

NEETs: What's really going on?

16-24 year olds
not in employment,
education or training

Jamie Elliott
Community Links
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Community Links
105 Barking Road
Canning Town
London
E16 4HQ

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Foreword

Oona King: Former east London MP, Head of Diversity Channel 4



It is research like this that tells us the truth about the state of Britain today. A 17 year old man drops out of education because he can't afford the £20 a week travel costs. A 20 year old woman cannot finish a degree because she can't get the time and space to study in an overcrowded home where nine people live.

London is wonderful for those safely in the economic system; terrifyingly expensive for those who are not. Yet so many of those young people who are not in education, employment or training want work, want skills, want a future – this research from Community Links show that force of circumstances can make it hard to do just that.

The economy has never been more competitive. We have highly qualified graduates coming out of the banks looking for work. And we have people battling to get a foot on the ladder against them – perhaps on the face of it with less 'marketable' qualifications – but the same desire to work to their full potential.

We need to acknowledge that the current system needs reform. The Jobcentre Plus system comes in for a lot of criticism. We need to think about the way it works. But we also need an educational system that resolves problems early. So many of those without qualifications have been excluded from school, for example, but we need to explore ways of giving people a second chance.

What is clear is that personal support, financial support and family support are at the heart of dealing with the problem. We cannot afford to waste the talent of our young people, who want to get on in life, but are struggling to do just that.

Oona King

Foreword

Shaks Ghosh, Chief Executive of the Private Equity Foundation



Young people who are not in education, employment or training have become so called 'NEETs', a convenient label but one which makes it easy for society to lump them into one seemingly homogenous group or statistic.

Except they're not homogenous, they're anything but and that's why this research from Community Links is so valuable. It helps to give young people, who happen to also be NEET, their voice back and a chance to explain their predicament. The report cuts straight to the real complexity of the issue and questions commonly held assumptions.

The NEET issue is not new but given the current economic climate it is now urgent. It is only by gaining a greater understanding of who the NEET young people of 2010 actually are, that we can possibly tailor effective solutions to really tackle this problem and make sure history does not repeat itself.

Shaks Ghosh,



Eren Tame
One of our
respondents

Acknowledgements:

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And each of the young people whose stories we collected

Neets – what's really going on?

The problem

Unemployment amongst 16-24 year olds is growing. In the first quarter of 2010, a total of 924,000 people in this age group were out of work, up 4,000 on the last quarter of 2009. Many of these young people are 'neet' – not in any form of education, employment or training. Figures from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), suggest that at the beginning of this year around 15% of 16-24 year olds fell into this category.

This recent increase contrasts with a long period during which the number of 'neets' was relatively stable. According to the latest report from the Children, Schools and Families select committee, the proportion of 16–18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training fluctuated between 8 and 14% between 1985 and 2008 'with no discernible trend'.

There is growing alarm, however, that as the impact of the recession bites, an entire generation of young people is at risk of becoming trapped in a self-perpetuating pattern of unemployment; the longer you are without a job, the less likely it is you will find one.

The response

Politicians and industry leaders agree something must be done.

"We are committed to raising young people's skill levels and building a young, skilful and dynamic workforce throughout the economic recovery," said Iain Wright, the Labour minister for 14- to 19-year-olds at the end of February, commenting on increasing levels of 'neet' young people.

Former CBI leader Lord Digby Jones wants workfare to force young people into employment or training. "I believe that we should, as a society, have a government of whichever party that actually passes a law that says you will not get the money from the state, from the taxpayer...unless you actually are either in training and you're going to college or apprenticeship or whatever and then you'll get your money," he said in April.

David Cameron has suggested a form of compulsory community service to help address the problem. The Labour government introduced a number of measures to address the 'neet' problem; these included:

- ▶ **The September and January guarantee** – all 16 and 17 year olds are guaranteed a place in learning (some form of education or training) following compulsory education in either September or January.
- ▶ **Raising the compulsory education age to 18** – in 2013 the age at which a young person must be in education or training will rise to 17 and in 2015 it will rise to 18.
- ▶ **Employer subsidies to encourage apprenticeships.**
- ▶ **A dedicated personal adviser to help young jobseekers from day one of their jobseeker's allowance claim.**
- ▶ **The young person's guarantee** – all 18–24 year olds still unemployed after six months guaranteed access to a job, training or work - experience.

Taking a closer look

Workfare, training, compulsory voluntary work and some of the other measures intended to help often share a common assumption about the situation facing 'neet' young people – that the problem lies with young people themselves. These responses are predicated on the idea that young people are lacking something - skills, motivation or the willingness to work.

Community Links wanted to test this assumption. Like politicians and others, we were unclear about what lay behind the statistics. Why were almost a million young people out of work, and why were so many not in education or training?

We decided to conduct a piece of qualitative research, starting with 'neet' young people we come into contact with through or youth and community work in East London, but also encompassing young people in other parts of the capital. What had led to them to leave education or training? What was their experience of school or employment? Did anyone try and persuade them to stay in education? Are they looking for work now? What are their aspirations for the future?

We carried out 35 structured interviews (see appendix 2 for questionnaire) with 16 – 24 year olds not in education, employment or training in East, North and South London. We are grateful for the invaluable assistance of the Princes Trust and The Boys Clubhouse who helped us contact young people.

What we discovered

Many of the young people we interviewed were a long way from the stereotype of the poorly qualified, de-motivated and inarticulate individual often associated with the label 'neet'.

Keen to work

All but two respondents wanted to work and were actively looking for a job. Of the two that were not, one was planning to leave the country and the other wanted to return to education.

Highly qualified

Over two thirds of interviewees had qualifications – our 35 respondents had a total of 96 grade A-C GCSE's between them, with just over a quarter possessing five or more GCSEs at grade A-C. Some had as many as 10 GCSEs at grade A-C, five had 'A' levels and a further five had a degree or BTEC.

"I've applied for loads of jobs," one 22 year old with a BSc in Computing and Business told us, adding that even this high level qualification was insufficient in the current jobs market. "I've been to graduate career fairs where I'm competing for entry level positions with people who have been made redundant from Lehman Brothers and other big firms and who have years of experience. It's incredibly difficult to get your foot on the ladder."

Another graduate, with a BSc from Queen Mary University, three 'A' levels and 10 GCSEs said had been claiming jobseeker's allowance for six months, after being made redundant

from his job as a recruitment consultant. He now qualified for the government's New Deal programme which is aimed at helping young people at risk of long term unemployment.

Some respondents were clear that further training or education was not what they wanted. "I've done a three year course in Art and Fashion and just finished a computer course. What I need now is a job," a 21 year old woman said.

Some lack skills

At the other end of the spectrum, a minority were hampered by a severe lack of skills or qualifications. 11 of our 35 interviewees had no qualifications at all, and some had very low levels of literacy.

Six interviewees identified exclusion from school as an important factor leading to this situation. A common complaint amongst this group was the failure of the school system to meet individual needs, such as literacy problems, or prolonged periods of illness which caused them to fall behind.

Money is critical

A lack of financial support was cited as a reason for giving up on education and training. Sometimes the sums needed were small but made all the difference. One 17 year old had enrolled on a college course but could not find the £20 per week needed for travel to Havering College. His father's level of earnings meant he was not entitled to the means tested Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), but his parents did not give him the money he needed for travel. Three other respondents described almost exactly the same scenario concerning EMA, saying lack of funds caused them to leave college.

Another 17 year old, who qualified for the maximum EMA payment due to her parents' low income, said it was too little to live on. "I simply could not survive on £30pw and gave up my course."

Those in higher education reported financial problems too. One 22 year old had left his degree course in Graphic Design after two years because of a lack of cash.

"I left a year before the end because I was struggling to pay the fees and was having to borrow a lot of money," he said. "My mum and dad are on jobseeker's allowance so they couldn't help, and I was worried about getting into so much debt."

Limited reliance on benefits

Only half of respondents were in receipt of benefits; most 16 and 17 year olds are not entitled to financial support from the state. Instead, many respondents were surviving on very small hand-outs from parents or from cash-in-hand work. "I live on money I get from baby-sitting for my mum's friends, but I give my mum some of this for my keep," one 17 year old woman told us. "I do casual work at a football stadium, but only get about £60 a month," another 18 year old woman said.

A 17 year old at a youth club for Jewish boys told us he had been living on a £500 nest egg he had received for his barmitzvah at the age of 13. "I've only got £50 of that money left," he

said. "I get the odd tenner from my sister, but no other money." Another 16 year old boy said he did not receive any money at all.

Parents are a positive influence

We asked respondents whether anyone tried to encourage them to stay on at school or college instead of entering the jobs market. Two thirds of respondents said someone had tried to persuade them to continue with education or training. Overwhelmingly this person was a parent, and usually their mother.

"My mum wanted me to go to university but dad left it up to me. I think now my mum was right," one 24 year man told us who had left college aged 18 and unsuccessfully sought a job in computing.

"Mum told me to stay at college and warned me that finding a job after leaving college is really hard," an 18 year old girl said. She had left school aged 16 with ten A-C grade GCSE's but the only employment she had been able to find was casual bar work.

Sometimes, however, advice was ill-informed or based on experience that was no longer relevant.

"My gran told me that instead of carrying on with education I would do better to leave and try and get a job," said another 19 year old, who had taken this advice and abandoned education at the height of the recession. He had been continually out work for the past 16 months.

Bullying

An unexpected finding concerned the role of bullying from other students both at school and in further education. Four respondents referred to this problem.

"I started at college after finishing school at 16 but had to leave because the bullying was too much," one young woman told us.

A young man described leaving college "because I was having trouble with the people in the area and couldn't go back into that area." His parents urged him to continue with his studies, he said, but added: "Parents don't understand some problems."

Impact of poverty

Some respondents described severe levels of poverty or neglect within their family which had a major impact on their ability to remain in education or training. One 20 year old woman from a traditional Muslim family described being unable to complete a Business Studies degree because of chronically over-crowded housing.

"It was just impossible for me to study at home," she said. "I share a two bedroom flat with eight other family members and five of us sleep in one room. There was just nowhere to work or think and after 18 months I left the course."

Another young man, who had been excluded from school, had poor literacy and no qualifications, described leaving his family home at the age of twelve due to physical abuse.

“My mum and her boyfriend didn’t care what happened to me and used to beat me black and blue,” he said. “That’s why I went to live with my gran and granddad, but when I was fifteen my granddad died and my gran couldn’t look after me any more, so I started staying on friends’ floors.”

Getting the right support

We asked young people about their perceptions of the quality of support they received from statutory and non-statutory agencies.

Of the 17 respondents who had engaged with Jobcentre Plus (those who were claiming jobseeker’s allowance), only three said they had been helped or supported in finding a job. Comments about the Jobcentre included: “The personal adviser was very helpful;” “They just don’t understand;” “They don’t do much, just check you’ve been looking for work;” “They need to do more to help people find jobs;” “They’re a handout centre, completely useless” and “They are a waste of space.”

In contrast, of the 25 respondents who had used the Connexions service, 11 said it was helpful. “They helped as much as possible and I’m always treated with respect,” one respondent said. But another commented: “They did not really boost my confidence and didn’t help me.”

Aspirations

We asked interviewees to tell us both what they expected they would be doing with their lives in three years time, and what they would like to be doing three years hence. Just over half said their expectations and their hopes were one and the same. But amongst the 15 respondents whose expectations did not match their wishes for their future, the miss-match was sometimes stark.

“I think I will be doing something I don’t want to do but am forced to do because I need the money - retail, or something like that,” the young woman who had left college due to overcrowded housing said. What she wanted for herself three years hence, however, was “to be settled in a company working in online marketing.”

A 21 year old man said he would like to be running his own store or other business. But the reality he expected in three years time was “to be working in retail as a sales assistant.”

Conclusions

Our research sought to interrogate the stereotype which characterises 'neets' as poorly qualified, lacking in skills and sometimes unwilling to work. We were especially interested to test this perception because many policy prescriptions – from the threat of withdrawal of benefits for those who turn down work to a strong emphasis on training and education – appear to reflect this view.

All of the young people we spoke to were actively seeking work and in nearly all cases, when asked about their aspirations, work and a career took centre stage. So there is reason to question a punitive or compulsion focused approach to solving the 'neets' problem. Young unemployed people already want to work.

As far as education and training is concerned, our interviewees fell into two broad groups. There were those who were reasonably well qualified - some with considerable work experience - who simply could not find work in a highly competitive recession-hit jobs market. Then there were others who, following exclusion from school, or some other disruption to their education, were chronically short of the skills and training looked for by employers. Of course some of the young people we spoke to fell somewhere between these two extremes.

But these two groups have dramatically different needs. The first needs access to appropriate work experience to enable them to begin their careers. At the other end of the spectrum there is an urgent requirement for help with basic education and training, including literacy and social skills. To meet this diverse range of needs, provision for helping 'neets' needs to be tailor made to the requirements of the individual. In a time of high unemployment, when young people with such a wide range of skills and abilities are facing worklessness, a one-size-fits-all approach simply cannot work.

We also identified financial support, or rather the lack of it, as a key factor inhibiting 'neets' in their progress through education and training and into work. There have recently been calls to reduce or cut benefits for young people who refuse work or training. But our survey suggests that a lack of cash is the very thing causing some young people to fail. Some who simply could not afford the cost of travelling to college, for instance, were abandoning education as a result. Others from poor backgrounds were giving up on higher education because they were afraid they would be unable to repay high levels of debt accrued to cover tuition fees and living costs.

A more generous level of support for young people in education and training could cut the risk of young people becoming unemployed for extended periods, and reduce the long term cost to society. Taking away financial support by cutting benefits or other punitive measures is likely to have precisely the opposite effect to that intended.

For many young people, Jobcentre Plus is the principle point of contact when they are looking for work – for the first six months, a young person receiving jobseeker's allowance is not obliged to seek help from anywhere else. But our research suggests the Jobcentre may be letting some young people down by not providing the help and support they need in this critical early phase of worklessness.

Jobcentre Plus staff may be able to learn useful lessons from the other providers of statutory and non-statutory sources of help and advice whose services were rated considerably more highly by respondents to our survey.

The research we have undertaken is preliminary - we have not focused on recommendations but rather sought to uncover and highlight key issues. More detailed work is needed to develop practical recommendations. But the diverse needs of the young people we spoke to and the dissatisfaction expressed by many with services intended to help them, suggests further research is urgently needed. Only by better understanding 'needs' and their needs can unhelpful stereotypes be debunked and effective policies developed. Such an evidence based approach is urgently needed in order to reverse the growth in the number of 'neets', a trend which left unchecked could indeed threaten the future of an entire generation.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Survey data

Age of respondents

The spread of ages amongst respondents is shown in chart A and table 1 below. The most common age was 17 (ten respondents) and the least common 23 (no respondents).

Chart A

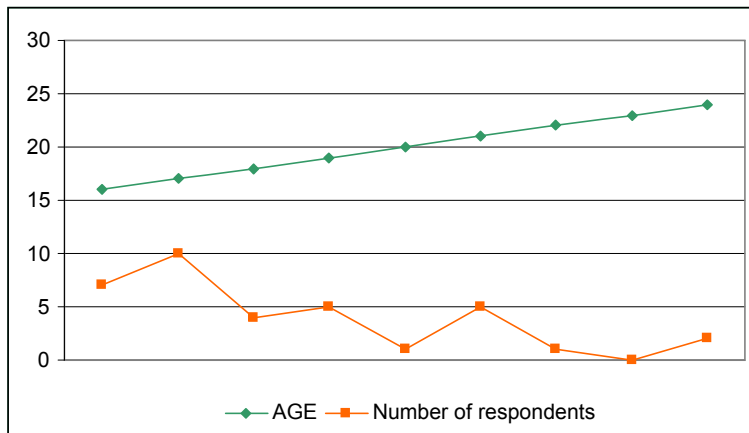


Table 1

Age	Number of respondents
16	7
17	10
18	4
19	5
20	1
21	5
22	1
23	0
24	2

Gender

Of the 36 respondents, 21 were male and 15 were female.

Age on leaving school or college

Just under half of respondents left school or college aged 16. Only five ceased education or training aged 19 or over. One interviewee left school at 12 – he claimed he was struggling with reading and that, due to insufficient support at school, his mother opted to educate him at home.

Chart B

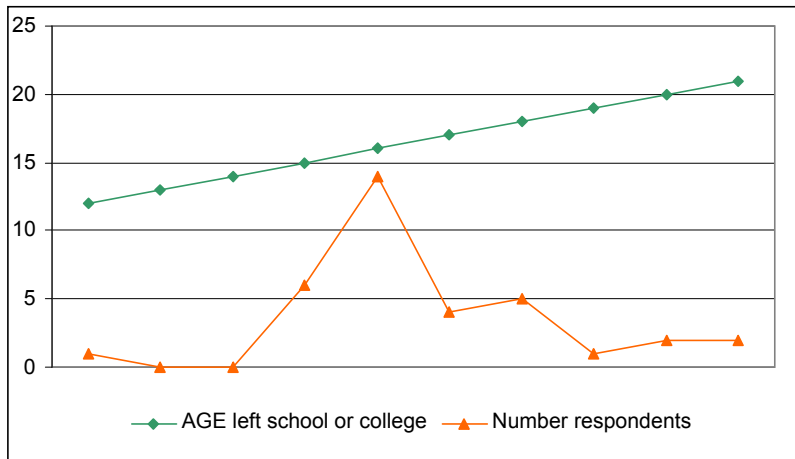


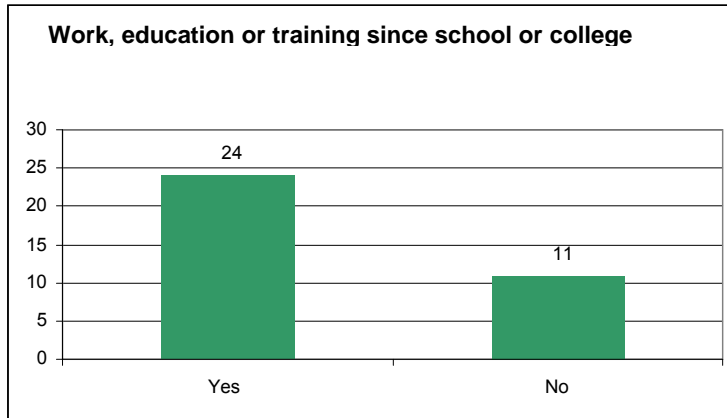
Table 2 Age on leaving school or college

Age on leaving school or college	Number of respondents
12	1
13	0
14	0
15	6
16	14
17	4
18	5
19	1
20	2
21	2

Work, education or training since leaving school or college

Of the 35 respondents, 24 said they had engaged in some form of employment, education or training since leaving school or college.

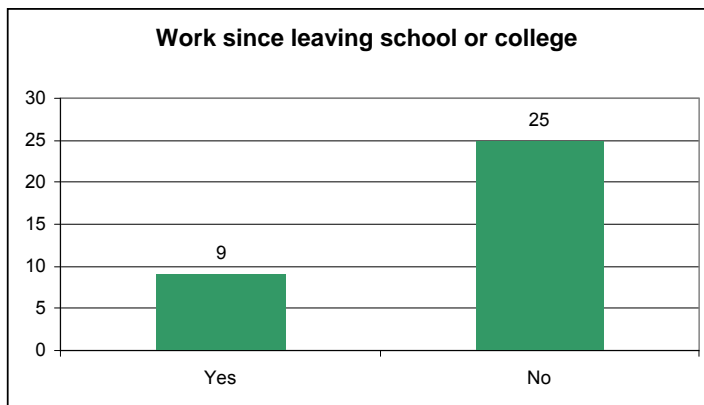
Chart C



Work since leaving school or college

Around a quarter of interviewees had worked since leaving education or training. Half of these had worked as sales assistants in retail outlets whilst others had worked in hairdressing, office work, recruitment consultancy and construction.

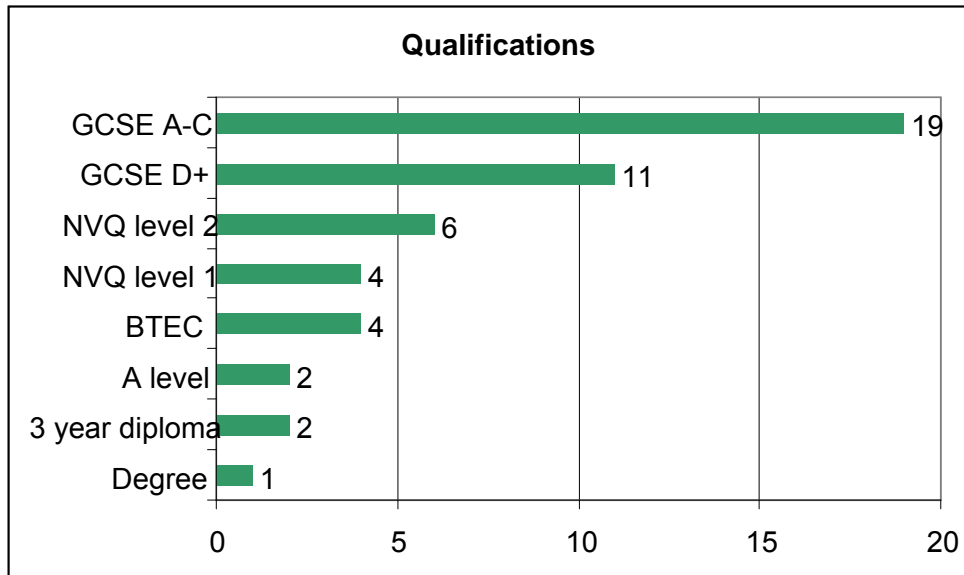
Chart D



Qualifications

The most common qualifications held by respondents were GCSEs (30 respondents). Degrees were the least common (one respondent).

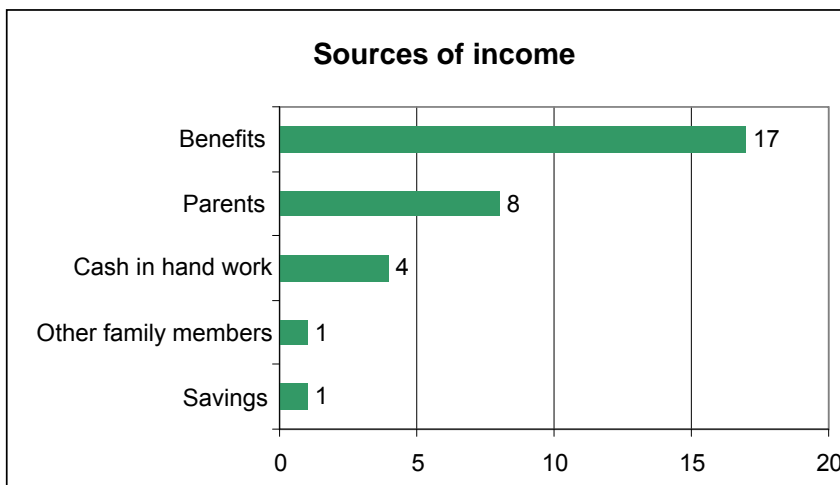
Chart E



Income

Of our respondents 17 were in receipt of benefits (jobseeker's allowance in all cases). Parents were the second most common source of income. Only four interviewees were doing cash-in-hand work.

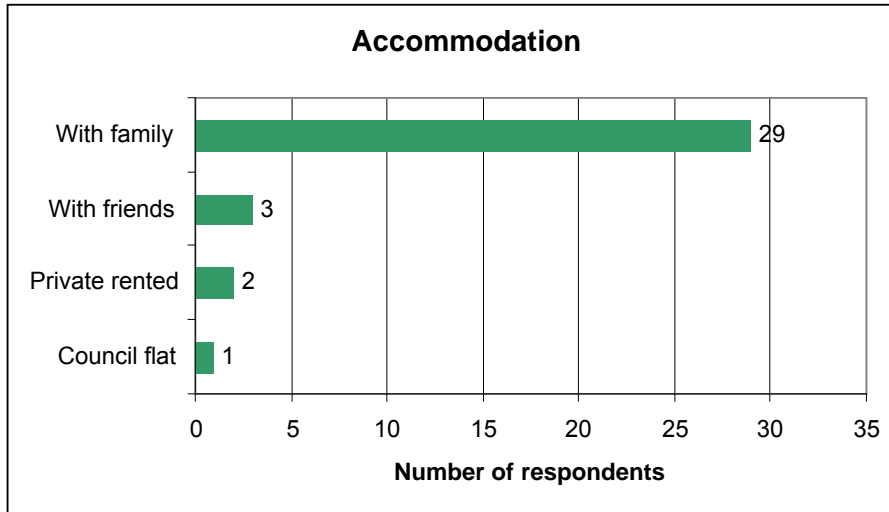
Chart F



Accommodation

The vast majority of respondents (29) were living with their family. Only three lived in rented accommodation of their own.

Chart G



Appendix 2. Questionnaire

1. Are you doing any of these at the moment?

Formal paid work (i.e. work that is NOT voluntary or paid cash in hand)

Education

Training

Yes / No (please circle)

IF YES, INTERVIEW ENDS

2. How old are you? ___ years ___ months

3. Male / Female? (please circle)

4. How old were you when you left school or college? ___ years ___ months

5. Have you done any formal work, education or training since you left school or college?

Yes / No (please circle)

6. If yes, what formal work, education or training did you do and for how long?

7. Do you have any formal qualifications (GCSE's, NVQs etc.)?

Yes / No (please circle)

8. If yes, what qualifications do you have?

9. Why did you leave school when you did, instead of carrying on with your education or training?

10. Are you looking for a formal paid job (that means a job that is 'on the books' not paid cash-in-hand)?

Yes / No (please circle)

11. If "no", why have you decided not to look for a job?

12. If "yes", have you been helped to look for a job by Jobcentre Plus, Connexions or some other agency? Please say what help you have had:

13. What do you think of the help you had from Jobcentre Plus, Connexions or some other agency? Do you think it will help you find a job? Were you treated with respect?

14. Did your parents, or someone else, try and persuade you to carry on with your education or training instead of leaving school?

Yes / No (please circle)

15. If "yes", please say more about this:

16. Are you getting any state benefits like jobseeker's allowance?
Yes / No (please circle)

17. If "no", where are you getting money to live on? (Please give details of any cash-in-hand work you are doing or any other sources of money).

18. What job / career would you like ? _____

19. Are there any educational or training courses you would you like to do?

20. What do you expect you will be doing with your life 3 years from now?

21. What would you like to be doing with your life 3 years from now?

22. Where do you live now (please tick)

- a. With family
- b. With friends
- c. In private rented accommodation
- d. In accommodation provided by the council, a housing association or another organisation: Please say which: _____
- e. In accommodation for 'looked after' young people (sometimes called 'young people in care').
- f. Other. Please tell us: _____

YOUR CONTACT DETAILS (optional)

Name: _____

Mobile: _____

Email: _____

MEDIA WORK

To help us publicise these important issues, we sometimes ask young people to talk to journalists we know and trust. Would you be happy to speak to a journalist about your experience to a journalist? (You would not need to use your name if you didn't want to)
Yes / No (please tick)

Thank you for completing this survey

About Community Links

Community Links is an innovative charity running community based projects in east London and sharing local lessons to create national change

Our network of 60 community projects reaches over 30,000 vulnerable children, young people, adults and older people every year, empowering individuals and communities to build their own ladders out of poverty and towards a brighter future. And our programme of national work shares the local lessons across the country to widen the impact of our projects and generate lasting social change.

Examples of our Employment work:

We are based in Newham, the east London borough with one of the highest rates of long-term unemployment in the country. In Newham and Tower Hamlets we run two courses for young people not in Education, Employment or Training. The first is a four-week introductory course. The second is up to 20 weeks of intensive one-on-one support, with the aim of getting everyone into a job or work placement. Additionally we run a "Future Links" course designed specially for young people not in employment, education or training. It's 10 weeks long, completely free and most people end up with an apprenticeship or a job.

Community Links is the most successful New Deal provider in London and the South East, having helped over 2,000 of the hardest to reach young people back to work in the last three years. We have been delivering the New Deal since 1999 and have remained the most successful Prime contractor in London and the south east for over four years, supporting over 2,000 people into work. The majority of our clients have complex needs, are aged between 18-24yrs and are considered long-term unemployed yet through the new Deal they have remained in employment for at least six months.

Many of the people we work with struggle to overcome difficult and complex problems. Everyday we see the impact that living in poverty has on the lives of local people; poor health, inadequate housing, debt problems, children excluded from school, troubled teenagers caught up in anti-social behaviour or themselves victims of crime. We also see how people are able to turn their lives around when given the support and help they need to tackle their problems.

More details of our programme of work, our research reports and consultancy and training offers are available on our website www.community-links.org

