Social exclusion and young people in rural Scotland

The extent and nature of social exclusion among young people living in rural areas is an under-researched topic. Stephen Pavis, Stephen Platt and Gill Hubbard of Edinburgh University have explored how young people moved from childhood to adulthood in two contrasting Scottish rural towns and their surrounding areas. Using in-depth interviews, a postal questionnaire and official statistics, the study aimed to reach a representative sample of 18- to 25-year-olds:

- Despite some differences between the dominant employment sectors in the two study areas, young people faced similar problems in each.

- However, the experiences of those who had completed higher education (degrees and HNDs), those who had attended higher education but left before course completion, and those who had not attended higher education varied markedly.

- Young people who did not attend higher education tended to obtain local employment relatively easily. However, most work was poorly paid and offered limited opportunities for skill/career development or any intrinsic satisfaction.

- Living in the parental home often disguised young people's personal poverty. Parents commonly received only nominal 'digs money' and provided subsidised accommodation and food.

- Informal networks were key to securing work and private rented housing within relatively tight-knit communities. A 'bad' reputation related to personal difficulties (eg having learning or mental health difficulties or experiencing drug problems) could make securing work almost impossible.

- Limited public transport was a major issue for young people in both areas. Commonly, young families had one car which the husband took to work. This often left women and young children isolated and without transport throughout the day.

- Young people setting up their own home often perceived there to be no real alternative to private rented accommodation. Owner-occupation was too expensive and they were not classed as a high enough priority to be allocated limited public sector housing. However, much of the private rented sector accommodation available to them was substandard, in need of modernisation and isolated.

- The researchers conclude that simply having a job did not itself prevent social exclusion. Some people in low paid, low quality employment felt undervalued and marginalised within their community.

Background

The study explored the experiences of young people (aged 18-25 years) from two rural areas as they moved from childhood to adulthood. The focus was how they made the change from school to work, training or further education, to independent housing and the formation of relationships and new families. The research took place in and around Duns in Borders region and Callander in Stirling region of Scotland.

Different areas but similar experiences

While the study areas differed in how easy it was to get to urban areas and in the types of jobs available locally, they were similar in terms of population size, age profile and household composition. The experiences of young people across the two areas were also fairly similar. Educational experience and achievement, gender, and general issues surrounding rural life were more relevant to an understanding of life experiences and life circumstances than specific geographic location.

However, experiences varied markedly between: those who had *completed higher education* (degrees and HNDs); those who had *attended higher education but left before completing the course*; and those who had *not attended higher education.*

The lack of diversity within the labour markets

Callander is heavily reliant upon service sector employment, primarily within the tourist industry, while in Duns the largest employers are light manufacturers and food processors. However, both study areas suffered from a lack of diversity in the terms of skill gradient within their labour markets. Young people did not join the labour market in entry level jobs and then progress to better quality work as they matured and became more skilled. Rather, most gained employment relatively easily but undertook tasks which could be learned quickly, lacked intrinsic satisfaction and were poorly paid.

> "Oh, it's just, if you can imagine a jumper, it's sewing these bits together. Sewing the arms on, all day, every day. ...Oh, it's just boredom, total boredom." (Jenny)

The young people said that such employment was acceptable in some circumstances (ie when living in the parental home prior to setting up an independent household, or as summer work while studying), but was inadequate in the longer term. Graduates had little choice but to seek work in other parts of the country.

Setting up home and getting work

Young people from both study areas had to relocate in order to attend higher education. For many, starting in higher education therefore coincided with setting up their first home. On graduation, many returned to their rural home for a short period before once again moving (normally to an urban area). The main reason given for returning was to live cheaply with parents whilst paying off student debt.

Graduates mainly looked for jobs in the national, rather than local, labour markets. These young people reported an increasing social distance between themselves and those who had not attended university. This reflected a combination of emotional and psychological separation prior to attending university and exposure to different ideas and ways of life once there.

Young people who did not attend higher education tended to live with their parents to an older age. The majority were employed; the average monthly net incomes of young people receiving wages were £576 in Callander and £536 in Duns. Parents commonly received only nominal 'digs money' and provided subsidised accommodation and food, for both graduates and non-graduates.

For young people who had not attended higher education, marriage/cohabitation and pregnancy

Table 1: **Level of educational achievement among interview respondents**

	Duns	Callander
HND or Degree	3	9
Left higher education before graduating	4	5
Never attended higher education	16	9
Current full-time student	7	7
Total	30	30

were the main reasons for setting up their own home. However, with rising house prices and reduced public sector housing provision (due to 'right to buy' policies), young people with low incomes could often only get private rented sector accommodation. Much of this was located on outlying farms and estates and was of low quality; some lacked mains water and gas, much was reliant on solid fuel heating.

For most respondents, the tight-knit nature of their communities meant that social networks were a key way of getting both work and private rented housing. However, for a small minority a 'bad' reputation made finding employment or housing difficult, if not impossible. 'Bad' reputations could result from personal difficulties (for example, experiencing learning or mental health difficulties) or past behaviour (for example, illicit drug use or involvement in criminal activity).

"… half the time I feel like just pack the bags and just leave. But you just can't do that, but what's interesting in my life now- nothing. I can't do anything, can't work, there's nothing, the only thing I can do is walk about, sleep, walk about, sleep, walk about… I like to do things but there's nothing round here… it's just four walls, Sky TV and that's it or walk about." (Mathew).

A sizeable sub-group of the young people who took part in the study had attended higher education but left before completing the course. The most often cited reasons for 'dropping out' were financial difficulties, wrong choice of course and engaging in too much partying and not enough work. Like graduates, young people commonly returned to their parental home but saw this as a stop-gap situation. Most found employment easily, using local networks, and had begun clearing student debt. However, they often expressed frustration at the quality of available work and searched in the national labour market for more rewarding employment. Some were attempting to pursue career interests by starting at the bottom and working their way up, while others planned to return to higher education.

"…well, if I was stuck in Duns, then I would regret it but, I don't know, I just can't wait to escape, so it's just like another period for me… yeah, it's not like that was my one shot at escaping, you know what I mean? It's like, it was a good time and all, but leaving Duns'd be better." (Joe)

Transport issues

Poor public transport was an issue for most young people, although the problems were more acute in Duns than in Callander due to the poorer road infrastructure. In both areas, employers were not located in a convenient central location but were scattered around outlying areas. Often, owning a car and driving were seen as prerequisites to being able to get to work. It was relatively common for parents to help their children with the costs of buying and running a car. But even when families owned a car, limited public transport remained an issue. It was not uncommon for one partner (most often the husband) to take the car to work, leaving the other partner (and young children) effectively stranded until his return at the end of the working day. This situation led some young people (primarily mothers with young children) to become geographically and socially isolated.

"I'm stuck in all day and then my husband comes home from work with the car an' like he's tired, he's had a hard day at work, so either my mum comes from Berwick or, em, I don't get out 'till weekends [laughter]. Like being stuck in prison, get out on day release." (Jane)

Conclusion

The study demonstrates the complex inter-relationships between employment, housing and family matters during youth. It also highlights the key role of education and how life circumstances and opportunities diverge during the late teenage years. The young people's accounts indicate that simply getting a job is not enough to avoid social exclusion. The lack of diversity within the local labour markets was a major issue for young people. Graduates and those who had previously attended higher education responded by seeking work nationally. Those who remained found themselves trapped in poorly paid low quality employment. Their low incomes excluded them from owner-occupation and they were not deemed a high enough priority for the limited public sector housing provision. The combination of living

in isolated areas, poor public transport and lack of affordable childcare resulted in social isolation for some young mothers, even though their partners were employed.

About the study

The study was undertaken by Stephen Pavis, Stephen Platt and Gill Hubbard of the Research Unit in Health and Behavioural Change at the University of Edinburgh. Three main methods were used: analysis of published statistics (census and local government); in-depth interviews with 30 randomly selected young people in each area; questionnaires involving 187 young people in the areas. General Practitioners' patient lists and old school registers were used to contact young people. On the basis of the available (limited) information both (interview and questionnaire) samples were representative of the larger population of 18- to 25-year-olds. The quotations are taken verbatim from the in-depth interviews but names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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