

foundations

Analysis informing change

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The youth divide

Diverging paths to adulthood

Young people's transitions into adulthood have changed in recent years. Since 1997, the JRF has supported a programme of research exploring the nature and extent of these changes, and their implications for young people, parents and policy-makers. Gill Jones, Professor of Sociology at Keele University, draws on the findings from 26 projects to summarise current patterns of transition to adulthood. This *Foundations* raises issues for policy and practice. At a time when the major policy thrust is to combat social exclusion, the report shows how difficult this will be - with young people becoming more and more sharply divided.

- The period of 'youth' has gradually been extended. However, this overall trend masks significant differences between different social groups of young people.
- There is an increasing polarisation between young people who stay on in education and gain qualifications, and those who leave school at 16 or 17, risking bad jobs, low pay and unemployment.
- There is also a growing divide between the minority who start families in their teens and the majority who are increasingly deferring parenthood.
- This divergence largely reflects inequalities of social class, but there are also persisting inequalities of gender and ethnicity. For example, the increasing educational achievement of young women and of some minority ethnic groups does not seem to be resulting in the expected dividends for them in terms of work and pay.
- Financial disincentives prevent poorer prospective students from applying to universities. Some are not aware that they may be exempt from tuition fees; some are put off by the prospect of debt.
- The increasing delay in achieving economic independence, coupled with Government policies which assume that parents will accept additional responsibilities and extend their financial support to their adult children, has redoubled the importance of positive family relationships to young people's life chances.
- Through transmitting beliefs about family life, education and work, families still have a significant impact on whether young people will face social advantage or disadvantage in their adult lives. Formal education cannot always overcome the effects of early family disadvantage.

The JRF Young People in Transition programme

The JRF programme of research on young people came about in recognition of an increasing need for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to take a more joined-up ('holistic') approach to the problems of young people in Britain. This *Foundations*, and the full report that accompanies it, is based on the 18 projects in the programme, supplemented by other recent JRF-supported research.

Fast track and slow track

Transitions to adulthood take place along distinct pathways. These include moving from school into the labour market, from being a child in a family household to forming a family and a household of one's own, and from the economic dependence associated with childhood to the independence associated with being an adult. While for many the pathways to adulthood are getting longer, for others adulthood comes early. The result is a polarisation of experience in youth. At one end, some young people are still leaving school at the minimum age, still becoming parents while in their teens, in effect still following traditional working-class patterns. These 'fast track' transitions are becoming more distinctive, more problematic and more stigmatised when the increasingly middle-class majority is deferring entry into the labour market and into marriage and childbearing until later.

The reasons for this polarisation are apparent in the research. While policy-makers are spreading one message – that education is good for you – families and communities may be spreading another. Many of the beliefs held in families and communities are based on the perceptions of the social world as it once was, rather than as it is now. Patterns of transition into adulthood have been changing fast, with the extension of education, the loss of the bulk of the youth labour market, and the erosion of welfare benefits for young people. Young people need the support and encouragement of their parents more than ever. Unfortunately, they cannot always get it.

Educating for an equal society?

Policy-makers want to increase the competitiveness of the UK labour force. Young people are encouraged to stay in education and training, rather than enter the labour market before they have gained the skills and qualifications they will need. There has been a massive increase in young people continuing in post-16 education, and going on to higher education (HE), but this is not across the board. Several studies explored transitions between school and work, and found polarisation between the majority who are benefiting from education and a minority who are not. Some

working-class young people are missing out, either because they may not share the prevailing belief that education is good for you, or because they may not be able to afford to study rather than work.

Education policies depend on public belief in the value of education, 'the education ethos'. With the erosion of state support for students, people need to be doubly sure that their personal investment in education will be worth it. Unfortunately, the benefits of post-16 education are not always immediately apparent.

- There is evidence that qualifications are reducing in value. The later earnings bonus of gaining a degree is decreasing, thus challenging the assumptions underlying the current student loan system.
- Education works better for some than for others. Though increasing numbers of higher education students are female and/or from minority ethnic groups, the beneficial effect of a degree is not necessarily carried through into the labour market for these groups.
- The benefits of education may only be seen in the longer term, when the employment histories of those who stay on in education become increasingly distinguished from those of early school leavers.

Many students have financial problems and no hope of ending them. The need for economic support from parents can put strain on family relationships. For students from poorer families, life can be a complex balancing of study and work. The result can be a social division between richer and poorer students. The social benefits associated with university life are disappearing. Dropout from courses is becoming more common.

"I did like being at university. I liked the people and that. I enjoyed the course. I thought it was really good, but at the end of the day it just got back to money again. That was the thing that was going to stop me."

Socioeconomic disadvantage and access to higher education

A labour market alternative?

Despite economic growth and a decline in the numbers of young people available for work, a core of unemployment among young people remains stubbornly present. As the better-qualified stay on in education and training, so the youth labour market increasingly becomes one for less-qualified labour. Simultaneously, the jobs once entered by early school leavers are fast disappearing with the restructuring of industry. The combination of effects has led to increased polarisation in the labour market in terms of occupations, qualifications and earnings.

The loss of the youth labour market has been to the disadvantage of the working class. Many of the jobs typically held by school leavers have disappeared. Traditional craft apprenticeships for young men and clerical/secretarial jobs for young women have been replaced by sales occupations, often insecure, part-time and low-paid. Previously young people could start at the bottom and work up a career ladder, but 'stepping stone jobs' no longer exist. There are now few work alternatives to educational success. This has particularly affected those without qualifications and from low-income households: they are more likely to experience early unemployment, which affects both later employment and earning power.

Many early school leavers still hold a strong work ethic, but this may be based on outdated beliefs about the kinds of jobs now available to young people in the labour market. In one study looking at the attitudes of working-class young men, most valued and aspired to a 'proper job'. They still thought in terms of manual jobs, and had no sense at all that they might not be able to achieve and maintain the traditional pattern of working-class life in which they were the main breadwinner.

These young men emphasised jobs over education, despite their jobs often being temporary or casual or less than full-time. The study thus raises the question of how they could be advised on the realities of the labour market and won over to the educational ethos, given their lack of awareness of its increased importance.

Family and household formation

There is broad consensus about the domestic ideal. Despite the increasing instability of marriage as a social institution, most young people saw their own futures conventionally as '*nice husband or wife, nice house and nice car*', and to '*settle down in a good job, buy a car and get married*'. Those with disabilities shared these conventional aspirations despite the barriers in the way of achieving them.

Again there is polarisation, this time between the majority spreading major changes over a period of time, and a small minority whose transitions are rapid, stigmatised, and potentially problematic.

- What was previously a middle-class pattern of spreading change is now a majority pattern. We do not know whether people are positively choosing to have children later in their lives, or whether lack of resources and the demands of mortgages and expensive life styles cause them to defer family formation.
- At the same time, there is a continuation of working-class patterns of early childbirth, which has become

more problematic as it diverges from the majority pattern, and as the support structures of marriage, job security, and formal welfare systems are eroded.

- In the longer term, the trends towards remaining single and remaining childless may constitute a greater problem than teenage pregnancy.

These slow track and fast track patterns are closely linked to socio-economic background and educational level. There are also continuing gender differences. Women typically marry and have children at a lower age than their partners, though this pattern would be expected to continue to change as women's educational levels increase, their attachment to the labour market becomes stronger and better rewarded, and their incomes play an increasing role in their family finances.

Teenage pregnancy and motherhood

The Government has pledged to halve the teenage pregnancy rate within ten years. Young people in the UK are no more sexually active than in other European states. Teenage parenthood is associated with family poverty and education level, but particularly with having a young mother oneself. Early motherhood thus follows an inter-generational pattern, the continuation of which poses one of the most serious challenges for the Government's social exclusion agenda. One of the main reasons for high rates of teenage pregnancy is the low level of contraceptive use. Apart from a need for more information about contraception, and easier access to it, research also pointed to a need for information about abortion to be included in sex education in schools.

The policy intention is that young mothers should be enabled to escape social exclusion through work. This involves childcare, but formal provision is limited in many areas, and young mothers may have to rely on their relatives or remain in the poverty trap.

"I'm stuck here now really until he's a lot older and until I can find somewhere else to live, somewhere cheaper, or until some poor bloke comes along and marries me"

Getting a job, finding a home

Young fathers

Young working-class men are marginalised not only in the labour market but also in their roles as fathers. Most understand that fatherhood involves financial responsibility for the child, but fewer take responsibility for the conception, seeing this as the responsibility of their girlfriends. This made them feel thus less culpable in the event of an unwanted pregnancy. Some young men have particularly judgemental views about teenage pregnancy and young women themselves may see their boyfriends as peripheral to the decision-making process.

“It makes me sick, girls at that age. They have still got their lives to live and you can’t live a life with a kid at that age.”

Young man quoted in *Young men leaving school*

“To me, men have some say but not a lot really, they think they’ve got a big say in it but they haven’t really, not really.”

Young woman quoted in *Teenage pregnancy and choice*

The role of men in teenage pregnancy and motherhood has also been marginalised in official accounts. The policy emphasis on teenage *pregnancy* and on fathers’ *financial* responsibility may be encouraging this very partial view. The possibility that young men could contribute to their children’s upbringing as *fathers* appears to be overlooked.

In the interactions between young men and young women the emphasis appears to be on sexual intercourse and its outcomes, rather than on personal relationships. There is a need for more research to explore how lasting partnerships - leading to *shared parenthood* - can develop from these rather humble origins. There is no sense either in these young people’s accounts or in official policy reports, of the prospects for fostering positive partnerships around the concept of closeness, intimacy and interdependence.

Leaving home

Young people have a growing need for independence from their parents, and leaving home is clearly associated with greater autonomy. Changing patterns of leaving home - including leaving home as a single person to study or work rather than to live with a partner - mean that the housing needs of young people have changed and increased. Housing supply, however, continues to be geared to families. Young people have to find ways of affording the available housing, such as sharing with friends. They may, if they are able, continue to live with their parents (usually paying board money), but this can disguise personal poverty. Furthermore, there is no legal obligation for parents to provide a home for their adult children, and much therefore depends on the quality of the parent-child relationship. Moving away from a disadvantaged area means the loss of local networks that young people rely on for support, jobs and housing.

Social inheritance: the problem of family background

The research has shown some of the ways in which social inclusion and exclusion are reproduced. The programme findings provide striking evidence that it is difficult for some to escape early disadvantage. **Young people in transition** indicates that patterns of inter-generational inheritance have strengthened over the last decades rather than reduced (despite the increase in marital breakdown),

and several other studies indicate the continuing significance of family disadvantage, despite the extension and expansion of post-16 education. Many studies in the programme showed the influence of family beliefs - for example an education, work or family ethic - to the younger generation. Family beliefs are likely to affect not only the behaviour of young people, but also whether families provide emotional and economic support for education, work and domestic transitions.

Revising the policy approach

If policies for young people are to be effective, then the whole policy approach to the age group needs to be brought under scrutiny. Currently, too many policies are based on outdated and false assumptions about ‘youth’, too few take real account of the family and community context of young people’s lives, and the current emphasis on targeting fails to address the needs of the many who risk falling through the gaps in the safety net.

Abandoning out-dated assumptions

Balancing acts defines the underlying assumptions that have guided government thinking.

Outdated policy assumptions

- *Age* - that people gain responsibility and independence with age, regardless of social class, gender, or cultural variation
- *Dependency* - that young people are, or can remain, dependent on their parents
- *Parenting* - that parents will accept extended responsibility for their children
- *Economic rationality* - that economic incentives or disincentives alone can be effectively deployed to control behaviour
- *Empowerment* - that ‘giving young people a voice’ confers power on them
- *Conformity* - that young people will sign up to conventional white middle-class aspirations.

Extending the holistic approach

Holistic policies for young people would need to take into account the different contexts in which they are becoming adult: in particular their **life course** and **family and community** contexts.

- Earlier experiences, such as childhood poverty or bereavement, affect later outcomes, including truancy and disaffection with school. Equally, disadvantage during youth, such as early experience of unemployment, can have a damaging effect on later employment. Policy interventions at various stages of life are therefore vital.

■ The youth divide

- The significance of family life and family relationships comes out strongly in this research programme. There is insufficient awareness of variations in family patterns of care and support, and times when family support needs to be supplemented with alternative formal provisions. Youth policies cannot therefore be constructed in isolation from family policies.

Recognising the problems of targeting

- **'Poor neighbourhoods'**. Policies tend to focus on poor neighbourhoods as a practical means of targeting socially excluded young people. Labour market economists argue that increased funding (e.g. for education) for disadvantaged areas would have a direct effect on labour market prospects in these areas. On the other hand, poor neighbourhoods are not homogeneous, and targeted interventions may only help those who would have achieved without them. Thus, the authors of the study on HE do not consider that initiatives to increase HE quotas on a community level will be effective. It is therefore important to understand the varying circumstances and responses of people in inner city neighbourhoods or deprived rural areas.
- **'The socially excluded'**. It is tempting, when so many studies identify a minority cluster at the bottom of the socio-economic heap, to focus policies on this group. After all, 'they' are the ones who do not subscribe to the education ethic, truanting and failing to obtain the qualifications 'they' will need; 'they' are the ones most likely to become unemployed in adulthood, or be in low-paid jobs; 'they' are the ones who become teenage parents; 'they' are the ones who leave home 'too soon' and become homeless. 'They' are fairly easy to identify and if 'they' cannot be saved and become full participants in society, then 'they' will pass on their disadvantage to their children, and their children's children. If only it were as simple as that. Young people's lives can change very rapidly and individuals can move in and out of visibly excluded groups, making tracking of the kind envisaged by the ConneXions Service difficult. Even if there were a static and identifiable group, this would only be the visible tip of an iceberg. Many other young people risk joining their group. It is therefore important that 'the disadvantaged' are not stereotyped and stigmatised, and that the wider inequalities of young people are also addressed.

Towards an agenda for effective policies

Many of the projects described in this report put forward recommendations for policy and practice.

Extending education take-up

Education is seen as the principal means to overcome poverty and disadvantage. For this to be effective, young people and their families need to be persuaded to take up

education and training opportunities rather than try to enter the impoverished youth labour market.

- Selling the idea of education requires a shift in the educational ethos of many families (and schools). New ways must be found to engage with disaffected young men when they are still at school, and inform them of the realities of the labour market. This could take the form of peer education by 18- to 20-year-olds with labour market experience, or a 'school into work' programme in the final compulsory school year.
- The message is that Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) and other financial incentives to stay in education cannot work on their own. If educational aspirations are to be raised, there is also a case for educating the parents of young people, and encouraging them to gain educational qualifications.
- There is a need to question 'levels of participation' in HE and the impact higher levels will have on standards and outcomes.
- Tuition fees should be abolished and non-returnable bursaries or grants reintroduced for poorer HE students. These should be supplemented with cheaper accommodation and assistance with travel. Student loans should not be based on the premise that graduates earn more. The earnings benefits and status value of a degree are likely to continue to decline, and levels of student debt increase, as more young people stay on.
- The issue of bias on the grounds of social class, gender, ethnicity, disability and community should be addressed in schools and colleges.

Reforming the labour market

Even if extended education is desirable for (if not desired by) all, there will still be young people who enter the labour market, and who need jobs.

- The curriculum should be re-addressed. Post-16 school qualifications are currently geared to university entry, rather than entry into the labour market. Whatever the inducements to stay on, there are some who will opt for work and risk unemployment.
- There needs to be an easier transition from school into work. The links between education and labour market institutions need to be improved. Young people need an extended period of support in the first steps towards employment, and employers should take on the task of vocational training for all young people entering their first jobs.
- Interventions are needed to alter the terms and conditions of low-paid work and youth incomes should be reviewed. The transitional National Minimum Wage (NMW) should be abolished, and all over-18s should be entitled to the adult rate. The NMW legislation should also protect under-18s.

- There is an urgent need for help with transport costs, especially for those in rural areas, to break the ‘no car, no job’ cycle. This could be met by the Access Fund under the *Investing in Young People* strategy, through Youth Cards, and/or through a mobility grant for young people in rural areas.

Reducing teenage pregnancies

Policies need not only to seek ways of reducing conceptions, and providing support for young mothers, but also at engaging young fathers in the role of partners and parents.

- Provision in schools should be extended to include more relationship education. Abortion information should be included in sex education.
- Young mothers need effective childcare to enable them to work if they wish, and should not have to be dependent on informal systems of childcare. The New Deal for Lone Parents caters for mothers over 18 years, but younger mothers also need alternative provision ranging from childcare to supported accommodation.
- Care should, however, be taken to support positive relationships between young mothers and their partners where appropriate and not to cause them to separate.
- Young men miss out on health, relationship and sex education. Parenthood education work undertaken in young offenders’ institutions provides a model for what other agencies could achieve.

Providing housing and preventing homelessness

Young people may have to leave home to access the new opportunities available to them, or they may become trapped in the parental home.

- There is still an urgent need for affordable housing for single young people, in both rural and urban areas.
- There is still a heavy policy reliance on parents for accommodation, despite the fact that young people may need to leave home.
- If young people are to live at home, they should receive an income which enables them to pay board money to their parents. EMA or Child Benefit might provide an appropriate source, if levels were raised.

Providing alternatives to family support

Young people need an alternative to family economic support. This problem could be addressed in some of the ways identified above: by improving conditions in the youth labour market, addressing the financial problems of students, and recognising young people’s housing and transport costs. There are additional lessons from the research.

- Many parents seem unaware of their responsibilities for children over the age of 16 years, and a public education programme on parental responsibility for older children might now be needed.
- Young people’s incomes should be sufficient for their needs, and should not be based on an assumption their parents will provide subsidies.
- Information and guidance on a range of issues from sex education to labour market information should be provided for young people and their parents.
- Schools need the resources to enable them to provide support for children during family crises such as bereavement or parental divorce.
- Community care services need to respond quickly to the needs of disabled and ill parents if their children are to be prevented from taking on inappropriate caring roles. They should also provide a viable alternative to parental care for young people with disabilities.
- Adolescent support teams could offer a short-term, focused preventive service to families in crisis. Family mediation is one possible form of intervention. Preventive services for teenagers should be part of a continuum of inter-agency family support services.
- Joined up policy-making for young people and their families is essential.

Conclusions

Transitions to adulthood have become polarised, with a majority apparently making significant changes over a period of years, while a minority takes a quicker route. This latter course is seen increasingly as problematic. The problem for young people is that society seems to define some patterns of transition as inappropriate and then condemn them, even though they may be based on long-standing class or cultural traditions. There is an expectation that white middle-class patterns of extended transition and extended parental support should be followed and that alternatives – including young people’s own solutions – are wrong.

Inequalities persist among young people and in some respects they have deepened. However, the polarisation described here hides a more complex and disturbing picture. In the social hierarchy of young people, between the ‘socially included’ and the ‘socially excluded’, there is a large (and largely invisible) group trying to survive on scarce resources, including their own resilience. The current emphasis on the most socially excluded should be revised to consider the varying circumstances and needs of all young people. The proverbial iceberg will be overlooked if we focus only on the tip.

How to get further information

A full report on the Young People in Transition programme, **The youth divide: Diverging paths to adulthood** by Gill Jones, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 076 8, price £12.95).

This *Foundations* is based on the following studies. Unless otherwise stated, all titles are available from York Publishing Services Ltd. Reference numbers are given for any *Findings* summary published by the Foundation: you can read *Findings* on our website, www.jrf.org.uk, or get printed copies by calling 01904 615905 or emailing publications@jrf.org.uk.

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