

Vulnerable young men in fragile labour markets

What happens to young men who experience a period of long-term unemployment early in their careers? Are they able to overcome the impact of unemployment and go on to establish relatively successful careers or do they continue to suffer from insecurity and recurrent unemployment? This study by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel of the University of Glasgow is based on in-depth interviews with 32 young men who experienced a period of long-term unemployment more than five years ago. The study found that:

-  Most young men continued to occupy precarious positions in the labour market and experienced periodic unemployment. Their problem was not so much finding work, but finding jobs that offered a degree of security.
-  Most had left school with few qualifications and had spent time on Youth Training, usually in an occupation for which they had little interest. They had typically worked in a wide range of low-skill jobs and their employment was usually terminated as a result of changes in labour demand rather than through employers' dissatisfaction with the quality of their labour.
-  The opportunities available for relatively unskilled workers tended to be temporary, frequently requiring short-term work, sub-contracting or working for agencies.
-  Few opportunities exist for training in casual and insecure sectors of the labour market. Workers tend to become trapped in precarious positions in which it is difficult to avoid recurrent unemployment.
-  While it was common for young men to end a period of unemployment after a training programme, few gained skills that helped them move into secure sectors of the labour market.
-  The few who went on to establish fairly secure careers tended to have stronger initial qualifications and often came from families that were able to provide resources or draw on work contacts.
-  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.
-  Agency working imposed demands for extreme flexibility, and men often did not know from one week to the next whether they would be employed.
-  The researchers suggest that issues related to the supply and demand for labour, and reversing the trend towards casualisation of employment, could be addressed.

Background

Many studies have analysed the prevalence and impact of youth unemployment, but little research has examined the long-term impact of unemployment or the subsequent experiences of young people who have spent substantial time out of work.

The project

This study focuses on men between the ages of 25 and 29 who had encountered a period of long-term unemployment around five years earlier. The main aim was to examine the reasons why some young men manage to escape a period of unemployment and go on to establish relatively successful careers while others remain scarred by their experience.

The study highlights the barriers which prevent young men from moving from precarious positions into the more secure sectors of the labour market and illustrates the ways in which they become trapped in cycles of unemployment and insecure work.

For most of the men, stable employment was elusive, and continuous unemployment over several years was also uncommon. The majority occupied precarious positions, and their labour market histories were largely characterised by periodic unemployment and short-term insecure work. Only around a third of those who were interviewed had managed to move into forms of employment that could be regarded as stable.

Turbulent beginnings

Most of the young men had left school with few or no educational qualifications after attending low-achieving schools where relatively few stayed on beyond the minimum leaving age. The majority came from lower working class families and 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 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.

The majority of those who did find work tended to find themselves in insecure positions or on inferior

training programmes. However, those who left school with reasonable qualifications eventually tended to find their way to settled labour market positions, despite having encountered a lengthy period of unemployment. 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. Those without such resources rarely accessed stable employment.

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. Many parents were unemployed, and financial support was frequently not available.

With a high demand for quality jobs, employers were able to select young people with relatively strong qualifications. Young people with little to set them apart from the crowd were forced to settle for insecure positions on the labour market periphery. The establishment of careers was 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 rejected options that involve further study because they have been so alienated by previous educational experience.

Training schemes appeared not to provide compensation. Places offering quality training were filled competitively, with inferior placements offered to the less well qualified. For many, the linkage between these lower-tier training schemes and employment was poor. Many subsequently entered occupations that were totally unrelated to their 'training' and, even when they gained vocational qualifications and attempted to secure relevant training, they found it very difficult to compete with those who had trained in other settings.

The impact of unemployment

The family is crucial to the experience of unemployment and to the prevention of social exclusion. 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 maintain social relationships and help open up opportunities for

education and training. Families can also introduce young people to some of the strategies that are necessary to cope with prolonged periods of worklessness and financial hardship.

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. Many families, however, were unable to provide financial support. Several young men lived in households that had been surviving on benefits for years. Some lived in single-parent families where one person was struggling to support a family on a low income.

The families that provided the most adequate financial support during periods of unemployment tended to be the less deprived and it was these young men who were most likely to break out of the cycle of unemployment and precarious work. Family pressure on young men to intensify their job search activities or seek out training opportunities was also most common within the less deprived families and some did admit that proactive parents helped them end a period of unemployment.

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 sometimes appalling conditions.

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. However, the sanctions imposed when these activities become known can provide a further push towards social exclusion. 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.

The researchers found that low levels of benefit can help explain rates of long-term unemployment rather than providing a disincentive to the few people who might prefer to live on benefits rather than find work. 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 finding work. 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. 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.

Getting by

The labour market biographies of most young men in the study were dominated by insecure and short-term work usually paid at minimum rates and often characterised by harsh and exploitative conditions. 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.

The majority of respondents left the unemployment register to begin a job. Most 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; they were frequently offered through agencies.

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

The young men who became trapped in cycles of unemployment and precarious employment had typically worked in a wide range of low skill jobs. Most had left school with no qualifications and had spent time on Youth Training, usually in an occupation for which they had little interest.

Agency working

Agency working was a common form of employment for these young men, although there was little expectation that it would lead to permanent employment. In some areas, the majority of job opportunities came through agencies and it was almost impossible to break the vicious cycle of short-term agency work followed by unemployment and a further short-term placement. Agency working imposed demands for extreme flexibility. Men often did not know from one week to the next whether they would be employed for all or part of a week or whether they would have to sign on again.

"You had to look at the board at the end of every week to see if you had a shift for the next week. It was unbelievable. You didn't know by the Friday if you were working. I was actually OK, 'cause 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)

Agency workers often had a series of very short placements, consisting sometimes of an 'odd shift' here and there. In these circumstances they 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. 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.

Conclusions

The researchers suggest that, from the evidence obtained, issues related to both the supply and demand for labour should be addressed. They consider that policy interventions that simply attempt to enhance the quality of labour supply through addressing individual 'deficiencies' are unlikely to be successful. They suggest that a trend towards casualisation of employment could be reversed.

About the study

This report is based on in-depth interviews with 32 young men who were first contacted in 1996 as part of a study of unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds. In this research, a sub-sample of 25- to 29-year-old males were re-contacted, all of whom had been unemployed for a year or more at the time of the original survey. For some, earlier periods of unemployment were extensive and the educational profile of the majority of interviewees was poor. Many had multiple disadvantages.

The interviews were conducted in a range of areas including cities, smaller towns and rural locations. Respondents were encouraged to talk at length about their lives from school to the present day, and were asked about events that they regarded as particularly significant. They were probed for perceived linkages between events and asked about key systems of support and at attempts to deal with precarious situations.

How to get further information

The full report, **Vulnerable young men in fragile labour markets: Employment, unemployment and the search for long-term security** by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 179 4, price £11.95).