

ARE 'CULTURES OF WORKLESSNESS' PASSED DOWN THE GENERATIONS?

This study investigates the idea of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness' and if there are families where 'three generations have never worked'. It is based on research with families living in deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow and Middlesbrough.

Key points

- The idea of 'three generations of the same family who have never worked' appeals to many, including politicians and policy-makers, as an explanation of entrenched worklessness in the UK.
- Despite strenuous efforts, the researchers were unable to locate any such families. Even two generations of complete worklessness in the same family was a very rare phenomenon, which is consistent with recent quantitative surveys of this issue.
- Families experiencing long-term worklessness remained committed to the value of work and preferred to be in jobs rather than on benefits.
- There was no evidence of 'a culture of worklessness' – values, attitudes and behaviours discouraging employment and encouraging welfare dependency – in the families.
- Workless parents were keen for their children to do better than they had, and actively tried to help them find jobs. Working-age offspring remained strongly committed to conventional values about work as part of a normal transition to adulthood. They were keen to avoid the poverty, worklessness and other problems experienced by their parents.
- The long-term worklessness of parents in these families was a result of the impact of complex, multiple problems associated with living in deep poverty over years.
- Policy-makers and politicians need to abandon theories – and resulting policies – that see worklessness as primarily the outcome of a *culture* of worklessness, held in families and passed down the generations.

The research

By Tracy Shildrick, Robert MacDonald, Andy Furlong, Johann Roden and Robert Crow

BACKGROUND

The idea that worklessness can be explained by families passing on values and practices that discourage employment and encourage welfare dependency is a powerful one, popular with UK governments and the general public. There is, however, little research evidence to support this idea. Using methods and locations most likely to reveal such families, this study tested the idea of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness'. Life-history interviews with different generations of the same family investigated how far a 'culture of worklessness' might explain long-term detachment from the labour market and, if so, whether this was passed down through the generations.

Three generations who have never worked?

Despite dogged searching, the researchers were *unable to locate any families with three generations who had never worked*. If such families exist, they can only account for a minuscule fraction of workless people. Recent surveys suggest that under 1 per cent of workless households might have two generations who have never worked. Families with three such generations will therefore be even fewer.

To investigate further researchers interviewed 20 families with long-term worklessness across two generations. The 'older generation' members of these families were usually too ill to participate, or deceased. They interviewed:

- a 'middle generation' parent (aged late-thirties to mid-fifties) who had been workless for a very long time (at least five years, but usually longer);
- a 'younger generation' child of working age (usually aged 16 to mid-20s) who was unemployed (most of these had never worked).

In reporting these experiences, the research focused on families who are statistically quite unusual. Their experiences are not typical of the wider problem of worklessness in the UK. These were severely deprived, troubled families. Rarely were there simple, single explanations for why individuals in the middle generation had such extensive records of worklessness. Characteristically, a range of serious problems associated with social exclusion and poverty combined over time to keep them out of the labour market. As one interviewee asked, "how can you work when you have a life like mine?" Their problems included, but were not limited to:

- poor schooling and educational underachievement;
- problematic drug and alcohol use;
- the attraction of illicit opportunities (such as drug dealing) when legitimate opportunities were scarce;
- criminal victimisation, offending and imprisonment;
- domestic violence, and family and housing instability; and
- most commonly, and sometimes as an outcome of these cumulative adversities, physical and mental ill-health.

In an already tight labour market, these personal and family problems combined to place such individuals at the back of a long queue for jobs.

The younger generation interviewees had been trying to enter the labour market in times of high national unemployment and very high local unemployment. Their troubled family backgrounds did not give them a good start, but their personal problems were not so extensive or unusual enough to explain their worklessness, especially given their strong commitment to employment. With a stronger local economy, it is likely that many of the younger generation would have got jobs.

Cultures of worklessness?

Detailed interviews explored what are said to be characteristics of a 'culture of worklessness'. There was no evidence that parents transmitted to their children values, attitudes or behaviours that discouraged employment and encouraged welfare dependency. Across the generations, people stressed the social, psychological and financial value of working for a living, in preference to what Ryan Blenkinsopp (54, Middlesbrough) called the "miserable existence" of long-term unemployment:

"It gives your whole day some sort of order. It's like a regimental thing ... whereas if you are just sat around it can be frustrating and awful, really."

Patrick Richards, 49, Middlesbrough

"I've always wanted to be able to say to somebody, 'I work here', 'I'm going to my work'."

Pamela Fraser, 21, Glasgow

"Of course it would be important to me [to have a job], especially when I'm only on £95 a fortnight. God, to have a wage that would be £95 a week; I would feel like a millionaire!"

Verity Lamb, 16, Middlesbrough

Both younger and older interviewees described the day-to-day struggles of living in long-term poverty. Socialising was severely restricted, and the absence of holidays – even day trips – was emblematic of living in poverty. Many in the middle generation appeared to have become resigned to their long-term worklessness, given their length of time out of the labour market, the multiple problems they faced and their assessment of the chances of getting a job locally. Nevertheless, these parents were unanimous in not wanting their children to end up in the same situation. Roy Cunningham (50, Middlesbrough) had been out of employment for 25 years because of a long-term disabling condition. He said: "What I want is for my family to have jobs. They're not asking for anything big, that's the thing, they are not, like, being greedy". Parents made efforts to help their children, for instance by accompanying them to job interviews or ensuring that they had newspaper rounds when they were younger so as to learn about earning money.

Equally, younger interviewees emphasised how they wanted to avoid the worklessness and poverty of their parents' lives. They expressed conventional aspirations about wanting a job, and most were very active in seeking work. Connor Nash (16, Middlesbrough), for instance, had only recently left school but said: "I have applied for 120 jobs and haven't got one". Currently a single parent, Charlotte Harris (21, Glasgow) summed up young people's conventional aspirations. She wanted to return to college to study childcare and:

"... to live somewhere quiet and be able to have a house and stuff for her [daughter], to show, right, well if I work hard than I can have a house and a motor and bring my kids up and ... be OK ... I've set my heights [sic] a wee bit higher [than my parents]."

A culture of worklessness is sometimes said to be typified by people working fraudulently in jobs 'on the side'. The study found no evidence of this. However, many interviewees had responsibilities outside of formal, paid employment, so strictly speaking they were not 'workless'. Women in particular carried a heavy burden of caring: for their children, partners and for other family members when they were ill. Bringing up children in very difficult circumstances often got in the way of looking for work

or taking up further education courses that might improve their job prospects. Many people had also done voluntary work because of the local lack of employment, or because ill-health made it difficult to hold down a full-time job. Volunteering offered some of the social and psychological benefits normally associated with employment.

Some of the middle generation interviewees had been involved in criminal activities. This was usually shoplifting or drug dealing, both of which were motivated by a need to raise funds to support their drug use (e.g. heroin or crack cocaine). The neighbourhoods studied had thriving drug markets. These individuals, leaving school unqualified and sometimes already dependent on heroin, had found the opportunities for working in the illegal drug trade to be more abundant and attractive than those in the formal economy.

Ideas about cultures of worklessness imply that workless people are cut off from those who are in jobs, and occupy social networks where unemployment is a social norm. Given the high rates of worklessness in the neighbourhoods studied, it was not surprising that interviewees mixed with people in similar positions to themselves. Nevertheless, the majority of residents even in these very deprived neighbourhoods were not workless. Interviewees knew many people who were in work. Indeed, an important finding concerned differences *within* these families. Very often, other family members, including siblings, were in jobs. This runs counter to the ideas that cultures of worklessness are transmitted from parents to children, and that workless individuals are disconnected from those in jobs. Younger people often looked to working family members as role models.

Conclusion

The research was unable to uncover evidence of a culture of worklessness among families. The key conclusion, therefore, is that politicians and policy-makers need to abandon theories – and policies flowing from them – that see worklessness as primarily the outcome of a *culture* of worklessness, held in families and passed down the generations. If these cultures cannot be found in the extreme cases studied here, they are unlikely to explain more general patterns of worklessness in the UK.

About the project

The study was carried out by Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald (Teesside University) and Andy Furlong (Glasgow University), with Johann Roden and Robert Crow. It used a critical case-study approach, in deprived neighbourhoods of Glasgow and Middlesbrough with families experiencing extensive worklessness. Pseudonyms have been used for the interviewees quoted in this study.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF.

The full report, **Are 'cultures of worklessness' passed down the generations?** by Tracy Shildrick, Robert MacDonald, Andy Furlong, Johann Roden and Robert Crow, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

Read more summaries at www.jrf.org.uk
Other formats available
ISSN 0958-3084

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

email: publications@jrf.org.uk
www.jrf.org.uk
Ref: 2818