

the way it is



young people on race,
school exclusion and leaving care

**research
summary**

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Research summary

The United Kingdom is one of the richest countries in the world. In terms of GDP, it comes in at number four and around two million of its young people are enrolled in further education each year. Life expectancy is high and infant mortality is low. We are, by almost any measure relative to other countries, healthy and wealthy. Most people in the UK have adequate housing, food and warmth. The great majority of young people attend school and college, gain qualifications and find work. They are supported by family and friends; they develop plans and ambitions. They feel good about life.

But around one in 20 have few of these things and rather more face some significant difficulty which makes life a struggle. Currently 5.2% of 15 year olds in England leave school with no qualifications and of the 6,500 who left care last year, 63% have no qualifications. Nearly 25% have fewer than five GCSEs and 3% have been convicted of a criminal offence in the last 12 months.

But young people's needs are often very complex - they face a combination of linked problems. In order to give young people the self-confidence, motivation and resilience to overcome these difficult circumstances, we need to understand what they think and feel about their lives.

Last year we investigated the views and hopes of young parents, the unemployed and young offenders in our publication *It's Like That*. We found that many of the young people most alienated from society feel that nobody listens to, understands or respects them. Much of what we found in *It's Like That* challenged commonly held beliefs about disadvantaged young people.

This year, in the second part of our research programme into young people's attitudes and aspirations, we uncovered similar views when we spoke to young people who have been permanently excluded from school, those from minority ethnic groups and young adults leaving local authority care.

Despite reports of continuously improving exam results, falling unemployment and an increasingly diverse Britain, multiple layers of disadvantage exist which prevent vulnerable groups of young people from getting the right start in life. We believe that learning more about their motivations, concerns and hopes is vital in removing the barriers to success that would otherwise remain undetected.

"We are disadvantaged by society. We have skills and the ability but it is the way that we are viewed."

Simon, 23



Key findings

In the minority

"I mean let's not ignore it girls, there are barriers out there for black people ... It's there but I'm just not going to let it get to me."

Kim, 24

Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds are consistently over-represented in indices of disadvantage. They are more likely to face barriers at school and in the workplace, even though they stay on in education longer. But despite the prejudice they face, young people from minority ethnic communities are up-beat about their lives.

- They feel strongly about their British identity and often prioritise this over their cultural heritage.
- Family support networks are extremely important, particularly to those from the Asian community.
- Whilst young people are generally happy with, and integrated into, their communities and appreciate the benefits of cultural diversity, they recognise that some communities become voluntarily mono-cultural.
- Many young people felt their religion was something that set them apart from mainstream British culture. Young British Muslims reported feeling 'singled out' and 'looked at differently' in the wake of events in America on September 11th.
- Staying on in further education is a priority for the young people in our study, with 77% wanting to continue in full-time education. Qualifications are seen as vital to securing the job they want in the future.

- Variation exists amongst ethnic groups regarding attitudes towards education, with Bangladeshi and African Caribbean young people consistently the most pessimistic and withdrawn.
- Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds experience prejudice both at school and in the labour market but are remarkably mature about the causes of racism. They feel they can cope with racism and are determined to succeed despite society's prejudice.
- However, one in three young people feel that their race puts them at a disadvantage. Some believe that their race excludes them from certain parts of society. Young people who live in rural areas appear to experience a greater degree of discrimination than their urban peers.
- Young people from minority ethnic groups are generally interested in current affairs and 58% said they would vote in the next general election although 44% believed that 'politicians don't care about people like me'.



School's out

“When I used to get to school I used to play up so they'd send me home again – get suspended again and again and then I wouldn't have to get up for another week.”

Sarah, 13

Truancy and exclusion from school are an ongoing source of concern for government, the media, parents and teachers. New measures to tackle bullying and anti-social behaviour have helped to portray excluded young people as aggressive trouble-makers who are unwilling to learn and are a risk to those around them. We discovered that, for many young people who

have been excluded from school, their difficulty starts at the point of transition from primary to secondary school. They never come to terms with the size and anonymity of the latter and the lack of apparent parental interest that most of them experience leaves them without a key support when they need it most.

- Young people who are permanently excluded from school are more likely to come from one-parent families, characterised by a range of movement in domestic settings. Compared to their non-excluded peers, they have a much lower rate of adult involvement in their lives.
- Large class sizes and a lack of one-to-one attention from teachers meant these young people were unable to understand classroom tasks fully. Their educational and behavioural needs were not always detected or addressed, causing frustration, anger and further aggressive behaviour.
- Many excludees appreciate the chance to be able to tell their side of the story in out-of-class support groups and notice a positive change in their behaviour as a result.

“I don’t know what qualifications I need. Tried to get down to the careers office but my dad can never take me. I have a problem sticking to stuff. Gotta get English, geography, maths GCSEs, I didn’t know how much you gotta do.”

Marc, 14

- ‘Unofficial’ exclusion is a problem for many pupils. It allows them to avoid the stigma of being permanently excluded but also means they lose their right to appeal, have no legal recourse to re-sit exams and are often unable to reintegrate into another school.
- The period immediately after exclusion is rarely spent constructively, which becomes problematic when some local education authorities take up to nine months to find alternative education for a pupil. Forty-two per cent of excluded pupils believed that no one was encouraging them back to mainstream school.
- Excluded pupils are positive about Pupil Referral Units and believe the units give them the opportunity to get the help they need. Excludees feel they respond better by being in a less authoritarian environment.
- The majority of excludees recognise that school is not a waste of time and that gaining qualifications is important to their future but they are often unsure which qualifications they need to gain the kind of jobs they want.
- Three in four excludees are optimistic about their lives and futures, despite having experienced a difficult and disrupted education.



Careleavers

"I used to get bullied because I was in care. These kids in school used to tell me I'm in care 'cos my family doesn't like me ..."

Jason, 20

Careleavers are a particularly vulnerable group of young people. They are more likely to experience homelessness and unemployment, have low basic skills and become parents early. On top of the psychological effects of being 'looked after' by the local authority, young people leaving care have troubled family lives and inconsistent support structures to help them get by independently.

- Half of the careleavers we spoke to were first taken into care between the ages of 12 and 15 and the most common age on leaving care was 17.
- A third feel inadequately equipped to live independently. The main difficulties they face are managing personal finances and coping with loneliness.
- Mentors are a welcome change to young people whose experience of care has made them wary of social services. Careleavers value the independent advice that mentors provide.
- Many careleavers had not attended school regularly whilst in care and over half have experienced both temporary and permanent exclusion.
- 77 per cent of the careleavers we assessed had basic skills needs. Few qualifications and poor basic skills in turn impact on careleavers' employability – 29 per cent of the young people surveyed were unemployed.
- Although most careleavers maintain contact with members of their family, only 13% said that this contact was with their father. Some feel they have no one to turn to if they need help.
- Careleavers are generally positive about their lives, many said that having a place to call their own is the main reason they feel this way.

Who we spoke to

We spoke to almost 700 young people across England and Wales, using questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and focus groups. We surveyed the views of young people in a number of locations ranging from the high street to Pupil Referral Units.

We asked young people from minority ethnic backgrounds questions about:

- Cultural identity and community
- Education and employment
- Racism
- Politics and citizenship
- Future aspirations

In the school excludees module, we looked at:

- Home life and family relationships
- Attitudes to mainstream school
- Being permanently excluded from school
- Life in a Pupil Referral Unit
- Hopes for the future

With young people who had left care, we wanted to explore:

- Perceptions on leaving public care
- Education and basic skills
- Living independently
- Support systems
- The future

Young people across all groups were able to talk about the specific barriers they face in moving forward with their lives. They were also given the opportunity to reflect on their family backgrounds and speak about their hopes for the future.

We have compiled their thoughts and opinions in this publication to share our understanding of these groups with politicians, policy makers, social agencies, other charities and the general public. We believe their views highlight some key directions that policy and practice should take in the future.



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