

## Young Turks and Kurds: a set of 'invisible' disadvantaged groups

The Government's new universal youth programme, **ConneXions**, identifies young people from minority ethnic groups, asylum seekers and refugees as targeted 'at risk' groups. This research project, by **Pinar Enneli, Tariq Modood and Harriet Bradley at Bristol University**, looked at the position of young people within London's Turkish-speaking community. This is itself fragmented into three main groups: **Cypriot Turks, mainland Turks and Kurdish refugees**. The study found that:

- Turks do not occupy a clear position in the white/non-white divide upon which current understanding of 'ethnic minorities' is based.
- Some young Turkish-speaking people believe they suffer discrimination and harassment from white people, from some minority groups and even from some other Turkish-speaking groups.
- Truancy and exclusion from school are problems for the Turkish-speaking young people, especially the Kurds, nearly a quarter of whom in the sample had been excluded.
- Few of the Turkish-speaking young people in the survey have many qualifications to help them in the labour market.
- Most of the young people with qualifications stay on in further education but need to have part-time work to fund their studies.
- The young Turks and Kurds clearly use, indeed rely on, family and kin links to help them through risky and extended transitions from adolescence to adulthood.
- Few are in employment with employers outside their own ethnic economy.
- The majority of young people do not consider looking for a job outside London, though are willing to move to a different country.
- The young people are ambivalent about what it means to be British and most are reluctant to adopt that identity. Neither do they see themselves as part of a broader Muslim community.



## Background

According to the 2001 census, 45 per cent of Britain's people from minority ethnic communities live in London, where they comprise 29 per cent of all residents. Yet surprisingly little is known about many of Britain's smaller minority communities. This project looked at the position of young people within one such grouping, London's Turkish-speaking community. This community is itself fragmented, comprising three main groups: Cypriot Turks, mainland Turks and Kurdish refugees. Very little research has explored the British component of the Turkish diaspora and particularly how the young people are adapting to their lives in Britain.

## The project

This study presents some exploratory findings about the lives of London's young Turks and Kurds, their ambitions and aspirations, the choices and constraints that they encounter and the typical problems they face. It aims to give voice to the experiences of a group of young people who are largely inaudible and invisible within youth research. By most measures of cultural difference, Turks and Kurds are in a similar position to many non-white groups. In socio-economic terms, they are worse off than many. The Kurds, as the newest migrant group, suffer the highest levels of disadvantage in their lives, in part linked to the refugee status of many of them, while the longest settled group, the Turkish Cypriots, are the least disadvantaged. This pattern is transmitting itself to the next generation.

## Struggling to learn: education and qualifications

For many Turkish-speaking young people, their school experience is not a good one. The school may be an alienating environment. One result of this and of their families' economic background is that many young people who filled in our questionnaire had few qualifications. The problem is not so much that the Turkish-speaking young people uniformly have few qualifications, but that, as a group, there is a bipolar distribution. Forty per cent of Turks have no qualifications but more than half have at least one A level or GNVQ. Similarly, nearly 60 per cent of Kurds are without any qualifications but 37 per cent have something higher than a GCSE. In other words, few stop at GCSE - either they don't get there, or they go further.

One of the reasons for the lack of qualifications is that most of the respondents attended what they referred to as 'sink schools'. The Turkish-speaking young people do not seem to receive enough support from the school staff to tackle their problems, including educational achievement. Many of them, especially the Kurds, have language difficulties. Regardless of the area the Turkish-speaking young people come from, the schools they went to were made up almost entirely of pupils from minority ethnic groups; there seemed to be much tension and harassment between groups, sometimes ending in physical fighting.

All these factors contribute to high levels of truancy and exclusions. When some individuals were not able to solve their problems, they stopped attending school. Others got

### Box 1: Nazim: failing schools or failing pupils?

Nazim has spent all his life in North London. He wanted to be a police officer, but left school with no GCSEs and has no qualifications. His father came to Britain in the 1960s. After two years, he went to Turkey to marry his neighbour's daughter, returning with her. They worked in textile factories, then he owned one, then a kebab shop, before retiring. He can write and read Turkish and a little English; his wife is illiterate.

Nazim has one sister and one brother, both also born in this country. He started to play truant in year 7, and was a regular truant from secondary school. He was excluded three times. Once, he beat an 'English guy' who called him a 'fucking Turk'. He said that his best school experience was his last day, as he didn't need to go back. He found school hostile and full of discrimination. He said he did not receive any help from his teachers. His mother wanted him to do well at school, but Nazim said, could not understand the problems he faced. His relationship with his father is distant. He said that only his brother, who attended the same school, understood his problems.

Nazim did not look for a job immediately after school, spending two months with his friends drinking, driving and 'chasing girls'. Then his father gave him an ultimatum to work either in the kebab shop or find a job. He did not resent this as he was bored. He left his CV at shops, but heard nothing. But with friends' help, he worked in two shops.

He found his current job, in a sports shop, with a friend's help. He was promoted to shop manager and believes he deserved it, since he worked very hard. But he said that his wages did not match his position. He complained about it, but they said he was too young to be paid more. He believes being Turkish is the problem, not his age, since his area manager is not much older than he is.

Nazim says that when he has a good job, a beautiful wife, together with a beautiful house, he will feel successful. He believes that he can achieve this, though he is realistic:

"For the future, my only advantage is my current job, because I didn't get anything from school. I don't have any GCSE, no college, nothing. I have only my employment experiences in this job. Other than this, I have no advantages."

## Box 2: Gulistan: on the way up?

Gulistan is a Turkish Cypriot girl born in Britain. She is third generation Turkish and has one younger sister. Both her parents had a college education and hold professional jobs related to the Turkish-speaking community. The family own their house.

Gulistan had no major problem during her education and got full support from her family, including private tutoring. She said she did experience no discrimination at her mixed school where the staff were also mixed. The staff always supported her and she had friends from various backgrounds.

While at school, she always worked in part-time jobs. Gulistan is currently working in an agency to raise money for her education. She took a 'gap year' to support herself financially at university later, not wishing to rely on her family for everything. She has always worked within the Turkish-speaking community.

Gulistan believes that her biggest advantage is that she can speak both English and Turkish, though she said that her Turkish is not that great. She does not intend to marry till she has graduated and found a good job. She is not concerned about a future partner's origin as long as he respects her and she respects him. Religion is not an important part of her life. In relation to identity, she said:

"I can be a British Turkish Cypriot because I was born here, grew up here and have been schooled here. I've made my friends here and worked here. But Turkish Cypriot is where my blood is and my roots are."

involved in fights, some of which were quite serious. In the end, they gave up school altogether. The young Turks and Kurds have to fend for themselves in a school system which is partly riven by ethnic conflicts and apparent teacher disinterest in their special problems.

### Risky transitions: young Turks and Kurds enter the labour market

In their early experiences in the labour market, when many are both simultaneously studying and working while others are happy to be temporarily drifting, the young people do not identify themselves in classical employment terms such as unemployed or in paid employment. Most do not consider that they will settle down with the jobs they are doing. Those with qualifications do not seem to get enough reward for that in terms of employment at this stage, so most young people rely on their community networks in order to find employment.

There is clearly an ethnic enclave present, consisting not just of sandwich and kebab shops but many other family businesses that provide extensive services and, in many ways, a parallel micro-economy. This is clearly a resource not often available to all disadvantaged groups, for example to indigenous white working-class neighbourhoods. But it has to be stressed that this resource comes at a price. Its presence may be a contributing factor in the young people's relative disengagement with the broader structure of labour market opportunities and can lead to them being trapped in the ethnic enclave.

### 'Why don't you go back home': discrimination and harassment

A third of the young people in the survey said that they experienced discrimination to do with their race or colour, or their religious or cultural background. Discrimination is a complex and multidirectional phenomenon. Each group has experienced discrimination and harassment in varied

ways. Many young people have experienced discrimination by white people, whilst some experience harassment from people from other ethnic minorities. Kurdish people are also discriminated against because of their refugee status, and there are tensions between different Turkish-speaking groups.

### Multiple identities and belonging

The young people are ambivalent about what it means to be British and reluctant to adopt that identity. Yet at the same time, most do not simply use a Turkish identity either. They usually choose multiple ethnic identities, but in the majority of cases, the term 'British' is not (yet) part of that plurality. This is complicated by the fact that the majority of Kurds refused to self-identify as Turks. It is clear that they are not experiencing the full range of opportunities that are associated with British citizenship. Here is a group of young people in grave danger of labour market exclusion, who must fall back on families and communities for support. There is a separate issue of treating people decently who are seeking asylum in Britain.

"Everybody is trying to get rid of us because we are refugees. They always pick on me at school, because I try to concentrate on my studies. The best way is to get along with them, not answering back and not showing off when the teacher asks something in the class. But I prefer to be here where I have more chances, both economic and educational. If I can sort out my language and if my family gain the right to remain in this country, I would like to go to university. I do not feel British, but would like to have citizenship in this country for security reasons."

(Figen, a Kurdish refugee)

Young people's relationship with religion is not straightforward either. They do not consider themselves part of the Muslim community, but, for some, religious

identity is seen as a feature of or extension of their ethnic identity.

## Thinking positively: young Turks and Kurds and the future

It is remarkable that most Turkish-speaking young people are not pessimistic about their future, despite their many disadvantages and early experiences of the transition to adulthood. In fact, despite all the difficult conditions in terms of employment, it seems that the majority of young people do not consider looking for a job outside London. However, many are quite willing to move to a different western country.

## Conclusion

This research has sought to uncover the distinctive experiences of young Turks and Kurds, to illuminate the special problems they face and to give them a voice. It found that Turkish-speaking young people struggle to find their way through structural disadvantages, exclusion and neglect and that their transition to adulthood is prolonged and fractured. While individuals respond to their situation in their own personal way, the combined effects of racialisation, type of migration, ethnicity, gender and class continue to shape their lives and restrict opportunities. For many young Turks and Kurds, their families and communities seem to be a source of economic security and may feed their optimism. But there is an urgent need for policies to prevent these family cushions becoming traps. Society should not have to rely on the families and the community to guarantee a successful transition for these young people, and they should not be pushed to depend on their families for support.

The researchers recommend that schools, colleges, careers agencies and local government departments should overcome their blindness towards the Turkish-speaking communities and learn to perceive their needs. These institutions and agencies should employ specialist staff who can work with young people from the Turkish-speaking communities to help them steer their way

through the structural disadvantages identified (such staff are likely to come from the same groups as the people they serve). There is a special role here for ConneXions, which is charged with delivering a joined-up youth advisory service for all young people aged 14-18, and with targeting groups that are considered to be most 'at risk'. There needs to be effective communications and coordination between those responsible for assistance – for example, school personal advisers, outreach personal advisers and the ConneXions main office.

Similarly, Haringey Council needs to attain a more 'joined-up' approach so that different departments work together to meet community needs.

The research report offers some specific recommendation in relation to these agencies, and concludes that the inter-generational marginality of these groups can only be reversed by an explicit and targeted approach that consults young Turks and Kurds about their needs and how to meet them, and employs staff from these communities.

## About the project

The research was small-scale and aimed to draw a broad picture of aspects of the Turkish-speaking young people's lives. It involved multi-stage fieldwork. The first stage was a survey with 250 people (78 women and 172 men), of whom 99 were Turkish, 68 Kurdish, 54 Cypriot and 29 of mixed origin. The mixed category comprised six of Turkish and Kurdish origin, six of Turkish and Cypriot origin, four of Kurdish and Cypriot and thirteen of Turkish-speaking and other origins. Thirty people were in the age group 16-17, 172 in the age group 18-20, and the rest were aged between 21 and 23.

At the second stage, thirty in-depth interviews were conducted (15 with each sex). The parents of six interviewees (two from each group) were also interviewed. Finally, three organisations were contacted for their comments and three focus group discussions were held with the young people to discuss the final results.

---

## For further information

The full report, **Young Turks and Kurds: A set of 'invisible' disadvantaged groups** by Pinar Enneli, Tariq Modood and Harriet Bradley, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Black and Minority Ethnic Young People series (ISBN 1 85935 273 1, price £14.95).

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

Read more *Findings* at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available. Tel: 01904 615905, Email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE**  
FOUNDATION

