

Childhood, Youth and the Civic Order

research proposal



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Top Line

The transition from childhood to adulthood is an increasingly difficult time for many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, creating problems that not only seriously affect their life chances, but can spill over into wider society.

As political and public attention continues to focus on key problems arising from difficult transitions – anti-social behaviour, the numbers of those not in education, employment or training, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and teenage pregnancy – there is a growing concern that the recent huge investment in the early years agenda will be substantially mitigated without better policies supporting childhood and adolescence.

Billions of pounds are currently spent each year on initiatives aimed at facilitating the transition to adulthood and all political parties have identified tackling youth problems and anti-social behaviour as a key goal.

But the assumptions underpinning these approaches appear increasingly outdated and many policies are manifestly failing.

This is largely because the fundamental strategy has remained the same since the 1970s – despite important changes in how young people experience adolescence. In the post-war period, young people in working class areas could expect to leave school and go straight into work, settle down and have a family. The moral boundaries of their communities were clear, if often oppressive. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the post-war patterns of work and family life, rooted in industrial economic structures, collapsed and there has been a failure to replace them with new structures of socialisation into the adult world that meet contemporary realities.

Demographic and societal changes such as the increasing commodification of childhood as society has become richer, shifting patterns of household formation and dissolution and the trend to remain in the parental home and in post-school education for longer, have meant that for many middle class young people, childhood is compressed, while the entry into adulthood is delayed. So adolescence is stretched at both ends.

At the same time, lower down the social scale, some young people are entering ‘adulthood’ earlier – rates of teen pregnancies remain high despite government’s best efforts, and too many young people choose not to continue their education and instead enter the labour market earlier. These young people are fast-tracked to a life at risk of poverty and poorer job prospects.

Public policy has been slow to respond to these conflicting shifts. The gap between school and work has not been filled and many young people fall through it. Child and adolescent mental health services are weak or non-existent despite greater investment, and youth community facilities are dilapidated. At the same time – at least in England – children are treated as criminally responsible at an earlier age if they start offending. From both ends, public policy is inadequate.

There are difficult moral and social issues here that progressives have been wary of approaching; conservatives have effectively communicated a story of family and community breakdown leading to a collapse of moral authority that progressives have been unwilling, or unable, to face head on.

Youth policy in Britain has been left behind by new academic research in a range of disciplines, such as the literature on ‘peer effects’ and ‘norm influences’ from the behavioural sciences and sociology and research on processes of socialisation and the drivers of adolescent mental health disorders from social and developmental psychology. Primary research has not been adequately used to inform policy development, despite a wealth of new and evidence-based research, published mainly in the USA. As a result many policies rest on flawed assumptions about how young people will react to aims expressed by policymakers and practitioners, often producing ‘unanticipated consequences’ (ODPM 2005). This is particularly evident in the continued investment in youth clubs and mentoring, despite evidence that attending youth clubs has a negative impact on life chances, while mentoring has no effect.

This project would address these fundamental flaws at the heart of current youth policy, by undertaking a rigorous assessment of the key drivers behind problematic transitions and developing policy approaches that integrate different fields of analysis to provide a modern, sophisticated and thorough understanding of how young people experience adolescence, how the process of socialisation into adulthood is managed, and how young people live their lives in contemporary Britain.

The goal is to engender a fundamental shift in the thinking around young people in British policy circles and develop new, more imaginative policy responses.

Aims and Objectives

The project would have three aims (see below for detailed research questions).

Firstly, to catalyse informed debate around youth transitions, integrating different fields of analysis to provide a sophisticated understanding of how modern British young people experience adolescence and the transition to adulthood.

Secondly, to provide new empirical analysis to inform evidence-based policy development affecting youth transitions.

Thirdly, to develop a range of policy tools, strategies and reforms based on this analysis.

Policy Context

The appointment of Children’s Commissioners and the creation of Children’s Trusts are encouraging signs that the government is firmly committed to tackling youth problems. So too is Gordon Brown’s announcement of a UK version of the Americorps youth volunteering

programme, the announcement of proposals to direct unclaimed assets in bank accounts towards youth services and recent plans to invest £17 million in voluntary organisations working with children, young people and families.

Labour has introduced a range of policy initiatives aimed at young people, including a greater focus on participation and active citizenship, with the introduction of citizenship education to the national curriculum in 2002, and greater emphasis on including the 'voice' of young people in policymaking. The Connexions service provides personal advisors for all those in the 13-19 age group and has a strong inspection record. Meanwhile Local Authority Youth Services focus on the personal and social development of young people through initiatives such as neighbourhood centres, youth clubs or outreach work, complemented by a wide range of voluntary sector organisations. Yet provision is extremely patchy and quality extremely variable. Further, new evidence suggests that youth clubs may impact negatively on the life chances of disadvantaged young people and mentoring schemes often produce disappointing results.

These universal services have been complemented by a range of targeted support programmes aimed at those most at risk, including Positive Activities for Young People, Positive Futures and the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Yet there is widespread duplication of provision, often focusing several different interventions at the same target groups. At the same time reforms are not producing the desired effects, suggesting new approaches are needed.

A range of additional targeted measures have been introduced aiming to tackle directly anti-social and 'problem' behaviour by young people, including Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs), Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Parenting Orders. Although these often punitive measures are widely praised in official circles, there is recognition that they may not be producing the desired results. Practitioners complain that ASBOs have become a 'badge of honour' for some young people, and most policymakers agree that while corrective interventions are often necessary, policy must also tackle the roots of anti-social behaviour and youth disorders.

A further policy strand has aimed to encourage disadvantaged young people to stay in education or training and provide better routes into the labour market. The New Deal for Young People and the Educational Maintenance Allowance are flagship initiatives in this area.

These approaches have had some impact on young people. More teenagers leave school with good qualifications and go to university than ever before. Youth unemployment has fallen dramatically from its peak in the 1980s. Drug use amongst 11-15 year olds has declined recently, as has smoking, while rates of informal volunteering have risen to 46 per cent. Teenage pregnancy rates fell by 10% between 1998 and 2003 and 16-18 year olds are more entrepreneurial and enterprising than previous generations. Fifteen per cent are already planning their own business.

But at the same time one in four young people say that they have committed some form of anti-social behaviour in the last year. Ten per cent of 10-11 year old boys and seven per cent of 11 year old girls say they have committed a violent offence in the last 12 months, rising to 33 per cent of 16-17 year old boys and 18 per cent of girls. Two per cent of teenagers have reportedly sold drugs to peers, and adolescents in the UK have one of the highest levels in Europe of alcohol use, binge-drinking (consuming more than five drinks in a row) and

getting drunk.

Recent government reports have noted the flaws in the above approaches, highlighting the need for a better understanding of young people and to engage with some of the structural determinants of problematic transitions. Recent notable initiatives include the following:

The Respect Action Plan (Home Office 2006) details how the government will encourage respect in communities, including combating anti-social behaviour, by:

- Supporting or challenging anti-social households
- Tackling truancy and anti-social behaviour in schools
- Providing activities for younger people
- Strengthening local communities
- Introducing stronger measures to tackle anti-social behaviour

Transitions (ODPM 2005) examines the effectiveness of services for young adults with complex needs as they make the transition to adulthood. It identifies three primary concerns:

- Age boundaries in existing provisions
- Delivery of holistic services
- The need to understand the thinking and behaviour of young adults

The Youth Matters green paper (DfES 2005) addresses key issues relating to how to support and challenge teenagers. The consultation sets out a package aimed at improving outcomes for all young people, with a particular emphasis on those who are disadvantaged. Key findings were that:

- Young people should have more choice and influence over services and facilities that are available to them
- Young people should be encouraged to volunteer and contribute to their local community
- Young people need better information, advice and guidance about issues that matter to them, delivered in the way they want to receive it
- There must be better support for those who have more serious problems

Every Child Matters (DfES 2005) promotes the idea that all young people should achieve five key outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being). The paper proposed an improved system for the inspection, assessment and review of children's services and has had an enormous impact on DfES thinking and investment, and local authority structures.

While the government's commitment to tackle youth issues is impressive, the manifest failings to tackle effectively many of the indicators of problematic transitions – teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol problems, anti-social behaviour, unemployment, poverty and truancy, suggest that new approaches, underpinned by a more sophisticated understanding of the structural and psychological causes of problematic transitions, are urgently required.

The government's agenda signals an intuitive grasp of much of the problem. Young people want hierarchy, clear pathways into the future and relationships with adult authority figures. If left to themselves, peer groups can tend to excess and disorientation – unstructured activities for young people are not the solution. A progressive agenda on youth transitions requires a new approach, serious politics and a far reaching policy agenda.

Key Research Tasks

Five key tasks will be undertaken:

First, an audit of current youth policy and practice will be conducted, drawing out the theoretical assumptions underpinning it and examining its effectiveness, and exploring where policy innovation has stagnated.

Second, a comprehensive literature review will be undertaken around the latest thinking and research from a wide range of disciplines (including the behavioural sciences, psychology and sociology) about the underlying drivers and trends affecting transitions.

Third, we will conduct original empirical analysis and mapping to develop and apply these theories in a British context. Models will be based on empirical observation of how people really behave in certain situations rather than on theoretical assumptions about how they might behave, in keeping with ippr's tradition of evidence-based policymaking.

Fourth, detailed fieldwork and qualitative research will be undertaken, visiting communities, projects and centres, and interviewing young people undergoing difficult transitions to inform and test policy ideas.

Fifth, we will develop a range of new policy tools, approaches and responses building on this analysis.

Key Research Questions

1. What are the impacts of different forms of consumption – media, leisure and commercial – on childhood and the transition to adulthood?
2. Are mental health problems occurring at earlier ages?
3. What is the process through which young people are socialised into adulthood in today's society? What are the differentiating factors between a successful and unsuccessful transition?
4. What are the key life stage events that catalyse problematic transitions and how can policy respond?
5. How do 'peer effects' operate in youth society and how can their influence be harnessed for more positive outcomes?
6. What kinds of activities for young people have a positive affect on life chances and behaviour?
7. What principles and organising ideas should underpin youth policy?
8. How does the demographic structure of local communities affect youth transitions?
9. What are the travel patterns of different groups of young people? Does geographical mobility impact on life chances and behaviour?

Methodology

Systematic literature review spanning several different disciplines including research by behavioural scientists, sociologists, political philosophers and psychologists including Prof. Peter Bearman on peer effects and youth culture; Prof. Susan Hurley on normative influences and behaviour; Leon Feinstein on the impact of different forms of youth services on life chances; David Buckingham on childhood and the media; Lydia Martens on capitalism, consumption and the impact on childhood; Prof. Cass Sunstein on social norms and socialisation; Prof. Robert Sampson, Prof. Samuel Bowles and Prof. Herbert Gintis on

collective efficacy and neighbourhoods and Gill Jones, Ruth Lister and Karen Evans on processes of socialisation and transitions to adulthood.

Quantitative analysis of a range of existing datasets and annual reports. ippr has access to the original data for a range of relevant surveys. For example, the 1970 British Cohort Study, the National Child Development Study and the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales provide excellent longitudinal data mapping transitions to adulthood. The National Travel Survey provides data on young people's mobility in local areas and the extent to which people are ghettoised within communities. The United Kingdom Time Use Survey provides data on young people's self-reported activities. The Neighbourhood Boundaries, Social Disorganisation and Social Exclusion, 2001-2002 Survey provides qualitative data on the extent and nature of informal means of social control utilised by their residents and how collective efficacy is related to social capital and social cohesion. The Young People's Social Attitudes Survey provides attitudinal data on a range of issues relating to family life, socialisation, communities and adulthood. The On Track youth Lifestyles Survey provide information about risk factors, protective factors and self-reported involvement in problem behaviours from children in at risk areas. The Home Office Citizenship Survey provides measures of civic participation. The Crime and Justice survey provides data concerning young people's experience of victimisation and offending.

We would also commission detailed original mapping work through the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield using Census data, investigating the ratio of adults to young people in local areas across Britain, the prevalence of crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour and producing detailed maps.

Qualitative research and fieldwork. ippr would undertake fieldwork to inform the research and would conduct detailed qualitative research with key groups of young people and service providers, with an aim to identify underlying patterns of behaviour, motivation and attitudes and assess likely responses to policy options. We would aim to commission a television documentary team to extend and record this fieldwork.

Further qualitative research, using a semi-structured, informal, face-to-face interview process with key academics, experts, policy makers and stakeholders will be used as a means of gathering information, cross-checking ideas, and ensuring buy-in.

Peer review. The research would receive extensive peer review from leading experts in the relevant field(s).

Desk research would draw on previous ippr scoping work and academic research. This would be used to author the ippr report, as well as identify key opinion leaders and stakeholders.

Launch, publication and dissemination ippr's press team will help ensure that the publication receives widespread coverage. ippr will also make use of its extensive political and other contacts to promulgate the findings.

Links to ippr work

This project aims to draw links between several areas of ippr's work. It will draw on ippr's 2006 *Population Politics* report, our flagship *Understanding Behaviour* project, and benefit from the research experience of our influential [Social Policy Team](#), the qualitative expertise of

ippr's [People and Policy](#) team and the economic and fiscal modelling experience of ippr's [Directors' Research Team](#). This project will also draw on the work by the [Democracy Team](#) on the potential of Teen Courts.

Outputs and Dissemination

There would be three main outputs of the project: a series of seminars in July 2006, drawing on initial findings and exploring policy options; a *final report* to be published in September 2006; and a website, ideally in partnership with a leading media organisation, incorporating digital media, filmed interviews, online resources and comment.

ippr would launch the final report at a high profile event attended by senior government figures and other high level stakeholders.

We would aim to place articles on key findings in relevant journals and magazines. The project team will also identify appropriate speaking opportunities at relevant events and publish short press articles in appropriate media in order to disseminate the research.

The primary audience will be decision-makers in Government, particularly in the Home Office, ODPM, DfES, the DWP, the Treasury and No. 10; and private companies and third sector institutions engaging with youth policy. The findings will also be of interest to university departments, think tanks and academics.

Core Project Team

Nick Pearce, Director. Nick is a member of the Equalities Review panel chaired by Trevor Philips, the Welfare Reform Advisory Group to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the UK-India Round Table. He is also a trustee of Crime Concern and a member of the advisory committee for the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education & Training. Nick was formerly a Special Adviser to David Blunkett at the Home Office (2001- 2003), where he led work on migration, asylum and citizenship, and at the Department for Education & Employment (1999 – 2001), where he worked on further and higher education, skills policy, and asset based welfare, including the original ideas for the Child Trust Fund. Between 1997 and 1999 he worked on education policy at ippr and as an adviser in the Cabinet Office and Social Exclusion Unit. During this period he helped develop the initial plans for learndirect and worked on government policies for disadvantaged teenagers. Nick studied at the University of Manchester (First Class Honours in Politics and Modern History) and Balliol College, Oxford University (M.Phil in Politics). He is married and lives in South London.

Howard Reed, Research Director. Prior to joining ippr, Howard was Director of the Work and Income research programme at the Institute for Fiscal Studies. He is an economist by training with a range of publications in leading journals such as the *American Economic Review*, and the *Economic Journal*. His research interests include the labour market, tax, benefit and credit policy, pensions, education and training policy, and disability and ill health. Howard was educated at Keble College Oxford and University College London.

Julia Margo, Research Fellow, Directors' Research Team. Before joining ippr Julia spent three years at *The Sunday Times* as the assistant editor of the News Review. Prior to that she worked as a researcher at the *New Statesman* and at Demos, and as a parliamentary assistant to Paddy Ashdown and Simon Hughes MP. She was also chair of the London Liberal Democrat Youth and Students. Julia graduated from the University of Bristol in 2001 with a First Class BSc in

Politics and is now studying towards a masters in Government, Policy and Politics at Birkbeck. Her publications for ippr include *Population Politics* (2006).

Mike Dixon, Research Fellow, Directors' Research Team. Before joining ippr Mike worked at Ogilvy and Mather, where he advised on communications strategy for Ford, Motorola and IBM. Mike's research interests include wealth, globalisation, political economy, demography, genetics, crime and sustainability. His publications for ippr include chapters in *Social Justice: Building a Fairer Britain* (2005), *Brave New Choices* (2005), and *Population Politics* (2006). Mike is a regular commentator on local and regional radio, and has also appeared on China's Phoenix Television News and Germany's WBR public radio network. He has written for a range of publications including *The Sunday Times*, *Prospect*, *Tribune*, *openDemocracy* and specialist journals and magazines. Mike graduated from St. John's College Cambridge with a First Class BA in Philosophy.

Timescale

The project would run from February 2006 to September 2006.