









## The needs of excluded young people in multi-cultural communities

The Government is phasing in a new support service for young people which is intended to be universal for all 13- to 19-year-olds, but targeted at those most at risk of social exclusion. A joint research team from the Universities of Hull and York and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion has interviewed some of the most disaffected African, African-Caribbean, South Asian and European young people about their life experiences. The main findings of its study are:

-  There are significant numbers of 16- to 17-year-olds disengaged from education, employment and training.
-  Many are unknown to the Careers Service and a disproportionate number of these are from minority ethnic groups.
-  'Looked after' young people were greatly over-represented in the sample as a whole.
-  Nearly half the sample had been excluded from school and many had begun to drop out of education of their own accord at an early age.
-  Disengagement from school often coincided with incidents at home, including abuse, bereavement, threats of arranged marriages and other traumatic events which appeared to have gone unnoticed by schools or professional workers.
-  Minority ethnic young people had often experienced racism in school and, among those 'looked after', in care. Agencies appeared to have been unable to respond adequately to racial diversity.
-  Local voluntary sector agencies were often the only agencies in contact with these young people and their help was greatly appreciated. This was particularly true of those from minority ethnic groups.
-  Some disaffected young people resented and resisted professional intrusion in their lives. However, support from other, significant adults was sometimes a route out of their current situation.

## Background

One of the first major social policy initiatives of the Labour government elected in 1997 was to establish the Social Exclusion Unit. Much of the policy output of this unit has concerned the position of various groups of disaffected or disadvantaged young people including 16- to 17-year-olds not in education, employment or training. One major outcome of this attention has been the creation of the Connexions Service – a national network of personal advisors for 13- to 19-year-olds – to be delivered through local partnerships. The first 13 pilot schemes began in 2001 and the service is being rolled out nationally from 2002 onwards. Connexions is intended to be both a comprehensive service for all young people but also to be targeted at those young people most at risk of social exclusion. One of the major challenges for Connexions is in identifying, making contact with, and securing a good working relationship with vulnerable groups of young people.

The research consisted of secondary data analysis, and in-depth interviews with two groups of disaffected young people about their experiences and perceptions and their routes into and out of social exclusion. Interviews concentrated on three significant areas: education and family life pre-16; the transitions following compulsory education; and the impact of being 'looked after' (previously known as being 'in care').

## Education and family life

In the first interviews, young people were asked about their experiences of schooling and family life. Various forms of educational disaffection were widespread. Most of the sample had regularly played truant from school to avoid lessons, teachers or bullying and some had been absent for lengthy periods of time (measured in months). Some schools and parents had appeared to tolerate this. Nearly half of the sample had also been subject to exclusion from school of some kind, including permanent exclusion. According to respondents, many exclusions were for fairly trivial offences (sometimes truancy). Others were excluded for fighting although some reported that they had been racially victimised at school. Only a quarter of the 64 interviewed had achieved any formal educational qualifications. Most thought they could have done better at school and regretted wasting opportunities.

Young people rarely made the connection between their disaffection from school and the traumas or disruptions that were happening at home. Yet the two often seemed to coincide. The home lives of many in the sample were turbulent and unstable, characterised by violence, disrupted and sometimes abusive family relationships, illness and bereavement. Educational professionals did not seem to make any attempt to link home and school problems. As a result, the causes of educational disaffection were often inadequately explored or understood by professionals.

The Careers Service was not generally seen as particularly helpful. It was seen as having a narrow remit – mainly concerned with courses and training (and after school-leaving, necessary for accessing benefits) – rather than being a broadly-based agency which might address the whole range of needs of these young people as its successor, the new Connexions Service, aims to do.

## Routes into, and out of, disengagement

Previous research indicates that the reasons for not being in education, employment and training at the ages of 16 and 17 are complex and varied. Many more young people begin – but then drop out of – training, college courses and employment, than simply leave school and do nothing.

Some of those interviewed had left school and had not had a single job, or done any courses or any training. This group were also the most likely to be living in stable home circumstances, often with both, white, biological parents. Often they were receiving very significant financial support from other family members. Their life-style had developed in a way that could make it very difficult for them to adjust to the time-clock of a normal working day. Where they were in touch with a formal agency, it was more likely to be located in the community nearby and run by the voluntary sector.

There were profound gender differences within the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in 'Northend' (a large northern city). Asian young men told of tolerance, indulgence and support from their families even when they were out of school or unemployed. Two said they had become reconnected to Islam, one after despairing about how his peer

group was failing – unemployed and involved in crime – the other as a result of contact with a Muslim youth worker. Many of the young Asian women told of turmoil surrounding either attempted or actual arranged marriages and pressure from parents. Several escaped from home to try and avoid this. One young woman had run away from home to try to continue with a college course but was forced to return when she failed to get financial support from the college. Her father made her give up her course. Several others reported violence within the family because of tensions over arranged marriages.

Seven of the young women interviewed had become pregnant at around the age of 17 or 18. Most described parenting as ‘fundamentally changing their lives’ but approached this in a positive and forward-looking way. As a result of becoming a mother, some had become more determined than before to balance responsibilities for their baby with their desire to pursue education, employment and training for themselves. These attitudes and behaviour, and that of at least some of their young male partners, challenge widespread political and media stereotypes which typically view teenage pregnancy in a negative light.

Access to an adequate income was problematic for many in the sample. Difficulties with official (benefits) agencies meant that many survived by borrowing and sometimes by stealing and other crime. A few had tried to obtain an Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA - the pilots for which were being carried out in both fieldwork sites) in order to stay on in education. But only three out of eight had actually managed to obtain an EMA. Some respondents relied upon the informal economy. One had become a successful DJ. Others were involved in various ‘scams’ and two were in prison by the time of the second interviews.

For some the psychological damage they had suffered as children (sometimes because of violence, abuse or rejection) made them ill-equipped to survive the knocks and set-backs they met when trying to take on a course, a job or survive in a new home. Some had support from families, surrogate families or partners who cushioned financial and housing difficulties. But this was more likely to be support from an adult they had met by accident rather than from a professional worker to whom they had been allocated.

## The experience of care

A high proportion of the respondents – more than a quarter – had been ‘looked after’ at some time. In statistical terms these respondents, many of whom were of minority ethnic origin, confirmed more general pictures of the experiences of care leavers – poor education leading to a lack of qualifications, homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, poverty and involvement in crime and the criminal justice system. Their stories also illustrated the unsettled and unsettling careers of young people in official care, with frequent moves, insecurity, and feelings of chaos and a lack of control over their futures. Although many reported bad experiences of contact with professionals and agencies, some, particularly respondents from black and minority ethnic groups, had clearly felt supported by key individuals – members of their peer group, some teachers or carers – at critical points in their lives. Some reported racism and, in one case, homophobia. Yet a number of care leavers were showing great tenacity in making significant progress in their lives, despite very difficult circumstances. Some were critical of a lack of support and, even more importantly, a culture of low expectations.

## Conclusion

At a time when the Connexions Service is being refined and rolled-out nationally, this research indicates that major challenges might still need to be acknowledged and met. The research suggests that the young people most vulnerable and at risk may be either missed, ignored or misunderstood for several reasons:

- Significant numbers of the young people covered by this research were unknown to, and unregistered with, official agencies (such as the Careers Service).
- The special problems faced by minority ethnic groups are often being ignored. One Careers Service covered by this research still thought not being in education, employment and training was "a largely white, working class, male problem". Yet, in the same area, significant numbers of minority ethnic young people were not on their books. Confronting and addressing racism in all its forms wherever it is found – in schools,

statutory agencies or within the care system –would appear to be vitally important.

- Where young people do have some contact with the Careers Service, this may be very limited because of a mismatch of expectations. Many young people want jobs; however, mostly what was on offer was advice about training and college courses.
- Where agencies had tried to work with young people, professional help was often met by a mixture of suspicion, scepticism or hostility.
- Many of the causes of disaffection and disengagement have deep roots and often seem to be overlooked.

This research found just how difficult it was to make and keep contact with the most disaffected over even a relatively short period of time. For Connexions to do so for longer timescales may require a major cultural shift from the approaches and working methods of the old careers services. This is likely to include a much stronger role for community and voluntary organisations and the use of outreach and detached workers.

### About the project

The research was conducted by a joint research team from the Universities of Hull and York and the London-based Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. It involved secondary data analysis of large data sets as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with two small samples of disaffected young people, one group living in a group of London boroughs (called Southside in the report), and the other in a large northern city (called Northend). The qualitative research explored the career dynamics of 64 young people, who were all interviewed in depth at least once. Half of the sample was re-interviewed at a later stage. The sample was equally split between young men and women but it was selected to significantly over-represent young people from minority ethnic groups, with two-thirds coming from such a background.

### How to get further information

This *Findings* was written by Gary Craig and Bob Coles.

The full report, **Missing Connexions: The career dynamics and welfare needs of black and minority ethnic young people at the margins** by Liz Britton, Balbir Chatrik, Bob Coles, Gary Craig, Carl Hylton and Saira Mumtaz with Paul Bivand, Roger Burrows and Paul Convery, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 382 5, price £13.95).