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Talented, marginalised and out of work. Why?

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This first chapter of the **Employer's Guide** explains why **talented**, marginalised **young people** may not be employed or actively looking for work.

It draws on the latest evidence from psychology and social science to unpick some of the typical **experiences** that affect many young adults today. It illustrates the **challenges** they face and points to the **character** and **resilience** produced by this kind of lived experience.

Young adults in Britain categorised as '**NEET**' (Not in Employment, Education or Training) are frequently seen by employers and public services as hard to reach. But there is often very little insight as to why this might be true. Without **understanding** the reasons behind their apparent **disengagement**, attempts to support them into work and make the most of their talent often fail,¹ leaving us all worse off.

Understanding the data

- Young people aged 16–24 face the highest levels of unemployment in Britain. During the period July to September 2017, youth unemployment was 11.1%, compared to 4.3% for the rest of the working age population for whom unemployment has been decreasing.²
- The Office for National Statistics divides NEET young people into two categories: Economically Active, who have looked for work in the last 4 weeks through the Job Centre, and Economically Inactive, who haven't. As of September 2017, 62.1% of the 790,000 young people in Britain who are currently NEET are also economically inactive.³
- During the period July to September 2017, 264,000 young women were classified as NEET and economically inactive compared to 227,000 young men.⁴
- The number of young men who are economically inactive has risen fast over the last two years. The primary reason for young men being defined as NEET and Economically Inactive is due to health problems, in particular mental health issues.⁵
- In addition, many young people are simply classified as 'unknown'. Local authority data from 2016 shows the number of 'unknown' 16–18 year olds is as large as the NEET population in some areas, suggesting the overall problem could be much bigger than the statistics reported by the ONS.⁶

Understanding the experience of marginalised young people

“We must **look** at the lens through which we see the world, as well as the world we see, and **understand** that the lens itself shapes how we interpret the world.”

Stephen Covey
Educator, author, businessman

The lens through which a problem is viewed shapes people’s emotional response to it as well as the solution offered. One common societal lens used to understand unemployment is that young people (and their families) have a ‘skills or motivation deficit’.⁷ The answer is then that they simply need to ‘work harder’ and make some personal changes to get a job.

This is such a dominant story in our society that unemployment is often seen as the result of ‘personal failure’⁸ and the story of marginalisation and/or youth offending as one of ‘family dysfunction’.⁹ But in reality it merely illustrates the phenomenon of ‘fundamental attribution error’¹⁰, explaining our tendency to ascribe the behaviour of other people solely on the basis of individual internal qualities rather than their situation or context.

Explanations that narrowly focus on the individual (and their familial context) miss the wider structural, social, and multiple systemic and contextual factors that shape the lives of marginalised people, as well as the ways in which systemic disadvantage can accumulate and multiply.¹¹ Explanations at the individual level also tend to make invisible some of the unearned power and privilege of certain groups that can account for differences in occupational outcomes.¹²

The evidence presented in this chapter tries to make visible some of these other contexts and deepen our understanding of what life is really like for many young adults.

A better lens

To understand young unemployment, we need a framework that can represent the multiple interrelated factors that create, maintain and exacerbate it. Ecological systems theory¹³ views a person in relation to the wider context in which they live.

According to this approach, individuals develop in the context of a multi-layered system of relationships, from the widest systems, such as culture and the way society is organised through economic

and social policy, through to the more obvious and directly felt relationships, such as immediate family. Considering these different systems can also reveal hidden powers, privileges and resources.

Figure 1 illustrates the different systems and structures that affect an individual young adult. The arrows between the circles demonstrate the interactions over time and the complex relationships between these different systems.

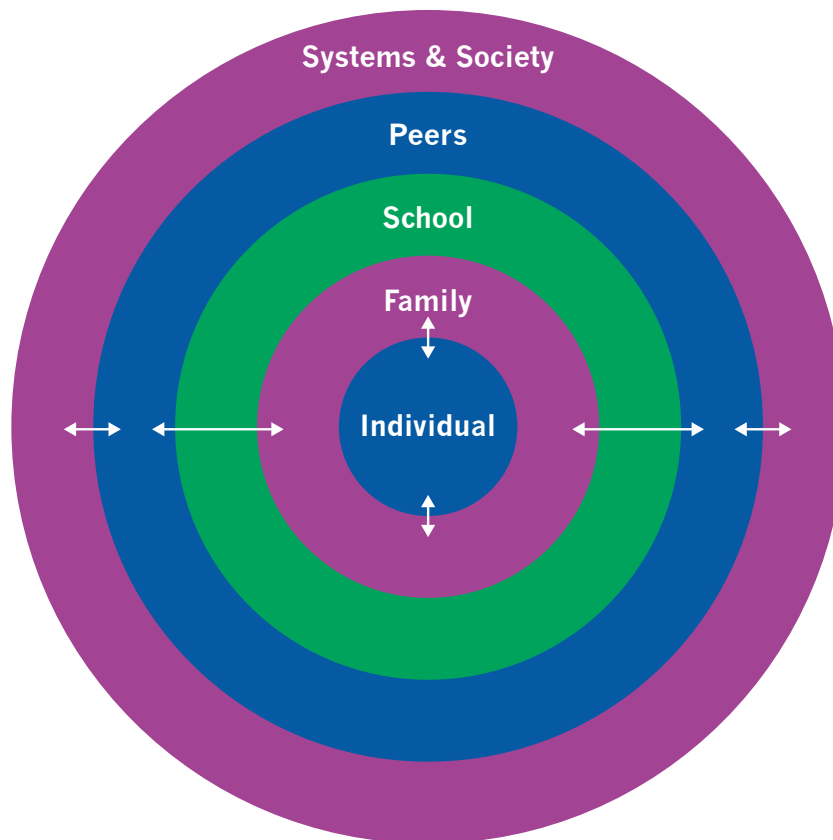


Figure 1: The ecology of a young person's life

The rest of this chapter applies this framework to the hypothetical story of a person called **Ty**, as a way of helping organisations understand the **talents, experience** and **behaviours** of young people who they might employ.

The individual

Ty is 19 years old. He loves to play football and is often out with friends. He is passionate about music and very well connected on his local estate.

Ty identifies as mixed heritage, his mother is of African heritage and his father is White British. He enjoys learning about both sides of his family. He is deeply protective over his mother, grandmother and younger brother. He and his mother laugh a lot together, sharing a sense of humour.

He is keen for his younger brother to gain qualifications, go to university and get a job. He realises his brother looks up to him, and with this in mind he has been thinking about how he can transform his own life.

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Family

Ty lives with his **Mum, Kea**, and his younger brother, **Ben**. They live together in a two bedroom local authority flat in inner city London. Ty shares a room with his brother. Most of Ty's extended family live outside of the UK. Ty's grandmother (Kea's mother) lives in a flat in a different area and they regularly spend time together.

Ty's father, Blake, used to live with them in the home but he left after being arrested for domestic violence. Kea was financially dependent on Blake and felt unable to leave. Blake's alcohol use had increased since leaving the army, and this contributed to high levels of conflict and controlling behaviours in the home. Ty often tried to prevent his younger brother from witnessing aggression at home. Blake's violent outbursts left the young Ty fearful and their relationship stormy.

Domestic violence accounts for 29% of violent crime in London, with male on female violence a significant majority.¹⁴ One in seven (14.2%) of under-18s will have lived with domestic violence at some point in their childhood, often combined with other forms of abuse.¹⁵ Evidence shows that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect and violence, impact on healthy cognitive, emotional and behavioural development.¹⁶ High levels of fear, anxiety, threat and criticism can heighten stress responses in children for the longer term and lead to poorer well-being, often referred to as 'developmental trauma'.¹⁷

ACEs are associated with low self-worth, difficulty in expressing, controlling and communicating emotions, and higher levels of energy due to differences in the stress arousal system.¹⁸ These effects can in turn impact on behaviour at home and in school, so it might be more difficult to sit and concentrate for long periods or get along with friends.¹⁹

Similarly, attachment theory asserts that children whose primary caregivers are unreliable, unresponsive or inconsistent can affect the way those children relate to others in their future relationships.²⁰ Early relationships generate an 'internal working model' of how relationships operate and can affect how young people later experience 'helping adults', potentially lowering trust in them.²¹ Ty experienced a positive primary caregiver relationship through Kea, but for some young people this is not the case. Children who are placed into local authority care are five times more likely to be in contact with the criminal justice system²² and more likely to experience unemployment.²³

School

Ty attended local state schools in which there were relatively large class sizes and low staff-to-pupil ratios. Ty **excelled** in **sport, art** and **creative classes** but found literacy hard. Repeated standardised numeracy and literacy tests ('SATs') from primary school onwards resulted in a series of unhelpful cumulative consequences for him.

First, Ty found studying for the tests narrow and unmotivating because sports and arts were not included. Second, repeated low scores on literacy meant he became labelled and targeted as a 'low achiever'. But with few spare resources (ie Teaching Assistants) the school could not offer much literacy support and his home life could not provide this either. This made him feel "overwhelmed by assessments and demotivated by constant evidence of his low achievement", further increasing the gap between him and other students.²⁴

Third, as a young black boy, psychological evidence suggests that Ty would have likely experienced extra pressure and stress from standardised tests because of fear that the tests will confirm negative racial stereotypes.²⁵ In addition, his elevated arousal levels, linked to developmental trauma, made it difficult for Ty to 'sit' tests.²⁶ Once in secondary school he disengaged yet further as these issues became more shameful for him when he hit adolescence. This in turn resulted in exclusions.

Broader evidence suggests that accountability measures of the current education system (such as SATs) disproportionately affect already disadvantaged children, narrow the curriculum, and negatively impact both teachers' and pupils' well-being and mental health.²⁷ In addition, evidence shows that BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) boys are three times more likely than their white peers to be excluded from school.²⁸

Developmental trauma has overlap with symptoms of ADHD and these young people often attract this diagnosis, leading to further negative labelling and discrimination.²⁹ In 2016, 21% of African Caribbean boys (the highest of the ethnicities) were identified to have special educational needs and a Statement of Educational Needs (SEN).³⁰ This may be part of a persistent pattern of historical misdiagnosis³¹ based on low teacher expectations³², peer pressure and masculinity issues³³ and schools not meeting cultural needs.³⁴

Peers

Ty would manifest some of the violence he experienced at home in his behaviour towards his peers at school by **'externalising behaviours'**, such as **verbal aggression**.³⁵ This sometimes made it difficult for him to sustain friendships and created feelings of frustration and shame, which he covered over with further aggression.³⁶

During adolescence, peer relationships become an increasingly important part of development, so it is unsurprising that adolescent depression and aggression is associated with both peer rejection and social exclusion.

With more time out of education, Ty found alternative peers within his community who were older. They used a mixture of coercion and incentivisation to encourage Ty to 'run' drugs for them. Ty was drawn into this peer group by a number of push and pull factors. Research has shown many young people join street 'gangs' for protection and to reduce any threat to their family, whilst also being attracted to the status, sense of belonging and large income that it can bring.³⁷ Ty saw the money as an opportunity to support himself and his family financially, which for him outweighed the arrests that inevitably followed.

As Ty became more drawn into this network, he witnessed and perpetrated acts of violence.

Ty's previous experience made it more likely he would be seriously emotionally affected by the violent incidents, such as the stabbings that he witnessed.³⁸ Ty began to cope with nightmares, flashbacks, and anxiety on his own because he felt unable to talk to his family or the health and victim support services offered. Although the sense of daily risk and danger appealed to Ty, it also brought hypervigilance and mistrust of unknown peers. Smoking cannabis helped with such anxiety but also affected his motivation.³⁹

Fear of being seen as a 'snitch' by peers, along with other geographical (such as postcode risk) and psychological barriers (like mistrust and finding it difficult to be vulnerable) have made it difficult for young people affected by 'gangs' in their communities to access services, especially mental health services that have rigid thresholds, waiting lists and appointment systems.⁴⁰ Indeed, up to one in three young people involved in the criminal justice system may have unmet mental health needs.⁴¹

Systems and society

Ty's **political, economic and citizenship education** was **limited**. He **doesn't vote** and when he sees politicians on TV, they rarely seem to represent his background or experience.

Ty was encouraged to sign up to the job centre by professionals. However, he believed his offending history prevented him from getting a good job so he didn't bother. He also had seen peers start jobs that were low paid and unrewarding. Moreover, the cultural context associated with an increasing sense that the poor are 'undeserving' of social welfare protection⁴² meant Ty had no interest in claiming benefits; aware of its 'humiliating' cultural significance in both his subculture and wider society. He also did not want to give up his personal details because of mistrust about where this information might be used.

Ty was repeatedly stopped and searched by police in his local community. The evidence suggests that he would have been exposed to stop and search by the police six times more than his white peers in his community (which is not explained by increased offending rates or drug use⁴³). He and his friends were regularly 'moved on' from their own housing estate because of changes to the law which tries to prevent groups of young people gathering.⁴⁴

In addition, Ty was charged rather than cautioned for drugs possession, whilst most of his white peers received cautions for similar circumstances (56 per cent of white people received cautions rather than charges for drug offences, compared to only 22 per cent of black people⁴⁵). Recent cuts to the legal aid system meant Ty was unable to access quality legal guidance for these issues.⁴⁶ Young men from BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities now make up 44% of those in youth custody with 35% identifying as black or mixed heritage, this is despite an overall decrease in the youth custody population.⁴⁷

In terms of Ty's experience of Youth Offending teams, he was regularly 'assessed' by various practitioners for his level of 'risk' according to 'risk factors'. This concept of 'risk management' dominates criminal justice policies.⁴⁸ Ty was repeatedly asked to think about his own 'anger' and 'impulsivity' and sent to different strangers to talk about this, which didn't make sense to him.

Instead, Ty tried to express what he thought needed to change in his community and to talk about his faith but there were limits to how practitioners could use his ideas within the youth justice system.

Ty also became aware he was regularly talked about in terms of his 'level of risk', and assigned points according to the borough's 'gangs matrix'.⁴⁹ This led to a further sense of mistrust and alienation. The gangs matrices have been critiqued for constituting 78% BAME young men.⁵⁰

These inequalities extend to the types of crime and criminals that are investigated by the system. For example, the current criminal justice system has been heavily challenged because "it focuses attention on a narrow range of predominantly minor harms, deflecting attention away from many other more serious harms⁵¹; and it tends to create and reinforce social inequality through its focus on the poorest and most marginal communities in our societies.⁵²"

The very common experiences of young people feeling misunderstood, misrepresented and unfairly treated by the criminal justice systems are associated with social isolation, less dignity, less trust in public institutions, and increasing propensity towards activities and behaviours deemed risky or 'not normal'.⁵³

“Young men from BAME communities now make up **44%** of those in youth custody with **35%** identifying as black or mixed heritage.”

Changing the future

Though he may not explicitly name these, Ty (and his family) has **experienced multiple social, health and racial inequalities** alongside some more **interpersonal adverse developmental experiences**. As a result, at 19 years of age, Ty has an offending history and low educational attainment. He is often left 'exasperated, resentful and insecure' by life on the margins.⁵⁴

Ty's accumulated experience of the education and criminal justice systems created a perception of services and authority figures as untrustworthy, unfair and blaming. At the same time, Ty internalised a view of himself (and his skills) as unwanted and unvalued in mainstream society. This meant he tended to avoid situations in which people might 'judge' or 'assess' him to avoid further shame.

Nonetheless, Ty is still motivated to act as a role model to his brother. He is ready for change. Despite his fears, he is willing to take a new type of risk and engage with people who are prepared to give him a chance.

We know that with the right support and opportunities, the trajectory of Ty's life can change. Many organisations are starting to work differently and find ways of harnessing the creative, entrepreneurial and leadership skills of young people like him.

Street Elite,⁵⁵ for example, uses sport, mentoring and work experience to help hard to reach young adults overcome the barriers to employment. Similarly, charities like MAC-UK, Leap Confronting Conflict and Drive Forward demonstrate that given the right support, people like Ty can become confident individuals and highly successful in the work place.

Increasingly, employers are beginning to recognise the opportunity these young adults represent. For every business the rationale will be different but there appear to be three main drivers:

- (a) Making an impact on the life of a young person and their family**
- (b) Acquiring a new source of talent and ideas**
- (c) Playing a part in making society fairer**

Some of the best examples of employer-led programmes working with this cohort of young adults include:

Movement To Work, a voluntary collaboration of UK employers committed to tackling youth unemployment by providing work experience and vocational training opportunities.

<http://www.movementtowork.com/about-us/>

Make Your Mark, a four-week work experience employability programme for local disadvantaged young people run by M&S and The Prince's Trust.

<http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/documents/plan-a/make-your-mark.pdf>

BAE Systems is a founding member of Movement To Work and provides opportunities to around 100 young people from across the country who are not in education or employment.

<https://www.baesystems.com/en/what-we-do/suppliers/united-kingdom/movement-to-work>

As more evidence like this emerges, a common pattern is visible which should give employers real confidence to engage with this part of the labour market. While every young adult is an individual, a successful journey to work for this cohort of young adults often follows quite a similar path, which is demonstrated on the next page.

“Many **organisations** are starting to work differently and find ways of **harnessing** the **creative, entrepreneurial** and **leadership skills** of young people.”

The journey to work



19 years old, creative, ambitious, living in a single parent household with caring responsibilities for a sibling and parent.

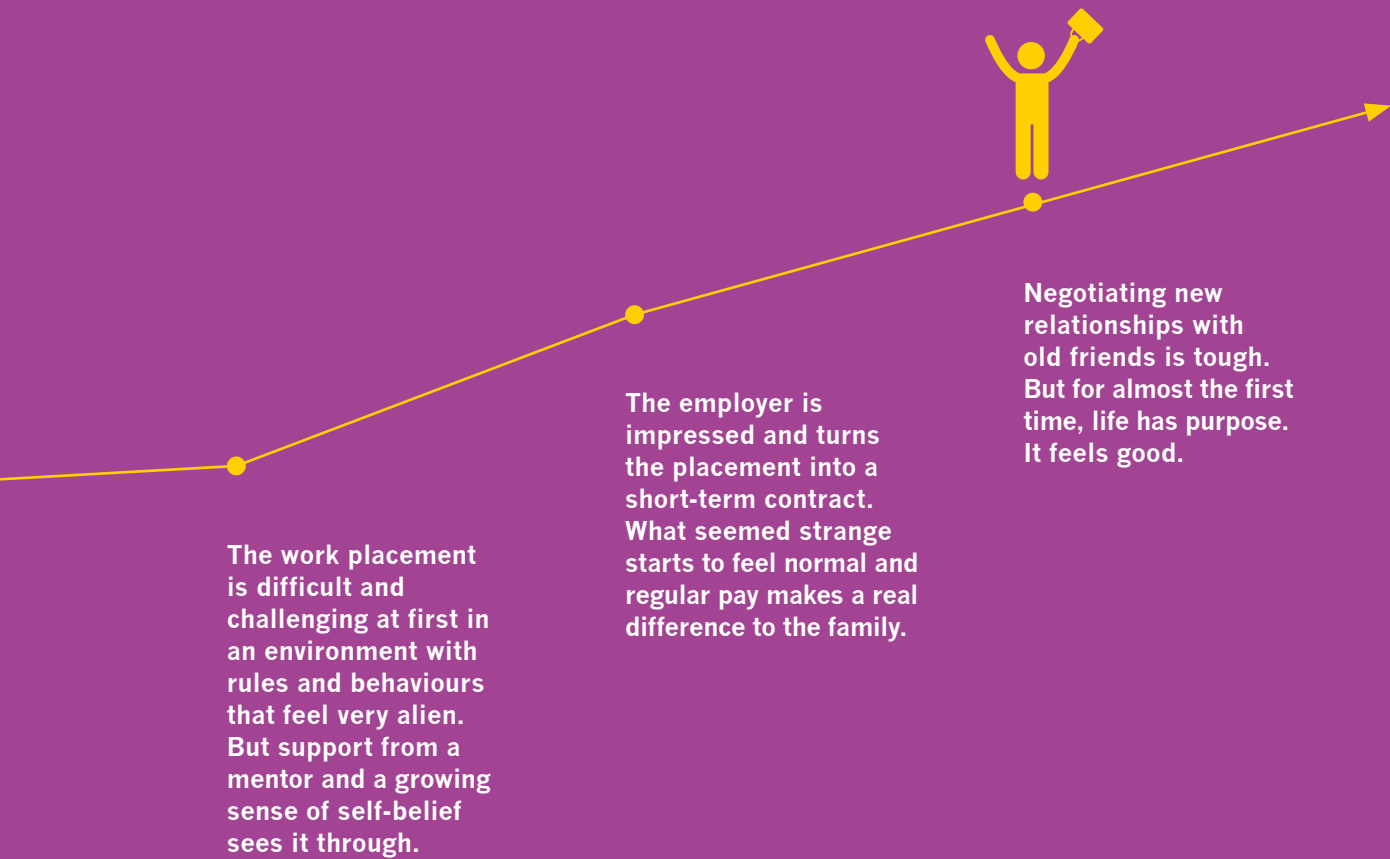
Sceptical about authority and state, not taking benefits or using health services and never voting. Unimpressed by a system that feels rigged and judgmental, and mixing with a crowd that's up to no good.

Something happens. A friend gets seriously hurt. Or they meet a positive influence, like a youth worker, who points them towards a programme that is worth checking out.



Surprisingly, the support they get seems real and respectful. They meet some impressive and inspiring people who've been on this journey themselves. The promise of a job actually materialises.

“How do we **break down** the **barriers** to **employment** for a section of **society** that is brimming with talent?”



So the fundamental question is, how do we make this kind of positive and progressive journey commonplace? How do we break down the barriers to employment for a section of society that is brimming with talent?

Chapter Two of this Guide describes the opportunities and challenges of working with previously disengaged young adults, drawing primarily on a training for work programme called Street Elite.

It examines the perspectives of both the young adults involved and their line managers during their first few weeks, months and years at work.

Chapter Three then provides guidance for people who are directly line managing these employees with a practical list of dos and don'ts.

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