The impact of social exclusion on young people moving into adulthood

An in-depth study of one disadvantaged neighbourhood, 'Willowdene' in Teesside in North East England, has explored the ways in which young people grow up and get by in the context of social exclusion. The study found that:

f **Despite sharing very similar socio-economic backgrounds and coming from the same place, young people's experiences during youth and early adulthood differed widely.**

f **The one exception was those involved in 'criminal careers'. Typically these young people had disengaged from school by the age of 12 or 13, had participated with their peers in street drinking, drug use and petty crime from an early age, and had later progressed to more serious crime and drug use.**

f **Crime was severely exacerbated by the influx of heroin into Willowdene in the mid-1990s. Heroin transformed the local criminal economy and had a devastating impact on the local community.**

f **Generally, young people's experiences were complex and sometimes unpredictable. Changing housing situations and family experiences (such as homelessness or bereavement) – as well as involvement in crime and drug use - had a dramatic impact upon moving from school into work.**

f **Although most saw 'getting a proper job' as a key aspect of adult status, and shared conventional aspirations, only a minority had been able to secure long-term or rewarding employment in this high unemployment area. Few, however, were keen to live a life on benefits.**

f **Early experiences (at 12 or 13) could have a significant impact upon people's later lives (in their twenties). This suggests that research and policy needs to explore the relationship between structural constraints and individual choices and actions over a longer time frame than has tended to be the case.**

f **The great majority of young people had no desire to leave Willowdene despite the stigma and problems they faced. Within Willowdene many informal social networks helped individuals to manage their lives. On the one hand, such local networks confirm Willowdene's 'social exclusion' in relation to the wider area. On the other, they represent considerable social support within Willowdene.**

Background

Debate about social exclusion and the alleged emergence of a welfare dependent underclass has, in particular, focused upon the situation of young people living in poor neighbourhoods. This study set out to explore how young people move into adulthood when they live in a place which shares all the objective measures of social exclusion in extreme form.

Built in the 1920s 'Willowdene', a neighbourhood of Teesside, was for fifty years an unremarkable but successful example of local authority housing and a 'respectable' working class community. Since the 1970s the dramatic economic restructuring of local manufacturing industry has stripped away the economic security which underpinned social cohesion. Joblessness in Willowdene is estimated at around 40 per cent and its wards are in the top 10 per cent most deprived in the country. Employment opportunities for school-leavers and young adults are particularly limited. Willowdene has become notorious for high rates of crime and drug-related offending. Teesside in general and Willowdene in particular provide extreme examples of rapid economic decline and long-term structural unemployment and, as such, this locality provided the opportunity to study a place where the problems of social exclusion for young people are thrown into sharpest relief.

Experiences of youth and early adulthood

Despite sharing very similar socio-economic backgrounds and coming from the same place, young people's experiences during youth and early adulthood differed widely. Events and experiences in childhood (e.g. family bereavement or the separation of parents) or in the early years of secondary school (e.g. a particularly good or bad relationship with a teacher) could have significant effects later on.

The way that young people engaged with or disengaged from formal systems of education and training was crucial to their later experiences in early adulthood. There was a strong relationship between young people becoming involved in regular truancy, being excluded (or excluding themselves) from school, and the likelihood that they would become involved in drug use, delinquency and crime. Such processes did not, however, have a uniform pattern. Key life events and encounters with particular people (e.g. teachers, careers advisers, probation officers) could have a significant effect. Thus early school truancy and delinquency did not *necessarily* predict permanent disengagement from education or the development of a longer-term criminal career (although these were common factors for those who had developed such careers).

Overall, transitions were extraordinarily complex; over time, people moved through many, fast-changing positions in relation to training, education and work. The post-school 'careers' that young people followed were unpredictable, insecure and largely lacking in regular employment. Although the majority saw 'getting a proper job' as a key aspect of adult status and of social inclusion – and shared conventional aspirations ("nice job, nice house, a family") - only a minority had been able to secure a long-term or rewarding job in this high unemployment area. Young people's active choices and decision-making were constrained by the limitations of living in a socially excluded neighbourhood.

Their accounts showed how there is much more to becoming an adult than simply getting a job after school. Young people's changing housing situations and family experiences – for instance, becoming homeless or the separation of parents – could have a dramatic impact on what they did after school.

The influence of the local area

The local area was a key influence on young people's experiences. Interviewees' opportunities and frames of reference were highly localised. The viability of a job, college course, training placement or health service provision was largely dependent on its physical proximity to the neighbourhood. Friends and leisure activities were also highly localised. Young people from Willowdene faced problems and stigma as a consequence of its negative labelling (e.g. failing to get job interviews because of their postal address, criminal victimisation, low levels of recreational and service provision). Nevertheless, they remained positive about living in Willowdene and most wished to carry on living there in the future.

This is perhaps surprising given the hardships they encountered but can be understood in terms of the value they placed upon their local networks and knowledge. 'Localism' brought advantages as well as disadvantages. Their friends, families and partners lived in Willowdene. Some had established their own families and were sending their children to local schools. They felt connected to the place and felt that if they moved to another town or city they would lose the local networks they had learned to rely upon for socialising and support, in searching for 'proper jobs', decent training schemes and suitable housing, and in coping with crime.

Thus, whilst Willowdene possesses all of the official, objective indicators of social exclusion, the subjective experiences of many young people growing up in the place – certainly those who are party to local knowledge and able to navigate local networks – are of 'social inclusion'.

Work, jobs and training

The *absence* of employment was a key feature of young people's lives. That is not to say that *work* was absent from their lives or that they displayed a 'culture of welfare dependency'. Many worked

outside the formal labour market: caring for children in the home; in more informal, sometimes (but not always) illicit economic activities; on Youth Training Schemes, New Deal Programmes or local community projects; or sometimes in criminal enterprises.

In many cases, interviewees had been ineligible for benefits (because they were under 18) or were morally opposed to claiming. Even in this area of high long-term unemployment, there was a general resistance to living a life on benefits. Some did manage to secure regular employment but, typically, this was after repeated spells of unemployment. Those jobs that do exist are often part-time, short-term, low-paid and of poor quality. Whilst some interviewees recounted their negative experiences of such jobs, none could identify any positive aspects to being out of work.

This general commitment to work tended to be found in young people's attitudes to training schemes as well. Again, there were criticisms of the problems encountered on particular schemes, and some were willing to acknowledge that they had not committed themselves properly to the training provided. Overall, however, informants talked about Youth Training or New Deal programmes as another chance to improve qualifications and to lift themselves out of their current, limited circumstances.

Crime and drugs

There were high levels of drug use amongst the sample and relatively high levels of criminality. Whilst there is no simple relationship between local patterns of drug use and local patterns of crime, the influx of heroin into Willowdene in the mid-1990s had an enormous impact upon the local economy of crime and upon the individual lives of young people. A common theme in all the interviews was how, as a consequence of heroin, the community had declined in terms of its safety and cohesion, changing from a "respectable place" to one "wrecked by drugs" (as one interviewee put it).

Though a significant number used or had used drugs, most drew a distinction between recreational use and the heroin dependency of the 'smack head' - even if these distinctions often broke down in practice in the course of individual long-term drug use. Willowdene was the source of the cheapest heroin in Teesside (itself said to have the cheapest heroin in the UK). This fuelled local demand and increased the number of local suppliers. The influx of heroin gave rise to a quantitative increase in acquisitive crime and stimulated greater levels of violence (e.g. street robberies committed for 'fast money' to feed heroin habits, 'turf wars' between rival dealers, violent retribution for burglary).

Some young people had been using drugs for a long time (typically starting at 13 with glue sniffing and/or habitual/ heavy drinking moving on to cannabis, amphetamine, and in some cases heroin,

and very occasionally to crack-cocaine) and some displayed clearly defined, long-term 'criminal careers'. Sometimes – but not always – criminal careers and drug use were interconnected. The precise relationship of criminality to the type of drug use (i.e. whether organised around alcohol/ cannabis or heroin) may be crucial to whether young people get involved in crime or in further drug use. Those who established criminal careers tended to cease schooling at age 12 or 13 years following a period of truancy. Further engagement with education, training or employment was unlikely. Offending typically progressed through shoplifting, car crime, street robbery, and domestic burglary to commercial burglary. Such young people often talked of their crime as *work* – "I was a thief, that's my occupation" – and described the social contacts and status it brought, its financial rewards and its routines in much the same way as others described the value of employment.

Again, individuals' movements into and out of drug use and criminal activity were complex, varied and often dependent upon other experiences. Changes in family, housing or work circumstances could precipitate criminality or facilitate desisting from crime and drug use. In particular, new opportunities to engage constructively with training, education or employment (which were sometimes inspired by contact with community-based regeneration projects) and/or the formation of new personal relationships (partnerships and parenthood) helped young people move away from crime and drug use.

Implications for policy

Although the study raises important questions for a wide range of policy areas, this section concentrates upon the Government's main, current youth policy development, the Connexions Service and Strategy. This recognises the complex and long-term nature of youth transitions and aims to provide "a ladder out of social exclusion" for youth by "breaking the cycle of non-participation and underachievement" (*Connexions: The best start in life for every young person*, DfEE, London, 2000:14).

The Connexions Strategy proposes a national, universal and holistic support service for 13- to 19-year-olds delivered through a network of Personal Advisors who are to ensure that young people engage with learning and have their diverse needs met through partnerships with the range of specialist agencies. This research confirms the need for careful, co-ordinated, well-resourced and long-term provision for young people. It does, however, raise some issues for how the strategy might work in practice.

- The Connexions service intends that regional partnerships of key agencies will be responsible for 'tracking' young people over their teenage years.

This study shows that individual experience is complicated, often unpredictable and plays out over an extended period.

- In providing much needed support to young people at crucial points in their lives (e.g. at times of family crisis), Personal Advisors will need to possess a detailed and sensitive understanding of the young people under their care. In providing such support they will need to draw upon a wide range of partner agencies in the statutory and voluntary sector and, at times, may feel it necessary to act as advocates for young people when they face difficulties (e.g. infringement of benefit regulations through 'cash-in-hand' work). This may not sit comfortably with the legal and formal demands of some partners (such as the police, social services and employment services).

- Some of the young people in this study had, from the age of 12, virtually no contact with formal agencies outside of locally-based peer networks (that is, until they eventually collided with the police and criminal justice system). Reaching such young people, winning their trust and developing productive, long-term relationships with them is likely to demand patience, resources and considerable skill. The philosophy and method of detached youth work may prove the most effective approach.

- A longer period of support service might be justified. Some young people are likely to have had experiences prior to 13 that define the context within which they make decisions and perceive formal agencies and structures. Similarly, a complete transfer of responsibilities from Connexions to the New Deal programme beyond 19 may disrupt the ongoing support that will be necessary for some people.

- Whilst Connexions pledges to ensure locally relevant qualifications and training, this may be largely irrelevant in areas with a chronic lack of decent employment opportunities of any sort for young people.

- Finally, the research suggests that youth policy faces a paradox. Though Willowdene is one of the most structurally deprived localities in Britain, its young residents do not all experience or respond to the problems of social exclusion in the same way. If youth policy is to be effective it needs a clear, sociological understanding of the local conditions and cultures that generate the different ways in which young people get by in socially excluded areas.

About the study

The research was carried out by a team from the University of Teesside. A sample of 98 young people - 61 men and 37 women aged 15 to 25 - took part in qualitative interviews which focused upon their lives to date – particularly their experiences of education, housing, family, work, crime, drug use and their locality – as well as their hopes for the future. The sample was selected purposefully to represent a range of experiences. Virtually all were ethnically white and from working-class backgrounds (reflecting the nature of the local population).

How to get further information