

KEY FINDINGS

I AM ONE IN A MILLION: YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth unemployment is at a record high, affecting over one million young people in the UK. The purpose of this study is to highlight this issue by voicing the stories of young people with first-hand experience of unemployment. Our research is based on 18 focus groups hosted by youth projects funded or supported by Frontier Youth Trust and Church Urban Fund. This note summarises the key findings and looks at what churches and voluntary groups could do to respond to the issues raised by young people.

- As the experiences of these young people show, unemployment is about much more than not having a job or surviving on benefits. It undermines young people's self-confidence and sense of purpose, and stigmatises them. At its worst, it leads to a loss of hope and dignity when young people should be looking forward to their future.
- The emotional, practical and financial support provided by family and friends is highly valued by young people, helping them to negotiate what is often a complex and stressful situation. Churches and faith-based groups have an important role in providing this kind of informal support, especially to young people who are living independently or require additional help. Young people respond best to relational ways of working, based on strong relationships with leaders who have genuine empathy with young people.
- Young people feel that employers are failing to acknowledge and fulfil their responsibilities – and they feel they are caught in a vicious cycle whereby they can't get a job without experience, and they can't get the required experience without a job. What young people want is to be given a proper chance to show what they can contribute to prospective employers; specifically, they would like more and better quality apprenticeships, work placements or trials that offer a real prospect of a job, and more on-the-job training.
- Churches could and should be doing more, by raising awareness about youth unemployment and tackling the problem in their local community through listening workshops, mentoring and personal development schemes, work clubs, networking with local businesses, and helping to establish social enterprises. National churches and faith-based organisations have an important supportive role.

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INTRODUCTION

Just over one million young people are unemployed; youth unemployment is a particular problem in the most deprived areas of England, where the unemployment rate among 16-24 years is over 30%. Academic studies have shown that extended spells of unemployment have harmful effects on young people's future prospects that persist for at least 20 years, as well as being a huge waste of talent and productivity.

This study was undertaken by Church Urban Fund and Frontier Youth Trust on behalf of Churches Together for England. Eighteen focus groups – involving over 100 young people - were held with youth projects across the country, at locations including Weston-Super-Mare, Tottenham, Birmingham, Salford and Middlesbrough. Young people were encouraged to talk about their experiences of unemployment and identify changes that would help people like them. Some of the participants were employed - usually in temporary or part-time jobs - but brought a useful perspective on what had helped or hindered them.

PERSONAL IMPACT

"I've been unemployed since last April [2010]. Because it's been a long time my confidence has got low. I've been trying to get work trials where you go to an organisation and offer to work for them for free for two weeks. But they just don't want to know. They treated me like it was a hassle to them. I think it was a lot to do with stereotyping. If you're young and you've been out of work for a long time, you must be lazy. But not everyone out there just sits on their backside. There are people who really try hard to get work."

Unemployment has a deeply negative impact on how young people feel about themselves and how they are treated by others. One young person articulated the frustration felt by many: *"There is no structure in my life. The one thing I can't stand is sitting in my house all week with nothing to do. My frustration spills over into the household and onto my own kids."* Perhaps most disturbing was hearing about the loss of hope and dignity: *"You get turned down so many times eventually you just give up all hope, so you don't even bother looking. There's only so many times you can take rejections before it gets you down."* The research also shows how personal circumstances, such as disability, lack of family support, and having a criminal record, can exacerbate these negative experiences.

Contrary to the image of a mythical 'care-free youth', the young people that took part in this research are anxious about their futures; they have the same aspirations as anyone else – a family, a secure income, and somewhere to live - and they have a wide range of ambitions, including chef, fireman, electrician, florist, mechanic, pharmacist and underwater welder! Yet, many young people feel they are blamed for being unemployed and stereotyped as lazy.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

"I know loads of people that don't even have a CV, don't even know what a CV is. Because they haven't had help, they haven't had family to help them. They just come out of school and that's it."

The importance of informal support from family and friends came up in many of the discussions. And where it was lacking, young people were very aware of what they were missing; in the most deprived areas, nearly one in two 16-24 year olds live independently without either parent.

Young people said it was important to have someone to listen to, encourage and motivate them, especially when going through a difficult time. Without this emotional support, young people can easily become demoralised and de-motivated. Participants also talked about practical advice and financial assistance

received from family members, such as help with reading CVs and being able to live rent-free at home; others bemoaned their lack of support.

Another issue referred to repeatedly was the benefit of informal contacts in finding employment, through friends and family members highlighting job vacancies or putting in a good word with a potential employer – ‘a foot in the door’. This is seen to be much more effective than applying in writing, particularly for those with few qualifications. The downside is that young people who do not have these contacts are at a major disadvantage.

Local voluntary groups play an important role in supporting unemployed young people, for example through mentoring schemes, personal development courses and voluntary work experience. Young people said they had benefited in terms of improved self-confidence, having something positive to do and being encouraged to explore different career options. It was clear that what young people value most from these projects is strong supportive relationships, and having leaders with genuine empathy and a commitment to the young people they work with.

EMPLOYABILITY

It was generally accepted that qualifications are helpful in finding employment, by demonstrating a willingness to work hard and helping to build young people’s self-confidence. Nevertheless, qualifications are not always seen to be sufficient or appropriate preparation for employment; some qualifications were deemed useless, whilst in other cases, young people said they had been refused a job for being over-qualified. Many participants expressed frustration with the push to get more young people to go to university at great personal expense when “*there were no jobs to go into at the end of it*”. Some wished there had been a greater emphasis on vocational subjects.

Voluntary work and paid work experience were generally seen as a positive step, either as a useful addition to a CV or in building confidence, learning new skills, exploring a possible career path, or simply filling in time. Work placements and apprenticeships, in particular, were seen as a good way to gain the necessary experience to secure a first job. However, concerns were expressed about ‘forced’ placements, which were seen as exploitative. Young people said they wanted more and better quality apprenticeships that develop their skills; are properly funded; provide recognised and useful qualifications; and ultimately lead to jobs.

EMPLOYERS

Young people feel that employers are failing to acknowledge and fulfil their responsibilities to young people. Common concerns were that employers often refuse to consider people under a certain age or exploit them by only offering temporary work, setting unrealistic targets, paying low wages and not providing adequate induction or training. There was a strong feeling that prior experience should not be required for ‘basic’ jobs.

In terms of recruitment, young people want to be given a chance to demonstrate the contribution they can make to an organisation, and suggested that work trials would be fairer and more accurate than CVs or interviews. Many commented that the lack of feedback on unsuccessful applications is very discouraging.

JOB CENTRES AND BENEFITS

Young people’s experiences of Job Centres were almost universally negative. Many of the participants felt demeaned by staff, and used words like “*rude*”, “*not bothered*”, “*viewed me like it was my fault*” and “*you’re just a number*” to describe their treatment. What young people consistently said they wanted was an

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assigned advisor who would get to know them and help them to find the right job for the longer-term; who was sympathetic, well informed and willing to listen and take account of personal circumstances.

Young people suggested various ways in which the system could be improved, by: being more responsive to changing circumstances; covering travel expenses and other costs associated with job-seeking; offering greater financial incentives to stay on in education; giving more choice over the frequency of benefit payments; and communicating clearly about benefit entitlements and sanctions.

WHAT CAN CHURCHES DO?

Increasing awareness and understanding about youth unemployment is crucial in challenging judgemental attitudes to young people. Local churches could take a lead by hosting listening workshops so that young people's stories can be heard as a first step towards taking practical action.

Currently, just 3% of churches have organised activities to tackle unemployment in their local area. But, there are some excellent initiatives that demonstrate what can be done using the people, buildings, and social capital available to churches and faith-based groups:

- **Mentoring schemes:** offering one-to-one support to young people.
- **Work clubs:** providing a place to meet, exchange skills, share experiences, and get the support needed to return to work. GB Job Clubs is a national network of church-based job clubs that exists to share best practice, training and resources.
- **Creative projects:** e.g. arts or media projects to help unemployed young people to engage, learn new skills and explore different career options.
- **Voluntary/work experience:** offering young people opportunities for voluntary or paid work in church administration or youth and children's work.
- **Personal development:** through initiatives such as SPEAR, which offers an interactive six-week training programme to support young people into employment by strengthening life skills, motivation and work-related competencies.
- **Employment hub:** using the contacts and networks of church members to connect young people with local employers.
- **Social enterprises:** establishing small-scale social enterprises to create jobs for young people. Examples include bakeries, car and bicycle repair workshops, catering companies, and nurseries.

National churches and faith-based organisations have an important supportive role in keeping the issue of youth unemployment high up the Church's agenda, setting a good example in their own employment practices, disseminating good practice, campaigning on issues relating to youth unemployment, and exploring innovative solutions, such as Job Centre chaplains.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the full report, including a resources section for churches, is available as a free download from www.cuf.org.uk/research. For more information about this study, please contact us at Church Urban Fund (tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk).

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