and two young women who had completed A levels and dropped out of higher education courses.

Unlike in Brown's study (2015), where children had moved schools on multiple occasions, the majority of young women within the NEET EI sample had resided in their local area for most of their lives and had attended neighbourhood schools throughout their compulsory education. The exceptions had moved due to non-attendance, ill health or undiagnosed learning and behavioural difficulties, such as ADHD or autism. However, similarities do exist between the two studies with regard to the issue of friendship formation. There were widespread reports of young women having experienced bullying in school, which had caused them difficulties, as well as admissions from some young women that they also bullied others as a strategy to cope within their school environment.

The analysis of the data showed that, within this sample, the disruption to the young women's lives had occurred primarily during the post-16 phase and had led to their current NEET and EI status. Reasons given for their inability to carry on in full-time learning included:

- their own mental health problems (depression and anxiety);
- caring for parents with mental health problems (depression and anxiety) and/or alcoholism;
- drug and alcohol issues;
- pregnancy and childcare responsibilities;
- physical health problems, and
- homelessness or simply dropping out of post-16 education or training.

In some cases, young women faced one or more of these issues and had experienced difficulties for a protracted period, while, for some, individual decisions had resulted in other challenges occurring in their lives. For example, a 'critical moment', such as dropping out of sixth form, had led to a radical change in direction, despite the young woman being classified as having made a 'successful' post-16 transition. The following quote illustrates this point.

> '*I got 11 or 12 GCSEs. All A* to C.*'
>
> Left school after Year 11 (aged 16) and went to a local sixth form college to take 3 A Levels but dropped out after four months.
>
> '*I kind of regret that now… I'm dead shy and none of my friends went there. And I didn't make any friends and it was horrible during the breaks and stuff. So, I didn't really go. And then my attendance was crap and I was dead behind. Then I thought 'I'm just going to get an apprenticeship or something.' So, I just left. But then I got an apprenticeship in the February. It was alright. It was me and this other girl who started at the same time, both apprentices. And it was a little shop, so it was a bit boring 'cos it was a brand new shop and we didn't have many customers. It was a Korean make-up and skin care ….. Well, I fell pregnant in, well, June when I found out and then I stayed on until I was about to pop.*'
>
> (Aged 19 years of age and lives alone with her one-year old son. Completed 11 months of the apprenticeship and returned to work part-time after having her baby)

Participation in post-16 provision was dominated by Level 1 and Level 2 vocational courses in female dominated occupational areas, namely, hairdressing, health and social care and childcare, which were undertaken at local further education (FE) colleges and, to a lesser extent, with local training providers. Very few interviewees had either embarked upon or completed higher level (Level 3) vocational courses. What was evident, however, was the 'churning' between different post-16 courses, often without any clear progression route, such as moving into employment in the same vocational area, being apparent. This was due to their being unable to secure jobs, despite undertaking qualifications on the expectation that they would lead to job opportunities in related areas. Also, many had 'drifted' between different types of provision, without any clear understanding about how particular courses or qualifications would translate into tangible progression routes. This churning between programmes is reminiscent of practice observed in the 1990s, when

large numbers of young people participated on youth training programmes and completed multiple types of training interventions without obvious progression (Roberts 2004).

While the vast majority of the young women had participated in some form of post-16 education, their experiences of apprenticeships and the world of work were much more limited. There was little evidence of them progressing from school into full-time work or from full-time vocational courses, such as those in, for example, health and social care or hairdressing, into full-time apprenticeship programmes or jobs in associated sectors. This raises questions about the value and currency of their post-16 vocational qualifications to secure related or equivalent level jobs in their local labour markets or training opportunities that would enable them to progress from their qualification attainment base (Wolf 2011). However, other factors, such as pregnancy or health issues, were also preventing some young women from moving from full-time learning into work or further training.

Experiences of apprenticeship training tended to be restricted to the retail and care sectors, call centres and reception work. The small number who had completed apprenticeships failed to secure employment with the company with which they had trained, while some dropped out or were asked to leave during the course of their pregnancy. This highlights that, in order to encourage completion, there is a need for a greater degree of support to be offered to young women who become pregnant during apprenticeship training. There was no apparent relationship between the types of apprenticeship training undertaken and prior vocational learning or academic attainment levels. Moreover, there was evidence of young women accepting relatively low-level apprenticeship training, despite leaving Year 11 with high GCSE scores.

Experience of paid work was limited to short-term, low-skilled employment (MacDonald 2011), often with precarious working conditions in, for example, sales, caring and catering. Respondents gave examples of sporadic employment patterns, which, as well as unskilled work in factories, included working in pizza bars, cinemas, shops and football grounds, on a part-time, casual and sometimes seasonal basis, alongside completing or following periods spent in full-time post-16 learning. Some of this work was secured via agencies or working for a relative on temporary or variable hours contracts. There was no evidence that the young women had built on their academic and vocational qualifications to secure related, equivalent or higher-level employment opportunities.

Day-to-day living

The in-depth interviews with young women showed that their day-to-day lives differed significantly according to the following four key factors:

- their reason for being EI – e.g. motherhood, caring responsibilities, physical or mental health problems;
- household composition – whether living with a child/ren, alone, with parent(s) or with a partner;
- entitlement to welfare support;
- support networks – notably, parent(s), partner, professional adviser or none at all.

An overarching finding from the research was the extent to which many young women faced multiple barriers. For example, while a young woman may have been in receipt of welfare support for caring for a child, this often sat alongside problems with depression and anxiety, and/or caring for other family members. That is to say, while their EI status may have been attributed to one factor, other recognised 'causes' or consequences were also present.

Reasons for being EI

Young women's daily routines were largely determined by their main reasons for being EI. These were, principally:

- *Motherhood*

  Mothers spent a lot of time feeding, bathing, dressing and playing with their children, as well as cooking, cleaning and shopping for essentials.

- *Having caring responsibilities*

  Those with caring responsibilities outlined how their responsibilities for a child/ren or relative dominated their days. Those caring for relatives took on housework as well as helping and supervising their relatives' basic needs.

- *Poor health*

  The range of conditions experienced by interviewees, to varying degrees of severity, means that it is not possible to build up a 'typical' day or week for a young woman in poor health in the same way as it is for a mother or carer. It was striking that the majority of those with either physical disabilities or illnesses, or developmental disorders, had also experienced mental health problems. In particular, for young women with physical illnesses and mobility problems, it had been the danger they posed to themselves through mental illness that had put them into contact with social services or being placed in institutional settings.

- *Being in transition between education and employment*

  Young women were defined as being 'in transition' if they were out of work and in part-time alternative provision or occasionally seeking work but would not meet the job search requirements for claiming unemployment benefits, or they were ineligible due to their age (under 18).

Broadly, four factors were identified as having a significant impact on the everyday experiences of young women interviewed for the study. These were: a reliance on family networks for financial and emotional support; feelings of being isolated from wider society; mental health issues; and the limitations imposed on them by their restricted incomes.

Family networks

The majority of young women relied heavily on their family for practical, financial and emotional support. Most were living with or near their close family network, regardless of whether or not they were living alone or with a partner/spouse. Among those who were independent from family support, the ability to establish and sustain a positive relationship with a key professional, such as a youth worker, a social worker or a community psychiatric nurse (CPN), was crucial in helping them navigate their way through welfare entitlements, housing issues and day-to-day living. Beyond the confines of family and/or professional support, young women were often devoid of wider social contact, with limited friendship networks and social activities, and lacking the means to travel.

Isolation

A consistent finding that emanated through all areas of the research was the degree to which young women who are NEET and EI are isolated within their households and their communities and, as a result of their circumstances, suffer from low self-confidence, low self-esteem and emerging mental health issues. In a number of case study areas, mental health issues were identified as a significant problem, which some areas are tackling through programmes and interventions targeted at identifying and supporting vulnerable groups. Integral to this issue is the extent to which remoteness and isolation

insulates NEET and EI young women from external and independent support and advice, which may lead to positive change.

> *The isolation issue is massive. It is a complex issue…. Most of the girls we work with have desperately low self-esteem and their connections/community are tiny. It is a small world that looks after itself and it forms a survival mode. They may have a mum who has mental health issues, who does not show you another way of being and although you may not be attached to that mum, there is no positive role model. It is much deeper rooted.*
>
> (Youth worker)

Mental health issues

The two dominant issues that faced a significant number of young women were pregnancy and/or problems with depression and anxiety. While the challenges of teenage pregnancy and the impact this may have on young women's ability to participate in EET are well-documented in research evidence (Harris et al. 2005), less is known about the prevalence of mental health issues among this group. Certainly, within this sample, many young women spoke about their problems with depression and anxiety, their treatment programmes (if any) and how their mental illness inhibited their ability to participate in EET. These problems were either caused or exacerbated by their isolation and disconnect from wider society. In some cases, there was evidence of long-standing issues, which had started in school, while in others their problems had been triggered following a period of post-natal depression.

These findings concur with research conducted by Scott et al. (2013) who found that prolonged economic inactivity had profound effects on mental health, with much higher risks of depression, alcohol or substance misuse and suicide attempts being significantly increased in economically inactive young people compared to their economically active peers (Scott et al. 2013).

Income constraints

Young women were asked about their access to financial support, the frequency and amount of money they received and their budgeting. The sample can be segmented according to whether the young women were:

- in receipt of independent welfare support or totally reliant on their parent(s) or partner;
- which types of welfare support they received and why;
- the frequency of welfare payments; and, crucially,
- whether or not they had their own children to support.

There was evidence of severe financial hardship, particularly among young mothers and those who were living alone. This was especially likely to occur following a change in circumstances, such as changing a welfare claim held jointly with an ex-partner, which had a huge impact on their finances until reassessments were in place. As well as practical and emotional support, all young women had a high dependence on financial support from family members, when this was available. However, this could bring its own problems, in terms of feelings of continued reliance and lack of independence. Wherever possible, they avoided getting into debt, although there were examples when this had occurred, due to moving home, accumulated rent arrears or borrowing to furnish a new house or flat. Among young mothers, spending priorities centred first and foremost on meeting their children's needs, with the odd treat or new item of clothing for themselves.

> *My mam and dad helped me loads, and then my mam was claiming for me and the baby up until last year. Obviously, she helped me with everything, she got me everything. Then, when I started claiming, then I started getting him stuff, and stuff like that, but it is hard because obviously I've moved out now. I'm paying for all the bills and everything, so I'm skint at the minute.*
>
> (Aged 18 and lives alone with 2-year-old son)

The welfare system

A key element of this research was to test how the concept of 'NEET' is applied and understood by policymakers and practitioners at local and national levels. Also, it was important to elicit the key differences between how young people are defined as EA and EI within the umbrella term of 'NEET'. Significantly, some policymakers commented on the fact that, while the term NEET has been extended over recent years to include a much wider age range of 16–24-year-olds (up to 29- year olds within EU programmes), the research evidence largely relates to the younger age group (16–18-year-olds) and is therefore somewhat dated. Another important assertion by some national policymakers was that, although the umbrella term 'NEET' captures rates of young people's economic and social disengagement, policy intervention tends to focus on specific groups within it, as a result of a shift away from general policy.

> *Any evidence that we have on the NEET group is dated. We have pockets to support different types of policy development, but no way do we have good evidence … It is easier to prove if you target specific groups.*
>
> (Key Informant)

Furthermore, the terms EA and EI were understood by policy makers and practitioners to relate to young people's eligibility for, and receipt of, welfare benefits and, crucially, the type of benefits they are eligible to claim. As a result, there are considerable differences in the types of support and intervention each group receives, as well as in their length of tenure within the welfare system. The focus and attention given to EA claimants, in comparison to other types of claimant, was also highlighted. The case study evidence showed that government funding is geared towards the needs of EA claimants in order to focus on reducing the unemployment rate, with other types of benefit claimants receiving comparatively scant attention. Also, the targets set for young job seekers by Job Coaches in Job Centres, such as the number and type of weekly job applications, were perceived by some to be too onerous, resulting in the largest number of sanctions being experienced by the young unemployed (Maguire and Mckay 2016).

This view was endorsed by some young women in the sample, who had been classified as unemployed before moving into EI status. They described how, when claiming unemployment benefits (Jobseeker's Allowance), they had felt under pressure to find a job while claiming their money, and their relief when they had moved onto alternative sources of funding.

> *I was stressed to find out that I was pregnant and then I had the Job Centre saying 'get a job, get a job, do this course.' It was all new to me …. I am on JSA at the moment, but next week I will move on to Income Support. It is the same, £115 per fortnight, and I will get extra when the baby is born.*
>
> (Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

The qualitative interviews with young women who were NEET and EI provided an illuminating insight into their world. They confirmed concern expressed by some policy makers and case study interviewees about the extent to which young women who have EI status are simply 'written off' because of the types of benefits they may claim and that, as a result, they receive limited support or intervention. Women who are NEET and EI are typically 'lumped together', without any clear differentiation between the needs and expectations of young mothers, carers and those who have physical and/or mental health issues. Interviews with policymakers and programme providers in case study areas also highlighted how young women who are NEET and EI are difficult to find and to support, due to their remoteness from available support services.

Moving forward

It was evident that young women in the sample did not lack ambition or a willingness to change their circumstances in the future. Many spoke of a desire to secure a 'stable' and 'secure' income from meaningful work as a primary goal, which would enable them to remove their dependence

on welfare support and the associated stigma (Middleton, Ashworth, and Braithwaite 1997). A pervasive finding was the respondents' overriding sense of a 'lack of entitlement' to money, support or a decent lifestyle until they could secure financial independence through decent paid work. This strongly runs counter to underclass theory, as put forward by Murray (1990, 1994), which argues that sub-groups such as single mothers make a lifestyle choice to be both welfare dependent and work shy.

Young women were asked about their future plans and how they hoped to achieve them. For many, the discussion focused mainly on their ambitions to: achieve financial security, independence and stability; move away from money worries, hardship and constant budgeting; and provide for their children. Escaping the boredom of staying at home with 'nothing to do' was another key factor in the young women's ambition to find work or a suitable training opportunity.

Careers and work

The route to achieving these goals was through obtaining meaningful and secure work in their own localities. Career choices were often shaped by their personal experiences, such as caring for others or having received support for mental health problems. Consequently, many young women mentioned nursing, teaching, care work, social work and counselling as potential career choices.

Constraints

The group facing the greatest number of challenges, in terms of carving out a future for themselves and leaving EI, was young mothers (Millar 2007). They reported a number of vexing issues that they faced, and which locked them into EI status and welfare dependency for considerable periods of time. The following reasons for this were cited as:

- anxiety over leaving pre-school children, due to concerns about the quality, cost and availability of childcare provision;
- the precarious nature of many local employment opportunities and the risk of fracture, disruption and uncertainty to their welfare support;
- the low pay associated with apprenticeship training, which would make this option unfeasible to young mothers, and
- the stigma attached to lone motherhood and the perceived discrimination that they felt they would receive from some employers.

Many young mothers commented on their ambition to leave welfare support and expressed concerns about the negative label they perceived they carried because they claimed benefits and were lone parents. In particular, they were sensitive to assertions made in the press and in their communities that they were both scroungers and feckless.

> *'People judge you as 'well, you are signing on and a bum'. It is hard to look after kids and work. I don't know how I am going to do it. I don't want people to judge me'.*
>
> (Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

The lack of 'decent' jobs and their ability to find work due to the immense competition that young workers face was a prevalent concern, as well as the blame that they attributed to themselves. These findings are not peculiar to young women or to young people. They resonate with wider research evidence on the impact of unemployment and economic disengagement on self-worth (Shildrick et al. 2012).

With regard to their own needs, there was a strong voice for one-to-one personal support, which should be tailored to meet their individual needs. This call for intensive support included the need to access help with the demands of parenting and/or living alone, as well as assistance with navigating their way (back) into the labour market. Some young mothers feared the expectation that, once their youngest child reached the age of five, they would be catapulted into finding a job,

without any gradual reintroduction to active labour market status. This step-by-step approach might involve attending short courses to improve their skills etc. The overriding call for mentorship and personalised support is a significant finding, alongside the isolation and lack of external interaction with the outside world that many young women (and young men) face.

Priorities

Any personal goals or ambitions which were mentioned were tempered by the underlying premise that, first and foremost, they wanted to be good parents and to look after their children. They felt it was important to be 'there' for their children. Setting aside the high cost of childcare and the reality that most young mothers would be unable to secure jobs that would make them better off financially, a number of respondents were also worried and anxious about going to work and leaving their pre-school children. These findings confirmed the findings from interviews conducted with young mothers in the first year of the research, which evidenced that they felt that they would be deemed to be 'bad mothers' if they left their pre-school children.

Despite struggling with the money available to them from welfare payments to support themselves and their children, most young mothers could not see a route into earning more money through paid work until their children reached school age. As indicated earlier, the high costs of childcare and the possibility that any added financial benefits from working would be wiped out by childcare and travel costs were key concerns.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The findings of the research highlight the potential dangers of accepting, passively, that a significant number of young women who are NEET and EI are assigned to this status on the grounds of early motherhood or caring, and are therefore effectively 'sidelined'. Clearly, many other issues, such as mental and physical health problems and caring for other family members, are prevalent. Coupled, in the majority of cases, with isolation, this locks them into long-term welfare dependency and social disengagement. This demarcation with regard to the type of welfare benefit and intervention that young people receive, depending on their classification as either NEET and EI or NEET and EA, is inherently operating to the disadvantage and marginalisation of large numbers of young women (and increasing numbers of young men). Young women who are EI typically remain on welfare support for much longer periods than those who are EA and are also far less likely to receive any form of positive support or intervention.

Multiple barriers

An overarching finding from the research was the extent to which many young women faced multiple and interlocking barriers or 'binds' (Brown 2015). For example, while a young woman may be in receipt of welfare support for caring for a child, this often sat alongside recognised problems with depression and anxiety and/or caring for other family members. Moreover, the evidence from the case studies in five localities which were conducted in Year 1, coupled with the second-year in-depth qualitative interviews which took place in nine different geographical locations, suggest that a similar pattern of experiences exists across England.

Isolation and discrimination

The evidence about young women who are NEET and EI being isolated, disconnected and hard to reach is a powerful finding. It highlights their reliance on small family networks within confined communities, with little access to external support or recognition.

At first glance, it may suggest that this evidence chimes with the perspective of underclass theorists who would argue that this is a status of choice. That is, in a climate where there are record

levels of employment and low levels of unemployment across the UK, individuals choose to remain in a welfare dependent sub-class and are disconnected from mainstream society.

However, among our sample, low self-worth and low self-esteem were commonplace. To these young women, particularly those with children, interventions to enhance their ability to navigate their way back into the world of work need to counter significant obstacles, notably: their lack of self-confidence; the challenges of securing and funding reliable childcare; and finding employment in local economies where opportunity structures appear to be stacked against them.

Somewhat contrary to conventional perceptions, most young women in the sample had academic and/or vocational qualifications, with the majority having undertaken post-16 provision. However, what remains disturbing is the extent to which they were unable to build on their qualification base to progress into higher level educational provision or good quality and sustainable training and employment opportunities.

Many young women had 'churned' between Level 1 and Level 2 provision with a range of providers. While this lack of progression could be attributed to the disruption caused by an unexpected pregnancy, child care responsibilities or health issues, the lack of opportunity for many young women to access independent guidance and support, as well as secure 'small steps' or pathways towards economic and social independence, is a significant finding. Their reliance (where it existed) on family support often denied them the wider the networks and support mechanisms which may have enabled them to exploit their qualifications and skills and, at the same time, essentially locked them out of wider opportunities that may exist for other social groups.

This suggests that structural barriers to employment are very real in the lives of many young people and, despite record employment rates existing across the UK, the position of many disdadvantaged groups remains unchanged. Therefore, the evidence from this research resonates most closely with Raffe's position on transition systems. He argued that it is important to look beyond the infrastucture of education and training and include broader institutional and structural factors, most notably labour markets, as well as social welfare systems and family structures to fully explore youth transitions (Raffe 2014, 277–278).

What to do

Personalised and continuous support

In terms of supporting young women who become NEET and EI, the feedback was consistent in suggesting that they needed the offer of personalised and continuous support, with a named adviser who was trained to work with the specific needs of young people. Moreover, this service should be provided without either compulsion or penalties, in order to encourage greater numbers to come forward. The availability of affordable and accessible childcare is another key requirement to encourage young mothers to start thinking about (re)entry into the world of work when they are ready to do so. The demarcation between the level and type of support offered to young people according to whether they are defined as NEET EI or NEET EA should end and no longer be determined on the basis of the type of welfare support they receive. Rather, their needs as individual young people who require recognition, support and intervention should be paramount.

Lack of strategic ownership

The key informant interviews and the case study evidence pointed to fact that, despite the extension of the term NEET to embrace a wider age cohort across the UK, namely, 16–24-year olds, this has not been accompanied by an expansion of services or policy intervention. There was a perceived lack of strategic ownership and direction in England, with fragmentation of responsibility resulting in different parts of (local and national) government having both contrasting and overlapping types of responsibility, rather than these being in alignment. There remains a lack of a national strategy or coherent policy development. This should be led by a government minister,

who coodinates responsibilities across education, welfare, employment and skills to develop a national policy, which is ultimately devolved to regional or local level to ensure that it is responsive and inclusive.

Inadequacy of NEET label

What is abundantly clear is that the NEET 'label', rather than exposing the reality of many young people's lives, serves to hide the scale of youth disengagement that currently exists. While the term 'NEET' was devised in the UK as a mechanism to shine a light on the scale of economic and social exclusion that existed in the 1990s among the under 18s group, the day has now dawned to question whether it is any longer fit for purpose both within the UK and internationally. Its inclusion of a much wider age cohort, coupled with the incorporation of both youth unemployment and economic inactivity rates, serve to mask rather than support the needs of many young people (Maguire 2015). The evidence from this study showed that young women who were defined as NEET and EI did not lack a poverty of aspiration but rather a poverty of opportunity, with a clear lack of recognition within policy-making that their needs should be addressed.

An international agenda

A review of the literature which was conducted as part of this study highlighted the dearth of UK or international evidence about the NEET EI group. This suggests that high rates of NEET EI status among young women (and increasingly among young men) are not only a problem in England but exist in many other countries. However, the spotlight remains on reducing rates of youth unemployment, with what appears to be a tacit acceptance that economic inactivity within the NEET group remains less of a policy priority and, consequently, is under-researched. What this study has shown is that NEET EI status among young people is inextricably linked to a life of social and economic exclusion resulting in negative consequences for both individuals and wider society.

Although the findings of this study, based as they are on qualitative research with a relatively small sample, cannot claim to provide overwhelming evidence on transition systems, they can, nevertheless, be seen as highlighting the importance of welfare systems and the role of families in those debates. They also highlight the significance of the 'binds' identified by Brown.

At the same time, they offer support to MacDonald's contention that those who may be deemed to be part of an underclass, in this case economically inactive young women, invariably see employment as an aspiration. For some, the constraints imposed by caring for their children and/or other family members inhibit their ability to find work in the immediate future. Nonetheless, there is an overwhelming aspiration to secure well-paid and meaningful work in the longer term.

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