

Youth unemployment in rural areas

Although the experiences of young people in rural areas are somewhat different from those of their urban counterparts, much of our knowledge about youth unemployment is derived from studies of urban youth. This study by Fred Cartmel and Andy Furlong of the University of Glasgow compares the experiences of 18- to 24-year-olds in urban and rural areas who have all recently encountered a period of unemployment. The specific experiences of rural youth are further investigated by a series of in-depth interviews with young people, employers and key professionals in four contrasting rural labour markets. The study found:

- f** Long-term youth unemployment tends to be less common in rural than in urban areas, however, rural labour markets are characterised by low skilled and insecure employment. Demand for qualified workers tends to be low.
- f** With rural employment being concentrated in small firms, opportunities for young people to undergo training or to upgrade their skills are limited.
- f** Many rural employers have a poor knowledge of the New Deal and even those who are aware of the programme frequently feel unable to become involved. Barriers to participation include an inability to meet minimum training requirements or to provide access to external forms of training.
- f** Poor or costly transport frequently restricted young people's employment opportunities. Even when transport was available, employers tended to be wary about taking on young people who had to make long or complex journeys.
- f** Social networks facilitated access to job opportunities for those young people with good local contacts. For others, the lack of social networks represented an important barrier to employment.
- f** Although there was often a high demand for female workers in tourist-related services, those with children frequently lacked access to childcare facilities.
- f** A shortage of affordable housing both restricted the labour mobility of young people and caused difficulties for those who wished to remain within the local area.

Background

While youth unemployment has been well researched, the majority of studies have focused on young people living in urban areas. Although many of the problems associated with unemployment which young people in both urban and rural areas face are the same, the latter face additional difficulties linked to geographical isolation and to the narrow range of employment and training opportunities which are available. In Britain, few studies have focused on youth unemployment in rural areas and knowledge of the significance of different opportunities and difficulties remains underdeveloped.

This study analysed survey data collected from unemployed young people from across Scotland in order to investigate what factors lead to employment and unemployment for young people living in urban and rural areas. Qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with young people, employers and key professionals was used to provide information on the problems that young people in rural areas encountered in getting work.

Contrasting rural labour markets

Recognising that the term 'rural' is used to cover a wide range of circumstances, the qualitative study focused on four distinct types of rural area:

- a 'traditional' rural area in the South West of Scotland which was geographically isolated and had significant economic activity in the agriculture sector;
- an 'urban fringe' area north of Stirling in which employment opportunities were affected by proximity to a town;
- a 'seasonal' area in mid-Argyll where job opportunities in significant sectors of the local economy undergo strong seasonal variation;

- an 'ex-industrial area' in Ayrshire in which the decline of opportunities in the manufacturing and extractive industries has had a detrimental impact on local opportunities.

In some ways young people living in each of these rural areas had different opportunities in terms of employment, education and training, yet many of the structural barriers faced were common to all areas. The main differences between the areas related to the level of job opportunities, the availability of seasonal employment and the extent to which poor transport and housing provision inhibited employment possibilities.

Rural and urban contrasts

From a quantitative perspective, there was little evidence to support the idea that rural young people experience greater difficulties in getting work than their urban counterparts. The average number of periods of unemployment experienced in rural and urban areas was very similar. In rural areas, the duration of unemployment tended to be shorter and young people who became unemployed found it easier to obtain jobs.

The study identified four different patterns of participation in the labour market: settled, vulnerable, marginalised and excluded (using information on current status and the proportion of time young people had been unemployed since leaving school). Six months after a period of unemployment, those living in rural areas were more likely to be in settled work than their urban counterparts. Although levels of labour market 'exclusion' among rural men were relatively high, women were less likely to experience prolonged or continuous periods of unemployment and were more likely to find work quickly after a period of unemployment. In part, this was a reflection of a higher demand for female labour in tourist-related and general service industries, but women also

Table 1: Labour market position by residence

	<i>Urban men</i>	<i>Rural men</i>	<i>Urban women</i>	<i>Rural women</i>
Settled	17	22	17	25
Vulnerable	47	49	48	45
Marginalised	25	14	25	24
Excluded	11	14	9	6
(n)	(326)	(179)	(171)	(107)

gained advantages as a result of having stronger educational qualifications. However, the data did not support the notion that young people in rural areas were more likely to move in and out of work.

The importance of informal networks

One of the main factors affecting young people's success in moving from unemployment to employment was their connection with local informal networks. Informal networks provided young people with information about forthcoming employment opportunities or personal recommendations for jobs. The majority of respondents who had secured employment relied heavily on such information and very few obtained employment through newspaper advertisements or the Jobcentre vacancies board.

Rural employers frequently recruited new staff through 'letting it be known' that they were seeking additional workers. Informal recruitment methods were popular with employers who thought they helped guarantee the reliability of recruits. Several key professionals also highlighted the importance of informal networks, suggesting that many young people secured employment or apprenticeship training through family connections. One Careers Officer argued that such informal networks mean that rural Careers Officers' role in matching young people to available vacancies was much reduced, compared with their urban counterparts.

Whilst social networks provided significant opportunities for some, a lack of local contacts caused difficulties for others. Those who lacked contacts were disadvantaged, as were those who were stigmatised by the community in some way. While strong family contacts can clearly smooth young people's transitions to employment, in small communities poor family reputations can also prove to be a barrier to employment. Some young people claimed that their 'incomer' status was a disadvantage, especially since parents lacked local contacts and sometimes commuted to work outside of the area. Those perceived as 'trouble-makers', those that kept 'bad company', single parents and incomers found that negative perceptions about their lifestyle could work to their disadvantage.

Transport problems

Young people's chances of moving from unemployment to work was strongly affected by their ability to get to jobs and training opportunities in their locality. In this context, having private

transport helped many young people get work and the possession of a driving licence was often significant. Those who relied on public transport complained that timetables were restrictive and the costs often prohibitive. The lack of transport served to restrict opportunities and limited the job search area, although if feasible in terms of timetables and cost, young people were prepared to travel long distances for work. Yet even when a young person was prepared to travel for work, employers seemed to be reluctant to risk recruiting those who had to undertake long or complex journeys fearing that extensive travel, especially in the winter, would result in poor time-keeping.

Lack of opportunities

In each of the rural areas relatively few quality jobs were available for young people. Firms tended to be relatively small and few employers employed large numbers of young people. Within these companies young people tended to occupy the most insecure positions. Some employers relied heavily on seasonal workers, and most expressed a low demand for qualified workers. The employer's view that demand for young people was concentrated in low skilled jobs was borne out by the experiences of young people who frequently complained about the poor quality of employment opportunities.

Formal training provision in each of the areas was rarely in evidence. Few employers offered more than short on-the-job training programmes or training which was legally necessary to meet minimum health and safety requirements. Although the New Deal had been introduced shortly before the start of the fieldwork, knowledge of the scheme was limited and few expressed an interest in involvement. Even among those who had investigated the possibilities offered under the New Deal, many felt unable to offer the necessary training to potential recruits.

Getting work

For employers, the personal characteristics ('soft skills') of potential employees (sometimes seen as confirmed through previous work history) were particularly significant when recruiting. Social skills were important and recruits were expected to be able to fit easily into the work environment. Where employees would be spending time dealing with the public, in hotels, for example, "clean looking, energetic young people" were in demand. Personal skills highlighted by employers included dress,

appearance, motivation and attitude through to accent and telephone manner.

Many employers regarded these personal characteristics as more important than educational qualifications, especially in the service sector. However, those with work experience and the 'appropriate' personal attributes also tended to have strong qualifications and, as such, qualified young people were recruited by default.

Work experience was also perceived as an important way into employment by both employers and young people. Young people with no previous work experience often felt that this was one of the main barriers to gaining employment.

Although many young people had worked in seasonal or part-time jobs, very few made the transition from such work to permanent employment. Indeed, the two segments of the labour market tended to be somewhat distinct and mobility between them restricted. Experience in the less secure segments of the labour market did not translate very easily into more secure employment. This was particularly true of the part-time, female-dominated, sector. Difficulties here tended to stem from a lack of childcare facilities and the absence of family or friends who were able or willing look after their young children. There were no childcare facilities in any of the rural locations.

Housing

The lack of affordable housing represented another difficulty. Although most of the young people lived at home, they were aware that high costs and poor availability would force them to leave the area in the future. Many of those who had moved away from home lived in poor quality accommodation, such as caravans. Low wages were a central part of the problem as high housing costs meant that few young people could either afford housing in their home area or afford a move to a new area.

About the study

This report is based on research conducted in Scotland between November 1997 and September 1999. A number of complementary methods were used, including a survey of 817 18- to 24-year-olds from across Scotland with recent experience of three months continuous unemployment. This sample was used to develop a macro-analysis of youth

unemployment and of routes back into the labour market. It was also used to draw broad contrasts between the experiences of rural and urban youth. From this sample, 80 young people living in rural areas were selected for in-depth interviews about their experiences of unemployment and of their difficulties in finding jobs. To discover more about factors that either restricted the opportunities available to young people or facilitated their entry into employment, 40 rural employers were also interviewed, together with 25 key professionals such as Careers Officers, Jobcentre staff, Rural Strategy Officers and officials from Local Enterprise Companies.

How to get further information

The full report, *Youth unemployment in rural areas* by Fred Cartmel and Andy Furlong, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 60 1, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).