



## **Tackling Youth Exclusion in the UK: Challenges for Current Policy and Practice**

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### **Summary**

*Addressing the situation of marginalised youth has been central to policy initiatives directed at tackling poverty and social exclusion in the UK in recent years. The period since 1997 has therefore witnessed a renewed emphasis upon the development of a coherent framework for youth policy in the UK with the goal of promoting youth inclusion and participation. Nevertheless, understanding the nature and prospects for policies designed to tackle youth exclusion involves a deeper interrogation of the concept of 'social exclusion' and its applications within UK policy debates. Here, it is argued that whilst considerable progress has been made in the promotion of a coherent and integrated strategy for youth inclusion in the UK such policies are unlikely to be effective without a re-conceptualisation of the nature of social exclusion, its causes and consequences. In particular, a more holistic understanding is called for which extends beyond an emphasis on labour market activation policies as a response to the circumstances facing marginalised youth in the UK and elsewhere, and one which interrogates exclusionary processes and institutional practices rather than addressing only the symptoms of disadvantage.*

### **1 Introduction**

Understanding the trajectory of youth inclusion policy in the UK in recent years needs to begin by acknowledging the profound effects of social, economic and political changes in the 1980s and beyond. In particular, the dramatic increase in youth marginalisation during this period has been well documented within UK youth research which describes the impact of economic restructuring during the 1980s and the effects of neo-liberal social policies, for young people's subjective experiences of growing up in a society characterised by widening social divisions (e.g. Bates and Riseborough 1993; Coles 1995; Macdonald 1997).

These processes have also had a profound influence in redefining youth transitions, particularly in renegotiating the scope and nature of the state's involvement in young people's lives – issues with which policy makers and youth researchers in the UK continue to grapple. From the perspective of youth research, recent work has therefore sought to examine continuities and change in the circumstances and prospects facing 'excluded' youth (e.g. MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Webster et al. 2004), and to interrogate the nature of precarity, complexity and de-standardisation in youth transitions (e.g. Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Mizen 2003; Walther 2006; France 2007) as well as their wider implications for youth policy and practice (e.g. Biggart et al. 2004; Walther and Pohl 2004; Williamson 2005).

In the context of the marginalisation of youth within UK social policy during the 1980s and beyond, the election in 1997 of New Labour marked a sea change in the direction of UK youth policy. At the very least, New Labour's focus upon the concept of 'social exclusion' as

its preferred conceptual framework for understanding processes of marginalisation and disadvantage amongst UK youth represented a welcome and long overdue acknowledgement of the enduring multiple problems facing disadvantaged young people in the UK – as well as a recognition of the need for coherent and ‘joined-up’ policy solutions. This is reflected in the introduction for the first time of a comprehensive youth policy with ministerial oversight in England and Wales as a result of the work of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) and in particular arising from recommendations contained within the SEU’s Policy Action Team Report on Young People (SEU 2000). As we shall see below, this revived impetus for UK youth policy spawned a wide range of policy initiatives which in various ways sought to re-couple ‘youth’ and ‘exclusion’ at the heart of UK policy making. At the same time, the renewed focus upon youth exclusion reflects the influence of competing discourses of exclusions which suggest very different understandings of the nature and causes of youth disadvantage and the policies needed to tackle it.

## 2 New Labour and Youth Exclusion

The primary focus of policy initiatives directed at tackling youth marginalisation in the UK has been through the work of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) established in 1997 to provide an integrated and joined-up approach to tackling exclusion. In a 1999 speech the then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair famously described social exclusion as:

*“a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown”* (SEU 2001: 10).

The above approach does not in fact provide a theoretically informed *definition* of social exclusion, although it has subsequently been taken as such within UK policy making. Rather, it illustrates instances of normatively undesirable outcomes for individuals and areas held to be ‘linked’ with the broader concept of social exclusion in some unspecified way (perhaps, for example, as a result of inequalities of power and wealth). In the absence of a coherent theoretical conceptualisation of social exclusion, the work of the SEU has therefore focused upon addressing social exclusion as a series of discrete policy challenges in which the social situation of young people has featured very prominently.

In particular, the SEU’s *Bridging the Gap* series addresses a wide range of youth-orientated policy ‘problems’ which lack any clearly articulated theoretical coherence. Reports have therefore focused upon young ‘runaways’, teenage pregnancy, school absences, young people not in employment, education or training, and subsequent work has investigated issues such as youth homelessness, substance misuse and the situation of young people with ‘complex needs’ (e.g. SEU 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2002; ODPM 2005). The predominant focus of youth inclusion policy in the UK has therefore been upon seeking to mitigate the impact of severe marginalisation rather than tackling the wider enduring effects of social inequalities in young people’s transitions to adulthood. Equally importantly, as several commentators have noted (e.g. Colley and Hodgkinson 2001; Williamson 2005) in the absence of a clear theoretical understanding of exclusion as a process of ‘othering’ in which individuals and social groups are effectively shut out from society, there is a danger that such a focus upon the behaviour of excluded groups blames the victim for their own exclusion.

Nevertheless, alongside this focus upon tackling more ‘extreme’ forms of youth marginalisation, wider initiatives directed at promoting youth inclusion and participation have found expression through wider UK Government initiatives including the *Opportunity for All*

framework for reporting on poverty and social exclusion (e.g. DWP 2007), via the *Youth Matters* framework (e.g. DfES 2005), and through the policy objectives outlines within the UK's *National Strategy Action Plan on Social Inclusion*. In contrast with the therapeutic, youth work-orientated approach explicit within much of the earlier work of the SEU, the concern here has been with the wider 'drivers' of youth exclusion, identified very largely in terms of young people's educational and labour market participation. This approach very largely identifies youth inclusion with participation in paid work, and aside from the promotion of labour market participation and associated education and training there is in fact little emphasis upon the social well-being of young people per se within the associated objectives, targets and delivery strategies.

### 3 New Labour and Social Exclusion

In order to understand the direction of youth policy in the UK since 1997 we therefore need to consider in more detail what is meant by the concept of social exclusion, and how the term has been deployed in recent policy debates within the UK. As Washington et al. (2000) note, the antipathy of UK Conservative governments to the term 'poverty' provided fertile ground for the reformulation of European understandings of social exclusion within UK social policy in the early and mid 1990s. In the political context of the UK in the mid-1990s it is perhaps not difficult therefore to envisage the political attraction of the concept of social exclusion given New Labour's reticence in discussing widening income inequalities in the interests of securing the votes on middle-class 'Middle England'. For some critics at least, the new government's emphasis upon tackling 'social exclusion' in part at least served to deflect attention away from an interrogation of more fundamental structural inequalities of power and wealth, and how these shape citizen's choices and prospects (e.g. Levitas 1998; Lister 2001).

Nevertheless, the concept *has* proved to be a fruitful framework for understanding both the complex, multidimensional and dynamic nature of disadvantage itself, and the underlying process of discrimination, impoverishment and denial of rights which underpin it. This has been most clearly articulated at the European level, where the language of social exclusion has been entrenched within EU policy debates on living conditions and the 'social situation' for some considerable time resulting in the development of the Laeken indicators and associated member state *National Action Plans for Social Inclusion* (e.g. Room 1995). Tackling social exclusion is also increasingly acknowledged as an important policy objective within the context of European youth initiatives such as the EU's *2001 Youth White Paper* (CEC 2001). It is perhaps ironic therefore that a UK government keen to demonstrate its 'Europe-sceptic' credentials has led the way in pioneering the application of a concept so deeply rooted within European policy discourse - especially given the attractiveness of North American thinking within New Labour circles.

### 4 Discourses of Social Exclusion

However, to understand the increasingly complex architecture of UK youth policy it is also necessary also to explore their conceptual foundations. One highly influential approach has been that of Levitas (1998) who identifies three competing 'discourses' of social exclusion underpinning policy developments in this area: a 'moral underclass' discourse, a 'social integrationist' discourse and a 'redistributive' discourse. The latter 'redistributive' discourse focuses upon poverty and low income arising from entrenched structural inequalities of power and wealth as a key driver of social exclusion. Within this framework, income maximisation strategies and a radical redistribution of wealth are seen as crucial to long-term prospects of tackling exclusion.

In contrast, youth policy since 1997 has owed far more to policies centred upon ‘social integrationist’ discourses emphasising the importance of inclusion through paid work and, for young workers, the development of marketable skills through education and training participation. Despite the profusion of indicators and targets for tackling social exclusion in recent years, the main official indicators of progress with respect to UK youth continue to focus vary largely upon labour market participation and educational attainment. Whilst these are clearly critical with regard to young people’s long-term prospects, much less attention is given to investigating young people’s material and social circumstances, their incomes, living conditions, and the wider structural terrain of (dis)advantage which shapes their opportunities, choices and prospects. This is perhaps surprising given the very significant commitments to tackling child poverty and deprivation by UK government in recent years. As a result the underlying assumptions driving policy appears to reflect a preoccupation with youth people as young *workers* but not necessarily as young *citizens*.

At the same time, in their focus upon ‘disaffection’ and ‘deviant’ behaviours policies directed at tackling the problems facing highly marginalised youth in the UK have tended also to reflect the influence of discourses centring upon the idea of a ‘moral underclass’ in which the causes of exclusion are individualised as a form of social pathology. This is most clearly reflected in the highly normative framework underpinning the early work of the UK government’s Social Exclusion Unit. In particular, its emphasis upon the outcomes of exclusion for the most marginalised groups of young people largely bypasses a deeper analysis of the underlying processes contributing to youth marginalisation, for example as a result of a lack of affordable housing, low pay, poor working conditions, inadequate childcare provision, and so on. It is especially striking that despite the voluminous outputs of the SEU, little reference is made to low income and material and social deprivation as root causes of exclusion. In contrast, the emphasis is very much upon the behaviours and attitudes of ‘vulnerable’ young people themselves and the ways in which *their* ‘complex problems’ contribute to their exclusion.

Within the wider context of the discourses of social exclusion identified by Levitas (1998), the main thrust of youth policy under New Labour has therefore been associated with ‘social integrationist’ perspectives focused upon the centrality of paid work as a mechanism of social inclusion. At the same time, the often pejorative connotations associated with ‘moral underclass’ discourses remains a persistent theme with respect to deficit models of marginalised youth which label ‘excluded youth’ as in various respects deviant, anti-social, and ‘disaffected’.

## **5 Assessing the Impact of UK Youth Inclusion Policies**

What then has been the overall impact of New Labour policies in tackling youth exclusion in Britain? Despite the limitations noted above it is clear that some progress has nevertheless been achieved in stemming the rising tide of inequality and social polarisation in Britain as a whole. This is reflected in overall rates of income inequality which have remained broadly stable in the UK during the 1997-2003 period despite a period of prolonged economic growth which typically we might expect to result in a tendency towards widening inequalities. However, although analyses suggest some ‘redistribution by stealth’ favouring households towards the bottom of the distribution, the incomes for the poorest decile of households have experienced little or no growth, whilst growth in the incomes of the richest households has continued to accelerate. These effects are also highly selective according to household characteristics with households with dependent children and the elderly benefiting disproportionately from policy developments since 1997 (e.g. Sefton and Sutherland 2005;

Brewer et al. 2008). In fact, overall rates of relative low income and material deprivation amongst families with children have finally begun to decline for the first time in a generation (Stewart 2005). This trend reflects the impact of income maximisation policies for these groups based upon changes in the tax and benefit system (Tax Credits), the introduction of minimum wage legislation in the UK in 1998 and, later, Minimum Income Guarantees.

In contrast with this emphasis upon income maximisation strategies driven by the UK Treasury, policies directed at the social inclusion of young people have focused very largely upon promoting inclusion through participation, principally in relation to labour market and educational participation. Partly as a result, it is difficult to estimate young people's overall vulnerability to low income and material and social deprivation because official disaggregations of relevant data are not routinely undertaken for young people with respect to the UK government's reporting requirements as specified for example within the *Opportunity for All* framework and within the UK's *National Social Inclusion Action Plan*.

However, recent analysis of up-to-date data drawn from the UK *Family Resources Survey* - the most authoritative source for the analysis of income distribution and dynamics - suggests that overall young people remain at substantially greater risk of low income relative to the situation of older adults. For example, over the 1994 to 2007 period young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK have remained consistently at greater risk of living in low income households compared with older working-age adults, with no evidence of a long-term downward trend in the 'income gap' between these groups (Palmer et al. 2007). These analyses update earlier analysis of the *1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain*, the most comprehensive and scientifically robust survey of poverty undertaken in Britain, which again show poverty to be widespread amongst the UK's young people, especially amongst young women, single parent families and young people from low status occupational groups (Fahmy 2006).

Although the UK government has not prioritised income maximisation policies as a route to social inclusion amongst the UK's young people, a range of sources do document medium-term trends in other indicators of youth inclusion relating to educational participation and economic activity. There certainly have been notable achievements in some policy areas, for example in relation to teenage pregnancy (DWP 2007). Nevertheless, overall evidence of progress is rather lacking. With regard to youth unemployment despite some initial progress in reducing unemployment amongst young people aged 19 to 24 in the 1997 to 2001 period, unemployment rates have subsequently stagnated and more recently begun to rise since then. As a result, rates of youth unemployment for this group remain approximately three times higher than those for working age adults aged 25 plus (Palmer et al. 2007). This is especially disappointing given the positive impact that we might have expected as a result of the most sustained period of economic growth witnessed in the UK for many recent decades - and in view of the prominence given to labour market activation policies for young people (i.e. the New Deal for Young People).

Indeed, if anything, the situation appears to have worsened for those young people most vulnerable to unemployment, with overall rates of unemployment having risen for young people aged 16 and 17 in the UK in recent years (Hills and Stewart 2005). Similarly, recent evidence suggests that the proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 not in employment, education or training has remained stable over the last decade at approximately one in ten young people. For those in work, progress since 1997 in tackling low pay has been equally bleak. In total, more than two thirds of young workers aged 16 to 24 were earning less than

the EU's Decency Threshold equivalent to £7 per hour in 2007, a proportion identical to that recorded nearly a decade ago in 1998 (Palmer et al. 2007).

A lack of overall progress in tackling rates of youth unemployment is sometimes explained by reference to the 'residualisation' of youth employment resulting from increasing rates of participation in further and higher education. Whilst this may contain an element of truth it nevertheless remains the case that overall rates of educational participation amongst 16 to 18 year olds in the UK have themselves not changed since the current government assumed power in 1997 (DWP 2007). Indeed, rather than 'bridging the gap' recent evidence on educational attainment points to an increasing polarisation of educational outcomes for UK youth. Thus, whilst overall levels of attainment at ages 16 and 18 have increased markedly (DWP 2007), the proportion of young people achieving basic qualifications by age 19 has remained stable since 1999. One in twelve young people (8%) continue to reach age 19 with no qualifications at all, again revealing no significant change since 1997 (Palmer et al. 2007). Although it is perhaps too early to reach firm conclusions, available evidence on the impact of changes in the funding of UK higher education also appear to suggest a widening in the socio-economic gap in educational attainment amongst young people (e.g. Callendar and Jackson 2005; Galindo-Ruenta et al. 2004).

## **6 The Conceptual Underpinnings of UK Youth Inclusion Policies**

Of course, it is true that the findings presented above do not provide a detailed and comprehensive picture of the situation facing those young people experiencing more extreme forms of marginalisation who have been a key focus of government attention for example through the work of the Social Exclusion Unit. One problem that we face here is that almost by definition such groups are often not enumerated by large-scale surveys focusing on the resident household population. Where such groups do fall within the scope of household surveys, higher rates of non-response and panel attrition amongst such groups in the UK mean that large-scale evidence on the prevalence of youth social exclusion inevitably underestimates the true scale of the problem (Levitas et al. 2007).

Nevertheless, and given the scale of the challenge posed by the persistence of enduring inequalities described above, progress is unlikely to be made in tackling more extreme forms of youth marginalisation without concerted action to tackle the underlying structural causes of youth inequality. Indeed recent evidence drawn from large scale UK cohort studies concerning long-term trends in social mobility for UK youth generally reinforce these conclusions by pointing to the entrenchment of social inequalities amongst UK youth. Comparing youth cohorts entering the labour market in the mid-1970s and in the late 1980s, it is clear that the association between parental background and both earnings potential and the risk of unemployment both increased over this period (Bynner et al. 2003), and that the association between childhood poverty and poverty in later life also strengthened (Blanden and Gibbons 2006).

This again draws attention to the conceptual underpinnings of New Labour's approach to social exclusion and its implications for youth policy in the UK. As previously discussed, the 'social integrationist' agenda implicit within much of the current government's strategy for addressing youth exclusion reflects a concern with promoting labour market participation as a route out of poverty and exclusion. However, the preferred approach diverts attention away from an exploration of the exclusionary processes which undermine young people's capacity to make successful labour market transitions. In contrast, New Labour's 'inclusionary' agenda

in fact focuses attention upon the apparent deficiencies of young people themselves in effecting their own inclusion.

As such, some of the language used to describe the position of marginalised youth in the UK is in some respect reminiscent of 'moral underclass' discourses which locate the sources of social exclusion in individual behaviours and attitudes rather than in relation to wider inequalities within society. Rather than focusing on the shortage of fulfilling work, poor working conditions, insecure employment and low pay as factors which shape young people's labour market experience, the emphasis is instead placed upon young people's own choices, their employability and marketability, upgrading of skill sets, and the need for 'flexibility' in an increasingly competitive labour market. Similarly although further and higher education may insulate young people from vulnerability to social exclusion, the benefits are viewed solely in individualised terms and the costs are to be therefore to be borne by individuals without adequate recognition of how young people's social background and material situation constrain their choices. Moreover, an emphasis on educational achievement as a route out of poverty at an individual level leaves entirely untouched the reproduction of inequalities within the labour market at a societal level, for example in terms of menial and degrading employment, low pay, and so on.

## **7 Conclusions**

How then should we evaluate New Labour's approach overall in promoting youth inclusion and tackling marginalisation? The emphasis upon joined-up thinking and policy responses, and the importance of person-centred therapeutic approaches to addressing the complex needs of vulnerable young people are certainly both long overdue and very welcome. The development for the first time of an integrated youth strategy emphasising youth inclusion and participation is in itself a vital first step in making real progress in tackling youth marginalisation. Equally, whilst government policy may not yet have succeeded in 'turning the tide' with respect to the widening of inequalities and deepening of social divisions that occurred under previous administrations for young people, it may at least have halted the further deepening of these divisions - and for some groups (notably families with children and the elderly) has actually begun to roll these back. It is important therefore that we do not 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' when considering the recent record in tackling youth exclusion.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that these therapeutic, youth work-orientated approaches will make much significant headway in tackling youth exclusion in the absence of mainstream, macro-economic and social policies which safeguard the material well-being of all young people, and restore their access to those social citizenship rights eroded by neo-liberal reforms in the 1980s and later. Firstly, the drivers of social exclusion are structural and do not accord with New Labour's preoccupation with an individualised 'deficit' model focused upon promoting employability and tackling 'deviant' behaviours. The focus upon 'exclusion' rather than poverty has all too often been interpreted narrowly in terms of labour market non-participation with the necessary corollary that the 'integration' of youth is the primary goal of inclusionary social policies to be achieved through labour market insertion. It therefore follows that policy solutions need to tackle the underlying structural causes of youth disadvantage and not simply address its symptoms.

Secondly, although case work based approaches can undoubtedly achieve real and important successes at an individual level in promoting the inclusion of multiply disadvantaged young people, such efforts will always be working 'against the tide' unless the underlying social

processes resulting in exclusion are addressed. Achieving real progress in tackling youth marginalisation therefore involves a shift in focus away from policies and practices informed by discourses emphasising the centrality of paid work and the role of undesirable behaviours as drivers of exclusion, and towards a more genuinely redistributive approach. This involves a commitment to promoting the material and social welfare of young people as citizens (and not simply as workers), and an emphasis on tackling underlying inequalities of power and wealth by, as Barry (2003) suggests, re-focusing our 'gaze' not only downwards at those at the 'bottom' of society but also upwards at those at 'the top'.

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