

Change and continuity in young adults' experiences of long-term social exclusion

An in-depth study of some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Britain has explored how young people's earlier experiences of disadvantage continued into adulthood. The study, by a team from the University of Teesside, found that:

-  As they grew older, young adults faced considerable personal change in social networks, family and housing. Earlier experiences of low quality work and low income persisted, however.
-  Surprisingly, most change was reported by those with long-term experience of offending and heroin use. Desistence was aided by the support of family members and partners and the leaving behind of earlier social networks that encouraged crime and drug use. For some, employment or forming families of their own had offered further discouragement, and many were using drug treatment services.
-  Young people's modest ambitions and persistent search for employment were disappointed by experiences of intermittent, low-waged work, often of poor quality, temporary and exploitative in nature (i.e. 'poor work').
-  Poor work accompanied by poor training and qualifications offered little hope of improvement in job prospects. Informal contacts were more effective in the search for jobs than training or education; this confirmed young people's perceptions that qualifications were irrelevant to getting a job.
-  For mothers, precarious childcare arrangements restricted paid employment. Most chose to stay at home and delay employment to care for young children.
-  Most young adults had left their parental home and – with social housing available locally – were living independently. Financial considerations were the main reasons for staying with parents.
-  For many, social networks had become smaller, more focused on immediate family and friends and even more embedded in their immediate neighbourhoods. This further restricted wider support and longer-term education, training and employment opportunities.
-  A few individuals had more success with education, training and employment. The most important positive influence was having a good employer who encouraged and supported good quality education and training.
-  Despite numerous initiatives in the study area over many years the impoverished situations of most interviewees remained largely unchanged. Such initiatives seem in effect to have channelled people to, and then trapped them in, poor quality and precarious work, thus encouraging rather than challenging the continuation of poor work.

Background

Young people's transitions to adulthood are likely to be particularly difficult in neighbourhoods beset by the problems of social exclusion in extreme form. This study of the longer-term transitions of young adults involved tracking participants from two earlier studies of socially disadvantaged 15- to 25-year-olds. It set out to explore what had become of these young people living in the poorest neighbourhoods in one of the poorest towns in Britain (on Teesside), several years after the researchers first contacted them. As they moved into young adulthood had their experiences of disadvantage changed or stayed the same?

The earlier studies in 1999 and 2000 identified three important sorts of transition in which people, when last interviewed, had chiefly invested their identities and energies:

- those who displayed enduring commitment to education, training and employment, even if their immediate post-school experiences were marked by economic marginality and instability;
- those whose primary activity was parenting (predictably these were predominantly young women, many of whom were lone parents);
- those who had displayed a commitment to long-term criminal and/ or dependent drug-using 'careers'.

This follow-up study re-contacted some of the individuals involved in the earlier studies.

Persistent poverty, poor work and poor training

There was a striking disparity between young people's strong attachment to work and their actual employment experiences. Their ambitions – though modest – were disappointed and accompanied by frustration, disappointment and anxiety. Although most young people were committed to employment and persistently searched for work, their experiences were of intermittent, low-waged jobs, which were often poor quality, temporary and exploitative, interspersed with periods of economic inactivity.

Adam, aged 25, for instance, had had several, short-term retail jobs, had participated in several government training programmes and had been unemployed for long periods, which he "despised". He worried that his lengthening, insecure work history might make him even less attractive to employers and, although he was "desperately" searching for a good job, he worried that "there's no decent work out there".

Those who had had dispiriting experiences of school did not later reject formal learning wholesale.

Similarly, having school and post-school qualifications did not necessarily lead to better jobs or further education, including among those who were relatively 'successful' in finding work. Low-quality employment opportunities, however, were reflected in poor training opportunities and, accompanied by poor qualifications, offered little hope of improvement in employment prospects.

Although most interviewees had been on further education and training courses since last interviewed they remained poorly qualified. Participation in training schemes and college courses continued to be short-term, often unfinished and – in most cases – seemingly ineffective in progressing work careers. Because informal contacts and networks were seemingly more effective and valuable in searching for jobs than training or education, this confirmed young people's earlier attitudes about the irrelevance of qualifications to getting a job.

"My friends try and help me get work...someone 'phoned one of my friends and said 'is there any chance you can get someone to come and work for us with you?' He came round to ask me straight away, 'cos he knew I was out of work." (Roy, 23, unemployed)

For the few who did have a supportive employer who encouraged good quality training/education, this was the most significant factor in relatively successful labour market transitions. Other factors, such as supportive families, good health, and childcare support also had an influence.

For most, however, the work they now did was largely of the type they had encountered in earlier years. Even those who had showed most commitment to and closest engagement with the labour market in the earlier studies had made little progress since. Theirs were still low-skilled, low-paid manual and service sector jobs at the bottom of the labour market. Interviewees reported that, in this context, getting a job that paid £4.50, rather than £3.50, an hour was counted as a good outcome and that potential jobs in call centres or as bus drivers were regarded as a step up. They did poor work, often for seemingly punitive employers who, according to these accounts, were as quick to fire as they were to hire willing workers.

The insecurity of jobs was a central feature of the economically marginal education, training and employment experiences the young adults described. Cyclical movement around jobs at the bottom of the labour market, unemployment and short-term or sometimes unfinished education and training courses remained the norm.

The importance of childcare

Young mothers delayed entering the labour market to care for young children. Nicky, 25, said: "I'd rather he [her son] gets the benefit of me, rather than me going back to work. I'd rather be out of pocket than him suffer". However, opportunities for childcare preoccupied all the mothers regardless of whether or not they returned to paid employment after having children.

Childcare arrangements and networks were essential and until these were certain women could not compete in the local labour market. Consequently, local opportunities in education, training and employment did not on their own account for the processes of transition and inclusion/exclusion for young parents, especially mothers. The availability of childcare arrangements that are durable, affordable and which match the personal preferences of young mothers is key to the broader and longer-term transitions of this group.

Desisting from criminal and drug-using careers

There were few discernible differences in the backgrounds and earlier experiences of offenders and dependent drug users compared with non-offenders and non-users. Childhood backgrounds could not predict offending behaviour. Once individuals embarked upon criminal and/or drug-using careers, however, they typically entered a vicious circle of drug dependency, crime, imprisonment, detoxification and chronic relapse from which it is difficult to escape. The more protracted the heroin use, the greater the tolerance, the greater the need for money and, therefore, the more prolific and serious the crime. Richard, 23, said:

"Heroin and crime are like a vicious circle. It's like one big, magnetic circle...and when you get out of jail it starts. You're slowly getting drawn back in all the time. Slowly you end back on the circle again, moving round and round back in the same direction all the time."

A criminal and/or dependent drug-using record could debar young people from getting housing or work, undermining subsequent opportunities to desist from offending and/or dependent drug use. Harry, 23, said:

"I started the job. I wasn't late once. I wasn't sick once. Hadn't missed a shift. And basically when they found out I did have a criminal record, they shot us out of the door without even an explanation. I was more reliable than some of the people they had in there. That's what bugs me."

Regular imprisonment had two perverse effects:

- drug dependency often lasted longer than might have been the case because prison enforced a break from the debilitation and health problems associated with longer-term chronic, especially intravenous heroin use;
- prolonged periods of imprisonment disqualified individuals from forming relationships with family, non-criminal friends or partners, who might encourage and support desistence.

The most important 'predictors' of later desistence from drug use among offenders and dependent drug users were the relinquishing of previous social networks, sustained employment and support from their family of origin, forming a family and having children and support from a partner (often living outside the immediate local area). Support from a non-drug-using partner seemed particularly important for those desisting from dependent drug use, as was availability and knowledge of good quality, non-punitive drug treatment services.

Early experience therefore did not necessarily predict later experiences. Individuals did change and stopped offending and using drugs as they got older. But the change from persistence to desistence from criminal and drug-using careers was a gradual and cumulative process rather than an abrupt event. Just as contingent events, choices and critical turning points could precipitate desistence, these could also engender relapse and return individuals to criminal and drug-using careers.

Change and continuity

The interviews with young adults presented something of a paradox. Many of them certainly felt that their lives had changed considerably since last interviewed. Between the time of their first and most recent interview, numerous events and experiences influenced individual lives in ways that might not have been predicted. Buffeted by unanticipated critical moments - ill health, parental separation or bereavement - these transitions were a complex set of twists and turns.

At case by case level, this description still captures the nature of their transitions as they extended over time. As in earlier periods of their lives, the flux and fluidity of individuals' experience made them feel they had undergone much personal change. The most recent interviews revealed that the research participants had, in many cases, taken important steps in respect of housing and family. This is a significant finding given the lack of progress in respect education, training and employment and

their continued poverty. The formation of new partnerships, households and families, for a large proportion of interviewees, constituted real change and progress. The other, most noteworthy experience of change was had by a significant number of those people with extended drug-using and criminal careers. Compared with the first studies, several people now displayed serious commitment to desisting from their previous destructive lifestyles.

These changes were played out in a situation where informants' general experiences of the economic aspects of transition remained constant. All but a few of the interviewees continued to express very conventional attitudes and attachment to work, even if several of those who were mothers still prioritised the care and upbringing of their children and had largely put work on hold until their children were older. Even some of those with the least promising work histories – those who had engaged in criminality and drug-use – had nevertheless managed to access employment.

Thus, whilst individuals may have felt and experienced considerable change since the first study, their economic circumstances remained largely unchanged. The researchers conclude that the local economy is crucial in shaping the *overall* outcomes for young people, even if, at the individual level, people pointed to other aspects of change in their lives.

Implications for policy

Current policy emphasises training, advice, incentives and childcare support as rectifying supposed gaps in employability and skills among disadvantaged young adults. However, this study suggests that such marginal redistribution of income and opportunity will not lift people out of poverty unless they have access to good quality training and rewarding and secure employment. Poor training and poor employment opportunities tend to be synonymous. Income from decent rather than poor work, for those able to work, is the best way of lifting people out of poverty. Although the National Minimum Wage raises the income threshold for some, it does not resolve how people might progress beyond this minimum. Those who are unable to work, or who delay work because of childcare responsibilities and/ or the disincentives of low-quality jobs, need more generous income support to lift them out of poverty traps. This might in the short term have the effect of deterring individuals from seeking poor work, but it may also have the beneficial longer-term effect of deterring offers of poor work.

A more comprehensive and generous redistribution of resources and opportunities, such as the creation of available and accessible good quality training, flexible childcare and decent jobs, might allay the longer-term social exclusion and economic marginality experienced by the individuals featured in this study. The researchers suggest that the Government's 'joined-up' policy towards reducing poverty and social exclusion, to be effective, needs to look at demand-side labour market reform, by creating more secure, better quality jobs in disadvantaged areas like Teesside.

About the project

The research was carried out by a team from the University of Teesside. A sample of 34 young adults aged 23 to 29 took part in qualitative interviews which focused upon their lives to date – particularly their experiences of education, training and employment, family and parenting, housing, leisure, social networks, and crime and drug use. The sample was generated from two earlier studies and re-contacted to discover what had happened in their lives since last interviewed. Virtually all were ethnically white and from working-class backgrounds (reflecting the nature of the local population).

How to get further information

The full report, **Poor transitions: Social exclusion and young adults** by Colin Webster, Donald Simpson, Robert MacDonald, Andreas Abbas, Mark Cieslik, Tracy Shildrick and Mark Simpson, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 650 6, price £13.95).