

Young people’s health inequalities

All young people in the UK have the right to lead healthy and happy lives. Unfortunately, we know that some young people have worse health outcomes compared to their peers, which is unfair. Covid-19 has exacerbated these health inequalities. It is vital that health inequalities are reduced and prevented for 10-25 year olds, to ensure that all young people have the best possible health and wellbeing.

This joint statement on behalf of the members of the [Young People’s Health Partnership](#) recommends that the needs of young people aged 10-25 are prioritised within policy and decision making, particularly in discussions on “levelling up” and the Health Disparities White Paper. Young people from the [NHS Youth Forum](#) have kindly shared their views and experiences of health inequalities, which are included throughout this statement.

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“Actually listen and believe young people... To improve health and healthcare disparities for young people, we (young people) need to be given real opportunities to be part of decisions made for young people. We need to be part of conversations, policy-making, and the delivery of programmes regarding young people”

– Young person

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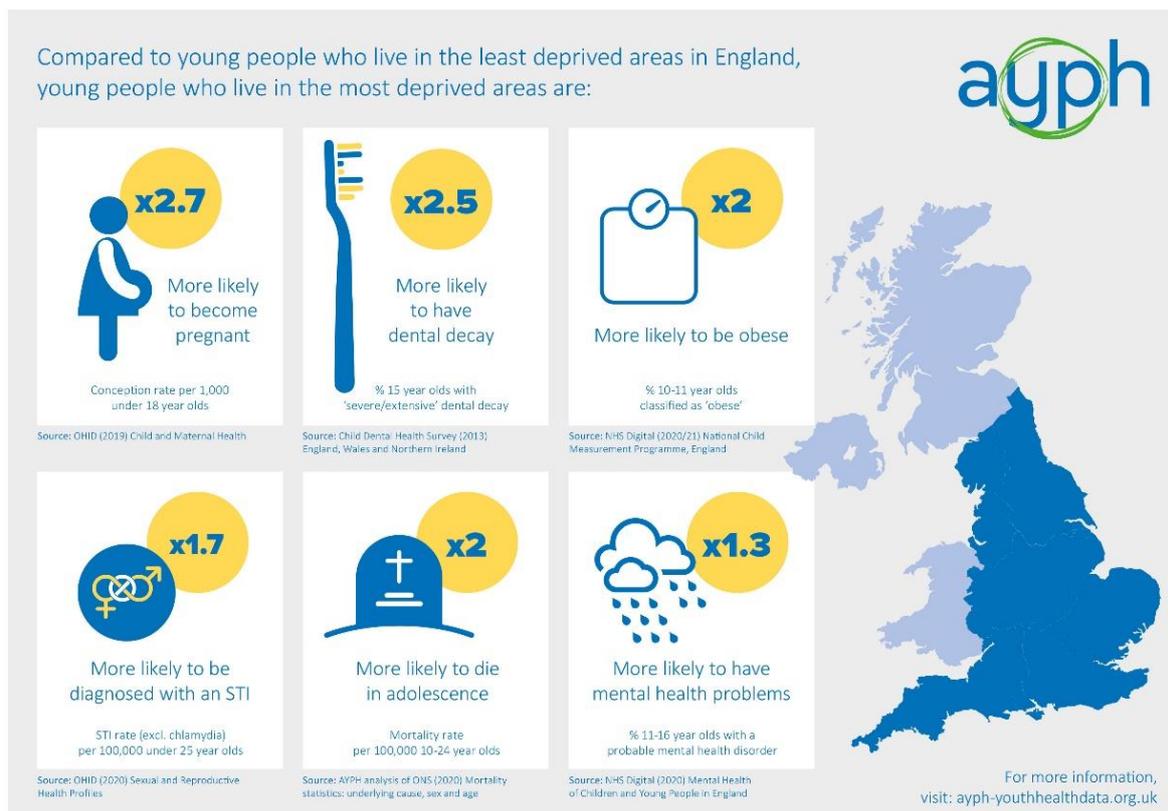
Young People’s Health Partnership (YPHP) – April 2022



Young people’s health inequalities – what is happening and why is this important?

There are [11.8 million young people in the UK, representing about 20% of the population](#). Although this is generally considered a healthy life stage, many long-term health conditions begin and become established between ages 10-25 (such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy and mental health disorders). Young people also form healthy or unhealthy behaviours and self-management techniques in this period, habits that they may carry with them into adulthood (such as physical activity, diet, smoking and alcohol use).

Different young people may have different health outcomes, because of the environment in which they live. Economic inequalities and “social determinants” have a major impact on young people’s health. Certain groups of young people may be more likely to experience health inequalities compared to others (e.g. homeless young people, LGBTQ+ young people, or care experienced young people). AYPH’s briefing paper [‘Clarifying what we mean by young people’s health inequalities’](#) provides a conceptual model, which sets out the importance of young people’s health inequalities. And a summary of the impact of the pandemic on the social determinants of young people’s mental health can be found in Youth Access’ briefing [‘Generation Covid?’](#).



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What do young people think and say about health inequalities?

The [NHS Youth Forum's](#) health inequalities group is dedicated to addressing health inequality. This section was written by young people from the group, who share their personal views alongside findings from a recent survey with a wider group of young people.

“It's unacceptable that the healthcare experience is better for some and worse for others” – young person

In many cases, children and young people (CYP) think their experience of accessing healthcare is “*the norm*” until they realise that their experience isn't shared by everyone. Many young people witness the ‘inverse care law’ (1971) and it can affect them for the rest of their lives. In the case of trans people, for example, [45% said their GP did not have a good understanding of their needs as a trans person](#), and 57% reported avoiding going to the doctor when unwell. Our own lived experiences of healthcare inequalities was the impetus behind our project. We ourselves have had to face the negative impact of healthcare inequalities and seen others around us face the impact too.

As part of the work of the NHS Youth Forum, we launched a survey on healthcare inequalities for young people from February – March 2022, which captured 152 responses from young people aged 14-25 years from different ethnicities and backgrounds across the UK. We set out to capture young people's experiences in their own words – something that is too often lacking in discussions on the topic of young people and health disparities. [Social determinants of young people's health is an area that has been previously explored](#), however, they are often overlooked so we wanted to explore this a bit more.

Our survey responses revealed a worrying trend of healthcare inequalities experienced by young people, particularly those from traditionally marginalised backgrounds:

- **Trans young people** expressed a concern with feeling that their GP did not know how to treat them or what language to use
- **Non-binary CYP** indicated that gender identity has a strong negative impact on their healthcare, whereas most CYP that identify as men or women indicated no effect of gender identity on their healthcare
- Most **Muslims and Hindus** identified as having experienced a negative impact on their healthcare, but for young people identifying as Atheists, Agnostics and Christians, there was no overall effect on their healthcare
- Heterosexual CYP respondents said that sexual orientation had no effect on healthcare whereas for a large portion of those with **lesbian sexual orientation**, this had a negative impact on healthcare (more so than any other LGBTQ+ group)
- **Young people with a disability** voiced particular concerns around their experiences of healthcare

“The fact I'm disabled, doctors seem not to care as much as they seem to think that as it's long term I can put up with it instead of needing help” – young person

“Being disabled I've been told I'm ‘just being sensitive’ or that I'm making up symptoms” – young person

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What policies and changes will make a difference to reduce young people's health inequalities?

Making progress to reduce health inequalities requires action to address the social determinants of health. We need to see policies that are aimed at improving economic and income inequalities, poverty, education, employment, housing, green spaces and other factors that impact on young people's wider lives. Prevention and early intervention in adolescence is key to reducing health inequalities and resources may need to be targeted at particular groups of young people who are more likely to experience inequalities.

Our recommendations:

- Implement a cross-government strategy to reduce young people's health inequalities (alongside other recommendations outlined by the [Inequalities in Health Alliance](#))
- Involve young people in decision-making about health inequalities
- Restore £1 billion of real-terms cuts to the public health grant for Local Authorities for the provision of services young people access in their communities
- Remove barriers for young people accessing healthcare services, specifically for certain groups of young people who experience multiple barriers – such as using appropriate language / good communication with young people, accessible opening times and training for all staff working with young people to understand issues of inequality and exclusion
- Improve communication between services to improve young people's experiences of holistic, joined up care
- Release the Youth Investment Fund in full (£500m)
- Increase funding for youth services to reverse the loss of [750 youth clubs since 2010](#)
- Invest in a diverse professional workforce, looking beyond healthcare professionals to, for example, youth workers and advice workers, who play a vital role in identifying young people's needs and helping them access the early health support that they need
- Focus on prevention and early intervention for young people, implementing the commitments from the Green Paper '[Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s](#)'
- Invest in youth friendly health services that meet the needs of young people and work specifically to reduce health inequalities, such as [The Well Centre](#) and [Healthspot / Spotlight](#)
- Invest in 'early support hubs' such as those offered in Youth Access' network of [Youth Information Advice and Counselling Services](#)

Young people's recommendations – on behalf of members of the [NHS Youth Forum](#):

- Address 'built-in-biases' in healthcare through: improved education of healthcare professionals, ensuring the use of technology and the digitisation of services are equitable and accessible to young people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, and building a diverse workforce that represents the diversity of young people.
- Increase training for professionals on how to treat and communicate with young people from marginalised communities – see '[Your rights when accessing healthcare: a resource for trans and non-binary young people](#)' created by the NHS Youth Forum health inequalities group in 2021 and [AYPH guidance poster on language to use to describe young people's health inequalities](#).
- Educate young people on how they should be treated and what they should expect from healthcare services. Currently there is no spoken 'universal' understanding of how

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healthcare should be experienced. Young people themselves should be part of the planning and delivery of such a resource.

- Help healthcare professionals to listen more to the voices of CYP and involve CYP in the conversations in a real way. Creating spaces for CYP to talk about their experiences and exchange their experiences with their peers is crucial. We need to have opportunities for openness and for conversations on topics that may be deemed controversial or difficult to discuss.

Good practice examples from YPHP members: How to reduce young people's health inequalities

StreetGames – our social prescribing work makes a difference to young people

Social prescribing is now well established for adults across the country, but the benefits of the link worker role for children and young people are still being discovered. At StreetGames, we have worked with research partners at the University of East London to publish the first academic paper on this topic, as well as creating a range of [Youth Social Prescribing Resources](#) to support others in their development of this work. Resources include case studies of our pilot sites and recommendations to support the development of new programmes or to benchmark existing delivery.

Youth Access – how our YIACS model works and reaches young people experiencing inequality

Youth Access represents a network of 180 youth services around the country, supporting them to develop, deliver and advocate for the Youth Information Advice and Counselling Service model, which offers young people a range of support with their mental health and social welfare issues up to age 25.

As a flexible, young person-centred service, YIACS are seen by young people as accessible and high quality. Counselling offered in YIACS has been proven to deliver comparable clinical outcomes to NHS and school-based support, but with higher levels of satisfaction and, importantly, catering to a higher proportion of young women, young people of colour and young adults, who can face inequalities in other parts of the system.

As a community continually striving to deliver better for young people, Youth Access runs regular workshops, webinars and communities of practice for members to develop and share expertise to drive high quality, accessible and equitable practice. Our 5-week learning programme for racially responsive services is helping our members tackle barriers for racialised young people and our upcoming community conference will feature a member-led session on inclusion for deaf young people.

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With You – our substance use services target young people experiencing inequality through early intervention

With You delivers prevention, early intervention, structured treatment and support to 50,000 children, young people and their families, teachers and peers. Many of the young people we work with have experience of health inequalities, such as living in deprivation, experience of care, mental health problems, not in education and employment, and intergenerational drug and alcohol use. We deliver many specialist early intervention programmes, such as our Mind and Body programme focused on young people who engage in self-harm and risk-taking behaviours, drug and alcohol education programmes in schools and colleges, family and affected other programmes, and programmes aimed at keeping young people out of the criminal justice system.

British Youth Council – our work enables young people to raise the issues that are most important to them through consultation and conversation with decision makers

The British Youth Council is the national youth council of the UK. We bring young people together to find their voice and use it for social and political change. We represent a wide network of organisations that work with or for young people to advocate for the issues that matter to young people. Our manifesto, created by young people across our network, has positions on a range of health areas including specifically health inequalities, giving us a strong mandate to advocate in this area. We run the UK Youth Parliament and this year our [Make Your Mark Consultation](#) highlighted that health and wellbeing is the highest priority issue for young people aged 11-18 across the UK. We also deliver the [NHS Youth Forum](#) in partnership with NHS England. Forum members have the opportunity to focus on areas that they wish to affect change and in recent years there has been a strong focus on health inequalities. We recently published a report on health inequalities experienced by minority ethnic communities and how this linked to the education of medical students, their findings can be found [here](#). This year we are exploring the social determinants of health inequalities experienced by young people.

Association for Young People's Health – our research raises the profile of young people's health inequalities

Our [Health Inequalities Policy Programme](#) is dedicated to exploring young people's health inequalities. Through the programme, we have conducted secondary research on [data relating to young people's differing health outcomes](#). We are planning engagement with young people from two specific groups, to better understand their unique experiences of inequality: care experienced young people and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Throughout our work we advocate on behalf of young people and raise the importance of young people's health inequalities with decision makers. We have also developed a toolkit with young people for how young people can learn more about health inequalities and make an impact in their local area.

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Brook – our sexual health services target young people experiencing inequality

Those living in poverty and/or experiencing discrimination are at risk of health inequality, which has lifelong impacts on their sexual health and wellbeing and their reproductive lives and choices: from increasing the risk of STIs, HIV and early, unintended pregnancy, to increased risks of maternal mortality and reproductive morbidity. Brook has a [strategic commitment to tackling health inequality](#) and we work every day to identify and remove the barriers people experience in accessing high quality, inclusive information, education and clinical services. Most recently, our national consultation on making sexual health services accessible to boys and young men sought the views of care experienced and asylum seeking boys and young men to inform our service provision and the sector more broadly. As the world moves increasingly rapidly towards digital provision, we strive to hear from those most affected by inequality and ensure that nobody is left behind.

UK Youth – our work enables young people to raise the issues that are most important to them

At UK Youth, we are involved in a range of programmes and partnerships that seek to understand and tackle barriers to healthcare that young people face, including those that racialised communities face, to ensure they can thrive.

Changemakers: We have partnered with The Diana Award and the Centre for Mental Health to deliver Young Changemakers, a programme, which supports young people from racialised communities to channel their lived experiences into tackling racial injustices in mental health services in the UK.

Thriving Minds: In February 2022, we launched Thriving Minds. This £11 million fund (in partnership with Julia and Hans Rausing Trust and the Westminster Foundation) will invest in youth work to support young people with their mental health. The fund was developed in direct response to feedback from across the UK Youth Movement - comprising of more than 8,000 organisations - about the urgent need to work across sectors to address the youth mental health crisis.

The Hope Collective: we are a member of the Hope Collective, a powerful partnership of cross-sector organisations working together to create real change for young people and communities across the UK. Formed originally to support the 20th anniversary legacy campaign for Damilola Taylor, the Hope Collective is driven by a shared purpose – to establish real change that enables UK’s most vulnerable communities to be free from poverty, violence and discrimination. The Hope Collective will co-design solutions that deliver for young people across a range of areas, amplify their voices and focus on their hopes for the future.

For more information, please contact: info@youngpeopleshealth.org.uk

Find out more about the Young People’s Health Partnership and our work:

<https://ayph.org.uk/young-peoples-health-partnership/>

