

Perfectionism and pressures on young people: what policy can do to help

New research from [Dr Thomas Curran](#) from the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science highlights the rising trend of perfectionism and the damaging impacts on young people's mental health.

Findings

Clinician case reports show that perfectionism conceals a host of psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, anorexia, bulimia and even suicide ideation. Worryingly, **the last 25 years has seen perfectionism rise at an alarming rate**. At the same time, we have seen more mental illness among young people than ever before. **Rates of suicide in the US alone increased by 25 percent in the last two decades**. We are now beginning to see similar trends emerge across Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Young people today are more focussed than their predecessors on acquiring and displaying material wealth. **The desire to create a 'perfect' life, complete with a high-status job, an enviable relationship, and expensive possessions is coupled with the ubiquitous rise of social media**. This ability to access a space of constant, heavily filtered comparison is damaging young people's mental health and placing huge pressure on the decisions they make.

The other side of **perfectionism can be found in our education systems**. Now more than ever, our children are tested, graded, and separated into educational streams which rank classmates. **Metrics, rankings, and lead tables have emerged as the yardsticks for which merit can be quantified and used to sort young people into schools, classes and colleges**.

Curran's most recent research focuses on the **alarming rise of 'socially prescribed perfectionism'**. This stems from the sense that the social environment's expectations of an individual are too high. This feeling could come from parents, friends, social media, teachers.

- **In 1989, just 9% of young people reported clinically relevant levels of socially prescribed perfectionism.**
- **By 2017, that figure had doubled to 18%.**
- By 2050, **projections** indicate that almost **one in three young people** will report clinically relevant levels of socially prescribed perfectionism.
- Shockingly, this is the element of perfectionism that has the **largest correlation with serious mental illness**.

What this means for policy

- Curran's research raises important questions about how we are structuring society and **whether the heavy emphasis on competition, evaluation and testing is benefiting young people.**
- Education systems need to **revaluate the way that competition is used** in schooling.
- Students need **support from parents, teachers, friends**. They also need strong and present welfare systems throughout their education.
- Access and use of **social media should be closely monitored**.