

Growing up in Northern Ireland

Findings
Informing change

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This study examines the lives of 18 young people growing up in (and sometimes leaving) Northern Ireland during a period of profound social and political change. The backdrop to their diverse stories is a place in transition after three decades of conflict.

Key points

- Young people voiced a need for more flexible learning conditions, easy return routes to education, and individual guidance and mentoring throughout school. Social networks were key as young people sought work. Young parents depended on family support for childcare to return to work.
- A few young people had experienced long-term unemployment. Training schemes and short-term/casual work defined their 20s, with significant impact on their self-esteem. There is a gap in support for those in their late 20s who want to return to work, training or education.
- Critical events like unplanned pregnancy, bereavement, family relationship breakdown, parental separation, and unemployment had significant and often negative long-term effects on young people's circumstances, including housing. Many reported feelings of stress, depression or anxiety, linked to education, unemployment, debt, relationships, and sexual identity.
- This group was part of the first generation to grow up in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland. However, their political interest and knowledge were low and the majority had never voted.
- There was little evidence of young people choosing to live in mixed communities, or that this was easily possible. For young parents, the primary location factor was the need to be close to family. This generally tended to perpetuate 'single identity' communities.
- For lone parents, access to flexible working arrangements was key to facilitating a work-home balance. This highlights the impact of inadequate state childcare provision, and the dependence on family support to facilitate a return to work.

The research

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Background

The 18 young people from Northern Ireland featured in this study were part of a larger, long-term project (*Inventing Adulthoods*). This study draws on their biographies and shows the impact of youth-relevant policies on real lives. It also identifies gaps and weaknesses in policies and service delivery. The young people were first interviewed aged between 13 and 23 in 1997–9, and re-interviewed up to seven times over ten to twelve years to 2009–10.

The local and the global

Travel, mobility and place featured strongly in the young people's narratives. Their relationship to the places they lived in, bordered on and had links to suggested a community embedded in and restricted to local areas, but aspiring to and focused on alternative spaces. Some young people were strongly affiliated to their local community, and thrived on the recognition and respect they garnered within very closely bounded geographical areas. Others only achieved this by moving away and establishing an identity based on roles and responsibilities.

In the early interviews (1998–2000), young people's accounts depicted how central their home area was, and the importance of continually negotiating local boundaries. This might mean avoiding certain neighbourhoods and streets, or changing out of school uniform before visiting nearby relatives, to avoid their religion being identified. For some young men it meant 'defending' their communities at interface points. Gender, class and ethnicity were significant factors. Over time, young women took tentative steps across these boundaries in pursuit of a growing leisure industry. Teenage boys from more middle-class backgrounds exercised more freedom and choice, travelling across community boundaries to pursue their interests.

For some, education and more middle-class backgrounds were passports to geographical and social mobility. For others, locally based networks within working-class communities facilitated more cosmopolitan links, via the Irish diaspora. On the surface, Donal's story is one of immobility, of cyclical unemployment smattered with courses, government-sponsored training schemes and volunteering. But it also illustrates change, through the impact of the Irish 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom and subsequent bust. It witnesses technological change, and how social networking sites, for example, transport people virtually and physically beyond the confines of their local spaces:

I just never thought New Deal really worked, just didn't think it was very good ... you got an extra £15 quid in your dole I think at the time. And I mean, you just went on and did it and then there was no follow-up either ... So I'm actually starting to repeat courses now, which is crazy 'cos it's not like where I want to be at all. The dole queues are huge like, it's crazy. Like in Dublin you have to ... queue like for an hour to sign on. And it's like a mix of people, it's not just people who you think might sign on, it's people like managers, and like people are really well dressed coming to sign on. It's like just a whole vast section of the community, it's crazy. And then when I went to America last fall and came back, it was just like this massive recession had happened in three months [laughing]. (Donal, age 33, 2009)

Risk and security

Although risk is an acknowledged part of growing up, in Northern Ireland it also takes on historical and local meanings associated with conflict, policing, paramilitarism and territorialism. Despite the ceasefire, sectarianism and paramilitary activity continued to have a significant impact on the young people's lives, particularly in working-class areas. Their experience was often coloured by the threat or legacy of violence and sectarianism.

In the face of bereavement, unexpected pregnancy, paramilitary expulsion, education or work-related stress, debt, job loss, relationship break-up or depression, young people journeyed back to families and familiar communities. The darker side of some tight-knit communities also emerged, however, as young people such as Adele who flouted community rules found that wanting more out of life, or to live outside community boundaries, resulted in fundamental loss and rejection.

Mental health and well-being

The young people offered clear testament of life's ups and downs. Repeated accounts of stress, depression and despair suggested increased psychological pressure and vulnerability among young people. Equally notable and concerning was that many struggled through without accessing support, although the internet and social networking sites provided an outlet for some. Northern Ireland has one of the UK's highest suicide rates, with reports noting a rise of more than a third in the number of young men taking their own lives since the end of the 'troubles'.

A series of events, including multiple bereavements, job loss as the construction industry collapsed, parenthood, relocation and a return to education overwhelmed Luke, who in the latest interview, aged 27, was carving out a

Adele

Adele was a spirited 16 year old in 1998, intent on leaving her home town for bigger cities and greater opportunities. She described the 'loyalist estate' she came from as a 'wile rough area' full of 'gangs', 'drugs' and 'rackets'. Distracted by a previously unavailable social life, she gradually dropped her studies. After arguments at home she applied for social housing. To qualify, she made herself homeless and left her hairdressing course. She was re-housed in a Protestant estate, but her relationship with a Catholic man meant that masked men intimidated her out of there. She moved to a neighbouring Catholic estate.

At 27, Adele still wanted a better future, but saw her choices as limited. Having left school with no qualifications, no formal work experience in nine years, dependent on housing benefit, too old to qualify for free college courses, she felt trapped and uncertain where to turn. With the country in recession and job opportunities limited, she felt even more disadvantaged.

I would love to ... get a job somewhere decent rather than what I was doing before ... now I realise you do need your education, definitely... I would love to go back [into training] but I don't know if it would be an option because you do get used to having money coming in and I think to go back to education I would lose all that.

demanding new life as a single father. Luke was "probably going through a bad patch at the minute", and tended to "try and ignore things ... try and put things over your shoulder, but things start to get heavy now and again". When things reached that point, Luke went to his doctor, who offered him anti-depressants. Luke refused these, reflecting that he just wanted "a bit of advice or something like that". This opportunity to express his feelings acted as a release valve: "as soon as I walked out of there I felt a lot better, after talking, for some reason".

Unemployment also featured for Danny, a young graduate who enjoyed a lucrative job placement in the City of London. High earnings, a "high life" and high expectations all ended abruptly when the company folded as the markets collapsed. At university, Danny became "severely depressed" for about six months, but did not talk to anyone at that time. His most recent experience of depression was linked to the end of a relationship and coincided with unemployment and loss of status. Danny described himself as "a wreck" and a "disaster". He did not cope well, lost weight, and "couldn't see any of [his] friends".

Community

Intersecting communities: participation and citizenship

In early interviews, community relations loomed large and young people's lives were directly affected by sectarianism, conflict and segregation. They depicted the most challenging aspects of living in a divided community, describing 'pure' and 'bitter' communities which perpetuated hatred and instilled fear and suspicion. They told of delineating the boundaries of their own areas, of respecting or challenging these boundaries, and then more cautiously of linking with other communities. Places defined by leisure, hobby and work interests, for example, took young people beyond territorial boundaries and blinkered mindsets.

Although much has been achieved, much remains to be done regarding community relations and achieving a peaceful, lasting shared future in Northern Ireland. But local politicians' and leaders' failure to engage with young people, interest them in political processes and demonstrate the relevance to their own lives and communities was particularly evident. None of the young people had, or planned to, vote in the Westminster elections of 2010. Sheila's response was typical: "I keep saying, I says to myself you know, at the last, I need to vote, I'm meant to be voting you know but ... I never did. It just does not interest me that much".

Community and relationships

Critical moments, timing, choices and resources available were significant in these young adults' stories. Coming from different backgrounds, they had very different experiences of education, work, housing, and community relations. But their stories highlighted the importance of family and community.

Three young men, Patrick, Adrian and Luke, gave further insights. All three faced responsibilities as single fathers. Unexpected parenthood had brought significant life changes: for some it meant an end to their education and had implications for their subsequent career paths and earning potential. The role of family and community bore significantly on how they responded and coped. All moved out of Northern Ireland aged between 17 and 20. Each capitalised on new opportunities: high earnings; travel to Europe and beyond; interaction with different communities and cultures, which expanded horizons and challenged attitudes; and new connections and networks.

These young fathers were committed to working to provide for their children in often difficult circumstances (as were all the young parents in this study). Limited work opportunities, low wages, limited childcare options and inflexible

Adrian

After moving to England aged 17, Adrian established a social network that provided security and support, and promoted lucrative work opportunities in construction. He was able to afford a long-distance relationship with a girlfriend he met on a trip abroad, regularly travelling thousands of miles to see her. They married, and soon had two children. Adrian relocated in his wife's country to try to work there.

When the relationship ended, Adrian took his children back to Northern Ireland (gaining custody), believing their futures would be better there. However, the recession had hit Northern Ireland, and he was unable to find work. For a year he was unemployed and lived at home with his parents and two children. Adrian found unemployment difficult and depressing. He was forced to return to England to find work. Adrian is back to commuting and his wages are lower than before, but at present feels he has no alternative. He talks to his children every day and they accept the fact that their father is working away so that he can "take them to Disneyland for the summer".

work hours made this desire to be independent more difficult. They relied on their own families for childcare, financial back-up, advice and moral and emotional support. They all experienced, at some point, a negative response or lack of acknowledgment of their role and responsibility as single fathers.

Conclusion

This study has spanned twelve years and addressed all aspects of young people's lives. The themes and personal accounts emerging reflect the complexity of their lives. Their stories illustrate the processes and events influencing education or housing pathways; the making and breaking of relationships and friendships; and the factors influencing young people's response to critical events in their lives.

The stories suggest a need for dedicated school mentors for students at critical moments or in response to life-challenging events which may compromise their learning and school commitment. More support is also needed for those who find themselves without work, educational options or direction in their 20s; this could be delivered through youth and community services. This age group found it difficult to return to education for various reasons, including finance, childcare issues, qualifications and self-esteem. Flexible, supported access is recommended.

Given the stress, depression and anxiety young people experienced, and their tendency to suffer alone, learning emotional resilience is recommended as a core part of the school and college curriculum across all years. Practical and emotional support services need to be made easily accessible to young adults, with a targeted programme for young men.

The findings suggest that young people have little resources or knowledge on which to make sound housing choices. It is recommended that education and awareness of housing options be part of a life skills programme available through schools and colleges, perhaps linked to wider personal development programmes available through education and training, social welfare and work.

About the project

Eighteen young people, all participants in a qualitative longitudinal study (www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods/), took part in an update interview, covering all aspects of their lives. Professionals who plan and deliver youth policy took part in a focus group, discussing links between policy and practice and how policies have affected young lives over the past decade.

For further information

The full report, **Growing up in Northern Ireland** by Sheena McGrellis, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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