

Efforts to tackle Britain's epidemic of poor mental health should focus on lower-qualified young people

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Young people are now more likely to experience a common mental disorder (CMD) than any other age group – a complete reversal compared to two decades ago when they were least likely to. And the economic consequences are greatest for those whose poor mental comes together with poor educational outcomes, with one-in-three young non-graduates with a CMD currently workless, according to new [Resolution Foundation](#) research published this week.

We've only just begun – the final report of a three-year research programme funded by the Health Foundation – explores the relationship between young people's mental health and work outcomes, and how policy makers should respond.

The report notes that in 2021-2022 over one-in-three (34 per cent) young people aged 18-24 reported symptoms of conditions like depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder – up from one-in-four (24 per cent) in 2000. As a result, more than half a million 18-24-year-olds were prescribed anti-depressants in 2021-22.

The rise in mental health problems among young people is not just a health crisis; it is limiting their economic options too. The report finds that between 2018 and 2022, one-in-five (21 per cent) 18-24-year-olds with mental health problems were workless, compared to 13 per cent of those without mental health problems. The number of young people workless due to ill-health has more than doubled over the past decade, from 93,000 to 190,000. People in their early 20s are now more likely to be economically inactive due to ill health than those in their 40s.

The Foundation notes that the focus on young people's mental health problems often centres around universities, where the share of full-time students with a CMD has increased by 37 per cent over the past decade. But the economic consequences of poor mental health are far starker for those who don't go to university.

The report finds that one-in-three young non-graduates with a CMD were workless, compared to 17 per cent of graduates with poor mental health.

Overall, the report finds that a shocking four-in-five (79 per cent) 18-24-year-olds who are workless due to ill health only have qualifications at GCSE-level or below, compared to one-third (34 per cent) of all people in that age group.

The Foundation says that with education playing such a key role in determining the economic impact of poor mental health for young people, this is where policy action, beyond that focused on improving the nation's health directly, should be targeted.

First, the report calls for greater mental health support to be available for those in compulsory education, particularly colleges and sixth forms. Last year, less than half (44 per cent) of children and young people in secondary schools or post-16 settings had access to Mental Health Support Teams, with this figure especially low (31 per cent) for students in post-16 settings like colleges.

Second, with qualifications providing such significant protection against the economic impact of CMDs, more should must be done to ensure fewer people leave compulsory education with very low qualification levels. The priority should be those students needing to resit GCSE level qualifications. Current resit success rates are woeful – last year, only one-quarter of those who resat GCSE English, and one-in-six of those who resat GCSE maths, achieved a pass.

Finally, the Foundation says that employers should learn from the success of tackling musculoskeletal problems in the 1990s and 2000s with a new focus on mental health in sectors where young people with CMDs, who report that the awareness of their manager makes a huge difference, are concentrated. With a third of young employees in the retail and hospitality sectors currently reporting mental health problems, better management practices and mental health training for employers in these sectors should be a priority going forwards.

Louise Murphy, Senior Economist at the Resolution Foundation, said: "With more than one-in-three 18-24-year-olds now experiencing a common mental disorder, urgent action is needed. Alongside work to address the root causes of this epidemic, we need to ensure that young people's future prospects are not blighted by their mental health problems.

"Attention on this issue has tended to focus on higher education, but what should most worry us is when poor mental health comes together with poor education outcomes. The economic consequences of poor mental health are starkest for young people who don't go to university, with one-in-three young non-graduates with a common mental disorder currently workless.

"To address this mental health crisis, we need better support services in currently underserved colleges, and much better provision for those resitting exams so that everyone has qualifications to build on.

"Employers also have a part to play, because the quality of managers in sectors like retail and hospitality

is key to more young people with poor mental health staying in the world of work.”

Jo Bibby, Director of Health at the Health Foundation, said: “The increase in the incidence of mental illness in young people is one of the greatest health challenges we currently face. It is already directly impacting the health and well-being of millions of people. Also, it represents a major challenge to economic and public spending through the social security system and pressure on the NHS.

“Moreover, the consequences of mental illness are not felt equally. This valuable report draws attention to the stark inequalities for those who experience mental health problems, undermining people’s ability to get the qualifications they need, and people with fewer qualifications are far more likely to be out of work because of mental illness.

“Policymakers need to focus on the building blocks of health, such as good employment and education, to ensure young people get the support they need and have the tools to move through the world as adults. Without concerted cross-government action, we risk creating a ‘lost generation’ due to ill health.”