

Transitions to adulthood

Richard Garside considers the findings from two new briefings on outcomes for young adults.

*Every year many hundreds of thousands of young adults (16 to 24 year olds) in England and Wales are processed by one or more agencies of the criminal justice system. This activity, justified on the grounds of its putative crime fighting and crime prevention efficacy, causes enormous harm to the lives of one of the most vulnerable groups in society. It tends to entrench rather than resolve the disadvantage, distress and trauma experienced by many young adults, while doing little if anything to make society safer or crime less prevalent. As the 2005 report from the Barrow Cadbury Trust, *Lost in Transition*, puts it:*

Criminal justice policies in England and Wales do unnecessary damage to the life chances of young adult offenders and often make them more, not less, likely to re-offend. They make it harder for young adults to lead crime-free lives and exacerbate the widespread problems of social exclusion that other government policies aspire to ameliorate.
(Barrow Cadbury Trust, 2005)

Through a series of project, policy and research initiatives under the auspices of the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (*Criminal Justice Matters*, 2010), the Trust has sought to promote more effective and inclusive criminal justice practice in relation to the young adult age group.

A concentrated focus on young adults subject to criminal justice capture is welcomed, but a mere focus on those *currently* subject to capture will only offer a partial view. Some young adults not currently subject to criminal justice capture will, in time, be arrested or charged, prosecuted or convicted. Others not currently in the criminal justice system will have been so in the past. If practice related to young adults currently subject to criminal justice capture is to be effective, it needs to be grounded in a broad view of the life experiences of all young adults.

Using data relating to the middle of the last decade – which is the most recent data that we have available for the detailed area-based analysis that is necessary – Professor Danny Dorling and I have co-authored two briefings that explore the life experiences of young adults in order to shed light on some of the challenges affecting policy and practice relating to young adults. We cannot look at something as rare still as incarceration (or wider criminal justice capture), but we can look at what happens to most youngsters in small geographical areas.

Across the whole of England full-time employment was the most common activity for young adults (35 per cent). The next two largest categories were higher

education in a former polytechnic or red brick university. In total, 30 per cent of young adults were involved in some form of higher education, whether in a further education college (3 per cent), former polytechnic (13 per cent), red brick (12 per cent) or elite university (2 per cent).

Some 11 per cent of young adults were involved in educational activities at GCSE (6 per cent) or AS/A level (5 per cent) standard, with a further 3 per cent involved in basic or vocational educational activities. The other categories were part-time employment (6 per cent), unemployment (7 per cent), not in employment, education or training (5 per cent) and being engaged in caring responsibilities (4 per cent).

These figures are the average for the entire population of young adults (aged 18–24) in England. Averages hide much variation. The average of seven per cent unemployment, for example, masks big variations in different parts of the country. In one constituency we looked at, for example, an estimated 20 per cent of young adults were unemployed. In another constituency it was less than two per cent.

Youth unemployment was bad in the middle of the last decade. Today, just a few years later, by various definitions youth unemployment is 20 per cent overall. It is likely that in some constituencies unemployment has become the most common ‘occupation’ for young adults.

Place matters greatly, but so does time. Being born 18 years before 2011 was bad timing if you are looking for a job at 18 rather than studying further. Place and time combined matter most. These are almost entirely out of the hands of children and young people as they enter into adulthood. ■

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The two briefings on young adults in transition by Professor Danny Dorling and Richard Garside will be available for download later this year from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies website (www.crimeandjustice.org.uk). The Centre would like to thank the Barrow Cadbury Trust for supporting the production of the two briefings. Danny and Richard would also like to thank Melinda Kerrison for the additional research she contributed.

References

Barrow Cadbury Trust (2005), *Lost in Transition: A Report of the Barrow Cadbury Commission on Young Adults and the Criminal Justice System*, London: Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Criminal Justice Matters (2010), ‘Transitions to adulthood’, June, No. 80.