

Vulnerable young men in fragile labour markets

Also available

Losing out? Socioeconomic disadvantage and experience in further and higher education

Alasdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong

(Published by The Policy Press in association with JRF)

Socioeconomic disadvantage and access to higher education

Alasdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong

(Published by The Policy Press in association with JRF)

Youth unemployment in rural areas

Fred Cartmel and Andy Furlong

Vulnerable young men in fragile labour markets

Employment, unemployment and the search for long-term security

Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel



The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Website: www.jrf.org.uk

© University of Glasgow 2004

First published 2004 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

All rights reserved. Reproduction of this report by photocopying or electronic means for non-commercial purposes is permitted. Otherwise, no part of this report may be reproduced, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85935 179 4 (paperback)
ISBN 1 85935 180 8 (pdf: available at www.jrf.org.uk)

Cover design by Adkins Design

Prepared and printed by:
York Publishing Services Ltd
64 Hallfield Road
Layerthorpe
York YO31 7ZQ
Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; Website: www.yps-publishing.co.uk

Further copies of this report, or any other JRF publication, can be obtained either from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/) or from our distributor, York Publishing Services Ltd, at the above address.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
1 Youth unemployment and labour market transitions	1
Introduction	1
The impact of early long-term unemployment	2
Employment	4
Methods	5
Locating the sample	6
Conclusion	7
2 Turbulent beginnings	9
Introduction	9
Experiences of schooling	10
Supporting labour market entry	11
Training schemes	12
Poor work	14
Conclusion	16
3 Trapped?	18
Introduction	18
Nae money, nowt to dae	18
Working 'on the side'	23
Dealing	24
Conclusion	25
4 Getting by in a casualised labour market	27
Introduction	27
Poor training, poor work	28
Agency work	30
Conclusion	32
5 Conclusions	34
Notes	37
References	38

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to express their appreciation for advice received from Bob Coles and Charlie Lloyd. Special thanks go to Olive Kearns, Lynn Campbell, Flora Smith and Jackie Shearer who transcribed the interview tapes. We would also like to thank all of the young people (whose names have been changed to protect anonymity) and key professionals who gave up their valuable time to speak to us during the course of the research.

1 Youth unemployment and labour market transitions

... employment does not guarantee social integration: in the longer run, poor quality jobs are likely to make many people highly vulnerable to job loss and to eventual labour market marginalisation ... Where jobs undermine work motivation and psychological health, people are more likely to quit their jobs, increasing their risk of unemployment, or to withdraw from the labour market altogether.

(Gallie and Paugam, 2002, p. 62)

Introduction

At present, levels of youth unemployment in the UK are relatively low and have been declining for several years. This decline is partially a reflection of trends in the adult labour market but they have also been affected by increased participation in post-compulsory education, by benefit restrictions and by the introduction of new training programmes. While the current all-age unemployment rate stands at 5.2 per cent, 13.5 per cent of under 25 year olds are registered as unemployed (Eurostat, 2002). The difference is usual; rates of unemployment among young people always tend to be around twice as high as for adults (Makeham, 1980; O'Higgins, 2001). There are several reasons for these age-related differences in levels of unemployment including the fact that young people are attempting initial entries into the world of work, they may move jobs more frequently in an attempt to obtain secure and satisfying employment, and may lack the experience and skills sought by employers (Ashton, 1986). There is also evidence that employers perceive young workers as less reliable than adults and in need of greater levels of supervision, both of which carry hidden costs (Ashton *et al.*, 1982).

Despite the relative buoyancy of the UK labour market, unemployment among young people is not necessarily a cause for concern and many (if not most) will be without work at some stage in the

early part of their labour market careers. For the majority of these young people, the experience of unemployment will be fleeting, although a small minority will encounter a lengthy period of unemployment and face great difficulty in securing labour market integration. While a long period of unemployment can have long-term consequences for patterns of labour market participation, many young people do manage to overcome these early difficulties and establish secure careers. To an extent, the various schemes introduced by the Government to enhance the employability of young people and tackle youth unemployment have helped some young people to obtain training and to enter stable employment. However, although contemporary youth training programmes are more concerned with providing quality training than were the early schemes, there is evidence that the main beneficiaries are qualified school-leavers.

The main aim of this report is to provide a better understanding of the reasons why some young men are able to overcome the impact of a period of long-term unemployment at an early stage in their careers while others face a future of recurrent unemployment and precarious employment. The research is based on in-depth interviews with 32 young men in the West of Scotland who had all experienced a period of long-term unemployment more than five years ago. Some of these young men had gone on to establish relatively successful careers and unemployment was a distant and almost forgotten event. However, while continuous unemployment over several years was uncommon, the majority of respondents occupied precarious positions and their labour market histories were largely characterised by periodic unemployment and short-term insecure work. In this context, it is important to highlight the barriers that prevent young men from moving from precarious positions into the more secure sectors of the labour market.

In the main, the young men whose lives we describe were neither workshy nor unemployable but many were effectively locked out of the segments of the labour market that offer opportunities for secure employment, career development and a decent quality of life. While we set out to examine the ways in which young men managed to break the cycle of unemployment, many of the life stories tell us more about barriers to integration and the resilience of those in the precarious segments of the labour market than about ways in which cycles of disadvantage are broken. Although around a third of the sample can be said to have moved from long-term unemployment into the more secure segments of the labour market, the report paints a poignant picture of the obstacles faced and of the ways in which young men become trapped in precarious positions.

A full understanding of the nature of these barriers is a precondition for effective policy interventions and effective solutions do not simply involve attempts to enhance the quality of labour supply through addressing individual 'deficiencies'. One of the strongest messages contained in this report relates to the need to focus on employment demand by reversing the trend towards casualisation of employment that damages young lives and thwarts attempts to build a high-skill economy. Discussions of the 'socially excluded' (with implied links to the so-called underclass) tend to focus largely on unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, and place an emphasis on supply-side 'deficiencies'. Yet, as this report shows, the main difficulties faced by these young men stem from labour market insecurities and the lack of opportunities for a decent quality of life rather than from the privations of unemployment per se. Effectively, the report is about the class conditions of those denied a stake in the modern economy and about the barriers that prevent young men from obtaining decent and secure forms of employment.

The impact of early long-term unemployment

Although most youth unemployment tends to be short-term and has few lasting effects, high levels of turbulence in early labour market experiences are clearly associated with continued vulnerability (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2001; Furlong *et al.*, 2003). In particular, there is strong evidence to support the claim that significant periods of youth unemployment are associated with an increased risk of subsequent unemployment, economic exclusion and labour market withdrawal (Banks and Ullah, 1988; Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Furlong and Raffe, 1992; Jones and Wallace, 1992). Recent work by economists suggests that 'the best predictor of an individual's future risk of unemployment is past history of unemployment' (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2001, p. 577). Similarly, evidence from the National Child Development Study (Gregg, 2001) shows an association between periods spent out of work prior to the age of 23 and the experience of unemployment between the ages of 28 and 33.

While few would deny that early experience of unemployment constitutes a risk factor in later labour market careers, there is evidence that short periods of unemployment tend not to have a significant lasting effect (Warr, 1987; Furlong *et al.*, 2003). A problem, however, relates to the determination of the thresholds at which the experience of unemployment leaves 'scars' on career trajectories (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2001). The current assumption underpinning government policy is that young people who have been unemployed for over six months are at risk of social exclusion. However, analysis of labour market histories between the ages of 16 and 28 among young people in the West of Scotland suggests that unemployment durations that are associated with ongoing difficulties are somewhat longer (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). With a focus on vulnerable youth, this study will be confined to young men who have a total early unemployment experience (prior to age 24) of over a year.

While there has been some debate about the reasons for the association between early unemployment and subsequent experiences, it is clear that recurrent unemployment is heavily conditioned by factors such as local labour markets and personal and familial resources (such as educational qualifications, 'hard' and 'soft' skills, family connections and finances). Although long-term unemployment is concentrated largely among young people from lower-working-class families, recent work has discredited to a great extent the idea that cultures of welfare dependency are significant in understanding prolonged and recurrent unemployment (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001). However, the possession of social and cultural capital gives young people strong advantages in the labour market, and family and social networks provide valuable sources of support and can directly influence patterns of recruitment.

Rejection of cultural interpretations does not require recourse to explanations that focus solely on individual resources and external contexts without giving credence to personal agency. In a recent study of extended transitions (Furlong *et al.*, 2003), a series of qualitative interviews conducted with 28/29 year olds provided clear evidence that transitional outcomes were mediated by individual life management strategies. Indeed, analyses of the effectiveness of various interventions suggest that serious limitations stem from policy approaches that neglect individual processes of rationalisation and attempt to impose outcomes on young people rather than acting with them in framing and setting plans of action.

In this report, by focusing on a group of young men who had experienced a turbulent early start to their careers, we look closely at the barriers they faced and at the ways in which they tried to overcome various obstacles. Although overall levels of unemployment are currently at a ten-year low, and while it has been claimed that the New

Deal for young people has reduced long-term youth unemployment by 76 per cent since 1998,¹ opportunities are not distributed evenly. In certain parts of the country (such as the West of Scotland), rates of long-term unemployment have remained relatively high and there is little evidence to suggest that those aided by the New Deal have been absorbed into the secure forms of employment. Indeed, the proportion of new Jobseekers' Allowance claimants who last registered for unemployment benefits less than six months ago has risen (Kenway *et al.*, 2002), indicating high levels of labour market precarity despite low headline unemployment rates.

Existing research shows clearly that those who face the greatest difficulties in the labour market are those with few qualifications, especially those with poor literacy and numeracy. In the report, we show clearly that those who experience long-term unemployment and who fail to secure stable positions in the labour market can be identified at school where they under-perform and frequently truant. Conditions in local labour markets are also important and high overall rates of employment can mask spatial pockets where few jobs exist. Young people with disabilities frequently face difficulties finding work, as do care leavers, the homeless and rough sleepers (Stein and Wade, 2000; Coles, 2001). Family responsibilities can conflict with the demands of employers and poor transport can restrict job search areas. Other young people are considered to be virtually unemployable because of drug or alcohol addictions (Casebourne, 2001) or because of low levels of motivation, while past criminal activities frequently deter employers. Of course, many of the factors that disadvantage young people in their search for work exist in multiple form. For example, a young person may have few qualifications, poor literacy and live in an area characterised by a lack of opportunities.

Employment

Although the labour market is currently relatively buoyant in many parts of the UK, the demands of employers have changed. Industrial employment has declined and there has been a corresponding fall in opportunities for traditional apprentice training. While new forms of training, such as the Modern Apprenticeship, have been introduced to provide the skills necessary within a modern economy, there is a relatively high demand for unskilled 'flexible' labour within the service industries. Many such jobs are low-paid, insecure and frequently offered on a part-time basis. According to Hutton (1996), around 30 per cent of the population now work in insecure sectors of the labour market and it is in these sectors that most of the men in this study found employment.

Employment and social inclusion are terms that are frequently regarded as synonymous. Yet the labour market biographies of many less advantaged young men are dominated by insecure and short-term work, usually paid at minimum rates and often characterised by harsh and exploitative conditions. The trend towards casualisation of employment and the increased use of agencies, temporary contracts and sub-contracting have led to a deterioration in working conditions and have increased the chances of frequent breaks in employment.

Drawing on a survey of employment precarity in the European Union, Gallie and Paugam (2002) show that the quality of work tends to be particularly low in elementary occupations and that there is evidence of a decline in task quality among 'clerical employees, service and sales workers, and machine operatives' over the last five years.

While these conclusions are drawn from an analysis of an all-age sample, we would suggest that conditions for vulnerable young people are particularly severe. In a qualitative study of disadvantaged young people in the North East of

England, MacDonald and Marsh (2001) observed a 'cyclical movement' between marginal jobs, training schemes and unemployment. The careers of disadvantaged young people were:

... characterized by the cyclical movement around various permutations of government schemes and college courses, low paid, low skill and often temporary jobs, recurrent unemployment and, for a minority, occasional voluntary work or irregular 'fiddly' work.

(MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, p. 386)

MacDonald and Marsh argued that, for these disadvantaged young people, 'becoming employed was typically a temporary experience, terminated in the main not by choice, but by redundancy, the end of a contract or by ... dismissal' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, p. 387). The difficulty for many disadvantaged young people was not getting a job, but retaining a quality job and developing marketable skills in settings where no training was available. Here, employment through agencies, which is symptomatic of the trend towards labour market 'flexibilisation', helps lock young people into precarious sectors of the economy.

A related problem is that the provision of training by employers tends to reinforce existing inequalities. Agency workers and those on temporary contracts and in the low-skill segments of the labour market are often excluded from forms of training that would enhance their job security and longer-term career prospects. Research also shows that employers are much more likely to invest in the skill development of those workers with the highest qualifications (Kenway *et al.*, 2002; Skillbase 2002).

Concerns about the paucity of workforce development strategies have been highlighted in a recent report to the Cabinet Office (2001) in which it was argued that there was an urgent need to raise the demand for workforce development from both employers and individual employees. It is difficult, however, to promote effective workforce

development among a casualised young labour force employed by agencies and firms that use every possible means to reduce the cost of labour. Ongoing skill development is a precondition for long-term job security; it:

... requires a regular updating and upgrading of skills so that people have the ability to keep pace with changing technological requirements and retain their value on the labour market in periods of economic restructuring.

(Gallie and Paugam, 2002, p. 75)

Barriers to the development and upgrading of skills, and the problems of obtaining and retaining secure employment are discussed extensively in this report. We argue that workforce development has been severely impeded through the trend towards casualisation and the public sector's effective abdication of its responsibility for training lower skilled workers as services are increasingly contracted out.

Methods

Respondents for this research were chosen from a sample of young people selected in 1996 as part of a study of unemployed 18 to 24 year olds funded by the European Commission.² To qualify for inclusion in the original sample, young people had to have been continuously out of work for at least three months during the previous year. Being designed to produce a nationally representative picture of Scottish unemployment, almost two-thirds of the achieved sample of 817 were males.

With fewer females in the original sample and with long-term unemployment being much rarer among females, the study focuses on males.³ In order to address the issue of how vulnerable young men overcome the impact of long-term unemployment, we recontacted a sub-sample at age 25 to 29. All had been unemployed for a year or more at the time of the original survey.⁴

A total of 32 biographical interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes, were conducted in a range of areas including cities, smaller towns and rural locations. In selecting the sub-sample, we ensured that those with extensive experience of unemployment were well represented. Many had multiple disadvantages (for example, residing in areas of high deprivation, coming from 'work-poor' families or having long-term health problems). For some, earlier periods of unemployment were extensive and the educational profile of the majority of interviewees was poor.

The interviews were holistic in focus (covering labour market experiences from full-time employment to informal work, education, training, illegal activities, family, domestic and housing transitions) with the central concern being to identify the ways in which young men overcame the impact of long-term unemployment in their early careers or, conversely, the reasons why the impact of early experiences continued to affect their lives.

Respondents were encouraged to talk at length about their lives from school to the present day. They were asked about events that they regarded as particularly significant, were probed for perceived linkages between events and were questioned about key systems of support and about attempts to deal with precarious situations (successful and unsuccessful).

In order to get a rounded picture of the difficulties faced by vulnerable young workers and the strengths and weaknesses of interventions, we also conducted interviews with 13 key officials who worked with young adults and had some remit for enhancing employability. These included New Deal advisers, a manager from the Wise Group, a prison training officer and staff from Working Links.

Locating the sample

At the time the original sample for this study was collected (1996), the unemployment rate among 18 to 24 year olds in Scotland was 16 per cent. Of these, around one in four (23 per cent) would have experienced long-term unemployment of a year or more. With all respondents having experienced at least a year’s unemployment prior to the age of 25, they represent around 4 per cent of this age cohort.

In 1997, the 32 young men we selected for interview had experienced an average of 44 months’ unemployment: all had encountered a recent period of unemployment, although at the time of the interview some had found jobs. Of the 32, 22 had jobs when interviewed in 2002/03 while ten were unemployed (Figure 1). However, it would be wrong to assume that most had recovered from their earlier period of unemployment. The vast majority (29) had experienced a further period of unemployment since 1997 while, at the extreme, four had worked for less than a year in total since leaving school. Despite their obvious difficulties, relatively few had experienced intervention programmes: just three young men had been on the New Deal⁵ since 1997 and a further three had been on an intermediate labour market programme such as

Heatwise. Consequently, only two young men had gained a vocational qualification since 1997 and just one had made a significant qualification gain.⁶

With around half of the young men living in areas of extreme deprivation (15),⁷ and with more than two-thirds (22) having parents who had experienced long-term unemployment, personal patterns of unemployment can be seen as indicative of poor local conditions. However, there was also evidence of personal deficiencies: eight young men highlighted problems with literacy or numeracy and most had no qualifications beyond O grade.

Those interviewed were fairly evenly divided between three groups (Figure 2).

- Those who were unemployed when interviewed, some of whom had spent considerable periods of time out of work while others had spent various periods of time in work.
- Young men who were working in relatively precarious jobs (often fixed-term contracts) and who tended to have encountered repeated or prolonged periods of joblessness.
- Those who had improved their position and who were in relatively secure jobs at the time they were interviewed.

Figure 1 Characteristics of interviewees

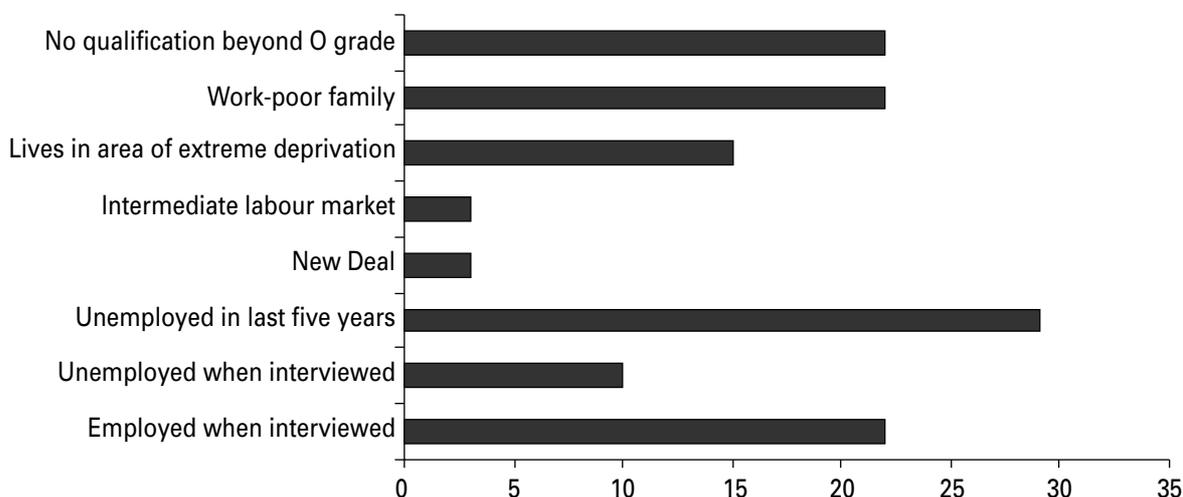


Figure 2 Distance travelled towards secure employment



In effect, the first two groups showed little improvement in their overall position since 1997. Those in precarious jobs are likely to find themselves unemployed at some point in the near future, while those who are unemployed will continue to move in and out of short-term jobs. The position of the third group had improved and these young men have effectively left unemployment behind them. However, closer analysis shows that, in a number of respects, these young men were the most advantaged. Members of this group had the strongest qualifications and some had specific marketable skills. Although they had spent periods on the periphery of the labour market, for them, the main issue related to becoming established in their trade and to finding the sort of work that made use of their qualifications.

Conclusion

In times of recession, many of those occupying the weakest positions in the labour market frequently encounter prolonged periods of unemployment. In more buoyant economies, long-term unemployment tends to be less common, although, for some, the alternative is a sequence of low-paid and marginal employment, punctuated by short

periods of unemployment. Therefore the issue addressed in this report is not simply about ‘breaking out’ of unemployment, but also about identifying barriers to career development and security. While, in the main, those occupying the most marginal positions tend to be those who lack basic skills or qualifications, it is wrong to concentrate solely on individual deficiencies. In the UK’s deregulated, casualised labour market, many young people are prevented from accessing the types of training that might offer protection against continued marginalisation. Indeed, there is reason to believe that labour market insecurity will continue to increase in modern economies. Many of the current initiatives have been designed to address basic skills issues or to bring young people up to a minimum standard of education or training (typically NVQ level 2). However, the experiences of the young men included in this study suggest that such qualifications are rarely enough to protect against marginalisation. The implication is that the most vulnerable must be provided with skills that are more advanced than those typically possessed by their more advantaged peers and certainly of a higher quality than those typically provided by programmes such as Skillseekers. In other words, although it is important not to focus solely on the supply-side of the labour market, ways do need to be found to provide the most vulnerable young people with a competitive edge.

In this report, we begin in Chapter 2 by looking at the difficulties these young men faced when trying to make initial transitions from school to work. It is argued that most of them experienced turbulent beginnings to their careers; school experiences were frequently negative and many left school with few qualifications. Few were able to draw on strong family and social networks to compensate for the lack of qualifications, and types of training provided under Youth Training were rarely beneficial. Early careers often involved frequent movement between unemployment, training schemes and insecure forms of employment.

Vulnerable young men in fragile labour markets

In Chapter 3, we go on to look at the experience of long-term unemployment and at the ways in which young men became trapped in insecure sectors of the labour market. It is argued that inadequate benefits are counterproductive, as young men are forced to concentrate on surviving rather than searching for work. Survival techniques, which include working 'on the side' and engaging in illegal activities such as drug dealing, serve to put more distance between young men and the labour market.

In Chapter 4, we examine the ways in which young men get by in a casualised labour market. Here, the focus is firmly on the demand side of the labour market, highlighting the ways in which new forms of employment, especially agency working, make it all but impossible for young men to break the cycle of unemployment and precarious work. The real barrier, we argue, is more to do with movement from insecure to secure employment than with ending a period of unemployment.

2 Turbulent beginnings

Murdoch lives with his parents on a quiet street in a working-class area of Glasgow. He was continuously bullied throughout his secondary school career and, on occasions, had his books and equipment thrown out of the window. Even though he found his secondary school experiences to be belittling, he never once played truant from school, mainly due to having a tough father who forced him to attend school every day. The continuous bullying affected his self-confidence and he dreaded getting out of bed every morning to go to school. Despite this, he achieved several Standard Grade passes at the foundation level before leaving school at the minimum age. On leaving school, Murdoch tried to find unskilled work but eventually had to settle for a Youth Training placement in a warehouse. He left this first scheme after six months, partly because his poor numeracy skills prevented him from doing the stock control that was a major component of his placement. He then began a Youth Training (YT) as a commis chef, but subsequently left because of arguments with the head chef. There was no college training on either of the YT courses and all training was provided on the job. However, on the first scheme, he was interviewed by a representative of the training provider to establish what skills he had gained and to monitor his progress. Murdoch has had few jobs since completing the YT courses and has participated on the Environmental Task Force Option on the New Deal for young people. Here, he planted trees for six months, but gained few transferable skills. Murdoch was due to have a meeting with an over-25s New Deal adviser in the week after our interview in order to ascertain which option he wanted to enter. He complained that there were very few options available for him and did not expect any of them to lead to a full-time job.

Introduction

With the young men selected for interview all having spent fairly long periods of time unemployed during their early years in the labour market, by definition, they can be regarded as having experienced relatively turbulent starts to their careers. Most had left school with very few or no educational qualifications after attending low-achieving schools where relatively few stayed on beyond the minimum leaving age. The majority lived in areas of high deprivation in which local labour market opportunities were restricted.

For most, their difficulties did not begin at the time of leaving full-time education, but had roots that stretched back much further. The relatively poor qualifications possessed by many of these young men often reflected their negative experiences of schooling and were manifest in high rates of truancy, bullying and literacy and numeracy problems that had never been effectively addressed. In turn, their lack of qualifications and

basic skills made it difficult for them to secure quality jobs or training on leaving school, and the majority of those who did find work tended to find themselves in insecure positions or on inferior training programmes.

Although all of the young men we spoke to had experienced long-term unemployment, they were not a homogeneous group. Some had faced much greater difficulties than others and had had to contend with extreme problems in the labour market and in their earlier family and school lives. Indeed, those who were unemployed when interviewed or who occupied precarious positions in the labour market tended to have much more deep-rooted problems than those who occupied more settled positions at this stage.

In this chapter, we highlight the sorts of difficulties faced by young men in school and on first entering the labour market, and draw out some of the main implications for their subsequent employment experiences. We first focus on school

experiences, which, for many, were negative and led to difficulties in securing stable employment. Second, we look at labour market entry and at the ways in which a lack of effective family support can reinforce existing disadvantages. Third, we examine the extent to which training schemes enhance employability. Finally, we describe initial labour market insecurities and discuss some of the ways in which young men tried to improve their positions. It is argued that those who experience turbulent entries to the labour market tend to have few qualifications and lack the resources necessary to compensate for these deficiencies. While interventions provide some assistance, we suggest that little is being done to promote the types of skill enhancement necessary for long-term career security.

Experiences of schooling

The differences between those who occupied precarious positions or who were unemployed when interviewed and those occupying more stable positions were evident in their experiences of schooling. For the young men who were unemployed or in precarious positions, school experiences tended to be extremely negative and few qualifications were gained. Of the 22 young men in this position, only three had qualifications above SVQ (Scottish Vocational Qualification)¹ level 1 while 13 had no qualifications whatsoever. In contrast, of those who subsequently occupied settled positions, all possessed Standard Grades or equivalents and four had some Highers passes. Truancy was more common among those who were unemployed or in precarious employment and many admitted to regular unauthorised absences.

While poor school performance was partly a reflection of a lack of effort and little sense of direction, there was also a culture of absenteeism with many failing to see school as having much relevance for their future careers. Some of the young people argued that teachers tended to focus

their attention on the more academically able pupils and that those who showed little enthusiasm or ability were virtually ignored: others felt that they were victimised by teachers:

I was dogging it [truancy] because I had a bad problem with my stutter. It was not bad but I was quite shy and tried to explain it to the teachers. I told them not to ask me questions in the class because if I try to answer them I'm going to make a fool of myself. One or two of the teachers said that was alright, but there was always one or two that would do it for pure badness. So after the first year-and-a-half or two years I just stopped going.

(Jacob)

Peer pressure was another frequently cited reason for truancy and regular truants often had a social life built around the time spent away from school. In the schools attended, truancy was often endemic and even accepted by members of the wider community. In retrospect, most regular truants regretted their lack of attendance and felt that the problems they faced in the labour market could be traced back to their lack of effort in school, their poor qualifications and, for some, their lack of basic skills:

My reading kept me back. That was one of the things that stopped me going for an apprenticeship because I would not be able to do the tests. That was the main thing that held me back.

(John)

While frequent truancy was often part of the peer culture, those who spent long periods away from school often highlighted specific problems, such as an inability to keep up with the work or other pupils who bullied them. These negative experiences of schooling stayed with them and tended to lead them to reject any further participation in education or in forms of training with a significant classroom element. This was true even when the young men themselves recognised that some further education or training would have been beneficial:

To be honest with you, after my experiences in school I don't even want to think about it. I am not even interested in education any more to be honest with you. It is a bad experience and I don't like it, you know.

(Matt)

Those who later came to occupy settled positions in the labour market were more likely to have reasonable school attendance records, although some tended to be there in body rather than in mind. Many of these young men also showed little interest in their school work and saw themselves as biding time until they were legally able to leave. For this group, their lack of interest often stemmed from an absence of clear occupational aspirations and of expectations of entering any available unskilled position:

I'd no set ideas about what I was going to do. I think it was more a case of when I left school then we will see what happens and see what's open to me.

(Wallace)

Education was not always seen as being particularly relevant to their future careers. There were also indications that careers advice was poor and even those with relatively good qualifications were left floundering:

I passed my exams, I think I got four or five Highers, but when I think back there was no guidance for me. I didn't know what university was, they didn't tell you. The Careers advised me and I said I wanted to be a policeman, maybe if everything else fell through something like that. They advised me to be a traffic warden, I just thought that that sums up the whole training, so I left school with no idea of what was happening next.

(Jamie)

While those who came to enter settled labour market positions tended to have reasonable qualifications, only two had a satisfactory school experience. Within the schools attended, those who

worked hard or got reasonable grades tended not to be accepted by their classmates and were often the victims of bullying. In turn, this constant harassment led to protracted periods of truancy that had an impact on grades or the willingness to participate in post-compulsory education.

Bullying in school can seriously undermine a young person's confidence and lead to a withdrawal from academic activity. Those who are bullied are also more likely to suffer from depression and low self-esteem as young adults (Balding, 2000). The young people who had experienced bullying at school described their school days as 'miserable' times and described being harassed by peers and sometimes by teachers. Most of the schools attended by these young men were tough schools in which there was little tolerance of those who did not fit into the dominant working-class culture. One person, for example, talked about being bullied as a result of having long hair. A young person from a tough housing scheme where there were major problems with drugs, alcohol and gangs became a target by *not* drinking and as a consequence of his hobbies, which did not fit into local stereotypes of masculine behaviour (animal care and model engineering).

Supporting labour market entry

Studies of employment transitions tend to highlight the importance of family contacts in smoothing entry into work. However, with the young men being drawn predominantly from the lower working classes, family and friends tended to be concentrated in relatively unskilled and insecure positions, and few parents were able to assist the young men into the more secure sectors of the labour market. Indeed, among those who remained in the precarious sector, few received direct help from members of the family or from friends: with many parents being unemployed, this source of assistance was simply not available. Here, the lack of support can be regarded as an important source of disadvantage.

Despite the weakness of their positions, family and friends did offer advice and encouragement, information about vacancies and, occasionally, provided more direct help in securing a job or an interview. In a few cases, parents picked up application forms from their place of employment, told the young men about vacancies they had come across or showed them newspaper adverts:

My girlfriend's Auntie worked in the Ayrshire Post. She seen the jobs before they were printed so she phoned me and I got an application form from the agency.

(Glen)

Many of the vacancies notified by family and friends were for short-term work in unskilled positions and, while social networks can provide information, the position of the informant was rarely strong enough to ensure entry to secure forms of employment. Several young men spoke of their disappointment when they failed to get an offer for a job they had discovered through social networks:

In Springwell's it is who you know. They put a word in for you and then, if you do well in the test or whatever, then you are almost guaranteed to get a job if they are looking for folk at that time. I got a letter back saying that I was unsuccessful.

(Barry)

In many communities, especially where they are small and close-knit, personal and family reputation can be crucial and can strongly influence recruitment decisions. The young men tended to be aware of the importance of connections but also felt that their own networks were not strong enough to provide the necessary assistance. However, while family and friends tended not to be able to exert a strong influence on recruitment decisions, they frequently offered practical help. There were a number of cases, for example, where relatives offered a spare bed to enable someone to accept a job that was difficult to access through daily travel.

Those who eventually moved into settled positions tended to have stronger informal networks, which helped in their search for work. Here, family members occupied stronger positions in the labour market and were therefore in a better position to make successful interventions on behalf of their offspring. The social and cultural capital of the family clearly helped to protect young people from marginalisation:

He [Dad] got me the interview. I was working with him since I was 12 helping him do what he does. I just went up for the interview. The guys in the office, they all knew me. It was just a case of getting my name and address and my National Insurance number and that was basically it.

(Jake)

Social networks also provided incentives for young men to make greater efforts in their search for work or to stay in jobs that they had considered abandoning. Wives and girlfriends were particularly influential in this respect. One young man, for example, described his wife as 'the driving force' behind him while another said that his girlfriend kept him on the 'straight and narrow'. The lifestyles of working friends provided an incentive to some young men to intensify their job-search efforts. When friends began to buy cars and flats, the young men started to look at their own lives and at their lack of security, and were sometimes prompted to take action:

You cannae buy anything, you cannae prepare for the future. You cannae buy a car, you cannae go oot and get finance like for a house, you cannae get a mortgage.

(Tony)

Training schemes

Most of the young men who occupied precarious positions in the labour market had entered a cycle of insecure work and unemployment immediately

after leaving school or Youth Training.² For those who left school at the minimum leaving age with relatively few qualifications, Youth Training (YT) was usually their first experience in the labour market and was frequently followed by a period of unemployment:

I finished YT and went on the dole, think I was on that for something like two-and-a-half years.

(Jerry)

Very few young men (and none of those who continued to occupy precarious positions) had a positive experience of Youth Training and, from their perspectives, training had been low quality and was regarded largely as a waste of time. Indeed, for some, it was hard to identify a training component in their work and there were examples of outright exploitation. One young man, for example, was placed in a fruit delivery firm and spent all day accompanying a delivery driver:

For most of the year I was with the City Fruit Company. I used to go in there for about half-seven in the morning to about half-three in the afternoon and got taken in a delivery van away up to the fruit market. Then they'd bring them back and then I took the stuff up in the lifts and whatever and then we used to go out doing deliveries, fruit deliveries and different restaurants and bars.

(Edwin)

Edwin received no training and, after he completed Youth Training, the company replaced him with a new trainee to undertake the same routine tasks. The image of Youth Training as 'slave labour' was one that was repeated by several ex-trainees. Although some gained vocational qualifications, most of these ex-trainees subsequently moved into other occupations where these qualifications were of little use. Some even left to take up 'permanent' work a short time before they were due to complete a vocational qualification and hence regarded their training as a waste of time:

The job was offered to somebody that was working in the same YTS [Youth Training Scheme] place, but they didn't want it because they wanted their City and Guilds so they could go to college. So I applied for it and they says 'well we are desperate for somebody so if you want to come up for an interview', like they pretty much said you've got the job right there and then. It was an Italian restaurant like I was washing dishes, preparing like maybe stuff for the dishes and that. But then it fell through.

(Jacob)

Jacob attempted to return to Youth Training to complete his exams but was not allowed to do so. The lack of flexibility in the delivery of Youth Training led to problems for several other young men. One of the young men who had obtained vocational qualification in a secure unit, for example, found that Youth Training could not offer him the chance to get more advanced qualifications in the same trade and he effectively spent his time repeating the training that he had already undertaken:

It was just the same as what I had learnt in the jail, you know.

(Patrick)

For those who eventually secured settled positions, experiences of Youth Training tended to be more positive and, in two cases, led to apprenticeships. These young men tended to get accredited training, usually at college, and managed to secure work as a result of their YT experience. However, these young men had left school with reasonable qualifications and this put them in a better position to obtain quality training through YT.

In recognition of the importance of experience and skill development to labour market integration, the Government sponsors several programmes aimed at unemployed young adults. A few of our respondents spent time on the New Deal; others had spent time on intermediate labour market

projects (such as Heatwise and Landwise) that aimed to enhance employability or had been members of the Jobclub where they were assisted in the search for work. While there is evidence that these programmes help people to secure jobs, there is a concern that many of those who are assisted are the easiest to place and that they may not be entering stable forms of employment. In other words, there is no concrete evidence that 'hard-core' disadvantage is being addressed through current initiatives. Alarming, we had only one example of a young man who secured work immediately after having participated on any type of programme. He was working on a Landwise programme and was given a full-time contract as a chargehand by the programme.

There was, however, evidence of other gains from adult programmes. Some had clearly addressed basic skill deficiencies and had moved closer to the labour market. A few secured jobs shortly after completing a programme, although in unrelated areas and often on temporary contracts. An ex-Landwise trainee, for example, subsequently found work laying railway tracks in Derby and discovered that some of the other workers had also spent time on intermediate labour market programmes. The Jobclub seemed to help some people focus their job-search activities and rethink strategies. On the other hand, there was no evidence of skill gains through the New Deal, although all who participated were allocated to the Environmental Task Force where they spent their time planting trees and cleaning up derelict areas.

They didn't actually train you as such, they just told you to go and plant a tree or cut the hedge and after that they came and marked you on what you had done.

(Murdoch)

Poor work

Those in precarious positions tended to move into insecure forms of work at a relatively early stage. For these young men, temporary positions were common throughout their careers, especially short-term jobs secured through agencies. Very few of these young men were provided with an opportunity for training at any stage in their careers and virtually all were paid at minimum wage rates. Some worked in local factories that usually had 'hard-to-fill' vacancies. Three of the young men all worked at some stage in a potato packaging firm that was always desperate for people to undertake arduous labour for low wages in unpleasant and dangerous conditions:

Aye it wasnae safe, there were people driving fork lifts and that without licences and they were just asking you basically if you think you could dae it just jump on kinda of thing and dae it. Know what I mean.
(Cameron)

For those who encountered a 'poor start', opportunities for reasonable employment offering a degree of security and to undertake some training were rare, and many found the need to abandon aspirations to gain a skill and accept unskilled work:

There were no really a lot of options. There's no really a lot of work in Airdrie, you know what I mean. People that are leaving school without any qualifications and that, there's no really many jobs about is there? You need to stay on at school and then go to college and that, you know.
(Stuart)

Although many young men were forced to accept jobs that were much more menial than those they had envisaged, they were often surprised by the poor quality work that they were being offered:

I remember I went for this job interview. I was sitting at the interview and the guy was talking away to me

and I was asking him what the job entailed and I was basically just a skivvy. I had to clean the toilet and stuff like that. I thought I am not into doing that but I never said this to the guy. I just started fidgeting and scratching and picking my nose, anything I would think of so he wouldn't give me the job. It turned out I was still second in line to get the job. I was too polite to say I am not doing this and I don't want to do that.
(Jake)

While many of the young men were somewhat unfocused in their job search and were content to apply for most suitable vacancies, those with reasonable qualifications often had relatively strong career aspirations and their experiences were quite different. Initially, these young men frequently held out for particular sorts of jobs, although most eventually reached the stage where they would apply for any jobs. A few had strong desires to get an apprenticeship, but were frequently frustrated by a lack of opportunities and their own weak position in terms of qualifications. Here, periods of unemployment served to 'cool out' their aspirations:

I sent away a few letters like trying to get an apprenticeship in plumbing and heating, but I didn't. There were some qualifications that I didn't have. And others just weren't taking people on at the time, they hadn't a space available for apprenticeships.
(Cameron)

Cameron and others like him saw their failure to gain an apprenticeship as being due to poor educational qualifications. They became aware that employers were favouring other, better-qualified, applicants over themselves.

There was also a sense in which those who had moved into relatively secure forms of employment tended to be more focused in their search for work. One of the most successful young men spent several years trying to find an apprenticeship, which he eventually secured by constantly writing letters to firms that seemed to offer some potential.

He was in his early twenties when he secured an offer of training and accepted that he would spend several years on a relatively low training wage:

I was continually sending letters to them. The manager eventually phoned me up and asked me if I wanted to come in and have an interview for an apprenticeship. He took into consideration my age at the time. I was 21 or 22. He said to go away and think about it and he would interview the other people and he would contact me again. Later on he contacted me again and asked if I was still interested and I said aye, so I went in for the second interview. He showed me the pay package and what he could do and what he could offer. He showed me the length of the apprenticeship and how long it was for and what you get at the end. I took it even though I was only getting £120.

(Dave)

Another young man joined the Territorial Army (TA) in order to get a driving licence so that he could get a job as a bus driver:

It was actually the army, the TA, that got me my licence. They paid me £475 to do my driving course for two weeks. It was a two-weeks' crash course. It was a week and then your theory test. If you didn't pass your theory test you didn't get out in the car the next week. I passed it.

(Karl)

There were plenty of other examples of young men who were extremely proactive in their search for work, even though some of that effort was unfocused. Aside from writing speculative letters, some regularly called in on local firms to see if they had any vacancies:

I just went up to the factory like looking for ... just asking them if they were looking for any workers, and they gave me a date to go up and I got a starting time and that, just started frae there.

(Cameron)

Although those who had managed to move into stable forms of employment tended to display greater levels of initiative and determination than those who remained in precarious positions, these 'successful' young men tended to have other advantages that helped them secure stable work, such as reasonable qualifications and strong family and social networks. In other words, they had other resources to draw on (such as cultural capital, supportive families and effective social networks) in addition to strong agency.

The routes that young men followed from unemployment to relatively secure or regular forms of employment were sometimes indirect. Several took part-time jobs that they hoped would lead to something full-time, although frequently the pay from part-time employment didn't leave them much better off than they had been on the dole. In only two cases did the gamble pay off with the offer of full-time employment:

I started as casual, that's the only way in the Post Office, starting you part-time. You need to start part-time and wait till a vacancy arises. It goes with seniority, if it's your turn for that full-time vacancy, you get it. That's the way it works in the Post Office, they don't start anybody on full-time any more, it's all part-time.

(Dan)

Another risky route involved commission-only employment. One young man did enjoy a degree of success through this route and moved on to a paid sales job. However, others failed to make a living and had to give up, as they had neither benefits nor a living wage on which to survive. A few of the better qualified young people took low-skill employment as a way of trying to get a foothold in the job market. One young man with an HNC in catering, for example, was so desperate to gain employment in the food industry that he took a job on a food production line:

At the beginning I was trying to get something that was matching my qualifications, by the end it was just anything that was available. As I said, it was just to get a job. I was hoping to get something in the food industry, even if it was just being a basic production worker like I ended up doing. In the end I was in Seafresh Seafood and I ended up working on the lines just making scampi and stuff like this.

(Dale)

For those with skills, experience was crucial. Many employers had the attitude that a 'proper' tradesman is not someone who has just finished a course or an apprenticeship, but someone who has several years' experience in the trade. This meant that a willingness to accept temporary jobs was required from those who had recently completed training. Young tradesmen can also lack knowledge about the ways in which jobs are secured. A joiner, for example, is often expected to have a 'mate' and lone joiners can find it difficult to find work on the building sites. Knowledge of this type is not something possessed by many newly qualified tradesmen. With a limited number of large contractors working in an area, reputation is also important but is something that newly qualified workers lack:

I got a start with them. The site agent knew us and he knew my work.

(Wallace)

Conclusion

Most of the young men who participated in this study were in vulnerable situations prior to leaving school. Poor qualifications and the lack of basic skills have been identified by many researchers as key factors in the prediction of unemployment and turbulent labour market careers. Educational research has also shown clearly that many young men who grow up in work-poor communities with parents who have not enjoyed an extended

participation in education can find it difficult to see the relevance of education for their working lives. Most of these young men fitted that picture. Those who tried to do things differently were frequently regarded as abnormal by their peers, were bullied and withdrew from active participation in their schooling. However, those who did leave school with reasonable qualifications eventually tended to find their way to settled labour market positions. The routes followed were not necessarily direct, but it was clear that they had greater levels of social support and that more options were available to them from the outset.

For young men from lower-working-class families with poor qualifications, it is difficult to get an effective foothold in the labour market. With a high demand for quality jobs, employers are able to select young people with relatively strong qualifications and those with little to set them apart from the crowd are forced to settle for insecure positions on the labour market periphery. Yet, paradoxically, there is pressure in working-class communities not to stand out from the crowd (Sennett, 2003); those who do may be vulnerable to bullying, which may in turn lead to truancy and poor educational performance.

The establishment of careers is also seriously impeded by poor basic skills. Even when appropriate routes exist, those with difficulties in

reading and writing can find it impossible to sit or pass vocational exams. Many reject options that involve further study because they have been so alienated by previous experiences in the education system. They have rejected formal schooling but many of the routes being offered to them involve a return to the classroom. Where on-the-job training is provided, skill transferability is often impeded by employers' preferences for formal certified training programmes.

Although most of the young men were not economically excluded, many were marginalised. Training schemes such as Youth Training appeared not to provide compensation. Places offering quality training are filled competitively and inferior placements are offered to the less well qualified. For many, the articulation between these lower-tier training schemes and employment is poor. Many subsequently enter occupations that are totally unrelated to their 'training' and, even when they gain vocational qualifications and attempt to secure relevant training, they find it very difficult to compete with those who have trained in other settings. Unemployment is a recurrent problem and tends to punctuate periods of employment and training. In the next chapter, we look at the ways in which the experience of unemployment can lead to marginalisation.

3 Trapped?

Tim played truant extensively during his last year at school and left at the minimum age with no qualifications. He began work as a van boy delivering large electrical goods to people's homes. He enjoyed the job at first until he realised that it held few career prospects in the future. Tim then started a Youth Training course as a landscape gardener, which he really enjoyed, but the company went out of business. He then started a second YT in which he successfully undertook a painting and decorating course and gained a City and Guilds. With no prospect of employment as a painter and decorator, he considered starting his own business but decided that, without a driving licence, he was unlikely to succeed. He has been unemployed for five years. The only other job that he has held was an eight-month stretch as an assistant in a pet shop. He enjoyed this job immensely and developed a keen interest and knowledge about animals. He has tried to get similar work, and has visited local pet shops and has contacted Glasgow Zoo about becoming a volunteer. Although he left school with no qualifications, he began an adult literacy course at his old school, but he had to give this up to look after his mother, as her schizophrenia was making it difficult for her to cope with basic tasks. Tim now fills up his days looking after his mother and providing occasional care for one of his children from his second marriage. In his spare time, he is heavily involved in computer games. Although he has never considered the possibility of finding work related to computers (and while his literacy problems would probably impede his chances of doing so), his skills are considerable. Over a period of several months, he taught himself programming from books and uses these skills to write programmes to improve games. He is frequently asked to write games programmes by other players that he meets through the internet.

Introduction

It is well recognised that unemployment can have serious psychological consequences for those affected. Unemployment can affect self-esteem, and can lead to frustrations and to a lack of self-confidence, which in turn makes it more difficult for people to find jobs (Warr, 1987; Fryer, 1990). Long-term unemployment is particularly problematic; employers can be wary of recruiting those who have been without work for long periods, while those without work can lose confidence and find it more difficult to sell themselves to employers.

With all of the young men who participated in this study having experienced at least one protracted period of unemployment, in this chapter, we identify some of the difficulties young men faced in breaking out of a period of protracted unemployment. Drawing on the evidence from the young men and key professionals, we examine how

long-term unemployment leads to marginalisation and highlight some of the ways in which young men survived lengthy periods of unemployment through working 'on the side' or engaging in illegal activities. We suggest that the experience of long-term unemployment (especially the inadequacy of benefits) lowers self-confidence and forces young men to develop survival strategies, which can serve to delay a return to full-time employment.

Nae money, nowt to dae

Although relatively few respondents had major financial commitments or had been used to bringing in large pay packets, coping on state benefits (or in some cases surviving without access to state support) was a major problem for all concerned. Young people below the age of 25 usually receive a reduced level of state benefit, while those below the age of 18 tend to be eligible

only for short-term bridging allowances while waiting for training placements. The assumption underlying current policy is that parents will provide extended financial support for their offspring.

For the majority of respondents, parents did provide some financial support during periods of unemployment, although often in kind rather than by a regular cash allocation. The families that provided the most adequate financial support during periods of unemployment tended to be the most affluent and it was these young men who were most likely to break out of the cycle of unemployment and precarious work (in the previous chapter, we noted that those from the more affluent families were also more likely to receive direct help from their families in the search for work). Family pressure on young men to intensify their job-search activities or seek out training opportunities was also most common within the more affluent families, and some did admit that proactive parents helped them end a period of unemployment.

Many families, however, were unable to provide financial support. Several young men lived in households that had been surviving on benefits for many years (18 years in one instance). Some lived in single-parent families where one person was struggling to support a family on a low income. Indeed, evidence of widespread deprivation was clearly visible during the interviews, which were often conducted in sparsely furnished accommodation in which there was a notable absence of material possessions. In one small damp flat, for example, six members of the family were huddled around a two-bar electric fire in the living room and water ran down the walls in the bedrooms.

Unemployment put a strain on families that were already struggling to make ends meet. These strains can be particularly severe where the unemployed person has children, but can also

cause resentments when others feel that few efforts are being made to secure jobs. Many arguments were triggered by shortages of money, but enforced idleness was often perceived as laziness:

Aye it was a big hassle, a really big hassle and mostly about money. Most of them [arguments] have always been about money, especially with having two kids. There is always going to be something you need money for, there is always going to be something.
(Dan)

My Dad and myself never really got on as such, so there has always been a wee bit of tension between ourselves and with me not fully pushing myself for a job or anything like that. I was about the house and stuff like that, and my Dad got pensioned out through a back injury. So I think it's almost a frustration with himself, knowing that he couldn't do anything and seeing that, even though I was obviously fit enough to do a job, and I wasn't actually pushing myself, I think it was that sort of thing that was the frustration that was coming out through.
(Gordon)

Family conflicts were also exacerbated because women had fewer problems accessing jobs in these local labour markets. Parents could not understand why their daughters could get jobs while a son was long-term unemployed. The higher demand for female workers in low-skill service occupations was recognised by local officials and a New Deal adviser spoke about a client who had been unemployed for three years despite being seriously engaged in job-search activity. Eventually, his wife decided to look for work and found a job within a month.

The lack of money also severely curtailed young people's social activities and served to restrict their social networks. In turn, exclusion from the sorts of social activities enjoyed by their peers affected their self-confidence and led to a withdrawal into the home where young people would spend long hours watching TV:

I think it was the money situation. Knowing that I couldn't go out and enjoy a social life and that, it got me down, so it did. I was sitting there, I didn't know what to do. You start losing your confidence and you are like thinking 'am I going to be like this for the rest of my life, am I ever going to get a job?'

(Dan)

You feel as if you cannae do any jobs and things like that. Just get yourself into a wee rut and you end up getting kind of depressed I suppose.

(Jerry)

For most of the young men affected by long-term unemployment, boredom, depression and a reduction in self-confidence were important issues. Increasingly, any small activity came to be seen as a major event and a short walk to the Jobcentre was sometimes the central event of the day. Effectively, they vegetated:

Because you aren't working you get up around 11 o'clock or 12 o'clock and then look in the papers, watch the news and then go to the Jobcentre and come back and sit about.

(Jarrett)

Main problem ... boredom. Boredom, nae money, eh, getting depressed basically. Aye, just basically falling into no wanting to get oot your bed. Getting oot your bed at tea-time, daeing the same thing every day.

(Eric)

While the social isolation of unemployment frequently affected self-confidence and self-esteem, there were a few young men who were closely involved in peer-group activities with others who were unemployed. In these cases, days could be structured with low-cost activities, a camaraderie could develop and leisure could replace work as an activity giving meaning to life. While an active social network of unemployed peers did make the experience more tolerable, instances were rare and tended to be confined to deprived estates where levels of unemployment are very high. Even in

such areas, active social lives among the unemployed were far from common:

I would go away fishing. I would go over and see my pals because there was a group of us. That was mostly the problem I think. Because there was a group of lads and none of us were working, we all just wanted to stay together. We would get together and have a good laugh. We would go and play football and go away fishing for the day and we just got used to doing that. It got to be a routine and the hardest thing is breaking the routine.

(Karl)

For many, self-esteem was also affected by the impersonal nature of the benefit system and the way in which they started to feel that no one was really interested in helping them find a job:

When you go to the Jobcentre it is as if you are just a bit of meat. You are just a number to them. They are not interested. You just go in and sign your name and go back out.

(Jake)

The loss of self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness were particularly severe when a job had been lost because of poor performance or for other reasons that young men blamed on themselves. Suffering constant rejection in the search for work also took its toll:

You obviously think that it's your fault, that you're not willing to perform to that sort of level when everyone else is. It's hard to go and get your self-esteem up from being told every day that you're not doing good enough.

(Colin)

I think it was mainly my confidence, like after getting knocked back just purely the letters that it really started to knock my confidence and I was like 'oh hold on, will I ever be good at anything at all?'

(Gordon)

In many ways, the greatest frustrations were experienced by those who had some qualifications or strong occupation aspirations, or were attached to an occupation in which they had already worked. In these circumstances, young men had to reconsider career options or had to accept that they were unlikely to get anything more than unskilled positions. This often resulted in frustration and resentment:

I had just done two years of a college course and wanted to do something useful, but you are sitting in the house. All you're doing is writing to job adverts and you're getting a small forest of 'thank you but we will keep your letter under review blah, blah, blah' letters. You have done two years' training and you can't do nothing with it. You just want to actually do something.

(Dale)

You start to think about what you want to do. I could never, and I still don't, see myself ever working long-term in a shop. It's just not my sort of thing, say scanning through products over bar codes for eight hours a day five days a week. It's just not me really.

(Gordon)

There was some evidence, however, that the better qualified young men tended to 'take stock' of their lives during a period of extended unemployment and began to seek out new opportunities. One college dropout, for example, finished outstanding coursework and went on to complete his course. Another came to the conclusion (aided by parental persuasion and support) that the only way to improve his situation was via further study.

While a return to education is frequently seen as an effective route out of unemployment, those who had a negative school experience or who had problems with basic skills tended to reject the possibility of further education. For some, education was also ruled out on the grounds of cost. Even when fees are waived and transport

costs covered, education carries many hidden costs that form an insurmountable barrier to those who are living in poverty:

I went for college for to try and dae catering, chef work. Basically they told me I need £400, to buy all my equipment. I'm like, 'where am I going to get £400 frae?', you know what I mean. Go oot and buy my knives and all that. I was like 'I cannae dae that'. My mate he's a chef now, his family had a wee bit of money and that behind them, they could help him oot, you know what I mean and they put him through college. My family has no got the money that they could help us oot that way.

(Eric)

The key professionals we spoke to highlighted a range of barriers that made it difficult for the long-term unemployed to obtain jobs, especially jobs in the more secure sectors of the labour market. The lack of training among the long-term unemployed was identified as a significant problem by advisers, but they argued that it was not always easy to convince people of the need to undertake training. It was also suggested that the types of jobs sought by the unemployed tended not to be readily available. While there may be a surplus of part-time service jobs in a local labour market, the unemployed were often seeking full-time unskilled manufacturing or labouring jobs: jobs that had been in decline for some time:

Most are unskilled, they don't have any trade and don't have any educational qualifications. Basically, they are looking for general labourer, factory labourer or builders' labourer jobs and these jobs do not exist in this area any longer.

(New Deal adviser)

This mismatch between aspirations and job availability in the new service economy was seen as a significant barrier. While, in many of the areas, there were jobs available in the service and financial sectors, many men who are unemployed do not regard these jobs as suitable as a result of

'traditional' views on masculine roles. The Wise Group tries to tackle this problem in its educational programme by highlighting trends in the labour market:

I have to educate folks on the reality of today's labour market, tell them about the types of jobs that exist, the types of environments that these jobs operate in, the types of wage structures operating within those jobs, the terms and conditions that operate within them and have to disabuse an awful lot of them of their previous perceptions that there are still jobs in heavy industry and manufacturing, ship building, trades and the construction industry.

(Wise Group manager)

The professionals also recognised that the long-term unemployed often tended to lack basic skills and that many also had personal problems to contend with, including alcohol and substance abuse, and chaotic lifestyles. Yet, while these factors certainly made it difficult for those affected to find jobs, some argued that many people with these sorts of problems do successfully hold down jobs. Few can be regarded as unemployable and individual solutions can sometimes be identified.

In one case, a young man had to get a daily prescription of methadone by personally attending a pharmacist close to his home. There were problems in changing pharmacies to enable him to attend a training course and he said that he would feel stigmatised by taking a break from college each morning to collect his methadone. The New Deal adviser reached an agreement whereby his sister could collect his prescription on an evening and give it to him the next day. These arrangements made it possible for the young man to receive training that would otherwise not have proved possible.

In another case, a review of a CV and advice on presentation led directly to the offer of a job:

Sometimes it can be the simplest of things that can hold somebody back. I remember a chap who was

nice, had a good CV and was always applying for jobs. But he had unfair dismissal down as the reason for leaving his last job and always put that on his job application forms. It suddenly occurred to me that that was why he was not getting interviews. I suggested that we change that and he could discuss that when he got to the interview, as an employer would probably see him as a troublemaker. He got a job within one month.

(New Deal adviser)

Not all barriers can be overcome through advice and it was recognised that direct financial aid was also important. Programmes such as Working Links and the New Deal permit advisers to make grants to those who were seen as likely to have a problem in making the transition from benefits to wages. Help of this sort was seen as crucial to successful transitions. Discretionary allowances allowed advisers to tailor assistance to individual circumstances. These funds can be used to help overcome any obstacle that the adviser feels is preventing access to work. Examples provided included alarm clocks, payments for road tax, repairs to get a car through an MOT, clothes for an interview and travel expenses to cover travel costs while a client waited for a first wage packet. One New Deal adviser even helped a client in a rural area purchase a car:

I've just had a chap who's got a job, he lives in Cumnock and got a job in a wee town called Maucline and has bought a car for £300. He gave me the receipt and I gave him the money for the car. We have bought mobile phones so that we can get in touch with them, street trader licences, window cleaners' licence, etc.

(New Deal adviser)

Advisers also recognised that poverty impacted on employment prospects by making it impossible for some people to deal with a period of transition from unemployment benefits to wages. The 'benefit trap' can affect the affordability of accepting offers

of employment but can also be manifest in a fear of having to take responsibility for personal financial management. With rent and sometimes bills being paid directly by the Social Security, people can get used to having to cope with only daily expenses. One adviser, for example, spoke about the anxiety faced by a long-term unemployed client who had just been offered a job. The person concerned had never had to budget before and was worried about how he was going to pay rent and bills. The adviser had to help the client to set a budget:

People settle into an economic cycle where they don't have much money but they know how much they have got to spend. After five or eight years getting benefit and housing rebate and council tax rebate, they get into a cycle of knowing that they don't have much money, but it is safe as they know that that money is coming in regularly. They build a routine around it and manage to create a life of sorts around it. To risk all of that on the roll of a labour market dice for a lot of people is not an option. They ain't going to do it.

(Adviser, Wise Group)

The benefit trap was seen to cause particular problems to vulnerable groups such as ex-prisoners who feared losing everything if they left unemployment benefit for an insecure job. With ex-prisoners likely to receive minimum wages, the benefits of employment were relatively low compared to the risks entailed if they lost their jobs and had benefits stopped. In such cases, job loss could mean loss of a home and could lead to reoffending.

Working 'on the side'

In some areas, there were more opportunities to engage in low-paid, cash-in-hand work than there were in the formal sector. Such jobs were usually secured with the assistance of friends or family. Consequently, many young men spent some time working 'on the side' while claiming benefits. Most

of these jobs were unskilled jobs driving vans, labouring on building sites or in shops, although one young man was able to utilise the skills he had learnt on a government training programme. Few of these jobs were long-term and employment tended to be sporadic:

I've had a few general typing jobs, which I heard about through friends and family but which I've done on occasion when I've been unemployed, but you're only talking about a couple of days here and there.

(Colin)

I done occasional wee jobs now and again but that was working with my big brother 'on the side' doing the roofs.

(Karl)

Sometimes these jobs were more about helping someone out than intentionally setting out to establish an alternative career. One interviewee helped his brother out one day a week and was given cash in return, but his main motive was to help the family:

Yes, it was only one day a week just as a labourer because my big brother needed help. If he asked me I would give him a hand and he would give me a wee £10 or something. He would give me a wee backhand, it wasn't out the company, I wasn't on the books for the company. It was just helping my brother out.

(Karl)

Others openly admitted that they needed to supplement inadequate benefits:

It was actually a friend who got me a wee job, but I was still unemployed if you know what I mean. I was still signing on, but he was getting me a wee job. It was actually with a couple of bricklayers, I was just like a labourer for them. The money was better, the money I was making with them on top of my giro was better than what I was getting in my last job, so I wasn't in any hurry to get back anywhere you know.

(Marc)

Most respondents saw nothing wrong with working 'on the side', and many, especially those with children, argued that it was necessary in order to survive. Indeed, with many of the 'proper' jobs available to them being temporary positions on minimum wages, little distinction was made between the formal and informal sectors. To an extent, claiming benefits while working informally drew more respect and kudos than deriving a similar income through poor-quality work. However, few saw this work as providing them with a lavish lifestyle, but it provided money for the necessities that they were unable to buy while on state benefit and allowed them to be a little more particular when looking for jobs:

We needed it. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't need to do it. It is plain and simple. The people that do it do it because they need to. Basically, you don't get enough money on the dole. When you have got weans it is a lot harder.

(Jake)

All of those who engaged in work 'on the side' were constantly aware of the danger of being caught and having their benefit suspended. One, while working on an ice cream van, was 'shopped' by a neighbour and had to switch to a less visible form of work:

Somebody I went to college with bought himself an ice cream van, so he said to me 'why don't you come and drive a van for us?' So I says I can't work and he says 'cash in hand' and I says no problem, so I did that for a couple of months. But I got caught, somebody decided to shop me, so that was that up in the air as well. I mean, if I was unemployed and I was offered cash in hand, I would always take it.

(Wallace)

Work 'on the side' carries other risks aside from that of loss of benefits. Work in small unregulated firms can be dangerous and workers are unlikely to be insured. One young man was involved in an

accident, which prevented him seeking work in the formal sector for several months:

I thought it was the scaffolding that had caved in because it was only like those lightweight boards and one of the heavier boys that was working he fell through one of the them. But I mean there was another roof like that underneath him you know, so there was no damage to him but I thought it was the scaffolding thing that had caved in again. I went straight into a bit of steel and nearly took my finger off, I've got no feeling up there.

(Patrick)

This particular young man received no compensation from his employers who told him that, as he wasn't on the books, they would deny any knowledge of him working on the site.

Dealing

The financial strains that are associated with long-term unemployment encourage young people to explore other avenues of income generation. While some have the chance to work 'on the side', others create their own opportunities, some of which are illegal. In this study, a few individuals were involved with dealing soft drugs, but few admitted to regular participation in any other illegal activities. One of these young men sold soft drugs to supplement his income whether he was in employment or unemployed and had done so since he was 16. However, when he was out of work, he increased his sales so as to make a reasonable living:

Once I got sent to prison 'cos, when I wasn't working, I ended up buying drugs and selling them. Know what I mean, so ... that got me a better weekly wage which you could call it. That was like my job for something like a year, selling cannabis, know what I mean, so ... because there wasn't really that much jobs there at the time. It was that easy to get hold of the money just selling cannabis.

(Stuart)

A few other young men sold cannabis to cover the cost of their own use rather than to make money:

... helping my pal sell drugs. No hard drugs, just hash. I mean just to keep us in enough for us to get a smoke ourself, you know what I mean. Rather than blowing all our giro money on hash, we'd sell a wee bit so that we've got left say like a half ounce or something, that would keep us for a fortnight, you know what I mean. So really we're no making money out of it, we are just making enough to keep ourselves in like a wee bit of hash. We were never selling big time or anything like that, just like occasional ounce or two and we were like have a wee half ounce to ourself just to have a wee smoke so as to keep wur giros to pay off wur debts.
(Matt)

These young men felt that their activities were a legitimate way of life in a context where they would otherwise not have had the money to enjoy themselves. They acknowledged the illegality of their activities, but did not regard it as a serious offence. The same was true of other forms of petty crime such as small-scale shoplifting; it was something that was necessary to get by:

But, when I say stealing, I mean like a couple of bottles of booze out the offie's and the supermarkets and stuff, nothing highly serious, you know what I mean, I have never really done any serious crime, you know.
(Matt)

Dealing and working 'on the side' are both activities that carry risks that can threaten processes of labour market integration. Suspension of benefits can leave people with no real alternative but to engage in other forms of casual employment or crime. Convictions and imprisonment can increase problems finding employment, while a lack of money and family conflicts can lead to homelessness. Two young men had experienced a period of homelessness, both due to a relationship

breakdown that, in one case, was a result of heroin addiction:

I was homeless for a wee while, know what I mean, and my Mum didn't want me back because she knew I was into heroin as well.
(Stuart)

The young man with the heroin addiction subsequently entered a methadone programme but is unable to seek work because of the constraints of having to collect a daily prescription in working hours.

Conclusion

In the UK, generous benefit levels have been regarded by politicians as factors likely to reduce commitment to finding paid work, yet evidence from other countries suggests that such an approach is counterproductive and can actually increase levels of long-term unemployment, partly by making it more difficult for the unemployed to maintain social networks (Heikkinen, 2001). Rather than providing a disincentive to the few who might prefer to live on benefits rather than find work, low levels of benefit can be regarded as a factor that helps to explain rates of long-term unemployment. When people are placed in a situation where they have to struggle to meet daily needs, their attention can become focused on making ends meet rather than on finding work. They may withdraw from all forms of social life and develop a sense of despondency. The loss of self-confidence may prevent people from applying for certain types of jobs, lead to a downgrading of expectations and can affect performance at interviews. Yet participation in social and community life is not only an important component of self-esteem, it can also provide networks that supply information on job vacancies. Thus, the denial of the resources through which people can remain attached to the social life of the community is not something that promotes a rapid return to the labour market.

Despite having spent extensive periods out of work, most of the young men in this study (regardless of current position or past experience) were committed to finding work. This was partly evidenced by their willingness to accept temporary jobs even where the financial benefits were negligible and to tolerate appalling conditions. While putting people into a survival situation can restrict the types of social contact that may lead to employment, the benefit system can also result in family conflict, which, in some cases, can lead to family breakdown and homelessness. Lacking the means to enjoy the living conditions that are customary in contemporary society also creates the need for people to seek out work 'on the side' or obtain money through illegal activities, while the sanctions imposed when these activities become known can provide a further push towards social exclusion.

The family is crucial to the experience of unemployment and to the prevention of social exclusion, and few of these young men came from the more advantaged social classes. However, for some, the support and encouragement (and even pressure) provided by the family can help prevent despondency and keep young people actively looking for work. The financial support of the

family can also help young people to maintain social relationships and it can open up opportunities for education and training. In work-poor families, tensions can arise from the increased financial strain of unemployment. However, families can also introduce young people to some of the strategies that are necessary to cope with prolonged periods of worklessness and financial hardship.

While some of the young men clearly had to deal with personal problems, and many were in weak positions because of a lack of qualifications and limited work experience, patterns of labour demand are also a central part of the problem. In part, there was some evidence of a mismatch between the sort of jobs that are available in the new service economy and those sought by the young men, but, while the job-search field may have been limited by dated ideas about labour demand, in general the young men were willing to consider most jobs. Although this study did not focus on employers, evidence from the young people and key professionals provides a strong indication that those jobs that are available to relatively unqualified young men tend to be low-waged and insecure. The consequences of these patterns of demand are discussed in the next chapter.

4 Getting by in a casualised labour market

Eric lives on a deprived estate in a town outside Glasgow. He left school at the minimum age with no educational qualifications and, although he has had many jobs, he has never held a permanent job. After leaving school, he started a YT as a painter and decorator, but was sacked because of poor attendance (at the time, he was working informally with a local builder, who paid him £25 a day). He then found a YT placement in a kitchen in a community centre where he gained health and hygiene certificates. While he had hoped that the kitchen placement would lead to a permanent position, at the end of the course, he was told that there was no work for him. He then considered going to college to study catering, but he found that he could not afford to buy the equipment required. Since then his employment history has been very chequered. He has worked on numerous fixed-term contracts, has frequently been employed by agencies and, at times when he has been unemployed, has had various unskilled jobs 'on the side'. Eric argues that there are very few opportunities for stable employment in his area and is very aware that temporary employment and agency work are not routes into secure forms of employment. He accepts that he is likely to continue to work in a series of temporary jobs. At the time he was interviewed, Eric was unemployed, although he was enrolled with two employment agencies and was hoping to get a little work 'on the side' with a local builder.

Introduction

For the majority of our respondents, leaving the unemployment register to begin a job was a relatively common occurrence. Most young people had had several jobs since leaving school. Although they had spent long and frequent periods without work, their main problem was not finding work, but keeping it. This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes on the part of the young men or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the 'flexible' nature of low-skilled employment in modern Britain. The jobs that less skilled young men were being offered, and which they often performed successfully, tended to be temporary or precarious and were frequently offered through agencies.

Employment within the precarious sector rarely provided a bridge into the more secure sectors of the labour market but was part of a process of 'churning': most of the workers would be without work again in the near future. In this sector, very little training is provided that goes beyond the immediate demands of the tasks for which the worker is employed. The growth of the precarious sector is a direct consequence of 'flexible'

employment policies that began in the 1980s and that resulted in the contracting out of many lower-skill positions within the public sector. As a result of their relative lack of marketable skills, contacts and qualifications, these young men are rarely able to make inroads to the primary labour market. Our evidence also suggests that government-sponsored training programmes rarely provide disadvantaged young men with the sort of skills that would facilitate secure entry into the more desirable sectors of the labour market. While subsidised employment can lead to unsubsidised jobs, the evidence presented here shows that those who move on from subsidised jobs usually remain in precarious positions.

In this chapter, we consider the experiences of young males in the precarious sector of the labour market and examine the factors that trap them in cycles of poor work punctuated by worklessness. Here, we suggest that changes in labour demand have led to the emergence of a new group of workers who occupy precarious positions and have few opportunities to enter more secure segments of the labour market. In particular, the increased role of agency work means that, even in times of

relatively full employment and even when young men make determined efforts, it is difficult for those with few qualifications or with low-range skills to secure any dramatic improvement in their conditions.

Poor training, poor work

The young men who became trapped in cycles of unemployment and precarious employment had typically worked in a wide range of low-skill jobs and had been trained for several occupations. Many had had a series of jobs in which they had worked for very short periods (several days or a few weeks). Most had left school with no qualifications and had spent time on Youth Training, usually in an occupation for which they had little interest. Youth Training rarely gave them an effective start in the labour market, many resented what they regarded as slave labour and training tended to be superficial. At an extreme, one 29 year old had been on a succession of training programmes but had been employed for a total of only seven months since leaving school at 16.

Edwin's story is somewhat severe but not a totally atypical example of what has been referred to as the 'black magic roundabout' (Craine, 1997). He left school at 16 with relatively poor qualifications and entered Youth Training. As a trainee, he spent his time as a driver's mate but was not provided with the opportunity to learn to drive and, once the scheme had ended, he was replaced by another trainee and spent a period out of work. After a period of unemployment, he entered a second training scheme, this time as a road builder. This was followed by a third training scheme and another period of unemployment before securing a job as a shop assistant followed by two further jobs in retail. Each of the retail jobs lasted for about three months and ended because the firm encountered financial difficulties:

I got the push just before Christmas. What happened was he had overspent on his budget. He had spent too much, there was a new store opening and he had flushed everything into advertising and all the stock he had bought in store. So he kept so many folk on part-time and then he had to make choices out of different people that had worked in different departments. Just had to get rid of them, wiped them off.

(Edwin)

As a relatively unskilled person who had not been with the firm for very long, Edwin was one of those selected for redundancy. Unemployed again, he joined the Jobclub where he managed to secure a couple of interviews, but no offer of work until he was offered a place on the New Deal on a subsidised job in a factory. This placement lasted seven months and was brought to an abrupt end due to a minor conflict:

... one of the other supervisors said that I wasnae working right, putting stuff in stock or whatever, this was the way they used to dae and they had their ain set ways. That was it.

(Edwin)

After losing this job, Edwin became unemployed once again. His next position was also a subsidised job within the intermediate labour market, this time working in a warehouse. Here, he gained a few additional qualifications, but then was unemployed once again before finding work on a production line making toiletries. After a short time, the chemicals that he worked with in the factory affected his health and he was forced to leave. Unemployed for a further two months, he managed to find a job in a wallpaper shop. With compulsory overtime, the hours were long and he was even expected to do some gardening at the manager's home. Work conditions again took a toll on his health and, after he was signed off sick for two weeks, he was sacked by the supervisor.

Edwin is currently unemployed and, when interviewed, was hoping for a temporary job in the run-up to Christmas. On reflection, he thought that possession of a driving licence would have made a real difference to him. Many of the other young men criticised the lack of training on YT and the New Deal. A small number of those who entered such training programmes with few qualifications managed to develop marketable skills and some highlighted a total absence of skill training.

In the poor sectors of the labour market, conditions are frequently harsh. The young men interviewed provided numerous examples of blatant breaches of employment and health and safety legislation. Summary dismissal for trivial 'offences', arguments and bullying were common and facilitated by the use of short-term contracts. A simple occupational title masks a wide range of working conditions. Call centres are often highlighted as examples of new occupations where pay is low and conditions of work are highly regulated. Yet the conditions typical in major call centres are very different to the casualised call centres that provided temporary employment for some of the young men. Here, small companies won contracts to provide a service for a larger firm. They hired office space for the duration of the contract, brought in equipment and hired staff on very short-term contracts. The only permanent member of the workforce may be the owner. Conditions in the centres are particularly severe:

The way the call centre works is that, if you don't perform or get results or reach your stats or meet your sales targets, you are out the door. I am on medication an all because ... like my stress levels go away through the roof and I take panic attacks and like I all seize up and all that you know, it is horrible. There are quite a few of my mates that are in call centre work and they are suffering from stress and all, you know what I mean, we are all on the same tablets.

(Matt)

These companies often find cheap temporary premises in areas of high unemployment where they are guaranteed a good supply of cheap labour and can rely on benefit regulations to ensure that workers put up with the conditions. Bonuses, which can form a key component of the overall wage, often fail to materialise even when employees have worked hard to secure them:

They laid off everybody, bumped us out of all our commission collectively, it was about four-and-a-half grand. I mean no that much myself, probably about £150 quid or something but I mean collectively out the 20 people. I mean there was one lassie got bumped out about £750/£800 you know what I mean and they point blank refused to pay it. I mean that wasnae just commission that was our pay. It is highly illegal, you know, so as I say you have no rights.
(Matt)

Poor conditions are not something that are confined to the smaller firms. Many examples of insecure, tedious work characterised by low wages and harsh conditions related to large and multinational companies, some of which had been attracted to areas of high unemployment due to the offer of subsidies. A large electronics firm, for example, was regularly recruiting new workers and a lot of the respondents had spent periods of time in this factory. Few, however, could stand the work for protracted periods and labour turnover was extremely high.

It was clear from the key professionals that many improvements in training had been implemented in recent years, particularly in relation to the identification of individual needs. The New Deal and Working Links, for example, are partially tailored to the needs of the individual: diagnostic interviews are used at the outset and a range of appropriate options are presented. However, some professionals criticised the ways in which individuals were treated as 'resource units' by training providers whose income was directly

related to 'bums on seats' rather than to the fulfilment of client needs.

One senior professional argued that the predominant approach was to 'chuck' people at the labour market in the hope that they would 'stick'. In other words, many advisers met their targets by placing clients in any available job or training scheme without due regards for the long-term interests of the client. This senior professional argued that it was inevitable that such an approach would fail in the majority of cases and would result in the need for further (largely ineffective) interventions. From the point of view of the providers though, high throughput and repeat training could actually enhance profitability:

An awful lot of providers and an awful lot of organisations (Jobcentre Plus not least) just chuck people at the labour market. Any job will do. I think that's the way they look at it, any job will do, get them into a job, just get the number of unemployed down. In fact you are just recycling people into short-term, intermittent jobs that pay minimum wage. It's no good saying 'don't worry Jack, you're really into computers, we'll get you a job working in a hotel cleaning pots', that's not really very good because Jack is not going to do it for very long.

(Senior professional)

The need to educate the unemployed about labour market issues, to provide quality training and work experience and, importantly, to put great effort into the job-matching process was seen as crucial by many professionals:

I think that the answer is to orientate them to the labour market, give them good quality-of-work experience and then make a good job match. More and more today, the job-matching process is important. If you put someone into a job that they are not ready for and don't provide them with what they need, they will fall out of that job pretty damn quickly and therefore waste a whole load of public money.

(Wise Group)

Even where organisations were able to provide quality training to individuals motivated to work in a particular area, there were other barriers to contend with. The prison service, for example, has a range of quality vocational training programmes leading to SVQ/NVQ level 2. However, as they stand, training board regulations prevent individuals from studying for a level 3 qualification if they have access only to a simulated work placement rather than working in a 'normal' work environment. Effectively, this regulation stands in the way of advanced training for prisoners and others who are not working within a particular trade.

Agency work

Agency working was an extremely common form of employment for these young men, although it was very evident that there was a hierarchy of agencies with our respondents largely working for the poorer agencies that supply low-skill labour. There was little expectation that agency work would lead to permanent employment. There are two distinct forms of agency work, which can be characterised as the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. The traditional agency is the type that has existed on the high street for many years. These types of agency tend to specialise in different forms of employment, from secretaries to computer operators and drivers. In traditional agencies, workers are sent out to fill a labour shortage for anything from a day to several weeks. Some of these agencies are relatively exclusive; they may set their own 'entrance' tests and may demand specific qualifications or experience:

I went through a few tests and they just phoned to say I wasn't successful.

(Jerry)

As such, these 'superior' agencies may not offer opportunities to young adults with relatively few qualifications. Although these agencies will not

usually guarantee a set number of hours' employment per week, they frequently demand the exclusive right to the labour of an 'employee' while they remain on their books.

The second type of agency is a more modern form of employment and these types of agency mushroomed during the 1980s as a result of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). Here, an agent wins a contract to supply a service to a large employer, such as a cleaning contract for a hospital. These agents often supply different types of workers, including supervisors and managers. Here, the agent may have a long-term contract, but this does not necessarily mean that the employees are given lengthy contracts:

You had to look at the board at the end of every week to see if you had a shift for the next week. Oh, it was unbelievable, you didn't know by the Friday if you were working. I was actually OK 'cos I never got paid off once, but there were a lot of people come through maybe there for months and months, then on Friday just get told 'cheerio, see you later'. Every week yer heart, it wis in yer mooth wondering if you were gonna have a job for the next week.

(Tony)

The two types of agency working are not distinct and workers were often supplied by one of the traditional agencies to the modern contract agent. The worker is then placed at two removes from the company for which they are providing a service. As Toynbee (2003) found while working for an NHS contract holder called 'Carillion' when researching her book on life in low-pay Britain:

In the hospital now everyone below the rank of nurse – all the cleaning, catering, portering, technical and other non-medical staff – work for Carillion not the NHS. Or at least they work for Carillion in principle but in practice, as I soon discovered, many of those wearing Carillion colours were, like me, employed by agencies, working for the proliferating array of agencies around the fringes of London. I was working

not at one but at two removes from the national health service, lower paid and more insecure than even the Carillion workers, who were themselves lower paid and more insecure with worse pensions than thirty years ago.

(Toynbee, 2003, p. 59)

This distance from the main employer, together with the use of agency supervisors, made it very unlikely that the temporary employee would be selected for a permanent position. Indeed, most agents have clauses in their contracts with employers that explicitly prohibit 'poaching' and impose financial penalties on firms that offer jobs to agency staff. In some respects, the relationship can be characterised as a modern form of tutelage.

Agency working imposed demands for extreme flexibility on workers. They often did not know from one week to the next whether they would be employed at all, if they had a full or a part week or whether they had to go and sign on. Work location could also be highly variable and meant that the worker may have to study the logistics of getting to the other side of the city for an early start or getting home after a late finish:

They basically phoned me up on a Sunday night and told me to be available for 9.00 a.m. the following morning out on the far side of the river. So I had to get right away to Cathcart to start working there the following day. I didn't know anything about the job at all, it was just really out of the blue and luckily my sister was living over there at that point so I said 'well I could go and move in there for a while and save a wee bit of money from travel expenses' and I probably wouldn't have been able to do it, otherwise I would have taken two hours each way to get to and from work.

(Colin)

Many of the young men worked for major employers on agency contracts. The Motorola factory, which closed down in 2001 with the loss of around 3,000 jobs, was a heavy user of agency

labour. One young man worked there on an agency contract for 15 months, was laid off for a few months and then was re-employed for six weeks before the factory eventually closed down. Another had spent the majority of his working life being employed by agencies, although he had never worked for one place for more than a year. He was under no illusion that agency work would lead to permanent employment.

Others had a series of very short placements consisting sometimes of an 'odd shift' here and there. In these circumstances, young men had to decide whether it was worth remaining on the books of an agent and had to manage the complex business of keeping the Jobcentre informed about working hours and money earned. Conditions were virtually always inferior to those of any permanent workers who were performing the same tasks, and opportunities for training or advancement were virtually non-existent. Time was carefully controlled and agency workers could be removed rapidly in the event of any small downturn in production demand. Hours and even minutes of work were also carefully recorded:

If you went to the toilet one of the bosses would be standing at the toilet with a stopwatch. I am not joking, if say you'd spent about four or five minutes in the toilet you had to work that into your dinner break, you know what I mean. That four or five minutes that you were in there they would make you do it working your lunch hour. But see, if you spent 20 minutes in the toilet, you would have to spend 20 minutes of your lunch break working, you know what I mean. As far as I hear it is highly illegal what they were doing.
(Stuart)

In some of the areas we visited, the vast majority of job opportunities for workers with few skills involved some kind of agency work, and it was almost impossible to break the vicious cycle of short-term agency work followed by unemployment and a further short-term placement. In these precarious labour markets, the young men

came to predict the periods in which demand for labour would increase:

It's every couple of months, it's the end of every quarter and it always seems to get busy coming up near Christmas or whatever. That's when they take on like 600 people and then you get work for three or four weeks and then they pay off about 500. They may keep one on depending on how good a worker you are, etc., so I got kept the last time. But they come in and tell people lies, like you will get to be kept on if you do all your hours and do seven- and 12-hour shifts and that, it's just a complete and utter lie because they end up paying you off anyway, they just lie to you.
(Eric)

In these conditions, those who work extremely hard and stand out as good workers may be kept on when the agent requires less labour, but their contract will remain temporary and their position insecure. Line leaders (who were also temporary agency staff) usually made decisions about who to keep and they seemed to favour those with specific skills:

You got kept on to finish off whatever small orders they had at the time. I think a selected few got a job in the whisky distillers, the ones that could drive. I couldn't drive at the time.
(Barry)

Conclusion

In order to break cycles of unemployment, it is not only necessary to find ways of moving people into jobs, it is also crucial that new ways are found to move vulnerable young people into settled and secure forms of employment. Progression from unemployment to precarious employment tends to result in a further period of unemployment and additional cost to the State in the form of benefits, additional training or subsidised employment. From the experience of the young men who

participated in this study, it is very clear that the sort of training or work experience available is not of the level or quality required to ensure progress to settled positions.

The precarious sector of the labour market can be regarded as an invisible sector. Current policies are focused on reducing unemployment in line with national targets and those who are in precarious work lack visibility on the policy agenda. Yet any adequate approach to combating social exclusion needs to go beyond an approach based on an employment–unemployment dichotomy and must focus on moving people into positions where they obtain ongoing skill development. Many of the new policies tend to reinforce and even reward short-termism. Targets

set for initiatives like Jobcentre Plus and Employment Zones actually provide financial incentives for agencies to place unemployed people into jobs without any concern for the quality of such jobs and reinforce precarious situations that carry future cost implications.

From the evidence we have presented, it is very clear that labour market ‘flexibility’ and the increased demand for workers who are not covered by standard forms of employment protection have led to the emergence of a new form of labour stratification: that which exists between the stable and precarious sectors. By concentrating on getting people off the employment register and into jobs at any cost, current policies do little to improve the long-term prospects of vulnerable young men.

5 Conclusions

Most of the young men whose labour market experiences we have described were vulnerable workers. For a number of reasons, they failed to thrive in a school environment and tended to leave at the earliest opportunity with few, if any, qualifications. Transitions from school to work were turbulent and involved protracted (and usually repeated) periods of unemployment as well as time on schemes such as Youth Training. Although these young men were contacted five years after having experienced a period of long-term unemployment, the majority were either in precarious forms of employment or were experiencing a further period of unemployment. The minority who had managed to obtain more stable work were different in a number of ways: in the main, they came from families that were better equipped to provide resources and support, had left school with stronger qualifications and had obtained further vocational qualifications.

In many respects, this report presents a depressing picture. It suggests that, over a five-year period, most young men who have been affected by long-term unemployment will have failed to enter stable forms of employment. At the same time, the large majority had managed to find employment on several occasions and, while there were a few whose post-school careers were heavily dominated by unemployment, the problem for most was not so much in finding a job as in breaking out of a cycle of temporary or insecure forms of employment punctuated by periods of further unemployment.

To what extent are these difficulties linked to individual deficits? It is true that these young men tended not to have strong educational credentials or skills that were in high demand by local employers. Some had personal issues that made it difficult for them to find secure work, such as drug and alcohol problems or criminal convictions, but these rarely led to total exclusion from the labour force. With most young men readily accepting any opportunity to work or train for new jobs, there

was little evidence to suggest that the young men were feckless and preferred to live on benefits rather than work. Nor was there evidence that they were unemployable: most had spent considerable periods of time in jobs and their employment was usually terminated as a result of downturns in demand or the completion of a temporary contract rather than through employers' dissatisfaction with the quality of their labour.

At the same time, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that deficits in basic skills, poor levels of education and a lack of vocational qualifications were having a detrimental impact on patterns of labour market participation. It is clear from other studies that young people with these sorts of disadvantages face the greatest difficulties in the labour market. From this study, it was also evident that the minority who did enter stable employment had more qualifications and access to stronger social networks than those they left behind. Although the links between social class, educational performance and labour market experiences are well recognised, these observations are generally interpreted as evidence of a skill deficit and the emphasis tends to be placed on training as a remedy.

In the UK, a variety of training programmes are available to provide vocational training and skills to people without work and the young men we spoke to had participated in a range of programmes. However, there were few genuine success stories. While young men had frequently ended a period of unemployment after having followed a programme of training, few gained the sorts of skills that would have helped them move into secure sectors of the labour market. Even when training led directly to employment, more often than not careers continued to be characterised by cycles of work punctuated by short-term unemployment. There are two main reasons why training programmes tend not to benefit the most vulnerable. First, the training programmes that they enter tend not to be of the highest quality

available. In a competitive situation, poorly qualified young men from lower-working-class families are rarely selected for quality training when there is a high demand from those with stronger qualifications. Second, there was also a process of self-selection: those with a negative history in formal education may avoid forms of intervention that require a return to a classroom setting. Again, this can result in placement on the poorer quality programmes.

To move vulnerable young people into stable sectors of the labour market requires a level of skill and experience that is provided by few government training schemes, and there are few ex-trainees who moved into jobs where there were opportunities for ongoing skill development. While effective solutions have to involve early interventions within the school, there is scope for providing more advanced training to the long-term unemployed than that which is currently available through mainstream programmes. Indeed, with a need to compensate for chequered labour market histories and poor local labour market conditions, SVQ/NVQ3 (rather than SVQ/NVQ2) should be regarded as the desired training threshold. However, the current rules of accreditation bodies prevent the award of SVQ/NVQ3 in simulated work environments. This regulation must be seen as a barrier to the introduction of effective integration programmes that provide quality training and skill development.

There is clearly a case for the provision of more advanced training, yet, in recent initiatives, there has also been a recognition that some vulnerable young people may not be in a position to fully benefit from skill training until they have addressed any personal issues that may impinge on labour market participation. Some, for example, may have drug or alcohol problems that they need to overcome; others may need to develop basic skills before they can thrive in a classroom environment. Although the young men we spoke to were unable to provide us with examples of pre-

training interventions, the professionals argued that these were important and that some of the most effective measures were those that gave advisers discretionary powers. When an adviser was able to identify the barriers faced by particular clients, it was argued that relatively small discretionary grants or tailored advice could clearly make a difference.

While there is obviously scope for the development of imaginative new interventions designed to help vulnerable young people gain the skills that will help them move into the more secure sectors of the labour market, it is important to recognise that issues of labour demand are also crucial. No intervention can effectively move vulnerable people towards stable employment if the pool of stable jobs is rapidly declining. Here, we noted that the process of labour market casualisation has eroded opportunities and is making it increasingly difficult for people to enter stable employment. Vulnerable young men frequently get caught in a cycle of unemployment and casual work that offers no opportunities for training or advancement. Agency working poses particular difficulties because of restrictive clauses that penalise employers who want to hire agency workers. Here, it was also noted that the contracting out of public services is likely to have led to a reduction in training opportunities for young men. Perhaps all tenders for public services should be evaluated for the quality and quantity of training provision as well as for the quality and price of the service or product being offered. Without such a condition, the taxpayer is effectively left to pick up the bill for compensatory training that is often inferior to that provided by companies.

Evidence from the young men as well as from the key professionals highlighted a concern that the private partnerships that increasingly deliver both training and placement services have no real incentive to ensure that they are helping their clients to move towards stable forms of employment. Some

advisers clearly treat individuals as resource units and show little interest in identifying client needs. For most partnerships, profits are directly linked to job placements and this could provide incentives for advisers to ignore client wishes or the long-term sustainability of employment.

We also argued that the benefit system is not sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of a labour market that is often characterised by short-term and casual opportunities. Breaking a claim for a short period of work can be problematic and can lead to financial strains that are intolerable for those living in poverty. For some, the costs of making a transition to work can be prohibitive. We

noted a greater availability of discretionary grants to help meet these needs, but argued that, for those affected by long-term unemployment, benefits should be continued for some time after a job has been secured.

Finally, one of the most important messages to come out of this report is that current approaches to the integration of the long-term unemployed are very ineffective if success is measured over a period of several years. To improve this situation, a range of imaginative solutions are required, but perhaps the greatest challenge, and the key to an effective set of policies, is to reverse the trend towards labour market casualisation.

Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page656.asp>.
- 2 The sample for the study was collected in 1996 and the interviews carried out six months later in 1997.
- 3 With few females having experienced long-term unemployment and with anticipated problems in tracing women after a five-year interval as a result of marriage and name changes, the nature of the sample made it impossible to include females in any meaningful way.
- 4 Of the original sample, 57 per cent had been unemployed for over a year.
- 5 The New Deal was not introduced until 1998 and those who move in and out of the labour market tend not to be eligible.

6 'Significant' qualification gain is that which entails moving from one SVQ/NVQ level to the next.

7 Depcat of 6 or 7.

Chapter 2

- 1 Equivalent to the English NVQ (National Vocational Qualification).
- 2 These young men entered the labour market at a stage where the two-year Youth Training had superseded the one-year Youth Training Scheme. The new scheme was designed to offer more in the way of formal training, including periods spent in college.

References

- Arulampalam, W., Gregg, P. and Gregory, M. (2001) 'Unemployment scarring', *Economic Journal*, Vol. 111, No. 475, pp. 577–85
- Ashton, D.N. (1986) *Unemployment under Capitalism*. Brighton: Harvester
- Ashton, D.N., Maguire, M.J. and Garland, V. (1982) *Youth in the Labour Market*. London: Department of Employment
- Balding, J. (2000) *Young People in 1999*. Exeter: Schools Health Education Unit
- Banks, M.H. and Ullah, P. (1988) *Youth Unemployment in the 1980s*. Beckenham: Croom Helm
- Bynner, J. and Roberts, K. (eds) (1991) *Youth and Work: Transitions to Employment in England and Germany*. London: Anglo-German Foundation
- Cabinet Office (2001) *In Demand: Adult Skills for the 21st Century*. London: Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit
- Casebourne, J. (2001) 'Barriers to work for drug misusers', *Working Brief*, No. 136, pp. 21–3
- Coles, B. (2001) *Joined-up Youth Research: Policy and Practice*. Leicester: National Youth Bureau
- Craine, S. (1997) 'The black magic roundabout: cyclical transitions, social exclusion and alternative careers', in R. MacDonald (ed.) *Youth, Underclass and Society*. London: Routledge
- Eurostat (2002) News release 94/2002
- Fryer, D. (1990) 'The mental health cost of unemployment: towards a social psychological concept of poverty?', *British Journal of Clinical and Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 164–75
- Furlong, A. and Raffe, D. (1992) *Young People's Routes into the Labour Market*. Edinburgh: Industry Department for Scotland
- Furlong, A., Cartmel, F., Biggart, A., Sweeting, H. and West, P. (2003) *Reconceptualising Youth Transitions*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive
- Gallie, D. and Paugam, S. (2002) *Social Precarity and Social Integration: Report for the European Commission Based on Eurobarometer 56.1*. Brussels: European Commission
- Gregg, P. (2001) 'The impact of youth unemployment on adult unemployment in the NCDS', *Economic Journal*, Vol. 111, No. 475, pp. 626–53
- Heikkinen, M. (2001) 'Social networks of the marginal young: a study of young people's exclusion in Finland', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 389–406
- Hutton, W. (1996) *The State we're in*. London: Vintage
- Jones, G. and Wallace, C. (1992) *Youth, Family and Citizenship*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Kenway, P., Fuller, S., Rahman, M., Street, C. and Palmer, G. (2002) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Scotland*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Makeham, P. (1980) *Youth Unemployment*. Research Paper No. 10. London: Department of Employment
- MacDonald, R. and Marsh, J. (2001) 'Disconnected youth', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 373–91
- O'Higgins, N. (2001) *Youth Unemployment and Employment Policy*. Geneva: International Labour Office
- Sennett, R. (2003) *Respect in a World of Inequality*. New York and London: Norton
- Skillbase (2002) *Stock of Skills*. <http://www.skillbase.dfes.gov.uk/Narrative/Narrative.asp?sect=5&page=9>

Stein, M. and Wade, J. (2000) *Helping Care Leavers: Problems and Strategic Responses*. London: Department of Health

Toynbee, P. (2003) *Hard Work: Life in Low-pay Britain*. London: Bloomsbury

Warr, P. (1987) *Unemployment and Mental Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

