BECOMING ADULT

Health and wellbeing

Research Brief 5
Elaine Chase
www.becomingadult.net

Key findings

- Young people's own understandings of wellbeing are ignored in current policy responses.
- Young people's personal development and the strength of social ties made over time in the UK fundamentally affect their wellbeing and the feasibility of return to countries of origin.
- Key aspects of immigration and asylum policies impact negatively on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

- Young people with precarious legal status struggle to access basic health and wellbeing services.
- Education and learning are key elements of wellbeing but frequently disrupted once young people become 'adult'.

Introduction

A central concern of our research was what young people themselves value as constituents of their own health and wellbeing as they make the transition to 'adulthood' within a framework of migration, 'hostile environment' and immigration control. Previous research has demonstrated a link between migrant young people's subjective wellbeing and their potential for realising viable futures[1]. The longitudinal and retrospective accounts of young people revealed the complexities of understanding wellbeing within contexts of fluctuation and uncertainty and how wellbeing is determined by the intersection of other factors such as country of origin, ethnicity, class, and gender[2]. Broadly speaking, wellbeing was thought to combine: safety, freedom and choice; legal recognition and integrity; a sense of belonging and identity; opportunities to build futures; good physical, emotional and mental health; strong friendships, ties and connections both in the UK and transnationally. Security in terms of legal status was the main anchor for these aspirations, allowing young people to build lives in the UK, establish work and study pathways and nurture a sense of belonging from which they could contribute in terms of 'paying taxes', and 'giving back to community'. Conversely, precarious legal status had adverse impacts on all aspects of young people's lives including their sense of identity and belonging, access to resources and shelter, learning and education pathways and their potential to construct viable futures.

Findings

Safety, freedom and choice

"I don't mind any other country as long as people are treating me fair so that I can carry on and hopefully build a new life. I just want peace, a country where I feel safe which I don't have in Afghanistan... I don't mind to be in any other country as long as I feel safe." (Akram[3], Afghanistan, stranded in Indonesia for 18 months)

The search for safety, freedom and choice were core to young people's narratives about why they made their initial journeys and the reasons for subsequent migratory decisions. Some young people reported enjoying safety, freedom and choice for the first time in their lives, only to have these rescinded when their legal status changed. As they turned 18, a chasm frequently emerged between young people's own and other institutional perceptions of the sorts of safety and freedoms most conducive to their lives. During this transition, some young people disengaged from formal systems and structures despite other unintended consequences for their wellbeing.

Legal recognition and integrity

I: "So for those three years when you had to disappear really, what impact do you think that had on you?"

"Going crazy, it's hopeless. And no future, no thinking, your brain is stopped you know? You can't think of the future, you can't think of going back, no way." (Kamran, Afghanistan)

"When you are living in some countries like England and Germany without permission to stay after four or five years, people get depressed you know." (Ali, Afghanistan)

Legal residency is fundamental to determining whether young people have access to the constituents of wellbeing which they most value. On a practical level, rights and entitlements to housing, social protections, education, training opportunities, health (including dental) and other statutory services are all contingent on having a recognised legal status. Precarious legal status associated with feelings of stigma, discrimination, alienation and isolation. Young people, particularly from Afghanistan and Albania, in the course of the research, went from being ineligible for any access to public funds to, through timely access to legal redress, becoming legally recognised young people in need of protection and support; or from 'bona fide' children in need to removable citizens from one day to the next. Moreover, the evidence from the study (and from supporting data) suggests that young people are collectively treated differently by immigration and asylum systems depending on their country of origin. Importantly, many young people gave accounts of poor or inconsistent legal advice, the costs of which became increasingly prohibitive as they lost their eligibility to financial support for legal services from public funds.

Belonging and becoming

"The way I think five years ago and the way I think now changed a lot. A lot of things have gone on you know? You just have to connect. What I believe is if you're living here you just have to be like here. The way they behave, the way they are, you have to connect with them. If you don't you're not going to get by." (Aaron, Eritrea)

"After coming here, it was like... I was just born at 16. All old memories are erased from my head. Like I can't tell you what I used to do in the school or anything, I can't remember anything. I'm trying to put them deep inside my head, but I've forgotten everything. It's a weird feeling that. I didn't have a childhood, I can't remember how it was." (Ilir, Albania)

Young people consistently reflected on what they saw as a sense of self transformation which meant that they had become someone quite different to the person that originally arrived in the UK. Their interactions with other worlds, cultures, values and opportunities and possible futures created discord between who they felt they had become and how they were perceived by institutional processes. From a policy perspective these are closely tied with problematic notions of 'belonging' and the assumption that young people can step back into worlds which they left several years previously[4].

Building futures through education and learning

"Education is the most important thing in my life as it gives me hope for the future and allows me to make a positive contribution to my community. Education has basically turned a mirror into a window. You can see things from a different point of view." (Habib, Afghanistan)

"I had negative result and they didn't accept my application. I left college because it was so stressful and plus I was thinking if I can't get a job there's no point in continuing with education. I was doing like so well in college and I was planning to join the British army or join the services. But it was too much stress, I left college, I had no accommodation and no support… I lost all hope and everything." (Rasheed, Afghanistan)

Education and learning experiences in the UK for many young people had been transformative. Some had access to formal education for the first time in their lives and had completed or were about to complete higher education degrees or nationally recognised vocational qualifications. Young people spoke about how education had enabled them to imagine 'bigger' futures than were previously possible. Educational pathways and aspirations were contingent on security of legal status and could be suddenly interrupted when young people became appeal rights exhausted after 18. The stresses and anxieties surrounding protracted legal decisions, combined with fears about possible refusal and forced return, also meant that some young people ceased to engage in education.

Mental and physical health

"You have spent all that time here studying and making the connections with community… like basically adapting and then all of a sudden you have to think about going back now. So it was so stressful, I had to take stress release tablets to not go into depression. But those tablets don't help… you know the actual main point, why the stress is there and it could go away but it is the thing you can't do anything about… it's not in your hands, and that's what makes it difficult." (Izat, Afghanistan)

Young people when referring to their physical health frequently made reference to their bodily strength, having adequate nutrition and taking regular exercise. Young people's state of mental health and wellbeing was often defined by experiences of the journey combined with post-migration experiences, the latter frequently creating or exacerbating anxieties and/or symptoms of trauma. Legal status could directly impair mental health or conversely have a transformative effect in the case of a positive judgement on an asylum claim. Significant stress and anxiety were associated with immigration processes coinciding with transitions at 18 years. Mental health difficulties could impact all other aspects of young people's lives including sleeping and eating patterns, their educational pathways, relationships with friends and significant others, and their ability to function on a daily basis. Suicidal ideation and attempts at suicide were described by some young people in the study. Yet despite high levels of apparent need, young people were reluctant to engage with health services and sceptical of how medication/ medical interventions could alleviate problems linked to their precarious legal status and associated uncertainty. Some young people with precarious legal status had significant problems accessing health and dental services. The research also revealed accounts of coping strategies which undermined health such as excessive use of alcohol, drugs and gambling.

Friendships, connections and ties

"I have to ask money for the college; money for the bus pass; money for everything… it's amazing… I just feel so embarrassed – that's what I feel like. Even money for food or stuff like that it's too much." (Dan, Eritrea)

"I did well and that is when life became normal. I had a good relationship with my teachers, they trusted me and they relied on me. So I had a good relationship with the teachers, I still do. I go and see them and I visit them. And I started to have friends at school. And it became normal. That is when I transformed more into a normal life." (Mohammad, Afghanistan)

Feelings of connectedness were central to young people's sense of health and wellbeing, and friendships provided important emotional support as well as vital sources of accommodation, food and other basics when young people were no longer eligible for public funds. These ties and networks were local, national and international and for many young people included

family and friends elsewhere in Europe or back in their country of origin. Difficulties with sustaining these ties impacted on young people's sense of wellbeing. Being unable to reciprocate or contribute to households meant that people could feel a burden on others, or felt obliged to frequently move from one place to another. Failing to secure work or income in the UK to contribute back 'home' could cause strain on relationships with family, and placement moves within the social care system or being transferred to the adult National Asylum Support Service at 18 meant that people were removed from friendship groups and felt isolated. A number of young people who had been returned to Afghanistan had married and had children before re-migrating, which further complicated their lives and the decisions they were making about their future migratory pathways. At least three young people who now have secure legal status in the UK had subsequently married and were starting the process of bringing their wives to the UK.

Policy implication

- Young people's conceptualisations of wellbeing need to be central to policies governing their lives.
- Aspects of immigration and asylum policies are detrimental to the wellbeing of migrant young people becoming 'adult' and may have long term impact on their capacity to contribute to society in the UK or elsewhere.
- Access to basic health services for all young people, regardless of legal status, should be improved.
- Educational and learning pathways should be sustained for as long as possible as they offer an import anchoring to young people's development and wellbeing.

1. Chase, E. (2013) 'Security and subjective wellbeing: the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 35, 6, 358–72.
2. Allsopp, J. (2017) 'Agent, Victim, Soldier, Son: Intersecting Masculinities in the European "Refugee Crisis"' in Freedman, J., Kivilcim, Z. and Özgür Baklacıoglu, N. (eds.), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis.* London: Routledge, pp.155–175.
3. All names have been changed to protect anonymity.
4. Allsopp, J. and Chase, E. (2017) 'Best Interests, Durable Solutions and Belonging: Policy Discourses Shaping the Futures of Unaccompanied Migrant and Refugee Minors Coming of Age in Europe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.* DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1404265.

The Becoming Adult project

The Becoming Adult project is a three-year ESRC-funded research project exploring the post 18 wellbeing outcomes of young people who migrated on their own to the UK as children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania. While the main focus of the research has been on young people who arrive in the UK, the policy implications are relevant to Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the grant-linked studentship has enabled a comparative analysis of experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK and Italy.

Methodology

The study comprises three research components addressing (i) how ideas about migration, futures, 'becoming adult' and wellbeing are conceptualised in different cultural media; (ii) unaccompanied young people's lived experiences of becoming 'adult' after migrating on their own as children; and (iii) policy and practice governing unaccompanied young people.

Young people between the ages of 18–25 took part in research. A narrative enquiry approach was used, combining retrospective narrative interviews and longitudinal research with participants up to a period of 18 months. Questions were asked about: experiences of turning 18 and other key transitions; educational experiences and outcomes; accommodation and living arrangements; factors perceived to promote or undermine their health and wellbeing; migration history, influences and experiences; social ties and networks; experiences of social care and leaving care; family ties; and aspirations for the future. In addition to taking part in interviews, other young people engaged in the research through activities including photography, art, writing, and theatre projects. A core team of young people who had previously migrated to the UK on their own worked as core members of the research team. In total some 100 young people participated in the research in the UK and Italy. Fifty interviews with policy stakeholders and practitioners in four local authorities and a FOI survey of all local authorities in England offered insights into the governance of this population and the encounters between the asylum and child protection regimes and young migrants.

How to cite

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