

# Missing Connections

**The career dynamics and welfare needs of black and minority ethnic young people at the margins**

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**Research note:** The research participants were given an absolute guarantee of their confidentiality. For this reason, the two fieldwork sites are simply referred to as 'Northend' and 'Southside' throughout the course of this report, and respondents have been allocated a false name of their choice.

# Young people at the margins: the policy context

This report is about a group of young people (mainly 16 and 17 years old when first contacted by the research team), many of whom are at the margins of mainstream society. The aim of the study was to explore in an holistic way, and through the accounts of the young people themselves, their ‘career dynamics and welfare needs’ as they made the transition out of full-time education into potential labour market status. Whether the young people put themselves at the margins, or were put there as a result of what the incoming New Labour government called the processes of social exclusion (SEU, 1997), is one of the central issues addressed in this report. It also addresses ways in which they can be – if they want to be – helped back into the mainstream.

Although it is not directly addressed in this report, it is crucial to note the context in which processes of marginalisation occur. The majority of young people in the UK now have ‘extended transitions’, involving some form of post-16 education or training and longer periods of family dependency (Coles, 2000a). This is, at least partly, the result of changes in ‘a range of policies affecting different areas of young people’s lives’ (Jones and Bell, 2000). In this sense, the young people studied in this report are atypical. Although some of them have been in some form of post-16 education and training or have had a job, they have also spent some time without participating in any courses, training or employment.

What is not in doubt is that there are substantial numbers of young people who are not engaged with mainstream activities – education, employment and training (hence the government acronym, NEET, for this group: in other words, Not in Employment, Education or Training). There remains considerable debate about the

numbers of those who are NEET, a debate to which this report provides a further, challenging contribution. What is also not in doubt is that this group, characterised by a wide range of aspects of deprivation, is one that has been a cause of growing concern for some time to those making policy or delivering services, although policy prescriptions have varied from big sticks to at least mildly tasty carrots. In this report we focus also on policy responses and explore some of the issues facing organisations that seek to support young people on the margins of ‘mainstream’ society. In this chapter we outline the way in which political concern has been expressed over the past 15 years, and the present policy context within which government in particular seeks to address their needs.

## The early 1990s

The position of potentially marginal young people first began to be discussed politically in the late 1980s. At that time, research, particularly in South Wales, identified the phenomenon of significant numbers of young people who were leaving school (at or before school-leaving age of 16) and not engaging with continuing education, finding sustainable jobs or becoming involved in training (Istance et al, 1994; Istance and Williamson, 1996; Armstrong, 1997; Williamson, 1997). This early research coined the phrase ‘status zero’ for those not in the identifiable statuses of education, employment or training. Margaret Thatcher’s 1987 government used a twin-track policy as its main instrument for re-engaging these young people, involving new youth training schemes linked to the withdrawal of the automatic right to benefit for 16- and 17-year-olds. However, this appeared to have had

only a marginal effect. The position of young people with limited skills or financial resources was made more precarious by unfavourable housing and labour market conditions, and by the introduction of the 'poll tax'. Growing political and public awareness developed that significant numbers of young people were 'disappearing' from official records, in other words, were not known to any of the large numbers of agencies responsible for aspects of their welfare. For example, an innovative study undertaken by the Manchester Careers Service (MCS) in the late 1980s, one of the first careful attempts to track the destinations of a cohort of 16-year-old school-leavers, found that MCS 'lost' a quarter of the cohort within six months of leaving school (Craig, 1991). Analysis of the 1991 Census also revealed that the largest number of those missing from counts were young men under the age of 30 (Craig, 1991).

The withdrawal of the automatic right to social assistance benefits generated considerable anxiety in unofficial and official circles (Craig, 1991, 1998; Social Security Advisory Committee, 1989). Despite often intrusive questioning from social security officials and other barriers to accessing help (MacLagan, 1992), there was a growth in the numbers of young people claiming the social assistance Special Hardship (SH) provision. By the late 1990s the annual number of SH claims was around 150,000, challenging government's view that the scheme should be seen as a marginal arrangement for a few young people slipping through official 'safety nets'. Even this number was thought to be a significant understatement of the total number of those who might be in need of special forms of assistance (Coles and Craig, 1999). Later in the 1990s, the Unemployment Unit and YouthAid 'calculated that only around 15% of unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds received any form of state income (Chatrik and Convery, 1997).

Obstacles to receiving help that were identified in research included lack of knowledge of arrangements for entitlement and claiming benefit, barriers created by the claiming process and the low level of benefit involved. Further work in South Wales and elsewhere (Instance and Williamson, 1996; Coles et al, 1998) suggested that up to 20% of 16- and 17-year-olds were not engaged in education, employment or training. Particular groups within this population were especially at risk. These included: minority ethnic

young people, for whom unemployment rates and poverty levels were substantially higher than for the population as a whole (Shire, 1997; Berthoud, 1999; Craig, 1999); young people leaving – or running away from – care; young women who were either pregnant or single mothers; and those with special needs, such as young people with a disability.

## New Labour's response

The New Labour government<sup>1</sup> rapidly introduced a series of major changes to the policy context within which young people were to be assisted into the mainstream of society. The most high-profile innovation in the area of training was the introduction of the New Deal for Young People (NDYP), one of a series of measures, each of which was targeted at differing population groups, such as people with a disability, lone parents and long-term unemployed people (Chatrik and Convery, 2000; DfEE, 2001). This provided young people aged between 18 and 25 with four alternative routes into full labour market participation: through education and training, direct employment, voluntary sector activities, or work on an environmental task force (Perkins, 2001; Unemployment Unit and Youth Aid, 2001). (There would be, the Chancellor of the Exchequer asserted at the time, no "fifth option" of staying on benefit.) Despite NDYP being the "flagship" of Labour's approach to unemployment, this still left the problems of unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds unaddressed. To be sure, youth training schemes for this age group were transformed and training allowances increased. New Start was relaunched by the Labour government in 1997 and the careers service was refocused in an attempt to meet the needs of young people thought to be particularly at risk (Killeen et al, 1992; Watts et al, 1996; Craig and Kelsey, 2000; Watts, 2001). But Labour in government showed itself no more willing than preceding Conservative governments to consider the reintroduction of entitlement to social assistance benefits for 16- and 17-year-olds. The expected radical reform of services and support for 16- and 17-year-olds who were

<sup>1</sup> Although, as Tony Blair said at the time of the 1997 General Election, "we were elected as New Labour and will govern as New Labour", the term 'Labour' is used throughout this report for simplicity to denote those governments elected in 1997 and 2001.

unemployed and NEET had to wait until the 1999 Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report *Bridging the gap* was published (see below).

Alongside a general acknowledgement of multiple forms of disadvantage – including educational under-achievement, housing disadvantage, poverty and risk of exploitation and abuse – there is also a recognition that some groups are more disadvantaged than others. Those ‘looked after’ by local authorities are widely recognised to be one of the most disadvantaged of all. The size of this group, approximately 75,000 throughout the UK, is relatively small, but this snapshot disguises a much wider level of involvement of young people in some aspect of the official care system, with almost 200,000 children referred each year to local authority social services departments in England and Wales alone. Approximately 100,000 young people also run away either from care or from their own families each year, placing them in an even more vulnerable position (Children’s Society, 1999). General research into marginalised young people, the work of the SEU (see below) and specific investigations into the prospects of young people in care all point to overwhelming levels of disadvantage and, as we shall see, the likelihood of becoming part of the NEET population.

The Utting Report (Utting, 1997) confirmed earlier studies, pointing to low levels of academic achievement, high levels of unemployment, pregnancy among young females, dependency on special hardship provisions, likelihood of admission into prison, and homelessness, among those who have been in care. A ministerial taskforce response to the Utting Report led to new funding streams and development work for local authority care provision under the Quality Protects programme. This makes patterns of local provision subject to a national care standards monitoring regime, and sets performance targets for local authorities, including reductions in the proportion of children in care with multiple placements, and improvements in educational attainment (DoH, 1999a). A consultative paper, *Me, survive, out there?* (DoH, 1999b) was particularly relevant to the plight of care-leavers. This was followed by the 2000 Children (Leaving Care) Act (implemented in October 2001), which fundamentally changed arrangements for care-leavers. Issues concerning young care-leavers are covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

One of the major policy instruments of the Labour government in relation to general issues of poverty and deprivation was the creation of the SEU in 1997. Given that the position of young people had not been the subject of much significant political debate – and, even where there had been political pressure, little policy change – during the early 1990s, it was surprising to many that much of the SEU’s early work focused on aspects of the welfare of young people (Coles, 2000b). However, the SEU reports have acted to focus attention on this group very effectively, and have led to a series of analyses of the (complex) routes into disadvantage for young people, their spatial concentration, and appropriate policy responses (Bentley and Gurumurthy, 1999; Bentley et al, 1999; Prince’s Trust, 2000).

Several SEU reports are of importance to the research reported here. During its first three years, the SEU produced reports on:

- Truancy and school exclusions (SEU, 1998a) (Both truancy and school exclusions disproportionately affected certain groups of young people, particularly males of African Caribbean origin and children in care)
- Rough sleepers (SEU, 1998b)
- Deprived neighbourhoods (SEU, 1998c) (This spawned 18 Policy Action Teams (PATs); one of these, PAT12, (SEU, 2000) made an extensive review of youth policy, see page 5)
- Teenage pregnancy (SEU, 1999a)
- Young people who were NEET (SEU, 1999b)

This last report, *Bridging the gap*, provided a long-term agenda for change in a number of policy areas, the most significant one being the establishment of a new youth support service, called ConneXions, described below. The SEU analysis identified some familiar issues. Only about 20% of those identified as falling within the NEET category became so immediately on leaving school, with substantial numbers ‘dropping out’ either from training or, more substantially, from employment or further education. Young people who became NEET often did so on an intermittent basis, moving in and out of engagement over a period of years.

The SEU also concluded that non-participation at age 16 was the single most powerful predictor of later unemployment, a finding that underlined the importance of acting early to re-engage this

group. This linked with findings relating to the early exclusion or truancy of certain groups of young people from school. Those who truanted persistently or were excluded from school (either permanently or on a fixed-term basis) were much more likely to be disengaged after minimum school age. For young women, more than two thirds who experienced non-participation of six months or more had at least one child by the age of 21, with more than a third having two children or more at a significantly earlier age, findings that underpinned some of the analysis within the SEU's report on teenage pregnancy. Excluded young people were again found to be concentrated in areas of substantial unemployment and deprivation. Young people from minority communities particularly prone to poverty – those from African Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities – were over-represented in the NEET category.

Debate continued to focus also on the size of the NEET group. In preparing *Bridging the gap*, the SEU commissioned a special analysis of the Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) and a review of the statistical evidence on the number of people covered by the NEET category (see Appendix C). This review (Payne, 1999) suggested a figure of about 140,000, broadly in line with an earlier Education Select Committee review of the evidence (House of Commons, 1998). However, the YCS methodology, a longitudinal study of a cohort of young people, includes a questionnaire survey of young people at age 18. At this point in the survey only around 40% of the initial sample responded, and it is not unreasonable to suspect, in light of all the research evidence referred to earlier, that those who are disengaged are heavily over-represented within the non-participants. Some young people in special schools, including those with moderate to severe social, emotional and learning difficulties, are not included within the original sampling frame. Yet they are known, from other evidence submitted to the SEU report, to be over-represented among the NEET group, together with young carers, those 'looked after' by local authorities, and those with a disability or mental health difficulties.

There are, therefore, questions about the extent to which these official counts continue significantly to under-estimate the size of the NEET population, an issue that is acknowledged in the Select Committee report. The most recent estimate published by the Department for

Education and Employment (Copeman, 2001) suggests a slightly higher level than previous official counts; the figure for 1999 was estimated by Copeman to be around 157,000. The issue of the numbers of those young people who are NEET is discussed in Chapter 5 and Appendices B and C, where we suggest that the present number of those NEET may be in excess of 217,000.

## The ConneXions Service

It has been recognised for some time that careers guidance and advice comes into school "too little and too late" for many young people, and that much of its work is ineffective in preventing many young people 'dropping out' of engagement with education, employment or training (Tan, 1997; Watts et al, 1996; Watts, 2001). The SEU report also noted that careers work tended to be poorly funded, not well integrated into other mainstream provision, and built around inappropriate outcome measures. It proposed, in line with wider government objectives of 'joined-up government', the creation of a new service (ConneXions), intended to build on the best practice of all those organisations – youth service, statutory and voluntary sectors, careers and other agencies – working with detached or disengaged young people. ConneXions is intended to provide "advice, guidance, support and personal development, differentiated according to need, to help them overcome barriers to participation in learning and work, and help them achieve a successful transition from their teenage years into adult life" (CYPU, 2001). The new service is intended to be a wide-ranging one for all young people, delivered not only through schools and further education colleges, but by training providers and employers, youth offending teams (established under criminal justice legislation), local authority social services departments and community and voluntary sector projects.

A further structural change, aimed at assisting inter-agency working and creating a level playing field in terms of funding post-16 training provision, was the replacement in April 2001 of local Training and Enterprise Councils by Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). These have a remit to coordinate and deliver all post-16 education and training (other than higher education) through Local Learning Partnerships. LSCs are intended to coordinate local action to raise standards, identify



and address gaps in provisions, eliminate duplication and ensure that education and training meet local needs. Of particular relevance to this study also (see Appendix B), the 2000 Race Relations Amendment Act placed a statutory duty on public authorities to promote race equality in carrying out their functions, to avoid race discrimination before it arises.

Although the new ConneXions Service is intended to be comprehensive (DfEE, 2000), it is also supposed to give priority attention to the most vulnerable young people, in other words, those in the NEET category. The ConneXions approach is expected to be linked to much better systems of mapping and tracking young people (Craig et al, 1999; Green et al, 2001), felt to be necessary to enable all young people (and especially those vulnerable and at risk) to be identified, to be engaged at an early age, and to take an active part in career planning and have their progress monitored. Such a system would also, it was argued, begin to address the problems with data (where most data collected on young people tended to be static and short term), enabling it to be replaced with a system centrally dependent on the work of personal advisers, to one of whom each young person would be attached between the ages of 13 and 19. Personal advisers would be the vehicle through which young people would obtain advice, guidance, support and help with their personal development. Other related provisions are to include the introduction of a Youth ('swipe') Card (now branded as a ConneXions Card), which, it is hoped, will help young people access free public transport and discounts in some youth consumer markets. The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) has also been introduced in some parts of the country to give financial assistance to some 16- and 17-year-olds wishing to stay on at school when they might otherwise be unable to do so.

Both these later provisions have been tested in a number of areas (the EMA scheme in parts of our fieldwork sites) during the course of this study, and the ConneXions Service itself has begun to be piloted in 13 areas across England through multi-agency partnerships involving many of the key local agencies. Early comment on the work of these pilots (ConneXions, 2001) suggests that a number of important issues are beginning to be explored, albeit unevenly. These include: the need to recruit personal advisers from a wide range of backgrounds; testing ways to ensure the

involvement of and consultation with young people in shaping the local service; improving the local database by effective mapping techniques; and exploring a range of approaches for reaching young people. To achieve the latter, the ConneXions pilots are experimenting with one-stop shops, outreach services, detailed engagement with local schools and colleges, and special training for advisers. A national ConneXions call centre was introduced in 2001, and ConneXions work will be extended to all parts of England and Wales by 2004.

## Making better connections?

The government regards its ConneXions Strategy as crucially important to its new approach to improving support for young people. But, following the PAT12 report (SEU, 2000), the government also intends to coordinate youth policy development at a national level and to provide a lead in 'joined-up' policy and practice. To aid this, it has established a cross-ministerial committee on young people, chaired by the Chancellor, and supported by a new Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU). The Unit is also responsible for a £380 million Children's Fund to support "preventive services for children and supporting innovative local solutions involving partnerships between the voluntary, community and statutory sectors" (CYPU, 2001).

The research contained within this report will describe many of the challenges to be faced. The ConneXions Service, the CYPU and the coordination of youth policy in government are all new and ambitious developments. But to be effective in meeting their aims, they must deal with the complex everyday realities of young people's lives, especially those suffering from multiple disadvantages, and must recognise the widely differing needs and aspirations of young people. It is for this reason that we see this research as both timely and critically important to the implementation of the new policy agenda.

## The study

This study is based on four elements:

1. a literature review;
2. interviews with representatives of key agencies working with young people (such as Careers Services) and analysis of their administrative data;
3. secondary data analysis from large data sets (see Appendix C); and
4. qualitative interviews with 64 young people.

The main form of primary data collection consisted of two sets of in-depth interviews with 64 young people in two fieldwork sites. The locations for the research were chosen particularly to ensure that the study focused on the experiences of young people who were NEET in multi-ethnic communities in England. Half the interviews were conducted in a group of four neighbouring London boroughs (henceforth called ‘Southside’), with the other half undertaken in a northern city (henceforth called ‘Northend’). Appendix A lists the characteristics of the sample in more detail. In summary, of the 32 participants in Southside, 15 were female and 17 male; 21 were from black and minority ethnic communities, the great majority of these being African Caribbean, black British or black African. Of the 32 ‘Northend’ participants, 16 were male, 16 female, 12 were of South Asian origin and 8 of African Caribbean or African Caribbean mixed heritage origins. Thus, of the 64 research participants, 41 were from minority ethnic communities. The vast majority of those interviewed were 16- or 17- at the time of the first interview, with 17-year-olds dominating numerically. A few respondents were 18, and one was 20, at the time of the first interview.

Recruitment of participants was undertaken through two routes. One was through contact with the appropriate Careers Services (either by using the process of writing to targeted young people described below or by physically waiting at the Careers Office, with the Office’s agreement, to recruit young people). The other was through voluntary and community organisations working with our target group of young people. Of the 64 people originally interviewed, half were successfully followed up for interview four to nine months after the first interview.

The main body of this report is based on an analysis of the interview material – young people’s accounts of their own biographies. What must be emphasised is that this is their version of, and reflection on, the events that helped shape their lives. Their teachers, parents, social workers, careers officers and other family members will all have their own (and possibly different) versions, but we report only young people’s views. The researchers were struck by the openness, honesty and maturity with which the participants in this study were able to describe, and reflect on, things that had happened to them – sometimes with obvious pain or with remorse. The testimonies we report are sometimes angry and acrimonious. They are also often self-accusatory – accepting that the main blame for things that went wrong lay with themselves. The researchers and authors do not make judgements about the accuracy of any of this. We merely wish to act as a vehicle through which young people’s voices can be heard.

The next three chapters review the key issues covered in our interviews, loosely grouped around major themes and periods of the young people’s lives. Not all the issues discussed by the young people could be dealt with in detail here, nor can we cover the perspectives of all young people on each of these issues: we plan to discuss other aspects of these young people’s experience elsewhere. We have chosen, in these three chapters, to review those things that seem central to the lives of the majority of those interviewed: education and the experience of schooling; the transition from compulsory education into the period when employment or training would be the norm for those not still in education; and the impact of being in care. In the final chapter, we review major conclusions from this study, and their implications for policy and service delivery, as well as trying to give a more holistic picture of young people’s experiences as recounted to us<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> For details of other publications, please contact either Bob Coles, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, YO10 5DD, or Gary Craig, Department of Comparative and Applied Social Sciences, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX.

# Pre-16: educational disaffection and troubled early lives

In this chapter we examine the educational experience of the sample prior to their reaching minimum school-leaving age. As noted in *Bridging the gap*, disaffection and disengagement between the ages of 16 and 18 are strongly correlated with forms of disaffection before the end of compulsory schooling. The SEU report on truancy and school exclusions (1998a) followed very rapid rises in permanent exclusions from school in the 1990s, during which exclusions rose from less than 3,000 per year to more than 13,000 by the mid-1990s. The SEU report was followed by new Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) circulars to schools and local education authorities (LEAs) in an attempt to reduce exclusions wherever possible and to ensure that those who were excluded still received their entitlement to full-time education. The overriding policy concern was that school exclusion was closely linked with later labour market disadvantage, and with young people's involvement in crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour. The young people in this sample, however, would have completed their schooling before that policy change took effect.

A second major concern of this chapter is with the variety of 'traumas' experienced by the sample, few of whom made the connection in their own minds between things that were happening at home and their behaviour at school. But it is clear from their accounts that the troubles at home or aspects of their general lifestyle were happening at the same time as, and connected to, disaffected behaviour at school. We also comment on their involvement (or lack of involvement) with careers guidance and advice. One of the main aims of the new *ConneXions* Strategy, described earlier, is to broaden careers guidance, especially to vulnerable groups such as

those covered by this research. Where young people are experiencing serious personal problems, it is clear that these need to be addressed before they can concentrate adequately on their educational or employment careers.

## School exclusion

Overall, nearly half of our sample (31 of the 64) reported that they had been subject to exclusion from school of some form. Some reported that they had merely been instructed to stay at home for a couple of days as a 'cooling-off' period following a flashpoint at school. Others had received one or more fixed-term exclusions but were allowed to return at the end of each period, sometimes after their parents had signed a contract of good behaviour. Some were permanently excluded, a few sent to special units such as a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). This would sometimes involve only a few hours contact time per week. There were also several instances of parents being 'encouraged' to withdraw their children under threat that, if they did not, the child would be formally excluded and would have an official record of this.

According to the young people concerned, some incidents of exclusion were for fairly minor offences. Sharon, in the 'Northend' sample was "excluded a few times" for dyeing her hair bright colours. Donna, in 'Southside', was suspended for a day for truancy "which I thought was kinda funny. I was suspended for a day. It was like you're kinda giving me what I want anyway". Sue, in 'Southside', was also suspended and expelled on several occasions:

S: “cos I was making too many, how can I say it, er, noise and everything like that, behaviour, temper wise as well.”

R: [researcher]: “So you were being disruptive?”

S: “Yes! Erm, I was doing graffiti, smoking in the toilets, nicking books, anything really, giving mouth to teachers, swearing at them ... spitting in school....”

R: “Looking back now, it was a couple of years ago, why do you think you were doing that?”

S: “It was for attention I reckon. But now I’ve grown up, I realise that was a bad mistake.”

Exclusion, for Sue, meant several changes of school in the last two years of schooling. Eventually,

“I went to a place, it’s like a school where if people haven’t been to school for two, three year, they take them in and try to learn what they can. That was fine, I enjoyed that.”

All three of these young women were white. Overall, in our sample, there was little evidence of the often-reported over-representation of African Caribbean boys among school exclusions.

Jayne, a black African in ‘Southside’, reported slightly more serious incidents related to racism at school:

R: [Racism?]

J: “Yeah! With my teachers there was actually. My school was full of white people, so other white kids from different schools would come over and try and attack us black people. I just left them with their ignorance.”

Often, exclusion brought with it a serious disruption of education. Neo, a Pakistani young man in ‘Northend’, said:

“When I lived in [another northern city] I went to school and liked it. I then went to Pakistan and we moved here when we came back. I went to [local high school]. I don’t think it’s a good school. I hated it. I got thrown out, about ten times. They didn’t

really have reasons ... I didn’t get on with the teachers. I told them that I felt like they were picking on me, and they started laughing at me, and they chucked me out again. The first time they chucked me out I was in Year 7. The teacher said that me and my mate had spat on her. That’s disgusting, isn’t it? I didn’t do it. She got us kicked out. We were suspended till our parents went in and signed something. I had three months off. I just sat at home and watched my videos. I’d get up about 6 or 7 and my friend would call for me and we’d just hang out for the day.... We need schools though, I miss it now, it’s the best thing that can happen to you, and you’ve got to try hard.”

Simon, a white young man in ‘Northend’, ended up with no qualifications; he told us that the unit to which he was referred did not even send him a letter to say when the examinations were.

“I went to [local high school]. I got kicked out of there and went to a Pupil Referral Unit, and then in my last year I went to another unit. School were all right but I got kicked out, a teacher grabbed me, they were always trying to get me kicked out. I thought this teacher had grabbed me in a funny place so I threw a chair at him. The unit were all right. The second unit were too far for me to go and I couldn’t be bothered with it and only went a few times. I wanted to go back to school but they said that I had to prove I were behaving myself. I were in fairly average classes, but they were moving me down ‘cos of me behaviour, and in them classes the work were really easy for me. I weren’t in classes that I were able to learn from. Everyone has a laugh at school and I was just the one that got into trouble for doing it.”

The largest number of exclusions were reported by those who also experienced a turbulent life being ‘looked after’ in care, confirming the difficulties experienced by such people from other studies (see for example, SEU, 1998a for relevant literature). Jason, a white young man in ‘Southside’, described himself as being in care all of his life. He also had a history of running away, often to the place where his mother lived. He started school at the age of five.

“When I was 6 I got kicked out, for smoking and I didn’t pay attention ... well they didn’t exactly kick me out, they said to my mum that it’s best that I leave now before they do kick me out. I went from there to [another school]. I went there when I was about 7. They didn’t find me another school straight away.”

He was excluded from several other schools before being referred to a special unit.

“When I was in [high school] I kept getting suspended. I was in care in [town], it was too far to get from [there] to school so I ended up not going ’cos it was too far, so they kicked me out ’cos I was truanting all the time. The only one I felt established at was my boarding school. That was the only one I liked. That was when, it’d be ’95. I left there two years ago, I got kicked out of there as well.”

Asked about his school qualifications, he said that his teachers had said he could get a C in english and science and an A in art, at which he was good. But in the event he left school with no qualifications. The main reason Jason was excluded from school was his truancy:

“That was the main reason I got kicked out. I just hated being away from my mum. I used to run away from there [boarding school] and come all the way to London.

## Truancy

Given the known close ties between educational disaffection and dropout post-16, and similar behaviour before then, it is perhaps unsurprising that fairly systematic truancy was the norm among this sample of young people. Only a tiny minority said they did not truant at some stage. Several were simply not going to school by the final years before school-leaving age. The majority of young people had days (usually the same ones) off each week; others were away for weeks and sometimes months at a time. Rather than illustrate this with further detailed examples, it is perhaps more important here to explore the reasons they gave for their truancy, what they did with their time, and some of the longer-term consequences for them.

The reasons participants gave for truancy can be divided into positive reasons for staying away and negative reasons for wanting to miss school. The most common pattern involving positive reasons for staying away concerned doing other things with friends.

### *Out of school with friends*

Josie, a white young woman in ‘Southside’, said:

“I was always bunking school. I did what I could not to go to school. I used to go around my mates’ houses ’cos they were all off school.”

Tariq, a black British young man in ‘Southside’, similarly used to ‘bunk off’ with friends, often intercepting letters or ’phone calls so his parents did not know about it. X-Man, a black Caribbean in ‘Southside’, similarly

“[used] to bunk because ... the reason why I used to bunk, yeah, is because I used to follow friends. We all do that you know, we all say, let’s go bunk today and do some – you get me?”

In ‘Northend’ there also seemed to be other sub-cultural factors at work. For Asian young women, going to school was one of the few times they were legitimately away from parental surveillance, and sometimes they made the most of it by not actually attending school. Sameena explained:

“A lot of Asian girls play truant due to the fact that they are not allowed to go out once they get home.... I think the majority of Asian girls play truant.... We just used to go to town and go shopping – go to MacDonalds, or go to [shopping centre]. We used to go into town when Asian women don’t go into town. They go into town on the days of the fruit market ... we used to go on a day such as Fridays – prayer days.”

### *Degrees of vigilance*

Mark, a ‘Northend’ African Caribbean man, did not need to hide things from his parents:

“If I didn’t want to go I could stay at home, me mum would ’phone school and get them to send me work home. If I’d had a reasonable excuse she didn’t say anything.”

Some schools were obviously more vigilant than others. Nicholas, who is white and went to school in ‘Northend’, said:

“I used to go round to me mates or I’d go home early. I got caught sometimes. It started off once a month and then I started doing it once a week. Sometimes I’d go to school in the morning and when me dad left for work I’d go back home. Sometimes I’d go on my own but most of the time it were with friends. School put me on report, where I had to have it signed every lesson.”

Fatima, however, who was Asian and also went to school in ‘Northend’, reported that

“No one was interested when I took time off – when I got back they just used to say ‘so, you are back, are you?’”

Nicholas, in ‘Northend’, had both his school and his mother to deal with:

“I was also truanted a lot in my third year ’cos I was bored in classes. My mum knew I was truanting, she’s not stupid. Mums do know everything! I used to get spotted by her friends ’cos I was stupid enough to do it in the local area. My mum would never talk to me about it. She’d wait until the school phoned up. She used to think that if she blocked it out it would go away.”

The parents of some participants, especially Asian (used here as a shorthand for young people from families of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin) young women in ‘Northend’, actively colluded in taking their children out of school for lengthy periods of time (a year or more) (Bhatti, 1999). This sometimes involved visits back to Pakistan or Bangladesh in connection with arranged marriages; one of our participants disappeared from contact during the study apparently as a result of such an event.

### *Disaffection and boredom at school and escape from bullying*

Many participants reported that they mainly stayed away from school in order to miss lessons or teachers they did not like. Craig, a white young man in ‘Southside’, said:

“Certain lessons I liked and certain lessons I didn’t like. What I used to do is like you have a set period with two lessons, then a break, then two lessons, then lunch, and then you have two lessons and go home. So I might have PE in the morning, then just like wake up about 10 am and not go in, miss two lessons, then just go to break and carry on normal lessons.”

For Jeux, a black African young woman in ‘Southside’, it was the other way around – she only went to what she liked. Eleana, a white young woman in ‘Southside’, stayed away from school to avoid bullying. Asked about truancy she replied:

“Yeah I did because I was fed up with being bullied and tried to stay away from them.”

For others like Bab, an Asian young man in ‘Northend’, it was merely laziness that explained his absence:

“I just wouldn’t go in. I’d stay off ’cos, I’d try and stay in bed, it was just laziness and that. I’d try and hide upstairs and that so I wouldn’t have to go. If we had PE I didn’t want to go, it was just laziness.”

Only Jayne clearly related her truancy to problems at home. Asked whether she played truant, she said:

“Yeah, I did actually. It was in secondary school. I don’t know, I think because I had home problems. I had my own problems at home ’cos my dad die [sic] and then I just didn’t like school.”

There was clear evidence of traumatic events in the past of many young people, which might help explain their instability and inability to concentrate on schooling. For others, the traumas occurred at, or around, the time they were completing compulsory age schooling and planning their post-school careers.

## Troubles and traumas outside of school

Almost half (28) of the sample spoke about a range of events in their young lives that would be regarded by most people as traumatic. Much of this detail related not to things that had happened at school but to things that had happened, and in many cases were still happening, at home. It is quite possible that there were still others who preferred not to share their experiences with us. There is not space to give full details of these here, and we merely indicate some of the common, and uncommon, features.

### *Violence*

Many reported living with violence, both the beating of their mothers and of themselves. It was exclusively women who told us of violent relationships in the home. Helen is black British and formerly lived at home in 'Southside' with her mum and three other brothers. Helen's oldest brother used to hit all of his siblings, sometimes with a baseball bat, in order to get them to do chores; her mum observed this violence but was too frightened to intervene. Helen eventually left home to escape the violence. She is unsure as to when the problems started, but remembers that when her father was still there (he left about three years earlier) he was the only one who could keep the brother in line. When her father left, however, her brother took over as head of the family.

Sameena, in 'Northend', described being hit by her older brother who took out his frustrations of having been trapped into an arranged marriage with his mother's cousin. The brother started to take over the father's role in relation to Sameena when they came back from Pakistan. He started to 'beat' her and not allow her out:

"He only hit me a few times ... I wanted to go out – and he said, you are not going – and I said, I don't know what the problem is – and he just started beating me. I think that the fact that he was forced into an arranged marriage and my parents left him with the business to run, he hated it – but she [his wife] won't leave – because she's, like, my Mum's cousin.... Within himself, he wasn't very happy, so he was taking out his frustrations on me."

Chantel is black British and living in 'Southside'. She told us of a long history of abuse and violence in her family and the consequences of this:

"It just messes you up really. You've got social services involved in your life all the time, counsellors, seeing child psychiatrists. [I've] taken an overdose and all sorts of things.... When I was about four, my mum went to America for about six weeks. It felt like six months [because of the abuse she suffered during this period]. I kept it to myself for quite a few years. I did tell my mum when I was seven or eight, and from there things went downhill. My mum's and my relationship went. We weren't as close as we used to be.... Well I think the abuse affected me, 'cos I used to get bullied and terrorised so I wouldn't tell anyone. They'd pinch me, punch me and bite my fingernails. I was scared. I didn't want to say nothing to anyone. It started affecting me at school, the teachers wanted to know what was wrong, I wouldn't say anything.... I ran away from home at eight. I tried to take [pills] – kill myself by taking an overdose."

Mel is white and lives in 'Southside'. She said:

"My mum was just too much. The drink overtakes her, so she gets abusive [physically and verbally]. She was drinking before when I was about 12 but it wasn't so bad. Now she's terrible. She started 'cos she was going through domestic violence with her boyfriend."

### *Rejection and betrayal*

Some told us either of single traumatic events or of a lifetime of rejection. Suzanna was of mixed heritage but brought up by her African Caribbean grandparents in 'Northend', whom she thought were her parents until she was 15. The discovery that they were not came as a huge shock:

"I was just upstairs getting ready to go out and I went to the door – and there was this little white woman stood at the door – and then there was all the talking – and they just called me down and they said that the little white woman is your mother."

The person she thought was her brother was her father; the people she thought were her parents were her grandparents. She could not speak to anyone about this because “everyone that I was used to talking to had lied, hadn’t they?”. This precipitated her running away. “After that I did not go back to school ... could not concentrate.” She ran away from home to stay with an older friend (19 years old) who lived in another nearby town, and was there for one year. For the first few months her family did not know where she was staying. They tried to find her but kept it in the family and did not inform the police.

During the year at her friend’s house, Suzanna says she “got drunk a lot – everyday and all day” – anything and everything for about eight months. At the same time, she got involved in a relationship in which her boyfriend was violent towards her.

“I thought it was normal [behaviour]. [He] used to hit me and then said it was my fault ... it was always my fault.... I think it was [during] the period of the time when I was drinking.”

This lasted for around six months. Suzanna felt weak, physically and mentally low – but added, “one day I decided to look in the mirror”. She did not like what she saw. An ex-boyfriend from ‘Northend’ helped her escape, and she went back to her grandparents and stayed with them for two years.

Jason was born to white parents and, as we have seen, described himself as “being in care all his life”, although he did have periods living with his mother. His main period in care started when he was nine years old:

J: “I was in care when I was a baby as well but I can’t really remember that. When I was about two. I can sort of remember it but I can’t really remember it all. I can remember being in my mum’s arms and being given to someone.”

R: “You can remember that?”

J: “Yeah.”

R: “Do you know why you went into care?”

J: “Because of my mum’s drink problem. And my dad ... that’s a long story, I wouldn’t like to get into that ... I hate him really. He left me and my two brothers in a flat.... I was in and out of care. I went back [to see my mother] once when I was about 12 or 13. I was there for about an hour. She said, ‘there you are, there’s a pound, now fuck off back to care’.”

Despite this, many of Jason’s traumas during his teens, which involved running away from residential care, suggested a continued deep attachment to his mother.

“I just hated being away from my mum. I used to run away from there [residential school] and come all the way to ‘Southside’. I used to get caught and taken back again. Waste of time really. Don’t know why. I used to run away to the area where my mum was. She’d drive past or see me or something – ‘get in the car’” [and he would find himself transported promptly back to his care placement].

Brian’s turbulent career is described in more detail in the chapter on care and care-leaving. But here it is important to note the impact of his relationship with his parents on his telling them that he was gay. Brian is a ‘Southside’ participant.

“I ‘came out’ at that time as well. I came out to my mum. That was absolutely fine. My mum said something so touching at the time. I said ‘why are you crying, mum?’ [And she said] ‘cos of all the discrimination you’ll face. I don’t want any son or child of mine to go though that’. It was very supportive. But we were in contact with my natural dad at the time. My natural dad had a second son, who was five years old and I doted on him ‘cos I’d never had a younger brother before. When I ‘came out’ to my natural dad he accused me of doing things I shouldn’t have been doing to this young boy. My mum didn’t believe that I didn’t do anything and that was mainly lack of trust, and that’s why I moved to social services accommodation.”



## Abuse

A number of participants told of their abuse as a child. Donna is white and was taken into care in 'Southside' at the age of about 11. She said she was sexually abused at the age of six and again at the age of 10 or 10½. She eventually told a dinner lady about one of the blokes her mother was with who "used to treat her really horribly". The child protection team was called in. She also tells of an incident shortly after this when she was sent to the chemist to get a prescription for her mother. She went with her little sister, but they lost the money on the way. When they returned her mother 'just went mad'. Again, the child protection team was called in and she was taken into foster care. She still had strong feelings for her mother, and her mother's own problems often became her own. The abuse was not the only traumatic issue she has had to face, however:

"Erm, yeah, my mum is HIV-positive. I found out when I was about 8 and that is quite hard. It's a bit difficult to deal with. She'd had two kids since then and one of them is fine and I don't know about the other one. It's hard not knowing whether your little sister's got HIV or not."

She tells of discovering one day that her mother was HIV:

"On this tape was this label which said 'When I found out that I was HIV and how I felt'. It was the first time that there was any evidence that it was real, and that broke this little fantasy that I had that maybe it wasn't quite real, do you see what I mean? It's made me look at it in a completely different way. How can I explain? It was just a shock really. I don't like reality at all.... It's been kinda hard, it's been a really long struggle, how long is it, the past sort of nine months. I've tried to kill myself twice, I've started self-harming, I ripped all my arms to shreds and all my belly and stuff like that."

Eleana is also white. Like Donna, she was abused as a child.

"My sister was raped by my uncle, and we were put into care because of that. We were then put with a couple called Mary and Kevin who had a son called Scott. He then

started sexually abusing me and my two sisters...."

## Serious illness and bereavement

Jon is a 'Southside' black Caribbean young man. He was asked about things that had happened in his family.

J: "I was pissed, man. I had to go to the doctor, they wondered what was wrong with me. So I went to a doctor and they classed me as manic. Then I went to [psychiatric unit] but not for long though."

R: "What is it [psychiatric unit]?"

J: "It's like a madhouse, innit like. I'm on medication. It's not like I am a freak or anything like that."

R: "How long were you there for?"

J: "Three months. Then I went back to school again."

Jill is mixed heritage and living with her mother in a large 'Southside' family (eight brothers and sisters).

J: "When my mum had cancer. She had a tumour on her skin, she had to get it cut out but she recovered though. It was about three years ago. She had it twice. The first one came about five years ago and then two years after the other one come and got cut out and it hasn't come back since. It did upset me but, not really, 'cos I knew she was going to get better, I knew it weren't that serious."

R: "Did your mum's illness affect school at all?"

J: "No. It didn't affect school."

Yet it did coincide with episodes of Jill not going to school and "getting in with the wrong people".

There were several other cases in the sample where young people had experienced either the bereavement or hospitalisation of themselves or of people they defined as close to them. In other cases there was a painful divorce or separation of

their parents. These traumatic events, as well as their stated reasons for truancy and school exclusion, can have a marked effect in terms of accentuating disaffection and disadvantage at school.

## Educational disadvantage

Given the widespread occurrence of truancy and school exclusion and the range of personal problems many of the young people in the sample were facing, it was of little surprise to find that, when asked about their school qualifications, the sample contained a high proportion who had no qualifications at all. A quarter of the sample overall knew they had no formal educational qualifications, either because they had not taken the exams or because they thought they had done so badly they had not bothered to find out their results.

Some were regretful about not having taken school seriously and having nothing to show for it. Sarah, a 'Northend' white young woman, said:

"I didn't do them at all – I truanted from Year 9 to 11 – I'd go three times a week the most but I did do some full weeks. School was boring – I could've got into top sets if I'd wanted to ... I wish I could go back to school, and I never thought I'd hear myself say that – I'd like to go back to Year 9 and start again. It's hard to get a job without any exams – you've only got packing jobs and that. I went for a receptionist's job and I didn't get it 'cos I didn't have any qualifications. I regretted it a few months after leaving school and I'd lost my first job and I couldn't get another one. My friends had stayed on at school. I wasn't that bothered at the time but I was a bit afterwards. When I see them out now, they tell me they've got good jobs."

This sense of regret was not true of everyone, however. X-Man, a black Caribbean young man in 'Southside', was more ambivalent about school:

"Ma mum used to say to me you know X-Man, you need to go into school to achieve your qualification and [I] never really did you know 'cos my friends they bad influence

me. Now I say to myself, damn ... Then again, even when you get qualification you still don't get no job anyway."

Several participants said they had qualifications, but these were often certificates of achievement rather than GCSEs. However, some had moderate grade GCSEs which still left them believing they could have done better if the circumstances had been different. Tamara, for instance, a white 'Northend' young woman, was both proud and disappointed:

"Yeah, I got five Cs and five Ds. It wasn't as good as what I expected but I didn't put as much work in as I could have done. It was my fault, no one else's. No one wanted to help us out – all the attention was going on the disruptive ones in class – I thought if no one's gonna help me why should I bother helping myself."

Some, including two 'Northend' Asian young women, had been conscientious and done well. Salma, for instance, said she had got all the grades she needed to go to college, and Anna said she had taken 10 GCSEs and passed all of them: two As, five Bs and three Cs. But for these young women, as we will see later, examination success was not going to provide the much-wanted passport to the sort of career where education or employment played a strong part.

## Careers advice and guidance

The response to questions about careers advice was mixed. Many said they did not have a careers interview at all because they were not in school at the time. Others could remember meeting someone who might have been a careers officer, but typically they could not remember what they had talked about. Some were mildly positive. Josie said, "Oh yeah, Mr Jones, he was dead nice he was". Others were more critical. Bab merely observed that "through school I had a careers interview – it weren't any good".

Most saw the Careers Service as one of two things: a source of advice on courses or training programmes, or a source of help in claiming benefits. Much of this became useful only after they had left school rather than before they left. Asked about careers, Sanaam in 'Northend' said:

“Yeah I had to go to [specific training scheme] and I had to go to Careers to get my form stamped each time I signed on. Careers gave me every support, but then suddenly I had to go abroad again. At school I wanted to do childcare, but then I switched from that to do business and admin with [the scheme]. But I don’t want to do that now, I want to do cabin crew training.”

Much of the hostility to the Careers Service came from young men who said they simply wanted a job and kept being pointed towards college courses or training. Sue, however, made the connection between claiming benefit and job search.

“When you’re on JSA [Jobseekers’ Allowance] we have to go [to] the Careers Office about once or twice a fortnight or once a week or something like that. They ask you if you’ve been looking for jobs and if you ain’t they offer to help look for jobs for you.”

None of the participants saw the Careers Service as offering more generic support to them. Indeed, Chantel made the point that, when there were more pressing personal problems to deal with, careers guidance was not the paramount concern.

“There was a careers teacher at school. They talked to me about the courses you can do. But at the time I was moving around, like, hostel, refuges. But you can’t build your life until you’re stable. If you’re not stable you can’t get a job.”

Many of the more positive responses to careers guidance came from young people after they had left school and when many of their other problems were being dealt with by other agencies. Jayne, for instance, said she

“saw one in college and I saw one here [the leaving care team]. It has helped me decide. These ones I think have been better.”

But Sue again seemed to emphasise that their remit was narrow and she did not feel she could talk to them about the ‘joined-up’ problems she was confronting.

“In July or August the careers told me about some training but I didn’t go. It was training

for life I think. I didn’t go ‘cos it was in ... ‘cos of my past. Because I used to hang about with this bloke and he hit me a few times, well quite a few times. If I do go to [training scheme] I’ve always got to be with someone. I didn’t tell careers why I didn’t go ‘cos I didn’t want to talk to them about that.”

## Making connections

This chapter has reviewed the fortunes of many of the sample of respondents up to and including reaching minimum school-leaving age. It has described the broad patterns of educational disaffection and disadvantage of most of the respondents, but it has also drawn attention to the more complex disadvantages in the young people’s home circumstances. Very few young people themselves made the connection between the two spheres. Yet it is part of the rationale of the new ConneXions Strategy that the new service should provide a means of helping young people in a more ‘holistic’ way.

The chapter also recounts the very narrow way in which the Careers Service is viewed by young people. It is regarded as being concerned only with courses, training and jobs, and as a hurdle to overcome if any benefits are to be accessed. If the new ConneXions Service is viewed by young people only as a new name for the old Careers Service, and operates in that way, then it will have great difficulty in providing the more generic and holistic service that the young people in this sample clearly need. It must also be recognised that some young people in the sample had simply disappeared from most mainstream institutions; many were not in school, and many did not have Careers Service records. We return to these issues in the final chapter.

The current thinking around the ConneXions Service, however, suggests that it is not planning to be a new welfare profession for young people. Rather, it is hoped that different agencies can be brought together, in partnership, with better linkages forged through young people’s personal advisers. It is planned that the service can be delivered through a variety of different agencies and not just through schools and colleges. These are likely to include social services departments

(for those 'looked after' [in care]), youth offending teams, and a variety of community-based organisations. What is clear from this sample is that there will need to be workers within ConneXions partnerships with the skills and sensitivity necessary to deal with the variety of traumas described in this chapter. The sample in this research also included a large subset who had experience of being 'looked after' (described in Chapter 4) and several more who had become homeless without being accommodated in the care system. Chapter 3 looks at the post-16 experiences of the whole sample.

# Post-16: the experience of being 'NEET'

According to our recruitment criteria, all young people in our sample had spent at least four weeks since minimum school-leaving age (MSLA) during which they were not in any form of education, employment or training. We tried initially to construct with the respondents a month-by-month diary of their (in)activities, but this proved impossible to do with any degree of reliability. Chapter 2 explored their experiences prior to the MSLA of 16. This chapter reports their subsequent career dynamics.

The statistical profile of young people who are NEET tells us that many young people do not just leave school and do nothing (SEU, 1999b). Certainly some of them do nothing, as is illustrated by the case study of Craig on page 21. But most young people who become NEET are more likely to drop out of employment or post-16 education. The simple demographics of NEET do not, however, convey the complex decision-making involved, or the sometimes appalling circumstances in which young people are forced to make them. This chapter cannot tell all 64 of the stories reported to us. Faced with a choice between analytical description and the power of contrasting case studies, we have chosen to emphasise the latter; this approach also helps to place some of the young people's experience of being, and coping with being, NEET in a wider context.

## Donna: 'dropping out' as a route into NEET

Donna is a white young woman living in 'Southside'. She was sexually abused as a child and taken into care at the age of 11 (some issues concerning care-leavers are covered in more

detail in Chapter 4). Donna had three foster placements, and in the third of these she was very happy indeed. Many young people who are 'looked after' experience schooling as an obstacle race. Donna did her fair share of truanting, but, compared with many of those 'looked after', she had done well at school, passing all her GCSEs. She was disappointed with her grades, getting Ds in her favourite subjects of maths and sociology because she said she had not studied hard enough.

Donna had thought of staying on, as she really wanted to get a job in childcare, but she decided to take a year out. Like many care-leavers, she was anxious about how she would make ends meet when she had her own flat. Getting a job, she hoped, would enable her to save for this. She had a Saturday job in a café and decided to work there full time. She earned around £150 a week. But, as she explained, she got her wage packet on Friday and by the end of the weekend it had gone. Her employer used to remonstrate with her about this.

"She used to always have a go at me about this. I used to think to myself, I work eight hours a day, I'm on my feet all day long, and she's having a go at me about what I spend my wages on. In the end I just decided that I weren't going to go in no more and she rang up and said that I might as well not bother coming in anymore. I kinda wanted her to do that. I was scared to say that I wanted to quit."

She tried to turn this into an advantage by registering for a course on childcare, but she was being moved out of her foster placement at the same time. She had liked her foster placement but had had a big falling-out when she had to

share her room with another girl who she could not stand.

“It’s very hard because I wasn’t ready for it and everybody used to say to me that I wasn’t ready to be living independently ... I tried to get on a [local training scheme] ... I kinda did that for about two weeks, I moved into my hostel. I left my foster placement exactly at the time [the scheme] offered me a place. It’s an NVQ, like, a day release type thing so you’re in sort of four days in a placement and one day in a classroom. But it never worked out, I was moving and it was just too hard settling, trying to move and get things organised. Going to this placement [childcare] and doing the college stuff was too hard. I just couldn’t balance both of them. I kinda ended up losing that as well. From then on I just didn’t do anything, I just kinda moped around. I’d come from a family where there was like eight people then all of a sudden I’m having to deal with all these things, it was just too hard.”

A combination of loneliness, a sense of failure, and unsuitable accommodation left Donna in despair and, as we saw earlier, she had begun to self-harm.

D: “I’ve tried to kill myself twice ... I went through a really bad period because I got burgled. They put me back in that room and I felt really unsafe and insecure in that room, and that’s how I felt when I was little so it was like kinda like bringing back a lot of emotion from when I was small. It knocked a lot out of me, being burgled. At that point it was like a downhill struggle from then on. I found it really, really hard to cope. The loneliness of it.”

R: “How did you spend your time?”

D: “I used to spend time at my mum’s but that didn’t really help ’cos we was always rowing. And evening times I used to go round to my friends’ houses and sit there. That got really boring. Sometimes I used to just sit in my room all day for days on end. The only time I ever used to go out was to go and get my money and do a little bit of shopping that I had to do. That was like the highlight of my week really.”

Donna was still determined to get back on track. She registered again the following September for a childcare course. But again events conspired to frustrate her. She explained that she was getting help for her self-harming. Money, however, was still a big problem for her.

“I’m on Income Support at the moment. It’s about £41.35 a week. I should be getting a college grant, like £100 a term. I think it might be the access fund. I was supposed to apply for the EMA, I missed. I couldn’t get that because my birthday was after the 31st of August. I wasn’t really supposed to get the college grant because I didn’t really fit into the boroughs. They recognised that there was a few 18-year-olds who slipped through the net.”

At the time of the second interview, the first thing she wanted to talk about was a series of big rows with her mother and disputes, which were in the hands of a solicitor, about access to see her sisters, with whom she was very close. She said that she had not been self-harming for months but her mother was claiming she was a danger to her sisters. At the first interview she had said that she was not interested in boyfriends. But by the second she had one:

“He 22 and he’s lovely. He’s really helped my confidence and makes me feel like it’s worth living, and there’s other ways of doing things.”

Asked about her college course, she said that she had dropped out following the discovery of her mother’s tape about being HIV-positive. Despite this further setback, she still planned to take another course.

“I’m going to be starting a course. An ‘independence’ course.... That would be really good. It’s like confidence-building, self-esteem building and that sort of thing. That would be really cool.”

And she was hoping to move – in the near future – away from the hostel that was still causing her grief. The new accommodation was also to have a resident volunteer helper, so she should not be entirely without support.

“I’m going to another hostel over in [area]. I’ll have my own kitchen and my own

bedroom. Like a half-self-contained unit, which would be really, really good.... Yeah I am ready to go independent. But one step at a time.”

But her ambitions remain the same – to get into childcare.

“Yeah, still well into childcare definitely. That’s where I want to be – in childcare. But you have to get on to training before you can do anything else, which is fine. I’m just sick of sitting on my bum at home all day, it’s just really frustrating.”

While Donna is busy doing nothing waiting for her life to start happening – one step at a time – she listens to music a lot. Destiny’s Child was her favourite of the moment.

“Destiny’s Child’s new song, ‘Survivor’, that’s my song. It’s all about making it and proving to people that you can do it, so it’s my song with me and my mum. It’s like I don’t need you [her mum].”

## Salma: family and cultural constraints

Salma is a ‘Northend’ young woman of Pakistani origins. She lived with her parents and had an older brother who had just left home at the time of the first interview. She enjoyed school and did well, even though, like many of her friends, she used to truant with them and go into the city on a fairly regular basis.

R: [GCSEs?]

S: “I did well; I did sit my exams. I wanted to go to college, I got my grades and go to college. I had a careers interview and we set out an action plan and everything, for me to go to college and do me course. But then when I got my grades, I was stopped from doing anything. It were me parents. I don’t know why they stopped me, they never tell me. They make me feel guilty emotionally. They wanted me to stay at home; get married, that kind of thing. There’s no way I’m going to do that.”

Salma found her home environment very restricting.

S: “They’ve cut me off from my friends. Yeah, I mention it to my brother, he understands. If it were anyone, it would be him that could change my parents’ mind. They listen to him more than they’d ever listen to me, I don’t know if it’s because he’s older or what.”

R: [Relationship with parents?]

S: “It’s OK with my mum, I can sometimes talk to her, but I can’t be as open as I’d like to be, ’cos, it would just end up going straight to my dad. With my dad I just can’t do it, I can’t talk to him at all. He has changed a bit, though.”

R: [Run away from home?]

S: “I have. I was 16, just turned 17, they stopped me going to college. I was doing the course I wanted to do. I ran away from home to live with a friend, a white friend. I felt as though I was not imposing on them, but it didn’t feel right after a while. So I spoke to her mum, she found [me] a place in a hostel, and when I started college, it was business management. I was on the course for a month, but I couldn’t cope with college. I didn’t have enough money. I ran away because they wouldn’t let me do what I wanted to do.”

R: [Grants?]

S: “I did apply for a hardship fund but didn’t get it, which really stuffed things up for me. I don’t know why I didn’t get it, I didn’t get it. I filled in the application form myself. I didn’t have any money, I couldn’t rely on my friend, I was really embarrassed and I just couldn’t do it any more, so I went back home.”

R: “What was that like?”

S: “Really frustrating, my dad thought that he’d won. He thought, ‘Oh, look, she can’t live without us, she had to come home’. It was horrible. I just needed to grow up. If I’d had some sort of backing from anybody, financially and mentally....”

- R: “What kind of support would you have needed?”
- S: “Just someone to talk to and to go to. But my brother lives away now. I can only call when I get the chance.”
- R: [Friends?]
- S: “I looked forward to going to school because of my friends; school for me was my social life and everything. It was the only chance I had to actually be myself.”

At the time of the second interview Salma was still at home – busy doing nothing.

- S: “I’m still living at home with my parents. It’s weird because dad seems to have calmed down a bit. He’s still strict and everything, but he seems to have calmed down a bit ... I know they just want to take me to Pakistan and get [me] married, but there’s no way.”
- R: “What do you do about that?”
- S: “I just stay in one room, that’s it. I’m not allowed to go out, I can’t leave the house. When I was at school I’d sneak in to town ... I really miss school and wish sometimes that I was still there.”
- R: [Asked again about college courses]
- S: “No, they [my parents] are still dead against it, they don’t even want me to go to ‘Northend’ Uni or anything. I don’t know why. They still want me to get married and that, but it’s not gonna happen – I really want them to understand that I won’t do it – not for them.”
- R: [Any significant changes?]
- S: “Nothing’s changed really [sighs], it won’t probably ... I have changed I think. I’m not arguing with my mum as much and that, but I’m still sick of not being able to do what I want – I just can’t be bothered to argue with her anymore, or my dad.”

Salma was not the only person whose route into NEET involved difficulties arising from attempted arranged marriages, sometimes involving

considerable pressure from parents and family members. Six young women, all ‘Northend’ Pakistani or Bangladeshi women, referred to their involvement in either attempted or actual arranged marriages. Sanaam was married to her cousin on her mother’s side. Her husband was still in Pakistan at the time of her interview. She had a ‘Northend’ boyfriend, but her husband was due to come to Britain soon. She planned to try and terminate her marriage after about a year. Amna had run away from home, fleeing the violence she had experienced when she resisted an arranged marriage. Saira too had fled her home [in another northern city] to escape violence and an arranged marriage. She was at a ‘safe house’ in ‘Northend’ at the time of the first interview. Sameena also fled to a hostel in ‘Northend’ from her home in a nearby city. She too told us of violence which had initially started when she resisted an arranged marriage. Fatima had a mother who was German and a Bengali father, and was brought up in a strict Muslim culture. She too left home because of constant rows with her parents.

“I was supposed to get married next year.... They [parents] turned around and said to me that if I didn’t marry I ain’t got no mother and father ... I think I have the right to choose who I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.”

There were marked gender contrasts among Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people in ‘Northend’. Saj and Zee, young men, both lived at home and were NEET. They reported a lifestyle in which they got up late and just “messed around” with friends. They, like Neo, thought they were well-treated at home. Neo said:

“It’s all right living at home, I’m treated really well ‘cos I’ve always got what I’ve wanted, especially from my sister. We’ve always got on well, she buys me whatever I want. They got me a PC, and in my bedroom I’ve got everything I want – a TV, video, hi-fi and PC. It’s because I’m the youngest. I love living at home, ‘cos I’ve got 300-400 films to watch. When I get grounded I never get bored.”

Bab’s lifestyle was like that at the time of the first interview. But by the second interview he had changed markedly.



“My friends don’t know what to do – one of them is all right, he’s working and he’s sorted. Another one just lays around all day, and my two brothers just lay around all day. They all look at me and say ‘What are you gonna do then? How are you gonna be, like?’ I don’t want to be like them. I’ve lost contact with a lot of friends ... I now have friends that are practising Muslims, they are good company. Like one of them works and the other one’s on a course. I’ve got out of the bad company. My new friends are older than me and that – I used to know them from before and that. Islam has made me open my eyes. Seeing my brothers has sorted me out – Islam makes me think good things and that when I get down. I know that if I go on a course at college, I’ll still get paid [possibly through an EMA]. I’ll be 18 in March and I want to work when I’m 18. When I’m 18 I’ll start looking for a job.”

By the second interview Bab had also been back to school and taken a course. It was a pre-vocational course which he described as fairly elementary, but it was also designed to boost confidence. However, he was critical of the course itself:

“The PVP [pre-vocational] course hasn’t helped me think about what I want to do next. The teachers have gone and that. The teacher would send us out on to tasks, like go out and find what courses you can do, ask questions and that and see what jobs you can do. I thought some other teacher would help, but they haven’t...”

He was, however, back in contact with the Careers Service:

“I had an interview with the careers adviser and they told me about what I can do – I thought I’d go and do building or car mechanic and that. I don’t think I could do a job like that – work for my own and that. I don’t like the idea of me being my own boss, too much on my hands and that.”

One of the main influences instrumental in his change was a Muslim youth worker who had started working in the area. But Bab had still not found work.

Anwar too had done a college course and had also been influenced by becoming more religious. He described this as the one of the several important things to have happened to him between the first and second interviews.

“Turning to Islam, that’s been really important. I’m also working now and again. I’ve been working at this packing place, just working 5 ’til 11pm; it was while I was still at school. I worked at that time too. It was all right, I was just helping out and that, it was over Christmas, it was part-time. One of me close friends have got jailed. He got done for burglary, he got four years. It’s affected me a lot. I’ve lost me best friends and I’ve had to change.”

## Craig: permanently NEET

Craig is white and lives in ‘Southside’ with his mother and father. He did not like school much and used to bunk off around six times a week and only go in for lessons he liked – art and english. Craig had literacy problems, but his parents badgered him to take school seriously, and his form teacher used to ring up and try and insist that he come to school. But he usually did not bother. The school told him he would only get low grades, but they entered him for a few subjects. He stopped going to school about three weeks before the exams. Asked if he had thought of going to college afterwards, Craig was adamant that he did not want any more courses: all he wanted was a job.

R: [Careers?]

C: “Er, I had a meeting to speak to one [careers advisor] over here but I didn’t turn up.”

R: “Have you ever spoken to a careers person?”

C: “I think I have, I honestly cannot remember. I think I have.”

He was asked what he had done since he finished school. He replied:

C: “Nothing really. Stay out in the streets, play football and stuff like that. Other nights come here [a youth project]. I’m

mainly in the snooker room. Snooker, that's my hobby. Tuesdays and Fridays. I sometimes go round the pub on Friday and Saturday. I used to go a lot. I play for the pool team, we won the ... league last year. I got my first trophy. It's sitting on my stereo."

R: [Normal day?]

C: "I get up roughly at 12.30-1pm. It's pretty late, it's too late. If I do it all the time then my mum gives me a clip around the ear for waking up too late. Have a bath, come down have my breakfast, watch a bit of telly 'til about 2.30pm, go back upstairs, play on me computer, listen to music 'til about 4pm, house and garage, jungle like, old school drum and bass. Then, er, someone will knock at me door then nothing really. We'll just go outside. I'd come out about 4.30pm and come back in about 5.30pm, have me dinner then come back out and come over here at 7pm. Stay until about 9.30pm, stay out until about 11.30pm then go indoors, watch the telly, play computer and go to bed. That's it really."

R: "How do you feel most days doing that?"

C: "Pretty pissed off 'cos I want to get a job but I ain't been bothered. The only reason why I ain't been bothered is ... I go down to the JobCentre then they say that you got to go down to speak to a careers officer. But, I can't be bothered to go down [there]. And, one of me mate's granddad works in, well gets fruit from the [wholesale fruit market] and he's going to try and get me the number so I'll 'phone up there and try and get a job over the fruit market. Just putting fruit in the back of the lorry and stuff. Night work. That don't really bother me, I'll do that."

Asked about jobs he has had, he said:

C: "I've had odd jobs. I've even had a job in the club, like. Just cleaning up the car park and chopping all the weeds down. 'Cos we, well, in here [youth club] there's all those youth achievement awards. One of my awards, I mean, something I had to do, was build a barbecue. So I built a barbecue. That was all right, that wasted a bit of time..."

R: "Are you interested in learning?"

C: "Er ... I'm doing something in the club anyway. They've just had all new computers put in. One of the staff is helping me do all the IT skills so that should sort of help me with my reading and writing. I come in about ... oh, I've got to come in tomorrow morning at about 10 am. I won't like that, 10 am, it's a bit too early. I get on with them, so that's all right."

He was asked about sources of income.

R: [Benefits?]

C: "No. My mum says why don't you go down the JobCentre and see if you can get any benefit, but I always think nah, 'cos I'll try and get a job next week. Then come next week it'll just get all forgotten about, then two weeks later I still haven't got a job yet."

R: "Do you get pressure from your parents?"

C: "Er, not as much as some of my other mates ... I think I've got it pretty easy. I don't give her no money."

R: "What do you do for money?"

C: "Er, me next door neighbour, sometimes she might go 'do you want to paint the fence'. So she might give me a couple of quid. She [mum] gis a couple a quid at the weekend, well, I say a couple of quid, £15 to see me through. But that just gets spent over the shop. I don't need it to buy bus journeys or stuff like that."

At the first interview Craig said that he did not smoke cigarettes and did not like beer, only vodka and not much of that. He used to smoke dope first thing in the morning when he got up, but said he did not any more. His main 'lifestyle problem' appeared to be getting up in the morning. Asked about barriers preventing him getting a job or going on courses, he replied:

"Yeah, er ... waking up. Getting up to get to the job, 'cos I'm lazy. I am lazy 'cos I haven't gone out looking for a job."

At the second interview, Craig thought he had been interviewed only a couple of weeks before: it had actually been several months earlier.

R: “You didn’t have a job last time I spoke to you...?”

C: “Same! I’ve been going out looking but there’s been nothing that I really fancy. I went for an interview at Iceland’s just down the road, but they just mucked me about. They kept on telling me to come back and then they would tell me if I got the job. I kept on going there and then coming back and then this went on for a month or something. Then they started ringing me but I just don’t want to know no more. This is the main time that they need me but I don’t think I’ll be going there.”

R: “Did you ever get to the careers centre?”

C: “No. I ain’t been down there.”

His job at the market had not materialised either. He was asked about claiming benefit.

“Still not claiming. No. I’m not old enough. I think there is something you can get under 18 but I ain’t bothered. The dole, it’s just round the corner as well, I mean for ages, ’cos I’m 18 in April so I’ll most probably sign on.”

He is still adamant that he is not interested in college and would not even consider a job that involved him doing courses on a part-time basis. He was also back ‘puffin’.

R: “What have you been doing for money?”

C: “Nothing. Put money into a building society account, well, I had been putting money into it, and so I’m living off of that. Money that I’d put in when I was 14 or 15 or something, when I didn’t have a clue what to do with the money. So I use it now. About £70 a week, just to get me through, I don’t need much money living at home and everything still.”

R: “How’s everything going there?”

C: “Er, all right. They found out that I’ve started puffing again.”

R: “So how did that happen?”

C: “Just with a group of mates, just started puffing. It’s better than drinking.”

Craig’s time is being filled more with the youth club, where he helps out a bit with the snooker club for the kids. He also comes down to the club for himself two days a week. But he is brutally honest about not making much progress – except in his snooker. At school he had been a persistent truant; he had literacy and numeracy problems and had dropped out of school before his exams. The youth club was managing to entice him into doing something about his basic skills by rewarding him with snooker opportunities.

“From the last time I’ve seen you I’ve done sod all. But now I’ve got to do things for [youth club] and coming over here Tuesdays, Thursdays, just playing snooker. You just seen me there thrash one of the youth workers. I go on the computer first and then snooker, that’s what they sort of reward me with. So it’s not boring all the time going on the computers and doing something that I like after.”

By the time of the second interview, Craig says he is sometimes drinking quite heavily, smoking joints and taking pills. He says he had eight Es at a club on New Year’s Eve.

“Still single, just mucking about when you’re pissed. I think I’m a totally different person when I’m pissed. More sort of like happier, you’re on that level.”

Many of his friends have jobs, but Craig is not under any pressure to do so and his mother has not threatened to throw him out.

We asked him how he responded to some of the commonly used definitions of social exclusion and ‘status zero’ – “going nowhere and counting for nothing” – but he did not seem to understand.

R: “Do you think you’ve changed?”

C: “That’s a good point ’cos that’s what I was saying to myself, I was sure that that was what you were going to bring up. But I don’t think I have changed. I thought I would have.”

- R: "Are you feeling better or worse about yourself?"
- C: "The same. Feels like it was only yesterday that we had the interview. Do you know what I mean?"

## Jon: getting back in the groove

Jon is a 'Southside' African Caribbean young man living with his mother and his little brother and sister. He came from the Caribbean when he was four and has been living in the same house ever since. He has another older brother who lives independently and other brothers and sisters who live with his father. He says he loves all of them, though he does not get on with his father as well as the others.

"I love ma mum. She looks after me, you get me. She really does."

His mother has stood by him through thick and thin, including arranging bail for him on more than one occasion when he got into trouble with the police. He is very serious about his music, and even when he should have been at school before the age of 16 he took every opportunity to take time off school to be around the music scene. Asked about his happiest moments, Jon replied:

"On the decks – DJ. I've been doing that for four years now. I DJ on radio, I DJ at clubs, all around, man. That's, like, I get paid for that. That's what I do."

He had also been classed as 'manic' after the assessment at a psychiatric hospital referred to earlier. At the first interview he said that, although he would not touch any other drugs, he regularly used cannabis.

"I'm allowed to smoke weed in my home. I'm allowed to do those types of things. I've smoked weed from the age of nine and I don't think I would ever want to stop. Every single day you see me I'm wrecked like. That's Muff. I do it from when I get up until the time I sleep. Every single hour."

He did not take his examinations at school because of a big fight after which he had to leave. From school he joined a training course. He is a little critical of the Careers Service, as they seemed to want to direct him towards college courses. He wanted to either work or learn a trade. This is what he got eventually.

"I was working for mechanics, for Volkswagen. As soon as I left school I never had no qualifications, so I went for a training course with someone called [...] and they got me a training course at [...], I worked there. I liked it.... Like when I went to training course that was for people who've like come out of homes and come out of prison ... that was the type of centre it was for. Not good children, you get me...? On the training course everyone work together, no matter what colour or creed you are, you get me. You had to work together, like a team, you get me. It was definitely better, it was cool, you get me."

But Jon was sacked from his training course. In the first interview he was clearly part of a sub-culture in which going to the JobCentre was decidedly "less cool" than alternative activities with his friends.

R: "Do you find that your friends get in the way of you getting on?"

J: "Yeah, of course. Like, say that I woke up in the morning and I say to myself, I'm going to the JobCentre today, definite without fail. One of my friends will say, 'Yeah Muff, we'll go to the JobCentre together', I'll say, 'Alright then, come down then'. He'll come down with an ounce of weed and we'll just sit in the house all day smoking it, like. I'll say, 'Forget the Job Centre', then go mixing later on, earn some money from mixing, then buy a weed again, then go to bed, like, off my head, like. That's a normal day for me. It's hard to get up in the mornings as well. I wake up every single day at three, and I reach my house at five o'clock in the morning. For a 17 year old's life that's mad, like. That's crazy. You need your hours sleep or your body just gets run down, man...."

Jon is a little ambivalent about smoking weed as much as he does but doesn't hold out any prospect of stopping.

J: "If I knew what weed would have done to me now, if I had a chance to take it back, I would never even of smoked the cigarette in the beginning. It's made me violent, it's made me aggressive, it's made me not myself, I'm not myself, I'm not myself no more, I'm someone else, man."

R: "Do you think you'll stop it?"

J: "What, smoking weed? Never, never. If I don't have weed my hand starts sweating, my head start sweating, my back start sweating. It's mad, mad, it's mad, like.

The other big change about to take place in Jon's life related to his being about to become a father. His girlfriend (older than him) was to give birth in three months' time (described in the section on parenting pp 27–31). By the time of the second interview Jon had become a father. But his career in entertainment was also going from strength to strength.

"Yeah. Everything is all right now, going smoothly. Still DJ-ing. That's what I do now more than ever. Before I was DJ-ing at the raves but now I'm doing it all the time ... I DJ ... here on a Wednesday and a Friday, and then on that same Friday, I go up to [club]. I DJ there. On the Saturday I DJ at [club]. On the Sunday I got [an FM radio show], then the rest of my spare time is listening to garage music. My whole life is garage."

Although Jon likes the life he is living, he also yearns for his mother sometimes to stop him in his tracks and make him slow down. He is also worried about the impact of smoking 'green' as much as he does. He is also becoming bored and disenchanted with the promiscuous sex life he has around the rave scenes, and craves a stable relationship with a woman. The rave scene also means that he had split up from his girlfriend and mother of his child.

"It was, like, I weren't allowed to play out. I weren't allowed to do this, to go here, to go there. Say I took her to a rave, yeah, say we went raving tonight, yeah, and I'm DJ-ing –

she wouldn't like the girls that are there. So it was hard for me to do what I want to do, you get me."

And while he does intend to continue his DJ work, he also knows that his lack of qualifications is still a barrier to him doing anything else.

J: "Yeah, 'cos I'm making dub plates, I've been in a magazine, I've done this, I've done that. Work. I don't mind working. Have you heard of [recruitment agency]? A company called [name]? They're like an agency. I've done warehouse work for them. But you can't get full-time unless you've got fucking qualifications. Me, as a person, I ain't got no qualifications, yeah. I'd need to go to college and do some type of course. You need some type of qualifications to go. But there are courses that say you don't need none. But that's like going back to school 'cos you're dealing with those people. I don't deal with people who are 17. I deal with people who is 23, 30 years of age, yeah. I'd rather go night school. Them people, my age, who is in an environment like school, they don't learn nothing."

R: "So do you think you will ever go to college and do a course?"

J: "No never. Never, man. Never ever."

R: "Have you had any other jobs in the past few months?"

J: "No, except for the [agency] thing. I was there maybe two months ago. I was there a while. I was thinking how many pay checks I got, and it was nearly a grand ... Just storing boxes for Midland Bank and NatWest. Then the place got full up. So no more places for no more boxes, so no more work. So that was that and I carried on DJ-ing."

R: "Would you be happier with that? If you and your ex-girlfriend were living together and you worked all day in a normal job?"

J: "I couldn't do that. This is all I know. What else do I know? I can't do anything. As soon as I left [school], I was a DJ. Then I went to [training course], I did that mechanics thing, they kicked me out. I

failed school with no GCSEs. I got a qualification in mechanics and got kicked out. It was a case of I wasn't really wanted. I never felt wanted at all. Anything to do with writing, maths, english, reading, anything like that, I wanted no way near there. I thought to myself that's not my skill. I'm not going to be a writer. I'm not going to be working in a bank. I'd rather be a drug dealer or a DJ. So I tried both of them and I came out best at DJ-ing, 'cos all I did with the weed was just smoke it – you get me – instead of sell it like. So I became a DJ and that's what I've been doing ever since."

Although the particular circumstances of Jon's case were unique in some respects, they are fairly typical of many others in the sample in terms of his striving (for most of the time) to do something with his life. Most of the other participants were much more like Jon than Craig. Even when their circumstances are difficult, they have been trying to do something.

## Karl: trying to get back in

Karl is of mixed heritage and was living in a 'Northend' hostel at the time of the first interviews. He had moved to 'Northend' almost as a whim. His home town was a Midlands city where he used to live with his white mother. His African Caribbean father did not have anything to do with him. Karl had been excluded from school several times and did not take any examinations because he was "locked up" by the age of 15. He had been on remand in a northern prison on burglary charges. Many of the inmates were from 'Northend', so when he got out he decided to move away from the 'bad influences' around his home town.

Karl first tried a plastering course. He did it for four months then left because ... "it was just doing me head in". The instructors kept telling him to take down the wall he had just plastered. The only other work or training he had done was a part-time cleaning job. At the first interview he said that if he worked he would have to give his wages to the hostel. By the time of the second interview he had moved out of the hostel into a flat owned by the same voluntary sector organisation. He did not make contact with the

Careers Service until November 2000, as a means of claiming JSA. They had referred him on to the local training place provider. He had already done two training placements and was, at the time of his first interview, about to enroll for NVQ3 courses at college, taking evening classes in maths and english. He thought the most help had come from the hostel project and his key worker there.

"The best support has really come from the [hostel project]. If you are fair with them they will do all in their power to help you out. If it wasn't for them I would be doing something but I don't think I would have come as far as I have now – because when you are in your bad times you go and tell them your problems and they use the best of their powers to try and help you out."

Mel, a white young 'Southside' woman, had run away from home and was staying with her friend at the time of the first interview. She used to live in 'Southside' with her mother, whom she described as an alcoholic. She left school at 14 and, although they had letters from school, nobody visited so she did not bother about it. She just stayed at home and listened to music. She only went to the Careers Service when she was worried about how to get financial support. She described them as very helpful. She wanted to get into childcare and planned to start a course soon after the first interview. Meanwhile she was not doing very much, just meeting up in friends' houses.

At the time of the second interview she had moved into a hostel. She did not mention the childcare course but talked about another run by the Prince's Trust:

"I did the Prince's Trust and it was great, great experience for about 12 weeks. We went to several places and we had lots of fun, it was great ... I did learn to work with others, I am finding it easier to work with others 'cos before I didn't want to make the effort to be friendly to people at work and others."

She was unemployed again for a while, but then a neighbour got her a job in a 'deli' earning around £140 per week. But the employer kept moving her to other branches, and when she had to go to a north London branch she gave the job up. She

was also working from 8 am until 6pm and on two days a week worked 12 hour shifts, so she thought she should have been paid more.

She still wanted to work with young children, and at the second interview said she would go back to Careers, which had also arranged her Prince's Trust course. Asked whether the terms 'status zero', 'NEET' and 'socially excluded' might apply to her, she said:

"I don't identify with any of those [socially excluded, marginalised], maybe if I wasn't trying to make money I would feel like that. I've never really left myself down in the dumps or anything, I've always tried to help with benefits. It might have taken two weeks, but right now I'm still trying."

## Pregnancy, parenting and decisions involving children

One major route into NEET not covered by the case studies so far is through becoming a mother. In all, seven young women, five of them from 'Southside', were mothers during the course of the study. Several participants were quite clear that they thought they were far too young to take on the responsibilities of parenthood. A further two, who had become pregnant, reported that they had had terminations, and one more revealed in the second interview that she had miscarried.

Termination was a route chosen by some young women who could not face having a child. Melissa, a black British young 'Southside' woman, was taken into care at the age of nine, following a very turbulent childhood. Her experience of foster care had not been good, and her educational career had also been turbulent – several suspensions and time at a 'disabled school' [sic] because of her dyslexia.

M: "Last year we got into a bit of a mess. If we'd told social services, he would get arrested because at the time I was under age. So we went behind social services' backs to have a termination. They found out about it through my foster sister, she told them."

R: "How old were you when you had the termination?"

M: "Fifteen. I'm not ready to have children just yet. I took one day off [from school] for it [the termination]. If I had have taken more than one day off for it then teachers would want to know why I was off."

She was still with her boyfriend, whom she had been close to for nearly four years. At the time of the second interview she was living in an independence unit and still doing her college course – a GNVQ in Sport and Recreation.

Anwar, in 'Northend', when asked if he was a parent said: "I was nearly, she wanted to keep it but her dad made her get rid of it". Many other participants also expressed the view that they thought that they were too young to have children, even though, in some cases, their partner was keen to have them.

Some members of the sample, however, had decided to continue with their pregnancies and become mothers. Some wished to continue with their education, training or employment and attempted to balance their responsibilities. Whether they planned further educational or employment careers or not, many commented how becoming a parent had fundamentally changed their lives and made them "grow up" in a hurry, taking responsibility for the welfare of someone else (the baby) as well as themselves. This seemed most obvious for the young mothers, but it occurred for some young fathers as well. Four young men indicated that they were fathers.

For some young women, pregnancy had been a major (and unplanned) disruption of their ambitions, while others were happy with the way things had turned out. One young pregnant woman had been prompted to return home from the hostel where she had been living in order to get support from her mother. She hoped to finish off a college course which had been interrupted and to get a job before she tried living on her own again. Josie, a white 'Southside' woman, reported that she had had a "bad" family background, a father who did not want to know her and an alcoholic mother with a "bit of a reputation". They had moved up and down the country and rarely been settled. With her boyfriend, she was trying to build a bit more

stability into her life. But life proved never to be straightforward for her.

“I passed all my army tests and I would have been in the army before the end of this year, but of course, I got pregnant ... I was training to go into the army, but I’ve had a lot of problems with contraceptives, they don’t work with me. My boyfriend didn’t want me to go into the army ... I think teen mums are discriminated against, I think everyone judges them. When you say oh I’m pregnant and I’m 15, 16, 17, they judge and think oh a slag, she sleeps about. But I haven’t slept about. I had my doubts. I thought of having an abortion and carrying on my career and then ... I wanted a family but I just didn’t want one yet. I wanted to go in the army, come out, get a mortgage, do driving lessons, get a car and then money and everything that a kid needs for security reasons and then I would have settled down. But it just all went pear-shaped. I’m cursed, me, ... It’s only four weeks away, I am really, really scared. But I think all day long, I wonder what she looks like, I wonder what she sounds like, I can’t wait to get her in me arms and give her a cuddle. Maybe it’s because she’s mine and I can be different to her to what my mum’s been to me.”

She also recognised that it was going to involve big changes for her partner as well. At the time of the first interview, Josie had severe doubts about him and his drug habits. By the second interview he seemed to have changed his behaviour and she seemed to have changed her mind.

“Me and my boyfriend are getting along a lot better. He can’t wait to be a dad and that, so ... looking forward to it. I didn’t think that we’d still be together, but he proved me wrong. I’m engaged, for about five, six months now. He got down on his knee ... it was quite romantic actually [laughter]. He’s like, ‘don’t walk too far, don’t do this’ ... ‘cos I’ve had quite a rough pregnancy. I didn’t think he was cut out to be a dad, he was a normal 18 year old. I said to him, ‘You’ve got to change your ways or I’ll go’. He had a good job, but he lost it. He’s out looking for work today. He’s, like, gotta have a job before the baby comes. He’s looking for warehouse [work] ‘cos he hasn’t got many

qualifications. He’s bought everything for the baby ... it’s all paid up. He’s been really supportive. He’s changed a lot, he’s virtually stopped puffing now.... If I’m there he won’t do it.”

Josie herself also still had some career ambitions.

“After six months, I’d probably be wanting to get out of the house and start doing something, and probably the money would come in handy. I don’t really want to live on the social.”

Denise, a black British young ‘Southside’ woman, described her education as the most important thing in her life. She went to a fairly strict Catholic school who told them to “keep away from the boys”. Her mother was proud of her achievements (mainly GCSE D grades and a certificate in DVE [vocational education]). She went on to study business studies in the sixth form but became pregnant, which soured her relationship with her mother. Denise did not think the pregnancy would happen, and although she was unhappy at first she does not agree with abortion. She regards herself as independent and “wants to do more with my life”. If she was not pregnant she says she would probably still be “talking all the way through sixth form and not doing as well as I should be”. If she were to advise anyone else, she would tell them to wait until they are older and independent – and she would “see what sort of mind they had”. However, she did not tell any of the teachers at school about her pregnancy before she left, as she thought it was none of their business, so it is unclear as to what sort of support she would have if they had known. She also left home and was being supported by a local project.

Denise knew that her baby might restrict her in developing a career. She says she will look into childcare options but also says she does not want to leave her baby when it is young – she wants it to know her. She thinks she can cope as she is strong and mature and has experience in bringing up her many nieces and nephews. Although unhappy about the pregnancy at first, she has turned it into a positive thing – it has made her more independent, and she is determined her child will be proud of her. At the time of the second interviews, however, her mother refused to give us her new address so we were unable to discover how Denise was managing her new life.



For Jayne, a black African young 'Southside' woman, pregnancy led to a disruption of her education, but she had fought hard both to keep her baby and to continue with her education. "When I got pregnant I dropped out in Year 10." She had her baby in Year 11 and went to a nearby education centre where she was taken into foster care. At 16 she went to college where she had ambitions to do her GCSEs properly, do A levels and go on to university to do a law degree. However, she had a major dispute with social services about the custody of her child. In the second interview, she said she had won the court case. She was still doing a foundation course and hoped this would lead to GCSEs and A levels. The baby was, however, making heavy demands on her time.

"They thought that he was missing out on his mother. I was getting up early in the morning, 'cos I was living in [...]. So I had to get up at about six in the morning, arrive at college at nine, leave at half-seven so I can get him to the nanny and give him his breakfast. So he wasn't properly fed.... He was very irritable.... Yes, it has affected my life 'cos I have limits of what I can do. I wanted to travel, so that I can see the world, but I love having my child. At first I was like oh no what am I going to do, I can't go out and party, I can't do nothing. But really I find that having him has helped me in a lot of ways. It has helped my head get around a lot of stuff that before I couldn't. I was thinking party come first, boys come first, doing everything that everyone else was doing, but now I can step back and say no, I've got a child, I can't do that ... I'm a mother and I can think of the consequences.... With a child you have to be there and understand its needs and feelings and meet his needs as well.... Sometimes I find it hard and it's like, 'oh my god! What am I going to do now?' But it's not as much of a panic when you're in care 'cos you know you'll get help. On your own, it is a panic."

By the time of the second interview her ambitions had been trimmed back a little, but she was still intent on a professional career.

"I'm interested but there's other stuff ... areas that cover law.... You can be a secretary and be beside lawyers and

everything. But at the end of the day, law doesn't really interest me, I like things which are more fun. Like social work and that. But that's hard work too, 'cos kids can be so hard on you. But I don't mind 'cos I've been in their situation, so I feel that I can work with them and help them understand at the same time that I'm their social worker, but I can give them my experiences and they can give me theirs. So we can have like a 50/50. So I don't mind working with other people and telling them what it was like, having been a young person in care and why I came into care. So they don't feel judged with a hypocrite sitting next to them, pretending to understand what they have been through. But with law as well, it's like helping families and helping people. And I would like something that has to do with people."

Tamara, a white young 'Northend' woman, had got modest qualifications at school and started a college course. She had to give that up after a huge row with her father which resulted in her leaving home and living in a hostel. She could not afford to carry on and had not had much support in applying for grants to help her do so. She then met her boyfriend and together they moved to an east coast resort. Here, she reported:

"They send you to college, so I started a course, but I then found out I was pregnant, and I was really ill – really bad morning sickness – they kicked me off the course and the careers wouldn't sign the form for me to go back on Jobseekers' Allowance. So we moved back to 'Northend'."

At the time of the second interview the couple had been in 'Northend' for eight months and had recently moved houses. Tamara said she would like to go back to work and even complete the course she started, but not until the baby is a little older. In order to cope financially with a baby, they have decided to share the workload by working part-time, morning and afternoon shifts. She has call centre training and is going to try and get a few hours work in the mornings. Despite all this, she described the past few months as the happiest time of her life: "recently got married, a baby on the way – looking forward to getting my own family started".

Rebecca, a black African Caribbean ‘Southside’ woman, had been looked after in local authority care since the age of seven, having been beaten by her father and mother. Her career in care was turbulent, with several moves between foster and residential care, and her education too had been peppered with suspensions and exclusions. She was already a mother at the time of the first interview and no longer in a relationship with the father of her child. Yet it was having the child that Rebecca thought had turned her life around.

Reb: “I’m more mature, more sensible, more responsible. I help people too. Say if someone has been through the same thing as me, I’ll help them, tell them what to do, give them advice. Before I used to be up and down, causing trouble, and all of a sudden I’ve just changed. Completely changed.... My life has been sad and it’s only now it’s getting better. If I didn’t have this baby, I wouldn’t be here right now, I’d be in Holloway [prison]. Because the way I was before, the reason why I was doing that was because I didn’t have my family to talk to ... I was rejected.”

R: “Rejected by your family?”

Reb: “Yeah. Since I had my baby my relationship with my mum has changed, she is more involved with me than she was before.”

She also had a befriender (through a project) whom she found helpful when she was not sure what to do, or was unsure of things. However, by the second interview she was less positive about the project.

R: “What about [the project]?”

Reb: “Well I’ve been going, but only to get myself off the child protection list. The environment that I came from, they thought I wouldn’t cope, they didn’t think I would care for him.”

R: “That must have made you angry?”

Reb: “Yeah. It still does. The way I see it, I’m looking after him very well, there’s nothing wrong with him, I’m coping very well, so I don’t think he should be on the child protection list.”

R: “Who put him on?”

Reb: “Social services. Now I have to go to [project] and I have to go to clinic, just to get them off my back.”

## Young dads

Four young men in the sample also told the interviewers they were fathers. For some this did have some impact on their lifestyle, but not as profoundly as motherhood proved to be for the young women interviewed.

Jason is white and lives in ‘Southside’. He said that he had been responsible for the conception of a child when he was only 12 or 13 years old but that he was not bothered about the child because, “obviously”, at that age he was too young to be a father.

Dan, a white young ‘Northend’ man, described having two children already living with their mother in Southampton, and a girlfriend in ‘Northend’ who was pregnant. He had seen his daughters once, when they were two months old, but had not seen them since that time and indicated that “I don’t want to talk about them because it upsets me”. They are 13 months old now – he has no contact with their mother.

Michael is white and also lives in ‘Northend’. Becoming a father did mean changes both to his work and his living arrangements.

“I’ve had a cleaning job for a year. Just a few hours a week, between 12 and 20 hours a week, I saw the job in the paper and needed the money. The job was easy and I enjoyed it. I had to leave ‘cos my daughter was born.”

At the time of the interview, he told us:

“I was on my own in a flat. My daughter’s with her mum. I been there for four months, I was living at home before with my mum and dad and my two brothers, one older and one younger. I had to leave ‘cos my daughter was born, my dad didn’t like it.”

Jon, the DJ described earlier in this chapter, when initially asked whether he was a father, replied:

J: “Well, nearly. Three months. A few more months to go. But boy, that was a big mistake, man. Trust me, it was a big mistake.”

R: “Are you worried about it? Do you think it will be all right?”

J: “Yeah, I think so. My mum knows about it, my dad knows about it. It’s safe, you get me.”

At the time of the second interview he reported:

“I had my little girl. That was all right like. It was a big shock, you get me, it was a big shock. It’s all right now, but before I was, like, what am I gonna do, I didn’t really want to have a kid like. Now it’s all right, not as hard as I thought ... but it’s hard. As she’s [the mother] older than me like, it was her choice not my choice. But I don’t believe in killing my youth, so I said to her it’s her choice and she had the baby. If she was the same age as me, yeah, then I wouldn’t have really thought it was wise.... Your life’s gone, you get me, you can’t be a kid no more. All gone, everything, just gone.”

Despite his DJ career he was still playing the role of a father:

“I spend a lot of time with her, you get me, ’cos most of the type of events are late at night. Say if it’s on a Friday, I don’t get much sleep like, then I would have Georgia on the Saturday and look after her until I have to go out and do what I have to do. And then when I come back she’s still there. I see Georgia more than four times a week, say.”

However, Jon seems also concerned about protecting the legitimacy of his parenthood. The child’s mother now has another boyfriend:

“What I’m vexed about, yeah, [is when] Georgia call her boyfriend ‘dad’, like, ’cos boy! I spoke to the girl [his ex-girlfriend] about that already, and she understands what would happen, if I ever hear Georgia call her boyfriend ‘dad’. She understands

what would happen. Before she never understood, but now she understands. She’s only got one father, you get me....”

He got an extra job in a warehouse to earn money for his child.

“I got that job that so before Georgia came I had some money. The DJ-ing thing was paying, but I have to put clothes on my back, just pay, pay, buy tunes. The grand I gave to Georgia’s mum – to look after her. If that’s how you’re gonner be.”

## Financial support and Educational Maintenance Allowances

Jon seemed adept at being able to raise money when the need arose. Craig, still not 18 at the time of the second interview, was living on his savings and handouts from his parents or other family members. Lauren, a white young ‘Southside’ woman, similarly relied on money given from her mother and father – around £50 per week in total. Ali and Neo, Pakistani and Bangladeshi young ‘Northend’ men respectively, said they relied on money given to them from their brother and sister respectively and on ‘free’ accommodation and food from their parents. But these are stories about the financial costs to families of extended periods of dependency, and by no means all families are in a position to cope with this.

For some in the sample, access to financial support was very difficult indeed, and this exacerbated their problematic lifestyle and intensified already poor feelings of self-worth. We asked Brian, a white young ‘Northend’ man, about how he survived financially. He told a very familiar tale of the problems of under-18-year-olds trying to claim benefits.

“They helped fill the forms in, but at first I got rejected ’cos I had some money in the bank so they wouldn’t let me have it. When it were gone, I went back again and then they let me have it. It were only £70 . I couldn’t do owt and had to ask me dad for money. It didn’t make me feel very good. I just had to stay in the house all day. I’d just stay in, watch telly and then go to bed. Me

dad were pressuring me to get a job. He didn't have much money. I used to go out when I were signing on, I had money to go out with. I used to give me dad some money to help him out with food and stuff. Me dad's on Jobseekers' Allowance as well, so we haven't got much money."

Amanda, a white young 'Northend' woman, had similar financial problems. She had initially survived mainly on food and money given by her grandmother before finally getting access to JSA. But then she moved to another northern town.

"When I moved ... I took me claim and that over there and I weren't getting anywhere. Me friends were helping me out with food and that. I didn't know where to go for help over there. There were only one person I knew over there and then he turned out to be alcoholic. I were living on nothing but handouts from other people. I felt like I were someone who were living on the streets, with people giving me pennies and that. It were awful. I get about £40 a week, which gets me enough food for the week."

Bernice, a black African young 'Southside' woman, had been trying to claim JSA at the time of the first interviews but ran into trouble with the JobCentre. She was born in England and had a British passport, but the JobCentre did not believe her. She was told she had no right to claim in this country, and that she needed a National Insurance number before she could claim or register for any training. She had filled in all the forms, even though she was unsure what some of them were about. Her benefit claim had been refused and she had appealed but still got no benefit. She was awaiting a tribunal date and had an appointment with social security officials. But the outcome of this is unknown to the research team, as we were unable to contact her at the time of the second interview. The Careers Service records indicate that she had left their 'active register' for an 'unknown destination'.

Some of the sample had tried to access Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) which were being piloted in parts of both sample areas at the time of the first interviews. For Salma, the Pakistani young 'Northend' woman, some independent financial support at the time she ran away from home might well have helped her avoid having to return home and give up her

course under duress. She had been turned down for a college 'access fund', although other members of the sample had been financially supported through this route. Jim, a Kosovan refugee in 'Southside', had applied for an EMA, and been told it would take two weeks to process it, but he had not had an answer weeks later at the time of the second interview. Ho, a Vietnamese young man in 'Southside', had applied, but by the time his application was processed he had left the course. In some cases, eligibility for EMAs had to be explained by the researcher, as the young person had no idea they might be eligible. Overall, eight young people applied for EMAs but only three eventually got them, mainly those who were part of a care-leaving scheme.

At the start of this chapter we described Donna's story. She was one of the several care-leavers who had been told about EMAs. But by the time she knew about them she had reached the age of 18 and said that she was no longer eligible. Like others in the sample, she would not be subject to the changing patterns of support for care-leavers introduced in October 2001. Also like many of the care-leavers, money matters were very difficult for her.

R: "How are you managing for money?"

D: "Money. Money's hard. Money's money. It's hard 'cos I'm supporting Mo [boyfriend] on my little giro as well now 'cos he hasn't been working for the past couple of months. I'm claiming JS, 'cos I'm 18 I had to start claiming benefit. I started on Income Support 'cos of my course. But because I stopped my course I went on to JSA. You pay like your £5 rent and plus I got a £300 pound [social fund] loan from social security to buy some clothes and stuff like that, 'cos I was wearing these trousers with holes in them and stuff and I needed shoes. So they're taking £6 out of my giro, so now I'm on £60 every two weeks. Social services used to give me £40 a week and then I'd pay my £5 rent and so I'd have £35 a week. It's hard but I can cope with it. It's been a bit harder recently because I'm supporting Mo and feeding him, so you ... you're always borrowing money."

Nor were all care-leavers on benefit. Jason, a white 'Southside' young man, told us of his

lifestyle at the time of his first interview. He was living in a hostel at the time.

J: “In the morning I go to my mum’s. I don’t eat that much though ’cos my stomach’s shrunk. I used to have a big appetite but when I lived on the streets I weren’t eating hardly anything. I used to eat breakfast, lunch. I used to be starving, starving, I used to eat something little and it would fill me up like. Get a portion of chips eat half of them and throw the rest away.”

R: “So what do you eat now?”

J: “Just breakfast at me mum’s. That’s it. That’ll last me all day. I just help myself. Have cereal, toast or something, sometimes there’ll be dinner left over. She’ll say, ‘there’s dinner there’. Unless I’ve got money and I’ll buy something from the takeaway ... I was signing on but then I stopped. So I’ve got no money at all. That’s why I want to get a job. In a way it’s better because if I know I’m getting money I won’t go and look for a job somewhere. If I ain’t got a penny and my trainers are like this I’ve got to get a job, I have to get a job.”

By the time of the second interview things had gone from bad to worse. Jason had got a job but had been sacked for stealing. Unemployed again, he had turned to heavy drinking and drugs (mainly ecstasy), which he said he was taking almost everyday. It is difficult to use his own words to describe his story, as the interview took place in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI), and he thought if he was seen talking to someone with a tape-recorder he would be taken for a ‘grass’. He was in the YOI on remand, charged with theft (of a mobile phone) and assaulting a police officer. He denies personal involvement in either offence although he says he was there at the time with friends.

Jason was not the only participant to tell us of their involvement in crime and drugs, but their accounts are not included here. The researcher found Jason to be depressed in the YOI. He said:

“It [being in jail] feels like it will never end.... The future don’t seem like it’s coming.”

## Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the experiences of young people who have spent varying amounts of time outside of any form of education, training and employment following the end of compulsory schooling. We have used a series of case studies which illustrate the (albeit diverse) ways in which, for many in the sample, the problems they experienced pre-16 seem to continue post-16. Yet it is pertinent to ask the question, ‘why is being NEET a problem?’ or rather, what ‘problems’ (plural) exist, either now or in the future, as a consequence of being NEET? And for whom are they a problem? For it is in the identification – and, potentially, in the solution – of these ‘problems’ that the major challenges for the ConneXions Strategy will be found.

A few young people (like Craig) seem to have followed educational disaffection and disadvantage pre-16 with no education, training and employment post-16. Like Craig, Jill, a mixed heritage young ‘Southside’ woman, is also involved in a youth project that fills some of her time. She said in the second interview that she has aspirations to be a singer or a model – hopes hovering over “next week’s” horizon. Meanwhile she resists ideas of shop work or the few part-time jobs she knows are there for the taking.

For many of the Pakistani young ‘Northend’ men, the future is still waiting to happen, and families, with different degrees of support (and especially financial support) shoulder the burden.

Craig, Jill, Saj, Neo (and to a lesser degree Bab) are potential ‘problems’ for the system, in that they bear all the hallmarks of being destined to join the ranks of the long-term unemployed in their twenties. They may get jobs, of course. But where the absence of effective support up to the age of 18 has left them still disengaged, they may also become a major challenge for New Deal Gateway when they become eligible for JSA and remain unemployed for a further six months post-18.

Other young people have dropped into and out of training, college courses or, in some instances, full-time work. Jon was unusual in being able to use his skills and popularity as a DJ to make serious money. Many of the rest struggle either to “get back in” or simply to “get by”. And those

with the most serious problems also struggle with systems of financial support which seem to them to be slow and ineffective and provide inadequate income.

Often it is only those with other forms of personal support (including leaving-care schemes) that manage to escape being NEET and get back into some form of education or training.

Salma, and others like her, present different sorts of 'issues' and 'problems'. In one sense, Salma is simply a 'drop-out' from education. Neither her educational talent nor occupational aspirations are being fulfilled. But she is not claiming benefits and is being looked after by her family in accordance with their traditions of 'family support'. Yet this 'support' is also effectively undermining her 'rights' to self-determination. And within the sample there are other cases where 'arranged marriages' have either taken place or been threatened under situations of duress, or where attempted arranged marriages have resulted in young women running away from such situations to temporary shelters. These stories tell of the consequent disruption of the young women's own desire for a career building on education or training.

Some routes into NEET are associated with pregnancy and becoming parents in a young person's mid- to late-teenage years. Many of the young parents tell of their continuing ambitions for educational and occupational careers and of how motherhood (and in some cases fatherhood) has enhanced their feelings of responsibility. Sometimes, however, young people's ambitions were thwarted by disputes, notably with social services departments.

For some in the sample, the traumas they have experienced pre-16 seems to have left them vulnerable to having their careers derailed later in life. For instance, one case study presented in this chapter, concerning Donna, illustrates how a history of abuse and a volatile home life had left such deep marks that a re-emergence of these triggers served to undermine her ambitions and knock her off track. People like Donna require sensitive understanding and long-term support from someone they can trust. Many of the most acute cases of problems pre-16 turning into even bigger problems post-16 are to be found among those who had been 'looked after' in the care system. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, it

is too simple to see being 'looked after' as itself irretrievably damaging. Many of the care-leavers, like many of the young parents, are very strongly determined to overcome even the most difficult obstacles, to get their lives together and succeed against the odds. It is to this group we now turn.

# Multiple disadvantage and the care system

Given that the sample was intended to be representative of young people with ‘multiple disadvantages’, we recruited some respondents through a leaving-care project (in ‘Southside’) or through other projects (such as those dealing with the homeless) that might be expected to have a proportion of those leaving care among their users. In fact, an unexpectedly large minority of the young people interviewed – going well beyond those recruited specifically in this way – had experiences of being ‘looked after’ by local authorities. In all we have details of the experiences of 17 young people – more than a quarter of the sample – who told us of their experiences of being ‘looked after’ and leaving care. These are worthy of special attention, both because of their numbers and because they feature in most accounts of the most disadvantaged young people. As with other studies of children and young people ‘looked after’, they are a mixture of those whose time in care started in early childhood, and ‘teenage entrants’.

The research literature on care-leavers makes it clear that they are highly likely to be unqualified, homeless at some point, to have mental health problems, be pregnant or a parent in their teens, and, especially if male, to be involved in crime and over-represented in the prison population. Most of those in this sample who had been ‘looked after’ were certainly poorly qualified, or had no qualifications at all. Some were very angry and some seemed just confused. A number had long-standing and serious mental health problems. The experience of many of the care-leavers we interviewed strongly confirms the general accounts given in other research that focused exclusively on that group (Carlen, 1988; Kent, 1997; Utting, 1997; Children’s Society, 1999). Four cases only will be reported here

(although others’ experience is alluded to elsewhere in this report). In some ways, these four are not typical of the 17 cases covered by the research. But three of the four young people described here were both articulate in their accounts of the care they had experienced and determined to succeed despite the odds. Our intention in choosing these four out of the 17 was to illustrate three main issues.

First, as we explained in Chapter 1, the ‘care system’ is being transformed following two major policy reviews. The Children’s Safeguard Review (Kent, 1997) and *People like us* (Utting, 1997) provided (yet again) a critique of the failure of foster and residential care to protect young people from harm and abuse or adequately to promote the welfare of children and young people ‘looked after’. Much previous research on the care system has drawn attention to the ways in which being ‘looked after’ presents a huge obstacle to educational success. The Quality Protects programme, launched in response to the Safeguards Review, is intended to address some of these issues, including educational disaffection and disadvantage. Elsewhere in this report we have commented on the ways in which disrupted home life also disrupts education and generates disadvantage. The cases presented here are from young people determined to succeed, despite the odds. But it also highlights the obstacles they face in trying to do so.

Second, this is one of the very few research projects to have covered the care experience of minority ethnic young people. Three out of four of the case studies presented here are from minority ethnic young people’s experiences. These three young people in particular, but also some of the other accounts, describe the ways in

which the disadvantages of care interact with their experiences of racism in care.

Third, following a review of support for young people leaving care in the Green Paper *Me, survive, out there?* (DoH, 1999b) the Children (Leaving Care) Act was passed in 2000. This amends the 1989 Children Act to make it a duty of local authorities to assist and support young people up to the age of 21 (instead of 16). New regulations became effective in October 2001 and are intended to empower and support young care-leavers in developing their own careers. They are to be involved actively in the development of Pathway Plans and to have a named person responsible for the achievement of key milestones and support from a personal adviser (much as the ConneXions will provide advisers for all young people). Three of the accounts bear powerful testimony to some of the challenges to be faced by social services departments and the ConneXions Service in trying to identify and meet the needs of young people in their mid- to late-teenage years.

## Chantel: abuse and racism, but coming up focused

Chantel is black British. She started her first interview in 'Southside' with a series of very telling statements:

"The most important thing is stability. You need to be stable to do anything. In my life I haven't been stable at all. All I want is stability so I can get on with what I have to do ... go to college, go to work, whatever it may be.... My mum's been through a lot in her childhood and I've seen my dad beat my mum up. We've been through abuse, physically, mentally, sexually, everything."

Chantel had been sexually and physically abused since the age of four but was not taken into care until much later. The allegations were only just being taken to court at the time of the first interview. When the child protection team was brought in, her mother's response to Chantel's abuse was to turn to drink. When Chantel eventually disclosed, her mother's initial response was hostile:

"She called up social services and told them to take me into care or she'd kill me."

Her experience of care, however, although fairly typical, was not good. She had a series of moves in care – what has been referred to as "accommodation pinball" (Jackson and Thomas, 1999) – not the best way of ensuring the stability or continuity of care. In Chantel's case this was compounded by racism. Moves backwards and forwards between care and being looked after by her father and relatives of her friend further disrupted her education.

"I got taken into care at 13. I got put into a children's home for four months. I loved it there, it was the best time. Social services sent me back to my mum and she beat me up. They said do you want to go back [home] and I said no and they said you have to go back. Then they sent me to my aunt's house for six months, but my mum kept phoning me up every day abusing me. One day I took lots of tablets and went to school and just fainted. They took me to hospital and the psychiatrist was talking to me and they brought my mum and I smashed up all the plates and everything in that room.... Then they put me in another children's home for about four months. It was a really nice place. I didn't want to go [from there] but they sent me with my dad. I told them I didn't want to go 'cos I didn't feel comfortable. But they said you have to go somewhere, your time is up, we have to dump you somewhere. I said please don't put me there. But it didn't last more than five days. They gave my dad some money, but he kept the cupboard locked where he kept the TV and the telephone. It was boring, boring. He wanted me to be home by 5pm but it took me two hours to get from school to home...."

"Then my best friend, she's still my best friend now, she said come and stay at my auntie's. She went through social services and I stayed there. I was there about a year. One day we were watching TV and he [her carer] said, 'Bloody blacks, we don't want them here'. Then one day he started swearing at me. So I packed up my bags and called Childline and they told me about the Centrepoint hostel. They helped me a lot in Centrepoint. They had a counsellor



there who helped me a lot and helped me get things sorted in my head.”

“Then they put me into foster care, I was there for about six weeks. The foster carer’s daughter’s husband was bullying me and told me I should be more like his wife. I left there ’cos I thought I was being bullied. They wanted me to go out of the house when I didn’t want to go out. I just got dumped there, I didn’t know where I was going.”

“Then I was put in a B&B for nine months. I got sexually harassed several times. I was only 15 then. The police were called several times and social services were meant to visit but they never did. I been in lots of B&Bs for one night, then a week.”

“Then they put me in another house and I had to move out two weeks ago. Social services told me to call up the YMCA about vacancies. But there were no vacancies, but I didn’t know that until the day I had to leave. Then the council denied they were accommodating me, but I got all the paper work that [says] they have to accommodate me.”

“Then they moved me to this house. But there were racists in there who didn’t want me in there ’cos they wanted the three-bedroom house to themselves. They spit into my food, putting my toothbrush down the loo and putting shit on to the plate. Then my friends called a cab for me and I went. The next day I went back with my friends and the man hit me and locked the door on me. Then my friend jumped out and there was a big fight. Then the family moved out. Then I had to move out from there ’cos the landlord didn’t want to rent it anymore ’cos he wasn’t getting housing benefit.”

At the time of the first interview Chantel was, hardly surprisingly, still unsettled.

“I’m staying between two different places. One of them [is] on the same road as my mum which is very awkward. My things are at two places. I’ve lived in people’s houses for too long. I want to get better, to go to college and get some more qualifications.

But I can’t do that until I’m stable and no one wants you to work for them if you haven’t a stable address. I’d like to have somewhere to live, even it’s just a room. I’d like to have a job or be in college doing something that I want to be doing. I just want to be happy.”

At the time of the second interview, things had taken a decided turn for the better. Chantel had left her friend’s house and moved in with her partner, whom she has been seeing for two years. She was “on the housing list so I should get re-housed soon”. Her partner, who is older than her,

“... gives me a lot of encouragement. Anything I want to do, he’s 100% behind me. If I feel down he’s behind me: ‘Listen’, he says, ‘you’ve got everything to live for, you can do anything you want. Nobody owns you’.... Michael [partner] helps me a lot, all my clothes you see there he bought me. He pays rent, gas, electric, I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

Chantel was also doing a college course on sound engineering and doing really well.

“I’ve proved my point I’m top of the class, I get called ‘boff’ ... I’m getting top marks, my attendance is 100%, I’ve been to college every day.... The course is easy, we’ve got to do numeracy, it’s improved so much I can’t believe it. Do electronics, learn about all electrical components, look at systems, televisions. The teachers are excellent, my form tutor is really good. Last day of term is [several months away] but I’ve finished most of my work.”

She also has ambitions for her future:

“I want to continue in higher education and hopefully get a place of my own, although I like living here. I want to continue to achieve what I am being – top of the class and on top of things and be a stronger person, and be happy, that’s the main thing.”

## Jeux: pregnancy as a turning point in a turbulent life affected by racism

Jeux was born in Nigeria and was sent to England when she was six. She thinks this was to get a decent education. When she arrived in 'Southside' she was sent to stay at her mother's friend's house. Jeux was not happy with the arrangement. Her mother: "left me with her friends. They never look after me properly. I used to just do whatever".

When she had finally had enough, at around age 14, she left.

"I just got up one morning and I thought I'm not taking this – packed my bags and went to a friend's house. I was there for a couple of days, plucking up the courage and planning what I'm going to do, you know.... Then I was out on the streets for a while and then one day I met this boy."

The boy she met was in care and so he advised her on how to get help from social services.

"I didn't know nothing about it.... They put me in the children's home. It was nice. There was dinner time, breakfast time, school time. That was times I never got [previously]."

From the children's home, Jeux went into foster care where, like Chantel, she encountered racism.

"They were Jamaican. I thought OK, they're black. But they're racist! I found that you can get racism within the black community.... I thought, yeah, that foster carers are just people that want to help you but they don't really, you know, they're just doing their job."

Jeux did do well at school and finished her GCSEs, although, as she says in the second interview (below) this was largely despite, rather than because of, the care system. She left school with good GCSEs in spite of her poor attendance and interest. She achieved an A for IT, six Cs, one D, and one E. She carried on in education taking A levels:

"I was doing A level IT, that's why I got the computer, 'cos I needed it for my course

work.... Then I got pregnant and ended up not finishing."

Jeux was already a mother at the time of the first interview and described the birth of her daughter as a turning point – the most important thing to have happened in her life.

"Feels like a turning point for me. It is where my childhood stops and it's where independence begins. Through like having her, I've got a lot of things I've been wanting for a very long time."

At the time of the first interview, Jeux had recently split up with the 21-year-old father of the baby, even though they are still friends and he wants to have a relationship with the child. However, she complains that he is no good for the baby or for her because he is also NEET.

"Her dad don't work; don't go to college; don't do nothing.... A baby can't survive on love alone."

Despite wanting to be a good mother, Jeux was also very frustrated because she desperately wants to finish her A levels. But the Careers Service did little to help.

"You can't get crèches until she's 2 years old but I don't want to wait that long."

She repeatedly asked about studying from home and could not understand why this was not possible. In the second interview several months later, she was asked what had happened. She told us:

J: "I've moved, got my own flat and I'm more settled now. It was a bit unstable because I moved into a bed and breakfast and I really hated it there.... It was a room in a basement and it had this tiny little window and I couldn't even tell what time of the day it was.... That place would make anybody miserable."

R: "So you left there and came straight here?"

J: "Yeah. They just sent me a letter saying that they got a place for me and that I should come check it out ... and I said well I ain't got no choice ... I moved. It's OK."

She was also still hopeful of getting her career ambitions back on track:

R: "Last time I spoke to you, you were annoyed about not being able to study from home."

J: "Yeah. I've got prospectuses. I've gone to college and they're going to write me back a date for the interview, to do Science Advanced National Diploma. I want to do that course so that I could go into uni."

R: "What do you want to do at uni?"

J: "Pharmacology. I heard it's very competitive though. I just want to get a degree...."

R: "So when do you start college?"

J: "September."

R: "She'll go into childcare?"

J: "Apparently, yeah, they are supposed to pay a certain amount, a percentage of something and then I am meant to pay the rest, 'cos nurseries are really expensive."

R: "Would you work as well?"

J: "Nah, there's not really enough time."

R: "It would affect your benefits though?"

J: "It's going to get lower. I get Income Support which is about £82 a week, but when I start full-time education.... He said while you're in full-time education, you're not entitled to it. And I said what? That's a bit shabby. But I'm not bothered as long as they pay the childcare and part of my rent...."

Jeux also provided a devastating 'user's' critique of the care system and the challenges that the proposed system of personal advisers will face.

R: "When you look back at your time in care now, how does it make you feel?"

J: "Terrible.... They are getting paid to say to you...."

R: "Who? Social workers?"

J: "Yeah! Social workers, carers, all these people that's got to do with care. They get paid for chatting crap and dictating your life, for telling you how to lead your own life and telling you what would suit you.... I think being in care is what makes people not care, makes most of them mash up.... Most of the people that have been in care, they've just got this anger thing like hate thing and they hate the world and it's care that makes them like that."

R: "How could it be different?"

J: "It can't be different. They don't wanna change. The way they see it is that they're the adult and you're the child and you haven't got a say in what they say ... it's all a load of crap, about the child matters and it's all about the child.... When I'm saying that I don't want something, I'm saying I don't want something.... I want to be in a semi-independent unit. You could at least listen. They are like, 'We don't think that you can handle being in a semi-independent unit'. Is it your life?! Are you in my head?! And they are still there coming to see how I am! Who cares!! They are like, oh, we're just trying to help and I mean you could help by just pissing off.... They turn round and say to you: 'Erm, this is just my job, I'm just doing my job'. Oh, so now you're just doing your job – you don't really care! ... If they cared, things would be a lot different. If they cared in the way a mum would ... things would be a lot different."

"When you're living with your mum, it's different, yeah, it doesn't go outside of the house. When you're in care, it's not just between you and your foster mum, it's been between you, your foster mum, the social worker, the other social worker, the social worker's manager, everybody in the whole office. Anybody who wants to go and look in your file can go and look in your file. They're chatting shit when they say that oh your file is private and you can go and look in your file any time ... [but] you have to go through a very long process to go and look in your file. When they write things about you in your file it is not things that have actually happened, they write it the way they interpret it.... And you never have just

one social worker, they change social workers like you change your jacket....”

R: “How do you think this experience has affected your life?”

J: “... I could have grown up being a person that just totally hates everybody sort of thing.... You have too much of them in your life so you grow up hating people, not wanting to know anybody. Or, you can grow up being your own person, like me now.... I suppose being in care makes you more unstable, as a person. It makes you like, boy, it’s all about number one ... it’s all about you.”

R: “There are a lot of other people I have spoken to, who have had a similar experience to you. They didn’t come out as headstrong, and didn’t get qualifications. What do you think makes you different?”

She told us that she had truanted a lot from school until finally someone took notice of her and treated her with respect.

J: “My IT teacher, he was nice to me. He used to talk to me a lot.... One to one time is what you don’t get from your social worker. You know that there’s not an ulterior motive, they’re not going to then write it down. I used to get that from my IT teacher. He used to say, ‘What’s up with you, how’s things?’, and talk to me on the level. I used to know that he wasn’t getting nothing out of it. He wasn’t paid to be nice to me....”

R: “Do you think you have changed from the person you were then?”

J: “It can be very easy to fall into the old lifestyle.... It’s tempting for me ’cos of my environment. The old lifestyle is just going out, partying, not caring, drinking, getting out of your head, doing whatever, scams, all about the money. You know – oh, my life is already fucked up. That’s how people in care look at it, like – I’ve got nothing to lose.”

R: “What do you mean by your environment?”

J: “Well c’mon, look at it [high rise inner-city estate]. There’s nothing. Normally in the

daytime, everyone should be in school or in work, but it’s not like that. You’ve got people doing nothing that you can always hang around with. Because most of my friends were in care, and most of them have babies as well, I could go and meet any of them and do whatever I want to do ’cos all of us are in the same boat.”

R: “So do you do that or are you trying to avoid that?”

J: “No, man. I just stay at home with my baby and try and teach her how to say whatever. I hate it ’cos you just watch the day go by. I choose not to go out and hang around those people ’cos I’d rather just stay at home and do nothing than just hang around with the old crew ’cos I just don’t want to do that anymore. I don’t feel like it.”

Jeux’s success in remaining focused was, as we have seen, partly a result of her feeling noticed, respected and listened to by her IT teacher, which for her was a model of what an adult–child relationship should be.

“I think every child just wants to be loved. I think they should get people who actually care and stick with that person from the beginning right to the end.”

Jeux still had a social worker and a ‘befriender’. But she was critical of ‘professional’ help.

“The government is just creating new jobs. Like c’mon, a befriender. A befriender! I mean if you just want to befriend me, why do you have to get paid! ‘I’m not here to judge you.’ Hello?! They are taking us as fools.”

## Brian: achievement amid instability and homophobia

Brian is white and also living in ‘Southside’. He says he was doing very well at school until his mother withdrew him from school at the age of 14 to avoid his being excluded. He added:

“Lots of other problems occurred at home so I ended up in social services

accommodation. I'm on my 23rd address in the last four years."

Many of Brian's problems relate to his 'coming out' as gay. However, this was only one of the sources of disputes with his parents. He had arrived home very drunk well before he reached the age of 16.

"On the gay scene it's very easy for young men to club and pub. Young crowd to meet the older crowd, club promoters exploit that.... So I found it very easy to go there, so I found it easy to drink. I was 13 when I first went there. I had no problems 'cos I was always going in with older people anyway.... It became a problem the minute I started, 'cos you start having sex as well. When you start having sex, you want more, more, more of it. I was so promiscuous for about two years.... Then I discovered drugs. I never ever got into anything heavy like heroin or crack.... I took recreational drugs, ecstasy, speed and every now and again I'd snuff cocaine. I wasn't paying for it, I was just the young cheeky guy."

Brian had also been picked up by the police for drugs offences. Eventually he told his parents about being gay, and (as described earlier) the outcome was fairly traumatic, undermining his relationship with both parents. He was moved into the first of several family resource centres he was to stay in. He was in the first one for nine months, much longer than anyone is supposed to stay. He also resisted attempts by social services to reunite him with his family.

His next experience was trying to be fostered by gay carers.

"I was put into contact with an association set up ten years ago to help young gay teenagers that have nowhere else to go. They take referrals from social services for under-16s. So I needed social services referral 'cos social services had to pay for it. It was with a really homophobic council and I asked for gay foster parents from the trust. We were initially told yes by the fostering and adoption panel and, 'cos it was such a unique case, if you like, they had to go directorate level. So all my social workers wrote in my report that is the best thing. Their managers said the same thing, and

then we got to the assistant director and he said no. 'Absolutely no, you are far too young to decide you are gay.'"

There then followed a long-drawn-out complaints procedure and the panel of three external assessors eventually found in his favour.

"So I started a complaints procedure and [that] condemned me for the next three to four years really. They turned around and said [to the council] 'How dare you be so homophobic?' The panel was brilliant. They said we can't believe this still goes on today. They agreed with me, but the assistant director had the ability to turn round and say, 'No, we disregard this decision'. And they made me jump through their hoops."

He was placed with foster carers, but this lasted only five days after which he made allegations about how they were treating their disabled children. Back he went to another resource centre. Then a family friend decided to intervene and persuaded him to go and live with her and her husband in rural Wales.

"I lived in Wales and loved it for a little while. My aunt took me clubbing once a week to keep me up there and also put me in a school up there. I went to school successfully for two months which was amazing. But Welsh schools are very different to English schools.... I had enough of the quiet life, I needed Leicester Square and Soho. You're used to it and just have to have it back.... I came back from Wales and went back to another family resource centre, the third one. I was there for quite a while actually. I quite enjoyed living there but they didn't enjoy me...."

After this, 'accommodation pinball' continued with another foster carer:

"The foster carer, Jill, was a frail old woman, and she was thin and she'd always fostered girls 'cos boys were too much trouble. She'd heard about this young gay boy that had come along and she thought gay boys are so lovely and quiet. Then she got me and had the shock of her life. But me and Jill got on like a house on fire."

But Brian spent a lot of time in a nearby pub, which he described as a ‘very druggy pub’. Although he obviously enjoyed this, he was also pretty relieved when he was finally moved away from this placement, first to another resource centre and then into foster care with gay foster carers. But this did not last, and he moved on to another gay carer where, at the time of the first interview, he seemed quite settled. Social services, however, were thinking of moving him to independent living, which he was dreading.

“I’ve already said I don’t want to live on my own, it’s the most lonely experience you can have. My greatest fear is being lonely. I’d want to move into a gay shared house or something. At the moment that’s the sort of direction we’re heading in.”

By the time of the second interview things had changed yet again. He had had one job (with a solicitor), but even though he was being promised promotion, the pay was not good. Brian stayed with it for a few months before leaving after disputes about pay and time he had off when ill:

“I couldn’t stick it, I couldn’t handle not progressing very quickly so I left there.”

He was unemployed again. He had also been charged with taking and driving away a car and had been given a six-month probation order. And he was struggling with benefits.

He then got a job as a key worker in a house looking after young people with learning difficulties. He loved this and felt a sense of achievement and thrived. But this went wrong when his mother reappeared and “started digging her claws in”. He resigned from his job, having taken time off work without warning or permission. Eventually Brian’s taste for high life and alcohol got the better of him. At the time of the second interview, he was serving 18 months in a YOI for robbery and criminal damage (when he had attempted to rob an off-licence shop). But even in the YOI he was still being optimistic about his future.

“I’ve started doing education since I’ve been in here. I’m sitting my maths GCSE in June. I’ve done a [psychological profiling] test in here. It’s like a profile of you – an ingenuity test, aptitude test and accuracy test. It builds

up a profile of you, what jobs you’d be perfect at. Most of the population is at 40%, but I was in the 80% and 90%. When it [the profile] came back with jobs, it was like stockbroker and business consultancy and things like that. They said you can easily do A level maths. It’s one of the most difficult A levels you can get. I was really pleased. I’ve sat loads of lower exams than the GCSEs just to get me going and I’ve been getting 90%. The last one came back with a distinction. I was really pleased.”

He also reported he was receiving love letters from an ex-inmate who seemed really genuine, and was looking forward to being released, even though he will be electronically tagged when he comes out – probably a few months after the second interview was completed.

Brian’s case presents a different sort of problem for social services departments and ConneXions. Clearly, he has been involved in illegal activity throughout his mid-teenage years. He has also proved to be beyond the control of a long procession of, first, his parents and then other surrogate adult carers, gay and straight. Indeed, some of them appear to have colluded in his illegal activity, albeit with the best of intentions of providing him with some semblance of stability, in the hope that this would enable him to settle down. Most of his carers, if they ‘succeeded’, did so for only a short time. In contrast to Jeux, Brian does not seem to crave continuity of love and affection. Indeed, he is brutally honest about his ‘problem’:

“My problem is I love the lifestyle that goes with the drinking, the socialising, being happy, being merry, doing silly things and having a fantastic time.”

Yet this lifestyle had also proved to be a recipe for instability and under-achievement.

## Joe: downhill after an adoption breakdown

Joe is African Caribbean and was born in ‘Northend’. He is aware of the identity of his mother – he thinks she is mixed heritage – but has not contacted her or even spoken to her, although he thinks she lives locally. His father is

black, but he does not know if he was born in the Caribbean or Africa. Joe was adopted by a white family when he was two years old.

He got on OK with his adopted parents between the ages of two and 13 years and calls them mum and dad. But at age 13 he moved out to a friend's house because he "fell out" with his adopted mother. He says he can still talk to his "mum and dad" – but generally they do not want to know too many details about what it's like on the streets, how he copes with the problems of racism.

"They don't like to know. When I was coming up to about 13 I got put into foster care."

He went to school in 'Northend' but was excluded at around the same time he was having trouble with his adoptive mother.

"Got asked to leave in Year 8 [13 years old] ... I was too bad – messing about in the classrooms.... They asked me to leave or I would be expelled."

He went to a second school but things did not improve.

"I didn't like school because I was in the lower sets ... I knew I had more potential – but the teachers would not move me ... into higher classes to higher sets."

He did not sit any school examinations. Nor did he get on with any of his carers once he had left his adoptive parents, and he was eventually moved into hostel accommodation. The main hostel carer was a woman; her boyfriend was also a carer.

"He called me a black bastard once.... It was him that stitched me up."

He had arrived back late on New Year's Eve and had a row with them the following morning.

"They wanted to throw me out of the house at about half nine [the next morning].... He tried to drag me out of bed – eventually I got out of bed, but I heard [him] say [to woman carer], 'Just ring up the police, stitch him up and say that he hit me...'. [She] rang up Youth Justice, and they said that they can't

do nothing, and that's when [he] said to ring up the police.... I thought they were only kidding."

Joe thought they wanted him to say sorry, but the police came and he was arrested and held in custody for three nights. This issue was not resolved at the time of the first interview – "I will probably get more hours' community service". At the time of the second interviews, Joe could not be traced.

## Conclusions

This chapter has presented four case studies of young people's experience of being 'looked after'. Three of these case studies are of minority ethnic young people. All three reported experiences of racism from their carers, as did some of the other care-leavers not reported here. Chantel suffered a history of abuse and a turbulent series of moves between unsatisfactory accommodation which were still continuing at the time of the second interview. She still wants to get her education back on track but recognises the importance of stability in order to achieve that. She says she is now finding this through her new, older, boyfriend.

The second case study, Jeux, became a mother at 16. She is obviously intelligent, talented and also determined to get her educational career back on track. She was highly critical of those who did not seem to want to help her to do this, especially the procession of allocated social workers and her befrienders – merely "doing their job". Her critique of the care system certainly emphasises the importance of young people having a say in the allocation of personal advisers, befrienders or mentors. She also emphasises that being 'looked after' often involves a lack of continuity in support, a feeling of not being listened to and not having her wishes respected. What makes Jeux unusual is that, despite all this, she feels she is strong, adult and determined to succeed both as a mother and in her chosen career.

The other two cases were male and both had spent time inside YOIs. Brian had lived a chaotic lifestyle and had a running battle with social services about wanting to have a gay foster carer. He had won some of these battles but this had not really prevented placement breakdowns. His

story is, in many ways, unique, but serves to emphasise the fast-moving roller-coaster of some young people's lives. Some of the carers and professionals working with him appear to have made very difficult decisions about tolerating illegal behaviour in order to try to hang on to the reins. His one chance of translating his obvious abilities into meaningful qualifications seemed to have come, ironically, as a result of being in a YOI.

Joe in 'Northend' had also had a custodial sentence. He was mixed heritage in terms of his birth family but adopted by a white couple. When this broke down and his education began to go wrong, things began to disintegrate for him and he could well have been in custody again by the time of the second interview.

The well-trodden path from care to custody (Carlen, 1988) also stretched out in front of some of the female sample. Rather than being strong and determined like Jeux, many remained vulnerable. Melissa, a black British young 'Southside' woman, was a more typical case of vulnerability. She was taken into care only at the age of 15 but before that lived in extremely deprived circumstances. She had learning difficulties (dyslexia) and had not done well at school, but with the encouragement of her foster carer had started college courses. Despite being in an independence unit at the time of the second interview, she was still being emotionally supported (on a voluntary basis) by both her foster mother, with whom she obviously had a very good relationship, and her boyfriend. These, rather than staff in the independence unit, were the people who had a positive influence. Yet these key 'significant adults' in her life were not formally responsible for her, nor were they paid for doing so. Indeed, it was the lifestyle she was living separate from the independence unit that made her still highly vulnerable, and she could, like her brother, end up in prison. She was on fraud charges at the time of the second interview, after allowing her bank account to be used by a third party (possibly for money laundering).

Many of the young people's stories told in the last two chapters are (frustratingly) incomplete. The policy context is changing – since October 2001, those 'looked after' who reach the age of 16 continue to be the responsibility of local authorities, which now have a statutory duty to assess and meet their needs until the age of 21.

But there are no interim measures to cover care-leavers represented by those in this sample. Those aged 17 and 18 in this research are destined to be (yet again) another 'lost generation'. And those vulnerable young people who have not been 'looked after' before the age of 16, some of them described in the last chapter, will also have to fend for themselves – with a little help from their friends and families. The young people covered in this research have clearly identified the problems they face. It seems that the 'solutions' will have to be reserved for the generations that follow in their wake.



# Making better connections: main findings and their policy implications

This final chapter draws together some of the main findings and outlines some of the key policy implications of this research, particularly for the emerging ConneXions Strategy.

This research confirms that the population of young people who are NEET, or otherwise 'socially excluded', is markedly heterogeneous (see for example, Johnston et al, 2000). Although Johnston et al's Teesside sample included around 10% who were South Asian, this group was not discussed in detail in their research report. By contrast, our research is based on a sample that specifically targeted those who lived in multi-ethnic communities and areas of deprivation, and much of the discussion reports the experiences of black and minority ethnic young people. Like the white Teesside sample, the experiences of young people whose ethnicity was other than white British in this study was extremely varied. It might be tempting to conclude that, since almost no two biographies were the same, any intervention and support will require a level and type of engagement that is 'tailor-made' to the uniqueness of the individual circumstances. Yet, within this heterogeneity there were some clear patterns. Within the South Asian community in 'Northend', for instance, there were clear differences between the gender groups but similarities of experience within those groups. There were also marked differences between the experiences of minority ethnic young people in 'Northend' and 'Southside'.

Those who had become young mothers seemed to need particular types of support in order to balance the responsibilities they had for their children with their (almost universal) wish to be able to get back to their studies, take courses or find employment. Many of the minority ethnic participants faced racism in its various forms.

Many of those who had been, or were, 'looked after' by local authorities found the experience disempowering. So there is not a simple lesson to be learnt from the heterogeneity of this sample, that is, that one size either will or will not fit all. Rather, the conclusion must be that patterned experiences and circumstances require sophisticated and sensitive interventions if they are to have any chance of being successful.

A highly troubling finding is that a significant number of young people who were NEET were not known to official agencies, such as the existing Careers Service and, we suspect, other 'official' agencies (see Appendix B). This was also a finding of the last major study of 'young runaways' (Children's Society, 1999). This research illustrates just how easy it is for young people to 'disappear'. It also illustrates how there is often very little coordination between agencies. Taking both these points together suggests the vital importance of mapping and tracking young people and the huge difficulties involved in doing so (Craig et al, 1999; Green et al, 2001). This is especially true of the most vulnerable. On the basis of this research, it would also be fair to conclude that it is often the voluntary sector, and particularly community-based organisations, that are dealing most effectively with the 'disappeared'. However, even these organisations, which are often under-resourced, did not know where some of the 'disappeared' had gone. Even they had lost contact with them, and despite our combined best efforts during the course of this study.

This presents a major challenge to the new ConneXions Service. The recommendations of the range of studies into the problems of 'mapping and tracking' young people referred to in Chapter 1 requires urgent attention. What is

minimally required is more systematic collaboration between agencies. This will also need to be aligned to better systems of data collection and exchange, better systems for ethnic monitoring, and a particular focus on those groups known to be at particular risk.

There is evidence in this report about the young ‘disappeared’ that raises a serious question concerning whether current and frequently quoted estimates of the size of the NEET group are accurate. If we were to generalise from this study on the basis of those we identified as not registered with official agencies, the numbers of those NEET would be well in excess of 200,000. Of course, it is unwise to generalise from a sample of this size, but there is more than a strong hint that a substantial number of young people (and, disproportionately, minority ethnic disadvantaged young people), are slipping through the ‘welfare net’. Voluntary sector organisations working with young people ‘looked after’ reported to us that it is rare to have minority ethnic young people referred to them (also see Coles, 2000a). A very large number of agencies were established to help young people in our fieldwork areas. But simply having many agencies is clearly not the answer, particularly if they are not working effectively together or even talking to each other.

A disproportionate number of those (unknown to agencies) who are NEET were of minority ethnic origins. This is particularly true of the ‘Northend’ sample and would be, we suspect, equally true of most areas outside of the major UK centres of the minority ethnic population. In ‘Southside’ there appeared to be much more acceptance – reflected in routine practice – of the multicultural nature of the local population. Finding and keeping up with the movements of the (predominately minority ethnic) ‘disappeared’ was a major challenge in this research, and it certainly should be a major challenge for ConneXions. It must be also recognised that ‘disappearing’ is a two-way process. Some young people ‘disappear’ either because they are not finding help from agencies, or because they think they can manage better on their own without their help, or with help from some other agency. Some simply do not want the help on offer. To (some) statutory services that seem oblivious to the existence of the ‘disappeared’, this gives them a perfect alibi – indeed, one official ‘Northend’ agency characterised NEET to us as ‘a white working

class issue’, which, on the basis of its own (incomplete) data, it would have appeared to be. If young people do not (according to the agency’s records) exist, then there is not a problem for them to address. But the young ‘disappeared’ do exist. We have talked to them, and their words are in this report. And, sooner or later, they will probably be somebody’s problem. They will eventually reappear as young parents, offenders, serious mis-users of drugs, or potential or actual suicides.

Another important finding relates to racism in its various forms. Many of the minority ethnic young people in this sample told us of their experiences of racism in school, and, in the case of those ‘looked after’, of racism from some of their carers. There is evidence too of organisations (some schools, social services departments, local careers services and others charged with the care of young people) that are not able adequately to respond to issues of difference and diversity, including issues of ethnicity, sexuality and unusual life-styles. One particularly complex situation reported to us was that of a young woman of mixed Bengali–white origins studying at a local college on an Asian women’s course. Because she was fairly westernised in her appearance, she found herself isolated within the course by both the tutor and the other participants. Following the enactment of the 2000 Race Relations Amendment Act, all public agencies now have a duty to ensure that they address issues of institutional and individual racism within their own organisations. This duty will need to be responded to far more energetically than have been the equal opportunities requirements of the past 30 years. There is clear evidence from this study that much, much more needs to be done.

This research also confirms that many (but by no means all) of those who are NEET experienced various forms of educational disaffection pre-16. A substantial majority of the sample played truant a lot. A large minority of the sample had been excluded from school, and several had not been in school at all as they approached minimum school-leaving age. This finding confirms the appropriateness of the general direction of policy outlined in various SEU reports, particularly that attempts to engage with disaffected young people need to start at a very early age and to be both determined and systematic. The reasons for truancy and behaviour resulting in school

exclusion were complex, ranging from bullying to bereavement, from dealing with abuse and other traumas to 'life-style' and laziness. Too much truancy was tolerated. Few of the complex reasons for it were explored or understood. If high truancy rates are to be remedied, schools and support services will need to be much better resourced and home-school support services will need to work together. It is clear that many of our participants later regretted not 'hanging on' at school but felt that their needs – and indeed they themselves – were overlooked at critical points in their lives.

Although few of the sample made the connection for themselves, there were strong indications that trouble at school was mirrored by – or mirrored – trouble in the home environment. When some young people experienced traumatic events, these seemed to have thrown them into personal chaos to which the school was unable or unwilling to respond, even if it knew about it – which often it did not. For a few, the school, or a particular teacher, provided a lifeline. To some the failure of family relationships – which appeared frequently in our participants' accounts – appeared very much connected to educational disadvantage. It must be pointed out, however, that some in the sample seemed to be living happily at home with two biological parents and siblings. But many lacked a stable and sustainable biological or surrogate family base from which they could explore their own potential, develop and thrive.

A significant number in the sample had experience of being 'looked after'; for this reason, a separate chapter was devoted to this experience. Indeed, this is probably one of the largest studies of minority ethnic experience of care, a fact of which the policy and research community should not be particularly proud. This study confirms, if confirmation is now needed, that care-leavers are very often multiply disadvantaged. In the case of the minority ethnic members of the sample, this disadvantage seems to have been exacerbated by experiences of racism or, in one case, homophobia. However, there are also examples of young people 'looked after' who were relatively successful against the odds, in terms of either educational or social achievements. There appears no inevitable association between being in care and failing. The bleak statistical correlations that associate being 'looked after' in public care and poor

outcomes should never be used as an excuse for perpetuating a culture of low expectations.

Routes into, and out of, NEET also presented a very complex array of different patterns. This implies that, to be effective, agencies must respond in differing and flexible ways to the experience of young marginalised people. Between the first and second interviews (in some cases a period of only a few months) some young people's circumstances had changed markedly and were likely to do so again – some for the better, some for the worse. Some seemed to have attained a stable and sustainable position of independence. And it should be remembered that this is in marked contrast to the majority of young people who are still heavily dependent on their families at this age – and for many years later. Other young people seemed to have experienced extremely volatile careers, often involving a series of physical moves (between placements and/or different addresses). For this latter group, there seemed to be little stability – either of friendships, jobs or a significant other. On many occasions this was not a matter of choice, as young people were moved on between placements, pushed out of accommodation, found important relationships severed, prevented from doing things by parents, carers, or officials, or, *in extremis*, fell foul of the legal system.

The research also found that, to many young people, help from people in the voluntary and community sectors and volunteers appeared to be very important. Often these seemed more user-friendly to them, and especially to minority ethnic young people, than statutory services. These voluntary sector agencies are often based within local communities; they are often staffed by people well known to, or living in, local communities and more likely to be sharing many of the cultural norms of local people than official agencies. Statutory services, on the other hand, were generally physically distant from these local communities and (with exceptions) were not perceived to be accessible or helpful.

Some young people, indeed, found official agencies profoundly disempowering. To many it seemed more important that they sustained a relationship of trust with an adult, particularly at critical moments in their lives. Some of the case studies recounted here also demonstrate that finding such a relationship was associated with exploring a route out of NEET, just as the

breakdown of relationships was a route into it. In terms of 'routes back', support from a 'significant adult' was as likely to be from a relative, a teacher, a partner or a chance encounter as from someone with a professional paid caring responsibility for the welfare of the participant (see Butler and Williamson, 1994).

Sometimes, despite a difficult or chaotic life, stability and responsibility came with becoming a parent in their mid- to late-teenage years. In contrast to the popular media images of 'teenage parents' (sometimes also embraced by politicians and policy makers), most of the young mothers and some young fathers seemed to be taking their responsibilities extremely seriously. Many of the young mothers also had significant aspirations to educational and occupational careers. However, on occasions these were undermined by the lack of help and support from official agencies, including social services, the Careers Service and the Benefits Agency.

## Re-ConneXions?

The cornerstone of the government's approach to better forms of welfare support and guidance for young people is the new ConneXions Strategy. Personal advisers are being heralded more generally as something of a panacea for helping disadvantaged people. Yet perhaps we should be at least somewhat sceptical of this new model army of personal advisers, mentors and befrienders before there is some clear evidence that they work, and of how they work, and under what conditions and circumstances. At the moment this is lacking (Coles, 2000a).

This research raises some serious questions for those likely to be the lynchpin of the new ConneXions Service. Who is likely to be the most effective in this role? What are their characteristics and how are they being (re)trained? Allegedly, one of the key policy goals of the present government is to shift away from a focus on poverty to one on social exclusion, and to promote more 'joined-up' partnership working in addressing this. But how will ConneXions forge connections between agencies that are currently finding such great difficulty in working together? Some evidence shows that the creation of multi-agency partnerships in itself does nothing to address the disparities of power between

agencies, and sometimes this undermines effective collaborative working (Craig and Taylor, 2002). Where will the ConneXions Service most effectively be based, and will it have enough resources to do its job? If outreach is an important tool of re-engaging young people, who is best equipped to do it, and how will it be managed in relationship to the ConneXions umbrella (Britton, 2001)? The research reported here shows both that there will be enormous difficulties, even for the most assiduous 'personal advisers', in contacting some disaffected or disengaged young people. Is ConneXions a 'strategy', a 'service', a 'partnership' or an 'umbrella'? If only the latter, then who is to be allowed underneath (too many or too few?), and is anyone testing whether it is waterproof, or effective in gale-force conditions?

One clear hint from this study is that the voluntary sector certainly needs to be centrally involved and well resourced, and its experience and ways of working respected. For this to be accomplished, there will have to be a cultural shift in the personnel currently employed in the statutory sector. The response of young people to the old Careers Service in this report suggests that ConneXions must be more than a 're-badging' of existing roles and responsibilities. The responsibilities heaped on ConneXions suggests that a much more holistic approach to young people's welfare is critical to its success. There is little sign from this study that the elements are yet in place to support such an holistic approach. If ConneXions is to prove effective, it will need to ensure that its patterns of provision reflect the complexities of young people's lives. Clearly, an 'appointments-based service' is unlikely to work with young people whose lives resemble those of many in this sample. Outreach or detached work may have more success if it is properly resourced and managed and the workers are appropriately trained. The skills required to work with some of the most severely damaged and disturbed young people will be considerable. There are also dangers in basing interventions and support on a psycho-pathological model of the 'individualised' nature of their problems. Many of the root causes of the problems described by participants in this study suggest that solutions must also focus on 'systems' (care), 'institutions' (schools and colleges) and 'sub-cultures' (including drug misuse, crime and life-styles). The policy stance and rhetoric of the government associated with ConneXions seems, in any case, to assume that all young people who may be reached by the new

service will wish to be re-engaged in mainstream society through routes defined by government. What is not clear is what stance will be taken towards those young people who choose, for reasons that appear perfectly rational to them, not to be helped by ConneXions and seek other, perhaps less formally recognisable, means for survival (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). Nor is it clear what powers the ConneXions Service will have to require local agencies to respond to the needs of young people identified by the work of personal advisers.

One potentially hopeful sign is that ConneXions is currently engaged in a pilot phase. Unlike many such recent pilot programmes, perhaps this time government could take time to learn properly from the experience of the pilots, and from detailed, rich-textured research such as is to be found in the pages of this report. Otherwise, the over-hasty 'rolling out' of ConneXions will end up as 'rolling over', or indeed being 'rolled over' by, the very young people it is said to be most concerned to help.



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## A

# Appendix A:

## Sample details

Fictionalised names, researcher references, ethnicity, gender and Atlas Ti (qualitative statical package) identity numbers. (Ethnicity was, as far as possible, self-defined by participants, using the 13 categories now used by the ConneXions Service, following guidance from the Commission for Racial Equality.)

### 'Northend' sample

Tamara, SM, white, female, 32  
 Sanam, SM, Asian, female, 33  
 Sarah, SM, white, female, 34  
 Michael, SM, black, male, 35  
 Simon, SM, white, male, 36  
 Jamie, SM, white, male, 37  
 Nicholas, SM, white, male, 38  
 Mark, SM, black, male, 39  
 Amanda, SM, white, female, 40  
 Saj, SM, Asian, male, 25  
 Zee, SM, Asian, male, 26  
 Neo, SM, Asian, male, 27  
 Ali, SM, Asian, male, 28  
 Anwar, SM, Asian, male, 59 (x2)  
 Bab, SM, Asian, male, 58 (x2)  
 Salma, SM, Asian, female, 57 (x2)  
 Sharon, CH1, white, female, 48  
 Donna, CH2, white, female, 64 (x2)  
 Dan, CH3, white, male, 50  
 Karl, CH4, mixed white–African Caribbean, male, 60, 75 (x2)  
 Suzie, CH5, white, female, 52  
 Gordon, CH6, English–Italian, male, 53  
 Maxine, CH7, white, female, 54  
 Dionne, CH8, African Caribbean, female, 55  
 Suzanne, CH9, mixed white–African Caribbean, female, 56  
 Luke, CH10, African Caribbean, male, 41  
 Saira, CH11, Asian, female, 61 (x2)  
 Joe, CH12, African Caribbean – adopted white family, male, 43  
 Sameena, CH13, Pakistani, female, 44 (x2)  
 Maureen, CH14, African Caribbean, female, 45  
 Amna, CH15, Asian, female, 46  
 Fatima, CH16, Asian, female, 47

### 'Southside' sample

Donna, LB, white, female, 1  
 Jill, LB, mixed heritage, female, 2  
 Jayne, LB, black African, female, 4  
 Josie, LB, white, female, 6  
 Clive, LB, black Caribbean, male, 8  
 Jon, LB, African Caribbean, male, 9, 19  
 Eleana, LB, white, female, 10  
 X-Man, LB, black Caribbean, male, 14  
 Jeux, LB, black African, female, 18  
 Lauren, LB, white, female, 7  
 Melissa, LB, black British, female, 16  
 Michael, LB, black African, male, 15  
 Paul, LB, black British, male, 74  
 Jason, LB, white, male, 11  
 Rebecca, LB, black Caribbean, female, 13  
 Craig, LB, white, male, 17  
 Jim, LB, Kosovan, male, 5  
 Ho, LB, Vietnamese, male, 12  
 Paul, BC, white, male, 73  
 Monica, BC, black British, female, 69  
 Andrew, BC, white, English–Irish, male, 70  
 Mel, BC, English–Turkish, female, 21 (x2)  
 Helen, BC, black British, female, 71  
 Berneice, BC, Nigerian, male, 66  
 Sheryl, BC, black British, female, 67  
 Tariq, BC, black British, male, 68  
 Gary, BC, black British, male, 72  
 Ben, BC, English–Turkish–African Caribbean, male, 65  
 Michael, BC, black British, male, 20 (x2)  
 Brian, BC, white, male, 22 (x2)  
 Chantel, BC, black British, female, 23 (x2)  
 Sue, BC, white, female, 24 (x2)



# Appendix B:

## Reaching young people on the margins: ethical and methodological considerations

This study is based on four elements:

1. a reading of the recent and contemporary literature and policy papers (which are steadily growing in volume);
2. interviews with representatives of key agencies working with young people to deliver programmes seeking to engage young people (such as Careers Services, local authority training departments and, until they were abolished, Training and Enterprise Councils) and analysis of their administrative data;
3. some secondary data analysis from large data sets (gathered for other reasons, but able to throw some light on the situation of marginalised young people – see Appendix C); and
4. qualitative interviews with young people.

The main form of primary data collection for this study was two in-depth interviews each with 64 young people, split between two fieldwork sites: a group of inner London boroughs ('Southside'), and two areas within a large city we call 'Northend'. The sites were chosen to ensure that the fieldwork would cover populations with substantial minority ethnic populations, since this was one characteristic strongly associated with being NEET but under-researched in previous studies. In parts of 'Southside', minority ethnic populations are in excess of 40% of the local population as a whole. In 'Northend', though the proportion of ethnic minority populations is considerably lower than in many London boroughs, we chose two fieldwork sites where minority populations were more concentrated, African Caribbean in one area and Bangladeshi in

the other. Ethnic matching of researchers with participants as far as possible was also felt to be an important consideration: three of the four researchers who carried out interviews were of minority ethnic origin.

The original goals of the project were to recruit half of the participants through Careers Service contacts and half through voluntary and community organisations, and to ensure that about two thirds of those interviewed were either of African Caribbean/black or South Asian family origin, as well as having a reasonable gender balance. All these goals were broadly achieved. Appendix A lists the characteristics of the sample in a little more detail. Of the 'Southside' 32 participants, 15 were female and 17 male; 21 were from an ethnic minority background, the great majority of these being African Caribbean, black British or black African. Of the 32 'Northend' participants, 16 were male, 16 female, 12 were of South Asian origin and 8 of African Caribbean or African Caribbean mixed heritage origins. A total of 41 participants – two thirds of the overall sample – were of minority ethnic origin.

The methodology chosen drew on the experience of earlier studies which had attempted to recruit 'disengaged young people' (for example, Merton, 1998; Johnston et al, 2000), adapted to fit the particular circumstances of this study. Recruitment of participants was undertaken through two routes. One was through contact with the appropriate Careers Service (either by writing to targeted young people – described below – or by physically waiting at the Careers Office, with the Office's agreement, to recruit

young people). The other was through voluntary and community organisations working with our target group of young people. In relation to the Careers Service, a 'person specification' or 'ideal type of participant' was provided to the Careers Service involved, which incorporated the geographical area for the fieldwork (by postcode), age, ethnicity and the fact that the person was to be NEET. Each service, which cooperated fully with the study, identified from their records young people who fitted this description. Within 'Northend', for example, approximately 100 young people were identified who fitted the person specification and who had signed personal Careers Action Plans which indicated their agreement to take part in research studies. (No such plans had been instituted in 'Southside' Careers.) The Careers Service itself then wrote to young people seeking their agreement to take part in the study and encouraging them to contact the researchers directly to arrange an interview. A small fee was offered as payment for participation as an acknowledgement of the time given by the participant.

At the same time, the researchers mapped the range of local organisations within the study areas, including youth projects, further education colleges, community organisations, outreach agencies and projects specialising in work with specific groups such as care-leavers, young pregnant women, those excluded from school, those involved in drug or criminal justice rehabilitation schemes or homeless young people. Almost 100 such organisations were identified within 'Northend', for example (itself raising questions about the need for effective inter-agency working). A selection of appropriate agencies, particularly those working within the fieldwork sites, was targeted by the researchers. In 'Southside', where there was also a large number of potential agency routes to disengaged young people, about a dozen carefully chosen agencies were targeted. Again, a written person specification was provided to these agencies, seeking the help of workers in locating potential participants. Standard letters were then sent to potential participants from the researchers, introducing themselves and providing contact details; or else agency workers brokered contact between the researcher and the young person in some other way. The target of 32 participants in each of the two fieldwork sites was achieved relatively easily. Those recruited outside of the Careers Service were mainly from a Bangladeshi

youth organisation, several community projects for homeless young people, a leaving-care team and several generic voluntary youth sector organisations.

Because the researchers were undertaking interviews largely in the evenings, and working on their own, the team was familiarised with and worked to the draft code of safety, later published by the Social Research Association (SRA, 2000). For example, researchers were encouraged to carry either a mobile phone or screech alarm at all times in the field and, where there was doubt about the safety of conducting an interview, to have call-back arrangements with someone who would know where they were conducting interviews. One of the fieldwork sites was an area where there had been outbreaks of violent behaviour involving the local community and police, and safety issues were perhaps more pertinent here than in other studies; both sites had experienced well-publicised racist assaults. The whole study was undertaken within the code of ethics published by the SRA. Participants were all provided with a written consent form for them to acknowledge their agreement to take part in the study by the researchers. They were also informed of the scope of the study and their right to withdraw from it, and they were assured that all information would be treated in confidence "except in circumstances in which you indicate that you or others might be in serious danger". Participants were also encouraged to choose a false name to be used within the analysis of data and reporting of the study to ensure anonymity in writing up the study.

Clearly, it cannot be claimed that the 64 young people included in the study are statistically representative of all young people who are NEET. They were, however, recruited in a variety of ways to ensure that they represented the population of 'disaffected' young people within the fieldwork areas, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity. They all shared a common characteristic – that of being disengaged from education, employment and training for significant periods of time. (The 'person specification' suggested at least four weeks, but many had been NEET for much longer.) Some were registered as inactive on Careers Service returns. Others were recorded as 'destination unknown'. The most problematic category in the administrative data kept on this group by Careers Services are those categorised as 'unemployed' or

'unavailable for work'. A significant number were recruited through voluntary and community agencies and, from their responses, were presumed not to be known to the local Careers Service. This was later double-checked in conditions of confidentiality by comparing details given to researchers by participants against records held by the Careers Service. In practice, reaching a representative sample of those NEET is currently an impossibility, and this is one of the issues that the ConneXions Service has been established to address. However, we are confident, as a result of the careful measures we took during the process of recruitment, that the participants provide a reasonably representative picture of the experience of those who are NEET within the two areas where fieldwork took place.

The original intention was to conduct the second interview with participants about six months after the first interview. However, one researcher left the project to take up another post halfway through the first round of 'Southside' interviews and the inevitable delays in recruiting and appointing a replacement researcher meant that the first round of interviews was finished much later than originally scheduled. The consequences of this delay were different for the two sites. In 'Southside', the second interviews undertaken by the first researcher (who had undertaken to complete these) were attempted about nine months after the first set, whereas the group of second interviews undertaken by the replacement researcher was undertaken approximately four months after completing her group of first interviews. In 'Northend', to try and align the timing of the interviews in the two fieldwork sites, the second interviews were delayed to a period about eight months after the first interviews.

This delay appears to have been crucial in terms of dropout from the study between the first and second interviews, as well as necessitating a small extension to the study as a whole. After the first interview, participants were asked if they would be prepared to be interviewed a second time. They were told that a slightly enhanced fee would be paid if they agreed to participate in the second interview. They were also kept in contact with researchers by means of postcards. In the event, of the participants for the 18 first interviews completed by the replacement researcher in 'Southside', 17 second interviews were achieved (after a four-month gap). For the 14 ('Southside'),

16 ('Northend' – Saira Mumtaz) and 16 ('Northend' – Carl Hylton) participants interviewed for the first time, where the gap to the second interview was eight to nine months, researchers completed only five, three and seven second interviews respectively. Thus, an overall total of 32 second interviews were achieved compared with 64 first interviews. A number of different methods were employed to try to locate the participants to minimise this dropout rate. These included: follow-up telephone calls and visits; calls to the agencies through which the participant had originally been recruited; checking the details of participants anonymously against the records of Careers Services; writing to 'new' addresses where someone with the same name as the participant was known to Careers; and enlisting the help of the agency workers as brokers for the researcher. The research team is confident that, within the parameters of the study, everything reasonable was done to try to track down participants and achieve second interviews.

This account is significant not as a defence of the hard and often quite difficult and sensitive work undertaken by a team of skilled researchers, but because it raises profound questions for the operation of the ConneXions Service. This was a small-scale study, with researchers familiar with the fieldwork sites (and living in or close to them), working in a fairly informal paradigm, and in close contact with local agencies. Considerable amounts of time and effort were spent in attempting to stay in touch with the sample of 64 participants, with whom researchers felt they had developed some rapport during and after the course of the first interview. Despite this, half of the participants were 'lost' to the study within a relatively short period of time. The critical point between the two interviews appears to be somewhere between four to six months, after which the likelihood of losing contact appears to be much greater than if a second contact was made at less than four months. If the ConneXions Service is to retain contact with the most disengaged young people, it appears from this study that contact will have to be very frequent. Furthermore, it will have to take place with a service in which an informal outreach mode may become the norm, rather than the exception, for contacting the most disadvantaged young people.

The researchers were not, of course, able to identify with complete certainty what had happened to all of those who had 'disappeared'.

But some information was gleaned from friends, agency workers and so on, and indicates how difficult it may be to stay in touch with the most rootless and disengaged young people. For the two 'Northend' researchers, at the point of abandoning the second round of interviews (with a total of eight completed interviews and two months' trying to track the remainder of the sample), the (similar) pictures were as follows (the main form of contact was usually supplemented by attempts at other means of contact – those in italics were not recruited through, or at, the Careers Service):

1. *Second interview achieved*
2. *Second interview achieved*
3. Still in 'Northend', had an accident; no response
4. *Second interview achieved*
5. *Known to have left 'Northend'; destination not known*
6. *Moved away; destination not known*
7. Moved accommodation; no response to follow up calls; letters sent to two new addresses; no response
8. *Second interview achieved*
9. *Left 'Northend'; now working as prostitute in London*
10. *Moved to own flat locally*
11. *Second interview achieved*
12. *Left area, destination not known; letter sent to new address; no response*
13. *Second interview achieved*
14. Known to be still in a hostel in 'Northend' but working as prostitute locally
15. *Left hostel; moved to own flat locally*
16. *Second interview achieved*

1. No response; participant was pregnant and may have been rehoused
2. Married at 15; may have returned unwillingly to Pakistan
3. Two new addresses tried; no response
4. No response to calls
5. No response; participant expected at first interview to be imprisoned
6. Letter to former address (grandmother's home); no response
7. No response to calls
8. Moved away from home because of 'family trouble' to special accommodation; no response to contact
9. May have moved to another city; no response
10. No response; youth worker lost contact also
11. *Disappeared; out of contact with youth worker*
12. *Still around, working; refused contact*
13. *Disappeared; destination not known to youth worker*
14. *Second interview achieved*
15. *Second interview achieved*
16. *Second interview achieved*

By cross-checking what the participants told the researchers against Careers Service records, we are able to establish without doubt that a significant proportion of those interviewed overall were not known to Careers Services in the two fieldwork areas and that those records were relatively inaccurate, although the picture was different in the two areas. In 'Southside', a minority was not known to Careers; in 'Northend' those unknown to Careers accounted for slightly more than 40% of all those interviewed. This is despite the fact that we recruited a substantial number of participants directly through Careers Service records, or at the Careers Offices, in 'Northend'. Equally worrying, a disproportionate number of those not known to Careers Services were of minority ethnic origin. For example, 9 of the 16 participants identified as not known to the Careers Service in 'Northend' were of minority ethnicities. This was about four times the level we might expect from local demography. Although the numbers involved are numerically small, because of the size of this study, this must raise some profound questions about the extent to which young people of minority ethnic origins were able equally to access this particular Careers Service. It also raises similar questions about the way in which the ConneXions Service proposes to deal with the issue of ethnicity among its 'customer base'.



This finding also, incidentally, completely contradicts the self-fulfilling comment made to the research team during one of its initial interviews with official agencies that ‘status zero’ in ‘Northend’ was “a problem of white working-class youth”. These figures also suggest that, at the very least, there must be considerable doubt about the numerical counts of young people who are NEET. One of the reasons for this argument is because the overwhelming majority of those not recruited through Careers – and therefore probably not known to other official agencies – were not known to the Careers Service, either. This aspect of the research suggests that official estimates of the size of the NEET population should be treated with a very great degree of caution and certainly as substantial under-estimates.

The topic guide for the first interviews was developed through discussion, examining frameworks used in parallel studies and after pilot interviews. Overall, the intention was to explore how young people came to be in the position in which they found themselves, and whether and how they wanted to move on to something different. It was structured around a number of key themes, including: schooling and experience of education; family life and support; contact with other agencies; leisure and social relationships; experience of work and training; financial issues; and their views of their own situation and aspirations for the future. The second interviews were used mainly to pick up on information gathered in the first interviews, to check on progress and change since the first interviews, and to clarify issues that remained unclear from the first interviews, following careful transcription. Interviews were, with the agreement of participants, tape-recorded and transcribed (in extensive notes and quotes format).

Given that researchers had begun to establish relationships of trust with the participants, it also provided the opportunity to explore more sensitive issues – such as family relationships and racism – in greater depth than had been generally possible in the course of the first interviews. We also tried to ask participants how they defined themselves in relation to concepts such as ‘status zero’ and ‘socially excluded’, the latter description being most commonly used by government to apply to them (and one that, as other research has found, is inappropriate for describing disengaged

young people in particular circumstances – see Johnston et al, 2000).

The first interviews lasted, on average, about an hour and a quarter; the second interviews were slightly briefer. Although the research was undertaken in two separate fieldwork sites, members of the research team met or communicated frequently in order to plan, timetable, prepare common research instruments, and compare and contrast findings from the two fieldwork sites. Data were coded and analysed using a qualitative software package (Atlas Ti), working to the key themes and concepts developed in constructing the topic guides.



# Appendix C:

## Quantitative evidence on NEET

Secondary analysis was undertaken mainly of the Labour Force Survey (by Paul Bivand at the Unemployment Unit) and of the Survey on English Housing (by Roger Burrows at the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York). This provided confirmation of the broad characteristics of young people in the NEET category, although neither (nor other more youth-focused studies such as the Youth Cohort Survey – see Chapter 1) is able to provide definitive indications of the size of the group (see Appendix B).

### The Survey on English Housing (SEH)

The SEH is a continuous government survey, carried out every year since 1993/94. Here we have analysed data from 1998/99 – the most recent available for analysis at the time of writing. The analysis is based on an unweighted base of 20,506 households containing 50,074 individuals. The results that are given below are based on the weighted and grossed data files representing 20,423 households containing 48,705 individuals. Crudely, every single household in the SEH sample represents 1,000 households in England.

The weighted and gross data estimates that 1,825,000 16- to 18-year-olds lived in households (that is, non-institutional) in England in 1998/99. Table 1 shows the estimated age distribution and Table 2 their recorded educational or economic status.

**Table 1: 16- to 18-year-olds living in households in England**

Age	Number (000s)	% of cohort
16	571	31
17	642	35
18	611	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,824</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Employment status of 16- to 18-year-olds**

Economic status	Number (000s)	%
Base	1,810	100
Student	738	41
FT employment	400	22
PT employment	447	25
Government training scheme	21	1
Unemployed	140	8
Sick/disabled	10	1
Other inactive	54	3
<b>NEET</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>11</b>

The most obvious categories to be included in estimating the size of NEET are the unemployed, those categorised as ‘sick/disabled’, and ‘other inactive’, which indicates that, of the 1,810 16- to 18-year-olds on whom we have data, 204 or 11% are NEET. This figure of 11% is an estimate for all 16- to 18-year-olds. However, it should be noted that a further 447 or 25% are only in part-time employment.

It should be recognised that some 16 year olds will still be at school because they have not yet reached school-leaving age. So at age 16, 9% are recorded as NEET, and at age 17 this has risen to 10%. By the age of 18, the size of the NEET group has increased by one half to 15% of the age group. Young women are also slightly more

likely to be NEET than young men – 12% compared with 10%.

Although the sample cells are small, in percentage terms, some minority ethnic groups (black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) are more likely to be NEET than their white counterparts, although those from an Indian background are less likely to be NEET.

One of the reasons for using the SEH is to examine spatial concentrations in particular housing tenures. Young people living in the social rented sector are considerably more likely (2%) compared with 7% of young people from the owner occupied to be NEET. Those living in private rented accommodation have an intermediate likelihood (19%).

NEET is also associated with living in households where the head of household is either unemployed or economically inactive. Almost half of the young people living with an unemployed head of household are NEET, compared with 34% where the head is inactive; 17% where the head is sick or disabled, and 7% where the head is in full-time work.

There is also evidence of regional differences (Table 3), with some northern regions having more than double the percentages of those reported in the Midlands and East Anglia.

**Table 3: Regional differences in NEET**

Government office region	Number (000s)	%
North East	79	17
North West	206	13
Merseyside	67	10
Yorkshire & Humberside	169	15
East Midlands	163	9
West Midlands	227	8
East Anglia	198	7
London	244	12
South East	292	10
South West	166	13

Finally, a preliminary logistic regression undertaken for this project suggests that those least likely to be NEET are those living with two parents in owner occupied housing with the father working full time. Those most likely to be NEET are those living as a couple or on their

own, with children, living in social housing, and with a head of household who is unemployed.

## The Labour Force Survey (LFS)

The LFS is a survey of households living at private addresses in Great Britain. Since 1992 quarterly publications have become possible because of the increased size of the survey – now 60,000 households every quarter. The LFS is intended to be representative of the whole population of Great Britain. It covers all persons resident in private households, all resident in National Health Service accommodation, and young people living away from the parental home in a student hall of residence or similar institution during term time. The sample design currently consists of 59,000 responding households in Great Britain every quarter, representing 0.3% of the population of Great Britain. A sample of approximately 2,000 responding households is added to this, representing 0.4% of the Northern Ireland population, thus allowing UK analyses to be undertaken.

Based on the most recent survey, estimates were provided for this report. This suggests that at the time of this survey 217,300 16- to 18-year-olds were NEET, that is, 7.7% of the age group, a figure more in line with the sort of estimates that might be suggested from the qualitative evidence discussed in this report. This number has increased sharply over the past year from a previous estimate of 193,700 (6.8% of the age group). This estimate is based on all those aged 16-18 in households covered by the survey. Many of the 16-year-olds, however, will again be below school-leaving age. However, LFS data do allow for the age groups to be determined by 'educational years' rather than chronological age. This survey indicates that, whichever age definition is used, there are slightly more young men than young women in this category. The International Labour Organisation unemployed represent about 59% of the NEET population.

The survey also indicates that some groups of young people are more likely to be NEET than others. There is a large number of young women NEET (over 21,000) who are looking after family. Just over a quarter of these say they want to work. A further 10,000 are sick and disabled and give this as their reason for economic inactivity.

There are substantial numbers of NEET young people who may be disabled and ILO unemployed. The total NEET and disabled in the winter of 2000-01 was 34,000 (18% of those NEET). Thirty-four per cent (67,000) had no qualifications and 54% had no qualification or a qualification below GCSE A–C grades (105,100). A further 68,000 had at least one GCSE A–C and the remainder, a scattering of higher level qualifications.

As with other surveys, the number of young people who are NEET and are members of minority ethnic groups is difficult to estimate because of the small sample size. Overall, 9% of the NEET population appears to be from minority ethnic groups, according to the LFS. This is likely to be an under-estimate, in the light of the prevalence of minority ethnic young people living away from the family home found from our interviews and therefore less likely to be contacted or to respond to a household survey such as the LFS. Following concern from researchers, there are now plans to have booster samples in new cohort studies. The LFS data do, however, confirm that Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people are more likely to be NEET than other groups.

Reviewing a range of evidence, the SEU also reported on spatial concentrations of young people who were NEET. Regions with a history of high unemployment, and deprived areas in all regions, had much higher rates. Young people whose parents were unemployed were also reported to be over-represented (SEU, 1999b). Young people from African Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi minority ethnic groups were also over-represented: one in six young people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities experienced spells of non-participation of four or more months during the two years following the end of compulsory schooling (SEU, 1999b).

The estimates here are based on a three-quarter average of autumn, winter and spring quarters preceding the end of this study, of those aged 16-18 and 'ILO unemployed or inactive' and 'those not on a course or did not respond when asked about their current education'. Using the three-quarter average lessens the potential confusion caused in the summer quarter by parents' answers about young people in summer between leaving school and starting college in September.

## The Youth Cohort Survey (YCS)

The most recent information from the YCS ninth survey of 18 year olds was based on a survey carried out in spring 2000 (DfEE, 2001b). The survey found that 11% of 18-year-olds were NEET and that almost half of those who were out of work at age 16 were also out of work at 18. The percentage of all 18-year-olds out of work has fallen by more than half since 1993. Young people from an unskilled manual background were more than five times as likely to be out of work than those from a managerial/professional background. A third of those who were persistent truants or excluded from school were NEET at age 18. Occasional truants were far less likely to be out of work.

The DfEE (now DfES), using a combination of administrative data and the YCS, estimates that there are over 160,000 people aged 16, 17, 18 – some 1 in 11 of the population – NEET, but this is considered to be an under-estimate according to other agencies and researchers, although it is difficult to find numbers in the published reports of the precise age range for England only.

Payne (1999) outlines the characteristics of young people who are NEET; for example, 28% spent between three and six months NEET and 25% spent more than six months NEET. Unemployment was the most common reason for people to be NEET, although almost half of young women were 'doing something else'. People become NEET through different routes, some from education, some from jobs. They also leave in different ways. Low levels of education were more common in the NEET group than for others. Other characteristics include greater likelihood of truancy, poor family backgrounds and an over-representation from certain ethnic minority groups.





