The accumulation of risk in the life course

Young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face a number of challenges that can limit their chances of success in education and employment. New research from City University tracks the development of 30,000 individuals from birth to young adulthood to investigate the long-term influences of disadvantage on individual adjustment. The study compares the experiences of two groups born in 1958 and 1970. The researchers analysed how a child’s circumstances in infancy affect development in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. They also investigated how the interplay of individual and contextual factors shapes young people’s transitions into adulthood. The research found that:

- Children with above average abilities from socially disadvantaged backgrounds do better than their less able peers. However, they do not succeed to the same extent in education and employment as young people from privileged backgrounds.
- It is less able people from privileged backgrounds who currently benefit most from expanding educational provision and opportunities.
- Able children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are held back by factors such as lower self-esteem, lower parental aspirations and lower expectations of teachers and employers.
- However, the negative impact of socio-economic adversity can be diminished by factors such as academic ability, behavioural adjustment, positive motivation and a belief in one’s own abilities.
- A stable family environment, parental commitment to education, strong aspirations and encouragement from teachers and youth leaders can help override the effects of poverty and disadvantage.
- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to depend more on support and encouragement from parents and teachers than their more privileged peers.
- Disadvantages such as over-crowded accommodation, frequent house moves, no areas for quiet study and shared facilities increase the risk of poor academic achievement, behavioural problems, poor health and adjustment problems in adulthood.

This project was one of 17 in the Economic and Social Research Council’s programme “Youth, Citizenship and Social Change”. The programme aimed to improve understanding of the way young people aged 16–25+ make the transition to adulthood and examined the support and resources they need to become effective citizens of the 21st century. For more information http://www.tsa.uk.com/ycsc
Background

A growing body of evidence shows that children raised in socio-economically disadvantaged families are at greater risk of low academic achievement, behavioural problems, poor health and difficulties with adjustment in adulthood. However, not all young people from disadvantaged families fail to succeed. This is often due to positive factors such as motivation, academic ability and support from the family and teachers.

Much of the existing research focuses on short-term studies in mid-childhood and adolescence. In contrast, this research follows individuals from birth to adulthood. This longitudinal approach enables an in-depth understanding of different life paths in a variety of contexts, from the family and school to training and work.

The study compares data from two groups of people: the first group born in 1958, the second born in 1970. The comparison provides important information on the different experiences and changing circumstances of young people growing up in the 1980s and 1990s.

The researchers developed a new model to track young people's transitions. This took the following factors into account:

- The socio-historical context – economic conditions, social policy and job opportunities
- Individual factors such as personal agency (interests, motivation and aptitudes), personality (psychosocial adjustment, behaviour and attitudes), and biology (physical health and development)
- Demographic background factors such as gender, social position, parental age and parental education
- Environmental factors including home and family (material resources, emotional support and encouragement), institutions such as nursery and school, the workplace, and region
- Learning, training and achievements
- Adult situation in terms of work, family, citizenship and housing

The project placed special emphasis on the role of education and training in helping people negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The impact of disadvantage

The researchers observed a strong accumulation of risk factors in both groups. They found that children born into a socially disadvantaged family were more likely to remain disadvantaged, and to accumulate risks associated with that disadvantage (overcrowding in the home, no housing tenure, receipt of state benefits, lack of household amenities).

Children are influenced by their environment, but also have some control over their own development. However, the development and maintenance of individual adjustment can be undermined by the experience of early and persistent socio-economic disadvantage. The research demonstrated that when children experience adversity before the age of 7, it has a strong impact. Subsequent adversity is then likely to further weaken a young person's ability to learn, develop socially and psychologically, and to achieve in adulthood.

The study showed that young people born in 1970 grew up in better material circumstances than those born in 1958. Yet despite an improvement in conditions, social class continued to be a barrier to individual achievements. Parents from privileged backgrounds had higher aspirations for their children than parents from less privileged backgrounds. Children also tended to be influenced in their own outlook to the future by the aspirations their parents held for them.

Young people from the 1958 group had better opportunities for career development that were less dependent on their academic achievements, while for young people born in 1970 the stakes for achievement were raised, especially regarding the importance of qualifications for future attainment. Overall, though, the findings indicate that the 'desire to excel' is an important factor in achievement that can counterbalance limitations for children from a disadvantaged background.

The changing lives of young adults

The changing socio-historical background has had an important influence on the transition patterns of the two groups of young people.

People born in 1970 have experienced growing unemployment and a shrinking youth labour market. Qualifications have become increasingly important, yet access to post-secondary education continues to depend on social background.

While the experience of youth training schemes for the 1958 group generally led to full-time
employment, for young people born in 1970 it has become associated with unemployment, suggesting that the new Youth Training Schemes introduced in the 1980s have not fulfilled the high hopes placed in them. The findings also suggest that the experiences of young people are susceptible to the overall socio-economic conditions, which saw the virtual disappearance of the youth labour market since the mid-1980s.

Of those born in 1970, a larger minority faced difficulties in entering the labour market, which indicates increasing social exclusion. This pattern was also reflected in the decreasing political involvement and religious affiliation in this group, especially among socially disadvantaged men.

Compared with 26 year olds in the 1958 survey, those born in 1970:

- Spent longer in full-time education
- Were better qualified
- Were more likely to have non-manual occupations
- Were more likely to still live in the parental home
- Were more likely to remain single without a partner (both men and women)
- Were less likely to have become a parent (both men and women)

**Gender differences**

A number of important gender differences emerged. The 1958 study showed that 7 year old boys were more susceptible than girls to the risks of socio-economic adversity. In comparison, in the 1970 research there were no gender differences at age 5.

At age 16 in both groups, socio-economic factors affected secondary school achievements for boys more than for girls. Adolescent girls showed more behavioural problems than boys, but these were emotional difficulties rather than problems linked with conduct or hyperactivity. In adulthood, young women were more likely to be depressed than young men. The study also showed that the rate of depression nearly doubled for those born in 1970, compared with the 1958 group. This was particularly the case for young men.

In both groups, more women than men were outside the labour force, either because they were in education or involved in family care. More women in the later group stayed on at school, but further education was still strongly related to family background. Generally women travelled diverse paths combining work, education and family life, whereas men’s career paths were more regular, mainly involving full-time employment or education. But in the 1970 group, there was an increasing minority of young men who were mostly unemployed.

**Protective factors**

The research confirms that support from parents and teachers, as well as personal resources, can override the effects of socio-economic adversity.

Those most at risk are young children from socially disadvantaged families who experience local authority care, frequent moves or long-term separation from the mother figure. Crucial protective factors include:

- Small family size
- Extended education of the mother
- A father who helps with domestic tasks and childcare
- Parental involvement with the child’s education

Generally, parental support and encouragement from teachers play a vital role in encouraging young people to achieve and to trust in their own abilities. Young people also rely on their own resources to varying extents. Academically able, psychosocially well-adjusted individuals with high educational and occupational aspirations were more likely to develop their potential than young people with low abilities, behaviour problems and poor aspirations.

The study shows that adolescents from less privileged backgrounds may rely more on external sources of support and encouragement than those from more privileged backgrounds.

The research suggests that young people who are well-adjusted at school set up a positive cycle for adult adjustment.

Bright young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely than their less able peers to continue full-time education, to delay parenthood and to be in full-time employment. They felt more in control, were more satisfied with life and less depressed. Yet they still did not achieve to the same level as young people from privileged backgrounds.

Case studies also revealed that people could adjust positively due to a supportive marriage or to taking control of their lives after becoming a parent.
Conclusions

The impact of adversity on an individual's development depends on when it happens and how long it lasts. Young people's life chances and experiences are also closely linked with the overall socio-historical context; the study found increasing polarisation in education, work, health, family formation and civic participation.

The pathways to successful adult adaptation are influenced by young people's early experiences and are shaped by the resources and support available to each individual throughout childhood and adolescence. Educational qualifications play a particularly important role in predicting adult outcomes.

Yet people's achievements are not pre-ordained, and it is the whole life course that influences individual development, not just the early years. Therefore it is never too early or too late to increase access to the material, emotional or cultural resources that can enable an individual to fully realise his or her potential.

Further Information

The full report Accumulation of Risk in the Life Course from Birth to Young Adulthood is available on the ESRC database REGARD at http://www.regard.ac.uk

Relevant publications:


For more information about Youth, Citizenship and Social Change see the programme’s website: http://www.tsa.uk.com or email the Programme Director on: lcatan@tsa.uk.com

About the study

This research (The Accumulation of Risk in the Life Course from Birth to Young Adulthood) was carried out by Dr I. Schoon and Dr R. D. Wiggins of City University, and Professor J. Byynner, Professor H. Joshi, and Samantha Parsons of the Institute of Education, University of London. The project followed the development of over 30,000 individuals from birth to young adulthood. It used data from two British birth groups: the 1958 National Child Development Study and the 1970 British Cohort Study. The researchers developed a new model to analyse the effects of social and economic adversity on young people's development. In addition, anonymous case studies drew on the detail of real life stories and illustrated individual variations in transition patterns.