

Snakes & Ladders

Young people, transitions and social exclusion

Les Johnston, Robert MacDonald, Paul Mason, Louise Ridley and Colin Webster



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Les Johnston is Professor in Criminology at the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, **Robert MacDonald** is Reader in Sociology, **Louise Ridley** and **Colin Webster** are Senior Lecturers in Criminology, all at the School of Social Sciences, University of Teesside, **Paul Mason** is Researcher at the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Birmingham.

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All place names and the names of young people have been changed to protect the participants.

Introduction

The project

The research project (Young people, transitions and social exclusion) on which this report is based aimed to:

- explore the causes, extent and consequences of socioeconomic exclusion for a diverse sample of young people in one particularly disadvantaged locality;
- examine and understand the range of ‘mainstream’ and ‘diverse’ careers that young people develop in this context;
- suggest what policy and practice interventions might ‘work’ in terms of securing ‘inclusive’ careers for disadvantaged youth and to explore the extent to which these can be extended further to other groups of young people.

The project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation under their Young People Programme, began in October 1999 and concluded in March 2000. This chapter discusses the research site and the rationale for its selection, outlines the theoretical and policy context of the study and describes the project’s design and methodology. Chapter 2 looks at six cameos of individuals drawn from the larger sample. The stories revealed in these cameos exemplify the events, problems and processes typically experienced by young people as they grow up in Willowdene. In Chapter 3 we draw on these cameos – and, where appropriate, on data from interviews with other young people – to identify the key analytical themes which aid the understanding of youth transitions in a context of social exclusion. Finally, in Chapter 4 we summarise the main findings of the research and consider some of its policy implications.

Social and economic change in Teesside and in Willowdene

Willowdene, which cuts across two adjacent electoral wards (Willowdene Rise and Willowfields), was built in the 1920s as one of the original Garden Cities. For 50 years it was an unremarkable example of a successful local authority housing project containing a ‘respectable’ working-class community of 1,740 households. Excellent housing stock combined with large gardens, allotments and landscaped public spaces created some of the most desirable homes in the town of Kelby, within which Willowdene is located.

As recently as the mid-1960s, near full employment in relatively well-paid, long-term and skilled jobs in Teesside’s chemical, steel and heavy engineering industries provided the economic security which underpinned social cohesion and stability. However, the restructuring and mass redundancies which affected this local economy in the 1970s and 1980s were severe. Between 1975 and 1986 one quarter of all jobs and half of all manufacturing jobs were lost in Teesside and the area still suffers from high rates of unemployment and joblessness. Nationally, unemployment stands at around 4%; the town of Kelby, however, records a rate of claimant unemployment of 10% (and 12 and 18% for the two Willowdene wards) (Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit, 2000). The jobless figure (which includes those on training schemes, those classed as economically inactive but who would probably take jobs if they were available and claimants) is even more revealing. The jobless figure for Kelby is 35% and for the two Willowdene wards 38% and 47%. Local surveys suggest that even these figures underestimate joblessness in some parts of

the locality (Willowdene Tomorrow, 1996). According to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' *Index of local deprivation* (DETR, 1998), Willowdene Rise is in the top 10% of the most deprived wards nationally and Willowfields in the top 5%.

Young people in places such as Willowdene have been particularly hard hit. In 1974, over half of Teesside's school-leavers gained jobs or apprenticeships. By 1998, only 6% moved into work. The social and cultural certainties of the past have gone to be replaced by the insecurity of casualised labour markets in which the jobs available for young people tend to be low paid, low skill and often short term. Youth Training Schemes are reported to lead to employment for around only one third of participants (Teesside TEC, 1995). Around 15% of Kelby school-leavers move from school into a situation that Williamson (1997) calls 'Status zero': 16 and 17 year olds who are not in education, employment or training and normally not entitled to unemployment benefits (Future Steps, 1998). The persistence of unemployment for school-leavers and young adults has been linked to youth crime and disorder in national policy commentaries (Audit Commission, 1996). Willowdene witnessed sporadic street rioting in the early 1990s and since then has become notorious for high rates of burglary, theft, car crime, vandalism and drug-related offending. Over the past three years one of the Willowdene wards recorded the highest levels of anti-social behaviour and disorder in Kelby (Kelby Borough Council, 1999).

Thus, the socioeconomic problems of Willowdene are severe, even in comparison with the wider conurbation of Teesside – itself notorious for having suffered some of the highest levels of crime and unemployment in mainland Britain. Teesside in general, and Willowdene in particular, provide extreme examples of the consequences of rapid economic decline and long-term structural unemployment. Our choice of this locality as a research site provided the opportunity to examine an area in which the problems of social exclusion for young people are thrown into sharpest relief.

Theoretical and policy context: social exclusion and youth transitions

The research questions for this study have been informed by two sets of academic and policy debates. These are considered in turn.

Social exclusion, the 'underclass' and young people

Academic and policy commentaries about the alleged emergence of a welfare underclass and more recent related debates about social exclusion provide part of the intellectual context for our study. While the more heated and controversial aspects of the underclass debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s may now have been replaced by less value-laden discussions of social exclusion, we would argue that current thinking draws implicitly on some of the ideas of underclass theory.

Underclass theories led some sociologists and social commentators to seriously consider the idea that long-term economic marginality could generate distinct anti-social and anti-work 'underclass' cultures of benefit dependency and crime among young people in poor areas (MacDonald, 1997a). Indeed, Murray – the chief exponent of conservative underclass theory – singled out Kelby as home of the 'new rabble' underclass (Murray, 1994). While Murray's thesis has, justifiably, been criticised, it recognised – albeit in a limited way – that *something* has changed in places like Willowdene. Yet, existing research on the underclass and welfare dependency has both methodological and theoretical shortcomings. As to the first, there has been a reluctance to focus on the people and places most likely to display underclass tendencies and the survey techniques deployed by researchers have been insensitive to uncovering underclass cultures (Roberts, 1997). As to the second, there has been a tendency to conceive excluded young people – that section of the population most fundamental to underclass theories – as homogeneous. This view has two shortcomings. First, it ignores the importance of gender, ethnicity and other factors in shaping youth identities and activities. Second, it denies the complexity of experiences, motivations and behaviours which may be found *across* groups of young people living in areas such as Willowdene. Our research aimed to provide a corrective to both of these shortcomings and, by so doing, to make an original contribution to theoretical and

policy debates about dependency culture and underclass formation.

Since coming to power the present Labour government has made the combating of social exclusion the prime aspect of its domestic policy:

“One challenge above all stands out before we can deserve another historic victory – tackling the scourge and waste of social exclusion.” (Peter Mandelson, 14 August 1997, Fabian Society)

A range of area-based programmes (including the Single Regeneration Budget, Health Action Zones, Education Action Zones, Employment Zones, New Deal for Communities) and labour market initiatives (such as the New Deal for Young People) all focus on this and are all represented in Kelby. The government’s Social Exclusion Unit says that:

Social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. (SEU, 1998)

For us, one of the problems with current analysis and policy towards social exclusion is exactly this shorthand reduction of a complex phenomenon. Like the underclass concept before it, social exclusion seems to have become a ‘catch-all’ phrase, meaning all things to all people (Atkinson, 1998). Despite this conceptual confusion, social exclusion discourses have two analytic advantages over underclass theories. First, they highlight the diverse and interconnected problems which face young people in Willowdene: problems which cannot be reduced to unemployment or income poverty. Second, they emphasise the processes whereby some young people become socially included and some do not. Our approach has been to explore the notion of social exclusion inductively: to assess its usefulness as a descriptive and explanatory term from the point of view of the young people said to be experiencing it.

Youth transitions and diverse careers

Centrally our research considers the strategies which young women and men deploy to cope

with their apparent social and economic exclusion. Our view is that in order to identify the conditions and policies necessary for social inclusion in the longer term, it is important not only to address the conventional problems of employment, education, health and housing, but also to understand the totality of ‘coping strategies’ utilised by excluded local populations. Jordan and Redley have argued that the “survival strategies and cultures of resistance” of the poor and economically marginal should become the focus for a “new orientation in research on social exclusion” (1994, p 156). We believe that this argument can be applied both to the theorisation of youth exclusion and to the understanding of young people’s responses to such exclusion.

Here we can draw on studies of youth transitions undertaken in the UK over the past 20 years. Within this body of work, youth is conceived of as a life phase when the *transition* between childhood status and full adult status is made. One of the most useful contributions to this debate has been made by Coles (1995). Arguing against the tendency to see transitions purely in terms of young people’s involvement in the labour market, Coles suggests that there are three main dimensions to youth transitions: the transition from full-time education and training to a full-time job in the labour market (the school-to-work transition); the transition from family of origin to family of destination (the domestic transition); the transition from residence with parents, or surrogate parents, to living away from them (the housing transition) (1995, p 8). For Coles, each of the three transitions interrelate, so that the status gained in one may both determine and be determined by the status which is gained in another (for example, a significant change in a young person’s housing situation, such as becoming homeless, can have dramatic effects in their labour market situation, for example, becoming unemployed).

A key theme within youth transitions literature has been the relative emphasis given to young people’s *agency* in creating individual paths of transition compared with the constraints on personal choice and decision making provided by social *structures*. Where earlier models characterised transitions as career trajectories which almost predetermined a young person’s social position (see Banks et al, 1992), later ones see transitions as becoming increasingly fragmented, individualised and cut free from the

determining grip of social structure (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). This shift in theoretical emphasis has been accompanied by empirical shifts in youth transitions. The virtual collapse of the youth labour market, high levels of youth unemployment, the introduction of youth training schemes, the diminution of welfare support to young adults and the growth of mass further and higher education have all served to extend the youth phase. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) conclude that this fragmentation and protraction of youth transitions does *not* mean that young people have become free of the determining influence of social structure. Rather, while individual young people may *feel* that they have more choice, the pathways that they follow are still strongly influenced by factors such as social class, locality, gender and ethnicity.

A central objective of this study is to explore the interplay between agency and structure in youth transitions. In order to do this we examine the *different* responses that young people aged between 16 and 25 make to shared socioeconomic disadvantage. Towards that end, we employ the concept of ‘career’ to capture the diversity of transitions that young women and men make. ‘Career’ helps us to theorise how the events surrounding transitions may follow a particular sequence, yet lead to different destinations.

With rare exceptions (MacDonald, 1994, 1997b) little has been written about the *range* of ‘diverse careers’ that young people adopt in the absence of legitimate employment opportunities. Indeed, youth studies, underclass theory and popular imagery have all tended to focus on the *singular* and *negative* responses which young people supposedly make to socioeconomic dislocation. Here, much attention has been paid to young men’s pursuit of acquisitive criminal careers, sometimes linked to drugs. The use and trading of drugs has become widespread in places like Willowdene, and for some young men – and a small number of young women – drug use and drug dealing now provide work-like activity and, for some, a putative career (see Parker et al, 1995). Although an exclusive focus on criminality would further demonise young people and ignore their attempts to find legitimate alternatives to joblessness, our study has, necessarily, considered the significance of these acts within the overall dynamic of career transitions.

Predictably there has been little attention to the other coping strategies of young women in the

face of limited economic opportunity. Wallace found that young unemployed women “drift into” parenthood due to the “lack of positive alternatives” (1987, p 18). Underclass theory has claimed – with little empirical evidence – that young women will seek an ‘economically rational’ solution to poverty by seeking the state housing and income benefits that come with single motherhood. Craine (1997) also discussed young women pursuing the ‘mothering option’ when legitimate opportunities for employment are severely restricted. Others have contested this depiction of young, single motherhood (Burghes and Brown, 1995), yet this group of young people continues to figure large in the demonology of underclass theory and in the policy prescriptions of government.

Research design and methodology

There are three components to the methodology: interviews with stakeholders, participant observation in Willowdene and interviews with a sample of Willowdene young people.

Stakeholder Interviews

The first stage of the fieldwork comprised semi-structured, qualitative interviews with ‘stakeholders’ (such as professionals who work with young people or in relation to issues of social exclusion in Kelby). Around 30 interviews were held with staff from local community groups and agencies in the statutory and voluntary sectors (for example, the probation service, local secondary schools and further education colleges, drugs advice agencies, youth centres, the police, community regeneration projects, training providers, the New Deal programme). The purpose of these stakeholder interviews was three-fold: to discuss and negotiate the aims and procedures of the research; to gain the views of local experts on the research questions; and finally, to negotiate access to a sample of young people for interview.

Participant observation

The project employed participant observation techniques to enrich our qualitative understanding of young people in Willowdene and to assist with recruitment of the interview sample. This element of the research involved one of the project team accessing detached youth work provision and, for

one or two evenings a week over a period of four months, accompanying detached youth workers as they moved around Willowdene meeting and talking with young people ‘on the streets’.

Interviews with young people

The main element of the research was a series of semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 98 young people aged 16 to 25 from Willowdene (see Table 1). (Although Willowdene is almost completely white, Kelby has a significant Asian population. In view of this, we also interviewed a small sub-sample of 10 young British Asians who live in the neighbouring area and who attended the same secondary school as the Willowdene youth. Findings from this sub-sample are not included in this report but will be reported in further research on the ethnic dimension of youth transitions.) The interviews sought to collect in-depth, narrative accounts of the diverse events, experiences and contexts which made up the young person’s post-school transition up to the time of interview. The retrospective focus of the interview enabled young people to describe the events and processes which led them to their current situation. Interviewees were also asked about other pertinent issues, such as how they felt about life in Willowdene, why they had taken particular decisions and not others, and what aspirations and expectations they had for the future.

The sample was recruited in four ways. First, stakeholder interviews often led to contacts being made with young people connected to the stakeholder organisation (such as young people participating in a New Deal programme). Second, interviewees were asked to recommend other young people from Willowdene for interview. Third, participant observation generated contacts with interviewees. Fourth, the project advertised for participants through posters and flyers distributed in Willowdene. Sample recruitment proved relatively (and perhaps surprisingly) straightforward. There was no shortage of young people in Willowdene prepared to be interviewed by the project team and the final sample number exceeds those anticipated in the initial proposal. This was in part assisted by a £5 payment made to interviewees to help cover their attendance expenses and as a token of our appreciation for the time they had given. Interviews were tape-recorded (in all but one instance) and carried out in various locations (including the offices of a

local regeneration project, interviewees’ homes, at training scheme premises, in prison, at the university).

In order to capture the diversity of young people’s experiences, the research proposal hypothesised six potential ‘career routes’ which young people might take in a locality like Willowdene. In constructing the sample, young people were sought who could reflect aspects of each of the following hypothetical ‘careers’:

- ‘traditional’ careers of regular employment in the economic mainstream (those who appear to have made ‘successful transitions’ from school to jobs with apparently little difficulty);
- careers involving little engagement with employment or education in the long-term and repeated or continuous spells of unemployment;
- careers involving extensive or repeated engagement with more informal economic activity (such as volunteering, self-employment and cash-in-hand ‘fiddly work’);
- educational and training careers (perhaps comprised of prolonged and/or repeated periods of formal education and/or training, which delay the transition into the labour market);
- domestic and home-centred careers (which are concentrated, largely, on childcare and domestic labour);
- criminal careers (those who appear to have withdrawn from careers in education, training or employment in favour of repeated and long-term offending).

We should add one important qualification. The primary aim in formulating these career routes was to facilitate the research, rather than to force young people’s diverse experiences into discrete ‘boxes’. We did not assume that the majority of young people, at the time of interview, would fit neatly into one of these categories. We neither ruled out the prospect of individuals shifting between categories sequentially, nor of them occupying more than one category simultaneously.

The sample

Table 1 differentiates the sample by age and gender.

Table 1: Profile of the sample (from 82 interviews)

Age	Male	Female	Total
15	0	1	1
16	15	6	21
17	9	4	13
18	11	6	17
19	3	3	6
20	9	5	14
21	2	1	3
22	2	4	6
23	3	2	5
24	3	4	7
25	4	1	5
Total	61	37	98

The main activity of interviewees, at the time of interview, was as follows:

- 7% employed;
- 47% unemployed;
- 15% in post-16 education;
- 1% in higher education;
- 11% in training;
- 11% in prison;
- 7% at home with childcare responsibilities;
- 1% at school.

Further information on the sample of interviewees may be found in the appendices.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative material generated by the research – stakeholder interview and participant observation field notes plus verbatim transcripts of 82 interviews with 98 young people – was analysed to identify key themes which cut across the data. These are explored in detail in Chapter 3. In addition, we mapped individual transitions and explored within each one the relationship between their key aspects (for example, school-to-work, housing, family, criminal and drug using careers). This exercise generated 98 biographical sketches, thus allowing for consideration of longitudinal – rather than cross-sectional – processes. In Chapter 2 we present six cameos which exemplify much of what is found in these 98 biographical sketches.

Six cameos of youth transition in Willowdene

We have chosen to illustrate our research findings by focusing on six ‘cameos’ of individuals drawn from the larger sample of 98 young people. Following analysis of all of the interviews, these six were selected because they exemplify, in different ways, the processes and problems faced by young people as they grow up in a context of social exclusion. The stories that they reveal are not extraordinary ones and many other individuals might have been chosen to exemplify the findings of the study.

We have selected six people because this allows us both to explore individual biographies *in depth* and to illustrate the diverse experiences encountered *across* the sample. The people chosen – Rebecca, Matthew, John, Holly, Pauline and Lee – were *at the time of interview* engaged in the different sorts of activities suggested by our initial career typology. Rebecca was working in a full-time job, Matthew was unemployed, John was involved in informal economic activity, Holly was on the New Deal programme, Pauline was a

single parent and Lee was in prison. Again, it must be stressed that these six career tracks were not found to be mutually exclusive routes through which young people made transitions to adulthood. Rather, the cameos show that *prior to interview* individuals experienced diversity, rather than singularity, of transition.

In each case we have found it useful to set out in sketch form the main components we consider critical to deciphering young people’s transitions. These are school-to-work careers (which incorporate experiences of school, post-16 education, training and other labour market programmes, employment and informal economic activity); family and housing careers (including leaving the parental home or care, homelessness, partnership relationships, parenting and family formation); criminal careers (patterns of offending and encounters with the criminal justice system); and drug careers (involvement with illicit drugs).

Rebecca: 22 years old, currently in full-time job

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs
16	Leaves school with average qualifications Starts FE college	Living with mother and father in Willowdene	None	None
17	FE college – GCSEs and 3 A levels			
18				
19	Finishes college Abandons the idea of going to university Unemployed			
20	Unemployed Job			
21	Job Unemployed			
22	Job			

Rebecca was employed full-time as receptionist-cum-cleaner in a local firm. Her experiences of school were generally positive. She talked favourably about the other pupils and about some of the teachers, but felt that many of the subjects she had studied were ‘irrelevant’ to her life. She was a diligent pupil most of the time but on some days, and with her mother’s consent, she would miss school and stay at home or walk around the area on her own. Her truancy was an individual matter and she talked about resisting the pressures of others to join them in more continuous absences and to ‘mess about’ in school. She achieved four GCSEs with quite good grades. At the age of 16 her ambition was to train as a veterinary nurse but she found that there was no such course available in Teesside. Her parents, with whom she lived, could not afford to finance her accommodation and study away from home:

“... I tried all the colleges and things like that, tried to get apprenticeships, but there wasn’t just any in the area really. The locest was, like, in Yorkshire. My

parents were on benefits. I wouldn’t have been able to afford to go anyway so in the end I thought I’d do a year at college and then try again the next year but there was still nothing there either, so I ended up doing three years at college instead.”

She enrolled to study for some further GCSEs and three A levels at Kelby Further Education College. She was frustrated by the lack of opportunity to pursue her vocational interest: “It wasn’t what I wanted to do, but while you were there it was better than being on the dole or whatever ... it was the only thing that was open for me at the time”. For Rebecca, in the absence of a vocational course in veterinary nursing locally, the only choice she perceived was continuing in post-school education. She now saw her time at college as “wasting three years really” and, after picking up further qualifications, she dropped the idea of going on to university because she “was sick of studying”. She was critical of the fact that careers advisers had first directed her into A levels (arguing that “there isn’t much choice really”) then, when she had finished them, tried to

channel her towards higher education in the absence of alternatives.

Instead of continuing her education she decided to look for work. She became unemployed and sought the help of careers service staff. Her sister told her to put down an expected wage of £3 per hour on the job-search form. Rebecca remembers them commenting: “You’re looking at less than that because you haven’t got any experience ... just ... take what’s going”. She remained unemployed for five months until she landed a short-term Christmas job as a sales assistant in a department store (which paid £4 per hour). Following this she was unemployed for a further two months before starting her current job. Her father had been asking around the area and knew somebody who worked in a Willowdene firm. Her wage had originally been £50 per week but this had risen with the advent of the minimum wage. Her post involved receptionist and general administrative duties as well as cleaning work. Part of the reason that she took the job – and has stuck with it – is because of the costs of travelling further afield to work: “There was a job going over the other side of Kelby but the wages were that bad it would have cost me half my wages just to get there”.

A further reason why Rebecca has stuck with this job is because of her previous, negative experiences of unemployment. She was able to claim benefit (being over 18 years) but still found unemployment:

“... horrible, really. I just used to go down there with me Dad and sign on every week and check all the jobs and half of them weren’t like suitable, just because of the hours – seven hours a week and that sort of thing. They just weren’t any good.”

One of the biggest problems apart from the poverty was, for her, the boredom of unemployment: “You just sit at home all the time ... you had all that free time to do nothing. No money to go out. Just sit at home and watch the TV, something daft like that. Go to the shops or something”.

She looked hard for work, sending off dozens of letters to prospective employers every week but rarely received replies. She did not think there were many opportunities for young people locally

and this influenced her to stay in a job that she was “getting a bit sick of now”. She felt that she was overworked and unfairly treated – several newer staff, she said, were receiving higher wages than her. She said she had no formal, written contract but was expected to work 37 hours per week. Working was better than not working even if she was still short of money. A good part of her wage was spent on rent. She lived with her mother (who had not been employed since having children) and her father (who was retired from work on sickness grounds), both of whom were in receipt of benefits. Rebecca explained that she had to pay a set amount of the rent to the local authority, leaving her very little to spend on a social life. She used to be able to go out only once a month when she first started work but now, because she has been saving, she can usually afford to go out once a week. Rebecca emphasised the importance of saving carefully and of avoiding debt: “I fear the debt ... it’s like my worst nightmare having a debt”.

At the age of 22, Rebecca was beginning to think about the possibility of saving up to buy her own house in the future. She wanted to keep living near her family and didn’t want to leave Willowdene. She described her part of the locality as “really quiet, not much trouble” but went on to describe how her immediate neighbours had been burgled six times and how the previous weekend her house had been subjected to an attempted burglary. Her family cannot afford house contents insurance and now the house is never left unattended.

Matthew: 25 years old, currently unemployed

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs	
13	'Messing about' at school Occasional truancy	Living with mother in Willowdene	'Messing about' and fighting	Starts sniffing glue	
14					
15					
16	Leaves school with no qualifications			Recreational drug use with advent of rave culture (Ecstasy, LSD)	
17	Joinery course at college, leaves after three months	Prison, then lives with brother (barred from Willowdene)	Violent affray (glue related) – three months in prison	Continues glue-sniffing	
18	Unemployed	Back to mother's house in Willowdene	Second affray charge (remand and probation)		
19	Occasional short training courses, interspersed with unemployment and 'fiddly jobs'		Desistance from crime	Discontinues glue-sniffing	
20					
21					Lives occasionally with brother
22					Forms a family with a woman, 3 step-children
23					... and their own child
24					
25	Currently unemployed (for one month)				

At 25, Matthew is at the upper end of our sample's age range. He is currently unemployed and claiming benefit, spending much of his time during the day looking after his young children.

He described his school experiences as simply "messaging about", truanting occasionally and getting into fights. In the mid-1980s, at the age of 13, he started sniffing glue – "It was the Willowdene thing then" – and much of his explanation for the trouble he got into over the next six years, in and

out of school, hinged around the aggression that this generated in him. He left school at the age of 16 with no qualifications. He started a joinery course at college but this only lasted two months. Unlike his form teacher at school (whom he described very positively), the joinery tutor was seen as overly strict and unsupportive ("He said, 'You'll never be a joiner'"). Matthew then became unemployed and claimed hardship allowance benefits (around £30 per fortnight): "Your dole

money used to go on glue ... it was just something to do – to pass the time away. It was a good buzz”.

Around the same time he began using recreational drugs (such as Ecstasy and LSD) irregularly. It was at this time in the late 1980s that local use of these types of illicit drugs was increasing with the advent of rave culture. But the use of glue remained central to Matthew’s ‘drug career’ and, in his view, it lay behind the criminal convictions for violent affray that he picked up at the age of 17, and again about a year later.

The first conviction came about after a fight in which he and his older brother, who were both “high on glue”, assaulted another young man in Willowdene. He received a six-month custodial sentence, serving three months in a local prison. The second conviction resulted from a run-in with the local Police Task Force who were cracking down on crime in Willowdene at the time. Again he was convicted of affray but this time, following the intervention of his barrister who said, “Look, he needs help with the glue”, he received probation. Matthew describes this as a key turning point in his life.

“And then I just grew up a bit.... When I left school I was still glue-sniffing. I was at college doing the joinery, but then on the night I still sniffed glue and that ... I was never into burgling or ‘owt like that, but the glue got us into trouble ... through the violence. And like I went to prison. Then I was going to go to prison again ... and then I just sorted me ‘ead out and I packed the glue in. And then I just used to knock about with people, you know having a drink. And then I just got in with her [his partner] when I was about 22.”

During his late teenage years Matthew, apart from the time he spent in a bail hostel and in prison, was still living with his mother in Willowdene. One of the conditions of his affray sentence had been that he could not live there and for this period he lived with his brother in central Kelby.

Matthew stopped sniffing glue at the age of 19. He started to socialise away from Willowdene with a different set of friends. Since then he has not been in trouble with the police. At the age of 22 he met his current girlfriend and a year later he moved in with her and her three children. Shortly afterwards he became a father himself and he now spends most of his days looking after the four children while his partner is working. He greatly

values these experiences and is keen to teach the children to avoid the mistakes he made (his involvement with glue, his violence, his lack of engagement with school, his lack of qualifications). He says that “it’s hard to beat the real world” and his children need to know how to cope with it. Forming a stable relationship and becoming a father consolidated his decision to ‘settle down’:

“I’ve settled down a lot. It’s no good to nobody going to jail, stuff like that. As you get older you get sick of being a nuisance. You think to yourself, ‘it’s about time I settled down’. And it does settle you down, getting a girlfriend and having a kid. It doesn’t half. You’ve gotta think ‘I’ve gotta be responsible now’. You just keep away from things and then you just, sort of like, sort yourself out.”

‘Settling down’ is not easy, though, in a context where the local economy provides limited opportunities for gainful employment. By his mid-twenties regular, standard employment had been limited to one short spell working as an industrial cleaner (a skill he had picked up while in prison). Matthew had not spent much time looking for ‘proper jobs’ because “people just don’t seem interested in people who’ve been to prison”. In the nine years since he left school he had largely been unemployed. He had worked occasionally in more informal work gained via friends: “That’s how people often get jobs, isn’t it? Through their friends or family or what have you”. Once he had had a fortnight’s work labouring ‘on the side’ and had worked for two months selling counterfeit goods (fake designer label sportswear) door-to-door.

The most positive work experiences Matthew recounted concerned various training courses (in construction and joinery) that he had participated in. The most recent of these had lasted for a year and was part of a local community project’s attempt to train local people at the same time as physically regenerating the locality. The course paid £10 per week on top of unemployment benefit and he had managed to gain the NVQ level 2 in joinery. Unfortunately, an industrial accident had cut short Matthew’s involvement with this project and he was, for the time being, confined to seeking non-manual work. His aim for the future was to recover from his injury, undertake further training and find “a decent job” as a joiner. There was only “a slim chance of this happening”, he felt, because there were “no real jobs around” and “nobody’ll take people on, even fiddly work ‘cause the social are cracking right down on people”.

John: 17 years old, currently involved in informal economic activity

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs
13	Regarded as 'lazy' at school Begins to behave disruptively	Lives at home with his mother and father, both of whom work, and his older sister		
14	Behaviour at school worsens Increasingly in trouble Begins to truant		Caught shoplifting 'daft things' once	Drinks occasionally
15	Diagnosed as dyslexic but truancy increases Begins to work for local 'odd-job man' and stops attending school	Sister leaves school, becomes unemployed		Tries cannabis
16	School-leaving passes Work with local man ends Works briefly in factory Attends NVQ for one day Gets an "enjoyable" job in a scrap-yard		Generates some income selling various goods informally, some of which are stolen	
17	Scrap-yard is sold after five months Finds intermittent cash-in-hand work locally Continued involvement in the informal economy provides income Looks unsuccessfully for mechanics training	Pays no board at home		

John is 17 and has lived in Willowdene all of his life. He lives at home with his unemployed older brother and his employed parents. John was unemployed at the time of interview and was neither in receipt of benefits nor involved in education or training. He was, however, engaged in informal economic activity.

At secondary school John had difficulty reading and writing and found that the teachers did not

spend any time with him as he was considered lazy. He started to act as the 'class joker', was sent home regularly and began truanting. In his fourth year it was discovered that he was dyslexic, and although the school offered to provide support, his truanting increased. John occupied his time with friends in local parks and woods. He was once arrested for shoplifting ("Just daft chocolate bars and things like that").

In his final year John stopped going to school. The school attempted to keep him in education by placing him on a mechanics training course, one day a week, with a local training provider: “They thought, ‘Right, if I give him a day off a week anyway, he might come for the other four’”. When John stopped going, he was told that, in order to be entered for his exams, he must attend school every day. Instead, he walked out and “never went back, ever” – something he now regrets. Aged 15, John began to work for a family friend who was an ‘odd-job man’, helping him with loading, unloading, decorating and gardening. As this was irregular work, John would also help a neighbour with her garden in between jobs.

He worked for the family friend for five months but the work eventually dried-up. Next he worked briefly in a factory, leaving that to join a carpentry training course at a local college. When, on his first day, he discovered that the course initially entailed a day’s carpentry and four days’ book work he left. After this he gained a job at a scrap-yard and this enabled John to pursue an interest in cars. It was a job which, although poorly paid, he enjoyed (“I just wanted to be a mechanic after that”). Six months later the yard closed and John, now aged 17, found himself without regular work.

In the two months between this event and the time of interview, John had managed to use “all sorts” of activities to generate an income. Through his own and his family’s contacts in Willowdene, John was able to find work tending people’s gardens and helping people with minor car repairs. He also continued to do what he had done since first working for the family friend: “Buying and selling, anything that comes for sale, cheap. I always buy it to sell it on”. Sometimes, although not always, these goods are stolen. On one occasion John bought a bulk quantity of clothes from a warehouse, legitimately, and visited the local pubs selling them at a profit. Also, for a brief period he sold electrical goods which had been recovered and repaired by a local man. However, he had also sold goods such as car radios and clothes that he either suspected or knew to be stolen: “[It’s] easy for me to make money because I know everybody ... there’s a few people I know that are bad, they’d buy anything, no matter what it was”.

John would like to train as a mechanic and has looked for a Youth Training (YT) place, and been for careers guidance. He has also tried asking in local garages and has been placed on the waiting lists of two training providers. The Careers Service also gave him the forms to apply for benefits but he doesn’t “wanna be called a dole-waller or ‘owt like that”. Although hopeful that in the long-run he will be able to find full-time employment, John says he is happy “taking each day as it comes”. When he is not working John spends his time playing football, pool or computer games. He is not involved in drugs, rarely drinks, and described young people who spend their time this way as ‘bums’.

John knows the young people who are involved in criminal activity but has not been involved in crime himself (apart from his informal work and his early arrest for shoplifting). Although friendly with people involved in dealing drugs, John has no interest in them himself. He thinks that although Willowdene has problems, they are no worse than those of comparable places and says he will never leave the locality. John hopes to leave home one day, but at the moment does not regard it as necessary as he pays nothing towards his keep and can come and go as he pleases. In the long term John aims to have a job, home and family but feels “it never happens the way you want it to happen”. Asked about his hopes for the future John says “I don’t like to think about it. I just get on with it. I never think ahead, never”.

Holly: 24 years old, currently on New Deal

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs
15	Goes "off the rails"	Father dies		Begins to drink and smoke
16	"Hates school" and doesn't bother with exam marks	Relationship with mother deteriorates		
17	Begins YT, shop closes Other placement poor – leaves Unemployed for six months Various part-time jobs	Moves in with boyfriend who is an offender		Begins taking speed and smoking cannabis
		Leaves boyfriend, goes to Brighton to 'escape' before returning home		
18	Still working part-time Works in nightclubs	Moves to Manchester with new boyfriend	Sells imitation perfumes	Use of speed and Ecstasy becomes problematic
19				
20	Does NVQ	Moves back to Kelby Gets house in Willowdene with boyfriend		Has given up speed and Ecstasy Cannabis use continues
21	Starts business but low wage and unhappy – leaves	Likes home but not area due to crime		
22	Part-time shop work but leaves after dispute with manager Unable to find work Unemployed for a year	Boyfriend begins HND		
23	Joins New Deal, but no options Is placed on NVQ 3			
24				

Holly is 24 years old and lives in Willowdene with her boyfriend, with whom she has been for six years.

Holly was a good student at school until her father died when she was 15. She received no

emotional or other support at this time: "I just seemed to have no one really so I just went wrong about things". She started smoking and drinking after getting in with the 'wrong crowd', began to truant and rebel, and her relationship with her mother began to deteriorate. She

“couldn’t wait” to leave school and resented the teachers and school rules. Although she sat her GCSEs, she has never collected her results as she didn’t think that they would be worth receiving.

After leaving school Holly went straight into a hairdressing YT scheme. She spent 18 months working in one salon, on placement, before the business closed. She began training at another placement but there was already a junior there who was given the majority of work to do: “They were just giving me all the daft stuff to do while she was getting everything ... so I just left. And I left home at the time so I got in with the wrong boyfriend. Just went a bit wild”. She now feels ‘gutted’ that she got no qualifications. By now she was 18 and her relationship with her mother was worsening. She moved in with her new boyfriend, a young man who was in and out of prison. She left her YT scheme unqualified and spent six months unemployed.

Holly managed to find various part-time jobs working in shops, all of which were gained through word of mouth. She began taking amphetamines and smoking cannabis, and sometimes would not eat due to her low income. She remained with her boyfriend for a year, despite his spells in prison. Through the mediation of her sister, she decided to move back into her mother’s house. Her boyfriend threatened her (his friends attempting to run her over with a car in one incident) and she fled to Brighton to stay with relatives until he went into prison again.

At this point, Holly started to see another boyfriend who worked as a DJ, and they moved to Manchester as he had some work there. Holly was still only able to find part-time shop work, although she also worked in the same nightclub as her boyfriend. She had a short-lived enterprise selling fake perfumes, mainly to friends and family. During this time she began taking large amounts of ecstasy and amphetamines. Although friends and family had expressed concern, it was only when she overheard some girls commenting on how thin she was, and she saw her reflection in a shop window, that she decided to stop. “I thought ‘What have you done?’”; she weighed just over four stone. Holly and her boyfriend decided to move back to Kelby and due to the lack of job opportunities she decided to re-enter training.

After passing a one-year National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in beauty therapy at college,

she went into business with her boyfriend’s mother. They rented a room above a hairdresser’s shop, but the business never took off. Her boyfriend’s mother gave her no actual wage and Holly left to work part-time again in a local clothes shop. She quickly fell out with the manager and lost her job. Although just after this the manager was himself sacked for the way he treated staff, she was unable to work there again. This began a spell of unemployment that lasted for almost a year.

During this time, despite Holly’s wish to find work she was unable to do so: “Even the women in the Job Centre were saying there’s just nothing going, nothing worth having really, there is nothing”. By now Holly and her boyfriend had their own house in Willowdene, and he had begun a Higher National Diploma (HND) at a nearby university. She became bored and lost motivation, describing herself as “stuck in a rut” after failing to find work through local newspapers and by approaching shops in person. She was placed on the New Deal programme when it was introduced.

During the ‘gateway’ period of the New Deal, Holly applied for more jobs, once a fortnight: “It was just you’d go on a Wednesday and sign on and do your job search. If there was some jobs going, apply for them, if not you’d just go home”. At the end of this 16-week period her personal advisor suggested she begin an NVQ level 3 in Business Administration; this was the only option offered. Holly decided to do the course, which – at the time of the interview – she had been on for four weeks. Holly, at 24 years old, was beginning to feel more optimistic about her life and her future. She is enjoying having something to do, does her homework as soon as she gets home every night, and is gaining confidence through giving presentations and learning new skills. She hopes that it will lead to a full-time job in administration, although she has received no careers guidance.

Holly hopes to leave Kelby in the future as she feels there are no labour market opportunities and that the situation can only get worse. Her boyfriend is beginning a degree, and she hopes that when this is completed they can move South, to Kent, where she thinks there is more employment and a better environment in which to raise a family. Although she likes her house in Willowdene she is scared of being burgled and feels intimidated at night. Her aim is to get married, have children and be “just normal”.

Pauline: 20 years old, currently at home looking after child

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs
14	Bullied at school, but no truancy	Living with parents	None	Short-lived cannabis use
15		'Thrown out' of home for a short period		
16	Sat GCSEs (mostly grade Ds)	Living with parents		
17	One year full-time college to do resits Did not improve grades			
18	Started Health and Social Care course at college, left after a couple of weeks Job for 18 months			No drug use
19		Met boyfriend Becomes pregnant, moves in with boyfriend, then shuttles between living alone, living with boyfriend and parental home		
20		Child born, moves to own council house three months later Lives alone, but still has relationship with boyfriend		

Pauline is a single mother living on Willowdene with her baby son. She did not like school – she was bullied and suggests that the school failed to deal effectively with the problem – but her attendance was good and she did not truant. Although thrown out of the house by her mother for a short time at the age of 14, she continued to live at home until the age of 19. Her father is an installation worker; her mother works in the kitchens at a local school. Pauline left school having sat eight GCSEs (one grade A pass, the rest grade Ds, she thinks, but “... can't remember”). At 16 she attended a local further

education college full time for one year in order to resit failed exams. Unfortunately, she only achieved the same grades. She put this down to too much socialising and drinking and to her failure to cope with an environment in which she was treated like an adult, rather than like a child. At the age of 17 she began a Health and Social Care course at the same college but left after a couple of weeks. Following this she had a job for 18 months. At the age of 19 she met her current boyfriend, became pregnant – “[I] fell pregnant and did now't [that is, in regard to career or education]” – and decided to leave home in order

to live with him. The pregnancy was not planned: "... when I found out I was pregnant I was devastated ... I wasn't ready to settle down with a kid...".

Since then she has lived at two addresses (with him); at a third address on her own (following a breakdown in the relationship); has moved back to her mother's house (after the birth of the child); has moved in again with her boyfriend; and finally, has taken up single residence of her own council house on Willowdene (four months before the interview). The relationship with her boyfriend – who is older than Pauline and has several children from previous relationships – continues. She doubts that she will have another child with him and, in any case, would not want another for 10 years.

Pauline has no involvement in crime and little experience of drug use. She does engage in social drinking, but only did street drinking a couple of times at the age of 14-15. She tried mixing cannabis with alcohol at 15 or 16 and was extremely sick, never doing it again. As she said, "You grow up and get wise to these things don't you?". By contrast her younger sister is heavily involved with her peers in cannabis and alcohol use and her brother is a heroin addict who has stolen from family members. Since having the baby, Pauline's social life has changed: "I was out about five nights a week. I used to go in the club with me mam and go to Checkers and go down town", but now, she adds, "I've got the responsibility [of the baby]".

Much of her social life is now spent at her friend Claire's house, the two being old school friends, now re-united by the coincidence of living in the same road. Claire, having no children retains her social life. As Pauline puts it, albeit tongue in cheek, "She's got a life. I haven't!".

Much of Pauline's life is now focused around her concern for the well-being of her child. She smokes to counter the stress caused by the baby not sleeping. She has profound fears about the impact of heroin on Willowdene and how it might impact on him: "I don't know what I'd do with Justin like! Lock him in his bedroom, bars on the window and lock him in his bedroom!". When asked about how she would like Willowdene to change, she asks for "a nice little park or something when the baby gets older ... somewhere where nobody's gonna sit about

drinking". Pauline says that when the baby gets older, and can be left with her mother or put in a crèche, she would like to go to college and train to be a nurse – something she has always wanted to do ("I know I can do it").

Despite having left home at 19 to avoid 'nagging', Pauline has close ties with her mother. She is integrated into the life of Willowdene and says that she feels "in control" of her life.

Lee: 18 years old, currently in prison

Age	School-to-work	Family/housing	Crime	Drugs
11	School "alright" Good at football	Living in Willowdene with mother, father and siblings	Stealing cars, burglary	None
12	Truantiing regularly		Stealing cars, burglary and shop-lifting	Using cannabis and LSD
13	Football career failing			
14	Left school	Brother becomes heroin addict	Increasing criminal activity	Begins heroin use
15	"Doing nowt"	Temporarily on remand in Young Offenders Institution	Burglary conviction	Continues heroin use (non-injecting)
16	Unemployed/prison	In prison for 2½ years		
17		Father begins five-year prison sentence for drug-dealing Family evicted by council Family buy private house in Willowdene	Released from prison Further burglaries Remand again	Cocaine use begins
18		Mother dies Father in prison Lee in prison	Serving four-year sentence for burglary (only five months out of prison since age 15)	

Lee was 18 years old when he was interviewed at a local Young Offenders Institute (YOI) where he was serving a four-year sentence for burglary.

At 11 Lee felt that school "was alright". He was then a very promising footballer, playing for the junior county side and aspiring to a career in the sport. However, he soon began to truant from school regularly and stopped attending altogether when he was 14 years old. School days were replaced by days spent house burgling (in more prosperous areas near to Willowdene), hanging around and stealing cars. Lee is keen to point out that he "never got nicked for joyriding", just for actually stealing the cars. At the age of 15 Lee

first went to prison for shop-lifting and car theft. At 16, was convicted of several burglaries and imprisoned for a further two years. Since the age of 14 Lee has only been out of prison for five months.

From the age of 12 Lee was using drugs regularly – first cannabis and LSD, then heroin – and this had a major impact on his football training: "I just fucked up with the drugs". The prospect of a career in football began to fade and, at around the same time, Lee said that Willowdene changed from what he called a "respectable" place to an area "wrecked by drugs". The availability of heroin in Willowdene at this time – and its

popularity among his friends – was the simple explanation that he gave for the shift towards heroin use. He said that “smack took over” in 1995: “no one said nothing, I didn’t even know about it, and just all the big lads and that, 20 year olds and that, just all started coming round with it”.

Lee’s family had tried to help Lee come off the drugs – for instance, by taking him to a drugs clinic – but to no avail. His mother had never used drugs and Lee was vague about whether his father had used heroin, although he thought not. Because he was afraid of needles, Lee smoked (rather than injected) heroin. At 15, when he was released from a local YOI, Lee ‘graduated’ from heroin to cocaine use: “It [cocaine] was just there.... Heroin just gets you monged, doesn’t it? Coke brings you up, man”. He was paying £60 a gram for cocaine, compared with £45 for heroin, and the increased costs brought about an intensification of his criminal activities.

As well as being involved in further burglaries and car theft, Lee was also selling heroin. His father was a drug dealer and when he was sentenced to five years in prison, Lee and his brother “took over the family business”. This quickly went down hill, however, as Lee and his brother had developed cocaine addictions: “We started blowing all the money on coke and that”. Lee still refused to inject his drugs although his brother did: he was “out of it, bad on it [heroin]”. Lee emphasised that if you sell heroin on Willowdene, you do not deal in cocaine. Hence, he and his brother were buying their cocaine from other dealers in the area while still selling heroin. According to Lee there are drug dealers on every road in Willowdene. Lee and his brother felt compelled to take over their father’s heroin business as they knew, otherwise, another dealer would quickly “clean up” their patch. It was easy to carry on with the dealing, as Lee had learned everything about it from his father. Once he was convicted, the family was evicted by the council from their home: “As soon as he got found guilty and that, they evicted us straightaway, so we bought a private house on Garth Road [in the centre of Willowdene]”.

Lee had never had a job but said that he wanted one in the future. He was intending to sign on the dole on his release. At the time of the interview Lee was enjoying one of the more orderly, settled periods of his life. His mother had

died recently and his father was in prison but he was currently studying for GCSEs in prison and regrets the fact that he did not complete his schooling. Lee says that if he had the choice he would go back to school now. He is also enjoying playing football for the prison team. Lee has a girlfriend whom he hopes to live with eventually. This has given him something to look forward to and helped him cope with his imprisonment. He was, however, concerned about getting involved with his old, drug-using friends from Willowdene (and being drawn back into drug use himself). He described how all “the good people” had left the area. People used to go to the pub for nights out, he says, but none of his mates do that now as everything is for the “brown [heroin]”. Lee is keen for his father to buy a house outside Willowdene for the rest of the family to live in and for him to return to (“away from the drugs”).

Understanding young people's careers and transitions

What can we learn about young people's careers and transitions from these six stories? In this section we identify several analytical themes which help us to understand the different experiences of growing up in a context of social exclusion. It should be stressed that while we have only presented six cases in the previous section, the stories they contain are indicative of the wide range of experiences relayed to us across the full range of interviews. For that reason, where it is appropriate, the following discussion also draws on the content of other interviews.

The range and diversity of career transitions

Perhaps the most striking finding from the study was the sheer range and diversity of transition experiences revealed by the sample. Young people who shared very similar socioeconomic backgrounds and who came from the same geographic place, nevertheless evolved different paths of transition which resulted in different outcomes for them in their early adulthood. Although our six hypothetical career tracks proved invaluable as an investigative device, the reality which they helped to reveal was – as we had anticipated – much more complex than the typology itself. Certainly the typology captured the *range* of transition experiences which individuals had, but locating young persons unambiguously within any one of these six career tracks proved impossible in most cases. The one exception arose with those – such as Lee – who had clearly defined criminal careers. The majority of young people, however, had moved through several careers during their post-school years. Matthew, for instance, had recurrent experiences

of training courses *and* of unemployment. At one time in his late teens he seemed to become involved in a pattern of repeat offending. At the time of interview, however, his main activity was parenting.

The nature of youth transitions

These diverse and complex accounts suggest the need to reconceptualise youth transitions and careers. The following six points are pertinent to understanding the transitions of young people in Willowdene and have implications for how we understand youth transitions more generally.

First, transitions are extraordinarily *complex*. They do not convey a simple, straightforward 'story'. Careers involve a multiplicity of changing statuses over time, which are not connected in a linear, neat and orderly fashion. During her post-16 'school-to-work' career, for instance, Holly has been a youth trainee, employed in a part-time job, unemployed, a further education student, self-employed, involved in informal economic activity and a 'New Dealer'. Some of these statuses are recurrent and some experienced once only. Moreover, not only has Holly experienced fast-changing and multiple training, educational and labour market statuses *over time*, she has also been involved with some of these different activities *at the same time*.

Second, we can observe in these complex stories the *unpredictability*, *insecurity* and *contingency* of (some) youth transitions. If we were able to 'freeze-frame' Holly's biography at a particular point it would be very difficult (without the hindsight provided by retrospective interviews) to foresee with any certainty the likely next steps along the way. For instance, despite starting out

as a trainee hairdresser, seven years later Holly is training in business administration. The training schemes that Holly entered and the jobs, self-employment and informal economic activity she found were typified by their insecurity and temporary nature. We can also see how early transition experiences can have important repercussions later. Failing to gain a qualification from a training scheme or a decent reference from a job, or picking up an early criminal record may hamper the search for secure, decent employment. For example, Rob (aged 20 and currently awaiting New Deal) gained a criminal conviction as he was about to apply to join the army. This deterred him from making the application: "They said you had to wait for so long ... so, I think, I couldn't go back later with a criminal record". This is what we mean when we stress the contingency of these careers: the next steps along the way are heavily contingent on what has happened in previous ones and insecure, unpredictable careers can be established very early on with little opportunity to start afresh in new, positive directions.

Third, these case studies reveal the importance of understanding the *different aspects of youth transitions* and how these interrelate. The six stories show how there is much more to becoming adult than simply making a transition from school to work and that experiences outside of the educational, training and labour market spheres can have dramatic impact on school-to-work transitions. In Matthew's case we can see how events and experiences in different career paths were intertwined. He explained how glue-sniffing from the age of 13 to the age of 19 had serious, negative consequences for his school and labour market experiences and housing situation, and also brought about criminal convictions for violent affray. It contributed to his poor school attendance, his poor attitude when he was there, his failure to gain any qualifications, his inability to sustain post-school training courses and culminated in his imprisonment (and subsequently having to leave home as part of his sentence). Only after he had stopped sniffing glue was he able to take steps to plan his life in more positive ways. Experiences in terms of his housing and family career – forming a stable relationship with a partner and becoming a father – had positive consequences for other aspects of his life. Matthew's cameo suggests that, in addition to tracking school-to-work, family and housing careers, youth research needs also to understand the impact of criminal and drug-using careers if

we are to understand properly the transitions of young people in socially excluded areas like Willowdene.

Fourth, these case studies remind us of the importance of trying to trace *youth transitions over the longer-term*. Previous youth studies have often tended to focus on a relatively narrow age period as people leave school and go through their late teenage years. The longer scope of our study allows us to track the outcomes of these early careers to see how they influence processes of social inclusion and exclusion as people enter their early and mid-twenties and, as noted above, the uncertainty of initial career routes and the possibility of 'extended' transitions. In many cases it was also necessary for us to delve deeper into the late childhood and early teenage years in order to understand how the direction of a transition was originally established. Matthew saw glue-sniffing at 13 as the start of his problems. For Lee a long-term criminal and drug-using career began when he was 11. The death of Holly's father when she was 15 set in train a series of negative experiences which lasted into her mid-twenties.

Fifth, these case studies show how difficult it is – but also how important it is – to attempt to unravel the way that *personal agency* and *structural constraints* interact in shaping youth transitions. Although individuals made clear decisions reflecting their own agency at certain times (for example, whether or not to commence a Youth Training Scheme), these need to be considered within the context of the structures which shape opportunity. Simon (aged 24 and currently employed as a supervisor in a retail outlet) put it as follows: "I try to make the best out of the choices available but I have no control over what choices are available ... so it's a mixture ... I control my own destiny to a certain degree".

Rebecca, Holly, Matthew and John had experienced repeated and lengthy spells of unemployment despite attempts at finding work: they were unable to find jobs and had little choice about this. Holly chose to enter the New Deal programme, but was given no choice about the sort of New Deal option she was to take. Coupled with the fact that failure to take up New Deal opportunities can result in the withdrawal of unemployment benefits, we can see that her 'choices' are only very partial examples of individual agency. Lee's desire to stay off heroin is severely circumscribed by the fact that he is likely

to return to living among other users and by the lack of legitimate alternatives to crime open to him at this stage of his life.

Finally, the cameos demonstrate the importance of *locality* in shaping youth transitions. Interviewees felt that the area in which they lived shaped their opportunities and chances in life. Holly described being a young person in a poor area like Willowdene as: “Shit, it is shit really. If you haven’t been brought up with money ... like a family who can do things and pay for you to do things, then you haven’t really got a chance”. Holly now imagines her future outside Willowdene; somewhere with more job opportunities, where she can feel safe and “be normal”. Interviews made repeated reference to local crime and criminals, to the heroin problems of the area and to problems with anti-social neighbours. Rebecca and her family constantly fear being burgled. Lee worries about returning from prison to Willowdene but has, himself, been a leading member of the criminal and drug-using groups which have generated severe problems for people like Rebecca and Holly. Like them, he accounted for his life experiences in terms of the opportunities – in his case, for trouble, for crime and for drug use – available locally.

These cameos also tell us that while an area might share all the problems and show all the prime indicators of social exclusion, these problems are not shared equally by an area’s young residents. This takes us back to one of the central research themes of the study: the diversity of youth experiences and transitions which are generated in the same place. Rebecca, Matthew, John, Holly, Pauline and Lee had quite different stories to tell and coped with the general difficulties of growing up in Willowdene in quite different ways. None of these biographies, however, can be properly understood in isolation from the local socioeconomic and cultural context from which they evolved.

The influence of locality

An understanding of the locality of Willowdene is vital for a comprehension of young people’s experiences and biographies. We were constantly aware that interviewees’ sociogeographic frames of reference were highly localised. Some had had experiences of living in or visiting places further afield than Willowdene, but these were in the

minority. Most had grown up here and had very limited exposure to different places, communities and cultures. The extent of that limitation was striking. Rob, when asked whether Willowdene was different from other places in Kelby answered: “I dunno. I don’t really venture out...”.

The career paths travelled by young people were shaped by, and explained in terms of, the structure of opportunities that prevailed locally. Generally, people searched for jobs in Willowdene itself or in Kelby town centre which was less than two miles away. The viability of a college course or a training scheme was, in part, dependent on its physical proximity to Willowdene. Rebecca had settled for a ‘second best’ college course because her first choice was not available in Teesside. Access to health services was constrained by geographical distance: Anthony (aged 17), described how he had withdrawn from treatment for his heroin dependency because the drugs service was located a mile and a half away in another part of Kelby. Friendship networks were rooted in the neighbourhood. If these were perceived as influencing a young person towards criminality, efforts were sometimes made to establish other social and leisure activities outside of Willowdene. Matthew, in trying to abstain from glue-sniffing, made a positive decision only to visit friends and places away from his home. Dan (aged 16) was forbidden by his father from socialising in Willowdene and had to make new friends in a more middle-class area of the town.

Willowdene also suffered from negative labelling by others. The area had a poor reputation locally and was often the subject of stories about crime, disorder and drug use in the local press (one of the first strategies of Willowdene Tomorrow – the local community development organisation – was to submit ‘good news stories’ to the Kelby newspaper on a monthly basis). Some interviewees felt that they had suffered directly from this area labelling and described instances of what they perceived as ‘post-code discrimination’ (for example, failing to get job interviews because of their postal address). Nevertheless, the majority of informants were able to describe real problems (for example, being the victim of crime, or living in a place they felt was dangerous) which they had encountered as young Willowdene residents and acknowledged that the area’s poor reputation was in many ways deserved (even if it was unfair that they as individuals were “tarred with the same brush”).

Conceptions of place within Willowdene are highly localised. According to our informants the area was cut through with neighbourhood level social divisions. Rob, like many others, differentiated between 'good' and 'bad' parts of Willowdene: "They're from over that side, we're from over this side". Chiefly, these local divisions revolved around perceptions (which were probably accurate) of the extent of crime and drug use in a particular neighbourhood and of the predominance, or otherwise, of 'criminal families' living there. The problems generated by crime and drugs in 'bad' areas were, however, experienced by Willowdene as a whole. Even if, like Rebecca, you lived in one of the "safer, quieter" parts this did not mean that you were free of the area's problems. Her family now never left their house unattended so fearful were they of burglary.

Despite these problems young people generally remained positive about living in Willowdene. When asked about their future lives, the majority said that they did not want to leave. This might seem strange, given the hardships that they had encountered, but it can be understood in terms of the value they placed on their local networks and knowledge. The parochialism and localism that limited their career opportunities also brought advantages. Their friends, families and partners lived there. Some were bringing up their children there and sending them to local schools. They felt connected to the place and, if they moved to another town or city, they would become disconnected from the local networks that they had learned to rely on for socialising and support, in searching for jobs, decent training schemes and suitable accommodation, and in coping with crime.

The significance of local knowledge and informal social networks cannot be overestimated since, in general, they provide a resource for the management and regulation of life on Willowdene. There is a plurality of such networks and people engage with them for a variety of different reasons (work, friendship, leisure, and so on) and in a variety of different ways. In areas where burglary is commonplace, for example, networks may have an important function. If you want to avoid having your house burgled, it helps to be acquainted with – or, at least, to know others who are acquainted with – potential burglars. That way, you can persuade them not to victimise you. And if you are the victim of a burglary, your chances of recovering the goods

are better if you are acquainted with those who are 'in the know'. Some young people are very much in the know. Darren and Max (both 24, formerly involved in crime but now restricted to periodic 'scams') present themselves as local knowledge brokers ("we know everything that goes on"). Having the capacity to access such local knowledge is, of course, critical for some people in some circumstances. Newcomers are not always welcomed to Willowdene – one interviewee told us "foreigners don't come here anymore". To be sure, those who do come to live there may soon move out (we know of one new family who did so on the same day) unless they have a 'sponsor': someone who is known and respected by other locals, *as 'a local'*. Local networks, together with the knowledge contained within and transmitted through them, are critical to the social regulation of Willowdene.

Willowdene, as a place, is segmented by area and group. This 'mapping' defines for individuals and groups whom it is safe to associate with and where it is safe to go. Through a working knowledge of networks, residents learn how to negotiate their way through a place, parts of which have a legendary toughness. In these places, as Darren and Max put it, only "stone-faced fuckers" get by.

The paradox is that local knowledge and plural networks are both a manifestation of Willowdene's separateness (its 'exclusion') vis-à-vis the wider area, *and a condition of existence of the social inclusion of residents within the locality*. Thus, while Willowdene possesses all of the official, objective indicators of social exclusion, the subjective experience of many young people growing up in the place – certainly those who are party to local knowledge and able to navigate local networks – is one of local 'social inclusion'.

Processes of inclusion and exclusion

In mapping and dissecting the diverse careers and transitions that develop in Willowdene we are focusing centrally on processes of inclusion and exclusion. For young people, these processes take shape most obviously in relation to their levels of engagement and disengagement with formal systems of schooling (prior to 16) and further education and training (after age 16). The whole thrust of current government policy towards 'excluded youth' interprets 'successful transitions' in terms of (re)engaging young people with formal systems of learning and training (DfEE,

2000). Social inclusion is interpreted primarily in terms of individual young people then, and as a consequence, entering employment in early adulthood.

The interviews revealed detailed descriptions of individuals' changing relationships to schooling. For example, there seems to be a strong relationship between young people becoming involved in regular truancy, being excluded (or excluding themselves) from school, and the likelihood that they will become involved in drug use, delinquency and crime. In contrast, relatively successful transitions (for instance, involving regular employment and non-offending) invariably result from academic success, although school and college qualifications in themselves do not guarantee employment. The accounts we gathered demonstrated that processes of engagement and disengagement did *not* play themselves out in a uniform or fixed pattern and that *key moments and experiences*, and *particular people and policies*, could have a very significant effect.

Truancy was a common experience for many in the sample. A total of 64 of the interviewees had truanting at least *once* from school. School was perceived by many as irrelevant or too authoritarian and some fled its confines for the freedom and fun of 'hanging around' the streets or making trips to parks and woods in the area with groups of friends. For some the spur to truancy came from particular problems or events. John felt that his disengagement from school resulted, at least in part, from his (then undiagnosed) dyslexia. Holly had been a 'good student' on track for exam success and continued education until the death of her father and the emotional disturbances that ensued.

Young people's evaluations of school life were often related to how they gauged the worth of *particular* teachers. Many described how the energy and commitment of named teachers had raised their aspirations and achievements. Yet, some described how other tired and cynical teachers had done little more than undermine their confidence. Most, of course, had experienced a mixture of the good and the bad. One young man – Oliver (aged 19) – related how a particularly good teacher had gained pupils' interest by making them "do little story boards and stuff like that". By contrast, the school's response to his dyslexia had been poor. At one point they gave him an amanuensis for the

duration of the exams, but the person concerned "never turned up".

Thus, the reasons for disengagement from school can be quite varied. A common consequence for many, however, was truancy – and, for some, (self-)exclusion from school – followed by a fuller immersion in local, street-based youth networks and longer-term disengagement from the opportunities provided by college and training schemes. While many in the sample – particularly the young men – showed similar early patterns of school disengagement and related delinquency *only for some* did this develop into a sustained, longer-term and serious criminal career. Lee was typical of this latter category.

Of course, the key *formal* turning point in youth transitions happens at the age of 16 as young people finish compulsory schooling and face the various options available in their locality. (Theoretically, young people are prepared for these choices by careers advice. In practice this was viewed by all our interviewees as being largely unhelpful or irrelevant.) In 1998 – the most recent figures available at the time of writing – 42% of Willowdene's young people stayed on in full-time education, 18% joined a Youth Training Scheme, 7% entered full-time employment, 21% were classified as 'not settled' (that is, they were in no fixed, full-time activity and most of these were unemployed), and 12% did not respond to the Careers Service survey on which these figures are based (Future Steps, 1998).

These figures represent only the first destinations of 16 year olds. Young people's accounts of post-16 education and training revealed a complex process of engagement, disengagement and re-engagement over time. Our biographical perspective also reveals that earlier experiences of school disengagement (and delinquency) do not *necessarily* predict that young people will be forever detached from the formal systems of education and training designed to ensure social inclusion. In addition to particular people (such as, teachers, trainers, careers advisers) and life events (such as family bereavements), particular youth policies and projects played a key role in shaping the twists and turns of young people's biographies.

Matthew, who spoke very favourably of his form tutor at school, described how a joinery tutor at college was unduly strict and unsupportive and how this had been a major factor in him dropping

out of his course. He did, however, re-enter training with a local community regeneration project in his early twenties: an experience that he describes very positively and which was only cut short by another particular life event (his industrial injury). Youth Training Schemes were not held in high regard by some of the interviewees and Holly's experiences were not unusual. Although she was committed to her first YT placement the business closed down. In her second she was given only menial, low-level tasks to do. She left this placement, and two years spent on YT, with no qualifications and no job. By the time of the interview, however, she was happy to be participating in the New Deal programme and regarded it as a positive way of putting her life back on track.

Family

One factor revealed by the research was the extent to which young people had experienced personal loss, either by virtue of family breakdown or through bereavement. Out of the 98 young people interviewed, 42% were either living or had lived in single parent families. This figure is high in comparison with national totals: Census figures for 1991 show that 19% of families with dependent children in England and Wales were single parent ones. (The same source reveals figures of 23% for Tees Valley, 30% for Kelby, 39% for Willowfields and 52% for Willowdene Rise.) In addition, 10 young people in the sample had experienced loss through the death of a parent, sibling, partner or child. We should not be surprised by the experience of bereavement in such a young population. Both the Black Report of 1979 and the recent Acheson Report (DoH, 1998) confirm the relationship between morbidity, mortality and socioeconomic deprivation. Indeed, the recent *Economic audit of the Tees Valley* (Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit, 1998) noted, among other indicators of social deprivation, that poor health in Teesside is very pronounced with 29% of households affected, compared to 25% nationally.

Clearly bereavement can influence families in different ways according to circumstances. Holly's school-to-work transition was severely disrupted by the death of her father for which she received no emotional or other support at the time. Yet, her family was also an important source of support and protection from the negative influence of her boyfriend. Family illness and

death can create tensions among surviving family members especially around issues of care and financial loss. Colin, aged 20, related the detrimental effects of his grandmother's illness and death on himself and his mother. Because of her illness, they had returned to Willowdene from overseas in order to care for her. Colin, 15 at the time, disliked the locality and has struggled to find decent work, in-between unemployment and training schemes, ever since. When his grandmother eventually died his mother became depressed and had to claim sickness benefit. They also lost the care allowance which they had previously received. Although Colin was at college and working part-time, while signing on, he was eventually forced to drop out of his course in order to retain the benefits on which the household depended. Yet Colin also felt that this extra responsibility had given him motivation and direction.

Many interviewees experienced what might be regarded as 'normal' family life. For example, Hannah, aged 16, explained her 'difference' from other young people on Willowdene, in terms of the firm and protective – yet positive – influence of her parents. Hannah was not allowed to hang around on the streets, and although her parents' protectiveness sometimes annoyed her, she was generally happy to share the company of her sister and parents. Peter, aged 17, also lived with his employed parents. He felt that they had influenced his upbringing positively by being neither "too lenient" nor "too heavy". Peter was waiting to commence a training course. He had never used drugs, had no involvement in crime and knew nobody who had.

By contrast, some young people's family experiences had a direct bearing on their subsequent criminal and drugs careers. Anthony, aged 17, lived with his mother throughout his childhood and early youth. His father was in prison for most of this time. At the age of 14 Anthony was involved in shop-lifting, stealing from sheds, drinking and cannabis use. Soon after, he tried to separate from the street culture which supported this behaviour. From 15 onwards, however, events connected to family members conspired to set Anthony on a serious and negative drugs career. His cousin, who lived nearby, was released from prison and introduced Anthony to heroin. His cousin's parents were long-term drug users and dealers, having invested a large amount of family inheritance and compensation money into the initial stock. At 16,

Anthony's mother discovered that he was using heroin. She asked him to leave home and ceased providing any financial support: "She doesn't wanna know me". After finding himself homeless and with no immediate source of income to fund his increasingly serious heroin habit, Anthony returned to crime. In this case, Anthony's early experiences of his father's absence, and much later, of rejection by his mother, speak of loss. Family relatives were the source of his drug use and criminality, the rejection and punishment of this behaviour by his mother compounding Anthony's drug use and criminality through his homelessness.

Family experiences, in general, impacted on young people in complex ways. The influence and significance of mothers, whether negative or positive, was mentioned during the interviews a lot more than that of fathers. In many cases parents – but particularly mothers – had made strenuous efforts to dissuade their children from truancy, crime and drug use. Sometimes this was successful, sometimes it was not, on occasions it was only partially so. Unlike his friend Darren, Max – due to the influence of his strict mother – never burgled houses. Instead, he restricted his criminality to the sale of stolen goods, including those burgled by his friend, Darren. Examples like this point to the complexity and contingency of family-related influences. Thus, tragedy and tribulation might produce positive, partly positive or negative outcomes depending on the circumstances. Dave, aged 23 and in prison, has recently experienced a bereavement, his brother having died from a drug overdose. Yet, despite the pain of this loss, the event has also had a positive effect, reinforcing Dave's anti-drug sentiments (he has never used drugs). The experience of Laura (aged 19) is similar. Her mother has been in and out of prison, and is a heroin addict. Despite, or because of this disruptive home life, Laura is against heroin, having seen its effects on her mother: "I've lived without my mum while she was in jail; it didn't turn me to crime...". Pauline's unplanned pregnancy had a major impact on her housing and work transitions, as well as placing severe restrictions on her social and leisure pursuits. Yet motherhood has also caused her to redefine her priorities in a fundamental way. Nowadays her main concern is with the upbringing of her small child whom she "wouldn't be without". By contrast, similar events may produce devastating effects. Brad was 12 years of age when he made his 16-year-old girlfriend pregnant. The

consequences were profound: no further school attendance beyond 12; fatherhood and co-habitation with his girlfriend at 13; heroin use at 14; shoplifting and burglary at 15; fatherhood for a second time at 16; on remand, awaiting trial for conspiracy to supply heroin, at 17.

Finally, a consistent finding of the research was that, whatever the nature of individual family experiences, young people shared a conventional outlook and aspiration to marry, settle down and have children themselves. This aspiration was found throughout the sample, including among persistent criminals and drug users who had had the least positive experiences of family life. For virtually all young people in the sample the future is seen conventionally as "nice husband or wife, nice house and nice car".

Work and the economy

Getting a 'proper job', to use the local term, is often taken to be a key indicator of a successful career transition and the majority of our interviewees also placed similar value on gainful employment. Although many regarded a regular, secure job as an important aspect of adulthood, few people in the sample had experienced work in this form (seven were currently employed; 21 had been in the past). The absence of employment was a key feature of the transitions they made. That is not to say that *work* was absent from their lives or that they had developed what is sometimes called a 'culture of dependency' where reliance on state unemployment benefits is preferred to gainful employment. People worked outside the formal labour market: caring for children and in the home (Pauline and Matthew); in more informal economic activities (John); on Youth Training Schemes or New Deal programmes (Holly); or in criminal enterprises (Lee).

In many cases, interviewees had been ineligible for, or opposed to claiming, unemployment benefits. John commented that he did not want to be "called a dole-waller or owt like that". Even in this high unemployment area where many, including parents and other family members, had been long-term unemployed there was a general resistance to living a life on benefits. For some of the younger members of the sample, like John, this combined with the fact that under-18 year olds are normally unable to claim. A common

response to the limitations of the formal labour market was to seek more casual, cash-in-hand work. Like 'proper jobs' these occasional bits of work tended to be found through word-of-mouth via local contacts. In many cases they were legitimate (in the sense that they did not infringe tax or benefit regulations) but sometimes they would merge with criminal enterprises (for instance, the selling on of stolen or counterfeit goods). For John and Holly this was the limit of their criminality. Others talked about their longer-term criminal endeavours in much the same way that people talk about their jobs.

Informants who were engaged in acquisitive crime to support dependent drug use (for example, of heroin) described and explained their daily activities by reference to those categories of experience which social psychologists say define work more broadly (Jahoda, 1982). Activity is enforced (by the pressing need to satisfy drug dependency); social contacts are developed (in local networks for the trading of stolen goods and drugs); social identities are evolved (in terms of positive local images of successful criminals); and goals and purposes are located within a time structure (by the daily imperatives and routines of earning cash through crime and its exchange for drugs). These informants saw crime (and related drug use and trading) *as work* and often used the same colloquial expressions to describe their activities. In the past 'grafting' has meant hard, physical labour of the sort which typified this local economy. Within Willowdene it also has another, more specific, meaning: the burgling of houses.

Some had managed to secure regular employment but, typically, this was after various spells of unemployment. There are job opportunities within the local youth labour market but they are not great in number, are often part-time or short-term, and are generally low paid and of poor quality. Some interviewees had even been turned down for archetypal youth labour market jobs (such as working in burger bars or as sales assistants in local, budget shops). Although some of our interviewees spoke about their experiences of working in "shit jobs" with poor pay, few prospects and little inherent reward none could identify any positive aspects to worklessness and the majority were prepared to work for low pay in poor conditions.

One young man (Simon, aged 24) had left school at 16 and, over the next few years, had variously

been a college student, a Youth Trainee and long-term unemployed. He obtained occasional bouts of Christmas seasonal work, the first of which – a stock-room job in a high street store – had a profound effect on him:

"... it was the first one actually where I worked in ... the stock room. Bombing around getting all the gear for Christmas and stuff. And I loved it. I surprised myself at how much I enjoyed it, 'cause it was the tempo and the constant work, sort of thing. And the other thing that I really liked about [it] was... they could keep one person on and it wasn't me, it was another guy. But if it wasn't the other guy it would've been me sort of thing. Which made me think, 'Bloody hell. I nearly made it there'."

Although it was a further three years before Simon obtained full-time employment, this experience – "I realised that I fucking enjoy graft, when it's genuine honest graft" – had an impact on his future attitude towards work. He now subscribes strongly to the view that it is better to work for low wages rather than to stay on the dole.

Rebecca had also been able to find full-time work. Until recently her job paid her £50 per week; this had now risen to the level of the minimum wage but most of her income went on paying the rent of her parent's council house. Related to this, interviewees generally – but not in all cases – expressed a positive attitude to training and New Deal schemes. Some criticised the quality of the training provided in colleges or on placement or gave instances of unfair or exploitative treatment. Some acknowledged that they had not committed themselves properly to the training provided. Others – such as Matthew and Holly – regarded their training courses or New Deal schemes as another chance to gain qualifications after failing at school and to lift themselves out of their current, limited circumstances.

Crime and drugs

Our findings revealed high levels of drug use among the sample (65 admitted having used drugs; 21 admitted having used heroin) and relatively high levels of criminality (39 admitted having criminal convictions). In writing this report we deliberated, at length, on whether to discuss

the issues of crime and drugs separately or together. Although mindful that there is no simple relationship between the two, the appearance of heroin on Willowdene in the mid-1990s had such a dramatic impact on the community that we considered it vital to examine crime and drugs together.

Willowdene's "local economy of crime" existed long before the influx of heroin. Wayne (aged 21), although now imprisoned for burglary offences linked to his heroin habit, had been a member of the same criminal peer group from his early teenage years. Goods stolen by young males, like Wayne, circulate in a criminal economy whose existence is taken for granted by many young people whether they engage with it or not. Yet, participation in the benefits of this economy is by no means the prerogative of the young. Darren and Max describe how an old lady used to leave her porch door open at night (together with a plentiful supply of tea and biscuits) so that they might escape the police when stealing cars. In return, they would give her "a favour for a favour". As Max put it, "There's a lawnmower for you".

The influx of heroin had a major impact on the community, on the local criminal economy and on the lives of individual young people. A common theme across the interviews was that, with the growth of heroin, the community had undergone a decline in terms of its safety, solidarity and cohesion, changing from what Lee claimed was a 'respectable' place to one 'wrecked by drugs'. Many young people commented on the growth of heroin-related property crime, on their families' experiences as victims of burglary and on the widespread fear of such victimisation among residents. Although some felt that the impact of crime on them was minimal, the great majority of young people said they were affected by it. Overall, the growth of acquisitive crime has had a major impact on residents' quality of life. Jane, a 22-year-old single mother, told us that she would never carry her handbag to work for fear of being robbed.

Heroin impacted on the local criminal economy in several ways. First, Willowdene was the source of the cheapest heroin in Teesside, a fact which fuelled demand from locals, attracted large numbers of outsiders and increased the number of local suppliers. Second, as we have inferred, heroin gave rise to a quantitative increase in acquisitive crime and to the corresponding growth

of stolen goods in circulation. As a result, the value of stolen goods fell, leading to a change in the character of acquisitive crime. A number of interviewees, currently imprisoned for burglary theft and handling offences, stated that their desire for 'fast money' (to purchase heroin), coupled with the falling value of 'conventional' stolen goods (such as video players) caused them to focus more and more on the theft of jewellery and cash. Third, the influx of heroin sometimes generated 'rough justice'. Paddy (aged 18) referred to the people who burgled his parents' house having "paid for it": "My uncle took 'em up the moors man, broke their kneecaps".

The impact of heroin on the lives of young people was also dramatic. Although, as we have said, a significant number of those interviewed used or had used drugs they invariably drew a distinction between recreational use and the heroin-dependency of the 'smack-head'. Rod, aged 20 and currently serving a 14-month jail sentence for burglary, expressed his fears about returning to heroin: "I'd rather be in here clean, than out there with a habit ... I know it's your freedom and that but I'm happy in here...". People told us, repeatedly, that 'smack-heads' could not be trusted as they would beg, borrow or steal from anybody, including their own families. Non-using criminals perceived them to be indiscriminate, predatory and incompetent in their criminal activity; to live outside the established networks of mutual advantage and support; and be prone to 'grass' on others. When Rod only smoked cannabis he hated 'smack-heads':

"We'd say, 'Look at them scruffy horrible bastards' ... 'They're fucking scum' ... we used to fight 'em and batter 'em ... just 'cause they were on heroin.... But when you get on it yourself, it's a different story ... you can't call 'em no more 'cause you're in the same boat...."

The onset of criminal careers sometimes preceded drug use, though the use of heroin intensified them. Phil (aged 19) began joyriding and carrying out burglaries at the age of 13. At about the same time, he stopped going to school – having truanting since the age of 11 – and began drinking, only later progressing to LSD use (he tried heroin only once and didn't like it). Phil declares himself to be a member of a criminal family. With 60 convictions to date, he received his first custodial sentence at the age of 15 and is now on his fifth, having spent most of the last four years in

custody. Unlike Phil, Wayne – one of many with a similar history – began to use heroin at the age of 18 after years of petty crime. At this point his criminal activities escalated both in number and seriousness (including some till snatches in which he was disguised with a Balaclava helmet and armed with a baseball bat). Wayne says his parents tried to discourage his criminal activity though he also admitted that the proceeds of that activity contributed to the family budget. Interestingly, he had reassured his parents that, like his brothers, he would eventually grow out of crime:

“He’s done it, my other brother’s done it, they’ve grew out of it, now I’m doing it ... and I will grow out of it eventually. There’s nothing you can change.”

A composite profile of those in criminal careers would go as follows. Truancy tends to be followed by the cessation of school at age 12-13. From this point on, subsequent education or training, or contact with employment agencies or schemes, is unlikely. In the great majority of cases, the young person will never have signed on the unemployment register or claimed benefit: “I’m not a dole-waller. I never sign on. I was a thief, that’s my own occupation” (Dave).

Clearly defined criminal and drug careers are discernible from the age of 13. The precise relationship of criminality to drug use, and the type of drug career – whether organised primarily around alcohol, cannabis or heroin – may be crucial to both criminal and drug career outcomes. The sequence of offending may be from shop-lifting to car crime (including thefts of cars and car parts for local rings), to street robbery to domestic burglary, and to commercial burglary. The sequence of drug use is from early glue sniffing and/or habitual/heavy drinking to cannabis, amphetamines/speed, and in some cases heroin use, and very occasionally to crack-cocaine use.

Of course this composite picture hides many points of convergence and divergence between drug and criminal careers. There is clearly a strong relationship between drug use and criminality but this is unlikely to be a simple causal relationship. Dave, interviewed at 23, specialised in street robbery but had never used drugs, whereas for Jerry interviewed at 21, “crime, money and drugs” had become “a way of life” by the age of 14. In combining quite long-standing criminal and drug careers Jerry had, at 18 to 19,

started getting into heroin, “and that’s when it all went downhill from there” – more serious crimes, taking higher risks – “doing anything at all, anything, to get money for the smack”.

The factors shaping individuals’ transitions ‘into’ and ‘out of’ crime are complex and varied. Some transitions are obviously linked to key events. We have already referred to the consequences of Brad becoming a father at 12 years of age. Likewise, Ian (aged 18), who had worked hard at school having taken 11 GCSEs, “went off the rails” when his parents split up. Only his departure from Willowdene – an aunt took him to live with her in London where he gained a job as a chef – enabled him to avoid further involvement in drugs and crime. Just as critical events, such as bereavement, separation or divorce may precipitate criminality, other factors may facilitate the termination of crime and drug use. Thus, Ian’s friend, Paddy, who had also been involved in crime felt that he (Paddy) had been ‘straightened out’ once he had secured a post (also as a trainee chef). Overall, it would seem that those who desist from – rather than persist in – crime may exhibit one or more of the following:

- engagement with training and/or college;
- engagement with temporary, informal or legitimate (though usually casual) employment;
- avoidance of, and affected contempt for, ‘smack-heads’;
- participation in a stable relationship with a partner;
- experience of the criminal justice system;
- acceptance of responsibility for others (such as one’s own children or other young people in the area).

A recurrent theme among those who regarded *themselves* as criminals was their perception of crime as an alternative form of work. We have already seen that, in Lee’s case, drug-dealing was, literally, “the family business”. Wayne expressed it as follows:

“I would regard it as work ... ‘cause it was a routine thing... Getting up in the morning, getting ready, going out, going to work, coming home. Our mam’d have the tea there ready for us. We’d give her 60 quids ... It’s just like going to work.”

One might conclude from this that some

individuals 'chose' to pursue a criminal career. Certainly, some expressed that view. Rod said "I liked the way I was living then ... I was ... doing what I wanted. I didn't wanna go to work. I wanted to do what I wanted to do...". Like others expressing this view, however, Rod now wishes he had chosen to stay on at school to improve his training, educational and work opportunities. In retrospect, the great majority of interviewees who are now involved in crime and drugs regard their prior choices as having been made with limited knowledge of their consequences. Rob, when asked "Did you know what you were getting yourself into [when you took heroin]?" answered bluntly: "No, you're joking aren't you? I don't think anybody did".

Conclusions

Summary and main findings

- Few young people in Willowdene have experience of full-time, regular employment. Many of them come from single-parent families and a significant number have experienced bereavement.
- Despite their similar socioeconomic backgrounds and common residence, young people in Willowdene exhibited highly diverse transitions, most of them moving through a variety of different career paths as they approached adulthood.
- The one exception was with those involved in criminal careers for whom uniformity of experience was the norm. Typically, these young people had disengaged from school by the age of 12 or 13; had participated with their peers in street drinking, drug use and petty crime from an early age; and had later progressed to more serious crime and drug use.
- Criminal transitions were severely exacerbated by the influx of heroin into Willowdene in 1995. Heroin also transformed the local criminal economy and has had a devastating impact on the local community.
- With the exception of criminal careers, we found young people's transitions to be complex, multiple, non-linear, often disorderly and sometimes unpredictable. Contingent factors (such as the influence of a particular teacher, the break-up of their parents' marriage or the experience of bereavement) sometimes had significant effects on transitions.
- Virtually all young people in Willowdene adhere to the traditional aspirations of conventional society: "nice husband or wife, nice job, nice house, nice car".
- Most young people in Willowdene have no wish to live off state hand-outs. Many are willing to work for poor wages rather than live on the dole. The great majority of those involved in crime had never signed on or had contact with official agencies, other than criminal justice ones.
- Early transitions (from 12 or 13) often had a significant impact on later ones (beyond 18 and 19). This suggests that youth policy and the academic study of youth transitions has to adopt a wider time frame than that previously adopted.
- Any analysis of youth transitions (and any policy based on such analysis) has to explore the relationship between structural factors (such as socioeconomic conditions) and the factors shaping young people's choices.
- A critical factor mediating between 'structure' and 'choice' is the specificity of place. By any objective measure, Willowdene may be defined as a 'socially excluded' place. Yet, to describe it as such is to obscure much of the complexity and difference found there.
- An understanding of that complexity and difference helps to explain why the great majority of young people have no desire to leave Willowdene, despite the difficulties many of them face. Within Willowdene there is a plurality of informal social networks which, individually and collectively, help individuals manage their lives (for example, by finding them regular or irregular work). On the one hand, the existence of, and need for, these local networks is confirmation of Willowdene's 'social exclusion' vis-à-vis the wider locality. On the other hand, they are a condition of existence of young (and older) people's 'social inclusion' within Willowdene.

Policy implications

This discussion of young people's experiences of transitions in a context of social exclusion has implications for a broad range of policy arenas. The accounts that young people gave raise important questions, for instance, in respect of national and local policies for economic development and the creation of decent employment for young adults, for criminal justice and debates about the best way to intervene in criminal careers, for social security policy and the provision of adequate welfare support for young people and for high quality education and training that is valuable and relevant to young people. We must, however, for reasons of space, leave the implications of our study in respect of these wider policy arenas largely implicit.

The Connexions strategy and service

Instead, we focus on the government's main, current youth policy development which is particularly relevant to this study: the new Connexions service and strategy (DfEE, 2000). The strategy recognises the complex and long-term nature of youth transitions and aims to provide "a ladder out of social exclusion" for young people by "breaking the cycle of non-participation and underachievement" (DfEE, 2000, p 14). As such, it resonates with the findings of this report and we believe that we can make a useful contribution to its implementation and evaluation.

The origins of the Connexions strategy lie in the White Paper *Learning to succeed* (DfEE, 1999) and in the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) report *Bridging the gap* (SEU, 1999). The focus on post-16 education and on 16 to 18 year olds not in education, employment or training (so-called 'status-zero' youth), should not hide the important innovation of the introduction of a new youth support service developed in these reports. The SEU's report, in particular, recognises that current service provision for young people is fragmented and uncoordinated. The Connexions strategy therefore intends to take an holistic approach to policy implementation and practice with respect to service provision, and focuses on the 13 to 19 age range. An even more recent report from the SEU – *Towards a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal* (2000) – places similar emphasis on developing an holistic, policy response to the complex, interrelated and

multiple disadvantages faced by young people from deprived areas.

The Connexions service will be delivered through a network of personal advisors drawn from a range of professions which currently work with young people. They are to receive specific training and will be based in a variety of locations, including community settings. They are to ensure that 13- to 19-year-old young people are engaged in learning and that their needs be met by the relevant specialist services. They will provide: information and advice on career, learning and employment choices; in-depth guidance for those identified as 'at risk of disengaging'; and intensive and sustained support for those with 'multiple problems'. A partnership approach to delivering the service will involve careers service companies, Youth Offender Teams, Drug Action Teams, school and college support services.

The new policy interest in young people – particularly those growing up in socially excluded areas – signaled by the government's recent SEU reports and by the new Connexions strategy is to be welcomed and we offer qualified support to these policy developments. The evidence from our study provides support for the key themes and proposals of the Connexions strategy:

- first, the development of a flexible curriculum that engages young people in learning and leads to 'relevant qualifications' through work-based vocational learning in the final two school years;
- second, an intention to ensure the quality and relevance to local labour markets of post-16 education and training provision, primarily through the development of vocational provision;
- third, financial support and incentives for those young people who stay in education and training (through an increase in the basic level of training allowance but chiefly through the Education Maintenance Allowance);
- finally, the provision of information, advice, support and guidance via the new youth support service.

Many of our informants emphasised the irrelevance of a too rigid academic curriculum, in contrast to the enjoyment and benefits they had received from school-based work experience. Some pointed to the disappointment they felt after being given the opportunity to do 'proper work'

on returning to school, and others had been excluded or had excluded themselves directly because of the perceived irrelevance school had had for them. One policy development worthy of note here is the education maintenance allowance (EMA), a national initiative which is currently being piloted in Kelby. The EMA pays young people up to £30 per week to stay on in education. Teesside has traditionally had low levels of post-compulsory education. In 1998, 48% of Kelby school-leavers stayed on in education (compared with 25% in 1974). Following the introduction of the EMA, however, this figure rose to 64% in 1999. That this striking increase occurred after the introduction of the EMA points to the possibility that young people who are disaffected from education can be encouraged to stay on. Some of our interviewees were aware of this new incentive to remain in education and at least one, Samantha aged 16, described this as the major reason that she had decided, despite her very mixed experiences of school, to enrol at college. The tailoring of good quality post-16 education and training to local labour markets, and realistic financial incentives and support, may help to dispel the scepticism that some young people share towards the Youth Training Scheme and New Deal.

Our particular focus here, however, is on the issues, dilemmas and problems raised in our study that might inform the delivery of a new youth support service. These are considered below.

Some issues for the Connexions strategy and service

There are four broad areas where we are able to make some, necessarily preliminary and brief, comment on the proposed strategy and service.

Tracking

The Connexions service intends that regional partnerships involving key agencies such as the Careers Service and the Youth Service be responsible for 'tracking' young people. As our research shows, a too narrow and restricted view of what this might entail will be to the detriment of young people. In our retrospective mapping and tracking of individual young people's careers and transitions it was found that these were complex, long-term and often unpredictable. The resource implications and anticipated intensity of the work for the new service should be clear.

Personal advisors

It is clear that the role of the personal advisor will be a demanding one. Personal advisors will need to be highly sensitive to the types of major life events described in the study and for which there were shown to be glaring gaps in support. Crucial points in young people's lives such as bereavement, family break-up or the imprisonment of their father, if they are to be supported, require personal advisors to possess in-depth, detailed and long-term knowledge of young people under their care. In attempting to provide such support, they will need to draw on a wide range of agencies and services. They will be expected to work across service boundaries, yet they will be employed and based within one service agency. In addition, large and demanding caseloads will not be conducive to effective work with young people. There are obvious tensions between these different elements. A universal support service is to be welcomed, but how personal advisors manage their work between the extremes of intensive support work and the provision of basic information to young people, will be central to its success.

The work of personal advisors with the most 'disaffected' and 'at risk' young people will be particularly demanding. Some of our informants, from as early as 12 years of age, had had virtually no contact with formal groups or agencies outside locally-based peer networks (that is until they eventually collided with the police and criminal justice system). Many informants, whether they had offended or not, reported an adversarial contact with the police. We might question how the young people who are most disengaged and disenchanted with formal structures will react to the intervention of the personal advisor in a way that is different from current service arrangements. For example, in Kelby, school-based Education Welfare Officers, who are responsible for ensuring that young people participate in learning, were referred to in our interviews as 'school bobbies'. It is possible that personal advisors will be regarded in much the same manner by those young people most in need of their support and, importantly, by their families. Among those with most experience of working with detached youth, the Community and Youth Workers Union's (CYWU) response to the Connexions strategy commented that:

Many of those young people most needy of the new services will only be contacted

meaningfully using the outreach and detached work method developed successfully within youth work.... [E]xcluded young people ... will not automatically attend sessions with personal advisors. Indeed, the most excluded will at best sceptically experiment with any new facilities. (CYWU, 2000, p 5)

We would agree that, in tracking, contacting and maintaining contact with the most 'excluded' or 'disaffected' young people, this youth work approach may be essential to the success of the strategy. In these cases personal advisors will have most effect if they are seen by young people to be acting independently of agencies and as advocates for them in their dealings with agencies. However, the adoption of an advocacy role based on trust and confidentiality may not sit comfortably with the legal and formal demands made by statutory and non-statutory partners such as police, social services and the Connexions agency itself. They will be uneasy about young peoples' engagement with 'fiddly work' and hostile to their involvement in 'scams' or crimes. In consequence, personal advisors may face pressure from these agencies to provide information about 'disaffected' young people, a demand which would conflict directly with their role as young peoples' advocates. In those circumstances, some young people might be reluctant to invest their trust in the service.

Ongoing support

Although the service aims to support young people across the 13 to 19 age range it is possible that, in some cases, support will be needed before and after these ages, and continuously over longer periods. Our research demonstrated that some young people are likely to have had experiences by the age of 13 which already define the context within which they make decisions and perceive formal structures. Similarly, a transfer of responsibilities from personal advisors to the New Deal programme beyond 19 may disrupt ongoing support which will be necessary for some young people.

Local relevance

Perhaps of greatest concern from the point of view of our research, is that while the strategy pledges to ensure *locally relevant* qualifications and training, this may be irrelevant in areas, such as Kelby, with a chronic lack of decent employment opportunities for young people.

Finally, our research suggests that youth policy faces a paradox. Although young people in Willowdene live in one of the most *structurally* deprived areas in Britain, the variety of their transitions demands that policy makers have a clear understanding of the *local* factors which produce diversity in places such as this.

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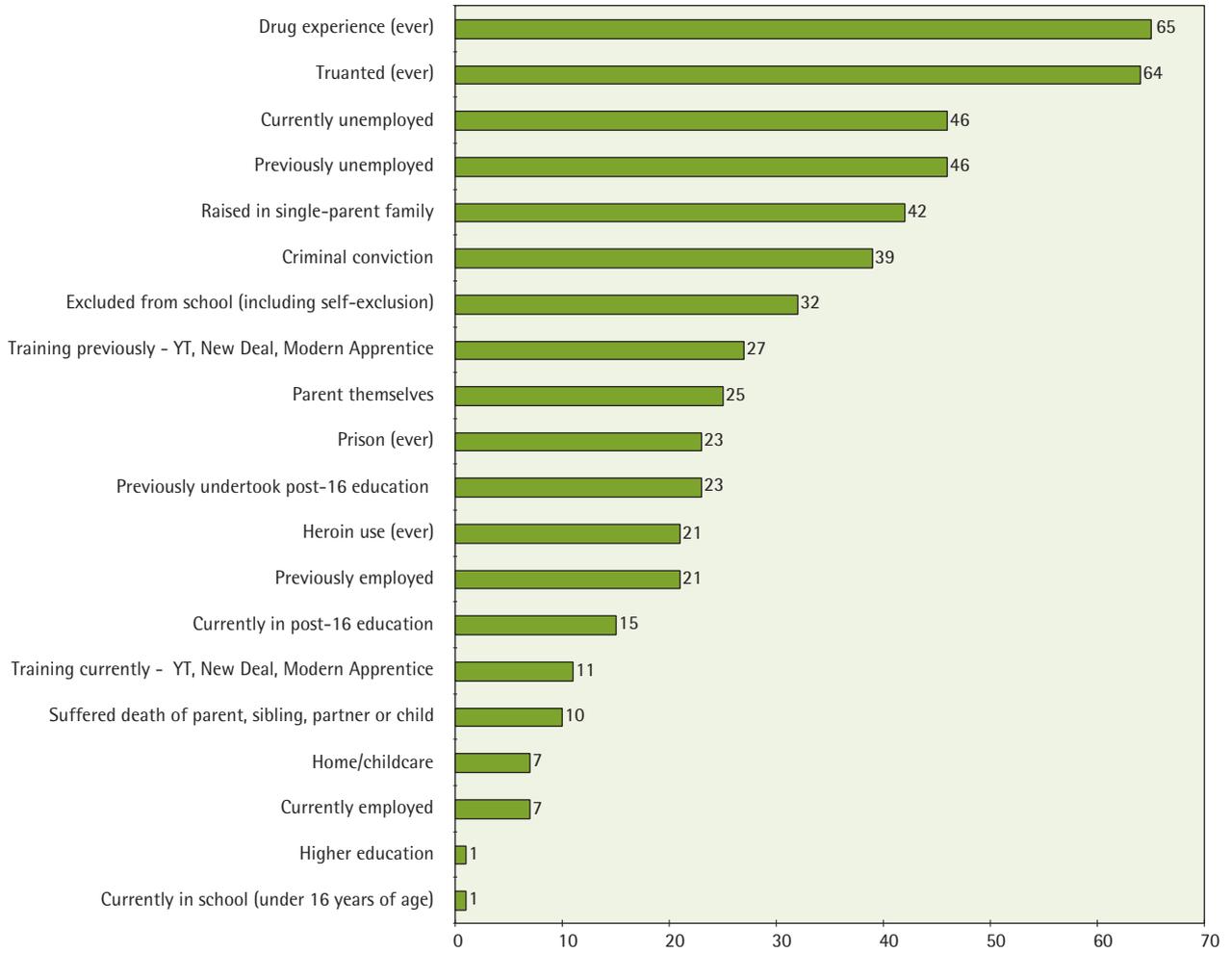
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Appendix A: Positive responses

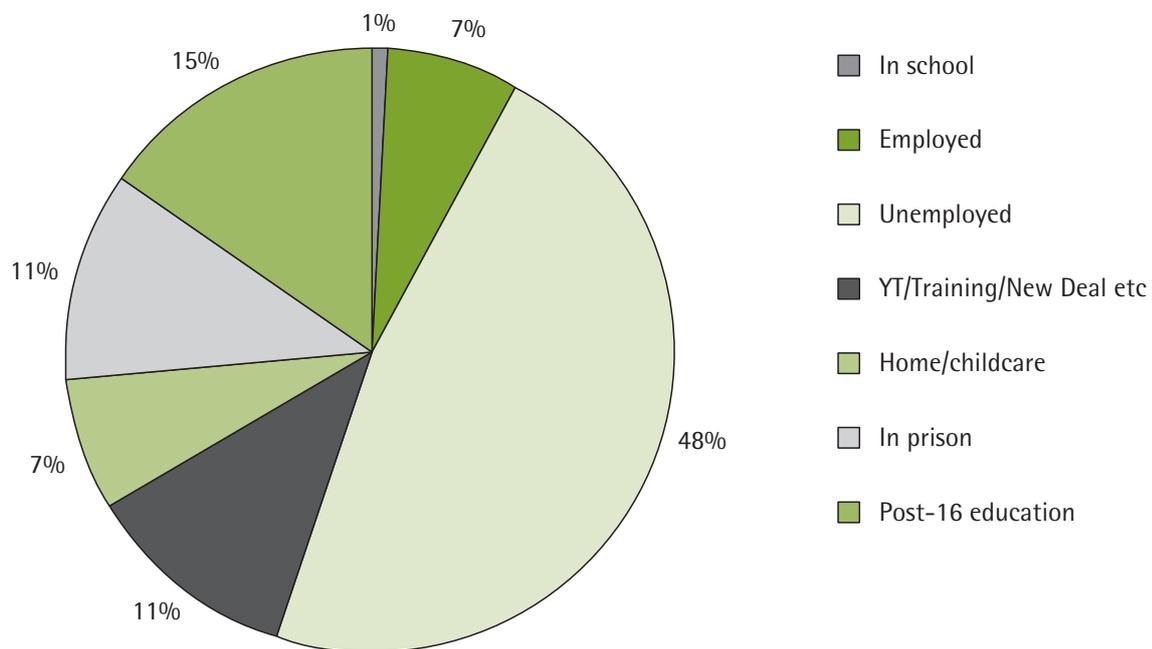
Ref	Question	Yes responses
1.1	Living with parent(s)	51
1.2	Living with extended family/friends	7
1.3	Living with partner	8
1.4	Lives alone	15
1.5	Prison	11
1.6	No fixed abode	4
1.7	Not known	2
2.1	Parent themselves	25
3.1	Raised in single-parent family	42
4.1	Suffered death of parent, sibling, partner or child	10
5.1	Currently unemployed	46
6.1	Previously unemployed	46
7.1	Currently employed	7
8.1	Previously employed	21
9.1	Previously undertook post-16 education	23
10.1	Currently in post-16 education	15
11.1	Currently in school (under 16 years of age)	1
12.1	Training currently – YT, New Deal, Modern Apprentice	11
13.1	Training previously – YT, New Deal, Modern Apprentice	27
14.1	Higher education	1
15.1	Truanted (ever)	64
16.1	Excluded from school (including self-exclusion)	32
17.1	Criminal conviction	39
18.1	Prison (ever)	23
19.1	Drug experience (ever)	65
20.1	Heroin use (ever)	21
21.1	Home/childcare	7

Sample: 98 interviewees; 82 interviews

Positive responses



Appendix B: Current status of interviewees



Appendix C: Current living arrangements

