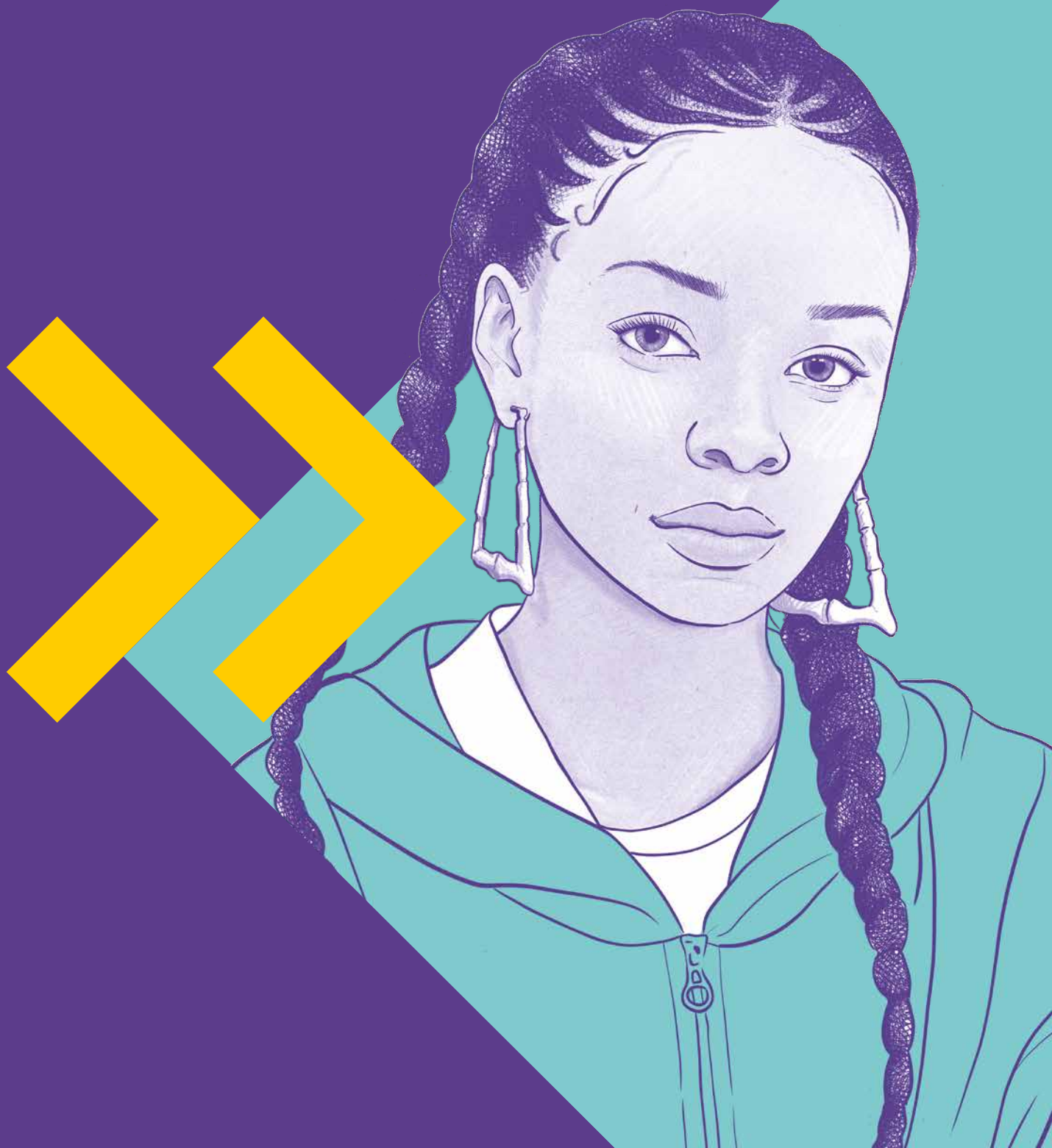




The Truth About Youth:
The Challenges and
Aspirations of Young People



About Nacro

We believe that everyone deserves a good education, a safe and secure place to live, the right to be heard, and the chance to start again when things go wrong, with support from someone on their side. We provide practical help and personalised support through our education, housing, justice, and health and wellbeing services. We work alongside people to help them build independence and to move forward to a positive future.

Nacro Education: We are one of the country's largest independent further education providers. We work with almost 2,000 students each year who are typically faced with multiple complex challenges and barriers to education. They have often experienced a broken or interrupted academic journey. We support our students to realise their potential and to gain the skills, knowledge, and experience they need to progress confidently onto their next steps. This could be going into further education, training, or work.

Our smaller class sizes, skilled and experienced tutors, practical workshops, and one to one support make us stand apart. We work in partnership with the communities in which our centres are based. We collaborate with leading industry experts and local businesses to ensure our courses provide the teaching, skills and learning opportunities our students need for the future.

Nacro NEST (Nacro Education Support and Transition): Our NEST service provides supported housing for young people, including care leavers, who would otherwise be homeless or at risk of homelessness. We tailor our housing and support to each young person's needs and provide a range of accommodation options from high need to move-on. We run NEST services in London and across Essex and Lincolnshire.

Nacro>
Education



About this report

The young people's views in this report were drawn from an online survey and a series of focus groups that were conducted across Nacro Education centres and our young people's supported housing services. We received over 240 survey responses from young people aged 14-21, which contained questions across a broad range of areas, including life satisfaction, aspirations for the future, and their views on crime and politics.

The majority of young people we surveyed and spoke to were from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Sixty percent of the young people that responded told us they received free school meals during their time at school. Additionally, of the young people who attend a Nacro Education Centre:

- **80%** are considered socially disadvantaged
- **55%** have a special educational need or disability (SEND)
- **30%** have an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP).

The survey was completed by 129 young men (54%) and 91 young women (38%). A small number of people preferred not to answer this question (5%) and 3% of people who responded identified as non-binary. As the number of people that identified as non-binary is small, their results are represented in the larger survey results but it isn't statistically valid to use these statistics alone.

To complement the survey, we also commissioned a media review from We Are Social, who carried out a discourse analysis of traditional news outlets' reporting on young people from August 2023 to August 2024. The analysis covered 10 national media outlets and five local news outlets to give a snapshot across the mainstream news. They analysed 153 articles.

Summary: Unheard and Unseen

This report is grounded in the voices and experiences of young people who Nacro support, offering an authentic perspective on their aspirations for the future and the challenges they and other young people like them face.

It is clear from many of the responses that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds feel unheard and unseen.

The young people we surveyed are amongst some of the most excluded in society, and the least likely to be heard by those in power. Their views and experiences reflect this. But there is also hope in what they tell us. They are confident they will find a career they love, and they know hard work and education are key to getting there but it is the responsibility of all of us to help them achieve their ambitions and to amplify their voices.

Young people should play a vital role in shaping our nation's ambitions and future. Their energy and fresh perspectives are key to creating a better future. Whether it's tackling the climate crisis, creating more quality jobs, improving public services, ensuring safer communities, or building a fairer society, young voices are essential. They're the ones who'll live with the long-term impacts of today's decisions, which is why the views that have been shared in this report are so important.

Sadly, 4.3 million children are growing up in poverty in the UK¹ and it is estimated that more than one in ten (12%) of all 16-to-24 year olds in the UK were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in January to March 2024.² Almost 140,000 children are recorded as being homeless in England.³ Social disadvantage creates barriers to opportunity, and breaking down these barriers is essential to realising the ambitions and potential of young people.

Despite all this, we know from our work with young people how strong and resilient they can be. We know they are ambitious and want to achieve. And we see time and again how, against the odds, young people who have faced significant disadvantage can overcome barriers, especially with the right support in place. We heard in our research that young people understand the value and importance of hard work, and that they are often unselfish, worrying about their families and those close to them. This is contrary to many of the messages we hear about young people, including those in the media, which too often portray young people as lazy, unprofessional or a problem to solve.

1 <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/poverty-facts-and-figures>

2 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7455/documents/78054/default/>

3 https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/at_least_309000_people_homeless_in_england_today

It is encouraging to note that more than half of young people (57%) who responded were confident about securing a job or career that they love. However, one in seven (15%) weren't, and only one in five young people (20%) felt their generation would have a better life than previous generations. This is perhaps unsurprising as this generation of young people have only known austerity, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. We need to ensure that young people receive the support and guidance they need to flourish and reach their full potential.

Our results found high levels of loneliness amongst young people we surveyed and concerning levels of low self-esteem, particularly amongst young women. Young people also shared experiences of being victims of crime with almost a quarter of young women (24%) saying they had been victims, and almost 1 in 5 young men (18%). They also told us they felt they had to adapt how they went about their daily lives, such as staying in the house more because they do not feel safe in their local area. Only a third of young people told us they trusted the police, and trust was lower amongst young women. We must ensure that young people have places to go where they feel safe, something to do, and someone by their side to support and advocate alongside them.

Decisions taken by politicians are clearly critical to tackling many of the issues in this report, yet our survey revealed a high level of disengagement from politics with only a quarter of young people (24%) saying they would vote in the next election. We must ensure that all young people are seen and heard.

Young people's views and experiences matter. Listening to and involving young people in decisions which affect them is vital. At Nacro, we will use these findings to shape and develop the support we offer to make sure we reflect, adapt and continuously improve to meet the needs of the young people we support. We will also use them to help amplify the voices of young people and work to bring them closer to the decision-makers who need to hear from and engage with young people.



What the media says about young people

The media in the UK has a significant influence on society's opinion of and attitude towards young people.⁴ The relationship is complex, what the press says both influences and reflects public attitudes. To understand how the media portray young people we commissioned a media review of articles about young people over the past year in mainstream media outlets. We found that media coverage of young people is twice as likely to be negative (28%) than positive (14%), with 58% neutral in tone. Young people were talked about but rarely quoted or interviewed. Only 21% of articles reviewed directly included a young person's perspective.

The research found common themes in the way young people are portrayed in the media. In order of frequency they are:



Much of the framing used in the media about young people directly contradicts what young people themselves told us about their lives.

By presenting more negative messages about young people than positive, and failing to include their voices, the media contributes to a commonly held view that young people are a problem which needs to be fixed. This distracts from the complex realities of their lives, influencing not just society's view of young people but also how many young people view themselves.

⁴ Mason, G 2011, The representation of young people in the media, Youth Justice, London

What young people told us

The future is unsettled

We have come to expect that each generation will have a better life than previous generations. But the young people we spoke to were not so positive about the prospects for their own generation.

- Only 1 in 5 (**20%**) thought that they would have a better life than the previous one. 2 in 5 (**38%**) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would have a better life and a further 2 in 5 (**40%**) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- Only 3 in 10 (**30%**) told us they are often or always hopeful for the future. And a worrying 1 in 10 (**10%**) said they are hardly ever or never hopeful for the future.

Hard work is important

The young people who took part in the survey felt hard work was important to achieving success at work and reported that enjoyment and stability were more important in a job than money or status.

More than half of young people (**57%**) who responded to our survey felt confident of securing a job or career that they love. However, 1 in 7 (**15%**) did not feel confident about this.

When asked what was important to achieving success at work, they responded:

- hard work (**94%**) and having an education (**67%**) were more important to achieving success at work than having money (**62%**) and connections/who you know (**54%**).

When asked what they think is important about a job, they responded:

- enjoyment (**88%**) stability (**85%**) and sense of purpose (**77%**) which all scored higher than money (**76%**) and status (**60%**).

“It’s becoming harder and harder for young people to work, especially if you don’t have qualifications. Young people need to be given a boost to create a decent lives for themselves and their families.”

Nacro Education Student

Young people are lonely, with young women feeling lonelier

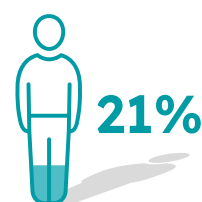
Loneliness and isolation were felt keenly by the young people we surveyed, especially young women, with young people also struggling with self-confidence. In 2023, NHS England's mental health of children and young people survey found that 12% of young people aged 17 to 22 years reported often or always feeling lonely.⁵ The results of our survey found much higher levels of loneliness amongst the young people who responded:

- More than a quarter of young people (27%) said they usually or always feel lonely. This was significantly higher amongst young women at 30% and was 21% amongst young men. 15% of young women and 4% of young men said they always feel lonely.

Women



Men



- A quarter of young people (24%) said they rarely or never feel good about themselves. This was 29% for young women and 16% for young men.



- 1 in 8 young people (13%) believe their friends do not care about them when times are hard. This rose to 18% amongst young women compared to 11% amongst young men.



⁵ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/part-2-sleep-loneliness-activities-and-health-behaviours#loneliness>

Life is harder for young women

Young women consistently reported more negative beliefs, experiences and feelings than the young men we surveyed. This was particularly pronounced in the responses around personal safety. A far higher proportion of young women reported staying at home after dark and avoiding certain areas in an effort to feel safer. They also felt less trust of the police than the young men. But this wasn't the only area where there was a significant difference in what young women reported. For example, a far higher proportion of young women told us they usually or always feel lonely and that they rarely or never feel good about themselves. This also coincided with more young women reporting spending more time on social media and less time taking part in activities in their local communities than young men. And a higher proportion of young women reported regularly worrying about family, money, relationships and health than young men. When it came to feeling listened to and understood by politicians, again a higher proportion of young women felt politicians never or rarely talk about things that matter to them, and that people who run the country never or rarely listen to them or people like them. It is clear that we need to do far more to respond to the concerns of young women and help them achieve their potential.

Few young people are taking part in organised leisure activities with many spending significant time on social media

Social media plays a significant role in young people's lives.

- Almost 2 in 5 young people told us they spend five hours or more per day on social media. This was higher for young women (**45%**) than young men (**33%**).



Young people told us that most of them never took part in activities out of school, college or work such as a club, playing sport, or going to the cinema.

- Over half of the young people (**55%**) who responded to our survey said there are opportunities in their area to take part in leisure activities in their free time. **16%** said that there aren't.
- Despite the availability of these activities a quarter of young people (**25%**) told us they never take part in activities outside college, work or where they live.

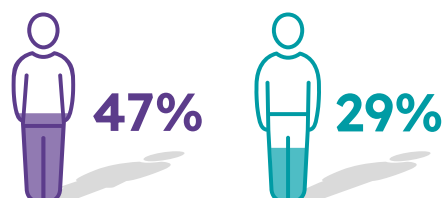
Young people are concerned about being a victim of crime, and this is higher amongst young women

Young women in particular reported being the victims of crime and believe crime has risen where they live.

- 1 in 5 young people (**22%**) told us they have been victims of crime. This rose to a quarter amongst young women (**24%**) compared to **18%** of young men.



- Almost half of young women (**47%**) think there is more crime in the area where they live compared to two or three years ago with almost **29%** of young men thinking this.



Sadly, the young people who responded to our survey feel the need to adapt how they went about their daily lives because of crime in their area. This was particularly the case for young women. For example:

- More than half (**54%**) of young women avoid some areas after dark, compared to **31%** of young men.



- More than half (**52%**) do not go out after dark, compared to **21%** of young men.



- **45%** stay at home more often, compared to **26%** of young men.



CASE STUDY: **BRUCE**

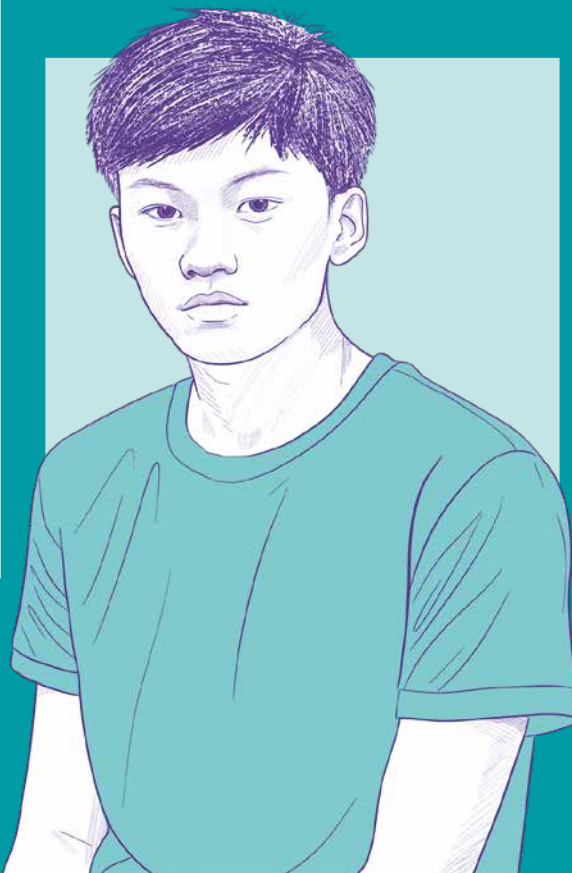
Bruce struggled at school and didn't feel that the teachers cared about him. They always assumed that he was misbehaving and he was sometimes removed from lessons for disruptive behaviour. He began to skip school and fell behind with his schoolwork. He was permanently excluded from school shortly before he was due to take his GCSEs, and he did not get any qualifications.

Bruce came to a Nacro Education Centre in order to catch up with his maths and English, and to study business studies at level 1. He is more settled and is committed to getting his qualifications, saying he feels respected by the tutors, is enjoying his lessons and works really well with the smaller class sizes. When Bruce was in mainstream school his attendance fell to as low as 20%, but he now has 100% attendance.

Bruce wants to own his own restaurant providing good quality and good value food. Bruce believes that hard work is important to help him to achieve his dreams, and he is trying to take all the right steps to make it a reality. He is taking

business studies so that he can understand as much as he can about running a business, and wants to get work experience in a restaurant so that he can learn as much as he can.

Bruce is concerned about crime especially when he is out with his family, as he is worried about their safety. He doesn't trust the police and has bought a stab vest which he wears sometimes when he feels particularly unsafe.



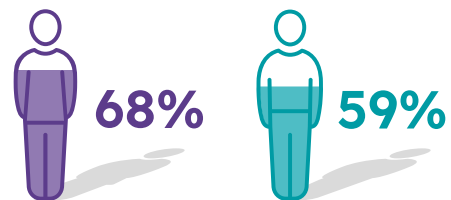
Confidence in the police

Only a third of young people (35%) told us they trusted the police. In our discussions, the young people we spoke to told us their distrust of the police is rooted in negative personal experiences and witnessing disproportionate use of stop and search powers, profiling and what they felt to be the excessive use of force by the police.

- Of the young people who answered the question, **35%** said they trust the police. A further **34%** told us they don't trust the police with **31%** indicating that they were unsure.

The survey also highlights a lower level of trust in the police amongst young women.

- A third of young women (**32%**) trust the police compared to **41%** of young men who responded. Two thirds of young women (**68%**) stated they either do not trust the police or are unsure as to whether they can, compared to **59%** of young men.



“They’re a waste of time and you might as well sort things out yourself because they don’t do anything. They can be prejudiced towards certain people because of what people wear.”

Female focus group participant

Young people are more likely to be the victims of crime, particularly more serious crime, than any other age group.⁶ It is clear from our survey results that there is not only much more to do to prevent young people becoming the victims of crime but also to ensure that they feel able to trust the police and feel safe in their local area.

⁶ <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/help-and-support/young-victims-crime/teachers-and-professionals/working-young-victims-crime/>

CASE STUDY: LEX

Lex was bullied at school and felt that she didn't fit in, and she would often behave badly to try and fit in. She was excluded on a couple of occasions and failed both her maths and English GCSEs.

Lex has young brothers and sisters and often cared for them as they were growing up. She has a really caring nature, and her experience of caring for her siblings means that she would now like to be a nursery teacher or a carer.

Lex is studying childcare with Nacro Education. She has done work experience in an elderly care home, and really enjoyed this opportunity. She says that the work is all about keeping people safe and bringing people joy. Lex knows that job satisfaction means knowing that you've done something good in your life, and this is much more important than how much money you earn.

Lex worries about the future and whether she will be able to get a job and create a life for herself.

She doesn't go out after dark as she does not feel safe. She thinks that the police and politicians need to make the streets safer for everyone, particularly young women, and that people must understand the importance of respecting others around them.



Family and money are the biggest worries

Worries were common amongst the young people we spoke to. The most common worries were about family and money. They told us:

- > **61%** of young people regularly worry about family
- > **58%** of young people regularly worry about money
- > **41%** of young people regularly worry about relationships
- > **41%** of young people regularly worry about health

The young women who completed the survey were more worried about all of these things than the young men:

- > **65%** of young women regularly worry about family, compared to **54%** of young men



- > **66%** of young women regularly worry about money, compared to **50%** of young men



- > **49%** of young women regularly worry about relationships, compared to **36%** of young men



- > **44%** of young women regularly worry about health, compared to **34%** of young men.

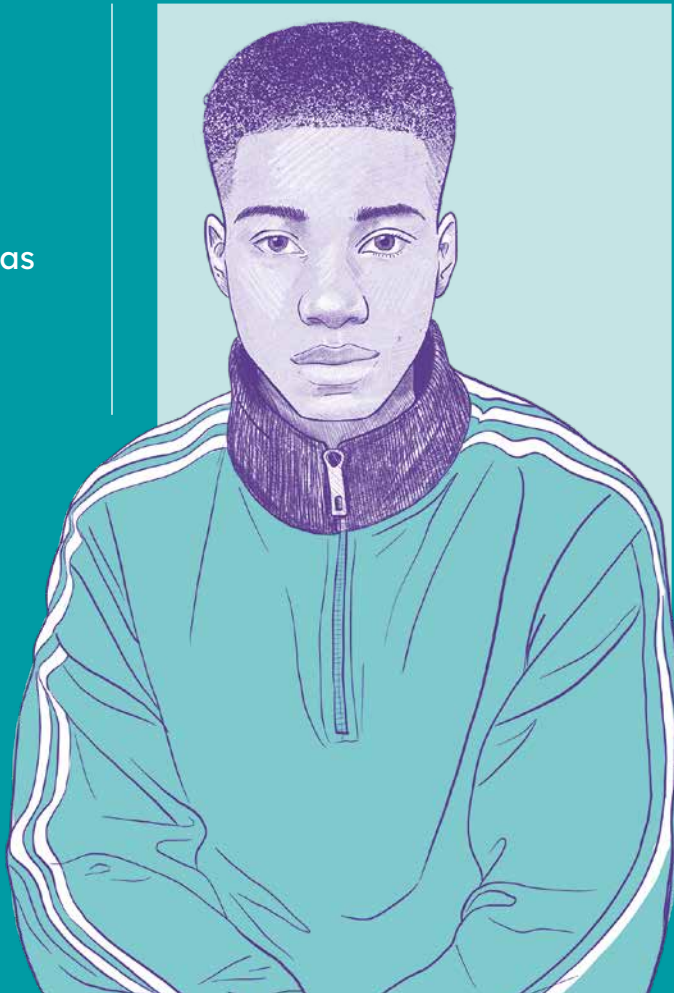


It is clear that the young people we spoke to are concerned about others, and our survey shows that they worry about their families more than they worry about themselves. It's clear this generation has the desire and potential to create better lives for those around them.

CASE STUDY: JOSH

Josh has type 1 diabetes and throughout his time in high school he was in and out of hospital, struggling with his health. This also affected his mental health and he felt like he didn't fit in at school, he was quiet and didn't enjoy going. He eventually left with two grade 3s at GCSE.

The doctors and nurses that helped Josh when he was ill, inspired him to pursue a career in healthcare. He wants to go on and help people who also have diabetes, so he can work with people like himself to get them back into daily life. He resat his GCSEs and achieved a grade 7 in English and a 5 in Maths. He also gained his Level 1 Health and Social Care.



“Voting is pointless. Nothing will change, they are all the same.”

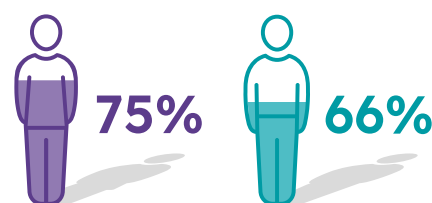
Focus group participant

Unheard and unseen: Young people often feel overlooked by politicians

Politics plays such an important role in shaping our futures and so engaging young people in democracy is important. But many of the young people that responded to our survey believe that politicians and political institutions are out of touch or unresponsive to the challenges they face. This is arguably why the young people we spoke to have a lack of interest in politics and a sense that their voices are not heard or valued.

➤ Less than a quarter of young people (**24%**) said they planned to vote in the last or any future election.⁷ A stark statistic. Many of the young people we spoke to felt there was little point in voting as they believe that nothing will change as a result.

➤ **71%** of young people felt that the people who run the country never or rarely listen to them or people living a similar life to them. This was higher amongst young women at **75%** and **66%** for young men.



➤ **70%** of young people told us that politicians never or rarely talk about things that matter to them. This was again higher amongst young women at **74%** and **64%** for young men.



These results suggest an even greater level of disengagement from politics for this group of young people compared to the broader population, as evidence showed that roughly half of 18–24-year-olds took part in the 2019 election,⁸ and a more recent estimate suggests that **37%** of people aged 18 to 24 voted in the 2024 general election.⁹

This level of political disengagement matters, and political parties need to rise to the challenge of listening and engaging young people. By connecting with young people, politicians can encourage engagement and empowerment, increased civic participation and policies that reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of the whole population. Young people bring fresh ideas and energy to the political landscape, making it more dynamic and forward-thinking.

⁷ The survey took place ahead of the 2024 General Election and therefore this question referred to that election as well as future elections.

⁸ Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 General Election - The British Election Study

⁹ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election>

The path ahead

These findings shine a spotlight on the realities for young people who access Nacro's services, and insight into the views and experiences of disadvantaged young people in our country. Unsettled futures and loneliness were a feature of the survey responses. The experiences of young women stood out in many areas and were particularly stark in relation to crime and distrust of the police, as well as loneliness and self-esteem.

Negative media coverage of young people contributes to young people's feelings of isolation and alienation. And the disconnect from politics means that too often these crucial voices are not being heard.

There is clearly much to do but there is also hope. We know from our work with young people how strong and resilient they can be. We know they are ambitious and want to achieve. And we see time and again how, against the odds, young people who have faced significant disadvantage can overcome barriers especially with the right support in place. But we all need to listen to their views and experiences.

At Nacro, we will use these findings to shape and develop the support we offer to make sure we reflect, adapt and continuously improve to meet the needs of the young people we support. We will also use them to help amplify the voices of young people and work to bring them closer to the decision-makers who need to hear from and engage with young people.



What needs to change

It is clear from what young people told us that they have the drive to contribute to society and achieve, and they know that hard work and education are key to this. But there is much to do if we are to fix the foundations and improve opportunities for young people to reach their potential and truly thrive. The Government's new National Youth Strategy aims to break down barriers to opportunity, and hear young people's views, which have historically been ignored in political debate. The Government must ensure the most disadvantaged young people are fully consulted, considered and engaged with the strategy.

1 >



Feeling safe is a key foundation because only when young people feel safe can they achieve their full potential.

- > The police must build trust amongst young people from all backgrounds. This should include proactive strategies to engage disadvantaged young people so they feel protected by the police and confident to turn to them. This should include a particular focus on supporting young women to feel safer in their local communities.
- > The police should also work closely with trusted adults of young people who have established relationships with them, such as youth workers. Alongside this they should consider their workforce development needs in order to improve their engagement with disadvantaged young people.

2 >



Young people need places to go where they feel safe, things to do, and someone by their side to talk to, support them and advocate alongside them.

We know from our work that when young people have a sense of belonging their communities are stronger.

- > The Government should invest in youth services and youth workers to rebuild the support structure around young people, particularly those most disadvantaged. These services must work for young people with different interests, including young women, and ensure access to sports, arts and creative activities.

- The Government's Young Futures Hubs Programme is a welcome step to increasing support in communities. To ensure these are locally owned and supported, they must be developed in close partnership with young people and local services that support them and who understand their needs.
- Our schools, colleges and other learning providers should be properly supported and resourced as places young people want to be, with opportunities to achieve and thrive, and to improve young people's life chances.

3 ➤ **Understanding the needs and experiences of all young people is critical.**

This report has highlighted significant differences between the experiences of young women and young men.

- All policy making and decisions should proactively use a gender, race and intersectional lens to identify where experiences are different and what steps can be taken as a result.

4 ➤ **We must tackle the significant disengagement with politics and democracy this report highlights.**

- Government, political parties and local decision makers must consider how to actively engage with young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and communities, and talk in ways that resonate with them.
- Young people from these communities must be consulted in the development of services and policy that affect them.

We have a shared responsibility to ensure that all young people feel, and are, heard and seen.



**We see your future,
whatever the past**

nacro.org.uk

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