Mental well-being from adolescence into early adulthood: an analysis of data from the longitudinal survey of young people in England (Next Steps)

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In an earlier paper (Attwood and Croll, 2015) we reported the results of an analysis of the mental well-being of a very large sample of over 8000 young people using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England which incorporated a version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) where respondents reported on negative and positive feelings about themselves. Although most young people had few if any negative feelings about themselves, about one in five expressed a significant level of negative feelings and, for a small proportion, the scale indicates a degree of distress and inability to cope with the challenges of everyday life. It was striking that young women in the sample were much more likely to report negative feelings than young men. There was no association with socio-economic background or with academic attainment but the fairly strong association with levels of truancy suggests that challenges to well-being may be linked to difficulties at school.

The data in our earlier study came from young people aged 14 or 15. The most recent wave of LSYPE (now called Next Steps) re-interviewed the same young people at the age of around 25. This makes it possible to compare levels of well-being in early adolescence and early adulthood and to look at similarities and differences in the correlates of well-being and the continuities in well-being for the same young people over time. A particular focus of the paper is on changes in reported well-being at individual level and the life experiences and educational experiences associated with both positive and negative directions of change. The study is relevant to understanding the extent to which problems of well-being are persistent for individuals and also understanding factors associated with changes in well-being as young people move into adulthood. The earlier analysis showed no association between well-being and attainment but the association with truancy suggests that negative aspects of well-being may have educational consequences and the longitudinal design means that any longer term consequences of negative feelings about themselves can be investigated. Initial analysis has shown that self-reported negative feelings are higher by about 25 per cent among the young adults compared with levels when the same people were teenagers. GHQ is explicitly targeted at short term disorders rather than long term attributes of individuals but we hypothesise that there will nevertheless be marked continuities in negative feelings at an individual level over time.