

UK: Students protest cuts to mental health services and increase in youth suicide rate

By Thomas Scripps
6 June 2018

Hundreds of students at University of Bristol in England—one of the institutions of the prestigious Russell Group—recently marched through the city centre to demand more funding and improvements to mental health services at the university. This followed a spate of sudden deaths, including suicides, among Bristol university students. Just this term, in the three-week revision period running up to end-of-year exams, three students died suddenly. A number of the 10 student deaths at the university in the last 18 months were confirmed as suicides.

Many students have great difficulty getting access to counselling on campus, with long waiting times being standard. At Bristol, there is a six-week waiting list for treatment, according to the university. Such has been the demand that the university has had to provide an extra 1,800 hours of counselling to its students this term alone.

Statistics compiled in recent years on the increase in mental health problems afflicting young people make for grim reading. “Minding our Future,” a report by Universities UK, the representative organisation for UK universities, is the latest study detailing the state of mental health among British youth.

The report is focussed on universities and notes that 146 students killed themselves in 2016, an increase on 136 reported in 2015, which had been the highest total since 2006. It notes that 94 percent of universities had experienced a “sharp increase” in the number of students trying to access support services. At some institutions, there was a threefold increase in student demand for support services. Between 2007 and 2016, according to another study, the student suicide rate increased by 56 percent, taking it higher than the rate among the general population of their age group.

Another “sharp rise” was recorded a few days later

for the number of under-11s referred for mental health help. Numbers in 2017-2018 were a third higher than in 2014-2015. Moreover, as anyone who works in education knows, the number of referrals is likely an underrepresentation of the scale of the problem. The bar for referrals is set so high, due to lack of resources, that children with problems are left unreported because they have no hope of being seen. In many cases, there are simply not enough places for referral.

Bringing together some overall numbers, as of 2017, one in four adults in the UK each year could expect to suffer some form of mental illness; three quarters of these begin before a person reaches his or her 18th birthday. One in 10 children had a diagnosable mental illness, with 75 percent of those not receiving treatment. Suicide was the biggest single killer of young people aged 20-34 in the UK.

It is common in the media to see these issues presented as the result of isolated causes, or sometimes combinations of the same.

The development of these various forms of mental ill health is the result of deeply rooted social trends. As Genevieve Leigh explained in her speech to the International Committee of the Fourth International’s May Day 2018 rally on “The role of the youth in the fight for socialism,” “This generation has been born into conditions created by 40 years of social counterrevolution against the working class and the effects have been devastating.”

Mental health problems are not a simple aggregate of single issues but a product of the general and worsening inability of capitalism to provide fulfilling, secure lives. The toll of daily life in some cases produces and in others intensifies mental health problems, which grinds down people’s mental and emotional resilience. Support networks are ripped

apart, both personal and state-provided, as the result of relentless budget cutting of essential mental health services.

A yearly Youth Index published by the Prince's Trust gives important insights into this process. The 2018 report—based on a representative survey of 16- to 25-year-olds carried out by YouGov—recorded the lowest Index score of happiness and confidence since the measure began in 2009. More significant were the reasons given for this situation. Twenty-eight percent of respondents explained they felt trapped in a cycle of jobs they do not want, and 44 percent thought there would be fewer job opportunities available in the next three years. Twenty-one percent felt their lives would amount to nothing. More broadly, 59 percent said the political climate made them anxious about the future, while 39 percent did not feel in control of their lives—a one-third increase over last year.

The 2017 report included the findings that 34 percent of young people felt they would have a worse standard of living than their parents and 42 percent thought that traditional life goals like a house or steady job were unrealistic.

The aggregate figures somewhat obscure the even worse situation, specifically among working-class youth. A rough indication is given by the comparison of the overall 2018 Index scores for those in Education, Employment or Training and those not (70 percent vs. 59 percent), those with five or more GCSEs at A*-C level (academic qualifications) and those without (69 percent vs. 64 percent), and those not eligible for free school meals and those who were (70 percent vs. 64 percent).

Statistics like these refute explanations that reduce the mental health crisis to the impact of new technologies, particularly social media.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt recently made use of this argument as the basis for a letter to leading tech companies, criticising them for “turning a blind eye” to their emotional and mental impacts on young users. He announced that his chief medical officer would produce a report on the impact of technology on youth mental health and recommendations for healthy “screen time.” The sham character of these measures was exposed just a few weeks later when a wholly inadequate government green paper on NHS mental health care was released.

The relationship between new technologies and well-being is not a simple one. Some studies have demonstrated the emotionally supportive potential of online communities. On the other hand, there is undoubtedly serious research demonstrating the negative impact, in certain circumstances, of social media activity on young people's self-esteem, meaningful sociability and stress levels. What this goes to show is that these issues cannot be separated from their social context.

Only in a society where success, adequate leisure time and job security are rendered the scarce object of a zero-sum rat race do they become the cause of distress and even illness. To the extent that technological developments play a role in intensifying these social problems, this is an indictment not of the technology but of the use to which it put by a system run with concern for profit over human need. One never hears criticism in official circles of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram's use of psychological tricks (developed at great cost) to grab and hold the attention of their users in an addictive fashion. Such talk would no doubt be dismissed as an unwarranted infringement on the profit-making prerogative of these multibillion-dollar companies.

Serious change on dealing with mental health issues cannot be achieved within the framework of any one nation. This is an international issue, facing workers and young people across the globe. If, as has been reported, British youth have among the poorest mental well-being in the world, then this is above all due to the exceptional fall in living standards they have experienced over the past decade. The crisis of capitalism and worsening youth mental health are inseparable. Not only must the necessary resources historically denied to mental health care and research be made available, the social system which routinely produces psychological distress must be ended and replaced with a socialist system based on human need and not the accumulation of profit.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>