

Politics, perceptions and identity

Initial findings from the Next Steps Age 25 Sweep



Next Steps Age 25 Sweep

The Next Steps Age 25 Sweep took place between August 2015 and September 2016. A total of 7,707 cohort members took part by web, telephone or face-to-face interviews. Data from this sweep and previous sweeps of Next Steps are available to download from the UK Data Service.

Introduction

Despite an increase in living standards and material comforts, today's young adults face many economic and political challenges. As a result, their formation of identity, perception of opportunity, and political values are likely to vary considerably and be of interest to many.

The Age 25 Sweep of Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) can help policymakers and researchers understand these aspects of the millennial generation's lives.

This briefing paper summarises 25-year-olds' experiences of adulthood, political interest and perception of opportunities. It describes the proportion who have an interest in politics, and their perceptions of the rewards for hard work and whether they have more or less opportunity than previous generations. It also covers whether this generation feels they have control over their lives, and whether, at age 25, they feel like adults.

Key findings

- **Politics:** Over half (56%) of adults aged 25 said they had little to no interest in politics.
- **Rewards in Britain:** 64 per cent did not think that Britain is a place where hard work is rewarded.
- **Improved opportunities:** 59 per cent felt that their opportunities in life had improved compared to those of their parents. Women were more likely to think things had improved than men, as were ethnic minorities compared to their White British peers.
- **Feelings of autonomy:** 87 per cent believed that if you work hard at something, you succeed, but 61 per cent felt like they could decide on what will happen in their lives. Forty per cent believed that it was an individual's fault if he/she is not a success in life, and 32 per cent agreed that how people get on in life is a matter of luck.
- **Adulthood:** 85 per cent considered themselves to be adults, although a smaller proportion (76%) felt like they were respected by others as adults. Only 69 per cent felt that they had fully matured.

Findings

At age 25, Next Steps cohort members responded to a series of questions designed to gauge their political, social and self-perceptions.

Interest in politics

Figure 1 shows that the majority (56%) of adults aged 25 said they were either 'not at all' or 'not very' interested in politics. Just over 2 in 5 (41%) were 'fairly' or 'very' interested. A higher proportion of women than men (62% compared to 50%) reported being interested in politics. There is some evidence that political interest varied by ethnicity, with a greater proportion of Bangladeshi 25-year-olds reporting being interested in politics (62%), than Black Caribbean (56%), Pakistani (56%) and White (58%) adults.

Improved opportunities

There was a perception among 59 per cent of 25-year-olds that opportunities in life have improved compared to their parents' generation, while 37 per cent disagreed that there had been an improvement. The outlook seemsto be more positive for women (61%) than for men (57%).

Figure 3 shows that in terms of ethnic differences in perception of opportunities, a higher proportion of Indian (76%), Pakistani (78%), Bangladeshi (83%), Black Caribbean (67%) and Black African (73%) were more positive about their opportunities than White (57%) adults.

Rewards in Britain

Figure 2 shows that when it comes to whether 25-year-olds perceive Britain today as a place where hard work pays off, the results are stark. Nearly two thirds (64%) of adults aged 25 disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that 'Britain is a place where hard work is rewarded'. A third (33%) agreed or strongly agreed.

FIGURE 1:
Interest in politics

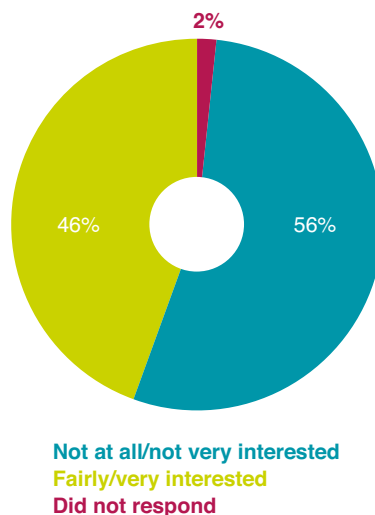
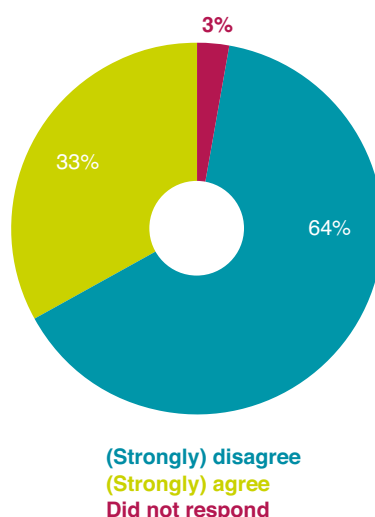


FIGURE 2:
Britain today is a place where hard work is rewarded



Feelings of autonomy

The extent to which people feel like they are in control of their own destinies – or locus of control – is an important indicator of the values of a population. The feelings listed in Figure 4 are based on items from Rotter's 1966 Locus of Control tool, which captures whether people believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain, or whether they believe that their own behaviour does not matter much, and instead that rewards in life are generally outside of their control.

Nearly 9 in 10 (87%) 25-year-olds in England either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'if you work hard at something you'll usually succeed'. Just 1 in 10 (10%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

The majority of 25-year-olds (61%) felt like they could decide what will happen with their lives, while just over a third (36%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had such control over their futures.

However, only 40 per cent agreed with the statement that 'if someone is not a success in life it is their own fault'. This suggests that over half (56%) of 25-year-olds believed that when it comes to success, there are factors at play outside of their control. Around a third (32%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'how well people get on in life is a matter of luck', while just under two thirds (64%) disagreed.

FIGURE 3:
Interest in politics

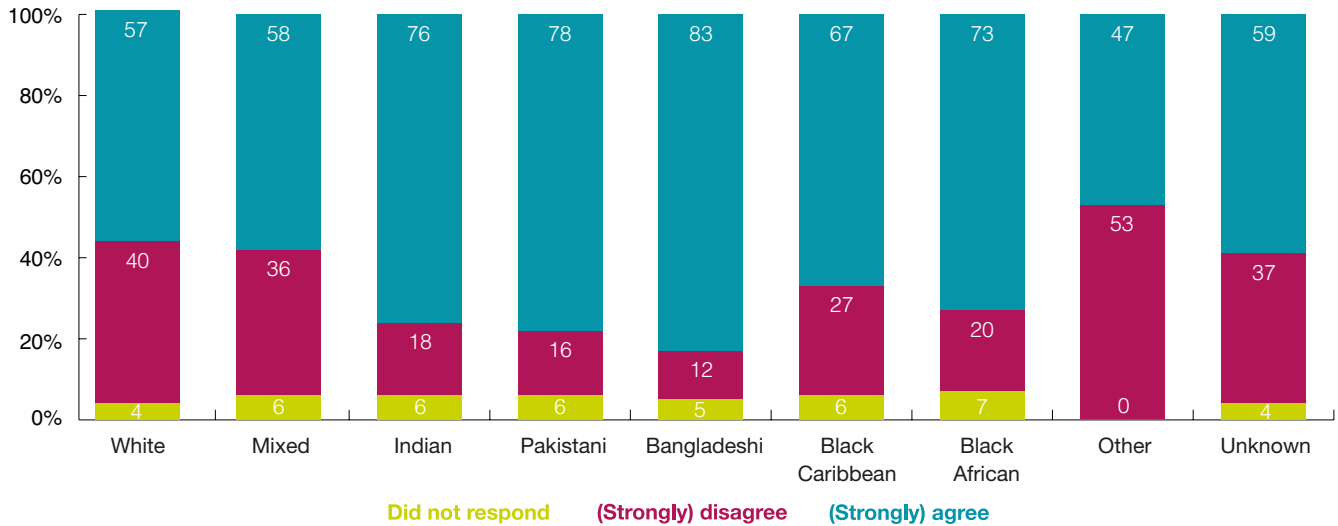
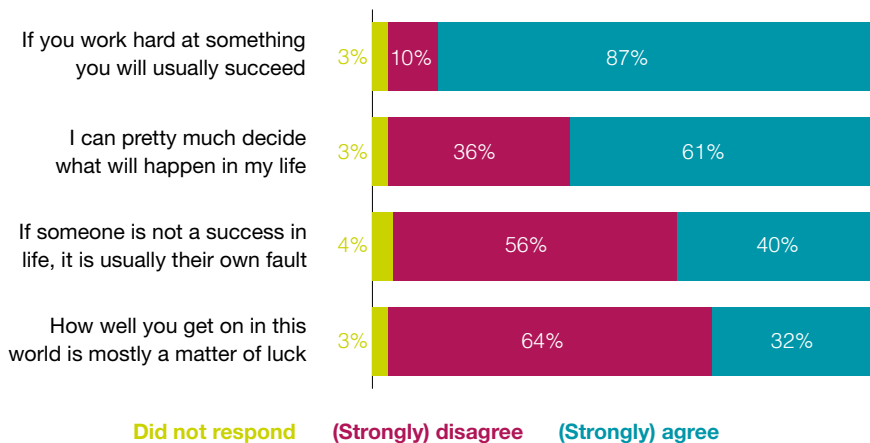


FIGURE 4:
Locus of control



“Almost 9 in 10 agreed that if you work hard at something, you will usually succeed.”



FIGURE 5:
Feelings about adulthood

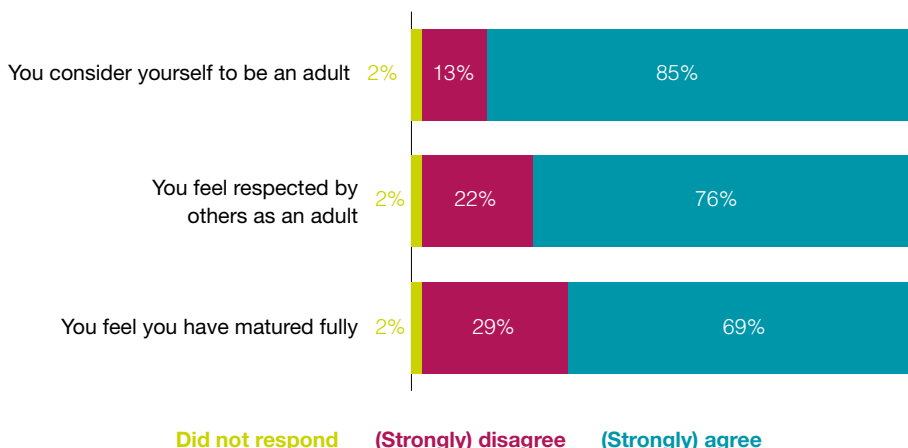


Figure 5 shows that while 85 per cent of 25-year-olds considered themselves to be adults, only 76 per cent felt respected as adults by others. A slightly higher proportion of men (77%) than women (74%) reported feeling like adults. Fewer (69%) felt that they had fully matured as adults, but a higher proportion of women (72%) said this than men (67%).

Conclusions

These initial findings indicate a certain degree of apathy among 25-year-olds, with more than half saying they have little interest in politics and that hard work goes unrewarded in Britain.

However, on the whole this generation remains positive, with the majority

feeling that their opportunities in life have improved compared to those of their parents. One-third acknowledged that how you get on in life is mostly a matter of luck, but a greater proportion, almost two thirds of 25-year-olds, believed that hard work is linked to success and that their lives are in their own hands.

About Next Steps

Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) is following the lives of around 16,000 people born in 1989-90.

The study began in 2004, when the cohort members were aged 13/14, and collected information about their education and employment, economic circumstances, family life, physical and emotional health and wellbeing, social participation, and attitudes for seven consecutive years.

In 2015, 7,707 cohort members took part in the Age 25 Sweep. This eighth sweep of the cohort broadened the scientific remit and value of the study, collecting information on health, education, employment, family formation, and wellbeing.

Data from the study have been linked to National Pupil Database records, which include the cohort members' individual scores at Key Stage 2, 3 and 4. Other administrative linkages are also planned.

Research based on Next Steps has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as educational funding, bullying and educational trajectories. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers and researchers addressing social challenges for years to come.

The first seven waves of the study were managed and funded by the Department for Education. In 2013, Next Steps was transferred to the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies. The Age 25 Sweep was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Future research

This briefing has highlighted some initial findings on political interest and perception of opportunity at age 25, and revealed some interesting differences by gender and ethnicity. This could be extended by looking at education and labour market relations.

Future research could also explore what factors lead to feelings of autonomy, and how this changes from adolescence to adulthood. Researchers could also consider whether there is a relationship between perceptions and life satisfaction.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under the grant numbers ES/L000164/1 and ES/M001660/1. This research would not have been possible without the important contributions of the Next Steps cohort members and the teams collecting the data.

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