

How do young people think about social security?

A project by Heard, The Children's Society and The University of Warwick

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Background

In 2022 Heard conducted [research](#) into public perceptions of social security. During this research we observed that “younger people in our discussions were less familiar with the term “social security” and the principles upon which it was based. Older members of the groups were more familiar with the term.”

In response to this, Warwick University convened and supported Heard and The Children's Society to investigate further. Specifically, the project sought to understand:

- How are young people thinking about poverty and hardship in the UK today?
- Whether and how young people understand the UK's social security system?
- What language and ideas resonate with young people when talking about these issues?

The approach we took

We took a three-track approach to exploring our research questions.

1. We drew on existing literature exploring:
 - Best practices for designing engaging workshops with younger people
 - The attitudes and perspectives of younger people
2. We worked with North London-based organisations Chickenshed and Oasis Academy to convene 11-18 year olds for in-person workshops exploring these issues.
3. We ran two traditional online focus groups with 18-25 year olds

What we heard from the young people

Young people feel strongly that there's not enough support for people

“So many people need help that can't get it”

There's widespread recognition that people are experiencing unacceptable hardship (and that all costs are increasing quickly, including the price of essentials like food and energy – *“it's coming from every direction”*).

There was a strong sense among almost all the young people we spoke to that not enough support goes to people who need it.

Some participants in our 18-25-year old group discussed ways that young people face particular struggles. There was opposition to the idea that younger people receive less financial support despite having needs that are comparable to older people's.

There was also recognition that current economic conditions are causing more people of all ages to struggle than is typical. While even the youngest participants were aware that the cost of many things has risen while wages (and benefits) have not, the cost of living crisis was more salient for the older groups, who are more likely to have first-hand experience with increasing expenses and stagnant incomes.

Young people are extremely disillusioned with the government

“When finishing school, you’re starting off feeling like the government is against you.”

“Government can’t be bothered to help.”

“Government have all these schemes but don’t tell anyone. This is done intentionally.”

There’s a feeling that the government is detached, uncaring, callous and not in control of anything. One person gave the example of seeking government help to secure employment, then being told to work in a bar. That this was prohibited by her religion did not seem to register with or be of concern to the official she was in touch with.

The economy was widely felt to be “a mess” and there was a strong sense that we’re in an era where no-one’s at the wheel.

“Everything is out of everyone’s control - couldn’t control Brexit, Covid, Ukraine, inflation.”

Getting by vs living well

“People will get by but won’t be a life”

There was a sense that lots of people are just about getting by, and that this is not enough. As one young person put it, many people must “choose between paying bills or basically their own wellbeing.”

Quality of life is important to today’s young people who are extremely attuned to the importance of good mental health. Many seemed to feel that people can’t live a good life and make a contribution if they are not supported emotionally as well as financially.

Young people see wellbeing as foundational, rather than a nice to have. They want to see more done in terms of emotional wellbeing support, with some saying this is more of a priority than financial support. Several mentioned ‘free therapy’ as a potential solution.

“Being in poverty is so hard. It will be better to give people financial aid, but also wellbeing aid”

Across the groups, a quality life was described as one where someone can participate fully in society. This includes having social opportunities like the ability to join clubs and even access to Netflix, which would allow them to watch shows that their peers are watching and discussing. It also means having the time and energy to do things like volunteer and build relationships.

Young people are very aware of people’s different and individual needs. They acknowledged that there are many reasons why a person or family might need government support, and using generalisations or a one-size-fits-all model to determine what and how much someone needs feels inappropriate to many young people.

Young people are unfamiliar with the term ‘social security system’

Most young people want to increase the levels of support available, but they don’t see or think about ‘the social security system.’

The younger people we spoke to were largely unfamiliar with the term ‘social security system.’ When pushed, they talked about having heard about ‘social security numbers’ in American films and TV shows.

The 18-25 year olds we talked to had slightly more familiarity with the UK’s social security system, but even in this cohort, some were unfamiliar or only had vague ideas about it (*“I’m pretty sure I’ve heard something about it at uni. It’s about having awareness of poverty and how different people struggle in the world”*). Most did have some connection between the term “social security” and the more familiar concept of benefits, but they defined the system in vague ways, and they were hesitant: *“is it... benefits?”*

The idea of an **overall system** that’s designed to support everyone, especially those who need it most, was largely unfamiliar to the young people, who saw things in more fractured and blurred ways. There wasn’t a clear line between financial help through social security and other forms of support such as mental health or the NHS in general.

Once the social security system was defined and the young people received examples, many expressed support, seemingly based on the same principles that mean they support the NHS.

There was also a sense that the goal of the system should be to “level the playing field.” Participants frequently expressed that the wealthiest people should not receive financial support, but they should be targeted to those who need them most because the same money would go further for people in need and would be one way of closing the inequality gap between the rich and poor.

“Money should be spread out and everyone should live freely.”

For most participants, it was difficult to think about the full range of ways that the government can influence the economic conditions that cause many people to struggle. Most suggestions were relatively direct (i.e., specific to benefits, the topic at hand, and the most proximate solution for financial hardship) but general (e.g., give more people more money or vouchers to buy what they need), with very few participants making more structural suggestions.

“Support people to buy things with the benefits. Government should help”

Responsibility, sympathy and judgement

Young people simultaneously draw on systemic and individualistic explanations for hardship.

There was strong recognition of hardship, of some systemic causes and a profound frustration that more is not done. But many young people also spoke in ways that revealed

a tendency to attribute responsibility to the individual, and to ‘other’ and judge those experiencing hardship.

- *“Single parents with loads of kids”*
- *“The main reason people are struggling is because they need to find a job”*
- *“People have a bad upbringing and that creates a vicious cycle”*
- *“What comes after benefits? Give them more than money, help and tools. Do they have skills to go beyond, to get work?”*

Several young people pointed to instances of people being given what they saw as unfairly generous social housing and benefit payments. These kinds of stories appear to be as sticky and memorable for younger people as they can be for older audiences. For some, concern about people cheating the system overrides the notion that benefits should be adequate for everyone else, reflecting a deep rooted desire for fairness.

One 18-25 year old felt especially strongly that people need to take more responsibility and not blame others: *“you’ve got to write your own CV, you can’t rely on other people to live it for you - if you think it’s taboo that’s your own problem, whining - you have a choice about whether to take jobs or not, doesn’t matter what’s going on in your life.”* However, this participant was somewhat out of line with his peers—in many cases, 18-25-year olds seemed to have more first- and second-hand experience with the diverse and complex circumstances that lead people to struggle.

However, there was also an emphasis on taking personal responsibility to ‘get back on your feet’, with a strong onus on the responsibility to play their part. The social security system was seen as something that people would need temporarily to bounce back. There was less understanding that some people will always need support.

Awareness of stigma

Many young people talked about stigma and its impacts with compassion and empathy.

“School always says if you can’t afford it let us know, but there’s always a stigma”

“Before year two you get free school meals. It should be free for everyone.”

However, the idea of stigma also fed some more individualistic lines of thinking. Many assumed that stigma meant people didn’t help themselves and put themselves forward for existing services. Education and ‘awareness raising’ were often cited as key solutions, revealing a sense that problems could be solved if **people** knew better about what was already available, rather than the **system** not being set up to work for people.

While thinking about stigma took people to somewhat judgemental conclusions - ‘if people knew how to help themselves, they would’ - young people were also frequently very aware of social norms, and the role of education, experience and perceptions in shaping the conditions in which people are able to access help.

Recommendations

1. Meaningfully involve young people

Young people have an important voice. They're disillusioned but principled: they know things should be better than they are. They believe that people should be able to live a good life, not just 'get by.' They place a high value on wellbeing and dignity and they're thoughtful and creative about what needs to change.

Young people - rightly - feel strongly that they should be involved in decisions that affect them. We need to create more opportunities for young people to explore these issues and talk to decision makers.

2. Bring to life the social security system - and the principles on which its based - in ways that resonate with younger people

- It's essential that we keep talking about and **defining the social security system** for young people. While they are unfamiliar with the term they are strongly drawn to the principles on which it's based.
- Young people need to hear and believe that **it is possible for governments to act decisively to improve people's lives**. Communicators need to understand that many young people are disillusioned and fatalistic. They have written off the very idea of a system that works for people, and they do not feel empowered to expect and demand better. We can use examples - like support with energy costs, the covid furlough scheme and longer term measures like child benefit - to bring to life the ability of governments to act decisively to support people.
- We should consider **wellbeing** an important lens for discussions about the social security system. Young people are drawn to the idea of a **holistic approach** that meets people's differing needs, and gives them a foundation so they can thrive, not just survive.
- The idea of '**upgrading the system**' appears to resonate strongly with young people, possibly because 'upgrades' are a concept they instinctively understand and see as a normal part of life. Communicators can use this as an effective metaphor to explain changes and improvements.
- We need to keep talking about the main, **systemic drivers of hardship**. Like older people, young people can tend towards individualistic and judgemental mindsets. More exposure to and - understanding of - systemic factors will help them to think about why a robust social security system is necessary, as well as the kind of support it should include.

Key references

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Young people's opinions and attitudes

[Young people explain why they're shunning the benefits system \(2018\).](#) Katy Jones in the Conversation.

[Benefits to Society: Homeless Young People's Experiences of the Social Security System.](#) Centre Point

[Public First polling August 2022](#)

General social security framing and opinion research

[Heard's 'Talking about social security effectively'](#)

[King's College's Public attitudes to poverty](#)

[FrameWorks Institute's 'Talking about poverty'](#)