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From Being to Becoming: The Importance of Tackling Youth Poverty in Transitions To Adulthood

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The central emphasis of New Labour's anti-poverty strategy has been on tackling child poverty. While such an approach is both important and valuable youth poverty has been given limited attention. Low and unstable incomes are a major cause of poverty amongst young people and risks are greatly increased as they try to live independently and move out of the family home. In the discussion that follows, I argue that New Labour's continued commitment to the social exclusion agenda has marginalised both the problem of youth poverty and the necessary solutions. Social exclusion policy is more concerned with responsiblising families and young people and disciplining them to work regardless of its value. Little attention is given to addressing the problems of youth incomes or providing adequate housing support for those most vulnerable to poverty.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s tackling child poverty has been at the heart of New Labour's policy agenda, yet this debate has focused on children aged between nought and 15 (HM Treasury, 1998). It is argued that tackling the poverty amongst 16–18-year olds is being addressed in policy aimed at the development of skills and employment opportunities for 14–19-year olds (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). Yet such an approach does not recognise that youth goes beyond the age of 19 and the problems of poverty, if not addressed, remain. For example, recent evidence shows that the youth phase of the life course is being extended beyond 18 into the early 20s (France, 2007) and that the age of leaving home has been extended creating major difficulties for large groups of young people to become independent citizens (Bynner *et al.*, 2002). But not only is the problem with the narrow age focus of poverty policy but also with how it defines the concept of poverty. Since 1998 the central feature of youth policy has been 'tackling social exclusion'. This has a fundamental weakness in that it fails to recognise the importance of poverty for how young people make the transition into adulthood. In the discussion that follows, I will show how this policy framework operates, and how it fails to tackle the problems of youth poverty. While this approach claims to aid the inclusion of the young, it can and does undermine not only the routes out of poverty but also vulnerable young people's transitions into adulthood. This then also increases the risk of poverty for certain groups of young people.

Youth, poverty and transitions

The United Nations has noted that having a basic sustainable income is essential if individuals are to have access to resources needed to participate in mainstream society

(United Nations, 1995). But what is a sustainable income especially for the young? There is, of course, much debate over how to measure poverty. The UK Government relies upon a relative income measure that sees the poverty line being drawn at 60 per cent of median income. Such an approach has been much criticised for being arbitrary and not based on need (Evans and Scarborough, 2006). For example, such a measure excludes housing costs and does not recognise what spending is required to maintain minimum but acceptable living standards. A more sophisticated measure is the Budget Standard. This constructs what a minimum level required for social and economic participation should be (Veit-Wilson, 1998). It defines minimum incomes based upon essential items and is relative (Bradshaw, 1993). The weakness of this approach is that measures have traditionally been constructed by experts, they are based on a limited number of family types and have not been uprated to reflect recent changes in cultural and social norms. This is especially relevant for the young in that those under 25 are not normally seen as a distinct family type. For example, for most young people, moving from dependency to independency is a major part of the transition to adulthood. Youth is recognised as both a stage of 'being' and of 'becoming', where they move from being dependent on others, such as parents, to independent citizens living autonomous lives (France, 2007). It is not necessarily linear or unproblematic, and youth transitions in particular have been going through substantial changes, especially for the vulnerable (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Having the resources to make this transition underpins the process and is therefore critical if young people are to make the move into adulthood without any major problems. No measures recognise the added costs this may bring for the young and their families.

What is, therefore, required as a minimum income for young people to make this transition into autonomous adulthood? At the very least, young people should not receive less than the rest of the adult population as a minimum. As Fahmy (2006) suggests, there is no logic behind the notion that the young require a lower income than other members of adult society. In policy terms, it is assumed that the young will be supported by parents. In fact, it can be argued that the movement into independence is an added expense that requires additional resources and support, especially as many vulnerable young people will not have adequate wealth or access to other forms of income to make this move successfully (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). For example, evidence suggests that the transition into adulthood is being extended and is creating new inequalities where those from wealthier homes not only have greater economic resources, but also have access to extended support, and more space and privacy to make the transitions (White and Wyn, 2004). Being poor or from poor families has the opposite effect in that limited opportunities exist for them to grow into independent adults (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

Have youth incomes been improving in comparison to other groups and are they helping the most vulnerable avoid poverty? One way of understanding this is by applying the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) level to measure how they compare with other age groups. This is the measure used by government, although, as outlined above, the notion of 'minimum' remains arbitrary. It is also banded by the type of relationship (single or couple) but it is only used normally for cohorts over 25. Fahmy, in his analysis, used this measure to explore poverty amongst the under 25s in the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (PSE). Results showed that 17 per cent of young people fall below acceptable levels (Fahmy, 2006). Significant differences also existed by gender with 7 per cent of young men compared to 29 per cent of young women being below the MIG level, while the

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16–24-year olds' incomes fall well short of what should be seen as a minimum income level to help them meet their basic needs (Fahmy, 2006).

Evidence also suggests that with the collapse of the youth labour market the youth wage has been suppressed. Young people now earn less than their counterparts of 25 years ago (Kemp, 2006). Inequalities of earnings between different groups also pattern the youth wage. This can, unsurprisingly, be shaped by skills and education levels (Hirsch, 2007). Where a young person lives can also determine not only the opportunities available for work (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005), but also the levels of wages available (Kemp, 2006). Work for some brings a limited income as local labour markets offer little incentive or opportunity for those with limited skills and qualifications (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). These patterns have a major impact on British minority ethnic (BME) groups. For example, BME's are concentrated in some of the most deprived urban areas of the country where unemployment is entrenched and the type of work available is low paid and insecure (SEU, 2000). Most BME groups tend to be located in low-income brackets and have difficulties maintaining minimum incomes (DWP, 2007a).

In Europe, similar patterns exist. Evidence suggests that across OECD countries youth incomes are too low and increase the risk of youth living in poverty (Kangas and Palme, 2000). Only a small proportion of young people across seven European countries could, in their late teens and early twenties, support themselves on their own incomes (Smeeding and Phillips, 2002). After older people and children the most likely group to be income poor across Europe is the 16–24-year old age group (Eurostat, 2002), although in the UK this group is more likely to be poor than older people. For example, Aassve *et al.*, (2006) used income data[1] from the European Household Panel Survey (ECHP) and showed living arrangements and life course circumstances, especially around incomes and employment status, were important factors in shaping poverty levels (Aassve *et al.*, 2006). Those who lived outside the family home, especially if aged between 16 and 19, had increased risks of poverty (Aassve *et al.*, 2006). As Iacovou and Aassve (2007:3) suggest, 'the analysis shows that it can be confidently asserted leaving home causes young people to be poor'. Those who stay at home can be protected from the harshness of poverty by family circumstances, although, if young people live in workless households, this protection will be limited (Aassve *et al.*, 2006). Not only does leaving home increase the risk of poverty for those on low incomes, but also it is worse in the first year and if a young person is living on their own (Iacovou and Aassve, 2007).

Youth incomes are also greatly influenced by a young person's activity status. If a young person is a student, in formal training, unemployed or employed on low pay, the risk of poverty is further increased. For 16–19-year olds in the UK this is a major problem in that incomes and benefits are lower for this age group. Their access to benefits and resources to support themselves is a major factor in the levels of poverty in this age group (Aassve *et al.*, 2006). These issues are made worse if a young person has been living in chronic poverty or in a family circumstance where intergenerational transference of poverty takes place. In other words, if a young person lived in poverty as a child, the risks of them staying poor are increased (Moore, 2005) Crosscutting these two factors is the notion of vulnerability. Evidence shows that certain groups are more vulnerable to future patterns of income poverty than others. For example, teenage parents, and especially young mothers, are one such group. Teenage motherhood is a major cause of poverty amongst young women aged between 16 and 24 in that they have low incomes (Berthoud and Robson, 2003). For example, 48 per cent of young women with dependent children

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were living in poverty compared to men young men (YWCA, 2007). The risks are also increased if young women are under 20 years old and living outside the parental home (Aassve *et al.*, 2006). A second group is young people leaving care. This group is also vulnerable to lower incomes and therefore higher levels of poverty than other groups (Stein, 2005). Evidence shows how those leaving the care system after the age of 16 are most vulnerable to living future lives in poverty. Having no support or family networks increases the risks these young people have of remaining poor (Stein, 2005; DfES, 2006). A third group is BME groups, and in particular Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people (Platt, 2007). They tend to have the lowest incomes, come from families that live in poor areas or are employed in some of the most insecure sectors. In this context, the most isolated and vulnerable young people are at increased risk of poverty because they have low incomes and limited support networks to help them make the transitions into independent living.

New Labour: social exclusion and the 'youth problem'

So how have New Labour responded to the problems of low incomes amongst the young and the problem related to transitions into independent living? Since 1997, youth policy has concentrated on reducing social exclusion, not low incomes or poverty. This recognises the vulnerability of young people, yet does not see poverty as a significant 'cause' of their social problems. As Byrne (2005) suggests, social exclusion has become the new language of social policy, and poverty reduction is seen as only one of its many functions. In fact social exclusion policy can have a key role to play in creating systems and processes that act to control the poor and to continue the maintenance of the economic status quo, where the poor remain poor (Byrne, 2005). Social exclusion is being understood by policy makers as a process of individual agents acting in circumstances, giving little recognition to the wider influence of corporate capital or the interdependency of wealth and poverty in shaping the lives and life chances of some of the most vulnerable young people (Byrne, 2005). In this context, being excluded is not the same as being poor. Exclusion is something government believes can be dealt with by tackling the poor labour skills of individuals and unemployment (Mizen, 2004), the immoral behaviour of the undeserving and the underclass (MacDonald, 1997) or the poor attitudes of parents and communities to their responsibilities (France, 2007). Social exclusion policy targeted at the young has also concentrated on those that are seen as most 'troublesome' to the state and wider society. For example, those young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), persistent school truants, young teenage mothers and young offenders. Tackling these social problems are seen as essential, not only for getting young people to take up their responsibilities (France, 2007), but also for the safety and security of the successful majority (Byrne, 2005). Attention is then turned away from seeing the problem as one of poverty and from tackling 'causes' to one that claims to help the poor manage their circumstances or to get the most troublesome to behave (France, 2007). Within this, blaming the poor remains a critical component of how social exclusion is experienced by many young people, especially for those who come from disadvantaged environments and families (Byrne, 2005).

New Labour: making 'work pay' for the young

So what impact has the social exclusion agenda had on helping tackle youth poverty? In terms of employment and pay New Labour has focused on making 'work pay'. The past

ten years has seen a major shift take place in policy terms and since 1997 these policies have been underpinned by core beliefs that:

- Work and having a paid job is the best way out of poverty (exclusion?) for young people.
- The option of living on benefits is not acceptable. It is only in exceptional circumstances that benefits are made available.
- Rights and obligations are connected and that conditionality should be core to their benefits.
- Young people's needs are less than other groups, therefore their wages and benefits can be less.

This approach has since been reinforced in the recent Welfare Green paper (DWP, 2007b), highlighting the importance of work as the way out of exclusion and the importance of making 'work pay'. A central part of the delivery of these policies for young people over the age of 16 has been through the New Deal programme. This is compulsory for those not staying on at school or getting a job. Government policy insists that there is no 'fifth option' of unemployment and being on benefits. Yet New Deal has not been successful in helping increase incomes or reduce poverty amongst the most vulnerable young people. For those at the bottom of the pile it has become a 'warehousing' or 'churning' mechanism keeping them on low pay (Kemp, 2006). New Deal repeatedly moves unskilled young people from unemployment to low paid employment and back again. The most vulnerable and unskilled young people find themselves in a 'revolving door' between schemes and unemployment (France, 2007). There also remains a large number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and this figure has remained stubbornly high throughout the last ten years (France, 2007). In 2006, over 120,000 were defined as NEETs (Low Pay Commission, 2007). As Furlong and Cartmel (2007) suggest, the way this problem is constructed within government discussions of social exclusion suggests that NEETs are the feckless underclass who do not need support but punishment. In reality many are in desperate need of intervention and help, being isolated and marginalised. How they financially manage is hard to discover, but this is clearly a major worry in that young people might find other illegal means of getting money or work in insecure and poorly paid 'shit jobs' that have limited protection from the worst aspects of the labour market (Mizen, 2004).

In 1998 New Labour introduced the National Minimum Wage (NMW). This created a statutory minimum hourly pay rate which varied by age. Initially the NMW was only available to young people over the age of 18 but in 2004 under eighteens were included on a 'development rate' that was linked to commitment to being involved in training. The age banding gives different income protection for different groups. For example, in October 2008 the 16- and 17-year old rate will be £3.53 per hour, for 18–21 it is £4.77 and the adult rate (22 and above) is £5.73. Concerns remain over the logic and rationale of this policy in that young people are the most vulnerable in the labour market and the lack of protection for minimum incomes opens for abuse (British Youth Council, 2006). It is usually those who are already living below the poverty line who are more vulnerable to low pay or having to take work that is not financially worthwhile. The Low Pay Commission also recognises and argues that the age banding does not always seem logical and that the rationale behind paying 21-year olds a lower rate than 22-year olds is unclear and should be abandoned (Low Pay Commission, 2007). The new Age Discrimination Act

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(Employment Equality (Age) Regulations, 2006), while offering added protection to young workers in the workplace, does not cover the NWM. The justification for this was that it is claimed a higher NMW may have acted as a deterrent to young people staying in education, although, in reality, little evidence supports such a position. Youth incomes therefore have not been enhanced by the NMW in fact for many it has created an age banded system that does not recognise their minimum needs at the important stages of their transitions. It is also important to recognise that their remains a 'gender gap' within youth incomes in that young women are likely to earn over £2,282 less a year than young men between the ages of 18 and 21 (YMVA, 2007). Evidence from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings also shows that a quarter of the lowest paid young women are getting £80 or less a week (YMCA, 2007). This gender gap is also evident in apprenticeships with young women between 16 and 18 getting over £40 less a week then young men (YMCA, 2007). When it comes to the use of benefits to help maintain incomes, similar patterns emerge. At the heart of New Labour's welfare benefits policy is a movement towards conditionality. While benefits such as Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) still allow an element of right, conditionality has become more central. JSA introduced measures that required the unemployed to actively seek work and be available to work at all times. Alongside this were new welfare to work practices that punished those young people who did not conform to this practice by removing their benefits (Mizen, 2004). JSA also discriminates against 16–17-year olds who are not entitled to claim the benefit unless in severe hardship. Eighteen- to twenty-four-year olds also get a reduced rate of £46.85 per week, which is £10.30 less than the adult rate. Again the rationale for this is unclear, as is the rationale for why the full rate is available only at 25 years of age as opposed to 22 for the NMW. Benefits that are conditional or age graded mean that some of the most vulnerable have an insecure safety net that may not guarantee protection at a time of high need. It is also the case that there has been an increased number of benefit claims being disallowed or withdrawn, and also, as evaluation evidence consistently shows, young people who are vulnerable to unemployment and low pay have negative feelings about the system and its claims to help them (Mizen, 2004).

Youth incomes therefore have not been a major component of the social exclusion agenda of New Labour, although getting young people into work has. Yet as the above discussion suggests, this has not particularly helped tackle youth poverty. In many cases it has created more difficulties and, in some situations, worsened the position for the most vulnerable. Policy in this area has therefore ignored some of the fundamental causes of youth poverty and marginalised it as an issue still to be addressed by policy makers.

Transitions from dependent to independent living

The chances of a young person either becoming poor or staying poor is increased by the transition process to independent living, especially amongst the most vulnerable (Iacovou and Aassve, 2007). So how has New Labour intervened to help those most vulnerable young people on low incomes move from dependent to independent living? In 1997, when New Labour came to power, it was recognised that over the previous 20 years, policy had reduced the opportunities for the young to leave home (Jones, 2002). Social housing opportunities for the young had been greatly reduced with the introduction of the Right to Buy policy that had seen over two million council homes being sold. Alongside this, there was a reduction of social housing building programmes and a deregulation

of the private sector, giving private landlords more powers over the tenancy agreement (ODPM, 2004). Housing benefit and income support for young people under the age of 18 had also been reduced (ODPM, 2004). In this context, if young people had low incomes, it was increasingly difficult to get access to private housing, while if they were single and young, housing associations and local authorities were less concerned about trying to find them somewhere to live, suggesting they should return to their family home (Jones, 2002). As a result, young people often ended up homeless rather than choosing to live with their family.

Since 1998, New Labour has tried to address problems of young people's transitions into independent living through a number of policy developments. The core policies were: The Rough Sleepers Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998), the 'More than a Roof' initiative (Homelessness Directorate, 2002); the Homelessness Act of 2002 and the Housing Bill in 2004. Through these policies New Labour has aimed to reduce the number of homeless young people and to improve the opportunities for the most vulnerable to find accommodation. For example, the Homelessness Act (2002) extended who was defined in priority need. This broadened the categories to include 16- and 17-year olds, those leaving care aged between 16 and 20 years old, and those under the threat of violence. In November 2006, the government also pledged to reduce the number of homeless 16–17-year olds put into bed and breakfasts (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007a). Teenage parents have also been targeted with initiatives under the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Recent policy initiatives have aimed to give all teenage parents who cannot live in the family home a place in a semi-independent home that is supervised (ODPM, 2002). This policy aims to help teenage parents to gain independence and to ensure that they are not left in social isolation or vulnerable to homelessness.

While policy has achieved much, this approach also has major problems. Part of the difficulty lies with the way policy understands the housing needs and problems of the young. For example, homelessness in policy terms does not recognise the 'hidden' homeless who are living in hostels, staying with friends or living in temporary accommodation. If they are included in government figures, over 380,000 would be classified as homeless. Neither are these groups recognised as a priority. Evidence also suggests the threshold for emergency support being used by local housing officers make it increasingly difficult for some of the most vulnerable to get access to housing (Shelter, 2002). This is especially difficult for 18–24-year olds as they are not recognised in any of the priority groupings (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007b).

Social policy for the homeless is also underpinned by a perception that exclusion and homelessness is for many a 'choice', temporary or a result of actions of an underclass who are unwilling (or unable) to get into work. As a result, social policy has a strong emphasis on coercion. For example, the Rough Sleeping Strategy aims to force people off the streets rather than ensuring they are treated fairly, and in some cases this policy is criminalising some of the most vulnerable groups (Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2005). The policy conflict between helping the most vulnerable and the perceived anti-social behaviour of homeless young people also creates a tension in the process of dealing with young people's needs. With new legislation aimed at monitoring and controlling those on the streets, and the re-defining of street behaviour as anti-social, many young vulnerable, people are being stigmatised and problematised (France, 2007). But policy also has a strong emphasis on putting the responsibility of young people's transitions out of the family home on to

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parents. For example, the policy of bed and breakfast support for 16–17-year olds has been replaced by family mediation. This has a core set of objectives that focus on getting young people who are at risk of homelessness to stay in or return to the family home (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007b). The expectation is that the family should have core responsibility for a young person, regardless of circumstances and the quality of relationships.

Strategies for a wide range of vulnerable groups have similar emphasis. While the government claims to be supporting those most vulnerable, there remains a strong focus within the social exclusion agenda on controlling welfare dependency and putting the responsibility back on to the family. For example, national policy on teenage pregnancy has tended to focus more on prevention than support (Cooke and Owen, 2007). While supported independent accommodation has increased, young mothers still do not have access to alternative living arrangements (Shaw and Guillari, 2005). Major problems tend to exist in more isolated or rural areas where resources are more limited (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2003) and young mothers still have little choice over how they live. Access to benefits is also limited, especially for those young mothers under 16, meaning that parents are expected to support not only the young mum but also her child (YWCA, 2007). Policy has a strong emphasis on trying to keep them in the family home, even though this may create major problems for their families (Shaw and Guillari, 2005). Opportunities for independent living have therefore become more restricted and evidence suggests that flexibility in options do not always exist. Teenage mothers can feel that supervised accommodation restricts their independence and can stigmatize them (Cook and Owen, 2007). Policy is more concerned with controlling teenage mothers rather than supporting them (Shaw and Guillari, 2005).

Conclusion

Evidence shows that one of the most effective ways of tackling youth poverty is to break the cycle of poverty early. New Labours' attempt to tackle this has been to focus its anti-poverty policy on reducing child poverty. Such an approach is both important and valuable, yet it has given limited attention to those over 16. Amongst young people poverty increases when incomes are low, and support for transitions into independent living are limited. Becoming adults for the young has, in late modernity, become far more risky (Bynner *et al.*, 2002; France, 2007). Having a good wage and their own home for many young people signifies to others that they are independent and adult. But transitions to independent living are complex, fragmented, risky and a costly process. If young people do not have the resources and support to manage their transitions into independent living, the risks of them being poor increase (Bynner *et al.*, 2002). Those with family support may avoid poverty, but those who are most vulnerable and have limited support and few skills and qualifications will be most likely to find themselves in a worse situation. Government policy towards youth incomes is contradictory and built upon arbitrary age bands, which means some of the most vulnerable young people are unable to maintain stable incomes over their transition into adulthood. Youth wages need to recognise that the transitions from dependence to independence will take place between the ages of 16 and 24, and therefore youth wages should be underpinned by a stable and consistent guarantee of an income that allows this transition to take place.

But at the heart of the problem are social policies that concentrate on exclusion at the expense of support that will directly tackle youth poverty. Policies aimed at tackling social exclusion have a strong emphasis towards responsiblising families in the transition process and for blaming young people for their problems. While policy has tried to offer support, it has in-built assumptions that home, and family are where young people should be and that a central cause of social exclusion is the actions and choices young people take themselves. But these policies also have a strong measure of control, where a core function of social policy is seen as disciplining and punishing the young unemployed if they are not 'willing' to take up employment, search for jobs or stay in the family home. New Deal and benefit schemes such as JSA also reinforce the divisions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' and construct the unemployed or young people with problems as 'troublesome'. If New Labour is to have an impact on youth poverty, it needs to be more willing to find ways of maintaining young people's incomes over longer periods of time and helping them not only to establish independent living arrangements but also to maintain them. Using threats or withdrawing benefits and opportunities are still not going to solve the long-term nature of the problem.

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Note

1 The poverty threshold was set at 60 per cent of net household income.

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