

# Attachment to place, social networks, mobility and prospects of young people

Findings  
Informing change

October 2007

This study explores how young people's attitudes towards education, training and work opportunities are shaped by their social networks and attachment to place, and looks at how interventions might widen their horizons and improve their prospects.

## The research

By Anne Green and Richard White of the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, drawing on case studies in three deprived neighbourhoods in Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

## Key points

- Place and identity can be powerfully connected. Attachment to place is a very important factor in some young people's life choices.
- Where people live affects the availability of education, training and employment opportunities, their access to these opportunities, and their perceptions and horizons. Young people living close to Wolverhampton city centre had better access to opportunities than those in more peripheral neighbourhoods in north-west Walsall and East Hull. Young people in Hull also had more localised horizons than those in Wolverhampton.
- Locally based social networks give some young people strong advantages in the labour market, with family and friends providing valuable support.
- In some instances, family support encourages young people to pursue their interests, take up education, training or employment, and helps them to decide what opportunities to pursue. In other cases, reliance on family support can reduce ambition and limit choices to familiar options and locations.
- Wider social and spatial horizons can expand the range of opportunities young people consider and improve their prospects, but their choices may remain constrained in more peripheral areas where there are more limited employment opportunities within easy reach.
- The authors conclude that:
  - policy needs to recognise that local, place-based social networks affect aspirations and behaviour;
  - it is important that young people are aware of and can access opportunities beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

# Background

There are ongoing policy concerns about deprivation of individuals, poverty relating to place and how to transform the prospects of deprived places. Concentrations of worklessness persist despite a favourable economic climate and policies aimed at helping people to find work. This has provoked an upsurge of interest in the role of geography in the labour market behaviour of people living in deprived areas.

This study was undertaken to provide new insights into the role of attachment to place in shaping the attitudes, aspirations and behaviour of young people from deprived areas in accessing post-compulsory education, training and work. It examines their horizons and questions what policies would be helpful in 'widening horizons' to help improve their prospects.

## Case study areas

New Deal for Communities (NDC) neighbourhoods in Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton were selected as the focus for the study and a survey, focus groups and interviews were conducted in each location with young people aged between 15 years and their early twenties. These areas were chosen to investigate young people's social networks, attachment to place, spatial awareness and access to opportunities in areas with high levels of worklessness in a range of settings:

- *Hull* – the case study neighbourhood is in east Hull. The city has a relatively sluggish economy with relatively low levels of growth, productivity and earnings. There are no other major employment centres within easy reach.
- *Walsall* – the case study neighbourhood has a peripheral location in north-west Walsall. The local area has seen decline of heavy manufacturing, but there are new employment opportunities close to the neighbourhood and elsewhere in the metropolitan West Midlands.
- *Wolverhampton* – the case study neighbourhood is adjacent to the city centre, near to the university, and has good public transport links to other parts of the West Midlands. The local area has seen decline of

traditional manufacturing but there are employment opportunities in the city centre and beyond.

## Social networks, place attachment and aspirations

Social networks and place attachment shape young people's aspirations and intentions in education, training and employment. This highlights how important it is for organisations seeking to help young people into post-compulsory education, training and work to understand young people in their social and local context.

Most young people across all three locations wanted to work and had conventional and often high career aspirations. The overwhelming majority recognised qualifications as important, although some, particularly those who had not liked or had not succeeded at school, were reluctant to continue with classroom-based learning.

Many of those interviewed could call on strong social networks, including family and friends, to provide support in achieving their aspirations, but not always the necessary bridges to opportunities. Indeed, the nature of opportunities has changed considerably over the last quarter century:

- the restructuring of labour markets has led to a reduction in manufacturing jobs and the growth of employment in services;
- young people face a considerably different set of opportunities for further/higher education, training and/or work than their parents and grandparents did at 15/16 years of age;
- youth transitions into work have become longer, more complex and varied, with increasing numbers entering higher education before working.

In some instances, reliance on support from family and friends was positive in encouraging young people to pursue their interests, take up training and in helping them to decide what opportunities to pursue. This applied particularly when family members had connections into employment networks and/or were able to make useful suggestions about education and training opportunities.

**"My mum used to work in the fire service. And that's what I want to do. I know it means working hard, and she's brought me some information that I need to apply. I'll even give up smoking next year so that I can pass the fitness test!"**  
(17-year-old man, on training course, Hull)

However, in other instances such reliance reduced ambition and/or limited choices to familiar options and locations. Some young people – especially in Hull, where place attachment was strongest – had very localised outlooks, which could cut them off from the full range of opportunities available. In some cases, young people did not realise this, but in others they appeared content to trade off a reduced set of opportunities in favour of proximity to family and friends.

**“I like Preston Road because you know where everything is and you know people. If you move you have to find things out.”**  
(17-year-old woman, seeking employment, Hull)

Some young people felt that to maximise the quantity and quality of opportunities available they would need to leave their neighbourhood, and they were happy to do so in order to ‘get on’. In Wolverhampton and Hull most young people viewed ‘getting on’ in the labour market and ‘getting out’ of the area as being linked to the need to buy a better house, not simply to job opportunities. In Walsall there was less agreement about the need to move away to improve their situations, because of the availability of desirable housing locally.

## Labour market knowledge

Most young people knew about the skills and attributes employers were looking for, but some were unclear about how to achieve their aspirations, or how generic work experience could help them attain longer-term goals.

In general, young people thought they knew where education, training and employment opportunities were. Young people in the Walsall and Wolverhampton case study areas demonstrated a reasonably accurate spatial knowledge of job locations and sometimes they discounted local jobs on the grounds of perceived ‘poor quality’. In Hull, spatial knowledge of job locations was more limited, as were actual opportunities.

## How spatially constrained are training, jobs and careers?

Analyses of commuting data show that nationally the majority of journeys to work are over short distances. How far young people think it is reasonable to commute is influenced by their social networks (i.e. where family and friends work), the location of job opportunities, pay and prospects. Young people in Wolverhampton had access to opportunities in the city and also, via good public transport and motorway links, to Birmingham and the rest of the West Midlands conurbation.

**“It is easy to get into the centre of Birmingham in half an hour and relatively cheap.”**  
(18-year-old man in education, Wolverhampton)

Those in the Walsall case study area were a bus ride away from the town centre, but from there could use connections to other towns and cities in the sub-region. For young people in Hull there was no other large employment centre within easy travelling distance/time and there was a strong perceived divide between the east and west of the city.

Low wages are a key factor in understanding how geographically constrained people are in their job search. Most young people considered it was not worth travelling far for a low wage, but indicated they would be willing to travel further for a job offering more money and better prospects.

There has been a general trend for employment opportunities to move from city centres to the outskirts of cities, which are often difficult to access by public transport. The “hassle” of “difficult journeys” involving two buses – for example, into the city centre and then out to a different part of the city – was off-putting to many young people. Access to a car was seen as a way of overcoming such constraints and could enable young people to search for jobs over a wider area. However, most young people did not cite transport as a major barrier to achieving their aspirations.

**“Generally, you have to get a bus to the centre and out, but that should not be a problem. People who say there are not good transport links do not know what they are talking about.”**  
(17-year-old man on work placement, Walsall)

Postcode discrimination was not a widespread concern, although the negative impacts of area reputation and stigma may linger for a minority of young people.

## Widening horizons

Some young people display relatively wide horizons, both socially and spatially. Others have limited aspirations and restrict their consideration of opportunities to the immediate local area. The findings from this study suggest that wider social networks, positive role models and experience of and confidence in travelling outside the local area are all important factors in widening horizons. There is a strong case for broadening the horizons of all young people, not just those with the most limited outlooks, to enable them to make informed choices about all the education, training and employment opportunities available to them.

It is also important to acknowledge that the real limits and constraints of the labour market are more significant in peripheral areas than in central, well-connected locations. Social factors are also relevant alongside spatial ones. Both Hull and Walsall NDC areas are predominantly White British outer estates, to some extent psychologically cut off from the city centre in the minds of some local people. Hull is also geographically distant from opportunities in other major urban areas, although this is not the case for Walsall. In contrast to Hull, where homogeneity and a peripheral location appear to be factors in narrowing horizons, the NDC area in Wolverhampton is more ethnically and socially diverse, is close to the city centre and has good transport links and more widespread social networks.

Initiatives to widen horizons take various forms and aim to tackle actual and perceived barriers across several policy domains. Key areas of focus include:

- transport – raising awareness of available services and help with costs;
- visits, trips, sporting and social activities – designed to provide new experiences, enhance confidence and broaden spatial horizons; and
- educational and work-related initiatives – aimed at raising young people's awareness of routes into employment, opportunities and experiences of relevance to the workplace.

Young people who had taken part in such initiatives felt that they had benefited from the experience.

## Conclusions

Subjective factors influence young people's decision-making about their future opportunities alongside physical constraints. The work opportunities they perceive to exist usually represent a subset of all opportunities actually available.

Family and friends are an important source of knowledge about jobs and can provide encouragement and help in accessing training and employment opportunities. They can also act as a 'brake' through a lack of positive role models or by impacting negatively on confidence and discouraging take-up of opportunities.

Place shapes people and their outlooks, and how they interpret and act upon what they see. Place identity can be a source of strength, but it also appeals to the parochial.

It is important that policy-makers keep in mind that not all neighbourhoods or people are the same – where they are located, their history, their socio-demographic and economic characteristics are crucial in understanding how they operate. This calls for local flexibility in design and implementation of policy in a manner that is sensitive to local circumstances.

## About the project

The project was undertaken by Anne Green and Richard White at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick.

The study was based on case studies in three deprived neighbourhoods in England. In each, the researchers conducted a survey of 60 young people aged from 15 to their early twenties, recording their attitudes towards the local area, patterns of mobility and use of transport, current economic position, labour market aspirations, job search methods and sources of information and guidance used. In addition, focus groups and individual interviews explored in greater detail young people's perceptions of the neighbourhood and city, place attachment, knowledge of local job opportunities, and future residential and labour market intentions. The authors also carried out an extensive literature search and interviewed stakeholders and employers.

---

## For further information

The full report, **Attachment to place: Social networks, mobility and prospects of young people**, by Anne E Green and Richard J White, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

Further information is also available from: [Anne.Green@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Anne.Green@warwick.ac.uk).

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

[Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)