

Understanding the risks of social exclusion across the life course

Social exclusion is about the complex and enduring problems that cut people off from the sorts of happy and productive lives that most of us take for granted. While many people may experience one or two setbacks in their lives, only a small number suffer from complex and enduring problems.

New research from the *Universities of Bristol and York* and from the *National Centre for Social Research* explores the risks of social exclusion among people and families across four key life stages:

- Children and families
- Youth and young adulthood
- Working age without dependent children
- Older age

The research uses an innovative approach to gain insights into the different triggers and risks that can lead to social exclusion. Understanding who experiences these risks and how they can impact on the lives of individuals and families is vitally important for improving public services. Findings from the research will be used to help policy makers and service providers to better identify those most in need of help. These studies provide further evidence supporting the Government's drive to deliver more personalised and responsive public services.

Progress so far

The Government has made significant progress in tackling poverty and social exclusion:

- The number of children living in poverty has fallen by 500,000 since 1998/99.
- Between 1997 and 2008, the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 or higher in the Key Stage 2 tests for English and Mathematics increased by 18 and 17 percentage points respectively.
- The number of young people who achieve a level 2 qualification by the age of 19 increased from 66.3 per cent in 2004 to 76.7 per cent in 2008.
- The employment rate of lone parents increased from 44.7 per cent in 1997 to 56.3 per cent in 2008.
- Over the past 10 years, the estimated number of people sleeping rough has decreased by over two thirds.
- The number of pensioners in poverty has fallen by 200,000 since 1998/99.

This paper summarises findings from analysis of the risks of social exclusion across the life course. It is

not a statement of Government policy

Key findings from the research

- There are a small number of families who experience persistent and chronic social exclusion – the study suggests 4% to 7%.
- Families experiencing complex problems were more likely to be lone parent families, have four or more children, have a younger mother, have a mother from a Black ethnic group, live in rented accommodation and in the most deprived areas.
- Higher self esteem in adolescence is a protective factor against disadvantage in young adulthood.
- The proportion of young people most at risk of exclusion fell from 21% to 16% over the period 2001/02 to 2005/06.
- Events such as becoming employed and finding a partner reduce the risk of falling into social exclusion.
- The research highlights the importance of responding to the needs of working age adults without dependent children.
- Working age adults without dependent children who are older, unemployed or inactive, living alone, have few educational qualifications, and are renting their homes have a higher risk of exclusion.
- Around 5% of older people had multiple risk markers of social exclusion, including poor access to services and transport, physical inactivity, fear of their local area after dark, low social support, and poor general and emotional health. Older people in this group were likely to be aged 80 and older, have no qualifications, and live alone.
- Good health and social support can protect older people from becoming socially excluded, whereas becoming divorced or widowed significantly increases an older person's risk of exclusion.

The reports were commissioned by the Social Exclusion Task Force in the Cabinet Office and examined risk markers of social exclusion using a new analytical framework – the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix – developed by researchers at the University of Bristol.