YOUNG, FEMALE & FORGOTTEN?

SUMMARY REPORT
When Young Women’s Trust conducted its ‘Scarred for Life’ inquiry into young women who are not in education, employment or training, it became clear there is a very large, often hidden group of out of work young women who do not count as unemployed – far larger than for young men. These young women are not regarded as unemployed because they are unable to actively seek or imminently start work. They are instead classified by government as “economically inactive”.

We therefore followed up our inquiry by embarking on a major two-year project, with the support of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, to better understand the issues faced by these quarter of a million-plus “economically inactive” young women.

As this mid-project report shows, high numbers of young women in this position find it hard to make ends meet, are reliant on benefits or handouts and increasingly cut off from the labour market. Many also experience isolation, anxiety and depression. There appears to be a vicious spiral, where a lack of appropriate employment opportunities leads to isolation and stress, which leads to anxiety and depression, and which in turn make it harder to engage in work. Similarly, unaddressed mental health issues can lead to long periods out of work.

While many young workless women are parents or have other caring responsibilities, this does not provide a sufficient explanation for why they are not earning or learning, or why, in many cases, they are not receiving any support or encouragement to remain engaged. Indeed, almost three in ten young women who are economically inactive want to work now, and nearly all want to work in the future.

And what of this term “economically inactive”? We need to do better. The phrase fails to identify the range of reasons why young people are workless, and is particularly demeaning to parents and carers, who are contributing to the economy as well as to those who are unwell and unable to work. I very much hope this report triggers more activity and a greater focus on this often-overlooked group. All of us stand to benefit if we can turn things around so that the next decade looks very different for young women whose needs are currently going unnoticed.

Dr Carole Easton
Chief Executive, Young Women’s Trust
INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

For over a decade young women have been more likely than young men to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) and to be NEET and economically inactive (EI). At the time of writing, the most recent figures showed that 843,000 young people in the UK were NEET. Of these the majority – 434,000 – were women.

Those who were NEET and economically inactive (as opposed to economically active and actively seeking work) were predominantly women too. 274,000 women aged 16-24 were NEET and EI compared with 179,000 young men. However, beyond an assumption that most EI young women are caring for others, there is limited research and policy that addresses this problem.

Between 2015 and 2017 Young Women’s Trust and Professor Sue Maguire (University of Bath) with the support of Barrow Cadbury Trust, are investigating economic inactivity among young women. We aim to understand the reasons why young women are economically inactive, enable young women to share their experiences of being EI, and recommend new ways of supporting EI young women into work.

In the course of 2016, we have completed:

- a review of relevant research publications about NEET and EI young women
- analysis of the Labour Force Survey
- interviews with national employment and skills policy experts; and
- case study research with local policymakers in Oldham, Norwich, Kent, Hull and Birmingham, as well as interviews with young women in two localities.

Using this methodology, we have summarised the present evidence base about NEET and EI young women; sketched out the key ways national and local policy affects the economically inactive group; and built a basic profile of EI young women, including their demographics, attitudes to work, and daily lives.

DEFINING PROBLEMS

During the 1990s the term ‘NEET’ was coined for 16-18 year-olds who were not taking part in education, employment or training. Over time, conversation around this group has grown to include 18-24 year-olds. Within the 16-24 year-old NEET group, there are two groups: the ‘economically active’ and the ‘economically inactive’. NEET economically active people are unemployed and actively seeking work. The inactive group are also not working, but have not looked for work in the last four weeks and are not able to start work, even if they may want to work.

Crucially, the unemployment rate does not include those who are economically inactive – meaning it misrepresents the full size of the group who are out of work but may want or need opportunities.

Anecdotally, young women have told us that they find the labels ‘NEET’ and ‘economically inactive’ difficult to use or to identify with. They are not alone. Academics and others have criticised the way the NEET group is defined by what they are not doing. More clarity about who is NEET and economically active or inactive would be a starting point for better policy.

“NEET is a residual statistical category. It tells us who are NEET but it doesn’t tell us why and how they became NEET. It doesn’t tell us how many people are vulnerable to becoming NEET in the future. We need to develop a terminology that identifies distinct groups, facilitating a more targeted policy response. ‘Disengaged’, ‘undecided’ and ‘unable to find work or training’ would help provide a sharper policy focus.”

(Gracey and Kelly, 2010, p 2)
Researchers who have considered economic inactivity have described it as ‘an under-researched black box’ 1. This project has begun to open and unpack that box. But since we do not yet have more information or better definitions in policymaking, throughout this report we will be using the terms that are standard in the UK, from the Office for National Statistics (ONS):

**Economically active**
People who are either in employment or unemployed (actively seeking work).

**Economic activity rate**
The number of people who are in employment or unemployed expressed as a percentage of the relevant population.

**Economically inactive**
People who are not in employment but are not seeking work. Reasons for inactivity include sickness (temporary and long-term), looking after family or home, student, retired and believes there are no jobs available.

**Economic inactivity rate**
The number of economically inactive people expressed as a percentage of the relevant population.

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**ECONOMIC INACTIVITY IN NUMBERS**

In the first quarter of 2016 55% of NEET young people were economically inactive (EI)2. Women who were NEET were more likely than young men to be economically inactive. 66% of young women NEET were EI, compared to 43% young NEET men who were EI.

Young women who were NEET were much more likely to be classified as economically inactive as they got older, possibly in part because they pick up caring responsibilities as they age.

Young women in the East Midlands (12.6%) and the North East (12.5%) were most likely to economically inactive, against the average rate of 8.1% across the UK. In contrast 4.5% of young men were economically inactive in the UK.

Among young women, Pakistani and Bangladeshi young women had the highest NEET rates (18.4% and 17.3%). When it came to being NEET and EI, White women had the highest inactivity rates (8.5%) followed by 2.9% among Bangladeshi women, and 1.8% for those from other Asian backgrounds.

25% of NEET EI young women were lone parents, and a further quarter were living with a partner and children. However the largest group (38%) were living with other relatives.

**Reasons for inactivity:**
61% of EI young women said they were not seeking work because they were caring for family and home. In comparison, EI young men were most likely to be EI because of a long term illness or disability (49%). Of the young women looking after family and/or home 92% were looking after children below school age.

**Working in the future?**
29% of young women NEET and EI said they would like to work now and even more – 86% – thought they would work in the future. 78% said they thought this would be within five years and almost a third (31%) expected to work within a year.

97% of EI young women in lone parent households expected to work in the future and 93% of those living with a partner and children said the same. This suggests young mothers view being economically inactive as a temporary status in their working lives.

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2 We used data from the Labour Force Survey covering January-March 2016.
Everyday Lives

We are grateful to several young women who gave us an insight into their daily life and experiences of being economically inactive.3 Their interviews are a first step in understanding the sort of support young women want and need and how it could fit into their lives.

Learning and work

Qualification levels varied among the young women, but all of them had started post-16 education, training or work and had dropped out because of pregnancy or mental health. One was just finishing training to be a youth/family support worker:

“To be honest, I am hoping to be in work before my youngest reaches five … I just did the course, I am doing it now for myself and my children. I want to help the people who have been through what I have been through, rather than an outsider coming in. That is what I used to feel like when social services used to come in and tell me. I did not agree with them.”

(Single parent, aged 26, living alone with 3 children)

“I did work experience at the Job Centre at [name of town]. I done that for 4 weeks and then they asked me to stay for another 4 weeks. So all in all I did 8 weeks. I really, really enjoyed it – it was wicked. I am one of those people, as you can tell, I’m not very good with my words, but if you put me in a ‘hands on’ situation – I was always greeting and meeting people, I like to meet people and to interact. … That was not long before I found out that I was pregnant.”

(Single parent, aged 21, living alone with her child)

Isolation

Typically the women were isolated with limited support networks. Most stayed at home, some looking after their children or others, undertaking domestic responsibilities.

“Monday morning, we wake up. I probably put the washing on and we go out. We walk up to see family members and I take the baby to the park. He goes to his nan’s every other weekend. On those weekends, I stay at home and clean. I don’t have any friends really – most people my age, they do not have kids and they want to go out and party. By the time it comes to the weekend and [name of baby] is away, I’m absolutely shattered. I’d rather sit at home with a cup of tea and a colouring book.”

(Single mother, aged 21, lives alone with baby)

“I don’t go into shops or anything – pretty much do everything on line. I avoid everything that is bad for me. I don’t like going into the public. The only time that I go out is when the dogs are with me.”

(Single woman, aged 21, lives alone)

Managing money

Money was tight for all the young women, and budgeting hinged on benefits payments. Priorities were food, rent, fuel, children’s clothing and toiletries. Buying clothes for themselves was a luxury and sweets for the children were a fortnightly treat.

“I had a debt counsellor involved but I am OK now … I keep my money separate from my kids’ money and that is how I manage … I get my money every 2 weeks so … and, to be honest, I do use some of my kids’ money, but that is for bills and stuff. I use my money for food and to top up the meters and whatever is left is for me and if I need ‘owt. The girls get what they need. I manage but I struggled a bit at the beginning … it is OK but it could be better. Sometimes, I have to sacrifice and go without shoes or clothes for a few weeks so that I can get things for the girls.”

(Single parent, aged 26, living alone with 3 children)

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3 Researchers spoke to 10 young women whose information is in keeping with the evidence we received from policymakers and will be expanded upon when 40-50 more young women are interviewed in 2017.
Those who had claimed Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) described how they had felt pressured by it. In contrast Income Support (IS) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claimants did not report issues with their payments, on the whole.

“I claimed for a few months, I think. It was OK – I kind of needed the money but I did not want to take it ‘cos I do not think sitting in front of a computer looking for jobs earns you that money. I do not cope well with pressure and I do not feel good enough and take it out on myself.”
(Single woman, aged 19, lives with her father/boyfriend)

The young mothers felt it was their responsibility to look after their children, and support from family and benefits payments was more important than support from male partners, even if they contributed financially.

“I have a boyfriend. My boyfriend helps me out. He pays half of everything. If I asked him for money, he would give it to me. He works for (name of warehouse) but he is applying for a job at another warehouse … It is his responsibility as well (bringing up the baby), but everything else I do myself. I would get the house and he can move in with me.”
(Single mother, aged 20, lives with mother and siblings)

Hopes for the future
All the women said they hoped to find work, leave the benefits system and secure financial independence. They liked the idea of having an adviser who would help them with parenting or living alone, but also help them get back into the job market gradually.

“(… people will say ‘chavvy girl on benefits with a kid’ but I am trying to do stuff …)”
(Single parent, aged 20, lives alone with child)
**DIFFERENT TREATMENT**

The terms ‘economically active’ and ‘economically inactive’ were not in common use among policy-makers we interviewed. Rather, people who are actively seeking work are job seekers and are eligible to claim Job Seeker’s Allowance. Those who are economically inactive are associated with being sick or caring, and eligible to claim ESA or Income Support. As a result, each group receives quite different support and conditions within the welfare system.

**Claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance**

Young women are less likely than young men to be claiming JSA. This may be because there is a social expectation on young men to find work, whereas young women may work in the household if their only alternative is low skilled work. Young women (and some young men) are also put off by the registration process for claiming JSA, the amount of time it takes for a claim to be processed, and by the idea of dealing with or travelling to the job centre.

On the whole those we spoke to felt that government funding was geared towards the needs of JSA claimants. Other benefits claimants receive less attention from Jobcentre Plus. At the same time, many we interviewed were concerned that Jobcentre Plus set young people unrealistically high targets, resulting in the largest number of sanctions being experienced by the young unemployed.

**Claiming Income Support and ESA**

Interviewees were concerned that EI young women only received limited employment support because of the types of benefits they received – Income Support (IS), Carer’s Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Typically, EI young women in receipt of benefits are in contact with Jobcentre Plus for reviews every six months, to check whether their circumstances have changed.

Women who are EI are all typically treated in the same way including by Jobcentre Plus, without any consideration of the different needs and expectations of young mothers, young carers, and young people with physical or mental illness.

**“If you are a young woman with a baby and getting along, no one is bothering you. But at the same time, no one is igniting you either.”**

(Voluntary Sector Representative)

Other academic research shows that those on ESA and IS tend to stay there for long periods of time. 52% of young people claiming ESA had been doing so for over a year, as had 61% of under-25s claiming IS\(^{4}\). Such long spells out of work come at a price: being NEET and inactive for over a year has been shown to limit a young person’s chances of moving into work\(^{5}\) and has significant impacts on future employment and earnings.

For EI young mothers, there were two main barriers that successful support would need to address. The first is childcare: being able to both access and afford childcare in the right places and at the right time of day. The second is the expectation of families and communities that a good mother stays at home with her children.

**“There remains a stigma about women leaving their children to better themselves through education and work. It is seen as their responsibility to stay at home with their children ... That is our constant battle. If you have a child under 5, then you are not expected to be economically active. The village does what the village does and it is the village that has to change.”**

(DWP Manager)

Regular, accessible and affordable transport to travel to employment support, training and work is also a barrier, especially in rural areas. In some areas, and among particular ethnic groups, travelling alone was discouraged.

EI young women’s isolation within their households and communities, often combined with low self-confidence, low self-esteem and mental health issues, was identified as a significant problem.

A more pro-active approach to helping the EI group, without sanctions or penalties to their benefits, would offer the entire group better support. This might include a positive and sustained relationship with one case worker, backed up by different local agencies working together.

\(^{4}\) Cooke, G (2013) No more NEETs: A Plan for all young people to be earning or learning. London: IPPR.

SLIPPING THROUGH THE NE(E)T

Destination unknown?
It is simple enough to identify economically active and inactive young people by the benefits they are receiving. But what about those young people who are not ‘in the system’?

Staff from local authorities, JCP, voluntary sector organisations, and training and support providers all voiced their concern about the growing number of young people whose status is ‘unknown’. This includes both those under and those over the age of 18.

Their fears are borne out by the gap between the numbers of 16-24 year-olds estimated as NEET by the ONS and the claimant count published by NOMIS. For instance, only three-quarters (74%) of young women who are economically inactive are claiming Income Support or ESA. And a meagre two-fifths (42%) of young women who are economically active and seeking work are claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance.

Since there is no agency within the UK responsible for tracking the activities of young people aged 18-24, there is no readily available ‘unknown’ rate for this group but policymakers and practitioners know they exist. Unwillingness to fulfil benefit conditions, fear of statutory agencies like DWP, support from family, the stigma associated with benefit receipt and cash-in-hand work might all be reasons not to register with JCP. While we can assume this group is diverse, in practice we cannot measure who is not claiming benefits, why or what support they need.
During our case study research – in Manchester, Norwich, Hull, Birmingham and Kent – we found that local initiatives to support NEETs tended to be aimed at specific groups: for instance, young offenders, lone parents or the homeless. None had a design that distinguished between young people who were economically active or inactive, with the exception of the Springboard Programme in the Humber region. This had a target of reaching young people who were economically inactive and not known to services, but sometimes struggled to engage them.

Stakeholders in all case study areas expressed concern about funding for local NEET programmes. Increasingly, funding comes from the charity sector through projects like the Prince’s Trust or Big Lottery Talent Match. The Work Programme is the only government-funded initiative in each area, and is aimed at the economically active, referrals of whom end in 2017. Many were aware of the Youth Obligation scheme beginning in 2017 – but unclear on the detail.

The Youth Employment Initiative, funded by DWP and the European Commission, had just been launched in several case study areas, comprising partnerships between statutory bodies and charities to offer one-to-one support to NEET young people up to the age of 29. Despite its innovative approach, there were fears that it would be hard to recruit economically inactive young people for the programme and that it could become over-reliant on Jobcentre Plus referrals.

Overwhelmingly, there was concern about funding beyond 2018 for projects that have received EU financial support, including from the European Social Fund (ESF). In each case study area there were a number of established and valuable partnerships and strategies to help NEETs. But alongside cuts to government services and reliance on charitable funding, the uncertainty about the future of funding streams damages local areas’ abilities to plan ahead and respond to local youth unemployment and worklessness.

"We don’t know what’s going to happen. These (ESF) contracts are quite short-term. It doesn’t make sense that they’d be withdrawn straightaway. Losing these opportunities will be a sad loss."

(Local Authority Representative)
RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations from the first year are that:

1. There are limitations to the NEET label. Policy-makers need a much better understanding of who is NEET and the difference between those who are ‘economically active’ and ‘economically inactive’.

2. There needs to be specific research and policy targeted towards the growing number of 18-24 year-olds who fall outside the NEET group and have ‘unknown’ destinations.

3. One person should own the NEET agenda at national level. We would like to see a Minister for young people with responsibility for the relevant areas of young people’s education, skills, employment, local government and welfare.

4. Reducing the large numbers of NEET economically inactive young women will need to consider multiple elements:
   • Large numbers of NEET, economically inactive young women are claiming benefits for a long time with limited support. One-to-one support or mentorship could help them develop relationships outside their family units and ease their transition into work.
   • Childcare – its affordability, accessibility and sustainability – continues to present a barrier to young mothers working or studying. Getting this right, especially for mothers who feel they should not leave their children in someone else’s care, is core to solving their exclusion from the labour market.
   • Better mental health provision is required for the alarming number of young women (and young men) in the NEET group suffering from anxiety and depression and in need of support.
   • Mentoring, impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG), work experience and early intervention programmes in schools are all options which should be explored by national government.

5. Re-integration programmes for NEET young people need sustainable funding. There is a particular need for clarity at local level around funding to replace European Social Fund provision.

6. Many economically inactive young women want to work, both now and in the future. Creating the right conditions for appropriate, high-quality and sustainable employment opportunities should be a policy priority.

WHAT NEXT?

In 2017 Young Women’s Trust will continue its research into economic inactivity with a direct focus on the experiences of young women.

• Our data analysis will examine the common factors and pathways which lead young women to economic inactivity over a number of years.

• We will interview young women themselves, so they can tell us their own stories in their own words.

• We will bring young women and policy-makers together to discuss the policies that could reduce the numbers of economically inactive young women.

• At the end of 2017 Young Women’s Trust will publish its final report answering the question: who are NEET, economically inactive young women and what support should government give them?

To find out more including to see a more in-depth report which this is based on, go to:

www.youngwomenstrust.org