



# The impact of government policy on social exclusion among young people:

A review of the literature for the Social Exclusion Unit  
in the Breaking the Cycle series

## Summary

### Introduction

1. In Summer 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit commissioned a series of literature reviews examining the impact of Government policies and initiatives to tackle social exclusion policies across the lifecourse. John Bynner and Mary Londra from the Institute of Education and Gill Jones from Keele University were commissioned to undertake the literature review among young people.
2. The aim of the review was to critically examine published evaluation evidence of the impact of government programmes since 1997 on social exclusion of young people aged in England between 13–25 years of age. Given the very extensive and wide range of policies affecting young people the research team focused on four main policy areas relating to social exclusion: education, training and employment; teenage pregnancy and parenthood; housing and homelessness; and youth offending. Many of the evaluations are of pilot projects and the findings relate more to design issues and implications for delivery, than to policy impact. The research for this review was conducted between August 2003 and February 2004, although where possible later publications have also been included in this review.

### Background

3. Over the past decade there have been many policies and initiatives designed to address social exclusion among young people. Within the Social Exclusion Unit, Policy Action Team 12 focused on the identification and prevention of social exclusion in youth and ways of re-integrating socially excluded young people into mainstream society. Documents published by the Unit represented a shift towards a more holistic and 'joined-up' inter-departmental approach. This approach to youth policy parallels an increasing research interest in exploring young people's lives in relation to their overall life course, and making explicit links between the different areas of their lives.

### Conceptual framework – transition to adulthood

4. Youth is a period in the life course characterised by rapid and dramatic individual change on many fronts, and this is why some young people face particular risks. The review is set in a conceptual framework that regards young people as being in a process of transition between dependent childhood and independent adulthood. This process involves changes of status in the different interconnected domains of life – education and employment, family, housing, health – that are related to this particular stage of life.

5. There has been significant change over time in the form and length of these transitions and therefore in the ways in which young people achieve adult identity. Patterns now suggest 'disordered transitions' which are less age-related and more complex. By distinguishing between strands of transition, we can identify the differing needs of young people in different spheres of their lives. Growing demand for a qualified workforce and the extension of education beyond the minimum statutory age have increased polarisation among young people, with those maintaining the 'fast track' to adulthood without qualifications increasingly disadvantaged. Those not engaged in education, employment or training are particularly at risk of social exclusion and are therefore a particular target for government policy.

## Transition to work and further education

6. **Active Labour Market Policies** directed at young people, such as the New Deal and Modern Apprenticeships have been effective in reducing unemployment and increasing employability, though their success has been helped by economic conditions that ensure the continuing availability of jobs.
7. **Education-based policies** are designed to enable young people to remain in education. Post New Start, Connexions offers an information, advice and guidance service for all young people, while targeting support for disadvantaged young people, especially those at risk of entering the NEET group. Educational initiatives such as Connexions and the Education Maintenance Allowance show positive returns in terms of increasing participation in education among young people at most risk of dropping out or leaving school without qualifications.
8. **Area-based policies** represent a move away from universal services, replacing them with strategies directed at raising standards in traditionally poor performing localities. Some key components of the policies reviewed are clearly benefiting many of the young people for whom they were primarily intended. The success of such programmes as Excellence in the Cities in helping to raise standards is reflected in the take-up outside the programme of components such as Learning Mentors and the extension of the programme from secondary to primary schools.

## Teenage pregnancy and parenthood

9. **Reducing rates of unwanted pregnancies.** Teenage pregnancy rates are falling. Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in schools has had an impact on sexual health awareness and cultural openness, although its short-term impact on teenage pregnancy rates appears to be small.
10. **Reducing social exclusion among young parents.** Participation in education and training more than doubled between 1997 and 2002, but has since fallen back. Sure Start Plus (SSP) in particular appears to be relatively successful in working with pregnant young women, helping them out of social isolation and enabling them to access the appropriate benefits. Early evidence also suggests Re-integration Officers are a valuable means of encouraging young mothers to return to education. Support with the cost of childcare, through Care to Learn is clearly crucial to young parents who want to return to education, training or employment.
11. **Involving young fathers.** Although it is recognised that more needs to be done to engage young fathers in sharing the care of their child, so far it has been difficult to engage them. SRE in schools and SSP could be developed in ways which will involve young men, who appear to need more specific help. It has been argued that there needs to be more positive support for young couples.

## Housing and homelessness

12. **Tackling youth homelessness.** Holistic interventions have focused on rough sleepers and the most vulnerable groups of young people. The Government's strategy on rough sleeping has achieved its target but wider homelessness is continuing to increase. The number of households in temporary accommodation rose by 9% in the past year and the incidence of young people being accepted by local authorities as unintentionally homeless and in priority need because their families were no longer willing or able to accommodate them has increased.
13. **Appropriate support and move-on.** It is increasingly recognised that many young people with housing needs cannot live with their parents, and are not yet ready to live in independent housing. Despite this, the level of support needed for some young people has been underestimated. Various models of housing with in-house or floating support are now being piloted, and the range seems ideal for young people who are gradually becoming independent.
14. **Link with mainstream housing.** Several studies have indicated the need for a range of accommodation to cater for different and changing needs in youth and young adulthood. It is too early to assess the impact of new policies to increase the quantity and quality of housing stocks for rental in helping to prevent homelessness among young people.

## Youth offending

15. **Youth Justice System.** The new arrangements for administering the Youth Justice system (Youth Justice Board, Youth Offending Teams and Youth Offender Panels) have received positive appraisals from the judiciary and independent observers such as the Audit Commission.
16. **Preventative programmes.** Programmes targeted at reducing youth offending, such as SPLASH, Positive Activities for Young People and the Youth Inclusion Programme, recognise the multi-faceted nature of problems young people face and include a variety of out of school educational activities capable of impacting on a broad range of risk factors. Residential schemes to develop new skills are particularly valued by participants and have been shown to play a significant role in reducing anti-social behaviour and levels of offending in the areas where they operate.
17. **Rehabilitation programmes.** Custodial sentences are expensive and less effective in leading the young offender away from crime than community-based approaches. Detention and Training Orders which combine both have been found to be less effective than Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme, which does not involve custody. Support from a Personal Adviser and education and training are vital parts of these programmes. The matching of provision to individual need is an essential feature.

## Emerging cross-cutting themes

18. **Family issues.** The review shows the importance of parental advice and financial support for young people and the problems which occur when this is not available, such as in the case of many care leavers. Evaluation evidence indicates the need to involve the parents of teenagers, highlighting a need for family- and community-based initiatives.
19. **Personal Advisers.** The evaluation evidence consistently emphasises the importance to 'at risk' young people of contact with a highly skilled professional in a Personal Adviser role. Well-trained advisers combining youth work, teaching, counselling and brokerage skills, as in the model for Connexions, are critical to success. Probably the most valuable component of crime prevention programmes is access to a sympathetic adult able to provide advice and support. Personal advisers may be particularly significant where a young person lacks the support of his or her own family.

- 20. Use of sanctions.** Those who are targeted for interventions to reduce social exclusion are vulnerable. The use of sanctions against them may therefore be particularly damaging and make them feel that their negative experiences at school and at home are simply being reinforced. Where support is conditional on attending a course or seeking work, any sanctions associated with noncompliance need to be applied with great care and sensitivity.
- 21. Multi-agency working.** Joined-up, multi-agency working is a key component of 'holistic' policies to reduce the risk of social exclusion in young people. Effective interagency partnerships show all the best features of joined up services, because they supply the best means of matching the appropriate provision to individual need.

## Remaining challenges

- 22. Tensions between policies.** Homelessness, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, school dropout and offending are often linked, and policy structures in all domains reflect this. There are, however, some problems as well as benefits surrounding joined-up policies. The labour market driven aims of New Deal and Modern Apprenticeships are to a certain extent in conflict with education initiatives which aim to encourage young people to stay in education.
- 23. Relating to the mainstream.** The relationship between targeted interventions and mainstream provision needs to be examined more closely. School education initiatives for young offenders, for example, need to be linked to mainstream education. Supported housing for homeless young people and other at risk groups needs to be closely linked, through appropriate move-on accommodation, to the mainstream housing market.
- 24. Targeting disadvantaged communities.** The focus of policies has been on urban communities and several initiatives have been based on areas seen as in greatest need – such as highest rates of offending and teenage pregnancy. Although such programmes are an efficient means of supplying a range of services, many vulnerable young people outside the designated areas may miss out on them.
- 25. Targeting vulnerable groups.** Young people targeted as vulnerable and in need of special services (such as Connexions, and financial support such as EMAs) often gain a lot from them. But there is still a risk that not all young people who could benefit from these services will necessarily receive them.
- 26. Age limitations.** A recurring theme in the review is the limitations of age-limited policies. Connexions is designed primarily for young people aged 13/14 to 19 years. This structure reduces continuity of support from the primary school years and closes off access at a time when many vulnerable young people may still have a strong need for it. Many initiatives for teenage parents also peter out at 19 years, Youth Justice Board provision for offenders does not extend beyond age 17. While holistic and joined-up policies represent an important step forward in youth policy approaches, there may be an increasing need for more vertical integration of services.

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