

Who are the young people who are not in education, employment or training? An application of the risk factors to a rural area in the UK

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Abstract

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are a focus of government attention in the UK. For social service professionals the mechanisms underpinning the individual experience of NEET are critical to designing effective interventions. International comparisons point to similar experiences at the level of the individual family. This article examines the factors that may contribute to a young person becoming NEET and applies these to the demographics of a rural area in England. Poor educational attainment and low socio-economic status are key factors, with the mental well-being of young people as a proposed underpinning mechanism.

Keywords

Family Assessment, NEET, rural, social research, social work

Introduction

NEET is a government acronym for young people currently ‘not in education, employment, or training’. People under this designation are called NEETs. The term became consolidated under the New Labour government as part of their broader agenda to tackle social exclusion. The paper *Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16–18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) set out a range of strategies to address what was seen as a

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complex social issue. However, in simple terms, the key aim was to promote employment and employability. As then Prime Minister Blair said in the foreword to the paper:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience. (SEU, 1999: 6)

To be termed NEET, therefore, is not only problematic in its own right, but is also indicative of young people who might go on to become socially excluded adults. As Lee (2001) argues, children are perceived as ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘human beings’, for we understand childhood largely as a preparation for adulthood.

In the United Kingdom, the term is used to refer to people between 16 and 24 who are no longer in compulsory schooling and yet have not taken on employment, further education or training schemes such as apprenticeships. Even so, the term is not always consistently applied or interpreted. It has been argued that NEET is not a useful categorization as it is ill-defined, making international comparisons difficult and enabling governments to adjust the inclusion criteria to their specific needs (Furlong, 2006). Nonetheless, this grouping includes many of those vulnerable persons who are the concern of social welfare and social service professionals and a greater understanding of the factors that promote risk of NEET will enable those professionals to develop targeted interventions. Such interventions might need to be at community level (policy) or at an individual level (welfare) or both.

The risk of becoming NEET is linked in the literature to educational achievement and socio-economic status, and is differentiated by gender. This article examines the risk factors that have been identified as contributing towards NEET status in young people and applies these to the specific demographics of Fenland, an isolated rural area in the east of England, offering an overview of the background and circumstances of young people and their families in that district which might be linked to the development of NEET status. In doing so, it explores the idea that these risk factors may constitute what Young (2007) terms ‘systematic structural exclusion’, meaning that normative expectations of the transition to successful adulthood can be almost impossible to realize for some groups. The impact of this may be particularly acute for people within an area of rural deprivation which is surrounded by considerable affluence.

Risk factors for becoming NEET

There are a number of routes to becoming NEET, which on an individual level may be very complex. However, overall the two key ways in which young people can become NEET are that they have poor educational achievement or come from a lower socio-economic status. These broad categories can be related to a number of disparate risk factors.

Poor educational achievement is highlighted in the literature as strongly associated with NEET status as it limits young people’s abilities and opportunities to enter further training or be seen as appropriately qualified for employment. An analysis of the UK 1970 birth cohort found that young people with no qualifications were six times more likely to become NEET than those with qualifications (Bynner and Parsons, 2002), and being NEET is strongly aligned with educational deficits (Furlong, 2006; Raffe, 2003). The reasons for low achievement may be varied.

Young people may be withdrawn from school by their families, perhaps to help as carers for another family member with disabilities (Becker, 2007), or in developing countries to help with domestic duties (mainly girls) or to help on the family farm (mainly boys) (Mukherjee, 2012). Becker (2007) examines the role of young caregivers in Australia, UK, USA and sub-Saharan Africa, finding that young carers have much in common irrespective of where they live or how developed their national welfare system is.

Other factors which can be linked to poor educational attainment have been explored, including negative school experiences, lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, and persistent truancy, although the causes of truancy have not been significantly researched (Furlong, 2006; Payne, 2000; Raffe, 2003; Sachdev et al., 2006). Consistent links have been made between poor educational achievement and negative behaviours or emotional difficulties in children. Whilst the general consensus is that behavioural difficulties in childhood will impact significantly on the academic achievement of young people, a closer look at the research indicates that it is only behavioural difficulties in combination with poor IQ and attention difficulties that are significant in poor achievement (Breslau et al., 2009; Fergusson and Lynskey, 1998). It is the combination of factors impacting on the young person's well-being that predicts the likelihood of them becoming NEET.

A link between anti-social behaviours of boys and poor psychosocial outcomes in adulthood, with poor prospects and performance as adults, has been established. Boys who showed only one antisocial problem behaviour between the ages of 5 to 18 were most likely to be college-educated in contrast to those who were most violent in adolescence, with poor work histories leading to low unskilled jobs as adults (Moffit et al., 2002).

Links between poor mental health and educational attainment have been studied in the UK, Australia and the USA, finding that adolescents with depression are at increased risk of school failure, reduced likelihood of entering university or pursuing other forms of further education, and experience higher rates of unemployment and early parenthood. In other words, adolescent depression can lead to the combination of factors known to predict risk of becoming NEET. Contextual factors such as problematic social, familial and personal factors often combine with adolescent depression resulting in such outcomes (Fergusson and Woodward, 2002; Haas and Fosse, 2008; Rothon et al., 2009). NEET status is prevalent among those who have experienced difficulties in childhood with 70 percent of care leavers experiencing emotional difficulties and having no qualifications at all (Akister et al., 2010; Stein, 1994).

Understanding the reasons for poor educational attainment is key to addressing NEET and developing appropriate interventions (Haas and Fosse, 2008; Hallam and Castle, 2001; Luck, 2008). At present, poor educational attainment is identified as a risk factor (or even route) for NEET, but poor educational attainment, as shown above, may have its roots in poor mental or physical health, adverse childhood experiences or families with a lack of commitment to education. Policy initiatives focused solely on education provision and environments may not address the full context of NEETs, which will also include young people in 'out-of-home care' (Akister et al., 2010; Barham et al., 2009).

Lower socioeconomic status can be identified as the second key route to becoming NEET, although it cannot be entirely separated from low educational achievement as the two are often closely associated. Growing up in housing estates marked by poverty and lacking good schools are significant risk factors (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Raffe, 2003; Yates et al., 2010). Studying regional variations in NEET status, even though NEET numbers were less in the South East (5.6%) compared to the Humber and Yorkshire region (9.3%), the profile of NEETs reveals the same factors of low cost housing, large numbers of looked after children and poor transport links as well as poor educational performance (Sachdev et al., 2006). In Humberside and Yorkshire additional features are identified including higher proportions of young mothers, and large ethnic minority groups whose NEET numbers are higher than the average.

Individuals' low socio-economic status may be associated with many risk factors for becoming NEET, but it is important not to lose sight of the wider socio-economic context. Although a detailed analysis of changes to the labour market is beyond the scope of this article, the shift from manufacturing to the service sector alongside the decline in demand for lower skilled labour have all been cited as reasons that young people may experience reduced employment (Barham et al., 2009). Within the current climate of recession, young people will have many competitors for

opportunities. This position may be particularly acute in rural areas, where pockets of deprivation have been identified as existing. Farmer et al. (2001) note that research has often concentrated on urban poverty and its associated problems whilst rural deprivation has remained hidden. However, whilst there will always be multiple forms and definitions of rurality, common disadvantages include uneven access to services, poor public transport, the expense associated with running a private car as a necessity rather than a luxury, restricted employment opportunities and lack of choice and information.

Part of the problem appears to be where there is a mismatch of expectations about what employment a young person would like to achieve and what would be required to meet that goal. Yates et al. (2010) found the relationship between early occupational aspirations and educational achievements is linked with NEET status, with 40 percent of their cohort holding occupational aspirations which exceeded their educational achievements. Coming from a low socio-economic background increased the risk of NEET for young men with misaligned aspirations by 90 percent. In this context poor transport links add to the mismatch between aspirations and opportunity.

There are also marked differences in the reasons for NEET status between males and females. For males the risk lies in growing up in low cost, city housing estates but for females it is residing in families where there is little educational commitment (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). Additionally, teen pregnancies and motherhood are significant for NEET status in females, who are likely remain NEET longer than males (Payne, 2000; Robson and Team, 2008).

Additionally, Sachdev et al. (2006) identify a range of other factors linked to becoming NEET, some of which are not mentioned in other sources, drawing attention to the impact of:

- Discrimination;
- Young people not seeing the benefits of being EET (In Employment, Education or Training);
- Lack of family support;
- Lack of information on various professions.

Linking these factors together, a picture begins to emerge of dissonance between aspirations for employment, and the support and steps needed to achieve these aspirations. Whilst employment is portrayed as the passport to inclusion, obtainable by all who work hard enough, in practice there are groups who are most at risk of what Young (2007) refers to as 'systematic structural exclusion'. For them, this tension between the possibilities which are meant to be available and the realities of the restricted opportunities on offer may lead to tension and insecurity. Those who are not included become 'othered'. This can be seen in the striking label of NEET, which defines people by what they are not rather than who they are. The characteristics of those who comprise this group are discussed next.

Characteristics and duration of time young people are NEET in England

The figures in Table 1 are taken from a longitudinal study of young people in England in 2010 (DoE, 2010) and suggest factors that influence the length of time that young people may remain as NEET. A breakdown by ethnic origin indicates that Pakistani and White British young people are more likely to be NEET for longer than 12 months. Conversely, for Indian and Black African young people, only a small percentage is likely to be NEET for long periods of time, although differences between ethnic groups overall are low.

Parental occupation and educational achievements can be used to predict the likelihood of becoming NEET, with young people whose parents have qualifications above A-level, and occupations reflecting this, being much less likely to become NEET. For example, 19 percent of the children of

Table 1. Length of time in NEET by characteristics.

	Weighted base	0 months NEET (%)	1 to 12 months NEET (%)	Greater than 12 months NEET (%)
Gender				
Male	7521	66	25	9
Female	7192	73	20	8
Ethnic origin				
White	12,558	69	23	9
Indian	350	79	19	2
Pakistani	354	67	23	10
Bangladeshi	149	66	26	8
Other Asian	178	79	18	*
Black African	262	83	15	2
Black Caribbean	214	69	23	8
Parental occupation				
Higher professional	1006	79	19	2
Lower supervisory	1170	67	23	10
Routine	2479	59	27	14
Other/not classified	1706	54	25	21
Parental qualifications				
Degree	3220	76	22	2
At least 1 A Level	3187	75	20	5
Below A Level/not sure	8297	64	24	12
Free school meals Year 11				
No	11,899	72	22	7
Yes	1685	51	29	20
Year 11 GCSE qualifications				
8+ A*-C	6847	82	17	1
5-7 A*-C	2065	72	23	4
1-4 A*-C	2998	64	28	9
5+ D-G	1541	50	32	18
1-4 D-G	711	31	30	39
None reported	543	27	28	45
Truancy Year 11				
Persistent truancy	544	38	29	33
Occasional truancy	3640	59	30	11
No truancy	9874	76	20	5
Ever been excluded by Year 11				
Permanently excluded	156	24	35	40
Not excluded	12941	72	21	6

Source: Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (2010) Waves 4, 5 and 6 and Youth Cohort Study Cohort 13, sweeps 1, 2 and 3 (DfE, 2010).

parents classified as in higher professional occupations are NEET for between 1 and 12 months, falling to only 2 percent remaining NEET for longer than 12 months. For children of parents in 'routine' occupations, these figures are 27 percent and 14 percent, respectively (see Table 1). This may suggest that these parents are supportive of educational goals or intellectual capacity (or both).

The link between coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and being NEET is reflected in the outcomes for those young people who received free school meals: 29 percent became NEET for a period of between 1 and 12 months (with 20% remaining NEET for longer than 12 months), contrasted with only 22 percent and 7 percent respectively of those who did not receive free school meals (see Table 1). As a protective factor, those with high attainment at GCSE were highly unlikely to enter NEET status and for those that did enter NEET status, the large majority remained NEET for less than 12 months. This might be explained by what we know about periods of gap years before entering full-time higher education. Conversely, those with very low grades attaining only 1–4 GCSE's Grades D–G were more likely than those with higher grades to remain NEET for more than 12 months. Persistent truancy and permanent exclusion also predict future NEET status (see Table 1).

Additionally to the qualifications that promote employability of young people, their attitudes to employment will also determine their status. *The Labour Force Survey* undertaken in 2008 examined the attitudes of young people to work (Barham et al., 2009). In women aged 16–24, 72 percent of economically inactive women gave their reason for this as looking after the family or home. For men, 57 percent of young people gave their reason for economic inactivity as other. Whilst 'other' is not defined, this suggests that clearly different factors support men and women in their status of NEET. Across the range of ages (16–24), 95 percent of those in education or training felt they would definitely work in the future, compared to those who were not in education or training, whereas only 65 percent felt they definitely would work in the future, expressing a lack of confidence in their ability to gain employment. Interestingly, the survey identified a subgroup, who actually have no intention of working: 5% of young people in Fenland, ages 18–24, who were not in education or training, stated that they definitely would not work in the future, whereas only 1% of those who were in education or training said they definitely would not work in future.

Fenland: Demographics related to risks for NEET

Using survey and census data the next part of this article explores the risk factors for NEET as applied to an area of rural deprivation in the UK. Fenland is a rural district in north-east Cambridgeshire, with a population of 83,519 (Office for National Statistics, 2001) who are predominantly White British (96.87% were White British, compared to the whole of England, where only 87.5% were White British). Whilst Cambridgeshire is identified as a relatively affluent area, there are three areas in Cambridgeshire that fall within the most 10% deprived areas in England and all of these are in Fenland. Fenland is Cambridgeshire's most deprived district (ranking as the 94th most deprived local authority out of 326 nationally) and is in stark contrast to other districts within the county. The Fens, also known as the Fenland(s), are a naturally marshy region in eastern England. Most of the fens were drained several centuries ago, resulting in a flat, damp, low-lying agricultural region. The major settlements in the region lie on the edges of Fenland having with modern rail and road transport links. Thus, while located near to areas of affluence, Fenland is relatively isolated, with poor transport, and it is difficult to access opportunities for education or employment in the surrounding areas. There is a dissonance between aspirations which are developed through access to modern communication and the realities offered in the built environment.

The Office for National Statistics was the source for the majority of data presented here, including health and labour market statistics and key demographics. Information on lifestyle and health for Fenland were explored through the Association of National Health Observatories webpages and labour market statistics searched for on NOMIS (Official Labour Market Statistics). Information found in the Health Profile for Fenland, Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, was linked to the English Indices of Deprivation. Additionally, Fenland District Council's website as well as

Table 2. Economic activity.

	Fenland	Cambridgeshire	England
Population	91,900	616,300	60,462,600
Working age population	56,100 (61%)	65%	64%
Economically active	42,600 (71%)	79%	76%
Economically inactive	16,500 (28%)	20%	23%
Not wanting a job	12,200 (21%)	16%	18%
Gross weekly pay (£)	440.60	547.80	501.80

Source: NOMIS (2010).

Cambridgeshire County Council's website were used to source specific publications in relation to key data.

Income and employment in Fenland

Levels of income deprivation can be seen by comparing a cluster of data from Fenland with the rest of Cambridgeshire and England. In particular, the type of jobs held and the income of households are relevant here.

Data taken from the Office of National Statistics for 2010 (Table 2) demonstrate the low levels of income of those in Fenland compared to nearby areas in Cambridgeshire. For Cambridgeshire as a whole, gross weekly income figures of £547.80 are higher than the national average of £501.80. For Fenland however, they are comparatively low at £440.60 (NOMIS, 2010).

Of the working age population in Fenland, 28 percent are economically inactive compared to only 20 percent over the whole of Cambridgeshire and 23 percent nationally. The fact that 21 percent of working age individuals in Fenland stated that they do not want a job might help explain this figure to some degree, reflecting a higher proportion of the population than in Cambridgeshire (16%) and nationally (18%). Considering that Cambridgeshire itself is an area of relative affluence, the fact that the figures for Fenland for economic inactivity are higher than the national average indicates that this is a significant problem for Fenland.

The proportion of families receiving means tested benefits is also relatively high in Fenland at 19.8 percent compared to only 10.9 percent in East Cambridgeshire and 8 percent in South Cambridgeshire (DoH, 2011). Whilst the national average is 20.9 percent, these comparisons do show that in a generally affluent county, income deprivation levels are proportionately high in Fenland.

Health, deprivation and disability in Fenland

The Department of Health's profile on Fenland and Cambridgeshire (2011) on its inhabitants provides some significant information on the health and well-being of people in Fenland:

- educational achievement is very low, with 45 percent achieving Key Stage 4 as compared to the national average of 55 percent;
- long-term unemployment is high at 7.4 per 1000 as compared to the national average of 6.2 and only 3.2 in South Cambridgeshire;
- there is high relative poverty and violent crime at 14.5 per 1000 as compared to 6.4 in South Cambridgeshire.

Table 3. Health profile for Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, South Cambridgeshire and England, 2011.

	Fenland	East Cambs	South Cambs	England
GSCE achievement (% achieving Key Stage 4)	45.6	60.4	68.8	55.3
Long-term unemployment (rate per 1000 population)	7.4	3.2	2.3	6.2
Proportion of children in poverty (% of families receiving mean-tested benefits and low income)	19.8	10.9	8	20.9
Violent crime (per 1000 population)	14.2	7.4	6.4	15.8
Obese children (% of children in Year 6)	19.7	17.3	13.5	18.7
Teenage pregnancy (under 18 conception rate per 1000 females age 15–17)	36.7	20.1	20.5	40.2
Physically active adults (% age 16+)	9.1	10.0	12.3	11.5
Hospital stays for self harm (rate per 100,000 population)	232.7	147.8	240.6	198.3
Hospital stays for alcohol related harm (rate per 100,000 population)	2026	1449	1607	1743
Drug misuse (estimated number of drug users of crack or opiates age 15–64 per 1000 resident population)	8.9	4.5	1.9	9.4

Source: DfE (2011).

Specific issues within this overall picture include childhood obesity, teenage pregnancy and drug and alcohol abuse. Childhood obesity appears to be a significant issue in Fenland with 20 percent of children in Fenland being obese, while in South Cambridgeshire, this is only at 13 percent (see Table 3). Other data taken from The National Child Measurement programme in 2008/09 showed that the highest rates of childhood obesity in Cambridgeshire were in Fenland both on entry to school at age 4 years (9%) and at age 11 (20%) compared to the lowest rates in South Cambridgeshire at age 4 (7%) and at age 11 (13%).

The incidence of teenage pregnancy in Fenland is considerably higher in Fenland compared to both East and South Cambridgeshire. Per 1000 females aged 15–17, the teenage pregnancy rate is 36.7 in Fenland compared to only 20.1 in East Cambridgeshire and 20.5 in South Cambridgeshire.

Levels of alcohol and illegal drug use in Fenland also seems to be problematic: hospital stays for alcohol related harm are at 20 per 1000 population compared to only 14 in East Cambridgeshire, 16 in South Cambridgeshire and 17 in England. Additionally, the number of individuals abusing drugs aged 15–64 is recorded at 8.9 per 1000 in Fenland but only 1.9 in South Cambridgeshire and 4.5 in East Cambridgeshire. Drug and alcohol misuse is not only a concern for health providers but may lead to involvement of social welfare services in relation to the wellbeing of those individuals, including their capacity to care for their own children, and in the case of young people prevention of becoming NEET.

From what we know about the risk factors of becoming NEET and its links with low socio-economic backgrounds, the above data regarding Fenland offer some explanation for the high NEET figures in this region. What we see is a picture of young people who may be disadvantaged by a range of personal circumstances who are also denied opportunities in a region which experiences deprivation.

Fenland and risks associated with being NEET

Taking what we have learned about NEETs and risk factors from the literature and the above data, comparisons with Fenland data can be made to understand NEET figures in that district. Table 4 shows NEET numbers across Cambridgeshire and England from 2007 to 2009. Although NEET

Table 4. GCSE attainment, teenage conceptions and NEET in Fenland.

District	People Not in Education, Employment or Training (%) ^a			Pupils achieving 5+ A*–C at GCSE including English and Maths (%) ^b	Conceptions in females aged under 18 years, 2006–2008 ^c	
	2007	2008	2009		Average number of U18 conceptions per year	Rate per 1000
Cambridge City	7.3	7.4	7.0	54.9	52	28.6
East Cambridgeshire	5.1	4.5	4.7	56.0	30	20.7
Fenland	8.1	7.7	7.5	41.2	63	38.0
Huntingdonshire	5.2	4.5	5.5	54.0	87	27.0
South Cambridgeshire	2.7	2.9	3.6	68.7	45	17.8
Cambridgeshire	5.0	5.2	5.4	56.2	276	26.0
England	6.7	6.7	—	50.9	39,429	40.9

Sources: ^aConnexions (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010); ^bDCSF (2009) in SFR 01/2010, SFR 34/2009 and SFR 27/2009; ^cLongitudinal Study of Young People in England (2010) Waves 4, 5 and 6 and Youth Cohort Study Cohort 13, sweeps 1, 2 and 3 (DfE, 2010).

rates for Fenland have decreased from 2007 to 2009 and rates for Cambridgeshire overall have increased, NEET numbers in Fenland still remain higher than anywhere else in Cambridgeshire, and above the national average for England.

Poor educational attainment has been linked to NEET status throughout the literature and in data gathered from the Longitudinal Study of Young People discussed above. Educational attainment at GCSE level is low in Fenland compared to the rest of the region and to England as a whole. Only 41.2 percent of young people in Fenland attained 5 or more GCSE's Grades A*–C in Fenland compared to 54% in Huntingdonshire which is very close geographically to Fenland. Even in England as a whole where there are consistent areas of deprivation, GCSE attainment is higher, at 50.9% (see Table 4).

Another indicator for NEET is teenage pregnancies. Whilst the rates for teenage pregnancy in Fenland are just below the national average, they are noticeably higher than the rates found in the rest of the county. Even compared to Huntingdonshire and in Cambridge City, where there are areas of deprivation, rates per 1000 are higher in Fenland. This will contribute to the prevalence of NEET numbers among young women in Fenland (see Table 4).

Truancy is also associated with NEET status (see Table 1) and again, in Fenland unauthorized and persistent absences in both primary and secondary school are higher in Fenland than in South Cambridgeshire and nationally. For secondary schools, the rate of persistent absentees in Fenland is at 6.3 percent and only 3.6 percent in South Cambridgeshire (compared with 4.2% in England). The rate is also significantly higher in Fenland for primary school aged children.

Finally, the occupational breakdown of the working age population in Fenland and Cambridgeshire is relevant. Those with routine occupations are more likely than those in managerial or professional positions to have children who are NEET (see Table 1). In comparison to Cambridgeshire (22%) and England (14%), Fenland has a low percentage in managerial/professional positions (9%) and higher numbers in routine occupations (15%).

From the statistics available Fenland is over-represented in the factors aligned with NEET status: poor educational outcomes; high truancy; low socio-economic status; poor health indicators, including drug and alcohol problems; and fewer people employed in managerial or professional positions.

Discussion

Collectively, the literature identifies multiple risks that lead to NEET status and different prevalence of NEET relating to gender and location. Poor educational attainment and low socio-economic status are key factors. Underpinning poor educational attainment are factors such as truancy, limited or misaligned aspirations and poor mental health, meaning that young people do not engage with educational opportunities. A cycle of poor educational attainment predicting less skilled occupations and restricted opportunities to improve well-being is set up. However, interventions targeted at educational opportunities alone will have limited success since poor educational attainment results from a complex interaction of factors. In addition, reinforcing a narrative of cultural inclusion for all via education and work may only serve to strengthen the alienation of those who find themselves unable to translate these aspirations into reality. Whilst deprivation can be experienced in many areas, this dissonance between expectations and actual opportunities may be more pronounced for those whose deprivation exists relative to a largely affluent population at close quarters. Cambridge and Peterborough are thriving cities adjacent to Fenland, with employment opportunities in high technology industries, excellent transport links (road and rail) and are upheld as exemplars of development potential for the future. The edge of fen villages are benefitting from this but the gap in housing and transport costs for those located over 15 miles away from these major centres is growing. These structural or built environment problems thread through the whole system and it is difficult to recruit doctors, teachers and other professionals to work in Fenland.

In spite of the existence of predictable risk factors for becoming NEET, their interaction is complex. Although emotional and behavioural difficulties can be identified in primary age children, there appears to be no systematic basis for the identification of younger children who might be at risk of becoming NEET. Interventions aimed at this age group are limited (Akister and Mutty, 2012). The main focus of thinking and interventions about NEETs is aimed at adolescents, and primarily concerned with young people who present consistent difficult and anti-social behaviours (Bentley and Gurusurthy, 1999; Bynner et al., 2004; Borduin et al., 1995). The presence of poor mental health in children and young people is disconnected from discourses on NEET status, although it is highly pertinent to factors such as educational attainment which appears to be key to becoming NEET. As Yates et al. (2010) point out, the label of NEET conflates different sub-groups of young people; this may present a misleading homogeneity.

Patterns have been found, in the demographic data, between the lives of young people and their families in Fenland and the identified risks for becoming NEET generally. As an area of deprivation, Fenland is an area characterized by factors affecting the lives of young people that are known to increase the risk of becoming NEET as young adults. Rural deprivation is compounded by lack of transport, trapping people in impoverished environments. Studies in developing countries have found NEET to be higher in rural areas: 'The incidence of NEET is much higher in rural areas compared to the urban areas, amongst smaller children rather than older children and amongst girls compared to boys' (Mukherjee, 2012: 3).

Further longitudinal studies are required in order to clarify current research and also to investigate what interventions are likely to work with young people at risk of becoming NEET and whether these children can be identified at an earlier age. If the reasons for NEET lie in the family, including the family withdrawing them from education, for example to act as carers in the family, the intervention required to improve their attendance at school will be very different to those who are struggling with the school environment and interpersonal issues. The interface between mental health or well-being in children and young people and the impact this has on educational attainment needs further research.

What role can social work play in improving outcomes for young people in Fenland or similar rural areas?

Social workers will be involved with many of the young people who are failing in education. The Cambridgeshire Children's Trust have identified problems with school attendance and are concerned to support children who have poor attendance at primary school through the transition to secondary education at the age of 11 years. Significant literature on overall attendance problems at this age is sparse, however there is an extensive body of evidence (Furlong, 2006) that links truancy to poor educational achievement and the risk of becoming NEET. Furthermore, in a small study in Fenland, children with attendance problems were also identified as having problems with self-esteem, anxiety and learning needs (Akister and Mutty, 2012). The link between emotional problems and NEETs, particularly for children in 'out-of-home' care or with social work involvement is established (Akister et al., 2010). The role for social work lies in a multiagency approach that focuses on the mental well-being of the individuals as well as their engagement with education. Lack of attendance at school triggers social welfare involvement and is known to be costly to social welfare services.

Families known to social work services will include those where there are concerns relating to drug and alcohol misuse. Where these concern parental substance misuse there is a role for parenting programmes and intervention for the children's welfare. If the substance misuse is by the young person, there will be a role for a multiagency approach including the social worker, the school and health services, and often concerns about the young person being homeless. The social work role may help the young person re-engage and prevent their becoming NEET.

Social work interventions focused on improving an individual's social engagement and employability might well prove effective with certain service users, however, social work interventions alone cannot be expected to adequately compensate for a lack of investment in the region in terms of transport and other key aspects of the infrastructure and the built environment.

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