

## Young men on the margins of work

A new report by Pamela Meadows of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research brings together the results of a number of research projects about young men and work. Most of the projects formed part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Work and Opportunity research programme and relate to the 1990s, but many of the lessons remain important today. The key issues emerging from the research were:

- f Education has come to play a more important part in the successful integration of young men into the labour market.**
- f The transition from education to work has become more complex. In the past the process of leaving school and getting a job took place in a single step. Now, young people follow a variety of combinations of and movements between education, training and employment.**
- f Social networks still play an important role in helping young people to find work.**
- f Young men with family support are more successful in the labour market than those without.**
- f It has become more difficult for young men to become sufficiently established in jobs that enable them to live independently of their parents.**
- f A small minority of young men are finding it difficult to adapt to the world of work. Some of them are moving between jobs and unemployment, but others who have a combination of personal, social, health and educational disadvantages experience particular difficulties.**

## Background

During the 1990s there were some indications that the labour market prospects of young men, particularly those who had not been successful at school, were under threat. There was a decline of employment in traditional manufacturing industry. Jobs in the service sector of a kind that had traditionally been seen as the preserve of women - particularly retailing, personal care and catering - were increasing. The educational attainments of young women were improving, and this was leading to their greater success in what had traditionally been men's jobs in management and the professions. The failure of a minority of young people, especially young men, to integrate successfully into work was one of the factors which led the Government to establish its New Deal programme.

The research showed that the true position was not as problematic as it had appeared. Well-educated young men were still successful in the labour market - more successful than young women. Few young men had no experience of work, although a few were drifting between jobs that they did not regard as having good career prospects. The problem appeared to be less about exclusion from work and more about a failure to become established in a satisfactory long-term job. However, a minority of young men have multiple problems - with their qualifications, their health, their family background, their social networks or their past behaviour - and are at risk of social exclusion.

## Entry to employment

Entry to a first job is no longer a straightforward transition from school at the age of sixteen. Three-quarters of young people now remain in full-time education beyond school leaving age. Twenty years ago two-thirds went straight from school into a full-time job. Moreover, apprenticeships and other routes into well-paid manual work now generally require GCSE qualifications, which they did not in the past. Many employers who used to recruit young people without qualifications now require some evidence of application and commitment and use qualifications as an indicator of this. Young people now spend the years between the age of sixteen and nineteen moving in complex patterns between full-time study, part-time work, part-time study, vocational training, full-time work and unemployment.

Young people are more likely to experience unemployment than older age groups, and the present generation of young people is more likely to

do so than those from earlier generations. Young men are more likely to be unemployed than young women and take longer to find new jobs.

Social networks remain an important part of the process of finding jobs for young people in both urban and rural areas. This method was particularly important for young men without qualifications who rarely found work through formal methods and did not find them helpful. However, while advantageous to many, this practice was disadvantageous to others. Those whose social networks did not include friends and relatives with jobs - ex-offenders, homeless people, people new to an area, those who have been looked after by a local authority - end up at a disadvantage, as do those who have a bad reputation.

## The transition to economic independence

The transition from youth to adult status, particularly the move to establish an independent home, either alone or with a partner, is also a gradual one. Few young men under the age of 25 are able to earn enough to support a family as a sole breadwinner. The earnings of young men relative to those in older age groups are now markedly lower than they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

Young people also have different priorities than previous generations did. They attach greater importance to buying and running a car than they do to having their own home. In part this is related to the increasing importance employers attach to people having independent transport. The pattern in Britain is therefore becoming more like that in continental Europe, with young people living with their parents until their late twenties or early thirties, when they are established in work and have some savings.

## Education

Education is important to labour market prospects in three ways:

- it influences the chances of getting a first job;
- it influences the chances of subsequently becoming unemployed and the speed of leaving unemployment;
- it influences career progression and earnings once in work.

Although young men's academic achievements have been improving over the past twenty years, the

achievements of young women have been improving faster. Part of the explanation for this may be the replacement of the GCE and CSE by the GCSE, which has a larger element of course work. But motivation is likely to be relevant as well. Some young men find themselves in school belonging to social groups which at best attach no importance to academic achievement and which at worst positively despise it. There are clear links between poor academic achievement, truancy and delinquency. There are also links with other forms of disadvantage, particularly having been looked after by a local authority, and homelessness.

Many young men who have not done well at school come to recognise that they have missed a valuable opportunity. They have come to realise that the sort of jobs to which they aspire generally require them to have some qualifications and the sort of jobs they can get are not what they want to do long-term.

Young men from all ethnic groups who had qualifications had better labour market outcomes than those who had none. They were less likely to be unemployed, they earned more and they had jobs at higher occupational levels. However, the effect of qualifications varied between groups and between areas. People of African origin, in particular, tend to gain less from their qualifications than other groups. Moreover, apart from those of Indian origin, young men from other minority ethnic groups earned less than similarly qualified white men.

## Unemployment

Many young people, including those who are well qualified and who go on to do well at work, experience unemployment when they first enter the labour market. This is because the process of finding a suitable first job can take some weeks or months. In addition, young people change jobs more frequently than older age groups. This is partly due to the long-standing practice of young people trying out different kinds of work before they find a job that they want to do.

Longer-term unemployment is more worrying in its potential for social exclusion. Sometimes it relates to a relatively low level of demand in the local labour market, which leads to higher than average rates of unemployment generally. But unemployment can be a symptom of a series of underlying disadvantages, which are often interrelated. Lack of qualifications on its own is not a barrier to employment. Most young

men with no qualifications at all do have jobs. However, young men with few qualifications, a history of offending behaviour, substance abuse, poor health and homelessness are very likely to find themselves unemployed. Moreover, the kind of help that they need relates not just to their job readiness, but also to their ability to tackle their other problems at the same time.

## The role of family support

Families help the successful integration of young men into the labour market in a number of ways. They help in finding jobs by putting the young people forward as candidates for vacancies they know about. They encourage them to do well at school, which improves their job prospects. They sometimes lend financial support to those on low earnings. This can take the form of free board and lodging, help with transport and clothes or helping to run a car. They can offer practical support – helping young people to get up in the morning, advice on job applications and interviews, lifts to work and to interviews.

The evidence suggests that young men who live with their parents have better labour market outcomes than those who live alone. One problem is that young people who live with their parents may be drawn from a different group than those who live alone. The latter group will include those on good terms with their families who are living alone out of choice, but will also include care leavers and those who are estranged from their families who have no choice.

## Understanding of the world of work

A minority of young men find it difficult to adapt to the social and behavioural requirements of the world of work. They think it will be easier than school, whereas they find it is much harder to handle. Some dislike being given instructions. Others have problems with appropriate clothing or personal hygiene. Employers who have had experience of recruiting ill-prepared young people are wary of repeating the experience. These issues represent a challenge for schools and for the new Connexions service.

## The outlook for young men

Most young men – that is those who have done reasonably well at school, who have support from their families, who are well-motivated and

presentable – have little difficulty securing a job with reasonable prospects.

Qualifications can offset other disadvantages. For instance, young men of Caribbean origin are more likely to be unemployed than white men and generally earn less. However, if they are well-qualified and live in a prosperous area with a partner, their prospects are the same as a similar white person. But overlapping disadvantages can reinforce each other. Thus young men of Caribbean origin are more likely to be homeless or have been in prison than young white men and these disadvantages reinforce any others they might have. Young men who have been in prison are more likely to have literacy or numeracy problems or mental health difficulties than the population generally. Interventions to support young people with serious and overlapping problems need to have their outcomes measured in terms of distance travelled. It is no good rewarding projects only for the award of vocational qualifications if some of the trainees are unable to read at the start.

There remains a second group of young men whose needs are not being addressed. They are reasonably well integrated socially and have support from their families, but their school experience did not do justice to their potential. By the time they reach their early twenties they recognise that if they are to escape from the cycle of dead end jobs they need to improve their skills. Many would like to go back to college to make up for what they missed first time around, but they find it difficult to get appropriate impartial advice about suitable courses. Part-time courses are often geared to those sponsored by their employers, whereas these young men want to find the means of changing employer. Support from the Connexions service ends at the age of nineteen, which means that these young men do not have access to an adviser as of right. Both groups in their different ways represent a challenge for those developing and delivering policies.

### About the study

The report is a review of the findings from a series of research projects supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which look at young men's experience in the labour market during the 1990s.

### How to get further information

The full report, *Young men on the margins of work: An overview report* by Pamela Meadows, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 022 9, price £10.95).