

The nature of employment for new travellers

Little is known about the nature and extent of employment among the 'new traveller' community. Dr Lyn Webster and Professor Jane Millar of the University of Bath have explored how new travellers make a living. Drawing on the material gained from in-depth interviews with travellers, they found that:

- f Overall, travellers' values and expectations were similar to those of other members of society, although few placed a high value on materialistic wealth and possessions.**
- f Employment was common among new travellers: about half were working at the time of the interview and most had worked at some time during the previous year. Seasonal agricultural jobs, temporary jobs and self-employment generated the most work.**
- f Mobility was important in giving access to seasonal agricultural employment. But enforced mobility, through eviction, made regular employment very difficult to sustain. Opportunistic activities, most of which were legal, were also undertaken to supplement income. Illegal activities were rare and carried out mainly in times of crisis or through desperation.**
- f Travellers with good health, portable skills, transport, bank accounts, and mobile phones were most likely to be in paid work. Male travellers found it easier to work because women were mainly responsible for domestic work. The collective support of the community was also important in facilitating employment. Those least likely to have access to paid employment were lone parents, who often faced multiple barriers to work.**
- f Most of the travellers had claimed Income Support at some time, although only the lone parents were long-term recipients. Difficulties with both claiming and obtaining benefits were common. Working Families Tax Credit was providing a very important source of income for self-employed travellers, who often earned very little, but only one of the low-income employed families had ever received this.**
- f The researchers conclude that, if travellers are to gain greater access to the labour market while maintaining their travelling lifestyle, the key priorities for policy are: improving access to employment programmes and making these sensitive to the particular needs of travellers; more flexible benefits which can support temporary and seasonal employment; and – very importantly – access to stable and secure sites.**

Background

The Government has introduced a number of welfare reforms with the central aim of integrating people who can work into the labour market. This study explores the ways in which the marginalised and controversial 'new traveller' community make a living. 'New travellers' are the most recent travelling group. They are ordinary people who live in alternative low cost mobile accommodation and who hold the same sort of values as the wider population. Focusing on the experiences of new travellers, the study examines their patterns of paid work, benefit receipt and other forms of support, including that of community.

In-depth interviews were conducted with travellers on rural sites across four counties of the South West of England, selected because it has a large new traveller population. The South West incorporates such areas as Glastonbury and Stonehenge which hold significance for the travelling community. In addition, the region has a festival scene and also a high prevalence of rural labour markets from which travellers frequently obtain work.

New travellers and work

Employment was common among interviewees and many had positive experiences of both their job and work conditions. Many were economically active for at least part of the year. Nevertheless, the mobile nature of their lifestyle limited their access to conventional employment, apart from short periods when some were able to secure temporary agency work. This type of work was only available to travellers who possessed both a mobile phone and bank account and generally interviewees with these facilities had more opportunities than those without them.

Securing a regular and permanent job required a more settled existence that could only be obtained by residing either on an authorised site or at the place of work. As legal sites are few and far between, most participants had to look to the informal labour market for work. Paradoxically, high mobility assisted some travellers to get certain forms of casual work, particularly crop picking. On the other hand, longer periods of casual employment required a more stable existence. This was also the case for interviewees who were self-employed, although those combining this type of employment with the Working Families Tax Credit had more leeway. Only

one traveller managed to secure a temporary position and combine it with receipt of Working Families Tax Credit.

Overall, interviewees placed a high value on work-generated income. In addition, the relationship between the collective nature of the travelling lifestyle and employment was important to the participants. Few families would have been able to get work had it not been for the sharing of childcare. The men were also helped by the fact that many time-consuming domestic tasks were mainly carried out by women.

New travellers and benefits

A total of 21 travellers out of the 39 interviewed were claiming social security benefits, most frequently Income Support. Most of the (nine) travellers receiving Income Support were claiming as lone parents. Seven families were working and claiming Working Families Tax Credit. The income of eleven interviewees came solely from paid work. The evidence suggests that most interviewees were not 'dole scroungers': nearly half the interviewees were working and many more were able to obtain some form of employment over the year.

The continuity of social security claims varied. Long-standing lone parents tended to have the longest claims, while claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance tended to have the shortest claim periods, rarely longer than three months of the year.

Thirteen travellers reported that they had made fraudulent benefit claims at some point, eight infrequently and five on a more regular basis. Fraud was generally opportunistic rather than planned, the monetary gains were quite small, and almost all said that they had committed fraud to meet basic needs and/or to avoid the problems that can be caused by declaring small amounts of irregular earnings. In general, fraud was seen as something to be avoided and most travellers preferred other ways to try and make ends meet.

Interviewees experienced a number of problems both with social security benefits and in-work benefits. In relation to social security benefits this appears, primarily, to be the result of how the system tends to classify travellers as having 'no fixed abode'. This affects the frequency of signing-on, the amount of benefit paid and payment methods. In relation to in-work benefits, specifically the Working Families Tax Credit, problems appear to be the result of some lack of understanding about the travelling lifestyle, in

that it was difficult for the Inland Revenue to believe that travellers were earning and surviving on so little money. Nevertheless, despite the problems, all the travellers receiving this benefit found it beneficial.

Travellers and 'alternative resources'

Interviewees were able to draw from a wide range of different resources in order to supplement their income or their lifestyle. The variety of activities helped sustain them through difficult times. The activities could be divided into 'borrowing', 'selling' and 'doing':

- Borrowing from family or others on site was common. Loans from family who lived in the settled community tended to be large and long-term, covering large bills or emergency expenses. Loans from other travellers were small and short-term and covered day-to-day living expenses. Exchanging money was not the only form of borrowing. Help took many other forms and all, including money, incorporated a reciprocal element. Daily chores, childcare and vehicle maintenance were invariably shared among the occupants of a site.
- Selling items, entertainment and labour was also common. However, there was not always the opportunity for such activities. The demise of free festivals, the drop in scrap metal prices and the rural location of sites all had an impact.
- 'Doing' included such activities as 'skip-runs' (taking things discarded in supermarket skips), begging, shoplifting, burglary and prostitution. These last four activities tended to be carried out as a last resort, but skip runs were very much part of the travelling culture and almost all those interviewed regularly obtained food and other goods in this way.

Overall, interviewees tended to undertake activities that involved a reciprocal element and that sat comfortably with the nature of the travelling community. They turned to their community first before turning to outsiders, and only turned to family when the help needed was beyond that which could be given by other travellers. For interviewees, self-help strategies were the most acceptable; activities such as selling drugs, begging and burglary were the least acceptable.

Policy implications

The researchers conclude that there are a number of issues to be addressed if policy is to enable travellers to gain greater access to the labour market while maintaining their mobile, community-based and low-impact lifestyle:

- There are currently no specific policies that target and help travellers to participate in the labour force. Nor are travellers benefiting from the welfare reforms that are in place. Only one interviewee had any experience of the New Deals, and no one had encountered other Employment Service initiatives. This is perhaps not surprising, given the difficulties these schemes have in reaching the most disadvantaged groups and those with unusual or additional needs. Travellers may also find it particularly difficult to access such programmes because they are rarely in any one location for very long and many do not fall into specific target groups. The New Deal for Young People, for example, is targeted upon those unemployed for six months plus but many travellers have a pattern of short spells of benefit receipt, between short spells of employment. The result is that travellers who work find their own employment and not much help seems to be on offer from official sources. Whether the introduction next year of the new Working-Age Agency, which will deliver more intensive work-focused services, will help the mobile population remains to be seen. But if this service is to benefit travellers as well as other groups, advisers will need to understand the constraints and requirements that underpin the travelling lifestyle.
- The benefit system is not very flexible in supporting people whose main access to work is on a temporary or short-term basis. Working Families Tax Credit was very important to the self-employed workers, who often had very low incomes. But only one employed traveller was receiving this benefit. Working Families Tax Credit is available to people who work at least 16 hours per week and is usually based on proof of earnings over six weeks or three months. This does not necessarily fit the pattern of work actually obtained, which may be for much more than 16 hours per week but last only a week or two. Flexibility in these rules might help more travellers to claim Working Families Tax Credit and so

supplement wages and help sustain families between spells of paid work. More flexibility of payment systems would also be helpful, including for child benefit, which is not always reliable for travelling parents.

- A national change of policy is required in relation to site provision which would restore both the duty placed on local authorities to provide sites and the financial resources needed to do so. Travellers need to reside on stable and secure sites – transient and longer term – if they are to link successfully to the labour market, employment initiatives and in-work benefits. Security of tenure is also essential for those travellers who are unable to work or for whom work is not currently a feasible option. This group is typically made up of lone parents who need the support that the benefit system offers but face difficulties claiming benefits when highly mobile because of eviction. Without secure sites travellers will remain at a serious disadvantage. This is true not just in respect of employment but also more generally in terms of health care, education and other welfare services.

Conclusion

Current policy emphasises the need to combat social exclusion. However, the policy agenda focuses on people's ability to participate in the labour market. Interviewees valued paid work and it was an important factor in increasing their quality of living. But for these travellers, 'paid work' meant low quality, low paid and insecure jobs, which did not guarantee any greater level of 'inclusion'.

It is also evident from this study that interviewees wanted policies to help them sustain their way of living, not policies predicated upon them giving this up. A policy approach that involves identifying particular groups as socially excluded can risk stigmatising those groups as 'the problem'. The temptation may be to target, control and assimilate such groups in order to reduce numbers, justified on the grounds that living in such circumstances is self-evidently a bad thing for the individuals involved. The researchers conclude that constructing welfare policy for a diverse society is a major challenge and one that requires both an understanding and an acceptance of that diversity.

About the study

This study was undertaken by Lyn Webster and Jane Millar of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Policy at the University of Bath. The analysis is based on in-depth interview material. Interviews were conducted with 39 travellers living on 19 sites across four counties of the South West of England in two batches between February and August 2000. In addition, seven follow-up interviews were carried out, as well as interviews with the Children's Society's Traveller Support Workers. The research included single travellers, lone parents and couples with, and without, children.

How to get further information

The full report, *Making a living: Social security, social exclusion and New Travellers* by Lyn Webster and Jane Millar, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 331 0, price £10.95).